

# **Fatimid Cairo:**

## **The transformation of an urban logic**

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### **Abstract**

Modern day Cairo does not owe its existence to either the Pharaohs or the Egyptian Copts, but to the Fatimids, a ruling dynasty that had settled in modern day Tunisia. The founder of the Fatimids, Ubayd-Allah, had earlier been driven out of Syria to establish the Fatimid state in North Africa in 909 AD. The Fatimids were Shia'at muslim rulers who posed a major challenge to the authority of the Abbasids in the middle eastern parts of the Islamic nation. In 969, Jawhar Al-Siqeli, the ex-slave, ex-Christian young general of Al-Moez, the fourth Caliph of the Fatimid, headed an army of 100,000 strong in a conquest of Egypt, taking it and building a city modelled on a plan similar to that of the Al-Mansuriyya, the North African capital of the Fatmids, and even giving the new city the same name as its model "Al-Mansuriyya". The city was re-named Al-Qahira (corrupted later by travellers to "Cairo") only after Al-Moez, the Fatimid Caliph arrived to visit it, and planned a palace for himself and the gates to the walled city. Cairo quickly became the centre of a considerable empire. As well as being the location of the oldest university in the Islamic world (Al-Azhar, founded 970 AD), it was a seat of the finest craftsmanship of the Islamic world: fine jewellery, woodwork, ceramics and glass were all features of the city. The urban logic of Cairo was dominated by that of the symbolic and ritualistic variety (Hillier, 1996), mainly to accommodate the palace of the caliph and establishing a formal relationship between his troops and statesmen.

### **Keywords**

urban structure,  
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In contrast to the highly ordered plan of early Cairo, the modern day city gives a feel of a less ordered, albeit structured (Hanson, 1989) urban layout. This significant shift is quite curious, and this research used Space Syntax tools and techniques to investigate this shift in urban logic and characterise the urban evolution of this part of Cairo from its 10th century Fatimid origin to its modern day, highly functional, logic. We analyse six urban layouts to trace the urban evolution of Fatimid Cairo and its similarities and differences with the more modern surrounding urban context. One novel aspect of describing urban layouts is what we term the congruence factor, to denote the degree of correspondence between local and global integrators. This factor was found particularly useful in characterising Fatimid Cairo and its configurational evolution.

During its early life, Fatimid Cairo exhibited a high degree of differentiation between local and global scale movements, the factors leading to this were found to be a mix of the ethnic make-up, cultural notions of privacy, climate as well as the

instrumental purpose of the city itself. This meant that a low degree of congruence between global and local scale movement integrators was meant to separate these two scales of movement into two domains, very much in line with many oriental domestic spaces. An analysis of further plans of the same area shows that this differentiation has been gradually reduced as the city evolved, leading to increased congruence between local and global scale movement integrators. Also, the most recent maps show a strong correlation between global and local integration profiles and commercial land use. Comparison with the whole of Cairo shows that the latter does exhibit a higher degree of correlation between commercial and retail land use on the one hand, and global and local integration profiles on the other. Although Fatimid Cairo seems to have followed its own urban functional logic at its early stages, it is now coming gradually closer to the more conventional, highly synergetic, urban logic visible in many cities today.

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