

Visual Spaces of Change

Photographic documentation of environmental transformations



SOPHIA
SCOPIO EDITIONS

volume 6, issue 1 | publication year: 2021
issn: 2183-8976 [print] 2183-9468 [online]
doi 10.24840/2183-8976_2021-0006_0001_18
homepage: <https://www.up.pt/index.php/sophia>

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A Walk through Urban Decay: al-Hattaba Is Worth Saving!

Yara A. Khalif, Ahmed El Antably, Mona A. Abdelwahab

Abstract

Beyond the glamour of Cairo history lies a different side of the city that unravels the unique beauty of urban decay. Al-Hattaba, a UNESCO heritage area, is caught in between these narrations of beauty and decay; the beautiful home whose inhabitants want to keep and grow, and the formally enlisted dangerous informal space subject to eviction and demolition.

Al-Hattaba embraces the beauty of its rich and diverse history, growing through time. It beholds moments of prosperity, failure, change, beauty, and loss.

Urban decay photography is used to interpret al-Hattaba's controversy and explore the bonds between time and memory. We take the reader through a visual journey in al-Hattaba.

It constitutes a photo-sequence that considers al-Hattaba in reflection of its background context, the Citadel of Saladin; historic and residential buildings, some abandoned and attempts of local renovation. This urban setting reflects a rich visual diversity that witnessed its changes through time. We argue that the essence of al-Hattaba's beauty is in its urban decay. It is a space that will never fail to amaze its visitors with its hidden beauty.

Keywords: Photography, Urban Decay, al-Hattaba, Visual Layers, Aesthetics

Yara A. Khalf (Cairo, 1992) is a current student of the Master degree in Architectural Engineering and Environmental Design at the Arab Academy for Science & Technology & Maritime Transport. She received her bachelor degree in Architecture from Faculty of Fine Arts, Helwan University, Egypt. She is currently working as the graphics designer for "Arcplan": Arabic cities planning e-journal. She is an enthusiastic architect and photographer interested in understanding the relations between architecture, the urban and photography through urban explorations.

Ahmed El Antably is currently an Associate Professor at the Department of Architectural Engineering, the Arab Academy for Science, Technology & Maritime Transport. He is interested in design media and the ways in which they are socially deployed in design discourse, and the effects they introduce in design practice. He is also interested in issues of (re)mediation and perception in virtually (re)constructed places. El Antably received his doctoral degree in Architecture from the University of California, Berkeley, with a Designated Emphasis in New Media.

Mona A. Abdelwahab is Associate Professor in Architecture, Department of Architecture and Environmental Design at the Academy for Science, Technology and Maritime Transport, Egypt. She received her PhD in Architecture from Newcastle University, UK. She followed her post-doc studies at the Department of Spatial Planning, University of Groningen, NL, where she co-founded "YA-AESOP- Booklet Series: Conversations In-Planning". She is a founding member of Khotout Association for Design Studies and Planning, and co-founder and editor-in-chief of "Arcplan": Arabic cities planning e-journal.

Introduction

Beyond the advertised city in brochures, tour guides, and media, there are other undiscovered and neglected layers. Ones that are often missed by the public. The marginalized spaces of urban decay have their own aesthetic charm beyond their common narrative as spaces of demolition.

This essay will explore al-Hattaba in Cairo as an example that embraces the core qualities of the visual paradox between beauty and decay. As such, the essay presents a theoretical background about the urban narration of decaying spaces. Then it starts examining the story of al-Hattaba's creation, the dilemma of its existence, and presenting its visual narration.

The methodology for the visual narration adopts photography as a performative act of exploring urban spaces. As such, the urban narrative evolved through three stages: the planned walk, the interaction, and the choice. The last phase represents the real experience after fully engaging with the space of al-Hattaba. Accordingly, the analysis of the last phase is divided into two categories ruins of space and inhabited ruins. This essay argues that there is a certain hidden beauty within the decay explicitly present in the case of al-Hattaba.

The Paradox of Decay

Decaying structures – ruins – are the physical representation of the passing time. They are a reminder of humanity's past achievements and failures.¹ Philosopher Carolyn Korsmeyer² argues that ruins are completed by the passage of time, adding value and aesthetic dimension to their existence. She added that ruins have an aura of mystery surrounding their very existence, where time is at the heart of that mystery. However, decayed as they may seem, ruins manage to outlive humanity's existence.³ Decaying buildings/ruins thus embody the notion of time, where the past, present, and the potential for the future co-exist.

