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CAIRO'S NEW TOWNS

FROM ONE REVOLUTION TO ANOTHER

From Emptiness to Emerging Urbanity, Passing through Exclusionary Urbanism

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It is the real, and not the map, whose vestiges subsist here and there, in the deserts which are no longer those of the Empire, but our own. The desert of the real itself.

– Jean Baudrillard, 1981¹

The Two-Stage “Concrete-ization” of the Desert: From a Public Approach to a Neoliberal One

Amr is back home: Sixth of October city, Hay al-Muntaz, stairwell C, third floor, left door. The Ministry of Housing, Utilities, and Urban Development’s bus has taken no more than an hour to reach his residential district, even though it is located 35 kilometers from the planning office from where he has been monitoring the Greater Cairo master plan for the last twenty years.

By moving to this residential district on the edge of the western desert, he has become far less marginal than when he lived in the crowded middle-class apartment blocks of Giza, although these are much closer. Once it had reached the car bridges and crossed the ring road without any major delay, his bus raced westwards above the intricate universe of illegal constructions (*ashwa’iyyat*) that overlays the rare surviving

irrigated cultivation activities in Greater Cairo. This is one of the Housing Ministry's nightmares: four million people live there today, where only a little more than 700,000 lived in 1970, when the ministry launched the master plan that was supposed, with its four new satellite cities, to put an end to the encroachment of agricultural land. The bus then finally reached its destination, the desert plateau of Giza, northwest of the three pyramids.

Thinks change rapidly. His best friend from school, Ahmed, who chose to stay downtown, commutes every day to the IBM Technology Development Center in the Smart Village, where he works on a prepaid smart electricity meter project for all of Cairo. The meters will merge with a complete, real-time geo-database, gathering information on residents.

The current military regime touts the promises of rationalized urban flows and the performance surveillance attendant to smart urbanism. It prolongs, in the virtual world, the current president's pharaonic ambition to create a new capital between Cairo and the Red Sea.

Heavy traffic jams are recurrent in the city nowadays, but in the reverse direction, as workers and engineers commute to industrial and IT parks on the desert fringes. Retail employees, too, are traveling to jobs in the malls that have more recently completed the landscape of the new towns in the desert. The Mall of Arabia, Arkan, Tagamu el Khames, or Designopolis have become central places where all of Cairo can come together to share, under freshly conditioned air, the infinite consumerist possibilities of an imagined Dubai way of life. The two worlds, the desert city and downtown with its ministries and offices, are increasingly interconnected environments of living, work, and leisure. Their networks pass over and neglect the working-class areas in the Nile Valley that are also burgeoning like never before since the mass uprising of January 2011. Increasingly, land conversions and construction in the fertile valley are also

taking the form of speculative-housing.²

A decade ago, Amr could not have imagined moving so quickly into such a comfortable flat. He was among the first to purchase, based on plans, from the Engineers Syndicate, thanks to his connections among the Muslim Brotherhood that was controlling it until the crack down on the organization in the fall of 2013—after the coup against then-president Mohamed Morsi. The real estate boom of the 1990s and the early twenty-first century changed everything. He and his colleagues at the Greater Cairo Physical Planning Office did not see it coming at all. In less than fifteen years, the urbanized area of Cairo has almost tripled in size, and roadway infrastructure, as well as the supply of transport—privately run, rather than public—has finally caught up, keeping pace with the projects of developers.

Amr's residential district, built in 1991, had stood empty for almost a decade, an improbable juxtaposition of concrete and brick skeletons plunked down willy-nilly in the middle of the desert. For the next ten years, it remained just barely accessible and livable. It was only after 2010 that neighborhood shops started expanding their offerings and supermarkets like Carrefour opened.

In the meantime, the modernist, working-class cores of these new towns, which were built by the state, gained more than 1,000 square kilometers of recreational and exclusive residential projects—gated communities, golf courses, and amusement parks, not to mention universities and private hospitals—during the 1990s. Residential complexes with evocative names such as Utopia, Gardenia, New Garden City, Qatamiya Heights, and Dreamland emerged by the dozens. As of 2016, new high-class projects are still popping up and consuming space like never before: Park Corner, Oriana Villas, and Mivida in New Cairo, or El Patio Zahraa in Sheikh Zayed-Sixth of October are just a few of them.

