Before the Final Demolition: an Alternative Reading for Al-Hattaba's Urban Decay through Ruination Theories

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Abstract: This paper investigates the controversial historically / decayed al-Hattaba, a neighborhood in the heart of Historic Cairo, Egypt, that is set for demolition by the state. The state's unwillingness to consider alternative approaches when dealing with decayed settings raises the controversial question: Should the city's layers of decay be removed, or should they be saved? We used urban decay photographs along the boundaries of al-Hattaba, where three entities clashed: the neighborhood's urban fabric, the Saladin Citadel, and Bab-Al-Wazier cemeteries, to contribute an answer to this question. We present an alternative view reflecting marginalized ruination qualities, as a physical narration for the political and economic dilemmas, as a manifestation of lost past, memories and potentials, and to introduce new orders to common space classifications. Our methodology included an in-depth literature review of alternative theories, photo-walks through al-Hattaba and thematic photo-analysis. Through the findings of this study, we argue that al-Hattaba is a decayed yet still living setting with potential for revival. It holds historical, social, and cultural significance. Proper management and investment could transform it into an alternative city experience. While decayed, Al-Hattaba should not be demolished, as doing so would erase its valuable history. This study aims to spark dialogue on preserving decaying spaces like Al-Hattaba and reconsidering what is deemed worthy of saving.

1. Introduction

Historic urban centers in the Middle East are characterized by their dense areas and residential buildings. These centers serve as hubs for economic and cultural activities, while

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also housing monuments and artifacts of architectural and historical significance [1]. The old city centers are the physical manifestation of ideologies and sociocultural beliefs of Middle Eastern societies [2]. Unfortunately, most of them face the grave danger of urban decay, as the city fabric is changing and traditional buildings are being replaced by larger residential and commercial projects that are foreign to Middle Eastern culture and identity [1, 2]. However, the attitude towards their preservation and restoration varies across the world. In some parts of the world, such as Europe and the United States, decayed historic urban settings have been preserved and restored, while in other parts, such as the Middle East, factors such as war, neglect, and rapid urbanization lead to the demolition of such settings [3]. Generally, decayed historic settings in the Middle East are valued primarily for their historical significance, yet this appreciation is not always fully realized [4].

Urban decay presents a distinctive physical appearance, typically comprising both deteriorating buildings or ruins and their surrounding context. The sense of abandonment that is created from physical appearance results in evoking a sense of inaccessibility or insecurity. As a result, urban decay environments or buildings –most of the time– could only be experienced through photography [5]. As such, urban decay photography has been a widely celebrated genre in photography and architecture throughout recent years [6]. In this paper, we examine the rich Egyptian context, specifically of al-Hattaba, using urban decay photography. Al-Hattaba is located in the northern part of the Saladin Citadel of Cairo (referred to as "the Citadel") in Historic Cairo, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The Citadel served as the seat of the government for seven centuries [7]. Al-Hattaba's history is closely connected to the Citadel, with many structures built to supply water to the Citadel complex [8]. The district was named al-Hattaba (the woodcutters) because it became a major market for firewood since the Ottoman period. Additionally, royal funerals and Islamic pilgrim processions from the Citadel passed through the district [9]. Al-Hattaba's urban layout has remained largely unchanged since its documentation during the Napoleonic French campaign in 1801's "Description de l'Egypte" [10, 11]. Despite al-Hattaba's historical and cultural importance, authorities decided to clear a buffer zone around the Citadel, which included al-Hattaba, Arab-al-Yassar, and the surrounding historic cemeteries [12]. The state declared these areas "decayed" and "unsafe" spaces.

Al-Hattaba, as a decayed urban setting, is "perceived to be within, but not of, the city" [13]. It is considered the hidden underworld that marks the city's failures rather than a part of its image. This aligns with the modern attitude toward materiality, where there is a tendency to show off aesthetically and functionally pleasing elements and the desire to hide whatever may seem ugly [14]. This attitude considers decay as an embarrassment that must be kept hidden. The state is punishing al-Hattaba for its ruinated/decayed status, disregarding that these state laws led to this condition. Al-Hattaba's case represents the current political disputes between heritage sites and the state plans that require resolution. Al-Ibrashi et al. [15] argue that these issues can be resolved by changing the state's approach to heritage sites, considering them as integral parts of the living city rather than burdens. They urge the

state to widen its scope for what should be perceived as historic and part of the heritage sites.

Throughout the study, we use photography walks to explore this layer of the city before it ceases to exist. We present al-Hattaba's situation from the viewpoint of alternative theories of decay, which consider the undervalued nature of decayed sites as a representation of political stands. In addition, we complement the reading with urban decay photography to ground our theoretical interpretation of the everyday life of the inhabitants of al-Hattaba. We aim to reconceptualize decayed sites beyond historical narratives and disrupt the state's space classification. We argue that al-Hattaba is a decayed historic setting that is a living space in the city that formed through time. In that sense, we argue against removing these historic layers of the city as it would change the city as we know it.

2. Literiture Review: Alternative Ruination Theories

Urban decay is a global phenomenon mostly affecting major cities' centers [16]. Sarah Arnold [6] defined it as "the process whereby a previously functioning city, or part of a city, falls into disrepair." Many scholars agree that the concept of urban decay in urban and architecture studies is synonymous with urban blight, urban decline, urban rot, urban slum, and urban deterioration, all of which are terms associated with negative connotations [16, 17, 18, and 19]. Moreover, these terms are typically associated with physical entities [20]. Accordingly, urban ruins are the physical manifestation of urban decay in the built environment. They are the expression of the traits and connotations of decay.

From a Marxist perspective, objects of urban decay are commodities that have a lifecycle and are devalued by decay [21]. Once their owner dies, they may move towards waste and eventually get disposed of. Buildings and urban spaces undergo the same process over time. Their value is thickened by time [22]. However, this materialistic perspective does not always justify demolition (Thomsen & Van Der Flier, 2011). Other factors, such as political agendas and public acceptance, may affect the decision to demolish or keep a decayed building. For example, monuments such as the Great Pyramid are functionally obsolete, but no one will dare to suggest their demolition. As such, decayed buildings may lend themselves to Alois Riegl's [24] interpretation of monuments' value in terms of collective memory or "commemorative value."

Accordingly, DeSilvey and Edensor [25] present three main arguments for that speak for the underrated and often neglected nature of urban decay. Their first argument states that urban decay indicates the political stands and state laws that affect the change in spatial forms. Their second argument states that the real hidden value of urban decay is their ability to provoke the mind to look beyond simple historical narratives. And their third and final argument states that the sight of urban decay disrupts the commonly known classifications of space.

2.1. Decay indicates the political stands.

In terms of the politics of urban decay, DeSilvey and Edensor [25] argue that decayed ruins can be used as sites to examine the state's manifestation of power and reflect the economic impacts. Eyal Weizman [26] argues that urban decay is an architecture in which controversial political processes are reflected and can be analyzed and reconstructed. Similarly, Gonzalez-Rubail [27] argues that the decayed ruins signify the change of state power. Weizman [26] adds that a decayed structure is a form of media, as it beholds information about the effect of historical processes that can be decoded and interpreted by the viewers, as making sense of ruins depends on how and who is looking at them [25]. Daryl Martin [28] stands with Wesizman's claims, saying that decay can create the "regimes of truth for the nation" (p. 1038) as they collect the fragments of history, creating memorable scenes that construct the authorized narratives of the past that echo into the present.

