

Liminal Publics, Marginal Resistance: Learning from Nubian spaces

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ABSTRACT

In 1964, indigenous Nubians were displaced from their original land – the land between what is now Egypt and that of Sudan – to modernised settlements built by the Egyptian state. The Nubians dissatisfaction with the novel built environment translated into transgressive public spaces. One of the most common transgressions was the addition of an external bench called Mastaba. Since power relations between men and women have changed, the built environment now acts as a catalyst in the exclusion of women from formal public spaces such as conventional coffee shops and squares. Mastabas function as liminal spaces, spaces which blur the boundaries between public and private spheres. As these spaces do not suit the formal understanding of public spaces, we investigate these liminal spaces in order to reveal the spatial tactics of the marginal. We argue that the existence of these spaces raises issues of spatial justice and spatial resistance.

The behaviour of liminal public spaces varies; they have the ability to transform adjacent spaces. This research investigates the role of the Mastaba in opening up the public space for women, thereby giving them the ability to contribute to the writing of their social contract. We base our analysis on extensive fieldwork, consisting of auto-ethnographic observations and participation, informed by a feminist epistemology. We use tools of spatial analysis to explore an alternative public space offered by liminality. To question the binary notions of private and public space, we ask ourselves: where does that space start? As spatial professionals, we also wonder: can we contest the hegemonic definition of public space and contribute to spatial resistance? Drawing lessons from the case of the Mastaba, we propose contingencies for designing the liminal that serve the marginal.

Disclaimer: Due to the methods used in this research, the research team wishes to clarify the use of personal pronouns in this text, especially those referring to one of or both the researchers. The use of *I, my, mine, myself* and *me* refers to the first author, Menna Agha, and often appears within auto-ethnographic notes and narrations. Plural personal pronouns such as *we, us, our*, etc. are used to refer to both Menna Agha and Dr. Els De Vos, in order to elaborate on arguments, proposals and convictions that were produced by both authors.

INTRODUCTION

This paper is a narrative of places and peoplehood. We look at the Mastaba — that cuboidal bench — from a critical perspective to learn tactics of marginal placemaking within the shadow of the spatial system. While the narration is focused around my home settlement in New Qustul, Lower Nubia, the Mastaba has been regarded as simple street furniture by the Egyptian government and scholars alike. Here, we explore the subtle acts of rebellion performed by a Mastaba.

Although the recommendations in the literature on Nubian displacement offer solutions regarding policy and development strategies, they fail to engage with the personal spaces of marginalised Nubians. The lack of research at micro level is partly because the state forbids long-term and human-oriented research. Geographer David Harvey argues that it is intrinsic for research to bridge the knowledge gap between the micro-scale of the body and the personal, and the macro-scale of the global so as to understand issues of justice.¹ In this research, we will show that it is fundamental to link the political, personal and spatial dimensions on the macro and micro scales to study the dynamics of power structures from the position of the marginal, in order to explore the ways in which an understanding of political and global factors helps in comprehending the hegemony of the space. Further, this approach addresses a need to engage with micro resistance. The purpose here is to investigate the liminality of the Mastaba as a spatial tactic used by Nubians, in order to learn its roles in the act of resistance against spatial injustice.

HISTORICAL ANCHORS

When I was 9, on a winter break from school, I sat at the Mastaba of our house like every day. My grandmother was telling me, and children from our street, stories about our homeland: a land that is drowned and whose people were forced to come here. She emphasised that the place where we sat, did not come close to the beauty of our original villages and that this Mastaba was not even half as spacious as her original home's Mastaba.²

This paper draws upon research on spatial injustice caused by involuntary resettlement, a form of displacement induced by the development of mega-projects. The economic ambitions of certain states during the last century have had a drastic effect on people. Resettlement colonies have become the by-product of large infrastructure projects. The building of dams alone is responsible for the dislocation of ten million people annually, most of which are rural and indigenous populations.³

My people were a part of those millions, as they were affected by the Aswan High Dam in Egypt.⁴ My grandparents, like all Egyptian Nubians, were moved by the state from their thousand-year-old land to state-built settlements in Kom Ombo Valley. By 1964, all remaining Egyptian Nubians were moved from the Nile valley to a housing project called 'New Nubia'. This project was planned

and executed by the Egyptian state according to British principles of modern planning. The plan conveyed values of a productive and functional ruralisation.⁵ Planning thus depended on the fundamentals of amenity, order, and efficiency,⁶ to offer villagers optimised and functional dwelling units, central services and public venues.⁷ After a decade of displacement, evaluations and surveys showed that the project had failed to offer Nubians the promised prosperity.⁸ Most studies attributed problems that occurred to organisational and policy causes,⁹ but gave little attention to the role of the built environment and its aggressions that were inscribed into the cultural and economic displacement of Nubians.