In less than a decade, a new urban world has emerged at Cairo's gates: 1,000

square kilometers outfitted with sewers and utilities, an immense, sparsely inhabited, recovered surface of sand and rocks partially divided into plots. This is equal to twice the size of the contemporary Cairo urban agglomeration, which took a millennium to grow and had a population of some thirteen million inhabitants in 2006—twenty times more than the 600,000 urbanites who cope with uncertainty and deficiencies of all manners in this uncompleted milieu of public housings and gated communities.³

Amr works in an office on the roof of the ministry, in an extra story added on top of the fifteenth floor. The walls are made of planks and the roof of corrugated steel—not very legal. He registers the plots of land sold by the state that are open to property development, and records them on a map. Ever since the appointment of minister Mohamed Ibrahim Soliman in 1993, Amr has been constantly covering his map with new areas devoted to grandiose projects that were never part of any previous planning rule. The desert fringes have become the new horizon for Cairo and for Egypt, the place to be: these days, one has to be in Palm Hills or Beverly Hills, just as in the early twentieth century one absolutely had to move to Baron Empain's oasis at Heliopolis, and in the 1880s, to the banks of the Nile, which were done up in the Haussmannian style.⁴ So many sites have been sold, most often by mutual agreement and without any public tender, that no one can figure out where the second ring road should now go. The housing ministry no longer makes plans; it just keeps records.

And yet the idea of crossing the desert plateaus was considered inconceivable by Amr's father, who as a young engineer participated in the formulation of the first Greater Cairo Master Plan in 1956, right after independence: "It has to limit the urban development on the west side for preserving the agricultural land whenever possible as green belt and protecting it against any further encroaching of the city....The eastern limit was determined by the Moqattam hills and the contour lines which make any development highly expensive."⁵ While the change in direction towards favoring new

towns in the 1970 master plan—later reaffirmed in the 1982 plan—opened the door for today’s boom, development remained under the guidance of a progressive planning vision controlled exclusively by the state: “Massive opening of desert land to urbanization *especially toward the east which is easiest to develop* with the creation of new settlements along the ring road and around the satellite cities.”⁶ This was a continuation of the hygienist and reformist discourses of the early twentieth century in Egypt, which promoted model villages and the conquest of new lands—in order to expand agricultural land, of course, but also to bring about the advent of a modern peasantry and, with the new towns, to turn peasants into city-dwellers.⁷

Starting in the early 1990s, land on the desert fringes, which is the property of the state, began to be sold without restraint or any overall plan to private developers. This transfer continues to this day, involving increasingly gigantic private projects. This political about-face is grounded in the practical implementation, in 1991, of the Egyptian government’s adoption of liberal dogma, something to which it had hitherto merely paid lip service since the Camp David Accords (1978) that ended the conflict with Israel. At the Ministry of Housing and New Communities, as the housing ministry was known at the time, this manifested itself in the end of the era of the omnipotent minister Hassaballah el-Kafrawi in 1993. This champion of standardized, mass-produced public housing built on the desert fringes had been in command of the housing ministry since 1978. In el-Kafrawi’s view, what mattered was to establish a planned alternative to counter the expansion of illegal working-class housing into the fertile land of the Nile Valley, while also creating a new urban society. With the end of his term, a halt was called to the mass production of *blockat*: the “Kafrawi no. 4 and 5” or “Chinese”-type buildings that dominated the landscape, urban-design compositions plunked down in the middle of the desert.⁸

In 1991, immediately after the First Gulf War, Egypt signed a program of reform and

economic liberalization with the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. The agreement aimed at reducing public spending, facilitating privatization, and opening up to foreign direct investment. It was accompanied by the partial reduction of foreign debt in return for the deployment of Egyptian troops in Kuwait alongside the international coalition that had repelled the Iraqi army.

After this agreement, the state could no longer give priority to public housing programs. In any event, the initial program of new towns intended for the working class had entirely failed to achieve its aims. The new towns remained ghost towns, full of pitiful and soulless concrete structures. Instead of the one to two million inhabitants they could and should have housed, given the completed housing on offer, a mere 30,000 unfortunates were spending a difficult exile in them. Even when inhabited, the buildings were becoming dilapidated at an incredible rate: bearing structures and foundations would crumble after the smallest leak, and many even had to be demolished less than ten years after they were built. Reform thus provided an opportunity to put an end to a plan that had been sustained merely to support construction suppliers and reach the plan's quotas, with surreal landscapes as a result.

The sale of land resources was also part of a privatization program meant to refill the government's coffers. The transfer of real estate development in the desert to the private sector signified the disengagement of the state from housing production altogether.

The real-estate boom was now underway, and has maintained, ever since, a dynamic of producing new, exclusive, and restricted residential neighborhoods—private cities, even. Better still, the ministry has allocated lots in the desert to major building contractors in exchange for public infrastructure projects such as bridges, irrigation canals, and so on.

In the mid-1990s, the cabinet did attempt to impose a moratorium so that a universal

plan and regulatory instruments could be drawn up to ensure the transparency needed for transactions, but the housing ministry paid little heed. Updates to the master plan consistently endorsed the sale of building lots. New Cairo was developed on an area almost equal to the size of the existing city; on pre-1990 maps, this area had been designated as a zone to be greened and where building would be prohibited.

