

Update: Townhouse building demolition postponed

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By: [Mada Masr](#)



The demolition of the partially collapsed downtown Cairo building housing art space Townhouse was postponed by Cairo's deputy governor on Sunday morning following an intervention by the head of the [National Organization of Urban Harmony](#).

Deputy Mohamed Amin Abdel Tawab visited the building on Sunday morning and listened to tenants' complaints about a municipality committee that they said had taken an arbitrary decision to demolish the building, according to former Townhouse employee Mido Sadek.

This occurred after a working group consisting of the building's tenants and volunteers reached out to Soheir Hawas, the head of the National Organization of Urban Harmony, on Saturday following a sudden demolition order. Hawas intervened and prompted Abdel Tawab's visit, according to Sadek.

The National Organization of Urban Harmony is a government body that helps protect heritage buildings.

"The deputy governor promised to send a new committee to actually carry out the assessment," Sadek told Mada Masr, clarifying that he said this would happen in the coming two days and that the building will not be demolished until then.

Sadek had told Mada Masr on Saturday that the building would be demolished Sunday pursuant to an order from the Cairo governor's office.

The southeast corner of the five-storey late-19th-century building on Nabrawy Street had collapsed on Wednesday and the municipality say it is now unsafe.

Three tenants and a lawyer working with Townhouse went to the governor's office on Saturday afternoon to try and negotiate on the matter, but were told the demolition would take place on Sunday morning, and that residents had until that time to evacuate the building and collect their belongings.

"The demolition order is final, and will be carried out," the deputy governor stated yesterday, according to Sadek.

A force from Qasr al-Nil Police Station had arrived with a representative from the municipality to demolish the partially collapsed building early on Saturday morning, according to eyewitnesses.

The decision to demolish the building had resulted in a standoff with the various tenants on Saturday, who initially refused to collect their belongings and evacuate the building. The tenants include six families, a textile workshop, some mechanics' workshops and Townhouse.

Tenants then spent the evening removing their belongings, and volunteers helped clear out the spaces rented by Townhouse, moving items such as the gallery's archive and books from the library to its neighboring Rawabet Theater.

Earlier in the day, police had threatened to recruit the help of Central Security Forces if tenants did not comply with the order to clear out.

"They would have demolished [on Saturday morning] had the tenants not stood up to the police and refused to evacuate," Sadek said.

He explained that representatives from the municipality came to inspect the building after it [partially collapsed](#) on Wednesday morning, with an architect in tow.

Sadek said that the architect only stood on the stairs before issuing a memo saying that the building had been inspected and its current state endangers people's lives. An accountant from the municipality returned Saturday morning with this memo, he said, along with a police force to clear the building for demolition.

"This memo is not an official decision," Sadek said. "It is not stamped and is not binding."

He said the tenants had been expecting a force to clear the rubble that resulted from the collapse, rather than demolish the rest of the building altogether.

Some of the mechanics had continued to work in the street outside the building after the collapse of the southeast corner on Wednesday. The main entrance to the building had been closed with an official seal, however, and power and water cut off.

Alexandra Stock, former curator at the Townhouse gallery, described Saturday's standoff as tense, saying that tenants were adamant that they would not clear their belongings from the building.

"Once you start getting your belongings out, you are acknowledging that the building is going down," she told Mada Masr.

However, now that the order will likely be carried out, with threat of force if necessary, tenants and Townhouse staffers are scrambling to move all belongings out of the building, which includes the Townhouse's office, library and archive as well as private residences and workshops.

Stock said the people on the street were strongly voicing their anger and directing it at Al-Ismaelia for Real Estate Development as one of the players who could benefit from its demolition.

According to Omar Nagati, architect and founding partner of CLUSTER, a platform for urban design and research, who was also on the scene, the demolition order is a culmination of earlier restoration decrees issued against the building due to structural issues.

He explained that these decrees pertained to standard issues such as cracks in the building and the addition of an extra floor. "The building's partial collapse then created a sense of urgency and sped up the process of issuing a demolition order," he explained.

Nagati said the municipality is legally obliged to evacuate the building, and that there is an added political pressure on its head to do so. "If the building collapses on its residents, they don't want to be asked what took you so long to evacuate it," he said.



Note: This article previously suggested that Al-Ismealia for Real Estate Development owns part of 10 Nabrawy Street - it actually owns Townhouse's neighboring Factory Space and other surrounding properties, and a sentence was adjusted to reflect this on April 10.