

The Bawab, the Palace, the Neighbor, and the Rooftop

Malak Abdelhady

التقسيم المكاني وحوارات الطبقات في القاهرة ★

Spatial Segregation and Class Conversation in Cairo

Énoncé théorique 2025
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The Bawab, the Palace, the Neighbor and the Rooftop :
Spatial Segregation and Class Conversations in Cairo,
Malak Abdelhady

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To my father,

a humble continuation of what he began in June 2022, introducing inclusive design practices to the furniture manufacturing industry.

I extend my deepest gratitude to my advisory team—Florence Graezer Bideau, Charlotte Malterre-Barthes, and Summer Islam—for their invaluable guidance in shaping and framing this work.

Thanks go to the Bawabin and their families—Rizk, Mohamed, Gabr, Abbas, Mohamed, Mahmoud, Salem, Fathy, Akram, Howaida, Mahmoud, Sayed, Aya, Bichoy, and Karam—for their generosity, openness to discussion, and willingness to share their spaces and stories with me.

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Special thanks to Eva her unwavering support and care, providing hope and energy that brought this work to life.

To my dear friends Paty, Juliette, Hana, and Marie —thank you for the countless hours spent discussing, debating, reviewing, and supporting during the most challenging moments of this process.

To my mother, Yasmin, my grandmother, Nouaa and my siblings Lilo, Sino, Hima—thank you for grounding me in Cairo, embracing my constant critiques of its social dynamics, and supporting me unconditionally.

And finally to you, a heartfelt thank you to Papy. Till we meet again.

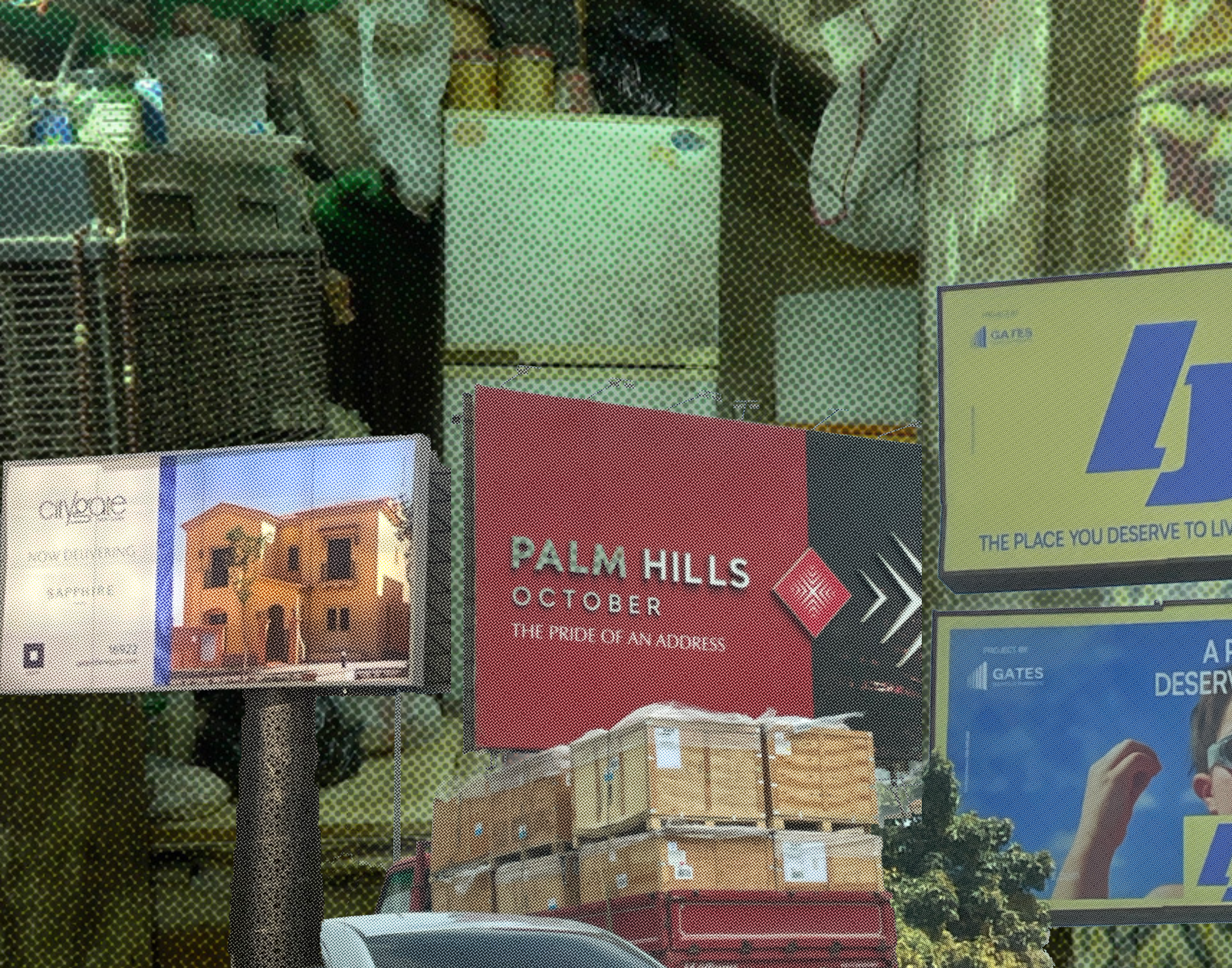

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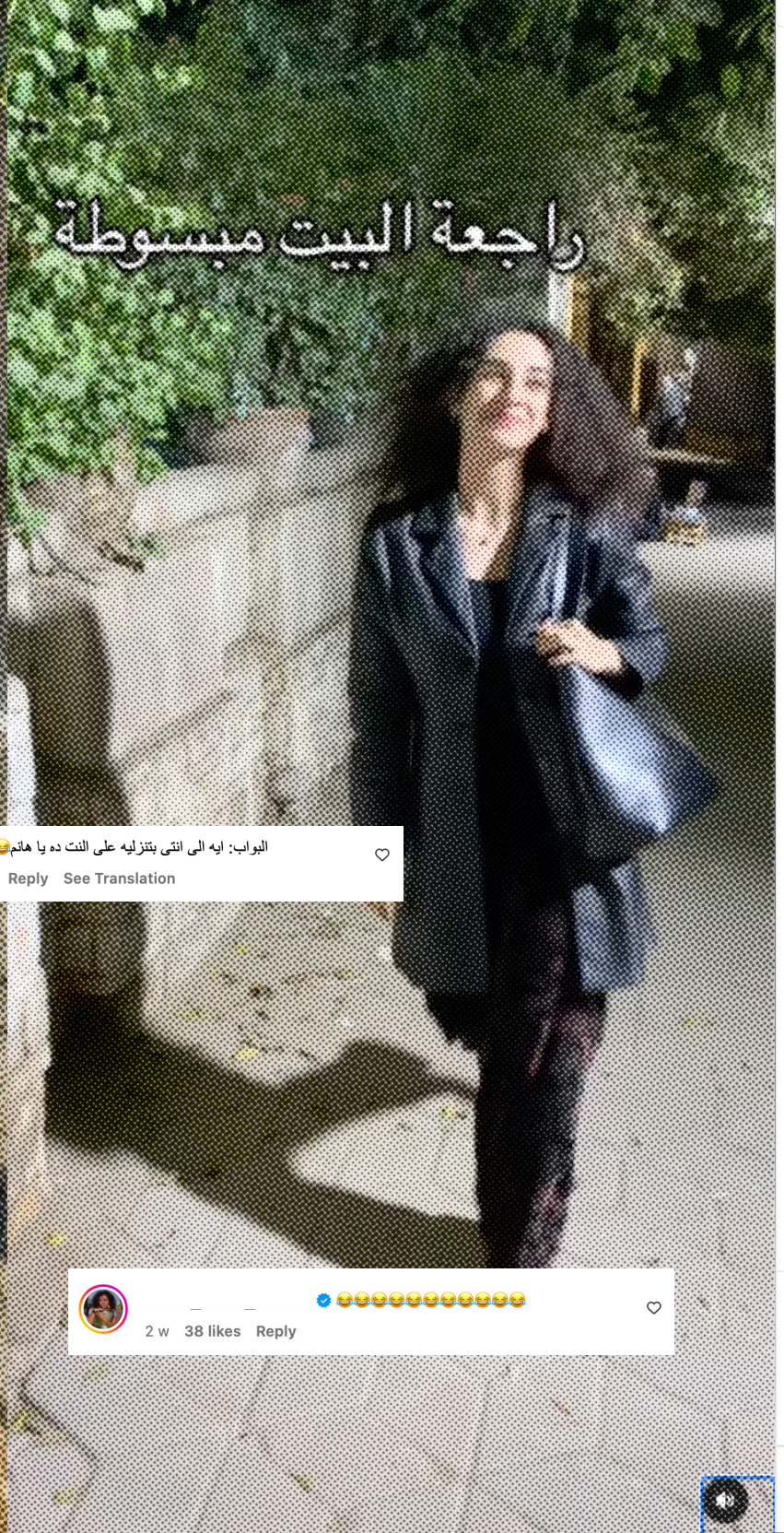





روض العرج







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The Bawab,

ساره : رجعة البيت مبسوطة

بواب: ا لساعة كم يا هانم

ساره : ماما وبابا وافقوا على السفر

بواب: أ نا مش موافق

ساره: رجعة فيه أبر

بواب : من دة ؟! ؟

Sarah*: Returning Home happy*

Bawab: Do you see what time it is miss?

Sarah*:* Mom and Dad agreed on my trip

Bawab: I don't agree

Sarah*: Coming back in an uber*

Bawab: who's this Man?!

The Neighbor,

The Palace,

"The bawabin are the worst category of people: eavesdropping on tenants' conversations and stirring up drama between them. Then they step in as the peacemaker to look like the building's Hero" read one.

On November 26th, my brother sent me a TikTok after I told him I was studying the archetype of the Bawab for my theoretical statement. The content itself wasn't quite central to my subject, however, something about the confirmation of legitimacy for this popular, mundane topic struck me—especially seeing the engagement in the post's comment section. People shared stories, made humorous remarks, and related to the topic in their own ways. Their versions of this stereotype, highlighting his intrusion into the private sphere of Egyptian society, reveal how versatile the Bawab is as both a lens and a methodology for this study.

& The Rooftop

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& The Rooftop

The issue of spatial segregation in Cairo goes beyond an abstract academic problem for me— it is deeply personal, rooted in a lived experience that reveals how the city's physical landscape reinforces socio-economic divides. Born into what is commonly regarded as a "privileged" class, my experience of Cairo has been restricted, confined to a fraction of the urban fabric, shaped by an insidious form of spatial exclusion that is rather normalized.

People's perceptions of inequality are deeply influenced by their immediate surroundings (Hauser and Norton, 2017). In Cairo, inequality is strikingly visible to the naked eye. The city presents a vivid juxtaposition of wealth and poverty as we see in generic aerial images in developing cities contrasted with slums adjacent to affluent neighborhoods. However, these visual representations often oversimplify reality. Maps that delineate affluent areas in blue and lower-income areas in red fail to account for the hidden interconnections: the blue zones are often sustained by services provided by people living in the red zones, while some individuals from lower-income groups reside in marginal, overlooked spaces within the blue areas, perpetuating an invisible coexistence.

Growing up in Cairo, I have inhabited a 'bubble', moving within sanitized, carefully curated environments—spaces that mirror the Western idea of public spaces, yet are far from public. Private clubs, passed down through generations, with hereditary membership policies, perpetuating a tightly controlled social homogeneity. The "others" are kept out—those who, in our community's every day, "don't look like us," or as we say, "*mesh shabahna*"[1]. It seems that an obsession of surrounding oneself with socio-economic likeness has, over time, eroded not only our cultural diversity but also our collective identity [2].

This research is an attempt to confront my own ignorance, to unlearn the partial truths I've absorbed. The aim here is to challenge my limited view of Cairo as fragmented, to seek a more comprehensive understanding of the city's socio-spatial dynamics. The field of architecture—so often complicit in catering to an elite—becomes the lens through which I intend to explore these hidden spaces. Our discipline has, in many ways, become an instrument of exclusion, serving a narrow clientele and projecting an image of elitism that it need not embody. Therefore I focus my study not on "informal" areas within the city, rather "informal communities" that live within the "formal" city.

Incorporating insights from urban studies and urban anthropology, this approach emphasizes the social practices and lived experiences that shape the built environment. This compels me to interrogate biases in both my perspective and architectural frameworks, moving beyond description toward a critical engagement with Cairo's socio-spatial entanglements. Ultimately, this study seeks to re-imagine architecture as a tool for inclusion and equity.

1. *Social identity theory suggests that individuals develop a self-concept or self-identity that leads to a view of the world in terms of "us vs. them." Thus, this social identity results in "intergroup cognition" characterized by mistrusting, stereotyping and being unwilling to cooperate with "others".*

2. Gabr, Rana. "How Cairo Observer's Mohamed El Shahed Mends Cairo's Fractured Memory: A Conversation across Borders." Cairo Scene, January 2, 2025



Fig.01.
Spatial distribution of wealth in Greater Cairo neighborhoods

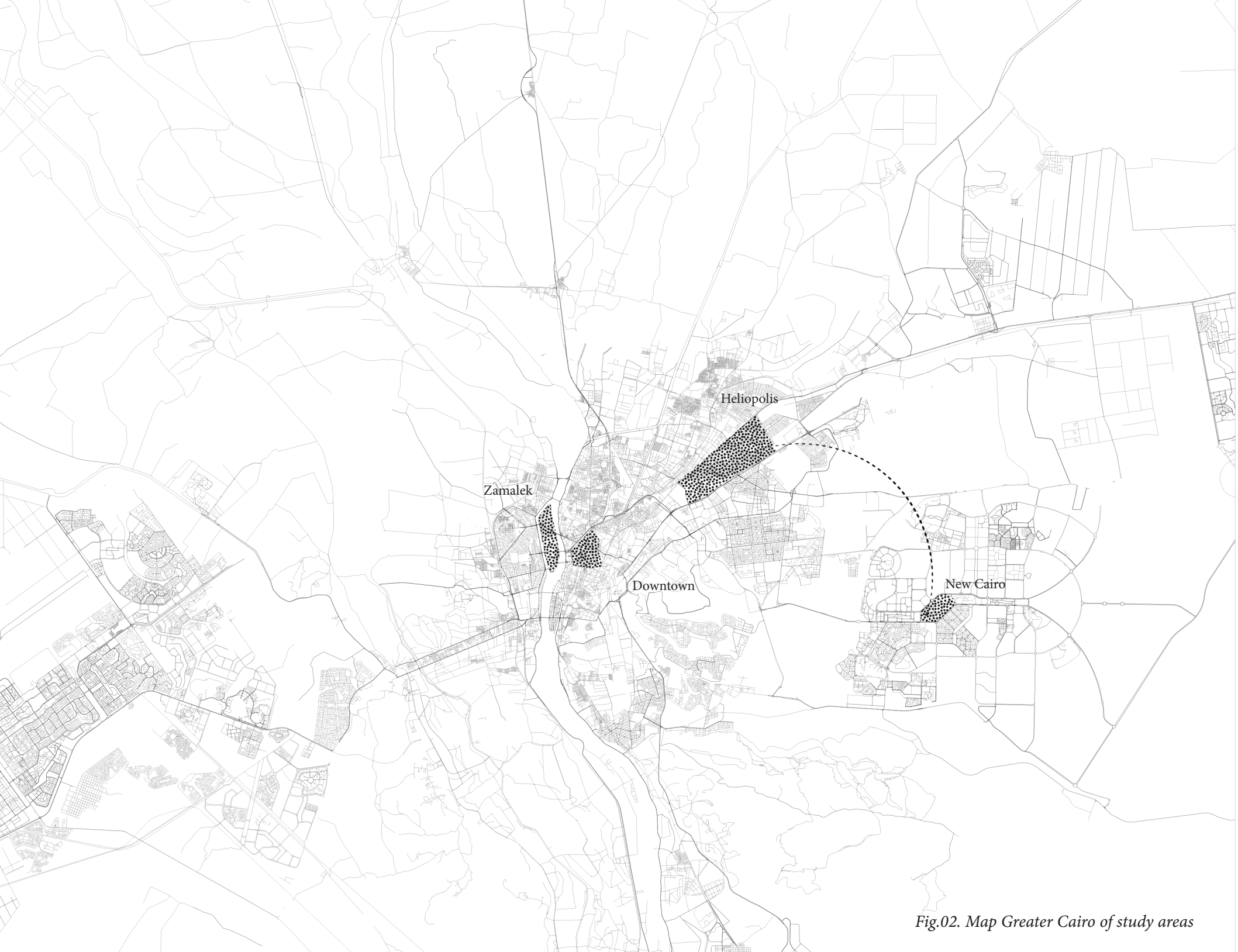


Fig.02. Map Greater Cairo of study areas

Bawab (pl. Bawabin) (literally "doorman" or "gatekeeper" in Arabic) is a caretaker traditionally responsible for overseeing the security, maintenance, and day-to-day services of residential or commercial buildings in Egypt. Usually, a man, bawab's duties can include controlling access to the property, monitoring visitors, collecting mail or deliveries, arranging repairs, and facilitating various tasks for residents. The word often symbolizes a low social status and carries a stigma that can often be used as a slang, implying a lack of education. Some prefer titles like Ghafir (guard) or Harris el-'Aqar (building guard) to avoid its negative connotations.

The 2023 economic crisis in Egypt has starkly illuminated the deeply ingrained patterns of inequality and social segregation woven into Cairo's urban fabric. Rising inflation, currency devaluation, and mounting national debt have exacerbated existing disparities, further widening the gap between affluent gated communities and overcrowded informal settlements[3]. These economic shocks reveal not just financial instability but also the structural failures embedded in the city's socio-spatial organization[4].

