

MARK NO 30
FEBRUARY, MARCH

ANOTHER ARCHITECTURE

ZECC UTRECHT – YASUTAKA YOSHIMURA TOKYO – MORPHOSIS SHANGHAI – CAAU HONG KONG – THOM ANDERSEN LOS ANGELES – RONNIE
SELF HOUSTON – MANUELLE GAUTRAND VILLENUEVE D'ASQ – JR SHANGHAI – HIROSHI NAKAMURA & NAP TOCHIGI – JUNICHI SAMPEI TOKYO
LETTER FROM CAIRO – TAKAYUKI SUZUKI KYOTO – BEAT KARER ZURICH – NEY + PARTNERS BRUSSELS – SANDER ARCHITECTEN AMSTERDAM



'Criticism of modern architecture is an expression of social conservatism'

— Thom Andersen —

PLAN^B

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TEXT AND PHOTOS: MANUEL ALVAREZ DIESTRO

VIEW OF CURRENT DEVELOPMENTS, WITH EXCLUSIVE VILLAS IN THE FOREGROUND AND SCATTERED TOWERS BEHIND THEM. THE PHOTOGRAPH WAS TAKEN FROM THE NEW CAIRO CAMPUS OF THE AMERICAN UNIVERSITY. EXCAVATIONS WILL ACCOMMODATE UNDERGROUND INFRASTRUCTURE.

DEAR MARK,

this vast lowland area. Amidst the villas a slender, pointed rock stands out, alone. I wonder whether it will become the prime feature of a landscaped roundabout within the projected suburban area. With the Stone Towers and the Convention Centre – another Hadid project – near the airport, Cairo will achieve the international status that comes with the presence of star architects. Several well-known names, such as Machado Silvetti Associates and Ricardo and Victor Legorreta, will direct other projects on the periphery of Cairo – luxury housing developments and public installations for the most part. As a consequence, Egypt will feature in contemporary-architecture guides that, until recently, reserved only a page or two for the Alexandria Library built in 2001.

Suddenly, from the window of the taxi I catch a glimpse of the first gated communities, including Katameya Heights. Among the many types of villas are those that exhibit features borrowed from the most diverse and decontextualized architectural styles: neoclassical, pharaonic, South American (hacienda), Mediterranean – I even see houses sporting elements copied from Chinese temples. In the distance, huge construction cranes sway against the horizon.

Along with a multitude of promotional billboards next to the road, other conspicuous signs point to locations such as the Future University, the American University (AUC) and the German University (GUC). We exit the motorway and arrive in the heart of New Cairo, where an area measuring 100 km² is destined to house millions in the near future.

Omar and I are driving on the great Mubarak Axis Road, which crosses the zone designated for commercial activities of the global era and ends where the vast expanse allocated to impending development begins.

Many companies, official organizations and public entities will transfer to New Cairo. The city centre needs decongesting to make it more livable. A number of Egypt's middle- and upper-class citizens are looking for a chance to breathe cleaner air and to distance



HIGH-DENSITY CONSTRUCTION ALONG SUEZ ROAD, NEW CAIRO.

themselves from traffic congestion.

Egypt, with a rate of rural-to-urban migration that has made it one of the fastest-developing countries in the world – a nation with an annual population growth of over one million inhabitants – needs drastic urban-planning solutions, especially in the more marginalized areas. The city centre of Cairo is at saturation point, and the decision to decentralize towards the area east of the Nile appears to be the most appropriate, considering the amount of land available there.

Let us not forget that satellite cities like New Cairo and Sixth of October are not new to El Cairo. As early as the beginning of the 20th century, part of Cairo's bourgeoisie had moved to Heliopolis and Maadi, which lie to the north and south of the capital, respectively.

'Omar, please drop me off at this signpost. I'll call you next weekend.' He bids me farewell – *'Ma'a al-salama, Mr Manuel'* – and disappears from view, leaving me staring down a wide empty boulevard straddled by hundreds of streetlamps, which will soon light up the new city.

