

# L25

## THRESHOLDS, POROSITY, INFORMALITY: THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON FOODSCAPES AND CITY HOSPITALITY

## LIMIARES, POROSIDADE, INFORMALIDADE: O IMPACTO DA COVID-19 NAS PAISAGENS ALIMENTARES E NA HOSPITALIDADE DAS CIDADES

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## ABSTRACT

Flux and movements are notions that describe the contemporary urban life underscoring the important dimension of mobility. During the Covid-19 pandemic, the lockdown of cities has created an unprecedented urban atmosphere. It disrupted the normal rhythms of city creating a break, decelerated rhythms and offered new sensory experiences within the city. The health crisis led to a reorganization of cities, with various adjustments affecting city hospitality. Some changes aimed to create a more welcoming environment while others caused a decrease in social interactions and increased voids and interstices within the urban landscape. This paper focuses on the qualities of the urban environment in three Mediterranean cities that made it possible to (re)inhabit the city. Porosity of thresholds, informality, appropriation of public spaces and some other specific qualities of the urban environments typical in the Mediterranean architecture played a role in reassuring residents and encouraging breaks and public interactions.

**KEYWORDS:** Ambiances. Porosity. Thresholds. Foodscape. Adaptability. Informal uses. Covid-19. Sensory Experience.

## RESUMO

Fluxo e movimento são noções que descrevem a vida urbana contemporânea sublinhando a importante dimensão da mobilidade. Durante a pandemia de Covid-19, o confinamento das cidades criou uma atmosfera urbana sem precedentes. Perturbou os ritmos normais da cidade criando uma pausa, desacelerou os ritmos e ofereceu novas experiências sensoriais dentro da cidade. A crise sanitária levou a uma reorganização das cidades, com vários ajustes que afetaram a hospitalidade urbana. Algumas mudanças visaram criar um ambiente mais acolhedor, enquanto outras provocaram uma diminuição nas interações sociais e aumentaram os vazios e interstícios na paisagem urbana. Este artigo centra-se nas qualidades do ambiente urbano de três cidades mediterrânicas que permitiram (re)habitar a cidade. A porosidade dos limiares, a informalidade, a apropriação dos espaços públicos e algumas outras qualidades específicas dos ambientes urbanos típicos da arquitetura mediterrânica desempenharam um papel importante na tranquilização dos residentes e no incentivo às pausas e às interações públicas.

**PALAVRAS CHAVE:** Ambientes. Porosidade. Limiares. Adaptabilidade. Usos informais. COVID-19. Experiência sensorial.

## 1. INTRODUCTION. THE SENSORY TRANSFORMATION OF PUBLIC SPACES

The Covid-19 health crisis and successive lockdowns constituted an unprecedented situation. They have resulted in a “great slowdown” of the urban economy and an alteration of urban environments. Cities were reshaped by numerous micro-modifications, some intended to guide and reorder the bodies, with the effect of fading a city’s hospitality. Others aimed to create a more welcoming and friendly atmosphere.

The lockdown has created an unprecedented urban ambiance. Lockdowns disrupted the usual rhythms of city, decelerating them and offering new sensory experiences within the city. In these typically bustling environments, residents experienced a decrease in spatial and sound “saturation”, as well as “vacancies” (Antonioli et al., 2020): voids, gaps, breaks and silences. These offered a new kind of experience within the city, a quieter and more contemplative space.

Sanitary barriers have also disrupted our familiar attachments to the city and the way we inhabit it (Breviglieri, 1999, 2006). Dwelling involves engaging our bodies in a familiar space, which provides stability and a sense of security (Breviglieri, 1999). How have these changes in urban environments and atmospheres influenced the ways we dwell in and experience public spaces? What qualities of the urban Mediterranean city environments allowed residents to (re)inhabit the city? What elements fostered a sense of recovered hospitality (Stavo-Debaugé, 2018), welcoming the one who comes with its vulnerabilities, towards more resilient and inclusive urban forms?

These questions were the heart of a two-years research project (2021-2023) investigating how three Mediterranean cities – Montpellier, Cairo, and Rabat – adapted their foodscapes and public spaces during the crisis (UrbaSens Project<sup>1</sup>).

## 2. METHODOLOGY

For the fieldwork, we have chosen to conduct it in two types of urban spaces: five boulevards in Cairo, and five squares in Montpellier, with Rabat featuring a mix of both. Data collection relied on photographic and sound recordings of these urban environments, alongside interactions with residents (in Cairo and Rabat) and “commented-walks” in Montpellier (Thibaud 2001). This aimed to understand the pre- and post-crisis transformations in these spaces, with a particular focus on “forms, formers, and formalities” (Chelkoff, 2001).

