

## Cairo as Neoliberal Capital?

### From Walled City to Gated Communities

Eric Denis

#### Insecurity and a Land of Dreams

Ahmed Ashraf al-Mansuri will not be slowed down too much by traffic this evening.<sup>1</sup> His chauffeur is without equal for sinuously extricating him from the agitation of the inner city. Blowing the horn and winking to the police, the driver climbs up the on-ramp and merges onto the new elevated beltway. He dashes quickly westward, toward the new gated city in the once-revolutionary Sixth of October settlement. Without so much as a glance, Mr. al-Mansuri has skimmed over that unknown world where peasants are packed into an inextricable universe of bricks, refuse, self-made tenements, and old state housing projects. When it occurs to him to turn his head, it is to affirm that he has made the right choice in moving far away from what he thinks of as a backward world that remains a burden for Egypt, and that diminishes and pollutes the image of Cairo. He knows that he has again joined the future of Egypt. At any moment, he thinks, this crowd could mutate into a rioting horde, pushed by who knows what manipulating sheikh's harangue.

Neither the heat, nor the muffled noise of the congested streets has penetrated his air-conditioned limousine. Ahmed Ashraf al-Mansuri considers

the prospect of a round of golf, followed by a discussion at the club house with his friend Yasin from the Ministry of Finance, then a short stroll home. The stress of his day is already fading away.

Since 8 AM, shadows had begun to haunt Ahmed as he looked out from the eleventh-floor windows of the Cairo World Trade Center dominating the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and looming over the corniche that lines the Nile River. He is experiencing a downturn in his business transactions—that important monopoly on ice cream was not granted to him and the opportunity to buy an apartment building escaped him. 'Risky' remains his watchword. Would that it were owing only to this currency devaluation of which no one knows the way out, or the disappearance of foreign exchange. Fortunately, he has obtained a respectable distribution contract with an international chain of hotels to buy his cartons of milk that he packages in his small factory. He will have to go there tomorrow to accelerate production before going to the office. He has hardly the time to call his son who is in his third year in political science at SOAS (the School of Oriental and African Studies) in London. But in his car his anxieties fade away as he commutes away from downtown Cairo, past the Pyramids, into the desert. Then Mr. al-Mansuri arrives home, entering the gates of his new residential community, Dreamland.

There he passes Abu Muhammad, his usual caddy who, having finished his day, is waiting for the minibus that will take him to his small apartment of forty square meters, shared with some ten other waiters and workers living in the oldest quarters of the town of Sixth October, farther to the west on the desert plateau. His wife and children, having never migrated to the capital city, have remained in the village near the city of Mansura in the Delta.

The wife of Ahmed Ashraf al-Mansuri has not been to Cairo for more than two weeks. She comes only to visit a female cousin in Utopia, a nearby gated community. After her foray to the shopping center, she is late picking up her children. They are returning from an afternoon at the amusement park with Maria, the Ethiopian maid. The children are playing now in the pool, watched over by Mahmoud, the security guard. Maria, the Ethiopian maid, knows that she will return to her room—a small room without windows behind the kitchen—but only later that evening. There are the guests; she will have to help the cook after putting the children to bed.

### New Risks and Privatized Exclusivity

With the above fictionalized narrative, we arrive on the desert plateaus bordering the city and suburbs of Cairo. To the east and to the west, for a dozen or more years, promotion of the construction of private apartment

buildings has led to the acquisition of vast expanses of the public domain, putting them in the hands of development contractors. More than one hundred square kilometers are actually under construction, that is to say, a surface equivalent to more than a third of the existing city and suburbs, which has been fashioned and refashioned among the same founding sites for a thousand years. Dozens of luxury gated communities, accompanied by golf courses, amusement parks, clinics, and private universities have burgeoned along the belways like their siblings, the shopping malls. (See Abaza, and Elshehawry (chapter 7) in this volume for analysis of the growth of luxury malls in Cairo.) Against an extremely compact 'organic' urban area, the model for the dense, non-linear 'Asiatic' city analyzed by orientalist geographers, is juxtaposed against the horizon of a new city more like Los Angeles, gauged from now on according to the speed of the automobile. This new dimension of Cairo is marked by a flight of the urban elites made more visible by the de-densification of the urban center. This radical reformulation of the metropolitan landscape, which its promoters invite us to view as an urban renaissance or *nahda 'umriyya*, is completely in tune with the parameters of economic liberalization and IMF-driven structural adjustment.

To be sold, the gated communities brandish and actualize the universal myth of the great city where one can lose oneself in privatized domestic bliss. Promoters exploit more and more the stigmatization of 'the street,' spread by the media on a global scale, and finally of the Arab metropolis as a terrorist risk factory that is necessarily 'Islamic.' Far from being rejected, the Islamist peril is exploited by the Egyptian authorities to legitimize political deliberalization, while it promotes a particular landscape of economic restructuring. The current regime redirects and displaces the urgency of law and the immediate interests of Egypt's elites through the affirmation of market and security systems, of which the gated communities are a prominent feature.

Within this optic, the gated communities must appear as a privileged window onto the reality of liberalization in Egypt. Analysis of these settlements allows one to understand how mechanisms of risk control impose social exclusion (the reverse side of elitist globalization) and how they define the risks themselves. Urban ecology and the priorities of security are reversed to favor suburban desert colonies: defensive bastions against the lost metropolis. At the heart of this reversal, global/local developers and state agencies play out the transfer of power to businesspeople associated with the construction of a new hybrid, globalized Americano-Mediterranean lifestyle.

# خان العزيرية

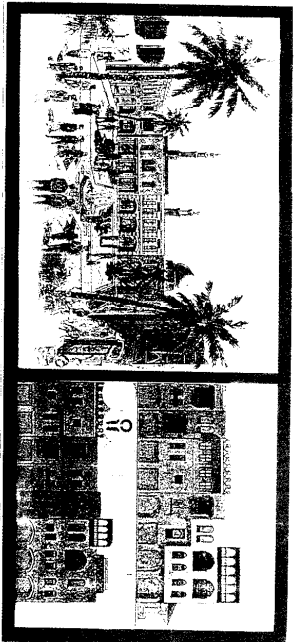
بجوار الاهرامات

والفنادق والمتحف المصري الجديد

من ١٩٣٠ الى ٧٠  
بلد الله

فتح باب الحجر  
المرحلة الثالثة

the rise of a new gated community in Cairo that replaces neo-Islamist/Islamic 5, (al-Ahram 1996, n.d.).



