

FOCUS

## Chronicle of a Downtown walk



Cinema Revoli



**GIHAN SHAHINE**

[Articles](#)



It was on a cold winter afternoon that we started our one-hour stroll down Cairo's perhaps most fascinating memory lane. We had hardly stepped out of the offices of the magazine *Mantiqti* on Elwi Street in the Al-Borsa district when Tarek Atia, my guide, paused for a few seconds.

The grime-clad façade that veils the architecture of the building housing *Mantiqti*, as well as a one or no-star hotel and the flats of various tenants, perhaps sets the tone for the whole tour. The building is only one of hundreds of other long-neglected structures in the Downtown Cairo area awaiting restoration and in search of solutions as to how to finance its refurbishment in the light of the varying budgets of its tenants — a kind of epitome of the challenges facing the renovation of Cairo's aging urban jewels.

We move on into the pedestrian-friendly area surrounding the Cairo Stock Exchange, a 60,000 square metre section of Downtown extending northwards from Sherif Street to Talaat Harb Street and eastwards from Sabri Abu Alam Street to Qasr Al-Nil Street. The scaffolding on some edifices in the area indicates that change could be just round the corner.



Talat Harb Square

Bedecked with 19th-century-style street furniture and palm trees, Al-Sherifein Street and its sister streets exude an aura of history. They provide a haven for a number of architectural landmarks and century-old structures, featuring 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. For me, they also conjure up memories of the celebrations I attended in 1999 marking the completion of the first phase of the renovation of the Bourse building and the revamping of the surrounding area.

The century-old Stock Exchange (Bourse) building on Al-Sherifein Street has now been turned into a museum introducing the history of one of the leading exchanges in the world during the 1907 stock market boom when it was rated among the world's top 10-stock 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."

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 Sednaoui's department store on Midan Khazindar," Raafat wrote in his book.

"Downtown Cairo could one day have 50 or 60 museums of this sort that could be major tourist attractions," Atia said. 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.

Soon we come to a giant building exuding an aura of century-old Italianate architectural elegance. We get closer, and it's breathtaking. This is the iconic 1903 Cosmopolitan Hotel, an architectural masterpiece designed by Italian architect Alfonso Sassoon that has been recently rejuvenated and is now undergoing some final touches.

Qasr Al-Nil Street, a premier shopping destination in the neighbourhood's heyday, breaks the serenity of the pedestrianised streets with its buzzing traffic. "This street could be developed into a premier shopping destination today," Atia says as we march forward. As we dive deeper into the streets and alleyways of the Downtown area, I feel inundated with seemingly endless urban legends. "Each building here has a story to tell," Atia notes. There is the Greek Club, the Armenian Church and Club, the main Jewish Synagogue, historic churches and mosques, all of which are woven into a thrilling cosmopolitan structure alluring to tourists and locals alike. "You should bring your children to see all this," Atia suggests.



Al-Sherifein street - courtesy of Mantiqti

We pause in the middle of Mahmoud Bassyouni Street, and suddenly I feel that, yes, perhaps I need to bring my children to see this important architectural heritage. The fading rays of the late afternoon sun now reflect beautifully off the fresh paint on some of the old edifices. A cool breeze wafts through the area as I contemplate the panoramic thoroughfare with Talaat Harb Square at one end and the busy Abdel-Moneim Riad Street at the opposite end.

Near Talaat Harb Square a banner announces the much-anticipated renovation of Downtown's iconic 1909 café and ice-cream shop Groppi's, engraved in the collective memories of many as a premier hangout. Nostalgia overtakes me as I remember having once relished ice-cream there with my family on Thursday night outings in my early childhood. Groppi's has since suffered years of neglect, but now it is being renovated under the supervision of the CHDC and promises to restore the whole neighbourhood to its past glory.

