A CONFEDERACY OF CHAIRS

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Located in the middle of the desert, Cairo is a tropical jungle of chairs. Like moss in the rainforest, they spread from the banks of the Nile to the sidewalks, even spilling occasionally onto the streets. Avenues, alleys and markets serve as the ideal microclimate for their growth.

Visiting Egypt in 1949 for a series of theater presentations, Jean Cocteau wrote in his diary, “Cairo is a city of streets. Everything happens on the street…”[1] confirming what European painters had conveyed a century earlier: Cairo was an animated city of lively bazaars lined with shops and coffeehouses open to the streets. In Orientalist paintings, people were represented sitting on crates made of palm fiber, on heavy wood and stone benches — *dikkas* and *mastabas* — or closer to the floor, on carpets. However, by the 1940s, the four-legged chair had not only penetrated private and public spaces, it had also established itself in the literary imagination of the city. Naguib Mahfouz’s *Midaq Alley*, published in 1947 illustrates this relationship to street chairs: “It is Amm Kamil’s habit, even his right, to place a chair on the threshold of his shop and drop off to sleep with a fly whisk resting in his lap. He will remain there until customers either call out to him or Abbas, the barber, teasingly wakes him.”[2]

Today, Cairo — 20 million people and counting — is a universe in expansion which generates chairs as it spreads. Omnipresent street chairs have become one of the city’s defining fixtures. This growing network of four-legged dots, located between building and street, suggest an alternate monumentality: Cairo, the city of the 1000 mina-

rets is also the city of 1001 chairs.

Many of the chairs found on the streets of Cairo seem as if they've made a journey from another era, like in the famous Yussuf Idris short story, "The Chair Carrier"[3], a text in which a man appears in the Cairo of the 1970s wandering with a Pharaonic throne he has been dragging for centuries on his back. Today, ancient-looking pieces coexist with a myriad of fresher chairs, and interact with *dikkas* and *mastabas*, traditional furniture which continues to be used. All the styles and epochs are represented in what is probably the biggest open-air chair museum of the world. To wander the streets of Cairo is to embark on a non-linear excursion through the history of furniture, one where you might find a monobloc chair in the vicinity of a Rococo seat, or a bentwood Thonet chair flirting with a tubular Bauhaus-style seat.
A museum for a history still in the making, where anonymous designers write new chapters in street corners, mixing times and styles to produce genre-defying chairs in limited or unique editions.

Where to locate then, in the imagination of the city, this wild multitude of chairs? The symbolic connection of chairs with authority travels through the centuries, unaffected by the corrosive effect of time. In Egypt, this enduring association has its roots in the distant past: the oldest known chairs in the world are the magnificent pieces created for the rulers and nobles of Ancient Egypt[4]. Moreover, the hieroglyph for a dignitary in Pharaonic times depicts a man sitting on a chair. Thus, in their historical and political reading, chairs stand above the common man and imply vertical command.

But a chair is also a point of view, a perspective informed by a location. The far-from-perfect, beaten chairs of Cairo speak of the city from below. From the unassuming position of the street, the idea of a unique seat of power vanishes, replaced by the crowds of chairs that occupy small parcels of public space. The panoptic aerial view of the presidential chair disappears, giving way to modest, horizontal glances that capture the city in a fragmented way. Acting at times as zoom and wide-angle lenses, street chairs appear as appropriate tools to reveal intimate details and collective aspects of the urban environment.

With its ability to digest the objects that land on its streets and make them unique in the process, Cairo is a factory that transforms mass-produced chairs into individual characters. Chairs are more than pieces of wood, plastic or metal assembled to defy gravity; they also carry scars and personal signatures on their bodies.

The streets chairs of Cairo bear the particular charm of imperfection. Their appeal lies in the way in which the passage of time, and the interventions of their owners to reverse it, has made each of them unique. Fixed and decorated with the resources at hand, they are old and worn out, yet startlingly fresh and appealing. They project the attention they have been granted, becoming indirect portraits of their owners. Sometimes, they reflect, in a strange mimetic way, the spaces

of the city where they are stationed, camouflaging like chameleons with the sidewalk.

