



# What happens to the knowledge produced in Egypt at this year's Venice Architecture Biennale

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*The 15th Venice Architectural Biennale runs from May 28 to November 27. The exhibition presented at this year's Egyptian pavilion was commissioned by Egyptian architect Hilal with an Egyptian-Italian curatorial team including Eslam Salem, Gabriele S Borlenghi and Mostafa Salem. This is an edited version of a text published in the catalogue, written by Manar Moursi of Studio Meem, whose own works were included in the exhibition.*

In response to changing socio-economic patterns, bursting economic bubbles and confrontations with the vulnerability of our environmental resources, a recent trend in architecture globally has been a shift towards knowledge production outside of traditional built and commissioned projects.

More space is also being given to those who explore architecture's role in creating socially and environmentally built environments.

In Egypt, these modes of production, while marginal, have gained currency as elsewhere. More and more academics are identifying questions, introducing new concepts and working with unusual tools.

But Egypt's is an urgent case for architectural and urban researchers, partly because its unmatched rate of growth necessitates immediate solutions. In 2016, more than half the population is estimated to be between 25 and 34 years of age, and the balance is therefore tipping toward the affirmation of youthful desires, and the 2011 uprising was just one of many moving train with multiple stops and demands.



*A model of Ard al-Lewa, including proposals by MAS Urban Design students*

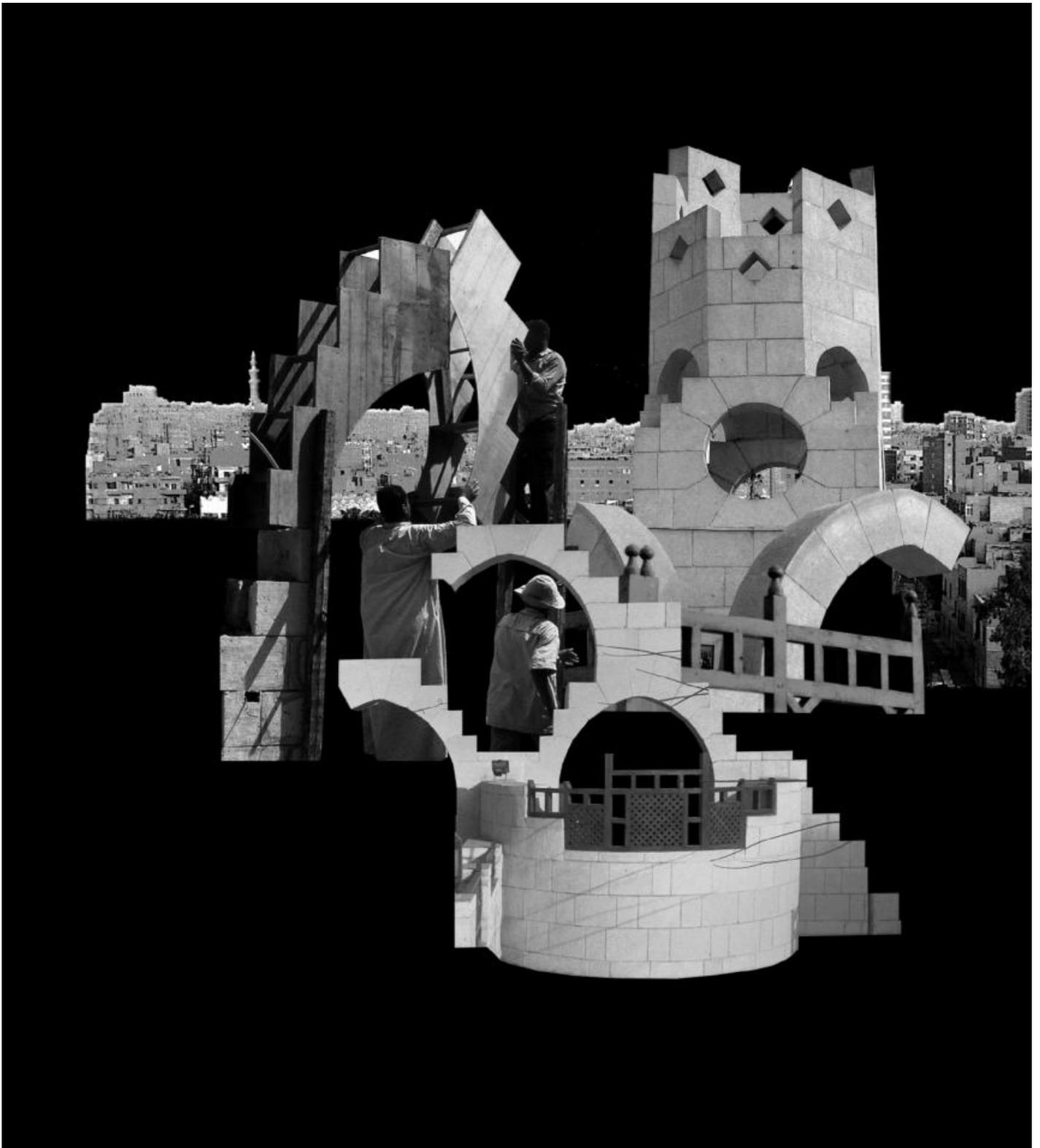
Sprawl and informal urbanism have been the two parallel dynamics of growth in Egyptian cities for the past decades. Where the government has failed to provide, a robust informal economy has been providing lower-middle-class housing, prompting an unprecedented rate of urbanization, development and incursion on scarce agricultural land.