The dynamic was maintained by a rise in revenues, an opening to foreign capital (from the Gulf in particular), the performance of the real estate market, and the devaluation of the Egyptian pound, which guaranteed ever-greater liquidity to holders of currency. These afforded them profit margins far superior to inflation, which fueled a rise in real estate prices. Investment in land and real estate—in an apartment, *sha'qa*, or villa—is something all sections of Egyptian society aspire to, in order to deal with the uncertainties, devaluations, and deficiencies of the banking system. It is the only investment (along with gold) that makes it possible to stockpile acquired wealth and reduce the risks associated with the volatility and lack of transparency of the markets, as well as with devaluations. The standard housing produced by the state and the corporate syndicates in the new towns was turned over entirely to this speculative market, which explains why they never reached their working-class target.

Finally, one must not forget that Egypt is still undergoing significant demographic growth.⁹ This means that demand, even if it is only partly solvent, does exist. Investment in construction and especially in land therefore entails minimum guarantees: prices will adjust to demand, but the money will not vanish like in a stock market crash.

This unprecedented reversal, in which the desert became the focus of all investments and all efforts toward social progress, was not simply the product of government reform in favor of the private sector. Rather, it was above all the result of the private sector gaining access to government, under the guise of an opening up to

civil society. In the 1990s, having taken over the machinery of the National Democratic Party, entrepreneurs entered parliament and subsequently became part of the government.

Court cases against the collusion between land developers and the state elite had preceded the January 2011 uprising. Take the Talaat Moustafa Group and its Madinaty megaproject, for example, which was on the brink of cancellation after the group bought thirty-three million square meters of land for almost nothing in a direct sale from a government agency. Famous slogans during the uprising addressed these injustices, political racketeering, and the dilapidation of public properties. A banner deployed by one protester renamed Tahrir square as *Montaga al Huriyya* (the Freedom Resort), directly addressing the liberal turn and its exclusive landscape of residential and leisure compounds.¹⁰ Then, the sons of then-president Hosni Mubarak were notably arrested for their involvement in real estate affairs and their supervision of “Cairo 2050,” a liberal and Dubai-inspired vision for Cairo’s urban development that was projected to dispossess and displace many working-class communities; the housing minister was dismissed and brought to court along with his predecessor; several tycoons escaped abroad; and major residential projects were left on the edge of bankruptcy.

Despite the voices calling for the restitution of public property, the real estate business rebounded rapidly after 2011. It has been flourishing more than ever since the army retook power on June 30, 2013, in a sort of impeachment-by-force of the first freely elected and Muslim-Brotherhood-backed president, Mohamed Morsi. It followed an unequalled mobilization of millions of citizens against the non-secular regime.

This unfinished sequence of historical change reveals how the tycoons of the Mubarak era, as well as the upper-class coalition who made itself rich in the land deals and the easy access to credit before the revolution, managed to survive the difficult

times with their fortunes safeguarded in the land they had capitalized around Cairo.¹¹ Their land assets have withstood the revolution, with its terrible inflation (10 to 12 percent per year) and the fall of the Egyptian pound (from 5.74 against the US dollar in January 2011 to 8.87 in September 2016) associated with the quasi collapse of the stock exchange. Land value and real estate prices, however, did not erode. The owners of such properties are today in an excellent position to refinance themselves via the bank and (re)articulate themselves within the state apparatus. The tycoons are back on the stage with even bigger projects—thanks to money from the Gulf.

For Amr, after the uncertainty and incapacity of Tariq Wafiq, his former professor at the school of planning of Cairo University and housing minister under the Morsi administration, to show the way toward a more inclusive and just urban development, the present day is just like wearing his old and comfortable castor pajamas to go to the daily market. The routines are back. After the coup, Ibrahim Mahlab, the former president of the giant, semi-public construction company Arab Contractor, briefly became his minister, but Mahlab advanced rapidly to become prime minister in March 2014. Then, Mostafa Madbouli, Amr's former boss at the General Organization for Physical Planning during the conception of Cairo 2050, became the new housing minister. With the support of UN-Habitat, he supervised the revision of the 2050 plan. Renamed the *Greater Cairo Regional Strategic Development Vision*, it preserves the business friendly spirit and provisions for new towns and gigantic high-end residential and commercial projects that were present in the Cairo 2050 plan. The largest change was the adoption of a new name—the ministry was now known as the Ministry of Housing, Utilities, and Urban Development, instead of the Ministry of Housing and New Communities.

When, in March 2015, the Egyptian president and army general Abdel Fattah al-Sisi launched the pharaonic Capital Cairo¹² project in the presence of most of the Gulf

leaders as well as many representatives of Dubai and Abu Dhabi construction and real estate companies, the possibility of an inclusive city that had been opened up by the 2011 uprising was completely extinguished. Later, Chinese entrepreneurs began showing interest in investing: in September 2016, a memorandum of understanding was inked with the state-owned China Fortune Land Development company. It will move several ministry buildings there and fund a trade-fair and a giant conference center following a diplomatic line of strategic investments already experimented with in several other African countries. This grandiose, dystopian plan reflects the comeback of a familiar pattern: nepotism and racketeering backed by an authoritarian state apparatus, in turn supported by foreign investments from non-democratic states characterized by a firm association of private business expansion and national interest. The Capital Cairo project concretizes (at least on paper as a “regime of graphics”¹³) the will to capture in a gigantic grid all the wealth of Egypt while excluding, under control, the people (*al-sha’ab*). The potential cost has been estimated somewhere between fifty and three hundred billion US dollars, which can be put in perspective when considering the eight billion US dollars of public money spent for new cities over the last thirty years.

