With(in)
With(in):
Three women, three informal settlements, and the rituals of the meal as a microcosm of urban life

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Shared transnational challenges are connecting people in unprecedented ways. Crises such as the 2020 pandemic proved that the world is a single organism and no issue is only a local issue. If social and technological trends continue toward increased globalization, people of different cultures must find new ways to better understand the needs and values of communities that we are unlikely to experience first-hand.

To build this understanding, this work conducts a natural experiment to increase cross-cultural awareness through a medium all can relate to: food and its attendant social rituals. The goal is to create a novel way to understand and communicate urban specificities by using the table rituals as a microcosm of community. The research looks for a connection between the act of procuring food, preparing food and eating together and the structures of the communities people live in.

This thesis is a two-part inquiry comprising: (1) A comparative study conducted with field research at rapidly urbanizing areas of Port Harcourt, Cairo and Guadalajara, and (2) an immersive video installation and multimedia book for communicating this content.

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It’s said that once you eat someone’s food, you become part of them too. I am for sure a different person after this thesis. It was a life-changing event and I am nothing but immensely grateful for the opportunity to have lived this work.

Kent is a real visionary. “What is your big view?” He challenges us with the difficult task of imagining the future, with purpose in what we do, and he does that by giving us total creative freedom and support in every possible way. He encouraged me to go much further than I could ever have expected. Thank you for bringing me in, Kent.

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Gabi
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This work presents an immersive window into the worlds of three women in three rapidly urbanizing areas of the world: Eva in Lomas del Centinela, Guadalajara, Mexico; Gihan in Ezbet Khairallah, Cairo, Egypt; and MamaG in Port Harcourt, Nigeria.

In 2050, 3.5 billion people may live in informal settlements without access to conventional infrastructure and buildings. As extreme urbanization unfolds at an astounding pace, all three locations reflect the chaos and the importance of community. One woman’s journey can be both individual and global when viewed in the context of the others. We ask ourselves, how does rapid urbanization impact the community we seek, and how do intimate domestic activities such as food preparation and celebration reflect a larger cultural context?

This work is composed of 2 parts:

Part 1. The field research

1a. Meeting the communities: The team of researchers at MIT City Science group who are studying informal settlements reached out to contacts in each location from various collaborations and were able to connect with local hosts from NGOs and institutions to introduce our research to the context and culture of each location. This work sought to connect with one family in each place, and within that family closely follow the person who is most responsible for the food decisions. Not by chance, in each location we were directed to meet with a woman. Eva, Gihan and MamaG’s leadership roles led to their identification as suitable representatives for their communities in this work.

1b. Framework: The research was conducted during a two week visit at each place. The three women would be followed during two different occasions:
- Their most important meal on a day they work;
- Their most important meal on a day they rest.

For each of those events, the women were accompanied during the acquisition of the food or ingredients, the preparation and eating.

1c. Video documentation: The field research was mainly documented through video. Local film crews added expertise to both the cinematography of the piece as well as help navigating cultural nuances. Each of the local hosts and crew members were critical to the success of the piece.

Part 2 - Visual storytelling

2a. The immersive installation: The research conducted in the field was organized in an immersive installation, comprising wall projection mappings, a soundtrack and a physical 3D model of the cities. The stories of the three women and their cities are edited in a 20 minute narrative that crosses these worlds, highlighting the commonalities and singularities of each.

2b. Multimedia book: This book itself is part of the media exploration for conveying the content. It’s organized in a combination of a graphic novel and short video clips that complement each other and are equally important.

Whenever you see a QR code in this book, point your mobile phone at it or click on the link to access the webisodes and 360° videos.

This thesis approaches extreme urbanization through the lens of food culture. It explores a new framework to understand communities and communicate its specificities by using the table rituals as a microcosm of the communities where they are performed.
Three cities, three women
**Bricks**

**Watch it**

MEET GOHAN
EBEET
ROOF TOPS
RUINS
A PINK BALCONY

---

**Tracks**

**Watch it**

MEET MAMAG
THE TRAIN
PORT HARBOUR
FLYOVER
PATHWAYS

---

**Power**

**Watch it**

MEET EVA
LUMAS
CABLES
VARILAS
CLIFFS

---

**Webisodes**
Cairo is red. An ocean of bare brick buildings flood along the Nile’s margins from the North to the South. Millions of housing units are built informally in private agricultural land and state-owned desert areas to house the inflow of migrants coming from upper Egypt and the Delta, seeking for better opportunities in Africa’s largest metropolis. The government’s incapacity to provide affordable and viable housing for the vast majority of Cairenes leads to a rapid and relentless process of unplanned urban growth.

Driving along the Ring Road, the dense mass of red buildings extends to the horizon. The size and population of those areas are difficult to precisely measure; it’s estimated that 62% of the Greater Cairo Region population lives in the so-called Red City, also known as the al-ashwaiat, a term which in Arabic means haphazard. This naming reveals a lot about Egyptians’ perception of those areas. Official policies of demolition and relocation to unaffordable social housing, as well as mandates to paint facades facing roads, try to deny a reality that is already in place.

Although the al-ashwaiat may seem carelessly unfinished, the practice of leaving the facades unfinished is done to avoid taxation. The structures are solid, and the standards of construction are high. These buildings usually have a minimum of 4 stories, growing up to 15 floors in some areas. Buildings are largely owned by families that bought small parcels of land from local brokers, and negotiated themselves with local constructors to raise the building as an investment in their future. Floor by floor, room by room, additions are made as the family grows and external newcomers increase the demand for rental apartments. The incremental nature of the al-ashwaiat’s architecture is resilient as it leaves space for adaptation.

Informal Cairo is a contemporary phenomenon in a city that has a much longer past. The origins of present-day Cairo can be traced back to the year 641 AD, at the founding of Al-Fustat by Muslim conquerors, an area known today as part of Old Cairo. The south of Al-Fustat remained an inhabited desert plateau until the mid 1970’s, when a group of newly arrived migrants started occupying the area.

