

When Revolution Meets Design Studio: Initiating academic debate on “a new urban order”

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**WHEN REVOLUTION MEETS DESIGN
STUDIO: INITIATING ACADEMIC DEBATE ON
“A NEW URBAN ORDER”**

RÉSUMÉ

Après le 25 janvier 2011, architectes et urbanistes se sont inspirés du processus révolutionnaire pour imaginer de nouvelles pédagogies et de nouvelles pratiques professionnelles. Cet article décrit une initiative pilotée par le département d'architecture de l'Université du Caire, dont les projets de fin d'étude visent à contribuer à la restructuration du Caire et de ses espaces publics. La promotion 2011 a cherché à faire de ces contributions des projets laissant l'initiative aux citoyens, en accord avec un ordre social et politique émergent. L'article rend compte du travail de 16 étudiant-e-s, chacun-e avec sur un site ou un projet particulier, dans le cadre plus général d'un projet baptisé « Building Legitimacy ». Il aborde de manière critique les limites et défis rencontrés au cours de la démarche et s'interroge sur la capacité de l'atelier à contribuer à un débat urbain plus large en Egypte.

MOTS CLÉS :

Formation en architecture, Espace public, Environnement urbain, Ville égyptienne, Révolution.

ABSTRACT

In the context of the January 2011 Revolution, architects and planners in Egypt were inspired by the revolutionary process. They envisioned new modes of pedagogy and professional practice. This paper exposes an initiative led by the Architectural Department at Cairo University to

develop the 2011 graduation project as a contribution to the ongoing restructuring of the city and public space into citizen-initiated and inclusive settings for emerging social and political orders. This paper documents the work of 16 students, each with his or her particular site and project, within the broader framework of the “Building Legitimacy” mashru’ (project). It critically discusses the limitations and challenges encountered during the process and reflects on the capacity of the Studio to contribute to the wider urban debate in Egypt.

KEYWORDS:

Architectural education, Public space, Urban environment, Egyptian city, Revolution.

The few months after January 2011 were marked by a sense of euphoria among architects and planners (academics and practitioners alike). Both took cues from the revolutionary process and envisioned new modes of pedagogy and professional practice.

The Architectural Department at Cairo University led an initiative to develop the graduation projects of the class of 2011 into a contribution to the ongoing restructuring of the city and public space. These projects were supposed to be citizen-initiated and inclusive, setting the groundwork for emerging social and political orders.

A team of 16 students, 3 faculty members, and 3 assistants embarked on an experimental design process. This process emphasized the relevance of the “local” and invited each student to propose a critical urban intervention in his or her neighbourhood, where he or she lives, studies, or works. The goal of the project was to explore the potential of local-based initiatives for developing and legitimizing citizens’ space within the city. Through specific interventions, engaging current political, and social transformations, the class aimed to develop critical design approaches to the role of space and space making in such transformative processes.

Can space contribute to better social practices? Or is it merely a neutral container where alternative uses and activities take place? Conversely, how can architects and planners negotiate the socio-spatial dialectic? And finally, what is the future position of architects and planners within such a fluid socio-political transformation, whereby the roles of state institutions, local communities, and other stakeholders are being redefined and reconstituted?

With one eye on the *Tahrir* experiment and another on other “*Tahrirs*” in each and every neighbourhood, these were some of the questions raised at the eve of an unprecedented social upheaval and urban revolt. Today, three years later, with much disillusionment, fluctuating hopes, and increasing frustration, the same questions remain relevant and timely.

This paper documents the work of 16 students, each in his or her particular site and programmatic framework. The geographic areas cover locations in Cairo, Giza, Qalyubiya, Damietta and Sinai. Topics addressed involve conditions in the historic core and outlying

fringes; planned districts and informal neighbourhoods; and housing, agriculture, craft and industrial activities. Projects also addressed issues such as gentrification, urban economy, cultural identity, gender equality, housing rights, accessibility, and alternative modes of mobility, as well as political control and freedom of expression.

CONTEXT AND PREMISES

For years, there have been numerous attempts at the Architectural Department of Cairo University to generate enough critical debate on culture and urbanism to push this topic into the mainstream academic debate. At last, the energy emanating from the 2011 Revolution, which erupted one month before the beginning of spring semester at Cairo University, led to enthusiastic and intense discussions among the graduate studio project team.