METHODS AND TOOLS

This research relies on a single case method, namely the settlement of Qustul, named after the original village that was submerged in 1964. In order to find spatial resistance, we have drawn an informal map of Qustul. This map includes all the spaces that were not approved or designed by state agents. It also indicates activities that violate spaces or disrupt their allocated functions. Furthermore, all the Mastabas — the external benches in mud that were added by Nubians to the houses they received from the state — are explicitly drawn. They emerged everywhere, at every house all over the settlement, and facilitated other uses of the outdoor space. As such, they were the most effective transgression in the settlement, as we will argue further.

We employ methodological reflexivity throughout the process ¹⁰ in which I position myself as a scholar, a Nubian, a woman and a feminist. More specifically, I engage in self-critical and sympathetic introspection as a researcher. Researchers generally embrace a morality of care, by regarding people encountered in their research as relational. Philosopher Virginia Held’s ethics of care appreciate emotions and relational capabilities that enable morally concerned persons in actual interpersonal research.¹¹ Such interpersonal relations develop sensibilities, which allow the detection of subtle spatial phenomena, spatial stigmas and gender roles. I used an auto-ethnographic toolkit to collect data and analyse places that I have experienced first-hand. Through the use of knowledge stemming from long-term situations, and observations of different phenomena repeated over the years, the rendered data have depth of field. Being an insider has also allowed me to access the shadow economy and its activities easily.

I incorporate my body into the narrative. I regard my clothing as my second skin and the space around me as a third skin.¹² By marking my body, I use my subjectivity as a source of data, but more importantly, I prevent my role as a researcher from inscribing power to the ‘institutional scholar’ to dominate the space or dictate the narrative.¹³ I noticed that during what I labelled ‘narrative sessions’ that took place when I was sitting on the Mastaba and soliciting stories from people, a relative asked me to get her something from inside the house whilst she continued her story. As a result, I missed certain parts of it. Thankfully, I could rely on the mobile phone recorder, which we had all forgotten about. I also mark my biased position as a Nubian who grew up subscribing to the



meta-narrative of Nubian displacement, in which Nubians see their story as being removed from a paradise by the river. I acknowledge the rooted feelings in me and the constructed imaginations that jump to my mind when hearing stories about the old land.

It is worth mentioning that feminist scholarship strongly inspires research efforts and sources in this paper. It offers an understanding of institutional problems, spatial phenomena and gender roles. We base our understanding of gender on Judith Butler’s theory of performativity.¹⁴ She defines gender as a performed social construct: a construct dictated through social contracts, which are – in themselves – a result of political interest. Consequently, we look at performed gender roles in public spaces as symptoms of power politics, to indicate the presence and the span of the effect of different power structures in public spheres.

Above
Figure 1: An informal map of Qustul, showcasing the repetition of the Mastaba.
Drawn by Menna Agha.

NOTIONS OF PUBLIC SPACE

Public spaces in New Nubia are located in the central area of each settlement. They offer ‘public’ functional spaces such as a Mosque, commercial spaces and a support centre for agriculture, in addition to what the state labelled ‘modern spaces’ (such as a community centre and youth sports facilities). However, they are all designed and occupied by men, and they facilitate (or perform) activities that are foreign to Nubian indigenous culture, in a culturally instructive spatial organisation with a spatial agency that Sandercock labels as ‘spatial police’.¹⁵ Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe argue in their book *Hegemony and Social Strategy* that the creation of modern ‘public spaces’ is not carried out in the form of true democratisation but through the imposition of new forms of subordination.¹⁶

People in Qustul had an essentialist notion of space and made essentialist connotations, like many other Muslim African cultures, such as the Kasena in Northern Ghana ¹⁷ or the Berbers in Kabylia.^{18,19} Nubians associate women with the domestic sphere and men with the non-domestic sphere. Nubian women were managing ‘the human’ around their houses, while men were working in ‘the natural’ environment. However, historical evidence indicates that Nubian women had a strong presence in the public sphere,²⁰ which overlapped with the domestic space. This fact refutes the exclusion of women from the public sphere (and from public life in general) as a Nubian tradition. Women ventured into public spaces and participated in public life from inside and outside the house. This means that the current understanding of the ‘domestic’ as ‘private’ and the ‘female’ is not indigenous to Nubians. It is instructed by the design of the built environment, by state-commissioned architects and planners, generating an Aristotelian separation between the men and the *polis*, and the women and the *household*.

