

**Public Appropriations of Private Space**  
**Ambiguous Notions of Publicness in the Egyptian Resort Town of El Gouna**

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## **Abstract**

While much of the academic debate is predominantly concerned with the ongoing privatization of public space, this paper conducts a reverse approach by exemplarily investigating the public appropriation of private space in the corporate resort town of El Gouna. To this end, the concept of public space is utilized in a way that moves beyond the frequently heard postulation of “free entry for everyone” towards a more comprehensive perception as advanced by Siebel and Wertheim, who propose four dimensions of public space: juridical (public vs. private ownership), functional (market and politics vs. production and reproduction), social (distance and anonymity vs. intimacy and emotionality) and material (accessibility vs. exclusion through elements of architecture and urban design).

It is found that El Gouna exhibits strong deficiencies in all four dimensions of public space. The entire land, on which El Gouna was erected, is controlled by a single company. Closed holiday retreats and internal gated communities add supplementary layers of privacy. The market function strongly dominates the public realm, while cultural and political functions are barely visible. Social encounters are often limited to commercial interactions between buyers and sellers. Limited accessibility, exclusion, and spatial segregation, which were deliberately built into the spatial fabric of El Gouna, are strong symbols of dysfunctional publicness.

As the concept of public space is inherently Eurocentric, it can be argued that it cannot be applied adequately in Egypt. Instead, the country’s social, economic, political, and historical conditions ought to be considered when analyzing El Gouna’s urban space. This leads to the conclusion that insufficient institutions and failing cities may have led to individuals’ preference of order and security over democratic participation, equity, and social cohesion.

Notwithstanding, investing in good public spaces may contribute to the mitigation of the unfavorable conditions that many Egyptians are seeking to escape from.

Keywords: public space, privatization, resort town, El Gouna, Egypt

## Introduction

The Egyptian resort town El Gouna markets itself with the slogan “Life as it should be” ([www.elgouna.com](http://www.elgouna.com)). By providing a wide range of typical urban amenities El Gouna generates a carefree image for its residents and consequently markets itself as a utopian escape for Egyptian well-offs and European pensioners.

This paper explores the question, what kind of public spaces there are in El Gouna, which characteristics they exhibit, and how they are being used. The main thesis under examination is that despite the ubiquitous private ownership status of El Gouna, public activities take place in the open and local residents appropriate the town’s spaces in a public matter.

The paper proceeds as follows: First, the concept of public space is defined as utilized for the upcoming analysis. Second, the area of investigation, El Gouna, is introduced, focusing on its peculiarities as a resort town. Third, a variety of nine case studies illustrates the different appearances and usages of public spaces around El Gouna. Fourth, the findings are discussed under the perspective of public space, as laid out in the first part, and their implications are discussed in the closing evaluation.

## 1. Public Space and Urbanity

This paper follows the conceptualization of public space as laid out by Siebel (2000) and Siebel and Wehrheim (2003). Rather than focusing on a single aspect, such as the frequently heard postulation of “access for all”, they propose four complimentary dimensions of public space.

The first dimension covers the *juridical* aspects of space under the perspective of ownership and, as a consequence, the freedom of accessibility. “Public space is under public law, private space under the law of ownership and domestic authority.” (Siebel, 2000, p. 31)

The second dimension revolves around *functional* considerations of public space. It deals with the different usages of space, the functions that people carry out in public. “The market function, leisure, cultural and political functions are attributed to the public space of a city; whereas production and reproduction are attributed to the private areas of the business and the apartment.” (Siebel, 2000, p. 31)

The third dimension deals with *social* interactions, how people meet and engage with each other, and how their interactions differ between publicness and privacy. “Public space is a place

of ritualized anonymity, of a sterilized, distanced behavior. Private space, instead, is a place of intimacy, physicality, and emotionality.” (Siebel, 2000, p. 31)

The fourth dimension looks at the *material* and *symbolic* characteristics of space, which complement and exemplify the other three dimensions. “A broad repertoire of architectural and urban planning elements signal the accessibility or exclusiveness of spaces. The design, used materials and symbols exaggerate and illustrate the juridical, functional and social differentiations of public and private spaces.” (Siebel & Wehrheim, 2003, p. 4)

In the academic literature, the concept of public space is closely intertwined with the perception of urbanity. Public spaces provide the frameworks in which *urbanity* can develop. It sets the stage for Jane Jacob’s (1961) “sidewalk ballet” and constitutes a main factor of Siebel’s (2000) European city. Marion Young (1990) identifies four ideals of urban life: social differentiation without exclusion, variety, publicity, and “eroticism in the wide sense of an attraction to the other, the pleasure of excitement of being drawn out of ones secure routine to encounter the novel, strange and surprising” (p. 239). Similar attributes can be found by the advocates and observers of publicness, including, for example, Richard Sennett (1974), Mitchell Duneier (1999), and Jürgen Habermas (Goode, 2005).

For a collection of introductory texts on public space, see Anthony M. Orum & Zachary P. Neal (2010). The privatization of public space in the case of London and the UK is discussed by Anna Minton (2006; 2009). Related concepts include the Disneyfication of cities (Rost, 2000) and the peculiarities of touristic spaces (Wöhler et al., 2010). The rising security concerns of urban residents are covered by Walter Siebel and Jan Wehrheim (2003).

