

A Study on the Cognitive Structure of the Historical European Quarter in Cairo

Ali Essam El-Shazly

Assistant Professor, Environment and Technology Division, Graduate School of Economics,
Hitotsubashi University, 2-1 Naka, Kunitachi-Shi, Tokyo 186-8601, Japan.
E-mail: elshazly@econ.hit-u.ac.jp

Abstract

In this cognitive study, the incorporation of digitized map-overlay clarifies the chronology of urban change for the European Quarter in Cairo. Layers of shape files with attributed data were generated for the quarter's detailed 'Insurance Plan' in 1905, and overlaid by similar surveys in 2003. The urban tissue in 1905 superimposed a network of boulevards to link major open spaces, as well as integrating with Old Cairo through transitional spaces. Meanwhile, the node of 'Ezbekieh Plaza' filtered the function of buildings in correlation with the urban tissue, thus defined as the composer of the quarter. When overlaying the urban information in 2003, the squat or retreat of micro spaces had weakened the network of boulevards. This together with the lack of enforcing the function of buildings and open spaces had facilitated the dissolution of node structure in present Cairo. The neglect of the core 'Ezbekieh Plaza' is obvious to affect the assemblage of historical urban structure in Cairo.

Keywords: Cairo, European Quarter, Ezbekieh Plaza, Municipality, GIS

Introduction

The foundation of the European Quarter in Cairo dates back to the reign of the Egyptian ruler, Ismail (1863-1879), who adored the European civilization. The French engineer, Haussmann, in 1867 first planned the quarter with, Le Grand, in 1874 further realizing the plan (Ali 1998:32). The British occupation in 1882 continued to develop the colony, and later in 1905 the European Municipality set the 'Insurance Plan' for the enlarged colonial urban structure (Caneri 1905). This plan resembled a GIS scheme, manually though, of linking the design plan to the detailed street-building information, function, and insured building items as a precaution measure against the risk of damage by the colonized (El-Shazly 2003:175-182). However, in 1952 the revolution for nationalization resulted in the mass exodus of Europeans from Egypt, and followed to the present by urban transformation. Meanwhile, in 2002 Cairo Governorate addressed the architectural conservation of the historical quarter (The Urban Planning Association 2002). The description of physical characteristics, nevertheless, lacked the strategies of conservation. In this study the GIS technique of overlaying

maps attempts to compare the cognitive structure of the colony between the formation (1867-1951) and the nationalization (1952-to date) according to: 1) urban tissue, 2) nodes and landmarks, and 3) function (among the readings this paper is based on are: Kostof 1999, 1991, Krier 1979, Rossi 1986, Lynch 1981, 1960, Cohen 1999). Through this analysis the key issues of Cairo's European Quarter are pointed-out for conservation.

The Formation of the European Quarter (1867-1951)

The status quo of Cairo in 1867 secluded a walled town eastwards of the Nile bank. The Haussmannization plan in 1867 of Cairo formed the plaza named 'Ezbekieh' to border the Islamic Town. In the same year the French engineer, J. P. De Schamps, landscaped the open space of the plaza on the precedence of Parisian gardens (Mubarak 1889:211-213). From Ezbekieh, in 1867 'Rue Neuve' crossed the town straightforward to the eastern wall-gate, while in 1872 'Boulevard M. Ali' split the town diagonally towards the 'Manshieh Plaza' located at the town's southeast edge. The latter boulevard was extended through 'Rue Claude Bey' to the Central Station of railway terminal (Scharabi 1989). These major boulevards were superimposed on the irregular Islamic urban tissue to structure the axial orientation of Cairo. The total buildable area of blocks webbed interior courtyards and narrow passages into the Islamic urban tissue. Later in 1874 the French engineer, Le Grand, planned the network of radial streets to spread over the alluvial green field bound between the town wall and the Nile course (Ali 1998:27-29). The state ownership not only eased the urbanization of this field, but also the ruler, Ismail, gifted the land parcels to any citizen (regardless of nationality) on condition to develop European-style buildings with gardens (Owen 1969:337). The real-estate business adopted the free-market of ownership and rents, with taxes imposed to reinvest in public facilities (Owen 1969:337-339). Despite the geometric radial pattern of the European Quarter, another gridiron pattern was overlaid following the Nile stream. In 1874 the streets occupied 30% of the total land area, while the buildings formed only 13 % leaving the rest of the land as gardens of approximately 63 hectares (Ali 1998:40). In the 1900's the European Quarter experienced a building boom of average 3,344 permissions of construction per year compared to 1,477 during the 1880's and 90's (Owen 1969:338). This resulted in the partial replacement of previous gardens by buildings along the perimeter of blocks.

