

Take a coffee with your heritage! Bottom up approach to communicate heritage: a project in Downtown Cairo.

Vittoria Capresi and Barbara Pampe
Associate Professor of History of
Architecture
Associate professor of Architecture
Design
Architecture and Urban Design Program
German University Cairo
vittoria.capresi@guc.edu.eg
barbara.pampe@guc.edu.eg



How would it be possible to link the everyday habitants of the historical city with the tangible values of the building heritage?

Our case study focus on Downtown Cairo, the district developed under the Kedive Ismail at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. The city plan was inspired by the streets and squares pattern introduced by Haussmann in Paris, and several European architects built palaces and apartments buildings using a stylistic vocabulary which referred to European, Ottoman and local architecture. The result of this process is a system of straight streets leading to round squares, based on a radial design, embraced by a variegated ensemble of buildings with different styles and façade rhythms.

Nowadays Downtown is the main lively heart of the city, hosting small shops, offices, houses, cafes and restaurants in a complex social, religious and functional equilibrium. A general lack of regulations regarding how to deal with the heritage and an old rental system, which had frozen the fees since the 1950ies, are the main reasons for the neglect of the architecture and numerous demolitions of the old buildings.

Some studies and projects started surveying and analysing the architecture and the intangible heritage (oral histories) of Downtown¹, producing new researches and fundamental data for scholars working on the topic.

Besides the scientific research, the main problem remains the lack of interactions and communication between these scientific works and the inhabitants (and users more in general) of the historical buildings.

¹ Scharabi, M., *Kairo. Stadt und Architektur im Zeitalter des europäischen Kolonialismus*, Tübingen 1989, the recent publication of the Hercomanes Project and Galila El Kadi, the work of the National Organisation of Urban Harmony – NOUH and Cultnat and several individual researchers: Mercedes Volait and Claudine Piaton, just to name only the most active. For the intangible heritage we refer to the work of Samir Rafaat, Khaled Fahmy, Omar Hussein.

1. The preambles: a workshop to collect ideas

In March 2012 the open workshop “Downtown Cairo: sharing competences about documenting and communicating heritage” was held at the GUC campus.²

The workshop aimed at bringing together professionals to discuss the current state of the art concerning the documentation and communication of the Downtown’s Cairo heritage, both tangible and intangible. From the analysis of the work already done, the target of the discussion was to focus on still underdeveloped studies and areas, to create new ideas for future actions, building up multidisciplinary synergies among the participants.

One of the main conclusions was that it would be necessary to make an effort to involve the inhabitants in the process of researching the tangible heritage of Downtown, to link the users with the architecture.

2. The first step for the conservation is knowledge

Our project “Take a coffee with your heritage!” follows up the outcome of the conference, with the main purpose to start and encourage the communication between specialists and inhabitants, developing and supporting the awareness of the users towards the architecture of Downtown.

To start working with the inhabitants, we decided that it would be necessary to have a space directly in the heart of the historic city, promoting different activities related to the heritage. Instead of creating a new space *ex novo*, detached from the everyday life of the inhabitants, we chose a small local coffee shop, not too famous and not too big, located in one of the primary street of Downtown.

Our idea was to introduce small changes in the furniture of the shop and to modify objects of daily use (such as shishas, tablets, chairs) with a corporate design based on images of buildings and information about the Downtown architecture and history. On the other hand, we started using the space as a location for activities related to the tangible and intangible heritage of the area.

3. The implementation of the project



One of the stickers.

The first action addressed the most used objects in the coffee shop, to gradually announce our project and wake up curiosity in the daily guests. We therefore focused on the shishas and coffee and tea glasses: we created five different designs of stickers, and put them on these objects. The stickers contained a drawing or a picture of one of

² The workshop was the first step of the project about Downtown financed by the DAAD – German Academic Exchange Service and the GUC, and was organised in cooperation with the Egyptian group of DOCOMOMO. For more info see: www.docomomoegypt.com; www.baladilab.wordpress.com.

the most known buildings in Downtown building and basic information such as the name of the building, the architect, the building year and the address.

The idea was to make people recognise the buildings (because of the picture or the architectural drawing) and read the few data contained on the sticker. To design the images we used a logo with a coffee cup: the idea behind this decision is to increase the automatized mechanism of recognition, which would support the costumers in the process of linking together the various events / activities / objects related to our project.

Parallel to this first action, we organised an open presentation, where students from the class of History of Architecture of the Architecture and Urban Design Program of the GUC presented their researches about the historical heritage of Downtown. The event was announced with a poster in the coffee shop few days before, which was again prepared using the logo of the coffee cup developed for the stickers.

On the day of the presentation a white sheet was installed on the outside wall facing directly the street, and a video beamer projected the works of the students. Two researches were presented and commented in Egyptian by the students to the public of the coffee shop and to the passing by people, initiating the discussion with the inhabitants about their experiences related to the heart of Cairo.

In addition the documentation of the work of the other students where presented in form of small brochures which were available to read and look at during the evening.



A moment of the presentation of the works about Downtown by the students.

4. A first assessment and future steps

The open presentation was a very interesting experiment, and we will work to repeat similar activities in the coming future.

As soon as the students started to talk, a very tiny audience gathered around them. The group increased little by little, until people from the street even stop walking to understand the reason of this small crowd, discovering afterwards the projection on the white sheet. Beside the number of the audience or the attention paid to the presentation, what fascinated us were the discussions which at the same time were

going on among the public. People started guessing the name of the building on the picture projected on the wall, telling stories and personal memories related to them. The discussion at the end of the presentation was lively, and many persons from the audience started adding extra information to the researches presented.

This interaction was exactly the main purpose of this experiment: our idea is to consider the public not as a passive audience but much more to involve them in a common discussion to build together a stronger consciousness toward the Downtown's heritage. The second step of the project foresees in fact to start collecting memories and legends about the area, asking the people to bring us their stories but also photographs, objects, documents ... related to their very personal memories and earlier experiences connected to the area. These objects and stories will be collected in the coffee shop, to continue the discussion with the guests of the shop and show everybody the first result of the action. Afterwards the oral histories, as well as the objects and images collected, will be post-processed and critically analysed by the team of the project. The final product will be a guide about Downtown, which will include not only objective data about the urban structure and the architecture, but also the histories and legends of the inhabitants, including oral history as a basic component to create a common feeling of belonging and proudness toward Downtown.

The main problem which emerged, related to such events, was the particularity of the moment where it happened. It would be in fact necessary to guarantee a continuous presence at the coffee shop with activities, meetings, discussions, which we will try to organise on a monthly base. In this case, the involvement of the students and of the various heritage groups active in Cairo is fundamental. A second similar project is going to start in Heliopolis, coordinated by Megawra, and the fact of linking the two projects will guarantee a bigger resonance concerning publicity and general interest.³

The two described actions are the very beginning of the project, which will develop for the coming months. At this present time, more objects of daily use are going to be re-designed to host information about buildings and streets in Downtown, a library with books and flyers in Arabic will be installed in the coffee shop and finally we are working on a calendar with meetings and discussions.

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³ Megawra is an independent group of architecture experts and lovers, which works to promote and organise activities related to architecture, photography, heritage. On facebook: megawra.

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