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العمرانية الهوية in crisis

REDEFINING VERNACULAR ARCHITECTURE IN CAIRO

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URBAN IDENTITY IN CRISI

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INTRODUCTION

This research stems from a critical reflection on the urban processes of growth that trigger the construction of new cities in Egypt, in particular the development of the New Administrative Capital (NAC) that sits 45 km to the East of Cairo.

Over the last 50 years, Cairo's built environment has exploded onto its agricultural land, both formally and informally,¹ within its urban fabric, and into the desert around it, in the shape of desert archipelagoes.² This is clearly visible when comparing satellite imagery from 1985 and 2020. Egypt's government promotes the new capital as the key to reducing Cairo's urban load as a result of its explosive metropolitan population,³ currently at 21.3 million projected to over 40 million by 2050.⁴ The NAC is well underway with ongoing construction clearly visible on site and from neighboring cities such as New Cairo.

What is striking about the NAC, besides the scale of the development, is its architectural and urban narrative. The narrative here entails not only the discourse through which the government presents the project to the public, but also the spatial experience, architectural expression and organization of space. The city from scratch departs from its predecessor, Cairo, taking seemingly little to no reference from it. Unfortunately "the words chaotic, overcrowded, cacophonous, disorganized, confusing, polluted, dirty, teeming, sprawling, and so on"⁵ are what seem to come to the minds of the government and city planners. In an effort to establish legitimacy and a new stronghold to represent the prosperity of the regime, the government seems to have been eager to move away from Cairo altogether and start with a blank canvas in the desert,⁶ focusing on gestures of power and grandeur and not on the needs and everyday lives of the population.⁷

1 Examined and explained in extensive detail in chapter 7 of Yahia Shawkat's book, *Egypt's Housing Crisis*, listing examples in both rural and urban areas at formal and informal capacities.

Yahia Shawkat and David Sims, *Egypt's Housing Crisis: The Shaping of Urban Space* (Cairo New York: The American University in Cairo Press, 2020), 222-246.

2 David Sims, *Understanding Cairo: The Logic of a City Out of Control*, (Cairo ; New York: The American University in Cairo Press, 2012), 59-62.

3 Aya Al Tawy, 'Egypt's Sisi Officially Launches New Administrative Capital Project', *Ahram Online*, 11 October 2017, <https://english.ahram.org.eg/News/278593.aspx>.

4 Cairo's metropolitan population was 3.7 million in 1960 and has reached 21.3 million in 2021. World Bank Open Data, Egypt, Arab Rep., 2021. ID EN.URB.LCTY. License CC BY-4.0. Accessed April 20, 2023. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/EN.URB.LCTY?locations=EG&view=chart>

5 Sims, *Understanding Cairo*, 1-2.

The aim of this work is to observe, analyze and reflect on the social, cultural, economic, urban, architectural, (in)formal, and political layers of Cairo to examine the need to return to the vernacular in search for a local identity. The city offers an opportunity to dig deeper into its fabric and extract narratives of how people live their everyday lives and adapt their built environment to their needs, beyond the physical space that exists, from its urban core and historic centers to its desert cities and extensions.

6 There seems to be a relationship between the choice of location and the Suez Canal expansion, one of the many mega projects set in motion.

Declan Walsh and Vivian Yee, 'A New Capital Worthy of the Pharaohs Rises in Egypt, but at What Price?', *The New York Times*, 8 October 2022, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/10/08/world/middleeast/egypt-new-administrative-capital.html>.

7 Farah Choucair, 'Egypt Crisis: Sisi's Mega Projects Are No Substitute for Feeding the People', *Middle East Eye*, 30 January 2023, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/egypt-crisis-sisi-megaprojects-dont-feed-people>.



Cover Photo Islamic Cairo from above

Source: Author's Work

Figure 01 Satellite Image of Greater Cairo in 1985 (left)

Source: Google Earth

Figure 02 Satellite Image of Greater Cairo in 2020 (right)

Source: Google Earth

PROBLEM STATEMENT

THE NEW ADMINISTRATIVE CAPITAL: EXPECTATIONS VS. REALITY

The NAC is promoted as the solution for Cairo's over population. It intends to house an estimate of 7 million inhabitants on a plot of 170,000 feddan with a master plan that is divided into three main phases,⁸ which includes a total of 20 residential districts of varying typologies and densities.⁹

Although the discourse for the NAC depicts equal residential opportunity for all Egyptians, the released propaganda shows a plethora of high-end residential villas and apartments, high-rise luxury towers, commercial, mixed-use and cultural districts. With approximately 70% of Cairo's population living in informal settlements,¹⁰ it begs the question of who the NAC is being built for.

