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# Oases in the Dust: Investing in Cairo's Green Spaces

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Cairo is not a shade close to green. Considered one of the top 10 most polluted cities in the world, the Egyptian capital is toxic. Breathing its air is equal to smoking 20 cigarettes a day, and the Nile River's water has become more grey than blue. The season of rice hay burning leaves the air even more suffocating. Meanwhile, going

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like finding money on trees.

“Cairo is a very dense city, so space is a premium,” confirmed Omar Nagati, co-founder of Cluster, adding that “any open space left is used by people for other things.” Sidewalks are taken over by cafes, cart sellers, and other commercial activities, he explained.

On a macro scale, in planning (often formal state planning) there is always a provision for green spaces, with a percentage allocated for every neighborhood, Nagati stated. For example in planning the Nasr City district, every few blocks there was a central garden. “However, if you go to visit it now, gardens have been converted into mosques, coffee shops, parking lots... etc,” he pointed out.

As there is so much pressure on land in Cairo, green spaces became sidelined as the least important use of the land. Among the few exceptions, particularly in the lower-income parts of the city, is Al-Fostat Garden. Built on what was once a dump site, the garden entertains families on a 10 square kilometer area. Another exception is the International Garden, located in the busy Nasr City district.

In informal areas, which are unofficially planned and built by communities in a bottom-up process, there is no allocation for public services, which includes gardens. In these areas, there are even fewer green spaces, almost none, Nagati said.

Yet on a small scale, there are always small leftover spaces that are often converted into green spaces, which include gaps between buildings, front yards, rooftops, or a little lawn outside the building. So people find a way to create these kinds of micro scale urban gardens informally, which sometimes make up for the lack of large-scale open spaces.

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a sustainable urban environment and a more diverse and accessible public space. It also investigates new approaches to informal practices that would generate alternative modes of urban development.

To go around the “reality of spaces,” as Nagati put it, people use spaces that are not necessarily planned as parks but do have some greenery. In Gameat El Dowal Street in the Mohandessin District, or in Heliopolis where there are large boulevards, one finds green strips between the two road lanes, where it is not an unusual sight to see citizens using such areas for picnics, or sitting down and relaxing.

The gap is vivid, between the planned approach of the city, and the reality where people find ways to make up for the lack of green spaces by inventing or appropriating other spaces which are not designed as such but used as green elements, Nagati highlights.

A recent University of Exeter study (<http://www.ecehh.org/research-projects/urban-green-space/>) found that such green spaces are not a luxury, but a necessity for the psychological and mental health of a citizen. Individuals reported less mental distress and higher life satisfaction when they were living in greener areas, the study maintained.

“In comparative terms, living in an area with higher levels of green space was associated with improvements in our well-being indicators roughly equal to a third of that gained from being married, or a tenth as large as being employed vs. unemployed,” it stated.

The study raises the issue to the attention of investors, policymakers, and urban planners, saying “Urbanisation is considered a potential threat to mental health and wellbeing and although effects at the individual level are small, this study demonstrates that the potential benefit

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Two ways would make it attractive for investors to put money in green spaces, Nagati believes.

One business model is having some commercial activities attached to parks, such as concession stands or cafeterias, which would generate income. Al-Azhar Park is a good example, according to Nagati. It has a mix of small fee ticket (10.L.E) for the general public, he said, and high end restaurants to subsidize such tickets.

Al-Azhar Park is a rare 30 hectares located at the heart of Islamic Cairo. The biggest green area in the capital, weekends leave the park packed with families looking for a cheap breather from their stressful daily lives.

The other model is that in the city center itself, large corporations such as banks, insurance companies, and law firms ensure as part of their branding to have a little bit of an urban park outside the premises or headquarters, and it becomes part of their marketing image to dedicate some of their property to public use. "This is called privately owned public space (POPS) , and it is applied in many cities of the world. New York is full of that," said Nagati.

Numerous start-ups and construction companies, such as Schaduf (<http://invest-gate.me/features/schaduf-cultivating-a-new-urban-landscape/>), are also turning to green solutions, planting roof tops, recycling waste, and incorporating plant-covered walls in otherwise non-green buildings, in a non-green city.

Through a combination of private interest and common good, one finds reconciliation. "You can find smart ways to combine them," Nagati concluded.

