Omar Nagati on renegotiating Downtown Cairo through design

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The city of Cairo is in a state of deterioration, says city planner Omar Nagati. Like many spaces in Downtown Cairo, Nagati’s headquarters is indistinguishable from its surroundings. The mercifully air-conditioned office after making our way out of the hordes of street traders competing for space in the 40-degree heat of the streets below.

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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 like 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 here is 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 passageways to bring nature back into the city. In Cairo, there’s a lot of spillover from shops onto the street but also street vendors and informal traffic. 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 and to question how urban planners can negotiate, through design, the competing interests and come up with ways to mediate the public and private spheres. From a gender perspective, there are different frames of reference for what you can and cannot do – it’s not necessarily the case so far. There are multiple layers of order that govern,” he adds.

The projects are a testing site for Cluster’s Cairo Downtown Passageways: Walking Tour, which explores the notion of 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 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, not just the developer, to lobby for the changes they need. Secondly, plans to restore Downtown were undertaken through a mechanism of participatory government in which locals have no local government through which to lobby for the changes they need. Secondly, plans to restore Downtown were undertaken through a mechanism of participatory government in which locals have no local government through which to lobby for the changes they need. Secondly, plans to restore Downtown were undertaken through a mechanism of participatory government in which locals have no local government through which to lobby for the changes they need.”

“You can see the buildings being painted. And that’s led by the government in partnership with private sector companies. Usually, these private sector companies are less concerned about the fine grain of the development. 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 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.
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 sense of purpose in Cairo.

Graffiti lined the walls of the crumbling buildings, and old cafes and bars became the birthing places of ideas out of sight of a then weakened regime but close enough to the iconic Tahrir Square. As Nagati recalls, the 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 things on the ground. We knew that this is a temporary condition and that the State would eventually come back," he says. "We wanted to discuss, how can we use this moment of suspension of order, this political vacuum, people do if they were left to organise their streets and their neighbourhoods? And how can we as artists 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 to revitalise Downtown’s public spaces to promote more diverse, inclusive, and accessible areas. Conceptualised during a workshop in 2014, two pilot projects were launched: the Kodak Passage and the Philips Passage. The "Oasis" which transforms Kodak into a pedestrian park, while the latter is a "Light Oasis" in Philips, with lighting and the possibility for film screenings to a previously dark and decaying space.

An alternative to gentrification in Downtown Cairo