

Sit Alshai - Tea Lady; Events taking Place in El Meshtal Street

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Abstract

Sit Alshai is a Sudanese local term that means the lady who sells tea, coffee and other drinks to passersby. There are many issues related to the Tea Lady, as she represents the socio-economic changes in the Sudanese community. These ladies get an income by appropriating parts of the streets of the city and transforming them to temporary cafes where people drink tea and socialize for a while. The authorities however do not approve their business and many times both the government and opposition parties use them as political leverage. The paper will investigate this phenomenon and the effects of it on the urban society. The Tea Ladies can be found in many places in Khartoum where this happens, mostly concentrated in the centre. However this paper will focus on documenting Tea Ladies located on one street in Khartoum, El Meshtal Street. The road has been chosen specifically because of its rising importance in the past years and because it is located in an upper-class neighbourhood. The existence of the Tea Ladies on that street symbolizes juxtaposition on that street that is worth being studied and documented.

Keywords: Adaptation, Informalities, Juxtaposition, Khartoum, Place-making
Reprogramming

1. Introduction: Lessons of Sit Al-Shai

"[...]I think architects are unable to read the mutations that take place and to reinterpret certain phenomena they previously know in architectural terms."

Koolhaas, 1996: 45

Reprogramming of spaces in the city is becoming a main topic of discussion and research today as more architects go back to the informal architecture in cities to learn lessons. Perhaps it started when Scott Brown, Izenour and Venturi went to Las Vegas and pointed out lessons for architects there in their book *Learning from Las Vegas* (Venturi et al., 1988). This notorious book that created a revolution in the architecture world was followed by another and an even more rebellious book and film by Koolhaas as that exploits Lagos, an informal city, as a city of the future inviting planners to take notes from it (Koolhaas et al., 2001). Both researches depended almost entirely on the image and representations they documented of these cities. This paper aims to examine the phenomena of the Tea Lady in the city of Khartoum in a similar approach to that used in Las Vegas and Lagos. Using both photography and film the Tea Lady phenomenon was documented in a specific location in both space and time. The space is El Meshtal Street in

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Riyadh Neighbourhood in Khartoum and the time was 16th December 2013. Some photos included within this research may not have been taken in those exact coordinates in time and space, but are used to further explain and reinforce a specific point. The reader will be able to distinguish these photos, as the captions will disclose this information. It is important to note that this paper does not take the entire multiplicity of the issue, such as the socio-economical aspects and historical development of this phenomenon. Instead the research is initiating a first step into exploring these informalities in Khartoum.

2. Literature Review

Meneses-Reyes & Caballero-Juárez (2014) claim that street vendors are usually seen by researchers in three different lights; a) as committing criminal activities by breaking the law, b) an economy that should be regulated by the law & c) viewing informality as a better and more practical system of management and control than the law. This research approaches these informalities, represented within this research in the Tea Ladies in Khartoum, in a different light. In a country where the law is not clear and that is going through turmoil this paper highlights the strong agency of these ladies in the city. By confirming the voice of the Tea Ladies in the city and looking at their street economy and place making methods one can draw out numerous effects of the Tea Lady in modern Khartoum, which if put to its fullest potential could create positive change in the city. By studying existing researches related to street vendors one can find that street economy of this nature is strongly related to the notion of place making and creating a notable identity for the place. Lauermaann (2013) is one of the researches that addresses this claim and finds that the vendors can "*leverage the social and material characteristics of their specific market spaces*". However this research does understand that there are various potential dangers as a result of the food and drinks street vending economy. Some of the problems that could arise with these informalities are health threats that comes along with street vended food or drinks that are not hygienically regulated, controlled or supervised. These health threats were discussed by various researches in different countries such as Muyanja et al (2011) in Uganda and Choudhury et al (2011) in India. Nevertheless this paper is looking specifically at the agency of the Tea Ladies in determining the urban landscape of Khartoum.