## 2. El Gouna

### 2.1 History and backgrounds

The resort town of El Gouna is located 450 kilometers southwest of Cairo and 25 kilometers north of Hurghada on the coast of the Red Sea. It is owned by Orascom Hotels and Development, a developer with a focus on touristic destinations, which also acts as the managing company in charge of the town's daily operations. Whereas Orascom stipulates a number "of between 22,000 – 24,000 permanent residents and visitors" ([www.orascomdh.com](http://www.orascomdh.com)), other sources estimate the amount of people staying in El Gouna to be around 14.000 on an annual average, including international tourists and domestic visitors (Banhardt & Hartenstein, forthcoming). In low season, the number of people present in El Gouna can be as low as 10,000, while during festive seasons it can grow beyond 30,000.

El Gouna does not possess any democratic institutions in terms of an elected council or mayor. Instead, it is governed by a General Manager, who is appointed at Orascom's discretion. Comparable to a municipal tax, a monthly fee is levied onto El Gouna's inhabitants to cover community services such as security, street cleaning, garbage collection, as well as the provision and maintenance of the urban infrastructure. The resort also comprises a wide range of typical urban amenities, including a hospital, a library, a museum, a mosque and a Coptic church, childcare facilities, schools, and a university campus of TU Berlin.

### 2.2 Social composition

El Gouna is socially comprised of several groups, which differ in their length of stay, purpose of residence, and socio-economic status. *Permanent residents* include Egyptian and foreign nationals that own a villa or apartment and live in EL Gouna for the bigger part of the year. They make up the core population and maintain a network of social contacts and activities between themselves. A large group of *Egyptian owners* possess a domain in El Gouna but live in Cairo or other parts of the country. They only come by for long weekends, vacations or public holidays. There are also Egyptian *business owners*, who run a shop or other commercial enterprise in El Gouna. They live on site or in Hurghada and spend a significant proportion of their time in town.

*Regular staff members*, such as hotel clerks, drivers, cleaners, or security wardens, also spend the majority of their time in El Gouna. Their contracts often stipulate an eight-week working

period, followed by two weeks of holidays. As many of them stem from areas in Upper Egypt around Aswan, they tend to spend off-times with their families in their home region. *Workers and laborers* are hired on a project basis, predominantly in the area of construction. They also reside in El Gouna during their contract periods but are largely absent from public life. Their range of movement is limited to the work sites and the labor camps in which they are accommodated (see 3.6 below). *Foreign expats*, including diving and kiting instructors or lecturers at TU Berlin Campus El Gouna, embark on more seasonal stays of several months per year.

*International tourists*, mainly from Europe, usually come to El Gouna on holiday packages and typically stay for ten to fourteen days. Individual travelers are much less frequent and stay for varying amounts of time. *Egyptian tourists* come mainly for the festive seasons of *Eid* and New Year's, staying for one to two weeks.

### **2.3 Economic foundations**

El Gouna's main purpose – and in fact the very reason for its existence – is to serve as the backdrop for vacations, i.e. to provide an appealing setting and the required facilities for international and domestic holiday makers. In addition, large parts of the resort's physical structures are sold to private owners in the form of holiday homes and apartments. Consequently, El Gouna constitutes a product. It lives a double existence as a town, being a home to its permanent residents, and as a commodity, being internationally marketed by tourism agencies and real estate traders.

Most economic activities in El Gouna strongly rely on tourism. The resort boasts 17 hotels with a total capacity of 2,707 beds. The visitors are catered to by over 400 restaurants and shops, spread across several locations ([www.orascomhd.com](http://www.orascomhd.com)). The local retail sector is largely focused on touristic demands, selling clothes, souvenirs, handmade crafts, and sportswear. Holiday related service providers include tour operators, spas and gyms, diving schools, kiteboarding centers, and other water-based activities. Several supermarkets and fruit and veg shops service the local population. Most other products need to be purchased in Hurgada.

El Gouna's economy underwent a severe downturn in 2011. As a consequence of the political turmoil in the aftermath of the first Egyptian Revolution, tourism arrivals in the country plummeted from 14 million to 9.5 million between 2010 and 2011. A small recovery has occurred after a second shock in 2013 and arrivals returned to 10 million in 2014 (World Bank).

Although El Gouna was hit by the recession less harshly than other regions in Egypt, local businesses were strongly affected by the drop in customers. In order to avoid closures and resulting vacancies, the Orascom decided to grant rent breaks for several months in 2011 (El Gouna Magazine, 2012)

Real estate developments form another pillar of the local economy. Until recently, Orascom used to build and sell villas and holiday apartments only by itself. The main target groups were wealthy Egyptians looking for an exclusive holiday retreat and European pensioners seeking a place for their retirement. Lately, El Gouna has begun to sell off parts of its land to external developers, who construct projects on their own account (see 3.9 below).

A small industrial sector is present in El Gouna. A brewery, which used to be part of Orascom's portfolio of sub-companies until it was sold to Heineken, produces beer for the tourism dominated areas along the Red Sea coast. A small winery processes grapes from the Nile Delta and equally caters to the regional market. A wood workshop produced furniture for local residences.

The prevailing dependency on tourism as the predominant economic foundation of El Gouna resulted in plans for diversifying the local economy. The idea of a business park emerged that would house companies, which wish to escape the inconveniences and security concerns of Cairo or intend to serve the market in the Red Sea Region. While architectural drawings were already prepared, the lack of a proper concept for the business park and the recent stabilization of the domestic economic and political situation have decreased the emergency of such an undertaking and the plans have not materialized so far.