I am standing by a signpost planted in the sand. The words on the sign read 'City Walk'. An arrow points to the desert, and I can just make out the bare outline of a future road traced in the soil. Holding my camera, as sand seep into my sandals I feel the first surge of adrenalin. During the next few hours, under the red-hot sun, I shall enjoy 'paradisa' irresponsibility, as essayist William Arrowsmith might have called it. In his book, *Antonioni: The Poet of Images*, he refers to this term when writing of the meanderings of characters in films directed by Michelangelo Antonioni. And like one of those characters roaming the outskirts of Milan, I sense that I'm getting lost, with neither map nor GPS. It's a predicament I've faced many times during the past 20 years while searching for the perfect periphery.

Wearing my Utah Jazz cap and sun-protection factor 50, carrying a camera charged with an 8 GB memory card, I'm here to escape from it all – to return to the wild, inhospitable landscape before me, where the metropolis advances with the striking of shovels and the droning of cement mixers and power drills. In every city where I have lived, I have chosen to stay close to the periphery. I openly admit that it's in areas like these that I escape from everything, ultimately reaching a point where I flee even from myself in order to witness the city in full transformation and to assume the identity of an environment that is basically fragile.

The way I approach a city is to walk for hours from the outskirts inwards or vice »

VILLAS SPRAWLING ACROSS THE DESERT AREA IN THE EASTERN SECTION OF NEW CAIRO. THE PHOTOGRAPH WAS TAKEN FROM A HILLTOP A FEW KILOMETRES FROM THE NEW CAIRO CAMPUS OF THE AMERICAN UNIVERSITY.

It's six o'clock in the morning in Cairo when I call my taxi driver, beginning the conversation by wishing him good morning: *'Sabah elkhair, Omar. Can you come round to pick me up?'*

'Where do you want to go today, sir?'

'To New Cairo, as usual.' I reply.

'But whereabouts in New Cairo? It's enormous ...' he enquires, sounding worried. *'Same as usual. Some place where the city ends and the desert begins. Just drop me off with my camera, and I'll find my way back later.'*

It's been 20 years since I left Santander in northern Spain to become an urban nomad. Thence came my years in Los Angeles, New York, Boston, San Francisco, Paris, Madrid, Beirut and Algiers. In the various cities where I have lived, I have locked the front doors of different houses so often that occasionally I

A SIGNPOST READING 'CITY WALK' IS PLANTED IN THE SAND. AN ARROW POINTS TO THE DESERT

wonder where I am.

Today I lock my front door in Cairo, standing in semi-darkness on a doormat marked 'Welcome'. Omar is waiting for me in the street. It's an ordinary Saturday, and this charming man from the Shubra district will take me to the satellite city of New Cairo to photograph the latest residential developments.

We set off in his white Hyundai and drive east, towards Suez. As we cross the El Mounib Bridge, beneath us – in the middle of the River Nile – we can see Dahab Island, where the last remains of a rural world appear to have been swallowed up by the city. A few kilometres away, a horizontal sprawl of suburban development will unfold against the massive Egyptian backdrop, revealing the great desert conquest. Being a cityscape photographer

specializing in new developments, I've been unable to resist becoming deeply involved in the documentation of New Cairo. I call this project 'The Conquest'.

From the beginning, El Cairo has evolved in close proximity to the River Nile, the



connecting thread that runs through the city's history. For centuries the Mokattam highlands have witnessed Cairo's expansion. From a sandy, unpaved lookout, while smoking a shisha pipe at a makeshift bar complete with sunshades and plastic chairs, you can enjoy a view that, in my opinion, is unique in the world. Here, in this spot, the epochs comprising the history of mankind can be summarized as you contemplate a series of architectural statements.

At a glance – and following a visual sequence – on a clear day you can identify the Mastaba of Sakkara tomb (widely acknowledged as the first architectural structure, it was built in 2611 BC), the Giza pyramid complex, the minarets of Islamic Cairo and, lastly, the skyscrapers in the city centre and in Maadi. In other words, from Mokattam we are able to witness a procession of vertical structures that represent a huge stride from the origins of this place to the present day. Farther towards Suez are massive building developments premonitory of the Cairo of the future. These cannot be seen from this balcony, however, because a lack of space is forcing the city to reinvent itself increasingly farther from the Nile.