In her book *Feminist Morality*, Held offers an understanding and critique of these Aristotelian constructions. Based on her theory of ethical morality, Held explains the discount/reduction of female activities around the household. She refers the exclusion of women from public life to the understanding of women as

biological beings who cannot transcend their animalistic nature. They bear children, breastfeed, raise children, all of which are considered natural and not political or even voluntary, and therefore are confined to the household.²¹ The problem, according to Held, is the injustice perpetuated by the exclusion of women from the making of the social and the political spheres, and dismissing the area situated and formulated around the domestic sphere from being recognized as a part of the public sphere. The same argument is raised in feminist architectural theory, where this naturalized connection of women with the home and domesticity is problematized, as the female element is mostly repressed.^{22,23}

Nubian houses used to accommodate social gatherings that varied from weddings to courts. The government dwellings only offer areas between 100 and 240 square metres, ²⁴ which is at least five times smaller than a traditional Nubian house. This drastic shrinking of interior spaces moved large gatherings of people from interspaces to central public spaces. Furthermore, Nubians had a tradition of only locking their homes when travelling.²⁵ That being so, all house doors were left unlocked for passers-by to enter. When inhabitants received doors that locked from the inside, they poked a hole in the door with a string to enable people to enter from the outside. When I was growing up, I often pulled such a string to get into my house without having to knock.

We argue that the built environment of government settlements has played a great part in stripping the Nubian household of its transformative political powers, therefore stripping Nubian women from their place in the public sphere. The surface area and the accessibility of Nubian traditional houses allowed the house to be the most complex typology in Nubian architectural heritage. Indeed, most economical, social and cultural activities had relevance to parts of the house, which rendered it the most attractive element to study among Nubian architectural scholars. By looking at the average surface area of Nubian houses before the resettlement, we find vast spaces of between 500 – 2000 square metres.²⁶ Such large areas were not just used for dwelling, neither were they confined or inaccessible to the public.

The state offered what it called ‘optimised dwellings’, with narrow courtyards, functional services, and minimum standards for the surface area for each function, denoting modernist theory of design.^{27,28} The house was hence reduced to a dwelling. Ironically but characteristically, ‘dwelling’ was the same term used in formal documents to describe the housing units. The design of dwellings included superficial and diluted references from the original house, such as the small courtyards. However, the dwelling design did not recognize the fact that a Nubian house was not only a ‘dwelling’ but also a place to gather and organize all kinds of communal activities.

SPATIAL TACTICS OF RESISTANCE

It is in this context that the Mastaba emerged. The Mastaba is a traditional element of the Nubian home culture. It is a cuboidal attachment to a house’s main façade. It functions as a simple bench attached to the house and associated with its household. Nubians felt a shortage of space for certain communal activities. By building and adding a Mastaba to their new house, they were able to improve their living conditions. However, it did more than just improve: it was also an act of disagreement, of resistance even.

As a way of showing their resentment, Nubians refuse to refer to the Kom Ombo resettlement area as ‘New Nubia’, the title used by government agencies and official bureaus. Instead, they use the Arabic term *El-Tahjir*, meaning ‘the place of displacement’, ²⁹ which is also the term I use when referring to the place I was born. Furthermore, Nubians showed their resentment towards the built environment by transforming virtually every possible aspect of the latter. Architecture professor Yasser Mahgoub notes that by the 1980s, virtually all Nubian households had performed some kind of change to their houses.³⁰ Through these transgressive changes to the settlements, we find Nubian women to be the main instigators, after having suffered the biggest spatial losses in the domestic and public spaces – which often intersected.

The addition of the Mastaba is a way to extend the inside out and the outside in, giving Nubian matriarchs a metaphorical

throne. This space is dominated mainly — but not exclusively — by women, despite being described otherwise in most of the literature. For example, Urban researcher Wael Salah Fahmi, in his 2004 book on Nubian resettlement,³¹ describes the Mastaba as a space for men. I could justify his remarks with the fact that his body dictated his experience as an outsider and a male employee from the government. Fahmi’s existence around the Mastaba caused women to retreat to the inside of their houses. This view is also shared by Mahgoub, who describes his experience: ‘As we walked between the houses, women who were sitting by themselves on the Mastabas disappeared inside their houses when the crowd approached them, while those who were accompanied by men stayed and looked at us curiously.’³²



Above
Figure 2: Women Preparing food for cooking around their Mastaba.

Most of the literature also sees the Mastaba as a way Nubians coped and accepted their new settlement. We here strongly disagree with the accepted scholarly view on Nubian resettlement because we see the Mastaba as a tool of spatial resistance against the hegemony of the settlement. We want to challenge the common narrative in the academic literature on Nubians, which regards the role of the Mastaba as passive/reactive, to seeing it as an expression of the active marginal whose *powerlessness* had — and still has — the ability to transform a built environment.³³ We want to promote a discussion about the active, resisting, and dynamic marginal that is able to innovate and develop tools to reside and sustain itself.

