Urban Struggles Redefined: On the Disenfranchisement and Agency of Cairo's Middle-Class Citizens

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1   Introduction

For some political scientists, a state is defined as being comprised of three components: land with defined borders, a ruler in the form of a government, and peoples as a defined population (Grotenhuis, 2016; Mitchell, 1991). Similarly, urban geographers define cities as a composition of urban space, structures and laws, and subjects as communities (Soja, 2009; Lefebvre & Nicholson-Smith, 2013; Abdoumaliq Simone, 2015a). In this analogy, a city is understood as a microcosm of the state, as it contains rather similar features articulated in spatial and physical forms, involving several exchanges and flows.

For those who are interested in understanding how and why cities evolve as they do, it is crucial to look at the larger picture and question why nations also evolve the way they do. In that sense, the study of cities contributes to the understanding of the trajectories of nation states and their prospective futures.

The 2011 Revolution in Egypt produced new spatial, social, and political dynamics in the country. The period afterward, particularly post-2014, produced even more variegated trajectories for the development of the country in what the state has termed as the birth of the "new republic," as part of the newly established regime own propaganda. Hence, this research looks at the post-2011 period, situating urban transformations within the broader sociopolitical context.

It examines how the urban environment is shaped through interactions between space, structures, and subjects in post-revolutionary Cairo. In this regard, city-making is understood as a set of arrangements that allows for exchanges to occur and a product to emerge. The product is the outcome of the collective enactment of the physical and nonphysical presence of three elements: space, structures, and

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211

subjects, in the built environment. This process is achieved through moments of confrontation and cooperation. This chapter aims to capture these moments of struggle between citizens and their urban environment.

Primary qualitative data was employed in the form of semi-structured interviews and site observation to collect information on citizen's interactions with the state/built environment including social media content analysis. Secondary data such as literature review and case study research were used to build a larger analytical framework to situate the results into.

The chapter is organized into six sections beginning with an introduction. The second section outlines the research framework, including the research question, methods, and key concepts. The third section describes the context and provides the reader with background information about the setting. The fourth delves into the case study and empirical data. The fifth discusses the findings within a theoretical framing, and the sixth is the conclusion.

2   Research Framework

This chapter examines urban transformations and city-making practices since 2014 up until 2022. *It seeks to answer the question: how do citizens' socio-spatial practices within roads, streets, and public spaces define and reshape the city as a space for urban struggles? How do such urban struggles contribute to the city's urban transformations?*

The primary data gathered was collected through ethnographic observations done in Cairo between September 2019 and September 2022, and semi-structured interviews with key informants, conducted in October to November 2022 and February 2023. In total, six people were interviewed: four males and two females. The selection criteria required participants to be adults over the age of 18, who had lived in the case study area, for at least 10 years. Preference was given to those who had lived in the area since at least 2010, so as to capture their perceptions of the urban changes in the neighborhood since the 2011 Revolution. All responses were anonymized, and all data were used strictly for research purposes. Oral consent was taken for audio recording. Identification of respondents was done through the snow-balling/referral sampling technique (Parker et al., 2023), whereby a research assistant offered to connect the author with some recruits. This ensured that the main author did not have any prior relations with the interviewees. The remaining three informants were contacted via social media (Facebook) after commenting on a public post on the "Nasr City Complaints Group" Facebook page. Additionally, social media pages (public residents' groups on Facebook) were observed and information about residents' complaints in the neighborhood was collected. Data about the neighborhood was cross verified with the interviews to avoid gathering any misleading information or generating false generalizations.

The key methodological challenge of this paper was the restrictive environment for field data collection, due to personal security concerns, which meant that data collection had to be subtle and quiet. To overcome this challenge, observation was

done in virtual spaces such as social media pages to collect primary data and conduct content analysis (Prandner & Seymer, 2020) as mentioned above. Street observations, photo-documentation, and conversations with people in public spaces were done quietly and swiftly to avoid being noticed.

