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Five critical days in the life of 10 Nabrawy Street

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<http://web.archive.org/web/20160702024612/http://pinterest.com/pin/create/button/?url=http%3A//www.madamasr.com/sections/culture/five-cr-street&description=Mustafa%20Nassar%20was%20asleep%20in%20his%20textile%20workshop%20on%20one%20side%20of%20the%20bu-story%20facade%20on%20the%20side%20of%20the%20building%20believed%20to%20have%20water%20damage%20and%20showing%20cracks%20and%20showing%20cracks&count=horizontal&via=madamasr&text=Five%20critical%20days%20in%20the%20life%20of%2010%20Nabrawy%20Street&counturl=critical-days-life-10-nabrawy-street>

Mustafa Nassar was asleep in his textile workshop on one side of the building when the other side collapsed. It went down quickly and quietly, but not as a surprise. This was shortly after 9 am on Wednesday, April 6, and at 11 pm the night before Mustafa started warning the other tenants and the headmaster of the neighboring school that something was wrong. He'd seen rocks tumbling down the five-story facade on the side of the building believed to have water damage and showing cracks. Now he was being woken to screams from women standing in the lane below, residents of an apartment that suddenly wasn't there anymore.

No one was injured, owing both to Mustafa's foresight and to the fact that two people came to work late that day. Some were affected by more permanent and immediate loss than others, but generally speaking the collapse wasn't nearly as bad as it could've been, nor as extensive as the first pictures and information shared on social media had one believe. What actually came down is the corner to your right if you are standing facing the entrance to the building, a slice on the southeast side that makes up about one sixth of the total structure. The gap is almost absurdly neat, as if a limb was removed, leaving a right angle of load-bearing walls and closed doors to form scar tissue over the building's exposed innards.


Staying with friends or relatives, tenants reeled from the loss, but all felt the building was still stable and quickly started talking about how it could be fixed. But as the situation became increasingly complex and violent over the next five days due to the intervention of various authorities, they began hankering for the simplicity of a mere partially collapsed building.

Diagrams by Mido Sadek, using images © Elke Uitentuis & Wouter Osterholt (project and exhibition Model Citizens at Townhouse 2008-09)

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View of Townhouse from the Talaat Harb Technical Industrial School For Girls by Mido Sadek

View from the Talaat Harb Technical Industrial School For Girls by Mido Sadek


View from the Talaat Harb Technical Industrial School For Girls by Mido Sadek

Many know 10 Nabrawy Street as the main building of Townhouse, but with its founding year being 1998 the gallery is one of the most recent tenants. According to the 2015 book *Discovering Downtown Cairo: Architecture and Stories*, edited by Vittoria Caprese and Barbara Pampe, both the architect and the year of construction of what resembles a “small freestanding palace” are unknown. But the book quotes a Ms. M., who lived in the building until 1958 and recalls playing ping pong in the family salon – the space where the Townhouse library was later set up – as estimating that it could have been built in 1902.

As is common in downtown Cairo, the building has become a mix and match of residential and commercial spaces. Today, aside from the art institution that spreads over four apartments on three floors, there are apartments where four, six or eight families live (depending on who you ask), and 12 densely packed workshops that skirt the ground floor of the building, opening onto the lane, not much larger than walk-in closets. They are run by mechanics, carpenters and other craftsmen who have been there for half a century or more.

“I have been in this corner since 1973,” says car-upholstery workshop owner Atteyya Abdel Aziz, who has an easy authority over the rest of the men and works with a Singer sewing machine that has since become an antique. He has an extensive knowledge of the history of the neighborhood, from when it was largely Jewish and later largely Armenian, and of the building in particular, when it held the original Wafd Party’s offices and then-prime minister Mustafa al-Nahhas paid it visits.

It was some five tons of material that was brought to a third floor apartment for DIY construction work that is said to have caused the already water-damaged structure to give way, dragging down that apartment and two more, crushing parts of Townhouse’s recently-opened extension of its First Floor Gallery and burying two mechanic shops underneath. Maybe it was the collective shock, the futility of shifting blame onto someone whose situation is just as bad as your own or just plain solidarity, but there seemed to be no ill-will toward these residents from the third floor, even as the collapse appeared both to have been entirely preventable and to haplessly catalyze the surrender of the lane’s fragile ecosystem to the mercy of the authorities. The collapse was braved as people fast-forwarded past hypotheticals to reach a united, pragmatic front.