A POST-COLONIAL POPULISM

Cairo's larger planned districts have followed a seemingly imported process at their inception,¹¹ with two major time periods having significant influence. Islamic Cairo came about as the capital of the Fatimid Empire in the 970s and followed the empire's guidelines. With the end of the Islamic Ottoman Empire, the city later faced major expansion in the 1830s and areas such as Downtown Cairo were built in the image of Paris and transformed into a colonial enclave by the 1880s.¹²

The result of this process seems to take shape in new cities such as New Cairo and 6th October, which are composed of series of privately owned and developed plots, many of which appear to have drawn inspiration from the neo-classical architecture of colonial Cairo while gated communities imported international styles, from American, French, Greek, Tuscan, Mexican, and to even Scandinavian styles.¹³ A sea of Corinthian columns and cornices have systematically come to represent the populist architecture of the constantly expanding built environment.

LOSS OF IDENTITY: A SEARCH FOR MODERNITY

An article published in the Architecture Review in the 1990 issue argues that the notion that Middle Eastern architecture is out of date or regressive is flawed as it assumes a western perspective on progress and modernity.¹⁴ Although this may be true, it is also undeniable that the leaders and appointed, typically foreign, planners and architects within the region have vastly adopted a 'cut and paste' mentality in their respective built environments.¹⁵ Thirty years later, this continues to be true today with the development of the NAC in Egypt.

The government has chosen to adopt gated communities, green rivers, and grand administrative and commercial districts with crystal glass

towers. This presents an image of a city that can be anywhere with a desert backdrop with minimal ties to the cultural heritage of Cairo. It must be stated, however, that homage has been paid to ancient Egyptian civilizations with landscape elements depicting lotus and key of life symbols only recognizable from a bird's eye view and the temple like structures of the ministries district that use black glass curtain walls. Although from within, the 'cut and paste' process holds true.

8 'The New Administrative Capital - Main Page', New Urban Communities Authority, accessed 12 November 2023, http://www.newcities.gov.eg/know_cities/newcapital/default.aspx.

9 Al Tawy, 'Egypt's Sisi Officially Launches New Administrative Capital Project'.

10 Regina Kipper, "Cairo: A Broader View." In Regina Kipper and Marion Fischer, *Cairo's Informal Areas: Between Urban Challenges and Hidden Potentials; Facts, Voices, Visions* (German Technical Cooperation, 2009), 13-26

11 Following the narrative in Nezar Al-Sayyad's *Cairo: Histories of a City*, a pattern emerges of rulers shaping the city in their image, depending on the time period, the influences changed.
Nezar AlSayyad, *Cairo: Histories of a City* (Harvard University Press, 2011).

12 Britannica. 'Cairo | Egypt, Meaning, Map, & Facts | Britannica', 6 November 2023. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Cairo>.

13 Promotional campaign by Marakez, a Cairo based real estate developer, for their project AEON in 6th of October City. The advertisements depict a modern residential tower overlooking a city that resembles Los Angeles.

14 The Architectural Review. 'A Living Culture'. March 1998. 4-5.

15 Asfour, Khaled. 'Cultural Crisis'. The Architectural Review, March 1998. 53-60.



Figure 03 New Administrative Capital, Iconic Tower (left)

Source: Author's Work



Figure 04 New Administrative Capital, House of the Senate and Parliament, People's Square and Council of Ministers (right)

Source: Daily News Article, Administrative Capital for Urban Development achieves EGP 19.8bn in PBT during 2022.



Figure 05 Photocollage of Sultan Hassan Mosque showing the layers of Cairo

Source: Anton Aleksenko Dreamstime.com

RESEARCH QUESTION

This research presents a critical reflection on the discourse presented by the architectural and urban narrative of the NAC and questions how different it would be if lessons were learnt and inspiration was drawn from rich layers of Cairo.

This curiosity leads to questioning if the discourse of these new cities does not represent the culture, the heritage, the people, the complexity of Cairo, then what does? The research investigates historical continuity and circulated discourse in the search for an alternative narrative, perhaps a local vernacular, and thus the search begins.

The theoretical framework entails questioning the validity of the notion of vernacular architecture, problematizing its existing Eurocentric premise and over-romanticized definition and breaking down and redefining the term 'vernacular' in the context of Cairo on the physical and social level. This can only be achieved through a critical lens that can then identify whether there is a need to return to it in the search for a local identity.

The methodological framework follows the grounded theory approach, a qualitative research method. This includes a spatial, urban, visual and ethnographic analysis of chosen sites in Cairo to investigate the relationship between spatial practices and the built environment. This is accompanied by local dialogues, composed of structured and unstructured interviews with local scholars and practitioners, discourse analysis of videos and interviews with politicians, the NUCA and the public, and archival research on newspaper articles that reflect the local and promoted discourse in real time. The approach will contribute generation of theory grounded in the research.

Ultimately the research poses the following questions:

MAIN QUESTION

[How] can the term 'vernacular architecture' be redefined to reflect and regenerate the built environment and spatial practices of Cairo and its future urban development?

SUB-QUESTIONS

What is vernacular architecture in the context of Cairo? How can it be defined and categorized? Is it related to knowledge, process or spatial practices?

What is at stake with the vernacular discourse? How can it be selectively used, misused, or over-romanticized by architects?