In Cairo<sup>2</sup>, we have selected five boulevards in five neighborhoods which represent a diversity of spaces and architecture (Haussmannian, socialist period, colonial

<sup>1</sup> The project “Approaches SENSibles and Effects of the COVID-19 Health Crisis on Mobility and Ambiances in Urban Food Landscapes” was funded by the MSH-SUD and included researchers and students in a transdisciplinary perspective (See more details: <https://www.mshsud.org/projets/urbasens/>).

<sup>2</sup> In Cairo, the study was carried out as part of an urban sociology course with master’s students from the Urban Design Course, Architectural Engineering Program, at Ain Shams University, directed by Noha Gamal Said.

period, etc.). A spatial and architectural study of the ambient situations of these boulevards was carried out. In terms of temporality, the situations were observed and photographed repeatedly over periods of 10 minutes, and during 3 key moments: the usual situation, during Ramadan, and during Covid-19 health restrictions.

In Montpellier, the survey took place between February and July 2021. This period covers in particular the third lockdown in France, then, from 19th May 2021, a post-lockdown period with an end of restrictions. We made sound recordings of the ambiances and photographed the uses in public spaces in five squares. The recordings were spread over a period of 5 hours repeatedly, at two key moments: during and after the third lockdown.

We also carried out “commented walks” (Thibaud, 2001) with residents within the “1 km radius” near their homes, a major measure of the strict first lockdown. During the walk, residents revisit their routes during the first lockdown, and clarify their perceptions of the ambiance in the space they pass through. The stories are recorded and the walks are photographed; they feature the inhabitant, the use of the place and their interactions with urban materiality during the lockdown.

We paid attention, during this period of lockdown, to the uses of urban space by the inhabitants, their interactions, body postures, mobilities, etc., but also to the urban forms which shape the atmosphere and to the formers of the atmosphere (light, sound spaces, tactile and visual materials) (Chelkoff, 2001).

### 3. FINDINGS

#### 3.1 Lockdown and public space

The research findings revealed a multi-layered impact of the pandemic on public spaces. Lockdowns led to a decline in the city’s hospitality and a reorganization of movement patterns. The vibrant intermingling of bodies, the sounds of bustling squares, and the sensory experience of markets all gave way to a sanitized atmosphere. Frequent cleaning procedures, imposed walking directions, spaced-out stalls, and protective barriers separating vendors and customers became the norm. The so-called “barrier” measures thus had repercussions on all formats of hospitality, transforming the usual atmospheres of the city, which ceased to be “familiar” (Stavo-Debaugue et al., 2022). This shift was particularly evident in emblematic spaces known for their multi-sensory experiences, such as charity tables in Cairo during Ramadan, which traditionally offered close physical proximity and shared meals. These tables were replaced by take-away options distributed along major roads, fundamentally altering the social and sensory experience. Also, open-air food markets in Montpellier underwent similar transformations. Stalls were relocated and reconfigured to maintain physical distance, sacrificing the labyrinthine layouts and sensorial contact with food.

Figure 1 is evocative of the atmosphere of charity tables before the Covid-19 health crisis in Cairo during the Ramadan period. Charity tables make it possible to offer meals to people passing through during the break of the fast. These are long tables decorated in multiple colors, for sharing a meal, seated, in close physical proximity, meeting and resting. These charity tables are generally installed in intermediate spaces between public spaces and private spaces or next to mosques. During the health crisis, these tables could not be deployed. Instead, take-away meals were placed along major roads and distributed by volunteers. The colors are more sober (Figure 2). Everyone eats their meal alone.



Figure 1. Charity tables.

Source: Journal Independant Arabia (URL: <https://www.independentarabia.com/node/115611/>)



Figure 2. Distribution of food in Ramadan during lockdown on 9th STREET-Maadi, Cairo.  
Source: Student work, course urban sociology, 2021.

In Montpellier, open-air food markets have been relocated or reconfigured in order to space out the stalls. The arrangements between stalls and the circulation aisles have taken square and aligned shapes, erasing the irregularities and the old labyrinthine shapes, sources of proximity and strolling. Sensory contact with exposed food has been reduced.

Conversely, resource places have proven to be particularly hospitable in crisis situations. New forms of appropriation of public space have appeared on sidewalks, terraces, squares, church steps, etc. Taking the opposite approach to guidance and social distancing measures, inhabitants have reactivated old uses and developed new ones. The city has become a vast field of experiences of another appropriation of space, of another atmosphere.

