

## Reclaiming Urban Settings

### A Community Based Public Space

Bedour Ahmed & Basil Kamel  
American University in Cairo

#### Insertions

The modes of production of urban spaces today have shifted from being initiated by institutional and formal production entities and has been transferred into the hands of the community. This change is widely represented in pocket urban spaces that have developed in inner cities and under bridges, overpasses, and highways. The utilization of these spaces unites the community and allows its inhabitants to reclaim public space.

Can the production of active urban space be driven by a community utilization of lost pockets in the city? Can the design of a fully-utilized group of functional spaces emerge from the need of a community to define its identity through an informal process of building? Sakiat ElSawy, a community-driven cultural center, grew to become a cultural node for a mixed urban class in Cairo, Egypt. This project provides a unique experience, one that formal architectural production systems would not have produced. It demonstrates an outcome of a process that reflects commonality between community users, yet a unique expression of local identity and cultural expression.

Built in 2003, Sakiat ElSawy (or El-Sawy Culture Wheel) was initially intended to serve as a temporary insertion under an overpass on the Nile riverbank, in the island of Zamalek directly in the heart of the capital. ElSawy Culture Wheel is a comprehensive cultural center ly-

ing on a 5,000 square meter (16,400 square feet) area under the 15th of May bridge on Zamalek Island. The center was established in 2003 by its founder Mohamed ElSawy, who chose that location after seeing its current condition serving as a garbage dump and shelter for the homeless and drug addicts.<sup>1</sup> Its mission, as stated on their official website is, "ElSawy Culture Wheel values human beings without any kind of classification. All visitors are treated equally regardless of their social, official, and economic status."<sup>2</sup>

Shortly after its establishment, it became a bustling hub and hangout for young Egyptians, foreign residents, and visitors and was even included as an important tourist destination.<sup>3</sup> The center took on an even stronger presence after the 2011 Egyptian Revolution as the forum for several debates and performances, adding a political dimension to the scene. The center now caters to a more diverse mix of middle and upper classes, contributing to a strong local identity; a setting difficult to achieve through formal architectural processes.

#### Indicators

Analyzing functional urban insertions and their role in the cityscape remains a valuable venue for scholarly exploration. From precedents and as reviewed, there is no specific theory or methodology that can directly achieve this objective. Variables are vast and specific to context, activities, and settings, which, as a whole, can allow for continuous ex-

plorations as means to understand how these insertions work in the local communities.

The following discussions aim to investigate Sakiat ElSawy as it evolved as a public node of activity. The objective is to identify specific attributes that would allow community designers to formulate design guidelines for community activity space generation. Reflecting on a number of theoretical approaches from Trancik's *Finding Lost Space*<sup>4</sup> to Alexander's *The Nature of Order*<sup>5</sup> on one hand, as well as, phenomenology and post-structuralism on the other, four domains of study are presented to help track the dynamics of evolution of such community-based outcomes: cultural context and communal reflections (perception and recognition); space settings in relation to hierarchy of activities (activity logic); form generation based on performances of activity rather than function (space structure); and the urban edge as a place of gathering rather than a wall of separation (access and linkage). These four guidelines are the basis for the argument presented herein.

The analysis of these four domains in relation to Sakiat ElSawy formulates the understanding of a different methodology of design based on changes in culture and social class. The outcome of this study reveals the importance of understanding the needs of the people and their aspirations for spatial representation through simple architecture. The building is not the end but the

means to constructing spaces of public wealth.

Georg Simmel in his writings pointed out that long before the arrival of the bourgeoisie, the aristocratic classes used to reside in particular locations where the domestic economy created the infrastructure of buildings, roads, and facilities.<sup>6</sup> In this setting one could perceive the urban outcome as a colonial settlement.<sup>7</sup> Consequently, power divisions in society and the sequential change of various controls over consumer goods, production, assets, resources, and skills create a reconfiguration of the public space; its recognition, spatial structure, and organization.

