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POSITION PAPER

Gossip on the Doxiadis 'Gossip Square': Unpacking the Histories of an Unglamorous Public Space[1]

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Understanding the historical complexities surrounding Doxiadis Associates' idea of 'gossip squares' in housing projects helps frame larger theoretical questions about the potential significance of the 'gossip square' as an everyday public space. The focus of this paper is the gossip square as a spatial and social concept. The idea of 'gossip square' was discussed among Doxiadis Associates' designers and patrons, to eventually become entwined with larger visions of urban development. In examining the 'gossip square', new 'gossip' arises about how the term reflected ambivalent alignments with mid-twentieth-century modernism, and how it advanced particular agendas of nation-building and modernization. Unpacking the history of the term and the way the concept was appropriated (or not) by the firm of Doxiadis Associates provides insights into such public hubs in the larger context of social relations and the space of a city.

In the mid-1950s, when the Athens-based architectural and planning firm, Doxiadis Associates, was pursuing its ambitious housing program for the young and oil-rich state of Iraq, proposing the restructuring of cities and the building of new villages in the name of national modernization, the firm also introduced the concept of the 'gossip square'. Gossip squares were small public spaces built into each new neighborhood designed by Doxiadis Associates, in Baghdad and other parts of the country. These neighborhoods formed part of a hierarchical system of communities. The system, also developed by Doxiadis Associates, identifed six classes of communities. The smallest neighborhood was a Class I community, of up to fifteen families of similar income; a Class II group comprised three to seven Class I communities; a Class III community included several Class II communities plus some basic services. Class IV constituted a somewhat self-sufficient community of mixed income groups, and a Class V community combined a group of community sectors. The next category, a class VI community, was an entire city that would then join larger regional communities.[2] The 'gossip square', found in each of the smallest communities (Class I), was conceptualized as a small, low-budget outdoor space of minimal design, with a few paved areas, plants, benches, and a fountain. The name arose from initial references by the architect and planner Constantinos Doxiadis, head of Doxiadis Associates, to such squares as 'the place where women gather with their infant children to talk and gossip' (Doxiadis 1957: 297; Doxiadis Associates 1960). In later reports, Doxiadis conceded that both mothers and fathers could engage in gossip as they watched their children play, and, becoming mindful of the gender stereotyping, Doxiadis described such squares more generally as a setting for the everyday activities of families (Doxiadis 1975).

The term 'gossip square' stands out as a bit odd in a master plan that emphasized social and spatial ordering though a zealous scientific and universalist ethos. The firm's plan for Iraq is dominated by such abstractions as 'hierarchies' of communities, 'scales' of cities, and 'housetypes' for 'income groups', and employed diligent analyses of optimum traffic patterns and statistical data on population and resources. With the term 'gossip square', the plan uncharacteristically alludes to the intimacy of the neighborhood context, and hints at the informal, accidental, daily experiences of a city. As a spatial element, of course, the gossip square was defined as abstractly as the categories of 'classes' and 'scales' that prescribed the urban order. Specifications for gossip squares included size and configuration, and the firm's discussions of design priorities for the squares mostly revolved around issues of construction cost. In several reports, Doxiadis himself requested that his design team in Baghdad keep the budget of these squares to a minimum, and thus in some cases paving was reduced, fountains simplified, and landscaping confined to the planting of barley (Doxiadis Associates 1958; see also Doxiadis Associates 1956) (**fig. 1**).

Unlike the wide roads and administrative and commercial centers of housing sectors, or the green areas that neatly separated the city's functional zones, gossip squares were not perceived as key to the efficiency of the new city (**fig. 2**). Instead, they were justified as having stemmed from the firm's study of local cultural patterns in Iraqi villages, and they served as proof that Doxiadis Associates aspired to insert local character into the rationalized methodology of housing and urban design.

