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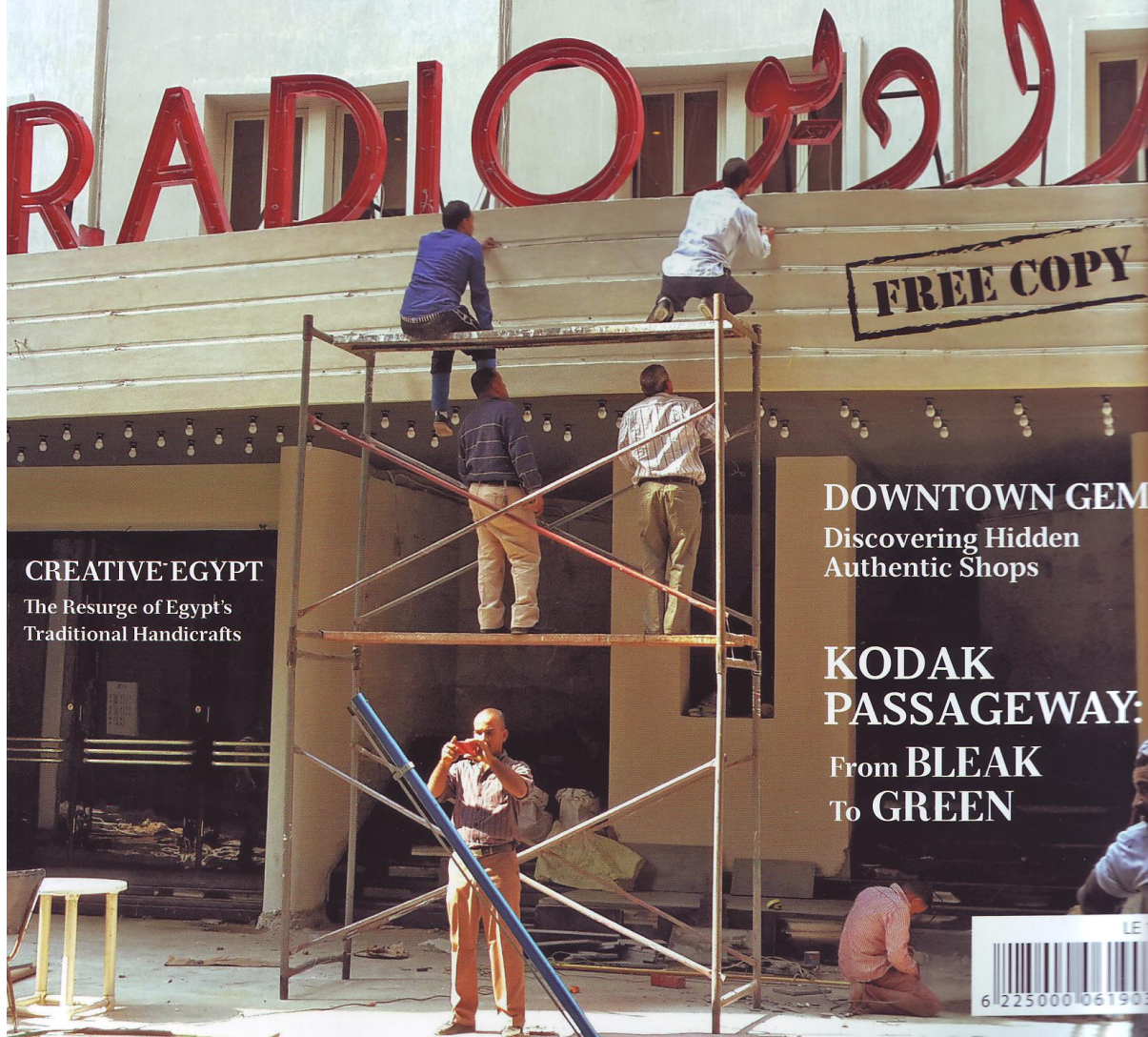
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# TIMES

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### KODAK PASSAGEWAY:

