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Drawing Dissent: Egyptian Subversive Comics and the Critique of the Built Environment

1. Introduction

Subversive comics connect to marginalized communities and harbor significant potential for social and political commentary. They operate through satire using derisive wit, exaggerations, and indirect fictional narratives to deliver a message subverting norms and expectations, disrupting the status quo, and inviting critical reflection on a specific subject of public interest, such as the built environment.¹ Despite their satirical nature, authorities perceive these comics as unserious and unworthy of artistic or political consideration.² Therefore, artists use comics as a potent emancipatory medium to critique the state ideology and status quo in an acceptable and low-risk manner.³ This article addresses the Egyptian political context, where artists indirectly critique the status quo through subversive comics while combating media censorship.

Egypt's authoritarian regime adopts an ideology that isolates citizens from state governance to preserve the ruling class's power. In return, this ideology is reproduced through various apparatuses—such as education, media, and culture—that subconsciously safeguard citizens' compliance, turning them into interpellated subjects.⁴ Through these cultural artifacts, or ideological state apparatuses (ISAs), citizens insensately conform to the state ideology.

¹ Griffin, *Satire*; Carleton, "Drawn to Change: Comics and Critical Consciousness."

² Guyer, "Speech Bubbles: Comics and Political Cartoons in Sisi's Egypt."

³ Carleton, "Drawn to Change: Comics and Critical Consciousness"; Høigilt, "Egyptian Comics and the Challenge to Patriarchal Authoritarianism."

⁴ Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*.

The built environment is one of Egypt's recently expanding material manifestations of state ideology. The transmission of state power is ubiquitous through state buildings, heavy urban interventions, and mega-state projects. Nevertheless, these apparatuses can also become sites for resistance using numerous forms of expression, including comics.⁵ In that vein, Egyptian comic artists protest the state ideology by subtly, and sometimes overtly, mocking its built projects.

In this article, the authors introduce Louis Althusser's work on ISAs and the notion of "interpellation" in the cultural debates surrounding the Egyptian built environment to provide a critical lens for understanding the intricate interplay between comics and politics. Althusser's conceptualization of ISAs explains how the built environment perpetuates power structures and serves as a potential site of subversion, as well as how subversive satirical comics function as a form of resistance within authoritarian contexts.⁶

2. Radical Dissent and Censorship

In her account of the history of comics in Egypt, Afaf Marsot traces the earliest example of a pictorial cartoon to a bas-relief from the Old Kingdom (circa 2000 BCE) currently on display in the Egyptian Museum. Comic strips in their modern form emerged in Egyptian newspapers in the 1870s for satirical purposes. However, other forms of verbal satire existed before this relatively recent period and served as social and political commentary outlets. Disguised in humor and wit, they allowed Egyptians to critique those in power without seemingly risking direct confrontation.⁷

⁵ McAllister, Sewell, Jr, and Gordon, *Comics & Ideology*.

⁶ Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*.

⁷ Marsot, "The Cartoon in Egypt."

Nevertheless, such dissent has always been subject to censorship. Even in the early days of comics in Egypt, the state sought to control potentially subversive narratives. Typically, it would tolerate satire only if it did not “go too far.” This elusive and arbitrary criterion primarily prohibits artists from depicting the head of the state.⁸ However, at other times, it refers to “violating public morality,” which means addressing taboo topics such as sex and religion.⁹

The current Egyptian media landscape operates under Law 180 of 2018, which grants the “Supreme Council for Media Regulation” full powers to censor content across all platforms.¹⁰ While traditional media face strict surveillance, digital platforms have opened new opportunities for comic artists to reach larger audiences and encounter fewer restrictions.¹¹ Social media enables swift distribution and anonymous posting, spreading radical opinions across various social categories even amidst increasing surveillance from authorities. Despite countless uncensored dissent materials, the Council regularly selects one artist as a scapegoat, sending a warning message to the rest. For example, in 2008, the state temporarily banned the first Egyptian graphic novel, *Metro*, due to public morality concerns.¹²

The fact that comics, both in their early forms and in the contemporary period, have faced censorship underscores this medium’s potential to challenge the status quo and provoke authorities. Nevertheless, despite censorship, a continuous cat-and-mouse game has always existed between the state and rebellious Egyptian

⁸ Freedman, “The Middle East: Raging Against Cartoons.”

⁹ Guyer, “Speech Bubbles: Comics and Political Cartoons in Sisi’s Egypt.”

¹⁰ Sadek, “Egypt.”

¹¹ Freedman, “The Middle East: Raging Against Cartoons”; Ghaibeh, “Telling Graphic Stories of the Region.”

¹² Guyer, “On the Arab Page.”

artists.¹³ The artists' choice of radical forms of expression impacted their self-preservation, including satire.

