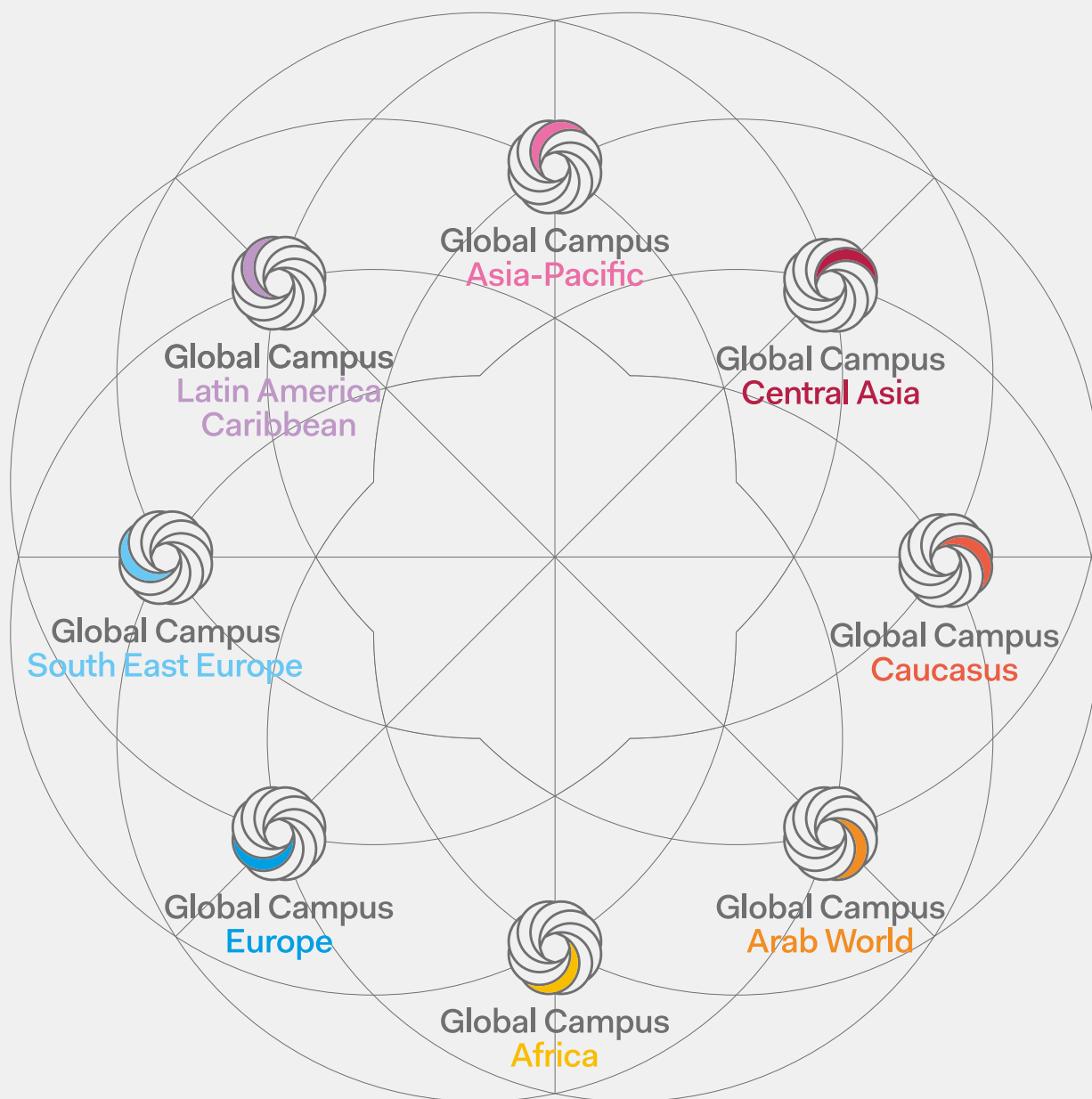

Mostafa Masjedi Arani

University architecture and academic freedom in the Middle East: a case study of Al-Azhar University





Global Campus of Human Rights

This policy brief is part of the **7th edition of the Global Campus Policy Observatory**, which revolves around the research project on 'Protecting, promoting and enjoying academic freedom: trends, challenges and impacts from a human rights-based approach', which was conceptualized and led by GC Research Manager Dr. Chiara Altafin and involves a team of eight policy analysts selected among alumni* of GC regional programmes, namely Meline Avagyan (CES - GC Caucasus), Anida Gjurgjiali (ERMA - GC South East Europe), Lakshita Kanhiya (HRDA - GC Africa), Luis Fernando Herrera Martínez (LATMA - GC Latin America and the Caribbean), Mostafa Masjedi Arani (ArMA - GC Arab World), Minh Nguyen (APMA - GC Asia Pacific), Dr. Nikolaos Sousos (EMA - GC Europe), and Akylai Tenizbaeva (MAHRS - GC Central Asia). Research outputs include workshop presentations, policy briefs, advocacy plans, and webinars held in cooperation with the GC E-Learning Department.

