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# Finding bureaucracy a new home

Plans to relocate the Mugamma add to the state's reimagination of downtown Cairo

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By: [Passant Rabie](#)



Thousands of people flow in and out of downtown Cairo's Mugamma al-Tahrir building daily, but a government [announcement](#) indicates that the iconic structure will be emptied of government offices by 2017.

The 14-story Mugamma — a name describing its purpose, as a building that groups together different government bodies — greets all visitors to Tahrir Square with its austere concrete façade, accommodating hundreds of small offices, tens of thousands of employees and towers of official paperwork. The nexus of Egypt's notorious bureaucracy has people coming in for passports and citizenship documents, work visas and military conscription papers, and holds offices for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Social Solidarity, among other service ministries.

Mugamma employees are dismissive of the government plan to relocate the different functions of the building to their respective ministries or other state bodies, emptying the building and repurposing it for other, likely profitable, uses.

One employee says that they have been talking about this move since he began working at the Mugamma close to 10 years ago, but it never actualized — despite the Cairo governorate's recent announcement that it has begun clearing out the building, nothing has actually been done, he claims.

On May 3, national newspapers [announced](#) that the Cairo governorate has begun evacuating the Mugamma building in a process to clear all 1,310 offices, and relocate around 30,000 employees by June 30, 2017.

Cairo Governorate Mugamma supervisor Osama Abdel Aal confirms that while plans to evacuate the building have been discussed since 2004, this time it will actually be carried out.

"This time round, there is special interest in the relocation because they are looking to clear traffic from the downtown area," Abdel Aal tells Mada Masr.

He adds that they have already cleared the offices of the Ministry of Social Solidarity from the Mugamma building, relocating around 120 employees, though employees at the Mugamma were unable to confirm this move.

Each government body will be responsible for relocating either to their own headquarters or to other yet undecided locations, according to Abdel Aal.

In the last year or so, there has been a move toward relocating governmental institutions from downtown Cairo to the outskirts of the city with the announcement of the new [administrative capital](#) in March 2015. The plans for the capital are currently underway east of Cairo, near Suez, and will house government departments and ministries. Additionally, the Ministry of Interior was recently relocated from its downtown headquarters to New Cairo.

The proposed move is part of a larger plan to relocate all governmental institutions, says Omar Nagati, an architect, urban planner and a founding partner of [CLUSTER](#), a platform for urban design and research.

The plan to revamp downtown Cairo was originally initiated in 2008 during the rule of Hosni Mubarak with a government plan titled Cairo Vision 2050, which had a general aim of privatizing government-owned buildings in downtown for commercial purposes in order to make use of their real estate value. The plan was halted with the outbreak of the 2011 revolution as the area became a contested site between the public and the state.

However, the plan was revisited recently as security forces regained control of the area, and other buildings were cleared out, including the former National Democratic Party headquarters, which was [demolished](#) in 2015.

As for the Mugamma building, deputy Cairo Governor Mohamed Ayman Abdel Tawab [announced](#) during a talk show on Sky News channel that the government's tentative plan was to turn the administrative building into a hotel. Abdel Tawab added private companies will submit proposals for repurposing the buildings in a bid.

Karim Shafei, chairman of [Al-Ismaelia](#), a private real estate company that has engaged in urban regeneration projects in downtown Cairo, says that if the building was up for sale then the company would consider it, despite the project being a little outside of their framework. Shafei says that the company usually buys and develops smaller properties, but explains that Mugamma is highly desirable in terms of real estate worth due to its central location and architectural value.

However, Mugamma supervisor Abdel Aal has a little less faith in the building.

"This can't be a hotel," he exclaims. "The building itself needs to be torn down."

Abdel Aal also argues that Mugamma is surrounded by a number of other hotels in downtown Cairo that are practically empty, given dwindling tourism.

The Cairo governorate is the government body overseeing the repurposing of the Mugamma building.

According to Nagati, there are a number of hotels in Downtown that are owned by the government under The Egyptian General Company for Tourism and Hotels. The state-owned company was founded in 1976 and owns the Mena House Hotel, Cairo Marriott Hotel and Shepherd Hotel, among many others. He explains that the building is considered a public asset, and would be invested in by a private company in order to turn it into a hotel while remaining under government ownership.

Shafei argues that this is precisely why more emphasis needs to be placed on finding a proper use for the building. “The future function of the building has to be studied by the government in order to ensure that it enhances the downtown area,” says Shafei.

More generally, Shafei thinks “the idea of repurposing buildings is one that Egypt needs to explore largely ... Egypt has huge architectural heritage and if these buildings remain as an expense to the government then they will not be maintained,” he says.

Beyond the real estate value of the building, Nagati argues that the Mugamma is an important icon with a history and identity, not just as an institution.

The giant structure, despite the common misconception that it was erected during the era of former President Gamal Abdel Nasser, was actually built in the late 1940s, representing a pivotal time in Egyptian architecture, at a time when Egyptian architects started being contracted for buildings instead of their European counterparts. Thus, the building is considered to represent modernist Egyptian architecture.

“If you look at it, it has a lot of architectural elements that represent the time it was built,” Shafei says, who believes it is important to maintain the building as it is, while repurposing it so that it becomes commercially viable.

Arguing for the privatization of real estate property in downtown Cairo, Shafei adds that that the area should have a diverse number of activities that cater to the whole spectrum of Egyptians with different socioeconomic backgrounds.

“The success of downtown is not to have it be exclusive to anyone — if this happens, it will be a sign of our failure,” he adds.

However, some argue that undergoing plans to renovate downtown Cairo are doing just that, and that the introduction of more and more private entities, such as a hotel, that are likely to close off downtown to the lower-income population.

“Relocating government institutions will change the make-up of the demographics in downtown,” says Nagati. The result, he adds, will be a city center with a different social structure.