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RETRIEVING MEMORIES OF ALEXANDRIA'S PAST BY REVITALIZING THE HERITAGE OF KOM EL-DEKKA

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Abstract
Across the history of dealing with problems of increasing poverty in historic city centers of developing countries, studies have indicated high levels of demand and strong support for urban revitalization projects compared to other solutions such as relocation or clearance and redevelopment. In such historic inner city centers, heritage can become a driver for development. Revitalization projects that demonstrate a concern for affordability for less wealthy citizens has become the best alternative to meet the needs of the citizens and small businesses in such deteriorated areas in old city centers. Preparing Alexandria for the 21st century has to take into account the way by which the city’s old city center will be developed. The city needs to be equipped with strong development strategies that will support its revitalization and development, based on studies of each part and area that holds special character and potentials. This paper proposes an adaptive urban revitalization project at Kom El-Dekka in Alexandria, Egypt. The proposed project is based on an investigation done and proposed by the authors in a previous study, where the history, potentials and present problems at Kom El-Dekka is highlighted. Two main points are discussed. First; the outcomes of the field survey and its analyses. Second; the proposed idea for urban, cultural and economic revitalization, followed by a discussion on the expected outcomes and their impact on the old city center of Alexandria.

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ABSTRACT

Across the history of dealing with problems of increasing poverty in historic city centers of developing countries, studies have indicated high levels of demand and strong support for urban revitalization projects compared to other solutions such as; relocation or clearance and redevelopment. In such historic inner city centers, heritage can become a driver for development. Revitalization projects that demonstrate a concern for affordability for less wealthy citizens has become the best alternative to meet the needs of the citizens and small businesses in such deteriorated areas in old city centers.

Preparing Alexandria for the 21st century has to take into account the way by which the city’s old city center will be developed. The city needs to be equipped with strong development strategies that will support its revitalization and development, based on studies of each part and area that holds special character and potentials.

This paper proposes an adaptive urban revitalization project at Kom El-Dekka in Alexandria, Egypt. The proposed project is based on an investigation done and proposed by the authors in a previous study, where the history, potentials and present problems at Kom El-Dekka is highlighted. Two main points are discussed. First; the outcomes of the field survey and its analyses. Second; the proposed idea for urban, cultural and economic revitalization, followed by a discussion on the expected outcomes and their impact on the old city center of Alexandria.

KEYWORDS
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1. INTRODUCTION

Upgrading projects of unique urban rundown areas tend to have a two side effect on the locals and areas where they perform. Generally, it is about striking a balance between investing in areas that attract investments to the city on higher levels and in programs that invest in the local citizens so they can gain the benefits as well. The interconnectivity of the two is crucial to any successful development strategy. (Alliance, 2014)

The studied case in this research at Kom El-Dekka is very unique; the area has potentials to fulfill the social, cultural, historical and economical sides of a sustainable urban upgrade project. Site surveys and investigation clarified that the area contains an ancient historical background and a rich culture, capable of attracting local investments. As well, the area is also known as home to a national
2. RESEARCH AIM

The aim of this research is to investigate the ability and the capability of enhancing the quality of life of local inhabitance at Kom El-Dekka while maintaining their unique urban character and at the same time insuring profitable revenue capable of sustaining their future.

This proposed development also intends to enable Kom El-Dekka to reach a state of stability in which residents can experience equitable development, allowing them to reap the benefits of economic development and urban improvement that will occur as the result of the proposed revitalization project. The intent is to support diverse cultural activities that generate business, attract tourists, stimulate cultural development and foster a sense of civic pride.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The methodology used in this research is an inductive research approach; where qualitative and quantitative data are gathered through various resources then analyzed to come up with a unique idea for revitalization that takes advantage of the areas potentials and supports a sustainable future based on the integration of social, environmental and economic situations.

4. GENERATORS OF THE REVITALIZATION PROJECT

This research contains a proposed preliminary urban revitalization project based on the outcomes and findings of a previous historical, urban and social study prepared by the authors. In this research a more detailed survey is conducted, with the help of two investigation teams. Site investigation and analyses data were emptied in a group of maps that contain urban and architecture information gathered during the two survey periods held in the spring 2014 and summer 2015. The intensive investigation focused on studying surrounding buildings and areas of a suggested pathway that would become the generator of the revitalization project at Kom El-Dekka. The pathway is highlighted on the map in figure 1. Detailed description of this path and the way it will be treated as well as its selection criteria will be discussed in details in the following parts of this research.