If, strictly speaking, *Sidewalk Salon: 1001 Street Chairs of Cairo* is a photographic documentation of original chairs found on the streets of Cairo, in a larger sense, it deals with the material and human dimensions of a particular layer of the city. Invisible in the frames, owners and users of street chairs are present through the pages of this volume. Though empty chairs appear in focus at the center of the pictures, the edges of the images are equally telling. Borrowing an expression from the photographer William Gedney, one can say that the territory of this book is a strip at the "bottom of pyramids"[5].

I.

By choice or by necessity, Cairenes work and socialize in large numbers on the sidewalk and the streets of the city. To understand the origin and the persistence of the practices of sitting and gathering in public spaces, socio-economic, cultural and urban factors have to be taken into consideration. From an economic perspective, the incapacity of Cairo to provide enough jobs in the formal sector, explains why for so many people work is an outdoor activity. With the demographic explosion and the massive rural-urban exodus, the containing dams of Cairo gave up in the second half of the 20th century, releasing floods of people onto the streets of the city. Year after year, large battalions of young Egyptians join the informal sector or spend long, idle, poorly paid hours on the pavement.

For security guards, work is almost undistinguishable from waiting. More often than not, a workday is a flat lapse of time between two shifts spent looking at the surroundings for any suspicious movement. To endure these journeys of emptiness, a chair is essential. The wait of a doorman is usually similar but less static, since they have the option to retreat to their small rooms. The movements of the parking attendants of the city are determined by the rhythms of traffic. Usually surveying the theatre of operations from the shade, they emerge from their protected spots when a driver needs their services and sink back to their chairs once their task has been accomplished.

Market vendors take equally long shifts on the sidewalk but face specific problems in keeping their seats safe at night. In bustling markets like Ataba, it is not uncommon to find, past midnight, chairs lying out on the sidewalk without their owners. Street peddlers place them, for the night, in horizontal positions or upside down on top of their wrapped stands, relieving them from the tension of the day. They attach them with chains to a light post or a column, almost as if to prevent them from wandering too far. In the silence of the night, these chairs will rest while cats in heat rub themselves against their legs.

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The gender codes of the city play an important role in shaping the patterns of socialization and impact public behavior. Although women circulate all over the city on their own, by foot, by car or by public transport, their absence on the sidewalk reveals the way in which gender and spatial dynamics intersect. Broadly speaking, Cairo is like a Russian doll whose inner and domestic layers are more feminine than its masculine outer and more visible skins.

Despite the increase of mixed gender cafes in the upper middle class and rich enclaves of the city, the vast majority of coffeehouses in Cairo continue to be masculine territories. Considered a heretic drink initially, in the sixteenth century, coffee progressively became accepted as the drink of the "tavern without wine", where men could entertain away from home[6]. From tiny hole-in-the-walls in the Islamic city to expansive affairs in the faded splendor of downtown, the contemporary coffeehouses of Cairo come in all shapes and sizes, usually offering indoor and outdoor seating. Their basic kit-of-parts is always the same: a tiled room with a drinks counter and, lining the walls and pavement, tables and dozens of chairs, constantly arranged and rearranged as the clients come and go, alone, in pairs or in large groups. When the flow of clients requires it, cafes expand and push the boundaries of their territorial waters. Seen from above, these chairs on the sidewalk are archipelagos of moving islands where new atolls pop up and disappear throughout the night.

Wide avenues, commercial and industrial districts also remain male dominated. In spaces characterized by a loose social fabric and the constant flow of unrelated people, almost all the professional activities linked to the pavement are reserved for men. Workers from dark, narrow workshops are regularly drawn to the sidewalk, where empty chairs lie expecting them, for the pauses that punctuate their days. Some shopkeepers spend more time by their storefront than behind their counters. Sitting by the door, they appear in an amphibious position at the threshold between "the outside and the inside, action and inaction"[7], work and leisure. Navigating in those areas under the constant fire of the male gaze, women are exposed to eyes that mark their bodies with burning lasers of desire. The anonymity of the crowds plays against women: it empowers men with a freedom that encourages them too often to cross the red line of sexual harassment.

