Mūhndsīn; explorations of the right to the city

Fatma Saber

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ABSTRACT

With the majority of the world’s population living in cities, the urban has become a dynamic space where contemporary social relations, gender roles and subjectivities are being recreated. This thesis explores the nexus between the urban and the social spaces it creates, with a specific focus on Cairo. It adopts critical urban theory and the right to the city as theoretical approaches to understanding these dynamics by studying Mūhndsīn a district in the city which combines diverse forms of living and dwelling.

The thesis reaches conclusions on the operationalization of the right to the city by focusing on three themes of significance, which are the evolution of the built environment, visibility in the urban and neo-liberalization of space. These areas of study reveal the impact of the urban on the social, reaching conclusions on the possibilities of political action which go beyond conventional activism and resistance. It argues that participation and appropriation of space are the paths towards a city yet to come.
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Introduction

Cities may be planned, drawn, managed and divided along the lines of functionality, economic rationale or political power, but like plants slowly cracking stones, human life shapes another a city, to accommodate its ways and directions.

This thesis will explore the spaces between the planned and the lived in cities, how social relations fill the gaps in the urban fabric. It seeks to answer the paradox of power, who yields it and in what form, without focusing on the traditional binary of capital and institutional authority. The thesis focuses on a district in greater Cairo (Governorate of Al jīza) known as Mūhndsīn, using the right to the city and critical urban theory as a framework to understand the dynamics of space and place in the creation of social relations and structures.

The thesis is a contribution to the field of urban studies, especially in light of recent trends in contemporary urban planning towards the creation of sanitized urban spaces; Dubai, Singapore and gated communities around the world. I mean here by sanitized that they are free of the ugly of the city; where the poor and discriminated are hidden, where the smells and sounds are controlled and where human difference is not tolerated. On the other hand, much has been written about developing countries cities within a narrative of poverty and slums, essentializing an understanding of wealth, power and the connection between global neo-liberal arrangements and local socio-economic structures. Indeed, this thesis situates itself within the context of debates on critical urban geographies and ‘space’ as a social realm. Such debates introduce space as actor not a context.

Cairo as a city is interesting as it combines many phenomenon, whether gated communities, slums which engulf towns, informal neighbourhoods, rural pockets within cities and plenty of urban decay. It is thus difficult to place Cairo to a specific type of urban category, for it is nether slum nor gated community. Attempts at classifying the city are abundant; varying according to the observer. Sims for example finds that “Cairo’s urban development from 1950 by focusing on three distinct morphological phenomena or urban forms: (1) the continuing growth of the formal city, (2) the emergence and explosive expansion of the informal city, and (3), beginning in
the late 1970s, the crafting of the modern desert city.” (Sims, 2012, p. 46) Local authors tend to perceive Cairo’s built environment as a binary between formality (the planned urban) and informality (organic urban expansion known as ‘ashwa ’īyat) (Mosilhy, Fathy ed., 2002). This does not preclude a recognition by these same scholars that between these two extremes there are many uncategorized forms of the urban, such as the older neighbourhoods in the heart of Islamic Cairo, the tomb and roof dwellers, the ‘ishash (a group of huts which were enveloped by the planned urban growth) or the ikr (endowments).

AbdouMaliq Simone describes how apparently chaotic cities in Africa are governed by functioning, albeit invisible and impromptu practices and social arrangements rather than institutional and juridical norms and regulations (Simone, 2004). Cairo as a site is filled with such flows, circuits and practices, presenting the urban as a space for social movement and change (relations, structure, practices, gender roles). Indeed, Space is the object of this research; exploring the nexus of built environment, the urban and the social. It premises that the city is a site where planned public policy and the agency of human beings meet and that urban planning and construction have a direct impact on the way we relate to each other socially. Changing the height of a building – for example - or the number of rooms in an apartment can be as powerful in shaping social structures as public policy. More importantly, the city is a context in which gender roles, subjectivities and practices are recreated, in directions which cannot be foreseen, opening up windows for change.

It is moreover challenging to define a theoretical framework to adequately answer the question of how these diverse arrangements within the urban fabric of Cairo continue to co-exist and what does such a persistence means for an understanding of how power is shared by inhabitants. Accordingly this thesis has adopted critical urban theory and Lefebvre’s concept of ‘the right to the city’ as the methodological and theoretical frameworks to explore the themes referred to in the previous paragraph.

Indeed, Lefebvre’s contribution to the debate on justice and equality in the urban is to highlight space as living, as life. He argues that a change in the three pillars of social space - spatial practice, representational and representations of space – can create moments of justice in the urban by claiming the right to the city. Interpretations of Lefebvre’s theory – including Harvey’s - call for a rights-based approach to the
right to the city by associating its realization with modifying structures, legal frameworks and institutions; expanding the share of a specific category of humanity in the share of power. Such ‘empowerment’ is concerned with mainstreaming, managing and integrating dissent rather than promoting tangible changes in a dominant ideology.

Accordingly, this thesis opted to base research on an approach to the right to the city according to Purcell’s interpretation. The latter ties its implementation to increasing Participation (contributing in any decision that influences urban life, regardless of one’s legal status in the territory at hand) and Appropriation (a mix of physical presence, management and use of space).

This thesis engages with such themes by focusing on the district of Mūhndsīn. The district is known in its contemporary form is known for its high rises, cafes, shops and infamous traffic jams. Yet it is also host to multiple communities which are not only different in economic terms, but also in identity, provenance and in their use of the living space they share. Mūhndsīn is an ideal site for the observation of both the glory and failure of capital in controlling lives in the city. It is not clear for example how a number of rural pockets continue to survive to the present day in some of the most valuable real estate in Cairo. Does the fact that these all of these communities share the same space represent an actualization of Lefebvre’s ‘right to the city’?

It will also consider the political possibilities emerging from spaces such as Mūhndsīn especially in cities like Cairo which have grown similar to layers of earth; each replacing but not eliminating the other (Lefebvre’s analogy of the “mille-feuille pastry”) (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 86) What are the modalities for the management of such spaces?

The following is thus the main research question posed:

**Does contemporary Mūhndsīn represent an actualization of the right to the city?**

Other questions to be posed by this paper:

*Has the evolution of Mūhndsīn been a reflection of surplus capital expansion, as espoused by Harvey or is it the triumph of the urban over capital as embraced by Lefebvre?*
Why has the urban evolution of Mūhnsīn failed to eliminate existing communities? How have the latter negotiated their co-existence within this urban space?

What are the political possibilities generated by the social space that is Mūhnsīn?

The thesis is divided into five chapters. The first will set the scene by expanding on the theoretical elements of the ‘right to the city’ on one hand and by narrating the history of urbanization of Mūhnsīn on the other. Chapter two will focus on the urban evolution of the district and its impact on social space, while chapter three studies the themes visibility in the urban; what the growth of Mūhnsīn choose to hide and reveal in the urban fabric. The rural pocket of ‘izbat wilād ‘allām, will be taken as a case study. Chapter four will engage with the dynamics and flows of capital in the district. This will be through the study of the most flagrant of capital-related phenomenon; the ‘franchise’ boom.

In these three core chapters, the study identifies signs of participation and appropriation, signifiers of the right to the city as will be explained further on in Chapter One. Chapter five will be a conclusion on whether Mūhnsīn is indeed an actualization of the right to the city, outlining the observations reached based on the theory, fieldwork and analysis.

With regards to method and sources, this study is based on field research including interviews with current or former residents and ‘users’ of the district. Interviews took place from April 2015 to February 2016. They focused on collecting narratives on living, working and dwelling in Mūhnsīn in order to identify social arrangements and subjectivities linked to the urban environment. Questions focused on belonging, identity, relations and perceptions of neighbours. Other research material¹ include maps, newspaper articles, regulations and legislation concerning the construction of Mūhnsīn, as well as original layouts of houses

The theoretical foundation of the study is the existing academic scholarship on critical urban studies, the right to the city and the production of space, especially the work of Lefebvre, Harvey, Brenner and Purcell.

¹ The photographic material used in this thesis are the author’s own. The material was gathered
Chapter One

SETTING THE SCENE

**Critical Urban theory, the production of space and the right to the city**

At the dawn of the twenty first century, new questions on identity, belonging and the structures which connect human beings in societies, are posed. Mass mobilizations demanding political choices are a global phenomenon; not limited to the dictatorships of the world, but also in well-established liberal democratic States, with a long history of public participation in Government. While power continues to be the purview of those with institutional and economic authority, it appears that such mass protests aim to shift the balance in their favour. Much of the ire of these protests is directed at the transformation of socio-economic arrangements in global governance known as the neo-liberal world order. The concept “(…) has been appropriated by scholars and activists to describe the organizational, political and ideological reorganization of capitalism that has been imposed through the attempted institutionalization of such “free market” doctrines in specific historical and geographical contexts.” (Brenner & Theodore, Neoliberalism and the urban condition, 2005, p. 102)
These movements have one element in common; they mostly take place in urban centers, which opens the field to question what is it about the urban or the city that causes grievances and mobilization for political action – specifically against neoliberalism - in the contemporary moment. David Harvey engages with this theme, elaborating on the link between the capitalist economic system and cities. (Harvey, 2012) For Harvey, cities are both the product and the site of surplus capital accumulation. As product; the city absorbs profits and labour, in particular due to the sustained intervention and commitment by the State and investors for the construction process. (Harvey, 2012, p. 42) As a site it is a reflection of consumerism and the creation of urban lifestyles (Harvey, 2012, p. 16)

Moreover, Harvey blames recent trends towards decentralization and neoliberalism in the second half of the last century as being the primary cause of increased disenfranchisement, poverty and marginalization in the urban. In essence, Harvey argues that the social contract which evolved with the growth of the urban was destroyed with the unleashing of a capitalist system that was no longer refrained by a package of rights and regulations associated with the development of the industrialization process (inter-alia; Labour rights, environmental regulations, State control and monitoring).

Furthermore, the failure of socialism as an approach to governance after the fall of the Soviet Union contributed to the eating-away of welfare entitlements that had existed in the industrialized world. The reorganization of space in cities to suit evolving urban lifestyles and changing trends in real estate are equally destructive to the marginalized, with poorer zones within the city are being destroyed in the name of gentrification. (Harvey, 2012, p. 18) Recently, even wealthy neighbourhoods are falling under the knife of extreme capitalism. In New York, the well-off residents of Sutton Place are resisting the transformation of their well-heel ed habitations into a series of skyscrapers aimed to cater the growing interest by overseas investors (Arab Gulf, Russian and Chinese) in Manhattan property ownership. (Bagli, 2015)

For Harvey, power is closely linked to capital and consequently the urban. They are all sides of the same coin, which explains much of the cycle of marginalization and subsequent mobilization with demands for participation in government. He does not limit his argument to the material manifestation and destructive capacity of
neo-liberalism, but refers to the impact of the latter on the “production of space” in the urban, a concept coined by Lefebvre to explain the social contract, relations and understandings that exist in the city. (Lefebvre, 1991)

Indeed, according to Lefebvre, the discourse on ‘Space’ has for too long been dominated by schools of knowledge which view it’s physical aspects such as engineering, and physics (physical space) or those that transform it into in-tangible units for calculations and formulas, such as mathematicians (mental space). (Lefebvre, 1991) Such a reduction of space into these two categories masks its social nature. Lefebvre states “(Social) space is a (social) product.” (Lefebvre, 1991 , p. 26). He claims that each mode of production (society) creates and shapes its social space, pointing to three inter-locking elements, which not only define relationships between individuals but even the material surroundings present in the urban:

“Here three interrelated levels must be taken into account: (1) biological reproduction (the family); (2) the reproduction of labour power (the working class per se); and (3) the reproduction of the social relations of production - that is, of those relations which are constitutive of capitalism and which are increasingly (...) sought and imposed as such.” (Lefebvre, 1991 , p. 32)

These levels then constitute the three pillars of social space according to Lefebvre which are spatial practice, representations of space and representational spaces.

Spatial practice is what Lefebvre describes as the routes and circuits inhabitants move in their daily lives in the urban. These are unique practices in the sense that for each person they differ. (Lefebvre, 1991 , p. 38) Representations of space is that physical manifestation of capitalism, such as building, maps and streets. Meanwhile, representational space are the codes and symbols by which society actually lives and uses, such as ideology or religion. (Lefebvre, 1991 , p. 41)

For Lefebvre, the interaction and exchange between these three pillars -along with abstract space (symbols of capital which have no links to local nature and history) - are what urban society is constituted of. Change in society - he argues - can only
be achieved when these three pillars take on different forms. It is this moment of change from which emerges the political project, or revolution.

Indeed, it is this last point which is at the core of Lefebvre’s engagement with Marx’s critique of capital. The latter, he argues, focused too much on the production of objects in space (the manifestation of capitalism) and the plight of the working class, while ignoring space itself. (Lefebvre, 1991) Lefebvre’s interest was not in the investigation of these hierarchies that create society, but in the circuits and paths of space that interpenetrated and superimposed but could never dominate the existing structure. It is for this reason that the local always persists despite the influence of capital and its strive to shape space according to its terms (social, mental and physical).

Ultimately, Lefebvre’s investigation of social space is concerned with the discovery of new windows for emancipation and justice, rather than a superficial re-definition of democracy or identifying modes of grass-roots involvement in public decision-making. His project is much bigger and the stakes are much higher; for Lefebvre the shape of the city, physical and ephemeral, was the object of transformation. Harvey on the other hand is more concerned with the future of what he terms the “urban commons”, a term which signifies (in my opinion) a much less ambitious notion of change (Harvey, 2012, p. 67)

Basing this latter concept on Marx’s theory on collective labour, but locating it in the city, Harvey argues that

“(…) the metropolis that now constitutes a vast common produced by the collective labour expended on and in the city? The right to use that common must surely then be accorded to all those who have a part in producing it. This is, of course, the basis for the claim to the right to the city on the part of the collective labourers who have made it” (Harvey, 2012, p. 78)

He laments the disappearance of these commons, due to the mechanics of capital and its underlying policies of decentralization and autonomy. These forces divide between populations and groups of urban residents, not only in where they live in the urban but also what public goods they receive. Mayer has a similar approach, where-
by the divisive power of capital and neoliberalism have contributed a decline in democracy, the welfare State and the rise of sub-State actors (private service and good providers). Local Government has become governance that aims at finding a place for the village/town/city in question in the world market:

“Cities have transformed into gated communities and privatized public spaces, where wealthy and poor districts are increasingly separated as if by invisible barriers, and access of the poor to the amenities and infrastructures that cities once held for all have become more and more restricted” (Mayer, 2009, p. 367)

Brenner on the other hand attributes the rising importance of the urban as an element of social analysis due to the extension of its fabric beyond the limits of the city. In his understanding, questions of poverty and marginalization are of a global nature as the urban has become a state of being rather than physical structures. Similarly, Neoliberalism changes the face of the city and controls the movement of urban inhabitants. Brenner and Theodore explain how spatial practices of division and segregation in the urban were put in place following 9/11. (Brenner & Theodore, Neoliberalism and the urban condition, 2005) In their view such practices used the narrative of terrorism and fear to mask neo-liberal tendencies towards the production of space in the urban.