From BLEAK  
To GREEN



Feature

# BLEAK TO GREEN: THE KODAK PASSAGEWAY

By Rana Kamaly

*In an effort to create a culturally rich experience for the public and breathe new life into one of downtown's less-noticeable features, The Cairo Lab for Urban Studies, Training, and Environmental Research (CLUSTER) has transformed the Kodak Passageway from a neglected backwater into a vibrant, green space*



Kodak building and passageway before renovations  
Courtesy of Al Ismaelia for Real Estate Investment



Kodak passageway during renovations  
Photo courtesy of CLUSTER

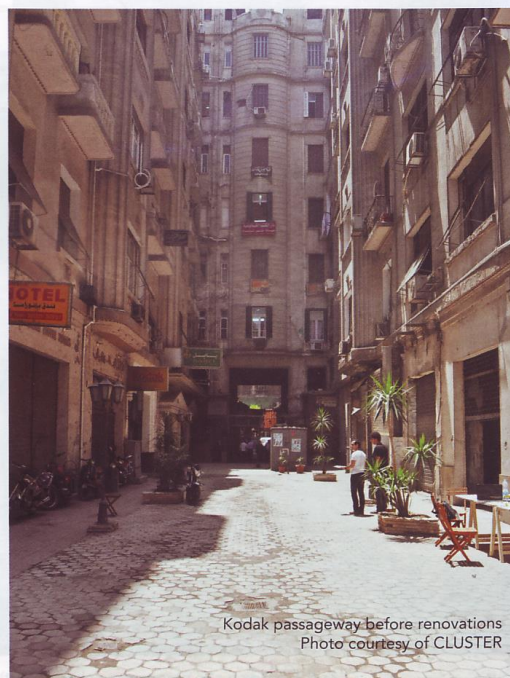
Although famous for its wide boulevards and distinctive Parisian architecture, downtown Cairo has a well-kept secret that threads between its looming buildings: its passageways. These passageways, many of which connect main streets, acted as a breathing space for the district for many years, housing little shops and cafés where shoppers could rest. Over time, they were largely neglected, and many became dodgy, un-safe spaces that were notorious for harassment and petty crime.

Architect and urban planner Omar Nagati has long been interested in downtown's passageways. In 2013, he and curator Beth Stryker partnered up to establish The Cairo Lab for Urban Studies, Training, and Environmental Research (CLUSTER), and one of their first projects was mapping downtown's passageways. He explains that, in addition to locating passageways and understanding their relationship to surrounding streets, identifying different stakeholders in and around them was key to the project. "We were interested in this idea of 'in-between-ness' or the gaps between buildings. The passageways symbolize the gap between public and private, and formal and informal structures – and not just the physical gap," he explains. He describes passageways as "a space of transition and mediation."

"If you look at this network of spaces collectively, you will find that there are enough back alleys, side streets, pedestrian streets or passageways that allow you to get from one main street to the other. They are not just shortcuts – they are also protected from street noise and pollution and are more interesting, as you'll often find hidden coffee shops or old vintage stores. So you can look at the network of passageways not only as an alternative way to experience downtown, but also as a framework to envision and develop downtown in a different way."

After their research phase was over, CLUSTER selected the Kodak passageway on Adly Street as its prototype, partially because it had several unoccupied stores, but also because they saw the potential to refurbish it. Over the next few years, they organized and curated

**“** We were interested in this idea of 'in-between-ness' or the gaps between buildings. The passageways symbolize the gap between public and private, and formal and informal structures, not just the physical gap



