

The Influence of the Changes in Urban Design on Contemporary Egyptian Painting

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Abstract

The great cities in Egypt have been exposed to radical changes in its form and design since the second half of the Twentieth century. The study discusses these changes and their effect on the artistic production of the contemporary Egyptian painters. The positive and the negative aspects of this continuous relationship between the artist and the surrounding environment feature are presented, prominently, here.

Did the changes in the urban design reflect in the paintings of these artists? How did the Egyptian artists receive and respond to these major urban changes in their paintings?

The study deals with the most important changes in the design of the great cities in Egypt. This is coupled with a comparative study of the selected examples from the works of the contemporary painters, with the real image of the urban designs revealing interesting insights about the dynamics of this process.

1. Introduction

The city evolves through different eras and so its design, including shape, layout, and style of buildings and streets. This transformation is determined according to multiple factors stemmed from the culture and needs of the society as well as the social, economic and political conditions of every era. The scientific progress, which followed the industrial renaissance, in the middle of the 20th century, has contributed to the rapid growth of the city. It has also led to the sprawling increase of the population due to immigration from the countryside for several reasons. Accordingly, the cities expanded, and its main distinguished characteristics have transformed. The Egyptian cities were established about forty centuries ago. However, Egypt's current capital –Cairo- is one of the largest cities as it hosts the country's administrative and political authorities. Cairo's importance is followed by Alexandria, which is the largest Egyptian seaport in the Mediterranean. As both cities are ancient and have passed through several historical periods, they have had radical changes, which were reflected in the works of the contemporary painters.

2. The most significant changes taking place in Egypt's large cities

The occurring changes in Egypt's large cities included all the elements of design, namely, the general planning, the shape of buildings, open spaces, streets and the distribution of main areas as well as the movement systems inside them.

2.1. Urban planning

The foundation of Cairo goes back to the Fatimid's Conquest of Egypt. That is why we find that its design (Fig. 1) followed the pattern of a square with a mosque at its center having a social and cultural activity as well as a religious role. The planning also shows an associated market and government buildings at the heart of the



Figure 1
Cairo's old planning



Figure 2
Cairo's modern planning

old city with roads on the sides of the housing units and fences to protect them (Yehia, 2000, p.206),(Kenany,2006,p.3). Over different historical stages, the city then expanded to the east and the west in a way that exceeded the fences. Its square-shaped design has also changed (Fig. 2) and has been dominated by irregularity (Hemdan, 1996,p. 95) due to the wars that Egypt faced in the second half of the 20th century. At that time, Cairo received myriads of displaced people from the Suez Canal cities (Lao, 1994.p.29). Also, Egypt was subjected to a widespread immigration from the countryside people for the purpose of education and work (Alphonse, 1960. p.30-35). In the 1980s and the 1990s, industrial progress emerged. Accordingly, the waves of immigration increased while large tracts of the agricultural lands surrounding Cairo were ploughed by the urban expansion. So, the city expanded to the north and the west destroying a lot of green spaces. Otherwise, the state had contributed to such changes by building roads and allowing construction on the agricultural lands in order to accommodate the growing number of immigrants from the countryside. (Hemdan, 1996,p .191-192).

Away from the control of the state, individuals completed construction works on agricultural lands. Every individual used to buy a plot or a parcel of land in order to establish a building. Fortunately, the process of construction, or we can say destroying the green land, was halted due to lack of the financial capabilities. It has paved the way for urban expansion at the expense of agricultural lands as well as the defamation of the view; beautiful greenery had gradually disappeared with incomplete, ugly buildings replacing it (Fig. 3). That did not happen in Alexandria because of its sea-governed design. The coastal strip of the Mediterranean and Alexandria's large space controlled its design. That has protected the coastal city from design problems ensuing from urban expansion as can be seen in Cairo. The sea -controlling the growth of Alexandria- makes its extension linear, so that Alexandria has not expanded on the agricultural lands, but it has rather resorted to the desert-areas (Denis, 1997, p. 174). Industrially speaking, major changes in Alexandria included the establishment of several factories. Alexandria is an industrial city, and its industrial production represents about 40 percent of Egypt's total production (Chaichian, 1988, p. 34). Until the middle of the 20th century, factories remained separated from the city; however, it gradually extended to industrial areas (Fig. 4) due to the growing population (Ibrahim, 1962.p.7). The Industrial progress and development, especially in the techniques of shipbuilding, have also led to a transformation in the shape of the seaport. Moreover, it increased the used equipment as well as harbors relying on modern machines (Fig.5)