4.1 Urban field survey

Site surveys indicated that the uses of the majority of the buildings in the area were found to be residential, but mainly on the upper floors. Figure 1 presents a land use map of Kom El-Dekka prepared by the investigation team in July and August 2015. On the ground floors, many buildings contain small shops, workshops, and commercial services; like food shops and cafes. In the ground level, the land use investigation map shows that; more than 50% of building's ground floors at Kom El-Dekka are shops and stores. They generally sell goods and food for local needs. Investigation also found that many of these stores are permanently closed. And many of them stand solely on the land-lots without accompanied building. The area also contains a considerable number of workshops for wooden handcrafts and furniture, and car repair workshops mostly on the south-east side of the area. The survey conducted that the area also contains a good number of vacant lots and open spaces. In general, land-lot areas are relevantly small (about 50 m²), they were family residents for middle to low class local Alexandrians, built in the traditional Turkish style known in Alexandria in the early 19th century. Some of these traditional buildings are still present, but many of them are now empty and on the verge of collapse.

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3 The first site survey was conducted as part of an Architecture Design course at Pharos University in Alexandria in spring 2014, where the authors were constructors. The first author created the idea of the Culture Path and the revitalization project. They incorporated the idea as an urban revitalization project for architecture students. The Authors also supervised a project team of students and researchers that won an honorable prize at the international University Competition titled: “Switch On, Powering Transformation”, held during the conference "WSB14 Barcelona Sustainable Building Conference in October 2014, in Barcelona, Spain. The second site survey was conducted one year later as an initial survey and a preliminary project report for the Bibliotheca Alexandrina, under a program co-funded by the European Union called: “Support to Cultural Diversity and Creativity in Egypt” in 2015. The first Author as the owner of the idea was the architecture team leader. The survey was done as summer training for architecture students.
The survey study found that the area contains a number of cafes, yet very famous to Alexandrians such as; Sayed Darwish café, Deket El-Darawish café and Farag café. These cafes are distributed in the area, although they are located mostly along the edges. Some of these cafes are not only places to meet friends and spend nice times listing to traditional music, drinking coffee or tea, and smoking the traditional Shisha. Farag café, presented in figure 2, hosts some cultural and artistic activities, especially during the Sayed Darwsh festival held in the streets of Kom El-Dekka each year.

While surveying the area, the team spotted 70 illegal buildings in the area. A map and picture showing these buildings are presented in figure 3. They exceeded the legal heights that should be no more than one and one half times the width of the street, which in this area is no more than 4 floors or 12-14 meters (according to the Egyptian Building Regulation Law). These buildings represent a threatening problem to the local infrastructure. They are the result of still ongoing political state of instability after the Egyptian Revolution in 2011. In an attempt to take advantage of the instability under negligence of the law, developers seeking rapid gain took advantage of the situation and are demolishing old 2-4 story buildings to replace them with dreadful concert 15-20 story apartment buildings. (Egypt, 2008)
Regarding the urban and street patterns at Kom El-Dekka; the investigation clarified that they following the topographic characteristics of the area. They are considered “organic”. The streets are formed with slopes or steps. Streets width determines usage by pedestrians or carts. Small allies and dead-ends are commonly cited in the area. The urban fabric established in this traditional neighborhood reflects the socio-cultural aspects of its inhabitance. Dissimilarity of street fabric at Kom El-Dekka with regards to surrounding areas is evidence to the private nature and close relations between its inhabitances. This typology is very important to preserve and focused upon in the revitalization proposed project.

