

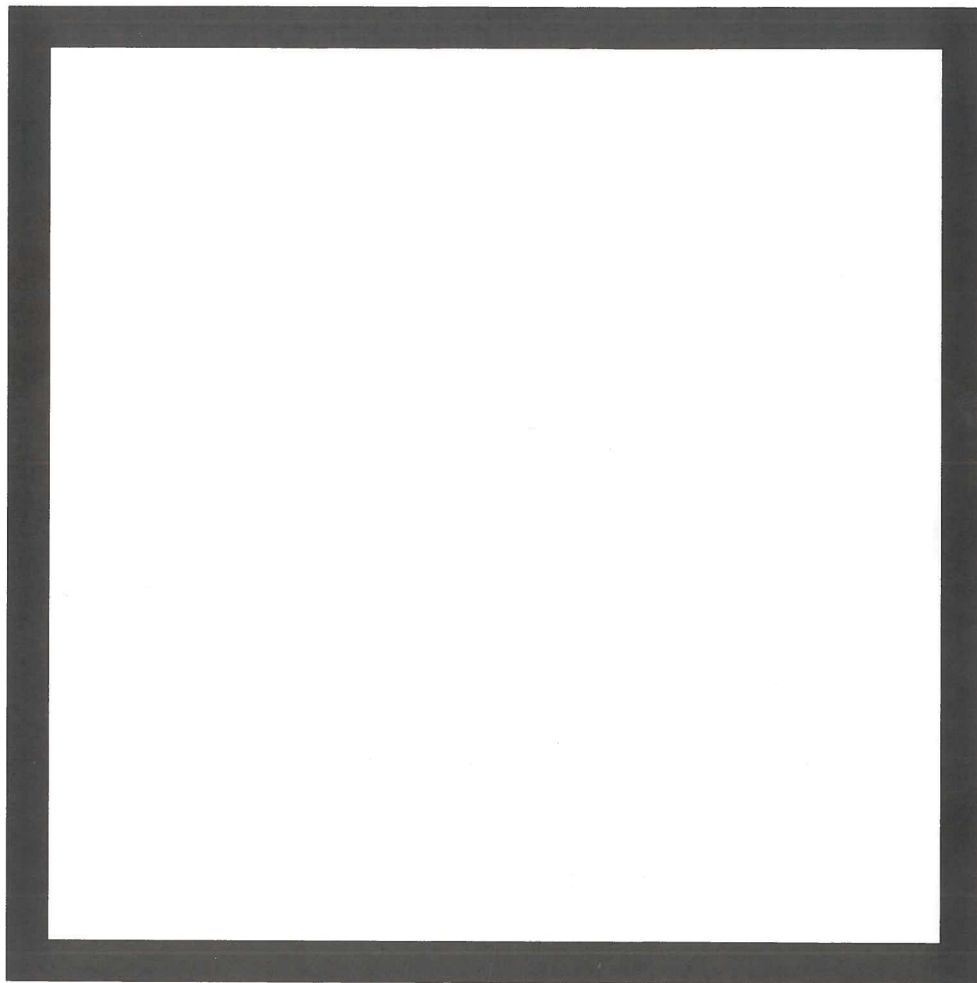


la Biennale di Venezia

15. Mostra
Internazionale
di Architettura

Partecipazioni Nazionali

REFRAMING BACK//IMPERATIVE CONFRONTATIONS



PADIGLIONE EGITTO / BIENNALE ARCHITETTURA 2016

IN OTHER WORDS

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With changing global socio-economic patterns, the bursting of economic bubbles, and confrontation with the reality of our limited and vulnerable environmental resources, a noticeable response in architecture in the past years has been the shift towards research practices and production of knowledge outside the traditional realms of built and commissioned projects. Further, emphasis and more space is being given to those who explore and value architecture's role in the construction of a socially & environmentally sustainable built environment.

In Egypt too, albeit more marginal, this mode of production outside the framework of traditional practice, has gained currency in the past years. More and more architects and academics are shifting their focus to the task of identifying and asking questions, introducing new concepts and working with unusual tools.

But what makes Egypt different and therefore more pressing to investigate in an urban sense, is amongst other factors, its unmatched rate of enormous population growth, as the Mapping Cairo diagrams presented in this pavilion illustrate. In 2016, more than half of the Egyptian population is estimated to be between 25 and 45 years old. The balance is therefore tipping towards the affirmation of youthful desires. The 2011 uprising was just one stop, failed or successful, in an ongoing moving train with multiple stops and demands.

