The Metamorphoses of Mansheyah

In the heart of Alexandria's European centre

is what is known as *el Midan* or *Mansheyah* – Arabic words used to signify "The Square." Over its recent history this space has also had other names: *Place des Armes, Grand-Place, Place des Consuls, Place Mohamed Ali*, and now *Midan El Tahrir*, or "Liberation Square." These names reflect changes in socioeconomic and political conditions in Egyptian society, in general, and the society of Alexandria in particular.

This square is the oldest urban space in the cosmopolitan city. Here cosmopolitanism began and flourished in the early 19th Century, encouraged and favoured by Egypt's progressive ruler Mohamed Ali (1805-1848) and his successors. Ironically, it was also here that the nationalist leader Gamal Abd el-Nasser on the 26th of July 1956 declared the nationalisation of the Suez Canal, thus ending a century and a half of cosmopolitanism.

During the Hellenistic period, this part of the northernpromontory of Rhakotis with its indigenous quarters of the ancient city had extended up the great harbour, the Portus Magnus, west of the Caesarium and the Emporium.

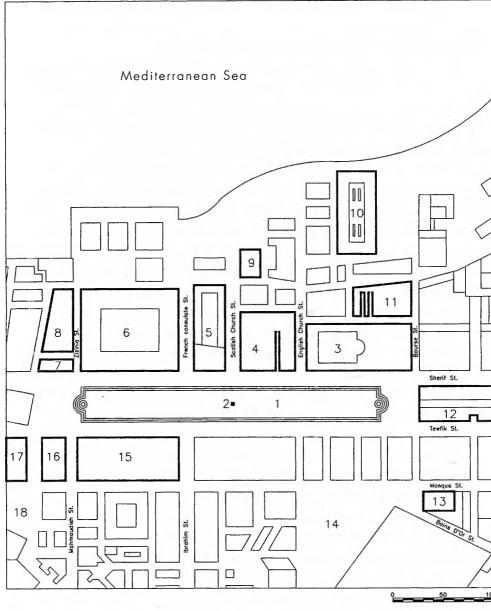
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The geographer Strabo described it as an area of warehouses and shipbuilders which extended as far as the Heptastadium and linked the mainland with the island of Pharos.

During the Islamic period the area around the Heptastadium expanded as a result of silt deposited on its shores. The classical city, laying in ruins, was gradually depopulated; the inhabited area shifted outside the city walls into the area between the two ports, in what came to be known as the "Turkish town." Activities such as fishing and boat-making moved towards the north-west of the harbour, while the central area of the Turkish town west of Mansheyah developed into a commercial area with souks and bazaars, whose names were often identified with the sale of their goods: e.g. souk El-Attarine and souk El-Samak; or by the professions: e.g. souk El-Tabbakhine; or by ethnicity: e.g. souk el-Turk or souk El-Magharba. The wakalas were common multi-use structures which included mosque, school, habitat and commerce. Indeed, wakala Terbana (1685) and wakala Chourbagui (1757) still stand among the city's most important Islamic monuments.

When the Bonaparte expedition disembarked in Alexandria in 1798, the area now occupied by *Mansheyah* was an open field. In the famous *Description de l'Égypte* (1809), the scientists described the north-western sea front as occupied by Muslim cemeteries – probably referring to the area of the agglomeration of mosques established by pious Maghrebis around the mosque of Abu l-`Abbas Al-Mursi in about 1767.

