

---

# FROM FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION TO EXPRESSION OF FREEDOM: RESPONDING TO SOCIO-POLITICAL CHANGE IN THE CLASSROOM

**MAGDA MOSTAFA**

American University in Cairo

## **INTRODUCTION**

Civic engagement in the classroom is not a new concept. Since formal education first began, the socio-political realm has influenced, and been influenced by, education, oscillating from open dialogue to dogmatic oppression. As a result of this dynamic relationship, many social movements, historically, have begun within or revolved around the congregation of students in educational institutions. From the South African school boycott of the 1950's<sup>1</sup>, to the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960's at Columbia University<sup>2</sup> to Tianenmen Square in the 1980's<sup>3</sup>, engagement in civic society, politics, and issues of social liberties have come to the forefront of our educational forums. Closely intertwined, education and social awareness live symbiotically. More relevant to this discussion is the modern dialogue between social awareness, civic engagement and education; with the Egyptian Women's Rights movement and its relationship to public education reform.<sup>4</sup>

Technology has brought an entirely new dimension, and indeed power, to this relationship between the classroom and the street. Today's Facebook® generation- with a population currently placing it, were it a country, as the 3<sup>rd</sup> largest in the world- has been instrumental in effecting change, for better or worse, in today's society. Bringing such technological culture and networking dynamics into the classroom is fast becoming a pedagogical revolution in and of itself. Real-time experience, online keyword "trending", user-created content such as YouTube®, image tracking such as Instagram® and a multitude of other dynamics are continuously being effectively woven into classroom strategies. A most recent example of this is the multimedia, real-time, online discussion of the Occupy Wall Street movement of 2011-2012 as documented and experienced through MediaThread at Columbia University's Center for New Media Teaching and Learning.<sup>5</sup>

Egypt's recent revolution is no exception to this paradigm shift. Not only were students of the Facebook generation actively involved, and indeed perhaps the tipping point for social unrest, but they were joined almost unequivocally by all sectors of society, making the Egyptian 2011 Revolution at once unique and incredibly powerful in its leaderless galvanization of society against oppression, corruption and decades of dictatorship.

## **ARCHITECTURE AS A VEHICLE OF SOCIO-POLITICAL EXPRESSION**

Architecture has always been an important vehicle of social, collective expression. Most notable among such architectures in contemporary Egypt, is the work of Hassan Fathy, and later Abdelhalim Ibrahim. Both heralded for their dedication to community and society, they paved the way for contemporary architectural form, expression and constructs that represented important paradigm shifts of the time. Their work challenged totalitarian modernism with responsive communal expression, and has been called by Halim himself "an architecture of resistance"<sup>6</sup>.

With such shifts from the international, Post World War II mass architecture, the path was set for contemporary Egyptian discourse over the role of architecture as a tool of social expression, symbolism, change and identity<sup>7</sup>. This project is an example of such discourse.

## **THE UNIVERSITY ON THE SQUARE**

The American University in Cairo has a long history as witness to social change in Egypt. Founded in 1919 by Americans determined to bring liberal education to the region, it grew from its original 20 students to its current enrollment of over 6000 students, in both undergraduate and graduate programs. Throughout this time it has both contributed to and influenced the socio-political dialogue in the country, while remaining non-political<sup>8</sup>. Its student body, with their western mentality and Egyptian loyalties, has made at times historical contributions to contemporary Egyptian society.

This role was literally thrust to the forefront when the American University in Cairo became the urban backdrop for one of the most influential events of recent Egyptian history- the January 25<sup>th</sup> Revolution. In physical proximity to Tahrir Square, the site of this historic event, AUC once again bore witness to Egyptian societal change. Figure (1) shows the view of Tahrir square during the 18 days of revolt, as seen from the viewpoint of the AUC's Tahrir campus. Figure (2) shows the interactive expressive work of graffiti artists in the neighboring streets during the ongoing conflict between police forces and protestors.

