Article

Spatial Transformation—The Importance of a Bottom-Up Approach in Creating Authentic Public Spaces

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Abstract: This study explores the integration of phenomenology in urban placemaking, focusing on the Ghobeiry neighborhood in Beirut. By examining the transformation of a public garden through a phenomenological lens, this research highlights the impact of a bottom-up approach in urban design. The methodology combines a literature review with empirical data gathered from interviews and observations within the community. The findings indicate that the initial top-down development of the public garden failed to resonate with residents, leading to its neglect. However, a shift towards community engagement, initiated by a local social activist, encouraged a sense of ownership and transformed the space into a vibrant, meaningful area. This study contributes to urban planning literature by demonstrating the practical application of phenomenological principles, emphasizing the importance of community involvement in creating authentic urban spaces. It underscores the need for inclusive, participatory approaches in urban development, offering insights into the transformative potential of engaging local narratives and experiences.

Keywords: bottom-up; citizen engagement; phenomenology; city placemaking

1. Introduction

In recent years, the realm of urban planning and design has taken strides towards understanding the nuanced relationship between human beings and their environment [1]. Phenomenology, a branch of philosophy that studies the structures of consciousness as experienced from a first-person point of view, sheds light on the importance of direct, subjective experiences and perceptions in understanding reality [2]. This inquiry lends itself to a study of 'place', a term that transcends physical descriptions and involves the layers of personal and social meanings that individuals and communities assign to a location [3].

The study of 'being in place' from a phenomenological perspective hence takes us beyond the tangible characteristics of a space to consider the lived experiences, emotions, and memories that emerge from human interactions with the place. By doing so, it offers a rich understanding of the place as an interweaving of the physical, social, and psychological dimensions of human existence, potentially providing the basis for more responsive and humane approaches to urban design and planning [4].

One such approach gaining traction is the pursuit of authenticity in placemaking. Authenticity in this context extends beyond originality or truthfulness in a historical or material sense, encompassing a broader understanding that resonates with the 'spirit of the place' or 'genius loci'—a concept that captures the unique, indefinable character and atmosphere that distinguishes one place from another [5,6]. By utilizing a phenomenological appreciation of personal and collective experiences and perceptions, urban designers and planners can attempt to instill or retain the authentic spirit of a place in their projects, by being capable of understanding the socio-cultural aspect of the lived experience of citizens. Moreover, the role of memory is pivotal in this process, intertwining the past, present, and future in a tangible and intangible narrative of space. Memory and reminiscence

help to cement the authenticity of a place by preserving its historical narrative and thus perpetuating its unique identity [7]. As individuals and communities interact with their environment, they infuse it with their lived experiences and memories, inextricably binding the human and spatial dimensions. This complex interaction contributes to the formation of a collective memory that is embodied in the 'genius loci', forming an authentic and unique identity for each place.

This study highlights the effectiveness of a phenomenological methodology in comprehending the dynamics of the Ghobeiry–Hay El Jamea neighborhood in Beirut. Initially, the implementation of a public garden in this community followed a top-down strategy, which met with resistance, evident in the frequent vandalism and misuse of the space. However, shifting to a bottom-up approach, where the community members were actively involved in the development process, led to a remarkable transformation. The once resistant community members evolved into caretakers of the public space. This paper explores the transformational impact of community engagement in urban development, using the Ghobeiry case as a focal point. It argues that a bottom-up approach not only raises a sense of ownership among the community members but also facilitates the creation of authentic and sustainable public spaces.

2. Method

The methodology focuses primarily on the intersection of phenomenology and urban placemaking. Initially, the research involves a literature review analysis to define phenomenology within the context of urban studies and to understand the concept and processes of placemaking. This stage aims to establish how placemaking is significantly influenced by the experiences and interactions of individuals within a space. Following the theoretical groundwork, the study transitions into a practical phase with a focused case study of the Ghobeiry neighborhood in Beirut. This component is designed to provide empirical insights that bridge theory with real-life urban dynamics. To achieve this, the research engages with a selected number of residents from Ghobeiry, utilizing phenomenological research methods like in-depth interviews and observations. These interactions are intended to capture the diverse and rich perspectives of the community, offering an understanding of how their everyday lived experiences contribute to the shaping and evolution of a specific public space. Building upon the foundational theoretical and practical aspects of the study, the methodology also incorporates a significant component of direct engagement with key stakeholders and residents of the Ghobeiry neighborhood in Beirut. This engagement was structured to gain a comprehensive understanding of the local urban dynamics from various perspectives. A critical part of this engagement involved conducting structured interviews with members of the local municipality. Over a period of three months, I conducted interviews with five members of the municipality (one of whom is the municipal head, Mr. Maan Khalil), offering insights into the administrative and planning aspects of the region. Additionally, I worked closely on a weekly basis with two members of the municipality. This collaboration provided a perspective on the ongoing efforts and challenges the municipality is facing.

