

POLYPHONIC MORPHOLOGY

Unseen Acts – The City as Reflection

Yara Al Heswani

Abstract: What if we imagined a mirror that reflects the city's reality to itself? What if the city's components identified themselves and defined meaning in their own reflections? This article aims to explore the critical dimensions of the contemporary reality of a place from multiple and unexpected points of view. It explains the theoretical framework of a project which is being conducted as part of wider research that focuses on the informal behaviors and interventions in the urban morphology that is made by the inhabitants of the urban cluster around Damascus.

Keywords: Informality; Urban Morphology; Reflexivity; Post-conflict; Dialogue; Theater of the Absurd.

The Spotlight

Today, Jaramana, a city district south-east of central Damascus, holds the largest concentration of refugees in Syria. Several waves of immigrants – from Palestine in 1948 and from Iraq in 2003 – have caused significant population growth. Since the war in Syria, the large number of internally displaced people living and working here has further fueled urban expansion and development. (ETH Studio Basel 2009). Jaramana's current population density¹ is greater than 15,000 inhabitants per square kilometer (UN-OCHA 2017). In this context, informality has become the default condition.

However, while there are existing studies charting the city's history, its expansion and migrant influx, as well as its social fabric and population, a detailed investigation of Jaramana's informal architectural and urban development in this current phase of rapid change is still missing. In addressing

¹ The metro area population of Damascus in 2021 was 2,440,000, according to United Nations population projections. This is nearly 20,000 inhabitants per km².

this lack, my work builds on, and expands, Jaramana Council's own historical analysis of the city (2000), ETH Studio Basel's study on Iraqi refugees and urban planning (Fahmi/Jaeger 2009), and anthropologist A. Maria A. Kastriou's detailed ethnographic account of historical changes in modern Syria that sheds light on the diversity and stratification of the close-knit social fabric of the Druze neighborhoods during wartime (2014).

A large proportion of Syria's population lives in informal housing. According to estimates, informal housing represented 30 to 40 percent of the total number of dwellings before 2011. A recently published analytical report on informal settlements in Syria (Sukkar/Abou Zainedin/Fakhani 2021) maps and analyzes the government's approach toward informality. It provides a critical reading of the legal framework that underpins government policies on land management and argues that informality is an outcome of the government's chronic and systematic failure in coping with the increased need for housing.

The phenomenon of informal housing began to spread in Syria around the middle of the twentieth century. Unplanned housing areas and settlements sprang up in places not originally destined for construction, violating construction laws and encroaching on state property and agricultural land. Since then, they have spread and become an unavoidable feature of the city; in other words, in most cases, they NORMALIZE the INFORMAL by adding these features to the city.

Jaramana's growth over the last 20 years may at first seem like any normal city expansion. However, the speed of informal growth by far exceeds the planned one. New neighborhoods are built outside the formal city boundary before the drawings can be adjusted accordingly. In addition, new building permit legislation in 2003 made the construction of informal housing easier than the normal process. Informal building modifications, now commonplace, are frequently tolerated by the city. For instance, adding an extra floor to a building can be agreed upon with the council after it is inhabited, even if this exceeds the maximum number of stories permitted according to the construction laws.

Mirrors in the field

My project seeks to make visible this normalization of the informal. It encourages reflection on building details and overlooked aspects of the city through the act of mirroring, exposing the various components that actually

face each other in the urban space. I argue that it is worth observing and learning from these practices, especially in a city full of contradictions like Jaramana. Depending on the scale of construction and its effect on the city's morphology, the informal vocabulary can be classified into three types: an intervention, for example an additional unauthorized floor; a modification that turns a balcony into an enclosed space; or an expansion, which means building a new block in an unplanned area or in a spot that is not zoned for residential buildings. Those »absurd« physical additions are part of the city's reality today. They cannot be ignored when thinking of the urban future. Yet, beyond buildings, they also include the internally displaced people who came from other regional districts during the war, and who will leave large empty informal neighborhoods if they decide to return to their hometowns.

Here, the word »absurd« denotes elements of informal urban development, including people, and refers to their invisibility and how they are unconsidered in official documentation and future planning. From this governmental perspective, they are considered negative and undesirable additions to the city. However, those actors affect the urban environment as much as they are affected by it. They are part of the uncertainty of life that the city is experiencing today.

What if we held up a mirror to reflect Jaramana's reality to itself? What if, in these mirror images, the city's building components became identifiable and gained meaning in this act of self-reflection? Those are the questions this project poses.

The idea of reflection leads to the concept of the mirror stage in the psychoanalytical theory of Jacques Lacan. Lacan argues that the literal externality and otherness of the reflected image with which the child becomes totally identified creates a defensive »illusion of autonomy« (Lacan 1949: 80). The mirror stage thus describes the first felt sense of identity: »the image of one's own body is sustained by the image of the other, in fact introduces a tension: the other in his image both attracts and rejects me« (Julien 1995: 34).

Lacan's early theory, including the mirror stage, centers on the imaginary register.

»Lacan associated the Imaginary with the restricted spheres of consciousness and self-awareness. It is the register with the closest links to what people experience as reality. Who and what one »imagines« other persons to be, what one thereby »imagines« they mean when communicatively interacting, who and



I.

