

# Season of Place Perfection: Urban Memory, Street Art and Public Festivity in Cairo

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## Abstract

Throughout the past century, celebrations have traditionally drawn people out of their homes to come together in streets, parks, gardens, community grounds, and places of worship to mark events. Public festivals can be a source of exclusion. Musical festivals, for example, invite those with specific culture or musical taste and exclude others. The author argues that public festivals can be a source of inclusion, not exclusion, if they are driven by public interest and by place- and memory-making. The study investigates the role of festivals in generating memories and identity. By examining elements of street art and urban memory, the author was able to pinpoint the traces left by public festivals on place identity, social bonds, and placemaking, both tangible and intangible. The study targeted an informal area in eastern Cairo, Ezbet Hamada. The area is located within the Mataria district and became known for its annual Ramadan festivals. Ezbet Hamad's festival proved the residents' ability to create memory traces, street art, and place identity year-round. Graffiti and wall writing deliver the place's memorial landscape.

## Keywords

Placemaking, Street Art, Memorial Landscape, Graffiti, Wall Writing, Urban Memory, Public Festivals

## 1. Introduction

During Ramadan, Muslims fast from dawn to sunset. The ritual nature of the month encourages charity and social support. In Cairo, as in other Egyptian towns and cities, the custom of providing free meals at sunset during Ramadan is widespread. Tables, chairs, and decoration constitute what is labelled as *Mawa'ad al-Rahman*. *Mawa'ad al-Rahman* is a tradition in which people are invited to break their fast with others. Food is prepared during the day by professional chefs and

distributed, including beverages, minutes before sunset. The activity of breaking one's fast is known as *Iftar*. *Mawa'ad al-Rahman* is usually held in a temporary tent in medium- to high-income areas. The tent's capacity varies according to the patron's generosity and the number of expected attendees. *Mawa'ad al-Rahman* is held on the street and pavement in medium- to low-income areas. They expand or contract depending on the number of attendees.

While the term event simply refers to an occurrence, the term special event expands this meaning to include temporary, infrequent, and unique experiences. Moreover, the definition of the term 'festival' further conveys ideas of community and celebration. Approaching festivity with this perception, festive activities are not just activities for their own sake, but rather activities that can shape, change, and have consequences (Biaett, 2015: p. 5). Festivals bring people together to celebrate their culture and rituals. It is the most significant activity that brings humans enjoyment and relaxation. The popularity of festivals and their effects on communities create a relationship between urban space and festivals that emerge in the everyday realm (Kadu, 2023: p. 2). This introduces a unique character that provides opportunities to transform urban spaces and further enhances the city's urban image (Kadu, 2025: p. 437).

There are countless forms of festivals, such as cultural and religious. Cultural festivals are significant events that celebrate a community's heritage, traditions, and values. These festivals provide a platform for cultural expression and creativity. Festivals should play a crucial role in bringing people together, regardless of their backgrounds, and creating a sense of unity and belonging (Rutagand, 2024: p. 16).

Festivities can take place in various locations throughout the city and typically involve mostly rhythmic movements between venues (Quinn et al., 2022). Among those locations, the streets are commonly used for popular festivities. During the street festivity, the street's ambience temporarily becomes an extraordinary space (Pratiwi, 2016: p. 1). Biaett (2015: pp. 1-2) argues that there is no denying that many of today's community festivals [in the western world] have evolved into well-planned and executed commercial enterprises. Pine and Gilmore (1999) highlighted a paradigm shift in attendees' behaviour, with attendees now seeking and demanding unique experiences more than traditional goods and services.

Ezbet Hmada (Hamad's Farm) is named after the time when the place was an agricultural farm. In time, the farm was built and became a part of the urban mass of Cairo. Every year in Ramadan, the place witnesses an interesting sociocultural activity. A spatial event for sociocultural activities that leaves its mark on the place.

Festivals can be a source of exclusion. People can be excluded based on cultural, religious, ethnic, or gender factors. The author argues that popular street festivals are more likely to include diverse groups and to generate social bonds, stories, and collective memories. Without delving into a detailed analysis of the study area's mural art, the author explores Ezbet Hamada street art as a carrier of memory. This objective is realised by investigating Ezbet Hamada (Hamad's Farm) before,

during, and after its annual Ramadan festival on 5th March 2026. To explore the impact of Ezbet Hamad's festivals on urban quality and place identity, the elements of street art and their role in social activity were identified. Moreover, information, ideas, and arguments were collected from the relevant literature. The article is primarily based on personal observation and spontaneous interviews with community members. No interviews were conducted with the event organisers, as the author focuses on the festival's traces of place- and memory-making. All photos were taken the day after the festival, early in the morning, in 2026.

