

# Daily Mobilities

## Young People in the Urban Periphery

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MUNDHIR: 'After graduating from university, I managed to find the right job for me in a private company in Megrine [an eastern quarter of Greater Tunis – 36 kilometres away]. Nevertheless, the daily commute from Burj al Amri to Megrine is very arduous. This forced me to quit my job and then look for another, closer option. For me, as well as for the majority of young people in Burj al Amri, the first criterion for choosing a job is proximity. So, living in Burj al Amri means struggling in terms of daily mobility because we don't have a transport system that meets our needs'.

Mundhir Jlassi, 31 years old, Burj al Amri

This chapter examines how the requirements of daily mobility are transforming everyday lives, and – accelerated by the forces of modernity – are changing family contexts and creating new social landscapes. This is argued from the perspective of young people in Burj al Amri, a growing peri-urban town, located 25 km southwest of Greater Tunis. My argument is based on three dynamics: First, on the transformation of work-relations in the Maghreb. This relates to profound changes in the Tunisian economy, which was dominated for many centuries by agriculture and subsistence production, and now is characterised by low-paid industrial work, precarious labour in services, and dependent export production – all based predominantly in urban spaces. During recent decades, rural and agricultural livelihood systems have changed and caused large-scale rural-urban migration processes – especially to the Greater Tunis area, while university education and graduation increased, without a corresponding labour demand. Graduate unemployment is thus high and rising in Tunisia (Garraoui 2023). This development is compounded by regionalisation, the second dynamic. Regionalisation reflects the constitutive process of economic and socio-spatial restructuring, which constantly produces new links between the local and the global, and is exemplified here by commuter activities – the everyday movement between suburbs and inner-city places for purposes of education or work. The constant renegotiation of social relations be it in the family or between friends, as well as in the community, together with shifting borders of mobility, consti-

tute the third dynamic, the production of new social landscapes. The latter is characterised by a variety of departures, in both senses of the word: physically, as individuals set out on new daily routines, as for example commuting to work; and in terms of deviation from an accepted, prescribed, or usual course of action, such as engaging in new encounters, that may be uncertain, but may change local social contexts and offer new opportunities.

In the chapter, two central terms – everyday life and mobility – are discussed in more detail. I first refer to the term everyday life, which in Giddens's sense is largely structured by routines ([1984] 1990a). Routinisation refers to 'the habitual, taken-for-granted character of the vast bulk of activities of day-to-day social life; the prevalence of familiar styles and forms of conduct, both supporting and supported by a sense of ontological security' (ibid. 376). According to Giddens, routines are constitutive for the continuous reproduction of the personality structures of the actors in their everyday actions as well as for the reproduction of social institutions. Complementary to routines is a dynamic perspective of everyday life. Following Scott (1991) this can be captured by the notion of experience, as a constructivist conception:

Subjects are constituted discursively, but there are conflicts among discursive systems, contradictions within anyone of them, multiple meanings possible for the concepts they deploy. And subjects do have agency. They are not unified, autonomous individuals exercising free will, but rather subjects whose agency is created through situations and statuses conferred on them. Being a subject means being "subject to definite conditions of existence, conditions of endowment of agents and conditions of exercise". These conditions enable choices, although they are not unlimited (Scott 1991: 793).

Actors are hence not simply at the mercy of discourses. Although actors are bound by concrete conditions, they have the potential for action (agency) that opens up choices for them, even if these are not unlimited. It is this aspect that marks a central interface in the argument of Scott (1991) and Giddens (1984): Both tie the ability to act back to access to resources. The access to resources thus shapes the potential for action of individual actors. The space where the possibilities of access to material and immaterial resources interlock again and again is the acting individual (Gertel/Breuer 2011). In the wake of these dynamics, the conditions of experience-making and thus of the construction of one's own biography are increasingly fragmented, even for the inhabitants of the seemingly peripheral places, like in Burj al Amri. Based on these considerations, my focus is on everyday practices. This raises questions about the reference of experiences: whether they refer to a place, to a feeling, a routine or to an active being-in-the-world (Gertel/Grüneisl, this volume). All combinations seem possible. I therefore comprehend experience as an interface between space, power and identity.

