

Informal Norms in Urban Public Space Governance: A Study of Cairo's Daily Dynamics

Dr. Youssef Abdelrahman

Institute of Social Research, The American University in Cairo, Egypt

Dr. Layla Khaled

Department of Political Science, Alexandria University, Egypt

ABSTRACT

Urban public spaces are shaped not only by formal regulations and planning policies but also by informal norms and practices that govern everyday interactions. This study investigates the role of informal norms in the governance of public spaces in Cairo, Egypt, focusing on how daily social dynamics, tacit agreements, and localized customs influence the use, management, and negotiation of urban environments. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork, interviews, and observational data, the research reveals how informal governance frameworks enable resilience, adaptability, and inclusion in contexts of limited formal oversight. However, they can also reproduce inequalities and contestations over access and authority. The findings contribute to a nuanced understanding of how informal and formal modes of governance interact and shape the lived experience of urban public space.

KEYWORDS

Informal norms, public space governance, Cairo, urban dynamics, informal practices, everyday urbanism, spatial negotiation, social norms, participatory governance, Middle Eastern cities.

INTRODUCTION

Urban public spaces are critical components of city life, serving as vibrant arenas for social interaction, cultural expression, and economic activity [1, 7, 8]. They embody the "public sphere," offering arenas where diverse populations can converge and engage [1]. Effective governance of these spaces is crucial for ensuring their accessibility, functionality, and equitable use [3, 4, 14]. Traditionally, urban governance is understood through formal planning frameworks, regulations, and institutional policies [24, 25]. However, particularly in cities of the Global South, the lived reality of urban spaces often deviates significantly from formal plans, shaped instead by complex, often unwritten, agreements and informal practices [5, 19, 22, 23].

Cairo, Egypt, serves as a compelling case study for exploring these informal dynamics [31]. As a megacity characterized by rapid urbanization, significant informal settlements, and a complex socio-political landscape,

the daily management and negotiation of its open public spaces—from bustling sidewalks to local squares—frequently rely on arrangements that exist outside official directives [17, 21]. These "unwritten agreements" represent an adaptive, ground-up form of governance, reflecting the resourcefulness of urban inhabitants in navigating formal constraints and accommodating diverse needs [11, 27]. The informal economy, a significant aspect of Cairo's urban fabric, heavily utilizes and shapes these spaces, often creating ad-hoc arrangements for vending, transportation, and social gathering [18, 20].

While formal governance structures aim for control and order [15], the reality on the ground in many Southern cities is one of constant negotiation, adaptation, and co-production between citizens, informal actors, and, at times, formal authorities [26]. These unwritten agreements are not merely deviations from the norm; they are integral to the daily functioning and vibrancy of public life [12, 13]. They represent a form of "situated practice" where rules are not explicitly codified but are understood and enforced through social norms, customary rights, and localized power dynamics [21, 28]. Understanding these informal norms is crucial for a more nuanced and realistic appreciation of urban management, moving beyond idealized planning theories to address the complexities of actual urban experience [19, 23, 30].

Despite the evident prevalence of such informal governance mechanisms, there is a distinct research gap in systematically documenting and analyzing these "unwritten agreements" in the daily urban governance of public spaces, particularly in a context as dynamic and historically rich as Cairo. Most studies tend to focus on formal planning failures or the challenges posed by informality, rather than examining the functional and adaptive aspects of these informal arrangements themselves. This study aims to fill this gap by providing insights into how Cairo's open public spaces are governed through these unwritten, daily agreements, highlighting their characteristics, their role in facilitating urban life, and their implications for formal urban planning. By exploring these insights, the research contributes to a deeper understanding of urban governance in the Global South, offering a perspective that embraces the organic and adaptive nature of city life.

METHODS

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative, exploratory research design using a case study approach focused on Cairo, Egypt. This design was chosen to delve deeply into the nuanced and often implicit dynamics of unwritten agreements governing public spaces. The exploratory nature allowed for the identification of emergent themes and patterns without rigid pre-defined hypotheses, while the case study approach provided an intensive understanding of a real-life context [5, 19].

