

Since the 1950s, Egypt has developed a dozen new towns in the desert around Cairo. This book offers the first systematic exploration of these cities, analyzing their architecture and urban form, their promise and shortcomings. Intended to satisfy growing demand for housing, most of the desert towns have never been completed. Taking this condition of permanently emerging urban development at face value, the study identifies the potential of these towns through a series of design scenarios. *Cairo Desert Cities* underscores the value of re-engaging with modernist town planning, for wiping away the dust of past failures may uncover the contours of future opportunities.


Edited by Marc Angélil
and Charlotte Malterre-Barthes
with Something Fantastic in
collaboration with CLUSTER Cairo

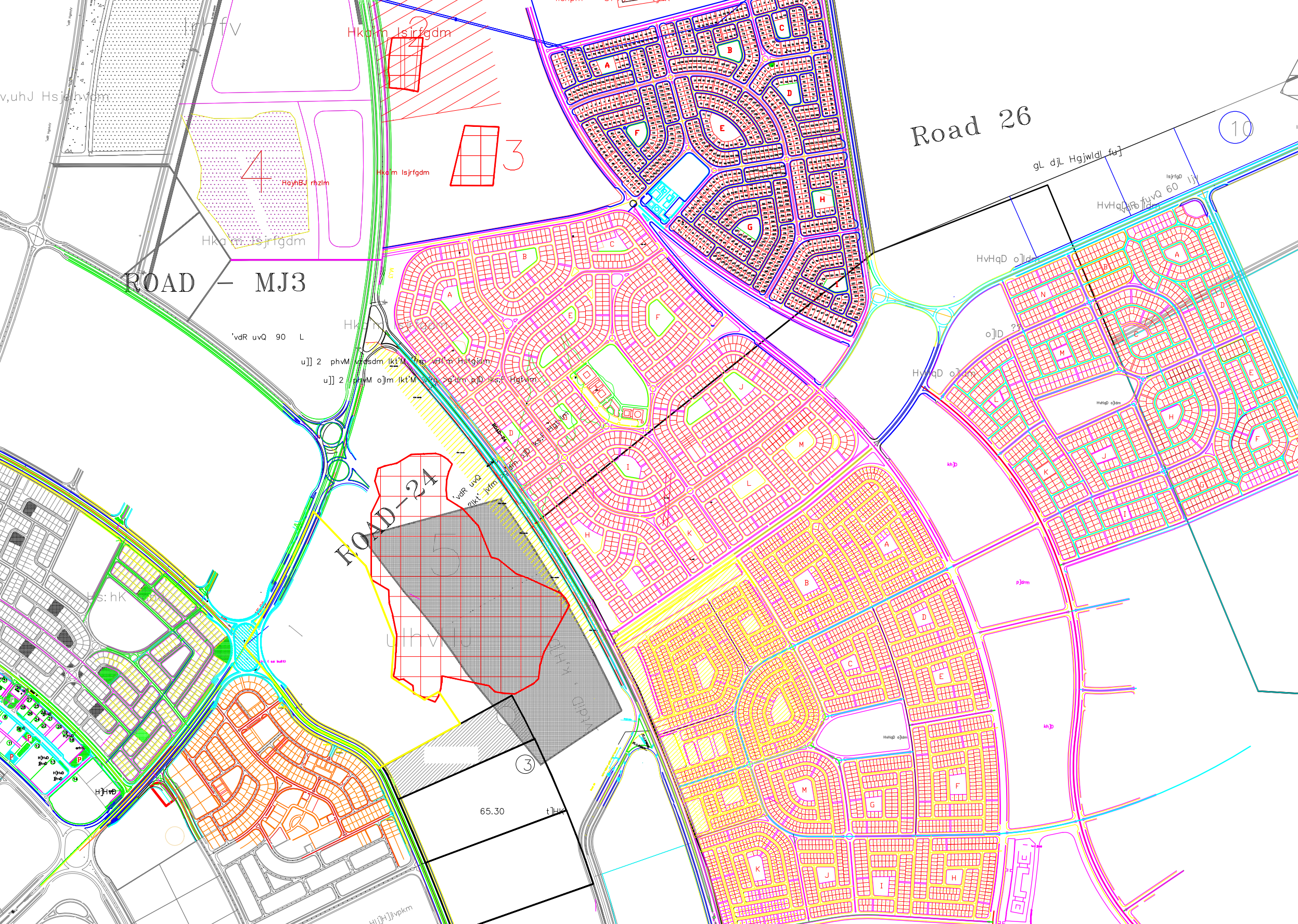
ETH Zurich MAS Urban Design

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CAIRO DESERT CITIES

RUBY PRESS





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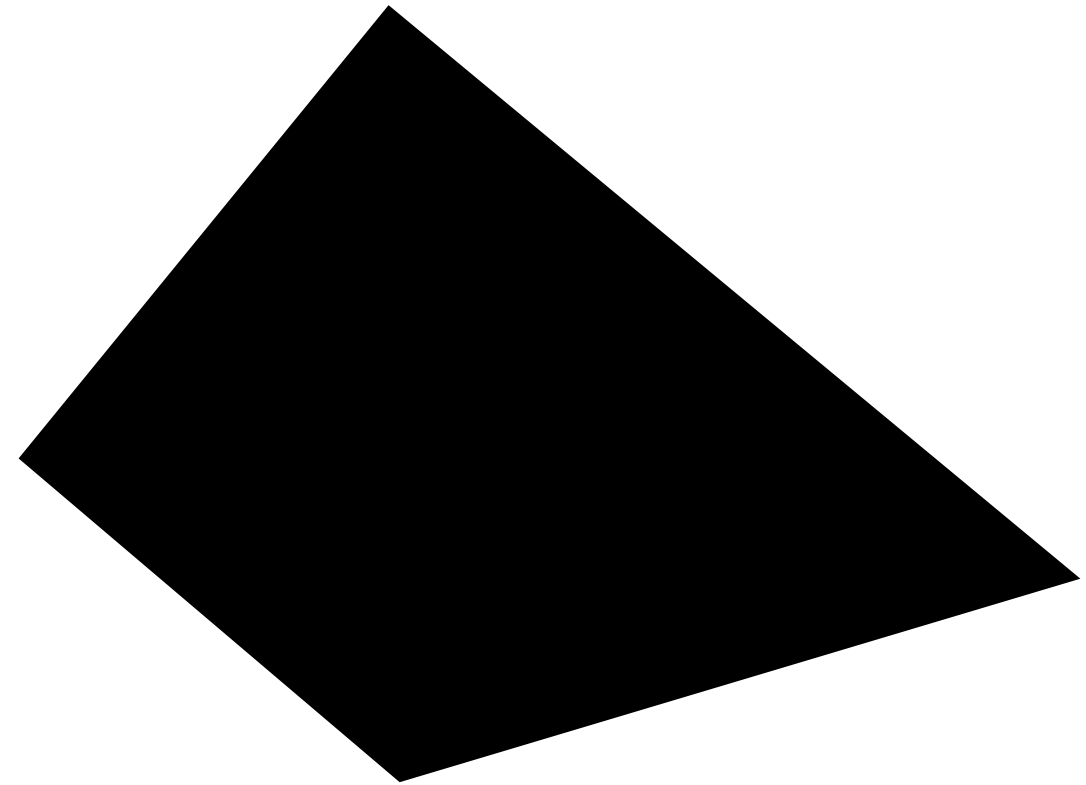
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ETH Zurich
MAS Urban Design

Cairo Desert Cities



Ruby Press

Edited by Marc Angélil and Charlotte Malterre-Barthes
in collaboration with Something Fantastic and CLUSTER

