

هذا ما القاهره

CAIROBSERVER

— بداية حوار حول معمار القاهرة —

[CLUSTER Re-frames Downtown Cairo's Creative Landscape](#)



Mia Jankowicz

“Chaos is found in greatest abundance wherever order is being sought. It always defeats order, because it is better organized.” - Terry Pratchett, *Interesting Times*.

In the *Creative Cities: Re-framing Downtown* conference at the American University in Cairo (for which Cairoobserver was a media sponsor), Cairo Lab for Urban Studies, Training and Environmental Research ([CLUSTER](#)) attempted to “emphasize comparative and interdisciplinary approaches to issues related to public space, heritage and urban culture, the revitalization of downtown in the context of gentrification and securitization, and urban governance.” As the current government recognizes, announcing a large-scale bricks-and-mortar planning vision for a place like downtown Cairo is far easier (and probably more lucrative) than grappling with the multiple realities, economies, histories and activities that actually go on there. CLUSTER, however, undertook to herd these cats in a conference that recognized that the very contradictions of downtown are the root of its possibilities.

Across six panels and numerous walking tours, the conference addressed gentrification, the role of artists and small-scale entrepreneurs, governance, and urban heritage. Perhaps most importantly of all, it acknowledged the ideological nature of the government’s top-down urban planning habits in relation to public freedoms; making the connection between urban planning, securitization and social control. On the panel named “Is Gentrification Inevitable?” Lucie Ryzova stated that the regime understands ‘the crowd’ (eg, street vendors and activists) as ‘pollution’. Thus, ‘cleansing’ the streets takes the form of repainting the building facades, but also evacuating unlicensed vendors and imprisoning activists. These actions, she says “... were aimed at eradicating the non-hegemonic and socially porous space of Downtown, its essential liminality and heterotopic quality.” In stating this, she didn’t paint a utopia, rather saying that within downtown Cairo differing groups of people and their numerous (often conflicting) interests coexist “like ships passing in the night.” To say otherwise would imply that we, too, might fall victim to the same nostalgias that characterize the accepted histories of Khedival, protectorate and post-1952 Cairo.

“The company’s buildings in downtown have been given little more than a lick-of-paint-and-fix-the-wiring. These efforts are laudable on their own terms but the

company representative speaking on the panel failed to provide any insight regarding the company’s consideration of the human needs and use of these buildings.“



[Six thematic walking tours comprised an key element of the conference. Above, Omar Nagati leading the “Passageways” tour, and below, Aida Elkashef leading the “Cinematic City” tour.]

Almost inevitably on this panel, the question of gentrification was opened up rather than laid to rest. Certain moments were more telling in what was *not* said; such as in the presentation of Akram Ismail Mohamed, from the board of [Misr Real Estate Assets](#), who have been superficially restoring many of their 62 historic buildings—out of many more that are not listed as historic. The company’s buildings in downtown have been given little more than a lick-of-paint-and-fix-the-wiring. These efforts are laudable on their own terms but the company representative speaking on the panel failed to provide any insight regarding the company’s consideration of the human needs and use of these buildings.

“The problem, of course, is that in the absence of an active, knowledgeable and equitable Ministry of Culture, ‘self-sustainability’ is extremely difficult.”

The focus sharpened on real estate and gentrification during the next panel, “Artists As Urban Catalysts.” Jane Hall, of the Turner-nominated British architectural collective [Assemble](#), discussed their work in Hackney in London. Hackney is arguably the birthplace of the Western neoliberal conception of the ‘creative city’, in which artists play a ‘pioneering’ role for forthcoming gentrification; a situation that Assemble have attempted to work against in their multifarious projects. The warning brought from the UK is, of course, that this embrace of artists does not automatically spell state support either for the artists or for the poorer citizens subsequently priced out of the area. The presentation of [Townhouse Gallery](#) director William Wells implicitly raised the question of whether this Western model automatically maps onto locations like Cairo. He characterized a more slippery relationship between artistic activity and its neighborhoods: “Every now and again, I try to catch up with Townhouse. It is impossible to catch up.” An art space changing faster than its own planning hints rather romantically that Downtown’s unpredictable side might be able to break the seemingly inevitable link between artists and gentrification. The focus of questions, however, fell on Karim Shafei of [Ismaelia for Real Estate Investment](#), who consider the cultural diversity of downtown as part of their business strategy, giving preferential rental rates or lending space to artistic initiatives.



[The biking tour led by Dirk Wanrooij and Nancy Naser Al Deen, above, and the “Modernist Architecture” tour led by Mohamed Elshahed, below.]

