



— fig. 1 View of Coptic Garbage City from the Sacred Complex, Cairo, Egypt 2019. Photo: K. Wiącek

The Cairo Garbage City as a Self-Sufficient “Inner City”

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John Turner’s view of the (self-)will to build

Already in the 1960s, the British architect John Turner was concerned with the uncontrolled growth of informal architecture in urbanised areas. He treated this phenomenon as a manifestation of natural urbanization processes in historically unprecedented conditions. Turner saw the emergence of illegal and uncontrolled urban settlements with distorted forms of housing as a problem, while being aware that modern cities in a world of growing social inequalities must accommodate an unprecedented number of the poorest inhabitants. And it was exactly the experience of living in poverty that determined the physical escalation of informal settlements¹. When Turner mentioned in the quoted strategy paper, prepared for the UN, that more than one third of the population of the City of Mexico City lived in *colonias proletarias*, known as “parachutists” neighbourhoods², or the then over one million Ankara inhabitants of *gecekondu*³, he stressed that the city had changed its character irreversibly. It was no longer merely a cultural and social home for a narrow community holding secular and religious power, but a refuge for thousands of enraged people, for whom the only hope for further survival and progress was the urban melting pot.

In terms of informal architecture, Turner’s research, who, among others, worked for eight years (1957–1968) in the marginal districts of Peruvian Lima and Arequipa, is distinguished by his positive perception of illegal settlement. Turner assumed that a housing is a value in itself and that every person is free to make decisions about building their own home. He treated it as a time-consuming and complicated process, but devoid of architectural norms and social control and customized to the individual needs of the user, who decides on the methods of construction, design and selection of building materials. Turner believed that informal architecture is the only solution to housing problems for the poorest. He saw the need to involve the state and local authorities in the infrastructural development of marginal districts and to create administrative regulations to facilitate access to affordable building plots.

¹ J. Turner, *Uncontrolled urban settlement: problems and policies*, [in:] *Urbanization: Development Policies and Planning*, New York 1968, pp. 107–108.

² In Spanish: “*barrios paracaidistas*”.

³ A Turkish term for a house illegally erected in one night.

The (self-)will to build reflected, according to Turner, the promotion of the idea of self-help in collective actions leading to the integration of residents - and it is thanks to this narrative that Turner is regarded as part of the critical trend that developed in the 1960s and concerned the perception of public housing programmes and the departure from modernist visions of the city. Thanks to Turner, the perception of informal and substandard architecture began to change, not only in academic circles, but also in global development programmes⁴. As a result, in the early 1970s, the World Bank started to fund programmes based on the site-and-service method, which contributed to helping poor people to get modest homes – by building them by themselves.

The global right to housing

Although Turner's research provided the basis for participatory architecture and the Scandinavian co-housing movement, the "intellectual marriage" between the neoliberal president of the World Bank Robert McNamara and the architect, who was once associated with the anarchist *Freedom* magazine, is criticized by Mike Davis. In „*Planet of Slums*”, he writes that Turner's program of "self-help, incremental construction, and legalization of spontaneous urbanization was exactly the kind of pragmatic, cost-effective approach to the urban crisis that McNamara favored"⁵. Jeremy Seabrook sees in Turner's work a negative legacy that has helped lay the foundations for a global policy of moving away from low-cost municipal construction programmes and avoiding the state's responsibilities to tackle homelessness and economic and housing poverty⁶.

Housing exclusion on a global scale results from a number of interrelated factors, such as, according to Karol Kurowski: inability to purchase flats on the conventional housing market due to systemic exploitation; domination of privileged classes (monopolization of means of production and land) or avoiding the introduction of a housing policy allowing equal access to housing resources⁷, and mass overpopulation. As a result, people all over the world meet their basic need to dwell and in an independent (and often illegal) way create an informal architecture that irrevocably changes the perception of the modern city.

Self-will violation of urbanistic standards

In the global perspective of developing countries whose cities are facing increasing overpopulation caused by mass migration from the countryside, I consider the notion of informal architecture, identical to Bernard Rudofsky's **spontaneous architecture** or **anarchitecture**⁸, as imprecise and insufficient. The notion of anarchitecture excessively ideologizes urban informal architectural structures, while spontaneous architecture refers more to the historical tradition of rural construction, so I suggest introducing a new terminology. In English I decided to use the term "self-build architecture" although it does not fully reflect the nuances of the Polish term⁹. This concept is more appropriate for contemporary urbanised

⁴ R. Harris, *A double irony: the originality and influence of John F. C. Turner*, "Habitat International" 2003, no. 27, p. 246.

