
خصوصية المكان : النيل



THE NILE

AN AUTONOMOUS SPACE

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Spring Semester 2009

THE NILE

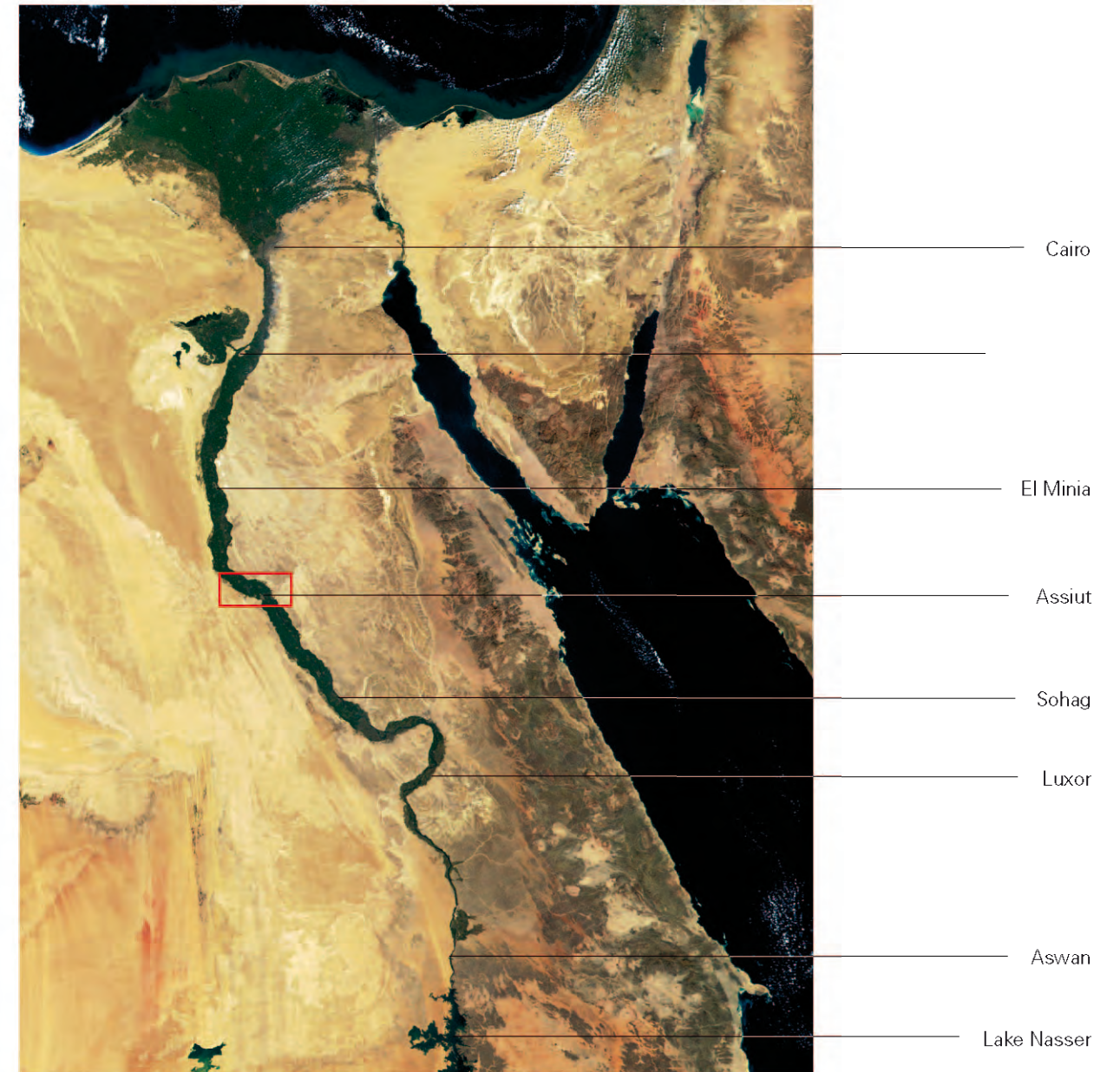
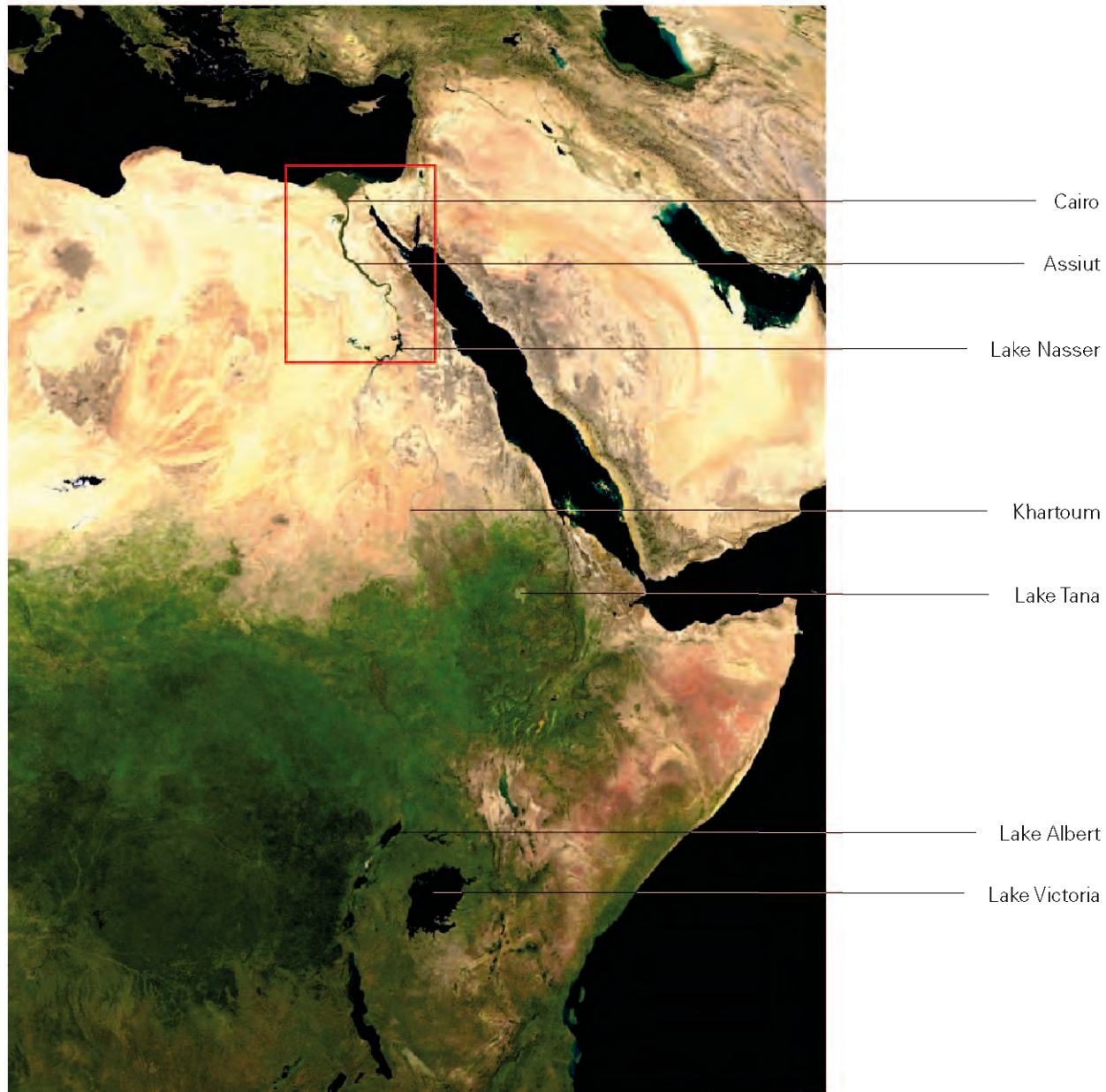
AN AUTONOMOUS SPACE

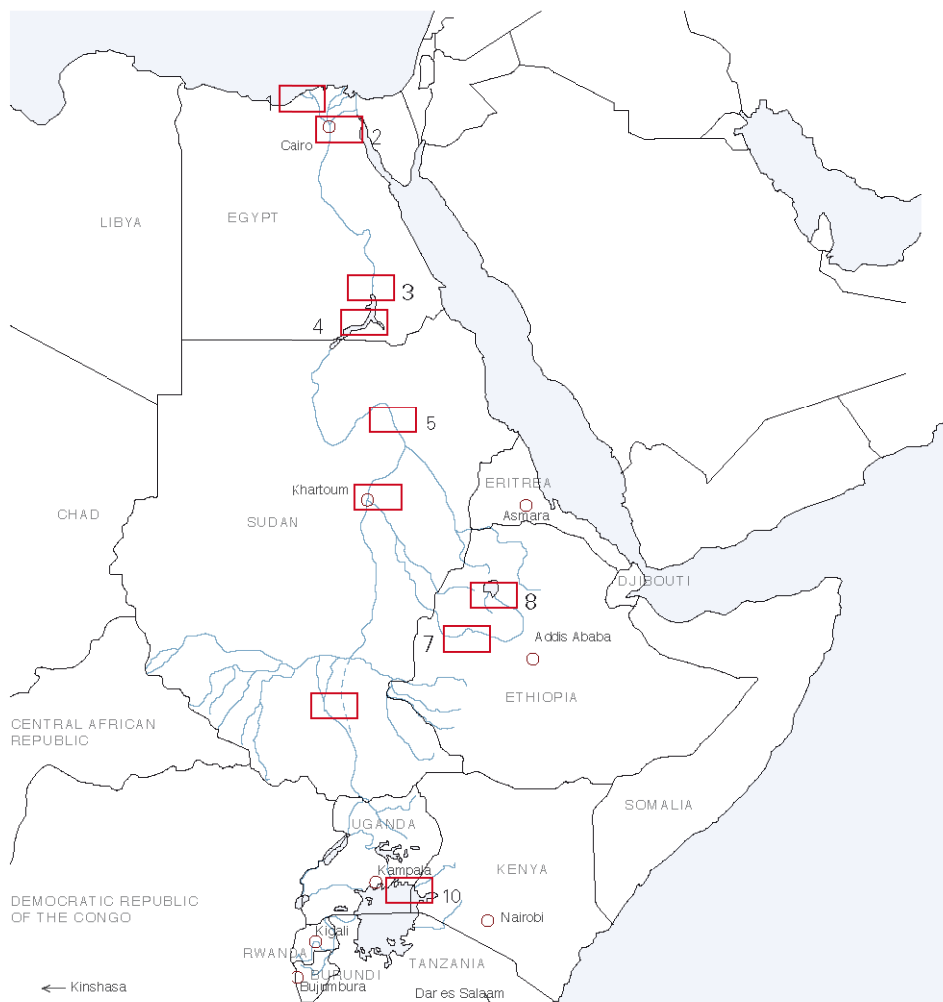
The Nile is a unique river on this planet, a river with its own distinctive face. The Nile covers a distance of over 5000 km by the time it reaches Egypt, a country which owes its existence to this river. Throughout history, the Nile has piqued the imagination of people, and the river's history is closely marked by human attempts to control its waters. In a gradual process, the stream has become more and more constrained by embankments, barrages and dams, but the Nile has not entirely lost its autonomy; the river willfully washes out foundations and erodes riverbanks. Even though humans have altered the appearance of the Nile, it seems that life along its banks has not significantly changed. The river simply continues to flow by. There are, although, tentative attempts to occupy newly available space along the engineered riverbanks. Programs are introduced which turn their orientation more towards the river and thereby integrate themselves as a part of the autonomous space of the Nile.



PHYSIOGNOMY OF A LIFELINE

The Nile is a salient geographical feature of North Africa. It is the only river which is able to carry a portion of Equatorial Africa drainage through the barren and rainless Sahara to the Mediterranean Sea. This feature is the precondition which made possible the evolution of one of the earliest civilizations on our planet. Isolated in the vast desert of the Sahara, the Nile created an autonomous space along this thin lifeline, a space in stark contrast to its barren surroundings. Without the Nile, there would certainly not have been the Egypt we know with its early civilization, culture and monuments. Herodotus, the Greek historian, already recognized Egypt as “the gift of the Nile” (ca. 500 BC). The Roman proverb “aut nilus aut nihil”—“either the Nile or nothing”—accurately renders the unique situation.





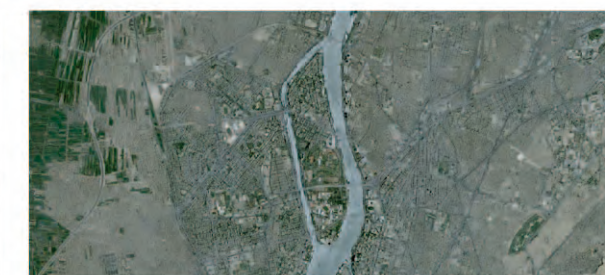
- 1 River mouth Rosetta branch
- 2 Cairo
- 3 Aswan
- 4 Lake Nasser
- 5 North of Atbara Sudan
- 6 Khartoum confluence of Blue and White Nile
- 7 Wallaga Blue Nile Ethiopian Highlands
- 8 Lake Tana Ethiopia
- 9 Sudd White Nile
- 10 Lake Victoria Uganda

Biography of the Nile

At its source, the Nile can be characterized as a young child—energetic, wild and unstable. As the river finds its way downstream, it grows up. It becomes an adolescent where the two main tributary arms of the river meet. Here, it seems as if the Nile would have already found its course, but there are still periods of wild uproar, much more powerful than in the upper regions. On its way through the Sudanese desert, the Nile loses much of its force. It reaches the Egyptian border as an adult, already tired and even-tempered. When the Nile discharges into the Mediterranean Sea, it has become an old man, weak and exhausted by its long course and finally loses itself into the vast sea.



