

Acupuncturing Luxor: Reinventing the Open Museum Concept

Adham Abulnour

Abstract During the first decade of the new millennium, the attempt to transform the city of Luxor in Egypt into an open museum resulted in a number of undesirable outcomes. A major reason for these outcomes is the lack of knowledge regarding the differences between the ‘open museum’ concept on one hand and providing open air/outdoor areas for sightseeing on the other. This lack of knowledge was exacerbated by a failure to recognise the need to maintain harmony between the locals, the built environment and the heritage sites in Luxor. The adopted ‘open museum’ scenario did not consider that a visitor’s experience of Luxor should include the local and vernacular cultures along with the magnificent landscapes that are as old and majestic as registered monuments.

The flawed plan led to an urban fabric that is segregated into two halves. Moreover, the plan resulted in heritage sites that, despite being very rich in cultural significance, tend to offer poor learning and sensory experiences for short durations of stay in the city.

This paper endeavors to counteract the flaws in the open museum project by ‘acupuncturing’ the city’s urban fabric. The idea is to identify spaces of ‘energy’ and then carefully propose a development program for these spaces in order to eliminate the negative effects of the flawed open museum plan. The logic behind the idea of acupuncturing certain spaces in Luxor (as a solution for the entire city) is that we have actually seen the ‘horrors’ that can result from mega scale developments so it might be useful to try developments on a much smaller (micro) scale. This new plan would enrich the experience of both locals and tourists in Luxor while offering an entirely new perspective for reinventing this magnificent city into

A. Abulnour (✉)

Architecture Department, Arab Academy for Science & Technology, Alexandria, Egypt
e-mail: adhamabulnour.devco@gmail.com

an open museum. The proposal identifies new attractions and integrates them into a comprehensive experience of the city, while providing for prolonged durations of stay and promising higher revenues for the local economy.

1 Introduction

Since the late 1990s and early 2000s, the governorate of Luxor in Egypt has been preparing for a massive project to transform the city into an open museum (Abraham, Bakr, & Lane, 1999). During the first decade of the new millennium, funds were allocated and contractors were hired to remove encroaching infringements on the Avenue of Sphinxes (a ceremonial road 76 m approximately in width and 3 km in length with statues of Sphinxes rhythmically arranged along its side). The entirety of the Avenue was excavated to reconnect the ancient axis between the Karnak and the temple of Luxor, both located on the eastern bank of the Nile (Fig. 1).

Another axis, extending between the Karnak and the temple of Hatshepsut (on the western bank of the Nile) was also to be renovated as an integral part of the city's development project (Aghabi et al., 1999). According to an antiquities map, ancient Egyptians dug a canal along this axis and created a harbor on the eastern bank of the Nile to gain access to the west bank at a position that faces Hatshepsut's temple (Shetawy & Dief-Allah, 2006). The development project took this historical fact into consideration and conducted further excavations in the space extending between the Karnak and the Nile to uncover more of the Karnak's archaeological story, in particular the ancient harbour and canal that once connected the temple to the Nile.

The project also necessitated removing the bazaars scattered in the Karnak's vicinity. The vacated area was transformed into a one-storey commercial zone (which is now commonly known as the Bazaar) with a vast parking area (Fig. 1). A visitors' center was also established in the plaza to provide visitors with information about the history of Karnak (El-Aref, 2008).

Despite its noble intentions, the project (which came to conclusion in 2011) left relevant parties (locals, visitors, decision makers and scholars) with a number of undesirable outcomes:

- **A fabric segmented into two**

With a length of 3 km and an average depth of 4 m below the street level, the decision to excavate the entirety of the Avenue resulted in a trench-like axis that runs along the city from north to south while splitting its urban fabric into two longitudinal segments. Only three points of pedestrian crossways (stairways) are located along the Avenue's length (Fig. 1). Each time a pedestrian wishes to cross the segmented city, he/she has to ascend and descend a combined height of 8 m (almost three floors) with no special provisions for the elderly or the handicapped.



