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‘THE ALEXANDRIA YOU ARE LOSING’?

James Moore

Urban Heritage and Activism in Egypt since the 2011 Revolution

ABSTRACT

Activist groups and non-governmental organizations have played a key role in highlighting the threats to Egypt's modern built heritage. The administrative and regulatory chaos that followed the Egyptian revolution saw the 'delisting' of many heritage buildings and the destruction of modern archaeology of international importance. This paper reviews the ongoing threats and the role of community groups in protecting heritage assets. It suggests that growing public engagement with heritage may help secure better state protection for key assets, although lack of resources for investment, widespread corruption, and the scale of the decay of the built environment makes progress very difficult.

KEYWORDS: urban heritage, urban archaeology, conservation, planning, Egypt

The Egyptian revolution of 2011 provoked an outbreak of international concern about threats to the rich archaeological heritage of Egypt. Plundering of ancient sites, petty vandalism, and unauthorized excavations abounded in the security vacuum that followed the Arab Spring. Yet little attention was paid, outside Egypt at least, to the threats that governmental changes brought to more recent built heritage and modern standing archaeology. As a recent editorial comment in *JEMAHS* noted (Scham 2013: 313–18), the nineteenth and early twentieth century built heritage of Egypt had long been under threat from the intensification of urbanization. The security vacuum and political changes brought about by the revolution saw a number of important historic buildings disappear overnight, some through illegal demolition and some through the exploitation of an apparent loophole in Egyptian conservation law. While some local commentators have seen this period as disastrous for the modern heritage of Egypt, there has also been a remarkable public backlash against the destruction (*Cairo Observer* 2012). In a country where political activism is restricted, many prominent historians, architects, and public intellectuals, as well as ordinary people, have taken to the streets to protest against the loss of important buildings. Heritage groups have sprung up in many Egyptian towns, often led by young people who view present policy as reflecting wider corruption within the Egyptian state. This article will

attempt to review the position of modern built heritage in Egypt today. An examination of celebrated cases will be followed by consideration of the current legal protections that exist and the regulatory framework in which they operate. There will be a brief overview of the different types of threats that Egypt's built heritage faces and, finally, an assessment of whether activist groups can be effective in the face of powerful developer interests.

Egypt's major towns and cities were radically reshaped by the colonial experience, leaving an architectural heritage that is, arguably, unrivaled in the eastern Mediterranean. As late as the 1940s, Cairo and Alexandria were home to substantial and varied foreign populations. Greeks, Italians, Armenians, and the Syro-Lebanese played a vital role in the commercial economy, while citizens from France, Britain, Belgium, Germany, and Austria also had a very important presence (Kitroeff 1989; Mansfield 1971; Ismail and Gabriel 2012; Zimmerli Hardman 2008). The large number of Italian architects sometimes gave cities like Alexandria a distinctive Italian feel, although the plurality of nationalities present meant that their residential patterns and tastes produced a very varied, cosmopolitan urban landscape (Awad 2008: 5–11). Often there were attempts to blend

European architectural influences with local traditions, most notably in the famous suburb of Heliopolis on the outskirts of Cairo (Fig. 1), the place where Suzanne Mubarak was brought up and one of the first areas to face sustained efforts at urban conservation (Van Loo and Bruwier 2010).

The richness of Egypt's urban heritage was not always appreciated by the post-1952 regimes. Urban planning focused on developing new centers, New Cairo, Mohandiseen and, later, desert cities on the urban periphery. In recent years, not only has the European architectural heritage been largely ignored by the government, developers have sometimes seen its 'foreignness' as an argument for demolition and redevelopment. Perhaps the most notorious example of this came in 2013, when Mai el-Tabbakh of the Stanly Group development corporation condemned foreign communities for building 'architectural Disneylands,' suggesting that local people did not feel any connection with them for 'historical and colonial reasons' (Athanasiadis 2013). There is rich irony in this statement as the Stanly Group is itself a foreign company, based in the United Arab Emirates, and is famous for developing American-style hotels and malls in Egypt. Although redevelopment is



FIG. 1
European urban forms meet local traditions: European-style shopping arcades meet Baron Empain's vision of neo-Islamic architecture in Heliopolis, Cairo. (Photo by J. Moore.)