Cairo, a city with a history marked by cycles of foreign domination—from Alexander the Great's conquest in 332 BCE to independence from British colonization in 1922—depicts enduring spatial practices of control, division, and gatekeeping[5]. From its origins as Al-Qahira, a fortified enclave on the Nile's east bank, Cairo's urban evolution has unfolded into a fragmented archipelago of enclaves separated by physical barriers like walls and roads, materializing socio-economic frontiers, sprawling across eastern and western deserts[6]. These limits oscillate between hard boundaries and diluted thresholds, inhabited and activated by different actors. The bawab, or gatekeeper, living within these gaps, is a defining figure in the city's landscape through whom we can untangle the city's complexities[7].

3. Kharas, Homi, and Jehan Arulpragasam. "Egypt's 2023-24 Economic Crisis: Will This Time Be Different?" Peterson Institute for International Economics, December 2024

4. Ibid

5. Staffa, Susan Jane. Conquest and Fusion: The Social Evolution of Cairo, A.D. 642–1850. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1977. p.40

6. Nezar AlSayyad, Cairo, (Belknap Press, 2011) p.59

7. Throughout this work, the presence of a bawab is associated to the presence of a building entrance

Far from being a mere doorman, the bawab embodies a multifaceted role that blends domestic labor, surveillance, and spatial mediation. As both observer and agent, he reflects and reinforces the socio-economic divides shaping Cairo. His presence is deeply tied to the city's constant flux—a metropolis perpetually transformed, where spaces seem to be bound by expiry dates[8].

This work, through an analytical and ethnographic study, will look at the history of segregation in Cairo through the bawab's lens, at three different scales. Portrayed vividly in Egyptian cinema in films like El Naddaha (1975), El-Baih el-Bawab (1987), Imarat Yacoubian (2006), the bawab symbolizes a complex social and spatial phenomenon, embodying shifts in governance and urban development. Acting as the city's "eyes on the street"[9], he mediates between public and private realms, accumulating knowledge through constant observation. This gaze aligns with Foucault's panopticon[10], contributing to the vitality of the street and creating informal infrastructures. The thresholds he occupies—doorways, entrances, and streets—become zones of interaction, where public and private dynamically intersect.

The bawab's labor, intrinsically tied to domesticity, also highlights the marginalization of his own domestic life. His room, a constrained space for storing and restoring, underscores the abandonment of personal domesticity in service of others. Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari's A Thousand Plateaus (1987), the bawab functions as a nomad—a pivotal figure within the urban landscape, navigating its complexities without fully embodying the role of an economic agent. His actions, as "space multipliers," extend the domestic sphere into collective forms of spatial practice, challenging rigid boundaries of private and public life.

8. Omnia Khalil, "Securitizing the Urban Geography: Cairo Between Destruction and Construction," The Funambulist, no. 56, "Bulldozer Politics: The Precise Political Order Contained in the Apparent Chaos of Rubble"

9. Jacobs, Jane. The Death and Life of Great American Cities. New York: Random House, 1961.

10. Michel Foucault, Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison, translated by Alan Sheridan, New York: Vintage Books, 1977.

Confronted with the complexity and breadth of challenges inherent in Cairo's urban and architectural landscape, I found it essential to address these issues comprehensively within this theoretical statement, particularly within the framework of the École Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne —a context where the subject can feel unfamiliar and uncommon. The choice of analogy and focal gaze becomes central to this statement, emphasizing that the topic is not about a single person but about positioning within a multi-scalar approach. It explores the collateral effects of the bawab's gaze, actions, and presence on questions of bio-politics[11], political economy of space[12] and anthropology of housing. This analysis transitions from the macro-level mechanisms of state control, which fragment public spaces through securitization and privatization, to the micro-level interventions of the bawab, who reprogram these spaces through their everyday practices. By bridging the scales of governance and informal labor, the bawab embodies a fluid link between the rigidity of architectural boundaries and the adaptability of urban life. This multi-scalar approach reveals how control and resistance coexist in shaping Cairo's built environment.

The scarcity of data has led me to rely on sources from different disciplines including popular cinema, media, and novels to explore this topic - sources that often reflect a privileged perspective discussing a marginalized group that doesn't have the platform to tell their own stories. The work also relies on sociological and anthropological research of upper-Egyptian communities in Cairo and ethnographic fieldwork, interviews, immersion, and observation in 4 neighborhoods, Heliopolis, Zamalek, New Cairo, and Downtown.
Cairo's stark urban dichotomy and spatial segregation[13] serve as a backdrop for this paper, which shifts the focus toward the in-between spaces—the thresholds of separation—through the lens of the *bawab*. In this work, I also confront my own privileged position, recognizing that directing a lens at the bawab and labeling it as "my work" inherently frames the narrative. However, this act itself becomes a step toward fostering a broader dialogue about class.

11. The intersection between power (political, economic, judicial etc.) and the individual's bodily autonomy: Foucault, Michel, and Robert Hurley. The history of sexuality: An introduction. New York: Vintage Books, 1990.

12. Charlotte Malterre-Barthes, "Mapping the Political Economy of Space," Harvard Graduate School of Design. The interplay between economic systems, power structures, and spatial configurations.

13. Diane Singerman, Cairo Contested, (The American University in Cairo Press, 2011). p. 16

14. Presidential palace in Cairo, Egypt. It serves as one of the official residences and administrative offices of the President of Egypt.

15. Diane Singerman, Cairo Contested, (The American University in Cairo Press, 2011). p. 4

This paper, *The Bawab, the Palace, the Neighbor, and the Rooftop*, intertwines an analytical framework with a deeply personal narrative, rooted in the spatial, social, and institutional landscapes of my upbringing.

The palace, specifically the Itahadeya Palace[14], epitomizes a governance that is detached and aerial. It reflects what Diane Singerman terms "neoliberalism from the sky"[15]—a view of the city as a homogenized mass, stripped of its historical, social, and relational particularities. Below, the rooftop emerges as a counterpoint: an informal space, vibrant yet shadowed, existing on the margins of state recognition. It embodies a clandestine architecture of survival, where life unfolds dynamically in ways the official city cannot fully comprehend.

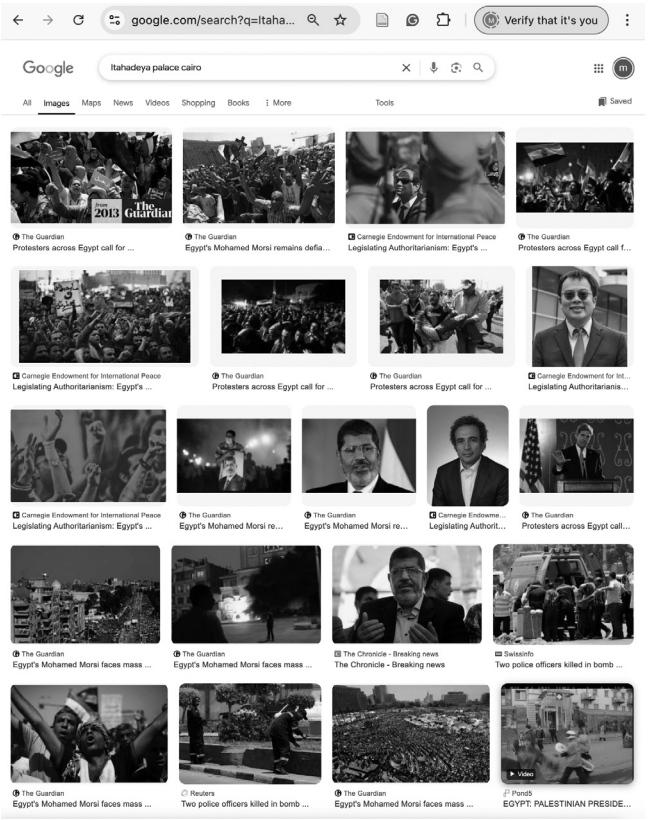
In this interplay, the bawab occupies a pivotal role as both active actor and observer, a custodian of the street's informal ledger. As a mediator between the palace's distant governance and the intimate, textured life of the neighbor, the bawab's work illuminates Cairo's complex urban choreography. Their labor bridges worlds: managing the shadow economies of rooftops, safeguarding the rhythms of neighbors, and interpreting the unspoken codes of the city. The bawab is not merely a figure within Cairo's urban fabric but thread weaving its disparate layers together.

Each element—the bawab as observer, the palace as a symbol of state detachment, the neighbor as a local agent, and the rooftop as a site of informal urbanism—represents a node in the intricate web of Cairo's urban life. These figures and spaces collectively narrate the city's rhythms, tensions, and contradictions.

This inquiry repositions the bawab as an indispensable lens to understand how Cairo is constructed, navigated, and inhabited. How does this overlooked labor inform and shape the city? What does the bawab's role reveal about the lived intersections of formality and informality, surveillance and care, control and agency? By centering these marginalized practices of urban life, this exploration seeks to challenge reductive narratives of the city and re-imagine its future. In doing so, it opens up possibilities for inclusive design practices that acknowledge and amplify the voices of those who sustain Cairo's delicate balance, not from the sky, but from the ground.

How does the evolving urban fabric of the city impact the spatial and social role of the bawab, and how might his traditional functions adapt or transform in response to these changes?

Fig.03. Where is the Palace?



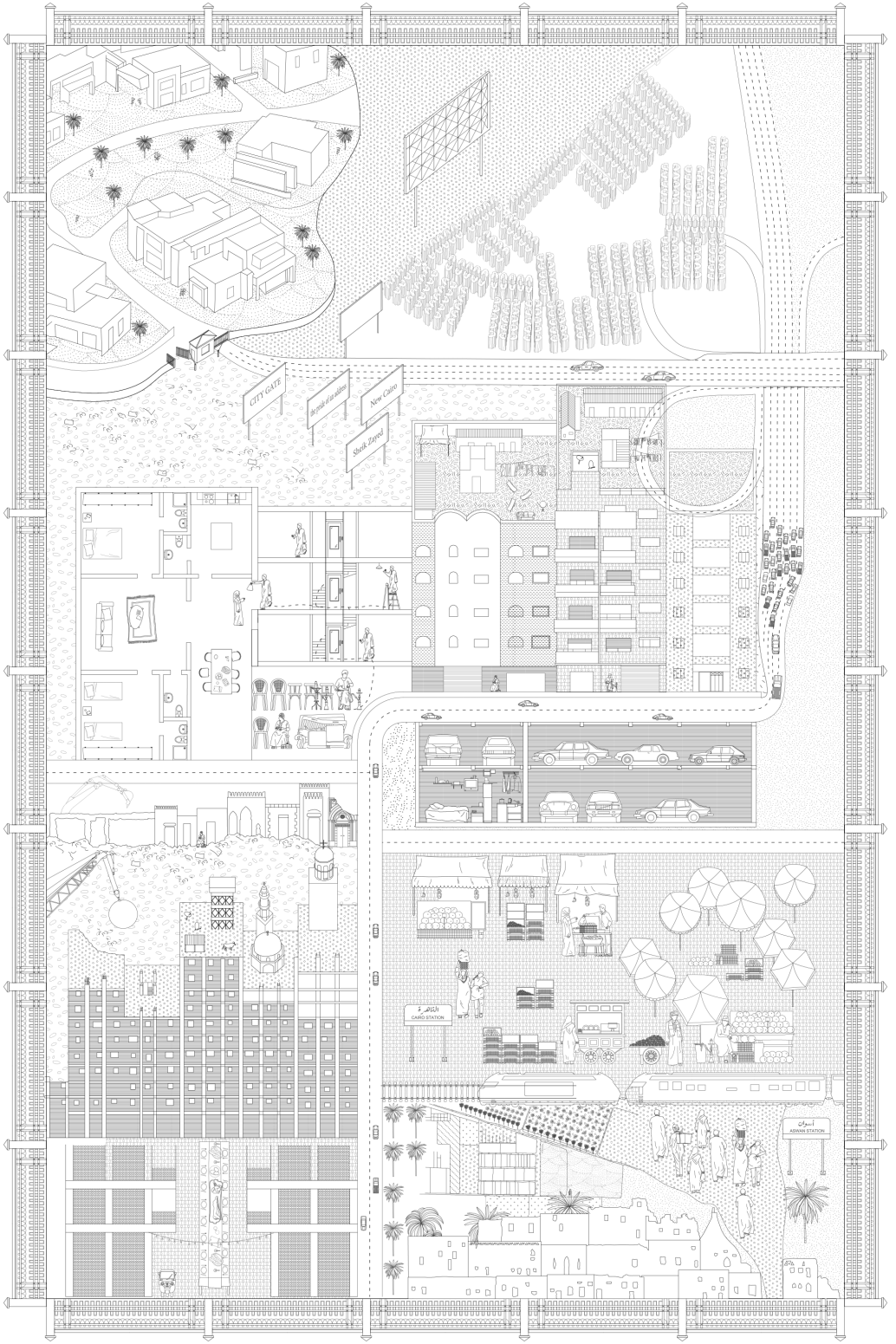


Fig.04. Tapestry of Spatial Segregation and Class Conversation in Cairo

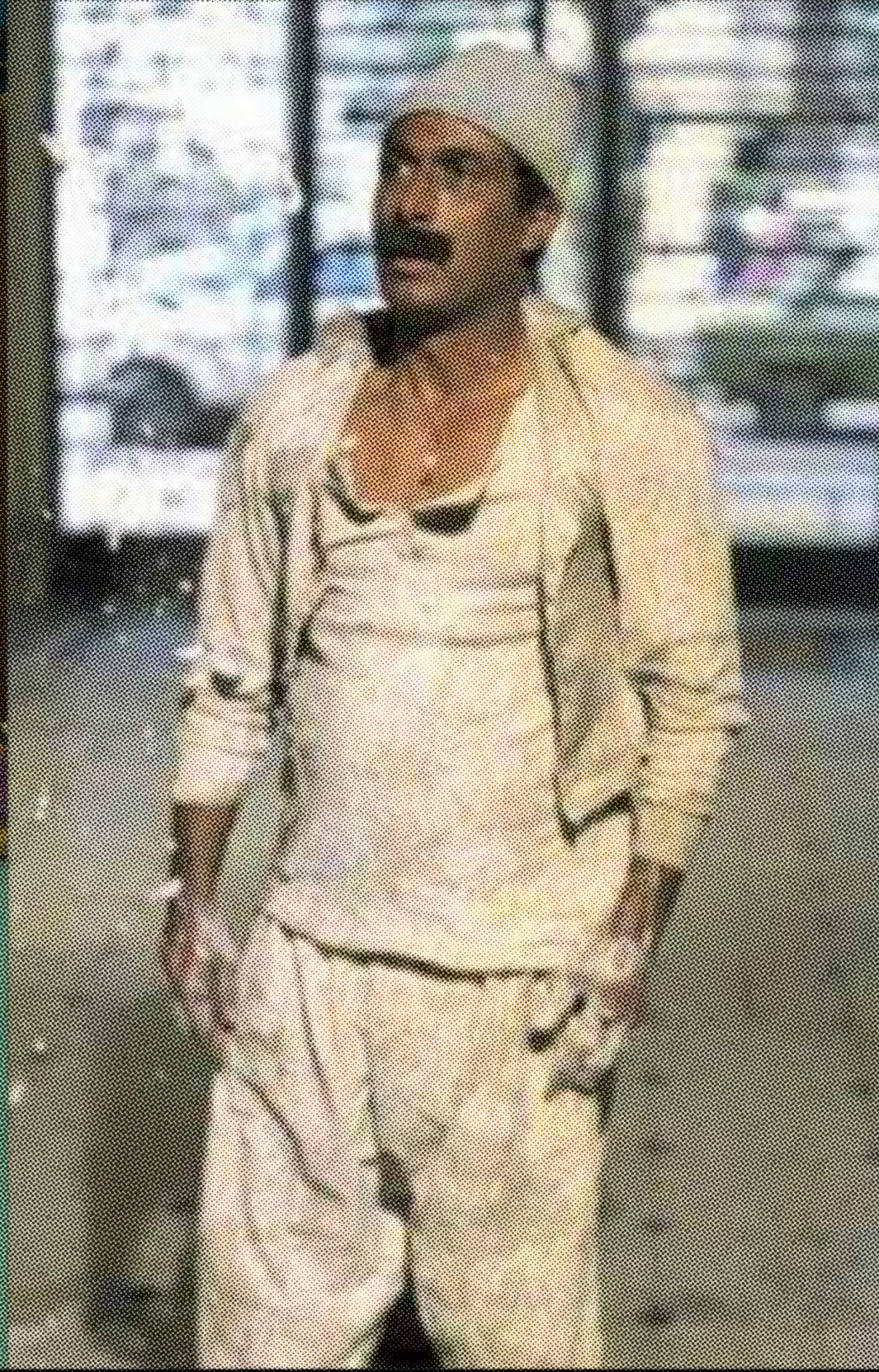
THE BAWAB AS URBAN ARCHETYPE[16]

البواب النموذج الحضري

16. *refers to a recurring, emblematic pattern or model in the design, structure, or social dynamics of cities. Can manifest in various forms such as building types, public spaces, neighborhood layouts, or even social roles and are recognized for their distinctive characteristics and influence on urban life.*










