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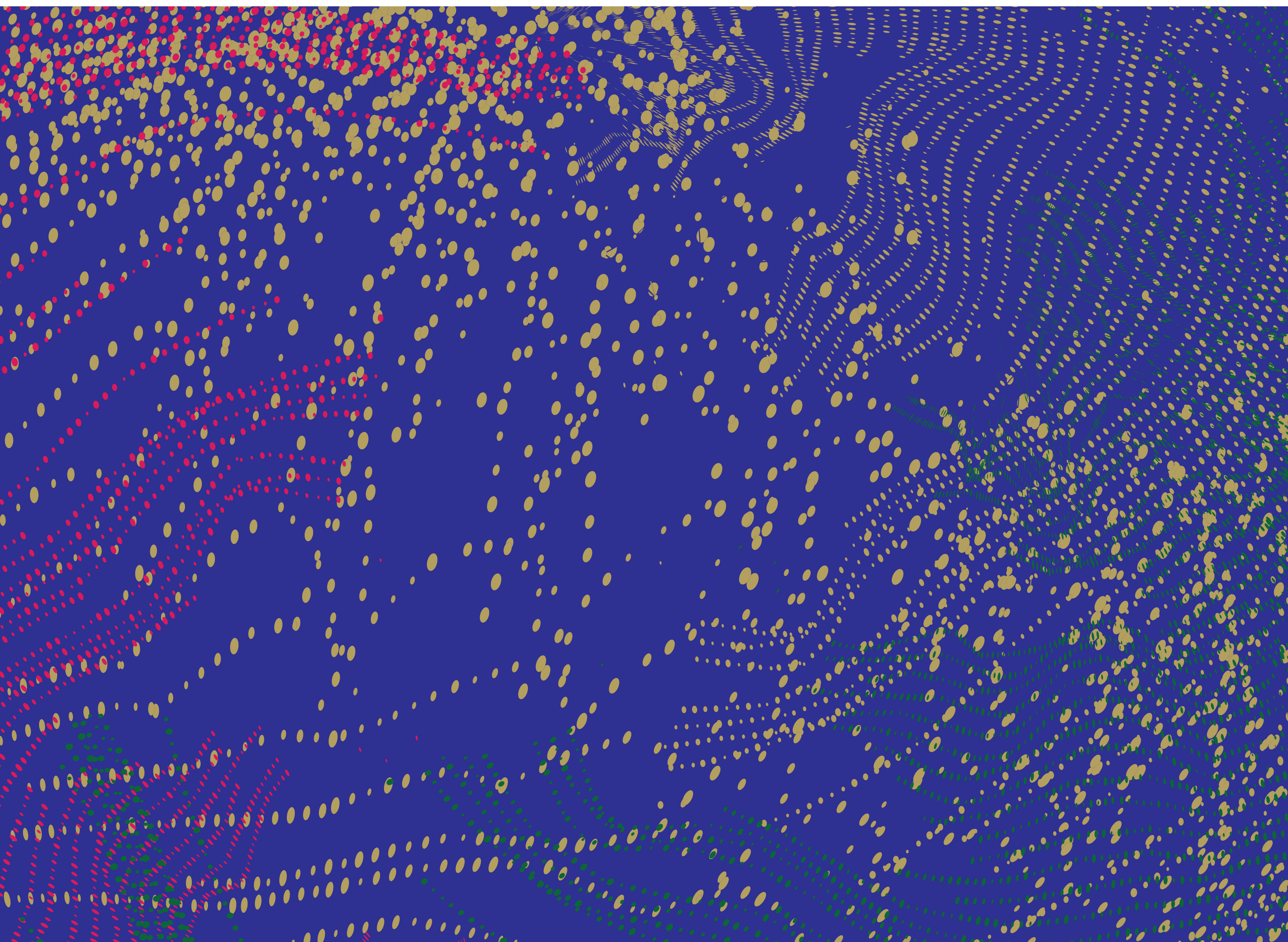
Hatim El-Hibri



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More information about the author can be found at the end of this document.

The Urban Condition and Its Imaginaries: Perspectives from the Arab World

Hatim El-Hibri George Mason University

Cities embody traces of everyday lives that are marked by the political projects that aim to shape them. If it is true that cities are best understood as being entangled with the suburban, rural, and maritime spaces outside of municipal borders, then it follows that cities are never as settled or still as they might seem. Like other locations of modern life, cities in the Arab world have been portrayed as spaces of dynamic movement and affective intensification by artists and state officials, elites and working-class people. Imagining the city, and imagining the city otherwise, is an integral part of how people negotiate place and space and how power seeks to define social relations.