A few metres away stands another icon in the Café Riche, established in 1908 on the ground floor of an Italianate-style apartment building and then serving for many years as a favoured venue for many intellectuals and politicians alike. The famous Yacoubian Building, an art deco apartment block constructed in 1937, adds to the historic aura of the street. It has long inspired visitors and writers alike, as it did Egyptian writer Alaa Al-Aswani earlier this century who wrote a best-selling novel using the building's name.

The contribution of private businesses has given a boost to this vivid area. Built in the 1930s and designed by Italian architect Gaston Rossi, Cinema Radio stands as a case in point. The cinema, once the home of some of Egypt's most-discerning audiences, is currently being renovated by the Al-Ismailia for Real Estate Investment Company. The cinema used to host TV star Bassem Youssef's popular show and is now hosting a show hosted by Abla Fahita.



Chronicle of a Downtown walk - courtesy of Mantiqi

We are now standing in front of the art deco Said Halim Pasha Palace built in 1920. I have to pause a little: the building's unique mix of neo-baroque, art deco and Islamic architectural styles has suffered badly from neglect in a way that is sadly typical of many other historic edifices nationwide. The palace was turned into a school, only closed two years ago. "The owner of the building will now renovate it," confide the security guards at the palace gate. It remains unknown how the building will ultimately be reused or when it will be renovated, however. But one can tell from the half-dead palm tree at the palace's entrance and the broken French windows on its façade that intervention is urgently needed.

Downtown is definitely not just about architectural treasures, however. It is also the home of a vibrant cultural and arts movement. We pass by a number of cinemas, hard to count since the Egyptian film industry was the third-largest in the world in the 1940s and 1950s. It was also in Downtown theatres and at the Old Opera House that legendary singers such as Um Kolthoum once kept their audiences happy for hours. The Old Opera House, the architectural jewel commissioned by the khedive Ismail in 1869 to celebrate the opening of the Suez Canal, was destroyed by fire in 1971 and a multi-storey garage built on the site. The good news is that the committee is studying whether another opera building can be built on the site in the long term.

Al-Shawarbi Street, once a renowned shopping hub, was previously developed into a pedestrian area, but more efforts are needed to stop violations of the space. Encroaching street-vendors are using benches as showcases, delivery motorcycles are breaking the rules of the pedestrian zone, and nagging street-vendors are annoying pedestrians with their goods.

"You're lucky you only got nagged by one vendor so far," Atia joked. The nearby Kodak Alleyway offers a respite with its carefully-planned greenery beds, rubbish bins, 19th-century lamp-posts, benches, and elegant shop windows. Recently refurbished by the Cairo Lab for Urban Studies, Training and Environmental Research (CLUSTER), a private design company, the alleyway now serves as a pilot project for the development of 70 others in Downtown Cairo.

A nearby Italian restaurant, where two lady owners are putting a new spin on an older one, offers a cosy ambiance with a taste of the nearby Downtown buildings on its interior wallpaper. The image of a woman flying through space on the wallpaper bewilders me: is this a symbol of how people should enjoy the public space?

We stroll down nearby Emadeddin Street, once the playground of art and culture, with an inspiring number of theatres, cinemas and iconic department stores like Gatinio and Sednaoui lining the street. We are introduced to many beautiful edifices restored by Al-Ismailia and the breathtaking Khedival Buildings, an architectural gem built in the early 20th century.

Al-Alfi Street is our next stop, and, bedecked with carefully-zoned cafés, street furniture, flower beds, security cameras and benches, as well as painted edifices, one cannot but admire the efforts being made to beautify the area. Pedestrians can enjoy a variety of cafés that have clear menus and price lists and in which waiters have clearly received hospitality training programmes — now a condition for getting a licence. Old songs by singer Abdel-Halim Hafez waft from the popular 1948 Um Kolthoum Café, located in the adjacent pedestrianised Saray Al-Azbakeya Street where statues of the late singer stand in reminiscence of the good old days.

"These are all small efforts here and there. But the important thing is that they are gaining momentum," Atia concludes.