Kodak passageway before renovations  
Photo courtesy of CLUSTER

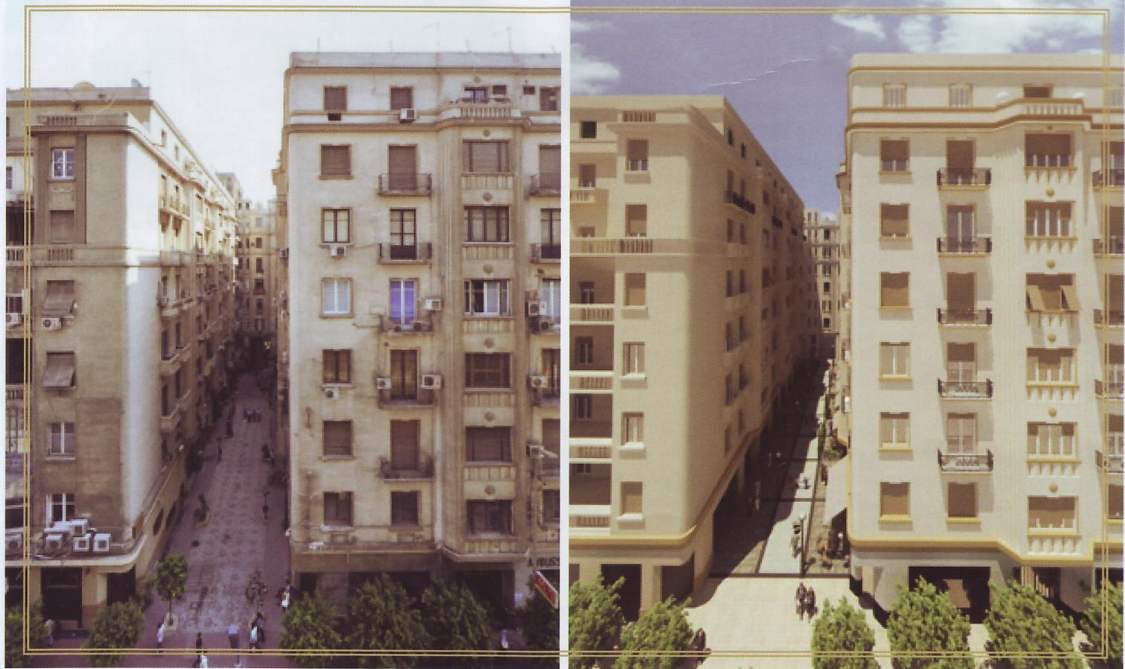
## Feature

a number of events there, the largest being an exhibition of artist Hassan Khan's work in 2014, which was staged in collaboration with the Downtown Contemporary Arts Festival (D-CAF). "The idea was to see what would happen if this space became an arts and culture hub, and how that would affect the whole area. We worked with two passageways: Kodak and Philips," says Nagati. He explains that the proximity of the two passageways to one another made it easy for them to work on both spaces in an attempt to create another art hub in an area that had no previous artistic activity downtown.

"In my opinion, a passageway is particularly interesting because it is less visible and conspicuous to the public eye, so there is a sense of tolerance that you won't find in the city's main streets. For example, in some passageways you would find a mosque, a bar and a coffee shop coexisting. I am not trying to romanticize it, I am just saying that there is a sense of acceptance, accommodation and diversity that is typical of a city center, where there is a variety of culture, activities and ethnicity for all levels of people," he says. "Downtown should be the place where you allow and encourage this diversity, layering and coexistence of seemingly contradictory and irreconcilable practices to take place so it's not a mono culture."

With a fund from the Danish Egyptian Dialogue Institute (DEDI) to begin the project, CLUSTER accepted proposals of different visions for the Kodak Passageway, and created a panel of judges made up of Danish and Egyptian architects, designers and academics to select the winning concept. The final concept, called The Green Oasis, aimed to bring nature into the space.

Next, the team spoke with shop owners, residents, artists, and other stakeholders living in the area in an attempt to understand their needs. From there, they made a detailed drawing of what the passageway would look like, integrating both the basic concept as well as the needs of the people who use the passageway everyday.



Kodak building and passageway -before (left) and after (right) renovations Courtesy of Al Ismaelia for Real Estate Investment



Kodak passageway before renovations  
Photo courtesy of CLUSTER



Kodak passageway after renovations  
Photo by Rana Kamaly

*The winning concept, which was eventually used to renovate the passageway, was called the green oasis.*

## Feature

"We created a matrix of do's and don'ts based on extensive interviews, and this became our design guideline: how to use a simple design to address all the concerns, interests and demands of people in the area. We wanted the people to have a say in the space that they occupy. Even if we couldn't accommodate everyone's wishes, they would still have a feeling of ownership and a voice in the matter," Nagati explains.

