

MEMORY AND PLACE

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Abstract:

The landscape of the environment we live in is an image of our common humanity. The sense of place individuals and people as a whole have is both a biological response to the surrounding physical environment and a cultural creation. People get attached to places that are critical to their well-being or cause them distress.

This paper sketches the story of ‘*Sahet Alqaryoun*’, a public open space in a residential neighborhood in the historic city of Nablus, West Bank. The question of how ‘*Sahet Alqaryoun*’ as an open public space is appropriated by the various segments of the population, and how this has been changing overtime is addressed here through investigating various stakeholders and users of this place, starting from individuals to the families living in this neighborhood or even the municipality and professionals who are responsible for any future intervention proposed for *Sahet Alqaryoun*. This paper will attempt to explore the structure of such a shared place, how it is related to the social meaning and also its cultural connotation as a place of collective use that is perceived through representation and images produced by its residents. It will also study the physical evolution and different factors that shaped ‘*Sahet Alqaryoun*’ and demonstrate the sustainability of this historic place through time, re-identifying it and re-establishing it as an essential part of the social, socio-economic and political fabric of the city.

This paper argues that urban spaces do present a public history. Our responsibility as professionals in preserving our historic spaces is to try to understand all factors that have played a role in shaping this space and to try to recognize and respect the long social and cultural history as successive stages of the city’s evolution.

1. Introduction

Sahet Alqaryoun (Alqaryoun square) is located on the southwestern edge of the Ottoman part of the city of Nablus in *harat* (or quarter) Alqaryoun, one of the city’s seven old residential quarters. Historically, it used to be one of the main open public spaces and had some commercial importance, soap factories and the cotton industry being located there. *Sahet Alqaryoun* was also a significant popular neighborhood in

the old city, being the largest un-built space, surrounded by Ottoman architectural façades. It is now an almost empty, deserted area, frequented only by males and in particular by teenagers who interact there during the day; children also use the space to meet and play. The place contains a few small shops, which are often just extensions of the houses and as such, act as magnets that strengthen the social knit of the neighborhood.

Sahet Alqaryoun has been subjected to many changes during the last century. One of them was the 1927 earthquake which destroyed many historic buildings in the city and resulted in changing the physical and spatial experience of this space. Seventy years later, in 1987, the first efforts to rehabilitate the historic square took place: the Municipality of Nablus, with funding from the French Government, initiated a project to enhance the aesthetic quality of the square by placing in it artwork by Fleur-Marie Fuentes, a French artist. She worked closely with the community to create a painting on one of the walls overlooking the *Sahet*. In 2002, after the Israeli invasion of the city, the square was severely affected by the consequences of this military action: the total destruction of the Alshubi family's *hosh* that constituted one of the sides of this open place.

The question of how Sahet Alqaryoun, as an open public space, is appropriated by the various segments of the population, and how it has changed over time, is addressed through investigating the various stakeholders and users from individuals to families living in this neighborhood. A short theoretical introduction on the meaning of “place” and how it is perceived by its users, will lead to an understanding of the dynamics of this square. This will be followed by presenting all the issues, which influenced and affected the physical transformation of the *Sahet*.

2. The Concept of Place

The concept of place can be traced back to the ancient philosophical writings of Aristotle. Place or *topos*, in his view, was the “where” dimension in people’s relationship to the physical environment, conjuring up a feeling of “belonging”. The Romans, centuries later, used the term *genius loci*, the “spirit of a place”, a “genius spirit” of a physical location. Recent years have seen a revival of the concept of place in many disciplines. In his writings, Venturi (1966) encouraged to not only consider the semiotic meaning of the external façade of buildings, but also the meaning of the spaces behind the walls. He claimed that architecture occurs at the meeting of interior and exterior forces of uses and “space”. On the other hand, Canter (1977) in his book *The Psychology of Place*, stated that “place” is a combination of actions, conceptions and the physical environment. Canter’s visualization of *placeness* formed when actions, conceptions and physical attributes were inter-related. The concept proved helpful in establishing linkages with planning practice. His “conceptions”, which are similar to Relph’s “meaning”, were expanded to include the mythical aspects of human experience to bring into the designers’ consciousness the need to attune to the “essential core of the culture”. Saarinen (1982) describes a “sense of place” as a “unifying concept bringing together a number of separate strands of geographic research in the general environment-behavior ‘design field’”. Essentially, the term “place”, by definition, extends the focus of attention beyond geographic space to the experience people have of being in a particular landscape environment. The value of the term “sense of place” is in highlighting the “sense of identity” of particular environments. This definition of “place” is also mentioned by Proshansky (1983), who argued that the role of places and spaces in a person’s development has been