When asked about whether Ismaelia’s support to artists will ever extend towards straightforward corporate giving, Shafei answered to the effect that eventually arts organizations need to be ‘self-sustaining’. In other words, no. The problem, of course, is that in the absence of an active, knowledgeable and equitable Ministry of Culture, ‘self-sustainability’ is extremely difficult. That absence was felt, as Elshahed remarked, at the conference itself, and it is easy to understand why. Beyond the difficulty of getting government to the table in the first place, those at the conference with quasi-governmental affiliations seemed deeply unused to the bias of the conference’s ‘natural’ audience, giving presentations that were platitudinous, descriptive, and unaware of their critical paucity in relation to the issues at hand. It is these circumstances that mean figures like Shafei receive a huge amount of the ‘gentrification’ scrutiny; not because Ismaelia are the only ones who should be answering for it, but because their engagement means that a conversation has become possible.

It is important, then, that the first session of the next day was “Cultural Policies and Urban Governance.” The tin-eared attitude of government was given useful context by Ahmed Ragheb of the National Organization for Human and Legal Rights. He traced the ways in which Egypt’s historically centralized government continues to straitjacket the power of municipalities, treating local governors as secretaries under permanent scrutiny of the government, rather than as actors with the independence to consult or speak for their communities. Galila El Kadi of L’IRD en Egypt bore this out at the level of her work in architectural heritage, remarking that while she does not believe governors are corrupt or inexperienced, she experiences a lack of transparency and an overall vision.

“Beyond the difficulty of getting government to the table in the first place, those at the conference with quasi-governmental affiliations seemed deeply unused to the bias of the conference’s ‘natural’ audience, giving presentations that were platitudinous, descriptive, and unaware of their critical paucity in relation to the issues at hand.”

Meanwhile, as Ragheb pointed out during the Q&A, the Ministry of Culture specifically stems from the Nasser-era Ministry of Cultural Guidance, whose propaganda-led activities stand in contrast to what Ragheb believe is the role of a ministry of culture: public provision of space for cultural activities, the preservation of freedom of expression, and the preservation of cultural heritage. As he noted, not one of these roles has anything to do with the government *producing* culture.



[Aida Elkashef with conference attendees in Talaat Harb Square during the “Cinematic City” tour.]

Instead, as the next panel attested to, it is about protecting certain types of space. On the “Whose Public Space? Security and Access” panel, Amr Abd al-Rahman of the Law and Society Research Unit at AUC gave an account of the ways in which laws pertaining to public behavior - such as the often vague public morality laws and the 2013 protest law - are exercised less in the interest of public safety and more as a means to practice extreme ideological control. For example, the prostitution law, ostensibly claiming to prevent sexual harassment, is being exercised indiscriminately to arrest gay people. From these examples to the simple consensual expressing of affection in public, the ‘public’ is being conflated with ‘civil society’ at large, rather than examining the many ways in which public and private worlds intersect in the streets of the country. For Abd al-Rahman, this calls for a fundamental rethinking of public space and what it means. This rigid division of public and private expression - which might, for example, forbid a consensual display of affection on the street - is part of a means for ‘the public’ to be conceived unilaterally, which eliminates spaces of alterity and dissent.

“Whether publicly or privately owned, one cannot ‘design’ a space for public protest. Spaces of protest are taken, not made.”

Another means of rethinking the public was brought by Jerold Kayden, an urban planner from the Harvard University Graduate School of Design. He described Zuccotti Park, the epicenter of New York’s Occupy Wall Street Movement; emphasizing the little-discussed fact that it is a privately owned space. Prior to Occupy, Zuccotti was far less behaviorally circumscribed than New York’s public parks, which normally display a wealth of restrictions typical of public bureaucracy. Whether it was due to Zuccotti’s privately owned nature that it became home to Occupy was not made clear, but it was a platform for Kayden to discuss the idea of ‘Privately Owned Public spaces’ (POPs), which he has been [extensively involved](#) in mapping across the USA. Inevitably, Zuccotti’s owner quickly made legal moves to evict the protesters. I asked why a single proprietor - whose whim can evict anyone - is better than a multiple, public one subject to public scrutiny. Kayden clarified that his discussion is about how we conceive of public-private partnerships (PPPs). A lot more questions remained on what Kayden considers a PPP - in which the public maintains leverage - from a private act of philanthropy - in which the public is reduced to a supplicant. In what we learned of the keynote case of Zuccotti Park, ironically, it was neither: the park’s private status allowed a temporary legal stalemate that prevented the public authorities from removing the protesters, but it didn’t prevent the owner from evicting them the moment she or he had the wherewithal. Hayden’s talk made a most important point: that whether publicly or privately owned, one cannot ‘design’ a space for public protest. Spaces of protest are taken, not made. Yet ‘the public’ itself is a space, and its conception is constructed by laws such as the 2013 protest law; in this, broader sense that Abd al-Rahman has highlighted, the law itself can clearly be an invisible designer of at least the possibility of dissent.