Furthermore, interviews were conducted with 8 families living in proximity to the Hay el Jamea garden of the neighborhood. These interviews encompassed a total of 16 individuals from these families.

In addition to these interviews, I also engaged in informal, open meetings with more than 30 residents from the broader area of Hay el Jamea. These unstructured conversations allowed for a more spontaneous and varied collection of viewpoints.

3. Phenomenology and Being in Place

Phenomenology, as a philosophical approach, underscores the importance of personal perception and experience in understanding reality [8]. In relation to urban environments, phenomenology places emphasis on 'being in place'—a fundamental aspect that molds our relationship with our physical surroundings. As Merleau-Ponty [9] articulates, our

body is not merely in space or in time, but it inhabits space and time. Our interaction with urban spaces transcends a mere physical or functional level; we imbue spaces with meaning through our lived experiences, contributing to a multilayered perception of place.

This perspective compels us to recognize urban spaces not just as physical entities, but as sites where personal and collective experiences, memories, and identities intersect. In this framework, the individual and the community become the center of urban planning and design, rather than peripheral considerations. However, understanding 'being in place' is not a straightforward endeavor. It encompasses not just the present experience, but also the complex interplay of history, culture, and personal and collective memory [10]. Here, the work of Bachelard is instructive. His 'poetics of space' suggests that the intimate places of our life—like our home—hold deep-rooted images and memories, shaping our mental constructs of space [11].

Through the lens of phenomenology, it becomes evident that our connection with places is mediated by our senses, emotions, and cognition. Every element of a place, from the materiality of the built environment to the intangible qualities like sounds and smells, informs our perception and experience. In this sense, 'being in place' emerges as an embodied, multisensory experience, rooting us in a specific spatial and temporal context [12]. Heidegger's existential phenomenology introduces a profound dimension to our understanding of 'being in place'. For Heidegger, space is not an abstract entity or mere backdrop against which human life unfolds but is intimately intertwined with our existence. He proposes the concept of 'Dasein', often translated as 'being-there', to underline that human existence is essentially a 'being-in-the-world' [13].

However, Heidegger's 'Dasein' is not an isolated, individual entity, but an involved being, deeply embedded in its world, where the 'world' is a network of meanings and relationships that Dasein comprehends and navigates. In Heidegger's analysis, space is not just an objective, measurable entity, but is inherently relational—we are always in a spatial relation to other beings and things. Thus, our spatiality is a constituent of our being. Moreover, Heidegger emphasizes that our experience of space is shaped not just by physical distances, but by the significance or meaning that entities hold for us. The world of Dasein is not a world of neutral, indifferent objects, but a world of meaningful entities that matter to us, to which we assign importance and value. For instance, a place where we grew up may seem 'closer' to us in a meaningful sense, despite being physically far away. In this endeavor, being in place emerges not just as a physical or sensory experience, but as an existential condition that involves understanding, concern, and care. It suggests that placemaking should be more than creating aesthetically pleasing or functionally efficient spaces; it should aim to create meaningful places that resonate with our lived experiences and existential concerns.

