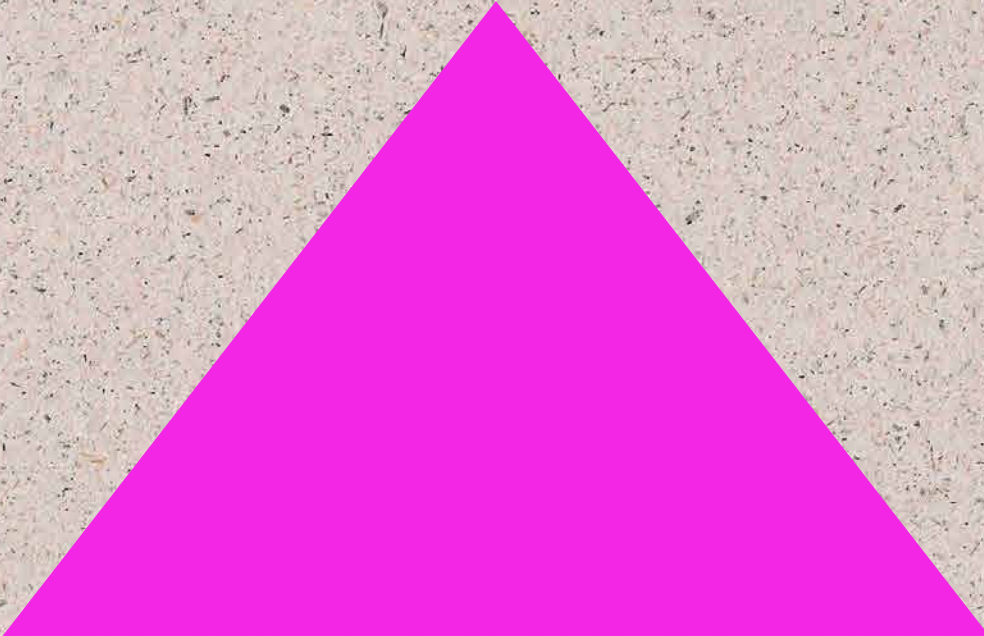
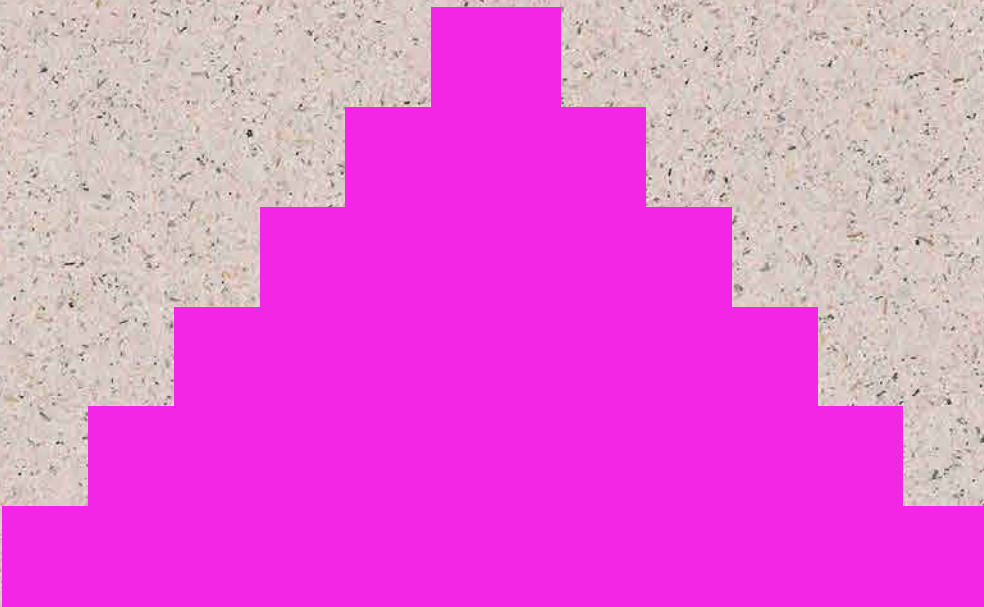


