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Elwageeh , Aya

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Rethink the City:

New Approaches to
Global and Local
Urban Challenges

Editors

Anja van der Watt

Luz María Vergara

Igor Pessoa

Caroline Newton

Contributing authors

Donya Ahmadi

Yuting Tai

Rosa E. Donoso

Rachel Keeton

Aya El-Wageeh

Bea de los Arcos

Roberto Rocco

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Editors

Anja van der Watt¹

Luz María Vergara²

Igor Pessoa³

Caroline Newton⁴

Contributing authors

Aya El-Wageeh⁵

Bea de los Arcos⁶

Donya Ahmadi⁷

Rachel Keeton⁸

Roberto Rocco⁹

Rosa E. Donoso¹⁰

Yuting Tai¹¹

¹ Department of Architecture, Urbanism and Building Sciences, Delft University of Technology, Netherlands, anja@vdwatt.com

² Facultad de Arquitectura, Arte y Diseño, Universidad Diego Portales, Chile, luz.vergara@udp.cl

³ Department of Public Administration, University of Twente, Netherlands, i.pessoa@utwente.nl

⁴ Department of Urbanism, Delft University of Technology, Netherlands, c.e.l.newton-1@tudelft.nl, Netherlands

⁵ Ain Shams University, Cairo, Egypt, A.M.A.ElWageeh@tudelft.nl

⁶ The Extension School for Continuous Education, Delft University of Technology, Netherlands, b.delosArcos@tudelft.nl

⁷ Rijksuniversiteit Groningen, Netherlands, donya.kad@gmail.com

⁸ University of Twente, Netherlands, r.e.keeton@utwente.nl

⁹ Department of Urbanism, Delft University of Technology, Netherlands, r.c.rocco@tudelft.nl

¹⁰ Departamento de Asuntos Públicos, FLACSO, Ecuador, redonoso@flacso.edu.ec

¹¹ Ecosystems and Sediment Dynamics department, Marine and Coastal Systems Unit, Deltares, yuting.tai@deltares.nl