Alexandria
Cairo



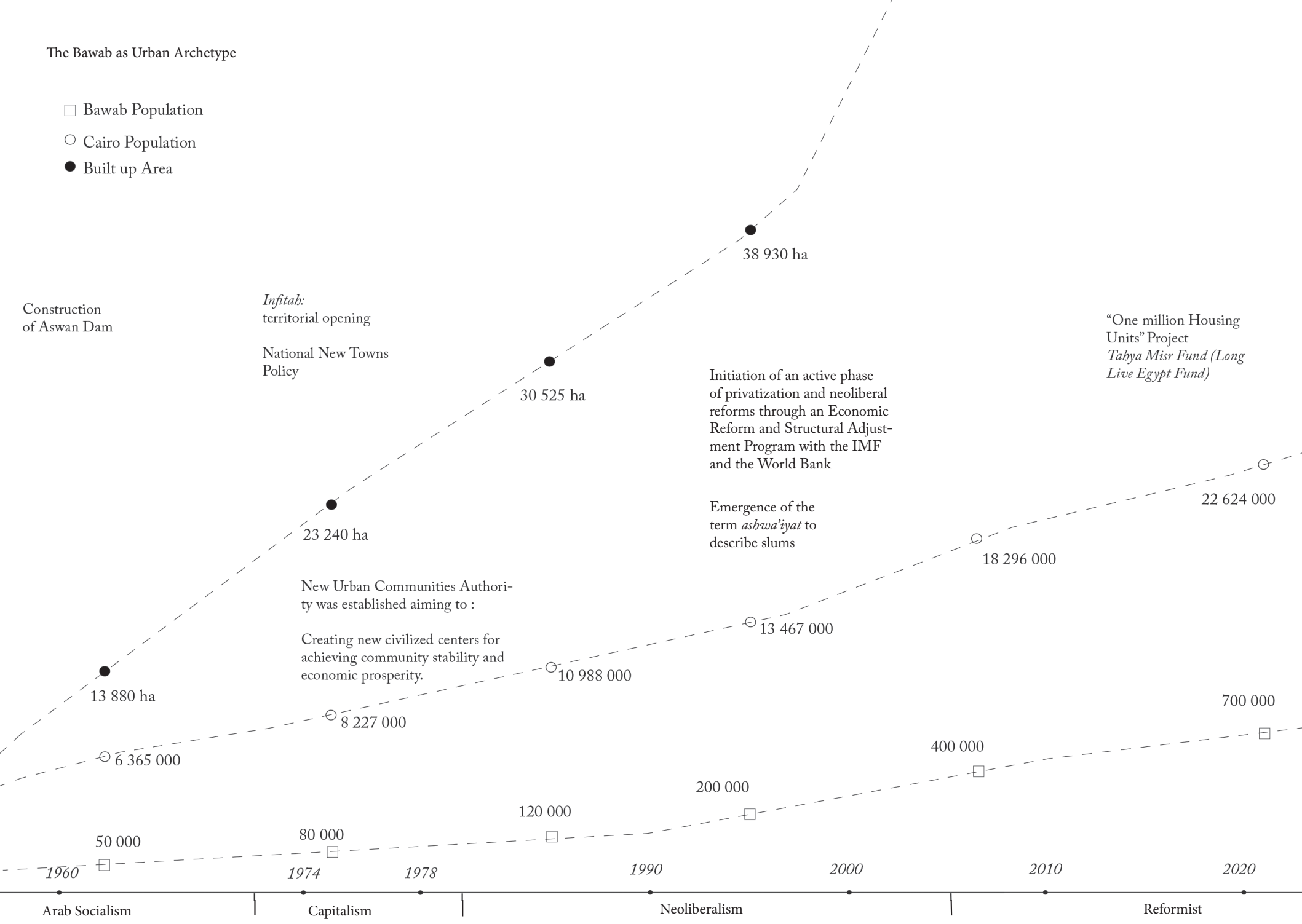


Fig.05. Timeline of paradigm shift in function of evolution of built environment

Stereotype in Egyptian Cinema
Origins and Representations

17. Baih honorific title to denote respect originating from the ottoman rule

18. Diane Singerman, Cairo Contested, (The American University in Cairo Press, 2011). p.146

19. Al Jazeera World, *The Doormen of Egypt*, 27:00, January 9, 2019

20. Janet L. Abu-Lughod, "Cairo: Too Many People, Not Enough Land, Too Few Resources," in *World Cities Beyond the West: Globalization, Development, and Inequality*, ed. Josef Gugler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) p.128

21. (AlSayyad et al., 2022, p. 170)

22. *al- Sa ̔īd,* southern portion of Egypt and is composed of the Nile River valley south of the delta.

23. Al Jazeera World, *The Doormen of Egypt*, Al Jazeera English, January 9, 2019

The film *El-Baih el-Bawwab* (1987) by Hassan Ibrahim and Youssef Gohar provides a critical lens into the bawab's evolving role amidst Egypt's dramatic socio-economic transitions during the late 20th century. This period marked a pivotal shift from President Gamal Abdel Nasser's state socialism to President Anwar Sadat's neoliberal *infitah* (open-door) policies, further intensified under President Hosni Mubarak. Nasser's era prioritized state-led development, public sector expansion, and social welfare, fostering a sense of collective identity under an authoritarian framework. In contrast, Sadat's *infitah* dismantled much of this structure, opening Egypt to foreign investment, reducing taxes and import tariffs, and privatizing large portions of the public sector[18].

This change in policy fundamentally altered Cairo's social and economic fabric, exacerbating inequality and reinforcing socio-spatial divides. While a small elite benefited from these reforms, the broader population faced rising unemployment, diminished public services, and increased precarity. The bawab, as depicted in the film, embodies these tensions—caught between Nasser's promises of inclusion and the harsh realities of Sadat and Mubarak's neoliberal Egypt. His role as both a gatekeeper and an opportunistic intermediary reflects the struggles of a class navigating the erosion of state protections and the growing pressures of market-driven urbanism.

The film begins by portraying the displacement of Abdulsami, Zainab, and their children, a peasant family forced to migrate to Cairo. This rural exodus, like many from the 1960s is a consequence of the construction of the Aswan Dam, causing flooding of many villages and pushing dwellers towards urban centers in search of *'akl el 'eish*'(livelihood, literal meaning eating bread)[20]. Moreover, Nasser's era was marked by rapid urbanization and industrialization attempts, leading to large waves of internal migration, especially to Cairo[21]. Within this context, the bawab—often a rural migrant from Upper Egypt[22]—appeared as a new central figure in Cairo's urban landscape[23]. Indeed, this job seemed ideal within the housing crisis resulting from the 60s rapid urbanization, as it provided employment

with housing, food and security. These migrants, who often lacked formal education but were recognized for their vigilance, were sometimes viewed through the lens of the "noble savage"[24]—a romanticized notion that portrays individuals from outside the city as morally pure and untainted by modern corruption—and consequently found employment in domestic labor[25]. Yet, their presence was met with suspicion and hostility from urban elites, who viewed them as a threat to Cairo's 'refined civilization'.
This tension between rural migrants and urban society has deep historical roots. The dichotomy between the *fallah* (peasant) and the *hadari* (translating to civilized) has long animated narratives of fear and exclusion[26]. Media campaigns, such as those of July 2002 advocating for restrictions on rural migration, reinforced the precarious and marginalized status of the bawab within Cairo's socio-spatial hierarchy[27].

> *"Upper Egyptians are Indignant at the Governors Plan to Forbid Them from Entering Cairo"*. Abd al-Jawad and Shaira 2002.
> *"Does the Governor Plot to Expel the Shaykh of al-Azhar and Pope Shenouda?"* al-Salimi 2002.

The figure of the bawab, often stereotyped as a comic or obedient character in Egyptian cinema, reveals deeper archetypal dimensions. In the film, the protagonist begins his journey as a fallah, characterized by his cultural conservatism, its resistance to modernity, unfamiliar with urban infrastructures, such as elevators. This unfamiliarity becomes a narrative pivot as he gradually masters these spaces, using them to assert control over the building's residents. He even convinces the residents of one of the largest apartments of the building to move to the rooftop as they can save up making profit by renting their apartment and selling them the idea of living on the rooftop as a luxury. His evolution, from a naive rural migrant to a clever social climber, mirrors broader socioeconomic dynamics. By renting properties, exchanging foreign currency, and acquiring land, he capitalizes on class divisions, all while retaining his rural identity, symbolized by his gallabiya, the traditional

24. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes (Amsterdam: Marc-Michel Rey, 1755)

25. Zohry, Ayman Gaafar. Rural-to-Urban Labor *Migration: A Study of Upper Egyptian Laborers in Cairo.* PhD diss., University of Sussex at Brighton, Centre for the Comparative Study of Culture, Development, and the Environment, 2002.

26. Singerman,Amar, Cairo Cosmopolitan, p. 51

27. Ibid. p. 375

Fig.06. President Nasser monitoring construction of the Aswan High Dam

Fig.07. Film's Screenshot, "Bawab and Real Estate"





clothing attire of the Egyptian peasant he keeps wearing.
The film's comedic tone juxtaposes its more profound critique of social hierarchies. The bawab's role as both a marginal figure and an opportunistic mediator challenges rigid class boundaries. While often portrayed in cinema as a stereotype, the bawab emerges as an archetype—a complex symbol of Cairo's fractured urban fabric, embodying the interplay between exclusion and agency. Another example is the pivotal role of the bawabin during the 1980s boom in real estate. Their intimate knowledge of the activity within and around buildings, as well as their networking with other bawabin, made them key sources of information for prospective tenants or buyers. The therefore bawab becomes central not only for the maintenance but also for access to housing.
In this way, El-Baih el-Bawwab becomes more than a comedic film; it serves as a cultural artifact situating the bawab within Cairo's socio-dynamic map and capturing a historical moment of transition while highlighting timeless themes of migration, class struggle, and urban transformation.

In parallel, 36 years later, *'Ala Bab el 'Omara (At the Building's Entrance*), a TV series, offers a contrasting perspective to *El-Baih el-Bawwab*. It follows Awad Abu Hamed, a wealthy Upper Egyptian man who, under his father's insistence, is forced to travel to Cairo to "start from the bottom" and understand his roots. Awad takes on the role of a bawab for a building, replicating his father's past before becoming a successful and wealthy mayor in Upper Egypt. This narrative introduces a modern twist: Awad becomes a TikTok sensation, documenting his journey as a newly appointed bawab.
The series frames his transition to this role as a fall from grace, reinforcing the implicit association of the bawab profession with social decline. While his actions challenge certain stereotypes, they still draw on common narratives portraying the bawab as an outsider navigating urban environments marked by suspicion and prejudice.
Ultimately, *'Ala Bab el 'Omara* continues the legacy of *El-Baih el-Bawwab*, using the bawab as a lens to explore Cairo's persistent

inequalities and shifting urban dynamics. Despite its updated tone and modern perspective, the series reinforces the bawab's enduring centrality in Egyptian cultural representations of class and migration. Both works demonstrate how stereotypes persist even as societal contexts evolve, solidifying the bawab as an archetype for understanding the intersections of space, labor, and identity in Cairo's urban landscape.
Neither fully part of the urban elite nor completely detached from it, the bawab occupies a rare liminal space within Cairo's harsh dualities. His role evolved with the city, as gates became more common and thresholds got sharper.





Fig.08. TV show's screenshot, Power dynamics in "Al Bab El-Omara"

Gatekeeping as an Urban Phenomenon

Evolution and Urban Typologies

28. *From the narrow street quarter to the apartment building, marks Cairo's urban transition.* Samia Mehrez, Diane Singerman, Cairo Contested, (The American University in Cairo Press, 2011). p.145

29. Raymond, André, *Cairo*. Translated by Willard Wood. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000.

30. Mohamed Gamal Abdelmonem, *The Architecture of Home in Cairo*, (Routledge, 2016), p. 95

31. Interview with Mahmoud, Al-Bostah street, Heliopolis, Cairo November 18th 2024

32. Youm7, "يرمزألا قماسأ تنمم خيرات فشكي مالسإلا يف بابوبلا," April 23, 2021

The metaphorical expression From the *Hara* to the *Imara*[28], describing Cairo's urban evolution in literature, reflects the city's layered history transformation. This section situates the evolution of urban typologies of gatekeeping within Cairo's neoliberal restructuring, emphasizing the relationship between built forms, socio-political dynamics, and economic liberalization. Adding *Katameya* (a gated community in New Cairo) as a representation of the latest layer of expansion in Cairo's sprawling urban landscape and *Asmarat* (state social housing) as an untouchable enclave of extending the narrative of spatial and socio-political gatekeeping.

From Hara to Imara

The Hara[29] refers to a close-knit neighborhood structured around a main alleyway. These quarters were more than just physical enclaves; they functioned as self-contained socio-economic units where residents, organized by occupation, religious affiliation, or familial networks, engaged in communal activities, commerce, and social support. The hara thus served as a core urban building block, reflecting and shaping the wider social and spatial organization of Cairo during the Ottoman period (16th to 18th century) and functioned as a self-contained unit, embodying communal coherence and structured socio-economic relations[30]. Its spatial arrangement, marked by *zuqaq* (main streets), *a'tfa* (dead-end alleys), and a *Bab* (gated entrance) guarded by a bawab, was reinforced by the Sheikh's mediating role with city officials. The Hara epitomizes the pre-modern clustering urban logic, creating a cohesive yet controlled urban fabric. Mahmoud, a bawab, explained that the role of the bawab during the Ottoman Empire was vastly different from its contemporary form[31]. Back then, it was considered a noble and prestigious position, drawing parallels to the companions of the Prophet Muhammad (*sah*), who served as gatekeepers to his home, maintaining constant awareness and vigilance over his presence[32].

However, as Cairo's growth accelerated in the mid-20th century, the Hara typology gave way to the Imara[33] (the apartment building). Representing the fragmentation of the city's social fabric, the 'Imara replaced the Hara as the dominant metaphor of urban life in literature and popular culture, embodying the contradictions of Cairo's modernization under the pressures of rural-to-urban migration, *laissez-faire* urban planning, and economic liberalization[34]. The 'Imara reflects an individualized and atomized urban reality, juxtaposed against the chaotic, informal sprawl of Cairo's peripheries. In the novel *Imarat Yacoubian*, Al-Aswany illustrates the transformation of the Yacoubian building following the 1952 Revolution. As foreign and Jewish residents departed, their apartments were taken over by military officers. The officers' families re-purposed the rooftop's laundry rooms for housing servants and raising livestock. By the 1970s, the '*open door*' economic policies spurred another shift: these families moved to upscale neighborhoods like Heliopolis and Madinat Nasr, often converting their old apartments into offices, clinics, or rental properties for their children. Meanwhile, servants occupying the rooftop rooms sold or rented their spaces to working-class migrants seeking opportunities in the city. Ultimately, the rooftop developed into a separate community, distinct from the rest of the building in class and privilege. The rooftop, a recurring architectural feature in Cairo and a typology depicted frequently in Egyptian cinema (Al Sutuh, The Yacoubian Building), exemplifies this dynamic. Rooftop dwellers, often bawabin and their families, occupy spaces inherited through informal, generational arrangements. These dwellings blur the boundaries between formal and informal housing. Approximately 1.5 million people inhabit the tightly packed rooftops of Greater Cairo[35]. Rooftop tranquility has long been cherished by residents of this hot, park-starved city. But as Cairo's population grows by 300,000 each year, its roofs are becoming colonized by what Egyptian officials politely call ''the informal housing sector."[36]

33. A multi-story residential or mixed-use building that reflects both the city's architectural evolution and its social diversity.

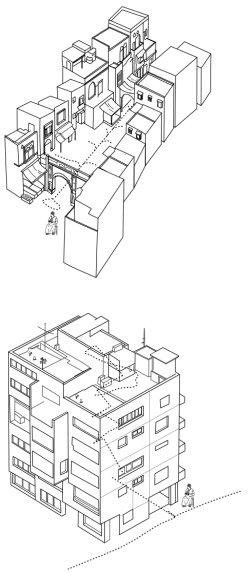
34. Diane Singerman, Cairo Contested, (The American University in Cairo Press, 2011). p.145

35. Goldstein, Eric. "In Crowded Cairo, Even the Rooftops Are Teeming with Life." *The Christian Science Monitor*, 2007

36. Ibid.

Fig.09.1. Diagramm urban typology of Hara

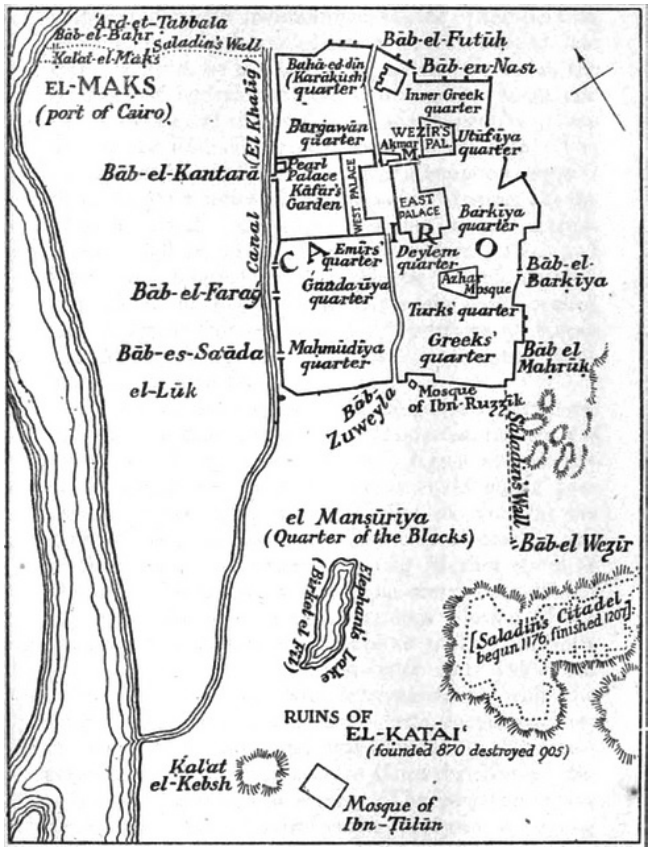
Fig.09.2. Diagramm urban typology of Imara

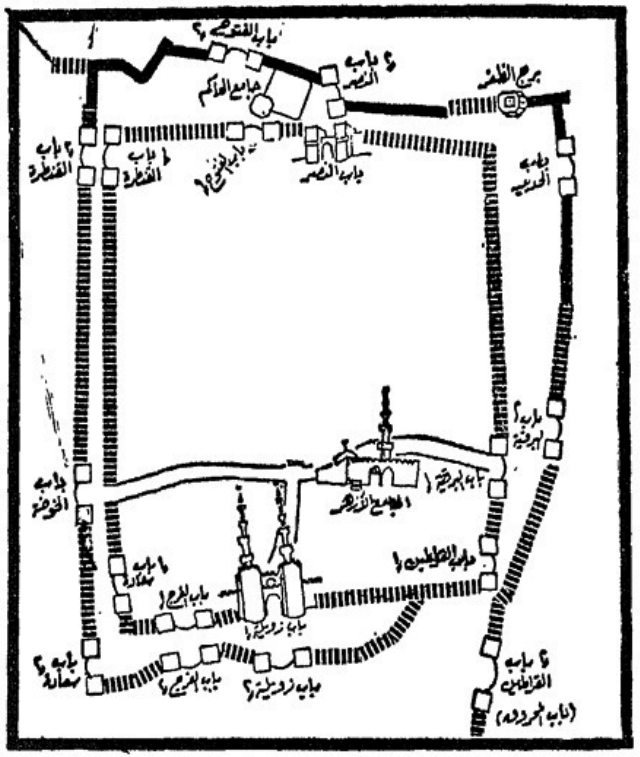


The hara symbolizes the collective hopes of modern times while the 'imara becomes a trope of urban post-modernity. The hara community is united by Mun'im's dream and pushes him to succeed in a utopian fantasy In the film *Shari' el hubb*, while in *Imaret Yacoubian* the 'imara's community throws Taha, into despair, trapped his status as the son of the bawab unable to get into the Police Academy despite his academic success. The hara represented Cairo of the mid-twentieth century, before and after the 1952 Revolution, and the lower-middle-class aspiration for upward social mobility. With the rapid urbanization and unstoppable social transformation that followed, the 'imara became the symbol of the loss of traditions and identity."