⁵ M. Davis, *Planet of Slums*, London - New York 2006, p. 72.

⁶ See *ibidem*, p. 72: "By demonstrating the ability, the courage, and the capacity for self-help of slum people, the way [was] prepared for a withdrawal of state and local government intervention and support".

⁷ K. Kurowski, *Samoorganizacja w wielkomiejskim slumsie. Przykład Limy*, Warszawa 2013, p. 95.

⁸ Which is associated with the work of the architect G. Matta-Clark, who founded the anarchitecture group, or with the work of the architect L. Kroll, who was named an anarchist in the 1960s by the authorities of the Catholic University of Leuven for including its future users, i.e. students, in the design process.

⁹ The term "**self-build architecture**" refers to the historical terms given in the text and uses the Polish word play "self-will - will - freedom". It also draws on the construction vocabulary (illegal construction, land use violation, which in Polish refers more to the term I am introducing). It refers to a conscious violation of the law, departure from building standards and hierarchy of spatial planning. It violates the convention of the primacy of the architect over the user of architecture, who lawlessly (and out of necessity) starts to create an architecture customized to their own needs, as John Turner wrote about.



fig. 2 Public housing near the *bidonvilles* in El Hank, Casablanca, Morocco 2018. Photo: K. Wiącek

spaces, explaining more precisely the specificity of independent building by socially and economically excluded communities. I want to bring out the factor of self-sufficiency and agency in creating informal architecture. In the analysis of this phenomenon the open way of thinking about contemporary cities, where layers of formal and informal architecture intertwine, is important. Therefore, it is helpful to reject the value of aesthetic, technological (use of recycled building materials) and legal (lack of compliance with building standards) issues.

Informal housing models in developing countries

In developing countries, the patterns of housing are similar to each other and most often boil down to taking rational decisions aimed at: convenient location of the plot in relation to the workplace and affordable dwelling. In analysing this phenomenon, generalization is unavoidable and Mike Davis himself falls into this trap, writing that:

Other analysts might give priority to legal housing status (**formal** versus **informal**), but I think most urban newcomers' first decision is whether or not they can afford to locate near the principal job concentrations (**core** versus **periphery**)¹⁰.

¹⁰ M. Davis, *op. cit.*, p. 30.



fig. 3 Muqattam Hills, Cairo, Egypt 2019. Photo: K. Wiącek

When Davis writes about the housing situation of the poor inhabitants of Cairo, he refers to the analysis of Ahmed Soliman, who, apart from the conventional but most expensive choice of renting a tenement house in a central location, evokes a frequent model of living in an informal shelter in the city centre¹¹, and the cheapest choice for the poorest, i.e. occupying (squatting) public land, usually in peripheral and desert areas of the city, without sufficient infrastructure, where the air is most polluted. The most desperate and poorest people of Cairo buy a plot of land for construction from the authorities of a given village or from the Bedouins in semi-informal areas where a basic communal infrastructure is being built thanks to social pressure. In the latter case, the buyers become the legal owners of the land but without a building permit, so they again enter a “zone of informality”, which is an inherent value of self-build architecture. The literature on that subject often describes these informal methods of housing as “a product of neoliberalism” or “resistance to neoliberal globalisation”. This approach is criticized by David Sims in his book *Understanding Cairo. The Logic of a City Out of Control*, who rightly believes – that *ashwa’iyyat*, or informal urban areas, have existed in Cairo for decades. According to urban planner David Sims, informal Cairo exists and even dominates the city¹², partly because of the authoritarian governments in Egypt leading to a pathology in the management and planning of cities, and not because of some simplistic approach resulting from the allocation of insufficient funds for housing purposes¹³.

Informal Cairo

To fully understand the reasons behind the emergence of informal Cairo, one must go back to 1950, when Cairo metropolis had a population of 2.8 million and the city was developing in three parallel models, which were physically and legally separated from each other. Although their formal and informal features were often blurred and overlapping with each other, despite the different motives for their creation, the values and norms of each model. The first model was the further development of the formal city, followed by the emergence and rapid expansion of the informal city (in the decade 1976–1986 it grew by eight per cent per year), and the project to build modern satellite towns in the desert launched in the 1970s (in 1986 over thirty thousand people lived there)¹⁴.

Since the topic of this article is the founding of the Cairo Garbage City¹⁵, created by a religious minority of Christian Copts, I would like to take a closer look at the informal model of this “inner city” [fig. 1].

