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The Power of the Speculative Image: On Branding Desert Developments and Selling Cairo's Urban Future

1 Introduction

In his book *Egypt's Desert Dreams*, the planner and economist David Sims provides an overview of the role of desert developments for successive governments in Egypt in creating the possibilities of future wealth by speculatively building real estate and by land sales.¹ One of the striking features in all the new desert cities, observes Sims, is the presence of “superblock” concessions, sold by the government to real estate developers, which always abut other large areas designated for individual land plots and for social housing estates. In recent times, these superblocks have dominated newer desert developments, particularly in the eastern and western desert expansions of metropolitan Cairo. In the New Administrative Capital, which is currently under construction, the government is taking a step further: the new city is entirely planned for and built by large-scale public and private property developers; its striking feature is the urban typology of a low-density, gated residential community.

The past four decades witnessed not only the transformation of desert lands through major urban projects, but also the steady rise of a real estate market, with successive governments progressively portraying large-scale property developers as the driving force of urban development and economic progress. True, urban observers in Egypt already began noticing these desert expansions and transformations in the late 1970s. From the turn of the 21st century onward, however, academic writing on these desert developments started to view urban production in Egypt as part of a wider state neoliberal economic shift, which they contend began in the early 1990s.² It is important to emphasise that these claims have always been empirically buttressed by referring particularly to these desert developments and more specifically to the gated residential communities as spectacularising Egypt's neoliberalisation.³

1 See Sims, 2015.

2 See Singerman and Ammar, 2006.

3 See, for one example, Denis, 2006.

Building on these researches, I want to further investigate the relationship between the developers' branding techniques and the economy associated with the realisation of their real estate offerings. Specifically, I will focus on showing how the use of promotional methods and visualisation techniques by large-scale real estate developers working on desert developments is intertwined with the political economy of the urbanisation process of today's Cairo. To do so, I build on the premise that the planning, designing, and building of new cities and large-scale urban developments reflect the way we organise the relationship between our imagined urban future and our lived present. I will argue that the functional power of the various visual and experiential techniques used to sell housing units lies in their ability to insinuate themselves into our memories as "urban lifestyle script" materials – an analytical concept that refers to a set of loosely shared expectations of a globally oriented class of citizens about the quality of certain lifestyle forms in a prototypical global city – that can be used to turn the future into extractable revenue for the present. To present my argument, the following discussions are divided into three main sections. In the first section, I present a very brief history of the recent re-emergence of large-scale desert property developers. I say "re-emergence," because conquering the desert through large-scale urban housing development is not without precedent in the city's modern history. This developmental logic goes back to the turn of the 20th century, to the establishment of the suburb Heliopolis by a private, foreign property developer.⁴ What distinguishes the current round, however, I argue, is not only the current scale of these desert expansions, but also the active involvement of the state in the process, particularly in discovering the economic value of desert lands and in gradually adopting branding and promotional methods of new cities similar to those of private developers. In the second section, I show the functional aspect of the promotional methods used in selling the future developments and how they help construct a particular memory of that future in order to sell it. To do so, I discuss three cases from these large-scale developments. In the final section, I show how this memory constructed through promotional materials is linked to the functioning of the new economy, which is increasingly geared towards extracting revenue from the future through speculation.

⁴ See Adham, 2004.

2 The Developer and the Entrepreneurial Government: a Brief History

Urban planning is self-evidently an interdisciplinary field oriented towards the future. By definition, planning is a process of making choices among the options concerning the future that are available today, and then securing their implementation. As a temporal bridge between the future and the present, the planning and building of new cities and large-scale land developments reflect the way we organise and structure the relationship between our imagined urban future and our lived present. No doubt, architects and planners have always used models and perspective drawings as representational tools to show their clients how their buildings and residential developments would look after completion. It was only in the past two decades, however, that large-scale property developers and the government used such visualisations more frequently to brand and sell their housing and commercial space offerings. Before this date, the representational mode of planning new cities was limited to technical reports and land use drawings and analyses that only planners and specialised professionals could critically read, visualise, and comprehend. Today, the visualisations of the future of all so-called fourth-generation desert cities appear more like collections of eye-catching images and computer-generated videos of architectural and urban solutions similar to the ones private real estate developers produce to market and sell their luxurious residential units and commercial spaces in large-scale developments to those eager to invest. This state entrepreneurial spirit, particularly with regard to desert developments, has a history.

