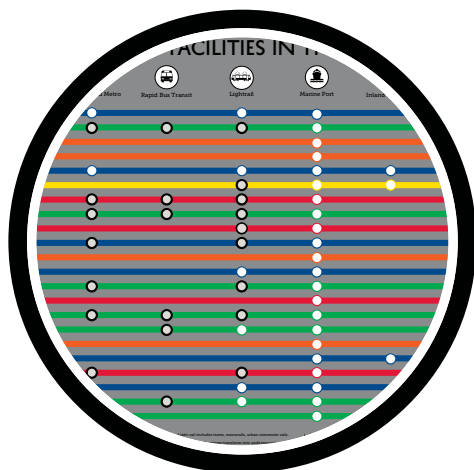




*Kalimat is proud to call its Winter 2012 the Egyptian Design Issue. Check out the Art+Design section for more.*



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# STATE OF DESIGN: DISCUSSIONS WITH KEY FIGURES IN EGYPT'S DESIGN COMMUNITY

by SALLY EL-SABBAHY

Chances are if you've spent any time living in or visiting Egypt, you've been exposed to the work of its ambitious designers without even realising it. Although still growing in size and reach, the influence of Egypt's design community can already be seen around the country; from private homes to bars to coffee shops and offices, these designers are leaving their mark in a multitude of ways.

But beyond the notable individual impacts that these designers have made, the larger scope of design in Egypt usually goes undiscussed. This includes anything from the education offered to future Egyptians designers to the untapped problem-solving potential of wider design utilisation in Egypt. For a sharper insight into these issues, we spoke to Cherif Morsi of Cherif Morsi Design, Dina El Khachab of Eklego Design, Shahira Fahmy of Shahira Fahmy Architects and Mona Hussein of Temple of Light. The result was a varied and no-frills look at the current nature of the Egyptian design scene.

**SALLY:** First of all, was it a challenge to become established in the design community in Egypt?

**SHAHIRA:** There is almost no community (laughs), it's very small and tight-knit. I think this is primarily because it is so hard to succeed as a designer in Egypt, and one of the reasons for that was the Mubarak era. Everybody left the country, including many potentially good designers, because not everyone could afford to open their own office or could manage to get a job in one. Even the cultural environment made it very hard; when I started my company in 2005, I had two or three commissions for architecture, and they were never built because the clients rejected them, even though they had said that they wanted to work with me. They just couldn't bring themselves to accept the designs I was producing – although when I submitted these same designs in international competitions, they won awards. In 2007, I finally got my first paid commissions in architecture, but much of the work I had previously produced from 2004 up to 2007 was sitting in drawers because no one wanted to act on it. The corruption also makes it hard to succeed as a designer here, and that's why a lot of people are "underground". By that, I mean that there are a lot of designers that do great work, but because they don't have the right connections they're still not widely known. Generally, in every field in the country you had a few people who were the so-called stars of that field, whether it was culture, politics, education or medicine. They didn't get those positions because they were the best at what they did! So, you have all the talented and hardworking people at the very

bottom and the system continues to put unqualified people at the top because of who they know, and this has killed so many things, including the growth of the fields of design and architecture. Things are improving though, the design community has really grown over the years and I think, if things go well, within the next two years we'll find many designers who are currently underground begin to really blossom.

**SALLY:** Why do you think that the boundaries of the Egyptian design community have succeeded in expanding, in spite of the obvious obstacles?

**DINA:** I think it's a function of the way the city and the country have been growing, in the sense that we're more exposed. More products come into the country now and people are exposed to much more and they can appreciate a design service a lot more. In the past that wasn't the case, but it's like that in any country at the beginning of the development of a service industry because services are always undervalued; it takes time to nurture the value of the service and have people learn to appreciate it or understand why they're paying for it.

**SALLY:** Can design in Egypt be construed as sort of an elitist niche?

**CHERIF:** In the end, what I or any other designer do may end up looking very elitist, and that's because the design community in Egypt is sort of stuck in this elite niche right now. It's not because we choose to be, but it's because what we do is still kind of new, and companies and clients are still slowly realising that design isn't so much about flexing muscle as it is a way to offer real alternatives to ways of living and problem solving. I do think design should be much more available, but unfortunately the majority of people or companies who currently commission designers to do something for them are, by default, the companies or people that can afford to take that risk. But it's getting better, in the last 2-4 years design has become much more available and popular.