The key concepts used are urban transformation, city-making, urban struggles, disenfranchisement, agency, and socio-spatial practices. Urban transformation refers to changes that occur at the physical level within the city. City-making refers to a combination of citizens' behaviors and state's interventions (Holston, 2019; Stavrides, 2015). Urban struggles are a set of interactions that different groups engage in to claim certain rights in shaping the urban realm (Holston, 2009; Simone, 2021). Disenfranchisement is a state of disadvantage, a deprivation of an entitlement. Agency is the opposite: the capacity to alter the status quo. Socio-spatial practices are the modes of interaction based on social status and spatiality.

In more details, *urban transformation* is defined as a change that has occurred in a range of urban elements (Lynch, 2008) as follows:

1. Streets
2. Pavements
3. Signage
4. Traffic lights
5. Zebra crossings (pedestrian lines)
6. Street vendors
7. Bridges/flyovers
8. Coffeeshops and restaurants under flyovers
9. New shops
10. New spaces
11. Greenery/green spaces
12. Walkability
13. Overall orientation and order of the neighborhood (Fig. 1)

In this study, the "middle-class" is defined by educational level and professional affiliation: holders of a university degree, employed in a white-collar job (Abul-Hassan, 2021). In addition, socioeconomic status is taken into account, based on the World Bank's scale for income strata. They defined middle-class as "individuals who consume the equivalent of US$10 or more per day" (World Bank Group, 2019). However, due to the devaluation of the Egyptian pound in 2022, it became harder to determine which income bracket represents the consumption level of which class in Egypt given the unstable economic situation (Magdy, 2023). As such, other factors such as place of residence, culture, taste, and other subjective values such as choice of leisure activities are also taken in consideration when determining class positions.

Fig. 1 The Nile River in Cairo, Egypt. Source: Author. Date: 4 November 2021

3   Contextual Background

3.1   About Cairo

A key feature of pre-revolution Egypt was the general political apathy and lack of interest and engagement in public affairs (Abul-Magd, 2012). The authoritarian state, led by Mubarak, had been consolidating its power since the 1980s. The economy was protected, heavily managed through subsidy policies, and privatization took place under strict government scrutiny. This ensured that wealth was shared carefully between business people and state agents (Soliman, 2012). A clear distinction between social rights and political rights was carefully weaved by the Mubarak regime (Abdalla, 2012). This left little room for any real change and meant that the citizens followed the sociopolitical order that evolved. However, citizens occasionally staged demonstrations to demand better labor rights and employment conditions and express general opposition to privatization plans (Soliman, 2012).

In January 2011, Egypt experienced an unprecedented upheaval that came as a surprise to many observers (Bayat, 2013; Rennick, 2013). The 25 January revolution led to the overthrow of Mubarak regime who had ruled for 30 years and came with Mohammed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood in June 2012 through what could be considered as the only nearly fair and free elections that Egypt has witnessed in modern times (Chams El-Dine, 2014). Only 1 year after, in July 2013,

Abdelfattah Al-Sisi rose to power after ousting Morsi from office, backed with the military and fueled with widespread demonstrations (Kingsley, 2013). For the following year, protests continued, and uncertainty kept growing; until in May 2014, Al-Sisi won the presidential elections (Chams El-Dine, 2014) and brought back the military establishment to power (Roll, 2016).

In June 2014 and after the evident failure of all opposition forces to shape the political transition and with the domination of the military establishment over the scene, one could argue that this was the end of the January 25 revolution and the sign of victory of a counter-revolutionary order that has since ruled Egypt (Kingsley, 2014). State authorities began to rearrange and replan the city to prevent mass demonstrations and sit-ins (Abaza, 2014). They aimed to destroy any spaces of street politics and instead instituted heavily surveillance and securitized new "spaces" for politics, such as the New Administrative Capital and a series of new cities (Elmouelhi, 2019). They later termed this as building the "new republic." According to state media "the term new republic … encompassed a series of so-called fourth generation cities that are being built across Egypt" (Essam El-Din, 2022). The fourth-generation cities are defined as smart cities that are built to accommodate the growing population and according to the New Urban Communities Authority (NUCA) they will "introduce the use of artificial intelligence in smart cities in a manner in line with the state's vision of the future" (Abdel-Ghani, 2021). Moreover, 2014 was the year when Al-Sisi launched the National Road project with the goal of developing and extending Egypt's 23,500 km road network (Morsy, 2022).