Moreover, ruins do not look like their original architecture.⁴ Their form emerges from the decay or collapse of their original designs. They look incomplete as they lose their original elements. Thus, time can neither be separated from the process of forming the ruin nor the ruin itself. As such, a ruin's state of incompleteness becomes complete, where the eye sees fragments of their original state. The ruin formation thus becomes the deformation of its original architecture; as man is the architect of the building, yet time is the architect of the ruin.

1 Tanya Whitehouse, *How Ruins Acquire Aesthetic Value* (Basingstoke, Hampshire, Winchester: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 12.

2 Carolyn Korsmeyer, "The Triumph of Time: Romanticism Redux", *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 72 (2014): 429

3 M. Nieszczerewska, "Derelict architecture: Aesthetics of an unaesthetic space", *Argument: Biannual Philosophical Journal* (2016): 395.

4 Zachery E. Fein, "The Aesthetic of Decay: Space, Time, and Perception", (PhD diss., University of Cincinnati, 2011), 11.

Yet, the question remains: how do you capture and experience urban decay and its aesthetics created by time? Decay remains a very unique physical state of the space that must be experienced through the body presence in the space of decay.⁵ The transfer of that experience – visually through photography – is a complicated relationship between the produced image and the hidden bodily experience of the photographer in each image. In that sense, the photographer's documentation captures a specific moment in time of their own experience of decay.

Moreover, as a technology of recreating the visual experience, photography beholds the ability to change our existing memory of the past, the current experience of the present and even our vision for the future. It melts the line of time between them, giving new meanings as remembering the future, imagining the present, and experiencing the past.⁶ Thus, images/ photographs of ruins become atemporal and multitemporal, as they exist out of time yet convey a reminder of time and its work.

Photography as a visual narrative is a double-edged weapon. It can be used as an argument supporting preservation or demolition, especially for neglected or decayed spaces. As the photograph shows a specific physical setting of a space, according to the photographer's intentions, it gains the ability to alter the way we judge and see those spaces.⁷ In the case of decay, this ability is crucial to be used wisely; as terms like decay and neglect are negatively accepted by most people, it blinds them from seeing the beauty within the decay.⁸

As the shape and structure change, the decaying building seems like a work of art narrated by time and nature.⁹ The beauty of the neglected spaces and their architecture emerges from their expressive fragmentation qualities that could be experienced through physical interactions or even through photographs. The ruin's ability to change, modify and adapt becomes the foundation of their aesthetic quality as a product of time.

In light of the presented theoretical background of the paradox of decay and ruins, the essay argues that there is an aesthetic dimension for urban decay and the existence of ruins in the space of al-Hattaba that needs to be explored through its photographic visual narration.

5 Fein, "The Aesthetic of Decay: Space, Time, and Perception", 11.

6 Nieszczorzewska, "Derelict architecture: Aesthetics of an unaesthetic space", 394.

7 Ignasi Rubio, "Terrain Vague", in *Anyplace* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995).

8 Fein, "The Aesthetic of Decay: Space, Time, and Perception", 4.

9 *Ibid.*, 7.

The Visual Narration of al-Hattaba

Deep within the urban fabric of historic Cairo, at the northern part of the Citadel, lies the historic neighborhood of al-Hattaba; a space between the visual narrations of beauty and decay.

The story starts with the Citadel, a grand architectural complex in the heart of historic Cairo that sustained its status as the seat of the government for almost seven centuries.¹⁰ Its construction was started in 1176 by Salah al-Din al-Ayyubi.¹¹ He chose its location north of al-Muqattam hill and fortified its defenses with a wall. The wall had an opening that led directly to the northern area outside the Citadel, known as al-Thaghra (the breach) and later as al-Bab al-Jadid.¹² Several structures were constructed in that site and its surroundings to provide the Citadel with water.¹³

The Citadel then evolved during the Mamluk era into a small town expanding beyond the walls into the space of al-Hattaba. From this point on, it became the main path for the Muslim pilgrims¹⁴ leaving for Mecca till the end of Muhammad "Ali family"'s reign. It also became the royal's path to the cemeteries.¹⁵ Whereas during the Ottoman rule, the northern space outside the Citadel's walls was named al-Hattaba, which means "the lumberjacks," referring to its status as a strategic area that sold firewood in Cairo.¹⁶ Then, Muhammad "Ali changed the stepped northern gate into an entrance ramp for his carriages which elevated the status of al-Hattaba.¹⁷ In 1979, al-Hattaba was listed by the UNESCO World Heritage for its historical and cultural significance as part of the Historic Old Cairo.¹⁸ Then the Citadel opened its doors for tourism in the 1980s, and al-Bab al-Jadid was considered a secondary entrance.¹⁹