The military maps of the disembarkment mark an undefined space as *Esplanade*. The same space appears on Henry Sait's map of 1806, as does the house of the British consul positioned on the north-west, directly on the sea. In 1814 the site is described by the British traveler Bramsen: "The large square near the sea is spacious, it has been improved and covered with gravel by the Europeans who come here to breathe the sea breezes." This conforms with Captain W.H. Smyth's map of 1833 indicating the space as *parade gravé*. A year later *Place d'Armes* appears in Le Saliner de Veuhello's map, still incomplete, yet beginning to take shape with the French Consulate located in a central position. While Mohamed Ali was engaged in campaigns, Alexandria served as a garrison town, a military and naval base for the Egyptian army and fleet, and the square was probably a parade



PLACE DES CONSUL - PLACE MOHAMED ALI 1855-1882

- 1 Mohamed Ali Sq. (Liberation Sq.)
- 2 Mohamed Ali Statue
- 3 St. Mark Church
- 4 Wekalet Abra
- 5 French Consulate Post
- 6 Wekalle Neuve

Q Miyad Tribunala

7 Palace of Conte Zizinia Belgium Consulate

- 10 Bazar
- 11 Old Stock Exchange Bourse
- 12 Tossiza Palace
- 13 Hotel Abbat
- 14 St. Catherine Square
- 15 Hotel D'Europe
- 16 Wekalle D'Anastasi
- 17 Wekalle Gibra
- 18 Cheikh Ihrahim Sayare

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ground. Captain Smyth's revised map of 1842 records the removal of the old gate of the saracenic wall for the new extensions of the Frank quarter, while the docks still line its northern sector. The elongated rectangular square is more defined in Lt. Colonel Napiers map of 1841-1846; on its eastern end is the Tossiza palace. The fully developed square appears complete in Charles Muller's map of 1855.

Alexandria prior to 1834 had been shaped by Turkish influences. The town had been mostly built through the traditional guild system by master masons and craftsmen. Building regulation conformed to Islamic law and traditional practices. The architecture began to be influenced by European models when Egypt's ruler sought to affirm an independent political status and to develop a modern state. This occurred while the country's economy was gradually being absorbed in the world-economic system as a major producer and exporter of cotton. Egypt's ties with Europe were fostered by the resident foreign consuls, who also acted as commercial agents. Alexandria's European quarter extended from rue Franque (presently rue de France) into the new square; its immigrants came mostly from the southern European Mediterranean countries and the Levant. Their position was made favourable by the Capitulations, a system of special privileges granted to Europeans in Ottoman provinces, exempting them from taxation and trial by sharia law.

The modernization of the urban built environment implied the adaptation of European building standards and planning techniques. The traditional Turkish town and the densely-populated shanty towns posed problems such as difficulty of circulation and the repeated spread of epidemics. Mohamed Ali recruited foreign consultants who adapted new European building standards and town planning models. In 1834, according to de Cerisy, the French engineer in charge of building the arsenal, "the system of buildings is comparable to that anywhere in the world. We already possess buildings that would be considered magnificent even in Paris."

For the accommodation of his navy personnel, Mohamed Ali adapted a district-city plan in which each house had two stories to accommodate two families; at the center of the district was a location for a mosque. Four years later, Mongel, who had come to

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build the naval-basins of Radoub, proposed to the Vice-Roy a Moorish style city plan for the local inhabitants "planned with squares and gardens with fountains, to combat dirt, humidity and provide better aeration in the city." These proposals were to become realities with the creation of Majlis El Ornato in 1834, the first planning commission in the city, and, indeed, in the whole of Egypt. The Ornato, inspired probably by similar commissions already functioning in Italian cities like Milan and Venice in 1807, was part of the health department, the Intendence Sanitaire: it was presided by the Italian Colucci Bev. While headed by the Consul Michael Tossiza, an old time friend and confidant of the Wali Mohamed Ali, the Ornato's technical direction was confided to the Italian engineer Francisco Mancini. Among the many responsibilities of the commission apart from the alignment of streets, monitoring of construction and designing public buildings such as schools, hospitals etc., was the creation of a new European Center or Frank quarter around the Grand Place. This took place under the direction of the Wali's son, Ibrahim Pasha, who owned most of its land and buildings.

