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## ‘Cairo Ring Road’: Anthony Hamboussi’s Poetic Survey of an Urban Topography

### Abstract

*Cairo’s landscape has morphed over the past century due to uncontrolled urban growth. This transformation has overturned the city’s iconic status as a city of great monuments of Islamic art, the ‘City Victorious’. While Cairo has occupied a central position in the study of historic art and architecture from the Middle East, poor planning and mismanagement of heritage sites have put the city’s historic significance into a state of crisis. While historians turn away from Cairo’s contemporary urbanity, by contrast, photographers such as Anthony Hamboussi have refocused their lenses on the city’s current realities. The city’s historic monuments are drowning in an urban topography that resulted from impoverished governance and improvised urban expansion. What can we learn from photographs of Cairo’s ongoing urban informality, uneven development and spatial inequality? This article critically examines one photographer’s project to make visible the undesirable majority of contemporary Cairo. The author argues that engaging with the city’s contemporary reality, in this case through photography, is key to understanding its declining heritage status and the poor condition of many of its monuments of Islamic architecture.*

### Keywords

Egypt  
Cairo  
photography  
informal urbanism  
heritage  
Arab Spring

The upper half of the photograph [Figure 1] is dominated by a large oppressive concrete structure that slightly curves into the distance, seemingly hovering above. T-shaped columns rising from the dirt road below support the structure’s apparent heavy weight. This is the underbelly of the 6th October Bridge, an elevated road that dissects Cairo from east to west, a mammoth structure that cuts through neighbourhoods and city squares, and bypasses historic buildings and dusty architectural gems. The road is notorious for its constant flow of traffic, allowing for a stream of car pollutants to seep into



Anthony Hamboussi.

*Figure 1: Al-Damirdash Station, Al-Sharabiya, Cairo, 2009.*

apartments that once overlooked wide tree-shaded streets. In Cairo's planning paradigm, as seen and executed by the authorities, cars rule supreme. To the right side of the photograph is a red brick wall bordering the metro tracks. Another set of tracks, previously used by a now-defunct tramline, are partially submerged by dirt and trash. To the left of the photograph is a glimpse into Cairo's urban reality, where many Cairenes rest their heads at the end of the day. A lone anonymous figure stands off-centre; his anonymity matches that of the surroundings, as this scene can be found across Cairo's vast geography.

### **Photographing Cairo's Urban Condition**

Anthony Hamboussi's photography of Cairo is part of a field of work in which photographers direct their lenses away from grand monuments and towards the city's contemporary urban conditions. Other photographers have focused on documenting Egypt's uneven urban development and the many life-worlds that inhabit the country's complex and densely populated settlements. Thus, photographer Jason Larkin's 2009 project 'Cairo Divided', documents the unfinished constructions of elite gated communities in the



Anthony Hamboussi.

*Figure 2: Maryutiya Road, Saft al-Laban, Giza, 2011.*

desert fringe of Cairo, presented as an apocalyptic landscape resulting from ill-conceived planning and governance. Photographer Mosa'ab Elshamy, on the other hand, has documented the colourful street-life of several informal settlements in Cairo, by photographing lively events such as street parties where young males dance as a form of entertainment, an expression of masculinity and to claim urban space. In Egypt, with the policies of economic liberalization introduced in the 1970s by President Anwar Sadat, cities were envisioned as playgrounds for the upper classes with the poor pushed to the margins.<sup>1</sup> In reality, however, such physical marginalization of the poor and working classes has proven impossible to achieve. Authorities failed to displace the masses out of the city; they managed to wilfully ignore the urban majority and to carefully manage the resulting chaos. As the dysfunctional state institutions ignore the needs of Egypt's urban inhabitants, communities provide for themselves by building new housing and neighbourhoods outside of government control. These grassroots urban transformations have a long history dating to the beginning of the twentieth century, yet they have only recently attracted photographers working in Egypt [Figure 2].