Does the architecture (built environment) encourage spatial practices or is architecture the byproduct of social production of space?

How do patterns that shape the built environment facilitate, encourage and provide context for spatial practices?

How can these patterns be translated into design strategies that reflect the layers of Cairo?



Figure 06 Al Moez Street in Islamic Cairo (left)

Source: Author's Work



Figure 07 Azhar Park view towards the Nile with Ministry of Interiors visible in the distance behind layered residential blocks (right)

Source: Author's Work

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

There is a myriad of ways on the path to rediscovering Cairo's spatial identity. One of these possibilities is to look to the vernacular as a means of addressing the issue of new emerging architecture and to break the current cycle of production.

However, in order to do so effectively, the definition of vernacular must be approached critically and problematized.¹⁶ The existing Eurocentric premise and over-romanticized definition needs to be redefined to reflect Cairo's context, built environment and its people. This has been the case for many years, since its inception with Fletcher's "Tree of Architecture", as architects, magazines and competitions use the term loosely to refer to a particular style of architecture.

In an article titled "What is vernacular architecture?" which appears as one of the top results upon typing vernacular architecture into the search engine of ArchDaily, all of the projects in this article belong to non-western nations and are of a specific context and material expression, from Mali, Morocco, Iraq, Rwanda and Cameroon.¹⁷

The term inherently holds biases and colonial ideologies as it refers to the vernacular as the other, the exotic and the informal, that which is non-western. An extensive literature review will support building a glossary of terms that challenged the existing one and elaborates on the makeup of 'the vernacular'. It is imperative to emphasize that the lens through which the term vernacular is to be defined must extend beyond the physical forms and aesthetic expressions. It will encompass the process, spatial practices, people's occupation and appropriation of space. The theoretical framework synthesizes into a glossary of terms that introduces the relevant theoretical and practical references.

The encounter with the vernacular in this capacity will therefore entail redefining other tangential concepts, such as Islamic Architecture,¹⁸ 'Al-Nahdah',¹⁹ Arab Modernism,²⁰ Critical Regionalism, Informality, Populism, Placemaking among others.

Another critical dimension to be considered in the vernacular discourse is its contextualization. Language plays a pivotal role in defining concepts and their perception. Since the mother tongue of Egypt is Arabic, the research also investigates the Arabic and colloquial terminology for vernacular architecture, shedding light on the influence of language on its perception, identification and classification.

VERNACULAR²¹

/vernækjələr/

COUNTABLE NOUN

The vernacular is the language or dialect that is most widely spoken by ordinary people in a region or country.
...books or plays written in the vernacular.
To use the vernacular of the period, Peter was square.
Most of these new sermons were recorded in literary Sanskrit rather than in vernacular language.
Synonyms: speech, jargon, idiom, parlance

ADJECTIVE [ADJECTIVE noun]

Vernacular architecture is the style of architecture in which ordinary people's houses are built in a particular region.
[formal]
...the island's vernacular architecture.
...the untouched vernacular buildings in superb limestone.
Synonyms: colloquial, popular, informal, local

¹⁶ Charles Holland, 'Outrage: The Vernacular Can Lead to a Toxic, Reactionary Culture', *Architectural Review*, n.d.

¹⁷ 'What Is Vernacular Architecture?', ArchDaily, 25 November 2020, <https://www.archdaily.com/951667/what-is-vernacular-architecture>.

¹⁸ Nasser Rabbat, 'What Is Islamic Architecture Anyway?', *Journal of Art Historiography*, no. 6 (2012): 15.

¹⁹ Stephen Sheehi, 'Towards a Critical Theory of Al-Nahdah: Epistemology, Ideology and Capital', *Journal of Arabic Literature* 43, no. 2-3 (2012): 269-98, <https://doi.org/10.1163/1570064x-12341244>.

²⁰ Stephen Sheehi, 'Modernism, Anxiety and the Ideology of Arab Vision', *Discourse* 28, no. 1 (2008): 72-97, <https://doi.org/10.1353/dis.2008.0008>.

²¹ Vernacular. In *Collins Dictionary*. Retrieved November 8, 2023. <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/vernacular>

METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

Informed by the glossary of terms that redefine the vernacular, the methodological framework follows the grounded theory approach, a qualitative research methodology. It entails the generation of theory, which is 'grounded' in gathered and analyzed data,²² to unearth hidden patterns and contribute to the production of knowledge.

The grounded theory methodology is broken down into a series of methods that rely on qualitative rather than quantitative data. These methods include a spatial, urban, visual and ethnographic mapping analysis of chosen sites in Cairo to investigate the relationship between spatial practices and the built environment. This is accompanied by local dialogues, composed of structured and unstructured interviews with local scholars and practitioners, discourse analysis of videos and interviews with politicians, the NUCA and the public, and archival research on newspaper articles that reflect the local and promoted discourse in real time. This methodological framework combined with the theoretical framework contribute to the production of theory that is grounded in research.