FIG. 2
Alexandria's 'Cinema Paradiso'—
the entrance to the famous
art-deco Rialto Cinema shortly
before it was controversially
demolished. (Photo by J. Moore.)

sometimes cloaked in a nationalist message, it is the substantial returns on investment that drive the redevelopment process, with el-Tabbakh admitting to a journalist that “you cannot imagine how profitable it is” (Athanasiadis 2013). Rapid urbanization, the growth of a consumer economy and a weak Egyptian currency has made investment in Egyptian real estate attractive, especially as the regulatory framework that governs the redevelopment of historical sites has a number of potential weaknesses.

The Stanly Group was involved in one of the most notorious cases of demolition in Alexandria in recent years, the destruction of the Rialto Cinema (Fig. 2). This was by no means the first demolition of a famous place of public resort; in 1999, the redevelopment of the San Stefano Casino, a building dating back to 1886, provided some of the first stirrings of heritage activism in Egypt. However, the end of the Rialto Cinema, located in the city center on 36 Safya Zaghloul Street, represented the loss of a building enjoyed by generations of Alexandrians and holidaymakers from across Egypt. Built in a celebrated art-deco style, it represented the city at its most affluent and self-confident, where Durrell had watched

“Brief Encounter” and a place that had inspired a generation of Egyptian movie-goers and future film-makers (Fouad 2013). The bitterness caused was aggravated by the circumstances of its loss. The Greek-Egyptian owner allegedly sold the cinema to a developer on the condition that it would be renovated, in the same way that the nearby Amir and Rio theaters had recently been restored. Almost overnight, it was demolished on the orders of the Stanly Group to be replaced by a shopping mall. The incident highlighted a major gap in heritage conservation laws—the lobby group Save Alexandria estimates that twenty-five historic cinemas in the city have been lost, and only five renovated and restored (Fouad 2013).

Weaknesses in Conservation- and Planning-Protection Law

Even buildings that are on the conservation list have not been safe. Three cases, in particular, were so controversial that, unusually, they attracted attention outside Egypt. The threatened demolition of the Aghion Villa, built by

celebrated French architects Gustave and Auguste Perret, caused such outrage that even the French consulate intervened in a desperate attempt to halt the developer's action. The owner, who had previously tried to demolish the building in 2009, responded by pledging to 'send it to dust in 72 hours,' boasting that he had demolition permits signed by district officials and accusing his opponents of 'extortion' (*Al Ahram* 2014). When the international press took an interest, the owner blamed foreign governments for failing to provide the funds for restoration. It was only the intervention of the governor of Alexandria that put a temporary stop to the demolition, although by that time the majority of the building had been destroyed (Kingsley 2014). The decay and partial demolition of Villa Ambron has also attracted attention. Famous for its associations with Lawrence Durrell and where he wrote *Prospero's Cell*, it was a major stop for official tour guides of the city. The response of the owners to complaints from overseas was to put the remains of the building on offer for an absurd five million dollars (Spencer 2013). Finally, the partial demolition of the Cicurel Villa highlighted the general lawlessness that exists around the built environment. The Cicurel, famous for its associations with one of Egypt's most prominent textile families, faced several illegal attempts at demolition in 2012. Just over three years later another attempt was made, with little intervention from the authorities or the police. Only a public outcry and a potential public order problem seemed to persuade the authorities to take action. General Saeed Fawal, head of the district, eventually intervened, making it clear that no demolition authority had been given (Fouad 2015). In each of these cases, the buildings were damaged so badly that they were placed beyond economic repair.

Why, then, are legal protections still so apparently weak and is it possible that the situation will improve? The security and political vacuum largely ended with the Al Sisi coup/revolution and the new government has shown promising signs of protecting some forms of built heritage, especially in the downtown-Cairo area. The importance of built heritage has been recognized in law for some time. Historically, Egypt has offered relatively strong legislative protection for some older built-heritage sites. Law 215 of 1952 provided protection for objects and sites dating before 1879, with more

modern assets protected if they could be shown to be of national importance. Law 117/1983 abolished the 1879 cut-off date and created a 'hundred year' protection rule, while allowing for protection of more recent objects if they were of archaeological or architectural value or of historical importance. Objects less than one hundred years old could be protected by prime ministerial decree, on the recommendation of a minister of culture. This system of decree was not, however, used all that extensively and seems to have only protected around forty buildings between 1983 and 2002 (Volait 2013). In 1997, a 'National campaign for the preservation of architectural heritage in modern Egypt' was launched with the active support of Hosni and Suzanne Mubarak. This led to a number of local initiatives and, in 1998, a new military law designed to prevent the demolition of historic buildings. Unfortunately, this was subject to a challenge in the Supreme Court and was struck down. Predictably, developers sought to exploit the legal vacuum and the government was forced to legislate quickly in order to restore some of the protections (Dorghamy 2006). The result was the poorly-drafted Law 144/2006, which created important loopholes for developers and has often been misunderstood by those charged with upholding the protection it afforded.