Fig.10. Map of fortified Cairo before 1300

Fig.11. Gates and walls of old Cairo



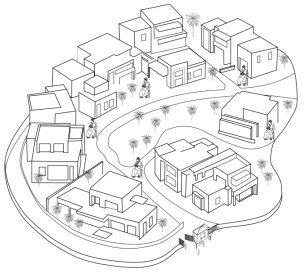


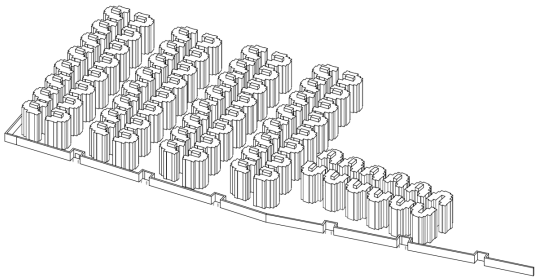
To Katameya : The Neoliberal Enclave

Katameya stands as an example to more than 500 other gated communities presented in Greater Cairo Region that all function in a similar manner. The rise of Katameya in 1997, a district in New Cairo, marks a significant typological shift within the neoliberal urban framework[37]. Its gated communities, exclusive clubs, and sprawling compounds exemplify the privatization. Gated communities epitomize the dual processes of disorganizing and reorganizing urban life, serving as 'defensive bastions' that reinforce social stratification while promoting a globalized, Americano-Mediterranean lifestyle[38]. These enclaves, with their private infrastructure and commodified public spaces, redefine urban governance by transferring power to private developers and economic elites, a central dynamic to Cairo's neoliberal transformation. The obsession with placing gates—and, by extension, gatekeepers—around any form of infrastructure stems from a deep-seated desire to control access and prevent these spaces from 'decaying.' This fixation is rooted in a fear of attracting lower classes, perceived as a threat to the sanitized microcosm of these compounds. A striking example of this phenomenon is the recent use of QR codes, as a prerequisite for entry into gated communities. Codes serve to tightly regulate access, reinforcing exclusivity and further entrenching social divides[39]. Moreover, delivery personnel and domestic workers are required to leave two forms of identification, including a driving license, as collateral to ensure their departure from the space, highlighting the pervasive mistrust and rigid control mechanisms within these communities.

To Asmarat

Al-Asmarat represents a different form of gated space compared to Katameya's neoliberal enclaves. Established in 2016 as a government-led relocation project, Al-Asmarat aimed to relocate residents from informal settlements labeled as unsafe by state authorities. Al-Asmarat reflects a state-centric vision of control over the built environment and civilizing of the urban poor.
This relocation has often reproduced the precarity it sought to eliminate, disrupting livelihoods, inflating living costs, and erasing the spatial logic of informal settlements that sustained residents' socio-economic networks. Al-Asmarat's gated infrastructure, monitored by visible security forces, emphasizes strict regulation of residents' behaviors. Social gatherings in public spaces, commercial activities in residential units, and informal practices like street vending are prohibited[40]. Uniform apartment layouts, pre-furnished and standardized, enforce a singular vision of domestic life that disregards the diverse realities of relocated families. Prepaid utilities and rigid rental agreements further burden residents, many of





37. Momen El-Husseiny, "Spaces of the Maybe: Fragments as New Urban Possibilities in Cairo's Extended Urbanisation," *Journal of Urbanism: International Research on Placemaking and Urban Sustainability*, October 2022,

38. Denis, Eric. "Cairo as a Neoliberal Capital? From Walled city to gated communities." In *Cairo Cosmopolitan: Politics, Culture and Urban space in the new globalized Middle East*, edited by Diane Singerman, and Paul Amar, 47-71. The American University in Cairo Press.

39. Qureshi, Hira. "Gated Communities as a Living Choice in the Global South: A Qualitative Review of the Physical and Socio-Economic Features." Sir *Syed University of Engineering and Technology*, Karachi, Pakistan.

40. Fatma Ramadan, "Asmarat: The State's Model Housing for Former Slum Residents," *Mada Masr*, June 18, 2018

Fig.09.3. Diagramm urban typology of Kattameya

Fig.09.4. Diagramm urban typology of Al-Asmarat

whom transitioned from informal settings where such costs were negligible or negotiable.
While Katameya embodies neoliberal exclusivity, Al-Asmarat enforces spatial segregation for the sake of safety and order. This form of gatekeeping extends beyond physical barriers to regulate the movement, behavior, and socio-economic practices of its residents, ensuring the persistence of state control over marginalized urban populations. The project exemplifies a broader governmental strategy to peripheralize the urban poor, relocating them to state-built enclaves that prioritize surveillance and conformity over integration and empowerment.

Gatekeeping as Urban Ecology

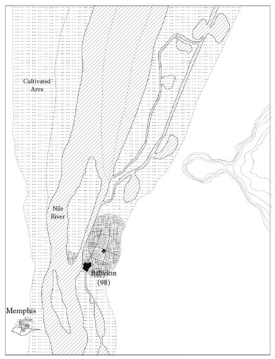
Gatekeeping in Cairo transcends residential typologies, becoming a pervasive motif in the city's infrastructure. Gates, walls creating a fragmented urban ecology that mirrors the city's socio-economical divides. The increasing reliance on privatized gatekeeping mechanisms underscores the neoliberal reordering of Cairo, where access and control are mediated by economic and social capital[41].
This evolution of gatekeeping, from private developments to state-led projects, reveals a broader pattern of urban control aimed at consolidating power and shaping public space in ways that reinforce existing inequalities[42].
Positioned at the *Bab* (gate) of the *Hara*, the bawab controlled access, mediated between residents and external authorities, and played a role in sustaining communal coherence. This role underscored the bawab's status as a key agent of social and spatial order.
As Cairo transitioned to the *Imara* (apartment buildings), the bawab adapted to new forms of urban living. While their role remained essential, serving multiple households within a single building, it became more specialized, reflecting the fragmentation and individualization of urban life. This shift mirrors the broader neoliberal restructuring of the city, where urban forms prioritize privatized

41. Sims, D. and Abu-Lughod, J.L. (2010) Understanding Cairo: The logic of a city out of control. Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press.

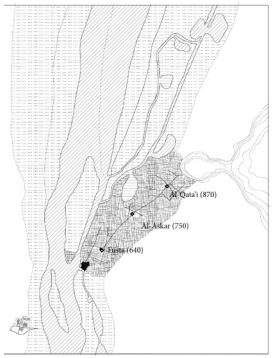
42. Diane Singerman, Cairo Contested, (The American University in Cairo Press, 2011), p. 228.

governance and segmented living.
In gated communities like Katameya, the bawab's role has taken on a more symbolic dimension. Despite the presence of advanced surveillance technologies, security personnel, and gated infrastructure, the bawab persists rarely, not out of necessity but as a marker of status and comfort. Their presence signals an individual or household's ability to delegate even trivial tasks, reinforcing social hierarchies. This transformation highlights the bawab's role as both a functional figure and a status symbol within Cairo's privatized urban enclaves.
Conversely, in state-led projects like Al-Asmarat, the absence of the traditional bawab is notable. Here, the state assumes the role of gatekeeper, imposing strict surveillance and rigid control over residents' behaviors and movements. This shift reflects a broader pattern of the state's engagement in urban governance, where control is centralized, and the bawab's mediatory role is rendered obsolete. The state's heavy-handed gatekeeping in Al-Asmarat underscores its attempts to regulate and "civilize" urban populations, contrasting sharply with the informal negotiations facilitated by the bawab in earlier typologies.

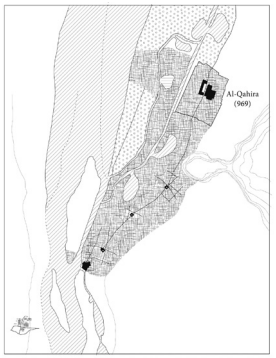
The bawab, as a recurring figure across Cairo's urban evolution, symbolizes the city's layered history of gatekeeping. This trajectory highlights the dual role of gatekeeping as both an architectural and socio-political practice, shaping access, control, and the dynamics of public and private spaces.
Moreover, the bawab's evolution parallels the Egyptian state's own role as a "gate-keeper," as described by Cooper (2002) and Deboulet (2009). Just as the bawab mediated the flows of people and power within micro-urban settings, the state has struggled to balance its engagement with informal urbanism, often neglecting its public duties while simultaneously reinforcing control through projects like Al-Asmarat.



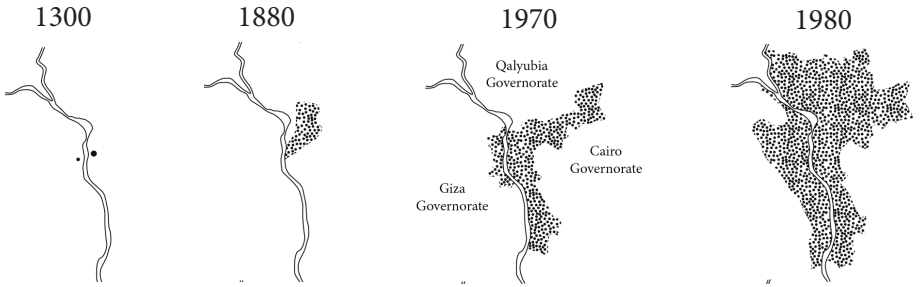
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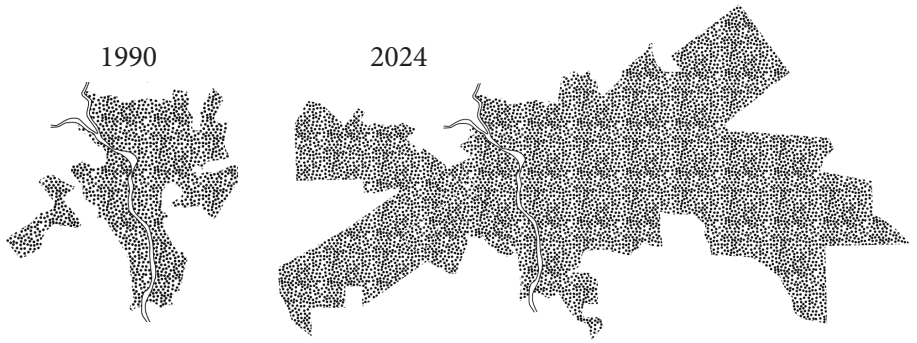


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(Top) Fig.12. The beginning of Cairo

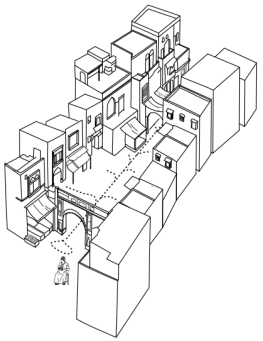
(Bottom) Fig.13. Evolution of built environment and urban sprawl in Cairo



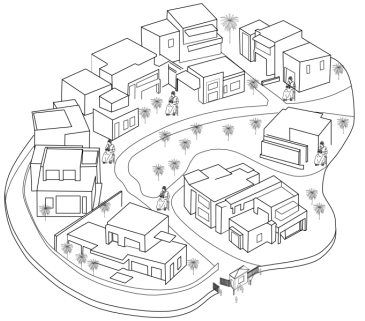
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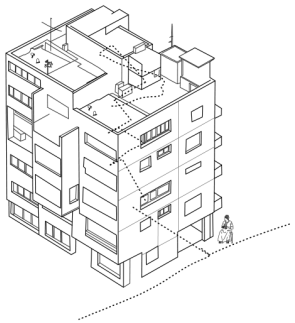
Fig.14.Google Earth Screenshots of the four urban typologies today

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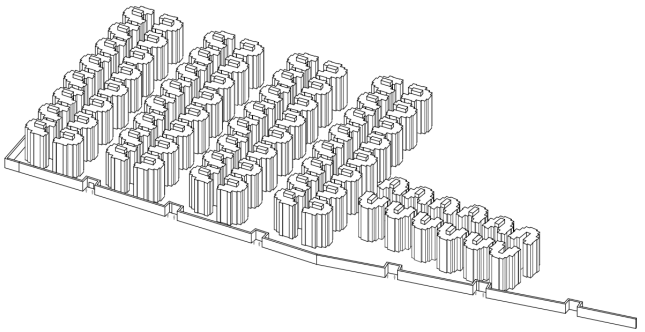


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Fig.09. Diagramm of evolution of urban clustering typology in Cairo

Fortress Cairo

Militarization of Public Space

43. Funambulist: "Securitizing the urban geography: Cairo between destruction and construction", Omnia Khalil, 2024

44. Ibid.

In the aftermath of the 2011 revolution, and with the July 2013 coup and the following Rabaa massacre, a heightened sense of securization was installed in Egypt. In Cairo, Tahrir square, once a space for political expression and social manifestation, was closed off with military tanks constantly parked there. This also extended to smaller squares such as Talaat harb square and Mostafa Kamel square, as well as smaller green spaces which are gated. Green spaces and surveillance have become normalized, internalized by dwellers. In addition, parks and green spaces are monitored by the ministry of agriculture, which doesn't have the means for maintenance and passes its safeguarding to the military.[43]

> *Surveillance, in addition to the language of militarization and police surveillance, also comes through other tools like demolition, construction and eviction.*

Since 2015, Cairo has been living through mass destruction through several new urban development projects answering to a new urban agenda: a city "free of slums". Omnia Khalil estimates that around 2.8 million inhabitants in the greater Cairo region were evicted between 2018 and 2022[44]. These projects, under the guise of urban regeneration, also serve the purpose of control and surveillance. Indeed, a new unit was created in 2020 called the spatial changes monitor. In this way, spatial changes become a security issue. This unit, created by the Ministry of defense, controls anyone making spatial changes such as adding a room, floor or demolishing without permission, and faces them with military trials. In addition to demolition and control, the state also uses construction as a tool for surveillance. Since 2013, a new network of roads and bridges was built to access the new capitals, these arteries allow to enhance the state's security, creating view points from above. During the anniversary of the 2011 revolution, security personnel were stationed in rows on bridges to control the movement of crowds. Additionally, these vantage points are equipped with security cameras, the new administrative capital alone is equipped with 6000. In addition to surveillance, this road

network made pedestrian movement much more difficult. Walking in local neighborhoods became harsh, with difficult street crossings and no pedestrian lights.

Many security apparatus are scattered in Egyptian cities, The recognizable green metal barriers are one of them, bulky and over a meter in height, they frame Cairo's main squares and avenues. The assumed reason for these barriers is traffic control, for managing pedestrian crossings, but they end up generating very hard pedestrian experiences. Indeed, they restrain masses from moving freely and even cause accidents throughout the years.

From Alexandria in the north to Aswan in the south passing by Cairo, the green barriers appear as markers of the state's hegemonic presence, distinguishing little between regions. Pedestrians can find themselves locked outside the sidewalk so they walk alongside them on the road, competing for space with cars. These walls are inherently violent, in their presence and action in the public realm. During the revolution, the dead spaces created by these barriers were a place of death during the violence between protesters and the security forces. Some protesters found themselves trapped behind them and were beaten to death, the walls[45] become an apparatus of police violence. Despite the violence they embody, the barriers have become a normal and almost invisible feature of everyday life in Cairo, their anchoring in Cairo's urban streetscape create a sense of permanence[46].

The street emerges as a contested space, where informal actors step in to navigate and mediate its fragmented landscape. In this context, the bawabin, with their constant presence and intimate knowledge of the neighborhood, assume a dual role as custodians and facilitators of public space. Their presence bridges the gaps created by rigid urban controls, making them agents of a new form of spatial governance—one deeply embedded in the fabric of the neighborhood, yet constrained by the overarching logic of surveillance.