3. Satire

Dustin Griffin defines satire as a literary mode that uses humor and irony to critique and expose societal vices, follies, and absurdities. Its effectiveness lies in blending humor with critique, creating a tension that entertains and challenges the reader.¹⁴ It can also function as a mechanism for diffusing radical criticism and avoiding censorship by operating within the boundaries of acceptable social norms or even breaking them without directly pointing this out. It uses humor to disguise its more critical intentions, making it difficult for censors to identify and suppress satirical works. The intentionally ambiguous nature of satire leaves room for multiple interpretations and challenges censors to determine whether a work is subversive or a harmless joke. Hence, satire can be a powerful tool for disarming censors and defusing their attempts to suppress criticism.¹⁵ It can also serve as a form of aggression or release, allowing individuals to vent their frustrations or anxieties in a socially acceptable manner.¹⁶

Since humor is integral to the function of satire, Vladimir Propp's insights into the underlying mechanisms of humor and laughter are essential for understanding comics. Propp identifies several crucial functions that contribute to laughter, including violating expectations through unexpected juxtapositions, incongruous situations, exaggerations, foiled plans, and the use of irony and puns. It also employs ambiguity

¹³ Freedman, "The Middle East: Raging Against Cartoons."

¹⁴ Griffin, *Satire*.

¹⁵ Griffin.

¹⁶ Propp, *On the Comic and Laughter*.

and double meanings, allowing readers to interpret the work both literally and metaphorically.¹⁷ These techniques subtly highlight flaws and question established norms, effectively criticizing societal standards without directly confronting them.

While humor can help diffuse radical dissent and escape censorship, it can produce the opposite effect. It may reinforce the very societal rules it seeks to subvert. Umberto Eco argues that humor can reinforce negative stereotypes about marginalized groups, perpetuating harmful prejudices and discrimination. It can trivialize serious social or political issues, making them seem less important and urgent, or otherwise acceptable and funny, thereby normalizing them in the process. Eco contends that the state is not oblivious to this double function.¹⁸ It can tolerate humor as a safety valve, enabling the public to release tensions that might lead to political action.¹⁹ Thus, serious satire appears to provide a peaceful and “acceptable” form of dissent due to its humorous intentions.

In Egypt, ridiculing social and political norms is a common escape mechanism from life's problems.²⁰ Satire is found everywhere, and authorities are always aware of that. Because of its witty, entertaining nature, authorities seldom act against it. For example, former President Nasser (1956-1970) was known for delighting in the jokes made about him.²¹

¹⁷ Propp, *On the Comic and Laughter*; Propp, “The Comic of Difference”; Propp, “The Verbal Devices of the Comic.”

¹⁸ Eco, “The Frames of Comic Freedom.”

¹⁹ Freedman, *The Offensive Art: Political Satire and Its Censorship around the World from Beerbohm to Borat*.

²⁰ Kishtainy, *Arab Political Humour*.

²¹ Freedman, “The Middle East: Raging Against Cartoons.”

4. Comics in the Egyptian Context

The 2011 uprising sparked a cultural efflorescence, making subversive comics a significant cultural tool that promoted alternative opinions and reshaped the country's social media landscape. Some scholars refer to this era of subversive comics as the equivalent of the "underground comix" movement in the United States of America.²² This is due to their greater daringness and expressiveness in dissent and objection, addressing various restricted content and employing colloquial language.²³ Individual artists began to publish their comics on social media and online comic websites, ridiculing dominant ideologies.²⁴ Subversive comics allowed artists to indirectly critique the status quo, navigating and challenging the constrained political landscape of the time. Despite the state's heavy-handed censorship, today, these comics continue to serve as vehicles for low-key "acceptable" critique of the state.²⁵ Accordingly, this new era of Egyptian comics is more audacious, expressing satirical and indirect dissent against the oppressive government and its apparatuses that perpetuate unfair ideologies. One of these criticized apparatuses is the built environment.

5. The Egyptian Built Environment as Ideological State Apparatus

This article draws on the work of Louis Althusser (1918-1990), a notable French Marxist philosopher whose intellectual influence peaked in the late 1960s within French leftist circles and then later extended to the English-speaking world.

²² Davies, "Drawing Public Space: Revolutionary Visual Cultures and the Right to the City in Cairo."

²³ Guyer, "On the Arab Page."

²⁴ Ghaibeh, "Telling Graphic Stories of the Region"; El-Farahaty, "Egyptian Satirical Graphics on Social Media after the Arab Spring."

²⁵ Guyer, "Speech Bubbles: Comics and Political Cartoons in Sisi's Egypt."

