

# Why Arab Cities Matter ... 2



## **Territories of Memory: North Africa to the Levant**

Across North Africa and the Levant, the story of Arab modernity unfolds not as a unified arc but as a collection of intimate, turbulent, and often painful experiments in building – and remembering – cities. From the Nile Valley to the Maghreb to the hills of Jordan and the shores of Lebanon, each place offers its own constellation of hopes, ruptures, and improvisations. Together they reveal how modernity in the Arab world was never a single project imposed from above, nor a clean break with the past, but a series of negotiations between states seeking order, architects seeking meaning, and residents struggling to preserve their sense of place in landscapes repeatedly reshaped by power. Blog 2 turns to six of these sites – Gournā, Cairo, Algiers, Rabat, Casablanca, Amman, and Beirut – where memory, identity, and policy collide in ways that illuminate the region's broader urban struggles.

Gournā, the most modest of these places, is often treated as a footnote in the history of Arab modernism, yet its significance lies precisely in its contradictions. My relationship with Hassan Fathy's New Gournā began long before I first walked its crumbling streets in 1984; it began in the absence I felt as a young student in Cairo, when Fathy's ideas were excluded from our architectural curriculum, as if his vernacular experiments were too provincial and beneath serious architectural pursuit. Years later, standing before the decaying mudbrick vaults and half-abandoned courtyards, I realized how easily architecture becomes myth. For some, Gournā was a noble, humanist alternative to Western modernism; for others, an eccentric and misguided failure. But its reality was far more complex. It was a project entangled in state politics, cultural anxieties, and the colonial dynamics that shaped Egypt's understanding of its own identity. Literary and cinematic representations amplified these tensions. Fathy Ghanem's *The Mountain* and its 1965 film adaptation portrayed villagers as backward figures resisting the benevolence of modern planning, while Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North* echoed the ambivalence between tradition and modernity that haunted mid-century Arab intellectual life. These stories helped construct an image of Gournā that served national narratives but did little to illuminate the villagers' own aspirations. Re-examining Gournā today reveals not only the limitations

of paternalistic architectural visions but also the way vernacular aesthetics – once celebrated as ‘for the poor’ – were later appropriated by elites and global capital. The domes of Al-Azhar Park, the controlled charm of Sheraton Miramar, the curated authenticity of the Children’s Cultural Park – all signal how Fathy’s language migrated from a radical proposition to a picturesque lifestyle brand. Gournā thus becomes a lens through which to question authenticity, essentialism, and the political uses of ‘heritage’, reminding us that architecture cannot be detached from the power structures within which it is produced.



*Luxor, 1984: the village of Gournā.*



*Gorna today with new additions. (Photo: CC Roland Unger)*

The story of Cairo, by contrast, is vast and overflowing, a metropolis where modernity was not a singular episode but a continuous struggle over space, memory, and possibility. My childhood memories of the city – crossing Qasr al-Nil Bridge in my father’s car, walking past the bridge’s bronze lions, attending the *Deutsche Schule* in Zamalek (German School), and browsing the shelves of downtown bookstores. Here one must also acknowledge the city’s more formal histories: Khedival reforms that dreamed of a Paris on the Nile, Nasser’s sweeping infrastructural modernism, Sadat and Mubarak’s neoliberal turn towards the desert, and Sisi’s monumental vision of a militarized, meticulously controlled capital. Cairo’s planners have always believed that Egypt’s future lay not in the dense, layered city along the Nile but somewhere beyond it, in the blank slate of the desert. The new capitals and satellite cities, from Sadat City to Sixth of October to the current New Administrative Capital, promise order, cleanliness, and modernity, but they often reproduce forms of exclusion hidden behind their wide boulevards and gleaming façades. Meanwhile, Cairo’s lived reality – captured beautifully and painfully in films like *In the Last Days of the City* and *Rags & Tatters*, or in the lingering nostalgia of Naguib Mahfouz’s recollection of the old city – reveals an entirely different city. It is a Cairo of houseboats, sidewalk vendors, ageing cinemas, overcrowded microbuses, and families improvising livelihoods in informal settlements that governments refuse to see as legitimate neighbourhoods. The contrast between the