Decayed ruins are made "but not just by anyone, anytime, anywhere" (p. 21) [29]. Stoler [29] argues that the process of ruination needs vast resources and planning that only the state has. She adds that the process of forceful eviction of residents from old neighborhoods, repurposing the left setting, and enforcing laws for new inhabitants that dictate how they should live and deal with the setting is always a part of a state-planned project.

Consequently, decayed ruins act as "political counter-sites" [25]. One of the great examples of these arguments is the repurpose of Soviet imperial ruins as a commune for the homeless and community outcasts [30]. At the border between Ukraine and Poland, an old nuclear base was recycled by the outcasts as a commune and home. They used the remaining totalitarian structures to create a community home that defied the capitalist market that emerged after the fall of the socialist Russian and East European empires. Similarly, Abu El-Haj [31] discusses the contrast between the Israeli state's attitude towards the ruins in Jerusalem and Palestinian villages. In service of the Israeli Afforestation project, the state completely erases historic Palestinian settings from existence. They do not acknowledge the remains of the cities as ruins or part of history. In contrast, decayed ruins in Jerusalem are restored to preserve the memory of the setting, and they even use old stones in modern structures to add depth to the city's temporal dimension. The whole process between the purposeful ruination of the site and it repurpose highlights the ambiguity and complexity when discussing the political implications of decay [32].

2.2. Decay provokes the mind to think beyond historical narratives.

Tim Edensor [33] argues that scholars need to adopt an open-minded approach to read and narrate the spaces of decay and ruins, to consider the other possible narratives told by hidden signs beyond the official narratives of those spaces. He states that "Ruins foreground the value of inarticulacy, for disparate fragments, juxtapositions, traces, involuntary memories, uncanny impressions, and peculiar atmospheres cannot be woven into an eloquent narrative. Stories can only be contingently assembled out of a jumble of disconnected things, occurrences, and sensations" (p. 846).

This statement aligns with Jonathan Hill's [34] assumptions that ruins are embedded with fragments in their physical form as well as in their ability to provoke memories and the sense of absence and incompleteness. This allows the discovery of new interpretations, values, and meanings. On one hand, the physical state of the decay is deteriorating as time passes, while on the other hand, its metaphorical potential is expanding. This complexity in its material existence makes urban ruins a controversial topic to be debated [35].

Beyond elemental classifications, when in decay, the visibility of elements omits the borders between the visible and the invisible [36]. Urban Decay conveys meaning through what it misses [37]. As such, it becomes an intersection between the visible remains of the structure and the invisible traces of what it lost [38]. For example, the continuity of the street fade is disrupted by the existence of decayed structures in space. When looking at Roman historic ruins, one can visually detect the material existence of their remains, the invisible memory of what they used to look like, and the idea of what they might look like in ten or more years. Thus, the overall scene becomes a representation of the past, present, and future together.

These qualities employ the decayed ruins as material residues of an irreversible past that evoke sensations about lost parts of the future. A great example presented by Stoler [29] is the Srisailam megadam building project in south India. The project started in 1981 and had catastrophic effects on neighboring areas, where 150,000 of the residents were evicted and one hundred Indian villages were completely submerged. The submerged villages still reappear annually during the dry season as a constant reminder of the state failures and the lost futures of people who used to live there. The site is yet preserved alongside the well-preserved neighboring Hindu temples as a part of India's national heritage. The visual diversity between the two ruinated entities enhances the sense of temporality and the embedded ghosts of the past.

Exploring decaying spaces can encourage alternative sensual and imaginative interactions with the past [33]. For example, Sophia Davis's [39] article described her thoughts, ideas, and sensual experience of the ruinated space of the techno-military landscape "Orford Ness" as she moved through it. Her body as a researcher became an instrument for sensing the material and sensual aspects of the time ruins. The imaginative approach allowed for an active experience with the absent others, the ones who, at a moment in time, inhabited the space and used the decayed structures. Victor Buchli and Gavin Lucas [40] argue that these types of encounters create significant appreciation for others' lived experiences as well as educate the researcher about the unsettling power of materiality.

2.3. Decay disrupts common classifications of space.

Urban decay settings are ambiguous sites that defy the known classifications of normal urban spaces [25, 41]. Schönle [42] claims that urban decay challenges the viewer to make sense of it, as it dramatizes the emptiness and incompleteness. Urban decay settings add a unique experience to their spaces that remain unexplored within the world of capitalist developments and geopolitical histories [28]. This gap in the research calls for a more

dedicated academic interest in the experience of the sites of urban decay, allowing for a more active engagement in the translation of these spaces.

Traditional urban planning and political discourses define ruinated space or decayed structures as a problem that needs to be solved and a catalyst for unwanted behavior [25]. During recent years, many scholars have sought to highlight the philosophical and functional values of such spaces. This resulted in new tag names for spaces that were shaped by ruination, such as "terrain vague" [43], "voids" [44], "places on the margin" [45], etc.

Scholars used ruination to critique the rigid management and control of urban environments. For example, De Sola-Morales's [43] work argues that ruins defy common ideas about productive and unproductive spaces as they normally exist outside the city's acknowledged productive spaces. Similarly, Jorgensen and Tylecote [46] argue that these ruinations can open new conversations about the production and consumption of urban environments. However, one cannot ignore the negative dimensions of ruination and decay. The creative potential does not eradicate the negative effects. For instance, Cuppers and Meissen [44] argue that although urban voids are filled with potential and unlimited opportunities, they are also an expression of loss and forgotten parts of the past.

Making sense of and dealing with ruins depends on how and who is looking at them. To some, they are manifestations of failure and danger while to others they present an opportunity [47]. Abandoned structures are seen by states as dangerous and useless, but to the homeless, they are shelters and places to live. Informal demolition workers strip old buildings of their materials, ornaments, and elements, such as doors and windows, for fast cash through reselling those [48]. Children use these spaces as unofficial playgrounds, where they repurpose the loose materials to invent new games [49]. Scholars argue that the lack of surveillance in ruinated settings presents an opportunity for children to reorder the space without adults' interventions or expectations [50]. Ruinated spaces also present an opportunity to be used as adventure sports locations and to hold unconventional music events. They acted as the ignition for the "urban exploration" phenomenon [51]. Spaces were also used as clear canvases for temporary art galleries, shooting locations for films, advertisements, and TV series, and sites for holding cultural events [47, 52, and 53]. Accordingly, decayed structures and ruins do not simply crumble and disappear. Instead, they are dismantled and reassembled, gaining new meanings and interpretations.

