

FOCUS

Cairo heritage back on track

The Cairo Heritage Development Committee is pushing for the completion of the revival of Downtown Cairo after delays in the Borsa district, reports **Gihan Shahine**



The iconic 1903 Cosmopolitan Hotel (photo: Sherif Sonbol)



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It was 18 April, World Heritage Day, and the newly-refurbished Al-Sherifeen Street in Downtown Cairo was bedecked with 19th-century-style lights. Painters were drawing sketches and seeking inspiration from the area's history, while musicians were playing soft music and traditional Egyptian classics, all contributing to the romantic and cheerful ambiance that seemed more typical of some European cities than other parts of Cairo.

The khedive Ismail, Egypt's ambitious ruler who ascended the throne in 1863 and decided to turn the triangle between today's Tahrir Square, Bab Al-Hadid and Abdine Square into a version of Paris on the Nile, could easily be conjured up beaming with delight as the object of his passion revived after decades of decay.

The decorative lights, the 19th-century lamps and the tall palm trees lining the newly tiled pedestrian street reflected beautifully off the fresh paint on the area's historic edifices. A giant building exuding an aura of century-old Italianate architectural elegance loomed from afar, bathed in breathtaking lights that soon unfolded an architectural masterpiece as we approached. This was the iconic 1903 Cosmopolitan Hotel designed by Italian architect Alfonso Sassoon, which had recently been restored and perfectly lit in a design by the Sound and Light Company.

The day marked the inauguration of the first phase of the rejuvenation of the Borsa district that covers 60,000 square metres of Downtown Cairo, extending northwards from Sherif Street to Talaat Harb Street and eastwards from Sabri Abu Alam Street to Qasr Al-Nil Street. The project, part of the larger project to revive Khedival Cairo, was launched by the Cairo Governorate in cooperation with the National Organisation for Urban Harmony under the auspices of the Cairo Heritage Development Committee (CHDC).

The CHDC, formed by presidential decree in late 2016 with a mandate to examine strategies “for a better future for Downtown and Historic Cairo” and draw up a comprehensive master plan to balance the area’s historic preservation with its economic growth potential, “has been breathing tremendous life into Cairo’s Downtown area”, according to CHDC Spokesman Tarek Atia.

Said Al-Bahr, in charge of the renovation of Khedival Cairo at the Cairo Governorate, told Al-Ahram Weekly that the renovation of the Borsa district, a triangle which includes 30 officially registered heritage buildings, aims to refurbish the buildings in a way that will restore them to their former grandeur, in addition to paving, lighting and landscaping the already pedestrianised streets, at a total cost of LE30 to LE40 million.

“The Cairo Governorate has only been able to finance the landscaping and paving of Al-Sherifeen Street, or 20 per cent of the total Borsa area, at the cost of LE2 million,” Al-Bahr said. “The national banks, mainly the Al-Ahli Bank, the National Bank Union, and the Suez Canal Bank, financed the refurbishment of 15 historic edifices at a cost of LE10 million, while the Ministry of Tourism took charge of the renovation of the Cosmopolitan Hotel, which cost around LE2 to LE3 million.”

Envisioning the area as an open-air museum and a hub for the arts and culture, former Cairo governor Atef Abdel-Hamid has declared that all the streets in the Borsa triangle will see restrictions on motor traffic, as is already the case in Al-Sherifeen Street and the Al-Alfi district.

Officials have insisted that benches would not be installed at the request of inhabitants, who feared that the seats would be abused by street vendors using them to show off their wares as was the case in some other Downtown areas a few years ago. In the meantime, the area’s café have been closed, and the authorities insist that all the shops in the area will now have to adapt their activities to a vision of the district as a centre for the arts and culture, an open-air museum and a significant tourist attraction.

Mohamed Anis, head of the Abdine District, to which Al-Sherifeen is affiliated, added that video cameras would be installed to track any violations on the part of shops and to make sure that street vendors do not intrude on the revamped area.

“We will not allow coffee shops to re-open in the Borsa district, as the governor has decreed, and the owners will have to turn their shops into galleries or similar shops in line with the cultural ambience of the open-air museum,” Anis said.

The inauguration of the area in April was only the first phase of the Borsa project, which has included refurbishing 15 historic buildings in Al-Sherifeen Street, most notably the Old Stock Exchange (the Borsa) and the Cosmopolitan Hotel. However, the second phase of the project has not started due to a lack of funds, and the Suez Bank has not fulfilled its dues for the first phase, a challenge that the CHDC is currently addressing.



