

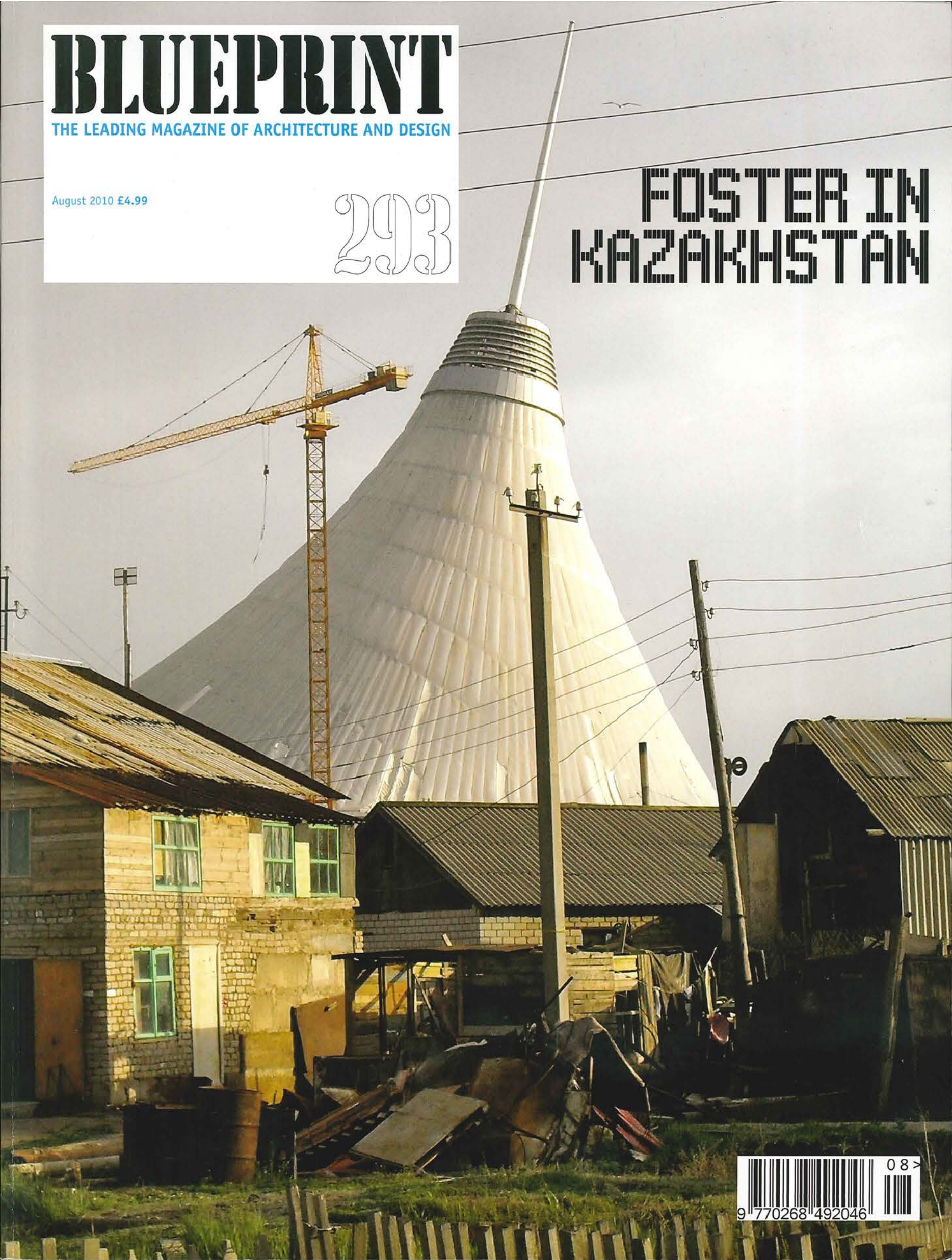
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FOSTER IN KAZAKHSTAN





*A view looking towards
New Cairo to the south
of the American
University shows the
gated communities under
construction. In the
foreground work is
taking place to install
the city's infrastructure*