4. Authenticity and the Spirit of Place

Our existential understanding of place sets the foundation for a discussion on authenticity and the spirit of place, or 'genius loci'. Norberg-Schulz introduces 'genius loci' as the particular character or atmosphere of a place, and argues that understanding this character is vital for creating places that are meaningful and authentic [5]. Authenticity in place refers to the qualities that make a space genuine, unique, and meaningful to its inhabitants. It includes aspects such as the history of the place, the cultural and social practices associated with it, and the collective memories and experiences of the people who inhabit it [4]. Authentic places are those that resonate with our experiences and values and evoke a sense of belonging and identification [14]. Creating authentic places, then, is not just about design and aesthetics, but about fostering connections between people and their environment. It involves integrating the physical, cultural, and social elements of a place in ways that reflect and enhance its unique character and history [15]. This is where the principle of 'genius loci' comes into play. Moreover, the spirit of a place is not a fixed or objective entity, but a dynamic and subjective phenomenon that emerges from the interaction between people and their environment [5]. It reflects the unique ways in which

a place is perceived, experienced, and valued by its inhabitants. As such, understanding the 'genius loci' of a place requires an empathetic and holistic approach, one that considers not just the physical attributes of the space, but also the meanings, emotions, and memories associated with it.

This emphasis on authenticity and 'genius loci' highlights the importance of place-making approaches that are participatory and people-centered [16]. Such approaches involve engaging with local communities, understanding their needs and aspirations, and integrating their insights into the design and development of public spaces. They aim to create places that are not only functional and aesthetically pleasing, but also meaningful and authentic, places that enhance the well-being and quality of life of their inhabitants.

5. Memory and Authenticity

Building upon our understanding of the phenomenological experience of place and the importance of authenticity in placemaking, we now turn to the role of memory in defining the authenticity of a space. Memory, both individual and collective, plays a crucial role in our relationship with space, shaping our perceptions, experiences, and identities. Tuan posits that "space" becomes "place" when it is imbued with human experience and memory [17]. Similarly, Bachelard in his seminal work, "The Poetics of Space", explores the intimate connections between memory and space, arguing that our most profound, lived experiences are often tied to specific places [11]. These places, imbued with our memories, become repositories of our histories, identities, and emotions, carrying a sense of familiarity, comfort, and belonging. Hence, memory, in this context, is not merely retrospective; it is a dynamic process that shapes our present experiences and future anticipations [18]. In terms of placemaking, memory serves as a critical link between people and their environments, informing the meanings they ascribe to spaces, their emotional attachments to them, and their interactions with them.

The concept of 'lieux de mémoire' or 'sites of memory', introduced by Nora, further illustrates the intertwining of memory and space [19]. Nora suggests that certain sites, such as monuments, landmarks, or even less tangible entities like rituals and symbols, serve as repositories of collective memory, embodying shared histories and cultural identities. These 'sites of memory' are crucial in maintaining a sense of continuity and coherence in the face of rapid social and spatial changes. Therefore, understanding the role of memory in the experience of place offers valuable insights for placemaking. It suggests the need for placemaking approaches that respect and incorporate the historical and cultural layers of a place, preserving its 'memory traces' [20] and promoting a sense of continuity and identity. This might involve preserving historical structures, celebrating local traditions, or creating spaces for community storytelling and commemoration. Moreover, placemaking should also enable the creation of new memories by facilitating social interactions, community activities, and personal experiences. In this way, placemaking can contribute to the ongoing narrative of a place, maintaining its authenticity while allowing it to evolve and adapt to changing circumstances.

6. Spatial Transformation and Placemaking

In the quest for authentic placemaking, the role of spatial transformation and the involved stakeholders cannot be overlooked. Urban theorists and planners have long grappled with questions regarding the dynamics of spatial transformation and the creation of meaningful, vibrant spaces. Central to these debates is the distinction between top-down and bottom-up approaches to urban planning and placemaking.

In a top-down approach, decisions about spatial transformation are typically made by a centralized authority, often with minimal input from the community. While this approach can be efficient and cohesive, it often neglects local nuances and disregards the lived experiences and preferences of community members. As a result, these transformations may fail to resonate with the local population, and thus, might not engender a genuine 'spirit of place'.

In contrast, a bottom-up approach privileges the input and engagement of community members in decisions regarding spatial transformation. Rooted in the belief that those who live, work, and play in a space have the most intimate knowledge and stake in it, this approach emphasizes participatory planning and design processes. As Healey suggests, such a strategy recognizes the pluralistic, multi-voiced nature of the city, respecting the diverse needs, desires, and visions of its inhabitants [21].