Harvey, Marcuse, Mayer and others seek to outline a solution to reverse the tide of disenfranchisement so intrinsic in the nature of the urban city and which is driven by capital and neo-liberalism. For Harvey the answer lies in the retrieval of the urban commons, which in his vision consists of taking back the resources that the market is trying to appropriate. This can only be done after a sustained, collective and organized movement of inhabitants vis-à-vis the State:

“This requires a double-pronged political attack through which the State is forced to supply more and more in the way of Public goods for public purposes, along with the self-organization of whole populations to appropriate, use, and supplement those goods in a way that extend and enhance the qualities of the non-commodified reproductive and environmental commons.” (Harvey, 2012, pp. 87, 88)
As the city is both a site of surplus of production and its motivation, Harvey argues that it may also be its absolution. Indeed the right to the city in his imagination is the search for the urban commons. For both himself and Marcuse, it is a moral claim more than anything else. (Mayer, 2009)

Yet, other scholars have different ideas about what that right actually means. It is particularly field for debate taking into consideration its use as a slogan by many contemporary urban activists to mobilize support. For some, the concept falls within the ambit of the juridical, along with packages of other entitlements dictated by the post-World War Two international system. Such an approach to the right to the city supports other political claims for increased benefits, public goods and the general welfare of citizens, but does not by any means reach Lefebvre’s ideas on the transformation of social space. Such an approach has been happily adopted by the United Nations to call for habitation and sanitary living standards, as well as minimum welfare requirements for a fulfilling life for the urban resident. (Mayer, 2009)

Marcuse dissects Lefebvre’s original reference to the right to the city, referencing who has a right and to what. (Marcuse, From critical urban theory to the right to the city, 2010) He highlights that it is the poor and disenfranchised (whatever the cause) that have the right to the city and that it is not limited to an issue of material presence in the city centre. He gives the example of a homeless person who sleeps in a public square; it certainly does not signify his triumph over capital, rather such a sight is considered a defeat. (Marcuse, From critical urban theory to the right to the city, 2010, p. 98) Marcuse views the right to the city as an empowerment project, where the poor and oppressed attempt to re-acquire power. It is “(…) a claim and a banner under which to mobilize one side in the conflict over who should have the benefit of the city and what kind of city it should be.” (Marcuse, From critical urban theory to the right to the city, 2010, p. 192)

Marcuse also touches upon critical urban theory as a means to identify and implement the right to the city. The former is an analytical approach to the structure of cities, which avoids conventional explanations that their growth is due to functionality and urban planning. It focuses rather on the power relations, which direct the development of the urban. Power relations according to critical theory determine who lives where and has access to which part of the city.
With a view to understanding the right to the city, Critical urban studies should thus seek to:

“(..) systematically investigating the relationship between capitalism and the urbanization process; understanding how that urbanization shapes and determines socio-spatial inequalities and politico-institutional arrangements; exposing the naturalization of inequalities and injustice that result from capitalist urbanization, deciphering the crisis tendencies, contradictions and lines of conflict that exist within contemporary cities; and finally the prospects for socially progressive and sustainable alternatives to contemporary capitalist urbanism.” (Marcuse & Imbroscio, Critical Urban Theory versus Critical Urban Studies: A Review Debate, 2014)

Marcuse further elaborates on this approach, proposing that any study aiming to implement the right to the city through critical urban theory should do three steps: expose, propose and politicize. Such studies “(..) need (s) to expose the common roots of the deprivation and discontent, and to show the common nature of the demands and the aspirations of the majority of the people. A critical urban theory can develop the principles around which the deprived and the alienated can make common cause in pursuit of the Right to the City. How to politicize most effectively that common ground?” (Marcuse, From critical urban theory to the right to the city, 2010, p. 195)

Indeed, Marcuse’s use of the right to the city through critical urban studies is very similar to Harvey’s (who in his turn echoes Hardt and Negri) that the end result of the right to the city as a political moment of politicization, mobilization and activism. For these scholars the right to the city is a stand against power manifested in the contemporary formal Nation-State which has been completely subsumed by the influence of neo-liberal capital.

It is possible that the afore-mentioned scholars have reduced Lefebvre’s more extensive imagination of transformation, revolution and change into moments of activism, due to the difficulty of translating it into actual action or tangible steps in reality. Dreams of cities to come a la Lefebvre can be exciting, but how does the inhabitant of the contemporary city turn it into difference in everyday life?
Purcell engages with this paradox, arguing that the right to the city should not be limited to “(..) users claiming more access to and control over the existing capitalist city, a bigger slice of the existing pie.” (Purcell, Possible worlds: Henri Lefebvre and the right to the city, 2013, p. 150) His reading of Lefebvre interprets the latter’s vision of change into a direct affront to the liberal democratic structure and the concept of citizenship. It is a challenge to the modern Nation-State with all the good it entails (democracy-human rights- citizen participation in decision making and accountability of government) and bad (the role of capital and markets – consumerism – private ownership – environmental degradation).

Indeed, he dismisses the strive of contemporary urban-based movements to expand the rights entailed by citizenship as an application of the right to the city, since in essence they are blind to the plight of those who do not fall under this privileged category (migrants – homeless – refugees). In some cases they are more than just blind; the very nature of the urban movement is to take back the local territory from the ‘outsiders’ who are perceived by locals as changing their way of life. This is very clear in current European resistance to migration whether on the grounds of fear of job loss, religious intolerance or the narrative of crime.

Purcell purposefully uses the term “urban inhabitants” to denote belonging in a particular locality, which is not connected to the legal category of citizenship, rather it is based on Lefebvre’s notion of circuits and paths or the use of urban space, “(…) it is earned by living out the routines of everyday life in the space of the city.” (Purcell, Excavating Lefebvre: The right to the city and its urban politics of the inhabitant, 2002, p. 102)

Hence, it is this liberal- democratic structure that needs to change in order to move away from these fixed categories of belonging and to focus on reproducing space:

“Key to this radical nature is that the right to the city refrares the arena of decision making in cities: it reorients decision-making away from the state and toward the production of urban space. Instead of democratic deliberation being limited to just state decisions, Lefebvre imagines it to apply to all decisions that contribute to the production of urban space. The right to the city
stresses the need to restructure the power relations that underlie the production of urban space, fundamentally shifting control away from capital and the state and toward urban inhabitants.” (Purcell, Excavating Lefebvre: The right to the city and its urban politics of the inhabitant, 2002, pp. 101 - 102)

The restructuring of power relations and the shift of control mention above should aim at auto-gestation. (Purcell, Possible worlds: Henri Lefebvre and the right to the city, 2013) This notion echoes Marx’s ideas on the take-over of the means of production by labour, much like Harvey’s approach to the retrieval of the urban commons. However, unlike Harvey’s advocacy for activism as a means to that end, Purcell – interpreting Lefebvre’s right to the city - offers the notions of participation and appropriation.

The right to participation is contributing in any decision that influences urban life, regardless of one’s legal status in the territory at hand.

The right to appropriation

“(..) includes the right of inhabitants to physically access, occupy, and use urban space, and so this notion has been the primary focus of those who advocate the right of people to be physically present in the space of the city (Capron, 2002; Isin and Wood, 1999; Lamb, 2002; Salmon, 2001; Mitchell and Staeheli, 2002).” (Purcell, Excavating Lefebvre: The right to the city and its urban politics of the inhabitant, 2002, p. 103)

Moreover,

“Not only is appropriation the right to occupy already-produced urban space, it is also the right to produce urban space so that it meets the needs of inhabitants. Because appropriation gives inhabitants the right to ‘full and complete usage’ of urban space in the course of everyday life (Lefebvre, 1996, p. 179), space must be produced in a way that makes that full and complete usage possible.” (Purcell, Excavating Lefebvre: The right to the city and its urban politics of the inhabitant, 2002, p. 103)
Purcell hesitantly describes a politics of rescaling which would imply a re-definition of political identity and involvement in urban decision-making to accommodate the afore-mentioned right to participation and appropriation. If the right to city is indeed operationalized then the inhabitants of one city would potentially have influence on the decision taking place in another. Purcell uses the example of Mexican citizens having a say on the urban policies of Los Angeles, a city which receives many migrants from that country. (Purcell, Excavating Lefebvre: The right to the city and its urban politics of the inhabitant, 2002)

Purcell’s hesitance lies in his fear of where such transformations may lead, taking into consideration the power relations that exist between communities, much like the example of Sutton Place (Bagli, 2015) or consumer-based activism, such as the global Uber protests. The latter are in essence a stance by consumers, in solidarity with the private sector, against the State, through a call of greater deregulation. If rules, laws and policy frameworks set by the State are translated into permits, taxes and administrative procedures, blocking the free movement of capital, and thus an obstacle towards cheaper services to the consumer, then the latter will protest. Such a phenomenon is worrying, taking into consideration that the packages of regulatory procedures aim for the provision and financing of public goods which is the State’s principal mandate. Such ‘activism’ reflects an increasing sense of private individual interest being above that of the public.

Indeed, Purcell’s fear is that right to the city may evolve into discriminatory practices, along the lines of closing urban centres to specific groups or categories of inhabitants.

The next section will provide a history of the urbanization of Mūḥndsīn, a zone which could be significant in understanding the implementation of the right to the city. This is taking into consideration the particularity of its transformation from rural territory to residential neighbourhood to the beating heart of consumer Cairo.

**Introducing Mūḥndsīn**
Contemporary Mūhndōn is located on the West bank of the river Nile, within the Governorate of Al - jīza. While there is no administrative unit called Mūhndōn; the term is used to describe a zone that spans the two districts of Al ‘ajūw-zah and Al Dūqy. Reference to Mūhndōn is to denote the land that had previously been the property of the Ministry religious affairs and had been divided among professional syndicates in the 1950’s for residential purposes. It is also a reference to an urban development project proposal in the 1930’s known as ‘Madinat Al-Fu’adīya’, which had been suggested by the Planning Authority as model for a ‘modern’ city (Abu-Jāīl, 2013, p. 493). For the purpose of this thesis, Mūhndōn is the area bordered by Sudan street to the West, Nile street to the East, Ta rīr street to the South and Sphinx Square to the North. This echoes the initial division of wāsā Al Ḍūqy which included both these districts, that was changed in 1977. (wāsā Al Dūqy, 2015)

This following section will explore the history of the urbanization of Mūhndōn in order to set the scene for the next chapters on the direction of the urban evolution, the role of capital and visibility. To do so a brief history of Al - jīza and growth trends in Egyptian cities will be provided as without it, there will be difficulty to address and understand the urban in Mūhndōn.

History of urbanization

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2 A note on administrative division: Egypt is divided along a Five-tier hierarchy of administrative division for official purposes; (In descending order) Governorates, Cities, Centers, Districts and Villages. There are 27 Governorates, of which two are classified as fully ‘urban’ and are considered one ‘City’ without any other sub-units. Centers and villages are usually found in the ‘rural’ or ‘mixed’ Governorates as they are used to categorize zones according to the number of villages. While Giza is an independent Governorate under law, it constitutes part of what is known as the ‘Greater Cairo region’ along with Cairo and Qalubiya. As it is considered an ‘Urban’ Governorate it is divided into districts (ay) (“Egypt State Information”Service, 2015)
Al-jīza is one of the oldest inhabited Governorates in Egypt; its urban development has been directly linked to that of Cairo. (Al-Zawahriy, 1991) Cairo itself is considered a recent construct taking into consideration that it was built gradually since the Arab/Islamic conquest. The heart of Cairo are the four settlements of the first Arabs (from 640 to 969 A.D.) which were later surrounded by a wall. Built originally with the aim of being a fortress, the city nestled in the Moqā‘āmah mountain range (Al-Zawahriy, 1991, p. 33). With the passage of time, construction moved towards the valley of the river Nile. This was a reversal to the kind of settlements which Pre-Arab populations preferred, which is to dwell on the banks of the Nile for easy access to drinking water as farmers did not need to dig too deep to reach underground water.

This urban growth spread from the East of the Nile to the West. Until the late 19th century, Cairo was considered the urban center, where the administration was based, while neighbouring Al-jīza was the source of fresh produce as well as entertainment and education (rural passages, the royal zoo, Al-Orman gardens, the Pyramids, the higher school of agriculture – the Sa‘diya school). The bridges that were built in that period were instrumental in connecting the urbanized West with the East and was a turning point in the gentrification of large swaths of Al–jīza. The railroad connecting the North and South (Delta and Sa’īyd line) of Egypt was also completed at the time, passing over the Imbaba bridge (Al-Zawahriy, 1991).
Al-ţīza at the time was host to a number of villages, including Saqīyat Mikīy, Bolaq Al Daqrūr, the three villages of ‘jūwzah, Mit ‘oqba, Al ūtiyah, Dūqy, ‘zbat Bayn Al tharāyat, Imbaha, ‘izbat wilād ‘alām as well as the village of Al-ţīza which was considered the largest inhabited conglomeration. The first of these villages to witness signs of urbanization were Dūqy and Bayn Al tharāyat - the area between the pyramids and Cairo (then King Fouad) University - to provide services to the latter (Al-Zawahriy, 1991). Moreover, other sites of entertainment for the wealthy were created. The land was host to the king’s shooting club built in 1938. The Zamālek (formally King Farouk club) moved to the Northern borders of present day Mūḥndsīn in the 1950’s (Abu-Jalīyl, 2013). It already hosted the Ministry of Agriculture as well as the agricultural museum.

It is worth noting that the particular swath of land around the villages mentioned above, up to the Pyramids belonged to Khedive Ismail’s daughter, the Princess Fatma Ismail. She was famous for having donated parts of this land for the construction of the King Fouad University, as well as other public enterprises in Al-ţīza. She is an important figure in the history of Al-ţīza and the urbanization of Cairo, especially with regards to ‘izbat wilād ‘alām. I will return to this point in the chapter focusing on this area.

*Figure 2: A bust of Princess Fatma Ismail in the Egyptian Agricultural Museum, her former palace.*
The real explosion of urbanization of Al-ġīza took place from 1952 onwards with the increase of internal immigration with the development of the industrial areas on both the West and East banks of the river such as Imbaba, shūbra, olwan and in Al-ġīza itself (Al-Zawahriy, 1991). To accommodate the population explosion the State decided the inclusion of more and more swaths of land in the ‘city corridor’ (Kordown Madiynah), transforming what was once land for agricultural purposes into part of the city. This opened the door for the parcelling of land into sites for residential use. (Al-Gamal, 2003) During that period, almost 46 thousand square kilometres of rural territory become officially part of the city.

It was this point in the 1950’s that the first features of urbanized Mūhndšīn started to appear (The first wave urbanization). According to Ossama Taha, (Taha, 2015) whose construction company started working in the zone in the 1990’s, one of the main reasons for the gentrification of the areas around the villages of Dūqy and Al-ğīwzah was the saturation of the abodes of the economically wealthy Egyptians concentrated in the West bank of the Nile such as Garden city, ‘abasiyāh and Zamālek.

Moreover, at the time the State was the principle employer of citizens and was committed to providing generous entitlements to its employees, including housing schemes. This included allocating parcels of land to various public entities as well as syndicates, who in turn would offer them at advantageous rates to the civil servants under the State’s employment.

Mūhndšīn is an abbreviation for the longer name of the district; ‘Madiynat Al- Mūhndšīn, literally translated into ‘The city of Engineers’. However, the latter is misnomer; as was previously mentioned the district was meant to house more than just engineers. The area was divided into smaller ‘cities’ or ‘houses’ (Masaken), with each public entity attaching its professional label to the plot. The area assigned to police officers was named Masaken Al-Zobat, while the plot taken by Ministry of Agriculture was named Madinat Al-Zira’īyīn.

The construction around the village of Dūqy was characterized by “(..) wide, well organized streets, whereby the urban residential growth took the form of villas for those with high and above-average incomes and for the superior social classes of
high-ranking civil servants, University Professors, intelligentsia, writers and Engineers.”

(Al-Gamal, 2003, p. 15)

Meanwhile, the area around the village of Al-‘jūwzah – according to Gamal was not as neatly divided. “In the villages of Al-‘jūwzah and Al-ūtiyah urban construction crawled in their direction and swallowed them with the rural and village aspects which turned them into urban islands that were inconsistent with the superior urban fabric in that middle-zone.” (Al-Gamal, 2003, pp. 15 - 16) However this changed with the construction of the three towers by the Ministry of Religious Endowments and which were thus known as the Awqāf buildings in the 1960’s.

\[Figure 3: The official map of present day Duqi (ay Al-Dūqy, 2015)\]

\[My translation from the Arabic text\]
The gentrification of the area eventually replaced the rural characteristics of the dwellings and activities surrounding Dūqy and Al ‘ajūwzah with the (legally permitted maximum) three floors buildings and the groomed gardens of the bureau/technocrats. By the 1980’s the district became the object of desire of the newly wealthy; Egyptian returning with hard-earned petrodollars from the Arab Gulf States, film stars and politicians made Mūhndsīn their home. Arab tourists found the district perfect for purchasing pied-a-terres in Cairo. With this second wave of wealthy residents, zoning laws including restrictions on the height of buildings and green areas were made more flexible by the government in order to accommodate the lifestyles and the consumer culture they brought with them. The government became more easy-going about providing licenses for commercial activities and the conversion of the cherished gardens of the civil servants into cafes, shops and restaurants.

