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Housing Crisis by Design: Egypt's Politics of Respectability

Cairo has been through massive changes with the upheaval of Egypt's political regimes. Today, the city continues to experience the neoliberal civilizing mission of earlier decades, seen most clearly through the expansion of roads, bridges, and other car-based infrastructure. While the expansion of the Ring Road, and the accompanying destruction of any housing in its way, is a current project of President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi's regime, informal settlements have been a source of contention since the introduction of neoliberal economic policies in the 1970s under President Anwar el-Sadat. El-Sisi's cabinet has declared that Egypt will be "free from informal housing" by 2030—a rallying cry that is often not so much about improving livelihood or safer housing as it is about attracting more global investment into the country.[1] In fact, it is precisely because these settlements abut such a vital instrument of development that they have become a site of contestation over what is and is not allowed to be seen, respected, and produced as part of Egypt's national identity. In a sense, the Ring Road has made certain citizens and certain forms of life hyper-visible as a threat to the country's civilizing mission. The drive to "free" Cairo from this "informality" has, however, destroyed many of the social and economic structures that maintain the city itself.[2]

Since the Ring Road's inception in 2012, it has served as one of the main axes through which to move in the city—making visible the sprawl of informally built housing. The government's ongoing slum-freeing project has been one of demolition and forced relocation. As housing is torn down along the highway, the Ministry of Housing moves former residents into newly built neighborhoods on the peripheries of the city—occasionally rehousing people in "upgraded" versions of the settlements they once inhabited but often moving them to entirely new regions of Cairo. This development policy has been traumatic, not only destroying people's homes and any accumulated wealth but also severing people from one another and the sources of their livelihood, as communities in informal settlements cultivated their own job opportunities, transportation routes, and civic relations in the absence of government support. The political rhetoric that has named the brick walls of informal housing "visual pollution" obscures the many lives that have made a home within them.[3] The destruction of these homes manifests the costs of what the government touts as modernization plans.

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[1] "Egypt to Be Free from Informal Housing by 2030: Cabinet," *Daily News Egypt*, November 15, 2021, [link](#).

[2] Ian Wallace, "The Campaign to Reshape Egypt's Cityscapes and Eliminate Informal Housing," *Jadaliyya*, May 24, 2021, [link](#).

[3] Hatem Abdelmoneim Ahmed, "Protecting the Environment from Visual Pollution, Informal Housing, and Trash," *Al Ahrām*, October 27, 2018, [link](#). Translation by the author.



An informal means of transportation organized by people who have built stairs leading to the Ring Road to connect their neighborhoods to the rest of Cairo, 2023. Informal housing is seen in the background. Courtesy of the author.

Since the introduction of neoliberal economic policies in the 1970s, developers in Egypt have turned to Western architectural styles as signifiers of Cairo as a modernized city. But without investments into social policies that guarantee better standards of living for the residents, all these plans offer are the aesthetics of progress. By destroying informal housing along the highway, the government has privileged and produced a form of aesthetics to reflect its economic agenda, which, more than mobilizing and serving Egyptians, mobilizes and serves prospective sources of global capital.[4] All along the highway, advertisements for private housing compounds boast of “California-style living.” Meanwhile, many Egyptians continue to struggle in informal communities that they have developed from the ground up, facing the stigma that is associated with living in these communities presented by newscasters, social media, and movies. The ruins you see along the Ring Road are the ruins not just of buildings that stood in the way of road expansion but also of lives beyond the eyes of global trade and capital expansion.

[4] Heba Elhanafy, “Cairo Informal Settlements Confirm Market Potential for Developers,” *The Future of Development*, May 19, 2022, [link](#).



A billboard along the highway celebrating this so-called California-inspired living, 2020. Courtesy of the author.

