



Khairallah Sketches Project

Azza Ezzat

Ezbet Khairallah's massive informality and continued struggle to exist, as more ambitious plans to modernize the city take place, raises questions how are cities built and how do communities come and live together. The density of historical layers and the shadows of former cities (ruins, monuments, traces,..etc) constantly confront any attempt to deal with the city as a modern tabula rasa. Cairo is never just a flat, empty plane, and herein lies the challenge.

This work pays tribute to shadows, phantom presences and memories, that are embedded within the fabric of the city, even if the process of how the city evolves is rooted in acts of constant erasure and refabrication. The work then becomes more than just memorialization, but an artistic engagement with the lived and continued interactions with the city, that continues to challenge us in trying and unexpected ways.

Khairallah Sketches is an ongoing project that started in 2015 through organic explorations of the urban fabric of the city of Cairo and its myriad complexity. Employing methodologies of visual mapping, illustrations, and graphic experimentation, the project mirrors and attempts to expand the possibilities and meaning of being in the city.

In the absence of adequate planning and the ever-increasing conflicting policymaking from different government bodies, and the usual marginalization of the periphery, it was up to the increasing flux of dislocated urban residents of the settlement to improvise and find a way to coordinate amongst themselves for basic resources (water, electricity, sewage system,...etc). This improvised, instantaneous mode of planning might not have always served the interests of the residents or sufficiently responded to the challenges of their environment and larger, long-term needs.

The tenor of the conflict between "informal residents" and the central mode of planning escalated as plans to extend a main road through the settlement, splitting the dense urban quarter in two. Contesting the state's label of informality and desire to "legalize" the status of ownership for the residents, has been an ongoing battle over the past three decades.

Developed through waves of migration and settlement over more than five decades, Ezbet Khairallah epitomizes the resilience of the inhabitants of the city as they confront the dual effect of centralization and marginalization.

The settlement situated over a rocky plateau, making it hostile and difficult for construction work, was originally a site for a gunpowder factory and warehouse (1829) dating back to the reign of Muhammad Ali.

With pressure to modernize a largely agrarian economy and population, by the mid-twentieth century, a consistent trend of extending the urban fabric of Cairo all around the city would start to take shape. With the rate of population growth and migration to the capital being much faster than what the central government would have anticipated and in many cases the central government chose not to address the underlying causes of this rural to urban shift.

Illustration of the outline of Ezbet Khairallah, courtesy of the Agency of the Aga Khan Development Network via Tadamun Initiative, published 25.12.2013