Nevertheless, by the mid-1980s, his prominence saw a notable decline.²⁶ Recently, his work has witnessed a resurgence, notably impacting fields such as cultural and literary studies, as well as art theory, highlighting art's capacity to reveal prevailing ideologies that perpetuate normative behaviors crucial to class struggles.²⁷

For Althusser, ideology is a system of representations, beliefs, and practices that shape individuals' perceptions of reality to support existing social structures.²⁸ It constitutes individuals as subjects within such structures, ensuring their continuation by making the structure appear natural and inevitable. Accordingly, for the ruling class to conserve its state power, it has to reproduce its ideology using ISAs, which comprise institutions like family, education, media, cultural artifacts, and religion, which subtly shape consciousness through "interpellation," embedding state-sanctioned ideas so deeply that individuals internalize them as personal beliefs without apparent coercion.²⁹ Unlike traditional repressive methods, ISAs naturalize power structures, making individuals unknowingly complicit in upholding the status quo. This process limits individual agency, converting people into subjects who unconsciously reproduce dominant societal norms and power relations through their everyday practices and cultural interactions.³⁰

As an ISA, the built environment—encompassing state institutions, infrastructures, urban planning and residential and public buildings—functions as an ideological tool through which power is exercised and social relations are reproduced. Following

²⁶ Wright, "The Intellectual Saga of Althusserian Marxism. A Review of Benton, T., *The Rise and Fall of Structure Marxism: Althusser and His Influence*"; Porta, Cini, and Guzman-Concha, "The Contentious Politics of Higher Education"; Poulantzas, *Political Power and Social Classes*.

²⁷ Porta, Cini, and Guzman-Concha, "The Contentious Politics of Higher Education"; Masemann, "Ideology and the City"; Bourriaud, *The Exform by Nicolas Bourriaud*.

²⁸ Tiece, "Ideology in Marxist Traditions."

²⁹ Althusser, *On the Reproduction Of Capitalism*.

³⁰ Althusser, *On the Reproduction Of Capitalism*.

Althusser, it can be understood as a material embodiment of state power that shapes social behavior and reinforces existing power structures. It normalizes certain ways of dwelling while marginalizing others. Furthermore, it serves as a platform for political expression, with imposing state structures acting as symbolic visual narratives that project authority, communicate power, and demonstrate dominance while also reflecting a society's self-image and desired external perception.

Such materiality manifests in architecture, aesthetics, spatial distribution, social interactions, behaviors, institutional consistency, and symbolic codes.³¹ Expressed through seemingly neutral design choices, it subtly constitutes how people think, live, interact, and perceive their place and associations with the prevailing ideological categories without questioning these normative behaviors.³²

In Egypt, as elsewhere, the built environment perpetuates the existing social order and status quo. The current state is an authoritarian regime reinforced by the military, upper classes, and parts of the middle classes.³³ It is devoted to the undoing of Nasser's welfare state and bolstering regional capital accumulation, isolating citizens from governing the country and dividing class groups based on their ideological affiliations rather than their relations to capital production.³⁴ Thus, it employs ISAs to perpetuate these ideologies, where the military acts as an empowered economic actor, governing most of the capitalist investments and protecting the super-rich. It utilizes mega-state projects to ensure that capital accumulation is uninterrupted. The New Administrative Capital project exemplifies

³¹ Blagojević, Lazar, and Mako, *Architecture and Ideology*; Xi and Ng, "Space as the Ideological State Apparatus (ISA)."

³² Rosen, *On Voluntary Servitude*.

³³ Shehata, "Sixty Years of Egyptian Politics: What Has Changed?"

³⁴ Wainscott, "Class Politics and Ideology in Revolutionary Egypt."

this ideology, reflecting the desire of the ruling class to avoid the daily encounter with the old city's urban planning failures³⁵ and an expression of the state's ubiquitous power. Normal citizens are alienated by their distance from the New Administrative Capital and its unaffordable real estate projects, exacerbating social hierarchy and securing the ruling class' reign.

Furthermore, the New Administrative Capital uses modern and massive state buildings to express state power. This desire to symbolize the sovereign's authority is rooted in Egyptian history back to the Pharaohs' frequent use of obelisks as symbols of dominance and authority.³⁶ The monumental Mogamma El Tahrir in Cairo's downtown is a relatively recent example. Built between 1946 and 1949, it is a mid-twentieth-century modernist structure that glorifies centralized governance. Its design reflects the architectural approaches of Nasser's era, which utilized physical structures to manifest administrative might, thereby creating a universal language of governmental power through the built environment.³⁷

Today, the built environment has become a source of contention because spendthrift developments uphold the growing wealth inequality, whereas the New Administrative Capital exemplifies class discrimination and alienation. Embracing Arab Gulf-inspired Western modernity expressed in skyscrapers, glass facades, and extensive flyovers alienates the Egyptian urban sensibility, signaling a powerful state and capitalist mode of production. All the while, the celebratory message behind these urban developments is considered immune to public scrutiny.

³⁵ Wainscott.

³⁶ Rupasinghe and Botejue, "Skyscraper Being a Phallus."

³⁷ Middle East & Africa, "A Movable Beast."

