
Spatio-temporal Patterns of Events in Historic Cairo Around Iconic Mosques

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Abstract

This paper presents spatial analysis of two of the largest events in Historic Cairo. The study aims to understand the space transformation during *mawlid* event in the vicinity of the iconic mosques of al-Husayn and al-Sayyida Zaynab, and the use of such space as event venues. The main objective is to understand the studied place, thus be in a better position to manage and creatively transform them for future developments in the region of historic Cairo. The study is guided by the theories of place making with special emphasis on the complexity associated with place assemblage. The research is conducted through observation, description and analysis of the scene and the activities that take place in the spaces during the *mawlid* event. Observations are analyzed through maps and sketches of the actual physical setting, leading to different themes extraction. The paper demonstrates how people appropriate and adapt to the urban space and how the looseness of space fulfill the diverse needs and desires of people's behavior.

Keywords: Place making; Events; Loose space; Appropriation; Assemblage.

1. Introduction

Recently, the Egyptian government announced current plans to initiate a revitalization scheme to the current urban fabric of historic Cairo. This enforces urbanists to present data analysis that can aid in this process. This paper aims to dive into the diverse behaviors during events in urban spaces of historic Cairo.

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The paper looks into a certain event which is the *mawlid*. Observations presented were made pre-covid time in the years 2016, 2017 and 2018. This is important to note as the Egyptian government banned all celebrations and gatherings in 2020 & 2021 due to social distancing and covid restrictions. Expectations of the return of these events has been high in the next few years while recovering from covid restrictions, as these events constitute a great element in the heritage of historic Cairo. In Egypt, *mawlids* are popular religious festivals that celebrate the symbolic birthdays of figures *awliyā*, who set an example for many Muslim lives in the past, and who may also have founded a particular Sufi order. The *mawlid* is an important event held in the vicinity of the iconic mosques where people express themselves freely. They stimulate public involvement, and take over the everyday functionality of urban spaces. It is estimated that 6 million Egyptians belong to over 120 Sufi orders [1].



Figure 1: Facets of *mawlid* event

The mosques and their surroundings witness a complex integration between people of different social, economic and geographical entities. The *mawlid* attracts various participants: some participate for religious beliefs, while others are attracted by facet of the *mawlid* as a world of entertainment and commercial activities. The participants are Sufi orders who organize and participate in the events, participants in religious/ ceremonial rituals, people seeking entertainment and children enjoying events, and travelers just coming to enjoy and experience the scene. The festivities bring together the residents and visitors from the entire country, rearranging the physical and social spaces around the mosques (figure 1).

2. Events significance in Placemaking

Festivals are events that has the ability to rearrange, reorganize and disrupt [2] urban space. They also has the ability to de-territorialize and re-territorialize space [3]. An urban festival often show the city in a new way by revealing hidden features and by upsetting the normal city flow [4]. The festivalized city presents a different rhythm from the normal. Rhythm is for Lefebvre [5] a concept for understanding time and space and for seeing the urban 'not as a singular abstract temporality but as the site where multiple temporalities collide' [6]. The city is lived in temporal rhythms of activities and people. The festival space is a framed spontaneous moment which challenge the everyday routine life [7]. What makes the urban festival visitors involved and connected in place is creating an attractive environment that comes from the activities, events, services and diverse social spaces [8]. "Urban festival that creates a liminal space between the orderly ambitions of its organizers and the passionate and sometimes destructive impulses of its participants can inscribe urban space with novel meanings available for later preservation" [4]. Space is partly produced via social relations that happen at a particular point in time [9]. Places where people relax and socialize, and the unplanned 'natural festivals' are main elements in the spirit of a place of any good city [10]. A vibrant festival space is indeed crucial for the continued functioning of the city [4]. The feel of the place is made up of experiences, repeated over the span of years [11]. The *mawlid* as an event taking place every year express these meanings that play its role in shaping the identity of the district. The *mawlid* has its own identity as an event. Its identity offers a form of urban isolation where it occurs in the vicinity of the iconic mosque. Because these patterns of events represented in the *mawlid* repeat themselves every year, they are always attached to the space, and they became part of the place structure and identity. Norberg-Schulz [12] described place as a "totality made up of concrete things having material substance, shape, texture and color which determines an environmental character". The character of the place depends entirely on the nature of the patterns of events the *mawlid* is made-up from. In that sense, they contribute to the identity of the place, allowing people to provide the public space with personal meanings that are invisible to others, and in the process, create an urban place [13]. Spatialization happens through the appropriation of urban places for temporary use [6]. Franck and Stevens [14] call the dynamic spaces that have been appropriated by citizens to pursue activities, not set by a predetermined program as loose space. Looseness develops as a response to specific constraints and opposing influences: between necessary and optional activities, rules and meanings and anticipated and shocking occurrences [15]. During the *mawlids*, activities integrate and overlap between spaces: between interior and exterior, from building entry to stairway, from sidewalk to street. For Franck and Stevens [14], people create looseness through the lack of rigid controls, rather than by changes to the materiality of a space. People look for spaces that offer freedom, to increase possibilities for them and to customize the spaces to fit their needs. Those spaces are used by people in creating programs other than their original functions. People look for particular opportunities to do what they need to do, searching for sites to maximize their choices and select the ones that offer them alternatives [16]. The *mawlid* is created of occupied sub spaces that are adaptable and transformable leading to new forms of urban place. Character of the place during the *mawlid* depends on the uniqueness and the presence of physical properties such as material, shape, texture, color as well as layers of human use. The visual complexity of the *mawlid* is created as a result weaving those things together. Cities and destinations use events as tools to convey positive images and meanings, so the event itself becomes a symbol applied to create the value for the space or the city [3, 4].

Creative place making is significantly important in developing city tourism [18]. The eventification and festivalization of place has proven its positive outcome on urban and economic development in many cities worldwide. The transformation of urban space into a theatre where the public participate in placemaking, promote the space as one with new experience [19]. Experience design demands the connection between architecture and the user personal dreams and desires [8]. *Mawlid* celebrations feature meanings of place resulting from the merge of a sacred place as the mosque with a festive moment. Meanings follow the built environment, but they cannot be fixed there and cannot easily be enforced [20]. Places can be assigned meaning quickly through relating the memory of an important event happening in a certain place [21]. Experience and meanings attached to events are understood through the use of personal and social constructs [22].

