Ethnography of Space: A Dynamic Approach towards the Interpretation of Historic Heritages, with Djemaa el-Fna Square as a Case Study

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Abstract
Nowadays, it is a huge challenge for architects and planners to preserve urban historic heritages without losing its “soul”. With the case study of Djemaa el-Fna Square in Marrakesh, the distillation of exotic Orientalism and the construction of an “authentic” experience of Morocco (Minca et al 2016), the article develops an architectural-anthropological approach to not only reveal the “soul” of space, but also remind us of the contested realities that have put the “soul” in danger. The ethnography of space starts by projecting the phenomenological experience of “being-in-the-world” (Heidegger 1962) into the objectifiable construction of “being-in-the-square”, bringing forward the spatial dynamics of Djemaa el-Fna between its tangible and intangible configuration. Furthermore, by exploring the struggle between the set spectacle and the neglected quotidian, the article reveals the “stage” structure of space constructed by the on-lookers and the desired “other”, showing the contested struggle between tourists and local actors within the postcolonial context.

Keywords: ethnography of space, Djemaa el-Fna, historic heritage, contested space

1. Introduction

Djemaa el-Fna Square, located at the edge of the medina in Marrakesh, is one of the grandest and oldest squares in Morocco. It is considered as a most important symbolic landscape since its foundation in the 11th century. Inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List as a part of “Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity” in 2003, Djemaa el-Fna is famous for its intangible activities contained in its tangible boundaries, a daily spectacle of Moroccan traditions “performed through musical, religious and artistic expressions”:

Located at the entrance of the medina, this triangular square, which is surrounded by restaurants, stands and public buildings, provides everyday commercial activities and various forms of entertainment…All through the day, and well into the night, a variety of services are offered, such as dental care, traditional medicine, fortune-telling, preaching, and henna tattooing; water-carrying, fruit and traditional food may be bought. In addition, one can enjoy many performances by storytellers, poets, snakecharmers, Berber musicians (mazighen), Gnaoua dancers and senthir (hajouj) players. The oral expressions would be continually renewed by bards (imayazen), who used to travel through Berber territories … (UNESCO Culture Sector 2003)

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Despite its historical roots as a market for Berber and Arabic merchants and pilgrims, the present Djemma el-Fna is more of a construction of national identity and global tourism. The spectacle of the square has been fascinating western travellers since their first encounter, from the French colonist Marshal Lyautey in the 1910s, who decided to transfer the empty expanse into a “square” and also a piece of Moroccan heritage. During the Casablanca Conference in WWII, Eleanor Roosevelt convinced King Mohammed V that Djemma el-Fna, where she had been taken as a child, was one of the most wonderful places in the world and should be saved (Fernea 1980: 54). Contemporary Spanish poet Juan Goytisolo, who has been living in Marrakech since 1997, enthusiastically promoted its preservation and inscription into the UNESCO list.

From the context of postcolonial tourism, the article aims to explore the spatial and social implications brought by the dual-construction of Djemma el-Fna, “embodied both by the European tourist searching for a lost Oriental innocence and ready-made exoticism, as well as by the Moroccan authorities who, through the square, endeavor to map ‘true’ national heritage and justify its preservation” (Benjelloun 2002).

Ethnography of space as an alternative analytic approach is thus employed. First of all, it starts from the endeavor of anthropologists of space to settle the dichotomy between situation and setting, with the “objectification of the sense of the situation upon the setting so that the setting becomes a material image of emerging situation” (Richardson 1982). By projecting the phenomenological experience of “being-in-the-world” (Heidegger 1962) into the objectificated construction of “being-in-the-square”, the article brings forward the spatial dynamics between its tangible and intangible configuration. Sensual experience of former travellers is hired as supplement to the architectonal and perceptive trivialities uncovered by a 3-day fieldwork.

Furthermore, by exploring the struggle between the set spectacle (Debord 1970) and the neglected but crucial quotidien (Lefebvre 1991), the article reveals the social tension brewing in the square and the surrounding medina brought by tourism. A “stage” structure of space shaped by the on-lookers on the balconies and the desired “other” performing in the square is elaborated as a symbolization of this tension, showing the contested relationship between tourists and local actors within the historic heritage. With the spatial ethnography of Djemaa el-Fna square, the article seeks not only to present the “soul” of its intangible and tangible space, but also to warn against the social crisis that is bringing the “soul” into danger.

2. Objectification and Subjectification: Temporality of Space

To show the dynamics between the lively activities in Djemaa el-Fna and its boundaries within the medina, this part of the article moves back and forth between the objectification of the observer’s experience upon its physical setting, and the subjectification of the spatial configuration into the perceptive situation.

Temporality is the dominant feature of Djemaa el-Fna. As Derrida phrased: “La Place is everyday the same, but also everyday different in its very sameness.” (Minca et al 2016: 135) Its never-ending difference is
achieved through the flexibility that enables it to reschedule and rebalance among its kaleidoscopic activities, while its “sameness” lies in this inherent time-related mechanism and the overwhelming sensual experience that all the observants are unexceptionally involved in.

