Deconstructing Heliopolis

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Prelude

This paper attempts to offer a deconstruction reading of the planning and building of Heliopolis, the affluent suburban district planned and partially built by Baron Empain in the beginning of the 20th century.

Typically, an academic paper would have an abstract, then an introduction, followed by a method section, then analysis and results, and finally a discussion and conclusion (Huck, p1). However, since the topic I am attempting to address here follows the philosophies of deconstruction, I found that imposing such a rigid structure on the work I'm attempting to do, is rather unfit.

In contrast, I found that deconstructing this structure, and not committing to it, even when it came to choosing the names for the sections, makes more sense as an approach, because after all, there is nothing "Natural" about language and writing (Stocker, p72).

This is not to say that the paper has no structure, of course it does, like any other text do, but the structure I chose to follow came from the flow of ideas, and the process of approaching the deconstruction of Heliopolis. I feel that this may be more true to the spirit of deconstruction, or at least to my understanding of it.

Introductory Formalities: Historical Background

In 1906, Baron Édouard Empain, famous Belgian business man and entrepreneur, established the Cairo Electric Railways and Heliopolis Oases Company, and through this company, he started construction on a newly planned utopian city dream, on a large plot of desert land he previously acquired East of Cairo (Ilbert, p1).

Empain was an international man, a globalist before the age of globalization, his business empire spanned four continents and his Business group was one of to the top 50 largest European companies before World War I (Vandamme, p7).

Starting in 1906 Empain's newly established company proceeded with the building of his dream city, amidst the harsh desert, ten kilometers from the center of Cairo. Belgian, French and British architects were brought in to design a "city of extravagance and leisure", to be built after the European city plans, with wide opulent avenues and luxurious palaces.

FIGURE 1. BARON EDOUARD EMPAIN, 1852-1929

In their Book "Heliopolis: Rebirth of the City of the Sun", Agnieszka and Jarostaw Dobrowolska, relate a story about the planning of Heliopolis, where Baron Empain invited the Architect Ernest Jaspar, and reportedly said to him:

> *"I want to build a city here. It will be called Heliopolis, a city of the sun… I want it to be magnificent.*
>
> *I wish that the architecture will conform to the tradition of this country, I am looking for a specialist of Islamic art."* (Dobrowolska, p37).

The story is attributed to Jaspar's son, but whether it is true or not, it does express an already paradoxical feature that relates to the identity of Heliopolis, and that is whether the identity of Heliopolis is an overly European one, or an Egyptian identity, or is it rather Oscillating between both identities?

Approaching deconstruction: How to deconstruct?

Before attempting a deconstruction reading of urban space, I should first attempt to define deconstruction as a process. What is deconstruction? And how to deconstruct?

This proves to be a problematic task in itself, when the Derrida himself, widely considered the father figure of deconstruction, have written of such task deconstruction or a definition of it is the impossible, the undefinable and the unattainable (Abdelwahab, p81).

Deconstruction is arguably one of the most important schools of thought in contemporary thought, the term itself may have been coined by Derrida, but Edward Casey argues that philosophers have been applying deconstruction since Plato & Aristotle (Casey, p46 & p68).

But if it is impossible to define, how can it be applied to a reading of Heliopolis?

In her book A Reflexive "Reading of Urban Space", Mona Abdelwahab alludes that deconstruction is an impossible method, that cannot be used for "reading or interpretation" (p82, 83). This is again echoed by Martin McQuillan's Introduction to "Deconstruction a Reader" but he goes on to establish that despite be a "None method", deconstruction is also a method, and that it is the first condition that allows for the later (p25, 26). One of the reasons of such paradox, is that most of the texts of Derrida, are originally written in French, which renders deconstruction as something that is constantly caught in translation, continuously shifting meanings and interpretations, while eluding all and any attempts of definition and classification.

So deconstruction is the impossible, undefinable, none method method. How then to do deconstruction? How can it be applied to urban space?

