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Creative Cities: Mapping an Alternative Downtown Cairo

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Navigating the teeming streets of the Egyptian capital is often akin to an attempt to map out a labyrinthine urban landscape—mediated by obstacles that range from the human throngs to the decrepit architecture and dilapidated roads. In a city where [70% of the population](#) lives in informal settlements, the concept of urban planning in Cairo is often simultaneously haphazard, and rigidly governed by vested interests and preexisting conditions. In this context, the city gives birth to a plethora of theoretical questions; can those who frequent Downtown Cairo be considered part of its urban fabric? How can this dense urban overgrowth be transformed into an ideal terrain for innovative solutions? What are the common interests that can draw artists, writers, architects, and vendors together? And how can civil society contribute to Cairo's revival, and the protection of its diversity? These are just some of the questions that the Creative Cities: Re-framing Downtown Cairo project attempts to answer. Over the past years, there have been numerous individual and collective calls for change, particularly in light of the string of Arab revolutions in 2011. Though such calls have since been muted, a number of initiatives have taken off in the intermediate years, in response to the limitations of official lethargy, intransigence, and bureaucracy. Among these initiatives, Creative Cities was born, with a view toward developing Downtown Cairo's urban landscape along different models or strategies than those employed by private developers and the state. Launched by the [Cairo Laboratory for Urban Studies, Training, and Environmental Research](#) (CLUSTER), the project initially materialized in the form of a conference in October 2015, discussing the role of art, culture, and innovative initiatives in urban rehabilitation and renovation.



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According to CLUSTER's website, the conference sought "to emphasize comparative and interdisciplinary approaches to issues related to public space, heritage and urban culture, the revitalization of downtown in the context of gentrification and securitization, and urban governance".

15732705_1188995194483181_7507909424605019183_o "Civil society is an integral part of the system, taking part in the development process with alternative ideas. Our role is to come up with ideas that bring a bit of balance," says Omar Nagati, Founding partner of CLUSTER and an architect and urban planner.

[h2]Capital, Heritage, and Diversity[/h2] In light of what many refer to as Cairo's real estate boom, focusing largely on its ever-growing satellite cities, various urban developers have [cast doubts](#) on the sustainability, and ultimate efficacy, of such development models. According to Nagati, real estate developers focus, primarily, on the return on investment from real estate projects, while the cultural dimension and social diversity are not similarly prioritized. In light of the private companies' targets for high profit margins, the state will often look the other way with regards to preserving the area's architectural integrity and the restoration of historic buildings. In this context, CLUSTER aims to safeguard the cultural and social diversity that distinguishes the Downtown area. As such, the initiative stands against the displacement of residents or workers, amid various government [campaigns](#) to evacuate the area of street vendors and cafés. The project also aims to address the void created by the absence of local councils after the revolution. "We are proposing a platform for social dialogue; for the exchange of opinions and critiques among the various stakeholders—most importantly, the people of the Downtown area themselves," Nagati notes. Downtown Cairo is distinguished by the fact that the majority of those who frequent its establishments are not residents. "Hence, they can be considered the real stakeholders, just as the Downtown area can be considered public property for all Egyptians," he explains. **[h2]Cairo Passageways: Gaps in the Heart of the City[/h2]** Nagati repeatedly refers to the notion of creating "gaps" or "vacuums" within the city. In one of CLUSTER's previous projects, the group worked on renovating a number of passageways, as models for such urban gaps that embrace diversity and the coexistence of different lifestyles in Downtown Cairo.

15675579_1185891448126889_8709325651740035135_o The project began with the Kodak and Philips passageways, transforming them into small urban parks. These passageways are considered "points of confluence in the streets, or miniaturized expressions of the wider community", according to Nagati. "Out of these forgotten Downtown passages, we can rebuild a healthy society," he adds. Passages appear as gaps in the heart of the city, with the potential of becoming an integral part of the urban fabric, and a parallel network for pedestrians, through the establishment of



art festivals, and other public events there. Alternatively, they can also serve as open-air museums, or green areas and bicycle paths. Nagati suggests that squares are “arteries of the city”, while these narrow passageways are like its veins. “Passageways negotiate between the public and private, and are vibrant embodiments of coexistence and tolerance, where a café will open up next to a bar, and adjacent to both will be a mosque.”

Catalyzing Change

The Creative Cities project channeled its attention toward Cairo, and particularly Downtown, as an interface for the rapid political and physical transformations that have swept the city and the country over the past years. Against these tumultuous transformations in the social and cultural fabric, residents of the Downtown area have been treated as pawns in a pre-designed path. Few initiatives have considered the residents and shop owners, or enabled them to voice their opinions regarding the [externally imposed changes](#) of their neighborhood. In response, the Creative Cities project invited all stakeholders to answer questions on the role that artists can play as catalysts, and the impact of cultural policies in the development of Downtown Cairo. Among these stakeholders were the government, local rights organizations, private real estate development companies, and independent cultural organizations, as well as Egyptian and foreign architects.

Informal Settlements as Creative Economies










The project relies on the preexisting experiences of developing other, similar world capitals as a reference point, in light of the movement toward post-industrial economy. Nagati explains that Cairo’s overwhelming reliance on informal settlements can in fact be considered one of the best examples of innovative urban solutions. He suggests the formulation of “informal urbanization” as an integral component of the Creative Cities concept, amid the absence of formal planning. While urban hubs in the Global North have gravitated toward the arts as means to resist oppressive economic transformations and to revive urban economies, similarly, forms of resistance have erupted in Egypt, albeit with their own unique slant. “Hence comes the importance of recognizing informal urban practices as parallel economic activities, transcending the limited definitions of creativity as artistic and intellectual production only,” Nagati notes. Based on its expertise in designing projects in the Downtown area over the past five years, CLUSTER aims to formulate a participatory framework in the form of a Downtown Board of Trustees. This would be established under the auspices of the Cairo Governorate and official institutions, while including shop owners, vendors, artists, and intellectuals.

Narratives of Cairo: Hope and Destruction

In her book, *The Literary Atlas of Cairo*, Samia Mehrez, Professor of Arabic literature and Director of the Center for Translation Studies at the American University in Cairo, maps out Cairo through its various literary representations. Inspired by a Roland Barthes’ idea that “the city is a discourse”, Mehrez partook in the Creative Cities project by offering



a [literary tour](#) of Cairo. According to Mehrez, the writers that come to represent the city in literature are the architects of its history. In view of Egypt's long literary tradition of realism, Cairo has retained the lion's share of literary representation in the 20th century, often acting as a key figure, and at times even the protagonists, in some works. In her book, Mehrez ventures to provide a "literary topography of the sociocultural, political, and urban history of the city by bringing together some one hundred works of Egyptian and Arab writers". Among these writers are Ihsan Abdel Qodous, Edward Said, Radwa Ashour, Ahdaf Soueif, Mekkawi Said, Mahmoud Wardani, and Ahmed El-Aidi.

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