

DIENER HERZOG MEILI DE MEURON
HS 2010

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Exercise types: 'e' (Entwurf) with 'P' (Planung)
Group work in Basel and fieldwork in Cairo
Start: Tuesday, 21. September, 2010, 10 AM at ETH Studio Basel, Spitalstrasse 8, 4056 Basel



view of the pyramids from Giza

CITIES IN THE MIDDLE EAST: Part Two - Cairo

Cairo

Last year ETH Studio Basel commenced a three year project focusing on processes of urbanization in the Middle East with the cities of Beirut and Damascus. This year the research project will continue with an investigation into the largest city in the region, and one of the largest cities of the world, Cairo. Few cities have captured the imagination of the world over such an extended period of time as the Egyptian capital. Strategically located at the mouth of the Nile Delta, the region around Cairo has been continuously inhabited for the last five millennia. With Memphis, capital of the Old Kingdom approximately 3000 BC located a few kilometers to the south, the pyramids of Giza, constructed approximately 2500 BC to the West and the ancient Heliopolis located in the north east of contemporary Cairo, the area has for the longest period occupied a central place in the history of ancient Egypt. With the establishment of Roman 'Babylon' and the city of 'Fustat' during the early years of the Muslim Conquest in 641 the foundations of modern Cairo were laid. Henceforth the city has been known as Cairo, the Triumphant City, or the City of the Thousand Minarets (referencing the unsurpassed Mamluk and Fatimid architecture). The importance of the city is underscored by the fact that 'Misr', the Egyptian word for Cairo and for the whole country is the same, thus identifying the country by its capital, and even more so, the city being referred to as 'the Mother of the World.'

City Models

We observe the cities in the Middle East at a crucial moment in time. Rich in architectural and urbanistic heritage and at a turning point of political transformation and undergoing extensive (re-) construction, the cities struggle with questions of identity, globalization and a reconsideration of the notions of the public and the private. In contemporary Cairo we can identify the layers of history in the shape of different city models, or ideas of urbanity, that make up its urban fabric. Elements of a Fatimid and Mamluk city lie next to (or sometimes coincide with) areas shaped by Ottoman city planning, Haussmannian schemes and neighborhoods planned in the style of early modernism like the Garden City movement. More recently this assemblage has been supplemented by late modernist neighborhoods, large new desert cities on the outskirts of Cairo and a vast expanse of informal neighborhoods housing a majority of the rapidly growing urban population as well as rural-urban migrants. The city can thus be read as consisting of different concepts of 'city making', never executed in their full extent, always exhibiting processes of transformation and questioning their validity in contemporary economies.

Urban Activities

Can we describe and assess a city by how it is being used, by how its population inhabits a city? Instead of abstract notions of urban theory, such as formal / informal, or methods of master planning, we can analyze a city by looking at how people live and work in it, how they use the city as a place for recreation, for learning or for trade. It is these standard urban activities which give us an insight into the range of urban conditions, and that enable a comparison, or even an evaluation of urban models.



City of the 6th of October

It is in Cairo, a country ruled by an authoritarian regime and having been under a State of Exception for the last 40 years, that these urban activities gain a greater urgency. When a state of exception becomes normality, everyday activities gain a crucial role in the relationship between the state and its people: How does a population organize its daily routine, modes of communication and activities of transport, culture and work? Urban activities adopt the function of a litmus test assessing the power struggles within society and how the population adapts to it.

Power

The recent urban developments of Cairo have seen the development of vast new Desert Cities for the affluent on the city's fringe with populations in the hundred thousands and at the same time an unprecedented growth of informal neighborhoods, often self-built on former agricultural land. While often seen as representing virtually opposite models of urbanity – the former being formally planned for upper income groups while the latter stands for uncontrollable urban chaos and plight – both tendencies have to be seen as being intimately connected, even representing two sides of the same coin. With the ascend of Mubarak to state power in the early 1980s, Egypt has vigorously adopted a neo-liberal economical model. Inviting international investment (often from the gulf countries), Cairo has seen tremendous capital flowing into the real estate market, resulting in the construction of office parks, gated communities and enormous desert cities. It is these very construction projects that have facilitated vast rural-urban migration, with hundreds of thousands of new Cairenes working as construction workers, house maids or taxi drivers, constituting an ever growing lower class and participating in the growth of large informal neighborhoods, now housing 70% of the urban population, mostly without the provision of public services or urban transport.