Every detail was planned, including the kinds of trees and types of street lamps to be used in the passageway. Nagati explains that one of the biggest dilemmas that the team had was whether to integrate benches into the plan, partially due to a lot of negative preconceptions about people sitting in public areas. Many thought that including benches would be an invitation for people to go smoke shisha and play cards; even the city council did not want to include benches for security reasons. The team also collaborated with sexual harassment groups to make the passageway safer.

Nagati explains that, although government authorities were very receptive to the idea, CLUSTER spent a long summer getting permission from the buildings' owners and at least seven different permits from bodies that regulate traffic, electricity, water, gas, heritage organizations, and security.

"Another obstacle that we faced, besides dealing with many jurisdictions and different authorities, were the claims by residents and shop owners. Passersby would drop in with tons of questions and concerns about what we were doing. They wanted to know who designed it, who was funding it, and of course there are those who always have ideas about how to do things 'better.' Although this was very interesting, it was exhausting as well, because you had to justify yourself to every single person. But that is the price you have to pay when you work in the public realm," says Nagati.

Since the passageways are considered an intersection between public and private space, CLUSTER also collaborated with the owners of the buildings during the renovation; according to law, everything on the ground in the passageways is considered public space and everything on the sides of the buildings is considered part of the buildings.

One of owners of the adjacent buildings, Al Ismaelia Real Estate Investment Company, collaborated with CLUSTER on the renovations. "Similar to other stakeholders in surrounding buildings, Al Ismaelia Company, which owns some of the buildings, had an interest in helping out with the lighting fixtures. Together, we restored the Art Deco lights that were there and reproduced the rest," explains Nagati.

Karim El Shafei, co-founder and CEO of Al Ismaelia for Real Estate Investment says: "We own one of the buildings around the Kodak passageway, so we worked with CLUSTER from day one on the designs and concepts. It was a successful experience, as their inclusive approach is similar to ours. They are not just forcing their opinion; they took into consideration the needs of every single stakeholder or beneficiary before and during the process. We sponsored the maintenance of the space and some of the refurbishing that took place."



“So we divided the passageway with greenery and benches into three zones; the first part is in the middle from point A to point B for passersby and public use. The second and the third zones are envisioned as potential extensions for shops and cafes on both sides. So you are allowing people to extend their usage without encroachment, and therefore compromising the right to public space



Kodak Passageway after renovations  
photo taken by Najla Riad

## Walking A Tightrope

Nagati explains that, unlike designing a home for a family, the main obstacle to working with public space is that it is not owned by any one entity, which means that everyone has the right to an opinion. “It looks like a very simple and straightforward project, but it is not, as it implies a number of very controversial issues. We wanted to introduce a public space that is more diverse, accessible, safe, and inclusive,” he says. “The borderline between a public and a private space in Egypt is not very well defined; it’s more of a grey zone. One way to define it is to put up a fence, which most people do. But we thought of using green or soft scape to articulate this borderline.”

Nagati explains that CLUSTER divided the passageway using greenery and benches to create three different zones. The first zone is for passersby and public use, while the second and the third zones are envisioned as potential extensions for shops and cafes on both sides. These divisions allow the passageways’ users to extend their space without compromising the right to public space. “It’s a subtle way of saying: this is where you should stop,” he says.

In spite of the challenges that the project posed in the process, now that the renovation is complete, fresh life breathes into the formerly decrepit passageway; new renters and owners have begun to think about investing in the area, and shops that have been closed for years are considering reopening. The project, which has been largely well received, has spurred CLUSTER to look to other forgotten pockets downtown – including other passageways – but also to consider the potential for abandoned rooftops to be converted into galleries, restaurants, or art spaces. □



photo taken by Rana Kamaly