Fig. 1 The two development axes chosen for the open museum project in Luxor. The excavated avenue of Sphixes (first axis) and the Karnak Plaza (second axis) after conducting the project

- **An evident lack of services**

With the encroaching infringements removed, the residual urban fabric around the Avenue is mainly residential. The project has clearly neglected to include urban regeneration and tourist-centred venues as well as properly-equipped heritage conservation and restoration facilities. These facilities should have been established to allow for proper restoration of the salvaged Sphinxes statues. Without consideration for the principles of visitor management, along the entire length of the Avenue there is no provision of an information center, greenery, shaded areas, multi-lingual signage systems, local refreshment facilities, pedestrian safety features or other tourist services.

- **A fragmented picture of the city**

The ideal open museum should endeavor to integrate cultural, traditional and natural environments into one coherent experience. The identity and interests of local communities should be expressed through the open museum concept as much as monuments are publicized (Rentzhog, 2007).

Luxor, however, fails to encompass this ideal. Tours in the city are typically confined to visiting (or more precisely: sightseeing) monuments. In consequence, these monuments—despite being culturally significant beyond academic evaluation—are perceived as ‘bits and pieces’ of a fragmented picture of the city instead of being appreciated as an integral part of a comprehensive experience. This flawed picture is consistent with the notion that ‘monuments-based’ tourism is typically the sole factor in shaping touristic development agendas in Egypt. The fact that most donor investments in Luxor were channeled to upgrade individual monuments substantiates this notion. Few investments were made to upgrade the residual fabric of Luxor local communities.

In addition, one of the objectives of Luxor’s development project was to reconnect the east and west banks of the Nile by re-digging the ancient canal (which was located along the central axis of what is now the Karnak plaza). This goal could not be executed because the Corniche street (a vehicular route running along the Nile’s length from north to south) separates the plaza from the Nile. The final result of the failed attempt was a ‘barren’ open plaza with very poor furniture and landscape elements. More recently, a number of restaurants and commercial facilities were added to the plaza, specifically on both its sides, which only served to accentuate its ‘isolation’ and failed to encourage pedestrians to exit the Karnak to walk to the Corniche street and enjoy the views of Theban hills and the western bank of the Nile. Visitors are deprived of an excellent opportunity to view Luxor’s west bank, an integral part of the city’s image, while still standing on the east bank. The lack of an attraction to encourage people to walk along the axis of the plaza and reach the Nile is exacerbated by the lack of shading devices.

- **A silent tour—No storytelling**

In the ‘monuments-based’ tours of Luxor, no effort is made to colour the visitors’ tours with historical storytelling, which would at least provide a comprehensive experience of the monuments. For example, after excavating almost the entirety of the Avenue, no serious efforts or preparations were made to revive the ancient Opet ceremonial progression that used to start from the Karnak and proceed along the Avenue of Sphinxes up to the temple of Luxor as a part of the spring festivals in Ancient Egypt.

And even if such efforts or preparations were made, one cannot ask a visitor to walk a 3 km distance under the scorching sun with no shading devices (temperatures can surge up to 42°C in Luxor during the summer).

- **Minimal durations of stay for a location so rich in historical, cultural, natural and vernacular attractions**

The absence of services, tourists’ activities and storytelling in Luxor discourages long stays in the city. Undesirable outcomes include minimized benefits to the local economy and less flexibility to reschedule touristic visits. These shortcomings are made worse by the decisions makers’ failure to perceive Luxor beyond being a one-dimensional product (i.e. offering monuments-based tours). The limited offering of activities, cultural events and performances as well as the failure to enrich the visitors’ experience with a diversity of attractions (varying between the natural, cultural and vernacular) typically limit the duration of stay in Luxor to 3 days with the following itinerary (Fig. 2):

1. 1st day tour (To west bank): Excursion to the Necropolis of Thebes to visit the tombs of various Dynasties and the temple of Hatshepsut. On the return journey, stop at the Colossi of Memnon which are two gigantic sitting statues representing Amenopsis III facing the Nile.
2. 2nd day tour (East Bank: Karnak and Luxor temples): Excursion to the temple of Luxor to visit its courtyard and the granite statues of Ramses the Great. Proceed by carriage or bus to visit the complex of Karnak temples.
3. 3rd day tour: Shopping activities in the morning and visiting the Karnak temple by night to watch the ‘sound and light’ show (Touregypt, 2017)

This itinerary reveals how the current touristic scenario in the city is limited to sightseeing activities without any real opportunity to experience the local urban context, the traditional lifestyle of the city or, at the very least, the historical significance of the visited monuments. This is truly a great opportunity lost because Luxor is more than a repertoire of monuments; Luxor is rich with its people, local culture and traditions, activities, natural landscape elements, agricultural lands and vernacular living style. Luxor is also characterized by the aesthetic tension between the desert and agricultural land, which has been present since the early days of Thebes.