## 2. Ezbet Hamada as a Playground

Ezbet Hamada is a low- to medium-income informal housing area. It constitutes part of the al-Mataria district in eastern Cairo. The area is located near a major traffic node, Midan al-Mataria. The original urban character of Ezbet Hamada twelve years ago was very similar to that of its neighbouring informal areas: narrow streets, low-quality architecture, and no public services. As it is common in low-income housing, buildings are left without plaster. Their walls gradually turn dark grey, revealing the concrete slabs, columns, and brickwork. Despite this similarity, Ezbet Hamada's twelve years of experience transformed the area into an artwork. It became a cultural attraction, and social media was overwhelmed with news about its activities and uniqueness. This encouraged the community to expand the *Iftar's* label beyond the area's boundaries, spreading its identity by naming it after the entire district, al-Mataria *Iftar*; the special event is labelled as '*Ramadan fi al-Mataria*' (Ramadan in al-Mataria), as shown in **Figure 1**.



**Figure 1.** The logo of Ezbet Hamad's festival: Ramadan in al-Mataria. The author.

Apart from its use in interpreting children's play, the term "playground" appears to be used metaphorically (Boos, 2024: p. 71). For example, treating playgrounds as spaces of possibility and new opportunities, Lessen and Petermann

(Lessen & Petermann, 2022) present peripheral villages and small towns as playgrounds for the negotiation of individual and collective identities. The definition of “festivity” shares similarities with that of “play”. Festivity, like playing, refers to activities that typically follow a cyclical temporal logic. They both are temporary gatherings, usually held at specific locations, with activities that focus on a particular cultural theme (e.g., honouring a patron saint, music, food, or a competition) and involve a particular symbolic system (Handelman, 1990).

For twelve consecutive years, Ezbet Hamada became a playground for celebrating Ramadan with a remarkable *Iftar*. While the tradition of *Mawa'ad al-Rahman* is practised throughout the month of Ramadan across Cairo, Ezbet Hamada *Iftars* are more of a one-day-a-year event. On the 2026 anniversary day, during Ezbet Hamad's 15th Ramadan *Iftar* on 5<sup>th</sup> March 2026, around 100,000 meals were served. Days before the event, food was prepared, walls painted, banners hung, and tables and chairs were rented. Eznet Hamada's *Iftar* might raise the question of whether it is just a special event or a street festival. *Mawa'ad al-Rahman* in Ezbet Hamada brings people together and transforms streets into an extraordinary playground. People talk with their neighbours before, during, and after the meal. If Ezbet Hamada's street *Iftars* are occasions of an out-of-the-ordinary experience, this makes the *Iftar* at least a special event. Despite attending such a special event, which represents a withdrawal from everyday social structure, it is directly correlated with the local culture's social structure (Turner et al., 2017). Because festivals have been presented as dynamic place elements that enable people to foster memory and meaning in places (Kadu, 2025: p. 442), Ezbet Hamada's *Mawa'ad al-Rahman* should be considered a form of festivity, as it plays these roles.

### 3. Ezbet Hamada Memorial Landscape



Figure 2. Old graffiti from 2016. The author.

Ezbet Hamada's street festival featured countless signs and symbols, including murals, decorative elements, and food. Visiting the area the next day after the 2026 *Iftar*, one can notice wall stories that began twelve years ago and those created just before the festival (**Figure 2** and **Figure 3**). Although the Ezbet Hamada memorial landscape was intended to celebrate Ramadan, it also carried traces of commemoration. Profiting from the event's reputation, the local community advocated for their sociocultural values by commemorating their lost loved ones and their solidarity with the suffering. As it is expected, the playground attracted children and elderly citizens. Children were accounted for by providing play equipment. In general, these types of children's equipment are common in popular areas. They provide their services for a small fee. Nonetheless, the festival provided free children's amusements at the festival (**Figure 4**).



**Figure 3.** New calligraphic graffiti: "I am the sun". The author.



**Figure 4.** Play equipment for children, in the early morning after the festival. The author.

#### 4. Mural Art at Ezbet Hamada

While viewing unusual or rarely seen static art can enthuse people, creating art and being a collaborative part of the process lead to a liminal experience (Biaett, 2015: p.16). Among those static art elements, graffiti and wall writings are overwhelming (Figure 5). Ezbet Hamada's mural art expresses various objectives, including celebrating the month and fostering social solidarity. Moreover, there are graffiti and writing that aim to capture attention, for aesthetic purposes, and to create territorial boundaries and individuality. Mural art in Ezbet Hamada introduces graffiti and wall writing full of signs and colours. Aside from the graffiti and writings, banners, decorations, hanging lines, posters, and individual photos are distributed in a specific order (Figure 6). Decorative bands are drawn around windows and entrances (Figure 7). The author's point is that most mural art is created by artists or skilled individuals. Despite some graffiti appearing unprofessional, wall writing demonstrates professionalism and skill. The young people and children's collaboration in the street art explains such unprofessionalism (Figure 8). Wall writing in Ezbet Hamada depicts social slogans such as "We are one family", "Let us join others in celebration", "Shoulder to shoulder" and "A family gathering". Other slogans expressed hope, future objectives, and congratulated people, such as "Ramadan Kareem", "Twelve events only are not enough", and "Drawing happiness in people's eyes" (Figures 9-11).

All buildings are painted above eye level in white plaster to receive the art. Painting the ground floor, and sometimes the first floor, white creates a clever background for wall writing and graffiti. Colours become more vibrant against the white background. The writing and graffiti not only vibrate against the white background, but the white background also creates a visual unity among different designs.



