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**Autor:** Malterre-Barthes, Charlotte

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# EGYPT'S NEW CAPITAL: YEARNING FOR URBAN YOUTH

Charlotte Malterre-Barthes

Administrative New Capital, Egypt, November 2018.[A]

«We are very bored» confesses the smiling hostess budging off her turquoise uniform, heels tapping against the marble marquetry floor of Al Masa-Royal Palace's immense lobby[C]. We pass the fake beach, the diamond-shaped restaurant tower (‹Al Masa› means diamond in Arabic), the conference center, and the deserted shopping mall. With some 300 employees and 10 guests as for now, the overstaffed 5-star hotel is the sole completed and operating building complex of the gigantic construction site that will become Egypt's New Capital. The unusual manned tank[B] guarding the gated entrance suggests a military involvement of some sort. In fact, on the fronton of the neo-classic building flaps the national flag and the tiny black swords on the upper left corner—symbol of the Egyptian Armed Forces—give away the actor behind this enterprise. «The military» was the laconic answer of Fatma, chief of Food and Beverages, to the question on the hotel's owner. While the entity in charge of construction and management of the entire city is the Administrative Capital for Urban Development (ACUD), 51% of which is public and owned by the New Urban Communities Authority (NUCA- under the Ministry of Housing), the 49% remaining share is with the Armed Forces. Literally rising from the sands 40 kilometers East of Cairo toward the Suez Canal, the New Capital is the latest and largest desert city promoted by the regime[D]. In March 2015, at the ‹Egypt the Future› Conference, President Abdel Fateh el-Sisi had announced plans for a 45 billion US$ new capital to be completed by 2020, on the base of a rough masterplan by SOM.[1]

While Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates had pledged funds at Sharm-el-Sheik, these agreements rapidly collapsed and China stepped in.[2] Yet what was presented as Chinese investments are in fact tightly limited loans: the funds can only be spent on Chinese equipment (i.e. light rail project).[3] Today, the bulk of the construction cost for the 700 km2 project falls on the national budget. Arguing the urge to accommodate the rapid population growth of Cairo—Greater Cairo's population is about 18 million, with an expansion rate of 2.5%—promising to alleviate pollution and traffic congestion, the New Capital is presented as a hub for international investment and economic growth. The vocabulary deployed to promote the project refers to Singapore and the Gulf, not only suggesting these technocratic conurbations as guidelines in terms of buildings types (i.e. high-rises and mass-housing) and esthetics (i.e. neo-classic and glazed facades), but also following a narrative of cities built ‹ex nihilo›.[4] This new city should become home to 6.5 million Egyptians, with a large public park, a new airport, an opera house, a sports complex and several high-rises. An endeavor of such scale is not uncommon in Egypt, and past and present regimes have previously exhibited confidence in construction schemes that claimed to solve unemployment, transportation, and overpopulation issues through gigantic enterprises. Water mega-projects—from the High Aswan Dam to Toshka, and decades of urban and agricultural development of desert land—logically places the New Capital in line with familiar large-scale schemes.[5] These have served as governmental instruments of political hegemony and social control, fostering national pride and diverting attention and budget from other pressing matters.[6] Nasser's urban settlements for and by the government (Nasr City), Anwar Sadat's pet project of new cities, and Hosni Mubarak's New Cairo illustrate that the movement towards the desert is ongoing. The desire to escape Cairo and recreate on a clean slate an urban youth has been a persistent national dream since the early nineteenth century. The New Capital only corroborates the persistence of such planning ideas and processes even today.

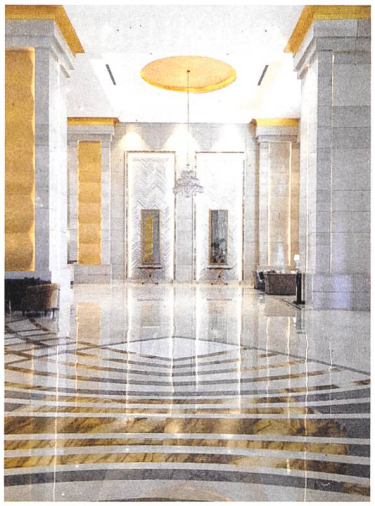
Perhaps something is different this time around. Both parliament—the House of Representatives currently in Magliss El-Shaab Street in Downtown (built 1878), and the presidential palace—residence of President el-Sisi at the Al Etehadiya or Heliopolis Palace (built 1910), are to be relocated by June 2019 along with several ministries and administrations. This move cannot be dissociated from the 2011 revolution, when the Egyptian population took to the streets of downtown Cairo to oppose President Mubarak's long-lasting regime. This revolution, whilst also manifested in rural areas, was primarily urban. The movement gained traction thanks to the concentrated popular mass of Cairo, where networks and connectivity means allowed for civic organization and rapid mobilization. Huge crowds emerging from Downtown, from neighboring informal areas, from dilapidated historical parts of the city and even from more wealthy districts materialized in the streets of the center, seizing public space as a spatial platform to gather, fostering political momentum. In that sense, these crowds understood and exposed Cairo as a space of power: the site of official entities, parliaments, state representatives, head-

A

B

A Desert, New Capital construction site, Egypt, 2018.
B Military vehicle guarding the entrance of Al-Masa Hotel, New Capital, Egypt, 2018.