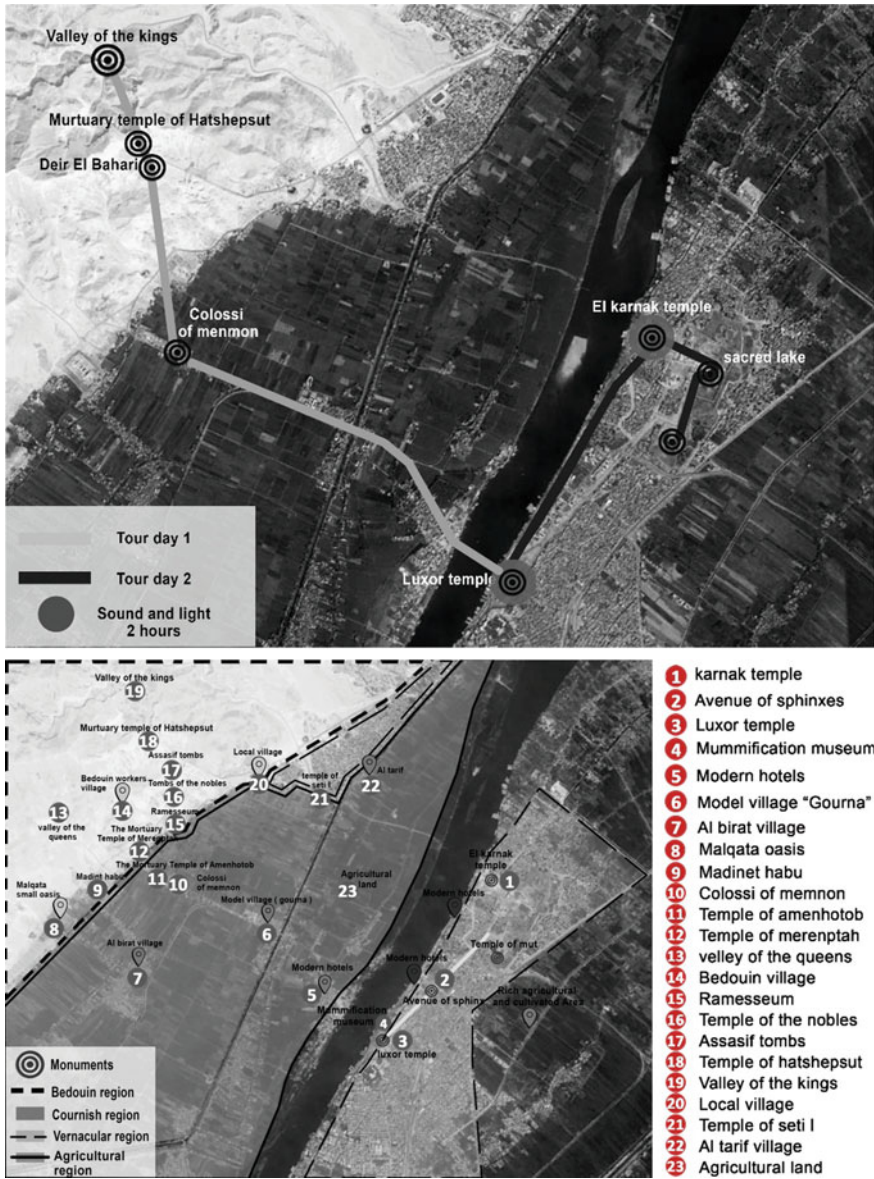


Fig. 2 Above: the typical 'monuments-based' tour in Luxor (3 days). Under: the expanded repertoire of monumental, traditional, vernacular and natural attractions in the city

2 Statement of Problem and Logic of the Solution

The open museum vision adopted for Luxor was based on eradicating infringements, relocating residents, constructing massive housing settlements for those relocated, excavating routes and rerouting paths. Meanwhile, Luxor's urban context (spaces and buildings) was dealt with on the grand scale of urban planning rather than the more intimate scale of urban design.

