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Book Review: Housing Cairo

Fiona Shipwright

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Housing Cairo: The ~~Informal~~ Response **(http://ruby-press.com/shop/housing-cairo/), edited by Marc Angélil and Charlotte Malterre-Barthes, was published earlier this year by Berlin-based publisher Ruby Press. Recently it won a** **DAM Architectural Award 2016 (http://www.dam-online.de/portal/en/Awards/DAMARCHITECTURALBOOKAWARD/0/0/84596/mod1183-details1/1854.aspx). According to the publisher, the book "illuminates the architecture of informality and its mechanisms of production through a series of theoretical essays and architectural design proposals." Here we present freelance writer and editor Fiona Shipwright's review of the book.**
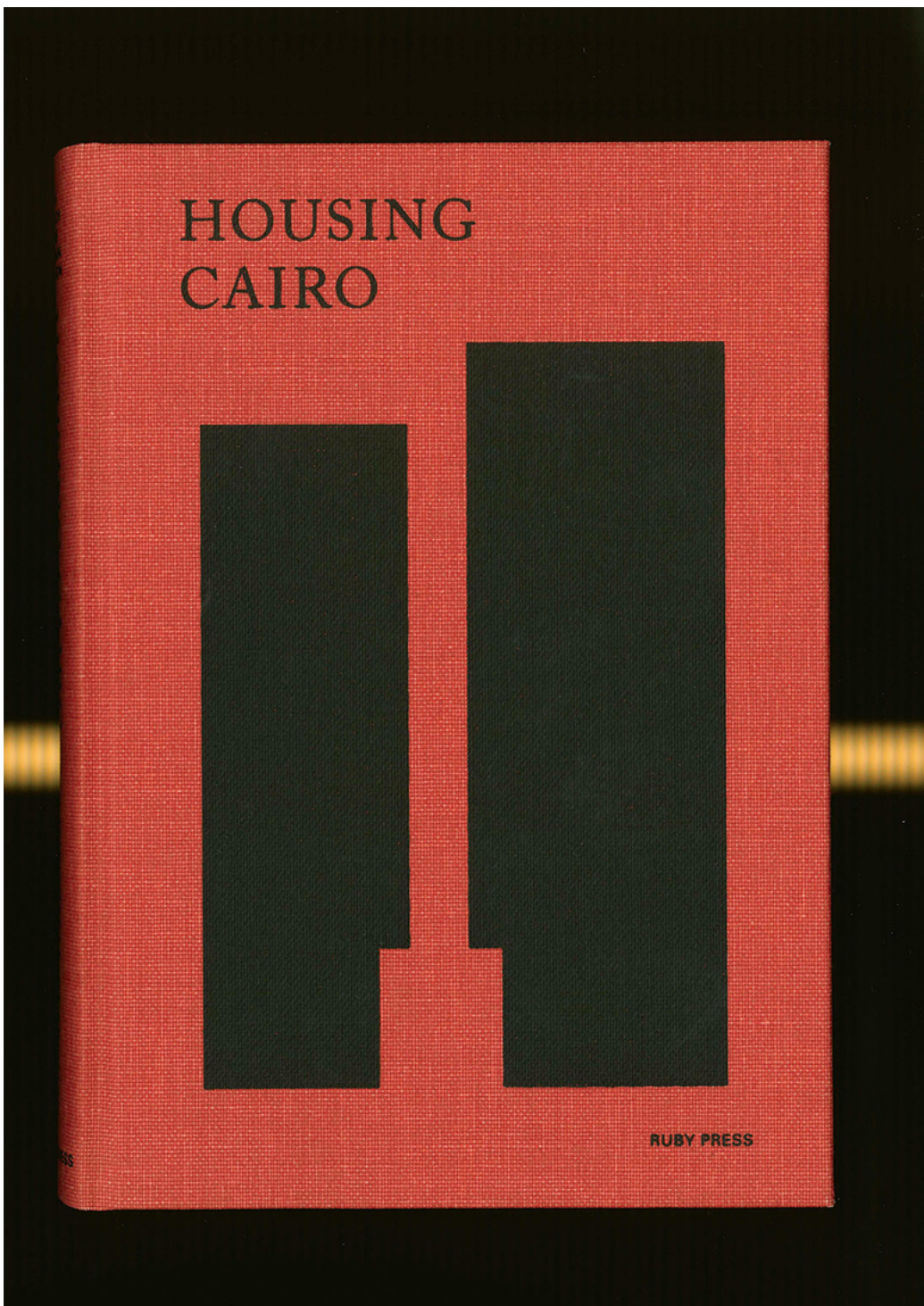
What do we talk about when we talk about informality? *Housing Cairo: The ~~Informal~~ Response* takes this question head on, rooting its investigations within the context of the Egyptian capital. This is ostensibly a book about architecture and urbanism. But in a sense it is fitting to describe it as first and foremost a book about *language*. In recent years it is the language of the informal – both in architectural form and linguistic expression – which has come to dominate discourse on future city-making across the globe. A plethora of terms on the ever-growing nomenclature of the informal abound: self-initiated, homegrown, DIY, guerrilla, and bottom up, to name a few.

