

Investigating Informal Vending Practices and Social Encounters along Commercial Streets in Cairo, Egypt

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Abstract : Marketplaces and commercial streets represent some of the most used and lively urban public spaces. Not only do they provide an outlet for commercial exchange, but they also facilitate social and recreational encounters. Such encounters can be influenced by both formal as well as informal vending activities. This paper explores and documents forms of informal vending practices and how they relate to social patterns that occur along the sidewalks of Commercial Streets in Cairo. A qualitative single case study approach of 'Midan El Gami' marketplace in Heliopolis, Cairo is adopted. The methodology applied includes direct and walk-by observations for two main commercial streets in the marketplace. Four zoomed-in activity maps are also done for three sidewalk segments that displayed varying vending and social features. Main findings include a documentation and classification of types of informal vending practices as well as a documentation of vendors' distribution patterns in the urban space. Informal vending activities mainly included informal street vendors and shop spillovers, either as product or seating spillovers. Results indicated that staying and lingering activities were more prevalent in sidewalks that had certain physical features, such as diversity of shops, shaded areas, open frontages, and product or seating spillovers. Moreover, differences in social activity patterns were noted between sidewalks with street vendors and sidewalks with spillovers. While the first displayed more buying, selling, and people watching activities, the latter displayed more social relations and bonds amongst traders' communities and café patrons. Ultimately, this paper provides a documentation, which suggests that informal vending can have a positive influence on creating a lively commercial street and on resulting patterns of use on the sidewalk space. The results can provide a basis for further investigations and analysis concerning this topic. This could aid in better accommodating informal vending activities within the design of future commercial streets.

Keywords : commercial streets, informal vending practices, sidewalks, social encounters

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