Approach

It is these and other issues with which the research project 'Cities in the Middle East: Cairo' will be engaged. Running over a period of three years, we will continue with a focus on Cairo after having started the project with Beirut and Damascus in the previous year. To extend and deepen the comparative and regional approach, Tehran and Istanbul will be included in the following years. In our past research, Studio Basel has identified a set of tools and agendas that are central to its study of cities in transformation. Instead of understanding the city as a system composed of binary opposites, such as formal and informal parts, the study attempts to unfold the very complex simultaneities and dependencies of these parameters, by carefully tracing the basic human activities and their spaces in which they unfold. Instead of an approach centered on the preconceived grand dichotomies, we would like to focus on activities at the local scale. Our research will also build upon debates that have questioned the idea of the Middle East, and the political and hegemonic bias of related terminology, such as 'the Orient'. It will allow us to question our own research methods, such as mapping tools, which obtain an urgency and a pivotal (political) significance and have often become tools of social control, thereby losing any remaining innocence that mapping is perceived to have. Space is the medium where debates, negotiations of power and conflict are played out.

Semester Organization

The project starts on Tuesday 21st September 2010, at ETH StudioBasel, Spitalstrasse 8, 4056 Basel. Students will travel to Cairo for a two-week fieldwork phase during October 2010 (compulsory). The project is carried out in joint cooperation with students and staff from the faculty of architecture of MSA University (6th of October). In Cairo, students will be able to conduct the research in groups of two, together with students from MSA as well as additional partners, and other local research institutes and local NGOs amongst others. (An investigative, self-reliant and independent spirit is welcomed!) The results of the fieldwork and the further project development will use architectural portraits, urban biographies, as well as employing standard techniques such as maps and diagrams, whilst also sketching out scenarios for a future of the city. The final presentation of the student's works will be in the form of a book and a slide presentation. The estimated fees for participating in the project will be 1.400,- CHF. Students who are receiving stipends and grants, or who have been exempted from school fees can seek financial assistance by the ETH. (Application forms are available through Mrs. Giordano, HIL E 73.3)



View over Cairo from the East

SCHEDULE (to be confirmed)

SEP	21	Start	Basel	Introduction ETH Studio Basel
	22	Themes	Basel	Distribution of Drills, Themes and the Cairo Atlas Project
	28	Studio Work	Basel	Atlas development
	29	Studio Work	Basel	
OCT	05	Studio Work	Basel	
	06	Studio Work	Basel	
	12	Studio Work	Basel	
	13	Studio Work	Basel	Jury / Presentation of Cairo Atlas Project
	17	Cairo Trip	Cairo	Cairo Trip starts
	18		Cairo	
	19		Cairo	
	20		Cairo	
	21		Cairo	
	22		Cairo	
	23		Cairo	
24		Cairo		
25		Cairo		
26		Cairo		
27		Cairo		
28		Cairo		
29	V	Cairo	Cairo Trip ends	
NOV	02	Studio Work	Basel	
	03	Studio Work	Basel	
	09	Studio Work	Basel	
	10	Studio Work	Basel	
	16	Studio Work	Basel	
17	Mid-Term Jury	Basel	Zwischenkritik / Mid-Term Jury	
23	Studio Work	Basel		
24	Studio Work	Basel		
DEC	30	Studio Work	Basel	
	01	Studio Work	Basel	
	07	Studio Work	Basel	
	08	Studio Work	Basel	
	14	Studio Work	Basel	
15	Studio Work	Basel		
21	Studio Work	Basel		
22	Final Jury	Basel	All Day Final Jury Egyptian Dancing Party	