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POTENTIALS FOR CREATIVE URBAN DEVELOPMENT AT KOM EL-DEKKA- ALEXANDRIA

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Abstract

Can Alexandria lead a future as its bright past? To raise this question, it is important to understand its past and present. Alexandria is a Mediterranean city and the second largest city in Egypt after Cairo. It was home to the Ancient Pharos Lighthouse and Library of Alexandria. Alexandria was once, not only the center of its region, but of the entire world. Now, merely any physical evidence of this history exists. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Alexandria became known as a cosmopolitan center of Mediterranean culture, economy and trade. These unique layers of cultural identity are now going through massive urban transformation, erasing all evidence of its heritage and history. This research plans to explore possibilities for a culturally proactive new path for Alexandria's future by highlighting heritage potentials in a special old area that contains unique cultural identity. The case study of Kom El-Dekka area is investigated; by presenting its rich history, its present problems and potentials for development. The research will also propose a sustainable vision for Kom El-Dekka's future. Two main points are discussed; first, identifying the area's history and morphology, second; identifying the area's problems and potentials to help sustain its rich cultural identity

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ABSTRACT

Can Alexandria lead a future as its bright past? To raise this question, it is important to understand its past and present. Alexandria is a Mediterranean city and the second largest city in Egypt after Cairo. It was home to the Ancient Pharos Lighthouse and Library of Alexandria. Alexandria was once, not only the center of its region, but of the entire world. Now, merely any physical evidence of this history exists. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Alexandria became known as a cosmopolitan center of Mediterranean culture, economy and trade. These unique layers of cultural identity are now going through massive urban transformation, erasing all evidence of its heritage and history .

This research plans to explore possibilities for a culturally proactive new path for Alexandria's future by highlighting heritage potentials in a special old area that contains unique cultural identity. The case study of Kom El-Dekka area is investigated; by presenting its rich history, its present problems and potentials for development. The research will also propose a sustainable vision for Kom El-Dekka's future. Two main points are discussed; first, identifying the area's history and morphology, second; identifying the area's problems and potentials to help sustain its rich cultural identity.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Rapid urbanization results in the formation of slums; either in areas around cities, or more often in city centers, where certain kinds of communities became less fortunate and poorer over time. On the other hand, urban development is done easier in other parts of the city, like beautifying main streets. Therefore, poor people will continue to live in underdeveloped parts of the city or in old city centers mainly because it's cheaper; they walk to their work and to their schools. People save money by using less transportation. But in certain unique old areas, as in old rundown areas in the city of Alexandria-Egypt, like in Kom El-Dekka, people chose to live there. They are closely tied together, in their community. They all know each other; they have pride in their history and past.

The purpose of this research is to investigate and further understand the potentials and problems found in special rundown areas like Kom El-Dekka. The aim is to propose a suitable and creative revitalization project. Analytical studies of the area's history, urban morphology, social and cultural identity are needed for future development plans. This research will be followed with another study that proposes an adaptive revitalization project based on the findings and recommendations given in

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this research. The idea is to come out with creative and sustainable solutions for future development practices in Alexandria.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research uses an inductive research approach; where qualitative data are selected through various resources such as; site investigation, historical studies, and field observation. An urban, social and Architectural study of the current situation at Kom El-Dekka area is analyzed, to define the challenges and constrains at this rundown residential community in the heart of Alexandria. The reason for choosing this research methodology is to explore the area's urban and architectural condition with the community's social and cultural historical background, thus link them into practice.

3. STUDY AREA PROFILE

Kom El-Dekka is an old neighborhood in the old City Center of Alexandria. It is considered an epicenter of Alexandria's archaeological sites. Still to this day, the area is filled with excavations. It contains the largest baths ever found in Egypt with a huge cistern to feed them with fresh water. They date back to the period from the second to the sixth century AD. In addition, the Roman amphitheater lies on its west corner. It is a small theater accommodating about 700 people and the only archeological monument of its kind in Egypt. Recently, a number of excavations found about 22 Auditoria directly in the northern side of this amphitheater, dating back from the fifth to the seventh centuries AD. (Mostafa, 2015)

