

<http://www.ymag.it/schede.asp?id=7681>

01. Informal Repair Culture *(Column curated by Marco Navarra)*



How long have you been using your current cell phone? And what happened to the one you had before? What happens when the mobile in your pocket breaks? Where will its components end up to? Which roads do our mobiles go after we've thrown them away, because we're simply unable to repair them? How does what we throw away change? Why would a multinational company such as Nokia be interested in these questions? If you live in a country like India, China, or Ghana the answer is likely to involve the vibrant second-hand marketplace, and something like the informal culture of reparation - guys on the street who seem able to fix pretty much anything, using little more than a flat surface, a screwdriver, and (somehow) just the right knowledge.

But how does this affect architecture or project design? "In an effort to understand the total user experience, I've taken time out in recent field studies in emerging markets, to explore local repair cultures. The journey has taken me to cities such as Chengdu, Delhi, Ulan Bataar, Ho Chi Minh, and Lhasa with recent brief stopovers in Kampala and Soweto. They all contain clusters of shops and market stalls, selling a mix of used and new mobile phones, and whilst (in this instance) size does not necessarily matter, they often operate on a scale that yet remains unseen in cities such as London or Tokyo. What sets these locations apart from cities in more 'emerged' markets? (...) Aside from the scale of what's on sale, there is a thriving market for device repair services ranging from component swapping to circuit board re-soldering and phone reflashing - in a language of your choice, of course. Repairs are often carried out with little more than a screwdriver, a toothbrush (for cleaning contact points), the right knowledge and a flat surface to work on. Repair manuals (which appear to be reverse engineered) are available, written in Hindi, English, and Chinese, and can even be subscribed to, but there is little evidence of them being actively used. Instead, many of the repairers rely on informal social networks to share knowledge on common faults, and repair techniques. It's often easier to peek over the shoulder of a neighbour than open the manual itself.



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Repairing Cities # 2. Repair Culture Ecosystem

(Column curated by Marco Navarra, 05/27/2010)

REPAIRING PRINCIPLES

In western cities, to repair an object – especially an electronic one – is a forlorn hope, but in Cairo repair culture is widely diffused. Whole districts in the city are entirely occupied by flea markets and repairers, able to fix anything from a car to a mobile phone. The electronic parts market around Ataba, for instance, takes up many roads and arcades and includes more than a hundred little shops and vendor stands.

Besides the shops, at the end of the commercial spaces overlooking the main street, or on the lofts overtopping the selling stands, there is a growing activity of repairmen quickly and effortlessly performing different tasks: from substituting parts to reselling microchips and electronic circuits, to activating mobile phones with a language chosen by the customer.

In Cairo, those objects commonly used as “disposable” by our society – conceived and produced not to be repaired – are converted from waste into raw materials. All around the streets surrounding these informal markets the heterogeneous quantity of mechanical parts covering building facades seems to generate, in front of our incredulous eyes, a new engine in which sand stone and lime hide within a metal skin. Repair constitutes a micro economy that transforms urban space and becomes a solid inertial form of resistance to the makeovers caused by the global economy.

This culture sets against urban consumption and acts as a continuous collective practice, in which survival rises up to an ethic value. It is grounded in the concept of concatenation, as a multiplicity implying several heterogeneous terms and establishing relations among them through different natures.

The culture of repairing produces itself through a practice of measured actions repeated in time and shared by a group or a community. It breaks up the individualistic idea of author to provide invention and innovation through the procedures and the techniques that constantly work with error and the unexpected. Each single accident breaks some parts, making them available for a new market that can activate different functions, by inserting them in other machines that create new objects with slidings, overlappings, and jams in different contexts. Repair tries to put order into the accident as an unexpected event. To begin with, it requires the accumulation of various materials and the warehousing of unutilized fragments and object parts – abandoned because they are not working anymore – that are therefore available for further assemblages.

These manipulations give way to a process in which the displacement of pieces from their original configuration produces a new graft, releasing an unexpected form of détournement. It also manifests itself through the turnover of established relations, along with the re-appropriation of all the relations thus generated. Following the reactivation of discarded pieces, a new concatenation between the parts emerges. Catching the right moment is the condition making the operation of graft and re-configuration effective. The repairing work is an urgent action, made under the pressure of one-time circumstances. Whoever makes it, it is always in a state of emergency.

POSTPRODUCTION These techniques of repair, so widespread in Cairo, make us immediately think of the processes and tools used in contemporary art, which “, although heterogeneous, share a look towards pre-produced forms, thus demonstrating the will to inscribe the work of art within a network of signs and meanings, instead of considering it as an autonomous and original form (...) The artistic matter is not seen in terms of “ what can we do new?” anymore, but instead of “what can we do with what we already have?” In other words, what can we do to produce singularity and meaning, starting with this chaotic crowd of objects, names, references that set up our ordinary day? Today artists plan shapes instead of creating them. Instead of transfiguring a raw element (the white canvas, the clay...), recombining already available forms using their information.” (Nicholas Bourriaud, Postproduction) Repair practices, making us measure the open-endedness of objects and things, provide a new tool box for design and a new horizon to rethink urban transformations, starting from those parts that, in the cities, have been discarded, refused, and forgotten.