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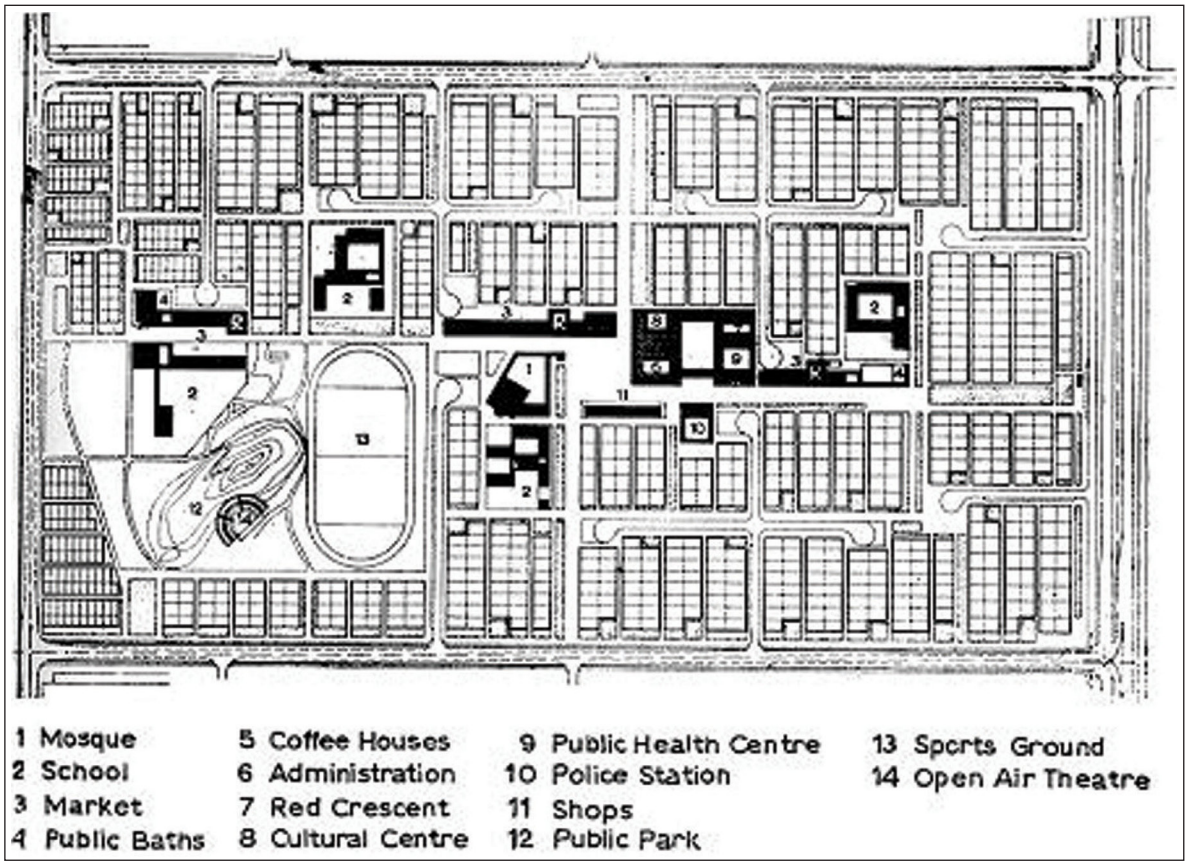

Fig. 1: Model of Community Sector in Western Baghdad. Constantinos A. Doxiadis Archives, Western Baghdad, Sector 10, Slides 9601 © Constantinos and Emma Doxiadis Foundation.

