Negotiating the City—Everyday Forms of Segregation in Middle Class Cairo

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As a consequence of economic restructuring, Cairo's urban landscape has seen increased social polarization and segregation. In order to explore these changes, I examine the urban trajectories of young upper-middle class women. Their trajectories highlight the ways in which social distance and segregation are embedded in the minutiae of the urban landscape and the fabric of city life. Their privileged lifestyles and routines hinge on combinations of class privilege, social avoidance, and segregation.[1]

This paper attempts to read the urban landscape by exploring the ways specific people move through it. These specific people are young female upper-middle class professionals in Cairo. To walk the city with these urbanites allows me to bring out some of the logics implicit in urban life, to map the knowledge and the specific cartographies movement through the city presupposes. Their urban trajectories, moreover, offer a complex picture of Cairo's public spaces and allow a glimpse of the everyday life of segregation in what has been called "Egypt's new liberal age" (Denis 1997).

My ethnographic observations speak to a larger story of a shift from a developmental to a more neoliberal state, and the effects of this shift on Cairo's professional middle class. While the mid-1970s saw a move away from the

1 This contribution is an abridged version of a longer chapter of my dissertation on the changing sociocultural landscape of middle-class Cairo under conditions of neoliberal policies and a search for global inclusion (cf. de Koning 2005). This article has profited much from a follow-up research trip in 2004 that was financially supported by the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO).

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earlier national development path with Sadat's infitaah (open-door) policies, attempts to transform Egypt into a more liberal market economy integrated into the global market sped up significantly in the 1990s with Egypt's adoption of structural adjustment policies.

In Egypt's new liberal age, new lines of segmentation in schooling, the labor market, and consumption are giving rise to new divisions and distinctions within Cairo's professional middle class. These divisions and distinctions rely importantly on cosmopolitan capital: familiarity with Western repertoires and standards—for example, fluency in English—as well as the ability to participate in distinctive cosmopolitan lifestyles (de Koning 2005). There is a still tentative formation of a distinct professional upper-middle class, which is employed in the more internationally oriented up-market segment of the urban economy and inhabits Cairo's up-market spaces. This up-market segment of the urban economy offers relatively good wages and careers when compared to the meager pay of the generally highly insecure private sector employment or the low-level government jobs on which less privileged middle-class strata are forced to rely. While the latter often range from 150 to 1000 LE, wages in the up-market sector might start at 1000 LE, but can reach 10,000 LE.

The upper-middle class professionals employed in this up-market segment can be seen as the protagonists of new state narratives and projects. They are the ones who can match global standards and staff transnational workspaces, not unlike India's "new middle class," which, as Leela Fernandes argues, is constructed as "the social group which is able to negotiate India's new relationship with the global economy in both cultural and economic terms" (2000: 91). These divisions have their counterpart in the urban landscape, most notably in the form of the upscale coffee shops that have carved out a specifically young, upper-middle class presence in Cairo's landscape.

By examining the urban trajectories of some female upper-middle class professionals in their mid-twenties to mid-thirties, I explore the way these changing class configurations are expressed in, and constituted through, the urban landscape. I first explore the ways in which gender, class, and space combine in the constitution of the coffee shop as a "safe space." I then turn to the more ambivalent spaces of the street and explore the ways these women navigate these "unsafe spaces." I finally come back to the insights that can be drawn with respect to the changing features of Cairo's urban landscape.

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The "safe" space of the coffee shop

Cairo's up-market districts are dotted with coffee shops and restaurants that serve a mixed-gender clientele. Up-market coffee shops, modelled after American examples like Starbucks, have become an essential part of the daily routines of many young and relatively affluent Cairenes. These coffee shops, always referred to in English, are never to be confused with 'ahawi baladi, the male-dominated sidewalk cafes for which Cairo is famous. Different coffee shops have become spatial orientation points, as well as markers of social belonging. A new and distinctive leisure culture has emerged in and around these coffee shops, centered on, but not exclusive to, young single affluent professionals. Yet coffee shops are a relatively recent phenomenon. Coffee shops started appearing in the mid-1990s in central affluent districts like Zamalek and Mohandisseen, as well as in outlying Heliopolis and Maadi. New coffee shops open regularly, crowding certain streets and turning formerly residential areas into lively Downtown hotspots.