French sociologist Henri Lefebvre's (1996) '*Writings on Cities*' underscores the importance of bottom-up processes in spatial transformation. Henri Lefebvre's theoretical perspective on the production of space plays a significant role in understanding urban transformation [22]. Lefebvre contends that space is not a static entity, but rather a socially produced phenomenon, generated by and intertwined with the complexities of social interactions, power dynamics, and economic systems. His triadic model of perceived, conceived, and lived space offers a holistic approach to understanding spatial contexts. This model suggests that space is simultaneously a physical reality (perceived space), a mental construction or representation (conceived space), and imbued with individual and collective experiences and symbolism (lived space). This understanding of space as socially produced posits that changes in society are intricately linked to the transformation of space itself, reinforcing the essential role of individual and collective action in shaping urban environments.

By allowing residents to influence the design and use of their spaces, a bottom-up approach can foster a sense of ownership and attachment, key ingredients in the creation of a true 'genius loci'. Such participatory practices can help ensure that the built environment reflects the collective memory, culture, and identity of its inhabitants, thus enhancing its authenticity and sense of place [23]. However, the effective implementation of a bottom-up approach to spatial transformation and placemaking is not without its challenges. It requires an open, flexible planning system capable of accommodating diverse perspectives and facilitating meaningful public participation. It also necessitates a shift in mindset among planners and decision-makers, from viewing the public as passive recipients of design to active contributors and co-creators of space.

7. Case Study—Hay El Jamea, Ghobeiry

This bottom-up, top-down dichotomy approach was witnessed during our research in Hay El Jamea in Ghobeiry, Beirut. To understand this change we will look a little into its history.

After World War II, Beirut transformed into a bustling center of economic activity, attracting Lebanese citizens from the villages who were seeking better prospects. Unfortunately, the city's economic prosperity was accompanied by visible signs of social inequality, which drove these migrants to seek affordable housing in the suburbs near the city [24]. As Beirut's urban landscape rapidly developed in the 1950s and 1960s, a new era of modernity emerged, accompanied by new urban policies and regulations [25]. Unfortunately, the situation took a turn for the worse, first in 1977, with the start of the Lebanese civil war, then in 1982, with the Israeli invasion of Southern Lebanon, which caused citizens from Southern Lebanon to migrate to Beirut and settle in areas where other communities had already established a presence.

These historical events set the stage for the spatial production of neighborhoods like Hay el Jamea in Beirut's southern suburbs. Despite the intensification of neoliberal practices in the Lebanese economy after the 1990s, and the effects of globalization, these communities continued to maintain their cultural values [26]. It is important to note that the spatial production of Hay el Jamea and other neighborhoods in the region was shaped by various factors, including migration patterns, economic trends, and urban policies. These factors worked together to create a unique urban landscape that reflects the community's values and aspirations. Despite the challenges and difficulties faced by the residents, they managed to create a vibrant and dynamic community that continues to thrive to this day.

8. Space Formation

While doing the research in the neighborhood, to understand how these working-class communities constructed their communal space, and partake in the community events, a phenomenological analysis was performed by interviewing residents who live in the neighborhood for the second degree. The analysis required us to go back and understand their history on an individual level and how most of them came to the neighborhood; moreover, understanding their political and social interactions through in-depth talks.

C05, C08, and C02, are all family members living in Hay el Jamea Neighborhood. These individuals all come from a poor background, are mostly working class, underpaid individuals.

"My father was a gardener for the minister, Rachid Youssef Beidon, in a village in the Bekaa valley known as Janta. Janta served as a trade route between Beirut and Damascus via Yahfoufah's train station. After years of working in Janta, My father requested to move to Beirut to work as a gardener for Beidon's mansion in Beirut during the early 1950s". C05

"My father first came from Sareein (Bekaa Valley), he came to work for Gandour (Lebanese sweets factory). First he lived with his friend with 6 others from Sareein in one room". C08

"I came in the early 1973, first I worked in the port, but I wasn't lucky, as only 2 years afterwards, turbulences started to occur on the way down to work, I had to work as a car mechanic in the neighborhood to avoid the road" C02

