

The World Humanities Report

Case Study: Studio Urban

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Case Study: Studio Urban

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Studio Urban (formerly The Urban Episode) is a research studio founded in 2017 in Khartoum, Sudan, that documents, analyzes, and curates a people's history of the city, its culture, and its residents.¹ They experiment with artistic, audio, and visual means to render typically technical and jargon-heavy investigations more accessible. In addition to making their work visually and intellectually exciting for nonexperts, they note the importance of social media for wider reach and engagement. In correspondence with the World Humanities Report team, they told us,

Studio Urban is an experimental practice with an exploration lens that conducts research, maps out different phenomena, and experiments with the use of different technologies, art, visual and audio mediums as a tool to communicate knowledge to a bigger audience.

We try to shed a new light on known narratives and bring in new perspectives through critical discussions and documentation. The studio now has a core team that consist of architects, researchers, designers, artists, and archivists but also collaborates with a diverse group of specialists and creatives in their media productions and research projects.²

The history of Studio Urban goes back to 2014, when the founder, Zainab Gaafar, started a project to document interesting unknown or abandoned buildings around Khartoum. In 2016 the project became Urban Explorers Khartoum, an initiative that organized city walks, asked questions regarding visual identity and inclusion, and produced maps and tips to navigate the city. After it was apparent that more was there to be learned, the initiative grew to become a multidisciplinary research studio 2017. Architect Gaafar describes herself as a storyteller and modern-day explorer, “not a photographer, nor an artist, just a moment collector.”³ This can be understood from the kind of work available on

¹ See <https://web.facebook.com/studiourbands/>.

² Studio Urban (The Urban Episode at the time the survey was disseminated), responses to the Humanities Initiative online survey by the Arab Council for the Social Sciences / World Humanities Report, 2020.

³ Zainab .O .M Gaafar (@zainab_gaafar), Instagram profile bio, https://www.instagram.com/zainab_gaafar/.

their website, where one of Gaafar’s posts is a collection of moments in Sudanese history and contemporary society, reflected in book covers on fashion, consumerism, and architecture, among other topics. The audiovisual materials contribute to the meanings of the text. Finally, their approach to storytelling, freed of disciplinary criteria, arguably does more justice to the incoherence of living cities than do the confining styles dominating traditional academic publishing.

Emphasizing the form and content of knowledge productions, Studio Urban marshals multiple genres and media to tell their stories. “Omdurman through the Times,” for example, is an essay on the history of Omdurman, its residents, and its regional importance as a stop for pilgrims on their way to Mecca. They place these narratives in the context of other aspects of social life by sharing photographs of areas such as the market, demographic trends, and the effects of conflict on its residents.⁴ The text is accompanied by a podcast, a song, archival images, and maps. Studio Urban’s appreciation of the importance of visibility is not just reflected in the medium of their work (maps, which are visual texts) but also how they carry out their work and disseminate their research. For example, they use social media to ensure that their maps reach a wide audience. This is part of their effort to make information accessible, having faced several obstacles in accessing material historically and contemporarily. As they indicate in a video,⁵ part of the rationale behind their project is an absence of maps in public spaces. However, this raises an interesting question: Does the virtual space of social media mirror the physical space of the public sphere?

In their attention to visual culture and the power of what is visible and tangible to shape people’s experiences, one of Studio Urban’s central aims is to counter the paucity of maps in public spaces. The maps that do exist are often housed in foreign archives, made to serve the purposes of foreign interests and colonizers. Such maps represent the “extension to British colonialism in Sudan,” they explain. Esmat Elhalaby notes that histories, whether transnational, local, or global, “often rest exclusively on . . . archives of empire.”⁶ Sudanese people are not only blocked from accessing documents captured by foreign archives but likewise face bureaucratic and political obstacles incurred by locally run institutions. The accessibility of historical knowledge, produced and guarded by

⁴ “Omdurman through the Times,” Goethe Institut: Sudan Moves, accessed February 6, 2021, <https://artxdialogue.org/omdurman-through-the-times/>.

⁵ Goethe Institut Sudan, “Map | Contested Object,” December 11, 2020, video, 5:25, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E30oVThEu8c>.

⁶ Esmat Elhalaby, *Arab Archives and Asian Histories* (World Humanities Report, CHCI, 2023), 6.

powerful institutions, is an issue commonly faced by people under colonial rule as well as those braving decolonization.

Studio Urban attends to the way maps, along with the contexts in which they are made and archived, shape how people read and understand history, their identity, and place in that history. Maps, they argue, are power-laden visual narratives that prefigure people's imaginaries of the city as well as peoples' self-understanding.⁷ When residents are blocked from understanding the knowledge produced and used by foreign powers, they are arguably alienated from their own histories, unable to trace how certain events, ways of being, and practices came to be understood or were mobilized on their behalf, often to their detriment.

As they try to make sense of their collections, Studio Urban has turned to unofficial resources and pools of knowledge. In some cases, they use social media to crowdsource the information necessary to understand their collections. For example, in an effort to explain the Russian-language notations on a map of Khartoum Province, created by the Soviet Union in 1971, they turned to their Instagram followers for help. The caption of the post, published on November 10, 2020, reads:

Through this map we would like to raise questions regarding the authorship of our history and the foreign interests in our country that go simultaneously with the local political climate at the time. If you have more information, maybe even know how to read Russian please let us know.⁸

The issue of authorship is important, and through this post we can see how the map is both an archival snapshot of a historical moment and a visual representation of that moment. However, the author of the map is not an inhabitant of the area it represents but a representative of a foreign power writing in a different language.

Ultimately, Studio Urban presents research on the city and incorporates visual, artistic, and audio outputs to further the dissemination of such research. They raise interesting questions about the relationship between text and image, language and authorship, archives and history, and how the urban space is affected by the state and its policies. Through a critical analysis of maps, Studio Urban provides historical insights and lends nuance to the seemingly straight-

⁷ Goethe Institut Sudan, "Map | Contested Object."

⁸ The Urban Episode (the_urban_episode), "Omdurman 1971, Khartoum Province, produced by The Soviet Union (Moscow)," Instagram, November 10, 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CHZqDzlnUpD/>.

forward practice of cartography with stories of people, politics, displacement, migration, and the effects of colonialism and consequent political changes and upheavals. By taking the maps out of their institutional shrines, Studio Urban is one step closer to giving people the right to the city. Providing this information in Arabic is yet another means of democratizing the use of maps and challenging (foreign) authorship of Sudan's history.

Hana Shaltout graduated from the American University in Cairo in 2014 with a BA from the Political Science Honours Programme with a specialization in international relations. She completed her MSc in gender, media, and culture at the London School of Economics in 2015. After being a researcher at the Arab Council for Social Sciences working on the World Humanities Report, she is currently doing her PhD in cultural studies at the University of Sussex, on feminist activism in Egypt post-2011. Her research interests include alternative knowledge production, gender studies, cultural studies, and women's participation in the political arena.