Public Transport and Arab Revolutions: Three Opportunities

David Moncholí i Badillo
Civil Engineer
Transport and Consultancy
IDOM, Valencia

Between December 2010 and May 2011 major social uprisings and protests took place in several Arab countries, particularly in North Africa, dubbed the "Arab Spring" or "Arab democratic revolutions" by the international media.

These Arab revolutions are seen as the first great wave of secular and democratic protests in the Arab world in the 21st century. Unprecedented in these societies, the revolts had a clearly social nature and were driven by different structural and demographic factors, in which harsh living conditions, entrenched in unemployment and poverty, coupled with corrupt and authoritarian regimes have played a vital role.

Factors that were not present in revolts in the past, such as globalisation and the universalisation of information and communication technologies (the Internet, mobile phones and social networks), improved training and education in society, together with the negative effects of the 2008 world crisis, which were multiplied in the region, were the perfect breeding ground for a keen awareness in large sectors of Arab societies of the need for change, which was channelled into the famous protests in squares such as Tahrir in Cairo, Pearl in Bahrain or Change Square in Sanaa.

These revolts and revolutions have essentially been an urban phenomenon. Rural areas, which although in general suffer more greatly, have been much less involved. In Tunisia for example, the protests took place inland, in small and medium-size towns (Gafsa and Kasserine, with the tourist city of Sidi Bouzid as the driving force), and started to spread through and express the discontent and frustrations of the coastal towns (Sfax, Hammamet), eventually reaching the

capital, and losing none of their intensity on the way. In Egypt, the capital has been – and still is – the focal point of the mobilisations, although there were also major protests in Alexandria and Suez, and likewise in many of the cities of the densely populated Nile Delta. Reports of widespread institutionalised corruption and demands for better democracy and greater freedom of expression have been widely reported by the international media. However, it is undoubtedly the urban dramas of the vast majority of cities in the area, the reality of everyday life for people living in cities in the region, with high levels of unemployment and extremely poor living conditions, that has been one of the de facto catalysts of the revolutions.

This urban drama is clearly visible in two closely interconnected aspects of city life: access to the housing market and access to basic services. Anyone who has travelled to the suburbs of an Arab city will have seen the very poor conditions and state of the housing, which in most cases does not comply with any legal regulations regarding housing or construction. What is more, any attempt to regulate and standardise housing conditions and the distribution of property on the terrain has had adverse effects on the housing market, leading to disproportionate rises in house prices, thereby making it harder for large sections of society to access the sector. The numerous (mega) projects and city planning works with the accompanying infrastructure, fuelled by the pre-crisis boom years, have only helped to push prices upwards, increasing the pressure on poorer neighbourhoods.

If access to basic housing for most of the population represents one side of the urban drama in most Arab cities, access to public services shows the other side. The supply of basic services like electricity, water, sewage, public transport, waste treatment, etc., is a long way from meeting the most basic of human needs. For many years, these services have been provided by public companies. They have been highly

subsidised, clearly lacked investment in modernisation and maintenance, and offered very low service standards and a large operational deficit. Attempts in the past to introduce reforms and rationality to management, such as investment in technologies, have inevitably led to an increase in the cost of services, making them even less accessible for the majority of the population. The authorities are facing a dilemma for which there is almost no solution, debating between maintaining subsidies – which they can hardly afford –, which leads to inefficient and mediocre services, or the elimination of subsidies and the introduction of incentives (even privatisation) to stimulate investment in and improve these services, although at the cost of making their access impossible for a large amount of the population.

The reality of everyday life for people living in cities in the region has been one of the de facto catalysts of the revolutions

It is small wonder, therefore, that with this accumulation of circumstances, the protests and revolts have been concentrated in the cities and led by their inhabitants – the citizens. Cities offer a unique scenario for exchanging ideas, values, social life and economy. The existence of social networks and the globalisation of communication technologies have been instrumental in allowing the organisation of protests and the almost immediate transmission of information and orders. However, the cities' public spaces, from the traditional mosques to the more modern squares, have played hosts to the gatherings; this is where the people have made their demands for social, economic and democratic improvements. Without citizens taking over and recovering public space, the revolutions and protests would not have had the same success and strength.