45. Elshaded. "Public Space in Cairo: A Fragmented Archipelago." Failed Architecture. June 4, 2013

46. Ibid.

Fig.15. Demolition of cemeteries for roads extensions

Fig.16. The green walls of Cairo and the fragmentation of public space





THE BAWAB AS AGENT OF LIMINAL SPACE

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The Neighborhood Panopticon

Surveillance and Presence

Michel Foucault's foundational work, particularly Discipline and Punish: *The Birth of the Prison* (1975), has been instrumental in shaping our understanding of modern surveillance systems. Building on Jeremy Bentham's 18th-century conceptualization of the Panopticon, Foucault analyzes how architecture and spatial organization are central to disciplinary power. The Panopticon, a radial prison design with a central observation tower, embodies the principle of asymmetrical observation—where the few watch the many, making the possibility of constant surveillance lead to internalized discipline.

David Lyon, a leading scholar in surveillance studies, extends these ideas into the modern era. In *The Electronic Eye* (1994), Lyon defines surveillance as "an umbrella term to cover the many expanding contexts in which personal data are collected by professional, commercial, and administrative agencies, as well as by police and security forces." Over time, his definitions evolved to emphasize the systematic and routine collection of personal data to influence, manage, protect, or control individuals[47]. This progression illustrates how surveillance has shifted from being primarily physical and spatial to encompassing digital and data-driven dimensions.

47. Surveillance Studies: *An Overview*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007.

These theoretical frameworks resonate deeply with the lived realities of Cairo's urban spaces, particularly through the figure of the bawab. In the district of Zamalek—and by extension, much of Cairo—the bawab operates as a localized, embodied form of surveillance. Unlike the disembodied, passive gaze of a camera or institutional monitoring, the bawab's role is deeply tied to the sensory and relational fabric of the street. His tools of surveillance extend beyond sight to include sound, habit, and time.

> *While Mahmoud, the bawab on Bahgat Street, was speaking to me, I noticed him suddenly step away to move a chair on the street and clear a parking space. At first, there was no car in sight, but just moments later, a vehicle appeared, turning into the street and*

parking in front of the building. "I hear Mr. X's car before he turns" he notes, "so I know I need to clear out a parking spot for him right away."

This act exemplifies an active process of knowing, due to repetitive observation rather than merely watching—a form of surveillance rooted in practice and proximity.

Jane Jacobs' concept of "eyes on the street"[48] aligns with the bawab's spatial presence. Jacobs advocated for the safety of well-used city streets where people, through their natural activities, maintain a form of collective surveillance. The bawab's chair in front of a building becomes a marker of his presence. His role underscores Jacobs' belief in the importance of trusting what one observes in context, rather than imposing theoretical frameworks that may not apply to the site. This principle is evident in Cairo's streetscapes, where street vendors, *sayess* (parking attendant), *roba bekya* (junkman), and garbage collectors create a dynamic system of informal surveillance and interaction. These individuals form a network that, while seemingly chaotic, represents the 'organized complexity' of the city—neither fully ordered nor purely random.

The bawab's knowledge goes beyond the constraints of the building he guards. His intimate knowledge on the street's rhythms and inhabitants is unique to his own work and relations. In Zamalek, the Chief of Detectives organizes monthly gatherings with the bawabin, particularly during festive occasions. These meetings serve as opportunities to address concerns, report unusual activities, and share insights about street-level dynamics. He therefore becomes a carrier of knowledge, serving not only inhabitants but other actors of the urban realm. During critical moments, such as the Egyptian revolution, his role expanded to include active protection of the building and its residents. One bawab recounts, "The most important part of my job is the security of the residents really, during the revolution, even if this building has a metal gate. I put my bed in front of the door or else I couldn't sleep at night knowing I have this responsibility."[49]

48. BBC, *Citizen Jane: Battle for the City*, directed by Matt Tyrnauer (2016)

49. An interview with Bawab, 16 Champollion rd, downtown, Cairo, November 19th 2024

Here, surveillance transcends observation to become a physical and embodied act of care and responsibility, his body doubles the metal gate.

Despite the bawab's power in managing the microcosm of his street, he remains at the bottom of the social hierarchy. This paradox invites questions about the nature of his influence: what kind of power does he hold, and how is it exercised within the city's broader dynamics? His spatial position—always in the in-between, neither fully private nor fully public—complicates traditional notions of surveillance as detached and hierarchical. Instead, his work demonstrates how surveillance can be deeply embedded in the social and spatial practices of urban life.

If we stick with David Lyon's output of surveillance as data collection, what kind of data does the bawab hold?

The bawab's role is not limited to monitoring traffic or securing the building; he is also a moral arbiter, reflecting the gendered dynamics of Cairo's society. The bawab enforces conservative societal norms, particularly on women, by scrutinizing their behavior, attire, and relationships. Women's comings and goings are often judged against rigid moral expectations, leading to internalized fear of judgment. An example of this would be the 'bawab' reporting to a girl's father at what time she came back home although unsolicited. This moral policing reflects a deeply ingrained patriarchal system that prioritizes collective reputation over individual autonomy. As a vigilant observer, he seamlessly evolves into that of a spatial catalyst, where his deep familiarity with the street allows him to actively shape and adapt urban spaces. This interplay of oversight and intervention underscores his essential role in navigating Cairo's divided urban fabric.

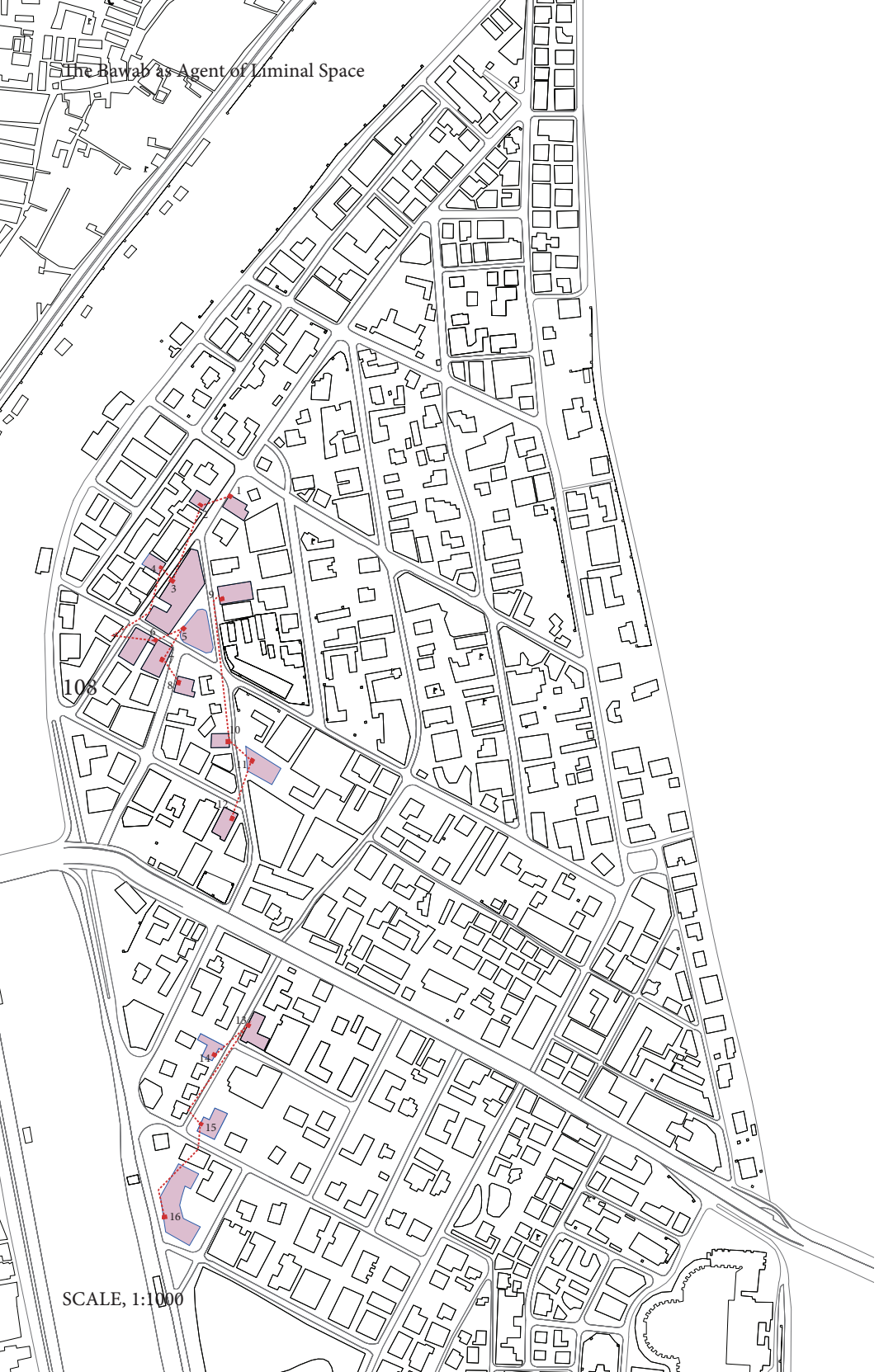


Fig.17. Map of Zamalek: Surveyed rooms and chairs of bawabin

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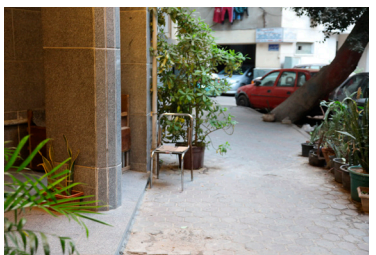
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Spatial Activator

Programming the City

The absence of effective local governance has left Cairo's urban landscape shaped more by informal interventions than by formal planning[50]. Municipal structures, undermined by a lack of democratic processes, operate under a top-down system where governors are appointed by the central government, and district officials serve short, self-serving mandates. Local elections are nonexistent, and with only 12% of public expenditure allocated to local governments—compared to 30-40% in developed nations[51]—Cairo's neighborhoods are left underfunded and poorly maintained. This lack of local governance leaves the people to act directly on their streets, shaping public spaces through bottom-up interventions. Within this context, the bawab emerges as an active agent[52], not only maintaining but actively programming the urban fabric through adaptive and relational practices.

The bawab's contributions go far beyond their traditional role as caretakers or doormen. In a city characterized by rigid hierarchies and fragmented spaces, they act as spatial activators, transforming static urban environments into dynamic, lived spaces. Their work resonates with Michel de Certeau's distinction between strategies and tactics. While formal urban planners impose strategies through fixed layouts, the bawab employs tactical interventions to adapt these spaces to the needs of the community[53]. For instance, they create what Manar Moursi describes as "sidewalk salons" by arranging furniture on the streets, establishing a form of domesticity in the public realm. These elements, though seemingly mundane, are deeply significant, as they belong to the bawab and their communities, asserting their presence and agency in spaces often neglected by formal governance.

The bawab's role extends beyond spatial curation to acts of care that embody both social and environmental responsibilities. They set up water points for drinking and ablution on hot days, arrange carpets for Friday prayers in the street, and even provide food and water for stray animals, particularly cats, which are often stigmatized yet

50. Singerman, Cairo Contested, p. 194.

51. TADAMUN, "*Learning from Cairo: Presentation by TADAMUN: Working Session 4*," YouTube video, 1:06:43, (2013)

52. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1984), xix.

53. Yorgos Lavantsiotis and Katarzyna Pankowska, "PROGRAM{-ing} THE CITY," in *Cairo Desert Cities*, ed. Charlotte Malterre-Barthes et al. (Zurich: ETH Zurich, 2013

remain a persistent feature of Cairo's urban ecology. These acts of maintenance, though unrecognized in formal urban narratives, challenge the boundaries between public and private, functional and symbolic spaces, and contribute to the vitality of the city's neighborhoods.

During the Holy month of Ramadan, the bawab takes on additional responsibilities by organizing Ma'edat Al Rahman initiatives in garages and communal spaces, transforming these areas into sites of sharing. This tradition, rooted in Islamic practices dating back to Ahmed Ibn Tulun in 880 CE and later the Fatimid era, exemplifies the bawab's role in preserving cultural and social rituals within the city. These actions embody a form of programming that reflects Cairo's communal care, creating fluid and inclusive spaces that transcend the rigid boundaries of the city.

The bawab's informal interventions can be seen as a form of "dirty theory,"[54] embracing the messy, unpredictable realities of urban life. Their improvisational practices challenge the authoritarian metaphor of the "chair of power" that dominates Egyptian governance, replacing it with the "mundane chairs," silent witnesses to overlooked but meaningful acts of everyday life. By situating themselves at the intersection of public and private realms, the Bawab make the invisible labor of the city visible, revealing the intricate networks of care, maintenance, and adaptation that sustain Cairo.

Resonating with Mierle Laderman Ukeles' exploration of maintenance as a vital, yet undervalued, form of labor. Like Ukeles' sanitation workers who sustain urban life through often invisible acts of care, the bawab performs essential maintenance that bridges public and private realms. Their everyday tasks—cleaning, organizing, and adapting spaces—mirror Ukeles' emphasis on the relational and transformative potential of maintenance. By making visible the overlooked labor that underpins urban functionality, the bawab, like Ukeles' "maintenance art," challenges hierarchical distinctions between high and low work, highlighting the indispensable role of care in sustaining Cairo's dynamic urban ecosystem.

In a city often described as fragmented and chaotic, the bawab act as vital agents of resilience, transforming neglected spaces into vibrant hubs of activity and care. Their contributions underscore the importance of shifting from static programs to dynamic programming, fostering a more inclusive, adaptable urban environment. Far from being passive custodians, the bawab are active participants in shaping the city, redefining Cairo's urban landscape through their persistence, presence, and labor. In a framework for tactical and adaptive practices, blurring the line between material and immaterial production[55]. The vitality of these practices underscores the need for planning approaches that embrace the unplanned, fostering coexistence and adaptability.[56]

54. Frichot, Hélène. *Dirty Theory: Troubling Architecture. Critical* ed. Baden, Germany: Spurbuchverlag, 2019.

55. Martino Tattara and Pier Vittorio Aureli, "A Simple Heart," in *DOGMA: 11 Projects* (London: Architectural Association, 2013), p.22

56. Amanda Reeser, Lawrence Schafer, and Ashley Schafer, "Re:Programming," *PRAXIS 8 Re:Programming* (2006): 5.

Fig.18. Green spaces? bawab intervention on the sidewalk



Thresholds and Boundaries

Mediating Public and Private Spheres

The spatial positioning of the bawab within Cairo's built environment reveals complex intersections of marginality, visibility, and social stratification. Architectural features such as doorways, service staircases, elevators, rooftops, and garages—often categorized as "servant spaces" in architectural discourse—become active zones. Louis Kahn's division of space into "served" and "servant" categories situates these areas as secondary, meant to support the building's primary functions without being inhabitable. Traditionally allocated for mechanical systems, storage, and brief functional use, these spaces rarely account for human habitation. Yet, in Cairo, the bawab and, in some cases, his family occupy these zones, transforming their intended purpose and reconfiguring their spatial and social significance.

How are the boundaries between private and public space materialized in Cairo? He occupies this boundary—this in-between space. What does it mean to live within this liminal zone? Is visibility balanced between the outside and the inside? Does it extend to observing the lifestyles within?

The bawab's placement within these peripheral areas—whether at the entrance, in the basement, or adjacent to service staircases—serves a dual purpose. It ensures constant surveillance over shared spaces such as entryways and public corridors while simultaneously restricting his access to private interiors. This calculated spatial positioning ties his function to mechanisms of visibility and control: his ability to observe public movement is essential to his role, but his own presence remains discreet and relegated to the periphery of residents' private lives. This asymmetry in visibility reflects and enforces spatial hierarchies within the building, where access to privacy signifies social privilege.

This dual structure of visibility not only determines the bawab's role as an observer but also establishes boundaries on his own visibility and access. Interior visibility, particularly within residential areas,

becomes dense and ambiguous, with unclear lines of sight that reflect broader spatial hierarchies and cultural sensitivities.
This dynamic creates a system of spatial control that mirrors the principles of the panopticon: the bawab's capacity to observe is restricted by limits placed through architectural decisions to his visibility and accessibility. His placement thus becomes a critical element in the building's spatial order, delineating not only who and what is surveilled but also the terms of his own surveillance within the structure.

