

[Artists as Urban Catalysts in Downtown Cairo](#)



Last December the Goethe Institute hosted a panel discussion titled “Artists as Urban Catalysts in Downtown Cairo.” The event was organized by Beth Stryker and Omar Nagati ([Cluster](#)) and supported by the Ford Foundation. Invited panelists represented two types of stakeholders in downtown: property owners (Karim Shafei, CEO of [Al Ismaelia Real Estate Development](#), and Bruce Ferguson, Dean of the School of Humanities representing the [American University in Cairo](#)), and representatives of cultural organizations (founding member of the [Contemporary Image Collective](#) Heba Farid, [Townhouse](#) Curator Ania Szremksi, filmmaker and co-founder of [Cimateque](#) Tamer El Said). The panel was moderated by Mohamed Elshahed (Cairoobserver).

The panel aimed to bring together the above mentioned representatives in an open public discussion to re-examine what the organizers called “the classic appropriation of artists as catalysts for urban regeneration by real-estate developers seeking future gentrification,” asking how things might play out differently in Cairo. However, a key word in that sentence is difficult to translate into Arabic: Gentrification. Although the discussion was held in English (with Arabic translation available), it was important to note the untransability of the conversation’s central concept. The unavailability of a direct translation of the term/concept doesn’t mean the processes of gentrification do not exist in Cairo but it points to the need for analysis and theorization grounded in the Egyptian context.

AUC’s downtown campus, much of which is no longer in use, could potentially act as an anchor for cultural activity downtown and provide much needed space for independent artist organizations as well as to its own students to maintain the link between the now suburban university and its downtown urban past. The university has not taken an active role in realizing that potential, however it has made its Falaki Theater available for public performances and events. Al-Ismaelia on the other hand is actively engaged with arts and culture in downtown; not only do several arts organizations rent space from the company, Al-Ismaelia is also the main sponsor and organizer of the Downtown Contemporary Arts Festival.

The three arts spaces represented (CIC, Cimateque and Townhouse) while they rent the spaces they presently occupy, their relatively short-term leases mean insecurity and potentially being forced out of their premises due a variety of economic factors. In other cities, particularly in Europe, similar arts organizations were able to negotiate deals with municipalities in which long-term leases were granted, sometimes with no rent, which has helped such organizations thrive by focusing their funds into their creative activities while catalyzing the regeneration of their urban contexts (which municipalities are interested in). Such a process is not possible in Cairo as the state; the governorate (the closest Cairo has to a municipality) does not seek artists as catalysts for areas it manages where underused buildings could be transformed into cultural centers. Nor does the Cairo governorate have a development plan or vision in which independent culture plays a key role in transforming the city. Thus, Cairo’s independent artists and the cultural organizations they establish depend on their relationship to private property owners when it comes to establishing a space. The three speakers on this side of the debate explicated the opportunities and challenges they face in this matter.

It is important to note that Egypt has a massive centralized Culture Ministry with an immense budget and numerous spaces including nearby downtown at the campus of the Opera and in downtown such as the National Theater. However these spaces are often inactive and unwelcoming not only to audiences but also to artists. The ministry's budgets mostly go into paying wages, not into programming.

Two competing voices emerged from the audience; on one hand some applauded the work of Al Ismailia and its support for the arts in downtown. One audience member argued that as artists “no one owes us anything” and that artists must find ways to establish their spaces without relying on support from private interests. On the other hand, others voiced concern with those sentiments and argued that in the Egyptian context when contemporary art lacks cohesive institutional support, private developers and property owners have an increased responsibility to support artists with affordable spaces.

The panel discussion revealed the need for a mediating entity between the various and sometimes conflicting interests of stakeholders. As moderator I suggested the need to establish a “Downtown Arts Council,” an independent body that incorporates members of the various stakeholders on its board and which acts as a mediator, organizer, advocate and promoter of the arts in the district. Such councils have been established as non-profit organizations in cities around the world for several decades and they have had a key role in the stimulation of cultural and artistic life in those cities. An arts council for downtown Cairo will allow artists to focus on their creative work and not be burdened with logistics while acting as a buffer between the two co-dependent yet unequal (in financial terms) main players in this scene: the artists and the property owners/developers. The institutional structure of arts councils differ around the world and their relationships to the states and ministries of culture also differ and range from direct support by the state to parallel operations and autonomy. Cairo's downtown arts community and other stakeholders will need to sit down on many occasions besides this panel to decide on which model works best for Cairo's context.

To this end the organizers staged the panel around the critical questions: “How is Cairo different from other cities, such as New York and Beirut, where such cycles of gentrification have taken place? What role may the underutilized AUC campus play in providing a cultural anchor Downtown? What are the advantages and downsides of private sector partnerships between real estate stakeholders and independent artists and arts organizations?” They created this initial forum seeking “to explore potential local strategies for sustaining artists' access to the generative contributions they make to urban development.”

The arts can be an engine for urban regeneration and development while urban development and investment can enrich the arts, but striking this balance without repeating the mistakes of other “creative city” experiments will be difficult. This panel discussion was an important first step in starting a meaningful conversation. Cluster organized the panel discussion as the first in what they are developing as an ongoing series of stakeholder meetings related to the arts and urban development in Downtown Cairo. Maintaining that conversation, evolving it and reaching useful conclusions and outcomes will be work that the stakeholders will have to carryout for themselves and in cooperation with one another, otherwise such panel discussions risk becoming ephemeral one off events with little tangible impact on the issues discussed therein.

For more information and for a video of the discussion [click here](#).

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