1



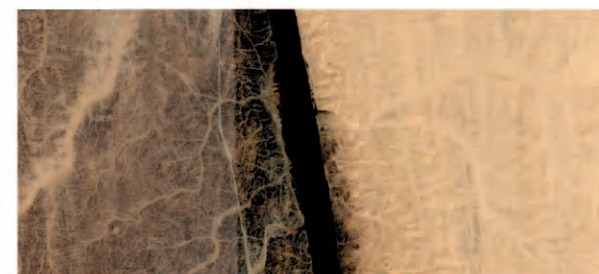
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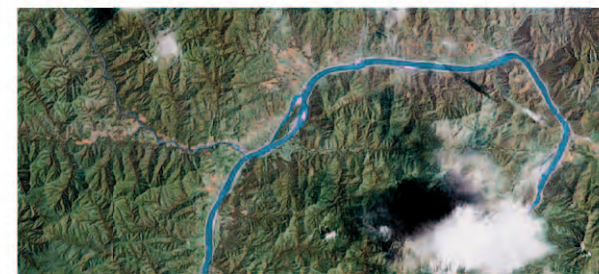
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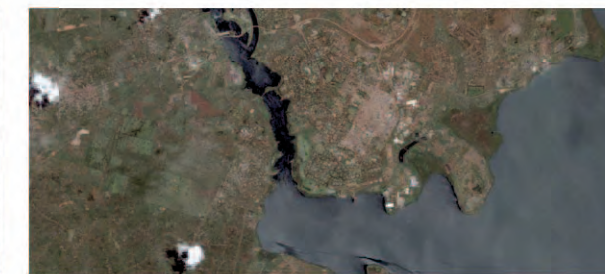
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The Nile

Length.....6671 km

Distance through desert.....2700 km

Catchement area.....2,870,000 km²

Basin area.....3,030,000 km²

Altitude difference.....2,700 m

Average water volume.....White Nile: 33, 9 bn km³
Blue Nile: 51.7 bn km³

Tributary stream.....White Nile
Sobat
Blue Nile
Atbara
Bahr al-Ghazal
Wadi al-Malik
Wadi Howar

Rainfall.....Near Equator: 1600 mm/ year

Riparian states.....Tanzania
Congo
Burundi
Rwanda
Uganda
Kenya
Ethiopia
Sudan
Egypt

Fish species.....1976: 320
1997: 115

The Egyptian Nile

Length.....1550 km

Distance through desert.....1550km

Catchement area.....0 km²

Basin area.....300' 000 km²
9.9% of the total basin area

Altitude difference.....85 m

Average water volume.....Aswan: 84 bn km³
River mouth: 15 bn km³

Tributary stream.....0

Rainfall.....South of Cairo: 25-50 mm/ year
Coast: 100 - 200 mm/ year

Riparian states.....Egypt

Fish species.....1948: 47
1998: 74





God Hapi

The life-giving Nile was personified as an obese man with a large paunch and pendulous, sac-like breasts, clad only in a band that covered his genitals—as if to avoid being identified with a specific sex. (Mysliwiec, 2004)

“Hail to thee, O Nile! Who manifests thyself over this land, and comes to give life to Egypt! Mysterious is thy issuing forth from the darkness, on this day whereon it is celebrated! Watering the orchards created by Re, to cause all the cattle to live, you give the earth to drink, inexhaustible one! Path that descends from the sky, loving the bread of Seb and the first-fruits of Nepera, You cause the workshops of Ptah to prosper!” (Hymnus to the Nile, ca. 2100 BC).

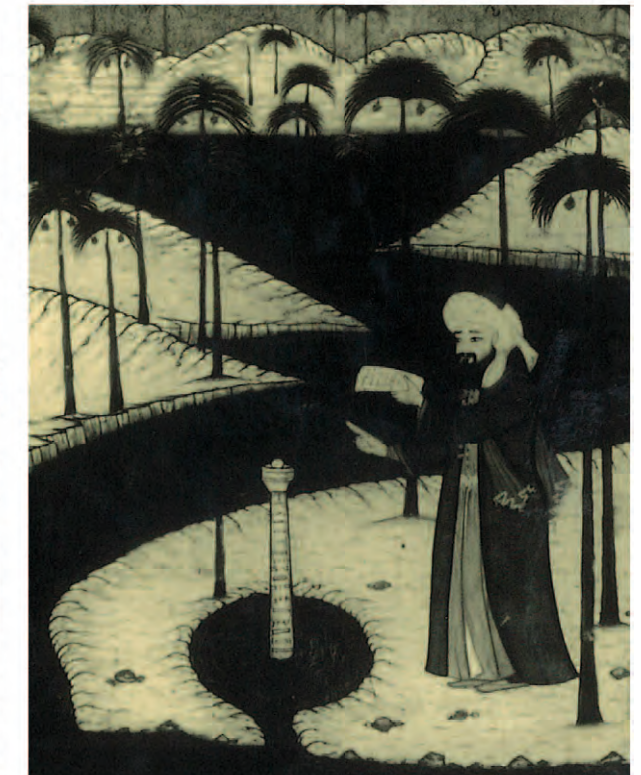
Personification of the Nile

During the Old Kingdom, a nearly human relationship was established between river and society, between a source of life for a fertile plain, and a civilization that was regulated by the rhythm of its waters. The Nile exerted itself as both a blessing and a curse. In their narrow valley, Egyptians experienced the destructive force of nature and became conscious of the conflict between order and chaos, which the gods alone could resolve (Kérisel, 2001). The natural phenomenon of the river became, through a process of cultural codification, an ensouled subject. Historical evidence emphasize the Nile as a subject with an outstanding position in Egyptian culture.



Rhythm of Life

The rising and falling of the Nile had governed life in Egypt for thousands of years. In the Pharaonic period, the year was parted into three seasons: “akhet” (August to October) the time of the flooding, “peret” (October to February) the time of sowing, and “shemou” (February to June) harvest time (Guillou, 1995). The Egyptians believed that the Nile rose out of the ground between two mountains which lay between the Islands of Elephante and the Island of Philae, but they had no exact idea where and how the inundation took place. Therefore, the rise and fall of the river was undoubtedly a genuine mystery to them.



Letter to a River

According to the legend narrated in “Marvels of the Creation,” the people of Egypt were preparing to sacrifice a young woman in order to appease the Nile. The Muslim conqueror of the country (640 AD), ‘Amru b. al-‘Ass, would not allow this because the custom was unacceptable to Islam. Soon afterward, the river nearly ceased to flow. Amru then obtained a letter from Khalifa ‘Umar b. al-Khattab, who ordered the Nile, in the name of God, to renew its flow. ‘Amru delivered the letter to the river and the next morning all could see by the nilometer that the water had reached its highest level. (Erlich, 2000)



Le Grand Tour d'Egypte

It was both the Napoleon expedition (1798-1801) and the stringent ruling of Mehmed Ali (1805-1847) which opened Egypt to the West. During this time, the Grand Tour of Europe, as a part of the education of a young man of higher standing, was superseded by a journey to the Holy Land or to Egypt. (Humphreys, 2001)



Filling in the Blanks on the Map

Reports of early explorers are characterised by a wild and exotic world. On the image above, a hippo attacks the canoe of Dr. Livingstone, one of Africa's most famous explorers. His fame drove forward an obsession with discovering the sources of the Nile, which culminated the classic period of European geographical discovery and colonial penetration of the African continent. (Guadalupi, 1997)

Mysterious Sources

On this 1525 map, Africa's outlines are known in detail, while the interior and course of the Nile remain a mystery, which was only solved in the 20th century when Burckhardt Waldecker discovered the real source of the Nile.

Mystification by the West

Over millenia, Egypt had occupied the heart of a world out of which western culture had developed. In common perception, Egypt as a reality is constantly overlaid with fantasies and legends. In the 19th century, the Napoleonic Campaign particularly influenced the image of Egypt; Egypt became fashionable. Romantic, exotic, and unknown, Egyptian mysteries and legends inspired the West.



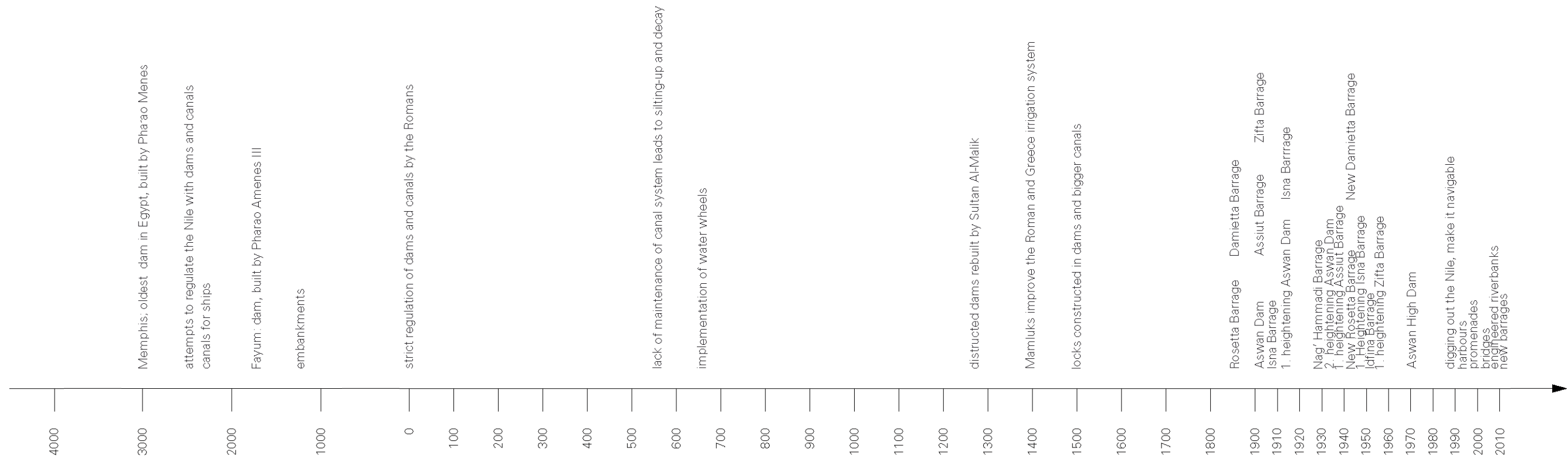
Romantic Adventure

Every autumn when the temperatures fell, dauntless tourists arrived in Alexandria in order to continue south to Cairo where they hired a local guide and chartered a Dahabiya (large sailing boat). The 850 km-journey between Cairo and Aswan took about 6 to 12 weeks. At around 1870, sailing boats were replaced by the first steamers. All of them exclusively belonged to Thomas Cook who thereby introduced package-tourism to the world. After Cook made Nile cruises affordable to a wider public, they became a fixed part of every tour to Egypt. (Humphreys, 2001)