Cairo has long faced a housing shortage, exacerbated by what David Harvey calls “accumulation by dispossession”: informal communities are being demolished and their residents relocated to clear space for a highway that links new luxury gated communities to the heart of the city.[5] In doing this, the Egyptian government is attempting to wipe away an image of poverty for an aesthetics of global cosmopolitanism as it courts development dollars. And while this may be an unfortunately common pattern of neoliberal urbanization, in Cairo it is inflected by a history of expropriation, securitization, and criminalization *manufactured* by the state. The housing crisis has served, since Egypt’s official independence from colonial rule and authority in 1952, as an opportunity for each regime to stage and enforce its own ideals of national identity—revealing the aspirations but also the anxieties of the state.[6]

[5] David Harvey, *Spaces of Global Capitalism* (New York: Verso, 2019).

Historicizing the Crisis

The word “crisis” obscures the protracted struggle and reoccurring condition of housing instability in Egypt as well as the ways that this “crisis” has been produced, reproduced, and sustained by the very policies intended to end it. Rather than a crisis, it has been a means through which the government (allied and aligned with other governments) and the wealthy have been able to create or maintain power—and to carry out larger geopolitical ambitions and state-building campaigns. Widening the temporal frame to look at housing policy since independence in the 1950s reveals how, time and time again, working-class Egyptians have been used to sustain the capital development of upper-class Egyptians.

For the postindependence government of Gamal Abdel Nasser, for instance, solving the housing crisis was necessary to free Egyptians from the chains of colonialism and to establish a dignified, socialist state for the people.

[6] See also Kenneth M. Cuno, “The Origins of Private Ownership of Land in Egypt: A Reappraisal,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 12, no. 3 (1980): 245–275.

Nasser sought to increase public housing throughout Egypt but was overwhelmed by housing needs when Israel invaded the Sinai in 1957, displacing some 800,000 Egyptians. “Can we really solve the housing crisis in one year, or three, or four, or five?” Nasser pushed at a debate on housing in 1965. “I want to build popular housing and affordable housing and so on... but can we in a short time change this situation that is a result of exploitation and colonialism of hundreds of years?” Under Nasser’s postcolonial, pan-Arabist regime, adequate and sustainable housing was a long-term project inextricably linked to the global anti-colonial struggle—not only was the housing shortage a remnant of the colonial system in Egypt but it signified a wider occupation by colonial powers in a bid to exploit Indigenous populations across the Global South.

Nasser’s successor Anwar el-Sadat, on the other hand, shifted the rhetoric away from anti-colonial cries to a slow acceptance of neoliberal reform. The housing crisis became a method through which Sadat’s regime could advance its neoliberal turn and allyship to Western forces. Sadat invested heavily in desert housing projects modeled on the American suburb as a means of promoting nationalist Egyptian imagery—choosing to name the new cities after themes of Egyptian unity or Egyptian success in war, such as “El Obour” (or “the crossing,” in reference to a maneuver by the Egyptian army that led to the armistice with Israel in 1973). This was strategic, aligned with a shift in the country’s geopolitical agenda. Under Sadat, Egypt began to distance itself from the anti-colonial rhetoric and socialist-oriented economic policies of the Nasser government, instead normalizing relations with Israel and forming a more explicit alliance with the United States. By opening Egypt’s economy—literally naming his policies “the opening” (*al infitah*)—to the global economy, Sadat’s rhetoric and investments shifted perceptions of Egyptian national identity and the mechanisms of internal development. Particularly throughout the 1970s, counterterrorism protocols increased in both the US and abroad as Egypt, Israel, and the US intensified discussions around control in the region. These discussions helped lead to the post-1974 (and particularly to post-2001) policies that further cemented Egypt’s role as a strategic military and economic partner to the US in the region as rising dissatisfaction with American policies threatened Western stability and hegemony. Housing, in both name and typology, again, remained a central method through which the state presented its political aims.

