MIDDLE EASTERN CITIES *1900-1950*

Public Places and Public Spheres in Transformation

Edited by Hans Chr. Korsholm Nielsen and Jakob Skovgaard-Petersen

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Table of Contents

Construction of the Public Sphere in the Middle Eastern Medina

During the First Half of the 20th Century

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At the beginning of the 20th century, urban development in Northern Africa and the Near East was restricted mainly to those areas, which are today called "Old Towns" or *medinas*. Spatial extension beyond the town boundaries was usually initiated only by colonial or protectorate powers. Moroccan sociologist Metalsi (1980) gives the following description of the field of social conflict of the *medina* brought about by the overall material culture of the town, by individual buildings and the concept of the buildings in juxtaposition, as well as by human communication patterns:

The material structure and social organisation of the *medina* is nothing but the consistent translation of a specific social order into architectural terms where relations between interior and exterior, between men and women — in other words: between the public and the private realm, are most precisely determined, strictly arranged and most effectively controlled. This becomes clear from the Moroccan saying: "The Medina is a mirror" (Quoted in Escher and Wirth 1992, 107).

There is hardly a space or place within the Old Town where the inhabitants or visitors to the *medina* may avoid "social control", i.e., observation by third parties (Escher and Wirth 1992, 100). This means that the inhabitants of the *medina* live and work in a sphere of omnipresent polarization. The building structures, the overall layout of the *medina*, the dwellings as well as the spaces between them and the functional buildings all reflect these requirements. There are usually no large open spaces serving as central spaces for the *medina* and as communication locations, except those which serve as parade grounds for the demonstration of power and authority. The town presents itself as a close web of buildings, streets, lanes and active people (Bianca 1991). It was only the colonial powers that created parks for the population as well as boulevards and meeting places. The free spaces in the *medina* are a symbol for a zone of transition and contact between opposite poles. The polarity of the urban forms of market *(suq)* and dwelling house develops into the context of the *medina* (Hakim 1979).

In the *medina*, the market creates the public sphere. Markets are public spaces insofar

as they are places where meetings and exchanges may take place between strangers. In addition, the streets and squares constitute transitional zones to the private realm, i.e., to the dwelling houses. Markets and the activities taking place within markets necessitate an extremely varied and specific stylisation of behavioural and action patterns in order for communication and business and other arrangements to be brought about, thus creating the public sphere (Bahrdt 1983, 616).

In the *suq* and in the *medina's* public spaces, a fixed social order and regulated communication prevail, becoming evident in the public interaction between the sexes: "Social order is established via the drawing of boundaries. This order is created by separating persons, things and actions and allocating them to specialised social spaces" (Heintz and Nadai 1998, 75).

Men organize themselves in the public space of the market and the streets; women "occupy" the private spaces of dwelling houses and inner courtyards. In its spatial expression, the social ideal of the public sphere in the Middle Eastern town between 1900 and 1950 becomes clear in the separation of genders. The Quran and the *hadiths* give rules of conduct for the public interaction of men and women. Strict clothing regulations relegate women to peripheral roles in the public sphere to the point of making them "invisible".

The photographs by Ré Soupault are a very authentic documentation of the spatial separation of genders in Northern African towns. The artist was born in Pomerania in 1901 and was a student of art at the Weimar Bauhaus. From 1925 on, she worked in Berlin and Paris as a fashion journalist. In the 1930s, Ré Soupault travelled to Northern Africa with her husband and took numerous photographs, which, however, were published for the first time only in 1988. Between 1938 and 1942, Soupault and her husband lived in Tunis. Her photographs of Tunis provide an insight into the Islamic social order of the early 20th century. Judging by today's criteria, Ré Soupault took "fair and unbiased" photographs (Brauen 1982; Wiener 1990).

The Tunisian writer Abdelwahab Meddeb comments on Ré Soupault's photographs in this way:

When looking at all the views and portraits which Ré Soupault took in and around Tunis between 1938 and 1942, the fascinating relation of these pictures to the past immediately springs to my mind. They show a scene which has since seen far-reaching changes and thus has also changed the acting players on this scene (Quoted in Metzner 1996, 5).

The artist's pictures document the life and world of the *medina*, and cannot be compared to the "oriental pastiche photography", most prominently represented by Lehnert and Landrock (Rouvinez 1998; Gabous 1994). She shows her "photographic objects" in their everyday environment. They are not made part of a "stage production" of the Orient as

Europeans of that time imagined it, nor were they fashioned into a masquerade of beautiful colors and shapes. The settings were not contrived in a studio (Turner 1989), an ordinary brothel was not turned into a picturesque harem. Ré Soupault did not succumb to the "aesthetic cult of misery", but she succeeded in capturing "the country in its visible nakedness", as A. Meddeb puts it (1987, 143).

