

Passageways redefined: Investigating Downtown Cairo's in-betweens

Egyptian and Danish artists and architects gathered for four days to present intervention concepts for two pedestrian passageways in Downtown Cairo, raising further questions on the cracks between structures

Rowan El Shimi, Wednesday 7 May 2014



Cairo's Downtown Passageways (Photo: Rowan El Shimi)



Eight young Egyptian and Danish architects and artists came together for four days through the Cairo Downtown Passages workshop, closely examining two pedestrian passageways -- the Kodak Passageway and the Philips Passageway -- to propose artistic and design interventions.

The workshop, which ran 27-30 April, was organised by CLUSTER (Cairo Lab for Urban Studies, Training and Environmental Research), supported by Danish organisations DEDI and CKU.

On Wednesday 30 April, as the audience gathered in one of the empty shops in the Kodak Passageway, the walls of the space had been transformed into lines and drawings. Merely days ago, the location had hosted part of the retrospective exhibition on Hassan Khan within the Downtown Contemporary Arts Festival (D-CAF), which was also curated by CLUSTER.

Workshop participants presented three concepts for intervention: two in the Kodak Passageway and one in the Philips Passageway.

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Following the Hassan Khan show which presented an alternative intervention in the shops, the two groups dreamed further still, and in a more systematic manner.

CLUSTER has been working for a year on mapping Downtown's passageways, with a focused research particularly on these two passageways. Prior to the workshop, participants of the Cairo Downtown Passages were presented with a design brief built on extensive interviews with several stakeholders from the area: shop owners, residents, building owners, security personnel, nearby art spaces, developers etc.

"We take a stakeholder approach to design," Omar Nagati, architect and founder of CLUSTER told Ahram Online. "It doesn't start from an artist's vision in an abstract way; it starts from interviewing many people in the area — trying to get an idea of what people need, and bridge gaps between the different stakeholders."



Kodak Passageway during the Hassan Khan retrospective exhibition (Photo: Rowan El Shimi)

Unlike most passageways in Downtown, the Kodak one is very quiet, spacious and uninhabited by vendors. Perhaps this is simply due to the fact that it is located metres away from the Jewish Synagogue.

As such, the participants proposed a project which uses the actual structure of the flooring to create shade, layers and spaces for different activities. The group suggested to plant vertical vegetation and place benches... Shortly, the participants took the approach of trying to retain the serenity of the passageway and render it a "haven from Downtown's hustle and bustle".

The Philips Passageway group had much more to work with. The L-shaped passageway is filled with vendors, street cafes, and uneven flooring. A struggle exists between the vendors -- who want to retain their businesses -- and the Ismailia for Real Estate Development Company which owns the building and seeks to attract high-end businesses. Not to mention the structural problems of the passage itself.

The participants spent an extensive amount of time on location, conducting further interviews with the vendors, and suggested an intervention which included colouring the floors, changing the lighting, and executing creative solutions to attract pedestrians into the passage.

Besides the participants' presentations, the space's walls included previous inquiries into Downtown's passageways that have been spearheaded by Nagati and CLUSTER through work with university students and commissioned research that the non-profit company worked on.

Nagati explained to Ahram Online that the process of mapping and inquiring into Downtown's passageways is far from over. In the next six months, they are set on choosing one or two very specific ideas to use as interventions within the limited budget they possess. "After negotiating with the different stakeholders, we hope to have a more lasting intervention not an exhibition or a screening," he commented.

Nagati's interest in passageways started a few years back, around the time he was looking to co-found CLUSTER. He explains that it was all part of the same idea of "in-betweenness," a condition that the country seemed to be following after the revolution: when one order collapsed and a new one was about to begin. This grey area we live in creates a state where nothing is clear – and thus everything is negotiable. Here emerge possibilities that allow several practices to renegotiate what the new order will look like.

“The passageways is a very focused project that refers to larger questions on contestation and negotiation,” he says.

On the long run, CLUSTER is working on a website to map Downtown’s passageways, along with another website which is a walking tour of Downtown.

“It’s much more pleasant to experience downtown through passageways,” Nagati asserted.

His words sound very true once we realise how the chaos of traffic, vendors, pollution and Cairene shoppers can turn a simple walk through Downtown's streets into a nightmare. The passageways present an escape from the overwhelming reality and allow for faster movement through the neighbourhood.

Nagati also hopes that this inquiry into the passageways will not just help map them, but create a dialogue of what the actual purpose of these passageways may be in light of the development of Downtown as a whole.

“You can almost look at Downtown passageways as alternative spaces for development: book fairs, vegetable markets, bike lanes, all happening in these little cracks without compromising traffic or security,” he said, admitting that these ideas are, for now, only dreams but could one day become a reality.