As one of the first institutions to return to their regular schedule, AUC's New Cairo campus, situated outside of the city, began classes again a mere 48 hours after the successful ousting of the dic-

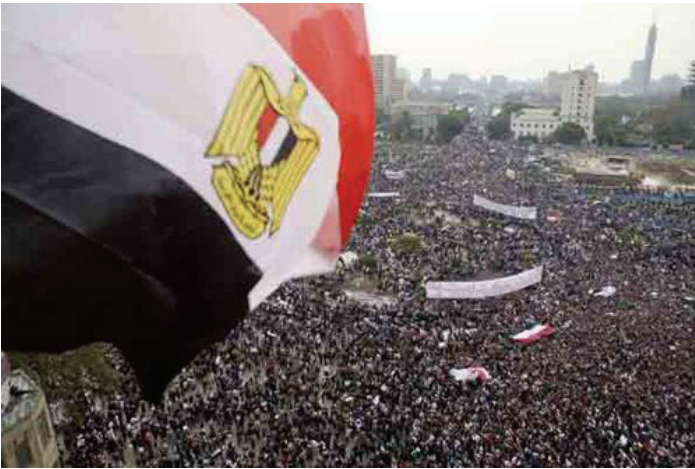


Figure 1. AUC bears witness to the Egyptian Revolution (photograph by Thomas Hartwell, from the exhibition "Tahrir", April 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2011, The American University in Cairo)



Figure 2. Creativity in conflict- graffiti by street artists, using informal art to dissolve boundaries and visually remove the barricade placed by security forces to block protestors from accessing streets adjacent to Tahrir Square. This work has been referred to as the "bedoon hawait"- or "without walls" movement. The buildings to the left are part of AUC's Tahrir campus (photograph by Ursula Lindsey<sup>9</sup>)

tatorship regime. With this return to the educational forum came a desire to document and create a collective memory of events, and the University on the Square Initiative was launched.<sup>10</sup>

The University on the Square Initiative aimed at capturing the experiences of AUC's community, as well as the community at large. A multi-media collection of images, artifacts, testimonials, videos, works of art, articles and essays, this collection serves as a real-time living memory of Egypt's ongoing struggle on the path to democracy. Over the coming years such an archive will play an important role as an impartial reference for the events.

## THE FREEDOM PAVILION PROJECT

In response to this initiative, a project was developed for the AENG 352- Design Studio II course in the architecture program at AUC during the Spring of 2011- truly the Arab Spring. The title of the project was "The Freedom Pavilion".

The primary objective of this project, as outlined in the brief presented to students, was to create an architectural domain where the AUC community and visitors can view, experience and reflect on the events of the revolution. Programmatically the pavilion was required to house the University on the Square collection. This would require flexible and varied facilities for display.

Students were encouraged to expand their position on "exhibition" from a static, unilateral, spectator approach to one that involved interaction and experiential viewing- a more immersive methodology than that typically used in exhibitions. The critical discourse underpinning the design process involved questioning not only what was to be displayed and how to display it, but the role of the pavilion itself. Should it have an experiential approach, focusing on having its visitors relive the experience? Should it be purely documentative and neutral? Should its form and expression play a symbolic role, almost as an exhibit in and of itself, making it more installation art than architecture? If so, what symbolic role should that be? What themes are appropriate references for such symbols- hope, violence, oppression, freedom, rebirth, society? What is such a pavilion's social role? Can it be expanded programmatically to include more than just exhibition space by providing public space for critical discourse? Should such social functions be formalized, or given their dynamic are they best left informal, with the architecture only creating the opportunity, but not necessarily the form, of social expression?