These terms are necessary for talking about the direction of cities, but in order to further that discussion, it's useful to consider precisely what these terminologies refer to – and how those meanings change according to context – rather then taking the term "informal" as mere shorthand for "everything that wasn't approved by the authorities." As informal urbanism shifts from being fêted to increasingly fetishized, it is often introduced as if recently discovered anew, an immediate, pop-up "solution" rather than an enduring (decidedly non-spectacular) approach. The reality of the informal is usually far more nuanced and politically complex than its language might imply. And there are few places where this is more apparent than Cairo, a city where the extensive and sophisticated nature of informal urban practice would count as "established" in many other places.

With the practice so widespread in the Egyptian capital, it's strange – patronizing even – to consider this kind of urbanism as something to be "fixed," especially as Greater Cairo's rapidly expanding population of 20 million shows no sign of slowing down. People need housing, whether it's government sanctioned or not. With government strategies failing to address that need, and with the standard of the informal being extremely high, what's needed instead is recognition and integration of such schemes. This notion of acknowledgement was central to the ethos of the architects and planners participating in the Master of Advanced Studies in Urban Design program at ETH Zurich, who undertook the research that underpins the book. Instead of proposing solutions that would supersede this kind of urban practice, the group was interested in "working against the negative perception attached to informal areas and for a stronger engagement of architects and designers in these neighborhoods."

Initiated in 2014 by Charlotte Malterre-Barthes at the Chair of Marc Angélil, in collaboration with design practice Something Fantastic and CLUSTER (Cairo Lab for Urban Studies, Training and Environmental Research), *Housing Cairo* stems from the Master of Advanced Studies's investigation on informal settlements (https://www.arch.ethz.ch/lehre-forschung/mas_urban_design_angelil.html) in the neighbourhood of Ard-el-Liwa. Ard-el-Liwa has gained attention in recent years following the informal construction of some key pieces of infrastructure: namely highway ramps to allow access to the Cairo ring road (http://uncu.be/4MBndO) that passes along one side of the district. With large infrastructure as well as housing provisions now seemingly falling under the unofficial remit of the local population, one can understand why the research team was concerned with "calling for governmental awareness to legalize, recognize and integrate these areas as an essential part of the city."


But to speak a "new" language with which to achieve all that, it's necessary to come to grips with the old one first. It's fitting then that the book opens with an "anti-glossary," with expert contributors situating just what informality *doesn't* mean within the context of Cairo. The first section of the book then goes on to investigate how approaches towards informal urbanism have been part of government policy past and present – at best, displaying that aforementioned tendency to "fix"; at worst, fixated on eradication. This includes the various "desert city" projects, located far from the existing urban center, which have sought to redistribute both population and resources yet so far have drawn only a small number of middle and upper class residents. Examination of these schemes neatly illustrates the point that it is a mistake to see informal and formal as binary opposites. When the distinction between the two is taken as simply as this, the informal becomes a means of fueling neoliberal manifestations of the formal. More appropriate is editor Charlotte Malterre-Barthes' choice of language on this point: she uses the analogy of a thermometer to discuss the gradient that exists between and thus *joins up* the two.

With historical (and potential future) failings introduced, the second section of the book delves right into the heart of the Ard-el-Liwa neighborhood, conducting an architectural survey of five built examples which have emerged from the long running practice of Cairo informalism. What's particularly interesting here is the fact that this assessment takes place not through the lens of sociology or ethnography but through a firmly architectural one. The focus is on contributing to an architectural record that is largely absent, and doing so through the traditional means of representation employed by architects. This drive to document is interesting when contrasted with the portrayal of the aforementioned desert city proposals. Such projects – one being the Muburak government's 2008 plan, Cairo 2050, discussed in Alice Merche and Stamatina Lamprou's text "Delusional Cairo" – are characterized by their tendency to use glossy renderings to place the schemes in a visual context that can be easily grasped without necessarily paying attention to the details, thereby channeling such global centers as London or a Paris.

Conducting a survey of the informal, however, is interesting precisely because you don't get to see it beforehand; there's no approval process based upon a visual before and after. This is architecture that comes from the city, not designed remotely and then dropped into it. In keeping with the idea of "language" in documenting these structural qualities, *Housing Cairo* acts a little like a thesaurus for architects, allowing them to re-engage with and see informality as a language they in fact already speak, not one that have to learn from scratch (they're perhaps just a bit rusty on the grammar). Following this survey is a section entitled Another Architecture, comprised of seven urban design proposals for Ard-el-Liwa that encompass and build upon informal practices but, taking that idea of acknowledgement further, also facilitate the production of "legitimate" affordable housing. Here we learn that "each project is, at least as far as financing is concerned, playing by the rules of the game, yet each elaborates a strategy of resistance." Each of the proposals pleads for "the re-engagement of architects in the production of the city, beyond the formal/informal dichotomy."