Cairo Garbage City as an informal “inner city”

Sims shows that probably the first informal occupation of the city area took place in Manshiyat Naser¹⁶, which is precisely the area currently inhabited by the Coptic Zabbaleen¹⁷, located in the former quarries

¹¹ See A. Soliman, *A Possible Way Out: Formalizing Housing Informality in Egyptian Cities*, Lanham [Maryland] 2004, pp. 119–120; as quoted in: M. Davis, *op. cit.*, p. 29: “a very small room or rooftop with allocation with a poor quality environment and a cheap rent, or no rent at all, with good access to job opportunities but with no hope of secure tenure. Such illegal dwellers will eventually be forced to move to squatter camps or semi-informal housing”.

¹² In 2011, it was estimated that 18 million people lived in the so-called Grand Cairo (the Cairo Governorate, the City of Giza, the City of Shubra al-Khayma), of which 12 million, or almost 67% in informal areas. See D. Sims, *The Arab Housing Paradox*, <https://www.thecaireview.com/essays/the-arab-housing-paradox> (access date: 19 I 2020).

¹³ See D. Sims, *Understanding Cairo. The Logic of a City Out of Control*, Cairo – New York 2010, pp. 19–20.

¹⁴ See *ibidem*, p. 85. The author reports that between 1960 and 2006 formal Cairo grew slowly, from 4 to 5 million inhabitants, while the informal city grew rapidly and very dynamically. In 2006, it had a population of 7 million. Meanwhile, in satellite cities built in the desert, the population reached 3,000 inhabitants in 46 years (*ibidem*, p. 86).

¹⁵ I researched the Coptic City of Garbage in January and February 2019, at a field study in Cairo: *Cairo’s City of Garbage as an example of self-build architecture representing a phenomenon of contemporary culture in globalised urbanised spaces*, funded by the Youth Grant no. 0420/2873/18, as part of my full-time doctoral studies in Cultural Studies at the Institute of Cultural Studies, University of Wrocław, Poland.

¹⁶ D. Sims, *op. cit.*, p. 61.

¹⁷ In the Egyptian dialect, the word means garbage handlers, i.e. people who earn their living by recycling garbage.



fig. 4 Gate separating the secular part of the Garbage City from the sacred one, Cairo, Egypt 2019. Photo: K. Wiącek

at the foot of the Mokattam Hills, near the Northern Mamluk Cemetery¹⁸. The illegal occupation was carried out by residents of the liquidated slums in al-Darrasa and al-Azhar. Sims, writing about informal Cairo, recalls the definition of areas with no spatial planning, referred to in Arabic as *al-manatiq al-gheir mukhattata*¹⁹. They are created in violation of current building laws and standards, although physically they have typically urban features, such as a rare and often irregular grid of narrow streets, with small but completely built-up building plots (80–150 m²) and vertically ascending residential buildings, often with unfinished storeys with reinforcing wires sticking out of them. The rural features of self-build architecture are primarily the lack of common spaces (parks, squares) and the total absence or inadequacy of space for public buildings (schools, hospitals, places of worship, cultural centres). Self-build architecture is not subject to restrictions on maintaining the required height of buildings, hence the cascading and irregular line of development of individual quarters, resulting rather from a family situation and level of wealth of the owners. The extension of individual buildings is dictated by pragmatic and cultural issues, e.g. a wedding in a family or the enlargement of a family with another descendant. Both situations require an extension of a living space, which requires the addition of another storey or

illegal appropriation of the common space (loggias, balconies, roofs, drying rooms) by a given family for private purposes, as is the case in Casablanca, Morocco for example²⁰ [fig. 2].

At this point it is worth to mention the work of the Belgian architect Somers Glenn, who in his research proves that Arabic culture is dominated by the D.I.Y. (Do It Yourself) method in the field of informal construction²¹.

The features of informal architecture I mentioned are also characteristic of the Coptic illegally built “inner city” at the foot of the Cairo Mokattam Hills [fig. 3] in the Manshiyat Naser district (covering 5.5 km²), known as the Garbage City²², because of the recycling of waste, which is the main source of livelihood, as an informal economy, for the local Coptic Zabbaleen community.²³

¹⁸ Called the City of the Dead, where about a million people live.

¹⁹ Officially used by the Egyptian GOPP, or General Organization for Physical Planning. See D. Sims, *op. cit.*, p. 95.