At the center of this new way of life are Egypt's elites, themselves connecting

together the archipelago of micro-city communities that they administer as if they were so many experimental accomplishments of a private democracy to come. The gated communities, like a spatial plan, authorize the elites who live there to continue the forced march for economic, oligopolistic liberalization, without redistribution, while protecting themselves from the ill effects of its pollution and its risks. In the same way, these elites rejoin the transmetropolitan club of the worldwide archipelago of walled enclaves (Caldiera 2000). The potential guilty anxieties relative to the suffering of ordinary city dwellers are, then, masked by global rejection of the city, according to an anti-urban discourse that incorporates and naturalizes pollution, identifying it with poverty, criminality, and violent protests against the regime. In this elite perspective, Cairo has become a complex of unsustainable nuisances against which nothing more can be done, except to escape or to protect oneself. Urban risk, and, by the same token, urban ecology, are radically recomposed.

In the rest of this chapter, I will trace the material development of the gated communities, their promotion and appropriation. Then I will identify the risk discourses that create the foundation for, and enable the legitimization of, the renewed management of social distances. But first, it is appropriate to define what we mean by fear, risk, myth, and urban ecology.

## Contouring Risk and Legitimacy in the Landscape

Risk is understood as a social and political construct that crystallizes, sorts, and normalizes dangers, fears, and anxieties that define and limit a given society (Hacking 2003). The formulation of risks allows one to focus on modalities of individual and collective action, and to determine strategies of habitation, in order to protect integrity and the sense of being among one's own, or simply, diversity control. As places in which diversity and coexistence are maximized, metropolitan areas are, in their material, social, and political expressions, the product of responses and reactions to the dangers that are negatively associated with density and diversity. Dimissive fears, like those associated with pollution, nourish the procedures of self-definition and delimitation of a city community. They facilitate the creation of 'society' (Douglas 1966; Douglas and Wildavsky 1982). Like marginalities, fears define borders. They lie at the heart of the interactionist formulation of identity as relationships of domination.<sup>1</sup>

The specter of risks, projected through media and representational structures, normalizes collective fears (Weldes et al. 1999). It claims to validate legitimate worries and put aside superstitions that appear as backward. This work of definition authorizes a system of protection of individual or collective control, and the establishment of norms and institutions, such as insurance, legislation, armed forces, police, medicine, borders, architecture, urban planning, etc. Measures taken to acknowledge risk aim at replacing chance occurrences with predictable events.

Always present is the myth of the urban Babylon, portrayed as a prostitute and as a place of potentially unfathomable corruption and loss. As always, this image serves to reify diffuse anxieties that threaten the stability of a regime embedded in urban order. Risk myths allow the legitimization of borders and of territorial command. The definition of risk enters into the heart of procedures that stigmatize subordinate groups, designate 'scapegoats', and map illegitimate territories (Girard 1982). It lies at the foundation of the designation of clandestine transients—those who do not have their place in the city and must be kept at a distance because they threaten its harmony.

It is, therefore, more than coincidental that, precisely in Egypt, the word *ashwa'iyat*, which derives from the Arabic root that signifies chance, appeared at the beginning of the 1990s to designate slums, shantytowns, and the self-made satellite cities of the poor, i.e. illegal and/or illegitimate quarters. By the end of the 1990s, the term came to describe not just spaces but peoples, encompassing a near-majority of the city as risky, 'hazardous,' errant figures. The figure of the errant is that which most frightens this urban society.

Seen as the invading silhouette of the decidedly peasant migrant from the provinces, the *fallah* (peasant) frightened and still frightens urban society. This designation also reanimates the classic Muslim opposition between the *jalliah* and the *hadari* (the urban or 'civilised'), and between settled and nomad communities.

Today Egypt's globalizing metropolis finds itself at a point of instability, swaying between a society in which fatalism and malediction play a major role in the management of crises and catastrophes, and the 'society of risk' characterized by a lack of certainty, in which it becomes impossible to attribute uncertainty to external or ungovernable causes. In reality, the level of risk depends on political decisions and choices. It is produced industrially and economically and becomes, therefore, politically reflexive. Egypt, however, analyzed from the perspective of Ulrich Beck, reminds us that old modernization solutions are untenable, because religious radicalism and authoritarian practices are growing, but are always attributed to foreign plotting, denying the development of a reflexive national public and representing internal debates (1992). In this context, risk remains an ambivalent object that produces exclusionary norms while ancestral myths and beliefs are reappropriated and remade in order to master and stabilize current forms of political monopoly.

Gated communities are one of the most striking and revealing products of this new ecology of risk and monopolization of politics. They reveal processes of disorganizing and reorganizing modes of living and cohabiting in the city, that is, the dynamics of spatializing a new neoliberal 'moral order' and justifying it through risk discourse (Park 1926).

## The New Liberal Age and the Material Framework of Colonial Nostalgia

The state's offering of a new exclusive lifestyle ignited an explosion. From 1994, when the Ministry of Housing began on a massive scale to sell lots on the desert margins of Cairo, the number of luxury construction projects very quickly surpassed market absorption capacity. The region of Greater Cairo includes a limited number of middle-class families; not more than 315,000 families' current expenses exceed 112,000 per month (\$350 in 2005 dollars). And these are counted as the 9.5 percent most wealthy.<sup>1</sup> Yet within this limited market, 320 companies have acquired land and declared projects that, in potential volume, total six hundred thousand residences.<sup>2</sup> In the first years since the boom, no less than eighty gated city projects have been erected, with many sectors presold, and the first families settled. In 2003 alone these

companies put some sixty thousand housing units of villas and apartments on the market. Where will all these rich families come from?