This empty plateau, with no urban infrastructure or services of any kind, meant the possibility to have a piece of land to settle down and begin to dream of a possible future. They delimited parcels with stones and built shelter with materials found in the area. Despite many attempts by the government to dismantle this settlement, those migrant families firmly resisted. Today that desert plateau has become the large community known as Ezbet Khairallah*, home to more than 650,000.

The bustling streets of Ezbet, with their high rooftops, vibrant food markets, and the energy of children at play, prove that toughness can be built on sand. It’s a symbol of human resilience, displayed side-by-side with ancient monuments that also persist, reminding us of the vast and unknown desert that is our collective journey of civilization.

The spelling of Ezbet Khairallah differs. This work adopts the spelling indicated by participants in the field research.
The brick and concrete houses reach the feet of an abandoned stone fortress. From a house’s roof, one can glimpse the interior of this mysterious monument. Some call it Stabl’Antar, a reference to the medieval poet-knight Antarah ibn Shaddad, who’s life was featured in a film shot here.

This site was the place of a gunpowder factory built in 1829 AD during Muhammad Ali’s dynasty. After other factories like this caught fire at Cairo’s Citadel, he decided to move the facility to a remote location, safer for the population.

The elegant rhythm of the arcade show Muhammad Ali’s rigor for architecture. In a manuscript from the time, three criteria for military construction are stated: regularity, unity and simplicity. The buildings of Ezbet continue to comply with these criteria.

This aerial photo was not easy to take. In Cairo there is only one company officially allowed to operate drones, and the government has to review all the material before it’s handed to the clients. This company warned us that images taken in the area would probably not be approved, since the slums present Cairo under a “negative light.” The solution was to hire an informal business to perform this service.
The Stabl Antar has been closed to public access for years, but kids have found a way in. They play hide and seek behind what is left of the stone walls and between the big arches.

Inside it's dark, only a bit of sun enters through the small windows.

There's a big snake living there!

Don't get too close or...

It will eat you!!
Another vestige of ancient Egypt is found on the rooftops of Ezbet.

Appearing as water tanks from far away, these curious wooden structures are actually dovecotes where the men of the community keep pigeons for racing. This popular sport consists of trying to trap other racers’ pigeons, a competition that extends across neighborhoods.

At sunset, the pigeon racers put their birds to fly and call them back whistling and waving pieces of cloth, hoping to lure them back to the cage with a couple of neighbors’ birds.
The whistles echo across Ezbet Khairallah's sky, mixing with car horns, pop music, dust, and the call to prayer. The many loudspeakers spread around the city play the call to prayer in unison five times a day — at dawn, noon, mid afternoon, sunset, and nightfall. It's a ubiquitous reminder to the community that it's time to stop and talk to God.

The loud Cairene air leaks inside each window, it's impossible to escape.
On a pink balcony with red striped curtains is Gihan. She’s talking on her phone while waiting for the fresh bread to dry out a little bit. She just got her family’s weekly supply of loaves from a government subsidized bakery.

On each balcony, particular universes of texture contrast with the brick austerity outside. The facades are left unfinished to avoid extra costs, but the interiors express the colorful preferences of their residents.
Gihan moved to Ezbet Khairallah not long ago. Escaping from an abusive marriage, she bravely left home in upper Egypt with her three kids — two boys and a teenage girl — with faith she would find in Cairo her chance of a new beginning. A friend of a friend mentioned that a catering kitchen was looking for cooks, and Gihan didn’t think twice. She took the job and rented a flat just a few steps from work. This proximity protects her and her children from too much exposure in an Islamic community where a divorced newcomer, especially a female one, is quite unusual.

She found a vacant unit in a family-owned building, a common setup at the al-ashwaiyat. The two bedroom flat would be enough. For the moment she shares one room with the boys while her teenage daughter, soon to be engaged, sleeps in the other. Their pet turtle stays in the living room. After painting every wall in bright pink and covering every inch of the floor with carpets, Gihan could start a home on her own terms.

Every morning before going to work, her red dyed hair is gently tucked into her purple hijab. She walks down the dark winding concrete staircase into the street and crosses the road to her workplace. The Dawar Kitchen has become a home away from home to Gihan and other women in vulnerable conditions — some Egyptian migrants, some Syrian refugees. Their work has offered each of them a new life. The Kitchen is their community. For Gihan, this fresh start means that her mark as a divorced woman has not held her back, and here, in this community, she is accepted.

When things get more settled she might be able to pursue an old dream: to become a professional singer. Gihan has a powerful voice and everyone around her knows it. With a bit of push she uploaded her version of a classic Egyptian song online, Ahwak — I love you.
I love you
I love you and I wish I could forget you
And forget my soul with you
And if it gets lost then it remains yours if you ever forget me.

Gihan uploaded her songs online.
The history of Port Harcourt is a history of brutal extraction. The city of 1.86 million inhabitants (2016) was founded in 1913 by British colonizers as the port to transport coal found in Enugu, taking over the land from Ijaw, Ikwerre and Ogoni peoples. Port Harcourt’s deep waters and many creeks provided the ideal conditions to transport minerals by train from inland to the Atlantic.

Today Port Harcourt is still a key port in the country, and it’s main economic activity derives from crude oil and natural gas. Since the discovery of oil in the region in the late 1950's, the city has been the oil capital of Nigeria, hosting headquarters of the main multinational companies. The money attracts migrants from all parts of Nigeria, leading to an urban population growth of 5.8% per year as of 2010. But the reality found in this Eldorado is a harsh one.

