



Downtown as laboratory: Q&A on Cairo's Creative Cities conference

CLUSTER and AUC hold conference on alternative visions for downtown Cairo

Wednesday, October 28, 2015 - 13:06

By: [Passant Rabie](#)

Both government and private sector plans for historical downtown Cairo came to a pause with the January 25 uprising in 2011, but four years later they're back in gear. Against this backdrop of a return to order, downtown hosts a multidisciplinary conference exploring alternative visions for the area.

The international Creative Cities conference, organized by urban design and research platform [CLUSTER](#) and the [American University in Cairo](#) (AUC), seeks to bring together stakeholders who often don't speak to one another and give information to the public.

Like the conference CLUSTER organized with AUC in 2013, [Learning from Cairo](#), the two days will consist of talks, discussions and critical urban walking tours.

Among its several projects, CLUSTER boasts an open [library](#) on architecture and urban planning and a unique interactive [map](#) of events and initiatives around Cairo. Mada Masr sat with CLUSTER cofounders Omar Nagati and Beth Stryker to talk about their work, downtown Cairo and the conference.

Mada Masr: What was the idea behind establishing CLUSTER?

Omar Nagati: We started, like many other initiatives, after the revolution. We were interested in the mass changes on the ground, interested to see these changes involving public space. The idea was to establish or loop together architects, artists and urbanists who are interested in urban research and design. We started to develop different programs.

MM: What are some of the programs that you have developed?

ON: We have four sets of activities: One is the design projects, such as [Cimatheque](#), and [Kodak](#) and [Philips](#) passageways. The second module is research, including Archiving the City in Flux, looking at the transformation of the city, Downtown Passageways, and Street Vendors Initiative. The third module is programs, conferences, workshops and public sessions as well as developing mapping websites, we also have a library project. Finally we have a training and internship program, including collaborations and partnerships with local and international universities.

MM: It's probably safe to say that the city has changed over the past few years. How has that affected your work?

Beth Stryker: When Omar and I started working together, a lot of what we were looking at were questions related to the city in flux: we were looking at this being a moment when things were possible, and asking, as architects and planners, how can we take advantage of what's happening on the ground. I think in particular with downtown Cairo, you see a lot of transformations. At the time when we were undertaking research on the city in flux, we knew that at some point there would be a restoration of order. That's why we were taking the time to document changes on the ground, and now what we're seeing is a return to order.

All along, one of our themes has been the role of art and culture as a catalyst for urban development in downtown Cairo. One of the things we're hoping to accomplish with the Creative Cities: Re-framing Downtown conference is to revisit some of the questions we've been posing over the past few years on the role that arts and culture play in downtown in particular. Now we're hoping to bring in actors from different positions: from the government, the private sector, the arts scene, and to use this as a forum to understand what the plans are for downtown, and try to be a part of the conversation, and bring alternatives to the table.

ON: The city is changing on two levels. There are changes on the ground governing practice in public space, including stronger enforcement of law in addition to more permits and approvals for public activities. There also new laws creating more limitation and restriction on organization in the art and culture spheres. Change on both the ground and legal structures are definitely affecting what we can and can't do.

MM: Tell us more about the conference.

ON: The idea of the conference is an extension and culmination of a theme that we started three years ago, basically looking at the role of arts and culture in the regeneration of downtown. Is there a role that they play?

BS: We were interested in bringing in people who have assets and infrastructure in downtown, and who are already in some way engaged in arts and culture.

ON: We have already started this dialogue through earlier convening by inviting some of these actors, and creating a platform to make information available and enable the public to react. To bring the stakeholders of downtown and try to make sure that the arts and culture scene, which has gone through rapid changes, will have a say in what's happening. It is interesting that many of the current plans for downtown are taking place without the public knowing why and how these decisions are being made.

So, on the one hand, the conference will continue this process of bringing in arts and social actors, but it also aims to broaden the scope of the debate by inviting planners, advisors to the governor, consultants with the Ministry of Culture, large developers and small businesses, but also to invite international experience, case studies, so that we can address a larger question of gentrification, issues of heritage preservation, questions of public space, questions of policy. The idea of reframing downtown is to explore alternative visions for downtown.