Promoting Housing outside the “Victorious City”: the Flight into the Desert¹⁴

For exclusive housing developments of the gated-community type, the tourism angle is fundamental. The tourist resorts of the Mediterranean or the Red Sea were the frontlines for the normalization of an alternative lifestyle, taking place outside the city walls, for the wealthiest of Cairo’s residents. The summer months spent among peers, far from the maddening crowd, made it possible to conceive of an alternative to city living in spatial proximity with the rest of society. Therefore, when the first gated

communities appeared in the early 1990s, they immediately found a clientele that was convinced of the benefits of this new mode of living. These luxury tourist villages west of Alexandria are also where the elites have been shoring up their contacts for several decades, and where the circles and alliances of today's business and political figures—those same figures now carrying out liberal reforms—were formed.

From this point of view, the elites filled their role as pioneers perfectly, introducing, at the heart of social aspirations, a radical rupture from the *felahi wa madani* (peasant and city-dweller) model of settlement in Egypt. They literally fled the fertile river valley and disavowed a city model anchored in density, diversity, and sharing the same public space. By championing private cities on the front pages of newspapers and on television, they succeeded in promoting what had hitherto—given the poor people who had been forcibly relocated, without means or recourse, to the first working-class residential districts of the new towns—seemed a terrible relegation, exposed to the threat of wild dogs and oblivion, far from the support of loved ones. The desert fringes became the territory of all success, of empowerment.

The desire to follow the new trend has subsequently spread throughout society, even if for the majority, the reality of the super dense, working-class suburbs surrounding Cairo remains the norm and will continue to be so. For in a context of global economic competition, it is unlikely that a stable and expanded middle class can emerge that is capable of borrowing from banks in order to gain access to housing in the new private communities in the desert. The market for these desert cities remains largely speculative, driven by the transnational demand for millionaire villas and other mansions with views over the golf courses, amusement parks, or the stretches of preserved desert that guarantee the exclusion of others.

The prices give an idea of the speculative nature of the sector. A villa on a golf course purchased for 250,000 US dollars in 1996 was worth one million US dollars in

2010. Similarly, a standard 60 square-meter apartment sells today for around 60,000 US dollars, or nineteen years of the average annual income, despite expert agreement that the cost of low-income housing should not exceed five years' worth of earnings. The speculative nature of this urbanism can also be assessed against the yardstick of the number of housing units acquired but still unoccupied: the 2006 census reported vacancy rates of 63 percent in the new cities around Cairo, compared to 25 percent within the city, while 10 percent is the average rate in the large cities of industrial democracies.

This is in fact why, since the 1990s, the regime has initiated a policy of tolerating and often legalizing illegal working-class housing around Cairo. It can no longer offer a public housing alternative, even if, until the brutal end of the Mubarak era, it boasted a massive program of subsidized housing named after Madame Mubarak that has never reached the modest young couples it was intended for. On the periphery of Sixth of October city, Haram City, an award-winning project by the Orascom Housing Communities, exemplifies the affordable housing programs being realized in public-private partnership. Designed in 2007 with support from the World Bank and the United Nations Development Programme, it has become the flagship of a potential socially mixed form of development for the new towns. Despite the defective construction, the burden of housing costs, and the difficulty faced by the more modest households in accessing credit lines, a real urban life is emerging there for its thirty thousand inhabitants. Its expanding Suq el-Sha'abi (daily market) gives a unique sense of community that constitutes an all-too-rare expression of spontaneous appropriation of space in the new cities.

In 2016, the affordable housing concept was appropriated by the regime as a central element of the Capital Cairo plan. It promoted a 1.5 billion-dollar plan to relocate 850,000 *ashwa'iyyat* dwellers. Under the name "Tahya Misr" (Long Live Egypt),

housing projects have already caused forced evictions of residents in illegal neighborhoods qualified as non-inhabitable, pushing them out toward the satellite cities in the desert. The Tahya Misr Fund is directly controlled by the president, lacks any transparent accounting, and is supported by tycoons that have found a convenient way to continue their businesses close to the state, pay their back taxes, and avoid court cases for their arrangements with the pre-revolution regime.