In the more intimate regions of the city, particularly in popular neighborhoods with a strong sense of community, women socialize on the sidewalk with less restriction. This is the case on the edges of Cairo, where urban villages are the hybrid results of the expansion of the city into agricultural land. In places like Um Khenan, in the southern border of the city, the textures of the afternoons are clearly feminine. While some women finish or continue their household chores in broad daylight — cleaning utensils or chopping vegetables for the dinner — others gather with their babies for long gossip sessions. Like in the countryside, permanent and collective structures for sitting are, by far,

more common than individual chairs. Cement benches run parallel to the front walls of buildings and can host many more people than a regular sofa. The stairways that lead to the slightly elevated entrance of houses are miniature amphitheatres, overlooking the unpaved roads where men pass by on donkeys, on their way back from the fields before sunset.

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This sense of community is not only a reality in the peri-urban margins of the city: it also persists in the heart of Cairo, in the informal settlements[8] and in the older urban quarters. There, poor and middle class Cairenes meet in front of their buildings as if the sidewalks were the natural extensions of apartments — replacing nonexistent balconies and verandas — becoming wider and more comfortable versions of tiny and congested salons. The model for this fluid and expansive notion of home can be traced back to the *harra*[9] of the medieval city where, over centuries, houses built up around alleys developed "a notion of a collective home, in which boundaries between individual houses were seen as less significant than the collective territory."[10]

The outdoor living rooms of the city are family affairs: men and women sit together while kids run around, friends and relatives are welcomed and entertained, cups of tea flow from the kitchens to the street. Depending on the occasion, singular constellations of chairs are drawn and erased on the pavement. When invited to spend time on a neighbors' sidewalk, people are expected to carry their own chairs. When guests show up in large numbers from the countryside or from another area of the city, chairs are borrowed to make everyone feel at home. Sidewalks are often as equipped as living rooms. Mobile phones provide the music. Until late, groups of young men watch movies sitting around their laptops. During major sports events like the football World Cup, friends congregate in front of large flat screens facing the street.

Exceptional circumstances also require spaces that cramped apartments don't provide, and command specific and recognizable displays of chairs in the streets. Private companies called *ferasha* rent out resistant metal-framed chairs to fulfill the demand for special occasions. For weddings and funerals, they deliver the requested amount of chairs and pick them up after the end of the event. One or two rows of austere chairs lining the entrance of a building signal the death of a neighbor; chairs and tables under a colorful tent set in an alley announce the imminent celebration of a union.

Ramadan comes with a particular month long choreography of tables and chairs rehearsed over the years. Every day, as the afternoon progresses and the time of breaking the fast approaches, tables are spread out on streets and sidewalks, connected like the wagons of long trains. Flanked on both sides by chairs, these tables bring to mind

an image of a centipede with 100 legs of chairs. On those tables, free food is offered to break the fast. Anyone can join but it is usually people with limited resources who enjoy the charity. Tables fill until no chair is left empty and the “train” leaves with no passengers, soon after food and drinks have been served. Tables are folded and chairs are packed until the next day. Cars, stalls and passers-by immediately reclaim the space that had been confiscated for a couple of hours.

II.

Some chairs have been in the same spot on the sidewalk for so long that their legs have become like nails hammered into the pavement. From these chairs, fixed like cinema hall seats, one can enjoy the movie of the city: an un-interrupted realist film with bits of action, set religious pauses and occasional sensual moments stirred by young women who pass by in tight clothes. Offering a more intimate view than windows, which place the observer outside the stage, street chairs allow the viewer to be an actor, to monitor the surroundings while being immersed in them.