The initial response of European Mediterranean countries perhaps lacked the energy that corresponded to the changes that were occurring. However, from a personal point of view, for many professionals who understand in some depth the Arab world and cities and have had some kind of technical relationship with them, the perspective of the Arab revolutions introduced new elements of hope and opportunity in attaining and overcoming the major challenges faced by Arab cities and society. In the specific case of transport and mobility, which is so closely related to the conception and use of public space in cities, we believe three opportunities have arisen.

The Traditional Urban Structure of the Arab City and its Relation with Public Space

Despite the wide variety of origins and growth patterns, Arab cities were founded on a common set of social, geographic and religious factors, which triggered the beginnings of the morphological development of very similar urban fabrics. The pattern of development of the Arab city, as highlighted by Anthony Kiet, was based on the division of the social hierarchy, in which the daily activities of the majority of the population were concentrated in the city centre, while the leading classes were located in outlying palaces and fortresses.

Starting in the centre of the city, the most common pattern for using the land arose from the multifunctional base structure surrounding (entirely or partially) the main mosque, which branched out into different layers of interconnected souks, between which were interspersed the different commercial spaces, caravansarais, educational and civic areas and buildings, as well as other religious and social structures. All together, this congregation of structures and facilities created a massive mosque-complex, whose central courtyard arose from the main public space not just of the complex, but also, sometimes, of the city itself.

Within this organisation the system of circulation around the souks became the basic route for mobility and access to the central complex. Likewise, numerous smaller open spaces located outside of the main streets became public areas specialised in different social functions, balancing and satisfying the needs of the population.

The urban model of the traditional Arab city was completed with a network of main streets, which connected the central complex with the exterior city walls and gates. Each of these axes was lined with shops, organised along the pedestrian pathways with the clear aim of maximising the clientele as they travelled from one part of the city to another. These structuring axes or avenues had an additional function: they served as protective shields, concealing the residential districts from "intruders." The entrances to these districts were marked by arches and small doorways where alleyways crossed the main axes, subtly indicating the transition between the public and private sphere, and the entry into the sacred world of Arab family life.

The residential districts made up the rest of the Arab urban morphology. Again, these were structured following social norms and patterns, with wealthier and more prestigious classes located close to the central mosque complex, and the working classes on the periphery.

The process of creating the city was made more complex by the Islamic law on inheritance, which strengthened the relentless subdivision of the residential units as families grew.

Without citizens taking over and recovering public space, the revolutions and protests would not have had the same success and strength

In terms of organising land and transport, the structure of the traditional Arab city represented a perfect example of sustainable management (as we understand the term today) in the area of mobility. The distribution of public space was optimum, thanks to the structuring of the primary elements of community life that minimised the need to travel, and with the generation of excellent pedestrian axes that held together commercial and social activity, while at the same time allowing people to travel between different areas of the city and the central mosque complex. Reducing the need to travel to a minimum, guaranteed access to public space and the latter's efficient distribution to support social activities and mobility are city planning principles that may "sound" highly revolutionary, but which the Arabs were already putting into practice several centuries ago. And not only the Arabs, since these patterns of urban organisation and mobility can also be identified in cities on the northern shores of the Mediterranean, impregnated with the Christian culture but organised on practically the same principles.

In the 19th century, however, the solid traditional structure of the Arab city (of the Mediterranean city at its fullest extent), began to break down as a result of the slow but widespread process of industrialisation, which arrived mainly through the development and expansion of the European colonies. The urban models of cities like London and Paris began to influence the Arab cities of North Africa. One of the most dramatic transformations of an Islamic city took place in Cairo. Enormously impressed by the designs and planning of Haussmann, after a visit to the Paris Universal Expo in 1867, the Khedive Ismail Pasha, Governor of Egypt, decided to adopt the Parisian models for the Egyptian capital. A new city plan was designed in a less populated area to the southeast of Cairo, which was also the origin of a major social divide: the wealthy classes immediately preferred living in the more Westernised area, while the more popular classes remained in the old city. This decision represented, in essence, the start of the stigmatisation of the old city of Cairo, which until then had enjoyed great urban health (favoured by the traditional Arab-Mediterranean structure), as a slum of the lowest social classes.

