

*LEAD-IN: The dictionary definition of an atlas is a book of maps and charts. In this audio documentary, Nadeen Shaker attempts to explore another type of atlas: that in the minds and memories of people in the A-U-C community who experienced both the old campus in downtown, Tahrir and the new campus in New Cairo.*

*(Music: Dan Deacon: Of the Mountains; music plays for four seconds before source speaks, is lowered and then keeps running until 01:38)*

*AHMED SHAHEEN: "I enrolled in A-U-C in Fall 2007, so I spent a whole year in [the] downtown campus, and during that time, I had to explore the campus. I'd imagine myself walking through a museum while walking through the campus." (0:16)*

That was Ahmed Shaheen speaking, a Construction Engineering senior, reminiscing about the times when the American University in Cairo, A-U-C, was still on its downtown campus in Tahrir.

*AHMED SHAHEEN: "But I would say I explored it more after I moved to the new campus than while I was studying there because when I moved to the new campus, I was in the state of comparing what was there that is missing in the new campus or what was it that made me attached to the old campus even though I was just spending one year there." (00:20)*

Shaheen can't talk of the old campus without mentioning the new campus in the outskirts of Cairo, where most classes are currently held, and therefore, is the place that students now might call 'school' or 'university'. But before A-U-C changed locations in 2008, the old campus was home to thousands of students for almost 90 years.

*AHMED SHAHEEN: "It is very different I have to say from walking through the new campus. You'd walk and could sense that legacy or the history within. Here, I don't feel attached to any of the buildings; it's just going from one classroom to another. There, I have a specific memory in each part of the campus." (00:20)*

*(Music runs for three more seconds, and ends abruptly. At 01: 40, start nat sound of students on campus)*

The campus is the space where go not only to study. It's where you walk to your classes, spend time with your friends, plan for activities, and even sometimes occupy and hold rallies. Every person experiences the campus quite differently than the other.

The only tricky part about A-U-C would be which campus? Your speaker might prefer the old campus over the new one or vice versa.

The New Cairo or new campus is located 35 kilometers east of A-U-C's old campus, and was hurriedly moved into in 2008.

(Nat Sound of backup truck runs between 02:14 and 02:17. Nat sound of desert wind is background to Samia Mehrez's soundbyte)

*SAMIA MEHREZ: “There was this horror at leaving the heart of downtown and relocating out in the middle of nowhere basically, which it was until quite recently. I still remember my first trip out there when the campus sort of stood alone in the middle of the desert before all of these developments sort of crowded us in.” (00:23)*

Samia Mehrez is a professor of Arabic studies and the director of the Center of Translation Studies at A-U-C. She recalls how she felt when she was confronted with moving.

*SAMIA MEHREZ: “It was an emotional shock, I think, to many of us, of my generation who had— it wasn’t only that I was working at A-U-C as a faculty member for at least 15 year, but I had also been a student for another seven or something. So, it was almost half my lifetime that we were talking about and a tremendous lot of attachments, and memories, and friendships, and stories.” (00:26)*

*(Music: Qarar Izala: El Dor El Awel; music starts before the following passage)*

And one story did stand out. It was that of Amira Gabr is a current graduate student at A-U-C, studying to become a teacher of Arabic as a foreign language. Gabr spent three years studying theatre and political science as an undergraduate on the old campus. She tells me that on moving to the new campus, A-U-C had simply lost its identity.

*AMIRA GABR: “The A-U-C identity is being in the heart of Cairo, is being in Tahrir...and the identity of A-U-C is closely tied to that cultural experience, to being in the heart of Cairo. So, when you take A-U-C out of the heart of Cairo, this is not A-U-C! What you see around you here is not A-U-C.” (00:31)*

She tells me how radically different her experience of the new campus was.

*AMIRA GABR: “Everyone was talking about how this area is going to be the new center of Cairo. I completely disagree. It is not going to be a cultural center- it will be a center as far as the number of people living here, although they are all going to be living in gated communities— but, it is not going to be a cultural center. It is not going to be like Zamalek or downtown, ever! So, how can you produce art in a place that is not culturally vibrant!”(00: 33)*

*(Raise then fade out music)*

But, if moving were to affect students and faculty to this degree, why did A-U-C go ahead with it?

As early as A-U-C’s first years of operation, during the 1920s, the university was already looking for room to expand.