Car accessories salesman Anwar Mohamed Ali and life-long 10 Nabrawy St resident Zeinab Aalem

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Front row from left: Mahmoud “Mido” Ali Mahmoud, Attiya Abdel Aziz, back row from left: Hassan Mahmoud Hassan, Ahmed “Saidi” Abeltaweb Ahmed

Front row from left: Mahmoud “Mido” Ali Mahmoud, Attiya Abdel Aziz, back row from left: Hassan Mahmoud Hassan, Ahmed “Saidi” Abeltaweb Ahmed


Most of the men who worked in the lane stayed by the building after the collapse. Their reasons were straightforward: this is all they have and all they know, and they worried about looting or that their spaces would be shut down by authorities without warning. The jobs that were interrupted by the collapse still had to be carried out. The men arranged themselves to work in extended shifts around the clock. Since power and water had been cut from the building, they moved their work onto the lane, carrying-on at night by the intense orange-yellow light of two public street lamps. Once the building was initially inspected and sealed off by the municipality on the day it collapsed, all shop owners and workers had to sign individual release forms, stating that they were now staying there at their own risk. The only other option was to leave, which none of them considered an option.

“The people who have been here the longest are my grandfather who came in 1952, then my father, then me,” says Mahmoud “Mido” Mohamed Ali, whose mechanic workshop lays buried under the rubble, along with a car and motorbike he was servicing and for which he is liable. Things are bad but still not nearly as bad as they could have been for Mido, because his father Ali and his brother Sherif are the two people who came to work serendipitously late.

“We won’t be able to find a place as special as this one. This area has always had a lot of craftsmen, each shop had between 15 and 20 workers, some of them foreign,” says Atteyya, adding of his own modest shop: “Five, six, seven years ago I had a lot of workers too. Now I only have one and all of my worries are being able to pay my one employee.”

Auto body painter Ahmed “Saidi” Abdulwahab Ahmed’s workspace, which he shares with his young sons Mohamed and Abdelwahab, is a shed at the end of the alley between the building and a wall separating it from the neighboring school and a high-rise apartment building. His shop is mostly undamaged, but it is cut off behind the meters-high mound of rubble that has also trapped a client’s car. “We grew up in this neighborhood and lived here all our lives,” he says. “My clients come to me here. If the government is even able to provide us with a replacement, they are going to put us at the end of the world.”


Car accessories salesman Anwar Mohamed Ali says, “When I was at school I’d come to my father’s shop. It was in this spot that was torn down [in the collapse]. In 1981, I took over this shop [that remains mostly intact], and spent my life here. If we can’t renovate the building and it will be torn down, where can I go? I will build a shack and just stay here if I have to.”

 From left: Auto body mechanic Hassan Mahmoud Hassan, a neighbor of 10 Nabrawy St, Tamer Anwar who works in the shop of his father Anwar, car radio repairman Osama Mohamed Ahmed al-Shafei, Ahmed "Saidi" Abeltaweb Ahmed and beh

L-R: Hassan Mahmoud Hassan, a neighbor, Tamer Anwar, Osama Mohamed Ahmed al-Shafei, Saidi and behind him sons Mohamed and Abeltaweb Ahmed Abeltaweb, Anwar Mohamed Ali, and behind him Marouf Abdelwahed, Atteya Abdel Aziz and Mido Sadek

 Anwar Mohamed Ali's car accessories shop


Anwar Mohamed Ali's car accessories shop

 Mohamed Ahmed Abeltaweb, Hassan Mahmoud Hassan, Abeltaweb Ahmed Abeltaweb


Mohamed Ahmed Abeltaweb, Hassan Mahmoud Hassan, Abeltaweb Ahmed Abeltaweb

There wasn't time to project too far into the future because the surprise visit by police caught everyone off guard on Saturday morning at 8 am. It was three days after the collapse, and the people in the lane were anticipating help from the military to clear the rubble. Instead, a couple dozen uniformed police officers arrived, announcing that they would demolish the building. They held no relevant permits. The resulting standoff between the tenants and the police stretched into the afternoon. After hours of screaming, crying, begging on one side, and shouting, mocking, threatening on the other, an ultimatum was given to clear the building because it would be torn down in the morning.

