

minaret. The starting point of this geometric order is, fittingly enough, also the place for water, the source of life and growth. The end point is a lone tree at the other extremity of the palm-tree axis. The site is then organised in stepped platforms following the geometry created by the spiral. The platforms move upwards toward the middle of the site to form an arena-like park, and then they turn in the opposite direction forming a downhill arrangement towards the end of the site where the museum is located. The theatre is situated at the turning point of the two movements. Those three elements, the water point, children's museum, and the theatre are the main poles around which sets of activities, and hence meanings, are created within the realm of the park.

The second layer is a circumstantial layout resulting from the ceremonial process. The building process was organised in a series of events, each of which combined technical work with cultural aspects of that particular operation. The park was built in stages, and the precise shape of each stage was defined as the work progressed. This granted us the manoeuvrability to wed conventional architectural design tools with the active participation of the community.

Initially, when we were first awarded the scheme following the design competition held by the Egyptian Ministry of Culture, the local residents were, if not uninformed, confused and suspicious about the whole project. Although the project made waves with the media, the people in the community who should have been its real supporters were removed from it. The issue became how to enlist their involvement, how best to transform them from passive observers to active participants in the design and construction of the park.

The opportunity presented itself when the Minister of Culture decided to hold the cornerstone-laying ceremony during the National Festival for Children, a celebration held yearly in Egypt during the month of November. Normally such ceremonies are dull affairs attended by bureaucrats politely standing by, along with the architects

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and some local representatives. Rarely are the general members of the surrounding community invited. For this reason, we proposed to the Minister of Culture that a community festival be held where the project's facilities could be mapped out on a large-scale, canvas model representing the geometry and configuration of the scheme. Local artists, musicians, and dancers could also be invited and propose works suggesting the scheme which could then be performed by school children from the local community.

The result was the creation of a setting that enabled the community to see what was being proposed and to get involved. Rather than peering at meaningless plans, charts and miniature models, guest officials and the surrounding community found themselves facing a real-life situation. The building ceremony was thus not simply an empty ritual but a dynamic process where the static order of the original blueprint became flexible. Actual communication was established with local residents and creative decisions regarding how best to integrate the project into the community ensued, giving legitimacy to the process. Ideas and images emerged for the park that would not have transpired in the sterile environment of an architect's drawing office.

As a consequence of the building ceremony, a number of services catering to the community, such as a corner cafe, a small mosque, an ablution fountain, stores, and workshops were added to the plans for the northwestern side of the park. The park wall, rather than preventing access, as is common in Cairo, became permeated by a series of openings to allow access to cultural facilities beyond. Again, in order to create a practical link between the service strip and abutting neighbours, the side street was pedestrianised. In addition, the Cairo Governorate was successfully lobbied to overrule an old expropriation law that prevented the renovation of the houses overlooking this street. Once residents were assured that their homes were not going to be demolished, they set about repairing their apartments, thereby upgrading the entire area.