

When millions of protesters gathered in Tahrir Square in Cairo this winter, they were linked as much by communications technologies as by the sheer spaces that surrounded them. Indeed, if the revolutionary movements sweeping across the Middle East and North Africa have been framed largely in terms of texts and tweets, the protesters' momentous actions are no less inseparable from the very sites through which they moved and in which they assembled. Tahrir Square, in particular, is a densely layered territory in which the modern meets the Mamluk, Haussmannian vistas meet cold-war brutality, and networked paths meet the open agora. The facades and structures of the square's built environment carry an intense political and cultural charge. *Artforum* asked renowned architectural historian and critic Nasser Rabbat to shed light on this extraordinary public arena, its historic energies, and its spaces of possibility.

Circling the Square

NASSER RABBAT ON ARCHITECTURE AND REVOLUTION IN CAIRO



“EGYPT SPEAKS FOR ITSELF” is the slogan Al Jazeera chose for its continuous coverage of the popular revolution that took over the streets of every Egyptian city in January and February. And Egypt, for those of us who have been listening, has not spoken about itself so powerfully, so confidently, or so defiantly in decades. The millions of voices that roared in demonstrations all over the country were loud and clear: The protesters wanted freedom from dictatorship, a more accountable and responsive government, and a decent life. To people in most Western liberal democracies, these demands are rights guaranteed by constitutions and laws (or so we blithely think). But to people in the Arab world, these rights have been

absent from public discourse for much of the twentieth century. They were first robbed from the political arena in Egypt after the Free Officers’ “revolution” of 1952, which spawned three consecutive autocratic military rulers: Gamal Abdel Nasser, Anwar al-Sadat, and finally Hosni Mubarak. The restoration of such liberties to the region may have begun after the successful Tunisian uprising this January. But in Egypt, it still seemed too idealistic to expect an unarmed and socially networked youth movement to dislodge a brutal, corrupt, and fully armed regime, which has been hard at work dismantling and dissipating all political expression in the country. Indeed, the crack-downs in Libya, Bahrain, Yemen, and elsewhere in

the region point to what one might have expected in Egypt as well, for some of those regimes came to power in coups inspired precisely by the “revolution” of 1952 and have consciously followed the Egyptian model of government.

The Egyptian youth, however, succeeded in forcing the dictator Mubarak to step down, after eighteen days of peaceful demonstrations. Despite the attacks by the regime’s thugs and the indifference, if not complacency, of the army, the protesters changed neither their peaceful tactics nor their fundamental demands. They stood in Tahrir Square in Cairo (and other squares in every city), hoisting their banners and chanting their slogans demanding

Opposite page: **Tahrir Square, Cairo, February 18, 2011.** Photo: Carsten Koall/Getty Images. Below: **Tahrir Square, Cairo, February 13, 2011.** Photo: Tara Todras-Whitehill/AP.





Jean-Léon Gérôme, *Napoleon in Egypt, 1867–68*, oil on wood, 14 3/8 x 9 1/8".



Alexander Nichosoff, map of Cairo with Isma'iliyya Square and surroundings, detail, ca. 1934.

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the departure of Mubarak and his regime. Their actions, their deployment, and their speech were fundamentally shaped by the public space that Tahrir Square offered them. The square effectively became their home, their operation room, and our window onto their revolution. It morphed into the place where they ate, slept, prayed, socialized, and demonstrated. Many lost their lives defending it, and their burgeoning revolution therein, against the attacks of the so-called Mubarak supporters. Others found meaning in their lives in finally breaking the chain of fear and revolting against the regime that had dehumanized them for so long. Still others seized the occasion and inscribed their own fates onto that of their country, as when Ahmad Zaafan and Oula Abdul Hamid held their wedding in the square on February 6 with thousands of protesters witnessing their commitment.

