THE LAST FEW MONTHS OF 2000 WITNESSED a rebirth of what had long been forgotten - competitions related to both sculpture and urban design for a major public square.

Once upon a time, during the Khedival period, this task was usually carried out by French artists and planners. Then, during the period of national awareness, sculptor Mahmoud Mukhtar's works came to fill the void. Lately, it has been left to obscure contractors and government officials neither related to the artistic nor the urban design fields to decide what to put in our city squares and urban spaces. They have been referred to as "touches of beautification," but always fall short of any aesthetic value - whether by popular or formal standards. The initiative taken lately by the Cultural Development Fund, under the Ministry of Culture, for a competition to design a sculpture within the urban context of al-Galaa square was hailed by many as the rebirth of the concept of popular public art.

The requirements of the competition project were simple: to design a sculpture expressing 20th century writer Taha Hussein in relation to the urban context of the square, taking into consideration materials, sight lines and scale. The presentation required a model accompanied by several A2 sized cardboard sheets to show how the designer executed the idea in the urban context.

The 12-member jury was headed by sculptor Adam Henein and was implicitly divided along professional approaches and inclinations, which helped the discussions and decision-making processes thrive. Some were inclined to give equal weight to the artistic and urban dimension of the competition such as the Head of the Cultural Development Fund Salah Shawkat, architects Gamal Bakry, Aly Gabr and Mohamed Abu Seeda, theatre designer Salah Marei and Giza Governorate representative Ahmed Fathy. While others were inclined to treat sculpture as a pure art form. This last group included sculptors Ahmed al-Sotouhy, Farouk Ibrahim and Mahfouz Salib.

The jury first held unstructured group discussions, which later helped the members to form a checklist of criteria for evaluation. These preliminary discussions were vital to create the foundation for what would be considered acceptable and eligible for evaluation. The checklist was formulated according to a hierarchical structure: first was the matter of concept and capability of idea expression; second, the notion of the scale of the sculpture versus its immediate urban context as well as the scaling of the sculpture itself; third, came the sculpture's expression of the contemporary; fourth, its capability of abstraction and detailing; the fifth point was the different scopes of vision that the work as a whole provided to the different viewers and its readability given that the concept would have to be gleaned after only a brief glance from people in moving vehicles; sixth was the ease of implementation, as sculpture and as an urban solution. Finally, the last criterion was the choice of material and surface treatment of the sculpture itself and its base as well as its reaction to sunlight.

After a series of rounds, there was a vote for the shortlist of three sculptors. All...
three projects were well received. It was also suggested that two other awards should be given to encourage those participants who took the design task seriously.

The first award worth ££ 30,000 went to Khaled Zaki Ali Abu el-Ela. His idea was strong and bold whereby an exaggerated abstracted vertical colossus-like figure with the detailed facial features of Taha Hussein is placed in the centre of what looks like the pivot of a huge circular sundial indicating time and the passing of days. This work is analogous to both the timeless quality of Hussein's writings as well as his famous autobiographical work al-Ayyam which literally means "The Days."

Each segment of the circular base is either textured or inclined in a manner that helps break up the natural reflected light on the work. To strengthen the centrality of the figure and its pivotal position, a new circular pedestrian arcade approached through a series of staircases is introduced, thus creating an urban pierced enclosure. This upper new level is uniquely presented in this entry and allows for viewing the sculptural composition from different levels up to five meters above ground level. In this way, the work is experienced from varying distances and perspectives, maximising its impact on the viewer. This work definitely shows an ability for abstraction in the extended posture of Taha Hussein, and is more contemporary than most other entries which tended to copy Taha Hussein's figure in varying sizes. The suggested material for execution is rose granite, a readily available material, which adds a local dimension to the Egyptian figure.

The second award of ££ 20,000 went to Hassan Kamel Hassan Ibrahim. Although more traditional than the first entry, the second prize winner is demonstrative of a developed sense of design composition, scaling and hierarchy. This project is a safe entry, with no adventurous gamble on public acceptance, and likewise no complicated symbolic message. The swirling and winding volute base leads to a vertical column resembling a classical rostral column of victory. A capped Taha Hussein figure faces the bridge and is
highlighted with gilded metal. Three cylinders with slanted gilded tops symbolise the diversity of intellectual activity that Taha Hussein patronised. Although it is a safe project that satisfies the requirements of the competition program, the jury found that it lacked a contemporary edge.

The third award for £E 10,000 went to Essam Mohammed Sayed Darwish. This project was both bold and simple in its conception. A huge oversized sculpted head of Taha Hussein is placed on a half-planted and half-paved base creating dialogue between the second and third dimensions. The main concern of the jury regarding this bold entry is dual. First, the inadequacy of the project for the context. The sculpture is a huge detailed head set against a busy urban setting of varying heights, projections and recesses. Secondly, the fear that this project would be a disturbing shocker and would not attain public acceptance.

Two honourary awards of £E 3,000 went to Tamer Ibrahim el-Enany and a joint entry by Rania Mohammed Said Shafik and Hossam Hassan Samir Salama. Both entries showed merit in dealing with the competition requirements. The first did this by an interplay between two half arches that touch one another creating a contemporary pseudo-triumphal arch. At its foot is an interwoven metallic coiled tube, symbolising the complexity of Taha Hussein's literary skills, faced by a screen and a hologram of the late writer.

While the second joint entry showed a very high quality in abstraction and was amongst the few entries that successfully introduce polychromy to their composition. Here a silhouette of Taha Hussein in red with his branding, black spectacles, as the only direct reminder of his character and figure. Otherwise, the composition is a play with forms and spaces echoing the fragmentation of the urban setting of the context. These fragments also symbolise Hussein's multi-faceted dimension in the literary arts. Unfortunately, the form and spaces of this entry are those of a pavilion and not a sculpture, and they would never have been experienced by the viewers particularly since this square is inaccessible to pedestrians.

On the whole this competition is a highly positive step towards reviving our sense of urban aesthetics. Also, the project emphasises that the Ministry of Culture can play a role in conjunction with the various governorates to help raise public awareness to contextual art and design.