3.1 Location of the study area

Kom El-Dekka is located along the south side of El-Horeya Street, former Fouad Street, following the line of the ancient "Canopic Way" that was the main thoroughfare of Alexandria (founded by Alexander the Great in 331 BC). The street connected the Gate of the Moon to the West with the Gate of the Sun to the East. (Morcos, Tongring, Halim, El-Abadi, & Awad, 2003). Now this famous European style street is part of today's city center. And Kom El-Dekka is well hidden behind a row of late 19th to early 20th century Neo-classic European style buildings along this street. Geologically; Kom El-Dekka is an artificial mound that was formed by the rebels of demolished buildings piled on top of each other, therefore it is 8-12 meters higher than sea level. (Abdel Fattah, 2010). The dissimilarity of the organic urban fabric at Kom El-Dekka is very clear, regarding surrounding areas. Due to this special nature; entrances to the area from surrounding streets are steep thus provided with stairs for pedestrians. Pictures in figure 1 show pedestrian stairs for entering Kom El-Dekka from Fouad Street.



Fig. 1 Pictures of stairs used for entering Kom El-Dekka from Fouad
Reference: Photographed by authors 2017

3.3 Ancient history of Kom El-Dekka

Kom El-Dekka is an important remaining symbol of the ancient Greeks and the Romans city in Alexandria. The area was inhabited for more than three thousand years, throughout the Pharaonic, Ptolemaic, Roman, and Ottoman eras of Alexandria. When Alexander the Great (356-323BC) build Alexandria to be the capital of his empire on the south side of the Mediterranean Sea; he connected an Island called "Pharos", which lied close to the coast to an ancient existing small village called "Racotis", by a constructed link called "Heptastadion". (Mohareb & Kronenburg, 2012) This action formed two harbors; east and west. As a result of sedimentation, this village and the link later became a quarter in the city, known today as the Mansheya neighborhood. Kom El-Dekka area is located right to the east of the ancient "Racotis" village. (Ilbert, 1996) The city was constructed as a Hellenistic city with its grid- iron form, like any other Ptolemaic city. Alexandria, as the capital of Egypt, grew and flourished throughout the history. It was surrounded by defensive walls in the Hellenistic- Roman period, occupying larger areas of land.

During the first three centuries of the Islamic period, from 642 AD, the capital of Egypt was moved from Alexandria. The city lost its glory and shrunk down to occupy only the "Heptastadion" area, known later as the "Turkish Town". In this medieval period new city walls were constructed and Kom El-Dekka got outside the city, thus became abandoned. The Islamic walls were smaller due to the city's decline in size and population. (Mohareb & Kronenburg, 2012) Kom El-Dekka was then located near the eastern city gate. It was used in the 14th century as a dump site for the surrounding urban areas as well as a cemetery and a possible industrial area. (Wladyslaw, 2008)

A different street pattern was gradually established at Kom El-Dekka. It is the organic urban fabric found in almost all Arab traditional cities. Based on the writings and maps of the German orient-traveler "Johann Helffrich" an assumption was made that the market-street illustrated in his map of the 16th century, which runs in the middle of the area and represents its backbone, originates the formation of the present Sayed Darwish Street. This street was formerly called; Souq Kom El-Dekka. It used to be a market place. (Dimer, 2013) It is a narrow zigzagged street that crosses through Kom El-Dekka leading to most of its current attractions such as; Sayed Darwish café and former house, some heritage Turkish style buildings and an ancient water cistern. The construction of cisterns was important in Alexandria through the different periods of the Greek, Roman and Islamic. They were underground stone buildings used for storing fresh water throughout the dry season. The water came through canals from the Nile River in the flood season.

3.4 Modern history of Kom El-Dekka

In the beginning of the Ottoman era in Egypt, and under the rule of Muhammad Ali Pasha (1769-1849), the city flourished, and Alexandria was remodeled, it became a cosmopolitan city, where Italians and Greeks lived and worked there along with Egyptians. Kom El-Dekka area was predominantly inhabited by Egyptian craftsmen, small tradesmen and workers in the palaces of the rich living in surrounding neighborhoods. These inhabitances mainly migrated from rural areas and southern Egypt, searching for work opportunities in the new European city that was being constructed. Its location made it a hub for Egyptian Alexandrians, right in the heart of the central European quarter; as the market Street and cafes were attractions. Locals who lived there for generations never thought of leaving, their since of belonging grew every day. Kom El-Dekka was an island for the Egyptian working class, in the middle of the growing central business district of Alexandria.

Due to all these historical values, the area offers a very important excavation site in the city and potentials for development based on the unique culture and built heritage. But due to its current occupation as a residential area, no one could excavate within its boundaries. The current urban fabric is closely fitted and some buildings possess heritage wealth that must be conserved. Moreover, since the beginning of 21st century, real-estate developers started to bring old buildings down and construct towers without any archaeological investigation which predicate the loss of archaeological and historical information that was preserved for millennia. These raped negative actions calls for a creative action plan to help save this wealth and lead future development in the right way.

