

## **Visual Communication and the Professional City: From Street Billboards to Offices of Urban Planning in Cairo**

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Visual communication in urban planning and design disciplines is the main form of creating as well as exchanging ideas and interpretations about the urban environment, not only among planners and architects, but also between them and the general public (Steets, 2015; Langendorf, 1992; Al-Kodmany, 2002). Many urban scholars in Egypt have also addressed the role of visualizations and graphics in planning as well as in communication (e.g., Selim, 2015; Abotera & Ashoub, 2017).

Today, by simply walking in the streets of Cairo or tuning into one of the national TV channels, one is captured by hundreds of real estate billboards and TV ads that share certain characteristics. These can be summarized in two points: promoting moving out of Cairo and buying a new apartment or villa in a new city or a nearby compound, and the use of almost the same visual symbols (i.e., 3-D models of the apartments overlooking a big green area, swimming pools, shopping centers etc.) that project what the future city will look like. According to a media scholar interviewed in Cairo, "In Egypt, there is no communication or open invitation to discuss urban planning issues or projects, but rather, there are only advertisings from investors or news from the state." On one hand, this reflects the common narratives/images of the city publicly communicated in Egypt, which do not always comply with the current diverse urban realities (e.g., El Kadi, 1988). On the other hand, this is connected to Andreas Hepp's concept of "mediatized worlds" which in his words "points to the fact that the articulation of meaning in an everyday life-world is unquestionably interwoven with the processes of media communication. Within mediatized worlds the moulding forces of media are a constitutive part of their social construction" (Hepp, 2010: 41). Within these discourses, street billboards are largely connected to the discussions on visual public communication, as well as current discussions about mediatization (the social changes as a result of dependency on media, media culture and society (Hepp & Krotz, 2014) (see also: Hepp, 2010; Krotz, 2007).

The above introduction exposes the significant role visualizations play in planning and designating cities; however, to what extent these dominant narratives and visuals impact/construct professional planning practice is still under-researched. At the same time, the current discussions about mediatization and urban planning are usually directed towards the emergence of smart cities or the last generation of 5G ( e.g. Kourtit & Nijkamp, 2012; Watson, 2015). While this paper is positioned within the same discussions, it aims to discuss something as simple as street billboards before talking about the internet of things. Billboards in this sense are not only perceived as a final

product but as embedded in a network which employs agency in creating the presented visuality, both in the physical and mental/imaginary space.

This inquiry is developed through adapting an assemblage ontology and using Actor-Network-Theory (ANT), starting from the street billboards as a representation of the urban-visual experience and going backward to planning offices which create part of the billboard content (the promoted 3-D rendered images). According to Patsy Healy (2013), 'systems' are "no longer imagined as discrete, integrated and equilibrium-seeking, but as overlapping and conflicting in different ways" (Healy, 2013: 1514). In a similar sense and derived from Latour's recommendation to 'follow the actor' (Latour, 2005: 68), this paper adapts a reverse/backward process to unravel the layers behind the construction of street billboards as a spatial phenomenon (product) and the embedded action which produces them (Figure 1).

Using ANT, urban visualizations and media are perceived as both the method for research and the method for understanding planning practice and planners' role accordingly. The paper aims to study planning through analyzing the communications adopted, the media tools employed, and the media assemblages created instead of merely studying the employment of media in urban planning. To give an example of how different media enroll network partners/the public differently, a two-way interactive media tool, such as the use of digital platforms that allow customer feedback, entails a participatory planning process, while a one-way media tool like TV advertising or street billboards reflects a classical planning process<sup>(1)</sup>.

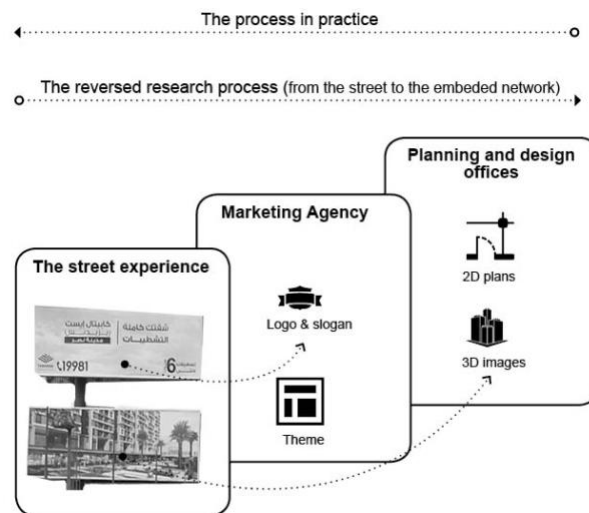


Figure 1 The research process (following the billboard)

The paper argues that there are different media assemblages that are used/employed by different actors/actor groups – and that through the specific assemblages of media one can reflect on (1) planning practice – how planning is done, (2) the kind of city planners see/plan and (3) the kind of public sphere they co-produce/are part of. Accordingly, the research questions that guide this study are: What planning knowledge is communicated to the general public (on street billboards in Cairo)? How is this knowledge constructed (in planning offices)? What is the influence of the constructed media assemblages in these processes?

### **Methodology, scope and approach**

The article follows a qualitative exploratory methodology. Data were collected through various methods including participant observations and visual analysis of Cairo billboards as an outdoor advertising tool to obtain a general overview of the publicly mediated city images/messages. The billboards on the sides of 6th October Bridge were used as a case study for this investigation as it is the longest bridge in Egypt. This analysis was conducted in November 2018 on a sample of 209 billboards. Simultaneously, interviews with media experts were conducted to understand what planning knowledge is generally communicated to the general public. Moreover, and in order to investigate how this knowledge is constructed, interviews and field visits to planning offices in Cairo were conducted.