Figure 3 Incomplete buildings at agricultural lands distorting their image



Figure 4 Cement Factory in Alexandria



Figure 5 Part of Alexandria port

2.2 Building Form

With the scientific progress and the 19th century industrial revolution, major changes took place in the building pattern. In the middle of the 20th century, new concepts emerged and the principle of "Form Follows Function" gained traction. The building pattern in the Egyptian city was changed and affected by the growing population. In addition to the Old Cairo's traditional Islamic buildings, which had housing units with internal spaces and decorated windows, some buildings emerged in an abiding trend following a new pattern. Simple architectural lines, containing no decorations or inscriptions, started to dominate the design of buildings. The buildings became like cubes with small windows or small-sized balconies and concrete high-rise buildings tower using reflective glass to limit the sunrays, which is contradicting to the Egyptian climate's nature (Fig. 6). So, many contradictions had emerged, including the spread of high-rise buildings not only in the city's main areas but also in old districts and narrow streets (Fig. 7).



Figure 6 Photo of Nile Corniche late in the 20th century houses



Figure 7 The photo shows high-rise towers amid old

Horizontal extension and unified height of the residential buildings were the major characteristics of the traditional buildings disappeared that have disappeared (Kenany, 2011, p.5). In the past, the buildings extended horizontally (Fig.8) contrary to the existing ones (Fig.9), where the buildings extend vertically, and there are different heights of them. That phenomenon had increased the lack of harmony in the general view.



Figure 8 Alexandria's beach in the past



Figure 9 Alexandria's beach now



Figure 10 Fatimid Cairo in the 19th century



Figure 11 Fatimid Cairo in the 20th century

The existence of modern buildings in the old districts amid landmarks made a view of unique and exotic architectural models that have accordingly become unfamiliar to the place. The Photos (Fig.10), (Fig. 11) show Fatimid Cairo in the 19th century and -the same place- in the 20th century after demolishing the old buildings and replacing them with modern style buildings that caused a remarkable contradiction in the visual scene and a changing of the place's identity.

2.3 Open Spaces and Streets

In major Egyptian cities, the buildings' crowdedness has come to dominate the general view because of the rapidly growing population and the absence of the appropriate civil planning. That has led to the narrowness of streets and the disappearance of empty spaces in many areas whose existence was fulfilling balance and visual comfort. Randomness was clearly manifested in residential districts, which represented the city's urban expansion. In modern history, the planning of the Egyptian city was controlled by the private property and the financial capabilities of the individuals without stringent laws governing the random, spontaneous, or individualized building process, which doubled the crowdedness and its irregularity (Fig.12). Engineer *Dr. Abdull Baqi Ibrahim* said: The Egyptian community of the city did not evolve according to a studied policy or a clear plan through which we can determine its characteristics or expect its future; however, the Egyptian cities grew randomly according to individual desires and available opportunities. (Ibrahim, 1962.p.9) They also appeared without a clear social or natural structure. The phenomenon of markets spreading in residential districts emerged as well. The principle of the main center, which divides the city into a market area, a residential area and a service area, vanished. Thus the markets, shops, and street vendors were merged in the residential area (Fig. 13). Blocks condensed, spaces disappeared and humans and buildings caused crowdedness simultaneously.