slanted 46

cairo



One of the most interesting questions I love to throw into the workshops is: which is more cultural, Tagamoa, the new area in Egypt built with Western architectural styles and standards, or downtown Cairo, the old heart of the city with its authentic, original architecture? It's a great way to challenge assumptions about what "culture" really means—because sometimes, the answer isn't as obvious as it seems. The answer we got every single time is "downtown Cairo is more cultural." Pierre Bourdieu made a famous distinction between "high" and "low" culture, basically saying that culture belongs to the upper class, and everyone else doesn't really "qualify." In Egypt, we've somehow flipped that idea. Here, the newer, wealthier classes are often seen as *not* cultural, while all the "real" culture is reserved for the older, less resourceful communities. I always answer participants the same thing every time: it's not up to us to decide where culture lies. Wherever there are people, there is culture.



*During Arabic branding workshop, Image courtesy of Werash Al-Khatt.*

*Photo: © Raghda Moataz*

#### PART IV: A LOVE LETTER TO MY CULTURE.

Our practice as Arab designers is still in the process of being rediscovered and rewritten. Design is a reflection of our identity, demanding critical thinking, constant questioning, and cultural honesty. Having one comprehensive list of Egypt's visual culture practices was a naive idea, one that was mistaken for being the ultimate goal. But the true goal should be constant and subjective discoveries: not providing definitive answers, but sparking curiosity. So let me ask you this: How would you define yourself as a [insert identity here] designer?

Throughout searching for my identity as a designer, I found myself falling in love again with my people, Egyptians, the fiercely warm, endlessly resourceful, intensely passionate, and incredibly proud people who continue to create functional beauty out of almost nothing. Despite life's weight, they hold on to a deep sense of gratitude—Reda, as we call it. They are the ones I wrote my book for; the ones who remind me why I stay rooted in who I am and where I come from.

# DESERT CITIES: NEW CAIRO

by MANUEL ÁLVAREZ  
DIESTRO

Manuel Álvarez Diestro is a Spanish photographer and filmmaker whose work explores the intersection of architecture, landscape, and urban expansion. After studying Art History at Boston University, he spent over three decades living across the Middle East and Asia, documenting the transformation of cities and their environments. His photographs have been exhibited internationally and published in numerous platforms, often revealing hidden narratives within built spaces. Now based between Madrid and Toulouse, he continues to develop projects that reflect on modernity, displacement, and the poetic tension between nature and the metropolis.

The objective of “Desert Cities” is to portray the construction of new developments in the desert on the outskirts of Egypt’s main cities including Cairo, Alexandria, Hurgada and Aswan. The main focus has been placed on New Cairo in the Eastern part of Cairo, since it is the largest in scale and is intended to host millions of people.

This work emerged when the author decided to wander with a camera for a period of two years far from the Nile River. The photographs cover a territory that stretches along the boundary lines between the emerging cities and the desert, from Greater Cairo to Suez. The work was not intended to become a formal critique through photography on how New Cities in Egypt were being built and if it really meets the needs of the Egyptian people or not. The artist intended to spark reflection about the urbanistic development formulas used in Egyptian new cities and how they shape the surrounding desert and the social fabric of the inhabitants.





*New Cairo. Photo: © Manuel Álvarez Diestro*

A few scholars have written about this particular urban phenomenon in the Middle East, providing well-rooted empirical background. In fact, I agree that New Cairo is mostly for the wealthy and does not solve the scarcity of housing for the lower social strata. Eventually, this disconnection with reality, in which more housing is required for the lower classes will transform these places for the wealthy into utopias in the desert (ghost towns). I have photographed these territories of desolation, from tower blocks to low-rise constructions. When it comes to the former, I believe that the construction of gated communities is a global trend rather than a local need. New Cairo will introduce a new way of living for Egyptians based on the construction of fear and stratification, which will push the population towards deeper social segregation.

As a visual artist I wanted to concentrate at one level on the aesthetic values generated when a new city is built from scratch, and contrasting that with a strong emphasis on the alterations in the landscape's topography. Finally, I attempted through visual inputs to posit fundamental questions on how we are shaping the cities of the future. In the past I have done work through film and photography about high-density cities in Asia. Particularly, I focused on the new towns: Chongqing, Busan, Seoul, Beijing, Canton or Hong Kong. I spent numerous hours pondering the influence of geographical conditions and different human behaviors, based on identity, economy and social traits, in determining the evolution of cities. In Asia, my eye was too 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, the Arab Spring.

