

vernacular

10SSoRly

الشعبية

24 terms to redefine the discourse on
vernacular architecture in Cairo, Egypt

٢٤ مصطلحاً لإعادة تعريف الحوار حول العمارة المحلية
في القاهرة، مصر.

by
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URBAN IDENTITIES IN CRISIS
Redefining Vernacular Architecture in Cairo

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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, within its urban fabric, and into the desert around it, in the shape of desert archipelagoes. 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, currently at 21.3 million projected to over 40 million by 2050. 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" 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, focusing on gestures of power and grandeur and not on the needs and everyday lives of the population.

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.

G

GLOSSARY

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.

In order to do so effectively, the definition of 'vernacular architecture' must be approached critically and problematized. The existing Eurocentric premise and over-romanticized definition must be challenged and revised to reflect Cairo's context, built environment and its people. For many years, since its inception with Fletcher's "Tree of Architecture",¹ architects, magazines and competitions have used the term loosely to refer to a particular style of architecture. The term holds biases and colonial ideologies referring to the vernacular as the other, the exotic and the informal, that which is non-western. 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 role of the glossary is to provide a foundation for the research as a whole. It examines a set of terms and problematizes their notions and explains how each term is used in the architecture field and each could have more than one meaning or interpretation.

The set of terms in this glossary were chosen on the basis of their overlaps and crossovers in relation to the challenge of identifying what kind of architecture may be referred to as vernacular architecture in Cairo. The encounter with the vernacular in this capacity entails redefining both tangential and intangible concepts, where the vernacular exists along the boundaries of each. Furthermore, the acknowledged relationship between the built environment and spatial practices guide the choice for the inclusion of user centric terms that help shape the new definition of the vernacular.

The glossary consists of 24 terms, some of which are defined to a deeper extent than others, many offering departure points for further investigations. Since this glossary is part of a master of architecture thesis, limitations were set to ensure that the task could be completed efficiently and effectively within the given timeframe and (wo)manpower. The chosen terms address the complexity of defining vernacular architecture. Some of the terms tackle the subject in the field of architecture in general, within the Arab region and specifically in Cairo. Furthermore, others address vernacular as expression, as materiality, as process and as spatiality.

Each term in the glossary follows the following format. It starts with an in-depth literature review including books, journal

articles and urban dictionaries, citing sources that support the existing definition and those that problematize and criticize them, allowing for the author to present her position on each term and its role in framing vernacular architecture. This is followed by a series of questions that provoke the reader and trigger avenues for further research. They also act as departure points for the cataloging of Cairo's built environment and spatial practices, the next step in the research phase. Each section concludes with a list of references and recommendations for further research and explorations.

Another critical dimension considered here 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 glossary investigates the Arabic and colloquial terminology for vernacular architecture, shedding light on the influence of language on its perception, identification and classification, as a result revealing the challenge in defining it. Furthermore, the glossary provides the Arabic equivalent for each of the terms extracted from their use in the architecture field in the Arabic speaking region.

Finally, this glossary is not intended as a final product. It is meant as an open-ended body of knowledge that can be changed and expanded upon in the future. That being said, this glossary acts as fundamental and foundational for the development of the research, ensuring that it starts on solid ground.

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A

AGENCY

noun

the capacity, condition, or state of acting or of exerting power ¹

One interpretation of agency, in the context of redefining vernacular architecture, refers to the capacity of individuals or communities to actively shape and influence the design, construction and appropriation of their built environment. Emphasis is placed on the notion that people have the power to make decisions that influence their individual private and shared public spaces. People become actively engaged actors as opposed to passive observers of the process of production and transformation of their built environment. Although this may be

الفاعلية

اسم²

هو مفهوم يدل على النية أو الفاعلية المتأصلة بتقسيم نطاق
السيادة من خلال الفعل (أي التصميم أو السيطرة المكانية)

linked to the idea of a participatory process, it goes beyond the limits of the design and construction process. Agency promotes the sense of empowerment and resilience of architecture that represents the people it directly serves.

An alternative perspective looks at the agency of the architecture itself. In doing so, the challenge shifts to a design question, how does an object in space exert agency? Whose agency and to what end?

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A

L-NAHDAH

This entry has been left purposefully blank to indicate the incompleteness of this glossary as a body of work in time. The glossary is a work in progress as well as a design tool that is intended to be incremental and grow over time.

النهضة

References

- 1.
- 2.

A

RAB MODERNISM

The critical reflection on the urban and architectural design of the New Administrative Capital (NAC) of Egypt has been the trigger for the endeavor to redefine vernacular architecture in Cairo. In order to paint a clear image of the architecture discourse of the NAC, it is essential to dive into the root cause of the disassociation of this new capital city from its historic counterpart, Cairo, within the larger context of the Arab region.