In Port Harcourt misery is blatant and ubiquitous. The wealth generated from oil extraction stays concentrated in the hands of very few while the rest survive in subhuman conditions. There is no middle ground. It’s even difficult to spot inequality there. The wealthy — many of them foreigners — stay in a couple fenced urban islands while the rest of Port Harcourt remains in the throes of chaos. A corrupt and inefficient government offers no alternatives to its people other than informal jobs and slum housing. It’s estimated that 65% of Port Harcourt lives in squatter settlements. Another good chunk, that lives in so-called “formal” parts of town, are in equally precarious conditions in crowded tenements with no running water, no sewage and intermittent electricity. Diesel generators are the most reliable source of power there.

The waterfronts of Port Harcourt’s creeks are crammed with self-built neighborhoods. The muddy ground is filled with debris, and from there the tiny houses are erected with scavenged materials. Needless to say, without sewerage and running water, the creeks are completely polluted with waste, creating all sorts of health and environmental issues. It’s common to see in the communities' food markets people selling periwinkle collected a few meters away in those same creeks. Their shells are also used in construction, and this cycle establishes a vernacular of the area, with intelligent simplicity derived from necessity. However its ultimate impact is precarious, putting people at risk of sanitary disease and structural collapse.

Another constant threat, the most destructive one, comes from the government. Policies of demolition of squatter populations deteriorate a situation that is already at its limit. Without warning, people lose their homes with no viable relocation alternative. To these totally marginalized communities, there’s no other option but to rebuild themselves from scratch somewhere else.

In a constant loop of destruction and rebuilding, Port Harcourt is an incredibly resilient city. Streets and markets are teeming with people coming and going, non-stop, busy inventing their own way to exist. Always proper in their colorfully tailored clothes, it is so beautiful that it hurts.
The Mile One Market goes as far as the eye can see. The colorful umbrellas hide the train tracks connecting Port Harcourt to Aba.

This big open air market, the biggest in Rivers State, goes back to the late 1930's. Transporters and traders of goods brought by the train would stop there. Naturally, a market established in the area. Back then it would open with one week intervals, but as the population grew, so did its operations. Today the market is open every day, from early in the morning until late in the evening.

Markets are an intrinsic part of Nigerian culture, and the demand for more market areas is as urgent as the demand for housing. The Mile One Market is a nodal point to generate employment and provide supplies to people not only from Port Harcourt, but also to surrounding villages. Many local idioms can be heard at the market, chatting, yelling and bargaining. It is an Agora where people socialize, exchange knowledge and create perspectives.

The authorities' brutality also marks its presence in the markets. Task Force agents are frequently seen dismantling stalls and loading their trucks with confiscated goods. Bribery is an open possibility. In a failed attempt to formalize the Mile One Market, the government closed it and built a fenced three story concrete complex to reallocate the vendors. The building, that resembles a jail, had unpayable rents, so it remained totally empty, like a monument of failure, while the colorful umbrellas quickly returned to the place where they belong.
The train from Port Harcourt to Aba cuts through the market four times a day.

Horns echo in the distance. The vendors immediately move off the tracks.

We caught the train on its way through the market by chance. As we wanted better images, we prepared the whole team for an adventure to document the train very carefully later that week. Half of us would stay at the market, half would be inside the wagons. We checked the schedule the day before and early in the morning the nine of us headed to the station. After waiting there for more than one hour from the time the train was supposed to come, a guard informed us: “it won’t come today”. The train was under maintenance. When would it be back? In two weeks. Or three, or four.
The Flyover Market sits at the intersection of the two speedways: the train track underneath, the flyover road above.
In a place where basic infrastructure is no guarantee, the leftovers of urbanism gain a new purpose. Using the big elevated road for shade, people go about their business.
Mama G carefully organizes her table at the market. A green plastic basket keeps her potions, made in a mix of whites (hard liquor), Lipton tea and herbs:

The Flyover Market is polyphonic and polyglot. A megaphone screams in Pidgin the bus’s itinerary:

We dey go Essien Udim, we dey go Ika, we dey go Etim Ekpo, we dey go Iri Awa, we dey go Azumini, we dey go Ekparakwa.

Garlic, for chest. Scent leaf, for throat. Lemon grass, for body pain.

Man power, all the body-body.
MamaG stands for Mother General, she is the mother of all at the Flyover Market. MamaG is Ibibio, born in the rural Etinan and moved to Port Harcourt after marriage in search for better life opportunities. For more than a decade, from Sunday to Sunday, she sets up her stall at 7am and doesn’t stop for a second. Clients are constantly coming to buy drinks and to make deposits in the money pool she manages. Every transaction is carefully accounted by hand in her small notebook. They call this type of collective loan/savings system akao. It’s a business model based on trust among peers, which allows people to access larger sums of money than they would otherwise be able to. It’s apparent that MamaG is incredibly respected and trusted to have this responsibility. She is a real business woman, an akao-woman.

By the end of the day, MamaG closes her stall and pays night watchers to take care of her belongings. She used to share business responsibilities with her husband, but now she needs to operate on her own, with her son stopping by at times. As she heads to the bus stop, flyers pasted to pillars with the likeness of Harry Bassey, a.k.a. PapaG, share details of his upcoming funeral. The posters remind the market that MamaG is newly widowed, although the grieving is hard to spot in this tough woman.

Back to her home, in the pitch black of night, MamaG prepares to sleep with the help of a battery-powered lamp. She lives with her son in a small room in a crowded tenement shared with about 10 other families. She moved there in 2009, after her house at a waterfront community was brutally demolished at an eviction. Their water-based home was humble, but it was a home of their own.

Years of her family’s investment shattered in front of her eyes. Now she has to cope with the loss of a life-long partner. MamaG will manage, as she always does, with assertiveness and composure. She is a woman of few words but with many names: MamaG in business, Ediye among her husband’s family, Bakara at her father’s village, Imaobong at her mom’s. She calls herself Love.
Across the ravines you can see Lomas del Centinela’s houses bravely standing on the slopes. One of the many of Guadalajara’s informal areas, this one started forming in 1985 by illegal purchase of rural land at the edges of the city. The urban mesh sprawls taking over the land, only stopped by the topography. In the 1960’s, it was estimated that only 1% of Guadalajara’s urban area had informal origins. In 2000 this number increased to 30%, a process that continues.