Ali Pasha Mubarak in his famous account of 19th century Egypt, describes the area of Manshevah as partly open vacant land, used by Bedouins as a sheep market and for the sale of their goods, such as wool, dates, etc. It was known as Kom El Halah. The few houses there were expropriated and their owners compensated. The first building in the area reportedly was the mosque of Cheikh Ibrahim (1820), the second the Wakalat Moharem Bey, named after an admiral of the Egyptian fleet and Mohamed Ali's son-in-law. These were followed by the residences of D'Anastasi and Gibra, the latter being then bought by the Wali. The meat and vegetable markets originally known as the "Camel Lane" or Harrat were lands offered by the Wali to the princes who eventually developed them. These initiatives clearly demonstrate the extent of power, wealth and involvement of the autocrat ruler and the vice-regal family in promoting the Westernisation of the built-environment.

The new *Place des Consuls* was designed by Mancini who, it is said, designed most of its buildings. The square, 420m long and 65m wide, was surrounded with buildings. The rectangular residential blocks, three or four stories high, seemed similar to the block development concept applied in Italian cities such as

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the port of Trieste in the mid-18th century Austro-Hungarian Empire. Alexandria was on the verge of becoming the major port of Mohamed Ali's new Empire.

The buildings had an Italian-oriental aspect. In the manner prevalent in the Levant and the eastern-Mediterranean cities, they were painted yellow and pink with pastiche decorative moldings applied to their facades, European fenestration with Venetian shutters.

The square initially had a short new Alabaster obelisk located at its center. This aroused much sarcasm in a country where authentic obelisks are in abundance. It also had a fountain at one end.

In 1857 Barthelemy Saint Hilaire noted that "Alexandria is a half-European city, whose Grand Place is equivalent to those of the principal cities of France." Other observers of the period differed; for example, Poitou, who in 1859 describes the nude square "with not one tree to warm its cold regularity." The hybrid character of the square is described by Theophile Gautier: "Despite the imperfect European forms, we still may feel we are in Africa." Lottin de Laval, however, affirms that the city had lost its picturesque oriental physiognomies, but he praises the social gains due to Mohamed Ali's reform programs and innovations.

Early wealth on the Place Des Consuls is attached to new Greek fortunes, and to friends and close business associates of the Wali. The palace of M. Tossiza (the Greek Consul) designed by Mancini stood majestically on the prime eastern location of the square. Another was the elegant Palais of Count Zizinia, Belgium's acting Consul. The place was dominated by commercial and business activities: numerous large wakalas, such as Gibra, D'Anastasi, and Neuve, had ground floors reserved for all kinds of commercial enterprises and public services. Murray's Guide mentions David Robertson and Co. Booksellers, Rocheman Jewellers, Boret the hairdresser, photographers such as Fiorillo and general outfitters like Cordier. There were also numerous cafés, restaurants and hotels. Prince Omar Tousson, in his memoirs of "Alexandrie en 1868," noted the most glamorous as Le Café de France n°27 and the reputed Hotel d'Europe which even had a hammam (admission 2 Fr). Other businesses located on the square included insurance companies such as Peel & Co., the Lebon Gas Co., the Italian postal services and Banks such as



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the Anglo-Egyptian Bank. The upper floors were usually reserved for residential and office use.

The most noted building on the square was the French Consulate, which included the French postal service. Its gardens were open to the public on weekends and for special occasions, as were those of the Anglican church of Saint Mark, the only religious building privileged with a location on the square. Its land was donated by Mohamed Ali in 1839; he had made similar gestures to other religious congregations encouraging them to build impressive edifices. Grouped near the place were the Scottish church, the German and French Protestants, the Roman Catholic, the Greek Orthodox, the Maronite and Armenian Churches, while the Moslems were grouped around the area of the El Cheikh Ibrahim mosque. The presence of the Coptic and Jewish places of worship in proximity to historical sites affirms the multi-ethnic composition of the nascent cosmopolitan city.

The church of St. Mark was designed around 1841-42 by the visiting British architect James William Wild. It took over 9 years to complete (1845-54), probably due to lack of funds. Its plan was modeled on the Basilican tradition and its facades demonstrated Byzantine, Islamic and Judaic influences. Wild's concept was eclectically orientalised, in keeping with its time and place.

