Rediscovering the Heritage of the Belle Epoque Cairo Museums

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1- Introduction

This research paper addresses some innovative strategies for public participation developed in 2016 within the Belle Epoque Cairo Museums itinerary project (BECAMI). The research project was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) in the United Kingdom and the Science and Technology Development Fund (STDF) in Egypt. The project aimed to raise awareness of the Egyptian society, particularly the young generations, toward the importance of the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth-century Egyptian cultural heritage. The aim is to make them understand an essential stage in their history and enhance citizenship, feeling of belonging, and identity. The focus has been on museums as they are receptacles for the nation's memory, preserving its heritage throughout the ages, and the places from which generations overlook their memory. Twelve museums have been chosen in the city of Cairo, representing three types of Egyptian cultural heritage:

- The tangible architectural heritage.
- The heritage of their tangible exhibits.
- The intangible heritage linked to the social, economic, cultural, and political conditions of the Arab Renaissance (this is an essential aspect of the Egyptian nation's memory as a depository of the history of iconic figures in politics, music, literature, and fine arts that shaped the identity of the Arab world).

The last two decades witnessed several initiatives to safeguard the cities and architecture founded between 1896-1952, labeled the Belle Epoque period. These initiatives included introducing new regulations, creating new legal institutions, the diversification of stakeholders and funding resources, and education research and publications that increase knowledge about this new category of heritage and its visibility (HERCOMANES, 2004).

Since the 1980s, the Egyptian Ministry of Culture together with the former High Council of Antiquities (HCA)1 have followed a policy of adaptive reuse of heritage buildings for educational, cultural, and tourism-related activities. This policy was extended in 1992 to include the architecture and sites of the 19th and early 20th century, aiming to raise them to the same rank as the medieval urban fabric. Twenty listed buildings dating back to the late 19th and early 20th centuries (some designed by famous Italian and French architects) have been converted into hotels, museums, and libraries. Furthermore, the paper focuses on the theoretical framework of the project by explaining four concepts: Belle Epoque, the itinerary, accessibility, and visibility. The concept of Belle Epoque was also presented by Trevor Mostyn (a British

journalist) in his book "Egypt's Belle Epoque" and covers the period spanning the opening of the Suez Canal in Khedive Ismail's era to the end of the royal era (Mostyn, 1989). Restoring and renewing Belle Epoque buildings and adapting them into new museums formed an essential strategy for managing and safeguarding this heritage (El Kadi, Attia, 2002).

The research paper addresses the operational methodology based on designing the itineraries through innovative urban interventions in public spaces; by linking groups of museums spatially in loops, which contributes to transforming them into parts in an open book that is more readable and attractively accessible. In the final part, the paper shows the itineraries' final designs, and the paper refers to other outputs of the scientific project that targeted younger age groups. These outputs include games and leaflets that interact with museum collections and emphasize the museums' educational and catalytic role in linking new generations of Egyptians with their fathers' and grandfathers' memory.

2- Research Aim

This research paper aims to explain BECAMI project, its different stages, and outputs. To show the importance of research projects in which the younger generations, especially university students, participate in developing awareness of the less fortunate architectural heritage represented in this case by a group of museums built in the mid-19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. The paper also reviews the approaches taken to maximize the museums' visibility and accessibility through urban interventions in the public space to link museums together.

3- Research Problem

Preserving and raising awareness about cultural heritage is considered a great challenge for developing countries with a great heritage like Egypt. This research project points to the importance of research projects in raising awareness among the young generation.

4- Research Question

To what extent can scientific research projects increase the awareness about our forgotten heritage and reintroduce it to the young Egyptian generations.

5- Research Methodology

This research follows the theoretical and analytical approaches. In the first part, the Egyptian state's role in preserving the architectural heritage and the adaptive reuse policy of heritage buildings is reviewed. The research presents four concepts that the research project used: itinerary, Belle Epoque, visibility, and accessibility.