Guadalajara was founded in the 1500’s by Spanish colonizers following the same traditional spatial configuration as other Hispano-American colonies. A central urban grid surrounded by ejidos — publically-owned reserves for city growth — followed by agricultural land that was concentrated in the hands of a few. The king was the ultimate owner of the land, and the municipality would distribute it arbitrarily based on the exchange of favors. Guadalajara grew after that and today it is today Mexico’s 2nd largest city. Its metropolitan area is home to 4 million people (2010). Nevertheless, those foundations are still embedded in today’s policies of land use, often done with power-sharing purposes.

Another reminder of its colonial past is that people in Mexico call its neighborhoods created after the 1920’s las colonias (the colonies). This word traditionally means a group of people who are originally from a place and re-settle in another, but in Mexico it means the movement of people from the city center to the peripheries. This name acquired a new meaning when the increased demand for housing in the early 20th century attracted foreign real estate developers, largely North American and European. They brought with them hygienist concepts that broke with the logic of the historic center built with time based on its inhabitants’ necessities, house by house. Las colonias were new urban areas disconnected from the city fabric, delimited in its total area before occupation with standardized housing and separated from its adjacent areas by gardens. This created a sprawling model for Guadalajara’s urbanization, requiring great distances for travel within the city.

Los colonos (the colonists) from Lomas del Centinela know this problem well. Most of them work in the wealthy adjacent communities, that even though geographically close, are difficult to reach with the incipient public transportation routes available. Although still not legally recognized by authorities, Lomas gained throughout the decades a few infrastructural improvements, such as pavement and electricity in the main public street leading to their commercial center, Las Cinco Esquinas (The Five Corners). A quick stop there each morning for fresh tortillas is integral to the daily life of los colonos; another visit after a hard day’s work features a traditional meal of tortas ahogadas.

Las Cinco Esquinas is a source of pride and fear in Lomas. On one hand it marks the physical, social and commercial center of a community that is developing its own identity. On the other, it’s perceived as a meeting point for gangs and drug dealers. At night, many avoid that area, and other streets as well. Empty lots with incomplete construction projects, as well as a lack of public illumination makes nights in Lomas complicated and risky.

But tomorrow is another day. The sun will rise behind the ravines painting the sky in purples and pinks, and everything will be worth it.
El Parque Nacional la Barranca de Huentitán (Huentitan Ravines National Park) was a natural barrier for Guadalajara’s urban expansion. The houses go up to the very edge of it, and the risk of collapse is imminent.
Lomas’ houses gently accommodate the topography between the ravines and El Bosque del Centinela (The Centinela’s Forest). The generosity of space and sky attracted many there.

A park full of pine trees marks the physical separation between the wealthy Zapopan’s neighborhoods and Lomas: swimming pools and golf courses on one side, and the roofless and crowded homes of Lomas on the other. The inequality is stark and evident.

The coexistence of Lomas’ and Zapopan’s wealthy residents in the park creates friction. To the former is attributed responsibility for violent incidents that happened in the place; to the latter, moral harassment and humiliation inflicted onto Loma’s people by private guards. This conflict almost resulted in the shut down of Lomas’ access to the park, their only recreational amenity. This reinforces the utilitarian view authorities have over low income communities. The access to basic infrastructure is provided almost as a “favor”, due to their irregular condition, while leisure amenities like parks, if available, are side effects of the need to separate those places from wealthier colonies.

An average parcel in Lomas has 150m², much bigger than the 20m² of the other parcels of local low-income suburban patrons.
The sprawling homes are under constant construction, each one or two floors and filled with multiple generations of the same family. For structural stability on the slope, the men in the community build the houses with metal reinforced concrete. The rebar is left intentionally sticking out from the rooftops so that new floors can be added in the future. In the community, they are called ‘varillas de la esperanza’, or ‘bars of hope’, signaling to all the potential of upward growth and new opportunities.
She waves to neighbors passing by. She knows everyone and everyone knows her.

A big piñata swings at Eva’s upper floor. There’s wind coming from a corner window yet to be finished with a glass panel. It’s framing the horizon, inter cut with more cables. Eva is very proud of this architectural detail she created herself.

Lomas’ wide sky is entangled with vanillas and power cables. Get close enough and you can hear the crackle and hiss of corona discharge from the high voltage lines.

Los colonos call it huachicol. The term more commonly refers to stealing gasoline from pipelines, but in the context of Mexican informal settlements it means “sucking” water and electricity from the public grid. The huachicoleros are hired to steal energy from the public power line that passes by Lomas and bring it to the homes. The practice is already embedded culturally and it’s done openly. It’s easy to spot who is doing the same: search for the buildings without electricity meters. The local church and a government facility don’t have them.

Ventana esquinera

Little bow ties, bells and Santa Claus festoon los huachicolitos while the community waits for Christmas.

A big piñata swings at Eva’s upper floor. There’s wind coming from a corner window yet to be finished with a glass panel. It’s framing the horizon, inter cut with more cables. Eva is very proud of this architectural detail she created herself.

Little bow ties, bells and Santa Claus festoon los huachicolitos while the community waits for Christmas.

She waves to neighbors passing by. She knows everyone and everyone knows her.
It’s easy to spot Eva as she makes her way through the dusty streets of Lomas. Her big blond hair, military boots and bold clothes, often self-customized, inspired her nickname “La Barbie del Centinela.” She’s a creative seamstress and earns her living by making costumes and small repairs for the neighbors.

Eva grew up at the old Guadalajara city center in a small apartment with her parents and five siblings. She stayed in the area with Martín, her husband, until her four kids were born. At that point Eva was worried about her future and her family at a rental place. What could happen when they grew old and couldn’t work anymore?