## Studying Urbanism in the Global South

As cities of the Global South continue to be dominated by anonymous constructions that have constituted the majority of building activities since the 1970s, these cities become more the laboratories for social scientists and less the sites of renewed interest by architectural historians.<sup>2</sup> Cairo stands as an example of this condition, as few of its buildings erected since the 1950s have entered into the canon of architectural history nor attracted the interest of historians. At the same time, the city's urban developments since the middle of the twentieth century have transformed it into a laboratory for sociologists, economists and political scientists seeking to investigate new forms of urbanity. After the uprising of 2011, local initiatives have sprouted and focused their attention on the myriad urban challenges confronting Cairo, including informality.<sup>3</sup> For example, Yahia Shawkat, author of the blog *Shadow Ministry of Housing*, has consistently monitored and commented on issues related to 'the right to the city': informal urbanism; housing; and state policies, plans and expenditures on urban infrastructure.<sup>4</sup> The initiative Tadamun also boasts a rich website with ample information on the authorities that control the urban environment. Tadamun also highlights urban areas located within the centre of Cairo, which occupy marginal positions when it comes to public knowledge about their social compositions, histories and urban conditions.<sup>5</sup> In 2013, the conference 'Learning from Cairo' organized by the initiative CLUSTER and hosted at the American University in Cairo, brought together many of the activists and initiatives that made the city an object of debate following the 2011 uprising.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, several urban design studios in European universities have sent students on exploratory trips in Cairo not to study the city's historic monuments and urban fabric, but to investigate, map and attempt to understand its overwhelming urban informality.<sup>7</sup>

For historians of Islamic art and architecture, Cairo is a city that has shaped the field with its wealth of iconic buildings, ranging in style from Fatimid to Ottoman. Cairo, and Egypt more generally, have a particular relationship with photography that goes back to the very early days of the daguerreotype.<sup>8</sup> Early twentieth-century photographic surveys of the city's historic architecture, such as K. A. C. Creswell's photographs, continue to be some of the most useful primary sources for historians studying the city.<sup>9</sup> However, even in such early photographic documentation, the contemporary city fades into the background and contemporary figures are featured only when needed for scale.<sup>10</sup> Historically, photographic collections of the Middle East focus on ancient monuments and exclude 'modern' urban scenes and subjects.<sup>11</sup> Monuments, elite structures and buildings of fine architectural quality dominate the architectural history of Cairo and the photographic archive of the city.<sup>12</sup> There is, however, another Cairo that has evolved over the past century, which has been ignored by architectural historians of Cairo who often sever historical sites of architectural merit from their contemporary surroundings.

Despite increased interest in informal urbanization from architects and urbanists, historians of architecture have not yet turned to this issue. For photographer Anthony Hamboussi, this omission is a form of erasure and amnesia. According to Hamboussi, Egyptian authorities also wished to erase the informal city that emerged: 'It [informal development] was thought of as a sore thumb and should be dealt with by erasing its image'.<sup>13</sup> Informal urbanism is fertile ground for social science research, in fields such as sociology,

anthropology and political science. However, this overwhelming urban condition of contemporary Cairo is unlikely to attract historians of architecture in the near future, because informal urbanism, by definition, challenges the basic tenet of writing architectural history due to the anonymity of the builders, the lack of stylistic referents, the populism of its aesthetics and the poor quality of its building crafts. Images of the city in this context are highly political instruments that can shape public policy and impact the lives of entire communities.

Informal urbanism is a global phenomenon that reflects the exclusion of large swathes of urban populations from formal politics.<sup>14</sup> Such urbanism takes many diverse forms from impoverished slums to speculative real estate development outside of regulated markets. In Cairo, informal urbanism became visibly prominent as it encircled the city, starting in the 1970s, and became a new way of experiencing and living in the city [Figure 3].<sup>15</sup> Starting in the 1980s, informal urbanism in Cairo, sometimes referred to as 'spontaneous' urbanism, began to receive some attention from scholars.<sup>16</sup> Since then, a steady increase of this form of self-built urbanism continued, but the scale of building units was often defined by the extended family of



Anthony Hamboussi.

