

Facades of Modernity

Image, Performance, and Transformation in the Egyptian Metropolis

by

Mohamed Elshahed

Bachelor of Architecture
New Jersey Institute of Technology, 2005

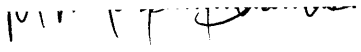
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
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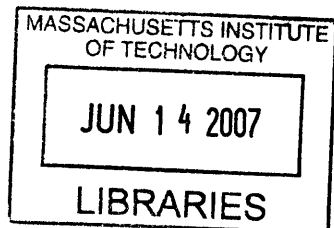
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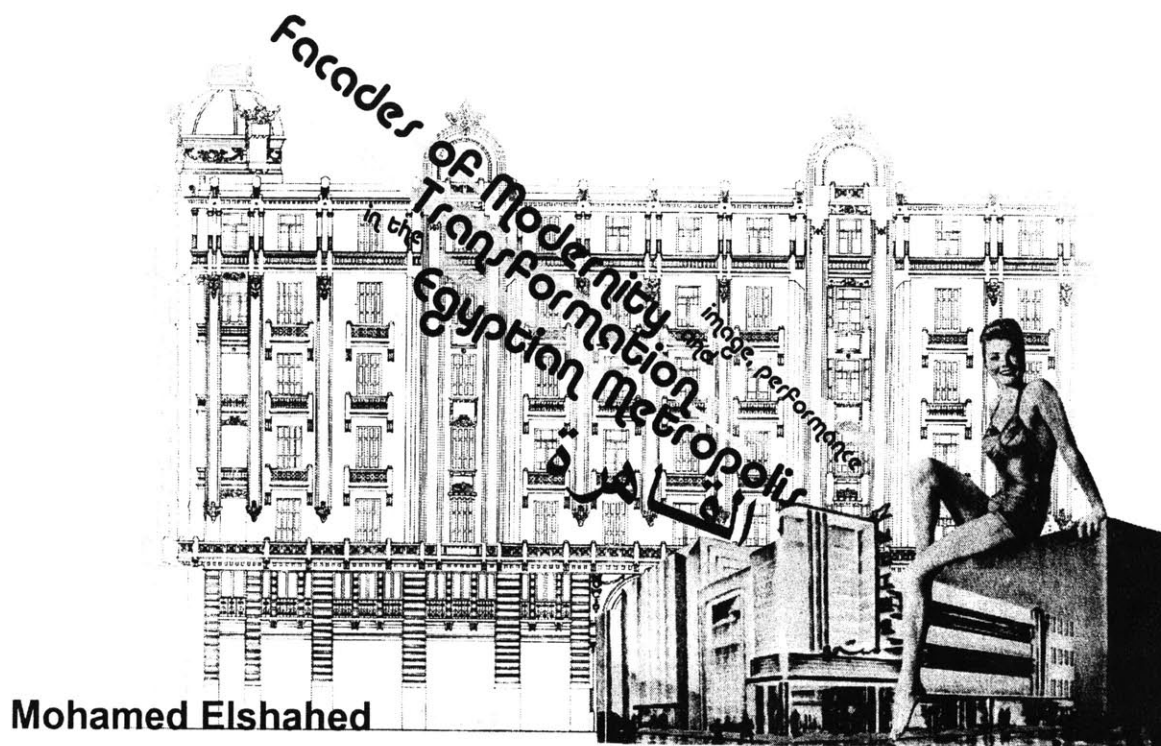
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By

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On May 24, 2007 in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
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Abstract

Shifting political, social and cultural landscapes in contemporary Cairo with the triumph of Neoliberalism are defining the city's modern heritage. In order to create a narrative of transformation of architectural production and its entanglement in different social, cultural and political contexts within the city's history, I will focus on the epicenter of the modern city, wust-el-balad, Downtown. It has recently been appropriated through a dual process of asserting the city's modern heritage. The first part of this process utilizes popular media such as period-based soap operas, photography exhibitions, literature and film. The second part of the process is through preservation of Cairo's modern buildings and the drafting of legislation to protect them. Architectural style, ornamentation of frontages (façades), is central to this process of shaping 'modern' Cairo. The criteria for inclusion into this heritage as practiced by the various committees and authorities explicitly place facades and aesthetics at the top of their selection process. Thus the process of heritization is inscribing a certain image of modernity in Cairo by selective inclusion of certain architectural styles. This thesis traces the constantly shifting image of modernity throughout downtown's history from its origin in the nineteenth century to its present state in the twenty-first century.

In response to the hyper-functional architecture of the 1970s and 1980s accommodating population growth of the capital, architectural trends in the 1990s in Cairo heavily relied on historicism. According to Ashraf Salama, Professor of Architecture at Al-Azhar University, "historicism has been materialized with a strong reference to three main Egyptian cultures: the Pharaonic, the Coptic, and the Islamic." However, in the last decade a new architectural trend is growing in popularity that historicizes an alternative era in Egyptian history, the modern period of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Thus the study of the state of architectural practice in contemporary Cairo is directly related to the city's modern origins in the 19th century. In this thesis I will narrate the making of an architectural and urban aesthetic that is later forgotten by processes of damnation of memory and is recently being nostalgically appropriated by the middle class for the making of new architecture. These processes of making, forgetting and remembering are reflective of the cultural identities of those active in them.

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Biographical Note

Mohamed graduated with a Bachelor of Architecture from the New Jersey Institute of Technology in 2005. During his undergraduate years he had diverse work experiences including working for the Jersey City Housing Authority on community housing, for non-profit organizations Concordia in France and Legambiente in Italy working on fort restoration projects, and for artists Christo and Jeanne-Claude on their work The Gates in Central Park, New York City.

Mohamed joined the SMarchS program at MIT immediately following graduating from NJIT. As a graduate student he developed his interests in the role of nostalgia and historicism in contemporary Egyptian culture and architecture. This thesis project is the culmination of his work at MIT which he will further develop as a doctoral student in the Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies Department at New York University beginning Fall 2007.

Façades of Modernity: Image, Performance and Transformation in the Egyptian Metropolis

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Preface and Acknowledgments

This project stems from my fascination with fragmentation. The term fragment is imbued with nostalgia as it suggests that a complete unity once existed. I have always focused on details, fragments of subjects and objects, buildings and cities to understand my surroundings. I believe that my experiences through my childhood, studies, and travels have been composed of fragments of sights, sounds, smells, tastes and feelings. I can not recall experiencing anything as a whole. When I decided to work on downtown Cairo, my initial ideas were reactions to and observations of fragments: real-estate advertisements, television programs, family conversations, and aimless walks in the streets of both Cairo and Alexandria. These fragmented experiences produced responses and criticisms that, ironically, begged to be part of a whole, a narrative that connects them when a connection is possible and that questions the disconnection when the fluidity of a narrative is challenged. Admittedly, this thesis is a montage of the fragments that make up downtown Cairo as seen through my lens.

Youssef Chahine's filmic representations of Alexandria have had a lasting effect on my psyche and on how I perceive the world around me. Chahine's interest in translating the disintegration of the physical, social and cultural landscapes of the city producing almost chaotic, disenchanting film sequences is to my eyes the most honest and realistic portrait of a place. He deliberately avoids processing his observations of the city through a filter that then produces an idealistic, wholesome, limited, or constructed view of the city with a singular reading, rather his work unapologetically reflects the city's multiplicity, confusion and fragmentation.

After completing my studies towards a career of practicing architecture, I discovered my desire to research, study and observe the existing physical space around me rather than adding to it. Professor Zeynep Celik at the New Jersey Institute of Technology has been instrumental in helping me locate my first in-depth research project in the history of architecture and urbanism. It

was my research on the cities of the Suez Canal that ignited my interest in primary research and to further develop my skills as a historian and as an observer of culture. Also at NJIT, Professor Gabrielle Esperdy, who was not only a professor but also a mentor and a friend, introduced me to the history of modern architecture with such rigor and excitement that shaped my interests and propelled me towards an academic career.

Aga Khan Professor Nasser Rabbat has directed me in the last two years to explore new territory and to focus my research interests into manageable projects. As an advisor, teacher and mentor, Professor Rabbat continuously provided me with challenges and opportunities to expand and grow intellectually. During my two years in Cambridge I had the pleasure of working with Professors Mark Jarzombek, Robert Cowherd and Heghnar Watenpaugh at MIT who all introduced me to new areas from philosophy to cultural studies to issues of preservation. I am indebted to Professor Christine Smith at the Graduate School of Design at Harvard University who generously provided me with ample career advice and always gave me time to discuss my research and interests.

My academic experience in Cambridge was enriched by the opportunity to work as a Research Assistant in the Aga Khan Trust for Culture project Archnet for three semesters and as a Research Assistant for AKPIA during my final semester. My most rewarding and valuable experience came from teaching at the Boston Architectural College for the last three semesters at MIT. I am indebted to Professor Sibel Bozdogan who entrusted me with her students to assist in teaching the History of Modern Architecture and who recommended me to continue teaching the course for another semester with Professor Peter Parsons. Also thanks to Richard Griswald at the BAC who gave me the opportunity to teach Design Principles for two semesters.

I always valued true friendship and I have been lucky to make many new friendships during my two years in Cambridge. AKPIA colleagues Saima Akhtar, Dalia al-Husseini and Razan Francis have shared with me the ups and downs of academic life at MIT. My many friends at the various divisions of the School of Architecture at MIT continued to support and surround me from our first days in our programs. Also adding color to my experience are the many friends from the Center for Middle Eastern Studies at Harvard, many of whom I met for the first time while in Cairo during the summer of 2006, who provided me with their diverse perspectives on the city victorious.

My father, whose endless courage, generosity, love and adventurous travel stories keep me going and my mother who never fails to say the right thing have shaped who I am with their open-minded and liberal beliefs. My family nurtured me in an environment that encouraged asking questions and respected difference of opinion. Everyday I am reminded of the endless support of my brother Waleed and my sister Nashwa, who never allowed me to be selfish and made sharing second nature to me. Finally, the city of Alexandria, where I only lived for five years of my life, has left a lasting impression on my very being. My love for architecture, history, and cities found its roots on a street corner down a steep hill from Stanley Beach where my grandfather built the building my family occupied. It is that building with its high ceilings and balconies on that street with its tram line, shops and mosque in that district with its beach cabins and cafes in that city that formed the very essence of me.

Mohamed Elshahed

Cambridge, May 23, 2007

A Greek dentist we met in Constantinople who had been practicing for many years in Cairo said:
“Ah, Cairo? It is a hundred times more beautiful than here! Oh, but certainly, because they *have* the English *over there*. By all means, go there. It’s just like a European city. You’ll love it there; you’ll see lots of paved streets. And then there are the streetcars, and the hotels, fifty or a hundred times bigger than this one here...” *Dumbfounded, I inquire about the Arab city, the white city with moucharabies and polychrome minarets, and then about the museum in which everything of Egypt will soon be housed.* “Yes, yes, I know all that, but after all it’s not the real Cairo!” *On the other hand, he knew about the Pyramids.*

--Le Corbusier (Charles-Edouard Jeanneret)

Journey to the East

Introduction

In this thesis project I explore the transformation of aesthetic production and perception in modern Cairo in the making of architectural facades. The project begins with observations and analysis of the contemporary city and the current tendency towards historicism. The larger part of the thesis is a historical study, a narrative, of the evolution of the aesthetics of facades from the birth of the modern city to the most recent process of appropriating that aesthetic for the making of a new architecture that is rooted in a newly discovered heritage. Although presented chronologically, the narrative is divided into three deliberate acts of making, forgetting and remembering.

The first chapter introduces the two anchoring elements of this project: downtown Cairo and its place in the increasingly fragmented urban context of the city, and the significance of facades as physical evidence for the evaluation of transformation. The second chapter recounts the origins of the modern city and focuses on the process of making of an architectural aesthetic. The third chapter begins with the rise of Egyptian nationalism in art and architecture in the 1930s and the slow beginnings of the eradication of the already established ornamental aesthetic of the modern city. The focus of this chapter is the process of forgetting, the erasure of an architectural aesthetic. The fourth chapter is centered on the process of selective rediscovery of the aesthetic sensibility already discussed in both the process of its making and its forgetting. The focus of this chapter is the process of remembering, and the role of nostalgia in reviving fragments of the past for the purposes of the present. The fifth and final chapter concludes the thesis with emphasis on the transformation of downtown Cairo and its present significance within the larger context of a transforming city.



Figure 1. *Sakakini quarter in Cairo: Ismail's urban vision*

Chapter I

Downtown, Public Space and Urbanism

“The distance between Baehler Passage, where Zaki Bey el Dessouki lives, and his office in the Yacoubian Building is not more than a hundred meters, but it takes him an hour to cover it each morning as he is obliged to greet his friends on the street.”¹

Timothy Mitchell noted in *Colonizing Egypt* that “the identity of the modern city [Cairo] is created by what it keeps out. Its modernity is something contingent upon the exclusion of its opposite.” Mitchell’s observation applies to the Sadat era which Farha Ghannam in her *Remaking the Modern* criticizes for privileging the gaze of tourists and upper-class Egyptians. Ghannam asserts that part of Sadat’s plan to build a modern Cairo was to relocate its disadvantaged lower classes to the periphery, leaving the center of the city for the upper classes and foreigners to occupy.² Although parts of the city center remain enclaves of well-to-do Egyptians, downtown, the epicenter and origin of modern Cairo, remained a distressed business district catering to the intermediate and lower echelons of the population. The advantaged population living in Zamalek, Heliopolis or Dokki bypassed downtown via the elevated high-speed road network that was built to get around the old city center. The rise of the Cairo skyline during this period with large scale projects such as the Television and Radio tower and the Ramsis Hilton and more recently the Ministry of Foreign Affairs are part of the continuous process in the second half of the twentieth century of making a contemporary modern image of the city. These buildings are what Egyptian engineer Milad Hanna refers to as “the golden peel that covers the surface, [hiding] the miserable conditions of popular areas.”³

Unlike the rapidly developing periphery, downtown still maintains recognizable features such as: squares, promenades and streets. The central city enjoys types of public life that are a combination of Mediterranean, medieval, touristic, giving the downtown a specific sense of place that survives beneath the new layers of urbanism that have developed in the past decades including elevated high speed bridges such as the Sixth of October Bridge cutting through the fabric of modern Cairo with its heavy flow of traffic multiple stories above the “traditional” street. Yacoubian Building, both novel and film, depict this space as pleasingly dense with social possibility and human interaction. Although bustling street life continues to exist all over the city,

¹ Yacoubian Building, 3.

² Ghannam, 30.

³ Ibid, 32

it is particularly in downtown, where the connection between urbanism and social engineering is most evident within a modern urbanist vision.

