

urban

narrative

حواري

عمرانية

an investigation into Cairo's built environment,
public space and spatial practices

تحقيق في البيئة العمرانية في القاهرة، والاماكن العامة
والممارسات\الانشطة المكانية

by
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URBAN IDENTITIES IN CRISIS
Redefining Vernacular Architecture in Cairo

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INTRODUCTION

This research stems from a critical reflection on the urban processes of growth that trigger the construction of new cities in Egypt, in particular the development of the New Administrative Capital (NAC) that sits 45 km to the East of Cairo.

Over the last 50 years, Cairo's built environment has exploded onto its agricultural land, both formally and informally, within its urban fabric, and into the desert around it, in the shape of desert archipelagoes. This is clearly visible when comparing satellite imagery from 1985 and 2020. Egypt's government promotes the new capital as the key to reducing Cairo's urban load as a result of its explosive metropolitan population, currently at 21.3 million projected to over 40 million by 2050. The NAC is well underway with ongoing construction clearly visible on site and from neighboring cities such as New Cairo.

What is striking about the NAC, besides the scale of the development, is its architectural and urban narrative. The narrative here entails not only the discourse through which the government presents the project to the public, but also the spatial experience, architectural expression and organization of space. The city from scratch departs from its predecessor, Cairo, taking seemingly little to no reference from it. Unfortunately "the words chaotic, overcrowded, cacophonous, disorganized, confusing, polluted, dirty, teeming, sprawling, and so on" are what

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seem to come to the minds of the government and city planners. In an effort to establish legitimacy and a new stronghold to represent the prosperity of the regime, the government seems to have been eager to move away from Cairo altogether and start with a blank canvas in the desert, focusing on gestures of power and grandeur and not on the needs and everyday lives of the population.

The aim of this work is to observe, analyze and reflect on the social, cultural, economic, urban, architectural, (in)formal, and political layers of Cairo to examine the need to return to the vernacular in search for a local identity. The city offers an opportunity to dig deeper into its fabric and extract narratives of how people live their everyday lives and adapt their built environment to their needs, beyond the physical space that exists, from its urban core and historic centers to its desert cities and extensions.

URBAN NARRATIVES

The investigation into the built environment begins where the glossary left off. The vernacular glossary offered a new departure point for vernacular architecture to be defined through the relationship between people and places, the theory that vernacular architecture may be defined through spatial practices.

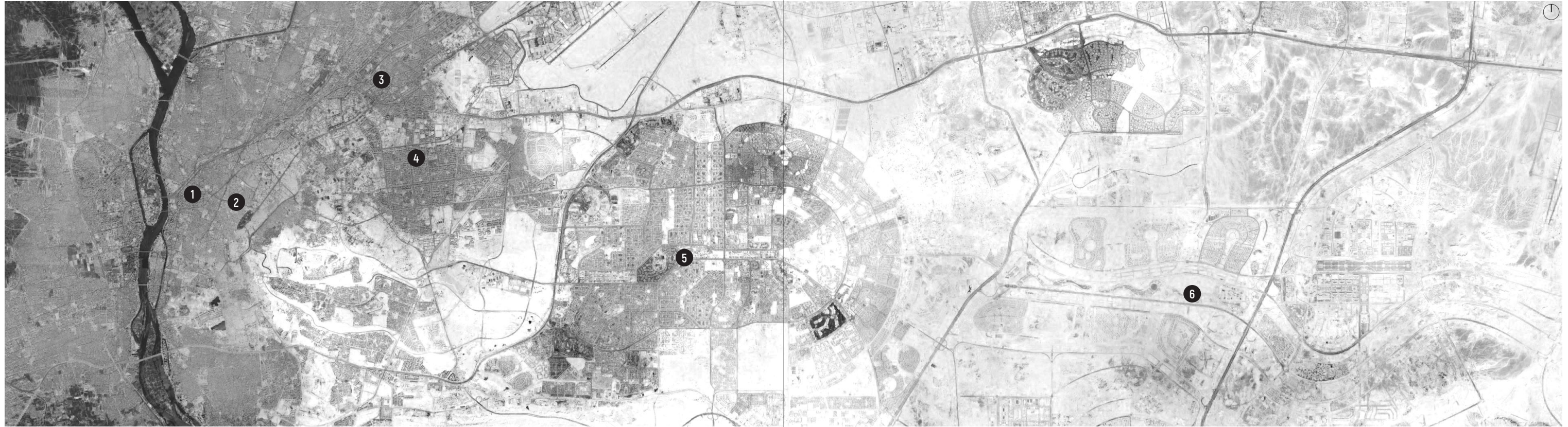
The chosen method to investigate this theory on ground was through urban narratives. Urban narratives is a personal journal that follows the process of moving through Cairo as a passive observer, with a limited active role in the daily lives of the people inhabiting it, to see the traces of how people engage with space. The purpose of this method was to observe the city and test to see if there truly is a relationship between people and place, how space and place influences their behavior and if there is repetition of behavioral patterns.

The investigation follows the account of the author's personal journey through five districts in Greater Cairo, Downtown Cairo, Islamic Cairo, Heliopolis and Nasr City, New Cairo, and the New Administrative Capital. The lens of observation used reflects on the physical space, embodied experience and challenges while moving through it. This approach will supply a personal perspective to the analysis, as an Egyptian woman navigating space in the city. These sites were chosen to represent a cross-

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section of Cairo's neighborhoods from the urban core to the desert cities. Due to limited time and accessibility, informal settlements were not explored in this research method. Although the journey through each district was not entirely premeditated, the urban geometry including significant landmarks, nodes, districts, edges and pathways guided the experience.

Unless otherwise specified, photographs are taken by the Author.



- 1 DOWNTOWN CAIRO
- 2 ISLAMIC CAIRO
- 3 HELIOPOLIS
- 4 NASR CITY
- 5 NEW CAIRO
- 6 NEW ADMINISTRATIVE CAPITAL

DOWNTOWN CAIRO

If you squint your eyes and drown out the noise, walking through the streets of Downtown Cairo will begin to feel like a stroll the streets of any European city. That was my feeling as I, as if for the first time, walked for three hours through its streets.