Arab modernism is the artistic, intellectual and cultural movement that emerged in the late 19th and early 20th century in the Arab world. It was linked to the desire to form roots in Arab culture against the challenges and opportunities made present by modernity, which often provided western influences.¹ This period brought about educational, political, literary and artistic reforms with the purpose of promoting progress, innovation and development.

The argument that Middle Eastern architecture is out of date or regressive is flawed as it assumes a western perspective on progress and modernity. Although this may be true, it is also undeniable that the region has adopted a 'cut and paste' mentality which encourages "the wrenching of images from one cultural context and arbitrarily sticking them into another" without understanding.² This collage culture, a term coined by Khaled Asfour, Egyptian architect, professor, philosopher and

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thinker, is not limited by any means to the region, meaning that the modern and postmodern world is not immune to it. However, its effects have been exceedingly obvious in cultures and economies that had gained rapid prosperity with images of "attention seeking towers and flashy malls, with their competitive coarseness and lack of scale."³ Ismail Serageldin, founding director of the Bibliotheca Alexandrina, has described the effects as "a process of disassociation from cultural roots, which led to the dichotomization of cultural perception, where the historic heritage (cultural, religious, spiritual) is identified with the past, backwardness and poverty, while the image of "progress" is borrowed from elsewhere, namely the West."⁴ The perception of this follows a sense of optimism that there is a guarantee of a better life and better standards and believing that the present will be better.

"Hope for the future of architecture in the Middle East lies as much in reinterpreting traditional culture as with a desperately needed understanding of ecological imperatives. There are signs that the tide is turning, and that the area may have started to have lessons to teach the rest of the world."⁵

Borrowing architecture is a global phenomenon that has unfortunately had a negative connotation with its process requiring "little inquisitive consciousness and much image cloning" which is quite problematic as it ignores the discourse that monitors design quality and output.⁶ In order to facilitate discourse production, Arab architectural history must be reinterpreted. This is not only by architects for architects, but also for the enhancement of people's connection to their tradition and culture, to generate a new kind of architecture that is devoid of burden from the culture of borrowing that further allows for spontaneity to unexpected opportunities offered by the context.

Taking a step back, it may be of value to investigate the relevance of looking back at Arab culture and art as a source of inspiration for modern building. L'inspiration Arabe offers two opposing views on the value of Arab art in modern society.⁷ On the one hand, art is created under very specific conditions that may not exist today and therefore it is important to question the relevance of the art if the context is removed. Does it make sense to give a skyscraper an Arab style when the idea of a skyscraper is borrowed from the West? On the other hand, contradiction need not exist between the desire for a modern or elegant appearance and the choice to unjustifiably combine styles, where "Arab art is perfectly capable of using modern means." Perhaps there is an alternative to the binary, a way to preserve the 'spirit' of Arab art without holding onto the cornices

and moldings that are taken out of context and reach beyond to understand the source of these elements and reinterpret them in today's context.

- What were people's needs, how did they occupy space, how has that evolved?
- Why are things being designed based on outdated models that no longer satisfy people's livelihoods while also moving away from Arab culture and tradition and holding onto a notion of modernity and progress that actually hinders these ways of life?
- How can it be done differently?

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B

BOTTOM-UP

adjective¹ progressing upward from the lowest levels
(as of a stratified organization or system)

The term bottom-up in the context of vernacular architecture refers to the decision making process with regards to design and construction that emerges from the local community, as opposed to the top-down approach where decisions are made by external authoritarian figures or 'experts' that are imposed on the community. Through this approach, the local community plays a central role in the process of production of space.

التصاعدي

صفة
التقدم صعوداً من أدنى المستويات
(اعتباراً من منظمة أو نظام طبقي)

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C

RITICAL REGIONALISM

Critical regionalism was defined by Kenneth Frampton, who sought to balance the global influence of modern architecture with a nuanced understanding of local contexts, as "an architecture of resistance."¹ It challenges the universal homogenous notions offered by modernism, which imposed itself on global architectural and urban discourse. However, rather than casting out global influences all together, critical regionalism seeks to utilize both global and local influences.

