



# The Cluster Effect

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*This design company sees community buy-in as the key to urban renewal* By Frank E. Bartscheck II The Kodak passageway was an odd place for an art gallery. Like so many of Downtown Cairo's alleys, it suffered from long-term neglect and had descended into dilapidation. Many of the storefronts along the passage — including the Kodak store, labs and warehouse — lay vacant and crumbling. But last April, it took a baby step towards rehabilitation when the Cairo Laboratory for Urban Studies, Training and Environment Research (CLUSTER) used the space to host an exhibit by internationally celebrated

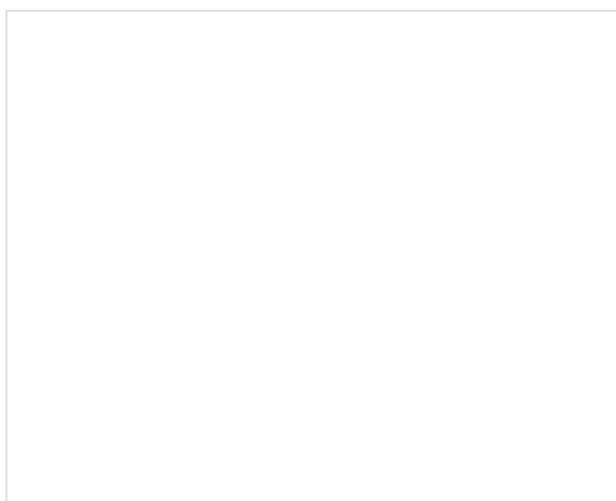
Egyptian artist Hassan Khan, the largest display of his work ever presented in Cairo and first solo show in 11 years, for the Downtown Contemporary Arts Festival (D-CAF) To convert the space into a pop-up gallery, CLUSTER, an organization focused on critical urban discourse and design practice, teamed up with Khan and D-CAF to conduct a full-scale, ground-up renovation of unused storefronts to transform them into contemporary art spaces. Normally, the story would end when the show closes, and the space is once again abandoned. But in November, CLUSTER broke ground on the final stage of the passage's revitalization, based on the input of its residents and business tenants who have committed to maintaining the new space. When it reopens in January, the Kodak passage will include a completely new walkway and some green space. The CLUSTER designers hope this can provide a formula and the opening for renovating the rest of Downtown's walkways. Urban renewal involves renovating dilapidated areas of a city and often includes clearing slums through official channels. This traditional approach entails constructing new buildings, parks, roadways or industrial areas, often without consulting those living and working in the targeted region. At best, this type of project can alienate those within the community. At worst, it forcibly removes and relocates them. CLUSTER's urban renewal concept is more comprehensive than traditional methods because it includes local community stakeholders, art and culture in the development process. Co-founder Omar Nagati describes it as "a combination of local experience and local knowledge along with an outside perspective. I think this is the right format that can be very regenerative." As successive governments have wrestled with stabilizing the country on the national level since 2011, local needs have often been left unaddressed. In that gap have risen informal community reclamation projects in many forms, from makeshift stairs connecting a slum area to a major thoroughfare to microbus stops carved out of a busy road. CLUSTER wants to augment these reclamation projects and set them on the path of legitimate urban renewal. The idea of CLUSTER, founded by Nagati, an architect and urban planner, and American artist and designer Beth Stryker, was hatched while they were documenting changes directly after the revolution, particularly how individual communities were reclaiming public spaces. "On an individual basis we were, as a loose collective, starting to take photographs and interviewing people. We were interested in archiving this manifestation of the revolution," Nagati explains. "Then we began to formalize our company and began investigating the informal usage of public spaces as an entry point for the establishment of our company." Preserving Passageways The inspiration for the Kodak passageway revitalization project actually came prior to the 2011 Revolution, with Nagati observing how passageways serve as a bridge between different spaces. "I have always been fascinated by these in-between spaces. So I started trying to identify where these places are and we did a comprehensive mapping of Downtown to