Death on the Nile

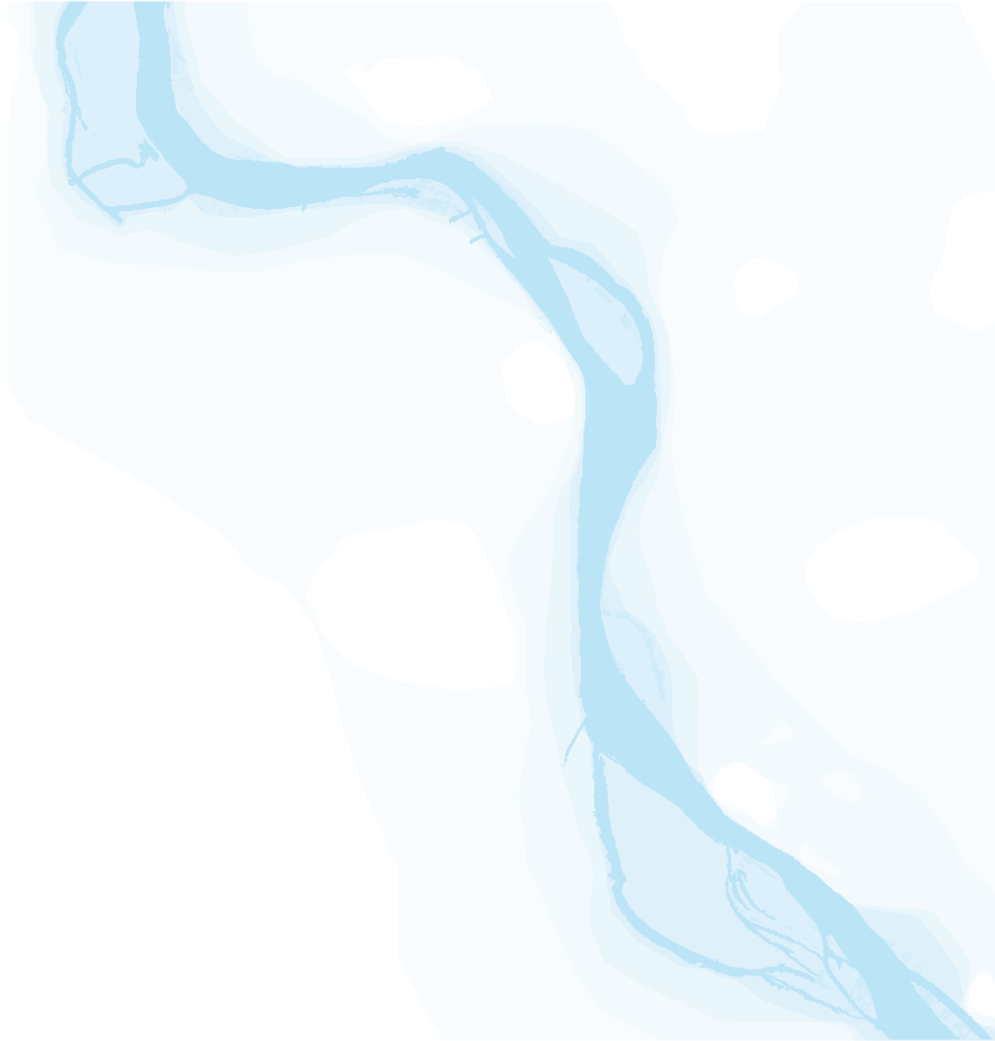
In this famous detective story written by Agatha Christie in 1937, the Nile plays an outstanding role. Most of the plot takes place on a steam cruiser travelling along the Nile. A honeymoon journey on the Nile ends with a mysterious murder. Linette Ridgeway is found shot to death in her sleep. The investigation of Hercule Poirot brings reveals that the steamer has become the meeting place of a group of people carrying hidden secrets. The Nile acts as a history-laden background full of mysteries and old stories, encircling and isolating the steamer with its passengers.



(Source: Knörschild, 1993)

Attempts to restrain the Nile

Throughout history, attempts have been made to restrain the Nile. On one hand, the Nile is the most predictable of rivers; unlike other great rivers, the date of its flood is rarely capricious. On the other hand, no one can accurately predict how much water the Nile will provide from one year to the next. In the years of low flood, it would not provide sufficient water or deliver nutrients, and the result was famine and death. Years of high flood meant entire fields and villages would be destroyed. All human interventions can be read as a continuous struggle of civilization to reduce the river's autonomy in order to gain control over its utility. Even though the Nile seems to be a controlled system today, it has not entirely lost its autonomy. The Nile still flows along its own course; it removes riverbanks and erodes the riverbed to let bring new islands to surface. Regardless of all the built structures, the Nile is not tamed; it washes out barrages and bridges and takes away the coast. Ultimately, the river prevails.



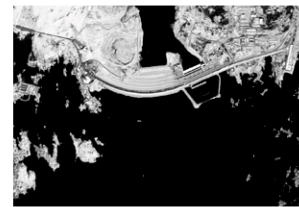
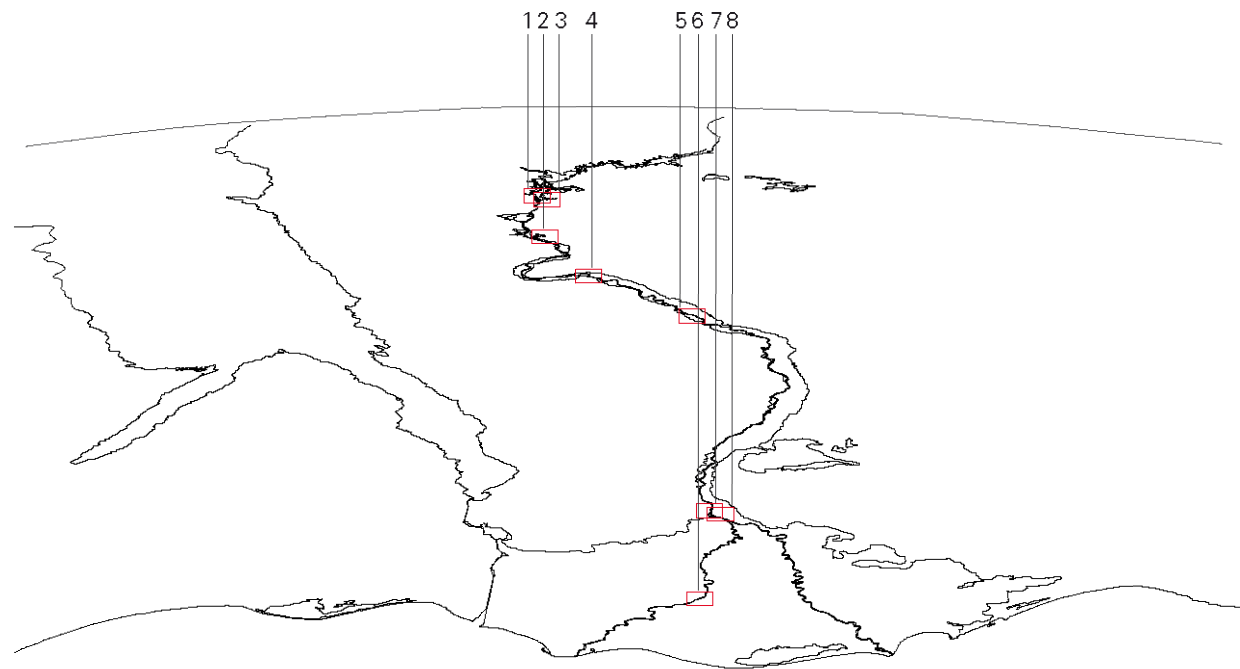
Dynamic Organism

According to Herodotus, “when the Nile overflows, the whole country is converted into a sea, and the towns, which alone remain above water, look like the islands in the Aegean.” (Kérisel, 2001) The river determines whether land can be developed or has to be abandoned. Human settlements followed permanent changes of the valley due to the yearly inundations. (Seidlmayer, 2001)

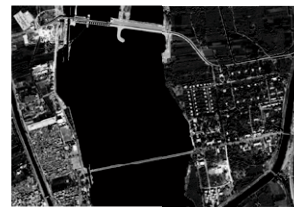


Today's State of Control

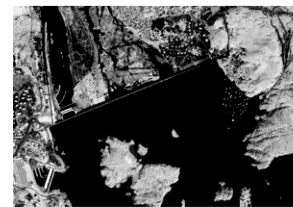
Due to increasing constriction, the Nile seems to have found its final course. On one hand, buildings can be built near the river without being endangered by an unexpected flood. On the other hand, all technical solutions attempting to tame the river cause new problems which require other technical intervention. Only the islands continue to exist as what they have always been—a part of the river.



1 Aswan High Dam



2 Isna-barrage



3 Aswan-dam



4 Nag'-Hammadi-barrage



5 Assiut-barrage



6 Sifta-barrage



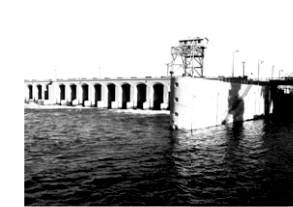
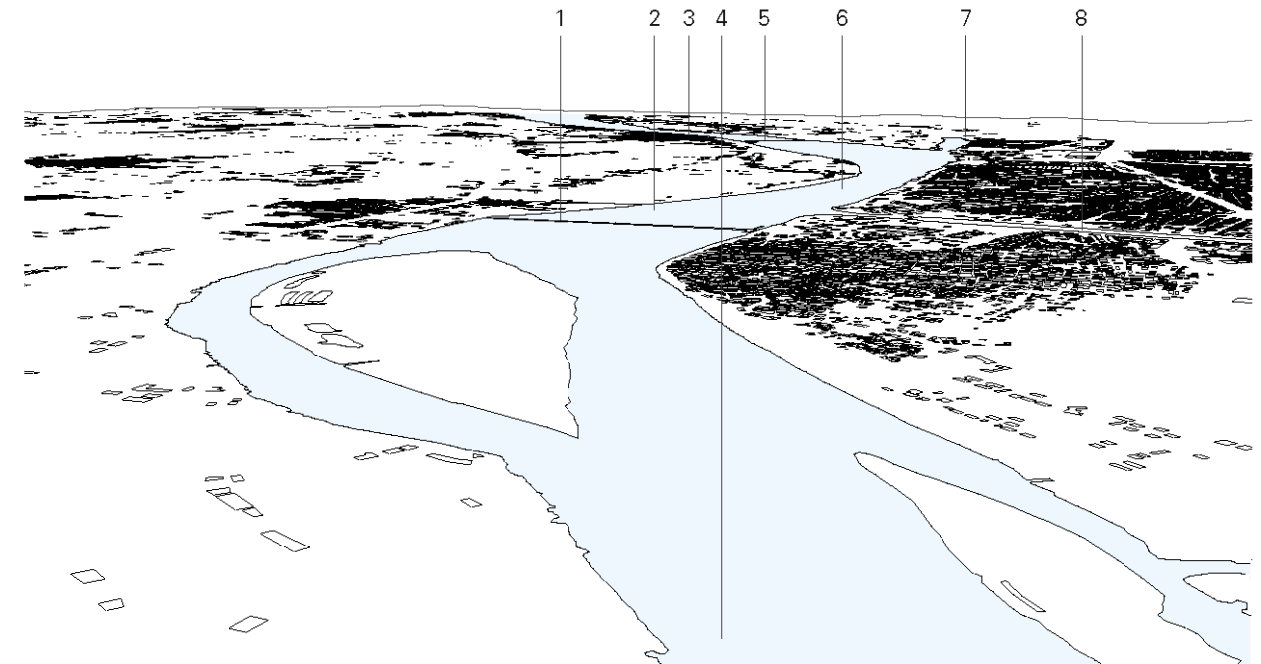
7 Mohammed-Ali-barrage



8 Delta-barrage

Physical Interventions

The impellent force in the attempt of restraining the Nile to the will of humans, is located in Cairo, from where all the interventions are planned. An aim which has driven public endeavor since civilization began. The biggest impact, finally, was triggered by the Aswan High Dam which allowed for more control but has not reached complete domination. Punctual measures and reparations of different scales have to be taken all over the course of the river.



1 Barrage



2 Nile flowers



3 Harbour



4 Engineered riverbanks



5 Bridge



6 Floating dredg



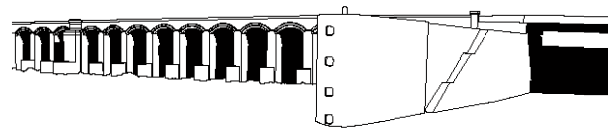
7 Access



8 Canal

Infrastructural Interventions

There are also interventions in terms of infrastructure. Harbours have ensured that the Nile could have been used as a navigable watercourse since pharaonic times; both, across the river and along its course. In more recent times, bridges have joined the two sides of the river.



| | |
|-----------------------------|-------------|
| Construction period | 1898 - 1902 |
| Heightening | 1934 - 1938 |
| New barrage | projected |
| Length | 800 m |
| Number of openings | 110 |
| Crown width | 8 m |
| Bottom width | 17.3 m |
| Altitude of foundation | 43.75 m |
| Altitude of backwater level | 48.80 m |
| Storage level | 4 m |

Feeding the Agricultural Canals

The barrages along the course of the river were constructed decades before the Aswan High Dam for the purpose of raising the water level upstream to feed the main canals. This function lies in contrast to the purpose of the Aswan High Dam, which was built in order to store the annual floods of the Nile to allow a controlled discharge. The interference of the barrages, compared to the Aswan High Dam, did not have a negative environmental effect on the Nile. They only regulate the volume of water; November to December the volume is reduced by half, and then doubled in April to June in order to fill the canals for irrigation purposes. Compared to the High Dam, they do not affect the transport of fertile mud downstream. (Hartung, 1991)

Hydraulic Properties at Hanadi

| | Discharge [m ³ /s] | Hydraulic Depth [m] | Suspended Sediment [to/a] |
|--------------|-------------------------------|---------------------|---------------------------|
| PreHigh-dam | 8200 | 11.2 | 129'000'000 |
| PostHigh-dam | 2350 | 5.9 | 4'200'000 |
| | -71 % | -47 % | -97 % |

(Source: Saad, 2002)

Main Aims of the Aswan High Dam

(constructed 1960 - 1971):

- full control of the Nile flow
- year-round irrigation
- regulation of the discharge downstream of the dam to match the actual water needs
- protection from high floods and drought hazards
- hydroelectric power
- improvement of navigation through the Nile
- reclamation of 535,000 ha agricultural land

Effects of the Aswan High Dam

Built structures in and along the river are endangered by the deepening of the river bed and collapsing riverbanks. Fundaments are being layed open or washed out. (Knörrschild, 2008) The reason for this erosion is the increased flow velocity as a result of the decreased load of sediments caused by the building of the Aswan High Dam. Before this barrier was built, the seasonally-deposited silt could naturally correct the erosion. (Fouad, 2006) The altered discharge of the Nile not only causes lateral erosion but also leads to a washing-out of the river bed in some places and the deposition of sediments and formation of islands in other places. The islands benefit the growth of water plants like the water hyacinth which in turn negatively affects navigation on the river. (Fouad, 2006)



Punctated Mending Operations

The map above shows the masterplan of the Ministry of Physical Planning in Assiut.