After Sadat’s assassination in 1981, his successor Hosni Mubarak intensified housing rhetoric. He framed housing conditions as an impediment to Cairo, and by extension Egypt, becoming part of the Global North. In 1986, Mubarak and the National Democratic Party (NDP) declared it was finally time to solve “the crisis.”^[7] For Mubarak, the mission to house Egyptians was part of his modernization campaign, which increasingly centered Western aesthetics and identities in opposition to the rising Islamist movement and power of the Muslim Brotherhood as an organized political party. As an ally to US imperialism, Mubarak’s regime considered these Islamist movements a direct threat to urban cosmopolitanism—and thus to the government’s hold on power. Informal communities, where these movements were believed to thrive, thus became a target. Under Mubarak, two housing realities coexisted: Egypt had both “the largest number of empty homes on a per capita basis worldwide” and “a significant proportion of its population sheltered under the threat of constant

[7] Yahia Shawkat, *Egypt’s Housing Crisis: The Shaping of Urban Space* (Cairo: American University of Cairo Press, 2020).

eviction.”[8] This threat of eviction was represented in the constant war against the informal housing sector—a war that only intensified over the years. Between 2001 and 2002, US foreign assistance to Egypt (mostly in the form of military aid) almost tripled, increasing from \$391,937,666 to \$1,043,878,563.[9] When the US embarked on its invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, the need to cement allies within this region became immensely important. On the streets of Cairo, this aid often came in the form of militarized police violence.[10]

Vilifying Informal Communities

Even before the height of the American “war on terror,” Egypt had begun carrying out its own internal war on terror across informal housing—leading to changes in the constitution and beginning Mubarak’s several-decade-long state of emergency and modern police state. By 1996, the state had released two decrees stating that “any new building on agricultural land and any urban construction without a permit would be severely punished through military courts.”[11] These expropriation laws took advantage of long-standing, informal land tenure. The government’s emphasis on agricultural land was strategic too, related to the centrality of the Nile River in securing Egypt’s livelihood. With the effects of climate change looming and an agricultural industry in distress, the government used the fact that many informal settlements are built on land suitable for agriculture (again, a result of the socialist land reform policies under Nasser) as justification for their removal.[12] The state continued its formal, martial encroachment on informal communities, often destroying and uprooting entire neighborhoods with no regard to long-standing connections to residents’ sources of living. Rather than improving the livelihoods of people who lived and worked in the informal sector, the state offered a mirage of new public housing that was ultimately unaffordable for poor people.[13] These new public housing projects were often critiqued for a variety of reasons—“lack of services, transport, security, or possibly speculation,” exorbitant prices, and difficult application processes.[14] Notably, they were also critiqued for their modernist designs, where the term “modernist” is used not just to highlight the architectural design movement but also to signify developments built under influence of how “modern” or “civilized” housing should appear to be in a country, and world, deeply affected by Western imperialism, where what is developed is necessarily what comes in the image of the West.[15] In the end, the urban poor had to rely on their own means to help themselves, creating informal cities within formal cities—a juxtaposition to the Western-style spaces being built in Cairo beyond the reach of most Cairenes. Ananya Roy argues that, because of the ways (dis)investment in housing was organized, “informality must be understood not as the object of state regulation but rather as produced by the state itself.”[16] David Sims comments that “it is as if the housing sector in Greater Cairo has developed without the government, even in spite of it.”[17] Both arguments are true: The housing sector in Cairo developed in spite of the government, and it is because of government disinvestment that the state produced the housing crisis. Through this framework, government investments in luxury housing and megaprojects, which attempted to transform Cairo into a California-style suburb through modernized cosmopolitanism, can

[8] Sheetal Chhabria, “Shelter as Capital: The City as Prison/The Housing Question in Egypt,” *Borderlines*, November 19, 2020, [link](#). And yet, despite this, within Cairo, 67 percent of residents own their own housing. Shaimaa Al-Ees, “Egypt’s Housing Ownership Sets World Record High, as 67% of Population Own Apartments,” *Daily News Egypt*, December 10, 2019, [link](#). Many Egyptians are driven to build informally because it is easier to own their own apartments or homes through the informal sector, where they may expand slowly as their needs and financial means grow.