### 3.2 Re-appropriation of public space

In the three cities studied, a newfound adaptability was particularly evident in the way residents utilized public furniture. Public benches, stairs, low walls, and amphitheater-style church steps transformed into vibrant social hubs. In the absence of open terraces and restaurant seating, these spaces offered places to sit, rest, chat, or enjoy take-away meals, fostering a sense of community (Figure 3).

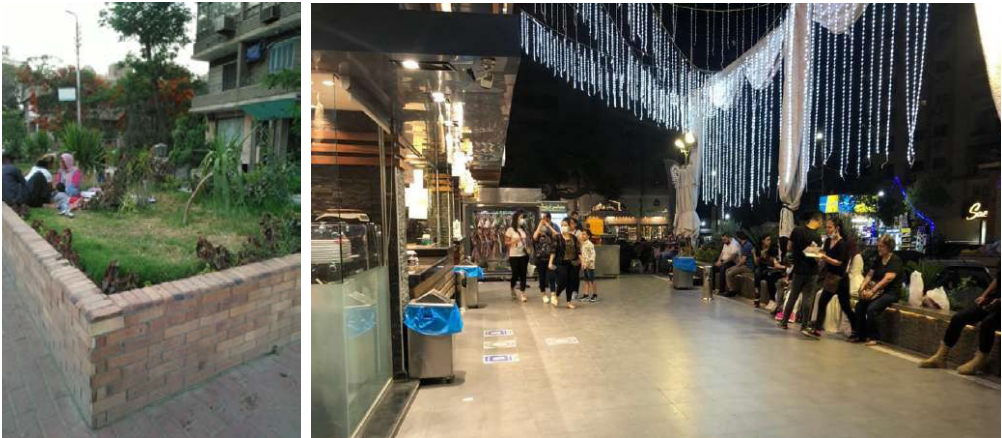


Figure 1. People sitting on the space edges at Abbas Elakad Street to the right and in elevated gardens on Ahmed Tayser Street - Masr Al-Gadida to the left, Cairo.  
Source: Student work, course urban sociology, 2021

In Montpellier, the third lockdown saw residents flock to welcoming public spaces that encouraged connection. The steps of the Saint Roch church became a popular spot for socializing and enjoying a sense of shared community, offering an escape from isolation and a chance encounter with others (Figure 4). The amphitheater-like design of the steps facilitated conversation and interaction, fostering a lively atmosphere. More than an atmosphere of public intimacy, the place responds to a fundamental need for public encounter, to vibrate together in public space. Installed in groups, spread out on the steps which act as amphitheater-shaped stands, the users blend together as the steps fill up. Chance encounters are again possible. For some, these steps allow them to endure a distressing situation of lockdown and find a “dose of normality”. For others, it is a welcome manifestation of micro-resistance to body guidance. While it is still compulsory in public spaces, very few people wear a mask.





Figure 4. Occupation of the steps of the Saint Roch church at lunchtime during the third lockdown, Montpellier. Source: E. Cheyns, avril 2021.

The Saint Roch church and its surroundings form a partition (Amphoux, 2001) composed of several parts providing a variety of atmospheres. The walker passes from one atmosphere to another, on a site which offers a plurality of uses (church steps, square with a fountain and benches in the shade behind the church, children’s play area, forecourt, etc.). Outside of the lockdown period, the forecourt at the bottom of the church steps and the adjacent streets are bar and restaurant areas with very popular terraces. During lockdown, when these bars and restaurants had to close, the steps of the church welcomed the inhabitants. The steps were occupied from midday until the curfew at 7 p.m., alternating times for lunch, rest (nap, games, reading), and, between 5 p.m. and 7 p.m., having drinks with friends. With an amphitheater shape, the steps allow a reciprocal gaze between seated spectators and passers-by, between those who stop and those who pass. The shape of the steps allows users to arrange themselves in groups without pre-defined limits and with a moving shape. The sound effect resonance of the place reinforces the feeling of common vibration. The reduction in saturation of the square space and of the sound saturation (closure of the numerous terraces) creates a new appropriable zone, where seating is pleasant. Little by little the bodies come closer, relax, the groups merge, converse. Bodies are no longer ordered, the borders between groups becomes porous. The residents may sit there as if on their own terrace, sometimes with animals and objects brought from home (some came in slippers or with their bird. Figure 5).



Figure 5. Occupation of the steps of the Saint Roch church at lunchtime during the third lockdown, Montpellier. Source: E. Cheyns, avril 2021.

### 3.3 Informal innovations: Café-cars

The flexibility and adaptability of the so-called “informal” uses have made it possible to reoccupy public space, with the emergence for example of mobile “café-cars” in the streets of Cairo or the expansion of informal food markets in Rabat.