By comparison, the satellite cities and garden city suburbs are gutted of pedestrian networks that allow social interaction to occur. Satellite cities such as the Sixth of October of Nasr City are badly executed CIAM-styled modernist cities of building blocks without the spaces in between. If Jane Jacobs were to visit these cities she would criticize their emptiness and their inability to simulate rich urban experiences.⁴ The need for the urban social experience has been satisfied in different ways in the last decades: frequently returning to the center to quench the thirst for urban life is an option for under-privileged citizens, while privileged citizens have long abandoned downtown and opted for privatized public spaces such as extravagant shopping malls and semi-public parks and gardens; others opt to spend most of their time at home making television and the internet the new frontiers of public space.

Wust al-balad: establishing the center

The term downtown, from American origins, was associated with this area during Cairo's colonial rule after it was established as a business, commercial and leisure center of the city. The term's Arabic counterpart, wust-el-balad, literally translates as center-of-the-city. In all textual sources on the city the English term 'downtown' is used and so for ease of reference I will be using the term to refer to the area sandwiched between Fatimid Cairo to the east and the Nile to the west particularly the streets linking Talaat Harb, previously Sulayman Pasha Square, and Tahrir, previously Ismail Square. The area is selected as it has been the primary stage of events in the city's modern history from its inception to its most recent nostalgic processes.

Samir Raafat's scholarship and writing has been built around nostalgia for colonial Cairo and is focused on the loss of "a sense of place" in many of Cairo's districts, including downtown. This idealist, and non-contextual view of the development of greater Cairo has recently been disputed with the increasing interest from scholars and historians in the notion of Cairo as "global city." Although some argue that Cairo can not be studied as a global city because of its minute role within the larger context of global economy, there is no doubt that the term itself is contested when considering Cairo, a city that in the last quarter of a century and increasingly in the last

⁴ J. Jacobs 1961

decade has had the signs of growth found in other global cities such as Bombay, Mexico City and Sao Paulo: Satellite cities, gated communities, luxury shopping malls with restricted access, the privatization of public space and an increasingly international and cosmopolitan group of expatriate population.

Raafat dismisses current trends as irrelevant to vernacular modes of development. Raafat, however, praises the urban and architectural ingenuity of nineteenth and early twentieth century garden city developments such as Maadi and Heliopolis. I argue that current developments in greater Cairo, which affect the development, status and image of downtown districts, are in fact the twenty-first century equivalent to those earlier suburban ventures. Economic growth and the increasing number of Euro-American-Egyptian citizens with substantially high incomes combined with the high density of population and poor development in the central districts created the need for housing and development in the peripheral areas of Cairo. Combined with the development and building of ring roads, highways and the availability of automobiles, Cairo has “naturally” taken the course of other mega cities in the southern hemisphere towards a new culture of commodity, greater gaps between rich and poor, hyperrealistic garden cities on the periphery and deteriorated downtown and a new cosmopolitan society that redefines cosmopolitanism as it was understood and experienced in Cairo in the last century.

Facades for Tracing Change

Facades are the physical evidence for this study as it is a study of aesthetic evolution. The most notable and telling aspect of architectural transformation has been in the treatment of frontages and the packaging of familiar institutions and residential blocks. This research project was motivated by the use of “classic modern facades” that refer to Egypt’s recently dusted off belle époque heritage used as an attractive selling point for new real-estate developments. Historicism that refers to belle époque aesthetics depends on the recent expansion of heritage to include selected styles from the turn of the century.

Architectural style, ornamentation of frontages (façades) is central to the process of shaping the city’s modern heritage. The inventory of buildings commissioned by the General Organization for Physical Planning (GOPP) explicitly lists architectural styles (neoclassical, neo-Renaissance, art deco, art nouveau, Arab revivalist) as criteria for inclusion into this constructed heritage. The current and on-going process of construction Cairo’s modern heritage is centered on a certain

architectural image, where ornament and façade are consolidated, historicized and narrated as modernity. In the context of Cairo, modernity is being defined as one carrying a Euro-inspired façade, this process of creating history is in effect influencing the city’s future modernity as the public is increasingly interested in referring to heritage in the process of making architecture today.

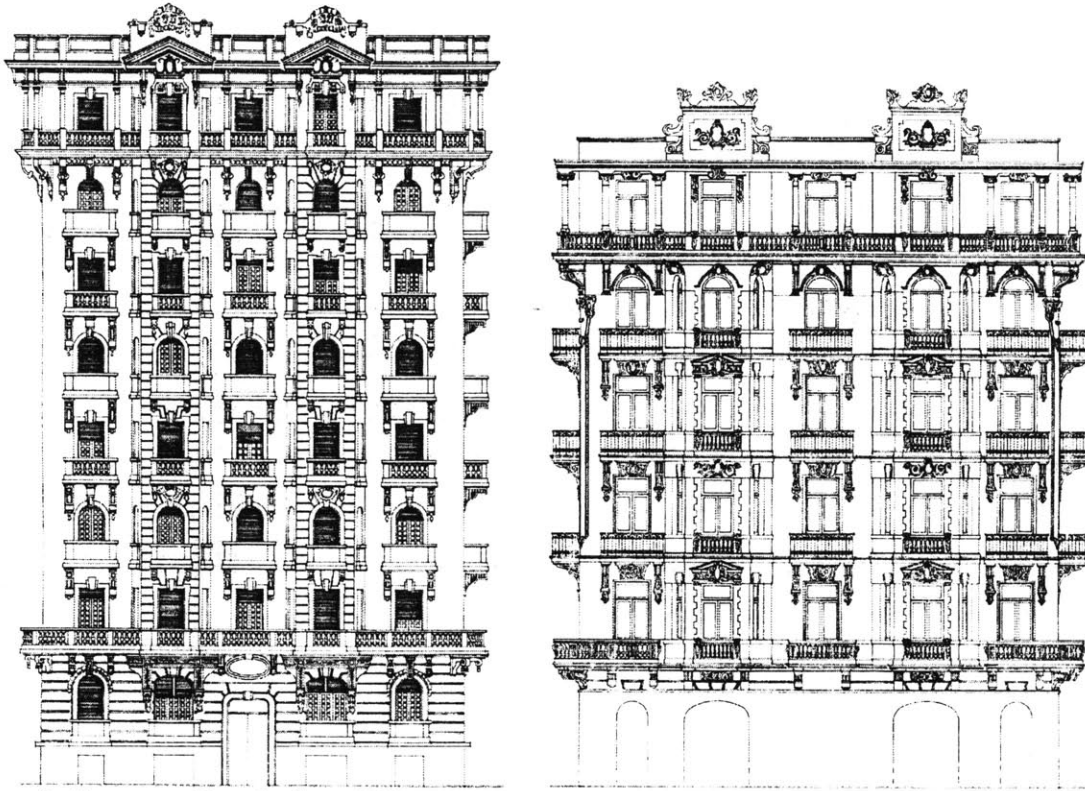


Figure 2. *Downtown Facades from 1927*

As the city expands, façades announce the ends and beginnings of eras in the city’s history. With every transition the modern city turned its back on the old and looked towards the new. The making of modern Cairo was one part of a dual project, the other being making medieval Cairo through selective restoration. Similarly today there is a dual project at work. I argue that the post-*infatih* neo-liberal policies that have produced a new *suburban* Cairene typology created an interest in its antithesis—“*urban Modern Cairo.*” At the end of the nineteenth century there was a trend of looking back at old parts of the city to project a new kind of modernity, one that values history. Efforts to restore the city’s medieval quarters are part of this attempt to highlight its modernity by preserving its medieval past.⁵ At the end of the twentieth century started a trend that

⁵ See Irene A. Bierman’s chapter *Disciplining the Eye: Perceiving Medieval Cairo* in *Making Cairo Medieval* (New York: Lexington Books, 2005).

returns to the center of the modern city by bringing attention to the city's modern heritage.⁶ The transformation of facades is reflective of the shifting identities of the city's bourgeois society. The downtown stands in the middle of a continuous series of events since the middle of the nineteenth century aimed at projecting an image of modernity through architecture and urban form. In this text, I construct a history of transformation of downtown where image is at the center of the making of a modernity that is Cairene.

⁶ See Galila El Kadi and Dalila ElKerdany's *Belle-époque Cairo: The Politics of Refurbishing the Downtown Business District in Cairo Cosmopolitan* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2006) .



Figure 3. *Satellite image of central Cairo*

Chapter II

Making: The Origin of a Central Commercial and Residential district

Downtown was the product of the famous westernization or modernization of Cairo carried according to plans by Ali Mubarak⁷ under the rule of Khedive Ismail. However, downtown was not designed to possess the role that it eventually held in the first half of the twentieth century as the business and administrative center of the city. Downtown was not built in a single effort either, rather it was built over a span of forty years by various landlords who purchased land or were given land by the khedive if they promised to build “worthy” architectural pieces worth a minimum of 2,000 Egyptian pounds.⁸ Worthy architecture of value at the time meant that it followed contemporary “European” architectural styles. These buildings would house residential units for upper classes of society both Egyptian and European. Later on more businesses and commercial activity filled the apartments and ground floors of downtown buildings making the area a vibrant center for the city.

The area west of the old city sandwiched between the river and the dense fabric of Fatimid Cairo was part of the larger plan to redevelop the capital outside the limits of its old city. The area was known as Ismailiyya, after the Khedive Ismail. To understand its form and function, it should be placed within the historical context of the creation of modern Cairo. Two key texts are employed here in retracing the history of the making of modern Cairo and in effect the making of downtown: André Raymond’s *Cairo* and the quintessential text on Cairo by Janet Abu-Lughod, *Cairo: 1001 years of the City Victorious*.

Prelude to modernity⁹

The established history of modern Egypt has begun around the time of the French Expedition and the rule of Muhammad Ali (1805-1848).¹⁰ Thus the period between 1798 when the French landed in Egypt and 1805 when Muhammad Ali came into power is marked as the ambiguous beginning

⁷ Mubarak was responsible for (1) supervising the execution of plans for the quarter of Ismailiyya; (2) redeveloping the older and vacant lands peripheral to Azbakiyya; (3) drawing up a master plan for the entire city in accordance with the style of Paris. Abu-Lughod, 105.

⁸ Raymond, 314.

⁹ The term here refers to the deliberate departure from tradition using architecture to signify that departure.

¹⁰ See Afaf Lutfi Sayyid-Marsot, *Egypt in the Reign of Muhammad Ali* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984) for the reign of Muhammad Ali.

of modern Egypt. Although Janet Abu-Lughod disputes these dates as inaccurate suggesting that modernization did not arrive in Cairo until the rule of Khedive Ismail (1863-1879) whom she credits with inaugurating the process of transforming of the city.¹¹ according to Raymond, with 300,000 inhabitants in 1863 Cairo has in fact changed little since the arrival of French troops on its soil,¹² this account is slightly challenged by Abu-Lughod's earlier account which mentions that the French "severely damaged large sections of Cairo" in addition to adding a series of short-lived improvements.¹³ In either case, both scholars would agree that the modern city came to take shape under the rule of Ismail, for this purpose I propose understanding downtown and Cairo at large as a product of the Ismail plan for modernization and expansion.

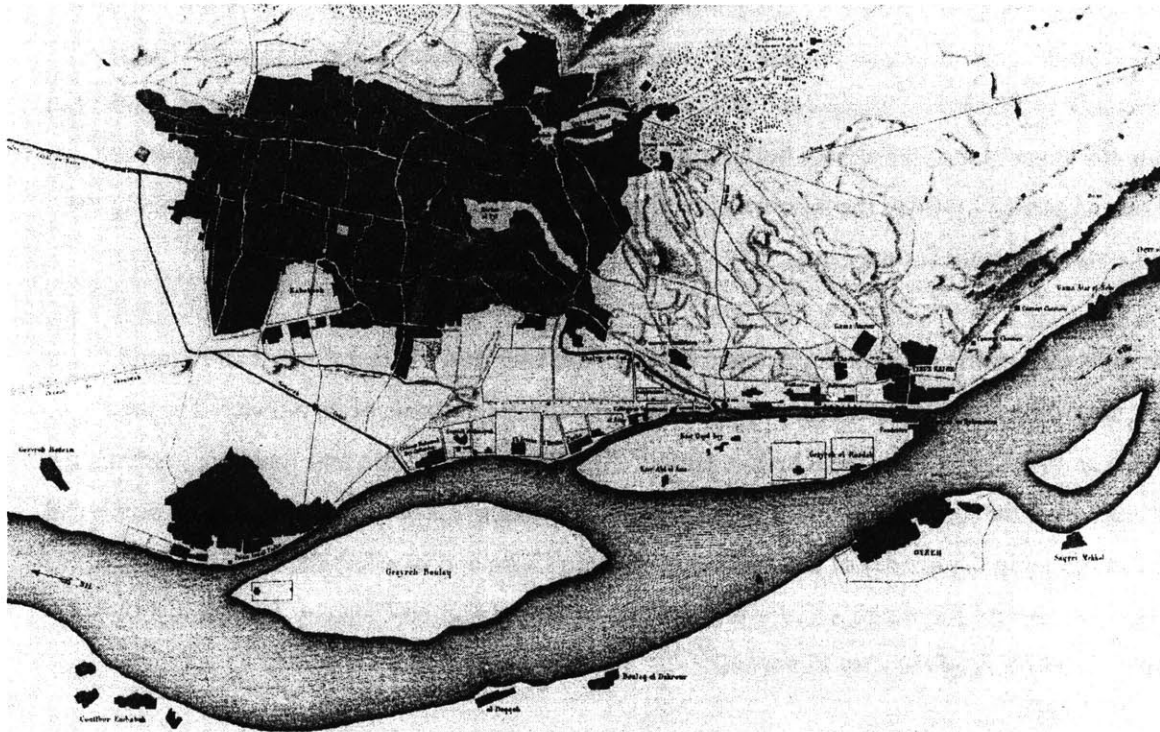


Figure 4. *Cairo, Bulaq and Misr al-Qadima. Plan by P. Coste from Une architecture arabe ou monuments du Caire, mesures et dissines de 1818 a 1825*

Note-worthy precursors to the Ismail plan that paved the way for further modernization during his reign include the drafting of a *tanzim* plan for the city in 1845 which included recommendations for widening streets.¹⁴ The plan was short-lived, however; its concepts would clearly influence

¹¹ Abu-Lughod, 83.

¹² Raymond, 292.

¹³ Abu-Lughod, 84.

¹⁴ See Raymond, *A Slow Awakening in Cairo* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2000); Janet Abu-Lughod, *Cairo: 1001 years of the City Victorious* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), pp. 87-88; Ehud Toledano, *State and Society in Mid-Nineteenth-Century Egypt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 222-224.

later plans for opening streets through old Cairo's urban fabric and widening existing streets. Tanzim proposed two new streets: Sikkat al-Jadida (New Street) connecting the Muski Bridge to the al-Azhar quarter in addition to a street that would connect diagonally across the old city from Azbakiyya to the Citadel. The opening of such streets already required demolition of parts of the medieval fabric of the city foreshadowing the future French-styled plans for straight boulevards connecting old and new squares in the city.¹⁵ Also in 1845 cemeteries near Azbakiyya were razed in addition to houses at the edge of the old city. This process of demolition was slow and was not completed until the 1860s under Ismail. Finally, on the architectural front, Muhammad Ali and his son Ibrahim Pasha called for building fronts to be whitewashed and later prohibited the construction of *mashrabiyya*¹⁶ and promoted the use of glass windowpanes creating a new style that is a clear step in the direction of a vernacular modern Egyptian typology.

