



A view towards New Cairo to the South not far from the American university. Gated communities are under construction. In the foreground work is taking place to install the city's infrastructure.



Frontal view of a gated community under construction



A view of an almost finished gated community with a concrete pipe on the left margin pointing at it.

New Cairo

By Manuel Alvarez Diestro

The objective of "New Cairo" is to portray the construction of a satellite city for millions of people in the desert outside the city of Cairo. This photographic project was conducted before and during the Egyptian Revolution in 2010.



A gated community in construction seen from a hill



Apartments under construction in New Cairo. Driving along the Suez Road these structures can be seen occupying a vast territory of land.

This work came to place when I decided to walk with a camera for a period of two years far from the Nile River and along the boundary lines between the emerging city and the desert in the Eastern part of greater Cairo towards Suez.

The work was not intended to become a formal critique through photography on how New Cairo was being built and if it really meets the needs of the Egyptian people or not. When I conducted the work I was not interested on criticizing New Cairo.

Few scholars have already spoken about this particular urban phenomenon in the Middle East and with more empirical background than myself. However, I do share my opinion with them that New Cairo is mostly for the wealthy and does not solve the



Intervened land and in the dessert with new constructions in the background



Rocks and land with gated community in the background



The desert and New Cairo expanding with its gated communities in the right margin

scarcity of housing for the lower social levels. Also, I believe that the construction of gated communities is more of a global trend than a local need. New Cairo will introduce a new way of living for the Egyptians based on the construction of fear, which will push population towards deeper social segregation.

As a visual artist I wanted to concentrate at one level in the aesthetic values generated when a new city is being built from scratch and with a strong emphasis on the alterations in the landscape's topography.

Finally, I attempted through visual inputs to deliver fundamental questions on how we are shaping the cities of the future.



Apartment buildings under construction with removed wooden scaffolding standing on the ground in the foreground.



Construction machinery parked in front of residential buildings in New Cairo next to the Cairo Suez Road



Unfinished apartment blocks with a car parked in what it will become a street.

In the past I have conducted works through film and photography about the high-density cities of Asia. There, I focused on the new towns. In places such as Chongqing, Busan, Beijing, Canton or Hong Kong I have spent a great amount of time trying to understand how the geographical conditions of the land and different human behaviours based on identity, economy, or sociological characteristics pushes cities to evolve in one way or another.

In Asia, my eye was to comfortable dealing with the vertical axis during times of stability. In New Cairo, I had the opportunity to tackle the new horizontal city during an exceptional historic period in Egypt.



A gated community seen through a scaffolding on the foreground



Corridor of light posts not far from Mubarak Axis Road.

As something anecdotic about my life, I have always shifted from extreme vertical to the horizontal cities. I have lived in predominantly horizontal cities such as Los Angeles and Johannesburg or vertical ones like New York. Interestingly enough my home is also in Benidorm, the most vertical enclave in Spain. My life could be seen as one of Piet Mondrian compositions radically shifting from one axis to the other. This particular obsession between vertical and horizontal shapes my view in how I see the world and how I depict what I see through images.

Overall, “New Cairo” became a long-term project in a territory, which required both a strong physical and emotional involvement. Distances between construction sites were massive and the socio-political context was at the edge of collapse.



Security wall surrounding the perimeter of a gated community



A view of what it will become a street in New Cairo

Considering that it was complicated to photograph any subject within the city centre during the revolts, New Cairo became another perfect solution to disconnect from the daily stress when the governmental forces were clashing with the opposition. New Cairo became a sort of therapy. My work office was in Tahrir Square in downtown Cairo. In this plaza I witnessed how millions of people were confronting the government in one of the most violent episodes in the Egyptian history. I lived extreme moments of both joy and discomfort during this episode in Cairo. I did not live the country with the rest of the Spanish community and foreigners based in the city. What I had was the desert to escape in silence. Every weekend early in the morning Ahmed and Omar would drive me from my home



A new road leading to a Mosque not far from the American University in New Cairo and Mubarak Axis Road



View of a gated community under construction with a Religious structure and residential villas and with main entrance in the foreground

in Dokki to New Cairo. They would leave me in front of Zaha Hadid's future Stone Towers site, or in the main gas station at the Mubarak axes Road. From these locations I would dive by foot into the desert for hours in the search of new structures rising from the sand. I had no GPS or Google maps information. My interest was to record the slightest human intervention in the desert. I wanted to feel with my senses how construction companies were moving and digging the land in order to accommodate the future structures. In parallel, I was experiencing through artistic creation my own movement of the mind.

I took thousands of photographs in New Cairo. The editing was complex since I found different stories within the project. For instance, images on New Cairo's topographic



This image corresponds to an unfinished entrance of one of the largest mix used complexes in New Cairo, which will have shopping centers, corporate buildings, villas, golf courses, and apartment blocks.



A new road in the desert



Asphalt poured in the ground

qualities, architectural styles, people, textures and so on. At the end, the editing had to show a global view on New Cairo that could express levels of human intervention.

As I once pointed out to Tomas Alcoverro from La Vanguardia's newspaper in Spain, I wanted to portray through photography a new conquest of the desert by humanity in Cairo, the quintessential metropolis of the Middle East.

Manuel Alvarez Diestro is a visual artist from Spain currently living in London. For the previous two decades he lived in Algiers, Beirut, Casablanca, New York, Paris, Los Angeles, Madrid and most recently in Cairo. He explores city landscapes around the world with the objective of revitalizing through photography, film and writing our appreciation and understanding of cities.