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Daniel Dendra

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At anOther Architect (aA), we exploit a chameleon-like strategy, in which discourse with the client and the specifics of site and culture influence design decisions. Bringing this architectural method to each project, we offer each client a fresh look at normative situations in everyday life. Most projects undertaken by aA are based outside of its current home base of Berlin, Germany. By utilizing the cultural perspective that this place provides and pairing it with our clients' cultural perspectives, we seek to enrich and intensify the fabric in which we design. Berlin is a melting-pot of cultures and, at the moment, a perfect base for such expansive, inclusive endeavors.

In 2008, aA received an invitation from the Egyptian Furniture Export Council, to participate in an international workshop entitled KYME. Kyme is an ancient Egyptian word meaning black land, the fertile ground on the banks of the Nile River. Six international designers from Barcelona, Los Angeles, The Hague, Tokyo, Cairo, and Berlin each teamed with five young Egyptian designers to develop new products for Egyptian furniture manufacturers.

After visiting the pyramids and the Egyptian Museum, I was uncertain about how to approach the project. How, as a foreigner, does one deal with such a rich and old culture as found in Egypt? How does one reconcile this place—in some respects, this antiquated place—with modern design and manufacturing techniques? Local manufacturers mainly produced furniture through historical methods. Many did not understand modern design procedures such as rapid prototyping. Some of the manufacturers did, in fact, utilize cutting edge technology such as CNC routers, but only for efficiently simulating a "hand-carved" aesthetic on standard wooden doors and furniture. Further, knowing we were scheduled to present the furniture at the Milan Furniture fair, only four months away, we were faced with a very tight deadline.

Uncertain of the digital skills of the young designers in our group, and having just arrived from a freezing Berlin, I decided that the team would begin work outdoors, in the warm climate, working fundamentally with our hands, in an effort to embed all of our work with the Egyptian culture around us. We made countless models with found objects (from the streets and shops of Cairo) and gypsum plaster, which dried fast (and in a very particular way) under the Egyptian sun. These models were the initial ideas for the products that we continued to develop for the workshop, once back in Berlin with my designers at aA.

Understanding our background at aA, working with the precise and in-time manufacturing processes of Germany, one can imagine the difficulties we encountered in communicating with an Egyptian manufacturer who was not familiar with prototyping furniture before it goes

into production. As a result, we did not strive to achieve an exactingly precise object; a strong, expressive form would hide any mistakes in design or manufacture that might result from these cross-cultural experiments. The general strategy for this project was to design a table based on a concept generated by combining the strong geometric rules of ancient Egyptian design and the complex and chaotic nature of Cairo today. (Egypt and Cairo are synonymous in the Egyptian language).

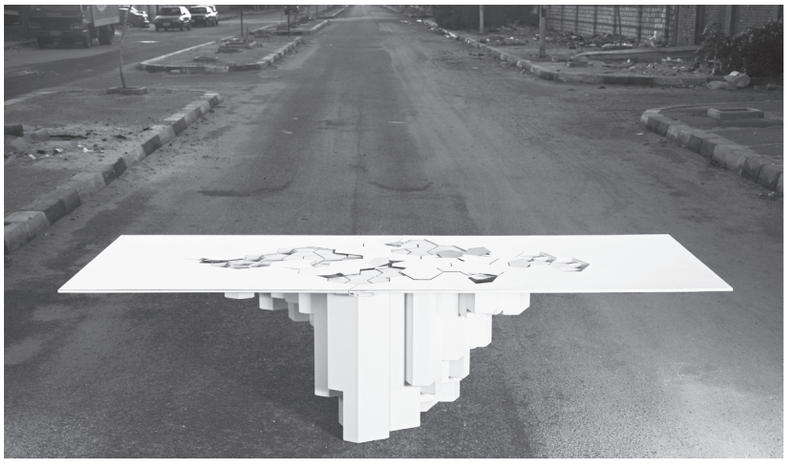
The table design is derived from a vernacular tile mosaic pattern and from Islamic patterns, appropriately called Cairo Tessellation, commonly found on the streets of Cairo. This tessellation consists of small pentagon-shaped tiles rotated about a central point. Four of these rotated pentagons fit together to form a hexagon, elongated along one axis. This pattern grows out of the center of the tabletop and forms a central pedestal. As a reference to the Egyptian topographical condition, which diagrammatically consists of two desert plateaus with a crack (the Nile) separating them, the table consists of two parts. On one side, the hexagons are aligned horizontally; on the other side, the hexagons are aligned vertically. Additionally, the table can be reconfigured with the pedestal facing to the outside. Due to a materially intensive method of construction, the pedestal of the first prototype weighed approximately half a ton. We did not produce the top metal and glass trays for Milan, but it was still a great success at the show.