imagined desert metropolis and the lived city by the Nile exposes a deeper tension: Cairo's modernization has often meant selective forgetting. Maspero's demolition, the relocation of residents to Asmarat, or the eerie emptiness of the new capital's guarded streets all testify to a city fearful of its own people. And yet, Cairo refuses erasure. Its fragments – the worn steps of Zamalek apartments, the alleys of Wikalat al-Balah, the stubborn vitality of Bulaq – persist in shaping its true urbanity, reminding us that planners' visions cannot fully contain the city's messy, resilient life.



◀ *The Old city.*

▼ *Modern Cairo, 1994.*





*Old Cairo, 1994.*



*Informal vendor sitting across the Administrative Center in the Administrative Capital, Cairo, 2023.*

If Cairo is a city of simultaneity, Algiers is a city of rupture. Few urban landscapes in the Arab world bear the weight of history as heavily as the white terraces of Algiers and the labyrinthine Casbah rising behind them. My encounters with the city were shaped as much by cinema as by its streets. Watching *The Battle of Algiers*, I absorbed an image of the Casbah as a crucible of resistance, a space where colonial oppression and anti-colonial struggle were inscribed on staircases, rooftops, and alleyways. Later, films like *Omar Gatlato* and *Mariner of the Mountains*, and novels from Camus' *The Stranger* to Kamel Daoud's *The Meursault Investigation*, reframed Algiers as a place of alienation, longing, and contested memory. Walking through the Casbah, one feels these layers – colonial urbanism's rigid hierarchies, the scars of Independence, and the uncertain futures built into the city's decaying fabric. Modern architecture in Algiers was never neutral. The French *grands ensembles*, especially Climat de France, were instruments of surveillance and control, while Le Corbusier's Plan Obus cast the city as an orientalist fantasy to be reconfigured from above. After Independence, Algeria sought liberation through architecture, bringing in Oscar Niemeyer to imagine a revolutionary modernism. Yet many of these visions remained unrealized, and contemporary



*Residential buildings: Boulevard Verdun and Climat de France, Algiers, 2023. (Photos: Sebastian Anderson)*

interventions – like the controversial Jean Nouvel proposal for the Casbah – raise questions about who owns the right to redesign a traumatized landscape. Algiers today remains caught between decay and ambition, pursuing metros, new towns, and grand mosques while the Casbah continues to crumble. Its modernity is not triumphant but wounded, shaped by memory as much as by aspiration.

Morocco reveals another dimension of modernity: the persistence of exclusion across time. Rabat and Casablanca, with their colonial *villes nouvelles* designed by Prost and Écochard, show how segregation was embedded into the very geography of urban life. The medinas were confined by zoning boundaries, *bidonvilles* kept at the edge as reservoirs of labour and sites of control, while European quarters embodied order, hygiene, and visibility. Post-Independence Morocco has transformed its cities with tramways, waterfront megaprojects, and developments backed by Gulf capital, but the fundamental logic of spatial hierarchy often remains. The Bouregreg development – spectacular, expensive, dramatic – overlooks communities that have faced decades of marginalization. Casablanca's vast tram network improves mobility yet also highlights the stark divide between polished boulevards and peripheral neighbourhoods. Against these official narratives, Moroccan cinema and literature offer essential counter-memories. *Ali Zaoua*, *Casa Negra*, *Razzia*, *Horses of God*, and short



*Casablanca: Art Deco Building in downtown (Photo: CC Sambasoccer 27) and Carrieres Centrale, 1953.<sup>1</sup>*





*Casablanca: the crossing Boulevard Hassan I with the Avenue des FAR, seen from United Nations Square, 2013. (Photo: CC Achalhikarim)*

stories like 'Another Day in Rabat' reveal the texture of lives unfolding in fragile spaces – industrial ruins, makeshift playgrounds, illegal rooftops, contested streets. These works remind us that cities are not shaped only by policy documents and masterplans but by the everyday practices through which residents assert dignity in landscapes that often exclude them. The Morocco that emerges is neither romanticized nor condemned; it is a place where exclusion and creativity coexist, and where understanding the city requires listening to the voices that official urbanism tries to ignore.