3. Defining Sit Al-Shai

The Sudanese phrase "Sit Alshai" has been translated within this paper as Tea Lady however the translation does not entirely explain the Arabic version of the word; therefore a more accurate definition should be given. The usage of "Sit" in Sudan refers to a female that is the owner of any object; therefore an exact translation would be the owner of the tea. However since it is very difficult to use "the owner of the tea" in English "Tea Lady" is used as the most appropriate phrase. The spread of Tea Ladies in the city of Khartoum is on the rise since the 1990s. The Saudi newspaper Alriyadh (29th March, 2011) writes about the conditions of the Tea Ladies in Sudan stating that most of them arrive from war tore zones and are supporting their families due to them being widowed, divorced or are sometimes working for extra income to support their husbands in the big expensive city. Having to work literally on the street these ladies are many times subjected to insults from men and confiscation of their stalls by the police.



Fig. 1 A Tea Lady at work on EL-Meshtal Street. Like any business they wake up early to set up their stalls before their customers leave their homes heading to work or schools.

Source: Author

4. Three Dimensional Analyses

The framework for this research draws from Theirsten and Schein's (2008) who created "method triangulation", a systematic method to analyze urban space. This method is based on Henri Lefebvre's definition of space "*Space is lived, perceived and conceived*". Their method has been developed further into a triangular pyramid to encompass the analysis levels this research is covering. At the top of the pyramid is the case study that is dissected into three levels: 1- social level, 2- physical level and 3- program level. Each one of these levels is linked to agents that are respectively: 1- the community, 2- the built environment and 3- the authorities. Amongst these agents are relations based on Lefebvre's definition of space. Several methods have been used to collect the data and they are divided into four categories, literature review, photography, onsite observations and discourse analysis. The data collected for this research is qualitative in nature and the aim for it is to illustrate trends that can be further examined in future researches.

4.1.1. Literature Review

The paper looks into the numerous literatures that have approached the city in an unconventional way. This literature discusses issues of mutations, events and informal architecture that exist in response to the needs of the community. In addition it has looked at literature that examines street vendors and their effects.

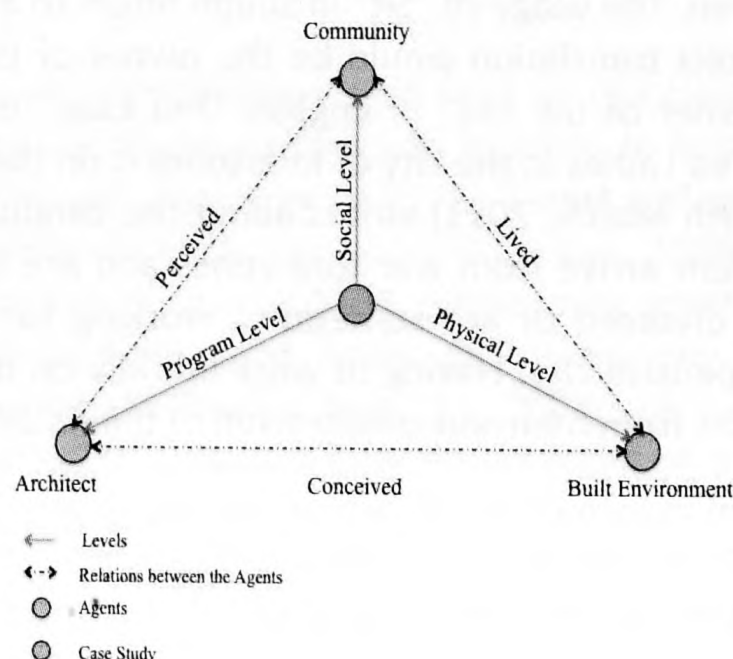


Fig. 2 Pyramid Analysis Diagram

4.1.2. Photography

With the excessive use of images in people's lives photography is no longer only a documentation method; it produces yet another body of information for the researcher to observe. In the past photography has usually been used in research as a means of illustration and presentation but not as a method for conducting research with the exception of a few cases. Sutton claims (1997) that most researchers tend to use qualitative methods including photography without mentioning it in their research fearing it might weaken the authenticity of their research. However at the present time photography is becoming more popular as a research methodology. There are two approaches to using this technique: a) systematic way and b) unsystematic. Whilst the first might be more accepted in academia the second proves to be more useful as it presents us with information that we would have not been able to obtain in a systematic way. Therefore this paper adopts the second method due to the lack of existing literature and information regarding the urban situation of Tea Ladies in Khartoum. The photographs that were used for the observation were taken from two points: a) by walking down the street and documenting the street elevation of the opposite site & b) documenting interesting events happening on the walkway.