While the under-privileged have resorted to DIY architecture and urbanism, the elite have been hiding out in the safety of new state-sponsored, gated desert suburbs. Instead of confronting the problems of the city at hand, the solution has been escapism. But no matter how many DIY units are produced, thousands of families still lack adequate housing and access to infrastructure.

Social justice — including more equal access to housing, health care and labor opportunities — were among the demands of revolutionaries in 2011. Fueled by the energy of the post-revolutionary context, some architectural researchers found themselves intensely questioning the two trajectories of growth, aiming for a potential fundamental reform. The fruits of their work are presented in the biennale.

In ancient times, Egypt was commonly referred to as “Kemet,” believed to mean the black Nile Delta earth and “Deshret,” the red barren desert. Like these two contrasting ground conditions on which the country stands, Egypt has long had a strong duality. Arguably ruled by authoritarian regimes since Pharaonic times, a continuous tension has run through the course of its development: An elite aligned with the ruling regime invests in its self-interest, and the interests of the rest of the population are left to self-organize.

Informality in this context is not an unintentional consequence of a lack of resources, but a clear strategy to



*A representation of Abdel Halim Ibrahim's built Cultural Park in Sayyeda Zeinab was also presented*

Paradoxes and dualities thus shape the observational scaffolding in which the Egyptian pavilion at the 15th Architecture Biennale is set. As economic opportunities shrink and unemployment soars, there's huge growth in youthful labor including architects and urbanists with no opportunities to practice in the classical sense, as unskilled labor with a strong DIY tradition. Historical layers and a multiplicity of stakeholders on every inch of the complexity, and Egypt's unique geopolitical position make it both a sponge that absorbs agendas and inadvertently secretes a strong odor to those surrounding even if it hasn't been bitten into.

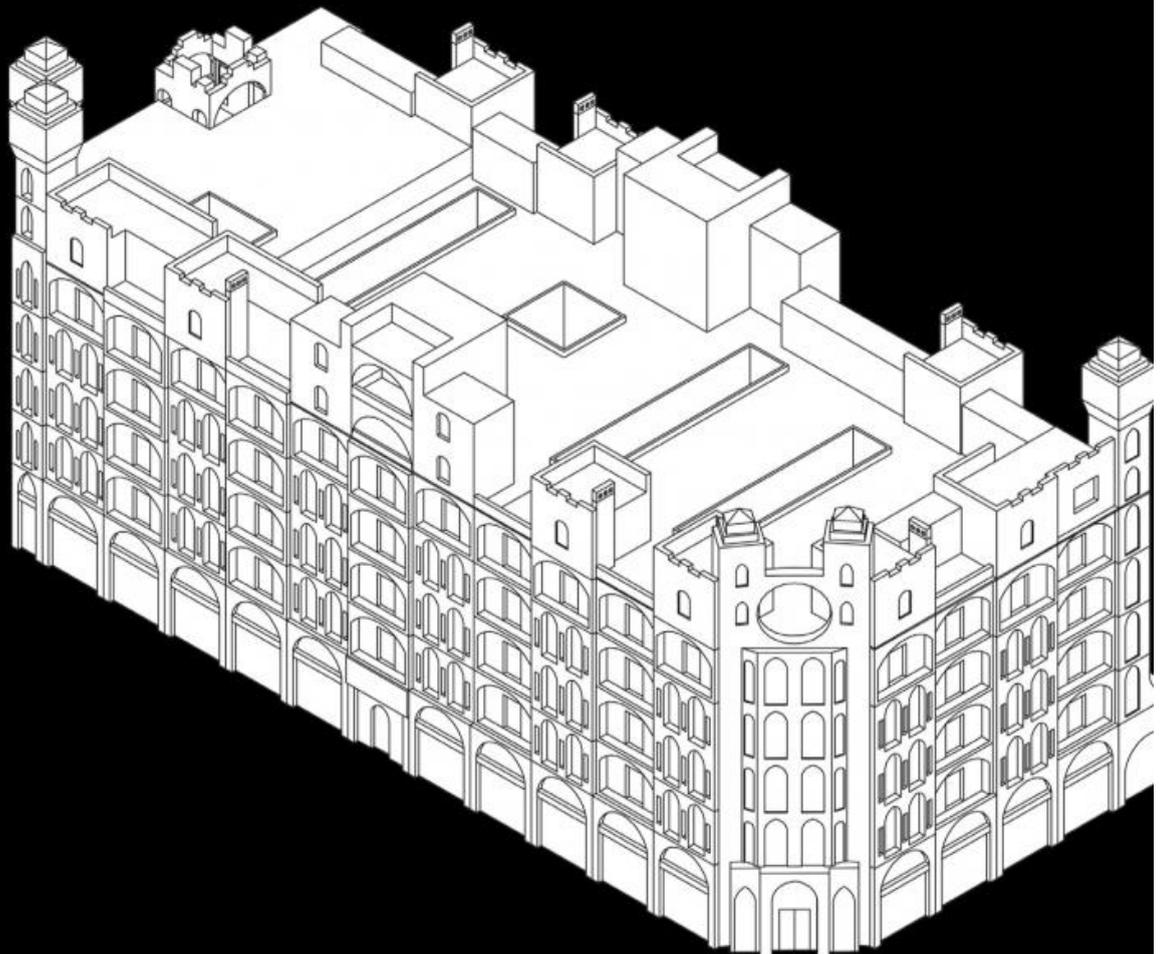
The pavilion is not a comprehensive survey of all initiatives and works produced recently in Egypt. It's an attempt to present to a large audience the work of individuals and collectives searching for new operating models and engaging in a field of critical intellectual inquiry over the past decade. These works demonstrate the interests of a