In the following, I shall attempt an interpretation of five of the artist's photographs.

Picture 1

The photograph shows a group of people in a small Tunisian town. They are on their way to the festival for a saint's feast day. The entire town population takes part in the action. All inhabitants have left their houses in order to participate in the festivities in the streets and open spaces between the houses. There is an atmosphere of expectancy. The festival is a major social event for all inhabitants of this small town. The people shown in the picture do not notice the photographer. They are concentrating on the events happening in the background of the picture. Nobody cares about the camera.

When looking at the picture from a gender point of view, a strict spatial segregation of the sexes can be clearly seen. All women are standing or sitting on the house roofs and are observing the happenings from a relative distance. They camouflage their sexuality, i.e., their gender-specific traits, by wearing veils and the wide, floor-length *galabiyat*. By "merging" their clothing to the white of the houses, on this black-and-white photograph, the women have become almost invisible. The women appear in their own "public space", not in the male public space. They are not even perceived by the men and because of the "different spatial levels" cannot communicate with them. The women are thus physically present, but the men are practically unaware of their presence. An appearance of both sexes in the public sphere, in the sphere outside the dwelling house, may therefore become possible on the occasion of specific social and religious events.

Picture 2

The picture focuses on a group of women on a house roof. The flat house roofs are a popular and permitted space for women. In the towns, these are the places where the washing is hung up to dry, although grain, vegetables and fruit are also dried on the roofs. From up here, the women are observing the parade of men going by. The action and behavioral patterns of women in the public sphere are also determined by their ages. Whereas the older women are covered with wide clothes and light veils, leaving only their eyes free, the younger girls are dressed in airy dresses. They are in close spatial proximity to the women (their mothers), but they are not veiled, and therefore present in the public sphere. Their headscarves are loosely tied and probably more for protection against the sun than as a covering for their hair. It thus becomes evident that for women there is an age-dependent dif-

Picture 1. Procession of male pilgrims for a saint's feast, veiled women on the roofs (Soupault 1988).

ferentiation with respect to public behavior. Women before menarche and after menopause enjoy more freedom and have partial access to male-dominated spaces.

The three veiled women in the left half of the picture are looking into the camera with great reserve and shyness and are visibly irritated by the photographer's interest. The three little girls, however, pay only peripheral attention to the lens. This also shows a behavior pattern typical of these women: they observe their environment with great care and react to unknown patterns with suspicion. The first reaction is a "retreat" behind the veil.
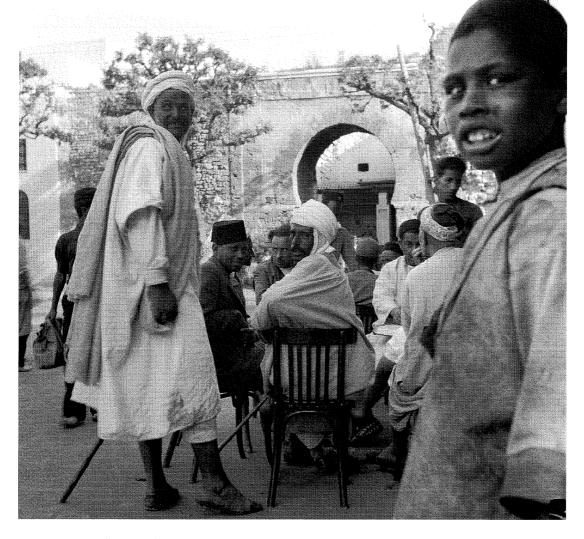
Picture 3

The coffeehouse is traditionally a space reserved exclusively to men. It is almost an initiation rite when fathers take their sons to the coffeehouse for the first time, and they are "counted among the men" from then on. The scene from the coffeehouse in the