MAPPING

The first is in the form of psychogeographic mapping of the city to reveal its physical and phenomenological layers extracted from the built environment through spatial, urban, visual and ethnographic mapping. The mapping consists of identifying the relationship between people, their practices and the built environment. This will uncover whether the built environment contextualizes or encourages spatial practices or whether spatial practices are a byproduct of the social production of space.

It must be noted that when reference is made to mapping of Cairo, it must be understood that it is an almost impossible task to map the whole of Cairo in the given time frame. Cairo is one of the populated cities in the world. In addition to that, it is divided into approximately 50 districts. Therefore, only a sample will be taken from these districts to reflect the spectrum. The districts and cities are divided into two categories, Urban Cores and Desert Cities. These will include Islamic Cairo, Downtown Cairo, Heliopolis, New Cairo and the New Administrative Capital. Further thought will be given to the addition of informal settlements as an additional category, however, limited accessibility may hinder primary research.

There are other limitations to the mapping process. Since there is limited time allocated to the fieldwork, the mapping represents a somewhat stagnant moment in time. The sites cannot be analyzed during all times of the day, on weekdays and weekends, and during events such as Ramadan or Easter in real time. Extrapolation may be made based on the author's personal knowledge from living in Cairo for over 10 continuous years. A critical position will be applied when studying these areas to ensure that

there are no former or inherent biases to seek a deeper understanding of existing conditions and how they came about.

URBAN NARRATIVES

A booklet titled 'Urban Narratives' will accompany the maps. This booklet will include the author's personal journey through the sites, reflecting on the physical space, embodied experience and challenges while moving through it. This will supply a personal perspective to the analysis, as an Egyptian woman moving through space.

DIALOGUES

In addition to mapping the city, discussions in the form of structured and unstructured interviews will be held with architects, urbanists, researchers and professors. These dialogues lend themselves as a platform to get insight into the on-ground issues faced daily in their practices, how they perceive the vernacular and its relevance. Furthermore, they open up the discussion for defining the vernacular in Arabic. Ultimately, beyond the extent of the research, this becomes an initiative to foster a sense of collectiveness, to share resources and to reflect on the process and outcome of the research.

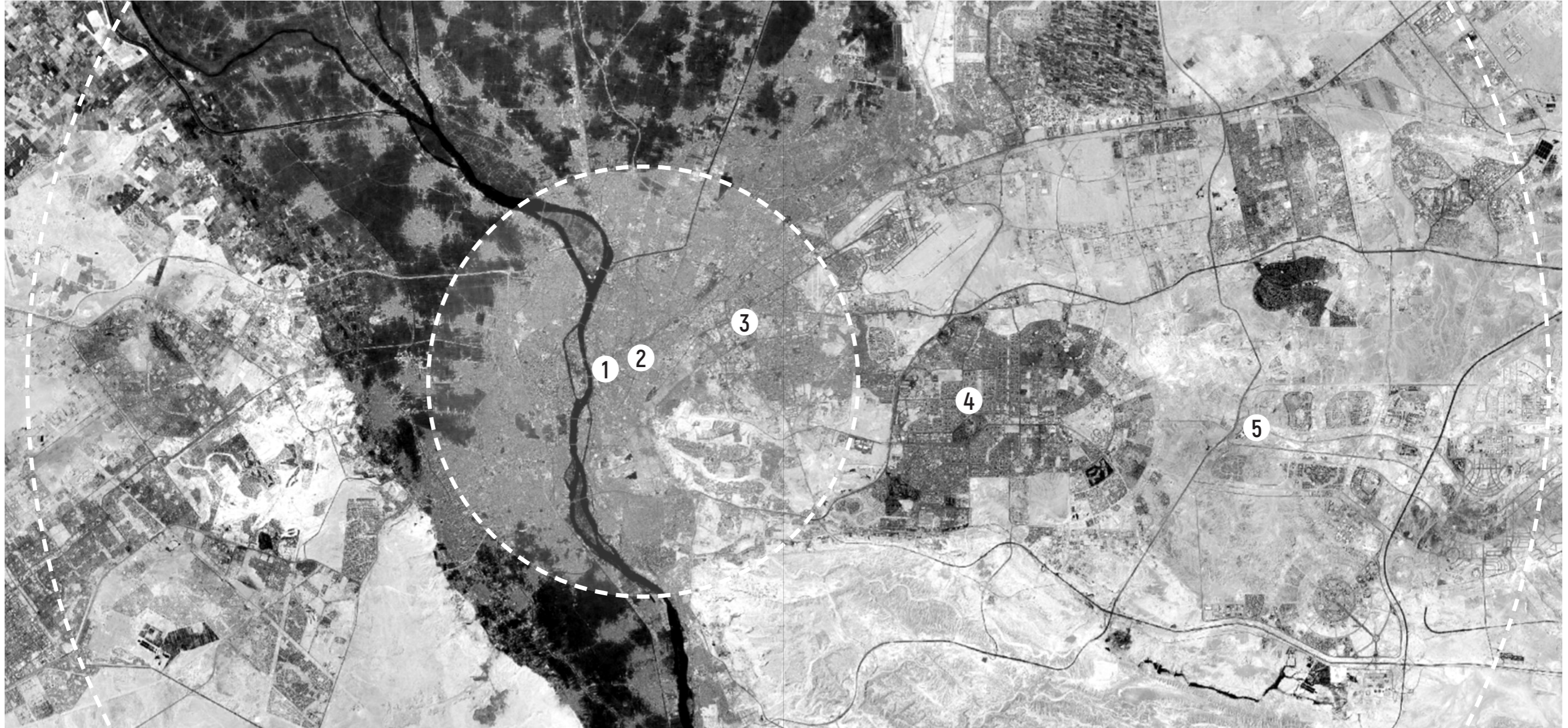
DISCOURSE ANALYSIS AND ARCHIVAL RESEARCH