C



D

E

C Lobby of Al-Masa Hotel, New Capital, Egypt, 2018.
D Administrative buildings in construction, New Capital, Egypt, 2018.
E Housing units in construction New Capital, Egypt, 2018.

quarters of international organizations; buildings that embody political regimes and economic ideologies. On Tahrir Square—a large public space at the heart of the city where revolutionaries gathered, representative edifices such as the headquarters of the Arab League, the Mugamma'—Egypt's bureaucracy center, Nasser's era Nile Hilton Hotel, and Mubarak's National Democratic Party (NDP) siege embodied that symbolic force. During the mass protests, the NDP building was torched. Crowds marched toward the Presidential Palace—and again in 2013. The current regime is aware of the iconic force of the Square: the NDP building—a modernist icon designed by Mahmoud Riad—empty since 2011—was demolished, and the square sanitized.[7] The street to the Palace is now blocked and a gate controls the bridge access to Tahrir Square.[8] It is also in the light of this that the aspiration by the authorities to leave old, dirty, congested, and politically unstable Cairo must be read. Essential decision-making bodies, ministries and administrative centers (such as the Muggama' services) will be situated some 40 kilometer-deep in the desert, away from the population it is to administrate and govern. Such abandonment of the city center signals the fear of ruling powers to stay in the vicinity of urban populations and of their unpredictable movements.

One of the immediate consequences of these relocations for Cairo is concerned with what will become of the buildings currently occupied by these administrations, many imposing mansions confiscated under Nasser. «Museums and hotels» answered officials.[9] However, with many of the recent architectural heritage in Cairo, neglected or poorly maintained, the fate of these buildings is uncertain. Another effect, once administrations have relocated could be an increase in commuters' flows between Cairo and the New Capital, with functionaries living in Cairo shuttling to their new workplace. While hundreds of units to sell or rent to state employees are completed or in construction[E], a large-scale move of entire families is unlikely. This is in part because of rent control. Rent control laws in Egypt date from the early 20th century, with the first abolition of a landlord's right to evacuate tenants, followed by the passage of a statute under Nasser allowing the inheritance of rented units, which permitted the continuation of rent control implications across generations. Laws passed under Sadat then allowed tenants to re-rent or exchange the unit they occupied without referring to the landlord. Only units built after 1996 are exempted.[10] This signifies that many state employees still benefit from low-rent apartments, deterring anyone of moving 40 kilometers away from schools, services, friends, and family. If middle-classes have invested in new dwellings, these are treated as investment and remain empty, in a country where banks are not trusted. Upper classes already have moved away to New Cairo and Heliopolis, or reside in enclaves like Ma'adi and Zamalek and have neither intention nor interest in moving further away. While some scholars have speculated on Cairo's fate, potentially to be «left to die a slow death, » such gloomy prophecies might not become a reality so fast.[11] The Egyptian capital has been a thriving human settlement since thousand years. It even encloses several earlier capitals.[12] Built in the 1950s, Nasr City too, was to become a new capital, only to be absorbed by Cairo entirely. A polluted, congested and crowded megalopolis, harsh to its poorest and vulnerable, Cairo is also a vibrant capital, home to 20% of the nation's population, still holding promises of job opportunities and services and, foremost, a tight social network. Many desert cities (more than twenty around Cairo alone) have been built, promising employment and housing, never fully catering to the need of the majority. They have remained largely uninhabited, investment-driven settlements, populated by a fraction of their targeted population.

In a quest of an illusory urban youth, and a clean slate for planners, relocating centers of power is a common spatial gesture that has been exerted time and again, from the Abbasid new capital Bagdad (established in 762), to the fetishized Brasilia (1960) replacing Salvador de Bahia and Rio de Janeiro. Contemporary examples have shown the limits of purely administrative capital cities, consuming national finances and resources. The question whether Egypt's New Capital will succeed in becoming an actual city remains open.

Charlotte Malterre-Barthes is an architect, urban designer, and contemporary scholar. As the Principal of the urban design practice OMNIBUS, she directs the MAS Urban Design at the Chair of Marc Angélil, and holds a PhD from ETHZ on the effects of the political economy of food on the built environment, case study Egypt. Co-curator of the XII Architecture Biennale of São Paulo, she co-authored ‹Housing Cairo: The Informal Response› and ‹Cairo Desert Cities› (Berlin, Ruby Press). She is a founding member of the Parity Group, a grassroots association committed to improving gender equality in architecture.