

There has been a gap in the discourse of dealing with informal settlements since the early 1980s despite local and global efforts and intentions. Developmental and upgrading projects were sought, focusing on the physical built conditions and infrastructure, which are still quite important; but an important parameter is missing, which is the residents' themselves, the so-called "*informal*" residents. It is argued that vast development agendas lack a deep understanding of the residents' culture. A closer and deeper understanding of informal settlement culture(s) is fundamental for all parties involved with informal settlements.

This research proposes to explore the role the residents' local culture plays together with their urban space in daily life within '*ashwa'eyat*, assuming that the residents are the main actors in the city and that they create and live within the so-called urban informality.

## 1.2. Research Objectives

The research topic tackles the issue of "understanding culture" from the scope of its association with the dynamics and interrelationships of (urban physical space, residents and use of their urban space) of a certain locale. This research will contribute by shedding light on a new perspective for considering and dealing with informal settlement residents. However, the ultimate contribution of this research is its attempt to merge and reflect on different theories, concepts and tools for domains (e.g., urban anthropology, ethnography, the urban scope of environment-behavior studies, etc.) in the context of the Cairo informal settlements. It shows how residents, through their culture and within the context of informality, are correlated to the informal production of their urban space (i.e., informal urban development); they are interrelated, influenced and affected by each other.

In order to resolve the complexity of *informality* in terms of culture - which also a complex term- and daily life in '*ashwa'eyat*, and its urban development, an interdisciplinary approach is adopted, after bringing different notions and theories together. This helps the aim of reaching a better understanding of Cairo '*ashwa'eyat*, and to record and analyze '*ashwa'eyat* culture and social organization as a record for the future that preserves a body of information upon which scholars and officials could draw. This includes the following objectives:

- Reframing Cairo '*ashwa'eyat* by presenting an understanding of *Cairo informality* in '*ashwa'eyat* through a cultural perspective and
- *Unpacking the 'ashwa'eyat residents culture* in terms of introducing the constellation of cultural factors as a way of understanding the complexity within informal urban development.
- Studying the *use patterns of urban space* as a reflection of certain *rules and values* deduced from the different residents' cultural factors, and its interrelation with the area's urban physical characteristics and power relations between residents (Figure 1.2).

Exploring each of the case study areas from this perspective is by itself a contribution to the Cairo ‘ashwa’eyat discourse.

Although the research does not aim to provide a handbook or a prescription for dealing with such research problem, the findings of the research may help to understand other informal settlements in the Global South, especially cases that similarly have solid cultural factors, where urban development processes are massively ongoing and where residents’ culture can play a crucial role throughout that process.

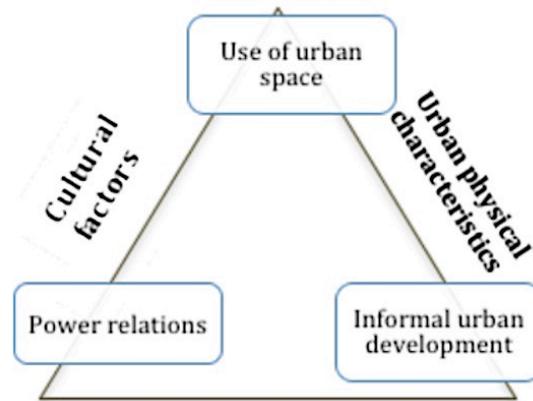


Figure 1.2 Different aspects of urban informality that define the research rationale (source: author).

This might be either in the same geographic region of Cairo (e.g., Middle East and North Africa – MENA countries), or even other remote countries having similar economic conditions (e.g., other Global South countries such as India, Mexico, etc.).

### 1.3. Research Questions

Based on the theoretical background discussed in this research, the research explores the relation between culture and urban informality. Culture, on one hand could be unpacked into a constellation of cultural factors, that are related to values, as mechanisms means of control of behaviors, which lead to certain way of using the space, in addition to the formation of urban space as a result of houses construction. Informality also contains certain factors and values, which control it, including power relations. The main intention of this research is to answer how *cultural factors* interrelate with informality and the urban space within Cairo ‘ashwa’eyat areas. More detailed questions have been considered to help answer the main research question:

- How and why do people use their urban spaces in ‘ashwa’eyat?
- How did the specific study areas develop in a certain fashion?
- What are the *cultural factors* that play a role in this context? How?
- What are the relations between the use patterns of urban space (forming “way of life” in ‘ashwa’eyat), and the culture and its mechanisms (e.g., values and concepts) of the residents (i.e., Upper Egyptian migrants) in Cairo ‘ashwa’eyat’s urban spaces?
- How do the urban physical characteristics of a certain area, interrelate with the cultural factors and, accordingly, use patterns of urban space and informal development process?
- What are the power relations acting within the informal urban development (power relations within local residents) with regard to the studied cultural factors?

