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# CAIRO RUNNERS

## Francesco Tonnarelli

Running seems irrelevant in urban terms: no one would consider it a serious substitute or a viable alternative to vehicular traffic. And in comparison to other urban sports practices (such as skateboarding and parkour) it lacks the critical and creative engagement.

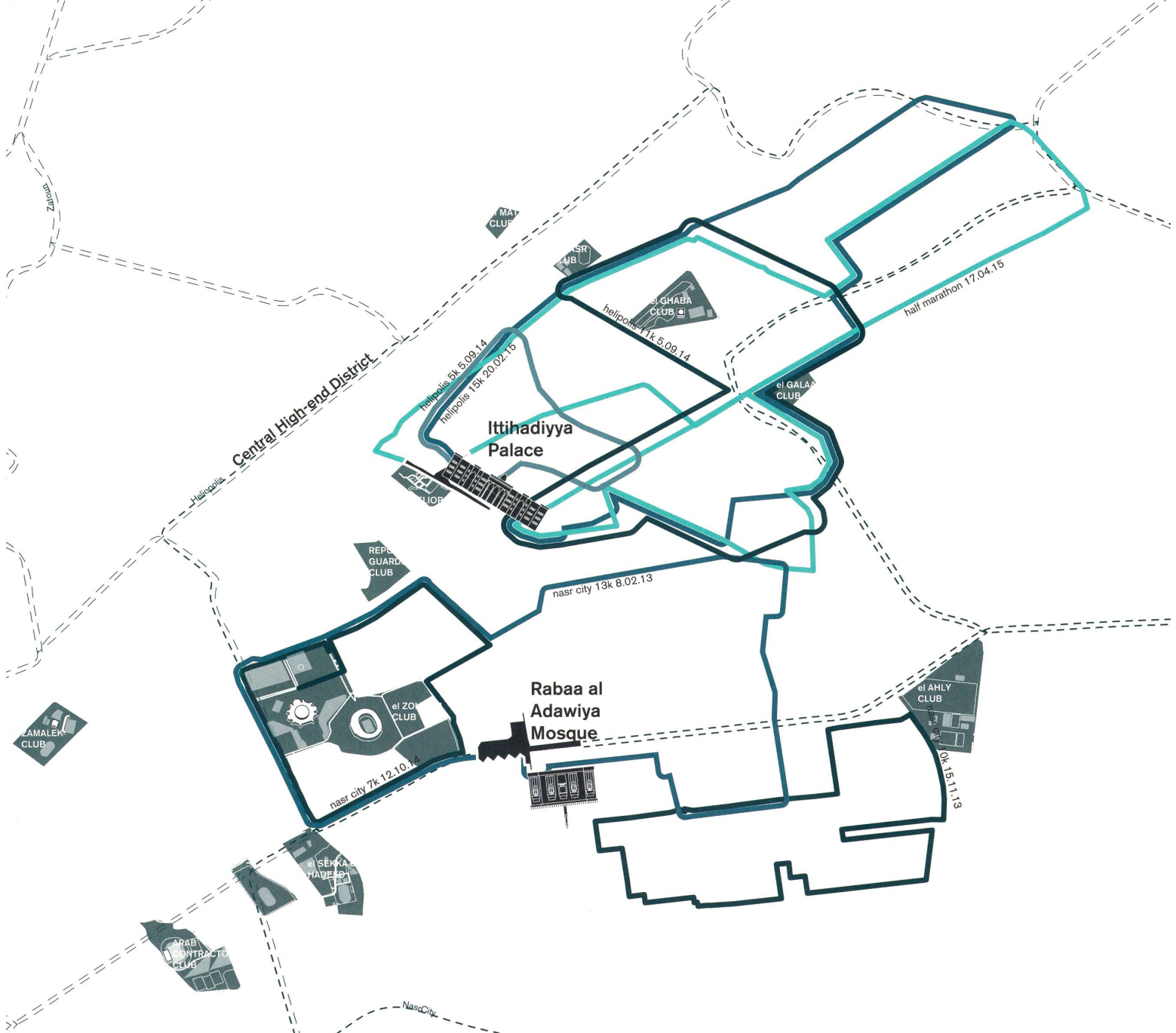
‘Cairo Runners’—one of the many initiatives born during the ‘glorious day’ of the Egyptian revolution—is an organization that arranges city runs throughout greater Cairo. Started in 2012, with sixty attendees, the average

number of runners has steadily increased and culminated with the recent half marathon in April 2015, with around 7000 registered. The series of runs take place every Friday morning, the traditional Muslim day of congregation, also to avoid the main traffic congestions and ensure a safer environment for the participants. Even if the organizers insist upon the rhetoric of fitness and health, it is quite clearly a critical attempt to affect the normal functions of the city and shape its urban landscape. They create a critical connective network and offer meet

ing spaces for critical reflection on the trajectories taken by the town, the consequent threats to the environment and possible solutions.

Soon after the political uprising that brought the military regime back to power in July 2013, Egypt’s government issued a law that banned any public gathering of more than 10 people without government approval. The right to public expression and free assembly, regarded as major conquest of the 2011 Arab Spring, is indeed seriously





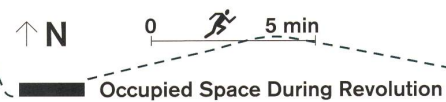
regulated. Cairo Runners has been able to organize events where other kinds of public gatherings are forbidden. The half marathon in April 2015 went through the streets surrounding the presidential palace. In February 2015 a path was even passing in front of Cairo University, and crossing Qasr al Nil Bridge, between Tahrir Square and Zamalek (this doesn't mean that the group has been completely indifferent to restriction). Running shoes and shorts become simple means to create a critical connective network without challenging the government.

The most attended runs are the ones taking places in central Cairo, between the districts of Downtown, on the east bank of the Nile, Doqqi on the west bank and the island of Zamalek. These districts are regarded as ones that share the highest standards in

terms of quality of life. If we look at the trend in the city centre of Cairo, though, only 15% of the open space is accessible. The largest part is occupied by private investors and governmental institutions that limit access to the properties; they are either inaccessible or require an entrance fee. During the British protectorate (1882-1954) sport clubs were introduced as tightly structured association, strictly exclusive and, in many ways, exclusionary: as colonial institutions, they served as powerful political symbol.

The island of Zamalek is an example of this. Approximately half of its surface is occupied by sporting clubs (Cairo Sporting Club and Gezira Sporting Club, the first and most important in Egypt) and elitist public buildings (for example the opera house). The

other half is a high-end residential neighbourhood, which has indeed a highly pedestrian friendly character in its inner streets, but remains still not enjoyable by the majority of the Cairenes. Zamalek consciously ignores the surrounding city. The runners inject onto the island a tempo that it doesn't want to know, fostering the consciousness of a change needed.



*Francesco Tonnavelli, born 1988, is an Italian architect and currently enrolled in the MAS Urban Design at the ETH Zurich.*