3. Methods and Tools

This research aimed to provide an alternative reading/interpretation for the urban decay phenomena in al-Hattaba using its photographs. In this section, we highlight the main data collection methods and the analytical framework. Due to the unique physical appearance of decayed settings, urban decay photography emerged as a new genre that focuses on exploring and highlighting the values and aesthetics of such neglected settings [5]. Decay photographs can be seen as a material engagement with the photographed subjects, making

them as important to discussing the nature of subjects as any other textual forms [14]. Pétursdóttir and Olsen [14] advocate for the power of photography in providing insights into the setting beyond representation, which allowed for more explorations of various forms of material meaning, aesthetic knowledge, and memories beyond simple interpretations. As such, the temporality of a photograph dissolves the boundaries between here and there and between material and representation, allowing the decay photograph to present a symbolic code that enhances the powers of spatial and temporal scales.
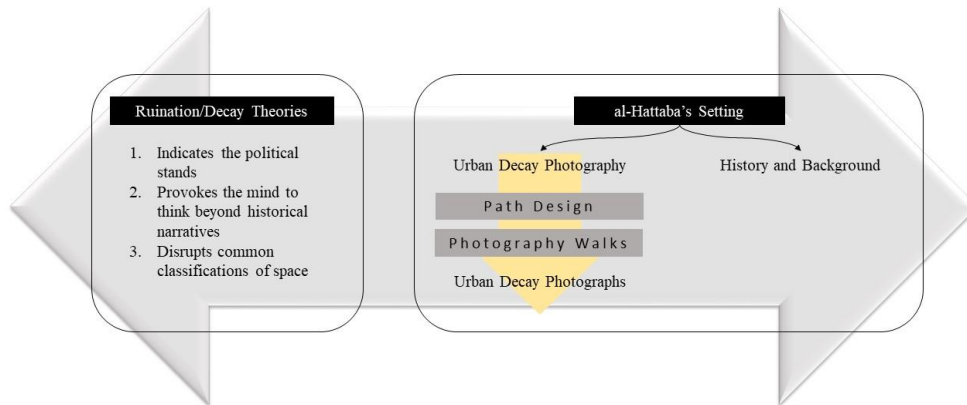

Fig. 1: Methodological approach. Source: The Authors.

In that sense, photography becomes a non-intervention act that turns the photographed subject into an "event," i.e., "something worth seeing—and therefore worth photographing." [54]. Coupling photography and walking in an urban setting creates a conversation between the body of the photographer/walker and the surrounding environment. According to Edensor [55], "walking allows for a particular experiential flow of successive moments of detachment and attachment, physical immersion and mental wandering, memory, recognition, and strangeness." These disruptions present the opportunity for a click of a camera shutter with each step [56]. Adopting these theories for photography and walking allowed us to analyze the historic setting of al-Hattaba through its photographs as a series of "events" that were created through attachments and detachments of participants in the setting.

To explore the nature of the setting, al-Hattaba's location in the buffer zone surrounding the Citadel inspired the design of the path we took through al-Hattaba. We wanted to explore the boundaries of the setting in relation to The Citadel. The resulting path had three main entities interacting together: al-Hattaba's fabric, the Citadel, and the historic cemeteries, as shown in Fig. 2. We then analyzed the photographs that were collected during the photo-walks to identify the events that were commonly captured along the path. The events were identified using a disassembling method of photographic content, where we sorted the photographs into three categories according to their location along the path as follows: Citadel vs. Ruinated Fabric, Ruinated Fabric vs. Ruinated Fabric and Ruinated Fabric Vs. Cemeteries. We then sorted the photos according to the dominance of captured street setting component —floors, walls and ceiling—, gain a general idea about their nature and identify the prevailing decay features that exist in them. We used all these produced data to classify

al-hattaba's image into themes as follows: drama, layered experience, metaphor, change in economy, change in policies, personalization, re-purpose, additive attitude and extended spaces. These themes were then reviewed in the light of the presented theories in the literature review, to present provide an alternative interpretation to al-Hattaba's decay as shown in Fig 3.
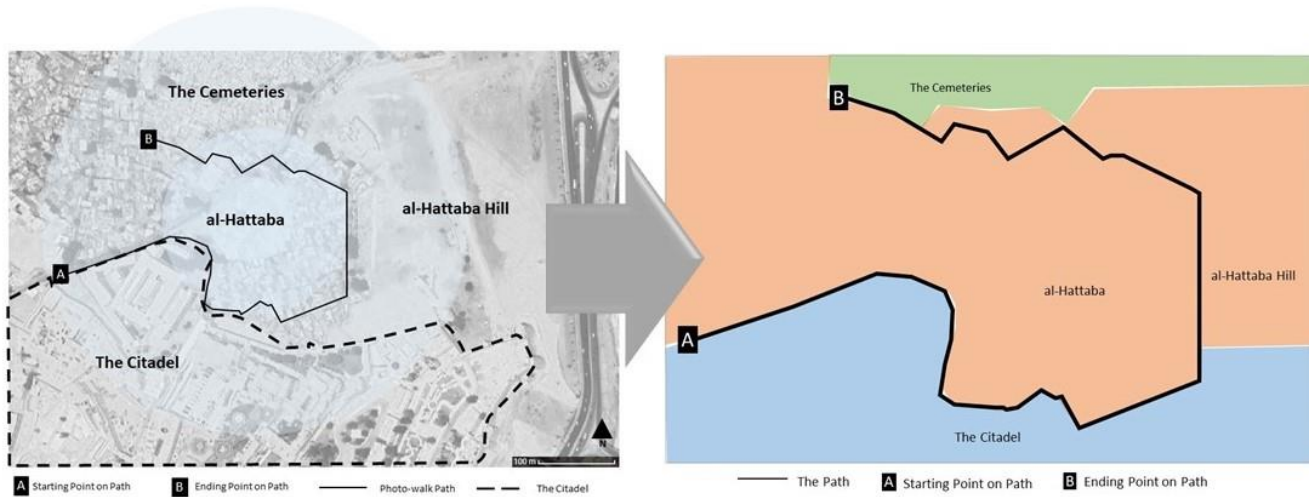

Fig. 2: The Designed Photo-walk Path showing the intersections between the three entities. Source: The Authors (Adapted from Google Maps).
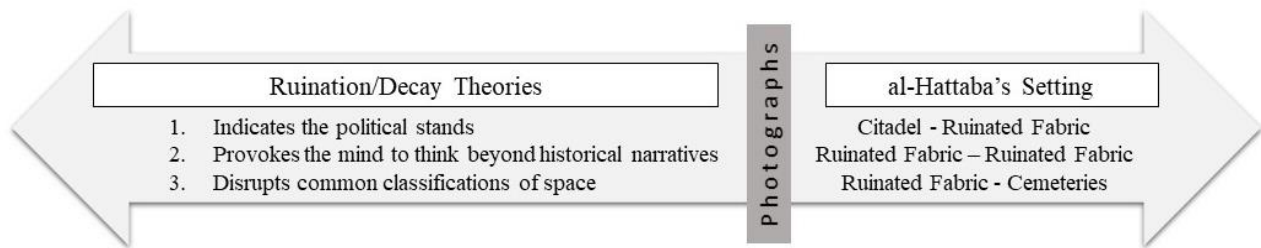

Fig. 3: Analytical Framework. Source: The Authors.