I chose to follow the path set by CLUSTER in their Cairo Urban Tours initiative in 2015. Although I am sure much has changed, including the facelift to all buildings along the major axes in the area which included repainting of the facades and the harmonious (or monotonous) rebranding of all retail and food shops, the biggest difference today was the presence of police cars and trucks along the major axes in Downtown. Therefore, I was unable to capture images during the visit and instead will be using either images taken from the car or through other sources.

I started out in Tahrir Square (direct translation Liberation Square), crossing the major roads the Egyptian way of maneuvering between moving cars although there are traffic lights and traffic police, these seem to provide no guidance for pedestrians to follow. With my back to the square, I made my way East towards the Greek Campus. It provides a safe haven with its internal courtyard, a moment of rest in the busy city. Unfortunately, this is a privately owned public space, i.e. inaccessible to the public.

وسط البلد

I make my way north through the urban fabric to the central node of Talaat Harb Square with the iconic statue in the middle of the roundabout and the also iconic Groppi at the tip. I am once again disappointed at the discovery that it is temporarily closed for renovation as it is known to serve one of the best frozen yogurt cakes in town. Its recognizable art deco inspired architecture hidden behind a tarp with an abstracted image of what is hidden underneath. I believe that what has always brought this place to life has been the people, which at the moment are unfortunately missing.

A sheltered walk past the Champillion Palace leads to the tucked away spot of Townhouse. An independent art space established in 1998 that hosts exhibitions, artists, curators, workshops and outreach programs. It is only recognizable by a sizable colorful mural on an otherwise humble structure.

Then I was off to Al-Shawarbi Street, which exemplified the epitome of the "infitah period" of the 70s. It was the place to be for imported goods, clothes and devices. Although they may have undergone their own facelifts, shops still liven the ground floor level of this street.



Photograph by Andrew Shenoda

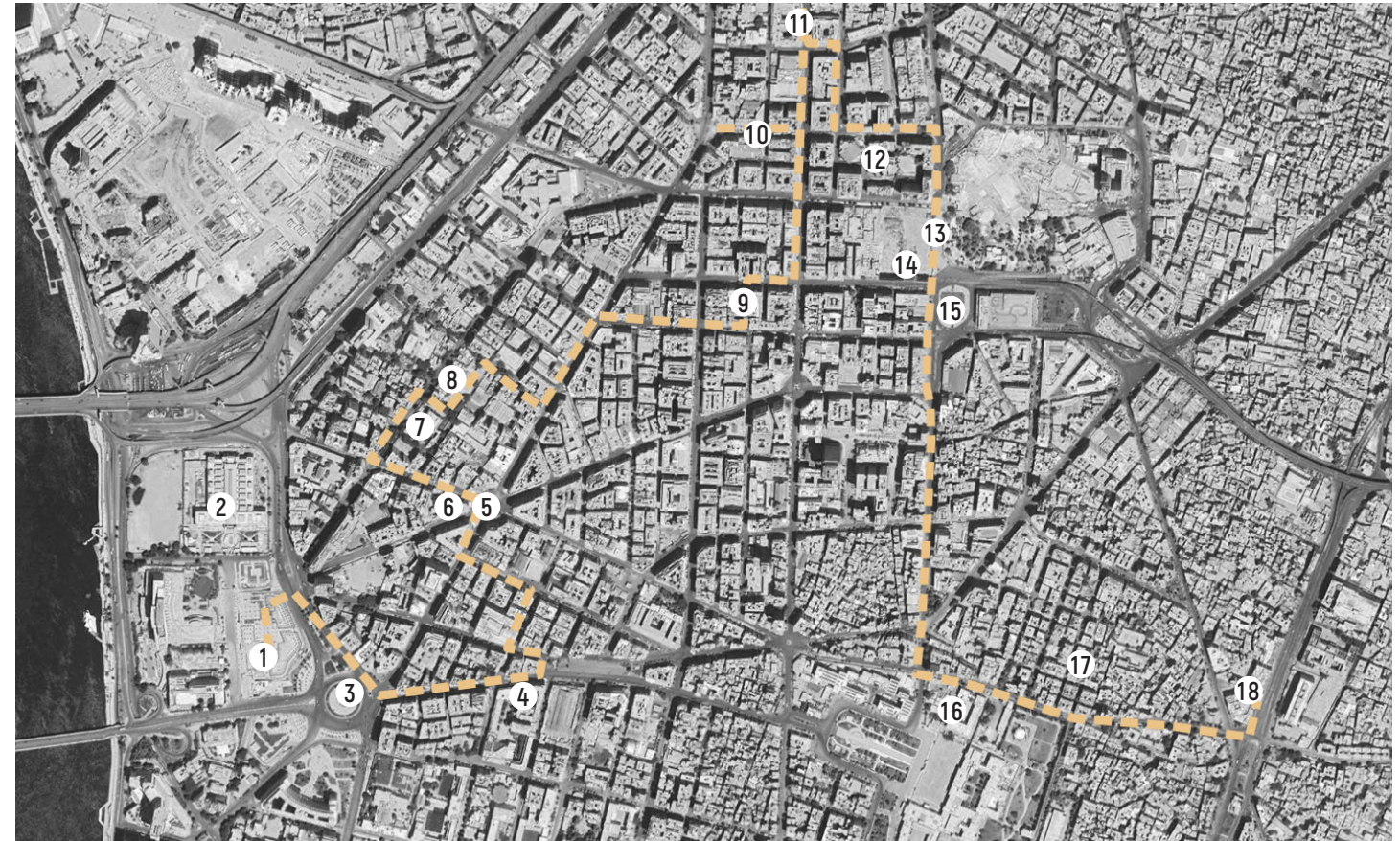


- 1 TAHRIR GARAGE
- 2 EGYPTIAN MUSEM
- 3 TAHRIR SQUARE
- 4 THE GREEK CAMPUS
- 5 TALAAT HARB SQUARE

- 6 GROPPI
- 7 CHAMPILLION PALACE
- 8 TOWN HOUSE
- 9 KODAK PASSAGEWAY
- 10 AL-ALFI BEK PASSAGEWAY

- 11 IMMEUBLES KHEDIVIAUX
- 12 MIXED-USE NEIGHBORHOOD
- 13 AZBAKEYA MARKET AND GARDEN
- 14 CONINENTAL HOTEL
- 15 OPERA SQUARE

- 16 ABDEEN PALACE
- 17 RESIDENTIAL NEIGHBORHOOD (M-L)
- 18 MUSEUM OF ISLAMIC ARTS





The second moment of solitude and escapism I found during this visit was the Kodak Passageway. It holds true to CLUSTER's intention upon redeveloping it in 2015 as a 'green oasis' representing the potential of public space upgrading by the private sector. It was a true moment of peace and serenity with shading from the buildings flanking it, the planted vegetation that brought life to the urbanity, the colorful posters hanging above and the benches emerging from the ground offering a moment of rest.