The failure to understand that a city such as Luxor should provide users (visitors and locals) with a comprehensive experience (instead of a fragmented mental image of an incohesive and segregated fabric) led the Avenue of Sphinxes to be excavated and developed through the logic of a 'highway'. The Avenue should have instead been developed as a datum for connecting the entirety of the city with services and shaded areas on both its sides. Adopting a similar logic, the space in front of the Karnak temple was transformed into a 'barren' plaza with minimal services, attractions and shading devices instead of being developed as a space for socio-cultural, educational/entertainment (edutainment) and commercial activities. This strong inclination towards macro-scale developments is arguably a major reason behind the flawed attempt to redevelop Luxor. The direct outcome was transforming the city into a series of outdoor (open-air) touristic sites that fail to offer the rich and comprehensive experience that should have been offered through a successful open museum vision.

To this end, this paper endeavors to enhance the limited visitors' experience of Luxor by adding new attractions and aiming for larger numbers of tourists. Providing a more comprehensive experience (one that is diversified between the vernacular, Bedouin, agricultural, natural and monumental) should appeal to a wider sector of tourists (Mckercher, 2002). The goal is to encourage the individual visitor to visit Luxor frequently over the years while combating the frustration associated with incomplete sensorial and intellectual experiences. Visitors can enhance the thrill of experiencing (and not merely sightseeing) magnificent monumental sites by gaining a true picture of Luxor, Ancient Egypt and the people who live and have lived there. This picture should be framed in a manner that encourages visitors to stay longer in Luxor while providing the locals with economic opportunities through tourism-related jobs.

3 Discussion of Procedure

The challenge which faces a comprehensive open museum experience in Luxor is how to comprehend and build on the relationship between the attraction sites (monumental, vernacular, etc.) and the overall urban context.

A logical starting point for facing this challenge is to refocus the scale of development from urban planning to urban design. This change entails developing

the diversity of attraction sites to impart visitors with a 'sense of pace' through which they can understand and interact with the entire urban context.

The shift from the macro to the micro, though logical, evokes further challenges: How can urban spaces be developed on the micro scale in a manner that provides solutions on the macro scale? How can this shift be performed while maintaining an eye on the 'bigger picture' of the city? What spaces are eligible for this tremendous responsibility? And, challenged by a suffering economy, which of these spaces deserve the limited funds allocated for development?

A logical solution presents itself in the concept of urban acupuncture. This concept draws inspirations from the traditional Chinese medicinal practices and amalgamates them with modern urban design trends such as New Urbanism and Placemaking (Cerviere, 2015). Urban acupuncture would apply small-scale interventions to specific constituents of Luxor's urban context (micro scale developments) as the key to 'healing' and improving the city's tourist industry and transforming the larger urban context into a comprehensive experience (macro-scale developments).

The specific locations for applying the interventions are best selected after analyzing and critiquing aggregate urban design factors. A typically influential factor is identifying spaces of 'energy' that are, or have the potential to be, centers of attraction for both visitors and locals while encouraging socio-cultural interaction and hosting edutainment activities (ibid).

Investigating the possibility of acupuncture in Luxor necessitates a more thorough examination of the city's monumental, vernacular, traditional, local and natural repertoire. The map illustrated in Figure (2) illustrates an augmented list of highly potential centers of attraction.

A prime space of 'energy' is the Karnak plaza. This plaza is adjacent to one of the most prized monuments of the ancient world. In comparison to Luxor temple's plaza, the underdeveloped Karnak plaza is still open for design suggestions that can revive the ancient link between the temple, the Nile and the west bank.

Acupuncture the Karnak plaza will also enhance its role as a starting point for a revival of the Opet festival. However, the substantial length of the Avenue of Sphinxes (almost 3 km) might discourage Opet festival walks under the scorching sun, especially in absence of shading devices. For this reason, the Avenue, with its potential for storytelling and magnificent statues, is a priority 'energy' space that merits acupuncture. The goal would be to create an enhanced walking experience through a network of open spaces and parks for recreation along the Avenue. These spaces and parks would contain a mix of public facilities, edutainment activities and local commercial venues that are strategically positioned on different platforms covering the level difference between the street and Avenue (almost 4 m).