4. Al-Hattaba's decay provokes the mind to think beyond historical narratives.
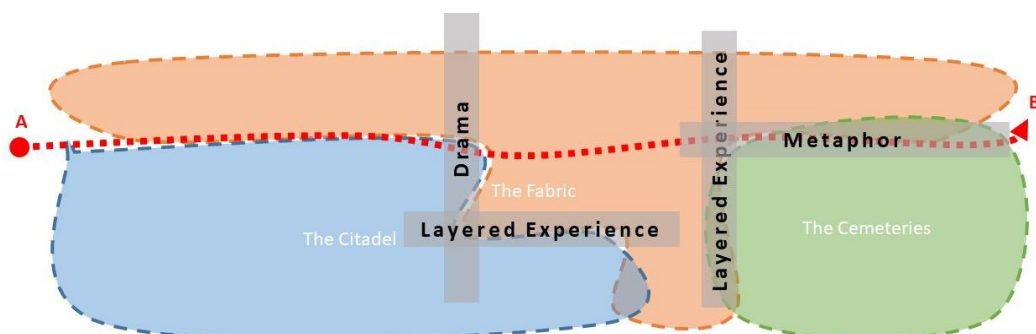

Fig 4. The clashing of the three entities along the path and generated themes. Source: The Authors' Illustration.

Historically, al-Hattaba's story began when Salah al-Din al-Ayyubi decided to build the Citadel on the top of al-Muqattam hill in 1176 [7, 8]. He built a wall surrounding the

complex to fortify its defenses. He then created an opening in the northern part of the wall called al-Thaghra (the Breach), later named al-Bab al-Jadid (the New Gate) [57]. During the Mamluk era (1250-1517), the Citadel extended beyond the walls into al-Hattaba, which incentivized the population to increase. During that era, many structures were built in the area to serve the Citadel. For example, as the main Muslim pilgrim procession went out of the Citadel through al-Hattaba, there were many water structures that served the pilgrims, such as the sabil of Shaykhu, and the cistern of Manjak [8, 58]. During the Ottoman rule (1517-1867), al-Hattaba gained its name due to its status as the leading market for firewood in Cairo, where it was inhabited by middle class residents, including merchants and traders [59]. The neighborhood further evolved during Muhammad Ali's reign when he transformed the stepped northern gate into a carriage ramp, increasing the value of al-Hattaba as an extension to the Citadel [60]. The new ramp was named Shari' al-Bab al-Jadid [57]. Additionally, residents of the area became more of the working class and craftsmen [59]. However, during Khedive Ismail's reign, the citadel seized to be the seat of the government and was replaced by the newly built Abdin Palace in Downtown Cairo [7]. During the British occupation (1882-1952), the British inhabited many neighborhoods in al-Khalifa district surrounding the Citadel (including al-Hattaba). They established their barracks at the Citadel and transformed the old palace into a hospital. After the independence in 1952, the Citadel kept being used as a military stronghold by the Egyptian military and was closed for public access. The Citadel welcomed tourists in the 1980s, who entered the complex from Bab al-Jabal (Gate of the Mountain), relegating al-Bab al-Jadid to a secondary entrance. This development directed tourism traffic away from al-Hattaba, whose local economy depended on the tourist flow from and to the Citadel gate. The residents used to sell handmade goods to tourists, such as pearl inlay products, carpentry, and Khaiyamia (tent-making) [8]. In the early 2000's, the state closed al-Bab al-Jadid, further degrading the economic conditions of al-Hattaba residents. Many shops along the ramp to the gate closed, and many sought works elsewhere [15, 59].

Considering that historical background during the photo-walks, we noticed that exploring the clashing entities at the boundaries is affected by their state of ruination and decay. The first themes/events evoke a sense of visual drama between the Citadel and the fabric of al-Hattaba (Fig 5). At the entrance of al-Hattaba, one encounters a clash between the continuous walls with the adapting space. The path forms an imaginary border between both bodies until they collide at the end. The metal fence adds a sense of separation at that segment of the entrance path. The two clashing worlds eventually become one, as fragments of the citadel blend within the form of al-Hattaba. Moreover, as the variation between the materiality of colors and shapes of both bodies narrates the struggles of being in the Citadel's buffer zone. These interactions provoke one's imagination: how did people live here before? What was lifelike before that ruination?

At several points along the path, parts of the Citadel emerge creating a layered experience (Fig 6). The scenes reveal themselves in overlapping layers of floors — floors cape elements, street furniture…etc. —, walls —inhabited ruins, historic ruins, debris and

collapsed structures— and sky as the hypothetical ceiling. These layered pockets highlight the historic value of al-Hattaba's urban fabric and the way its history is intertwining with the Citadel. The photographs recorded those encounters at various points through the setting.
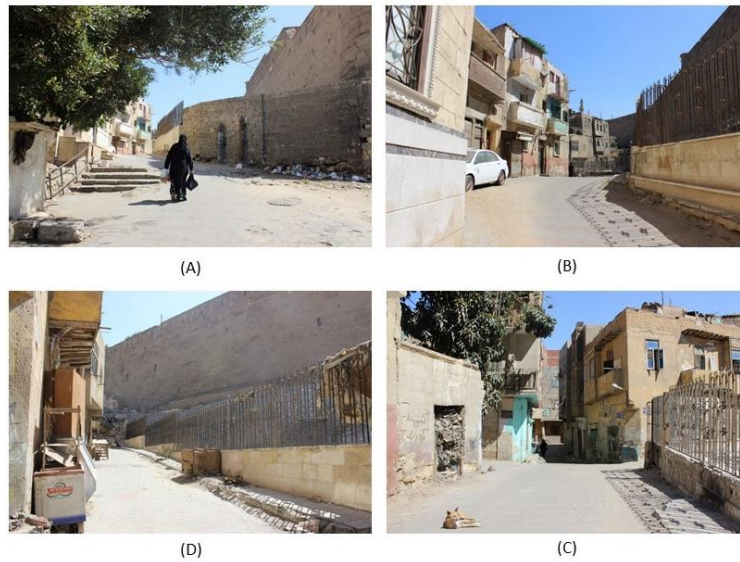

Fig 5. The Drama of status and scale between the Citadel and the fabric. The photos from (A) to (D) record the pedestrian experience on the boundary path between the Citadel and Al-Hattaba.

Fig 6. The layered experience of the Citadel and the fabric. These series of photographs show the interaction between the inhabited ruins and historic ruins that co-exist on a pedestrian level and the mighty Citadel that is constantly dominating the background.

Moreover, al-Hattaba presents itself in a series of scenes that compose a layered experience between the fabric and the cemeteries. The hidden tunnel leading to The Mosque of Manjak al-Yusufi captures that encounter. The scene represents itself as a series of unfolding visual layers. As such, it evokes the sense of exploring beyond what the eye sees. At first, one encounters the small close ended alleyway. The entrance of the historic structure seems