*Figure 3: Al-Tunsiy, Al-Abagiya, Qism al-Khalifa, Cairo, 2010.*

rural migrants. In the past decade, however, speculative real estate development and the unregulated and corrupt construction industry have adopted the visual and architectural language of informal urbanism, and transformed it into readily available real estate for purchase. This economic transformation of informally built apartment buildings also changed their architectural qualities: these structures became much larger and taller, as contractors sought to maximize profit.

David Sims has shown that informal urbanity is an outcome of the failure of the state to perform its duties.<sup>17</sup> This form of mass urbanization cannot be reduced to a symptom of poverty; informality is also about capital speculation. For example, many owners of would-be heritage buildings in the city centre demolish their properties due to the lack of an economic and legal system to protect them. Buildings that belong to the category of the informal frequently replace these lost, often undocumented, historic domestic architectures. The main drive behind this shedding of urban heritage and its replacement by new properties is purely economic. Following the start of the Arab Spring, the number of new informal buildings – considered by authorities to be spontaneous structures built without the guidance of an official urban plan – skyrocketed with estimates of over 100,000 new constructions in the span of three years.<sup>18</sup> This rapid urbanization has had a profound impact on Cairo's architectural heritage, but this is only part of a larger story of immense urban transformations.<sup>19</sup> Uncontrolled urban growth encircles the city centre but also penetrates it. One way to engage with this evolving urban reality is by surveying and documenting the urban landscape through photography.<sup>20</sup> Hamboussi's photographic survey of contemporary Cairo turns the lens away from masterpieces of architecture and structures of faded grandeur to present a wider view of a city expanding horizontally and vertically, with a mass of red brick and concrete, arguably the city's contemporary vernacular.

### **Introducing Hamboussi**

Anthony Hamboussi is an Egyptian-American photographer, born in Brooklyn, New York in 1969 and currently based in Cairo. He has exhibited at the International Center of Photography, MoMA/PS1, Americas Society and Queens Museum, and has taught at the International Center of Photography and the State University of New York. For much of his career, spanning fifteen years, Hamboussi has photographed the built environment with a keen interest in informal, everyday landscapes, vernacular constructions, post-industrial sites, and in-between spaces. From 2009 to 2014, Hamboussi travelled with his large-format camera to Cairo on multiple occasions to capture the city from which his family hails. Having spent most of his life in New York, for Hamboussi a journey to Cairo was one of return and discovery. 'My own family come from working-class roots, from al-Matariya and Shubra,' Hamboussi told me.<sup>21</sup> Al-Matariya is a working-class area,<sup>22</sup> and Shubra is a middle-class enclave; both neighbourhoods are located north of the city centre. Shubra has become significantly denser in terms of population, and its middle-class character has faded, giving way to the kind of speculative developments that architecturally belong to the category of the informal, despite their location in one of Cairo's planned neighbourhoods. Al-Matariya has transformed from its rural agricultural origins into amassed speculative informal urbanization serving the working classes



Anthony Hamboussi.

*Figure 4: Al-Mounib, Giza, 2011.*

and rural migrants in the form of high-rise, high-density apartments, built in the form of 'domino house' concrete structures enveloped in exposed red brick [Figure 4].<sup>23</sup>

As Hamboussi returned to Cairo and rediscovered his family roots, he began to photograph these neighbourhoods, and others around the city. With these journeys of return, Hamboussi began to understand the *'ashwa'iyat* – the colloquial term for informal settlements or spontaneously built areas. 'In some ways the informal settlements represented everything good and bad I came to know about Egypt,' Hamboussi said.<sup>24</sup>

The informal areas seemed at first chaotic but as I started to understand their structure and design I realized that people took their destinies in their own hands and achieved what the government chose not to do for their own people.<sup>25</sup>

The image of the brick city struck Hamboussi as he searched for ways to photograph Cairo's overwhelming urbanity.

### **Informal architecture in Cairo's *'ashwa'iyat***

Piecemeal urban expansion, developed outside of government plans and building regulations, dominates contemporary Cairo's urban landscape [Figure 5]. Until World War II, Cairo was largely composed of historic areas and modern planned spaces catering to various social strata. Despite serious



Anthony Hamboussi.

