**Fouad Street: The oldest planned, still inhabited street in the world**

**If you were to walk down Fouad Street in**[**Alexandria**](https://round-city.com/interview-hanaa-dahy-on-the-architects-responsibility-towards-sustainable-construction/)**, it might not immediately stand out. Although home to a number of cafes, restaurants, cinemas and apartment complexes, the city’s large thoroughfare blends into its surrounding environment, which hugs the Mediterranean Sea on the northern coast of**[**Egypt**](https://round-city.com/exploring-the-philosophy-of-one-of-egypts-most-admired-living-architects-dr-abdelhalim-ibrahim-abdelhalim/)**. With origins dating back to 331 BC, when it was known as Via Canopica (or the Canopic Road), Fouad Street launched the birth of Ptolemaic Alexandria, and is the world’s oldest planned street that’s still inhabited today – more than 23 centuries after it was first drawn in sand.**

**It was April of 331 BC when Greek architect and planner Dinocrates of Rhodes walked steadily toward the eastern side of the construction site of the new city, outlined in chalk and barley grains. His vision for the street was clear: it would traverse Alexandria longitudinally to be its main artery for movement and activity, starting from the east by the Sun Gate that leads to Canopus, a small, nearby city, and stretching to the Moon Gate, five kilometres to the west. The colonnaded street, he planned, would be five times wider than all the other streets in the city – more than a plethrum wide. This main road would divide the city into two main sections: a northern one, to host public and institutional facilities, and a southern one, dedicated to residential districts.**

**Dinocrates was committed to his scheme, which he believed would accomplish Alexander the Great’s aspirations of creating the ideal city, rising up with a Hippodamian network of streets, fortified walls and amazing buildings.**

**Today, the reasons behind Alexander the Great’s choice of this particular site for a new large capital are not clear. It’s also not clear if the orientation of the city was deliberate, or if Dinocrates really did manage a 30-metre-wide street, as asserted in classical resources (yet conflicting with Mahmud al-Falaki’s 1866 seminal study which concluded that the street was only 14 metres wide). What we do know, though, is that only a few decades after the start of its construction, Ptolemaic Alexandria became an exceptional Hellenistic megapolis, the capital of the world, with an unprecedented lighthouse (the Pharos) and unique institutions founded and sponsored by Ptolemy I Soter and his successors (332-30 BC).**

**In his 1996 book, *Alexandria in Late Antiquity: Topography and Social Conflict*, historian Christopher Haas provides a fascinating account of the social functions of Via Canopica throughout antiquity. Haas believed that the road served as an urban stage for the people of Alexandria’s most important religious rituals, whether pagan or Christian, and civic ceremonies, which ranged “from the great religious procession of Ptolemy II Philadelphus (285-47 BCE) …to military parades occurring during the Mamluk period (A.D. 1250-1517).” The street also witnessed another type of procession – that of the “outcasts and criminals” who were cursed by the public as part of their condemnation and punishment. The rich account of events and accidents provided by the book illustrates very well “the multifaceted nature of the Via Canopica’s social function throughout antiquity – at once a via sacra, a via triumphalis, and a via dolorosa.”**

**By the start of the 16th century, Alexandria suffered a long period of urban decline due to a series of successive natural disasters, diseases and neglect. It took the city three centuries to bring this enormous decline to a stop, and by the mid-19th century, the city began to witness an upswing of development again.**

**A drawing of a city

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**To understand this phase, we can refer to a 1998 report by the Alexandria Preservation Trust (APT), a privately funded entity founded by the Alexandria-based architect Mohamed Awad. In his report, Awad traces the street’s development throughout the second half of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century. The Rue de la Port Rosette, or simply Rue Rosette, was a successful revival of the ancient Canopic Way, a result of the city’s expansion towards the east thanks to the economic growth fostered by the policies of Viceroy Mohamed Ali and his successors.**

**During this phase, the street witnessed the construction of a number of notable public buildings, such as the Theatre Zizinia and the Graeco-Roman Museum, to name a few, but the dominant building typology was the “elitist residences” of families from foreign communities (that formed the cosmopolitan society of Alexandria at the time). Most of these were designed and constructed by Italian architects and contractors. The architecture of both public and private buildings was eclectic – basically Neo-Classical and Neo-Renaissance, in addition to the then-contemporary Art Nouveau and Art Deco styles. This was followed by another wave of elegant apartment blocks, also eclectic in style, right after the end of WWI, when the street was renamed Fouad I Street after the new sultan and king of**[**Egypt**](https://round-city.com/interview-egyptian-initiative-film-my-design-hopes-to-spread-awareness-of-regional-creative-landscape/)**. Later, in the 1940s and 50s, Art Deco and Early Modernist cinemas were introduced in addition to other entertainment facilities such as coffee houses and pastry shops.**

**Following the 1952 Revolution, Fouad I Street witnessed “a mass exodus” of the city’s foreign communities, as Awad calls it. The street itself was renamed once again to Gamal Abdel Nasser Street, which is still its official name. Most of the mentioned elitist residences were confiscated and reused as schools and other public facilities, as part of the Revolution’s nationalist movements, and then left without maintenance for decades.**

**Most of the street’s residential blocks were also victims of the 1960s rent control policies, where the owners of the buildings were not allowed to increase rents or terminate rental contracts during the lifetime of their tenants, and consequently, both parties became unwilling to maintain the buildings, which were left to decay. Furthermore, new building laws allowed higher building heights, which encouraged many owners and investors to demolish the historical buildings, substituting them with much higher, poorly designed blocks. The once dominant character of the street started to wane gradually.  
  
Aside from the persistent aspiration for demolition and rebuilding, an emerging segment of the private sector has recently shown a different kind of interest in the historical buildings of the street. Some of the buildings are increasingly being reconsidered as valuable assets once again, amid increasing speculations about upcoming legislative changes that might end the above-mentioned rent control, which would increase their monetary value significantly thereafter. Although this gives some hope towards safeguarding these important buildings, there are concerns about the gentrification side effects of such attitudes.**

**Despite being renamed, the residents of Alexandria still refer to the street as Fouad Street, which reflects how attached they are to the street’s heyday, apart from any political orientations. Regardless of any upcoming changes, Fouad Street will persist as the city’s greatest marker of its historical transformations.**