A plausible date to locate the origin of the government's discovery of the economic value of desert land is the 1979 inauguration of a subsidiary of the Ministry of Housing and Reconstruction, namely, the New Urban Communities Authority (NUCA). From its inception, the state land-managing organisation was assigned the developmental mission of planning and managing the economic use of the desert lands for a better redistribution of the population out of the congested Nile Valley, as well as to maximise the economic returns from these developments, mainly through land sales.⁵ One of its early development ventures, however, was to build a luxury summer resort on the North Coast in the early 1980s. From the start, therefore, NUCA was a “planner and regulator on the one hand, and a developer and investor on the other.”⁶ It is a fact, however, that during this initial stage, new des-

⁵ See Adly, 2020.

⁶ Adly, 2020: 169.

ert lands were developed mainly to receive working and professional classes through the construction of state-subsidised housing blocks and to welcome citizen-investors through the allocation of individual residential plots.⁷

Towards the mid-1990s, another change within the government took place. Characterised by the implementation of a “much more state capitalist mode of development, large private real-estate developers became the main agents of progress.”⁸ Massive amounts of serviced desert lands were sold to private developers at negotiated below-market prices. NUCA also established partnerships with private developers to build residential compounds.⁹ This period witnessed the emergence of gated residential compounds in the Al-Shaykh Zayed, New Cairo, and Al-Shorouq desert cities. Interestingly, at the time, these new cities had few public housing projects remaining in them that were from older developmental schemes. Al-Shaykh Zayed City, for example, was originally planned as a mixed-income city; it transformed as NUCA discovered the profit-making potential of land sales to developers. Thus we find luxury housing accommodating 71% of the city’s residents, while low-income housing accounts for only 15%.¹⁰ Today, NUCA still continues to establish partnerships with private developers in large-scale urban projects, such as Noor Capital Gardens in East Cairo, a 32 billion USD mega-development that will house a population of over 600,000 when completed in 2026. Once more, ultra-realistic videos and computer-generated images of the city are being used in the initial launch of the project in early June 2021.¹¹

In 2004, desert land management took a more market-oriented turn. Aiming for increasing state revenues from land sales and reduced speculation, NUCA introduced a new pricing mechanism based on selling land plots in public auctions, which in fact raised land prices to new heights.¹² Thus we find these new desert settlements around Cairo increasingly catering to a new class of well-to-do Egyptians. Moreover, this housing category witnessed an increase in partnerships between NUCA and private developers to produce more high-end desert settlements. Significantly, in this historical stage of development, the former government acted like a private developer and, for the first time, used similar visualisation and branding techniques at the level of urban planning when it released the “Cairo Vision 2050” in 2009. This was a government-sponsored planning document that com-

7 See Sims, 2015: 128.

8 Sims, 2015: 128.

9 See Sims, 2015: 129.

10 See Keeton and Provoost, 2019.

11 See Abo Almajd, 2021.

12 See Adly, 2020.

prised various large-scale projects and was replete with computer-generated images and collages of a retrofitted city that viewers could barely recognise.¹³