The other tenants looked to Townhouse to see if anyone from the gallery would enter the now-unlocked building to retrieve its property, and the gallery staff's first inclination was to resist for ideological reasons, but ultimately the threat of losing the archive and library – over 15 years of irreplaceable work by both the institution and many artists – outweighed the implications of caving in to the intimidation. So, in the early evening, the decision was taken to evacuate the space Townhouse had held since its first day. Volunteers answered a call on social media to help the staff move its library, offices, and archive to the neighboring Factory Space, which Townhouse rents from Ismealia for Real Estate Development. People formed a human chain, reaching from the third floor of the building, down the stairs, through the lane and into the Factory Space. Townhouse was fully moved not too long after midnight.

 Residents evacuating the building on April 11

Residents evacuating the building on April 11

 Looking down onto Mounir's cafe

Looking down onto Mounir's cafe from 10 Nabrawy Street

Sunday morning brought a beautiful spring day that seemed like a mockery of the frenzy just hours earlier. The lane was quiet, birds were in the mulberry tree in front of Townhouse's shop and people sipped Nescafe and tea from Mounir's, a cafe that was still open for business. It opened 25 years ago in the narrow strip of land between 10 Nabrawy and a parking garage, right in front of Townhouse's Factory Space. On the rare occasion it rains, if you sit right against the wall on the Townhouse side, the balconies can just about protect you from getting wet. On busy nights, Mounir's loyal patrons would expand his cafe far into the lane in lieu of the larger cafe Takayiba, the former focal point of the lane that was bought out by Ismaelia and shut down almost exactly one year ago, on April 1 2015.

[News had just come through \(http://web.archive.org/web/20160702024612/http://www.madamasr.com/news/culture/update-townhouse-building-demolition-postponed\)](http://web.archive.org/web/20160702024612/http://www.madamasr.com/news/culture/update-townhouse-building-demolition-postponed) that allowed an exhalation. A flutter of text messages and status updates from various sources announced that the building at 10 Nabrawy was now listed as protected, pending the report of a technical committee. It would be incredible news if it would stick, but because of the unpredictable pattern that was starting to emerge, a break from the chaos was acknowledged with caution.


 April 11

Outside the building on April 11

The apparent safety of having paperwork on the tenants' side didn't hold up because the next morning, Monday, April 11, riot police blocked two of three access points to the lane, armed with AK47s and tear gas launchers and three more backup trucks. The police were unwilling to acknowledge the newly issued delay for demolition or to present permits of their own. They forced out those residents who had managed to slip back in, occupied the building and ushered in laborers, men barely out of their teens wearing flip-flops and toting sledgehammers, picks and shovels. These laborers destroyed the interior of every room in the building and some of its exterior, tearing up wooden floors, breaking through tiles and concrete, smashing glass and removing balconies. Given that most of the windows had been taken away or unhinged when they had visited two days before, the sound of the destruction travelled far.

Youssra Mounir, whose apartment on the top floor lost one room in the collapse, said that when she received the official paper, declaring the suspension of a previous application to destruct the building, "We were so happy, we thought we were saved. We said we would hang the paper on our doors and, then, no one could enter." After being driven out of the building on Monday, Youssra handed out copies of the certificate that she made herself to the other tenants who were scattered in between the dozens of civilians gathered in the lane. She tried to reason with the police for hours, even when she was being shouted at and was told, "It won't help. It's just paper."

The media and others documenting the situation gravitated toward her. The more her friends and family crumbled, sobbed and lost composure, the stronger and more focused Youssra seemed to get. Later, I asked her why she was standing up for everyone else. After a pause, she said she hadn't realized she was doing that, but maybe it was a reaction to the helplessness she felt at Saint Catherine. It turns out Youssra is one of the survivors of a tragedy that made headlines in February 2014, when eight hikers were caught [in a freak blizzard in mountains near Saint Catherine's monastery in Sinai and rescue attempts were delayed](http://web.archive.org/web/20160702024612/http://www.madamasr.com/sections/politics/what-happened-st-catherine) (<http://web.archive.org/web/20160702024612/http://www.madamasr.com/sections/politics/what-happened-st-catherine>). Four of her friends did not make it out alive. "Maybe I had a lot of power now because I didn't do much when I was in the accident. I didn't know what to do. I was just shocked. I tried to help my friends but I didn't know how, I didn't have anything to keep them alive." She adds: "I was trying to find out why I am alive, why I didn't die with them. I was always asking God why am I here? Why did this happen to me? Sometimes I felt guilty, but I was with them in this situation. I didn't leave anyone until the end."