I am unclear as to what drove me to skip the Tawfi'eya market but I found myself walking down the 26 July Street towards Zawya Cinema housed in one of the Khedive Buildings. I quickly glanced at the Al Alfi Bey passageway and was drawn to the way people gathered here at a much slower pace, stopping to sit on benches and at cafes for a drink. The Khedive Buildings, a set of four buildings each with a private courtyard, are immediately associated with downtown Cairo, with their Neo-Baroque style and four domes that are visible even at a distance. Although they are notable buildings, there is nothing particularly captivating about the people's engagement with them.

I make my way back to 26 July Street but following a new path that leads me Azbakeya Market, a self-organized market in the closed off street along the boundary of Azbakeya Garden. A vibrant scene unfolds in this market, with self-made stalls and platforms for selling clothes and shoes at discounted prices.





The backdrop to this scene are the remnants of the Continental Hotel built in 1869 and reopened in 1899. A once grand hotel and hosting many famous characters, the structure has been completely demolished with the exception of the deteriorating façade along the 26 July Street, leading to Opera Square, perhaps an attempt at restoring it to its former 'glory days'. But I couldn't help but wonder what then would become of the tangential market and people whose livelihood has depended on this self-made public space for years.

The most significant pattern identified during this visit to Downtown Cairo is its passageways. Every now and then, if you look closely, there are moments that are tucked away from the cars, nestled between the buildings, protected from the hustle and bustle of the city. These are spaces of varying levels of socialization and contemplation. The hierarchy leading from the main axial streets and these passageways is what amplifies their role. They are also categorized by a change in activities that take place on the street. These activities range from shops extending their goods or services onto the side walk, from retail shops, to food outlets to car mechanics, and street vendors who have utilized a left over concrete bolder as the base for their daily business.



ISLAMIC CAIRO

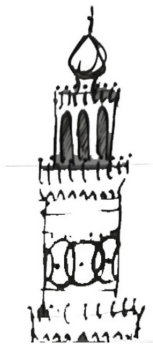
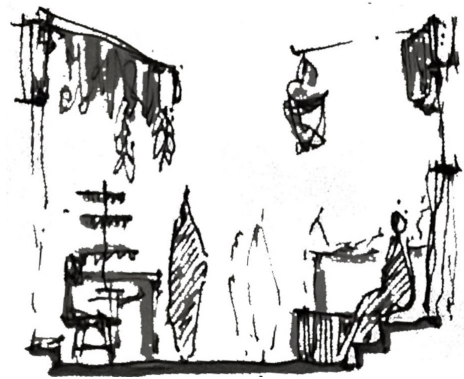
A familiar old friend, it welcomes you with open arms. A safe haven for visitors and locals, once you make it through the metal fences and past the security guards along the main streets. The journey through Al-Moez Street, although seemingly simple and straight forward, offers opportunities for curiosity and discovery. This may be credited to the nature of its urban fabric which is typical to the Islamic city. The main street is meandering and offers changing views as you move along it. Minarets appear and disappear as you make your way up/down the street. The streets lends itself as an open museum, with marvels and fascinations around every corner, from monuments (mosques, schools, hospitals) to markings and etching on the walls. This is history, this is heritage. Endless stories were told along these very streets and alleyways. The intricate details of the domes and minarets as well as the facades signal whether this structure was Mamluk, Fatimid or Ottoman.

The journey starts at Bab Al Futtouh and Bab Al Nasr (Bab meaning the gate to the old city). I chose Bab Al Futtuh as its axis goes all the way down towards al Azahr Street and Mosque. The structure is massive, symmetrical along the center with two semi-circular towers on either side with vertical slits for protection and visibility for archers. Once inside, the first structure that greets you is Al-Hakim Mosque. In my opinion, this is one of the most beautiful mosques in the area. The

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humility and simplicity offered by its interior, as opposed to the intricate exterior, offers a tranquil courtyard and prayer space that muffles the noises of the loud street just outside its walls. The thin pencil minaret, common to the Ottoman dynasty, gives away that the next structure is the Mosque and Sabil (a place that offers free drinking water) Kuttab (religious elementary school) of Sulayman Agha Al-Silahdar. Another peculiar building is the Sabil-Kuttab of Katkhuda which was designed in the Mamluk style although it was constructed during the Ottoman dynasty. What is fascinating about this structure is that even today people still gather around it, sit on its steps and enjoy the shade it provides. It is also the only structure in the area that is free from three sides and stands in the middle of the street. The structure is quickly eclipsed by the Qalawun Complex, consisting of a mausoleum, madrasa (school) and hospital. The double minaret and dome from Qalawun and Ibn Qalawun draw your eye to the sky. The intimacy in scale of the streets and the buildings not only makes the user feel seen but also allows for lots of shade that creates a comfortable environment that encourages prolonged stay.