4. URBAN STUDIES OF KOM EL-DEKKA

The Kom El-Dekka municipality contains about 2271 families living in about 3204 housing units, according to the statistics of 2006. (Government, 2008) They are living on an area of about 155,000 m², which indicates low residential density, due to the nature of the area's narrow streets, small building sizes and heights. Although the streets are quite narrow and unfit for car traffic, vehicles enter the area; they either belong to locals or people who come to fix their cars at local mechanics that occupy part of the area. Therefore the area does not have traffic problems. But this situation is unfortunately coming to an end. With increasing numbers of high-rise new apartment buildings being rapidly built that leads to higher densities, thus traffic and parking problems.

4.1 The urban morphology at Kom El-Dekka

The urban pattern at Kom El-Dekka is considered organic; it is typical to street fabric in traditional areas, such as Khan El-Khalili in Cairo. The urban pattern at Kom El-Dekka also follows the topographic characteristics of the area. The traditional Islamic city that was formed one thousand years ago affected future developments in the 19th century and beyond. The social relations and coherent way of life of the inhabitants affected the typologies in which formed the streets and the style they built their homes. The streets are formed with slopes or steps. Their widths determine usage by pedestrians or carts. Small allies and dead-ends are commonly cited in the area. The urban fabric established in this traditional neighborhood reflects the socio-cultural aspects of its inhabitation. Dissimilarity of street fabric at Kom El-Dekka with regards to surrounding areas is evidence to the private nature and close relations between its inhabitants. Pictures in figure 4 present street morphology at Kom El-Dekka.



Fig. 4 Pictures of the street morphology at Kom El-Dekka.

Reference: Authors

4.2 The building styles at Kom El-Dekka

The typology of the existing urban fabric consists of a mixture of building styles. This situation resulted from layers and layers of history that formed this current situation. Still to this day some very little buildings stand from the late 19th century. Such buildings represent the last evidences of the past era. Their Ottoman architectural style is called locally "traditional Turkish style". They are 2-3 floors residential buildings that were originally built to house one family, on small lots of land about 50 m². Their construction style is bearing walls of lime stones in the ground level, than bricks on upper levels. These buildings are characterized with their extended wooden floor structures towards the streets, performing cantilevered wood beams that carry the load of the upper extended floors and give shades to ground floor shops. The buildings have very simple façades, free from ornamentations except for the main two doors that lead to the upper level and the ground level, which are almost always separated. This style contains no balconies, but small vertical windows covered with decorated wooden shutters for privacy. The form of the building is relevantly cubical in shape. Now the remaining buildings in Alexandria with this unique style are almost extinct. Unfortunately none of them is properly conserved.

Kom El-Dekka also contains a considerable amount of primitive housing buildings. They are considered shelter buildings. Most of them are not painted, without any finishing materials on the

façades. Wall materials are red bricks, windows are covered with wooden shutters, and balconies are made out of brick. Residents of such buildings mainly come from rural backgrounds immigrated to the city in search for job opportunities in the second half of the 20th century.

Another building style that exists in Kom El-Dekka, although they are not dominant, is the European Mediterranean style with some local Turkish modifications. These buildings exist in many other areas in Alexandria. They are characterized by; fer-forgé balconies, symmetrical façades with considerable amount of classical ornamentation. These apartment buildings are 3-4 floors high, built mainly in the 20th century.

The rest of the buildings in the area that are now starting to grow and swallow the traditional unique fabric are the illegal residential apartment buildings (13-17 floors) made out of concrete and cement. They lack any architectural style or planning regulations. They represent a threat to the local community and pressures on the infrastructure, electricity and streets. They overshadow streets, totally preventing sun light, ruining air quality and destroying the social and cultural heritage of Kom El-Dekka. Pictures in figure 5 present different building styles at Kom El-Dekka.



Fig. 5 Pictures of architecture building styles at Kom El-Dekka.
Reference: Authors

5. CULTURAL HERITAGE OF KOM EL-DEKKA

During the second half of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th Kom El-Dekka became popular and in the center of the events. Sayed Darwish; amusician and a national figure was born and lived there. The main market street was named after him. The name of Kom El-Dekka is now closely tied to his history and the ideas for urban development in this research are based on the findings and heritage of Sayed Darwish.