These earlier steps towards modernization opened the way for the full fledged attempt to "westernize" the city as envisioned by Ismail Pasha. Before exploring Ismail's contributions to the making of modern Cairo, the equating of modernization with westernization must be briefly examined. Raymond avoids examining the equation by simply stating that "modernization, given the material and cultural state of the world in 1860, could only mean Westernization."¹⁷ However, the East/West dichotomy embraced by historians was much more fluid and perhaps ambiguous during the nineteenth century where cross cultural exchange between Europe and the Levant has been emphasized by many recent studies. Alexandria for example preceded Cairo in the direction of modernization and can perhaps be seen as a link between Cairo and the so-called European influence in modernization. What I am proposing is to read the process of modernization as one that was filtered into the vernacular through time rather than a quick and simple act of mimicking European modernization.

Alexandria earlier in the nineteenth century during the reign of Muhammad Ali was transformed from a small fishing village into the political and commercial center of Egyptian trade. This

¹⁵ What is referred to in texts as French-style planning from the nineteenth century is only referring to the climax of Baron Haussmann's career embodied in his design for New Paris. Thus the question must be asked: what is French about Haussmann's plan? In fact it was imposed on the medieval Parisian urban fabric as a mode of altering the city and modernizing it, an exercise that would be repeated in Cairo only a short while after. A more proper way of referring to the plan is Haussmann-style planning or haussmannization rather than western planning or French planning.

¹⁶ According to Raymond the *mashrabiyya*, the traditional projecting wood latticework screens, were prohibited for safety reasons although he suggests that it was a direct attempt to "legislate 'modernism.'" Raymond, 303.

¹⁷ Raymond, 308.

transformation was directed towards relations with European traders, however, I argue that it was a vernacular development towards modernism where European influences were introduced by a vernacular interest to learn from the other and improve on the local conditions. In many ways Alexandria attracted a great number of Europeans from across Europe to migrate there in search of wealth and fame because it appeared modern in European terms but it was not Europe, it was a new city with its own vernacular modernity perhaps rivaling that of old European centers. This was the same reason Muhammad Ali used Alexandria as his “main theater of diplomatic interests” rather than Cairo which was “linked to a past he was actively abolishing.”¹⁸

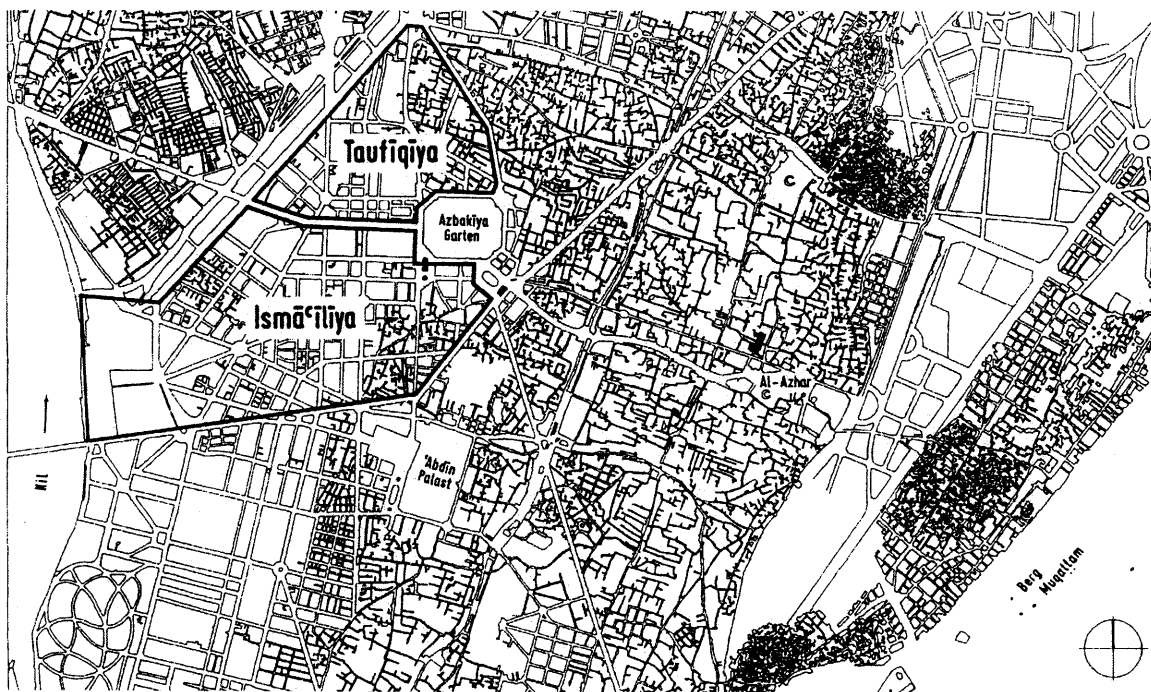


Figure 5. Map of Ismailiya and Taufiqiya districts

The cultural, economic and diplomatic exchange with Europe is thus a contributor to the process of modernization in Egypt; however, I argue that this very process was inherent in an interest to elevate Egypt’s status and role in the global context by its own ruler not by mimicking European developments but perhaps by learning from them. By the time the process of modernization reached Cairo under Ismail, many of the urban planning ideas that Ali Mubarak learned in Paris and implemented in Cairo had precedent within the Egyptian context embodied in Alexandria. Again there is no doubt that there was an interest in “westernizing” the city by Ismail following his visit to the Universal Exposition of 1867 in Paris, however, according to Raymond, the Khedive planned to modernize Cairo prior to his visit to Paris.¹⁹ I am interested in downplaying

¹⁸ Raymond, 301.

¹⁹ Raymond, 312.

the notion that modernization in the Egyptian context simply meant mimicking European models without any vernacular precedent or intentions.²⁰

Ismail's Cairo: realizing a vision

“Over the past thirty years European influence has transformed Cairo. Now we are civilized.”²¹

The history of Ismail's Cairo has been overshadowed by the notion that Cairo had become a “double” city. Ismail, “the first ruler in nine centuries to make an overall plan for the city's development,” led an internalized city planning process mastered by Egyptians.²² In addition, his urban transformation was preceded by the creation of various institutions which would plan, manage and oversee the implementation of his vision for the city.²³ His vision: to rival Paris by building a modern city using the latest contemporary urban model embodied in Haussmann's plan of wide, straight boulevards connecting public squares. This contemporary modern city was to be planned mainly west of the old medieval fabric of old Cairo creating a second Cairo giving the city its “double” identity.

The Ismailiyya district, that would later become the downtown, extended from Azbakiyya south towards the barracks at Qasr al-Nil constructed by Said Pasha in the 1850s where the Nile Hilton would later be built in the 1950s. Much of the architecture in this area was built after the reign of Ismail when the city was occupied by the British. The urban layout already existed with the blocks remaining mostly vacant awaiting development. The district was laid out in wide streets and sidewalks with very little buildings actually built during the reign of Ismail. An account by F. Barham Zincke who visited Egypt in the winter of 1870-71 describes the state of Ismailiyya at that time: “...the Viceroy has here, for the space of about a square mile, laid out broad macadamized streets with broad trottoirs on each side, as if he were contemplating an European

²⁰ The planning of modern Cairo with apartment blocks has been historicized as a direct translation of Haussmannian organization of the city. However, the *rab*, has been an existing vernacular model of group housing similar to apartments sometimes with shops on the ground floor. One way to rewrite the history of modern Cairo is to suggest that the “modern” apartment blocks transformed the vernacular *rab* into an updated form of group housing. The *rab* has thus been updated and packaged in a Franco-influenced façade to signify its transformation from the medieval form of group housing into the modern one. This kind of rewriting the urban transformation of Cairo is important to my approach as it challenges the notion that modernization equated with westernization was literally force-fed to Egyptians who are usually depicted as unwelcoming to the process.

²¹ During his visit to the Universal Exposition of 1867, Ismail declared Cairo's ability to rival European cities. Raymond, 312.

²² Raymond, 309-11.

²³ The Ministry of Public Works was founded in 1864-65 in addition to a department of urban planning in each of the city's newly created four districts or *aqsam*.

city, [but] not much, however, with the exception of these roadways, has yet been done towards carrying out his grand designs, except around the Ezbekiah.”²⁴

Azbakiyya garden is noted as a major project of transformation in the building of modern Cairo. The garden is a public space linking the edge of the Fatimid city with the edge of Ismailiyya. Azbakiyya is Cairo’s earliest attempt at creating a public space where a Cairene brand of cosmopolitanism is forged, allowing for residents of the old and new quarters to mingle. The English-style garden designed by Barillet-Deschamps had restaurants, cafés (European, vernacular and Greek), shops and a photographer’s studio among other amenities.²⁵ Inaugurated in 1872, the garden was perhaps intended as a center for a united city, a connecting piece of green space that would join two opposing urban conditions, however, as the Ismailiyya district continued to be filled in with new residential and commercial blocks it quickly became the true center of the city further isolating Old Cairo.

The duality of Cairo under Ismail resulted from his attempt to maintain the rich urban fabric of the old city while creating a new modern city. His surgical approach preserved the medieval character of Fatimid Cairo by introducing a select few interventions into its dense condition. This approach contrasted with the French model that razed much of the city in the process of realizing Haussmann’s plan for Paris. The act of preserving much of old Cairo can be argued as a modern desire on the Khedive’s behalf to contrast with his new city.²⁶ Ismail has been represented as the insensitive ruler who was not interested in preserving Islamic Cairo usually by referring to his construction of the Muhammad Ali Boulevard through the Fatimid city. There is no evidence that Ismail ever intended to fully copy a Parisian modernization plan which would destroy larger parts of the old city, in addition to being a logistical nightmare, I argue that the Khedive may have understood the need to maintain the integrity of old Cairo.²⁷

²⁴ See F. Barham Zinke, *Vicar of Wierstead, Egypt of the Pharaohs and of the Khedive* (Smith, Elder and Company, London: 1871), p. 405. Also see Abu-Lughod, 106.

²⁵ Raymond, 315.

²⁶ See Making Cairo Medieval for the process of medievalizing pre-modern Cairo while creating modern Cairo.

²⁷ Although other boulevards were planned to be cut through the old city, such plans are still sensitive when compared to the Parisian execution of modernization. In addition, Europeans romanticized medieval Cairo and taking a more vigorous approach to modernization that would endanger the medieval city would be harmful to the city’s image. The French architect Rhoné, for example, “deplored Cairo’s mechanical modernization.” Abu-Lughod, 109.

In front of the spacious verandah of Shepherd's Hotel – the meeting place of all Frankish Cairo for gossip in the afternoon, and a delightful lounge when we are too lazy or tired to go sightseeing – the eminently European shops of Azbakiyya display their plate-glass windows and the Greek, Italian, and Levantine rogues who stand smoking within, ready to cheat us; and we shall have to do some distance before we can find the picturesque cupboard-shop of the East, with its sedate occupant and its queer little stock in trade.²⁸

The double nature of the Cairo that emerged at the end of Ismail's reign was not that of colonial cities where old and new or European and Arab sections of a city were politically and culturally isolated. I argue that the duality of Cairo in the 1870s was a result of conflicting urban models that coexisted within proximity that carried clear physical distinctions but were fluid and open on the social and cultural fronts. In the years following the reign of Ismail under colonial rule, this fluidity and openness would be challenged as new Cairo grows to become distinctly more European and upper class and old Cairo remains stagnant and ignored by development, housing mainly lower echelons of the population. The rich districts of old Cairo would slowly be drained of its merchant population as more well-to-do families will eventually move out and acquire new homes in the Ismailiyya district and other modern areas of new Cairo. This shift will be repeated in the twentieth century as families will again abandon "modern Cairo" or downtown and head to the new "modern" communities of the late twentieth century and early twenty-first.

The birth of a downtown

It is under British rule (1882-1936) that the area now known as downtown took its present shape.²⁹ Much of the district was built during the building boom in the decade between 1897 and 1907.³⁰ The already planned Ismailiyya district became the self-contained colonial city during the rule of Lord Cromer.³¹ Vacant lots not occupied by villas in the area were filled with residential, financial and commercial buildings that transformed the area into a financial and business center as well as a place of leisure for the new and growing Egyptian middle class. British influence in

²⁸ Lane-poole, *Cairo: sketches of its history, monuments and social life* (London: J.S. Virtue, 1898 [1973 edn.]) Expresses European disinterest in the "modern" side of Cairo in search for its romanticized double.

²⁹ For the colonial period see Robert Tignor, *Modernization and British Colonial Rule in Egypt, 1882-1914* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966).

³⁰ According to Abu-Lughod, the decade between 1907 and 1917 was a period of slower population and urban growth due to the market crash of 1907. The 1920s were prosperous with increased urbanization and building activity in the downtown area as well as larger population growth in the city at large. Again the 1930s were marked by a recession triggered in 1926 by the drop in cotton prices and further worsened by the 1929 New York crash. Abu-Lughod, 122-129.

³¹ Abu-Lughod, 114.

Cairo's urbanism took shape in Garden City in 1905-07 which was planned south of the rapidly growing Ismailiyya. Already by the beginning of the twentieth century Ismailiyya was developed with a dense urban character framed by Qasr al-Nil Street, Sulayman Pasha Street and Fouad Street enveloped by old Cairo, the Nile and newer suburban developments to the south, north and across the river in Zamalek and beyond. The British residents of Cairo would contain most their activities within this nicely defined district in addition to the island of Gezira:

It is the custom of the swallows of London Society, who go to Cairo for the season, and spend their entire time between the hotels, the Turf Club, and Ghezira, to complain that Cairo is almost as European as London or Paris. You would gather from their conversations that the one thing they really yearned for in Egypt was to see unspoiled native life... [But in truth there is another Cairo,] a city as Oriental as Granada was in the days of the Moors, and not totally different to the Baghdad of the Arabian nights."³²

The British in Cairo were a closed and introverted community with a business-oriented strategy with little interaction between them and their Egyptian counterparts. The period of the cotton boom (1903-1907) witnessed a building boom initiated by land speculation companies. Over thirty companies with very little Egyptian operation exercised European-style land speculation. The activities of these companies shaped the urban landscape of Cairo. Ismailiyya was affected as available land was developed with more apartment blocks were fitted in the Ismail-laid streets. While wealthy Egyptians mostly built villas away from downtown, English companies invested in apartment blocks, department stores and office blocks built right in the center of the "European city." Mostly French and Italian architects were hired by these companies to design the modern four to six-story apartment blocks which sometimes replaced villas and private homes that were built during or immediately after Ismail's reign. Land was divided and sold, and gardens that once belonged to palaces were sold for private building activity such as the gardens of the Gezira Palace. In 1907 the cotton boom ended and Cromer left Cairo and was replaced by Sir Elodn Gorst. The sudden end of the cotton/building boom left holes in the urban fabric of Ismailiyya where buildings were demolished making way for new construction.³³ As Ismailiyya was established as an urban experience, accounts such as the one by Magdi Wahbi abound, describing the district as an active downtown:

³² Douglas Sladen, *Oriental Cairo: The City of the "Arabian Nights"* (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1911), 3-4.