On the macro level of Cairo, the projected streets from the 'Ezbekieh Plaza' terminated in major nodes of the city (Fig.1.) In this regard, the peripheral railway plazas of 'Manshieh' and 'Central Station' were linked to the central 'Ezbekieh' for commercialization. Meanwhile, the traditional Islamic node of 'Azhar Mosque' was integrated through 'Rue Neuve' to the central plaza. The radial network of the European Quarter, however, nodded in round-points that distributed all over the area. The pole

of 'Ismailia' round-point on the Nile radiated the axial boulevards of 'Kasr El-Nile' and 'El-Bustan,' respectively, towards the other poles of 'Ezbekieh plaza' and the royal 'Abdin Palace' with its front plaza. The latter two plazas were linked by boulevard 'Abd El-Aziz,' of dense pedestrian flow. Another node of special character developed all through the Nile to form a recreational promenade of continuous gardens. The landmarks culminated in the focal point of 'Ezbekieh' with The Opera in 1869 designed by the Italian engineers Scala & P. Avosciani (Ali 1998:70), in addition to Hotels Continental & Shepherds, The Mixed Tribunal and the Central Post Office. Other landmark buildings developed in the various nodes of the European Quarter such as the Museum of Egyptian antiquities located in 'Ismailia' round-point. Furthermore, vistas of sculptures were adorned to the round-points, which together with towers and minarets of religious buildings formed vertical landmark features.

The rise of Cairo's European population from 35,385 in 1895 to 55,987 in 1905 demanded new policies of development (Owen 1969:337). The European Municipality of Cairo was founded in 1905 to enforce the colonial urban structure. The Municipal policy of 'Insurance Plan' in 1905 not only correlated the urban form to the function of the colony, but also the 'insurance' of building items in risk of damage (Insurance Plan of Cairo 1905). In this plan, the commercial center of 'Ezbekieh Plaza' was regulated a 27 m building-height of Neo-renaissance style façades. Commercial 'galleria' buildings, however, developed on both sides of 'Rue Neuve' with characteristic interior passages of average three-stories (ibid). Arcades were built along boulevards 'Claude Bey' and 'Mohamed Ali' for retailing activities with residential function on the upper floors (ibid). Further east and south of 'Ezbekieh' prevailed the preexisting housing of the Islamic Town (ibid). The zone to the west of 'Ezbekieh' replaced the single-family houses of surrounding gardens by maximum 36 m building-height of Victorian and Neo-Gothic façade styles. In this zone flourished the European business offices, commercial banks, insurance companies, prestigious shops and restaurants (Ali 1998:59-65). The villa-type of housing, meanwhile, shifted to the new residential area of 'Garden City' in the southwest zone of the colony. This developed Baroque style houses and palaces of flower gardens along characteristic curving street-pattern on the British conception (Ali 1998:80-83, 184). Later during the 1920's and 30's emerged apartment buildings and governmental buildings of Art-Deco styles that prevailed in Egyptian cities.



Photo 1: 'Ezbekieh' Garden.



Photo 2: Hotel Continental.



Photo 3: The Opera House.



Photo 4: 'Abdin' Palace.



Photo 5: 'Abdin' Garden.



Photo 6: Nile Promenade.