However, in the context of civic life, residents demonstrate robust social cohesion, as evidenced by organized neighborhood interactions and governance structures. Local community leaders commonly spearhead the convening of meetings in designated communal spaces within their jurisdiction. These locations can be diverse in their initial intent, ranging from enclosed interior environments to open plots of land, transitional spaces, rooftops, or even adjoining thoroughfares. C12 and C08 mention that in this neighborhood, they meet on weekly basis. The locality features two principal communal venues: one is politically aligned with a local political faction, while the other serves as a versatile space. The latter primarily functions as a forum for residents to discuss communal needs and challenges, partake in collective celebrations, or engage in religious observances such as "Majles azaa" during the Ashura event (a yearly event that takes place for the commemoration of Imam Hussein). When asked if they do some of those meetings in Hay el Jamea garden, C12 explains that not all community meetings are the same; some are more exclusive—which are more of a political meeting—while others are more of a community meeting for needs and problems, and in all these aspects—although this park (Hay el Jamea garden) is now open, still, community members never meet there—they continue to use the old meeting spots. It is possible to assume that this park is not used as a communal meeting space due to its proximity and non-private geographic location. C09, a current community representative, explains that the community preferred using interstitial in-between spaces due to their intimate nature and structure (more private).

In 2014, the Ghobeiry municipality initiated the construction of the Hay El Jamea Garden, aligning with their strategy to augment the region's green spaces. The project commenced with the strategic reclamation of peripheral lands around Hay El Jamea. This process involved a meticulous series of acquisitions, mergers, and reorganizations of these lands, which ultimately led to the transformation of the area into a public park. By the end of the year, the project reached completion, marking the inauguration of the first public park in the neighborhood. Prior to this, local residents had limited exposure to communal recreational spaces. Traditionally, the community engaged in the cultural practices of spending weekends and holidays in their villages of origins (Bekaa valley, or South Lebanon), as noted by C04, C07, C08, and C012. These visits were not just social gatherings but also opportunities for the locals to collect homegrown produce and strengthen familial bonds.

When the municipal authority established the Hay El Jamea Garden (see Figure 1), it was observed that the local residents, residing in the vicinity of the park, persistently utilized the area as a site for garbage disposal and dumping (refer to Figure 2). Furthermore, there was a noticeable trend of deliberate damage to the park's infrastructure. This behavior can be attributed to a lack of a sense of ownership or connection with this newly developed public space, which was imposed in a top-down manner. It is important to note that these residents have a history of independently managing their community spaces, adapting and cultivating areas without external intervention or support from public authorities.

Figure 1. Hay el Jamea's garden after reformation. Source: author (2018).

Figure 2. Hay el Jamea's garden before construction, with the garbage surrounding the old, abandoned structure. Source: Ghobeiry Municipality (2014).

M02, a social activist and member of the municipality council, proposed to create a communal meeting and talk to community members in order to find solutions for this ongoing problem. The residents refused to participate and cooperate at first, particularly because she was a representative of an official governmental body. To penetrate the social border, M02 mentions:

> *"I knocked on every door of each community member and offered coffee and mana'aesh (a traditional Lebanese breakfast pastry made with thyme). Initially, I only wanted to enjoy a cup of coffee with them to get to know them better and create peaceful relations. After two months of these continuous interactions, I created a successful social bond of respect with the community members". M02*

M02 notes a subsequent pivot in her dialogues to focus on the garden initiative. She underscored the uniqueness of this communal asset, further granting residents access via a key to the main entrance, and the power to have it as their own garden, by planting and changing the urban furniture (where it is possible) in the way they would like. Gratifyingly, this sparked a positive shift in the resident's sentiment towards the area. Mobilizing collective efforts, the community transitioned the space from a neglected, graffiti-ridden wasteland to a well-maintained garden.