La Barbie’s dream was to have a spacious house of her own, close to nature, and very different from the crowded apartments she had experienced so far. She knew they had to secure a place for their uncertain future, so she convinced her reluctant husband to buy a piece of land via an installment from a local broker. She was aware the place wasn’t regular, but she took her chances. In the year 2000, the six of them moved to Lomas. At the time there was nothing in the area but the ravines and a few houses.

Ever since, they have been building their new home. Each new addition is carefully planned and earned with sweat. The house is in constant growth, just like the community and Eva herself. Now a grandma, she cares deeply about the community she chose to settle in for life, and she strives to provide access and opportunities to its residents. It was during her time presiding over the neighbors’ association that they got the first bus lines reaching the inner streets of the community. She also fearlessly led multiple demonstrations to the government to fight for their rights.

People from Lomas rely on Eva to create a community that they might not otherwise have, and she’s proud of it.

La Barbie, la casa y la colonia sculpt each other. Never finished, always ready to go.
Work day meals
Webisodes

Produce
Watch it

Craft
Watch it

Eat
Watch it

SEMI INDUSTRIAL FOOD PRODUCTION

MEN AT WORK LOCAL ECONOMIES

GEOHAN'S MAMIS'S EVA'S MEALS ON A WORK DAY
8am in Ezbet Khairallah, Gihan prepares to work.
Red hair and polka dotted pajamas go under the black tunic.

20 meters across the street, she reaches her destination at the Kitchen.

Tuk tuks are starting to pop up, transporting people across Ezbet.

E£ 5 (0.30 USD/ride)
To get to the community I would hop on Ubers at Cairo downtown and jump off by Ezbet entrance street. There, one of our local connections would be waiting for me and we would walk or get a tuk tuk to reach the Kitchen. The Uber cars could physically reach much further inside, but there’s a big stigmatization of the area. Once, a thoughtful driver warned me using Google Translator on his phone: “This area is not safe”.

To move around the winding streets of Ezbet Khairallah, Gihan and everybody else rely on lightweight three-wheeled cars. The formal public transportation and app drivers only go up to the community entry point, while the internal transportation is made by the skilled tuk tuk drivers who know each corner by heart and the fastest route to get everywhere.

From early morning to late night, the streets are jammed with them, negotiating space among the kids, elderly, fruit stalls and cats. Accidents are not uncommon. These lightweight vehicles are owned by the families and are an important source of income in the local economy. A typical driver would make around 300 EGP a day.
Eva hops on the bus. Today she will take care of her 80+ year old parents in the city center. She does it three times a week, alternating shifts with her sister.

The first bus stop is just by her house, a privilege she got from the times she used to be Lomas’ president. It was during her mandate that bus lines arrived to the inner parts of the community, so she got to decide where.

The driver doesn’t accept money from La Barbie. In Lomas she travels for free.

40 minutes later, the bus arrives at the Periferico Norte terminal. From there she takes another bus, this time 7 pesos. 1 more hour, she hops off at the San Juan Bosco market.
MamaG is careful to cross the streets. It’s just past 7am and streets are already busy with commercial buses painted in white and blue — Rivers State flag colors.

Hanging from the open doors, skillful men shout the itinerary and collect money from the passengers. Very quickly, a bus to the Flyover shows up.
The women leave their footprints as they move through the city for work.

In sprawling Guadalajara, Eva is the one who travels the most. Gihan commutes the least. The dense Ezbet is a city in itself, as many live and work there.
In 5 minutes, MamaG arrives at the Flyover Market and starts unpacking her stuff. She mops the floor with a straw broom while Harry, her son, washes the glasses in a water bucket.

She unlocks a big chain that is guarding her belongings and begins to put the stall furniture in place. With four wooden benches she delineates her area by a big concrete column. On her table are potions, liquor sachets, candy, bitter kola packs, bus tickets and her notebook. She is constantly taking notes as people come to trade.

MamaG is the head of a collective bank in that section of the market. As she explains how it works it’s clear how comfortable she is with numbers:

I will collect the money. At the end of the service, if you put 200 in a month, for 31 good days, the owner of that money will collect 30 days. 30 days with 200 Naira is 6 000. And the last one, which is the 31st day, 200 Naira is my own.

If it’s 100 Naira, it’s 3 000 for 30 days. And the last of the 31 days is my own, 100 Naira.

If you put 1 000, for 30 days it’s 30 000. The one day which is the 31st is my own 1 000, only.

This system is based on trust. The people commit to keep paying until the end of a pre-established time and trust their peers will also comply with the rules. This is a form of resistance created by those who have been historically marginalized. It tightens community bonds as they know they can rely on each other when they know they cannot trust the institutions.
It’s Harmattan season in Nigeria. The air is hot, dry and muffled. Thirsty mouths empty water sachets.

Port Harcourt doesn’t have a running water system. Even wealthy homes have wells to reach groundwater. The business of manufacturing purified water sachets thrives as an alternative to providing drinkable water at affordable prices.

For about ₦15 (0.04 USD) a sachet, kids find a way to provide for their families.

A factory of Savior Water is just around the corner of MamaG’s house. Five workers take turns at the feet of two packaging machines. They have to keep the pace while the filled sachets are falling into a big bowl. Around them, piles of bags are ready for distribution. The water comes from the soil, passes through filters and is packaged in the little bags.

As backyard factories like this one pop up throughout Port Harcourt, it’s hard to regulate the sanitary conditions under which they operate. Water borne diseases are a sad reality of Nigeria, costing the life of thousands of kids every year.
Bread is the water of Egypt, it’s been ingrained in its history since ancient times. The skills to carry huge racks of bread over their heads seems like part of Egyptian DNA. Many do this on their bikes.

Egypt used to be one of the biggest exporters of wheat in the world. Now the situation has shifted to the other end of the spectrum, and it has become the world’s biggest importer. With diminishing availability of fertile areas along the Nile and a booming population, Egypt is no longer self-sufficient in wheat, and hence bread production. As the demand grows, prices also rise.