Figure 6. Café-cars on El Merghany Street-Masr Al-Gadida, Cairo.  
Source: Student work, course Urban Sociology, 2021.

In Cairo, the number of café-cars increased during the Covid-19 crisis. The latter set up in the streets, on the sidewalks, with a few chairs to receive customers (Figure 6). Some café-cars have developed with a design and brand, with the same type of cars, colors and logos, such as the “Coffee-Jeep” brand. These cars are installed in different neighborhoods. Most café-cars users are young people who get together to have coffee together.

### 3.4 Blurring the lines: Thresholds’ porosity

The impact of lockdown led to the emergence of new uses in the city and a blurred distinction between public and domestic or private spheres due to the expansion of thresholds, for example through the deployment of bank “waiting areas” on the sidewalks, juice or coffee bar counters at the thresholds of administrative buildings, the opening of doorways, garage or windows in residential spaces. This expansion of thresholds promoted porosity with public space.

In Cairo, during the lockdown, banks moved their waiting rooms outside onto the sidewalks, installing chairs and umbrellas. Café-cars have been set up nearby to serve customers in bank “waiting rooms”, which have been moved to public spaces. In Rabat, street sellers were invited by residents to enter more widely into the interior common inner courtyards.



In the three cities, some bars and restaurants have chosen to remain open by taking out their counters at the threshold of their business, while extending on the sidewalk, to serve take-away meals, coffees or drinks. They invite a re-occupation of public space, although still uncomfortable (standing), and testify to an art of expansion of thresholds which maintains an experience of social links (Melliti, 2002; Breviglieri et al., 2021).



Figure 7. Moving the counters to the sidewalks at the thresholds of the business, Montpellier  
Source: E. Cheyns, mars-avril 2021

The porosity or openness of the thresholds between the interior and exterior (thresholds of doors, garages, food shops, windows or balconies) contributed to forming an atmosphere. They signal the presence of others and provided security of existence and emotional comfort (Gamal Said, 2014, 2020). In Montpellier, the opening of the thresholds, particularly marked in the *Mediterranean district*, has contributed to providing security to its inhabitants, by maintaining forms of living together. The doors of buildings frequently remain open and the greening of the sidewalks and the square by its inhabitants accompanies this plasticity of the thresholds. A street intersection was nicknamed the “chat corner” during the first lockdown. The occupants of the balconies had installed a ritual of conversations from balcony to balcony, in a face-to-face and square situation, inviting passers-by to take part. This porosity of the thresholds contributed to an intensity in the levels of protection of others, with residents going to check on a neighbor who had not opened her shutters. Food solidarity was particularly evident there, sometimes as a pretext to take care of others.

The opening and personalization of thresholds have also allowed an extension of the domestic life into the public space, which provided security, through the presence of others, in squares and in the streets. In Montpellier, in this *Faubourg de la Méditerranée* district, some residents went to the public square with their coffee-cups of home. A street was transformed into a children’s play area and was almost closed to cars. A garage threshold was used to set a table and bring together neighbors from the street for an aperitif, every evening, during the first lockdown, between home and outside. A piano was “invited” in the street for a concert. A family set up a camping table on the sidewalk for lunch.

The architectural irregularities in this district are particularly conducive to the integration of different common spaces and practices of thresholds (Breviglieri,

2018): facing balconies and proximity to facades, nooks and crannies, “hill streets” creating differentiated spaces with the difference in level, arcs of vegetation growing from wall to wall facing each other, etc.

These results invite us to rethink thresholds as an element of resilience and a challenge of living together. They emphasize the importance of thresholds and adaptable spaces in fostering social connection and resilience within cities. Rethinking public furniture and urban design to create spaces that encourage interaction and social gathering can contribute to a more vibrant and inclusive urban experience.

## 4. CONCLUSION

The development of new centralities in the public space in times of lockdown invites us to rethink furniture and urban forms, in arrangements conducive to rest and public meetings and towards an enrichment of uses and atmospheres.

The porosity and dilation of thresholds, their plasticity as a living structure (Breviglieri 2018) become an issue of living together, of existential security provided by others (Gamal Said, 2020). They are, just like the amphitheater steps in front of the churches, markers of Mediterranean cities.

By reimagining future thresholds and new forms of street furniture, this may create cities that are able to accommodate new uses that encourage break, social interactions, and communal activities. This research underscores the significance of adaptable urban practices and spatial design in shaping the city of tomorrow, fostering resilience and enhancing societal well-being.

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