³³ Aldridge, 211-21.

Department stores, guarded by mustachioed Albanian porters with their “fustanellas” and high boots ... here French and English bookstores, tearooms and Parisian-style café (of which only Groppi’s achieved international repute), were interspersed with clothing stores, milliners, art galleries, clubs for the rich, banks... here Europeans, rich Egyptians, and Levantines of every class did their shopping, conducted business in their offices, and sipped coffee.³⁴



Figure 6. *Street scene near Tahrir*

The physicality of downtown was then born with the rapid urban development and massive population growth³⁵ during the early colonial period. Shops, department stores and banks as well as hotels and grandiose apartment blocks gave the vibrant new center its cosmopolitan feel. The aesthetics of its facades reflected an eclectic interest in mixing styles from various European sources corresponding with the interests of the European-trained architects and the westward-looking patrons. During this period in Cairo’s history “western” influences in architecture and interiors become increasingly translated into the vernacular language and widely sought after by a wide range of classes within the growing population of the city. Downtown with its glamour and appeal assisted in translating these aesthetics combined with lifestyle changes into vernacular modes of production and consumption.

³⁴ Magdi Wahba. “Cairo Memories.” In *Studies in Arab History*, ed. D. Hopwood. London, 1990.

³⁵ Urban growth, the cotton boom, the establishment of mass transit (1894-1917) and finally the arrival of automobiles in 1903 contributed to the mass rural-urban migration of Egyptians and the explosion of the population and the district.

The story of downtown Cairo and its success as a commercial, residential and financial center in the first half of the twentieth century can not be told without mention of Baron Empain's Heliopolis and his Heliopolis Oasis Company. From 1907 to 1931 over 6,500 housing units were built in Heliopolis, making it a remarkable success story for private capitalist housing ventures. The model set by Baron Empain will be replicated later in the century as the need for more housing catering to middle class Egyptians will be needed away from dense urban centers. Heliopolis was the first project to recognize the need for distance from the "traditional" urban context of Cairo while making it accessible via a relatively fast tram system. Over 20,000 people lived in Heliopolis from 1920-30 while making regular trips to downtown to work, shop, conduct business and entertain. It is thus essential to pair the success story of the sub-urban and capitalist enterprise in Heliopolis with the flourishing of the urban and downtown quality of the newly established center of Cairo during the same period.³⁶

³⁶ Raymond, 329-33. Also see Angieszka and Jaroslaw Dobrowolski, *Heliopolis: Rebirth of the City of the Sun* (Cairo: Cairo University Press, 2006).

Chapter III

Forgetting: The Erasure of an Aesthetic and the Damnation of Memory

With the fall of the Ottoman Empire, the ruler of Egypt was elevated to the status of king, making Fuad its first king in 1922. Sa'd Zaghlul who led the Wafd national party became Egypt's first Prime Minister as the nationalist party won a majority election in 1924. The win came after a period of political turmoil following the fall of the Ottoman Empire when a great majority of Egyptians wanted true independence. In 1919 Egypt's first revolution marked the presence of a majority of Egyptians, including those who are "western" educated that called for a sovereign modern Egyptian state.³⁷ The rioting lasted three weeks and resulted in the death of 800 Egyptians and the freeing of Zaghlul who was exiled to Malta.³⁸ This shift in sociological and political landscapes of Egypt and Cairo during this period is often pushed to the periphery of the story of cosmopolitan Cairo. Downtown Cairo was the stage for this cosmopolitan society and these political shifts and the rise of nationalism will subtly change the face of downtown. A romanticized version of the Liberal Age (1922-1952) was captured in Robert Graves' 1925 autobiography *Goodbye to All That*:

I had not realized how much the British controlled Egypt. Egypt ranked as an independent Kingdom, but it seemed that I owed my principal allegiance not to King Fuad, who had given me my appointment and paid my salary, but to the High Commissioner, whose infantry, cavalry and air squadrons were a constant reminder of his power. [But] there was no Egyptian nation, I was assured. The Greeks, Turks, Syrians and Armenians who called themselves Egyptians had no more right there than the British... Nationalism, a creed derived from the new smatterings of Western education we were giving to Upper classes, should be disregarded as merely a symptom of the country's growing wealth.

The year 1937 marked the beginning of rapid population growth lasting a decade at an annual rate of 4.8 percent. "The population of Cairo, which had doubled in 1882-1914 (thirty-two years) and again in 1917-1942 (twenty-five years), more than doubled in 1947-1966 (only nineteen

³⁷ The year 1919 did not only witness a political revolution but also a cultural and social one. Secular liberalism since 1890s, seen as an attack on tradition, exploded after the revolution during the years 1920-30. The veil was practically abolished as it was never seen in the streets of downtown or among the middle class and the elite. Other cultural and societal shifts became increasingly visible as a consequence of British presence and influence.

³⁸ P.J. Vatikiotis, 279

years).”³⁹ This surge in population due to natural increase as well as rural-to-urban migration, according to Raymond, gave birth to a third city of Cairo created by an exploding population that is characteristically Egyptian with a growing middle class and a growing sense of nationalism. These developments reshaped the Cairo’s downtown.

The prime difference, although subtle, between downtown buildings erected in the original Ismail plan and the buildings erected during the colonial Liberal Age is that the buildings of the latter period show signs of Egyptionizing European facades. Such Egyptianization was established by a sprinkling of architectural flavors from Pharaonic to Mamluk. The mixture of pointed arches and Pharaonic ornaments in addition to the standard European elements is reflective of a shifting sociological profile of the residents of downtown. During colonial rule, Egypt’s doors were open to educated Europeans needed to fill high positions in government, economy and trade. At the same time growing Egyptian middle and elite classes who associate with European culture also established root in downtown in addition to Heliopolis, Garden City and Zamalek. For the European residents oriental flavoring to their facades brought back a sense of the exotic as many earlier European residents seemed uneasy with the over-familiarity of downtown’s European appearance. For the Euro-Egyptians such facades reflected an interest in modernity as it was established in Egypt while maintaining a sense of national identity.⁴⁰

The rise of a national modern architecture

Mahmoud Moukhtar’s Egyptian Awakening (1919-1928) was a clear sign of the arrival of nationalism in the world of art and architecture would follow. The pink granite sculpture for the Cairo University gate was Egypt’s first modern, public statue representing an idea rather than the image of a ruler or a public figure. Undoubtedly the statue would have a lasting effect on the acceleration of the development of artistic reflections of national pride in both art and architecture. The work of Shaykh Rifaa al-Tahtawi and Ali Mubarak Pasha in translating western arts and sciences into Arabic and the coming of age of a mature, home-grown educated Egyptian class, national identity in the arts would begin to take shape with different interpretations ranging from a more orthodox one rooted in a particularly Egyptian past, to moderate interpretations that

³⁹ Raymond, 339

⁴⁰ See Saad-Eddin Ibrahim, Cairo: A Sociological Profile, in *The Expanding Metropolis Coping with the Urban Growth of Cairo*, Proceedings of Seminar Nine in the Series *Architectural Transformations in the Islamic World*, held in Cairo in 1984. Published by Concept Media, Singapore, for the Aga Khan Award for Architecture.

are inclusive of the regional (Mediterranean) influences that became part of modern Egypt and finally a less dominant but progressive and forward-looking attempt at universalism as a sign of national progress.⁴¹

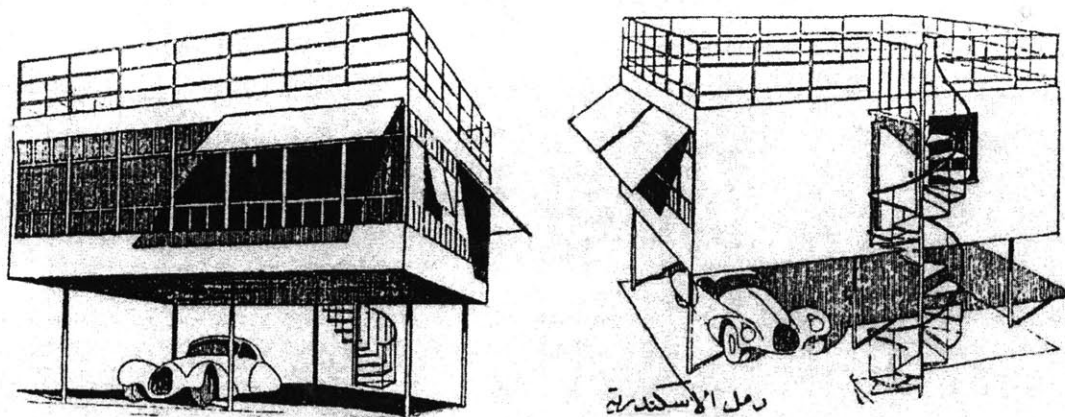
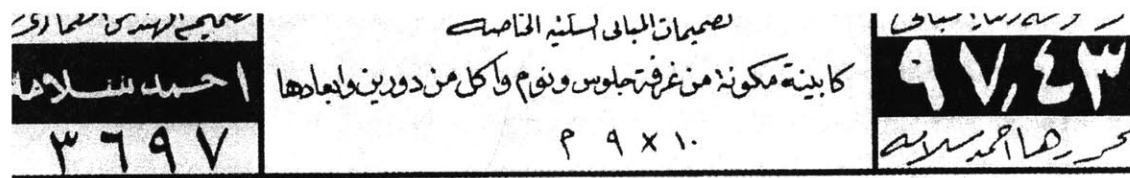


Figure 7. Design for a private residence by architect Ahmad Salama, 1952

The commercial and residential urbanization of downtown bled to the north, south and across the river. In the 1930s, there were two primary architectural currents at work: one with a strong national identity focused on a modernity rooted in Egypto-Islamic origins and the other a modernism that focused on transforming the face of Cairo using universal visual language. Downtown Cairo only had a few additions from the period 1930-1952 such as Cinema Radio, while its edges witnessed increased building activity in the new styles. Apartment buildings built around Ismail square, the future Tahrir square, and other areas surrounding the center of downtown were over ten-story high and departed from ornamental façade-making with balconies emphasizing stacked horizontality.

The architectural atmosphere during the period leading to Egypt's second revolution in 1952 witnessed the rise of a new class of professional architects born in Egypt around the turn of the century, some educated in Paris but most in Cairo's universities. The profusion of modern architectural production during the early 1930s led to the inauguration of Al-Imara, an

⁴¹ Karnouk, 10-31, 57-66

architectural review magazine, in 1939.⁴² Architects such as Ahmad Ibrahim Kamil envisioned projects expressing an interest in the modernist International Style of the time such as his proposal for a hotel in 1933. Antoine Selim Nahas championed a contemporary modern architecture that was evolving around the Mediterranean basin and can be found in Italian, French and Spanish cities as well as Beirut and Casablanca. Mustafa Fahmi created an architecture that is modern yet aggressively rooted in Egyptian history exemplified in his Mausoleum for Sa'd Zaghlul (1928-31) in the neo-Pharaonic style or his exhibition hall, now used as the Museum of Modern Art, built in 1936 in a style evoking Mamluk aesthetics with a modern twist.

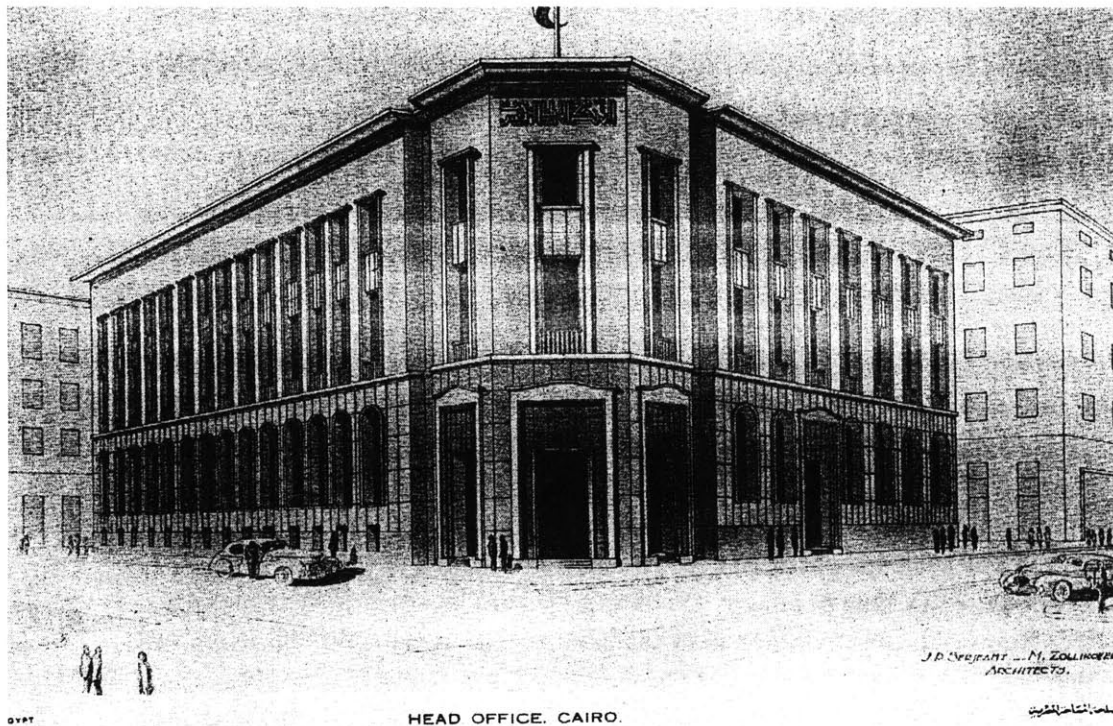


Figure 8. National Bank of Egypt building prior to alterations initiated in 1948

Downtown was also changing. During the 1930s its economic and commercial roles were at their height with thousands of people swarming its streets from around the city. The colonial and Ismail-era facades were already displaying signs of distress and age. Architects, engineers, doctors and dentists who established their practices in the prestigious zone displayed signs outside their windows and balconies to advertise for their businesses, inadvertently adding layers to the facades of their buildings. The addition of commercial signage to facades in Cairo is thus not a negation of downtown's architectural ornament; rather it is an attempt by building users, not architects, to communicate their habitation of architecture through the use of signs carrying their

⁴² See *L'architecture moderne en Egypte et la revue al-'imara 1939-1959*, by Mercedes Volait.

name and profession. The commercial activity that downtown buildings deliberately expressed on their ground level when they were built was already beginning to filter upwards into higher floors and commercial signage naturally followed.



HEAD OFFICE, CAIRO.

