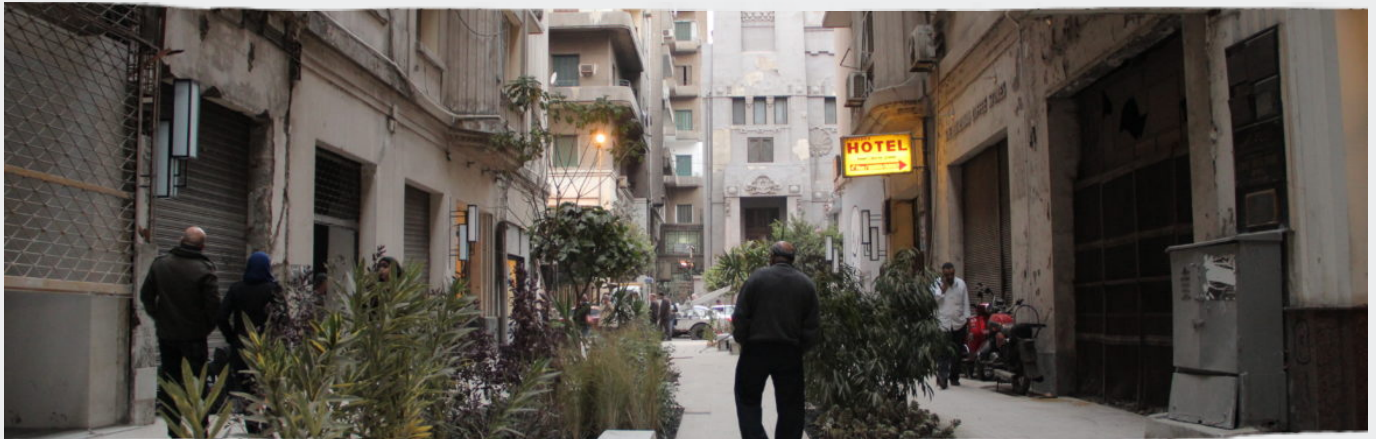


Downtown in-betweens engage in urban development dialogue



By
[Rowan El Shimi](#)

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Like many others, architect and urban planner Omar Nagati has a fascination with downtown Cairo. He feels at home there despite not being a native of the area. Its social heterogeneity, cultural diversity and elaborate history always made him go out in it, take part in its culture scene and even set up his office there.

One element that has long taken his fancy is the neighborhood's in-between spaces: pedestrian alleys, designed pathways and simply spaces between buildings that connect the main streets — with their hustle and

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bustle — to each other in an elaborate network of 100 to 150 passageways.

“Your entire experience of downtown can be through these in-betweens,” Nagati tells Mada Masr one afternoon at one of the more “chic” passageways, named Kodak because it once hosted a Kodak store, studio and print shop. “You see in them various alternative uses for space. A state of co-existence: the mosque next to the bar next to the cafe. The idea kept marinating in my head without a clear path for it.”

Nagati is co-founder with American artist and curator Beth Stryker of the [Cairo Lab for Urban Studies, Training and Environmental Research](#) (CLUSTER). The lab researches urban development, with a particular focus on informality and design projects spanning both public and private space.

On January 17, Nagati, Stryker and the young CLUSTER team unveiled to the public one of their biggest re-design projects yet: A revamp of two downtown passageways, Kodak and the more run-down, but far more alive Philips passageway.

The event included a concert by Nadah El Shazly at Kodak, a screening program by independent cinema initiative Cimatheque at Philips, and an exhibition showcasing the steps to the redesign.

The exhibition starts from the project’s initiation in 2011 with Nagati’s 30 architecture students from MSA University collecting data on the passageways, and

moves to more formal documentation carried out by CLUSTER. It also covers the renovation of the Kodak shops for visual artist [Hassan Khan](#)’s comprehensive show (curated by Stryker) during the 2014 edition of [Downtown Contemporary Arts Festival](#) (D-CAF), and finally the passageways workshop hosted by CLUSTER in April 2014. The exhibition also showcases CLUSTER’s vision for other community projects and artistic interventions that could take place in such spaces.

Supported by Danish organizations [CKU](#) and [DEDI](#), the workshop included Egyptian and Danish artists who were split into groups for a week. Through a competition, they came up with redesign concepts for both passageways. Its approach to design was unique: It focused on a multi-stakeholder application. The participants — with CLUSTER’s support — spent their days engaging with shop owners, landlords and residents to formulate the redesigns. The two projects eventually picked by a jury of urbanists and artists were “The Green Oasis” for Kodak and “The Light Oasis” for Philips.

CLUSTER’s unusual approach to design and implementation has created a moment to both celebrate its successful urban development project, and to stop and evaluate the general regeneration — or what some call gentrification — currently taking place in downtown. It also opens up questions on how downtown can be developed from its currently decaying state — due to decades of governmental and private negligence — and the role artists are playing in this process.

CLUSTER's redesign involved re-tiling the passageway and developing an irrigation system to maintain a garden of trees. Modern benches and street lights reminiscent of those that hung in the passageway in Cairo's hey-day have been constructed.

Kodak's tenants and shop owners were skeptical at first, but as the renovations rolled out they took a closer interest. Some even contributed financially, such as Babel Shoe Store, Sarwat Abdel-Shahid Law Firm and the [Al-Ismaelia for Real Estate Investment](#), which owns several downtown buildings including the two overlooking Kodak.

But Ismaelia were not so supportive of the Philips renovations, and not shy to admit it either.