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University architecture and academic freedom in the Middle East: a case study of Al-Azhar University

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Executive summary

Middle Eastern countries do not score well on academic freedom. Promoting and protecting academic freedom concerns, among other things, the exercise by academic staff and students of their right to freedom of peaceful assembly. This human right is not restricted solely by police behaviour or related suppression of protests in academic environments. One of the means of restricting this right is the architecture of university campuses as designed in such a way that allows to form or hold effective assemblies. This policy brief examines the situation of Al-Azhar University and shows how the change of the university campus from the city centre of Cairo to a newly built city called Nasr in the 1960s, as well as new changes in architecture, especially after the protests of 2010 and 2011, have limited the access to university public spaces, its inclusiveness and the scope of actions such as walking on campus, ultimately creating tools of repression that have made the exercise by academic staff and students of their right to assembly and protest in connection to their academic freedom impossible. The policy brief also considers four scenarios (ie, University of California; Federal University of Santa Catarina; American University in Cairo; and Middle East Technical University) that have pursued positive practices facilitating students' right to peaceful assembly and protest, which can in turn promote and protect their academic freedom. Policy recommendations to different stakeholders are therefore provided from a rights-based perspective.

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Introduction

This policy brief specifically examines the restrictive role of university architecture in relation to academic staff and students' right to freedom of peaceful assembly and protest and academic freedom in the Middle East, with a case study focused on Al-Azhar University in the city of Cairo, Egypt.

Although some scholars trace the origins of academic freedom to the dismissal of a Stanford University professor in 1896 (De Witte 2023), at the international level the recognition of academic freedom as a human right has had a comparatively recent development. A significant milestone in this evolution was the 2020 report of the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, which examined the protection of academic freedom under international human rights law (Kaye 2020). Building upon this report and drawing on expertise from around the world, the Working Group on Academic Freedom (WGAF) progressively drafted and adopted the Principles for Implementing the Right to Academic Freedom in 2024 (WGAF 2024). Notably, the UN Human Rights Council's Resolution 59/9, adopted without a vote during its 59th session, took note with appreciation of these Principles (UNHRC 2025: para 18).

The WGAF Principles conceptualise academic freedom as 'the human right to acquire, develop, transmit, apply, and engage with a diversity of knowledge and ideas through research, teaching, learning, and discourse' (WGAF 2024: Principle 1). This, however, gives rise to two key questions. First, how does this definition of academic freedom relate to the issue examined in this policy paper? Second, why has the present case study been chosen as the focus of analysis? It is argued that the 2024 WGAF Principles, complemented by the interpretative guidance and implementation measures contained in Annexes I and II, represent one of the most comprehensive frameworks currently available at the international level. Accordingly, they provide the principal analytical framework for the assessment presented in this policy paper.

Importantly, the protection afforded by academic freedom extends beyond university campuses (WGAF 2024: Principle 1(a) and (b)). So, academic expression, whether exercised within higher education institutions or in the public sphere, falls within the scope of protection where it is intrinsically connected to research, teaching, learning or scholarly expertise.

It should be also emphasised that 'academic freedom is protected under existing international human rights law and international standards relating to education', and 'restrictions on academic freedom, if any, must be consistent with international obligations' (WGAF 2024: Principles 2 and 2(c)). The right to peaceful assembly and protest is likewise firmly established in international human rights law, precisely under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), as will be discussed in the following sections. In the context of academic freedom, peaceful assembly and protest, however, is not only a right of members of the academic community but also a professional and civic responsibility. In this vein, the WGAF Principle 4 further highlights their 'right to engage in expression and discourse with persons and groups inside and outside the academic, research and teaching sector', as well as specifying that sharing research findings and scholarly perspectives developed within the education sector also constitutes a core 'social responsibility' of members of the academic community (WGAF 2024: Principle 4(b)).

