



De-territorialisation in Egypt's Desert Cities: The Case of Sixth of October City

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Abstract

This article examines the application of ideas around the 'de-territorialisation' of cities in the global South to new desert cities surrounding Cairo, Egypt. It also responds to the call for 'engaged theory-making' by working with a local community development organisation on a case study of Sixth of October City (SOC), a new city in Cairo's desert hinterland. Drawing on interview data, the article argues that a certain form of Western-inspired suburbanism has come to characterise Egyptian cities, stemming from the need to recirculate capital outside the existing cities. I propose three ways in which these desert suburbs are being de-territorialised. First, I argue that governance in the new cities is more focused on territorial transformation than on management of populations, and that this has resulted in what I describe as planned informality. Second, I show that housing in the new cities has become so financialised that even social (purportedly subsidised) housing has been integrated into circuits of capital. Finally, I demonstrate that there is a persistent form of inequality in basic services and infrastructure, and that the way the state governs the system of service provision has made it impossible for residents to develop alternative modes of access, resulting in an end to people's ability to act as infrastructure.

Keywords: de-territorialisation, Egypt, infrastructure, subsidised housing

Résumé

Cet article examine la mise en œuvre d'idées ayant trait à la « déterritorialisation » des villes du Sud global dans les nouvelles agglomérations urbaines du désert entourant le Caire, en Égypte. Il répond également à l'appel à une « élaboration théorique engagée » en collaborant avec une organisation de développement communautaire locale sur une étude de cas de Sixth of October City (SOC), une nouvelle cité dans l'arrière-pays désertique du Caire. S'appuyant sur des données d'entretiens, l'article soutient qu'une certaine

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forme de suburbain d'inspiration occidentale en est venue à caractériser les villes égyptiennes, caractérisation qui découle de la nécessité de faire recirculer le capital en dehors des villes existantes. Je propose trois manières de déterritorialiser ces banlieues désertiques. Premièrement, je soutiens que, dans les nouvelles cités, la gouvernance est plus axée sur la transformation territoriale que sur la gestion des populations, et que cela a abouti à ce que je qualifie d'informalité planifiée. Deuxièmement, je montre que, dans les villes nouvelles, le logement est devenu tellement financiarisé que même le logement social (soi-disant subventionné) a été intégré dans les circuits du capital. Enfin, je démontre qu'il existe une forme persistante d'inégalité dans les services et les infrastructures de base, et que la manière dont l'État régit le système de prestation de services empêche les résidents de développer des modes d'accès alternatifs, ce qui a mis fin à la capacité des personnes servir d'infrastructure.

Mots-clés : dé-territorialisation, Égypte, infrastructures, logement social

Introduction

For many working in urban studies in the so-called global South, it would be difficult not to notice how the influence of real-estate capital has been substantially altering significant portions of the urban landscape. Real-estate speculation has often relied on erasing cities' unique architectural characteristics and reproducing them in the image of Western cities (Simone 2020).

This trend has been quite evident in Cairo for decades, as large historical settlements are labelled 'informal' and then evicted and replaced with shopping malls (Abaza 2001), and as gated communities sprout up with Western names such as Hyde Park and Beverly Hills. The juxtaposition of luxurious gated communities against Cairo's informal areas is one of the city's most striking features. Furthermore, the spatialisation of social difference and inequality is one of the most dominant characteristics of the Greater Cairo Region (GCR) (TADAMUN 2017).

The potential spoils of real-estate speculation and the transformation of urban territory have led to seemingly unlimited urban expansion, which has extended far into the hinterlands of existing cities. Simone (2020), speaking of the agricultural hinterlands of Kinshasa and Addis Ababa, describes such extended urban regions as a 'hodgepodge of makeshift, hurriedly constructed commercial centres; affordable housing for an emerging middle class; farmland; rough-hewn, autoconstructed provisional shelters; leisure parks; waste dumps; and factories'. He has labelled this type of unlimited urban expansion the 'deterritorialisation of southern cities', while he terms efforts by communities to eke out a living and make these cities habitable by manoeuvring the patterns of urbanisation as the 'reterritorialisation' of these cities.

This study is concerned not with the 'hodgepodge' urbanism of many agricultural hinterlands, but with the carefully planned, state-led urbanisation of Cairo's desert hinterlands. These cities – or 'new urban communities' as termed by the Egyptian state – have been built with the purpose of avoiding (urban) mistakes of the past. With an initial interest in exploring the extent to which the dynamics of spatial inequality in the GCR are replicated in its desert hinterland cities, this research ended up coming across a web of urban relationships that defied simple notions of spatial inequality, and instead shed light on how Egyptian urbanism is being de-territorialised through these new cities.