There is no set of steps to go about this, but as McQuillan asserted, one of the prime concerns of deconstruction is to identify and rethink binary oppositions, undo the opposition through the act of reversing the binary, and ultimately displacing the entire binary system of thought. (p35) Simply put, deconstruction therefore is not only about facing the contradiction rather than trying to eliminate it (Stocker, p67).

> *"Deconstruction cannot limit itself or proceed immediately to neutralization: it must, by means of a double gesture, a double science, a double writing, practise an overturning of the classical opposition, and a general displacement of the system. It is on that condition alone that deconstruction will provide the means of intervening in the field of oppositions it criticises"* **(Derrida, MP, p329).**

Heliopolis: What is in a name?

Place naming is highly symbolic and it has strong socio-political aspects attached to it, place names are not arbitrary, place names are symbols that articulate and emphasize broader cultural meanings, that of identity, Nationalism and political power hierarchies (Berg & Vuolteenaho, p11).

Deconstruction has adequately questioned the capability of names to express uniqueness and identity (Derrida, OG, p279). Therefore, this paper will not attempt to question whether Heliopolis is the "proper" name for Heliopolis, because according to Derrida, no such property of properness can be determined. Rather I will try to explore the tensions and oppositions between the name "Heliopolis", and the meanings attached to that name, both direct and indirect. Another area of exploration is the opposition between "Heliopolis" the name, and "Misr al Gadida" the name that is used now to refer to the collective area where Heliopolis is located.
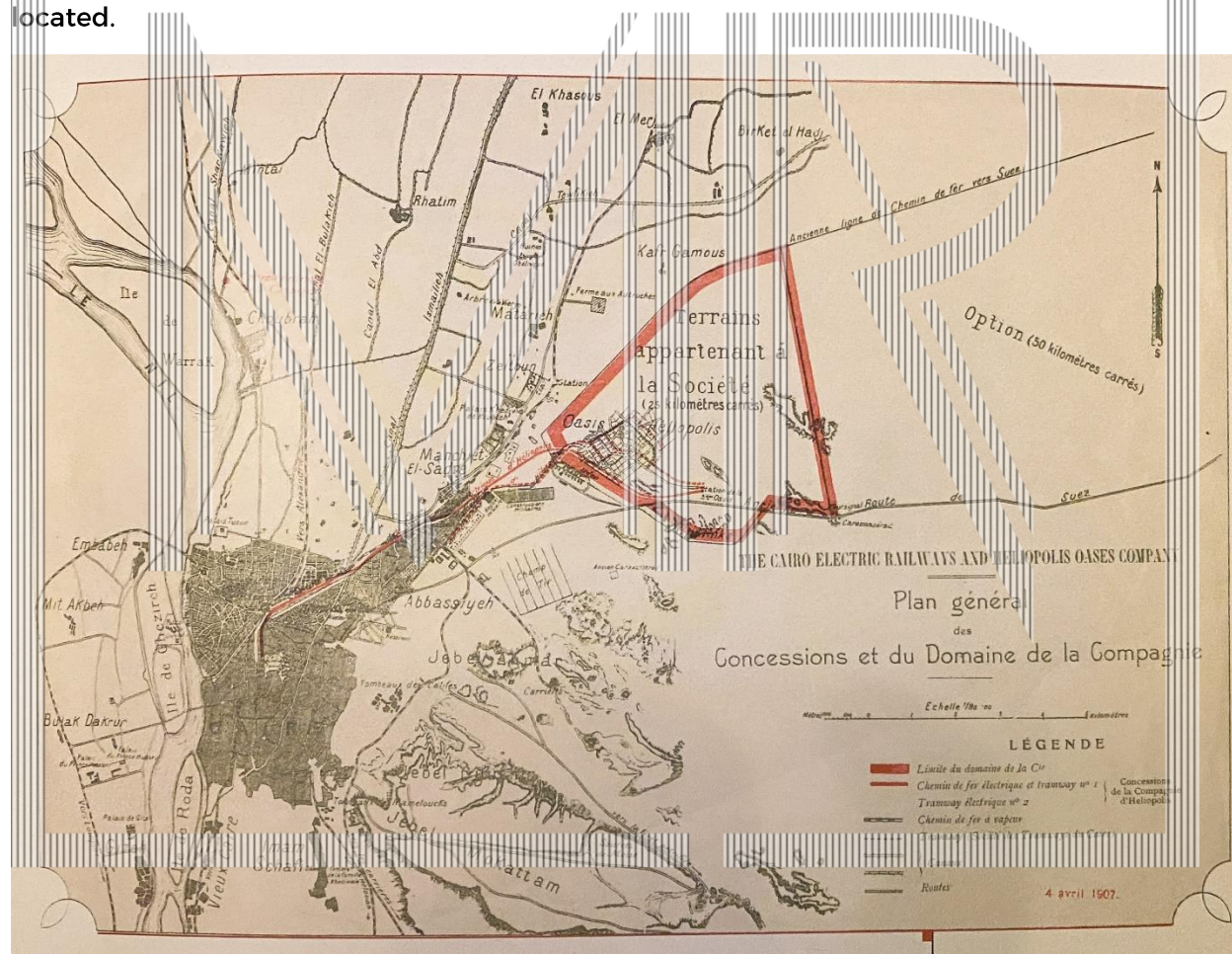