5.1 The Egyptian musician Sayed Darwish

Kom El-Dekka was home to Sayed Darwish, (1892 –1923), an Egyptian singer and composer who is considered the father of Egyptian popular music and one of Egypt's greatest musicians and its single greatest composer. He is still regarded as a noble and adored figure in Egyptian history. His songs are considered an important methodological leap in the history of Egyptian singing and music. He is also the composer of the song that became Egypt's national anthem, and many of his other works are still popular. He believed that genuine art must be derived from people's aspirations and feelings. In his music and songs, he truly expressed the yearnings and moods of the masses, as well as recording the events that took place during his lifetime. In his songs, he dealt with the national feeling against the British occupiers, the passion of the people, and social justice, and he often criticized the negative aspects of Egyptian society. His works gained popularity due to their social and patriotic subjects(Salloum, 2001). Darwish's many nationalistic melodies reflect his close ties to the national leaders who were guiding the struggle against the British occupation in Egypt (1882-1952). His songs are considered a catalyst for the Egyptian 1919 Revolution against British occupation. The revolution was carried out

by Egyptians in the wake of the British-ordered exile of revolutionary leader Saad Zaghlul in 1919. The revolution led to Britain's recognition of Egyptian independence in 1922, and the implementation of a new constitution in 1923. (Fawaz 2013)

5.2 Sayed Darwish café

During the British occupation, residents of Kom El-Dekka embodied the national cause. They used to gather each and every night at a small café (now called Sayed Darwish café) in the heart of this residential area to discuss their concerns about Egypt from foreign influences, and listen to Darwish's songs. This café still exists and is very popular in the area, but unfortunately, the places where he gathered people and played his music, is suffering from neglect and loss. His house was also demolished in the 1980s, and many of his relatives and family still live in Kom El-Dekka. They enjoy strong affiliation to the place and want to revive the musical heritage of Sayed Darwish.

A local NGO in Alexandria called "Eskenderella for Cultures and Arts" took advantage of the potentials at Kom El-Dekka and started organizing a yearly street festival for music, culture and art called "Visit me once a year". The celebration is held every year in March on the streets, open spaces and cafés at Kom El-Dekka. It celebrates the birthday of the legendary Egyptian composer "Sayed Darwish" at his hometown. This celebration has been going since 2006 in partnership with locals, cafés and musical bands. The festival emphasis on popular art, cultural and societal values, it also includes art events, street and field activities with locals and children and interactive discussion events (Eskenderella, 2005). The festival also intends to save the cultural heritage of Alexandria and the values and the musical heritage of Sayed Darwish. It sets attention and gives support to Kom El-Dekka's social heritage and popular culture authenticity. Eskenderella and many local Alexandrians lobby to support the initiative of re-building the house of Sayed Darwish to become a center of art and culture; a thoroughbred space for artistic creativity. Figure 6 shows pictures of Sayed Darwish café and the street music festival held once each year at Kom El-Dekka.



Fig. 6 Pictures of Sayed darwish festival. Reference: Internet And the café named after him in the heart of Kom El-Dekka. Reference: Authors

5.3 The heritage conservation environment

Due to the previous historical importance of the area it is officially considered a heritage conservation area; therefore it is registered as number (4) in the Heritage Registered List of Alexandria (Harmony, 2009), according to the Egyptian Law number 114, 2006 for Heritage conservation. The requirements of the National Egyptian Organization of Building Harmony states that; Kom El-Dekka is considered a unique urban fabric, evidence is found in the organic street structure and tight urban pattern dating back to the Arab-Islamic era in Egypt (from 639 AD). Local building requirements at Kom El-Dekka according to the National Organization for Urban Harmony are as follows:

- The maximum building heights allowed for new constructions should not exceed one and one half of the existing streets widths and with maximum height of 16 m.
- The facades of new constructions should follow the traditional common style (Turkish style).

Therefore, Areas of windows and openings in new constructions should not exceed one half of

the façade area, such windows should be vertically oriented and upper floors cantilevered should not exceed 50% of the facade.

- Uses are limited to; housing, cultural facilities, small workshops, shops and cafés.
- The original urban and street fabric must be conserved, as well as all old street furniture and lighting fixtures.
- The area also possesses some Ottoman style buildings that date back to the late 19th century. They represent the building style, structure, local climate solutions and social life of the inhabitants at that time. They are evidence of history. Unfortunately none of them is registered. Pictures in figure 7 show two of the oldest, still standing, buildings at the study area, suffering from neglect and threatened to be demolished to make way for new constructions.