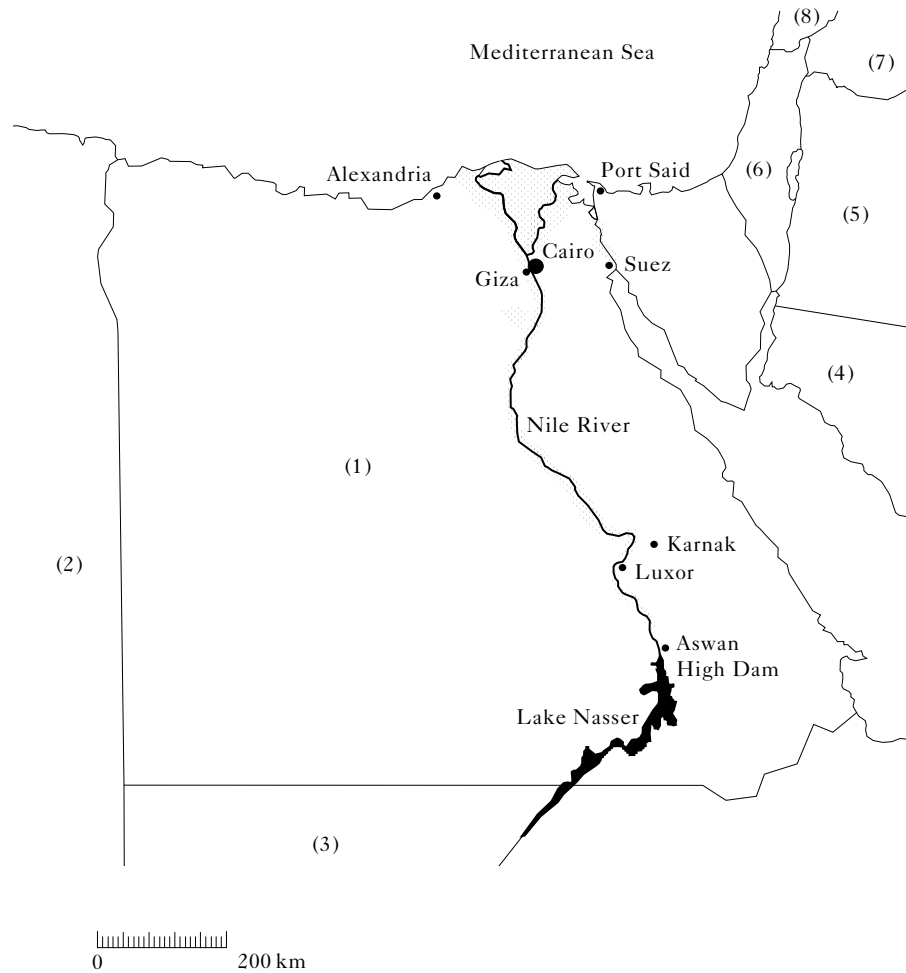


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- (2) Libya
- (3) Sudan
- (4) Saudi Arabia
- (5) Jordan
- (6) Israel and Palestinian Occupied Territories
- (7) Syria
- (8) Lebanon

Capital	Cairo
Total area	1 010 407.84 sq km ²
Population 2015 estimate	89 247 000 m.
Population 2017 estimate	94,799,000 m.

Fig. 1: Egypt and its neighbouring countries

Presented since 1950 as the solution to all urban problems, new cities have flourished in the deserts around Cairo. Colossal amounts of money and resources have been spent in the name of a modern Egypt, all of which have yet to show success. Huge tracts of land have been urbanized to produce housing that stays largely vacant, benefiting only a small portion of the population. This phenomenon is the legacy of a long history of expansionist urban policies in Egypt. New cities of the nineteenth century were driven by hygienist (Helwan, 1870s) or elitist motives (Heliopolis, 1920s). The Cairo suburb of Nasr City, envisioned by Gamal Abdel Nasser in 1954, was intended as an urban settlement for and by the government, and it initiated a movement towards the desert that continues to this day. The creation of new cities was also a pet project of Anwar Sadat, and was consolidated into a surprisingly long-lasting policy pursued throughout the 1980s and 1990s by Hosni Mubarak—as exemplified by New Cairo, his personal project. The New Capital, announced in March 2015 by the current President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, confirms the persistence of such planning ideas and processes even today.

These towns have never proved efficient nor were they ever fully realized—none of the new cities of the past decades have reached their projected populations, for example—but their expansion is unlikely to stop. In fact, domestic demand for housing is growing, as Egyptians wary of the banking system seek secure investments for their savings. Desert land, a seemingly infinite resource owned by the Egyptian Ministry of Defense, is sold—often at bargain prices—to private investors willing to develop gated communities or condominiums. Desert cities also serve as dumping grounds for government-led relocation programs,

with poorer populations housed in new, remote settlements lacking services, transportation, or basic infrastructure. As multiple announcements of new cities in recent years have demonstrated, it appears that the political powers that be are still willing to pursue this form of development, even as official data from the 2017 census reveal that twelve million new housing units stand vacant throughout the country.