Some of these projects were built on earlier political-urban transformations, whereby the development of new cities was introduced in the late 1970s during Sadat and kept growing during Mubarak's era in the 1980s–1990s, but the urgency in reinitiating and completing these ambitious projects increased after 2014 specifically as the new regime sought to showcase physical developments to earn social acceptance and credibility. Additionally, there have been acts of rebranding and establishment of multiple depoliticized spaces (Beveridge & Koch, 2019) to eliminate revolution-linked spaces altogether. For example, the notorious Raba'a Al Adaweya square in Nasr City, which witnessed the brutal raid on the Muslim Brotherhood's (MB) sit-in in August 2013, resulting in mass killings of the supporters of the MB in 1 day, was renamed in 2015 after Hesham Barakat (general prosecutor of Egypt 2013–2015) who was assassinated as a retaliation (Ahram Online, 2015). Later, the square was abolished altogether in 2018 following the erection of several flyovers in the neighborhood. This particular space (square then flyover) is described by the Arab Contractors as "Bridge of Martyr Hesham Barakat … among the development works of East Cairo to accommodate the traffic density in the squares of Nasr City to be without intersections" (*The Arab Contractors*, n.d.).

A major problem that posed itself for the post 2014 regime was the accessibility and abundance of open spaces in the form of squares and roundabouts, which they construed as potential spaces for protests and sit-ins (Antoun, 2012). Hence, as a strategy for containment, in many parts of the city, these intersections and roundabouts were eliminated, disrupted, and eventually replaced with wider streets,

flyovers, and barriers, through embarking on a national road redevelopment plan, to eliminate any potential street politics and to change the urban politics of the city.

3.2   Urban Transformation Timeline

The megacity of Cairo, a metropolis of around 20 million inhabitants, keeps growing and shows no intentions in slowing down. Most of Cairo's older neighborhoods have undergone some upgrading interventions between the years 2014–2022. In his speech at the Economic Conference in October 2022, Al-Sisi announced that "the state is working on upgrading the old city and at the same time building the new cities" (Mohamed, 2022). According to the press, the state's plan is to "to continuously develop and modernise the network of roads and axes in Greater Cairo" (Ahram Online, 2022).

Hence, as part of the afore-mentioned upgrades most of Cairo's core neighborhoods witnessed interventions composed of street widening, removal of intersections and sidewalks, and erection of flyovers. These transformations engulfed well-established and affluent neighborhoods within east and central Cairo, such as Heliopolis, Nasr City, and Downtown. They also impacted some southern and
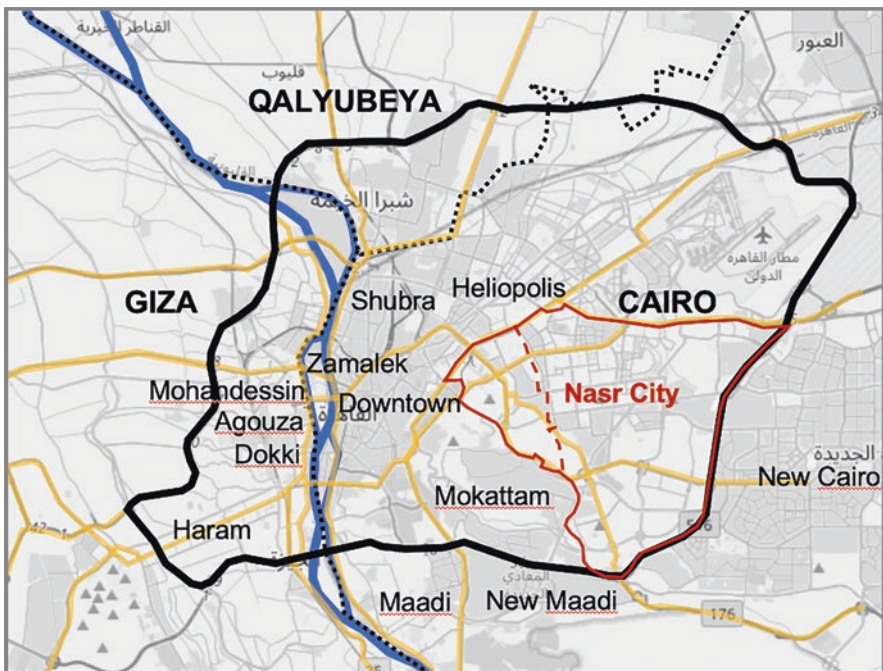