Figure 5. Wall writing and graffiti: a Quran verse encouraging charity. The author.



**Figure 6.** A Street in Ezbet Hamada. Distribution of street art. The author.



**Figure 7.** A decorative element around the entrance. The author



**Figure 8.** A graffiti drawn by an unskilled individual. The author.



**Figure 9.** Wall writing: “Gathering the big family” and “The taste of home’s intimacy”. The author.



**Figure 10.** Wall writing: “Drawing happiness in the eye”. The author.



**Figure 11.** Wall writing: “Twelve festivals are not enough”. The author.

#### 4.1. Ezbet Hamada’s Graffiti

Distinctive graffiti are identifying elements that ensure competitiveness with neighbouring areas. The graffiti in Ezbet Hamada featured various primary elements, including signs and figures. The signs represent a common vocabulary of geometric forms in Egyptian cultural heritage. This, however, did not create monotony, as the signs were transformed to introduce new derivatives, and the sign combination exhibited limitless designs.



**Figure 12.** Ramadan Lantern. The author.

Ezbet Hamada’s graffiti adapted well-known signs symbolising the month of Ramadan, such as the Ramadan Lantern and the Half Moon, the cannon, traditionally used since the 18th century to announce the *Iftar*, and the wake-up drum as a symbol of *Suhur* (the last meal before fasting), see **Figures 12-14**. Those signs were used extensively along the street. One of the remarkable graffiti was painted on the wall of a small light-industrial facility (**Figure 15**). What is remarkable about this graffiti is the advertisement dominating it. A tea company label was painted, occupying a significant wall position and size. Another remarkable work is presented on the shop’s rolling door and facade. The artwork seems very professionally done. Despite its colourful dots and small lines scattered in an out-of-

order arrangement, the whole composition is cheerful and exciting (Figure 16). The authors speculate that such a work must have been created by a professional artist who paid attention to distinguishing it from its context.



Figure 13. *Iftar* traditional cannon. The author.



Figure 14. The *Suhur's* traditional drum. The author.



Figure 15. A graffiti with a tea company's logo. The author.



**Figure 16.** A graffiti decorating a shop. The author.

Following the timeline of Ezbet Hamada's graffiti, explain how national and international events impacted the symbols presented. For example, graffiti painted six years ago did little to express solidarity with Palestine and Gaza. Graffiti expressing the community's solidarity with Gaza, however, intensified from 2024 to 2026 (Figures 17-19). This went so far that a cartoon character Hanzala, created by Naji al-Ali, a Palestinian artist, was presented in solidarity (Figure 20). One might ask what political solidarity with the Palestinian has to do with a local street festival. The answer to such a question emerges by observing that the local community showed solidarity with families who had lost loved ones (Figure 21), whether they were considered Martyrs or deceased. Parallel to Gaza graffiti, graffiti commemorating young residents is to be found in particular places. A young football fan, for example, who was killed by the security forces, is depicted in a significant graffiti in the form of an Angel (Figure 22). "Remembering those who were lost, suffered or are still suffering during our time of happiness and celebration is essential," as an individual said.



**Figure 17.** Expressing solidarity with Gaza. The author.



Figure 18. Expressing solidarity with Gaza. The author.

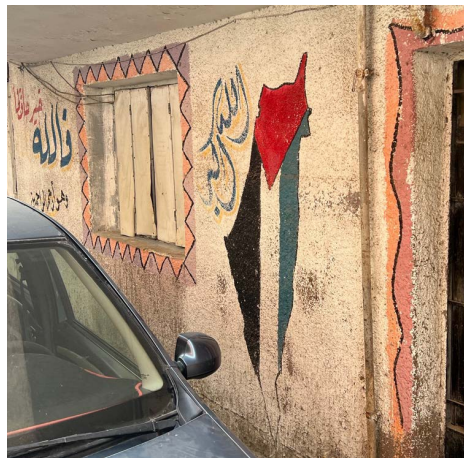


Figure 19. Expressing solidarity with Palestine. The author.



Figure 20. Expressing solidarity with Palestine: Hanzala, "From Egypt". The author.



**Figure 21.** Commemorating a loved one, a photo and writing: “The Sun sets, but his name remains”. The author.



**Figure 22.** An Angel: commemorating a football fan. The author.

#### 4.2. The Colourful World of Ezbet Hamada

Colourless expressions and experiences lack visual stimulation and information, resulting in massive gaps in overall cognition, feelings, emotions, awareness, and comprehension of the natural and man-made world (Hettiarachchi, 2025: p. 158). The role of colours in the built environment is not limited to beautification or to the creation of visually pleasing, harmonious compositions (Mahnke, 2012). Colours play a pivotal role as a mode of communication expressing certain meanings, signs, signals, and symbols. Colours have psycho-sensory and psycho-physiological impacts on the moods, feelings, emotions, and behaviour of individuals, which are identified as dichotomous in nature (Gilbert et al., 2016). If colours are used to emphasise the difference between a space designed for relaxation and another designed for activities, they can add a stronger sense of place and can significantly help with spatial orientation (Torres et al., 2020).