inaccessible at first. However, the closer one got, the more seemed to be hidden within. The changes in scale between the street, the entrance of the structure, the inside of the structure and the open clearing at the end takes one's body into a whole unique visual and sensational experience. The experience acts as a metaphor for the al-Hattaba's structure as a series of layers of temporality and visual aesthetics. The interior walls of the tunnel show significant features of physical decay such as mold and water damage. Those features affect the experience when walking the space.
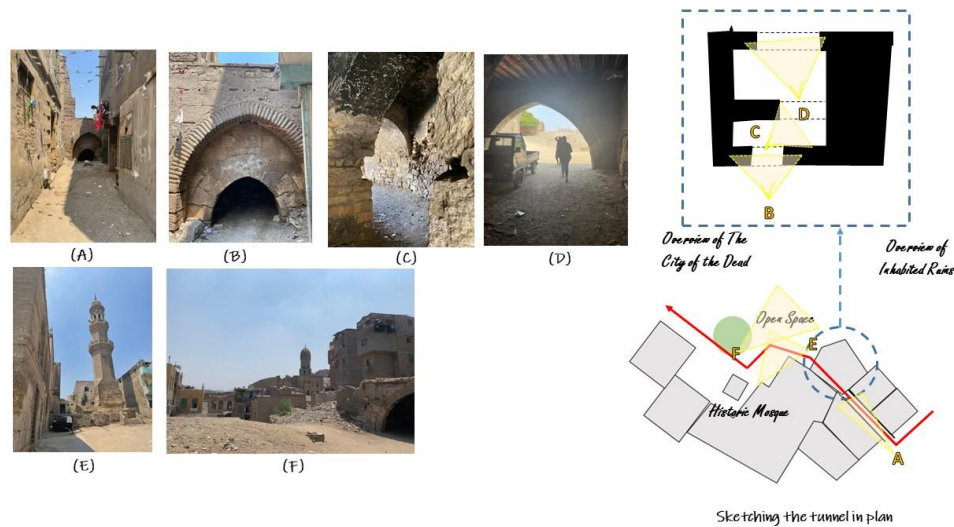

Fig 7. The tunnel leading to the Mosque of Manjak al-Yusufi showcases the layered experience between the fabric and cemeteries entrance point. The photo-series record the experience through the narrow tunnel reaching the grand mosque and cemeteries that are hidden.

The panoramic view that overlooks the cemeteries represents an alternative view of seeing Cairo's skyline (Fig 8). This superior view of the city is unique to this area. Photographs for that scene taken by us and the participants captured the same thing. This led us to look at the scene components and not just the captured frame. This view shows the complex fabric of the historic cemeteries, the historic ruins and domes as well as the inhabited ruins. This experience adds a special essence to the setting. The visible features of decay also add to the complexity of the scene. The clash between the two entities: the fabric and the cemeteries, stand as a metaphor for the city of the dead and the city that is considered dead.

Scenes of Decay embrace humanity's triumphs and failures. They are reminders of the temporal layers of time. The fabric of al-Hattaba has scattered encounters with scenes of history. Looking at the photographs, the ruination formulates memories of what was lost in time by omitting the boundaries between the visible and invisible. Accordingly, decayed historic ruins become encounters of forgotten pasts in their present forms.

For example, Fig 9 shows the Mausoleum of Yunus al-Dawadar. It was built by Yunus al-Dawadar, the royal secretary of Sultan Burquq during Mamluk era —1250-1517 [58]. However, he is not buried there [7]. The original complex, that contains hawd, collapsed whereas the tomb chamber is still standing [8, 59]. The structure can be seen from different angles along the path, giving different experiences. The first scene is when it reveals itself

with the pedestrian movement and thus is seen first as a 3D form before approaching to capture more façade details. The second scene is when it is seen as part of al-Hattaba's skyline. This other view provides a visual clash between the historic ruins and inhabited ruins. Whereas Fig 10 shows the Mosque of Manjak al-Yusufi. During his reign as a vizier, Manjak built that mosque 750 A.H./1349 C.E. [58]. The remains of the mosque still maintain its façade details despite the visible features of decay. The decay features create a visual drama between what still stands and what was lost in time.

Fig 8. The city of the dead as experienced standing in the fabric.

Fig 9. Scenes of The Mausoleum of Yunus al-Dawadar show the visible and invisible lines. The left photograph shows the first encounter with the monument as it reveals itself, looking reasonably maintained. The right photograph shows the second encounter with the monument from the clearing of the Mosque of Manjak al-Yusufi. From that angle, the structure looks surrounded by rubble and debris.

Fig 10. Scenes of The Mosque of Manjak al-Yusufi.

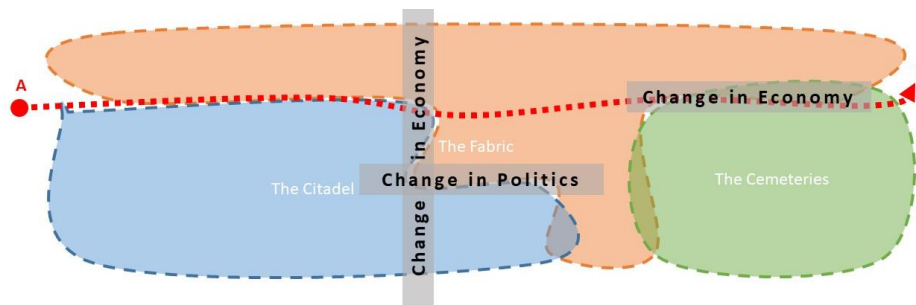## 5. Al-Hattaba's decay indicates its political disputes.

Fig. 11: The clashing of the three entities along the path resulted by changes in politics and residents' economic status. Source: The Authors' Illustration.

Al-Hattaba's setting was built in the service of the Citadel. The main residents of the area were servants and workers who worked there. Al-Hattaba's fabric design was affected by its proximity to the Citadel. As it remained the center of power for centuries, many structures that were built were also in service to the Citadel, streets and paths were built to be main routes to pilgrim to mecca and to the royal cemeteries. As times changed, the state changed too. The new state considered the Citadel as a monument that needs to be preserved. That change of power made al-Hattaba fall into a loss of status. Al-Hattaba's proximity to The Citadel affected the life of its residents. They managed to interact and adapt to The Citadel's constant changes. Al-Hattaba's local economy depended on selling their handmade goods to the tourists visiting The Citadel. Their shops were lining the ramped road reaching the Citadel's gate [7]. They worked in handmade pearl inlay goods, wooden goods as well as tent-making [15]. That depth of historic and social backgrounds of the area paints al-Hattaba as a living space that formed within and throughout time. In al-Hattaba's case, it is safe to say that the hostile relationship between the state and the residents was promptly initiated by the state. In 1912[4] and 1918[5] , the state issued laws to conserve Egyptian heritage sites by granting the state the sole power to decide the fate of monumental sites and their surrounding buffer areas for the public good. However, the 1918 law went one step further and banned the use of heritage sites or monuments in any function other than their original ones.

Subsequently, the state issued the Administrative Decree of Evacuation Zone of 1973 (Article 28) that specifically labeled al-Hattaba as an evacuation area, which needed re-planning. This law caused significant implications, as residents were banned from obtaining permits for building or maintaining their homes. There was not a proper justification for such a law, at the time, except following the general trend[6] that leans towards evacuating the areas surrounding listed monuments [59].

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[4] Loi N.14 sur les Antiquités de l'Egypte, Law No. 14, 1912. Accessed on 06 February 2024. (In French) https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/egypte_arrete50_08_12_1912_fre_tno.pdf
[5] Protecting antiquities of the Arab era, Law No. 8, 1918. Accessed on 06 February 2024. (In Arabic) https://manshurat.org/node/13257
[6] The trend was started by the Comite de Conservation des Monuments de l'Art Arabe to protect the Islamic Monuments (between 1882 - 1953) and was followed later by the Antiquities Authorities [59].