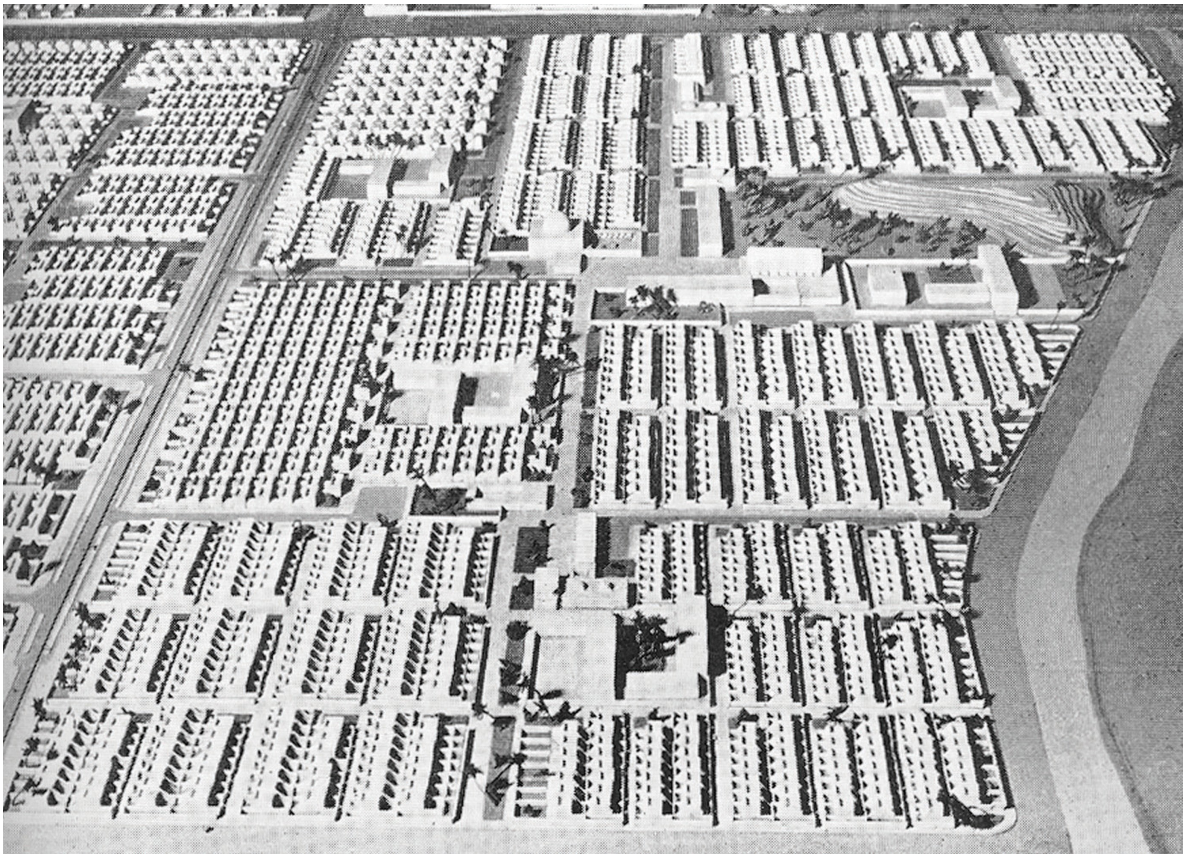

Fig. 2: Plan of Community Sector in Western Baghdad. Constantinos A. Doxiadis Archives, Slides 9332 © Constantinos and Emma Doxiadis Foundation.

Gossip squares received positive praise from the very beginning, precisely because they were perceived to be amenable to local cultural preferences. A *New York Times* reporter, quoted in the journal *Ekistics*, called the gossip square 'a modern substitute for the traditional gathering places of tribal life', and even predicted that it would facilitate the 'transformation of the village dweller into an urban dweller' ('Special to The New York Times From Baghdad,' 1958: 280). This reporter concluded that Doxiadis Associates' master plan compared favorably to other new cities emerging in the postcolonial world, both because it refrained from 'razing the existing slums and erecting tenements on their site' and because the housing units, pedestrian ways, and gossip squares 'provide[d] the close family and tribal relationship the rural Arab knew in his ancestral home'. This reporter also connected the value of this master plan to the larger anticommunist anxieties of the Cold War. By nurturing a strong sense of community, the article argued, those small communities were combating the void and loneliness felt in other, unsuccessful urban environments, which were threatening to make urban dwellers 'overly susceptible to conversion by Communist agents'. More positive feedback came years later from a local Iraqi commentator, who singled out the small gossip square as a gesture of cultural sensitivity on the part of Doxiadis Associates. He also found it exemplified how the work of Doxiadis differentiated itself from other contemporary modernist interventions (Saini 1961; see also Ehrenhrantz and Tanner 1961). Indeed, if one compares gossip squares to the boundless plazas of Brasilia in Brazil or the huge squares of Chandigarh in India, one can readily see justifications for such acclaim.