This essay draws on contemporary debates in the critical humanities and humanistic social sciences and original research centered on Beirut to explore three key questions: How do regimes of power organize the representation of urban space? How do cities become centers of cultural life, including media industries? What possibilities and constraints do the arts hold? These questions are pursued with special attention to the relationship between media, culture, and urban space, and I draw conclusions about the political stakes of urban imaginaries in the Arab world in the contemporary moment. Rather than a comprehensive survey, what follows is an invitation to a relevant interdisciplinary set of concerns. Although some of the discussion focuses on the relationship of technology and culture to urban transformation, we should be mindful that some of these questions are among the oldest in social thought. One need not be a philologist to be aware of how the density of social relations in medieval Arab cities captured the minds of philosophers and military strategists. Contemporary theorists of affect (and of viral contagion) follow a lineage of Arab thought on how the social is felt and shaped.

Media, Space, Governmentality

The word "imaginaries" might at first evoke literary and cinematic expression, but equally important is the realm of urban planning, which in many contexts

is limited to the demands of the state and its real-estate proxies. Interrogating the media techniques of governmental regimes is one way to assess how power depends on technocultural forms. This task becomes more urgent when we consider how technology is not just seen as key for solving urban problems but becomes a material part of the city.

The figure of the map stands at the center of many ways of speaking about geography, from negative critiques of the epistemic violence of colonial powers and state projects to alternative approaches to data visualization that seek graphical clarity to express complex relations. Maps and mapping have been part and parcel of technoscientific representations of space long before online interactive maps, and as technical objects they have played a role in governmental practices and public imaginaries. My research has investigated the mapping of Beirut as part of a history of attempts to visualize the city's spaces and shape them.[1] This history demonstrates how the state projects that mapping supports, like the photographic and ground survey work necessary for producing maps, are always less totalizing than the impression these images give. Urban plans, from the French Mandate (1920–43) through the Lebanese Civil War (1975–90), were often left unevenly implemented if at all. From the perspective of the lives of the maps, the history of the city is bound up with the technological means by which power regimes have sought to shape it, but this is best understood as a recursive process whereby the city turns back on the maps as well. The recursive process of mapping is typically understood as a circuit in which knowledge of the city is turned into maps used to regulate or remake its spaces that are then turned back into maps and so on. Archives, typically understood as the means to secure and authorize the historical record, are also materially shaped by the city, producing dispersals and gaps in the record. Much like the maps in the Beirut archive, cities are not entities disconnected from the social worlds around them, even if urbane attitudes have sought to police their boundaries.

"The city" has often been equated in modern discourses, favorably and unfavorably, with promises of development, cosmopolitan refinement, and political economic control. Specific cities and their glorious pasts (real or invented) loom large in this cosmology—Alexandria, Baghdad, Damascus, Tangiers, and, more recently, Dubai. Often, these and other cities are made symbolically useful to nationalist or pan-Arabist sensibilities, a redescription shaped by their importance to the real effects of public cultures. Nowhere is the work of the imaginary more concrete than in linking cities with technology, explored in the rich but often

[1] Hatim El-Hibri, *Visions of Beirut: The Urban Life of Media Infrastructure* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021).

underappreciated history of Arab architectural modernism.[2] This pairing exists in notions of the city as a place where modern lives take shape through modern devices and global connectivity, to ancient cities brought into the contemporary through technoscientific means, to conceptions of the city in machinic or informatic terms.

