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on Mediterranean
Urban Spaces
and Cultural Heritage



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Publisher

Aiap Edizioni – via A. Ponchielli 3 – 20129 Milano – Italy
aiap@aiap.it – www.aiap.it

PAD © ISSN 1972-7887

#15, december 2018

www.padjournal.net

PAD #15

Research Alert on Mediterranean Urban Spaces and Cultural Heritage

O. EDITORIAL #15

Research Alert on Mediterranean Urban Spaces and Cultural Heritage

Marinella Ferrara & Chiara Lecce

005

I. URBAN SPACE ALERT

Design Intervention: Understanding Cairo Informal Areas

Jomana G. Attia and Alaa El Anssary

012

Industrial Waste Management in Egypt: a Sustainable Design System

Nariman G. Lotfi

032

Kaleidoscopic Presence. A Study of Presence, Listening and Movement in Lisbon

Camila Soares de Barros

051

II. CULTURAL HERITAGE ALERT

From Moving Image to Still Image: Feature Films as References for Preserving the Architectural Heritage

Ahmed Wahby & Nora Kahil

070

Augmented Reality Implementation in Cultural Heritage for Emotional Experiences. The Case of CHEESE

Carla Langella

091

Critical Design Approach to Understand the Current Public's Perception of Islamic Art and Design

Andreas Sicklinger, Alaa Baligh, Sherin Helmy

117

III. SUGGESTIONS FOR DESIGN

Post Disaster Rooftops

Gabriele Leo and Grazia Mappa (Plasticity Studio), Peppe Frisino, Gabriella Mastrangelo

140

IV. BIOGRAPHIES

About the Authors

151



CULTURAL HERITAGE ALERT

From Moving Image to Still Image: Feature Films as Reference for Preserving Architectural Heritage

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Keywords

Egyptian Feature Films, Historical Architecture, Cityscape, Alexandria, Downtown Cairo, Cairo, Egyptian Cinema, Khedival Cairo, Belle Epoque, Paris on the Nile, Cultural Heritage

Abstract

History is preserved by conserving the heritage of bygone periods and without documentation, future generations would not have any access to this past. It is imperative that records of historical events and/or accomplishments are retained and revisited. The history of Egypt is rich and varied. This paper centers on Egypt's Belle Époque (1930s and 1960s) and the vision that the Khedive Isma'il Pasha (19th and 20th century) had for developing Egypt. The Belle Époque or 'beautiful era of Egypt' to date has received relative attention. Periods such as Egypt's Pharaonic and Islamic eras are well-known and commonly debated as they were, and remain, continuously researched and documented. Documentation of the past generally occurs through the mediums of writing, engraving, painting, photography and cinematography. The motivation for this research study was to extract information from Egyptian feature films to aid as reference source for present and future studies. This research primarily focused on the metropolitan cities Cairo and Alexandria as they were the predominant centers for Egyptian cinema during the period 1930-1960. The latter cities were competing with the top ranked cities worldwide. However, with time they became out of the ranking

due to negligence, mega population and ignorance. Somehow, Cairo's downtown is still maintained comparing to Alexandria's architecture. However, the disregard for Alexandria's architectural heritage is sadly proliferating the loss of original building façades. The threat to Alexandria of losing its bygone charm and therefore the greater part of its identity, weighs heavy on the spirits of its inhabitants who wish to preserve their surrounds.

1. From moving images to still image: new sources of information

“Film is ... an important scientific tool that has opened up new areas of knowledge” (Monaco 2000, p. 63). New universes and parallel worlds can be explored through cinema. The cinematographic experience is an apt instrument for educating the public. Through a portrayal of humankind through the ages, it serves as an opulent visual record of the past, present and future. Films are contemporary story-telling tools that impact indefinitely. Whether they present in the form of documentaries or narratives, cinematographic genres deliver a broad overview of society and its unique cultural traits.

Through a combination of sound, text and visuals, movies constitute underestimated, detailed sources of information. Each of the mentioned recording mediums potentially represent a new realm of study which, in return, aids in an understanding of the past and present. Films can be a medium to export information and documenting nations, in particular in the case of Egypt with its long cinematic history, as per (Kahil, 2018) film footage can be used as a mode of ethnographic representation. Performing research to investigate film objects, consider aesthetics representations, identities and evaluating how the Egyptian culture and country are evolving and developing. An image, whether in still or moving format, reflects the world of fashion, behavioral science, architecture, furniture and urban design amongst others. Sound informs on the language and musical traditions of a specific community. Through promoting the importance of urban rebranding, recreating memory and restoration, cinematographic films

indorse urban historical spaces as products, which in return provides them with marketable value. These historical spaces could attract investment, new residents, retailing opportunities, whilst also supplementing cultural tourism. Moreover, films augment heritage archives through the preservation of documented architectural and building styles.