The advent of the newly wealthy brought an end to the modern socialist dream. The skyline of low rises gave way to very high rises, with barely any green areas. Gone were the animals and fruit trees; instead the district proudly hosted the first Mcdonalds in Egypt in 1994. The zone already has three Starbucks outlets. The
first decade of the 21st century witnessed the rise of the café; home of the cappuccino, ceasar salads and the abode of young urban professional cosmopolitan Egyptian female yearning for coffee, cigarettes, low-fat lunches and the anonymity of the urban (Konig, 2006).

*Mūhndsīn and the right to the city*

Capital, particularly in its contemporary more aggressive, strives to create a society in its own image. The site of such efforts is most clear in the urban, where capital profits and surpluses are absorbed and produced. With a view to perpetuating its own existence it manipulate space, social, mental and physical, to best serve its needs of labour, consumers and structures.

The production of space in the contemporary moment is within the hands of capital, which has subsumed the Nation-State, with all its institutions and symbols. Power is no longer with citizens, it lies firmly in the hands of the market. Democracy has failed to deliver the kind of emancipation and justice that would allow inhabitants of any given urban center to decide on their own destinies independent of the capitalist machine. Such a struggle can neither be limited to moments of grass-roots activism, which can mask many discriminatory and oppressive currents, nor to demands for rights within the liberal-democratic system of governance.

What is needed is change that will touch Lefebvre’s three pillars of spatial practices, representations of space and representational space. The right to the city is a window through which this can take place, by focusing on the two principles of participation and appropriation. Lefebvre’s understanding of social space is revealing when exploring the urban fabric in cities such as Cairo, which have a long history replete with ideology, human movement and construction (Lefebvre appropriately compared such space to the *mille-feuille* pastry). The three pillars Lefebvre describes – Spatial practice, representation of space and representational space – would explain the disorderly growth of the city despite frequent and cyclical attempts at urban planning. As mentioned earlier *Mūhndsīn* is interesting as a sample of the urban fabric of Cairo, taking into consideration the multiplicity of communities, circuits and pathways of living and the extreme visibility of consumerism and capital in its streets.
Another point of interest is the lack of the ‘moment’ of change or revolution in Mūhndsīn.

Going back to the research question, does the urban represented in Mūhndsīn constitute an operationalization of the right to the city? Is Mūhndsīn the tangible output of socially constructed difference and power dynamics reflected in urban reality as pundits of critical urban theory would imply? Moreover, is Mūhndsīn site of capital surplus as in Harvey’s understanding and would the co-existence of starkly different patterns of living and dwelling be the enactment of the ‘right to the city’? How are these lives shaped and negotiated in the everyday interaction of the inhabitants of Mūhndsīn and what possibilities – gendered or otherwise - are being created due to this interaction?

This thesis engages these questions by identifying signs of participation and appropriation as espoused by Purcell in his reading of Lefebvre. Chapter Two will examine the impact of the built environment (the urban evolution) as a reflection of power relations in a given society as well as creating subjectivities and gender roles.

Chapter Two

EVOLUTION OF THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT AND SOCIAL SPACE IN MŪHNDŚĪN

A conversation; Mūhndsīn, mid-1990’s. Two ladies.

“..So that what he said? That he can build two buildings in the place of your villa!!!” These apartments would be tiny…who would actually live in these cramped spaces!!!”

“That’s what he said,… he took a tour of the house then sat down and told me the price per meter and the permits and all that nonsense.”

“You will sell?”

“Of course not…what in God’s name am I supposed to do with all that money?”
This chapter will explore the evolution of the built environment in Mūhndsīn in order to explore its relationship to the creation of social relations, subjectivities and structure. Using the right to the city as a tool to understand the impact of the built environment on social space, the chapter focuses on identifying symbols and practices of appropriation and participation, particularly by observing and analysing the effect of capital expansion, power balances and residents’ capacity to influence the urban evolution.

While not pre-assuming a categorization of Mūhndsīn’s urban evolution, I use concepts which link urban growth and social relations – such as ‘gentrification’ and ‘urban decay/deterioration’ as a measure and lens of the role of capital and power in the neighbourhood’s urban growth, covering the two waves of construction (Villas-buildings) described in the previous chapter. Taking into consideration the intangible nature of the right to the city and the difficulty of its measurement as explained in Chapter One, these concepts are more solid tools with which to understand and classify observations from the field, especially when studying the growth in the constructed environment.

The chapter focuses uniquely on residential construction, taking into consideration that commercial aspects are studied in the following chapter. It does not consider Mūhndsīn prior to the 1950s when it was part of rural Al-jiža. Moreover, Chapter three is dedicated to question of these pre-urbanized Mūhndsīn communities.

The focus is thus the first wave of construction which took place in the 1950s to mid-1970s) with the division of agricultural land into plots among the professional syndicates (the Villa phase) and the second (mid 1970s to present) with the introduction of the high rise buildings (the Tower phase). The first section engages with the concepts of gentrification and decay with a view to classify the urban evolution of the district.

Understanding the urban evolution
Gentrification is a generic term for the process by which the wealthy are able to move into neighbourhoods which previously belonged to the poor or disadvantaged. According to Lang:

“….gentrification will connote essentially private-capital-induced development in formerly lower income areas that results in a pattern of higher rents and land and house values. The pattern of rising rents and property values displaces many existing renters and owner-occupiers on fixed incomes by making the area unaffordable.” (Lang, 1982, pp. 8, 9)

Bryson also refers to it as:

“(…) a process that involves the reinvestment of capital after a period of disinvestment, the production of an aestheticized landscape, and lower class displacement followed by middle class replacement. (…). These mutually informing characteristics help to explain the significant social, demographic, and political changes that accompany gentrification, as well as the significant transformation of the visible urban scene.” (Bryson, 2013, p. 578)

The above definitions highlight a number of characteristics linked to the phenomenon of gentrification. The first is that is a specifically urban process, linked to housing and city planning, demographic increases and policy choices. It is moreover highly dependent on the movement of capital, market and housing supply and demand; as the number of housing units decrease with an rising population the State – and investors – logically focus on the already existing built environment within the urban. Finally, it is a phenomenon that is used within the context of class-based interpretations of society. (Smith, 1979; Redfern, 2003) with the ‘lower’ classes being displaced by the bourgeoisie or ‘upper’ classes.

Recently, much of the academic literature tying between urban development and power relations has focused on gentrification as a tangible result of a change in lifestyles, habits and societal structure driven and shaped by the rise of consumer culture. Conventional studies on gentrification, especially in the United States, describe how inner city neighbourhoods - once shunned by the economically affluent -became at-
tractive. This was due to increasingly smaller family structures, the decline of the Fordist production system and the associated Suburbia urban planning formats.

Indeed, up until the late 1960’s, suburbs were predicted to remain the space for any future urban development due to the expansion of highway construction, availability of cheap land and the movement of businesses out of the city. (Frieden, 1964, p. 2). According to Frieden “(…) Central locations no longer play a dominant role in the housing market (…) the vast majority of those in the market for new housing choose suburban dwellings.” (Frieden, 1964, pp. 2, 3).

The last three decades of the Twentieth Century have witnessed a reversal in this trend. Where once the wealthy used to move out of the city towards the suburbia, they currently prefer the urban in what Lang describes as “Neighbourhood resegregation” (Lang, 1982, p. 13) whereby “(…) the original, usually segregated, pattern is replaced by another segregated pattern” (Lang, 1982, p. 13).

Specifically in the United States, the post-World War two pattern of minorities and the poor living in the cities, has been replaced by the affluent returning to these neighbourhoods. This return has been prompted by better services and amenities such as entertainment, education and transportation, in addition to marketing schemes of urban developers.

Another concept directly linking developments in the built environment to the social is the concept of decay of city/metropolis decline and decay. Movements of population whether driven by economic changes, public policy or social trends inevitably lead to the abandonment of neighbourhoods. Lang points to the American preference of abandoning older urban zones in favour of the new; “Our development ethic is clearly to move on when an area wears out.” (Lang, 1982, p. 87)

Empty buildings, factories and public edifices symbolize this decline, characterized by disrepair, with their ownership disputed. Some residents who simply cannot leave for various reasons, remain, turning such zones into what Frieden describes as “grey areas”. (Frieden, 1964, p. 2) Such neighbourhoods are costly to rebuild taking into consideration the real estate value of the land which has become part of the city center and occasionally due to the legal complications of moving the remaining residents out.
Similarly, many of Cairo’s older neighbourhoods have witnessed a replacement of the affluent by the poor, turning them into what is Egyptians loosely refer to as ‘Popular districts’ Manatiq sha’bīya. Notwithstanding that these older urban centers were planned and connected to services, the pressure of increased residents and users, the purpose of the use of this physical spaces, combined with a distorted tenancy system, has led to visible decay.

Areas which were not meant for residence in the first place such as tombs or roof tops or even the temporary accommodation of railway workers, have also attracted the poor of the city. Meanwhile other areas – such as Imbaba - which were once working-class or industrial have become residential as the factories closed and the workers remained.

The described forms of the evolution of the built environment are both a result and a factor in the creation of social space in the city of Cairo. Each form of urbanization – regardless of its definition or category – carries with it a specific direction in subject formation, especially with regards to gender roles and responsibilities. affected and of urban evolution have implications for the nature of urbanization in Mūhndsīn in order to identify signs of gentrification.

**Phase one: The villas**

According to Taha, Egyptians like to build where they can find fresh water close to the surface of the earth; where it is easy to dig a well and install a pump. The urbanization of Cairo’s older residential neighbourhoods such as Būlāq, and later on Garden City and Zamālik were in part due to that feature. Again, it was for that reason that urbanization crept to the lands surrounding the Al -jīza farms of Dūqy, and Al-‘ajūwzah. The availability of fertile land allowed houses and gardens to be built.

Leila Q. is a woman in her eighties. She was a member of the Faculty of Agriculture at Cairo University and was one of the first wave residents of Mūhndsīn. Her father too was a Professor of Agriculture at Cairo University (then Fouad the First University) in the 1940’s and she was from the early generations of Egyptian women to graduate from University and acquire tenure. She grew up in the elegant neigh-
bourhood of Garden City, home to many of the Cairo affluent in the turn of the 19th century, located on the East bank of the Nile. However, when the University offered her Father a plot of land in the 1950s - in his capacity as a faculty member - in the developing neighbourhood of Dūqy, he did not hesitate to move. Why?

“Privacy … and it was so green” she answers “Garden City was beautiful but if we moved to the new location offered by the University, we could build a villa and have a garden.” Moreover, “Everybody was moving out of Zamālik and Garden City; they were coming here to where we could build villas. I convinced my Father to move.” (Q., 2015)

Responding to my question on why not Madyīnat Nasr, another option available at the time for the building of villas, she shook her head “Mūhndāsīn was older, it had history and nobility (‘araqa.) The University was here, as well as other monuments, the Princess’s (Fatma Ismail) palace, the Pyramids district, the Ministry of Agriculture, the German school…. Madyīnat Nasr was a desert.”

The family was entitled to 500 meter plot in the area that the Government allocated to Faculty members, in the zone known as hay’et Al-Tadrīs, currently located between Mesadaq street and the Ministry of Agriculture. This particular zone was also located in close vicinity to ‘izbat wilād ‘alām and the original village of Dūqy.
“We barely noticed the ‘izbat, they had their own business and we had ours. They were polite and did not mingle with us and we the same.”

According to Leila Q., prior to the arrival of the bureaucrats, Mūhndsīn was agricultural lands. The Government decided to divide the plots among the professional syndicates. The Judges were allocated a plot of Land in the direct vicinity of the Shooting club, while army soldiers were entitled to the land located in the streets now considered as the main throughways of Mūhndsīn; the Al-Batal A ṣīr ‘bd Al-‘zīz and Thawrah (revolution) Street. The latter was actually named so to honour the high ranking officers of Council of the leadership of the 1952 revolution, who were now residents of that particular zone. Incidentally, those streets were also the first to witness the construction of high rise buildings and where commercial activities started to appear. The E‘lamīyn (media professionals) were given the line of plots directly along the walls of the ‘izba, on the corners of Al-Nahdah and the end of Al-Batal A ṣīr ‘bd Al-‘zīz streets.

The Engineer’s and the Journalist’s syndicates were allocated the areas on the West of Jām‘at Al-Dūwal Al’arabīyah Street and in through Lebanon street. The latter currently is main artery to reach the circular road which leads to the newly urbanized ‘desert’ cities of the 6th of October and Sheikh Zāyid and the gated communities located in the Al- jīza periphery.

Each syndicate was responsible for the design of the house and the size of each plot. The Engineer’s syndicate for example created model homes from which their members could choose from, while the Judges left this decision to the residents themselves. The general regulation which applied to all the houses regardless of which syndicate the residents purchased from was that the maximum built area would be 30% and that the number of floors should not exceed three. The sizes of the plots ranged from 450 to 800 meters, with some buyers opting to buy two adjacent ones.

Leila chose to move with her own family during the 1970s to another area in Mūhndsīn. Once again she preferred this neighbourhood for its greenery and gardens. She also decided – like many women in her situation – to use the space she had to start a business. At the time the neighbourhood had become attractive as residence to foreigners living in Cairo. In easy distance of most Embassies located in Dūqy and
Zamālek. The buildings were newer and the apartments to let larger. There was a garden for children to play. Leila and her family decided to open a small hotel to cater to these foreign clients.⁴

Leila was one of many women who decided to turn their plots into businesses. Afaf S⁵ bought her plot from her brother who in turn had received it from the Judge’s Club. At the time he owed her accumulated share of proceeds from the family farm located in the South of Egypt. He was also incapable of paying the Judge’s club the installments of the land he had been allocated in Mūhndīn. He thus offered it to Afaf in 1963 in exchange of the debt he owed her. She was quick to seize the opportunity and decided even to sell a large part of her inherited agricultural land in the South to cover the remaining installments and start construction.

Her idea was two-fold; to build a ‘suitable’ home (a villa) to house her family (her husband and daughter) as well as the occasional grandparent, sibling or distant cousin. Moreover, she would build an attached apartment building to rent out to expatriates or foreign businesses, which had started to trickle into the Egyptian market in the 1970s.

Indeed, under the housing law existing at the time, short-term or time –limited contracts did not exist. Egyptian citizens enjoyed a vast number of rights related to housing, including rent control, open-term contracts which could be passed on to the second generation of the original tenant, and an endless legal procedure should the owner which to evict the latter. For this reason Afaf and others looked towards foreigners as tenants as they were exempted from the housing law restrictions, and in all cases were usually looking for short term contracts.

Construction ended in 1969 and the family left their rented apartment in the district known then as Al - ḥīza , which was the residential area near the Zoological garden and Cairo University. The new villa’s garden, along with others in the neighbourhood– and occasionally roofs – had rabbit hutches and were surround by low fences. The gardens and spacious living spaces allowed for the hosting of parties,

⁴ Mūhndīn has a significant number of such small hotels, such as the Kenzy, the Nabīla and the Raja.
⁵ Not her real name.
birthdays and even weddings and wakes. An active member of the Automobile and Rotary social Clubs, Afaf hosted many events in the garden.

Neighbours knew each other by name and family, taking into consideration that most residents in the same district shared the same profession. Friends and relatives visited for hours at a time, staying through breakfast, lunch and dinner. Since it was a residential area, Mühndsīn was known for being very quiet and peaceful, especially in the evening. Cars rarely passed and residents could easily spot those belonging to people from outside the neighbourhood.

