Mugamma revisited: Reimagining the building and the square

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In this series, together with architects, designers, artists and writers, we try to visualize the already changing Tahrir Square as a different space, where sites of bureaucracy for the citizenry become communal establishments, seats of power become colossal fantasies, and squares are experienced as time machines.

The government administrations housed in the infamous Mugamma building at Tahrir Square are most likely set to be replaced by a luxurious hotel, while the square itself is being renovated. Amid the digitizing of many government services and the relocation of core government functions outside the city center, several administrative departments in the building have already moved out. This building, which was once the national hub of the physical interface between citizen and government, dating back to the 1940s, perhaps most acutely exemplifies the challenges facing Downtown.

As the government relocates to the New Administrative Capital, the city's public life is hollowed out. The new capital under construction on the outskirts of Cairo is expected to house 6.5 million people in a range of luxury and affordable housing options, provide employment opportunities, host an array of public parks and top-end urban amenities, and boast a new presidential palace and parliament. The project falls in line with a longstanding policy of new constructions that expand into the desert, away from an increasingly complex, dense inner city and the Nile Valley in general.

And while the process of hollowing out unfolds, a wave of gentrification has also been emerging, exemplified in individual building renovations that are typically leased as high-end office spaces or hotels and frequent public space upgrades aimed at "beautifying" the city, while controlling flows of

pedestrians, traffic and undesired informal activity. Already, many of Downtown's diverse users are being pushed out, from independent arts and culture spaces, cafes and economically diverse commercial activities, to street vendors who are frequently subject to evictions.

Between the intertwined effects of urban expansion, relocation, gentrification and securitization/sanitization, more and more of what makes the city a city is being eliminated.

In the following series of images, we propose a mixed-use renovation for the Mugamma building that seeks to re-establish it as a civic center deeply intertwined in the public life of Downtown Cairo, the city's current political-economic hub.

I. Tetris: Stakeholder negotiation
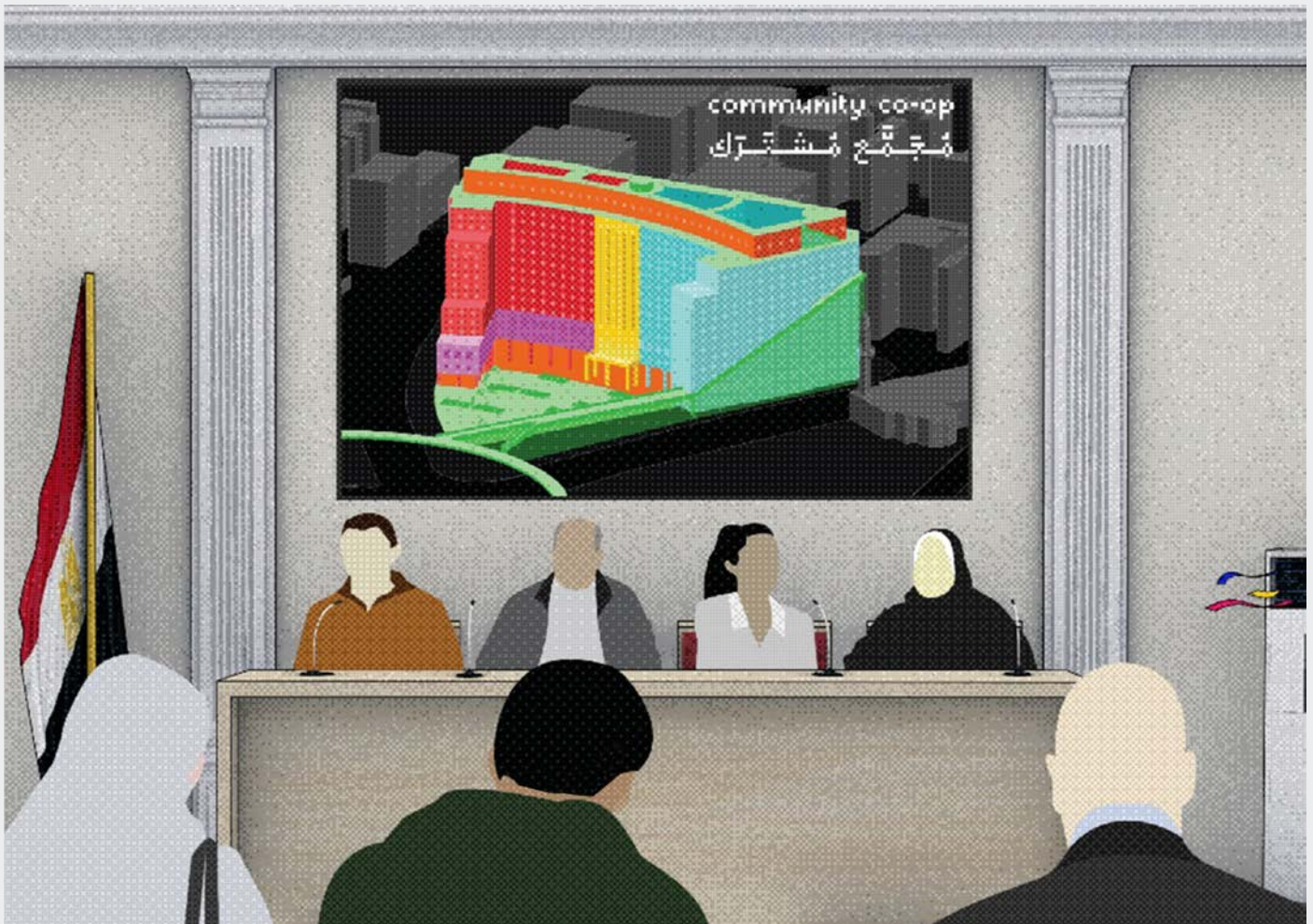
In such a colossal volume and public space, we propose a diversity of activities: a public library, affordable housing, a hotel, government headquarters, and a range of new public spaces.