Scientific committee

As mentioned on p.148

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Anja van der Watt

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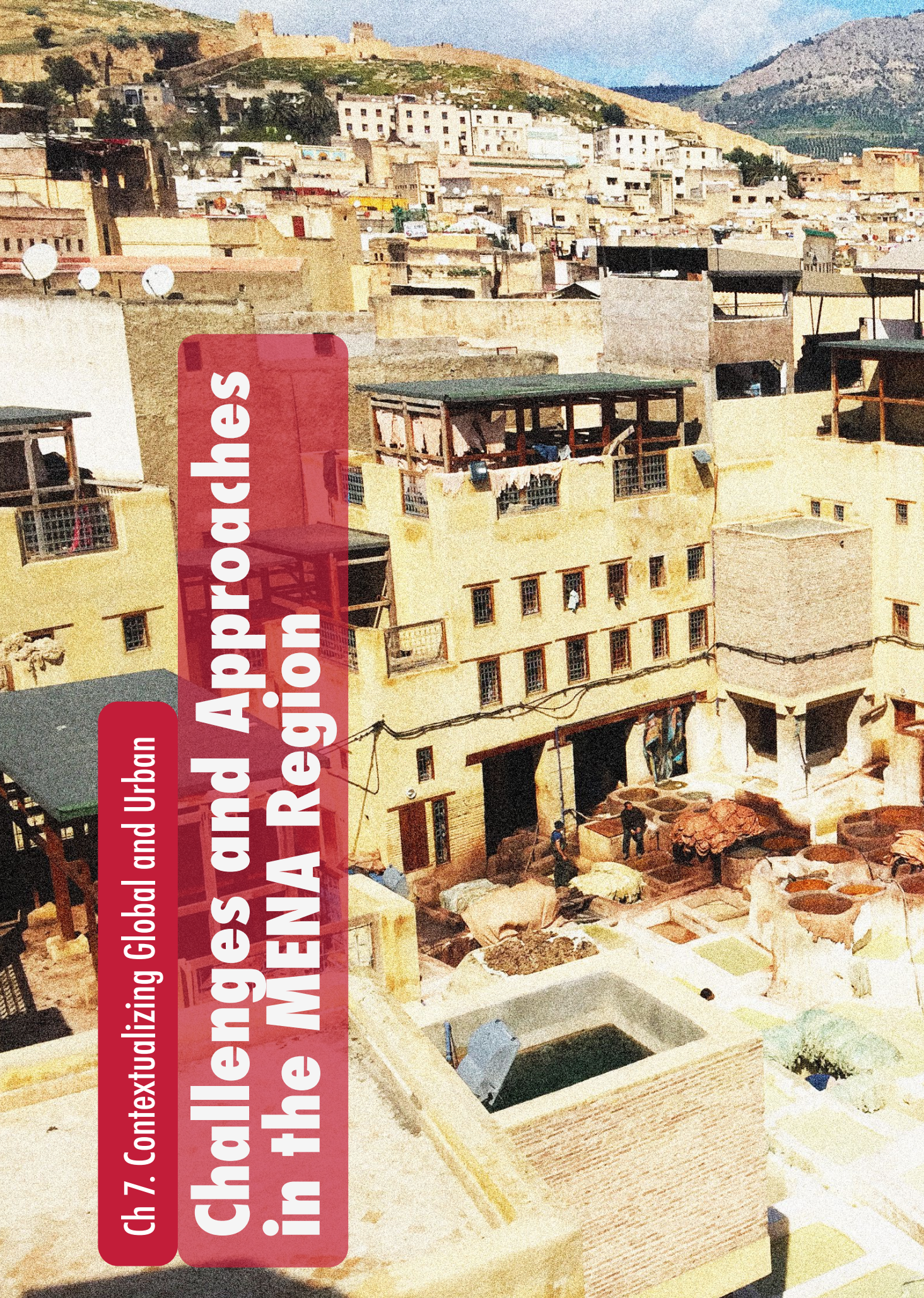
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Ch 7. Contextualizing Global and Urban

Challenges and Approaches in the MENA Region





A more diverse and inclusive scope of urban studies is needed to develop a body of knowledge capable of understanding diverse cities. Motivated by this need, this chapter focus on the MENA region to emphasise the importance of contextualisation, as well as the link between the context's specificity and global urban challenges and approaches. This is achieved in two parts. The first highlights the implications of the region's socio-cultural, political, and economic dimensions on the manifestations of urban challenges. The second discusses the impact of the MENA's context on the practice of urban approaches in the region. The chapter highlights four main issues. First, the urban challenges regarding vulnerability, spatial injustice, housing shortage, and citizens' weak right to the city are discussed as by-products of the complex context of the MENA region. Second, the gap between the promised sustainable urban development strategies in the region and their ambiguous application on the ground highlights the absence of proper contextualisation. Third, a brief examination of the values of pluralism in knowledge creation and citizens' right to the city against the context of the MENA suggests their limited existence. Fourth, the MENA context stimulates innovative and adaptive urban practices from its citizens and urban practitioners. These findings pinpoint the need for focused contextualisation that zooms into individual cities in the region.

Keywords

Contextualization, culture of engagement, integrated planning, MENA region

Dr. Aya El-Wageeh

Assistant Lecturer Ains Shams University

Aya El-Wageeh is an Assistant Professor in the Urban Design and Planning Department at Ain Shams University, Egypt. She is also a guest researcher at the Department of Urbanism, Faculty of Architecture and the Built Environment, Delft University of Technology, the Netherlands. Her research focuses on better understanding urban activism and residents, wpractices to engage with the governance of their neighbourhoods, especially in Global South contexts. Through her participation in teaching courses related to contemporary environmental issues and human behaviour, Aya discusses the topic of urban activism from different perspectives and in relation to different fields. Aya recently received her PhD from the Delft University of Technology.