A recent cultural event at the Borsa district (photo: Sherif Sonbol)

HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE: Bedecked with 19th-century-style street furniture and palm trees, Al-Sherifeen and its sister streets exude an aura of history.

They provide a haven for architectural landmarks and century-old structures and feature a blend of neo-classical, baroque, rococo and art nouveau styles. The fresh off-white paint on the buildings provides a homogeneous flavour to the scene.

“The historical value of the Borsa district should be seen in the larger context of Khedival Cairo, the Downtown urban masterpiece replete with a wealth of historical and architectural gems,” notes Soheir Zaki Hawas, a professor of architecture at Cairo University and member of the management board of the National Organisation for Urban Harmony. Hawas also prides herself on the fact that she was the first to name the Downtown area Khedival Cairo in a 2003 encyclopaedia.

Hawas’ passion for the revival of Khedival Cairo can hardly be put into words. Not only has she written an encyclopaedia registering the significance of every building and thoroughfare in the area, but she has also volunteered years of her life that could otherwise have been reserved for her family helping with revival plans.

“What characterises the Borsa district is the fact that it witnessed the birth of a new economic concept in Egypt in the second half of the 19th century and the early 20th century, namely the Bourse itself,” Hawas said. “That new concept soon found expression in the iconic architecture of the Bourse or Borsa building, which also stands as a symbol of how Egypt then paralleled the West in terms of economic progress. And the very presence of the Bourse soon attracted other economic activities to the area, with various banks being built in the surrounding area.”

The century-old Stock Exchange, or Bourse, building on Al-Sherifeen Street has now been partially turned into a museum introducing the history of what was one of the leading exchanges in the world during the 1907 stock-market boom when it was rated among the world's top 10 exchanges. As the preface to *The Egyptian Bourse* by author Samir Raafat, a chronicler of modern Egyptian history, says, "the history of the Cairo Stock Exchange has to be told."

In 1928, the Cairo Bourse moved to its present location on Al-Sherifeen Street. The building's art nouveau edifice stands replete with history, "with its multiple neo-Doric colonnades designed by French architect George Parcq, who was also responsible for much of Cairo's elegant inter-war buildings, including the Sidnawi department store on Midan Khazindar," Raafat wrote.

"Downtown Cairo could one day have 50 or 60 museums of this sort that could be major tourist attractions," Atia says of the building's present potential. Next to the Bourse is the historic National Radio building, the Central Bank, the National Bank, the Suez Canal Bank, as well as a number of commercial and residential buildings, many dating to the 1920s and 1930s.

"The whole neighbourhood is replete with buildings having unique architecture styles, including baroque and classical elements, but what is actually characteristic about the Borsa district is that it includes an edifice, affiliated to the Central Bank, featuring a neo-Islamic architectural style that was not familiar in Khedival Cairo and was introduced later, adding extra flavour to the cosmopolitan city," Hawas told the Weekly.

Such valuable information about the history of the area will be provided to visitors on plaques attached to each building so they will be able to navigate the historic wealth of the neighbourhood.

"I dream of seeing what are empty apartments and stores today turned into galleries, showcases for handicrafts, music classrooms, and things of that sort," Atia told the Weekly on the inauguration day. He was pointing at the refurbished edifices, and his eyes were wide-open with an ambitious look. Background music provided a pleasant backdrop.

"The fact that the area is reserved for pedestrians and has many iconic buildings makes it a district that will be an enjoyable outing for families, young people and tourists," Atia said.



Al-Sherifeen Street (photo: Abdel-Rahman Mohamed, courtesy of Mantiqti)

AWAITING SOLUTIONS: A few months later, however, some of that enthusiasm and cheerful atmosphere had evaporated.

Although the neighbourhood had been the venue for events and music concerts organised by the Ministry of Culture during the holy month of Ramadan, these soon disappeared except for a few smaller ones. The renovation work stopped, and the area now turns into something of a no-man's land in the evenings when darkness falls and a gloomy silence reigns.

That atmosphere was reflected in Atia's tone of voice when we met him in his Downtown office a few months after the inauguration. What happened? "The renovation process has three phases," Atia said. "The first has to do with collecting the budget needed for infrastructural and property development, and that paused for a while. The second phase has to do with community participation and stakeholder engagement, which already started even before the official inauguration, while phase three is concerned with how to turn the area into an arts and culture district. The third phase goes on two tracks, organising performances and business zoning."

