

Cycling on Route 10: An elemental geography of contemporary Cairo

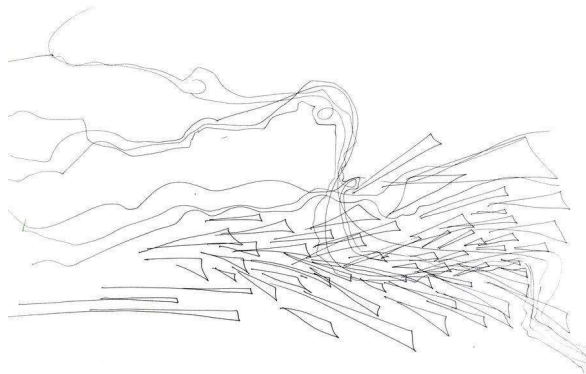
Context and Rationale

This proposed project brings an academic geographer and an artist in mutual conversation to interrogate infrastructural extensions in contemporary Cairo, Egypt. The project intersects between a very personal and pragmatic reality of the artist (a diabetic woman who does not own a car) and a deep interest in finding other ways to navigate the city that takes into account the incredible challenges posed by Cairo itself as an urban context: lack of infrastructure to support alternative or green modes of transportation, absence of pedestrian spaces or cycling lanes, wilful destruction of large swathes of green spaces across different parts of the city, and the frantic construction of highways across several densely populated urban districts, making it even more difficult to move across Cairo's urban space.

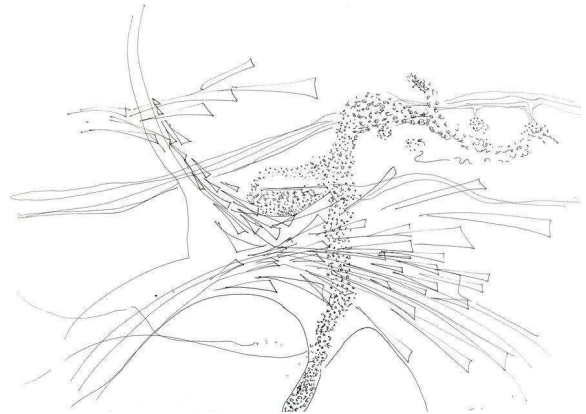


Azza Ezzat, Nasr City Bridges, 2019, 50×50cm, pen and ink on paper

The project's main objective is to try and find ways, through collaboration and a multidisciplinary approach, to make the city habitable again, easier to navigate, and to think of new and radical ways to make that possible. One very central idea to achieve that is to shift the focus of looking at a city from the perspective of a planner, a government official, a cartographer, and look at it from the point of view of the quotidian perspective. It is precisely at that level, that a different perception of the city becomes possible. The infrastructure designed to escape old Cairo relies on desire for a sanitized urban life that leaves the messy entanglements behind. This has been generating a lot of critiques and legitimate fears that Cairo will be reduced to nothing else than a network of endless highways. Yet we contend that these undesired entanglements haunt the very infrastructural extension that is designed with the intent of glossing over them.



Azza Ezzat, Above the bridge study- Nasr City Bridges, Bridges, 2019, 42×29cm, pen on paper



Azza Ezzat, Under the bridge study- Nasr city 2019, 42×29cm, pen on paper

The research project focuses on one road, *Route 10*. Route 10, is a highway that is part of the extended road infrastructure that connects the city proper with its new extensions. The project will utilize different media to articulate the artists' impressions of Route 10 as she traces its elemental and sensorial geography as experienced through cycling (roughly 14 KM). In the context of greater Cairo, cycling on this scale is not common or accessible.



Azza Ezzat, Sensorial Snapshot (Tumbleweed Detail), 2022
7 ink on paper drawings, various dimensions (average size 70×15 cm)

However, through decentring private cars as the dominant way of experiencing this route, the artist will address the various elements that make up these infrastructures. As these highways

are walled, Ezzat attunes herself to the olfactory, sonic, and multi-sensorial-scapes that are hidden behind the concrete walls of the highways. She traces the non-human (such as flies, bugs, urban animals, weather, atmospheres, dust, debris that interject her path as she cycles) as well as the human (non private-car owners, companions on the road), who would typically be seen as “out of place” on this highway. This is what we propose to understand as an elemental geography of urban reality.



Azza Ezzat, Sensorial Snapshot (Flies Detail), 2022
7 ink on paper drawings, various dimensions (average size 70×15 cm)

Research expertise

The project brings together three partners and builds on their academic research experience in urban and creative geography, and a long-standing critical and curatorial practice in the Arab Region about urban memory, as well as a multidisciplinary, participatory artistic practice.