However, there is critical refute of the intent of critical regionalism as a tool empowerment and resistance, problematizing its intellectual construct. Eggener highlights that the way in which it has been applied to the architecture of developing, postcolonial nations, exemplifies postcolonial tendencies produced by colonialism as described by Jane Jacobs. He describes it as "an architecture that purportedly reflects and serves its locality, buttressed by a framework of liberative, empowering rhetoric ... a construct imposed from outside, from positions of authority."²

الإقليمية الحرجة

In the question of vernacular architecture, in basic binary terms, what can be derived from the debate is the notion that not everything that is global is bad and not everything that is local is good. A critical lens must be applied during the search for Cairo's identity, through the investigation of the vernacular, to encourage an architecture that is both rooted in its context and provides intellectual engagement through its position.

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E NVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY

The unchallenged definition of vernacular architecture holds the environment in the highest regard. It assumes a direct connection between vernacular architecture and the entrainment through the traditional knowledge that emerges from the indigenous communities that it classifies as vernacular. That to a certain extent holds true.

الاستدامة البيئية

However, as opposed to the definition, which assumes an unplanned, haphazard or informal approach, the redefinition focuses more on the traditional knowledge as a legitimate system that draws from the environment and contributes to its sustainability.¹ The context acts as the main source of inspiration for the design and construction process including climate, geography, and materials.

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F

ORM LANGUAGE

The form language is purely geometrical, defined by the elements of form which are composed of floors, walls, ceilings, among other architectural components that together represent a particular form and style of building. "A form language is a repertoire of forms and surface elements that can be combined to build any building, and so it represents more than just a superficial style."¹

اللغة التشكيلية

The form language relies on "an inherited vocabulary of all the components used in the assembly of a building; rules for how they can be combined; and how different levels of scale can arise from the smaller components."² One such example of form language is the "Classical Language", which relies on an array of variations of the Classical mode of building grounded in Greco-Roman history.

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G

RASSROOTS

- noun¹ the basic level of society or of an organization especially as viewed in relation to higher or more centralized positions of power ¹
- adjective being, originating, or operating in or at the grass roots ¹

القاعدية

- اسم² هو مصطلح يستخدم لوصف مبادرات أو حركات اجتماعية جذرية أو من الشعب

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INFORMALITY

The notion of 'informal' is typically associated with the economist and anthropologist Keith Hart who coined the term 'informal economy' to refer to activities that existed outside official institutional frameworks. In Cairo, the scale of the informal economy manifests in the built environment in the shape of informal settlements making up 70% its building stock.

Yahia Shawkat introduces housing in his book "Egypt's Housing Crisis" as a fundamental cornerstone of Egyptian life, linking directly to social, economic and political dimensions while also being contentious. Despite the fact that almost every ruler in the last century has been directly associated with the least one large scale housing project, millions of mostly poor, but also middle, income families live in a state of precariousness in threatened informal settlements. The housing crisis seems to be the birthplace of informal settlements, vis-à-vis the notion of informality.

There are many publications that dive into the complexities of informal settlements in Greater Cairo. One such publication that offers a comprehensive historical and qualitative analysis of the informal settlements is Cairo's Informal Areas: Between Urban Challenges and Hidden Potentials; Facts. Voices. Visions, a book published in the framework of the Egyptian-German Participatory Development Programme in Urban Areas (PDP) and the German Technical Cooperation (GTZ). It sheds light on the

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personal narratives, telling stories of people's daily lives in these neighborhoods.

For some local practitioners, those who work in urban laboratories and research initiatives that go beyond the commercial realm of development in Cairo such as CLUSTER, vernacular architecture and informality appear to be synonymous. In informal settlements, the intuitive yet planned process emerged as a direct reflection of people's needs in Cairo when the state no longer provided them with viable housing options. To them, however, this does not absolve the state of its role "the guardian of public good." It is impossible to ignore the "magnetite and dynamism of informal practice" nor can the "ingenuity, resilience, and resourcefulness of local communities" be discarded. The role of the architect here is to try to understand logic and systems of informality, to engage with it and to propose elements or interventions that enhance the quality of living within these areas.

As a result, the purpose of this research is not to speculate on the origins of informality or debate the legitimacy of these settlements, but rather to focus on informality's tenacity to sustain the livelihood of its people, its logic and its process of repetition. Informality becomes a starting point for understanding the human condition, how people shape the built environment as a response to their needs not being



A narrow street in Boulag El Dakrou, one of Cairo's largest informal settlements.

Photograph by Claudia Wiens/Alamy

met by the state. Perhaps then lessons may be learned from informal settlements and informality towards the development of a vernacular architecture that comes as a true reflection of people's needs and their daily lives.

- If informal settlements are a pure representation of people building for themselves to satisfy their needs, is it possible to decode informality and use it as a tool for design vernacular architecture?
- Can vernacular architecture adapt the informal's logic of growth without the negative connotations associated with lack of legitimacy and incompleteness?
- Where is the line between vernacular and informal architecture? Is it related to a framework or process?