The Cairo Governorate can only afford to pay for a fraction of the regeneration costs of the Downtown renovation — unofficial estimates put it at 10 per cent — and the government has thus been inviting state and non-state stakeholders, civil society, and, just as importantly, local residents and shop-owners to take part.

However, at least in the case of the Borsa renovation, the financial contributions on the part of stakeholders, mainly the national banks, then suddenly stopped, and the subsequent shortage of funds has literally crippled the renovation plans.

"We are ready with the plans and will go ahead once the budget is available," said Haidi Shalabi from the National Organisation for Urban Harmony. "It's just a matter of time."

Could it be that priorities have changed in a country struggling with economic problems and many other national projects? No one could provide a definite answer as to why stakeholders had suddenly lost interest in the renovation plans, but almost all those who talked to the Weekly suggested that both stakeholders and officials in the Cairo Governorate anticipated a possible reshuffle inside the Governorate and the CHDC.

Former prime minister Sherif Ismail replaced prior prime minister Ibrahim Mehleb as CHDC chair, and this transition produced uncertainty as to whether the Downtown renovation plans would continue as scheduled. Last week also saw a reshuffle of governors and General Khaled Abdel-Aal Abdel-Hafez, who was Cairo security chief before his retirement a month ago, is now appointed as new Cairo governor. Questions about whether donors would feel other projects should have priority, or doubts about whether the renovations would yield economic profit, also arose.

Have there been feasibility studies on whether reviving Khedival Cairo could yield a significant income? “The CHDC has a sub-committee mandated with finding ways of financing the project and studying the potential economic benefits,” said Al-Bahr. But it remains questionable who will actually see those benefits. The governorate, for its part, “is a non-profit government body whose job is to refurbish and manage the streets without seeking a profit,” Al-Bahr noted.

However, the fog may be lifting soon. The CHDC convened on 7 August, issuing a list of recommendations that seemed to put things back on track. It recommended, among other things, that the renovation work in the Borsa district must be completed and that challenges impeding the renovation of the iconic Azbakiya Park should also be tackled such that it can be revived.

Atia is hopeful that the CHDC will continue “breathing tremendous life into the Downtown area”. He expects that “work will regain momentum once the committee starts encouraging stakeholders to contribute the promised funds.”

“Once the budget is available, the renovation work will be resumed, and investors will start to show interest in the area once again,” he added.

Al-Bahr concurred, saying that after the committee’s recommendations the governor was now insisting that “work should be resumed, at least in the form of the plans and studies, so that once funds are available the work can be easily accomplished.”

“The governorate will even try to meet the costs until donors step in with needed finance,” Al-Bahr added.

Atia can’t just sit and wait for that day to come, however. He has been roaming the area collecting data on the number of potential shops and housing units that can be turned into art galleries, estimating their value at market prices, examining the legal status of their present uses, related laws and possible compensation, and gauging the interest of potential investors in the field of the arts, handicrafts and culture in the area.

Creative Egypt, an initiative enabling local craftsmen and artists to sell their products to the public that has recently moved its store displaying its distinctive products from Omar Effendi in Mohandessin to Cairo Festival City Mall, has been among those reached out to by Atia. Ahmed Taha, the director of Creative Egypt, told the Weekly that he was “ready to open an outlet in the Borsa district if a suitable place is made available”.

Photographer Mohamed Maymoun, who specialises in using old photography techniques dating back to the 1920s and 1930s, is even more enthusiastic. He was displaying his techniques to guests attending the Borsa inauguration to which he had been invited by the Ministry of Culture.

“I wish they [the governorate and Ministry of Culture] would organise such cultural events every weekend,” he told a video shot by Mantiqti, a Downtown-Zamalek community magazine published by Atia that advocates for a stakeholder-driven regeneration of the whole of central Cairo. “I would be ready to come here every day if they would allow me, but there are always various concerns.”

Maymoun has a point. Some critics might mention “security concerns” as the real reason why the benches and cafés were moved out of the area. The coffee-shop owners, for their part, are not happy with the governor’s ban, insisting that they are also needed if the area is to attract tourists and local visitors. They have been complaining to officials and the media that turning cafés into shops for artifacts or galleries could cause major losses.



photo: Abdel-Rahman Mohamed, courtesy of Mantiqti

PUBLIC SPACE: The regeneration of the Borsa district should also be seen in the larger context of the national three-phase project to regenerate Cairo’s Downtown area that aims to restore a total of 500 historic buildings, as well as squares, thoroughfares and passageways at a total cost of LE450 million.