3. The *Mawlid* as an Urban Festival

This paper studies the largest two events in Cairo, al-Husayn and al-Sayyida Zaynab *mawlid* celebration, located in the vicinity of the two iconic mosques in old city of Cairo (figure 2). The two cases of al-Husayn and al-Sayyida Zaynab have an ordered physical form but complicated use of space. *Mawlids* around their mosques represent the most intense and are the peak of the space transformation in the occupied spaces throughout the year; they manifest people's participation in space. Site observations of the transformation of spaces during the events were documented through photos, sketches and maps, showing the different experiences of physical settings, activities and additions in spaces. Data gathered through those methods are analyzed to trace the physical transformations occurring in those spaces and their impact on place making. In al-Husayn, people circulate in the open space in front of the mosque around the fenced green areas to reach different zones in the space. Residential settings are accessible through the secondary movement systems of narrow pathways and alleys around the mosque. These alleys are considered to be the branches along which the pedestrians flow during events. They act as both social space and as connectors, they accommodate and integrate the demands and needs of the various movement systems while supporting social interaction (Figure 3).

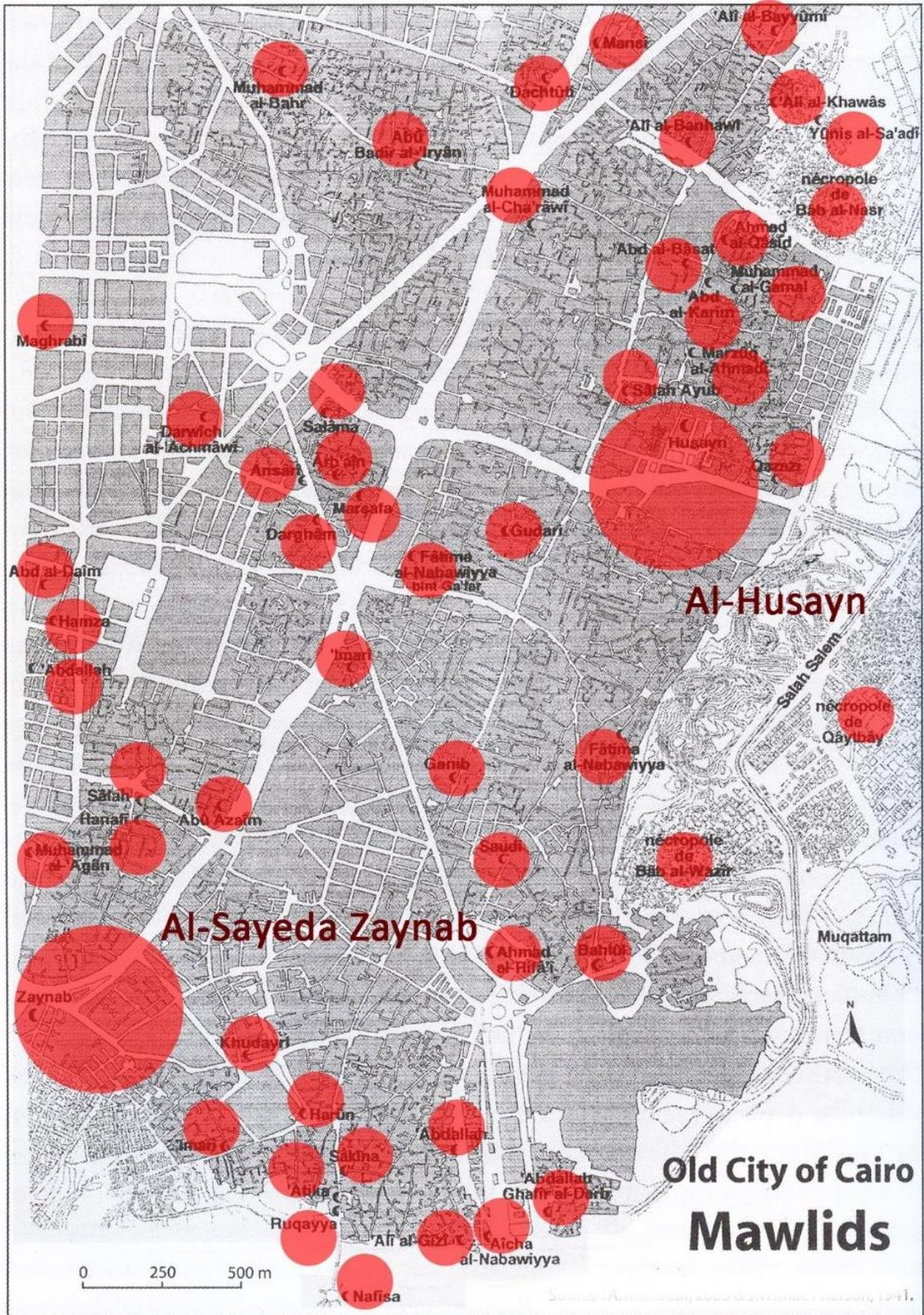


Figure 2: Map showing the *mawlid*s in old city of Cairo and the largest *mawlid*s of al-Husayn and al-Sayyida Zaynab (by the author after Madoeuf [23])