Figure 2. A 1907 Plan of the plot of land acquired by Empain company, From the Heliopolis Company Archives

According to Dobrowolska, it was Empain who chose the name himself, yet in the same sentence that he professes the chosen name to French architect Jesper, he follows that by claiming that he want the architecture of Heliopolis to conform to the tradition of this country.

There is a strong paradox here, between wanting to conform to the tradition, and choosing the Name "Heliopolis". While "Heliopolis" is indeed a name that has some roots in the Egyptian history, Heliopolis is a seemingly odd choice for a city that seeks to conform with the traditions of the early 20th century Egypt.

Ancient Egypt Heliopolis, famous for the temples of Atum and Ra, was one of the three major cities of ancient Egypt, alongside Memphis and Thebes. However, the ancient Egyptian city was not named Heliopolis, the ancient Egyptian name for the city was Iunu. Heliopolis is actually the name that the Greek invaders gave to the prominent city, and it translates to "city of the sun" (Allen, p88).

Accordingly if Empain intention was to correlate with ancient Egyptian traditions, Iunu as alien as it is to the ears of the early 20th century Egyptians, would have been a more logical choice for a place name, one that invokes the identity of the ancient Egyptian, and evokes the meanings associated with it.

But the second part of Embain's sentence suggests another intention altogether, because it reveals that the tradition he wants to follow in his then newly planned city, is not the ancient Egyptian tradition.

> *"I wish that the architecture will conform to the tradition of this country, I am looking for a specialist of Islamic art."* (Dobrowolska, p37).

This clearly reveals that the "Tradition" Empain seeks to conform to, is the Islamic one, and then the paradox of naming an Islamic inspired new city after a Greek name for an ancient Egyptian city, becomes even more apparent. The tension between the Islamic Identity, and the Ancient Egyptian identity, is one that is rooted in long history of their coexistence. And architecturally, it is a tension that is none more too obvious than in the historical mosques of Fatimid Cairo, which were sometimes built with stones and columns appropriated from Ancient Egyptian monuments (Petersen, p79).

The tension between the Islamic identity Empain dreamt of conjuring and the greek name he chose for the city, is a manifestation of the binary that Mona Abdelwahab referred to when addressing Cairo urban space, the binary of us/them, west/east, (p145) and I add to those the binary of orientalist/traditional.

But this hereditary tension, strong as it may seem, masks an even stronger contradiction, one that lays in the name that is commonly used to refer to Heliopolis, "Misr al Gadida" which literally translates to New Egypt, here the Binary opposition of "New" versus "Old" is evident, and one that is again echoed today in the "New" Capital and the "Old" one.

Empain seeking to conform to Egyptian Islamic "tradition", named his then "new" city after an "old" Greek name, the public seeing the city for what it is, referred to it as "New Egypt".