(As it will appear on completion of extensions and alterations initiated in 1948)

Figure 9. National Bank of Egypt building after completion of extension and alteration initiated in 1948

A telling example of the desire to move away from the aesthetics of the colonial-era building boom is the renovation project for the National Bank of Egypt building in 1948. The original two story building occupied a corner site in downtown and its classical façade was rusticated and highly ornamental. The renovation which was initiated by the need for additional space, called for the construction of a third level as well as the redesign of the bank's façade. The rendering for the completed three story building shows a complete transformation from a historicizing European façade to a simplified, ornament-free version that does not explicitly refer to a history or a region. The renovation of the National Bank follows the architectural trend of the late 1940 leading to the 1952 revolution.

Little architectural development occurred with World War II taking center stage in world politics and an unstable political situation within the Egypt in addition to a growing frustration at the King and the British presence and public complaints about the city's inability to accommodate its growing population. The status quo continued with the new wave of high rise apartment blocks in the new modern styles being built all over the city in districts that were once filled with villas and

gardens. The once residential downtown had already transformed into a business district by the 1940s with many of its residents moving out to Cairo's new suburbs seeking quiet tree-shaded streets and lush gardens. Downtown grew in density with apartments already beginning to be divided into multiples as some of its old residents moved to other districts abandoning the increasingly busy streets of the central district. Transformation in downtown had already begun in the days leading to Egypt's second revolution in 1952.

Against architecture, burning Cairo

“Architecture is the expression of every society's very being.... [But] only the ideal being of society, the one that issues orders and interdictions with authority, is expressed in architectural compositions in the strict sense of the word.... Thus great monuments rise up like levees, opposing the logic of majesty and authority to any confusion: Church and State in the form of cathedrals and palaces speak to the multitudes, or silence them. It is obvious that monuments inspire social good behavior in societies and often even real fear. The storing of the Bastille is symbolic of this state of affairs: it is hard to explain this mass movement other than through the people's animosity (animus) against monuments that are its real masters.”⁴³

The increased presence of military personnel during the years of WWII intensified the awareness of the occupation which was no longer welcomed. Cairo was ready for revolution. Ismailiyya Square was the stage of the killing of thirty Egyptians who demonstrated at the steps of Kasr al- Nil, still occupied by British troops. The building and the square have thus gained an increasingly negative image during this period and were seen as symbols of corruption, occupation, and injustice. Increasingly, the clearly European influence in architecture in this part of Cairo was given a negative association. Although Ismail's urban plan preceded the British occupation, time was collapsed in the collective memory and now Ismail-associated buildings, streets and squares were linked with corruption and occupation. A change of government in Britain following the riot at the Kasr al- Nil barracks led to the withdrawal of British troops from Cairo and Alexandria with the Citadel and the barracks being handed over to Egyptian control 1946-47. The handover of the barracks marked the beginning of a series of events where architecture associated with foreign presence in Cairo would be victim to burning and bombing, a ritualistic process of cleansing the city.⁴⁴

⁴³ George Bataille, “Architecture,” in *Oeuvres Completes*, 12 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1971-88), 1: 171-72.

⁴⁴ Aldridge, 234-46

Cinema Metro was one of the first to be mutilated with a bomb in 1947 but the fate of other buildings that symbolically and architecturally were seen as western followed. The process of urban and architectural cleansing paralleled the assassination campaign that targeted government members such as Nokrashy Pasha, the prime minister. The events led to the rather systematic and seemingly organized burning of the Ismailiyya district, downtown was on fire on the day soon to gain the name 'Black Saturday.' Although the exact events of 26 January 1952 are not fully historicized, accounts of various demonstrations and burnings abound, including the burning of a cabaret in the Place de l'Opera, the Casino de l'Opera of Madame Badia. The burning of the cabaret, symbol of decadence and the distractions provided by the occupation to deter from national progress was followed by the burning of Rivoli Cinema on Fuad Street in downtown. Chaos gripped downtown and marked the beginning of the end of an era.⁴⁵ By the end of Black Saturday four hundred buildings were burned and several hundred more shops were destroyed, downtown Cairo was in ruins and resembled a bombed city.⁴⁶

The facades that once were meant to symbolize Cairo's modernity now symbolized its demise. There is a direct association between aesthetics and revolution in the case of downtown Cairo, where architectural facades not only symbolized wealth, prestige and modernity but also political affiliation and national disassociation. Thus the wide range of facades that developed in Cairo since the injection of European architecture into its center by Ismail have become a collective entity associated with the political, cultural and social conditions of the periods they reflect. In the mind of revolutionary Egyptians, all such facades were reflective of an Egypt that was under control by European intruders, even though many buildings burned during the fervor of revolution were not aesthetically European, they still associated with western capital and interests. Thus cinemas (Metro and Rivoli), restaurants and cafes (Groppi), banks (Barclay's Bank), airline and travel offices (Thomas Cook), hotels⁴⁷ (Shepherd's Hotel), and department stores (Cicurel's) in downtown were burned despite their cultural, economic and social roles for the growing Egyptian middle class. According to James Aldridge, a majority of Cairenes were "interested in political activity and violent protest but not in fire, the minority, was more

⁴⁵ Ibid

⁴⁶ Ibid

⁴⁷ The Shepherd's hotel along with the barracks at Kasr al-Nil was a particularly symbolic building and institution described as the jewel in the old British crown in Cairo.

interested in burning down all the old landmarks of eighty years of British and foreign occupation.”⁴⁸

With downtown burned and revolution in full effect, the cosmopolitan ethnically non-Egyptian population of downtown along with 4000 wealthy Egyptian families began their exodus from the city. Gamal abdel Nasser would officially rid the city of its outsider residents and confiscate their property in the name of revolution. In the immediate months after the revolution, the once prestigious but now abandoned downtown flats, buildings and shops were quickly taken over by government companies, revolutionary military personnel and their families, a significant transformation in the socio-cultural make-up of the district.⁴⁹ Besides the shifting demographics of the area and the transformation of downtown roofs into squatter settlements for the poor, the core of downtown will see little change. Surviving buildings will see little or no maintenance and some buildings will be replaced by taller apartment blocks. The southern end of downtown around the Ismailiyya square is where dramatic Nasser-era change will take place in this part of the city.

Liberation through architecture?

Ismail Square was and still is the center of central Cairo. From it the first Bridge crossed the Nile and the palace housing the British headquarters stood. Samir Raafat has referred to it as a “*faux* Champs de Mars,” a forced analogy to continue the “tradition” of linking Ismail’s Cairo with Paris in anyway possible. In fact the square was not a *faux* anything; it was a very real Ismailiyya Square. The square acted as a southern gateway to downtown and a pivotal point in the transition westward across the Kasr el-Nil bridge to Cairo’s future developments and expansions. The abundance of things named Ismail in and around the square made it an easy target for change that would announce the arrival of a new era.

Nasser’s first set of alterations for Cairo included the renaming of downtown streets and squares, this included Ismail Square where the barracks and the museum were located. The new square would be called Midan el-Tahrir (Liberation Square) and Kasr el-Nil barracks building was torn

⁴⁸ Aldridge, 242

⁴⁹ Beattie, 191-96

down in 1952 to figuratively liberate the square of its occupation.⁵⁰ The building could have remained and been reused as was the fate of many downtown buildings, however the choice to remove the building was a necessary symbolic act.⁵¹ And as Ismail once quickly built his modern city, Nasser quickly constructed concrete blocks to house his new ministries, national enterprise and civil servants. The face of these buildings would soon showcase an alliance with the East, the USSR whose notorious soviet modernist architecture was spread as far as its economic arm reached. The USSR's willingness to fund Nasser's large scale projects such as the Aswan High Dam would mark the new beginning for the facades of Cairo. Prior to this alliance downtown was already blessed with soviet inspired block, The Mogamma.

The notorious fifteen-story Mogamma was part of a plan to redevelop Ismailiyya square under King Farouk. Although the building is associated in the Egyptian collective memory as a vestige of Nasser-era bureaucracy, it was actually opened in 1951 immediately before the revolution. The building was described by its architect Kamal Ismail to be a "simplified form of the Islamic style" and was designed to house "a large number of bureaucratic functions... under one roof, including many carried out by the ministries of interior and education, as well as the new Cairo Municipality itself."⁵² The building is mistakenly associated with Nasser by the collective nostalgia at the end of the twentieth century in the interest of using architecture to demarcate periods within the history of the city. Thus, an image is repeated in literature, film and popular media by colonial nostalgists who associate ornamental European-inspired architecture with the belle époque while excluding ornament-free architecture following various modernist aesthetics of the mid-twentieth-century. For this purpose, modernity in architecture in the Egyptian context has been defined as one that embraces European architectural accents. The Mugamma, although a product of a Farouk-era plan, does not neatly fit into the notion of a beautiful modern Cairo that existed pre-1952 and a functionalist, "grim and gray" architecture that is post-1952. The Mugamma is a clear example that challenges the arbitrary periodization of architecture in Cairo solely based on political transitions.

⁵⁰ A 1947 issue of the Egyptian magazine *Al-Musawwar* includes plans for the replacement of the Barracks with two new buildings as part of an anti-colonial driven renewal plan for downtown and its surroundings. The barracks according to the plan would be replaced by a municipality and a parliament building.

⁵¹ Golia, 82

⁵² Fatma Farag, <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2005/764/feature.htm>

The primary transformation of downtown during the Nasser-era is an intensified shift in the district's status from *raqi* (high-class) to *sha 'bi* (popular).⁵³ The view of downtown as a distinctly different district from its surroundings has been dissolved and blurred as it deteriorated and its surroundings modernized in up-dated styles. Most importantly, the previously European-associated customs and behaviors have been so absorbed into the popular psyche of the Egyptian middle-class which inhabits the city in all directions around downtown. Downtown no longer was the stage of certain behaviors or codes of dress, for better or worst, it has lost any signs of alienation and it has been fully integrated. Greater Cairo has lost its center, and in the coming decades as the city expands into the desert in government planned cities such as Nasr City, Cairo will be a multi-center fragmented city with zones catering to three economically divided social groups: lower strata, intermediate and upper strata. Despite this shift, downtown Cairo, also referred to as Kasr el-Nil, belongs to the intermediate strata of Cairo's social space. By the second half of the twentieth century downtown's density was slightly declining as residents left it and it increasingly was becoming *baladi*.⁵⁴ Cairo's new modern, luxury quarters in the 1960s were diffused in Zamalek or Doqqi while the primary streets of downtown falling into disrepair are more active then ever before with ordinary goods replacing luxury items in stores.⁵⁵

Post-revolutionary symbols: Hilton

Nasser opened the zone of Tahrir square for modern hotels to develop along the east bank of the Nile. The proximity to the museum and the famed downtown made the southern tip of the district a prime location for tourist accommodations. The Semiramis, Le Meridian, Sheraton and the Hilton quickly took advantage of the opportunity to establish new business in the center of the world's oldest tourist destination and birth place of western civilization. The Hilton on Tahrir Square was Nasser's attempt at attracting foreign currency, tourism and advertising an interest in capitalism. The hotel opened in February 1959 and "the modern form of the structure was the materialization of the modern social practices that it housed. The building rendered public certain aspects of Nasser's new Egypt. It monumentalized Egypt's ambition to acquire international political status through modernization."⁵⁶ The architecture of the hotel and its white façade is a twelve-story high blank billboard on Tahrir Square showcasing Nasser's vision for the city.

⁵³ Raymond, 361

⁵⁴ The number of occupants per room fell from 2.8 to 1.6 in 1976-86 in the central district which includes downtown

⁵⁵ Raymond, 363-364

⁵⁶ Wharton, 46

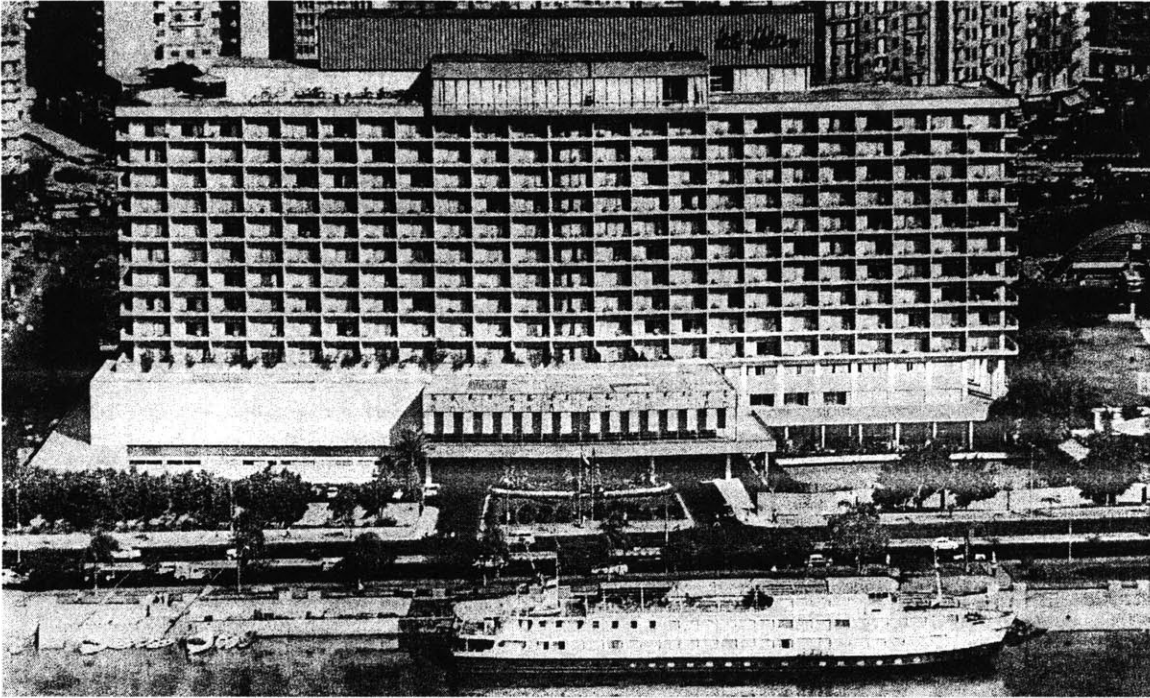


Figure 10. *The Nile Hilton Hotel*

The Nile Hilton was a new façade associated with a new era; however, what was behind the façade was a familiar institution: a social space for the rich and powerful in Cairo akin to the old Shepherd's Hotel. The functional façade of the hotel with its equally sized room balconies and the exposed stairs, three on each side of the slab, zigzagging up its side appears to be a new departure from the classical architecture of the museum next door or even the recently opened Mogamma. Although the building was a private enterprise accessible to a few, its symbolism on the site of the old barracks and its modern contemporary image was seen by all Egyptians who flood the square. The building thus acted as a double-edged tool for Nasser, signifying a degree of openness to the west while marking a new beginning to locals with a clear architectural symbol⁵⁷, finally eradicating the ghost of British occupation on the site.