The collected data was analyzed and is presented using the Actor Network Theory (ANT) approach. ANT was developed by Bruno Latour and Michal Callon in the 1990s as a methodological approach that draws on assemblage philosophy to analyze the interaction of human/social elements and non-human/material/technological elements in a network. According to Latour (2005), “A good ANT account is a narrative or a description or a proposition where all the actors do something and don’t just sit there” (Latour, 2005: 128). In this sense, the actor is defined as “any element which bends space around itself, makes other elements dependent upon itself and translates their will into the language of its own” (Callon & Latour, 1981: 286). This therefore allows the consideration of agency in all elements or in other words, the elements' power or ability to impact the process (Carroll, et al., 2012; Ratnayake, et al., 2016; Sun, 2015; Healy, 2013). Nevertheless, ANT has been criticized for giving agency to non-human actants. It is claimed that maybe non-human actants have affordance and can invite potential action, not that they can totally act independently. This is considered the main critique of assemblage theory in general and ANT in particular (Storper & Scott, 2016). Moreover, ANT is criticized for its apolitical and descriptive nature as it fails to explain events or processes and does not show causes and effects. Furthermore, while ANT explains the relationships within a network, its claimed that it does not explain how or why they emerge (Chavarría & Stollmann, 2018). However, it is important to mention that making all human and non-human elements active in the network provides new insights not only

on the network but also on its elements. In fact, by paying attention to the material world and acknowledging the agency of both human and non-human actants, planning visualizations are investigated in this paper from a new angle. Accordingly, the extra value of using ANT in this paper is that it makes it possible to perceive the agency of billboards, which cannot be grasped through traditional media analysis in the public space.

### **The global context of planning practice and the comparability of Cairo**

The profession of planning is conceived of as manifold. It is not only attached to creating plans, solving design problems but also to the execution of plans. Traditionally, a planner would use seminal media to perform this task and, in the end, to implement those plans. Historically and even globally, planning practice had in it its tools and media that worked on impacting the whole discourse in the public sphere, but recently in various cases in the global north and south, one can see this activity of producing visualizations become rather media than its construction impact. In fact, a lot of plans remain at the media stage and never turn out to actual plans. Maybe, this is because of the mediatization of everyday life and politics. In this sense, the studying of urban planning in Cairo is a manifestation to similar phenomena. Accordingly, in Cairo where I look at how projects gain political importance in the public realm through means related to the planning process. In this case, it is aimed to look further at how in the process of communicating urban plans, the urban reality is rendered invisible. This global tendency about how the planning profession works can be looked at more specifically in Cairo given my access to resources in it as well as my background of studying urban planning and working in planning practice in it.

On the other hand, various literature in the time being studies how different contexts are bound with one another and how inequalities are similarly produced worldwide. For example the work of Cindi Patz on the economic situation of the USA and Africa. At the same time, in a similar way of diffusing the divisions between humans-objects from an ANT perspective, in this paper, it is intended to also break down the local-global scales as well as the north-south classifications. It is argued that this is particularly relevant in the contemporary age as we continue to live in an age that is characterized by being highly globalized and mediatized (see Friedmann, 2005; Healy, 2012; Healy, 2013; Hepp 2013; McLuhan, et al 1967; Watson, 2016). Accordingly, this research findings contribute on one side to the general debate about mediatization and the public sphere. On the other side, this study adds also to the global discussion on neoliberal urbanism.

### **The context of billboards on the 6th October Bridge**

An outdoor advertising tool, billboards in Cairo play a significant role in communicating news, ads and campaigns in Egypt. They show what and who is made (in)visible (Abotera & Ashoub, 2017) as well as "conveying meaning and providing order to the landscape" (Venturi, et al., 1977). In Cairo, billboards are present on streets, highways and bridges.

The billboards on the sides of 6th October Bridge were used as a case study to understand the position of visual communication in Cairo. 6th October Bridge was constructed in 1980 and is 18.705 kilometers long. It ranges from 14-34 meters wide (Arab Contractors, 2014), and is currently crossed by more than 500,000 persons daily (Osama, 2017). The map and images in Figure 2 provide an aerial view and the atmosphere of the bridge.

The bridge is located in the center of Cairo, linking its key areas, and is accessible by cars only. The bridge physically connects the old and new areas/city, creating a communicative situation for the targeted public who use it. Given that only 9.34% of Egyptians own a car (CAPMAS in Arham Online, 2017; Worldometers, 2019), by considering the location of the bridge in contrast to who can get into it, it is shown that the bridge presents an exclusive space. This reflects the complex socio-cultural assemblages of moving people, cars and specific visual impressions which accordingly reflect the specific physical and communicative situation that is highlighted in this study. By putting the billboards in the center of this communicative situation and perceiving them as an actor in the network, it becomes of interest to study how the billboards produce a space that reproduces those who are involved in their design and construction – the city and its inhabitants.