Figure 12 The crowdedness of modern buildings in Cairo



Figure 13 Entrance of Mouski market in Cairo now

2.4 Roof Scape

Significant changes occurred in the appearance of the rooftop, which is a key, or an effective factor in determining the relationship between mass and spaces. The good design of the rooftop determines the shape of the building and contributes to drawing the skyline, which strengthens and highlights the identity of the city. The rooftop of the modern buildings flattened in conjunction with crowdedness and poor planning which had a significant impact on the morphology of the Egyptian city. The technological progress of the communicational means and the control of capitalism have played a major role in changing the shape of the buildings' rooftops. Satellite dishes and colorful advertisement billboards had irregularly settled on the rooftops of the houses (Fig. 14) to form unflattened building shapes.



Figure 14 Satellite dishes and advertisement billboards situated on the rooftops of residential houses

2.5 Transport system

All the means of transportation, including bicycles, cars, and trains, are an important factor in determining the shape of the city. The good city utilizes all the means of transportation and limits the use of cars, but in the Egyptian cities, the use of cars on a large scale had put new burdens on the city in terms of its crowdedness. The photo (Fig. 15) shows one of Cairo's streets in the early 20th century and features the line of the tram with the low number of cars in contrast to the current photo of the same place (Fig. 16). Cairo and Alexandria are two of the largest Egyptian cities pertaining the number of cars due to the high living standards and the centralization of authorities there. The development that occurred in the means of transportation and the entry of cars and trains in the urban fabric of the city required the establishment of roads in the old city, the digging of tunnels and the building of a network of modern style hanged bridges (Fig. 17), (Fig. 18) with straight and curved lines to connect the parts of the city with one another.



Figure 15 One of Cairo's streets in the early 20th century



Figure 16 One of Cairo's streets now



Figure 18 The network of bridges in Cairo



Figure 17 The network of bridges in Alexandria

3. Influence of the changes in the city design on contemporary Egyptian painters

We explore echoes of the city's real images in the paintings of some contemporary painters. Their styles vary according to the existing image of Cairo and Alexandria.

3.1. *The impact of change of Cairo on its contemporary painters*

Painter *Mohamed Abla's* set of paintings titled "Towers of Cairo" (Fig. 19), (Fig. 20) reveals an impact in the field. Through the paintings, *Abla* criticized the phenomenon of change in architectural style and high-rise buildings, which are inconsistent with the old city's landscape. He has expressed his own vision for the city's existing scene containing crowdedness of city buildings that have different architectural patterns. The patterns carry all the contradictions such as reflective glass, homemade of non-painted red brick, the incomplete concrete buildings with concrete pillars and advertisement banners, in addition to the rooftop objects, including water tanks and satellite dishes. On the other hand, the old buildings' wooden oriental doors which the artist has mixed with each other to form high-rise tower of different sizes and colors, were introduced in an artistic formula, taking into account the aesthetic values of the artwork. The artist also used some elements to express random shapes and colors that dominate the current scene of Cairo. He has chosen the view angle of the upper part of the building without ground appearance and has reduced the sky space to become a mere gray cloudy background.

The artist also used the contrast of the cold and hot colors and integrated them in certain ways, like blue glass reflection against the yellow color of the old-fashioned door with a gray sky as a background. In addition to that, he used the red color in the unfinished buildings against blue and green degrees of the sky. *Abla* reflected upon these works: "In my new paintings in downtown Cairo, I have seen the city through windows; spacious streets and buildings. Every day, I choose one of the buildings to live with it and imagine how it has witnessed great events and dramatic changes reflecting the time effect on it and the reaction of people through permanent additions of colors and shapes. I have become obsessed with that, but it leads me to wonder about our fate destined by this city. Where are we taking it? Is there a way to save it? Are they Cairo Towers? And we have to accept them as they are, or is it the Tower of Babel? (Awad, "Towers from the window", 2011, URL). This

question summarizes the artist's vision, which is reflected in his works and is affected by watching the city's current image. The artist had deprived the city of its ugliness and introduced its elements in an expressive artistic image, showcasing how the artist is influenced by it.