Curator: Ismail Fayed. Fayed is a writer, critic and educator based in Cairo. He has worked with key regional institutions and platforms (Mada Masr, Townhouse Gallery, Contemporary Image Collective, Cairo Institute for Liberal Arts and Sciences...etc) and internationally (The Museum of Modern Art in New York). His interests span a broad range of contemporary artistic practices ranging from visual arts, to performing arts, to contemporary Arabic literature. In 2016 he co-founded the History and Cultural Memory Forum, a series of seminars and publications examining the realities of the Arab world post-2011. He was the associate editor for the MoMA's publication, *Modern Art in the Arab World: Primary Documents* (2018) and has contributed to numerous publications such as *ArteEast*, *Aperture*, *Nafas Art Magazine*, *Nachtkritik*, *Mada Masr*, *Ma3azef*, *Manshoor*, among many others.

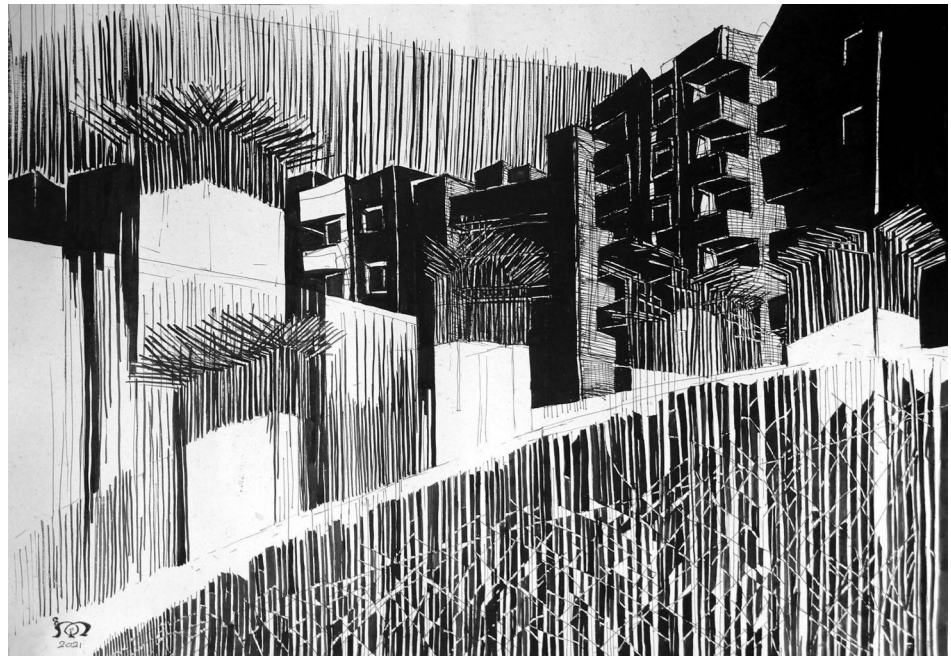
Academic: Aya Nassar. Nassar is a lecturer in the geohumanities (the intersection of human geography, art, and the humanities) in Royal Holloway, the University of London in the UK. Her research focuses on post-independence Cairo, interrogating politics of space, archives, elemental geography, memory and storytelling. She has published on Memory and commemoration in urban space and aesthetics and poetics of space in Cairo. She has collaborated with Egyptian (Ezzat) and International (Heidi Fasnacht and Jenny Perlin in NYU) Artists, and she is one of the editors of the bilingual platform *Arab Urbanism*.

Artist: Azza Ezzat is a Cairo based visual artist. She is interested in urban observations and detecting human traces in the built environment. Between the planning of the formal city and the reactions of informal communities, Ezzat searches for hidden cities that are built by impressions, memories and perceptions. Through her practice, Ezzat attends to fragments and shards of urban space, creating an altered and playful map of the city.

Relevance to the Region

This interdisciplinary project builds on a long-standing collaboration among the three partners that consistently investigates urban politics, infrastructure, architecture in creative forms. By focusing on breaking down a road to a series of visual elements, this project will unpack the perceived notions about infrastructural extension in contemporary Cairo. With the construction of the new administrative capital, the current regime undertook a massive construction of a highway network in the old city. The project engages the perspective of the everyday dweller navigating an ever-changing destruction of the urban fabric. The project is in conversation with elemental geography and geographies of mobility which have, so far, not been addressed in the context of Cairo. The project opens the possibility of creating an alternative geography and democratizing the notion of planning beyond the single will of a regime. This has implications for creative practice about infrastructural questions (extensions, build-up as well as failure) in other Arab countries: Occupied Palestine and Lebanon come immediately to mind.

The project will be a crucial phase in Ezzat's ongoing multidisciplinary practice, as it sets a precedent for an artist-based initiative to address issues of mobility and infrastructure in a city like Cairo. The project will consolidate Ezzat's network in the region and will extend her practice and research network in the UK amongst those interested in Creative Geographies and Global Urbanism. The project builds on a small research development fund from the University of Durham, Department of Geography in which Nassar and Ezzat worked on investigating urban processes during COVID-19, resulting in two exhibitions and an academic paper (under review).



