

Chapter 16

Cairo's Downtown in Narratives: From Singularity to Hardship

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ABSTRACT

Cairo's downtown, through sociopolitical conditions, had been moved from a single city to a hardship one. The authors attempt using a method of multiple readings to provide a new comprehension for the city by using the historical review side by side with several examples from Egyptian literature that describes this dramatic evolution. For this neighborhood, it is considered an active part of Cairo. The period they suggest for scanning the literature begins from Cairo Great Fire in 1952 and its consequences. The year of 1952 and the constitution of the first republic until the dramatic fall of this last by the revolution of January 2011. This chapter aims to articulate the evolution of Downtown Cairo from the singularity to the hardship.

INTRODUCTION¹

Cairo's Downtown evolution is the focus of the present research. The period was limited and selecting between since the 30th until the second decade of the third millennium. The review emphasizes on the turning points that influenced the area, deforming and its characteristics from a district of singularity hosted by the elites to a zone of hardship that lacks the essential levels of the quality of life (Abaza, 2006; AlSayyad, 2011; Ashour, 2003; El Kadi G., 2012; Mitchell, 2002). This analysis is considered an approach for re-tracing its character, comprehending its qualities, and understanding its overlapped layers of history. The current work goes in depth through looking for traces and mapping of its historical, political, social, and urban deformations.

Arguably, Cairo Downtown has suffered from substantial sociopolitical changes since the second half of the twentieth century (Ashour, 2003; Awatta, 2015; Taher, 2008). These changes are seen in the shift from its glorious birth of a unique urban setting and architecture character, combining European

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styles with local influences and materials (Ashour, 2003; Abu-Lughod, 1971; AlSayyad, 2011; El Kadi & Kerdany, 2006; El Kadi & Kerdany, 2006; Hawas, 2001; Myntti, 1999). The district has a feature of hardship living (Elshahed, 2007; Haykal, 1973; Sims, 2012).

In this work, the characteristics of the cities of hardship are addressed to describe the lacking the essential quality of life principles. These are seen in the gradual replacement of famous palaces and villas by commercial activities on the ground floors of residential and mixed-use buildings.

Throughout this on-going evolution, shifting from a district of singularity, Cairo downtown was the platform of progressive dramatic political movements, leading to directional activities of visions and perceptions, influencing its qualities, and transforming it to a district of hardship (Abaza, 2006; Ashour, 2003; Assy, 2006; Elshahed, 2007; Essa, 2013; Mehrez, 2011; Raafat, 2003; Singerman, 2009).

The research problem is the transformation in political, social, cultural and economic changes, lead to deformations affected the main attributes of Cairo Downtown. The deformations are recognized in the change from a city of singularity to a city of hardship. The current chapter addresses several further questions on how Cairo Downtown is considered as a reflection of sociopolitical evolutions. Another interesting question in this context is: what are the impacts of those evolutions that led to make it a district of hardship after being a glorious one?

This work traces the continually shifting of the hardship multi-attributes throughout downtown's history that goes beyond reviewing its origin in the nineteenth century. Scanning the narratives from the Egyptian literature focus mainly on its transformation from the 40th and early 50th to the January revolution of the present state in the twenty-first century. In this reading, the current work begins with observations and readings of the Cairo Downtown transformation process and shifting manners from its origins as a city of singularity to the current tendency towards socio-political deviations.

BACKGROUND

Cities of Singularity

In Cambridge Dictionary, the word 'singular' is to describe a formal of an unusual quality or standard; noticeable. In English grammar, this word is used to talk about only one thing (Cambridge Dictionary, 2019). In Oxford living Dictionary the word *singularity* is more than the quality of being singular; it's *a hypothetical moment in time when artificial intelligence and other technologies have become so advanced that humanity undergoes a dramatic and irreversible change* (Ogilvie, 2012, p. 106).

According to Aldo Rossi, the city of singularity is "*beings in the event and in the sign, which marked the event*" (Rossi, 1982, p. 106). For Rossi, the history of the city and its "locus" make the singularity and presuppose the existence of the architecture artifacts. According to Rossi, the artifacts of the city pointed out by the geographer Maximilien Sorre presented to his work about the fractionation of space's theory. In Sorre's work, the locus appeared inside the undifferentiated spaces, the situations, and the qualities that are indispensable to understand urban artifact (p. 34). Besides, the efforts of Viollet Le Duc asserted that the in his efforts to architecture is interpreted *as a series of logical operations based on a few rational principles, he also admitted the difficulty of transposing a work of architecture from one place to another* (p. 103). So that, the sites are considered the locus in the city an essential agent in creating its singular unique and physical place. According to Rossi (1966), *each city is constituted of parts, and each one of these parts have characteristics; each city has some singular (Primary) elements*

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