Technology in the imaginary and in practice has often been reduced to a rather limited type, namely, systems of control. One of the latest iterations is in the discourse of smart cities, founded on a dream of a city of sensors feeding information to computational systems in real time, enabling human and automated responses. Such promises have historically been useful to private entities whose business models are geared toward attracting speculative investment or state governing bodies in search of a techno-fix. That the technology rarely delivers on its promises, or that cities are more complex than what is captured in such data, is left aside. The infrastructural wonders said to power Masdar[3] and NEOM[4] are two such projects. Masdar City was created as part of the UAE government's broader energy futures initiative starting in 2006, aiming to pioneer and embody a new green urbanism. NEOM, which was announced in 2017 as part of the Saudi government's Vision 2030 plan, aims to create an entire new economic region, logistical center, and urban future, centering on the implementation of AI-powered infrastructure. The utility of projects such as these may lay in how they allow states to create new partnerships and legal arrangements, as well as resulting in useful, greener technology and built space.[5] Promises made about machine learning—or big data and artificial intelligence—should be regarded critically not only because they fall short but because they work to shut down other ways of relating to, knowing, and making urban spaces. In the words of one critic, a city is not a computer.[6] States have often sought to constitute their relationships with the governed (citizen and noncitizen, included and excluded) by creating and providing infrastructure. Electricity, water,

[2] For example, see Mohamed Elshahed, *Cairo since 1900: An Architectural Guide* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2020).

[3] This ad, for example, bears a close resemblance to the marketing of Silicon Valley firms that the Masdar project builds links to. See "Masdar City for a Sustainable Future," June 16, 2021, video, 0:59, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cJ0zW_yXhMY.

[4] The NEOM project is often billed as not just being powered by artificial intelligence in every infrastructural system, but also as a future center for all things related to technological advancement. See "NEOM Is Changing the Future of Technology & Digital," October 26, 2021, video, 1:00, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2-VJKjxb4pU.

[5] Gökçe Günel, *Spaceship in the Desert: Energy, Climate Change, and Urban Design in Abu Dhabi* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019).

[6] Shannon Mattern, *A City Is Not a Computer: Other Urban Intelligences* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021).

roads, and internet are all ways of shaping public conduct, and their importance lies in how these relations become sites or the means of contestation. Attending critically to the city-technology pairing is not to dismiss the latter in order to preserve the organic wholeness of the former but to hold the possibility for more equitably designed cities, built around principles other than corporate and state surveillance.[7]

Cities and the Concentration of Culture and Media

Cities are constituted by dense social, intellectual, and economic relations, a quality that sometimes leads to their emergence as centers of cultural life, which can in turn concentrate cultural and media industries in specific cities. The contingencies that lead to such flourishing are not reducible to state control. Even as popular culture and the arts are key sites for articulating imaginaries of the city, artists and cultural workers of all types are themselves not separate from the uneven social contexts in which they live. To shift the parameters of the discussion from how political and governmental agendas have shaped built environments, we might consider how and why cities become central nodes in the cultural landscape. Specific cities have often become media capitals in relation to certain media industries—San Francisco to Silicon Valley, or Cairo to Egyptian media. The needs of these industries—from robust labor pools to the constellations of specialized services they require—end up inhabiting or even becoming synonymous with the city.

Historical accidents and complexities aside, some states have also tried to foster or create media capitals more or less from scratch as a matter of economic and cultural policy. Arab governments have pursued the "creative industries" for many of the same reasons that countries have found knowledge economies attractive. Dubai Media City is one example of how special economic zones, preferential or parallel legal and taxation systems, infrastructure, and political capital are extended to create a base for media and tech industries.[8] Jordan's attempts to draw global (and regional) production and location shooting are a similar effort.[9] Such spatial

[7] Germaine R. Halegoua, *The Digital City: Media and the Social Production of Place* (New York: New York University Press, 2019).

[8] Joe F. Khalil, "Towards a Supranational Analysis of Arab Media: The Role of Cities," in *National Broadcasting and State Policy in Arab Countries*, ed. Tourya Guaaybess (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 188–208.

[9] Jordan's natural landscapes have a long cinematic history. Since the founding of Jordan Media City in 2001, there has been a more concerted effort to attract regional and global firms and partnerships.

formations exceed more conventional understanding of a city and emphasize how our analytical frames must contend with capital movements congealing in response to deterritorializations that exceed national borders. Media cities are often built outside of established city centers, where real estate is less expensive. The digital distribution infrastructures that contemporary media and streaming platforms presume emerge from the regional and national media markets that preceded them, transforming the terrain of policy negotiation in which nation-states reassert their authority over media landscapes.[10]

The category of creativity—as both a generalizable quality and a specific professional class that perform it—occupies a particular place in liberal imaginaries and neoliberal economies. As critical perspectives on the media or creative industries suggest, the term "creativity" should not be taken as a self-evident or transhistorical category. Much like the term "innovation" in the tech industry, "creativity" has been used to name and valorize certain dispositions or self-making practices, promoting work as a means of self-fulfillment.[11] The genealogy of the creativity discourse includes states and economies advancing an expedient model of citizenship and precarious labor, as well as reappropriation for more radical ends, as seen in the Arab uprisings of 2011 and after.[12] Just below the sheen that accompanies the creative classes are older discourses of modernization and urbane sensibilities.