Azza Ezzat, Bridges, pen & ink on paper, 35×50cm, 2021, part of “Kites, Billboards and Bridges” research project

Research Methodology and Analytical Tools

Academic research:

- Months 1-2: Desk-based research will involve a two-month literature review and write up on the themes of sensory geographies, elemental geography and poetics of infrastructure.
- Months 3-6: Secondary research will involve reliance on media outlets reporting on, and commenting on Route 10 and similar road construction.
- Months 6-10: Write-up and translation.

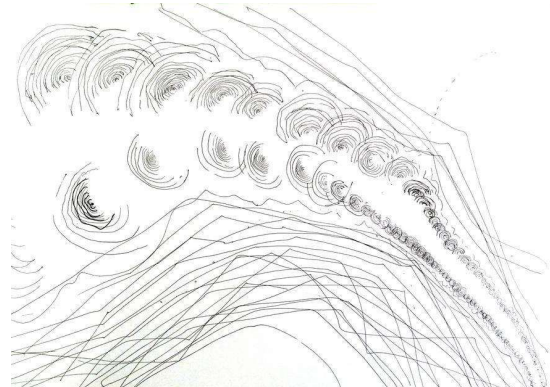
Artistic Practice:

The artistic practice of the project aims to create an extensive library of maps, footage, digital traces of the ongoing journey of navigating Cairo and its urban reality. The alternative practices of navigating and exploring the city will engender substantive material that itself serves as documentation and possible representation for the work and the research process behind it.

The research methodology would then entail:

- digital surveying of the urban landscape

The digital surveying will use specialized cameras, geo-tagging techniques, and navigation and timing applications, which will build an archive of maps, routes, itineraries of moving across Cairo which all reflect an alternative experience-- that is the experience of pedestrians, bicycle riders,...etc. An experience that rarely gets featured in a city like Cairo, and an experience that reveals radically different experiences of the city and its changing reality. The archive will include daily footage and GPS maps of different routes cutting across the city (from east to west, or north to south). The footage will include images, videos and stills, that capture a different side of the city which vehicle passengers might not be able to perceive or register and that would require a different mode of engaging with the city. Highlighting the need to slow down, literally, to the pace and position of a pedestrian or a bicycle rider and to experience the city from a pace and a perspective that takes into account the multifaceted reality, is a much-needed exercise in reflection and documentation.



Azza Ezzat, Lighting Flicker Study, Nasr City Roads, 2019, 42x29cm, pen on paper

- ethnographic mapping

Ethnographic mapping which will include reflections, interviews and interventions from other residents, citizens and individuals affected by and enmeshed in this urban reality. The ethnographic mapping would be a complement to the digital surveying in showing the perspective of different subjects whose everyday lives are shaped by the changing urban reality, as well as the ways in which they are responding and thinking about that change.

This is strikingly relevant to other major urban centers in the region, where also historical cities are undergoing profound changes related to urban expansion and modernization. Raising questions about how historical sediments and uses of the city are going to be integrated or wiped out in that process of constructions/destruction. Whereas other cities might not be as dense or with similar urban complexity and heterogeneity, they nonetheless face similar questions with regard to the weight of the past and limits and usefulness of capitalist-fuelled expansion.

- Sonic and audio mapping of the different urban experiences

Another significant aspect that rarely receives any attention or analysis is the soundscape of the city. In a densely populated city like Cairo, sound becomes a defining feature of the urban experience and the construction of a network of highways amplifies a particular kind of sound at the expense of other sounds and sonic experiences. Through creating digital recordings of different daily trips across the city, the artist will accumulate an archive of sound that reflects that changing reality, from the sound of urban dwellers, inhabitants and their interactions, to the sound of fast moving vehicles across a highway. The contrasting sonic experiences will reflect the changing nature of the urban experience and will also highlight the changing dynamics of the urban environment.

A project Schedule

Description of research outcomes and how we intend to take it forward

The project will consolidate Nassar's, Ezzat's and Fayed's collaboration on the creative geographies of Cairo. It is planned upon completion this project will develop this collaboration in three directions:

1) Outputs:

- A series (6-9) of visual renditions of different elements from the road, based on Ezzat's field work. These will be hosted online as part of a digital publication.
- Non-academic publication co-authored by Nassar and Fayed to accompany the visual artwork in the digital publication.
- A multi-authored academic article to be submitted to a multidisciplinary journal receptive to creative urban geography: Geohumanities, Cultural Geography or City.

2) Future extension for the project:

- The visual artwork will act as a prototype for a follow-up exhibition to explore the city via its ever-expanding road network and will be commissioned, in collaboration with local spaces and galleries. Each artist would be given a route connecting one old urban center to a new satellite settlement, and each artist would develop their own impression of the urban/non-urban environment based on their practice and interest.
- Further Research: It is envisaged that a next phase of research will include interviews and workshop series with different constituencies that have to live along with the various typologies from the old urban centers to the new satellite settlements. Those constituencies would include, everyday service workers, builders, food supply personnel, watchmen,...etc