The process of Westernising (Americanising?) city planning and urban space intensified in the middle of the 20th century, and with the growth of Western business and professional models, urban growth began to resemble the American model of the central business district. However, this took place in the new city centres, while the old areas began to suffer a process of accelerated degradation, afflicted by a lack of accessibility (in accordance with the new concept of accessibility, that of a private vehicle), of low quality services, facilities evidently not properly maintained, over population, poor economic conditions, etc.

The prevailing Western city planning methods enforce a detrimental separation of functions, designating specific areas for housing, commerce, civic uses, leisure, etc. The original purpose of separating functions was aimed at creating more efficient and rational urban systems, rather than effectively resolving the social needs of the population.

The traditional Arab city and its counterparts on the northern shores of the Mediterranean were conceived and designed on a pedestrian scale, with a highly dense, rich and complex cityscape. The main arteries were integrated into the system of souks and markets, the secondary byways were fully linked in with the system of residential neighbourhoods; the alleyways and entranceways, directly connected with the private realm. Thanks to its design, this circulation system ensured the satisfaction of all the social and spatial needs of its users, the inhabitants of the city. The road system was not just a means, but an end in itself, since it contained countless urban functions, which have today become separated.

The Arab cities have not escaped the vicious circle of city and public space planning, which has proved itself to be ineffectual and ruined the living structure of the traditional city, creating large monofunctional spaces, joined by hard roadway infrastructures. Basic

urban functions have therefore been displaced, heightening the problems of accessibility and mobility (congestion, extremely low quality in public transport services) for the vast majority of the population. This situation has merely served to deepen the degradation and loss of value of the public space, increasing widespread impoverishment and creating the breeding ground for the protests and revolutions that have taken place.

The Three Opportunities of Public Transport Following the Arab Revolutions

The breeding ground for recent events has been the harsh living conditions of most inhabitants of Arab cities, arising from scarce economic resources, limited access to basic services and a serious degradation of the urban public space, which is already a long way from satisfying the traditional needs of Arab culture. It is therefore extremely interesting to note that it is the urban public space and demands for its recovery that have been one of the key elements in the revolts and revolutions that have taken place.

During decades of despotic Arab governments, the two public spaces with the capacity to accommodate and/or generate political expression, which have arisen from the evolution of the traditional structure of the Arab city – the mosques – and subsequent Western city planning – the squares – have, in effect, seen their civic function eliminated. Some of the violent revolts in the past were able to make their demands, albeit fleetingly, in one place or the other, but the repression was almost always severe and went unchecked. In the 2011 Arab revolutions, however, both public spaces were aligned in a new form of civil protest, and success came despite numerous initial doubts. It is of particular relevance that both types of public space that bore the hopes of democracy and a better life, the mosques representing traditional values and the squares which arose from the "new city planning," worked in tandem after decades of mistrust between religious and secular movements.

Of course, the new means of communication, the social networks, have helped enormously with the diffusion of ideas and in calling for demonstrations, but all the demands have been developed, in the end, in the real space of the city. The Arab citizens have again conquered the public space.

The revolutionary events witnessed by the Arab countries have facilitated a kind of new "dialogue" between the spaces of tradition and the spaces of modernity within the city. The mosque, and what it represents, is no longer the antithesis of the square, nor its substitute. Both spaces are taking back their civil roles through the hopes and demands of thousands of anonymous citizens, yet without renouncing the roles and functions that identify and differentiate them.

In this "new order," both spaces have contributed to protecting and fuelling public opinion, providing a platform where the population can demand its civil rights.

Public transport, as a basic structuring and configuring element of public space, and as an aid to one of the basic needs of the population, mobility, cannot be left outside of this "dialogue." It can (and must) contribute to the recovery of public space, offering a new paradigm for mobility in cities, in which more sustainable patterns and models than those used today are brought back into use.

The Arab revolutions and their demands regarding public space offer great opportunities to develop and integrate transport systems into community spaces, thus tackling several of the pressing problems of the citizens of Arab cities.