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ISLAMIC ARCHITECTURE

Islamic architecture is almost synonymous with Cairene architecture. Cairo is one of the oldest and largest cities in the world with origins that date back to the Fatimid Empire in 973 AD when it was established as the Fatimid capital, and a new mosque and seminary, called Al-Azhar, was established in its center. To this day, Al-Azhar University is the chief center for Islamic and Arabic learning and thought in the world.

The study of Islamic art and architecture, as described by Nasser Rabbat, was a post-enlightenment European project, "with architects and artists who traveled to the 'orient' in the wake of the first European interventions there, in search for adventure, employment and the thrill of fantasy associated with that mysterious land." That being said, there are two contentious issues associated with defining Islamic architecture, the first being its self-definition and the second being the time frame associated with it. From a Eurocentric perspective, there seemed to be no model with which to position the architecture at hand leading to the development of "an architectural historical discipline that cast Islamic architecture as a formal expression of Islam, which itself was not so homogeneously defined." There has been an accepted degree of incongruity between Islamic architecture and modernism, but when modern architecture arrived in the late 19th early 20th century, it eclipsed and replaced Islamic architecture. As a result, the architecture that

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was built under colonialism and after independence was not classified as "Islamic"; it was seen as either modern or culturally hybrid.

Scholars, as a result of the confusion around the difficulty in recognizing what it was because it transcended space, geography and religion, needed to develop a set of criteria to recognize Islamic architecture through defining "common formal qualities." Olge Garber offers a seemingly simple definition, Islamic architecture is the "architecture built by Muslims, for Muslims, or in an Islamic country, or in places where Muslims have an opportunity to express their cultural independence in architecture." The nature of the definition however does not work well for those for whom Islamic architecture is an object to identify with or build upon, a living tradition with culturally distinct roots.* In praxis, some local architects aspired to develop their own architecture representative of their culture instead of borrowing and imitating. This led to dialogue on Islamic architecture with vernacular and regional architecture presenting an opportunity for postcolonial national architecture to emerge.*

In order to grasp the mixed and dynamic character of Islamic culture today, it is pivotal to take into account the ways in which Islam engages "with the effect of Western, secular modernism on its cultures and vice versa". This isn't specifically the "formal



Al-Moez Street towards Qalawoon Complex.

Photograph by Author

or stylistic" qualities produced by Islam, but rather the influence of religion on aspects of daily life. Instead, it is the impact of Islam on architecture as seen and used by people that makes this architecture particularly Islamic.*

- Does this mean that any architecture that has been built by Muslims may be classified as Islamic architecture?
- Does Islamic architecture shape the perception of vernacular architecture?
- How does Islamic architecture fit into the discourse of vernacular architecture today?
- Can Islamic architecture be categorized as vernacular under the premise of vernacular as a process that is bottom up rather than top down? Is it enough to be understood and used as a cultural reference to extract values and spatial geometries as opposed to ornaments and façade elements?

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O

ORIENTALISM

noun¹ scholarship, learning, or study in Eastern subjects or languages

now often used with negative connotations of a colonialist bias underlying and reinforced by such scholarship ¹

"Orientalism" by Edward Said is a seminal work that critically examines the Western construction of the East in academic, literary, and artistic representations.² Published in 1978, Said's book argues that Orientalism is not merely an objective study of the East but a form of cultural and political domination. Said contends that Western scholars and artists, influenced by imperialist ideologies, created a distorted image of the Orient that served colonial interests. He explores how Western scholarship has been complicit in constructing a dichotomy between the rational West and the exotic, inferior East.

الاستشراق

These notions still hold true today when studying vernacular architecture, among a wider spectrum of subjects. Vernacular architecture is used as a term to pool non-Western architecture.

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P

ARTICIPATORY

adjective¹ characterized by or involving participation especially: providing the opportunity for individual participation ¹

To participate is to take part in, and in architecture it is to take part in the architecture process. One of the recognized roles of participatory design is the widening of the engagement between architects and society, where typically the participation is reserved for the architect and the client while excluding the user and the public.²

In theory, participatory design offers an opportunity for architects to go beyond their self-serving nature and provide the opportunity for communities to take part in designing their built environment. However, the paradox of participatory design resides in the misrepresentation of people and process. The romantic notions of negotiations in the participatory process present a kind of fallacy that assumes that all members of the community are included in the final outcome. The process if not handled with consciousness can perpetuate existing power structures and inequalities within communities especially when certain voices are marginalized. In other cases, participation

التشاركية

اسم تتميز بالمشاركة أو تنطوي عليها خاصة: إتاحة الفرصة للمشاركة الفردية

is manipulated as a tool to keep up appearances of inclusion without real impact, merely a symbolic gesture.³ It is imperative when taking a participatory approach whether it genuinely empowers the community or risks reinforcing existing power dynamics and inequalities.