*Figure 2 Aerial view and images of the billboards on the sides of 6th October bridge in Cairo*

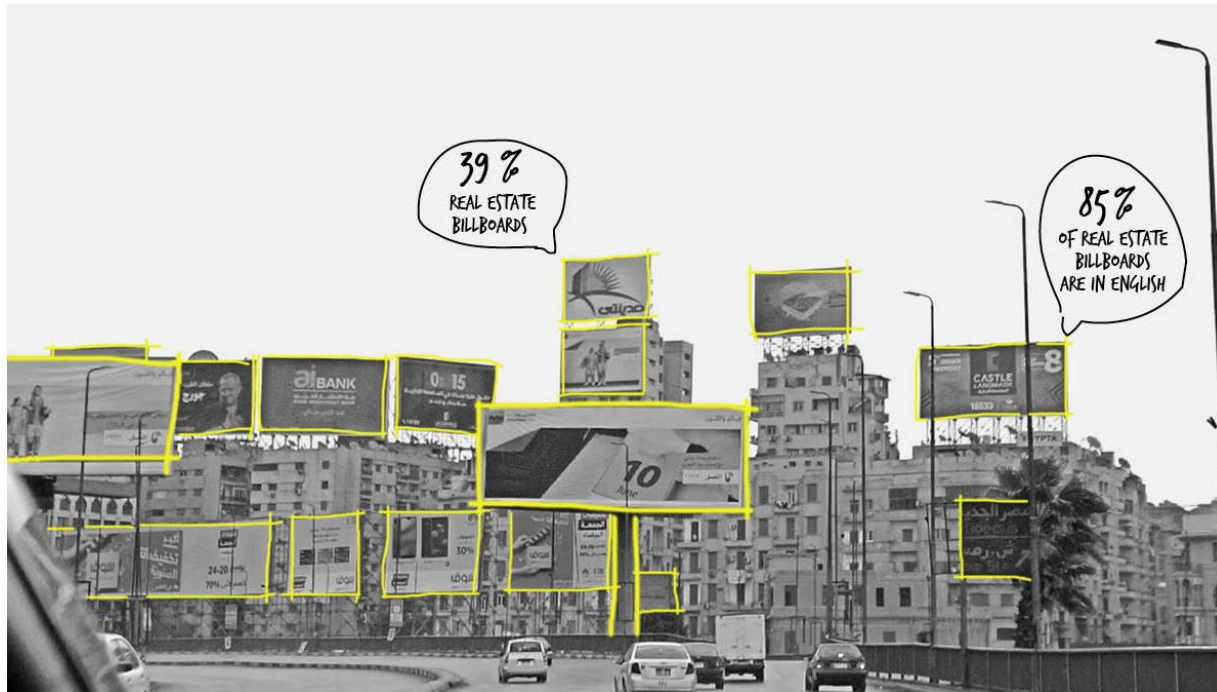
### **The physiognomy of real estate billboards on Cairo's bridge**

A sample of 209 billboards on 6th October Bridge in Cairo was investigated from four angles: the language used on billboards, the content of the billboards, the patterns of real estate billboards and the geo-positioning of the billboards in reference to the advertising communicated through them.

The analysis of the 6th October Bridge showed that around 40 % of the analyzed 209 billboards were real estate ads, of which a striking 85% were in the English language, 10% were bilingual and only 5% were in the Arabic language. Figure 3 shows photographs of the billboards on the bridge and an overview of these statistics. Simultaneously, the study of the bridge showed the names of 23 Real Estate projects/developers, 21 of which were Western (English and French names), with only 2



developer names in the Arabic Language (Amer and Emaar). Nevertheless, Emaar as a developer company (Arabic name) offered two real estate projects that utilized non-Arabic names (Mivida and Uptown Cairo) and one Arabic named project (Marrassi). Similarly, Amer as a developer company (Arabic name) offered a series of real estate projects that were promoted under the name of “Porto”, a non-Arabic word (Porto Cairo, Porto Marina, Porto Sokhna, etc.). In a country with an almost 75 % illiteracy rate (Egyptian Streets, 2014), billboards in the English language – nor do Arabic ones – target the majority of the population.



*Figure 3 Analysis of the content and language of the bridge billboards (Author)*

Figure 3 also shows how far the billboard advertising affects the street experience of the general public passing by the bridge. Moreover, it shows the influence of the billboards over the built environment nearby, as they are constructed on the facades and rooftops of the buildings. In the same vein, Abotera and Ashoub (2017) discuss the dominance and exclusivity of billboards in Egypt, describing them as “reproducing nature and dominating spaces of representation”. They argue that billboards focus on marketing the scarce resources of water and greenery in the Egyptian urban environment (Abotera & Ashoub, 2017). The analysis in this paper also shows that the promise of green living was one of the main messages continuously observed on the bridge billboards. In addition, other messages that dominated the billboards were communicated through the names and slogans of the real estate projects promoted by the billboards. As an example: 'Castle land mark....More space better life', ' The Ridge Villas....Elevated life', La Fontaine....Live the water front', 'Stella Park....Every home with a view', etc. On the

one hand, this again illustrates the dominance of English and French names. On the other hand, it demonstrates the nature of the promises communicated through the billboard advertising. In ANT terms, billboards as a material actant emphasize other material actants (water and greenery) and at the same time cover the nearby materials (the surrounding buildings).

Furthermore, during the investigation of the billboards on the bridge, two main patterns of real-estate billboards were observed (as seen in