The goal of these platforms is to remove the sharp transition between the Avenue and street while diminishing the trench-like feel of the former. Once the Avenue is transformed into a corridor for shows and events, the Opet festival can be revived through appropriate landscape design, increased shading devices and improved local bazaars that would prevent the the 3 km walk from being either boring nor exhausting.

Other priority locations for acupuncture in Luxor include agricultural lands, natural landscapes and traditional (vernacular) housing settlements, Bedouin villages and oases, especially those on the Nile's west bank. The goal would be to rediscover these local, traditional and natural attractions and position them strategically on the touristic map of Luxor.

4 Acupuncture the Karnak Plaza

The aim of acupuncture the Karnak plaza would be to transform the characterless and poorly-serviced space in front of the temple's entrance on the Nile side (Fig. 3: left) into an attraction site that can engage the mind and senses of visitors as a comprehensively rich experience. The project would pay the utmost attention to the 'sanctity' of the Karnak temple as one of the major monumental sites on the world stage.

The acupuncture of the plaza, as envisioned by this paper, takes place in three subzones (Fig. 3):

Zone A

The edutainment zone of the plaza should contain outdoor digital display systems to project the history and cultural stories of Luxor. The idea is to introduce technology as an appealing way of telling the story of Egyptian culture from architectural, technological and artistic points of view. The projected media should encourage people to support the preservation of antiquities.

Zone B

The middle zone is designated for temporary uses. The goal is to provide an open space for diverse cultural activities ranging from musical to folklore and stage performances.

Zone C

The third and last zone is reserved for commercial activities that should join the existing restaurants and Bazaar in providing job opportunities for the locals.

Approaching the Karnak from the Nile and Corniche side, users in Zone C are subjected to a sensorial experience (of merchandise and goods) that is both rich and diverse. As users continue to proceed towards the temple, the sensorial engagement decreases. This is evident in Zone B where the activities are more cultural than commercial. This means lowered noise levels and less visual distraction.

The design of Zone B should be based on a modular system (a distribution of columns, lighting fixtures, etc.) to facilitate the distribution of several time-limited activities happening simultaneously in the plaza. This shift from 'the commercial' to 'the cultural' between the two zones diversifies the users' experience and builds up anticipation as users get closer to the temple.