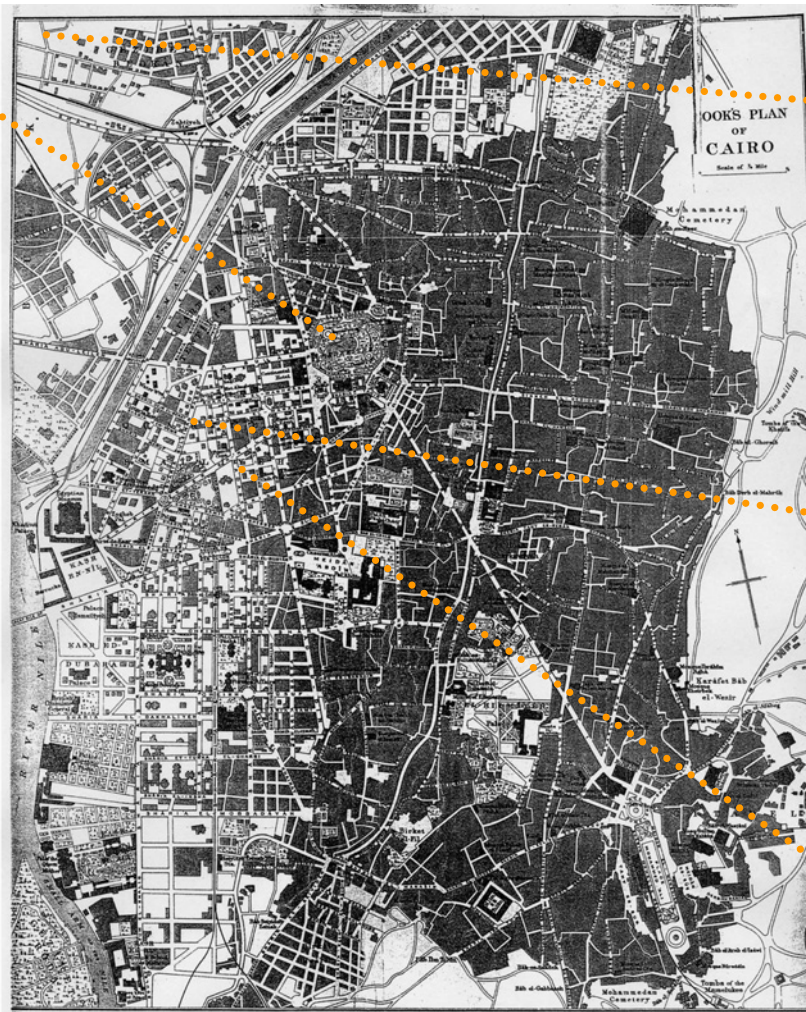


Fig. 1: Plan of Cairo in 1905.



Photo 7: Boulevard-type of street in Residential Suburbs

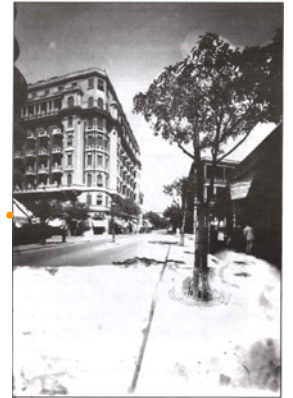
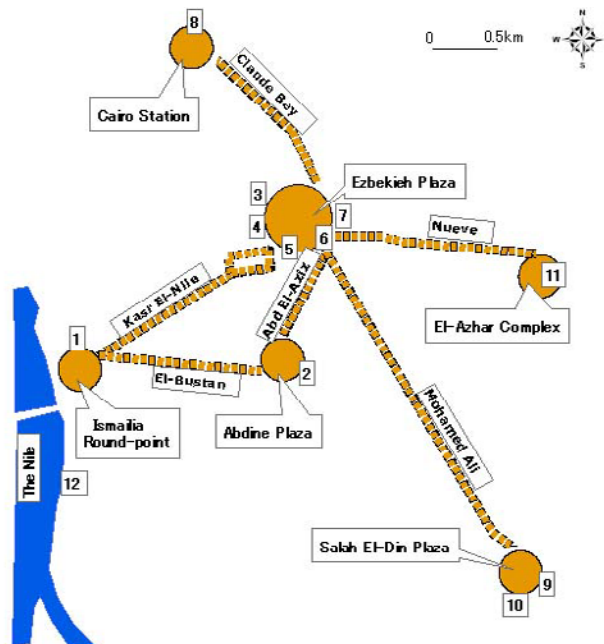


Photo 8: Boulevard-type of street linking between Round-points.