Professor Abdelhalim Ibrahim, has long pioneered what can be viewed by many critics in Egyptian academia and practice as “Architecture of Resistance”. He championed the idea of the studio and was joined by Nabeel Elhady and Omar Nagati, who are younger generation design academics, to form a taskforce and engage the emerging urban discourse relevant in the context of revolution.



Photo 1: Graduation design studio at work. Students discuss issues with Professor Abdelehalim (left), Nabeel Elhady, and Omar Nagati. Photo by Amar Elzaman.

While many other architectural academic institutions reacted to the rapidly unfolding political events by addressing the issue of redesigning Tahrir Square as a symbol for the revolutions, the studio team thought that it was both premature and reductionist to address the square itself. What became clear was that citizen-led initiatives everywhere would be an alternative approach for engaging spaces of revolution. In many neighbourhoods of the city –irrespective of their social profile and economic conditions– groups began to form. Such groups mostly consisted of young men and women who were discussing the needs of their urban areas and different ways to enhance their immediate surroundings. Some of the groups initiated *facebook* pages dedicated to their specific communities. Others formed neighbourhood committees while in larger areas stakeholders developed coalitions of citizens, NGOs, and sometimes government representatives. Some of the initiatives later translated into development projects, perhaps modest in size and scope, yet having ambitious dreams and aspirations. What was striking was the new process of engagement, organised through face-to-face meetings, through direct and passionate deliberation, and an emerging sense of ownership. Citizens, it seemed then, had finally reclaimed their right to their city and public space.

The team viewed these urban initiatives and actions as manifestations of an emerging order, whereby new modes of urban citizenship are forged. The concept of *mashru'* –meaning in Arabic both “legitimacy” and “project”– as observed by Professor Abdelhalim, was key to understanding the emerging political space. Both terms are derivatives of the same Arabic word root, implying the conceptual and political linkages between initiating an architectural project and a legitimization process. Furthermore, “building legitimacy” implies both developing representative institutions as well as bestowing legitimacy onto the building process –the physical act of creation. Architects, planners, and space makers need to redefine their position *vis-à-vis* their local communities –their constituency– in order to legitimize their act of building. Thus, they need to re-examine the professional, academic and institutional frameworks of their practice, and the frame of reference of such a practice. The geography of injustice is not exclusive to Tahrir Square, but extends into every street and neighbourhood.

Legitimate architectural intervention, thus, became the basis of what the team thought to be a timely debate on the future of the Egyptian urban environment, as well as for the course outline and project brief.

PROCESS OF DESIGN STUDIO

The context of the local initiative

The events of the revolution and the lack of the sense of security led many residents to identify physical boundaries within which they can maintain security. Based on the social and physical aspects of these boundaries, each student identified the context of his or her project. They then pursued an in-depth investigation of the goal and framework of the proposed urban action. To follow and discuss this investigation, site visits were organised to each student's neighbourhood. Sharing neighbourhood (site) visits was seen as helping students to think about the different aspects of their sites as they pose varying challenges and opportunities, and to help engage them to the wider city communities. For a majority of the students, in what is a generally a conservative public education, many of the sites were actually visited for first time.

More importantly was the participation of students in critically evaluating the challenges and potential of communities other than their own. The sixteen sites selected by students constituted a wide variety of urban conditions and geographical contexts. Some sites were mainly industrial, such as the one in Qalyubiya, where the majority of activities and buildings on site involved an industrial community on the periphery of Cairo. Other sites comprised mainly cooperative housing projects, while some others were located within informal areas. Altogether, the wide range of sites and locations helped the students in the studio to outline a broader understanding of the common challenges facing different urban contexts within Egyptian cities.

To help support further engagement with their sites and create a clear sense of their structure and form, students were required to use physical models as one of their main tools of investigations. Since this is not the standard tool in architectural education in Egyptian universities, the staff invested in training students in the technical skills of model making as a tool for developing their urban contexts and framing their future proposals.

A new social and political order, it was observed, was being reconstituted and was expected to translate the Revolution's motto "Bread, Liberty, and Social Justice" into reality. Citizens were increasingly feeling that they reclaimed their own place as a direct result of the revolution, leading to a new urban experience, and calling for a direct engagement with local initiatives to improve their neighbourhoods on their own terms.