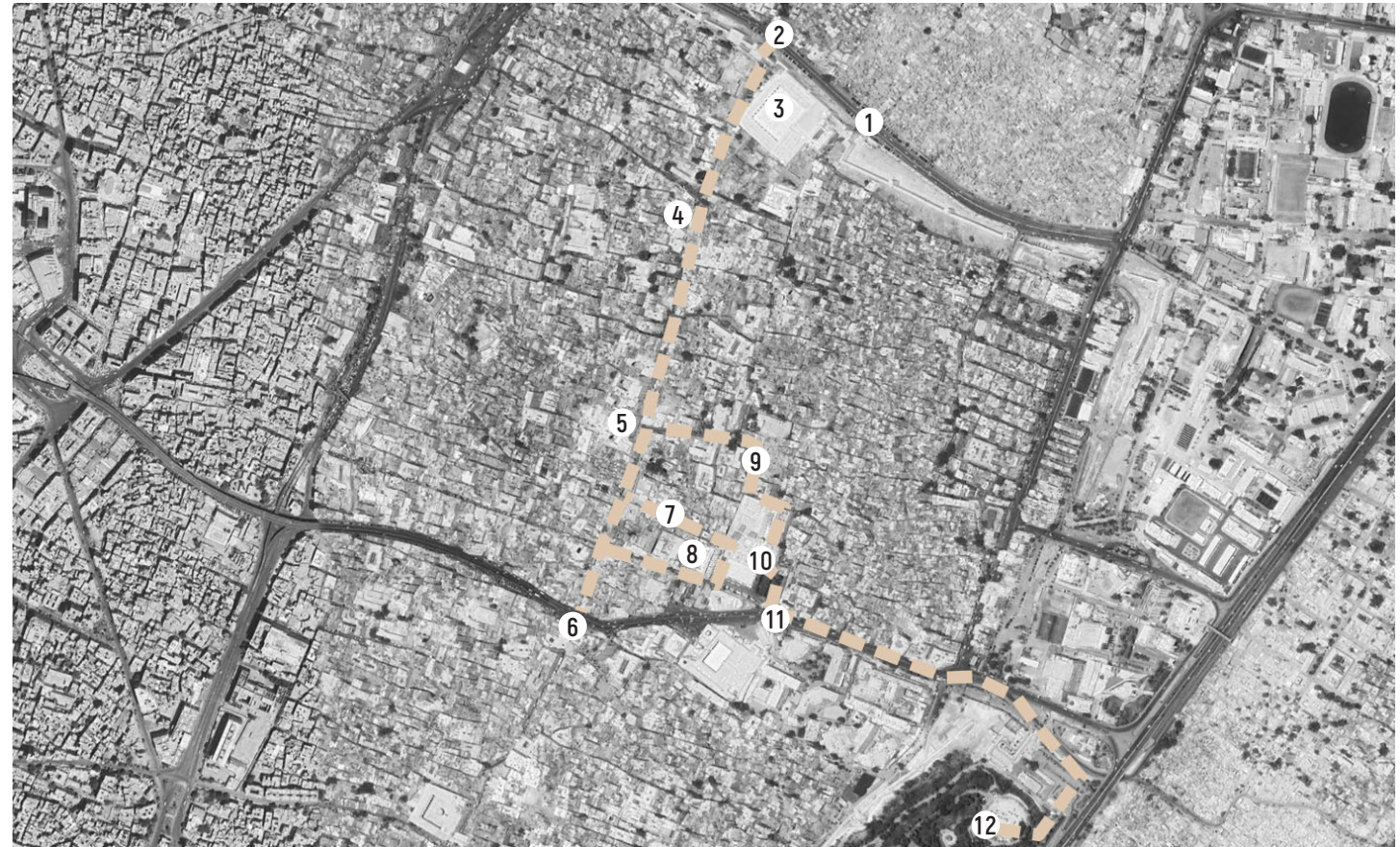


- 1 BAB AL-NASR
- 2 BAB AL-FUTTUH
- 3 AL-HAKIM MOSQUE

- 4 AL-SALAH DAR MOSQUE AND SABIL
- 5 QALAWUN COMPLEX
- 6 AL-AZHAR STREET

- 7 KHAN AL-KHALILY
- 8 AL-FISHAWY CAFE
- 9 RESIDENTIAL NEIGHBORHOOD

- 10 AL-FATH MOSQUE AND PARK
- 11 GATED ACCESS
- 12 AL-AZHAR PARK









What keeps you grounded is the people. The plethora of colors, shine, sounds and smells brings your gaze from the scale of the monuments down to the eye level. Shops seem to naturally burst out into the streets and alleys and their owners follow suit making sure to attract and talk to every single potential customer passing by, with either Quranic verses playing from a radio or the recorded voice of today's prices and offers on a loop. This is even more evident in Khan El Khalili passageway. The architecture melts away entirely as if unimportant or irrelevant to the events on ground. Shops are facing each other in the narrowest of passageways leaving little room for people to escape the vendors. If you look up, it is nearly impossible to recognize the features of the buildings, the passage way resembles a cave of wonders. The thrill of maneuvering the space with all its trinkets and attractions is enticing. This is the true essence of Al-Moez, never a dull or lonely moment.

While moving through the old city, you can always hear people effortlessly exchange greetings, saying just a name with a customary head tilt or arm raise, and the other acknowledging by returning a similar gesture, signaling to an outsider that these people are a part of each other's every day life. As I make my way down the length of the street, I am accompanied by a man, a tray in hand with four cups of tea. With every stop he makes along the way, he is one cup shorter than when he started, a daily ritual naturally occurring, without the need to fill out an order or write anything down, or even accept payment. A flock of

school children, dressed in bright yellow, bring a melodic cheer into the area as they frantically explore the streets, chasing each other, eager for the excitement the area has to offer. A vendor calls out in fluent Spanish to the couple walking ahead of me in an attempt, seemingly successful, convincing them that what he has to offer cannot be missed. [And only in Cairo in a highly touristic area can a woman leave her handbag on the street to take a photo without worrying that it will get stolen.]

Al Moez Street is not all the area has to offer. Beyond the hustle and bargain deals is a parallel world of much simpler taste. There is a clear distinction between the areas dubbed as touristic and the more tucked away areas reserved for the local residents and shop owners. Gone are the lavish monuments and the streets covered in glittering metals and trinkets. All that is left is the raw Islamic city urban fabric and the everyday life of the people behind it all. A quite falls over the area with only the sound of the radio from one of the cafes frequented by the neighborhood regulars. The also familiar stray cats and dogs are flagships of the endearing nature of the area. Makeshift shed structures shade the streets and provide space for people to sit for a moment. The one moment where these two worlds collided was near Al Hussein mosque which has been completely fenced off. The small green space near it had some vendors using the park benches and mosque fence as a backdrop while others were covered in reed carpets and had people sleeping there covered with blankets.





Another typology that captured my attention during this visit was the abundance of hotels located in the heart of Islamic Cairo. There are several of these hotels around the area, many seem to have been recently renovated or given a facelift. There is even a new hotel being built at the start of the site near Bab Al Futtouh, whether this was built in the aftermath of demolition of existing buildings is unclear, however, what was clear was that the whole block in front of Al Hakim mosque was leveled.





I end my journey through Islamic Cairo by going to Al Azhar Park, currently the largest operating green space in Cairo. Although it is ticketed and not completely open with free access, it is frequented by couples, families and school fieldtrips. As I walk through the winding oaths sheltered by trees there are children run and play, three men pray duhr prayer on the grass, maintenance men take a break under a tree while couples take photos.