²⁰ I wrote about this in my article *Architektura “bidonvilles” w Casablanca*, “Kultura Współczesna” 2018, no. 3.

²¹ S. Glenn, *Casablanca: Enforcing El Hank’s Right to Exist*, Antwerp 2014, p. 259.

²² See the map with a visualisation of the Garbage City compared to Greater Cairo on the website: <http://cairothelivestcityintheworld.blogspot.com> (access date: 19 I 2020).

²³ The Coptic community in Manshiyat Naser is about 30,000 people. The number is given after: M. Tadros, *Copts at the Crossroads. The Challenges of Building Inclusive Democracy in Egypt*, Cairo Press, Cairo–New York 2013, p. 178.

Migrations of the Coptic Zabbaleen

The history of the creation of this “city in the city”, nowadays further developed by the Coptic religious minority, dates back to 1910. It was then that a group of Muslim migrants from the Dakhla Oasis in the western desert of Egypt moved to Cairo into the area called Bab El Bahr, in the center of Cairo. Those people from the oasis (*al-wahat*), called the *Wahiya*, began to collect garbage and took sole responsibility for the collection and disposal of household waste in Cairo, under separate agreements with building owners. Initially, the *Wahiya* paid a fixed amount to the building owners, and then charged the tenants of each apartment a monthly fee for their services. The paper and garbage collected was then used as fuel for traditional *fava* bean cooking on huge street hearths and for heating public baths²⁴.

In the 1930s and 1940s there was a large migration of a group of landless peasants in Egypt, known as the Zabbaleen. The descendants of subsistence farmers come from the district of El Badari in Asyut, a rural region of Upper Egypt. As agriculture was no longer a profitable way of earning money, the Zabbaleen struggled with economic difficulties that led them to migrate to Cairo in search of work. It was then that the Zabbaleen came into contact with the *Wahiya* and established cooperation with them by purchasing the waste sorted by the *Wahiya* and used it as pig feed. It was from the *Wahiya* that the Copts learned a new profession²⁵ and developed a “garbage business” thanks to pig breeding. This allowed the Copts to extend their work from waste collection to waste sorting. The neglect of Upper Egypt under the centralised government of Naser in the 1950s, who pursued an intensive industrialisation policy, led to an increase in the population and an increase in the number of poor landless peasants who continued to emigrate to Cairo in search of work. The Christian Copts settled in different parts of the city, in 'Izbit al-Nakhl, Manshiyat Nasir, Muqattam (southern Cairo) or Ard al-Liwa' (central Cairo), but their stories are similar. Most of the Zabbaleen have been relocated at least four times before they settled in their actual place²⁶.

Initially, the Zabbaleen settled in the district of Imbaba in the Governorate of Giza, but in 1970 they received an eviction order from the Governor of Giza and settled in an abandoned quarry at the foot of the Mokattam Hills, which falls under the jurisdiction of the Governor of Cairo. He granted the Zabbaleen administrative permission to settle in the area, but without signing the tenancy agreement. As a result of the legally unstable situation, the Zabbaleen initially lived in makeshift sheet metal huts, built from barrels found among the collected waste. It was from this community that the current informal garbage collectors in Cairo originated, who, after another relocation, founded their self-sufficient city in the midst of the Mokattam Hills. It is separated from the rest of Cairo, not only because of its difficult geographical location but also because of the cultural identity of the Christian minority marginalised by the Muslim Cairo. This hermetic space with rural features (informality, insufficient infrastructure, compact community maintaining social ties, cultivating religious and cultural tradition) in urbanised areas of a city reflects a typical but not new phenomenon in cities in developing countries, where the internal migration of rural population, continuing their own (often tribal)²⁷ tradition of construction determines the character of urban planning based on non-observance of building standards.

²⁴ M. A. Zaki Hussein, *Middle Class Imaginaries of Cairo's Waste: The Zabaleen's Story Retold*, Master of Art Thesis, The American University in Cairo, p. 20. See http://dar.aucegypt.edu/bitstream/handle/10526/5181/Thesis_Manar%20Zaki_GWST.pdf?sequence=1 (access date: 19 | 2020).

²⁵ M. Tadros, *op. cit.*, p. 178.

²⁶ M. Tadros (*ibidem*, p. 179) quotes the words of one of the Zabbaleen from the Ard al-Liwa region: “The government evicted us from one place to another. They say we are polluters of the environment. We arrived at Imbaba, then moved to 'Ayn al-Sira, then to Hudn al-Gabal (also known as Batn al-Baqqara), and then Mazalakh Ard al-Liwa, where again, the government came to level us with the bulldozers, so we went to Shaf'i and then were evicted to Ard al-Liwa”.