While the villas and the affluent bureaucracy were the main features of the first wave urbanization of Mühndsīn, other more modest – and higher rising – edifices existed. The Government decided in the 1970s to construct several buildings dedicated to large scale popular housing, in Jām ’at Al-Dūwal Al’arabīyah and in Mu’ adaq streets.

One of the most famous of these housing estates is located on the corners of Mu’ adaq and Al-Batal A med ‘bd Al’zīz, and is now known as the Awqāf buildings. The thirteen floors of this famous building was initially let in the 1960s to employees of the nearby ministry of Agriculture as well as the Ministry of Religious Endowments. Later other professionals, such as doctors and lawyers, became tenants of the building, or kept offices and clinics. The varying sizes of the apartments, which ranged from one to three bedrooms, allowed for both commercial and residential use.

Mona Bashīr’s grew up in the Awqāf building, in a room on the roof. (Bashīr, 2015) She is in her early forties, married with three children. She is a civil servant and has a high school Diploma. Her parents moved to Cairo from the Governorate of Fayūm in the 1960s when her father found work as a cook. A family member helped them find lodging which is the room afore-mentioned.

Such roof-top rooms are a common feature of buildings in Cairo, regardless of the economic status of the district. Such rooms were used to lodge staff or for household services such as hanging laundry. They usually had a number of amenities installed such as running water and electricity. With changing demographics, vague housing legislation and restrictions, these rooms – like the graveyards in Cairo - offered alternative housing to the poor.
Mona’s mother worked as domestic help in the neighbourhood where it was easy to find work with the close proximity of many large houses which needed her services. The family of five shared two rooms and a common bathroom with a number of other families on the roof. Part of these two rooms was sectioned off to create a kitchen. According to Mona, there are about fifty such rooms on the roof. She refers to them as informal settlements or slums ‘‘ashwa’iyât’ as they are not divided into apartments and the services are shared.

Mona’s life in such close proximity with strangers does not seem to cause her unhappiness. Rather she speaks of it with some fondness, referring to the people who shared the roof as family. “Many of them are educated and have high school and university degrees, they developed with their life in Cairo. Many of the women are like me, they went to school and are employees.” Why don’t they move to more suitable lodging? “Why leave, here the location is central and there are many (public) services.”

Mona has her own apartment now in another popular area in Al-ţīţa known as Būlāq Al-Daqrûr, however she still lives in the rooms for the better part of the year. Her mother, now elderly, needs her care. She also is closer to her work and her children to school. The latter may possibly be the main motive for remaining in the Awqâf building; she fears for her girls’ safety in transportation. Asking her whether living in Mūhndsîn made a difference in her life choices and opportunities, she refers to what she has previously mentioned about traffic and being closer to work.

Phase two: The towers

Contemporary Mūhndsîn is a city of scaffolding, red brick and metal in which the caterpillar reigns supreme.
It is impossible to walk anywhere in the neighbourhood without meeting the now familiar sight of an empty space between two buildings, occupied by a Caterpillar and a number of construction workers in Galabiya. Scaffolding dotting the European downtown or in the fifth district (also one of the newly constructed suburbs of Cairo) do not raise the same kind of revulsion, for their presence in these zones is
mostly to refurbish or to build where there was nothing. In Mūhdsīn it is to destroy and maim the Architectural heritage and particular characteristics of the zone.

Many of Mūhdsīn’s streets no longer bear any signs of villas, especially the main streets or thoroughfares.

There are a number of tangible reasons why the district underwent – and continues to witness – such dramatic changes in the built environment and its human content.

According to Taha, many reasons were behind this second wave of urbanization of Mūhdsīn, whereby the villas were taken down to create space for higher rises. He refers to the change in housing law in 1976 when for the first time the State
permitted the sale of residential units (apartments) whereas before they were only available to rent. This was followed by a decline in the construction of popular housing by the State, coupled with an increasing demand due to a growing population.

President Sadat’s open-door economic policies also led to the creation of a group of newly wealthy entrepreneurs who may not have enjoyed such affluence earlier. These policies were preliminary steps towards moving away from State-led and managed development towards a market economy. Some restrictions on trade, investment and ownership of land were lifted and the entry of the private sector in specific sectors of the economy was welcomed by the State.

This policy was key in the transfer of wealth in the 1970s from the civil servants and employees to the burgeoning private sector. At the forefront of those newly wealthy were the self-employed; whether professionals such as medical doctors and lawyers, or technicians, such as plumbers and mechanics. Money also seemed to be in the hands of those working in the movie industry; from actors to script writers to directors. It was also the time of the petrodollar and the appearance of visitors from the Arab Gulf countries with significant amounts of disposable income.

Moreover, developments in the Middle-East also had an impact; Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait in 1991 forced many residents of that Gulf State to flee to Cairo. Demand for large apartments to let increased and Mūhndṣīn was one of the few areas that was available for this form of accommodation. The shooting club became a meeting point for the Kuwaitis who had made Cairo their home.

Many of the newly wealthy decided to invest in real estate. It was at this moment that price of land per meter in Mūhndṣīn started to rise drastically, from 450 to 700 Egyptian pounds. By the 1980s and 1990s the families that had moved in the first wave of urbanization were now in their second and third generations; the original proprietor had either become elderly or had passed away. The rising real estate prices
were a motivation enough for many of the heirs considered sale of their land.

The 750 to 1000 meter plots were especially attractive to developers, as it would allow them flexibility in the sizes of the housing units. The more elegant or desirable the street was, the larger the building and the greater number of apartments per floor. Taha categorises those who were buying in the 1980s and 1990s as ‘Class A’; they had money and had a strong desire to show that they had it. Apartments purchased ranged from 200 to 250 meters squared. Appearances were very important to the newly affluent; they required the very best and most expensive finishing for the apartments. This included parquet floors, coloured marble in the bathrooms and ceramic tiles in the kitchen.

Moreover, the change of the Mūhndūn buyer was reflected in the design and layout of the apartments. A new concept of ‘isolated areas’ became popular whereby the living and dining areas were in one part of the apartment (no dedicated space for receiving guests), while a long corridor led to the bedrooms. The villas on the other hand were mostly designed to have a formal reception and dining areas downstairs and the family rooms upstairs to allow more space to welcome guests. The 1990s also witnessed the rise of the ensuite bedroom; with a bathroom and dressing room attached. A nanny’s room also became a requirement for the ‘Class A+’ residents.

Doctors particularly were increasingly interested in purchasing apartments in Mūhndūn. Some buildings had 140 meter squared apartments, adequate for a decent-
sized clinic. For many actors, buying an apartment in Mūhndsīn was an upgrade to where they resided before becoming famous.

**Gentrification in Mūhndsīn?**

The changes of the built environment Mūhndsīn and its inhabitants mask a shift in power in Egypt’s society over the years. However, the field research indicates that neither the first nor the second wave of urbanization may be defined as gentrification or decay as indicated earlier in this chapter.

If displacement is a measure of gentrification, the first wave of does not seem to have forced anyone to move. The land that had been allocated towards the new settlements of Mūhndsīn had not yet been urbanized. They were agricultural lands which had been served by farmers living in the villages of Al- ḥīzā. Both the academic and field research does not show that any of these villages had been demolished to pave way for the villas. Some even survive to the present day as will be discussed in the following chapter.

The second wave was characterized by a movement of inhabitants from Mūhndsīn to other areas but it was not necessarily a forced movement. The villa owners had not been driven out of their homes because of poverty or rising prices of living in the neighbourhood. They had mainly left because it made economic logic. Real estate prices had risen drastically and the sale price would buy all heirs of the first wave bureaucrats an independent home in the burgeoning Cairo periphery.

Indeed, the still-wealthy heirs of the bureaucrats sought new neighbourhoods which would mirror their childhood homes. Many Mūhndsīn residents after selling their homes set their sights on the closest, non-urbanized, available land that could be turned into villas. It is interesting that once again they sought the greenery of the Egyptian rural areas, specifically the lands surrounding the Manūrīyah Canal East of Cairo.

The period which witnessed an expansion in the construction of high rises was in conjunction with the exodus to Manūrīyah. In the 1990s the Mūhndsīn af-
fluent started to purchase intensively in the latter, building larger villas then the ones they had left behind. The plots differed from the ones that had been divided and allocated in the Mūhndsīn project and many took the form of country or summer homes rather than full-time residences. Many had gardens in addition to a small cultivated area usually not exceeding a few hectares.

With the rise of the desert cities and compounds in the beginning of the 21st century, some Mūhndsīn residents moved even further East. New urban settlements now known as Sheikh Zayid and the Sixth of October city were being constructed and were being connected to the downtown Cairo through the 26th of July corridor which started at Lebanon square, one of Mūhndsīn’s main thoroughfares. Cairo’s wealthy have been known to be consistently on the move, always expanding into new areas once the old become overpopulated.

The above narrative does not reflect a forced displacement of Mūhndsīn’s residents. It also does not indicate that Mūhndsīn was left to decay nor that it was occupied by the poor. The poor being evicted by the rich would not be an accurate description of what happened. The class-based element in gentrification is not visible in the changes the area witnessed. Rather it seems the affluent replaced the affluent. What had changed is to whom power had shifted and the influence of both capital and the State (in the form of policies and legislation) in determining the recipients.

Indeed, the influence of the State’s change of economic policy is glaringly obvious on the built environment in Mūhndsīn. It would almost seem as if the first brick in the first tower constructed was laid when President Sadat presented the ‘October paper’ outlining his vision for the movement from a State-run to a liberal market economy in 1973. The open-door policy opened the Egyptian economy to foreign investment and joint projects with entrepreneurs from the Arab Gulf States as well as the private sector; “Law No. 43 of June 1974 was promulgated; it allowed tax concessions for foreign private firms in the form of tax holidays, exemptions from labor laws, import/export licenses, and exchange rate control regulations.” (Alissa, October 2007, p. 3)

Moreover,
“Between 1974 and 1985, the economy grew at an average rate of 8 percent a year. (...) The state redistributed its increased revenue. For the lower end of the income distribution, it increased its subsidy payments and continued the guaranteed employment scheme initiated under Nasser. For those at the upper end of income distribution, the state created conditions for lucrative investment opportunities in imports. An overvalued exchange rate, coupled with the creation of the Free Trade Zone of Port Said, led to the exponential growth of imports and luxury goods.” (Alissa, October 2007, p. 3)

Capital was not only visible in the transfer of wealth from one group to another. It was also reflected in the form of increasing real estate prices and the expansion in construction during the second wave. Visible is Harvey’s reading of critical urban theory, of the city as a product and site of surplus capital accumulation, in Mūhndsīn. Profits – for both investors and villa owners alike – produced the high-rises which became the site of the newly wealthy.

Furthermore, the interviews conducted in the context of this chapter record the link between physical and social space in the district, with the Mūhndsīn resident changing in line with the built environment and economic policies. From civil servant in villas to entrepreneurs and liberal professionals in apartment buildings, the sizes, designs and structure of housing units were both a reflection and a result of the lives and practices of the tenants.

However, the field research also points to the above being a mega-narrative. For Mona and other occupants of the social housing projects which coincided with the first wave urbanization of Mūhndsīn, the accounts of their lived environment differ. Unlike the residents of the first and second wave, change for Mona was internal; self-advancement through education and employment rather than housing. Her interest in remaining in the district were the services rather than the physical living space. Even when provided with a more convenient apartment, she continued to stay in her childhood home. This was partially due to the support she found from a community composed of neighbours on the roof of a building. The layout of this patch of urban informality, with the shared spaces and proximity of abodes, created close social networks and a community support system in the heart of Mūhndsīn.
The field research also brings up a number of themes related to gender and the status of women as linked to the change of the urban, the use of space and policies. As with the cases of Leila and others, the combination of the open-door policy, the early generations of university educated women and a plot of land resulted in economic opportunity. The Mūhndīn project was not meant to be commercial rather residential yet it was pushed in that direction by the ambition of some of the first wave residents in what may be an operationalization of Purcell’s notion of appropriation and use of urban space.

The next chapter will explore the rural pocket of ‘izbat wilād ʿalām in exploration of the theme of visibility in the urban.
Chapter Three

THE ‘IZBA

This chapter explores ‘izbat wilād ‘alām as a case study of the pre-urbanized Mūhndsīn communities which survived (i.e., not demolished by urban developers).

As mentioned earlier, this research is interested in questions of visibility. What and why the urban fabric conceals and reveals is key to understanding notions of appropriation and participation and ultimately reaching conclusions on the operationalization of the right to the city. Why and how the ‘izba survived until today is another key question to understanding how the urban defines and shares power.

Moreover, this chapter explores what kind of social space the ‘izba and as such how it relates to the surrounding urban that is Mūhndsīn. Through the field research within and around the ‘izba, this chapter studies the spaces of human interaction and agency created in the shadow of the built environment that is the ‘izba,, whether inside or around it.

Field interviews was carried out inside the ‘izba and in its surroundings, including interviews with a range of age groups sexes and occupations. The research was carried out between September 2015 to February 2016. Information on the internal architecture and the layout of the ‘izba is derived from the work of other scholars cited, who had the appropriate engineering background to enable conducting an informed review of the built environment.

The chapter will be divided into a historical and descriptive background, followed by an analysis of the narratives provided by informants from the ‘Izba and who live in its immediate vicinity. Questions consistently focused on perceptions of belonging, identification, visibility, capacity to influence and change.

Introducing wilād ‘alām
In the late 19th and early twentieth centuries, the daughter of Khedive Ismail, Princess Fatma, decided to donate swaths of her extensive agricultural land to the cause of education, culture and progress. She was a firm believer in the national cause despite her aristocratic background and desired to do more with the wealth she had to support the creation of a modern Egypt. When her Physician informed her that he was facing difficulties in establishing the first National University of Egypt, she donated six fedans in Al-jiya where the University could be built. She also permanently endowed the returns of around 3000 fedans to the University’s budget in addition to selling some pieces of her personal jewellery collection to finance construction.

The Princess’s passion for endowments extended to the peasants working on her land:

“Awlād ‘Allām and several of its surrounding areas were part of an endowment Princess Fatima gave to host the peasants that farmed her land. The process of endowing the land to her peasants took place through the official channels of the Ministry of Awqāf (Religious Endowments) and such lands thereafter became part of the lands administered by the Egyptian Awqāf Authority (EAA).”\(^6\) (Tadamun; the Cairo Urban solidarity initiative, 2014)

It is not clear exactly when the ‘Izba was established, but according to oral memory and historical maps it seems to be anywhere from the mid to late 19th century. According to Al-Zawahirī, the original dwelling of the peasants was not the current location of the ‘Izba. Prior to 1900, the peasants lived in an area surrounding the Sheikh ‘Allām mosque (Al-Zawahiriy, 1991). They were later moved to more modern constructions in the location now known as the forty houses (Arb’yiyn beit), each of sixty meters squared. Incidentally the ‘izba was first know by that name (Mantiqat Al- Arb’yiyn beit) while in some maps as ‘Izbat Fatma Hanim (The Estate of Princess Fatma). (Tadamun; the Cairo Urban solidarity initiative, 2014).

The ‘Izba is located in the part of Mūhndīn that was built in the neighbouring areas of the former village of Duqī. The current residents claim that their neighbour-

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hood was known as West *Duqī (Duqī ‘arb). On the map of Mūhndsīn this where the ‘Izba is currently located.” (Tadamun; the Cairo Urban solidarity initiative, 2014):

![Map of the area with the location of the 'Izba marked](image)

*Figure 11: Location of the 'izba within the district.*

, (...)The ‘izba is named after Sheikh ‘Allām, one of the area’s early residents. On official maps, it is known as ‘Izbit Fatima Hanim. Awlād Allām is surrounded by the Agricultural Museum and the Ministry of Agriculture to the East, the shooting club to the North West, and the popular Musaddaq Street to the South.” (Tadamun; the Cairo Urban solidarity initiative, 2014)

Most documents that were reviewed as part of this research, as well as the oral accounts continue to describe the ‘Izba’s size in *fedān*. The latter is a local term usually used to measure rural property, and is almost the equivalent of an acre. The size of the ‘Izba is around six *fedān* in the shape of a rectangle. On the right side of the rectangle are the first forty houses while on the left side are newer constructions

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7 These materials were developed by TADAMUN: The Cairo Urban Solidarity Initiative. TADAMUN has given us permission to use the materials for a noncommercial purpose, and distribute any modifications under a similar license.”

