

Graduation Plan

Master of Science Architecture, Urbanism & Building Sciences



Graduation Plan: All tracks

Submit your Graduation Plan to the Board of Examiners (Examencommissie-BK@tudelft.nl), Mentors and Delegate of the Board of Examiners one week before P2 at the latest.

The graduation plan consists of at least the following data/segments:

| Personal information | | |
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| Name | Nada Ibrahim Abou Bakr Gemiei | |
| Student number | 5541743 | |
| Studio | | |
| Name / Theme | Explore Lab | |
| Main mentor | Suzana Milinovic | Architecture |
| Second mentor | Georgios Karvelas | Building Technology |
| Third Mentor | John Hanna | Research |
| Argumentation of choice of the studio | <p>My fascination with this topic comes from the connection I have to my home, my city, Cairo and the changes it has endured over the last few decades. As an architect, who lived, studied and worked in Cairo, I have always felt a sense of responsibility towards it and it has always been a pivotal part of my journey to work towards and positively contribute to its built environment and narrative. The starting point for my graduation studio journey was the research I conducted as part of my history thesis last year which focused on the critical reflection on the urban processes of growth that trigger the construction of new capital cities in Egypt. I chose the Explore Lab Graduation studio in an effort to pursue this fascination to a greater extent. The studio stood out to me with its flexibility to explore any topic of choice and the process of hand selecting the team of tutors to help nurture it to life.</p> | |
| Graduation project | | |
| Title of the graduation project | Urban Identities in Crisis: Redefining Vernacular Architecture in Cairo | |
| Goal | | |
| Location: | Cairo, Egypt | |
| The posed problem, | <p>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 Administrative Capital (NAC) as the key to reducing Cairo's urban load in response to 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.</p> | |

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| | <p>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. 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.</p> <p>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. The project focuses on the relationship between people, spatial practices and the built environment, from its urban core and historic centers to its desert cities and extensions.</p> |
| <p>research questions and</p> | <p>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. Ultimately the research poses the following questions:</p> <p>[How] can the term 'vernacular architecture' be redefined to reflect and regenerate the built environment and spatial practices of Cairo and future urban development?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 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? ▪ What is the relationship between spatial practices and the built environment? 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 complex layers of Cairo? |

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| <p>design assignment in which these result.</p> | <p>The process of theorizing, unfolding and learning from Cairo's built environment, through the lens of context, narratives, materiality and spatial practices, becomes the starting point for the design.</p> <p>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. The site locations are Downtown Cairo, New Cairo and the New Administrative Capital. In this way, it takes on an interdisciplinary approach, tackling issues on both the urban and architectural scales.</p> <p>Based on the findings from the research outcomes from the process of redefining the vernacular, the design will reflect the ever-changing nature of Cairo and therefore will not be a fixed moment in time. It must have a temporal dimension, be incremental in nature, be open to appropriation, change and grow with time. Following the same thought process, the program, although definitively public in nature, is left open ended as an opportunity for each intervention to take on its own life based on people's needs derived from the outcome of the research and site analysis. The lessons learnt from Cairo become the guidelines that shape the design. The design process itself becomes a series of experiments, grounded to each site, progressing in parallel to the uncovering of theories and narratives as they emerge.</p> |
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Process

Method description

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 must be approached critically and problematized. 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 challenges the existing one and elaborates on the makeup of 'the vernacular' in the context of Cairo. The glossary also investigates the influence of language on the process of redefining vernacular architecture.

Informed by the glossary, 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, 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 a discourse analysis that is divided into local dialogues and promoted propaganda. The local dialogues are composed of semi-structured interviews with local scholars and practitioners. The promoted propaganda investigates 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 outcome of the research is a series of research catalogues, the Glossary, the Urban Narratives, the Local Dialogues and the catalogue of Cairo's Pattern Language.

Literature and general practical references

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Reflection

1. What is the relation between your graduation (project) topic, the studio topic (if applicable), your master track (A,U,BT,LA,MBE), and your master programme (MSc AUBS)?

This thesis utilizes the freedom offered by the Explore Lab Graduation Studio to explore any fascination and topic of choice. As part of the Architecture track, the thesis offers a lens into Cairo, the challenges facing its constantly expanding urban environment and the process of production of architecture and urban space. It offers an alternative approach to understanding the city, tackling the notion of vernacular architecture within it, as well as challenging the definition of vernacular architecture altogether, learning from Cairo and using its patterns as a tool for design, in an effort to unearth an architectural identity that reflects its richness and its people.

2. What is the relevance of your graduation work in the larger social, professional and scientific framework?

Architectural discourse keeps the West as its compass. 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.

In this way, my graduation project will contribute to the body of knowledge in real time as new cities are being built in the region. 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 challenges the notion of architecture as a static object in time. By delving into the intricate relationships between the built environment and spatial practices in Cairo, emphasizing the significance of the architectural and urban scales, my work explores an alternative approach to the design process that stems from the context and the precious acts of daily life.

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.