

# ARAB STUDIES JOURNAL

THE DYNAMICS OF SPACE  
IN THE  
MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

Subalternity, Material Practices, and  
Popular Aspirations: Syrian Migrant  
Workers in Lebanon

*John Chalcraft*

Conflict and Community in Church-Based  
Refugee Havens in Cairo:  
The Quest for Space to be Dinka

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Spatial Transformations in the Lebanese  
"Independence Intifada"

*Sune Haugbolle*

Egyptian Theater:  
Reconstructing Performance Spaces

*Dina Amin*

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# Makan: The Right to the City and New Ways of Understanding Space

*Makan, Adalah's Journal for  
Land Planning and Justice  
Volume 1: The Right to the City*

Edited by Suhad Bishara and Hana Hamdan  
Shafa'Amr: Adalah – The Legal Center for Arab Minority Rights in  
Israel, 2006 (96 pages, maps, photographs, aerial pictures, diagrams)

**Reviewed by Özlem Altan**

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**M***akan* is a new journal published by Adalah, the Legal Center for Arab Minority Rights in Israel. The editors explain that the journal was born out of the recognition of the collective power of judicial and legislative organs and planning to shape spaces in a variety of ways for different population groups. These exercises could make spaces sensitive or insensitive to the needs of their inhabitants; ignore, cherish, control, or reinforce social differences; and establish or eradicate demographic, social, and economic means of discrimination. *Makan*—an Arabic word that denotes both space and place—has the objective of paying critical attention to these processes. It is intended as an academic venue through which planners, lawyers, and researchers can raise “public and academic awareness of issues of planning, development, and human rights,” shed light on “gaps” between planning and development for different groups in Israel, pay attention to “contemporary issues of the environment and sustainability,” and share similar international experiences (4).

The inaugural issue centers on the notion of the “right to the city” as articulated by Henri Lefebvre, who proposed the concept as a way to reformulate urban life through radical changes in the power relations exercised in producing spaces. Lefebvre’s theory of the production of space rests in part on an argument about the transformation of natural space into social space under the auspices of capitalist institutions. Instead of the state and other centralized mechanisms of power controlling this transformation, he argued that every inhabitant of a place was bestowed with the right to use and shape

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urban space as s/he wished. Because he formulated citizenship on the basis of actual presence in a location, these inhabitants also had to occupy a central role in decisions that had an impact on where and how they lived. Articles in this issue of *Makan* use Lefebvre's framework to explore how this particular practice of citizenship is hampered, to the disadvantage of minorities and weaker population groups in the particular context of Israel (the issue also includes one case study from London). In the second half of the journal, we find four specific legal cases of segregation in which Israeli authorities devised ways to isolate, displace, and expropriate Arab Bedouin citizens. These cases are then followed by a petition put forth by Adalah lawyers to the Israeli Supreme Court arguing against the legality of "the prohibition on Arab citizens of Israel from living on Jewish National Fund land," accompanied by the response of Jewish National Fund (JNF) lawyers (69). In this piece, I review *Makan's* three articles and their contribution to our comprehension of space, as well as the questions they inspire for further discussion. I will also suggest some possible limitations in the framework chosen by the editors and contributors, in order to propose some other directions that would be exciting to see explored in the journal's coming issues.

Yosef Jabareen's article, "The Right to the City: The Case of the Shihab el-Din Crisis in Nazareth," discusses the failures in implementing the aforementioned "right to the city" in the context of an urban planning crisis in Nazareth. Essentially, this is a crisis that culminated in a confrontation between Muslim and Christian inhabitants of Nazareth when Muslim residents demanded the building of a mosque during the development of a central square, adjacent to the Church of the Annunciation. The central square was being planned with the expectation of a dramatic expansion of religious tourism in 2000. Jabareen's survey among Nazareth's residents reveals that they perceived this crisis as having materialized as a result of mismanagement on the part of a number of central authorities, as well as the religious organizations that were challenging the former's decisions. He frames his discussion in terms of Lefebvre's argument that it is the inhabitants who have the right to produce the space in which they live. Jabareen argues that Palestinian citizens do not have this right to the extent that their Jewish counterparts do, and that this stems from the ethno-political structure of the state, as well as its extremely centralized distribution of power.

Jabareen's take on the right to the city inspires questions about the reciprocal relationship between identity and space production. While citizens have a right to produce space, this produced space also ends up reproducing its inhabitants and citizens, as the case of Nazareth clearly shows. The crisis that erupted around the appropriate usage of the public square also came about because the citizens identified themselves in binary opposition to each other through their religious affiliations. Jabareen's article shows that the fact that Israel is a Jewish state impedes the political participation of Palestinians and also contributes to the production of citizens according to their ethno-religious backgrounds. I look forward to reading further explorations into how such binary oppositions are reproduced spatially and how they attain primary importance in future issues of *Makan*.