The proximity of al-Hattaba to the Citadel is not simply talking to its geographical location. It is a story of how a whole area, including its residents' existence, interacted and accommodated the Citadel's changes and needs. As such, al-Hattaba's local economy mainly depended on the touristic flow of the Citadel. They mastered handmade crafts such as pearl inlay and carpentry as well as Khaiyamia (tent-making).²⁰ They depended on that flow to sell their handmade goods in shops along the sides of the ramped road.²¹

10 Nasser Rabbat, "The Citadel of Cairo: A Historic Guide", *Supreme Council of Antiquities*, no.2, (2009), 2.

11 Ibid. & Atharlina, "Alkhalifa".

12 Al-bab-al-Jadid (the new gate) is the given name for the Citadel's gate overlooking al-Hattaba.

13 Atharlina, "Alkhalifa".

14 Al-Hajj (the Muslim pilgrimage) is an annual journey to the holy city of Mecca in Saudi Arabia as a part of Muslims' religious rituals.

15 Mohamed Abo-AlAmayem and Mohamed Abd-AlHafez, "New Islamic monuments from Al-Hattaba and Bab Al-Wazir cemetery in Cairo", *Journal of the General Union of Arab Archaeologists* 9, no.9 (2008): 133.

16 Atharlina, "Alkhalifa" & Atharlina, "A Plan for Developing al-Hattaba Neighborhood in Historic Cairo".

17 Atharlina, "Alkhalifa".

18 UNESCO, "Consideration of Nominations to the World Heritage List"

19 Atharlina, "Alkhalifa".

20 Al-Ibrashy et al., "Research on Intangible Heritage and Storytelling Event in the Action Area - Final Report. Cairo, Egypt", Urban Regeneration Project for Historic Cairo - URHC, (2014).

21 Atharlina, "Alkhalifa".



[Fig.1]

The effect of the evolution in our vision of al-Hattaba – the photo to the left was captured in the first phase "The Planned Walk" as we saw al-Hattaba as a space of decay whereas the photo to the right is how we saw the beauty of ruins that are lying within the space of decay.

In the 21st century, the government decided to close the Citadel gate al-Bab al-Jadid for tourism. The closure harmed al-Hattaba's economy. Moreover, the government enforced more brutal laws that banned the residents from renovating their homes and held them responsible for the conditions of the historical monuments in the area.²² It also declared al-Hattaba an unsafe area in 2011 that needs re-planning in an attempt to evacuate the Citadel's buffer zone gradually.²³ Those brutal rules started a hostile relationship between the residents and the government. All of this evidently led al-Hattaba to fall into decay and despair. However, the residents of al-Hattaba refused to surrender to those pressures and managed to survive despite those laws. They insist that al-Hattaba is a historic place, as its urban fabric has not changed since it was documented during the French campaign in Egypt in the 1801 map "Description de l'Egypte."²⁴ The community is proud of its traditional crafts and heritage.

Abandoned and decaying spaces are portrayed as dangerous and inaccessible, the people inhabiting the ruins of decay as threatening. As such, most abandoned or decaying spaces are perceived and experienced through photography.²⁵ Accordingly, the visual narration of al-Hattaba between beauty and decay depends on the way its space is visually represented. Photographs of al-Hattaba are used back and forth between the government that wanted the area demolished and the residents that fight for its survival.

The methodology for the visual narration adopts the idea that photography is a performative act of exploring urban spaces. Photography is a recording device used by the performer/photographer to capture the urban space. As such, photographs are not only representational tools, they can also evoke feelings. The production process happens when the photographer's body dynamically engages with the urban space, affecting the production and being affected by the space.²⁶ As such, our urban narrative of al-Hattaba evolved through three stages (Fig.1): the planned walk, the interaction, and the choice.

Firstly, the planned walk was urban documentation of al-Hattaba. Our idea at that time was that al-Hattaba is a decaying urban space. We were prejudiced by the shared ideas and feelings accompanied by the space in a state of decay. The initially chosen route was inspired by the idea of walking around the boundaries of al-Hattaba to see the whole buffer zone. At the start, the captured photographs mainly focused on the negatively perceived aspects, implying that it is only a decaying space.

22 Al-Ibrashy et al., "Research on Intangible Heritage and Storytelling Event in the Action Area - Final Report. Cairo, Egypt": Urban Regeneration Project for Historic Cairo - URHC, (2014).

23 Atharlina, "Executive Summary: Preliminary Masterplan for the Development of Al-Hattaba Neighbourhood in Historic Cairo", 2.