MM: What are you hoping will come out of this sort of interaction?

BS: It's a combination of things. We want to create a forum where this information can be shared. One of the things that did strike us in the past was that the general public are not aware of this information, that there are no public hearings. It's an opportunity to have an open discussion. It's an opportunity for people to air their alternative visions for downtown, and I think particularly for the cultural sector, which has already had an impact on downtown, but it's also a question of how do you have a voice in that discussion.

ON: At the very least, the conference aims to create a forum for dialogue and to generate ongoing discussion. A more ambitious goal is establishing a framework whereby different stakeholders can have a say in what happens in downtown. In other words, to broaden the constituency of downtown development plans.

MM: Do you see all these different players potentially co-existing in downtown?

BS: Why not? Another question we're hoping to raise is regarding gentrification. There's a lot of fear and speculation over what's going to happen in downtown with respect to gentrification, and yet Cairo really is different in a lot of ways from cities like New York and Berlin in terms of rent control laws, etc. So we want to ask the question: Is gentrification inevitable? And how can we imagine a different future?

ON: We need to engage the triangle of private sector to promote business, the government as regulatory authority, and civil society with critical vision and social diversity. The question of urban governance and regulations is very important. Four years ago, the government was relatively absent and some streets were ruled by thugs. We definitely need the government but we need one that is accountable, representing the will of the constituencies. We don't have local councils, therefore residents of

downtown don't have a way to complain or express their interests. We think the government has a role, and the private sector also has a role in creating jobs and income generation, and then there's the role of the arts and civil society. The three positions are necessary, and none of them should be excluded.

BS: What is gentrification? I think that is the question.

ON: There's this fear of change. If change is happening too fast then you're also excluding generations and societal debate. It's good to have a process of change in increments, and allow a process of review. The point is not to stop the process but make it more inclusive.

One of the major challenges in Cairo is lack of information. We don't know. We need critical analysis. If we say, don't touch anything so you don't have gentrification, then things will start to crumble. There should be room to be critically active in public spaces. I fear that Cairo is going through a moment of stagnation. Downtown is becoming more and more dull.

MM: Is there concern that some of the changes are only cosmetic?

ON: Once you start to go beyond the surface, the building façade, there's a host of issues of infrastructure and ownership pattern, posing legal complexity. In Europe, it takes five years to restore a historic building. We're completing major national projects in a year, so when it comes to downtown, there is the expectation that changes should take place within six months.

It's important to find a common ground, to figure out how can we push it forward in a more critical way. They have resources that we don't have, and the money comes from the private sector. This is how we did the passageway [project], the money came from the private sector. We have to pay close attention to their needs. We have to negotiate a common ground.

It is good that the government is paying attention to downtown. I'm against demonizing; it's not a war. It's healthy to have different positions — that's democracy. I'm against having one monolithic vision; we have to debate. At the end of the day, we're in a public space.

MM: Could you tell me about the walking tours part of the conference?

BS: We partnered with different artists and academics, as part of our CLUSTER mapping initiative. We're designing some of the tour itineraries ourselves. Some of the tours focus on what's happening now, some of them examine historically what happened in downtown. One of the tours is a literary tour led by Samia Mehrez, she's looking at where the literati used to hang out, and some of these places are still operating. She's also looking at where certain novels have been set, and how those sites may have been perceived differently across different authors and eras.

ON: There is a cinematic city tour, looking at where the Egyptian movies were filmed. We have one on the Cairo Downtown Passageways, our own project that we've been working on. The idea of tours is to ground the discussion, so that people would know what they're talking about and it's not abstract.

MM: Where do you see the future of downtown?

BS: Downtown is a great laboratory. When we have undertaken pilot projects, the initiative of the local community has been really very impressive. Once we started to act, people came on board, the energy is there and there's a lot of possibility in downtown.

ON: These issues are not exclusive to downtown, which should be seen as a microcosm for broader questions facing the city and the country at large.

Mada Masr is media sponsor for the Creative Cities conference organized by [CLUSTER](#) and the [American University in Cairo](#). The conference is on October 31 and November 1. See [here](#) for details.