There were limited developments in terms of building activity in the *Mansheyah* area during the post-Mohamed Ali era, although Abbas I transformed an old fountain into a large building named after his son El Hamieyah. This building was sold after his death to the Greek Sir John Antoniadis, reportedly at a price of 50,000 L.E. In 1866 the stock exchange, *La Bourse*, was created with an initial capital of 24,000 L.E. The Tossiza Palace was used to house the new stock exchange, the offices of the Intendence Sanitaire and the Ornato. It also included the International Club and a public library containing about 8,000 volumes.

Khedive Ismail's "Haussmann-isation" scheme for Cairo hardly touched the already Westernised Alexandria, except for the embellishment of the Place – now known as *Place Mohamed Ali*, after the erection of the equestrian statue of the city's modern founder. The statue, designed by the French sculptor Jacquemart, was first exposed at the Universal Exposition of 1868. Its base of white carrara marble was designed by the French architect Ambroise Baudry (1871-1873). The erection of the

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statue at an extravagant cost of 2 million francs did not go down smoothly, despite the Khedive's absolute authority and rule. This was the first time that an equestrian statue had been placed in a public square of a Moslem country. Religious scholars rejected the idea, at least for some time, on the grounds that Islamic traditions oppose human figuration. The statue was put in its place only after the intervention of the enlightened Islamic theologian Sheikh Mohamed Abdou, a long-time friend and companion of the Khedive.

The era of Khedive Ismail is noted by the concessions granted to foreign service companies. The *Lebon* company had introduced gas to the city, and the *Place Mohamed Ali*, now brightly lit at night, was in full glamour. The Cordier firm, responsible for water treatment and piping, was commissioned to plant the *Place* with four rows of acacia trees; a band-stand and a fountain were also added to complement its symmetrical landscape.

The troubled finances of the Egyptian treasury in the 1870s led to political and social unrest. The abdication of Khedive Ismail and the Orabi revolt culminated in anti-European riots and the tragic Alexandria massacres of June 1882 in which thousands of Egyptians and tens of Europeans were killed or wounded. The Place Mohamed Ali and its adjacent areas were the scenes of these events, which served as a pretext for the British bombardment of the city and the occupation which followed. The European quarters, including the *Place Mohamed Ali*, were targeted and devestated by the bombardment of 11 July 1882 and the subsequent looting and burning. Of the destroyed square, only two buildings survived, namely the stock exchange and St. Mark's church. The destruction covered a total surface of 96,709 square meters, including approximately 500 apartment in the center of the city and a handful of villas in rue Moharem Bey. A military tribunal was set up in front of the Tossiza Palace and speedy judgments were passed. Manshevah was the scene of public executions and served as a graveyard for those put to death.

Following the bombardment, the Egyptian government compensated owners for the loss of their property. The amount reached 4.5 million pounds and covered 4,080 claims. There was a burst of prosperity due to the flow of such capital, and the city was quickly rebuilt.



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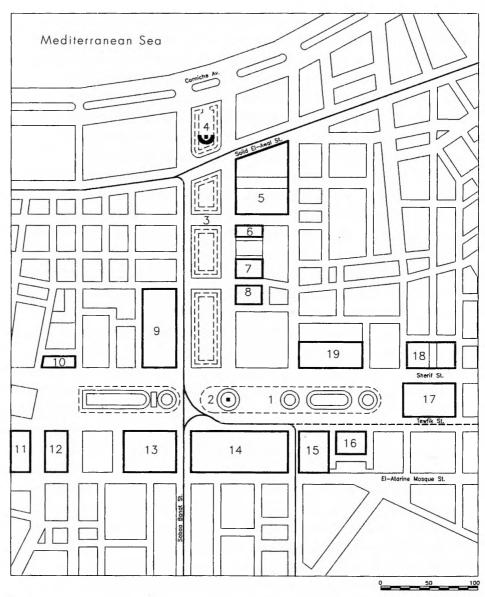
The rapid post-1882 development was primarily a result of these compensations. Expansion in trade and a rise in the price of cotton contributed to the stabilisation of wealth among a Franco-Levantine comprador bourgeoisie composed of merchants, financiers, and land owners. The building boom between 1882 and 1914, briefly interrupted during the speculative crisis of 1906-1907, occurred in a climate of political stability, sustained economic growth and administrative reorganization.