The first and second phases of the Khedival Cairo project started with the removal of street-vendors, the better regulation of road traffic, repaving pavements and restoring 100 edifices and a number of squares at a cost of LE100 million. The third phase of the project, which should be starting soon, aims at restoring about 300 buildings and reclaiming six squares at a cost of LE350 million.

The project to regenerate Khedival Cairo was first envisioned in 2009, but it did not really get into gear until 2014 when stability was regained following the political and economic upheaval of the 25 January Revolution. The Al-Alfi and Borsa streets were both pedestrianised and refurbished as pilot projects for a future, more pedestrian-friendly city-centre. Both areas had previously been regenerated in the late 1990s, but both had deteriorated over the years, perhaps due to the absence of sustainability plans or large-scale community participation.

However, it was particularly after the 25 January Revolution that such deterioration climaxed, as “public space was invaded by all kinds of people and almost entirely lost to the appropriation of street-vendors,” said a 2016 Cairo University study entitled “The Urban Regeneration of Public Space: Al-Alfi Street in Downtown Cairo”. The government then had to step into the fray, seeking “an approach to upgrade sites in Downtown Cairo and to set new conditions for the use of public space,” the study elaborated.

The regeneration of Al-Alfi Street “was initiated in order to try to control a situation of chaotic trespassing” and “re-emphasise the power of the state,” according to the study, which suggested that the same things probably applied to the Borsa and other streets in the neighbourhood.

Several regeneration projects have taken place in Downtown Cairo, specifically in Al-Alfi Street, Orabi Square, Al-Shawarby Street, Saraya Al-Azbakiya Street and the Kodak Passage. “Restoring order to Downtown public space came under the umbrella of urban regeneration,” the study noted. “Many activists called this an attempt to create an ‘apolitical / Revolution-free Downtown.’”

Shalabi said that following the 25 January Revolution, “the Borsa district was closed for security reasons, and it deteriorated to become a home to illicit practices.” It was necessary to “regenerate the area in a way that makes it buzz with cultural activities in order to bring order to public space,” she elaborated. However, as the Cairo University study noted, “having accepted and acknowledged the governmental intentions of the regeneration projects, the question arises of how the community perceives those initiatives.”

Almost all those who talked to the Weekly on the matter expressed their satisfaction with the regeneration of Al-Alfi Street. But that was not necessarily the case with the revival of the Borsa and other streets in the city-centre. A point of discussion raised by academic Hajar Awatta in a 2015 American University of Cairo thesis entitled *Whose Downtown is it Anyway* says that the regeneration of historic city-centres can “create conflicts between local forces, as each of them have their own goals and desired visions”.

“Theoretically, the state is the protector of the ‘public interest’; however, it is often difficult to define what that interest is,” Awatta wrote. “Substantial private investment in the gentrification of deteriorated city-centres in other cities has resulted in negative socio-economic impacts for existing residents and small businesses as the demand for real estate increases and original tenants get pushed out.”

Hawas, however, is not worried about such things. “The regeneration plans aim to regain the identity of the area, which has been lost over the decades by illegal workshops and stores that pose hazards to edifices forming important parts of our architectural heritage,” Hawas said. “We are just removing the causes of illness.”

Omar Nagati, co-founder of the Cairo Lab for Urban Studies, Training and Environmental Research (CLUSTER), a private design company that has recently refurbished the Kodak Passage in the Downtown area serving as a pilot project for the development of others in the Downtown district, argues that urban regeneration should always take into consideration not only issues of identity but also of social inclusion and sustainability. While efforts to revitalise Downtown should be recognised, this has not always been the case in Egypt, where some projects tend to focus on “refurbishing buildings and thoroughfares” alone instead.

“Urban development has a wider sense than simply the restoration of the façades of historic buildings or the introduction of streetscape elements such as benches, trees and lighting fixtures,” Nagati insisted. “The social element should be part and parcel of any regeneration effort if the renovations are to be sustained.”

COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION: Almost all the officials talking to the Weekly insisted that community participation was part and parcel of the Downtown renovation plans and that tenants’ associations had been formed to help sustain work in both Al-Alfi and the Borsa districts. But, as Nagati countered, that participation should have taken place prior to the renovations and not afterwards.