After the 2011 January revolution, NUCA's model of planner-regulator-developer was pushed even further. NUCA has also decided to emulate high-end developers and establish its own version to capture some of the speculative value of land generated by selling housing units. First, in 2015, the government decided to develop the New Administrative Capital through an Egyptian joint stock company in partnership between the armed forces and NUCA. The promotion of the city from its announcement till today is heavily dependent on computer-generated images and 3D videos of places to come. I shall return to discuss and analyse an example from this project shortly. Moreover, in 2017, in partnership with another state entity, the Housing and Development Bank (HDB), NUCA launched a new high-end public property developer company, City Edge Development, a top-level Egyptian developer of suburban residential communities.¹⁴ The flagship of the new company is the Gate Towers in New Alamein, one of the so-called fourth-generation cities, on the North Coast, where the prices of housing units were taken to new heights. Once again, ultra-realistic images of places to come were the main advertising materials used to promote the future coastal city. In the New Administrative Capital, City Edge Development is also involved in several large-scale real estate projects. Its prime development is the New Garden City, a 400-hectare development that harks back to a turn of the 20th-century development in Cairo, Garden City, and that is advertised with promotional images and videos as a themed revival of downtown Cairo's French-style buildings.

I would like to conclude this brief historical review with two comments: firstly, we can speculate several practical and economic reasons for the government's tendency to increasingly rely on large-scale developers to build the various desert projects, particularly given the recent pronounced political will, and to push to finish these projects in a very short span of time. For example, it is simpler and faster to sell fewer large tracts for developers than to sell many smaller, individual plots. In a similar vein, it is speedier and more efficient to complete large housing projects with a few developers, who are always keen to rapidly finish their projects and realise their profit, than to work with thousands of individual owners, who may not complete their buildings for years. From a design point of view, developers are presumably considered more reliable in guaranteeing a better overall uniform design quality and architectural character of their final residential products, as they typically hire renowned large-scale architectural firms. Finally, from an

¹³ See Adham, 2014; Cairo from Below, 2017.

¹⁴ See City Edge Development, 2021.

economic efficiency point of view, it is more profitable for the government to reduce the cost of supplying the infrastructure by transferring this responsibility to developers, who provide all electric, sewer, water, and rain drainage networks within their designated large land division. Secondly, the increasing reliance on visualisations and other sophisticated marketing and branding techniques intertwines with the rise of large-scale, private and public property developers. So, I would now like to move to and discuss in greater depth the developer's marketing and branding methods.

3 Constructing a Memory of the Future

In this section, I will argue that ultra-realistic, photo-like architectural videos and other visual representations used to brand coming projects evoke in us the sense that we can hold the future in our heads and construct memories of it as a yearned-for anthology of lifestyle snapshots. The power of these visualisations and experiential techniques, therefore, lies in their capacity to construct and inscribe in our memories a new, make-believe world that is graspable, credible, and desirable, which in turn can be sold in the present. Nowhere are these various architectural visualisations and publicity techniques better put to use to promote and raise the expectation of a future-to-come, to intertwine the present and the future, and to interlock dreams and finance than in the showrooms, TV commercials, and street billboards of large-scale real estate projects.

3.1 Showrooms, TV Commercials, and Street Billboards

Situated on the Moqattam Hills plateau overlooking Cairo, Emaar's showroom in Egypt is the gateway to its flagship project "Uptown Cairo."¹⁵ Uptown Cairo comprises residential quarters, a Business Park, a commercial centre, and entertainment and sports facilities with a presumed total cost of two billion USD when completed. I will argue that the planned showroom is segmented into three distinct phases with clear objectives: establishing trust in the makers, constructing a memory of the future offerings, and introducing the financial method to acquire that future.¹⁶ In the first phase, the visitor establishes trust and confidence in Emaar's ability to deliver: the visitor reaches the exceptionally large and elegant showroom

¹⁵ Emaar is a large-scale Dubai-based international real estate developer.

¹⁶ See Adham and Fahmy, 2010.

building via an avenue flanked with palm trees and sun-drenched billboards showing images of happy families and places to come. The showroom's large entrance lobby is full of eye-catching architectural renderings and photographs complementing a curated collection of mundane items that could likely fill the visitor's home – collectables and cultural artefacts that reflect his or her sense of luxury living. If the visitor did not know Emaar, now he or she knows the brand – it is the firm behind the world's tallest building, Burj Khalifa in Dubai, among other projects – and the visitor should trust it.