## **2.4 Ownership**

The ownership status of the land on which El Gouna is built is not transparent, as Orascom remains reluctant to disclose the necessary information. Through conversations with numerous residents and employees of Orascom it has emerged that the plot was most likely leased from the Egyptian Armed Forces, who are the biggest land owner of the country. The exact conditions of the agreement, including the lease price as well as the beginning and end date of the lease period, are unknown.

Since Orascom does not own the land of El Gouna, they can also not sell it. This implies that the buyers of any form of real estate purchase the building but not the plot on which it was

erected. They merely acquire the right of usage of the respective parcel for a prescribed period of time.

### **3. Case Studies**

#### **3.1 El Gouna overall – Life as it should be**

El Gouna exhibits clear characteristics of a gated community. On the land side it is surrounded by a trench to deter vehicles from intruding the premises through the desert. Two guarded entry gates allow access to El Gouna. The main gate serves tourist busses, individual vehicles and most arriving traffic. A secondary gate at the workers quarter of El Bustan (see 3.6 below) is limited to Orascom's busses to Hurghada and other company vehicles. In recent times, it was often closed due to security concerns.

The conditions for entering El Gouna are restrictive and ambiguous, following lines of class and status. While foreign tourists, domestic holidaymakers and a certain socio-economic clientele enjoy unlimited access to the resort, Egyptians of lower prestige are not generally permitted. Passengers of local busses arriving at the gate are routinely required to show proof of identification and disclose their intentions to enter the resort. Even though the controls are partly due to legitimate security concerns, they also serve the purpose of preserving the resort's character of exclusiveness.

#### **3.2 El Kafr – The ambitious beginnings**

The island of El Kafr (Arabic: the village) is surrounded by artificial lagoons and was one of the first phases of El Gouna to be completed. It was originally envisioned to serve as staff housing for the workers that were building the first private villas and hotels in El Gouna. The urban qualities of the resulting neighborhood were so convincing that people got interested in buying some of the units for their own purposes. Realizing this economic potential, Orascom shelved the original plan, converted the area into a residential zone, and sold off the apartments to private investors. The staff quarters were moved across the lagoon to what is now Downtown (see 3.3 below), where they suffered a similar fate once again, until they were eventually situated outside of town in El Bustan (see 3.6 below).

El Kafr is characterized by vernacular architecture, based on the principals of the Egyptian architect Hassan Fathy (1976), who rediscovered traditional local building techniques, especially



domes and vaults made from mud bricks, and propagated their superior performance under arid climate conditions. The residential areas host numerous small courtyards and alleys, where trees and bushes provide shading and add nuances of public and semi-public zones. Narrow passageways lead into neighborhoods, making them open and accessible, yet maintaining a smooth transition between the publicness of the main street and the privacy of the living quarters (see Gehl & Svarre 2013).

El Kafr is accessible by two all-purpose bridges and one pedestrian bridge. Cars cannot drive across the island as the streets coming from the two bridges end in cul-de-sacs and are not connected with each other. Neither can vehicles enter the residential zones but have to be parked along the main street. Rather, the entire area is optimized for walkability and sojourn.

In the center of El Kafr lies a square, which is occasionally used for events and markets. It is dominated on one side by a building that was originally meant to become a mosque. Today, its tower and rooftop are home to a pizza restaurant. On the opposite side of the square, a roofed souk houses multiple shops and boutiques, which mainly offer souvenirs and other tourist related products. The adjoining street was El Gouna's first entertainment area. While the local gastronomy was experiencing a downturn throughout the past years, it has recently picked up again and a number of new establishments settled down along this stretch of El Kafr. El Gouna's oldest supermarket is also located here. Further facilities on the island include an aquarium and three hotels, of which one now serves as the home of the local football club El Gouna FC.

Being El Gouna's oldest neighborhood, El Kafr comes closest to feeling like a real community. Many residents have been living here since the town's early years. Equally, some businesses have been operating in the same premises since the area was built. As a result, a network of personal contacts and commercial relations has emerged, which sets El Kafr apart from all other parts of El Gouna. The prevailing urban design strengthens this perception of a communal spirit. Private and public spaces are intertwined with each other. The continuous transitions are guided by unpretentious design elements, such as defining greenery, distinct entry points and passages, varying types of flooring, and architectural shading components. The architects of El Kafr, Rami El Dahan and Soheir Farid, were awarded the Honorary Hassan Fathi Award in 2009 for their efforts to "design a living and vibrant community with a mix of both permanent and temporary residents." (Alex-Med Newsletter, 2009, p. 5)

The built environment of El Kafr translates into a backdrop against which social encounters become more likely and fertile, making for an effectual public realm. Merely the functional dimension of public spaces remains underrepresented, as the local economy is predominantly tourism-centered, cultural activities are largely absent, and other vital functions of urban life are mainly located around Tamr Henna square (see 3.4 below). Of all areas of El Gouna, however, El Kafr encompassed the public realm that best fulfills the aspects of public space as laid out by Siebel (2000; 2003), except, of course, for the legal ownership status.

### **3.3 Downtown – The divided heart of El Gouna**

The so called Downtown area of El Gouna was built opposite of El Kafr, separated from the island by an artificial lagoon. It consists of three main areas: El Gouna's main street, which is lined by shops and restaurants, El Balad (Arabic: hometown), a low-profile residential area, and Tamr Henna, the town's main square, which is dealt with in a separate case study (see 3.4 below).