neglected in psychology. He introduced the concept of “place-identity” as a physical environmental referent for a better-known and widely used term: “self-identity”. As he suggested, “Humanistic geographers have argued that through personal attachment to geographically locatable places, a person acquires a sense of belonging and purpose which give meaning to his or her life.”

So the primary function of “place”, as Proshansky believed, is to gather a sense of belonging and identity. Place attachment is strongest in relation to a person’s own home. Individuals may strive to project their self-concept into the design of an environment (Assi 2000). Thus the term “place”, as opposed to “space”, implies strong, long-lasting emotional ties, between a person and a particular physical location. Sime (1986) refers to the “place” ascribed to a physical location, which engenders a positive, satisfactory experience. Creating places, according to this author, refers to “places” which the architect and/or potential users of the “space” actually like. The Norwegian architect and phenomenologist Christian Norberg-Schulz is a key theorist in elucidating the concept of *genius loci*, which he explores in several works spanning three decades. Norberg-Schulz claims that the *genius loci* of a particular place is important for our sense of identity, which may be bound up with a particular place; we may refer to this, for example, by the expression “I am a Parisian”. The location itself marks the position of the place, but place itself consists of the totality of the natural and man-made things, assembled in a unique way and may well include the history and associations attached to the place by the people who identify with it. While all places have a character, this in itself is not adequate to induce *genius loci*. It is the uniqueness which makes it special and with which we can readily associate.

On the other hand, the original intention of Schulz in his thesis (Schulz 1963), was to investigate the psychology of architecture. Based on the same *gestalt* psychological theory used by Kevin Lynch, Schulz (1980) explores the character of places on the ground and their meanings for people, while Lynch (1960) ignored meanings and focused on structure and identity. Norberg-Schulz uses a concept of townscape (although not in the same way as defined by Cullen) to denote skyline or image. He sees the skyline of the town and the horizontally expanded silhouette of the urban buildings as keys to the image of a place. He promotes the traditional form of towns and buildings, which he sees as the basis for bringing about a deeper symbolic understanding of places (Schulz 1985). The culmination of Schulz’s examination of the *genius loci* concept is found in *Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture*. It is described as representing the sense people have of a place, understood as the sum of all physical as well as symbolic values in both nature and the human environment.

When Jackson writes of “atmosphere” he indicates that *genius loci* has also become allied to the concept of the “character” of a place. Many writers on urban form and design have discussed the issue of “character”: some implicitly, others explicitly, using terms such as *spirit of place* or *genius loci* (see for example Conzen (1966) and Steele (1981)). In this way, “character” and *genius loci* become further enmeshed. This fusion of ideas is most clearly seen in discussions of “the past” and conservation. Lowenthal (1979) has suggested that “the past” exists as both an individual and a collective construct, with shared values and experiences being important within cultural groups. Group identity is thus closely linked with the form and history of place, creating a sense of place or *genius loci*.

In the course of time the landscape, whether that of a large region like a country or of a small locality like a market town, acquires its specific *genius loci*, its culture-

and history-conditioned character which commonly reflects not only the work and aspirations of the society at present in occupancy but also that of its precursors in the same area. Conzen regarded changes to urban form in relation to a cyclic building development by repletion, transformation, clearance and even urban fallow. Yet it has been suggested here that it is group identity, the people as a society that is closely linked with the form and history of place, creating a sense of place.

