Symbolic and Political Production of Space in Capital Cities in the Middle East and Muslim World

Professor Erdi, director of the ANR funded SpacePol Project, introduced the panel which focused on capital cities in countries with varying levels of authoritarian politics. In the age of the nation-state, it is first and foremost the political and cultural functions which distinguish capitals from other cities by linking urban space to the national imaginary. The scientific literature focuses on the fixed staging of political power in political geography and geopolitics and less has been said on the dynamics between the political regime and the fabrication of the city and lived and perceived lives in these cities (Morelle et Planel, 2018; Planel, 2015). Each national capital has a story reproducing a revised version of the national history. Architecture and landscape are then modelled and staged to show the weight of the new political power. They don’t only provide visual and spatial means of legitimation for a political regime or elite, but also as a genuine act of constituting political reality. In this case, special attention is given to the evolution of perceptions of urban aesthetics via architecture and design in different periods and political powers and how these perceptions affect the city, its population and the image of country.

The panel was the result of ongoing research within a collective research project funded by ANR France. This project named SPACEPOL Space and Politics in the Capital Cities studies all these aspects mentioned before by a comparative study of 6 capital cities which are Ankara, Moscow, Astana, Teheran, Abu Dhabi and Cairo.

The project has 3 main research lines:

1- the symbolic and political production of capital cities through the prism of power and
political ideologies.

2- the influence of global urban networks and the circulation of international models in the urban development of capital cities.

3- forms of antagonism between the spaces designed and the spaces experienced: the various strategies of resistance and adaptation of the inhabitants and the alternative forms of appropriating space.

For the project, mostly capital cities with political disruptions at some level have been chosen, which have transformed the perception of capital city’s image as the mirror of political regimes. After regime changes and political rupture like revolution or coup d'état, policy makers took up new directions of planning and urbanism in these cities. In some cases like Moscow, Ankara and Astana, the capital has even changed after the political change and new urban spaces have been created in order to reflect the symbols of political power. For example, Ankara became the mirror of Republic erasing the Ottoman memory and then the AKP government under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s presidency attempts to impose a neo-ottoman style in the architecture for wiping off early republican era’s style. Astana reflects the will of policy makers to erase the spatial footprints of Soviet era in order to promote Turco Islamic roots of the country.

Political clashes between rival groups with different beliefs often result in the reconfiguration of urban spaces. Politicians use physical structures and city planning to translate these political divisions into tangible representations. The panel's objective was to study the process of building a capital city as an image of the nation and its political regime and to explore the underlying struggles and divergences among different actors involved in the symbolic construction of space in capital cities.

Adrien Fauve, director of the French Institute for Central Asian Studies (IFEAC), Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan

The multiple spaces of Astana/Nur-Sultan: entangled narratives and practices

The capital city of Kazakhstan has already changed names several times since the moment of the independence (1991): Akmola, Astana and Nur-Sultan. Moreover, it has been analyzed as "the city of the future" by Laszczkowski and is now a functional city in the present days, as argued by Julien Thorez based on indicators of "capitalization". Beyond its symbolic construction, many urban layers are to be distinguished: the soviet city, the post-1998 city and the most recently built spaces. City planning was subject to an international contest, won by Japanese architect Kishio Kurokawa, who
proposed to incarnate his principles of the symbiotic city. However, local urbanists had to adjust to conditions on the ground, cope with the political context, economic obstacles after the 2008 world financial crisis etc. Nevertheless, several renown architects were hired in order to sign identifiable buildings, such as Manfredi Nicoletti, Norman Foster, among others. Urban policies very much focused on visible constructions, promotional events, such as 2017 International Expo. In Parallel, critical infrastructures were projected: a one-rail metro (not realized), a new airport, a new train station, universities, museums, concert hall, and of course, many commercial spaces and residential zones. Meanwhile the city was growing, a strong need for crucial infrastructure appeared, especially concerning roads and bridges linking the two banks (old and new parts of the city space). Water management and public transportation rapidly became an issue. As reminder, one must note that the city was home to 281 000 inhabitants in 1989, 328 000 in 1999, 613 000 in 2009 and now hosting 1.3 million people according to preliminary official data published in September 2022.

In addition, various narratives about a complex Eurasian identity with links to a nomadic past incarnated by monuments, contrast with hypermodern official building and differ from everyday practices of inhabitants in a consumer society under a neoliberal authoritarian regime. Capital flows in the real estate sector coming from China, Russia and the Gulf, in addition to local oligarchs at stake, contribute to the diversity of urban objects. Interestingly, the country experienced protests in 2022 that ushered in new government measures and a return to Astana as its name. Key questions come to the fore in relation to political representation and the production of space: does a new president affect the way space is produced? What is the role of the appointed (not elected) mayor in this multilayer constellation of actors?