4.2 Architecture survey

The investigation team also studied 130 buildings in the area. The selected surveyed buildings lay on the chosen pathway for development. On this path also lies the main plazas and open spaces. The path leads to various directions that lead from the area to Fouad Street and to Safeya Saghoulle Street (main streets in the city center of Alexandria). The typology of the buildings consists of a mixture of building styles, as presented in pictures in figure 4. This situation resulted from layers and layers of history that formed this current situation. A previous study by the authors explained these styles, which can be summed into; the traditional Islamic style called Turkish style, the Neoclassical style also called Mediterranean style, (Turcharulo, 2014), (Mckenzie, 2006) primitive buildings with no style which can be considered shelters of slum dwellings and the new illegal high-rise apartment buildings mentioned above.
4.3 Street activity survey

During many activities are done in the allies and streets at Kom El-Dekka. They were spotted all over the area; some were permanent street vendors occupying a specific spot on the street, others were extensions of ground floor building activities and some vendors were moving along the streets. The uses of streets are constantly changing according to the types of activity taking place at different times of the day, and depending on the exposure to direct sunlight. Most workshops extended their activities in the streets. Multiple layers of activity, including outdoor work spaces near workshops and a gathering point for people after work. At Kom El-Dekka workshops are mainly carpenters working in small workshop on furniture and car mechanics. Plenty of Food and grocery shops serve locale needs. Most food preparations are done in the streets, they generally poses local hazards to the area. Cafes are all extended in the streets and allies. In addition to serving local men after work, the coffee shop brings drinks to nearby workshops throughout the day. The survey investigation recorded in figure 5 on a map three kinds of activities:

- **Permanent activities**: performed every day in the same place in the street. At night the cart or table setting of this activity is left covered and graded in the street. It occupies a specific spot and doesn’t move nor has a storage place. Examples of such activities are traditional food cars and small bazaars.
- **Moving activities**: these are permanent street vendors that move in the area and sometimes outside Kom El-Dekka. They carry their goods or push a cart. They move according to

Fig. 4 Pictures of residential building styles at Kom El-Dekka. Reference: Photographed by authors 2017
available crowds of people to sell foods of goods. For example they stand outside schools or besides coffee shops.

- **Extended activities** from ground floor shops, workshops or cafés; these activities are also permanent in the same place, but at night the stuff is gathered and stored in the ground floor shop or café. In some places they relatively move according to sun and shades, or provide means of shading for the working area.

![Map of Kom El-Dekka](image1)

**Fig. 5 Up: street activity investigation map. Reference: prepared by the investigation team**

**Down: Pictures of some street activities found in Kom Eldekka. Reference: Photographed by authors 2017**

### 5. UNLEASHING THE POTENTIALS OF KOM EL-DEKKA

Authors envisioned a revitalization project for this area that can expose the hidden potentials at Kom El-Dekka. The aim is to preserve the area’s socio-culture and urban character that can attract visitors from all over the world, thus enhance the life style and well-being of the locals. Therefore, the stable residential core at Kom El-Dekka can be sustained by the proposed Culture Path. The suggested path adds a new touristic rout in the city of Alexandria that will start from the north east at the National Museum on Fouad Street, then enters the world of Kom El-Dekka. Visitors will live the essence of Alexandria’s past, after that, they are directly connected to the Greco-Roman archeological site south of Kom El-Dekka. The Culture Path is a walk friendly zigzagged narrow street, with no cars, that will revitalize the old Kom El-Dekka souq or Market Street of the 16th century. The path is consisted of a chain of well-maintained small open spaces for gatherings. On this walk, visitors will be introduced to the area’s rich culture heritage by passing through a group of urban open spaces, café’s, shops and old traditional rehabilitated buildings that and re-used adaptively into new culture and commercial uses to serve the locals and visitors. The suggested Cultural Path at Kom El-Dekka is marked on the map in figure 6. This satellite image shows the location of the path in relation to important sites and buildings at the city center of Alexandria.
5.1 Reasons For Choosing The Culture Path

- The path leads to main streets outside the area and main city culture and historical attractions; like the National Museum, the Greco Roman Museum, and the ancient Roman Amphitheater.
- The path follows the main street at Kom El-Dekka, named Sayed Darwish Street that already hosts most of the cafés, open public spaces, local services and shops. This street follows the historic Souq Street or market place in the Islamic era.
- Local small workshops lie off the suggested Culture Path, and more to the edges of the area, integrated within the residential buildings. This situation is important for the sustainability of these workshops and to the revitalization of the whole area.
- Important old inherited Turkish style buildings on this path proposed for upgrade and reuse can become catalysts for future developments in Kom El-Dekka. They can adaptively host needed facilities and services as well as cultural facilities. This action will insure their maintenance and survival as evidences of the rich heritage at Kom El-Dekka.
- Kom El-Dekka contains a chain of small open spaces, connected by the suggested Culture Path; they can be used for social gatherings and street celebrations. Buildings surrounding these areas will contain local cafés and restaurants.
- Private cars are prohibited to enter this path "car free zones" and parking areas can be added in different locations around Kom El-Dekka.