Figure 1: Coffee shop Beano's in Zamelek, an upscale neighbourhood in Cairo (Photo: © Anouk de Koning)

An elderly middle-class lady shook her head when I told her about the significant female public presence in such coffee shops. Those frequenting coffee shops must be impolite girls or women, hiding their outings from their parents. No respectable woman would sit in a public place without the company,

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protection, and control of her relatives. Her comments resonated with widely shared ideas regarding female propriety and mixed-gender socializing outside the purview of the family (see MacLeod 1991; Ghannam 2002).

Yet many young upper-middle class women live highly mobile and public lifestyles, outside the purview of the family. The presence of these young women in both professional and social public life has become normalized, even critical, to upper-middle class lifestyles, which are marked by the mixed-gender character of contacts and places. Their presence, however, is a fragile one, lived out in closed, class-homogeneous spaces, with respectability and protection being the sine qua non of their ventures into public space. The emergence of spaces like the coffee shop that are deemed acceptable and respectable for single, marriageable women is crucial to these new routines. But what creates these coffee shops as safe spaces, and how are their borders guarded?

Up-market coffee shops are generally seen as safe and respectable places where upper-middle class Cairenes can engage in mixed-gender socializing. These coffee shops have created a protected niche for non-familial mixed-gender sociabilities in the more contentious public geographies of leisure. They have been able to wrest such mixed-gender sociabilities away from associations with immorality and loose sexual behavior that cling to less exclusive mixed-gender spaces outside of the redemptive familial sphere.

Comparatively high prices and a minimum charge regulate access to upscale coffee shops. These economic controls are often augmented by an entry policy, which bars those who seem not to belong. The constant fear of attracting those of a lower "social level" is not only based on the importance of guarding the class markers of a place, but is also stirred by the conviction that they might not abide by the implicit rules of gendered sociability. Young men might flirt or harass, overwhelmed by the availability of young women, and some young women might come to pick up wealthy regulars. These fears echo assumptions about other, less elitist leisure spaces with a mixed-gender public, which are thought to be market places for easy relationships that involve some kind of exchange of money.

Venues were primarily judged on the "level" of their public and the extent to which the mixed-gender interactions were assumed to be respectable. Tamer, a middle class professional in his late twenties, said that he would never take his fiancée to, for example, the coffee shops located on Gamaa^{c}it id-Duwal Street, a major shopping street and thoroughfare in upscale Mohandisseen. He argued, "In these coffee shops, most of the girls are prostitutes. I can't go there with my fiancée. Others will think that she is not my fiancée, but my girlfriend. She will be seen as one of those girls."

Nihal, an upper-middle class professional in her early thirties, emphasized the issue of being looked at and the "social level" of those who look. She sum-

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marized the logics of the coffee shop as a safe space as follows: "A place has to have a certain standard, it shouldn't be cheap. This guarantees your safety. It guarantees that our kind of people go. This is crucial with respect to the image of women in a certain place. If people look at me in a certain place, it is enough to make me wonder what they say about me. It makes me insecure." Karim, also in his early thirties, had similarly given the logics of the coffee shop a lot of thought. "The 'ahwa [sidewalk café] does not have a door," he said. "Coffee shops, in contrast, are closed. Not every passerby will see you when you sit there; you do not get influenced by other people. My girlfriend would not like to sit in a place where she would be seen and would have to hear comments. She would refuse to sit in the street. She prefers a safely closed place."

Figure 2: Trianon, coffee shop on Gamaacit id-Duwal Street, Mohandisseen (Photo: © Anouk de Koning)

The look or gaze is central to comments and stories about coffee shops. It is a specific gaze that is viewed as problematic and even harmful: the invasive look of undeserving men directed at respectable and classy women. Public visibility is a central, yet highly ambiguous trope (cf. Ossman 1994). The essential question was who could be seen by whom. The recurrent references to "a certain standard of people" and "our kind of people," as well as the frequent negative mention of less classy others, indicate the importance of "social level" with respect to mixed-gender spaces. "Social level," which combines notions of

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class and culture, determined the interpretation of specific looks. A look might be part of an appropriate and desired visibility, or might be harmful and defiling, depending on "social level." Not being looked at by certain people was central to all discussions of coffee shops, and, more generally, movement through public space.