Fig. 7 Pictures of the two oldest surviving traditional Ottoman style buildings at Kom El-Dekka, locally called; Turkish style. Reference: Authors

5.4 The house of Sayed Darwish

Only one building in Kom El-Dekka is registered in the Heritage Registration List of Alexandria. It is the house of Sayed Darwish. It is listed under code 48. Unfortunately the building was demolished in the 1980s and the land lot is currently vacant. Figure 8 shows a map of the listed areas in Alexandria and pictures of the vacant lot where Sayed Darwish home used to exist. (The Heritage Conservation List of Alexandria, 2007)

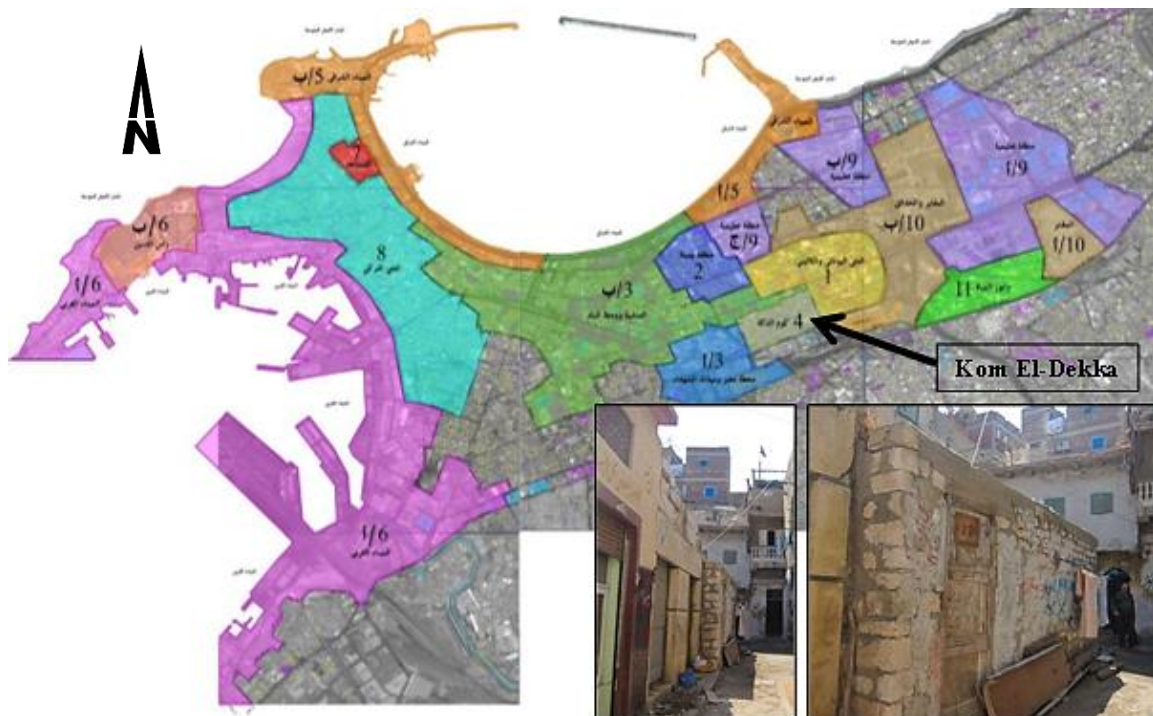


Fig.8 The map shows registered areas at the west city side. Kom El-Dekka is listed as number (4). The pictures show the vacant land lot of the former Sayed Darwish home.

Map Reference: Alex Heritage List

Pictures Reference: authors

Since the Egyptian revolution of January 25th in 2011, Kom El-Dekka suffers, like most of Alexandria's districts, from illegal real-estate development that is erasing all evidence of its modern national history and its far ancient glory. Old residential buildings (2-3 floors) are being teardown rapidly to make way for new apartment buildings (12-15 floors). Real-estate developers seeking fast earnings are viciously drilling through underground monuments, making way for new buildings foundations. They are destroying layers of history by pouring cement to fill-up any underground gaps they found. Such illegal transformation is also destroying the natural organic street structure and urban pattern of the area that was formed hundreds of years ago. Unfortunately not all destructions are illegal. New building regulation lines are being implemented, allowing car accessibility to small streets and allies. At the same time such regulations are allowing new constructions to set back increasing street widths and permitting more building heights in the area. Therefore, this research is very important to highlight the potentials of Kom El-Dekka and to point out threats that could erase the areas rich history and culture.