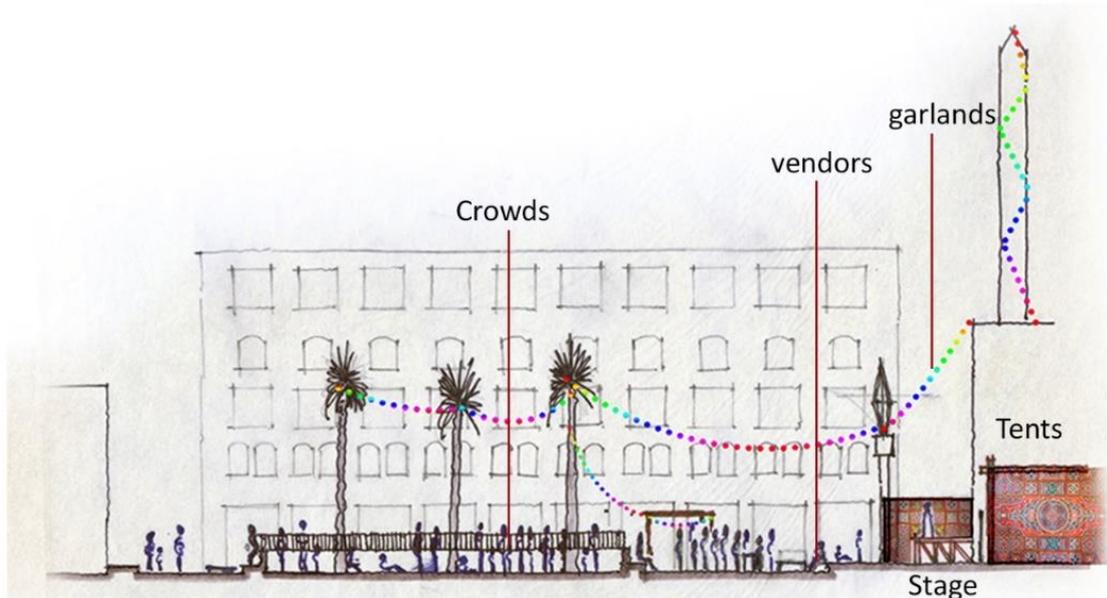
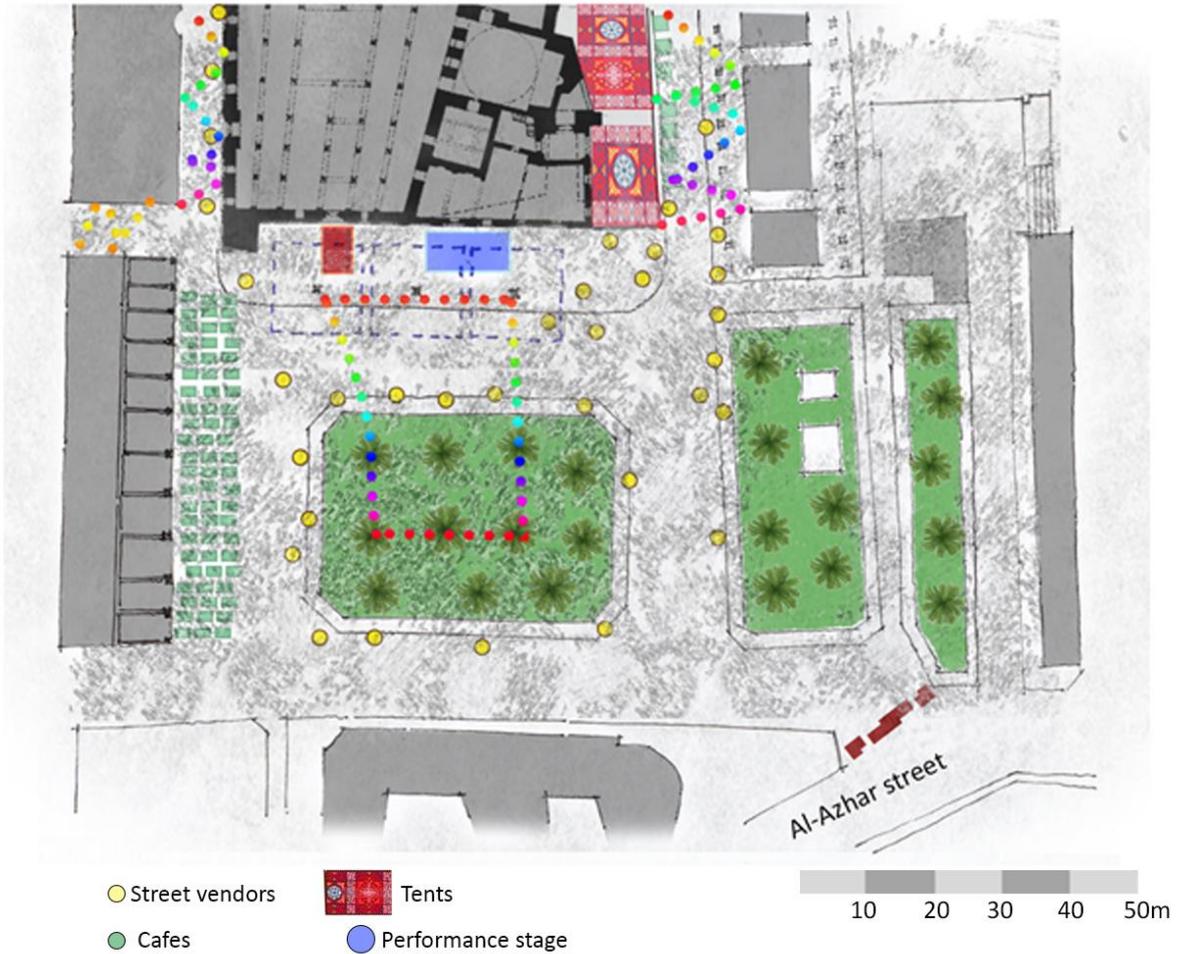


Figure 3: Map and section showing the vicinity of the mosque during *mawlid*

The urban fabric of al-Husayn neighborhood depends on the foreground of the mosque as a main open public space, square shaped, and surrounded by public buildings. The open space is defined and protected by the