“Laws pertaining to public behavior - such as the often vague public morality laws and the 2013 protest law - are exercised less in the interest of public safety and more as a means to practice extreme ideological control.”

On the “Heritage and Urban Culture” panel, examples of heritage initiatives in both Cairo and Beirut were discussed. But one of the most useful statements came from Kareem Ibrahim of [Takween](#), saying “I have a problem in segmenting heritage on the social, economic, material level; or dealing with it separate from the city as a whole.” He remarked how ‘heritage’ in different eras has been politically defined, often leading to the protection of specific buildings architectural eras (for example Khedival Cairo). His conception, by contrast, emphasized ‘intangible heritage,’ the social and cultural value of the property in the minds of all users, and not just as something intrinsically connected to property ownership and value. A student questioner raised an important example: the Mohamed Mahmoud graffiti wall (which surrounds the very complex we were sitting in, and which is slated for demolition). This wall, which has played host to an incredible wealth of ever-changing revolutionary and counter-revolutionary artworks, is a perfect example of Egypt’s contemporary heritage. The irony of this situation was not lost on the artist El Teneen, who made [a version of the conference poster](#) with “How Creative is Taking Down Revolutionary Graffiti Walls?” sprayed on it, an intervention that highlighted the irony of the conference’s topic in relation to the AUC’s own actions. Beth Stryker and Omar Nagati of CLUSTER talked of their appreciation for this action in the closing of the conference, saying that the wall had come up many times in the conference planning discussions, and invited El Teneen to join the discussion.



[The final panel of the conference, “Re-framing Downtown: Alternative Approaches.”]

CLUSTER’s conference works in the context of a particular dynamic: where the state often structures its activities in a vertiginously top-down way, and connects so rarely to activities on the ground that it cannot even ‘read’ them; where funding for alternative activities is minuscule, where downtown’s past is read purely nostalgically and its future, neoliberally (if at all); what, then, is currently possible? In the final panel, Omar Nagati described CLUSTER’s research focus on Cairo’s passageways, small linking zones that nonetheless teem with adaptations, small informal businesses, and social exchanges. These fairly overlooked aspects of the city also serve as a metaphor for working ‘in the cracks’. In the light of this, the panel “Re-framing Downtown: Alternative Approaches,” was highly refreshing, presenting points of view from residents working ‘in the cracks’. Nadia Dropkin, Dina Abouelsoud, and Tarek Atia are each people with a personal stake downtown, who saw a community need and organized self-sustainable initiatives to fulfill that need. In the case of Dropkin and Abouelsoud, it was in hospitality; their story of the reasons for starting Dina’s Hostel, the cafe [Kafein](#), and the [restaurant Eish + Malh](#) are [published here](#). Atia’s initiative, [Mantiqi](#) newspaper, addresses the issue of media and communication. In an age of mass, digital media, a parochial printed newspaper seems almost quaint, but it produces the close lens - *by* and *for* local families and businesses - that watching downtown warrants. A useful next question is what ingredients allow such local actors to break the mold, and what prevents others from doing the same?

During the plenary sessions, questions came from journalists, architects, local residents, students, artists, and others. The number of genuine stakeholders present gave the conference more of a town hall meeting feel than anything purely academic. In this situation, the presence of government-affiliated speakers was absolutely crucial, even if they were complete fish out of water. This speaks of one of the biggest issues of all, that is, the disconnect in understanding and ideology between government-allied, and independent actors. CLUSTER’s achievement is that these figures were present at all. Producing productive alliances between these figures and the many alternative positions, initiatives, and possibilities represented at the conference, may be the work of decades and political miracles, but it is important that CLUSTER have insisted upon starting it.

This article is part of a series about the Creative Cities conference organized by [CLUSTER](#) and the [American University in Cairo](#). Cairoobserver is a media sponsor for the conference, which was held on October 31 and November 1. See [here](#) for details.

All photos are courtesy of CLUSTER.

8 notes

[Show](#)

- posted [24 November, 2015](#)
- [8 notes](#) for this post
- [Permalink](#) / [Short URL](#)
- [creative cities](#)
- [cluster](#)
- [downtown](#)
- [urban studies](#)
- [Features](#)
- [previous post](#)
- [next post](#)