Discourse analysis of videos and interviews with politicians, the NUCA and the public, and archival research on newspaper articles that reflect the local and promoted discourse in real time provide insight on the process of production of space in Cairo. Furthermore, they provide perspective on the perception of this process and how it is delivered to the public and context on the political dimension of the relationship between people and the built environment.

CAIRO'S PATTERN LANGUAGE

The outcome is a catalogue of patterns that represents Cairo's pattern language, the tangible and the intangible. The exact details of how the patterns will be broken down, categorized and limited are yet to be defined. The pattern language accompanied by the glossary of terms together frame the grounded theory that redefines 'the vernacular'. The methodology lends itself to experimentation and unearthing of theory grounded in research that launch the design process.

²² Grounded Theory was first presented by Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss in their book titled *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: strategies for qualitative research* in 1967, with later interpretations of the research methodology by Juliet Corbin and Strauss in 1990 (updated to a 4th edition in 2015) and Kathy Charmaz in 1995.



URBAN CORE

- DOWNTOWN CAIRO 1
- ISLAMIC CAIRO 2
- HELIOPOLIS 3

DESERT CITIES

- 4 NEW CAIRO
- 5 NEW ADMINISTRATIVE CAPITAL

Figure 08 Categories of districts in Greater Cairo

Source: Author's Work



Figure 09 Mockup of Glossary, Urban Narratives, Dialogues and Patterns Catalogues

Source: Author's Work

DESIGN POSSIBILITIES

The process of theorizing, unfolding and learning from Cairo's built environment, through the lens of context, narratives, form, materiality and spatial practices, becomes the starting point for the design. The design throughout the preliminary research phase has been left open ended. This stemmed from a desire to allow the site and the research to drive the design rather than having a predetermined product and program in mind.

The design proposal acknowledges the existence of the NAC, however, it cannot turn its back on Cairo. As a result, it emerges as a series of interventions connecting the urban core to the desert city. In this way, it takes on an interdisciplinary approach, tackling issues on both the urban and architectural scales.

Based on the findings from the process of redefining the vernacular, the design cannot be a fixed moment in time, static. It needs to have a temporal dimension, be incremental in nature, be open to interpretation and appropriation, change and grow with time, never finished. Following the same thought process, the program is left open ended, an opportunity for each intervention to take on its own life based on the socioeconomic needs of the people, meaning that it will be public in nature. The design process becomes a series of experiments, grounded to the site, moving in parallel to the uncovering of theories and narratives as they emerge.

RELEVANCE

The research will contribute to the body of knowledge in real time. Furthermore, the research will reframe the vernacular through a lens that has yet to be explored, the relationship between the physical form of built environment and the phenomenological dimension of spatial practices. This project presents a possibility, a framework for future public architectural discourse and challenge the notion of architecture as a static object in time.

Architectural discourse keeps the West as its compass, i.e. euro-centric. Less attention is given to narratives that emerge from other parts of the world, even within the Arab world. As cities grow and references are drawn, it is imperative that what once was is not lost forever. If the region continues to draw from western culture, its own culture and knowledge is at risk of being lost

As an Egyptian studying in the Netherlands, I see this as an opportunity to contribute to the narrative and present a vision of my home that reflects its richness and vitality. It is almost a responsibility to address the issues that have been left dormant for years, identity and resilience. And so, although the NAC is already under construction and is on an inevitable path, the conversation and discourse must be kept alive for the sake of the future of our built environment and the preservation of our identity.