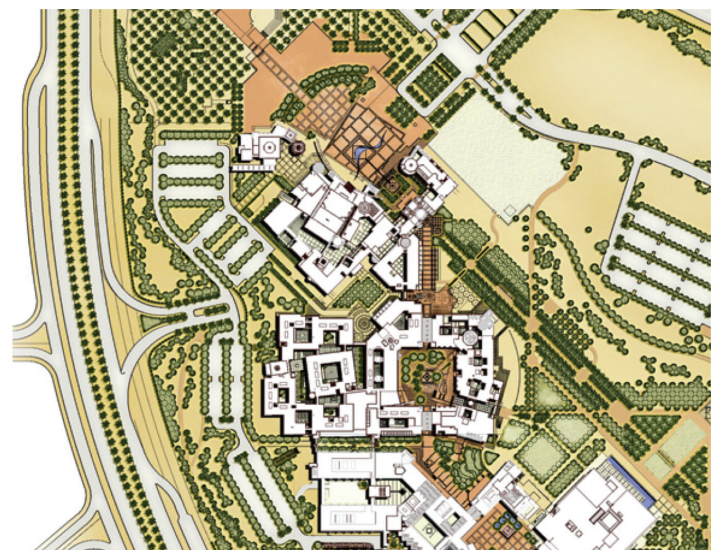


Figure 3. Site map of Freedom Pavilion proposed location indicated in blue (photograph courtesy AUC's University Architect's office)

## FROM FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION TO EXPRESSION OF FREEDOM

The pavilion itself was to be situated at the western end of campus, in the publicly accessible plaza in front of the university's main portal (fig. 3).

It would join a number of community spaces on campus including the AUC Press bookstore, a theatre, art gallery and campus center, all overlooking a public plaza accessible by visitors parking. Situated in an existing grove of trees, students were required to place their structure to accommodate the natural elements on site, as well as to respond to the surrounding architecture. This includes Abdelhalim Ibrahim's campus masterpiece, the AUC portal (image 4), which was designed as a contemporary reinterpretation of traditional geometry meant to inspire and symbolize the contemplation required of liberal arts education.



Figure 4. Abdelhalim Ibrahim's AUC Portal, symbolizing the underpinning contemplation of liberal arts education (photograph author's own)

The process by which students developed their work began with a visual collage of images and inspirations, set around a concept statement. Examples of such statements included notions such as "from oppression to freedom", "the architecture of re-birth" and "from darkness to light". These collages helped inform the

qualities of space, use of materials, geometric vocabulary, symbolic statements and the social roles of the pavilion.

The primary mode of investigation throughout the design process was through experimental scaled physical models on site. Environmental context and natural elements were investigated through investigational on site photography. These included particularly issues of daylight and their relationship to shade and shadow as a means to inform design in hot climates, create spatial quality and organize behavior within the pavilion.

In addition the architectural context surrounding the site was investigated through photo-collage. Students presented various approaches ranging from geometric analogies, conceptual referencing, symbolic gestures and utilization of lines of site (figure 5).

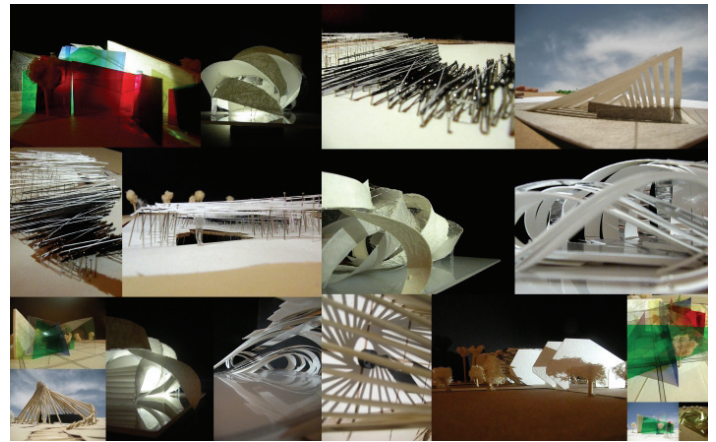


Figure 5. A collage showing the various approaches and compositions proposed within the studio

The following discussion outlines examples of some of the specific approaches presented by the students.