5.2 Adaptive Reuse As A Catalyst For Revitalizing The Area

Adaptive reuse of heritage cannot be only limited to the conservation of the authentic features, but also it includes within its scope surrounding urban development. (Chan, 2011) Heritages projects are known to push forward environmental upgrading efforts in old rundown areas. As the neighborhood continues to improve, gentrification is an important issue to consider. ((Arch.), 2013) The neighborhood’s high levels of poverty put its current residents at risk for being forced out of the area as rent and property values increase. The increase in rental values and aesthetic upgrading of old urban fabrics usually encourage surrounding members to do the same, and to refurbish their deteriorated buildings to improve their architectural and structural conditions. The relationship between people and buildings lead to increase awareness about socio-cultural values and helps preserve identity for future generations. Therefore, heritage buildings are great opportunities for revitalization and assets to sustainable development. (Vangelis, 2009)

In this revitalization project, a number of architecture re-use projects are suggested on and around the Culture Path. These projects present the starting point to upgrade the whole area.
According to the survey, some strategic buildings are selected, they ley on the main path and around important open spaces that can trigger more development in the area. These buildings will adapt new uses that will serve the locals and visitors. For example: (galleries- exhibitions- culture center- restaurants- police station- clinic- hotels- museum- welcome house- small shops- cafés ...etc.). These buildings are selected according to certain criteria and a vision for development. But some of these building are located off the proposed Culture Path. The reason for such action is to pull the development into other areas at Kom El-Dekka and at the same time insure the conservation of some important heritage buildings, yet in poor condition, thus, enable the visitors to walk around and discover the authentic ambiance of Kom El-Dekka.

Criteria for selecting buildings for re-use projects are as following:

- Buildings that are mostly vacant or abandoned, therefore easier to buy or rent.
- Buildings that are mostly in poor condition despite of their significant architectural style, thus the project will lead to their sustainability.
- Buildings which are in traditional Turkish architectural style; to recognize this distinctive character and revitalize it as Kom El-Dekka’s main building style.
- Buildings along open areas or containing cafés.
- Buildings that are stacked successively on the street, representing a characteristic façade, well oriented with the street; to possibly turn them together into new functions, for example; hotel or boutique hotel or cultural center.
- Buildings that are located off the main suggested Culture Path, but due to their revitalization, the surrounding area will redevelop.
- One important remark is that, Kom El-Dekka contains a group of open spaces that can be used for social gatherings, street celebrations and landscape. Building surrounding these areas could contain local cafes and restaurants. Privet cars should be prohibited to entre these areas (car free zones). The area also contains four very important sites and buildings, which are considered the catalyst for revitalization:
  - The historic water cistern lying under the open space in front of Sayed Darwish café is called El-Nabahna cistern. (Mckenzie, 2006) The construction of cisterns was important in Alexandria and an advanced architecture was developed through the different periods (Greek, Roman and Islamic). (Turchiarulo, 2014) This underground building is vacant and in cerios need for restoration. It consists of three stories. Each floor is supported with granite columns. It was also used as shelter during the Second World War. (Empereur, 1998) In the revitalization project the cistern can be rehabilitated and opened to visitors. It can be reused as a 3D exhibition area accessed from besides Sayed Darwish café.
  - The old water tank on the south east corner of the area can adaptively be re-used into exhibition space, and the roof can become accessible to visitors as an observation or view point to the city.
  - The legendary Sayed Darwish café is the third important location at Kom El-Dekka. It can be revitalized to become a gathering point in the area. It is located in center of the area and in front of the main open space -on the cultural path- that occupies the historical underground water cistern.
  - The fourth revitalization and reuse project is the reconstruction of Sayed Darwish house and turning it into a welcome center for Kom El-Dekka visitors.
  - Figure 7 presents a map showing the suggested Culture Path through Kom El-Dekka, the entrances to the area and selected heritage buildings, open areas, cafes, historical buildings for the revitalization project.
5.3 Locals Reactions Towards Development

Site investigation, interviews, casual meetings, and informal conversations with locals found out that; most inhabitants feel comfortable and safe in their neighborhood; the support of neighbors to each other is the main reason to stay in the area, thus highlighting the very traditional values and sense of community. Most of all residents see Kom El-Dekka as their primary and permanent home, and are ready to invest their own resources to improve their living conditions.