6. Comics and the Critique of the Egyptian Built Environment

Comics that critique and ridicule the ideologies behind the Egyptian built environment and state-led projects are relatively limited yet impactful examples. Several subversive comics emerged criticizing the alienating nature of building practices and state projects that privilege the wealthy and powerful.³⁸ In Egyptian graphic novels, the portrayal of cities and districts is not merely a background. It carries critical messages of dissent and subversion. Artists use urban portrayals to highlight prejudice and socioeconomic marginalization in the city.³⁹ They depict the contrast between the Egyptian skyline and monumental state buildings, delivering an indirect message against the unquestioned material representation of the ruling class power.

The authors use a selection of comics to examine the operation of satire as political criticism in Egyptian comics' textual and visual strategies. The choice depends on several factors. All selected comics must be multi-paneled, sequential, and issued after the 2011 uprising in Egypt when they became more audacious and subversive. The selection is limited to comics drawn by Egyptian artists using local colloquial Arabic. Since humor and satire are context-specific, this choice, in turn, limits the scope of satire and its significance to the Egyptian context.

The first selected comic, *Pass by Tomorrow* (2014),⁴⁰ comprising six issues, is a satirical graphic novel that depicts Egypt in a dystopian future drawn by Sherif Adel, a comic artist who founded "Barbatoze Comics" in November 2011. "Barbatoze" is an

³⁸ Davies, "Drawing Public Space: Revolutionary Visual Cultures and the Right to the City in Cairo."

³⁹ Hamam, "Over the Top and Underground: Graphic Visualizations of Space in Magdy El Shafee's *Metro* and Ahmed Khaled Towfk's *Utopia*."

⁴⁰ Adel, "Pass by Tomorrow."

Egyptian colloquial word for a baby onesie, deliberately foregrounding the comics' apparent silly content. His comics parody current events and have been featured in newspapers and online news portals.

The other comics, *The History of Contemporary Cairo* (2015) by Hicham Rahma,⁴¹ an Egyptian cartoonist and painter, and *Your Villa in The New Capital* (2022) by Khaled AbdelAzeez,⁴² a freelance comic book artist and illustrator, are two short multi-panel comics posted independently on social media. Rahma's and AbdelAzeez's comics satirically undermine the New Administrative Capital, its Arab Gulf-inspired identity, and its alienating real estate valorization. The two artists work for the independent adults-only comics magazine "TokTok." The comic's name borrows the Egyptian word for auto-rickshaws, widely used as an inexpensive vehicular transportation in low-income districts. The name choice highlights the magazine's advocacy for the poor and a vision to "make its way among Cairo's crowded suburbs and main streets, carrying its passengers with their diverse ideas and backgrounds. Everyone is making their own journey."⁴³

7. State Authoritarian Power, Governmental Buildings and State Projects

In *Pass by Tomorrow*, Adel creates a fictional setting for the story plot set in Egypt in the year 3014, when Egypt would become the "fourth" world power named "The Republic of New Egypt." Ludicrously, the story claims that the state claims the new designation to evade old national and foreign debts. Following two failed attempts,

⁴¹ Rahma, *The History of Contemporary Cairo*.

⁴² AbdelAzeez, *Your Villa in The New Capital*.

⁴³ TokTok, "About TokTok : TokTok Egyptian Comic Strips et Bande Dessinée."

the state is launching a new space shuttle to receive international scientific recognition. The protagonist, Ahmed Fahmy, a former chief of the “Anti-electronic Drug Investigations,” applies for a job related to the new shuttle launch at the “Scientific Secret Intelligence Institute” to join a special team comprising a genetically modified donkey, a cyborg, and a human communication engineer. The team is ironically called “Fut ‘Alina Bokra” (Pass by Tomorrow), an idiom used by the Egyptian incompetent state bureaucracy to indefinitely postpone, and hence deny, a service to a citizen. The wordplay connotes the team’s ineptitude. Eventually, an alien empire invades the country during the new shuttle launch ceremony, and the space mission is actually postponed.

When Fahmy visits the Scientific Secret Intelligence Institute, the building is depicted in the last and largest panel of the page as an alien-looking massive monument dominating the city. In the background, the city is dull and grey, except for the bright commercial billboards with advertisements that ridicule the commodification of public space by showing preposterous commercial messages (Figure 1).



Figure (1) The protagonist, Fahmy, visits The Scientific Secret Intelligence Institute (Credit: Sherif Adel, from "Pass by Tomorrow" page 13, 1st issue, 2014) (reading direction is from right to left)

The comic's second issue depicts another governmental building, the future "Ministry of Space." Like the Scientific Secret Intelligence Institute, the last and largest panel of the page shows the Ministry's monumentality in the shape of an alien-like pyramid. A bilingual sign in front of it restricting site access is poorly translated from Arabic into "No photo! No walk!" which shifts the original wording to imply a restriction on walking around the city (Figure 2).

