

# Cairo: An Urban Dialogue

## The Case of *Boulaq*

### Abstract

Our cities are not just places for dwelling, working or recreation. They can also be considered as stages through which we monitor events that take place in our everyday life. They are also stages for negotiating the relationship between the state and its people. In the case of Cairo, the stage is too crowded to the extent that you can consider it a chaos. A lot of events extend to the backstage. With Cairo you can't predict what happens nor can you deal with logic in everyday life. As Janet Abou Lughod has once put it, "Cairo has generated its own logic of accommodation and development. For lack of a better word, this logic can be called informal". And as Egyptian Journalist and academic Wael Abdulfatah once said, "Cairo's machine is unique and its system never overshadows its chaos."

An example of the chaotic actions that took place in Cairo of the last decade is the new politics being developed towards reorganizing the inner core of the city by evacuating it from people. Craftsmen and a variety of inhabitants are planned to be relocated to new unplanned satellite cities that lack any kind of accessibility or service, unlike their original settlements. This new approach is taking place under the auspices of the Cairo 2050 plan to transform the city into a new Dubai, with high rising glass towers for office buildings, 7 stars hotels to receive tourists, and boulevards that undo many neighborhoods standing in its way. All this takes place with a claim of investment and development by agents of what has been termed the *deeply-rooted* state. Such a plan, naturally, takes fateful decisions for hundreds of thousands of people, through relocating them, without any kind of discussion or consideration to their points of view or their needs. The plan does not care to study their situations and how it can affect them positively or negatively.

*Boulaq* Neighborhood is located in downtown Cairo, facing the Nile river from one side and extending inside the heart of Cairo from the other. Despite its rich history and strategic location, its urban fabric today exemplifies an old and deteriorated district with many evident problems. The inhabitants of the neighborhood struggle to protect their old neighborhood from removal. No one considered the importance of discussing with *Boulaq's* residents their right to decide their fate or destination, or the possibility of investing to develop their neighborhood. Since the 2011 revolution, Cairo 2050 has been practically frozen. The governor of Cairo held some discussions with representatives from *Boulaq*, but no agreement took place and no one could introduce a real solution for the problem of around 3500 families that face the danger of removal. The investors want to put their hand on the land and the government refuses to give the residents their right to renovate their deteriorated buildings. They have no other choice other than moving to the desert in multistory concrete blocks without any kind of service in vicinity to their workplaces, their children's' schools, etc.

*Boulaq*, however, is not the only example in Cairo that manifests the neglect of low class citizens in urban planning. Those citizens, alas, are considered by many to be the dominant masses in the city. By some calculations, informal settlements in Cairo amount to nearly two thirds of the population. Such a huge number requires a real and open dialogue between the society and the state, the inhabitants and the decision makers, in order to find a solution for their needs. We can't deal with the city's urban fabric as stones that are easily destroyed, removed and replaced. We need to deal with different cases according to their own circumstances. But above all, regarding the informality of Cairo, we need to open an urban dialogue.