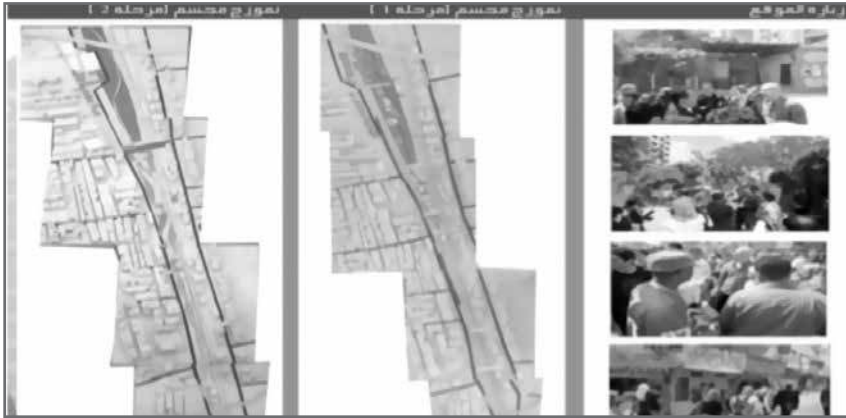


Photo 2: Students and instructors discuss local issues onsite with residents and activists. Photo Amar Elzaman.

In addition to formal site visits, students spent a substantial amount of time with their local community members. They were asked to identify active members in their neighbourhoods, particularly those engaged in improving the conditions and livelihood of their local communities. Popular committees (*al-lijan al-sha'biya*) and other emerging local collectives exemplified these development-based initiatives. This cycle of research lasted for four weeks, and concluded with a vision for urban initiatives and interventions.

Emerging local initiatives

During their encounters with local communities, students were encouraged to listen carefully and document their observations while refraining from making design propositions at that early stage. The process of re-engaging neighbourhoods and communities in which they actually live was conceived as a framework for students to help transform their everyday experience into a more sensitive understanding of their environment. The challenge put to students was clear: bring about a critical urban intervention that would contribute to develop their locale and help promote a more diverse and potentially democratic public space. Each student was in charge of investigating an urban strategy that could best serve their community and address its needs. This strategy then became the core of their subsequent design stages and the framework for a research process to develop innovative and sensitive proposals.



Image 3: Map of Cairo indicating the different localities where the proposal of each students is focused on. Image credit Ahmad Samir.

The diversity of sites led to different proposals. For example, there were two projects developed in Ma'adi. The first one focused on a more popular area of Ma'adi which is centred on the Ma'adi metro station. Since the metro is one of the community's primary means of transportation, the station became very important to the community. One of the students, Sarah Abdel Aziz, chose to extend her proposal to develop a network that would interconnect public spaces, mainly along commercial streets and sidewalks. Sarah also proposed linking these spaces to the popular market –on the other side of the metro track– which is located at the end of one of the old villages (prior to its urban planning) near Ma'adi. Sarah's proposal focused on re-establishing strong connections between the two sides of Ma'adi divided by the metro tracks and exploring opportunities that would connect the fragments that constitute the Ma'adi community. Through this intervention, Sarah's goal was to bridge the social divide existing in Ma'adi, such as the one between those living in what used to be the historic villages of Ma'adi on the one hand, and the upper and middle

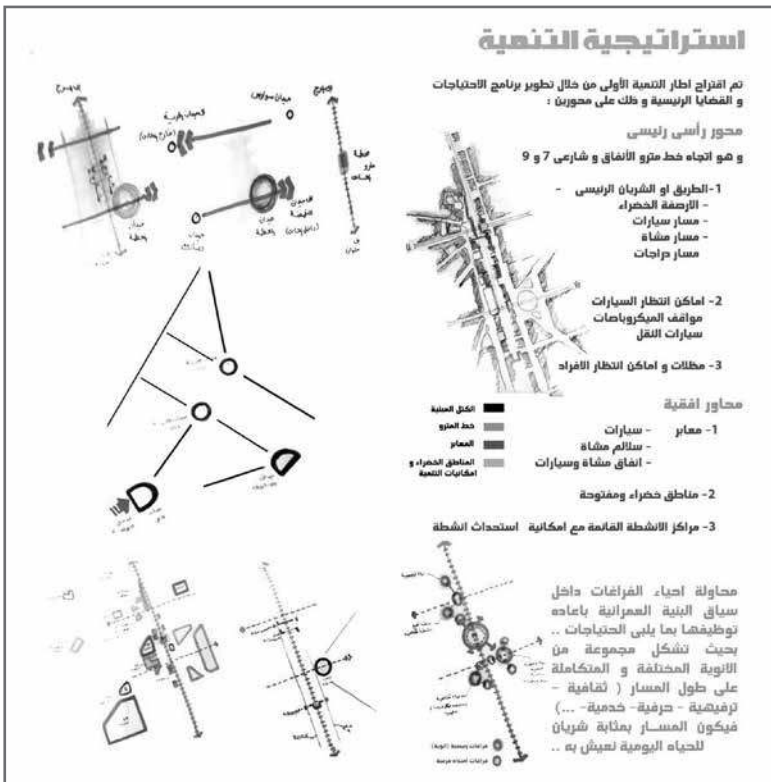


Image 4: Strategies proposed by Sarah Abdel Aziz for urban and architectural interventions around the Ma'adi metro station. Image credit Sarah Abdel Aziz.