Later, in 1983[7], another law prohibited construction work in heritage sites or their buffer zones. Law no. 117 of 1983 as amended by law No. 3 of 2010 defined the meaning of buffer zones (referred to as beautifying lines) according to the state. According to Article (2) of this law (p. 8), the treatment of such beautifying lines as archeological lands meant that these zones have excavation potential. However, this is not applicable in sites found within the city. As this law implies, whatever is below the ground should be preserved and whatever above the ground should thus be demolished. The law completely ignores the fact that the city is livable and inhabited. The ambiguous text of such law left a room for interpretations. In Article (20) of Law no.117 of 1983, the state defined the kind of interventions that were allowed in such settings. The article stated that any form of intervention must be firstly approved by the Ministry of Antiquities and done under its supervision. That law provided the sole power to the state in regards of renovations or even planting a tree. Consequently, the constant misuse/misinterpretation of such law resulted in banning al-Hattaba's residents from any form of renovation to the space or to their homes.

However, Article (30) of the same law presented the needed loophole to defy such rigid laws. This article stated that: "After the approval of the Competent Permanent Committee, Chairman of Council's Board of Directors may license competent authorities and scientific missions to undertake operations of restoration and conservation under the Council's supervision. Also specialized individuals may be given the license in writing to undertake such operations (Law no. 117 of 1983 As Amended by Law No. 3 Of 2010 Promulgating the Antiquities' Protection Law, p.26)." This article presented a possibility for experts' intervention and to advocate for these settings. NGOs such as Megwra BEC used that law relying on the specific mention of "approval of the Competent Permeant Committee" to advocate for al-Hattaba's case and help its invisible residents.

Another piece of legislation that is worth mentioning was issued by the National Organization for Urban Harmony[8] (N.O.U.H.). They published a regulation guide that was approved by the Supreme Council for Urban Planning and Development According to Law no. 119 of 2008 and its executive regulations 2011 (National Organization for Urban Harmony, 2011). The Boundaries and Conditions of the Historic Cairo Region presented a classification of Historic Cairo into three zones: Zone A, Zone B and Zone C. According to this classification, al-Hattaba is located in Zone A, in areas of high importance and advocates for the importance of maintaining historic urban fabrics[9] (National Organization for Urban Harmony, 2011; p. 3). Unlike previous laws, this guide provides a counterpoint that challenges the 1973 Administrative Decree of Evacuation Zones, seating al-Hattaba as zone of heritage value. Another report was issued in 2013 by the Informal Settlements Development Fund that classified Cairo's unsafe areas. This report categorized al-Hattaba

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[7] Law on the protection of Antiquities, Law No. 117, 1983. Accessed on 06 February 2024. (In Arabic) https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/egp_law117_araorof.pdf

[8] A governmental institution that aims to "apply the values of beauty to the exterior image of buildings, urban and monumental spaces, the bases of visual texture of cities and villages and all the civilized areas of the country" (p. 75) [59].

[9] The urban fabric includes buildings, streets and any physical composition in the setting.

as Category Two Informal settlement that describes it as an unsafe area that needs re-planning and/or demolition and evacuation (Informal Settlements Development Fund, 2013). This classification aligns with the 1973 Administrative Decree of Evacuation Zones. The dilemma of that classification is crucial as it ignored that the area was left to decay due to the misinterpretation of the precedent buffer zone laws and legislations, especially that of 1983. This had major drawbacks as Cairo governorate depended on that classification when issuing the Executive Order of 2017, Decree 5725 that specifically states that al-Hattaba needs re-planning [59].

All these misinterpreted laws prevented al-Hattaba residents from renovating, maintaining, or demolishing structures in their neighborhood. As the state believed, the only course of action is to demolish and/or evacuate such areas. The state relied on this ban to cause the gradual decay and collapsing of houses, thus effortlessly evacuating the area. The catastrophic consequences of these laws were seen after the earthquake of 1992, where houses collapsed, and the state refused to compensate the residents for their loss or allow them to reconstruct their lost homes [15]. The current law, issued in 2018[10], did not deviate from its predecessors, making it almost impossible for the residents of al-Hattaba to prevent their neighborhood from falling into decay. State laws treated al-Hattaba as empty/vacant land, totally disregarding that there are generations of residents that lived and living there.

Currently in al-Hattaba, the authorities are demolishing the urban ruins with total disregard for their value as a built heritage as part of the 1979 UNESCO World Heritage List. Despite the claims of the Ministry of Antiquates that demolitions are far away from any sites of value; the demolitions are destroying the unique fabric of the city that formed through and in time. In that sense, the urban ruins that represent a part of the built heritage are becoming a burden to local authorities rather than an asset and inspiration. The Antiquities Authorities took a step further by shutting down activities in almost all the heritage structures in the setting. They considered them as a liability and surrounded them by metal fences. In their defense, they are trying to protect the heritage structures from theft, refusing to repeat the hustle that followed the theft of the mihrab panels of the mosque of Manjak al-Yusufi. This created bad blood and throwing blames between the ministry and the residents of the setting [15]. However, these buildings are left without any maintenance which ultimately makes them fall in decay even further.

During the 21st century, the local economy was damaged due to the government's decision to close al-Bab al-Jadid. Additionally, the residents were banned from renovating their houses and were held responsible by the laws for the condition of historical monuments within the neighborhood [15]. These new laws also declared al-Hattaba as an unsafe area that needs to be evacuated to create a buffer zone around The Citadel [10, 11]. For al-Hattaba residents, the state disregarded their economic dependence on the touristic flow from/to al-Barb al-Jadid. The majority of the residents lost their main source of income. Shops that sold local crafted goods and local foods were closed and/or shut down. They

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[10] Amending some provisions of the Antiquities Protection Law, Law No. 91, 2018. Accessed on 06 February 2024. (In Arabic) https://manshurat.org/node/31514

referred to the closing of al-Bab al-Jadid as a symbolic and literal death to the craftsmanship in the area [59]. Consequently, many people could not afford to upgrade their homes or even move into better ones; thus, they are forced to settle to live and stay in a declining environment. They display a very admirable sense of attachment and dedication towards preserving their heritage and history as well as their homes. They sing songs, do interviews with the news and work with local NGOs to stay in al-Hattaba.

This hostile relationship between the residents and the government led al-Hattaba to its decay. Accordingly, al-Hattaba's decay can be explained through the broken windows theory. This theory is that if a broken window remains unfixed, the other windows will break in due time [61]. This approach applies to all the components of an urban setting. The theory considers urban decay in two forms: physical and social [62]. Physical decay reflects the level of maintenance of the physical environment and the social decay reflects the increase patterns of unacceptable behaviors such as prostitution and theft [63]. Physical decay in this theory can be caused by many reasons, such as climactic factors, biological and botanical and human interventions [64]. When walking through al-Hattaba, the political and economic disputes are narrated through the physical state of the setting. The built environment of al-Hattaba had diverse variations in them. The residents resided in what we will call "inhabited ruins", they are fairly newer buildings that showoff severe ruination features, or new renovations attempts. The renovations were done poorly due to the economic status of the residents and yet they showcase how the residents are still attached to staying in space.

Fig 12. Samples from Inhabited Ruins. The photographs showcase a collection of facades for the homes of al-Hattaba's residents showcasing their deteriorated state and their efforts to renovate and stay in their homes.

