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# Omar Nagati on renegotiating Downtown Cairo through design

“You need to include in any plan or revision for Downtown or any neighbourhood, the local context, not necessarily the case so far.”

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The city of Cairo is in a state of deterioration, says city planner [Omar Nagati](#) as he moves from his mercifully air-conditioned office after making our way out of the hordes of competing for space in the 40-degree heat of the streets below.

Like many spaces in Downtown Cairo, Nagati’s headquarters is indistinguishable from the informal spaces that surround it – its doorway obscured as it blends with the general dilapidated street. Here, there’s a visible relationship between the formal and the informal.

While street traders occupy the ground floors, side streets and alleyways, boarded up windows and closed upper storeys belie formal businesses within. For an organisation of urban planners and social researchers, [Cluster](#), infrastructure like this – sometimes even built by the people themselves – is the status quo.

“Cairo is a city where more than two-thirds is built informally,” says Nagati. “So the informal process has the exception; it’s the mainstream.”

It’s through the narrow streets and back alleys of Downtown Cairo that Cluster is able to engage with stakeholders to push an agenda of inclusive city planning.



“The design is fairly simple,” explains Nagati. “We’re using it [passageways] to bring nature back into a little bit of a green oasis or an urban garden. The idea is to try to mediate the public and private sphere. In Cairo, there’s a lot of spillover from shops onto the street but also street vendors and informal traffic so the public and private domain are not very clearly demarcated as they are in Northern Europe for example.”

Ultimately, the project, as evidenced by its small scale, is an attempt to look at the microcosm of the city. It is to question how urban planners can negotiate, through design, the competing interests and complexities that you have to negotiate your right to the street. From a gender perspective, from a class perspective, there are different frames of reference for what you can and cannot do – it’s not necessarily clear. There are multiple layers of order that govern,” he adds.

The projects are a testing site for Cluster’s *Cairo Downtown Passageways: Walking Tour* publication which explores passageways, back alleys, side streets and in-between spaces as an alternative framework for the revitalisation of the city.



The city needs an alternative because like cities across the world, the revitalisation of an area is very often gentrification. According to Nagati, it's the role of civil society to establish an alternative before classic private enterprises take hold.

“You need to include in any plan or revision for Downtown or any neighbourhood, the local community is necessarily the case so far,” he says, pointing to two reasons why urban planning has so far excluded

Firstly, Egypt does not have a mechanism of participatory government in that locals have no local government through which to lobby for the changes they need. Secondly, plans to restore Downtown were undertaken

“You can see the buildings being painted. And that’s led by the government in partnership with private companies,” says Nagati. “Usually, these private sector companies are less concerned about the fine grain and more about profit. And that’s their business, I’m not blaming them.”

The next step is to establish an art council that acts as a mediator between local people and the government. “We want to have a body that represents the interests of civil society and arts and culture relations to the government and say, we are the third leg of this triangle and it’s really actually your advantage that we thrive because of art and culture but we also bring business. Right now, we’re working on a study to assess the economic sector in Downtown and it’s huge.”

**Next:** [Cairo's underground youth & the gender divide in this growing subculture](#)

*An alley in Downtown Cairo - Image Courtesy of David Evers*

In August, we travelled to Egypt and Morocco to find the designers responding to social issues through design. After the [Arab Spring in 2011](#) and the political instability that followed, journalists and creatives found a new space in Cairo.

Graffiti lined the walls of the crumbling buildings, and old cafes and bars became the birthing places of new ideas out of sight of a then weakened regime but close enough to the iconic Tahrir Square. As Nagati recalls, this moment of flux would be short-lived. It was up to designers to capitalise on this fleeting opportunity to change.

“The state was very weak and there was a very empowered sense of community, and people were taking to changing things on the ground. We knew that this is a temporary condition and that the State would eventually take back. We wanted to discuss, how can we use this moment of suspension of order, this political vacuum to see what people do if they were left to organise their streets and their neighbourhoods? And how can we as designers learn from this informality, this informal order?”



One of the first projects to take root was [Cairo Downtown Passages](#), an urban design and art project that transformed Downtown's public spaces to promote more diverse, inclusive, and accessible areas. Conceptualised through a workshop in 2014, two pilot projects were launched: the Kodak Passage and the Philips Passage. The former, "The Oasis" which transforms Kodak into a pedestrian park, while the latter is a "Light Oasis" in Philips, which introduced modern lighting and the possibility for film screenings to a previously dark and decaying space.

**An alternative to gentrification in Downtown Cairo**