²⁷ A similar situation exists in *bidonvilles* in Casablanca, Morocco.



fig. 5 Monastery of St. Simon the Tanner, Al-Mokattam, Cairo, Egypt 2019. Photo: K. Wiącek

The *Sacrum* and the *Profanum* of the Garbage City

The most important feature of the Coptic Garbage City is its symbolic division into the higher *sacrum* zone and the lower *profanum* residential-labour zone, which are separated from each other by a huge metal gate, closed for the night [fig. 4].

The local Coptic church at the foot of the Mokattam Hills was founded in 1975, and this gave the Coptic Zabbaleen a sense of security after successive internal migration within Cairo. This in turn influenced Coptic construction technology and since then more durable building materials such as stone and bricks have been used to construct houses. Since 1976, the local Coptic community has lived in a vast open space, on the site of a former limestone quarry surrounded by hills²⁸, in which a secular part and a sacred part were separated from each other. A great tourist attraction are the churches carved in the rock, the largest of which is the Monastery of St. Simon the Tanner²⁹ with a semicircular amphitheatre which can accommodate as many as 20,000 people [fig. 5-6]. It is adjacent by the churches of St. Hurts and St. Mark

²⁸ From which temples and pyramids were built in ancient times.

²⁹ This is the largest church in the Middle East. Its name comes from the Coptic saint Simon the Tanner, who lived at the end of the 10th century when Egypt was ruled by the Muslim Caliph Al-Muizz Lideenillah. Simon the Tanner is a Coptic saint who is associated with the legend of crossing Mount Mokattam.