There is more than enough space to accommodate these activities, and to engage and provide for their multitude of users. The challenge becomes how to negotiate the coexistence of this diversity, both spatially and socially. While one could propose a rigorous, linear division — equal ratios, separate entrances, independent services — here we experiment with a tetris-like spatial interlocking that maximizes the intersection and engagement between components. And while privacy and separation can be maintained where required, the overall feeling is that of a shared building. Naturally, we maintain a shared main entrance, in keeping with the layout of the building's original intensely public and civic use.

The interfaces between users in the communal cores become moments of engagement that may not otherwise occur, signifying and promoting a wider ambition of stakeholder engagement. For such a layered site, however, who are the stakeholders?

In the first instance, the building and the square have a local context: Downtown Cairo. Nearby residents and those who commute here for work on a daily basis, or frequent the area for other reasons, may be considered primary stakeholders; those in frequent, direct contact with the physical site. And how the site can accommodate the variety of needs of these users is a crucial starting point. Moreover, Downtown, at the heart of which lies the Mugamma, is central to the city. Indeed, nearly all Cairenes have passed through the area at some point, and perhaps even the Mugamma itself, which has housed government administrations for decades. At the center of the city center of the capital city, Tahrir Square and the Mugamma play a cultural role for the nation. For years, the building has stood witness to the nation's most significant events, from funeral processions of national icons to revolution.

The uses we propose here aim to acknowledge and account for this multiplicity of stakeholders, promoting a sensitive and inclusive urban approach: the iconic connection between the building and Tahrir Square is reinstated; public space engulfs the building from all directions, allowing diverse public use; and governmental administrative functions retain a core position in the building, while space is allocated for private enterprise to subsidize local amenities.