On the other hand the investigation team realized some concerns that were discovered during site investigation. These concerns can be summarized as the following:

- The residents are skeptical of change and of the actual execution and development. The area of Kom El-Dekka has been studied and investigated by many academics in the past. Residents do not believe that change can happen.
- This proposed revitalization project by implementing a culture path and heritage conservation and re-use work is only the first step in the action for the actual development of the area. The risk and dependent upon finding funding resources puts the continuation this project at risk.
- The rapid pace of change in the physical environment and the social context that is taking place in the area may cause the site investigation to become outdated within a few years.
- The involvement of other stakeholders in the next steps is vital for the implementation of the project. These stakeholders include local authorities responsible for execution, local NGOs, small workshop and café owners.

6. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The potentials of Kom El-Dekka can be developed to revitalize the area. It can become a center for cultural activities in Alexandria. The suggested Culture Path will be developed and turned into a space of energetic exchange of experiences between locals, visitors and artists, presenting the Egyptian and regional contemporary arts in a traditional atmosphere. Turning this area into an international cultural site will not only add to the cultural scene in Egypt, but will also economically empower the inhabitants of this poor neighborhood. Alexandria’s city center revitalization project at Kom El-Dekka will become an open venue for international festivals and a space for cultural exchange with artisans and eventually a museum for Sayed Darwish. This would create an industry
for the local youth of the area, give them access to local and foreign cultures and allow them to interact with others and support tourism in the city.

The proposal capitalizes on the existing assets of the area, such as its history and its association with the iconic national figure of Sayed Darwish. (Ismail, 2002) This will trigger the urban development of the area, both its physical setting, the social and economic scale. Moreover, the proposal is expected to go beyond the boundaries of the district to other areas of the city with the same potentials and resources.

The proposed revitalization project is inclusive; it concerns a lot of stakeholders and requires funding and further investigation. Therefore phasing this project is very important. Each phase will test the possibility of sustain others steps towards implementing the whole project.

The proposed upgrade phases are as follows:

1. **Trigger phase**: street and building facades maintenance, street lighting and landscape. This phase will check the locals’ response to the idea of upgrading. It will help them get involved and show them the benefits of revitalization. This step also will publicize the potentials of Kom El-Dekka therefore; it will lead to administrative and governmental acknowledgment.

2. **Rebuilding Sayed Darwish house**: reconstructing and rehabilitating the house into a Welcome Center. This action will put Kom El-Dekka on the culture map of Alexandria and Egypt as well. Visitors will come from many places, and locals will gain benefits of this recognition.

3. **Re-using old heritage buildings**: services, culture center and music centers are the main new projects in the area. This phase is considered the heart of the upgrade action. It will directly lead to utilize the suggested culture path as an attraction for tourism. Also, reusing traditional Turkish architectural style buildings will give recognition to heritage buildings and encourage owners of other old buildings to invest in their assets thus eliminates the urge for demolition.

4. **Future sustainable development**: the future of Kom El-Dekka depends on the sustainability of the idea of the Culture Path and reusing more traditional buildings for local needs and services. During the investigation at Kom El-Dekka, the revitalization project initiated many positive points that can be summarized as following:
   a. The proposed revitalization project is a way of highlighting the importance of the area to local authorities and government officials who see it as a problematic area rather than as an area with latent potential.
   b. Involvement of Kom El-Dekka community through interviews, casual meetings, and informal conversations allowed them to express and clarify their needs and problems to the investigation team. The residents’ voices are often unheard and development plans, as is generally the case in Egypt, have a top-down approach.
   c. The investigation team consisted of students from Architecture Departments in Alexandria. They perform documentation and investigation work related to the revitalization project. This type of involvement allowed them to learn about the heritage of their city and explore hidden values in their community.

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