indicate where there are passageways," he explains. His team has mapped more than 100 passageways in the past three years. "The idea is to look at the in-between as a condition, not just as a physical gap between buildings." Since the revolution, he points out, these spaces have served as a powerful representation for the change the nation has recently undergone — "a transitional living space between an order that has collapsed and a new one that is coming. So it is a really incredible metaphor for a state of being." The actual development of the Kodak and Phillips passageways, located off of Adly Street between Mohammed Farid and Sherif Pasha, traveled a long route to fruition. Stryker says the process began after the Hassan Khan exhibit with an "outreach to do a community stakeholder analysis with all of the tenants of the passageway to develop a design brief and then hold a competition. The results of this competition were the design ideas for the two passageways, which CLUSTER has developed further and are actually on the ground and starting to implement. The negotiations with the community's stakeholders, who had specific requests and concerns both large and small, initially encountered a heavy dose of skepticism. Then CLUSTER started the physical work, incorporating engineering designs not usually seen locally. "People took notice because we spent the first two weeks digging [irrigation] trenches [to protect the building foundation against water damage]," Nagati says. "I think this kind of intervention created a sense of credibility within the community. Once they saw we were really taking care by doing things to a certain standard, in a way that is not often done, they started to take us more seriously and began to help and even conceding" some of their specific demands for the benefit of the greater good of the project. The Kodak passageway renewal "is ultimately an experiment in the hands of the community," Nagati says, adding that he is hopeful that the passageway "will take on a life of its own after we leave. Maybe people will change it or redesign it, I don't care. It isn't about the design itself but whether it will [make a] difference in the lives [of stakeholders], increase business, better the livelihood [of tenants] and promote more inclusive activities and accessibility." Stryker says it is already happening, noting that local stakeholders have started taking, "ownership and responsibility for the future life of the project" through a "community board to maintain and manage the upkeep" of the renewed Kodak passageway. She says that the new board is spearheaded by those who have offices in the buildings along the passage, and CLUSTER is helping them set up their first meeting. Nagati notes that the open dialogue of the passageway renewal project has fostered a sense of community that did not previously exist. If the project is a catalyst for local stakeholder maintenance after CLUSTER's role is concluded, Nagati says, "that to me would be the measure of success." Moving forward, Nagati and Stryker hope the Kodak and Phillips projects provide a format for a larger concept within Cairo, envisioning "a green oasis, a network of green passageways." The projects can also showcase the

company's design ideas to highlight Downtown's potential. In fact other areas are already taking notice. The company was approached by Popular Coalition of Ard Al-Lewa Ard Al-Lewa, Giza, a group of residents who in 2012 were protesting a housing development plan that would have eliminated the last vestige of open green area within the community. The activists, focused on renewing their community, wanted to see the land turned into a shared public space for civic usage. CLUSTER has been working with the coalition, ministries and government agencies to develop and implement potential designs for the land. "[The Ard Al-Lewa activists] see in the planner/architect a leader who can approach authorities," Nagati notes. "For them they see a good partner that puts them in a better negotiating position." Another project involves the UN Habitat Safer Cities Program, which works with local companies and organizations to improve the overall welfare and security, for women. One of several companies involved in the UN's Cairo project, CLUSTER is working on designing more accessible and safer public spaces within informal neighborhoods. The CLUSTER Culture CLUSTER's unique approach to urban revitalization can be found in the merger of disparate scholarship. "One of the things we do here is [promote] an intersection between architecture, urbanism and art so we collaborate a lot with artists in historic cultural spaces," Nagati says. Among its cultural projects, the design company is working with Cimatheque to rebuild the historical movie house on Adly Street with state-of-the-art features that can accommodate film screenings, workshops and events, making it a cultural meeting point for filmmakers and audiences to connect. The construction is in the final stages and the venue is due to open very soon. CLUSTER is also documenting Cairo's architectural heritage with a map of Downtown walking tours. The routes list historical locations and buildings with a synopsis of each locale's history. The team plans to host guided walking tours of Cairo as well. Perhaps the most valuable of CLUSTER's projects does not include design work at all: the company has created the Cairo Urban Initiatives Platform ([cuipcairo.org](http://cuipcairo.org)), a web-based community platform that connects organizations and businesses involved in issues related to Cairo's architecture, advocacy, urban development, arts, culture and urban environment. Businesses can communicate with each other to "avoid repetition and share resources," Nagati says, and these organizations also communicate with the community through an interactive map with locations of all participating firms and a monthly calendar detailing each initiative's events and activities. CLUSTER's office is a beehive of activity, with seven employees actively discussing and exchanging ideas. The integrative approach is reflected in the layout of the workspace. "All of the studio work, all of the discussions happen in one [shared/common] space," Nagati notes. "It becomes like a kitchen, there is an interplay going on." The company founders say they empower employees with more autonomy to learn and create than might be afforded at other companies. "This is part of the

experiment,” explains Nagati who, along with Stryker, are considering expansion, which would provide even more freedom to employees. “We are at the [stage] where we have been here for three years and have staff that have been with us that long as well. Part of what we are doing is also trying to help bring them up,” Stryker says. “So I think that will be how we eventually expand: They will take on more and more autonomy and we will start to grow as they can start to mentor people under them.” Nagati sees this work environment as “an incubator” for both ideas and his employees, and he hopes they will one day be able to branch out and establish their own offices within their own respective communities. “I think CLUSTER will be successful if someone is mature enough and has their own vision [so] they can establish an offshoot of CLUSTER.” Eventually, he adds, they will have “quite literally a cluster of CLUSTERS.”

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