8 These materials were developed by TADAMUN: The Cairo Urban Solidarity Initiative. TADAMUN has given us permission to use the materials for a noncommercial purpose, and distribute any modifications under a similar license.”
which were built at a later stage (the research could not identify a specific moment however Al-Zawahriyy states that to be circa. 1930s or 1940s) and differ in size and design than the original forty houses.

According to Tadamun the number of residents of the ‘Izba are anywhere between thirty to forty thousand residents while the government estimates them to be about ten thousand. (Tadamun; the Cairo Urban solidarity initiative, 2014) Al-Zawahriyy estimated it – based on his 1991 comprehensive study on rural pockets in greater Cairo– at around 900 persons per fedān (then total being 5400). From my own observations, I do not believe that the numbers exceed beyond twenty thousand individuals. As mentioned above, the majority of buildings are two-storey, with many witnessing great deterioration. This limits the number of people who can reside there, even with the assumption that families of five or more share one room.

According to Al-Zawahriyy, the ‘Izba differs from other villages which had been encompassed by the urban fabric in greater Cairo. Unlike Duqī, Imbaba, miyū ’oqba and the other indigenous congregations of farmers, the ‘izba was a planned settlement. This is one of the reasons why there is such a demographic diversity, unlike the organic villages which reflected the natural expansion and growth of local families. The ‘izba is thus a mix of original residents of the forty houses, newer waves of migrants from the Governorates and even other countries such as Sudan, who sought the ‘izba for cheap accommodation (A, 2015).

Units rented range from rooms to sheds to apartments. The buildings themselves range from one and two-story buildings to five and six floor apartment buildings. The rural nature of the constructions is visible whereby the many of the buildings are built using mud brick, roofs of mud and wood, and bearing walls. (Al-Zawahriyy, 1991) The layout of some of these buildings are similar to those common in rural Egypt, with some including an animal yard or pen and a storage area.

The residents of the ‘izba are no longer farmers. Over the years the land they cared for was swallowed by the expansion of the ‘Izba and the urban growth of the

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While photographs would have benefited this study, taking photographs in the ‘izba is not welcomed by the residents. Copyright consent for photographs received by some informants was verbal and thus could not be used in this research.
surrounding areas as described in Chapter two. Members of the community went to school, sought education, became professionals or had vocations. ‘Izba residents I spoke with are proud of their heritage and refer to the famous personalities who were or are residents there.

My interviews reveal that the people living in this area are anything but passive victims of power struggles reflected in a changing urban reality. They have an acute sense of who they are and what they want from society at large and the State in particular. The following sections will provide an account of my observations based on the field research.

**Entering the ‘Izba**

The ‘izba has three entrances. The two ‘front’\(^\text{10}\) entrances are on Al-Nahda, across from the Awpāf buildings mentioned in Chapter two. The entrances are a few meters apart and lead to parallel streets. The reason for having two adjacent entrances may be explained that one of these leads directly to the original forty houses, while the second entrance gives direct access to the more recent constructions. Both entrances give the impression of a market street or a metro station, with dozens of people moving in and out at the same time.

\(^{10}\) According to the residents.
Figure 12 Sketch of entrances to the Izba

The ‘back’ entrance is located off *Michel Bakhoûm* street, a few meters away from the front entrance to the Shooting Club. There are barely any physical indicators that would make the uninformed passer-by, the wealthy resident, or consumption–driven visitor of *Mûhndsîn* recognize that this gap is actually a passageway to a neighbourhood. It is located at the angle of two streets which are usually used as a thoroughfare from the Shooting club area to the plot of land which had been assigned to faculty members in the 1950s. This plot now takes the form of a garden square (*mîdân*), with surrounding villas and buildings, known as *mîdân hay’at al-tadrîys*. Driving through, the passer-by would be too busy focusing on turning the corner to notice the entrance. Rather the built environment conceals the entrance, giving the impression that it is an alleyway such as many that dot the urban landscape of Cairo. Even the houses of the ‘izba cannot be seen unless the pedestrian is actually looking for them and lifts his/her neck up to see them. Some of them are distinctly higher than the villas that line the walls of the ‘izba and are quite distinct in their red-brown colour of uncovered brick. The latter is a common sight in rural areas; a symbol of lax supervision by authorities on building regulations.

11 The sketch is the author’s.
Urban planning and engineering literature refer to the concept of ‘Edges’ in urban design and landscaping. This term refers to the physical contact point between the public urban space and the built residential space. In more simple terms this would be the point where the ‘outside’ of a neighbourhood or district began and the ‘inside’ ended. It is the “(...) interface between built form and public realm.” (Mohammed & Mahmoud, 2012, p. 228).

According to Mohammed and Mahmoud, Medieval Cairo residential zones were built to mimic small cities, divided physically and socially into sub-quarters, with controlled entrances and exits. This was intentional, driven by human agency, with a view to protecting neighbourhoods from external threats and to identify ‘strangers’. They also describe it as a “socially responsive pattern” of urban planning, with edges playing an important role in determining relations and communication between residents and ‘passer-bys’.

As an edge, the Michel Bakhoûm entrance to the ‘izba is meant to render it invisible. It would be a mistake to describe it as an entrance, rather it is a gate, both physically and socially. Interestingly, the ‘gate keepers’ have their homes and businesses, keeping a cautious eye on those who enter or leave the neighbourhood.

During the first meetings with members of the mobadara\textsuperscript{12}, the civil society group working in the areas of Al-duqî and Al-‘joīza’, the names of two particular community leaders were mentioned as the ‘contact’ points in the ‘Izba, Samy S\textsuperscript{13} and Farid A\textsuperscript{14}. The same names were mentioned as contacts when speaking with another urban researchers focusing on the ‘Izba. Understandably, the community of scholars, activists and researchers in the field of urban development is limited and know each other through working on the same areas and projects. This naturally results that the contacts of the same ‘informants’ are shared.

I met Samy the first time on one of my visits when the mobadara members were kind enough to let me join them. He owns a small but well stocked plumbing supply store to the immediate right of the entrance off Michel Bakhoum. As we en-

\textsuperscript{12} A background on the mobadara is outlined at the end of this chapter.
\textsuperscript{13} Not his real name.
\textsuperscript{14} Not his real name.
tered that day, we noticed that a couple of other residents were ankle deep in water; apparently a minor incident with the sewage piping. One of the men, saluted my companion and started complaining of the *ayyūbān*, which had not yet arrived to deal with the problem. At a later stage in my research, I recognized the complainant as well as Samy were two of the most interviewed personalities in online video stories on the ‘izba.

Both these residents and others form what is known as *lajna sha’bīya* (popular committee). The latter is an offspring of the 2011 revolution. Popular committees is the term used to describe the impromptu neighbourhood vigilante groups that materialized when security broke down during the eighteen days of the revolution. Within the context of the ‘Izba and the mobadara, the term is now used to denote the core group of locals who claim to represent the population of that neighbourhood.

The members of the popular committee are the main local partners of the *mobadara* and other scholars and academics who are interested in doing research and projects in the area. This group also includes Sherif, another of my interlocutors. All of these men claim that they are long term residents of the ‘Izba. All of them are supportive of research and make it relatively easier to access the ‘izba.

However, I also perceived that as much as they reveal, they also serve to protect the ‘izba by creating and controlling the indigenous ‘local’ narrative. They deploy it to counter State and society narratives portraying the ‘izba as dangerous, dominated by criminality and poverty. They also serve to articulate the demands and political claims of the residents of the ‘izba. Yet, whom they do not represent and which desires are not articulated are not clear.

An example of this statement was during a meeting in which the mobadara members were reviewing progress made on some of their projects in the ‘izba. The most successful of these is the establishment of a subsidized bread kiosk inside ‘izba, which had been a persistent demand of the residents. Upon its inauguration, it was extremely popular, residents lined for hours to get bread.

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15 The district administration, part of the State executive and manages the most basic public services in the district such as the sewage, street lighting, pavements. It is also mandate with issuing fines for construction and license violations.
The Government had since then (in the year 2015) introduced a new system for distributing subsidized goods aimed at limiting the waste of bread. With the new subsidized card, citizens accumulate points with every loaf of bread they do not purchase. Using the saved points, card holders can buy a range of consumer goods, including shampoo, soap and groceries.

The member of the popular committee was recounting that the residents were now limiting the bread purchased in order to use the points for other purposes. Women especially were happily using the card to buy shampoo, detergents or other groceries such as rice or pasta. The bread kiosk was now returning a large amount of the bread ordered to the main bakeries since the demand had dwindled.

This incident indicates that the articulations of demands and desires may not have been comprehensive. Possibly the demands and desires of some of the inhabitants – in this case cheaper groceries and consumer items – was ignored in favour of a perceived greater good (the bread kiosk).

The built divide

The division of the ‘izba into the area of the Arb ‘yn and the newer construction is not a simple description of a physical reality. It is also a line that creates an internal hierarchy and guides the distribution of power within the ‘izba. This is due partially to the legal limbo inhabitants find themselves in and in another party to the layout of the built environment.

Indeed, one of the main areas of contestation between the inhabitants of Welad ‘allam in their relationship with the State is the question of tenure and property rights. The forty houses- to the East of the ‘Izba - are currently the property of the Ministry of agriculture, however the residents claim that they own their homes and have the contracts in their names since the time of the Princess. (Al-Zawahriy, 1991) The buildings to the West of the ‘Izba on the other hand are now the property of the Ministry of religious endowments and fall under a tenure system known as the  *ikr.*

According to Tadamun:
“(..) Ministry of *Awqāf* made use of a form of tenure called “ *ikr*” which allows individuals to pay a rent to the Ministry in exchange for making use of a plot of *waqf* land. *Awlād ‘Allām* falls under this system, however, *ikr* tenure is no longer legally recognized and residents living on such *ikr* lands are expected to use certain legal provisions that allow them to purchase the land and legalize their situation.” (Tadamun; the Cairo Urban solidarity initiative, 2014)

Moreover;

'Waqf property can be one of two types: i) The first is charity trust (*waqf* khayry), and these are properties that the donor – known as the Wāqif – has donated to the Ministry of Awqāf and can generate income for charity purposes. The donor cannot specify a particular charity to which the property’s income would go, but rather the EAA becomes the sole entity responsible for distributing the income to different causes as it sees fit; ii) The second is private trust (*waqf* ahly) which allows individuals to specify particular recipient(s) to receive the income generated by the endowed property, a process that takes place under the administration of the Awqāf Authority. This type was abolished by Egyptian law in 1952, and thus the only type of Waqf recognized today is charity trust.’ (Tadamun; the Cairo Urban solidarity initiative, 2014)

Inhabitants of the *Waqf*-owned land are in a persistent debate with the State - in the form of the *Waqf* authority – to acquire ownership of the houses they live in. They consistently declare their readiness to purchase, albeit at the same rate that the first wave residents of *Mūhndsīn* had payed. At the center of their claim is the narrative of long-term residence and continuity; that they had been there ‘first’. Yet most of the residents of the *Waqf*-owned lands are tenants. Some indeed have been there for years, while others leave, paving the way for other tenants.

The layout of the ‘*izba* is another reason that encourages a division of its population. The area of the *Arb ṭyn* and the newer constructions are such that they are divided. To go from one side to the other, one has to go outside and re-enter from the appropriate path.
Moreover the plan of the Arbīyn is one that encourages isolation and intimacy between the residents. The paths separating the blocks of housing are dead ends, thus controlling the entry and exist of strangers. This was a system applied in Medieval Cairo to control movement in alleyways (Al-Bastawisy, 1999). Unless the visitor had a specific home or person he was heading to, he would literally be facing dead ends. The size of the paths makes it difficult for large numbers of people to move in and slowly graduates the passer-by from the public space of the city to the internal, private areas of the residents.

The ownership/power divide is evident in the perception of others captured in interviews. Consistently, my interlocutors referred to the tenants of the Waqf lands as ‘they’ or ‘them’. This was not necessarily done in a negative or derogatory, but the impression that a difference existed between the interviewee and the individuals in question was perceptible.

When asking if residents worked in the wealthy areas of Mūhendsīn surrounding the ‘Izba, one female interviewee answered that the “newer tenants send their children out to houses to work, but the older inhabitants are professionals or have vocations.” Another older male interviewee informed me that “they were kind people”.

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16 The sketch is the author’s.
When asking interviewees on why there was a narrative of violence and crime connected to the ‘izba, one answered “the new tenants sometimes don’t have work and occasionally problems occur between the youth.”

**Lines of contestation**

Field research reveals the ‘izba inhabitants’ turbulent relationship with the State. This materializes in the many lines of contestation existing between the inhabitants and the various agencies mandated to implement State policy and law.

Other than the Ministry and Authority of religious endowments, the ire of the residents of the ‘Izba is directed to the ‘Informal settlement development Facility’ (*Sandoqa tanmeyat al-manateq al-‘ashwā‘iya*). The latter is a government entity directly following the office of the Prime Minister. It is responsible for mapping such informal areas, setting government policy and designing projects to develop them. Moreover, the facility is tasked with categorizing informal areas, whereby each category is tied to a package of policy solutions the State can offer the occupants. The priority category is the ‘threat to human life’, following which the area is considered unfit for human presence and habitation.

The afore-mentioned designation is especially applied in locations which are subjected to natural disasters or hazards (Tadamun; The Cairo Urban solidarity initiative, 2013). In this case, the built area is demolished and the State is required to find alternate homes. The facility had designated *Welad ‘allam* as an ‘unsafe area’ of level 2, however it is not clear what the implications are in the near future (Tadamun; the Cairo Urban solidarity initiative, 2014). The facility does not include the ‘izba in its list of current or future projects (The informal settlements facility, 2012).

For obvious reasons the inhabitants of the ‘izba find such a designation as both offensive and as a threat/excuse by the State to push them out of their homes. Several of the interviews pointed to the surrounding buildings in the wealthier part of *Mūhendsīn*, claiming that they too have violated building regulations. They wonder why those buildings are not designated as unsafe, or that the *ma‘aliyat* (another
term for the *ay* did not fine them along the lines of similar constructions in the *izba*.

It does not prevent them however from producing an account of the *izba* as an appropriate destination of development should someone approach them with a project. During the first meeting with two of my interlocutors, and before I had fully explained my research aims, they started to show me photographs of decaying houses in the *izba*. Initially they were under the impression that I could be a potential donor and had been hoping that by showing me these pictures, they could direct any potential contributions to refurbishing these homes.

Furthermore, the *ay* seems to be one of their favourite interlocutors among the state agencies. My interviews revealed the importance this arm of State administration is to the everyday lives of the residents. Awareness of the *ay*’s mandate, activities and personal is high among residents, to the extent of knowing the latter by name. I did not note this level of intimacy with the *ay* amongst other Mühendşin inhabitants I interviewed. Moreover, I was impressed by the *izba* inhabitant’s clear conviction that they were capable of influencing the *ay*’s decisions.

**Paths of resistance**

Farid was born and lived in the *izba* most of his life. He is well spoken, educated with a vast interest and knowledge in Socialist and leftist thought. He is also a member of the popular committee of *Welad* ‘Allam and gets enthusiastic about any ideas of improving life in the *izba*.