As something anecdotic about my life, I have always shifted from extreme vertical cities to horizontal ones. I have lived in predominantly horizontal cities such as Los Angeles and Johannesburg or vertical ones like New York or Seoul. Interestingly enough, my home base 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 another. This particular obsession between vertical and horizontal shapes how I see the world and interpret what I see through images.

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

Considering that it was complicated to photograph any subject within the city center during the Arab Spring uprising, these new spaces became a straightforward solution to disconnect from the daily stress when the governmental forces were clashing with the opposition in the city’s central areas. The new construction sites in the middle of nowhere became a sort of therapy. My office was located in Tahrir Square in downtown Cairo. In this plaza I witnessed how millions of people stood up to the government in one of the most violent episodes in modern Egyptian history. I lingered through extreme moments of both joy and discomfort during this episode in Egypt. I did not abandon the country with the rest of the Spanish and expat community. I was left with the vastness of the desert to escape into silence.

Every weekend early in the morning Ahmed and Omar would drive me from my home in Dokki to New Cairo. They would drop me off in front of Zaha Hadid’s future Stone Towers site, or at the main gas station on the Mubarak axes Road. From these locations I would delve by foot into the desert for hours, in an endless search for new structures rising from the sand. I had no GPS or Google maps information. My goal 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 was using artistic creation as a tool to develop my train of thought.

I took thousands of photographs in New Cairo. The editing was complex, since I found different stories within the project. For instance, images of New Cairo’s topographic qualities, architectural styles, people, textures and so on. At the end, the editing had to show a holistic perspective on New Cairo that could express levels of human intervention. As I once pointed out to Tomas Alcoverro from *La Vanguardia* 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. Once I finished with New Cairo I started visiting the rest of the Egyptian cities and kept searching for other developments, although this time on a smaller scale.



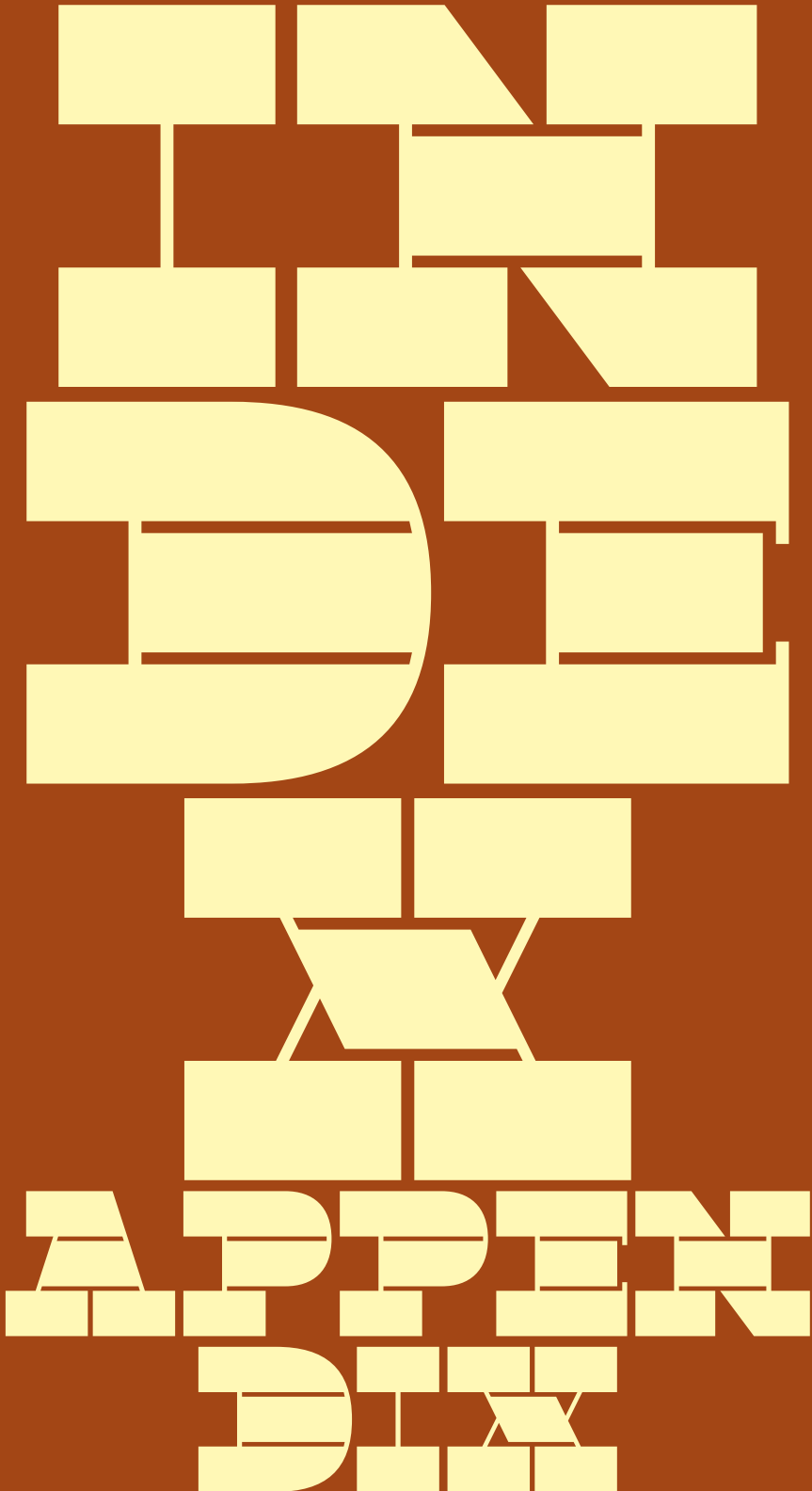
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*Photos: © Manuel Álvarez Diestro*