Fig19. Threshold



Fig.20.Threshold



THE BAWAB AND DOMESTICITY

البواب والحياة داخل البيت











I have three openings—facing the street, the entrance, and the garage—



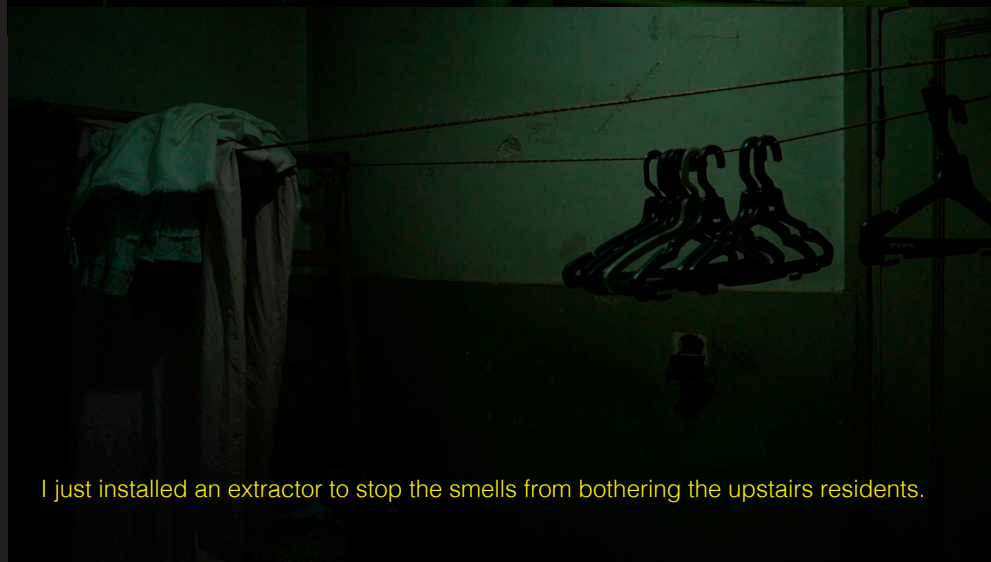
also, accessible for the cats





30 years I've been collecting things to have a room like this now

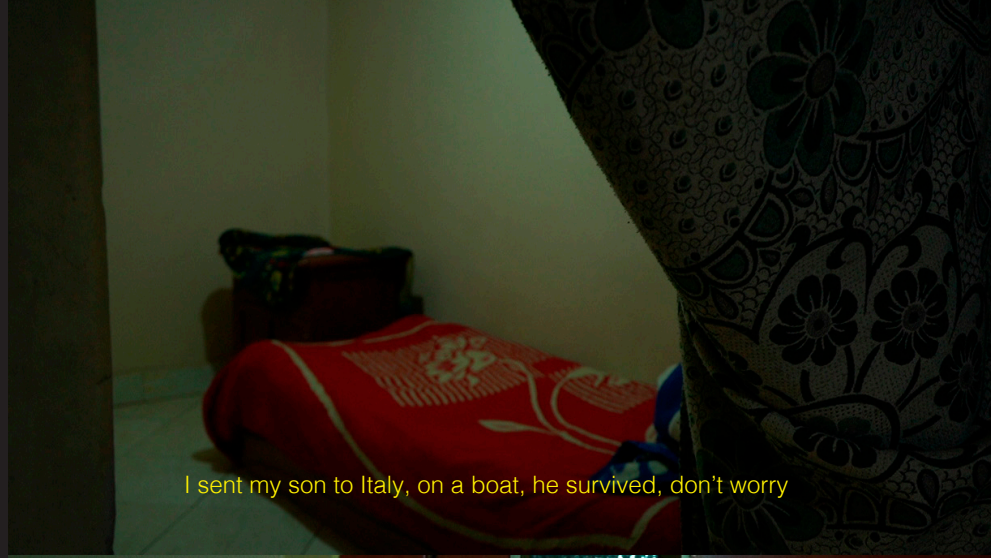




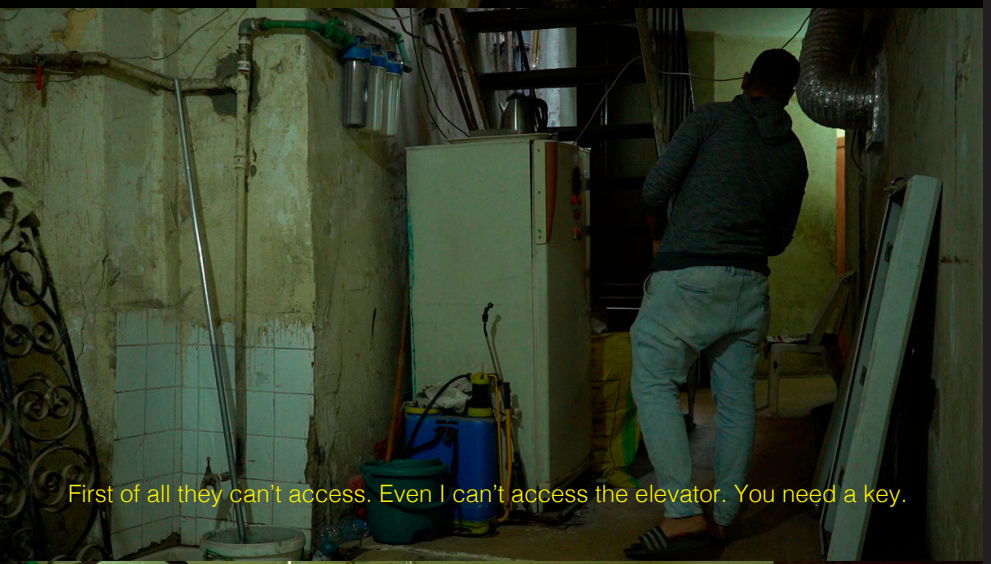
I just installed an extractor to stop the smells from bothering the upstairs residents.



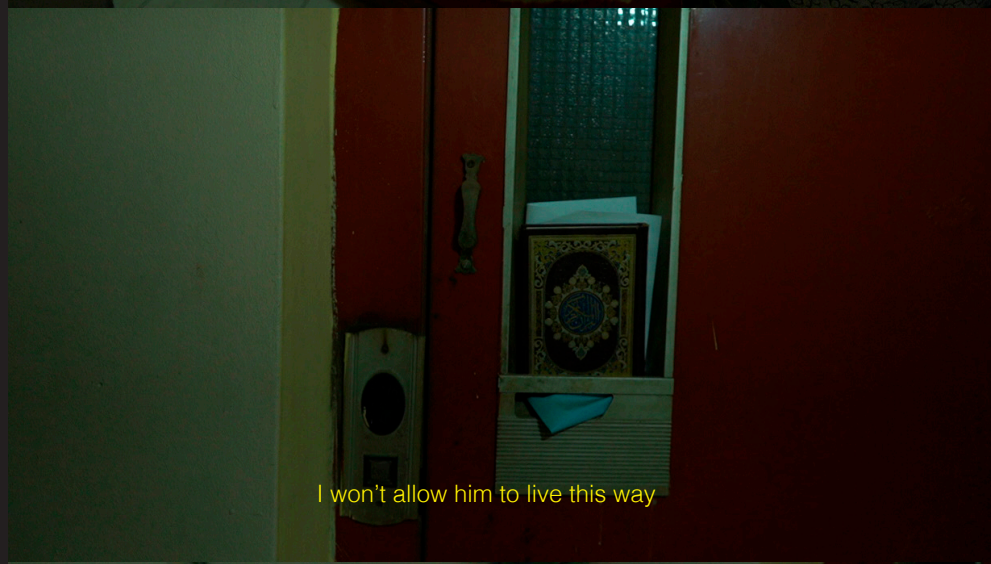
She blames the delivery guys for the broken elevator.



I sent my son to Italy, on a boat, he survived, don't worry



First of all they can't access. Even I can't access the elevator. You need a key.



I won't allow him to live this way

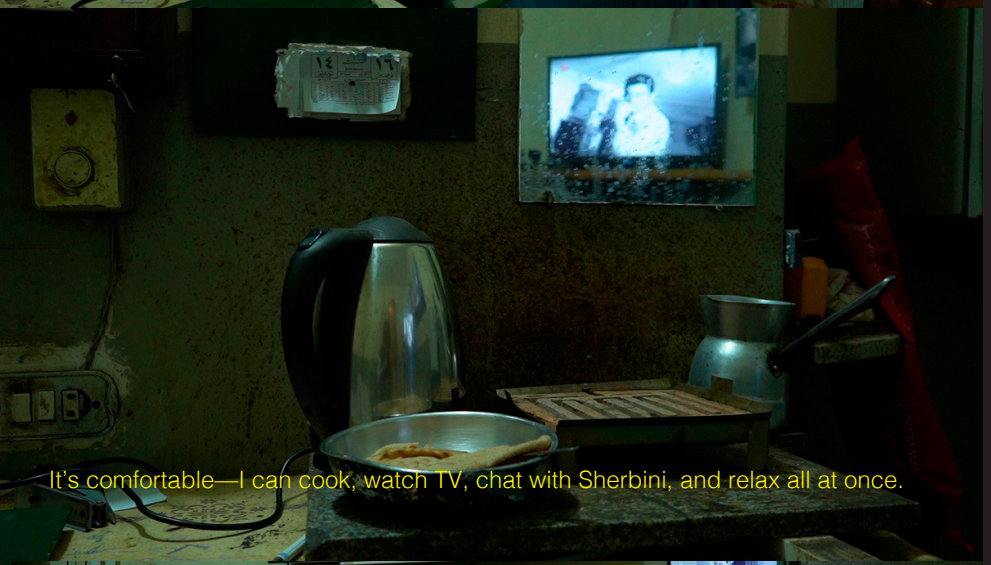


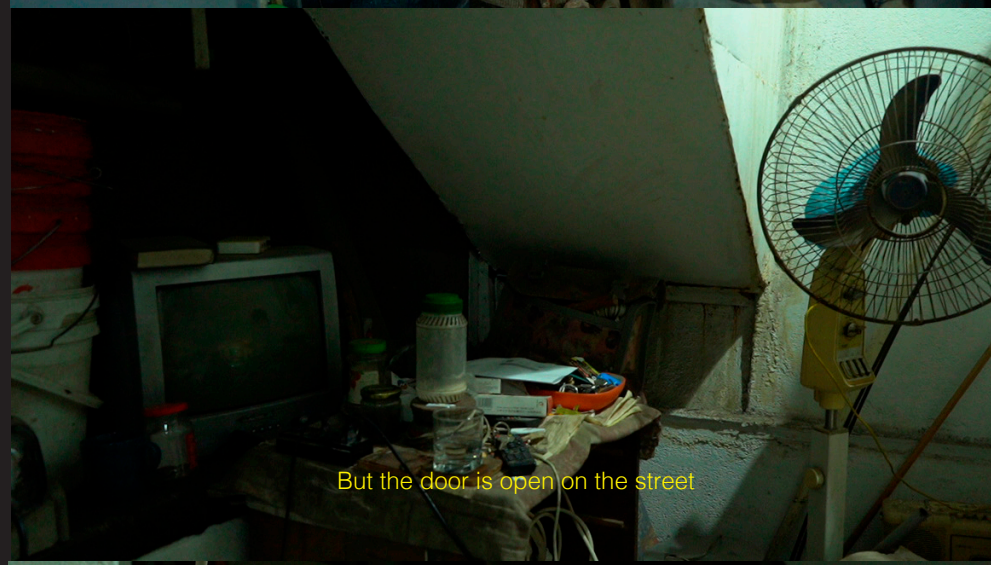
She reminds me she's from the 'royal family', so I should watch my tone



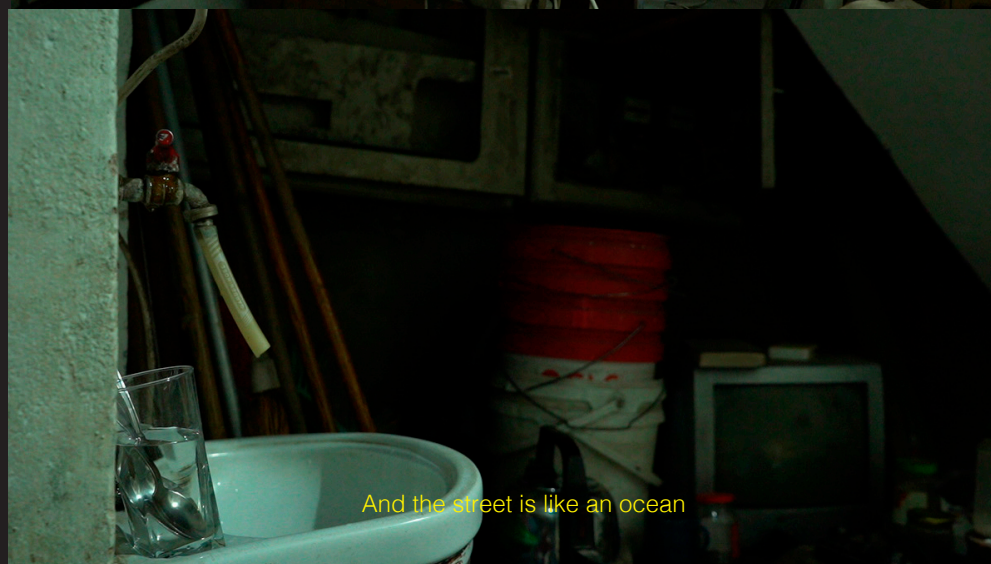



It’s not super spacious


It’s comfortable—I can cook, watch TV, chat with Sherbini, and relax all at once.


But the door is open on the street




And the street is like an ocean

Domesticity as Labor

The Bawab's Room: Storing and Restoring

Hannes Meyer's Co-op Interieur serves as a radical critique of domesticity and ownership, presenting a minimal, utilitarian space that rejects the bourgeois ideal of the home as a marker of individuality and status. In Co-op Interieur, Meyer envisions the room not as a private retreat but as a functional cell, stripped of identity and tailored to the collective needs of an uprooted, metropolitan existence. Drawing from his Marxist perspective, Meyer's design critiques the compartmentalization of domestic labor and the familial structure that reinforces it, proposing instead a communal redistribution of such tasks[57].This concept aligns with a historical lineage of "minimum dwellings" that prioritize utility over comfort, from monastic cells to workers' dormitories. These spaces challenge traditional notions of homeownership and privacy, often positioning the individual as both a user of shared resources and a subject of spatial and institutional control. Meyer's vision is particularly relevant in today's urban housing crises, where micro-apartments and precarious living conditions reflect similar dynamics of economic constraint and systemic inequity.[58]

After conducting an ethnographic survey of bawabin's rooms across different areas of Cairo, a recurring spatial pattern begins to emerge, revealing a hidden architecture intertwined with the city's rhythms. These rooms appear as minimal for survival, serving mostly as utility spaces rather then comfortable homes. Often tucked away in inconspicuous corners of buildings, they remain invisible to most residents, reflecting what Meyer might call the "anonymous but functional lodging"[59] of urban laborers.

Take Rizk, for example, a bawab on Shajaret el-Dur Street in Zamalek. Entering the building, you'd never notice the door leading to his living quarters. It's painted to blend seamlessly with the garage, almost as if to erase its presence—a spatial invisibility paralleling Meyer's critique of bourgeois decorum, which masks the labor supporting it. Behind this door, a dimly lit alley leads to a steep, service metal staircase. Beneath its first landing lies another door, opening

57. Pier Vittorio Aureli and Martino Tattara, "Soft Cell: The Minimum Dwelling," The Architectural Review, July 30, 2018

58. Ibid.

59. Ibid.

into a long, narrow corridor lined with identical rooms for drivers of each household. The repetition of these spaces evokes an institutional logic, similar to the cellular layout of workers' dormitories, where function subsumes individuality. At the corridor's end, a shared kitchenette underscores the communal aspect of this arrangement, constrained by necessity rather than choice.

Rizk introduced me to the bawab next door, Mohamed, whose circumstances offered a stark contrast. Heworked in a building combining offices and residential units. His tasks were rendered strikingly visible: cleaning supplies meticulously arranged at the entrance and car-cleaning tools prominently displayed on the street—a deliberate assertion of his labor's value in a system that often erases it. Instead, he operated from a central desk behind the PO boxes in the lobby, with his room reduced to a bed squeezed into a space that was meant for storage. The absence of windows or functional separation between tasks rendered the space purely utilitarian.

Through them, I continued meeting other bawabs, slowly understanding their social and spatial network. Abbas's room was tucked just beside the building entrance—a compact 4m² space squeezed between the hall and the garage. With a small window perched above a television, his routine was defined by stillness. In contrast, Mahmoud, who lived in even more constrained quarters, had inherited his job after his father's death. The narrowness of his space, with a bed under the staircase and access to the roof, encapsulates the asymmetry of laborer spaces within hierarchical urban architecture.

Salem's makeshift room, crafted by hanging a blanket across the opening of an old elevator shaft, is perhaps the most poignant. Yet, Salem's decision to send his son to Italy reflects a refusal to accept this precarious existence as destiny—a tension between endurance and escape. Not too far, Fathy's basement room doubled as both a living and working space, housing a bed, a stove-top, a CCTV monitor. Cooking on an electric stove-top while watching TV and sitting on his bed with the visibility of CCTV monitor, his space blurred the lines between domesticity and labor, surveillance entered his domestic space.

60. Frichot, Hélène. Dirty Theory: Troubling Architecture. Critical ed. Baden, Germany: Spurbuchverlag, 2019. p.44

Fig.21. Saber's room

> *"I am never in my room, actually, I don't even eat there even if I have a kitchen.. Sometimes I get food from the shop right around the corner or sometimes tenants would bring me some of their food down on a plate…"*

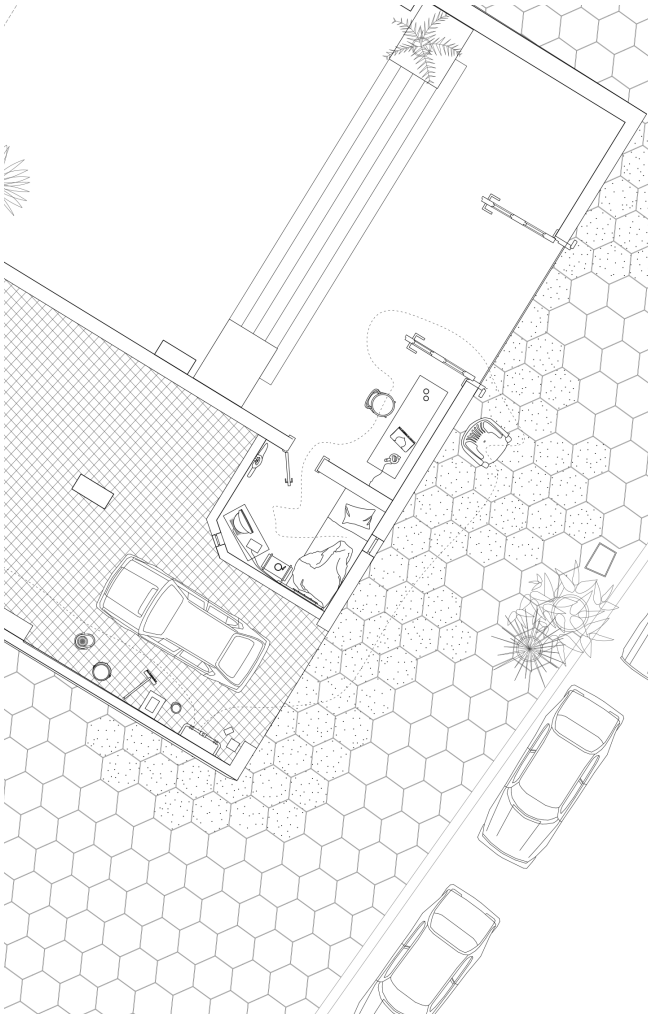
Frichot's critique of architecture's obsession with purity and order can be applied to explore how the bawab embodies the "messiness" of real urban life, which resists simplification.[60] Precarious housing include places that are not designed primarily for housing but are occupied with households of the time of survey. Examples include parts of buildings inhabited by the doorman or the concierge, a shop or garage occupied by a household, cemetery yards inhabited by families, etc. Shanty houses, tents and kiosks used for housing are considered also as precarious housing.