NEW CAIRO

ON THE OUTSKIRTS OF EGYPT'S CAPITAL, VAST SWATHES OF DESERT ARE BEING EATEN INTO BY SPRAWLING RESIDENTIAL AND COMMERCIAL DEVELOPMENTS. SUPPOSED TO DEAL WITH CAIRO'S EXPANDING POPULATION, THERE IS A DANGER THAT THE PRIVATELY-FUNDED CITIES MAY SIMPLY BECOME WEALTHY GHETTOS. **PETER KELLY** VISITED THE FAST-CHANGING NEW CAIRO

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MANUEL ALVAREZ DIESTRO



Driving east out of downtown Cairo, as the traffic eases on the Cairo-Suez Road from the heavily congested city centre, one passes the fast-built tenement buildings, which are variously called 'informal residences,' ashwa'iyat buildings (meaning 'chance' or 'random') or, more commonly, slums. Occasionally interrupted by small areas of agricultural land – currently protected from the city's relentless growth, but under consideration for commercial residential development – these eventually give way to open desert, until the vast construction sites of New Cairo come into view. Part of Cairo's ongoing construction programme of new satellite cities, which includes developments such as the Sixth of October City, to the west of Cairo and the »



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more industrial Tenth of Ramadan to the north-east, New Cairo is the newest, largest and, by some distance, the most densely residential.

The scale and pace of construction is extraordinary: large areas go from featureless desert, to bustling construction sites, to gleaming neighbourhoods in a matter of months. Already New Cairo's population stands at around 600,000 – the master plan, by Miami-based practice DPZ, was only drawn up in 2001. Covering 72 square miles – roughly the equivalent of three Manhattans – it is largely made up of huge residential communities, many of them gated, consisting of luxury villas and condominiums. Often with curiously

western names, including Mayfair, these communities correspondingly western, frequently resembling Swiss neo-classical facades and balconies. The development has alleviated the over-crowding of Cairo, yet it has not been created as a destination for the thousands who move to Cairo each year as a means of escape for Egyptians and upper classes, who have fled the overcrowding and pollution of central Cairo.

While the government has built these satellite cities back to back with earlier examples, including the Tenth of Ramadan, remained virtually



until the 1990s, when private investment in construction began to take off and road networks linking them to Cairo were completed. Now, local real-estate experts say that Cairo's established downtown, upscale suburbs – places like Mohandeseen, Heliopolis, Zamalek and Maadi – are losing ground to the neighborhoods of these new cities. 'Anyone who has studied the market and real estate trends knows there is no solution to Cairo's housing problems except to expand outwards,' says Cherif El-Mansy, marketing director for Egyptian developer Sodic. 'Life in places like Mohandeseen has become impossible. And this is inevitable; a long time ago, Abassia and Helmiya were the best parts of Cairo,

but then people left them for Heliopolis. It is natural for Cairo to keep on growing and changing.'

New Cairo is also, of course, a seductive investment opportunity for Egypt's wealthier citizens. One new resident of the city told me that he had just bought a second home in the under-construction Madinaty neighbourhood – just one part of New Cairo, it is intended to eventually house 600,000 residents – as his first property has almost doubled in value. Yet, to outsiders, the fascination is with the sheer ambition of the development. Spanish-born photographer Manuel Alvarez Diestro has been documenting the construction of New Cairo for the last two

years and views it as a remarkable conquest of the desert by humanity.

At the moment its one building of real architectural note is the American University of Cairo, a low-rise, 105ha campus designed by Mexican architects Legorreta and Legorreta. It will soon be joined in New Cairo by a multi-purpose development by Zaha Hadid, titled Stone Towers, which will provide around 525,000sq m of office and retail spaces, as well as a five-star business hotel. The predictably dramatic and sinuous design is unlike anything else in the region, and has not been greeted with great enthusiasm by local architects and commentators. Dalila el Kerdany, who runs her own architecture »



Above left: New Cairo apartments under construction. Driving along the Cairo Suez Road, these looming structures can be seen occupying large swathes of land