 Youssra Mounir

Youssra Mounir on April 11

Soft-spoken Mido also tried his best but couldn't stop the demolition, but "the police told us that this paper would end up in a drawer." Once the tenants and workshop owners conceded defeat, they pleaded with the police to let them get their belongings out. Before eventually being allowed to enter, they were first told they had their chance yesterday and that it was now too late. The other tenants had watched Townhouse staff evacuate two days prior and now followed suit. By nightfall, it looked like the building had turned itself inside out. A volunteer and former Townhouse staff member helping the tenants, Mido Sadek, posted to his Facebook a picture of one family that was sleeping upright on chairs in front of the contents of their apartments now stacked by the chained entrance.

 Mustafa Nassar's textile workshop evacuated into the lane

Mustafa Nassar's textile workshop evacuated into the lane

 Residents of 10 Nabrawy spend the night sleeping outdoors while guarding their evacuated belongings, April 11


Residents of 10 Nabrawy spend the night sleeping outdoors while guarding their evacuated belongings, April 11

By noon on Tuesday, most of the belongings had already been transported elsewhere, and it felt as if these were the final days that the community would be spending together. Mohamed "Foash" Fouad is only slightly older than Mounir's, where he has worked as a waiter since he was 18 years old. "We can't stay here if they are destroying the building, level by level. By the second floor they will be on top of us and we will have to leave. I can't put other people's lives at risk," says Foash. He gave the cafe about another week. "This community will never gather again because everybody will go where their work takes them. And from time to time, if I pass by and I see Mina is here, I will say hi to him. But if Mina and Aam Atteyya, for example, leave here and go to work in different place, I will definitely not go to where they are after. That's it, they will be like a memory."

In the Factory, Townhouse staff had begun claiming various sections as office space, a library, an archive, and a shop. Mina Noshy, who was Townhouse's first employee and started working there just weeks after it opened, when he was 19, now runs the shop. "The biggest changes Townhouse has seen were this year and last, the bad years," he said. "Until recently, Townhouse used to be a place where no one could touch you. It was freedom. But then [the government shut us down](http://web.archive.org/web/20160702024612/http://www.madamasr.com/news/culture/townhouse-says-closure-due-state-admin-failures-not-politics) (<http://web.archive.org/web/20160702024612/http://www.madamasr.com/news/culture/townhouse-says-closure-due-state-admin-failures-not-politics>) and, when they did, they didn't just close the space, they also closed our hearts. They made us scared. Now, sometimes when I see someone entering the space wearing a suit, I think the worst, and this wasn't the case before, at all. We felt safe, like no one could touch us. We work with the foreigners and they with us. But now working with foreigners is more dangerous. And foreign funding, oh Lord!"

Ever the optimist, though, Mina adds that there are also things to look forward to. "The office staff used to be upstairs on the third floor, but now working in the Factory feels like 15 years ago, when we first started with a few rooms on the First Floor Gallery. Now everyone is in one place again: the shop, the office, the library. It's a new start."



 View of Ahmed "Sai'di" Abeltaweb Ahmed's auto body painting workshop from the top of the pile of rubble

View of Ahmed "Sai'di" Abeltaweb Ahmed's auto body painting workshop from the top of the pile of rubble


The next day, Wednesday April 13, one week after the corner of the building had collapsed, there was yet another dramatic turn of events. The police's bluff was called out by [a specialized committee, ending the five-day police occupation](http://web.archive.org/web/20160702024612/http://www.madamasr.com/news/culture/committee-issues-final-decision-townhouse-building-be-restored) (<http://web.archive.org/web/20160702024612/http://www.madamasr.com/news/culture/committee-issues-final-decision-townhouse-building-be-restored>). An eyewitness who requested anonymity recalled that by this point the looting was happening openly and that, "the truck was loaded with shutters and windows and doors. It was huge. And when this committee came, then they said stop everything and the police cleared out so fast. They lifted the truck up and everything slid off the bed and everything smashed and now it's left in front of the building." Architect Omar Nagati of CLUSTER, who had been helping tenants on the procedural side, urged that, despite exhaustion, they needed to bring these parts of the building to safety. "These doors and windows are irreplaceable," he said.

By noon people were able to enter the building again, and they began gauging the full scope of what happened and scavenging what could be saved. The moment the last pickup truck drove past, artist Huda Lutfi, who was one of Townhouse's first collaborators and who has had a studio in the building for over a decade, walked past the newest pile of broken doors and windows proclaiming her anger. She quotes an Egyptian proverb: "They ruined it and sat on the ruins." Madame Zeinab, whose apartment still stands on the top floor, says, "I just came down from upstairs and it really grieves me to see what they did up there. When I went upstairs I had a fight, it was too emotional. I can't believe what's happening, it's unfair. The apartment was really good, impeccable, and now it's ruined. They drilled into the floor. I don't understand. I can't find a reason for what they are doing. Even the window, they ruined it completely just to take the metal out of it. Why would they do this? I wish it would go back to the way it was. Our entire life was spent here."


