Cultivating Culture towards a Healthy City Design: Learning from the Pandemic

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Figure 1. The natural landscape of the ancient Egyptian village, Pharaonic Village. © Sara Yousry, 2008

Introduction

Contemporary urbanisation patterns reveal that our cities are getting populated with people from rural backgrounds lured by infrastructural facilities and better living conditions. The rural-to-urban migration of people in an anticipation of the good life also brings a great deal of diversity to cities. Multicultural identities and the intermixing of faiths, religions, beliefs and convictions in urban centres give rise to inclusivity and mutual prosperity or become a cause of conflicts and chaos if not managed (Demikhov & Dehtyarova, 2020). Growing trends in the urban planning and design of cities have reached a point where planners, architects, city managers and, most importantly, their citizens begin to question planning paradigms and what they mean for an entity such as a city that is always flexible and adaptive yet holds a distinct identity (Mir, 2020).

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic and its manifold mpact on cities the world around, the concept of healthy city design has become an immediate agenda of governments and their allied agencies tasked with planning and managing city services, both in normal times as well as in health emergencies (Dagli & Dagli, 2021). When people face drastic mental health and well-being challenges, culture, an intangible aspect of everybody's identity, becomes essential for keeping spirits up in pandemic times. Culture has long been regarded as a vital aspect of designing cities sustainably and inclusively as it instigates human emotions marked by a set of beliefs and customs (UCLG Committee on Culture, 2011). The interconnection of culture and spatial planning pre-dates the growth of the scientific body of knowledge on urban planning and design (Kunzmann, 2004).

Against that background, this paper will discuss various examples of cultural factors (beliefs, attitudes, and habits) as tools for re-connecting and remaining engaged at the community level that are precursors to building bases for healthy city design. The paper will cite examples from Egypt and India during the Covid-19 pandemic to showcase the positives and innate success of culture as a driving force towards normalising the shift of urban planning towards healthy city design.

Physical and Mental Health Issues during Covid-19

Covid-19 has been a health emergency that has forced governments and city administrations to take precautionary measures to restrict the physical interconnection of humans and so prevent the spread of the virus (Arredondo, 2021). Lockdowns and home isolations or quarantine have been regarded as one of the most vital aspects of controlling the spread of the Covid-19 virus. Restrictions on physical contact have been adopted as the most stringent measures and have been enforced by lockdowns and mobility restrictions. Measures against Covid-19 were studied on a wide scale, with researchers and medical experts weighing their opinions to either justify the lockdowns or to pinpoint why lockdowns are not a long-term solution (Kharroubi & Saleh, 2020). The impact of Covid-19 on health protection has varied greatly, impacting health infrastructure, awareness of quarantine-based issues on individual health, and lack of public spaces in immediate vicinities of homes along with differences in age and gender (Sayed, 2020). Notably, lockdowns imposed to break the chain of infection tend to neglect the various psychological problems, such as adjustment disorders, depression, anxiety and panic disorders, apart from the various physical health issues (Eedara et al., 2022).

Studies and surveys done by Field (2020), Owens et al. (2022) and Fore (2020) documented an increase in the number of reports showing symptoms of stress, anxiety, depression and insomnia in adults before and after Covid-19. The disruption of the life routines of people has also led to a substantial increase in the use of alcohol and drugs. Having more free time due to the closure of schools and universities, business, and offices led to increased usage of electronic devices, to the point where internet-enabled mobile phones were regarded as the best pastime and a means of learning what was happening around the world over during the pandemic (Raj & Fatima, 2020). The closure of public parks and playgrounds, physical sports, gyms, and other institutions has led to various physical health issues due to a lack of physical activity. The impacts on physical health due to lack of open spaces and restricted access to nature have severely impacted the development of children: with no schools to attend and harsh quarantine rules imposed, children of various age groups suffered mentally and physically and were left confined within their homes (Reuge et al., 2021). With Covid-19 into its third year, data from the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) show that, globally, 1 in 7 children have been directly affected by lockdowns.

Covid-19 has been a catalyst in highlighting the physical and mental health issues in people and has posed serious challenges for urban health experts around the world. The pandemic and its impact on health have raised questions regarding the spatial planning of our cities throughout the world (Kyriazis et al., 2020). Urban planning through the lens of urban health has emerged as a proactive thematic area that requires considerable funding and time for research and practical implication as a mitigation measure against possible future pandemic-like health disasters. The involvement of health as a driver of space configuration, design and construction of built spaces, and allocation of equitable open public spaces seems vital for the post-Covid-19 world.