Tahrir Square—literally, “Liberation Square”—has come to frame the youth revolution and to represent its simultaneous exuberance and anguish. To a world that watched in wonder, the site has acquired the same mystique that other squares of revolution had gained before—the Place de la Bastille in Paris, Red Square in Moscow, Azadi Square in Tehran, and, perhaps most famous given our short-term memory, Tiananmen Square in Beijing. Unlike them,

however, Tahrir Square was not planned as a central square in the city: It grew out of the accumulation of leftover spaces that coalesced over time to form its huge trapezoidal contours. An urban-planning failure of sorts, Tahrir Square holds in its unwieldy open span and its hodgepodge of built edges a key to understanding the modern history of Cairo—and, by extension, of Egypt, with its successive episodes of struggle between a people yearning for its freedom and its right to a decent life, and a series of regimes that either withheld those rights or monopolized their administration.

THROUGHOUT ITS MODERN HISTORY, Egypt has been mostly spoken for. Pashas, khedives, sultans, kings, colonial proconsuls, colonels, and generals have taken turns ruling it autocratically and ruthlessly. This began with a cruel colonial farce when Napoléon Bonaparte landed with his occupation army in Alexandria in July 1798 and promised the Egyptians liberation from their oppressors. His vacuous declaration notwithstanding, it took more than seventy years for a more genuine call for freedom to resound across the country with the uprising of Colonel Ahmed Urabi and the Egyptian Army in 1879; less than three years later, this development was dashed by the British Occupation of 1882. A massive uprising

against the British in 1919 then galvanized the population around Sa'd Zaghlul, nicknamed the “Father of Egyptians,” and his Wafd Party, which was pressing for independence from Britain. But that popular and unifying movement was, again, a fleeting moment. Incomplete independence from and festering problems with the British, in addition to the failure of Arab armies to stand up to the Zionist expansion in Palestine in 1948, were among the primary causes behind the Free Officers’ “revolution” in 1952, which has been the legitimizing leitmotif of all subsequent regimes until the beginning of 2011. Promising a lot and delivering little, the architects of the “revolution” reneged on their pledge of granting political freedom to all, and Egypt went through a protracted age of military dictatorship, from whose rotten grip it is now finally struggling to emerge.

The revolution of January 25, however, took everyone by surprise. Analysts had long concluded that no popular uprising in Egypt was possible, given the brutality of the regime and the lassitude of a people crushed under spiraling economic problems. The youth of the so-called Facebook generation defied that verdict and took to the streets. They were joined by the much less affluent squatter youth and ultimately by representatives of all other classes, professions, and age groups in the equalizing space



Marcel Dourgnon, *Museum of Egyptian Antiquities, Cairo, 1896*. Design. Principal facade.

of the square. The uprising was also misunderstood or, to put it more accurately, misrepresented—sometimes deliberately. The Egyptian regime erratically dubbed it either an agitation of youth misguided by “external” enemies or one of Islamic fundamentalists. It was plainly neither. Opportunists in the meager opposition parties tried to ride it to potential political gain, and some may well yet succeed. Western governments and media vacillated between praising it for the great popular revolt that it was and cautioning against the repercussions of the fall of Mubarak’s regime for the region, but especially for Israel’s interests, the true concern of the West. The Arab regimes were deafeningly silent, undoubtedly with visions of their own eventual downfall tying their tongues. The most brazen among them, however, expressed support for Mubarak. Saudi Arabia even went a step further, its grand sheikh declaring the uprisings *fitan* (disorders), which are “worse than assassination,” according to a *hadith* (prophetic saying) regularly brandished by all Arab theocracies to deter any popular unrest. The youth, meanwhile, kept up and pressed on. Their successful reterritorialization of their city and their creation of a highly effective oppositional public sphere are testaments to the complex and astonishing ways in which seemingly enframed urban spaces can be both overcome and appropriated. Tahrir Square sits at the nexus of those powerful expressions of discontent.

That was the intention of neither the square’s first planner nor its successive rebuilders. The site began as Qasr al-Nil Square, an open space left between a series of royal palaces along the eastern bank of the Nile and a new district designed *à la française* in the late 1860s by Isma‘il Pasha (r. 1863–79), the

impatient modernizer who wanted to turn Egypt into a part of Europe despite all adverse circumstances. His passion for Europeanization was exemplified by this grand urban project, which extended from the medieval city westward toward the Nile along a north-south axis, with tree-lined avenues radiating from central squares to form star patterns modeled after the imperial Paris of Baron Haussmann. Planned in haste by the premier Egyptian reformer and a Haussmannian designer imported from France—Ali Pasha Mubarak (no relation to the deposed president) and Pierre Grand Bey, respectively—the new city was meant to impress Isma‘il’s guests, the European monarchs, who had been invited to Egypt for the inauguration of the Suez Canal in 1869.