Sherif also grew up in the *izba*. His father was the neighborhood butcher, a vocation which usually indicates a certain amount of wealth. Sherif - now in his fifties and a civil servant - grew up watching his father share food with those who needed it from the residents of the *izba*, which installed in him the sense of community bonding and support.
Both Farid and Sherif love the ‘izba. For them, it goes beyond the built environment to a close sense of shared destiny. Farid explained to me about how he had bought an apartment in another part of Al - jīza and had lived there for a time. He maintained his apartment in the ‘izba and would still head there after work and on weekends, until he finally moved back. Sherif on the other hand did move out, but he his relationship to the ‘izba continued visiting regularly and assisting in any necessary community work.

For both of them, the survival of the ‘izba despite the development of the surrounding areas is a question of action and intent. They acknowledge that the ‘izba—since the first wave urbanization mentioned in Chapter One – has been an object of desire by the State. They both claim, along the lines of Leila’s account, that the beginning of the first wave urbanization witnessed peaceful relations between the bureaucrats and the ‘izba inhabitants. They too refer to the bureaucrats as being polite and refined.

A change in this relationship occurred when word came out that the E’lamīyīn (media professionals) wanted to expand the plots they had been allocated to include parts of the ‘izba. They had originally been designated a line of plots directly along its wall and they wanted to remove the houses behind them in order to create a rectangle-shaped area, similar to what had been assigned to other civil servants. They offered the ‘izba residents money to move, but they refused.

Another attempt took place in the 1970s, when a Minister wanted to take the land in order to develop it. When some ‘izba residents realised what was taking place, they reached out for help from another Minister whom they knew was at odds with the first. They succeeded through this strategy in pitting the two men against each other and eventually to the failure of the plan to remove them. They also reached out to newspapers, claiming that the Government was trying to push out the poor from their homes. This contributed to the Minister in question to back off, fearing a public opinion backlash.

A third major attempt took place following the 1992 earthquake. Many houses crumbled as a result of the earthquake, especially in slums or informal neighborhoods. This event was a precursor to State strategies of categorizing slums into safe
and life threatening areas. In the wake of the tragedy, the authorities succeeded in convincing a large number of the inhabitants of the west part of the ‘izba to leave to more modern homes. The houses were sealed with red wax in order to prevent anyone from entering. Facing the danger of the ‘izba being demolished - seeing as now it was depopulated - the remaining original residents ‘resettled’ new families from other parts of Cairo into the houses which had been vacated.

In the late 2000s another attempt by the State to occupy the ‘izba occurred. This time, it was within the context of the liberal market-oriented Government push for privatization and development. The men claim that the area had been visited by a senior figure in the government, after having seen the ‘izba from one of the surrounding high-rises. Curious about the existence of the ‘izba in the middle of a wealthy neighborhood, the government official had apparently been trying to scope out the potential for its gentrification. The 2011 revolution had apparently ended this attempt.

Despite the obvious agency of the inhabitants of the ‘izba in ending any attempts to remove it, both men believe that the true reason for its survival is celestial. “Sheikh ‘allam was a good man, so were his sons. They were close to God and their shrines are here. The earth they are buried in protects the ‘izba.” (O, 2015) (A, 2015)

**Narratives of fear and invisibility**

“We are not poor, and we are not baltajīya (thugs). Had we been baltajīya, would we have protected them (residents of Mūhendsīn) during the revolution?” (Aya, 2015)

*Aya* is a twenty year old student at Cairo University who was born and raised in the ‘izba. She was introduced to me as a ‘good’ example; a girl who not only was on the path of completing her education, but who was also contributing to the development of the ‘izba by teaching school children. She feels strongly about how her neighbourhood is perceived by those living outside of it.

“They don’t want to see us.” Is *Aya*’s firm answer to a question on why many Mūhendsīn residents are not aware of the ‘izba’s presence. ‘We do not exist for them, for them (Wealthy Mūhendsīn residents) we are something very small.’
“Because you would not see them or enter into the ‘izba unless you needed a specific service.” is Taha’s answer when asked the same question, “Many of the people in the ‘izba have vocations so probably you would call them to come to your home rather in go in yourself.”

People living in the vicinity of the ‘izba acknowledge its existence but consistently within the terms of being a liability. They refer to the noise, or brawls or to the garbage that the ‘izba inhabitants leave at the entrances or the main streets. However, interviews revealed that they do not recognize the vast amount of services the inhabitants provide, whether in the form of technicians (plumbers, electricians, etc) or employees in the businesses in the neighbourhood. Many of the young men in the ‘izba work as delivery boys in the nearby fast-food chains or as waiters if they are better educated. Many work in the Shooting Club. A member of the mobadra recalls how she was surprised when working in the ‘izba when a young man recognized her as a member of the Club.

*Aya* admits that sometimes there are problems in the ‘izba. Occasionally violence or fights do occur, but they occur everywhere, and they are not phenomena exclusive to the ‘izba. In her view, the main problem of the ‘izba is the lack of education and schooling. However, this is the State’s problem, as it is failing to provide an appropriate educational system. She also recognizes that the cycle of underdevelopment is partially due to the residents’ lack of interest in education, especially the women. “They mostly do not work, with the money they have they buy clothes for their kids or mobiles.”

The theme of violence and fear from the ‘izba was also a subject of conversation with Farid. He laments how an occasional neighbourhood dispute becomes a reflection of the criminal nature of the area. He recounts how once a brawl broke out because a young man was rude to some women who were sitting outside their houses chatting. “Women sit at the entrance of the house during the summer, it’s cooler than sitting indoors,...there is nothing wrong with it. But this young man started shouting at them to tell them to go into their houses. So a fight broke out.” (A, 2015) “The men involved were hauled to the police station and it was resolved there. But the end result is, that the Police say is “you the ‘izba again; always creating problems.”
The perception of the ‘izba as a dangerous area is common among the contemporary inhabitants of Mühendsin. At least it is so by those who are aware of its existence. People living in the neighbouring high rises complain of the constant brawls breaking out there. Most of my interlocutors from the ‘izba recognize this perception and do not deny that there are problems of this kind. However, like Aya they find that it is unfair to characterize the entire ‘Izba as a hub of criminality and violence.

Indeed, they consistently refer to the role of the inhabitants of the ‘izba during the days of security breakdown concurrent with the January 2011 revolution. They could have easily shut down the entrances to the ‘izba and protected their immediate vicinity. However, they chose to go out into the surrounding streets, moved by a sense of responsibility for the protection of the entire neighbourhood.

A government official who lives in one of the buildings directly in front of the back entrance of the ‘izba recalls that moment. He used to join the popular committee every day in Michel Bakhoïm street where some of the ‘izba inhabitants had stood guard, side by side with the wealthier residents of the high rises He particularly remembers being struck that the ‘izba inhabitants refused to take money in return for their protection services.

The long hours in the popular committees created a sense of intimacy and opportunities for conversation that would have been improbable even a week earlier. He describes his surprise to understand that his partner from the ‘izba in the popular committee was related to almost everyone that provided services to the building. He realised that this person knew him by name and appearance and was aware of many aspects of the official’s life, through the stories of his relatives.

**Observation**

The survival of the ‘izba to the present day, despite the extent of urban development of Mühendsin, may be attributable to the residents themselves on one hand and on the built environment on the other hand.
The layout and entrances of the ‘izba are physically invisible to the casual passer by in the district. They are a by-product of a built reality and edges encouraging discretion and invisibility. There is no proof that this was done by intent, however what is clear is that it is very difficult to see the ‘izba. This may have contributed to shielding the eyes of society from the existence of an area which can only be considered an anomaly in the wealth that surrounded it. Such invisibility may have protected it from a persistent effort by the State – or developers – to control it.

The inhabitants of the ‘izba have also been vigilant in preserving their presence in that place. They have done so by negotiating their presence along the lines of laws, policies, State efforts at categorization and even politics. They have cleverly manipulated the changes in economic regimes more successfully than their neighbours of the first wave urbanization of Mūhendsīn. Unlike the latter, they did not sell and leave when the real estate prices rose. This is not attributable only to a question of poverty or incapacity to relocate, but also to a strong sense of identity and a choice to keep their community intact.

The informal and unorganized methods of resistance are not unusual in similar settings. Bayat describe similar situations, albeit in ‘slums’:

“De Wit and Berner suggest that slum dwellers may be less interested in collective action, extending horizontal networks and building solidarities, than in resorting to patronage to pursue individual gains. Thus, slum dwellers tend to seek assistance from officials, local leaders, chiefs or other trusted persons in exchange for services or votes, especially when scarcity of services causes competition among the poor, or when mobilization is, or is perceived to be, useless or time consuming. Only the very poor — those who hold few valuable connections at the top — may be oriented toward collective mobilization”. (Bayat & Biekart, 2009, p. 820)

Moreover, Das claims that;

“In following the struggles over housing among the poor I hope to have shown that claims to citizenship are crafted not through or only through formal legal procedures. Instead, it is the actual labor put in by residents of such marginal places as the jhuggi-jhopdi settlements, a labor of learning how to
deal with legal spaces of courts and police precincts as well the labor in securing objects on whose agency they can call on to establish incremental citizenship that creates new forms in which citizenship can be actualized.” (Das, 2011, p. 330)

The subjectivities created by the contact between the built environment that is the ‘izba and the urbanized Mūhendsīn are varied. The ‘izba is a site which continues to enjoy the characteristics of a private community, with inhabitants knowing one another and sharing public space. Its invisibility and the resident’s subtle management of the flow of people in and out reflects a regulation of Society that imitates the State, albeit without formal institutions and structures. In interviews, residents generally conveyed an impression that they considered the ‘izba to be a space of safety. By exiting it, they were on the ‘outside’. This is reflected in practices of residents that changed depending on whether they were inside or outside the ‘izba. This includes changing physical appearance, accents and attitudes. For example, Aya recounted her comfort in moving around the ‘izba in a dirty cape ‘abaya something she would never do once she steps out in the urbanized Mūhendsīn.

Their understanding of public administration, policy and politics and indeed the intricacies and the undeclared in policy-making is acute. In no way should they – or their home, the ‘Izba– ever be seen through the lens of a slum waiting to be handed down a development project.

At the end of an interview, I thanked one of my interviewees for supporting my research. I expressed my appreciation, especially for helping me even though my project was purely academic and would not materialize in any material benefits to the ‘izba.

He responded that research projects like mine were always welcome. What mattered is that they shed light on the lives and human beings in the ‘izba. What they truly wanted he said, was for the ‘izba to be seen.

The Mobadara
I was referred by colleagues focusing on urban studies to an ‘initiative’ (*mobadara*)\(^\text{17}\) working on neighbourhood development, known as ‘*mobadarat ma‘līyat Al-duqī wa Al-‘ajoūza*’. They were one of many urban-based movements and organizations that had appeared in the wake of the 2011 revolution in Egypt. The revolution inspired an interest in many educated Egyptian youth to improve the lives of their compatriots. It was also a moment where certain social barriers were temporarily lifted, giving these youth the courage to create links and to find common grounds of interaction with citizens from other economic and social contexts. This took place within an over-arching developmental/charity approach.

The *mobadara*’s activities mainly focused on acting as a link between residents of run-down neighbourhoods (ranging from formal to informal) and the service-providing institutions of the State. The latter included the most basic unit of administration in the Egyptian State, known as the *ay* (the district), which is responsible for managing the everyday and basic services in every district such as the sewage, street lighting, paving the roads and gas utilities. With regards to the ‘*Izba*, the *mobadara* had already carried out a number of successful activities such as the establishment of a bread kiosk – Egypt’s staple food item - which for years had been a request of the residents. They had also contributed to the pavement of some roads of the ‘*Izba* as well as contributing to the purchase of a car to transport the dead from the ‘*Izba* to the graves.

\(^{17}\) The term contemporarily used in Egypt to describe a civil society organization, that does not have an institutional arrangement.
Chapter Four

ON CAPITAL AND CONSUMERISM IN MŪHNDSĪN

Contemporary Mūhndsīn’s main attraction are its stores and cafes. It is famous for shopping with some of its thoroughfares dominated by the names of international and local franchises, with a focus on fashion and food. Of particular fame is the main boulevard that divides the two administrative divisions of Al ājūwzah and Al Dūqy, known as Jām’at Al-Dūval Al’arabīyah (the Arab league street). Equally well known for a slew of food franchises is Al-Batal A mad ‘bd Al-‘zīz, a main street which lies perpendicular to Jām’at Al-Dūval Al’arabīyah.

As mentioned earlier, the concepts of consumerism and capital are closely tied to the question of urban development and growth. This is particularly glaring in the contemporary form of capital loosely referred to as neo-liberalism. Literature on the relationship between the urban and capital are abundant as expanded on in chapter one. Such academic endeavours are based on critical urban theory with its understanding of urban development as an outcome of power balances and the perception of the city as a site and product of surplus production.

While chapter two has engaged on the flow of capital and its influence on the built environment, this chapter explore themes of consumerism and neo-liberalism in contemporary Mūhndsīn. This is not with an aim to fit into the current trend in critical urban theory literature to explain all urban evolution in light of neo-liberalism, the global city, transnational mobility (Centner, 2010, Volume 4, issue 1, article 11) and cosmopolitanism. The focus is rather to understand the particularity of the district’s multitude of users, inhabitants, desires and claims, with the aim of locating signs of appropriation and participation. This chapter contributes to reaching conclusions to the research question concerning Mūhndsīn as a site of surplus capital or the urban triumphant. The answer to this question reveals whether indeed social space has filled the gap generated by neo-liberal practices.

Field research for this chapter included young women who work in the district, human resources and marketing specialists in international franchises, as well as residents of Mūhndsīn. The choice of these individuals is to understand how Mūhndsīn is seen from the perspective of capital. Moreover, I chose to interview la-
dies employed in franchises, with an effort to understand the circuits and pathways generated as a result of the commercialization of Mūḥndsīn, rather than coming to conclusions on the positive and negative aspects of their work along the lines of empowerment and Women in/and development literature.

**From residential to commercial space**

Like the built environment, the commercialization of Mūḥndsīn may be described as having taken place over two stages. The first was from the late 1970s to the early 1990s while the second is from the latter to the present moments. The first stage may be described as a period of initial commercialization, while the second is the transformation of the district into a purely commercial area. To explain the difference between these two time periods, one can imagine the character of a potential user. In the 1980s and 1990s, people with a considerable amount of wealth sought to reside in Mūḥndsīn. They did so in order to have an upscale address and be in easy access to commercial and entertainment services. Businesses would choose their offices there, renting the three storey buildings.

The contemporary Mūḥndsīn user is almost exclusively a consumer. He or she are probably to spend an afternoon or evening in one its many cafēs and restaurants. Alternatively, he or she are coming to shop. local brands and cheaper goods are available in Shehāb and Wadīy Al-nīyl streets. The more expensive brands and international franchises are on jezīyrat Al-‘arab square and Lebanon Street.

That is not to say that it is no longer used for residential purposes, however Mūḥndsīn (much like Nasr City) has come to synonymous with consumerism and the best a market economy has to offer.

As mentioned in chapter two, the beginning of the transformation of the district from residential to commercial became visible circa the 1970’s. This change was concurrent with the State’s ‘open-door’ policy of economic liberalization, an influx of returnees from the Arab Gulf States and a change in housing laws. It was also related to the change of the architecture and the built environment of Mūḥndsīn; from villas to buildings.
Indeed, according to many of my interviewees, who lived or worked in Mūhndsīn, the most significant moment for its commercialization was the abolishion of the three-storey limit on building heights. The new limit of fifteen floors was ignored by some developers in the 1990s, while the ay silently watched. Locations of a particular value were the ones on main arteries such as Lebanon, Jām‘at Al-Dūwal Al’arabīyah, Moū Al-Dīyn Abū Al-‘ezz and Al-Batal A med ‘bd Al-‘zīz, Shehab and Wadiy Al-Nīl streets. The price of per meter for land located directly on these streets was higher compared to other parts of Mūhndsīn. The attraction of such plots was consistently the possibility of using the ground floor for commercial purposes. Al-Batal A med ‘bd Al-‘zīz was one of the first to become commercial and the villas belonging to the officers were the at the forefront of those sold.