My understanding of mobility fits into this notion. Based on the fact that mobility is generally understood as the movement of people, goods and information (Urry 2007), the emphasis here is on movements of people. Three forms can be distinguished (cf. Gertel/Breuer 2011: 13): First, the spatial mobility of individuals and groups moving between places. In Tunisia, migrant workers embody this in particular, but also commuters, pilgrims, tourists, and other travellers. Secondly, social mobility, which refers to

movements of people within and between groups – i.e. changes in positions in the social structure. This applies to upward social mobility such as successful entrepreneurs, but also to downward mobility such as marginalised casual workers. Thirdly, identities are not fixed entities, but rather mobile composites: these include changes in self-constructions in many ways, i.e. the possibilities and the way in which people shape their biography; they negotiate their identity positions in a changing social structure. These mobility dynamics interact to create new social landscapes and new processes of identification.

Burj al Amri serves as a case study. It is a small suburban town that has been transformed by rapid urban sprawl. Influenced by its proximity to Greater Tunis, the town has become increasingly attractive and has undergone various socio-spatial changes. On the one hand, it is confronted with changing land uses, namely the extension of private housing (legal and illegal) and new housing estates often built on fertile agricultural land, including the development of road networks connecting Burj al Amri via Mornaquia and La Manouba to Greater Tunis. On the other hand, it represents a typical urban fringe (Taleb/Sallemi 2015), where land and labour shape the economic development and the rural-urban transformation. The objective of this chapter is hence to explore the consequences of the mobility practices in Burj al Amri, based on semi-structured interviews in June 2022 with commuters, predominantly young people, and other local actors in the municipality. The aim is to highlight the interaction between the local practices of mobility in a peri-urban area, and the livelihood perspectives of young people who suffer from mobility restrictions and non-spontaneity of their movements.

## **Burj al Amri**

Burj al Amri represents a specific type of urbanisation, namely the development from a small rural village, dating back to the colonial era, to a sprawling peri-urban city that attracts real estate operators to profit from the housing needs of the rapidly expanding capital Tunis. Even today the most important commercial, administrative and industrial activities are located on both sides of the main street, the RN5, connecting Mournaguia / Tunis in the east and Mejez El Bab / Beja in the west. Along this route, the first nuclei of settlement and trade activities appeared during the colonial period. The small centre along this road was originally called Massicault, in tribute to Justin Massicault, Resident General of France in Tunisia from 1886 to 1892. Established by Beylical decree on 17 December 1904, it began life as a village inhabited by French settlers who grew cereals and wine. For a long time, it remained a small spot. In 1961, when the last French settlers departed, it was renamed after Burj al Amri an ancient fort. In 1975 only about 1,664 inhabitants lived in village, after which population growth accelerated until the mid 1990s as a result of both natural growth and migratory inflows. At the beginning of the 1980s, the municipal limit was extended and Burj al Amri absorbed precarious housing in the surrounding areas. From there some people were transferred to new housing estates within its urban setting, particularly to El Intilaka in the northern part of Burj al Amri. In 1994, there were about 5,523 inhabitants (INS 1994: 14). While population increase slowed down for almost two decades (6,519 inhabitants in 2014), with the communalisation of

the national territory in 2016, the municipality of Burj El Amri was extended again and integrated three peripheral locations and, compounded by population growth, it reached 19,072 inhabitants in 2023, representing about 4.6 percent of the population of the governorate of La Manouba.