In the second part of the research, the study analyzes the practical and implementation part with the students' creative ideas to link museums. 29 Students of architecture and planning departments from nine different Egyptian universities developed urban perceptions and interventions that increase the museums' visibility and accessibility through creative ideas that present the visions of young architects.

6- Belle Epoque Cairo Museums

BECAMI twelve museums can be clustered into four thematic categories: music and songs (Abd El Wahab and Umm Kulthum); literature and poetry (Taha Hussein and Ahmad Shawki); political figures (Prince Muhammad Ali or The Manial Palace, Bank Misr, and Saad Zaghloul); transport and communication (Railways and Post office) in addition to three large thematic museums: The Agricultural Museum, the Ethnographic Museum (Egyptian Geographical Society), and the Museum of the Faculty of Fine Arts (see figure 1).

The architectural style in which these museums are housed was another thematic clustering linking these museums virtually according to architectural trends introduced by European architects to Egypt during the Belle Epoque era.

The museums' size and locations presented another classification, the museums diverse from room museums to villas and palaces museums. They are located near the city center or in the periphery.
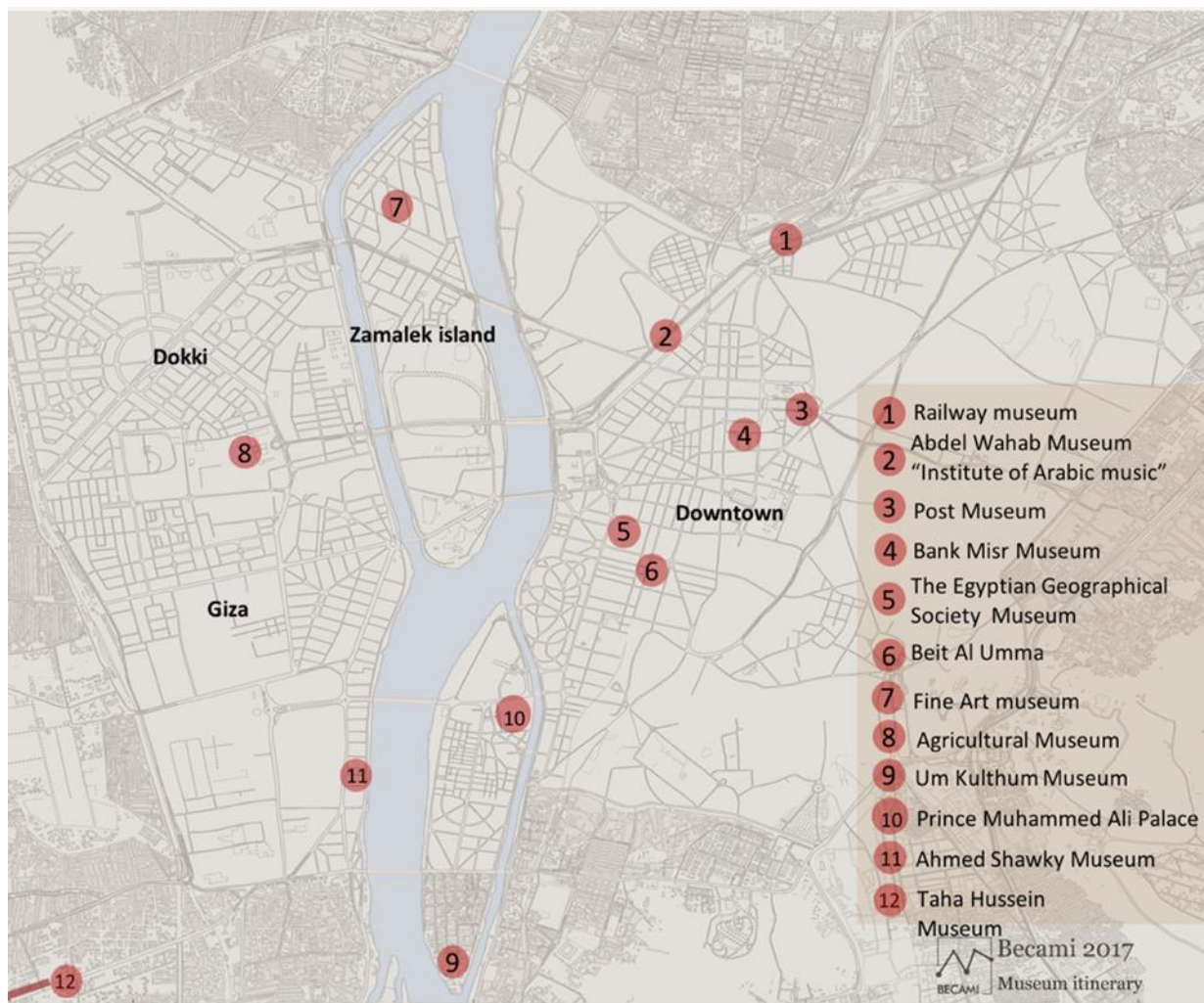