The design of the park emphasizes the visual corridor leading directly to Sultan Hassan and Mohamed Ali Mosque and is celebrated by the Hill Top restaurant designed Rami Al Dahan and Soheir Farid. The design raises the question as to why this view is reserved to only those who can afford to sit at this restaurant. With this in mind, I find myself at the top of the south lookout view point. It is as if I alone exist in this moment and the whole of Cairo and all its layers are revealed to me. In this moment it is clear why Cairo is called a city of a thousand minarets, as they all pierce the skyline from Mohamed Ali Mosque all the way to Al Azhar and Al Hussein Mosques. The pigeon towers are also typically associated with Cairo's skyline, they are second only to the minarets. The city seems endless, you can even see the towers along the Nile waterfront faded in the distance.





HELIOPOLIS (MASR AL-GADIDA)

The starting point on the journey through Heliopolis (locally known as Masr Al Gadida) was the Baron Empain palace. It is one of the oldest structures in this part of the city. It's striking reddish orange color and Indian style stands out from all other buildings in the area. It was the home of Edouard Louis Joseph Empain, the Belgian founder of Heliopolis as the new hub of luxury and leisure in Cairo.

Abandoned, the palace had severely deteriorated after the 1952 revolution until its recent restoration and grand opening. As expected, the palace is completely gated and requires a ticket for entrance. Although it has beautiful grounds and garden, it is not used as more than an open air museum displaying some of the motorway inventions of Empain. The palace garden offers potential for urban relieve in the area yet remains untapped. The fence continues along all four sides and although there is lots of shading by trees, unfortunately, the entire area smells of urine and dog feces. And so despite a beautiful yet blurred view of the palace, the sense of smell disrupts the scene.

The original plan was to walk from Baron Palace to Tharwa Street and then move towards Korba. Unfortunately, due to the speed of the traffic and width of the road, with an alternative detour route of a 30 min walk, I was forced to drive to Korba instead.

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Arriving in korba, one emerges out of the tunnel from Thawra Street onto Baghdad Street. It is at first difficult to take note of the scene because you are too busy eyeing the street for a vacant parking spot. 20 minutes later, once the car is parked an 8 minute walk away from the main axial road, the experience begins. The backyard of Baghdad Street is an area with heavy vegetation and varying typologies of buildings, including multi-storey housing, villas, and restaurants. The area is very well shaded and provides the passers through with comfort and protection on such a hot day.

Once you emerge through one of the alleys onto the main road, you are faced with the hustle and bustle of ongoing traffic, as shops unloading their daily merchandise and slowing down traffic. Eventually the noise filters away and your eyes travel upwards to admire the built form. Korba is particularly unique as a result of its architecture that has retained the seemingly 'grandeur' air of when it was built also by Baron Empein. In addition to the intricate ornamentation on the facades and arched windows, the feature that is truly associated with Korba is the colonnades on the ground floor. The cross-section of the buildings allows the upper floors to extend either entirely or with balconies above the ground floor to provide a roofed area of the sidewalk along the façade, offering protection not only from the weather but also from the street. In these corridors a



Photograph by Youssef Salhamoud



1 BARON PALACE
2 THAWRAH STREET
3 RESIDENTIAL NEIGHBORHOOD



4 BAGHDAD STREET
5 ASWAN CAFE
6 MIXED-USE NEIGHBORHOOD



7 BASILICA
8 AL AHRAM STREET
9 RESIDENTIAL NEIGHBORHOOD



10 MARYLAND PARK
11 ROXY SQUARE
12 IMPERIAL PALACE





wide range of activities may be observed, people waiting in the shade with others do some window shopping, vendors extending their shops outwards, restaurants or cafes adding a few extra chairs to their joint.

Walking towards Al Ahram Street, the area between these two major streets offers a transition from the elite neighborhood and expensive restaurants and cafes along Baghdad Street towards a more down to earth and local scene with local cafes also known as Kahwa in Arabic, bakeries, shawerma shops, fool and falafel shops and juice bars as well as street vendors selling things ranging from clay pots to fruits and vegetables. In one of these streets is one of the most famous kahwas in the area, Aswan. During the day, there are only a few table and chairs in the streets parallel to it but at night, the scene transforms into one of the busiest spots in the area full of life with drinks and shisha being shared among friends and strangers alike. The buildings are a mixture of low rise and high rise structures which offers a varying experience depending on the chosen path, they all however, lead to Al Ahram Street.





Al Ahram Street is one of the streets in Heliopolis that has suffered the consequences or the after math of 'development'. The metro line that used to split the road into two parts has been completely removed and the car lanes have expanded from 2 to 4 lanes on each side with a very narrow island in the middle. Although the tracks had not been operational for years, the larger island provided sanctuary when crossing the street and the metro stops offered shading and seating along the way. At the very top of the street sits one of the most significant landmarks in the area, Basilique Notre Dame d'Heliopolis, as many participate in weekly Sunday mass there.





From there, diving further into the residential area, there are kiosks spread across the sidewalk on almost every corner, accompanied by a mosque where people gather to pray Duhr. Eventually, Merryland Park emerges. However, it is on the other side of El Hegaz Street, another 10-12 lane wide highway parading as a street. With Egyptian tactility, I make my way across the street and take a moment to acknowledge the fact that I made it safely to other side. The park is completely fenced with only two access points that require a ticket. The park itself offers a tranquil space in the heart of the city. It has a spine down the middle that leads to some booths with coffee and snacks. There is also a youth initiative in the park that offers artistic activities such as pottery and painting on canvas and wood. They have an active following on social media and attract a wide range of people to participate. Otherwise, in the middle of the week, the park seems quite and empty except for a few couples and school fieldtrip that was getting ready to leave the park. In front of the park sits one of the largest concrete blocks in the area. At a staggering 25 storeys high, the structure towers over the park and if not for the presence of park elements, the human scale would be completely lost.

The next step, after going around this mammoth, is to head back towards Korba, but this time through Roxy square to arrive at Korba from the other side. Although named Roxy Square, there is not much square left. Once again to get to it, one must cross El Hegaz Street which has completely broken through the square





leaving little of the square behind. And so, although it is quite a large urban opening between the surrounding urban blocks, there is no sign of pedestrian life, only cars. Running to shelter beneath the every familiar arcades of Korba I make my way back to the starting point and walk past Al Ittihadiya Palace, designed in a Neo-Mamluk style similar to the rest of Korba, which was used for as a presidential office under the Mubarak regime.