However, urban development remains restricted. The lack of housing in Burj al Amri can be attributed to issues with land ownership. Developments are generally carried out in an irregular manner on agricultural land, and the majority of this land in Burj al Amri are plots without individual title. This hinders planned urban development. The land tenure situation of agricultural land – allegedly inherited from the colonial period, is therefore a real obstacle to the development of the municipality. People are forced to buy un-serviced plots on agricultural land and build their homes without a building permit. This led to the expansion of unregulated housing and a lack of formal housing options. Mongia Jlassi, 45 years old, who works as technical service person for the municipality, explains:

Unregulated housing has invaded our territory, and the municipality with its limited means cannot solve this problem alone. We have begun to settle the situation of those who have previously purchased their parcel of land from the commune. For the rest of the lots, we need help from other actors and it takes a lot of time.

Public intervention or even on the ground controls have been ineffective due to the lack of local authority resource and the inadequacy of urban planning. Public actors, central decision makers and local implementers, have therefore accepted irregular buildings as 'admissible' by default, in particular by including these unplanned localities in urban planning studies, new development plans, and by gradually planning for infrastructural projects (roads, sanitation, drinking water, etc.). New housing developments occur piecemeal, scattered around the edges of Burj al Amri, and increasingly encroach onto agricultural land. The physical spread of housing locations is a major constraint to taking action on making sure the developments are regulated and up to standard. As state intervention has remained limited, and often only has focused on the rehabilitation of roads and other infrastructure, the gap of unequal living conditions between the core and the periphery in the Burj al Amri municipality is widening, even in this small town.

Agricultural fields often separate low-density peri-urban areas surrounding Greater Tunis. In these sparsely populated peripheral areas, such as in Burj al Amri, public transport is often not efficient and does not meet the travel needs of the residents. Subsequently socio-spatial inequalities prevail, as the core of the municipality including the main axes is privileged over peripheral localities: most services and facilities are concentrated here. People living in the periphery, in contrast, do not have many transport options. They need to walk or otherwise travel into local urban centres in order to connect to anywhere else, by bus or collective taxi. As in Burj al-Amri this, of course, adds the burden of extra time and higher transport costs.

## Transport Options

Transport networks are a crucial tool for any city, facilitating the movement of people and goods, connecting locations of production and consumption, and those of education and work with local homes, spaces of reproduction and recreation. In his analyses of the superimposition of the lower ('traditional') by the upper ('modern') urban circuit Santos (1979: 19) identifies the transport system as crucial for facilitating exchanges between the two circuits of the urban economy (cf. Gertel/Audano, this volume).

Urban transportation organisations and the use of private vehicles are important in explaining the forms taken by both complementarity and competition in the commercial activities of both circuits. Transport facilities are sometimes so limited that certain individuals, even if they have money available, do not have access to products sold by the commercial upper circuit (Santos 1979: 141).

Moreover, urban labour markets, supplied from actors of the lower circuit are, for example, equally dependent on a suitable transport infrastructure. Each city produces its own transport networks – consisting of private and public operators – and is largely shaped by them (Dupuy 1991; Wachter 2004).

In Greater Tunis, the Tunis Transport Company, also known as TRANSTU, a public transport company created 2003 from the merger between the Tunis Light Rail Company (SMLT founded in 1981) and the National Transport Company (SNT founded in 1963), is responsible for the management of passenger transport. However, transport to and from Burj al Amri is shared between public and private operators: TRANSTU public buses serve the municipality via three different lines and also via school buses. But Burj al Amri is poorly served, as all lines only go down its main road, National Road 5. This is, of course, very inconvenient for residents who live far from the main road. They are forced to walk a considerable distance to reach public transport.