24 Ibid.

25 Fein, "The Aesthetic of Decay: Space, Time, and Perception", 21.

26 Gillan Rose, "Visual Culture, Photography and the Urban: An Interpretive Framework", *Space and Culture, India* 2, no.4 (2014).

Secondly, as we moved through the space and interacted with it, a totally different story was seen within the layers of decay. We realized that al-Hattaba had more to offer than what we anticipated, which affected how the photographs were taken, focusing more on highlighting the aesthetics dimension of decay.

Lastly, as we became more invested in the cause of al-Hattaba, our choice for the visual narrative became a subjective choice. We wanted to advocate the reality that the decaying space and ruins of al-Hattaba have their aesthetic stories. The photographs intend to prove that al-Hattaba is an exciting space to explore that offers more than advertised. The general idea was to offer an example that opens the path for conversations about spaces of decay like al-Hattaba, calling for an open mind to accept the other side of their stories.

In light of that, this essay will discuss the visual narrative of al-Hattaba, elaborating on what we saw and experienced through the third phase of evolution. The chosen photographs highlight the stories of urban decay and the aesthetics that are in space. Accordingly, the discussion is divided into two categories: ruins of space and inhabited ruins. The first category is concerned with analyzing the form of al-Hattaba's space and its uninhabited ruins, whereas the second category is concerned with analyzing the social impact on the form and structure of the inhabited ruins. Each is discussed with respect to the notion of time and the process of formation of ruins.

Ruins of Space

As previously mentioned, al-Hattaba's urban fabric has not changed since 1801. The experience of walking through the fabric allows for the feeling of the layers of time embedded in al-Hattaba. The ruptures of time could be sensed and seen at every corner. The visible clashes between the existing ruins of history and the fabric that maintained its originality manage to force the observer to stop and watch. The space is crawling with layers upon layers of visual aesthetics that cannot be seen or analyzed from the first gaze.

The first aesthetic engagement with the space realizes the drama between the great and mighty Citadel and the surviving space of al-Hattaba. At the entrance path to al-Hattaba (Fig. 2), encountering the clash between the continuity of the wall with the adapting space is undeniable. The path constructs an imaginary border between both entities until they merge at the end. The new metal fence adds an additional sense of separation, yet it loses that as we go deeper into the fabric. The two clashing worlds become one, as fragments of the citadel blend within the form of al-Hattaba. Moreover, as the variation between the materiality of colors and shapes of both existences speak for the struggle of being in the Citadel's buffer zone, it also highlights al-Hattaba's will to survive.

Our bodies do not only encounter the space; they also encounter past life in its present form. The bodily experience thus becomes a moment suspended in time that forces the viewer to establish the connection between the changing time and the nature of form. The Citadel's co-appearance with al-Hattaba (Fig. 3) evokes that sensation. The two spaces collide in sight into one existence like a painting that portrays time, space, and body experience.

Ruins behold humanity's failures and triumphs within their remains; within those ups and downs lies a reminder of how time passes and how it changes everything. The fragments of history are scattered in al-Hattaba's space. The remains of al-Khaniqah al-Nizamiya (Fig. 4) is an example of that suspended fragment. It was built in 1356 as a place for Sufis to worship God. Then, it was later used as a military fortress by the French campaign (1798-1805), and they destroyed it.²⁷ The stories between its construction, destruction, and change are embedded in the remains captured in space and a reminder of what is lost and could further be lost in time. Another time the same notion is captured in the unique Sabil Prince Sheikho (Fig. 5). It was built in 1354 as a public free water dispenser.²⁸ It is one of a kind structure engraved on the side of the hill. Nature affected its aesthetics by the layers of mold, changing stone colors, and climbing vines on the rusty metal fence, highlighting the artwork of the time. At the same time, the capture of Sabil of "Abd al-Rahman Katkhudha (Fig. 6) highlights the beauty of its remains. It was built in 1750 on the road leading out of the city. It had two open arched domes to allow horses to rest and drink. Its dome collapsed and what remained is the beautiful arches. The structure is inhabited by workshops who added wooden panels to enclose the space.²⁹ As you see in the new space of al-Hattaba, the fragments of history look out of time and yet frozen within it.

There is a hidden aesthetic dimension in al-Hattaba that urges the visitor to look beyond what is seen. Walking through the tunnel (Fig. 7) is a whole experience of its own. As the visitor encounters the hidden ally, the common perception that the seen structure is just a fragment of history. Yet, if one gets closer, the realization that it conveys more than is seen hits. The different human scale between one standing and the size of the opening forces the body to bend to go inside. Once inside, the body realizes that it can stand up fully, but the place is dark with only an arched light at the very end of it. Then, the body moves into the space of light. It encounters a hidden mosque as the eyes look to the left; a beautiful single minaret in the middle of space is the first thing seen. The whole experience is a metaphor for the visual narration dilemma of al-Hattaba lying between beauty and decay.