Study Area and Selection

The research was conducted in selected open public spaces within Cairo, chosen to represent a variety of urban settings where informal activities and diverse public uses are prevalent. These included:

Major pedestrian thoroughfares and sidewalks: Known for high foot traffic and informal vending [12, 20].

Local squares and gathering points: Spaces serving as community hubs and sites for informal social and economic interactions [29].

Areas adjacent to informal settlements: Where the interface between planned and informal urbanism is particularly pronounced [17, 18].

The selection aimed to capture different scales and types of public spaces to observe varied manifestations of unwritten agreements.

Data Collection

Data collection was conducted through a combination of methods to triangulate observations and provide a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon:

Direct Observation: Extensive fieldwork involved systematic, non-participant observation of selected public spaces over varying times of day (morning, afternoon, evening) and days of the week (weekdays, weekends). Researchers documented:

Patterns of use by different user groups (e.g., street vendors, pedestrians, socializers, children).

Spatial arrangements of informal activities (e.g., placement of stalls, demarcation of territories).

Interactions between users, and between users and any formal/informal regulators (e.g., police, local strongmen, community elders).

Instances of conflict or cooperation and their resolution. Detailed field notes, sketches, and photographic documentation (where permissible and ethical) were collected [20].

Informal Interviews: Brief, unstructured interviews were conducted with a diverse range of public space users, informal vendors, local residents, and small business owners. The purpose was to elicit their perspectives on:

How space is shared and negotiated.

Unspoken rules or norms of behavior.

How conflicts are typically resolved.

Their understanding of who manages or controls the space. These interviews were conversational in nature, aiming to capture authentic narratives and lived experiences without imposing pre-conceived categories.

Document Analysis: Review of any available local news articles, community reports, or non-governmental organization (NGO) publications that touched upon public space use, informal economies, or community-level urban management in Cairo. While formal documents were consulted for context, the primary focus remained on ground-level interactions.

The data collection period spanned six months, allowing for repeated observations and deep immersion in the selected sites.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis was performed using an iterative thematic analysis approach. The process involved:

Transcription and Organization: Field notes and interview summaries were organized and transcribed.

Initial Coding: All data were read thoroughly, and initial codes were generated, marking specific phrases, observations, or incidents related to how spaces were used, managed, or negotiated informally.

Pattern Identification: Codes were grouped based on recurring themes and patterns related to unwritten rules, behaviors, and actors involved in the daily governance of public spaces.

Theme Development: Broader themes were developed from these patterns, encapsulating the essence of the unwritten agreements. Examples included "territorial negotiations," "time-based access," "mutual tolerance," and "informal arbitration."

Interpretation and Contextualization: The identified themes were interpreted in light of existing literature on

urban governance, informality, and public space theory in the Global South [5, 11, 27]. The analysis also sought to explain why these unwritten agreements exist and how they function as adaptive strategies in Cairo's urban context.

The iterative nature of the analysis allowed for continuous refinement of themes as new data emerged, ensuring a grounded understanding derived directly from observations and narratives.

RESULTS

The extensive fieldwork and analysis in various open public spaces in Cairo revealed a robust system of "unwritten agreements" that fundamentally shape the daily urban governance of these areas, often operating in parallel to, or in direct contrast with, formal regulations. These informal norms facilitate the co-existence of diverse activities and users, reflecting a pragmatic adaptation to the city's complex realities. Several key categories of these agreements were identified.

1. Spatial and Temporal Delineations

A prominent unwritten agreement involved the implicit spatial and temporal demarcation of public space use. Sidewalks, squares, and street edges were not uniformly managed but were informally divided based on:

Time-based access: For instance, certain sections of a sidewalk might be dominated by informal street vendors during market hours, transforming into pedestrian walkways after business hours [12, 20]. This fluid use of space ensured that multiple functions could be accommodated sequentially without direct conflict.

Activity-based zones: Even within a small square, unwritten rules dictated where children could play, where older men would gather for tea, and where informal vendors could set up their stalls. These zones were not marked by physical barriers but by customary practice and mutual understanding.

Hierarchies of use: Pedestrian movement generally took precedence in crowded areas, but allowances were made for informal commerce or social gatherings that temporarily obstructed flow, particularly if they served a recognized community need.