Everyone creates their own view. Image: Yara Al Heswani.



what one »imagines« oneself to be, including from the imagined perspectives of others« (Johnston 2018).

Interestingly, the mirror plays an ambiguous role. It is crucial for our sense of self, but at the same time it is the origin of our imaginary order, as it is based on an image reflected back at ourselves, rather than our actual selves which are always threatened with fragmentation. We might say that the mirror stands between us and an unattainable »real« in the Lacanian sense. It stands between understanding ourselves and the others around us. How might Lacan's theory assist our understanding of the city's potential for self-identification based on its living consciousness, memories, and emotions?

The project is an imaginary experiment to mirror the stage of city life. The city is a separate but simultaneous entity, because of its ability to self-reflect. The project observes some specific »absurd« scenes around the city, by using photography and collages as tools to represent the fictional mirror images of those invisible components of the informal city that have been metaphorically placed in front of it. Doing so, it considers the city as a living consciousness and invites its entities to identify their »real« selves in front of a mirror to collectively form a full understanding of the city itself. The reflections of this reality, which the project proposes as the city's fictional conscious, will be in the form of written theater acts – a dialogical mode of storytelling that insists on the existence of those entities that are obvious features in the city, but which are rendered invisible.

Unseen Acts

The second part of my project explores urban activities and snapshots from the reality of the city, outside time frames. The goal is to shed light on these phenomena and tell their story through the voice of inanimate components in the form of dialogue, theater, and storytelling. The result is reflections that record the city's life in a new voice that is coupled with human emotion. Instead of being the silent background for the personal stories of their occupants, this project places the buildings, their elements, and spaces center stage as those who speak and confront their reality.



2.

Seen and unseen buildings – can you hear the conversation?.

Collage: Yara Al Heswani.

Act 1:

A Crowded Neighborhood in Jaramana City.

Afternoon.

Two buildings stand in the middle of an urban crowd. The first is a high, multi-story building with shops on the ground level. The other is a two-story residential concrete block.

Building 1: Will you take your walls off my balcony? It isn't fun anymore.

Building 2: Are you talking to me? I still exist, you can see me!

Building 1: Yes, of course I see you, annoying block. (*Talking to oneself*)

Here we go, a non-stop talker. I wonder when they will remove this noisy neighbor from here? It has been ages!

Building 2: I am not crazy! Someone just talked to me! This entire neighborhood acts as if there is an empty spot here. I almost believed that I'm dead ... No, wait a minute, I still feel kids and cats playing on my stairs ... I am here, my friend!

Building 1: Great! Enough with the sleepy cat story, let's solve our problem.

You are stepping on my foot! So, how about you take a step back?

(*Silence*)

What? Don't you like the solution?

Building 2: SHHHHH ... you will wake her up ...

Building 1: Who?

Building 2: The cat!

(*Days of silence ... months of silence ...*)

Building 2: Hey, my friend! I think I'm getting old, I can't remember who stood here first, me? Or you?

Building 1: Not sure who was the first, but we can check the new picture of the city to see who will stay here.

Building 2: I knew you would say that. I heard the gossip, the city council drew your face in their new picture and they skipped mine. They didn't see me, it's all your fault. Your height blocked the sun and blocked the sight.

Building 1: It's nobody's fault, they only have new plans for the future. We all turn into dust eventually.



3.

Residential buildings with informal additions in Jaramana.

Collage: Yara Al Heswani.

Building 2: If they only saw the families, the kids, the cats. I am sure they would turn you into dust first.

Building 1: Will this ever end?! We both sit here side by side, neither of us remembers who came first nor knows who will last longest. And all our arguments end up with cats!

This city is going crazy...

Act 2:

The same neighborhood.

A summer day.

The two buildings are still in the same spot. A running window enters the alley.

The Window: Run ... run ... save your life! RUN!

Building 2: (Coughing) Stop ... stop! What is all this chaos about? Aren't you a window?!

The Window: Oh, hello building, I beg your pardon. I got a little excited.

(Stops to take a breath)

Yes, I am a window and I ran from the north part of the city. I am looking for a proper wall to settle down on. Do you know any suitable walls?

Building 2: Oh dear Lord! Are we in Doomsday?

You are not supposed to run in the first place! You are born to be fixed in a wall, aren't you?

Building 1: I heard that they cut all the trees in the north and they are building new neighborhoods there. It is the perfect place to find a wall, so why did you escape from there?

The Window: Well... Allow me to tell you my story from the beginning.

(Takes a deep breath)

I am not from this city, I came here with my family five years ago. They assumed that it wouldn't be long before we returned home, so they didn't manage to settle down. My family rented an unfinished apartment, that's what they could afford, then they fixed me in the wall opening. It did not match my dimensions, but my father knew how to solve the problem using some sheets and wood beams. It was not the perfect life, but I felt good doing my job and making that unfinished apartment more suitable for them to live in.

Building 1: That is touching ... But what made you want to leave them?