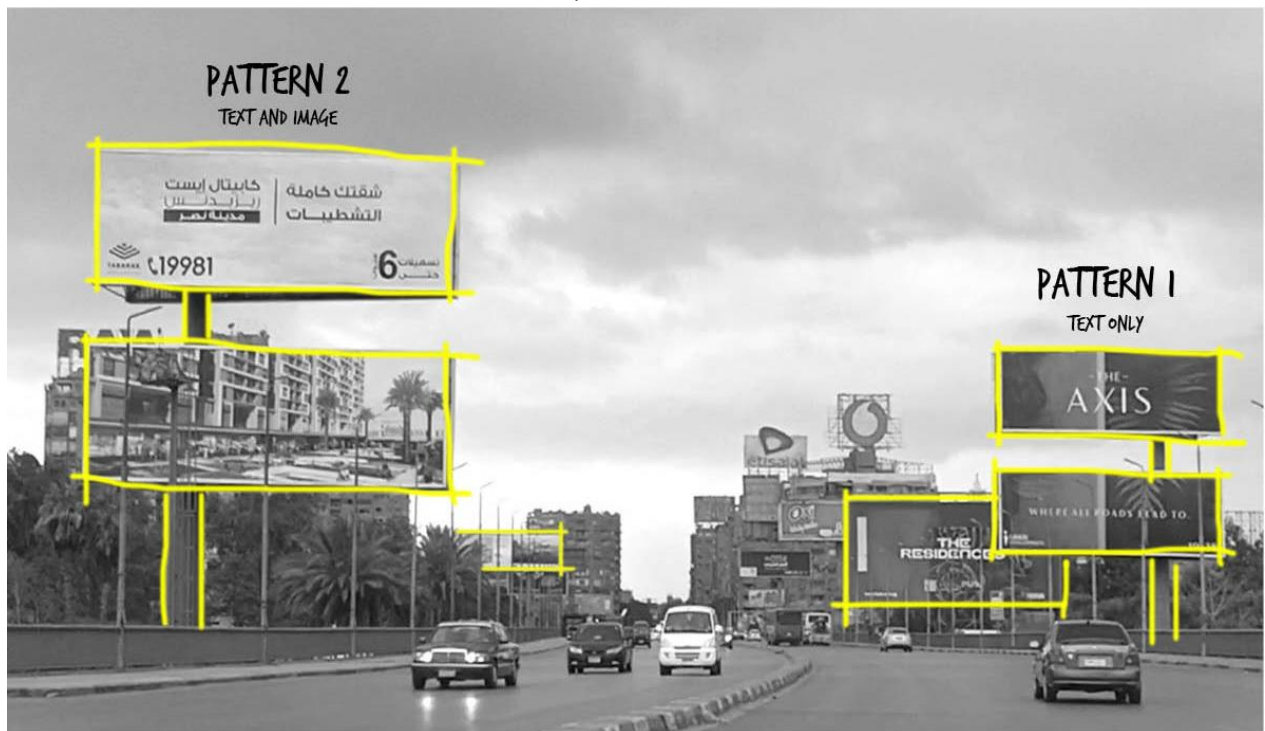


Figure 4). Pattern 1 included mostly text with the name and slogan of the communicated project, the contact information of the developer, his/her logo and slogan. Pattern 2 included this text in addition to 3-D rendered image(s) of the communicated project. These images visualized the promises mentioned above and were generated by the commissioned planning offices.



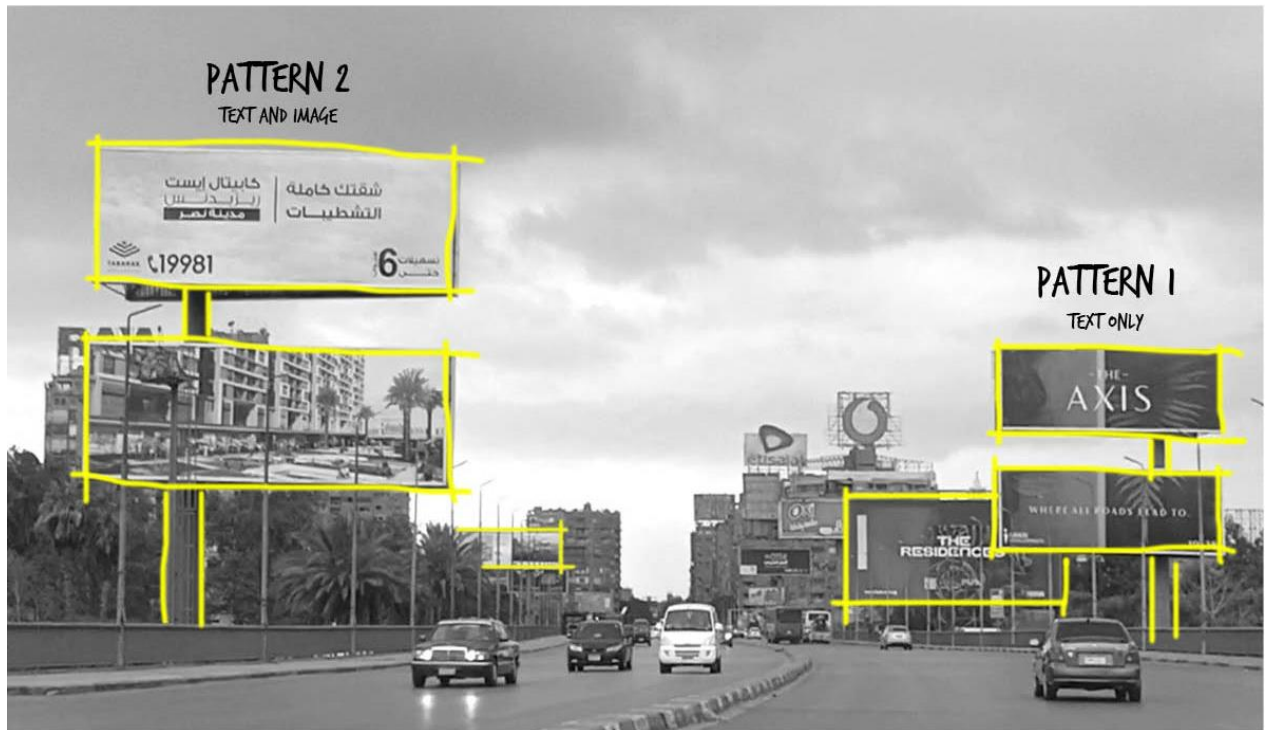


Figure 4 Patterns of real-estate billboards in Cairo (Author)

By looking more closely at the images communicated through the billboards, it was found that most of the images involved large green spaces, a number of trees, and water features. At the same time, very few of the billboards involved inhabitants, who if present, reflected a high socio-economic status. By looking from a wider perspective at the context of the advertising communicated through the billboards, the geolocations of the ads were determined and are presented in Figure 5.