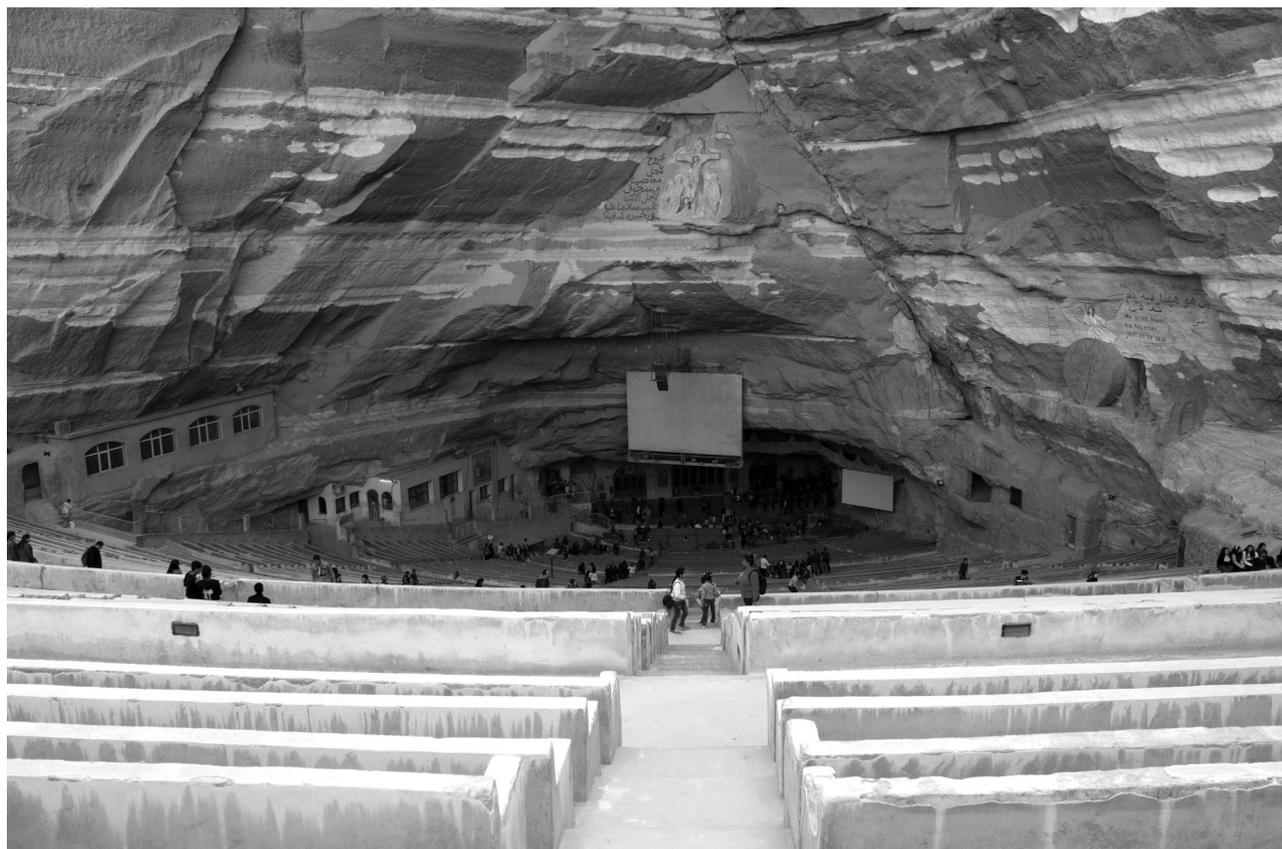


fig. 6 Auditorium carved in rock in the Monastery of St. Simon Tanner, Al-Mokattam City, Cairo, Egypt 2019. Photo: K. Wiącek

and St. Simon the Tanner’s Hall. This religious complex³⁰ is important for the local Christian community, but also for the Copts, scattered all over the world, who support financially the further development of the sacred centre of Mokattam, which is constantly developing. Besides the mentioned cave churches, apartments for Coptic clergy, cafés and souvenir shops for tourists, the local community put strong focus³¹ on creating infrastructure for Coptic children and youth (sport court, climbing walls, playground).

The view from the sacral part of the Garbage City on the lower part of the city with piling up several-storey red brick buildings and wooden, green constructions of dovecotes makes a depressing impression, which we have got already before, because in order to get to the sacral part of the city, you have to pass through the garbage sorting zone in the “lower city”. The well-kept and rich sacral part is a separate, although culturally and symbolically connected with the residential part of the Zabbaleen, whose unpaved streets without sidewalks serve as storages for the constantly sorted garbage heaps [fig. 7]. On the ground floor of the residential buildings, sorting plants were organized, warehouses for particular types of waste (paper, plastic, metal, organic waste, etc.), workshops converting waste for example into fine plastic. The residential part of the Zabbaleen is completely dominated by rows of unplastered brick buildings (there are elevations made of unfired adobe bricks [fig. 8], hand-formed), erected in a storied structure of

³⁰ Both the churches carved in the caves and the surrounding rocks are decorated with biblical reliefs (e.g. with the image of Jesus Christ) by a Pole, M. Dybich, who also works with the Coptic community as a streetworker.

³¹ This was confirmed in my direct interview with B. Mettry, a local animator, streetworker and member of a local association that produces and sells recycled crafts and supports the professional activities of women in the Zabbaleen community.



fig. 7 Streets of the Coptic Garbage City, where the sorted garbage is stored. Cairo, Egypt 2019. Photo: K. Wiącek

reinforced concrete. It is completely dictated by its informal economy (which is officially recognized by the city authorities), i.e. waste sorting³².

Coptic identity reflected in small architecture

In the secular space, there are also elements of sacral decoration which strengthen the religious identity of the Zabbaleen, such as: shrines with saints attached to facades (framed by colourful mosaics), Coptic crosses marking the residential zone of the Copts, images of the Coptic Pope on large-format banners, or hand-made miniature altars (*churches on the street*³³) [fig. 9], full of folk charm, hung over streets filled with rubbish and attached with tapes to the walls of the opposite buildings, with images of Mary and saints from the Coptic church glued on.

Waste recycling as an informal economy

The Garbage City as a former slum, contrary to popular beliefs, is characterized by a specific order and a structured network of narrow streets, which depart from the main and wide access road, which is used both by tourists heading towards the sacred part of the Coptic “inner city” and, above all, by the inhabitants themselves and by

truck drivers (but also by the poorest carts on wheels pulled by donkeys) bringing waste to be sorted and taking it out to external companies. Therefore, the City of Garbage is in constant motion, every family is involved in sorting of a given type of garbage, everyday difficult life goes on in the streets, despite still insufficient infrastructure (one hospital, a primary school, but still no secondary school, no asphalt streets and side-walks) and urban amenities which appeared in 1982³⁴. A project financed by the Egyptian government in cooperation with the World Bank’s International Development Association and managed by Environmental Quality International (EQI), a Cairo consulting company specializing in solid waste management and urban renewal, with the help of the Moqattam Association of Waste Collectors, the Gameya, consisted of preparing a local settlement map and constructing a municipal infrastructure. With the help of an external consultant, the government invested in Manshiyat Naser in a pipeline, electricity, sewerage

