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

Responsable

Gülçin Erdi
(chargée de recherche CNRS, CITERES)

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11h-13h
Salle Déméter 006

Intervenants

Laure Assaf
(New York University of Abu-Dhabi)

Adrien Fauve
(Institut français d'études sur l'Asie centrale)

Azadeh Mashayekhi
(University College of London)

Nora Semmoud
(Université de Tours / CITERES)

Haim Yacobi
(University College of London)

Résumé de l'atelier

Our panel will focus on capital cities in countries which have authoritarian politics in different levels. We argue that, 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 is focusing 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, a special attention will be 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.

For the panel, we have chosen mostly capital cities with political disruptions at some level which have transformed the perception of capital city's image as the mirror of political regimes. Policy makers took up new directions of planning and urbanism after political power's change. 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. Nur-Sultan reflects the will of policy makers to erase the spatial footprints of Soviet era in order to promote turco-islamic roots of the country.

Urban spaces are often reconfigured by political clashes between rival groups with distinct political, cultural and religious beliefs, and politics seek to translate these political divisions into physical structures and order of the city. The objective of the panel will be to study firstly the capital building process as the image of nation and political regime and then to show the backdoor struggles and divergences between different actors in the symbolic construction of space via capital cities.

Programme

Laure Assaf
"Legacy" and "destination": Developing Abu Dhabi
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 are embodied in the port's projected development will then be contrasted to alternative, and conflicted, perceptions of this urban space by Abu Dhabi residents.

Adrien Fauve
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 now 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. 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 neo-liberal 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. Recent fieldwork conducted by a team of three members of the SPACEPOL project will elaborate on these puzzling narratives and practices.

Azadeh Mashayekhi
The politics of urban development in post-revolution Iran: the case of Tehran
Concentrating on the link between power and urban space in the formation of capital cities, this 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.

Nora Semmoud
Alger, une capitale où la production symbolique et politique de l'espace se bouscule
L'histoire urbaine contemporaine de la capitale algérienne, Alger, correspond bien à l'hypothèse centrale du panel qui envisage la production symbolique et politique de l'espace dans les capitales comme fournissant non seulement

des moyens visuels et spatiaux de légitimation d'un régime ou d'une élite politique mais aussi un véritable acte de constitution de la réalité politique. Dans cette contribution, la compréhension des logiques politiques et sociales des pouvoirs en place (ou des rapports de forces du moment) est censée transparaitre, d'un côté, à travers l'examen de l'urbanisme et du marquage symbolique de l'espace par des réalisations architecturales et des opérations urbaines emblématiques, et de l'autre, à travers leurs effets sociaux et spatiaux. Ce marquage symbolique de l'espace reflète un discours idéologique qui se veut opposé à celui du régime précédent. Il y a ainsi une forme de « dialogue » entre les pouvoirs qui se sont succédé à travers leurs marquages de l'espace et les pratiques d'effacement (destruction/reconstruction) et de rupture ou de transformation avec des formes de continuité et de concessions.

Par ailleurs, en mobilisant la notion de réception sociale de l'urbanisme (Semmoud, 2007) qui suppose une confrontation entre les conditions de production et d'usage de l'espace, je propose d'examiner les effets sociaux spatiaux de ces urbanismes successifs et les oppositions et mouvements sociaux qu'ils ont généré. La communication se focalisera particulièrement sur la période d'après 1965 et pendant le Hirak.

Haim Yacobi
Jerusalem: the Architecture of a Settle-Colonial Capital City
"…[M]onumental buildings mask the will to power and the arbitrariness of power beneath signs and surfaces which claim to express collective will and collective thought".
(Lefebvre, 1991: 143)

"Jerusalem is the eternal capital of the Jewish people, a city reunified so as never again to be divided… Our people's unparalleled affinity to Jerusalem has spanned thousands of years and is at the basis of our national renaissance. It has united our people, secular and religious people alike".
(Benjamin Netanyahu, 21/05/2009)

The above citation, by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, is a common perception among Israelis, who see "united Jerusalem" as a fixed urban space, a given subject of Israeli sovereignty and ethno-national aspirations. However, the city of Jerusalem is manufactured by geopolitical practices including not just military occupation and exclusionary policies which are extensively discussed in the existing literature, but also planning and architecture which contribute, as this presentation will claim, to the production of the city's imagined geographies. Yet, despite the great relevance of architecture and the built environment to the study of geopolitics, these two fields of knowledge are often analyzed separately. Hence, in this presentation I attempt to discuss architecture in Jerusalem, a settler-colonial city, within the growing literature on urban geopolitics. In this presentation I will examine the use of "architecture as control" as particularly rife in settler societies. Through an examination of the political, social, and cultural dimensions of specific sites, I will open a wider discussion on power, protest and spatial counter-products that are inherent to the production of urban spaces and their built environment.