Sprawl and informal urbanism have been the two parallel dynamics of growth in Egyptian cities for the past half a century. Where the government failed to provide, a parallel and robust informal economy had been providing low-mid income families with housing, with an unprecedented rate of urbanization, development and incursion on scarce agricultural land.

While the under-privileged were resorting to a DIY architecture and urbanism, the elite were hiding out and expanding to the safety of newly-created state-sponsored and gated desert suburbia. Instead of confronting the problems of the city at their core, their go-to solution was escapism. But no matter how many DIY units were produced, in the context of a projectile population growth, still, thousands of families lacked adequate housing and access to infrastructure.

Social justice, encompassing more equal access to housing, health care and labor opportunities were amongst the key demands of revolutionary forces in Egypt. Fueled by the energy of the post-revolutionary context, some architects, urbanists and researchers found themselves intensely questioning these two trajectories of growth in Egypt, aiming for a potential force to change and reform. It is the fruits of their work that are presented here in the 15th edition of the Venice Biennale.

Paradoxes construct a particular observational scaffolding in which the story of this pavilion is set. As economic opportunities seem to be shrinking and with new record unemployment rates, in tandem, there's a huge growth of skilled youthful labor including architects and urbanists with no opportunities to practice in the classical sense. In parallel, there is also a creative unskilled labor that has a strong DIY tradition. To add to the complexity, are the historical layers and multiplicity of stakeholders on every inch of the land. Further, Egypt's unique geopolitical position, make it a sponge that absorbs agendas and an orange which inadvertently secretes a strong odor to those surrounding it without even being bitten into.

The work presented here can be broken down into two large categories – mapping projects and experimental proposals. The mapping projects attempt to survey existing conditions with applied analytical lenses, evident in their representational outputs. As with recent mapping efforts in other contexts, here, representation is viewed as a tool to think and present new information. It also entails the same potential shortcomings of mapping exercises when data is poorly researched and could advance a skewed perspective, or completely misinform.

Nevertheless, the importance of the concerted effort to map and document in the Egyptian context cannot be underscored. After years of academic and research neglect there is a pressing need to excavate layers of information and to present them to raise awareness on core issues in the built environment. The mapping efforts can therefore be considered as political provocations, calls to action and foundations on which other proposals can be built.

The experimental proposals on the other hand, begin to tentatively propose and sometimes concretely make a mark in the urban context through surgical interventions. They are academic endeavors or the work of small agencies that are attempting to write their own agendas based on research, engagement with the community and a desire to use local materials and know-how. These attempts are sometimes successful and sometimes equally unsuccessful in their architectural harvests.

In some instances, we see designers setting out with benevolent social agendas but design processes and solutions which do not justly address these aspirations. In other situations, good intentions can lose their original meaning when integrated into wider schemes of redevelopment.

This is the case in downtown Cairo, for example, which has been radically transforming since 2011.

A delicate balance between stakeholders has been the sine qua non condition for any architect wishing to operate in this space. This balance unfortunately is not always achieved no matter what the intents are. However, these problems are not unique to the Egyptian context, they are symptomatic of some of the limitations, amongst them the reduced sense of agency, confronting the architectural practice today.

Both scales of production presented here, the mapping and experimental project efforts, collectively address and bring to the fore issues of informal urbanism, sprawl, inequality, lack of agency and conservation that are the core themes of Egyptian urbanization. Though the outputs have been vast, poor communication and collaboration between initiatives is felt across the board. The pavilion is a fertile ground to posit all these voices together in one space and open the floor to a conversation amongst peers that will continue in Cairo beyond the Biennale.

Left out of the exhibition and the pages of this catalogue, is the work of the non-architects who have contributed more to the built environment than trained architects and urbanists in the past thirty years. Like the architects, the non-architect design-builders also face resistance while conducting their practice shaping the city due to their “informal” and precarious practices.

A wider and more inclusive dialogue about the built environment of Cairo should acknowledge their work and find better channels to collaborate with them professionally or professionalize them with better standards.