Fig.22. Abbas's room

Fig.23. Plan of Abbas's room



Care as Labor

The Bawab's Role in Class Dynamics and Social Translation

The role of the bawab in Cairo's urban landscape embodies a form of care labor deeply entrenched in class dynamics and societal power structures. Historically positioned as both a visible and invisible figure, the bawab operates within a dual framework of domestic servitude and social translation, constantly exposed to opposite lifestyles. Managing a house with three underutilized living rooms while all aspects of his domestic life are confined to a single, compact space. Their labor reflects broader patterns of exploitation and control in Cairo's stratified urban ecosystem[61]. The bawab's living quarters—typically small, poorly ventilated, and inadequate for habitation—serve as a physical manifestation of their marginalization. These spaces, often relegated to rooftops or cramped rooms in basements, ensure the bawab's constant availability while denying them autonomy. This belittlement enforces a form of control, alienating the bawab from ownership of their labor while ensuring their domesticity remains malleable to residents' ever-changing needs.

61. Mahmoud Hussein, *Class Conflict in Egypt 1945–1970* (London: Monthly Review Press, 1973).

Their work, categorized as informal labor, renders the boundaries of their responsibilities ambiguous. In return, the bawab's oversight of the building's social and spatial dynamics grants them a unique form of power in Cairo's highly communal society, where their visibility of residents' comings and goings becomes a source of influence. However, these spaces often fall prey to privatization, as illustrated in West El Balad, where a rooftop community composed of four families, including the family of the bawab of the building, was evicted to make use of the rooftop for the tenants. The family is forced into an uninhabitable space in the basement as they hold on to the status of the location where they stayed. Saber, the father of the family, has served as the bawab of this building for over 30 years. To retain his job, he was moved to a service space, a cramped area near the building's utility ducts for water and heating. These spaces, which felt like underground trenches, were dimly lit and isolated, buried deep beneath the structure. Saber and his family now live beneath the service stairs, an area once intended for access to the building's apartments and kitchens. Over time, this space be-

came cluttered with junk, cutting off any connection to the rooftop. Though the rooftop has remained empty and unused since their eviction five years ago, Saber chose to endure these uncomfortable living conditions to maintain his position as a bawab.

> *"There is a trend now in downtown; owners want to use the rooftop to make a restaurant or bar like the building next door. They told us that we needed to leave 5 years ago. I couldn't leave my job, I have a family to support, and I have this problem with my eye. Nobody would employ me at this age… so we moved, and ever since, the rooftop is empty… Nothing has been done".*[62]

His role, and the central location in Downtown Cairo, were worth the sacrifice. Despite the lack of formal contracts, Saber relies on an unwritten "contract of religious trust"[63] *waqf ahli* with the building's owner—a fragile but vital source of protection for his family's livelihood. This phenomenon is particularly evident in cases where residents of apartment buildings express discomfort with the socioeconomic diversity within their living spaces, often resulting in the displacement of those living on the rooftop who lack legal protections or formal tenancy agreements. For instance, in the case of Building 594 on Nile Street, the bawab lived with his extended family, comprising four families residing on the rooftop. Following the bawab's passing and the absence of a male heir to take his position, the residents sought to evict the families, asserting that they had no formal rights to remain in the building. These rooftop families, who did not pay rent or hold any legal tenure, resisted eviction attempts. After three years of negotiation, the residents ultimately offered alternative housing arrangements, which led to the families' departure.[64]

In contrast, a different scenario unfolded on Al-Somal Street in Heliopolis. A building vacated due to familial inheritance disputes became entirely abandoned, leaving only the bawab, his family, and his extended relatives on the rooftop. In 2009, the building faced imminent demolition by its owner[65] However, the rooftop residents exhibited remarkable resilience, refusing to leave despite the lack of legal protection. Their steadfast resistance ultimately preserved the building from demolition, showcasing the critical role of these marginalized communities in shaping urban dynamics and protecting vulnerable spaces from erasure.

62. An interview with Saber, Mahmoud Bassioumy Street, Cairo, November 19th 2024.

63. Shawkat, Yahia. Egypt's Housing Crisis. The American University in Cairo Press, 2020. p.177

64. An interview with resident, 594 Nile Street, November 18th 2024.

65. An interview with daughter of bawab, Al-Somal street, August 29th 2024

Fig.24. The Living rooftop

Fig.25. A view of the Palace from the rooftop





These cases underscore the precarious position of rooftop residents in Cairo's urban landscape, emphasizing both their vulnerability and their agency in resisting displacement. These narratives reveal the deep connection between the notion of care and the labor of the bawab, where the right to housing for his family is intrinsically linked to his role and work as a bawab.

The bawab's labor is multifaceted, encompassing physical tasks and social roles. From managing deliveries and facilitating resident interactions to maintaining the building's security, their work underpins the functionality of urban life while remaining undervalued and overlooked. "the bawab does nothing, this is how I feel I just just him sipping tea at the entrance and gossiping with others".[66] The bawab's embeddedness within the domestic sphere extends to intimate labor, blurring professional boundaries. As "shadow families," bawabin facilitate residents' private lives while their own families remain hidden, marginalized, or confined to cramped quarters as shadow family. This dynamic underscores the bawab's simultaneous inclusion within and exclusion from the households they serve.

Although the domestic worker is part of the "economic family," supplying necessary labor to the household, the paradigm of family law does not govern the terms and conditions of domestic work.[67]

Even when acknowledged, their work remains categorized under informal labor, where roles and responsibilities are often ambiguous and fluid. This aligns with Deleuze and Guattari's conception of the 'nomad,' who operates not as a 'visible participant' or a formal economic agent but remains intrinsically embedded in the system's functionality.[68]

Beyond physical labor, the bawab wields significant social power through informal networks and the exchange of information. Phrases like "*El bawab hay'oul eh*" ("What will the bawab say?") reflect the bawab's role as a gatekeeper of social norms and behaviors and leads the family to anticipate the 'Bawab's' reaction to their behaviors. This power stems from their omnipresent surveillance, which grants them access to private and communal interactions. In conservative, communal societies, this visibility solidifies the bawab's position as a mediator of trust and a custodian of property. Moreover, the bawab's network within their own class facilitates employment opportunities and sustains their community. Their interactions with other bawabin create an informal economic sector that operates parallel to formal labor markets, reinforcing class solidarity while navigating Cairo's rigid socio-economic hierarchies.[69]

As Cairo's urban fabric transforms to suburban expansions in the desert[70], the bawab's role faces decline, particularly in gated communities where advanced security systems and professionalized staff reduce their practical relevance. However, this marginalization does not erase their symbolic presence. The bawab remains a figure through which class dynamics, social translation, and labor relations are negotiated. Their persistence in a diminished capacity highlights Cairo's enduring inequalities and the evolving intersections of space, labor, and identity. The economy in gated communities often thrives on roles that are unnecessary or symbolic, reflecting a culture of excess rather than practicality. For example, employing someone to press an elevator button—an action easily performed by oneself—symbolizes a delegation of trivial tasks as a marker of wealth and status. Similarly, while these communities are equipped with advanced security systems, guards, and cameras, the role of the bawab is largely redundant compared to its traditional function of serving multiple households in a single building.

In this context, the bawab's role shifts from a practical necessity to a symbolic presence, offering residents a sense of comfort and status. Their presence underscores the privilege of having the option to delegate even the simplest tasks, highlighting the homeowner's affluence and their ability to command assistance for actions that require no external help. This transformation reflects a deeper cultural hierarchy, where the bawab represents not just labor but also the social stratification embedded in Cairo's urban landscape.

66. An interview with resident Bahgat Ali street, November 18th 2024

67. Shawkat, Yahia. Egypt's Housing Crisis. The American University in Cairo Press, 2020. p.179

68. Deleuze and Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus: *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), p.44

69. Mahmoud Hussein, *Class Conflict in Egypt 1945–1970* (London: Monthly Review Press, 1973).

70. *Cairo Desert Cities,* ed. Charlotte Malterre-Barthes et al. (Zurich: ETH Zurich, 2013) p.25



Fig.26. Rooftop Makeshifts

Fig.27. Laudry arragement on the rooftop



Fig.28. Bawab's bedroom

Fig.29. Bawab's bedroom





Space multipliers[71], operation of an atom

Choreography towards Embodiment of Inclusive Spatial Practice

71. Keller Easterling defines a 'multiplier' as an element within a system that amplifies its effects or influence, often through iterative or networked interactions

72. Keller Easterling, Extrastatecraft: *The Power of Infrastructure Space* (London: Verso, 2014) p.16

73. An interview with Fathy, Zamalek, January 5th 2025

In Cairo's urban fabric, the figure of the bawab functions as a profound spatial multiplier[72], an "active form" that embodies the infrastructural software shaping cities. The bawab's role surpasses the mere presence of residents or their absence; they remain embedded in the life of the building, ensuring its operation as an atomized unit within the more extensive urban choreography. Much like the elevator transforms vertical urban morphology or the car reshapes highways, the bawab transforms domestic and communal spaces through their constant, though often overlooked, actions. Their labor—facilitating deliveries, managing security, and maintaining the building's rhythms—extends beyond individual households, acting as a connective tissue that enables the urban ecosystem to function cohesively.

The bawab's tasks may appear mundane, even invisible, yet their repetition in countless buildings across Cairo generates a compounded spatial effect. Like the ubiquitous presence of radios in homes, these tasks may seem inconsequential but are vital to the infrastructure of everyday life. They transform static spaces into dynamic environments, adjusting to the changing needs of residents and embodying an inclusive spatial practice. In their omnipresence and adaptability, bawabin exemplify the multiplier effect: they maintain the functionality of the built environment while embodying Cairo's layered socio-spatial dynamics. Their existence highlights the intersection of labor, infrastructure, and spatial choreography, revealing the hidden mechanisms that sustain the city's intricate operations.

Each building in the area is distinctly associated with its bawab, so much so that the bawab's name often becomes synonymous with the building itself.[73] For instance, a particular building might be referred to as "Fathy's building," highlighting the bawab's indispensable role in shaping not just the day-to-day operations of the building but also its social identity. This deep association suggests that each building is essentially sustained by the bawab's labor and presence.

If we extend this logic, it becomes evident that the bawab's role is not merely supportive but foundational to the life of the building. Therefore, the evolution of the built environment becomes inseparably linked to the evolution of the bawab's role. As Cairo's architectural and urban landscapes transform, the work and status of the bawab adapt in parallel. This interdependency reveals how urban development and the bawab's role are co-constitutive, shaping one another over time.

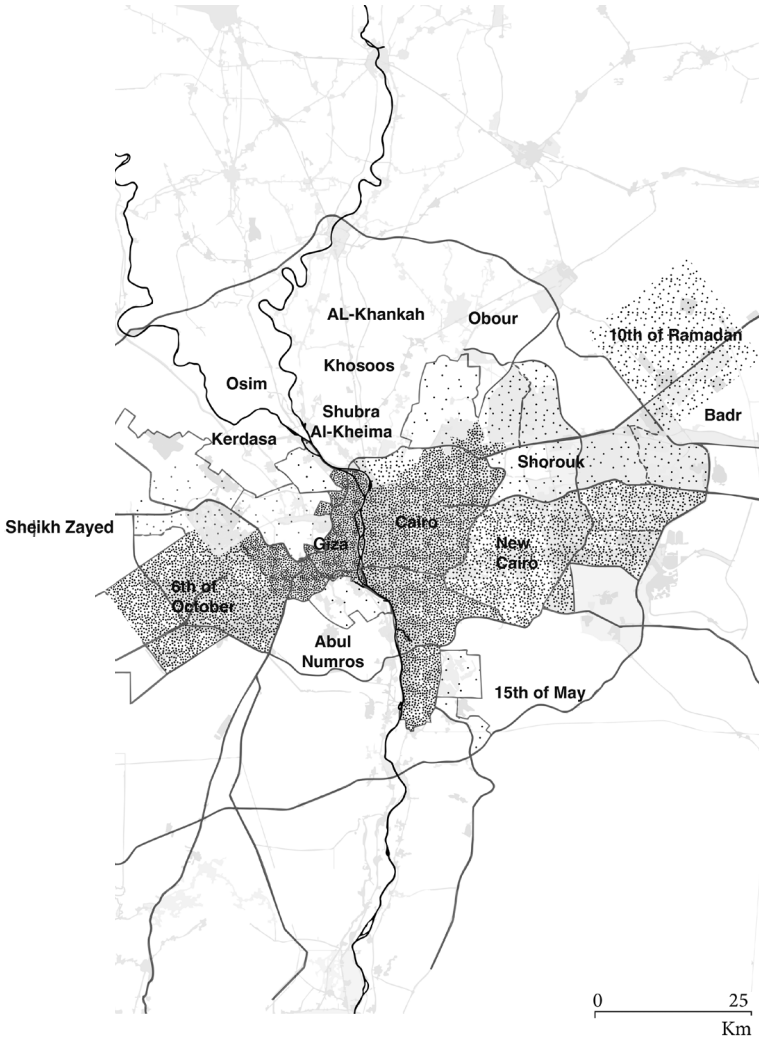


Fig.30. Map of Bawab density per district





This research examines the figure of the bawab as an entry point through which to explore Cairo's socio-spatial complexities, revealing interconnected layers of urban inequality and resilience across multiple scales. Through an ethnographic and analytical lens, the thesis has demonstrated that the bawab—far from being a mere doorkeeper—is a pivotal agent within the intricate choreography of Cairo's urban ecosystem. His presence mediates between spatial and social thresholds, embodying the contradictions and possibilities of life in a fragmented and stratified metropolis.[74]

The Findings: Scales of Gatekeeping and Labor

At the city scale, the bawab emerges as an urban archetype, deeply entrenched in Cairo's historical and socio-political evolution. The transition from the hara to the 'imara to gated enclaves like Katameya underscores the role of gatekeeping as a mechanism of control and exclusion, reinforcing socio-economic divides.[75] The bawab's evolution mirrors the state's shifting governance strategies, from communal mediators to symbols of neoliberal stratification. This trajectory reveals the persistent tension between the "formal" and "informal," where labor and survival are negotiated through invisible yet indispensable infrastructures.

At the neighborhood scale, the bawab occupies a liminal position as both observer and participant. Borrowing from Michel Foucault's panopticon and Jane Jacobs' "Eyes on the street," the bawab's surveillance embodies a relational and embodied practice. His presence is both a means of social control and a facilitator of informal urban governance. This dynamic positions him as an "activator of space," whose labor extends beyond functional tasks to acts of care and cultural continuity, such as facilitating community rituals and maintaining street-level ecology.

74. Diane Singerman, Cairo Contested, (The American University in Cairo Press, 2011), p. 147

75. David Sims, Understanding Cairo, (The American University in Cairo Press, 2012) p.45

At the domestic scale, the bawab's labor underscores the entanglement of visibility, marginalization, and care. The bawab's room—a precarious and often invisible space—is both a site of survival and a microcosm of Cairo's socio-spatial hierarchies. Drawing from Keller Easterling's concept of "space multipliers," the bawab's work transforms these peripheral spaces into critical nodes of urban life, blurring the boundaries between public and private, labor and life. His presence as a "domestic nomad," to echo Deleuze and Guattari, challenges conventional notions of belonging and agency in the built environment.

Toward an Inclusive Urbanism: Bridging the Peripheral

The bawab, whose life is centered around servicing others, opened his space for me to explore, a gesture that felt both generous and deeply ironic. Yet, perhaps that discomfort holds meaning. What if the act of surveying these rooms, of tracing their dimensions and imagining their possibilities, is itself an attempt to subvert that dynamic? What if I'm trying to be in service of the bawab, but in a different way—not through money, food, or the transactional gestures he's accustomed to, but through the tools of spatial design? To ask not how his presence supports the architecture of others, but how architecture might instead support him. The bawab's role as both a product and a producer of Cairo's urban fabric opens a critical dialogue about the politics of care and the possibilities of inclusive design. His persistent marginality reflects the failures of architectural and urban planning practices that prioritize exclusionary hierarchies over collective agency. Yet, his adaptability and embeddedness reveal pathways for reimagining these practices.