[9] ForeignAssistance.gov.

[10] See Joshua Stacher, *Watermelon Democracy: Egypt’s Turbulent Transition* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2020); and “Fact Sheet—US Military Assistance to Egypt: Separating Fact from Fiction,” POMED, March 31, 2023, [link](#).

[11] David Sims, *Understanding Cairo: The Logic of a City out of Control* (Cairo: American University of Cairo Press, 2017), 68.

[12] Under Nasser, land was redistributed from previous landowners to the workers. Due to Egypt’s inheritance laws, these parcels of land then became subdivided by the future generations, leading to land that is less efficient for agricultural purposes and can be better used to serve as housing while housing in the non-agricultural areas increased in price.

[13] Ananya Roy, “Urban Informality: Toward an Epistemology of Planning,” *Journal of the American Planning Association* 7, no. 2 (2005): 150.

[14] Yasmine el Rashidi, “Why Do We Destroy What Makes Us?” *New York Times*, November 5, 2018, [link](#).

[15] Rashidi, “Why Do We Destroy What Makes Us?”

[16] Roy, “Urban Informality,” 149.

[17] Sims, *Understanding Cairo*, 168.



The construction of more roads, 2023. Courtesy of the author.

be understood as methods to take attention away from the crisis at hand rather than attempts to solve the problem itself.

The rise of Islamism within informal communities was repeatedly referenced as the biggest threat to not only Westernization but also national unity and state stability. W. J. Dorman states that “from the late 1980s, Islamist militants established a ‘state within the state’ in the Egyptian capital Cairo, situated in ‘informal’ neighborhoods developed without official authorization, planning or public services.”[18] In 1992, the government invaded and bulldozed one of these neighborhoods, thought to host members of the militant Islamist group Gama’a Islamiyya. This marked the state’s expansion of its urban militarization under the umbrella of intervention against Islamism. “In this implicitly securitizing discourse, such disorder demanded state intervention, not just to expel the Islamists but also to rebuild the physical environment and reform its inhabitants. The longer-term fear engendered by the discovery of the unruly city, urban Islamists and their plebeian supporters contributed to Cairo’s 1990s building boom, as Egypt’s elite retreated to gated communities on the city’s desert periphery,” Dorman writes.[19] In response to successful

[18] W. J. Dorman, “Informal Cairo: Between Islamist Insurgency and the Neglectful State?” *Security Dialogue* 40, no. 4/5 (October 2009): 419–441.

[19] Dorman, “Informal Cairo,” 421.

organizing by the Muslim Brotherhood and the other Islamist organizations that provided resources to citizens suffering under neoliberal austerity, securitization politics rose as the main rhetoric to govern the city. Indeed, as state services were eroded and privatized, the police station became the most visible state institution “for the most part located in potentially suspect areas”—that is to say, in informal neighborhoods.[20] The means through which an area was, or was not, potentially suspect, however, became tied to its proximity to global capital. It was through the increased policing of these areas that their unlawful identity became cemented—and because of this, gated communities arose as forms of protection and escape for those who could afford them.

[20] Dorman, “Informal Cairo,” 424.

Manufacturing (Dis)Respectability

Within this securitized neoliberal playground, respectability in the city was dictated by proximity to global capital. This proximity, and thus respectability, was both situational and representational—and thus defined the degree to which Cairenes were subject to state violence and police harassment.[21] The global city version of Cairo had Starbucks, Zara, and all the other transnational brands and cafés that signified Cairo’s perceived ascendance out of the “Third World.” Cairo’s informal neighborhoods, however, were increasingly treated by the government as the least respectable spaces in the city given the lack of global capital situated in them. Without Gulf, American, or other international investments into informal communities, these spaces continued to be created by their working-class residents. And while those living in the new gated communities passed through security checks in their own neighborhoods and luxury shopping malls as a reassurance that their property was protected, those living in the informal communities were subjected to security checks in the form of police harassment and intimidation.