“Having graduated from a Greek University with a strong focus on the European context it was very interesting for me to familiarize with the MENA and African Challenges.

Although the assignments focused more on the local context, they helped me realize the global connections between the issues of Urban Resilience, Housing Provision and Management and Spatial Justice.”

Introduction

A 'Global South' perspective is needed to develop a body of knowledge capable of understanding diverse cities (Allegra et al., 2013; Parnell & Oldfield, 2014). In this regard, widening the scope of urban research to include different contexts and regions can answer the call to decolonise urban studies and support knowledge production from ex-centric locations (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2012). Besides this continuous need to understand excluded contexts, it is important to avoid reducing the different experiences of countries in one region while drawing general conclusions (Abdou, 2020). Motivated by these arguments, this chapter highlights the manifestation of global urban challenges and the main urban planning approaches for dealing with them in parts of the MENA region.

Urban challenges related to housing provision, vulnerability, and spatial injustice are occurring on a global scale. To deal with these, such urban approaches as integrated urban planning and effective citizens' involvement (Andrews et al., 2008) are developed. When adopting these approaches, it is crucial to consider the specificity of the context under investigation (Parnell & Oldfield, 2014; Roy, 2009). Socio-cultural, political, economic, and environmental historical contexts shape the emergence of such urban challenges and the approaches that respond to them in their cities (Patel, 2014; Watson, 2009). This is a process of contextualisation that focuses on examining and understanding global urban issues from within the studied context. Based on this, the context of the MENA region includes the influences that led to the manifestation of global urban challenges in its cities. Additionally, it includes the local efforts that operationalise global urban approaches to respond to these challenges locally. With a particular focus on the MENA region, this chapter emphasises the importance of contextualisation and the link between context specificity and global urban challenges and approaches. This is achieved by exploring several urban challenges and solutions in parts of the MENA region.

The MENA region has a shared political and cultural history spreading over a wide geographical boundary. Politically, the MENA region shares a history of post-colonial regimes that adopted state socialism and nurtured Arab nationalism ideologies (Mansour, 2020). These regimes rely on authoritarianism and centralisation to remain in power (Bayat, 2013). From Morocco to Bahrain and in between, the Arab Spring released destabilising, political forces in the region. However, most of these forces struggled to positively change the centralised and authoritarian regimes (Grinin et al., 2018). Culturally, MENA countries share language, religions, and many customs and traditions (Mabry, 2013). Geographically, the wide geographical boundary of the MENA region includes wealthy and resourceful countries, as well as economically- and politically-struggling ones (UN-Habitat, 2012). The resultant implications of these shared and complex cultural, historical, and political layers



Rooftops of Morocco. Image by Anja van der Walt

are produced and experienced in the urban realm of the region's cities (Allegra et al., 2013).

That said, MENA cities have two main variations. First, there are old cities with a complex relationship with modernity and globalisation, such as Baghdad, Cairo, Beirut, and Damascus. Second, there are Gulf cities that sprint towards modernity with 'concentrations of corporate skyscrapers, luxury lifestyles, and world-class cultural institutions', as seen in cities like Dubai, Abu Dhabi and Doha (Andraos, 2016). In these two variations, local and grassroot efforts are taking place to contextualise and develop global urban approaches. To balance between shared urban issues in the MENA region while acknowledging the diverse experiences of its countries, this chapter focuses on cities from economically- and politically-struggling^[1] countries. The chapter is organised into two parts: The first links the context of these countries to its urban challenges, while the second discusses the impact of the MENA's context on the practice of urban approaches in the region.