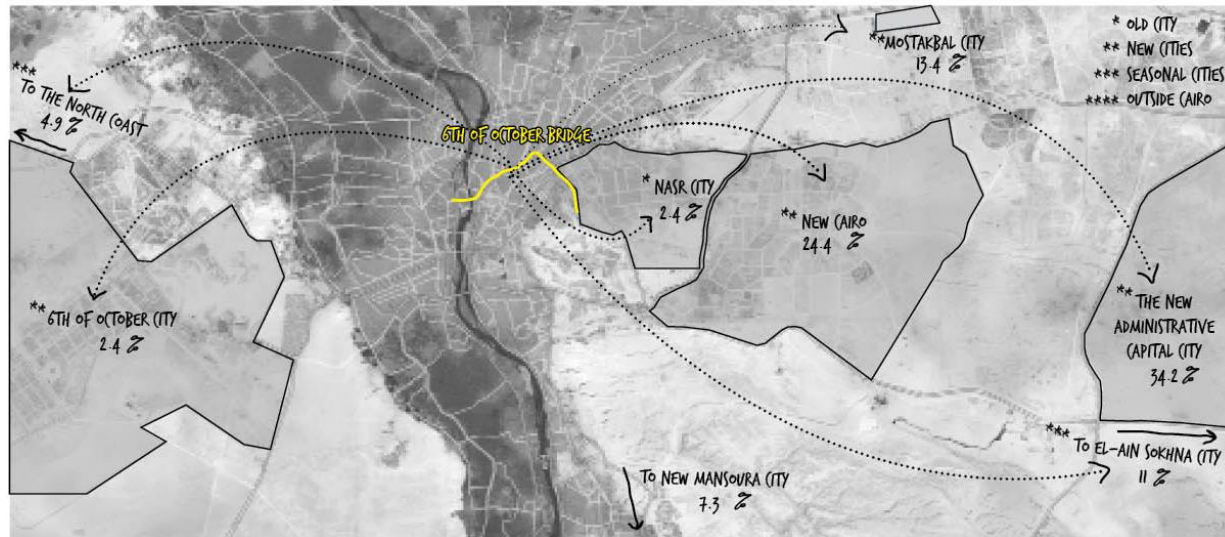


Figure 5 Geolocations of 82 real estate ads (out of the studied sample of 209 billboards) (Author)

Figure 5 shows that 74.4% of the communicated ads were for projects in new cities versus 23.2% for seasonal projects, and 2.4% for projects in the old city. While this mapping shows that in terms of size, ads seem spatially relevant, in terms of population, only 2% move to new cities (Shawkat & Hendawy, 2016). This shows that the billboard ads were exclusively for only a minority of the general public, as well as showing that there is a need for massive infrastructure to build these new cities.

According to the CAPMAS, in 2019, it was noted that the private sector established 221,187 housing units with total investment of around LE 77.3 billion (Egypt Today staff, 2019). By assuming that families in Egypt are 4 persons. The 221,187 housing units accommodates around 56000 families. Given that, the price of one 16 x 10 m billboard in the Bridge costs 200,000 LE (Around 12,000 \$) per year (Al- Muhtwa newspaper, 2019). This also means that all of the advertising budget is allocated towards only 0.002 percent of the 100,972,073 Egyptian population (Worldometers, 2019). This accordingly raises several questions around the large size of these ads in contrast to how little the population is served in the end. The previous analysis shows that a highly targeted elite have invaded the public space. Therefore, the regular population are enrolled in not only the communication of these projects but also should in one way or another agree on them.

This deconstruction of the billboards reflects not only the kinds of messages they communicate but also the targeted audience. In a context with high illiteracy rates and most of the population living in informal areas (40% of the population in the Greater Cairo region live in informal areas [El-Shahat & Khateeb, 2013], and only 2% have moved to the promoted compounds [Shawkat & Hendawy, 2016]), the current billboards do not target, nor do they include, the majority of the population. Accordingly,

the symbolic icons and images communicated to the general public through the billboards during their everyday street encounters participate in creating an exclusive city perception. In the case of Cairo, the billboards target and are accessible to certain milieus of the society (in the case of the 6th October Bridge, those who understand the English language and own a car or use privileged transportations [Taxi or Uber] and pass over the bridge).

At the same time, the plurality of billboards standing densely on the bridge and in front of existing buildings creates a sonographic facade and shapes the physicality of the bridge. While the bridge, in its essence, is expected to provide its users with an aerial view of the city, the extensive use of billboards changes these expectations. This reforms the city scape into a commercial scape.

### **Following real estate billboards**

Assemblage is a philosophical framework proposed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (and later developed by Manuel DeLanda) that was originally presented in their book *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980). The book represents a bottom-up approach to the analysis of systems and explores 'socio-spatial complexities' (Kamalipour & Peimani, 2015: 402), highlighting flexibility and multifunctionality (DeLanda, 2016), which are observed to already exist in cities (see Alexander, 1964; Jacobs, 1961). In spite of the perception that assemblages are able to work as one unit, they in fact consist of separate components, and each component is able to function on its own (DeLanda, 2016). From an urban assemblage perspective, cities are viewed as "massive socio-technical artifacts, a multiple object where different realities meet, pointing towards a research practice focused on describing and analyzing the multiple enactments of the city" (Munthe-Kaa, 2017).

