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An Interview with Mohamed Elshahed

The Editors 11.7.2014

Mohamed Elshahed is a young, dynamic architect and researcher who is documenting changes to urban space in Egypt at his highly popular blog [Cairoobserver](#). Elshahed completed a doctorate in Middle East studies at New York University and is now a postdoctoral fellow at the Berlin-based Forum Transregionale Studien. He also holds a MA in architecture studies from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. His dissertation is titled, "Revolutionary Modernism? Architecture and the Politics of Transition in Egypt, 1936-1967." It argues that 1950s urban and architectural development associated with Nasserism refashioned preexisting architectural production in the service of "necessary transitional authoritarianism" in Egypt.

What is Cairoobserver and why did you start it? How is it different from other publications and websites on architecture and city life?

[Cairoobserver](#) started in April 2011 as a personal blog about architecture, heritage, urbanism and other aspects of life in the Egyptian capital. Since then the site has evolved into a platform for reflections on the urban condition of Cairo, as well as other cities in the Middle East, posted by me and guest bloggers.

Perhaps what sets Cairoobserver apart from other sites that deal with issues related to architecture and urbanism is that it is anchored in Cairo, a city that hasn't been at the top of the list when it comes to architecture and urban studies. International (read, English-language) sites continue to look at European and American cities with a bit of interest in Asia, particularly the rapid urbanization in China. When it comes to the Middle East, coverage has been almost entirely focused on Dubai and other Gulf cities.

In 2010, when I had moved to Cairo to conduct my dissertation research, I realized that very little online speaks to the urban reality of Cairo. The plethora of websites about cities reproduces very similar themes — **star architects**, sustainability and green architecture, what are dubbed as global urban trends, such as gentrification. While all these topics are interesting, Cairo wasn't a place where contemporary architecture with a capital A was a prime concern. Nor was it a place where gentrification, pedestrianization or wholesale neoliberal takeover of urban heritage were happening, at least not in ways similar to the case studies on sites such as **CityLab** (formerly The Atlantic Cities). In the occasional coverage of cities from the global south (mostly South Asia or Latin America), the focus would typically be on topics such as slums and urban resilience. These broad-brush strokes did not really provide a useful toolbox for someone sitting in Cairo and interested in urban issues. **Cairoobserver** was my humble attempt to fill the gap.

Cairoobserver also comes out in a beautiful print edition. What made you go in that direction when most publishing seems to be going online?

My desire to create a print publication was partly influenced by my doctoral research. I had been collecting print material from the 1930s-1970s, ranging from booklets and pamphlets to magazines and journals. These sources form the backbone of my project, which looks at how architecture and the city were not only built but also mediated during the middle of the twentieth century. I realized that in 50 years a similar project about our present time would be nearly impossible. By comparison to the rich print culture of the early and middle twentieth century in Egypt, including specialized journals and magazines dealing with architecture, today the options are slim. There isn't a single newspaper or magazine in Cairo that facilitates the circulation of ideas about the city, its history and development, and that can act as a

bridging medium between professionals, policymakers and residents. Similarly, while Egypt was home to the first Arabic-language architectural journal, established in 1939, there simply isn't one of that caliber today. There had been several attempts over the past couple of decades but with serious drawbacks related to content and design.

For these reasons I thought it would be a worthwhile experiment to create a paper version of Cairoobserver. The **first issue was bilingual** but I'm moving toward making the print version exclusively in Arabic since it is printed and distributed in Egypt (as opposed to the bilingual but mostly English online version which reaches both a local and an international audience). I also wanted to invest in the print edition's design so that it appeals to a variety of readers and makes a contribution not only to the conversation about the city but also to the production of print culture in Egypt today. The **second issue came out** in January 2014.

I think the turn from digital to print is not as unusual as it may seem. There is a resurgence of print culture around the world with more do-it-yourself magazines than ever before. In the Middle East there is also a resurgence, with many new magazines, such as The Outpost, Brownbook, The Carton, Portal 9 and WTD.

Unlike the blog, the print edition costs money to produce. For the last issue I launched a **crowdfunding campaign** and raised the \$5,000 to cover the design, copy-editing and printing costs of 1,500 copies at 44 pages each. There were two successful launch events in Cairo at **Megawra** and **Nile Sunset Annex**. The distribution is informal. The issues are distributed for free.