³² It is estimated that the Zabbaleen collect informally a third of the waste from the surface of Cairo from 14 million people, which means collecting 3,000 tonnes a day, 85% of which is sorted directly by micro-enterprises generating income for 40,000 people (including the production of handicrafts from recycled garbage such as paper or wool carpets). See W. Fahmi, K. Sutton, *Cairo’s Zabaleen garbage recyclers: Multi-nationals’ takeover and state relocation plans*, “Habitat International” 2006, no. 30, p. 812. In a later article (2010) the same authors report that the Zabbaleen collect 6000 tons of waste a day.

³³ Bekhit Mettry’s words from the interview.

³⁴ The aforementioned Bekhit Mettry recalled in the interview the date of 1980 and a French nun, Sister Emmanuelle, who is said to have played a major role in aid projects initiating the construction of urban infrastructure in Manshiyat Naser.



fig. 8 Adobe brick facade, Garbage City, Cairo, Egypt 2019. Photo: K. Wiącek

networks, paved roads, a primary school and a health centre. In order to recover the invested costs and ensure the residents' housing security, community members were offered a thirty-year instalment plan to purchase the land on which the Coptic community lived. Work has begun to achieve the goal of improving the solid waste collection system in Cairo. The waste collection route of the Zabbaleen has been extended by 8,000 new houses in the neighbouring low-income area. To create an incentive for collection in areas that produce waste that is of little value in sorting, a tenant charging system has been introduced³⁵. Since the 1990s, the authorities have introduced a new mechanisation system for the transport of solid waste, so the Zabbaleen were forced to obtain funds for the purchase of waste transport trucks themselves. The purchase of cars and specialist waste processing machines was possible thanks to their own savings, from selling the remaining small plots of land or houses of their ancestors in the countryside, or by obtaining credit loans. Although responsibility for the urban waste system has long been shared by the municipal sanitation services and the community of the Zabbaleen, the creation of the EPC (Environmental Protection Company) has made the *Wahiya* and the Zabbaleen key players in the local government programme to modernise the management of the urban waste system in Cairo. The *Wahiya* administer it, introduce the company's services on the market, collect household charges and supervise service delivery³⁶. The

³⁵ See *The Zabbaleen environment and development program*, <http://tiny.pl/tb1qc> (access date: 19 | 2020).

³⁶ W. Fahmi, K. Sutton, *Cairo's Contested Garbage: Sustainable Solid Waste Management and the Zabaleen's Right to the City*, "Sustainability" 2010, no. 2, p. 1768.



fig. 9 Street mini-altars, Garbage City, Cairo, Egypt 2019. Photo: K. Wiącek

Zabbaleen, on the other hand, have an informal hierarchy in dealing with waste sorting. The lowest are the garbage collectors from the city bins and streets, who drive around the city on donkey-drawn carts. A little higher are the garbage collectors from upper middle class Cairo residences, whose garbage goes to the Zabbaleen who breed pigs being the first link in the sorting system because they eat organic remains. Both the processing of this waste and the care of pigs³⁷ are taken by local women. The richest Zabbaleen are represented by owners of trucks and machines, who employ paid workers in their workshops and sorting plants, and earn money by sorting cardboard, metal, plastic and other materials sold, among others, to China³⁸.

The quiet encroachment of the ordinary

The Coptic Zabbaleen, as a socially and culturally (though not necessarily economically) separated community [fig. 10] living in mostly Muslim Cairo, contribute to sustain the city's economy through a perfectly developed informal system of waste sorting, which fits into the phenomenon, characteristic of developing countries, described by Asef Bayat as a “quiet encroachment of the ordinary”³⁹. It challenges the distinction between public and private goods, the importance of the order and control of public space and the very definition of modernity. According to Bayat, it is not about a non-modern or anti-modern approach, but about conditions of existence that force one to seek a way of life outside of modernity, which is becoming too expensive for many people on the planet. Whereas for the authorities of the city the “encroachment of the ordinary” of the urbanization standards by the Garbage City is so embarrassing that it will most probably lead to another relocation of the entire community to a settlement built in the Qattamiya desert, 25 km to the east from the Mokattam Hills⁴⁰.