II. The square: Recalling a national public
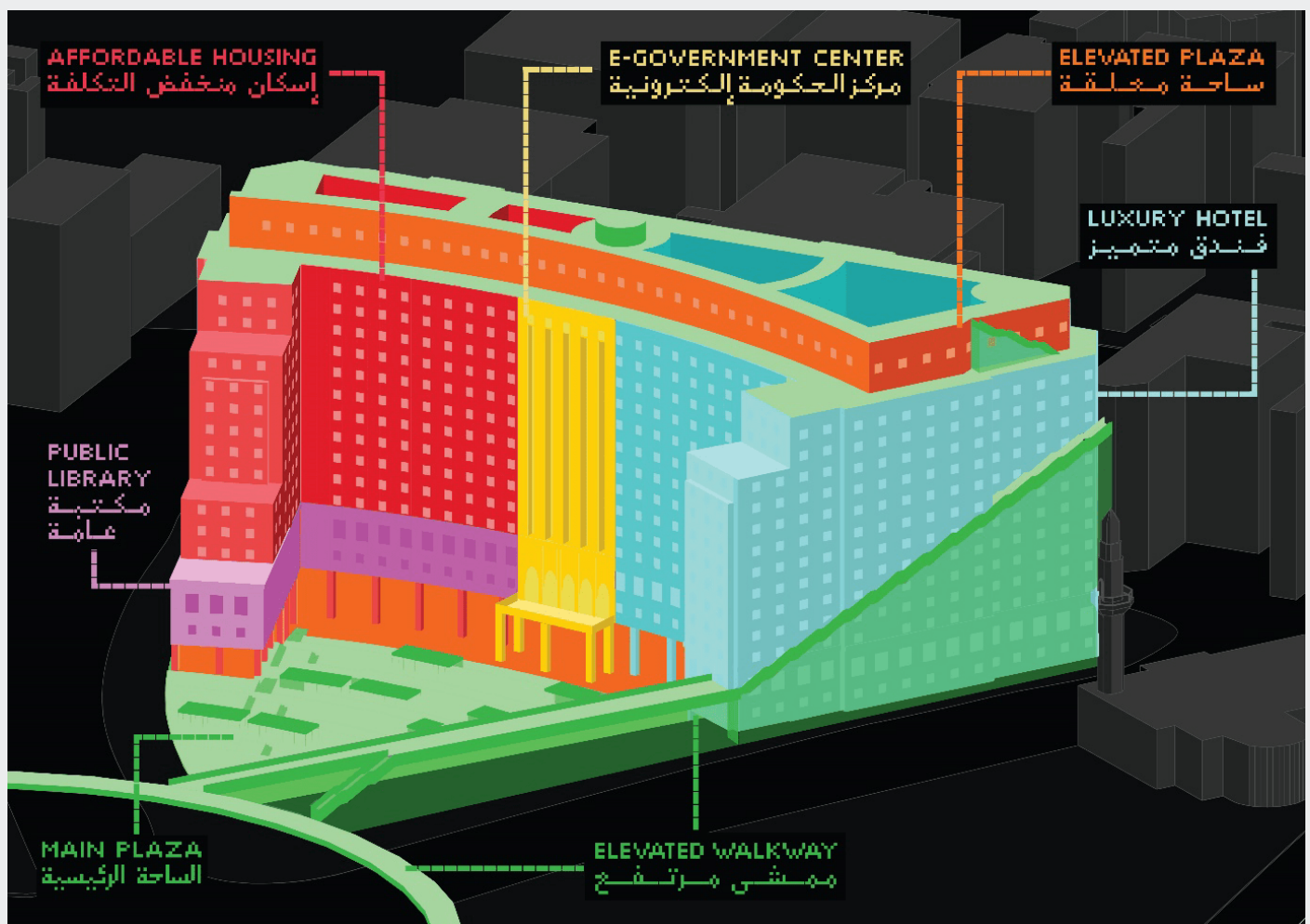
The intervention begins with Tahrir Square. In the mid-1980s, during the construction of the metro station, a raised public footpath that encircled the square and allowed room for safe strolling above the vehicular traffic was removed. We propose reinstating a contemporary version of this circular bridge and connecting it to the Mugamma and the public space at the center of Tahrir. Crucially, the intervention must be physically accessible. Ramps and smooth surfaces allow wheelchair access and a marked bike path accommodates shared pedestrian-bicycle use. In this spatial move of a raised platform, we prioritize every citizen's ability to exist and spend time at Tahrir, acknowledging the ultimately national-public role of the square as an urban park beyond its role in traffic organization.