buildings around it. The space is porous through connections to the surrounding urban fabric through openings in its outer boundaries. As the edge is porous, the space expands into other spaces visually as well as physically. In al-Sayyida Zaynab, vehicular motion is prohibited during the last days of the *mawlid*. The main streets around the mosque context are the space of the *mawlid* and the circulation paths as well. These walkways are the veins of the pedestrian's flow, allowing the *mawlid* to work as a whole. Tents, carts and street vendors are found along this temporary pedestrian route. The streets demonstrate a highly complex order. The space expands at the intersection in front of the mosque, allowing people to stop and watch the highly dense festival along the path. (Figure 4) Al-Sayyida Zaynab *mawlid* is structured around main streets and a main crossing round about. The *mawlid* takes place in main two streets at the mosque's intersection. Large residential and commercial buildings flank these streets and smaller residential alleys branch from the main streets. Al-Sayyida Zaynab's solid edges force people's movement and activities inwards in the main arterial streets. The large number and variety of semi fixed elements create visually complex and culturally specific streetscapes. Semi fixed elements express the cultural meanings associated with the specific uses. The types of semi fixed elements used for activities also indicate particular identities; some street vendors use stalls and others sit on the ground according to their products. Commercial activities display culture through the merchandise related to the *mawlid*. Space consumption that takes **cultural** forms can enliven local communities [24]. The semi-religious is inseparable from the festive and secular. The festival intensity overtakes the spirituality of the event, showing the *mawlid* as an expression of cultural traditions than a religious ritual. At first glance, there is a logic behind the spatial distribution of the festive and religious; the religious rituals is concentrated inside the Mosque, while the festive activities take place outside. Space shifts between the secular and spiritual activities over the course of a single day. All patterns of events require a place to happen, and al-Husayn and al-Sayyida Zaynab urban spaces are associated with their *mawlids*. The spaces support the loose nature of the *mawlid* where the space and the *mawlid* form a weaving unit of complex relations. The actions and the space containing them becomes undividable. When you enter into this weave you are quickly directed and modified by complex forces of junction of site, meaning and culture. The patterns of events are defined by the spatial character of the place where they occur.

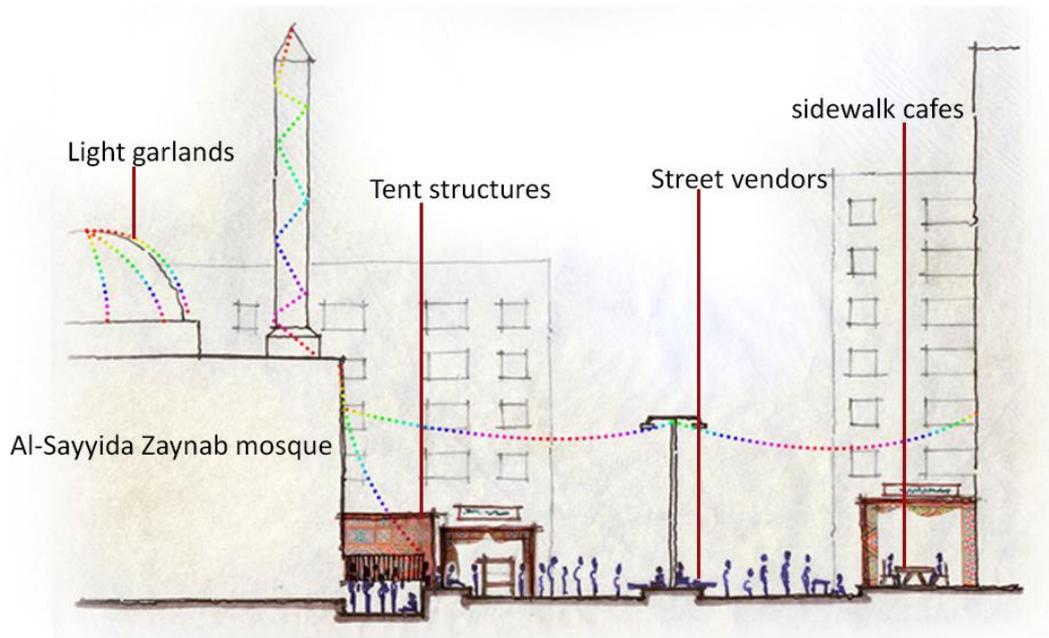
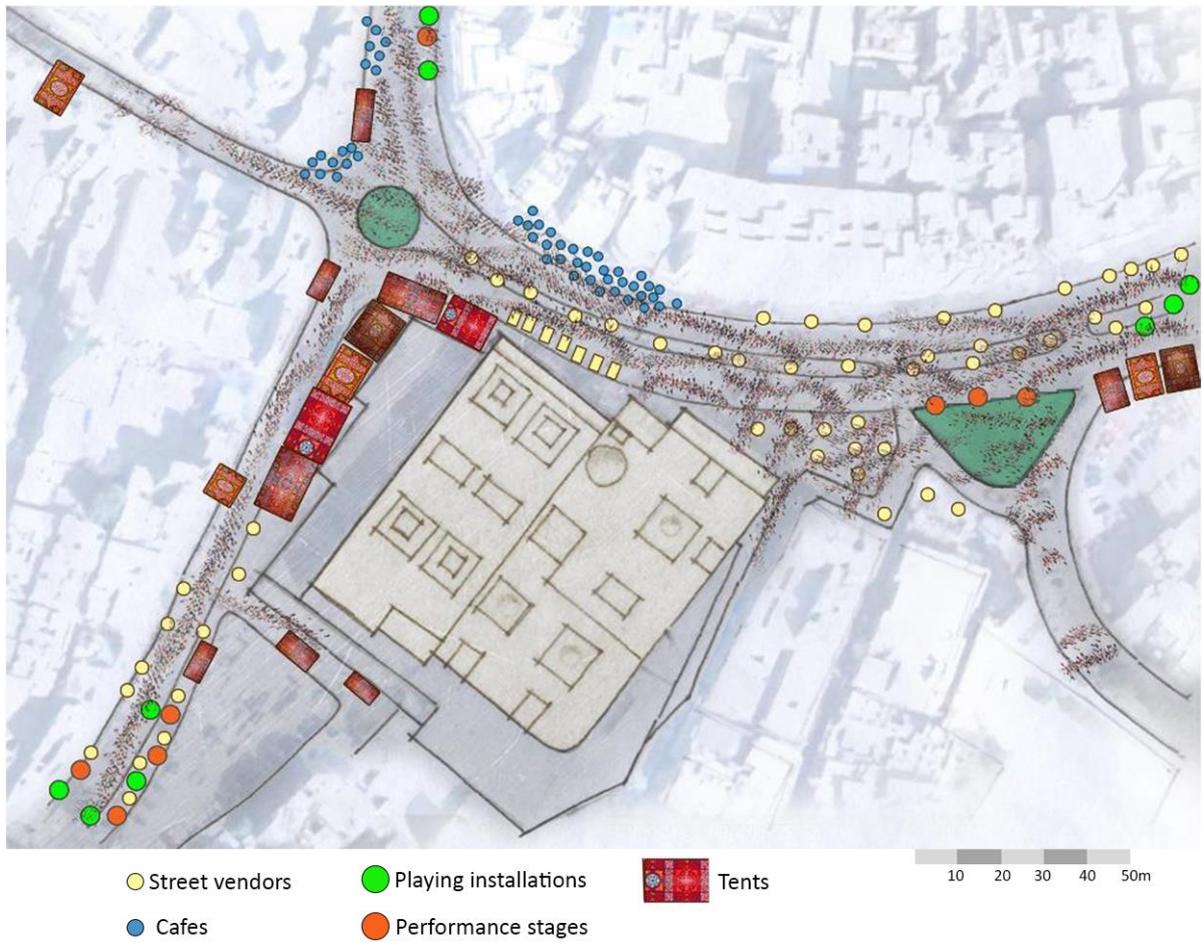