An alternative approach to incorporate the community is by taking into account the people's narratives and daily lives and designing open ended structures that may be appropriated or adapted by the people to respond to their needs. In that way, the architect acts as a facilitator leaving room for people to transform it.

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P

ATTERN

noun¹

a form or model proposed for imitation

a recurring architectural solution that combines geometry with social practices ¹

Christopher Alexander's *A Pattern Language* presents the elements of the language of building as entities called patterns.² Each of these patterns describes a problem that is frequently encountered in the environment and then it describes the essence of the solution to that problem, leaving it open to endless interpretations and possibilities.

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النمط

شكل أو نموذج مقترح للتقليد

اسم

P

PATTERN LANGUAGE

The pattern language translates the interaction of human beings with their environment into a code that reflects how and where people perform acts of daily life and how they interact with and move through their built environment. It brings together geometry and social behavior patterns into a series of useful relations directly reflecting how the built environment can support human activities.

Christopher Alexander (and his partners) were the first to propose the importance of a pattern language in architecture.¹

اللغة النمطية

Although that language is generic, and their universality is widely critiqued, there is still potential for an endless number of patterns that may be included. This leaves room for new pattern languages to emerge, ones that reflect "different modes of life, customs, and behavior, and is appropriate to specific climates, geographies, cultures, and traditions."²

The pattern language is not meant to be taken at face value. The role of the architect rests in analyzing the context, tradition, way of life, and presenting a new set of patterns that best reflect it.

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P

LACE

noun¹

a physical space; a particular region, center of population, or location

The concept of place in architecture encompasses more than physical space, it involves the experiential and emotional qualities associated with a specific site. It is a location that is charged with distinct qualities, meanings, experience, memories and emotions,² including cultural, historical and social dimensions that shape the identity of that specific site. Furthermore, the relationship between people and their environment and acknowledges the significance of these qualities in the design, legibility and imageability and perception of space,³ making a clear distinction between space and place.

المكان

مساحة واقعية؛ منطقة معينة أو مركز سكاني أو موقع معين

اسم

Jacobs offers insight into the qualities and characteristics that contribute to the vitality and success of urban places. The diversity of uses, walkability, density, mix of old and new buildings, eyes on the street, small blocks, public spaces and community involvement all contribute to a sense of place.⁴ She frames places as living entities that are shaped by the interactions of people, the built environment, and the social fabric of communities.

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3. Kevin Lynch, *The Image of the City* (The MIT Press, 1960).
4. Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, 1st ed. (Vintage Books, 1961).

P LACEMAKING

Placemaking is defined as "the process of creating quality places that people want to live, work, play and learn in."¹ There are four types of placemaking, Standard Placemaking, Strategic Placemaking, Creative Placemaking and Tactical Placemaking. As explained by Wyckoff's placemaking approach, the key elements of quality places, which are places where people thrive, are mixed-use, quality public spaces, accessibility, housing options, historical preservation, art, culture, creativity, recreation and

صنع المكان

green spaces. Placemaking aims to create vibrant, inclusive and meaningful space for communities.² It is not limited to the physical aspects of space, but focuses on the social, cultural and psychological dimension of it. It involves the engagement of communities in the process of shaping their built environment. Placemaking is an essential concept in redefining vernacular architecture, to ensure a sense of place, ownership and belonging.

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P OPULISM

When architects lean on local vocabulary and elements to gain authenticity to gain the favor of the masses, it raises issues of appropriation and plagiarism. This shines a light on one of the major critiques of vernacular architecture, populism. Although numerous public buildings seek popularity, being liked by a significant number of people, the derivatives 'populist' and 'populism' have more uncertain consequences. Populism has "the negative connotation of deliberately seeking popular acceptance at the cost of quality, intellectual rigor, or formal aesthetic value" while popularity holds on to its seemingly "neutral modern sense" of public contribution or things socially deemed popular. Populism relies on "pre-existing dichotomies, such as the opposition between 'popular', 'vernacular' or 'low' culture and 'high' or 'elite' culture." The preset narrative indicates that for anything to be considered high culture, it can never be associated with that which is popular, while populist architecture may be expected to rely on low status or cheap materials.