The Master of Advanced Studies in Urban Design (MAS), which focused on the urban development of the Egyptian capital for the 2015-16 year, explored the so-called informal districts of Cairo with the previous publication *Housing Cairo: The Informal Response*. Nonetheless, it appeared just as important to investigate the phenomenon of desert cities, particularly in relation to the role of planners and architects. The quest for an ordered urban form claiming to offer universal solutions to the perceived chaos of old or industrial cities—an idea partially inspired by modernist, rationalist models from the West—is the driving force behind this phenomenon. New towns gave modernist planners a blank canvas on which to create their vision of an ideal urban society. Architects have had a hand in the materialization of this ideology, which is why the MAS Urban Design explores these cities, their failure and relative success, and the urban conditions that have emerged as a result. Critical of these conditions, and aware of the responsibility held by architects and planners that comes with designing space, this publication offers an analytical and speculative overview of Cairo's desert cities.

Urban researcher and Egypt expert Eric Denis's in-depth account ("Cairo New Towns: From One Revolution to Another") of the genesis of desert development, the policies that facilitated its emergence, the administrative mechanism behind it, and how successive political powers have defined and used desert residential areas for different purposes, allows one to understand the intricacy inherent in this spatial

expansion. A chronological overview ("Cairo's Desert Cities: A Chronology") presents eleven desert cities around Cairo, from Helwan to Madinet Nasr, addressing the New Capital project with a few artefacts. The case studies are introduced systematically, with each city shown using a figure-ground plan, images, and their characteristic architectural typologies. This allows for a comparison of the characteristics of each settlement and provides an understanding of how desert development is physically expressed and architecturally translated. Interviews with young residents of the new cities ("Living in Desert Cities") offer valuable insights into how some people live in such settlements, while Markus Elkatsha, of the real estate development firm SODIC, provides an assessment of the situation from the industry's point of view ("Doing Business in the Desert"). A series of essays entitled the "Mechanisms of Desert Cities" attempts to untangle the complexity behind desert development—for instance from a legal perspective ("Legislating the Desert"), or by tracing the origins of such planning ("Desert Urbanization").

Architects and planners have played a crucial role in designing these areas, producing questionable results. Embracing the responsibility held by the design professions, the MAS program explored design solutions, proposing provocative projects for a paradigmatic case study: the city of Sixth of October. With the intention of launching a critical conversation, the projects ask: If desert development must happen, why does it have to be unsustainable and poorly designed? Under the name "Alternative Urban Futures," seven projects offer another take on desert development in Sixth of October. This city, in particular, is a case in which modernist urban planning, economic liberalization, and crony capitalism meet and overlap, with an unfortunate result. Tellingly, it is also considered to be one of Egypt's more successful new towns. Implementing Trojan-horse-like strategies that put design at the service of both rich

and modest populations (“Symbiosis”), planning the city for pedestrians (“In Praise of Shadows”), or transplanting planning tactics from informal areas (“Graft”), the student projects investigate alternative modes of planning and urbanization, thereby questioning the situation of Sixth of October and of desert cities in general.

Featuring essays by myself and prominent experts David Sims, Marc Angélil, and Cary Siress, Mirette Khorshed (with Lawrence Vale and Khaled Tarabieh), as well as an afterword by Mohamed Elshahed, the final section, “Reflecting on Desert Urbanization in Egypt,” positions urban expansion into the desert within the larger Egyptian context, addressing topics such as political agendas, long-term land-reclamation policies, national scales, and territorial organization. The intention here is twofold: to address the somewhat unattractive topic of new towns and failed planning in terms of the ethical duty of architects and planners, on the one hand, and, on the other, to use insights into the mechanisms behind desert expansion and the resulting spatial conditions to both question the phenomenon and ameliorate its effects with more intelligent and viable urban-design solutions.