Was the gossip square only a clever touch of local character in Doxiadis Associates' rational plans for Iraq? Why then the global spread of this idea through Doxiadis Associates' prolific practice 1960s, and why did versions of this small-scale low-budget square for neighborhoods appear from Islamabad to Philadelphia? One may attempt to answer these questions in terms of localism versus globalism, but the more interesting issues lie elsewhere: How exactly was this space for 'gossip' conceptualized, and how might this inform the larger history of mid-twentieth-century nation-building and modernization discourse? Doxiadis abolished the term at some point, only to reinstate it in his writings years later. These shifts contribute to defining a space for 'gossip' that goes well beyond Iraq, and well beyond Doxiadis Associates, to the larger social, cultural and political implications of a space for gossip in the city.[3]

Some of the historical complexities surrounding Doxiadis Associates' idea of gossip squares help to frame larger theoretical questions about the potential significance of such everyday public spaces. The focus of these questions is not the particular squares in Iraq (the history and politics of Doxiadis Associates' urban plans for Iraq is offered elsewhere (Pyla 2008; Pyla 2013)) but the gossip square as a spatial and social concept. In examining how the idea of 'gossip square' was used by designers and patrons, and how it was entwined with larger visions of urban development, one can engage in new 'gossip' on how the term reflected ambivalent alignments with mid-twentieth-century modernism, and how it advanced particular agendas of nation-building and modernization. In unpacking the history of the term and the way the concept was appropriated (or not) by the firm of Doxiadis Associates, one can ultimately contemplate the insights this historical analysis can offer to the understanding of such public hubs in the larger context of social relations and the space of a city.

(Gossip no. 1): On social engineering

The insertion of small neighborhood squares in the restructured urban plan of decolonized Baghdad indeed had a social dream behind it: It was an urban design strategy for facilitating the socialization of the citizens of a modern state (**fig. 3**).

In tune with the Iraqi regime's campaign to eliminate sectarian and tribal divisions and to champion a shared national identity and pride, Doxiadis Associates aspired to promote a slow and controlled intermixing of social classes and to help the 'gradual transferring' of people from family life to the 'national life of a whole nation'. This attempt at social engineering, often described by Doxiadis himself—both in his report to the Iraq Development Board and in the guidelines he provided for the many designers operating within his offices in Baghdad and Athens—was to begin with small neighborhoods and gossip squares that would facilitate 'community formation' (Doxiadis 1975: 124). The ultimate goal was the creation of 'happy and safe surroundings for people to live in' (Doxiadis 1957: 297–98) (**fig. 4**). The modernist dream for providing a better life would be fulfilled. In the context of local Middle Eastern politics and intertwined geopolitics of the mid-twentieth century, happy citizens were a promise both to the pro-western monarchy and its foreign supporters that Iraq might avoid social revolutions.

(Gossip no. 2): On unintended consequences

Although the gossip square was positively received, Doxiadis became wary of the popularity of the term. He thought outsiders abused the term and ignored his firm's larger goals. In an internal memo to his firm in May of 1957, he sternly forbade the use of the term by arguing the following:

> Many either do not understand the issue, or do not wish to understand it, and rather than look at the essence, they stick to the meaning of 'gossip' (characteristic of their own tendency for gossip) and perhaps they overemphasize a relationship between our work with gossip squares and the character of Middle Eastern societies and gossip. For this reason I ask that the use of the term 'gossip square' be stopped immediately from [sic] all our reports and drawings. These squares will from now on be called 'Community Squares of First Degree'. (Doxiadis 1956–57)