[21] Salwa Ismail, “Authoritarian Government, Neoliberalism and Everyday Civilities in Egypt,” *Third World Quarterly* 32, no. 5 (2011): 845–862.

The attempt to create a new Egyptian identity through housing development was clearly elaborated by President Mubarak’s wife, Suzanne Mubarak. According to Yahia Shawkat, she “would go on to spin off at least four housing projects of her own... all related to slum clearing and—often forced—resettlement in her bid to ‘build the Egyptian person.’”[22] Born to a Welsh mother and Egyptian father in Upper Egypt, Suzanne Mubarak embodied the conflict she worked to reframe—that is, the battle between modernization and identity: “When we talk about modernizing Egyptian society and talk about western influence, Egyptians have always tried to maintain their identity in the midst of all this. How can we have Western technology and at the same time maintain our own values and traditions that we cherish so deeply? This is always this conflict, and it will continue I think.”[23]

[22] Shawkat, *Egypt’s Housing Crisis*, 148.

“Building” a national identity under Mubarak meant establishing an Egyptian person who could seamlessly fit within Western society. This involved the mirage of protecting the Egyptian elite classes from the eternal terrorist threat, a threat that placed the country under emergency law for decades. [24] Salwa Ismail highlights how “stop, question, and arrest” policies enforced by police forces were based on images of “respectability” or “cleanliness”—that is, images of wealthy Westernization. Poverty was criminalized. In fact, many of those arrested for not looking respectable enough reported needing to call

[23] Barbara Gamarekian, “A Greater Role for Egypt’s First Lady,” *New York Times*, February 14, 1988, [link](#).

[24] Much like in other countries, the “terrorist threat” remains manufactured to increase the militarization and securitization of space and place.

on their employers to ask for their release.[25] Ismail offers an example from her interviews with Cairenes of an individual who was let go from a questioning stop because the police officer perceived him to be respectable based on his “clean” appearance.[26] The privileging of a certain image of (dis)respectability, cleanliness, and access to capital directly contributed to the privatization of the city, its public spaces, and its residents’ daily interactions as more people who could afford to flee to the gated communities in the desert would gradually do so—often under the pretense of safety.

However, cosmopolitan Cairo failed its constituents. Indeed, by 2011, after three decades of Mubarak’s policies and four decades after the institution of neoliberalization under Sadat, Egyptians rose up against the government with demands for bread, freedom, and social justice. While Cairo was marketed by both the government and international institutions as a global hub, a tourist destination, and a rapidly developing city, its people were suffocating under a very visible, yet continuously unnamed imperialism.[27] This imperialism came wrapped up in a new language of Western development aid that even included public housing institutions, human rights advocates, and the rhetoric of social justice. But while the language may have changed, the structural power relations persisted and heightened spatial segregation along class lines. Residents of Cairo’s informal cities were still maligned as “thugs” and “drug dealers,” and social programs often funded by Western NGOs did little to address their daily reality or the roots of their economic distress.[28] Those with access to global capital and Western cosmopolitanism also had access to justice-oriented rhetoric, and used it as a means to “improve” the internal “other.”[29] This played out through the violent policing of everyday life.

Despite hope for change, postrevolutionary Egypt remains characterized by destruction. And the housing crisis persists. In other words, cosmopolitan Cairo was designed to fail those of its constituents who were not given the resources to become part of this world, nor the power to dictate whether or not they wished to engage in it.

[25] Ismail, “Authoritarian Government.”

[26] Ismail, “Authoritarian Government.”

[27] See Stacher, *Watermelon Democracy*.

[28] Ali Al-Raggal, “Egypt’s Informal Settlements: Soldiers, Gangs, Poverty, and Construction: Ali Al Raggal,” *يبرعلا ريفسلا*, Assafir al-Arabi, August 1, 2022, [link](#).