Besides the gaze, the specter of prostitution is a central theme in these stories. They reflect a constant concern about the "level" of the female patrons and the nature of the relationship between men and women in upscale venues. The specter of prostitution is indicative of the symbolic minefield that these young women negotiate in Cairo's public spaces. The core of this ambiguity consists of the contrastive possible interpretations of a young woman's presence in public. Does her presence indicate a disreputable openness to sexuality, or is it part of a more respectable lifestyle and everyday routine?[2]

Wealth, social origin, and class position guarantee certain interpretations of a woman's presence in public. "Social level" was seen as central to a person's ability to indulge in casual, mixed-gender contact and play with features that otherwise suggest a lack of respectability. It frames such behaviour as part of a class-specific respectable normalcy. Similarly, wearing revealing [ᶜiryaan] clothes need not indicate a lack of respectability, as long as the good origins of the wearer are beyond doubt. These clothes are then framed as part of respectable class-specific norms and lifestyles, as much as the stylish clothing of upper-middle class muhagabbaat [veiled women]. Though class markers are a crucial part of a person's embodied performance, the surest way to avoid confusion and contestation of this sexy-but-respectable self-presentation is to move in classy places, by way of classy means of transport. Such class framing defines these women's public lifestyles and sexy appearances as normal and respectable.

The gendering of public (and private) spaces and the spatial inflection of gendered conceptions of propriety present old, yet recurring themes in urban landscapes (Bondi/Domosh 1998). Coffee shops frame the public presence of upper-middle class women as appropriate and respectable. By way of their prices and their explicitly cosmopolitan connections, which signal distance from

2 Elizabeth Wilson's sketch of the dilemma of the "public woman" in the nineteenth-century city highlights some of the central features of this ambiguity. As Wilson argues, "the prostitute was a 'public woman,' but the problem in the nineteenth-century urban life was whether every woman in the new, disordered world of the city, the public sphere of pavements, cafes and theatres, was not a public woman and thus a prostitute. The very presence of unattended-unowned women constituted a threat both to male power and a temptation to male 'frailty'" (Wilson 2001: 74). This ambiguity remains a central theme in numerous settings, among others in contemporary Cairo. It pervades the ambiguous views of young middle class women who—apparently unowned—move on their own through public space.

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surrounding places and their gender norms, coffee shops institute a normalcy of women's presence and mixed-gender socializing. The anxiously guarded mixed-gender nature of the coffee shop allows for the performance of upper-middle class gendered identities: the leisurely socializing of mixed-gender groups and the public lifestyles of young career women.

In the streets, where up-market norms are not hegemonic, and a clear class framing is absent, such self-representations may well be overturned. The same fashionable cut [sleeveless top] becomes minimally something out of place, but may also be seen as disreputable and taken to indicate easy morals, an open invitation to comments and even harassment. A young professional who was also a frequent visitor of the coffee shop scene told me of his annoyance with some of his friends. They insisted on harassing women they perceived to be less-than-respectable. A girl smoking or wearing tight clothes in the streets would qualify as such in their eyes. "Shame on you!" he reported telling them, "doesn't your sister dress just like her?" Such inversions indicate the extent to which impromptu identifications are framed, and to a large extent determined, by specific spatial contexts.

Crossing the city

In contrast to the closed coffee shops, the streets are largely characterized by male entitlement, even if male prerogatives to look at and judge women in public space can be partially mitigated by recourse to class hierarchies.[3] Women, particularly young women who are not accompanied by men, have a liminal and ambiguous status. They are supposed to be on their way somewhere, have a clear destination, and not linger for too long. Hanging around in the streets, especially on their own, is taken as an open invitation for men to make contact. As a consequence, most of my female acquaintances carefully planned their schedules and meetings to avoid time gaps during which they would have to spend time waiting in an open public space.