"I used to toss my cigarette butts here like it was no big deal. Never really thought about it, to be honest. But now, seeing my kids play here every day? Kinda changes your perspective. It's not just some dump anymore; it's where the neighborhood hangs out. Makes you realize what can happen when folks come together to clean things up. I'm glad it changed; it's better for everyone, especially the kids". C18

"I never really paid much attention to this lot before, just passed it on my way to work. It was a real eyesore, if I'm being honest. But now, it's like a little oasis or something. You see families out here, kids playing—it's become a part of our daily lives. It's surprising how a little effort can turn something neglected into something so valuable to the community". C03

"Surely, this land changed a lot, but I still don't use it, Arguile (Shisha) is not allowed in". C07

As the narrative of the Hay El Jamea Garden evolves, it is evident that the space has transformed significantly in the eyes of the local community. Children and families now regularly utilize the garden as a recreational area, a testament to the collective efforts that turned a once neglected space into a vibrant, communal asset. Despite this positive development, it is important to acknowledge that certain aspects of community life remain unchanged. Specifically, the practice of holding community meetings, whether they are politically oriented or centered around communal needs, continues to be conducted in more private settings. These gatherings, steeped in tradition and a sense of discretion, persist in spaces that offer the privacy and familiarity conducive to such discussions.

9. Discussions

Urban environments, as dynamic entities, are shaped not only by their physical constructs but also profoundly by the lived relation between human behavior and the built environment. This research looks into urban placemaking through a phenomenological lens, with a specific focus on how grassroots, bottom-up approaches can infuse authenticity and vitality into public spaces.

One of the findings of this study is the revelation that the initial approach to urban planning, characterized by a top-down directive in establishing public spaces such as the garden, initially failed to resonate with the local community. This disconnect can be attributed to a lack of participatory engagement and a sense of collective ownership. However, a paradigm shift towards a community-driven, bottom-up strategy, spearheaded by a proactive social activist from the municipal council, marked a turning point. This participatory methodology fundamentally changed how community members approached and interacted with the space. The result was the emergence of a public garden that became a meaningful and integral part of the community's daily life.

Expanding beyond its initial scope, this study also highlights the complexities of urban community dynamics. It showcases how historical, socio-cultural, and economic factors intertwine to shape communal perceptions and the utilization of urban spaces. For instance, the garden's transformation from a neglected plot to a working communal space is not just a tale of physical redevelopment but also a narrative of socio-cultural evolution. The community's initial indifference, rooted in a historical context of self-managed communal spaces and a cultural inclination towards private gatherings, gradually gave way to a collective realization of the garden's potential as a communal asset.

The originality of this research lies in its empirical manifestation of phenomenological principles within the realm of urban planning. By bridging the theoretical and practical realms of placemaking, this study provides profound insights into the creation of authentic urban spaces through a bottom-up approach.

10. Conclusions

Cities and urban environments, as we know, are not just physical entities. They are, above all, socio-spatial constructs imbued with meanings and values that shape and are

shaped by the individuals and communities that interact with them. The inextricable intertwining of physicality and lived experience in urban landscapes forms the crux of this discourse.

The overarching inference from this discussion is the need to foreground people and their experiences in the process of placemaking. It is through such an approach that urban environments can foster a sense of belonging, facilitate social interaction, and ultimately, serve the diverse needs and aspirations of their inhabitants. Therefore, the pursuit of more authentic and meaningful urban environments warrants an intertwining of phenomenological perspectives with conscious, inclusive, and participatory spatial practices.

This multi-dimensional understanding of placemaking illuminates the path towards the creation of urban environments that are not just physically appealing but also emotionally resonant, promoting a deeper, more fulfilling sense of place for all city dwellers.

The study of Hay El Jamea's transformation provides critical insights into the dynamics of urban development and community engagement. The shift from a top-down to a bottom-up approach in urban planning, as exemplified in this case studied from a phenomenological approach, underscores the profound impact of involving local communities in the shaping of their environments. The transformation of the public park in Hay El Jamea from a neglected area to a vibrant community hub stands as a testament to this.

The case of Hay El Jamea, therefore, enriches our understanding of placemaking in urban contexts. It advocates for a more inclusive, participatory approach that values the lived experiences and subjective perceptions of community members. This approach not only enhances the physical attributes of urban spaces but also imbues them with a deeper sense of authenticity and belonging. As such, the pursuit of meaningful urban environments necessitates a blend of bottom-up engagement and thoughtful, inclusive planning, paving the way for the creation of spaces that resonate with and fulfill the complex, varied needs of urban dwellers.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: Data is available in a publicly accessible repository that does not issue DOIs. Publicly available datasets were analyzed in this study. This data can be found here: http://www.ghobeiry.gov.lb.

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