The WGAF Principles also stress that states and public authorities have the primary responsibility for respecting, protecting and fulfilling academic freedom. This tripartite obligation extends to all governmental institutions, including ministries responsible for research, higher education and education, as well as law enforcement agencies, military bodies, intelligence services and their respective leadership. In accordance with international human rights law, states are required to adopt effective legislative, administrative, judicial and policy measures to ensure that academic freedom is respected, protected and promoted throughout their jurisdiction (WGAF 2024: Principles 3(a) and 9).

Nevertheless, while the WGAF Principles identify a broad range of state and non-state practices as incompatible with international human rights standards – including arbitrary suspension or dismissal from academic employment; arrest, prosecution, detention and violence against academics and students; infiltration, surveillance, interference with or dissolution of academic associations, trade unions and student organisations; the militarisation of university campuses and other measures that undermine institutional autonomy; and restrictions on freedom of movement, including limitations on entry, exit, return or residence, that intentionally impede research, teaching or academic

discourse – they do not explicitly address the role of the built environment itself (WGAF 2024: Principles (3)(a) and 4).

This policy paper seeks to address that gap by demonstrating how the architecture and spatial design of university campuses can themselves contribute to human rights violations. In particular, it argues that campus design may directly or indirectly facilitate restrictions on the exercise of the rights to peaceful assembly and protest, thereby undermining the effective enjoyment of academic freedom.

In this introductory section, it is also worth highlighting that the inquiry about the right to freedom of peaceful assembly in relation to academic teaching, learning and research in university environments of the region deserves attention given that Middle East and North African (MENA) countries do not have good status in academic freedom. In particular, the Academic Freedom Index (AFI), a collaborative effort between researchers at Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg and the V-Dem Institute, assesses de facto levels of academic freedom across the world and indicates that in 2025 the average of score in these countries were 0.30 (Kinzelbach et al 2025), as shown in Table 1.

Country	Score
Israel	0.84
Lebanon	0.62
Iraq	0.60
Tunisia	0.56
Morocco	0.48
Kuwait	0.42
Palestine	0.35
Libya	0.28
Yemen	0.24
Algeria	0.21
Oman	0.21
Bahrain	0.20
Syria	0.20
United Arab Emirates	0.20
Jordan	0.17
Qatar	0.10
Egypt	0.07
Saudi Arabia	0.07
Iran	0.06

Table 1: Score of MENA countries in the 2025 AFI. [Sorted from high to low]

Problem description

Before turning to the case study, it is necessary to examine the normative and legal foundations governing the spatial dimension of the right to peaceful assembly within university campuses. This requires a closer analysis of the relevant international human rights instruments, legal doctrine and interpretative guidance concerning the exercise of the right to peaceful assembly in academic settings. Such an examination provides the analytical framework for assessing how the physical design of university campuses may facilitate – or unduly restrict – the effective exercise of this right.

On the one hand, a key question concerns whether the ‘built academic environment’ can actually influence the right to peaceful assembly exercised in relation to academic teaching, learning and research. In this assessment, we can consider that AFI evaluates academic freedom based on five indicators: (1) freedom to research and teach; (2) freedom of academic exchange and dissemination; (3) institutional autonomy of universities; (4) campus integrity; and (5) freedom of academic and cultural expression (Kinzelbach et al 2025). Focusing on campus integrity, the latter means the absence of surveillance and security infringements (Spannagel and Kinzelbach 2023: 3978 and 3985), or ‘freedom from physical coercion and surveillance’ that is ‘violated by state security forces’ or ‘by heavy police presence’ (Ertem 2025: 5, 6 and 9).

On the other hand, it is equally necessary to examine how international human rights law regulates the spatial dimension of peaceful assembly, including the legal requirements and protections relating to the location in which protests take place. In particular, under Article 21 of the ICCPR, as interpreted in the UN Human Rights Committee’s General Comment No 37, ‘peaceful assemblies may in principle be conducted in all spaces to which the public has access or should have access’ (HRC 2020: para 55). In this regard, if a key question arises as to whether a campus university (in our case, the state university called Al-Azhar) is a public place, existing jurisprudence such as from the United States holds that a ‘campus...is a public place, and its dedication to specific uses does not imply that the constitutional rights of persons entitled to be there are to be gauged as if the premises were purely private property’ (US Supreme Court 1969).