The main street comprises El Gouna's most important commercial zone. Next to gastronomical establishments and the typical souvenir shops it also holds an engaging range of businesses that cater to the daily needs of permanent residents, such as a greengrocer, an optician, a barber, and a supermarket. There is also a gallery, a small museum, and Orascom's fees office. At the same time, a couple of small squares just off the main road would make for an intimate urban space but remain largely underutilized.

El Balad is separated from the rest of Downtown by a wide unappealing sand road that also serves as El Gouna's major bus stop. The quarter consists of dreary multi-unit blocks, the last stage of staff housing in the center of town before a new residential zone for employees was erected on the outskirts of El Gouna (see 3.6 below). The open spaces in this area are not clearly defined. Between the buildings are wide patches of plain sand, making orientation difficult and impeding the walkability of the area. The quarter is in a stage of neglect – paint and plaster are coming off the walls, the wooden windows do not close properly, and openings in the walls show where the air-conditioning devices used to be installed before they got broken. Many balconies are cramped with trash or covered with thick cloth or reed mats, giving passersby the impression of a barricaded desert town. Besides, there is virtually nothing to do in El Balad. There are no shops, no functions, no meeting places, no activities.

Downtown is the core of El Gouna's social and economic life. It is the town's central district, offering all main services and functions. Yet, the dissimilarities within the area are striking. While the strip along the main street offers a variety of mixed activities for living, working, and business, El Balad is bare of any form of activity altogether. In sharp contrast to the thoughtful urban design in El Kafr, which provides attractive qualities to the public realm and encourages numerous forms of social interaction (see 3.2 above), El Balad suffers from a complete disregard for the urban form. The result is an uninviting inner-city waste land, which lacks in every dimension of public space. In combination, Downtown gives a mixed impression of high functional density vis-à-vis underutilized areas and a prevalent neglect of spaces.

### **3.4 Tamr Henna – A theater of social inequality**

The central square Tamr Henna lies embedded in the center of El Gouna's Downtown area. It is dominated by the outside seating areas of various types of gastronomy. Further, the square hosts a number of central functions, including Orascom's head office, the tourist information center, the post office, a pharmacy, and two supermarkets. The ambience is complemented by a number of shops that primarily cater to touristic demands.

Tamr Henna offers a high quality of sojourn as it was evidently laid out to be the functional heart of El Gouna. The wide open space invites visitors to stroll about the L-shaped square, which is framed by one- to three-story buildings on all sides. Two wider openings and several narrow passages provide clearly defined points of access and connect Tamr Henna with the surrounding urban fabric in all directions. A circular arrangement of street furniture allows for longer stays under the protective shade of palm trees, while an open water feature supplies natural cooling to the adjacent outdoor areas.

The density of use options and the explicit design give Tamr Henna the look and feel of a typical public square. Yet, despite the pleasant plaza-like atmosphere, it does not portray the expected intermixture of public life. Rather than being a melting pot of social classes and diverse kinds of residents and visitors, the square exhibits and exacerbates strong socio-economic fault lines. The prevalent restaurants and shops are predominantly frequented by foreign tourists or external Egyptian visitors. These user groups meet the local inhabitants almost exclusively in the context of service provision: as a shopkeeper or waiter. The result is a strongly hierarchical form of public encounters. Instead of being a place for mingling, cultural exchange, social

quarrels, or political debates, Tamr Henna reinforces the strong economic divisions that determine the Egyptian society.

Tamr Henna comprises many functional and material characteristics of the most prototypical type of public space: the town square. At the same time, it lacks in the vital aspect of mutual and fruitful interactions on a personal level. It may be the center of civil life in El Gouna, yet Tamr Henna is not a stage to publically carry out the town's inherent debates or conflicts. Passing users and the square's occupants do not encounter each other as equals. Rather, a subliminal discrepancy in social status and economic power commands the scene and impairs any form of interaction, reducing individual contact to transactions between buyers and sellers, customers and employees, clients and service providers. According to Mumford (1937) "the city is a theater of social activity". Tamr Henna, in contrast, is a theater of social inequity.

### **3.5 Abu Tig Marina – The restricted luxury waterfront**

Abu Tig Marina was by design constructed to be the upscale part of El Gouna. It was commissioned as a second central location after Downtown was slipping into a downturn in attractiveness and activity, due to neglect and a lack of maintenance. Modeled after a Mediterranean sea town, the marina comprises two artificial bays with berthing for more than 220 boats. The waterfront is enclosed by a walkway and the small adjacent quarters feature narrow angular alleys that are reminiscent of an Arabic town. As Abu Tig Marina lies about one and a half kilometers north of Downtown, it is accessible from other parts of El Gouna only by motorized transport, yet cars are not allowed to enter the area but have to be parked in the surroundings.

The local businesses portray a distinct focus on touristic demands and include numerous restaurants and bars, boutiques and souvenir shops, small supermarkets, hotels, and diving centers. While the outlets are mainly occupying the ground floors, the upper floors and the buildings in the adjacent quarter host private apartments and holiday flats, of which many are uninhabited for most parts of the year. Tourists stay at most for a few weeks and private owners come by only for the festive season or for a long weekend. As a consequence, the marina lacks the frequent social encounters that would define a distinctive urban neighborhood. Instead, it is dominated by passersby, temporary spectators, and visitors seeking out leisure and amusement.

On Abu Tig's official website it is claimed that it "offers a wide range of amenities comparable to the best marina resorts in the world" (Orascom Marine Management), yet the architecture and urban layout feel artificial and *made* to arouse a particular association of urban life. The facilities that draw people here are all centered on shopping, dining and entertainment. Apart from these touristic activities the area gives a lifeless and monotone impression with little public life beyond business functions.