Cultural Beliefs: A Cornerstone of Community Resilience

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Culture has long been perceived as a tool of resilience in the community (Skevington, 2020). Indigenous knowledge and traditions passed through generations are aligned with the geographical and climatic factors shaping the lives of people. Culture is a part of the normal daily routine of people around the world. People of various religious and cultural beliefs practise activities individually and in groups at different hours of the day, sometimes connected with the lunar calendar or aligned with seasonal variations and agricultural practices (Rodin, 2014). Festivals and fairs of South Asia are famous for their integrated linkages to centuries-old traditions, events and even cities were designed to accommodate such large public gatherings. The health resilience of communities and individuals is a direct result of culinary customs, natural vegetation, and lifestyles, which have their roots in the cultural upbringing of the people of various geographical regions.

Although geographically and climatically different, both Egypt and India trace their roots to river-based civilisations. The Nile and the Indus were the centres of Egyptian and Indus Valley civilizations dating back thousands of years. The present-day cultures of Egypt and India boasts diversity and high significance of natural rivers and religious practices focused on ancient heritage and traditions (Kashdan, 2012). The cultural interpretations of both countries are documented and are a source of future resilience offering cuisine, heritage and traditions, and language and festivals. The impact of natural topography also plays a major role in shaping cultural connections between people. Festivals and social gatherings

were largely associated with agricultural practices, religious events and landmarks and were celebrated as community festivals enhancing mutual happiness and harmony.

Egyptian civilisation: a brief overview

According to Hamdan (1967), ordinary regional geography is the description of a place, the regional character is the philosophy of a place, and the study of the character of the region is the pinnacle of geographical studies. Therefore, studying Egypt's natural character to serve as the basis for Egypt's human personality is vital. The features of the natural Egyptian environment are determined by the Nile River, which penetrates the land of Egypt, dividing it into the eastern desert of Egypt and Sinai on the one hand and the western side (Hamdan, 1967). The Nile Valley is divided between the delta and the level, which, in turn, balances in a clear straight line between the north and the south, and correspond to two major seas in the north and east, i.e., the Mediterranean and the Red Sea, respectively. Any description of the geographical map of Egypt must consider this trio of natural lines (river – desert – sea) to form balance and diversity in the natural landscape of Egypt. This geographical nature, with its natural contradictions, has affected the characteristics of the built environment and the influence of man in the formation and adaptation of geographical nature and the ensuing urbanisation. Hamdan (2000) believes the best and most appropriate way to study human geography is to understand the spatial distribution of resources and the variation of the impact of the natural environment on human activity and behaviour, and study the manifestations and results of human action in modifying the environment and other aspects of highlighting the relationship between man and the environment. The Egyptian human envelope is separated by the Nile as the most important factor in the distribution of the population (Soliemal et al., 2020).

Egyptian urban homogeneity is the product of both natural and material homogeneity. The Egyptian society is cooperatively organised, and its interest and existence depend on solidarity and interdependence, as the village is the basic building unit of Egyptian society and the pillar of agricultural activity, which relied on man's connection with nature and spending his time outside his home, which in turn made him socially human and not isolated (Figure 1). Egyptian cultural unity is the heritage of both language and religions. For agriculture, the Egyptian depends not on rain but on irrigation (where the river overflows and irrigates fields, and harnessing this effect depends mainly on controlling the river in terms of understanding the seasons of drought and flood and people controlling the rules governing the equitable distribution of water) (Satoh & Aboulroos, 2017).

Indian civilisation: a brief overview

India, home to more than 1.38 billion people, boasts a rich and diverse cultural kaleidoscope. The geographical features of the country exhibit sub-continental elements including the Himalayas, fertile alluvial plains irrigated by perennial rivers, desert, plains, the Western Ghat mountains, and a vast coastline. The geographical features mean the lifestyle of the people responds to climatic variations and generate a more heterogenic belief system that emerges from a complex understanding of multiple religions. The historical journey of the country also manifests an amalgamation of different religions and belief systems that find their expression in architectural wonders across the country. More than 60 percent of the population of India still lives in villages and primarily depends on agricultural practices based on both rain and river water and according to Dey (2018) there is

a clear divide between urban and rural people in their perceptions of culture and its impact on the routine lifestyles of Indians. The religious practices of praying to the rain-god are still prevalent along with worship of the Ganges and Yamuna – two major rivers irrigating the vast alluvial plain of North India – as goddesses. The system of living in a extended family with sufficient housing space is being replaced by the new concept of nuclear families living in mid-rise and high-rise urban apartments as barely sufficient space to house all the inhabitants. One of the main aspects important for understanding the cultural characteristics of Indians is the celebration of festivals, which are considered shared events where the use of public spaces is predominant. Feasts and fairs are common sights in both urban and rural settings during the festivities across different religions.