More recently, the French historian Pierre Nora (1996) in his book: *Rethinking the French Past: Realm and Memory, lieux de mémoire* is a concept developed in order to help explain the construction of a nation or a community; it offers a useful tool for architectural historians by emphasizing the importance of physical and conceptual sites. A *lieu de mémoire* is any significant entity, whether material or non-material in nature, which, by dint of human will or work, in time, has become a symbolic difference between history and memory. Nora claims that “memory is life” whereas “history is the reconstruction of what is no longer”. “Memory” is subject to remembering and forgetting; it is vulnerable to appropriation and manipulation. The *lieux de mémoire*, material, symbolic, and functional sites, are the products of the interaction between memory and history. They embody a will to remember (memory) and to record (history). They also display the exciting quality of being able to change, that is, to resurrect old meanings and generate new ones, along the sites of memory (Celik 1997, 2002).

Nora’s concept pertains to all societies. The concept can be extended to the Palestinian struggle and show how the *lieux de mémoire* expresses the endurance of identity in the context of an armed conflict. Symbolic sites, which reflected the Palestinians’ struggle during the *Intifada* and their capacity to change and acquire new meanings allowed them to also act as places of memory. Nora notes,

“Acceleration of history: the metaphor needs to be unpacked. Things tumble with increasing rapidity into irreversible past. They vanish from sight, or so it is generally believed. The equilibrium between the present and the past is disrupted. What was left of experience, still lived in the warmth of tradition, in the silence of custom, in the repetition of the ancestral, has been swept away by a surge of deeply historical sensibility. Our consciousness is shaped by a sense that everything is over and done with, that something long since begun is now complete. Memory is constantly on our lips because it no longer exists.”

Our curiosity about the places in which memory is crystallized, in which it finds refuge, as Nora claims, is associated with this specific moment in history, a turning point in which a sense of rapture with the past is inextricably bound up with a sense that a rift has occurred in memory. When it comes to social meaning, Maurice Halbwachs stipulated that human beings require a social framework in order to remember. He thereby tried to dismiss psychological definitions of memory that emphasized the individual encoding, storing and retrieving of data (Halbwachs 1992). Therefore it is possible to compare Halbwachs’ treatise on memory with a more contemporary definition of culture. Clifford Greetz described culture as a web of meaning within which each individual is suspended (Greetz 1973:5). In other words, culture/memory sets up shared rules and understandings that allow persons to think, speak, relate or remain in solitude. By this definition there is an implicit bias towards memory as a cognitive knowledge (Volk 2001, 2005). The privilege concern for “knowledge memory” was sharply criticized by Paul Connerton (2003), who argued that bodily memories are profoundly social. The component of memories as

knowledge of how to do something has public and ritual aspects that engage every single person during the course of a day, as each individual performs and takes part in shared behaviors (Koselleck 2002).

One could argue that the practice of commemoration becomes a counter-strategy, or even an act of resistance, a trend of modernity (Davis 2005). Going back to the past symbols, rituals and practices or behaviors, even if they are out of time and place in our modern days, or even if the process of retrieval changes the “authentic” aspects of memory, it is still an act that has enormous symbolic power within the larger structure of our capitalist world system.

Connerton’s critique of modernity finds its eloquent parallel and elaboration in Nora’s works (Nora 1998), who famously argues that modern post-industrial societies have lost their sense of real memory (*milieu de mémoire*), and have restored to the weak substitute of “history” (*lieux de mémoire*), the former being defined as integrated memory, all-powerful, sweeping, unself-conscious, and inherently present-minded, whereas the second is “the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer” (Nora 1996). He goes on to declare that modernity has eradicated the practice of shared traditions of village life where everyone participated in celebrating birth, death, harvest, etc.

In addition to the question above, Nora’s writings raise another important concern, namely the re-appropriation of traditional sites of memory as agents of modernity. Not only are sites of memories lost, falling into despair or disrepair, but they are also reclaimed and redone. In this case, we are faced with the continuation of actual sites, but with loss of what used to generate shared experience and social ties.