The study focuses on Sixth of October City (SOC) a 'new urban community' established by presidential decree in 1979 as part of a first generation of desert cities created to fulfill Sadat's vision of exiting the valley and populating Egypt's vast swathes of unused desert lands. Given SOC's construction on vacant desert land, this study examines the dynamics of de- and re-territorialisation within the city. One of the main *raison d'être* of the new cities is to avoid certain pitfalls of the GCR – in particular, informality, ad hoc urban governance and pervasive inequality. This research argues that while these phenomena are indeed much less visible in the new cities in comparison with the GCR, the dynamics of de-territorialisation are actually operating insidiously within them.

The findings presented here are based on information collected during three months of field research in SOC, from mid-December 2019 to mid-March 2020. The fieldwork included interviews with residents, officials and experts, in addition to personal observation during neighbourhood visits. Overall, in-depth interviews were conducted with twenty residents, two experts and three officials. In addition, we had several informal conversations with residents and gathered data from observation in field visits we conducted in various districts. The twenty resident interviewees came from the different districts within SOC, ensuring that every district was represented.

I also hope through this study to respond to calls for 'engaged theory-making' in southern cities (Ernstson, Lawhon and Duminy 2014), which involves expanding research beyond academia to work with communities, companies, NGOs, activists, etc. and to use one's engagement with them to support the emergence of new insights into urbanism and urbanisation. In order to apply this in practice, we needed to, in the words of Edgar Pieterse, step 'outside traditional roles towards a deliberative context where we were not the experts' (Nicolson 2018). Thus, for the field research, I worked with Takween Integrated Community Development (TICD), Egypt's leading community development service provider with extensive

experience in urban research and practice around the built environment and socioeconomic development.

Together with two researchers from TICD (a senior researcher and a junior researcher) we used the concept of adequate housing as a multi-dimensional framework that would help guide the field research and interview questions around multiple urban phenomena. The features of adequate housing are access to physical shelter, with secure tenure and basic services/infrastructure, of a reasonable physical standard (well ventilated, not overcrowded, etc.), without putting unreasonable strain on the inhabitant's income. In asking questions around these issues, multiple interrelated trends of de- and re-territorialisation became evident, which I discuss along three main themes: urban governance as spatial transformation; precarity through housing financialisation; and the end of 'people as infrastructure'.

The article is structured as follows. The first section elaborates on Egypt's new cities as a new form of (sub)urbanism that has come to dominate the country's urban landscape. The second, third and fourth sections elucidate the three lines of analysis stated above. In the fifth and final section, the article concludes with reflections on the implications of the analysis for how Southern urbanism is understood.

New Cities and the (Sub)urbanisation of Egypt's Desert

The history of Egypt's new cities dates back to the 1970s, when President Sadat announced plans to reshape the country's population map by encouraging people to move out of the over-populated Nile Valley and inhabit the desert hinterlands that surround the cities. Since then, this call has become the central policy of Egyptian urban planning. Despite decades of limited success in attracting significant populations, the plan has continued stubbornly, with forty-one new cities established countrywide (some already built, and some still under construction). In order to oversee the planning, construction and administration of the new desert cities, the Egyptian state established the New Urban Communities Authority (NUCA) in 1979. NUCA's recently updated goals state the following:

The agency aims to achieve a number of social and economic goals that the revolutions of 2011 and 2013 called for, in order to achieve social justice. It aims to guarantee a decent life for all citizens through providing urban/residential communities with integrated services that include housing units suitable for all social groups, as well as the associated utilities, in addition to educational, healthcare, cultural and entertainment services' (NUCA 2020a)

In aiming to achieve the above-mentioned social goals, particularly in attracting lower-income populations who would otherwise settle in informal areas, the nine 'first generation' new cities – the first batch of new cities decreed by President Sadat in the late 1970s and early 1980s – were designed to be industrial and/or mixed-income cities. However, the later generation cities soon began to deviate from this model, particularly those around Greater Cairo, as they increasingly began to target Egypt's wealthier classes. With incomes rising during the 1990s among the emerging middle class that had been accumulating wealth through migrant work in Gulf countries, as well as the rising appetite for new 'modern' lifestyles, new cities began incorporating the phenomenon of gated communities, referred to in Egypt as 'compounds'.

Although state discourse around the new cities has revolved around avoiding the problems of past urban planning, many issues have discouraged people from moving there, namely, the lack of jobs and the lack of public transportation. This is especially true in the new cities in Upper Egypt, where the population sizes have remained incredibly low according to the latest national census (CAPMAS 2017). Contrarily, the cities around Greater Cairo have been faring relatively well in attracting inhabitants, compared with those in the Delta region and Upper Egypt (*ibid.*). The city of Sixth of October is actually the most highly populated new city in the country.

At the national level, the new cities are governed by NUCA, while locally each city has its own city authority, which is directed by NUCA and is in charge of all local services and infrastructure. According to law, the new desert cities remain the responsibility of NUCA only until they are deemed 'complete', after which they should be handed over to the nearest governorate authority and become subsumed into the existing urban governance regime.