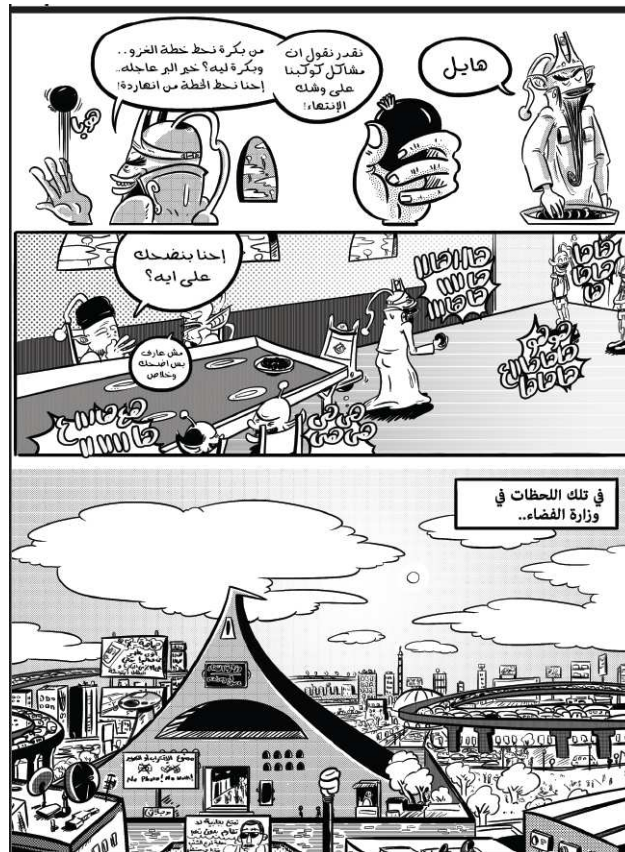


Figure (2) A depiction of the Ministry of Space as a headquarters for executing the launch of an Egyptian space shuttle (Credit: Sherif Adel, from "Pass by Tomorrow" page 11, 2nd issue, 2014)

On the following page, a colored panoramic panel of the context surrounding the Ministry shows the different urban fabrics along the Nile banks, with governmental and commercial buildings towering over the city (Figure 3).



Figure (3) A zoomed out panel of the area surrounding the Ministry of Space, showing the Nile River with its two banks and other governmental buildings (Credit: Sherif Adel, from “Pass by Tomorrow” page 12, 2nd issue, 2014)

In these two examples, the artist uses visual exaggeration and contrast to highlight a subtle message of subversion to the authoritarian nature of state buildings. From the exterior of the Scientific Secret Intelligence Institute and the Ministry of Space, the contrast between their monumental size and exceptional form and the rest of the urban fabric makes them stand out. Moreover, their alien forms and style signify the distasteful decontextualized design strategies of the government. It is not just the contrast in the content but also the contrast in the panel forms. The panel sizes dramatically increase and become borderless to fit the massive buildings and signify

their salience through emphasizing scale. The representation of such massive vertical buildings bears a political symbolism that addresses the relationship between verticality and power.⁴⁴ The exaggerated verticality of fictional governmental buildings and their salient positions in the lower panels signify the powerful and authoritarian position of the government and the exclusion of its citizens.

State buildings are in bright colors, monumental with questionable aesthetics, while murky low-income settlements are far in the background and distanced from the state monuments at the city center. Meanwhile, the future city's traffic is a dense network of congested flyovers, mocking the current state's obsession with building flyovers, especially in Cairo.

Other cues subtly satirize the state's control over its citizens. For example, in Figure 3, on the lower-left side of the page, a red sign welcomes the reader into the future city: "Smile, you are in New Egypt," and with fine print, "with the compliments of the Ministry of Happiness," suggesting that the state controls everything, including happiness. One building block away from the sign, a massive gold-colored building occupies the center-bottom of the panel, with the label "The Loyal-Duck Bank." The Egyptian intelligentsia sometimes reacts to the absurdity of its capital city by likening it to Disney's Duckburg, the hometown of the semi-intelligent Donald Duck and, more relevant here, his uncle Scrooge McDuck. The bank cannily resembles the exterior of Scrooge's Money Bin, but a duck needs to be loyal to the state, not parsimonious, to become super-rich in this future city.

⁴⁴ Becher, "Splendid?"

On a broader scale, the Egyptian state alienates low-income classes from governmental facilities through discriminatory urban planning.⁴⁵ The selected panels from *Pass by Tomorrow* satirize this aspect, employing visual contrast by representing a panoramic frame of a fictitious Future Cairo (Figure 3), depicting all mainstream media and governmental buildings as massive monuments. This depiction contrasts with the poor slums on the left bank of the Nile, blended with the Nile color, an unmistakable display of contrast in living conditions.

Political propaganda on street billboards is typical in institutional and commercial buildings around Egypt. The billboards reproduce the ideology of the powerful and inculcate it in the people through recurring slogans and representation of authoritative figures. They also induce a nationalist spirit in the citizens. For example, the billboards in *Pass by Tomorrow* ask people to smile simply because they live in “New” Egypt (Figures 3-4). In Figure 4, a billboard on the left of the last zoomed-out panel of the page says, “Smile! You are in the downtown... Smile! I said: Smile!” The state-enforced smile contradicts the representation of the actual center of Cairo, where people are crowding and, hence, frowning. Still, the billboard ironically contradicts this image, pointing to the downtown area’s urban problems, harsh living conditions, and continuous economic deterioration.