Warm or long-wavelength colours (red, orange, yellow) are found to arouse and stimulate individuals' attention and emotional levels. For example, Red captures attention and evokes strong emotional responses (Mahnke, 2012). Orange is

a bright, energetic, highly stimulating, and friendly colour; it grabs the attention of youth (Hettiarachchi, 2025: p. 165). Yellow is a bright, radiant, soft, cheerful and stimulating colour. Yellow is universally recognised as the colour of happiness (Fugate & Franco, 2019). The use of warm colours is a powerful tool that creates a cheerful atmosphere and greatly helps older citizens feel independent and safe (Hencová & Kotradyová, 2023). Cool colours with short wavelengths, on the other hand, are found to pacify them, inducing the opposite psychophysiological effects (Stone, 2001). White, for instance, universally symbolises purity and cleanliness. It is neither stimulating nor pacifying, keeping individuals in a neutral state of mind (Hettiarachchi, 2025: p. 166). The colour contrasts with the white background in Ezbet Hamada, drawing attention to the graffiti and writing. The colours in the Ezbet Hamada murals treated old citizens with the same care as children and grown-ups. As people age, their visual perception changes, as does their sensitivity to light and certain colours, making it harder to recognise their surroundings. However, warm tones at the warm end of the colour spectrum can still be seen even by people with colour deficiencies (Hencová & Kotradyová, 2023). Whether consciously or unconsciously designed, the wall art in Ezbet Hamada used warm colours that should enhance senior citizens' recognition of the environment. Nonetheless, the low colour saturation might have negatively affected all citizens' perception of the place's colourful ambience.



**Figure 23.** A cold and low-saturated colour at a street corner. The author.

Ezbet Hamada presents a significant colour scheme, mostly warm tones on a white background. Nonetheless, the impact of each colour on humans ranges within a spectrum of positive to negative attributes as a manifestation of the time of exposure, level of saturation (Wilms & Oberfeld, 2018), correlated colour temperature levels, amount/proportion of a particular colour on surfaces, and colour composition (Liu et al., 2022). In some cases, such as the graffiti in **Figure 22**, they are negatively attributed to their low saturation. Determining whether such a low saturation level was due to time and environmental factors or to financial means is challenging. One can only specify the effects of time and environment in countless cases (compare **Figure 2** and **Figure 3**).

Even if the use of warm colours is helpful for old people, the author can only speculate that adopting them in Ezbet Hamada's mural art was intended to introduce a cheerful atmosphere to the festival. Various residents expressed the symbolic meaning of the white background. However, the symbolic meaning of other colours was much debated. Drawing attention to specific elements in the mural art was widely expressed. Nevertheless, drawing attention to street corners was limitedly successful. For example, the calligraphic graffiti drawn on some corners was not bright enough to draw attention. Despite their unique design, using cold colours or reducing saturation compromised their notification (Figure 23).

## 5. The Food in Ezbet Hamada's *Iftar*

Food is a strong medium for expressing culture, identity, and pleasure. It is more than just a nutritional substance. The rich tapestry of sociocultural variety across the world is reflected in the culinary legacy associated with traditional foods (Sibal 2018). Traditional food serves as a unifying factor that helps people maintain their distinct identities (Manik et al., 2024: p. 69).

Food preparation, consumption, and sharing practises develop into a kind of culturally significant communication. Every step of a meal, from selecting the proper raw materials, food preparation and cooking, conveys values, beliefs, and traditions (Sibal, 2018). Meal preparation in the Egyptian tradition involves collective contributions from relatives and neighbours, especially before a feast. For example, it is customary for neighbours in rural and popular urban areas in Egypt to contribute to the food preparation of a marriage and a child's birth. Food preparation serves as a powerful metaphor for social relationships, transcending differences and forging ties between people (Kierans & Haeney, 2010). Before Ezbet Hamada's *Iftar*, food was prepared. It was clearly obvious that this stage presents social values and skills that attract non-residents to participate. The German ambassador in Cairo, for example, joined the residents in food preparation, during which local ladies taught her how to prepare *Mahshi* (Egyptian stuffed vegetables) (Egypt Today, 2026). Preparing the food in Ezbet Hamada became an activity that united individuals and the local community into a tapestry of unity and identity. The Participant Experience Theory asserts, "Levels of social capital bonding and bridging increase when attendees engage in more organically festive forms of activity" (Mannell & Kleiber, 1997: p. 83). Accordingly, one can speculate that engaging the attendees in food preparation bridges and bonds their social relationships.

Serving free meals in *Mawa'ad al-Rahman* in general and Ezbet Hamada in particular is a significant cultural sign because food is more important when consumed during celebrations. It manifests as a thread linking individuals to the core of festivities and functions as an audible and visual display of culture (Sibal, 2018). Barbecued meats, chicken, rice, salad, and dates are the four primary ingredients of traditional Egyptian cuisine during Ramadan, and serving them at the Ezbet Hamada festival displays local culture. Ezbet Hamada's cuisine serves as a bridge

between guests and the community, weaving social relations through cultural and religious activities. Festive foods blend flavours with shared experiences and cultural heritage to foster social cohesion in the vast tapestry of human existence (Derrett, 2003). Each dish represents a story about its preparation and flavour, connecting them to the past and passing them on (Manik et al., 2024: p. 78). Among the stories told is that of the German ambassador in Cairo, who contributed to food preparation. Cooking and sharing festive food is a cornerstone of human connection, transcending mere nutrition to become a potent medium for forming and strengthening social bonds (Ashley et al., 2004). While the author's impression is that elder citizens are considered in the festival mural art, the food presented little consideration for their health requirements. Elder citizens' meals were similar to those of everybody else.

