

CULTURE, ENVIRONMENT, AND SUSTAINABILITY: THEORETICAL NOTES AND REFLECTION ON A COMMUNITY PARK PROJECT IN CAIRO

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This paper consists of two complementary and loosely related parts. The first section, which I will entitle Culture, Environment, and Sustainability consists of three observations and a hypothesis about the interrelation between culture and the environment, and its dynamics of change, development, and sustainability. This hypothesis will serve as a theoretical and philosophical framework for the second part, in essence, an account of a ten-year-old experiment in linking the culture of a local community in Egypt to a major environmental and landscaping project. The community is Sayeda Zeinab, a vibrant but poor community of some 1,000,000 people in the old district of the city of Cairo, Egypt. The project is the planning, construction, and maintenance of the Cultural Park for Children in Sayeda Zeinab, a facility of two and a half acres which includes, among other things, a children's museum, an open-air theatre, a library, playgrounds, and several gardens.¹

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The theoretical framework and the account of the project will hopefully work together to illustrate an approach to a community-based planning and development process which rests on understanding and reconstructing age-old processes of development indigenous to most, if not all traditional or pre-industrial communities, while remaining completely rooted in the socio-economic and technical realities of today.²

The aim of this paper is to draw scholarly and professional attention to the importance of understanding local cultures as mechanisms for sustaining human solidarity and creativity in the context of the design and development processes. This is a tool, which when fully



RESTORATION OF OLD SANA'A, YEMEN IS AN EXAMPLE OF CURRENT TRENDS TYING THE ENVIRONMENT WITH THE CULTURE OF THE LOCAL COMMUNITY AND HERITAGE.

understood can, be mobilised to enable, empower, concretely and creatively engage local communities in the conception, production, and regeneration of their environment. The focus on landscaping is not an accidental or ephemeral aspect of present hypothesis, but is an essential part of the theoretical framework. As the account of the park will show, gardening in particular and landscaping in general can be a model and a focus for the reinstatement of this age-old process of regeneration.

I: Culture, Environment, and Sustainability

All living communities have their own culture with a set of norms and mechanisms shared by members of the community to establish and regenerate their identity and creative energy, and to re-establish their sense of solidarity. In traditional or pre-industrial, pre-modern societies, these cultural mechanisms were closely related to the creation and maintenance of the environment and its sustainability. In industrial and post-industrial societies, this relation seems to disintegrate. In such a context, a mode of environmental production prevails, where the conception, production, and maintenance of the environment is separated from the culture of the community. In the