Moreover, although there are no minimum requirements for the place of peaceful assembly and protest under the ICCPR, given our focus on universities and our assumption that they represent a public place, it is worth highlighting that two other conditions should be present. The first condition is drawn from the UN Human Rights Committee’s interpretation of Article 21: ‘while the time, place and manner of assemblies may under some circumstances be the subject of legitimate restrictions under Article 21, given the typically expressive nature of assemblies, participants must as far as possible be enabled to conduct assemblies within sight and sound of their target audience’ (HRC 2020: para 22). The second condition is that the place of peaceful assembly and protest should not be in a way that disrupts the security and freedom of participants. This does not mean that criminals should have immunity, but rather that the authorities should not prepare the place in such a way that participants have the reasonable understanding that the environment for holding the protest is such that during or after the demonstration, the government can deal with or suppress the participants, because if such a perception exists, the freedom of participants will actually be limited by fear of such dealings.

Another relevant question is whether the participation of non-academic individuals may, in certain circumstances, constitute an integral component of the effective exercise of the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and freedom of expression by members of the academic community. This issue arises where members of the academic community – such as students or academic staff – seek to increase the impact of their assembly by inviting individuals from outside the academic community to participate. A university (or even public authority) may attempt to prevent such participation on the ground that those individuals are not members of the academic community. It is therefore necessary to inquire whether such a restriction may amount to an unjustifiable limitation on the academic freedom of university students or academic staff, particularly their freedom of peaceful assembly. More specifically, does excluding non-members from participating in an academic-related peaceful assembly and protest interfere with the effective exercise of academic freedom by those within the academic community?

Based on the UN Human Rights Committee's General Comment No 37, '[a]ny restrictions on participation in peaceful assemblies should be based on a differentiated or individualized assessment of the conduct of the participants and the assembly concerned' (HRC 2020: para 38). Accordingly, restricting participation in such assemblies solely on the ground that the participants are not members of the academic community may itself constitute a restriction on the right to peaceful assembly and, consequently, on the effective exercise of academic freedom by members of the academic community.

Looking at a pertinent example at the national level, it is worth referring to the 1915 Declaration of Principles on Academic Freedom and Academic Tenure, according to which '[a]cademic freedom... comprises three elements: freedom of inquiry and research; freedom of teaching within the university or college; and freedom of extramural utterance and action' (AAUP 1915: 299). Thus, if academic freedom includes action outside the university in the first way, it also includes non-instructional environments on a university campus (such as university self-service dining hall or cafeteria or restaurants).

As far as positive measures are concerned, it should be borne in mind what has been well elaborated by two renowned scholars in the commentary on the ICCPR: 'in addition to their obligation to protect freedom of assembly against interference by third parties, States parties also have an obligation to fulfil this human right by other positive measures. For instance, they must make available public thoroughfares or other areas, possibly re-route traffic, and may not discriminate or act arbitrarily in denying access to public buildings for the holding of assemblies' (Schabas and Nowak 2019: 488).

Moreover, in General Comment No 37, the UN Human Rights Committee highlighted that 'the recognition of the right of peaceful assembly imposes a corresponding obligation on states parties to respect and ensure its exercise without discrimination', requiring states also 'to facilitate the exercise of the right and to protect the participants' (HRC 2020: para 8).

Focusing now on the chosen case study, Al-Azhar University has numerous branches both across Egypt and internationally (Spannaus 2018: 90). Considering Al-Azhar University's main campus in Nasr City, Cairo, the related architectural history or campus design trajectory raise a two-fold problem: (1) the very nature of the university relocation from the city centre and near the seat of government to Nasr City;

and (2) the structure of the new campus was such that it restricted the exercise of the right to protest by students and, consequently, the exercise of academic freedom.

In this context, tactics and instruments are illustrated in the testimony of one of the Egyptian student activists from that period (Eid 2021): 'The police were negotiating with the students...you can protest but you can protest only inside because we cannot allow you to go outside the campus. So, this was the regime's tactic, just to surround them in the campuses'. He further described how the state extended its control over university space by 'allowing the security guards to break into the campuses' and emphasised that repression relied not only on direct violence but also on architectural and spatial interventions: 'the regime repression was not only the extreme repression... but also other tools of repression...more than 100 cameras in the campuses...to build some walls in campus just to divide'. He also noted the expansion of surveillance infrastructure: 'more than 100 cameras in the campuses just to record everyone'. Finally, he highlighted the importance of the spatial configuration of Al-Azhar University itself, noting that 'they had divided campuses, which is shedding the light on the women activism', and that 'the majority of it is concentrated in Madinat Nasr away from Rabaa Square...this was a part of why they erupted like this', underscoring how the physical layout and location of the campus influenced both patterns of student mobilisation and the state's strategies of control.

