Today’s Consumption in Egypt

For those of us who grew up in Egypt during the era of Gamal Abdel Nasser in the sixties, we can still recall seeing in our households locally produced consumer durables from the ideal national company. The stoves, refrigerators, metal cupboards, beds, and desks, while aesthetically unattractive, were functional. In keeping with the principle of functionality, the ruling regime adapted Bauhaus architecture, a German invention born out of a situation of scarcity, to solve the housing problem for Egypt’s needy. As for cars, middle class families drove locally assembled Fiats. The few who possessed rare imported luxury goods were looked upon as the elite of the sixties. The socialist-oriented Nasser regime had led to the creation of middle classes with consumerist attitudes that were somehow fulfilled by the expansion of a bleak local market. During those long years of Nasserite ideology, the middle classes learned frugality as they joined long queues in front of the government co-operatives which distributed oil, soap, rice, meat and chicken, whenever these goods were available.

Sadat’s shift of alliance from the Soviet Union to the Western world in the early seventies was followed by the policy of the “open door,” or privatization at the expense of the “public sector” state monopolized large-scale industries. The shift from the Nasserite “state capitalist” era to full integration into the world capitalist system went hand in hand with encouraging consumerism and new lifestyles among Egyptians. Despite major changes in consumer habits, consumer studies are still mistakenly considered as a trivial field by most Arab academics. South Asian and Southeast Asian social scientists, in contrast, have developed a much more sophisticated understanding of the interactive processes of consumerism which could inform the research of Arab social scientists.1 Gendered spaces, youth and religious activism, the problem of scarcity of, and constant struggle over, space in the metropolis of Cairo are issues that have been under-researched. An understanding of how these gentrified and newly constructed spaces are reshaping life-styles of Egyptians, especially middle-class Egyptians, is crucial. The emerging new lifestyles and consumerism in post-Nasserist Egypt demand attention.

Globalizing Egypt
Cairo alone boasts twenty-four shopping malls, all of which were constructed since 1989, Yamama Center being the first. They have even appeared in the most remote villages of the Egyptian Delta. Cairo’s supermarkets such as the French mega-store Carrefour, offer everything one can imagine, from household items, food, beverages to ready-made home-delivered meals. ATM cards, almost unheard of some ten years ago, are becoming popular and ATMs users are expected to reach around 10, 000 in the next ten years.2 The acquisition of mobile phones has risen significantly from 200,000 in 1999 to 4.9 million subscribers today, spurring increasing numbers of thefts and pickpockets of mobile phones. The newly created shopping malls, super hypermarkets, and mega-stores in Egypt are indicative of the dramatic transformation of consumption habits.

Fancy restaurants and bars carrying ostentatious names like: La Bodega, Le Morocco, Le Peking, The Cellar, Justine, Villa Rosa, Cortigiani, Le Bistro Provencale, Sangria, Blues, and Casablanca are also multiplying. For the special occasion of Ramadan international five-star hotels like the Hilton, Marriott and Sheraton compete to offer the best iftares (the meal signifying the breaking of the fast) and traditional Ramadan evenings with oriental cuisine buffets, patchwork tents, shishas (water pipes) and entertainment that might even include whirling dervishes. The coffee shop culture has also become popular for middle class Egyptians. It would be erroneous to believe that this emerged only in the last decade. In fact, the sixties’ bourgeoisie had already adopted the café culture of the pre-Nasserite elite. Simonds of Zamalek, an Italian inspired coffee shop, had been the “in” place during the sixties competing with downtown cafés like Groppi, Lapas, the Indian Tea House, which were frequented mainly by Cairo’s elderly. These spaces were typical beau monde for parading and showing off. Today, the new coffee houses—and they are plenty—offer a mid-way solution for the younger generation of yuppies who can afford to pay for an over-priced drink, croissant, or a sandwich. Middle class Egyptians have in recent years been exposed to the culture of breakfasting on croissants, espresso and cappuccino’s, just as they have learned to eat Japanese, Italian, Thai, Indian, Iranian, and Lebanese food, thanks to the proliferation of restaurants that serve international cuisine.