It is not the first time that this occurs in the urban landscape of Cairo. Many of the streets of Cairo had names that were replaced by newer ones, but usually, the new name displaces the old and the old is committed to forgetfulness, or kept alive only in signpost subtexts followed by "formerly known as" inscriptions. This however, is not the case with Heliopolis/Misr al Gadida, today both names still exist, as a living testament to the duality of the Old/New identity.

Constant Oscillation: Traditional or Colonial?

Both the planning of Heliopolis and its chosen location allude to the duality expressed in its two names. On the one hand there is the peculiar choice of a desert location, ten kilometers away from Cairo, to build a self-proclaimed traditional city. The location may have been driven by economic reasons, desert land away from the heart of the city is usual relatively cheaper, and that maybe the reason Empain was able to acquire 5652 feddans for the cheap price of one Egyptian pound per feddan (Dobrowolska, p45).

But the ten kilometer distance is also revealing of another possible intention, in the time before cars and automobile transportation, a ten kilometers distance is considered a very effective way of exclusion and segregation. This choice of location highlights the binary opposition of Foreigner/Indigenous city planning, which was at work at the inception of Heliopolis (Willem, p4).

This binary is further accentuated in another detail, initially, Heliopolis was planned as two separate districts, each named an "oasis": one oasis was a residential district around the Heliopolis Palace Hotel, and the other oasis was for workers. The Christian Basilica was situated in key axial location in the residential oasis, on the "Pyramids" boulevard.
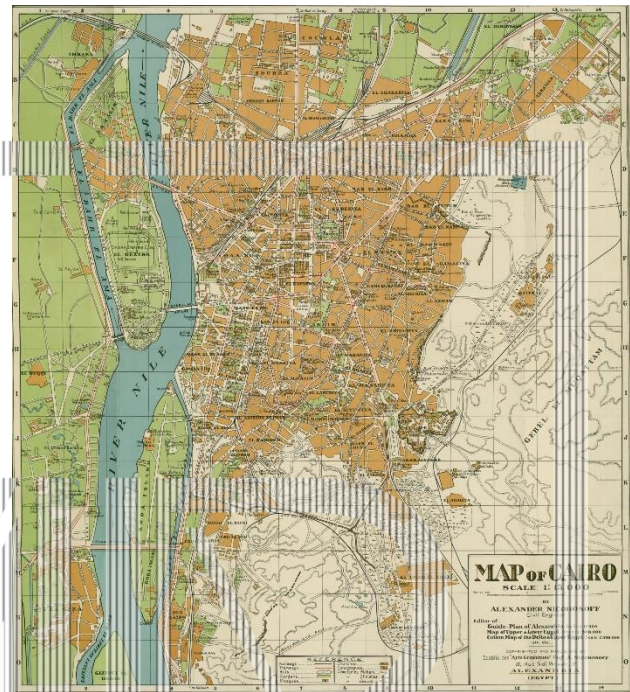

Figure 3: Map of Cairo Dated 1933, Heliopolis is not included in the map despite being built by then
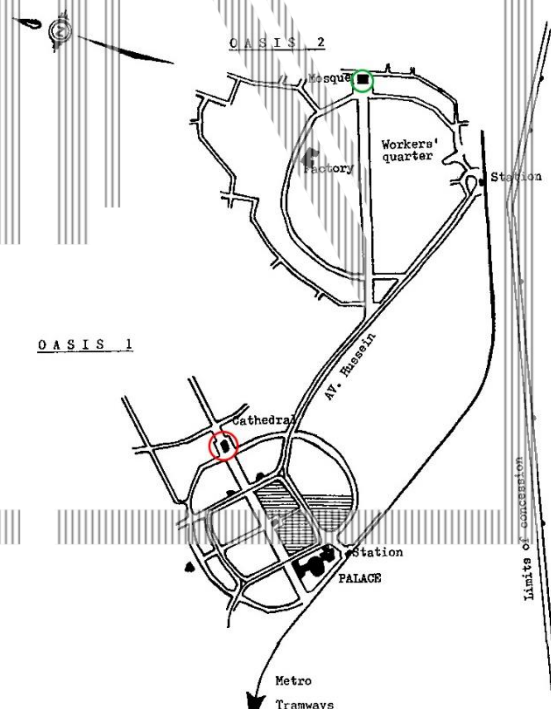