Figure 5: *Masakin Zahra', al-Maadi al-Jadida, Cairo, 2011.*

attempts to expand social housing, after the war the state was unable to build a sufficient number of low-income units to absorb urban Egypt's growing population, as well as the influx of migrants from smaller cities stricken by economic stagnation.

Building contractors, petty capitalists and speculators began to benefit from the housing shortage by building so-called *'ashwa'iyyat*. Today, such newly urbanized areas span a wide spectrum of economic strata, from precarious basic shelters to speculative apartment blocks as high as fifteen storeys, with apartments costing upwards of a quarter of a million Egyptian pounds (roughly 32,000 USD). Nevertheless, in the government's discourse and in popular representations of Cairo, these areas are simply known as *'ashwa'iyyat*, without distinction.<sup>26</sup> This reductive representation allows the government to exercise forced evictions with little regard for the lives affected.<sup>27</sup> The Egyptian government estimates that 40 per cent of Cairo residents live in these areas.<sup>28</sup> However, this is considered by many to be a conservative estimate. David Sims, economist and author of *Understanding Cairo: The Logic of a City Out of Control*, estimates that 67 per cent of the city's population live in informal areas or *'ashwa'iyyat*.<sup>29</sup>

The Egyptian state's inability to provide plans for adequate affordable housing is one item in a long list of urban failures. Another failure has been the inability to list, maintain, protect and make accessible Cairo's diverse architectural heritage. These two seemingly distinct problems converge in Cairo in ways that should invite scholars and policy makers to think of them together. For example, Cairo's historic city, first included in the UNESCO World Heritage List in 1979, has suffered innumerable violations.<sup>30</sup> These violations include the demolition of unlisted heritage buildings, particularly historic houses, and the poor upkeep of many historic shrines and mosques due to rising sewage and ground water levels – the result of unplanned densification of these historic areas. The most notable example is the urban transformation of the Darb al-Ahmar area of historic Cairo, once a rich cluster of traditional structures ranging from religious monuments to domestic architecture. Darb al-Ahmar lost much of its historic fabric after the completion of al-Azhar Park, a major landscaping project funded by the Aga Khan Foundation, which transformed a waste dumping ground into Cairo's largest park. Increasing land values in the district overlooking the park have driven speculators in the informal economy to buy decrepit centuries-old houses, demolish them and then replace them with crudely built red brick high-rise apartments.<sup>31</sup> Corrupt authorities have turned a blind eye as the last remaining clusters of Cairene non-elite domestic architecture rapidly disappear to allow for the illegal construction of apartment buildings bearing the hallmarks of *'ashwa'iyyat* architecture.

In one of Hamboussi's photographs, the monumental Ottoman-style mosque of Ottoman governor turned independent ruler of Egypt, Muhammad Ali (*r.*1805–48), completed in 1848, is relegated to the back of the image, dwarfed and almost unnoticeable to the unknowing eye [Figure 6]. The pencil minarets of the mosque and its reflective silver domes are desperate for the attention that the photographer has given to the complex urban settlement of Manshiyat Nasir, seen in the foreground. Manshiyat Nasir is a dense urban settlement on the edge of the rocky Muqattam plateau in Cairo. The area is home to an estimated 300,000 of the city's poorest inhabitants with a sizable Coptic population. The community of Manshiyat Nasir sifts through the city's collected waste and prepares it for recycling. The unique urban settlement in which people live and work densely compacted amongst the trash from which they make a living, is featured in Mai Iskander's 2009 documentary *Garbage Dreams*. While the community continues to be resilient, it is also vulnerable. In 2008, a rock slide in one of the poorest parts of Manshiyat Nasir, al-Diwaika slum, killed 119 people and resulted in the destruction of hundreds of homes, which led the government to clear the area and relocate hundreds of families to the outskirts of Cairo in government-built housing. The majority of Manshiyat Nasir, however, was not affected.