In this sense, billboards reflect the assemblage philosophy in general and urban assemblages in particular. A billboard itself is a form of assemblage that consists of different components, whereby if any of these components is not present, the assemblage will not function. Some of the components of a billboard include the billboard poster, its text, its images, its location, the advertising agency which rents it, the marketing office who designs its theme, the planning office which creates the 3-D rendered image, etc. Within the planning office that produce the images of future housing included in the billboards, there are also many other components that include urban planners, urban designers, administration, technical support, computers, software tools, printers, etc. The computers used in this planning aspect include other assemblages like the circuits in side them. Although the connection between circuits and billboards may look irrelevant, if there is no circuit in the network, the whole network will not function.

All of this represents only a few examples of the many components that form the billboard assemblages. Accordingly, a full ANT analysis of all actants who contribute to the assemblage of billboards would be too complicated. Therefore, the analysis in this paper takes a snapshot of the network and focuses only on a simple part of the network behind the billboard.

A standard actor analysis of the billboard would concentrate on the interaction between key social actors such as the urban planners who visualize the images of the billboard, the marketing agency which markets it, the general passerby public, the targeted public, etc. This is demonstrated in Figure 6 which illustrates the social actants in the billboard network. Looking at the network in this way alienates the role of material elements by perceiving them as only receivers/reactants to social actors.

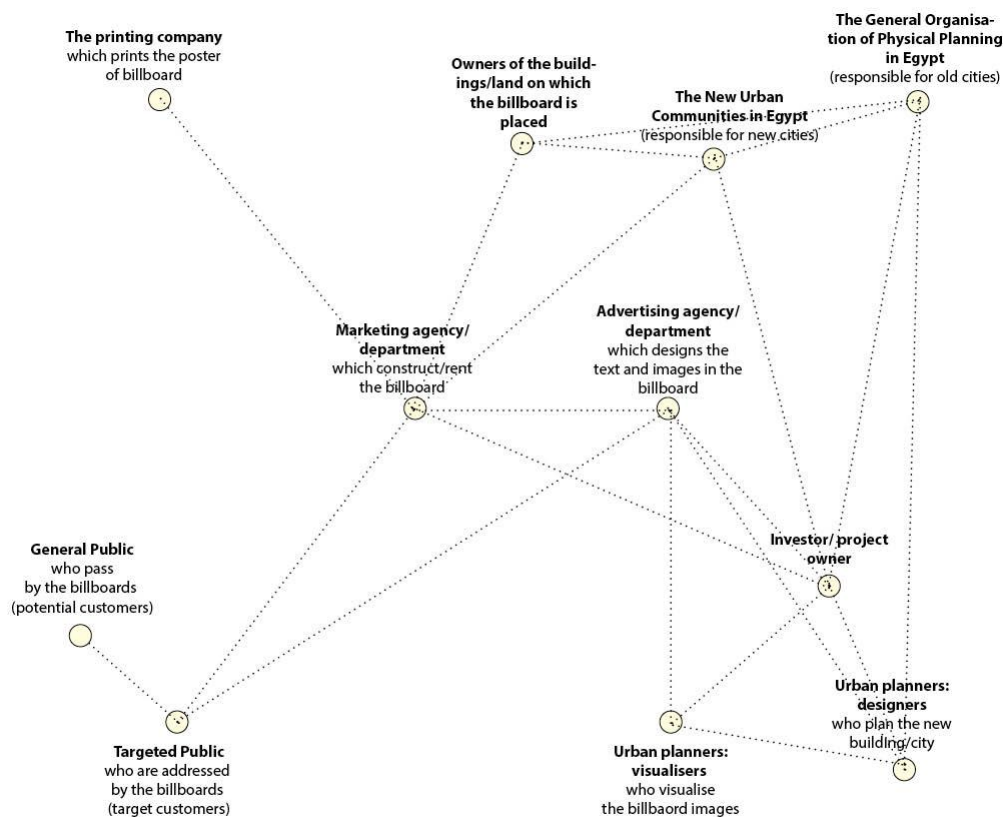


Figure 6 Visualizing the human actants in the billboards network

Therefore, to capture the equal role of material actants in the network, another scenario emerges. Figure 7 integrates the key non-human actants into the social network presented in the previous figure. In this mapping, other material actants become an integral part of the network, such as the billboard text/theme, the construction of the billboard, the buildings on which the billboard is placed, advertising codes and legislations, the paper or poster on which the billboard is printed, the images produced by planning offices and selected by the marketing agency, the computer software used

to create these images, etc. One of the many observations that arise from looking at the network in this way is how materials actants are also actors in the network. For example, the initially produced images by planners also co-produce the final billboards and the planners who produce them.

