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Cairo's Townhouse Gallery

Nerve Centre for Egypt's Young Art Scene

The Townhouse in the centre of Cairo, opened by the Canadian William Wells in 1998, has grown into an established magnet for artists, but also for children, families and refugees. Amira El Ahl has the details

Just before eleven on a Saturday morning in downtown Cairo, the streets are gradually coming to life. At the heart of the city between Talaat Harb Square and Champolion Street lies a spider's web of narrow roads and alleyways.

Tucked away between the smart fin-de-siècle buildings on the central Talaat Harb Square and the major shopping arteries are countless workshops and traditional coffee houses, their tables and chairs set out on the worn-down streets. Despite their vicinity to the city centre, few tourists stray into these narrow alleys.

Artists and locals of all kinds

But artists and locals of all kinds have been a familiar sight here for years now. Especially in the small street behind Talaat Harb Square named after Husein Pasha, now an established spot on Cairo's cultural map.

Since the Canadian William Wells opened the Townhouse Gallery in an old building at the end of the street in 1998, the local mechanics, carpenters and metalworkers have got used to watching foreigners and wealthy Egyptians go by their workshops – and to sharing a table with them at the coffee house.

Yet the remarkable thing is not that an elitist art gallery has opened up in a working-class area. What's unusual about the Townhouse is that it does the exact opposite, seeking dialogue and exchange with the local community.

"From the very beginning the idea was to develop a concept based on two pillars," says William Wells. "Firstly, a platform for young artists in Egypt, and secondly a forum to work with the community in which we live."

Eleven years ago, Wells set out to find a place where young Egyptian artists could show their work. He wanted a location that offered plenty of space for large artworks, installations and projects. "The moment I saw the building I knew: this is it," says Wells. "It had all the architectural elements I was looking for."

Back then none of the artists involved believed that the Townhouse could work in the location far away from the main streets of Cairo. But it did work, from the every outset.

Workshops for street children

Even before Wells had opened the gallery properly he began organising workshops for the local street children, together with the artist Hoda Lutfi. "We came into this neighbourhood where there are lots of informal businesses, lots of working children, street cafés and also children who live on the streets," says William Wells.

In the evenings he watched street children performing outside cafés to earn money. The idea came about to give the neighbourhood children a chance to express themselves through art. Hoda Lutfi and William Wells took the children along to a space for street children to use during the day, and taught them to use paint and paper to tell their stories.

"The kids' work was incredibly strong and inspiring," says Wells. He still has two of the original pieces on display in his office. Powerful colours dominate the pictures, but the motifs are dark and tell of fear, loneliness and sexual abuse.

The Townhouse held its second exhibition in January 1999, showing pictures by the street children. The idea was to attract attention for their situation and to raise funds for the day-space. The exhibition was an absolute hit, attracting crowds of visitors. And the gallery collected a great deal of donations. "The whole event opened up our eyes," says Wells.

A project for Sudanese refugees in Cairo

From then on, the workshops for street children became a permanent fixture at the Townhouse Gallery. They have taken place every Friday since 2000, bringing together working children from the age of eight to 18 in the gallery.

A new course for the three groups starts every three months, alternating between visual arts, animation and drama. "To start with it was very hard persuading the parents to send their children to us on their only day off," says Wells.

Now, though, the number of families wanting to take part outstrips the number of places. Having started off with twelve boys and girls, there are now 30 participants. The older children now help the teachers, and some of the beginners from the early days are now artists, have their own businesses or have gone back to school.

Workshops for children were not to be the gallery's only project. In June 2006 the Townhouse launched its Sawa workshops, for instance. "Sawa" is Arabic for "together". "We wanted to do something for the many Sudanese refugees in Cairo," Mina Noshy explains.

Now 30, Noshy was the gallery's first employee eleven years ago. "I had no idea what an art gallery was," he laughs. Trained as an accountant, he is now the gallery's Managing Director and runs the Sawa programme.

A successful programme

In the summer of 2006 he invited a group of Sudanese refugees to a workshop, and at some point Egyptians and later other nationalities joined them. Today, up to 200 people flock to the Sawa workshops. "Old, young, mechanics, carpenters, painters, students, foreigners, refugees – everyone works and learns together," says Mina Noshy, his face plainly reflecting just how proud he is of this success.

The groups that met up on Saturdays for lessons in painting, drawing, sculpture and design soon grew so large that they became two workshops. "The participants didn't want to leave their children at home alone, so they often just brought them along," says Noshy. Now the children meet up on Saturday mornings and the adults in the afternoon.

This Saturday, dozens of people fill the "Rawabet" theatre adjacent to the gallery. Young women and men are sitting at their drawings, colouring, sketching and designing.

They interrupt their concentration to turn to Ana Seco for advice. She has been trying to teach the Sawa participants the basics of T-shirt design over four consecutive Saturdays. A Spanish artist and fashion designer, Seco has been living in Cairo for six months and teaching the course as a volunteer, like all the artists. "It's fun teaching people something," says Seco as she discusses a student's choice of motif with her.

Walid Farouk is here too, like every Saturday. Originally from Sudan, he and his family have been living in Cairo for two years now. They had heard of the Townhouse Gallery from artist friends even before they left Sudan – "an open place where you always get an opportunity," says Farouk.

Well known even beyond Egypt

Farouk and his wife are artists, and it is down to the gallery that they have met people and built a life for the family in Cairo in such a short time. They and their children are regulars at the Sawa workshops.

In the mornings, Farouk and his wife work as teachers for the children's workshops, for which they are

paid – as are all the other employees. In the afternoons they attend the adult workshops. "The children love painting and they profit a great deal from meeting so many different peoples and cultures," says Walid Farouk.

Like Walid Farouk's family, countless others have attended the Townhouse Gallery's outreach programmes. They offer them a chance to discover a new world and develop new talents at no financial cost.

"Workshops are actually always very expensive," says the 26-year-old costume designer Lina Ali. She has come to Sawa for the first time, having found out about the upcoming design workshop through Facebook. "Sawa is a great opportunity for everyone, whatever their background, to learn something new without spending a single cent."

Of course the workshops do cost a huge amount of money, which an independent gallery like the Townhouse has to raise in the first place. Yet over the years, the gallery has become well known for its work beyond Egypt itself and now has so many supporters that it always manages to raise the funds it needs for its programmes.

In June of last year the Townhouse held its second art auction to raise money for its outreach programmes. A total of 42 works were up for sale. The Cairo art scene came, saw and spent some 130,000 dollars altogether. In this case, it was a good investment in more than one sense.

Amira El Ahl

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