The villas and three storey buildings themselves in the 1980s and 1990s were also witnessing an interesting form of commercialization, where the garages and some of the entrances were transformed into shops. In some places, even the gaps between buildings were appropriated for commercial use. They were roofed, walled and electricity amenities introduced. It is not clear where the ay was during this process. In one case, even a public stretch of greenery surrounding a building in a famous Mūhndsīn square were converted into a café.

According to Taha, Mūhndsīn is no longer of interest as a residential neigbourhood. The price per meter is so exorbitant, that buying a 200 meter (considered a standard sized apartment in Egypt’s context) costs the equivalent of a 200 meter house in one of the new gated compounds in Cairo’s periphery. Yet the villas are still being demolished and Abrāj (towers) are replacing them. The aim is the ground floor and mezzanine which developers can sell to businesses (usually banks) at a rate that covers all building costs and a profit. This includes the price of the land itself. In this case, the developer can afford to wait for potential buyers for the remaining residential apartments.

A question of permits

A term universally cited during field research on the urban development of Mohendiseen is the permit (tarkhīs). A permit is a document which translates regula-
tion into action, whereby the State authorizes conducting a range of activities related to the city. This includes, inter-alia, construction, demolition, repairs, sanitation, cars, driving and serving alcohol.

Within narratives of construction and commercialization, the permit (or license) is consistently referenced to as an equivalent to the legal (and moral) right to undergo a specific activity. The permit is the symbol of the State’s approval of the permittee’s power; to build, demolish, trade, market, advertise and even to be present in the street. It is also an operationalization of the State’s mandate to regulate and choose whom it delegates its power and authority to.

A permit holder is a person or entity who enjoys the State’s blessing.

In the contemporary urban evolution Mūhndsīn, permits even have a physical presence. Passers by in front of a gap where a villa used to be are familiar with the sight of a small sign, citing the number of the demolition permit provided by the ay and its date. Along the same lines, buildings being constructed also publicly display their permit numbers. Shops and food outlets hang their permits behind the cashier.

Obtaining a permit seems to be a question of filling in a number of forms and presenting the appropriate documents. However, the legislation and policies regulating the approval of permits was a significant element in changing the original residential nature of the district.

Since the 1950s, the regulation of what kind of activity may be carried out in the city was governed by a myriad of legislative frameworks, each relating to a specific aspect. Such laws included regulation for renting or selling housing and organizing the tenancy (law number 47 in 1977), standards of construction ‘building codes’ (106 in 1976) (The World Bank, 2007), and the opening of public shops (law number 371 of 1956). However, all of these laws were guided by the principle of centralization of power, a legacy of years of socialist approaches to planning. The centralized authority, be it a planning committee, or a ministry, would be the decision maker of all questions of urban planning; from the vision to the operationalization.

Moreover, the 1956 law regulating commercial activity, specifically in the case of public shops, including restaurants, bars or cafes, limited them to specific
streets within the city. According to that law, the local council was mandated with designating these streets. Naturally, permits regulated the type of service offered, such as liquor licenses or health standards or potential disturbance to the neighbours.

As the State’s policies changed with the transition from socialism to capitalism, urban and housing legislations also evolved. New laws were promulgated which promoted the devolution of authority to local entities with regards to urban planning, construction and the regulation of the city in general. This culminated with law number 119 in 2008 known as the unified building law. It creates a centralized authority mandated with setting State policy on urban development, known as the ‘Higher council for planning and urban development’, presided by the Prime Minister. On the other hand, the Entity for urban planning created by the same law is responsible for drafting strategy and operational plans.

The 2008 law moreover categorizes areas for regulation by packages of specific construction standards (The downtown area, un-planned areas, re-planned areas, etc.) and - more importantly for this research - it delegates centralized powers to local authorities at various level, to take the day to day decisions on city planning including the provision of building permits. Article 39 of the law, which is the preamble to the chapter on regulating construction works, clearly states that the latter can only take place if there is a permit from the competent authorities to carry it out (according to the executive code). Setting the construction specifications and standards according to this legislation is the responsibility of the local planning authorities within the context of local strategies. Law number 106 in 1976 previously accorded this right to a centralized committee created by decree by the Minister of housing, giving the State bureaucracy more control than the local authorities.

More importantly for the current research, the unified building law did not exclude the establishment of stores or shops in residential areas. Furthermore, Law 119 finally removed the central State authority on regulating activities in the urban and the nature of city neighbourhoods by handing decisions in these cases to local authorities.

In order to ensure conformity between the plethora of local administrations, from Governorate to ay, law 119’s executive code included standard formats for
permit application forms. They cover a range of activities which local authorities are mandated by law to consider, including approving the establishment of cafes and restaurants.

The standard application form to open a café in Mūhndsīn, whether at the Al jūwzah and Al Dūqay ay requires presenting information, documents and fees. The applicant must present basic personal information and on the location chosen to become a café. Documents include contracts, tax declarations, criminal records, status of military exemption as well as a layout of the location. Fees are imposed for the competent local authorities to conduct a preliminary survey of the location, regular inspections and a number of taxes. Such fees are calculated based on the size of the location in square meters.

Finally a small disclaimer in the permit request form states that the applicant is responsible to obtain the necessary approvals from other ministries to open his business.

Decentralizing decision making on the granting of permits allowed greater control for local authorities to decide on Mūhndsīn’s urban fabric, including the type of activities carried out. State policy and legislation contributed in guiding urban growth towards further commercialization of the district. It may not have been the legislator’s or State’s intent to encourage commercialization of residential districts, rather it may have been capital itself, in the form of the private sector, that recognized the economic potential of the area.

The next section explores the spaces carved by capital, in the form of the private sector, in Mūhndsīn. It focuses particularly on its contemporary manifestation, known as neo-liberalism, by observing the establishment and expansion of franchises of international brands in the district. The chapter explores the social space created by these franchises and the effect on gender roles and practices.

Mūhndsīn and the neo-liberal dream

“Jām’at Al-Dīwal Al’arabīyah is a street missing an owner (Shari’maloush sa eb)” is Dina Shehayeb’s description of the district’s best known shopping boule-
ward. Shehayeb is a professor in the Institute of Architecture and Housing, at the Housing and Building National Research Center (HBRC) in Cairo. She is also a long time resident of Mūhndsīn, living off the famous boulevard. Jām‘at Al-Dūwal Al’arabilah is a symbol of consumer Mūhndsīn, with stores, shops and towering office buildings lining its two sides.

Shehayeb’s reference is to the multiplicity of users of that street; ranging from avid consumers of fast food and gourmet coffee chains, the millennium generation buying smart phones, the hordes of Arab and African visitors strolling down the street, cars, buses, donkey carts, stray dogs, street cars selling Egypt’s traditional breakfast of baked beans, luxury car agencies, mosques, children from poorer districts swimming in the central fountain and the occasional demonstration.

In 1993, the world’s most famous fast food franchise opened in Jām‘at Al-Dūwal Al’arabilāya to the delight of many wealthy Egyptians who considered it a sign of the country’s budding cosmopolitanism. Interviews revealed that the choice of street was based on a number of market-related factors and analysis. This included urban elements, such as car traffic, the width of the street and neighbouring buildings.

Most importantly, the chain was targeting a specific consumer. It aimed at the time was for the first store to be a ‘landmark’, catering to an influential clientele whom other costumers would follow. Mūhndsīn at the time was known as a preferred residential and shopping area for Arab expatriates and Cairo wealthy and that was specifically the market the chain was aiming for. According to marketing and sales specialists, even Madinat Nasr, which hosted many of the wealthy returnees from the Arab Gulf at the time, could not be compared to the purchasing power and social status of the Mūhndsīn customers.

The question of permits was also present, with chain applying for a permit for a ‘touristic establishment’. It also allowed it to hang signs in latin lettering. The same franchise was able to find a location in zamallek with an existing permit, taking into consideration that the former is one of the few districts that by the 1990s had a permit hold for new commercial establishments.

The food chain in question’s policy is to be present wherever urban development takes the city. With the changing demographics and the push towards the pe-
riphery East and West of Cairo, the chain continued to open new branches in these locations. Consumer habits have also changed in the twenty years since the chain was inaugurated; they now prefer the controlled, air-conditioned and multi-entertainment environment of the mall. Street-level locations are no longer attractive to for contemporary clients.

The fast food chain inaugurated the introduction of dozens of international brands in the same sector. Soon Jām‘at Al-Dūwal Al’arabīyah was lined with their outlets. In 2008, the world’s best known gourmet coffee franchise opened in Egypt. By 2016, it had opened three branches in Mūhndūn. Once again, ‘market factors’ dominate decisions on presence and expansion, with Mūhndūn representing a large demand for gourmet coffee.

Indeed, this particular company has a guiding policy of making its coffee accessible as much as possible through opening several branches in the same area. It also has a store design policy which encourages ‘engagement’ with the built environment and the neighbourhood. It specifically uses the term ‘neighbourhood’, rather than district or area or zone, adding a touch of the local to what is otherwise an international chain which seemingly has no identity or affiliation.18

In a district that already lost much of its identity to consumerism, it is hard to imagine designing a coffee shop in Mūhndūn to engage with the neighbourhood specificity. However, because it is Mūhndūn it is not difficult for the vendors and consumers to turn the franchise into a neighbourhood ‘place’.

I usually get a coffee from the famous chain in the morning before heading off to the office. Amina19 is a vendor; she usually works the morning shift taking into consideration legislation preventing women from working after 8:00 P.M. She always laughingly greets me and the other customers in line by name. She knows most of the members of my family, a lot of my friends, always asks about how they are and knows their developments. She is now twenty four years old and has been with the

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18 While claiming to have no affiliation or identity, such chains do present packages of values which reflect an evolution of thought in market economies such as sustainability, free trade, organic agriculture and corporate social responsibility.

19 Not her real name.
company for three year. However, she has been working since she was thirteen, always in stores or as a vendor. Why?

“I love it”, she answers “I love working, meeting people, ..” (Amina, 2016) She was the one who asked her dad to work when she was thirteen and he reluctantly allowed her to work with relatives in their store while studying. Like most working girls, she has a high school diploma in commerce, known colloquially as ‘diblom’. The latter is a vocational degree received after three years of study after ending preparatory education in the Egyptian school system. Those of lower income in society perceive the ‘diblom’ to be a respectable end to a girl’s education. One day she saw a vacancy announcement as a vendor in the gourmet coffee chain. She applied and was accepted. She lists off many advantages of her work there; the intense training, investment in staff knowledge of products, decent salary and opportunities for promotion through rigorous examinations.

The company policy does not allow vendors to remain in the same outlet for longer than a few months. It usually rotates them around different zones of the city. This is necessary in order to introduce their staff to the wide range of clientele, store sizes and locations. Some of these outlets are street-level, such as the three in Mūhndsīn. Others are inside malls or gated communities, with a capacity for serving a large number of people, or are simply a booth serving the rush employees whose offices are in the same building.

Amina first worked in the location off Jām’ at Al-Dīwal Al’arabīyah, in one of the main streets that connect the latter to the Shooting club. She was later transferred to a branch in one of the shopping and business developments lining the Eastern bank of the river, then to one of the branches in Cairo’s biggest entertainment and office complexes in Nasr City. She was again transferred to Mūhndsīn in the chain’s latest opening in the district; a landmark store on Jām’ at Al-Dīwal street itself. Now she is back to her first and favourite location. “Those other branches are not like here… here I know all the clients, they either live or work around here.. I know their preferred drinks, we chat. It’s more relaxing, people come and sit for hours” (Amina, 2016)
The branch’s design itself encourages such relaxation. In the middle of the street it is on runs a narrow public garden, which gives customers a chance to enjoy the sight of greenery, albeit through the traffic. Respecting international standards on smoking, the shop is divided into a closed area indoors and an indoor terrace overlooking the street for clients wishing to smoke. The atmosphere encourages more than just relaxing, some clients act as if they were sitting in their home kitchen. It is not unusual for example, to see a client going behind the vendor bar fixing their own drink or add cream or sugar to the ones they are already drinking.

Despite the attractions of the Nasr City complex for a young women with a disposable income, Amina did not want to remain there. The clients were never the same and were always in a hurry. It was also too far away from her home in Giza, requiring her to commute every day for a number of hours. “It’s a mall,” she explains “People either stop to pick up a coffee to go on their way to the office or are taking a break from shopping.” She cannot compare the mall situation even with the landmark branch on Jāmʿat Al-Dūwal Al’arabīyah street, despite the latter’s commercial nature and wide spaces. She points out that Jāmʿat Al-Dūwal is after all a street; the majority of the clients were residents and people working in the district. Even the seasonal clients, such as Arab students in Egyptian universities, were familiar faces as they frequent the same branches.

Amina dreams one day of having her own business; perhaps a cosy café similar to her favourite branch of the international chain. Yet, she would not recommend any other young woman to get into the same career. She admits that the perception of working girls in such franchises for some potential suitors is negative who disapprove of the mixed-sex work location. Men either ask her to leave her career or to change jobs.

The narrative of respectability and marriage is heavily present when discussing work in the franchise with the young women I spoke to during the course of my fieldwork. Both the fast food and the gourmet coffee chains are self-service, vendors are not required to bring the product to the clients. Women are thus sales girls, not waitresses, a category which is sometimes perceived by the societies they live with as constituting an disreputable profession. Such jobs are also considered easier than working in a factory or workshop.
Indeed, the number of young women, usually in their early twenties, have noticeably increased as a percentage of the vendors employed by international franchises. A human resources specialist in one such chain informed me that the numbers have doubled in the past ten years, but she could not give me a concrete reason for that. She also stressed that women’s work performance is higher than their male counterparts. Yet their retention rate is much lower, with women sometimes deciding to stop work once they are married, albeit for different reasons. Some men ask them directly to quit after marriage, others simply cannot find the time to take care of their homes and maintain a career.

Other women only started working in the first place to save enough money for a dowry. One young woman told me that she finds it funny when suitors ask to meet her father – as convention requires - to discuss financial arrangements and decide on the division of costs related to setting up the conjugal home. That is because she is the one who will be paying for her dowry and knows what it is that she can afford to buy or not.

The accounts of many of these young women coincide with a noticeable trend in Egyptian society where women feel obliged to work rather than choosing to. The male members of the family no longer have the capacity to meet all the financial responsibilities of the family, whether due to fixed salaries, higher prices or the decline of subsidies. However, the goal of the young working woman is not simply to make ends meet nor to purchase basic items. Many of them are interested in setting themselves up for marriage, taking into consideration that dowries are a key element for both parties to agree on the marriage. If a women is not able to afford paying for her share of the conjugal home, then the marriage can be called off. It is also contributes to attracting a groom of better socio-economic status.

Other young women desire disposable income for consumer goods; smart phones, clothes and make-up. The answer I consistently received, for the question of the first purchase made by women with their new salaries, was a smart phone, payed for in instalments.

My field research focused on the spaces and opportunities created by the franchises that opened in Mühndsin, especially for women. Yet, on the consumer end,
these spaces also created spaces and circuits for women from the wealthier Egyptians. Konig observes how such cafes that opened in the 1990s were filled with young women relaxing after work:

“The overwhelming presence of women in most upscale coffee shops is one of the most striking features of the social life that unfolds in them. Un-chaperoned mixed-gender socializing and the presence of single women in leisure venues are issues generally surrounded by suspicions and restrictions, Yet in these upscale coffee shops, veiled and nonveiled women often constitute more than half the customers. Many single professional women (...) have taken to spending much of their time in coffee shops (...).” (Konig, 2006, pp. 222 - 223)

Konig elaborates on how conventional coffee shops in Egypt were usually the domain of men, with women rarely seen. By the early 1990s, young women were not just filling in the kind of modern, cappuccino-serving cafes that Konig describes, but there was also a noticeable increase of the number of women smoking hookahs (shīyshah) in public. This trend coincided with the appearance of a new kind of blend café in Mūhndsīn which served both cappuccino and shīyshah and again women were the main clientale.