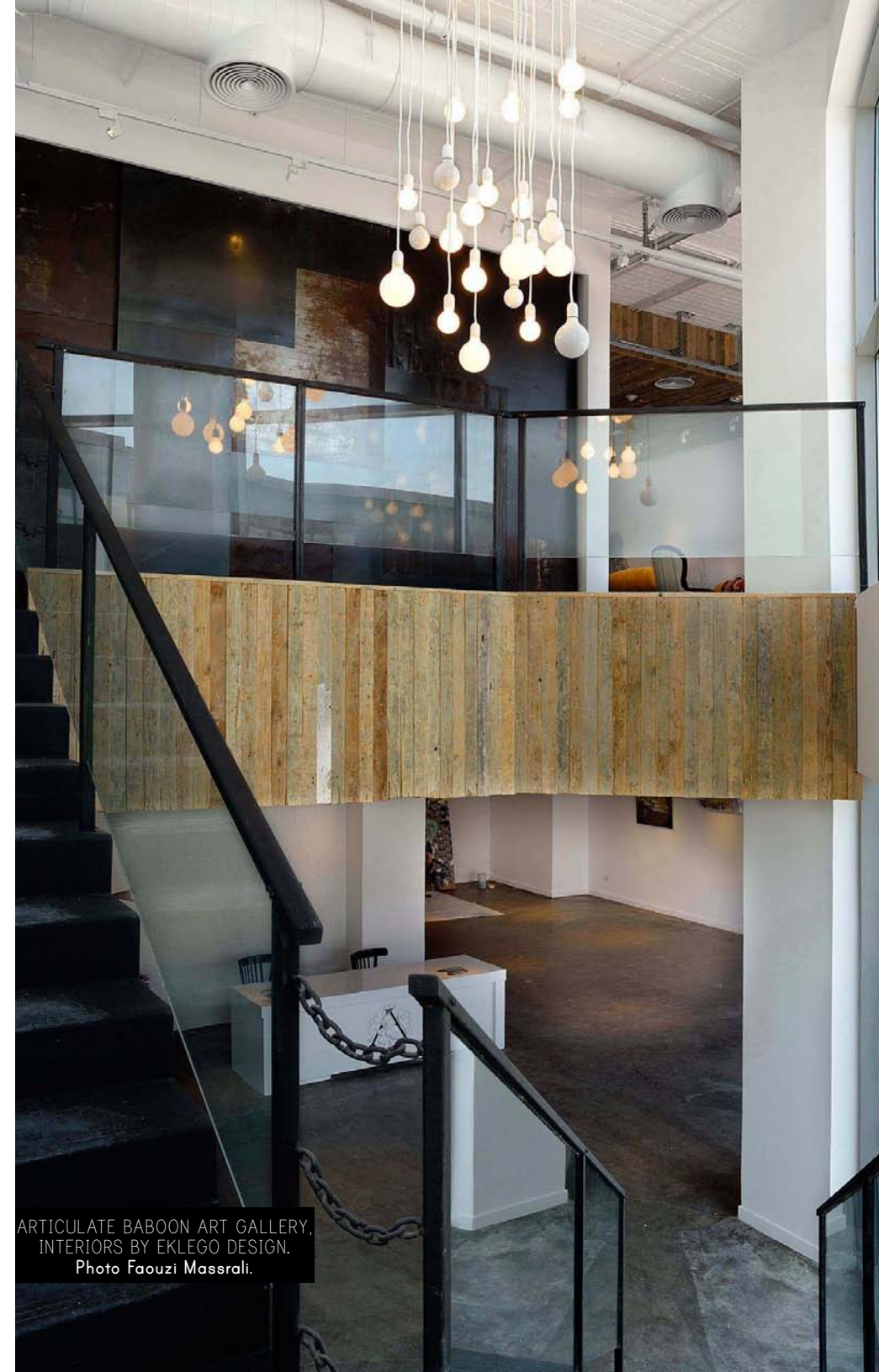
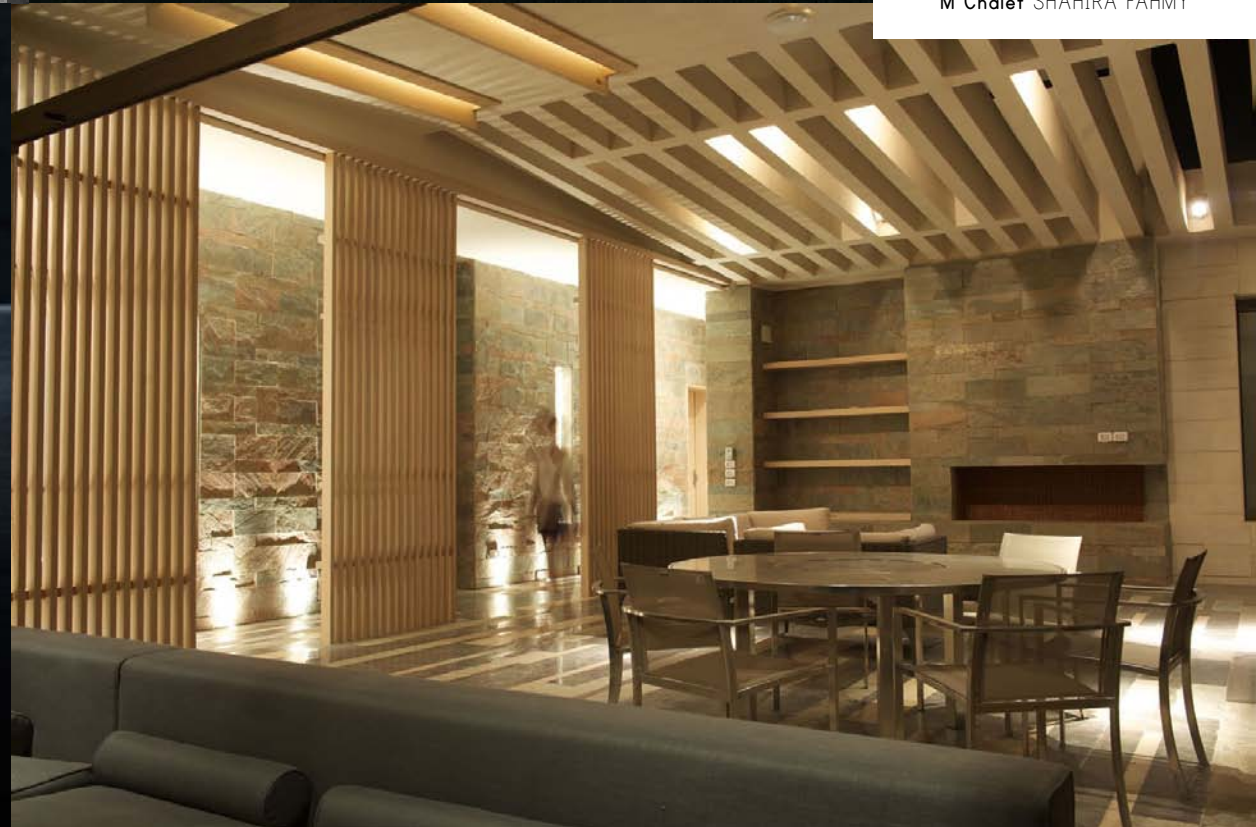
**DINA:** I think so sometimes, especially among the smaller, private clients. With corporate clients I think design is understood as more of a basic necessity because it ends up saving costs and the project itself is operating under such a big budget that it ends up being more efficient and alternatively, actually costs less. So, while design may be viewed as elite for the time being, I think it's only because it's still not properly defined in the