6. Al-Hattaba's decay disrupts common classifications of space.

Architecture is an artistic expression that manifests humanity's resilience and the changing nature of their surroundings throughout time [65]. In decay, residents of al-Hattaba introduced new definitions of the spaces through their interaction with the setting. They molded the physical setting to reflect their attachment to their homes and to advocate for its survival. Residents manipulated the physical structure of their homes that services their needs. This interaction represents an additive attitude (Fig 14). They added features such as

sheds, extended wooden balconies and external stair structures, according to their needs. They also used the street setting as an extension to their homes. They placed indoor furniture in outdoor spaces and turned parts of their homes into small kiosks and/or workshops to enhance their income. Children repurposed the clearing in al-Hattaba's hill as a playground to play football.

Residents personalized the physical aspects of the setting in two forms: their inhabited ruins and the scattered wall art. The inhabited ruins displayed variations of colors, materials and shapes in façade elements (Fig 15). For example, they renovated their old doors and/or changed them into new ones. The façade colors look like a collage of colors and materials that are composed according to the residents' taste. The wall art represents the residents' struggles and identity. They painted on the walls of al-Hattaba using vibrant colors on exposed façade materials (Fig 16). They incorporated elements of Islamic geometry, catch-phrases that represents their history and even actors they idolize.
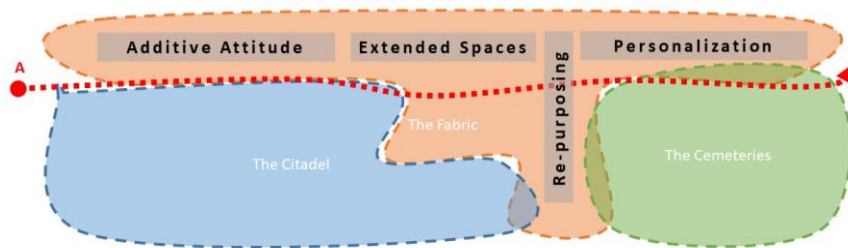

Fig 13. The generated themes that affected the new classifications of al-Hattaba's spaces. Source: The Authors' Illustration.

(A) Turning part of their homes into stores

(B) Adding Elements to the Façade - External Stairs

(C) Adding Elements to the Façade - Alterations to Balconies and Shades

(D) Adding water vessels to serve pedestrians

(E) Extending their homes into the street

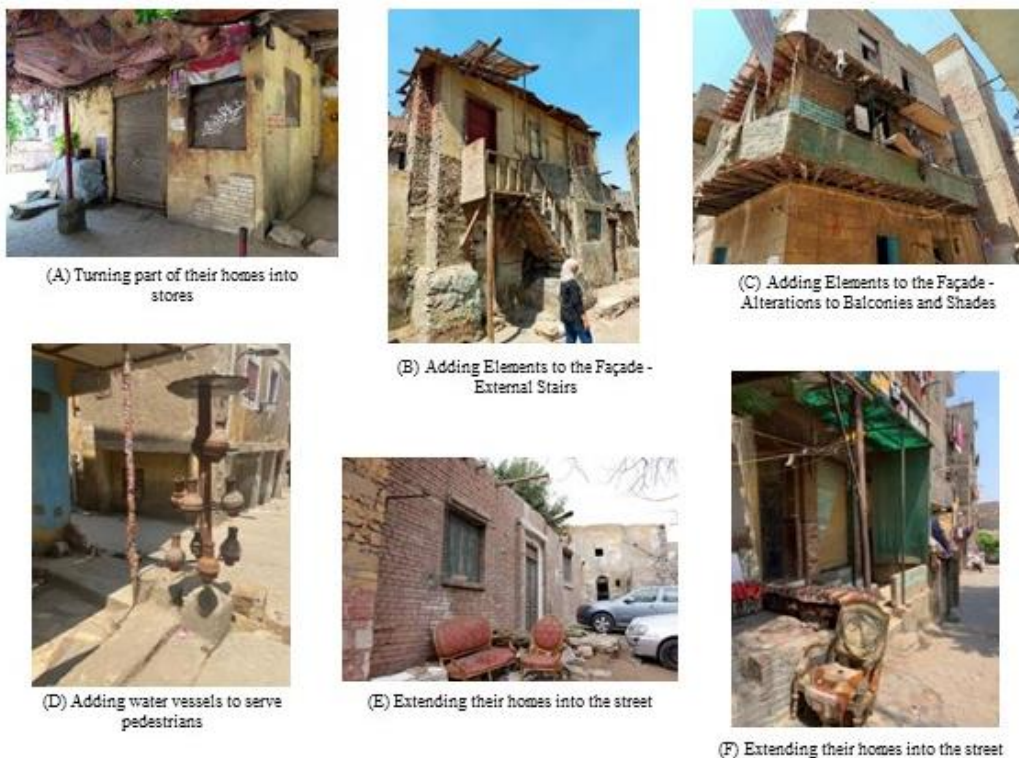(F) Extending their homes into the street

Fig 14. Residents' Additive Attitude.

Fig 15. Variations in façade personalization styles, colors and materials

(A) Wall Art "al-Hattaba is my address/ home"

(B) Wall Art " al-Hattaba: the start of the pilgrimage route"

(C) Wall Art of Actor Mohamed Ramadan

Fig 16. Residents' Personalized Wall Art.

7. Reflections and Conclusion

"Neither cities nor places in them are unordered, unplanned; the question is only whose order, who's planning, for what purpose?" – (Marcuse, 1995; p. 244).

Photography is a powerful tool that creates a digital memory of the city. As cities change in and through time, their documentation becomes helpful in studying the changes that happened to their image and in preserving their historic memory of what they used to look like before being altered. It can also be considered a trace of the past, just as a ruin. In this research, documenting al-Hattaba was an important step to preserve part of its memory and narrate its story before its demolition—although the documentation itself was not an aim in this research. We composed the alternative narrative using ruination theories by observing and analyzing the captured fragments in photographs. This type of documentation and analysis helped create a collage of al-Hattaba as a setting that always has something more to offer the more it gets explored.

Understanding al-Hattaba historic/decayed setting as a part of Cairo's fabric, and thus its overall image, opens the discussion about understanding the nature of Cairo's image. Any disturbance or alterations in a part of the image disrupts the whole image. Accordingly, it was essential to uncover the layers of al-Hattaba's image before its demolition to understand the upcoming alterations to Cairo's image when removing such historic areas.

In literature, walking through the city is one of the best ways to explore it. The body moves in a setting, the mind gets stimulated by the surrounding world, and then the body and mind

react to these movements and stimulations. This allows the body to have a series of attachments and detachments to the surrounding world, disrupting the rhythm of the body. In photography, attachments and detachments can be translated into what is worth photographing, "the events," and what was only experienced as a background. The photographic action of clicking the camera disrupts the movement in space, allowing the photographer to reflect and observe what is in sight, captured in the photograph and created as an image in mind.

Throughout this research, photography proved itself to be a powerful tool that can evoke deeper understanding of decay phenomena in an urban setting. The results of the photo walks asserted Sontag's [54] claims about the power of photography. That photography is an act of nonintervention, yet it gives the appearance of participation by turning the photographed into a series of "events."