class neighbourhoods in classic Ma'adi on the other. Furthermore, creating a spatial framework and expanding social connections would eventually foster new economic opportunities through the organisation of the areas surrounding the metro station for street vendors and the informal market. In that sense, the reinforcement of public space networks in Ma'adi, in partnership with local NGOs, such as the Ma'adi Youth Association (*Rabitat Shabab al-Ma'adi*) and other local community participants, could help support vibrant political space.

The second project in Ma'adi, by Sarah Issa, focused on developing parts of the cooperative housing in the Saqr Quraysh area. Her analysis of, and interviews with emerging local initiatives focused on rebuilding public institutions, such as the youth centre in the area. Sarah's idea was to include other activities in addition to sport, and transform it into a local destination for the development of mind and body. For her it was also important to link this community centre to other public institutions, such as schools. Furthermore, connecting this community centre to existing housing blocks, as she envisioned, would have a great potential for developing the living standards for citizens, which would in turn help create an environment more favourable to active community involvement. While the interconnection between recreational activities and cooperative housing was at the core of this proposal, the project raised larger questions in the context of housing all over Egypt: how to use the existing spatial opportunities to revitalize leftover spaces as platforms for more vibrant community activities. For example, the redesign of the youth centre and its connection to housing spaces, the existing school and streetscape would serve as a catalyst for urban regeneration, and a basis for economic and social development of the local community.

Several other projects involved interventions in informal areas which attempted to address the numerous challenges they face and to improve their deteriorated living conditions and remedy their sense of marginalization.

One of these projects was proposed by Hanaa Gad in Ard al-Liwa, where a very large population is condensed in what used to be agricultural land. The area lacks adequate educational, health, and other public facilities. Transportation was also one of the major problems, as hundreds of thousands of people try to get to work and other engagements during the day mainly through one access point crossing the railway tracks. Around this traffic bottleneck extends a few acres of agricultural land, owned by the Ministry of Endowments (*Waqf*), which was still undeveloped and remained one of the few green areas found in the whole district. This *waqf* parcel stood between the informal area, to the west, and the adjacent al-Mohandisin upscale district to its east. Hanaa proposed a transportation hub to respond to the need to establish stronger connections with the city as well

as accommodating health, educational and commercial facilities. In addition to addressing the question of traffic and accessibility, her proposal aimed at minimizing the impact on the agricultural land and transforming it into a public garden.

A number of projects were concerned with the riverfront and the question of public access, greenways, and ecology. Nouran Shafik, for example, proposed to address the stretch of waterfront along the Nile in parts of Zamalek, raising broader questions about the Nile banks and bridges that cross it as a prime public spaces in Cairo. Nouran investigated the historical connection between Cairo and Cairenes, aiming to make the place accessible to all citizens throughout the year. She proposed to create a network of pedestrian paths that would connect different parts of the city to the riverfront. In addition, she suggested floating structures as a means to lend immediate access the Nile itself. Nouran's project offered a vision of Cairo where residents were imagined to be filling not only the spaces around the river bank



Image 5: An image of the final proposal by Hanaa Gad. Image credit Hanaa Gad. The upper image is the main image of the project, the lower one indicates a cross section along the pedestrian and car crossing (Mazlaqan Ard El-Lewa).

but also these floating structures, especially during annual and seasonal communal celebrations. As the city gets reconnected to the river, the Nile reclaims its role as a generator of life, not only as a source of water, but also because of the immense diversity it encompasses, creating possibilities for new forms of urban and political landscape.