Sixth of October City (SOC) – named after the 1973 Egyptian-Israeli war – was established according to Presidential Decree 504/1979. It is situated in the desert hinterlands to the west of Giza governorate, around 17 kilometres from the Giza Pyramids and approximately 32 kilometres from downtown Cairo. It has an area of 218 square kilometres and a population of 348,870 (CAPMAS 2017).¹ NUCA aims for SOC to reach a population size of three million people by 2030 (NUCA 2020b).

The city was established with the goal of being independent economically and geographically, rather than as a satellite city of the GCR (Shalabi 2018). Its economic base was originally planned to be a large industrial area in the west of the city, while the eastern part of the city would include a mix of public and private housing, in addition to a large commercial axis in the city centre (World Bank 2008). The reality is that today it functions as a bit

of both: the city offers many job opportunities, largely due to a substantial number of companies, institutions and factories that decided to relocate their offices there. But, despite the number of factories in the city's industrial zone, SOC is far from being an industrial city, since it has increasingly been catering to upper- and upper-middle-class social groups.

During the city's initial planning and construction during the 1980s and early 1990s, attracting the working-class nuclear family was a main goal, and this was done by constructing thousands of residential units that NUCA then offered at subsidised prices (Shalabi 2018). But as the Egyptian state took on a more neoliberal approach during the mid-1990s, under the guidance of President Mubarak, and the profit-making potential of the new desert cities became more evident, large swathes of land were sold to investors, and gated communities and upscale commercial hubs began changing the city's landscape. NUCA kept up with trend by planning and constructing new districts that targeted upper-income groups and consist largely of villas and gated communities. SOC's first gated community, Dreamland, was established in the early 1990s (Mitchell 1999). Many more have followed since then, constituting one of the dominant features of SOC's housing market. The subsequent real-estate boom led to a rise in the phenomenon of vacant units, whether unsold or purchased and kept vacant for the purpose of speculation (Shalabi 2018). The 2017 National Census estimates that today there are 156,822 vacant units in SOC out of a total of 234,262 housing units, a vacancy rate of 67 per cent; there are an additional 180,365 vacant units in Hadayeq October City² out of a total of 195,998, a vacancy rate of 92 per cent.

As with most new desert cities in Egypt, SOC consists of housing units built by NUCA, as well as private-sector housing that includes gated and non-gated areas, and a number of state housing projects, some of which target upper- and middle-income groups and others for lower-income groups. All these forms of housing are formal and all are represented in the field research. SOC does not have any 'informal' housing, in the sense that all homes are either planned or licensed by NUCA. However, there is a degree of tenure insecurity, which stems from home-owners who are part of state social housing programmes illegally subletting their apartments, even though the programme's regulations forbid this. Therefore, any subletting in this category is not licensed and creates some informality within formal housing. These types of units are also covered in the field research.

For the purpose of this research, we focus on the city's twelve residential districts (except District 9 which is still under construction), as well as the Touristic and Mutamayez areas.

District 1 lies in close proximity to October 6 University. It therefore hosts a substantial number of students, both Egyptian and non-Egyptian, who rent rooms or flats in order to live close to the university. It is a central and lively area with many commercial facilities. Districts 2, 3, 4 and 5 are somewhat similar to District 1, but smaller, less populated and more residential, with fewer commercial facilities. These five districts consist mainly of large apartment complexes built by private companies, catering to students and small middle-class families, according to our interlocutors.

District 6 has a visibly different urban fabric, as it consists more of subsidised housing built by NUCA in the 1990s with the goal of attracting working-class nuclear families. The buildings are not as high as those in Districts 1 to 5, and have a large number of small shops and workshops on the ground floors, many of which operate without a formal licence. Since the vast majority of the shops are informal, these districts have no big supermarkets or entertainment facilities. District 6 is the largest and second-densest district in the city after District 11.

Districts 7 and 8 are purely residential, with few commercial services (malls, cafes, shops, etc.), fewer students and more families, higher ownership rates and lower rental rates. Both are considered more upscale, inhabited by middle-class families, and District 7 especially used to have some famous/wealthy people who have lately moved to compounds. District 7 is a better neighbourhood than District 8, in terms of physical structure and services, with some villas and many small three- and four-storey apartment buildings that function as family homes. District 8 has more large apartment buildings, but both districts contain mostly private housing with only a small percentage of subsidised housing.

Districts 10 and 11 are in the older parts of the city, where NUCA built many subsidised homes to attract low-income groups in the early days. Due to this, both are considered 'popular' or 'working-class' areas by our interlocutors. Since the homes are decades-old, their maintenance and physical structure are not good, and infrastructure and services are problematic. District 12 is quite similar, but was described by our interlocutors as in worse shape physically than Districts 10 and 11, and poorer. The Touristic Villages district is a residential area of gated communities/compounds, whereas the Mutamayez district has mostly wealthy families living in villas or expensive apartments. Both areas have sound structures and good service delivery, and barely any commercial business according to field observation and interviews with residents.

