

MSA – Faculty of Engineering  
Department of Architecture  
Elective 2 – Spring 2012  
Omar Nagati in partial collaboration with Beth Stryker

## **Archiving the City in Flux: Documenting Cairo’s Fluid Urban Condition**

### **I. Context**

Since January 2011, a breakdown of the security apparatus has generated new modes of informal urban interventions in public space that in both kind and measure would have been unimaginable prior to these events. These types of activities range from the simple outdoor extension of shops onto the side walk, and peddlers taking over the street, on one end of the scale, to roadside development alongside highways and the construction by local communities of exit ramps to access the ring road, on the other.

The same fluid condition has produced new forms of cultural and artistic expressions in public space, such as graffiti, street performances, art fairs and festivals in large squares, in addition to the emergence of new modes of political expressions, taking media to the streets and local neighborhoods. Public arts and monuments have also witnessed new types of expression, including both censoring and subversive tactics: such as covering up “naked” statues, adding eye patches to nationalist figures, and the construction of murals, obelisks and towers to commemorate martyrs.

On the negative side, Cairo urban and cultural landscape witnessed the destruction or burning down of some historic buildings and public institutions. Furthermore, walls, barriers, and barricades have been erected, some torn down, while others still standing—a testimony to a society divided and to ongoing ideological battles and street warfare.

During the past few months, the gradual return of law enforcement agencies has created a new condition of negotiation between the state/formal institutions, on the one hand, and local actors/informal processes, on the other. A “post” condition may thus be characterized as one of seeking a “new equilibrium” between the state and civil society, whereby public-private distinctions are being constantly renegotiated and redefined.

The timeliness of this semester suggests a critical engagement in such fleeting patterns. The course thus aims to take advantage of the current condition of fluidity, which may not last for long, in order to capture and analyze this moment of turmoil and change, before it stabilizes into a new structure.

### **II. Goal**

The purpose of this course is twofold. First is to introduce students of urban design to alternative ways of perceiving and documenting the city, by exposing them to non-architectural lenses and frames of reference. Secondly, the course aims to address the current fluid urban conditions that have impacted Cairo since January 2011, and thus attempt to capture some of the fleeting practices in public space.

### **III. Structure**

The course is generally divided into two parts. Part one is organized into a series of lectures and workshops led by guest artists, curators, photographers, filmmakers, journalists, and exhibition designers. Each session will introduce students to a visual documentation

technique, followed by a weekly assignment applying such approach to engage a specific urban issue. A parallel program of field visits to local archives, museums and galleries, will complement the lectures and workshops, and offer empirical examples from both the official cultural institutions and independent art scene. During the second part of the semester, each student will propose a documentation project based on a certain theme/urban question in the form of installation setup. The course concludes with a final exhibit that could be reinstalled in other places, and a brochure documenting all students' projects.

Schedule and weekly modules:<sup>1</sup>

1. Archiving the City: introduction and examples	Omar Nagati
2. Photo documentation Field visit: Art ELIwa/CIC/Townhouse	Hamdy Reda / Laura Cugusi
3. Video documentation	Kaya Behkalam / Lily Grimes
4. Graffiti, murals and public art (Workshop)	Adham Bakry
5. Searching the archive: maps, photos and documents Field visit: National Geographic Society	Clare Davies
Midterm Quiz / photography project	Omar Nagati/Beth Stryker
8. Installation and exhibit design /Project proposals Field visit: Agricultural Museum	Asuncion Molinos Gordo
9. Digital archive Field visit: Mosireen	Sherif Gaber
10. Cinematic City: Public Lecture	Tamer Said / Sherif El-Bendary
11. Project Review	
12. Project review	
13. Exhibit (moveable) and jury + Brochure	Omar Nagati/Beth Stryker

Potential Visits:

Egyptian Geographical Society  
 Agricultural Museum  
 The Museum of Egyptian Antiquities  
 6 October Panorama  
 Cult Nat/Library of Alexandria  
 Townhouse / CIC  
 Public Art/Murals  
 Mosireen

**IV. Reading List: TBA**

- Miles, Malcom. Urban Avant-Gardes: Art, Architecture and Change. 2004

**V. Assessment and grading:**

Attendance and weekly assignments: 40%  
 Midterm quiz 20%  
 Final project 40%

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<sup>1</sup> Subject to adjustment according to availability of guest lecturers