Important buildings were now placed into two categories. Historic buildings (Group A) were protected under Law 117/1983, while heritage buildings (Group B) under the new Law 144/2006. The intention was to provide a new system of listing for more recent buildings, with the prime minister acting on recommendation of the Ministry of Culture. Unfortunately, while the Ministry of State for Antiquities Affairs was charged with protecting buildings under Law 117/1983, no individual ministry was given responsibility for enforcing protections on these more modern buildings. Law 144/2006 was also ambiguous in its definition of the listing process. Under the new statute, the Ministry of Housing was required to compensate those owners whose buildings were listed, but it was not stated how this compensation should be evaluated or when it should be paid. Appeals could be made against listing to a government agency, in effect stalling the process. This gave owners time to damage or partly demolish properties and, consequently, undermine the original case for listing (El Sayed 2010). Worse

still, owners and developers could challenge listing decisions in local courts and apply for individual buildings to be de-listed. Confusion over the criteria for designating something a 'heritage building' made matters worse. In some cases, in order to have a building delisted, appellants simply produced an antiquities expert to declare that the building was not an antiquity. Following court decisions, up to February 2014 the Ministry of Housing has been forced to delist at least 37 buildings, removing their statutory protection. This explains how many Belle Époque buildings met their fate (Fouad 2014). In some cases, even the intervention of the central government has had little practical effect, once delisting had begun. The Aghion Villa is a case in point; the administrative court issued a ruling that the villa was not of 'archaeological' interest, after which its owners obtained a demolition permit. Shocked by the public reaction, the governor of Alexandria, Tarek al-Mahdy approached the prime minister, Hazem Beblawy, who suspended the demolition permit. It did not prevent further demolition from taking place (*Egypt Independent* 2016b).

The listing process is, itself, far from transparent. Recommendations for listing usually arise from local officials, although there does not appear to be any process through which the public or non-governmental organizations can effect recommendations. The law of 2006 supposedly covered around 1,135 buildings and, while this is a substantial number, it does not cover all properties that activists regard as important (Rollins 2015). There have, however, been some local initiatives to improve protections. In 1998, the governor of Cairo set up a special committee with the intention of protecting the most important nineteenth- and twentieth-century buildings in the city. A key aim of this committee was to produce a detailed list of buildings worth preserving and include them in the formal listing process. Locally, new planning laws have been enacted to prevent the over-development of traditionally low-density historic areas, such as Garden City, Heliopolis, and Maadi. A presidential decree 37/2001 created a new body, the National Organization for Urban Harmony (NOUH), which would work with local governorates to identify buildings suitable for protection. The position of the NOUH was strengthened in 2008, with the intention that conservation areas with restrictions on development could be enacted (Volait 2013). This does

seem to have protected some key locations. The demolition of the 'illegal floors' of the Heliopolis Tower were a notable, if rare, example of zoning regulations having a practical effect. Law 119/2010 also introduced a revised building code for certain areas, restricting the size of new buildings. It did not prevent the demolition of older buildings, but, in some areas, may have reduced the financial incentive for future demolition by making it harder to replace low-rise villas with more profitable high-rise apartments (El Sayed 2010).

Types of Threat to Urban Heritage

In order to understand the threats to more recent Group-B-heritage buildings in Egypt, one needs to appreciate the wider pressures on Egyptian urban systems. A concentration of urban economic activity, rapid population growth, severe road congestion, and poor mass transit systems have resulted in a fierce competition for residential land in major Egyptian cities, with local population densities in Alexandria and Cairo being some of the highest in the world. However, local property markets are heavily distorted by a system of protected rents that date back to the Nasser era. Rents in old, protected apartments can be as low as 10 Egyptian pounds (less than half a US dollar) per month (*Community Times* 2014). This, of course, provides no incentives for investment by landlords. Meanwhile, rents in new developments are rising sharply and providing a good return on capital. The patterns of demand for land in Egyptian cities vary considerably, but it is often the nineteenth- and twentieth-century parts of Egyptian cities that are under the most pressure. Places like Roushdy in Alexandria, once an airy suburb on the fringe of the city, are now regarded as convenient central locations and ripe for redevelopment (Fig. 3). Even when historic buildings do survive, they are often quickly surrounded by high-rise developments, reducing their desirability as homes and making their preservation even more unlikely (Fig. 4). Once permission for demolition is given for one historic villa in a neighborhood, others sense an opportunity to follow, with the result that whole areas can change within a short time.