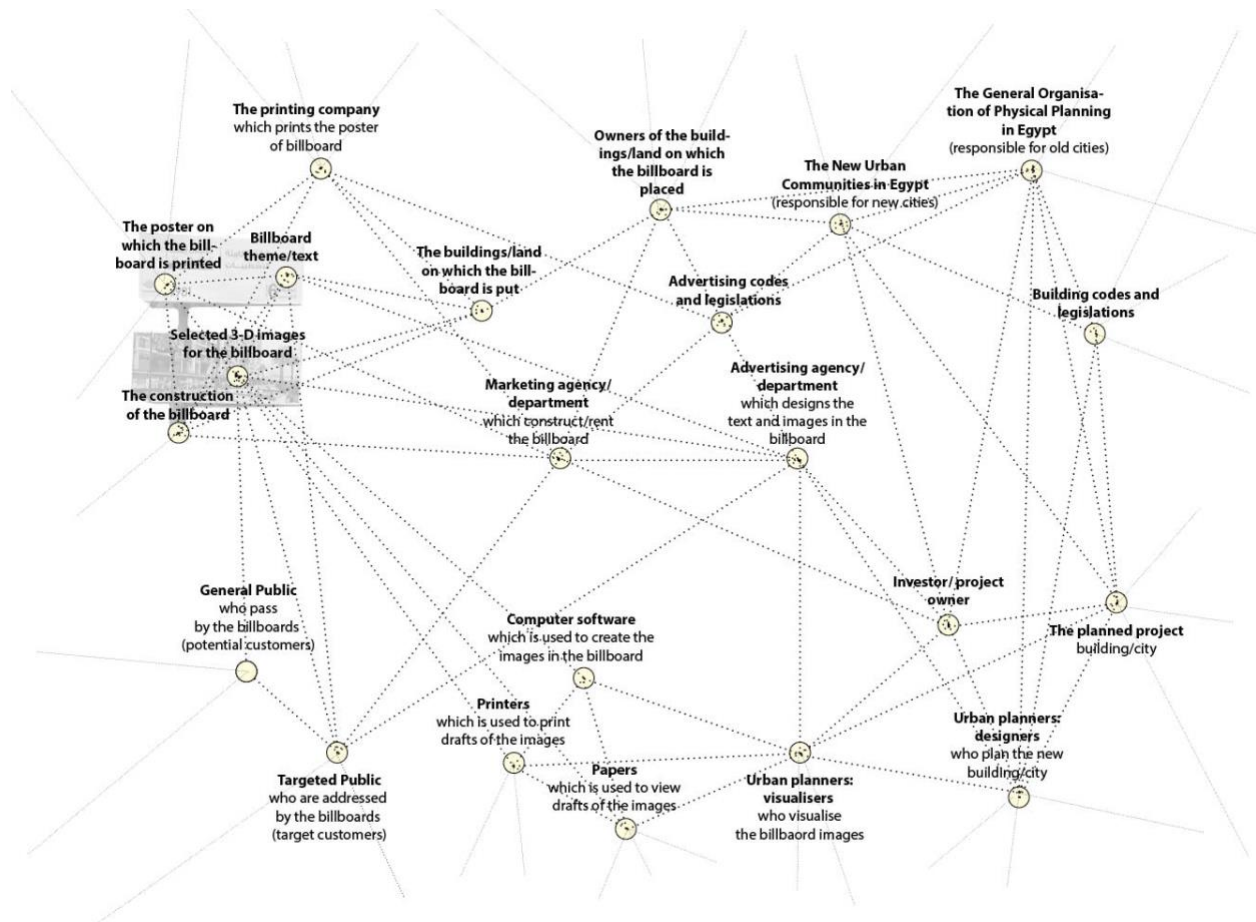


Figure 7 Following the never-ending network of billboard through an ANT perspective (Author)

This ANT diagram takes away the centrality of social actors and illustrates the interaction and interdependence of both social and material actants in the billboard network. The communication flow among actors indicates a lack of direct communication between planners and the general as well as targeted public. Marketing and advertising agencies have become the connecting social actor while the use of 3-D images in the billboards that are produced by planners have become the connecting material actant. This refutes the current global demands for communicative, collaborative and participatory planning practices where a direct communication between planners and those they plan for is expected (Rietbergen-McCracken, 2003; Cilliers & Timmermans, 2014; Healy, 1996).

ANT provides a different view whereby in the construction of billboards, there is not only the abstract interaction of social actors, but other assemblages are also involved, such

as knowledge, economy, text, images, etc. However, ANT represents only an illustration of the interaction of actors, with little reflection on how and why this interaction is constructed (Latour, 1999). Accordingly, and in order to study how these actants function in relation to one another, and how they engage each other in the network, the next section reflects on planning practice in Egypt, the kind of city Egyptian planners see/plan and the kind of public sphere they co-produce/are part of.

### **From street billboards to the offices of urban planning in Cairo**

Media plays a large role in the construction of our daily images, framed stereotypes, city perception and the defined standards of a beautiful design (Regan, et al., 2006). As an example of these media, street billboards are becoming more and more a part of the urban landscape in Cairo and hence reshaping the visual experience of the city (ElRouby, 2015). This study has shown that most of these billboards are occupied by real-estate ads. And while the theme of these billboards is mainly created by advertising agencies, the 3-D images that are used as content are developed by urban planners.

Offices of urban planning work meet these market needs by making sure that the appointed urban planners have visualization skills. In this context, most jobs call for urban planners to master the use of computer visualization software like 3D max and photoshop. According to an interview with a recent graduate, conducted as part of this study, "We are asked to be visualizers not designers or planners" (Interviewee 1, 2018). At the same time an owner for an architecture and planning office in Cairo mentioned "I build my image based on the mentality of the sales agency; this is paralyzing" This shows how the role of urban planners in Egypt has been reconstructed. which simultaneously impacts the process of planning itself by being highly dependent on the use of visualizations. To a large extent, this redefines the self-understanding of planners concerning their practice. During the interviews conducted for this study, many practicing planners highlighted that in this setting, investors drive the planning process and there is no place for a scientific urban planning process; rather, there is only 'urban media generated by planners'.

At the same time, although there are other types of planning projects of a developmental social nature, they are not seen in Cairo streets, nor in most of the profit planning offices. Simultaneously, the previous analysis demonstrated that the media employed uses a language spoken by a minority of the Egyptian population. In other words, the public (the mass public including planners) can be described "by territorial dispersal with synchronicity of attention" (Brighenti, 2010, p. 73). In this sense, it is claimed that, "If designers become aware of their networked practice, they avoid reproducing existing power constellations unknowingly. Plus, they become more



receptive for the expertise and knowledge types of the so-called lay people, amateurs or opponents" (Chavarría & Stollmann, 2018, p. 46). However, the previous analysis also shows that the practice of urban planning and the planner's communication with and connection to the general public are accordingly limited to an exclusive view of the city. This outlines the type of exclusive public spheres urban planners produce and at the same time construct/are part of.