### From Oppression to Freedom

This first project (figure 6) was rooted in the symbolization of the journey throughout the revolution, from the shackles of oppression to the refreshing liberty of freedom. Although possibly viewed as reductive with regards to the issues and slightly utopian, this scheme presented a clean expression of the two extremes of this polarizing event- oppression and freedom.

Using a transitional approach, the user would enter the pavilion from the eastern end, overlooking the plaza, under a series of frames tightly bound with black cables and through a dark web of thread-like ropes, which must be traversed to move on through the pavilion. The alcoves to the left and right of the central path would house displays of the artifacts representing the oppression, discrimination and persecution faced by the Egyptian people during the decades of dictatorship rule. This spatial experience would

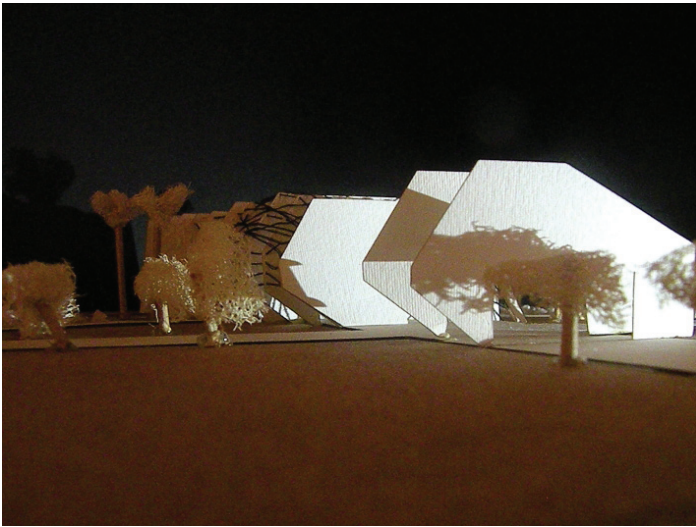


Figure 6. A project presented by Noha Rifaat based on the concept of symbolizing the transition from the binding influences of oppression to the liberated openness of freedom (photograph by Ayman Ghali)

gradually dissipate as the user moves further along the path and the frames become wider spaced, the cables less tightly bound and the color transitioning gradually to white. As this transition occurs the displays begin to move towards those expressing the revolution, its fight for freedom and eventually elements of its success.

The student used a variety of experiential contrasting elements to reinforce this transition- darkness to light; tightness to openness; black to white and dense to loose.

#### From Darkness to Light

Similar to the first project, this scheme represents a transition from two extreme experiences, in this case darkness and light, to represent the revolution (figure 7). Again the student uses a continuous line in the form of cables or threads stretched across a structure to achieve the necessary spatial qualities.

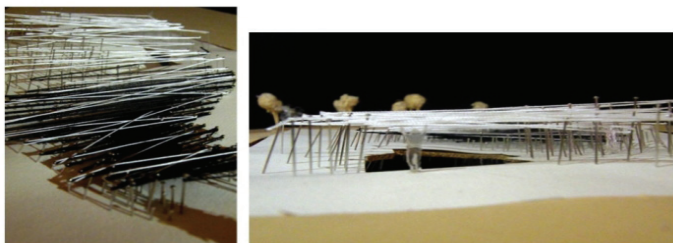


Figure 7. A project presented by Salah Maged based on the representation of the revolution as a movement from darkness to light. (photo by Ayman Ghali)

As a departure however, from the previous project, this student chose to use the vertical dimension, as opposed to a horizontal pro-

gression along a path, to further reinforce this transition. Starting at the eastern end of the site, the visitor would begin by descending into an underground exhibition space via a ramp and under a canopy of dense, dark cables stretched over spear-like posts. These posts pierce through the plaza level slab, creating a stalactite-like ceiling installation in the lower hall. This space represents the period of dictatorship of the regime. Its darkness, aggressive ceiling and underground location, reinforce qualitatively the historical period preceding the revolution- a period of oppression, violence and persecution, all hidden underground, invisible to the world.