> Finding a path to equitable, ecologically sustainable, and just futures requires a nuanced political understanding of how the urban and its imaginaries are linked.

Music scenes, although perhaps more ephemeral and typically not as cozy with political elites, have also often formed in particular cities (or even in particular neighborhoods), such as Ramallah, Amman, and Beirut. While benefitting from the spaces of gentrifying leisure economies, they sometimes inadvertently lend their cool to the context of deepening urban inequality, by which they are

[10] Joe F. Khalil and Mohamed Zayani, "Digitality and Debordered Spaces in the Era of Streaming: A Global South Perspective," *Television & New Media* (May 2021): 1–17.

[11] Chihab El Khachab, *Making Film in Egypt: How Labor, Technology, and Mediation Shape the Industry* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2021); Andreas Reckwitz, *The Invention of Creativity: Modern Society and the Culture of the New*, trans. Steven Black (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2017).

[12] Marwan M. Kraidy, *The Naked Blogger of Cairo: Creative Insurgency in the Arab World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016).

also affected.[13] Musical artists in the Arab world have not always found robust audiences in their home country, and with the digital platform economy, they sometimes find success with farther flung audiences before they do at home.[14] Success depends on states not cracking down on perceived dissidence and elites not inciting moral panics over "indecent" expression. These actions have the effect of shattering fragile social and creative ecosystems and destroying livelihoods.

Imagining the City, Otherwise

A materialist perspective on the culture of cities would be incomplete without reckoning with the real possibilities and conceptualizations found in the many expressive forms there. To imagine the city otherwise has often yielded penetrating insight into existing conditions. The problem of how to represent violence—whether the slow violence of environmental and infrastructural degradation or the more immediate violence of police repression—has been taken up by various actors in an wide array of aesthetic forms. As in earlier eras, the Arab cultural archive and its relationship to thinkers, writers, and artists from South Asia, Africa, the Americas, and Europe have been subject to complex reactivation. As in the evocation of Ferguson-to-Gaza, places become linked by new means that reassert older solidarities. In literature, the visual arts, and cinematic and televisual adaptations of literary works (such as those of Egyptian writers Naguib Mahfouz or Alaa Al Aswany), examinations and interrogations of narrative and aesthetic forms have taken on the question of how to represent urban life. The US invasion of Iraq and the uprisings and counter revolutionary tide across the Arab world are perhaps the most obvious contexts that inform a renewed interest in speculative fiction and genre study. From the science fiction scenarios of Gulf futurism or Larissa Sansour's reworking of living under occupation in architectural form[15] to hauntings and undead presences, cities brim with potentialities too numerous to recount in full.[16] Realist modes have also

[13] Rayya El Zein, "Toward a Dialectic of Discrepant Cosmopolitanisms," *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication* 13, no. 2 (2020): 170–89.

[14] Chris Nickell, "Promises and Pitfalls: The Two-Faced Nature of Streaming and Social Media Platforms for Beirut-Based Independent Musicians," *Popular Communication* 18, no. 1 (2020): 48–64.

[15] See, especially, Sansour's trilogy: *A Space Exodus* (2008), *Nation Estate* (2012), and *In the Future They Ate from the Finest Porcelain* (2015).

[16] For a rich discussion of how science fiction genres can speak to new contexts in unexpected ways, see Nadya Sbaiti, "Teaching Science Fiction while Living It in Lebanon," *Society and Space*, November 2, 2020, https://www.societyandspace.org/articles/teaching-science-fiction-while-living-it-in-lebanon.

found new expression in documentary and feature films. Since 2012, we have seen the emergence of independently produced, bold, and even experimental social media–ready multimedia, data, and photojournalism geared for online access or even specifically for digital circulation. A closely related way of seeing cities appears in videos shot or streamed by citizen journalists to niche audiences who are nonetheless globally dispersed.