Utopia, Qattaniya Heights, Beverly Hills, Palm Hills, Belle Ville, Mena Garden City, Dreamland: these are some of the gated communities under development. These developments are marketed as the cutting edge of a post-metropolitan lifestyle, invented between the imagines of 'fortress America's' sprawling cities and the new risk-apartheid of Johannesburg (Blakey and Snyder 1997). However, if the ensembles of villas respond perfectly to the global concept of the protected city, encircled by a wall and assuring a totally managed autonomy, this is not just an importation of a universal model. There is also visible the influence of the Persian Gulf oil monarchies' taste for luxurious living. Gulf fashions are represented in the grand embellishments of baroque gilding, imposing balconies, and neoclassic colonnades. The architectural models and the forms of appropriation by residents are 'hybridized', mixing local and Arab-regional influences as much as they correspond to values from global cities (AlSayyad 2001). The idea of the Mediterranean is also an essential referent framework for Egypt as a southern Mediterranean country, evoking idealized Greek village motifs, tiled roofs, Tuscan pine gardens, or the shimmering colors of Riviera resorts. The Mediterranean model has already been articulated through the Egyptian Riviera development experiment, on the coast west of Alexandria. This coastal model has since been adopted by potential inland Cairene buyers as an extension of a society perpetually on vacation under the sun. This positive Mediterranean image and the extravagant Persian Gulf styles are at least as visible as American/Western influences as Egypt renegotiates its international identity, reframing its primary Middle Eastern-Arab identity through touristic and residential commercialization.

Reference to the Mediterranean allows Cairo to negotiate and to attenuate Arab and Muslim values that are present architecturally, but made into folkloric consumer symbols. Islam and Arabness are referenced in a way closer to the iconography of Disney's Aladdin or Sinbad rather than to the culture of austerity, modesty, and self-discipline identified with contemporary Islamic populism and militance. The businessman Ahmed Bahgat even explains that it was after a visit to Celebration (the private ideal community built by the Walt Disney Corporation in Orlando, Florida) that he conceived of Dreamland ('Dreamland ...' 1998). More than a collection of luxury residences, this gated community complex offers a view of the plateau of the pyramids of Giza, access to a golf course, and your own private amusement park. When, at the end of the nineteenth century, Khedive Isma'il conceived of a new city

center for Cairo, he dreamt of a Haussmannian Paris of boulevards uniting public squares and apartment blocks. Today, a hybrid, Egyptianized version of the American dream predominates, but with a strong reference to the past and the Khedival/colonial era itself. This new global reconstitution of nostalgia becomes an essential argument for selling and living in the desert, as inhabitants are faced with the uncertainty of the future and the instability of the present.

## Exclusivity as Urban Renaissance

*Before we aspire to the day when, as Tounssaint Camet asked in 1905, the Muqattam (the plateau to the east of Cairo) becomes a park sprinkled with villas, linked to the city by a tram, can we wish, at least, for a less egotistical attitude among the ruling classes? It is even in their own interests, if they do not wish to prepare a certain of choice for the social experiments of tomorrow.* (Clerget 1934, 21; Camet 1905).

Clerget, one of the first French urban geographers who was critical of some of the Orientalist real estate schemes and Khedival politics of the era, perceived the tensions and the risks induced by liberal luxury developments. He feared that building outside the margins of Cairo would rupture the tissue of urban space even though he also built some projects in the new areas. Today, a nostalgic view of a vanished late-nineteenth, early-twentieth-century 'liberal era' is common. This perspective invites us to view the connection between the two epochs of liberalization in modern Egypt, as well as their urban development consequences. The late nineteenth and twentieth centuries were already a period of real-estate excess that marks, to the present day, the composition of the metropolis (Arnaud 1998). The promoters of the gated communities love to reflect back on the past in view of investing their own projects with the positive image of the belle-époque liberal age, that is, the age of Egypt's Khedive Ismail, the era of British colonial occupation, of high debt, foreign investment and control, as well as of rampant speculation and luxury public and private construction. This colonial (a.k.a. Khedival or Ismailian) era is called by some 'Egypt's liberal age' because it also featured the development of limited, elite-oriented, and colonially constrained liberal political and cultural institutions, and is remembered for the birth of democratic Western-leaning nationalism under Saïd Zaghlul.

Today, many prominent Egyptian real-estate developers, like Talat Mustafa, do not hesitate to present themselves as heirs of Baron Empain (Kamal 1998), a Belgian settler and investor in Egypt who founded in 1905 the sumptuous

urban oasis Heliopolis, then in the middle of the desert to the east of Cairo and linked to the city center by a tramway that he privately owned and profited from (Ulbert 1988; Garret 2001). (Close to the family of president Anwar al-Sadat, Talat Mustafa built his fortune beginning in the 1970s through the construction of military infrastructure. Mustafa is currently mobilizing support for the construction of an entire satellite city, al-Rihab, to be situated to the east of Cairo and designed to welcome some 150,000 residents (Zaki 1999).

Similarly, the Belle Ville project—a gated community boasting a view of the pyramids of Giza to the west of Cairo—was promoted in the daily press and in magazines with photos that drew parallels between the irretrievable architectural prestige of the Ismailian center, allotted since 1870, and the emergence of a future according to the image of this new, glorious page of private urbanism. Mena Garden City was shown on television in an advertisement that made the villas of the former Garden City, an early twentieth-century bohemian and foreign-residence zone, fly away, carried by powerful cranes. The old Garden City was built at the beginning of the twentieth century on the banks of the Nile at the edge of the heart of the Ismailian center, promising its residents quiet, likened to the tranquility of a desert oasis. Now, the Garden City of the future blooms literally in the distant desert, while the old Ismailian Garden City is invaded by high-rise towers and militarized security checkpoints that protect the few foreign residents and embassies that remain there. Elsewhere, models of villas don the names of the Egyptian rulers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—Farouk, Ismail, etc. Even the grandson of the original Baron Empain himself has participated in the promotion of a scheme for New Heliopolis.

If this reinscription of the past is henceforth possible, even invoked, it is then necessary that, like the rehabilitation of royalty, it allows the legitimization of the entrepreneurs who are partitioning and seizing the public lands in the desert. These enterprises then become vital to creating a new elite national patrimony of the sort developed at the beginning of the twentieth century. They participate in the creation of a patina, that is, a nostalgic landscape built upon the reappropriation of an old framework, patrimonializing and historicizing the gated communities. This patina promotes a sense of authenticity and nostalgia for the present (McKrahen 1988; Appadurai 2001). Not only does contemporary life appear historicized, but also as something already lost. Like fashion, a product of the tangle of worlds and a parable of accelerated circulation on a worldwide scale, the patina generates euphemality. This effacement of the present for the commercial ends of promotion and consumption is akin to the visibilization of risk, in that they

both create instability. They both invite self-protection, leading to demand for protections in the face of growing insecurity, and to destabilization of routines and relations.