⁴⁵ Davies, “Drawing Public Space: Revolutionary Visual Cultures and the Right to the City in Cairo”; Saad, “Power and the City. Cairo an Arena for Profit, Classes Dispute or Political Propaganda?”



Figure (4) On the lower left of the panel, a billboard in downtown displays a motivational quote,
(Credit: Sherif Adel, from "Pass by Tomorrow" page 16, 3rd issue, 2014)

Pass by Tomorrow does not directly question identity in the built environment. The following two sections analyze and discuss this aspect, revealing how comics satirically critique these alienating state projects.

8. An Identity Crisis in The New Administrative Capital

As discussed before, the New Administrative Capital perpetuates an ideology that seeks to isolate the ruling class and the wealthy from common citizens. This ideology manifests in allowing foreign investments, specifically from the Arab Gulf countries, to create an unhomely Dubai-inspired city filled with monumental state structures and valorized real estate projects. The result is an abject city that causes a strong sense of alienation and exclusion. Through alien fetishized planning, everyday

Egyptians “interpellate” themselves as estranged from the New Administrative Capital as the seat of government located outside of Cairo, their capital city.

The History of Contemporary Cairo, posted on the X social media platform in 2015, questions the identity of the New Administrative Capital (Figure 5). The comic satirically historicizes the planning of Cairo’s urban fabric. Four borderless panels represent five eras of Cairo’s urban planning history. The first and top panel represents the Fatamid Caliphate, Al-Mu’izz li-Din Allah Al-Fatimi (953-975), who founded the city in 969. He looks at the map of Cairo with the caption “Fatamid Cairo,” signed by “The Engineer Al-Mu’izz li-Din Allah Al-Fatimi.”

Then, in the second panel on the right, Khedive Ismail (1863-1879), credited for modernizing Cairo and heavily inspired by Haussmann's work in Paris, holds a small map of “Khedival Cairo.” He says, “More beautiful than Paris!” Later, in the third panel on the left, a caption declares, “Many years of ... have passed,” with a drawing of smelly feces meant to fill in the dots. Two speech bubbles stemming from the feces announce “Engineers, Usta (slang for bus driver)!” from one side and “Seventh and tenth...” from the other, referring to the names of different Cairene districts used by bus drivers.

Finally, in the lower and last panel, an exclamation bubble says, “And suddenly!!! We present to you... The Gulf Cairo...” On the left side of the panel, a Gulf Arab-looking man happily introduces a picture of skyscrapers with the title “New Capital (in English).” A song written in the Arab Gulf dialect floats below it. An ending caption says, “And there continues the chaos...”



Figure (5) The History of Contemporary Cairo (Credit: Hicham Rahma, 2015)

Using borderless panels with scene-to-scene transitions rolling together provides a significant jump between periods but with a seamless and continuous narration. This rolling transition between scenes breaks down the “blink” model of panel-to-panel comics storytelling on the side of something more fluid.

The comic derides Cairo's identity. All the rulers depicted in this comic are foreign-borns, not ethnic Egyptians, disturbing the city's constructed national identity. When an Arab Gulf person introduces the New Capital, the artist implies that the line of foreign rulers continues, with Arab Gulf countries indirectly ruling Egypt via economic aid and city planning strategies.

Moreover, the conflict between the identity of Cairo, the old capital, and the identity of the New Administrative Capital, which is full of skyscrapers, is revealed by locating the new capital in the final and largest panel and focusing all attention on it. Since the New Capital's architecture deviates from the normalized modernist old governmental buildings, readers can start questioning its ideology and perceive it as foreign to Egyptian sensibilities.

Moreover, the comic derides the authoritarian state ideology through the iconic visual representation of the rulers of Cairo across different historical periods. For example, the Fatamid Caliphate and the Khedive, protagonists in the first and second panels, signify the individualistic and autocratic role of the rulers of Egypt in planning Cairo in these eras. They aimed to project their ubiquitous power and control over the city by building palaces, castles, and plazas. The artist uses wit by playing with the Arabic word "engineer" and the name of Khedive Ismail. For example, instead of saying "Ismail," he says "Ismain," which is a colloquial pronunciation of the name. This meaningless alteration in words is what Propp calls "verbal mistakes" that are comical when revealing a lack of thought and hence become incongruous.⁴⁶ Here, it implies the speaker's lack of education and erudition, which adds unseriousness to the comic, softening the impact of the criticism while ridiculing the rulers' incompetency. Moreover, in the second panel, the exclaiming caption, "More beautiful than Paris!" is ironic when paired with the feces in the following panel, but also points to the continuous foreign influence on the city's identity.