However, if we look at these tactics in more detail, Al-Azhar University functioned predominantly in a traditional form, centred on religious and classical education conducted within the Al-Azhar Mosque (Spannaus 2018: 79 and 80) in central Cairo. The mosque was located one and a half kilometres from Abdeen Palace, which was the main seat of the Egyptian government from 1872 to 1980 (الموقع الرسمي لدراسة الجمهورية nd). However, in the post-1952 'revolutionary government' era, the Azhar Reform Law no 103/1961 aimed at 'integrating al-Azhar into the wider field of higher education, improving job opportunities for students, and producing modern scholars knowledgeable in matters of the contemporary world and able to serve the Muslim community' (Skovgaard-Petersen 2007: 185). At the same time, the university was relocated to Nasr City (Skovgaard-Petersen 2007: 186).

Relocation might simply be justified by reasons such as urban development (Fawzy ElKatsha 2000: 7) or even aligned with the idea of moving the capital (ARABI 2024). However, whatever the intention may be, the result is the creation of a type of enclosed

urban form (enclave). Given that Al-Azhar University is recognised as a fundamental pillar in preserving the historical identity and social stability of Cairo (Fawzy ElKatsha 2000: 14), any alteration in its surrounding environment impacts the vitality of this institution and can be interpreted as an anti-protest political act.

Furthermore, in similar cases like the relocation of the American University in Cairo from Tahrir Square to New Cairo, some researchers have explicitly stated that this action is a deliberate scheme to displace the vital landmarks of the city centre. This process definitively empties the city of its vital functions and essence; a phenomenon that began several decades ago (Abaza 2011: 1076).

From another perspective and following a four-day research workshop organised by 'Failed Architecture' on 20–23 November 2016, on the history, present and future of the Nasr City Campus of Al-Azhar, Abdel Bassir Mohammed, lecturer in the Planning

Department at Al -Azhar University, wrote a report, while Nabil El – Hadi, architecture professor from Cairo University, gave a lecture entitled 'Architecture Without Questions' (FA 2016). The latter is highly relevant for reflecting on the limiting role that architecture can play in shaping people's ability to enjoy the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and protest on university campuses. In particular, noting that the old campus spaces were open, interactive and inclusive, but the Nasr City campus was built in the 1960s with separate areas for male and female students, these two scholars focused primarily on changes that, according to one of them, occurred after the 'political uprising', or protests, of 2010 and 2011.

Based on the analysis of the requirements of the site of peaceful assembly and protest under international human rights law, as discussed above, the current situation of Al-Azhar University is examined through Table 2.

Requirement of the site	Description	Current status of Al-Azhar University's Nasr Campus
Public space.	It should have enough space for multiple people to attend (size), be open to the public (accessibility) and be accessible to the public (inclusion).	- New gates and checkpoints have been installed at the university's main entrance on the Al - Nasr Highway, which is considered an unpleasant location or even dangerous for students, with the lack of connection to the newly built metro line 3 that connects Nasr City to Cairo, while all other universities in Cairo are connected to metro stations. - Gender segregation.
It should not contradict the nature of protest behaviour and allow protesters to make their voices heard.	It should allow for the use of common protest tactics such as marches or gatherings, be close to centres where officials are located and be close to centres where other stakeholders who may potentially participate in the gathering are present.	- Creating obstacles to movement (as a prelude to protest gatherings) by building camps in the form of large blocks and with gates. - The Nasr City University campus is fragmented, abandoned and underused, hindering social interaction. - The university administration building is surrounded by a wall, separating its students from the building and key employees. - The isolation of its students from the public life of the city with the wall.
Maintaining the safety and freedom of participants.	There should be no possibility of extrajudicial prosecution or repression.	- Cutting down tall trees (to increase surveillance). - Increasing the availability of using of cars, (which simultaneously reduces walking opportunities and increases the ability to suppress demonstrations).

Table 2. Comparing the requirements for a peaceful protest site and the current situation at Al-Azhar University

It should be also noted that spatial tactics for controlling protests do not equate to eliminating the ‘possibility’ of peaceful protest as such. In the specific case of Al-Azhar University’s Nasr City campus, it was observed that protests continued three years after the 2011 revolution, particularly given the influence of

the Islamist Muslim Brotherhood faction among its massive student population of 500,000 (Malsin 2014). The issue at hand is that the Egyptian government employs spatial tactics to disrupt demonstrations, whereas it has the legal obligation to facilitate them according to international human rights law.