Straightforward demolition is not, however, the only threat to Egypt's modern built heritage. Demolitions



FIG. 3
One of the many neo-classical buildings on the Alexandrian seafront, typical of those now under threat from high-rise development. (Photo by J. Moore.)



FIG. 4
A semi-detached apartment villa in Heliopolis, Cairo, now overwhelmed by the high-rise developments around it. (Photo by J. Moore.)

attract the most public attention, but more subtle forms of decay may provide the more serious long-term threat, especially to touristic areas such as downtown Cairo and central Alexandria. Perhaps the most common 'heritage crime' in Egypt is the radical transformation of historic buildings in ways that destroys their aesthetics and, sometimes, shortens their life. The most obvious to visitors is the replacement of tradition shopfronts with those modeled on multinational businesses (Fig. 5). Sometimes the transformation is designed primarily to create more floor-space, although often this is not the object. There are very few cases in Egypt of municipalities or governorates restricting shopfronts. The historic



FIG. 5
This early twentieth-century building, on a corner in Al Ahram, Heliopolis, has been transformed by a modern shopfront and the addition of several new floors. (Photo by J. Moore.)

center of Alexandria, famous for the richness of its retail landscape, is gradually succumbing to a cult of modernization that is transforming the streetscape. This is particularly noticeable in the fashionable Fouad Street, where new coffee bars and luxury shops have appeared, but it can be seen in mixed districts too. Mobile telephone companies and electronics companies are prominent offenders. In some cases the transformations are so extreme that they obliterate the lower floors of the original building completely, leaving only the upper floors unaffected (Fig. 6).

Occasionally, some forms of radical modification are so extreme that they do attract public attention and comment, sometimes influencing the behavior of developers. Perhaps the best example of this in recent years is the case of the former Majestic Hotel in Alexandria, built by Henri Gorra in 1912. The Majestic was one of the first major luxury hotels in Alexandria and, for a while,



FIG. 6
Radical modification of this shopfront in Alexandria has left little of the original character intact. (Photo by J. Moore.)

was the residency of E. M. Forster (Haag 2004: 13–14). Although the building had long ceased to be a hotel, it survived largely unchanged until 2011. Shortly after the revolution, one of its two famous cupolas inexplicably collapsed, raising suspicions that the owners had started to demolish them and were attempting to add additional floors without permission. Adding additional floors or roof shelters to historic buildings had long been a practice in Egypt. While roof shelters to house servants may not do long-term damage to a building, there has been increasing concern that the addition of multiple floors to buildings can undermine the stability

of elderly structures. For the conservationist, of course, it can often damage the whole appearance of the building and destroy its core historic features. Ultimately, the owner of the Majestic agreed to 'restore' the cupolas, but only after he had been allowed to add two additional floors. The new cupolas ended up looking nothing like the originals, while the additional floors ruined the proportions of the building (Fig. 7). The consequence was a new Majestic that was little more than a pastiche of the old (Said and Borg 2017).

As developers have become more aware of the concerns of heritage activists, the danger of historical



FIG. 7

The addition of new floors and new cupolas on the famous Majestic Hotel building, destroying its original character. (Photo by J. Moore.)

pastiches, 'façadism' and Disneyesque reconstructions of historic buildings increases. Some of the most important modern buildings in Egypt have already suffered this fate. A recent conference on Egyptian heritage hosted by Egypt's Science and Technology Development Fund was held, without any sense of irony, at the former Khedivial Lodge in Zamalek, transformed, very unsympathetically, into a modern hotel (Arts and Humanities Research Council 2015). Sold off in the 1970s, the original building survived, only to be surrounded by modern hotel tower blocks that completely overshadow the historic structure. The interior became little more than a historical pastiche, reflecting little of the genuine history of the building. Sadly, such crude acts are not limited to the past. In December 2016, Cairenes were shocked to hear that the deputy governor of Cairo, Major General Mohammed Abdel Tawab, had approved a demolition order for the Intercontinental Hotel, a historical building on the corner of Adly and Al-Gomhoreya streets, in the famous Abdeen area of the city. The order was on the condition that the future building should keep the same 'architectural character and shape.' The head of the NOUH, Mohamed Abu Seada, approved the proposals, arguing that the façade would remain the same. Others doubted how much of the building would be preserved and the permit attracted strong public criticism from Zahi Hawass, a former minister of antiquities (*Egypt Independent* 2016c). For some, the incident raised serious questions over the independence of NOUH, particularly when faced with the lobbying of power corporations, such as the Egyptian General Company for Tourism and Hotels, who were behind the Intercontinental demolition application. There is also a broader question about the degree to which architects on public projects appreciate the importance of retaining the key historical features of major buildings and, in particular, protecting the heritage of their interiors (Fig. 8). The refurbishment of Cairo's main railway station was widely welcomed, but the transformation of its interior came under sharp criticism for failing to retain important original features. The station is important as it exemplifies the Neo-Mamluk style that was so prominent in Cairene architecture in the late Victorian and Edwardian era. For Fahmy, one of Egypt's most prominent modern historians, the Neo-Mamluk