4.1.3. Onsite observations

Conducting behavioural mapping, photographic observation and film observation to carry out observations. They have generated data in relation to how the space is lived in and the daily effect of the built environment on the users.

4.1.4. Discourse Analysis

This strategy is used to collect data from various media outlets regarding both the social and legal state of the Tea Ladies. Additionally the analysis includes the effect of the Tea Ladies in the contemporary literature of Sudan such as poems and novels.

4.2. Research Limitation

Many limitations existed in the research which could not be overcome have affected the outcome of the research. These limitations are:

- The fieldwork was conducted during one working day of the week
- Lack of exiting literature regarding the Tea Ladies in all related fields
- Interviews were not conducted with the Tea Ladies on El-Meshtal Street
- There was no updated planning records in the archive of the National Records Office of Sudan

4.3.1. The Conceived space: El Meshtal Street

The space that was chosen for this study is El Meshtal; a 1683 meter long road that runs East-West in the middle of Riyadh neighbourhood. Both the street and the neighbourhood became infamous when Bin Laden chose to live there during his stay in Sudan. Richard Minter has described this neighbourhood as the Sudanese version of Bel Air (Minter, 2004). He writes further about the Riyadh and describes it as following:

Riyadh neighbourhood, a wealthy enclave of Sudanese and foreigners who made their money in the Middle East and came to Sudan to build multi-story concrete houses

ringed by painted cement wall, stopped with razor wire or broken glass. Behind the gates lay hidden gardens kept green with expensive water and cheap caretakers. Sometimes a sunken swimming pool casts a glittering light on the palm fronds visible from the road or, in the harsh sunlight of the afternoon, a satellite dish winks back at a visitor.

Minter, 2004: 47

This affluent neighbourhood displays a meeting point and juxtaposition between the extreme wealth and poverty in the country. Wealth represented in its inhabitant's extravagant houses and the poverty symbolized by the Tea Ladies and their mobile structures. El-Meshtal, which is the main street going through the neighbourhood, is categorized by MEFIT consulting Engineers as a branch street that is of residential nature. However in the past years many businesses, banks and governmental institutes have either moved to the street or opened branches there. This reprogramming of the street to accommodate business transforms it from a residential one to a mixed-use street.



Fig. 3 A view of Riyadh from above taken in January 2014. Many public and influential figures, both Sudanese and non-Sudanese, have lived in this neighbourhood. The list includes political figures in the government, business tycoons and upper middle class families. In addition many Sudanese living outside the country have property in Riyadh. The street in the image is a small street inside the neighbourhood not to be confused with El-Meshtal. Source: author



Fig. 4 On El-Meshtal Street is a sign that says Abu Bakir Al Saddiq Street. Abu bakir is one of Prophet Mohamed's closest companions. This could either be the original name of the street or a name that was assigned to it after the Islamist government came to power. EL-Meshtal means plant nursery in English. This name became widely used because of a known plant nursery at the West entrance of the street and it is the name used in official papers. Source: author

4.3 Space: Event.2. The Lived

Event is one of the most important factors when analysing a site. In the same manner that the actual space is analysed the location within time should not be overlooked. Any appropriation of space happening in the city is a result of both the space and the characteristics of the time. As Bernard Tschumi states "*...Events are different from programs. A program relies on repetition and habit, it can be written down and be prescriptive. In contrast an event happens unexpectedly.*"(Koolhaas et al., 2007:8). The Tea Ladies who are victims of unexpected events have become authors of unexpected events in Khartoum; their structures are of a temporary nature, are unpredictable and are not meant to last long. Their structures exist in a specific moment in time; therefore they are called events in the city. These events are most likely to

happen on nodes which are strategic points on the street that gain their importance from being junctions or placing of gatherings (Lynch, 1960).