III. Engulfing the building: Accommodating multiple publics
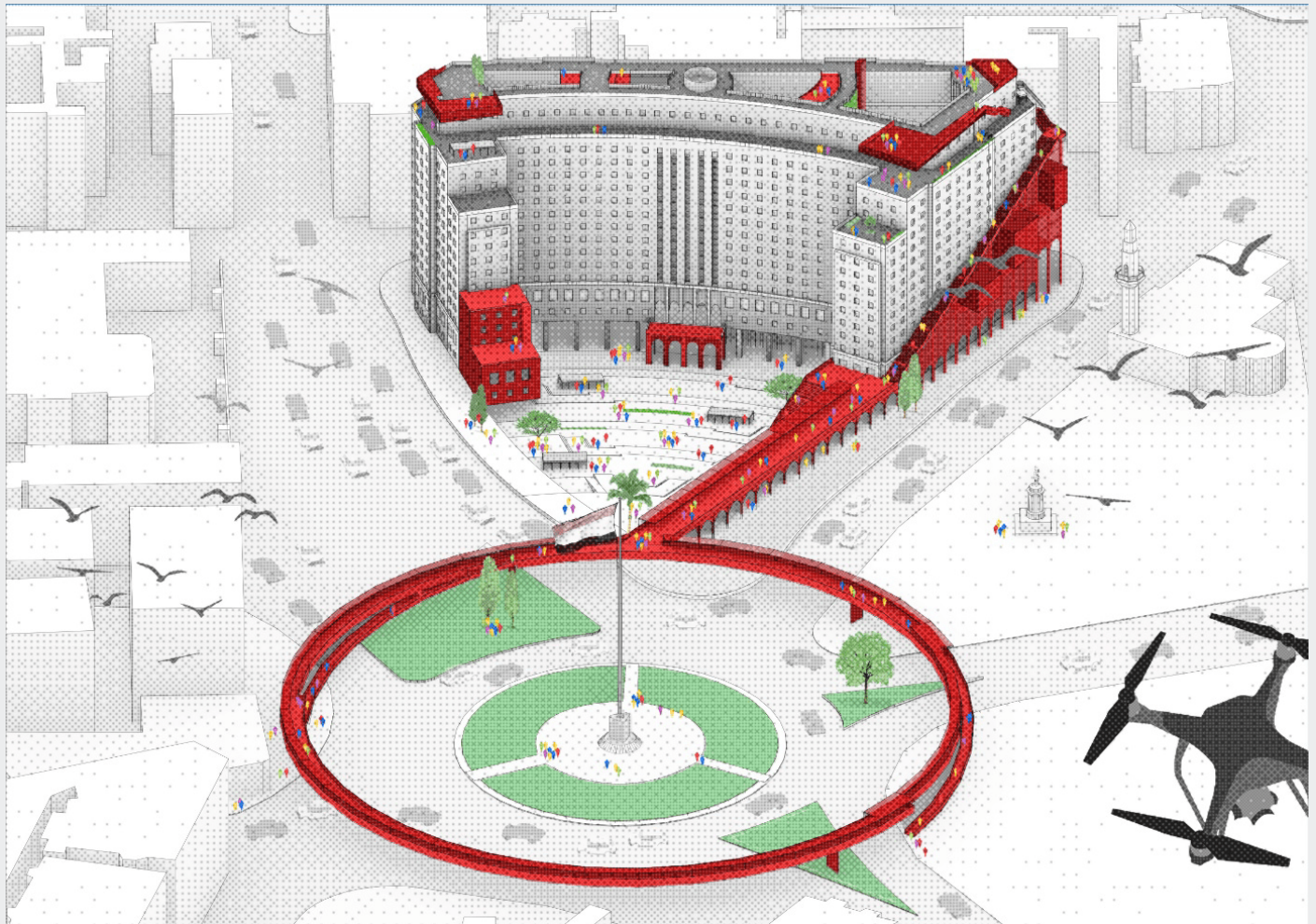
As a counter-narrative to the excessive privatization of the city, we explore the extreme opposite: We introduce a variety of public spaces all over — engulfing the Mugamma from multiple directions, blurring the boundaries between indoor functional spaces and outdoor urban plazas and ultimately between the private and public domains.