In certain cultural and intellectual genealogies, a particular city comes to stand in for the best or worst qualities of the nation or Arabness—the solution to the ills of rural underdevelopment or intolerances. In some diasporic invocations, memories of home are equated with a specific neighborhood or village, a lost object or site that only temporarily or partially renders its subject whole upon retrieval or return. In other varieties, urban dysfunction is the focus, standing in for the problem of the postcolonial or postrevolutionary predicament. This urban focus can burden the rural with new associations with political backwardness, beyond that of the regional or authentic. Geographic dispersal is not the only source of nostalgia, and as the politics of time and remembrance in Syrian television drama in the 2010s demonstrates, portrayals of the past can become the means to articulate idealizations and critique of contemporary circumstances.[17] The possibilities and traditions of coexistence have become a key political horizon in the era of neoliberal authoritarianism.[18] At the same time, television dramas from Turkey and South Korea have increased in distribution and popularity throughout the Arab region. Istanbul and Seoul, and more specific neighborhoods in these and other secondary cities, become more than just a setting for the trials of love and family. They are also spaces for audience consumption and affective investment, branded and remade for the screen as part of municipal and national economic strategies of tourism driven by media visibility.[19] Similar strategic curations take place in secondary cities such as Tyre in Lebanon, built around the affordances of platforms like Instagram.[20]

Cities are not simply objects out there waiting to be appropriately narrated, visualized, or made amenable to recording formats. They are complex sensory and mediated landscapes, defined by making and fashioning political and social subjects by cultivating and policing public and private interaction at the level

[17] Christa Salamandra, “Past Continuous: The Chronopolitics of Representation in Syrian Television Drama,” *Middle East Critique* 28, no. 2 (2019): 121–41.

[18] Ussama Makdisi, *Age of Coexistence: The Ecumenical Frame and the Making of the Modern Arab World* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2019).

[19] Youjeong Oh, *Pop City: Korean Popular Culture and the Selling of Place* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018).

[20] Reem Tayseer Joudi, “Visions of the South: Precarity and the ‘Good Life’ in the Visual Culture of Tyre” (MA thesis, American University of Beirut, 2018).

of sight, sound, smell, touch, and embodied encounter.[21] This is not to say that the sensory cannot find any cogent expression in mediated and representational form. Rather, as the work of Moroccan filmmaker Moumen Smihi demonstrates, the senses can be effectively refracted through cultural forms that rework how language, memory, and place cohere in and through modernist genres that can only be properly understood outside of Eurocentric framings.[22]

Naming cities in the Arab world is not to say that all the imaginaries of those cities are "Arab," as though that category has an internal coherence that does not vary across time and is not contingent on the uneven interrelations that constitute it. Only from a narrow and ethnocentric perspective it might appear that South Asian diasporas in the Arab world do not imagine and build Arab cities. Consider the place that Dubai (or the Gulf more broadly) has come to occupy in Indian cinema, on screen and in production practices and financial arrangements. Disavowals of Blackness and racialized labor hierarchies such as *kafala*[23]—including their near invisibility in Arab media—have also long constrained our understanding of how working-class migrant laborers experience their cities. The differentials of mobility, more recently overlayed by smartphones, have at times been illegible or rendered invisible in public discourse by the powerful, but also by those seeking to keep their socialities and economies hidden.

Conclusion

Cities attain coherence through their relationship to the spaces and sentiments that exceed their location, while creating uneven concentrations of opportunity, wealth, and power. Finding a path to equitable, ecologically sustainable, and just futures requires a nuanced political understanding of how the urban and its imaginaries are linked. This essay has highlighted some instances of how media technology and infrastructure have given shape to contemporary public space and public culture and how the question of aesthetics is also one of the production of urban space. The present moment demands a capacious understanding of what is, so as to hold the possibility of what might be.

[21] Ziad Fahmy, *Street Sounds: Listening to Everyday Life in Modern Egypt* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2020).

[22] Peter Limbrick, *Arab Modernism as World Cinema: The Films of Moumen Smihi* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2020).

[23] *Kafala* is a system of work visa sponsorship with roots in the colonial period; it gives an employer profound control over employees and supports conditions of limited accountability.

Hatim El-Hibri is an assistant professor of film and media studies at George Mason University. His research and teaching interests focus on global and trans-national media studies, visual culture studies, Lebanon and the Middle East, urban studies, television studies, and media theory and history. He is the author of *Visions of Beirut: The Urban Life of Media Infrastructure* (2021).