Globalisation and commercialisation have been serious disruptors that have brought a wave of Western traditions, changing the lifestyle, clothing, food practices, and entertainment activities of Indians. Indian culture gives individual space to all religions and people to follow their respective traditions. The impact of healthcare decisions is also largely governed by religious pre-existing norms and the large influence of herbal medicines. The cultural upbringing and its impact on healthcare decisions can be understood from the work of Worthington & Gogne (2011), who highlight the role of religious practices and belief systems on care, caregivers, and patients during the primary phase of an illness. Various healthcare ecosystems find relevance amongst the Indian people and also integrate with the cultural practices and belief systems that focus on managing individual lifestyle, eating habits, sleep and work habits in alignment with religious writings (Basu, 1990).

Cultural Practices: An Incentive for Healthy Habits in Urban Environments

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Egyptian stories

In Egypt, Covid-19 has been associated with fear and stress due to not knowing when the curfew will end and whether there will be a cure for the illness. Egyptians started to develop tools to cope with stress and find ways and practices to attain psychological resilience. This section describes some cultural practices that appeared during the lockdown.

Although the Egyptian Ministry of the Environment and the Governor of Cairo launched a green-roof initiative as early as 2019 to encourage planting roofs to reduce pollution levels and provide an eco-friendly use of space (Velazquez, 2020), before lockdown, the balconies, rooftops, and urban voids were in a sense abandoned or neglected spaces of the home. However, during the pandemic, many residents began to experiment with urban farming to grow small home gardens (Figure 2), as, as well as to join groups on social media to promote such activities and exchange knowledge and experience. Urban farming was considered a tool for developing habits that boost different aspects of mental health, too: some felt satisfaction for taking care of the usually neglected small open areas, whilst others enjoyed observing the continuous growth of plants. Ultimately, such activities encouraged positive thinking and a mental release.

Another popular activity during the lockdowns was to spend time outdoors in the neighbourhood flying homemade kites to celebrate the spring and Sham Ennessim, a religious national holiday in Egypt. This practice is a shared activity

Figure 2. Watermelon and tomato grown at home. © Amal Wagy, 2021

among different ages and genders. Many residents used their roofs for the largest or most beautiful kite competitions and promoted using social media to mobilise the idea. In many areas, neighbours of different ages and genders were able to remain connected socially and interact while keeping physical distance to avoid Covid-19 infection (Figures 3, 4). The sky became the public sphere where residents met, interacted, and connected. These practices have certain limitations, where residents of apartment buildings may confine themselves to their gated communities and may not be able to engage, whereas people living in traditional settlements of one- or two-storey houses with access to roofs can more easily engage in this community activity.

Ramadan, the holy month and the most spiritual event for Muslims, is well known as a month for devotion to God and charity to people in need, including sick people and poor families. During the Covid-19 lockdown, the informal sector was severely affected due to the curfew and restrictions on many activities, such as the movement of street vendors and the cessation of construction work. Many groups in the informal sector suffered greatly as a result. A regional donation campaign was organised to support and involve families working in the informal sector in Egypt. During Ramadan, Muslims attend religious lessons after prayer times inside mosques. But, due to the closing of mosques, Muslim groups used technology to overcome the restrictions and and disseminate culture like in the normal times of Ramadan, by gathering for lessons via Zoom or in online meetings.

During the lockdown, many adults engaged in birdwatching from their homes. As a positive impact of Covid-19, due to a drop in pollution and human activity during lockdowns, the environment flourishes and nature breathes. Egyptians in many areas observed new birds to the extent that events were held online to encourage documenting these phenomena and spreading knowledge about birds' names and their natural habitats (Figure 5). Such uses and interpretations of psychological resilience are contextually reflected in cultural practices seen in both urban and rural areas of either connecting with the sky or watching the birds. Such practices have been useful for interacting socially whilst observing physical distancing (Birdwatching from Home, 2020).