Henry Lefebvre, also confirms that every society produces its own space. The production of urban form, space, setting, and structure requires a background of culture and identity to maintain its sustenance. At the same time, to Lefebvre, the term "form" may be read as: aesthetics, abstract, or mathematics. In other words, it reflects the effect of material boundaries and contours, external limitation of expansion, areas and volumes, the internal versus the external activities, and performed functions.<sup>8</sup> Thus, form is limited by several functions that cannot be separated from the choices of structure, dimensions, volume, and exposure, which are intrinsic to the identity and character of society and the community. This is why communal settings and social urban space is an outcome of interactive relationships that consider the links

between the whole and the parts, between the micro and the macro levels of existence.

Access into space and linkage is important to the recognition of produced communal urban space. It is not only physical linkage and accessibility that is under question in the modern world, but access through media, cultural communication, class exposure, and knowledge-based referencing. Tönnies argued that the physical community has become like a commodity, compared to before where communities were non-negotiable—they were places where one finds oneself part of a group sharing the same space and activities. Reality, however, shows that the term community is now manifested in these small hub-clusters divided and subdivided within the intermix of communal variable settings.<sup>9</sup> As will be demonstrated, ElSawy Culture Wheel is physically based on allowing these subdivisions to thrive each within its own setting and its own definition of inclusion, access, and connectivity to society.

The rise of the market economy had an impact on traditional forms of social identities and community bonds. This includes the development of controlling power by the state and investors for the purpose of directing the social life and the mechanism of the social solidarity within the community. In most cases this led to a social conflict between the economic classes. The presence of these struggles in urban space



turns this conflict into one of power and hinders all notions of positive interactive outcomes.

In that regard, Tönnies assumed that all social relationships are created by what is called “human will.” This only exists through the will of individuals to associate and communicate with each other through social relationships, either in traditional community or in modern society. He also argued that traditional societies produce interpersonal ties of a more “organic” and binding nature. He developed a concept that is referred to as *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, which are two different modes of mental logic and behavior based primarily upon “natural will” and “rational will.”<sup>10</sup> He argued that the businessman, the scientist, authority figures, and upper class individuals are relatively more conditioned by “rational will,” while the farmer, the artist, and common people are more driven by “natural will.”

Accordingly, the issue of “elitist planning practices” arises through an explanation of the new trends of urban planning. This produced collaboration in privatizing the public space and subsidizing new exclusive enclaves also known as “urban villages,” perfectly protected from strangers. The edge here (or the fence) acts as a form of separation, segregation, and red lining, rather than being a space for gathering. This exploits the concept of “us” and “them,” further departing from all possible levels of integration, communication, and interaction.

Mike Davis addresses the issue of fear through his theory “Militarization of the City,” where he discusses a new urban fact around new suburbs.<sup>11</sup> As he notes, they tend to isolate themselves behind walls guarded by private security and electronic surveillance. In an attempt to segregate their neighborhoods from the poor, they build

monumental architectural expressions. These architectural messages are perceived differently between various groups of people leading to the issue of *perception and recognition*. After the rise of capitalism and neo-capitalism, a new ideology for the production of urban spaces was created, which Lefebvre calls “abstract spaces.” They include a world of commodities, governed by the power of money and possessions alongside a political course. Spaces in the age of capitalism are always erected on the basis of a vast network of banks, business centers, office parks, and many other huge production industries, divided by a complex network of motorways and highways. He defined how the complexity of imaginary and symbolic processes conducted in the realm of space could be manifested through a fourth dimension in the matrix of spatial analysis, the “psychic” dimension. This dimension affects the way people act in the space and the type of *activities* that occur.

Luis Wirth pointed out the aspect of hegemony and power control of one class. He explored how the segmented character and utilitarian sense of interpersonal relations in the city find their spatial expression in the proliferation of specialized institutions. In his writings, Wirth argued that density, land values, rentals, accessibility, types of activities, and prestige all determine the desirability of various areas of the city as places of social interaction for different sections of the population.<sup>12</sup> He explained how the city consequently tends to resemble segments of social entities, mostly governed by living conditions that have no emotional ties. That segmental character and sense of interpersonal relations in the city is reflected in the proliferated spatial expression of the privatized institutions.<sup>13</sup>

Jane Jacobs believed in power being exercised by individuals or people

in small groups rather than big governments and corporations. To her, most problems can be solved not by the elaborate schemes of experts but by the spontaneous interventions of community citizens.<sup>14</sup> Social hegemony is exercised over society as a whole, culture and knowledge, policies and policy makers, and intellectuals and experts. The ruling classes tend to dominate through all available means, one of those being knowledge. The relationship between knowledge and power is crucial to the ruling class, since from a capitalist perception, knowledge serves power.<sup>15</sup>