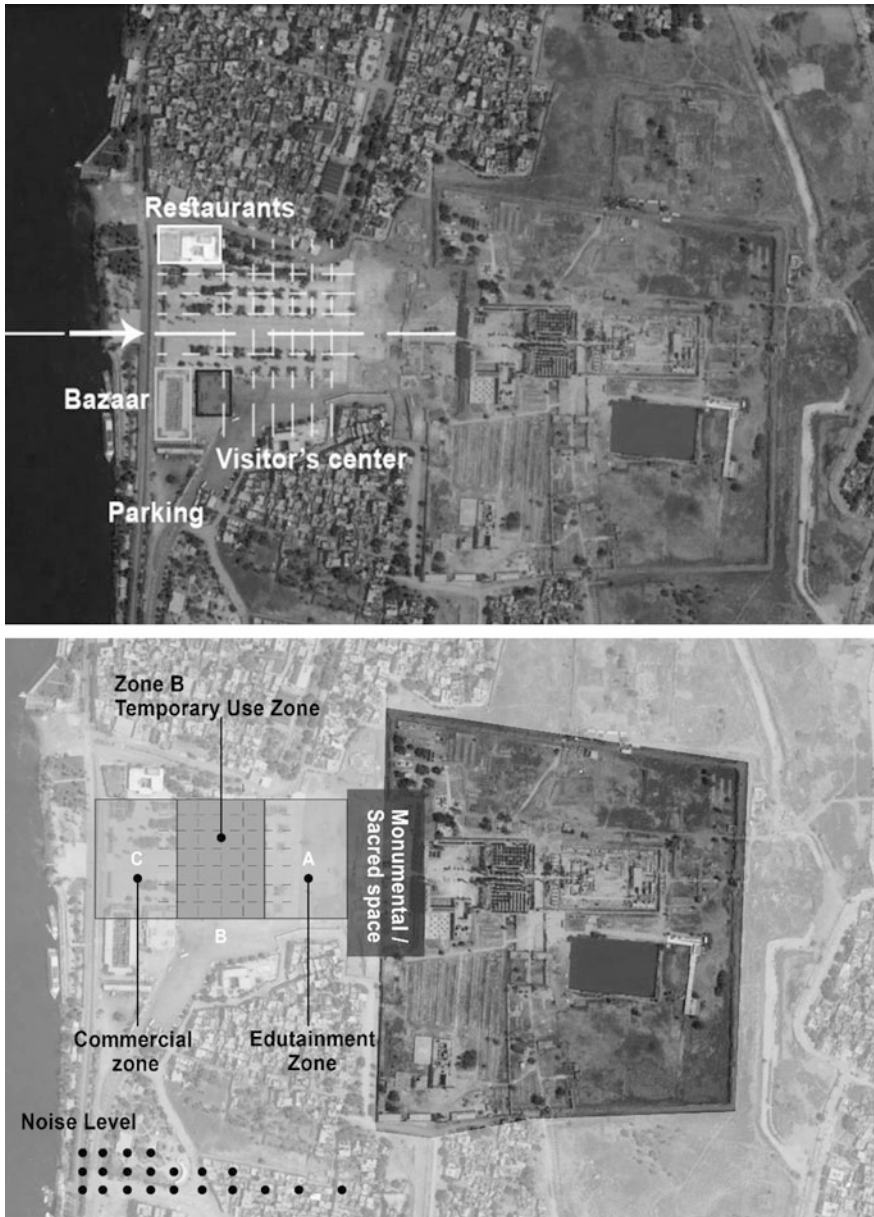


Fig. 3 The current design of the Karnak plaza. Under: Acupuncture the plaza in three subzones

Upon leaving Zone B and entering into Zone A, the sensorial distraction should start to decrease even more. Noises start to fade step-by-step as historical stories are told on the projection screens that constitute the foreground of the temple. A sense

of awe starts to accumulate and the anticipation builds up until the entrance gateway (pylon) of the temple is finally revealed.

The detailed design of the three zones should be an interesting task for urban designers and architects. A major design criterion is to allow these three subzones to flow seamlessly into one another without losing their individual character. Using soft landscape elements such as shrubs for fences can allow visual and physical continuity while subdividing the plaza into uniquely identifiable zones.

5 Acupuncture the Avenue of Sphinxes

In 2010, a team of researchers at the Politecnico di Milano, Italy prepared a project proposal for the conservation and restoration of the Avenue of Sphinxes (Folli, 2010). The team, which included the author of this paper, was headed by Maria Grazia Folli, Professor of Architectural Design at the School of Civil Architecture. The project proposal was developed according to the articles of a collaboration protocol (initiated and coordinated by the author in 2010) between the Politecnico di Milano and the Egyptian Supreme Council of Antiquities (SCA) headed by Dr. Zahi Hawass at the time.

The project presents itself as a valid acupuncture intervention that fits the aim of this paper while enhancing the length of the Avenue with various edutainment and socio-cultural activities (Fig. 4). The project strategically positions these different activities (tourists' information centre, digital displays, cafeterias, conservation and restoration facility, etc.) on several platforms that actively 'dissolve' the transition (levels difference) between the Avenue and street in order to 'rejoin' the segmented city for the sake of both visitors and locals (Fig. 4).

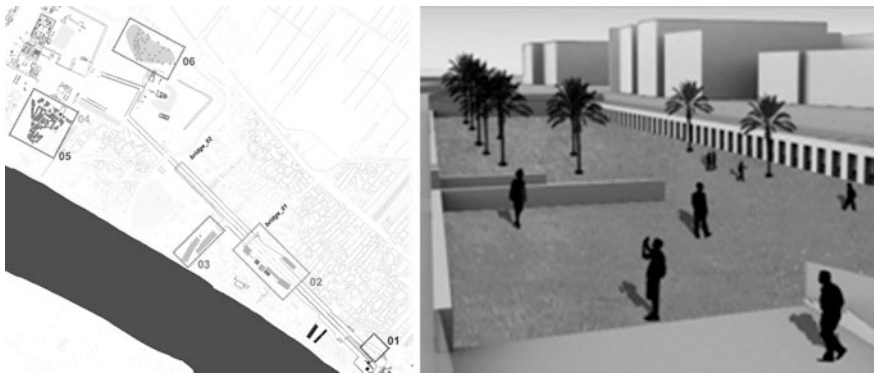


Fig. 4 Left: different locations for positioning attractions along the Avenue's length. Right: a 3D illustration of attraction zone (1) suggested in the vicinity of the temple of Luxor (Folli, 2010)