Treating the self-sufficient but informal “inner city” of the Coptic Zabbaleen as an irreversible element of modern urbanised spaces with urban-rural characteristics, it should be remembered that the Egyptian authorities themselves admit that it is not only the poorest people who live in the informal areas (self-build architecture). There are 17 million people living in similar conditions around Egyptian cities. As Dina K. Shehayeb⁴¹ writes, the informal mechanisms of such places, as well as formal mechanisms, are guided by their own rules, which are based on social relations and cultural norms. Shehayeb does not see the informal areas as unstructured and unorganized or chaotic, although urban planners consider them as such. Their informal activity should not be “outside” the formal sphere of the State. On the contrary, it should be considered as linked to the State in a complex way. According to Shehayeb, the persistently misconceptions of informal settlements as „chaotic”, and their inhabitants “uncivilized” and ultimately “dangerous” or “undesirable” place the authorities in the position of a controller rather than a guide or a facilitator⁴². Shehayeb sees the problem of marginalisation of informal neighbourhoods, which together with the lack of protection of young people from risks (e.g. drug trafficking) causes informal neighbourhoods to attract more illegal activities than other, better protected neighbourhoods.

³⁷ In 2009, the Egyptian Ministry of Agriculture decided to kill 300,000 pigs, officially because of swine flu, whose breeding, in addition to waste sorting, is the main source of income for the Coptic Zabbaleen communities. The Copts saw this as yet another sign of religious discrimination. They earn 7 LE per kilo of pig meat (\$1.25), or 450 LE (\$80) per live animal. See W. Fahmi, K. Sutton, *Cairo Contested...*, p. 1774.

³⁸ See M. Tadros, *op. cit.*, pp. 179–180.

³⁹ A. Bayat, *The Quiet Encroachment of the Ordinary*, “Chronic”, 15 II 2013, see <http://chimurengachronic.co.za/quiet-encroachment-of-the-ordinary-2> (access date: 19 I 2020).

⁴⁰ *Cairo. A City in Transition. Cities & Citizens Series Bridging the Urban Divide*, United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-HABITAT), 2011, p. 72.

⁴¹ Professor at the Institute of Architecture and Housing at the Housing and Building National Research Center (HBRC) in Cairo.

⁴² D. K. Shehayeb, *Advantages of Living in Informal Areas*, [in:] *Cairo's Informal Areas Between Urban Challenges and Hidden Potentials: Facts, Voices, Visions*, ed. R. Kipper, M. Fischer, Egypt 2009, p. 35.



fig. 10 A member of the Zabbaleen community during waste sorting, City of Garbage, Cairo, Egypt 2019, Photo: K. Wiącek

Informal architecture as a model of sustainable development

On the basis of my own field research, both in Cairo and in Casablanca, Morocco (*bidonvilles*), I see the same characteristics of self urban planning as Shehayeb, namely a fully self-financed mechanism for self-help in housing. Demand-driven (e.g. family enlargement), compact and low-energy forms of construction built from local building materials, provide an efficient housing model, not distant from the workplace and sustaining the self-sufficiency of the housing estate in terms of community needs⁴³. Paradoxically, it is precisely these characteristics that are part of the sustainable development models called for by urban planners and designers and international environmental protection agencies. The phenomenon of informal, self-build architecture requires careful and precise analysis so that official intervention processes do not waste the valuable resources of informally living communities. Instead of replacing what works relatively well, the intervention should be targeted at deficiencies (creation of adequate sanitary infrastructure, public buildings, common spaces) or improving what works poorly (creation of jobs, community cooperatives). The lack of political will to recognise the identity and cultural potential of informal places, and the use of gentrification mechanisms that accompany repetitive relocation practices still leads to a failure to draw conclusions about sustainable city design, where the potential is people and relations between them rather than standards and rules.

⁴³ D. K. Shehayeb, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

Słowa kluczowe

Miasto Śmieci, koptyjscy zabbalin, miasto wewnętrzne, architektura samowolna, architektura nieformalna, self-build architecture, informal city

Keywords

Garbage City, Coptic Zabbaleen, inner city, self-build architecture, informal architecture, informal city

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Summary**KATARZYNA WIĄCEK (University of Wrocław) / The Cairo Garbage City as a Self-Sufficient “Inner City”**

The informal Garbage City founded by the Christian minority of Copts, who recycle waste, as a spatially and culturally separated “inner city” is an architectural phenomenon of contemporary urbanised spaces. The strong division into the *sacrum* zone, with churches carved in the rock, and the worker’s *profanum* zone filled with perfectly sorted rubbish, determines the spatial separation, but also the cultural symbiosis between them.