

## In conversation: 'German-ness' in architectural representation at Goethe's new Cairo headquarters



By  
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In October, the Goethe Institut in Cairo, one of the most active foreign cultural centers in the Egyptian art scene, inaugurated its newly constructed headquarters. The plain white building and its adjacent 1940s villa hosted hundreds of people for a 36-hour program to commemorate the occasion.

To discuss the striking architecture of the new building, Mada Masr's Rowan El Shimi sat with architect and co-founder of the Cairo Lab for Urban Studies, Training and Environmental Research (CLUSTER) Omar Nagati and sociologist Ilka Eickhof, who is writing her PhD on northern European cultural institutions and the arts in Cairo, focusing on power dynamics and structures of social inequality in the framework of neoliberal production conditions. Both Nagati and Eickhof visited the center's construction site the year prior to its inauguration.

Rowan El Shimi: Tell me about the first time you visited the Goethe building together.

Ilka Eickhof: I visited it twice last year in 2015. Once with the architect overseeing the construction site, and once with the architect who was part of the design chosen in the competition to be the new Goethe cultural institution. Nagati came the second time.

Omar Nagati: I have an older connection with the Goethe Institut in Dokki, because I studied German there for a few semesters back in the 1990s. That was in the White Villa overlooking the main square though.

Back then they used to have parties in the garden, which is now the new building. I'm an Agouza resident and I went to Cairo University, so all my adolescent life was spent in Dokki.

IE: I wanted to look at the architecture because I research northern European cultural institutions and I find it very interesting how architecture affects you as a person, but from all sides — for employees that work there, but also visitors that come. These institutions all have representational characters — in this case representing German cultural politics. This is not a building that they rented or bought, it was built from scratch. So designs were submitted to a competition, and this design was chosen. That's a point that made me really interested in the architecture.

The building has a green “eco” touch, but also the latest technology in terms of equipment. It looks so modern, transparent, with huge windows, grey concrete and glass — it's a very clean design. It's very plain. It's kind of soothing. It's not playful. It doesn't have much décor.

The second time I went, I wanted to talk to the architect to ask him what he thought exactly when he designed it. Because making a design for a cultural institution, you think about how you want to represent it. They were all very friendly and open.

ON: A couple of things struck me. I agree there is a sort of pretence of neutrality in this kind of architecture — there is no character. It responds to ecological factors, water and heat. This state-of-the-art green architecture is an example of German modern technology, and there is no really explicit identity marker, except for the Goethe logo. But they also made an attempt to engage local architecture. It's been done before, but the external screen uses the concept of the mashrabia. The screen is an artwork in a way, but it functions as a sort of double wall, to screen the light but also to offer a filter. The corridor connecting the library to the language classes at the top has a beautiful perforated wall. When the sun is shining in the right direction, the light is beautiful. Do you remember that?

IE: Yes I remember that. The [Goethe Institut logo](#) is everywhere.

ON: Let's assume it's not the logo, but a geometrical pattern. It's a contemporary pattern that they played with. The screen is like a veil in architecture. It has a social role for privacy — you see without being seen — and a climatic role in terms of humidity and sun exposure.

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*“To what extent are international standards applicable to local contexts?”*

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The other thing that struck me was the villa that they tore down and reconstructed according to a German code. It's a question of international standards, and a very important question here is, to what extent are international standards applicable to local contexts? It applies to human rights and many other things too. With architecture you have very strict codes: the minimum width of a corridor, the height, the opening — all these kinds of things. Very measurable standards that we learn at school. It's often taught in a book by Ernst Neufert, which is a German book. But if you look at the local context and people who live in informal areas, they invent their own standards. So the question is whether to romanticize this more appropriate local context or to actually acknowledge that it is substandard.



Building that was torn down and reconstructed, Roger Anis

It's a very complicated question, politically and morally. Where do you stand as an architect? Do you follow the law of code, or do you follow the national code? Of course, I'm sort of oversimplifying it. But here is a German institution coming to Cairo constructing a building that represents its values and standards. Ironically, this is developing or upgrading a villa that used to house the GDR embassy. It's not historically very significant, but it's still part of the heritage of Dokki. Instead of trying to retrofit it to a code, they found it either easier, or cheaper, or both, to tear down and rebuild it again, exactly as it was, but including in the new structure all the code.