## 6. Ezbet Hamada Place Spirit

During the 1990s to the 2010s, urban communities in southern and eastern Ukraine underwent a "search for" and "invention" of new traditions, producing new semantic models and forms of their representation (Rachkov, 2021: p. 31). Like the eastern Ukrainian communities, the Ezbet Hamada community developed its local identity over 12 years of experience. This is because searching for identity is vital for creating a sense of place and place attachment (Afriyanti et al., 2021; Hernández et al., 2007; Holloway & Hubbard, 2013; Koch & Latham, 2021).

Wickison-Mapp (2023) argued that the tradition of street parties is part of the British national identity. Royal Weddings and birthdays, and the turning of the millennium, prompted their return. Festivals are held to construct or reconstruct the collective memory and citizens' behaviour. Anniversaries serve as a means of constructing historical memory since the beginning of the 20th century. Many aspects stimulate place identity, including religion. Religion may serve as a powerful tool in creating place identity, which shapes the unique experience of place (Kadu, 2025: p. 439). While some religious festivals commemorate saints, for example, others consider the event significant. Ezbet Hamada's festival is a religious event, but it does not commemorate individuals; it celebrates the event itself. The festival creates a seasonal identity through its celebration culture and a permanent identity through its traces.

Observing the Mataria district, around Ezbet Hamada, the extensive use of graffiti, wall writing and colours does not appear, except for temporary decorative elements. Even in places that offer *Mawa'ad al-Rahman*, the *Iftar* leaves little permanent traces. This created Ezbet Hamada's unique spirit of place. The concept of *genius loci*, or spirit of the place, was coined by Christian Norberg-Schulz, referring to a place's distinctive character. Light and colour, according to Christian Norberg-Schulz, help determine the spirit of places (Norberg-Schulz, 1980). However, as the lighting features are used temporarily, the colour, which Costa (cf. Barradas et al., 2022: p. 136) considers a property, is an element that confers the place spirit. Ezbet Hamada's uniqueness and its place spirit are constructed by

temporary and permanent traces and stories. Mural art, lighting, decorations, and free food created the festival's unique ambience. Activities and stories added to those elements, a memorial playground of experiences.

As Ezbet Hamada's original characteristic was fluid with its context and difficult to associate with the past, the festival formed its distinctive identity and place spirit. Its place spirit is built over twelve years of layered memories. Within Ezbet Hamada, places show few singularities. Some places are more distinctive than others, but a common characteristic of mural art is evident. Walking along the boundaries of Ezbet Hamada during the *Iftar*, one might ask, 'What is happening?' One's attention will be directed to the meanings behind the event, the *Iftar* ritual, and to the emotions of the celebration's attendees. Those who celebrate occupy the public realm with an unmistakable sense of claim to it, appropriating it as a public place meant to be (Koppikar, 2024). This was clearly evident the next day after the feast, when the lights were off, leaving the mural art as traces. Such an environmental behaviour draws attention to the place of particularity; its spirit of place.

### 6.1. Mural Art and Territoriality in Ezbet Hamada



**Figure 24.** Marking the access points with a giant graffiti of the festival logo and Egypt's flag. The author.

Ezbet Hamada's identity went beyond distinctiveness to urban territorial behaviour. Distinctive signs of territories, which are crucial for their characterisation and development, are the same elements that create their place spirit. Since distinctive signs contribute to place iconography and reaffirm its territorial marks (Barradas et al., 2022: p. 136), the elements of identity in Ezbet Hamada create a form of visual territoriality. Mural art in Ezbet Hamada creates distinctive signs

of territorial boundaries and identities. Banners, colours, and graffiti are used to symbolically gate entrances, indicating property and individuality, which, according to Istrate and Ilovan (2021), shape territorial identities through boundaries and local characteristics. Ezbet Hamada is accessible to public transportation and roads from two directions: the north and the east. The Northern seems more favourable due to its proximity to essential public or mass transportation nodes and landmarks. Various access points are available on the northern side; however, the attendees are mainly directed to two of them. The two access points are marked by a large graffiti on an apartment block, and posters and banners hang at their entrances (Figure 24 and Figure 25).

Moreover, the welcoming and guiding signs were distributed at those two access points. The primary access points were identified, with banners serving as territorial boundaries, providing significant information about the emergency, and drawing attention to specific unwelcome behaviours. Rally points, healthcare services, and other points of interest were also identified. The eastern side produces few marks to the Ezbet Hamada access points. Either one must know the way, or the individual might misuse the entrance. The graffiti, lighting, decoration, wall writing and eating tables constructed territorial signs during the festivals. However, among those signs, permanent graffiti and wall writing maintained the place method in constructing territorial identities and boundaries. While modern, top-down urbanism requires particular methodologies for creating territories (Banini, 2021), Ezbet Hamada, an informal housing area, also offers its own methods for creating territories.