A young woman's presence in the street is subjected to constant observation and judgments. Such judgments are based on looks, class markers, and signs of modesty, such as the higaab [veil] or loose fitting clothing. These markers are evaluated with respect to possible definitions of a woman's pres-

3 Streets in up-market areas like Zamalek and Maadi differ significantly from their lower-class counterparts, as do shopping streets from big thoroughfares and more residential streets. Despite such significant differences, a dominant male presence and women's liminality are shared features of Cairo's street life. Streets, moreover, share a certain indeterminacy with respect to class. Some residential areas constitute marked exceptions to these gendered definitions of the street, while women peddlers who occupy sidewalks in central streets defy notions of women's liminality.

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ence in a specific place at a specific time. Different styles of women's dress have become central to, and iconic of, different styles of femininity. As Secor (2002) argues with respect to regimes of veiling in Istanbul, specific attires allow for certain interpretations and interventions in public space and are therefore crucial with respect to the micro-politics of interaction in public spaces.

"Before going out I look ten times in the mirror to check my appearance. Will this do? Will I be left alone this time?" Nihal told me she would invariably ask herself these questions before leaving the house in the morning. Many women told me they ask themselves similar questions, going over the different places they would visit and the kind of self-presentation required in them. Women's strategies in crossing the city depend on social maps of Cairo that indicate what to expect in certain places, and mark these places with a sense of ease and tension, safety and danger.

Figure 3: Two women on Gamaacit id-Duwal Street (Photo: © Anouk de Koning)

Nihal told me of her one-time venture out to a disco that was not clearly marked as upper-middle class. She felt embarrassed as soon as she entered. She estimated many of the women present to be easy with regard to sexual morals and suspected that some might be prostitutes. Despite her self-identifi-

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cation as a proper upper-middle class woman, she felt she was included in this group of loose women as a result of her mere presence, and felt tainted by the experience. A number of women told me similar stories, imbued with similar feelings. Some stressed the social repercussions of being seen in a certain place, whereas others emphasized their sense of embarrassment or even defilement by being identified as less than respectable. This sense of embarrassment can be elicited by anything from personal misgivings to subtle signs of others present, from benevolent teasing and flirting to concrete interventions. A woman may feel the presence of such interpretations because of the concrete actions of others around her. Such interpretations may, however, also be attributed to an abstract, imagined public. Regardless, the women to whom I spoke were all sensitive to such interpretations.

Navigating the city thus requires extensive knowledge of the urban landscape. But no such mental map is perfect; one cannot rule out mismatches and embarrassment by mistaken identifications. Urban life is a process of negotiation and contestation, of indeterminate social interactions with unpredictable outcomes. Of course, one can try to rule out such mishaps through diverse preventive measures: going out by car, visiting only those places that are unmistakably classy. Such routines depend on the financial means to do so (cf. Armbrust 1998). For others, "It is a matter of fitting in, of being invisible," as Marwa, a middle-class professional in her early thirties, explained. For many of these women, visibility, or rather invisibility, is a central issue, a feat that relies on a presentation of the embodied self as respectable and in place. Since she lived in a working-class area, Marwa had comparatively extensive experience with a range of urban neighbourhoods. She said that as a muhagabba [veiled woman] she is able to blend in more easily. However, her veil does not protect her from flirts and harassment in the streets. "You don't do anything to look like somebody who can be picked up from the street. How can you feel safe like that," she wondered. Many women similarly complained that there is nothing that will stop men from harassing women in the streets.

Mu^{c}aksa [pl. mu^{c}aksaat], from "to bother, hassle, annoy," is mostly used for encounters with a sexual overtone, and ambiguously denotes anything between flirt and harassment. The term carries an inbuilt tension: whereas a 'ya ^{c}asal' [hey, honey] in the street can push a woman to step up her pace, a "charming" compliment in a closed-off, classy place will likely be perceived quite differently.

Mu^{c}aksa is a topic of society-wide debate and is experienced as a major nuisance and deterrent to women's ventures into public space (cf. Ghannam 2002: 100; MacLeod 1991: 63). For those living in the closed-off places of up-market districts, mu^{c}aksa comes to symbolize the streets tout court. They have never learned, have forgotten, or are no longer willing to adapt to the Cairene streets, or to try to be invisible. As Marwa commented, "You get used

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to your privacy, comfort and being free from harassment. You then find it difficult to adapt once more to a certain attitude, to step down." Many of those not willing or able to be invisible avoid the streets if they can. The question is: Who can afford to do so?