The streets of Cairo are equally stimulating for the eye and for the ear. The usual soundtrack of the city is a tapestry that weaves together a constant tremor of automobiles, distant passing voices and passionate conversations, occasional strident motorbike honks, shouts from short erupting fights and the regular call for prayer. Cairo can also be likened to a silent movie with birdsong interspersed through its early morning moments of stillness, especially on Fridays, in some narrow alleys of its hinterlands away from the main avenues. Even in the middle of the agitation of everyday life, escaping from the crowds of streets and homes, Cairenes have learned to isolate themselves. They sit on their own on the sidewalk or at a small cafe table, apart from noisy groups of friends. With a cup of tea, eventually a water pipe, lost in their thoughts or beyond thoughts, indifferent to their surrounding agitation. Immobile and at rest except for their inhalations, it is as if they are experienced practitioners of *Shikantaza*, Japanese Buddhism’s “art of just sitting”.

Meditations set on an unchanged frame extend sometimes for a lifetime. In the same position for hours, staring blankly at the street, falling asleep more and more often, a *bawab*[11] ages. His tired eyes reject the drops he applies every morning. They run down his cheeks like tears. He doesn’t recognize the tenants of his building anymore, his second family, the people he has been living with for years. “The Bawab dies in his chair”[12], writes Gilbert Sinoué — but his chair lives on, as an inheritance, as a blind man’s gift to his city.

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Setting their chairs every day on the pavement, street dwellers animate the stage of the sidewalk with their presence. They also leave their signature in a city built by others, while modifying the structure of the existing sidewalks or constructing, on their own, missing public amenities. In the informal settlements, which constitute the major part of the city[13], sidewalks have a fragmented presence. They appear as isolated self-built islands in front of buildings and shops, as rectangular platforms elevated above the level of unpaved and dusty roads. Even in the few areas of Cairo where they exist in a continuous form, sidewalks are not flat, uniform and uninterrupted grey ribbons but irregular patches of different pavings. In the span of a hundred meters, footpaths change in color, texture and pattern as if the sidewalks of Cairo were tapestries made by singular artisans.

Fragmented sidewalks and street chairs expose a converging process of appropriation of public spaces. People who spend time on the sidewalk occupy the pavement with their seats, while owners of shops and buildings transform their surroundings by customizing the surface on which street chairs are displayed. Individual initiatives to keep the sidewalk clean mirror this privatization of common spaces. Not relying on state services, shop owners, cafe employees and doormen attend to their parcel of the city on a daily basis. Despite their efforts to remove the garbage and to sprinkle water on the floor to appease the dust, sidewalks remain as sandy rugs that constantly receive empty bottles, cigarette butts, plastics and pieces of carton, or greasy papers which wrapped sandwiches. And when the season comes, acacias bless the human-made layer of trash with an organic touch, releasing their yellow, confetti-like leaves and their dry red flowers that bring to mind the fried onions that crown *koshari*[14] plates.

In their diversity, the walls and fences against which street chairs occasionally recline also talk of a city that refuses to wear a uniform. The iron curtains of shops are reminiscent of old-fashioned striped shirts of various faded tones. Peeling and scratched walls tell us that Cairo dresses very often in vintage clothes, with worn-out collars and patched holes. On the other hand, the recent explosion of political messages and graffiti reveal fresh urban trends in the skin of the city. The dominant colors of the facades vary depending on the area and can be read as class markers. If the very common uncoated red brick structures are identified with poverty, green is the color for privilege, reserved to the rich areas of the city: Maadi, designed in the early 20th century as a “garden city” with planted villas and wide leafy avenues, or the New Cairo compounds built in the desert where growing trees and grass at the entrance of houses are part of the suburban residential dream.

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Chairs punctuate every few meters the baroque text of the sidewalks of Cairo. In the grammar of the city they operate in ambiguous ways, acting on occasions like words that can convey more than one meaning at the same time. At first sight, empty chairs seem always inviting.

They bring to mind a person with open arms, a temporary shelter: a comma to breathe in the middle of an extenuating sentence. This is particularly true of chairs next to kiosks where clients sit and chat while they sip a soda before continuing their journeys.