That the long-term aims of Haussmannization, so emblematic of modern Western urbanism, were on the mind of Isma‘il and his minister Ali Mubarak is evident in their oft-expressed desire to modernize Egypt and to instill a new order in its social and urban structures. It is less clear, however, whether they were also aware of the security features of the new planning apparatus, with its creation of wide, straight boulevards that enabled surveillance, military movement, and crowd control. The cutting of two new boulevards in the medieval city’s fabric, al-Sikka al-Gadida (the New Street) and Muhammad ‘Ali Street, does indeed indicate an intention to enact a system of spatial control and surveillance. But the plan of reshaping the old city with diagonal and peripheral boulevards that would have created a Panopticon-like scheme was never completed. Having borrowed heavily from rapacious European banks to fund his flamboyant projects, Isma‘il ended by bankrupting the country and was deposed in

1879 before the completion of either his interventions in the old city or his Parisian-style, posh residential district of al-Isma‘iliyya. Three years later, the British occupied Egypt, ostensibly to straighten the country’s finances and to secure the repayment of its heavy debts—but they ended up staying for seventy-two years.

One of the first British colonial acts was to requisition the main royal barracks on the northwestern tip of al-Isma‘iliyya district, Qasr al-Nil, to become the headquarters of their Occupation Army. This quickly became a location of confrontation. British soldiers used the court between the barracks and the square to the east as a daily parade ground. Egyptians demonstrated against the British in front of the barracks. Clashes ensued, and the square saw its first martyrs for freedom around the turn of the twentieth century, with a peak during the revolution of 1919, when numerous demonstrations against the British occupation converged on the square that by then had acquired the name of its district: Isma‘iliyya Square.

But the square would not simply remain a zone divided between the British army and the Egyptian aristocracy living in palaces around it. At the turn of the century, the area acquired its first major cultural institution: the Museum of Egyptian Antiquities, commonly known as the Egyptian Museum, completed in 1902 north of the barracks to house the unique Egyptian collection of pharaonic antiquities. A neoclassical structure dreamed up by a French Egyptologist, Mariette Pasha; designed by a French architect, Marcel Dourgnon; and built by an Italian construction company, Garozzo & Zaffarani, the museum was planted in Egypt for practical reasons but was in fact meant to celebrate a heritage that



Above: Marcel Dourgnon, *Museum of Egyptian Antiquities*, Cairo, 1896. Design. Longitudinal section.

Below: Marcel Dourgnon, *Museum of Egyptian Antiquities*, Cairo, 1896. Design. Elevation detail.

Below: Friday prayers, Tahrir Square, Cairo, February 4, 2011. Background: Museum of Egyptian Antiquities. Photo: John Moore/Getty Images.



Europeans had already appropriated as their own. The building was long the domain of Western Egyptologists and historians, the first place to visit for Western tourists, and it served as a memorial to the late-nineteenth-century generation of European explorers and Egyptologists. Despite changes in recent decades that Egyptianized the staff and made entry affordable to all classes of Egyptian people, neither the museum nor the heritage it shelters has ever been fully integrated into the cultural consciousness of the city or the country. The new, ultraslick Grand Egyptian Museum, currently being constructed on the Pyramids Plateau about twenty miles east of the present-day square, will doubtless steal the limelight from the museum today. But it will probably suffer the same alienation from local

culture unless ancient Egypt is reclaimed as the source and basis of Egypt's history, heritage, and national pride in both scholarly and popular discourses.