Private contractors operate shared taxis, responding to the shortcomings of public transport. They ensure the transport of people from the town to rural localities and also provide transport options for people to La Manouba or Denden. Shared taxis including microbuses, that can accommodate up to eight passengers, can access into dense urban quarters where the roads are narrow or poorly communicated. In suburban areas, they thus represent a vital segment of the economy and transport system (Bouzid 2020): they provide speed of travel, as well as flexibility in service and schedules, and adapt to the needs of users who travel collectively. Using them is simple: vehicles are grouped together at stations, departure and arrival points, and follow precise routes to predefined destinations. As collection points, the private transport stations are located either at central urban locations, at locations with secondary centrality or at the most frequented places on the outskirts of the city. According to the regulations, shared taxis must only serve inter-municipal connections (i.e. interurban transport crossing municipal boundaries). However, in larger Greater Tunis area, shared taxi lines are tolerated by public authorities for use within communities like Burj al Amri because the public bus services are not sufficient.

Public school buses provide the transport for students to Burj al Amri High School (the first is at 8 am and return is at 5 pm). For lunch, students do not have buses to go home. They are forced to either stay in Burj al Amri or return home by taking the shared taxi or a public bus, if they have enough time. While students who live near the RN5 can take the TRANSTU bus, pupils living in localities far from the RN5 can only take a shared taxi, paying, of course, a higher price. However, even public-school buses have a lot of problems, such as delays in the morning and on rainy days.

## Daily Mobility of Young People

Being mobile is not simply traversing landscapes, mobility is not wandering or drifting. It is the extension of the limits of the self and multiple anchoring, for better or for worse (Le Breton 2015, own translation).

Everyday mobility differs from other forms of spatial mobility in that it is repetitive, reminiscent of everyday routines. It is inscribed in short temporalities and in habitual practices. On a day-to-day basis, mobility is the product of more or less constrained residential, professional and family strategies. Unlike one-off trips linked to the satisfaction of a rare need, work-related mobility is an unavoidable structuring axis of everyday life around which all the trips of an individual or a household must be organised. These trips are sometimes supplemented by other trips that can modify usual patterns of mobility. We are then faced with two situations: the first where the place of residence merges with that of work or study, here active individuals have a low mobility. In the second, workers or students have to travel outside their place of residence. In this situation, their mobility practices generate significant flows in terms of commuter mobility. The public transport network is not suitable for travel within or beyond Burj al Amri given its unequal urban housing dispersion throughout the community. Even for those who can access the TRANSTU bus lines, buses are slow, take many detours, come infrequently and are not punctual. Public transport is not attractive. As explained above, this has led to the use of shared taxis for daily mobility, especially for residents of peripheral localities, despite their higher cost.

In peri-urban areas, public transport quickly becomes restrictive in terms of frequencies and schedules. Meeting the mobility demands of young people often is problematic, particularly that of adolescents who are in the process of acquiring spatial autonomy (Thomann 2009). This spatial autonomy is important in terms of identity formation and social inscription. It is therefore interesting to focus on this sensitive and fragile segment of the population that is often not directly targeted by public policies. In territorial terms, middle and high schools are not well distributed throughout peri-urban areas. In the Burj al Amri community, the school map has not been changed since the 1980s and it no longer meets today's needs. But schools are not only locations for education: they are also local hubs for social life; being important for all young people, schools represent a strong element of identity formation.

Young people from Burj al Amri developed their own mobility practices to access their schools, whether primary, secondary or high school. Their mobility is often higher than

of the average population in the peri-urban community of Burj al Amri. This can be explained by 'study' reasons, requiring two daily round trips, since the majority of young people go home for lunch. Among young people, those who live in the community's centre use public buses more frequently, as already mentioned, they only have to walk short distances to access cheap public transport.

Mobility practices have also different temporalities: All rural areas of the Burj al Amri municipality have primary schools. All trips to school can be made on foot due. Going to school thus allows children to acquire their first spatial autonomy. Only children living in non-regulated housing centres far from anything else, and outside the municipal boundary have to travel long distances to school. Teenagers, sometimes at the beginning of middle school, but more likely at the beginning of high school, see their daily lives reoriented towards the city and their spatial practices expand considerably. When teenagers change schools, they have to take new modes of transport. New friendships are forged between teenagers from Burj al Amri and teenagers from elsewhere. Shops, cafés, restaurants, the youth centre, the cultural centre, the public library and other urban establishments can become the medium for leisure and sociability of high school students. The space for leisure and sociability is expanding, while the links with the neighbourhood of residence are weakening. The question of mobility for leisure and social activities therefore quickly arises acutely and is often a primary factor of conflict in the household. It is frequently teenagers in peripheral peri-urban areas who suffer the most from the inadequacy of public transport.