The seemingly chaotic world of Manshiyat Nasir is not dismissed as merely informal, disorganized, dirty and ugly. Instead, Hamboussi dares to walk the fine line between documenting an urban reality that has come to define contemporary Cairo, without fetishizing the 'resilience' of the poor or the genius of informality.<sup>32</sup> Cubic volumes of red brick rising eight to ten floors fill every inch of the lower half of the photograph. The blue Cairo sky, with its infamous layer of pollution and haze resting low on the horizon, dominates the top half of the image. The buildings are seemingly arranged with no logic, but upon closer inspection it becomes clear that each of the cubic structures is a negotiation between the orthogonal



Anthony Hamboussi.

*Figure 6: Manshiyat Nasir, Cairo, 2011.*

shape of this building-typology – which is, on the one hand, dominated by Egyptian domestic architecture and on the other, the irregular terrain of the rocky Muqattam plateau. This is the Cairo occupied by the majority of the city’s inhabitants. The monuments that have long attracted travellers, orientalist and historians are today little more than a negligible fraction of that reality [Figure 7].

The photograph of Manshiyat Nasir was taken in 2011, when world media and photographers parachuted onto Cairo to document and mediate Tahrir Square and the revolutionary youth who led the protests of that year. Hamboussi, however, continued uninterrupted with his project of surveying Cairo’s urbanity. According to Hamboussi, his work is ‘an attempt to create a visual document of an ongoing housing crisis in the years leading to and beyond the January 25 [2011] Revolution’.<sup>33</sup> By pointing his camera away from the city centre and towards one of Cairo’s most complex urban settlements, Hamboussi’s image of Manshiyat Nasr provides more complex insight into why Egyptians revolted than the sensational images of Tahrir Square. The city’s contemporary condition, as captured by Hamboussi, raises questions about Egypt’s exclusionary politics and poor public policy, its lack of social justice, uneven development and lost urban heritage. These questions are at the core of the Egyptian political mobilization that culminated in 2011, but which can be understood through a close reading of the city’s landscape that is omnipresent [Figure 8]. The seemingly banal, mundane, even repetitive images of Cairo’s red brick and concrete jungle reveal inherently complex issues such as land use, cultural development, education, economics, environmental neglect, preservation, heritage and history.



Anthony Hamboussi.

*Figure 7: Manshiyat Nasir, Cairo, 2011.*



Anthony Hamboussi.

*Figure 8: Masakin al-Abajjiya, al-Qal'a, Cairo, 2009.*

## Informality, Visibility and Representation: Hamboussi in Cairo and Beyond

The issue of informality in urban Egypt belongs both to a global evolution of cities, particularly in corrupt states and developing economies, but it is also directly linked to the particularities of Egypt's politics. Cairo's residents living in informal settlements are marginalized within Egypt's policies of urban development and within Egyptian academia. At the same time, a neoliberal class-war has been underway as residents of informal settlements are stigmatized as criminals, an image constructed and perpetuated in popular media from film to television serials.<sup>34</sup> For Hamboussi, the question of visibility and representation is at the heart of his photographic project. He explains: 'I heard lots of myth surrounding these areas. Stories of crime, drugs, fundamentalism, and a general negative backwardness.'<sup>35</sup> Such images are not insignificant as they play a direct role in legitimizing state plans to forcibly evict entire settlements in favour of creating a *tabula rasa* for international and Gulf investors, and to realize belated utopian visions for the future of Cairo, such as the Cairo 2050 vision.<sup>36</sup> These visions conflict with the reality captured in Hamboussi's images, including the photograph shot in Giza that shows another future unfolding, as communities transform precious agricultural land into a shabby neighbourhood, instantly dull, its buildings perpetually unfinished [Figure 9]. The people who built this vision of Cairo's future are conspicuously absent from the image, as if the image captures their silenced political voice. Hamboussi further states: 'As the government turns its back and erases a voice and image of a people in society, I try and give witness to their existence.'<sup>37</sup>



Anthony Hamboussi.

Figure 9: Al-Talbiya, Giza, 2011.