Moving images originated from photographs or still images. Besides functioning as a medium for self-expression, still images have always been valued for their ability to record, and record authentically. In the past photography was considered the most unbiased medium. However, photographers were always able and keen on manipulating the setting in order to add or remove elements deemed as either fitting or unfitting for the photograph subject matter. In a similar manner the moving image consists of a sequence of still images or photographs, which, through a sequence of frames played in a specific speed give an illusion of movement to the human eye providing the illusion of continuous movement or action. However, moving images provide the audience with a wider scope of information concerning place and time and, in most cases, not manipulated. A cinematographic camera moves by means of panning and tilting and these actions provide an extensive view to interpret. In contrast, the still image or photograph can be cropped and edited, and its understanding is not dependent on the involvement of a sequence. This allows the viewer to imagine and make his or her own deduction of time. Creating and exporting still images from moving images (films), through prolonging the time an image can be viewed and studied, encourages in-depth exploration of the bygone

period and ultimately, a deeper discussion regarding the construction of a rehabilitated public space. This, in return, may foster investment in heritage campaigns that are aimed at reviving historical districts.

2. Cases study

The Khedival Opera House, Cairo

Experienced theatre construction architects Pietro Avoscani (1816-1891) was consulted and invited to Egypt to design the first Khedival Royal Opera House (Volait 2001, p. 93). The Khedival Royal Opera House, which is located in the el-Az-bakeya district, was built on the occasion of the inauguration of the Suez Canal in 1869 as a small-scale replica of the renowned La Scala Opera House in Milan.



Figure 1. Khedival Opera House. Courtesy Cairo Opera House, Cairo, Egypt. Retrieved December 2017. <http://www.cairoopera.or/img-bank.php>.



Figure 2. Jean-Christophe Benoist Scala De Milan, Italy [Image] (2011). Milan, Italy. Retrieved December 2017. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/La_Scala#/media/File:Milan_-_Scala_-_Facade.jpg.

Currently, the area it is located on is known as Opera Square after the Cairo Fire 1952 which caused a partial destruction of the Khedival Royal Opera House. The Opera Square as well as equestrian statue of Ibrahim Pasha which is also located on the square, appeared in a number of cinematographic films between the 1930s and 1960s; among others in the films *Adl el Samaa* عدل السماء [*Heaven's Justice*] in 1948, in *Maaboudet el Gamahir* معبودة الجماهير [*The People's Diva*] in 1967, and in *Akhtar Ragol fel Alam* أخطر رجل في العالم [*Most Dangerous Man in the World*] also released in 1967. These movies and a small number of archived photographs are the only records which reference this area and how it looked during the past.



Figure 3. Khedival Opera House. Courtesy Akhtar Ragol Fel Alam Movie, 1967.



Figure 4. Khedival Opera House. Courtesy Maaboudet El Gamahir, 1967.



Figure 5. Khedival Opera House photo-merge of stills captured from *Dalila* Movie, 1956. Photo: Nora Nabil Kahil, 2018.

A number of the previously remarked upon buildings in Downtown Cairo had been demolished or burnt-down. Much of Cairo's architectural heritage disappeared. As per Wahba, Bahgat, & Saleh (n.d.) "Despite the legislation protecting these buildings from demolition and alterations, the public awareness to nineteenth and twentieth century architecture is still not fully formed and certainly maintenance laws were not respected." In 1971 the Khedival Opera House tragically burned to ground level and only some photographs and postcards survive to preserve the memory of its glorious past. The current Opera House located on Gezira Island in Zamalek in the vicinity of Downtown Cairo was inaugurated in 1988 by former Egyptian president Husni Mubarak twenty years after the original building was destroyed. The design and function of the current day Opera House differs entirely from that of its predecessor. The site of the original Khedival Opera House is now occupied by a multi-story car park. The history of the former Khedival Opera House is recalled in a display housed in a small room at the modern Opera House, and on the Opera House website.



Figure 6. Current place of the former Khedival Opera House, Opera Square, 2017. Photo: Nora Nabil Kahil.