The rehabilitation of the spirit and the city of royalty and colonial investors before the anticolonial struggle, before independence and before the Egyptian Revolution, is inscribed very clearly in the renovation of the old city center of Cairo. This spirit is reflected in the support for the idea of Hosni Mubarak crowning his own son as the next president, as a kind of khedivial successor. A legitimate façade of liberalization and adjustment is sought, paradoxically in the imaginary of the archaic colonized khedivial monarchy and its new/old luxury landscapes.

When, live on television's Channel One in May 1997, President Hosni Mubarak inaugurated a golf course and said that he saw there a green lung for the Cairene people, he validated a very exclusive enterprise as a national project. He sanctioned an elitist appropriation, closing off, and privatization of the once publicly owned deserts (and a seizing of the water needed to irrigate them) while cloaking it in the spirit of great open public projects realized in the national interest (*al-mashrūʿ al-ʿaṣmāʾī*).

Advertisement for Belle Ville, a gated community near the Giza Pyramids, which celebrates its links to the colonial architecture of late nineteenth-century Cairo (*al-Ahram*, 1996, n.d.).

In a parallel process, the state tightly censors and controls all forms of citizen representation by political parties, and NGOs are suppressed by a mountain of disabling laws, police seizures, and bureaucratic penetration, all while businesspeople are highly regarded and cultivated by the state, notably in support for the formation of working groups and privileged lobbies given highest level access in the National Assembly. While press, NGOs, and social movements are crushed, commercial foundations and business associations flourish, like those regrouping the businesspeople from the industrial zones of the new cities. To conform to the new national 'ethics' of neoliberalism and structural adjustment that prohibit direct intervention by the state in the domain of construction, the alliance between entrepreneurs and those in service of the state is redefined: Those public contractors who previously performed the construction, en masse, of public housing, now operate as semiprivate contractors, developing luxury lots while benefiting from credit furnished by public banks, which is gauged according to the speculative and overvalued worth of land purchased at a very low price, with the state holding down the price for developers.

At the same time, charity again becomes an urban bourgeois value and a way of self-presentation essential to the image of a good citizen and a good Muslim. In particular, populist soup kitchens, which had not existed since 1952, have been reactivated, whereas the list of subsidized products is presently reduced to four articles (oil, sugar, flour, and bread), whose stocks are constantly shrinking (Korayem 2001). The ostentatious charity tables for the month of Ramadan, begun at the end of the 1980s, and a pure product of the reinvention of the Islamic tradition, are more and more in evidence. They now constitute an emblematic figure of the rapport between the bourgeoisie and the urban people. They embody the legitimate exhibition of wealth made manifest through the concern to have the largest table, the one that provides the most places. These tables dramatize the gift of scraps. Here, the state and religious practice, like the rewriting of monarchial/colonial-era national history, validate the pertinence of neoliberal change and reflect the 'best times' of social reformism and its benevolent organizations. This spectacle of social inequalities and ams can also be read in terms of risk, of the accentuated risk of uprisings. Charity is imposed as the only relation to the poor and their only vehicle for social uplift, with the police as the last rampart. There are no other modalities allowed for the redistribution of the fruits of liberalization.

This mediatized work of the new urban world, affiliated with the liberal age before 1952, erases the period of national construction and of 'socialist' public, modernist, and integrative planning. The revolutionary, Arab nationalist,

Third-World Solidarity era of the 1950s—when Egypt won its independence—to the 1970s has since become represented as a dark period, identified by its visible lack of elegance, and its architectural and infrastructural sagation, rather than by its social achievements. Parallels with real-estate speculation during the belle-époque era suggest that only private entrepreneurs, not revolutionary states, are able to create the city and to distinguish it in an enduring way. But it should be said that this parallel does not just romanticize the spirit of neoliberal free enterprise or certain elite aesthetic values and lifestyles, it also reconfigures modes of production. Indeed, in both elitist epochs, then and now, the state offers up its public patrimony. It opens vast expanses of territory to be divided up amongst a handful of private developers, while stimulating the flow of capital through the sale of land.

Today's parallel is not, then, just about style, façade, or a set of symbolic representations. It indicates a disillusionment with respect to the public, state, and national development, as well as the project of modernization dominant since 1952.

A sense of shifting priorities is also generally in the air. It corresponds in effect to the spirit of 'good urban and corporate governance' promoted by the World Bank. Does the structurally adjusted state in Egypt really have an alternative? Must it rebuild its alliances with cosmopolitan elite entrepreneurs in order to survive?

### Entrepreneurial Spirit and the State

In 1991 Egypt signed a tripartite management agreement with the IMF and the World Bank. This Economic Reform and Structural Adjustment Program marks the entrance of Egypt into an active phase of reforms, transformations of the economic apparatus, and change in modes of government. Privatization was imposed as the privileged instrument of urban reform with the delegation of a network of public services.

Since 1991 the privatization of electricity has proceeded in the production sector and, more recently, in the power-distribution sector. The privatization of telecommunications and waste treatment are also well advanced. The state has privatized the building of parking garages, the subway system, roads, and tunnels through 'build, operate, and transfer' contracts (where private transnational companies, usually based in Europe or the United States, build infrastructure, profit from it by toll or fee-collection, then much later transfer it to the Egyptian state and public).

From now on, underintegrated slums (informal or self-constructed quarters in which poor people reside), may be demolished, restructured, and

'managed by a for-profit company as a state concession, providing that the firm guarantees in place relocation or some compensation for residents, and that it builds infrastructure.'

In 1997, the governor of Cairo, Dr. Ibrahim Shehata, explained his slum privatization plan: "Here, I have an informal quarter in which fifty thousand people live. The governorate of Cairo is interested in signing a development contract with a promoter, providing he furnish ten thousand residential units for those living there, a public garden, two clinics, and three schools. And he may develop the rest of the quarter according to his interests." And to this Dr. Shehata adds: "The volume of irrational use of urban land is insane. I would say willingly that all of Cairo is not appropriate to a logical, rational economic plan, with rare exceptions, like perhaps the Ramses Hilton [an international luxury tourist hotel that includes cinemas and a shopping mall for Egyptian upper-middle classes and Persian Gulf/Arab visitors]." (See Ghannam's chapter in this volume for an analysis of the government's relocation of the residents around the Ramses Hilton to clear the way for its development.)

