

# Creative Cities Symposium: Negotiating Downtown Cairo

CLUSTER, the Cairo Lab for Urban Studies, Training and Environmental Research, organised a two-day symposium titled Creative Cities: Reframing Downtown that was held at AUC's premises in Tahrir on 31 October and 1 November

Soha Elsirgany, Thursday 5 Nov 2015



Creative Cities: Reframing Downtown symposium taking place at AUC's Tahrir Campus (Photo: Soha Elsirgany)

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The Creative Cities symposium approaches Downtown Cairo as a social and architectural wealth and aims to lay out options for its future development by sparking dialogue with stakeholders who shape it: scholars, experts, cultural actors, state institutions and the public.

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The first day of Creative Cities also offered attendees six specialised tours of Downtown, which turned the area into a walking museum, providing alternative ways of mapping Downtown, and highlighting the wealth of its cultural significance.

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Creative Cities builds on an earlier [similar conversation](http://english.ahram.org.eg/News/68446.aspx) (<http://english.ahram.org.eg/News/68446.aspx>) titled "Urban Political Change: Southern Perspectives," held in 2012. Since then, a lot has changed, yet many core issues stand as relevant.

As philosophy professor Nathaniel Bowditch put it in an opening speech, "It's great to see how the different disciplines converge on this topic that touches everyone."

By bringing together all the stakeholders side by side with international experts, the conference emphasised a comparative and interdisciplinary approach, resulting in a much-needed conversation between players that have yet to make optimum use of their assembly.

Two plenary discussions were held on 31 October; the first panel titled "Downtown in Context: Is gentrification inevitable?" and the second titled "Artists as Urban Catalysts."

The first panel started with an introduction by moderator Mona Abaza, an author and professor of sociology at the American University in Cairo (AUC).

Abaza laid out the basis for the topics the panel aimed to address, namely questions around Downtown gentrification; trying to avoid the pitfall of displacing lower social classes; the Ismailia for Real Estate Investment company's role; the phenomena of military urbanism; and how political memory has shaped — and is shaped by — Downtown Cairo.

## **Heterotopia**

Lucie Ryzova gave an interesting talk in the first panel, where she spread out the social history of Downtown.

From being an upscale shopping experience in the 1930s, which was followed by a brief eclipse, to a movie centre with buzzing consumer culture well into the 1980s, to being a literati gossip triangle and suspicious area, and finally the epicentre of the 2011 revolution.

She described Downtown as a melting pot that is "socially porous, with flexible boundaries between the social classes," while also comparing it to philosopher Michel Foucault's concept of heterotopia.

"Downtown is a place with multiple claims, where the whole is larger than the sum of its parts," she added.

Ryzova lists the diverse demography of Downtown: older residents, foreigners who are mostly temporary residents, literati and artists who have other homes in a different parts of the city, middle-class families on the fringes, revolutionary youth, and young low income workers who are mostly males.

It wasn't until the 20th century that the area's economic culture fell from grace. It gained a new status then, as a social centre, or "The Capital of Bohemia" in Ryzova's words.

It also became this alternative opposition space by housing independent art and literature undercurrents, and by hosting the young revolutionaries during and after 2011.

"It's a site of cultural pilgrimage, where people who go there belong to this urban subculture," Ryzova said.

Where it is common among many upper and middle classes to lament the decline of Downtown, in recent years the government took action to "cleanse" Downtown of its overflowing street vendors and activists.

Yet what could be considered social pollution to some is to others an autonomous refuge.

“A place belonging to no one, yet welcoming to everyone ... It acts as a theatre, not by the absence of rules, but by having its own set of rules,” Ryzova added.

One of the audience members joined the discussion reflecting that it is the same small circle of people who attend the area’s cultural events, and that Downtown is actually socially abandoned and inactive.

“The social and urban activity of its middle class residents is frozen. The people who have moved out are not returning. Why hasn’t there been a rehabilitation?” the audience member asked.

“This is due to lack of incentives,” she continued, answering her own question and presenting two suggestions: that the government “offer loans for residents with alleviated taxes, and that the media, which is currently propagating migration to the compounds in the outskirts, direct a campaign at the middle-upper class to rehabilitate Downtown.”

## **Bricks and mortar**

During the Q&A session, another audience member pointed out a notable contrast between how “Ryzova speaks of the social fabric of Downtown, whereas other panelists are more focused on the ‘bricks and mortar’ — in other words the architecture of the area.”

Riham Arram, executive director of the Cairo Heritage Preservation Unit, which was founded amidst Cairo governorate’s recent interest in heritage preservation, was present to transfer the viewpoint of the government.

“The government’s first goal in creating this unit was preserving the national identity stored in the city’s iconic areas and heritage sites, while eyeing it as an economic tool for development,” Arram said.

The unit has already worked with its financial partners, Misr for Real-Estate Assets Management (MRAM), on rejuvenating Al-Qahera El-Khedewiya (Al-Azhar area).

Together with MRAM, they continue to oversee the restoration of both the infrastructure and exterior of buildings in Downtown.

“We have restored around 20 buildings already. The count of distinctive buildings that we own is 160,” Akram Ismail, a representative of MRAM said.