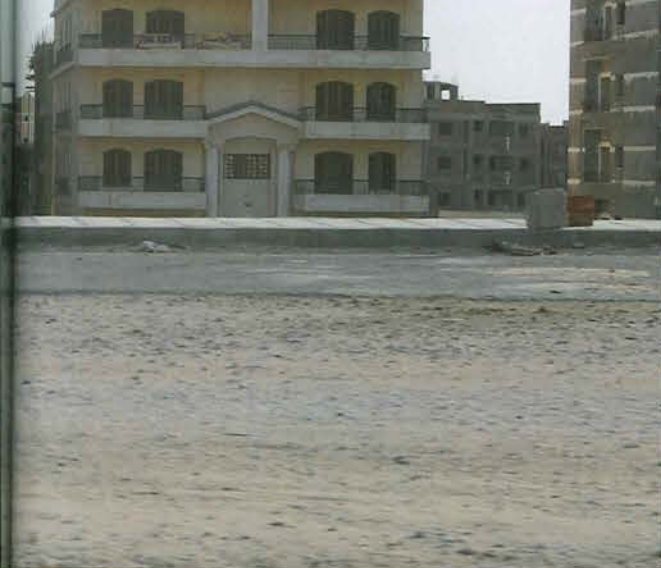
Above: Looking to the eastern part of New Cairo, a low-rise, gated community is part-completed, surrounded by pipes to service the future community

practice in Cairo, and is a lecturer at the city's main university, despairs at its bizarre form that is all about icon-making, and has little to do with the desert environment: 'how do you create the infrastructure, supply the water even, for such a development,' she says, 'it makes no sense in the desert setting.'

The notion of New Cairo being counter-historical to the normal development of Egypt's capital is common among its most severe critics. The National Organisation for Urban Harmony (NOUH), was established by the government in 2004, making commentator and journalist Samir Gharib its chairman. Its mission is to improve the architectural, planning and construction standards

of urban areas across Egypt, although, given that around one quarter of the country's population lives in Greater Cairo, the capital is inevitably its primary focus. A fearless critic of the government's policies on building new cities, Gharib describes developments such as New Cairo as 'disasterous', as it moves attention away from the problems of the downtown area and a short-termist approach to the city's ever-growing population. Others have criticised the privatisation of the desert that developments such as New Cairo represent; abandoning the notion of a mixed downtown area in favour of wealthy ghettos on the outskirts.

Yet one could also argue that Cairo's »





Corridor of lamposts on Moubarak Axis Road in New Cairo, which links the eastern part of New Cairo with its city centre. At this stage this major artery connects built areas to incomplete ones, or the desert

modern history is characterised by the continual creation of satellite cities in the desert that eventually become absorbed into its ever-expanding core. The first half of the 20th century saw the developments of new suburbs such as Heliopolis in the north-east of Cairo's Islamic core and Maadi in the south, which were both designed according to European standards to accommodate foreign and native bourgeoisies. According to Paris-based academic Eric Denis, who has made a study of Cairo's satellite cities, many prominent Egyptian real-estate developers consider themselves the natural heirs of Baron Empain, the Belgian settler and investor in Egypt who, in 1905, founded Heliopolis, then in the middle of the desert to the east of Cairo and linked to the city centre by a tramway that he privately owned.

Other critics of the new cities point specifically to the phenomenon of gated communities. 'This gate creates a conflict because once you fence something in, it becomes "theirs" and "ours." You create a divide,' says Basil Kamel, professor of architectural engineering at Cairo University. 'Our communities have always relied dramatically on a kind of entwining between rich and poor

in terms of the informal service sector, where both groups benefited enormously from living close together.'

The voices of these critics grow louder as developments such as New Cairo stretch further and further into the desert. The concerns are legitimate, yet it is difficult to see how the challenges faced by Cairo can be met with anything other than housing construction on a mass scale. Gharib sees the problem as fundamentally one of over-population, and suggests that the only solution would be to somehow reduce Cairo's population by one half. Even if this were desirable, it is very hard to see how it would be possible.

By 2017, when the 'third generation' of satellite cities for Cairo is inaugurated, the Egyptian government hopes to have a total of 44 new urban communities bordering Greater Cairo with a capacity of 12m inhabitants. Because of the rapid growth of population in New Cairo, an expansion to the Suez Desert Road is currently under construction – one can see it now, stretching into an empty distance, waiting to be surrounded by homes and infrastructure. Cairo's march into the desert seems unstoppable ■

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