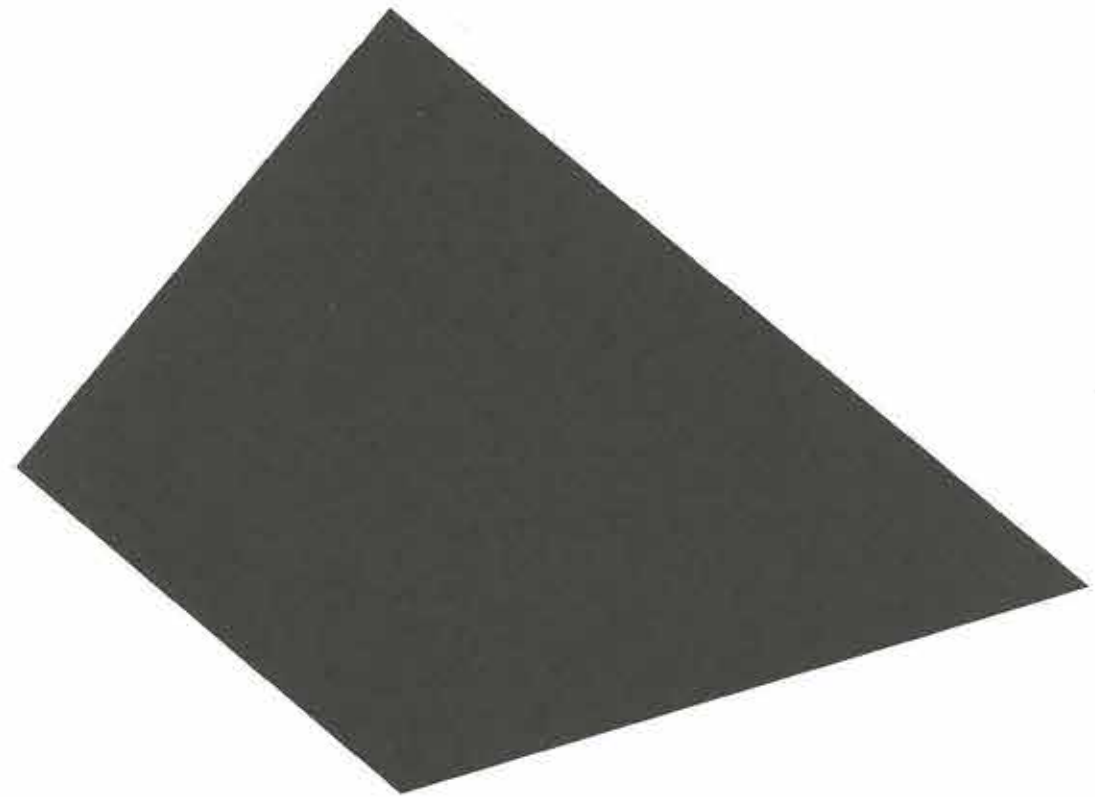




ETH Zurich  
MAS Urban Design

# Housing Cairo – The ~~Informal~~ Response



Ruby Press

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with Something Fantastic and CLUSTER