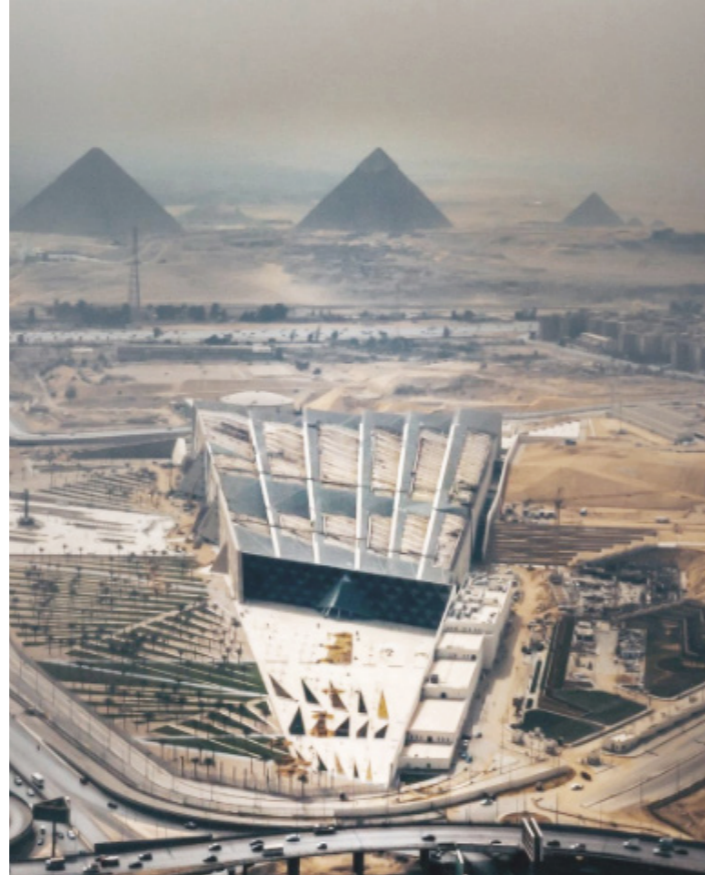
According to Michael Shamiyeh, there have been two well-known dimensions of populism in architecture when analyzing the second half of the 20th century. The first and main position is the "adoption of vernacular structural forms by experts in the field. Implying that what gets built is a reflection either of the context the vernacular forms are supposed to have originated in or the

الشعبوية

state in architectural forms and the general public's sensibility with respect to them." The second is of an operative nature and looks into "the exploration of the possibilities to integrate the public in the design process." Unlike other architectural movements such as Rationalism, Regionalism, or Brutalism, populism never occurred as a "single homogenous direction within the body of architecture." Society has undergone massive change over the last century and so populism as a result has gained traction in architecture. In addition to the influence of market economy and globalization, populism is now highly shaped by people or the public where "public consciousness is no longer some pliable material that can be shaped at will by a few strategic elites ... the simplified conception where by an architect plans a building which then easily goes on to be built" no longer stands. Instead there are three groups of interests to be considered, the architect, the client and the public.

Perhaps then the path to vernacular architecture may be one that is not derivative and does not look down to vernacular as a means of making a building condone to populism. There needs to be a degree of authenticity when it comes to its formalistic and materialistic expressions while ensuring that the people remain at the core of narrative.

In Arabic, popularity directly translates to 'shaebia'. This term



Grand Egyptian Museum overlooking the Great Pyramids of Giza.

Photograph by Ahmed Wahba/Archdaily

has been coined by some local architects, such as Ahmed Zaazaa cofounder of 10tooba, as the appropriate translation of vernacular architecture into the Arabic language. The position makes clear the direct relationship between people and place. It is situational, detaching itself from the historical temporal dimension. Instead it highlights the ever changing nature of the vernacular, linking it to what is popular or 'shaebie' at the time, as the people change and as context changes, the vernacular responds accordingly.

- Is the link of populism to people enough to remove its negative connotations and the trap of succumbing to people's whims? Does it fall into the trap of architects generating architecture for the sake of pleasing people and gaining favor and popularity?
- Can a deeper understanding of populism in architecture relieve the vernacular of its preconceived notions of 'plagiarism' and 'poverty'?
- Can it instead shift the focus to people and their spatial needs?

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P

PUBLIC SPACE

noun¹ all places of public use, accessible by all and comprises streets and public open spaces. It excludes the non-built up parts of public facilities and public commercial spaces.

Public space refers to areas that are openly accessible and intended for public use. It is multifunctional and serves various social, cultural and recreational purposes. Furthermore, it provides space for people to gather, interact and engage with each other as well as with the space, fostering a sense of belonging and ownership. Public space typically includes parks and gardens, plazas and squares, streets and sidewalks, pedestrian areas, civic centers, waterfronts, marketplaces and playspaces.