Statistics for SOC Districts

District	Area (km ²)	Population Size	Poverty Rate (%)	Illiteracy Rate (%)
1	1.95	11,866	6	9.6
2	1.7	15,514	4	1.6
3	1.5	15,720	5	3.3
4	1.5	19,742	22	5.4
5	1.7	27,905	13	6
6	2.11	63,419	19	14
7	1.1	8,043	7	0.5
8	1.2	15,861	3	2.3
10	1.1	25,792	24	11
11	1.2	38,443	9	3.6
12	1.1	21,072	21	12
Touristic villages	Not available	13,022	Not available	1
Mutamayez	Not available	5,012	Not available	4

On the issue of reputation, many of the interviewees indicated some stigma attached to specific areas, especially District 6. In multiple interviews the district was labelled as the *'ashwa'eyat'*³ of SOC. Due to the prevalence of markets, as well as informal shops and workshops in residential buildings as opposed to the designated commercial centre, District 6 has acquired a style and image that is very different from the rest of SOC, and is unique among the other districts. It is described by outsiders as 'uncivilised' and informal.

For example, Marwa (an interviewee from District 8) expressed how uncomfortable she felt when she used to live in District 6 because of its 'low standard', and said that almost any family would leave District 6 as soon as their financial situation improved. Other negatively stigmatised areas are the Masakin Uthman and Abou El Wafa areas, which lie between District 5 and District 6. The importance of the different districts' reputation among SOC residents was clear in the responses of our interviewees, such as the below quote from one who described his impression of the different districts:

SOC is divided into 12 districts, among which are two districts that are uninhabitable: District 6 and District 12. This is because of the low social standard and because they are all workers/labourers. I would not feel safe leaving my family there. Districts 10 and 11 are a bit higher in social standard,

and Districts 7 and 8 are even better and more expensive, especially since District 7 has a lot of universities. As for Districts 1, 2 and 3 they are the most expensive, and Districts 4 and 5 are trying to be like them (Mohamed, District 11).

Another interviewee from District 10 echoed similar sentiments:

There are only two areas in SOC that I would never live in: Abu El Wafa (between District 5 and District 6) and Masakin Uthman. Abu El Wafa is youth housing and used to be good but it acquired a bad reputation because the government started relocating people to it from unsafe slums or areas where buildings had collapsed. But the majority of these relocated people went to Masakin Uthman, so Uthman has become a warzone. Don't try to go visit the area. People get kidnapped there, and even the police don't enter the area because if they do they won't ever leave. These are areas you should never visit (Mohamed, District 10).

In general, high population density and informality are dominant characteristics of the 'popular' districts (6, 11 and 12), and we relate this to the failure of the formal planning approach and the lack of proper development/economic models to cater for the majority of the people in these districts. The existing planning/economic model does not recognise the economies and lifestyle of the working class, which is discussed further on in this article. District 6 alone hosts 65,000 people, which is three times more than the second-biggest district in SOC, and twelve times more than the smallest district. It is highly functioning because of its informal economy, but also stigmatised and neglected for the same reason.

Within scholarship on cities in the global North, the emergence of suburbs around metropolitan areas, suburban urbanisation, has been analysed by Marxian scholars as a spatial fix to the capitalist crisis of over-accumulation (Harvey 1982). This perspective argues that cities concentrate consumption and production, which makes them vulnerable to urban crises, generating repeated cyclical crises such as boom and bust. Capital investments are channelled through circuits of capital, whereas industrial production functions as a primary circuit of capital. When over-accumulation takes place, capital seeks out a spatial fix and in turn re-channels capital through a secondary circuit of capital, which is residential real-estate developments outside the main city.

Suburbs are therefore created essentially as a conduit for capital to ensure its continued circulation, which is why suburbs in Europe and America have tended to be dominated by upscale real-estate projects, low-density neighbourhoods and gated communities. This suburban lifestyle is also tied

to a particular urban culture centred around the American groomed lawn, unified architectural style, nuclear families and a rigid system of regulations regarding what is and is not acceptable conduct.

These dynamics of capital can be seen quite clearly within the new cities around Greater Cairo, especially in how the cities have become major pull factors for the upper and middle classes to leave the existing metropolitan region in favour of less urban decay (Denis 2006). However, this is only one side of the story, as argued by Ortega (2016: 25): ‘in interrogating the neoliberalisation of urban space, economic narratives intersect with context-specific processes and relations that need to be accounted for’. It is this intersection that comes to shape the specific ways in which cities are de- and re-territorialised, which I discuss in the following sections.