Figure 19 Mohamed Abla , Towers of Cairo, acrylic on canvas,180 x 160 cm ,2010



Figure 20 Mohamed Abla , Towers of Cairo, acrylic on canvas,180 x 160 cm ,2010



Figure 21 Mohamed Abla, The square of Ibrahim Pasha, acrylic on canvas, 100x80 cm ,2004



Figure 22 Ahmed Farid, beyond closed door, acrylic on canvas, 2016

As *Abla* has introduced contradictions of the architectural style in the city, he highlights the phenomenon of crowded cars and people on the streets in his painting (Fig. 21). In that painting, *Abla* features one of downtown Cairo's squares, which are full of cars. People occupy three-quarters of the painting. The artist showed a perspective vision relying on the multiple levels of the ground demonstrating the interdependence between the elements under conditions that did not conform to the laws of the spatial dimension of the passers-by and their relationship with the cars. The artist used multiple- transparent colors' technique and contrast of red colors at the bottom of the painting against the green statue at the top. It highly reflects the congestion and traffic chaos that appear in the real image of the city (Fig. 16). A different style was used by the painter *Ahmad Farid* covering the street of the city in his painting (Fig. 22). The painting is divided into several horizontal levels where the ground level does not appear. Each of the other levels has its own color and demonstrates its integration through various linear relations that were interacted to paint forms of multiple elements for buildings and characters in a way that made it look distinctive. The painter utilizes small tracts of colors in all spaces to achieve balance, unity and to confirm the congestion of the place.

In another style, painter, *Mohammed Banawy*, handles the mass-space relationship in his painting on a different ground (Fig. 23). He shows such a relationship amid crowdedness of buildings in a cube-shaped modern style with straight lines. The painter depicted the scene of the crowded buildings in his paintings through not leaving any empty space in the painting, which is filled with geometric shapes stacked. It was also overlapped in the relations between the relief and the intaglio by having multiple sizes of geometric forms in a beautiful manner that reminds us of the crowded buildings in the city (Fig. 12). The vertical and horizontal directions control the

shapes and reflect the spirit of the prevailing architectural style in the city where mechanization and industrial movements prevail. However, the artist presents it in an original and classical way as if he depicts an ancient Egyptian temple. He has chosen the colors of the earth and their tones with the yellow, red, gray colors that he has made from natural materials by using mosaic made from Aswan mud, natural stones, ceramics, and porcelain. The artist is influenced by the images of square-shaped urban charts of the old city (Fig. 1). He makes this group of paintings as square-shaped, which does not reflect any rejection or criticism of the reality of the city, but being affected by this reality and getting integrated with it by seeing its aesthetics as well as showcasing and expressing them. Artist *Samir Tadros* has introduced the same idea in a different and more realistic manner in his painting (Fig. 24). Buildings control the whole space, and the artist also creates the spatial dimensions through the accurate distribution of the one-color tones in the painting.



Figure 23
Mohammed Banawy, stone mosaic, 96x96 cm, 2010

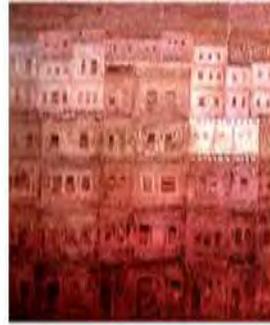


Figure 24
Samir Tadros-View 301, Oil on hardboard, 91x60.5 cm



Figure 25
Salma Abdel Aziz, Rhythms, Oil on canvas, 120x120 cm, 1991



Figure 26
Mohammed Banawy, Aerial 5, mosaic Glass, wood, cement, 118x170cm, 2015

Artists *Salma Abdul Aziz* also drew the scene of architectural jams controlling the city of Cairo (Fig. 25), by the same idea, based on the absence of empty spaces in the painting. By showing a lack of horizontal lines, relying on diagonal lines as levels to establish the space of painting in oscillatory lines, she expressed her vision about the movement and the instability of the place. Dr. *Amani Fahmi* explains the artist's style, saying: She creates an artistic world parallel to the reality suggesting the essential features in the scene that convey -in details- the extended lines smoothly. Then, it is intertwined thorough intersections highlighting the crowdedness of houses that fade until they get integrated together with the horizon. (Fahmi, 2008.p.10).