*(Music: City Lights: Charlie Chaplin; Start new track at 05:04)*

According to “The American University in Cairo Buildings Collection,” in the A-U-C archives, A-U-C had come across an ideal site overlooking the Giza Pyramids, which the university attempted to secure between the 1920s and 1940s.

Throughout these years, there were inside debates taking place amongst A-U-C's board of trustees on whether to buy the land and erect an A-U-C property that would house the College of Arts and Sciences.

According to a document within the same collection titled "Arguments for College Building on Suburban Site," one of the reasons named for securing this campus was

*VOICE ENACTMENT: "The city buildings are even now inadequate for the present growth of the institution." (00:05)*

Another point made for the argument was that it would:

*VOICE ENACTMENT: "...enable us to control more perfectly the spirit and atmosphere of the college." (00:09)*

Though this plan fell short, a larger enterprise for another suburban campus was initiated by A-U-C President John Gerhart in the late 1980s. This turns out to be the New Cairo campus.

*(Fade out music; Nat Sound of door opening onto discordant campus sounds, starting at the word 'scattered' and ending at 'growth')*

The reason for re-location was also cramped space and limited ability for expansion in downtown. Named the master plan, A-U-C would be forced to expand in a new area within 8 to 10 years. Instead of having buildings such as the main campus, the Greek campus, the library, and the Falaki building scattered around downtown, A-U-C would build an overwhelming structure with an elongated corridor coursing through faculties and buildings that shoulder one another on either flank, and still leave space available for future growth.

In short, it was a massive development project coupled with a large fundraising campaign. According to an A-U-C leaflet, the building of the new campus was the golden opportunity to make a large donation or gift; "Every brick counts," the leaflet advertised, and the donor's name on the brick was one of the re-pays.

*(Music: City Lights: Charlie Chaplin, starts at 07:12)*

Certainly, you can spot the donors' or investors' names imprinted in large on some buildings, departments, halls, and even seating benches almost everywhere you turn in the new campus. There's the Jameel Abdel Latif Hall, the Prince Alwaleed Bin Talal Hall, the Bartlett Plaza, the Malak Gabr Arts Theater and much more.

But, part of being in the old campus was its non-commercial nature, according to Gabr, especially when it came to food.

*(Fade out Music. Nat Sound begins of Amira Gabr leading chants from food sit-in. Chant: "We want foul (beans), We want Koshary (oriental food)")*

Gabr participated in one of the first unsuccessful sit-ins against A-U-C's food service that took place on the heel of the move. The food service on the new campus just until recently was catered by Delicious. Inc, an enfranchised food consortium.

*(Nat sound: someone ordering coffee. Nat sound of people ordering food on campus continues till the end of the food segment)*

The company had monopoly over the over-priced food offered on campus.

Where you would buy one meal for over 30 Egyptian pounds on the new campus, on the old campus, you could get three full meals for less than 15 Egyptian pounds, Gabr says.

*AMIRA GABR: "We outsourced food, and then even if you wanted cheap food, Koshary el-Tahrir— That's why we called it KT, Koshary el-Tahrir." (00:07)*

*(Nat sound: footsteps. Start music at 08: 4; Music: Blue Hair: El Dor El Awel )*

Mehrez, however, experienced the city in another way. Her experiences attest to what she calls the throb of the city.

*(Nat Sound: heartbeat, which continues until end of Mehrez's soundbyte)*

She experienced this throb first as an undergraduate during the seventies, when she studied English Literature with a minor in Theatre. What Mehrez particularly liked was the location of the old campus in the heart of Cairo.

*SAMIA MEHREZ: "We all went to downtown almost twice a week to shop, to go to restaurants, go to the movies, you know, go to bookstores. I mean, that was where everything happened and continued to happen for a long time". (0:16)*

While Mehrez continued experiencing the throbbing city as one of Cairo's Literati, she noticed how the downtown area was changing around her.

*SAMIA MEHREZ: "It wasn't really that it was losing its throb. I think what was happening was that the people who were partaking of this throbbing space were changing, you know, so that the heart of downtown was now the place for the middle class; hence, people began to say dah sha3by (It is for the lower class) so much so that when I would assign my students books in Arabic and ask them to buy them from Madbouly bookstore, which is like 500 meters away from the campus, many of them didn't know where Madbouly was. They were either from Maadi, or Mohandseen or Heliopolis and had never ever ventured downtown. And one of them, one said to me had actually come up to me and told me her mother had said to her what your instructor is asking you to do to go downtown, but this is a very dangerous place, and it was only 500 meters from where we are, before the move. So, you already had this vision of downtown as this wild, rowdy, lower-middle-class, threatening, loose, dangerous place." (00: 56)*

*(Nat sound of downtown traffic runs through Mehrez's last sentence)*

Even if downtown Tahrir couldn't be saved, were students and faculty so desperate to return that they wanted to reproduce the spaces of the old campus in the new one?