But other chairs are closer to full stops than commas. At the entrance of a building, a lonely chair can be a warning: an urban scarecrow positioned as an imaginary surveillance camera. Personifying the *bawab*, it reminds any eventual intruder that someone might be watching them. An even clearer example of territorial delineation through chairs is given by those used to mark and reserve parking spaces. Stripped of their original function and usually completely dilapidated, they become improvised barriers, easy to move around when cars reclaim or leave their spots by the curb.

Chairs invite, warn and block, communicating at times, in a subtle double language. They are also versatile structures employed in a wide range of situations. For small, street-side boutiques, they are ideal, flexible exhibition stands. The latest fashion in downtown Cairo can often be found on the roadside in displays set-up by informal vendors. Upper body mannequins are adorned in bright, colored fabrics and balanced on chair platforms. Fruit vendors complete the spread of their colorful stalls, with bunches of bananas reclining on the backrest of classical Cairene cafe chairs. Non-commercial uses include the support of the water containers that serve as public drinking fountains; traditional clay pots or modern colored plastic thermoses — usually blue or orange — are lifted from the ground by four legs and kept at a safe distance from the dust. There are also the more intimate and domestic uses of street seats: a decapitated chair can be transformed into a table and host a lunch bought nearby. Once cleared, the same chair will make an excellent side table to hold warm cups of tea.

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Unlike other crowded cities of the developing world where destitute people seek permanent refuge on the sidewalk, very few people live and sleep on Cairo's pavement. Instead, sidewalk sitting is a temporary respite. Cairo packs and unpacks itself daily and it is perhaps a maritime image that best captures its regular fluctuations: phases of low and high tide on its sidewalks in the course of twenty-four hour cycles. Cairo does not wake up early. By mid-morning, shops lift their metal curtains, informal vendors start to setup their stalls, food kiosks and coffeehouses open for business, chairs slowly spread to the streets, and as the day progresses their density rises to its highest level. The biological clock of street chairs is set to the nocturnal habits of Cairenes. At the time of closing, caféboys pile up chairs in tower-like structures and lock them up until the next morning. When they retreat from the streets to their tiny rooms, doormen carry their chairs indoor and park them in a corner at the entrance of their building.

There are areas of the city less affected by this tidal logic. Built on reclaimed desert land to the East and the West, new residential suburbs are satellites outside of the orbit of Cairo. In the upscale settlements of New Cairo and 6th of October, the number of chairs is almost constant throughout the day and night. It is also significantly less than in the center since it is a world of wide avenues and gigantic blocks made for cars. Social life does not take place on the pavement but in malls, restaurants and private clubs. Each house is an isolated entity with hardly any contact with its neighbors. The majority of chairs on the sidewalk are the seats of private security guards hired to watch over wealthy residences. Usually framed by a slim security booth, they stand twenty-four hours by the front walls of villas, traveling in and out of their shack but never leaving the area they are supposed to protect.

Some chairs have a limited mobility. Others undertake longer voyages through the city. From time to time it is possible to spot a chair, moving through the street in an open cart attached to a bicycle. Those are the old and broken chairs bought by *robabekya*, vendors who roam the streets in search of discarded objects that can be fixed and reinserted into the veins of Cairo. The circulation of seats in the city can thus be seen as an inverted version of musical chairs. Occasionally, it is the chairs, which revolve and move around people until they find new partners, and not the other way around.

In the streets of Cairo, chairs can have many incarnations, passing from one set of buttocks to another, supporting generations. In between assignments, some are temporarily relieved from their mission. Packed in balconies, thrown on rooftops, hanging legs up on fences or telephone booths, they wait to be called again to the front lines of the city. A couple of nails, a pirate leg, a few carton boards bring an end to a season in the purgatory of chairs. At the hands of a new owner, an old chair can come back to life.

III.