Figure 25. A banner indicating an access point and giving instructions. The author.

## 7. The Festival, the People, the Place and the Consequences

Festivals around the world have direct objectives and indirect consequences. They might be held for cultural, religious, or national celebrations or for pure entertainment. However, they carry consequences related to their forms. There are two primary forms of the festive process: official or authoritarian, and street or bot-

tom-up. Despite having similar direct objectives, their hidden agendas and consequences are significantly distinct. Nevertheless, managing street festivals requires skills. Managing thousands of attendees in Ezbet Hamada must have been well planned and executed. After twelve years of managerial experience, the community turned a simple *Iftar* into a festival that attracts consumers of cultural street activities.

People and places face conflicts with capitalism, which negatively affect people's right to the city. This led Toolis (2021) to argue that it is vital to restore balance among people, place, and profit. If this is essential to urbanism, it is equally, and probably more, vital in public festivals. In several international cases, festivals became a means for profit. In today's context, the festival venue is not only seen as a recreational place where people gather to celebrate, but also as a source of capitalist revenue. Drinking, buying accessories, paying for tickets, or consuming food is mostly part of public activity. With an explosion of bunting, people gather around tables laden with food to chat, laugh and have fun (Wickison-Mapp, 2023). Even if food brings people together, when payment is required, eating becomes a commodity rather than a means for cultural entertainment. Even though those sponsored by the authorities, in which attendance tickets are not expected, are a significant source of profit. Religious festivals, which have become tourist attractions, are economically invested in. Braga et al. explained that it was possible to conclude that the religious festivity in honour of Our Lady of Antime is attracting more and more believers and has become a complementary source to the destination's basic tourist resources in Fafe (Braga et al., 2024: p. 1). Thus, using festivals for generating profit challenges the balance between people and places. If profit became significant in a public place, it would lead to exclusion. Despite Toolis's wishes to restore balance between people, place, and profit, it is challenging to curb capitalist power at public festivals unless it is eliminated in the local community's benefit, without excluding everyone's economic access (Zukin, 2010).

Revenue is not the only consequence of festivities; in many cases, they are produced for political propaganda. During the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in the USSR, for example, anniversary-related festivals came from above rather than from below, shaped by the regime; anniversaries became a channel for propagating state and Party ideology and policies (Rachkov, 2024: pp. 179-180). Urban celebrations during the late Soviet period featured a variety of elements. This is represented by the functions and content of Soviet symbolic and ritual practices. As a result of Soviet ideology, they found extensive coverage in openly propagandistic works by Soviet authors. The main purpose of their literature was to explain the specifics of the Soviet culture of celebration. Soviet literature can be viewed as a kind of manual offering examples of symbolic forms accepted by the authorities, ranging from music and songs to clothing and everyday ritual elements (Rachkov, 2024: pp. 169-170).

Even in the Western hemisphere, festivals serve as a means of political propaganda. Periodically, political parties and the state use the festival to convey indi-

rect political messages. Granting access to certain political views and denying it to others is a form of marketing political interests. Officially, politically, or economically sponsored festivals emphasise synoptic viewing. The use of musical festivals in Vienna, for example, is the ruling party's means of political propaganda. The author gained this knowledge by attending various public, free-of-charge musical performances; the ruling party's slogan and signs were everywhere.

While official festivals are impressive and serve political or economic objectives, street festivals, in general and in Ezbet Hamada in particular, are more intimate, natural, and straightforward. This is because, on a smaller scale, people's participation creates its own kind of festive atmosphere and community (Koppikar, 2024). In contrast to many international festivals, Ezbet Hamada's festival is free to attend and eat. The street festival is not sponsored by the authorities; it is not a birthday celebration for a king or a royal wedding. The festival is primarily driven by religious aspects that shape sociocultural identity; Ezbet Hamada's festival is not a direct source of capitalist profit; it is a source of charity.



**Figure 26.** A Christian family collaboration. A wall writing: “We always support each other”. The author.

Despite being public events, festivals can be sources of exclusion. Such an exclusion is produced in cultural, economic, or religious forms. Because people differ in their interests and cultural tastes, not every form of festivity is suitable for everyone. Musical festivals attract those with similar musical tastes but exclude others. If the festival requires financial means to purchase tickets, food, or beverage,

ages, it excludes those without means. Sotevik and Stretmo argued that, depending on the context, different exclusion and inclusion mechanisms are put into work, implying that sexuality and ethnicity/race are produced (Sotevik & Stretmo, 2024: p. 4). Although *Mawa'ad al-Rahman* is religiously oriented, no one controlled attendees' identities, and free meals present no religious constraints for non-Muslims. However, as the Egyptian Christians were during their Great Lent, they might have been excluded from enjoying most of the food. Nevertheless, the residents of Ezbet Hamada had little choice; they could not postpone the event. On the other hand, Christians residents in Ezbet Hamada participated in the feast. This is confirmed by signs posted by residents indicating their intent to join the celebration (Figure 26). The walls, as carriers of memory and, at the same time, the author's impressions during the festival, depicted no sociocultural segregation or exclusion. Nevertheless, another form of exclusion has arisen during the *Iftar*. The food excluded older citizens from enjoying the meals. However, this form of exclusion is related more to the intellects of ordinary Egyptians; they do not pay attention to health issues.