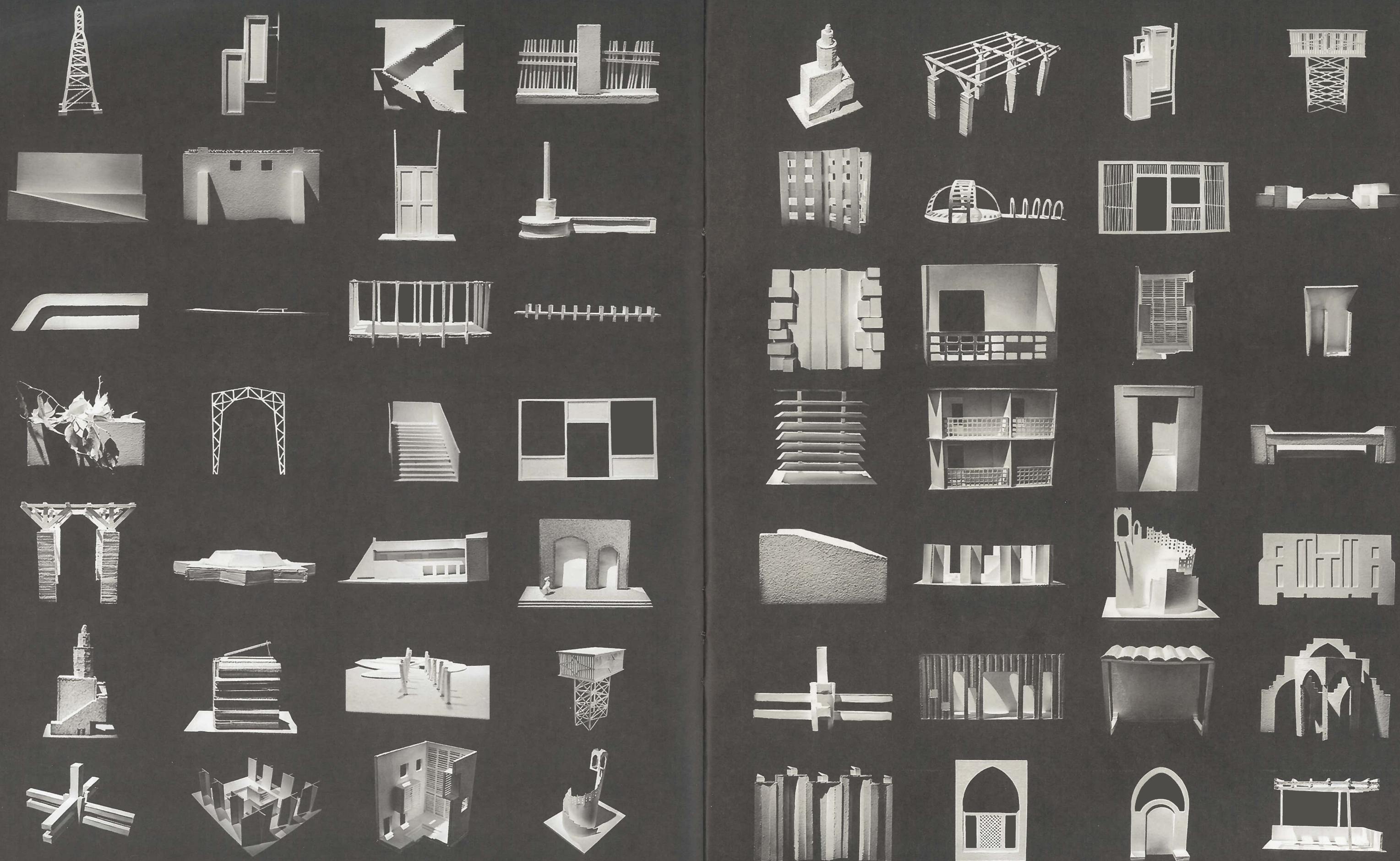
As architecture becomes more and more a tool and a way of thinking, the relevance of the Egyptian pavilion is that it demonstrates through a plethora of projects and voices this new de facto condition of constant change and the ongoing guerilla response to it born out of a willfulness and resilience by both architects and non-architects alike. It brings to the fore critical questions about our practices that go beyond the typical and broad dictums of social and environmental sustainability. It questions the relevance of our way of practicing and its outputs.

Having highlighted the need of a deeper and more intense dialogue, we should also take this opportunity to raise certain pressing questions.

When it comes to newly formed institutions in the urban field: what are their different structural models? How are they surviving in the market? What are their support structures? Is it important that they survive?

And in the case of academia: what do international and local collaborations entail? What are their political ramifications?

And finally and more importantly: what practical impact do all these academic, individual or institutional efforts have? What happens to the knowledge produced?