Photo 9: Typical Round-point 'Souarez' in the European Quarter.



Legend

- █ The Nile
- █ Boulevards
- Nodes

1. Egyptian Museum
2. Royal Palace
3. Hotel Shepherds (Lost)
4. Hotel Grand Continental (Lost)
5. Opera House (Lust)
6. Post Office
7. Mixed Tribunal (Lost)
8. Cairo Railway Station
9. Citadel Salah El-Din (Historic)
10. Helwan Railway Station (Lost)
11. El-Azhar Mosque (Historic)
12. British Consulate

Fig. 2: The Nodes and Landmarks in 1905.

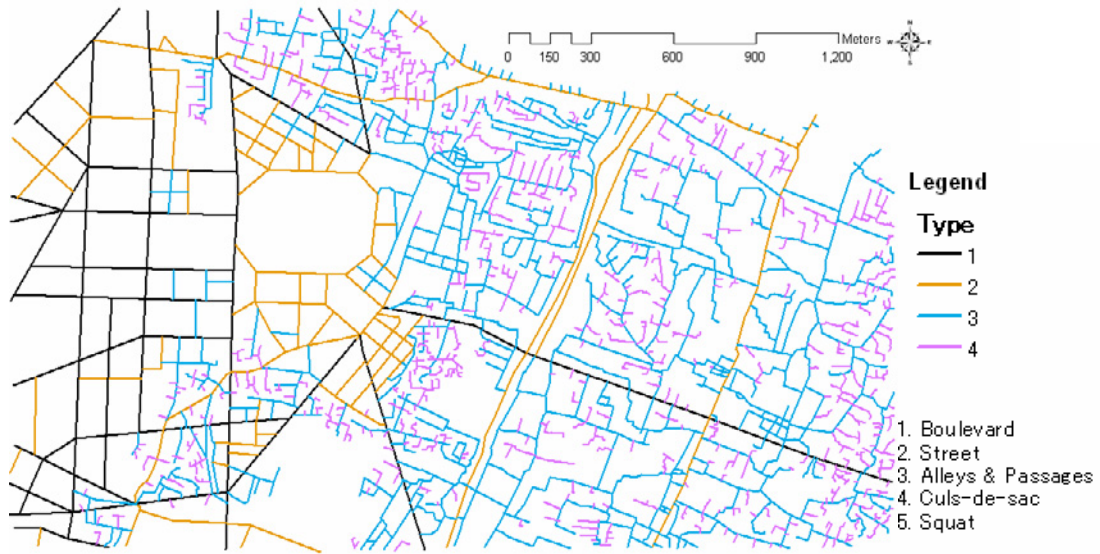


Fig. 3: The Street-Network of the European Quarter in 1905.