Fig. 1: Emaar's showrooms unmistakably feel like spaces in a museum

Photo: Todd Reisz, 2009. Courtesy of the photographer.

With confidence and trust established, the visitor moves to the second phase of the visit, the main showroom hall, via a magically lit tunnel, which accentuates the feeling that one is moving into another world, another Cairo. The renderings, physical models, and other representations of Emaar's projects in Egypt are located in the various showroom halls, which unmistakably feel like spaces in a museum. In addition to relying on a mix of photographs and architectural visualisations and models, Uptown Cairo's amenities and lifestyles are also represented by glass display cases filled with luxury items from famous consumer brands (see Fig. 1 and 2).

Emaar's vitrines preserve lifestyle like a museum and mix them with the architectural visualisations to evoke in the visitor's mind a dream world of luxury. The tour is additionally supplemented with mockup apartments and furnished model villas to further engrave the lavish lifestyle experience in the visitors' minds. Large photorealistic images of the landscape are set carefully behind the windows so visitors see how their future views from their future houses would look like.



Fig. 2: Various visualisations intend to evoke in the visitor's mind a future world of luxury
Photo: Khaled Adham, 2009.

The tour ends with the third phase, in which visitors are introduced to various financing schemes to purchase a piece of this dream world. The whole visit experience proposes to potential buyers and investors that they can transform their lifestyles by investing in this exclusive, fancied future. In this context, the various visualisations and mockups function as tools aiding potential buyers to live the future, establish the conviction of its durability, and create memories of it. Undoubtedly the potential buyers who fall under the spell of these luxurious real estate projects belong to a small housing market segment that can afford the high price tag.

Constructing a memory of the urban future is not limited to visual techniques targeting a limited segment of high-end showrooms visitors. Other innovative marketing methods have also been employed for a much wider audience. Aiming to become a complete gated private city, the branding of the large desert development of “Madinaty,” Arabic for “My City,” is a case in point. Located along the Cairo-Suez highway, north of the New Administrative City, the 3,200-hectare development aims to house around 600,000 residents when completed. An American international architectural firm has designed it as several sub-compounds, each with its own basic facilities and services. The developer of the city is the Talaat Mostafa Group, one of the largest real estate conglomerates in Egypt, known for developing mixed-use real estate and hospitality projects across the country with a total land bank development of over 50 square kilometres.¹⁷ Construction of the city began in 2006 with intermittent halts over the subsequent ten years because of the political unrest after the 2011 revolution and other legal challenges. Like Emaar’s Uptown, Madinaty also has created its own on-site showroom. During the first years of branding the mega-project, the slogan used to induce potential buyers to establish trust and confidence in the developer was “From the Makers of Al-Rehab,” referencing the company’s earlier successful mixed-use development project in New Cairo.

Brochures, physical models, and furnished mockup houses and apartments were initially the main advertising tools. In 2019, with large sections of the sub-compounds and central facilities completed, the company introduced to Egypt a new branding approach: commercial songs made for the city development by superstar singers. First, the Syrian singer Asala introduced the brand to the viewers with her song “Madinaty.”¹⁸ The three-minute commercial song tells the story of a couple from the time they met through their wedding night to their establishing a family and having their first child. In this context, the various cinematic imageries and spectacles from the completed sections of the city are meticulously intertwined with the lyrics, the melody, and Asala’s resonant voice to engrave in the memory of viewers that the future is already “here,” thus establishing confidence in its durability and creating memories of the city. Building on the success of Asala’s commercial song, two years later, a second TV commercial song for the city was released, “Life as it should be,” by the Lebanese superstar singer, Ragheb ‘Alama.¹⁹ In this song, viewers learn about the various lifestyle aspects of the “happy residents” of Madinaty from ‘Alama who, presumably for the purpose of the video, ap-

¹⁷ See the company’s webpage, Talaat Mostafa Group, 2021.

¹⁸ See the YouTube commercial song, Asala, 2019.

¹⁹ See the YouTube commercial song, ‘Alama, 2021.