Hybridized architecture and youth leisure
Leisure resorts, secondary residences, and walled and gated communities, such as Qattamiyya Heights and Bev...
erley Hills, have multiplied in Egypt. Advertisements sell a simulated dream of grandiose villas located in new, mainly desert, communities outside the city. They are incorporate-
ed in larger condominium complexes that might include a swimming pool, a fitness centre, and, the ultimate, a golf course. In other words, everything that leads to a healthy, luxurious, and suburban life, the counter image to the rot-
ing polluted old Cairo. But the fantasy comes with a hefty price tag! For example, the “de luxe” compound “Star Liv-
ing” in Nasr City’s mega project, Citystars, offers model apartments which sell for $1500-2000 per square metre with the average size of 317 square metres. The two-level penthouses with an area of 1250 square metres sell for an incredible $2.5 million.2

Most fascinating is how hybridization in design and archi-
tecture is being experimented with in the new gated
communities and beach resorts. Al-Gouna resort at the Red
Sea, for example, was constructed by the Orascom group,
one of the most powerful financial groups in Egypt. The
man-made al-Gouna lagoon consists of both an assort-
ment of five-stars hotels and privately owned villas. In a
brochure for al-Gouna, the architecture gets advertised as
"the blending of tastes, where West meets East." Advertise-
ments display the stylish and sophisticated interiors of the
villas which might be decorated according to exotic motifs
from India, Indonesia, and Thailand, or to western styles.

Architecture, like other aspects of consumer changes, is undergoing
global influences in Egypt, but do they represent an emulation or a
blending of styles? At al-Gouna the villa shopper can choose from Italian Tuscany imi-
itations designed by Alfredo Freda to villas with Arab-Islamic accents
inspired by the internationally acclaimed Princeton Architect Michael
Graves, or pseudo Greek style villas. The “White Villas,” designed by
the prominent Egyptian architect Shehab Mazhar, emenate a Mediterra-
nean flair. The late Egyptian architect
Hassan Fathi, known for his theory of “construction for the poor” advocating
the use of authentic traditional designs and local materials such as mud brick,
had today been embraced by the new
leisurely Egyptian class. Fathi’s work
had been tremendously inspired by
long years spent in studying Nubian
art and architecture. Domes, arches,
vaults which were trademark of
Fathi’s genius revival of traditional ar
chitecture are consciously re-popular-
ized in the new resorts and five stars
hotels as part and parcel of what Sami
Zubaaida has called the “folklorization of
culture.” With a recession taking
place and the recent deflation of the
Egyptian pound, resorts such as al-
Gouna are experiencing real transfor-
mation. Large numbers of the new wealthy Russians are purchasing
much of the real-estate all along the coast.

Youngsters now have a number of affordable ways to spend time.
They could go to the numerous internet cafes, bowling alleys, cinemas,
or air-conditioned fast food chains, which are available both, in shop-
ing malls, or as independent spaces. Discotheques and night clubs
cater largely to the richer strata. Travel to the Far East has become an
exotic tourist destination for the Egyptian rich who discover Thailand,
Malaysia, and Singapore; international music is widely available, and
Arabic music video-clips are becoming increasingly hybridized. Popu-
lar satellite channels transmit programs with a “mixing” of, for instance,
Indian and Thai dances and landscapes, Egyptian and Gulf young
ers, and European and North American tastes and music. Professional
belly dancing has attracted a large foreign contingent of Russian, Ar
gentinian, Scottish, Austrian, and American dancers. A local newspaper
estimates that nearly 5,000 foreign belly dancers are in Egypt. Curious-
ly, the Russian nationals have the lions share in this profession today.
As a result, the government has attempted to nationalize belly dancing by
restricting the work permits of foreign dancers.

Fulfillment or frustration?
Does intruding consumer culture, together with its cumulative aspect
for the poor, serve as an accommodative element with the galloping
inflation and growing poverty? Would window shopping and aimless
flanerie be sufficient replacements for consuming? Does window shop-
ping, in other words, fulfill dreams or increase frustration? Or, as many
have asked, can new consumer possibilities lead to forms of democra-
tization? For example, do mobile phones carry a democratizing effect
since, after all, “everybody” can own one? Today porters, maids, cooks, lower
grade employees, and taxi drivers carry mobiles. Admittedly, mobile phones
have facilitated communication and made life easier for the lower classes
who might not even have home phone lines in their shanty housing areas. Mo-
biles are no longer a luxury item.

After the Egyptian pound was floated in 2003 and led to a nearly 40% infla-
tion, many ask for how long more can the government hold power? One
could argue that these sanitized and modern spaces, like shopping malls,
serve merely as “clean air conditioned” spaces for escaping the crowded
streets of Cairo, flirting, time spending, and, possibly, shop lifting according to
the recurring complaints of the man-
gers of these malls. But today more than ever, the distinction between
the haves and have-nots is flagrantly displayed; the boasting of wealth
through consumerism can only
sharpen class differences.

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Notes
McDonalds,” in Consumption in Asia: Lifestyles
4. Asef Bayat, “Piety, Privilege and Egyptian
Youth,” ISIM Newsletter, July 2002.

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