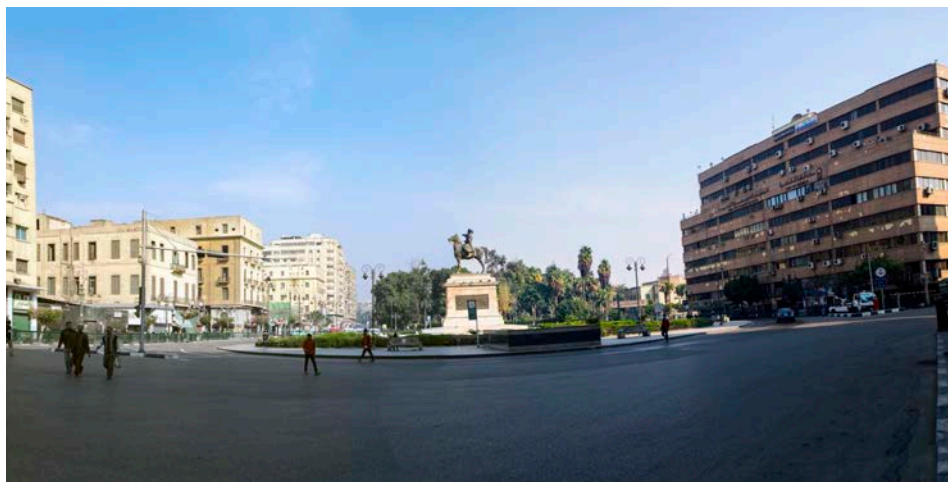


Figure 7. Current place of the former Khedival Opera House on the right side which became multi-story car park and the Historical Continental Hotel on the back-left side, Opera Square, 2018. Photo: Nora Nabil Kahil.

The Continental Savoy Hotel, Cairo

Downtown remained Cairo's business center as well as an elitist residential area and the societal focus of Cairo up until the 1950s. This area also featured the leading commercial establishments, amongst these The Shepherd, Semiramis and the Continental-Savoy hotels, a large number of distinguished department stores, international banks and art galleries.

The Continental (previously known as Savoy) Hotel was one of the last historical extravagant hotels to withstand modern development in the Downtown Cairo area. Sadly, this building was demolished in early-2018. It is currently not known whether the hotel will be rebuilt, or whether it will make way for fresh development.



Figure 8. The Continental-Savoy Hotel Advertising, Cairo 1922. Ahsan Nas. "Continental-Savoy Hotel" March 20, 2011.



Figure 9. The Continental-Savoy Hotel Main Entrance, Opera Square 1934, Egyptian Hotels, Ltd, Cairo. Courtesy Library of Congress.

Following figures, (Fig. 4 and Fig. 5), depict the Continental Savoy and the state the structure was in before being demolished in 2018. Re-photography is invaluable as it records historical buildings in their existing form. In addition, it highlights the unconsidered and hasty entry of commercial establishments into Cairo's downtown district. This phenomenon is illustrated by means of contrasting (Fig. 8) with (Fig. 11).

Downtown's main attractions and prime locations continued to present in films, either in the form of establishing shots, or through featuring in background scenery. Examples thereof are depicted in the following figures.



Figure 10. Main entrance of the Continental (Ex-Savoy) Hotel in 2017, before being demolished in 2018. Opera Square, Cairo. Photo: Nora Nabil Kahil, 2017.



Figure 11. The Continental (Ex-Savoy) Hotel in 2018 whilst in the process of being destroyed, Opera Square (Cairo), 2018. Photo: Nora Nabil Kahil.

By destroying many of its prominent national and international landmarks, the 1952 Cairo Fire unequivocally brought about the demise of the la Belle Époque era in Cairo Downtown.

3. Cinema and the City

Egyptian cinema started in 1895, shortly after the Brothers Lumière, the inventors of the moving images and manufacturers of photographic equipment who invented an early motion-picture camera and projector called the *Cinématographe*, had their first screening in Paris. In 1896 “(...) Only a few months after the first screening in Europe had taken place, films by the Brothers Lumière soon found their way to Egyptian audiences, in particular in Alexandria” mentioned Shafik (2016, p.10). Screenings took place in one of the halls of the Toussoun Bourse (the Café Zawani) in Alexandria, in Egypt.