Picture 2. Veiled women and festively adorned girls at a festival for a regional saint
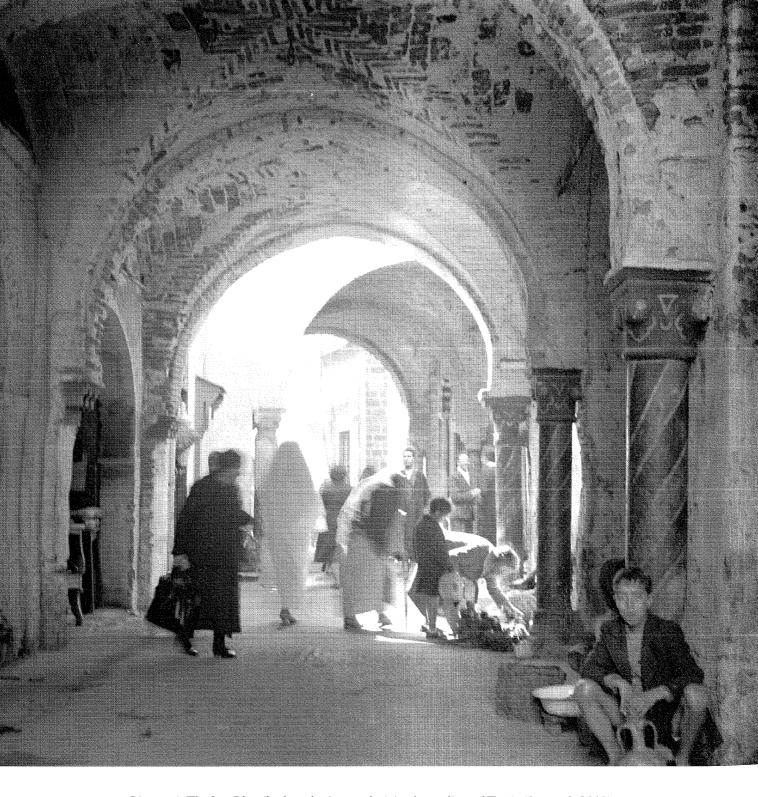*(Soupault 1988).*

Southern end of Tunis shows men only. No women are there to "disturb" the ambience. The coffeehouse is obviously off limits to respectable women. Men of various ages remain by themselves. Even today, one will not find a respectable lady sitting in a street-side coffee shop in Damascus, with the exception of Lebanese and European tourists. The photographer is observed with incredulity by her "photographic subjects". The boy in the foreground, most probably the servant responsible for hot coal in the hookahs, openly shows his curiosity. Other persons negate the photographer's presence; this is a classic male behavior pattern towards the other sex: by not taking notice of women, men avoid interaction and discussion. These women simply do not exist. If women proceed to over-step the invisible boundaries, however, men display defensive behavior and allocate them lower status in a very disparaging manner. This, in turn, is detrimental to the honour of these women's husbands, who will reprimand their wives and put them in their place in future. Thus, men succeed in their own way in keeping their spaces free of women.

Picture 3. Popular coffeehouse in the southern part of the medina (Tunis) (Soupault 1988).

Picture 4

The scene shows everyday life in one of the *suqs* of Tunis. Compared to the previous pictures, the surprise is complete: we can clearly make out four or five women, two men and two children. The women are in the market place, in the main public sphere of the *medina*. All persons display different behavior towards the camera, i.e., towards the observer. The women are almost veiled and play the role of strangers, of individuals who cannot be immediately identified, of persons who have no sexual identity and presence in the public sphere. They go about a purposeful activity: purchasing essential foodstuffs and objects. In this case, women are reduced to the purpose of their actions. They are not present as "social beings". The photographer remembers: "I never saw a Muslim woman when I was shopping in the market. The men did the shopping. No women took part in the prayers in the mosque either, nor in any other public event" (Soupault 1988, 11). Even in the photographer's memory, the women in the *suq* have disappeared. Although the camera portrayed women, these women had never been present for Ré Soupault! It was differ-

Picture 4. The Suq Blat (herb and spice market) in the medina of Tunis (Soupault 1988).

ent for the men, who show a marked interest in the camera, thus defending the public sphere as their very own sphere. The boys, on the other hand, remained indifferent.

The *suq* is the forum of the public sphere. There are no walls allocating spaces to men and women. Nevertheless, these boundaries can be felt and experienced in the behavior and in the actions of the people. "The Suq is a gigantic show stage, a colossal theatre. The Suq is corso, piazza and arcade of the Arab world" (Heller and Mosbahi 1993, 192); at least for the male half of the oriental Islamic world!

The bazaar is the traditional business area of the oriental Islamic town, mostly situated in its centre; it has a permanent set of buildings which almost exclusively serve business purposes, and it is open daily (excluding holidays). Its structure and function as well as its architectural layout are characteristic for the oriental Islamic cultural sphere. (Wirth 1974, 207).

In the spatial and architectural "heart" of the town, women (according to Islamic lore) can be regarded only as alien elements.

Picture 5

The last picture produces complete confusion. We see an unveiled woman in a pose which certainly could not have been photographed in a domestic family setting during the 1930s. The photograph was not taken in a dwelling house, nor in the town's *suq*. It portrays an "extraterritorial" section of public space, a particular quarter of Tunis, reserved to women, the "quartier réservé". This is the name given to segregated quarters for prostitutes. In many towns of the Ottoman Empire, women who did not fulfill the requirements of "respectability" or "decency" were taken to these quarters by their families. They were women who were unmarried or who could not be supported by their families and would include widows, unmarried mothers, mentally and physically handicapped women and women from poor families with many children. This indicates a "strategy" for Islamic society to deal with women who were on the one hand necessary for reproduction of the society, but who were not allowed a place in the "construction of society". These women would not or could not fit into the ideal type model of society. As late as the 1930s in Tunis, these women were deported to quarters and segregated and separated from the general public sphere. Once arrived, they were never to leave the quarter again (Soupault 1988; Largueche and Largueche 1992).