This initiative reveals the never-ending dialectic between the authoritarian reformists, on the one hand, who push for eviction and resettlement, and the social movements and alternative urbanists, on the other hand, who push for accommodating residents' grassroots capabilities to produce their urban environment starting with their own homes. Indeed, the military regime has taken its share in the latter as well, by directly contracting with army construction companies involved in rehabilitation schemes for illegal settlements. The Ministry of Urban Renewal and Informal Settlements did not last long (from July 2015 to October 2016)—a sign, among others, that the priority of the regime and the elite remains the development of new towns, as well as using construction and real estate as a motor of growth and personal wealth accumulation. In 2016, a study conducted by the interdisciplinary research group 10 Tooba showed that, for the fiscal budget for 2015–2016, infrastructure for the new cities received an equivalent amount of public investments as the rest of the settlements, villages, and towns in the country combined, where 98% of the Egyptian population lives.¹⁵

New Cities in a Regional Perspective: Stability and Opportunities

The pro-rich bias of the peripheral residential market is maintained by an Arab clientele, who are in turn powered by oil revenues. In light of the disintegration of the

rest of the Middle East, Arab entrepreneurs and clients see in the stability of Egypt—not to mention the individual liberty it affords its guests—an investment environment without equal. Egypt, and Cairo in particular, is thus a place in which wealthy investors from the oil monarchies increasingly prefer to invest, now that Lebanon no longer offers any guarantees. Iraqi businesspersons seeking to invest as well as set up residence abroad also constitute a choice clientele. The new mode of housing in the deserts also came by way of the Gulf monarchies, where many Egyptian graduates go to work: it is there that they first experienced gated communities and decentralized urban forms scattered across the desert.¹⁶ Since the 2011 revolution, Gulf countries are as present as ever in Egypt. With the exception of the Qatari sovereign fund and other Qatari construction companies, which presently lag behind after having supported the Muslim Brotherhood and the Morsi presidency, the Gulf monarchies and their businesspersons are very keen to lend money and aid to Egypt, gaining in exchange access to favored opportunities for investment. New cities and prime locations along the Nile are particularly privileged sites. Cairo Uptown, a megaproject developed by the Dubai company Emaar, sets the tone: “4.5 million sqm of luxury, indulgence, and comfort within a few minutes from Sixth of October Bridge and New Cairo via Emaar Drive.”¹⁷

A second reason behind the entrepreneurial adoption of the model of private cities in the desert lies in the social and political rehabilitation, through the prism of neoliberal dogma, of the Egyptian liberal age, which is to say the whole of the early twentieth century before independence and Gamal Abdel Nasser’s accession to power. This was a golden age for real estate development, during which all of the exclusive neighborhoods in Cairo were built up. This colonial-era memory is now used as a vehicle to promote gated-community projects such as New Garden City and New Heliopolis, or villas that, depending on their style, bear the name of various princes,

khedives, or princesses of Egypt.

The heritage-based promotion of the ancient center, as well as the restorations of the villas on the banks of the Nile, also carried out by the elites and the business community, served to legitimize exclusive projects in the desert and the development of a world of artifacts.¹⁸ The trend went as far as to create a fake ancient *souk* in the middle of the desert, Khan al-Azizi. It failed. The turmoil of 2011 precipitated its bankruptcy, and now it only lives on as an abandoned structure, although other commercial programs of this sort have taken off since then.

Conversely, the socialist experiment of the Nasser years has come to be considered an absolute abomination. It is now seen as a phase of stagnation for Egyptian society during which individual or private initiative was crushed. Social, public, and collective housing, which was introduced in this period and continued long after thanks to public policies led by engineers trained under socialism and a culture of modernist architecture that supports the powerful semi-public building lobby almost to this day, became its most virulently rejected avatar.¹⁹ In the process, the influence of the era of Egyptian nation-building after the 1952 revolution has also been minimized, although the country had been the core of the international Non-Aligned Movement and Pan-Arabism.

The Riverbank of the Dead Given Over to Skeletons

Until the authorities started using them to house several thousand homeless survivors of the 1992 earthquake as well as the daily victims of collapsing derelict buildings in the old city, the new towns of the 1980s were almost entirely deserted. The Egyptian press described them as “ghost towns,” and they indeed had the appearance of never-completed building sites, where no Cairo resident wanted to go. Those

unfortunate enough to be displaced or forced for economic reasons to move there were constantly clamoring for basic services. The only things the authorities successfully relocated to the desert were new cemeteries.²⁰

Those unfortunate enough to be relegated to these new towns, in Qatamiya or in the “Chinese” tower blocks of Sixth of October, were issued flats without any finished work, without proper doors or windows, and without a single shop—most neighborhood plans did not stipulate any, and there was no funding for those that had been planned. Similarly, there was virtually no regular bus line to these ghost towns, and the rare modes of transport, given the distance from Cairo, were far too expensive for their residents. Meanwhile, there was running water for only a few hours a day and the brand-new sewers were already overflowing.

Cemeteries and poorly finished skeletons (concrete-frame structures filled in with bricks) shared the landscape with piles of rubble and oversized (but never completed) roadways, along with a few barracks. This was the standard landscape beyond the pyramids or along the road to Port Said from the 1980s until the mid-1990s.