The visitor, once having concluded viewing the displays of this hall would emerge from underground via another ramp, which becomes increasingly washed with light. The overhead cables have now completely morphed to white and the visitor begins viewing the display representing the freedom achieved by the revolution. As the light increases the visitor once again reaches plaza level.

#### From Diversity to Unity

This project introduces the element of colour as a representation of the different sectors, classes and backgrounds of society (figure 8). Taking the position that the Egyptian Revolution was a truly unifying one, this scheme takes a symbolic approach, representing this phenomenon, one unique to such revolutions.

Being a leaderless movement, the Egyptian revolution united its people with a singular goal- an end to dictatorship rule. In a spontaneous, almost organic fashion this revolution, sparked by an unbridled series of manifestations of the regime's brutality and oppression, reached its tipping point on January 25<sup>th</sup>. This pavilion tries to represent that phenomenon.

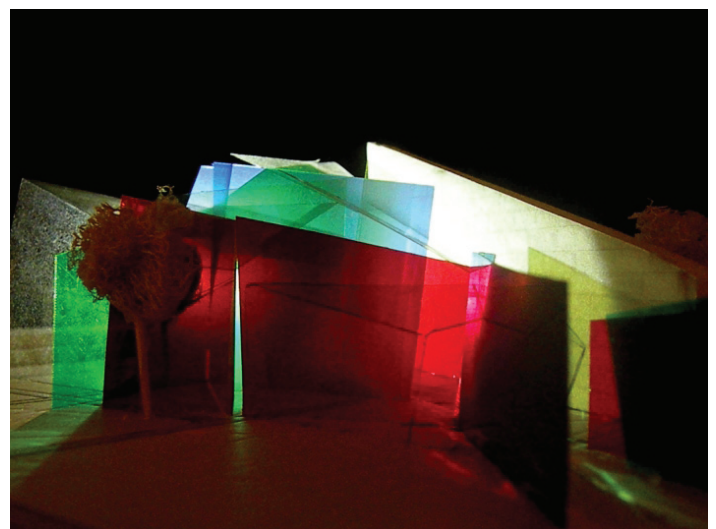


Figure 8. A project by Mariam Elibyari representing the intersection and overlaying of a diverse society to create a whole that is greater than its parts. (photo by Ayman Ghali)

Using strategically placed colored acrylic panels, the pavilion creates an optical illusion of a spectrum of colors far greater than those used in its original primary palette. Representing the different groups in society- working class, elite, rich, poor, Muslim, Christian, Agnostic etc.- each colour creates something beyond its own expressive limitations, when overlaid with the next.

As the visitor moves through this pavilion from its west end towards the central plaza, these colours continuously change and shift dynamically until one emerges through a specific frame, at the vista of which is the AUC's portal- a symbol of the way forward through critically minded, liberal education.

### The Power of the People

This scheme presents yet another spatial and architectural representation of the coming together of society over a singular goal, and the power that comes with this unification. Based on the principle that success can only be found in unification and that many voices united in a single call find strength beyond their numbers, this pavilion presents a visual and structural scheme to translate this. (figure 9)



Figure 9. A visual/structural/spatial representation of strength in unity designed by Marina Qaldas (photograph by Ezzat Ahmed)

Proposing the use of wood construction, this scheme presents a structurally viable option to such symbolic abstraction. Part of the investigation carried out involved constructability, and interestingly proposed that the pavilion itself would remain unstable during construction, requiring external bracing throughout, until it reaches completion- symbolizing the importance of remaining united until a goal is reached, a dynamic clearly felt during the revolution when momentum fell, sparking fear of aggressive retaliation.

### Rebirth

Taking its inspiration from a cocoon, this project symbolizes the metamorphosis that occurred in Egypt during the revolution (figure 10). As a highly conceptual scheme, this project relies on the almost ethereal quality of the space to represent the power, beauty and pain of change.