Figure 4: Heliopolis site plan, Mosque highlighted in green, Basilica in Red (Ilbert, 1985)

The Mosque was situated in a similarly axial location, but in the workers oasis. In reality, the second oasis was never built, due to the economical crisis of 1907, which resulted in the mosque not being built up until 1920 at least (Ilbert, p2). The contradiction of building a city that is heavily laden with Islamic ornamentation, to the extent of having faux minarets, but contains no Mosques, is one that reveals the tension between the two identities of Heliopolis European/Egyptian, Orientalist/Traditional, Foreigner/Indigenous
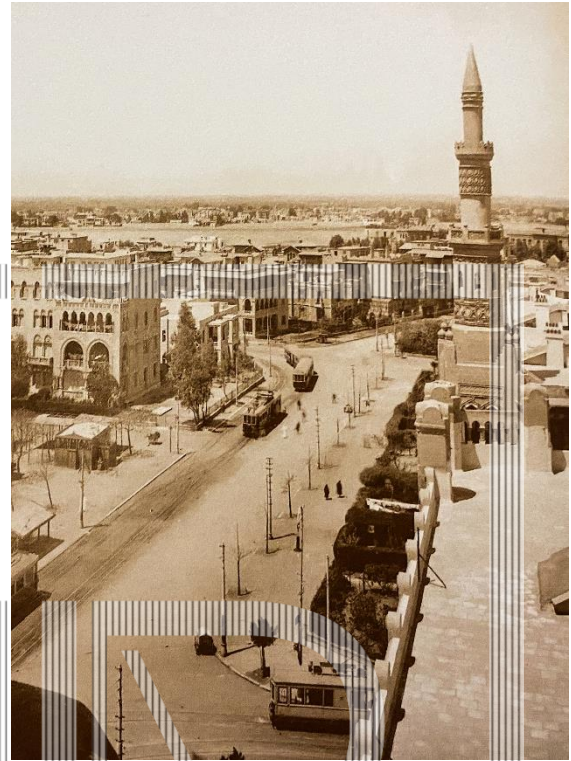

Figure 5: One of the Faux Minarets on the northeastern side of Basilica square
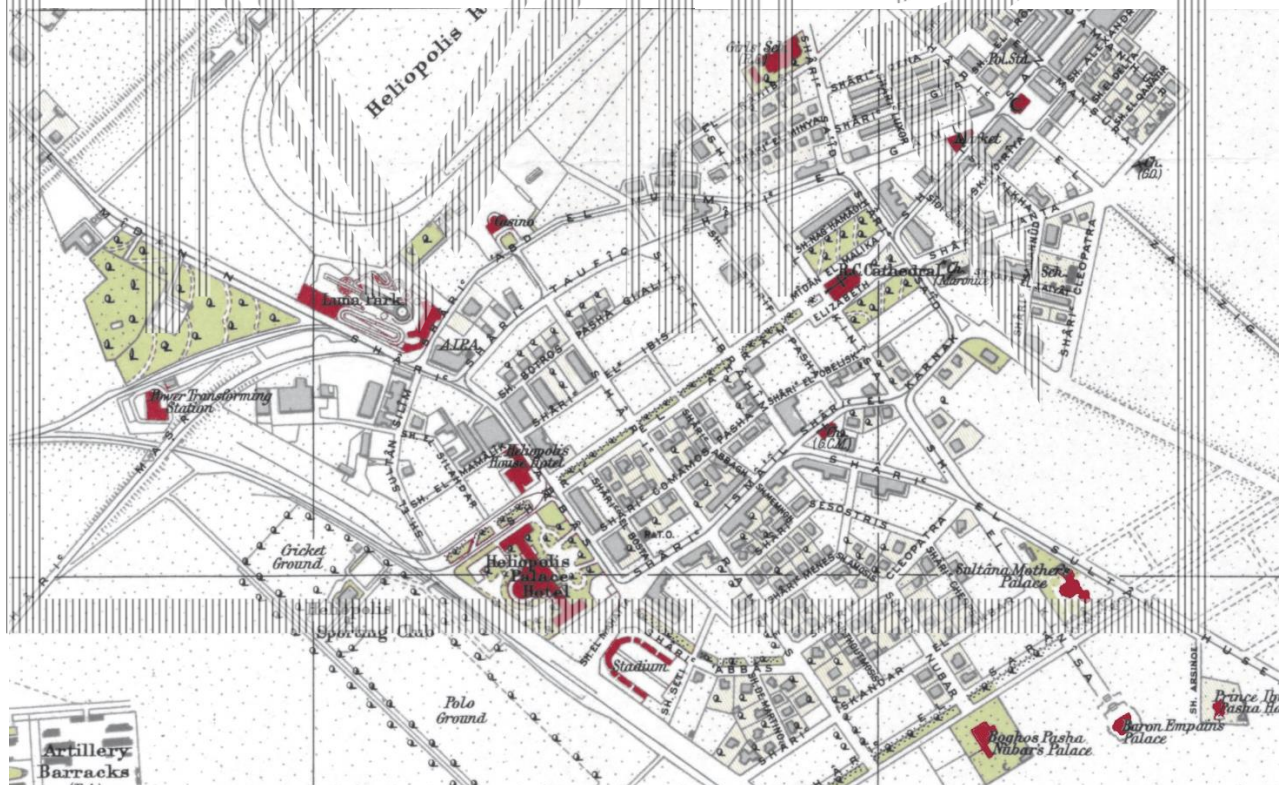