Figure 4: Map and section showing the vicinity of the mosque during *mawlid*

4. Thematic Analysis

The analysis of the studied spaces during the events revealed different themes: attraction, adaptation, diffusion and appropriation. Such themes describe the essence and particularity of the process of transformation from space to place with a unique identity during the *mawlid*. Those key concepts explain the behavior of the studied spaces during the event revealed by people’s creativity in occupying the built environment. (Figure 5&6)

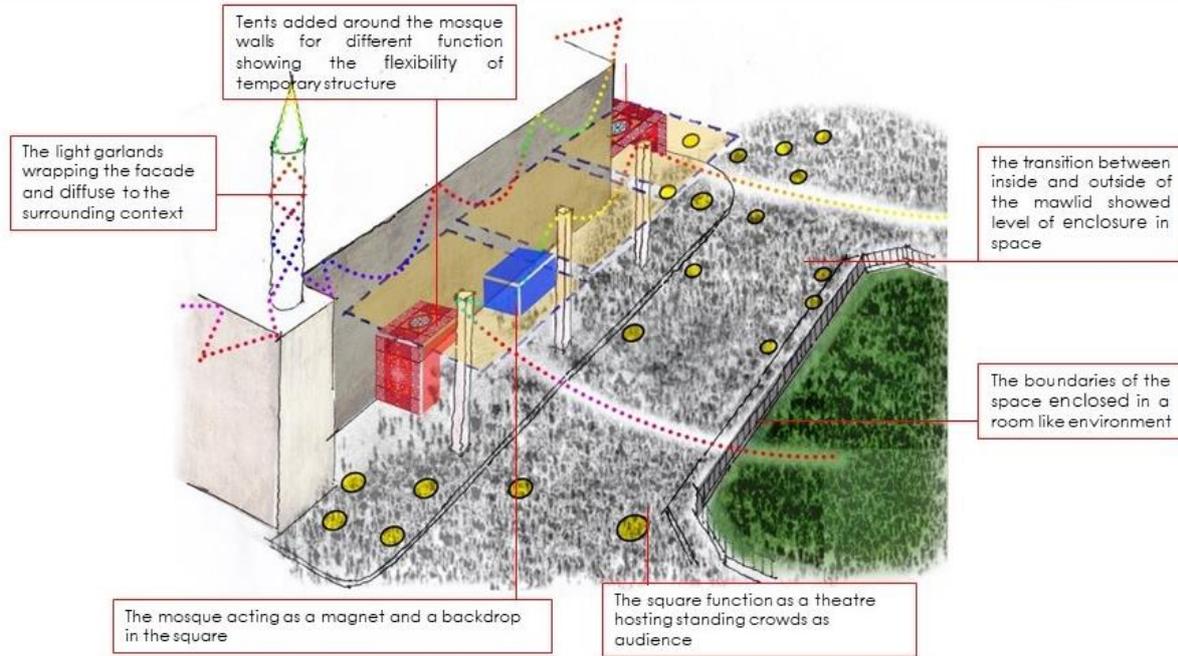


Figure 5: Al-Husayn: during and off the *mawlid* illustrating the key ideas that the analysis address.

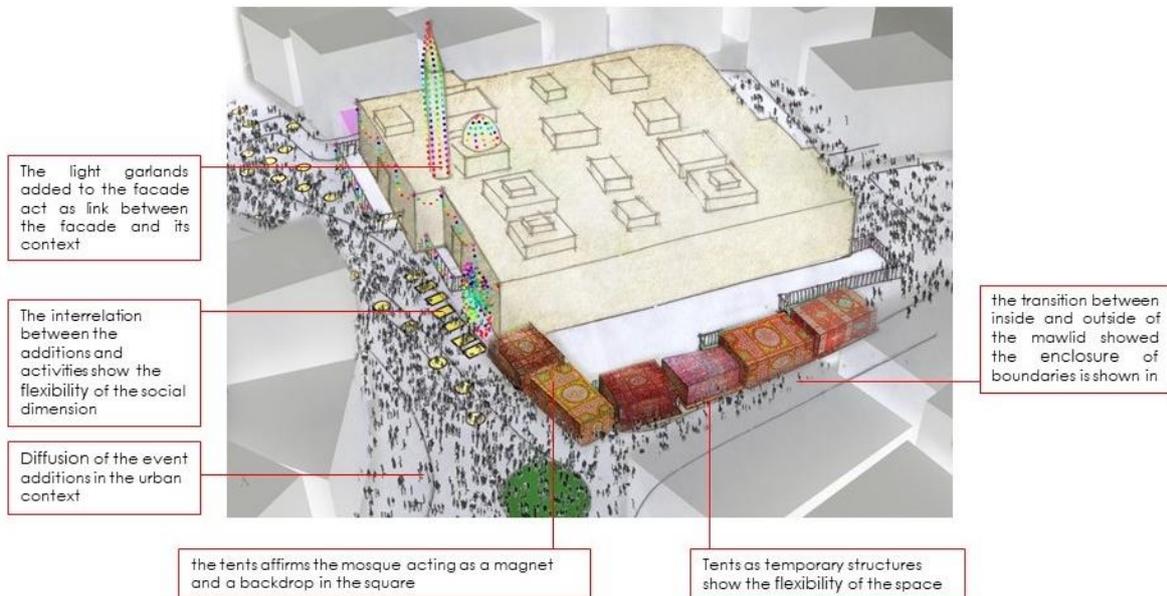


Figure 6: Al-Sayyida Zaynab: during and off the *mawlid* illustrating the key ideas that the analysis address.