Another tenant says, "Yesterday morning when I went inside the building I looked around and said, OK, those tiles, we can fix. We can sort that out. But by the afternoon there was no floor. They wantonly destroyed, for no reason."

Lawyer Reham Samir a family friend of Lamia and son Tarek Hany, who lost their whole apartment on the fourth floor to the collapse, took on the 10 Nabrawy case pro bono. "What I consider is that there was corruption in the city council, especially at the governorate because they were ready to tear down the building in a heartbeat. Some people were waiting for the building to be torn down to buy the land. I don't know who has interest in the tearing down of the building, but I know that there are people who have interest, or else the governor would not approve of tearing down the building over night. Add to this that the governor's office said that, for us to get back our windows and the metal that they took, they want that we go pay them money. So you are taking my things and you are making me pay to get them back. It was a very strange thing. So I am still wondering about it."



 Mustafa Nassar's textile workshop on the second floor

Mustafa Nassar's textile workshop on the second floor

 View from Osama Mohamed Ahmed El-Shafei's workshop up to Townhouse's First Floor Gallery

View from Osama Mohamed Ahmed El-Shafei's workshop up to Townhouse's First Floor Gallery



 View of the facade where the balconies have been dismantled on April 13

View of the facade where the balconies have been dismantled on April 13


"There's so much going on these days, it's impossible to remember all of it. And it's strange. Maybe, after a week, you realize that so much of it has been gone from your memory," says artist Rana ElNemr, who has exhibited several times at Townhouse. "I was saying yesterday – was that Saturday, or Sunday – am I getting this in the right order? I've lost the sense of time. It's like working against forgetfulness." Huda Lutfi says: "They are not going to kick us out. Holding on is what resistance is."

The desire to set up a crowd-funding campaign has been voiced by most of the people quoted above, and each has their own focus and reasoning. One obstacle that could strain the community's ties is when talk of money must be addressed, both coming in and going out. This could be the trickiest issue it has yet to face.

"We really hope that the person who will be in charge of restoring this is someone who cares about the architectural identity," says Mido. "All of the builders will tell you: Yeah, I can make it modern, with steel and concrete. And, if they do that, it will just ruin the whole identity of the building. So what we really want is this building to be the same as before."

"All people in this building love it, but unfortunately some of them loved it in the wrong way," says Atteyya. "If they loved it in a more proper way, we would not have reached this point. I hope that we all learn from our mistakes. We learned but a little bit too late."

As of the end of April, the debris is still obstructing the main gate to the neighboring Talaat Harb Secondary Technical School for Girls, although class hasn't been interrupted because the students now use a side entrance. Youssra is back to work, running her travel startup at the nearby GrEEK Campus. She found temporary accommodation in a nice place, but she wants to return. Foash has been working at Mounir's, as always, as is Mina at the Townhouse shop. Atteyya and Anwar have cleaned up their shops and are back to work. Along with the carpenters, the men have run power cables from the neighboring garage, since the electricity and water remain shut off. Mido, his father Ali and brother Sherif, mechanics Mohamed (Ismael Mabrouk) and Hussein (Abdel Aziz Mohamed Ali), and auto body painter Saidi are still out of work. The much-loved [Nubian shop just outside Atteyya's shop, run by Nesma Haddad](http://web.archive.org/web/20160702024612/http://cuip.clustermappinginitiative.org/en/passageways/nesma-haddad-nubian-bazar) (<http://web.archive.org/web/20160702024612/http://cuip.clustermappinginitiative.org/en/passageways/nesma-haddad-nubian-bazar>), was completely torn down by the sledgehammers and she hasn't returned. And Mustafa too is nowhere to be found: he is said to have moved his textile workshop closer to his brother, near Boulaq.

Townhouse technical staff, from L-R: Image 26: Hicham Mohamed, Mohamed Anwar, Mohamed Hamada and Ebrahim Sharkawy on April 19

Townhouse technical staff, from L-R: Image 26: Hicham Mohamed, Mohamed Anwar, Mohamed Hamada and Ebrahim Sharkawy on April 19

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