Hospital services are progressing toward privatization, and of course the state has moved to privatize and globalize most of the country's industrial base. The possibility of a private police force operating on the public highway has also been raised following violent incidents between union organizers. Finally, the gated communities assert their autonomy to provide 'free' sanitary drainage, portable water, and private security, guaranteeing quality services, free from ponderous state involvement. These communities benefit ungratefully from state-paid public infrastructure developed for the new cities. (See Vignal and Denis in this volume for further analysis of the manufacturing sector and structural adjustment.)

In this regard, we subscribe fully to the analysis advanced by Timothy Mitchell who argues that this neoliberalization does not in reality signify a retreat of the state (2002). Here, to account for the formal semblance of economic liberalization, it is necessary to recognize more fully the change of alliance modalities between entrepreneurs and the state. In fact, in addition to its huge irrigation projects—like the Peace Canal that is to be constructed near the shore of the North Sinai from Port Said to al-Arish, or the other branch of the Nile, Toshka, to be carved out of the (public) Western Desert near Lake Nasser by state funds and labor, and then sold to global agribusiness investors—the state continues to subsidize and construct housing that it calls 'social' or 'low cost' but which is in fact speculative and directed toward stimulating elite settlement. The explosion in private luxury construction within the gated communities also falls within the project to reformulate the

paradoxical neoliberal, neomonarchical appearance of an alliance between entrepreneurs and public elites in support of industrial channels for cement, steel, and construction, which compromise the gigantic industrial engine at the heart of the system of wealth generation and speculation, controlled by a few families that monopolize both private and public power.

### Political Deliberalization and Privatizing Democracy

Gated communities represent the socio-political result of economic neoliberalization. Here private democracy materializes. While estimating that public institutions cannot assure the well-being and the defense of the collective, a restrained community of like-minded people itself takes charge of the management of the protection of its own way of life. The community of residents of the gated community of Mena Garden City, for example, manages shared spaces, lighting, and the roadways from common funds that it places in the Cairo stock exchange.

This kind of private democracy flourishes in Egypt while on the national social scale, political exclusion and repression has intensified. The election of mayors (*umidas*) was suppressed in 1994 under the guise of the struggle against Islamism, replaced by a system of administrative appointment from above.

In April 2002, the election of local councils was marked by the attribution of 97 percent of the seats to the party in power! What is more, these representative, elected bodies, even in their highly constrained form, have always played a merely consultative role. The executive nominates the managers of the public administration who are typically drawn from the ranks of the army. The Cairo region is thus administered by three military governors named by presidential decree. Adding to this climate of 'political deliberalization' is the revision of the law on labor, which blocks the free constitution of labor unions and the right to strike. These prohibitions date to the declaration of the Emergency Law promulgated just after the assassination of President Sadat in 1981 (Kiciele 2001). Similarly, nongovernmental organizations are more and more tightly controlled. Their modes of financing their own actions cannot be political.

The adherence by the elites to the political model of the gated community, a form of voluntary disaffiliation and exclusionary self-organization facilitated by the state and stock exchange, aims to constitute autonomous units in which it is possible to live in a directly participatory democracy without waiting for, or while blocking the arrival of, the substantive democracy for the country as a whole. The elite gated communities authorize the construction of private democracies when, all around on the outside, economic liberalization is

accompanied by political deliberalization. Privatization of reform is extended into the privatization of politics, accelerating the downward spiral of exclusion, disenfranchisement, and poverty, dispossessing the rights and the potential of the workforce that is one of the primary resources Egypt possesses on the world market of goods and services.

### Evasion of Risk or Inversion of Risk

Although it is apparently motivated by an escalation of urban risk, the move to live in the desert cannot be understood as a mere evasion of risk. The phenomenon of gated communities is a form of fixing worth, investing the unshared gains flowing directly from the liberalization and privatization process, and then fixing them in a new global/local hierarchy and landscape. These constructions are inscribed in stone and real estate, from wealth extracted from the public patrimony and from public lands in a context of inflation, certainly reduced in relation to the 1980s, but characterized by a strong monetary devaluation. Major public stakeholders give private actors access to land and property while avoiding market competition. These public actors include the Ministry of Defense, the Egyptian State Railways, the Ministry of Housing and New Communities, the Ministry of Agriculture and Land Reclamation, the Ministry of Religious Endowments (*awqaf*), public insurance companies, etc.

To better understand this process, we turn to the field of structural geography and the "theory of takeover" (*théorie du rachat*) formulated by Rebour (2000) building upon the work of Desmarais and Ritchot (2000, 121):

*Dysphorias emanating from urban areas marked by industrial concentration (insubriety, social agitation . . .) were often invoked to explain the departure of bourgeois residents, conjoined to positions of contiguous assembly, for suburban villas and their country domains. These distant, sumptuous developments denote, however, something other than flight. They differentiate the urban expanse, break its homogeneity, and capture new values placed in charge by the dynamics of takeover [rachat] that feeds the economic system.*

The social values of the metropolis are taken over, refixed, and thus inverted.

Thus, the Shatir clan, at the head of a farm-produce empire, enjoys a quasi-monopoly on the production of potato chips in Egypt. The family built factory units in the industrial zone of the new city of Sixth of October and then began to develop an ensemble of villas in a residential complex, of which





the family is the proprietor. Up to the present time, they have not sold the seat of their company located in the commercial center of Cairo.

## Negotiating Appearances

Living in the desert does not speak for itself. It also symbolizes the realm of the dead. The desert remains associated with the successive displacements of cemeteries and visits to the dead. To render the desert attractive supposes then, on the one hand, that the repulsion of the dense metropolis is intense and that a fundamentally distinctive change of desert soil has been effected. Ecological recomposition is at play in the tension between rejection and attractiveness and between stigmatization of the masses and overvaluation of the elite. Promoted for more than twenty years as a space for the relegation of polluting industries, and, with the new cities, of the working class, the deserts are no Garden of Eden, nor are they perfect sites for creating modern utopias (although one of the new gated cities of Sixth of October is called Utopia). The shift of perception is socially constructed through neoliberal discourses that redefine the desert as virgin terrain for the refoundation of Egyptian society.