To relieve hunger, the Egyptian government issues subsidy cards to ration bread. The price has been fixed since 1989, 5 piasters (0.0032 USD) per loaf, a fraction of the cost of private bakeries. The population is highly sensitive to any changes in this matter. In the 1970’s the country was burned down when the subsidy was threatened. In 2020, people went to the streets again as the loaves shrunk from 110 to 90 grams each.

Rhythmically and precisely, men shape the amorphous dough into discs that are thrown in the oven, raising flour up in the air.

The subsidies are not enough though, and small private bakeries sit on each corner in Cairo. To feed people, a plethora of small, semi-industrial ovens spit loaves all day.
Tortillas de patata, tortilla con frijoles, tortillas doradas, sopa de tortilla, tortilla con carnitas, tortilla ahogada, tortilla con tortilla.

The versatile disc is the base of Mexican cuisine. Thin and flexible, it gently hugs the food to provide sustenance to millions.

At Loma’s small commercial center, already two tortillerías run their carousels from 6 to 6. Navarro Tortilla y Molina faces Tortillas Ely across the roundabout. The rivalry doesn’t bother the owners very much, there are enough clients for all.

A mountain of thick maize dough slowly disappears through the metallic funnel while fresh tortillas fall on a bucket. A strong guy comes and dumps another mountain.
Further down the street, a pile of sand is transforming into concrete blocks. A romantic song plays on the radio while men handle the construction machinery under Lomas’ harsh sun. The red bandanas around their necks are lifted to their faces every once in a while, preventing them from inhaling too much of the thin and dangerous cement powder.

It’s a common scene. There’s still a lot of empty space in Lomas, and new families are moving in. Oftentimes the houses are built by the family men, who work in construction developments around the city, and replicate in Lomas styles and techniques they learn on the job.
Nor here. A pile of wood planks rests at the foot of a blind wall. The sound of hammering and sawing is very loud and constant.

Each Cairene community is well known for its own craft. Ezbet Khairallah’s local economy is mainly based on wood recycling. On every street, piles of wood stick out from behind the walls, signaling the presence of workshops. These places are often owned by external people, but the labor force is composed mostly of Ezbet men and boys who rely on wood as their main source of income.

Industry disposed wood is collected by the workers and brought to the workshops in horse wagons. Later it goes through a manual cleaning process in which screws and damaged parts are removed. Then it’s cut and transformed into Ezbet Boards, that are stored in place to be resold in large quantities to businesses as affordable, local wood.

During the cold winter nights, people warm up by fire pits on the sidewalks. The risk of conflagration is imminent. Rescue services would be hard-pressed to find their way around Ezbet’s narrow and chaotic streets. People know it and they fear it, but there’s no other way. Hammers keep going.
The air is heavy with smoke and glue. Next to him, other young men and a woman are sitting on the floor doing the same. They each have a workstation set up on their laps on wooden boards. Every once in a while someone stands up to use the sand machine they all share. To turn it on, they have to start the diesel generator. Some of them have Peak Milk after work, hoping this will help clean their lungs as the popular culture says.

Harry, MamaG’s son — is gluing the soles on a stylish pair of sandals. It’s almost ready. He has an online page where he sells his footwear, all designed and produced by him. Shoe making and tailoring are big contributors to the Nigerian informal economy. They are not only a source of income, but also outlets for creativity and self-expression in a culture where style and originality are key.
Gihan cuts a pile of bread in half. It’s fresh from the baker downstairs.

The kitchen is in constant motion as women shift non-stop around a large metal table at the center of the kitchen. They work swiftly and confidently, as they prepare food for some 50 people this morning. The women are inspired by their different cultures and they take great pride in creating unique fusion recipes and dishes. The Syrians learn about the Egyptian seasoning and the Egyptians learn of the importance and care needed for the Syrian presentation style.

It’s almost noon and a cell phone alarm sounds. It’s the second call to prayer.

Some women, not all, make space in a corner at the kitchen and lay small colorful carpets facing the windows in the direction of Mecca.
Gihan’s work day meal

After the prayer, they start to set up the big table for lunch in the area where earlier they were assembling the crates with lunchboxes. The Dawar Kitchen is a beautiful and warm place to spend time, and eating together is the best part of the day. Every inch of the table is covered with salads, warm dishes and pita bread, all passed around and eaten with your hands. The meals are so beautifully plated that it is easy to wonder if this is some special occasion, but the women deflect this idea. “We like to spoil ourselves” they say and one look at the table and there can be no doubt that they are doing just that.
Gilhan’s work day table

1. French fries
2. Carrot mokabbalat
3. Bread
4. Domiat cheese
5. Syrian ful
6. Pickles
7. Omelet
8. Olive mokabbalat
9. Arugula
10. Onion mokabbalat
11. Cucumber

a. Serving plates
MamaG’s work day meal

Around noon MamaG takes a pause from her work. It’s time to eat. She positions a plastic table at the very center of her stall, circumscribed by the wooden benches. On the table, there lies the pot with the afang soup she prepared the night before, a water sachet, fufu bought from a stall and a plate of water to clean her hands as she won’t use cutlery.

Some people are sitting on the benches around her and, although she considers the market people her extended family, she eats on her own alone at the table. PapaG, her husband, used to be on a chair by her side until a few weeks before.

MamaG covers her head for a second with a perfectly white cloth and thanks God for her meal. She eats her delicious soup rolling and dipping balls of fufu in it. She doesn’t take very long though, the business can’t stop. As she finishes the soup, she bites a hole in the water sachet and drinks it all.

A client is already waiting.
**Mama G's work day table**

1. Fufu  
2. Afang fish soup  
3. Water sachet  

a. Disposed bones  
b. Hand washer
Eva’s work day meal

Eva waits, sitting by a long aluminum counter, for her flautas de pollo to get ready. It’s another style of preparing tortillas: wrapped around shredded chicken and deep fried. A charismatic man is preparing it while talking to the other clients and inviting passersby to try their specialties.