features had been replaced by "a style that is ostensibly pharaonic but which actually seems closer to that of Las Vegas casinos or Abu Dhabi glass malls" (Fahmy 2012). Perhaps even more worrying was the fate of the Egyptian National Railway Museum, a small building attached to the side of the station (*ARE National Railway Museum Catalogue* 1975). The museum was one of the first national railway museums and until recently retained much of its original 1930s interior. Its recent 'refurbishment' entirely removed the historic interior, part of its old collection disappeared and a historic locomotive, previously conserved under cover, was crudely repainted and placed on a plinth outside the station.

Yet perhaps the most serious long-term threat to Egypt's historic environment is neglect, decay, and insufficient capital to realize conservation projects that have been long planned. Outdated rent-control laws provide no incentive for investment in much city-center historic property. A functioning and open property market barely exists in some traditional areas, with word of mouth being the only way to find out and secure a rental property. The problem is compounded by government policies that encourage the development of new retail and commercial spaces on the edge of cities, but rarely incentivize investors to regenerate historic centers. This sometimes creates absurdities, including the attempt to create a 'City Center Alexandria' shopping mall, outside not only the city center, but outside the city itself. By relocating 'prestige' businesses out of cities, investors and consumers are drawn even further away from heritage locations. Even in places where there is a significant middle-class population and a relatively buoyant economy, such as central Alexandria and Heliopolis in Cairo, this has severe consequences. Historic hotels on Alexandria's seafront are decaying and suffering from years of insufficient investment. Luxury villas in Heliopolis lie abandoned, occupied only by watchmen or squatters. Outside these prosperous areas, the built heritage of peripheral towns is sometimes completely abandoned.

The once-celebrated spa town of Helwan, south of Cairo, is in a particularly sad condition, and probably one that is irreversible. Helwan was once the most prestigious health resort in Egypt, with foreign residents coming to take the famous waters, recuperate in its

hospitals or cross the Nile to visit the nearby Giza pyramids. Following a period of decline in the inter-war years, its character gradually changed (Moore 2014: 94–96). Under the Nasser regime it faced a program of forced industrialization and sequestration, resulting in the flight of many of its more wealthy residents. However, until recently it retained many of its traditional features, including its baths and public buildings. Many of these have now been abandoned. Its two main hospitals still stand but are in ruins. Many of its 'colonial-style' chalets have gone or are unoccupied. A single, very ramshackle, former pension reminds visitors of the grandeur that once was Helwan's tourist industry (Fig. 9). The chance

of any of these buildings being restored or renovated seems very remote. Although Helwan is on the southern tip of the Cairo suburban-railway network and home to a vibrant university, there is hardly any potential for touristic interest in industrial Helwan. While domestic tourism and nostalgia may help protect Alexandria, middle-class consumerism assist Heliopolis, a major question remains about the fate of smaller cities. Port Said and Suez have been partly protected by the Suez Canal Company and a small amount of international tourism has provided the protection for some heritage businesses. The independent 'Woolworths' store in Port Said deliberately traded on its colonial heritage, in the same



FIG. 8
Historic interiors with ornate ironwork and historic elevators are a feature of many older Alexandrian hotels. (Photo by J. Moore.)



FIG. 9
The Helwan Pension: one of the few remaining buildings from Helwan's 'golden age' of tourism. (Photo by J. Moore.)

way that restaurants and bars in Heliopolis help keep alive historic buildings. The Heliopolis House Hotel, now primarily a sheesha café, trades on its history, as does its neighboring L'Amphitryon bar, reminding customers of its origins in 1922. Sometimes banks have stepped in to rescue prestigious buildings; the former Italian consulate in Alexandria became a branch of AlexBank (Fig. 10). The difficulty is that there is insufficient investment available from banking or leisure enterprises, especially in areas without substantial tourism or a middle class with disposable income. Towns that lack these prerequisites, whether they be Cairo suburbs, such as Helwan, or delta towns, such as Tanta and Mansoura, face difficult prospects.