This perception is reinforced by omnipresent security guards and a policy of restricted access. Although not stated openly, Abu Tig Marina is implicitly reserved for a certain clientele. "Average" employees, workers and laborers, who work around El Gouna, are constrained from entering the realm - except for work related tasks. But also "accepted" patrons are limited in their ways of behavior. Activities that go beyond the expected and approved range of conduct, such as loitering, are discouraged and "offenders" can be sent off the premises. In an anecdotal episode, friends of the author have been asked by a guard to leave after they played a board game on a jetty.

In conclusion, the role of Abu Tig Marina as public space is limited at best. The setting was deliberately planned to mimic a blend between a Mediterranean harbor town and an Arabic settlement, embodied by the intentional architectural style and urban design. The pedestrian zone and the underlying layout suggest the intimacy of a community. Yet, social interaction is low and the available functions are limited to shopping and touristic amusement. The exclusion of unwanted socio-economic groups from using the marina enforces a double layer of legal marginalization – the first on the level of El Gouna and the second on the level of Abu Tig Marina. This combination of a staged material scenario and uniform users makes the area feel like a themed shopping mall, rather than like an urban quarter.

### **3.6 El Bustan – The remote workers quarters**

El Bustan (Arabic: the garden) is a designated quarter for staff of Orascom and other employees around El Gouna. It is located about five kilometers away from Downtown in the remote periphery of the resort, next to the small airport. The area has a separate entry gate at the main road to Hurghada. Orascom's own bus company transports the residents to Downtown or to Hurghada.

The building structure includes single-family houses for members of the management level of Orascom as well as multi-family blocks for lower level employees. There are no designed open

spaces in El Bustan. The patches between the buildings are left unimproved, covered by bare sand, and exposed to wind, sun, and dust.

In the midst of El Bustan sits the El Gouna stadium, which hosts the first league club El Gouna FC. The stadium feels alien to the area, out of place and proportion, especially as it remains unused most of the time. When the quarter- and semifinals of the African Champions League were played in El Gouna in 2014 due to security concerns in Cairo, crowds of fans swept the area, intruding the privacy of local residents.

There is a commercial building that could house around 20 shops and businesses. The units are lined on both sides of an arcade-like street, yet, the vast majority of them are vacant. A market area, consisting of container-like stalls, is equally defunct and almost empty. El Bustan further holds a small industrial zone with a beer factory and a car repair shop as well as an international hotel school. A Coptic church is located in the direct neighborhood, while the Mosque was placed in the Downtown region, yet equally remote. Beyond this, El Bustan features no amenities for the local population.

In the beginning years of El Gouna, the original plans intended the staff housing to be situated in the El Kafr and Downtown areas. The first designs comprised diverse and appealing units. A lot of thought was put into the conceptualization of suitable architecture, small open squares, and the connection between individual residences and the other parts of town. In later years, it was decided to relocate the staff quarters away from the core settlement area, five kilometers into the desert. This move physically manifested El Gouna's social and economic segregation. The urban layout now unambiguously demonstrates who belongs and who is merely tolerated. The "real" inhabitants live in villas and apartments along the waterfront of the Red Sea and the lagoons, while the "serving class" is constrained to the bare outskirts, left without services and amenities.

In sum, the zones in and around El Bustan suffer from a shortage in all dimensions of public space. As any part of El Gouna, the area is legally controlled by Orascom. But despite other quarters, El Bustan was not even laid out to give the impression of a mock urban setting. The neighborhood lacks cultural, political, and economic functions. The complete neglect of the outside areas hampers social encounters and confines the residents to the private spaces of their apartments. Above all, the physical disconnection of El Bustan from the rest of El Gouna stands as a symbol for the contempt that the people who live here face from the town's community: they do not belong, they are not meant to participate, they are not part of the public.

### **3.7 Private governance - Ambiguous regulations**

As El Gouna does not comprise any public governance but a private management structure, it is governed primarily by regulations and directives. Many of them tend to be ambiguous, altering, spontaneous, or vague. For example, a strip of at least five meters is to be left open between private properties and the waterfront in order to provide unrestricted passage along the beach. Yet, this point was slowly loosened over time and the initial ideal of a freely accessible beach has begun to change.

“Till a few years ago you could put your towel on any lagoon and just swim there. [Recently] residents started to pitch umbrellas on the beach, laying claim to a few meters of shade, writing ‘private’ and putting chains on their sunbeds – with approval of course.” (Restaurant owner, 2015)

Although no written form of regulations exist, the size, color and form of shop signage need to be approved by Orascom. The same holds for the types and names of any new business. In this way Orascom effectually controls the way in which public space is used for commercial purpose.

“The one general rule is ‘get approval from Orascom before doing anything’. That works for signage, transport, staffing, painting, the type of business activities, what you serve and what you sell.” (Restaurant owner, 2015)

### **3.8 Public streets – Labor protests and road blockades**

On at least two occasions, in 2013 and 2014, workers and laborers demonstrated in El Gouna for higher wages and against projected layoffs. In one instance, protesters occupied a central roundabout, which leads into Downtown, effectively obstructing any traffic in this direction. Another time, they blocked the main street between Downtown and Abu Tig Marina, erected barricades of metal trash bins, drums, and benches, and brought the traffic along this route to a virtual standstill.