### 7.1. Consequence of Ezbet Hamada's Festival; Social Cohesion

If official festivals have a hidden agenda or consequences, do not unofficial festivals, too? Ezbet Hamad's festival eliminates the direct profit of capitalism and the state's political propaganda. Eliminating or minimising capitalist profit and political propaganda from the relationship between people and places seems utopic in official festivities, as it requires a bottom-up process that strikes a balance between social cohesion and place. However, this does not mean that Ezbet Hamada's commercial services do not benefit from the festivity, or that it has no consequences. It means that the festivity did not target profit *per se*. Ezbet Hamad's festivals had urban and sociocultural consequences. It became the voice of the marginalised classes in placemaking and in place identity.

Social cohesion is an essential consequence of Ezbet Hamad's festival. Social cohesion refers to the strength of the social bond and the sense of solidarity within a community. One of the primary objectives of social cohesion is to eliminate segregation and exclusion. It encompasses individuals' willingness to cooperate and work together for the collective well-being of their society (Rutagand, 2024: p. 15). Certainly, social bonds have various levels. It has been observed to be strongly evident and easily recognisable within friend/family groups at community festivals, but minimal among unacquainted peers who share demographic similarities when attendees were primarily spectators (Biaett, 2015: p. 6). This argument relates the form of activity done by the attendees to social bonds. Observing a festival performance, such as a religious or cultural carnival in Italy or Brazil, does not necessarily require engagement in social activity. On the other hand, collaborating on Ezbet Hamad's festival activities and their preparatory stages requires engagement, thereby strengthening social bonds.

Through Ezbet Hamad's festivals, individuals weave themselves into the place,

its spirit, and its sociocultural activities. The fragrances, flavours, and textures of free traditional food evoke memories of sociocultural inclusion. Since festivities can be occasions for negotiating belonging and inclusion (Marston, 2002), attendees during the preparation stage and during Ezbet Hamad's *Iftar* were able to create social bonds and present social cohesion. Moreover, as social cohesion fosters communal pride and belonging by creating lasting memories (Bessiere & Tibere, 2013), Ezbet Hamada's experience became mesmerising. Ezbet Hamada's festival introduces the sociocultural consequences of placemaking and stories. Usually, *Mawa'ad al-Rahman's* traces disappear over time in other places, but they remain for longer periods in Ezbet Hamada, thanks to the place's mural art.

## 7.2. Consequence of Ezbet Hamada's Festival; Placemaking

One of the essential nonprofit consequences of Ezbet Hamada's festival is its placemaking. The tangible and intangible traces of its festivals create opportunities for constructing place identity and a sense of place. Placemaking in Ezbet Hamada was a direct consequence of its seasonal festivals, mural art and territoriality. Wall writing constituted the place's linguistic landscape, and graffiti constituted its graphic ideology.

An interesting intangible element of placemaking in Ezbet Hamada is created by the female residents. Young ladies from Ezbet Hamada collaborated on the festival's various activities, including organising the event, preparing for it and guiding female guests. As it is customary in countless Cairene popular urban areas, where older women are mostly housewives, they contribute to food preparation. Days before the festival, their everyday creativity attracted female collaboration from outside the place. Because women's everyday creativity can craft the place with intangible traces, as Platt (2019) argued, the female residents' creativity extended beyond food preparation to include collaboration in the placemaking process. It seems that such creativity was what invited the German ambassador to Egypt to join. Probably, it was not the act of food preparation *per se* that attracted her, but the place experience that mattered. In modern times, we might need a theoretical understanding of placemaking (Ellery et al., 2020). One wonders if Ezbet Hamada's residents had such an understanding? Probably not; it does not seem that the residents in the bottom-up placemaking acquired a theoretical understanding. Formal and informal areas in Cairo were playgrounds for bottom-up placemaking. Individual interventions were imposed in both housing types. However, they were imposed by distinctive economic aspects. While placemaking in Heliopolis, Cairo, as a formal area, was driven by the residents' financial power and individual requirements (Saad, 2022), placemaking in Ezbet Hamada involved collective, cooperative efforts. Trees, shrubs, luxury tiles, and flower boxes in Heliopolis are replaced in Ezbet Hamada with mural art and festival activities. In countless cases in Heliopolis, placemaking involved imposing control over the public space by reserving locations for private cars' parking (Saad, 2022), while in Ezbet Hamada, it involved social collectivity. Even after the festival, parking places

were rarely reserved for private use. The bottom-up process of Ezbet Hamad's placemaking created a place of matter and uniqueness. It answers Gatersleben et al.'s (Gatersleben et al., 2020) question of 'why places are so special'. Within the trend of authority creating placelessness through financial excuses, Ezbet Hamada proved that bottom-up placemaking can confront 'place-less power' (Hambleton, n.d.).