Fig. 3: Noor City advertisement “the first residential city with the future’s technology”
Photo: Khaled Adham, 2021.

appears as one of its residents. Using music and songs in advertising is not new. Music serves the function of making any commodity, including the property offerings of Madinaty, more memorable to viewers as the melody, lyrics, and associated images, places, and lifestyles of the development linger in their minds.²⁰

Building on its successful previous projects, and in partnership with NUCA, the Talaat Mostafa Group is currently introducing another mega desert project, namely, “Noor City.” Branded as a smart, eco-friendly city, the new 2,000-hectare development promises to be “a leap in the real estate and urban development map in Egypt.”²¹ Like all other projects of similar magnitude, the announcement of the new desert development was followed by a vigorous advertising campaign, which included street billboards that one finds today on most major roads and highways in and around Cairo (see Fig. 3 and 4). Like Emaar’s carefully planned showroom objectives, these billboards carry a similar message establishing the

²⁰ See Huron, 1989.

²¹ Talaat Mostafa Group, 2021; see also this company’s webpage for images of the project.



Fig. 4: Noor City advertisement establishes a memory of the promised future and communicates the financial objectives of the investor

Photo: Khaled Adham, 2021.

memory of the promised future and communicating the financial objectives of the investor.

3.2 Urban Lifestyle Script

If we believe that these images and promotional and advertising materials contain messages about the future they portray, then what are these messages? And how do they connect the future and the present? Consider one representative rendering from the scores of images produced for various desert developments, namely, the iconic Ring Gate, as it is called. Designed as an arch to cross over a three-lane bi-directional highway forming a western gate to the New Administrative City, the Ring, with its unique shape and urban setting, is meant to signify Egyptian inno-

vative capabilities, as the project website tells us.²² The highway that passes below the building is flanked by service roads in both directions, with generic renderings of high-rise buildings lining up on the sides, and with more high-rise buildings in the far distance. On one side, one sees a metro line, confirming the connectivity of the new city and the availability of rapid transit systems, a hallmark of sustainable urban developments. Lush green areas are dispersed throughout this image, along with various representational images of the future city. The central spine of the city is planned as a continuous stretch of green spaces, which are supposedly double the area of Central Park in New York City. In short, the overall impression that the viewer gets from the various visualisations of the iconic building constructions supports the memory of a future capital city that will be modern, connected, innovative, ordered, green, clean, and spacious.

While it might be argued that the ultra-realistic image is reminiscent of urban environments in other regional cities, particularly Dubai, I contend that any semblance lies in the peculiar way these architectural presentational instruments have been transformed into present-day “urban lifestyle script” materials that can be used to make the future durable and legible for the here and now. By “urban lifestyle script,” I mean the loosely shared expectations of a global-oriented class of citizens about the quality of certain lifestyle forms in a prototypical global city.²³ They comprise a framework for a good urban environment in the global city: green parks, fancy houses and loft apartments, sleek restaurants, various cultural venues, music scenes, sports complexes, conference halls, business parks, efficient transportation network, etc.²⁴ To simulate future urban lifestyle script in the produced visual representations, the makers of these images actually rely on their memories of other environments. This is how the past, the present, and the future are entangled. Let me explain.

Recent studies in cognitive psychology have shown that imagining or simulating the future relies on many of the same cognitive and neural processes as remembering past events and places. “Future simulations,” write Daniel Schacter and Kevin Madore, “are built on retrieved details of specific past experiences that are recombined into novel events.”²⁵ All of these details come from our memory of direct past experiences, similar depictions in cultural imageries and events, circulating images in the media, or the shared memories of others. Like remembering an event from the past, when we imagine a place we might experience in the

²² For images of the iconic Ring, see Cube Consultants, 2021.

²³ This explanation has its starting point in the concept of “cultural life script.” See Schank and Abelson, 1977.

²⁴ See Zukin, 1996.