A key reason for the abandonment of buildings is, of course, social change. The removal of the middle class to distant suburbs and changes in the tourist economy are inescapable features of this change, but the loss of older foreign communities is also a factor in some areas. The closure and demolition of the Greek Club in Alexandria's Ibrahimeya district was mourned by many. Although not of great architectural importance, it represented an important part of an intangible cosmopolitan heritage that is rapidly being lost (Morayef 2012). The sheer number of buildings abandoned or partially abandoned



FIG. 10
The former Italian consulate in Alexandria, now occupied by AlexBank. (Photo by J. Moore.)



FIG. 11
The Anglican (Episcopal) Pro-Cathedral in Alexandria, still active despite the loss of its English-speaking congregation. (Photo by J. Moore.)

by foreign communities creates a logistical problem for which there is no straightforward policy solution. Where foreign governments and institutions retain some presence, they are often able to protect the remnants of their built heritage. The Episcopal (Anglican) church has adapted to the loss of English congregations by encouraging congregations from other Episcopal communities in Africa, including the small Egyptian and Sudanese Episcopal community. The Pro-Cathedral in Alexandria no longer hosts English-language services, but its Arabic-speaking congregation is still active (Fig. 11). St. Michael's church in Heliopolis has become a community church and drawn in other European nationalities and become a center for the local Sudanese community, including those of the Muslim faith (Fig. 12).

This strategy cannot work in all cases. The Jewish Synagogue in Heliopolis lies abandoned and forgotten, while those in Alexandria and Cairo remain under uneasy state protection, reminders of a community that has all but disappeared. While there remains a strong Roman Catholic community in Egypt, many of the wealthy families who supported its churches have left, leaving congregations with limited resources to maintain buildings that are much larger than their modern requirements. Even



FIG. 12
The Anglican (Episcopal) church in Heliopolis, a very English-style church looking somewhat out-of-place in its Egyptian surroundings. (Photo by J. Moore.)

the celebrated St. Catherine's Cathedral in Alexandria is suffering from water ingress and damage to its historic interior (Fig. 13). 'Foreign' schools continue to prosper in wealthier urban areas, with French Catholic and Greek Orthodox schools remaining in Cairo and Alexandria, preserving not only educational traditions but also the historic buildings they inhabit. However, the survival of these schools is mainly because of their strong reputations amongst middle-class Egyptians; few foreigners or foreign governments are actively involved in their management and they are required to be self-sufficient. The departure of foreign workers since the revolution has further diluted Egypt's cosmopolitanism, with further consequences for the demand for school places and the market in historic properties. In 2009, the British Community Association helped secure the future of a historic villa in Maadi by turning it into a new social club. The departure of members since the revolution means that this is now likely to close, a move that could place the future of the site in doubt (pers. comm. with Michael Mulligan, BCA member, February, 18, 2017).

The Rise of Community Activism

The legacy of the revolution is not, however, an entirely negative one. One of the noticeable aspects of civic life after the revolution was the proliferation of community activist groups. While both the Morsi and, later, the Sisi government have been accused of clamping down on unauthorized protests and restricting these groups, not all voices have been silenced. Heritage seems to be one area where the state has allowed space for political protest. In Alexandria, young activists who had previously been associated with other popular movements, such as those against police violence, began to turn their attention to the heritage of the city, partly as a way of opposing what they saw as corruption in the heart of local government and the courts. Social media became an important tool for spreading resistance and highlighting abuses of the listing system. The Walls of Alex blog highlighted how a 'construction mafia' exploited legal loopholes, corrupt district engineers and a malleable police service to gain demolition permits and evade building controls (Ali 2012).



FIG. 13
The Roman Catholic Cathedral, St. Catherine's of Alexandria, showing signs of serious interior damage. (Photo by J. Moore.)