Konig reads these trends within the context of the economic and social policy changes following twenty years after the infīta, where a segment of Egypt’s society which benefited from the country’s return to international markets, demands goods and services which are privatized. This ranges from private education to international cuisine to imported goods, with cappuccinos representing the transnational taste Egyptians have acquired. Meanwhile, those of less fortune continue to make use of the remains of the Socialist era entitlements and State-run services.

Indeed, “These divisions are reproduced in the urban landscape through spaces like the coffeeshop.” (Konig, 2006, p. 228) Her account of changes in the objects of desire of the wealthy during the 1990s and 2000s and the strive for cosmopolitanism embedded in the new cafes, coincides with commercial evolution of Mūhndsīn as described throughout this chapter.
Observations

Reading the evolution of Mūhndsīn through Brenner and Theodore reveals a conventional pattern of neo-liberal reorganization and appropriation of space. In “Cities and Geographies of actually existing neoliberalism”, the afore-mentioned authors describe the ongoing proves of restructuring that takes place when neo-liberalism starts to operate in a territory. They define the former as a package of policies and approaches underpinned by “(…) the belief that open, competitive, and unregulated markets, liberated from all forms of state interference, represent the optimal mechanism for economic development. (Brenner & Theodore, Cities and the Geographies of "Actually Existing Neoliberalism”, 2002)

While much of the literature on neo liberalism focuses on themes of globalization and uniformity of application, these authors point to the spaces and unexpected outcomes that result from the interaction if pre-existing structural, urban and institutional arrangements with the kind of changes contemporary capitalism imports. The indicate that this encounter is not a linear or smooth process rather it is mired with instability as neo-liberalism struggles to replace former frameworks (they focus on the Keynesian-Fordist model of economic development) with those that facilitate its roll-out.

They argue that the world is still experiencing a situation of “neo-liberalization” (Brenner & Theodore, Cities and the Geographies of "Actually Existing Neoliberalism", 2002, p. 353):

“Hence, in the present context, the somewhat elusive phenomenon that needs definition must be construed as a historically specific, ongoing, and internally contradictory process of market-driven sociospatial transformation, rather than as a fully actualized policy regime, ideological form or regulatory framework.” (Brenner & Theodore, Cities and the Geographies of "Actually Existing Neoliberalism", 2002, p. 353)

Moreover, it:

“(…) represents a complex, multifaceted project of sociospatial transformation—it contains not only a utopian vision of a fully commodi-
fied form of social life, but also a concrete program of institutional modifications through which the unfettered rule of capital is to be promoted.” (Brenner & Theodore, Cities and the Geographies of "Actually Existing Neoliberalism", 2002, p. 363)

The authors describe the some of the symptoms of neo-liberalization, be that on institutions, policies or the urban (the city). Some such effects include unstable regulatory practices, the withdrawal of the State from supporting national projects and plans, and the devolution of power from central authorities to the local.

Neo liberalism is also reflected in the urban; “(...) the overarching goal of such neoliberal urban policy experiments is to mobilize city space as an arena both for market-oriented economic growth and for elite consumption practices.” (Brenner & Theodore, Cities and the Geographies of "Actually Existing Neoliberalism", 2002, p. 368)

Borrowing the concept of neo-liberalization, the urban evolution of Mūhndsīn since the 1990s as outlined in this chapter can be described as a roll out of neoliberalism. Many of the changes that eventually led to the transformation of the district into consumer heaven is due to the progressive neo-liberal restructuring of institutions, regulation and policies. It is also connected to an increasing informality of governance resulting in non-institutional organization of the urban. The power of the permit is symbolic of this kind of restructuring, as it moves gradually from the centralized State into the hands of the local.

The work-in-progress of neo-liberalization that Brenner and Theodore describe, explains the kind of diversity of the use of urban space in Mūhndsīn. The image of a child swimming in the fountain of in the middle of Jām‘at Al-Dūwal Al’arabīyah is a stark image to the kind of consumer-oriented space neo-liberalism seeks to carve out in the urban. It is not the existence of the child in the fountain that is an appropriation of this space, rather it is how the child transformed an ornamental public edifice into a source of entertainment. While such practices may have been impossible with the kind of strict regulation and supervision of the city that existed in the 1950s up until the infta, neo-liberalization’s destructive capacity created the conditions for a more personalized use of urban space.
Capitalism in its contemporary form hides behind process in order to shape the space in the urban. As Bayat describes it:

“Although modernity had already fractured cities along a class-spatial divide, the more recent neoliberal capitalist globalization is generating novel types of inequality and exclusion. In the neoliberal logic, the city is shaped more by the logic of the market than the needs of its inhabitants.... It is characterized by greater privatization, deregulation and commodification. In this urban form, important responsibilities of public authorities in responding to the needs of the urbanites are transferred to non-state and private agents and corporations, which may hold little accountability to the public.” (Bayat & Biekart, 2009, p. 817)

As the case of Mūhndsîn proves, space is not a static entity. Massey aptly describes the significance of the particularity of space on shaping what will emerge on its collision with neoliberalism/neoliberalization:

“It also makes space seem like a surface; continuous and given....It is an unthought cosmology, in the gentlest sense of that term, but it carries with it social and political effects. So easily this way of imagining space can lead us to conceive of other places, peoples, cultures simply as phenomena ‘on’ this surface. It is not an innocent manoeuvre, for by this means they are deprived of their histories. Immobilised, they await (..) (...., or global capital’s) arrival.” (Massey, 2005, p. 4)

On the other hand, gender scholars and academia have focused in many studies on the types of transformation and practices of women in the context of neoliberalism/liberalization. Some of these studies consider a return of women to the politics of place and locality, be it the body, the home or the environment, as a position of resistance to neo-liberalism (Harcourt & Escobar). Moreover, gender studies have focused on the question of women (especially in the developing world) in the transnational company, as a gear in the capitalist production machine. Such literature explores the habits and anti-dominant norms that appear within the category of female labour (Hewamanne, 2003), the transient nature of the female body within the con-
temporary production process, and the evolution of gender roles within the spaces left by neoliberalism (Data, 2005).

The neo-liberalization of Mūhndsīn is a narrative of women finding their places in the urban. It speaks of a silent revolution, one in which a café overlooking a small street and a garden can be the appropriate setting of overstepping the lines of societal norms. Moments of appropriation are revealed, with employment in franchises becoming ‘women’s work’.

What the research for this chapter reveals is that neo-liberalization is neither a uniform nor consistent phenomenon; the local and human element determines its direction. It also indicates that the results of this process cannot be pre-calculated. This very interaction, as observed in Mūhndsīn, is resistance that is neither activated nor organized. Appropriation is resistance.
Chapter Five

CONCLUSION

Growing up in Mūhndsīn, I always presumed that it was what it was; beautiful gardens and houses where families such as mine lived. A few years ago, I took a wrong turn down one of the district’s main thoroughways and found myself staring at - what in my limited understanding at the time - I could only describe as a slum. Right behind me, on the other side of that main thoroughfare, was a shiny new fast food chain which many Egyptians could ill afford. Meanwhile, in that alley which I had stepped in, a cow was roaming freely and the residents were staring at me as if an alien had just landed in their midst. It was only then that I recognized that I was the stranger; I was the intruder on a private space.

In “Ethnocracy” Yiftachel describes societies in which ethnonationalist groups guide and manipulate the State and its tools in order to perpetuate their existence and hold on power (Yiftachel, 2006). Such manipulation involves an acute understanding of the production of space, critical geography and urban theory. Ethnocratic States use planning, zoning and categorization of groups based on the land they stand on to create unequal societies, in which some are the eternal recipients of the economic and political entitlements of citizenship.

Ethnocracies are cases of extreme abuse of space, to produce, appropriate and participate in its use. It is an example of how the right to city if violated can create the kind of societies which are superficially democratic; which use narratives of electoral process and liberal governance while successfully stripping some of their claims to shape their everyday lives.

The essence of this research was to trace the existence of practised democracy in the urban; one did which did not fall under a neat categorization of a chapeau of a system of governance. Through the observation of the urban’s evolution in Mūhndsīn – a geographical space – it traced two basic elements which potentially prove that democracy can exist in many forms, not exclusively on electoral processes and integration in decision-making structures.

The right to the City is thus a pathway to democracy within an urban setting, no longer limited by the package of rights and claims linked to the twentieth century
binary of liberal democracy and socialist welfare. It is also an attempt to understand the numerous modes of existence and lives outside the model of urban citizenship existing outside the Modern, without characterizing them along a scale of development. It also avoids the lens of rights-based claims embedded in the modern citizen’s relationship to the State.

Cairo is a city of multiple spaces and users. One of the characteristics of its urban evolution is that it expands both horizontally and vertically. Desert cities are built to absorb the growing population while rooms on roofs in *Duqi* are still rented out. The old may be replaced with the new, but it is usually not abandoned. In Cairo space does not die; it is reimagined and recreated, offering different circuits and paths to its inhabitants.

As such, *Mūhndsīn* is but an example of many sites in the urban which are worthy of study from the perspective of the right to the city, especially if the latter is not an exclusive focus on rights-based claims. Lefebvre’s contribution to the debate on justice and equality in the urban is to highlight *space as living, as life*. Accordingly, change in the three pillars he describes - spatial practice, representational and representations of space – leading to such moments of justice can take place by claiming the right to the city. As outlined in the introduction, a rights-based approach to the right to the city associates its realization with modifying structures, legal frameworks and institutions; expanding the share of a specific category of humanity in the share of power. Such ‘empowerment’ is concerned with mainstreaming, managing and integrating dissent rather than promoting tangible changes in a dominant ideology.

The research’s main question was whether contemporary *Mūhndsīn represents an actualization of the right to the city?* Field research thus focused on identifying signs of participation and appropriation of space in *Mūhndsīn*, within three themes; the evolution of the built environment, commercialization/commodification and visibility/survival of urban communities. The following questions were also asked to accommodate the particular case of space in *Mūhndsīn*:
Has the evolution of Mūhndsīn been a reflection of surplus capital expansion, as espoused by Harvey or is it the triumph of the urban over capital as embraced by Lefebvre?

Why has the urban evolution of Mūhndsīn failed to eliminate existing communities? How have the latter negotiated their co-existence within this urban space?

What are the political possibilities generated by the urban evolution of Mūhndsīn?

Chapter two focused on the built environment and its evolution in Mūhndsīn by following the trajectory of construction and decay in that district. It began with the moment of the conversion of the agricultural land into residences for a group of wealthy civil servants then later into high rises for another economically fortunate group of liberal professionals. Research explored how the built environment accommodated the lives and desires of these two groups; from the spacious leafy villas of the civil servants to the flagrant display of wealth in the high rises. Two main conclusions arise from research on the urban evolution.

The first is the notable is the impact of the flow of wealth and power from the first group to the second on the built environment. The second is the role of the State in the form of policies and legislation in the built landscape. The transfer of power in this case was supported by a shift from socialism to capitalism which left its footprint on the urban landscape. A third observation based on interviews is the apparent lack of involvement or objection of the residents to this change in their neighbourhood, There are signs of disapproval but largely these transformation were left to be without any movement to prevent them.

In order to accommodate the academic discourse which – justifiably – ties much of the recent development of the urban to the rising dominance of neoliberalism as an ideology, chapter Four focused on the commercialization/commodification of Mūhndsīn. The franchise is used in this chapter as a marker of neoliberalism/neoliberalization. Research on this chapter revealed that while neoliberalism had a significant role in shaping space in contemporary Mūhndsīn, it did not succeed in dominating it or in excluding it as an enclave for the wealthy. Other forms of life persist at the doorstep of this form of commercialization.
Notable in this chapter is how capital’s exclusionary tendencies are translated into practices and regulations; in this case of Mūhdsīn symbolized by the permit. It aligns with Yiftachel’s account of how land ownership in the Occupied Palestinian Territories was used as a tool to categorize and exclude Palestinians from receiving the same entitlements as Jewish citizens, what he terms “The dark side of planning” (Yiftachel, 2006, p. 140 and 142). He describes how Israel managed exclusion through administrative procedure, including the categorization of land by activity (agricultural, commercial, etc) then allocating different packages of land ownership rights accordingly. The approval of permits or licenses or land ownership documents is allocated to Jewish national entities thereby practically barring persons from other backgrounds from accessing their services.

Accordingly, Mūhdsīn was not a static territory waiting for franchises to arrive in order to be filled. That explains the kind of practices that emerged when such a meeting took place, including the subtle gendering of space. This took the form of women’s growing role within the franchises as well as the bending of social norms that surfaced with the provision of areas for women’s loitering while protecting their anonymity. It is in this moment of neoliberalism meeting space that subtle signs of appropriation surface. Space is ‘bended’ to accommodate the desires of its users.

Chapter Three studied ‘izbat wilād ʿalām as an example of the once-rural pockets that became invisible with the urban evolution of Mūhdsīn. The ‘izba is invisible to many of the district’s users, becoming visible only within certain narratives of poverty and violence. Research revealed that the ‘izba’s inhabitants were able to negotiate their continued use of that space by identifying and benefiting from divisions within the groups in power. Their knowledge of national and local structures of governance and administrations supports their participation in shaping the decisions which could impact or threat their existence in that space. From the ay to civil society to government officials, the ‘izba’s residents capacity to reach and debate the legitimacy of their use of space is significant to explain their continued presence. Yet such participation takes place within a small circle of influential residents, who undertake to represent the rest in order to protect or advance their own interests.

Another observation emerging from the research on the ‘izba is the urban fabric’s capacity on hiding the unwanted. The ‘izba is invisible because of its physical
structure with entrances concealed. Movement into the ‘izba is controlled by the residents because of the nature of the urban fabric allowing entrance to be monitored. This is a stark discrepancy from the rest of the district which was designed to accommodate strangers rather than keep them out.

Going back to the original research question of whether Mühndsín represents and actualization of the right to the city, based on observations of participation and appropriation, the answer tends to be negative. There are signs of both these elements in different moments and spaces, however they are not consistent and are not applied to the district in its entirety. Yet it is not a case where “(...) neoliberal urbanity won the battle of urban citizenship.” (Bayat & Biekart, 2009, p. 818) Rather it is in Lefebvre’s imagination a moment when the millefeuille that is urban space has created pathways of survival and life which neither the city nor capital have been able to dominate.

Significant in Mühndsín is the lack of a moment of revolution or radical change. The types of resistance strategies so fond for Harvey are not seen in the district, even by the most disenfranchised. Collective action and activism are not strategies espoused by the users of Mühndsín to participate in the development of their neighbourhood. Rather as mentioned earlier, it is a silent revolution, allowing power to pass from one group to the other, or nudging social boundaries. This thesis concludes that participation and appropriation of space are paths towards the realization of the right to the city as imagined by Lefebvre and as such are possibilities for political action.

Exploring Mühndsín as a social space reveals the multitude of subjectivities the urban is able to offer, even within the same physical territory. In the encounter recounted at the opening of this chapter, and in many of the accounts throughout this thesis, moments of subject creation, visibility and recognition, as a by-product of the urban, are described.

At the time of writing this thesis, a new Cairo is being planned and constructed; one which would fit into a neo-liberal imagination of a world city. Intrinsic in this project is an abandonment of the physical and social space that is contemporary Cairo. This urban growth does not appear to be motivated by necessity, rather it seems to
reflect an Administrative rationality that the old urban has too much of Lefebvre’s Mille-Feuille to develop. At the heart of this new mega-project is an incapacity to understand social space, its relation to the urban environment, and ultimately how subjectivities – and citizens – are created. Without such an understanding, creating a world city is not foreseeable, as eventually social space will pour into the streets and buildings.

Ultimately, the right to the city is about the city – and the human subject - yet to come. Cairo as a city for humans, not buildings, is the real operationalization of the right to the city.
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