2. Negotiation and Mutual Tolerance

The daily governance was heavily reliant on negotiation and mutual tolerance among various users. Unlike formal systems that might enforce strict segregation of activities, observed interactions demonstrated a high degree of adaptability:

Vendor-Pedestrian Dynamics: Street vendors, while technically occupying public space informally, often maintained informal "corridors" for pedestrian flow, demonstrating an unwritten agreement to co-exist. Minor encroachments were generally tolerated by pedestrians, provided they did not cause undue inconvenience.

Sound and Activity Levels: There was an implicit understanding of acceptable noise levels and activity intensity depending on the time of day and the specific location. A bustling market might tolerate loud haggling, while a quieter residential square would expect more subdued social interactions.

Shared Infrastructure: Public benches, lampposts, or even building facades were often informally shared or temporarily utilized by various actors—from those seeking respite to those displaying goods—without explicit permission but by customary understanding.

3. Informal Dispute Resolution Mechanisms

When conflicts arose, they were often resolved through informal dispute resolution mechanisms rather than

reliance on formal authorities. These included:

Peer Arbitration: Disputes between vendors over territory or between a vendor and a pedestrian were often mediated by nearby shopkeepers, older community members, or even other vendors, who acted as informal arbitrators based on established social standing and local knowledge.

Social Pressure and Reputation: Adherence to unwritten rules was reinforced through social pressure and the importance of maintaining a good reputation within the local community. Persistent non-compliance could lead to ostracism or a loss of informal privileges.

Adaptive Relocation: In minor conflicts, one party might voluntarily relocate or adjust their activity to avoid escalation, demonstrating a flexible approach to space sharing.

4. Limited Formal Intervention and Local Agency

A key finding was the limited and often symbolic nature of formal governance intervention in these daily dynamics. While formal rules exist, their enforcement was often sporadic or focused on larger, more visible issues. This created a vacuum filled by informal agreements:

"Blind Eye" Policy: Formal authorities often turned a "blind eye" to minor informal infractions, implicitly acknowledging the functional role these activities played in the urban economy and daily life [18, 21].

Local Activism and Self-Organization: In some instances, local communities or groups of informal actors self-organized to manage their shared spaces, demonstrating significant agency in defining and enforcing their own norms [16]. This decentralized, bottom-up governance contrasts sharply with top-down planning approaches.

These results highlight that the daily governance of public spaces in Cairo is a dynamic, organic process, heavily influenced by unwritten agreements that are born out of necessity, cultural norms, and mutual adaptation among urban dwellers.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study offer a compelling perspective on urban governance in cities like Cairo, emphasizing the profound impact of "unwritten agreements" on the daily functioning of open public spaces. This informal layer of governance, characterized by spatial and temporal delineations, mutual tolerance, and informal dispute resolution, operates in parallel with, and often takes precedence over, formal regulatory frameworks. This challenges traditional notions of urban planning that assume a top-down, rationalistic control over urban space [24, 25], and instead aligns with critical urban scholarship that acknowledges the dynamic and often contested nature of urban realities in the Global South [5, 19, 22, 23].

The observation of implicit spatial and temporal demarcations highlights the adaptive capacity of urban inhabitants to maximize the utility of limited public space. This dynamic allocation of space by time and activity directly reflects the concept of "ordinary cities," where improvisation and local ingenuity are central to urban management [19]. It also resonates with theories of urban street life, which emphasize the constantly shifting sociologies and uses of public thoroughfares [12, 13, 30]. In Cairo, the intense pressure on public space, exacerbated by rapid urbanization and the pervasive informal economy, necessitates these flexible, unwritten rules to avoid constant friction [18, 20].

The prevalence of negotiation and mutual tolerance as core governance mechanisms underscores the inherent social intelligence and communal understanding within these urban settings. Rather than a chaotic free-for-all, there is an implicit understanding of give-and-take, allowing for the co-existence of seemingly conflicting uses.

This reflects a form of "co-production" of urban space, where citizens and various informal actors actively participate in shaping their environment, often without formal recognition or inclusion in planning processes [26]. Such findings suggest that a purely enforcement-driven approach by formal authorities may be ineffective or even counterproductive, potentially disrupting a delicate balance that has evolved organically [21].

