
Intraviews

Ahmed Zaazaa, Omnia Khalil, Ibrahim Abdo, Khaled Adham, Deena Khalil, Shehab Ismail, Abdulrahman El-Taliawi and Yahia Shawkat 2022: Nashtari Kul shay' [We Buy Everything: Housing and Urban Changes in Cairo]. Cairo: Dar al-Maraya

Local urban knowledge in Egypt is decidedly Arabic. However, international knowledge production about urban challenges in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) is mostly written in English, with a strong parallel Francophone tradition. Architects, urban planners and engineers are usually trained bilingually, and much critical social science and urban studies scholarship on the region has emerged in English. This dichotomy between the Arabic of everyday urban practice and anglicized knowledge production results in discrepancies and a resistance to conforming to mainstream international publishing tropes, revealing the inherent power relations within publishing practices.

Recently, in response to increasing state interventions in the urban sphere across the MENA region—alongside a revival of fierce public debates about how cities in these countries are shaped—knowledge production in Arabic has been prioritized in the project to engage public awareness, as illustrated by bilingual platforms such as [Jadaliyya Cities](#) and [Arab Urbanism](#). Focusing on a particular example of this trend, this intraview examines a recently published edited volume written in Arabic by scholars and practitioners working on urban issues in Egypt.

Architect and urban researcher Yahia Shawkat—a strong advocate of producing publicly accessible urban knowledge for as wide an audience as possible—has published in English on [Egypt's housing crisis](#) and in Arabic on [social justice and the built environment](#). The inception of this edited volume began during conversations with the editors at a [local publishing house](#) and historian Shehab Ismail, and was visualized as a way to produce knowledge for public consumption away from the usual academic tropes and journalistic essays. Instead, reaching out to include a wide range of academics and practitioners, the editors' vision was to think through how authors can appeal to an Egyptian audience as they begin to take stock of some of the radical urban changes affecting citizens in today's built environment. The final result is this book, with its title borrowed from the local urban signage used by flea market wholesale dealers and seen all around Egypt, especially in Cairo:

We Buy Everything: Housing and Urban Changes in Cairo

نشترى كل شيء: تحولات السكن والعمران في مصر

This signage sets the stage for the book's central contention and research question: 'Can you really buy everything?' The question lies at the heart of recent

privatization and commodification practices of state-led urban development and urban service delivery. This overarching theme emerged from collaborative practices between the editors and authors, as a process of thinking together about the common threads emerging from their respective research approaches. While Shawkat's initial proposition focused on commodification and housing, the group's multiple discussions led to the emergence of several themes that approach commodification in context, such as including a historicizing angle, focusing on generational shifts and family housing, understanding the evolution of legislative frameworks, and highlighting contentious formal and informal relationships, among others.

Centered within these discussions was the clear need for knowledge produced in Arabic that could be accessed by a non-expert audience. As post-2011 uprisings scholars, the sense of duty to democratize academic knowledge was shared by all the authors. However, writing in Arabic was no easy task—the editing and writing process was very time-consuming—but it was seen as a liberating exercise, casting off the shackles of academic writing in English. Authors were encouraged to 'have fun with it', and the resulting narratives provide a clear personalized edge and engaging stories about how urban lives often border on the surreal, while remaining grounded in scientific frameworks and methods.

Throughout the book, the authors provide empirical case studies of the ways in which institutional frameworks and public policies, recent national projects and state action have followed neoliberal logics that bypass the public interest and restrict the right to the commons. There is a clear chronological narrative covering 100 years of urban planning sectors, infrastructure and violence. Across eight chapters, the authors use multiple conceptual frameworks and data sources to construct episodes that critically assess the impact of macro- and micro-policy decisions in urban citizens' everyday lives. In what follows, we summarize selected chapters and offer a few reflections by some of the book's authors and editors whom we were able to interview.

The first substantive chapter after the Introduction provides an in-depth analysis of the provision and commercialization of water and sanitation services in nineteenth-century Egypt. Shehab Ismail explains how the first step of colonial and state practices in governing the water services sector was to develop and follow Western conceptions of health and hygiene (by ending 'native' social practices like public baths, for example), and the second was to instill engineering principles according to 'modernist ideals' of provision (including setting water prices for the first time).

Ismail details the socio-economic impact of these public works improvements and also traces the archival record of public dissent against these policies, breaking the myth of an apathetic 'native' population. Given that this is one of the overtly historical chapters in the volume, the group emphasized the need to trace the roots of commodification practices, particularly the extent to which they resemble and direct today's policy approaches. Centering past practices in urban discussions further problematizes the underlying logics of neoliberalization and supports the contextualization of these logics in time and space.

Moving to the middle of the twentieth century, the second chapter provides a unique personal account of two major legislative landmarks in the history of housing in modern Egypt: the end of religious endowments for land in the 1950s and the introduction of rent control laws in the 1960s. Abdelrahman El-Taliawi takes us

through a series of old family letters, legal documents and decrees from his own grandfather to tell the story of one of Cairo's oldest neighborhoods, Bab El Shaariya, while also providing a simplified legislative summary of laws and procedures affecting housing at the time. These policies constitute an important episode in the history of housing, as they continue to determine the dynamics of demand and supply in an expanding Cairo to this day.