The implications of the MENA's context on the urban challenges in the region

The MENA region faces major challenges related to population and urban growth, unemployment, political instability, severe water shortage and resources depletion, slow and incomplete economic and governance reforms (League of Arab States, 2016), and undefined civil rights regarding civil societies' participation in the urbanisation of their cities. This section highlights the implications of the region's socio-cultural, political, and economic dimensions on the manifestations of such urban challenges as vulnerability, spatial injustice, informal settlements, and absence of citizens' 'rights to the city' (Lefebvre, 1996).

The political context of the region significantly discourages citizens from engaging in urban governance. Typically, the region's regimes adopt centralised planning and governance (Bayat, 2013). Therefore, the citizens became entirely dependent on the state for urban planning, governance, and management. Accordingly, decentralisation and public participation in urban planning and governance are restrained. Despite the Arab Spring and the resultant voices calling for a new mode for urban practice (see, for example, Ibrahim, 2014), the repressive practices of the authoritarian regimes constrain organised change in urban policies (Harb, 2019). In consequence, post-Arab Spring regimes were unable to empower the resultant strong sense of activism (Meijer & Butenschön, 2017) and connection to urban spaces. In Egypt, public participation had been adopted by its central planning institution for decades. However, these participation practices were relatively low

[1] These are states undergoing political change in which they are either gradually sliding back to stricter authoritarian regimes or on a shaky transition to democratic ones, or engaged into civil wars (see Mansour, 2020; Sika, 2019)

on the 'ladder of participation' (Arnstein, 1969) and function within constraining structures of elitism, fear, and mistrust (Stephen Connelly, 2009). Despite the state's support to few community-based urban development projects (see MADD Platform, 2015; Zaazaa, 2019), Cairo experienced a continuous neglect of public participation in the urban upgrading projects of its neighbourhoods (see Ashoub & Elkhateeb, 2021; Elkhateeb, 2020; Sayed, 2021). This selective manner towards citizen engagement questions the presence of political will to involve citizens in the future of their cities.

The states' dominance over urban planning and governance does not only discourages citizen engagement, but also shapes an unfamiliar culture towards citizens' engagement in public life. The culture of engagement is 'a set of norms and expectations of what kinds of political interactions between state and citizens are appropriate and possible' (Steve Connelly, 2010, p. 335). The authoritarian regimes in the MENA region control and undermine citizen engagement in public life under the pretext of keeping the state's order and security. According to Elwageeh et al. (2020), the continuous controlling attitude from states causes an incrementally negative connotation to citizens' engagement in urban aspects. Therefore, citizens' right to shape and produce their cities is not an integrated part of citizens' rights in these contexts. This makes the right to the city neither state-supported nor widely claimed by the citizens.

The MENA regions' economic context played a major role in the existence of spatial injustice in its cities. The neoliberal reforms in the region were economic and led to states retreating over financial and service provision (Bayat, 2013). States' retreats and the weak presence of grassroots initiatives to maintain the urban quality resulted in an urban deterioration of historic centres in many cities (League of Arab States, 2016). Moreover, urban development plans and budgeting in specific cities led to a concentration of wealth, job opportunities, and better services within them (see, for example, Shawkat & Hendawy, 2017; Shawkat & Khalil, 2016). The wide gap in urban development between cities in the same country led to mass migration from small cities and rural areas to major cities. Consequently, major cities are unable to provide enough jobs, affordable housing, and basic services (UN-Habitat, 2012). The citizens responded to these unmet needs by building informal houses and self-providing urban services. As a result, the spread of informal areas and the urban deterioration of many old districts continue to challenge cities in Morocco, Egypt, Iraq, and Algeria (League of Arab States, 2016). The spread of the unplanned and informal settlements showcase the significant urban segregation and spatial injustice in the cities, especially when compared with neighbouring new elitist and exclusive urban communities in the same cities.