Figure 3. Flying kites in the Saft al-Laban district of the city of Giza, near the Egyptian capital. © Arabnews.com, 2020

Figure 4. Kites flying over Cairo during Covid-19 lockdown. © Hady-Ameen, 2020

Figure 5. Birdwatching from home (online event on April 30, 2020). © Sarah Rifaat, 2020

Indian stories

In India, governments have promoted entertainment-based resilience measures such as the airing of religious drama series, as well as healthy living habits involving exercise and yoga, to improve the physical and mental health of people. Also, religious influences on the lifestyles of people in India dictates healthy living and advise seeking medical aid only when ill. Thus, for the adherents of various religions, and predominately for the Hindu population, one of India's largest groups, wake-up calls from temples were considered a crucial measure in facing the pandemic. The early wake-up calls also helped people observe the custom of 'soaking' oneself with the rising sun as a way of greeting the sun-god under the name of Pranayam. Medically, this is linked with absorbing the rays of the rising sun to obtain vitamin D. After completing the Pranayam, people perform the other asanas of yoga to obtain health benefits. Religious places also perform morning prayers which are well integrated into the sleep cycle of people, thereby helping them maintain a healthy schedule.

The Covid-19 pandemic was a harsh reminder to the younger generation to resume good religious practices they had ceased to follow due to the pressures of day-to-day life. Covid-19 made people realise the importance of learning about and invest in a proper health-based lifestyle. The cultural manifestation of healthy living is reflected in the regular use of medicinal herbs by Indian people. 'Holy basil' or tulsi *(Ocimum tenuiflorum)* is a vegetable grown in kitchen gardens and as an indoor plant (Figure 6). It is considered sacred in Hindu philosophy and is a must in every Indian Hindu household, with the Hindu religion followed by more than 75 percent of the total population. The medicinal properties of holy basil enable it to be used in the treatment of respiratory, digestive, and skin diseases.

Figure 6. Tulsi or holy basil, commonly found in most of Indian households, has become central to a health-based lifestyle. © Nishtha Teberiwal, 2020

India is probably the only country where multiple forms of healthcare knowledge and systems of traditional and cultural practices are still prevalent (Payyappallimana et al., 2020). Ayurveda is an ancient medical knowledge system of preventive care that is more than 5,000 years old. This ancient science enables Indians to prepare home remedies and natural food supplements which boost immunity and enables people to live a healthy and safe lifestyle. Faced with a steep increase in Covid-19 infections, the Government of India under the Ayush Ministry promoted the use of homemade Ayurvedic medicines by people along with herbal doses for people quarantined in various government-operated facilities (Joseph et. al., 2021). Various successful cases were documented during 2020 and 2021 to assess the qualitative results of Ayurveda medicines as immune modulators. The faith of the people in the cultural aspect of Ayurveda was reinforced and Ayurvedic home-based remedies were extensively used by people all over the country.

Conclusion

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Cities and public spaces respond to the needs and aspirations of the people. Modern work patterns and lifestyles before the appearance of Covid-19 reflected the pressures of day-to-day life, which reduced the observance of cultural practices. The Covid-19 lockdown forced a shift in this trend, which motivated people to seek cultural practices and inculcate habits aimed at enhancing individual and societal health. The need to design healthy cities for the future must incorporate cultural manifestations and practices.

As evident from the examples shown in this paper, the cultural aspects of managing health and well-being play a significant role in immunity to future pandemics. Medicinal values embedded in culture can be integrated with land-use planning to enhance the awareness and knowledge of the city-wide people. Developing healthy city design guidelines must evolve from the cultural and religious ties of the people so that a greater degree of acceptance of future cities can be inculcated within the citizens. Cultural practices are a source of resilience and community brotherhood, unity, and harmony. Using the principles of cultural tolerance and affinity to human brotherhood and integrating it with health and well-being will empower city planners and managers to share responsibility with the people, thereby sharing mutual accountability, which can cause more proactive behavioural change. The aspect of living with health and well-being must be the key conclusion of the cultural interpretations as shown in the examples described in this paper as against the concept of seeking medical help only when required. A healthy city design based on cultural knowledge and wisdom should provide a change in lifestyle that is based on healthy living.

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