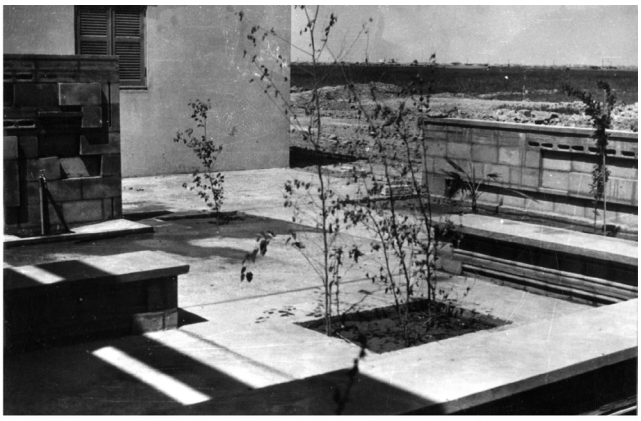

Fig. 3: a–c) Three gossip squares in western Bagdhad. Constantinos A. Doxiadis Archives, Archive Files 23970 © Constantinos and Emma Doxiadis Foundation.

Fig. 4: Gossip square in Mosul, with barley in the foreground. Constantinos A. Doxiadis Archives, Archive Files 23970 © Constantinos and Emma Doxiadis Foundation.

From today's perspective, one's first reaction to this memo might be, 'Bravo Doxiadis!' He had the foresight to recognize the orientalizing overtones in the term, and he was quick to distance himself from cultural stereotypes that saw gossip as what made Middle Eastern societies tick. What was important to Doxiadis was not an endorsement of a specific social practice, but his firm's effort to cater to the everyday needs and practices of families or other small groups. This is what the new more generic term aimed to highlight.

On second thought, however, one might also realize that the new, more neutral-sounding name seems to better align the small squares of residential neighborhoods with the overall scientific and technocratic claims of the firm. Just like the other parameters diligently charted in Doxiadis Associates' reports, the 'Community Squares of First Degree' would now be framed as objects of scientific knowledge, and could be reduced to statistical content much more readily. Those small public spaces would now fully and neatly fit into the master plan's system of ordering—an ordering of the city that was understood more in visual, aesthetic, and administrative terms than in terms of the actual, complex, colorful, and possibly contradictory daily operations of its inhabitants.

Doxiadis's renaming of 'gossip squares' to the abstract 'community squares of first degree' was not a simple change in terminology. The shift in rhetoric also meant that that his dozens of designers, engineers, and other experts who were working on the housing program for Iraq and who would read this memo would also be conceptualizing this small square in a different way. In a large firm with many branches on four continents (by 1959 Doxiadis Associates had office branches in Baghdad, Karachi, Beirut, Addis Ababa, Khartoum, and Washington), words—and the many memos and reports that circulated among different branches—communicated design strategies, spatial conceptions, and social visions. Thus the change of term from the firm's chief leader would signal a change in the symbolic, spatial, and social meanings of those squares. Was perhaps something lost through this change of name and its associations with the informal

and the quotidian? Was Doxiadis on to something when he returned to using the term in the mid-1950s?

(Gossip no. 3): On gossip, spatial practice, and historiography

While the charges of cultural and gender stereotyping mentioned above are valid, another useful potential can be found in the gossip square. Studies of the everyday show that even though in most societies, gossip is considered a contempible form of interaction, it is also a practice of the everyday, a way for people 'to make sense of things' (Besnier 2009: 2). In that sense, Doxiadis Associates' gesture to call these public spaces 'gossip squares' (instead of the abstract 'type X' space) provided—perhaps inadvertently—the possibility of challenging the official, technocratic, and orderly master plan with the lived, daily experience of the city. While Doxiadis Associates' overall restructuring of Baghdad was mostly about mid-twentieth-century dreams of urban industrialization and capitalist expansion, the aberration of gossip squares opened a window for an alternative imagining of the daily activities in neighborhoods, where the city's intricate tribal, nomadic, ethnic, and other social formations could encounter alternative possibilities of interaction and public engagement.