Top SHAHIRA FAHMY  
Bottom Inside-Out Tea Set by SHAHIRA FAHMY



M Chalet SHAHIRA FAHMY



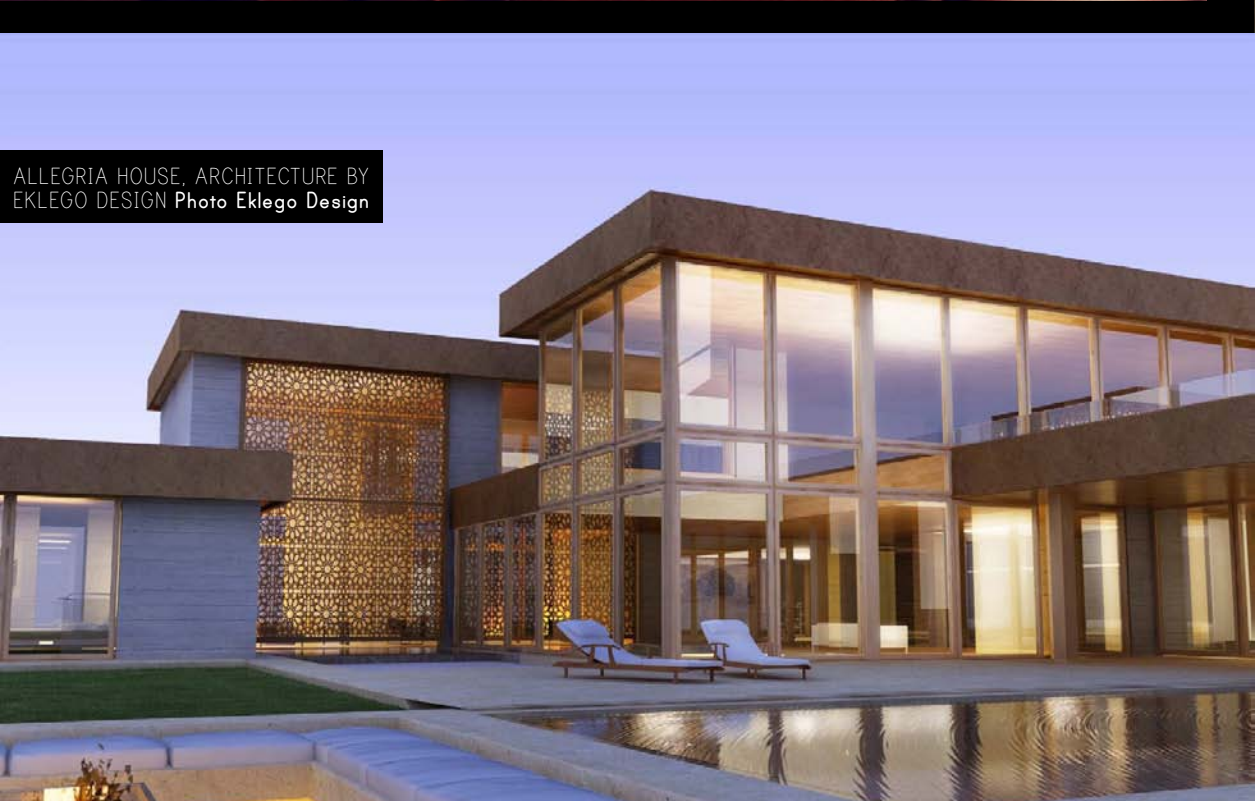