Governance through Spatial Transformation and Planned Informality

Schindler (2017) has argued that cities in the global South are characterised by a disconnect between capital and labour that results in local governments being more interested in spatial transformation than they are with managing populations. This rings very true for Egypt’s new cities, especially those like SOC that surround the GCR.

In these cities there is no governance *per se* but rather management of the city as a sort of permanent construction site. As mentioned previously, the new cities are not governed through governorates like the existing cities, but rather through city authorities that report directly to NUCA. Therefore, SOC’s city authority is completely independent from Egypt’s local administration structure. Even though public services are governed by their respective line ministries (for example, public schools by the Ministry of Education, public hospitals by the Ministry of Health, etc.), the only entity responsible for SOC as a whole is its city authority. But governance is traditionally considered to involve some continuous process of development planning and engagement with residents and other stakeholders around the socioeconomic needs of the city and how to allocate resources (Avis 2016).

In that sense, the SOC city authority does not actually govern. Legally speaking, the city authority is tasked with managing the city’s assets until the city is declared to be ‘complete’, after which it should then transfer the city to the closest governorate. Despite this mandate, not one single new city has been transferred to a governorate; even though some cities, like SOC, are over four decades old, because not one city has been declared as ‘complete’. In the words of one high-level NUCA official speaking of SOC:

How can we hand it [SOC] over when construction has not ended? For construction to end this means there are no more extensions, no more investments, and no more building. In other words, when we reach the point when an investor approaches me to say I want to build a school, or a university, or a compound, and I say I'm sorry I don't have any land left, only then will I consider the city complete, and only then can I transfer it to the governorate. This could take 100 years.

In fact, the official discourse around the new cities in general portrays them as functioning construction sites rather than inhabited cities. This ignores the universal fact that cities are ever-expanding, especially if they are built in the middle of the desert where shortage of land for extension is not a near-future concern.

To illustrate just how much SOC has expanded over the years, we need to look at the stages of its development. The city was established following Decree 504/1979, which allocated the land and launched the strategic plan. Early in the 1980s, the master plan was introduced, and the city authority started distributing the land and providing infrastructure. In the mid-1990s the concept of gated communities (GCs) emerged and dramatically shifted the mindset of land management and value capture. The city expanded way beyond the original plan, whether by adding new GCs or by the city authority planning and building new housing projects.

Some argue that the city authority controls more sites than it could cater for, which has led to major management failures in the border neighborhoods. The most recent development was the split of SOC into three independent cities: 1) Sixth of October City, which includes the old districts in the original strategic plan and some of the extensions; 2) Hadayeq October City (HOC), which includes the southern part beyond the Wahat Road highway; and 3) New Sixth Of October City (NSOC), which includes the old industrial zone of SOC and the land to the west of the city and planned to hold the new Cairo airport.

As for any sort of engagement with the residents of the SOC, the city authorities in the new cities are made up entirely of appointed officials, with no form of elected government, with the exception of the Councils of Trustees (CoTs), which were decreed in 2013 by the Minister of Housing as entities that would represent the voices of the new cities' residents. However, only a few years later, the CoTs' mandate and rights were reformed by another decree (107/2018) causing consternation and even, in some cases, resistance among the newly established CoTs. They claimed that the new decree reduced their power and hindered their ability to participate in city governance.⁴

This form of ‘territorially focused urban governance’ (Schindler 2017) has resulted in the odd situation in which a city like SOC, with a population of over 300,000 (and possibly more than one million according to NUCA’s estimates), has no government, and is rather being managed as a territory trapped in a permanently expanding construction site.

Furthermore, as Schindler (*ibid.*) argues, another implication of this form of governance (or lack thereof) is the disciplining of ‘people who interfere with the transformation of cityspace’, particularly those who do not abide by the ‘grandiose visions informing urban transformation’ (*ibid.*). As argued by Simone (2020), such visions tend to form around the imaginary of the Western city. Within SOC, the Western city-image has clearly influenced the city’s urban design, as there is a very clear aspiration for what could be considered to be the modern Western suburban aesthetic of uniform buildings, manicured lawns, wide boulevards and designated commercial spaces that are not within walking distance from the residential areas.

One example of this is the Ibni Beita subsidised housing project, which is based on the sites and services approach. Launched as part of Mubarak’s National Housing Programme, many of its residents are today, over a decade later, still struggling to make this area liveable. One of the main complaints from Ibni Beita is that the planning standards do not recognise people’s way of living nor their limited financial resources. The project’s building standards force people to have a front yard as well as a back yard, while the internal space of the actual housing unit is extremely small, resulting in overcrowded housing for larger families. On a land plot with an area of 150 square metres they are allowed to build their home over only 75 square metres, while the rest must be kept as a lawn. The project targeted lower-income groups, and so naturally the residents do not have the resources for gardening such a space. This has resulted in many of them living in overcrowded conditions while the so-called yards are used for storage or left to waste.