When Eva commutes to the center of Guadalajara to take care of her parents, she often has a quick meal at the San Juan Bosco market. It saves her time from preparing her own food, as the one she makes for the elderly can’t be as rich and spicy as she likes.

Just like her, many other Mexicans do the same. The public markets have delicious, fresh and affordable food. The good prices are due to the fact they are government subsidized, so a vendor can rent a stall at low cost and use its infrastructure. This policy was an attempt to formalize the traditional street markets, los tianguis, and now it has become an important part of the culture. There are two main categories of markets in Mexico: the public markets, which are fixed, open daily and operated in an enclosed building with formal infrastructure; and the tianguis, which are temporary, open once a week, and set at different streets open air.

In five minutes her chicken flautas are ready. She adds pozole to the plate, along with fried bread and tamarind soda. While she eats, Virgin Mary stands on a corner watching over everyone.
**Eva's work day table**

1. Chili  
2. Salsa picante  
3. Tamarind soda  
4. Chicken flautas, pozolle, lettuce salad and fried bread  
   a. Vendor utensils  
   b. Plastic cup
### Work day tables

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<th>Meal time (min)</th>
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Rest day meals
Down and down the staircase, Gihan brings her son with her to the market downstairs.
Where there’s pavement, there’s a market in Cairo. A few meters away from Gihan’s place, the food stalls are already popping up. In Ezbet many buildings have little shops and restaurants at the ground level, but at El-Nagah street is where the fresh food market traditionally sits.

It’s Tuesday and it’s Gihan’s day off from work. She’s getting ingredients to prepare taro soup for lunch with her kids. She moves around quickly to get what she needs. A new woman in the community shouldn’t be seen hanging out nonchalantly.

**Shopping list**
- Carrots: £8
- Green peas: £10
- Tomato: £6
- Taro root: £10
- Cumin: £5
- Greens: £5
- Coriander: £5
- Chicken: £55

Total: £104 [67 USD]
It’s Sunday and MamaG wears her best dress to go see God.
MamaG doesn’t have days off. On Sundays, however, she opens her stall later, after church. On those days she skips the cooking and buys food prepared at her market. On other week days she would get food from the Mile One Market and prepare afang soup at home to last for the week.

**Shopping list**
- Afang leaf: ₦300
- Water leaf: ₦200
- Dry fish: ₦600
- Stock fish: ₦700
- Onion: ₦200
- Kporro (cow skin): ₦200
- Fresh pepper: ₦50
- Goat meat: ₦1400
- Periwinkles (shell): ₦200
- Palm oil: ₦300

Total: 4150 ₦ [11 USD]
Christmas is around the corner and Eva is preparing to celebrate with her family. Some ingredients she’ll buy fresh on the 24th, but today the tianguis is open and she’ll get stuff for the week.
The tianguis are street markets dating back to prehispanic times. They remain today as the main form of popular trade in Mexico. They are temporary and open different days of the week in different streets. Today the Emiliano Zapata street is filled with vegetables, meat and all sorts of treats; tomorrow the cars will pass by as if nothing happened the day before.

**Shopping list**

1kg tortilla: Mex$ 15  
Dried chili: Mex$ 30  
Green chili: Mex$ 10  
Nopales (cactus): Mex$ 10  
Garlic: Mex$ 5  
Tomatillos: Mex$ 15  
Tomatoes: Mex$ 12.50  
Pilloncillo: Mex$ 30  
½ kg sugar: Mex$ 9  
Apples: Mex$ 40  
Banana: Mex$ 15  
Small piñata: Mex$ 25  
Big piñata: Mex$ 50  

Total: Mex$ 281.5 [14 USD]
Eva heads back home carrying two piñatas. One is for her grandson, the other is for the kids in the community. During the holiday many will rely on her to create a community which they might not otherwise have.

Lomas’ kids strike the piñatas ardently as they hang in the backyard of the church until they eventually succeed and lunge to the clay ground to collect the candy in a flutter of joy.

In this largely Catholic neighborhood, the Parroquia San Miguel Arcangel backyard is one of the few communal spaces where kids can play and the moms feel safe about it. It doesn’t have a fixed priest, though. Eva arranged for someone to celebrate the mass on Christmas Eve for them.
Across the ocean, MamaG kneels without touching the cement floor. She’s careful with her long tailored yellow dress.

Port Harcourt is full of pentecostal churches like this one. The Gate of Salvation Outreach International is not very close to MamaG’s home. She has been taking a long but journey to get there every Sunday for the past 20 years. When asked why she comes to this one instead of another more conveniently located she’s direct:

Because I love this church.
Coptic crosses dot Ezbet Khairallah's skyline. The Tahona Elbaba Kirolos is an orthodox church built after Pope Cyril VI of Alexandria. He used to live in solitude in a windmill during his early monk days, and after his death in 1971, people started to build the church around it. The Coptics are a religious minority in predominantly Islamic Egypt, but their population counts for millions in Cairo, and they are the largest Christian community in northern Africa.

The little windmill, dating back from Muhammad Ali's dynasty, sits in the middle of the Church patio, attracting visitors from all over Cairo and other parts of Egypt. They leave their shoes by its door and step onto the stone floor the Pope once inhabited.

Not far from there, a pile of shoes is accumulating by the door of El Motaqqin Mosque, as men congregate to pray. The minarets are calling.
Gihan and her little son leave their shoes by the door, and he helps her carry the bags full of groceries.

It’s 1pm and it’s time to start preparing lunch. Gihan works catering in a commercial kitchen, and here once again she’s cooking on her day off. The process will take a few hours, as she makes enough to feed them throughout the week.

Gihan peels the pink taro on a small sink countertop, sharing the space with many plastic bottles. Although their home has piped water, it’s common that it stops running a few times during the day, so they have to rely on the water stored in bottles to carry on with the cooking.