To understand the role of the Mastaba in making a post-displacement home, we must first look at the original Mastaba and its relationship to the old house.³⁴ Historically, the Mastaba³⁵ was a prominent feature of old Nubian houses. They were used as typographic negotiation in the construction process; their form changed according to the slope and other geological factors of the land. This complexity created outdoor places and facilitated outdoor situations while connecting a household to the outside, especially with the river. As in Old Qustul, the main façades of most houses — and consequently their Mastabas — were oriented towards the river Nile,³⁶ inspiring a poetic image of buildings performing an ancient prayer. In addition to its structural utilities, a Mastaba is the Nubian's first encounter with the outside world, as it is a child's first playground. There, they can play under the supervision of their grandmothers. The Mastaba was always a social space, where people gathered and formed commons. Evidence of this is found in official documents and grey literature, as well as in Nubian folklore. In the late Hamza Eldin's iconic ballad 'A Wish',³⁷ he keeps repeating the verse 'we always sat together side by side'. By this, Hamza refers to a configuration of human gathering commonised and dictated by the form of the Mastaba.

Although the Mastaba can be seen as an illegal violation of the street profile, the government allowed its construction. According to most Nubians, that had to do with the fact that the process of resettlement caused numerous problems, ranging from an

increased infant mortality rate to an immediate loss of wealth, which in turn, made the state less inclined to prosecute land-use violations. Moreover, they probably considered them as distractions for the inhabitants. Besides, as the Mastaba is an element of the traditional Nubian culture, it was likely seen as a way of re-evoking that folkloristic building culture. It was not seen as something hostile and threatening but rather as something inherent to those people. Moreover, the fact that academics³⁸ consider the Mastaba as an adaptation to the novel environment (or even as an approval, an acceptance of the new housing) confirms the idea that the Mastaba is rather seen as merely an innocent element of traditional street furniture more than as an illegal violation of the street. In short, they were seen as part of cultural heritage rather than elements of transgression and resistance.

The Mastaba in new Qustul is not an exact replicate of the traditional Mastaba. Rather, it is a transfigured version of the historical one. The new Mastaba is not integrated into the building of the house, nor is it oriented towards a body of water, as the new site is not located along an important river. It is a superimposed element to the façade of dwelling units and is less organic in shape than the old one. While the displaced Mastaba recalls the iconographic value of the old element (shape and position), it also summons up the spatial agency of the Nubian cultural institution. In this research, we argue that the new Mastaba transcends its old form, not only by re-enabling indigenous Nubian activities, but also by conveying latent political and structural abilities. The new Mastaba defies the designated land use plan. It also deconstructs binary understandings imposed by that plan.

The post-resettlement Mastaba performs a similar social role in bringing people together, giving children their first outdoors playground and connecting the household to the outside. It is the first social space in the village that did not serve a direct pre-planned economic or religious purpose. People who were born in the mid-60s and the early 70s say that they grew up to find it there. This indicates that Mastabas were built in the first few years of the resettlement, making it a priority compared to other construction efforts. Yet, it was seen by state informants as an act of beautification and embellishment.

Protocols and politics around the Mastaba follow a distinct spatial constitution that derives its morals from the indigenous cultural institution, therefore challenging the functions instructed by the state, as it lies between the dwelling unit and the street, both of which are designed and owned by the state. Indeed, all dwellings and public facilities in resettlement were given to Nubians under a legal status of usufruct.³⁹ To this day, Nubians do not own their dwellings, neither do they have a contract to sell their usufruct privileges. In the Nubian social contract, a Mastaba is a common domain in which its owners cannot prevent people (or stray animals) from using it. They are also private venues for daily house chores, sleeping and eating, while defining themselves as being in their house. During all the phone calls I witnessed while on a Mastaba during my observations, when the caller asked the owner where he or she was, the person answered: 'at home'. More tellingly, people occupy/use the Mastaba in their home gowns and pyjamas, and they also clean their Mastaba as they do their home. In fact, practices of cleaning are considered as ways of appropriating one's home.⁴⁰

A Mastaba is neither private nor public in the Aristotelian sense, but can host activities that are conventional to both. It serves the inside (personal) space and the outside (common) space, in a manner that blurs the line between the 'in' and the 'out' instructed by design. The spatial blur destabilises the dichotomy in our discussion about public/private or interior/exterior. It acts as a countervailing force that opens up the private space and reopens a space to contestation.⁴¹ It is a phenomenon that evokes the concept of spatial liminality.