An entire repertoire of unqualified urban objects can be brought into play starting from their description and individuation. “It is not about elaborating a form over raw material anymore, but about working with objects that are kicking around the cultural market, i.e. objects already informed by other objects. The notions of originality (to be at the origin of) and of creation (to create something from scratch) slowly vanish in the new cultural outlook marked by the twin-figures of the DJ and the programmer. Both of them have the task of selecting cultural objects and including them in new contexts ... if today the download of forms (sampling and remake) represents important problems is because that brings us to consider global culture as a tool box, an open narrative space, rather than a one-way speech or a line of industrial products.”

RepairingCities # 3. Casual/Tactics <http://www.ymag.it/schede.asp?id=9066>

By [Marco Navarra](#), 06/30/2010



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CASUAL. For many years now, Fashion, more than Architecture, has succeeded in understanding and capturing the informal processes concerning lifestyles and ways of living, turning them into thought and designer clothes, with naturalness and lightness. This example shows the effectiveness of a modus operandi that succeeds in keeping open the transits between spontaneous practices, observation and design. An flexible attitude, open to suggestions, turning actions and behaviors into new figures and ideas in a never-ending exchange between practices and culture, spontaneity and conscience, patching and packaging.



From Fashion we learn to use different speeds at the same time, and above all, the ability to keep high and low cultures together: from the house to the street, from the workshop to the office, from history to geography. A dogged internal work, focused on a continuously-shifting viewpoint and the attention to what is different, which constitutes the groundwork of these practices and suggests a different horizon of reflection for architecture.

In particular, for us, Cairo represents a chance and a frontier, able to push thought towards a possible radical line of change.