Parallel to Jacob’s influential writings, two urban theorists contributed to a new line of thought and practice for urban space effectiveness in the city and community juncture. Trancik’s work on *Finding Lost Space* is a glimpse into recognizing what good, intended interventions in the city could create: “Monsters under the bridge,” a symbolic phrase now used to describe urban pockets, blight at city edges, and under overpasses.<sup>16</sup> Cullen’s view of the dense urban community emerging and clustering around the basic notion of community integration, communication, and dependency led to a revitalization of thoughts, notions of community development, and the recreation of activity-based spaces stemming from within. Interestingly enough, the notion of overlaying integrated, less defined hierarchical space logic and design were vital to his theories and analytical approaches of understanding humane inter-relationships in space.<sup>17</sup> These notions of space design are integral to the success of community based, urban space logic.

These four domains can allow for a different measurement standard for the success of community based urban hubs. These hubs take different forms, yet all are rooted in the con-

cept of linkages, knowledge, identity, and character.

### Under the Bridge

ElSawy was the first privately owned, non-governmental cultural center in Egypt. It is located in Cairo, under a bridge on the island of Zamalek, with spaces opening directly onto the Nile River’s shore. It hosts poets, writers, singers, artists, musicians, and most recently, politicians. Since its initiation in 2003, the cultural center holds a series of seminars and activities including book fairs, music and film festivals, art exhibitions, workshops, and seminars.<sup>18</sup> The design includes two open spaces with a bar, a conference hall, an exhibition center, three indoor concert halls, a theater, a foyer with a bar, and a library with six rooms for workshops and rehearsals.

Our first investigation recognizes the *structure of space design*. As the space was created, incremental growth contributed to expand the area under the bridge. The initiation was coupled by a growing need from the community to engage in these semi-formal cultural activities that allowed for more funding and thus expansion of the space, design, and construction. Gatherings and performances by young and local artists, musicians, and poets, were the main attractions at ElSawy. As these performers came from a variety of social classes, they brought audiences that contributed to the success of the Culture Wheel experience.

### Location and Context:

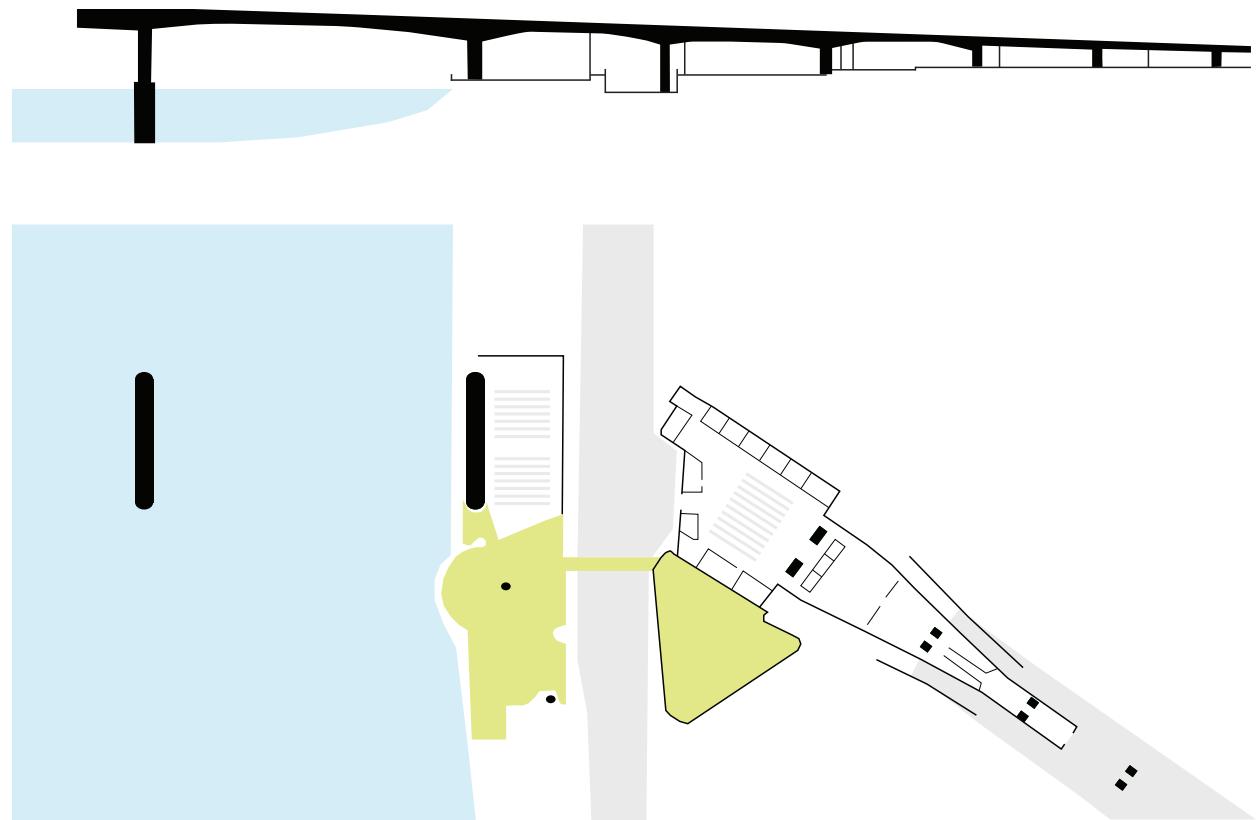
The center is located underneath 15th of May Bridge, on the extension of Abo-ElFedaa Street in Zamalek island; a middle- to upper-class mixed-use district in the center of Cairo, hosting several embassies, high-end shopping and small businesses. The district is full of cultural venues and art galleries like Khan El Maghraby, Arthropologie, Zamalek Art Gallery, Picasso Art Gallery, and