Rationale for action

‘The second week of March 1964 was set for laying the foundation stone for the new university buildings in Nasr City’ (الأزهر 1964: 515). This description is drawn from a book on the history of Al-Azhar University in Egypt, which encompasses why a need arose in that year to construct a ‘new’ campus for this university and why it took place specifically in Nasr City.

The university has always maintained a significant relationship with the city. In discussing the origins of the university as institution, Aurell (2024: 138–41) makes a range of relevant considerations. He argues that ‘[t]he nascent universities were heirs to the old cathedral schools’; this ‘transformation’ – from ‘a monastic school reserved for future monks’ to ‘an urban-university school open to everyone’ ‘went hand in hand with the evolution of professional, social, and economic structures’, driven by the proliferation of ‘cities’. He also highlights that, since ecclesiastics and merchants acted as ‘the main promoters of the universities’, there arose, ‘in a more pressing way, the need to educate those who were to succeed them in pastoral tasks and commercial activities’. Aurell adds that students at these universities were ‘the children of the burgeoning bourgeoisie...who were beginning to populate the suburbs (the burghs) of the emerging European cities’. On the other hand, he notes that ‘the universities had to address the question of the labor market for their students from the outset’ (and the problem of the labour market is an urban issue); therein, ‘the university student had to shed the rustic customs of the countryside, acquiring the urban manners of the city, moving from brutality to humanity, in a process of urbanization of forms and customs’.

As a scholar like Bender says, the university is not defined ‘in’ the city but is ‘of’ the city, meaning that they ‘have turned to the major drivers of cultural, economic and political relationship’ (Yaylali-Yildiz et al 2013: 104: 4). From a human rights perspective, notably citizens have rights towards the city. According to Harvey, one of the most important theorists of the right to the city, human beings

possess a right to the city – meaning ‘an active right to make the city different, to shape it more in accord with our heart’s desire, a public sphere of active democratic participation and to re-make ourselves thereby in a different image’ (Harvey 2003: 941). Lefebvre stated that ‘the right to the city is like a cry and a demand’ (Hutchison 2010: 667); it signifies ‘the right to belong to, and to determine the fate of, that urban world that urban dwellers had created’ and ‘the right not to be alienated from the spaces of everyday life’, but rather ‘the right of citizens-city dwellers, and the groups that they constitute (on the basis of social relations), to be central to [figure] the resources and circuits of communication’ (Hutchison 2010: 671).

Based on these two definitions, we may conclude that there is a right to shape the city in such a way that citizens do not become alienated within the spaces of their everyday lives and instead remain at the centre of the city. One of the times and spaces in which the right to the city is exercised is through demonstrations and public assemblies. In this context, we must consider the internationally recognised individual rights and freedoms applicable to all citizens, especially that ‘all higher-education teaching personnel should enjoy freedom of...assembly and association’ (UNESCO Recommendation 1997: para 26). Therefore, the right to freedom of peaceful assembly must be supported and respected both for citizens in the public sphere of the city and for academic staff and students in the public sphere of a university environment.

However, in the scholarly discussions about **restrictions on the right to freedom of peaceful assembly**, attention has predominantly focused on legal prohibitions, emergency regulations and direct coercive practices such as policing and surveillance. For instance, in 2012, when the Special Rapporteur on freedom of peaceful assembly and of association, after receiving 87 responses from member states, national human rights institutions, regional human rights mechanisms, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and other stakeholders regarding best

practices for exercising the right to freedom of assembly worldwide, the Special Rapporteur wrote their first thematic report (Kiai 2012). This consists of 100 paragraphs, 25 of which specifically address ‘Best practices related to the right to freedom of peaceful assembly’. In ten sections of this part, the use of police forces and law enforcement is discussed. Additionally, seven paragraphs contain recommendations specifically concerning the freedom of assembly, including three paragraphs on assembly permits and one on the use of force. The remaining four address relevant laws and regulations, violent behaviour by others and the protection of observers and reporters of assemblies.