The emerging small power group of notables, which probably never exceeded 1,000 individuals, controlled most financial activity in the city. Family names such as Aghion, Menasce, Sursock, Karam, Bustros, Suares, Rolo and Boghos Nubar, and those of a second generation of Greek fortunes – Zervoudaki, Raly, Salvago, Benaki, Choremi – appear repeatedly on the boards of banks, insurance companies, public service companies and social clubs.

These agents and bankers who had become real estate promoters were also the main shareholders of development companies which were responsible for developing a great part of *Mansheyah*, rue Sherif Pasha and buildings on rue Rosette.

Another essential role played by this small group, in addition to their activities in speculative development, was their creation of the autonomous Municipality of Alexandria in 1890. They sat on its Mixed Council and thus controlled the city's fate. This gave them the opportunity to further promote the European character of the city.

The post-1882 rebuilding of *Place Mohamed Ali* was marked by a dominant Italian influence. Among the most important buildings of the period was the grand *Okale Passage Menasce* (1885-1887), developed on a plot of land of approximately 1.5 hectares. This land, originally bought by the Baron Bohr Levi de Menasce, had been developed by the Société Anonyme des Immeubles d'Egypte (founded by the Karams, Aghion, Menasce and Suares). The *Okale* was then built by the Greek contractor G. Zuro according to the plans of the Italian architect Antoine Lassiac. Milanese galeria influences re-appear in the *Okale Monferato* by Luigi Piattoli. These commercial redevelopments, together with the Primi Building designed by A. Lassiac, the main Branch of the Imperial Ottoman Bank designed by Prosper Remy, and the Bourse in the renovated Tossiza Palace, insured the



PLACE MOHAMED ALI - LIBERATION SQUARE 1882 - 1996

- 1 Mohamed Ali Sq. (Liberation Sq.)
- 2 Mohamed Ali Statue
- 3 French Gardens Saad Zaghloul Sq. (Orabi Sq.)
- 4 Ismail Memorial (Unknown Soldier)
- 5 (Cotton Palace / Sengor Univ.) 6 Scotish Church (Modern Block)
- 7 Jewish Temple Menasce
- 8 Waqf Y. Dahan

- 10 Cordahi Building
- 11 (El-Nasr Developments)
- 12 Cotzika Building
- 13 Mixed Tribunals (Local courts)
- 14 Passage Menasce
- 15 Prince Ibrahim Building Block
- 16 Imperial Ottoman Bank (Regist. Of.)
- 17 Bourse (Car Park)
- 18 Alexandria Central Buildings
- O Walcalla Manfausta

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continuity and future of business and commercial activity in the redeveloped urban space. Another 19th century landmark on the square was the seat of the new Mixed Tribunals designed by Alfonso Manescalco in 1886.

This late 19th century "Belle Époque" architecture is conservatively eclectic; the revivalist pro-Renaissance forms and decorations appear more formal than the freer eclecticism of the early 20th century, especially in regard to the application of pastiche in decorative moldings. This block development creates the trend that affects the entire city center.

The Europeanisation of urban morphology was furthered with the opening out of the square to link it with the new quai development (1905); this created a new urban space – *La Place des Jardins Français* (1909). The Europeanised revivalist trends remain dominant despite the presence of Neo-Islamic architecture in Prince Ibrahim's palace, a weak reminder of the dual morphology of the cosmopolitan city.