Fig. 2 Ring Road circling Greater Cairo Region (GCR) with Nasr City's location. Credits: OpenStreetMap (openstreetmap.org), additions by Salma Khamis for Author. Date: 28 February 2023

western neighborhoods like Mokkattam, Agouza, Dokki, Maadi, and Haram (Ahram Online, 2022), virtually areas circled with the Ring Road (see Fig. 2) (Khamis, 2023b).

In addition, interventions have occurred in the dense neighborhoods of historic Cairo, which have been declared by the UNESCO as a heritage area (Antoniou et al., 1980). Much of the historic city fabric, including centuries-old cemeteries, were razed to make space for new road axes and motorized highways (Young, 2020), see Figs. 3 and 4. These decisions came as a shock to heritage preservationists and urban activists, and several launched campaigns over social media to try and save the area from being crushed under the state's bulldozers (Noshokaty, 2021, 2022).

In general, interventions across the city resulted in the widening of streets and the narrowing of sidewalks. This in turn required tree-felling and resulted in the loss of considerable amounts of greenery and open green spaces in all neighborhoods (Al Ahram Weekly, 2020; Galal, 2018; Mounir, 2019; The Arab Weekly, 2022). Additionally, the process of "upgrading" involved the demolition of houses and the removal of pedestrian infrastructure. According to state media, at least 390 houses have been removed along the Ring Road to enable its widening (see Fig. 5), and although there has been a compensation process for those affected (Egypt Today, 2021), the entire process has been widely criticized.

Fig. 3 Al-Fardous Axis, which cuts through the Autostrad road and penetrates the old city cemeteries. Source: Author. Date: 29 January 2021

Fig. 4 Cemeteries bulldozing. Source: Author. Date: 10 February 2021

The state narrative stresses the necessity of widening the roads, increasing the production of housing units, the creation of new cities, and the overall restructuring of the city. But citizens feel increasingly distanced from their urban environment, and a rift ensued between the "structures" and "subjects" of the city. As a result, a state of alienation, dissociation, and disenfranchisement developed between the citizens and their urban environment on the one hand and between the citizenry and the state on the other hand. In this regard, this study argues that the middle-class urban struggles are what constitute the city. Through their daily maneuvers, citizens deal with the urban transformations trying to overturn what has been imposed on the city.

4   Case Study: Nasr City

The primary case study for this chapter is the eastern neighborhood of Nasr City (Madinet Nasr in Arabic). Nasr City is about 250 square kilometers and is composed of two subdivisions (east and west Nasr City) (Aqarmap, 2023). Nasr City was established as the new capital of Egypt back in the 1950s (Elshahed, 2015; Frochaux & Martin, 2010). It was designed to attract middle-class citizenry such as bureaucrats, professionals, and small business owners (Elshahed, 2015). The masterplan of the neighborhood was put in place by modernist architect Sayed Karim in

Fig. 5 Ring Road demolitions. Source: Author. Date: 19 February 2023

1956 (Elshahed, 2015; Frochaux & Martin, 2010), with a grid-like urban-scape that mirrored the socialist-militarist mindset back then (see Fig. 6) (Khamis, 2023a).

