

Abstract

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Cairo: a deconstruction reading of space

'One day I would like to write a book on Egypt and Derrida. The two... are tethered together in suggestive ways' (McQuillan, 2010:255) Built upon multiple layers of history, the image of Egypt, and Cairo the capital city, is caught in a growing tension between past and present, national and global, east and west and the growing population reflects heterogeneous backgrounds, classes and cultures. However, studies of urban space in Egypt show the dominance of a monolithic historic image through 'a singular and short-sighted theme – namely socio/ religious reading of urban spatial patterns' (Elsheshtawy, 2004:2), which has linked the city to reflections and pre-conceptions detached from the surrounding reality and accordingly, influenced the emerging relations and patterns of power. This dominance has also resulted in a recurrence of the polarisation conflict between historic concepts, tradition, and nationalisation on the one hand and western concepts, modernisation, and globalisation on the other. The Egyptian identity is thus associated with many synonymous binaries in between the local and the western, which has helped to create a chain of inner conflicts within the city space (Elsheshtawy, 2004). These binaries were approached through themes of 'orientalism' (refer to Said, 2003[1978]), which is also considered to be a reflection of the city's whole hearted acceptance of the western metaphysics, particularly the binary opposition between east and west. Simultaneously, Jacques Derrida, the French philosopher, visited Egypt in February 2000 where he gave a series of lectures at the Egyptian Supreme Council for Culture (Al-Ahram-Weekly, 2000a), which also questioned the traditional reading and monolithic representation of Egypt. His reflections brought about a considerable deviation from an almost consensus on the reading of the city in literature associated with the image of the historic city. However, the traditional mainstream in Egypt questioned Derrida's reading and expressed their attachment to the perception of an Egyptian identity with strong attachment to the region and their fear of connection to Western culture (Al-Ahram-Weekly, 2000a Al-Ahram-Weekly, 2000b). At the same time, Derrida's name is forever associated with his deconstruction project (Collins, Mayblin, & Appignanesi, 2005 Hill, 2007). His reading of Egypt space proposes a marriage between her space and deconstruction to reflect on the unseen, ignored multiplicities, complexities and potentials beyond both 'a monolithic oriental image' and the boundaries of space and time. In this chapter, we shall investigate this question: 'could 'deconstruction' help the perception of the city to go beyond the inherited binaries, and 'monolithic' representation?' and the potential for developing a re-reading of her space which goes beyond this representation and associated literature.