Referring to the historic centre of the old city of Nablus, it is part of one of the most significant traditional Arab cities in Palestine, whose history goes back hundreds of years; its Ottoman urban fabric still exists. A brief analysis of the traditional Arab urban form will help understand the structure of the city and how public spaces (such as Sahet Alqaryoun) have been created and transformed.

3. Public Open Spaces in Traditional Arab Cities

Looking at earlier research on public spaces in the traditional Arab city, one finds that space by itself is an important physical element that is typical in most Muslim cities. Islamic cities had no space equivalent to the Greek *agora* or the Roman *forum*. The open courtyard of the mosque in most Muslim cities provides the space needed for public gatherings for the political and social processes. Public squares, when they existed, acted only as visual nodes. With their semi-public space, they relate to the residential quarters, which in traditional Islamic terms are private spaces for the residents. Little collective social activities take place in these spaces: they retain most of the time the role as nodes of intersection or can be used by the male population to interact.

The main patterns of land use of the historic Arab-Muslim city are usually focused on a multifunctional core structure enveloping or at least partially surrounding the central mosque by different layers of interconnected *suqs*. As a rule, these are interspersed with a number of *hammams*, *madrasas*, and caravanserais, which constitute the support for the mosque and retail shops. In such urban structures everything seems to be “under one roof” and thus the city can be compared to a spacious but coherent single mansion. By analogy, the mosque would be the main living room, the *madrasas* and caravanserais would correspond to the teaching, guest and utility rooms, and the *suqs*, equipped with long rows of cupboards, would

represent the connecting internal corridors. The residential district provides the private quarter of this collective urban “house” and is structured along similar principles as the public places but with greater emphasis on the articulation and intermediate passages (Bianka 2000).

The *intra muros* residential quarter, analyzed by Stefano Bianka in *Urban Form in the Arab World: Past and Present*, grew in the space left between the edges of the multifunctional core complex and the main pedestrian spines. The structure of residential quarters was generated and sustained by strong micro-communities, often sharing the same tribal origins. These neighborhoods were largely self-reliant in the sense that each one formed a virtually autonomous social unit, embracing a representative cross-section of society and establishing, controlling and maintaining the basic shared facilities, such as the local mosques, one or several small *hammams* and public ovens and a number of street fountains. By mediating in a subtle manner between the ‘inner’ and the ‘outer’ world, it enabled the self-contained units of individual houses to merge and to become components of a coherent residential cluster, which in turn was entrenched within a larger multi-cluster unit representing a complete neighborhood. At each respective hierarchical level, each residential unit of the urban structure had its own inbuilt circulation system, the individual section and ramifications being separated and connected by interior gates that preserved the territorial integrity of the various sub-communities.

The issue of privacy remains the main question in Islamic urban environment, whether be it a street, a house or a public square. It is very important in Islamic teaching to keep a clear separation between private and public life and it is considered the most significant social characteristic of Islamic culture (Mortada, 2003). Similarly, in an attempt to reflect the great value of privacy and distinction between private and public life, the Prophet Mohammed did not recommend using roads for public meetings but laid down specific conditions for doing so. Thus the issue of privacy, particularly that of women, is a major concern of Islamic beliefs and principles. For Islam, it is the right and duty of the family to live enclosed in its house. Hisham Mortada (2003) claims that keeping a clear separation between private and public life is the most significant social characteristic of Islamic culture. Considering privacy as a religious principle, Mortada stated that the privacy of the individual and his family should be maintained in both houses and neighborhoods alike. This was successfully achieved in the traditional environment, whose outdoor spaces and streets were in a hierarchical but integrated form of order.

The outdoor spatial order of the traditional Arab Islamic cities prevented any urban space from being ambiguous in terms of function, use and ownership. Likewise S. Bianka acclaims the socio-religious quality of this hierarchy as it gives priority to the privacy of neighborhood and houses. He states,

“The complex of movement patterns which are designed in such a way as to avoid crossing enclosed spaces and to establish transition zones between public, semipublic, and semiprivate domains, and the articulation of gateway for stressing the penetration of successive level of public and private life. These and other features together form a whole coinage of three dimensional signs and symbols, which intimately related to the Islamic way of life.”