Hamboussi's interest in cities has spanned his career. Previous projects include *Cuidad Abierta* (Open City) in Ritoque, Chile; Newtown Creek in Brooklyn and Queens, New York; and *La Petite Ceinture* in Paris. In 2009, he collaborated with the Center for Urban Pedagogy in New York in their project, 'What is Affordable Housing?'<sup>38</sup> Hamboussi's original photography is also woven beautifully in another book project, *LIC in Context: An Unorthodox Guide to Long Island City*, which documents the culmination of a three-year multifaceted public-history and public-art project, exploring 54 sites in a dynamic yet deeply misconstrued New York City neighbourhood.<sup>39</sup> These projects, among others, reflect Hamboussi's commitment to understanding cities and utilizing photography in complex ways that move beyond documentation and representation [Figure 10]. In his previous collaborations, photographs are an integral part of the multidisciplinary efforts to engage with urban realities that can be considered peripheral. These efforts, such as *LIC in Context* or Hamboussi's collaboration with the International Center for Urban Ecology, combine texts, images and illustrations in engaging ways that do not sit comfortably as academic works, nor as works of urban activism. Hamboussi elaborates further:

I'm trying not to produce images that are stereotypical, for I don't see those images as meant to question or agitate but rather to control, to dominate over others, whether politically, racially or culturally. I'm interested in a visually charged portrayal of the class polarization played out in the built environment; it's politics and contented elements. The embrace of the vernacular, the specific, and the local in a world that has otherwise embraced the 'generic city'.<sup>40</sup>



Anthony Hamboussi.

*Figure 10: Newtown Creek Water Pollution Control Plant, under construction, 329 Greenpoint Avenue, from 459 North Henry Street, Greenpoint, Brooklyn, looking north-west, 2001–06.*

It is precisely with this complex approach to cities that Hamboussi's lens promises observers and students of Cairo a fresh view of the city.

A consistent theme in several of Hamboussi's past projects is the idea of an edge or boundary. For example, *La Petite Ceinture* in Paris is a now-abandoned nineteenth-century circular railway that connected the city's different stations. In this instance, Hamboussi's lens was directed at the unused railway circumventing the city centre of Paris, creating a liminal space that is invisible in plain sight [Figure 11]. Similarly, in New York, Newtown Creek is a piece of industrial infrastructure that is also an edge, a boundary between Queens and Brooklyn. Both the rail track and the polluted waters of the creek are the focus of Hamboussi's images, which depict sites – previously activated with the movement of people and goods – that are now idling quietly despite their prime locations in the centres of Paris and New York. In the case of Cairo, however, urban liminality and marginality figure differently. The ring of *'ashwa'iyyat* encircling the centre of Cairo, including its walled historic city, is a paradoxical space: it is massive, it is visible from highways and elevated roads, yet it is little understood by many of the city's inhabitants who do not see it as a manifestation of Cairo's oppressive inequalities, and the failure of the state to treat all its subjects fairly.



Anthony Hamboussi.

Figure 11: 16ème arrondissement, image no. 113a, 2005.

Thus, in Cairo Hamboussi turns his camera outwards, looking at the ring of *'ashwa'iyyat* from the city's Ring Road, once conceived by planners as a way of defining the city limits and prohibiting the continued expansion of informality. In this case, the Ring Road becomes a technology for looking at the city, at the spaces inhabited by the marginalized majority. An unintended result of building this elevated piece of infrastructure encircling the city, is that it has become a viewing platform from which to observe the informal city. Furthermore, in the case of Cairo's ill-conceived official planning, what authorities imagined as a boundary, the Ring Road, served the unintended function of making new territories accessible by road, and thus ready for further informal urbanization. For Hamboussi, the road becomes a necessary tool to photograph an urban reality that would otherwise be incomprehensible when viewed from street level, or too abstract when viewed from the air.

A striking image that captures the essence of Hamboussi's Cairo project depicts the Great Pyramids of Giza in the background [Figure 12]: the view of the monuments is obstructed by a set of multistorey apartment buildings in various states of completion. The proximity of the seemingly mundane urban landscape to the pyramids is unsettling. Yet, the two – the ancient and



Anthony Hamboussi.