In both cases security guards promptly arrived at the scene. But not only did they follow a hands-off approach by letting the protesters continue, they effectually supported the blockades by switching on their car’s warning light to warn approaching vehicles, regulating the traffic, and safeguarding the whole situation. None of the car drivers arriving at the scene complained openly about the obstruction. The scene remained calm and stress-free, almost as if it was daily routine.

Streets are one of the oldest and most symbolic forms of public space (see for example Hall, 2012; Rudofsky, 1969; Speck, 2012) and demonstrations are one of the most direct forms of stating public opinion. The undisturbed protests in El Gouna's streets – against the labor policies of the owner of the resort town – represent a strong expression of free speech. This act of civic resistance signifies that public appropriations of spaces do occur in El Gouna and that the functional and social dimensions of public space persist despite the town's distinct private ownership status.

### **3.9 Recent real estate projects - Triple layers of privacy**

The newer quarters of El Gouna look and feel much like North American suburbs. The winding roads are lined by isolated villas, bordered by walls and impenetrable hatches. In order to enter these areas, one has to pass through a wooden swing gate, which is permanently guarded by a security warden. Owing to the high emphasis on private seclusion, these quarters make a deserted and sterile impression, especially since most villas frequently remain unoccupied for several months on end.

The two latest development projects in El Gouna, Ancient Sands and The Mansions, go even further in their strive for seclusion. Ancient Sands is a compact hotel-like construction that sits on top of a small hill. It overlooks the rest of town from its isolated location, giving the impression of a castle that needs to defend itself from the hostile surroundings. It contains private villas and apartments, hotel suites, and a central "piazza" with restaurants, shops and leisure facilities, thereby providing a wide range of amenities for its residents and guests. It is being advertised as setting "new standards in full-service community living" (El Gouna Magazine, 2011, p. 34).

The disconnection between Ancient Sands and the rest of El Gouna is twofold. For one, it is physically separated from the town as it is located on the edge to the desert and is completely surrounded by a golf course. Second, people residing in the complex have little reasons to go to the central locations of El Gouna as most services are available on site. Additionally, access to Ancient Sands is restricted to selected user groups, which creates a secluded environment for a privileged group and removes it from the available realm of many inhabitants of El Gouna.

The Mansions is a real estate project, which is located within the boundaries of El Gouna but was carried out by the external developer Remaal Misr for Touristic Development S.A.E. (El Gouna Magazine, 2011; p 36). The property lies about three kilometers off the core of El Gouna,



close to the road to Hurghada. It is completely enclosed by a high wall with a number of entry gates, resembling an old city fortification. On the inside, the plot is subdivided into several building sites, again surrounded by a wall and each with its own gate. Up to now, only the most central plot has been developed, the others remain vacant.

The plots of The Mansions are reserved for private developments and were planned to provide the highest level of privacy. There is a triple layer in place that separates the future owners from El Gouna's population and, in fact, Egypt's society at large. First, The Mansions lies within the secured boundaries of El Gouna, which serves as a first filter of accessibility. Second, the complex lies at a distance from other structures and is surrounded by a wall, a physical barrier and strong signifier of seclusion. Third, the demarcated compounds within The Mansions shield off the proprietors against their direct neighbors. In summary, the compound was explicitly optimized to shut out all aspects of "disturbing" publicness.

#### **4. Discussion and Conclusion**

The case studies above portray a wide collection of observations of public space in El Gouna – often conflicting, ambiguous, or inconsistent. This chapter subsumes some of the underlying factors along Siebel's four dimensions of public space, identifies common characteristics, discusses discrepancies, and offers some concluding remarks.

##### **The social dimension of public space**

As described by Henri Lefebvre (1974), urban space is constructed by its users. A city's residents appropriate and utilize its space according to their demands and desires. In El Gouna, however, a lack of genuine public spaces leaves little room for appropriation. In fact, it seems as if the majority of people in El Gouna aspire to reduce social engagement and rather retreat into private isolation.

This trend, which can be similarly witnessed in the gated communities around Cairo and countless fenced-off retreats along the coasts of the Mediterranean and the Red Sea, may be rooted in the chaotic, almost dysfunctional conditions in many of the country's urban centers, especially in Cairo. A widespread feeling of insecurity abounds, which results in a desire for safe sanctuary and an intentional separation from the prevailing circumstances, from the "potentially dangerous others", and eventually from society at large. This effect is exacerbated by growing socio-economic disparities, which increase the need of the well-offs for perceived

security behind protective walls. David Sims (2012; 2015) meticulously describes the devastating results of this physical and mental partition of the privileged parts of the population from “the rest”, which causes enormous economic, social, and environmental damages. The arising new cities waste enormous resources as they are mostly located in the desert and require new infrastructure in remote locations, including the costly provision of water and electricity.

The urban areas around El Gouna, which, through design and appearance, resemble public spaces, were in fact conceived primarily as stages for consumption by tourists. Hence, very few activities take place in public that are not dominated by commercial interests, with the exception of some occasional labor protests. The main square, Tamr Henna, is lined with highly frequented restaurants and shops, yet few people ever linger or stroll about the area.