²⁵ Schacter and Madore, 2016: 245.

future, we are essentially “pre-living” that scene. And just as memories are more detailed the more recent they are, imagined future scenes are more detailed the nearer in the future they are. But when people try to imagine the more distant future (or past), cognitive psychologists tell us, they tend to rely heavily on “cultural life scripts.”²⁶ By this they mean the skeleton or framework of progression of events that a life in a certain culture is expected to contain. In Egypt, for example, the cultural life script for a typical young Egyptian male adult is something like this: go to school, go to college, find a job, get married, move out of one's parents' residence, have kids, retire, ...etc. These are milestones with which young Egyptians will generally tell their life story, using them as a framework. In a similar vein, I will argue that the makers of these developments have relied on prescriptive components (milestones), which order what they collectively have imagined to be the good, modern, global city life. These milestones are the building blocks they have used to construct their urban vision of the future global city in the surrounding deserts of Cairo. From this perspective, the visual connection forged between the iconic Ring and other cities, such as Dubai, can be interpreted in the sense that their makers are using similar urban lifestyle scripts, as both cities aspire to respond to the same global cities' audiences. Moreover, I will argue that there is an important functional aspect that connects the use of visualisations, such as the one described above, with other global cities emerging under the neoliberal economic paradigm. Functionally, the memory that is created with these ultra-realistic visualisations is a memory of the future – seen as a generic global city – in the here and now. This constructed memory of the future matches and is necessary for the workings of an economy that is increasingly turning towards the future, and more precisely, towards extracting economic value from the future.

4 The Future-Oriented Economy

Adam Hanieh tells us that the term “financialisation” has emerged in recent years as a conceptual framework to describe and analyse the transformations taking place within contemporary capitalism.²⁷ While finance has always been part of capitalism, contends Hanieh, it is in the past three decades that we observe an expansion of the financial sector over the other sectors of the economy and a pronounced shift in the degree and magnitude to which the accumulation of profits

²⁶ See Berntsen and Rubin, 2004.

²⁷ See Hanieh, 2016.

“pivots around financial processes.”²⁸ Moreover, it is argued that since the 1970s land and housing have increasingly become financialised.²⁹ This is so, because they are considered assets with high-quality collateral that can absorb the surplus capital generated through finance. The expansion of finance, or financialisation, in these analyses corresponds to a particular growing globally dominant form of economic neoliberalism.³⁰

One of the important issues raised in the various rising analyses of financialisation of the economy is the temporal dimension and the economic logic and orientation that follow from it. All the instruments, techniques, and innovations in finance are intrinsically time- or future-oriented. For example, finance is a promise of future wealth; a credit is a promise to repay a debt in the future; and a financial asset is a promise of future value.³¹ Thus, the logical argument about temporality constructed here revolves around the following statement: because of the increasing financialisation of the global economy, its logic has turned towards the future, towards extracting economic value from the future. David Harvey, for example, argues that this future-oriented wealth extraction was capitalism’s response to the politics of wage repression and stagnation in the 1970s in the US and the UK.³² By pumping up the credit economy, argues Harvey, capitalism overcame the barrier of declining effective demand. And much of this created credit went into the housing market through the ever-expanding financial institutes. It is important to highlight that the financialisation of real estate should not be understood, however, as a process that unfolds uniformly across geographical spaces; rather, it is a process that is fundamentally fragmented, path-dependent, and variegated.³³ This raises the following questions: how is the housing market in Egypt responding to these global trends? Is the housing market in Egypt financialised?

The housing market in Egypt has a set of locally relevant policies, forces, and actors that shape and configure housing provision in general and housing financing in particular, with its associated current or future value extraction mechanism. For over four decades in Egypt, there has been a mismatch between the market prices and the ability of most income groups to purchase a home, particularly given that most of the customers in the market are cash buyers who have no recourse to institutionalised housing financing. True, there have been several attempts during the past two decades to expand the effective demand through the

²⁸ Hanieh, 2016: 1228.

²⁹ See Aalbers, 2016.

³⁰ See Palley, 2013.