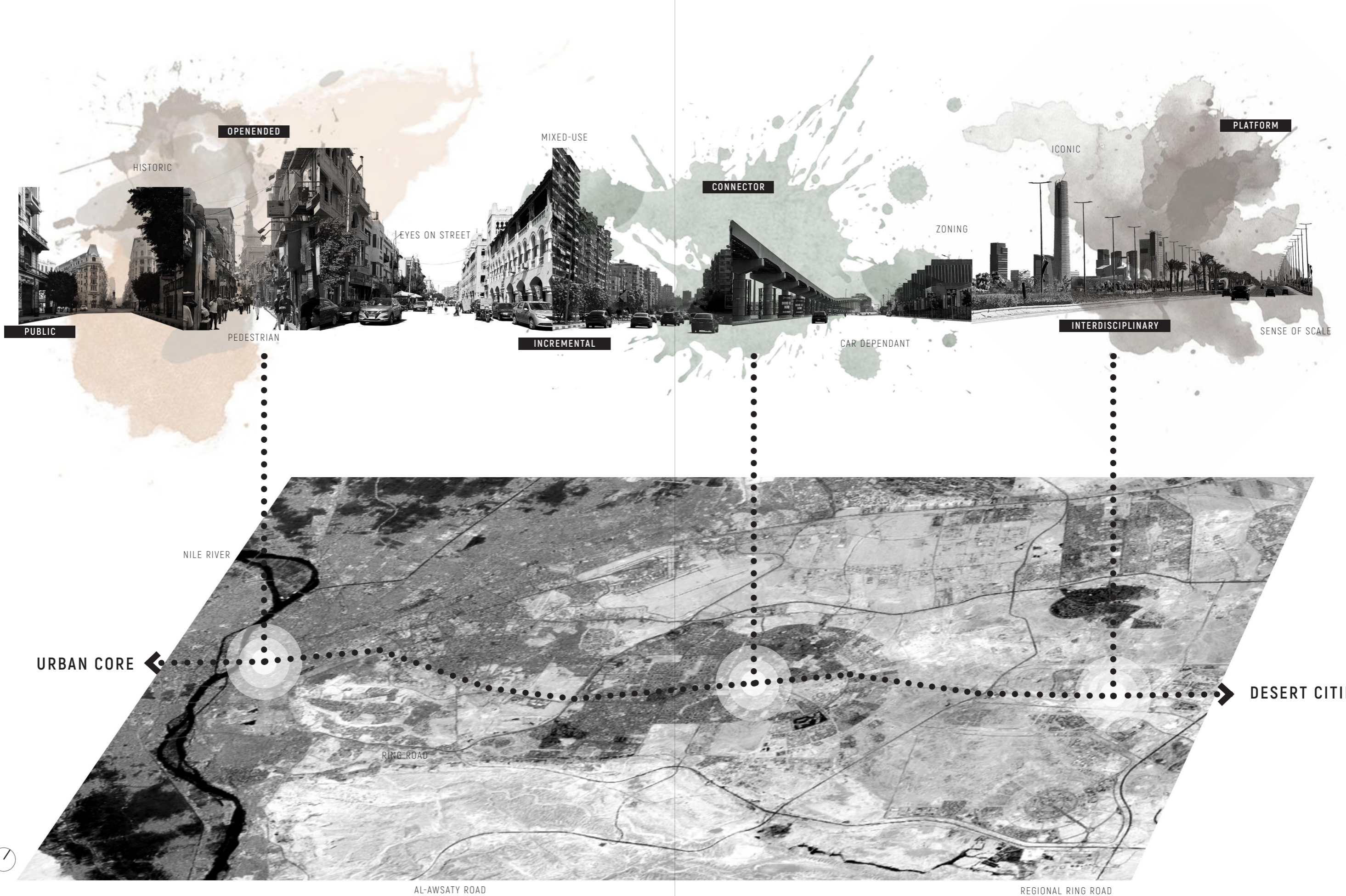


Figure 10 Design Possibilities stitching Cairo, from the urban core and desert cities