In video documentation of the workshop showing at the exhibition, Ismaelia CEO Karim Shafei tells participants that it is not in Ismaelia's financial interest to renovate Philips. Driving out tenants and shop owners would benefit Ismaelia more, since most use the old rent system whereby contracts are lifelong and a 450-meter flat can be rented for LE25 per month. With renovation, rent prices go up, so Ismaelia prefers to keep things as they are, he explains, and offer tenants a fair price to evacuate. Then Ismaelia would renovate and sell or rent the units for heftier prices.

"It's the mean, capitalist point of view," Shafei says.

Since less private-enterprise support was offered to Philips, and its businesses are of a much smaller scale, a lower budget was available for renovations. So not everything in the design plan was implemented, leaving several of the shop owners I spoke to dismayed.

A major problem with the Philips passageway is its lack of a proper drainage system. It was not designed as a passageway, but is merely an L-shaped empty space between buildings. So when it rains the passageway floods, and much more money would be needed to reconstruct the decaying infrastructure of nearby buildings.

The project could not sustain this cost, so instead CLUSTER introduced a temporary solution, elevating the flooring to allow water to flow to the streets where there is drainage.

Many of the shop owners at Philips who spoke to Mada Masr were satisfied with the renovations of the flooring, the lighting (as it was previously gloomy), and the attractive sign at the entrance. But they wished for more.

For Mahmoud Antar, son of the owner of the passageway's cafe, the drainage system was extremely important. He questions why so much money was spent on Kodak and not Philips, but congratulates CLUSTER on their effort either way.

This was echoed by another salesman who preferred to be anonymous. He also wishes that CLUSTER had included the graffiti mural

that was in the original mock-up, as he is very fond of art. However, he says the fact that that passageway is now well-lit is very good for business, as customers feel safer walking through.

Nagati was very understanding about these comments when I spoke to him after the opening. He explains that dealing with so many different stakeholders is a real challenge, particularly in terms of expectation management. He also mentions that Ismaelia owns the building the mural was planned for.

“Ismaelia said they won’t stop us, but won’t help us either,” he elaborates regarding Philips.

“We want to create a catalyst, an incentive for people to regain confidence in public good,” Nagati adds. “We fell short in what we could have done, but it’s not about the tangible, but what happened intangibly.”

The owner of a bags shop who has been working in the passageway since inheriting the business in 1998 from his father, who had been there since 1954, says that he was the first to renovate his own shop when the project proceeded to implementation.

“It brought us all together. We are thinking in the future to collectively renovate the ceiling and do more work around the shared area,” he says.

Nagati says he is working with the 20 shop owners of Philips and some building residents to create a board for the passageway, or a

passageway workers' union, to maintain the project and expand it. He hopes this pilot project will serve as a case study for a possible alternative to the current urban development of Cairo's downtown.

On art, culture and urban regeneration of downtown

For CLUSTER, one main vision they have for in-between spaces is to bring in arts and cultural activities: Screenings, book fairs and performances may reach more audiences and revive downtown's streets.

The neighborhood boasts much of Cairo's independent art scene. [Townhouse](#), the [Contemporary Image Collective](#) and the recently opened [Heytan Graffiti Space](#) are among the long-term renters from Ismaelia. Ismaelia also rented out to now-closed art initiative [10 Mahmoud Basiouny](#) and Bassem Youssef's political satire show [Al-Bernameg](#), which is now off air. They offer temporary spaces for exhibitions and performances in Hotel Viennoise and other locations.

Ismaelia is also a [main sponsor](#) of the popular D-CAF, a multi-disciplinary arts festival taking place yearly since 2012 in an array of spaces around the neighborhood.

In many cases around the world, such as New York or Berlin, artists have been used by real estate developers as urban catalysts, a way to bring in attention and traffic to decaying neighborhoods, increase rents and bring high-end renters in, thus bringing about gentrification.

However, in Cairo's downtown, things are not so black and white. Although there are many similarities, such as the old rent law and issues between inheritors to buildings, many apartments are left empty: The government and insurance companies own many downtown buildings with vacant spaces, according to Ismaelia.

These factors contribute to the negligence toward many of architecturally significant buildings and their deterioration over the past 50 years. It is well-recognized that there needs to be an urban development plan for downtown, since the current situation is not sustainable.

Artists are an integral part of this process, whether they engage with it directly, like CLUSTER, or indirectly. And for this regeneration to happen in a way that is fair for downtown's current users (owners, renters, shops and businesses) there needs to be a continual critical discourse to set parameters and safeguards.

Through its passageways project, CLUSTER proposes an alternative model that does exactly this, using the consistent state of negotiation we live in to involve the government, private sector and individuals in actively transforming a neighborhood. The passageways are a microcosm for a reality that is more profitable, culturally rich and sustainable.



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For Nagati, the passageways represent the state of in-betweenness we live in generally. On one level this means the current events, where a political regime is building itself after the fall of another. On a more continuous level, it means the gray area between public and private space in Egypt. Legally, a shop can stop cars from parking in front of it and an individual can take over a pavement for a business, for example. This creates a constant state of negotiation, and the passageways are a living, breathing manifestation of it.

The Kodak passageway, connecting Adly Street to Abdel-Khalek Tharwat Street, is a special case. Designed as a route between buildings, it is large and spacious. It's surrounded by high-end businesses and lies across from downtown's Jewish synagogue, which means security personnel are always present. Most of its shops are closed.



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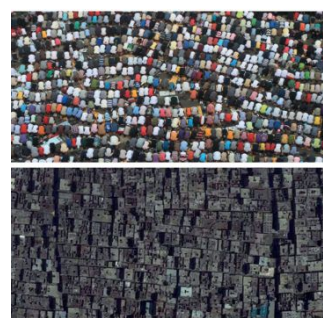
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