The shift from socialist governance to neoliberalism in the MENA region resulted in 'neoliberal urbanism' (Abdelmonem, 2016). This urbanism focuses on new investments and developments from a market perspective (Hourani, 2014). The neoliberal urbanism ambition shaped the development plans for new neighbourhoods around the old cities, such as New Cairo in Egypt, and the urban upgrading plans of city centres, such as Beirut's Downtown and Amman's Abdali Urban Regeneration Project. Abdelmonem (2016) and Hourani (2014) described these new projects as forced, distant, and disconnected from their surrounding urban fabric. This has led to more exclusive living cultures where proper public services have become the privilege of high-income neighbourhoods and gated communities (Mahmoud & Rashid, 2016). The market-driven urbanism is now growing and leading the new plans for private investment of Egypt's 'New Administrative Capital' (MHUC, 2021; UDC, 2015), with the state becoming more of a tenant and/or partner (Abdelmonem, 2016). The continuous expansion of this exclusive living culture increases the division in social structure and exacerbates cities' vulnerability to spatial injustice.

Finally, man-made and natural hazards risks are significantly present in the MENA region. Regarding the former, the region's state of conflict has been continuing for decades in the form of internal disputes and external invasions and occupations. The resultant unprecedented flows of forced migration and displacement have hindered cities' abilities to provide proper living conditions for refugees and thus, many refugees are forced to live in unsafe areas (League of Arab States, 2016). The prolonged state of conflict has turned temporal refugee camps into permanent housing, which are then re-appropriated by refugees to become more responsive to their needs (Dalal, 2014). Even the post-conflict recovery of demolished cities in Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria is torn between reconstruction and recovery (Alharithy, 2021), as well as how to balance between what to restore or replace (Barakat, 2021). Regarding natural hazards, they vary between high risks of flooding, earthquakes, dust storms, and severe droughts (The World Bank, 2014). According to Waha et al. (2017), the region is one of the world's most exposed to the negative impacts of climate change. The presence of these man-made and natural risks exposes the urban, environmental, and social vulnerability of the cities in the MENA region (The World Bank, 2014), especially among the vulnerable groups of refugees and internally-displaced persons (Eltinay, 2019).

This overview of the context's cultural, political, and economic influences shows how they have produced the urban challenges and experiences in the cities of the region. These influences created a culture of dependence on the government in urban planning and governance. This dependency is accompanied by security and state control over civil society. It has resulted in a deep socio-cultural disadvantage in which the citizens are largely unfamiliar with citizen engagement in decision-

Konstantina, student
Athens, Greece

"The Geographic Regions, Middle East and North Africa, and African Challenges, were the topics I enjoyed the most because I didn't have access to such subjects before..."

making and urban governance. This challenging context has made cities in the MENA vulnerable, spatially unjust, and lacking in citizens' involvement in urban planning and governance.

The impact of the MENA's context on practicing global urban approaches in the region

Various urban approaches have been developed and generalised to respond to global urban challenges. In an abstract form, these approaches focus mainly on addressing three aspects: urban planning, stakeholders and their mutual relationships, and the role of urban practitioners and scholars. Regarding urban planning, a holistic and integrated approach has been globally introduced (see Borie et al., 2019; Kuhla von Bergmann et al., 2013; Yigitcanlar & Teriman, 2015). This approach values different disciplines and the perspectives of different actors. It establishes pluralism in acquiring knowledge, and the operation of the urban planning system in a holistic manner rather than a sectoral one. Concerning stakeholders and their mutual relationships, effective citizen involvement in urban planning and governance has been widely advocated. Studies have focused on establishing 'enabler and responsive' governments that support 'willing, able, and equipped' citizens for effective involvement in urban governance and management (Andrews et al., 2008). Finally, the role of urban practitioners is being increasingly directed towards adopting flexible and adaptive planning strategies, as well as acting as mediators, and sometimes even as politicians in stakeholder interactions (Johnson, 2012).