An explanation of the liminal position appears in philosopher Luce Irigaray's work.⁴² Architect Peg Rawes (2007) draws particular links between Irigaray's work and the spatial realm in her reader *Irigaray for Architects*. In her concept of thresholds, Irigaray describes the liminal as continuously and simultaneously moving inside and outside, the threshold between the inside and the outside of the body.⁴³ She considers liminality a diagonal line between the inside and the outside. Consequently, it undermines theories that consider space to be discrete and uniform. In its 'deconstructive' role, the diagonal line becomes a figure that disrupts the binary.⁴⁴

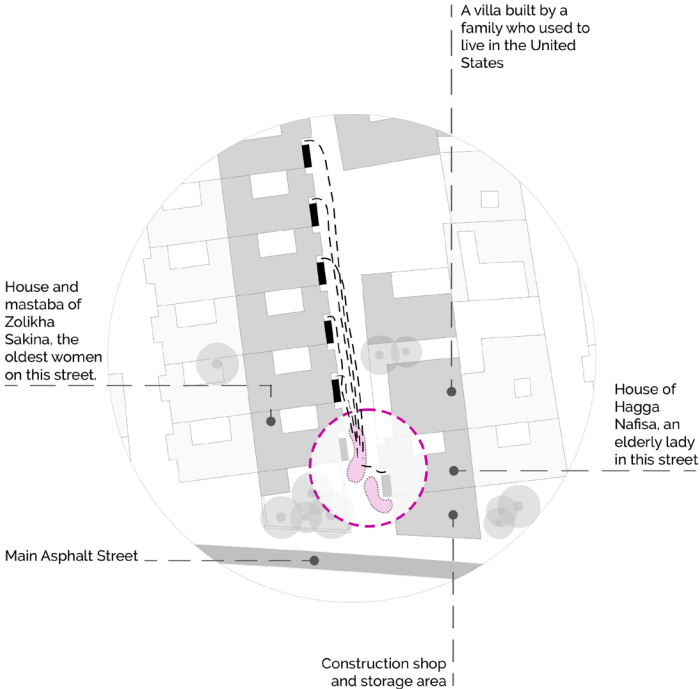
To understand the Mastaba in the context of spatial resistance, the literature on architecture suggests transgression, however minor, in everyday life activities. Architectural theorist Michael Hays⁴⁵ speaks of architecture that is 'resistant to the conciliatory operations of a dominant culture and yet irreducible to a purely formal structure disengaged from the contingencies of place and time'.

To further our understanding of the liminal disruptive capacities of the Mastaba, an examination of spatial patterns (on and around it) is necessary. The following stories illustrate common situations of usage. I look at them through a personal lens while citing personal memories and experience, in order to find the realm of conscious and unconscious speculation. Further, I question the 'zone' where concrete things and ideas intermingle, are pulled apart and reassembled; where memories, values, and intentions collide. In this situation, we examine the spatial strategies of domestication, internalisation, and publicness.⁴⁶

Mastaba in street No. 3⁴⁷: The domestication

There she was, as expected, sitting on her Mastaba, picking out small stones from dry rice that she planned to cook for lunch. My great-aunt, who after the death of her older sister, became the matriarch of our family. She scolded me for being late and missing breakfast when everyone has expected me to come. By 'everyone' she meant the elderly women who resided on Street number 3, they routinely sat outside during meals, but then they had gone back inside their houses to cook. At 5:00 pm, the women came to sit together at the entrance of the street adjacent to the Mastaba of my grand aunt, to dine together as usual and tell me stories about the old land.⁴⁸

The Mastaba here becomes a spatial reference to their house (their space), through which these women could gradually expand the surface area of their domestic sphere. With their simple everyday domestic activities, they mark the street as their territory, turning it into an open-aired addition to their houses. By occupying the street, these women also redefine the utility of the street. They are



disrupting its designated functions by forcing traffic to reroute. They are utilising Nubian morals that grant them status and respect, due to which a driver (usually a man) would be ashamed if he forced them to move or disturb their comfort in another way. Women on Street 3 take the street every day and gaze at the movement of life around their houses. Their gaze is a powerful tool through which they observe behaviours, judge morality, and conserve ethos. Their presence allows them to activate the transformative moral abilities. For them, this outside presence is indispensable: it means they can see and are seen.