Fig. 5 Priority candidates for acupuncture as eco-lodges. Left: a photographic image of Al Birat village. Right: a photographic image of El Gournia village. *Source* <http://panoramio.com/photo/127202312>

6 Acupuncture the Natural and Vernacular Environment: Introducing the Eco-lodge Design Concept in Luxor

A major objective of this paper is to reveal the potential of the natural and vernacular environments in Luxor to yield spaces of ‘energy’.

A valid starting point is to search for possible locations that can be converted into eco-lodges. An eco-lodge pursues a vernacular or traditional accommodation style that promotes environmental friendliness (Mehta, Baez, & O’Loughlin, 2002).

In Luxor, oases as well as Bedouin and rural villages (Fig. 5) enjoy these characteristics while depending on simple yet efficient techniques for ‘energy’ production (burning pallets of animal feces and plants residues) in addition to being built with local materials (mud, straw, palm fronds, etc.). Converting vernacular and traditional settlements into modern day eco-lodges would lead to an expansion of the retail/commercial sector of the local (and, in turn, the national) economy while offering new venues for expanded tourist activities. Agricultural landscapes and desert lands flanking Luxor on both banks are also ideal targets for environmentally-friendly touristic eco-lodges that offer prime opportunities for interaction with nature.

7 Results

Acupuncture the proposed locations in Luxor entails applying conservation and restoration projects to historic sites and constructing new venues and facilities. The proposal also entails developing vernacular, Bedouin and rural villages as well as establishing new settlements on desert and agricultural lands. The final result should

be reinventing the open museum concept in Luxor while offering several modes of experiencing the city intellectually and sensorially. These modes can be realised as different tour scenarios, each with its own selection from an expanded repertoire of attractions.

Each tour scenario should be developed to be unique. An individual tourist would thus be encouraged to visit the city frequently over the years as each visit promises him/her a new experience. The goal of each tour is to encourage a longer stay in Luxor while offering a comprehensive experience of the city.

All tours are recommended to start on the east bank of the Nile specifically from the acupuncture Karnak plaza (in contrast to the typical touristic tour which starts by visiting the west bank antiquities). This is a logical decision because the Karnak plaza is the most important point of attraction in close proximity to the entry road from the airport to the city (for visitors arriving by plane) as well as the harbors on the eastern Nile bank (for visitors arriving via Nile cruise ships).

All tours are also recommended to include the acupuncture Avenue of Sphinxes and its new experience. The east bank portion of the tours should end by visiting the mummification museum and then the temple of Luxor.

These are evidently the most visited attractions on the east bank of Luxor. The paper takes this fact into consideration and aspires to offer a continually reinvented experience of the touristic axis: Karnak temple—Avenue of Sphinxes—the temple of Luxor. To this end, this axis would be acupuncture to introduce a diversity of temporary uses, events, storytelling scenarios and digital display systems (cultural, commercial and edutainment activities that, in essence, are continually varying/changeable along time).

Visitors would be staying in hotels in the Karnak vicinity while enjoying the experience of the plaza over a number of days. Each walk along the Avenue of Sphinxes should be a new experience that is enjoyed through various services, activities and landscape elements. Storytelling along the Avenue should make the visit to the temple of Luxor and mummification museum a repeatable experience. Repeat visits are especially likely when the plaza of the former is developed to host temporary uses/events and the management of the later starts organizing temporary exhibitions and technical workshops.