The neighborhood carries a special importance for social researchers (Abaza, 2009; de Koning, 2005; Elshahed, 2015), given its reputation for housing the "new middle classes" of Egypt. These *new middle classes* emerged in the 1970s with President Sadat's political and economic reorientation of the country. His "*infitah*" policy—also known as the "Open door" policy—rather liberated the country's economy and established a new capitalistic society (Baker, 1981). Nasr city became famous for its mega shopping malls and new "lifestyle" that it offered from the 1980s until the 2000s. It became known as the uptown district of the "new middle classes," which are defined as the nouveaux riche who profited from the oil boom in the 1970s and 1980s by working in the neighboring Gulf states (Abaza, 2009). Yet, this neighborhood also hosts multiple military establishment complexes, including the Ministry of Defence, due to its pre-intended role as the capital of Egypt. This mix of highly consumeristic space coupled with a highly scrutinized and controlled grid-like landscape created the neighborhood's special character.

The first set of upgrades in Nasr City occurred in 2014–2018, whereby in that phase, state authorities enacted a series of infrastructural interventions to widen the streets and ease traffic. State authorities installed a Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) lane in Mostafa El Nahhas Street and removed the old existing tramway (Cairobserver, 2013).

Fig. 6 Nasr City borders, with a highlight on grid-like structure at its center. Credits: OpenStreetMap (openstreetmap.org), additions by Salma Khamis for Author. Date: 28 February 2023

That included removals of sidewalks, green islands, and installation of flyovers, see Fig. 7. The second set of upgrades took place between 2018 and 2022. In that second phase, a series of corrective actions to the preceding interventions took place to rectify the disruption of pedestrian pathways and interrupted commercial activities. This included erecting pedestrian bridges and installing street signage for the new routes to clarify the new orientation of the streets due to complaints about the confusion of street users about new directions (this was observed over social media public pages).

These urban changes have resulted in an urban struggle that manifested through social media, whereby citizens posted complaints and shared jokes about the status of the built environment in the neighborhood. For example, one commentator posted that instead of reducing traffic congestion, it became faster for her to walk between the stuck cars, due to the occurrence of more traffic jams after the removal of the tramway in Mostafa El Nahhas street (see Fig. 8). Some of these complaints have been discussed in a previous study examining the role of infrastructural projects in exacerbating socio-spatial fragmentation (Ashoub & Elkhateeb, 2021). In addition to sharing their grievances on social media, citizens also resisted these urban transformations through "territorial manoeuvring" (Schwarz & Streule, 2022). That is, through their everyday movements, choices, and struggles.

Fig. 7 A newly erected flyover in Nasr City. Source: Author. Date:11 July 2021

5   Disenfranchisement and Agency

5.1   Space, Structures, and Subjects

Urban scholar AbdouMaliq Simone (2021) has highlighted the perpetual tension between "human agencies and technicity," whereby he examines the relationship between technological instruments and human interactions within cities. He examines the "spatial and temporal frameworks of contemporary urbanization, as well as the changing parameters of collective life" (Simone, 2021, p. 1341), to argue that the agency of humans is articulated in collective processes of reworking the available resources, even in the most precarious ways. In the frames of this study, the notion of the collective agency is investigated in its variegated forms of choices, action, or even inaction toward the built environment as a domain for adaptation.

Building on the contextual conditions of the city described in the previous section, there has been a clear need for urban upgrading for the city. Nevertheless, the failure to involve citizens as key stakeholders in such process has resulted in a state of disenfranchisement. Yet the process of disenfranchisement is not linear. As a counteraction, citizens employed tactics of subtle disruptions, micro-aggression, and sometimes even indifference to regain a lost balance. Such means of negotiating the state's urban transformation projects, in both organized, collective ways as well

Fig. 8 Traffic jam at Mostafa ElNahhas Street after tram removal and BRT lane removal. Source: Author. Date: 12 March 2019

as disorganized, individual ones could be understood as iterative processes of adapting and reshaping the built environment.