Mr. AH

"The original Welsh owners sold to the Shurbagi family; then, under Nasser's rule, it was taken by Misr Insurance. The informal additions to the roof were legalized by the owner company later on for rental (after 1952), so now people pay a regular rent. Currently in the building there are normal residents (but few), the Dina's Hostel, some offices and workshops and several private businesses."

Mrs. MF

"I was born here; my children were born here. Now my children have got married: one lives in Al... lives in the US; and I live here in a rooftop dwelling. There are a lot of residents in the building, but many want to drive us out of the apartments: the rent was included the fees for the water company, the electricity (maintenance fees), but now we have to pay much more."



Mr. M

"Downtown had a lot of bookstores in the past; famous people going up to the Sout El Fan studio on the fifth floor used to pass by the bookstore, usually looking for books related to art. Mohammad Naguib also personally visited the bookstore sometimes! He was usually interested in books related to politics"

*Baladilab's published research on downtown Cairo, presented as a mapping initiative*

The mapping projects, like [Architecture and Stories of Downtown](#) by [Baladilab](#), [Mapping Cairo](#) by my own and [Frozen Historic Cairo](#) produced in collaboration with UNESCO, attempt to survey existing conditions through analytical lenses, evident in their representational outputs.

exclusion, gentrification and plans to Disney-fy the historical centers of Egyptian cities.

The experimental projects tentatively propose and sometimes concretely make a mark in the urban context interventions. These included projects such as [CLUSTER's UN Safe Cities](#) and [Downtown Passageways, Cultural Park](#) by [Adelhalim Ibrahim](#), and the [Ard El Liwa Proposals](#) by students at the [MAS Urban Design](#). They are academic endeavors or the work of small agencies attempting to write their own agendas based on engagement with communities and a desire to use local materials and know-how. They are sometimes successful and sometimes unsuccessful in their architectural harvests.

In some instances designers set out with benevolent social agendas but their design processes and solutions do not do justice to them. In other situations, good intentions can lose their original meaning when integrated into wider schemes. This is the case in downtown Cairo, for example, which has radically transformed since 2011. A wider stakeholder participation is essential for architects wishing to operate in this space, but unfortunately that is not always the matter. These problems are not unique to Egypt but are symptomatic of some of the limitations (lack of sense of agency) and intertwined relationships to politics characterizing global architectural and urban practice.

Both scales of production presented at the pavilion, the mapping and experimental projects, collectively address issues of urbanism, sprawl, inequality, lack of agency and conservation. Though the outputs have been vast, poor collaboration between initiatives is felt across the board. The pavilion is a fertile ground to put all these voices in space and open the floor to a conversation among peers that should continue in Egypt beyond the biennale.

Left out of the exhibition is the work of the non-architects who have contributed more to the built environment than architects and urbanists in the past 30 years. Like architects, non-architect designer-builders also face challenges in reshaping the city due to the informality and precarity of their practices. A wider and more inclusive dialogue between architects and urbanists, but also more broadly in civil society, about the built environment should acknowledge their contributions and channels to collaborate with them professionally or professionalize through with better standards.



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

Having highlighted the need for deeper and more intense dialogue, we should also take this opportunity to address pressing questions:

- What are the structural models of these new institutions in the urban field? What do they represent and what do they put forward?
- How are they surviving in the market? What are their support structures? Is it important that they survive?
- What do international and local collaborations in academia entail? What are their political ramifications?
- And most importantly: What practical impact do all these academic, individual or institutional efforts have? What knowledge is produced?