

Supervisor's report on Master Thesis

The Change of Morphology and Function of Public Spaces.
Case Study of Latakia since French Mandate till 2010, 109 p.

Prague 2014

Yara Issa

The master thesis elaborated by Yara Issa has to be exposed first as an attempt of an architect to enter the field of urban studies by the door reserved for historians. She decided to examine the history and practice in the social use of the squares in Syria, her country, in the 20th century from the historical perspective to understand better the public spaces, the formation processes in a country which was influenced in history by impact of many civilizations passing through. For a case study she has chosen the example of Syria's largest port city: Latakia, and its major squares.

Until now has Yara studied squares as public spaces created by architects and urban planners through the vocabulary they use to describe their work. While we were working together we discovered that architects and historians understand many terms differently. This was an ongoing process till the very end, since we were continuously encountering such terms. The work focuses mainly on the period from the beginning of the twentieth century until 2010, earlier history is treated as introduction or historical contextualization.

The thesis understands square as one important type of urban public space. In near East its forms can be studied in cities that have firm tradition since ancient times, and in Syria they correspond to the type of a Mediterranean city. Historians are for many years inspired and provoked by the concept of public sphere articulated by a sociologist Jürgen Habermas when they discuss public space. Its physical form is only marginal part of their concern. The architects understand it only as organization of multidimensional physical space. Yara Issa conceived her research in four stages. 1) To grasp the influential theories about the planning of the squares, their shapes, and social function. 2) To learn about urban history in Syria, and 3) to study the application of occidental urbanism during the French mandate period as a tool of transfer of cultural values. 4) To analyze how all this applies to Latakia and its squares.

This basic strategy is represented through the structure of the MA thesis. The author choose to examine the morphological and functional transformation of squares in the history and then analyzes the five significant, morphologically and functionally differently shaped squares of Latakia and classifies them according to specific criteria for successful Square, which was formulated in parts by western urban planners and architects. The notion of successful square is for an architect a very important tool of evaluation of urban planning, and the focus on how well the squares function in the urban community are totally missing from the questionnaire of historian who would rather ask about the social impact which creation of square, or change in its form and function would mean for the town. Considering this gap in understanding, Yara is interested in how the process of modernization transformed the perception of the success of the square from the architectural viewpoint.

The most interesting part of her thesis is the analysis of the five Latakia's squares and the functional typology of squares in concluding part of the thesis. For experts who are concerned with regional or urban development in Latakia a research concerned with the practical use of

city squares must seem inappropriate under the circumstances of current civil conflict, however for the author the part presenting recommendations streaming to implement the research findings into the practice of urban planning was the most important outcome of her MA. I appreciate Yara's extensive reading and interpreting the theoretical discussion concerning public spaces, squares respectively. Very positive experience is Yara's work with city plan, with visual sources, their morphological and functional analysis. Yara's personal contribution stems from the analysis of five Latakian squares and results into a functional typology of squares. She also has ambition to offer her conclusions in the form of recommendations to those who organize the city life, develop the plan, and create the squares.

Originally the fieldwork, observations, interviews with Latakians were envisioned, however this part of the project had to be abandoned as unrealistic, and unfeasible. The archives in Damascus were not accessible at the moment, the archives in Nantes and Parisian libraries can substitute it only partially, French authorities when the mandate period was over, while transferring the power to local authorities left all related to the work on the Cadastre in Syria. This important source for the analysis of urban planning is now inaccessible. I am critical towards Yara's art of narration, although she has learned a lot during the last two years. The textual part would profit from one more tour of reading and editing. On the other side I appreciate that she was very receptive to my comments and to the guidance of Kathleen Geaney, her teacher of Academic English. This helped Yara to accomplish her thesis successfully.

Yara has shown that she has mastered the craft and presented a very good master thesis, which I gladly recommend for defence. I propose to grade it B – velmi dobře (2) in Czech grading system which is 29 in Italian notation.

10.6.2014

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