The third panel offers a more audacious attack on the urban planning of Cairo using incongruity and puns. It exposes the blemishes of contemporary Cairo planning and

⁴⁶ Propp, "The Verbal Devices of the Comic."

signifies the Egyptians' disgust and dissatisfaction. The speech bubbles saying "Engineers, Usta!" and "Seventh and tenth..." is a pun. The word "Usta" has a double meaning here, referring to a bus driver or an uneducated craftsman. Describing the engineers of this era as "Usta" signifies their ineptness. Still, there is another pun with the word "engineers," as it is also the name of a district that became popular during the Nasser era, along with Nasr City, referred to by the "seventh and tenth" neighborhoods. One of Cairo's least-liked districts today, Nasr City was once intended to be Nasser's new capital city.⁴⁷

The comic's punchline is that Cairo loses its identity over time until it becomes an alien city. The artist uses a large panel, contrasting with the smaller upper panels, that catches the reader's attention and signifies dissatisfaction with the New Capital. The use of the narrative element "And suddenly!!! We present to you... The Gulf Cairo..." signifies surprise, mimicking a T.V. show or advertisement that propagandizes the "Gulf Cairo." The Arab Gulf announcer is the only character with a black shade pushing him to the panel foreground as the focus and destination of the city's history. A song in Arab Gulf slang parodies the Gulf countries' potent interference and recent investments in the country. It mocks foreign investments that alienate ordinary citizens. Finally, the witty phrase "and there continues the chaos..." represents the continuous dissatisfaction of the Egyptians with the state-led projects and the built environment strategies that never met the public interest.

⁴⁷ Saad.

9. Real Estate Valorization and the Exclusion of the Poor

An expanding social divide manifests in the speculative property market. Some comic artists ridiculed the New Administrative Capital for alienating the ruling class from the citizens because of the unaffordable properties. AbdelAzeez's comic *Your Villa in the New Capital*, posted on Facebook in 2022, satirically critiques this phenomenon (Figure 6). The comic comprises six panels with a moment-to-moment transition between panels used to slow down and draw out action.⁴⁸ A seemingly homeless man sits on a small island in the middle of the sea. He is depicted six times in each panel, always in the same location. In the first top-right panel, he says, "I am awaiting death." Then, a bottled letter emerges in the second panel in the middle of the sea, approaching the man. The man picks up the letter in the fourth panel and reads, "Your villa is in the New Capital. Supply is limited." The man thinks for a moment and, in the fifth panel, he replies to the message with "H.M.?" (short for "how much").

⁴⁸ McCloud, *Understanding Comics*.



Figure (6) A comic showing the impossibly affordable residential units in the gated communities of the New Egyptian Administrative Capital (Credit: Khaled AbdelAzeez, 3rd of January 2022)

The allegoric representation of the homeless man can represent the Egyptians' economic situation in general. The slow progress of time implies stagnant, unfair economic conditions. Moreover, the fatality in the man's thinking complements the hopeless situation of most Egyptians. Nevertheless, the polysemic nature of the allegory helps diffuse the grave situation.

The artist uses fiction and incongruity to deliver a critical message against the state's crony capitalism. A bottled message, usually portrayed in fictional work as a symbol of hope, reaches the homeless man. However, the message in the bottle is an

advertisement for a villa in the New Administrative Capital. It is a parody of the state's propaganda, where the new city is depicted as the hope for a future Egypt—a hope a few Egyptians can afford. The point is stressed further by the typical marketing slogan “the supply is limited” in the third panel. Indeed, few villas are offered for sale because they are reserved for the ruling class. This wordplay softly attacks the increasing perpetuation of a capitalist ideology in the built environment, specifically gated residential communities in the New Capital, through the media.

Still, the homeless man hilariously responds to the message by inquiring about its price. “H.M.” is frequently used by upper-middle Egyptians to ask about prices in online stores. The situation is incongruent because using such abbreviations for expensive properties such as real estate is uncommon, even among the wealthy. However, the artist uses this expression to satirize real estate prices, as if the homeless man instantly transforms into a super-rich for whom shopping for real estate properties is common and inexpensive. In addition, the shift to the English language satirizes Egyptian upper and upper-middle classes who use English fluency as a class signifier. This ironic misapplication of upper-class slang provides an indirect parody of the phenomenon of low-income classes' alienation from the New Administrative Capital. Through an iconic satirical representation, the message behind the comic is indirect and polysemic. It does not directly attack the alienating state ideology behind gated communities in the New Administrative Capital; hence, it can safely avert censorship.

10. Seriousness through Unseriousness

Employing Althusser's concepts, this article illustrates how Egyptian comics have emerged as a unique form of political critique of the built environment as an ISA. While not explicitly antagonistic, these works convey indirect critical messages that question prevailing power structures by depicting how the built environment materializes state ideology via monumental architecture, exclusionary urban planning, and imposed Gulf-inspired aesthetics.