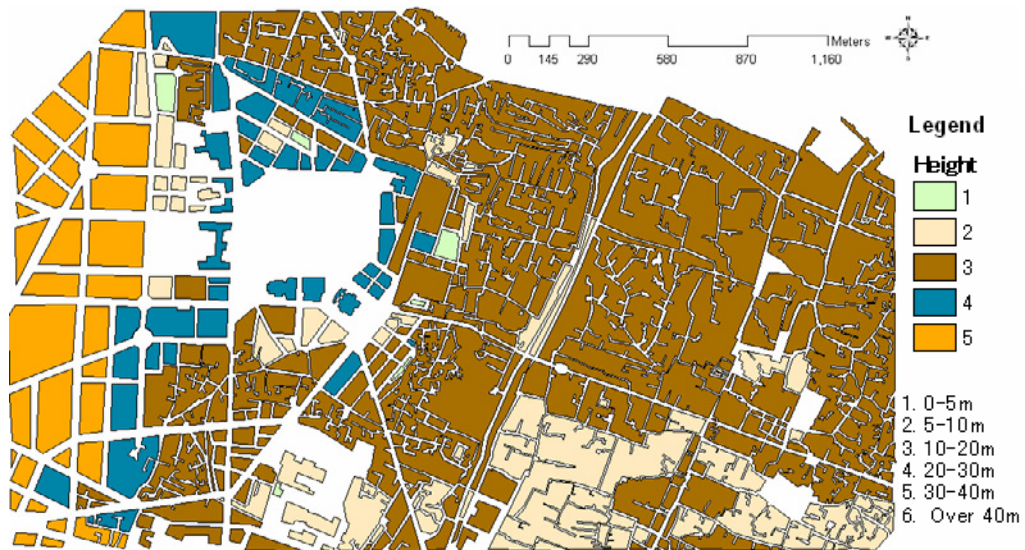


Fig. 4: The Building-Height of the European Quarter in 1905.



Fig. 5: The Building-Function of the European Quarter in 1905.

The Nationalization of the European Quarter (1952 - To Date)

The revolution in 1952 for nationalization occupied the European Quarter of major transformations in progress. In order to compare the situations of the quarter before and after the turning point in 1952, the method first digitizes the 'Insurance Plan' in 1905 that structured the cognition of urban tissue, nodes and landmarks, and function of the colony until the nationalization. Second, the present situation in 2003 as investigated by the author is digitized for the same criteria of the 'Insurance Plan' in 1905 to make the possibility of comparing the two situations. Through this access to urban information, the two values in 1905 and 2003 of the same field are overlaid to categorize their transformation.

The bylaws related to urbanism changed from the closed Municipality to the National Government of different policies. The concept of round-points linked by major boulevards is not classified by the code of urban design or public streets to transform into ordinary vehicular streets¹ (Fig. 2.) Meanwhile, the occupation by street vendors is not planned in the urban tissue in contradiction to the regulation specifying: *'The squat of public spaces without authorization is prohibited for selling goods, shop-windows, seats or tables, kiosks, bars and the like.'*² Besides, the characteristic passages of building interiors are being squatted for workshop extensions without pedestrian functioning.

Landscaping the outdoor environment lacks the public amenities, which suggests the law stating: *'The Local Authority should plan the elements of pavements, lighting & landscaping for the pedestrian amenity'*³ as too general to be enforced. Furthermore, the Government considers the historical European Quarter through: *'special bylaws of the Central District (European Quarter) should consider the capacity of streets in terms of vehicular circulation, parking lots, loading and unloading of goods, public transportation and the pedestrian circulation.'*⁴ In reality, however, the ever-increasing vehicular circulation overloads the capacity of streets and plazas in the historical quarter without realizing the law's expression 'should consider' into practice. The redevelopment of buildings, nevertheless, is regulated by setbacks for the purpose of widening the narrow streets as: *'a minimum setback ratio of one-third the street width up to 12m, and a one-fourth the street width up to 15m.'*⁵ This regulation is adopted without considering the conservation of the historical urban tissue, in addition to different building- height of: *'a maximum building-height of one and a half times the widest street of the building's site.'*⁶ Accordingly, the urban tissue experiences duality of figure-ground relationship between the original buildings and the redevelopment (Fig.3.)

Parallel to the chaotic urban tissue, the nodal structuring of the European Quarter ceased to develop at Cairo's different levels of resolution. The central 'Ezbekieh Plaza' lost the enclosure by landmark

buildings, while deprived from the recreational activities of its gardened open space. Other nodes had been cancelled such as the railway station of 'Manshieh Plaza' to affect the city-level structuring of railway nodes linked to the 'Ezbekieh' center. The round-points followed suit without nodal importance as for the 'Ismailia' one limited to vehicular through passing, while the Nile promenade transformed to a mere vehicular street. It is certain that the loss of 'Ezbekieh' node had affected, in consequence, the whole nodal structure of Cairo. Besides, the modern high-rise buildings overwhelm the original vertical features of religious buildings and sculptures. These high-rises, however, are scattered without criteria of structuring the spatial experience in the European Quarter. Similar process of high-rise development is taking place along the Nile, which destroyed the uniformity of original palaces and villa-type housing.