Transport and the mobile framing of class

Purity and defilement are central issues with respect to women's movement in public space. An improper gaze can constitute injury to the upper-middle class female body. The avoidance and barring of unwanted gazes are crucial upper-middle class strategies in moving through public space. A woman should not get tired, should be at ease and free of the unwanted touches of other bodies.

Two common means of transport have come to symbolize the two extremes of experiences in public space: while the car represents control, protection, and absolute freedom, the public bus has come to stand for forced proximity and possible harassment. Whereas a man might brave these nuisances, a woman should never be forced to undergo the horrors of crowdedness in an open yet closed space like the public bus, where one is condemned to the proximity of others and their unclean bodies, and, worst of all, physical harassment.

Cairo is generally seen as relatively safe, yet fears of sexual violence, especially rape, were commonplace. Stories of harassment in public transport abounded. When the subject of public transport came up, so did stories of the dangers of the mini- or microbus, which invariably featured men waiting to harass women moving on their own. Concerns about women's movement centrally focus on their unscathed passage through public space. Whereas rape is the ultimate desecration, even a look can harm and defile the pure, unsullied, and properly sexualized female body.

The need to take public transport or move by foot in the streets exposes upper-middle class women to infringements on their established routines and preferred lifestyles. Hoda commented that she had to change her way of dressing when she moved house after her marriage. Now that she is taking a taxi from home to the metro station located in a popular neighborhood, she has stopped wearing tight clothes and obvious make-up to avoid being too visible and thus warranting comments. "You cannot wear professional clothes, such as a skirt, unless you have a car," she said. She complained that she is therefore no longer able to live up to the image of the professional career woman she would like to present. For many middle-class women who can, and even those who cannot afford it, the car has become an indispensable item. The car allows them to dress the way they like and protects them from unwanted encounters. It allows them to be bi-rahithum, at ease. The next best thing is the taxi, a favourite, but expensive option for many non-car owners.

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In contrast to the stories of danger and defilement that surround public transport, the car thus becomes the symbol for and guarantor of a perfect world of professional life, self-representation, and respectable socializing. It provides a mobile framing of the self that confirms a certain class standing, akin to the fixed spatial framing of the up-market coffee shop. As a man in his early thirties remarked, "A woman who takes a taxi still has a relation to the street. She will eventually return to the street and can therefore be flirted with. A woman with her own car can dress in whatever way she likes. Nobody will harass her." The public lifestyles of young upper-middle class women depend on the financial means to sit in certain places and to take certain modes of transport—in short, to move exclusively in up-market Cairo. The car crowns attempts to create a controlled environment. It transports women unscathed and free of unwanted interventions from one safe space to the next.

Nihal sketched her paramount image of the young upper class woman: driving a Cherokee with closed, tinted windows, air-conditioning on, moving between different places dominated by her own norms of respectability and sociability. This image rings quite true. The ability of many upper-middle class women to engage in their preferred lifestyle and specific modes of sociability and self-presentation depends on such class closure and control over their environment.

Moving around with these female professionals, the map of Cairo seems to shrink to include only those areas where their distinctive lifestyles are the norm: the up-market districts of Mohandisseen, Zamalek, Maadi, and Heliopolis. For some, spaces outside of this class-specific economy seem a vague and distant reality. These other spaces are marked as dirty, full of bacteria and health hazards, uncouth people, and mu^{c}aksaat. Some of these spaces outside up-market Cairo, like the "popular" or "informal" housing sectors (^{c}ashwaa'iyyaat) (cf. Bayat/Denis 2000), are places never to be visited, unless by accident when one gets lost and is stranded in a popular area like Dar es-Salaam, full of unknown but lurking dangers.