After independence, the desert became the space to conquer and to populate, not only for reasons of de-densification and preservation of agricultural lands, but also, even above all, in view of producing a new peasant and a new urban resident, a veritable pioneer of a new society (Fanchette 1995; see also El Shakry in this volume). The gated communities, twisting this revolutionary perspective, are presented as inheritors of the national project for the conquest of the desert. Private investors, while substituting themselves for the state, restructure the nation in accordance with neoliberal modalities. Beside the promoters, who are lionized by the media for their efforts to populate the desert and to turn it green, the buyers of villas in the gated communities may see themselves as pioneers working for the expansion of inhabitable space, thus working for the valorization of the common good, embodied in Egyptian territory. Among the first residents of the gated communities, there are a good number of gentlemen-farmers who have first-hand experience with land improvement, allowing them to 'tame the desert.' The figure of the industrial pioneer—the hero, frontierman, innovator—allows buyers and promoters to divert attention from the private and above all very exclusive appropriation of public lands, and therefore from the disappearance of space and resources around the capital. The will to express one's individual difference, to expose one's capital, to speculate without worrying about society or general national uplift is thus 'transmuted

into a land of pioneering courage, and a kind of developmental innovation and entrepreneurial bravado.

From this point on, living in the desert is no longer conceived of as a departure toward the periphery, but as a relocation of the city center and new focus on places of innovation. This acts as a visible show of the reconcentration of the spaces of power that in part accompanies the expansion of the gated communities.



This migration of the experimental spaces of a model society of 'agricultural improvements,' to the new suburbs of Cairo is accompanied by the symbolic transfer of the power to innovate from the state's civil servants to the elites and entrepreneurs, and from the public to the private domain, which is made manifest by the marked exclusivity of the model.

This way of seeing development as pioneering makes personal success stories visible—stories that were masked in the heart of the metropolis and in the concepts of the public, national and social. In the city, such successes are effaced by the demands of density, proximity, and decency, which cohabitation, social diversity, and inequality impose. In the popular city, a lack of space

makes ostentatious display of individual 'innovation' or distinction impossible without risk of friction. In the old metropolis, spectacles of individuality must be confined to private or semiprivate interior spaces, such as the large five-star tourist hotels, in order to conform with the norms of discretion associated with modern public space in twentieth-century Cairo.

In contrast, the desert offers distance and perspective. The expanse favors the expansion of view-scapes, of rites of approach and of passages that dramatize the grandeur of the new residences; successive thresholds are thus established between the exit from the agglomeration and the arrival at the colonnade and steps of the villa. First, there is the rupture in the landscape of the desert, followed by the monumental entrance of the new city, and finally the passage through guarded doors of the gated community.

Desert localization favors the exhibition of one's success with grandeur and ostentation. The architecture of the villas expresses this clearly through recourse to a panoply of cosmopolitan transcultural signs: the pool, the square, the neoclassic columns, the lawn, the pines, and the garage. The garage in turn refers of course to owning a car, which has long served as a projection of private space in the crowded urban space, the only vector expressing one's rank and success among the popular throng. Perfectly understood by the ensemble of the social body, the Mercedes in Cairo has been given a popular nickname, "the phantom." This term reflects a view of the elites as distant, menacing, ephemeral. Mercedes are also nicknamed "pig eyes" or "powder," the latter implying that only cocaine dealers can afford them.

Projection of the spectacle of elite distinction from city street to desert gated city enables speculation and spectacle in the same way as does the migration to summer resorts on the shore of the Mediterranean, or driving a tinted-glass Mercedes through a downtown traffic jam. It is through a double rapport that one must understand the adhesion of the elites to the program of the gated communities: they can have access to this space because they have these cars, and inversely, the distance allows them to enjoy the power of these automobiles. Living in the distant desert has become a luxury, while previously the new cities had been seen as a burden, where poor workers and ordinary citizens took long bus rides to reach their factory jobs.

Ostentation leads us to a duality of the model of gated communities, which are apparently sold according to the theme of protection and security. Nevertheless, far from the bunker architecture of South African villas or the compounds of Latin America, defenses here are somewhat expressively outward looking. Certainly, the settlements are closed, but the walls appear to be quite fragile, rather low, and especially open, with grillwork that allows

one to glimpse the luxury of the villas from the outside. The buyer purchases a protected residence with a plan to create a sense of distance, of filtering, but he desires at the same time to be seen. Thus exposed, the security figure associated with the promotion of the gated communities expresses their fragility. The closure confirms the radical nature of the social rupture and clearly indicates the will of the promoters, like the buyers, to disassociate themselves voluntarily from the mass remaining behind in the dense areas of the city. But the model appears quite vulnerable. It responds to the demand for distinction and for exposure, but at the same time, it emphasizes insecurity rather than protecting from it. It produces risk in a city that remains perhaps quite overconfident.

### Ecology, Liberalization, and Authoritarianism

Ecology appears on the Egyptian scene as a radically imported category that accompanies the process of economic liberalization in the same way as IMF/World Bank programs for mastering poverty. These are two major tools for the mastery and regulation of the effects of liberalization and adjustment. Ecology imposes a foreign expertise and reorganizes the industrial apparatus on the basis of imported procedures and technologies, transferred through foreign companies; the struggle against poverty fills the domain once occupied by welfare-state social services and abandons questions formerly posed in terms of redistribution.

In Egypt, the institutionalization of ecology remains at the center of USAID and Canadian aid programs. In 1992, a presidential decree launched the National Environment Action Plan (NEAP) carried by the Egyptian Environmental Affairs Agency (EEAA), instituted in 1982 to formulate environmental policy and to educate public and private sectors, and the population at large, to the dangers posed by pollution and the manner in which to combat them. In 1994, the parliament voted for Law No. 4, concerning environmental protection and instituting norms for water and air pollution. In 1997, Presidential Decree No. 275 led to the nomination of the first secretary of state for the environment, and in 1999, the government launched the first plan for environmental action. Ecology arrived in Egypt at the same moment and in the context of gated city speculation (Hopkins, Mehanna, and el-Haggag 2001).

The state apparatus, while appropriating and instituting ecological discourse, confirms the largely shared sentiment of a global, ecological shift. It appropriates the monopoly on measuring and defining pollution, ignoring pollution from industrial, agricultural, and military sources, while directing attention to other kinds of pollution against which it is more convenient to

fight. Measures then come to reinforce regulation and the new elite social order at the heart of the metropolis. For example, the policy on green spaces and gardens empowers organizations for clearing and de-densifying central and peripheral spaces, but does not allow the public or NGOs to enter or use these spaces.