In Egypt, like elsewhere, globalization has multiplied the amount and the variety of disposable goods available at increasingly reduced costs. This offer has not only created a demand, it has also generated a new type of consumer who has started to take his distance from entrenched practices of recycling and reuse. But if the rise of plastic chairs possibly signals this new trend in the streets of Cairo, for many people old habits stubbornly persist: to extend as much as possible the existence of things is still pretty much part of their vision of the world, of an economic wisdom based on scarcity that trusts the capacity of man to revert and slow down the natural effects of erosion.

The traumas and transformations are considered an integral part of the lives of objects that only reach an end in complete exhaustion. People who sit on the sidewalks fix and repair, restore and redesign their chairs, making creative pieces in which disparate elements coex-

ist in surprisingly harmonic and effective ways. Several chairs are the result of the cannibalization of two seats, fusions in which fractured bodies complement each other's missing parts. A plastic seat with a missing leg placed on top of the healthy structure of an iron chair can give birth to an original and unique seat.

There are also hybrid specimens; half chair, half something else. A handicapped chair supported by a car tire or a couple of plastic crates makes an elegant experimental seat that would elicit a strong impression in any *avant garde* furniture salon. Others, like art installations, seem to have been assembled and left on the sidewalk by conceptual artists to stimulate thought and provoke: a chair with a palm fiber crate base, carries the top part of a mutilated office seat thus reconciling successfully opposing modes of production and materials. Blending the artisanal and the industrial, the organic and the synthetic, it suggests that Cairo is at the same time a rural universe and a city in the web of global capital. In a sculptural way, it represents the in-between conditions of a metropolis literally and metaphorically resting on its countryside.

Repair operations are comparable to the efforts of doctors: falling arms and wounds on backrests are stitched up, amputated legs are replaced by stone, metal or wood prostheses, broken bases are reinforced or replaced by wood boards. The materials for these interventions are easily available at constructions sites or sold at the small street hardware shops called *mawans*, epidemic in the city of growing pains. In a context where recycling and making an optimum use of scarce resources is an integral part of daily life, people have the skills to perform all kinds of surgeries. Once found, a solution that proves efficient is repeated and perfected. Shared along the invisible communication channels of the sidewalk, this knowledge becomes collective.

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Cairenes also carve zones of relative comfort for themselves on the streets, by "pimping" their chairs. They address the minor ailments of their seats with palliative treatments, which consist of adding pillows, fabrics and blankets to give the softness of couches to rather hard and decaying surfaces. With layers of all kinds of materials, street chairs can look like *mille-feuille* cakes or like spongy and inviting bird nests.

The most basic and readily available covers for the chairs of Cairo are the empty cartons boxes that land on the sidewalks from houses, food kiosks and supermarkets. Once unfolded and flattened, they are extended over the bases and the backrests or used, piled, as cushions. The majority of the cartons found enveloping chairs are of the plain brown type, but branded and colorful ones are not rare. Cartons from bottled water companies bring various shades of blue to the street salon, while the ones from chips boxes add more funky red and yellow tones.

Whatever resources at hand make the seats of the sidewalk salon feel cozier and look better. Street-chair styles range from the neutral to the eccentric and include also pious attires. Prayer rugs, with their velvety fabrics and beautiful patterns, are convenient and aesthetic covers, with the bonus of religious value. Pieces of floral print fabrics from discarded clothes, conceal the cracks in the skin of the seats that they dress. Hermetically sealed with cellotape, protected from further corrosion by plastic bandages, some seats appear to the passerby like mummies: prepared to outlive all of their brethren by centuries.

Though Cairo masters the art of reuse, some chairs are definitely beyond repair, finally relieved from the cycle of rebirths. Those are occasionally found crushed, their pieces detached, on the pavement. But the real chair graveyards of Cairo are the empty plots, the barren pieces of land, where the trash from the surrounding buildings usually settles. There, among sand and rubbish, lie the seats that will never stand again: disintegrating sofas that sink progressively onto the earth and chairs reduced to a bare skeleton, reminiscent of the bones of dead animals in the desert.

IV.