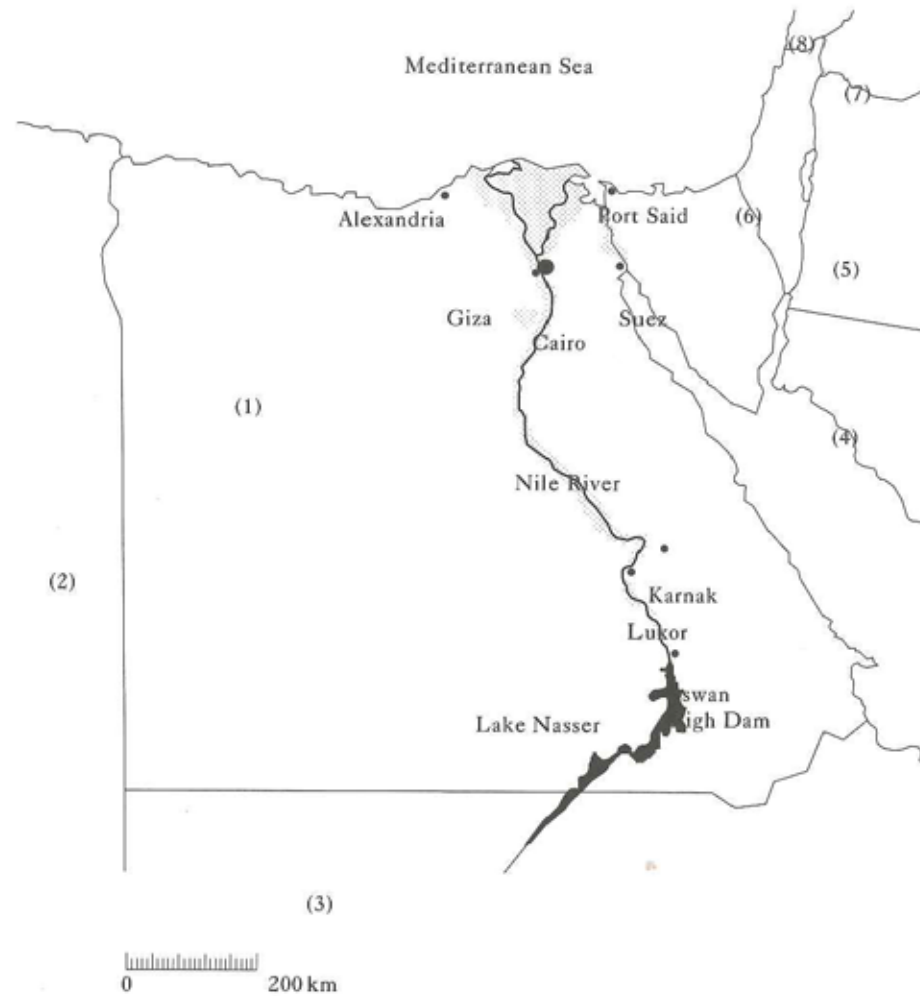
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## HOUSING CAIRO: THE INFORMAL RESPONSE

Home to 20 million people and still growing, Greater Cairo mirrors the global phenomenon of unplanned urban growth. Approximately 60 percent of the population of Africa's biggest city—the seventh-largest metropolitan area in the world—lives in so-called informal housing: five-to-ten-story concrete-and-brick-infill structures built without permits in the desert or on former agricultural land. These areas of Cairo are no longer the *terra incognita* of research they were in the 1980s, and several scholars and institutions from Cairo and abroad have engaged in the study of these “spontaneous” housing settlements at the immediate fringes of the formal city. However, because research on these areas has generally been undertaken by sociologists, urban researchers, and political scientists, whose primary interests are in populations and production processes, the materialization of the built environment itself has been largely overlooked. Instigated by architects and urban designers, *Housing Cairo: The Informal Response* aims to illuminate the architecture of informality and its mechanisms. In parallel, design proposals reflect on the role of architects, who are losing ground to such modes of construction.

Critical to this investigation of informality is the term itself. As noted by urban researcher Kareem Ibrahim, “the current labeling and categorization of underprivileged neighborhoods as ‘informal’, ‘unplanned’ or ‘unsafe’ (...) distracts the current urban discourse and confuses it through the formal/informal dichotomy.” This is precisely why an “Anti-Glossary” is presented first, as an attempt to tackle such a dichotomy by offering various understandings of the term “informal.” The first part of the publication, HOUSING CAIRO, then unfolds, offering keys to grasp the complexity of the present situation. Cairo is introduced through chronological maps tracing the growth of the capital from its earliest times to today. Examining the current dynamics of urbanization and the diversion of financial capital into the construction of desert cities outside of Cairo (“Desert Capital: How Formal Real Estate Mechanisms Fuel Informal Areas”), along with national issues regarding governmental responses and public housing schemes (“Affordable Houses: Housing the Poorest the Neoliberal Way”), these reflections compile possible causes for unplanned urban growth. An examination of the Cairo 2050 Plan is presented as a paradigmatic case that illustrates planning attitudes and architects’ responsibilities in the creation of an anti-informality narrative (“Delusional Cairo: Cairo 2050, the New Capital, and Other Grand Plans”). An overview of land-subdivision