As I continue my journey in Omar's new, white taxi – a vehicle that complies with strict (and successful) regulations imposed to reduce pollution levels – we drive past endless rows of ordinary, bare brick dwellings. On the right side of the carriageway, just past Carrefour, we observe a giant billboard illustrating Zaha Hadid's Stone Towers project. At the moment only a few random frames of future villas, resembling skeletons stranded on the sand of an archaeological site, rise from »

CORRIDOR OF LAMPPOSTS ON NEW CAIRO'S MUBARAK AXIS ROAD, THE ARTERY THAT LINKS THE EASTERN AND CENTRAL SECTIONS OF THE CITY.

AN UNFINISHED ENTRANCE TO MADINATY, NEW CAIRO. THIS STRUCTURE CAN BE SEEN FROM THE CAIRO SUEZ ROAD.

versa. At the end of the day, I climb to the top of a tower and assimilate the distance covered. I have often taken a transatlantic flight just for the experience of arriving in a strange city and discovering the urban layout. I stay for about 24 hours, feeling the effects of jet lag, and return home. I have walked all the way from an airport to a city centre more than once in order to gain first-hand knowledge of a place.

Here in the Egyptian desert, I have gone round to the other side of a mountain of earth and almost reached the place where condensed housing construction is everywhere. The entrails of the new city are in full view: pipes and cables at the bottom of the deepest gorges will soon be covered with

HOLDING MY CAMERA, AS SAND SEEP INTO MY SANDALS, I FEEL THE FIRST SURGE OF ADRENALIN

pavements, garden turf and urban furniture. Wooden scaffolding wraps the bare structures of the gated communities. Row after row seem to sprout up like plants that grow on arid terrain.

Immense concrete pipes leaning against mounds of earth are positioned like cannons, pointing towards luxury villas located behind thick rampart-like walls. This setting, which could have been arranged by a *metteur en scène*, is evocative of a medieval battle in the desert where hundreds of kilometres of land are seized. It's the greatest urban development I can remember seeing, although similar scenarios were staged in Dubai, during the creation of marinas, and in Chongqing, where I took pictures from the rooftops of the city's colossal new-town development. Another

example is the new commercial centre on the Pearl River in Guangzhou. Cairo is following the global flow, and as the new satellite city expands it will be branded with a new identity.

In the climate of a global slump in the



real-estate sector, Cairo, in common with other cities in the vicinity, such as Beirut and Tripoli, is experiencing a phenomenal construction boom. What differentiates New Cairo from the rest is the sheer magnitude of the surface area, which is being filled with scattered, horizontal building projects and a solitary skyscraper here and there, as well as developments of a certain density like El Rehab and others en route to Suez. On the other hand, Beirut's skyscrapers are spread out considerably across the new downtown area. Tripoli is also supporting the idea of building very large structures in its five-star district, next to the Old Medina. Cairo, in contrast with other Mediterranean cities, has practically no boundary to its growth. The desert absorbs everything like a sponge, and there's always room for more.

In any case, it seems a pity to 'flatten' Cairo, which has been a vertical city since time immemorial, demonstrated by the colossal height of the pyramids, the thousands of minarets and the Zamalek skyscrapers, erected in the last three decades of the 20th century. In Cairo, the decision to spread horizontally with a proliferation of gated communities parallels similar scenarios in cities such as Manila and Johannesburg. Once again, the desert is the way forward for many people, and things that are difficult to understand today will eventually become part of the city's history. «

Best regards,
Manuel Alvarez Diestro

ENTRANCE TO AN EXCLUSIVE GATED COMMUNITY NOT FAR FROM THE NEW CAIRO CAMPUS OF THE AMERICAN UNIVERSITY. VILLAS AND A MOSQUE ARE VISIBLE IN THE BACKGROUND.

HIGH-DENSITY CONSTRUCTION SURROUNDING THE CARREFOUR SHOPPING MALL.