Mastaba in street No. 17: Challenging the wall (Interior exterior)

This is the first field survey as a mother: Bahr, my baby girl, is visiting her village for the first time, and our family has been here to meet her since the morning. After the attention was gone from Bahr, and members of the family started to cluster for different activities, some remained sitting on the Mastaba, conversing and watching the children, while others were in the Mandara, the room adjacent to the Mastaba, watching TV or joining the conversation with those on the Mastaba. One of the children was standing on our Mastaba while leaning on a window sill to watch TV from outside. At that moment he was not on the outside, but he was in one big, open, and connected space.⁴⁹

Here is a showcase of the internalisation ability of a Mastaba. It is evident that a Mastaba can extend qualities of commonality to adjacent rooms inside the house. A feature that appears intentionally is that of rooms adjacent to the Mastaba. Indeed, they always contain furniture that mirrors the Mastaba from the other side of the wall, whether they be wooden benches or beds or in some cases masonry benches.⁵⁰ Nubians also add an external window above their Mastaba, which is quite peculiar if you take into account that external windows are very rare and do not appear in any other exterior wall. We believe that the Mastaba introduced these windows in order to create a relationship with the inside.

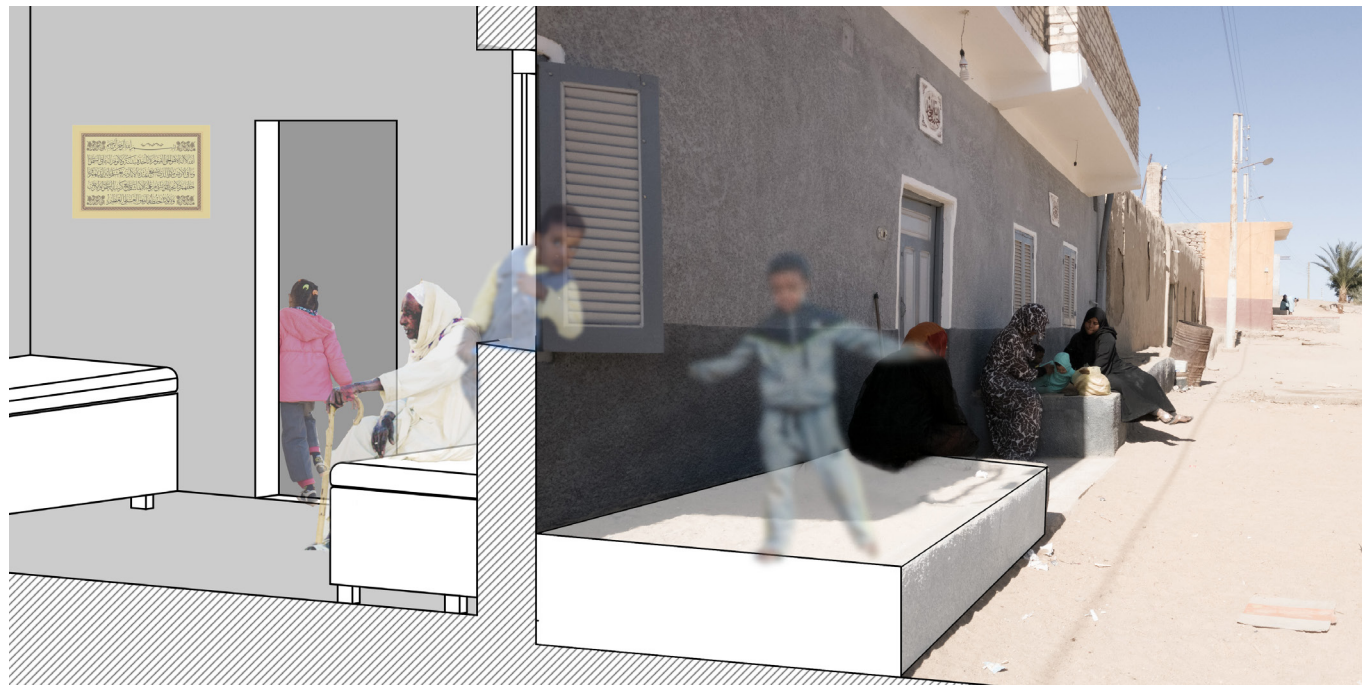
This liminal element has partially deactivated the separative ability of the wall, rendering its bordering duties obsolete. This configuration also helps to retrieve some qualities of the multi-environmental spaces that were common in traditional Nubian houses where spaces were semi-closed, including both the open air and a shaded area, all incubating an activity to offer different enveloping experiences without separating the occupants. The multi-environmental space was a sophisticated feature of the Nubian house that was not incorporated in the dwelling design of New Qustul. The Mastaba evokes a temporary version of this feature, namely when the windows between the spaces are open in a spontaneous contact between inside and outside, which is encouraged.

Mastaba in street No. 9:

I always thought that my late grandfather slept nights on his Mastaba to avoid the heat inside. I discovered recently that it was the other way around, he slept inside in the winter because it was too cold outside. He was not alone, as his mother used to move

Opposite top
Figure 3 : Illustration of women in street no.3 during lunch.