“We spent a year gauging public opinion, talking to all types of people in the area including the inhabitants, business owners, and civil society concerned with issues of harassment, street vendors, security bodies and even visitors before we designed our renovation plans to decide who should benefit from public space, and then we implemented those plans in just three months,” Nagati said.

“The result was thus very successful. The inhabitants are keen on maintaining the area now because they feel they were part of the project from the first day,” he added.

Conversely, in the case of the Borsa renovations, “there was not enough time to do the necessary studies before the work started, and the stakeholders were almost left out when designing the plans,” Nagati said. “The national committee overlooking the regeneration process should also involve representations of the wider public.”

It remains questionable who should decide how to settle sometimes competing interests in the area, according to Nagati. “There are the coffee-shop owners versus security issues, and the landlords versus the investors and so forth,” he said. “A compromise should have been reached before doing cosmetic changes to concrete structures in order to attain long-lasting success.”

The Cairo University study made similar comments on the revival of the Al-Alfi area. “Although the launching of the project was announced by the governor in the street, the local people felt they were not part of the decision-making process, and nor were they aware of the process beforehand. They were also not informed about it in time to allow any form of effective participation,” it said.

“The project ended with re-establishing the control of the state over public space by issuing legislation against trespassing. At the moment, people need to get the permission of the authorities to use the area and after paying the price of occupying public space to the government,” the study said. “By such agreements the inhabitants have given up the right to public space, which now officially belongs to the government.”

Nagati said that moving out the coffee-shops, once meeting points for intellectuals and artists, had “turned the area into a no-man’s land” and that such a “sort of failure is one product of a lack of community participation” or what he terms “urban diplomacy”.

“Urban diplomacy means that people should feel that the place is their own and that their viewpoint is taken into account, through negotiations and trade-offs until a common ground is reached. But what usually happens is that people wake up to see their neighbourhood undergoing changes without being told or asked about them,” he commented.

However, Atia insisted that “community participation is strong through the presence of the tenants’ associations.” He has personally been communicating with the different parties to reach a compromise, which, he said, “is just a continuation of the role Mantiqti has been playing.”

Both Al-Bahr and Atia said that only four of the 28 cafés in the Borsa district were officially licensed and that the legal status of those was in question. “There was no control over the cafés that had no licences. They did not abide by the rules and committed acts of trespassing,” al-Bahr said.

Atia nodded, saying that “many of the cafés were too noisy for those working and living in the neighbourhood.” Both Atia and Al-Bahr added that perhaps later a few licensed coffee-shops and restaurants would be allowed to work under strict regulations and zoning rules to allow visitors and tourists to enjoy the streets safely.

“I believe that allowing a few restaurants and cafés in would help the area boom with activity and bring more income to the refurbished area,” Al-Bahr said, conceding that more community participation was also perhaps needed for the area to be fully restored and sustained.

“That participation was stronger in Al-Alfi Street because it buzzes with cafés. The fact that the Borsa district is dominated by institutions has perhaps made community participation less effective,” Al-Bahr added.

However, “urban diplomacy” is not the only problem, according to Nagati. There is also the problem of the “single or mono use of some streets as shopping centres or food courts and things of that sort.”

“Public space should have diversified activities for the benefit of both visitors and business owners alike,” Nagati insisted. “You cannot have a street like Al-Shawarbi reserved for shopping and then another one like Al-Alfi for cafés and food outlets. Diversity helps different businesses boom and makes the area buzz with activity all day long, so it does not fall into silence at some point as has been the case in the Borsa district.”

Al-Bahr promises that such diversity will occur in the renovation of nearby Hoda Shaarawi Street, but that “there is no one-size-fits-all solution because each area and each street has its own character and identity.”

Hawas, a professor of architecture, has slightly different concerns. “Restoration is an ongoing process, and restored buildings still have to be maintained every two years, which remains a major challenge in the light of the lack of funds,” she explained. “I just hope that Downtown Cairo remains protected from looming deterioration.”

But the CHDC seemed adamant to “protect Downtown” in its latest meeting a few days ago. Not only is the committee pushing for budget allocations, and continuing to liaise with all possible stakeholders, but it has also mandated a working group to revise all previous studies by local and international consultants to come up with a sustainable masterplan with strict deadlines for its implementation, Atia said.

In the meantime, according to Al-Bahr, the governorate has already removed at least 300 illegal signs from the façades of historic edifices in different Downtown areas and will continue to do that until all such eyesores are removed by mid-October.

“We are back on track, and moving forward with serious steps,” Atia noted enthusiastically.