This focus obscures a less visible yet structurally significant dimension of repression: the role of **architectural and spatial design**. A common trend in Middle Eastern societies is that at least some university campuses have not been designed or built to be protest-friendly, thereby failing to support this particular facet of academic freedom. Correspondingly, in a recent comparative analysis of Qatar University and Education City in Doha, the authors say ‘[v]ast distances and extreme summer heat hinder pedestrian accessibility’ and that ‘the scattered model tends to disperse visual and linear integration, resulting in reduced clarity for users’ (Major et al 2025: 33). A study on the Kirkuk campus is even more direct, reporting ‘significant spatial fragmentation, with a lack of coordination in building distribution and facility placement’ (Naser et al 2025: 1). At Aegean University in Turkey, many public spaces have been constructed in a way that they ‘are not effective in bringing people together spontaneously’ (Yaylali-Yildiz et al 2013: 104: 16).

These spatial configurations do not merely regulate movement; they systematically constrain the **practical possibility of peaceful assembly**, particularly student-led peaceful protests. While such design choices are often framed as neutral, technical or security-oriented, their cumulative effect is the normalisation of spatial conditions under which the exercise of freedom of peaceful assembly and protest becomes difficult, risky or easily suppressible.

Despite this, human rights-based analyses and policy interventions have largely treated **architecture as politically neutral**, focusing instead on legal frameworks and overt enforcement practices. This key omission allows **structurally repressive spatial arrangements** to persist without scrutiny, accountability or rights-based assessment. As a result, violations of freedom of peaceful assembly and protest are addressed only at the point of confrontation, rather than at the level of institutional design where such violations are pre-configured. This problem concerns specifically university architecture, given the traditional role of universities as spaces for academic freedom with safeguards of academic staff and students’ freedoms of expression, assembly and association.

Recently, the current UN Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of assembly and association produced a relevant statement requiring universities to respect peaceful activism and revise repressive policies targeting pro-Palestine solidarity movement, but without any explicit reference to university architecture. She did require universities to ‘recognize that their responsibility extends beyond campus borders – their actions have the potential to shape political discourse, culture, civic education, and ultimately, the future sustainability of democracy, freedoms and human rights’, also stressing that ‘respecting and guaranteeing dissent is essential to ensure the universities remain spaces for free thought, speech and academic freedom, as well to guarantee freedom of expression, assembly and association’ (Romero 2024: paras 8 and 10).

Overall, addressing the architectural dimension of repression is essential for a **comprehensive human rights-based approach to academic freedom**. Without examining how space itself is mobilised as a governance tool, efforts to protect academic freedom and particularly its dimensions related to freedom of peaceful assembly remain incomplete and reactive.

Policy scenarios

In contrast to the practice we have witnessed at Al-Azhar University, which clearly restricts the right to peaceful assembly and protest, which is one of the dimensions of academic freedom, other practices have been seen in universities around the world and in the Middle East and have facilitated the exercise of the right to freedom of peaceful assembly.

Scenario 1: University of California

At the University of California, Berkeley, United States, the student centre and plaza designed by Vernon DeMars, Donald Hardison and Lawrence Halprin have been described as giving ‘the postwar university citizenry a monumental space to practice democracy as it paved the way for civic-oriented student centers elsewhere’ (Robinson 2016: 236). This is exactly the kind of open, legible, centrally placed campus space that can support the exercise by academic staff and students of their right to peaceful assembly and protest.

Scenario 2: Federal University of Santa Catarina

At the Federal University of Santa Catarina, in Florianópolis, Brazil, the main campus hosted several events in 2019 to organise resistance against the reduction of the federal education budget and local researchers have reflected on these assemblies of the university community on campus, also analysing their spatial attributes. In particular, they have argued that ‘[m]ore flexible and permeable spaces on the ground floor of buildings influenced these choices for bringing together and confronting ideas’ (*‘Espaços mais flexíveis e permeáveis no térreo dos edifícios influenciaram essas escolhas para reunir e confrontar ideias’*) (Pavan et al 2022: 1). The authors also called for solutions that are opposite to the practice of more protected entrances, suggesting ‘guidelines for the university to reduce its barriers’ and invite ‘the city into its open areas through buildings that offer free services to its citizens’. This makes it a good example of how permeable ground floors and open civic edges can help university students assemble without the campus feeling sealed off from public life.

Scenario 3: American University in Cairo

At the American University in Cairo, Egypt, the key spatial feature is the campus’s location in Tahrir Square. One scholar has stressed that the university was ‘with a campus in Tahrir Square’ and that it was ‘figuratively and literally a witness to the events of 25th January’, while the studio project around the campus was meant to create ‘a space for free exchange of ideas, debate and discourse’ (Mostafa 2014: 35). This is a strong example of a university whose setting and public-facing programme helped make academic staff and students’ right to peaceful assembly and political expression part of campus life.