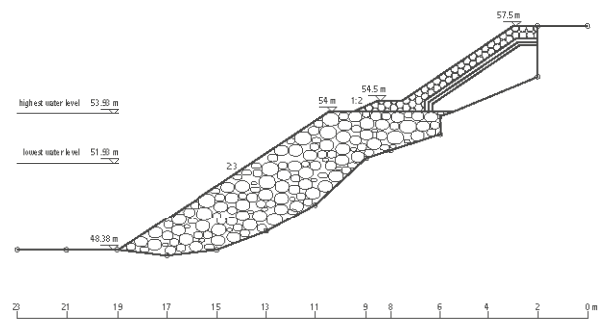
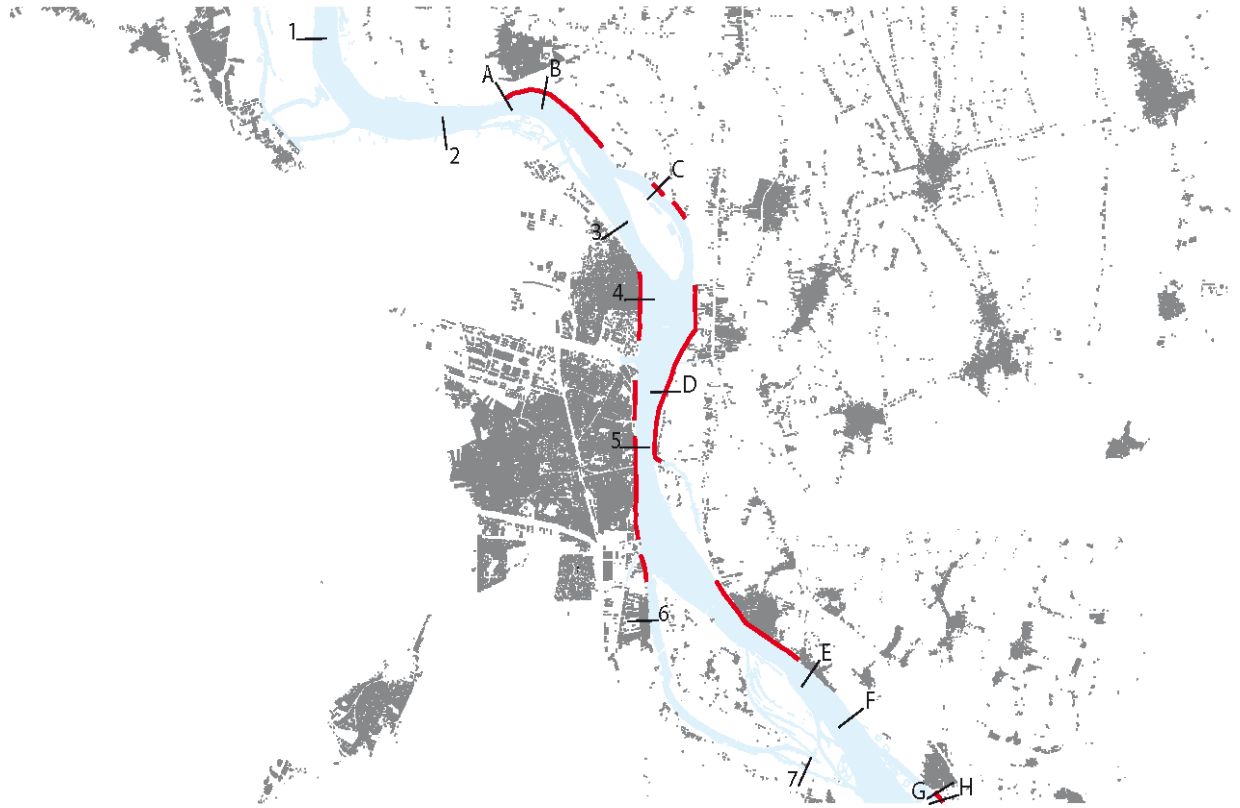
"We are responsible for the protection of the Nile river-banks. This means the two lines following the course of the river; what is in between is not regulated, so banks of the islands are not protected. People living there have to deal with erosion occurring on their banks by themselves. Exceptions are islands which are already settled, for example, islands at Luxor with all the touristic infrastructure."

"The ministry has no means to realize a continuous intervention along the Nile; there is no such overall plan. Due to financial and land property reasons, a constant interference is hindered. However, there are many punctated arrangements, which are mostly situated in river bends or in front of settlements in order to protect them." (Interview with the Ministry of Physical Planning, Assiut)

Legal Framework

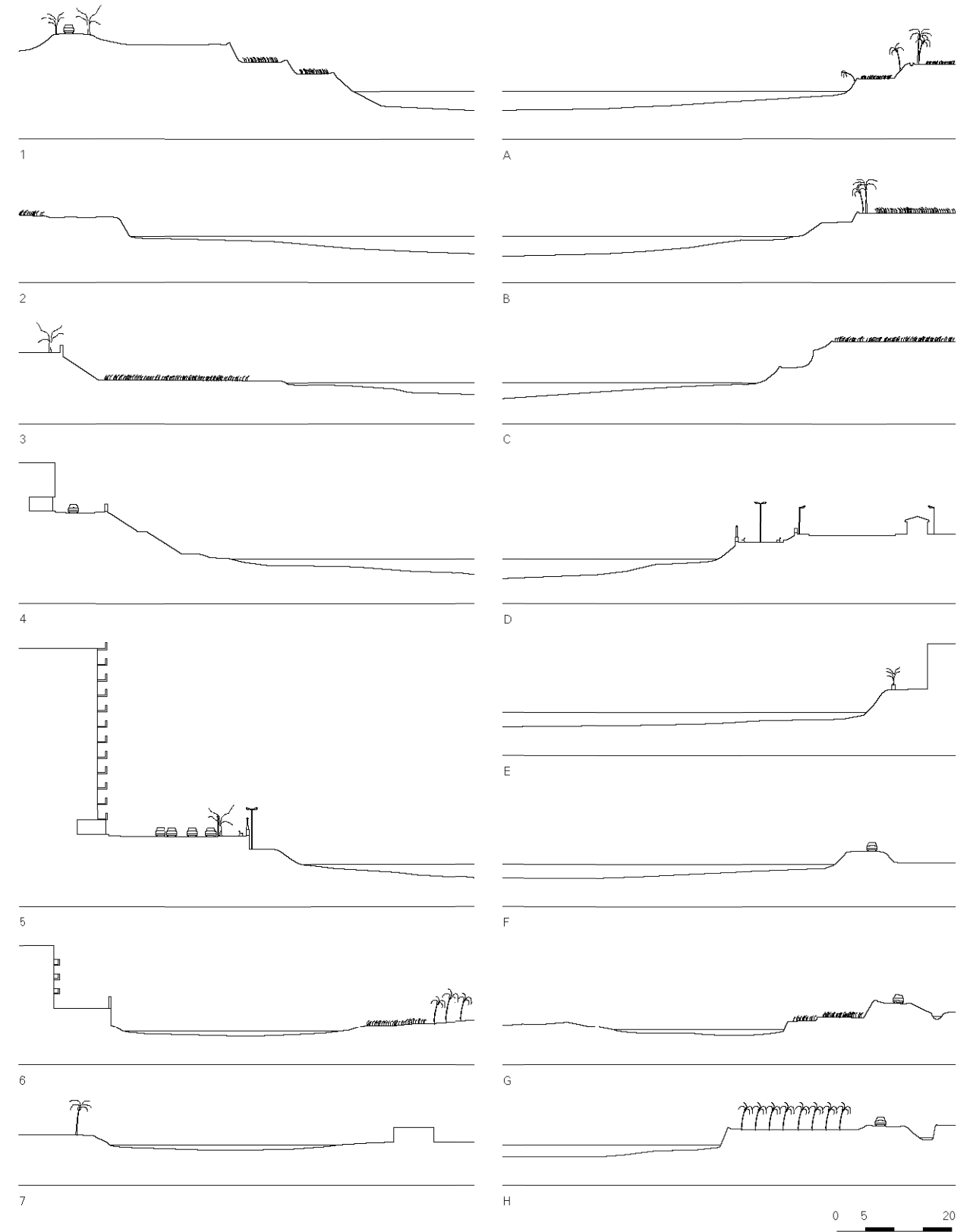
- Law 12 (1982), "Concerning the Issue of the Law on Irrigation and Drainage"
- Law 48 (1982), "Concerning the Protection of the River Nile and Waterways from Pollution"
- Law 4 (1994), "Law for the Environment"

Several laws have been set in place to regulated the river-banks, however, the laws are ineffective or not realistic under the present circumstances, due to an absence of mechanisms to execute legal mandates, as well as a lack of coordination among authorities responsible for executing the legislation, and an economic impossibility of following the laws. For example, strict enforcement of the regulations would mean very large investments by industry and municipalities, which are in the present situation not realistic and are even counterproductive. (MWRI, 2005)



Engineered Riverbanks

"We use the same standard cross-profile along the river, which is then modified according to site-specific conditions. The height of the riverbank defines the number of steps the profile has. The uppermost step of the cross section is made out of porous material. This allows groundwater to permeate. Otherwise the retained water would cause the sides of the structure to collapse. The same profile is used regardless if the adjoining land is agricultural land, settlement, or a road." (Interview with River Protection Authority)







Islands Integral to the Nile

Surrounded by water, the islands unite with the Nile. In a gentle slope, the land slides almost seamlessly into the water. The island as a physical body is still shaped by the force of the river. The seasonal inundation of water submerge parts of the islands and alters its banks. Life on the island is just as much influenced by the river, which possibly reveals river interactions with the land before human control.



Seasonal Flooding

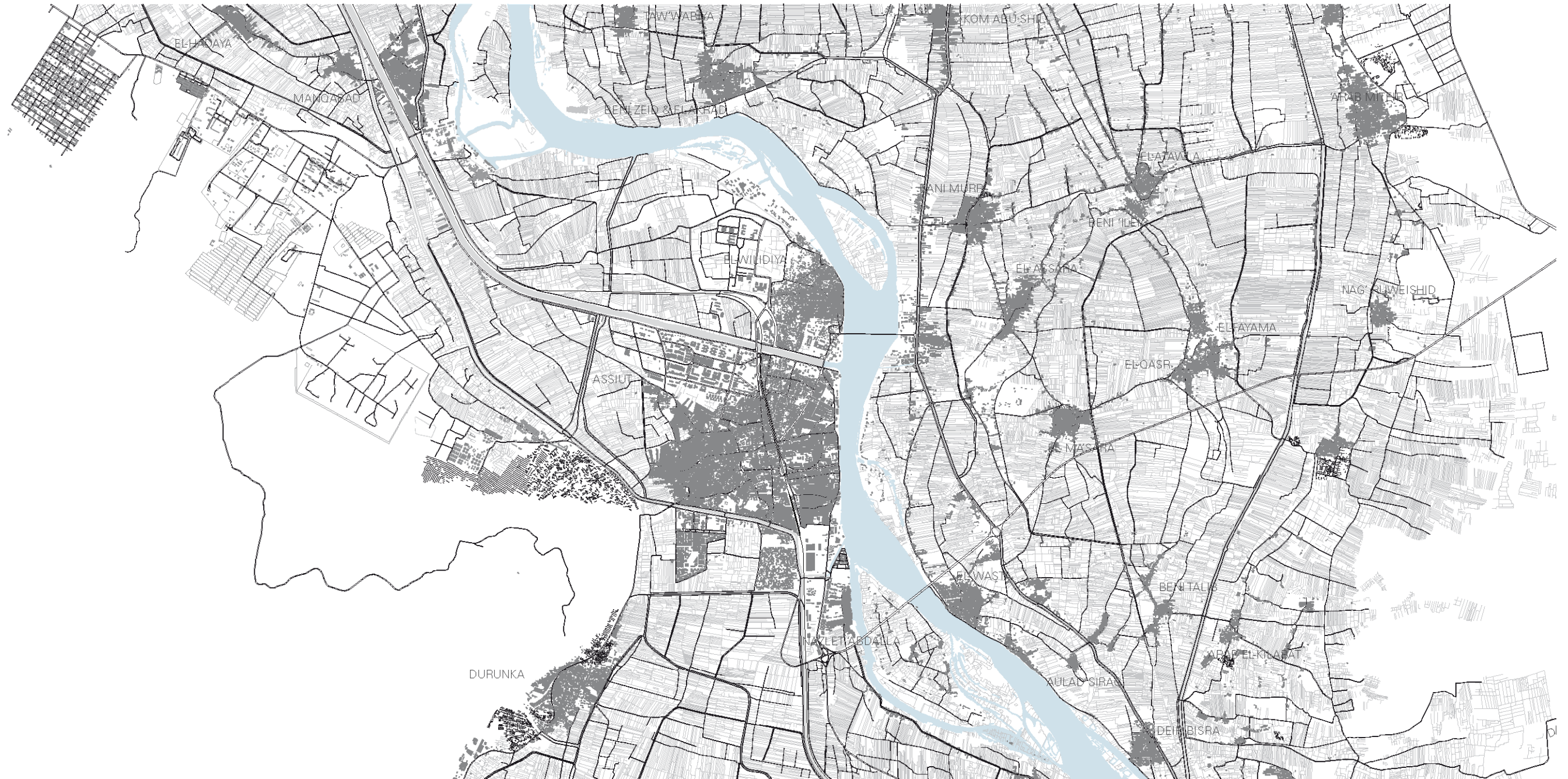
The images compare summer flooding in July 2002, with most fields submerged, to an intact island in winter 2006.