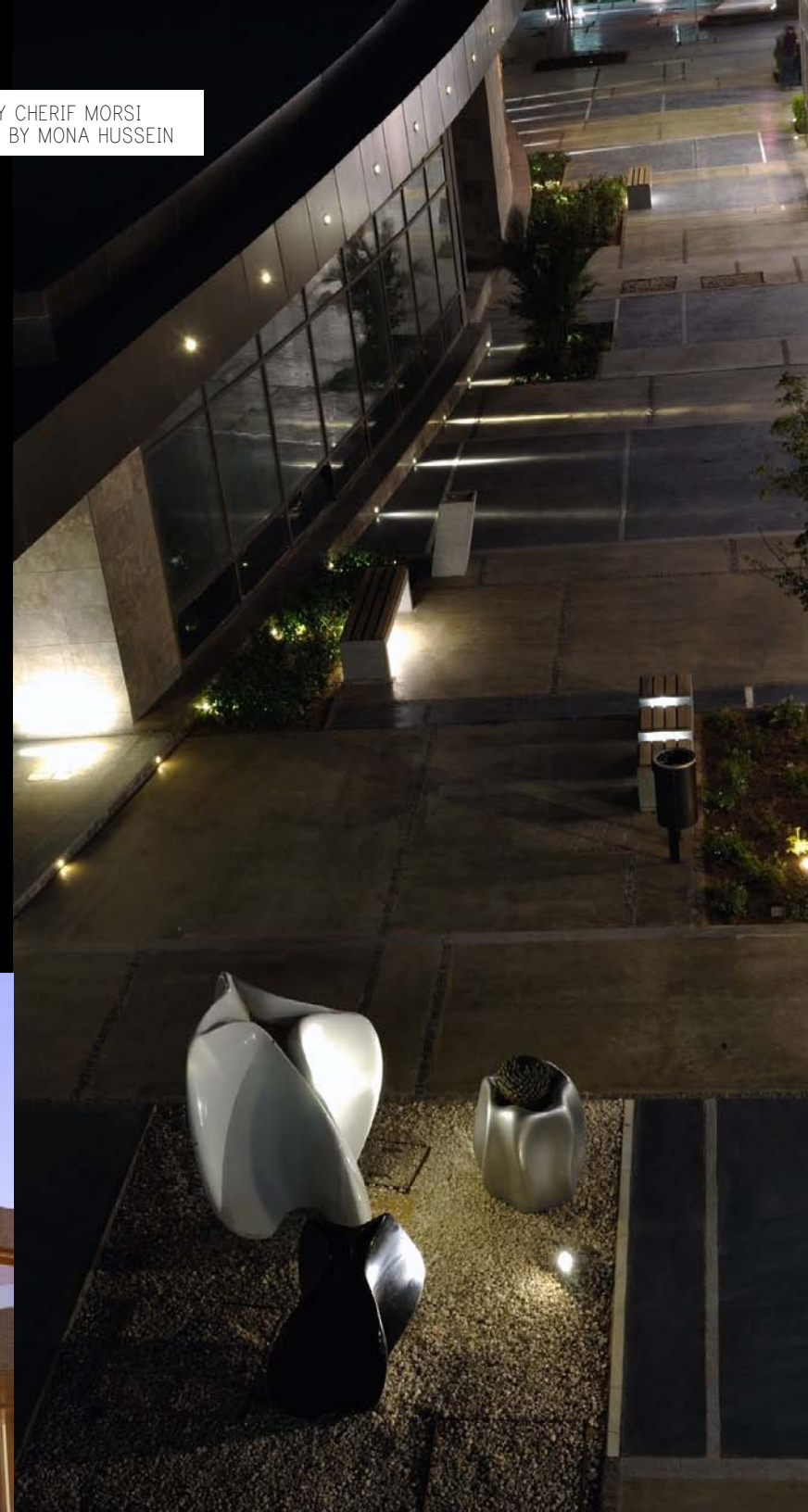
ARTICULATE BABOON ART GALLERY,  
INTERIORS BY EKLEGO DESIGN.  
Photo Faouzi Masralli.