Figure 12: Al-Labaini Street, Al-Haraneiyah, Giza, 2011.

revered and the modern and disdained – are tied together tightly as if they were unified monuments. The visual impact achieved would not have been possible or as powerfully framed had the photograph been taken from street level. At first glance, the vantage point from which the photograph had been taken is mysterious, lifted off the ground, hovering above an eerily empty street. Cairo’s elevated-road infrastructure is a technology used in state planning that works to privilege cars. It is often designed to sever underprivileged communities – and sometimes to conceal their existence by building side barriers that hinder drivers from visually connecting with the ‘undesirable’ city around them. Hamboussi utilized this road infrastructure as a viewing platform that allowed him to capture panoramic views not of the pyramids, but of a city that is not to be seen nor photographed. While the pyramids are the subject of countless photographs, often depicted in their timeless desert setting, Hamboussi turns his gaze on the reality that encircles the iconic monuments. The image shows a tall pink façade, bare concrete structures sprouting from the ground that was once lush with fields and palm groves. Only a few palms remain, a palimpsest of a transformed landscape [Figure 13].



Anthony Hamboussi.

*Figure 13: El-Mansuriya, Giza, 2010.*

## Conclusion

'Cairo Ring Road' is not limited to documenting informal settlements. Rather, the project also includes photographs of newly built middle-income housing, dilapidated government-built social housing, and uninhabited housing projects built decades ago [Figure 14]. Other images show vacant spaces between housing blocks; massive construction sites of dozens of apartment buildings rising simultaneously; electrical towers rising over the desert sands and supplying power to the ever-expanding city; and unmaintained infrastructure, such as canals and railways. Through Hamboussi's photographic practices, his Cairo is presented as an altered landscape, as a topography of human and material density, a city in a constant state of incompleteness, construction and destruction [Figure 15].

The present work, composed of nearly two hundred photographs, is both lyrical and documentarian. The images quietly renew the urgency of several questions that have occupied scholars attempting to understand how Cairo functions as a city. Is Cairo a city on the verge of imploding? Is it even a city, based on outdated definitions that lack the specificity of Cairo's conditions? What do these images of Cairo tell us about the Arab Spring and the politics that gave



Anthony Hamboussi.

Figure 14: *Masakin Zahra', al-Maadi al-Jadida, Cairo, 2009.*



Anthony Hamboussi.

Figure 15: *Tiraat Jisr al-Bahr, al-Qalyubiya, 2009.*

birth to it? How can we reconsider our conceptions of housing in a developing city after confronting the immense scale of housing construction in Cairo, as evident in the photographs? And finally, what does the future hold for Cairo's architectural heritage in the face of the city's unprecedented urban challenges? While these questions continue to be unanswered, Hamboussi's 'Cairo Ring Road' provides vivid illustrations and photographic documentation that bring these questions regarding Cairo's present and future into sharp relief.

### **Suggested Citation**

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17. Observers of Cairo's informal urban growth have noted that such developments are symptoms of the failure, retreat or total absence of the state. See: David Sims, *Understanding Cairo: The Logic of a City Out of Control* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2012).
18. Mimi Kirk, 'Informal Areas and Cairo's Silent Urban Revolution', *The National Interest*, accessed January 15, 2015, <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/informal-areas-cairos-silent-urban-revolution-10044>.
19. Petra Kuppinger, 'Globalization and Exterritoriality in Metropolitan Cairo', *Geographical Review* 95.3 (2005): 348–72.
20. Cairo's contemporary urban condition has inspired not only photographers but also architects and urbanists to observe, document and record the city's transformation. Initiatives that sprouted following 2011 include 10 Tooba, Madd, Tadamon, CLUSTER and Cairoobserver.