An audience member who is also a Downtown resident pointed out that MRAM’s restorations should not be limited to the skeletons of the buildings, when some buildings have ground floor shops that cause hazards and health concerns.

“We are already spending a lot to restore the buildings, and of course you know the rent rates aren’t enough to offset it. We can’t possibly do everything. Yet in our buildings we have a committee for residents to facilitate communicating their problems, and we try to solve them,” Ismail said.

From the faculty of architecture and urbanism of the University of Chile came Ernesto Lopez Morales, whose research specialises in gentrification and neoliberal urbanism.

Morales gave examples of gentrified cities in Latin America, mentioning how neoliberal redesign in Latin America led to higher GDP. His examples also showed how gentrification leads to the spatial concentration of power and stigmatisation of the poor, when original residents are displaced from the area.

The city of Quito, Ecuador, offers a unique example.

“This is a special case where the state played this dual role by gentrifying public spaces, but de-gentrified the houses,” Morales says.

Though a better deal for residents, this model brings little revenue to the state, and as such is not ideal to replicate. "There are still many discussions in Latin America on how the state can make partial revenue," Morales added.

## **Downtown as a co-working space**

The second panel, titled "Artists as Urban Catalysts," invited local and international examples of arts and cultural institutions with experiences that could relate to Downtown.

"Often the artist and culture maker's position is overlooked. We try to realise how artists can offer services to the community," says Jane Hall, a member of Assemble, a UK-based collective of 18 architects, artists and designers.

Assemble seeks to create projects that engage the public and audience in their work. Their portfolio comprises a series of temporary re-appropriations of neglected areas around the city — pop-up culture points.

One of their projects, Cineroleum, turned a petrol station into a cinema for five weeks. The collective repeated the idea under a bridge, creating a temporary cinema, café and workshop space. In another project, Assemble transformed a dump into a playground, with the participation of the community in the creation process.

In her speech, Ryzova had acknowledged the role of art in reshaping Downtown's dynamics. "The Townhouse Gallery helped bring a new crowd into Downtown, by liberating artists from state dependence," she says.

William Wells, founder of the Townhouse, shared his experience with renting the building that has now become a milestone in Downtown's art scene and the independent art movement in Cairo.

"The street was unpaved, unlit, the locals were suspicious, the artists I asked thought it was a bad idea, and yet I went ahead and rented the building down that street," Wells says.

As Wells added, the community of Townhouse developed to function as a co-working space, with artists benefiting from the craftsmen in the area.

"A change occurred, shifting from the initial stigmatisation of both parties, to realising what the other serves, and how they can compliment each other in a symbiotic relationship," asserted Wells.

For Wells, Downtown itself can function as a co-working space, where all players try to benefit from each other.

"Because we do change the society, whether we set out to do it or not. When we create an interesting work of art, people think and change," he said.

## **Fiscal elephant in the room**

But arts and cultural institutions seeking to be central players in Downtown face challenges with funding.

According to Wells, art projects depend on foreign funds that have recently dwindled.

As such, Townhouse recently [approached SODIC \(http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/5/25/131528/Arts--Culture/Visual-Art/Townhouse-West-Corporate-meets-contemporary-art.aspx\)](http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/5/25/131528/Arts--Culture/Visual-Art/Townhouse-West-Corporate-meets-contemporary-art.aspx), evoking the real-estate company's social responsibility.

"We asked them if they wanted to invest in us, and they agreed in return for replicating the Townhouse effect in Sheikh Zayed," Wells says, adding that the feat is proving very challenging because of the completely different audience and society in Sheikh Zayed.

Hall also mentioned the challenge of financing.

"The problem is not with starting a project, it's with long-term funding. Once the initial injection of funding is put in, the challenge becomes how to go on from there," she says.

“The real issue is rent control, and that’s really the elephant in the room, and I wonder when we will address that,” Ryzova said.

Questions were directed at Ismailia for Real Estate Investment, which has been buying buildings in Downtown since 2007.

Karim El-Shafei, the company’s CEO, explained that the company, though interested in garnering profit, is also interested in making Downtown accessible to everyone, and has been reappropriating its acquired spaces to new functions, including renting them out to art and culture institutions.

“We rent the space for a better-than-market price, then gradually increase the rent with long-term projects, because we believe art spaces should be self-sustainable,” says El-Shafei.

Yet this model might not be as beneficial to artists as El-Shafei hopes.

“Sustainable art spaces are diluted,” Wells said. “When artists are expected to produce what has to make money it weakens the product.”

“If they have to keep making more revenue with time, why would artists commit to that financial offer?” Hall added.

However, the question still stands on how all these players can negotiate the Downtown heterotopia.

An audience member asked Ryzova if, based on research paper, she could suggest options for the future of downtown.

“I have just laid out the stakes and presented it to the players,” Ryzova said.

In a sense, this is what the Creative Cities conference achieved: presenting what is at stake.

While providing much needed perspectives from all stakeholders, and offering a necessary platform for discussion, much of the conversation is still about venting problems and has yet to reach solutions.

Perhaps Creative Cities should be a more frequent event, to optimise the co-working space that is Downtown.

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