#### 1.4. Research Methodology

Responding to the research problem and research rationale displayed, an exploratory inductive approach is chosen for this research. It is also considered interpretive and narrative, as it mainly depends on personal observation and what the residents narrated. Targeting the understanding of *culture* in relevance to urban space within Cairo *'ashwa'eyat*, and due to the lack and the inaccuracy of data about *'ashwa'eyat* areas and their residents, the researcher uses qualitative research methods. Grounded Theory is chosen for this research as a valid tool to extract hypotheses from very complex settings (Glaser, 2002), which suits this research targeting informal settlements. It is used in the fieldwork, seeking to formulate and consolidate the research questions (O'Connor, Netting, F. E. & Thomas, M. Lori, 2007, p. 30). O'Connor mentions that "Glaser and Strauss (and to some extent, also Strauss and Corbin)" emphasize how theory generation takes place through the composition of conceptual categories or properties from gathered data. He describes that the *purpose of classical grounded theory* is:

*"... to create relevant theoretical abstractions describing or explaining the topic being studied, based on the assumption that the concept itself will not change but the facts at a given point in time may. Furthermore, in this early framing, concepts only have meanings specified because other theoretical and research purposes have evolved. In classical grounded theory designs, the discovered theoretical category lives on until proven theoretically defunct in subsequent phases of data collection and analyses. The test to establish the generality and factuality of a concept is through comparative analysis."* (O'Connor et al., 2007, p. 30).

O'Connor adds that Grounded Theory develops a theory that determines the possibility of first-hand generalizations through *comparative analysis* so that it is more generally applicable and *"has greater explanatory and predictive power"* and *"arrive closer and closer to a generalizable truth"*. Strauss and Corbin (1994) explain, *"There is built into this style of extensive interrelated data collection and theoretical analysis (Grounded Theory) an explicit mandate to strive towards verification of its resulting hypotheses"* (Strauss et. al, 1994, p. 274).

According to this, the research's hypothetical conceptual framework is generated in the process, which is tested by the verification through checking and developing the relations between categories for each case (O'Connor et al., 2007). Grounded Theory analysis techniques are used, starting with data collection. Then a coding technique is used during the analysis of the material collected from the fieldwork, followed by identifying units, categorization and note writing. This is applied through a multi-case study fieldwork research, followed by a comparative analysis as a step towards generalization. Although it is agreed that

the results from such a kind of research cannot be generalized (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 29), in addition to other problems that arise with qualitative research methods in general (e.g., a bias in the interviews), using triangulation and reflexivity in collecting and analyzing the data could provide a solution to overcome these difficulties (Gibbs, 2007, p. 91-94).

Yin (1994) analyzes *case study research* design and methods, and explains the reason for having multiple cases – assuming that *replication logic* is supposed to reveal support for theory by comparing the cases, through either finding *similar results* or *contrasting results* for predictable reasons. Choosing case study as a research methodology is based on the thesis research questions. It is the most appropriate methodology for this research because, as Yin states, "*The more your questions seek to explain some present circumstances e.g. how or why, the more the case study methodology will be relevant*" (Yin, 2009, p. 4). That is why in order to reach acceptable verification for the findings, multiple case studies have been chosen for the research.