This language, according to Bianka, not only established appropriate differentiations between the individual components of the city, but also acted as the cohesive factor, which integrated the single elements into a comprehensive and

meaningful urban fabric. The density of the traditional Islamic fabric is hence not just a matter of spatial compression, but also the expression of a tightly woven social network.

4. The Story of Sahet Alqaryoun

The analysis of the traditional urban form of Arab cities can be applied, to a great extent, to the historic city of Nablus and to Sahet Alqaryoun. The latter has a dual function, being a semi-public open space for a residential quarter that hosts several commercial and industrial activities. Usually public squares, when they exist, act only as visual nodes, as we mentioned earlier. With their semi-public space, these nodes usually relate to the residential quarters, private spaces for the residents where a certain amount of interaction is possible. This is not the case with Sahet Alqaryoun, which used to be the centre of the local cotton industry and soap production during the eighteenth and nineteenth century (Nimir (1961-1975). Its location at the edge of the old city made it very convenient for trade and the moving of goods to and from buildings in this area; it was thus the commercial hub for light industry and had the largest concentration of soap factories and cotton warehouses. Because of its relatively large dimensions, at least when compared with *Sahet An-Nasir* the main public square in the historic city of Nablus, Sahet Alqaryoun hosted several cultural and social activities not only for the residents of the *harat* itself, but also for the nearby residential quarters.

Sahet Alqaryoun has been subjected to many changes during the 20th century. On 27th July 1927, a powerful earthquake shook the city of Nablus, killing fifty people and destroying around six hundred houses. The earthquake became a watershed in the city's collective memory, as the destructions in the old city were enormous, and traces of its effects are still visible to this day. As a result of the earthquake, people were frightened to stay in the historic city, and they left their houses to live outside. The earthquake had both physical and social consequences on the *Sahet*: it had a major effect on transforming both its physical image and unique local character. Physically, the destruction of many historical houses negatively influenced the coherent compact urban tissue and the spatial experience of the place. Also, gradual changes in the social structure started at that time. Most of the abandoned houses, many of them luxurious, were divided into small units and inhabited by low-income families. Later, with the crisis of the soap economy and the cotton industry, the *Sahet* further declined. By 1947, many soap factories were closed (Sharif 1999) and Sahet Alqaryoun entered another phase and became a neglected and deserted residential place that served only its residents.

In 1997, in its first effort to rehabilitate the historic city, the Municipality of Nablus, with funding from the French Government, initiated a project to enhance the aesthetic quality of the square by placing in it artwork by Fleur-Marie Fuentes, a French artist. She worked closely with the community to create a work on one of the walls overlooking the *Sahet*. Sahet Alqaryoun was selected among different sites proposed by the Municipality. The French artist, in her proposal, strived to identify expectations of the municipal representatives. She said:

“I wanted to work in an inhabited, lively and protected space, and get the feeling of being accepted there as an individual and as an artist designing a new place. I wanted to find common ground for a project based on hope and exchanges. These places—such as the wall of the Abdel Majid soap factory and

the old garden bordering the square, which was destroyed during the Intifada—I found them at Alqaryoun, a popular neighborhood to the south of the Old City. This empty area with its dull and forgotten façades, where the children had no other space than the rare cracks let empty by the parked cars, was nonetheless the greatest un-built space in the Old City. This spot seemed interesting to me because of its light, its potential harmony, its houses peopled with large families and its craft shops, its Ottoman architecture and its available space.”

Fuentes tried to understand the context with all its historical and cultural implications of the local community. She felt the need to adapt to a new dimension. For that she was keen on working closely with residents: she held several workshops with the children in order to identify some of the key elements and symbols that could be adopted in her artwork. She added,

“Completely immersed into the cultural, economic, political and sociological reality of the inhabitants of the Old City of Nablus, I felt the need to adapt to the dimensions of the site, to understand the architectural and urban fabric of the “Qasbah”. I started by interpreting the symbols and observing the places of memory. With the children, teenagers and adults, I had to find actions that would enable them to restore the national heritage as well as to prepare them to the reception of the contemporary work. Through my experiences as a plastician, I had to develop a kind of pedagogy of Urban Art—an abstract notion, and even an unknown one, because of long years of Israeli occupation.”