The reinstated footpath extends across the square to the building's second floor. From here, a public staircase connects the ground plane to the rooftop garden, opening up typically exclusive city views to the general public. The plaza directly in front of the Mugamma becomes the focus of a diverse public life. The whole area cascades down smoothly, to open up the basement level of the building, forming stepped seating with the Mugamma as a backdrop. A multitude of possibilities open up: a podium for speeches, a stage for theater or performance, or a flat surface for screenings. Urban furniture creates a

variety of uses across the plaza. There are shaded areas for gathering, for a periodic marketplace or for prayer, while creative seating options double as obstacles and games for roller-skaters and children playing.

The building, too, faces the square in an open embrace. The basement façade is opened up into space for a shaded colonnade, inviting the public in and blurring the boundary between the outside and inside.

IV. Digital space: Accessible governance

As many governmental services are in the process of digitizing, we ask: What physical spaces will remain for citizen-government engagement? And how do we ensure the accessibility of those services for those without computers or internet access? Although governmental digitizing may be more efficient and cost effective, we must ensure that these changes uphold values of participation, inclusivity and transparency.

In an effort to maintain and uphold a genuine relationship between people and their government, we dedicate a core of the Mugamma to digital services. The proposal provides physical space for real-life government-citizen encounters and for a variety of administrative work, as well as the digital equipment required to allow access to online government portals to any citizen. The different layers of government could be perceived by the citizen visually: stacked vertically around a spiralling core, blending multiple publics through a collective consciousness of state-citizen interface.

V. River views: Economic strategy

We advocate a balanced development strategy, whereby an economic diversity of users may cross-subsidize public activities and positively engage the private sector. The western section of the Mugamma will provide impressive views across the River Nile, the famous Qasr al-Nil Bridge, and Downtown. We propose maximizing the profitability of this section of the building, dedicating it to a high-end hotel. The hotel occupies the western internal courtyard, to be planted with hanging greenery, overlooking a central hotel lobby. The hotel bedrooms can enjoy the exclusive interior views, while the rooftop becomes a shared interface between hotel visitors and city-goers, who have access to the public rooftop garden through a panoramic stairway, for engaging the city views together.

For such a financial strategy to be successful in safeguarding the socioeconomic diversity of the building, this kind of balanced development must be regulated by the development's owners, and ideally a decision-making board that involves the spectrum of stakeholders. In such a case, other service-oriented amenities may be successfully and sustainably incorporated in the remaining building volume.