Safar Khan.<sup>19</sup> The Opera house is also located in Zamalek, typically an elitist cultural hub due to its exaggerated ticket prices and audience restrictions. Yet, ElSawy Culture Wheel remains a unique place, different from all other venues due to its openness to the community and inviting all classes to mix and participate in its activities.

### Form

Due to its incremental planning and construction, the Culture Wheel is composed of several clustered spaces connected to each other in a way that appears impossible to understand from an architectural perspective. It has no plans with clearly definable quotas, nor recognizable geometrical forms, however the undivided internal spaces maintain a fluidity, fitting into each other and changing size and lighting according to different hours of the day.<sup>20</sup> This, in fact, is one major concept of interactive, accumulated space experience that we as designers are asked to achieve through well-defined spaces with clear boundaries, zones, and linkages. As noted earlier in the theoretical discussion, allowance for diverse classes and communal blending is created through these conceptual design frameworks.

To help create an understanding of the space logistics, the setting can be divided into five overlapping zones beginning at the Nile edge and crossing inwards. Separated by Abo El-feda Street under the bridge, Bostan El Nil directly on the Nile's bank hosts movie screenings and festival opening and closing ceremonies. It is equipped with a stage, screen, and two seating levels. It is recognized as the most interactive setting, hosting a unique space that emphasizes the wealth of the community cultural references and need for communication and openness between age groups and educational levels. The second zone is the River Hall located on the



Nile's borders. It includes theater-style seating with ceiling fans, and a wonderful garden for outdoor events. Most of the musical performances, open theater acts, presentations, and debates are conducted in this hall. It presents a vibrant setting for formal and informal activities.

Crossing the street under the bridge is Bridge Hall where the space is quite simple, with white walls and black flooring. Situated between two auditoriums, people constantly walk in and out, and the space is mostly used for exhibits and advertisements. The second theater, Wisdom Hall, was the first hall to be built directly under the bridge and the first space in the Culture Wheel setting. Last is the Sakia Garden, an introductory open-air area with a small stage and screen that regularly hosts art markets, book fairs, and small receptions. The openness creates a juncture to the surrounding community and helps represent the Culture Wheel center as a platform for interaction

rather than only an activity or space setting.