المساحة العامة أو الفضاء العام

اسم² هو مصطلح يدل على اماكن مصنفة للإستخدام (أو المصلحة) العام(ة)، والتي تكون ممتناول الجميع بدون قيود او تمييز ضمن نطاق المدينة.

As endorsed by Jacobs, the key to vibrant urban environments is the diverse, well utilized and community oriented public space by prioritizing the human scale experience.³

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S

PACE

noun¹

a limited extent in one, two, or three dimensions

Space is a three dimensional volume and is a fundamental and dynamic aspect of architecture. It is that which is occupied by people defined by architectural elements, but it can also be the void between these elements. Bachelard explores how spaces shape human experiences, memories and imagination.³ The experience and perception of space is subjective to every individual as a result of the impact of the interplay between elements on the spatial experience.

الفضاء

هو مفهوم يدل على الفضاء المعاش

اسم²

As space is not limited to its physical, material and measurable qualities and extends to the phenomenological, dynamic and transformative aspects that shape human interaction, this lens makes the exploration of space relevant to redefining vernacular architecture. With that perspective in mind, space may become a vessel to explore the core values of a society and identify their needs within the city.

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3. Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, First Edition (Beacon Press, 1994).

S

PATIAL PRACTICE

noun¹ the activities performed by people in their everyday lives that influence space

Spatial practices are embodied in the ways in which people interact with, use and shape space within their everyday lives. Ranging from seemingly banal everyday activities to broader cultural and social activities, spatial practices reflect the intricate interplay between people and space. These practices reflect larger dynamics within the city including territoriality, accessibility, mobility, culture and tradition. They contribute to the creation of places, the formation of identities and the establishment of boundaries between public and private realms.

De Certeau offers an understanding of spatial practices that are rooted in everyday activities. He argues that people engage in a form of "making do" within the restrictions of predetermined spaces, utilizing strategies and tactics to subvert and adapt to the structures imposed by urban planners and institutions. De Certeau distinguishes between the strategies of those in power, who dictate spatial structures, and the tactics of everyday people, who appropriate and reimagine these spaces as a response to their needs. This offers a valuable perspective on the agency

الممارسات المكانية

اسم² هو مصطلح يستخدم لوصف الممارسات، غالبًا التصاميم أو الدراسات، التي تؤثر على الفضاءات والقوات التي تنتج الفضاء وتهدف إلى إعادة تكوينه

that everyday people have in shaping their spatial experience through shaping their built environment and it challenges the relationship between how spaces are design and used.

In the search for Cairo's urban identity through redefining vernacular architecture, spatial practices provide insight into the complex relationship between people and the built environment. The vernacular then becomes a process of creating "spatial agency"⁴ identifying spatial needs, understanding lived experiences, cultural patterns and social dynamics that are unique to the city and its people and translating them into design principles to be utilized by architects in the design process.

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S

STYLE

noun

a distinctive quality, form, or type of something¹

The organization of architecture and categorization of the built environment based on time period, location, aesthetics, cultural and societal impact comprises style.²

Style seems to be one of the qualities always associated with vernacular architecture. Vernacular architecture is interpreted as a style adopted by a certain region. Here, the vernacular sets itself apart and detaches itself from style. Instead, it focuses on the design process and the way people engage with it.

الأسلوب

اسم

نوعية أو شكل أو نوع مميز لشيء ما

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T

TOP-DOWN

adjective ¹ controlled, directed, or instituted from the top level

Top-down is an approach or perspective where decisions are made from a higher authority that are then trickled downwards to lower levels. It is a hierarchical structure where those on top make decisions that affect those below. In the context of architecture, it is the imposition of design, planning or development decisions from the government, urban planners or architects onto the spaces and communities they are intended to serve. Such an approach has no place in the process of redefining vernacular architecture. By contrast, the bottom-up approach offers a more humble and sensitive alternative.

يتم التحكم فيها أو توجيهها أو تأسيسها من المستوى الأعلى

التنازلي

صفة

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T

TRADITION

noun ¹

an inherited, established, or customary pattern of thought, action, or behavior

the handing down of information, beliefs, and customs by word of mouth or by example from one generation to another without written instruction

cultural continuity in social attitudes, customs, and institutions

characteristic manner, method, or style

التقاليد

"Tradition" is a commonly used word—and, like many common words, elusive. Precisely because it is usually taken for granted as basic and so—in a sense—"obvious," it has often for that reason not been discussed.² It is instructive to look at the word in the standard reference works and dictionaries and find how often it is missing.