The change of scale between the neighborhoods in Heliopolis is quite extreme. One minute you are nestled in alleyways and relatable spaces the next you are confronted with the lack of feeling and heightened sense of self preservation. This difference is not only marked by the height of the buildings and widths of the streets, but consequently the nature of public life around it. The higher the buildings and the wider the streets, the less intricate and ornate the buildings are and the less activities on the street level exist and vice versa.

I end my journey where it all began, back in Baghdad Street. But before I leave, I visit one of the oldest institutions in Cairo, Mandarine Koueidar, the famous desert shop which offers Egyptian deserts and pastries. This was the original first branch that has been kept intact for years, a landmark in and of itself.





Nasr City is almost joined at the hip to Heliopolis thanks to Thawra Street. There are even some buildings that may be disputed whether they belong to Heliopolis or Nasr City, such as City Stars Mall. Nasr City, as the name suggested, was the city built under the Gamal Abdel Nasser regime which presented a socialist agenda. As a result, the urban landscape and built environment represented this ideology. As you drive through Nasr City, all building clusters and blocks look the same. Very high density, high rise concrete structures, repeated in a monotonous urban grid are spread across the area.

The once recognizable Nasr Road with its busy intersections has been replaced with a free flowing traffic thanks to bridges that have replaced every intersection. These bridges now sit at a staggering 4 stories high, at eye level for the people living inside these buildings. Although it may appear grim at this level, life on the street does not cease to exist, it is alive and well. The Egyptian people are nothing if not resilient. Life has developed underneath these bridges in the form of shops, cafes and parking lots that cater to the neighborhoods. Shops and restaurants occupy the ground floor of every building ensuring there are always eyes on the streets. Every now and then a super block emerges either hosting a park, sporting club, shopping mall, mosque or school.





NEW CAIRO

Although to the untrained eye it may seem that New Cairo has always been the same, to those of us who know where to look it has completely transformed. Not in the way you expect things to change, not just that there a few more commercial and retail strips that opened up or a few more gated communities scattered across the city, it is in the details. Because most who frequent New Cairo travel through any mode of vehicular transport, those few who had the opportunity to experience it by foot know the relationship between people and the built environment.

During my fourth year of architecture studies (out of five), my studio conducted research and studied New Cairo, my group did so through the lens of placemaking. At the time, New Cairo was fairly vibrant and so there were patterns of placemaking, categorized into need based, opportunity based and asset based placemaking. The category of need based placemaking emerged as a result of the then newness of the city and perhaps its lack of consideration to the working class who would require bus stops throughout the city in particular along 90th Street as well as market places in their designated residential areas, the third settlement. Opportunity based place making emerged as a response with food vendors gathering near bus stops to provide people their daily breakfasts and during events such as Friday prayer or Eid, once again vendors emerged on sidewalks, in front of mosques, on the island in the middle of the road to

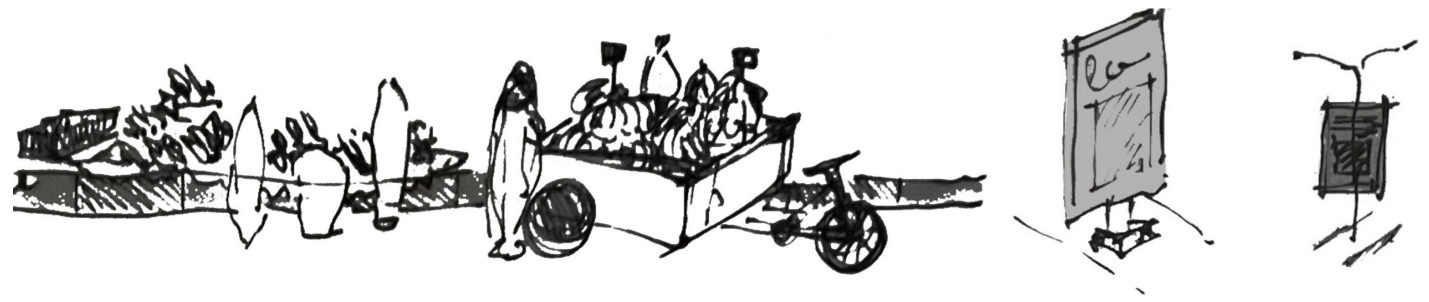
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sell goods and people would gather as a result. The asset based placemaking was by far the most prominent, as it was a direct reflection of social class. Developers were constantly catering to people's needs for spaces to gather and so the notion of privately owned public space was popularized, they had both the means and the funds and the people came. This took shape in the endless commercial strips scattered across the city.