A relevant route of exploration might start from an exercise of reflexivity. For instance, Jabareen's questionnaire, logically designed to give voice to opposing groups, makes use of notions such as "peace between Christians and Muslims" and reiterates

their relevance. Using such moments, one could move beyond a discussion of state planning and development of the space, from which some inhabitants are excluded, to look at all kinds of activities that somehow contribute to or challenge the centrality of this process. Attention to these processes would directly address the relations that go into producing binaries such as state and local, national and communal, central and decentralized, and Christian and Muslim as seemingly viable, relevant oppositions. Lefebvre's theory of the production of space also takes some such binaries for granted and does not consider in detail the ways in which they become fixed. Where does the state start and end? Is planning an activity that can stand completely outside the reality it claims to shape, or is it negotiated among a variety of actors every day? How does even research that aims to explore such significant moments become part of the events under scrutiny?

An amusing subversion of these dichotomies in Jabareen's article is the discussion of the negotiation for the right to the city among a number of actors who are not limited to "the state" and "the citizen." Indeed, in the attempt to develop a public square in a city that has religious significance for Christians and Muslims, the planners seem to have paid more attention to the tourists' right to the city! Urban spaces are not produced or changed in accordance with or in contradiction to the demands of their inhabitants only, but also by their visitors and the expectations of these visitors. Discussing this case study from this angle contributes to our understanding of how spaces affect and are affected by groups wider than the usual suspects. The picture is much more complicated than the state and the inhabitants negotiating rights to the city in total opposition to each other. Paying attention to the details that informed planners' visions for the square allows us to traverse such long-held binaries that do not recognize the roles of multiple actors in urban space production.

Haim Yacobi's article "From Rakavet to the Neighborhood of Neve-Shalom: Planning, Difference, and the Right to the City" follows another "crisis": the "deterioration" of a once upscale neighborhood (established during the Mandate period for the British) into an overcrowded, rundown, unplanned Arab neighborhood in the city of Lod/Lidd and the centralized attempts to "save" the city through housing projects and enforced relocation. The article documents the civic and cultural dimensions of producing neighborhoods. It reveals how the implemented projects seem to have failed at meeting both the cultural and civic needs of the Arab population. As a result, the writer challenges the perception that the civic encompasses the cultural, effectively arguing that it is in fact ethno-nationalist biases that most likely result in the patronizing attitude of state planning, which produces hierarchies among different population groups.

Yacobi also documents the Arab population's reactions to the cultural deficiencies in the development of their spaces. They respond to legal limitations on housing with the development of an informal housing market; when they move to new buildings, they build fences, make additions to buildings, close up open staircases, and establish ad hoc grocery stores when such needs are not met in the plans. He argues that attending to multiple negotiations and resistances allows us to escape other binaries, such as opposition versus compliance, active versus passive, and small opposition versus political process. The forms of resistance he documents indicate "a maze of autonomous actions, which have the power to challenge the appearance of total control"



(38). The strength of the article, however, stems from its careful study of the reports of ever changing government and private planning in response to everyday problems, obstacles, and challenges. The article thus taps into a theme that might be further developed: planning does not stand outside the reality that its actors would argue they are constructing. It is not rational, all-encompassing, or all-powerful. It is persistently interpreted and reinterpreted in everyday negotiations and challenges.

Furthermore, these challenges do not only come about in the form of human resistance. As Yacobi's surveys indicate, boulders are needed to prevent further building construction; walls crack; fences become run down; rain pools in the streets and seeps into the houses. These cracks, walls, fences, and weather conditions also become part of the power relations that Yacobi discusses. Lefebvre's conceptualization of how space should be normatively produced does not pay enough attention to the materiality of these relationships and actors. The examples provided in this article are fertile grounds for a critical engagement with "the right to the city" from this perspective.

Toni Fenster's "The Right to the City and Gendered Everyday Life" also critiques Lefebvre's formulation by focusing on another absence in his theory. By sifting through her interviews with women in Israel and London, Fenster makes two arguments. First, power relations involved in making spaces need to be understood in gendered terms. Second, a simple division between public and private, with the former constituting the city, is untenable, because in the experiences of women the use of the private and its multiple relations with the public are just as significant. Lefebvre does say that the private is distinct from the public but maintains that they are always connected. What he does not focus on is the intensity and centrality of the connection, which could disrupt the proposed dichotomy. This is also evident in the photographs accompanying Yacobi's piece, which show how inhabitants reengineered publicly exposed spaces of the home in accordance with their preferences in making the transition from the "outside" to the "inside." In Fenster's article, we can follow the words of her informants to better understand how the construction of the private is just as important as that of the public and how they cannot be separated physically or mentally.