Figure 6: Map of Heliopolis 1920, no mosques were built till then (Library of Congress)

Evidence show that Heliopolis was well aware of this dual identity as early as the 1930s. In 1930-1931, Heliopolis Oasis Company was invited to an International Congress on Town Planning in the Colonies at Vincennes in France, the directors of the company were reportedly hesitant to accept the invitation, in fear of associating Heliopolis with colonial town planning. However they ended up accepting the invitation, but with the condition of stressing the elements that made Heliopolis stand out from colonial towns per se (Ilbert, p2).

However, there is no denying that the initial plan of Heliopolis was heavily influenced by the European concepts of city planning that were trendy at the time of its inception, namingly Sir Ebenzer Howard's utopian ideal town proposed in his book Graden Cities of Tomorrow (Dobrowolska, p87, Ilbert, p2).

Furthermore, the principles applied in the planning of Heliopolis follows those applied in Letchworth, Paris, and other European towns. The emphasis on the Basilica through the axiality of its location in the plan, wideness of the boulevards, carefully placed gardens and city squares, the height of buildings and the solid to void percentages were all imported concepts (Dobrowolska, p101, Ilbert, p3).

FIGURE 7: ANALYSIS OF HELIOPOLIS PLAN AFTER ILBERT, R.

Similarly, the duality of identities is evident in the buildings themselves, which in elevation had a variety of eclectic Islamic architectural decorative elements, but in plan owed there overall concepts to European architecture. One such prominent example is Heliopolis Palace Hotel, with its immense thirty five meter high Islamic dome, and Versailles inspired plan (Dobrowolska, p103).
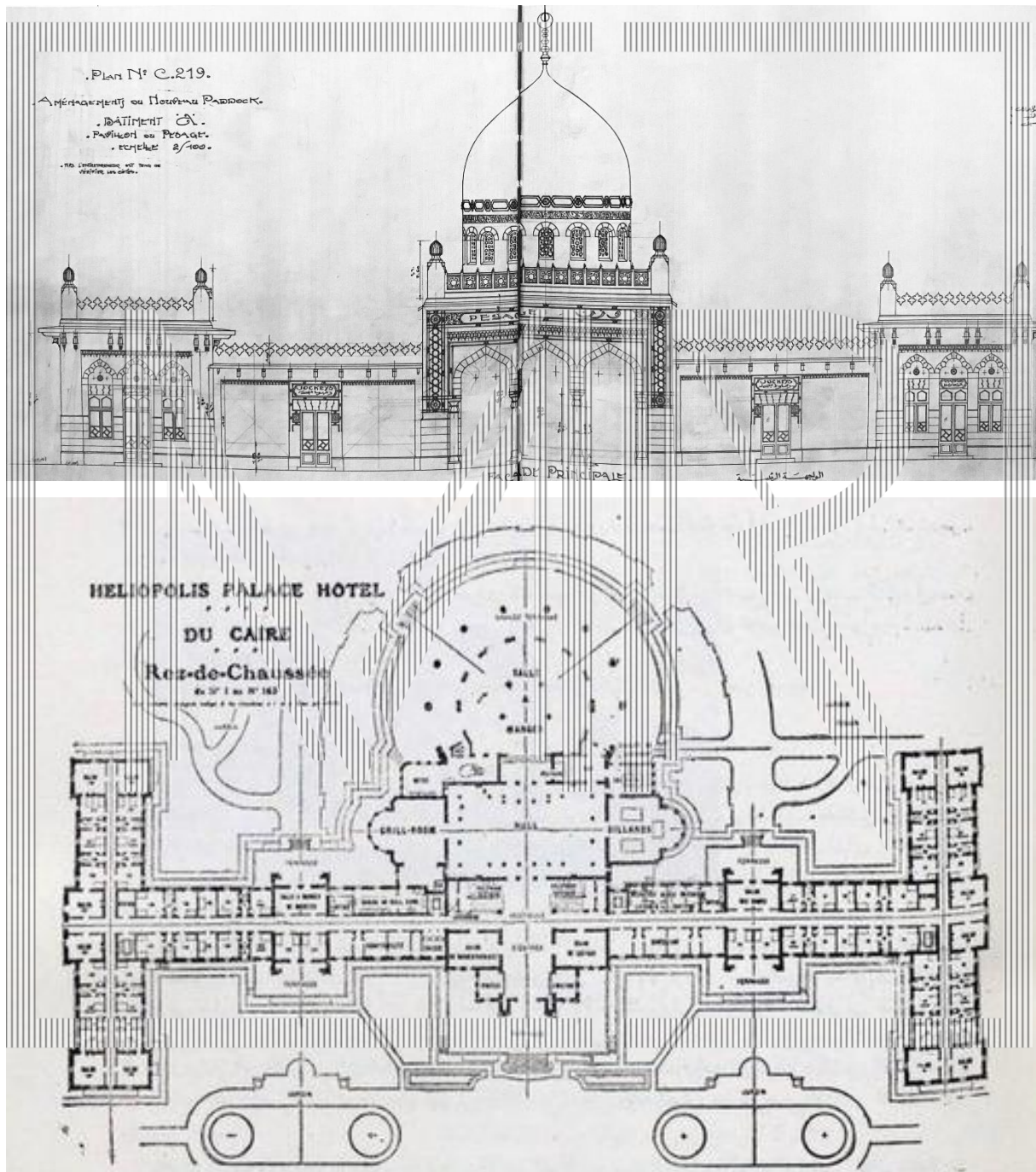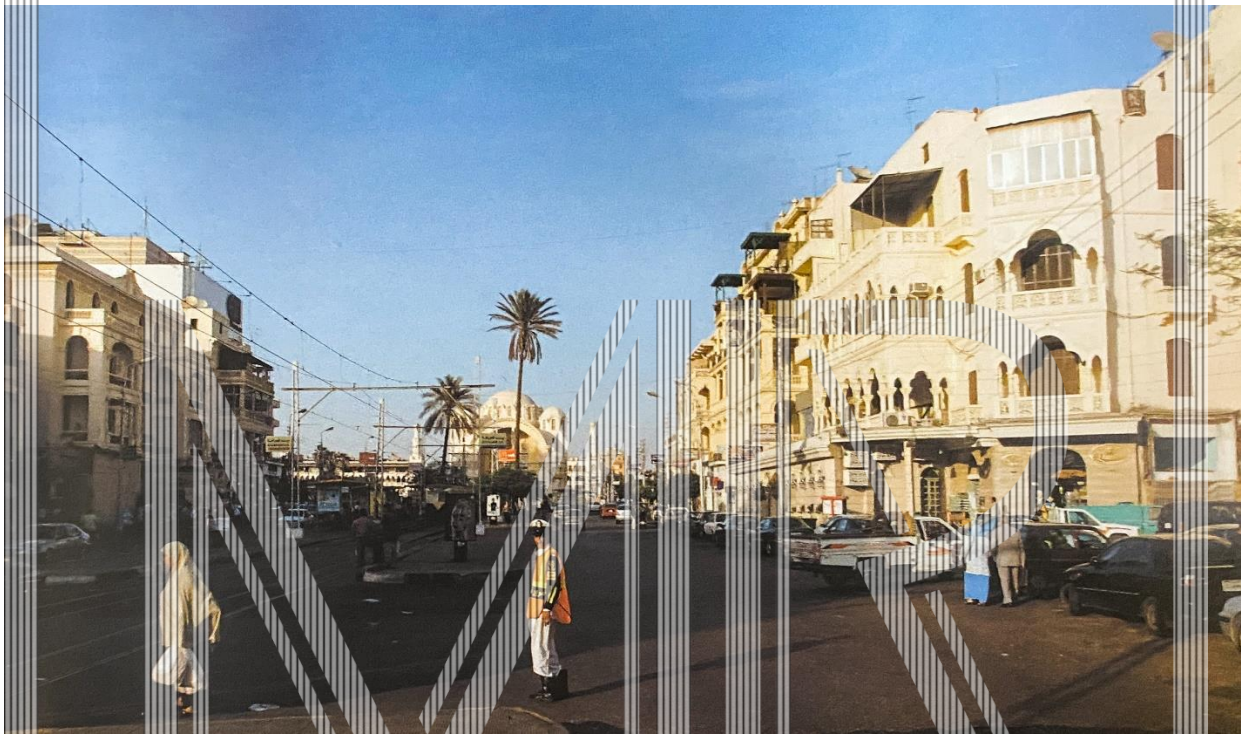