### Edges and Levels

The complex is surrounded by strong physical edges, which at first glance, create extreme barriers. Bordered on the west, the Nile River is paralleled by Abo-Elfeda Street, which splits the center in two halves. Perpendicular to these edges are the two exit ramps of the bridge creating a restricting triangle for architectural expansion. What resolves access, linkages, and interactions is the substantial movement between several levels that bridge, penetrate, and cross over any restricting edges. All are utilized within functional spaces that allow for smooth transitions. The main activity spaces are generally located at lower levels than the street allowing for a sense of exposure and a feeling of dominance that is critical in understanding spatial structure.

These edges do not restrict the urban exposure. Although well secured in

terms of its entrances, the vibrancy of the area when events take place—the lights, the sounds, the crowds—dismantle all these barriers and allow for strong linkages which are crucial points in public hub success.

### Gates and Gateways

To enter the space there are two options: either from in front of the Zamalek Mosque, or from one of the piers of the bridge itself. The place has a gateway in order to enhance the entrance, especially since it is built in a very discreet space under the bridge. It is intended to give a welcoming feeling for those who visit the area. Both entrances are accessible for the public without guards.

Circulation patterns in ElSawy vary according to how its boundaries are defined. Its form relates to the spaces it links. Three distinct settings can be identified allowing for interesting, non-monotonous experiences and circulation patterns, an enclosed space forming a public gallery or “pri-



vate corridor,” a circulation corridor open on one side forming a balcony that provides visual and spatial continuity to the main space, and another pathway open on both sides forming a colonnaded passageway.

#### Degree of Enclosure

The interesting part about Culture Wheel is that all its spaces are linked by two common outdoor spaces, creating a vibrant interactive transition and an ever-changing setting. The configuration does not matter because there are multiple ways to perceive the boundaries and definition of these spaces. The type of activity and the people experiencing the space are what define it, not its shape, dimensions, or scale.

#### Walls and Fences

Unique to the Culture Wheel design are the walls that are unrecognizable elements in space formation. They are there, but they are not there. Activities, advertisements, hanging objects, stages, lights, and furniture all cover the walls in different and variable spaces. There is a parallel pattern through which one can identify direction, making the visitor weave in-between spaces, thus creating an interesting experience. Fences are present where necessary. One feels

safe beside the fence that protects from the low street level, the high railing of the stair going down from the bridge, the partially exposed wall as one crosses over from the Nile bank inwards towards the central area passing through the gallery, and so on. The fences are not fancy with their architecture, but subtle. This is what makes the setting unique, a workable space that allows you to see and feel what you want to see and feel.

#### Uses and Activities

Culture Wheel has established itself as a key venue for various kinds of alternative activities. Mostly classified as socio-cultural, there are many workshops held to teach painting, sculpture, and music. The Sakia Garden, which is a museum to display artifacts and exhibit sculpture and ceramics, is also used at the beginning of each month for the establishment of the “Sakia Market.” This market sells a wide variety of goods reflecting communal outreach both physically and culturally. These social activities are an essential part of the wheel, as well as art exhibitions and educational activities. After the revolution in 2011, a political edge was added to the Sakia. Community representatives and politicians, several of whom were international public



figures, did public debates, seminars, dialogues, and presentations.<sup>21</sup> This added national and worldwide recognition to the place.

#### Intensity of Activities

The center is busy and full of visitors day and night. Mornings are vibrant with markets, exhibits, and social gatherings. Children typically occupy several spaces in the mornings, especially during holidays. They also frequent the children’s library during school days as well as shows and performances. Several schools associate themselves with the Wheel and utilize it as a venue for activities and experiential learning. Afternoons and evenings are busy with public exhibits, seminars, and performances. According to its website, the center gets more than 20,000 visitors monthly.<sup>22</sup>

#### Perception and Space Recognition

Subtle but memorable sums up the Sakia experience. There is a low-key atmosphere exhibited by its simplistic settings and elemental architecture that allows for concentration on social and cultural interactions and communal expressions.

#### Visual Continuity

What is commendable about this space is that it is very open and the

level of visual continuity is high between all levels. The elevated corridors make it easy for visitors to observe other activities happening below their level. Also, the fact that all of its indoor spaces are located along one axis and linked through two open spaces makes it very accessible and visually connected.