5.2   City-Making and Disenfranchisement

Throughout the process of upgrading, the city's fabric has been bifurcated, fragmented, and rearranged into a technologically dominant built environment (Mitchell, 2002). Citizens are treated as cogs who must fit into pre-prescribed roles. As such, human existence is reduced to its functionality and productivity, and the city's life is pre-mastered to fit into a larger schema of a pre-imagined self and a pre-prescribed other. In this schema, the city's streets are there to allow for the constant movement of people from one point to another and not for waiting (or sit-ins).

No lurking or temporariness in public spaces is allowed. A constant stream of movement is envisioned by state authorities articulated in the "removal of intersections" to allow for "traffic fluidity," as can be observed within the streets of Cairo, where the traffic police are constantly waving their arms and directing drivers of vehicles to keep them moving. Hence, outdoor leisure activities are no longer tolerated. This can also be seen in the establishment of designated leisure areas since 2018. These are mostly comprised of privatized spaces that have clear boundaries,

such as the open air malls in new gated cities or food courts within mega malls (Elhusseiny & Kesseiba, 2019), or even more astoundingly in encircled cafes under newly erected flyovers. These have very clear borders in the form of fences, gates, security entrances, and designated parking lots, allowing for scrutiny of visitors as well as establishing a barrier to the "outside" world.

In this setup, citizens are faced with structures that eliminate any form of spontaneous interaction; interactions are defined within a spatial-temporal framework. Citizens are transformed into subjects of the city's structures (Bokov, 2019). The ensuing relationship between space, structures, and subjects is what frames the city-making dynamic and citizens' agency. Citizens (subjects) must fully comply; their very existence on the streets should have an economic justification, and they should be involved in some kind of a transactional situation. Otherwise, their presence in public space is deemed suspicious by the government. Furthermore, the heavy commercialization of previously public spaces is connected to increasing consumption levels of the middle-classes and offering an alternative entertainment. Hence, a state of urban disenfranchisement takes place through disorientating citizens and confining them within a performative scenario of a transactional nature whereby people, goods, and information are exchanged in a known format and a clearly defined space and time.

City-making is a deliberate act of spatial-temporal ownership as well as a culmination of visible and invisible struggles. In simple terms, city-making can be understood as an ongoing urban struggle over shaping the urban realm, ultimately to the favor of the power holder. However, city-making is also a commoning process (Holston, 2019; Stavrides, 2015): Holston describes it as "as the development not only of a sense among people that they are constructing a realm of acting together—call it solidarity—out of their common activities, but also of a sense that they have contributor rights to the commons thus created" (Holston, 2019, p. 17). In other words, city-making is a consciousness among citizens that they are together eligible and responsible for something. In Cairo's case, city-making attempts have intertwined with a sense of micro-counter aggression taking place in the urban realm as citizens express their resentment toward the state power. For instance, in most of upgraded streets, motorcyclists have broken parts of sidewalks to create a small room for U-turns after all intersections have been eliminated. In this case, despite being disenfranchised, citizens (subjects) choose to reassert their ownership over the city through maneuvering new spaces to accommodate their own needs, which have been essentially disregarded by state authorities (structures).

5.3   Urban Struggles

Urban struggles are incidences of confrontation between citizens and the hegemonic authority represented by the state and its agencies. Such struggles involve dialectics of resistance and co-optation, exchange, and production. This translates into the restructuring of the political economy and the repositioning of citizens in the city and society. For instance, everyday struggles could arise due to streets' congestion,

pollution, poor infrastructure, poor urban amenities, or lack of maintenance. Yet they could also arise due to lack of spaces of representation and general poor economic conditions, which translate into the daily hardships of social and economic livelihoods of citizens.

In Nasr City, two waves of city-making and urban struggles are highlighted. The first one was between 2014 and 2018, and the second was in 2018–2022 onward as mentioned in Section 4.

In both times, no consideration for citizens' opinions was taken, leaving the inhabitants perplexed and feeling deeply marginalized. These two phases also correspond to two waves of transformation in the socio-spatial interactions. Citizens expressed their concerns over social media, firstly during the construction with recurrent complaints regarding roads closure and lack of alternative routes and later after the completion of the first phase, and with the resulting inconveniences, citizenry expressed their discontent and request for reversal of interventions.