[29] Of course, the internal “other” was being upgraded to become the new Egyptian—the one with this access to Western cosmopolitanism... except without the capital needed for that, thus forming an extended site of contention.



This screenshot visualizes, among other areas, informal parts of the city, where you can see agricultural land as opposed to planned settlements, in the form of grids across the city, including New Mansoura, New Dumyat, Al Sadat, New al Obbour, Al Obbour, Al Sheikh Zayed, Al Shorouq, Badr, Sixth of October, New Cairo, New Minya, and New Sohag.

Privatizing the Desert

While informal settlements continue to be demolished and many Cairenes struggle to find housing, more gated communities for the wealthy and expats have sprung up in the desert—complete with business centers, golf courses,

and malls. Over the last several decades, the government has sold large, often subsidized, swaths of land in the desert to private developers to encourage people to move away from metro Cairo. Where informal neighborhoods had cropped up in agricultural areas following Nasser’s reforms to agricultural land ownership and subdivision in the 1960s, new cities, requiring capital investment, were planned in the desert peripheries of Cairo where the government was able to sell land for cheap. Seen as solutions to Cairo’s perceived overpopulation problem, these cities—connected to Cairo through an ever-increasing stretch of highways—have been filled with private Westernized havens. From the mid-nineties onward, real estate corporations like SODIC, Orascom, and Emaar began buying up vast tracts of land in the desert cities and building luxury communities with names like Beverly Hills, Palm Hills, and Swan Lake, all marketed as Californian suburbs, a world away from Cairo.[30] Desert developments led to massive gains for not only real estate moguls and their corporations but also members of the Mubarak cabinet, who in some cases, like former housing minister Ahmed el Maghrabi, were direct shareholders of the corporations responsible for building these gated communities.[31]

This push to privatize the desert was also supported by international organizations. For instance, the United States Agency for International Development pushed for greater privatization despite their own admission that the Egyptian government had already “forcefully committed itself to privatization.”[32] USAID, much like other organizations, was committed to privatization as the only means forward for the Egyptian economy—a method of development that has been produced and tested out on countries in the Global South for decades.

[30] See Beverly Hills Egypt website, [link](#); Palm Hills website, [link](#); Swan Lake website, [link](#).

[31] In addition to his role as housing minister, el Maghrabi was Palm Hills’ chairperson. He was accused of selling hundreds of acres of land to Palm Hills Developments for an extremely low price. See Emad Mekay, “Corruption Investigations Begin in Post-Mubarak Egypt,” *Electronic Intifada*, March 31, 2011.

[32] David T. King, Bruce MacQueen, and Mack Ott, “The Costs of Not Privatizing: An Assessment for Egypt,” Report submitted to United States Agency for International Development/Cairo, Egypt Misson, March 2004, 1, [link](#).



Egypt’s “Beverly Hills” gated community, 2020. Courtesy of the author.

Twelve years after the 2011 revolution, Cairo is still crowded, polluted, securitized, and, now, expensive.[33] The movement toward desert cities remains contentious, especially as class tensions rise among inhabitants

[33] One American fancied it so polluted as to write an article titled “I visited what’s possibly the world’s most polluted city, and realized Americans have no idea how good they have it.” See Harrison Jacobs, “I visited what’s possibly the world’s most polluted city,” *Business Insider*, December 29, 2018.

that, in turn, fuel further expansion of the gated enclaves. For instance, a 2019 marketing campaign for the exclusive suburb Madinaty highlighted, as a selling point, the perception among its residents that everyone was similar. One individual even claimed that he could “stay here for an entire year without leaving.”[34] The campaign touted Madinaty as a “city of international standards,” a message for those who belong and adhere to those international standards to invest. [35] But, even as so many in Cairo struggle to find housing, some luxury suburbs remain only partially filled. In Sheikh Zayed, a desert city originally established in 1995, 71 percent of the residents live in luxury housing units, as opposed to regular apartments.[36] The city’s population currently stands at 330,000, which is a disappointing 49 percent of its target size. As of 2018, estimates indicated that up to 32.5 percent of the Egyptian population face income poverty,[37] and this was before the devaluations of the Egyptian pound in 2022. Yet, more luxury housing units, desert cities, and gated communities continue to be built, often to stand empty.

