



Nile Valley, agricultural landscape in the mist, 2008

NILE VALLEY / EGYPT

After several years of investigations in various international metropolises, in the coming semester we will focus on a new field of contemporary urbanisation: like an expedition starting in Cairo, we will explore the oldest valley in the world, the linear oasis along the Nile. From the earliest civilizations up until the present day, the urbanisation processes in the Nile Valley have generated a complex and specific territorial organisation under extreme geographical limitations.

The Nile Valley covers only about 5% of the territory of Egypt, while at the same time it provides a living environment for 95% of the country's population. This thousand kilometres long and fertile strip of land embedded within the smooth topography of the valley with a natural and sharp edge to the Sahara desert, allowed the genesis of the oldest civilisations dating back as far as 3000 B.C. Today the sublime beauty of this 'linear oasis' meandering through Sahara is still recognisable, still showing the extraordinary achievements of its ancient cultures. Throughout the 19th and the 20th century, modernization processes have tremendously transformed Egypt and Nile Valley with multiple layers of urbanisation and the new technologies in agriculture and water management. This growth was also a reflection of a society that repeatedly underwent significant political and economical breaks, from the period of Muhammad Ali, to the British protectorate, to independence under Nasser, Sadat and since 1981, Hosni Mubarak.

Egypt is today considered a developing country with its main economic revenues from pass-tolls of the Suez Canal, the real estate market and the tourist sectors. However, the main challenges to the country's development remain the scarcity of water, land and above all a rapid population growth of more than one million people each year. Egyptian society is also experiencing an increasing social and economic divide, with the formation of new and affluent elites, while a large amount of population continues to live in poverty. The governmental apparatus and the economic management are strongly centralised and concentrated on the Greater Region of Cairo. By contrast, the major agricultural regions in the Upper Egypt and in the Nile Valley seem to have less political and legal means for controlling their future. In this situation, various informal energies emerge as a vital, self-sustaining mechanism. A large portion of new construction in Egypt and the Nile valley belong to informal housing, which seems more advanced than elsewhere in developing world. The massive demand for housing is also not met through the so-called *New Town* or *New Settlement* program, run by the state since the 1970s. This long-term project has developed until today through three generations of cities spread all along the Nile valley on desert land, mainly intended for an upper middle-class and incompatible with the actual family needs.

This research project will look at the Nile valley as neither a rural nor urban condition. Rather, it is a form of contemporary changing urbanisation within a complete economic stasis. It is an urbanization paradox in which a rapidly increasing population coupled with extremely limited economic means, creates an environment forced to 'move forward within its stagnation'.



Desert City, New Assiut, 2008

PROGRAMME

During several years of investigations in international cities such as Havana, Casablanca, Hong Kong or Belgrade, ETH Studio Basel concentrated on processes of urban transformations in larger metropolitan centres. During this semester, the Studio will investigate a different pole of global urbanisation standing in contrast to global metropolitan areas - a territory that entails various other elements such as rural living, production and cultivation of landscape. What are the transformations patterns in the Nile Valley produced under the pressure of population growth and how are they manifested physically within its territory? To what extent does the unique geography and topography of the Nile valley generate a specific model of a linear urbanisation?

Such approach offers us also a new method of research: almost as an expedition, the Studio will start in Cairo and continue down the Nile Valley, moving and travelling more extensively than before. The research will unfold in the region of the Upper Egypt where the cities of El Minya and Assiut are the largest regional centres. The project will focus on a section of the Nile valley in the circumference of around 50 kilometres around the city of Assiut, within which all of the paradigmatic urban phenomena and landscape conditions can be recognized. While this territory has been inhabited and cultivated throughout millennia, in the focus of our interest will be its present day transformation. Each research topic will be developed by an individual team of student-researchers and tested-out through case studies. Each case study relates to a specific physical location, in which the recent tendencies are best visible – for instance the new town developments, rural villages, informal areas, the local practices in irrigation and drainage of land, or the state-organized and the individual agricultural production.

SEMESTER ORGANISATION

All students will travel to Egypt and Nile Valley for a two-week fieldwork phase during March 2009 (compulsory). The results of the fieldwork in Egypt and the further development of the research in Basel takes form of visual narratives with drawings, maps, diagrams, photographs, architectural portraits or anatomies of urban processes, that are finally presented as a book and a slide projection. A target for each work is to formulate a thesis regarding a particular research topic. However, we look beyond the obvious and commonly understood, into processes and situations that often go 'unseen', largely unplanned or created through conflict, negotiation and power plays of many actors in the field. The different themes that students address come together into a larger picture, an 'urban portrait,' reflecting the present reality of the territory and speculating possibilities for its future.

So far, we have already received a kind and generous support from experts and academic institutions in Egypt and we look forward to extend it during the course of the work. The Department of Architecture of the University of Assiut will join us as main partner in collaboration during the semester and the fieldwork, involving their students, experts and the teaching staff. Student groups will be able to conduct their research together with students of Assiut University. We will also collaborate with other local partners, as well as experts and NGOs from Cairo.

The previewed costs of the project will be 1.400,- CHF per student. Students who are receiving stipends and grants, or who have been exempted from school fees can seek financial assistance by the ETH (application forms are available through Mrs. Giordano, HIL E 73.3).



current urbanisation in the Nile Valley, 2008

Spring Semester 2009: Nile Valley Program

NOTE: ALL DATES ARE PRELIMINARY AND SUBJECT TO CHANGE

Date	Program	Location	
FEB	17	Start	Basel
	18	Themes	Basel
	24	Theory and mapping lab	Basel
MAR	03	Theory and mapping lab	Basel
	04		Basel
	10	Studio work	Basel
	11	Review	Basel
	14	Start field-trip	Zurich - Cairo
	15	Briefing days	Cairo
	16	Trip to Nile Valley	Assiut / Nile Valley
	17		Assiut / Nile Valley
	18		Assiut / Nile Valley
	19		Assiut / Nile Valley
20		Assiut / Nile Valley	
21		Assiut / Nile Valley	
22		Assiut / Nile Valley	
23		Assiut / Nile Valley	
24		Assiut / Nile Valley	
25		Assiut / Nile Valley	
26		Assiut / Nile Valley	
27	Review	Assiut / Nile Valley	
28	Trip to Cairo	Cairo - Zurich	
APR	31	Studio work	
	01	Studio work	
	07	Studio work	Basel
	08	Mid-term review	Basel
	14	Easter break	/
	15	Easter break	/
	21	Studio work	Basel
	22	Studio work	Basel
	28	Studio work	Basel
	29	Studio work	Basel
MAY	05	Studio work	Basel
	06	Studio work	Basel
	12	Studio work	Basel
	13	Studio work	Basel
	19	Studio work	Basel
	20	Studio work	Basel
	26	Studio work	Basel
27	Final review	Basel	
			Final review followed by 'Nile Valley Party'