Instead, many social functions take place in (semi)private places. Among some others, the Club House and the Kiteboarding Club, which has its own stretch of beach, have emerged as gathering points for a specific part of the local community. They serve as gathering points for personal encounters, festive occasions, informal meetings, and leisure activities. It is there that the permanent community comes together to celebrate, discusses daily affairs, and debate the future of El Gouna. However, these spaces fall under the owners’ domestic authority and access can theoretically be restricted. Moreover, the Club House and the Kiteboarding Club attract a very particular clientele with a cultural background of European or western connotation. As such, they can only play a limited role as public spaces from a social point of view. Rather, they serve as substitutes for genuine public space due to a lack of more suitable and more encompassing alternatives. In the same vein, similar substitutes exist for other sub-communities along the lines of cultural backgrounds, language groups, or socio-economic status. While these spaces may adequately serve the requirements of the determined user groups, their exclusive character prevents them from contributing to a town-wide understanding of community. In contrast, they further aggravate the trend of separation and seclusion.

### **The functional dimension of public space**

The insufficiencies of El Gouna’s public space with regards to social considerations are mirrored in a lack of diverse functional dimensions. The market function strongly dominates the scenery, whereas cultural or political functions barely materialize.

According to Henri Lefebvre (1996), “the city is itself ‘oeuvre’, a feature which contrasts with the irreversible tendency towards money and commerce, towards exchange and products” (p. 66). Since El Gouna’s urban realm is broadly dominated by commercial functions – and in fact constitutes a product itself – it becomes clear that it is not oeuvre. It was deliberately made for the exchange of goods (souvenirs, groceries, real estate) and services (accommodation, gastronomy, leisure, entertainment) and acts as its own shopping window, putting itself on display for tourists, buyers, and investors. All other functions and amenities are merely necessities that complement El Gouna’s selling point of a “fully-fledged town” ([www.elgouna.com](http://www.elgouna.com)) but are subordinate to the prime objective of marketability.

In terms of culture, El Gouna provides almost no public activities. The collection of the small museum is barely noteworthy and hardly receives any visitors. The branch of the Bibliotheca Alexandrina remains idle for most of the time, owing to its unappealing selection of books. There are a weekly cultural night on Tamer Henna and a similar happening in Abu Tig Marina. Yet, these events merely offer a folkloristic program, tailored for a touristic audience. Most other happenings qualify as entertainment rather than culture. There are annual golf and squash tournaments, a motor rally, and beauty contests. Even the graffiti, which sprung up on several walls around El Gouna in 2014, were no sign of an unhampered artistic expression – they were commissioned by Orascom. One of the few genuine cultural activities is the “Earth Week”, an annual environmental awareness event, which was initiated by the local community.

Culture, it can be concluded, has been largely commodified in El Gouna. The focus lies much more on entertainment than on any form of cultural contention over the town, its inhabitants, life in general, or any other subject of significance. This tendency is mirrored in the quality of public spaces around El Gouna, which are often much better suited for entertainment than for cultural happenings.

Politics are largely absent from public life in El Gouna. The nationwide events of the Egyptian revolutions in 2011 and 2013 were noticeable only indirectly – through a sharp drop in the number of tourist arrivals, stagnation in real estate sales, and a stark economic decline. But beyond coffee table discussion there were hardly any visible signs in El Gouna that the nation’s political landscape was undergoing a time of dramatic change.

On the local scale, El Gouna is run by Orascom through a General Manager and several layers of subordinated managers. The company fulfills almost all duties of a municipality. It is responsible for garbage collection, street cleaning, security provision, street lighting,

maintenance of infrastructure, distribution of electricity, and many other duties. But despite the enormous impact that Orascom's decisions have on the daily lives of El Gouna's inhabitants, there is no form of democratic involvement or public participation. Instead, Orascom governs primarily by means of regulations and directives, which tend to be intransparent, inexplicit, and inconsistent and get changed on an *ad hoc* basis.

Democratic forms of governance are typically concerned with the delivery of common welfare for the citizens. While Orascom provides very similar elements in El Gouna, its legislation has a much stronger notion of commercial service provision. Certain amenities are offered in exchange for a fee. Yet, this procedure does not occur under the main principle of welfare, as it would be in the case of a public provider, but in the context of a calculated business transaction. A strong similarity, however, between Orascom and a "normal" municipal structure is the complexity of administration. As the company is in charge of so many different aspects, a multifaceted structure of bureaucracy has emerged, which is strictly hierarchical in nature and habitually lacks coordination between different sub-divisions.

As politics are virtually absent in El Gouna, its public spaces do also not provide for such functions. Without political rallies or campaigns, there is no need for any space to host them. Closest to any governmental function are Orascom's administrative units, such as the housing and the fees offices, which are located in Downtown. Yet again, they fulfill a managerial role rather than a political one. Even the Mosque and the Coptic Church, which could potentially exert political influence due to their religious authority, have been banished from the town center to the peripheral areas of El Gouna. Subsequently, the public realm remains entirely void of any political functions, symbols, or manifestations.

### **The material/symbolic dimension of public space**

El Gouna's built environment resembles a pseudo-Arab town conceptualized for the comfort of mostly European tourists. The "award-winning architecture" ([www.elgouna.com](http://www.elgouna.com)) by, among others, Michael Graves and Alfredo Freda, is to imply a high degree of urban quality. Furthermore, it is stressed that particular architectural features, such as the widespread vaults and domes, are rooted in Nubian building traditions. Yet, it remains unclear what this mediocre collection of buildings represents. The town's fragmented components lack a comprehensive narrative that would link the disjointed parts and give it a meaning beyond its existence as a marketable commodity.

Many parts of El Gouna were planned by European or North-American architects and feel alien to the region. A notable exception is the area of El Kafr, which was conceived by the Egyptian couple of Ramy El Dahan and Soheir Farid. Their design rests on traditional building styles, which also consider the harsh effects of the local climate conditions and respect social norms and the prevalent standards of public spaces.