Being exiled to the anonymous cities of the desert was all the more unpopular because to relocate outside the Nile Valley, into the desert, signified a break with the cultural foundation of Egyptian society. The desert remains the realm of the dead—as the west bank of the Nile was in the religion of the time of the pharaohs—which is why it had remained off the market until recently. The desert constitutes a place of initiation, of the experience of the void. It is also where monasteries were built. Therefore, turning the desert into a place that was not just acceptable, but attractive—even exclusive—required a major adaptation of the myths guaranteeing the territorial structures of communal life, amidst density and diversity, on either side of the Nile. Nevertheless, starting in the 2010s, people from different classes have been moving voluntarily to Sixth of October and New Cairo. Life tends to normalize and services are

expanding, including spontaneous and interstitial solutions by small merchants responding to the insufficient offerings in the formally designed areas. Moreover, the industrial areas of new towns have long attracted hundreds of factories and thousands of jobs, and thus indirect activities have also emerged in the surrounding areas. With the development of tertiary activities such as universities, specialized hospitals, malls, and high-tech parks there, engineers too have started to think about a change in their job location and place of residence.²¹

At the beginning, living in the desert meant to transgress a fundamental, structural interdict on settlement. The placing on the market and the real-estate conquest of a void where settlement has been forbidden (a vacuum), which traditionally assured the exclusive promotion of the river valley and the delta, implies a powerful means of leverage carried out by private developers and thus the creative destruction of a proscription. Naturally, as they are open to the world, elites are more suited to free themselves of these cultural values and to domesticate this hostile environment. Such resources are not simply material and financial. They also entail a conversion to a new myth: the neoliberal dogma offering a framework of justification for individual and private conquest, exclusively among peers—a departure, therefore, from a tradition of living and participating in social diversity. Moving to gated communities outside the city walls means subscribing to this momentum of individualistic rupture, in which a part of society chooses to abandon solidarity with those who lack the means for such mobility and adaptation to the global scale.

Here, the devaluation of life within the inner city of Cairo, as much as the promotion of the new mode of life on the fringes, made it possible to initiate the settlement of desert areas as soon as the government lifted the interdict on settlement that had held for several thousand years.

Devaluation: The Abandonment of a Unified Urban Society in Favor of Privatized Democracy

The departure of the elites for these vast desert expanses was accompanied by a sense of a loss of control over their environment. The devaluation of Cairo was not a natural development. Until the early 1990s, the elites were in fact very active in defending the integrity of an idealized urban society against an invasion by peasants, against a ruralization that threatened Cairo's identity—even though migration to Cairo had been declining since the 1980s (today, little more than 10 percent of Cairo's inhabitants are not native to the city) and this invasion was therefore somewhat of a phantasm. The issue of distinction played out among Cairo's residents, between the rich and the poor, but it remained coded in terms of geographic origin and therefore of legitimacy as a true city dweller. Master plans attempted to represent this desire to protect the integrity of the city against invaders. The ring road was conceived as a raised rampart demarcating the boundaries of the legal city, while the new towns were intended to house the plebeian populace as separate suburbs. Anwar Sadat even considered issuing a Cairo identity card to monitor the influx of migrants. In 1996, a governor once again proposed it as a solution, but by then no one believed in it. It was too late: the city was already totally compromised, lost, and overrun. The elites no longer felt at home. They could not move around the city without being confronted, in endless traffic jams, by a noisy mob. To escape, to flee in order to establish a new city, became an attractive prospect.

The traumas of the 1990s further allowed for real estate promoters to position desert cities as a potential Eden. The 1992 earthquake laid bare Cairo's fragility and reinforced the notion that living in a villa would provide better protection than living in a block of flats that was often old and lacking proper maintenance. This is to say nothing

of the fact that Islamist groups, in the wake of this humanitarian disaster, displayed an effectiveness that far outstripped that of the state—a sign that they had a significant presence in Cairo’s working-class areas, precisely where the state had lost its grip. This evolved into increasingly violent confrontations between the state and these organizations, which signaled a point of no return in modes of protest against the regime.²² While Cairo remained one of the world’s safest metropolises, thus in no way justifying a flight to gated communities in line with the Californian or South African model, Islamist-based protest against the regime encouraged this kind of flight. These protests and rare popular unrests represented not so much a physical threat as a movement of structural dissent about values, which was gaining ground while imposing restrictive and orthodox moral standards on society as a whole. The gated-community model made it possible to escape this moralization of public space. The January 2011 uprising and the uncertainty that predominated until the summer of 2013 added layers of arguments for the upper-middle class to leave the inner city, which had been the theatre of violent unrests that clearly denounced growing inequalities. The grassroots appropriation of the streets turned into negative words on the lips of the “decent” families.