5.4   Agency Redefined

In an interview, one citizen (Interview 1, MN, Cairo, October 2022) mentioned that "I would say that I am deprived from the right to my neighbourhood. Like I cannot remember when did we as citizens approved the removal of the tram lines or when did we approve creating this bus lane in the middle of the street or … removing the street green islands or ... doing any of these transformations. I believe that I am alienated or currently I feel alienated from the neighborhood and that my memory to the city had been taken away without my permission."

In essence, several of the interviewees expressed that the urban changes in the form of "street upgrading" had changed their neighborhood in terms of accessibility, mobility, layout, and orientation (Interviews 1, 2, 3, and 6). Several mourned the loss of sidewalks and greenery in specific, see Fig. 9. Moreover, most of the interviewees indicated that they felt disconnected from their immediate urban environment. They felt the need to reassert their presence through a different set of actions, primarily through micro-reactions and adjustments to the new status quo, for example, one interviewee mentioned she observes the changes and writes them down in her diary, and sometimes she creates blogs about them over social media (Interview 1, MN, Cairo, October 2022). She also mentioned that she cycles to explore the new streets, and she sometimes takes the very same route everyday despite its lack of convenience; others mentioned taking a different route for ease of navigation or avoiding the inconvenient streets altogether (Interview 1, 2, 4, and 6).

This created a sense of in-betweenness and lack of clarity on the common objective or desire whereby citizens reject their status quo yet have no clear imagination of what the alternative might be (AbdouMaliq Simone, 2015b). The state has shown a deliberate disregard for citizen's needs and aspirations and imposed a statist vision that has resulted in disempowerment of citizenry through economic pressure and alienation and by changing the spatial-physical features of the city (Foley & Miller, 2020; Mitchell, 2002). For instance, another interviewee stated that "… I think a lot

Fig. 9 Removal of street islands in Nasr City. Source: Author. Date: 12 December 2020

of the changes that have happened in the Egyptian streets in the last four years (including Nasr City) are a great manifestation of both the corruption and failure of the state – meaning that, they are also a manifestation of the apathy sand lack of design perspective in the urban environment" (Interview 2, MW, Cairo, October 2022).

However, some interviewees also noted the possibility of using legal channels and organized civic action as another venue for agency. One mentioned: "I took a case to the court regarding the tree-cutting, and it is going very well until now. This is, actually, the first time a case is taken to the Egyptian court regarding the cutting of trees and I'm very positive because the judicial committee has only issued two reports and the two are to our interest" (Interview 2, MW, Cairo, October 2022). In this case, civic action is the embodiment of an urban struggle over the common realm.

The interviews revealed that most still liked living in the neighborhood, despite the perceived negative changes that had occurred in the last years. They liked the proximity of the neighborhood to other districts such as the airport and downtown, the open street fabric vis-à-vis the gated community urban fabric (Interview 2, MW, Cairo, October 2022), and finally the profuse availability of services and entertainment options (All interviews). This indicates that the neighborhood was built with a planning perspective favoring mixed-use streets ideology, coupled with multiple services to serve a large community (Elshahed, 2015). One interviewee mentioned

that they liked the neighborhood's liveliness: "The thing I like about Nasr City, in general, is the fact that you can find everything there. All kinds of shops and services. And I also like the chaos – it is also alive." (Interview 4, KHM, Cairo, October 2022). As Abaza indicates, "for most Cairenes, Nasr City is best known today for its endless variety of shops, spaces for leisure, restaurants, coffee shops, and cinemas" (Abaza, 2009, p. 9). As such, the neighborhood could be understood as catering for a growing consumeristic middle class that desires and can afford such places.