The 'Save Alex' group, an informal group of academics, architects, and activists, also developed a strong online presence, helping to turn outrage into street activism and vigils (*Community Times* 2014). Many civil society campaign groups were informally linked to campaigners in the academic sector. Even before the revolution, the Alexandria and Mediterranean Research Centre at the new Alexandria Library, had been prominent in organizing popular initiatives and town trails to draw attention

of residents and visitors to the cosmopolitan heritage of the city. Excellent tourist maps, with details of the major modern heritage sites, have been published in several languages (El Fadaly 2008). The Alexandria Preservation Trust produced both scholarly and popular publications, highlighting the richness of the city's heritage and the recent losses. Mohamed Awad, a former director of the center and a prominent member of the Trust, attracted international attention for his outstanding study of the Italian built heritage in the city (Awad 2008). Michael Haag, a regular visitor to Alexandria, also attracted a wider English-speaking audience to Alexandria with his important literary history that celebrated its many associations with Forster, Durrell, and Cavafy (Haag 2004). His subsequent photographic essay reinforced the vision of Alexandria as a dreamy, nostalgic place—but one that was under imminent threat (Haag 2008).

Independent journalists and writers also helped stimulate heritage activism in Cairo. The most prominent of these was Samir Rafaat. His most remarkable book, *Cairo: The Glory Years*, celebrated the city at its zenith and provided fascinating details on the origins of key buildings in Cairo's modern landscape (Rafaat 2003). In addition to publishing regular articles in the Cairo press, Rafaat also developed an antiquarian blog on modern Cairo, with detailed, carefully-researched essays on lost and threatened buildings across the city (Rafaat 2011). Rafaat is particularly interested in the cosmopolitan aspects of the built environment and the rich architectural traditions of the early twentieth-century suburbs. His work on Maadi (Rafaat 1994) stimulated wider interest in suburban history, including Abed's less detailed but valuable work on Zamalek (Abed 2013). Photographic studies have also appeared, most notably Myntti's work that places Cairo's downtown architecture firmly in the tradition of the Belle Époque (Myntti 1999). The success of these studies not only demonstrated public interest in the built heritage of Cairo, but also provided the resources for activist groups to make strong cases for the preservation of the historic environment. Many of these groups have prioritized education initiatives to persuade the public of the importance of protecting modern historic landscapes and archaeology. Although Alexandria often produced the most high-profile heritage campaigns, Cairo was also

home to a growing number of heritage-activist groups, with Treasures of Egypt at Risk, the Front for Saving Egyptian Antiquities, Save al-Moez Street, the Heliopolis Heritage Initiative and the Egyptian Archaeologist, all emerging to prominence in the months that immediately followed the revolution (Keshk 2012).

Public education programs have taken several forms. 'Alternative' tours that focus on a particular aspect of urban cultural heritage have become popular. The Cairo Laboratory for Urban Studies Training and Environmental Research combined tours of downtown Cairo, led by students, with small maps and micro guides aimed at visitors (CLUSTER 2017). In Alexandria, campaign groups have worked with local businesses to raise awareness of the value of heritage. Recently, activists have supported the Sigma company, a group led by architects, in initiatives to protect the historic Fouad Street (*Egypt Independent* 2016d). There have also been attempts to systematically document the changing urban landscape. In an attempt to raise awareness of the rapidity of change, Mostafa Mamdouh and Abdellah Hanafy have begun an ambitious project to photograph the changes that have taken place between 1996 and 2016 (*Egypt Independent* 2016e). Interestingly, it is not just in Cairo and Alexandria that the built heritage of Egypt is increasingly being appreciated. In Mansoura, a Make Heritage Fun initiative organized public walks and a sketch competition to document and highlight the famous Red Palace, the El Mehalawy Villa, and El Shenawy Building (Make Heritage Fun 2016). In Port Said, the Civil Campaign for Protecting Port Said's Heritage, the Port Said Writers' and Artists' Association, and the Islamic Arts and Archaeology Association came together to protest against the granting of a demolition order to the owner of one of the city's most famous wooden-balconied buildings (Khaled 2012). This led to a rapid growth of education programs about the city's heritage and the creation of the Port Said Heritage Initiative and Port Said Ala Adimo, bodies committed to working with the government to demonstrate the economic potential of the city's built heritage in future tourist strategies (Kafafi 2016). The development of these dynamic community groups has raised the possibility of a national network for the protection of Egypt's modern built heritage. In October

2016, the Ministry of Antiquities helped host the first 'Of People and Heritage Festival,' bringing together activist groups and heritage professionals from across Egypt and signaling at least some degree of official approval for the voluntary organizations involved in community heritage activism.¹