The interior of the Hilton introduced a different kind of façade to Cairo: the themed interior. With Nasser hailed as Egypt's first native ruler since the pharaohs, and the building of the Aswan high Dam which bought much attention to the relocation of the Abu Simbel temple, add to that a large urban population seeking a new identity that matches their new Egypt, the result is kitsch symbolism that would focus on a modern Egyptian identity rooted in ancient Egypt. While during the same time two other parallel identities were developing, one is the fellaheen (peasants) and

⁵⁷ The Cairo Tower will soon replace the Hilton as the architectural symbol of the new era when it opens on 11 September 1961.

the other is the industry worker. The Hilton being a space for the upper crust of Egyptian society would obviously embrace the ancient Egyptian-inspired modern persona with wall veneers representing ancient hieroglyphics and wall carvings in the lobby as well as linens and curtains printed with the 1960s ubiquitous lotus pattern. I argue that the status of the Hilton and its use of such representations of identity while projecting a modern identity gave post-revolutionary Cairo inspiration for further exploring the potential of kitsch for identity making and representation.⁵⁸ As Annabel Wharton notes in her study of Hilton hotels, unlike the experience of old hotels such as the Shepherd's in Cairo, new hotels maintain a distance from the urban context and provide the tourist with a distant view of the surrounding, perhaps reducing the city to a series of souvenirs rather than experiences. The new Hilton in downtown Cairo commodified ancient Egypt by giving it a modern façade. It was the Americanization of the tourist experience of Cairo: a modern façade that provides comfort and safety combined with controlled experiences of familiar symbols of local culture.⁵⁹

More important than the architectural additions to Cairo's cityscape are Nasser's acts of damnation of memory. Most notably in this process is the publication of *Cairo 969-1969* by the Ministry of Culture during the millennial celebration of the city. The book is a piece of propaganda of sorts that narrates the heritage of the city from ancient times to include its Pharaonic, Coptic and Islamic developments until the 16th century then it continues to fetishize the modernism of revolutionary Cairo, avoiding any detailed narrative of Ottoman and colonial rule. The entire history of modern Egypt and its founder Muhammad Ali and Ismail, the founder of modern Cairo, and their accomplishments are nearly erased. Mention of buildings from the era is limited to notable cultural institutions such as The National Library, The Opera House, The Egyptian Museum, and Cairo University. The Omar Khayyam Hotel, which was the Gezira palace built to host Empress Eugenie of France, is mentioned but then followed by "all this luxury and conspicuous waste were due to a ruling dynasty that, with its followers, prided itself on being Turkish and European and despised its own subjects." The only direct reference to downtown calls it "a city that seems to deny the past." Most importantly is the portrayal of the revolution which is presented as a direct reaction to "Decades of neglect" and that "a genuine metropolis had to be created out of the piecemeal growth of so many generations. Beauty was not

⁵⁸ It must be noted that the guestrooms in the Hilton faced west towards the new suburbs of Cairo and the pyramids in the distance, the hotel gave its back to the old city. Interiors in other Hilton hotels built in the 1950s in Athens, Berlin, London and Tel Aviv did not attempt to provide a themed interior contrary to the case of Cairo.

⁵⁹ Wharton, 48-54

forgotten, but it was seen as but part of the large schemes for organizing the capital so that it could provide not merely better economic and living conditions, but also its inhabitants' needs for culture, health and leisure." The aesthetics of the belle époque were officially erased, abandoned and replaced by Nasser's updated definitions of beauty.

Downtown after Tahrir

In the 1970s with Sadat's *Infitah* policy, downtown buildings witnessed their worst deterioration. By the mid-1970s development has ceased to exist in downtown for over thirty years with major catastrophic events such as Black Saturday and the exodus of its residents by 1956, the central district grew increasingly popular with bargain shoppers and professionals establishing more businesses in the upper floors of downtown buildings transforming the area into a fully commercial zone that is swarming with activity during the day and abandoned by night. Except for the occasional news about the razing of belle époque buildings to be replaced by multi-level garage structures or high-rise office blocks, the area was for the greater part of the 70s, 80s and 90s forgotten by the general public. The recent revival of interest in the old central so-called-European district of downtown is due to a new phase of Cairene identity-making, the search for a counter balance to the present fragmented city with its multiple manifestations serving diverse social and economic segments of the population that do not share a city centre.

As Ismail looked at Paris and Nasser looked at the USSR, Sadat looked at American cities. Sadat's vision was for every young Egyptian man to be able to "get married, own a villa, drive a car, possess a television set and a stove, and eat three meals a day."⁶⁰ This vision meant a sprawling Cairo expanding into the deserts with green, villa-filled residential neighborhoods connected to the city with highways and bridges. The open-door-policy benefited a rising Egyptian bourgeoisie class interested in brand new lifestyles away from the established old centers. Like Ismail, Sadat's modernization turned its back to old parts of the city and started anew with the emphasis on image of modernity fit for the capital of Egypt.⁶¹ Downtown was out of the conversation.

⁶⁰ Anwar el-Sadat, *In Search of Identity* (Cairo, 1978), 12

⁶¹ Ghannam, 31



Figure 11. *Tahrir Square and the Mugammaa office building, 1968*

Chapter IV

Remembering: Memory in Cairene Architecture from the Belle Epoque

What was so beautiful about the belle époque? In her book *Paris along the Nile*, Cynthia Menetti suggests a stylistic Parisian connection. Menetti is making the connection to Paris and its Hausmannian planning and architecture, which impressed Khedive Ismail. After a visit to Paris he decided to bring his plan to Cairo.⁶² However, the architectural products of the era were not state built; many of the best examples of Cairo's building boom were private residences, apartment buildings, department stores and cinemas. They testify to "an era when Egypt was more firmly tied into the world economy, when society was both open to and more accepting of outside influences."⁶³ While modernizing Cairo involved producing buildings stylistically similar to those in Paris, similar buildings were being erected in Geneva and Barcelona; the trend was simply following contemporary models rather than imitating Paris down to every cornice, pediment or replicate its ornaments. Until the 1950s architectural styles in Cairo ranged from Baroque, Neo-classical and Rococo to Bauhaus, Italian Renaissance and Arabesque. Although Egypt had its fair share of ornament-free modern architecture (studied by Mercedes Violet) the ornamental motifs of the belle époque continued to exist and be built until the 1952 military coup abruptly ended the era. Architecturally, the belle époque was over by the time Belmont building (b1958) by architect Naoum Chebib began to change Garden City's skyline; it was Egypt's first residential skyscraper, a 31 storey block of ornament-free concrete. For a nostalgic generation of Egyptians, modernity and the ornamentation of the belle époque are one and the same; what came after that with the rise of socialism and its negation of ornament is (not) being remembered by many; it has yet to have its episode in memory lane, or its moments of nostalgia.⁶⁴ Hayden White spoke of the rupture that isolates a period that is not immediately prior to our present but prior to that, as a moment to remember and look back at. The end of the nineteenth century until the 1950s is that moment to remember for a certain generation of Egyptians and the cultural and political transformation of the 1950s is its rupture.

⁶² The re-making of Cairo into a city of regional power envisioned by Khedive Ismail (1863-1879) was seen as a threat to the Ottoman Empire and Istanbul. Ismail was increasingly shifting away from the grip of Istanbul, establishing his own empire of sorts first by opening the Suez Canal then by introducing the Parisian style modernization of Cairo at the same time to present Egypt as a major economy and society to its European guests. This stage of the city's history beginning in around 1860 opened the gates of the city and the country to thousands of European immigrants seeking financial gains.

⁶³ Raafat, 9.

⁶⁴ Perhaps it is my generation that will look back at the concrete ornament free towers and think of the potential for architecture of modern brutalism that is free from the more recent layers of pastiche.

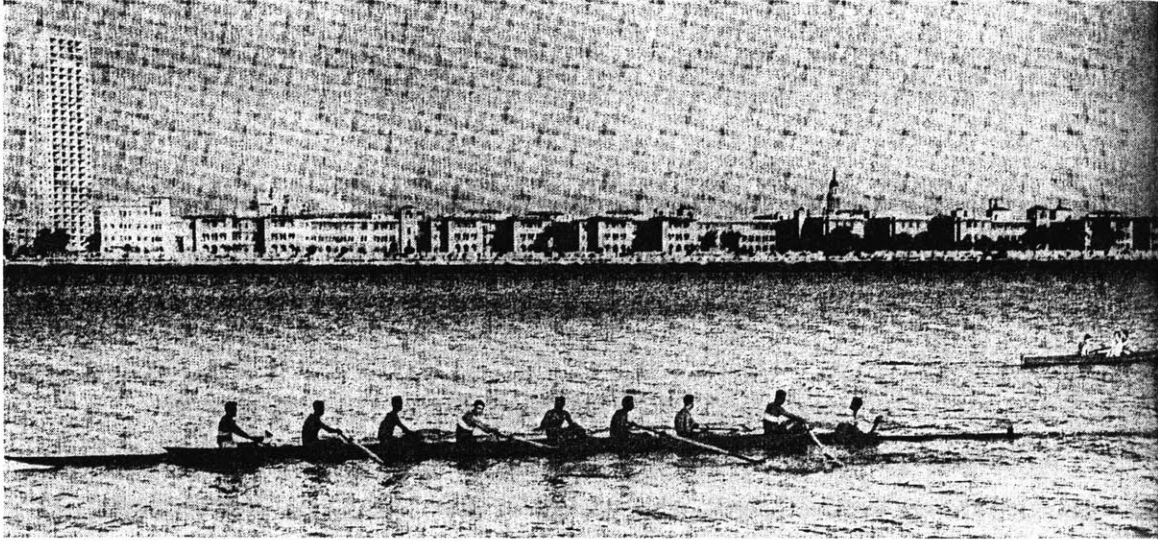


Figure 12. *Belmont apartment tower, 1960s*

Deficiency of the present

The cities represent themselves, accumulating a mass of vital imageries from the fluid matter of memory, nostalgia, evocation, and suturing that index of scars into the projection of the contemporary moment, the present and presence of the city in its immediacy and urgency.⁶⁵

Nostalgia, or turning back, is the opposite of progress or moving forward. It is an intellectual and emotional attitude that sees the past as a positive, idealized and in some senses a more complete reality than the present. The identity crisis⁶⁶ that Egyptian society in transition experienced, contributed to the desire for an idealized past to remember. Thus the ongoing sense of defeat or lack of self-confidence within the current cultural and political context of Egypt attaches a high value to the distant past.

The most recent installment in the milieu of self-criticism of the present and nostalgia for the Cairo's "Golden Age" is the novel-made-film by Alaa Al-Aswany titled *The Yacoubian Building*. It is centered on a building which stands as a symbol of beautiful times, a piece of urban iconography, whose cultural context has shifted to the unbearable present. It sees the present as having lost something which was alive in the past, making the past more attractive. Belle époque architecture plays a central role in the novel and the author, a social critic of today, manipulates

⁶⁵ Barber, 8.

⁶⁶ Ina-Maria Greverus has argued that nostalgia is due to a present identity crisis which triggers a search for an idealized past. From Greverus' *Zur Kulturstimmung Nostalgie* (1973), 171-81.

the architecture nostalgically in his work to emphasize the idea that architecture directly reflects society:

In 1934, Hagop Yacoubian, the millionaire and then doyen of the Armenian community in Egypt, decided to construct an apartment block that would bear his name. He chose for it the best site on Suleiman Basha and engaged a well-known Italian engineering firm to build it, and the firm came up with a beautiful design - ten lofty stories in the high classical European style, the balconies decorated with Greek faces carved in stone, the columns, steps, and corridors all of natural marble, and the latest model of elevator by Schindler. Construction continued for two whole years, at the end of which there emerged an architectural gem that so exceeded expectations that its owner requested of the Italian architect that he inscribe his name, Yacoubian, on the inside of the doorway in large Latin characters that were lit up at night in neon, as though to immortalize his name and emphasize his ownership of the gorgeous building.⁶⁷

This attitude makes people want to re-live the past, although in many cases, those who are nostalgic for a past period have never lived there nor do they have a realistic representation of its conditions. Nostalgia for the belle époque is based on constructions of history using fragments of evidence such as the surviving buildings, personal accounts, photographs and films. But the aim of such constructions is to reflect on the incompetence of the present. David Lowenthal explains that “what we are nostalgic for is not the past as it was or even as we wish it were; but for the condition of having been, with a concomitant integration and completeness lacking in any present.”⁶⁸

Constructions of nostalgia

What matters is not that [an account of the past] be correct by our standards or anyone else’s, but that it be convincing to the particular group of individuals for whom it serves as an explanation of the world they inhabit. What matters about any particular version of history is that it be meaningful to the collective subjectivities and self-identities of the specific group which it addresses. In other words, we are not concerned with ‘real facts’ or even a coherent methodology, but rather with the consensus of assumptions and prejudices shared by the historian and his audience.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Aswany, 13.

⁶⁸ Lowenthal (1989), 29.

⁶⁹ Elsner, 226.

Whether we see the present and the past as two connected or split entities depends on how we choose to narrate our cultural memory.⁷⁰ The accuracy of our representation of the past is an epistemological dilemma. Maurice Halbwachs places history and collective memory in opposition explaining that collective memory is shared by the populace and history is an academic pursuit and therefore reaches a limited audience.⁷¹ When considering this split between memory and history in the context of the belle époque, I would argue that the current nostalgia is a rewriting of collective memory rather than of history. This becomes apparent when separating the sources that feed into the nostalgic constructions: Samir Raafat is the primary scholar documenting the history of the period's architectural remains, in addition, Mohamed Scharabi's monograph, published in 1989, documents the actual architecture with maps, plans and photographs. Their scholarship is focused on the production of an accurate representation of the past rather than the production of a historical interpretation. To the contrary, film, television and the selective revival of imagery discussed above are agents of memory rather than history. The use of these media in the nostalgic reconstruction of the belle époque fundamentally challenges the separation between history and collective memory suggested by Halbwachs. Instead they blur the fine line between history and memory, creating fluidity and ambiguity and making it increasingly difficult to decipher between *lieux de mémoire* and *milieux de mémoire*, as Pierre Nora calls them.

Pierre Nora's *Les Lieux de mémoire* is instrumental in understanding the state of nostalgia for the belle époque and what it represents. Although he defines these sites of memory as being fabricated to help a community remember the past,⁷² one can think of the remaining fragments of the belle époque within downtown as sites of memory. The surviving buildings were not fabricated to remind a community of any past; however, what is being fabricated in this case is a heritage that appropriates these remains. The apartment and office blocks, department stores and cafes are becoming accidental monuments to a lost era and therefore they are becoming agents of keeping that memory alive. In the case of the belle époque, the nostalgia discourse is a way of coming to terms with the past and allowing it to be its own entity, its own "period." In the words of Dalila ElKerdany, a practicing architect and professor of architecture in Cairo University, "[we are] remembering the birth of our own kind of urban modernity."

⁷⁰ Assmann, 22.

⁷¹ Halbwachs, 43-51.

⁷² Nora, 7.