Like the body of the mythological giant Argos Panoptes, the pavement of Cairo is covered with eyes. An invisible scanning system crisscrosses the sidewalks, capturing every minor detail in its nets. In a city that sits outside, secrets are hard to conceal, as actions are prone to have witnesses, even the watchers feel watched.

Street chair dwellers are the front row audience of the urban reality show of Cairo. Their positions in cafes and sidewalks make them the privileged observers of the intimate movements of the city and repositories of endless stories. From their watchtowers, they are empowered by the knowledge they absorb from their loci. This position of leverage can be related to the message of verse 255 of the second Surah of the Qur'an titled "Ayat el-Kursi"[15], which refers to the throne from which Allah surveys the heavens and earth. The verse points towards the power Allah holds above all his creations. Surveillance from the throne leads to knowledge, and knowledge yields power.

The ubiquitous, almost stifling, number of eyes of the Cairene sidewalk resonates with ideas developed in Jane Jacob's famous treatise *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*[16]. But while Jacobs insisted on the notions of "do-it-yourself surveillance" and "built-in eyes" to enhance city safety, in an authoritarian political context this informal network of eyes lends itself to the possibilities of over-surveillance. Street dwellers can be enrolled or forced to provide reports for repressive institutions, while they themselves are permanently under scrutiny. In the nineteenth century, Mohamed Ali, the Ottoman governor of Egypt, was already capitalizing on the information easily

available through coffeehouses: “One wishing to hear the latest news — or, more likely, the freshest rumors — needed only to station himself in the coffeehouse for a short period of time” wrote Edward Lane in 1836 [17]. This form of espionage has prevailed until today: secret service agents are likely to be found, along with local realtors, in their outdoor office of sidewalk coffeehouses.

If the chairs of coffeehouses can somehow be considered the furniture of a wider despotic machine, they have also accompanied the spread of dissident voices. Café Riche was, for a long part of the 20th century, a hotbed of political activism [18]. On its premises, nationalist revolutionaries operated a printing press in the 1920s that produced pamphlets against the British occupation. It was also from its seats that the free officers planned the 1952 coup d’état that overthrew the monarchy. More recently, during the 2011 uprising, the energy of a revolt whose epicenter was located in downtown Cairo electrified hundreds of cafes of this area, spreading waves of heated political debates from one chair to the other.

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In the past four years chairs have also been more directly involved in the battlefields of Cairo. The most impressive image showing the use of chairs as weapons in the front lines of Tahrir Square, was taken by a Reuters reporter on the 2nd of February 2011. It captured an old street chair without a backrest flying towards a man who puts his arm out in the direction of the projectile, opening it flat in the hope of protecting himself from the imminent impact. His half hidden face reveals the fear of someone about to be shot.

Whereas no image matched the raw intensity of the photography taken near Tahrir Square at the time, many more similar images followed. While the sides of the conflict shifted repeatedly — from revolutionaries against the regime, to the Brotherhood against the army — the material conditions of the battle remained constant. Next to rocks and stones from the pavement, easily available chairs became part of the arsenal of the street fights of Cairo. On the defensive front, they also played a role as improvised helmets.

In the continuous struggle over public space that has unfolded since 2011, sit-ins have been as much a matter of tents as of chairs. At the same time that the heart of Tahrir became a camping ground for political activists, cafes mushroomed on the edges of the square delineating the borders of the occupied territory. Catering to protesters and curious passers-by, tables and chairs gave a sense of structure to gatherings under permanent fear of being dismantled. To “clean” Tahrir and Rabaa al Adweya sit-ins was thus to uproot, along with the camping material, the forest of chairs planted in the tarmac. Two pictures released by international press agencies on the 15th of September 2012 — the day of an intervention by authorities to clear

Tahrir Square of protesters — point towards this subversive, though maybe unintentional, use of chairs. In the first one, a policeman is seen energetically smashing a plastic stool against the floor. In the second, another policeman in a shiny white uniform stands proudly against the backdrop of the Mogamma, the most iconic administrative building of the city, ready to push a two-wheel cart packed with chairs.