There is some reason to suppose that Egyptian state authorities now regard the country's modern archaeology as an important part of its cultural heritage. A recent Anglo-Egyptian cultural heritage fund, co-sponsored by the Egyptian government, provided financial support for a number of modern projects that were in direct competition with those on ancient Egypt (Arts and Humanities Research Council 2015). Downtown Cairo has become the focus of an extensive regeneration project, designed to clean up the area and restore it as a heritage showpiece. This government initiative has been facilitated through a partnership with the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, who engaged professional advisors (OHK Consultants) to develop "a workable urban strategy" for the downtown district (OHK Consultants 2016). Collaborating with local businesses and architects, the program offered the possibility of a new regeneration plan that would secure the long-term future of key sites and the historical character of the area (Fadel 2015). Critics have argued that the changes are merely superficial and the forcible displacement of street vendors has created resentment, but it was at least a sign that the central government recognized the importance of protecting the historic character of key central streets for touristic purposes (Fadel 2015; *Egypt Independent* 2014). There have also been some promising signs in Heliopolis, where Antiquities Minister Khaled al-Anany recently announced that preparatory work had begun on restoring the long-abandoned Baron Empain Palace, the most famous landmark in the suburb (*Egypt Independent* 2016a). Yet, the lack of a coordinated modern-heritage-tourism policy means that other important buildings are still being lost. Public protests were not enough to stop the demolition of another famous building in Heliopolis, the celebrated Swiss Chalet (Abd Elrahman and Mahmoud 2016). Heritage initiatives in Heliopolis have also not been helped by the closure of the historic and very characterful electric tramway between Cairo's

main railway station and the suburb (Fig. 14). The tramway was one of the defining features of the area and its loss was greeted with dismay locally and internationally (Ezzat and Ibrahim 2016).

A Prognosis for the Future?

Providing a prognosis for the future of urban heritage is difficult, not least because of the continuing political instability in the country. In northern Sinai there is an ongoing armed insurgency. Elsewhere, major towns and cities still live under the shadow of insecurity. The Palm Sunday bombings of St. Mark's Orthodox Cathedral in Alexandria and the Mar Girgis Church at Tanta were a tragic reminder of the continuing danger of terrorism, even in major cities (Michaelson 2017). Yet, paradoxically, the Egyptian government's search for political stability may bring some unexpected benefits to those seeking to protect urban heritage. The desire of the government to prevent further street disturbances may mean that leaders will be more reluctant to sanction controversial actions, such as the demolition of historic buildings, for fear of the political backlash from community activists. Despite legal restrictions on political demonstrations, many activists seem more determined than ever to speak out against the destruction of heritage assets. In this sense, the most controversial demolitions could be in the past. High inflation and a stagnant economy may also inhibit the more grandiose schemes to transform the urban environment and thus, in the short term at least, prevent the loss of traditional streetscapes. However, economic problems also mean that historic buildings are left to decay, with local landowners, businesses, and hoteliers lacking the resources and business confidence to invest in heritage assets, even if they have the desire to do so. Landowners suffering from the country's ongoing economic problems may be even more determined to divest themselves of historic buildings, especially as rapid urban population growth means that the construction of high rise residential developments continues to be very profitable.

Economic problems also affect the ability of the central government to provide the financial resources to secure the future of heritage assets. With complaints

that there are insufficient funds to support the country's vast ancient heritage, it is not surprising, perhaps, that funds to support modern heritage, whether it be public buildings, private villas or historic tramways, are scarce. State funding for regeneration initiatives is very limited. Growing public interest in the modern built heritage of Egypt and grudging recognition by the government of the importance of protecting key sites offers some hope for the future. International funding programs, such as those benefiting downtown Cairo, can also provide much needed capital for restoration of key areas, although these initiatives need to be carefully managed, lest they be seen locally as inappropriate foreign interventions. Unfortunately, the combination of continuing insecurity,

reduced international tourism, a weak regulatory framework, petty local corruption, and the huge profits available to those securing demolition permits mean that urban heritage is likely to continue to be an important battleground in local and national politics. The rise in community-heritage activism has been one of the more positive aspects of recent political developments in Egypt and there is undoubtedly increasing awareness of the potential value of modern heritage tourism to the future economy of Egypt. Whether this potential can be realized very much depends on the willingness of local and central governments to take a long-term view, protecting key assets for the future, and the ability of the country to find lasting political stability and internal security.



FIG. 14

Mobile archaeology? Cairo's last tram service, illustrated here, has now been 'suspended.' Alexandria's extensive tramway network continues to operate and is regarded by many visitors as a heritage and touristic asset. (Photo by J. Moore.)

Note

1. Programme: Of People and Heritage Festival. *Al Ahram* October 10, 2016. <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/32/97/245371/Folk/Street-Smart/-Programme-Of-People-and-Heritage-Festival.aspx> (accessed March 22, 2017).

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