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| <b>Abdulla</b><br>behance.net/paplosins<br>@sins__design                     | 48            | <b>Abdelrahman Barakat</b><br>@barakatofficial_<br>@werash.alkhatt               | 42-46<br>137-158     | <b>Malak Ezz El Din</b><br>@saqala.studio                                           | 62                |
| <b>Noran Abed</b>                                                            | 43            | <b>Salma Sarah Benamar</b><br>@salmasarahbenamar                                 | 77                   | <b>Nada Ezzeldin</b><br>@new.ezz                                                    | E 173<br>-179     |
| <b>Mariam Abutaleb</b><br>mariamabutaleb.com<br>@mariamabutaleb              | 66-69         | <b>Aya Bendary</b>                                                               | 43                   | <b>Ämr Ezzeldinn / Divaz of Arabia</b><br>divaz.me<br>@divazofarabia<br>@aezzeldinn | 137-158           |
| <b>Bassant Ahmed</b><br>@imjustabeanie                                       | 86-87         | <b>Kathryn Best</b><br>glenholme-luxor.com<br>@glenholme_luxor                   | E 160-165            | <b>Omar Fathy</b><br>behance.net/<br>omaryasserbazan<br>@kareenasareena             | 63                |
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| <b>Rama Al Sabban</b><br>@rama.alsabban                                      | 56            | <b>Cairopolitan</b><br>cairopolitan.com<br>@cairopolitan                         | 1-5                  | <b>Zahini Fez</b><br>@thewonkydaisy                                                 | 75, 89            |
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| <b>Khodeir Alborsaedy</b>                                                    | 36-41 ■       | <b>Selim El Leithy</b><br>@saqala.studio                                         | 62                   | <b>Amanda Galal</b><br>amandagalal.com<br>@amanda_galal                             | 133               |
| <b>Toka Essam Ali</b><br>@tokaessama                                         | 91            | <b>Shahd El Sabbagh</b>                                                          | 216-217              | <b>Ghonim</b><br>@ghonim.st                                                         | 104<br>-105       |
| <b>Amr Alngmah</b><br>@tolio_                                                | 84            | <b>Nour El Safoury / CairoArtBookFair</b><br>@cairoartbookfair<br>@nouursafouury | 137-158<br>E 180-185 | <b>Gozooour</b><br>gozooour.com<br>@gozooour                                        | 112<br>-113       |
| <b>Manuel Álvarez Diestro</b><br>manuelalvarezdiestro.es<br>@m.a.diestro     | E 205<br>-208 | <b>Mohamed El Seify</b><br>@saqala.studio                                        | 62                   | <b>Habiba</b><br>@habibahassan1                                                     | 58                |
| <b>Paula Amin</b><br>@paulaamin_art                                          | 88            | <b>Dalia El-Layeh</b><br>@daliaellayehh                                          | 55, 71, 82           | <b>Ibrahim Hamdi</b><br>protype.studio<br>@protypetf                                | 51-53<br>212, 218 |
| <b>Farah Amir</b><br>@farahaayad.art                                         | 94            | <b>Amira El-Sheikh</b><br>@amiraelsheikh_                                        | 86, 98               | <b>Mahmoud Hamdy</b><br>mhamdy.com<br>@mahmouddd4                                   | 24-27<br>■        |
| <b>Toka Asal</b><br>@toka_artworks                                           | 131           | <b>Hend Elbalouty</b><br>hendelbalouty.com<br>@balouty                           | E 194-198            | <b>Ahmad Hammoud</b><br>hammoud3000.com<br>@hammoud_3000                            | 137-158           |
| <b>Mohamed Ashraf</b><br>behance.net/<br>mohamedenaan<br>@mohamed.enaan      | 130           | <b>Osama Elnahas</b><br>@osama.elnahas.50                                        | 54                   | <b>Salma Hesham</b><br>behance.net/<br>bysalmahesham<br>@by.salmahesham             | 70                |
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| <b>Soha Attia</b><br>@sohaattiadesigns                                       | 74            | <b>Sherif Elsayed</b><br>behance.net/<br>sherifelsayedd<br>@sherifelsayedd       | 91                   |                                                                                     |                   |
| <b>Noura Badawy</b><br>@nourabadawyy                                         | 50            | <b>Aly S. Elsayed</b><br>@aly.selsayed                                           | 135                  |                                                                                     |                   |