The Window: HOWEVER ... In that kind of place, usually the owner will need to finish the building or sell it, sooner or later, the families will move to another block structure. From then on, my family kept adding to, or taking something from, my frame to fit me in.

Building 2: Wow my friend! You are the most adaptive window I've ever met!

The Window: You think it is cool! Well, it is not!

I don't feel like a window anymore, even though I look like one.

I used to be that magical connector between in and out. I owned that border line! I had full control over light and ventilation. Now, I am just some useless decoration that they avoid touching so that I don't fall apart and I can be easily replaced with any plastic sheet.

I am tired, so I decided to look for a normal life ... Good bye!

(The window runs away)

Building 2: But wait ... *(Shouting)* What about your family?

The Window: *(Voice from outside)* They will leave this city eventually, after a year...or two... or ten ... who knows?!

Building 1: That doesn't sound good...

Building 2: *(Crying)* Poor window!

Building 1: I was talking about the north part of the city.

Building 2: What about it?

Building 1: It was mainly built for those new arrival families. They call them »displaced«. I was not sure what that meant, but I realize now from talking to the window, they will be »placed« again in their original homes, elsewhere.

Building 2: So?

Building 1: So, we will end up surrounded with empty concrete walls instead of trees! *(Silence)*

You don't get it, do you?

Building 2: No, I do not. It is just too sad! *(Wiping tears)*

Building 1: By the way, you are getting too emotional lately. I bet it is all coming from your little cats. Thank God they don't play on my stairs!

Jaramana, Dialectic or Dialogic?

Life is dialogic and a shared event; living is participating in dialogue. Meaning comes through dialogue at whatever level that dialogue takes place. We are always in dialogue, not only with other people, but also with everything in the world. Everything »addresses« us in a certain sense.

The city of Jaramana carries many controversial issues in its story: The transformation from a rural village to an urban city with some rural aspects; then the refugees flowing in and out of it, ending up with the current situation of expansion and being crowded with the internally displaced people. The urban morphology here has various components that mostly live in a parallel situation, in other words, they live side by side in the city without any interaction as if they don't see each other. Different components refer to different kinds of people, settlements, and lifestyles. In order to understand the reality of this city or make any positive changes to it, these components should see and hear each other. A dialogue should be made to understand the dialectical relations in this urban cluster, taking into consideration those relations in time and space. What if the mirrors of this project reflect imagined dialogues between things around the city? What could these observers tell us, or what could they gossip about?

If we want to take this idea to a philosophical level, we can refer to Mikhail Bakhtin's linguistic theory about polyphonic voices in the novel. It is an idea inspired by music, and Bakhtin transferred it to linguistics. Polyphony literally means multiple voices. Things don't exist »in themselves«, but only in their relations. Bakhtin sees being as a »unique and unified event«. Being is always »event« or »co-being«, simultaneous with other beings.

For Bakhtin, human life is an open dialogue. The world thus merges into an open-ended, multi-voiced, dialogical whole. Its separation (as in Marxist alienation) or splitting (as in Lacanian master-signification) is overcome through awareness of its dialogical character – in effect, as one big borderland. The reader does not see a single reality presented by the author, but rather, how reality appears to each character. In a fully dialogical world-view, the structure of the text should itself be subordinate to the right of all characters to be treated as subjects rather than objects.

In my project, the mirrors idea will be analyzed by fictional dialogues and characters. Those polyphonic voices in this particular city's story will present their reflections on the transformation that have been made in Jaramana, especially when the argument is about informality, which is the con-

struction logic in most cases. Absurd reality will need an absurd representation as a new perspective to reflect and analyze the place.

The Theatre of the Absurd, from Martin Esslin's point of view, shows the world as an incomprehensible place. The audience's confrontation with characters and happenings that they are not quite able to comprehend makes it impossible for them to share the aspirations and emotions depicted in the play.

Emotional identification with the characters is replaced by a puzzled, critical attention. For, while the written dialogues are absurd, they still remain recognizable as somehow related to real life with its absurdity, so that eventually the readers are brought face to face with the irrational side of their existence. Thus, the absurd and fantastic goings-on of the Theatre of the Absurd will, in the end, be found to reveal the irrationality of the human condition and the illusion of what we thought was its apparently logical structure. This form of theatrical expression represents the after-war reality that this city is living in by giving voices to the »things« that make the physical body of the city; its eternal silent observers.

Back to reality

People tend to change their surroundings in order to make their habitat the most suitable to live. However war, with all its consequences, mostly led to an absurd reality in most of the affected cities and compelled their citizens to dream of imagined realities that might (»not«) become true.

This project is an attempt to fully understand the city of Jaramana, which is part of the wider Damascus municipal area. Even though it has not been exposed to war destruction, it currently plays an important role as it contains people from many scattered cities. If we look at the case of Syria from a wider perspective, ten years of conflict has produced some kind of governmental deficiency regarding urban settlements and this increased informal construction. These kinds of actions and productions expand the sense of uncertainty about land and the distribution of resources.

The mirror insists on showing the city its actual reality, as it currently is, not as it was planned. This poses the question: When placed in front of a mirror, is the city aware of its own reality, or is it determined to overlook the truth?

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