Photo 10: Neglected 'Ezbekieh' Landscapes.



Photo 11: Lost Landmarks (The Opera).



Photo 12: Lack of Pedestrian Amenities.



Fig. 6: Plan of Cairo in



Photo 13: Original/New Building



Photo 15: Deteriorated Arcades.



Photo 14: Vehicular/ Pedestrian



Photo 16: Blocked Landmark



Photo 17: A Typical Round-point without



Photo 18: 'Ismailia' Round-point in



Fig. 7: The Street-Network of the European Quarter in 2003.



Fig. 8: The Building-Height of the European Quarter in 2003.

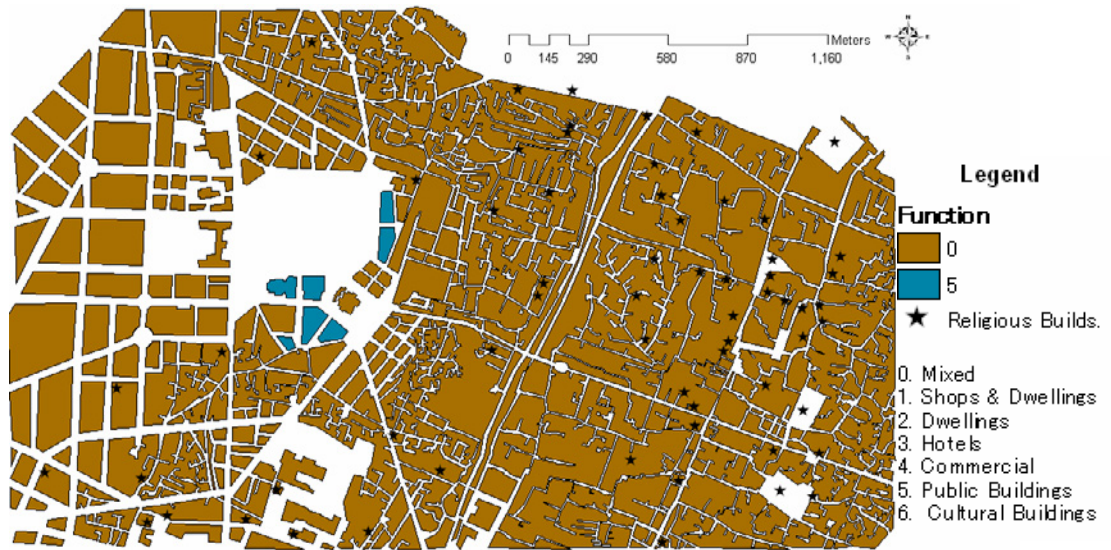


Fig. 9: The Building-Function of the European Quarter in 2003.

The governmental designation of the European Quarter as the Central Business District of Cairo specifies the functions of *'commercial and monetary establishments, business offices, hotels, recreational and cultural facilities, main administrative buildings, small-scale industry, and also the residential function'*⁷ to take place. The actual functions in the European Quarter, however, mix workshops, private clinics, residential flats, shops of different items, business offices, governmental offices and others in a laissez-faire manner (Fig. 4.) The law proves too general to control the functions in the historical quarter. The mixture of functions in any one building decorates the building façade by different materials, colors and signboards that spoil the characteristic historical façades. Furthermore, the conversion of building interiors to suit the various functions causes technical problems such as the removal of structural walls for space extension and improper fittings of building equipment.⁸ Besides, the ownership of real-estate properties transferred from the European nationals to the National Government or sold to natives. The Government in 1952 changed the real-estate business from the free market to the controlled economies without revenues.⁹ The low-income rent constrains the deteriorated condition of buildings in the European Quarter without maintenance or insurance. Meanwhile, the real-estate taxation law exempts the old buildings before 1944 that applies to the European Quarter's building stock without evaluation.¹⁰