Using uniquely treated textured paper and molds, the student went through numerous experimentations to reach a structure with the necessary lightness, translucency, flexibility and strength to create the desired quality of space. Creating a series of ribbons, which gradually break open to reveal the interior, this pavilion creates an analogous representation of the struggle and internal strength it takes to break free of a cocoon.



Figure 10. A project presented by Nourhan Mahfouz inspired by a cocoon structure as an analogy for the revolution. (photo by Ayman Ghali)

Light plays an important role in this scheme, and through the texture and translucency of the material used, the pavilion only comes to life when lit from within- a light that represents the luminous strength of change.

## Symbolism

Continuing on the theme of abstraction and symbolism, other students chose visual and spatial manifestations of the uplifting and regenerative characteristics of the revolution. Without being overly representative this project uses the triangular profile- vaguely reminiscent of the Egyptian symbol of the great pyramid- in a structure literally and structurally peeled from the ground, to represent a rising from the ashes. (figure 11)



Figure 11. A pyramidal profile casts a stratified shadow on the ground, reflecting the uplifting form of the pavilion on the circulation paths weaving between the exhibit displays. Designed by Ragya El Masry (photograph by Ezzat Ahmed)

This continuous structure proposes the use of a single material, for both ground and roof, enhancing the sense of fluidity. The ground, representing the people, and the pavilion, representing the revolution, are seen as a seamless whole.

Yet another project introduces a symbolic geometry representative of the American University itself, where the pavilion is located. Using an abstracted stylized Islamic pattern commonly found in ornamentation and logos at AUC, the student creates a scheme re-defining the building as a simple receptacle of activity (figure 12). This pavilion is experienced from above, below, within and around. Its accessible ramped roofs, overlooking the interior display halls, provide a visual connectivity throughout as well as a prospect for further viewing.

## CONCLUSION

The experience presented by the Freedom Pavilion project, given the polarizing effect of the subject matter, only served to highlight the very benefits of civic engagement in the classroom, particularly the design studio. The following is a discussion of these benefits and the lessons learnt for future application of community in the classroom.

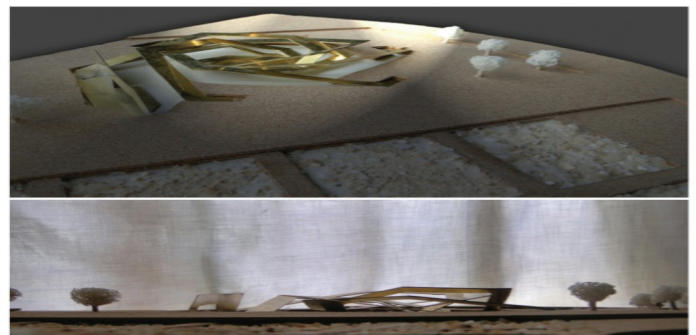
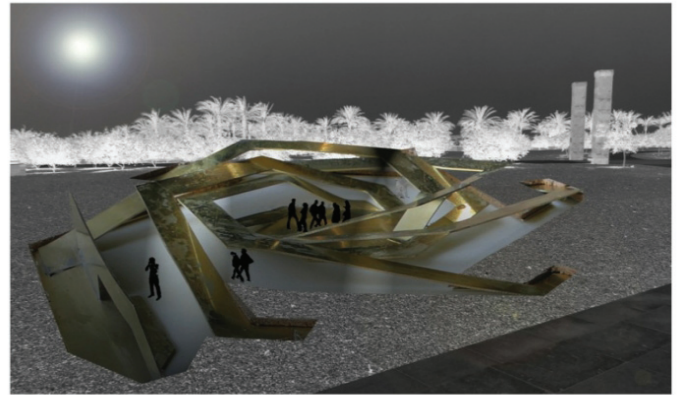


Figure 12. Showing a bird's eye view (top) and an elevation (bottom) of the pavilion inspired by Islamic patterns commonly associated with AUC through logos and ornamentations. Designed by Rana Swellam (photo by Rana Swellam)

The level of passion felt by the students, so early after the revolution, served as a driving force and motivation, taking them beyond the typical levels of work ethic and dedication. But we should not wait for such an historic event to bring community and society into the studio. Indeed our every day lives are full of issues about which students can express passion and which can inspire design. Better yet, we should perhaps build on existing interests and tap into the issues that students are already engaged and passionate about.