Samir Raafat comments on the state of decay of downtown buildings as the result of the “lack of civic pride.” Those who are nostalgic fear the disappearance of a valuable part of the city’s history. Nostalgia The constant state of decay that many of these buildings have fallen into and the process of negation by means of demolition campaigns carried out for the past two decades (at least 2,000 buildings have been destroyed)⁷³ have turned these pieces of the urban fabric into unintentional monuments⁷⁴ with both “historical-value” and “age-value” as distinguished by Alois Riegl in his 1903 study “Cult of Monuments.” These monuments carry the meanings inscribed onto them by their makers in addition to the multiple layers of our modern perceptions. Age-value of the buildings of downtown Cairo is born out of their state of decay and aging; which contributes to their authenticity as objects thus fueling nostalgia.⁷⁵ *Lieux de mémoire* keeps the distant past alive in the memories of those who choose to look back; thus they become generational landmarks.

It is important to ask, *who* is nostalgic for the *belle époque*?⁷⁶ It is the generation that was born at the end of that era and lived through the transitioning times of the revolution and its political and cultural changes. That generation is already being replaced by the *nouveau riche*, the new bourgeois of today who look at the *belle époque* as just another period in the past, with no personal or collective memory of that era. What we find today in Egyptian development and the growth of the bourgeois class is no different from that which happened a century ago. The current building boom of suburban communities in the deserts of Cairo, quickly criticized for their neo-California appearance as being out of context, I would argue that these communities fit Samir Raafat’s description of the *belle époque*: these developments of today do testify that “Egypt (is) more firmly tied into the world economy... society (is) both open to and more accepting of outside influences.”⁷⁷ However, change is hardly welcomed and at the present it is seen as a move in the wrong direction away from an idealized moral or cultural center. What is taken for granted today will be idealized and memorialized once it is placed at a safe distance into the past. One can already imagine the nostalgic calls made by future generations looking back at our present. The Cairo of the past that is being missed exists today as a hallucination made of stone and concrete, layered with signs of negation: advertisements, neon lights, graffiti. Some of those who reminisce about that past rioted against these buildings and burned them in the political fervor of revolution.

⁷³ Golia, 20.

⁷⁴ Riegl, 23.

⁷⁵ Ibid, 32.

⁷⁶ They are not the same as the vanished populations that inhabited the downtown buildings in their prime.

⁷⁷ Raafat, 9.

It seems that people are always nostalgic for an idealized past and are selectively forgetful of the meanings these urban objects symbolized. This constant dissatisfaction with the present and continual nostalgia for a distant past reflect the pessimistic outlook and negativity imbued in the human condition which views itself as constantly digressing culturally or morally.

Tradition is (not) modern

Arjun Appadurai's 'process geographies' such as tourism and colonization have been primary agents in the making of modern Cairo since its origin.⁷⁸ Process geographies in the case of Cairo are important in this argument for two reasons: current architectural and urban development models are attacked on the basis that they are not derived from an Egyptian tradition, those who carry that claim such as Samir Raafat embrace early twentieth century urban development in Cairo while refuting contemporary equivalents. Second, during the 1940s and 1950s the European-style architecture was attacked as not belonging to local tradition and as symbols of imperialism and occupation. In both cases the relationship between architecture and locality is questioned and in turns tradition and its relation to a geographic location is at the center of the debate.

In Cairo's modern history, the definition of tradition has been one of inclusion and exclusion patterns that shift with cultural and political transitions; at times what is inside the envelope of tradition is excluded at another moment under the control of a new wave of cultural and political identity. These shifting grounds make the writing of the history of modern Cairo a tricky task. This text proceeds with the assumption that the relationship between *tradition* and *the modern* is not one of opposition, rather that the binary in the case of modern Cairo collapses as the two terms become co-dependent and mutually exclusive.⁷⁹

The process of globalization is not merely a recent factor in the development of Cairo in the form of neoliberal policies and the cities and housing typologies that such policies create. Cairo is one of the world's oldest global cities in the sense that it was not merely a destination sought after by the colonial project; it was a meeting place for the major players in the colonial enterprise as well as a diverse collection of business-minded individuals from across Europe and the Levant. The

⁷⁸ A. Appadurai, 'Grassroots Globalization and the Research Imagination', *New Left Review*, vol. 12, no. 1, 2000, P. 6.

⁷⁹ See Jane M. Jacobs' *Tradition is (not) modern: deterritorializing globalization in The End of Tradition?* ed. Nezar AlSayyad (New York: Routledge, 2004), P. 33.

Suez Canal is the world's first large-scale global project that has dramatically changed the history of the world. This very project was the motivation for Cairo's famous hast modernization project. Was modern Cairo a fake transplanted European city? Is the question of authenticity invalid at this point in history? Did Ismail's modern Cairo authenticate itself with the passage of time?



Figures 13, 14. Photographs by Youssef Nabil for a magazine

Nostalgia for Cairo's golden age, its modern architecture, has manifest in two practices; both commodify the decay of belle époque vestiges: the first practice inhabits the skeletal remains; the second practice reduces the aesthetics to idealized symbols for the construction of new facades. The decay of belle époque architecture is not widely consumed and appreciated as an aesthetic experience; this is limited to the art community in Cairo that utilizes the architectural decay of Cairo's early modern phase as a backdrop to their events, social practices and contemporary work. In addition, a selection of piano bars, restaurants and social clubs are discretely hidden in downtown Cairo using spacing that are not altered nor renovated. These uses by the social elite are processes of the aestheticization of decay and a celebration of the modern past. This celebration, a mode of an imperialist nostalgia, indicates the 'mourning for what one has destroyed.'⁸⁰ The more popular result of this nostalgic process of aestheticization is the production of postmodern facades rooted in the value recently attached to the aesthetics of the belle époque. This postmodern production is generated by the search for iconic value, thus

⁸⁰ R. Rosaldo, 'Imperialist Nostalgia,' *Representations*, vol. 26, 1989, p. 107. Also see Ananya Roy's *Nostalgia of the modern in End of Tradition?*, ed. Nezar AlSayyad (New York: Routledge, 2004), P63.

classical architectural details are reproduced and assembled on facades as displays of value and class. I argue that while the first practice is a process of nostalgia, following Ananya Roy, the second practice of postmodern production is a process of memory. These varying degrees of remembering are the effects of the recent redefining of Cairo's heritage to include its twentieth century city as one possessing historical value.

The second practice mentioned above, producing "postmodern" facades provides an opportunity to discuss modernity and its definition in the Egyptian context. New facades of urban apartment blocks or villas in gated communities seemingly postmodern are referred to locally as *hadith* (modern). Is the aesthetic definition of modernity being rearticulated in Cairo? Or is it possible that the seemingly postmodern facades of today's Cairo are part of an alternative modernity, one that borrows, and reappropriates architectural elements challenging a singular definition of aesthetic modernity as found in western contexts.⁸¹ According to Fredric Jameson, postmodernism emerges as a reaction against the forms of high modernism.⁸² In the context of Cairo, the image perceived as postmodernism emerges as a process of embracing a recently valued past. Is it possible then that within the context of Cairo, one can locate multiple modernities that are products of varying relationships to memory and tradition?



Figure 15. *Historicism in a new apartment building*

⁸¹ Roy, 80-82.

⁸² Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism and Consumer Society in The Anti-Aesthetic*, 111.

Redefining heritage

For the general population of Egyptians it is much easier to accept the medieval, the Coptic and the Pharaonic heritages of Cairo than to accept the Modern. An important aspect of Cairo's experience with modern Euro-inspired planning however is that it has infiltrated into notions of the vernacular and popularized among middle class Egyptians. The bleeding of modern interventions into vernacular makes it difficult to immediately assess the value of modernism as a cultural heritage.

For most Egyptians, public buildings are clearly worthy of heritage status. Churches, Mosques have been the easiest to include, and more recently buildings such as the Misr Bank are now generally accepted within the lexicon of Egyptian heritage. Residential and commercial buildings have yet to gain similar acceptance. This poses a problem to the heritization of modern Cairene buildings from the belle époque, most of which are residential apartment blocks, villas, palaces, cafes and department stores. In order to increase public awareness of the significance of these residential and commercial buildings, they must be seen as parts of a unified urban fabric rather than as singular objects. With this approach, downtown Cairo as a whole should be considered as a singular urban unit composed of constituent parts: blocks, buildings, streets, etc. This approach is necessary to inject social and cultural value into the downtown district among popular Egyptians rather than limiting the interest in reinventing downtown and asserting its cultural value to the Egyptian elite. A cross section of the Cairene population is slowly rediscovering the potential of living, working and spending leisure time in downtown. Redefining heritage within the Egyptian context and within the popular media in Egypt will play an important role in determining the specific local approaches to be taken to reinvent downtown. Reinventing the urban landscape of downtown Cairo will in effect reinvent the social landscape of Cairo.

Reinventing downtown: Keeping Cairo Modern

Nineteenth century modern Cairo has received two extremes of attention in recent years: neo-nationalist dismissive attitudes that continue to see the urban and architectural products of the turn of the century to be foreign and reminders of a colonial-monarchical epoch, OR, blindly nostalgic attitudes that react to the present conditions of chaos by strongly embracing the 'belle époque' as Cairo's golden age of cosmopolitanism and secular modernity. I propose a moderate approach to seeing the districts of the nineteenth century and downtown Cairo: as an essential

district reflective the modern history of the city that should be preserved and maintained as a living, active part of the city of equal importance to the Islamic, Medieval, and Coptic. What efforts have been made by the nostalgic elite to preserve the remaining fragments of 'belle époque' Cairo? And what can be done to bring life back to the center rather than simply maintain the facades of modern Cairo in another open-air museum setting?

The Nasser era brought with it a wave of functionalist modern architecture. Confiscated art nouveau, art deco and Arabesque modern villas were reused as public schools with walls demolished, walls added, and loads of school desks replacing the fitted furniture. Building reuse has thus been part of the existence of belle époque architecture since the 1950s. However, recent attempts of building reuse have been for rather more exclusive venues such as museums or art galleries following in the trend of converting the Khedive palace built in 1863 into the exclusive Gezira Marriot hotel following a 1982 restoration.⁸³ There are obvious problematic aspects of these modes of reuse, both the nonchalant approach to building reuse as exercised by the Nasser administration as well as with the highly exclusive approach exemplified in the Gezira Marriot.

The Nasser model politicized belle époque architecture as irrelevant to the national heritage of Egypt and therefore not worthy of maintenance. The reuse of such buildings as public schools was a clear reflection of the socialist agenda upheld by Nasser. I argue that the conversion of lavish palaces and villas into public schools was in fact one of the most important causes of the recent revival of interest in belle époque architecture spearheaded by the children of the revolution. Rather than stark empty spaces void of an ornamental aesthetic, most public school classrooms surrounded generations of students with the slowly decaying ornamental aesthetics of the belle époque, inadvertently reminding students of a bygone age of aesthetic beauty. Many of the schools however were poorly maintained until the 1992 earthquake which caused structural damage to many of the buildings making maintenance an imperative.

After the 1992 earthquake, some initiatives were taken by multiple groups and organization to maintain the surviving and rehabilitate the damaged buildings of modern Cairo.⁸⁴ Public and Private interests participating in creating and maintaining this recent addition to Egyptian heritage include the Ministry of Culture, Al Azhar University, Helwan College of Fine Arts and the

⁸³ Kadi, ElKerdany, p362

⁸⁴ See Galila El Kadi and Dalia ElKerdany's chapter 'Belle-époque Cairo: The Politics of Refurbishing the Downtown Business District' in Cairo Cosmopolitan.

Goethe Institute. In addition, the Historic Buildings Authority (HBA), the Committee for the Safeguarding of Architectural Heritage, and the General Organization for Physical Planning (GOPP) have been responsible for the study, documentation, selection, classification and creation of inventories listing the buildings to be included in Cairo's Modern heritage.⁸⁵

This recent wave of studying, classifying, documenting belle époque structures have resulted in the elite interest in reviving old structures for new functions. Entire buildings have been reorganized to fit new programs such as art galleries. Successful examples of such transformations include Townhouse Gallery for contemporary art off Champollion Street in downtown and the Viennoise Hotel off Talat Harb square which is used for art exhibitions, performance art and experimental music concerts. Although this model of building reuse can be successful in reviving interest in the downtown area and bringing upper middle class Cairenes back to the center for occasional cultural entertainment, this model is limited. The scale of downtown revival needs to be larger than the selective elite-driven interest in savoring a taste for old decaying spaces by hosting art events and exclusive banquets. A unified plan on an urban scale needs to be devised to revive the district as a whole with mixed income brackets involved in the process rather than selective units, floors and buildings revived for a select audience.

Saray al-Azbakiya Street is the first attempt at an urban renewal project for a downtown street. The project involved simple measures of cleaning, repaving, planting trees, installing urban furniture and making the street a pedestrian throughway.⁸⁶ I recently visited the street during the summer of 2006 and found that the investment in cleaning and beautification has turned this seemingly ordinary downtown street into a new addition to the social landscape of Cairo. It has successfully been transformed into a pedestrian street where a diverse cross section of the Cairenes goes to see and be seen. The revival of the interest for strolling as a leisure activity which has been limited to the corniche is to be credited to Al-Azhar Park. Saray al-Azbakiya provides an urban alternative to park and corniche strolling. This model can consequently be used on other streets within the downtown district as a first phase in a more in-depth rehabilitation plan which includes the actual buildings and the spaces within.

The success of both models of revitalization (the Townhouse art gallery model, and the Saray al-Azbakiya Street cleaning model) is evidence that there is an emerging new Cairene urban identity

⁸⁵ Kadi, ElKerdany, p358-61

⁸⁶ Kadi, ElKerdany, p364

that is not class-specific. Cairenes seem to be willing to embrace their modern past within the frame of a neo-liberal, neo-nationalist attitude that is inclusive of what until recently were perceived as foreign elements within Egyptian urban history. Now that there is a proven interest in revitalizing downtown, and there have been scholarly effort in documenting, listing and categorizing various buildings in downtown and entire sections of the district what is to be done next?