The chapter outlines how these factors directly affected social mobility, as well as a lack of investment in new buildings due to the lengthy legal procedures and controlled rents, among others. This is one of the early signs of the government's policy approach to centralizing control over the system by increasing bureaucratic complexity and technicality. This chapter also elaborates how challenging it can be to research endowment documentation in Egypt, citing the different permits and approvals needed to access the historical archives. As El-Taliawi explains:

I finally made it to the endowment papers of my family's building in the documentation authority after many turns in dark hallways in the Ministry's headquarters in Cairo, and avoiding suspicious looks that follow you around as soon as you ask about the endowment archives.

'وصلت إلى حجة العقار من دار الوثائق بعد رحلة في أروقة ودهاليز مظلمة بمقر الوزارة ببابالوق، وعبر نظرات الاشتهاب التي ترمق ما أن تبدأ في السؤال عن الأرشيف'

The book continues its exploration of gray legislation in the housing sector, where chapter 5 examines the informality-ridden process of documenting private property contracts. This is one of the most captivating chapters for readers, in which Shawkat describes a prevalent legal issue that all Egyptians have heard of or personally been subjected to: the 'over-crowding of buyers' or sale of property to multiple buyers. Since the 1940s, property has been fraudulently sold to several buyers due to a legal loophole exploited by shady brokers. Shawkat uses official court rulings to enumerate the vivid personal tragedies of buyers caught in a long and opaque legal process to figure out who actually owns the properties, highlighting the slew of victims left behind. The author critiques the latest changes in real estate regulations in 2019, which have ignored these long-standing gray areas and simply focused on the revenue to be collected from legalizing tenure. This case study highlights the overarching argument of the book: that the government's most recent housing policies prioritize profit maximization while 'off-loading' the state's responsibilities onto citizens and civil society.

Omnia Khalil in the final chapter examines a third typology of urban development neoliberalization by detailing the ethnography of a crucial informal market in Cairo and the challenges faced by street vendors, especially female workers. This chapter explores how violence, whether actual or potential, has been commodified in everyday commercial activities. Khalil, an architect turned urban anthropologist, provides personal insights about the inner workings of this informal market. Through qualitative interviews and life histories, she recounts the story of how street vendors in informal markets are bullied into making protection payments by powerful individuals. Street vendors make these payments based on promises to keep their place in the market and be given sufficient warning before the authorities'

periodical patrols can confiscate their wares or evict them from the premises. The author illustrates how the lack of policy regulation for these markets creates the space for extortion practices like these to flourish—which is in itself a policy decision, as the state is either unable or unwilling to regulate these markets. This policy inaction results in spaces that can be co-opted by powerful actors:

Public spaces, or spaces which are not used in the public domain, have become highly contentious spaces where individuals who are not organized in any official way attempt to control and profit from this absence. All attempts to regulate these commercial practices have failed.

تحولت المساحات الفضاء بمعنى غير المخصص لها استخدام واضح، والعامّة في نفس الوقت إلى أماكن يتسابق عليها أشخاص لا كيانات لهم لفرض السيطرة عليها وتحويلها لمصدر كسب المال ودر الربح. وباعت معظم محاولات تقنين الممارسة التجارية بالفشل.

Consequently, the author deconstructs the processes by which individuals gain control over public space for financial gain—often not through violence per se, but by the threat of it. The author identifies these practices as the ‘commodification of violence’, where violence or its avoidance becomes a product to be bought in the market. These practices are not hidden and are often depicted in several popular historical and contemporary Egyptian TV and drama representations, which solidifies acceptance of these practices in the public imaginary. Commenting on her experience of writing in Arabic for a general audience on this topic, the author highlights the need to produce knowledge that is close to ordinary citizens:

I believe producing literature should essentially be for the sake of knowledge- sharing with the public, not just for academic purposes or journals. I even feel guilty when I get an article published in a journal in English if I do not follow up by publishing the Arabic translation [as well].

Ultimately, this collection brings together some of the most recent scholarship on the neoliberal evolution of housing policy in Cairo. While the Introduction discusses the overarching argument concerning the commodification of almost all urban-related matters, the individual chapters provide excellent anecdotes that detail the impact of this commodification on citizens’ everyday lives.

In order to counter the diversity of narratives, a concluding chapter would have helped to bring together these different episodes to show how they support each other in building a local neoliberal variant of urban development in a megacity like Cairo. Some of these themes could highlight how modernist ideals and technocratic expertise led to the evolution of the real estate sector, connections with dissent, and the changing ways in which citizens shoulder the burden of neoliberal transformations. Also, the inclusion of other sectors that could provide counter-narratives to these case studies—the electricity sector and the informal public transportation network, for example—would have added nuance and complexity to

these themes by bringing in other actors such as the private sector and grassroots communities which currently sideline these state practices.

Essentially, the book leaves the reader wanting to learn (or unlearn) the ways we are taught to think about the forces that shape our cities—including security, commodification, top-down approaches to urban planning and greedy legal frameworks—and to retain the memories of dissent, destruction and erasure that cities like Cairo are now facing. While the collection provides a much-needed intervention by centering Egyptian voices (particularly those of marginalized and ordinary citizens), we would have liked to see a stronger engagement with developing conceptual frameworks that are grounded in local knowledges and how they push against the mainstream tropes of urban studies. In addition, our interviews with some of the editors and authors also stressed the importance of including secondary cities outside Cairo, which would provide another layer of analysis to the study of neoliberal localization and dissent beyond the centers of capital. Ultimately, the publication of this book in Arabic brilliantly paves the way for bringing urban studies closer to those affected by urban policies in their daily lives, and enlarges the political project of local knowledge production.

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