In the years to follow, Alexandria became the birthplace of many Egyptian filmmakers. As Alexandria is located along the northern coast of Egypt which flanks the Mediterranean Sea, this port was the first point of entry into Egypt from Europe. The atmosphere in Alexandria at the time was conducive for establishing new industry, for attracting international investment, fostering innovation and creativity. Filmmakers who established in Alexandria, though referred to as ‘Alexandrians’, were predominantly of French, Italian and Greek decent. It was these filmmakers who further paved the way for investors to establish film production houses such as the Italian Cinematographic Society (SITCIA).



Figure 12. Still capture from the film *Ayam w Layali* (1955). The Continental (Ex-Savoy) Hotel, located on Opera Square in Cairo, is shown in the background.



Figure 13. Still capture from the film *Ehna el Talamza* (1959). The Continental (Ex-Savoy) Hotel is depicted in the background.



Figure 14. Stills captured from the film *Youm Men Omri*, 1961. The Continental (Ex-Savoy) Hotel is located to the right of the picture. Photo: Nora Nabil Kahil Photo-merge, 2018.



Figure 15. The Continental (ex-Savoy) Hotel during the demolishing process. Photo: Nora Nabil Kahil, 2018.

This Italian production company, was the first in Egypt to establish by means of an Egyptian-Italian partnership. It is also the first in Egypt to pioneer the production and release of a film, as opposed to simply creating the film footage.

Paralleling the above development, was the advent of Egypt's *La Belle Époque* in the 19th century. As elsewhere in the world, the *Belle Époque* in Egypt was characterized by a sense of renewed optimism, latter brought on by the introduction of technological advancement, scientific discovery, economic stability and renewed interest in Egypt. At the time, peace and prosperity allowed for the arts and sciences to flourish and prevail across the Egyptian landscape. Myntti (2014) stated "Cairo, 'Mother of the World': its vividly diverse neighborhoods and building styles reveal its cosmopolitan energy and reflect the myriad of economic, political, and cultural forces that have shaped the city over the centuries." This sums up the Khedive (Viceroy) Isma'il Pasha's vision for developing and modernizing Egypt. Isma'il Pasha (1830-1895), known as Isma'il the Magnificent was the Khedive of Egypt and Sudan from 1863 to 1879. During his reign, he heavily invested in industrial and economic growth, urbanization, and the expansion of the country's boundaries in Africa. Many noteworthy artworks and monuments originated during this period can be observed in Egyptian cities today. Of these, Cairo and Alexandria take center stage.

Relevant to the discussion presented in this paper is the commissioning of the ruling Khedive Khedive Isma'il' *Paris on the Nile* plan for Downtown Cairo. Latter was done with the guid-

ance of the Parisian city planner and architect Baron Georges-Eugène Haussmann (Rodenbeck, 2003). Baron Hausmann and a number of prominent European continued to design buildings which, collectively, established a new and regenerated Downtown district. These architects, who were largely French, Italian, British, German, Austro-Hungarian and Syro-Lebanese, also contributed to the architecture of greater Cairo, Alexandria, and Port Said as per Kahil (2018, p. 4).

The 1930s is generally considered the Golden Era of Egyptian cinema; Cairo's *Belle Époque* (Boraie, 2008). Bryant remarks as follows: "Through the 1920s until the mid-1930s, filmmaking was driven by the creative efforts (and financial investments) of individuals there was no Egyptian equivalent to the Hollywood studio system." (Bryant 2016, pp. 130-131). In the 1930s, a total of ninety-six films were produced in Egypt by both Egyptian and foreign film producers (Kassem 2008). The films produced during this period are indicative of a cosmopolitan society comprising French, Greek, Italian and British communities. Well-known Egyptian producers included amongst other Mohamed Bayoumi (1894-1963), Ahmed Galal (1897-1947), Naguib El Rihani (1889-1949) and Bahiga Hafez (1901-1983). Held in high esteem were Italian producers Alvisè Orfanelli (1902-1961) and Togo Mizrahi (1901-1986). As he established his own film studio and production company Shirkat el-Aflam el-Misriyya شركة الأفلام المصرية [Egyptian Films Company] in 1929, Mizrahi was considered one of the most influential persons in Egyptian cinema production at the time. Mizrahi's company also produced most of the movies during this period and as such he is also deemed one of the founding fathers of Alexandrian cine-

ma. Mizrahi's films aptly reflected the values of Egyptian society and a broader Arabic audience. Many Egyptian filmmakers paid homage to their place of birth, Alexandria. Youssef Chahine (1926-2008) produced an entire series of films dedicated to the city. This series comprised the films "Alexandria... Why?" (1979), "Alexandria Again and Forever" (1990), and "Alexandria, New York" (2004). The reason for Alexandria featuring in so many Egyptian films at the start of the 1930s, is its location and the fact that it acted as the main port of entry at the time. Cairo, however, presented more often in the 1940s due to an apparent shift of the film industry to the capital during this time, Tab. 1 presents data demonstrative of the latter.