Fig. 5 Map showing the nodes on El Meshtal Street, which are more likely to have vending events happening at them.
Source: author

4.3.3. The Perceived Space: The Tea Lady Coordinates

The most important factor in any business is location and Tea Ladies like any corporation understand the importance of the location they choose. Setting their stalls after carefully studying the pedestrian traffic into the road. According to the engineers in the MEFIT consulting Engineers during the morning peak El-Meshtal has 667 outgoing traffic and 181 incoming traffic. The Tea Ladies carefully set up their stalls at where the most traffic intersects (nodes), without academic research they know that most people come from these places. Therefore it would be interesting to study the traffic movement on the roads taking their stalls into account. As mentioned previously many new businesses have opened on the street and this might have resulted in more Tea Ladies moving into the area to serve the new workers. Previously Tea Ladies were concentrated in Khartoum centre. Another important issue in choosing their coordinates is related to the shade provided in the space, which attracts more customers to their location.



Fig. 6 : Families living in Al Riyadhare well known; some are political and economical decision makers in the country. Whilst on El Meshtal Street the unrecognized Tea Ladies appropriate a spot in front of their houses, using the shades cast by them to make a living.
Source: author

5. The Sit Alshai Effect: city scenarios

The Tea Lady who has now become an active agent in writing the urbanity of the city has many effects. This starts from her giving an identity to the space transforming it into a place in a process better known to urbanist and planners as Place making. Furthermore she also creates a public place where citizens can discuss common interests in what shall be called within this paper the Sudanese Salon. The Tea Lady designs her stall, understands how to use clear signage to market her product and has successfully exported her experience to others. The following is a detailed account of her effect on the urban landscape.

5.1. Place making

The space appropriated by the Tea Lady makes her automatically an active agent in the city in the Place making process in it. Place making is defined by Project for Public Spaces organization as *“both an overarching idea and a hands-on tool for improving a neighbourhood, city or region. It has the potential to be one of the most transformative ideas of this century.”*(PPS, 2014). Tea Ladies are always found surrounded by people, mostly men, who are able to easily socialize with one another while having their drinks in this informal setting. These gatherings have all the important characteristics mentioned by the PPS in their Place making diagram (Figure 7). They are social spaces and easily accessed which are comfortable and allow for various events to happen in them. There are other vendors on the street such as street traders of mobile credit, fruits, vegetables and other traditional food. But none of these provide the spatial experience a tea stall provides, which explains the reason of why it is always the Tea Ladies that are mostly identified with the spaces they occupy.



Fig. 7: The PPS diagram which has been created in a way so that the inner ring represents key attributes, the middle ring intangible qualities, and the outer ring measurable data.

Source: PPS, 2014

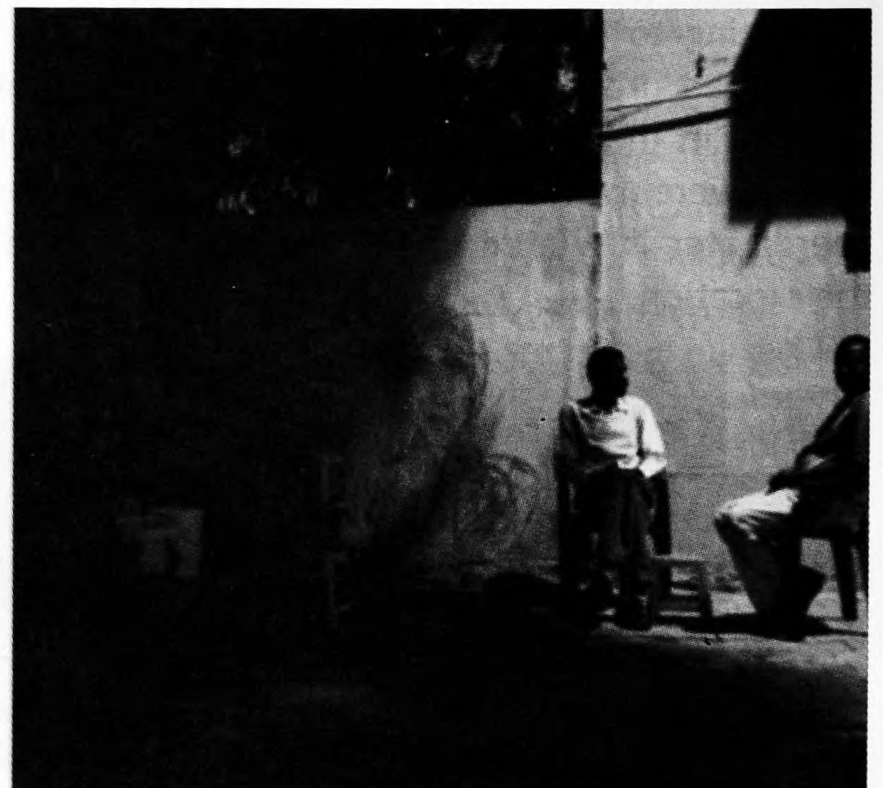


Fig. 8: This photo was not taken in El Meshtal Street, but the drawing on the wall behind the Tea Lady is interesting and it emphasises her role in activating spaces in the city.