The daily spectacle of Djemaa el-Fna is dominated by unbelievably diverse, yet tightly interlocked actors in successive time span. In the morning, the square awakens gradually from an overnight hustle and bustle. The few wanderers, mostly local residents or domestic travellers, are accompanied by small-scale services, such as henna tattooing and fortune-telling. Snack stalls sell fruit, spices and nuts for all day long. As more tourists show up in the afternoon, touristic business like souvenirs, snake-charming and gamble games starts. The square grows crowded and excited around 2 p.m., as Berber musicians and Gnaoua dancers begin to play. From late afternoon, when the torching heat from Sahara cools out, the size of the audience explodes exponentially. They gather around performers like story-tellers, acrobats and comic actors. Meanwhile, food stalls move quickly inwards and transform the square into a dinner party. The performances and the open-air food quarter continue until midnight. Early next morning, you may still smell the Arabic spices from the leftovers on the square shared by hungry doves gathering here for their breakfast.

Spatially, the flexibility of the “program” is made possible by two formal strategies. First is the stalls on wheels. Both the snack stalls and the dinner stalls are adapted to be moved easily, and a big restaurant could be assembled in less than 20 minutes. The stalls are restricted to a fixed area occupying less than one-third of the square, forming temporal “commercial streets” on the square. The location of the stalls barely changes throughout the years, keeping the spatial skeleton of this ever-changing program.

Second is the “archipelagos” on the square. It is called “Al-halqa”, a circle arrangement with audience forming around the center of the performers. It is a time-honored oral tradition in Arabo-Islamic cities formed as a didactic and entertaining space in public area, be it a marketplace, a medina gate or a downtown square. The size of “Al-halqa” could vary greatly, growing to more than 20 meter in diameter, in an organized spatial hierarchy. Such a spatial strategy uses the audience as enclosure for a temporary outdoor theater, and works together as flexible subdivisions of space, creating human-scale space from the over-sized square.
It is the storytellers who have the biggest following... the spectators crouched on the ground before them form a first, attentive circle, showing no visible hurry to move on... others, standing, form a second circle around them: these on-lookers too are practically immobile, hanging on the story-teller’s every word and gesture. Sometimes, two men will take turns reciting the story. Their words come from afar; they remain suspended in the air longer than the words of mere mortal. (Canetti 1989: 93-126)

Such spatial complexity also actively involves the observants through rich sensual interaction with the actors on the square. The sight of exotic dancers of different races, the interfering yet clearly defined sounds made by bands and instruments, and the psychological tension caused by close body contact, as shown by Billington, involve the audience “as part of the spectacle that makes the square, and as the mostly silent and anonymous protagonists of that daily mise-en-scène” (Canetti 1989: 93-126),

I find Edith Wharton's dancing boys performing to the resounding beat of a four-piece band. The principal dancer is a plumpy pretty boy of about 13 who wears a wide band of flashing sequins around his hips...I soon realize that the whole atmosphere of the place has become charged with a higher level of excitement. I am the only woman around, and I feel a man’s hand touching me (Billington 1986).

At dusk, Djemaa el-Fna reaches its prime of this spatial magic of juxtaposition, “with lights, flicking on in the scores of narrow shops, winking on the barrows of vendors, as they hawked smoking kebab, roasted almonds, sugar-covered peanuts, iced bottles of Judor.” (Fernea 1980) The following diagram, though far from conveying its unimaginable complexity, tries to bring the subjective experiences into objectification. It shows the temporary appropriation of the space by three dominant actors: snack stalls, barbecue stalls, and performers with evanescent formations of “Al-halqas” that construct the most dynamic area on the square.

Fig.4. “Snapshot” Map of the dynamic spatial subdivisions by ever-changing activities on Djemma el-Fna

3. Spectacle and Quotidian: Contested Space

Behind the mise-en-scène of Djemaa el-Fna, there hides a deeper social dichotomy, between spectacle and quotidian, tourists and the “other”, which reveals the spatial hierarchy in this “stage” structure of space. Since its development as a leisure hub since the early 20th century, Djemaa el-Fna has been embodied with the struggle between western tourists’ eagerness for an “authentic” experience of Morocco, and the suffocated consciousness of the desired “other” acted by “local” actors. The culture of “others”, as defined by Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1998), renders the daily spectacle of Djemaa el-Fna not only “a theatrical performance of selected and orderly elements of the culture in question”, but also a penetrated “drama of the quotidian” that intermingle the tourists and local people in the rich sensorium.
The intensity of the performance on the square has proved the encounter between the western and the oriental, the rich and the poor, to be not so pleasant. As globalism brings a greater amount of tourists to Marrakech in the 21st century, a tourist may be charged anytime for taking photos of performers, or even for showing too much curiosity. The hospitality imagined for the desired “other” has turned into unexpected hostility during countless disputes, pushing forward the square into an increasingly dichotomized “stage”.