IE: I think they had to do it, because it had to be in line with safety regulations for diplomatic buildings — especially regarding earthquake standards. They tore it down and rebuilt an exact copy of it.

ON: That's also an interesting encounter — not between different climatic conditions, social contexts and cultural values, but between different institutional structures: Egypt's National Organizations for Urban Harmony and a different [German] set of codes. You have colliding structures, so how to resolve that? — tear it down and reconstruct it.

I heard during the opening, from one of the guests, that during the demolition they found wiring in the ceilings, because it had been part of the GDR. I wish somebody had documented that. Every room was completely wired.

IE: I think what you said about representing the values is very important. This whole construction is ultimately about representing certain values or morals that relate to the whole idea of German-ness.

RS: Such as what?

IE: I find this question complicated, because I am German. But, for instance, when you look at German refugee politics and the welcoming culture at the beginning of the current so-called refugee crisis, the moral authority that speaks about it creates this German-ness. All the memory politics we had going on since World War II also play a part: We're the good people with no nationalism. But that is part of Germany's nationalism. It's complicated.

With the new Goethe Institut's architecture, what I find is that it has a feeling of openness, transparency, modernity, the good life. For me, it resembles the good life. It makes me want to be there, to sit in that library. I want to be part of it. Of course, talking about effects and emotion is a very grey area, because, it's very subjective.

But it's also attached to the question as to why learning German has become such an asset in the past few years. As far as I know, the courses are filled in a very short amount of time. Germany has become this haven to go to, because there you might have a future. Germany's soft power is very high. I think that plays out in the reputation Germany has — it has a very good reputation here in general. At the same time, Egypt is one of the largest partner countries for [German development aid](#). This is Germany being a “good northern European country,” somewhere you aspire to go to. I can imagine, if I were a language student, I would go to the Goethe to learn German. It would feel like an accomplishment.

ON: I'm sure somebody has done this research, but if you know how many people are learning which languages in a society, it tells you where that society's aspirations are. America is still the number-one dream country, but I think Germany is the prime destination in Europe. And looking at investment in cultural programs, I think Germany is number one. They're definitely a soft power.

But going back to technical aspects: The type of architecture this building eludes to can be traced back, if you look at Berlin compared to Paris or Vienna. A lot of Berlin was bombed, and that — in addition to the city's history — allowed architects to experiment without being tied to certain traditions. At the center of Paris, there are so many historical layers that you have to respond to. The link between history and modernity is very delicate there. In most German buildings built after unification there's experimentation, there's no baggage. There is a sense of freedom. So all the references come from green architecture, or other issues that are not historical but technical. Bringing that kind of approach to Cairo is interesting. Thinking about the Goethe building, you have to address the relationship between Germany and Egypt, but also the neighborhood itself is very interesting. Dokki not a historical quarter by Cairo standards. The extent to which historical references are brought into design is also something to think about.

RS: You mean that Dokki didn't tie down the design, but if the building was in downtown Cairo, for example, the neighborhood context might have had a different impact on it?

ON: I think so. Although if you look at the German Embassy in Zamalek, which was built in the 1980s, it looks like it was parachuted in. It completely disregards the context. It says: We're building a building that demonstrates state-of-the-art architecture. Or the German school in Dokki — it too is a statement vis-a-vis the context. It's an imprint.

RS: Most embassies operate in already existing structures, don't they?

ON: Not necessarily. I participated in design competitions by the Egyptian Foreign Affairs Ministry to build Egyptian embassies in Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. Part of the brief was to try to reconcile the host

contexts with the Egyptian one. My graduation project was an embassy. The whole exercise is about what kind of language to use — this or that.

RS: Is the standard when designing an embassy or foreign cultural center that the design has to take into account the local context?

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*“How do passersby who won’t be using the library or going to the German courses relate to it?”*

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ON: There are technical aspects to that, but in terms of character, it depends on architectural tradition. In some countries, the idea is to make a statement. In many cases, embassies inhabit an old building, so there isn’t the space to express much. In Riyadh, for example, they allocated an area called the diplomatic quarter, so every country had to build an embassy. You can quickly get an idea from that of how countries represented themselves.

It’s like building a pavilion in a world fair.