Not only did the barracks of Qasr al-Nil and the Egyptian Museum demarcate the northern boundary of Isma'iliyya Square, they also visually symbolized the interdependence between military colonialism and cultural imperialism—a reciprocity famously revealed by the late Edward Saïd in a series of biting critiques. But we did not have to wait for post-colonial studies to discern that relationship. The pioneering American Egyptologist James Henry Breasted was already well aware of it when, in 1926, he presented a project for a New Egyptian Museum and Research Institute in Cairo to the Egyptian government. Designed in a neo-pharaonic pastiche of

styles by the American Neoclassicist architect William Welles Bosworth and funded by the philanthropist John D. Rockefeller Jr., the new museum was to be located on the site of the barracks and was to replace the French-dominated and French-staffed Egyptian Museum as the main center for Egyptological research. This double-pronged usurpation of the presence of the two colonial powers—Great Britain and France—in the main square of Cairo by the American imperial newcomer was not lost on any of the protagonists. The project was strongly opposed by both the British and the French, before it was totally rejected by the Egyptian government of Ahmad Zivar Pasha after protracted negotiations with the Americans. In a principled nationalist stand rebuffed by Breasted, the government declared the



Above: Palace of Prince Said Halim, Tahrir Square, Cairo, 2008.
Photo: Nasser Rabbat.



Right: Palace of Prince Kamal al-Din Hussein, Tahrir Square, Cairo, 2011.
Photo: Lesley Lababidi.

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project's proposal "unacceptable" and an infringement "upon the sovereignty of Egypt," because it postulated that Egyptians would have to surrender all proprietary rights of the museum's artifacts to a Western-dominated board in return for American funding of the museum.

COLONIALISM, HOWEVER INDIRECTLY, continued to be the driving force behind the evolution and changing meaning of the square in the early twentieth century. Colonially based economic growth and preferential legal codes privileging non-Egyptians attracted large numbers of European and Levantine (the Egyptians call them *Shawwam*, meaning Christians and Jews from Greater Syria) merchants, investors, and adventurers, who settled in the city and sought their fortunes there. As a palpable sign of their financial success, members of this new bourgeois colonial class bought the huge palaces built in the late nineteenth century around Isma'iliyya Square by members of the royal family and land-owning nobility; they then parceled them out into smart Art Deco apartments. A number of these buildings—with names that recall the ethnic mix of

the bourgeois colonial class—still stand at the eastern side of the square today as reminders of a bygone belle-epoque era. But of the older aristocratic palaces, only three escaped demolition. The first, the magnificent palace of Prince Said Halim, who became the prime minister of the Ottoman Empire in Istanbul at the beginning of World War I, is truncated, deserted, and ruined today. The other two have played important roles in the modern political and cultural history of Egypt. The neo-Baroque Qasr Kamal al-Din was until recently the seat of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Built by the prolific Slovenian architect Anton Laščak (who also designed the palace of Said Halim) for Prince Kamal al-Din Hussein, the unfortunate son of the only modern Egyptian sultan, the palace's classical facades still cut an imposing profile at the western tip of the square. The other surviving palace is that of Ahmed Khairy Pasha, built in 1874 for this minister of Isma'il in a neo-Mamluk style. It successively housed a Greek cigarette factory for thirty-six years, the Egyptian University (today Cairo University) for ten, and the American University in Cairo (AUC) for more than eighty. Established in 1919 as an American-style

school, the AUC soon became a symbol of American culture, derided and admired at the same time, and also one of Egypt's finest institutions of higher education, which offered an intellectual haven in the square for visitors and Egyptians alike until its relocation in 2008 to New Cairo, thirty miles away from downtown Cairo.

The one structure that has come to be universally associated with the labyrinthine and gargantuan Egyptian bureaucracy is the behemoth al-Mogamma' (literally, "the Collective"), built on the southwestern end of the square to house most government agencies. Initially a gift from the Soviet Union to the Kingdom of Egypt, the Mogamma' was not inaugurated until after the "revolution" of 1952. It thus became a symbol of all that was statist, authoritarian, and ineffective in Abdel Nasser's republic. The building, designed by Egyptian architect Kamal Ismail, recalls Soviet-style compounds, but its facades also display unmistakable references to those of the mosque of Sultan Hasan (r. 1356–61), the most monumental Mamluk structure in Cairo and the most "modern" *avant la lettre*. No Egyptian or visitor can escape the Mogamma': Birth certificates,

Below: Palace of Ahmed Khairy Pasha, previously the main campus of the American University in Cairo (from 1919 until 2008), Tahrir Square, 2005.
Photo: Nasser Rabbat.