Dozens of roof-top balconies surrounding the square provide a perfect auditorium to enjoy the spectacle on the square from a “safer”, but gentrified space. While sipping an over-priced Moroccan mental tea, the tourists could not only enjoy the magnificent panorama of the square, but also be exposed to all the sounds, voices, scents, among other sensual experiences that constitute the phenomenological complexity of the spectacle.

“What’s that, Mama?”… From the myriads of performers moving in the hundreds of people milling in the square, Laila had indeed picked a new one. “A magician?” … Laila leaned closer and I looked at her, seeing that, away from the pressures and personal touches of Rue Tresor and the market crowd, here, removed from the contact, she was enjoying it… the marvelous fairy-tale quality of the living, sounding scene below us. (Fernea 1980)

However, the “gaze” from the tourists, embodied with their “cultural imaginaries” of the desired “other” (Alsayyad 2014: 129), works like the spotlight of setting, making the performers involuntary “actors” on the stage. The alienation sought after by these tourists from the modern world has ultimately caused the alienation of the performers, rendering them “detachable, fragmentable and replicable as a variety of materials morbidity, living specimens...” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998: 34), turning the quotient life on Djemaa el-Fna into a spectacle by this spatial “stage” effect. At the same time, the tourists themselves on the balconies are also exposed to a wider auditorium below, as if they are also an inseparable part of this grand show:

“…German tourists, French tourists, and elderly English ladies in red-tasseled sunhats from Tangier. They all sipped Coca-Cola judiciously, holding down their straw hats in case a breeze might whip them away, peering tentatively over the wall, edged with iron railings at the medieval fair, the folk and fairy tale below.” (Fernea 1980: 52)

Unfortunately, the spectacle and the quotidian, the “putative ‘actors’ (‘Morocco’ and the ‘Moroccans’) and ‘spectators’ (the tourists)” (Minca et al 2016: 148), are weaved together in this “stage” structure, merged and intertwined physically on one hand, but detached and contested socially on the other. Mesmerizing at first glance, the contested space behind the spectacle reveals itself to the ethnographers, with much despair,

The first few times the square had perhaps retained the fairy-tale quality…the flying carpet; the gnarled, missshapen dwarf; the lost children crying; acrobats and jesters in costumes tipped with bells. But for a month now…fairy-tale characters tend to lose their evanescence. The gnarled, missshapen dwarf is real and he is blind… the jesters and acrobats are pale children, and the cheap, shiny silk of their costumes clings to their bony bodies. The lost children are there, too, the brave child who cares for her baby sister, but the child has sores around here mouth and the thin baby carried in a sling on here back has infected eyes… (Fernea 1980: 55-56)

The romanticized representation of a static exotic culture risks forcing the square into “a process of objectification that may indeed compromise the life of the square, especially by trying to translate it into a
museum of sterilized things of the past." The "stage" structure aggravates the tourist's detachment from the scene, and gives rise to the de-subjectification of the 'traditional-looking individuals', who are pathetically "trapped within this "greater cultural economy of display" (Minca et al 2016: 144-153)

Sadly reminding us of what Herzfeld defined as "spatial cleansing", the gentrification brought in by the social tension is sprawling out of the square. Parisians have been seeking property to renovate houses in the medina as up-scale restaurants and romantic retreats (McGuinness 2007: 123); former residents of the old medina have been relocated outside the city to make way for boutique hotels; the cost of living has risen in tandem with the influx of international capital into the local market (Sebti et al 2009).

The contested space of Djemaa el-Fna seems to have expanded to the medina, the city of Marrakesh, and more former-colonial-and-now-tourist places in the third world. Who does the space belong to in the end? Spectacle for the tourists or quotidian of the "other"?

4. Conclusion

As a byproduct of the biopolitics of tourism and cultural heritage, Djemaa el-Fna is considered as "the ultimate postcolonial site in Morocco" "where narratives and the built environment of the colonial and pre-colonial past intersect and intermingle" (Minca et al 2016: 144) The ethnography of space of the square has not only revealed the mechanism of temporality, the "soul" of space, but also reminded us of the contested realities that have put the "soul" in danger. Actually, the real danger lies in the detachment of subject from the situation, and the intentional ignorance of the quotidian behind the more desirable romantic spectacle.

That's the key problem this article confronts, suggesting a situational, sensitive approach towards the interpretation and preservation of the urban heritage, integrating spatial analysis of the objective world with the phenomenological contemplation made possible by immersive involvement of the ethnographer and sensual experiences from former intellectual conscience. The ethnography of space, though far from enough from documenting the quotidian life in the square, may serve to remind future architects and preservationists of the "silenced figures" on the stage, calling for a more localized and subtle spatial strategy to keep the prosperity of the inevitable encounter while leaving them enough space for a normal, unrestrained life.

References