Spolsky (2020) argued that the most significant traces expected in symbolic expression are naming, the placement of linguistic elements, and graphic ideology. Using the slogan of 'Ramadan in Mataria' instead of 'Ramadan in Ezbet Hamada' is controversial. Naming the festival after the district, Mataria, rather than the place, might be an attempt to gain wider recognition and minimise competition. In contrast, it removes the place name from the memory. Ezbet Hamada's graphic ideology and signs of celebration and commemoration were significantly placed to create traces of symbolic expression. It did not target capitalist objectives, authoritarian narratives, or intellectuals' approach.

Ezbet Hamad's placemaking showed no attempt to improve the urban structure. It was primarily focused on creating a visual identity. Except for the *Iftar* event, the remaining placemaking is the mural art. Mural art contributions to placemaking in Ezbet Hamada reflect the residents' power over the place. Ezbet Hamada proved that poverty is no excuse for placelessness. Nevertheless, such an argument exposes the authorities' conflict with the community's attempt to enhance the place's power (Hambleton, 2021). Generally, the public's attempts to gain control of the place are consistently labelled by the Egyptian authorities as out of order and vandalism. This explains the state media's disregard for the festival. However, considering Ezbet Hamada's mural art a form of vandalism is inaccurate, as it exposes a conflict over the rights to place (Agrawal, 2022), memory, and cognition (Aletto, 2024; da Silva, 2023; Till, 2012; Wood, 2013). This is because individuals claiming the place disempower the city's authorities (Saad, 2021). If wall writing, graffiti, or street art introduces the bottom-up branding and marketing process for the place (Balirano et al., 2018), it also introduces the citizens' right to urban memory.

### 7.3. Consequence of Ezbet Hamada's Festival; Stories and Right to Memory

Stories about the festival, food preparation and mural art are delivered orally and through social media. Stories are reversal for circulating knowledge and experience (E2Praxis, 2022), because they bridge time and place and foster cognitive justice (Ortiz, 2022: p. 2). As storytelling is a breeding ground for public memory (Saad, 2024), it is an ideology of memory co-creation based on a learning alliance. Ezbet Hamada's stories transformed the festival from a local to a global event. Its stories had the power to attract celebrities and dignitaries. Although food was served during the festival, it left a lasting impression on residents and guests. This introduced the meals as stories to be told by individuals, similar to the stories the

walls tell all year long. Nonetheless, oral stories may be subject to natural forgetting, while wall stories endure to carry memories for decades.

Mural art in Ezbet Hamada collides with the official policy of forgetting. The official policy imposes the act of forgetting particular issues, such as the Palestinian suffering. It directs the collective memory to a “that-not-our-business” narrative. Introducing Ezbet Hamada’s community solidarity with Palestine, reflecting the community’s willingness to remember what is dictated to be forgotten. This is clearly evident in the memorial landscape, where residents introduce specific designs of graffiti and wall writing. Ezbet Hamada’s memorial landscape is a form of place power, practised to disregard the authorities’ attempts to disarm the community from its “right to memory”, as [Spencer et al. \(2020\)](#) explained.

## 8. Conclusion

In contrast to ordinary official festivals in the Western Hemisphere, Ezbet Hamada’s festival introduces symbols that contradict, or at least do not align with, official political narratives. The festival introduced a shift in ideology from “We serve food for those in need” to “We are providing it with style”. This encourages those with means to enjoy the playground. Turning Ezbet Hamada into a playground for seasonal gatherings and focusing on a particular religious theme, Ramadan, attracted thousands in 2026. Despite Ezbet Hamada including ethnic, religious, and gender groups within the playground, it excluded older citizens with health problems from enjoying the food; this exclusion was probably related to the intellectual determinants that lead ordinary people in Egypt to pay little attention to nutrition facts. Marketing Ezbet Hamada’s experience was emphasised through slogans and graffiti. The organising committee’s policy has transformed the festivals from local to global levels.

Mural art in Ezbet Hamada features wall writings and graffiti celebrating Ramadan, capturing attention and creating a sense of place. The festival’s history was documented, lost loved ones were commemorated, and solidarity with Palestine was emphasised. Warm colours were widely used in Ezbet Hamada, creating a cheerful atmosphere for the festival and for the attendees’ psycho-sensory mood and feelings of celebration. The white background successfully drew attention to the wall writing and graffiti. It also helped in elevating the building’s architectural quality. The painted Landscape of Ezbet Hamada stands out for its deliberate use of warm colours, which make its identity unmistakable. However, there are cases in which colour is unnoticeable or cold. The painting materials and colour saturation were probably affected by time, environment and financial constraints. The financial constraints also imposed a partial painting of the ground floors in Ezbet Hamada, taking advantage of the lighting features and hanging decorations to minimise the visual perception of the upper floors. Ezbet Hamada’s mural art went beyond urban identity to territoriality. It created an urban territorial boundary for the place and introduced various territories within it. Ezbet Hamada’s residents succeeded in creating a unique place identity and sense of place.

Despite the event taking place once a year, it leaves its mark, serving as a testament to public power in placemaking. Walls, entrances, gates, shops, and balconies became memory carriers of the place's spirit. Traces of Ezbet Hamad's festivals remain through mural art and storytelling.

## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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