21. All quotes by Hamboussi are from an unpublished interview conducted with the author (December 15, 2014).
22. More recently, al-Matariya has been a hotbed of resistance to the military and police authorities. See: Amira Howeidy, 'Matariyya, Egypt's New Theater of Dissent', *Middle East Research and Information Project*, accessed July 31, 2015, <http://www.merip.org/mero/mero060415>.
23. Justin McGuirk, 'The Perfect Architectural Symbol for an Era Obsessed with Customization and Participation', *Dezeen Magazine*, accessed January 15, 2015, <http://www.dezeen.com/2014/03/20/opinion-justin-mcguirk-le-corbusier-symbol-for-era-obsessed-with-customisation/>.
24. Anthony Hamboussi, interview by Mohamed Elshahed, December 15, 2014.
25. Ibid.
26. Asef Bayat and Eric Denis, 'Who Is Afraid of Ashwaiyyat? Urban Change and Politics in Egypt', *Environment and Urbanization* 12 (2000): 185–99.
27. Amnesty International, "'We Are Not Dirt": Forced Evictions in Egypt's Informal Settlements', August 23, 2011, accessed December 15, 2015, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/MDE12/001/2011/en/>.
28. Sims, *Understanding Cairo*, 3.
29. Ibid.
30. Caroline Williams, 'Islamic Cairo, Endangered Legacy', *Middle East Journal* 39.3 (1985): 231–46.
31. For more on the Al-Azhar Park project see the Aga Khan Trust for Culture project brief: 'Al-Azhar Park, Cairo and the Revitalization of Darb al-Ah-mar', accessed July 31, 2015, [http://www.akdn.org/publications/2007\\_aktc\\_egypt.pdf](http://www.akdn.org/publications/2007_aktc_egypt.pdf).
32. Dina Shehayeb and Shahira Issa, eds, *Cairo/Resilience: City as Personal Practice* (Rotterdam: IABR, 2009).
33. Anthony Hamboussi, interview by Mohamed Elshahed, December 15, 2014.
34. The stigmatization of informal settlements manifests through skewed media representations of life in these massive swathes of Cairo, most notably in films and television serials that depict informal urbanity as the setting for the production of subjects lacking in education, class and culture and thriving in an atmosphere of crime, violence and corruption. Viola Shafik, 'From Alley to Shantytown: Representing the Nation through Cairo's Changing City-Scape', in *Afropolis: City/Media/Art*, ed. Kerstin Pinther, Larissa Forster and Christian Hanussek (Johannesburg: Jacana Media, 2012); Diane Singerman and Paul Amar, 'Contesting

Myths, Critiquing Cosmopolitanism, Creating the New Cairo School of Urban Studies', in *Cairo Cosmopolitan: Politics, Culture and Urban Space in the New Globalized Middle East*, ed. Diane Singerman and Paul Amar (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2006), 35; Diane Singerman, 'The Siege of Imbaba, Egypt's Internal "Other," and the Criminalization of Politics', in *Cairo Contested: Governance, Urban Space, and Global Modernity*, ed. Diane Singerman (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2009), 111–44. The stigmatization of inhabitants of informal areas is a global phenomenon: Ananya Roy, 'Slumdog Cities: Rethinking Subaltern Urbanism', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 35.2 (2011): 223–38.

35. Anthony Hamboussi, interview by Mohamed Elshahed, December 15, 2014.
36. The Cairo 2050 vision was prepared by various government planning bodies and partially made public in 2007. The vision lacked any specific plans or technical aspects that could make it realizable. Instead, it proposed general ideas regarding the future of Cairo, which involved large-scale resettlement and depopulation of central areas; the transformation of large swathes of the city centre into parks; and the building of skyscrapers along the Nile. A 200 page document of the vision can be downloaded from the site *Cairo from Below*, accessed July 31, 2015, <https://cairofrombelow.files.wordpress.com/2011/08/cairo-2050-vision-v-2009-gopp-12-mb.pdf>.
37. Anthony Hamboussi, interview by Mohamed Elshahed, December 15, 2014.
38. The toolkit, 'What is Affordable Housing', created by the Center for Urban Pedagogy helps communities understand what affordable housing is and how to advocate social justice in the city: Center for Urban Pedagogy, *What Is Affordable Housing?* (New York: Center for Urban Pedagogy, 2009).
39. Paul Parkhill and Katherine Gray, with photographs by Anthony Hamboussi, *LIC in Context: An Unorthodox Guide to Long Island City* (Brooklyn, NY: Furnace Press, 2005).
40. Anthony Hamboussi, interview by Mohamed Elshahed, December 15, 2014.