Conclusion

The historical formation of Cairo's European Quarter in comparison to its nationalized situation at present concludes the following:

1. The locus of 'Ezbekieh Plaza' in 1905 projected radial boulevards to synthesize Islamic Cairo with a 'New Paris' by the Nile. The three thoroughfares of 'Rue Neuve,' 'M. Ali' and 'Claude Bey' welded in the Islamic urban tissue through building galleries and arcades in transition to the irregular alleys of the traditional Islamic blocks. The European network of round-points linked by boulevards, meanwhile, fused into another gridiron one after the Nile orientation. New blocks in 1905 maintained the amalgamation of 'Garden City' dotted by buildings with prismatic blocks of specific depth/height ratios. At present, however, the historical core of 'Ezbekieh' lost a definite role on the city level, with major boulevards transforming into ordinary vehicular streets. The historical urban tissue, nevertheless, is changing under the present regulations of building setbacks and heights that vary from the original.
2. The common-theme in 1905 of boulevards terminating in major open spaces structured the nodes of the European Quarter. The foci of 'Ezbekieh Plaza' overlapped the three-sided structuring of: 1) railway nodes at the two poles of the northwest-southeast axis, 2) the Islamic 'Azhar' node along the east-west axis, and 3) the triangular flow nodding in 'Ismailia Round-point,' 'Abdin Plaza,' and 'Ezbekieh Plaza' itself of concentrated landmark buildings. The longitudinal node of the Nile

promenade, nevertheless, formed the special urban landscape of the European development. On the contrary, the situation in 2003 of outdoor nodes dissolved into the vehicular circulation to replace gardens. In specific, the dismantlement of socio-economic activities from the core 'Ezbekieh' node reflects the catastrophe of shaping nodes in present Cairo. In chain to the lost nodes, the landmarks develop inharmonious high-rises that are scattered without concept.

3. The Municipal 'Insurance Plan' in 1905 of Cairo planned the function of the European colony through the process of invasion and succession. This developed the western zone of 'Ezbekieh Plaza' into business establishments instead of the single-family houses that shifted further southwest. Eastwards of 'Ezbekieh' developed commercial galleria buildings to stretch along 'Rue Neuve' in the residential Islamic town. It is obvious for 'Ezbekieh Plaza' to have structured the functions, while itself represented the socio-economic hub of grand hotels, The Opera, Mixed Tribunal and recreational open space.