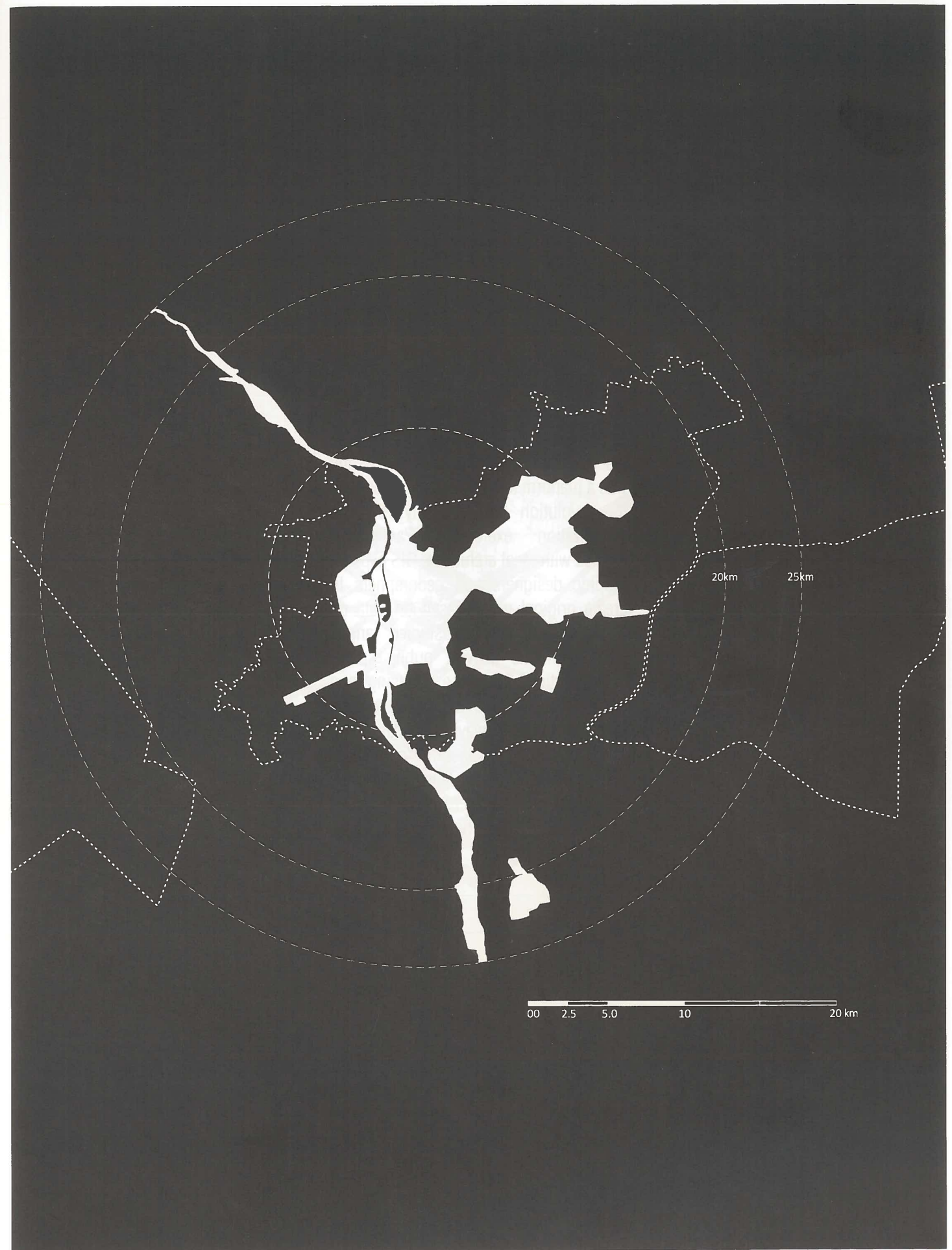


MAPPING CAIRO I

A research based on PhD Dissertation entitled "The Parallel City: A Proposal for Re-connecting the Formal and Informal cities - The Case of Greater Cairo" - in the year 2013.

Author
Noheir Elgendy

This contribution aims at stratifying the city layers defining the different city constituents. The work is presented in the form of info-graphics with brief statistical information about population, densities and percentages of open spaces including; An Overview of Cairo city section, layering maps, array of the city's formal and informal fabrics, and a closer view of the fabric on the margins between the formal and the informal city.



MAPPING CAIRO II

STUDIO MEEM
www.studiomeem.me

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Workshop and exhibition of Mapping Cairo
supported by the Japan Foundation in Cairo.

The workshop Mapping Cairo organized by Studio Meem in collaboration with the Japan Foundation Office in Cairo took place over 10 days in November 2015 and was a platform to analyze and understand the evolution of the city through visualization exercises. Participants worked with local architects, GIS experts, graphic designers and geographers to create original maps based on data on Cairo. The topics they studied ranged from economic activity, public space, transportation, land use, housing and population. Participants were encouraged to think of creative ways to visualize and document their data-sets correlating between different phenomena, therefore hinting at core problems and potential target areas that can be tackled in future plans for the city.