Professor Fauve highlighted the preliminary findings after recent fieldwork was carried out by a team of three members of the SPACEPOL project. They have mainly identified new residential areas as their focus of research: there is a type of cell of residential neighbourhood, a block constructed recently, commercial spaces on the ground floor, schools nearby, etc. these are cells added to the plan less and less as the city swells. These neighbourhoods have hardly been researched. Additionally, Professor Fauve mentioned there is a lake and marshes to the west of the city. The real estate developments in the area are drying the land so there is an impact on an important ecosystem of the city as it is one of its lungs. There is a strategy to transform these in
In November 2020, media headlines in the United Arab Emirates were unusually devoted to a demolition, rather than an architectural achievement: that of Abu Dhabi’s Mina Plaza, a four-towers complex which had stood abandoned for over a decade. While their construction had stalled during the financial crisis of the late 2000s, the towers’ demolition, just as the country was moving away from the COVID-19 pandemic, was highly symbolic. It launched a new stage in the port’s "redevelopment": one that would see the transplantation of existing marketplaces into new structures and concretize the turning of the old industrial port into a "retail hub". Using the case-study of Mina Zayed as an entry point to explore the new orientations of the capital’s urban development, this communication explores how the vocabulary of urban renewal (regeneration, revitalization, redevelopment) underpins a tension: while post-oil economic plans imply the development of Abu Dhabi as a global trade and tourism destination, its status as capital requires a display of the continuity of power and of the legacy of the country’s founder. The analysis of how these concomitant imperatives is embodied in the port’s projected development will then be contrasted to alternative, and conflicted, perceptions of this urban space by Abu Dhabi residents.

Dr Assaf identified the new urban vocabulary vis a vis the traditional urban narratives being mobilized around Mina Zayed port. She also highlighted the role of para-statal actors (people involved in the urban regeneration project who have something to do with the state in one capacity or another). The port is undergoing a process of gentrification, but not...
necessarily as we know it. If there were informal uses of the space, through the presence of truck drivers or security guards and their makeshift bathrooms and gardens, it would be easy to portray as a top-down process when in fact it is an assembling of actors with divergent objectives. Space is being developed by Addar, a well-known Abu Dhabi real estate promoter, and through an art district, trying to use existing structures such as warehouses. There is an existing will to preserve the legacy of the port which is absent in the rest of the city, it talks of a sentimental attachment to the port.

She also identified three different ways of reacting to the redevelopment: court cases, whereby the distribution of the industrial land done by the state is being contested and compensation is involved; through journalistic writing about the memories of the port, many on behalf of South Asian workers displaced by the transformation; through artistic works: documenting spaces and materials that are about to disappear.

Azadeh Mashayekhi, University College of London, UK

The politics of urban development in post-revolution Iran: the case of Tehran

Focusing on the link between power and urban space in the formation of capital cities, Dr Mashayekhi’s paper uses Tehran, the capital city of the Islamic Republic of Iran, as a case study, with its particular socio-political situation as the capital of a modern theocratic state. By reflecting on Iran’s political transition after the 1979 Revolution and by reviewing four decades of state-making practices, this paper shows how the polarised political structure of Iran – which combines authoritarian and democratic practices, and where sovereignty is divided between
elected executives and unelected ones—has directly influenced urban planning and development policies and practices and, therefore, Tehran’s urban form. Focusing on several post-revolution mega-urban development projects in Tehran namely Abbas-Abad hill development (1981-2007) and Maskan Mehr (2007-2022) this paper shows how the planning and development of these projects are the outcomes of the political project of the state and its founding ideology. Nevertheless, the finding of this paper shows that the making of capital cities, not only reflects the political project of the state but in fact, is the main device with which the state apparatus further consolidates its power and authority and maintains its legitimacy.

Dr Mashayekhi focused on the creation of political subjects through urban projects in Tehran. She identified the different stages in the urban development project of Abbas-Abad hill, and how those stages far from representing a homogeneous process they reflect the different changes in the Iranian political landscape through process fragmentations. The role of the mayor becomes important as a political actor. Importantly, the Abbas-Abbad Hill transformation has a three-fold dimension: it was declared a new cultural and diplomatic center; a new bridge Tabiat bridge was built after the design of a young architect Leila Araghian (a bridge that incidentally allows for other non-sanctioned interactions between users); the project served the purpose of image reparation through spaces such as the Abrahamian Garden. But there are other questions of accessibility that need to be answered, such as the difficulty to access the hill without a car, taking us to key issues such as who can access such a space.