Apart from El Kafr and parts of Downtown, most quarters in El Gouna show a strong disrespect for local conditions, customs and town-related considerations. They were predominantly envisioned for the sole comfort of their inhabitants and revolve around individualism, security, segregation, and enclosure – with the villa as the prototypical manifestation. They do not connect to a holistic urban fabric but constitute islands of isolation, void of public functions and communal areas.

The explicit positioning of El Bustan and other labor camps away from El Gouna's core area constitutes a strong symbol of socio-economic exclusion. "The undesired" are physically removed from public life, confined to prescribed areas. Their purpose is to serve "the privileged", yet besides this function they are expected to remain "invisible". Deprived of any public role and limited in their movement around town, they are restrained to the private space of their residences.

In consequence, there are two types of physical segregation in El Gouna: one by choice and the other by force – yet both manifested in the material design. The well-off seclude themselves through explicit structural elements, such as walls, fences, hatches, gates, or other demarcations. The less fortunate are sent off to the periphery, obliged to stay out of sight and deprived of any means to participate in public life. The result is a highly segregated town, planned to minimize unintended social encounters and maximize private seclusion. El Gouna's urban fabric thus mirrors and reinforces the strong socio-economic fault lines that have come to dominate Egypt's society.

### **Concluding reflections**

Undoubtedly, El Gouna is an artificial creation, a gated resort, and a product. We, as western researchers, tend to see this as betrayal of our highly praised values of publicness, democracy, the welfare state, and of a society that is open, just, and equitable. In our own cities we want to see these ideals to be physically manifested in our spaces, thereby clinging to the myth and the

idealization of the ancient Greek polis (see Siebel 2000). Thus, when looking at El Gouna, we also judge it by how well it does against the benchmark of this Eurocentric model.

Despite our bewilderment, El Gouna also constitutes a living space in its own right. Rather than comparing it to our own standards, we may want to ask how it is faring as part of the Egyptian society and under the prevailing social, political, and historical contexts. In fact, there are actually two lines which ought to be discussed: The first is the transfer of the western idea of public spaces to an Arabic country – which, if it wasn't for the large amount of western tourists and residents, would be clearly out of context. The second touches the idea of publicness itself. Which meaning is connected to “the public” in a resort town like El Gouna? It clearly does not live up to our expectations but nonetheless most of the needs of the residents and visitors are fulfilled. In a country, in which the state struggles to provide elementary infrastructure, security and many other means to cover basic needs, a place like El Gouna sets itself apart from most other towns. And Orascom is actually doing quite well in delivering services that are not for granted everywhere, ensuring a certain degree of order, and guaranteeing a decent living for its residents.

El Gouna explicitly markets itself as a counter concept to Cairo, the polluted, noisy, insecure, and overpopulated capital. It sends out an image of order, tranquility, exclusiveness, and security. In 2012 an advertising campaign brought home this point by saying “Things that don't exist in El Gouna”, followed by negative features, such as noise, stress or traffic, which are typical for many urban areas in Egypt. Of course, the promotion did not mention the more desirable aspects that are also absent in El Gouna, including democratic participation, diversity, social cohesion, or culture.

In a period where the individual becomes increasingly apolitical and searches for a retreat from these insecure and crisis-laden times, places like El Gouna become a mirror of our global society. The individual is ready to give up democratic participation, freedom, and resistance in exchange for a perfect feel-good environment. Accordingly, the true cost of living in El Gouna is citizenship. But without citizens, the resort remains only a product, which caters to its customers by creating a city-like illusion that shields them off against the unbearable impertinences of “the real world”.

So, is El Gouna's slogan “Life as it should be” a utopian promise or a dystopian threat? As always, it is a point of perspective. Advocates of publicness, social cohesion, or open political debate will argue that El Gouna offers little to foster these societal traits but rather reinforces the

existing divisions and inequalities through its elitist character. Others will respond that El Gouna offers comfort and security in a country whose cities have gone out of control and fail to serve its citizens' needs.

Those who come to El Gouna voluntarily have to decide how much of their freedom they are willing to leave behind at the entrance gate in exchange for the amenities inside. Those who come out of necessity, e.g. to work, cannot make this decision. But it is the very nature of the domestic society that forces them into the realm of El Gouna. Therefore, the question arises, how much freedom there actually is for them to leave behind. In either case, the decision to live in El Gouna is born out of the same set of political, social, and economic conditions, culminating in a state that is unable to provide its citizens with the necessary means to sustain their lives in their current localities.

If an endeavor like El Gouna can survive in the long-run remains to be seen. According to a UN-Habitat report (2013), "prosperous cities are those that recognize the relevance of public spaces (p. iv)". As discussed in this paper, the qualities of public spaces in El Gouna are mediocre at best. And yet, El Gouna is growing – though not necessarily prospering. This seeming contradiction could be attributed to a Eurocentric and idealistic exaggeration of the desirable characteristics of public spaces. Under the given circumstances in Egypt, with insufficient institutions and failing cities, the focus may be on the perceived necessities of order and security, rather than on the alleged luxury of public spaces. Notwithstanding, I want to argue that investing into an appealing public realm would be a worthwhile undertaking in El Gouna as much as in the rest of Egypt (see UN-Habitat 2013). Through diverse social encounters, familiarity with "the other", equity, and cohesion, the multilayered benefits of good public spaces will contribute to the very conditions that those, who retreat into privacy, seek to create: order and security.

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