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Cairo's Traveling Peep Show Boxes



By Manar Moursi

It's late in the afternoon on Sunday in Manial. Spring has arrived and bubbles are blowing in the air from an ice-cream cart look-alike. Two Cookdoor (fast food chain) employees in identical orange uniforms are seen peeping through the holes of what appears to be a cart but is tinted with pastel colors with a faceted form. A performer's voice rings clear over this untouched quiet stretch of a corniche in Cairo with the words of a *mauwal* of Sheikh Immam:

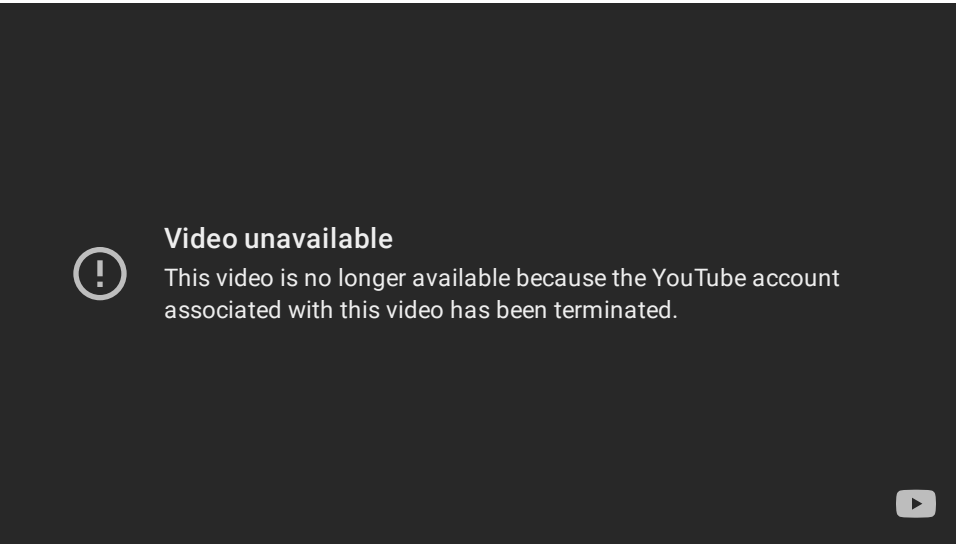
“Protect your candle from the wind

Whether you choose to love or not

The morning is light dear fish;

Love whom you wish”

The ice-cream cart lookalike is the Wonder Box or Sandook El Agab, a storytelling-public art and design project inspired in form and function by the ancient Sandook El Donya/raree that were in use from as far as China to Europe and the Middle East from the 15th century onward. Earlier this month, two seemingly familiar objects a giant disco ball with Islamic patterns and an ice cream cart lookalike, visited the neighborhoods of Heliopolis, Bayn El Sarayat, Shobra El Kheima, Manial, Moqattam, Zamalek, and Ezbet Khairallah to awe and inspire audiences.



The traditional Sandook El Donya often took the form of a simple wooden box with magnifying lenses and a set of prints inside, which along with the storytelling talents of the showmen that accompanied it were a medium through which the public was transported through a magical journey of stories and places they had never seen before.

Italian architect Leon Battista Alberti is credited for the design of the first raree/peep show boxes in 15th century Europe. Alberti's innovation was a mechanism which allowed users to look at perspective views through a small hole in a wooden box. Once viewers set their eyes near the hole they entered a private space of wonder beyond the mundaneness of their daily life. The traditional Sandook El Donya traveled from Italy to Egypt and once here, was modified with a form particular to this region, with puppets and “aragozes” that personified stories relating to this context.

Mahatatat, a collective which brings art to public spaces along with curator Aida El Kashef conceived the idea to revive the medium of the old Sandook El Donya with new forms and techniques in early 2013. A year later, after receiving a generous grant from the Swiss Cooperation in Cairo, they invited 9 artists from multiple disciplines including architects to storytellers and musicians to work collectively on the design, construction and animation of 2 boxes with contemporary forms and techniques. These two boxes would begin their journeys across Cairo traveling from Moqattam to Shobra El Kheima.