The appropriation of the environmental discourse and increased attention to pollution—not only air pollution, but all of the other blemishes that degrade the city, notably refuse and overflowing sewers—reinforced the sense of an irreversible degradation of living conditions. Then, according to a logic of naturalization, the poor, intrinsically carriers of dirt, became encroaching pollutants themselves, something to be fled. The exodus to the gated communities was thus part of a quest for a lost purity, in which the desert reclaimed its status as a purifying space. It was a media-driven social construct of an “ecology of fear” that made it possible to promote a commercial alternative and sell exclusivity and security.²³

In this regard, it is fascinating to see how promoters and buyers, as well as the government, repackage the development of villas surrounded by golf courses or artificial forests as the pursuit of the green revolution and the conquest of the deserts, or even as the creation of new natural areas for Egyptian society. This extremely exclusive and extremely costly way—particularly in terms of water resources—of turning the desert green has been legitimized as a contribution to the progress of Egyptian society as a whole.

The loss of class distinctions has to be viewed within the context of the degradation of the identity of the city. There is no longer enough open space to stage this difference. Moreover, liberalization has created a *nouveau riche* class, for whom it is unacceptable to find oneself alongside a butcher or a small contractor when picking up one's son at the gates of a private school. The gated community is therefore understood as an opportunity to create a neighborhood of "people like us" who share the same values. This exclusivity is far removed from—in fact the very opposite of—the reformist ambitions that drove the protagonists of Egyptian independence: they saw the new towns as instruments that would facilitate adaptation to modern life, as well as help along integration of working-class inhabitants from rural areas into the city and its practices.

"For the Desert of the Cities Is Equal to the Desert of Sands"²⁴

The real, historical city has therefore become a desert of sorts, in which life is impossible. The buyers of villas in gated communities and other private cities see themselves as pioneers of a new society, one that erases and excludes the old society and re-creates it on the margins based on a plan for a self-creating utopia.

Drawing from the experience of the clubs left behind by the British, into which one

can only gain entry through co-option and in which selection entails major stakes, the gated communities developed archipelagos of private micro-democracies. This has to be understood as an alternative to the Egyptian political system, which is completely hermetic and offers no such democratic spaces—no credible elections, no real decentralization, to say nothing of corruption: in other words, economic liberalization without political liberalization.²⁵ In that, too, 2011 has not been a turning point.

In the image of the world adopted by its elites, Cairo has in its very geographic form become a constantly expanding universe, where the center of gravity, or Cairo proper, is no longer particularly relevant in the face of the lures of the outside world, of the potential for mobility expanded to a global scale, and of the flows that connect the entirety of the planet. Withdrawing to one's villa is, first and foremost, connecting to the world—through satellite television, telephone, Internet, and so on. This represents a profound revolution in global settlement, in which the desert fringe, invested in and inhabited by these new cosmopolitan nomads, is redefining the contours and the integration of Egyptian society.

The public cores of the new towns built in the 1980s are also experiencing, thanks to the real estate boom that surrounds them, localized forms of regeneration. Transport services finally link them to the metropolis, services are multiplying along with businesses and sometimes even genuine commercial centers, like malls. More and more people are moving to these areas, in particular the middle class individuals who have their own cars. A diffusion of settlement is thus taking place that, through a new social mix, could bring nuance to the apparent exclusivity of the current appropriation of the deserts. As for the worst of the public housing projects—those plonked down there in the 1980s and 1990s to satisfy statistical demands—they are falling into ruin, stand abandoned, or have been demolished because they spoiled the view from a luxury residential project, or because developers wanted to buy the sites they

occupied.

Regional integration is not only bringing the shining exclusionary life of compounds and malls to the new towns; it also brings the victims of forced migrations due to raging wars. Since the 2000s, there have been a few Iraqi and Sudanese families that have found shelter in the unfinished and sometime decaying public and cooperative housing projects as sub-tenants. Today, the scale of such regional presence is changing at a tremendous pace; Syrians have taken over whole streets in new towns, opening restaurants and shops and even investing in factories—creating a “Little Damascus” behind Sixth of October University. There are no less than thirty thousand in Sixth of October alone, bringing a sense of diversity and subaltern cosmopolitanism to the new cities. Saying that is not to downplay the hard time migrants are having in Cairo, who have to face, all too often, xenophobic attitudes.