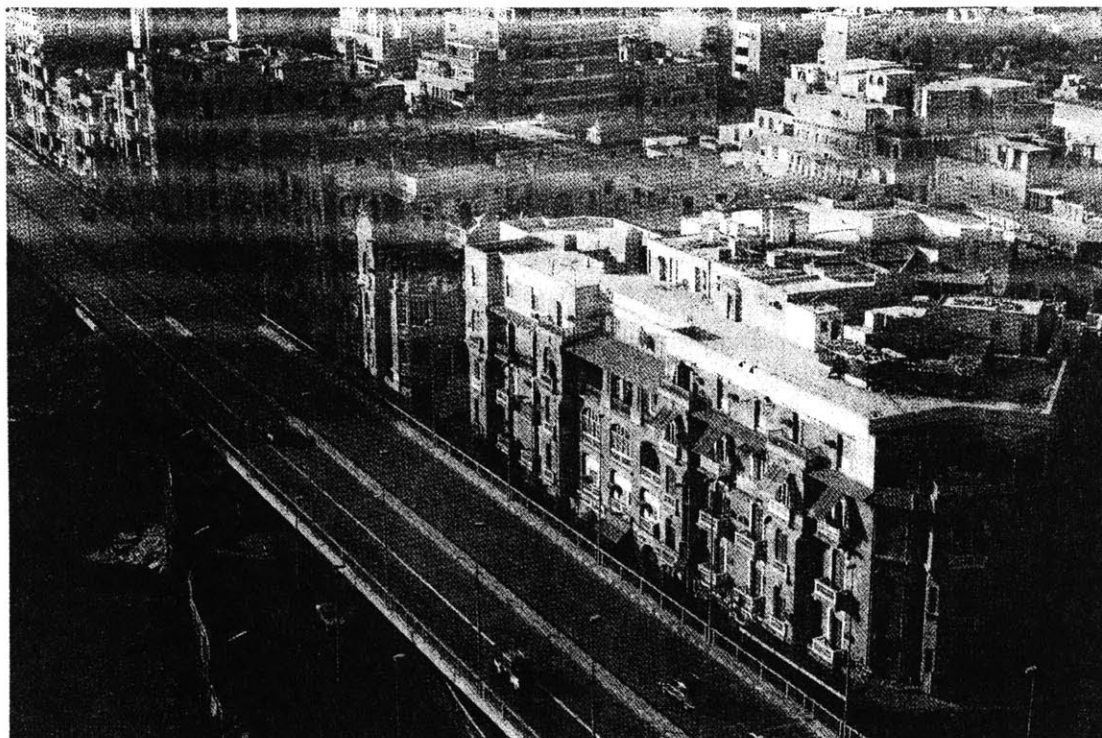


Figure 16. *Sixth October Bridge/highway passing through downtown*

A unified revitalization program is needed to bring together the collective efforts and scholarship of the various interested organizations and committees with the local government, state government, Ministry of Culture, and elite financial backing without posing any threat to poor families and small businesses currently existing in downtown. Possible interventions include: redirecting heavy traffic (as the 6th October bridge), introducing updated mass transit (similar to the successful but inadequately small fleet of privately run air-conditioned buses found in downtown), and reintroducing pedestrian space as has been done in the Saray al-Azbakiya Street. The potential for further transformation, albeit positive, of downtown Cairo aggressively depends on the continuing globalization of Egyptian economy and the necessary change in the political landscape of Cairo and Egypt at large. To summarize, the already existing diagnostic studies of downtown should be elaborated and categorized to deal with: 1) urban image, beautification and maintenance of buildings, streets, monuments, etc. 2) symbolic role/collective memory, the

protection and rehabilitation of publicly and privately own edifices to form an urban/architectural patrimony, 3) housing needs and redistribution, dealing with diversifying the income brackets of residents within the district as well as dealing with rooftop settlements, 4)commerce, 5)transport, traffic congestion and pollution.

Downtown Cairo is a contested space, between the rich and the poor, government agencies and private interests, pedestrians and motor traffic, street vendors and shopkeepers, and most importantly between promoters of visual rehabilitation (cosmetic fix) and promoters of tactile rehabilitation (experience-based). Downtown is thus in the middle of a multi-faceted conflict between competing interests all of whom aim at optimizing their advantages. The larger trend of commercial and economic decentralization that Cairo is witnessing has shifted the primary node of commercial activity to scattered points in the city. Downtown is also loosing its role as a cultural node for the city with the moving of the Egyptian Museum. The new museum is planned near the Giza plateau in a new contemporary building set to be the next architectural icon after the Bibliotheca Alexandrina in Egypt's attempt at promoting a modern image with large scale architectural projects. The competition for the needed space to accommodate the museum's collection could have been set right in the heart of downtown Cairo in the form of a building addition, an urban-scale project to revive the center, however, a tabula rasa site in the desert was an easier alternative. The American University in Cairo has also decided to leave its urban campus in the contested space of downtown Cairo for a garden campus on the periphery. The American University expansion is another missed opportunity that could have transformed downtown Cairo into vibrant, expansive urban campus injecting money and resources into the center.

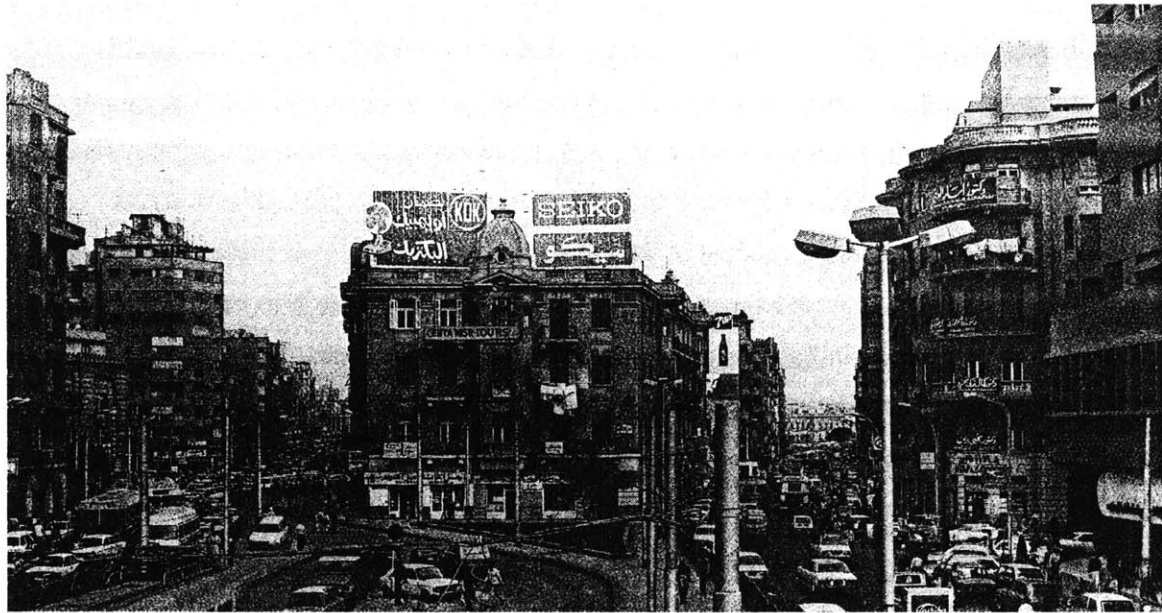


Figure 17. *Downtown near Tahrir*

Chapter V

Transformation

Once the rather exclusive domain of the 'colonial' foreigners and the Francophilic Egyptian elite, this zone has obviously undergone a dramatic transformation since the Revolution of 1952

-- Janet L. Abu-Lughod

The story of downtown Cairo's transformation is complex. From the origins of the modern city district to its ongoing morphosis, downtown has been reflective of the city's social, cultural and economic shifts. These transformations came in many forms including the general urban expansion of highways through the center, the use and reuse of early twentieth century buildings, the moving in and out of institutions such as the Hilton hotel, the American University and the Egyptian museum, and finally the redefinition of public space in the general Cairene context. In this thesis I have listed, commented on and analyzed these moments of transition and their effect on the urban landscape of downtown Cairo and their cultural, social and historical significance in the making of a nostalgically driven architectural image today.

Downtown Cairo has moved from the ordered early modernist urbanism to redefine its experience, aesthetics, boundaries and scale to a postmodern urban structure.⁸⁷ The need to bypass it and to create a link between east and west Cairo resulted in the construction of the Sixth of October Bridge. The bridge, over 15 kilometers long and continuously expanding, is an elevated high-speed skyway, an example of late twentieth century urbanism. How did the bridge affect the existing fabric of downtown Cairo? It created a second layer of auto-oriented urbanism literally layered over the pedestrian-oriented urbanism of downtown. Downtown thus transformed from an urban space conveying aesthetic beauty to merely a domain for circulation.⁸⁸ The belle époque facades of downtown were embellished with multi-storey signs and billboards that respond to the scale of the speedway.

Modern downtown Cairo shares its experience of transformation with other cities with similar conditions, histories and modernities. Cairo's belle époque was anchored by notions of beauty and appearance. Visual appearance in downtown played an important role in determining who is to use it, inhabit it and how to inhabit it. Along with the European facades, identity of

⁸⁷ Soja 1989, Dear 2000 +

⁸⁸ Krampen 1979 +

downtown's streets was visible in peoples' fashions, hairstyles and choices of leisure activity. Café culture translated from its European context into downtown Cairo where urban dwellers went to see and be seen. The contrast between the qahwa (the vernacular café such as the famous Fishawy) and the Euro-style café such as Groppie doesn't reflect a schism between an eastern oriented café culture and its western counterpart; rather it provided alternative venues for the same leisure activity corresponding to different parts of the city. The consumers of the Fishawy and of Groppie may well have been the same, only adapting a different persona depending on which café they visit and in which part of the city. This cosmopolitan, and illuminating example of the fluidity of Cairenes during the first half of the twentieth century up until the more recent years where new boundaries between the rich/poor, secular/religious, western/eastern, prototypical/vernacular have been created with the elimination of downtown's role in social engineering.

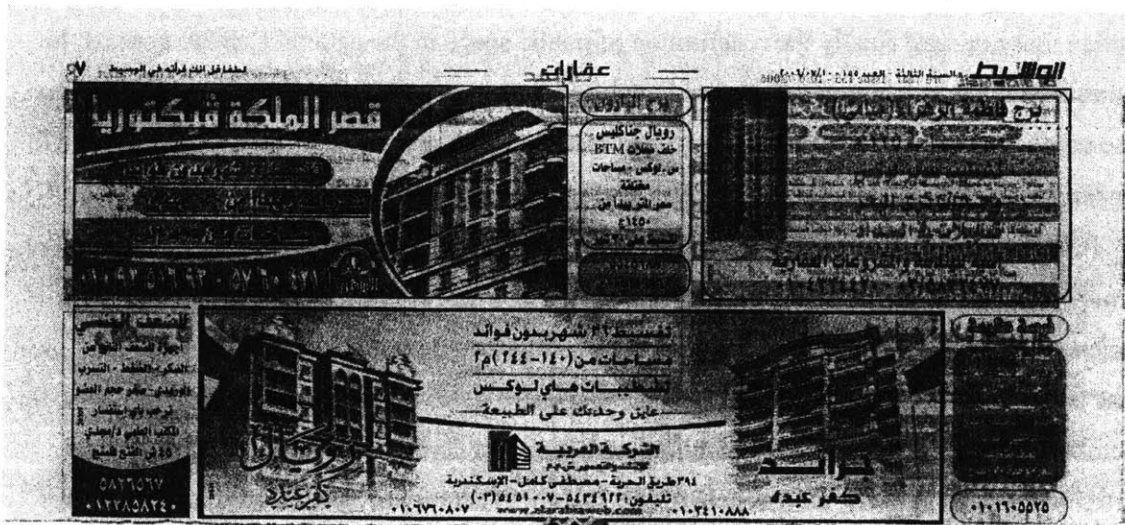


Figure 18. Real-estate advertisements from Al-Waseet newspaper

Conclusion

I presented a case where the fixity of history is challenged. In downtown Cairo, history is made, negated and later reinvented to fit the cultural and political needs of the present. The aesthetics of what is being defined as the belle époque are directly influencing the making of architecture today due to the redefinition of heritage to include euro-inspired buildings and the present need for historicism in the constructions of new facades. Most importantly, a phase of Cairo's architectural and urban development that was created in an effort to modernize and expand is being rediscovered in the last decade within the public sphere in the mode of nostalgia and within

the legislative and managerial spheres that document, preserve and officially recognize the importance for heritage in Cairo to be inclusive of historical developments that are more recent.

The thesis investigated the revival of interest, selective restoration, and nostalgic appropriation of Cairo's urban landscape. I brought attention to the shifting attitudes towards the pre-revolutionary modern city whose history is being rewritten today by a coalition of nostalgic cultural elite. After the making of the downtown was explored, the recent process of revival and nostalgia was positioned as a response to the nationalistic version of the city's history that deliberately erased the significance of pre-revolutionary, colonial-monarchical urban and aesthetic production. I have also suggested that the present interest in the urban center of the city is a response to the shared sentiments among nostalgists who see a decline in urban life as it previously existed in the city.

The development of a nationally-driven architecture in the 1930s and the rise of the revolution in the 1950s stigmatized the aesthetics of the origins of the modern city. I presented the chronology of events leading to this stigmatization as part of a process of forgetting. The void created by the process of forgetting allowed for the nostalgic processes of the present to rewrite a version of history that is meaningful to the collective subjectivities of those involved in various modes of making a heritage, inhabiting the remains of that heritage and appropriating it for the making of new architecture.

APPENDIX IMAGE CREDITS

- Figure 1 Okasha, Sarwat. *Cairo 969-1969*. Cairo: Ministry of Culture, 1971.
- Figure 2 Scharabi, M. *Cairo: City and Architecture During the Period of European Colonization*. Tübingen: Ernst Wasmuth Verlag, 1989.
- Figure 3 Google Maps, 2007.
- Figure 4 P. Coste from *Une architecture arabe ou monuments du Caire, mesures et dissines de 1818 a 1825*. Scharabi, M. *Cairo: City and Architecture During the Period of European Colonization*. Tübingen: Ernst Wasmuth Verlag, 1989.
- Figure 5 Scharabi, M. *Cairo: City and Architecture During the Period of European Colonization*. Tübingen: Ernst Wasmuth Verlag, 1989.
- Figure 6 Scharabi, M. *Cairo: City and Architecture During the Period of European Colonization*. Tübingen: Ernst Wasmuth Verlag, 1989.
- Figure 7 Volait, M. *Architectes & Architectures de L’Egypte Moderne: 1830-1950, Genese et essor d’une expertise locale*. Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, 2005.
- Figure 8 Scharabi, M. *Cairo: City and Architecture During the Period of European Colonization*. Tübingen: Ernst Wasmuth Verlag, 1989.
- Figure 9 Scharabi, M. *Cairo: City and Architecture During the Period of European Colonization*. Tübingen: Ernst Wasmuth Verlag, 1989.
- Figure 10 Okasha, Sarwat. *Cairo 969-1969*. Cairo: Ministry of Culture, 1971.
- Figure 11 Okasha, Sarwat. *Cairo 969-1969*. Cairo: Ministry of Culture, 1971.
- Figure 12 Okasha, Sarwat. *Cairo 969-1969*. Cairo: Ministry of Culture, 1971.
- Figure 13 Courtesy of Youssef Nabil
- Figure 14 Courtesy of Youssef Nabil
- Figure 15 Mohamed Elshahed, 2006.
- Figure 16 Scharabi, M. *Cairo: City and Architecture During the Period of European Colonization*. Tübingen: Ernst Wasmuth Verlag, 1989.
- Figure 17 Scharabi, M. *Cairo: City and Architecture During the Period of European Colonization*. Tübingen: Ernst Wasmuth Verlag, 1989.
- Figure 18 Al-Waseet newspaper, 2006.

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