Opposite bottom
Figure 4 : Plan of street no. 3.



her bed to the street next to their Mastaba and join him. Then they would talk for a long time before going to sleep, and sometimes a neighbour would join them. The view of wooden beds on the side of the streets was not a strange sight in Qustul.⁵¹

Nubians took pride in the safety of their settlements in comparison to other Egyptian communities. They considered their ability to sleep outside with open doors an inherited privilege. The Mastaba thereby plays the role of a cultural agent that facilitates the performance of this privilege. In this case, not only the normal spatial structure is challenged, but also its assigned function. In addition to using the street as an open-air bedroom, the exposure of sleeping bodies of men and women is against the acceptable norms of modern Egyptian culture. The Nubian sleeping culture is, therefore, challenging the normative notion of the 'private' and the 'private interior'. It also facilitates the performance of the Nubian gender contract in which women's sleeping bodies do not carry a stigma.

We learn from these stories that, in its everyday use, a Mastaba is a place to perform culture: one that was not included in the design of the settlement and one that can provide a platform for counter-hegemonic practices. Moreover, it is its marginality and liminality that enables its resistance, despite its marginal position.^{52,53} The liminal space offered by the Mastaba has carved



a place for indigenous cultural institutions. Its marginal position has allowed it to find a place in the cracks of the dominant institution. As such, we describe the liminality of a Mastaba as the source of its subtle rebellious powers. However, this marginality also carries a vulnerability. For example, a Mastaba facing the mosque would not offer a place for women, especially if men (non-Nubians) were occupying the outside space. The walls of the houses facing a mosque do not contain a Mastaba. For these houses, the Mastaba is added to another façade.

LEARNING LESSONS FROM THE MASTABA

In conclusion, we must credit the resilience of a Mastaba to its simplicity, its powerless appearance, and its ability to facilitate both resistance and withdrawal. The folklorist aura that surrounds it protects the Mastaba from vilification. In fact, the Mastaba has carved a place for Nubian culture within the power structure. It was necessary for the Mastaba to be disruptive, transgressive and constitutive to be able to serve and conserve the culture,

which is against 'the Modern' and 'the Egyptian'. As Edward Said says: 'We can read ourselves against other people's pattern, but since it is not ours, we emerge as its effects, its errata, its counter-narratives. Whenever we try to narrate ourselves, we appear as dislocations in their discourse'.⁵⁴ Nubians could only enact their spatial identity if they were against the settlement. Their counter-narrative emerges in the shape of a Mastaba, a simple element.

We also believe that the Nubians' resistance is born from their understanding of their own vulnerability and marginality and their acknowledgement of the institutional relations shaping their everyday life.⁵⁵ Because in these relations they are disenfranchised, they seek to change and challenge them.⁵⁶ Their proclamation of self-marginality is integral to the dynamics of effective resistance. What Nubians teach us is that employing subtle disruptive tactics opens a space of contestation. In the liminal, they found a place of immense opportunities. By means of activating the physical/social/political capacities of the liminal, people can reshape and contest rigid spatial structures. This makes the liminal an effective vocabulary among resistive spatial lexicons. When we reflect on these lessons and then reflect on our position as spatial professionals, we cannot but wonder: how do we design a liminal? How can we be part of the process of resistance? And how can we use it against spatial injustice? Here we draw from the Nubian practice to propose contingencies for an effective practice when designing the liminal, and to bring to the forefront the potential for activism in spatial professions and the practice of placemaking.

The first contingency is the position of the designer. As we learn from Nubians, they activate their marginality to subvert the hegemony of authority. Therefore, if spatial professionals wish to contribute to the process of resistance, it is critical that they are part of the margin. They should consider new practices that encourage them to position themselves within the margin, to practice everyday life from the margin while acknowledging it as a margin. We argue that design requires an inner understanding of the margin's discomfort. One way to do so is by employing a moral structure of care and relationality. Subsequently, they should avoid the lure of becoming a saviour to others, who will rescue the marginal with the power of his or her formal training



Opposite top
Figure 5 : Illustration of the relationship between the Mastaba and the Mandara.

Opposite bottom
Figure 6: Illustration of sleeping arrangement next to my house in Qustul.

Above
Figure 7 : The Mastaba carving a space for indigenous culture

— training that often stems from the same power institutions that perpetuate hegemony over the margin.