Of course, neither Doxiadis Associates' reports nor the reception of his work, positive or negative, intimated what 'gossip' might actually mean in those squares, nor did they suggest what alternative practices of public engagement these spaces might facilitate. The fact that Doxiadis Associates had to abandon the project in Iraq well before completion (a military coup in July 1958 resulted in the brutal deposition of the Hashimite monarchy) complicates the judging of both the users' reception and the long-term social impact of those public spaces. More historical research on the users' reception and social impact of the gossip squares in Baghdad (and of the 'Community Squares of First Degree' in urban plans that followed) is necessary. What can be contemplated, however, is the informal and quotidian qualities of the gossip square, regardless of the extent to which they were acknowledged by Doxiadis Associates. The fortuitous coupling of gossip, public space, and public life can be used to frame key historical and theoretical questions that could inform not only the histories of Doxiadis Associates's practice, but also the histories of mid-twentieth-century modernist practices and modernization processes and even current urban design debates on democracy, public participation, and the everyday.

The exploration of gossip squares in this paper suggests three areas for further discussion. First, if 'gossip' is understood not as a specific act of information exchange but, more generally, as shorthand for informal modes of social interaction that are available even to those with no or minimal access to formal political institutions, then the gossip square can be understood as a setting for alternative social encounters, even a locus of power that allows informal networks to flourish. Both the name 'gossip square' and its minimal design and construction allude to unglamorous settings for everyday activities, settings that are available to tribal or ethnic groups typically voiceless in formal democratic processes. Could these spaces then also allow social encounters that challenge the hierarchical structure of the functionally zoned efficiency-happy master plan, or even the state's presumptious top-down modernization project?

Furthermore, just as the challenging of the categories of public and private in feminist thought opened up opportunities for women to discover alternative arenas for action, the act of putting gossip outside the intimacy of a home or yard into a 'square' also allows the gossip square to become an arena of political engagement for voices and networks that are typically left out the public sphere. Might spaces for 'gossip' provide an opportunity for egalitarian processes that give voice, or power, to those who were left out of mid-century nation-building and modernization projects or later versions of urban planning and 'development'?[4]

Finally, as the seminal works of De Certeau, Barthes, and Levebvre teach, no element of daily life is 'lacking of value, meaning, or political resonance', and blindness to the details of everyday public life undermines our ability to imagine possibilities (Epstein 2008: 483; see also De Certeau 1984; Lefebvre 1991; Lefebvre 2004). It is not just modernist designers that could be found guilty of such 'blindness to detail', nor young states all too eager to advance nation-building and modernization. Historians of modernism and modernization also need to be mindful of such blindspots. Perhaps those small squares of grand mid-twentieth-century housing projects need to be re-entered and the type of nuanced questions explored that are prompted by this short history of Doxiadis Associates' 'gossip squares'. This might offer new insights, in terms of both historical analysis and urban design contemplations of public engagement in the space of the city.

Notes

[1] An earlier version of this article was published (with my thanks to special issue editor Meltem O. Gurel for the invitation and for overseeing the article's translation into Turkish) in a special issue on 'Architecture and Everyday Life' in the scholarly journal *Dosya*, as P. Pyla, 'Dedikodu Meydani' Hakkinda Dedikodular: Siradan Bir Kamusal Alanin Tarihini Ortaya Dokmek, *Dosya* 27 (December 2011): 19–24.

[2] Doxiadis Associates' master plans were based on Ekistics, 'the science of human settlements' developed by Doxiadis himself in 1942. According to the principles of Ekistics, the master plan divided the city into 'community sectors' of seven to ten thousand people, and each sector provided administrative, social, educational, health and other community buildings, shopping centers, green areas, coffee houses, and religious buildings. Each community sector (that is, each Class IV community, which typically constituted 'the basic element' of Doxiadis Associates' urban plans) was broken down in a hierarchy, described in the text, of smaller socio-spatial units.

[3] Many of Doxiadis's writing in the mid 1960s and '70s used the term 'gossip square' once again. See, for example, Doxiadis 1963.

[4] These questions draw on the insights of Besnier's discussion (2009) on the importance of gossip as a social practice that potentially gives voice to those rarely have access to publically sunctioned authority.

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