Artistic interpretations of Downtown Cairo

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Abstract
Towards the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th, Khedive Ismail’s vision of a modern Cairo, modeled on European aesthetic standards, slowly emerged, giving birth to a Paris-like “Wust-al-balad” (Downtown Cairo), a commercial, business and entertainment center. From its inception, Wust-al-balad would become an exclusive locale, catering to a cosmopolitan community of the colonial British army, expats, and elite and wealthy upper class Egyptians, ultimately ostracizing the underprivileged poorer population housed in the stagnant and neglected old Fatimid Cairo. This in turn created a sociological schism that would result in the popular notion of the “double city”. Many historians have argued against this concept of duality, claiming that Ismail’s idea of modernity in fact included all of Cairo, as evident in his original plan for the city’s development. However Wust-al-balad, from the moment of its creation until the mid-20th century, points to a different reality, one that would be challenged by the advent of the 1952 revolution and the attempts to nationalize Egypt. From that point on the place would lose its western and cosmopolitan nature, slowly falling into its current state of decrepitude. This article focuses on studying the socio-political shift undergone by Wust-al-balad and its implications as represented in three media: Radwa Ashour’s novel Qit’a min Urubba [2003; A Part of Europe], Mohamed Khan’s film Banat Wist El Bala [2005; Downtown Girls], and the soft rock band Wust El Balad, founded in 1999. The article attempts to show how they all use Wust-al-balad physically and symbolically to revisit the concept of the “double city” and the duality experienced by the Egyptian citizen residing in Cairo in the 21st century.

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