- 1 Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacres et Simulation* (Paris: Galilée, 1981), 10.
- 2 David Sims, “Trends in Informal Areas’ Development Since 25 January 2011” (paper presented at the CEDEJ/GIZ/UN-Habitat workshop series “Egypt Urban Futures,” Cairo, March 11, 2013); Donia Tawakol, “Speculative Informal Housing Provision and its Socio-spatial Impacts on Greater Cairo Areas: A Case Study on ‘El-Matareya’” (master’s thesis, Erasmus University Rotterdam, 2015).
- 3 18.2 million in the metropolitan area—the total population of three governorates: Cairo, Giza, and Qaliyubiya, see: “Egypt Census, 2006,” *Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics of Egypt*, last consulted 10 October 2017, <http://egypt.opendataforafrica.org/EGSNS2006/egypt-census-2006>. The released of the first results of the January 2017 census enumerated 23.4 million inhabitants for the very same metropolitan area – an increase of 5.5 million in 10 years, against 3.4 during the previous decade. See: <http://www.capmas.gov.eg> last consulted 10 October 2017.
- 4 Robert Ilbert, *Heliopolis: 1905–1922, genèse d’une ville* (Paris: CNRS, 1991); Jean-Luc Arnaud, *Le Caire: Mise en place d’une ville moderne 1867–1907* (Arles: Sindbad/Actes Sud, 1998).
- 5 S. El Sadr and the Planning Commission of the Ministry of Municipal and Rural Affairs, Municipality of Cairo, eds., *Master Plan of Cairo* (Cairo: SOP Press, 1956), 45.
- 6 Jean-Emmanuel Cornu, “Planning for Cairo’s Future Environment,” in *The Expanding Metropolis:*

- Coping with the Urban Growth of Cairo*, ed. Ahmet Evin (Singapore: Concept Media/The Aga Khan Award for Architecture, 1985), 191. Emphasis in original.
- 7 Timothy Mitchell, "The Invention and Reinvention of the Egyptian Peasant," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 22, no. 2 (May 1990), 129-150.
- 8 The "Kafrawi"-style standardized structures, named after the housing minister, were assigned a number according to the number of stories and thus of housing units; the other moniker alludes to a cooperation with the Chinese government, which supplied buildings made of pre-stressed concrete that are remarkably ill-adapted to desert heat.
- 9 Egypt gained fourteen million inhabitants between 1996 and 2006, including 2.7 million in the Greater Cairo area alone. Currently, in 2016, Egypt adds one million inhabitants every six months.
- 10 See Samia Mehrez, ed., *Translating Egypt's Revolution: The Language of Tahrir* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2012).
- 11 David Sims, *Egypt's Desert Dreams: Development or Disaster?* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2015).
- 12 The Capital Cairo official website, accessed August 8, 2017, <http://thecapitalcairo.com/>.
- 13 The expression was coined by Adham Selim, see: Adham Selim, "Capital Cairo: A Regime of Graphics," *Mada Masr*, August 5, 2015, http://www.madamasr.com/sections/culture/capital-cairo-regime-graphics#_ftn1.
- 14 "Victorious City" is an allusion to the title of the seminal 1971 work by Janet Abu-Lughod and to the Arabic name for Cairo, "al-Qahira," meaning "the victorious."
- 15 10 Tooba, "The Built Environment Budget 2015/16: An Analysis of Spatial Justice in Egypt," accessed August 8, 2017, <http://www.10tooba.org/en/?p=172>.
- 16 Yasser Elsheshtawy, ed., *Planning Middle Eastern Cities: An Urban Kaleidoscope* (London: Routledge, 2004); Mike Davis, *Le stade Dubaï du capitalisme* (Paris: Les Prairies Ordinaires, 2007).
- 17 "About," Uptown Cairo official website, accessed August 8, 2017, <http://www.uptowncairo-egypt.com/en/About>.
- 18 Galila El Kadi, "La genèse du patrimoine en Egypte : du monument au centre historique," in *Regards croisés sur le patrimoine dans le monde à l'aube du XXI^e siècle*, ed. Maria Gravari-Barbas and Sylvie Guichard-Anguis (Paris: Presses de l'Université de Paris-Sorbonne, 2003), 99-115.
- 19 Omnia El Shakry, 2006. "Cairo as Capital of Socialist Revolution?" in *Cairo Cosmopolitan: Politics*,

Culture, and Urban Space in the New Globalized Middle East, ed. Diane Singerman and Paul Amar (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2006).

20 Fuelled by joint ventures and foreign investment, industry has found highly advantageous, tax-free sites in the industrial zones of the new cities of Sixth of October and Tenth of Ramadan. This made them the prime industrial employment areas in Egypt. Few workers took up residence in these cities, however: every day, company buses ferry their employees to and from Cairo's informal suburbs. See: Eric Denis and Leïla Vignal, "Cairo as Regional/Global Economic Capital?" in Singerman and Amar, *Cairo Cosmopolitan*, 99-152.

21 Salwa Abdel Maksoud Abdulla Eissa, "Intra-urban Migration to the New Cities in the Greater Cairo Region: Causes and Consequences" (master's thesis, American University in Cairo, 2011).

22 Patrick Haenni, *L'ordre des caïds: Conjurer la dissidence urbaine au Caire* (Paris: Karthala, 2005); Eric Denis, "La mise en scène des 'ashwaiyyât: Premier acte: Imbâba, décembre 1992," *Egypte/Monde Arabe* 20 (1994): 117-132.

24 Baudrillard, *Simulacres et Simulation*, 219.

25 Eberhard Kienle, *A Grand Delusion: Democracy and Economic Reform in Egypt* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2001).