Source: author

5.2. The Sudanese Salon

The men gathering in groups around the Tea Lady enjoy their drinks whilst discussing the latest developments in the country, culture, art, literature and religion. These gatherings can be compared to those that took place in the French Salon in the “age of conversation”. They are both political and non-political and contain conversations that are both public and private in nature. These gatherings contribute to the place making effect of the Tea Lady and elevate her status, as she is informally the owner of the space. Therefore it is not a surprise that these gatherings have transformed Sit Al Shai to a political leverage for both the government and its opposition. The authorities in Khartoum seem to be undecided when it comes to the Tea Ladies business. On one hand the police systematically confiscate the Tea Ladies equipment, which disables them from continuing in their business. On the other hand the authority implicitly recognizes them as a profession when setting laws and regulations regarding their business. Examples of these rules set is that non-Sudanese are not allowed to sell tea in Khartoum, which is mentioned in the Sudanese newspaper Alshrouq (28th September, 2012).



Fig. 9 The Tea Lady's stall provides a place with an identity in the public sphere that allows for intimate conversations about public issues between the customers.

Source: author

Fig. 10 An example of a Tea Lady stall design that responds to the direct needs of the users of the space. The design also responds to site context analysis.

Source: author

5.3. Design

When analyzing a Tea Lady's stall design one finds that it must contain all of the following elements; shade, sign and seating. The shade is created in the design by either using a wall, a tree or installing a shading device such an umbrella. This is extremely important to attract customers and invites them to sit around the stall as the drinking cups handed to them are not disposable and must be returned. The second element that is noticed in the design is the sitting areas, which also invite the customers to stay for longer periods and encourages other people to join their gathering and conversations. The last element is signage such as using the Lipton tea sign and strong colours to draw attention to the stall.

5.4. Exporting the Experience

The phenomenon of the Tea Lady has become so important in contemporary Sudanese culture, it is one of the main attractions for tourists visiting the country. Entrepreneurs capitalize on this popular idea by bringing it into a more refined setting. This can be seen in Al Housh restaurant, one of the biggest restaurants in Khartoum and winner of many prizes. The design that is inspired from the Sudanese culture contains many references to the Tea Ladies in the country. In the middle of the restaurant is a circular Tea Lady stall where customers can live the street experience in a more lavishness setting.