- (1) Egypt
- (2) Libya
- (3) Sudan
- (4) Saudi Arabia
- (5) Jordan
- (6) Israel-Palestinian Occupied Territories
- (7) Syria
- (8) Lebanon

Capital	Cairo
Total area	1 010 407.84 Sq km
Population 2015 estimate	89 247 000 m.

processes explains the actual procedures of informal development. ("Sub-Dividing Egypt: Process of Land Management and Development"). The origins of the form, type, and appearance of these constructions are formulated with a hypothesis regarding "A New Vernacular" architecture thus generated (typology, construction, and aesthetics). A closer look at construction methods and materials illuminates both the capital of physical and human resources behind informal growth and the potential of such production methods ("Snapshots of Construction" and "On the Intelligence of Informal Construction"). Finally, a look at governmental policies directed against Cairo's unplanned settlements ("War on Informality: Governmental Policies against *ashwa'iyyat*") deconstructs the general attitude of the authorities, from one ruler to another.

The second part of the publication analyzes THE INFORMAL RESPONSE and its ability to provide well-connected, affordable housing for low- and medium-income residents of Cairo. The development of the neighborhood of Ard el-Lewa is explicated through chronological maps and a brief description of the area ("Just Another Neighborhood"). The personal account of an inhabitant engaged since the beginning of the area's urbanization ("A Story of Construction") offers precious insights into the production processes of this prevalent urban condition. "Five Typologies" of constructions methodically examined and visually explained with standard architectural representations complete the research section.

The third portion reflects on how design professionals are implicated in and by informal construction. It is manifest that the informal response to housing issues and the shortcomings of political and governmental structures is inventive, resourceful, and extremely ingenious, yet designers cannot keep pace with the ongoing urbanization process. Instead, architects and urban designers generally operate in the corporate sector as elite-serving practitioners and leave most spatial production to the informal sector. Challenging the idealization of informal solutions and their "architecture without architects," this section proposes ANOTHER ARCHITECTURE FOR INFORMAL AREAS, and seven alternatives to the current mode of development ("Seven Urban Design Projects for Ard el-Lewa") that advocate for the reengagement of designers in the process.

Finally, the conclusion assembles the work of several experts to offer a broader overview of the theme of architectural informality in Egypt. While Sarah Sabry outlines a comprehensive account of the emergence of informality in Egypt from Nasser to the present day ("An Introduction to Informal Housing in Cairo"), CLUSTER tackles "The Danger of Romanticizing Informality." I emphasize the consequences of illegal construction on

limited agricultural land ("Receding Rurality"), while Marc Angélil and Cary Siress offer a political chronicle of the *baladi* neighborhood ("Form Follows Food"). David Sims proposes much-needed potential directions for the future ("Prescriptions for the Informal Settlements") as a reflection on the potential of an informally built city, concluded by an afterword by Mohamed Elshahed.

This publication intends to contribute, with the tools of architects and urban designers, to another look at the architecture and urban condition of the dwellings that are home to an immense majority of the world's urban population. Cairo's informal response to housing needs not stand for a marginal phenomenon. It is an intelligent, optimized answer to planning incapacities, with its own flaws and strengths. Thus it should come as no surprise that architects and planners, responding to the duty and prerogative of the profession, participate in its production—for the better.