The implantation of the project was funded by the Municipality of Nablus, who paid for the cleaning and plastering of the exterior façades surrounding the *sahet*, and for the painting of the entrance gates of its shops. The budget (around US\$ 7.000) included the installing of light fixtures. The project in itself can be considered as a starting point towards thinking seriously about the idea of rehabilitation and beautification of the old city. It was a collective effort by the city council, the professionals and the community. Everyone felt that this project was his. The French artist said in her report,

“...Nice constructive dynamics were set up. Hundreds of people—craftsmen, industrials, bankers, workmen, engineers, architects, neighbors and families from the square, overseas development students and artists—gave a hand and this something “extra” enabled the project to take on all its dimensions and to exceed our expectations.”

On April 3, 2002, Nablus was hit by another earthquake, lasting not just a few seconds but seven long days. It also left in its wake the destruction of many historic buildings. It was launched from the skies above as Israeli fighter planes and helicopters bombarded the Qasbah of the city. The Israeli tanks and bulldozers razed to the ground the 17th-century *Wakaleh* Al-Farroukhiyyeh caravanserai as well as the 18th-century Kanaan and Al-Nabulsi soap factories.

During the attack on the city, Sahet Alqaryoun was severely hit by military action, causing the total destruction of the Alshubi *hosh*, which formed one of the sides of the square. The *hosh* is located on the southern edge of the Old Town, where nine low-income families used to live in an area of 300 m². Traditionally, one family

used the *hosh*, but it was divided into different units housing several families, each unit consisting of one or two rooms used by one family. As the *hosh* lay on the boundary of the Old Town, the Israeli army used heavy bulldozers to pull it down in order to access that part of the city. Its demolition was carried out at night while residents were still inside. Eight people were killed—3 children, 3 women and 2 men—while two old people, a man and a woman, were rescued one week after the incident.

This *hosh* is typical of traditional houses built during the Ottoman era. Part of the urban fabric of the Old Town, it enclosed one of the rare public open spaces while contributing to its spatial quality. The destruction of the house endangered the adjacent buildings and affected the structural stability of the whole block.

Today Sahet Alqaryoun has become a memorial place for the Palestinians who were killed by the Israelis during the second *Intifada*, and the place has become a symbol of resistance and patriotism. Around the square were built six martyr memorials. All of them, in marble or stone, offer pictures of the heroes, together with a text from the Quran. Some of the memorials recount the story of the martyrs and their death. Sahet Alqaryoun once again was loaded with memory which has added even more to its collective identity.

5. Discussion

Sahet Alqaryoun is a physical node of semi-public space that has been used by its local community. It is also a social space used by its residents, specially teenagers and children; they gather during the day and interact with each other or use the space as a playground. Today the place contains few small shops, just extensions of the houses and act as magnets strengthening the neighborhood's social knit by providing local needs.

The many physical transformations did not erase the past, and the old historic fabric of the place has survived in the inhabitants' memories and has passed from generation to generation. Fleur-Marie Fuentes's action added memory to the place and its stimulating quality enhanced the preservation of Palestinian memory. The appropriation of this public space hence embraced a new symbolism, without radically transforming its physical character, namely its boundaries and surrounding buildings. This can be confirmed if one refers to de Certeau's analysis of everyday spatial texts, alternative experiences split into clear texts of planned and readable cities.

Zaher Mostafa, a resident of this area for about fifty years and who owned a small grocery shop which used to be the mukhtar's place (the community representative) said,

"I remember Sahet Alqaryoun since my childhood: it used to be a very beautiful green open space. I remember many shops of the textile industry. There used to be a round elevated open area with beautiful carved stone seats where the English and Jordanian soldiers sat to discuss administrative matters related to the community with Al-Haj Sulieman Jeryes who used to be the mukhtar at that time."