This paper proposes a reconfiguration of the practice of relational design—one that centers the voices and labor of those who sustain urban ecosystems from the ground up. By engaging the bawabin as co-producers of space, architects and planners might envision

new typologies of housing, thresholds, and public spaces that challenge the rigid dichotomies of formal and informal, elite and marginalized. The bawab's spatial multiplicity also serves as an opening for future research. How might architectural practices harness the bawab's relational networks to create inclusive urban infrastructures? Could the bawab's presence inspire new models of shared agency in the governance of public and private spaces? These questions invite architects and urbanists to think beyond static programs toward dynamic, adaptive systems that reflect the complexities of life in the contemporary city.[76]

Could architecture reconfigure the bawab's room not as an afterthought of utility but as an integral, dignified living space? Could urban planning engage bawabin in shaping their own environments, creating networks of shared infrastructure that support their labor and lives without relegating them to invisibility? Could public spaces, often fragmented by surveillance and exclusivity, be reconceived as platforms for interaction and mutual care? It asks not only how we design for those on the margins but how we design with them—how we might integrate their lived realities and expertise into the production of space.

By moving from the vast city scale to the small, punctual scale of the bawab's chair, this research highlights how even the simplest, most immediate forms of architecture—such as a chair—are deeply urban. The chair, as a multiplied phenomenon across Cairo, represents a direct and functional interaction with space. It is both a tool of use and a marker of presence, embodying a poetic quality that persists even within the constraints of mass production. This shift in scale emphasizes the interconnectedness of the everyday and the urban, showing how small, human-centered elements can reveal the larger dynamics of the city.

76. *Cairo Desert Cities,* ed. Charlotte Malterre-Barthes et al. (Zurich: ETH Zurich, 2013) p.26

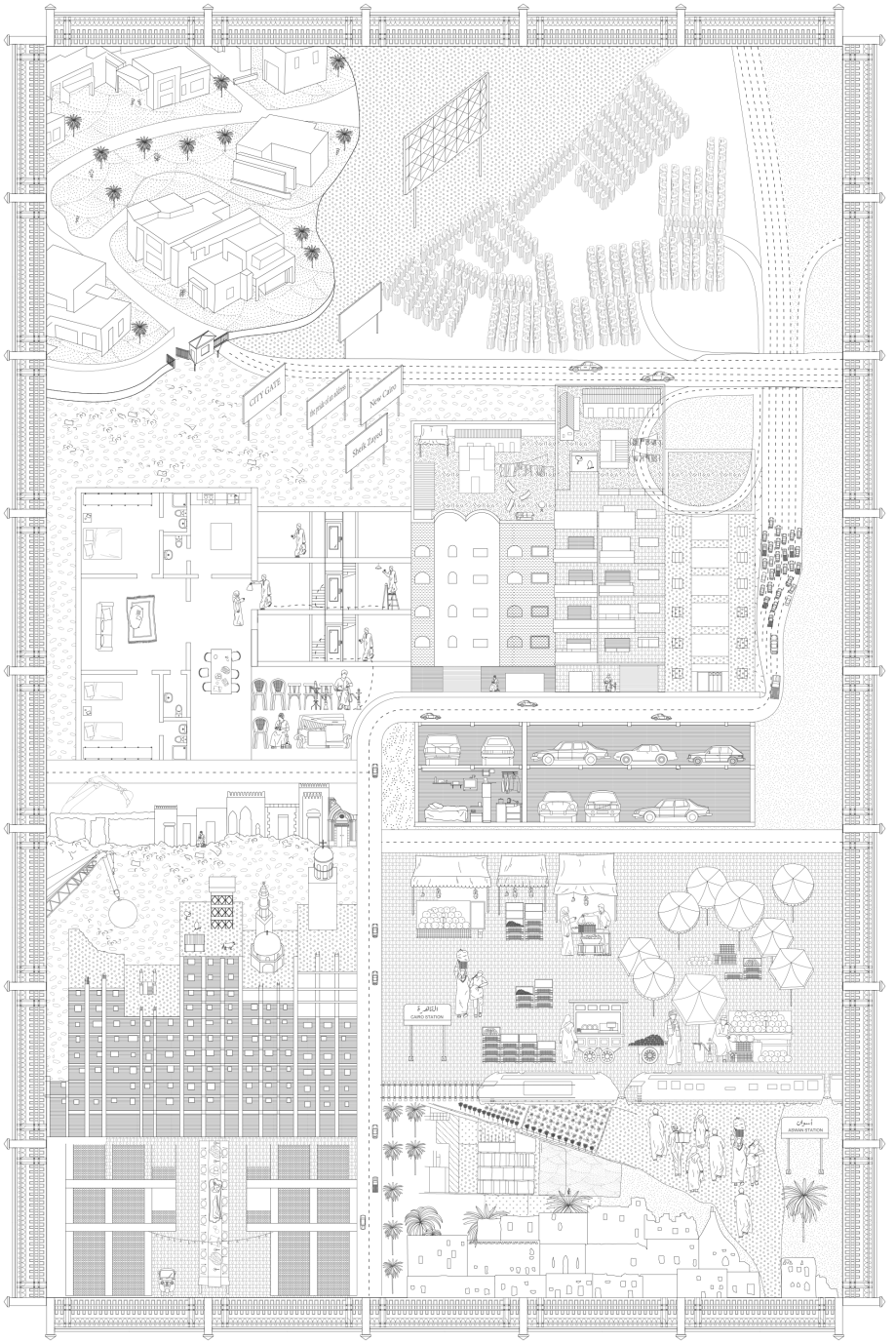


Fig.31. Where should we intervene?

MA: Can you share a bit about your background and how you came to work as a bawab? Is your family here or elsewhere?

RA: I'm Rizk Ahmed, from Luxor Governorate, Esna locality. An Pure Upper Egyptian. I came in 2007 and have been working in Zamalek ever since. I'm in charge of the building as a bawab—handling security, elevators, maintenance, and garage work. My family is in Upper Egypt, my wife and kids. I have a girl and two boys. I came because there wasn't any source of livelihood. Cairo is everything. I don't have land in Upper Egypt. Those who have land stay, and those who don't come to Cairo. When it comes to work, you come to Cairo: to work in a café, garage, as a bawab—whatever. My relative brought me here.

MA: What do you think of bawab representation in Egyptian cinema?

RA: Normal, there is no humiliation in this. It's livelihood (eating bread), like any other job. Beih el Bawab—that's funny, Ahmed Zaki's movie.

MA: How do you view your role in the building and the neighborhood?

RA: I'm a bawab, through and through. I do many things. Whatever the residents ask—fetch something, pay bills, run errands, provide security. My eyes are on the street and the building, on the people passing by, strangers and residents alike.

MA: In what ways do you mediate between residents and outsiders?

RA: Take Engineer Karim, for instance. I consider him like a brother. If he needs anything, if there's a visitor, I welcome them and take them upstairs. The longer you stay in this job, the more people consider you one of them. For example, delivery workers aren't allowed to take the elevator, but I can. There's safety—they trust me and know who Rizk is: he's honest. Honesty is the most important thing in any job. That's what makes the work good. The most important thing is guarding the place. Security is my priority. I need to know who comes in and who goes out.

MA: How would you describe your relationship with the residents and the responsibilities you have toward them?

RA: During the revolution, I slept in the street for two months. It was chaos, and people were scared. You see all these cars? I'm responsible for them. There's no such thing as sleep. I even brought my friend to help in case I needed to close my eyes for two hours. The most important part of my job is the residents' security. Even if the building has a metal gate, I put my bed in front of the door. I couldn't sleep for a month knowing I had this responsibility.

MA: What do you keep from your life in Upper Egypt?

RA: The galabeya! My Upper Egyptian galabeya. I've been in Cairo for 25 years, and I've never stopped wearing it.

MA: Have you been involved in any community-building initiatives, like mercy tables or charity events?

RA: Before the revolution, for sure. We prepared a Ma'edet Rahman (charity table) for more than 200 people—in the building's garage, sometimes even for 300 people. The residents would cook upstairs. We'd start preparing for iftar at 9 a.m. and begin setting up around 3 p.m.

MA: What do you think of public spaces? How do you use them, and how can they become more inclusive?

RA: I'm always working, so I don't really have time for that. When I come back from my vacation in Upper Egypt, I just stay at work. Zamalek is nice—it's calm and elegant. The other bawabin are always in the street; we're always together. I'm not sitting alone, after all.

م.أ: ممكن تحكيلي عن أصلك وإزاي وصلت لمهنة البواب؟ عيلتك هنا ولا فين؟

ر.أ: رزق أحمد، من محافظة الأقصر، مركز إسنا. صعيدي يعني. جيت سنة 2007 وبشتغل في الزمالك. ماسك العمارة الـ30 كبواب، يعني حراسة، أسانسيرات، صيانة، شغل في الجراج. عيلتي في الصعيد، مراتي وأولادي هناك. عندي بنت وولدين. جيت لأن مكنش فيه مصدر رزق. القاهرة هي كل حاجة. أنا مليش أرض في الصعيد. اللي عنده أرض بيقعد واللي معندوش بييجي القاهرة. لما تيجي للشغل، القاهرة هي كل حاجة. تشتغل في كافيه، جراج، بواب، أي حاجة. قريبي جابني، كنت محتاج أجي. هو اللي قالي أجي هنا.

م.أ: إيه رأيك عن تمثيل البواب في السينما المصرية؟

ر.أ: عادي، مفيش كشف ولا عيب يعني. ده أكل عيش، زي أي شغلانة. "بيه البواب" هاهاها، بتاع أحمد زكي.

م.أ: إيه دورك في المبنى وفي المنطقة؟

ر.أ: أنا بواب من الآخر يعني. بعمل كذا حاجة. اللي يطلبه السكان. أجيب حاجات، أدفع فواتير، مشاوير، حراسة... عيني على الشارع وعلى المبنى. وعلى الناس اللي بتعدي، الغريب والسكان.

م.أ: إزاي بتخلق تواصل بين الناس برا وجوا؟

ر.أ: مثلاً المهندس كريم، بعتبره أخويا. لو محتاج أي حاجة، لو عاوز يطلب حاجة، ضيف جاي أستقبله وأطلعه. كل ما المدة تزيد في الشغل كل ما الناس بتعتبرك منهم. يعني مثلاً الدليفري ممنوع يطلع الأسانسير، بس أنا ممكن أطلع عادي. في أمان، عارفين رزق ده وضعه إيه، أمين. أي حد في أي شغل أهم حاجة

الأمانة. الأمانة تخلي الشغل كويس. أهم حاجة هي حراسة المكان. لازم أعرف مين داخل ومين طالع.

م.أ: إيه علاقتك مع المُلَّاك، وإزاي توصف التبادل بينكم؟

ر.أ: في الثورة كنت بايت شهرين في الشارع. كان في فوضى، الناس كانت خايفة. شايف كل العربيات دي؟ أنا مسؤول عنها. مفيش حاجة اسمها نوم. حتى جبت صاحبي، لو عاوز أقفل عيني ساعتين مثلاً. أهم حاجة في شغلانتي هي أمان السكان. حتى لو الباب حديد، كنت حاطط السرير قدام الباب. مش عارف أنام لمدة شهر بسبب إني عارف إن عندي المسؤولية دي.

م.أ: إيه اللي موجود من حياتك في الصعيد؟

ر.أ: الجلابية! الجلابية الصعيدي. أنا بقالي 25 سنة هنا في القاهرة وماقلعتهاش.

م.أ: هل شاركت في أي مبادرات مجتمعية زي موائد الرحمن أو المناسبات؟

ر.أ: قبل الثورة أكيد. تقديم مائدة الرحمن لأكتر من 200 نفر. في جراج العمارة، أو ممكن 300 نفر. السكان كانوا بيطبخوا فوق. نبدأ تجهيز الفطار من 9 الصبح. نبتدي التحضير من العصر مثلاً.

م.أ: إيه رأيك في الأماكن العامة؟ إزاي بتستعملها، وإزاي ممكن تبقى شاملة أكتر؟

ر.أ: أنا دايمًا في الشغل، معنديش وقت أروح حتة. طالما جيت إجازة من الصعيد، هفضل في الشغل. الزمالك حلوة. راقية. كل البوابين دايمًا مع بعض في الشارع. مش هنقعد لوحدنا بردو.

MA: Can you describe your relationship with the bawab of your building?

SS: He's very important in my life. I'm kind of dependent on him—he knows everything about my life, my errands, my schedules. We're constantly in contact throughout the day.

MA: How important do you think the role of the bawab is in maintaining the building and its daily life?

SS: He's aware of who's going where and who's coming from where. He enters my apartment if someone needs to fix something to stay with them. He carries things for me and moves heavy items.

MA: Do you feel the bawab contributes to your sense of security in the building? If so, how?

SS: Yes, he's a form of symbolic security. Just knowing he's downstairs makes me feel safe.

MA: What tasks do you most rely on the bawab for, and how would things be different without them?

SS: I depend on him when the kids go down to school, for instance, to take the bus. As I mentioned earlier, I also rely on him for maintenance and errands.

MA: How do you view the bawab's presence in terms of their connection to the street and neighborhood dynamics?

SS: I think everybody knows him. I know that the building I live in is recognized in the neighborhood by his name. People refer to this building by his name.

MA: Do you feel the bawab has any influence on how you interact with the neighborhood or other residents?

SS: I mean, for events, an issue, or a celebration, he lets us know about it. For instance, when someone gives birth, dies, or gets married. He gets a salary from the building owner, but each resident also gives him a monthly salary. We also contribute for things like his kids' schooling or medical purposes.

MA: Have you ever experienced a situation where the bawab mediated a conflict or helped facilitate something within the community? Can you share it?

SS: We actually have an issue now. There's a boat in front of us that makes a lot of noise. He took charge of this for us—he's gone to speak to the other buildings to gather their complaints as well.

MA: In your opinion, how does the bawab fit into the social and cultural fabric of Cairo?

SS: Even if our bawab can't read or write, he's educating his children. I think I didn't fully understand the question, but I'd say he's a symbol of Egyptian domestic life.

MA: Do you think the role of the bawab has changed over the years? How has it adapted to modern life in Cairo?

SS: The terminology has changed. We don't really say "bawab" anymore—it's seen as a bit negative. For his kids, it can be pejorative to say they're the children of a bawab. We say "7aress," which translates to security.

MA: What do you think of the spaces the bawabin occupy in the building, such as their rooms or their chair in front of the entrance?

SS: We try to make it better. I mean, we got him an AC, a heater, and clothes. It's not luxury, but he has everything he needs. If there's something else, we bring it to him.

ازاي توصف علاقتك مع البواب في العمارة؟:MA

هو شخص مهم جدًا في حياتي. أنا معتمد :SS
عليه إلى حد كبير، هو عارف كل حاجة عن حياتي،
مشاويري، وجدولي. على تواصل مستمر معاه
.طول اليوم

في رأيك، قد ايه دور البواب مهم في الحفاظ على العمارة والحياة :MA
اليومية فيها؟

هو عارف مين رايح فين ومين جاي منين. :SS
بيدخل شقتي لو في حد بيصلح حاجة علشان
يكون موجود معاهم. بيشيل حاجات ليّ، وبينقل
.الحاجات الثقيلة

هل بتحس إن البواب بيساهم في إحساسك بالأمان في العمارة؟ ولو :MA
آه، ازاي؟

آه، هو شكل رمزي للأمان. مجرد إنه موجود :SS
.تحت بيخليني أحس بالأمان

إيه الحاجات اللي بتعتمد على البواب فيها؟ وتفتكر الحياة كانت :MA
هتبقى ازاي لو مش موجود؟

باعتمد عليه لما ولادي ينزلوا المدرسة مثلًا :SS
.ياخدوا الباص. زي ما قلت، في الصيانة والمشاوير

بتشوف وجود البواب إزاي في علاقته بالشارع والحياة في المنطقة؟ :MA

أظن إن الكل عارفه. العمارة اللي ساكن فيها :SS
معروفة باسمه في المنطقة. الناس بيشيروا
.للعمارة باسمه

هل بتحس إن البواب ليه تأثير على طريقتك في التعامل مع المنطقة :MA
أو السكان التانيين؟

يعني، في المناسبات أو المشاكل أو :SS
الاحتفالات، هو بيبلغنا بيها. زي لما حد يخلف، أو
يموت، أو يتجوز. بياخد مرتب من صاحب العمارة،
وكل ساكن كمان بيديله مرتب شهري. بنساعده
كمان في حاجات زي تعليم أولاده أو الأمور
.الصحية

عمرك واجهت موقف البواب فيه ساعد في حل نزاع أو سهل حاجة :MA
في المجتمع؟ ممكن تحكي عنها؟

إحنا عندنا مشكلة دلوقتي. في مركب قدامنا :SS
بتعمل دوشة كبيرة. هو اللي اتولى الموضوع ده،
وراح يكلم باقي العمارات علشان يجمع شكاويهم
.كمان

في رأيك، البواب بيمثل إيه في النسيج الاجتماعي والثقافي للقاهرة؟ :MA

حتى لو البواب بتاعنا مش بيعرف يقرأ أو :SS
يكتب، هو بيعلم أولاده. مش عارف إذا كنت
فهمت السؤال تمام، بس أظن إنه رمز للحياة
.المنزلية المصرية

هل شايف إن دور البواب اتغير على مدار السنين؟ إزاي اتكيف مع :MA
الحياة الحديثة في القاهرة؟

الاسم تغير. ما بقيناش نقول بواب، الكلمة :SS
بقت شوية سلبية. بالنسبة لأولاده، ممكن يكون
مزعج إنهم يتقال عليهم ولاد البواب. بنقول
.”حارس“ بمعنى الأمن

إيه رأيك في المساحات اللي بيشغلها البوابين في العمارة، زي أوضهم :MA
أو كرسيهم قدام المدخل؟

إيه رأيك في المساحات اللي بيشغلها البوابين :MA
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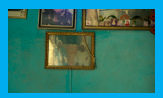
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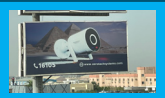
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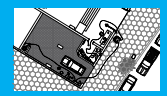
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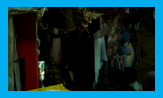
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