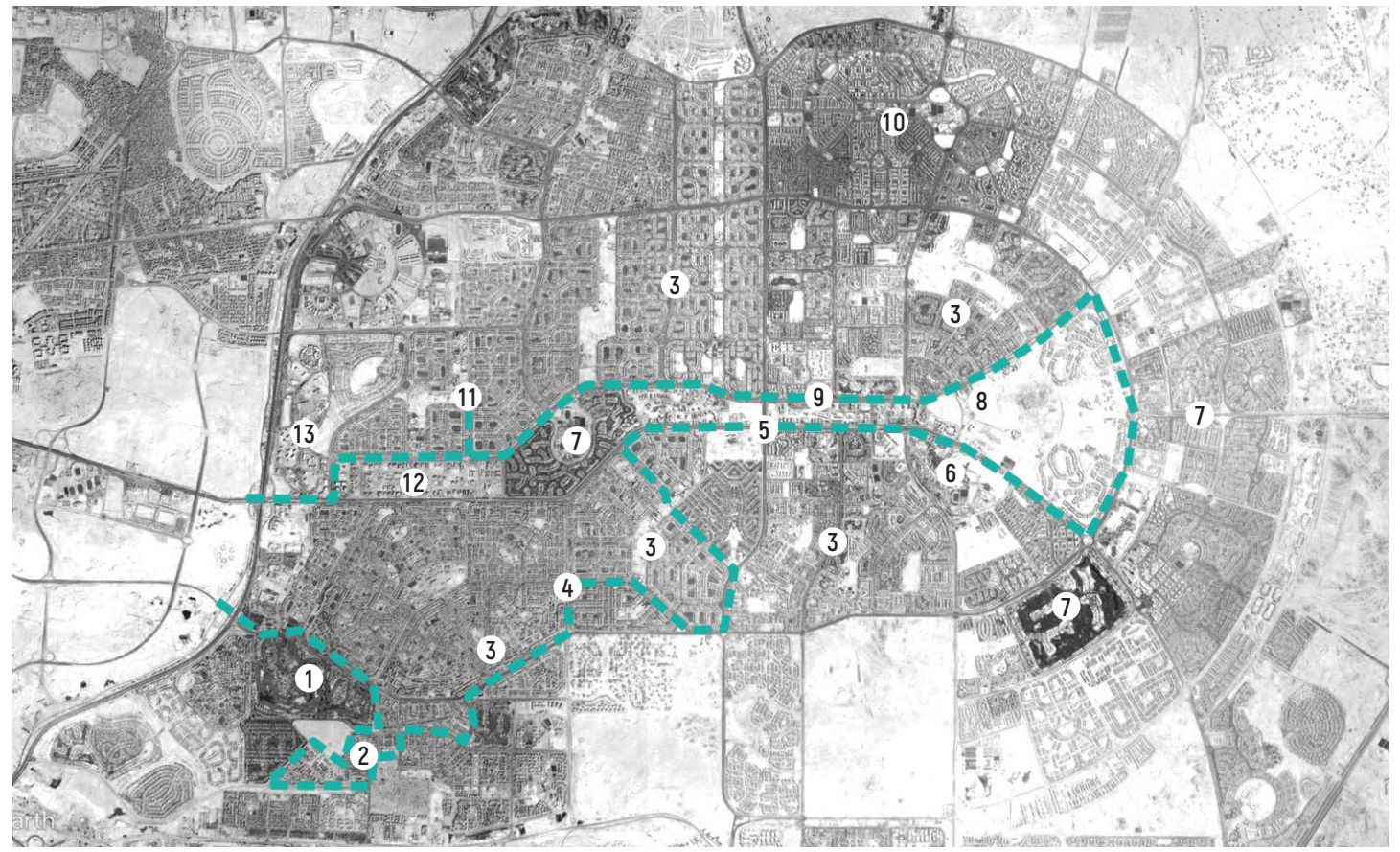
The most detrimental feature of the urban planning of New Cairo has been its zoning. The entire masterplan was divided into zones, making it impossible to acquire basic necessities without driving for 10-15 minutes at the least. The city is impossible to cover by foot, distances are too long and finding a shaded pathway is an even more impossible task. Both N. 90th Street (north) and S. 90th Street (south), for example, make a joke out of the term scale. The roads are 10 lanes wide and a challenge, if not fatal, to cross. These street also splits the functional zoning of the city into residential clusters on either side of them and hold commercial, administrative and business districts in between. The roads started at Cairo Festival City Mall, which sits on the Ring Road, and crossed east through the city till the American University in Cairo.

This, however, was all in the past. Today, the road cross-section has changed and the roads extend until the New Administrative





- | | | | |
|------------------------------|--------------------------------|-------------------|-------------------------------|
| 1 KATAMEYA HEIGHTS | 5 NORTH 90 STREET | 8 GAS STATIONS | 11 HASSAN AL SHARBATLY MOSQUE |
| 2 THIRD SETTLEMENT | 6 AMERICAN UNIVERSITY IN CAIRO | 9 SOUTH 90 STREET | 12 BANKS DISTRICT |
| 3 RESIDENTIAL NEIGHBORHOOD | 7 GATED COMMUNITIES | 10 REHAB CITY | 13 CAIRO FESTIVAL CITY MALL |
| 4 FATIMA AL SHARBATLY MOSQUE | | | |





Capital (NAC). An approx. 15 m high monorail cuts the city in half. It has been under construction for the last three years and as a result made the crossing from one side to the other all the more challenging as well as changed the lane distribution and eliminated slow side lanes. This monorail, 'the longest monorail in the world', was an undertaking aimed at connecting Cairo to the NAC. Many of the stations are under construction and cause traffic disturbances throughout the city, the major ones being near Cairo Festival City Mall, the Air Force Hospital, between Future University and the American University in Cairo and between Royal Club and Sodic East.

One of the oldest and first gated communities in the city is Katameya Heights, home to some of the wealthiest families in Cairo. It has the first golf course in Egypt and was operational before the masterplan of New Cairo was planned in 2001. You can imagine the luxurious facilities and green spaces that this community has, alas it is a shame that all this space is mostly only looked it while everyone stays sheltered in their private gated mansions with private swimming pools. Just behind the fence sits the Third Settlement, the working class government housing. The juxtaposition of these two communities speaks volumes to the zoning and segregation of resources and services as well as space. These are standardized housing units that bare no memorable marker except for their colorful window screens in contrast to the beige concrete rectangular volumes. However, people have brought life into the inbetween spaces. Self-made

markets are set up in wider streets to supply people's needs as well as for recreation in the shape of coffee stands with plastic chair seating.

Driving around the city, the most prominent typology is the villa district or even further segregated the gated community known as 'compounds'. Most of the masterplan is divided into clusters of these villas with a central garden in the middle which are typically 3 to 4 storeys high and bare the neoclassic style which was popularized in the 90's. The question I ask myself not just today but every day for the past 10 years was how did this become the popular or 'go to' style? Has our version of what is considered modern, progressive and luxurious become out of place Greek Corinthian columns on the façade of a house? Again, each house is gated with a private entrance only for residents, deprioritizing interaction between people.

The American University in Cairo, designed by CDC Abdel Halim and Sasaki and Associates, is the main structure that drove the development of New Cairo that far into the desert. The design of the university drew inspiration for the old campus in Tahrir Square and Islamic architectural features. It also followed the urban fabric of the Old Islamic City with its main axial spine and building blocks surrounding it. There are many similarities between the campus and Al Moez, the meandering spine, the disrupted views and sense of intrigue, however the major difference is the scale and the influence of the climate on the





design. Having spent 5 years there, walking through the campus feels like home, from the library to the garden to the portal. One of the unachieved goals that reduces the influence of the campus on its surroundings is its gates and fences. The campus was designed to be open to the public with an amphitheater at the tip to draw the community in, however, it was in the end fenced off and only accessible with a campus card. Unfortunately, the fence remains lifeless with no possibility of placemaking in sight.