Years	Total Films Skimmed	Alexandria	Giza	Downtown	Heliopolis
1930	18	4	0	1	0
1940	55	2	0	5	1
1950	67	4	4	18	6
1960	151	25	15	33	16
TOTAL	291	25	19	57	23

Table 1. Count of films and scenes featuring Alexandria, Giza, Downtown and Heliopolis spanning the period 1930 to 1960. Kahil (2018, p.91).

It is not only in Cairo and Alexandria, but also in cities such as Port Said and Isma'lia that architectural masterpieces from the past can be found. These buildings date from the reign of the Khedive Isma'il Pasha and Egypt's *Belle Époque*. However, due to negligent municipal law enforcement, a general disregard for the aesthetics, and ignorance regarding cultural preservation and historical significance, most of these structures have fallen

into disarray. Buildings are rapidly deteriorating and in some instances they, despite the fact that they should be considered monuments, are simply demolished to make way for modern developments. There is a notable urgency to revisit and recover information from the past, and to use this as historically-correct reference material. These resources could support the efforts of heritage initiatives intent on restoring and preserving the charm of these architectural masterpieces and the cities they occupy.

4. Conclusion

Historical film footage can provide unique material from which to reference and extract information. As a valid and original resource that presents a wealth of previously unexplored information, this material can greatly enhance studies reliant on historical data. What we learn from historical films should not be restricted to the act of studying film posters, dialogue and familiarizing ourselves with its cast. Cinematographic films capture layers of information that can be studied, intelligently analyzed and assimilated to act as fresh sources of information. The differing genres in film provide us with a broader, more “three-dimensional” perspective of the past. From these layers we make deductions regarding human behavior, the fashion trend of the time, a noteworthy event, interior- and architectural design – to mention only a few.

Through generating still images from moving images, original building facades, details of current architectural styles and urban design tendencies, are emphasized. For the purpose of this paper, said method was applied and referenced in a case study of the historical Khedival Opera House and the (now

demolished) Continental (ex-Savoy) Hotel which was located in Downtown Cairo. The added method of re-photography supplemented the research outcomes by means of providing not only a visual record for comparing the “then” and “now”, but by presenting a current-day document with which to contrast historical documents such as photographs, artworks and postcards. Film still images that were not subjected to “unorthodox” methods of photo-rendering, provided solid evidence of historical Downtown Cairo architectural styles and designs. This material will prove irreplaceable in the event of architectural restoration and renovation, and for the purpose of maintaining the integrity of such (original) design. These visuals in the end contribute to the restoration and/or preservation of our cultural history. Egyptian feature films, besides providing us with a glimpse into history, mainly from a uniquely architectural viewpoint, present us with the opportunity to learn about the development of Egyptian society and culture during a period of time now gone by. Moreover, this method of extracting and representing information can be applied universally and in any country with a past of producing feature films.

Cultural heritage can and should be preserved for generations that follow. The *Belle Époque*'s Cinematography from 1930's to 1960's is a means to achieve the latter. At least this article is an attempt by the authors to rediscover and revive historical Egypt, specifically as it relates to Egypt's *Belle Époque* period. It is the authors' prerogative to make their findings accessible to those who wish to undertake a similar study, have similar interests, or are able to benefit from it in a positive manner.

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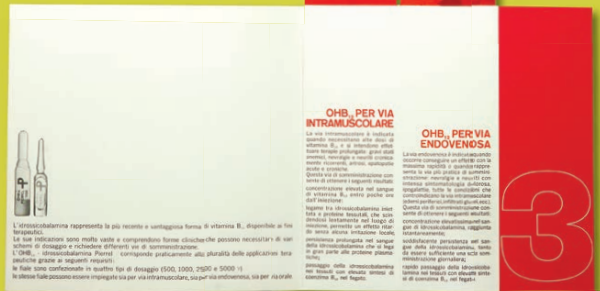
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PAD. Pages on a and Design

International, peer-reviewed,
open access journal
ISSN 1972-7887

#15, december 2018

www.padjournal.net