APERITIVO BAR & RESTAURANT,  
INTERIORS BY EKLEGO DESIGN.  
Photo Faouzi Masralli.



Right: BARTEN BY CHERIF MORSI  
Left: DESIGNOPOLIS BY MONA HUSSEIN



ALLEGRIA HOUSE, ARCHITECTURE BY  
EKLEGO DESIGN Photo Eklego Design



JOTUN ENVIRONMENT  
BY CHERIF MORSI



JOBAL SIGNATURE APARTMENTS, INTERIORS BY  
EKLEGO DESIGN Photo Orascom Developments



LUNIQUE TABLE BY CHERIF MORSI

majority of the population. If you look at Egyptians from lower socio-economic classes, you find huge amounts of innovation and creativity and design just because of a lack of physical resources and space. About ten years ago I went to a very isolated site we were working on and the construction workers there were living on-site. They had been sleeping there for almost a year and they really had nothing with them; there were no facilities and nothing to do and they couldn't get around because there was no transportation in the area. So they had made all these gadgets, like a shisha pipe from scrap metal and a bed structure that could be converted into a sitting space during the day. That, for me, is design, its just not labelled among these people as "design", because they see no value in that.

**SALLY:** So, could design be better embedded into popular culture in Egypt, as it is in countries like the United States, for example?

**SHAHIRA:** Yes, but actually I also think it has changed dramatically for the better. A client that rejected my work back in 2003 bumped into me recently and told me that my latest work was incredible and that he loved it. But at the time he couldn't see that. The awareness has just totally changed. Whatever happened in other Arab cities like Beirut and Dubai with the participation of international designers in those markets – although this has its pros and cons – has given people a different view of how things can look and has increased people's tolerance. So, I think a really dramatic shift has happened. At the beginning if I didn't think on the same wavelength of a client then they would just perceive me as being not educated enough about design simply because I didn't think like them. I also firmly believe that the majority of the population is actually more open to design than the very top percentile. This is because they themselves are so creative, even in the way they build their houses. I am so inspired by what Egyptians do. Even if everybody wants to label an area as a slum, I still love it, because the people living there have found ways to overcome space and resource issues to make these areas liveable. They've got adaptability and flexibility and are very open to new things and I believe that they are much more tolerant to design than the higher socio-economic minority.

**CHERIF:** Design in Egypt is still very much like a fashion statement, because people who are interested in it choose to go after the brand more than the design itself. But I do think this is normal, and it's a step that we have to go through at the beginning. Once design stops being "new" in the sense that the general culture gets more used to it, then we'll be able to appreciate the core of design more, without requiring a brand behind it to make it interesting.

**SALLY:** What are your takes on the education that is currently available to future designers in Egypt?

**MONA:** Generally speaking, the design education in Egypt remains quite conventional in that it focuses mainly on the major disciplines, such as architecture and interior design, but with a traditional, static curriculum. It usually churns out idealistic, textbook qualified people who are eager to begin their careers but are usually lacking real-life experiences and are unaware of the intricacies involved in realising conceptual designs. Since the focus during their education is usually based on hypothetical projects, the essential link between conceptualising a design and then actually implementing it is usually non-existent. However, the surge in new universities in recent years has seen an introduction to newer subjects such as product and lighting design as well as a new approach to teaching, whereby students are no longer confined to the classroom but are able to go out to meet suppliers, to discuss matters with them and to understand the production process. All of this has created an environment that is much more conducive to the development of good and progressive design than it was the past.

**DINA:** I really don't like to be negative, but I think so far the people coming out of universities, in terms of architecture and interior design, are not coming out as designers. I think that is partly because they have a very narrow education; its not holistic and it doesn't include artistic and creative ways of thinking, which should really be pushed on these kids from a younger age so they can learn how to think in ways that can have nothing to do with science. A lot of what is being taught today is very scientifically geared or is based on memorisation, so you may have a student who comes out very strong in architecture or AutoCAD, but not necessarily in design. There's a lack of creative and critical thinking, generally.

**CHERIF:** When I was in university, I was really unhappy with the gap between what we were being taught and what we saw on the ground. The ways of thinking in design education abroad are much more interesting and there were design movements that coincided with that. Here, the main problem is that designers are taught certain approaches and methods at university and then they're stuck with that select knowledge because they're not encouraged to develop on their own and to pursue alternative ways of thinking. This is why you'll see a lot of the same thought processes in the designs that are created here. I'm not saying that the designs are not interesting; it's just that they're not different or varied. We have to improve design education a lot, of course, but there is also another problem tied to that, which is to realistically figure out how to improve it,

*[...] the majority of the population is actually more open to design than the very top percentile. [...] They've got adaptability and flexibility and are very open to new things and I believe that they are much more tolerant to design than the higher socio-economic minority.*

and that is a whole other huge topic. I think that the moment that there is a more general interest in culture and an understanding of what the culture can produce for its people is when we'll have an opportunity to develop design education. Under those kind of conditions the government will be more inclined to invest in

educating designers and even things like design project initiatives would occur more frequently. But there are some pretty good Egyptian designers out there, regardless.