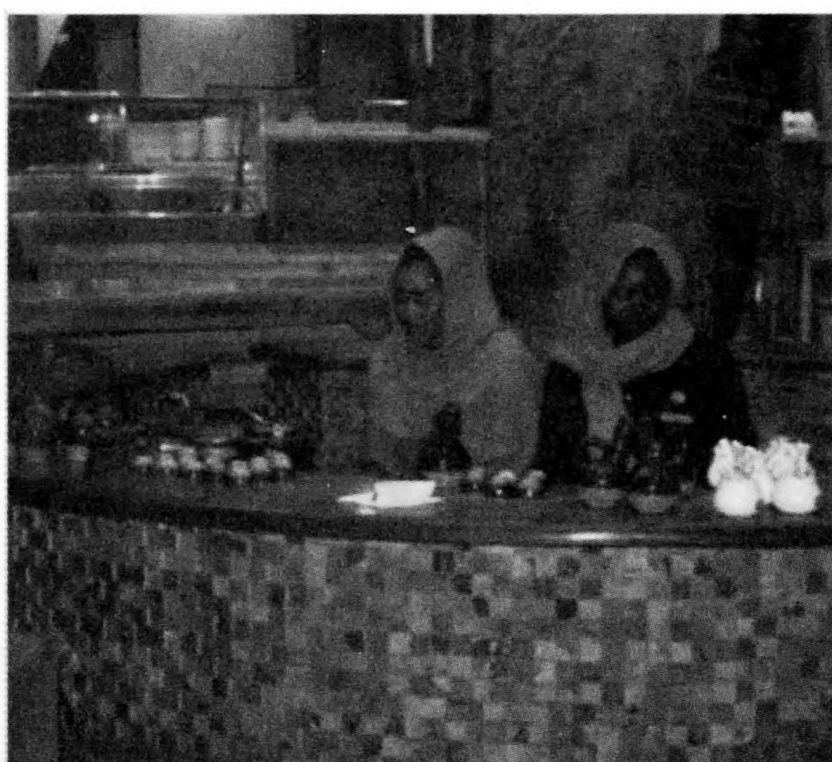


Fig. 11 Al Housh is a luxurious restaurant that opened recently in Khartoum. They have created their own – upper class – version of the street Tea Ladies inside the restaurant.
Source: author

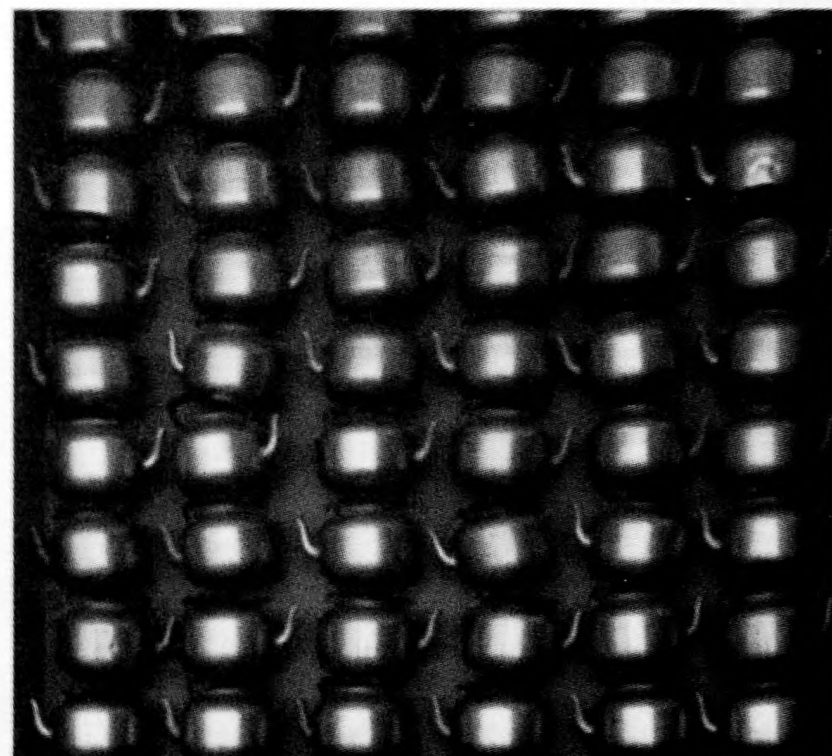


Fig. 12 Teapots used as decoration inside the wall of Al Housh Restaurant. The wall contains elements from the traditional culinary equipments in Sudan in a form of collage; this is one part of it.
Source: author

6. Conclusion

The existence of Sit Alshai allows for informal gatherings and for spaces of democracy in the city transforming spaces to places that people identify with and connect to. Her profession becoming a successful experience that is mimicked and she herself has become an inspiration for many of the contemporary literature in Sudan; from novels to poems. While serving tea, coffee and other drinks, Sit Alshai has become one of the most active agents in the decision making process in the city of Khartoum. More studies need to be carried out about this topic in the following areas:

- Mapping out the locations of Sit Alshai and analyzing their performance according to their location
- Exploring the historical development of Sit Alshai
- A more in depth analysis of the economical effects of the Tea Ladies in Khartoum
- Studying the health risk of selling tea of the street
- Examining how the Sudanese Saloon can be utilized as a tool to create positive change in the city

The importance given to the Tea Lady by the authorities, community and the large debate created by her in Sudan displays that even though she is anonymously appropriating space she is as influential as those living in the houses in Riyadh neighbourhood. This research is the first step towards understanding the dynamics of the informalities of the urban landscape of Khartoum.

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