Communal Initiative

People on the islands not only live on the Nile; they live with it too. The main means of transport is each family's rowing boat. As the Ministry of Nile Protection explained, islands are not considered a part of riverbank protection planning. Islanders must deal with the seasonal changes in water level and the occurring erosion by themselves.

LIVING WITH THE NILE

“Although Egypt has always been described as the gift of the Nile, we tend to forget its existence. So long as the great river runs its course and its valley is irrigated we do not give it a thought.” (Mursi Saad El-Din, poet) Many of the activities along the Nile in Assiut could be described by these words. The physical appearance of the river has been changed by man; it is no more the natural stream it used to be. But, the way people use its space does not seem to have adapted to this new situation.





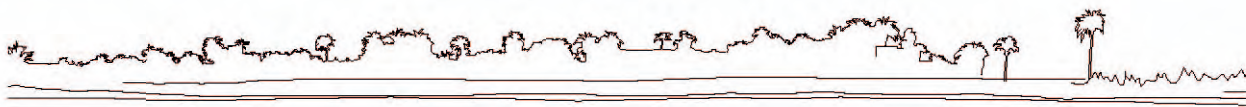




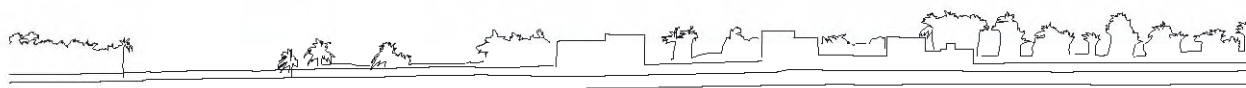
East Bank South of Barrage



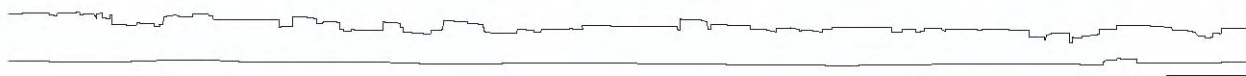
West Bank South of Barrage



Island



Agriculture



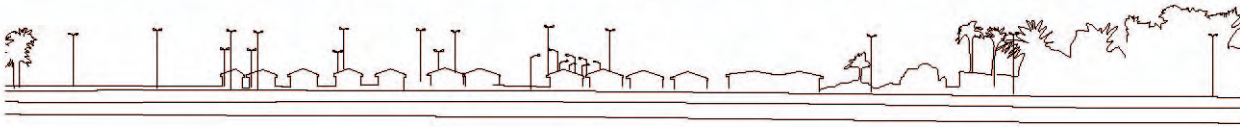
Village

Rural Riverbank Typologies

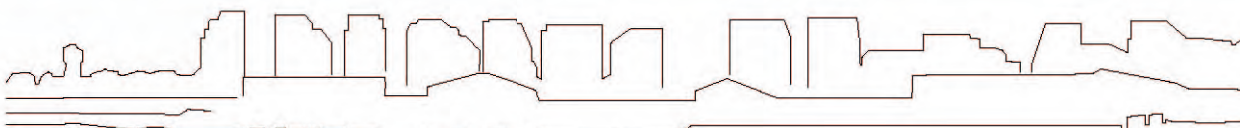




Industry



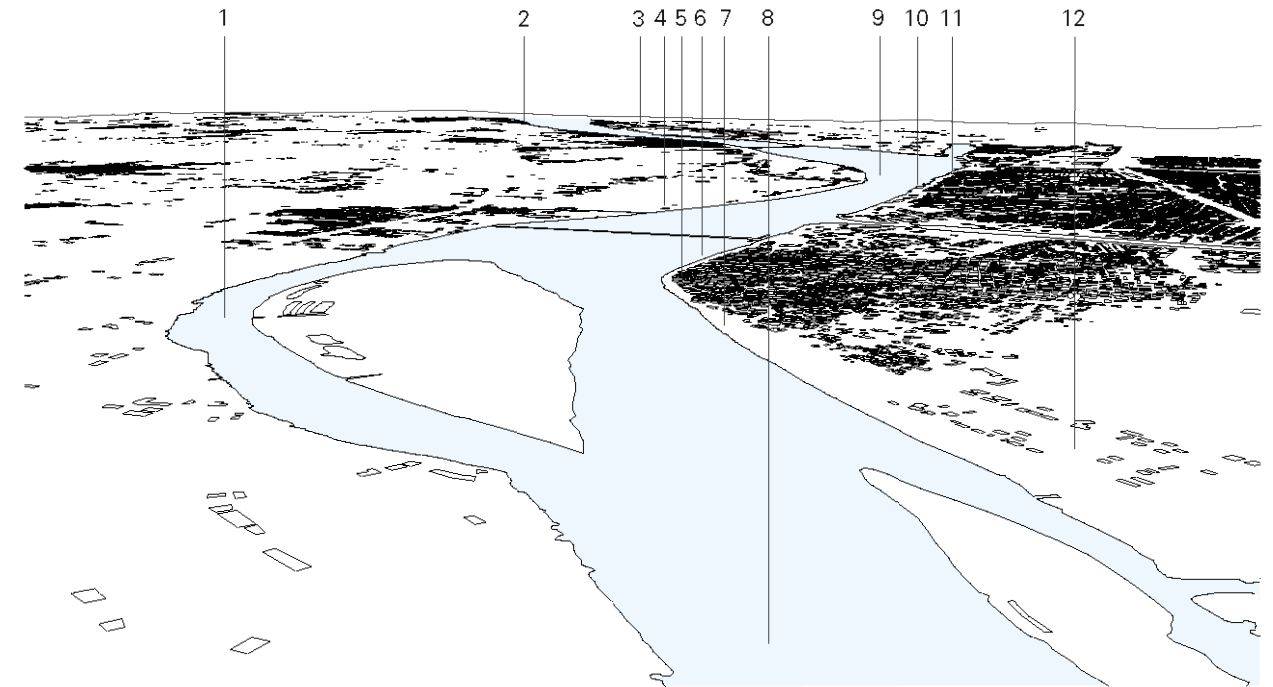
Promenade



City

Urban Riverbank Typologies





1 Transport



2 Lighting



3 Fishing



4 Promenade



5 Riverfront development



6 Swimming



7 Dumping



8 Washing



9 Public transport



10 Riverfront development



11 Clubs



12 Industry

Life On and Along the Nile

The Nile plays many different roles, depending on the actors who occupy its space. Traditional forms of how to make use of the river still seem to be very present. More recent developments like the promenades or the first riverfront restaurant appear as tentative attempts to discover a newly available space. The engineered riverbank created a space which can withstand seasonal changes.



Every dot represents a rowing boat
(Source: Google Earth)

Bridge Substitutes

There are two possibilities to cross the river via built structures; over the barrage or the bridge. Since they are far apart from each other they cannot cope with demand. That is why the traditional way of crossing the river by boat is still very popular. Besides the privately organized transfer by rowing or sailing boats, there are some commuting links run by the governorate, operating across the river.

Barrier or Main Street ?

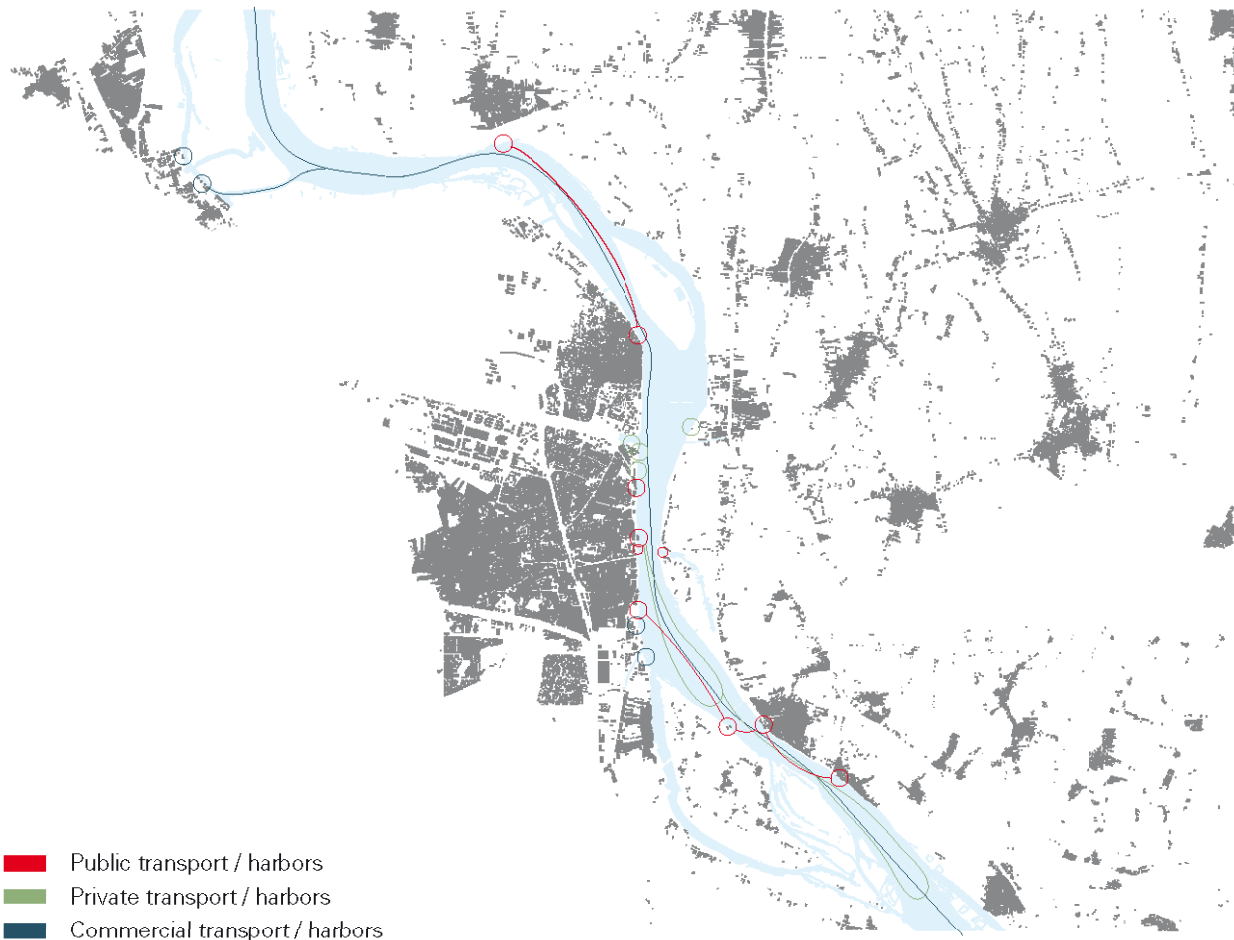
The Nile Valley can be seen as separated into two parts, divided by the Nile. From this point of view, the Nile appears as a physical barrier. On the other hand, the Nile also functions as a main infrastructure line, connecting all the cities throughout Egypt. In this context, infrastructure is understood in a broader sense, to include touristic infrastructure in addition to mere transportation function.



Assiut Shuttle

"I sail from 7 am till sunset. Usually, I cross the river from Assiut Promenade to the opposite side and back, but if required, I can also sail to any other place. People taking this connection go to the city for shopping or school. One way costs 50 piasters. During holidays, there are more people, as they want to visit their relatives in the city. As every Egyptian I love the Nile and therefore also my job."
(Interview with a sailor)





Floating Infrastructure

There are many different kinds of ships on the Nile, from government-run commercial passenger boats to cargo transporters to private feluccas and rowing boats. In Assiut, commercial passenger boat services started in 1979. Today there are 36 public boats operating on the Nile, serving the area between Dairut and Abu Tig on a regular basis. Ships for touristic uses are limited to short excursions, starting either from Assiut Harbour or from “Happy Dolphin” on Assiut Promenade. “The classic Nile cruises were forbidden in 1995 because of security reasons—the only part of the Nile where these cruises are still operating is between Luxor and Aswan.” (Interview with Ministry of Tourism)

Dredging a Navigable Channel

A safe navigation criterion for water depth, according to the River Transport Authority, is 2.3m (1.8m draft plus 0.5m clearance). As a minimum, a depth of 1.45m is required (minimum draft of 1.2m plus 0.25m clearance). As the water release from Aswan totals 75 million m³/day, there are 16 to 18 locations between Aswan and the Delta Barrage where the water level in the navigation channel is less than the minimum depth. There is no exclusive release of water from Lake Nasser for navigation. There only is a guaranteed minimum release of 60 million m³/day. Therefore, the shallows that affect the navigation on the Nile have to be removed through dredging. (MWRI, 2005)

Navigating by Instinct

“Every traffic system in the world has signposts and signals. On the Nile there aren’t any. And you can’t steer based on what you see on the surface. You have to know and anticipate at every point what is underneath. I learned all this from my father. You have to grow up with this knowledge—that way, you grow into it and you acquire an insitinct, a sense for the Nile...I started on cargo boats. At that time, they were used instead of trucks to transport goods up the Nile to villages and provinces. Groceries, cement, wood, you name it. The Nile was like a main street crossed by many boats going upstream and downstream.” (Abdel-Sabour, captain, Al-Ahram Weekly, Sept. 2003)





Fishing, a Livelihood?