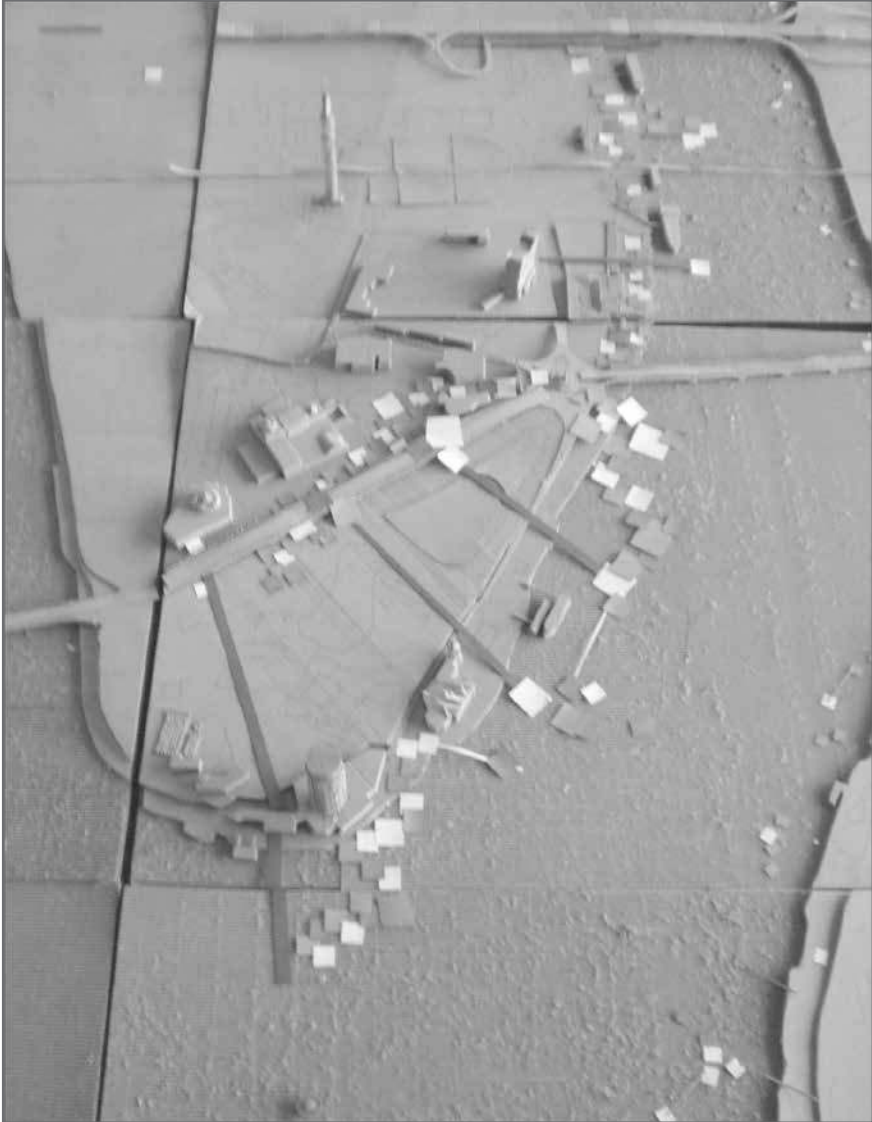


Image 6: An image of the proposal by Nouran Shafik. Image credit Nouran Shafik

Communicating and negotiating socio-spatial debate

One of the main underlying assumptions in this design studio has been that the Egyptian urban scene can be explored and re-built through many bottom-up, small, informed, and guided actions. The graduating students of this class are young architects and aspiring local experts who will be promoting and facilitating new urban initiatives and bringing together their social commitment and architectural knowledge to local communities.

To articulate these intentions into final proposals, students looked for ways to negotiate and communicate their ideas with the local communities. The proposed urban intervention had to be presented not only as an architectural project but also understood in ways that reflected the new emergent context. Assuming their newly debated and advocated role as potential local community activists had significant implications for their understanding of the contributions needed. Understood as a local intervention seeking legitimacy, the graduation project then became a social, economic, and political action manifesting itself in the spatial environment of the community.

To facilitate this process, and unlike the conventional final jury review of graduation projects, a community presentation was proposed as the main requirement for this studio. However, at the insistence of the Architectural Department that the assessment of all graduation projects



Image 7: Taking architectural proposal to the community for discussions and feedback as exercised in the public building studio by Professor Nabeel Elhady. Photo Nabeel Elhady.

should follow the exact same criteria, it was not possible for the studio to further test the students' work through a process of communication and negotiation with the community. Thus, the plan to present students' proposals to their respective communities and get feedback did not materialize. In short, the goal of the studio to challenge the educational process and test its relevance, especially in this critical moment of the Egypt's history, was not met.