Right: Al-Mogamma', Tahrir Square, Cairo, 2007.
Photo: Lesley Lababidi.



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passports, drivers' licenses, residency visas, and many other official papers can be obtained only there. People burn their nerves through interminable hours of pushing papers from one office to the other in its endless corridors, trying to satisfy the whims of apathetic civil servants. No wonder the building became the butt of jokes about all that is wrong with the Egyptian government. The popular frustration with everything the building symbolizes came to a boil on February 7, with the demonstrators in Tahrir Square blocking all three entrances to the Mogamma' and leaving thousands of perplexed civil servants waiting outside.

If the Mogamma' stood for the ubiquitous presence of government in every aspect of Egyptian life, the name of the square it commanded evolved to reflect the changing political ideology of that same government after the 1952 "revolution." Trying to erase all traces of the long-ruling royal family, Abdel Nasser changed the names of many streets and squares in Cairo. "Isma'iliyya Square," of course, had to go. Instead it became Maydan al-Hurriya (Freedom Square) in August 1952 and was then rechristened Tahrir (Liberation) Square in September 1954—in

reference to the success of the Free Officers in negotiating a termination of the presence of the British in Egypt, and hence the liberation of the country from the last vestiges of colonial occupation.

Revealing the impulses of a new regime searching for its bearings, Abdel Nasser then added two major buildings to Tahrir Square on the site of what used to be the British barracks of Qasr al-Nil. The first was the flamboyant Nile Hilton, built by the Los Angeles-based architect Welton Becket in 1959 immediately to the southwest of the Egyptian Museum and overlooking the Nile. This swanky five-star hotel complacently projected all that America wanted to represent at the beginning of the cold war: modernity, luxury, efficiency, and comfort. The hotel succeeded spectacularly and became the premier hospitality destination in Cairo, but its propaganda message failed, and Abdel Nasser's Egypt continued to move away from the West in the direction of strategic friendship with the Soviet Union. The second building was the drab yet functional modernist Headquarters of the Arab League, built between 1958 and 1960 by the Egyptian architect Mahmoud Riad on a site south of the Nile

Hilton. The structure marks the moment in which Abdel Nasser was riding high on the wave of Pan-Arabism sweeping across the Arab world—a crest that began with the founding of the league in 1945 and resulted in the toppling of several regimes, as well as the establishment of the short-lived United Arab Republic between Egypt and Syria. Although the building is today squeezed between two symbols of American economic and cultural dominance—the InterContinental and the Nile Hilton (lately the Ritz-Carlton) hotels—and although the Arab League mostly failed in its political missions, there is no denying the clear rekindling of Arab solidarity, expressed by the youth of the January 25 revolution and by their supporters across the Arab world.

BEFORE THE 1952 "REVOLUTION," a round granite pedestal stood in the center of Isma'iliyya Square, waiting for its statue. The king had intended to place a sculpture of Isma'il Pasha there, a late recognition of his legacy. The situation obviously changed after the "revolution"; Abdel Nasser and his admirers sought to place his own statue there instead. But Egypt's tragic defeat in the Six-Day War with Israel

Nile Hilton, Tahrir Square, Cairo, ca. 1960. Photo: James Burke/ Time & Life Pictures/Getty Images.



Below: Headquarters of the Arab League, Tahrir Square, Cairo, 2007. Photo: Christian Funke.



Below: Vintage postcard of Tahrir Square, the Nile Hilton, and the headquarters of the Arab League, Cairo, ca. 1960.





Above: Statue of Omar Makram with the mosque of Omar Makram in background, Tahrir Square, Cairo, 2006. Photo: David Evers.



Far left: Egyptians celebrating the ouster of President Hosni Mubarak, Tahrir Square, Cairo, February 12, 2011. Photo: Joseph Hill.