Virtually all Egyptian water bodies are fished to the maximum and some are already overexploited. Large companies are crowding out small, private fishermen who cannot make their living anymore. Not only is the quantity of the catch reduced, but there is also a falloff in quality to be examined. Reported average amounts of heavy metals, organochlorine pesticide residues, and PDB's in fish meat are substantial, and often well above the standards. These high levels indicate an increased health risk for people that consume much inland fish. (MWRI, 2005)

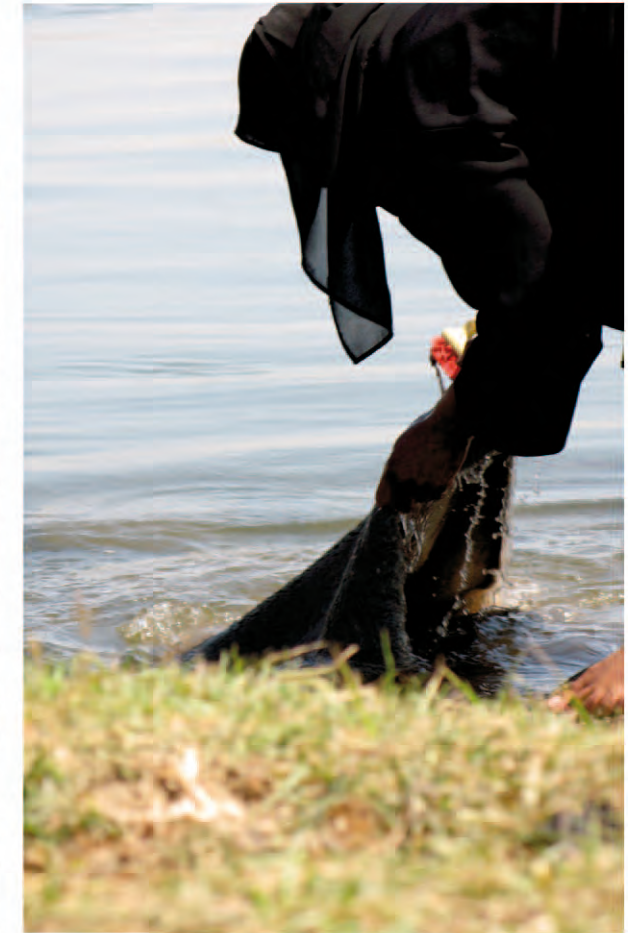
The Nile of the People

The Nile is so much linked to the very existence of Egypt that its presence is often taken for granted. It just flows by, it seems. People fish in it, as they have done for millenia. They wash their clothes in it, as they have also done for millenia. They sit on its banks to leave their daily sorrows behind and they dump their waste in it as they have done for centuries, although the refuse changes nature over time. These ongoing interactions signify an everyday, almost routine, relationship between people and river.



A Place for Contemplation

"A wise man once said: If you are feeling bad and you don't want to talk anymore, you can go either to the grave or to the water." Haj Aayd, 71, hobby fisher, who has been coming to fish at this small island for 35 years.





Purifying Waters?

Considering the significance of the Nile for Egypt, it is hard to understand how much waste is being dumped into the river. In an interview, Dr. Dina Shehayeb explained that there is a historical component to this phenomenon. Waste has been dumped into the river for ages. The difference today is the sheer amount of refuse and its altered composition. In former times, the river was able to deal with the organic matter dumped into its waters, but plastics and metals overburden its self-regulating capacities.

Riverbanks as Disposal Sites

The condition of the riverbanks in terms of pollution varies along the course of the Nile. Apart from the large governmental dumpsite at El-Walidiya (image on previous page), there are several riverbank disposals throughout El-Wasta (images above). The banks in the other villages do not show a comparable amount of pollution. The image which is shown by the map on the previous page is not a complete picture of the situation in Assiut. Depicted are only the dumping sites along the course of the Nile. Besides these, there are 6 larger landfills in the desert area of Assiut.

Powerless People

As the sign over the "entrance" to the dump site at El-Walidiya indicates, the land belongs to the Governorate of Assiut. "The situation as it is today has only been for six months. Before, we were living right on riverbank with a garden in front of our house and direct access to the water. One day, the first dumper appeared. No government official ever visited our family to inform us." (Family of Hajl Hassan Abd el-Rahman) Residents of the Walidiya dumping site have attempted to protest the communal waste disposal, but have yet to provoke reaction from the government.



Living on Trash

While environmentally hazardous, the disposal sites are actively used. Goats are led to the dumping sites to feed on bread and other organic refuse. People collect PET bottles and other reusable materials to sell to recycling companies.

A Political Issue

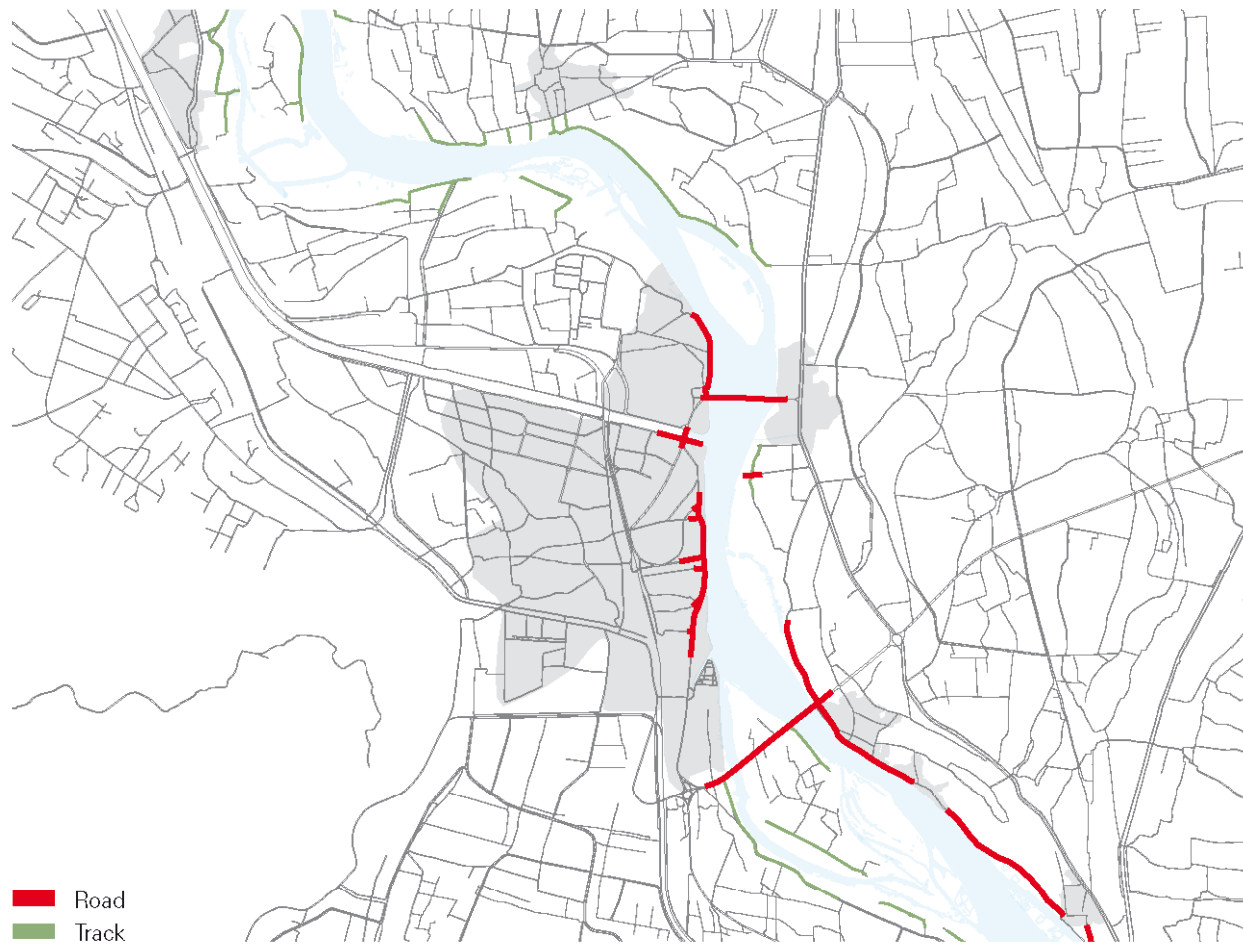
"Let me emphasize that the Nile is the cleanest river in the world, regardless of all the talk about its pollution." (Mohamed Fathi, Chief Irrigation sector, Irrigation Ministry, June 1998)

"Corruption is one factor that has led to the Nile's pollution and illegal constructions along its banks. The law is only applied on ordinary citizens, but enforcement turns lax when it comes to organizations or people who consider themselves above the law." (Gamal Zahran, Member of Parliament, Sept. 2007)

"Even just two years ago, nobody in Egypt really gave the environment much thought. Now, however, we are getting a lot of political support, and the environment is firmly on the political agenda." (Nadia Makram Ebeid, Minister of Environmental Affairs, Interview Al-Ahram, June 1999)

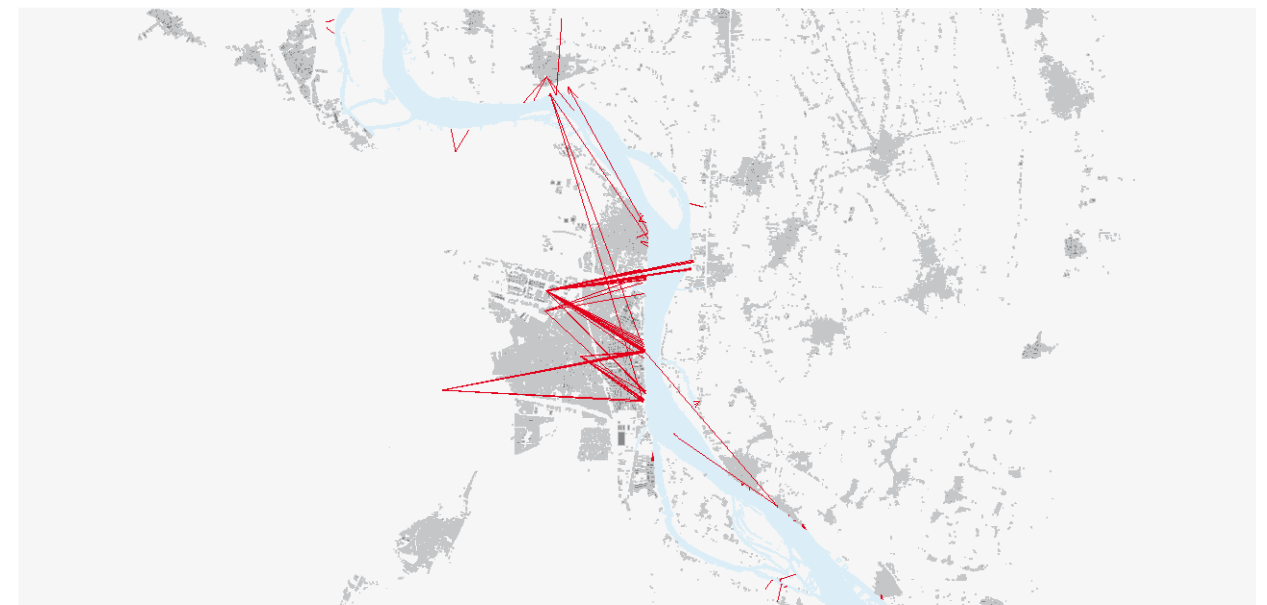
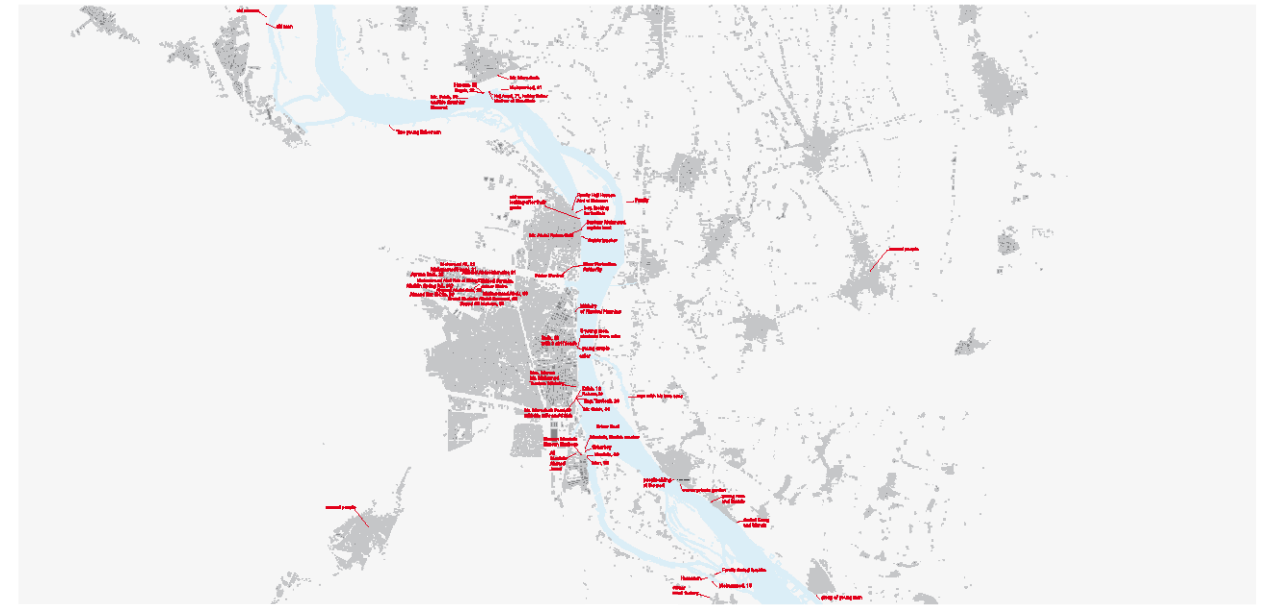
Polluted Lifeline