Performing fragile identities

> [The daughters of the high aristocracy] dreamt solely of a regular sojourn abroad, lived surrounded by electronic gadgets and refused to go out into the streets, afraid that the contact with all those poor drifting about the sidewalks would defile them. They would only go out by car, and then exclusively to closed establishments: restaurants, cinemas or beaches where they could be sure they wouldn't encounter any plebs.
> They were right. Wherever they went, the atmosphere grew tense. Their beauty was almost impermissible. Even if the girls laughed very modestly, it looked like a provocation. When they pushed up their hair, the gesture would become erotically charged. The pointed breasts under their shirts inflicted more chaos than a machine gun. Their transparent cheeks seemed made to be kissed. Rachid Mimouni (1991: 88; my translation)

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This passage is taken from *Une peine à vivre*, a novel about the life of a dictator in an unnamed country by the Algerian writer Rachid Mimouni. It describes the lives of women in a far more privileged position than the women whose trajectories have informed this paper. Yet it sketches a similar ironic situation in which elite fears and anxieties that surround less exclusive places and their inhabitants combine with the segmented everyday realities of a divided city. Elite norms increasingly clash with those of other city dwellers, thereby confirming the impossibility of "going out in the streets." As Mimouni writes, they were right not to go out into the streets. Even the simplest gesture could be "misread," creating confusion, inciting harassment and the defilement of otherwise pure and respectable embodiments of upper-middle class femininity.

Social avoidance and segregation are widespread phenomena in Cairo's socio-cultural landscape. The itineraries of these women highlight the everyday existence of social distance and segregation within the urban landscape and the fabric of city life. These are the footsteps of social segregation that play out against the more obvious maps of privilege and affluence and exclusion and poverty inscribed in the built environment, most markedly in the form of the gated communities that now surround Cairo. Their urban trajectories show the existence of specific upper-middle class norms of gendered propriety in public space, which are secured through the social closure of up-market spaces.

While their class status gives them a certain leverage vis-à-vis the male entitlement in the streets, most upper-middle class women I knew preferred to resort to the more reliable strategies of class closure to secure their unscathed passage through such open public spaces. Their trajectories were invariably based on class maps. It is only in exclusive up-market places that they can be at ease and dress and socialize as they see fit without being annoyed or being seen as disreputable. This points to what seems to me to be a crucial contradiction at the core of these high-mobility and rather public routines: their condition of possibility is social closure, the avoidance of any disturbance and the ability to avoid any unwanted contacts.

In the context of her discussion of exclusive urban developments in Sao Paulo, Teresa Caldeira argues that the tendency to spatialize social distance is connected to "the inability [of more privileged inhabitants] to impose their own code of behaviour – including rules of deference – onto the city" (2000: 319). Gender is an integral part of the drawing of class boundaries and justifications of social segregation in Cairo. These women's everyday routines and lifestyles are predicated on class closure, which keeps other codes and norms regarding public sociability and propriety at bay. Arguments about gendered behavior, and the need for the protection of "classy" women in turn, come to legitimize such social segregation. Many of the women featured in this paper

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were concerned about harassment and those even worse things that might happen in public spaces that were not explicitly marked as upper-middle class and appropriate or safe for women. These fears concern non-upper-middle class public spaces and tend to have strong implicit or explicit classist undertones. They concern upper-middle class women and the mass of lower class men of whom they must be aware.

The diverse attempts at closure discussed here must be located against the background of growing class differences and a larger trend towards social segregation in Cairo's urban landscape (cf. de Koning 2005). In Egypt's new liberal age, the city is being transformed through seemingly unbound private-sector initiative in combination with government attempts to bring the country up to speed with the global. New forms of class closure are a main component of these new urban developments. Parallel to developments in other major cities around the world, Cairo has witnessed a flurry in the building of gated communities (in local terms: compounds) in the desert, providing members of the upper (middle) class with pollution-free, exclusive, and prestigious housing. Next to these compounds, private hospitals, language schools, and universities have sprung up, which advertise American or British standards, teaching methods and curricula, and grant degrees that are only partly valid in the Egyptian context. The recently completed network of fly-over bridges, tunnels, and highways that connects different up-market areas of Cairo allows one to move from one part of this "other Egypt" to the next, without having to descend into some of Cairo's less palatable realities.

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