Gabr believes this is the case in the way students chose where to hang out.

*AMIRA GABR: "It's certain groups with certain lifestyles. Why do you sit in a certain place? Because you feel comfortable with the people that are around you." (00:05)*

Mehrez explains how students can hold on so tightly to their social spaces as she did as an undergraduate in the old campus.

*SAMIA MEHREZ: "There was a lot of, you know, chauvinism, about it as well. I mean, I remember vividly that before I belonged to the theatre group, which was an elite group on campus – it was a very exclusive group, so we looked upon them as demi-gods, until we joined them, and reproduced the same attitude." (0:36)*

While Mehrez hasn't found an equivalent in the new campus for where she hung out, she tells me she has come to terms with the new campus during one particular moment.

*SAMIA MEHREZ: The moment that has been decisive in the shift in my understanding of the new campus, and my interaction with it has been the student strike last year; that was very important. With the revolution and the repercussions of the revolution on campus, despite the fact that it was out in the desert, that was very heartening to see. But, it did not happen in vacuum. Had the revolution not happened; had our students not been part of it; had the youth not been in the forefront of this moment, then of course, what happened on campus last year would have not have happened." (0:40)*

*(Start music: Sout El Hurreya: Wust El Balad; the music runs through till then end of the documentary)*

*LARA EL-GIBALY: "I think everyone had a story to tell that was of some significance about the revolution. Everybody participated in one way or another." (00:06)*

For two semesters after the January 25 revolution, Lara El-Gibaly served as Editor-In-Chief of one of A-U-C's prominent student newspapers, The Caravan. She has dedicated a large portion of the paper's coverage to seeing how student spaces on the new campus were being forged in spirit of the revolution.

*LARA EL-GIBALY: The spaces in the new campus did contribute towards organizing the movement of students for protest on the new campus. For example, in front of the administration building, in front of HUSS (School of Humanities and Social Sciences), that became, sort of, the unofficial rallying point for any protests even since we came to A-U-C, we first came to the new campus, and there was the first protest about food prices. It happened there. Every single protest happens there. And there's this long corridor that stretches from right in front of the administration to the other side of campus, and that's always the bottleneck that emphasizes the students numbers, you know. When pictures are taken of A-U-C students protesting on campus, it's always an aerial shot of that corridor." (1: 03)*

But does Lara think the revolution has changed the students, and more importantly, their understanding of the space which they occupy on campus?

*LARA EL-GIBALY: "The space has definitely become more revolutionary than it was in the past, particularly the new campus. Everybody being here in the new campus, during the events of the revolution has definitely kick-started the development of the character of the new campus. The*

*new campus is going to be remembered as the place where students rallied after the revolution.”*  
(00:14)

Ultimately, the question is how can a connection be brought, made, or forged between both campuses?

*AHMED SHAHEEN: “The students are the connection. They are the common element on both campuses. They make the crown there and here.”* (00:07)

*SAMIA MAHREZ: “So, I think the revolution again, for me at least, represents a turning moment that will shift A-U-C’s understanding of itself even as it sits in El-Tagamoa el-Khames.”* (00:14)

It is the memories and experiences of the A-U-C community that draw an invisible atlas connecting between the new and old campuses.

*(Music fades out in 10 seconds)*

Credits:

Special thanks to Professor of Arabic Studies Samia Mehrez, AUC Graduate Student Amira Gabr, AUC Senior Ahmed Shaheen, and AUC senior and former Editor-in-Chief Lara El-Gibaly for lending their voice to this documentary.

The songs used in this documentary are:

- Of the Mountains by Dan Deacon
- Qarar Izala and Blue Hair by El Dor El Awel
- Supermassive Black Hole by Muse
- Sot El Hurreya by Wust El Balad
- Charlie Chaplin's City lights, boxing scene

Natural Sounds of desert wind, back up truck, and heart beat were provided by Freesound.org.

Chants from A-U-C food sit-in were provided by Youtube.com

Thanks to Hassan Shaker for providing the voice narration for the A-U-C archival document.

Archival file used for research: The American University in Cairo Buildings Collection.