Source: Author's Work

RESEARCH PLAN

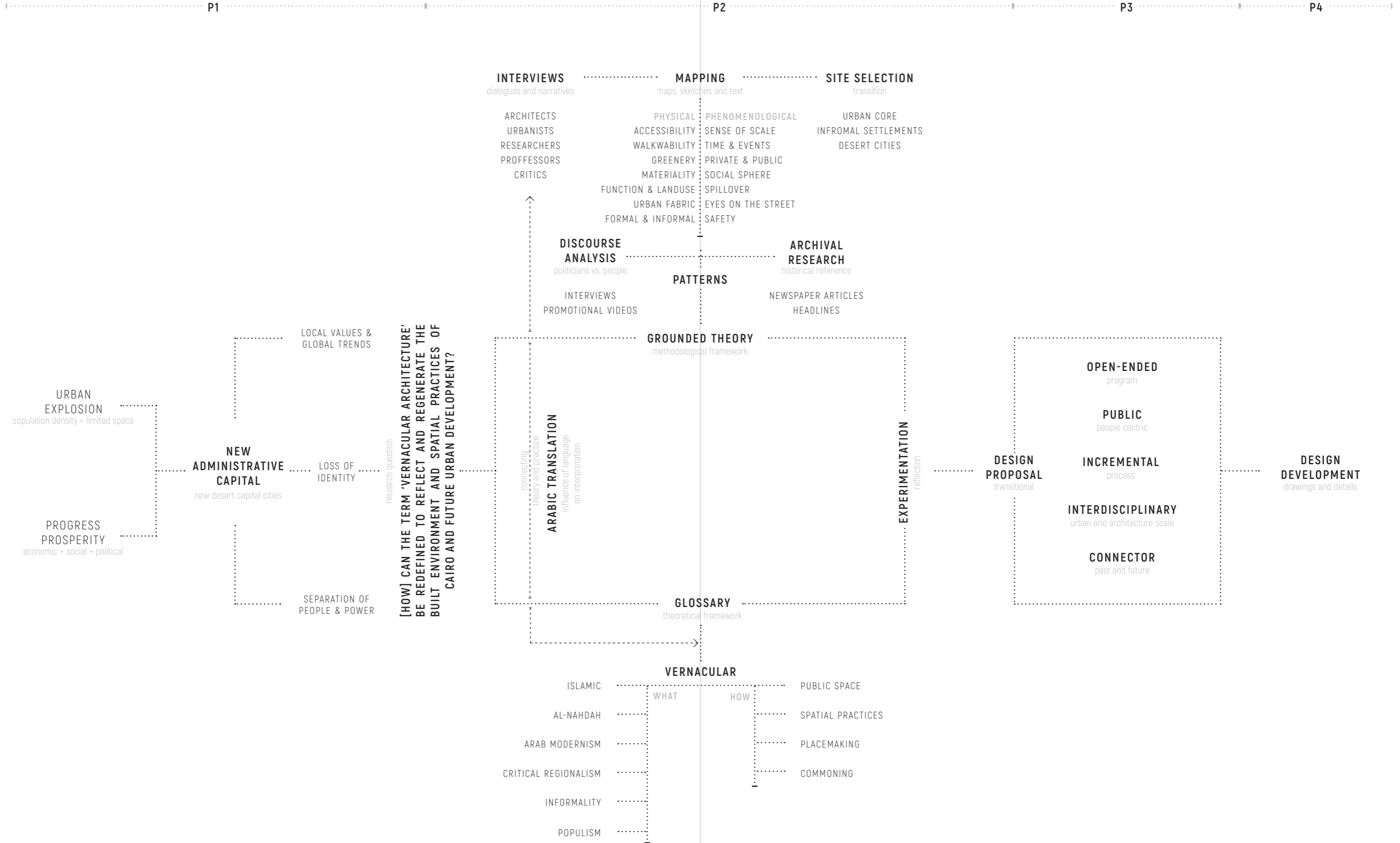


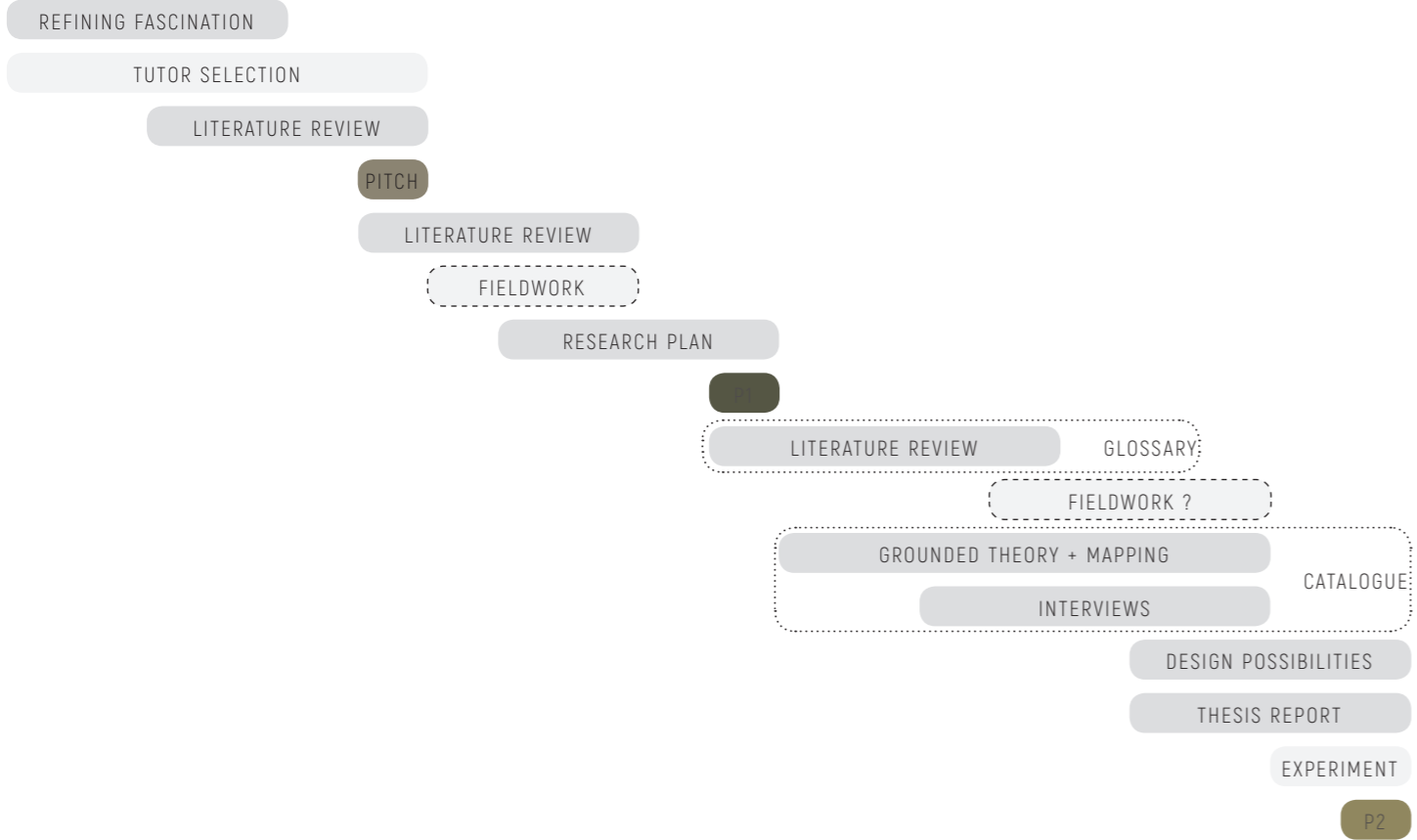
Figure 11 Research Plan Diagram

Source: Author's Work

RESEARCH PLAN

P1 P2

SEPTEMBER				OCTOBER					NOVEMBER					DECEMBER				JANUARY			
1.1	1.2	1.3	1.4	1.5	1.6	1.7	1.8	1.9	1.10	2.1	2.2	2.3	2.4	2.5	2.6	2.7	2.8	2.9	2.10		



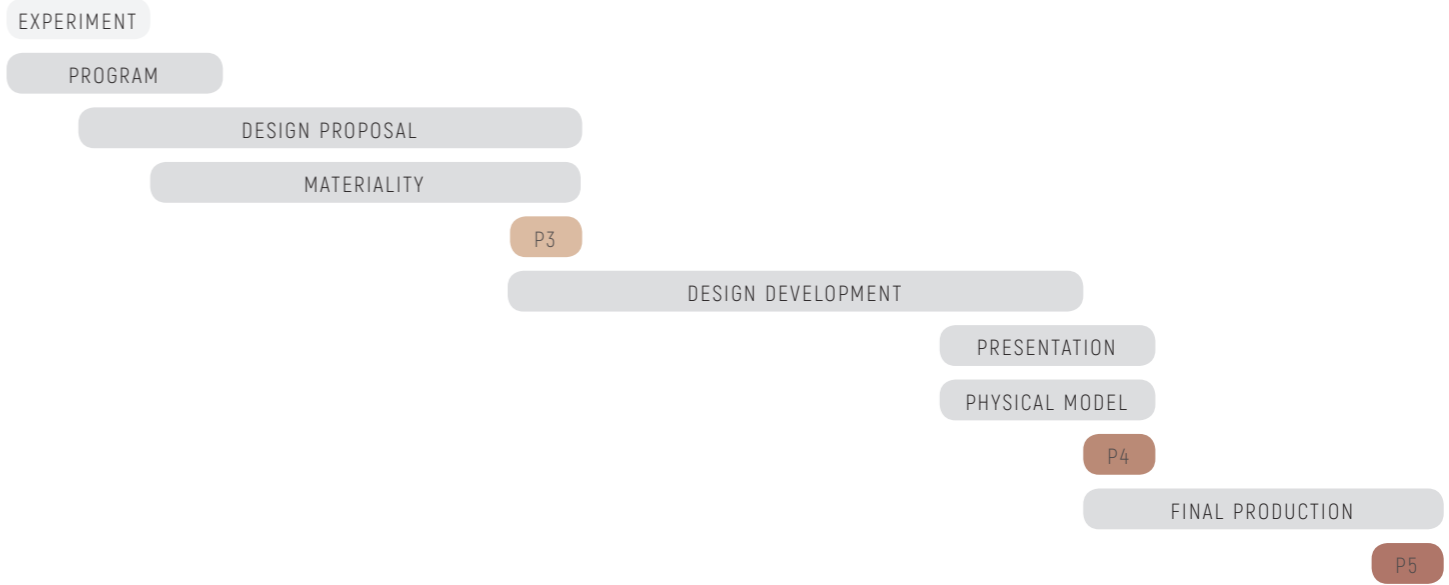
- FIELDWORK = MAPPING + INTERVIEWS
- PITCH PRESENTATION
- P1 PRESENTATION
- P2 PRESENTATION
- P3 PRESENTATION
- P4 PRESENTATION
- P5 PRESENTATION

Figure 12 Research Plan Timeline

Source: Author's Work

P3 P4 P5

FEBRUARY					MARCH					APRIL					MAY					JUNE				
3.1	3.2	3.3	3.4	3.5	3.6	3.7	3.8	3.9	3.10	4.1	4.2	4.3	4.4	4.5	4.6	4.7	4.8	4.9	4.10					



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