4.1. Attraction

The *mawlid* is attractive as both event and place, creating an attractive sight. The opportunity to experience the event is the main attraction. The surrounding spaces present a rich experience of social activities through sensual and symbolic processes. Consequently, activities are considered an attraction to the space. To experience place, one must spend a reasonable amount of time in which to see and process visual impressions [25]. Senses stimulate during watching events and people are attracted to seeing the presence of other people as their presence indicates the existence of activities in space. Sensual experiences are important factors that impact the perception of space, and as a result of the noticeable change in such sensual experiences, the streets are perceived as distinctive. Buildings can sometimes act as attraction venues in a number of ways: by being physically separated from adjoining buildings, by being taller or by being architecturally distinctive [26]. This has certain significance on place. The extent of the influencing radiance of a building depends on the nature and size of the building as well as its context [27]. The *mawlids* are identified by the mosques, as they are the center of visual attention; they stand out in the urban fabric as an icon wrapped in lights and different temporary structures. The temporary structures in streets and on buildings draw attention to the areas as a public space, and mark that space as special and distinctive. The mosque as a free-standing landmark forms the main structural arrangement of circulation and activities and physical configuration. The mosques stand out in the urban fabric as an object that have visual and symbolical significance. There is a hierarchy from the spiritual to the secular in the distribution of elements: the festive fairground and residential service tents are in the background while the ceremonial tents of official institutions, where the celebration take place, stand closely to the front of the mosque. The mosques are the center of spiritual activities while the secular activities are held on the outer circle. Although some elements of festivity are spatially concentrated, such as large, wealthy Sufi groups constructing their tents near the mosque for maximum prestige and baraka, there is no strict spatial differentiation between different parts of the festival. When urban streets are open to multiple public uses, they create a certain vitality and an inviting quality [28]. Whyte [29] explains how a single activity can draw in other activities in a spontaneous manner. People sitting on the sidewalks and the children running around attract others to join the activities. The presence of crowds indicates the existence of activities in space. Madoeuf [1] picks on Michel Maffesoli concept to explain that the feast is the expression of social viscosity where people attach themselves to others. A market may grow from a street to form the public space and social establishment, where social space is not separate from public space; it is part of it. Urban markets as defined by Dewar and Uytenbogaardt [30] are “the physical agglomeration of a large number of traders in space” [12, p.53]. The trading streets, full of street vendors around the mosques, forms a place of social living, where people are attracted to in this urban environment. Open space has to be “open to the freely chosen and spontaneous actions of people . . . it has no necessary relation to ownership, size, type of use, or landscape character” [18, p.396]. Vendors and visitors use the sidewalks without any predetermined pattern: vendors are scattered on the mosques’ foreground, in the center or on the edge of the sidewalk, while pedestrians maneuver around the spaces on the asphalt or walk in between the vendor stalls. The lack of a fixed program in urban public spaces enables a great degree of spontaneity in space use and creates opportunities for a variety of activities to take place and for expressing specific cultural identities [28]. Lefebvre argues that the most beautiful cities are those where there is a space where festivals could unfold rather than being planned in advance [20]. During the *mawlid*, although some activities are planned in advance by the festival organizers, others are created spontaneously. The spaces offer looseness that attracts people: the unplanned and spontaneity of the space offers potentials that are not available

in other places.

4.2. Adaptation

Adaptability refers to the potential of a space to accommodate different uses without any significant modifications to its original physical attributes [15]. Different actions and activities demand places with an adaptable character [32]. Street festivals grasp the experience of a reshaped world and they change the everyday pattern of events of certain urban spaces [33]. The *mawlid* exemplifies user's ability to modify and adapt their environment and this creates sense of identity in place. Adaptation takes form on a micro level in the immediate spaces around the mosques and on a macro level through infiltrating the existing urban fabric. During the *mawlid*, the spaces are adapted for different retail, entertainment and ceremonial activities. Physical features of the public space play a key role in making a street adaptable to diverse uses. By organizing and manipulating tables, chairs, and sign boards, the urban space is transformed from a busy retail street to a festive place during *mawlid*s and then back to its retail function. Sidewalks are easily adapted to accommodate extremely different uses, to express different meanings and to enhance public life (figure 7&8). The physical environment became highly adaptive to a great variety of uses without significant physical modifications, through adding new layers to the existing form: the moveable semi-fixed structures on sidewalks and streets. A conflict arises between pedestrian movement and social activities, shown by the struggle that visitors go through in walking among the crowds and temporary additions of the *mawlid*. Pedestrians adapt to the new physical constraints. Loose form in those urban contexts are the result of places of constant movement and transformation as the crowd streams, as vendors come and go, as the street festival starts or comes to an end.

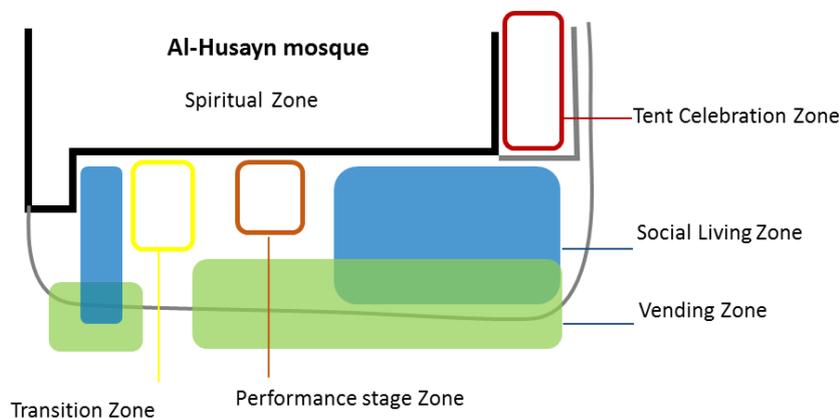


Figure 7: Al-Husayn: activities on the sidewalk of the mosque.