6. EVALUATION OF DEVELOPMENT FACTORS AT KOM EL-DEKKA

The distinctive historical character of Kom El-Dekka and the attention it took throughout the history of Alexandria made it extremely important to preserve. The field study, site investigation and interviews with locals, conducted updated information about the residents; their needs and potentials. At the same time, Kom El-Dekka suffers from weaknesses commonly found throughout old established neighborhoods that resulted from a series of socio-economic and physical factors. Site observation studies reached the following findings:

6.1 Strengths and opportunities

- Most inhabitants feel comfortable and safe in their neighborhood; the support of neighbors to each other is the main reason to stay in the area, thus highlighting the very traditional values and sense of community.
- Most of all residents see Kom El-Dekka as their primary and permanent home, and are ready to invest their own resources to improve their living conditions.
- The use of streets is constantly changing according to the types of activity taking place at different times of the day, and depending on the exposure to direct sunlight .
- Most workshops extended their activities in the streets, such as (carpenters working in small workshop on furniture and car mechanics).
- Multiple layers of activity, including outdoor work spaces near workshops and gathering points for people after work.
- Oriental cafés are all extended in the streets and alleys; they also serve drinks to nearby workshops throughout the day.
- A special pedestrian oriented layout, where housing, open spaces, commerce and social gathering are integrated, creating a highly cohesive urban environment.
- A good collection of traditional early 20th century Turkish style buildings.
- A well-established, closely related community with population largely employed in productive activities, thus an important pool of small enterprises.
- A long history of nationalism and art performance linked to one of the most important figures in the 20th century in Egypt.
- An archeological site of an important ancient Greco-Roman period in Egypt.

6.2 Weaknesses and threats

- Low economic situation of local inhabitants led to poor urban and infrastructure developments in comparison to other areas in Alexandria.
- Unrealistic planning constrains, pending demolition orders and limited access to credit resulted in a deteriorating housing core and widespread of tenure insecurity.
- Air pollution due to poor environmental practices such as; domestic, commercial and industrial practices are done in the streets without any restrictions. All such activities are mixed with housing and cafés.

- Other threatening environmental issues are found at Kom El-Dekka such as; excessive garbage, sewage problems, unclean streets, and noise pollution.
- Plenty of food and grocery shops serve local needs. Most food preparations are done in the streets, they generally poses local hazards to the area.
- Safety problems led from unlighted streets. Street passengers depend on the light coming from open stores, but late at night the area becomes dark, making it concerning for walking.
- Lack of some basic services such as; health unit, children day care unit, pharmacy, and other domestic services.

7. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper sheds the light on the potentials at Kom El-Dekka, although threatened by neglect and demolition, erasing all evidence of its rich cultural past and its unique present social coherence. Economic and financial problems pressure the urge to save its heritage, adding to that the weak Governmental control system over building violations. To conclude this study; the theoretical and field study revealed that Kom El-Dekka is an area filled with contradictions. Across the years it has gained popularity locally and nationally. Its strong association with a national figure and the fact that locals are coherent and have pride for their background makes it suitable for social development. Adding to that the perfect location in the city center, surrounded with culture and heritage, makes it a place worth visiting and a touristic attraction. Unfortunately all these positive strengths and opportunity, did not lead directly to a well-established revitalization project. In fact locals suffer from problems commonly associated with slum areas .

The positive and negative factors found in Kom El-Dekka tell that an action plan must be established. Authors intended to target and fulfill the needs of the locals and the capabilities of the location and cultural heritage with a unique and creative urban revitalization and upgrade project. The detailed studies for this project will be presented in another research. Recommendations towards the revitalization project at Kom El-Dekka are listed below:

- Protecting and promoting the diversity of culture, heritage, social and economic aspects in the area.
- Integrating the areas social, recreational and educational activities.
- Finding compatible new uses for significant inherited old buildings.
- Sustaining the traditional building style at Kom El-Dekka.
- Rebuilding Sayed Darwish house.
- Fulfilling local infrastructural needs.
- Restricting unplanned developments that do not take into account heritage value .
- Fulfilling the cultural and artistic needs of the locals and the Alexandrian community attached to the history of Kom El-Dekka.
- Identifying appropriate maintenance techniques for buildings and streets.
- Encouraging local NGOs to keep hosting street festivals and field activities.
- Encouraging local cafés to host social and cultural musical events.
- Introducing the area as a touristic attraction, by the suggested Cultural Path in the new revitalization project.

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