The case of Cairo shows that planners are highly influenced by media assemblages rather than influencing them. In ANT terms, the influence of the network is always stronger than [the planner] singularities. This demonstrates how media co-construct the urban and urban planners and immerse the general public in certain exclusive dreams. On one hand, this raises questions about where and when and how other types of urban planning projects are communicated to the general public. On the other hand, it discloses the agency of the billboard and its ability to act at a distance (Alexander & Silvis, 2014; Latour, 1987)<sup>(2)</sup> which reflects how these media assemblages impact discussions on cities both from a citizen and planner point of view.

All of this has reshaped the role of urban planners; their role is not only to plan and design future buildings and cities but also to visualize the future of those new projects. This reflects the changing profession of the planner. Ultimately, visualizations are not a task that planners do on the side; it has in fact become their main role. In one way or another, visualizing and visualizations have become a strain on the professional self-understanding of planners. Even urban planning students have started to appoint external offices to visualize their student projects. The problem that this creates is the invisibility this visibility (lack of diversity) creates. Accordingly, in the process of constructing the images/visualizations of the 'professional city' in the billboards, planning practice and planners themselves are closely linked (Figure 10).

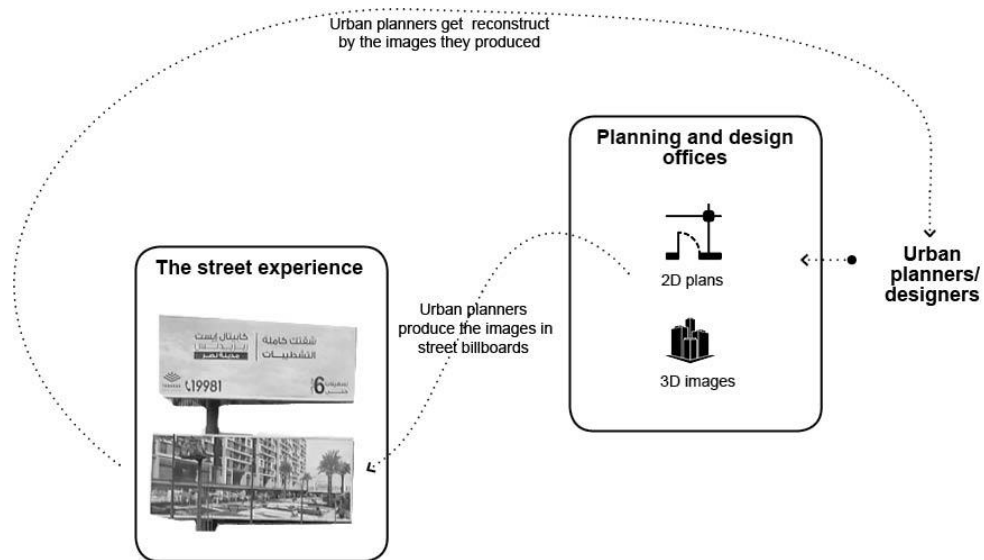


Figure 8 Production and reproduction processes of planners and the billboards (Author)

## Conclusion

This study provides a first look at the communicative network of urban projects in Cairo written from the perspective of assemblages and human/non-human actants – using ANT to tell the story of how media co-constructs the urban in Egypt. In general, different actants are formed between human and non-human actors (media) in relation to different communicative situations. Taking the city streets as an example, it becomes of interest to analyze how the state, planners, investors, images, billboards and the ground on which they are located come together to construct an extraordinary presence of an otherwise marginal urban phenomenon – middle and upper class communities. Evocative names and 3-D visualizations in many forms ( including billboards, TV, planning documents) and associations with other actors shift attention, finances, policies in a specific direction enrolling also the majority of planners

The planning knowledge that is communicated to the general public in Cairo's streets is shown to mostly consist of 3-D rendered urban images with English or French slogans promising a greener and bluer future. Meanwhile, the contact between planners and the general public does not go beyond these images, which are usually filtered by the advertising agencies. There is always a medium in between planners and the public with no possibility for conversation or feedback. In this context, the general public are excluded but at the same time targeted. This is certainly a conflicting relationship.

Nevertheless, planners are constantly met with the images they produce in the streets (which are also emphasized by their education and the omnipresence of similar images all over the streets). This means that planners themselves are caught in reproducing what they produce (the market). The study does not show how planners influence the public through their 3-D images, but rather how planners are embedded and enrolled and impacted by what they produce. Viewing planners from this perspective takes away the blame from planners as they become part of a communicative situation that they themselves are probably not aware of. Latour uses the metaphor of a dance to describe the process, stating "when the movement stops, the dance ends but, of course, the actants have been changed" (Latour, 2005: 37) Therefore, in a way, planners visualize plans and after doing so, these images recreates planners.

Material and physical conditions as well as media assemblages produce this material (billboards) in everyday life as well as in the planning profession. Hence, media is an important tool for communicating planning and the city to the general public. Urban planners become one of the influenced micro public – who not only create the billboard images but also get affected by it. On one hand, in a mediatized city, the mediatized city is the professional/real estate city that targets upper classes. On the other hand, in a mediatized city like Cairo, urban planning becomes the media.

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<sup>(1)</sup> While the classification of media as one way and two way represents a limited view in ANT terms (which is constantly doubting these preset categorizations), it helps as a first step to get into this complex network

<sup>(2)</sup> "For Latour (1987), action at a distance refers to situations where social action (like control, domination, measurement, surveillance, etc.) is performed at a distance through the use of technical objects situated in socio-technical networks" (Latour, 1987).