This summer that field work, and the resulting proposals in the form of 1:20 models of Ard-el-Lewa, was on display in the *Constellation.s* (http://www.constellations.arcenreve.com/) exhibition at Arc En Rêve-Centre d'Architecture in Bordeaux, fifteen years after the legendary show *Mutations* (http://oma.eu/publications/mutations), the joint venture between Rem Koolhaas/OMA and the Harvard Project on the City that looked at the phenomenon of accelerated urbanization. The work is also part of the Egyptian pavilion at this year's Venice Architecture Biennale (http://www.world-architects.com/en/architecture-news/by-tag/1/venicebiennale); within the wider theme of "Reporting From the Front," (http://www.world-architects.com/architecture-news/insight/Reporting_on_Reporting_from_the_Front_6166) the Egyptian contribution is entitled *Reframing Back//Imperative Confrontations*. The exhibition attempts to not only survey these kinds of initiatives but also introduce this type of production to a wider audience, so that these strategies may transcend any negative connotations and find both greater acceptance and application.
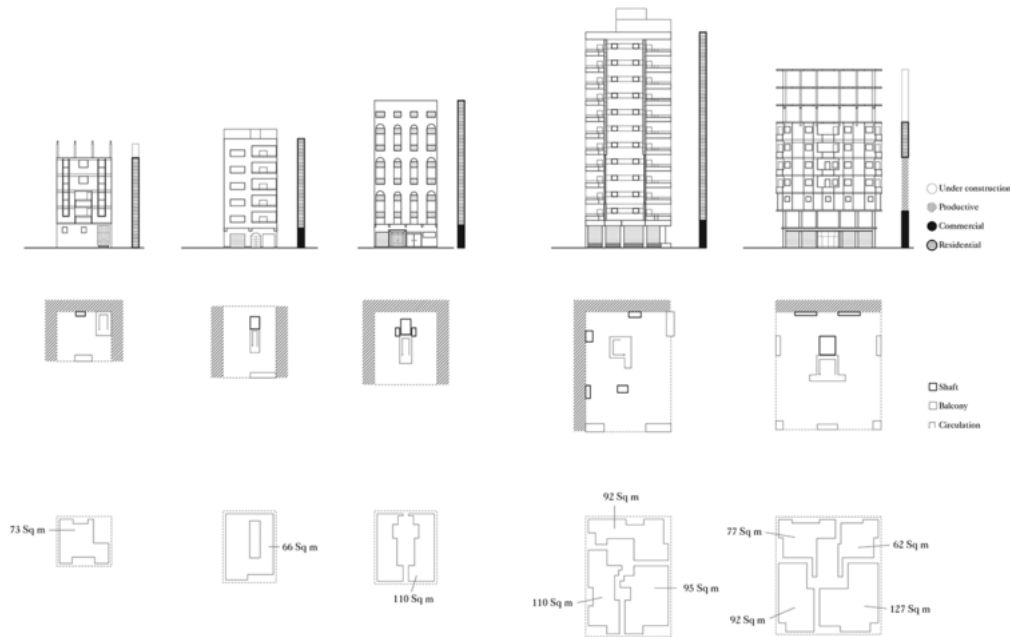
Losing the negative language is key here. The Arabic term which refers to the the self-built neighborhoods, *ashwa'iyyat*, is translated in the anti-glossary as literally "chaotic." But as Marc Angélil and Carey Siress remark in the book's conclusion: "On the contrary, informality in this context is highly organized." While this organization remains unsanctioned, "what results is a parallel society, one beyond official norms, yet guided by its own logic." The language that underpins this logic is not that used by the country's architecture schools, which are instead training architects towards the Cairo 2050 models. Added to that is the fact that beyond the walls of the academy, much of this discussion takes place in English. Addressing this point, *Housing Cairo* includes an Arabic translation of Charlotte Malterre-Barthes' text, *A Story of Construction*, at the close of the book.

Beyond the written word, there is the photographic meta-layer designed by Something Fantastic that runs through the book, reframing and appreciating the visual language and design intelligence of "undersigned" neighborhoods like Ard-el-Liwa, which are characterized by directness, pragmatism, efficiency and sometimes surprise. In turn, these qualities become underlying princples guiding the the book's design. This idea of reframing the language of the informal is best embodied by a simple formatting decision, the appearance of the book's title on the spine: the word "informal" is simply crossed out, reading *Housing Cairo: The ~~Informal~~ Response*. That, truly, is what all this is: a response. Becoming overly concerned with the formal – or otherwise – trappings of that response is a little like choosing to read the alphabet instead of all that can be constructed from it.

Fiona Shipwright (http://shipwright.berlin/) is a writer and editor in Berlin, originally from London, who focuses on architecture, urbanism and culture. She is a founding member of the &beyond collective, and between September 2014 and April 2016 she was an editor for uncube, the digital magazine for architecture and beyond. She currently works as an editor with Ruby Press. Her review of Housing Cairo was written before she assumed her position at Ruby Press.

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