With the recent urban interventions, further exacerbation of consumerism is being molded into every vacant space, notably under the bridges and on previously green spaces. Relating to this, several interviewees expressed their disgust over the excessive consumeristic venues that have opened in spaces under the bridges and as kiosks in every corner of the neighborhood (Interviews 2, 3, 5, and 6). They mentioned that this not only poses general health risks in terms of promoting an unhealthy fast-food culture but also due to pollution emitted from cars' exhaust in close proximity to the seating areas (Interviews 3 and 5). One interviewee also expressed dissatisfaction with a perceived misuse of energy, due to the excessive lighting and electricity consumed to light up these shops (Interview 5, SA, Cairo, November 2022). To give a clear example, one informant mentioned "I think the street vendors increased after the changes, I think with the whole cafés under the bridges, it seems to be counterintuitive." (Interview 4, KHM, Cairo, October 2022) (Fig. 10).

Fig. 10 A new coffee-place under a newly erected flyover in Nasr City. Source: Author. Date: 28 September 2022

Many of these new urban elements are found within public spaces: on main roads and residential streets. As such, public spaces can be understood as a dynamic arena for urban and political alterations. To sum up, middle-class agency can be traced through different tactics of (1) civic action and utilizing institutional channels for grievances; (2) self-empowering techniques such as education, journaling, and social media blogging; and (3) developing precarious maneuvers during daily practice.

The first depends on a citizen's ability to undertake action such as filing a case at the court. It requires capacity to pay litigation fees as well as mobilization of resources like networks of friends to participate in the case. The second type of agency, relating to self-empowering options, also has a cost, for instance, investing in higher education and joining global schools to get knowledge on urban city management, which is not an option for the majority of working-class or low-income citizens. Yet, the third option, devising one's own techniques to maneuver the city could be considered as a tactic that is personal, invisible, and rather available to both the middle and working classes. For instance, citizens enact subtle agency and diffusion of discontentment, in ways such as avoidance of driving, walking a different route, and eventually escaping the inconvenience (Interview 6, ASM, Cairo, February 2023) (Fig. 11).

Fig. 11 Construction of a new restaurant or a coffeeshop at the corner of the Child's Park in Makram Ebeid street in Nasr City. Source: Author. Date: 10 July 2021

In the end, this involves decisions of what to engage and disengage with at the street level in its everydayness and even though there might be no clearly articulated result at the end. The very subtle movement of bodies, objects, and information shapes the urban spaces of the disenfranchised.

6   Conclusions

This chapter has discussed the status of urban citizenship under the broader aim of tackling the relationship between middle-class citizens and the urban spaces they inhabit. The aim was to understand the dynamics of interaction and how it has changed over time. Cairo's urban transformation should be understood within the wider context of political transformation since 2011.

Focusing on the neighborhood of Nasr City, it was found that middle-class residents use a variety of socio-spatial practices to access and shape their city, with choices of action, inaction, and reaction. In some cases, the citizens took a step back and watched the distortion of their neighborhood in silence, avoiding any interaction with surrounding changes. In other cases, citizens chose to step forward and engage with formal channels of grievance and dispute through court cases, as a highly institutionalized form of civic action. Others have employed themselves, physically, to counter such changes, and asserted themselves in their surrounding space, through educating themselves, writing about and documenting the changes over social media as well as through active walking, cycling, and even through writing about the changes in their own diaries (personal blogs).

The deliberate exclusion of citizenry in state-led urban restructuring is not a new practice, but the pace and impact of this restructuring over the past 5 years is unprecedented. Yet with every attempt of removal of physical and cultural memories that the new regime of post-2014 tried to erase, the citizens negotiated and resisted these changes.

Appendix: List of Interviews

Interview 1: MN, Female, 33 years, Nasr City resident, interview in person, Cairo, October 2022.

Interview 2: MW, Male, 40 years, Nasr City resident, Cairo, interview in person, October 2022.

Interview 3: HA, Male, 32 years, Nasr City resident, Cairo, online interview, October 2022.

Interview 4: KHM, Male, 24 years, Nasr City resident, Cairo, online interview, October 2022.

Interview 5: SA, Female, 69 years, Nasr City resident, Cairo, interview in person, November 2022.

Interview 6: ASM, Male, 51 years, Nasr City resident, Cairo, interview in person, February 2023.

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