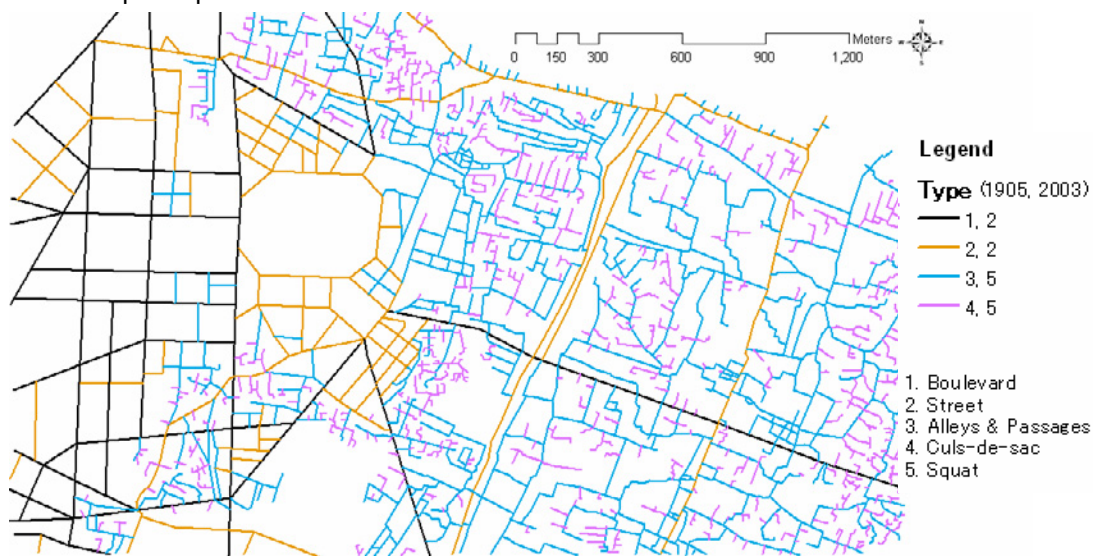


Fig. 10: Overlaying the Street-Networks of 1905 and 2003.

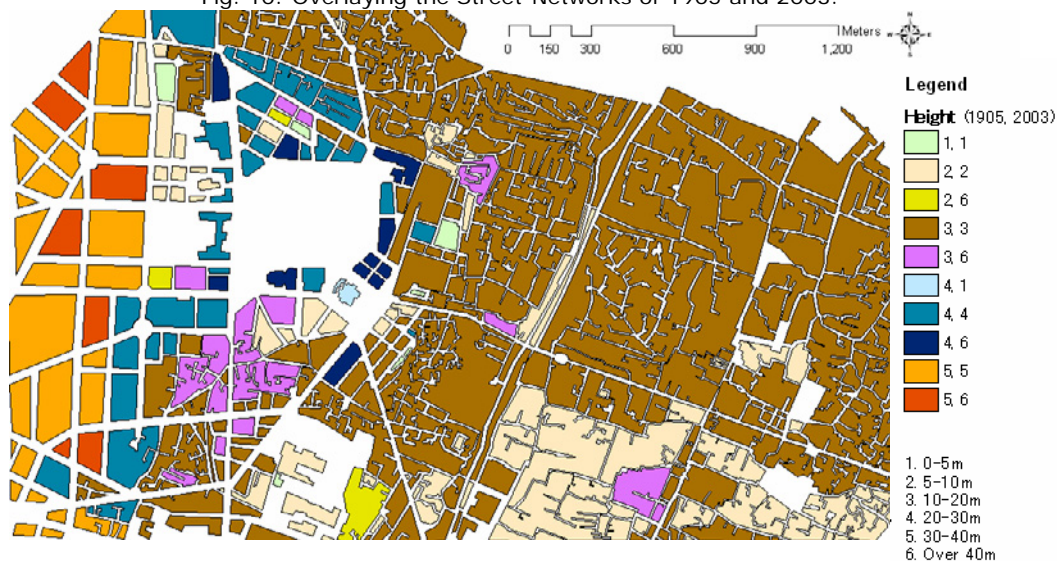


Fig. 11: Overlaying the Building-Heights of 1905 and 2003.



Fig. 12: Overlaying the Building-Functions of 1905 and 2003.

Although the present regulation classifies the building-function, the actual situation in 2003 proves a chaotic mixture of functions, which together with the controlled economies of real-estate without revenues cause the building deterioration.

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² The Law No. 140 in 1956 and No. 84 in 1968, *The Law of Public Streets and Advertisement*, Third Edition, El-Amiriyah Publishing House, 1992:2.

³ The Law No. 3 in 1982, op. cit.:15.

⁴ Ibid:67.

⁵ The Ministry of Housing and Reconstruction, The Law No. 106 in 1977, *The Law of Building Works*, Tenth Edition, El-Amiriyah Publishing House, 1995:75.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ The Law No. 3 in 1982, op. cit.:66-67.

⁸ Field surveys in 2003 by the author.

⁹ The Law No.49 in 1977, *The Law of Renting Building Spaces and Organizing the Relationship Between the Owner and the Tenant*, Thirteenth Edition, El-Amiriyah Publishing House, 1994:55.

¹⁰ The Law No.49 in 1977, op. cit.:25.

Figures 1-4: Insurance Plan of Cairo, London, E. Goad Press, 1905. And surveys by the author in 2002-2003.