The pictures show the strong polarity between men and women in the public sphere. One could even say that the public sphere in the *medina* is created or made possible only by the absence of women. The first photographs show that the public sphere is occupied by men and off limits to women. The penultimate photo makes clear that this dichotomy does indeed exist, but that women may nevertheless appear in the public sphere, but only

if they adhere to a complex system of rules and regulations. These rules may vary in their expression by historical and geographical context, depending on the region, the town and the historical epoch. The rules for the construction of the public sphere, all those regulations, requirements and bans refer to generally applicable basic patterns which provide a guideline and frame of reference for all inhabitants of and visitors to the *medina*.

What does this principle of gender organization look like? In the following it will be referred to as an ideal type model of gender-specific aspects for the spatial construction of the public sphere.

A Principle for the Social Construction of the Public Sphere in the Middle Eastern City

The content of these pictures alone, of course, is insufficient evidence for deducing an ideal type model for the interaction between genders in the public sphere, but may serve as confirmation of this model. The pictures were meant principally to serve as symbols for the model, which was developed by H. E. Eckert (1970) using Tunis as an example. Eckert devised a model based on empirical findings in order to explain the social organization of the *medina* society. This model may be used — in modified form, of course — for our purposes, yielding an ideal type representation of the social construction of the relationship between the sexes in the public sphere of the Middle Eastern city in the first half of the 20th century.

The model refers to five variables, all of which are related to each other. It is important to point out here that this model entails a high measure of simplification and abstraction. It must also be pointed out that the model does not constitute a representation of reality, but merely an ideal model, which is meant to map the phenomenon of "social construction of the public sphere with respect to gender". The model has two tiers, a space-gender dimension and a time-hierarchy dimension. The juxtaposed concepts — man and woman, young and old — are related to each other on the respective levels using the five Islamic legal categories for behavior: "demanded, recommended, permitted, disapproved, prohibited". I will leave aside the dimension of "rank and status" for the time being. Not being a legal scholar, I have abstracted these categories from the writings of Islamic law schools and available literature as applicable to all levels of individual and collective human activity. They are also valid for "social spaces" (Eckert 1970). The boundaries between these five main categories are rather gradual and may show considerable variation with regard to place and time. Based on previously demonstrated observations, we arrive at the following model:

Men represent the public sphere and act within it. Actions, which are demanded, of men within this realm are prohibited to women. Conversely, in the private sphere, certain

Picture 5. The Forbidden Quarter (Quartier réservé) (Soupault 1988).

actions demanded of women are prohibited to men. The dimension of gender and space in this context must be interpreted as a static structure. This polarity must remain intact in all activities. Yet there are also spaces such as the courtyards in the Old Town, which serve as "permitted spaces" and facilitate open communication between the sexes. The dynamic aspect of this model with respect to time must be seen in a different light, how-ever. Actions prohibited to young men and women are demanded of older men and women, and vice versa. The model shows that the spatial polarization between men and women is created mainly during the reproductive phase in each individual's generative cycle. In a simplified manner of speaking, there is a principle of mutual exclusion in the

medina: where there is a man, there cannot be a women and vice versa! In Metalsi's (1980) terms, the model indicates the social order's main demarcation lines and main tensions between interior and exterior. Let us now bring the fifth dimension of "rank and status" into the discussion. The polarity between men and women is reduced in cases where the persons communicating are of different rank and status. Hence, men of lower rank and status accept a woman of high rank and status as a "social man".

The ideal type model enables us to take a simplified look at the social construction of the public sphere in the Middle Eastern city. This model yields guidelines to which each individual must adhere in the public sphere in the Middle Eastern city in the first half of the 20th century. Perceived adherence to these guidelines is used to evaluate the moral value of the individual in the public sphere. This model could be described as an invariant basic concept for the construction of the spatial dichotomy between public and private sphere in the *medina*. Things look different outside the Old Town, as can be seen from many photographs from artistic circles in modern town quarters. The *Tunis chante et danse* between 1900 and 1950 (Bettaïeb 1991) is a completely different world where the principles of the *medina* do not apply; "seen with the eyes of the Medina society", it is a world which is morally corrupt.

It is important to note that this formulation is not based on individual constructions, but on social constructions. Individuals and groups within a given culture may always act against this culture's mainstream. Depending on the historical, regional and political context, the material appearance of the public sphere and the differentiation of the system of communication, the rules for the private and public spheres assume different forms. However, the quality of the deep underlying structure of the social construction — as I have tried to point out in the ideal type model presented here — could also have general validity to the Middle Eastern city of today, albeit in a more differentiated and contextualized form.

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