The Nile water quality is affected by agricultural drainage water and effluents from Upper Egypt settlements. 50% of the urban population has access to sewage services, while less than 10% rural areas have access. Domestic and municipal wastewater collection and treatment facilities are limited to main urban centers. In 2000, 28% of the population was connected to a sewage system. Industrial areas directly affecting the water quality included the fertilizer plants at Assiut, where no current data is available. In 1998, the government initiated a program to reduce industrial wastewater discharges. By 2006, a total of 91 installations either ceased discharging their effluents to the Nile or complied with the regulatory standards. The discharge volume from these 91 installations constituted 99.64% of the total industrial discharge volume. (EEAA, 2008)



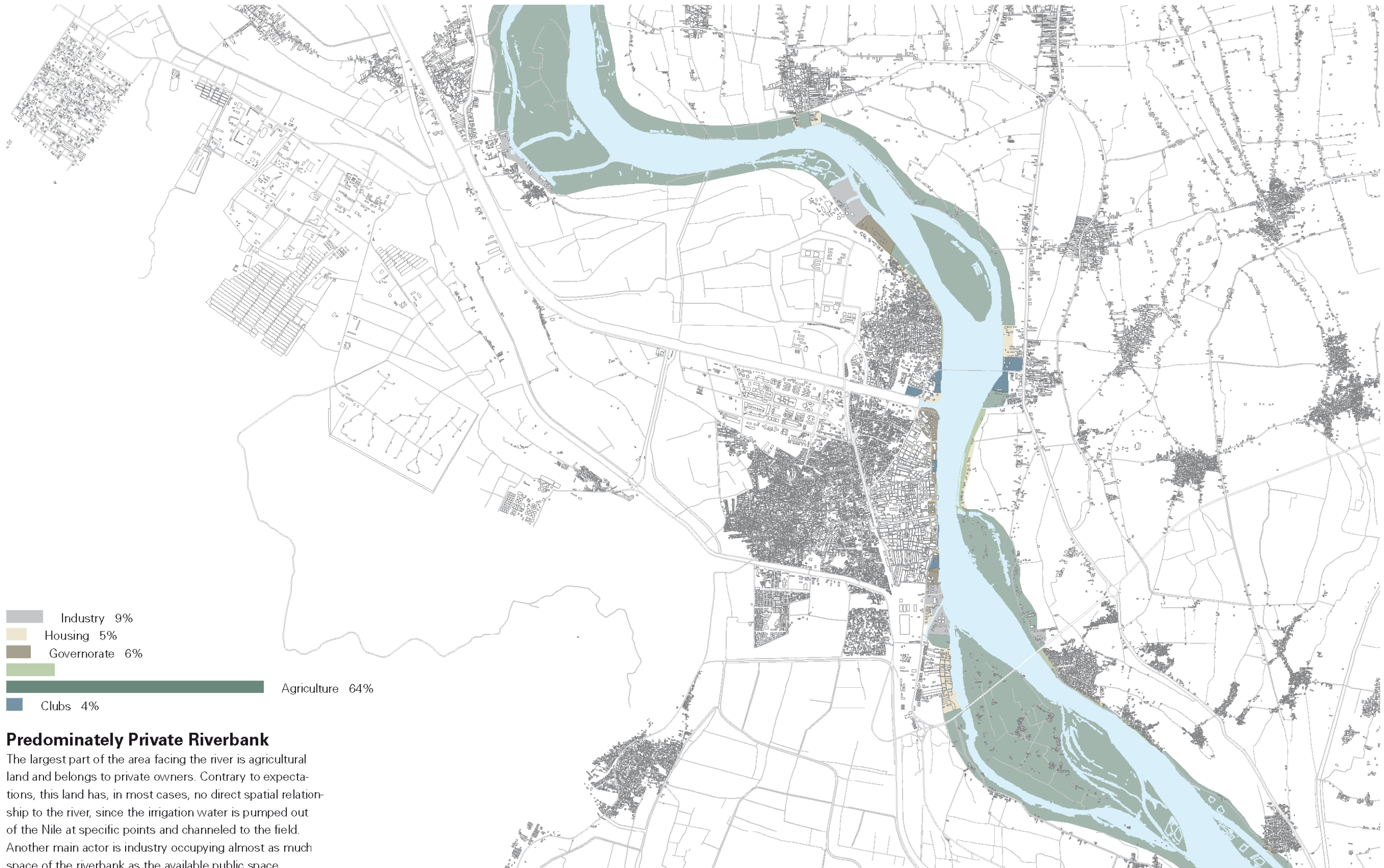
Fragmented River Space

The map on top shows that there are no longer stretches of continuous roads along the river. Roads following the course of the river are usually constructed on ancient dams. North of the barrage, access to the river is almost exclusively by unpaved tracks, many areas are not accessible at all, leading to a fragmented image of the river. On the level of actors occupying the riverbank, one can see that a rather large part of the riverbanks is privately owned and that there is no continuous public space.



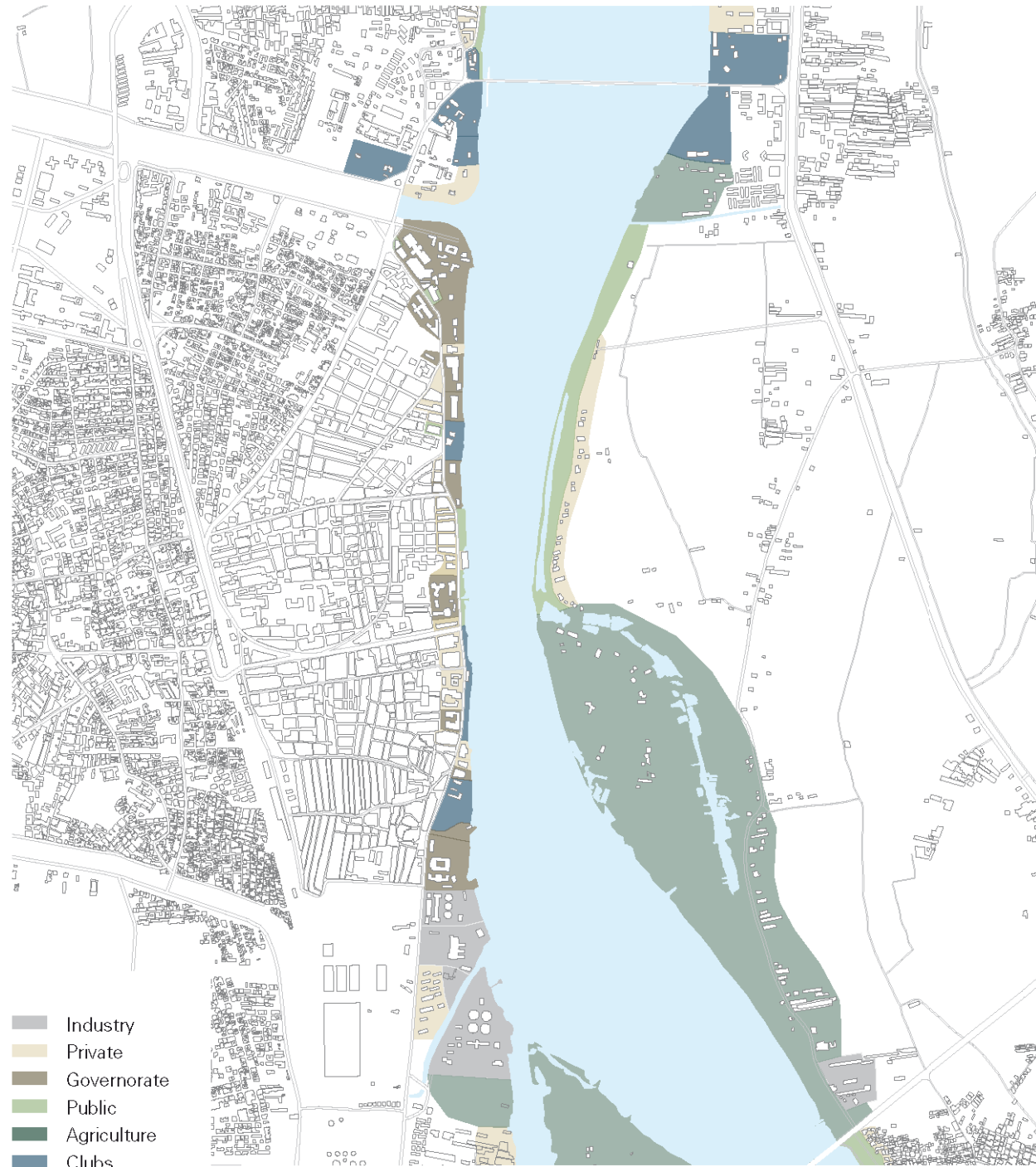
Where do you go on the Nile?

The graphics indicate the location of our interview subjects, their home, and frequented places at the Nile. People living in villages away from the river do not go to the Nile. Villagers next to the Nile prefer to sit in front of their houses rather than visit the river. People in Assiut city are regular club visitors. All interviewees said that their visits to the Nile are club-only occasions. People frequent the same places, without intent to discover new locations. The quietness of the river, as a place to think and relax, was the most mentioned reason for why people go to the Nile.



Predominately Private Riverbank

The largest part of the area facing the river is agricultural land and belongs to private owners. Contrary to expectations, this land has, in most cases, no direct spatial relationship to the river, since the irrigation water is pumped out of the Nile at specific points and channeled to the field. Another main actor is industry occupying almost as much space of the riverbank as the available public space.



Continuous Public Space?

In comparison to the large agricultural areas, a more fragmented zoning structure is found in the city. There is no continuous public zone along the river since the promenade is often interrupted by governmental estates and clubs.