I have made a call for contributions for two new issues, one themed #University and the other #Downtowns. The idea is to widen the scope of voices represented by opening the magazine and blog to students, architects, social scientists and interested residents. A crowdfunding campaign for these new issues will launch in November 2014. I'm also open to finding other ways of funding the print edition such as sponsorship and grants.

In what way was Cairoobserver shaped by the political upheaval in Egypt over the past three years?

In 2010 there was a sense of frustration in Cairo. For me the city was itself a source of frustration because its governing logic was clearly not meant to make it a better place for people. Trees were cut down randomly by the same authorities who failed to collect garbage; infrastructure was extended to secluded new cities in the desert with no population while crowded areas were underserved; public transport was not maintained and private cars were encouraged; public spaces were intentionally made uninhabitable. There was a need to talk about the day-to-day use of the city but there was no venue to do the talking. Given the stagnant political situation, it seemed that little could change, anyway.

Then January 2011 happened. By April [Cairoobserver](#) was online because for once I thought there might be a chance to talk about things like the cities we live in, and actually make some change. There were other initiatives that deal with architecture, urbanism and heritage that were established after 2011 such as [Megawra](#) and [Cluster](#). The [Tarek Waly Center for Architecture and Heritage](#) also started to produce its triannual newspaper starting in 2011. So I would say that for many, the possibility of imagining a better future, including a better urban future, was ignited by the events of 2011.

What specific changes in architecture and urban space, or understandings of these, have you witnessed following the uprisings?

I think there have been immense changes not only to the spaces of Egyptian cities but also in the perception of urban spaces and the ways in which certain actors engage with specific sites within various cities.

The physical changes to cities have unfortunately been for the worse: There is the sometimes temporary but often permanent encroachment on public space, particularly around police stations and other kinds of government buildings that might be associated with the army or the Interior Ministry. Entire streets have been blocked off, as well as sidewalks, to create security buffer zones. Trees have been cut down to create lines of sight for snipers and surveillance cameras and snipers. All in all, there is a militarization of Egyptian cities in ways we haven't seen or felt before, at least not to this degree. This militarization is now taking on legal cover. The president just announced that all civilian infrastructure will now be governed by military law. Other major physical changes are the rapid destruction of heritage and

the expansion of speculative real estate development, particularly in the informal market.

Perceptions of the city and engagement with its condition have also changed, especially with civil society initiatives (many of which will be **affected severely by the new NGO law**) and private capital initiatives such as the Downtown Contemporary Arts Festival. There has also been a surge in entrepreneurship catering to the upper class with many new establishments such as streetside restaurants and cafés. Of course, these ventures are limited to pockets in the city, but I think it is as an odd, even counterintuitive development that amidst the political circus of the last three years there are five new burger shops opening in Zamalek.

In the meantime, the great majority of city dwellers are still paying the highest price for the uneven distribution of services and the terrible governance, particularly on the municipal level.

What do you think of the Cairo School of Urban Studies?

The Cairo School of Urban Studies is a great idea, as Cairo is still a generative laboratory for studying urban processes and subjectivities. I think, however, that besides the edited volumes *Cairo Cosmopolitan* and *Cairo Contested* there hasn't been a consistent effort to bring the concept of the "school" to its full potential.

Diane Singerman, along with Kareem Ibrahim of Takween Integrated Development, established **Tadamun**, an initiative that picks up where the Cairo School of Urban Studies left off. Tadamun is an initiative with consistent output of new knowledge about the city and it is grounded in the city. Its output is easily available online in Arabic and English and they hold events and workshops in communities.

So I think the Cairo School of Urban Studies, which remains a concept, can benefit from Tadamun's experience over the past couple of years. The "school" needs to take shape as a real space in Cairo in which events and talks take place, knowledge is produced and disseminated, and experts, scholars, activists and Cairenes meet. The downtown campus of the American University in Cairo is a possible place for such an institution to take root.

What are your plans in the near future?

In the near future I'll be working to produce the two issues mentioned above. There is also a possibility for a special print issue supported by the Arab Council for Social Sciences. In December I am organizing a film program in collaboration with Zawia, an independent art house cinema in downtown Cairo. The theme will be "Life in the City" and the program will include **documentary films that highlight particular aspects of life** in Egyptian cities.

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