Ecology also reveals itself to be an ideal tool for showcasing the transfer of competences that characterize liberalization. From the regime's point of view, 'good' environment is based on an alliance with businesspeople who know the issues at stake, whereas the people, completely incompetent, can only be polluters. Gated communities are emblematic of this transfer and of the commodification of the environmental question. Here, ecology plays the role that reformism played during Egypt's pre-revolutionary liberal age. Ecology becomes one lever for putting into place the apparatus for taking charge of space and for population control.

## Naturalizing the Urban Order

The appropriation of ecological discourse should merit more ample development and serious investigation. The alliance of the 'greens' with right-wing Islamism reinforces the competences of authoritarian power. This alliance finds in ecology a new list of legitimate arguments to justify in the name of protecting the common good, their increased ascendancy in society and politics. We find a despotic appropriation of ecological values according to modalities that resemble those promulgated by Luc Ferry in Europe: i.e., elite-defined 'nature' comes before the needs of the social order (1992). This kind of ecology favors the enlistment of the technocratic edifice and the authoritarian state apparatus. It offers to the state a new savant discourse and instruments of scientific domination. Cairo ecologism favors the construction of threats and constraints legitimating the maintenance of an authoritarian regime and of an exclusivist mode of redistribution.

This kind of ecologism differs in a certain sense from the old reformism: pretensions to ameliorating life conditions and to education are effaced because the concern is with non-human 'nature.' As some would say, "It is in their nature . . . , they are filthy, they are violent, fanatics. . . ." In other words, the people are neither educable nor reformable. These principles of natural inferiority, already present in the construction of the categories of colonial administration, again finds here a new political youth. This colonial-liberal continuity of modes of government and of ways of understanding the social totality, its limits and its excluded parties, questions the very idea of national construction and of an independent state that strives to develop a community

of citizens. Similarly, gated communities reveal forms of disaffiliation and disinterest toward the life of the city to the benefit of a privatized life. This neoliberal geography permits the management of elite social or familial networks and facilitates the continued privatization, mining, and exploitation of national resources while social redistribution is reduced to the minimum. Meanwhile membership in a transnationally articulated elite is fostered. The values conveyed in their time by colonial urbanism are reproduced, dissociating the people's city from the city of their masters.

## Conclusions: Intersections of Neoliberal Risks and Justifications

The phenomenon of the gated community takes shape at the intersection of two kinds of justifying or legitimating arguments. The new exclusivist geography of neoliberal Cairo represents, on the one hand, a world showcase for a certain kind of liberalization, that which stimulates praise and affirmation far from Egypt, as the *Wall Street Journal* in 1997 blessed the new projects, remarking, "How far Egypt has gone" (*Wall Street Journal*, 14 April, 1997). On the other hand, this gated-city geography imposes a redefinition of risks. The so-called urban renaissance justifies and bears witness to the performativity of liberalization policy and to the new delegation of competences that will remake Egypt for transnational businesspeople. Further, these developments must be justified by the construction of risks corresponding to general principles associated with this lifestyle of living separately, among one's own class and clans, in elite microcollectives that are protected, subsidized, and 'democratically' self-run. This nascent mode of partitioning crystallizes the true logic of current neoliberal reforms, all the while hardening the social landscape against multiple countereffects, alternatives, and resistances.

## Moments, Models, and Universality

In this context is it acceptable, from the perspective of urban studies, to define today's city, the very big globalizing city in particular, as a combination of mixed elements, of diversity, and of density, favoring cosmopolitanism and innovation?

We must reconcile this definition with the new facts, not less universal, that the object of new urban policies is to struggle against combinations of incongruous elements, eliminate diversity, and criminalize density, mélange, and proximity. These policies separate and establish a hierarchy well beyond that which a simple functionalist perspective would require. The model of the European, cosmopolitan global city—without a doubt mythic, elitist, and

ethnocentric in its own way—is not today a useful 'ideal' nor even a useful point of comparison. And maybe European and U.S. settler colonial cities and postindustrial dystopias are more interesting points of comparison. Or perhaps Cairo is a city that 'models' neoliberal fashions in a way which is paradoxically and troublingly 'ideal' in a universal sense.

Egypt's gated communities are proposed as the ultimate figure of risk. Yet they generate by their very presence many profound forms of social risk, fragility, and general vulnerability that all the physical and discursive ramparts of neoliberal geography and luxury housing would like to block out. Walled communities realize, in fact, the national fragility and produce the generalized social risk they claim to secure.

If gated communities came to spectacularize Egypt's neoliberalization from 1990 to 2000, then it is not surprising that they lie at the heart of the post-2000 financial crisis in Egypt. The immense capitalization that was necessary for the exclusive subsidized development of these desert areas was evidently one of the major causes of the crisis in liquidity and the bursting of the building bubble that caused the collapse of property prices and the collapse of the national economy in general. The elite development model appeared at the center of the national crisis. And it came to stand, perhaps, for risk itself. The depreciation of speculative investments in the gated communities, sustained largely by many private as well as public banks, is reflected in all of economic headlines of the 2003–2004 period: the quasi-failure of the Bahgat group (whose proprietor was even imprisoned), the difficulties of the steel magnate Ahmad al-Ezz, and the scandals that haunt the shadow of the minister of housing, Ahmed Soliman, responsible for the sale of lands on which the gated communities were implanted. Protections and alliances among businesspeople and public officials were reconstituted and purged through the crisis. Certainly, as Timothy Mitchell shows, it is important to see capitalism in action, a channeling of benefits and of credit toward the most irrational desires, which during the boom years took shape in land and stone, transforming the desert into an inhabitable place (2002). The bubble burst. The Egyptian economy collapsed after 2000. But the new liberal, neocolonial city, the embodiment of risk and exclusivism, had already taken shape to occupy, constrain, and remake the social world. Cairo has been radically altered.

