

**Workshop report on the project designed to conserve Damietta’s historical and cultural furniture industry heritage. The workshop was organized at the Furniture Technology Center in Damietta on Sunday, October 24, 2021.**

1. The workshop started at 10: 00 a.m. and was attended by members from the Egyptian and British sides, details of which are mentioned below:

**CEDARE**

1	Dr. Ahmed Abdel Rehim
2	Prof. Dr. Elham Mahmoud Ali
3	Eng. Youssef Emad
4	Dr. Catherine Ghali

**University of Salford, Manchester**

1	Prof. Dr. Hisham El-kadi
2	Dr. Gloria Lancy
3	Dr. Nourhan Hesham
4	Dr. Maria Yotani Yakovidez

**Lancaster University**

1	Prof. Dr. Stewart Walker
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2. Thirty-five participants attended the workshop, namely factory owners, workshop owners and artisans working in different fields of the furniture industry in Damietta (attached is a list of the names of the attendees and their respective profession/ craft).
3. In opening the workshop inaugural session, Eng. Youssef Emad introduced the platform’s guests, namely:

General Mohamed Hamam, Secretary-General of Damietta Governorate,

Prof. Dr.Hisham ElQadi, Dean of the Faculty of Architecture, University of Salford, Manchester, UK,

Eng. Amr Fathy, Executive Director of “Damietta Furniture City”, and

Dr. Ahmed Abdel Rehim, Regional Programme Manager, Knowledge Management and Environmental Assessment, CEDARE.

4. The first session started with Dr. Hisham El Qadi’s introductory speech about the project and its objectives, highlighting the effectiveness of society wisdom (the collective decision by many is more intelligent than a few experts’ decision) and means of building and developing society based on the following:
  - ➤ Gathering creative ideas

- ➤ exiting the habituation zone (the comfort zone)
- ➤ Collaboration on multiple levels

The purpose of the above is to open the door for modern ideas and new proposals in the field of industry to develop it and simulate the current market. Dr. El Qadi spoke about the use of both: the “Graphene” in reinforced concrete sections and manufactured wood as an alternative to natural wood (in some products). He emphasized that resilience, talent and technological intelligence constitute the success metrics for any industry.

In reply to a question by a factory owner about the project objectives and impact on the industry, Dr. El Qadi said, “the main target and ultimate goal of the project are to achieve the sustainability of the industry and ensure the conservation of the craft and skills of its workers. Other sub-goals have to be achieved, namely the following:

- ➤ Attaching special attention to the place (Damietta city/governorate)
- ➤ documenting the history of the industry and relevant crafts
- ➤ Interconnected relationships and partnerships between people (Users/beneficiaries)
- ➤ Product authentication
- ➤ maintaining the authenticity of the design and documenting it as an antiquity
- ➤ documenting the integrated network of the industry /various crafts
- ➤ providing means to protect unique practices and secure livelihoods for the people of Damietta
- ➤ establishing a classification for the industry workers (furniture makers)
- ➤ developing the capacities of the industry employees and raising awareness of cultural learning
- ➤ designating special training on the specifications and standards necessary to meet the needs of customers and consumers to facilitate product marketing.”

Dr. El Qadi emphasized that these goals may be achieved if the project succeeds - in cooperation with the concerned parties (Damietta Governorate)-in authenticating the Furniture Industry in Damietta and considering it part of the Egyptian "cultural heritage" in addition to registering it through the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

Dr. Ahmed Abdel Rehim took the floor where he highlighted means of conserving the cultural Furniture Industry Heritage in the city of Damietta at the local and global levels, noting that communication with UNESCO is considered a prelude towards marketing the products at the global level.

One of the attendees, Hajj Mohamed, took part in the discussion, mentioning that the Furniture Industry in Damietta, which is famous for its most skilful artisans and workers, houses a diversity of the simplest and most complex crafts. However, he noted that craftsmen

have to know the criteria and designs required by the European and Afro-Asian markets, as well as those about the Egyptian consumers who seek the most advanced designs. He also asserted that they are capable of meeting any requirements and implementing any designs provided they get to know relevant conditions and standards as well as global taste.

Then another attendee, Hajj Abdou, welcomed members of the project team in “Damietta Furniture City” and introduced himself as one of the furniture makers in the city. He stressed their full readiness to learn and be acquainted with everything new related to the industry, and help the project team to promote expertise and ensure the sustainability of the industry which has been a distinct feature thereof for ages. He emphasized that they inherited this craft skill from their ancestors, and that they are very proud that they work in such a domain that is regarded as a heritage craft for Damietta City, which he considers the largest furniture factory in the world.

Engineer Amr Fathy then commented on the aforementioned artisans’ statements, asserting that providing technical support, attaching special importance to quality features and kinds of wood, and knowing the globally- required specifications and criteria as well as foreign and European markets’ taste, all represent the most important prerequisite for maintaining and developing the industry.

Engineer Fathy noted that it requires a lot of resilience, culture and sufficient susceptibility to allow a change in terms of development without hiding the distinguished industry heritage of Damietta furniture. He also underlined the necessity of integration between furniture makers and the craft itself.

In an explanatory speech, Dr. Ilham Mahmoud, Dr. Nourhan Hisham and Dr. Gloria Lancy-responsible for preparing and analyzing the study results or the field survey conducted to evaluate the current situation of the Damietta furniture industry- presented the methods adopted to analyze these results during several visits, by using a questionnaire prepared by the project team. All artisans expressed their viewpoints in this concern and the study culminated in some results regarding the following:

- Relations between craftsmen and labour markets, as well as mutual trust and established norms among all
- diligently monitoring the production system line and the size of workshops and factories (the relationship with the place, the user, and values)
- monitoring the spatial and productive differences between Damietta city and the governorate
- understanding environmental and climatic changes and their impact on the city and industry

Dr. Elham Mahmoud, Professor of Environment responsible for studying impacts of climate change and the environment on Damietta city's coastal environment, gave a simplified lecture on the effects of climate change on the city and governorate of Damietta in the near and far future. A documentary video was also presented on climate change impacts.