As visitors pass to the west bank of the Nile, the design starts to change as each touristic scenario now strives to cover a new set of attractions. The goal is to offer a continually changing 'taste' of the traditional and cultural life of Luxor during the west bank portion of the tour. This variation can be achieved by strategically positioning the eco-lodges in different locations on agricultural and desert lands. Users should be able to take in numerous novel perspectives of Luxor, all of which strive to be comprehensive while offering various selections from Luxor's cultural, vernacular, traditional and natural repertoires. Users will finally be able to experience Luxor as an open museum as they move between different Bedouin and agricultural villages while visiting different monuments. They can pass through the natural beauty of the Theban mountains and the fringes of the desert, then move across the Nile again to arrive to the start-end tour point: the Karnak temple plaza. Once acupuncture, Luxor can arguably offer extended durations of stay (a week

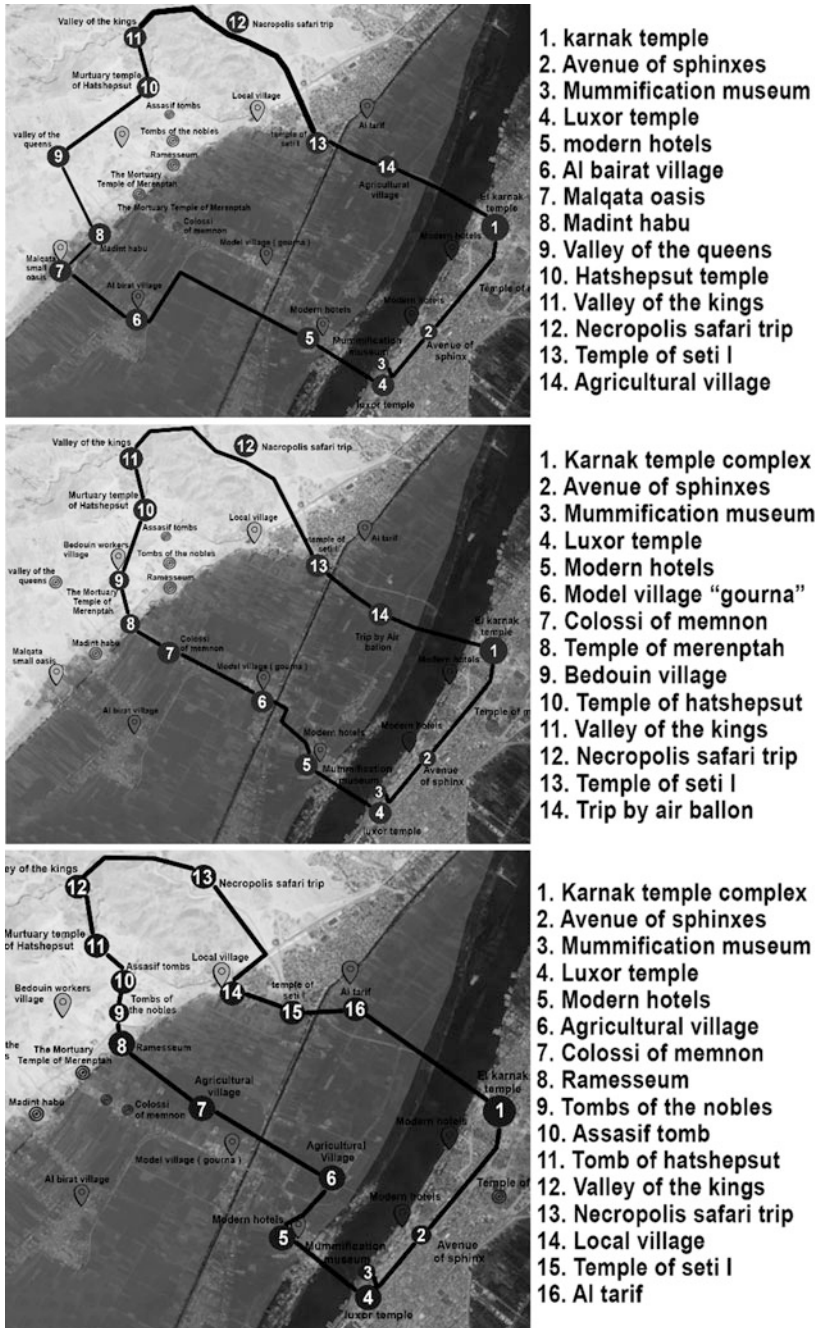


Fig. 6 The itinerary of three extended tours (achievable after acupuncturing the city)

per tour instead of the typical three days). The following figure is the suggested itinerary of three separate tours that are comprehensively rich and diverse (Fig. 6).

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