

Informal Self-Governance: The Formation of an Alternative Urban Framework in a Cairo Region

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Abstract : Almost half of Cairo's growing population is housed in self-built, self-governed informal settlements serving as an alternative in the absence of government-provided public housing. These settlements emerged as the spatial expression of informal practices or activities operating outside regulated, formal frameworks. A comprehensive narrative of political events, administrative decisions, and urban policies set the stage for the growth of informal expression in Egypt. The purpose of this qualitative inquiry is to portray informal self-governance practiced by residents in the Cairo region. This research argues that informal spatial practices offer an alternative urban framework for bottom-up development in the absence of government provisions. In the context of this study, informal self-governance is defined as the residents' autonomous control and use of public urban space in informal settlements. The case study for this research is Ard al-Liwa, a semi-formal settlement representing the majority of informal settlement typologies in Egypt, which consist of the formal occupation of land through an uncontrolled land subdivision, zoning, and construction. An inductive methodological approach is adopted to first study informal practices as singular activities and then as components of a larger environment. The collected set of empirical data consists of audiovisual material and observations obtained during regular site visits and interviews with residents native to the settlement. Methods of analysis are synthesized to identify themes in the data: the static and dynamic use of sidewalks, the urban traces of informal building allocation and construction, the de facto right to urban space, and the resultant spatial patterns. The paper concludes by positioning the research in the context of the current architectural practice, questioning the role, and responsibility, of designers in these self-governed urban regions.

Keywords : Egypt, informal settlements, self-governance, urban framework

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