Three key strengths define these comics' effectiveness as an "innocent" form of critique: First, the visual-verbal interplay inherent to comics enables multifaceted messaging that remains accessible yet difficult to censor. Visual techniques like contrasting color, scale, and panel sizes redistribute information by highlighting certain aspects while concealing others. This allows readers to perceive the ideological dimensions of built structures indirectly. Comics can present multiple perspectives simultaneously within a single page or panel, as demonstrated in *Pass by Tomorrow*, where the zooming-out technique reveals patterns of architectural power. In addition, the character-centered storytelling of comics exposes how the built environment ISAs function through interpellation, revealing the everyday frustrations, detours, and barriers created by exclusionary urban design that positions citizens as excluded subjects within the state's vision. Abstract concepts like spatial inequality transform into concrete experiences, as seen in AbdelAzeez's portrayal of class divisions through the narrative of a poor citizen amid the sea.

Second, the medium's architectural representation capabilities make it particularly effective for critiquing state-led urban development. Comics visually juxtapose

grandiose state projects and citizens' lived realities, revealing spatial inequalities that might otherwise remain abstract. By depicting stark contrasts of style and scale between institutional buildings and ordinary structures, such as in *Pass by Tomorrow*, these works invite readers to question the normalized standardization of state architecture and the embodied experience of powerlessness citizens feel when confronting designs intended to project authority.

Third, Egyptian comics circumvent censorship through strategic satire, allowing artists to critique state power while maintaining plausible deniability through creative deviation, humor, and fictional narratives. They employ carefully calibrated humor strategies, using incongruity, wordplay, irony, and visual exaggeration to create critique that remains palatable to censors while resonating with readers. These humorous functions denaturalize the interpellation process.

Approaches to satirical critique vary across platforms. Social media comics like *The History of Contemporary Cairo* can be more explicitly critical. Rahma's direct visual representations of rulers, alongside urban planning decisions and satirical descriptions, create historical narratives that implicitly critique current projects like the New Administrative Capital. AbdelAzeez uses a more abstract critique in *Your Villa in the New Capital*, employing allegory and incongruity to highlight class divisions in state housing developments. Meanwhile, Egyptian graphic novels like *Pass by Tomorrow*, being prone to more censorship because of its independent publishing, incorporate critique as background elements rather than central plots, using subtle contrasts and ironic verbal cues to undermine representations of state power, such as preposterous patriotic street signs demanding happiness from city dwellers.

In all cases, for humor or satire to work, the joke must remain incomplete. The established norm that humor breaks should be presupposed but never be spelled out. This helps satirical comics address serious critical messages indirectly.⁴⁹ It allows Egyptian comics to bypass censorship, invites readers to interpret the critical messages embedded in such comics, and enlightens them about ideologies perpetuated by the built environment. Other dissenting material on digital platforms, such as textual jokes, would have been more direct and aggressive, making them prone to censorship. Moreover, tangible expressions of dissent, such as graffiti and murals, must be materially present in public spaces and, consequently, abolished expeditiously.

Therefore, unlike more direct forms of dissent, comics owe their effectiveness as resistance tools to their perceived innocuousness and “protective ambiguity.” This protective ambiguity allows comics to simultaneously reveal and critique material manifestations of state ideologies while appearing non-threatening by exposing the functioning of architectural ISAs. Furthermore, it enables their wide circulation and fosters critical consciousness among readers who become active participants in decoding layered meanings by recognizing their own positions within the built environment and potentially forming a shared “inside joke.” This ambiguity counters Egypt’s censorship tactics, which rely on identifying explicit criticism. While authorities can restrict direct criticism, the interpretive nature of comics creates forms of critique that remain visible yet difficult to prosecute.

However, satire in comics remains a double-edged sword that can sometimes normalize the very ideologies it critiques. As Eco notes, humor can expose power

⁴⁹ Eco, “The Frames of Comic Freedom.”

structures, but its enjoyability may sometimes reinforce them.⁵⁰ For example, Rahma's comic has revealed the previously unquestioned rulers' authoritarianism in Egypt through city planning across its history in a satirical way, reminding the readers that the Egyptian capital never had an identity in the first place and still does not, as a consequence of the relentless grandeur state projects that preserve the rulers' positions. When readers laugh at the comics' depictions of standardized Cairo planning, they participate in a form of critique that acknowledges power's excesses while potentially neutralizing their transformative outrage through the relief of humor.

As Egypt continues developing massive state projects that manifest state power, comics will maintain their role in revealing underlying ideologies and expressing alternative perspectives. Comics provide persistent counter-narratives that document, critique, and reimagine these spaces. As censorship evolves toward digital monitoring and broader definitions of prohibited content, comics adapt with new forms of visual encoding and satirical techniques. In this ironic twist, a supposedly non-serious medium effectively highlights and subverts state ideologies represented in the built environment, potentially seeding broader critical consciousness about space and power in contemporary Egypt.

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⁵⁰ Eco.

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