Professor Gülçin Erdi (IFEA Istanbul, CNRS, SpacePol Project PI)

Remarks

Looking at the three capital cities dissected in the panel, Professor Erdi identified the important connecting lines that allow for an interesting comparative exercise between the different research objects. Some of these commonalities are obvious, others are less so, for example the presence of Japanese companies and urban planning expertise in all the cases. She offered some
**Thematic Lines of Analysis:**

*Historical Significance:* Many capital cities in the Middle East and Muslim world have deep historical roots, often dating back centuries or even millennia. These cities have witnessed the rise and fall of empires, the spread of Islam, and the influence of various civilizations. Historical landmarks and monuments, such as palaces, mosques, and ancient ruins, play a significant role in shaping the symbolic production of space.

*Political Power Centers:* Capital cities are centers of political power and governance. They house government institutions, presidential palaces, parliament buildings, and administrative offices. The layout and architecture of these areas reflect the authority and grandeur associated with political power.

*Religious and Cultural Identity:* Islam plays a central role in the Middle East and Muslim world, and capital cities often feature prominent religious symbols and institutions. Mosques, shrines, and religious schools are essential elements of the urban landscape, and their locations and designs contribute to the symbolic representation of Islamic identity. Many capital cities in the Muslim world incorporate elements of Islamic urban design principles. These principles often include the presence of central squares or courtyards, grand mosques, and extensive use of calligraphy and geometric patterns in architecture. The design aims to reflect Islamic values and create a sense of harmony and order.

*Monumental Architecture:* Capital cities often showcase monumental architecture and urban planning as a symbol of national identity and progress. These structures, such as modern
skyscrapers, government complexes, and cultural centers, project a sense of modernity and economic development.

**Public Spaces and Urban Design:** The design and allocation of public spaces, parks, and squares in capital cities have political significance. These areas often serve as venues for public gatherings, demonstrations, and celebrations, enabling the expression of political and social demands (for example Gençlik Parkı in Ankara).

In addition, public spaces and plazas in capital cities often play a crucial role in the political production of space. They can serve as venues for political rallies, demonstrations, and celebrations, allowing people to express their political and social affiliations. Examples include Tahrir Square in Cairo, Egypt, which became a symbol of the Arab Spring protests.

**National Museums and Cultural Institutions:** Capital cities often house national museums and cultural institutions that preserve and promote national identity and history. These institutions play a significant role in shaping narratives and disseminating the ruling ideology. They showcase cultural heritage, artifacts, and historical narratives that align with the dominant political discourse.

**Government Districts and Palaces:** Government districts and presidential palaces in capital cities serve as symbols of political power and authority. They are often heavily guarded and act as physical manifestations of state sovereignty. Examples include the Presidential Palace in Ankara, Turkey, and the Qasr Al Watan in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates.

**Urban Planning and Infrastructure:** The spatial organization and infrastructure of capital cities are often influenced by political considerations. The development of grand boulevards, administrative districts, and landmark structures are intentional efforts to shape the physical and symbolic landscape of the city, projecting power and authority.

**Contested Spaces:** Capital cities in the Middle East and the Muslim world may also have contested spaces that reflect political, ethnic, or religious tensions. These areas can become sites of protest, resistance, or conflicting narratives. For example, the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif complex in Jerusalem is a highly contested religious site for Muslims and Jews. In the case of our capital cities, Forest farm of Atatürk in Ankara is a politically contested area between Islamist power and republicans in terms of urban memory and heritage.

**Urban Segregation and Inequality:** Capital cities in the Middle East and Muslim world can also display stark socio-economic inequalities and spatial segregation. Wealthier areas, characterized by luxury developments and high-end commercial centers, may exist alongside marginalized neighbourhoods with inadequate infrastructure and services. These spatial divisions reflect underlying political and economic dynamics.

**Geopolitical Considerations:** The geopolitical context of the region can influence the symbolic and political production of space in capital cities. Strategic locations, such as proximity to important resources or neighbouring countries, can shape the development and prominence of capital cities.

By considering all of these aspects, we should note that it is essential to recognize that each
capital city in the Middle East and Muslim world has its unique historical, cultural, and political contexts, which contribute to the symbolic and political production of space. The interplay between these factors helps shape the urban landscape and the representation of power, identity, and governance within these cities.

It is also important to note that the production of space in capital cities is not static, and it evolves over time, reflecting the changing political dynamics and aspirations of the societies. Different regimes or ruling powers may leave their mark on the urban landscape, shaping the symbolic and political significance of these cities.