In theory, ruins and decayed structures articulate capitalist and political endeavors in their physical forms. Al-Hattaba embraced that quality of a ruinated setting. It is a space that is shaped by planned decay by the state politics, the same state that holds al-Hattaba accountable for its own ruination. The state laws negatively affected the lives of al-Hattaba's residents in both social and economic orders. This negative effect can be visually detected in the physical elements of the setting.

Moreover, Schönle [42] argued that ruins "evoke layers of the past without even pretending to represent any of them" (p. 649). In that sense, al-Hattaba presents an encounter with fragments of the past in their current forms. The remains of historical structures, ruptures of the Citadel's view throughout the fabric, and the collage of inhabited ruins and totally collapsed structures evoke the mind to consider the life of the setting beyond the state-sponsored narratives. This generated new themes and sensations of experience, such as drama, layered experiences, and metaphors of clashing scenes between life and death.

Additionally, ruinated settings and structures have an oscillating nature which results in a constant change in traditional meanings of space. They can introduce new binaries such as nature/culture, power/vulnerability, opportunity/uselessness, abandonment/re-purposing, and visible/invisible. There are many ways to interpret and make sense of such settings, as they mean and add different values for different users. In al-Hattaba, residents see their home, whereas the state sees a danger; the children see an opportunity to play in clearings, whereas the state sees trespassing on the Citadel's buffer zone; architects see history, cultural expressions, and undervalued architecture, whereas the state sees obsolete and unsafe structures. This provokes the mind to consider and imagine what its future might be like. This interaction between the body and mind raises more questions: how did they get to this? What happened? And why did it happen?

For us—pedestrians walking through ruination—al-Hattaba presents an experience where the past coexists in harmony with the present, creating a dynamic variation in architectural styles and states: old versus new, protected versus neglected, maintained versus collapsed, and heritage versus inhabited ruins. The experience of the fabric itself becomes a texture

experience. Rustic façade details intertwine with renovated and new ones along the organic fabric, eventually creating a turbulent and mysterious sensation for any viewer.

By the end of this research, one keeps on wondering: What justifies demolishing something? The label of decay—or even obsolescence—does not necessarily justify demolition. The Pyramids of Giza, Rome's Colosseum and the remains of the city of Pompeii are obsolete and are preserved as monuments of historic value. The entire El Moaz Street was decayed at some point but got rehabilitated for its value. The fact is the state practices, the way people understand these labels, and the published narrative and/or image are the key definers of what would be demolished and what would not—in the author's opinion. For example, al-Doweqa was labeled by the state as "informal," "a slum," and "dangerous" due to its physical condition. However, these labels are often interpreted by people as referring to its residents and the area's safety. The labeling aligns with the state's plan to relocate the residents to al-Asmarat. Another example is The Maspero Triangle, which was completely replaced with new towers named "Manhattan in Cairo." In 2008, inspired by Dubai, the state published its plan for Cairo 2050 and labeled the area a slum to be removed, ignoring its history since the early 19th century. Both instances represent a commonly practiced process in Cairo, the state labels a setting and publishes a politically influenced image, people misinterpret that label, a wrongful image is perceived, and all hell breaks loose. The published image acts as an advocate or justification for the state plans. But is the state aware of that? Is it a plan or luck? It is foolish to deny that Cairo has parts that are decayed, which can pose an unsafe condition—physically speaking. However, there are many ways to approach the issue: regeneration, rehabilitation, preservation, adaptive reuse, etc. Cairo's complex and organic development resulted in districts, with overlapping historic and cultural layers that are integral to its physical history and image. Understanding decay in Cairo requires dedicated, unbiased researchers.

Progress is inviable. Cities change through time. The question thus becomes: What is worthy of leaving behind or what is worthy of being demolished? Are we depriving future generations of experiencing parts of their history? The discussion of alternative decay narratives might not be new in Western literature. However, the topic poses a controversy in perspectives when applying them to Cairo's historic context. We argue that the findings from this research on al-Hattaba's decay offer vital insights for broader urban planning and policy decisions in similar contexts. Urban planners and policymakers can glean several lessons:

a. **Balancing Development and Heritage Conservation:** Urban development and heritage conservation are not mutually exclusive. The example of al-Hattaba demonstrates that it is possible to balance the two by adopting innovative and context-appropriate strategies. Urban policies should aim to harmonize new developments with the preservation of historical settings, promoting a city's continuous evolution while maintaining its historical integrity.

b. **Revisiting Labels and Narratives:** The labels and narratives used by authorities significantly shape public perceptions and policy outcomes. Policymakers should be

cautious of the language they use to describe decayed areas, as these labels can have far-reaching effects on the community and the approach to urban development. Al-Hattaba's case is a living example of how mislabeling a setting can have a negative impact on its residents. By promoting more positive and inclusive narratives, urban planners can foster environments that value and protect decayed areas as part of the city's living history.

c. **Prioritizing Preservation and Rehabilitation**: Rather than defaulting to demolition, urban decay should prompt considerations of preservation, rehabilitation, and adaptive reuse. Recognizing the historical, cultural, and social values embedded in decayed structures can lead to more nuanced and respectful urban development strategies.

d. **Context-Sensitive Urban Planning:** Urban planning should be sensitive to the unique historical and cultural contexts of each area. The case of al-Hattaba illustrates the dangers of imposing a one-size-fits-all approach to urban development. Policies and interventions should be tailored to the specific needs and characteristics of each community, ensuring that development respects and enhances the existing urban fabric rather than displacing or erasing it.

e. **Revisiting Labels and Narratives:** The labels and narratives used by authorities significantly shape public perceptions and policy outcomes. Policymakers should be cautious of the language they use to describe decayed areas, as these labels can have far-reaching effects on the community and the approach to urban development. By promoting more positive and inclusive narratives, urban planners can foster environments that value and protect decayed areas as part of the city's living history.

f. **Holistic Approaches to Urban Decay**: This research highlights the need for interdisciplinary collaboration in tackling the complexities of urban decay. Combining insights from various fields can lead to more effective and sustainable urban planning solutions that respect the multifaceted nature of decayed settings. The study of al-Hattaba serves as a valuable case in point, underscoring the potential of decayed urban areas to contribute meaningfully to the broader narrative of a city's development.

Eventually, we can safely conclude that Al-Hattaba is a living setting, a decayed setting, but not an obsolete one. It has the potential to be saved. Historically, socially, and culturally, al-Hattaba has value and significance that are highlighted by the presence of the phenomena—as argumentative as this may sound. With proper management and investments, al-Hattaba presents an opportunity for an alternative experience of the city, its hidden dimension that is often seen as shameful. We do not deny that al-Hattaba was decayed, but we argue that this decay is not a reason for demolition. The demolition of al-Hattaba will deprive the city of its right to integrate urban decay as part of its history and image. We hope through this study to open a conversation about decaying spaces like al-Hattaba, widening the scope of what is and is not worthy of preservation, restoration, or simply saving.

Although the study offers a framework for analyzing decay using photography and ruination theories, applying this framework to other contexts requires careful consideration of local nuances. The interplay between state policies, resident perceptions, and historical narratives

is complex and varies significantly across different cities and regions. Therefore, while the study's methodology can be adapted, the specific outcomes and interpretations should be tailored to the unique characteristics of each urban setting.

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