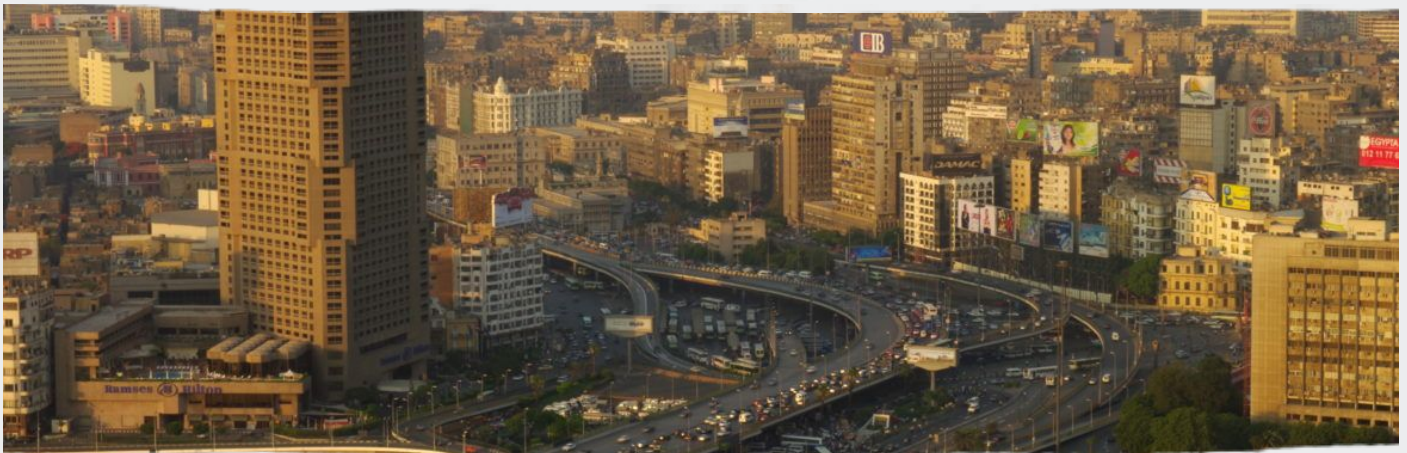


Downtown lost or reclaimed?

اقرأها بالعربية



Courtesy: Laura Cugusi



By

[Heba Afify](#)

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Downtown is not just another Cairo neighborhood. A hub for social, cultural and political activity for decades, many have a deep sense of belonging to the area.

Since becoming the center of nation-wide protests in 2011 that led to the toppling of 30-year dictator Hosni Mubarak, development plans for the district came to a halt and are now [being picked up again](#).

With revolutionary zeal and scaled-back security in those early months, downtown saw both a vibrancy and a jumble of chaotic practices. In the past 18 months, however, the state has applied measures that seek to reinstate order in the area including eliminating street vendors, prohibiting parking in most downtown streets and renovating some of its buildings.

Users and residents of downtown have mixed feelings about these changes. Some hail the state measures as positive steps towards reclaiming the area's lost glory, while others see them as stripping it of everything that made it unique.

Restoring order

Many of the area's residents stand behind the state's attempts to undo the chaos that has prevailed since 2011. Some say that the measures have been taken too far and are becoming a nuisance in and of themselves, while others think that the required solutions have yet to be enacted.

During the summer of 2014, security forces carried out several campaigns forcing street vendors out of downtown and relocating them to a temporary marketplace in Torgoman.

Most people with a stake in downtown approve of the removal of street vendors, who had ended up taking over most of the sidewalks in Talaat Harb and other streets and often got into turf wars.

Now Talaat Harb, which used to be lined with vendors on both sides, looks very different. The street has expanded in the absence of parked cars and vendors, and the municipality conducts regular patrols with pick-up trucks where civilians collaborating with the forces can be seen in the back along with confiscated items such as tea stands and merchandise.

On a recent stroll down Talaat Harb, I ran into 74-year-old Rasmi Samuel. He's been selling different merchandise on Talaat Harb Street for over 40 years.