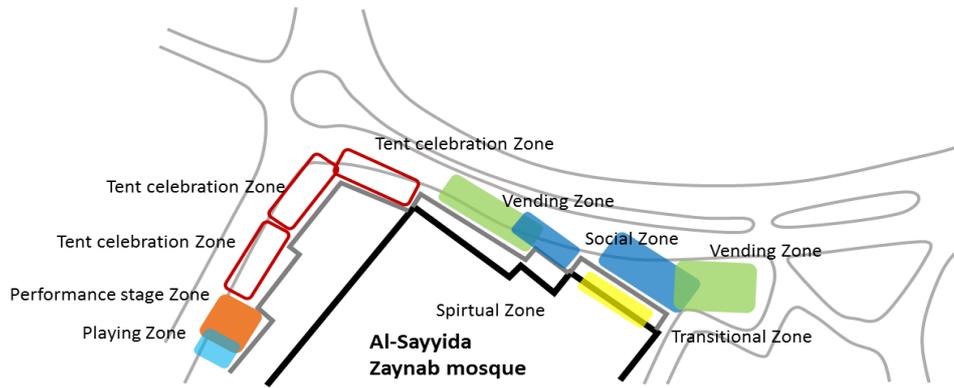


Figure 8: Al-Sayyida Zaynab: activities on the sidewalk of mosque.

4.3. Diffusion

Schielke [34] describes the festive space of the *mawlid* in the shape of a space consisting of a series of overlapping circles spreading out: in the middle of it all, stands the shrine of the saint, the very reason behind the festivity and a source of holiness. This shows the *mawlid* as a world with a mosque as the center and a sphere of influence that is variable. The extent of the influencing radiance of a building depends on the nature and size of the building as well as its context [27]. The mosques stand out in the urban fabric as an isolated element wrapped in lights and different temporary additions. The neighborhoods are identified by the existence of the mosques. The *mawlid* appears in the front of Al-Husayn mosque and it infiltrates and sprawls out to the surrounding streets and alleys of the residential setting. Some of the activities that are not allowed in the space in front of al-Husayn mosque cause the space to push these activities to the outside (figure 9). Intersections and alleys are appropriated and elements of the *mawlid* are added. As one moves deeper into the street network, urban regulations are replaced by local unwritten rules produced by people's behavior. This fluidity of form and the extension of the event is a result of the multiplicity of functions that takes place in the street network. In Al-Husayn, spaces expand and contract informally at various nodes. The fluidity of the spatial configuration allows activities to occur informally around the basic formal context which is the mosque's foreground. The form of diffusion the *mawlid* takes in al-Husayn is due to the formal business of bazars and touristic area blocking the *mawlid* from infiltrating the western side of the neighborhood, and not allowing the festivals to grow in the direction of the bazar area. Therefore, the high-density forces people outwards from the mosque foreground into the side alleys and the festival drift in the direction of the residential areas.



Figure 9: Al-Husayn: the diffusion of the event in the vicinity of the mosque.

The *mawlid* of al-Sayyida Zaynab is concentrated around the mosque in the main intersecting streets and growing to certain points to form larger areas for the public event life. The open-ended spatial form of al-Sayyida Zaynab allowed the added structures to sprawl in a linear fashion with concentration near the mosque and rarely infiltrates the inside alleys of the neighborhood (figure 10). Due to flow of people in the street network, the place always seems less dense with some concentration at the mosque's foreground and the infiltration through the urban setting is not very clear as in al-Husayn. The infiltration happens in al-Sayyida Zaynab in a less fragmented form as the immediate context of the mosque and the main streets are wide enough for the *mawlid* to unfold. In al-Sayyida Zaynab, the overall scale of the tents was larger than in al-Husayn as the wide spaces around the mosque allowed for that.



Figure 10: Al-Sayyida Zaynab: the diffusion of the event in the vicinity of the mosque.

While al-Husayn had more enclosure and centrality, al-Sayyida Zaynab had more connection and permeability, but in both cases the event infiltrated the neighborhoods in the vicinity of the mosque. The central figure of the mosque organizes the space around it acting as a focal point where intensity is not uniform and the pattern of diffusion is driven in different directions, in response to the physical context (figure 11). The surroundings of the mosques, formed of composition of subspaces, act as the context of activity creating a distinctive whole space.

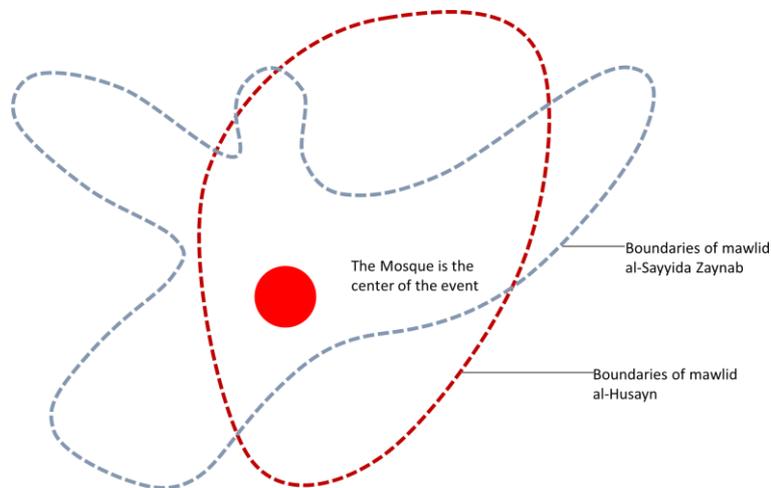


Figure 11: The Diagram shows the mosque in the center with irregular boundaries of the event

4.4. Appropriation

People's actions could be activated by qualities in the physical contexts and social situations they meet [35]. The urban spaces appeared neutral until the users creatively appropriated them during the events. Appropriation is a typical human action when people exert their right to the city and the street as a space of encounter [5]. Even in a tight institutional setting such as extension spaces of a mosque, where rules, meanings and physical structure are clear and set, people appropriate spaces during events and challenge conventional practices and principles. Crawford [36] suggests that outdoor spaces that have been appropriated for new and temporary uses lead to holding multiple meanings that shift and the functions of space become unclear. The appropriation of public space for unplanned uses results from freedom of choice. People find possibilities in the space through making use of what is present, and appropriating existing elements or bringing in additional ones. A tent becomes the roof of a temporary home; lampposts are used by street vendors as space markers. A piece of fabric defines a space for an outdoor praying area, the boundaries for a street vendor or the space for a family spending their time during the *mawlid* and fulfils their living needs. Loose spaces are created by people's engagement with the physical setting [14].