This was followed by Dr. Stewart Walker's lecture on the economic importance of products and the relation between crafts and place (the close links with culture and heritage). He cited several examples of industries and other traditional crafts in England and China and underlined the importance of knowing their motives and facing their challenges. He also noted that design represents a tool designated to help increase productivity and development, and establish a framework for action based on relationships associated with the crafts and links with users in the place. He further clarified the way this affects the product's ability to survive and create broader opportunities for its marketing.

Example: China

- More focus on innovation and creativity
- Use of modern techniques and technology
- Seeking to collect money from these crafts
- Attaching special attention to awards and appreciation
- Seeking to work in historical sites and exhibitions to market products
- Assigning importance to designs and developing them, and knowing consumer needs
- Product Branding - Opportunities and Marketing
- Internet presence and Web exploitation

Example: England

- Assigning priority to conservation of nature
- Preserving the old traditional crafts and methods and protecting them from previous generations
- Money collected from these crafts is insignificant
- Use of local materials
- Participation in local exhibitions

Then, the project team held two sessions that included discussion and brainstorming exercises attended by artisans from the furniture industry.

Five working groups were being set up and supported by a delegate from the project team. Group discussion focused on four important topics:

- The reason for taking up this profession that is part of the furniture industry in Damietta
- What is the connection between the profession/craft and the city/governorate of Damietta?
- The most important challenges facing the profession/craft, and

- Available opportunities or motives and incentives that make the job attractive

In the meantime, there was unanimity in the groups on the following points:

- The profession is inherited from the ancestors
- Maintaining financial returns
- Love for wood texture and designs
- Contribution to the development of the industry through the study of decorative designs
- Damietta city/governorate is the place of birth, life and living
- Social cohesion and the presence of workshops under the places of residence (family bonding)
- The availability of raw materials and industry data in various parts of the governorate
- Availability and quality of labour in the governorate

There was also a consensus that the following are the most important challenges facing the industry:

- The raw material price hike
- Raw materials monopoly
- The general state of stagnation
- The lack of sufficient training in the various fields of industry.
- Exit and flight of workers and labour force
- Change in markets' requirements and specifications

Participants underlined the importance of imposing control over commodities and raw materials. They also suggested turning Damietta Furniture City into a free zone.

However, they confirmed the existence of the following opportunities, which may ensure the survival and development of the industry:

- Tax credits
- International exhibitions
- Opening the door for exports to foreign countries without customs
- Existence and innovation of alternative materials

Meanwhile, one of the attendees working in the Furniture Industry mentioned that the current economic situation has affected many countries in the world, including Egypt, as well as the furniture industry. He stressed that small entities may be completely excluded from participation in the industry as they are only used as success tools for the great entities in the field. He also asserted the need to preserve the rights of workers and people with special talents and design skills.

He also spoke about the existence of a gap between the theoretical and applied reality, noting that the state should legislate laws to protect small entities and leave the application or implementation to be carried out by them as they have the required skills and efficiency to deal with this aspect.

One of the workshop owners, Mr. Yasser Fayed, submitted a proposal for cooperation between his enterprise and colleges with corresponding programs to provide practical training for students and hold joint exhibitions for manufacturers (the Furniture City) and students (the University).

Mr. Fayed said that the current workshop is a good example of attempting to find solutions on the ground with the participation of the problem owners. He affirmed his understanding that this project is an initiative to solve the Damietta furniture industry crisis, and that its first step will be its inclusion in the World Heritage List by an international organization (UNESCO) and turning Damietta into a heritage city.

Mrs. Safaa, the owner of a furniture factory, said that difficulties and challenges facing the furniture industry are summed up in the following:

- All of the industry's inputs are imported - the prices of raw materials
- Unorganized working hours
- Non-conservation of energy and the use of alternative energy such as solar energy
- Misuse of modern machinery

Dr. Hisham Al-Qadi assured the audience that the project and its results are nothing but a practical solution, through the reports that will be submitted transparently and honestly. Meanwhile, Eng. Fathy emphasized the fact that heritage is generally concerned with protecting the young, not the old, and that factories all over the world depend on small workshops, because there lies experience, craft and skill.

Dr. Ahmed Abdel Rehim highlighted the permanent contacts held with the Egyptian National Commission for UNESCO to manifest the importance of the Damietta craft furniture. He noted that a complete file would be submitted to the National Commission to activate the project, in cooperation with government agencies (the governorate), to conserve the craft as a heritage in Egypt.

Hajj Abdou referred to the support lent to the project by craftsmen and industry workers, and their strenuous desire to restore and develop handicrafts, voicing their willingness to face challenges and make use of opportunities as workshop owners and furniture makers, and work 24 hours a day to invent new competitive designs.

Hajj Abdou said that he is 62 years old and still works with his hands. He stressed the importance of artisanal manual work, emphasizing that modern machinery will not compensate, disrupt or outperform them, but on the contrary, it can help them, since they are producers and not consumers.

The workshop concluded at 5:00 p.m. with words of encouragement from Eng. Amr Fathy, who confirmed that the Domiaty maker is highly skilled and executes everything very quickly when he needs to finish a specific job. He finally advised all to use sizes and dimensions of the European market.