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Storytellers Laila El Balouty and Ahmed Mostafa collected stories from taxi and microbus drivers, as they were seen as vehicles which contain and collect everyday stories and myths that circulate around the city. These stories were merged and augmented through fictional devices. El Balouty and Mostafa worked in close collaboration with musicians Shadi El Hosseiny and Abdallah AbouZekry who composed the musical backdrop to the stories. Meanwhile architects Manar Moursi (of **Studio Meem**) and Mohamed Hassan worked alongside the visual arts team (comprised of Maya Gowaily, Yasmin Elayat and Youssef Faltas) to coordinate and integrate their structural constraints in the design of the two boxes.

For the design aspect it was important to visit and see existing traditional sandooks here in Cairo which are currently housed at the Agricultural Museum in Dokki and the Geographical Society in Qasr El Ainy. Further research was done not only on historical forms and techniques but contemporary uses particularly in India where the tradition is still alive in small towns across the subcontinent.



The artists decided from early on that one sandook would integrate traditional techniques with cutouts and projection mapping inside it while looking more futuristic from the outside. In contrast, the other sandook would integrate more interactive techniques while appearing to be more traditional in its exterior. Both sandooks were designed for private immersive experiences for the 4 viewers that were able to look through the holes at a time. The idea was to have 3 stories per sandook and to select members of the audience who could peep through the holes per story. The stories would be repeated in each performance site in order to allow more people to enjoy the experience. An important design objective was therefore to create a strong visual statement with the outer form of the sandook that would still captivate the non-peeping audience as they listened to the storytellers.

For the design aspect of the first sandook, I was inspired by a recent visit to Mashhad in Iran and the mirrored Islamic patterns that seemed to have psychedelic transcendental impact on those who witnessed their interiors. I found those patterns repeated in egg shops and maklas (nut and seed shops) that dot Cairo. Seeing that mirrors were also employed as animation tools in the praxinscope-like techniques used inside the traditional sandooks, it was decided that mirrors in an Islamic pattern would

be projected on a geodesic sphere to reference in some way both the context and these traditional techniques.

The form of a sphere was employed because of its purity and the desire to connect visually to magic crystal and disco balls. The designers wanted Cairo to have it its own giant disco ball that would travel accompanied by two storytellers and fantastical animated illustrations inside. The end result looked futuristic, like a giant space ship had landed in Bayn el Sarayat and in front of the Bazeleek Church in Heliopolis. Traveling around the city in an open truck the mirrors reflected light in brilliant patterns along their path.



The sphere was built as two geodesic domes that fit perfectly onto each other and these domes were further broken into 2 types of triangles that were attached together by joints that could be connected and disconnected. The idea was to construct something that can be assembled and disassembled easily on-site and then stored in a compact form in Mahatat's office for future use.

For the second sandook, the form was derived from the everyday ice cream carts that one sees regularly around the city. The ice cream cart fulfilled both functional (size of projection screen) and aesthetic requirements as it was meant to disarm the viewer who would be called at by its everyday familiar sight with a slightly different palette of colors and form only to discover a whole set of digital interactive wonders to be experienced by peeping through its holes. In this sandook, the peeps were in a two level, dual layered experience for the viewer to move through. The peeps themselves were meant to be somewhat immersive thus their inward facing facets that acted as beehives of sorts to draw the viewers in.

The two sandooks will be traveling to Germany this upcoming July to perform at a university there. Upon their return to Egypt, the goal is to travel with both through different towns and small cities along the Delta.

Once out on the streets, the sandooks acted as transporters through time and space and purveyors of both edification and pleasure. In one story on the loss of the legendary Simon Bolivar's sword, a drive through the city takes viewers to visit statues of the downtown midans, which come to life to startle and delight the viewers with their personal histories and contemporary stories.



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