But his long table of various products has been replaced with a single chair on which he keeps a few pairs of socks that he's hoping to sell to make ends meet. One of the few remaining street vendors on the street, he's constantly on the lookout for security.

A couple of young men come running, yelling "Arabic, Arabic," their code word for municipality patrol, and Samuel swiftly pushes his chair into a corridor to hide his few items of merchandise.

The authorities have also [closed several of downtowns biggest and most popular ahwas \(traditional street cafes\)](#), including the famous Borsa ahwa and others.

Patrick Werr, a financial reporter who's been living in downtown since 1999, says that while the state's recent efforts are a step in the right direction, there's still much to be done to protect the historical area from decay.

While some of the biggest ahwas have been closed down, many remain, with the same downsides: noise and visual intrusion. He's not personally a fan, but Werr understands the need for cafes in a historical area. He suggests regulating them by removing TVs and plastic chairs.

Werr also complains of other continuing infringements on public space in downtown by private enterprises. He points out a shop near his house, which has recently taken over the sidewalk, presumably after its owner paid off officials. He also complains about what he calls "the phenomenon of the fridge." Across downtown, there are fridges, crates and other objects sticking out of kiosks and blocking the sidewalk.

The state has also started a renovation campaign in downtown, but according to residents, the campaign consists only of painting the outside of buildings, while some are left to decay on the inside.

Ultimately, Werr believes that a deeper change in policy is needed to save the dilapidated buildings.

In recent years, the number of offices in downtown has dramatically increased as old rent contracts are approaching their expiry and tenants are giving over their properties to establishments. Additionally, many spaces in some of downtown's most beautiful streets, like Ahmed Abdel Aziz, are used as storage rooms.

Werr suggests a high tax on commercial activity in the area in order to encourage the use of apartments as living spaces, which causes less damage to the buildings.

Sherif al-Tabei has lived most of his life in his family's house on Bostan Street, and who works in a law firm on Qasr al-Nil Street. He's on board with the state's attempts to return order, but feels the implementation is unwise.

As part of its recent plan, the state has gradually banned parking from most downtown streets, attempting to steer traffic toward the newly inaugurated Tahrir parking garage.

Tabei is bothered by how strictly the rules are applied, and by the lack of practical alternatives.

He regularly gets tickets when his driver stops to drop him off at the office. And his work associates and customers are often late due to the parking situation. He suggests having shuttle services that people can use instead.

As for the change that he's looking for, Tabei is longing for the old, classy downtown. He thinks the look of shops needs to be regulated so that they fit in with the old look of the buildings.

Or closing down space?

Others see the recent security presence in downtown in a different light — a suffocation of public space after a brief break of governmental order over the area.

After 2011, the area went through a period in which it appeared as if security was absent, much like the rest of the country. People would smoke hash openly on Hoda Shaarawi Street, Falaki and other parts of downtown.

Some practices of the past have recently returned in full force, such as police officers going around in civilian clothes in minibuses with tourism plates stopping people and asking for their IDs, and possibly taking them to the police station. The area has become studded with new security checkpoints that are still increasing.

Karim Mounir, who has been living in downtown the past three years, has experienced the securitization of the area and the shrinking of freedoms first hand.

But for Karim, what's worse is the crackdown practiced by the people themselves, reflecting a general sense of paranoia that can be witnessed nationwide.

Earlier this year, Mounir got a taste of this when a friend took a picture with her phone as they were walking by the Endowments Ministry. Citizens passing by effectively detained them and went to fetch police personnel, yelling that they should arrest them to avenge the blood of their fallen comrades and accusing them of being members of the Muslim Brotherhood.

The officer took them to the police station and before releasing them from there, telling them they would have been in danger of being attacked by civilians had he not detained them.

Site of defeat

The inconvenience of the security crackdown is coupled with a feeling of detachment for those who relate to downtown on a political level. During the revolution and following period, Tahrir Square and its surrounding streets were a regular site of protests — now, the constant presence of security forces prevents this.