Scenario 4: Middle East Technical University

At the Middle East Technical University in Ankara, Turkey, the Devrim Stadium has functioned as a durable open civic space. A scholar has highlighted how this stadium has fed ‘dissident collective memory, inspiring generations of young revolutionaries’, adding that ‘for decades, it has been the place for large-scale sports events, collective forums, spring festivals, political marches, and graduation ceremonies’, and students have resisted efforts to ban those gatherings (Dolek 2022: 26). The combination of a large open venue and a politically charged collective memory make it a clear campus-space example from the region.

Looking at these four scenarios from other universities all together, we can draw relevant conclusions. Creating a student centre within a university, reducing barriers and linking a city to open spaces, being located in a city centre and using a space with a different function but prone to gatherings for protests and turning it into a collective memory with political charge and not allowing restrictions on assemblies in it are all positive approaches. They are not only far from the path of Al-Azhar University but also clearly facilitate the exercise by academic staff and students of their right to peaceful assembly and protest, which can in turn contribute to promote and protect their academic freedom.

Policy recommendations

Several policy recommendations emerge from the analysis of the case study and the other scenarios in relation to the promotion and protection of academic freedom through the exercise by academic staff and students of their right to peaceful assembly and protest.

- Academic freedom extends beyond university campuses and should be interpreted in a manner that enables academic staff and students to bring the outcomes of their teaching, learning and scholarly inquiry into the public sphere as part of their **responsibility to society**, including, in particular, through the exercise of the right to freedom of peaceful assembly in the public sphere of the city as well as in the public sphere of a university environment.
- Architecture and urban planning should not be seen as neutral and should be understood as possible tools for upholding human rights or, instead, for restricting human rights indirectly or even unintentionally, including academic staff and students' right to freedom of peaceful assembly and protest, with serious implications for academic freedom. Therefore, it is highly advisable to **create sensitivity in this area**.
- **Governments** have a main role in planning and designing cities through comprehensive urban plans, and they are also directly effective in this area through the design of public university campuses. They should align national urban plans, legal protections and higher education reforms with Article 21 of the ICCPR and the **positive obligations of states** to facilitate academic staff and students' peaceful assembly and protests as well as the **negative obligations of states** not to obstruct their demonstrations through architecture and urban planning.
- **Universities** should promote and protect academic freedom also by **facilitating a positive role of their architecture** as a provider of spaces influencing academic staff and students' choices to bring together and confront ideas.
- **Academic staff and students** should appreciate that space can be used and can also be produced. Therefore, even if the spaces available at the university may restrict their freedom of peaceful assembly and protest, they have the potential to **create a space for these and use protest tactics** (including sit-ins, building occupations, protest encampments, human chains and banner drops) in this regard.
- In their monitoring of states' implementation of the ICCPR, the **UN bodies** such as the Human Rights Committee as well as the Special Rapporteurs should explicitly consider the **restriction of the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and protest through architecture** in academic environments from a two-fold perspective: possible violations of both this right and the right to academic freedom which the first contributes to promote and protect.
- **Architects and urban planners** should appreciate that their science and art may unintentionally serve to restrict the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and protest, including in academic environments. Therefore, from the perspective of business and human rights, they should fulfil **their duty to respect** and not allow their service to lead to human rights violations.
- The **media and human rights NGOs** should increase their sensitivity on this topic during the presentation of urban and architectural plans and, as human rights watchdogs, take action to **raise awareness of the related implications of their implementation**, especially for the right to freedom of peaceful assembly in connection to academic freedom.

Conclusion

In the 1960s, the Egyptian government identified Al-Azhar University as a threat, relocated it to the suburbs of Cairo (at that time) and then designed its campus to at least eliminate its inclusiveness. The same approach was pursued by another government after the Arab Spring, this time using urban and architectural tactics more explicitly to restrict the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and protest. This policy brief, in both theoretical and empirical sections, attempts to show how academic freedom can be threatened, from a rights-based perspective, through the use of urban and architectural design in university contexts. Addressing this lesser-known

and under-regarded aspect through the case study and highlighting other university scenarios which can facilitate the exercise of the right to freedom of peaceful assembly of academic staff and students was a path taken to contribute to the ongoing debate on academic freedom. Hopefully in the future all relevant stakeholders could be better equipped to criticise seemingly city or university development plans, even in the name of improving students' lives and services or renovating university campuses, in a way that prevents possible restrictions of the right to academic freedom specifically in connection to freedom of peaceful assembly and protest.

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