³¹ See Lazzarato, 2012: 45.

³² See Harvey, 2006.

³³ See Aalbers 2006: 1–6.

promotion of a mortgage finance market, for example, by establishing in 2001 a regulatory body, the Mortgage Finance Authority. These efforts were even extended further when the Central Bank of Egypt, supported by a fund from the World Bank, launched a nearly 700-million-USD initiative (doubled a year later) to stimulate home financing for low- and middle-income Egyptians.³⁴ While these initiatives managed to attract a few thousand customers, their reach remains far below their intended target, making the mortgage penetration rate in the country very negligible. Moreover, most of these initiatives do not cover the high-end market category, where listed developers typically operate and to which all new desert developments cater entirely, attested by the prices of houses offered relative to Egyptian average yearly incomes.

The most common financing arrangement in the high-end market in Egypt today is the deferred instalment system, by which the developer sells a housing unit and receives a down payment of around ten to twenty-five per cent of the total purchasing price, followed by instalments over a period ranging from five to fifteen years.³⁵ The title is formally transferred when the last instalment is paid. There are three important points to emphasise here: first, developers operating in Egypt tend to begin construction once they secure the necessary number of buyers, meaning that most of their sales are off-plan, hence the importance of visualisations in the making of their projects. Though not legally pending, it is with these visualisations that customers are induced to sign contracts with developers. Second, the instalment system forms a barrier to capital accumulation, as it ties up the funds of developers, who would rather invest in new projects and who can be constrained by an adverse cycle of real estate markets. This is one reason why the mortgage system has been pushed: to resolve this problem of capital. Third, because large-scale developers' offerings are mainly in the high-end housing market, these large instalment plans usually cater only to a specific market segment: upper-middle-income groups of Egyptians and expatriates in the Gulf countries, Arab investors, and speculators, who compose the primary customer targets of developers. In 2015, for example, most listed developers targeted salaried workers who earn an annual average of 600,000 EGP (nearly 40,000 USD as of August 2021) and are willing to pay around forty per cent of this amount on housing – notice that the national average household income during the same time was less than one-tenth of this amount.³⁶

³⁴ See Al-Aees 2019.

³⁵ All methods and figures are subject to change, depending on the level of saturation in the housing market and the size and experience of the developer.

³⁶ Compare OBG, 2016.

To sum up this point, the developers of desert developments are using visualisation and promotional techniques to sell their housing units, not at the cost of construction (including profit), but at the discounted value of the instalment payments that they are charging its future occupants or buyers. As Timothy Mitchell argues, since this future revenue exceeds the cost of construction, the difference is presented as the future value of land itself.³⁷ Today, turning the future into a revenue stream in the present is partially operating through developers and is promoted and maintained by the various visualisations produced for their large-scale desert developments.

5 Parting Thought: The Power of the Speculative Image

The value of any land stems from both its current use and the expectations for its future, its locational potential in relation to its wider economic and political milieu. As an economic asset, its current price reflects these future expectations. By constructing images of a durable, attractive future, these various visualisations and experiential methods intend to create a social interest and raise the expectations for that geographic future in the present and thereby increase, or decrease (if they should be unsuccessful), the lands' economic and political values. But these visualisations are not only about the future; they are also about the present. Because they reflect the design choices of their makers in the present, they collectively function like a mirror. They imply both the construction of a future world and of a way of seeing ourselves in it – at once a window and a mirror. Every visualisation used is therefore a means of choosing, testing, confirming, and constructing a total view of what is considered a good life now. Because these visualisations reflect the way we want to transform our present lives to produce a future, they are indeed cultural artefacts imbricated in the politics of social change. The political economy of the reality, comprehended through these computer-generated visualisations and other promotional materials produced, conjures a window of a future in these particular geographic locations that is limited to a small fraction of society, while millions of other Cairenese can only peek into these promised futures on billboards or TV commercials, living in a reality that the well-to-do struggle to grasp.

³⁷ See Mitchell, 2016.

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