Artists were also inspired by the phenomenon of change in the rooftop appearance and its fullness of satellite dishes (Fig. 14). *Mohammed Banawy* presented this idea in his painting (Fig. 26) where the dish acts as the main focus associated with the wires and the net shapes. The artist repeated these shapes as a background to his work, using silhouette technique and geometrically divided the painting into spaces with different sizes, overwhelmed by red color, punctuated by small round circles of blue sky color. By doing so, the painter presented a new handling inspired by the rooftop's shape and the building's architecture in the contemporary Cairo city. A lot of contemporary painters did like their predecessors and painted Old Fatimid Cairo with its old buildings, which were famous for distinctive heritage. (Abaza, 2011).

However, they did so in a different way than before, reflecting how the contemporary painters were influenced by the contemporary urban design even if they used the same old items. This appears in the artwork of artist *Imad Rizk* (Fig. 27) when he drew Fatimid Cairo in the 21st century compared to the painting of artist *Shaaban Zaki* (Fig. 28) that was drawn in the first half of the 20th century portraying the same area. We have noticed in the first painting the hot pure colors, with its contrasts that overwhelmed the artwork. The painter used the colors with multi-directional brush touches to give the bustle feeling and the sense of continuous movement as well as to reflect the dynamic nature of the crowded city. At the same time, the painting merges the elements of the area including buildings, characters, and animals to prove the feeling of crowdedness that has characterized the current city. This goes in contradiction with the painting of *Shaaban Zaki*, which is dominated, by neutral colors and their gradations in wide spaces. Aside from representing the ground as an independent entity away from the architecture of buildings, it reflects the quietness and placidity of old city.



Figure 27
Emad Rizk , Street from Fatimid Cairo, acrylic on canvas ,100 x80 cm, 2016



Figure 28
Shaaban Zaky, al-khayamiya , Oil on wood , 39 x 59 cm,1934



Figure 29
Amany Fahmy, Borqash in Giza, oil on wood 90x60cm,1996



Figure 30
Ibrahim El-Desoki, view, charcoal & Pastel on paper , 140×95 cm , 2015

On the other hand, some of the painters preferred to be away from city's bustle to create a calmer and harmonic life. They reacted to the crowdedness of modern urban communities and drew desert and empty areas with a wide range of empty spaces and horizontal lines. They represented empty flat places in an exaggerated way like the paintings of *Amany Fahmy* (Fig. 29), which was dominated by light- gradient colors and the pure white color of the sky. Following the same methodology, *Ibrahim El-Desoki* presented a painting (Fig. 30) in which the neutral colors dominated a large space along with the horizontal lines that strongly affirmed the horizontal extension. It is the image of what we miss in the current image of the city.

3.2. The impact of the change of Alexandria on its painters:

The changes that happened in Alexandria were a little bit different than what happened in Cairo. The main design of Alexandria has changed over the time because of the presence of the sea and its geographic location. Therefore, we have not found in the paintings the absence of empty spaces or crowdedness as to what appeared in the paintings of Cairo painters. On the contrary, Alexandria's painters have used a wide range of spaces in their artworks with a balance between masses and spaces because they were affected by the nature of Alexandria. Meanwhile, they criticized the new Alexandria, with the domination of industrial machines and the modern designs as painter *Howaida Sebaee* demonstrated in her painting (Fig. 31). She depicted the scene of

factories spreading in the city and near the port through straight lines. She, however, put a large block in the middle section reminiscent of smoke ensuing from the factory as a contradictory form in its lines with the straight lines to cut all the lines and shapes of the painting giving a sense of continuity. There is no shape in the painting we can see its end. Even the yellow color in the space, it was not completed in order to attract the sight to the top of the painting. In general, all of the paintings are affected by the geometric formations and straight lines that are influenced by the city design, with its long streets and outstanding flyovers on the sea. In another painting (Fig. 32) The artist has divided spaces into areas controlled by grays because it is the color of the factories' smoke and raw materials used for modern construction. Also, the accumulated mass of houses in the front of the painting creates a critical contradiction like what exists in the city amid crowded architectural structures, debris and the wide space of the sea. So, these artworks reflect the new character of the city in a critical way that evokes the feelings and the thoughts.