27 Mohamed Metwalli, "French military campaign of El Khanqah El Nizamia in the Hattaba area in Cairo (1215 AH -1800 AD) Archaeological and Architectural study", *Journal of the General Union of Arab Archaeologists* 18, no.18 (2017).

28 Abo-AlAmayem and Abd-AlHafez, "New Islamic monuments from Al-Hattaba and Bab Al-Wazir cemetery in Cairo", 134.

29 Atharlina, "Alkhalifa" & Nicholas Warner, *The monuments of historic Cairo: a map and descriptive catalogue*, (American University in Cairo Press, 2005), 135.



[Fig. 2]

The drama of existence between The Citadel and al-Hattaba – In this photograph, the mighty citadel is to right whereas al-Hattaba to the left and the path splits the two realities. Eventually, the two worlds clash into one within the fabric of al-Hattaba.



[Fig. 3]

Encounter between body, space and time – The image captures the experience of the body in-between the two existences of al-Hattaba and the Citadel; forcing the body to establish connections between time and changing space.



[Fig. 4]

A reminder of our lost past "al-Khanqah al-Nizamia" – The remains of the structure lie alone in the space over al-Hattaba's hills evoking the sensation with our lost history.

Inhabited Ruins

Architecture is the form of art that captures the struggle between the desire for survival and the dynamic changes of nature through time.³⁰ The residents' interaction with their structures highlighted how they coped with time, defended their existence, and demonstrated their attachment to the space and their identity. They had a tremendous social impact on the spatial aspects of the space.

The initial interaction with the inhabited ruins displays the personalization quality expressed by the residents. Fragments caught in the variation of door colors and shapes (Fig. 8) display how time treated their doors and their response to that. As their doors started collapsing, they either brought new ones or renovated the old ones, both to their personalized taste. Other fragments of personalization are manifested in the windows, balconies, and buildings. The residents introduced different colors and styles according to their taste. This added another depth to the aesthetic dimension of the space.

Moreover, they have an additive attitude as they manipulated the structure of their homes according to their needs. Some added wooden sheds and allowed nature to crawl and bond the structure (Fig. 9), adding a beauty that was never there.

They added another dimension of the additive attitude as they used the space as an extension to their homes (Fig. 10). Some residents used a small part of their home as a business and extended that into space, whereas others added furniture, turning the space into a public space of encounter added to their homes.

The residents highlighted their struggle and will to preserve the space in their art (Fig. 11). The graffiti on al-Hattaba's walls stands as a statement of how they feel about the space, using vibrant colors on the unpainted brick buildings. Their art included Islamic geometry, caricatures representing the inhabitants themselves, and statements such as "al-Hattaba is my address" and "al-Hattaba: the start of the pilgrimage route."

30 Dariusz Gafjczuk, "Dwelling Within: The Inhabited Ruins of History", *History and Theory* 52, no. 2 (2013): 160.



[Fig. 6]

Neglected ruins of space "Sabil of Abd al-Rahman Katkhudha" – The remains of the structure turned into workshops changed the elements that originally formed it.



[Fig. 7]

Exploring the hidden beauty – The experience of the body between the changing scale of the opening in tunnel, the darkness and the fragments of history found behind it are evidence for the beauty within experiencing the space of decay.



Conclusion

The beauty of decaying spaces and the remains of architecture is manifested in the fragments of time that could be experienced through the existing body in space or transferred experience through photography. Nonetheless, deciding on whether its beauty or decay depends on the visual narration of such spaces. It is a paradox that calls for an open mind to fully explore the hidden layers beyond common knowledge, advertisements, or misrepresentations.

In that sense, our visual narration of al-Hattaba was not a product of one moment. It is the product of an evolving bodily experience of the space documented and transferred through photography. A space with such historical and cultural significance is worth spending more time exploring and analyzing its value rather than simply demolishing it. The captured fragments of history, the drama between the Citadel walls and the space of al-Hattaba, and other fragments of human existence throughout the fabric of al-Hattaba are evidence that it is a space that should be saved and preserved.

This essay does not deny the fact that there are some collapsing ruins in al-Hattaba; yet they do not justify deciding to demolish the space. However, the argument is that there is more than that in al-Hattaba. There is another layer of history and beauty that is unexplored. This essay hopes to open a conversation about decaying spaces like al-Hattaba, widening the scope of what is and is not worthy of preservation.

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