A "degentrification" of the square began after 1882, when the elite moved their residences towards rue Rosette (Aghion, Sursock, Pini), or into the Quartier Grec (Benaki and Salvago), or Moharem Bey (Menasce, Green, and Adah). Others moved to suburban Ramleh (the Karams, Binder Nagel, Zervoudachi and Laurens). Business, including banks, took premises in the adjacent areas of *Mansheyah* where a new city center was expanding round Sherif Pasha, Sesostris and Talaat Harb streets. Yet *Mansheyah*, because of the presence of the Stock exchange, retained its importance.

The dawn of the 20th century saw few changes in *Mansheyah*. The important exception was the construction of the electric tramways (1897-1904). The neighbouring *Place des Jardins Français* was enhanced by the elegant new French consulate built in 1909, designed by the French Bureau of Public Works, its construction monitored by the Alexandria-based French architect Victor Erlanger. In 1912 Erlanger also designed two blocks of residential flats for the Alexandria Central Co. on the corner of Adib and Sherif Pasha streets near to the Bourse. French influences seem to have also inspired the graceful *Wakf Yakoub Dahan* (1910), designed by H. Gorra Bey of the Ecole Centrale-Paris, which complemented the French garden landscape.

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This French influence continued in the Post World War I period. The economic prosperity of Egyptian affairs, due to the increase in the price of cotton, enriched the city's merchants. G. Cordahi, known as "Le Roi de la Bourse," was among the wealthy represented on the square. In 1926, he financed the construction of a very impressive building designed by the French architects A. Dressi, L. Oudin and R. Lecard. Its architectural style was eclectically conservative, but distinguished by two features: high articulation in form and the presence of red bricks on its façades. This contrasted sharply with the mono-chrome, plain façades of the other buildings on the square.

During the 1930s and 1940s the square was redeveloped, unfortunately leading to the replacement of some of the old and elegant structures such as the Primi Building. These developers were insurance companies, e.g. Misr Insurance, and industrialists such as Cozzika, whose building was designed by the modernists M. Flori and C. Giorgiadis. The heights of the new building in the early modern style sharply contrasted with the established order and style of the square.

Modernist trends continued after the 1952 revolution. The 19th century housing district south of the square was cleared to make way for the El Nasr road in 1958, thereby linking the port to what was now known as *Midan El Tahrir* – "Liberation Square." Along El Nasr road the Municipality developed a new comprehensive scheme to complete Egyptianisation. Uniform apartment blocks designed by an Egyptian architect, Mahmoud El Hakim, a graduate of Liverpool University, were meant to house businesses, especially those related to port activity. But the timing was wrong. Although the Free Officers of the Revolution took a personal interest in it, the project's development goals did not coincide with socio-economic and political realities at that time.

Anti-western sentiment, nationalisation and eventually the mass exodus of Europeans from the country were followed by the sequestration of Egyptian property belonging to the elite. This led to a reduction of business and a diminuation in the contributions of the private sector. The Municipality's project was eventually transformed for the use of small businesses and low cost housing.

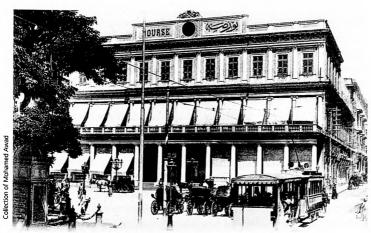
The area south west of the square also witnessed physical changes. A new market place planned by the Municipality's

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design office was part of the 1958 overall redevelopment scheme. The reorganisation of the market unfortunately was not sufficient to meet the enormous commercial potential of the square. Thus, the new market is dwarfed within the chaotic, disorderly and traditionally dense markets. *Souk Syria*, subsequently know as *Souk Libya* – depending on where the contraband came from – makes ironic allusion to the Pan-Arabism of the Nasser period. As for the "dollar market" for money changers, a phenomena of Sadat's open-door policy, it is now also a large conspicuous consumer market for cheap clothing and household equipment.