This is just one example of how the state’s modernist planning paradigm is out of touch with the needs and lifestyles of the people it is supposedly planning for. This planning paradigm is dismantling one of the core features of Egypt’s cities – and of many cities around the world – which is that each neighbourhood has a cluster of shops and services within walking distance. This can be seen very clearly in all of Egypt’s existing cities. But in SOC, there are strict instructions to separate residential and commercial areas. All shops should be clustered in each district’s central commercial area, away from the homes, meaning all shops and services are accessible by car/public transport only.

Such a city design caters to specific socioeconomic groups by making car-owners more easily able to access goods and services than non-car-owners. It also results in a local economy that advantages larger shops and chains over smaller shops, which rely on foot traffic. Furthermore, the rent for a shop in the commercial centres tends to be quite high in exchange for the oligopoly that naturally emerges from the limited shop spaces offered in the commercial centre.

The result of this is that many retailers have opened their shops within the residential areas, thereby going against the planning regulations and building codes, and having to operate 'informally' because they cannot register as a commercial unit but rather only as a residential one, creating a substantial informal economy. This informality has been framed in official and mainstream discourse as people acting in an uncivilised way because they are unable to fit in with the government's modern plans and designs. However, the reality is that the link between the informal practices of the lower-income population and the non-inclusive and unsustainable planning and development model is ignored by state authorities, who prefer to stigmatise people as being uncivilised, illegal and not suitable for the government's 'good plans'. By insisting on urban plans that do not match people's lifestyles, and leaving them no room to modify or adapt these plans to fit their needs, this can be described as planned informality.

Different social groups or income groups have different ways of navigating the city's strict rules. Upper-income groups have been more able to adapt their lifestyles to fit the city's urban vision. Lower-income groups, on the other hand, often have had to resort to operating informally. This gives them the space to manoeuvre within the system, but it also puts them in a precarious position, creating structural gaps between the city's rich and poor.

Financialised 'Subsidised' Housing

One of the most striking features of Egypt's new cities in general, and SOC in particular, is just how financialised the real-estate sector has become. Not only has private housing become embedded in a system of real-estate speculation, but even the government's public housing has become more money-driven than it ever was.

Housing financialisation in major cities is a global phenomenon that has been documented through many studies (see Rolnik 2013; Aalbers 2017). What is interesting about the phenomenon in SOC is that even public housing, which is meant to be subsidised for the poor, is becoming financialised in subtle ways.

Many studies of housing affordability in certain cities focus on residents already living in the city, but this is only one side of the affordability story. The other side, which is crucial to any question of affordability in Egypt's new cities in general and SOC in particular, is the question of who is left out from even being able to relocate to SOC. On the surface, it seems that families from a wide range of income groups are settled in SOC. But the real – and perhaps less visible – form of inequality in regards to the affordability of housing concerns access to housing and land finance, particularly today under the Social Housing Programme.

Based on our interview with one NUCA government official, it seems that the city authorities and NUCA are not involved in setting a shared or citywide vision/policy of affordability for different target groups. Rather, the provision of affordable housing is project-based and left to the market/developer or dependent on the different units provided by the state's subsidised housing schemes, which are determined by the Ministry of Housing. For lower-income groups, the main channel through which to access housing in the new cities around Greater Cairo is through the state's social housing initiatives. Under Mubarak, this was mainly the National Housing Programme (NHP), whereas under El-Sisi the current programme is the Social Housing Programme (SHP).

Two interviewees from District 6 who are living in NHP housing claimed that housing during the time of Mubarak was much more affordable than it is today, and most of those working in SOC were able to apply for and access subsidised housing. That is the route through which they obtained their homes for symbolic rent, and they both feel they got their homes for a very good price. Furthermore, they also have the option to own the homes after a certain number of years of paying rent regularly. Once this happens, they can put their units on the market if they want. So it is clear that despite any problematic aspects with the NHP, there was some acknowledgement that housing is a right. This is despite the fact that recent studies have highlighted serious gaps (and corruption) within the NHP that made a large number of units ultimately go to middle-income Egyptians rather than the poor (see Shawkat 2012).

Today, under the SHP, the form of support that applicants receive in making housing more 'affordable' is very different, in a number of ways. Firstly, only 3 per cent of available units have so far have been offered for rent (Shawkat 2012), while the vast majority of SHP units are for purchase (under the NHP, 14 per cent were offered for rent). Secondly, they are not actually subsidised, as applicants end up paying the full market price for

the unit. The only advantage they get from purchasing via SHP versus the market is the size of the instalment and the payment period, which can last for up to twenty and thirty years in some cases. Thirdly, according to article 1 of Prime Minister Decree 1864, 2008, which is an update on article 35 of Mortgage Law 148, 2001, low-income housing is defined as housing provided for households whose income does not exceed EGP 30,000 annually (EGP 2,500 per month).⁵ This definition far exceeds the actual incomes of low-income households and, according to the Household Income, Expenditure, and Consumption Survey (HIECS), this income strata actually includes high-income groups. Thus, higher-income groups are competing with lower-income groups for the offered units (Ahmed, Khalifa and Abdel-Rahman 2017).