The reliance on informal dispute resolution mechanisms further demonstrates the self-governing capacity of these urban communities. The role of peer arbitration and social pressure indicates a robust local social capital where trust and reputation play a significant role in maintaining order. This highlights the importance of social networks and community bonds in shaping urban behavior, a characteristic often observed in developing urban contexts [16]. For planners, this implies that understanding and potentially leveraging these existing social structures could be more effective than imposing external, unfamiliar enforcement methods.

The consistent finding of limited formal intervention and the significant role of local agency in daily governance is crucial. It suggests that formal planning in Cairo, and similar cities, often operates at a macro level, with a de facto delegation of daily micro-management to informal actors and community norms [21]. This "non-planning" or "planner's paradox" challenges the notion that formal plans solely determine urban outcomes [21]. Instead, it points to a reality where urban life is largely shaped by spontaneous, adaptive, and often resilient forms of self-organization. This is particularly relevant in a context where trust in formal institutions might be low, and citizens seek practical solutions on the ground [27]. The study further reinforces the concept of "public usable space" as a catalyst for quality of life, which is heavily influenced by how these spaces are informally managed and accessed [9, 29].

Implications

The insights from this study have several important implications for urban governance, planning, and policy in Cairo and other cities grappling with similar informal urban dynamics:

Acknowledge and Understand Informality: Formal planning and governance bodies should move beyond simply viewing informal practices as problems to be eradicated. Instead, they should acknowledge, understand, and even learn from the functional roles that unwritten agreements play in managing urban space [27].

Hybrid Governance Models: Future governance strategies could explore hybrid models that integrate formal frameworks with existing informal norms. This could involve formalizing certain successful informal arrangements, providing support for community-led initiatives, or developing flexible regulations that allow for adaptive use of public spaces.

Context-Sensitive Planning: Urban planning interventions must be highly context-sensitive, taking into account the existing social dynamics, cultural practices, and informal economies that shape public space use. A "one-size-fits-all" approach is unlikely to succeed.

Capacity Building and Dialogue: Foster dialogue between formal authorities, local communities, and informal actors to build trust and co-produce solutions for public space management. This could empower local activism and lead to more equitable and sustainable urban outcomes.

Rethink "Order": Challenge the Western-centric notion of urban order that prioritizes strict regulation and segregation. Embrace a more fluid understanding of urban order that can emerge from complex informal negotiations and adapt to diverse needs.

Limitations and Future Research

This study, while providing rich qualitative insights, has certain limitations. As a case study focused on Cairo,

the findings may not be directly generalizable to all cities in the Global South, given the unique socio-political and cultural context of Egypt. The exploratory nature means that causal relationships were not established. Additionally, the inherent difficulty of documenting "unwritten" agreements means that some nuances may have been missed or interpreted through the researchers' lens.

Future research could expand on these findings by:

Conducting comparative studies across different cities in the Global South to identify commonalities and variations in informal public space governance.

Utilizing quantitative methods to measure the impact of informal agreements on specific urban outcomes (e.g., pedestrian flow efficiency, social cohesion, economic vibrancy).

Investigating the specific mechanisms through which unwritten agreements are formed, maintained, and evolve over time, perhaps through longitudinal ethnographic studies.

Exploring the power dynamics embedded within these informal agreements and how they might perpetuate or mitigate inequalities.

Analyzing how formal interventions (e.g., new infrastructure projects, gentrification) interact with and potentially disrupt existing unwritten agreements.

CONCLUSION

The daily urban governance of open public spaces in Cairo is profoundly shaped by a complex web of unwritten agreements. These informal norms, manifested through spatial and temporal delineations, mutual tolerance, and community-based dispute resolution, enable the efficient and adaptive use of shared urban resources. This study underscores the need for urban planners and policymakers to move beyond rigid formalistic approaches and embrace a more nuanced understanding of how cities truly function. Recognizing and, where appropriate, supporting these organic, ground-up forms of governance can lead to more resilient, equitable, and vibrant urban environments, particularly in the rapidly evolving cities of the Global South. By acknowledging the "blessings of non-planning" and the agency of ordinary citizens, a more effective and context-sensitive approach to urban management can be achieved.

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