Figure 31

Howaida Sebaee, acrylic on canvas, 120x100cm, 2007



Figure 32

Howaida Sebaee, acrylic on canvas, 60x40cm, 2014



Figure 33

Gihan Soliman, acrylic on canvas, 60x80 cm, 2009



Figure 34

Gihan Soliman, acrylic on canvas, 180x200 cm, 2012

On the same critical point of view regarding the changes that occurred, Artist *Jihan Soliman* made a series of works that depends on modern construction in its formations. It criticizes the spread of the satellite dishes on the rooftops. Sometimes, she portrays it in an abstract way that covers only the buildings (Fig. 33), and other times, she portrays people themselves like buildings with their heads taking the form of a dish (Fig. 34). In another style, the painting of artist *Nevin Rifaee* (Fig. 35) reflects the spirit of the contemporary or modern city. She expressed that by drawing a realistic picture of the flyover amidst Alexandria Corniche recently (Fig. 18). Also, she used her artistic sense in a way that relied on contradictions of pure colors. She mixed the ground hot red with yellow touches as an expression of the uproar of the street; opposed to the shades of the blue cool sea, splashed with sporadic and trembling touches on the two parallel directions, to convey the movement and the tension of the sea. It was emphasized by selecting the birds' eye as a perspective angle of her painting, influenced by the style of high-rise buildings and the vertical extension of the modern city. Its major purpose is to deepen

the vision. Fishes are scattered on parallel lines to convey its tumbling from the top to the bottom by the waterfall. It animates the movement of the sea and completes the white-black colored circular composition on the front of the painting to match the colors of the asphalt-made pavement. In addition to that, the two towers of the flyover outlined with a white color appeared as if they were covered with a transparent glass containing the water of the sea inside it. Such a contemporary artistic image was in contradiction to the paintings of the same area portrayed by Alexandria, an artist in the 1950s. For example, painting of *Adham Wanli* (Fig. 36) shaped wide spaces with close-shaded neutral colors to reflect the calmness and spaciousness by using a much lower angle of vision than that of painter *Nevin* who painted other works to emphasize the horizontal extension of the place, free from any bridges. The black asphalt paved road, which made his painting comparable with the shape of the city at that time was also another constraint left by the artist in a liberal way.



Figure35

Nevin Rifaee, the spirit of Alexandria,
acrylic on canvas, 2011



Figure 36

Adham Wanly, view from Alexandria,
oil on wood, 64x38 cm, 1950

4-Conclusion

The current view of big cities in Egypt, such as Cairo and Alexandria, including the intrinsic changes in shape and design were represented in the paintings that were made by contemporary Egyptian painters who witnessed the dynamics of the changes, each on his own style. The representation of the contemporary alternation in the cities depended on using the elements of the visual language, like color, line, size, and space. The city's contemporary artistry image has been changed once the real image changed automatically. On the other hand, there was a clear variety of artistic visions that even impacted the way the elements of artwork are used by painters. Some of them criticized the reality of the city, the current life, while others found the passion and inspiration within it. Even others went deep in harmony with this life to produce paintings emulating it in an artistic way. Another group of painters escaped from this reality to present a wholly different view in order to create a better world. All of those visions are different, but they have one mutual concept; that each one of them has been affected by the city he or she lives in. Their artistic work reflects the visual life within the framework of the dynamic relationship between the painter and the environment he inhabits.

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