For Nayera Abdel Rahman, a 26-year-old researcher, downtown was her gateway out of her enclosed, upper middle class community and into wider society. During her university years, Abdel Rahman started frequently hanging out in downtown. It's where she got her induction into society, it's where she made her most valuable relationships and where she considers her most valuable education to have taken place.

"I feel that I owe a lot to this place, I learned so much. I still remember some of the most formative conversations of my life that took place in downtown," she says.

This relationship deepened with her participation in the 2011 revolution, but now a feeling of detachment has grown inside her.

The definitive moment came when a friend of hers got randomly arrested in downtown and remained in prison for one month.

"When I went, I felt for the first time that I didn't want to be there. I felt the streets closing in on me. I still go and I still love it, but not like before. Sometimes it feels heavy," she says.

Lawyer Ahmed Farag and his group of friends, all supporters of the revolution, have changed their hangout spot from downtown to Sayeda Zeinab in the last year.

“It’s very difficult for us to see Tahrir Square, which was the front of peaceful resistance in Egypt. I consider it to be a holy land that has turned into a military zone,” he says.

All of Farag’s favorite hangouts have either been cleared out or become studded with informants.

The last time that Farag and his friends hung out in downtown was in June 2013, as the zeal was starting to form for the protests that would end with a military-led ouster of former President Mohamed Morsi.

“I started to become certain that there was something wrong, and since then [Tahrir has ceased to be our place](#),” he says.

Cultural boom continues with setbacks

One aspect that seems to continue to thrive since 2011 is the cultural scene, albeit with some security-related challenges.

Nevine Ibiary is the director of workshop programs at downtown’s Studio Emad Eddin, and has been involved in the area’s cultural scene since 2005 . She says that the openness that came with 2011 was a serious boon to the scene, which may have now lost some of its vigor but has not completely dissipated.

Underground art was deep under the ground before 2011, according to Ibiary, when the revolution shed a light on the area. Art spaces such as the Contemporary Image Collective, Townhouse and the Townhouse Rawabet theater started coming up to the surface. Underground bands started making it.

“As cliché as it sounds, it has become cool to hang out in downtown, to sit in the cafes and visit the art spaces. It has become a sign of being cultured and hip,” Ibiary explains.

After 2011, the audience for cultural events in downtown expanded dramatically beyond the typical downtown crowd.

People started to realize that there’s an alternative scene and to get acquainted to the activities in downtown. Instead of going to the movies, they became open to visiting a gallery or attending a talk.

“Rather than a place for old people and shops, downtown became a young place, where young people move in and share flats,” Ibiary says.

As an example, Studio Emad Eddin has expanded since then from four people to a large team and several adjacent projects and activities.

Now, the euphoria subsided, but Ibiary says that it hasn’t completely died out.

Ibiary is partly with the newly returned state presence in downtown, and partly against it.

She supports the crackdown on street vendors and the regulation of traffic, as she says the chaos had reached a disruptive level where the sidewalks were unusable and the streets were blocked with cars double and triple parked on each side.

The recent security crackdown in the area has naturally confined the ability to hold events, which had been largely unlimited for a short while after 2011.

Ibiary recalls holding events in the street with no permits and having the police protect the event. Now that has become impossible, even if organizers try to get the correct permissions.

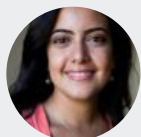
“Now there are no permits, and what’s worse there is no reason,” she says.

Ibiary says that the regular Egyptian bureaucracy has once again taken hold of downtown. An event might be denied permission for no reason, or the process could suddenly be stopped halfway.

Mada Masr is media sponsor for the international Creative Cities conference organized by [CLUSTER](#) and the [American University in Cairo](#). The conference seeks to bring together stakeholders who are often isolated from one another, and forge greater public transparency regarding ongoing urban development plan in Egypt. The conference is on October 31 and November 1. See [here](#) for details.



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