Repairing Cities #4. Paradox Architecture

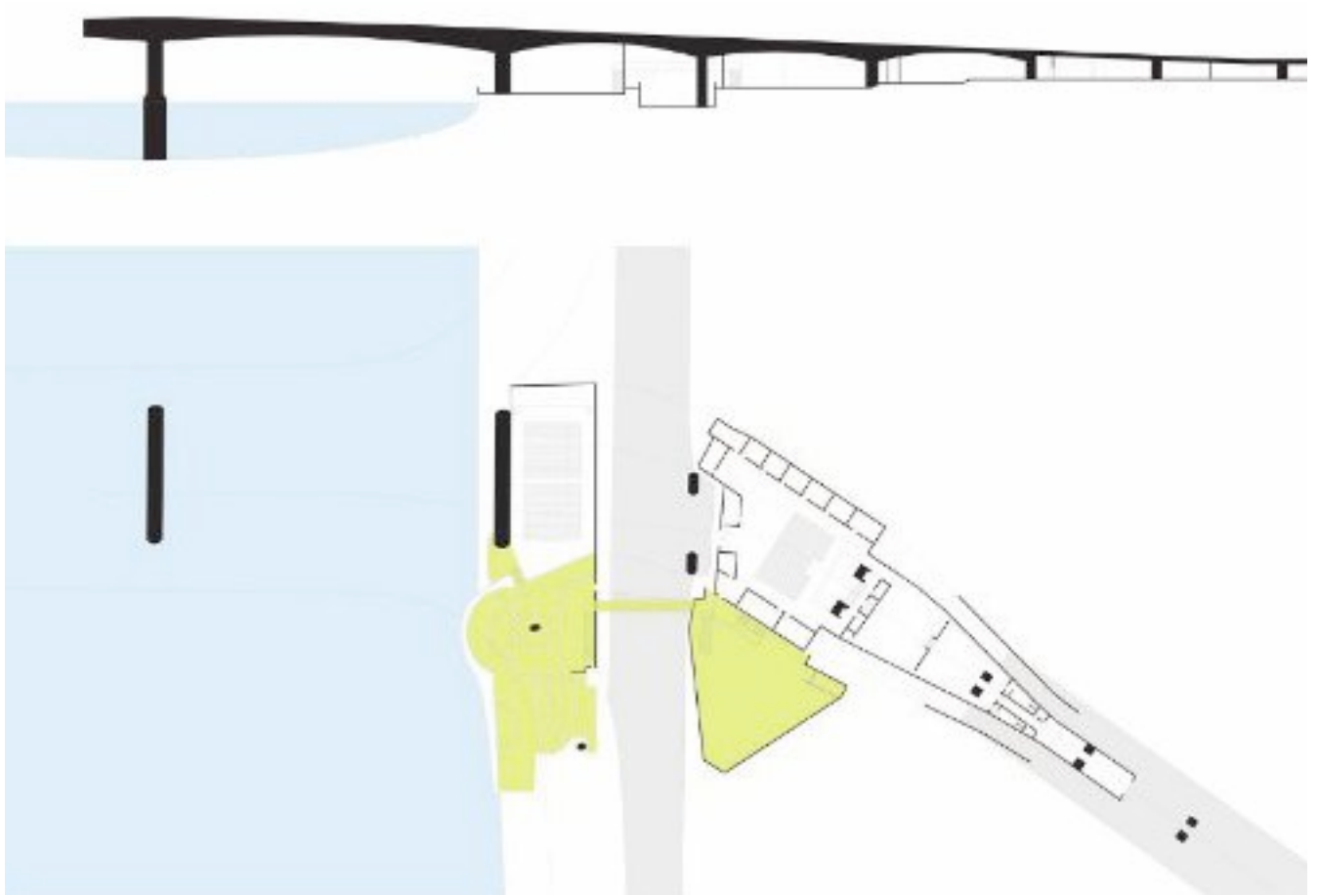
<http://ymag.it/schede.asp?id=9097>

(By [Marco Navarra](#)) 7/28/2010



[El Sawy Culture Wheel](#) is a new cultural centre, built under four spans of a mighty viaduct crossing the isle of Zamelek. And right in that point it broadens, to leap over a branch of the Nile. That area, which once used to be abandoned and full of scrap and garbage, has become an open public space, crowded from dawn to dusk. Two open spaces with a bar, a conference hall, an exhibition centre, three indoor concert halls, a theatre, a foyer with a bar, a library with six rooms for workshops and rehearsals. Mohamed El Sawy has restructured this scrap urban area in memory of his father Abdel Monem El Sawy, novelist and former minister of culture. The name “culturalwheel” comes from an ancient Egyptian custom, consisting in a fundraising race in memory of a defunct, expressed through the donation of goods to the public.





El Sawy appears as an architecture impossible to understand at a glance: it has no prospects or plans with clearly definable quotas, nor recognizable geometrical forms. The undivided internal spaces maintain an extreme fluidity, fitting into each other and changing size and lighting according to different hours of the day.

A complete and final project has never existed before the beginning of the works: the design has been strictly intertwined with the construction and the living. The building, still in progress, has been taking place in additional steps and adjustments.



El Sawy represents a first example of repair as a passage from temporary informal actions to a significant urban change. It's an architecture that transforms the unexpressed energy of a big monofunctional structure into a place of life, where living spaces entwine transit with stops and meetings.

This architecture grafts over a pre-existing one that, by function and dimension, constitutes the giant order and produces a jump and a weave of different scales, re-knotting the urban landscape with the household interiors. These elements prefigure an architecture of paradox which, as opposed to the idea of typology, is built without either a structured plant or clearly defined prospects or functional programmes, but through sections with operations of excavations and additions.



El Sawy Culture Wheel shows us how “...the power of paradox therefore is not at all in following the other direction, but rather in showing that sense always takes on both senses at once, or follows two directions at the same time.” (Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*).

If “paradox is initially that which destroys good sense as the only direction, but it is also that which destroys common sense as the assignation of fixed identities” (Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*), this architecture lies all in the surface, transfiguring the skin into a dress which wraps around a changeable body. It represents an exemplar synthesis of a series questions that are still open.



TACTICS. Cairo brings into question some of the most used concepts in the last few years in architectural and urban-planning culture: innovation, stratification, permanence, difference. All terms which this city invites to think over.

To the need of abstraction and overlapping figures or concepts to life itself, Cairo answers with continuous everyday actions, which operate on interstitial spaces and re-design urban spaces according to an inductive process using the body as a main instrument to define space and place.

These activities, designated as informal, set up a panorama of tactics suggesting other instruments for the urban project. Breaking the given rules, as a space-generating practice reading and tracing unexpected elements, constitutes the way to reclaim the character and the spirit of a place.



Informal practices generate little architectures of paradox, moving our attention on the unexpected as a design element, suggesting the possibility of a second thought, conceiving the error as an invention tool. Informal culture proposes itself as re-writing, which more and more trains itself through the possibility of making the errors its own and work on the variances, turning accidents into unexpected meetings.

In the case of Cairo, on one hand are the viaduct and freeway networks, expanding across the city as a dried up skeleton of modernity, on the other hand the roofs as new urban grounds, constituting the place and subject upon which the spontaneous actions of Cairo's citizens are concentrating their efforts, in different ways. New ways of living and using these spaces are variously declined and set up the invention of some possible answers to human pressure in the contemporary city.

Cairo is a phenomenal lab because the borderline conditions in which the whole city lives allow us to measure architecture's chances, making us discover its zero grade: those practices able to re-build the beauty of living, even in a condition of extreme need.