Figure 1. Location in Cairo and images of the twelve BECAMI museums. (source: authors).

7- The Executive Framework and Engaging Younger Generations in the Design of the Itineraries

The twenty-nine students were organized into three multidisciplinary groups, each working on one physical cluster and collectively on all the itineraries. Students were encouraged to walk and explore the itineraries linking these museums before participating in the design to develop proposals for itineraries with increased visibility and accessibility to these museums.

Students were faced with a variety of challenges brought about by Cairo's downtown area's inherent problems. The difficulties pedestrians encounter walking in downtown Cairo due to noise and traffic pollution and various types of encroachments on the uneven, irregular, and interrupted pavements were identified by the students as a first significant challenge. The students highlighted a second challenge linked to visual pollution due to the chaotic proliferation of signposts and their positioning as significant interference with the city's legibility and architectural character. The students' third challenge was the lack of quiet landscaped public spaces providing pedestrians the opportunity to rest along the itineraries.

The fourth challenge was the lack of visibility of the museums themselves to pedestrians due to the lack of appropriate signposting or the complete lack of any information indicating a museum's presence within the buildings in which they are housed.

The first group of students worked on the Egyptian Railway Museum/Abd El Wahab Museum and Post Office Museum itinerary. The second group of students focused on linking the three museums of Bank Misr, the Ethnographic museum, and Saad Zaghloul museum known as Beit Al-Umma. The third group focused on the two museums of the Umm Kulthum Museum and Prince Mohammed Ali Museum or Manial Palace, located on Rawda Island.

8- Conclusion

Students from different disciplines and universities in Cairo have been engaged through the BECAMI project to design museum itineraries. Not only most of these students had never visited the museums and were not aware of them, but they also were unfamiliar with the downtown area of Cairo and its architectural and urban heritage. Engaging the students with 12 museums and encouraging them to walk the itineraries has played an essential role in increasing students' awareness of downtown Cairo's urban heritage and the belle epoque era's history. Working in three different groups, students from different disciplines and universities collaborated effectively to produce imaginative and inspiring proposals. All three proposals addressed Cairo's urban fabric different issues, ranging from the lack of pedestrian-friendly itineraries, lack of greenery and pockets of landscaped areas to the visual pollution that makes it challenging to be aware of the belle époque buildings and the museums they house.

Imaginative solutions included bringing out images of museum displays to the street to increase public awareness, reorganizing public spaces to accommodate pedestrians and soft landscaping. Moreover, planting aromatic shrubs and trees to create a smellscape along itineraries and proposing mobile applications. All illustrate how students could develop a variety of imaginative solutions in a short time and engage with the museums and downtown area, forming an emotional attachment. BECAMI project has managed to engage students in new ways and encourage self-sustaining processes.

9- Summary References

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The Ministry of Antiquities has been created in 2010 and then replaced the HCA. In 2019, the ministry of antiquities had been merged with the ministry of tourism.