

Press release

Egypt at the 2018 London Design Biennale



Modernist Indignation

4-23 September 2018

Somerset House, East Wing

The Egyptian installation recreates a fictional 1939 exhibition put on by the editors of *Al Emara*, the first Arabic-language design magazine focused on contemporary architecture in Egypt. This is Egypt's first participation in the London Design Biennale. The country does not have a design museum or archive, an architecture museum or a national body concerned with design.

Al Emara, founded by architect Sayed Karim, was published between 1939 and 1959. The goal of the magazine was two-fold, first to invigorate Egypt's architectural culture by recording recent constructions and promoting the principals of modern design. Second, to make Egypt's contemporary architecture visible to the international community of architects. While the magazine published occasional content in English and French, its primary language is Arabic, making it a unique publication in the world at the time. The magazine promoted the work of Egyptian architects, featured international architectural developments, included technical, theoretical and art historical essays and reported on regional engineering conferences. Despite its historical and cultural significance, the magazine, as well as Egypt's embrace of modernism, remain on the periphery of design and architectural histories, a position that enables the erasure of this heritage.

In the 1950s, in addition to editing and regularly contributing to the magazine, Sayed Karim developed many urban and architectural projects in the Middle East and beyond that he was dubbed the "flying architect". Seventy-nine years after *Al Emara's* founding, this display sheds light on the magazine and Karim, who fell out of political favour in the early 1960s as the Nasser regime grew increasingly authoritarian. Karim's career was practically terminated in 1964 when his architectural office was confiscated, and he was placed under sequestration. His story echoes that of the country's modernist architecture, a rich heritage that has been destroyed or left to ruin. Hundreds of modernist buildings, some of which featured in *Al Emara*, have been demolished in recent years because of real estate pressures and the lack of a legal status recognizing and protecting twentieth century design.

Modernist Indignation proposes to read the theme of this year's biennale as "emotional States" by evoking the unfair treatment of a central figure in Egypt's design history. Like the magazine Karim founded, the aim of the display is two-fold: to make Sayed Karim and *Al Emara* visible to the international community of designers, and to insert them back into Egypt's narrative of architectural modernism.

Exhibition design by Suzanne Gaballa of Lund Gaballa incorporates materials and finishes favoured by Sayed Karim and utilised in such buildings as his private villa, built in Maadi, Cairo in 1948. In the centre of the room is a display that acts as a gateway into Egypt's modernist past. Layers of suspended sheer fabric are overlaid to evoke ephemerality and fluidity. Mirrored panels along the wall highlight milestones in the story of the magazine and its editor.

Suzanne Gaballa says, "Egypt's exhibition at the 2018 London Design Biennale reflects on the impermanence of architecture and subsequent historical loss to society. Visitors are invited to explore whilst unknowingly contributing to the erasure of Al Emara's title inscribed on the floor, reinforcing the themes of *Modernist Indignation*."

Graphic design by Valerie Arif draws from the magazine's distinctive typography and colours. Excerpts from Sayed Karim's 1939 manifesto "What is Architecture?" published in the first issue of Al Emara, are read by contemporary Egyptian architect Shahira Fahmy in a short film, commissioned for this exhibition, shot in Sayed Karim's villa and directed by Ahmed Tahoun.

Modernist Indignation is curated by Mohamed Elshahed, former British Museum curator for the Modern Egypt Project and author of the forthcoming book *Cairo Since 1900: An Architectural Guide*, published by the American University in Cairo Press in early 2019. Elshahed says "Sayed Karim's story shows the precarious position of being Egyptian and modernist in the years of nationalist politics, he is excluded from the international narrative of modernism, and his career and legacy are denied a place in national history when he no longer served a political purpose for the Nasser regime. Al Emara and Sayed Karim illustrate the vulnerability of design culture."

For further information contact:

Zein Khalifa: zein@zkhalifa.com

Mohamed Elshahed: elshahedm@gmail.com

High resolution images available at <http://goo.gl/ZvcUaa>

Administering bodies: Zein Khalifa (Tintera) and Cairoobserver

Curator: Mohamed Elshahed

Exhibition Design: Suzanne Gaballa (Lund Gaballa Architects)

Exhibition Fabrication: Nick Westby (Westby & Jones Ltd.)

Graphic Design: Valerie Arif

Director of Photography: Ahmed Tahoun

Lighting Design: Amarasri Songcharoen (Seam Design)

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About London Design Biennale

London Design Biennale 2018 is devoted to the theme Emotional States. Taking over the entirety of Somerset House, including the Edmond J. Safra Fountain Court and River Terrace, it will explore big questions and ideas about sustainability, migration, pollution, energy, cities, and social equality. Visitors will enjoy engaging and interactive installations, innovations and proposed design solutions from 40 countries, cities and territories - all in an immersive, inspiring and entertaining tour of the world.

Sir John Sorrell CBE, President Ben Evans, Executive Director

London Design Biennale's International Advisory Committee and Jury 2018:

Paola Antonelli, Adelia Borges, Dr Tristram Hunt, Hadeel Ibrahim, Mitra Khoubrou, James Lingwood MBE, Ana Elena Mallet, Professor Jeremy Myerson, Kayoko Ota, Jonathan Reekie CBE, Lord Richard Rogers of Riverside CH, Sir John Sorrell CBE, Ben Evans, Dr Christopher Turner.

About Somerset House

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Since its opening in 2000, Somerset House has built up a distinctive outdoor public programme including Skate, concerts, an open-air film season and a diverse range of temporary exhibitions throughout the site focusing on contemporary culture, with an extensive learning programme attached. In October 2016, Somerset House launched Somerset House Studios, a new experimental workspace connecting artists, makers and thinkers with audiences. The Studios provide a platform for new creative projects and collaboration, promoting work that pushes bold ideas, engages with urgent issues and pioneers new technologies. Somerset House is also one of the biggest community of creative organisations in London including The Courtauld Gallery and Institute of Art, King's College London Cultural Institute and over 100 other creative businesses. It currently attracts approximately 3.2 million visitors every year.