

Rediscovering the Heritage of the Belle Epoque Cairo Museums

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Abstract

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.

The research paper presents the Egyptian state's policies for the adaptive reuse of historical houses and palaces as museums. Then it presents the twelve museums showing their qualitative, geographical, architectural, and morphological diversity. Furthermore, the paper focuses on the project's theoretical framework by explaining four concepts: Belle Epoque, itinerary, accessibility, and visibility. 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.

Keywords:

Belle Epoque heritage; Museums, Itineraries