Returning to David Harvey and the “accumulation by dispossession method,” one can see how luxury developments in desert cities are tied to the relocation of residents of informal Cairo.[38] According to Harvey, this approach depends on the destruction of the (ugly, uncivilized, unstructured) old to make way for the (clean, civilized, ordered) new. The housing created for those moved from the destroyed neighborhoods is meant to project this ordered new: one NGO official called them “the new sanitized areas.”[39] In addition, when Khaled Siddiq, the head of the Informal Settlements Development Fund, was asked to comment on the facades of the new settlements, he said that the agency was working on unifying the styles in a way where they “conform to an image of the ideal society.” Meanwhile, on the road to the Cairo airport, dozens of posters of the current president, smiling, declare that “together, we can build a modern Egypt.” To modernize, to create new spaces for global capital, to invest in neoliberalization, the old must be destroyed—the stone corbels, the marble staircases, even the graveyards that tell the story of Cairo’s developments throughout years must be eliminated so that Cairo can be re-envisioned “like a rendition of Dubai.”[40]

Like many countries in the Global South, in its effort to transform Cairo into a global, financialized city, the current government has fallen into a neoliberal debt trap. Despite the revolutionary calls for social justice, postrevolutionary Egypt remains within the same neoliberal pattern. Initiatives like the New Administrative Capital have cost the government an estimated \$59 billion[41] while almost a third of the nation lies under the national poverty rate.[42] The Egyptian pound is at its lowest value in history and is consistently devalued under pressure from the International Monetary Fund.

The anxieties of national identity and global financial status are linked through development policy and the architecture it produces. This creation and promotion of a national identity creates a dialectic, one in which the new identity must constantly be created at the expense of whatever the old identity is perceived to be. When the wealthy set the standards for allowable development, the poor are consistently seen to be disposable, and national identity molds to whatever the powerful class(es) wishes it to be. The destruction of the informal communities by the Ring Road continues to be mere collateral damage. Their remains are historical ruins. Ruins, as such, must serve a purpose in an Egypt

[34] Madinaty, “Ramadan Ad,” YouTube, 2019, [link](#). Translation by author.

[35] Madinaty, “Madinaty 2019,” YouTube, 2019, [link](#).

[36] Rachel Keeton and Michelle Provoost, “New Cities in the Sand: Inside Egypt’s Dream to Conquer the Desert,” *The Guardian*, July 10, 2019, [link](#).

[37] Dina M. Armanious, “Accelerating Global Actions for a World without Poverty: Egypt Experiences,” 2018, [link](#).

[38] For a more detailed exploration, see Harvey, *Spaces of Global Capitalism*.

[39] Harvey, *Spaces of Global Capitalism*.

[40] Wael Hussein and Yolande Knell, “Cairo Masterplan Threatens Ancient City of the Dead,” *BBC News*, May 26, 2023, [link](#); Rashidi, “Why Do We Destroy What Makes Us?”

[41] Declan Walsh and Vivian Yee, “A New Capital Worthy of the Pharaohs Rises in Egypt, but at What Price?” *New York Times*, October 8, 2022, [link](#).

[42] Saifaddin Galal, “Egypt: Projected Poverty Rate 2018–2023,” Statista, December 16, 2022, [link](#).

where everything is commodified. And because their absence is more valuable than their presence, they must be destroyed so that the modern might move in. The state destroys and demolishes as it wishes to feed into capital accumulation. The cost is the continued dispossession of the Egyptian working class and the Egyptian people at large. Drive along the Ring Road today, and you'll see the graveyard of informal housing—take heed.



Remnants of colorful wallpapers cling to brick walls of housing destroyed for road expansions, 2023. Courtesy of the author.