Al Rehab City is was first privately owned and developed city with all inclusive services, amenities and utilities. It caters to various social levels providing both villas and apartment living. It includes schools, sporting clubs, mosques and a church. It also has parks that people frequent for picnics as well as malls and market places. It has a little bit of everything in the way that it is designed, it is a self-sufficient city in and of itself. Its architectural style however is not remarkable in any way. Perhaps its ambiguity and neutrality is part of the charm, it acts as a back drop for people's everyday lives. It is also completely gated and has approximately 20 gates, only two of which are open to the public for access. This creates a significant disturbance along the road of these gates as people ambush them on weekends to enter for recreation into the city.

The last unmistakable feature of new Cairo today is the combination of gas station-mall hybrids and bridges which have replaced all intersections in the city. Gas stations have been



popping up all over the country but particularly in New Cairo at an exponential rate, each with a design more perplexing than the one before. With flashy colors, yellow, red and blue, they attract a large crowd of people that are not particularly there to fuel up. The gas station has now become a hot spot for people to gather, an unimaginable series of circumstances. If there was ever a traffic light or round about or intersection, it has now been converted to a bridge. If we disregard the amount of reinforced concrete used to make these bridges, I can fairly say that traffic has improved. Furthermore, new life has developed underneath these bridges, similar to Heliopolis and Nasr City. Infrastructure for shops has been sighted near Platinum Club though one must ask, where are people expected to leave their cars in the middle of the road? These two new typologies are surely related as they provide the speed and sustenance to get to the New Administrative Capital as quickly and as smoothly as possible, considering that these are 10's of kilometers into the desert.





NEW CAIRO

If you follow the monorail from New Cairo east into the desert, you will find yourself at the largest mosque in the area followed by an immensely large gate that marks the beginning of the New Administrative Capital. The gate is made of a series of arches covered in Islamic motifs that only emerge once you are close enough. Saying that you feel tiny and significant is an understatement, the notion of scale ceased to exist in that moment.

The road is 6 lanes wide in each direction, 12 in total with a wide landscaped island in-between. The two sides of the city are separated by such a high way on both sides of the 'green river' with no end in sight to the asphalt road. Cars sprint down the road past us as if there are still hundreds of kilometers of ground yet to be covered. I imagine, if this city was not as empty as it was today, years into the future, how are people meant to cross into the 'green river' park/area/zone? Is the only possible mode of accessibility a car/vehicle? Once again the human scale seems to have been left out of the equation.

Tall glass towers emerge in the distance. These are large structures that are visible all the way from New Cairo as silhouettes in the desert. The area was still inaccessible and so we could not get too close or drive through this business district. The materiality of these towers begs the question of the

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kind of mechanical infrastructure required to cool and ventilate them during the hot summers and the possibility of a heat island in the spaces between them.

Although the scale of the development of the city leaves one with many feelings, impressive is definitely one of them. It must be noted that the pace with which the city has emerged from scratch and level of infrastructure and development that exist there today is noteworthy. The only question that kept coming to mind was what is it all for?

The question was short lived by the excessive stippling of 10 story high density housing clusters to the left and to the right of this immense central axis. Each cluster had a single prototype that is repeated extensively to create a high urban density neighborhood within the city. Each of the clusters has its own unique look/style/aesthetic but they all gave off the same feeling.

Another notable zone is the culmination of the financial, ministries and governance districts. The collection of buildings that make up the financial district are finished with sandstone and reflective black glass. The same materials are used for the ministries districts. However, each has a different expression. It is easy to see that for the financial district, each bank leaves





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|----------------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------|
| 1 AL-FATTAH AL-ALIM MOSQUE | 5 BUSINESS DISTRICT | 9 GOVERNANCE DISTRICT | 13 PRESIDENTIAL PALACE |
| 2 SOUTH GATE | 6 CHURCH | 10 PEOPLE'S SQUARE | 14 NORTH AXIS |
| 3 SOUTH AXIS | 7 CULTURAL DISTRICT | 11 PRESIDENTIAL AXIS | 15 NORTH GATE |
| 4 GREEN RIVER | 8 FINANCIAL & MINISTRIES DISTRICT | 12 PRESIDENTIAL PARK | 16 RESIDENTIAL DISTRICTS |





its mark on the architectural form and façade expression. As for the ministries district, they all resemble abstracted ancient Egyptian temples that cannot be distinguished from one another, all bearing the golden symbol of the Falcon.

Opposite the ministries district and the administrative governance district sits the presidential palace, which cannot be seen by the naked eye, separated by a longitudinal 'people's park' with the symbolic 'Arc De Triumph' at its center. Although the park presents potential for usable public space, it is both fenced and gated. The same applies to the green river, with designated entrance points. These inevitable choreograph the way people move through space. Here once again, we find a 20 lane road separating the people's park and the ministries and governance districts.

Perpendicular to the arc and the people's park is another axis that hosts the 'people's square', exactly between the Council of Ministers and the House of Representatives. This area was more challenging to access and so little may be said about the nature of the spaces there. However, if anything can be inferred from the experience leading up to that point, it is that the travel distance from any point a to any point b is enormous and not meant to be traveled on foot, and therefore unfortunately not intended for the referred 'people'.

Although the whole site is clearly under construction and there are numerous engineers and workers on site, they are almost negligible and indistinguishable in the landscape. This again makes me wonder about the future of this city. Are people only meant to marvel at the scale and grossness of the endeavor and the strength of the political regime that brought it to life, or is it actually meant to be lived in? Because from the way most public spaces I have seen during the visit are fenced off and have clearly demarcated gated access, that future for people is difficult to imagine.

It must be stated that an attempt has been made to adopt certain stylistic notions associated with Egypt's heritage, whether ancient Egyptian or Islamic. However, the question is, is it enough to take things at surface value/level and cut and paste certain Islamic motifs or ancient Egyptian symbols and place them on otherwise detached structures? Is the adoption of the arch or pattern or lotus flower enough to make the connection to heritage and identity?

This is where my theory comes in to challenge this notion of borrowing architecture, even if from within the local context, and instead look at the interaction between architecture and people. Instead of creating an architecture of grand gestures and bold statements to impress the "other", this new trajectory is adopted as the starting point to challenge the notion of the vernacular.