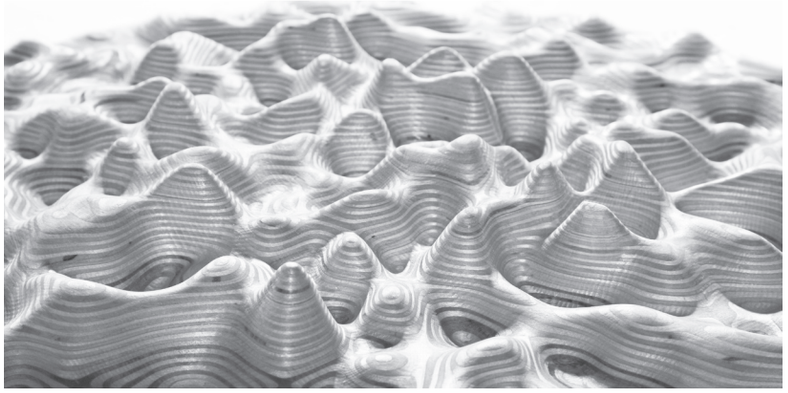
Another design featured in the Kyme series is NoisyTeaTime (PeakT)—a table, which, as a beautiful and practical furniture piece also exhibits an augmented program, a critical message on another scale.

PeakT is based on the coffee shop table typology: a small, square, high table, traditionally extended by placing a larger tray on top, if more people are to sit around it. PeakT has exactly the same proportions as the tables found in the numerous coffee shops in the old town of Cairo. The only difference is that this table is useless without its tray on top, as its three-dimensional topography prevents the user from putting anything down on it. This topography is a spatial translation of the soundscape of a part of the city of Cairo.

Cairo is considered one of the noisiest cities in the world. Cars are omnipresent in the public realm. The sound of traffic makes it difficult to even walk on the street, let alone engage in any of the public life commonly found in European cities. Metaphorically speaking, the table is unusable just as the city is unusable, due to negative effects of the car.

Similar to active sound cancellation, the table is made usable by adding its removable, big tray, which has the negative of the soundscape carved into its underside. When not in use,





the tray can be hung on the wall as a decorative reminder of the noise in the city. The table was manufactured with a CNC router that enabled us to cut a complex negative and positive tectonic out of a solid material.

In any other context, we would not have been able to design these tables, and I am sure that an Egyptian manufacturer, without the influence of a foreigner, would never have made them. By pairing our technological design expertise with the cultural knowledge of the young Egyptian designers, the Kyme team achieved great success.

As we experienced in Egypt and in these projects, face-to-face communication remains invaluable. However, we have found that emerging methods of idea-sharing make it much easier to collaborate, work abroad and to communicate with a much wider audience. Internet-based social media networks not only allow the architect and designer to spread their message much faster, but also allow them to re-think traditional methods of production.

Berlin is, at the moment, a breeding ground for many do-it-yourself design studios and networks. Here, and everywhere, the internet allows designers to skip the producer and manufacturer, and distribute their designs by themselves. Of course, this does increase the entrepreneurial risk for a designer, but at the same time, it makes the profit margin much higher as well. As architects, we share only 2% of the global building market. As our world population increases to nine billion by 2050 and our cities continue to grow, we are more and more interested in how architects can increase their market share in order to create better environments. Sooner or later, the internet and its possibilities of mass communication and unlimited shelf space will affect architectural and urban design. To address this, we have started several experiments in the last year, moving away from a purely architectural design practice, to a studio that is trying to work between the physical and virtual realms.

Inspired by the conceptual approach of open source initiatives, such as Creative Commons and "coworking," we started a project called OpenSimSim for the 2010 Architecture Biennale in Venice, curated by Kazuyo Sejima. Over the course of centuries, vernacular building types have been duplicated, modified, and improved by the public. The centers of notable cities, such as Paris, were created in an open source way. It is only recently that the design and construction of the urban environment has been reserved for professionals. OpenSimSim poses the question, If cities are used by the public at large, why not include everyone in their design, in a coworking manner? This potential for collaboration and cooperation supported the creation of OpenSimSim.

OpenSimSim is a community-driven platform that enhances the architectural design and building process. The design process is given a contemporary spin. Using this system, interested communities may offer their input and feedback on a design. This provides user-generated content for projects, where users help with needs and requests, and take part in the implementation and revision of a project, providing valuable input

along the way. The goal is to define objectives, develop strategies to initiate activities, meet people in the architecture field, make the design process more transparent, and create new visions. It is available to anybody in the world who cares about design.

Even though OpenSimSim provides a higher technological transfer when compared to our traditional offline projects, it is a logical continuation of our work. This is due to our care and attention for critical mass and openness. Due to the worldwide accessibility of the internet, the amount of people participating, the critical mass is potentially very large. So, the amount of possible peer-review and the chance to find the missing link in a line of thought, is much higher than in any other way of communication. The internet, as a medium, only developed so quickly because people were able to access and learn from the sources of each website, from its openness. This is also inherent within the web2.0 community. People like to share their ideas and thoughts on Twitter, forums and blogs. Massive communities form around certain topics, and to almost any existing question in the world, there is an answer online.

Once a critical mass of participants in a certain field of interest understand the advantages of this new openness, the development of that field will expand exponentially. By exploring design decisions with a larger group of people, in an open source way, we hope to embed the culture with an understanding of the process that we used in Egypt, one of collaboratively working toward a goal with an open mind.