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## Notes

- 1 Mr. al-Mansuri is not a real individual. Mr. al-Mansuri and this opening narrative represent a fictionalized composite of several individuals interviewed by the author during the past four years, and evoke the overall contours of their experience and vision of their new Cairo.
- 2 The agglomeration is marked by a clear depopulation of its center and even, for some twenty years, of its ancient inner-city suburbs, but the de-densification is entirely relative. Cairo remains one of the most densely populated metropolises in the world with, on average, more than 350 inhabitants per hectare and with quarters surpassing eight hundred inhabitants. Simply stated, extreme densities of population have left the historic center at the profit of unregulated peripheral areas, where, henceforth, the majority of Cairenes live. Up to the present, urban sprawl did not exist—the agglomeration remained extremely compact. Flight to the desert gated communities thus takes on a character which represents that much more of a rupture with the norms of habitation.
- 3 Here, we adhere to Fredrik Barth's approach to identity, which is understood as performative and elaborated through interaction; that is to say, in the encounter, even in confrontation, with others (1960). Thus, we distance ourselves from all

substantial definitions of culture, and the confusion between culture and identity. Ethnocultural identity uses culture, but rarely all culture. Culture is a resource whose composing elements are rewritten as a function of situations. Identity depends, therefore, on relationships with borders and not with a center. Admitted as a social construct born of and made dynamic through interaction, identity invites an interrogation of the following type: How, why, and by whom, at such a moment and in such a context, is a particular identity produced, maintained, or put into question?

- 4 These data are calculated from the 1995–1996 study of budget consumption of households and from census data taken between 1986 and 1996 on the number of households and their rate of growth. The study does not allow one to precisely identify the revenue and even less the property of the families studied. On the other hand, it provides a reliable distribution relative to current budgetary consumption, including housing expenses. These 35,000 families themselves represent more than 20 percent of current consumption, or as much as 50 percent of that of the poorest. Property may nevertheless be estimated with respect to the number of families possessing more than one residence in 1996, either 172,000 families or 0.6 percent of the families in the region of Greater Cairo (more than 8 percent in Cairo proper).
- 5 This is as many residences as were constructed in ten years in the Cairo region, all segments combined, between 1986 and 1996.

Seen as the invading silhouette of the decidedly peasant migrant from the provinces, the *jilali* (peasant) frightened and still frightens urban society. This designation also reanimates the classic Muslim opposition between the *jilali* and the *hadari* (the urban or 'civilised'), and between settled and nomad communities.

Today Egypt's globalizing metropolis finds itself at a point of instability, swaying between a society in which fatalism and malediction play a major role in the management of crises and catastrophes, and the 'society of risk' characterized by a lack of certainty, in which it becomes impossible to attribute uncertainty to external or ungovernable causes. In reality, the level of risk depends on political decisions and choices. It is produced industrially and economically and becomes, therefore, politically reflexive. Egypt, however, analyzed from the perspective of Ulrich Beck, reminds us that old modernization solutions are untenable, because religious radicalism and authoritarian practices are growing, but are always attributed to foreign plotting, denying the development of a reflexive national public and representing internal debates (1992). In this context, risk remains an ambivalent object that produces exclusionary norms while ancestral myths and beliefs are reappropriated and remade in order to master and stabilize current forms of political monopoly.

Gated communities are one of the most striking and revealing products of this new ecology of risk and monopolization of politics. They reveal processes of disorganizing and reorganizing modes of living and cohabiting in the city; that is, the dynamics of spatializing a new neoliberal 'moral order' and justifying it through risk discourse (Park 1926).

### The New Liberal Age and the Material Framework of Colonial Nostalgia

The state's offering of a new exclusive lifestyle ignited an explosion. From 1994, when the Ministry of Housing began on a massive scale to sell lots on the desert margins of Cairo, the number of luxury construction projects very quickly surpassed market absorption capacity. The region of Greater Cairo includes a limited number of middle-class families; not more than 315,000 families' current expenses exceed 142,000 per month (\$350 in 2005 dollars). And these are counted as the 9.5 percent most wealthy.<sup>4</sup> Yet within this limited market, 320 companies have acquired land and declared projects that, in potential volume, total six hundred thousand residences.<sup>5</sup> In the first years since the boom, no less than eighty gated city projects have been erected, with many sectors presold, and the first families settled. In 2003 alone these

companies put some sixty thousand housing units of villas and apartments on the market. Where will all these rich families come from?

Utopia, Qatamya Heights, Beverly Hills, Palm Hills, Belle Ville, Mena Garden City, Dreamland: these are some of the gated communities under development. These developments are marketed as the cutting edge of a post-metropolitan lifestyle, invented between the imaginations of 'fortress America's' sprawling cities and the new risk-apartheid of Johannesburg (Blakey and Snyder 1997). However, if the ensembles of villas respond perfectly to the global concept of the protected city, encircled by a wall and assuring a totally managed autonomy, this is not just an importation of a universal model. There is also visible the influence of the Persian Gulf oil monarchs' taste for luxurious living. Gulf fashions are represented in the grand embellishments of baroque gilding, imposing balconies, and neoclassic colonnades. The architectural models and the forms of appropriation by residents are 'hybridized', mixing local and Arab-regional influences as much as they correspond to values from global cities (AlSayyad 2001). The idea of the Mediterranean is also an essential referent framework for Egypt as a southern Mediterranean country, evoking idealized Greek village motifs, tiled roofs, lush pine gardens, or the shimmering colors of Riviera resorts. The Mediterranean model has already been articulated through the Egyptian Riviera development experiment, on the coast west of Alexandria. This coastal model has since been adopted by potential inland Cairene buyers as an extension of a society perpetually on vacation under the sun. This positive Mediterranean image and the extravagant Persian Gulf styles are at least as visible as American/Western influences as Egypt renegotiates its international identity, reframing its primary Middle Eastern–Arab identity through touristic and residential commercialization.

Reference to the Mediterranean allows Cairo to negotiate and to attenuate Arab and Muslim values that are present architecturally, but made into folkloric consumer symbols. Islam and Arabness are referenced in a way closer to the iconography of Disney's Aladdin or Sinbad rather than to the culture of austerity, modesty and self-discipline identified with contemporary Islamic populism and militance. The businessman Ahmed Bahgat even explains that it was after a visit to Celebration (the private ideal community built by the Walt Disney Corporation in Orlando, Florida) that he conceived of Dreamland ('Dreamland . . .' 1998). More than a collection of luxury residences, this gated community complex offers a view of the plateau of the pyramids of Giza, access to a golf course, and your own private amusement park. When, at the end of the nineteenth century, Khedive Ismâ'il conceived of a new city