Left: Protesters with list of demands share pedestal with the statue of Omar Makram in Tahrir Square, Cairo, January 31, 2011. Photo: Ahmed Saad.

The protesters poured into the square from the various boulevards connecting it to its venerable surrounding neighborhoods—repurposing the Haussmannian axes as a network of active linkages.



Demonstrators in Tahrir Square, Cairo, February 27, 2011. Photo: Carsten Koall/Getty Images.



Egyptians gather in Tahrir Square to celebrate the success of the revolution, Cairo, February 25, 2011. Photo: Khaled Desouki/AFP/Getty Images.

in 1967 drastically diminished the likelihood of granting him such an honor in Cairo's symbolic center. The pedestal remained empty until it was removed altogether with the excavation of the square in the 1980s, in preparation for the construction of the new Cairo metro. Tahrir Square was officially renamed Sadat Square after the leader's assassination in 1981, and it is possible that some cronies of the dead president may have contemplated installing his statue there. But the new name fast faded away and was displaced to the first metro station under Tahrir Square. The square returned to its revolutionary designation, perhaps in anticipation of its revolutionary reawakening—but most probably because the new and still insecure Mubarak regime was uneasy about consecrating the main square of the city to the memory of its slain predecessor.

Ciphers of spiritual authority were no less subject to politics. The sole religious building in Tahrir Square is a relative latecomer. The small and elegant mosque of Omar Makram was built north of the Mogamma' at the end of the royal era by the Italian architect Mario Rossi, the chief architect of the Waqf Ministry, in a neo-Mamluk style all his own. Having only one mosque in such a large public space is unusual in Cairo, affectionately known as the "city of thousand minarets," in reference to its abundance of mosques. But this could be indicative of the largely civic role of the square in modern Egyptian life—especially during the late nineteenth

and early twentieth centuries, when the aristocratic class identified with Western lifestyles, and during the rule of Abdel Nasser, marked by a statist form of socialism with a tilt toward secular appearances. The Makram mosque seems to confirm this reading, for, unlike regular mosques everywhere in the city, it appears to have transcended its straightforward religious function from the outset to become the funerary mosque of choice for the Cairene elite. Not a day passes without one or two memorial services for a politician, a high officer, an artist, or a member of the intelligentsia being held there.

In 2003, the open space in front of the mosque acquired the one and only statue in Tahrir Square, a statue of Makram, as part of a move to create foci of remembrance in the city in the form of statues of the nation's heroes. And Makram was indeed a hero: An Azhar-educated sheikh and a descendant of the Prophet Muhammad, he led the uprising against the French in 1800, providing Muhammad 'Ali with the popular support he needed in his struggle to rule Egypt, but turned against him when the latter showed his real autocratic intentions. Makram was ultimately exiled to Damietta and then Tanta, where he died. The slogans painted on the statue's pedestal and on canvases hanging from its body this past winter, shown in widely circulated news photos, suggest that the youth of 2011 may be looking up to their forerunner in their revolutionary struggle.

Surrounded by architectural reminders of all the forces that want to lay claim to their identity and garner their loyalty—a fantastic ancient heritage and a graceful belle époque, a powerful yet convoluted government, a dream of regional unity, multiple markers of religion, education, and resistance, and unaffordable temptations of luxurious American consumerism—the Egyptian protesters chose to plot an entirely new path on January 25. They poured into the square from the various boulevards connecting it to its venerable surrounding neighborhoods—Garden City, Wast al-Balad (downtown), Bab al-Louq, Bulaq, and Zamalek across the Qasr al-Nil Bridge—thus repurposing the Haussmannian axes as a network of active linkages. They reclaimed the huge open space of the square as their own stage and used the extraordinary diversity of buildings around it—Neoclassical, neo-Mamluk, historicist, modernist, totalitarian, and bureaucratic—as the backdrop to their forward-looking, digitally organized and recorded revolution. Mindful of the history that has unfolded in the square and on its built edges, the demonstrators vindicated the sacrifices of all the protests that had ignited there before their uprising. They finally validated the square's designation as Tahrir Square, fifty-seven years after a band of rebellious officers gave it the name but failed to fulfill its promise of liberation. □

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