The interviews underline the considerable attractiveness of shared taxis for young people living in the periphery. This is due to the inefficiency of school buses in relation to delay, overload, discomfort, and distance to public bus routes. During visits to Burj al Amri High School, there were huge groups of young people waiting to go home. The principal of the high school explains that the delay is caused by the school bus. This delay can be up to an hour and in some cases, buses do not come at all and young people have to find alternatives. Chaima Hammi, 18 years old from Mehrin comments:

As a captive of public transport, I am not at all satisfied with the public transit offer, particularly school transportation. The school bus is always late, which causes me problems with the school administration. The school bus should normally come at 7 am to be able to bring us to school until 7:35 am, but in reality, it comes either very early or very late. So, I have to take a shared taxi. In addition, I live away from the bus station, so it takes me a walk of 15 minutes to get to the station. I missed two exams last year because of the bus delays, I got two zeros (failed marks) and the high school administration didn't believe that my tardiness was due to the bus delays.

Jihan Benur, 17 years old, from Burj Ennur adds:

Burj Ennur is very quiet, but we lack facilities and more reliable public transport. I would prefer to live in a busier, more dynamic city. I'd prefer to change my place of residence and live in an environment that offers more amenities to its inhabitants, such as the municipality of El Mornaguia. And I want to live close to schools and extracurricular facilities in order to avoid costly and painful daily commutes, which have a detrimental effect on students. In Burj Ennur people know each other so we

don't live in peace: we live in a very controlled area; as a girl I don't feel comfortable and free to choose my clothes, for example.

The use of public transport by teenagers is contradictory, on the one hand it is restrictive, setting their travel times according to the schedules of the school buses, and on the other hand it positively affects their ability to socialise. Spatial mobility is important for young people because, as Kaufmann and Flamm state, 'the emancipation of the child and then the adolescent is built around the autonomy of movement' (Kaufmann/Flamm 2002: 3, own translation). For these young people who live in peri-urban areas, the gap between their perceptions of mobility and their real experiences is not without consequences. Transport difficulties lead to a strong desire to go somewhere else, which very often manifests itself in the desire to live in the city. Kaufmann and Flamm summarise the process of empowerment among young people as follows:

It begins with learning to walk, continues with the authorisation to go and play alone at friends' houses, then to move alone during the day, then in the evening, each time with negotiation [...], negotiation whose terms are differentiated between boys and girls (Kaufmann/Flamm 2002: 17, own translation).

Spatial independence should thus increase with the age of the adolescent, while girls are often more controlled and monitored than boys. Seventeen year old Jihan from Burj Ennur comments: 'I can't do extracurricular activities because I have to go home no later than 6 pm, the time of the last bus'. A crucial factor influencing the mobility of young people is thus their residential location. Activity of household members, and consequently the daily mobility of young people, is also shaped in a gender specific way.

Transport problems moreover relate to the labour market: The municipality offers educational and other facilities, but it cannot provide sufficient jobs to its young graduates. The majority of the latter are thus forced to move outside the municipality in order to find suitable jobs. The key problem in terms of daily transport is the movement from Burj al Amri to the Slimane Kahia feeder station in La Manouba, where passengers can change buses or even means of transport. There are no direct lines to Tunis or other destinations: passing through La Manouba is mandatory. Mundhir Jlassi, 30 years old, from El Griaat in Burj al Amri, whom we know from the opening quote, explains his situation:

Our problems in Burj al Amri lie in the lack of public transport, services and facilities. If I had a private car, my life would be better. I'd prefer to change my place of residence and live in an environment that offers more comfort to its inhabitants. I consider that Burj al Amri is the *delegation* [i.e. district] least served by public transport in Greater Tunis. In addition, living in the outlying localities of Burj al Amri is doubly problematic. In short, people here struggle a lot because of the lack of public transport and this especially during the school holidays since the frequency of bus runs decreases. In addition, living in Burj al Amri means being far away from the places where jobs are concentrated.