Anti-royalist sentiment, at its height during the early Nasser period, did not efface Mohamed Ali's position on the square. But Khedive Ismail's statue was toppled from its pedestal. The monument had been erected at the end of the French Gardens directly on the sea as a gift of the Italian community in memory of Egypt's impatient Westerniser. It was designed in 1938 by the Italian architect Ernesto Verruchi, chief architect of the Royal palaces during the reign of King Fouad, and was probably inspired by the Victor Emmanuel I monument in Rome. The site is now given over to a contemporary sculpture, a monument to the Unknown Soldier.



The Bourse in its hey day.

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Mansheyah also attracted the attention of Islamic fundamentalists during the Nasser period. The balcony of the Socialist Union, the former Bourse, overlooking the square, was chosen as the perfect spot for the mise-en-scene of Nasser's speeches to the masses. On the 26th of October 1954, it was the site of an unsuccessful attempt on the President's life. Blamed on the semi-official Muslim Brotherhood, the attempted assassination ended a short honeymoon between the Muslim Brotherhood and the secularist regime. The Muslim Brothers organization, however persecuted and legally banned, was not dissolved. Islamic fundamentalism, though contained during Nasser's tightly controlled state, was to make a vigorous resurgence during the Sadat era. Indeed it brought his own life to a tragic end.

Since the early 60s Nasser's autocratic socialist state controlled most industry and services through its bureaucratic public sector. Private enterprise shrunk significantly, to the extent that the stock-exchange came to a virtual standstill. The great edifice of the Bourse had become the premises of the single party National, and later Socialist, Union. Its interior was partly burned during the Bread Riots in January 1977, when government subsidies began to be gradually lifted. Partially destroyed, the building was demolished in the early 1980s. It is now an empty lot serving as a car park.

The religious buildings around *Mansheyah*, with the exception of the Scottish church (bombed during World War II) and the Jewish Synagogue (partly burned down during antisemitic riots following the triple aggression of 1956), still operate discretely for a relatively limited number of worshipers. Gone are the days of pluralism and religious tolerance, when Muslim celebrations accompanying the procession of *El Mahmal*, the Holy Carpet's voyage to Mecca, took place along with the Greek Orthodox procession of the Epitaph, proceeding through the city streets and its square.

Alexandria today is a monoglot city, one race, one creed, and fundamentally Islamic. The survivors of cosmopolitanism are marginal. That society is extinct, or on its way to extinction, and its physical heritage is in danger.

The urban character of *Mansheyah* continues to degenerate; the degradation of its buildings is due to a lack of maintenance,

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another repercussion of the socialist measures of rent devaluation and control. Its built environment is menaced by ill-conceived remodellings and additions inappropriate to its original styles. Overcrowding is overwhelming in both the built environment and the overall urban environment. Demographic pressure in the post-socialist era, combined with housing shortages, have brought about a subdivision of floor space in the existing buildings. Overcrowding in public space and in residences, including the phenomena of roof-top dwellers in the square, are direct consequences of the housing crisis and of poverty. Traffic chaos, and the presence of street vendors occupying every available inch of broken pavement, are at least in part a consequence of mismanagement and the decline of the State's role in the conservation of the built environment and the organisation of urban space.

The economic mismanagement of the square is well-illustrated by the construction of the fourteen-story monolith block of the Cotton Tower in the mid-eighties, designed by the Italian firm Volani Archittectura. While increasing the disorder of the square and the city-scape, it remains because of its exorbitant costs and bad location mostly vacant; only three of its floors are presently occupied by the Afro-French Leopold Senghor University.

After over a century and a half of history, *Mansheyah*, like the city itself, is searching to redefine its role in the modern era. Once the political, social and economic hub of Alexandria, it has been reduced to a vast trafic roundabout, congested by street vendors. The past splendour awaits its re-genesis, and perhaps a new name.

Mohamed F. Awad was born and educated in Alexandria before going to London to do a doctorate in architecture. Since returning to his native city, he has been practising architecture and teaching at the University. He is the founder of the Association for the protection of the Alexandrian patrimony of 1880-1920.

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Statue of Mohamed Ali, El Mansheyah.