This motivation pushed students in their investigations and experimentations, encouraging them to seek new materials, innovative structural systems and abstract expressions. There was an observed shift to wards the qualitative, multi-sensory aspects of design, as opposed to the typical visio-centric approaches of iconism and literal interpretations. The subject matter, and the students' affinity to it, allowed them to instinctually place themselves within the spaces, with a clear desire of the spatial values they aspired to. This engagement allowed them to design from a personal perspective, enhancing the depth, quality and innovation of the outcome.

Finally this experience highlighted to students their roles, responsibilities and powers as architects- to be a vessel of social discourse, a platform for resistance and rejoice, as well as possibly a voice for

the collective people. Perhaps this example will serve as a template for future civic engagement in design studios at the American University in Cairo and elsewhere<sup>11</sup>.

### ENDNOTES

- 1 Thomas Ewing (ed.). 2005. *Revolution and Pedagogy: Interdisciplinary and Transnational Perspectives on Educational Foundations*. GB: Palgrave Macmillan Ltd. pp. 1-6
- 2 Samuel P. Hays. 1969. Right Face, Left Face: The Columbia Strike. *Political Science Quarterly* 84 (2): 311-27
- 3 Zhuyuan Zheng. 1990. *Behind the Tiananmen Massacre: Social, Political, and Economic Ferment in China*. Boulder, Colo: Westview Press. 67-94
- 4 Barak Salmoni. 2005 The Limits of Pedagogical Revolution: Female Schooling and Women's Roles in Egyptian Educational Discourse, 1922-52 *Revolution and pedagogy: Interdisciplinary and Transnational Perspectives on Educational Foundations*, Thomas Ewing (ed.) Palgrave Macmillan Ltd. 61-86
- 5 Jonah Bossewitch, Michael D. Preston. "Teaching and Learning with Video Annotations" in *Learning through Digital Media: Experiments in Technology and Pedagogy* ed. R. Trebor Scholz (The Institute for Distributed Creativity iDC 2011), 175-185.
- 6 Abdelhalim Ibrahim, interview by the author as included in an unpublished transcript in preparation for a biographical book series, 2008
- 7 Khaled Asfour. "Identity in the Arab Region: Architects and Projects from Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Qatar" *Constructing Identity in Contemporary Architecture*. Peter Herrle & Staphanus Schmitz (ed.) Habitat International, TU, Berlin, p. 151, 2009
- 8 Murphy, Lawrence R. *The American University in Cairo, 1919-1987*. Cairo, Egypt: American University in Cairo Press. 1987
- 9 Ursula Lindsey. Looking Through Walls. *The Arabist* (blog) March 16<sup>th</sup>, 2012. <http://www.arabist.net/blog/2012/3/16/looking-through-walls.html>
- 10 The American University in Cairo. The University on the Square, accessed April 29, 2012 <http://www.aucegypt.edu/OnTheSquare/Pages/ots.aspx>
- 11 more images and information about the Freedom Pavilion project can be found in the Showcase section of the author's e-portfolio [http://www.epsilen.com/MyPortal/Public/ShowCase.aspx?prefix=mmost&ToolID=234&systemName=PerPublic\\_Showcase](http://www.epsilen.com/MyPortal/Public/ShowCase.aspx?prefix=mmost&ToolID=234&systemName=PerPublic_Showcase) and <http://www.dropbox.archive100.org/users/magda-mostafa/project/1629>