These approaches are general and applicable to many contexts, therefore, the core issue is to contextualise them to the regions. For instance, the Arab New Urban Agenda declared the adoption of sustainable development objectives regarding equity and social integration, housing and basic services, prosperous living for all, integrated and sustainable human settlements, and urban resilience against climate change (League of Arab States, 2016). These objectives include strategies for integrated planning and effective citizen involvement. However, such strategies are insufficiently contextualised to the cultural, economic, social, urban, and environmental specificities of the countries. These strategies continue to be ambiguous on the local and operational levels. According to Göll et al. (2019), the MENA region is progressing modestly in fulfilling the sustainable development objectives. The decision-makers in the MENA region need to face the local challenges and prioritise the contextualisation of the urban strategies and approaches for achieving their Urban Agenda.

To achieve contextualisation, Salama (2019) highlighted that understanding a context in terms of its content should be an important driver rather than an end goal. In this perspective, deciding on the adoption and application of urban approaches is driven by the particular issues of the context. Thus, the context is not overshadowed by the global urban approach, but rather, it is a source for improving the existing approach or developing parallel ones. Abdelatif et al. (2015) proposed a framework for contextualisation that focused on abstracting the values inside the urban approach, and then examining them against the different political, economic, environmental, and socio-cultural dimensions in a context. Applying this to the MENA region, the contextualisation of integrated planning, citizen involvement, and adaptive, enabled, and skilled urban practitioners depend on defining the values within these approaches and the possibility of their existence in the context. These values include – but are not limited to – pluralism in knowledge creation and citizens' equal rights in shaping, using, and producing urban spaces.

Indeed, focused research is needed for defining more values related to each approach. However, these two values are briefly examined against the context of the MENA and its resultant culture of engagement. As previously explained, the culture of engagement defines what society believes as possible and appropriate in citizen–state interactions. Additionally, the controlling and unappreciative view of the regimes towards citizens' involvement in the MENA region dominates societal perceptions. This dominant perception suggests a limited existence to the values of pluralism in knowledge creation and citizens' right to the city in the region. A paradigm shift is needed to (re)define these values in the perception of society. The road to this paradigm shift is long and requires persistent collective efforts. These should bring these values into the society's culture, and eventually become reflected in integrated and citizen-oriented responses to the urban challenges in the region.

So far, the MENA's context has been framed to shape urban challenges in the region and as an obstacle hindering resilient, integrated, and citizen-centred urban approaches. However, the closer we observe the different cities in the MENA region, the more we notice how grassroots initiatives and urban practitioners work on shifting societal cultures and expanding the limits of what is possible and appropriate in the context. Such expansions occur from within by practicing integration, resilience, and right to the city. These practices mobilise a gradual change in the culture of urban planning and governance in the region. Additionally, these local practices in such challenging contexts enrich the body of knowledge by introducing innovative and adaptive responses in the planning theory and practice.

For instance, the urban poor in many of the region's cities practice 'quiet encroachment' (Bayat, 2013) as a form of survival and urban improvement. The Palestinians are practicing 'insurgent planning' to resist occupation-based urban plans (Meir, 2005). In so doing, they problematising the use of the 'informality' term in a context with a settler-colonial nature (Ayoub, 2020). Social innovations by grassroots initiatives in deprived neighbourhoods in Egypt adopt the 'shadow approach' for implementing urban interventions apart from local authorities (El-Azzazy & Zaazaa, 2017). In post-conflict Iraqi cities, the citizens' adaptive capacity (Alkhalefy et al., 2016) and their physical and social resiliency (Al-Rawi, 2021) are paving the road for gradual urban recovery.