The immersion in the exercise of making the liminal is the second contingency. By making and not only designing, we can be successful in carving the liminal. As spatial professionals, we are empowered to construct hypothetical realities, relying on our institutional training. However, space-making from the margin is an immersive process, as Nubians have taught us. Also, liminality is often associated with dynamics that evoke the ideas of spatial tactics and techniques of praxis. This is because the process of creating resistant, critical and liminal spaces requires us to challenge a static design process, which is disconnected from the process of making .⁵⁷

Finally, spatial professionals must respect the shadow, the blind spot of dominant institutions, where we find the economies and ecologies of the marginal. In the shadow, the cracks and loopholes of the system are made visible. Only in these cracks is an effective liminal (such as the Mastaba) possible, challenging the normative and deconstructing its control. We must appreciate and seek to operate away from conventional rules, not only the legal rules but also rules of normative processes of spatial production. It is in the shadow that we operate a spatial vehicle of subtle resistance, and carve out a place for a counter-narrative, while unnoticed.

NOTES

1. D. Harvey, *Spaces of Hope* (University of California Press, 2000), 51–52.
2. From the auto-ethnographic notes of Menna Agha.
3. C. Cook, *Involuntary Resettlement in Africa*, The World Bank, 1994.
4. Nubians were partially displaced by dams several times before, due to the Aswan low dam. The high dam, however, had the most effect on Nubians in Egypt and Sudan.
5. Timothy Mitchell states the role of urban planning as a colonising tool; he also argues that British installation of planning instruments within Egyptian bureaucracy has influenced postcolonial Egypt. Timothy Mitchell, *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-Politics, Modernity* (University of California Press, 2002).
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22. C.H. Greed, *Women & Planning – Creating gendered realities* (London & New York: Routledge, 1994), 41.
23. J. Rendell, "Introduction: 'Gender; Space,' in Jane Rendell, Barbara Penner, & Iain Borden, (eds.), *Gender Space Architecture. An Interdisciplinary Introduction* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 101–111.
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25. The Nubian lock is an iconic element in Nubian tangible heritage; its door-wide size and large ornaments had the role of informing people from long distances that the house was empty and spare them long walks.
26. O. El-Hakim, *Nubian Architecture, The Egyptian Vernacular Experience* (California: The Palm press, 1999).
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32. Y. Mahgoub, *The Nubian Experience*, 44.
33. S. Sassen, 'Strategic Gendering as Capability: One Lens into the Complexity of Powerlessness' in *Columbia Journal of Gender and Law* 19 (2010): 179–200.
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36. Nubians revered the Nile throughout their history; it was to them the main vein of life. There is evidence of Nile worship in pre-Christian Nubia.
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40. J. Attfield, *Wild Things: The Material Culture of Everyday Life* (United Kingdom :Berg, 2000).
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45. K.M. Hays 'Critical Architecture: Between Culture and Form', *Perspecta* 21 (1984): 15–29.
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47. Street names at resettlement villages are numbered by the state, these numbers may change over the years for reasons unknown to Nubians, who neither had linear streets, nor the practice of street names, in their tradition; therefore, did not engage in the process of informally naming the streets.
48. Menna Agha's Field notes, Qustul, 28 Dec. 2016.
49. Menna Agha's Field notes, Qustul, 29 Dec. 2016.
50. In a few cases, people abandoned their units — or didn't receive one — and rebuilt an entire house, in which they reproduced traditional design and had masonry furniture.

51. From the auto-ethnographic notes of Menna Agha, 12 Jan. 2017.
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BIOGRAPHIES

Menna Agha is a doctoral researcher in the architecture program at the University of Antwerp, she works under the umbrella of Henry Van der Velde research group. Menna holds a Bachelor degree in architecture from Egypt and a master's degree in Design from Germany, her research looks at the architecture of marginality within the context of involuntary resettlement. Ms Agha has work experience in fields of academia, development and architecture practice. She was a lecturer at the German University in Cairo, in addition to collaborating on several projects with development agencies. Menna is a third generation displaced Nubian (Fadikka), her research record shows a clear focus on Nubian and gender issues. In addition, Menna Agha identifies as a third wave feminist. She is also a mother of an 18-month-old girl named Bahr.

Els DeVos is associate professor at the faculty of Design Sciences at the University of Antwerp, where she lectures at the architecture and interior architecture programs. She is a founding member of the research group Henry van de Velde. Her PhD dissertation on the architectural, social and gender-differentiated mediation of dwelling in 1960s–1970s Flanders has been published with the University Press Leuven (in Dutch). She has co-edited several volumes in the field of architecture, including *Theory by design* (2013) on the nexus between architectural design, research and education. She was awarded the BWMSTR label 2016 by the Flemish Government Architect together with Kimoura Hauquier and Jonas De Maeyer for a project on housing for newcomers in the city. She published in several national and international journals and is a member of the scientific committee of the new open source magazine *Inner* – The interior architecture magazine.