Fenster poses another challenge, inspired by Michel de Certeau. De Certeau's conceptualization of belonging pays special attention to the creation of space through everyday use and the sentiments that develop with increased familiarity. In his theorization, the practices of producing space are more intricate than previously understood; they encompass strategies employed by various institutions and tactics of ordinary citizens. Fenster employs de Certeau's well-known essay "Walking in the City" to explore women's tactics of producing their urban spaces and the limitations of these everyday exercises. By revisiting the right to city from a gender-sensitive perspective, Fenster shows the significance of safety for women, and how it determines when and where they choose to walk and where to be present in the city. Making the city one's own and belonging to it is thus, in some cases, a more limited experience for women.

In her conclusion, Fenster returns to a theme running throughout the journal—planning and space production—and argues that certain aspects of central planning exclude women from public spaces. This conclusion is most likely in line with de Certeau's formulation in *The Practice of Everyday Life* of strategies as "the calculus of force-

relationships, which becomes possible when a subject of will and power (a proprietor, an enterprise, a city, a scientific institution) can be isolated from an 'environment.'"<sup>1</sup> In other words, in her conclusion, Fenster reverts to a binary between forces that can stand outside what they impact and lesser powers that only "poach" the spaces of these entities. Hence she resorts to the existence of a detached planning mechanism that is capable of making untainted adjustments to space. On the other hand, just as de Certeau also talks about how the city can no longer be seen as a field of regulated operations, the body of Fenster's article moves beyond this conclusion. This is because she offers interesting nuances throughout the piece, such as her use of the idea of the making of space by walking and her blurring of the distinction between public and private spaces. Fenster's argument that "citizenship and belonging should be seen as spatial dynamic processes" can be pushed even further (48). Her informants attempt to assert their belonging by venturing into various parts of the city, finding solace in anonymity, and reversing the more conventional ideas associated with female safety. Her ethnographic material has the potential to suggest ways in which this citizenship becomes a dynamic process because women look for ways to make the city their own in their everyday lives.

In all three of the articles, the case studies reveal that planning is part and parcel of the space that it is claiming to create, adding force to the claim of the right to the city. The details reveal constant negotiation, reversal, and invention on the part of everyone involved. However, at crucial moments the writers revert to a seemingly clearer separation of a central authority that exercises decision-making outside the decentralized spaces being created. Another separation that can be challenged, and which does not hold (especially in the second half of the journal), is the one between violence and legality. I believe a closer look at the ethnographic material can productively question such distinctions. For practical purposes, the central institutions in Israel that blatantly discriminate against Arab minorities can be legally challenged using the existing system and assuming it as a set of objective rules and regulations, whose nuanced application might reveal results different from the current ones. However, as the exchange between Adalah and the JNF indicates, these rules and regulations governing space-making's legality do not necessarily stand on the side of "rationality" or "objectivity," but rather are constitutive of various forms of violence that characterize space production in the everyday.

*Makan* aims to bring together some of the salient discussions in the field in the context of Israel, where every exercise of space-making has historically been violent, wrought with conflict, and designed as a zero-sum game. It is a very appropriate theme for an inaugural issue, precisely because the right to the city is a significant political call for Palestinians in Israel, where they are simultaneously natives and estranged second-class citizens.

In its first issue the journal focuses on the notion and practices of "the right to the city," assuming some of the binaries on which Lefebvre's theory of space production rests. The case studies also reveal how our thinking and experiencing of space challenges these very binaries. It would be exciting if the editors pushed forward such critiques as well as alternative formulations in future issues. The ideas proposed in this issue provide

interesting venues for such an endeavor. One such theme mentioned in the introduction but not subsequently touched upon is the idea of sustainable development: it would be interesting to critique this notion in terms of its ambiguity, limitations, and underlying assumptions of organizing “the social” and “the natural.” The intricate ways in which central planning keeps shifting with respect to negotiations and physical conditions on the ground, while attempting to keep up a front of distance and objectivity, could also make for an intriguing issue. Another relevant theme for further exploration is how distinctions between “violent” and “orderly” versus “rational” and “irrational” do not hold up as well as legal arguments would make them appear to. Because it raises such a multiplicity of questions in its first issue, *Makan* promises to be an exciting contribution to the fields of urban planning, geography, and law. Equally important, if not more so, the journal also contributes to opening up new spaces of reflection and action for Palestinians and Israelis.

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## ENDNOTES

1. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), xix. ♦