Like many people, Um Imad, a housewife living in this area for quite a long time, liked Sahet Alqaryoun in the old times, and she still likes it today. The

transformation of Sahet Alqaryoun was accepted by the residents, as all the changes were a response to community needs at that time, she said,

“We were happy with the French artist’s intervention, and the beautification carried out by the municipality in 1998. Sahet Alqaryoun became better, we had trees in the main space and kids were happy with it and with the paintings, they used to enjoy gathering and playing, but sadly after the Intifada and because of neglect, the trees were uprooted and the place was not maintained with many garbage bags seen thrown here and there. Sahet Alqaryoun is not like it was in the old days anymore.”

This is also what Nida, a woman living in this neighborhood and working in a bakery shop in the main space agreed with. She added:

“Yes I like the painting done by the French architect, as it responded to the community as it talked about the community and reflected what they are. She gives sense to women putting the clothes???. It touches the community's daily life.”

Names of public spaces coalesce into text and define the city on a sociological level. They tell the history of a city and act as “a system of representation through which the collective identity defines itself, to itself and to the world beyond”. Many people in the old times used to call Sahet Alqaryoun *Sahet Altouteh*. Alqaryoun referred to the name of the main spring in this neighborhood and it has all the memory of women going to it for their daily needs. *Altouteh* referred to the big cherry (mulberry tree???) that used to be in the middle of the square. Many people still remember this place and how it used to be green with two large cherry (mulberry???) trees and the water spring that women used to frequent. This is what Um Imad said:

“I love my neighborhood. We used to go to the spring and carry our water to our house. The place was very active. We used to have many celebrations and social activities in the square”.

The “urban text” (the nomination of public spaces) is thus not fixed, but changes in a continual process of interpreting and accommodating social transformations. The physical transformation of the urban tissue of the square was associated with changes of the social structure. (Low-income families were displaying middle class values to well-known families???) who used to own the soap factories. Zaher Mustafa, living in this area noted:

“In the old days many large well-known families used to live here but not anymore: the Al-Nimir, Touqan and An-Nabulsi families used to live here but they left the neighborhood and their houses were rented to low-income families.”

6. Conclusion

Public spaces are like humans beings. They have ups and downs; sometimes they are vivid, live and active, and sometimes they are dull, empty and dark. Also, public open spaces influenced and were influenced by the world around them. With

their impeded memories, loaded symbols and codes, people can identify themselves with them. At the same time, these spaces embrace particular events that have collective social, historical and political associations; projections of these events influence the physical transformations, which can each be re-identified through time.

The various segments of the population appropriated Sahet Alqaryoun as an open public space, and this has been continually changing over time. This paper argues that urban spaces present a public history. The value of such historic places resides in the complexity of their structures, which are impregnated with the record of life and human thoughts and activities: the whole is much greater than the sum of its parts. Indeed, the meaning of an urban entity draws on the interaction between monuments, houses, meeting places and places of work, movement pattern, social habits and ritual commemorations. Through subtle transformation over time, the urban matrix incorporates and perpetuates the memory of the past generations of users. It thus reflects the *genius loci*, as conditioned by the given site factors and by the imprint of respective communities who collectively shaped their living space and were, in turn, molded by their environment.

Undoubtedly a heritage site as old as Sahet Alqaryoun, which has undergone so many historic transformations, is a challenging site for analysis. It is important to pay attention to the human efforts in labor, money, and staging of commemorations that go into the historical site in order to analyze the role of memory practice in contemporary society.

Each historic site that becomes the focus of conservation and restoration efforts needs its own analysis in order to ascertain which meanings, emotions, knowledge and behaviors are created through the contemporary memory work. It might be useful to begin a new classification system whereby we begin to distinguish between different kinds of *lieux de mémoire*, so that we can assess more concisely what kind of memory and history determine the content of memories put on public display. But it is important to note that the memory agents working within the confines of existing social processes of creating instances of recurrence and repetition need more scrutiny, as cultures and communities continue to envision themselves in this forward looking, fast-paced environment.

The continuity—one can say the tradition—of this rhythmical “give and take” accounts for the essential quality of historic cities, which must be carefully managed in order for it to remain alive for the coming generations.

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