Public transport can (and must) contribute to the recovery of public space, offering a new paradigm for mobility in cities

Specifically three major areas of opportunity can be identified regarding public transport systems in these times of transition in the Arab world:

Today, few people would doubt that public transport systems (including non-motorised modes of transport) are an extremely effective tool for resolving mobility problems for people in both an efficient and intelligent way. The arguments are no longer solely environmental – to lower emissions, noise and other externalities –, but now also consider social integration and economic rationality. Public transport systems make a decisive contribution to improving quality of life, guaranteeing accessibility to different areas of the city (and to the different urban functions that these areas play host to) and providing the basic support for day-to-day economic and social activities. Therefore, giving the impoverished neighbourhoods of Arab cities a good, rational, efficient, well-planned public transport network, would be a

contribution to the social and economic development of the people who live there, and would help to resolve the serious infrastructural shortcomings in these areas.

Furthermore, the implementation of public transport projects goes some way to recovering the public space, also understood as a place for the community and for democratic discourse, designed around humans (and not private vehicles) and able to support multiple urban functions and the creation of wealth. Above-ground public transport systems go hand in hand with pedestrian mobility, and with economic, commercial, recreational and communicative activity. In the past, traditional Arab cities relied on their pedestrian axes to structure and connect the different areas of life, from the central mosque to the private living areas, in turn enabling multiple activities to develop and not just providing routes for travelling from one place to another. Today, however, it is the public transport systems (especially above-ground systems) which can adopt this function, connecting the squares with the mosques, the interchange hubs with the administrative buildings and commercial with residential areas. To see how this opportunity can become a reality we need only consider how life develops along the Alemdar – Divan Yolu – Yeniçeriler axis in Istanbul, which runs through the main mosques, souks and universities of the city, right through the heart of the old city, and boasts a magnificent light metro system that is perfectly integrated within the city infrastructure, and compare this with the axis that connects Al Sayed Al Merghani, Al Sayed Al Maqreezi, Lofty El Sayed and Ramses Square, which is served by the ancient, dilapidated tram line from Heliopolis to Cairo.

Lastly, public transport systems are systems that above all need a democratic and civic management for them to function effectively. Here we can identify a further opportunity that good public transport systems in Arab cities could offer the strengthening of the collective spirit of a community faced with the prevailing individualism of the Americanised city planning and mobility model, which relies on private transport. Public transport systems depend on people observing certain rules of community life, behaviour and usage; from the chosen fare system, that everyone has to comply with, to the rules, rights and duties of the passengers and staff, as well as the need for public transport, its passengers and pedestrians to coexist. The development and promotion of public transport networks, as new unifying elements of the different social spheres of the Arab world, can contribute to the recovery of the central pillars of community life that arise from the structuring axes of traditional Arab cities, which also help to adapt the Western vision to the Arab culture.

Beyond the purely technical and technological challenge that the generalisation and/or extension of the public transport systems represents in the large Arab cities, the revolutionary events of last year have proved that the citizens of most Arab countries are becoming aware that their living conditions could and should be better and that they can and should take back the public space that has been wrongly taken from them by the ruling powers (and take control of the city planning these powers are responsible for). Thanks to the revolutions that have taken place, all the elements that make up the complex and rich human social system can and should have an opportunity and a duty to contribute to attaining the aims and hopes of the population. And public transport is a key component of this playing field, since it can contribute decisively to improving living conditions for the people, ensuring their mobility and accessibility; it can actively help to recover and interconnect the urban spaces which until today have been degraded and/or disjointed; and can collaborate in enhancing the social and democratic spirit of the people.

References

KIET, Anthony "Arab Culture and Urban Form." *Journal of the City and Regional Planning Department*: Vol. 8: Iss. 1, Article 10. (2011). http://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/focus/vol8/iss1/10

MERCHANT, Brian "Public Spaces Are Key to Revolution – And Democracy." http://utopianist.com/2011/02/public-spaces-are-key-to-revolution-and-democracy/

RABBAT, Nasser "The Arab Revolution Takes Back the Public Space." *Critical Inquiry* (January 2012) http://criticalinquiry.uchicago.edu/nasser_rabbat_the_arab_revolution_takes_back_the_public_space

SANBURN, Josh "Square Roots: How Public Spaces Helped Mold the Arab Spring." www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2071404,00.html

VERDEIL, Eric y WAINE, Oliver "Arab Cities in Revolution: Some Observations". *Metropolitics* (February 2011). www.metropolitiques.eu/Arab-Cities-in-Revolution-Some.html