Fragmented Riverfront



Prescribed Programs

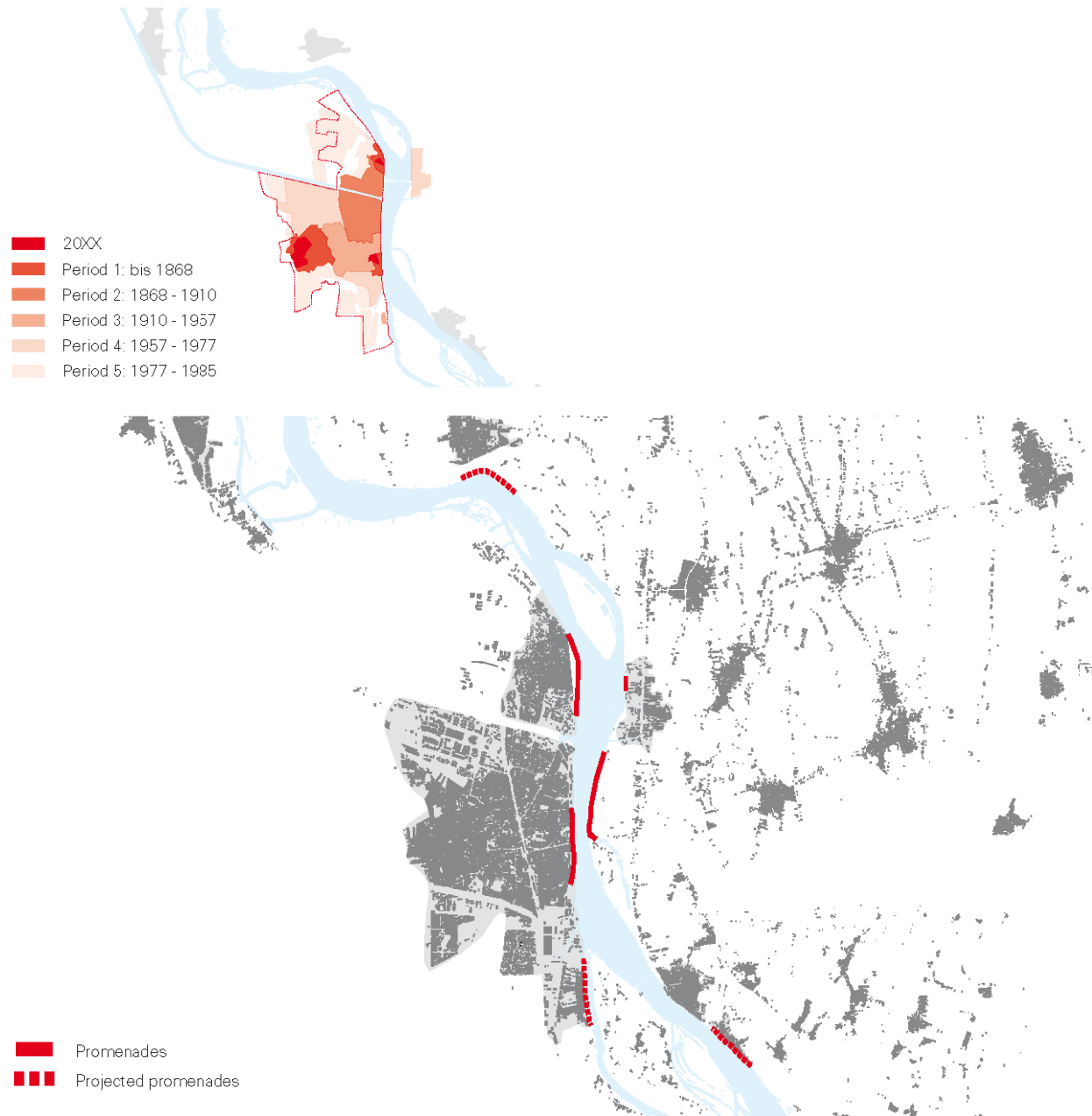
While the Nile is in most parts characterised by agricultural land, it seems transformed into a “city river” where it flows through Assiut. But somehow, these interventions are only attempts to cultivate a newly available space. Engineers created something which has not existed in this form for a long time; a permanent riverbank. Riverside clubs and recently developed promenades offer socially formalized public spaces. Although different in nature, they are both in their essence prescribed programs.

Privatized Public Space

Fourteen social clubs for different audiences gather along the river at Assiut. All are encircled by a wall—a privatized public program detached from the surrounding city, oriented towards the river. The concept is reminiscent of British inspiration, introduced in the colonial period.

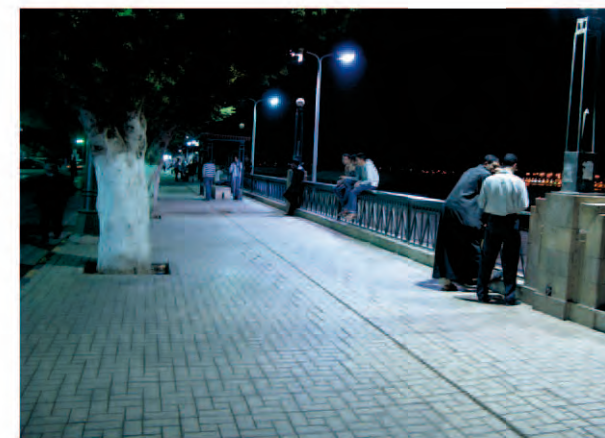
Encapsulated Space

According to interviews, clubs can be described as an encapsulated space. Compared to the street, the club is a place not directly supervised by the police, which are otherwise omnipresent in Assiut. Also, the club offers an opportunity for women to leave the household and be in public.



Imported Concept

Historically, Assiut is not a city on the water. The development of a riverfront results from city expansion and securing the riverbank by engineered structures. The Assiut Promenade is a recently established space, offering basic public infrastructure. Riverfronts in the villages like El-Walidiya or El-Wasta have also followed suit. People use the promenade to sit, smoke shisha, and socialize. Although restaurants are found along promenades, they do not have an explicit physical relationship to the river.



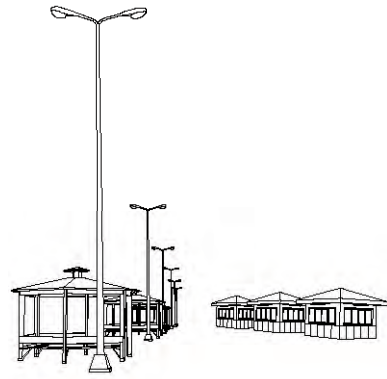
“Cleanliness is a civilized behavior.”

Certainly, cleanliness is related to the physical state of a tidy public space, but it could also be read as a general directive of “how” one is intended to use this space. The promenade is a socially formalized and controlled environment which belongs to the city, not to the river. There is no physical relationship between water and promenade; a clear line separates river from city.



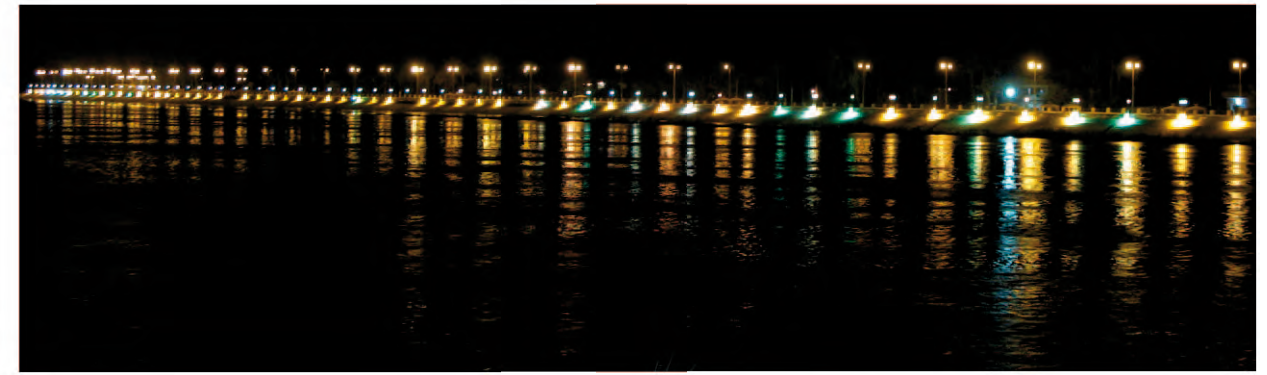
Dreaming of a Promenade?

In many interviews, people expressed the wish to have promenades established in their villages. Some, like the four men in Nazlet, complained about the existing earthen riverbank, which is polluted and dirty. A promenade in contrast would be a clean and safe place to sit at the Nile. But mostly, the visions remained unclear about the benefits of such an investment. Assumably, they were dreaming of the crowded promenades in Cairo, with restaurants and shisha bars. But, is there a public which would activate it?

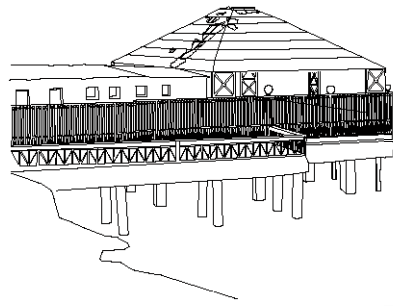


Infrastructure First

Following the Governor's directive, a few years ago, Wasta Promenade was built on the opposite side of Assiut. With no nearby settlement, and no public access, one must drive to get there. This is why the restaurants built along the promenade are still vacant and already in disrepair. (Interview with Ministry of Physical Planning) Similarly, in the south of Assiut, an extension to "Heaven Park" was built 5 years ago, including an open air screen with a bar, following a governmental decision. "Plans to use the screen for public cinema events are still nonexistent... The bar is not in use at all—they are still waiting for someone to rent and run it" (Interview with Ministry of Tourism)



Ornamentation or Control?



Hovering over the Water

The first commercial riverfront restaurant was established only a few years ago at Assiut Promenade, the "Happy Dolphin." It was built on piles, standing in the river. This physical feature already includes it much more as a space of the river than all the other phenomena along the banks.

Places to Escape

Our narrative about "Living with the Nile" began on the water, moved up the riverbanks, crossed the promenade, and now returns to the river on the riverfront restaurant "Happy Dolphin" and partyboats on the Nile. The narrative tells not only about the physical relation to the Nile but also about an underlying, mental relationship. Compared to the club or the promenade, partyboats are less formalized or defined in program. With own rules and, to a certain extent, autonomous features, partyboats can be seen as part of the space of the Nile—a space with its own rules within a larger framework.



The Place to Be

It is not just the physical appearance which brings the "Happy Dolphin" closer to the river, it is its program which is more open and less defined. A place to dine, to smoke a shisha, as well as to celebrate private parties, the riverfront restaurant has its own rules within the larger society.



Trial Balloon

The "Happy Dolphin" initially was built by the Government with the aim to introduce a new concept on the riverfront. After its completion the place has been rented out to a private investor who is still running the restaurant. After the "Happy Dolphin Concept" turned out to be a success, the Government is now about to realise a follow-up right next to the "Dolphin". A defunct fecal pumping station is transforming into a new riverfront restaurant.



Party on the Water

Somehow strange: one sits at the Nile, enjoying the scenery and suddenly, a boat around the riverbend approaches; ear-splitting sounds and party-lighting, a scene that seems out of place in Assiut. Yet, when talking to students, it appears that everyone has his or her own story of a Partyboat experience. An old tradition, going back to historical times when pharaohs escaped the boredom of their palaces via boats, this escape is still available today. An escape from the city and the rules of society, the boat becomes part of the Nile and thereby part of its autonomy.

Heterotopia

Brothels and colonies are two extreme types of heterotopia, and if we think, after all, that the boat is a floating piece of space, a place without a place, that exists by itself, that is closed in on itself and at the same time is given over to the infinity of the sea and that, from port to port, from tack to tack, from brothel to brothel, it goes as far as the colonies in search of the most precious treasures they conceal in their gardens, you will understand why the boat has not only been for our civilization, from the sixteenth century until the present, the great instrument of economic development (I have not been speaking of that today), but has been simultaneously the greatest reserve of the imagination.

The ship is the heterotopia par excellence. In civilizations without boats, dreams dry up, espionage takes the place of adventure, and the police take the place of pirates. (Michel Foucault, 1967)

Twenty Virgins for the Pharaoh

The pharaohs prided themselves on their pleasure boats with multiple decks containing cabins, kitchens, dining rooms and lounges. The attraction may not have been the journey itself but rather the atmosphere. When in the "Story of the Green Jewel" Snofru was bored, his advisor suggested a boat trip: "... twenty virgins fair to behold went into the boat, and they rowed with oars of ebony decorated with gold. His Majesty took pleasure in the outing, and the gloom passed from his heart as the boat went hither and thither, and the girls sang together with sweet voices." (Westcar Papyrus, Middle Kingdom)

Escape from the City

"Partyboats are used by everybody—for student parties, for weddings, for birthday celebrations... Basically, everybody can rent a partyboat... One reason for celebrating on the Nile is the loud music. It's no problem when people are loud on the river. You could not do this in the City. If you party on the river there is no problem with the police — within the city one could call the police because of noise disturbances." (Interview with Ministry of Tourism)



Adrift on the Nile

Written in 1966 by Nagib Mahfouz, the story describes life in an Egypt that allows only limited outlets; politically, culturally, sexually. Most of the the plot happens on a houseboat, adrift on the Nile where some friends have their meeting place. They fool around, smoke kif (hashish) and have intimate relationships. It offers a permissive island, a getaway from real life. The boat and all the events taking place on it seem to be much more part of the river than part of the city or society.

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IMAGE CREDITS

All graphics and photos by Bianca Kummer and Michel Frei, except where noted.

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Satellite Image Africa, Egypt

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THE NILE: COMMENTARY

The Nile River has always signified more than just a linear waterway. A complex and ever-changing body of water, it permeates the entire Nile Valley to the point of becoming synonymous with it. Over millennia, civilizations have attempted to tame this body of water for more efficient use. Yet, not even the Aswan High Dam has completely integrated the river into the manmade environment. Of course, as the provider of water and therewith life in the Nile Valley, the river is used to its maximal limits. But efforts to occupy the river spatially have remained marginal compared to its size, with the traditional farmer uninterested in developing the Nile as a “space”. Governmental attempts to produce waterfront promenades along its newly engineered banks are ineffectual attempts to make this complex entity part of the city. The Nile cannot be made an element in the vocabulary of Nile Valley urbanization because it derives incontestable sovereignty from its significance as a natural element and environmental factor. Today, the river’s territory is still only to a limited extent subject to the social and political regulations of Egyptian society. The Nile remains an autonomous space.