#### Scale

The spaces of ElSawy Center are considered intimate in scale contributing to its feeling of comfort and control. The way the architecture and structure of the space is handled is very appealing for the users, giving it a human scale.

#### Style

Considering the nature of the space and the fact that it was built underneath a bridge made the construction system very important. Special attention was paid to the way in which the walls and lighting systems were detailed, as well as the way the space interacted with the piers of the bridge. All of these factors give the place a contemporary setting, complimented by the use of steel bars and space trusses as a ceiling system.

The setting helps to promote a comfortable, welcoming environment,

with beverage booths and wooden seats in the gardens outside of the halls (when visitors are waiting for the performances to start), allowing the audience the opportunity to mingle and interact with each other. The Poetics of Community Space

In August of last year, on a hot summer night I decided to walk down from my nearby apartment building to ElSawy Wheel. I did not check the website for events, nor did I have knowledge of what was being presented that night. I approached the area with no specific expectations, yet with an enthusiasm that grew gradually as I got closer. I wondered which approach to take; should I go from the Nile bank or should I cut through towards the main entrance? As the sun was setting, the call for prayers started from the nearby mosque overlooking the center, close to the Nile. The sounds of birds singing for the closure of the day was resonating the words and I was pulled towards the Nile. Going in, as if it was planned, the call for prayers ended and suddenly a wave of vibrant echoes, sounds, humming, and discussions took over. I sat down near the riverbank to observe. If I were to design the cultural center under the bridge how would I have approached it? I would use my knowledge to articulate—create wild experiences, forms, junctures, planes, complex elements, relationships, styles—you name it. Of course, I have the wisdom of an architect, the decision maker and the creator of experiences. As I sat there, I was thinking, would I have messed it up? It is perfect now and it works. It is not the architecture of the place but its essence, vibrancy, activity, communication, the flow of knowledge, and the sense of identity that make it work. As architects, it is time to develop our designs as a process of reflecting communal will rather than our own, to better read our products as a process developed through a true understanding of people's simple needs and wants rather than our



philosophical interpretations of what is right and what is wrong. This may require a different knowledge and educational process than what is being delivered in architectural schools of today.

### Notes

1. "El Sawy Culture-wheel in Egypt: From a place for beggars to a resort for intellectuals" CNN. 2009
2. "About Us," Culture Wheel, accessed April 15, 2012, <http://www.culturewheel.com/eng/About-Us>.
3. Al Jazeera, accessed December 25, 2008, <http://www.aljazeera.net>
4. Roger Trancik, R., 1986, *Finding Lost Space*, Van Nostrand Reinhold.
5. Christopher Alexander, *The Nature of Order: An Essay on the Art of Building and the Nature of the Universe* (Berkeley, California: Center for Environmental Structure, 2002–2005), Volumes 1–4.
6. Kurt H. Wolff, *The Sociology of Georg Simmel* (New York: Free Press, 1950).
7. Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, (Berkeley: University

- of California Press, 1978).
8. Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1984).
9. Ferdinand Tönnies, *Community and Society*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1957).
10. Ibid.
11. Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles*, (New York: Verso, 2006).
12. Louis Wirth, *Urbanism As a Way of Life*, (Ardent Media, U.S., 2007).
13. Ibid.
14. Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, (New York: Random House, 1961).
15. Henri Lefebvre, op. cit.
16. Roger Trancik, op. cit.
17. Gordon Cullen, *Concise Townscape*, (New York: Architectural Press, 1994).
18. M. Khalil, "Three New, Creative Spaces:

Letters from Egypt," accessed 2011, <http://fnewsmagazine.com>.

19. All are located in Zamilk: Khan El Maghraby, 18 El Mansour Mohamed Street; Arthropologie, 13a Marashly Street; Zamalek Art Gallery, 11 Brazil Street; Picasso Art Gallery, 30 Hassen Assem Street; Safar Khan: 6 Brazil Street.
20. M. Navarra, "Paradox Architecture," accessed 2010, <http://www.ymag.it>.
21. Ban Ki Moon (then Secretary General of the United Nations) gave a public talk at ElSawy Culture Wheel when he visited Egypt after the revolution.
22. "Culture Wheel," <http://www.culturewheel.com/eng>.

### Image Credits

Images are courtesy of Jenelle Nicholas and Olfat Sakr