Despite the MENA region's problematic contexts, urban activism by practitioners and researchers exists. However, Harb (2019) mentioned that their possibilities are limited to 'knowledge production and changing the terms of the public debate on the city'. In Lebanon, The Beirut Urban Lab (2006) documents and analyses ongoing transformation processes regarding the themes of urban recovery, citizenship, and planning and informality. In addition, the lab has devoted a special focus to Beirut's urban recovery after the recent port blast in 2020. In Egypt, The Built Environment Observatory (2015) aims to support scholars, civil society, and officials with policy analyses, fact sheets, and resources to pursue equitable development. Meanwhile, Tadamun (2012) offers 'know your city', 'know your government', and 'voices of Cairo' as initiatives to mobilize, raise awareness and support the citizens to improve their communities and demand their urban rights. In Morocco, small movements have focused on researching urban issues related to informality, housing, and service provision without criticising the urban policies (Harb, 2019). Urban practitioners in the MENA region are struggling to experiment with ideas, approaches, and tools for building partnerships and engaging citizens. However, several practitioners have produced real alternative solutions led by community engagement approach and integrated urban planning and development strategies, such as Public Work (2012) in Lebanon, Cluster (2011), Takween (2009), Athar Lina (2012) in Egypt, and the Association of Tunisian Urban Planners in Tunisia (Harb, 2019).



الصرف
Change
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Bureau de change
Currency Exchange Bureau

Conclusion

Starting from a multi-central approach in the production of knowledge in urban studies, this chapter has contextualised global urban challenges, and some of the approaches responding to them, in the MENA region. This contextualisation pinpointed four main impacts of the MENA's context. First, the urban challenges of vulnerability, spatial injustice, housing shortage, and weak citizens' right to the city are by-products of the region's complex content. Second, the gap between the promised sustainable urban development strategies and their ambiguous application on the ground highlights the absence of contextualisation in the region. Third, the brief examination of the values of pluralism in knowledge creation and the citizens' right to the city against the context of the MENA suggest their limited existence. Accordingly, re-shaping a culture of engagement that includes these values in the MENA region requires a paradigm shift in public perception. This reshaped public perception can redefine power relations, the role of different actors, and the rights of citizens in the context. Fourth (and against the odds), the MENA context stimulates innovative and adaptive urban practices from the region's citizens and urban practitioners.

That said, the potential exists to stimulate a change regarding the urban challenges in the MENA region and the approaches responding to them. While the highlighted efforts in different cities are inspirational, they appear to be scattered and uncoordinated. Therefore, there is an urgent need to move forward with the region's contextualisation and zoom in to individual cities in the region. This could provide a deeper understanding of the cities' unique contexts. Additionally, it can provide a critical analysis of these scattered grassroots efforts and their influence on shifting the culture of citizens' engagement in cities. This focused contextualisation aligns with Gaventa's (2006) recommendation for understanding the culture and improving it from within to deepen a change in challenging contexts. This can be achieved through persistent and collective work from policymakers, academics, and professionals in the region.

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Rethink the City: New Approaches to Global and Local Urban Challenges

Rethink the City is a Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) of the Faculty of Architecture and the Built Environment at the Delft University of Technology. Since its creation in 2017, the MOOC Rethink the City has had more than 25.700 learners, involving students from over 180 countries, and 37 lecturers from 20 different nationalities. The purpose of the course is to progressively build-up a critical perspective on local urban challenges in the Global South around the themes of spatial justice, housing provision and management, and urban resilience. After five runs, the course has consolidated a strong online community that has contributed with nearly 10.000 first-source visuals from all over the world, and developed multiple debates around pressing global and local urban challenges.

This book draws inspiration from the online learning experience: its aim is to navigate through local narratives and international perspectives by developing reflections based on the students' work. The book builds a comprehensive overview of the local urban challenges we face in a global context, considering rapid urbanisation, the climate crisis, the increasing financialisation of cities, and socio-spatial inequalities. The main themes of the course: housing provision and management, urban resilience, and spatial justice are revisited with critical essays that combine students' and experts' perspectives. The goal is to trigger the debate on topics regarding the right to the city, adequate and affordable housing, resilience strategies, the relation between space and diversity, and planning in times of uncertainty. This publication intends to be a source of inspiration for students, academics and professionals who look for alternative approaches to urban design and planning based on a learning experience and knowledge exchange beyond geographical borders.


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