|                                                                                            |                               |                                                                                         |                       |                                                                   |                  |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------|
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| <b>Farida Kamel</b>                                                                        | 43                            | <b>Jana Rashed</b><br>@saqala.studio                                                    | 62                    | <b>Tobias Wenig</b><br>@tobiaswenig                               | ■                |
| <b>Negmedine Khaled</b><br>@negmedine                                                      | 28-31<br>■                    | <b>Riff</b>                                                                             | 98                    | <b>Mirette Wessa</b><br>behance.net/mirettewissa<br>@miretteslife | 86               |
| <b>Kholoud Khaled</b><br>behance.net/<br>kholoudkhaled200<br>@kholoudkhaled200             | 48                            | <b>Rizo Masr</b><br>rizomasr.com<br>@rizomasr                                           | 12-15<br>■            | <b>Wissa Wassef Art Centre</b><br>@wissa.wassef.artcenter         | 85               |
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| <b>Markus Lange</b><br>markuslange.co<br>@markus_lange                                     | 108<br>-110                   | <b>Ziad Salah</b><br>@ziadsalahelwakiel                                                 | 56                    |                                                                   |                  |
| <b>Farah Ibrahim</b><br>farahibrahim.com                                                   | E 186-189                     | <b>Samir Abdullah / MOULSQAT</b><br>behance.net/<br>Abdullahhsamir<br>@abdullahhsamir   | 49, 99                |                                                                   |                  |
| <b>Muhammed Magdy</b>                                                                      | 78-79                         | <b>SAREENA</b><br>behance.net/<br>omaryasserbazan<br>@kareenasareena                    | 74                    |                                                                   |                  |
| <b>Amina Metwaly-Gabr</b><br>metwalygabr.com<br>@habashtakanaty                            | 57                            | <b>Habiba Sawaf</b><br>@habibahassan1                                                   | 80-81                 |                                                                   |                  |
| <b>Raghda Moataz</b><br>mutlaqstudio.com<br>@mutlaqstudio                                  | E 199-204                     | <b>Mark Schlickmann</b>                                                                 | 76                    |                                                                   |                  |
| <b>Moshtarak Studios</b><br>@moshtarakstudios                                              | 20-23<br>■                    | <b>Bahia Shehab</b><br>bahiashehab.com<br>@bahiashehab                                  | 16-19<br>137-158<br>■ |                                                                   |                  |
| <b>Mozilla</b>                                                                             | 78-79                         | <b>Mohamed Sherif</b><br>@mohammed_sherif                                               | 106<br>-107           |                                                                   |                  |
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| <b>Ntsal</b><br>ntsai.com<br>@ntsaicairo                                                   | 6-11<br>■                     | <b>Sarah Suliman</b><br>behance.net/<br>sarasuliman1<br>@sarakhaledsuliman              | 92<br>-93             |                                                                   |                  |
| <b>Waleed Osama</b><br>@wledosma                                                           | 51, 75                        | <b>Nora Fawzia Taher</b><br>studiotaher.com<br>@norafawzia                              | 83                    |                                                                   |                  |
| <b>Celine Raffy</b><br>@cellii.bellii                                                      | 54, 136                       | <b>TheBeeProjekt</b><br>@thebeeprojekt                                                  | 95, 102               |                                                                   |                  |
| <b>Ramez Ragab</b><br>@rmzcalli                                                            | 55, 71                        | <b>Veveyzan</b><br>@veveyzan                                                            | 60-61                 |                                                                   |                  |
|                                                                                            |                               | <b>Manuel von Gebhardi</b><br>manuel.vongebhardi.com<br>@manuel.vongebhardi             | 216<br>-217           | ■ Feature in the video interviews<br>E Essay                      |                  |