Finally, under NHP, the Ministry of Social Solidarity (MoSS) was responsible for setting the eligibility conditions and evaluating the applicants. Since the units were heavily subsidised, the main criteria for this process were based on who was most deserving or in need of subsidised housing. Today, under SHP, this responsibility has been transferred to the Housing and Development Bank (HDB). The bank, as is the case with most banks, evaluates applicants based on their potential ability to pay the instalments. This also becomes the basis on which the size of the instalment and payment period are set. Applicants in their twenties with a steady formal job would likely be offered a long payment period (therefore with smaller instalments), whereas applicants in their sixties might be granted only five to ten years to pay the total (unsubsidised) price, even if the two applicants earned the exact same income.

Even people without full-time, formal jobs (the self-employed, informal workers, etc.) are judged by how much they earn, such that the bank sends an accountant to calculate the applicant's average monthly income and uses that as the basis for the evaluation. Under the NHP this group was totally excluded from being able to apply, so it is a positive step that they can apply under the SHP. But the fact that the main evaluation criterion is average income means that the poorest of the poor (such as day labourers) would still be effectively excluded, because they would be offered instalments that are too high for them to afford.

This type of real-estate financing is the only financing mechanism available for those who cannot afford to purchase through the market. Current financing mechanisms do not recognise the needs of the lowest-income groups, so the concept of social housing itself has changed drastically over the past several decades, and it is now financialised.

The End of ‘People as Infrastructure’

One of Greater Cairo’s largest studies of urban inequality was that done by TADAMUN (2017), which covered all the GCR’s districts and neighbourhoods. This expansive study found that one of the biggest areas of inequality in Egypt’s capital historically has been in basic service delivery and infrastructure.

In SOC, the issue of service provision is much less uneven, as NUCA has been making a strong effort to ensure the availability of a basic infrastructure for everyone. All housing in SOC is planned or sanctioned by NUCA, and all buildings are immediately connected to the public infrastructure networks. But given the fact that NUCA’s mandate for the new cities is – as mentioned above – to manage them as functioning construction sites until they are completed, NUCA is only actually responsible for putting the service in place; the governorate should then be responsible for ‘governing’ the services once the city is transferred.

Due to this loophole, there is a huge ambiguity around who is responsible for the maintenance of basic services and buildings. Residents of public housing projects as well as those in gated communities all pay a ‘maintenance deposit’ on purchasing a unit. This deposit is collected from all residents and meant to ensure that maintenance of services and infrastructure takes place regularly and continuously. According to residents, NUCA claims the deposit is too small to carry out maintenance of the buildings or the neighbourhood. For many buildings in the city, it is not clear who is responsible. For example, there are a large number of buildings owned by the Housing and Development Bank, but the bank claims it is responsible only for collecting instalments and not for the maintenance of these properties.

Within the gated communities, there is an ongoing debate about who is responsible for funding the maintenance of the infrastructure and buildings, and for the services, particularly garbage collection, landscaping and security. The developer claims that this is the responsibility of the residents, and that once the construction has been completed, the owners’ union should take over. The owners indeed pay the maintenance deposit, but it is the developers who contract the companies that carry out the maintenance. According to residents, the developers often go for expensive foreign companies, which end up charging more than the deposit paid by the residents. As a result, the developers argue that residents owe them large sums of money for the cost of the maintenance companies, and refuse to give them their ownership contracts until they do so.

For regular private housing that is neither part of a gated community nor a public housing project, it is the responsibility of the city authority to maintain the basic services, but all residents we spoke with agreed that it does not do this. There was, for example, a common issue in all districts – rich and poor – that streets were not paved. Many complained about the lack of safety due to the poor presence of security forces and poor street lighting.

Inequality of service delivery and maintenance is also manifest between the different districts. Even though all districts suffer from this, the city authority seems to be more responsive in wealthier districts. For example, when a sewerage pipe burst in the wealthy Touristic Area district, it was fixed immediately. In contrast, in District 12 – one of the poorer districts – residents had been suffering from sewage flooding for over a year. The residents of District 6 and District 12 had no way of contacting the city authority and were not even aware that they had a municipal head for their neighbourhood. Residents in the Touristic Area, on the other hand, were all members of a WhatsApp group of which the municipal head was also a member, and they sent all their complaints to him directly.

The issue of infrastructure and services in SOC is not one of provision or availability, as the services are there and the infrastructure networks are in place. It is more about quality, functionality and the system of governing. Such problems are not clearly visible, as most analyses of services focus on availability.