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V

ERNACULAR

Vernacular is a term that is typically called up in the context of architecture and language. It suggests a type of language that is formed naturally and organically, focusing on the spoken rather than the written form. This idea of vernacular as opposed to standardized form of language emerges in a postcolonial world where local communities draw on their own linguistic properties that are context and culture specific. In architecture, vernacular is a 19th century invention, which makes the challenge of defining it in the 21st century a difficult one. What would a vernacular architecture for the twenty first century look like? Will its influence and discourse surrounding it change? Will it become extinct? Or will it ultimately encompass everything?

AlSayyad classifies the challenge in defining vernacular in the etymological and epistemological limitations of the concept. Etymologically, for anything to be considered vernacular, it has always been assumed that it must be native or unique to a specific place, produced without the need for imported components and processes, and possibly built by the individuals who occupy it. However, the twenty first century ushers in the age of globalization where culture and tradition are not tied to a specific location. This means that the concept of vernacular has to reflect this paradigm shift. Epistemologically, the meaning must evolve in reference to knowledge and classification. The idea that vernacular and modern languages are entirely separate

العمارة الشعبية

must be discarded as there are instances where vernacular can be the most modern of the modern.

However, in this premise, the definition of vernacular must be approached critically and problematized. The existing Eurocentric premise and over-romanticized definition needs to be redefined to reflect not only context, but also the built environment and 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. These definitions, even the ones generated from Arab scholars like AlSayyad, seem to pool all architecture that has not been generated in the West into one body, the vernacular. 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.

Although vernacular architecture can be perceived as material manifestation of culture as artifact, it is not merely any design that uses contextual or regional features or employ's popular or traditional forms as a starting point for modern design. Furthermore, regional responsiveness is not the only determiner of the vernacular, meaning that not all works that are contextual may be considered vernacular. Design process and intent play a major role in the definition.

One critique of vernacular architecture comes from the involvement of the architect. In *Architecture without Architects*, Rudofsky explains that vernacular architecture is not a slave to fashion trends and stylistic impressions. He says that it is "immutable, indeed unimprovable, serving its purpose to perfection", and in being untouched by architects, it gains an immediacy and purity. Furthermore, Heath seems to suggest that an architect and vernacular architecture are mutually exclusive. One must be native to be considered a vernacular builder, but an architect already brings in an assumption of intellect and superiority. One promotes culture and the other aesthetics. However, the assumption that "vernacular builders are unskilled, illiterate, technology ignorant or isolated from the world of global commination" is no longer valid.

Unfortunately, vernacular is one of those words that has been endlessly repeated until it has become "ubiquitous and its meaning unchallenged." That statements holds true only if the definition of vernacular remains limited to its current framework. Instead of having the context, built form, aesthetic and motifs at the forefront of the classification process, perhaps there is a way to bring together the architect and the local people to generate the vernacular as both an intuitive process that facilities the people's needs and in a methodical way that may be replicated when necessary and remain associated with people and place. This transforms vernacular architecture into an act of storytelling rather than a projection of the architect's

ideologies, focusing on the relationship between people and the built environment through spatial practices. The vernacular then becomes a process of creating "spatial agency"⁶ identifying spatial needs, understanding lived experiences, cultural patterns and social dynamics that are unique to the city and its people and translating them into design principles to be utilized by architects in the design process.

- Can in this way an architecture designed by architects be defined as vernacular?
- Is it possible for the aesthetic and formalistic notions be dismantled and separated from the vernacular?
- How can vernacular architecture be redefined to reflect people and place?
- What are the components of that make up people and place?

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IN ARABIC

العمارة العامية	COMMON ARCHITECTURE ¹
العمارة التقليدية	TRADITIONAL ARCHITECTURE ²
العمارة البيئية	ENVIRONMENTAL ARCHITECTURE
العمارة التلقائية	SPONTANEOUS ARCHITECTURE ³
العمارة الشعبية	POPULAR ARCHITECTURE ⁴
العمارة الدارجة	VERNACULAR ARCHITECTURE ⁵

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بالعربي

as per google translate, more appropriate for language than for architecture

linked to a moment in time and historical dimension, takes away from the depth and complexity

confusion, may be mistranslated to contextual or environmental architecture

encompasses intuitive process; however, makes it seem haphazard and unplanned

linked to people, not a time or place, situational, may change with time; however, may fall into trap of populism

as per hossam mahdy's glossary of arabic terms for the conservation of heritage, not commonly used among the people

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Informality

Islamic Architecture

Populism

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