VI. Public interiors: Open institutions
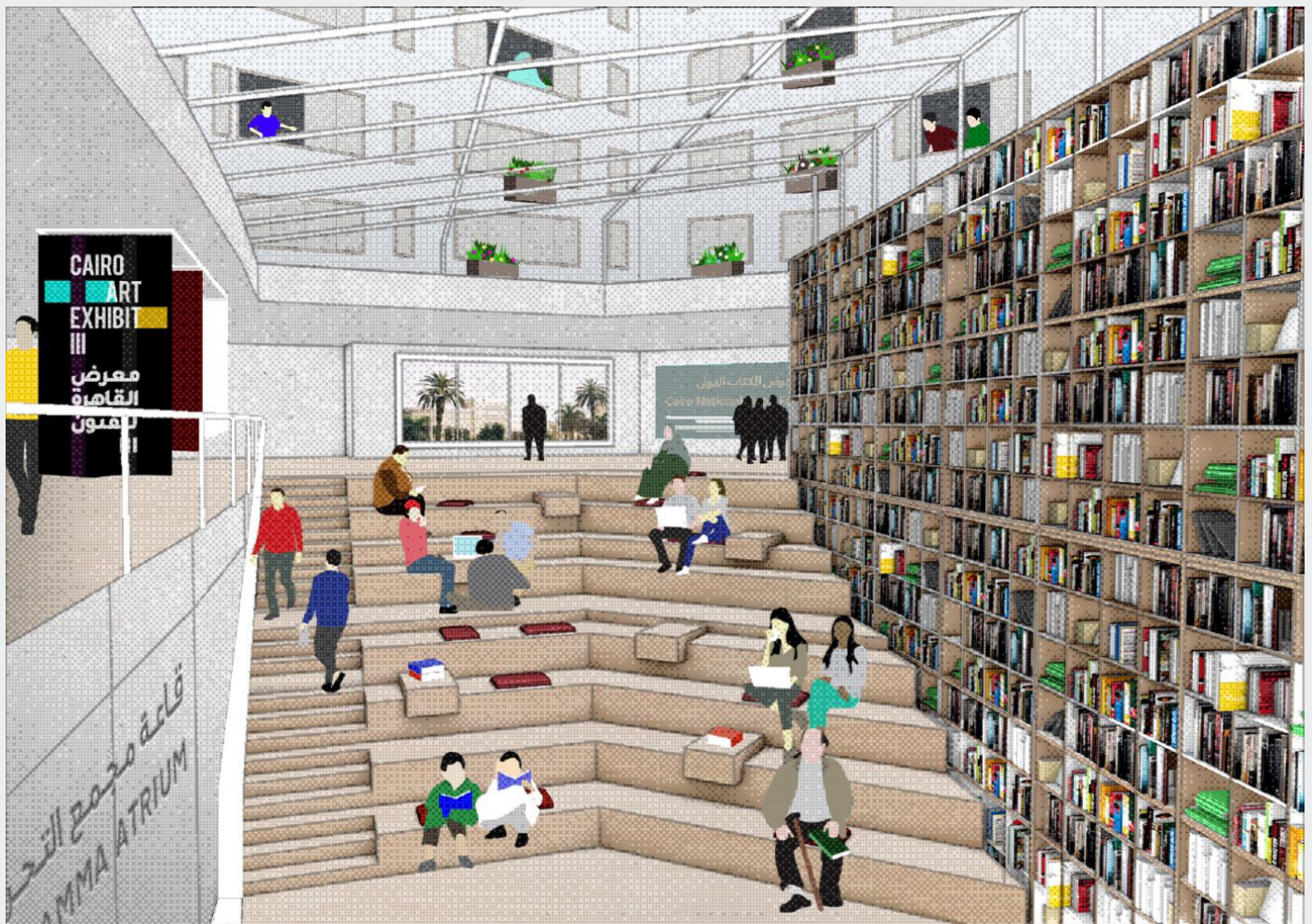
A large public interior can thus be maintained as a new public library, fulfilling a civic need that is sorely lacking in Cairo. Opening up towards the eastern façade, the new public library engages directly with the original American University in Cairo campus, which still houses some university functions, including a bookshop.

Pushing for open, accessible institutions and learning facilities, the new library seeks engagement with the adjacent AUC, while offering new and digital modes of co-learning. Inhabiting the expansive courtyard within the Mugamma, its large, interior public gathering space provides spill-over space that may be used to bridge between the AUC's activities, and that of other similar institutions and the general public.

VII. Micro-housing: Affordable city

The remaining rooms of the Mugamma will be adapted to suit small-scale, affordable rental opportunities, with full access to the amenities of the building. The design provides self-contained units, with their own kitchen and bathroom, that may be rented by an individual for housing or office space. Several units may be combined to accommodate larger groups.

Standing in contrast to the current patterns of development that segregate the population across different districts and gated communities, this proposal practically provides affordable living/working solutions, facilitated by economic strategies. In this way, we seek to uphold citizens' rights to access and live anywhere in the city, and the principles of urban affordability and socioeconomic diversity.

Some final thoughts

While we have taken the spatial, economic and managerial feasibility of this proposal seriously, we do not intend to put forth a single "ideal" solution. Rather, through the sensitive intervention at the Mugamma we propose an ethos for inclusive urban development that seeks to negotiate the diverse needs of a variety of city users: the multiple publics. We have also presented a collection of spatial and programmatic possibilities for the adaptive re-use of vacant buildings, which can diversify and reinvigorate public life in an emptying city. It is not just the Mugamma that is being emptied of its current inhabitants; embassies and ministries, among other buildings in central Cairo, are set to be relocated too.

However, these relocations do not necessarily have to result in the hollowing out of Downtown. The newly vacant buildings will be open to possibilities and may be viewed as an opportunity. Taking on the ethos we have presented, one could imagine them as vessels from which the revitalizing and enriching of Downtown may begin. How can we use this opportunity to reimagine a city center that caters to the multiple publics? How can we imagine a process whereby the different groups of stakeholders can participate in the remaking of Downtown? And what would be an alternative mixed use of the building (and Downtown) whereby private-sector investment could help subsidize public services, civic amenities and affordable housing units? Let's begin to imagine.

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