Another young person, Naim Chlagou, 32 years old, who lives also in Burj al Amri, in Entilaka housing estate, has an similar assessment:

Burj al Amri is very quiet, but we lack facilities and more reliable public transport. I would prefer to live in an environment that offers more services to its residents. And I want to live close to leisure and community facilities and industrial areas in order to avoid expensive and arduous daily travel. For example, I can't look for a job in the Lake area [35 km away, located on the opposite, western side of Greater Tunis] because it's impossible to commute to the [affluent] Lake area. I think that the distance of Burj al Amri from Tunis has a direct effect on the growing unemployment rate of young graduates of Burj al Amri.

The girls who live in the outlying localities of Burj al Amri have a feeling of being stuck far from urban areas. They have a lot of free time, especially during weekends and holidays; and experience boredom and residential isolation in the suburbs. They face serious problems of insecurity: they cannot move around in the evening as they live in a socially highly controlled peri-urban space. Manal Guesmi, 27 years old, from Mehrine, illustrates her experiences:

I take the bus daily from Griaat, where I live, to Burj al Amri and then to La Manouba where I work. I struggle daily with public transport, which remains insufficient in relation to demand. I can distinguish two major problems here for a girl: the first is that we can't dress in a free and independent way, people know each other and survey each other a lot; and the second is that you can't move easily because the buses are always overcrowded and, in the evening, they become unsafe.

These interviews show that transport and residential location strongly influence the daily mobility practices in peri-urban areas. They limit the professional opportunities of young people from disadvantaged households who are concentrated in peripheral areas. Inequality particularly affects women. For them, living in a place like Burj al Amri reduces the likelihood of finding a job. The place of residence can then have a decisive effect on access to employment and satisfaction with life.

## Conclusion

Burj al Amri has experienced considerable spatial and demographic sprawl. On the one hand, rural exodus attracts many people from the countryside to urban areas in search of work and better living conditions. On the other hand, cities are forced to find spaces to establish new residential areas. But very often the new urban population does not find housing opportunities in the city that match their income. The situation on the urban fringes was illustrated with the case of Burj al Amri. Here two types of peri-urban spaces, namely its centre and its peripheries were distinguished. Each space has its own characteristics and transport facilities that determine the lifestyles of families living there. The investigation of mobility practices reveals that social and spatial conditions combine to constrain daily mobility, and limit the accessibility of services and opportunities to disadvantaged households, especially those in peripheral areas outside the community core. Young people in particular suffer from mobility restrictions and the non-spontaneity of their movements, which ultimately impacts their livelihood prospects, their social ad-

vancement and consequently their socio-spatial integration. Teenagers are often victims of inequalities in transport options, complicating their access to schools and other facilities. Young graduates are disproportionately affected; especially women dependent on public transport. They are forced to look for jobs everywhere in Greater Tunis and are often limited in their choices by a question of transport accessibility or by restrictive working hours, such as is the case for those who work in clinics and hospitals with changing working shifts. However, the role of rural and shared taxis is considerable and of growing importance – and needs to be taken into account by the authorities. Transport networks and services are also important for another reason: private and public stakeholders are increasingly making location decisions for the settlement of households, companies and facilities that depend on the availability and reliability of transport infrastructure. If we want to better plan the spatial development of urban spaces today and to create sustainable social landscapes, we might be well advised to focus on good transport accessibility for peri-urban areas.