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01: Hombre al interior de su palomar / Man inside his dovecote © Paulina Bitrán

02: Palomares vecinos con diferentes alturas / Neighboring dovecotes with different heights. © Paulina Bitrán

03: Vista desde autopista hacia edificaciones de vivienda colindantes / View from the highway towards neighboring residential buildings. © Paulina Bitrán
Paulina Bitrán reflects on the relationship between humans and more-than-humans in the dovecotes of Cairo, “suprastructures” that function above the city’s skyline.

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When I arrived in Cairo at the beginning of 2021, the first thing that caught my attention, like any newcomer, was the city’s apparent chaos, congestion, and environmental, visual and noise pollution. Every day of that first month, I spent at least two hours sitting in a car in the middle of traffic-jammed highways, which cross a dense sea of housing construction that seems to have neither beginning nor end. These low-quality-home constructions make up neighborhoods with one of the highest density levels in the world, nearing 1,500 inhabitants/ha. (Barthet, 2010)

On the roof horizon of this dense city, however, the image drastically changes, and the scene becomes literally and figuratively opposite: light and delicate vernacular constructions emerge from the ceilings, raised on wooden lattices, and crowned by a semi-translucent box decorated with geometric and colorful patterns. With each sunrise and sunset, thousands of pigeons are released from these ornate boxes, transforming the city sky into a wonderful spectacle of flocks’ free movement. These are the dovecotes of Cairo, infrastructures destined to the development of pigeon breeding, an ancient practice in Egypt. This practice involves breeding and training pigeons,
Secuencia fotográfica de un palomar / Photographic sequence of a dovecote. © Paulina Bitran
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Interior del palomar / Inside the dovecote. © Paulina Bitran
either for consumption or just as a hobby. As pigeons are the oldest domesticated bird in the world, this practice has endured for millennia, and continues to be strongly developed in North Africa and the Arab regions, especially in Egypt, although it has undergone changes over the centuries. For example, the traditional dovecote of this region consisted of a conical tower made by stacking adobe bricks that could reach 25 m high. It could also be configured from a set of these towers which stabilize each other through branches or wooden slats. Inside, concave holes made with clay pots provided shelter for pigeons to nest protected from predators. Due to the accelerated rural migration, few of these traditional dovecotes are still in use, which has caused pigeon farming, as well as other agricultural and livestock traditions, to mutate and adapt to the country’s new urban, economic, and geopolitical context.

Rural migrants arrive in the poorest and most densely populated areas of the city, which are concentrated both in Cairo’s historic center and on the peripheries of major vehicular routes. These areas are characterized by vertical buildings of up to a dozen floors, built without party walls and using masonry and reinforced concrete. The construction standard is low, and the houses have precarious conditions. All of this results in buildings that are as easy to erect as they are to demolish, and in which inhabited space coexist with others in ruins. Most of them are informal constructions not regulated by the government and, consequently, lack basic infrastructure such as sewage or electricity, street paving or public transport. The only infrastructure that is present in these areas are the immense elevated highways—10 m above street level—which cut buildings in two, leaving the colors that represent the intimacy of the domestic interiors exposed to vehicular traffic. Given the scarcity of resources and space, roofs have become a key surface and skyline of the city. (Piessat, 2018) In the areas of higher density, these are mainly used for food production, particularly livestock. Among the animals raised, we can commonly find goats and chickens, but the predominant species is the pigeon, due to its easy reproduction and breeding, as well as being a valuable protein source for the Cairo population.

The elemental form of a dovecote in Cairo consists of a rectangular space, enclosed by four walls made up of stacked cages, with an access door leading to the central space. The peculiarity of breeding pigeons is that, if they are given good care and training, they will consider that space as their home and will always return to it. Otherwise, if a pigeon is not satisfied with its care, it will opt to join the flock of a neighboring pigeon house. In a more elaborate dovecote, each pigeon has its individualized
Dovecotes visible from kilometers away.

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niche, which has three small pieces of furniture made of clay so that it can rest, eat, and drink, or nest. In the same way, the food supply will be of the best possible quality, and the cages will be disinfected with antiparasitic insecticide to prevent several diseases that pigeons can contract. (Salem et al., 2022)

Height is a fundamental factor for dovecote to adequately operate in the city, thus, they are always built on the roofs. This responds both to considerations of sanitation and of territorial strategy: the higher the dovecote, the greater the distance between the pigeons and the city in which they can contract infections, be preyed upon, or stolen by other people. Additionally, the height provides a clearer space for the flock, facilitating both the visual interaction and movement of the pigeons and the connection of the person with their flock. This need has led to raising the dovecote even further on the buildings’ roofs, usually through a recycled wooden structure with a rhomboid lattice pattern, a feature that was spontaneously adopted as a general rule for dovecotes in Cairo. This structure must be firm enough to withstand the vertical load, while light and porous so that the wind does not bring it down.

Moreover, the shape of the dovecote can take on an even more pronounced vertical dimension, which does not obey solely to its breeding function. Rising as watchtowers, they acquire a strategic visual predominance over the neighboring dovecotes. In Cairo, pigeon training is based on guiding and controlling the flight of the flock. Pigeon breeders and trainers use codes such as whistles, stick blows, and the waving of a flag to direct the movement of their flock, even when pigeons are out of sight. A competition arises between different pigeon breeders, in which the largest flock with the best controlled flight aims to attract the pigeons of the neighboring dovecotes, keeping them as a prize. This competition’s objective is to accumulate exotic breeds, which are then shown at annual national fairs and competitions or sold at high prices. The dovecote, capable of housing up to 600 pigeons, (Saumure, 2022) becomes a symbol of power and social status, but it is also a supra-structure that has the potential to transmit peace and freedom.

It is important to clarify that this activity, like almost all work or recreational activity in Egypt, is reserved exclusively for men. With its sky-penetrating form, symbol of power, provider of wealth, strength and masculine virility, the dovecote is built by men to hold in high reverence a practice historically attributed to the female sphere, related to upbringing and care. Many pigeon breeders speak of a bond of love with each of their pigeons, sometimes associating them with their children, and caring for them as part of the family. They also express a passion that goes beyond a simple hobby, dedicating at least 5 hours of intensive work a day, and wishing to spend the rest of their time up in their dovecotes as well. It is not uncommon that the eldest son dreams of becoming the heir to the dovecote. (Caubet & Corten, 2019) As in a parallel reality above the roofs, isolated from the chaotic earthly world ruled by rigid military, religious, and social institutions, man finds a space of freedom linked to the sky and where he can project himself with his flock to the horizon. With a significant spiritual charge, dovecotes are suprastructures that compete with the minarets of mosques and church steeples.

On an urban scale, these constructions provide society with a space of both individual and collective identity that contrasts with the inhospitable, and often aggressive, conditions of the
urban landscape. Each tower of the thousands of dovecotes has a characteristic design that differs from the others, an expressive result of a resilient and creative population, and providing each neighborhood with their own personality. The activity developed in them has generated a social configuration in which their members have been able to establish communication networks that extend kilometers away.

Pigeon breeding in Cairo not only provides food and a pastime, but also a sense of belonging deeply tied to the city’s configuration and its inhabitants, who follow their own rules within these ungovernable and abandoned areas. Dovecotes, as functional infrastructure—in the sense that they enable the practice of pigeon breeding in the city—have given rise to suprastructures, making more visible the spaces and practices that endow people with a cultural wealth that has been transformed into a true living heritage in the midst of the current metropolitan context. ARQ

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