CRITICAL REFLECTIONS

Three years have passed since the studio class was completed. Given the luxury, one can sit back and reflect on what has been accomplished and what might have been done differently. Looking back at this experimental studio, four main points are worth noting.

Firstly, is the stark contrast between the excitement, range of possibilities, and expectations that followed immediately after the 2011 Revolution, and the realities, frustration, and demoralization in the following three years. While in retrospect it is always easy to criticize one's naiveté, it only seems fair to assess the studio project based on the context that seemed to be emerging of new urban orders and political and urban transformations. The main dilemma is still at play: Cairo continues to be in a state of flux whereby former urban orders are being contested and often dismantled, while alternative structures are still in a state of becoming. In the interim period, the streets of Cairo are awash in a sea of seemingly amorphous informality. An honest and more realistic position is to admit this state of confusion and uncertainty, and engage ongoing fluctuations *on their own terms* rather than proposing grand narratives or meta-theories.

A second point of reflection would be concerning the proposed interface with communities, gauging their feedback to students' projects, and revisiting the old question: to what extent are architects and planners serious in their claim to "participatory process"? The revolution has not only created new "realities on the ground" in terms of the ways streets and neighbourhoods have been and are still being reorganised, it has also helped generate alternative modes of urban citizenship. Individuals and communities are emboldened by a sense of empowerment and ownership of their city and the right to its public space. They have now had a glimpse of the structuring process from which they had long been denied access and participation. Today in many neighbourhoods, particularly informal areas, urban initiatives and interventions are transforming the face of the city, while architects, planners, and policy makers are following their lead. A true participatory process in action is being generated, or self-generated – and not by those who are professionally trained. This is a lesson to be learnt by academics and practitioners alike.

A third question is that of pedagogy: discipline and structure versus students' interest and freedom. This debate emerged and has been percolating since the Revolution. Was it a "Youth Revolution," *thawrat shabab*? And to what extent should this rebellion against the old order be extended to all other established societal institutions, from family, school, to university? Immediately after the 2011 revolution, many universities witnessed student rebellions, revolting against their deans, heads of departments, professors, grading system, admission requirements, and so forth. At the beginning of the spring semester, a debate developed between students and a group of instructors. The former "negotiated" their grading systems, number of assignments, and general workload compared to their peers in other studios. This bargaining process was then settled without seriously compromising the academic standards. However, the process did highlight a new evolving equilibrium between students and instructors, and potentially alternative modes of learning akin to those attempts during the 1960s Students' Movements in Europe and North America. Today, many of these attempts have either been aborted or failed to achieve their goals, but the youthful energy and sense of empowerment among students remains a valuable source of revision and renewal in the pedagogical *status quo*, bordering between stagnation and longing for revitalization.

Fourthly, while this design studio was inspired by the momentum of the revolution, preserving such energy and sustaining it in the design studio was somewhat overlooked. The design studio is the core where the intensive and more influential architectural debates take place. Design studios, especially in public universities in Egypt, are shying away from addressing relevant community issues, and avoiding critical investigations of relevant and timely political questions. With a broadening sense of freedom of expression, in addition to energy and enthusiasm, the younger generation can help rethink this educational structure and challenge the *status quo* of design studio culture in general –something that *this* studio certainly could have done better.

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OMAR NAGATI vit au Caire, où il est architecte-urbaniste. Il est diplômé de l'université du Caire, et a aussi étudié et enseigné à l'université de Colombie Britannique à l'université de Californie, Berkeley, en s'intéressant particulièrement à l'urbanisme informel. Nagati aborde les questions d'histoire et de conception urbaine sous un angle interdisciplinaire, et propose des analyses comparatives des processus d'urbanisation dans les pays en développement. Il est en charge de l'atelier de conception urbaine de l'université Modern Sciences and Arts à Gizeh et enseigne également à l'université du Caire. Nagati a récemment co-fondé CLUSTER, une nouvelle plateforme de recherche et de conception urbaines dans le centre-ville du Caire.

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OMAR NAGATI is a practicing architect/urban planner living in Cairo. A graduate of Cairo University, he studied and taught at the University of British Columbia and the University of California, Berkeley, with a specific focus on informal urbanism. Nagati adopts an interdisciplinary approach to questions of urban history and design, and engages in comparative analysis of urbanization processes in developing countries. He teaches Urban Design Studio at the Modern Sciences and Arts University in Giza and is a part-time instructor at Cairo University. Nagati has recently co-founded CLUSTER, a new platform for urban research and design initiatives in downtown Cairo.