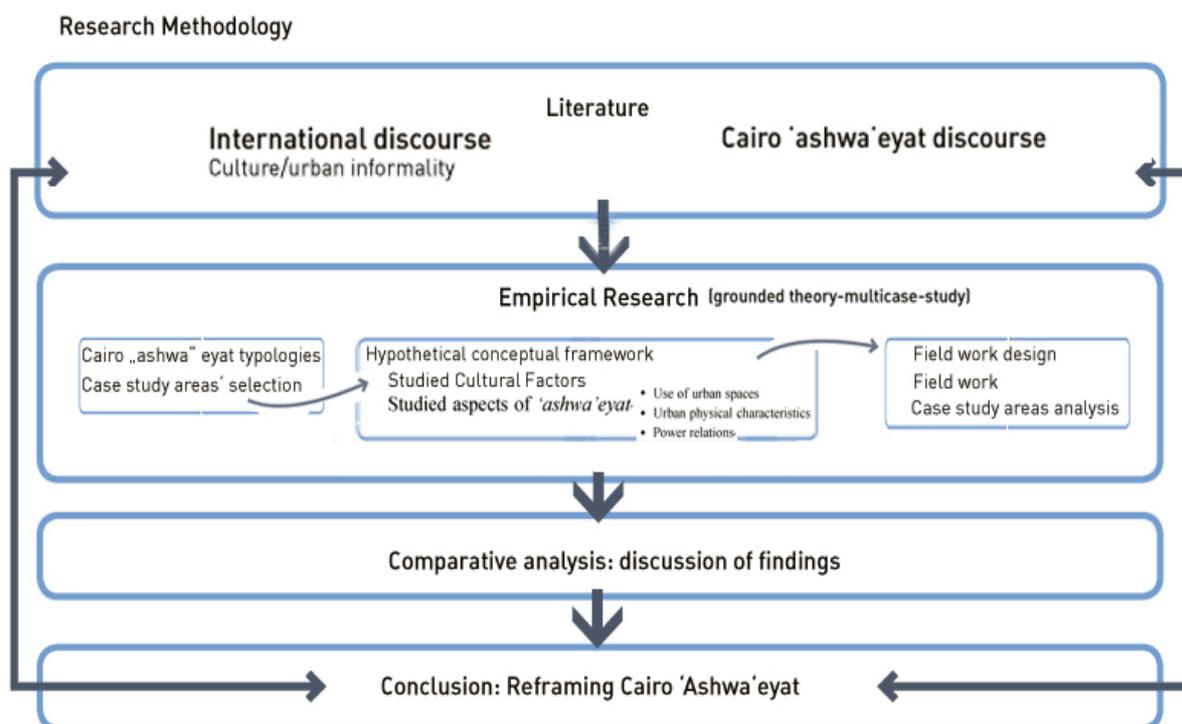


Figure 1.3 Research methodology (source: author).

To construct and verify the conceptual hypothetical framework, a comparative multi-case study is chosen for conducting the fieldwork. To identify the cultural factors to be studied, the researcher conducted a literature review about present-day Egyptian culture to construct a guideline for designing the fieldwork. In addition, an exploratory fieldwork phase was undertaken to explore which cultural factors relates to the research questions.

The flow of thoughts, concepts and theories, discussed throughout Parts II and III, leads to bringing the constructs together with the case study analysis on which the research hypothetical conceptual framework is built.

Based on this, several areas were chosen following several fieldwork trips in different informal areas in Cairo. Some of the visits were accompanied by students who shared in gathering the data in a relatively brief time interval, which was followed by other field visits by the researcher to continue the search for missing data. The focus of the study is "*Upper Egyptians*" as they form a large percentage of *'ashwa'eyat* dwellers. The cultural factors constellation (in addition to their sub-factors), which has been reached and studied through case study analysis are: origin (family and kinship relations and rural lifestyle), religion, relation to urban society (government, media and residents of formal Cairo, modern lifestyle, and revolution and political transformation), and relation to urban economy (mainly income and profession). Interrelations between culture and informality in Cairo *'ashwa'eyat* is seen in this research as a complex relation that leads to the informal urban development. This would be analyzed for each of the case study areas through cultural factors in relevance to the following aspects: urban physical characteristics, use of urban space, and power relations. A comparative analysis takes place between the case study areas, followed by discussion of findings and reflection on theories. The research description can be summarized as follows:

Part I includes the introduction, the background, research rationale, research methodology and research questions. Assuming the specificity of the case of Cairo as a city, and its *'ashwa'eyat*, it is chosen to be the place of the research. The theoretical part of the research is divided into several parts: international discourse and Cairo discourse.

Part II is mainly concerned with theories and international discourse about culture and informality, and a link is found between them. Literature and definitions of culture and urban space from different disciplines and different theories are critically discussed (i.e., Lefebvre and Rapoport among others). Informality, urbanization, and informal settlements are then demonstrated.

Part III covers Cairo's discourse regarding informal settlements with some of its related topics as the different characteristics and development history of Cairo *'ashwa'eyat* are discussed in the literature. Following this, the existing typologies of informal settlements are explored in order to facilitate the selection of the areas for the case studies.

Part IV is the empirical part. The theoretical parts (II and III) are essential to design the fieldwork by linking different theories to each other forming the preliminary research

questions. This leads to the formulation of the *hypothetical conceptual framework* of the research, including a description of the cultural factors (derived from the case studies analysis) in the empirical study part, in which each of the five case study areas is described. It starts with explaining the selection process of the case study areas. Exploratory inductive qualitative research is conducted using various research techniques (observation, participatory observation, semi-structured interviews and group discussions). The analysis and findings of the fieldwork is presented for each case separately. The 4 cultural factors in the form of a constellation are used in the analysis of 3 aspects of *'ashwa'eyat*: use of urban space, urban physical characteristics and power relations.

Part V includes the synthesis of the research, in which findings and results are discussed and comparative analysis is conducted to answer the research questions. This includes cultural factors' interrelation to use of space, informal urban development and power relations. The researcher criticizes the existing typologies of *'ashwa'eyat*, and proposing an extension of the criteria upon which typology could take place.

Part VI is the conclusion, through which an attempt for re-framing Cairo *'ashwa'eyat* is presented, considering *'ashwa'eyat* as an “ordinary” culturally accepted way of life that reflects residents' culture (i.e., cultural factors) as a part of daily life that supports social cohesion and considered as an asset for earning money (relation to urban society/urban economy). Rethinking about the condition of the Urban Physical Characteristics as an initiator and indicator for Informal Urban Development over time. Through a proposed simple model, Use of urban space is argued to be a necessity in center of daily life. *'Ashwa'eyat* complexity is discussed and cultural factors' constellation is shown to be in dynamic status, with mechanisms that control the whole process (i.e., mutual relations within cultural factors constellation, values and concepts).

The researcher proposes some recommendations and lessons learnt with some future perspective for the urban development discourse. Then the research ends up by proposing some points for further researches.

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