FIGURE 8: HELIOPOLIS PALACE HOTEL EUROPEAN PLAN & ISLAMIC ELEVATION

But despite the European features and principles, that were put into effect to appeal to Europeans, Heliopolis identity was still Egyptian right from the start, with Egyptians accounting for half its inhabitants in 1925. True, it may have started as an Elitist city, with most of its inhabitant from the upper and ruling class, but soon it attracted middle class Egyptians and members of the bourgeoisie (Ilbert, p3).

This may partly be attributed to the success of Empain's vision, yet Robert Ilbert also argues that it may be due to the city being "Egyptian in character" (p5). Where others criticize the dressing of European design concepts in Islamic decorations, which are devoid of any real understanding of traditional architecture (Dobrowolska, p75, p155). Ilbert sees it as a form of successful adaptation, and cautions against the over simplification of calling one thing or the other (p7).

Thus the identity of Heliopolis is neither Egyptian, nor European; neither Foreign nor Indigenous; neither orientalist, nor traditional; neither western, nor Eastern; Heliopolis is constantly oscillating between those binaries; it is none of those, and yet all of those at the same instance, never wholly embracing one over the other, and therein may lay its success as an urban planning project, and its uniqueness from the rest of the Cairo's compounded urban space which is primarily concerned with the binary "us who are not them". (Abdelwahab, p145).

Epilogue

This is not a conclusion as conclusions go, merely a reflection on the past text. The task of a deconstruction reading of Heliopolis, or any urban space, or anything for that matter, is a fairly complicated and tediously long one, and it would take up more than the length and breadth of one research paper, and the time allowed for this exercise.

In "LIVING ON: Border Lines" Jacques Derrida refers to deconstruction as "pas de méthode", the translator laments in the bottom margin that the text and the word are intranslatable, declaring that "pas de méthode" could mean "no method, but also a methodical step" (p96). And this is what this paper offers, just a mere attempt, a step, towards deconstruction, or nothing at all.

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