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Author: Hajer Awatta, The American University in Cairo.

Address: 17 Dr. Nageeb Hashad St., Apt. 14, Heliopolis. Cairo, Egypt.

Mobile: +(2) 010 000 350 24

Whose Downtown is it Anyway?

The Urban Transformation of Downtown Cairo between State and Non-State Actors

Abstract

Redeveloping highly significant and contested areas such as city centers create conflict between local forces as each have their own goals and desired vision for downtown. Downtown Cairo is experiencing an urban transformation guided in part by neoliberal globalization, state securitization, capitalist investment interests and the emergence of an independent culture/arts scene. Over the past decade, Egyptian State institutions have shown interest in the revitalization of the city center through developing strategic urban development vision for the city as a whole, focusing on certain areas including downtown. The 2011 revolution was unexpected by all and created a pause, albeit short-lived, in the state's development vision for the city. A brief detraction of the state in the following months created a security vacuum which resulted in increased public sense of ownership and informal usages of space, with Tahrir Square becoming "de facto the space for contestation, for grieving, and public performance."¹ This newly-gained sense of ownership and belonging is currently threatened with the rebranding of downtown Cairo as a commercial and cultural center, stripping away its social and political function if securitization and quartering of public space become a central part of the development agenda.

This paper examines how the influential state and non-state stakeholders interact, conflict and collectively shape the urban transformation of downtown Cairo. Different alliances and dependencies between entities within the same stakeholder group and between state and non-state stakeholders were identified through stakeholder analysis based on historical research and in-depth interviews conducted with representatives of key influencers. Despite the commonalities between the interests of the state and private investors, the state prefers to maintain development monopoly and control over the area in its beautification-focused development efforts. Influential stakeholders who do not have particular interest in the development of downtown, such as legislative authorities and large financial institutions, have significant power and influence that can be tapped into and directed towards a more sustainable transformation of the area. This paper's findings reveal that the ingredients of gentrification are present in downtown Cairo, however it is currently dampened by legislative and other parameters. Theoretically the state is the protector of the "public good", however it is often ambiguous to define what is in the interest of the general public. Such transformations in other cities resulted in negative socioeconomic impacts on the low- and mid-income individuals who live/work in the city core.² This brings up the question as to how the state is planning on regulating potential urban transformation in downtown Cairo in the current stakeholder power dynamics to minimize potential negative socioeconomic impacts.

¹ Abaza, M. (2014). Post january revolution cairo: Urban wars and the reshaping of public space. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 31(7-8), 163-183.

² Sassen, S. (1991). *The global city: New york, london, tokyo*. Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press.