Figure 12: Images showing the richness of the physical setting during the *mawlid* in the mosque's context

The physical urban elements such as fences, sidewalks, edges are reshaped becoming an indicator and a support for the event. People use features of public space and bring additional supports to carry out desired activities in

creative ways (figure 12). They made use of the physical features they find in space; many fixed elements intended for certain use has served another based on their needs and desires. Although the fences around spaces are intended as barriers, people use them to hang things or as a backdrop for their items. Adding a temporary structure to the front of the shops changes the façade of the shop and the whole façade of the building. The colors of the textiles added on the ground floor add contrasting colors to the scheme and make the facade heavier at the bottom. The structure added on the sidewalk in front of the shop territorializes the space giving the seller the advantage of a new space and a stronger approach. Performers are drawn to areas with potential audiences. They set their stage and temporary structures in spaces with physical qualities that can allow for people to gather in large areas to invite visitors, making the space denser and creating a new image of place.

5. Discussion

Space users found spaces and build tents, creating temporary homes in the vicinity of the mosque. These spaces allowed for range of services and social relationships that is characterized with privacy & enclosure. The found spaces act as sanctuaries. They offer freedom to appropriate, to find asylum, to connect with others. Such spaces stimulate thinking shown in people creativity in finding the possibilities offered by the physical qualities embedded in place. The integration between the offered possibilities of space usage and the freedom of use makes the places in the vicinity of the mosques attractive to people. Places are successful because they show a certain degree of disorder [37]. Actions that may be generally unacceptable become conventional during the certain time of the *mawlid*. This disorder has benefits: it invites people to take the initiative in imagining and creating their own arrangements of space stimulated by people's desires. People take advantage of the degree of looseness in space, and the physical qualities of the sites to pursue the activities. People explore the degree of looseness in space, whether activities are passive (sitting or standing around) or complex (building a tent or adding a structure) through the many possibilities of appropriation. The porous urban physical settings encourage looseness as they offer freedom of choice and movement, density & intermixing of people & activities. The combination of the possible scenarios to do things, the lack of obligated, verified function and the lack of restrictions and rules encourages greater potential for a diversity of occupants and activities, making these sites appealing to more people and add a vibrant visual quality to the urban scape. Spatial structures are always a mix of tree-like and rhizomatic structures with different relative weights [38]. Markets in *mawlid*s appeared rhizomatic as their system depends on network connectivity, while other structures where set tree-like hierarchically like the celebration tents. What makes a place is the connections between the physical components of this place: the relations of buildings–sidewalk–roadway, the flows of traffic, people and goods; the interconnections of public to private space, and of street to the city [38]. Concept of assemblage has been shown on the micro and macro level. *Mawlid*s demonstrate Deleuze's and Guattari [3] conception of place in its dynamic assemblage of people and environment, in the form of morphologies, socio-spatial networks, and situations that is defined by connections of desires rather than essences [39]. The *Mawlid* is primarily initiated by people's desire to celebrate. Paths, nodes, thresholds and edges are results of the desire to connect between places. These connections of desires are presented physically during the *mawlid* in the form of assemblage of striated and smooth spaces. Striated space has a stable and ordered identity and spatial practices have become stabilized, whereas the smooth spaces are dynamic spaces, free from boundaries and in a state of becoming. The *mawlid* highlights the connection between people's perception, creativity and physical environment and in

turning the place around and accommodating people's needs and desires at a certain moment in time. The open spaces are appropriated by the community in a flexible and ambiguous order, showing how People can become the designers of their own environments. Place identity changed temporarily as night becomes day, where *mawlid* sleeps during daytime and celebrations only begin with sunset, continuing until dawn. Spaces appear tight and rigid in the morning & becoming loose at night as their use & physical features change (figure 13). With its components, activities and temporary structures, the *mawlid* adds a new layer that superimpose itself on the studied spaces around iconic mosques in old city of Cairo transforming them into distinctive places. People found space & appropriated it creating a dynamic loose space. The assemblage of the loose parts & additions lead space to become a place with a unique identity during the event time.



Figure 13: The *mawlid* of al Sayyida Zaynab in the morning and at night.

5.1. Limitations of the study

This study has been constrained by the limited time of the observations that had to be made in a specific time. This time is defined by the time of the celebrations that took place each year. Another limitation of the study has been the current situation of COVID. The celebrations and gatherings are banned, which requires another further research of the pattern of events after restrictions on celebrations are removed.

6. Conclusion

These events show the place as a dynamic setting that is characterized by a spiritual nature but also has a physical form where interaction takes place between people, time and space. The freedom of appropriation reflects important dimensions in placemaking. People found space and appropriated it creating a dynamic loose space. They adapt and show their creativity in the spontaneous appropriation of spaces that allow for possibility and diversity in their physical form. Sidewalks are not used for pedestrians only. They are used as an urban open space, sometimes with activities taking place. Other times being used as vacant land that show an opportunity for a defined temporary structure. The place identity during *mawlid* is defined by this looseness between planned and unplanned parts, activities and meanings. The assemblage of the loose parts and additions results in a space becoming a place with a unique identity during the event. *Mawlids* are an outcome of tents enclosing festivals, vendors selling merchandise, pedestrians watching street actors, tents forming temporary residences

and children enjoying the added playing structures. The event is an assemblage of spatial and social practices and meanings characterized by an intense experience of place. The sense of place during the *mawlid* is in the assemblage of all the parts. Such an important moment in the life of around historic mosques in old city of Cairo has to be considered in the development plans currently developed of this region. Pattern of use of the contexts around these mosques has to be designed to allow for the spatio-temporal transformation that occur. The citizen space that allows people to appropriate and become the designer of their own space is an important aspect to consider when designing open spaces in this specific context.

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