In this highly politicized context, chairs also became extremely versatile icons, used by actors from across the political spectrum to convey different messages. Amongst them, in 2011, defying material and symbolic relationships, structured hierarchically for millennia, a group of revolutionary activists printed stickers and painted graffiti stencils of chairs around the city in a campaign that called for the military junta to hand over power to the Parliament. The words “The People”, written on the backrest of the chair, implied that a ruler is a delegate, a representative of the citizens, and not a disconnected entity floating above the nation.

Sidewalk Salon came into being during the span of the past four years of upheaval. It is probably no coincidence that the shift of gaze proposed in this book, from the chairman and his seat of power to the chairs of the men — and the few women — who spend part of their days on the streets, coincided with the efforts of Egyptians to build new democratic structures and their fight for social justice. As we worked to ground the word “chair” in the surrounding reality, as we tried to bring new associations to it by putting forward the neglected seats of the city and their stories, the utopic idea of a “Parliament of the street” kept floating around in our minds. This book could therefore be read as our attempt to give a form to this fragmented, vibrant but unheard assembly, at a crucial moment in Egyptian history.

Endnotes

1.
Jean Cocteau, *Maalesh* (Paris: Gallimard, 1949) 42.

2.
Naguib Mahfouz, *Midaq Alley*, trans. Trevor Le Gassick (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 1975) 2.

3.
Yussuf Idris, "The chair carrier," *Homecoming, Sixty Years of Egyptian Short Stories*, ed. and trans. Denys Johnson-Davies (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2012) 194–198.

4.
Galen Cranz, *The Chair, Rethinking Culture, Body and Design* (New York: Norton, 2000) 31.

5.
Geoff Dyer, *Otherwise Known as the Human Condition, Selected Essays and Reviews* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2011) 58.

6.
Gamal Al Ghitani, "A la recherche des cafés perdus", *Le Caire* (Paris: Autrement, 1985) 87.

7.
Santosh Desai, *Mother Pious Lady, Making Sense of Everyday India* (New Delhi: HarperCollins Publishers India, 2010) 36.

8.
David Sims, "Understanding Cairo's Informal Development," *Learning from Cairo. Global Perspectives and Future Visions*, ed. Beth Stryker, Omar Nagati and Magda Mostafa (Cairo: Cluster and The American University, Cairo, 2013) 38. Following David Sims, we understand by informal settlement the "residential buildings that first appeared in the 1960's and were developed without permits or zoning, mainly on private agricultural land on the metropolitan fringes and near existing villages."

9.
Mohamed Gamal Abdelmonem, "The practice of home in Old Cairo: Towards Socio-Spatial Models of Sustainable Living," *TDSR* Volume XXIII Number II (2012). Mohamed Gamal Abdelmonem uses the word *harra* to describe "predominantly residential communities formed around narrow, nonstraight alleyways and incorporating a limited amount of commercial activity."

10.
Mohamed Gamal Abdelmonem, "The practice of home in Old Cairo: Towards Socio-Spatial Models of Sustainable Living," *TDSR* Volume XXIII Number II (2012): 40.

11.
Bawabs: doormen and building superintendent who usually live with part of their family in small rooms in the ground floor of the building they work for.

12.
Gilbert Sinoué (text) and Denis Dailleux (photography), *Impressions d'Egypte*, (Paris: Editions de la Martiniere, 2011) 16.

13.
David Sims, "Understanding Cairo's Informal Development," *Learning from Cairo. Global Perspectives and Future Visions*, ed. Beth Stryker, Omar Nagati and Magda Mostafa (Cairo: Cluster and The American University, Cairo, 2013) 38.

14.
Koshari: popular Egyptian dish made of rice, macaroni and lentils mixed with tomato sauce, eventually topped with fried onions, chickpeas, vinegar and hot sauce.

15.
Qur'an, Sura 2, vv. 255.

16.
Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Random House, 1961).

17.
Edward William Lane, *Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians* (London: 1836).

18.
"A Riche history," *The Economist* 17th December 2011.