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We would like to thank everyone who followed our call for submissions online in autumn 2024 and submitted hundreds of graphics, artworks, photos, and texts. It was not easy to make a selection. Unfortunately, due to the limited scope, we could not depict every work. We hope that for those who did not make it into the magazine, there will be another opportunity in the future.

Heartfelt thanks to Luna Şenyurt for her patience, precision, and tireless dedication in managing all communication with the participants of this issue. You are the spirit and driving energy behind this edition!

We thank our longtime friend and designer Markus Lange, who lived and taught in Cairo for many years, building deep ties with its people and culture. Through him, doors to the city's creative scene opened for us. The Cairo Special Edition features motifs from his Tayara photo series (pp. 108/109), recalling the days when kites still flew above the rooftops. A postcard set of these motifs is available exclusively with the edition in our shop: [slanted.de/product/special-edition-cairo](http://slanted.de/product/special-edition-cairo)

We share a long-standing friendship with the pan-European fashion brand Reell, and we have once again collaborated on a special hoodie edition for this issue, featuring a design by calligrapher Negmedine Khaled. The various Arabic renderings of the word *Slanted* are showcased on the back of the sand-colored, high-quality hoodie—limited to just 100 pieces, available exclusively at: [slanted.de/product/cairo-hoodie](http://slanted.de/product/cairo-hoodie)

We extend our heartfelt thanks to Ahmet Şenyurt for so kindly connecting us with Hans Jakob Schindler—whose insightful and generous conversation about Egypt and the wider region proved to be both inspiring and deeply informative.

Our sincere thanks to Mahmoud Hamdy, who accompanied us on our journey to Cairo and later assisted us with Arabic typesetting and the design of the Contemporary Typefaces. Many thanks!

We are truly grateful to have met Nardine Shenouda and her team from ntsal. Their generous support with video editing and the fantastic film they created deeply touched us—we couldn't be happier with the result.

We're so grateful to Marian Misiak and René Wawrzkiwicz for joining us in Cairo. Thank you for the many faithful years of shared projects and encounters. The ride through the desert will always stay with us as a cherished memory.

This issue has been printed on different, great papers by OVOL—thanks a lot for the kind support, especially to Michaela Deckelmann, Sven Hamdorf, and Anna Boroday!

A big shout-out to our printing partner, Stober Medien near Karlsruhe, for their impeccable printing of this magazine. Our gratitude also goes to Marcus Grunvinck and the entire team for their outstanding work on this issue.

Finally, a special thank you to all our supporters and fans. Your enthusiasm, engagement, and willingness to share our work with the world help make Slanted the thriving design community it is today. We appreciate you!

We wish for peace and dignity for all people. We stand firmly against violence in every form. And we especially condemn the ongoing atrocities committed against the Palestinian people in Gaza and the occupied territories.





*Julia, Markus, Hassan, Lars*

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