In the existing cities – and GCR is a case in point – residents simply banded together and fixed things themselves. Indeed, several studies have delved into the way residents have negotiated around these inequalities by working together to put alternative (often informal) mechanisms of access in place (cf. Bremer and Bhuiyan 2014; Khalil 2019). These ways of collectively navigating the city's management have been described by Simone (2004) as a form of 'people as infrastructure', such that city-dwellers come to rely on each other in the absence of state provision of basic services. As shown by Khalil (2019), this was for decades an important, if not primary, means of accessing basic services in many Egyptian cities.

But this collective spirit does not seem to exist in the new cities, and when it does emerge, the strict rules of what is 'acceptable' in the new cities do not allow them to act independently of the city authority. For example, in one of the poorer districts (District 12), for every cluster of buildings there is a piece of land that should be used as a small public garden. The city authority, however, did not plant the garden nor carry out any maintenance of the land, and so it was left to waste. A couple of years ago, the residents decided to plant it themselves. The city authority then proceeded to fine

the residents for using a public space for private use, although the residents had left the garden open to the public. The city authority also demanded that the residents remove what they had planted, and return the garden back to its original state. This indicates that the government authority in this case is more interested in control than it is in actual provision of the service, and that it is trying to ensure that residents never feel like they own or belong to the city – as if the extent of residents' ownership is limited to their individual homes and not beyond. In essence, the city's rules destroy the ability for people to act as infrastructure, and almost alienate people from the city by preventing any room for collective action.

In the GCR there are districts where the state is present and others where the state has largely removed itself. This is why the spatial manifestation of inequality is so clear. In the new cities the state is present everywhere, as NUCA is the planner, constructor and manager. But the way the state is present differs in subtle ways from district to district, and the different social groups have different methods of navigating this and the resources that are available to them. This creates gaps that can produce inequities. This is something that distinguishes service/infrastructure inequality in the new cities from that in the GCR. In the GCR, inequality is more centred around provision. In SOC, inequality is related rather to the lack of room to manoeuvre the system and create alternatives where there are gaps in quality and functionality.

Conclusion

The three lines of de-territorialisation presented in the previous sections provide a different perspective on Southern urbanism from what is commonly presented in the literature. In fact, the most common features of Southern cities are those that the new cities are trying purposely to avoid. However, in this avoidance the desert cities are not only recreating some of these features, but are also creating new modes of de-territorialisation.

I argued that the new cities are governed mainly with the purpose of territorial transformation rather than the management of populations. This has resulted in a sort of planned informality such that the city's narrow regulations are largely out of touch with people's needs and lifestyles, practically pushing them towards informal modes of urbanism.

I also argued that housing in the new cities is so embedded within the circuits of capital that even social (supposedly subsidised) housing has become financialised. This ensures that certain social groups will always be excluded from accessing housing in the new cities, in a way creating a minimum social standard to be allowed to live in a new city.

Finally, I argued that there are forms of inequality in the new cities regarding basic services and infrastructure, but that this inequality centres more on quality and functionality than provision/availability. Whereas gaps in the existing cities are addressed by residents who put alternative informal services in place, the room for this to happen in the new cities is much narrower.

In general, the Egyptian state in the past year has been addressing informality much more aggressively than it ever has in the past, whether in regards to unlicensed buildings, informal areas or informal labour. The regulations around these issues change on a regular basis, and it is therefore unclear how the large number of informal shops in SOC will be addressed. But thus far it is clear that the state is minimising the room to manoeuvre as much as possible. Restricting the space for independent solutions, with the existence of strong structural gaps, is reshaping the production of subjectivity and alienating people from their cities, eliminating people's ability to act as infrastructure.

The analysis offered above is by no means meant to be an exhaustive list of the ways in which such state-led city-building projects are reshaping Southern urbanism, but sheds some light on the subtle ways in which inequality and precarity operate as and through complex modes of urbanism.

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Notes

1. The NUCA website claims that SOC's population size is 1.5 million. It is not clear where this large discrepancy between estimates by NUCA and the census stems from.
2. At the time of the census, Hadayeq October City had not yet been established, and is listed in the census as part of SOC.
3. The term 'ashwa'eyat' is the colloquial term used to refer to informal areas. It has a negative connotation similar to that of 'slums'; it literally translates to 'haphazards'.
4. News in 2018 and 2019 indicated unusual mobilisation among these councils, which included advocacy efforts to gain support within the government and the Parliament. The First CoTs Forum in Egypt was held in response to Decree 107/2018, but members of at least one CoT (the CoT of the New City of Al-Shorouk) resigned in protest to the new decree. However, the decree was not reconsidered and is still regulating the CoTs of the new cities.
5. EGP 1 = USD 0.064 (6 May 2020).

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