Amman, by contrast, is a city defined by arrivals. Unlike Cairo or Algiers, it is not a place with centuries of accumulated urban memory; its modern identity



*Amman's skyline, 2013.*



*Downtown Amman, 2013.*

emerged from layers of migration – Circassians, Palestinians, Iraqis, Syrians – each adding new textures while complicating the question of belonging. My own research and memories of the city reveal a landscape where many residents still answer the question ‘Where are you from?’ with the name of another town, even another country. Amman’s modernism emerged in this fluid context: modest three-bay houses in the early Emirate years, rationalist experiments by Jafar Tukan and Sayed Karim, and later, ambitious plans by Kenzo Tange. Yet the city’s growth also deepened its fractures. East and West Amman became shorthand for inequality; informal neighbourhoods expanded even as glossy towers rose in Abdali; public space became increasingly

securitized. Film and literature capture Amman's emotional urbanism in ways masterplans cannot. The staircases of *The Alleys*, rooftop pigeon keepers surveying the city, and Abdulrahman Munif's tender recollections of orchards and mills in 1940s Amman all reveal a quieter, more intimate city beneath the rhetoric of development. Rainbow Street and the Wild Jordan Nature Center illustrate the possibility of an inclusive urbanism – small interventions that stitch communities together rather than dividing them. What emerges is a portrait of a city whose future depends not on exceptional megaprojects but on acknowledging the everyday landscapes through which its identity has always been formed.

Beirut encapsulates the beauty and tragedy of the modern Arab city. My first encounter with the reconstructed downtown left me disoriented: a place too



*Solidere and Downtown Beirut.*



*Gruen Building, Hamra District, 2017.*

polished, too controlled, almost floating above the city's scars. But wandering through Hamra, Ashrafieh, or the southern suburbs revealed another Beirut – improvised, fragile, dazzling, and deeply human. Films such as *West Beirut* and *Capernaum*, and novels like *The Tiller of Waters* and *An Unnecessary Woman*, become guides to the city's unresolved trauma, its terrain vague, its persistent heterotopias. Beirut's modernist ambitions – from Mandate-era planning to the luxury hotels of the so-called 'Golden Age' – were repeatedly interrupted by violence, culminating in a civil war that reshaped the city as a geography of frontlines, ruins, and fragile survival. Solidere's reconstruction attempted to erase this memory in the name of rebirth, producing instead an exclusionary enclave polished to a mirror-like sheen. The 2020 port explosion shattered this urban fiction, exposing the city's infrastructural fragility and political negligence. And yet, Beirut endures not through its masterplans but through the resilience of its people. It's true modernity lies in its ability to rebuild, reinterpret, and hold together fragments that refuse to disappear.

Across these cities, a pattern emerges: modernity in the Arab world has been a terrain of contested experiments – sometimes visionary, sometimes destructive, often both at the same time. What binds these stories together is not a unified architectural language but the constant negotiation between

memory and ambition, between the desire to build anew and the need to reckon with what already exists. The next blog will follow these themes eastwards, into the shimmering new metropolises of the Arabian Peninsula – Doha, Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Riyadh – where spectacle, capital, and reinvention converge at unprecedented speed. Together, these explorations trace the full arc of Arab modernity, from its traditional centres to its newest frontiers, revealing how the region continues to imagine – and contest – its futures.

NOTE

1. <https://communedesign.tumblr.com/post/115246606870/cit.-verticale-at-carri.res-centrales-casablanca>.

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