**SALLY:** What about the uses of design in urban public spaces in Egypt?

**MONA:** The unprecedented expansion

Within this context, the potential for improvement is limitless. The transformation of the urban landscape in Cairo, through the collaboration of designers from various disciplines such as architecture, interior designer, landscape design, lighting design and so forth, is not only a possibility but should be a necessity. The introduction of minor elements, such as well designed signage systems, uni-

of Cairo during the last few decades has created a megalopolis with no clear urban planning or any structure or uniformity in design, as well as the creation of satellite shanty towns within the city and on its peripheries.

form street lighting, taking advantage of the weather and focusing on outdoor spaces for cafes and restaurants, even the planting of bougainvillea to grow on lesser buildings would go a long way in improving the urban landscape in Egypt.



EKLEGO'S PARTNERS: From left, Dina El Khachab, Hala Said, Hedayat Islam and Heba El Gabaly



Tamarai Lounge and Restaurant BY SHAHIRA FAHMY



Cairopolis BY CHERIF MORSI



TOP LEFT: Block 36 Westown BY SHAHIRA FAHMY



TOP RIGHT: Residential Interiors BY MONA HUSSEIN  
BOTTOM LEFT: Cherif Morsi BOTTOM RIGHT: Mona Hussein

**SHAHIRA:** I genuinely believe that design could really have an impact on the urban structure of cities like Cairo more than it ever had before since designers may potentially now have more of a say in how their city and their country can look and function. After the revolution, people are finally getting their cities back and developing a sense of ownership. Even the experience of the revolution was about that; walking from Zamalek to Tahrir Square was an experience in itself, because I had never walked on Kasr al Nil Bridge before. We've been living here for so many years and yet we always felt like we didn't own anything; it was as if we were all foreigners. Now that we feel like we own the country again, we can make it better in terms of design. This will take years, but it will happen.

**SALLY:** Where do you see the future of Egypt's design community heading?

**SHAHIRA:** I mostly hope that education will improve, for designers and in general. When I think about design education in Egypt my heart really hurts because it's such a huge issue and it will take a lot of time to improve it. Developing more competition and opportunities for designers would also have a huge impact for the community, because such things will challenge the current criteria, push for the improvement of

education and also drive young potential designers because the environment will be tougher. I think we're at the beginning of that already. I meet so many young designers who have amazing ideas, thanks in part to the new media age that we're living in. Young architects and designers in Egypt know that the system is not giving them the experience that it should, so they work on themselves by researching on the internet and exposing themselves to more things. They can even post their work online. These opportunities weren't there when I was a student, and the young designers I meet really do give me a lot of hope and inspiration.

**CHERIF:** The local design community has nowhere to go except forward. It won't be easy though, as design will have to be re-thought in the way it is actually taught and sold. Universities will have to rely on an eclectic mix of established designers to give workshops to exchange knowledge with future design students, but there also needs to be a big shift in the cultural policies on the state level too. There are good initiatives already operating and making a great effort but these initiatives should start getting more support and have more diversified and carefully planned design events.

**DINA:** I think the design community has a lot of roles to play, especially with creating competitions, whether they are local or international. For example, the memorial competition that was held for the World Trade Centre was an international competition and any designer could participate and in the end I think the chosen design was one of the most beautiful architectural pieces I have ever seen. Events like these raise awareness, they create a public space and they commemorate an event and we could have this same thing here, especially given the events since last January. We have a lot of spaces that could benefit from something like this. I think with more of these kinds of efforts, such as the creation of the Egyptian Design Forum, we can really make a huge difference in the country.

**MONA:** With an increased interest in the field of design by professionals and individuals alike, I'm certain that the local design community will continue to expand and influence future generations of designers. One direction I'd like the design scene to take would be to move towards creating a design trademark for Egypt whereby different elements of our culture and heritage are reflected in all the disciplines of design, from architecture to interiors, furniture design and more, rather than focusing on Western approaches to design and importing them into the local context.