Anyway, one of the new Goethe’s most appealing elements is that it creates a courtyard with a garden. That’s the most culturally attuned part of it. For example, during the opening, that’s the area people gathered in, as happened at the Goethe building in downtown, in the backyard. This semi-enclosed courtyard is something they tried to achieve through a contemporary interpretation. It is a very successful urban gesture. It creates a semi-public space. You don’t just leave the building and emerge onto the street, there’s a buffer zone. If we’re talking about the vocabulary of architecture and the language used here, there were grand gestures which in my view were successful.

IE: You can look into the courtyard from the street. They have a see-through fence. From the street you can see the architecture and the garden. I wonder what that effect that has on people who cannot afford to take German courses because of time or money — the fancy outline of the architecture and the nice little garden with palm trees. How do passersby who won’t be using the library or going to the German courses relate to it? It becomes part of your neighborhood, you see it, but there’s a fence, and you may be from a social class where you think that fence doesn’t allow you to go in.



Goethe Institut, Worchech Architects

ON: I would argue that it's a move forward. It's better than having a concrete wall, where there's a garden and you don't see it. But it also offers the city a piece of greenery — even if you can't use it, you can see it. There was a decision to maintain a garden and to have it be permeable in some way. In other places, there's a garden but you can't see it from the street. The Goethe could have decided to make it invisible, but they decided to make it visually accessible.

RS: That also fits with the values of openness and transparency the design is conveying. At the Swiss Development Cooperation in Garden City next to the Four Seasons hotel, the first time I walked in, I realized they have this beautiful massive garden but the wall around it is concrete. You can go by it every day and have no idea it exists.

IE: Another interesting thing is the interplay or grey zone between the German idea of a construction site and the Egyptian reality, and how that created spaces for working together.

ON: There were a lot of problematic construction details. The choice of materials comes down to a few details — the thickness of the glass, the knobs, the rails. One thing we found interesting was the local contractor is Egyptian — Habashi. I think he was playing a role in bridging the gap between German idealist design and the local reality — how to mediate this idea in implementation. He made a number of the decisions regarding details.

I'm curious about the feedback you got from the German language students [to [this article on the new building](#)] who are studying at the new building.

RS: I spoke to a few students who had commented on the initial article I wrote about the new building, which introduced the new headquarters and asked what would happen to the downtown villa after the Goethe moves out completely. One of them told me that she found there wasn't enough space in the waiting area designed to accommodate the number of registering students, which I saw on my visit during the exam

registration. The lobby was packed, and the garden with benches was packed too, leaving a couple dozen students in the street, waiting to register.

ON: Why aren't they using the courtyard for that?

RS: The entrance was from the other gate, which doesn't lead to the courtyard. It seemed to be part of the registration process to take a place in line. The main student I spoke to, who had feedback on the architecture, said that the big windows made the classrooms too hot, even with air conditioning. She also explained that there is a rule that they can't install blinds, which causes heat but also makes projections during day classes difficult. Since autumn started and use of air conditioning stopped, there's a ventilation problem in the classrooms. The lack of air circulation between two windows makes it stuffy.

ON: The classrooms are facing north though, so there shouldn't be direct sun. That's a design flaw, but I'd be surprised if this were the case, because it's the basics to have a classroom and a library with north facing windows, so you get enough light but not direct light and glare.



Goethe Institut, Worchech Architects

RS: Another thing the student said was that the downstairs bathroom doesn't take privacy into account, because it's in a corridor and when the door is opened any passerby can see in.

ON: These are technical design mistakes, if these comments are accurate. Those issues relate to standard design regulations. Did you investigate why the relocation happened in that article?

RS: Yes. They told me that they wanted to connect the staff, the audience for the cultural work and the language center, by just having one center for the Goethe. They also want to make their cultural program and library more accessible to their language students, and the language classes more visible to their culture program attendees. And they want to sell the downtown building after they finish refurbishing the White Villa, also next door in Dokki, in two years.

ON: I think they just wanted to leave downtown for security reasons, like why the American University in Cairo relocated. Of course they want more space and all that, but there are also security reasons since it's

close to Tahrir Square. I don't think centralization is a reason — institutions often branch out to have outposts in different locations. For the language center, Dokki makes sense — you're close to the university, close to schools — but for cultural institutions, I think downtown is the best location. It's where the scene is. By moving out you're cutting yourself out of the scene. I also don't think the German Foreign Ministry really needs to create revenue by selling land.



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