



CAIRO CHAIRS

NOTES FROM THE SIDEWALK SALONS

BY MANAR MOURSI & DAVID PUIG

In this article, Manar Moursi and David Puig give us a short account of their photographic and textual research about the street chairs of Cairo. Although mobile, these chairs enable gendered and political territoriality to take place in the daily practice of the city. Their occasional dilapidation is also a symbol of Cairo's informality at a moment the plans of a new sterilized capital are discussed.

Cairo can be seen as the largest 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 bent-wood 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 editions. People fix and repair, restore and redesign their chairs, making creative pieces in which disparate elements coexist in surprisingly harmonic and effective ways. To extend as much as possible the existence of objects is still pretty much part of a vision of the world, of an economic wisdom based on scarcity.

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 consists of an outdoor activity. The occupations of these sidewalk dwellers range from doormen and guards to shopkeepers whose shops spill out onto the pavement. 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.

In a context marked by a proliferation of informal economic activities and a lack of formal public spaces, the occupation of the sidewalks with chairs can also be seen as a kind of guerilla strategy by street vendors. Like a game of cat and mouse, this can be either tolerated or curbed by the authorities. Further, sidewalks offer respite from the heat of clammy apartments. In informal settlements and in older urban quarters, 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 small and congested salons.

The gender codes of the city play an important role in shaping the patterns of socialization in the public space and impact public behavior. Although women circulate all over the city on their own, by foot, by car or by public transport, their unequal presence 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 female than its male outer and more visible skins.

Despite the increase of mixed gender cafés in the upper middle class and rich enclaves of the city, the vast majority of coffeehouses in Cairo continue to be male 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. From small 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. When the flow of clients requires it, cafés expand and push the boundaries of their territorial waters. Seen from above, these chairs on the sidewalk are an archipelago of moving islands where new atolls appear 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 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," 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 conversations. 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.



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 doorman, it reminds any eventual intruders 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.

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. 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.

Street chair dwellers are the front row audience of the urban reality show of Cairo. Their positions in cafés and sidewalks make them the privileged observers of the 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," (Qur'an, Sura 2, vv. 255), 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* (1961), in which she insisted on the notions of "do-it-yourself surveillance" and "built-in eyes" in order to enhance city safety. In the context of Cairo however, this informal network of eyes lends itself to the possibilities of over-surveillance. Street dwellers can be forced to provide reports for repressive institutions, while they themselves are permanently under scrutiny.



(left) Chairs used for the display of goods on sale or as a stand for a public water thermos.
(right) Street assemblages: two chairs in one
All photographs are excerpts from the book by Manar Moursi & David Puig, *Sidewalk Salon: 1001 Street Chairs of Cairo*, Onomatopée and Kotob Khan, 2015.

In the 19th century, Mohamed Ali, the Ottoman governor of Egypt, already capitalized 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 (*Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians*).

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 as, for a long part of the 20th century, a hotbed of political activism. 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 cafés of this area, spreading waves of heated political debates from one chair to the other.

Since January 2011 chairs have also been directly involved in the battlefields of Cairo and have been used as weapons in the front lines. While the sides of the conflict shifted repeatedly — from revolutionaries against the regime, to the Muslim 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 street fights. On the defensive front, they also played a role as improvised helmets and shields.

In the continuous struggle over public space that has unfolded in Cairo in the past five years, 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, cafés 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" the sit-ins thus consisted in uprooting, along with the camping material, the forest of chairs planted in the tarmac.



Top view of a street cafe in an alley in Downtown Cairo
Photograph by Manar Moursi & David Puig (2016)

It is also interesting to note that 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.

After years of unrest, the promises of stability and economic recovery have been the core pillars of the current regime. The expressions of this vision in terms of urban planning have been significant. **In 2015, the creation of a new administrative and financial capital in the desert was announced without prior public debate, an approach that reinforces a top-down perspective of planning the city.** Designed by the architecture office SOM, this new mega-project with its grid of wide avenues and gigantic blocks made for cars, signaled a new rational environment that breaks away from the congested and chaotic existing city.

In parallel, the authorities have also centered their attention on Downtown Cairo and worked hard to deactivate the association of Tahrir Square and its surroundings with the political events they hosted. The site of the square itself

marks the beginning of these efforts with its new landscaping elements intended to discourage loitering or sitting. By ironing out facades and sidewalks, and increasing police presence, the government has sent a message of a rebirth of downtown coupled with order. The facelift of old decaying buildings has covered their wrinkles with fresh layers of paint. The irregular patchwork of pavings have been leveled and dressed in a uniform palette. Street vendors and cafés have been removed from central streets and alleys, and pushed to the edges.

One cannot deny that these projects find a positive echo in the aspiration of a large numbers of Cairenes who recognize themselves in the modernity that these efforts embody. In this vision of a pacified urban environment, order plays a central role while modernity is presented as a break with a degraded and unruly condition of the city. **Stains and street vendors fall under a same broad category of elements that need to be hidden. In this "ideal" urban setting, the street chairs of Cairo, broken, beaten and omnipresent, seem equally out of place.** They summarize in one object all that should be kept under the radar. In visual terms, they are dirt spots, cracks, garbage in the landscape of the city. They also reveal the importance of the informal sector and are markers of poverty. In that economic sense, they point towards an unequal structure and the failed attempts to fix it. They finally bring to the fore an image of idleness, of time spent together over cups of tea and coffee, and act as a reminder of the combination of frustration and conversation that can lead to social explosions.



Manar Moursi and David Puig, respectively architect and photographer, are the authors of the book *Sidewalk Salon: 1001 Street Chairs of Cairo* published in 2015 by Onomatopée and Kotob Khan. The present article draws from the research conducted for that publication.