From here it is possible to hear the boys playing video games in the room. Every once in a while they come to check if soup is ready.

Next to Gihan, her daughter sits on the carpet peeling the peas.
The last rays of light disappear from the sky while MamaG lights up the small gas stove to start boiling the fish. MamaG’s soup is also cooked to last for a few days. It’s a complex task as she sets up a cooking station on top of two water tanks by her bedroom door, facing the shared patio in her tenement.

While she cuts water leaves, a neighbor is washing a big pile of colorful dishes. Siblings take shower in a bucket. A woman washes her face using a water kettle. The last rays of light disappear from the sky while MamaG lights up the small gas stove to start boiling the fish. This time she cooks with the help of a friend from the Church, who MamaG calls her sister. Since her husband’s death, this woman and other church women have been giving her support, the same way MamaG did for them when they were in need.
On a tiny electric stove, Eva shifts between a big pan boiling cinnamon tea and another pan boiling chili. Tonight she will host a Christmas dinner for her family and she decided to make a traditional meal: tamales. This quintessential Mexican festive dish requires a lot of effort and time, but the occasion warrants it.

To speed up the process she uses a wooden tortilla press to shape the tamales dough before wrapping with the corn husk.

One by one Eva fills a big pot with dozens of chilis, carne, strawberry and pineapple tamales.

This process took a few hours, now some more hours to cook. Around her Christmas lights blink coloring the space.
Gihan lives in a rental two bedroom flat. She shares a room with her two boys while her teenager daughter sleeps in a room of her own. They have running water and electricity coming regularly from the city grid, but blackouts and shortages of water are frequent.

MamaG rents a small room and shares it with her 24 year old son. The patio, shared with many other families, is where the cooking happens. There’s no running water or electricity, the bathroom is communal, and the neighbors share the costs to have the septic tank emptied when it’s full. There’s a common well in the place, but each tenant also buys gallons of water from a facility nearby.

Eva and her husband own a two story house, although they don’t have the legal title of the land. Her daughter and two of her sons live in the house with their partners. Each couple has its own room, and one of them also lives with their kid in their own room. The water tank is filled from a private truck every other week. They also buy filtered water gallons for cooking and drinking. The electricity is illegally taken from the city grid.
Gihan’s rest day meal

Gihan serves the soups, fried chicken and rice on a big circular tray, and lays it on a pillow on the carpet in the living room, where the TV is playing an Egyptian soap opera. Next to the tray lies a bag of flat bread.

Half way through the meal the electricity blacks out and suddenly the room is quieter for a few minutes. The city hums from the balcony window and the clinking of plates on the tray is more prominent.

The family eats very close together, with their hands, while the spirals and finials of the carpet swirl out beneath them.
Gihan’s rest day table

1. Bread
2. Rice
3. Kolkas stew
4. Fried chicken
5. Carrot and peas soup
MamaG's rest day meal

After church MamaG is back to her business at the market. She opens her stall later on Sundays, around 1pm. On those days she doesn’t bring her food from home, instead she buys it prepared from a stall nearby.

A vendor brings MamaG a plate of spicy goat soup with rice and a water sachet. She eats it alone on the plastic table set there, as she avoids leaving her belongings unattended. MamaG has a quick meal, just like on her working days and quickly returns to her business.
MamaG's rest day table

1. Spicy goat soup
2. Rice
3. Water sachet
   a. Hand washer
Eva pushes aside her sewing machine and extends her working desk with a plastic table borrowed from the church to make space for a massive pan of tamales. It is finally time to eat. Eva, Martin, her kids, the step daughters and grandkids stand around the table. After everybody has had at least two tamales, one savory and one sweet, Eva allows the family to head to another house across the street to visit their extended family. They drink tequila and listen to music until the late hours. Outside, many families are doing the same, swapping houses from one party to another, from one group of loved ones to the next. This barely resembles the dark empty streets of yesterday. Tonight is a celebration of Christmas and tomorrow brings a new day.

**Eva's rest day meal**
Eva’s rest day table

1. Savory and sweet tamales
2. Cinnamon tea cups
   a. Disposed corn husk
   b. Tortilla press
   c. Box
   d. Extra tamale filling
   e. Sewing utensils
   f. Disposable serving plates
   g. Pan
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Rest day tables
Special day meal
Celebrate

Die

Cook

Webisodes

Watch it

Watch it

Watch it

EXIT
ANCESTORS' HOUSE
BACKYARD KITCHEN
FUFU LEAVE)

THE GOAT

THE BURIAL
Only a few weeks before the trip to meet MamaG in Port Harcourt, we learned of her husband’s unexpected death.

Our plans quickly shifted to help support her as she planned for the funeral, a public five day event welcoming hundreds of guests, to be taking place in PapaG’s ancestral village outside the city. It was difficult then, and still is, for me to understand the funeral arrangement since it’s radically different from the introspective and private western mourning. Were we organizing for a wedding or a funeral? But what intrigued me the most was what was going on with the body during all those days of planning. How come it was not buried immediately?

As soon as I arrived at Port Harcourt, we went with the local team to the market to visit MamaG and be introduced to the Chief. Very charismatic and elegant, dressed in a black embroidered tunic, this gentleman is in charge to look after PapaG’s family in their village. The chieftaincy is a traditional Nigerian hierarchy institution, where men — occasionally women too — are appointed to a position of power within a group. The Chief would consider our presence at the funeral celebration and discuss our contribution with MamaG.

After an hour of talking, note taking and calculations, we had a list of our support to PapaG’s funeral:

Fee for days of the body in the mortuary (about 31 days): ₦ 10 000
Ambulance to transport body from Port Harcourt to the village: ₦ 45 000
Coffin: ₦ 50 000
Suit with no shoes for PapaG: ₦ 15 000
4 Goats: ₦ 50 000
2 bags of rice: ₦ 40 000
Water: ₦ 10 000
Soft drinks: ₦ 15 000
Posters: ₦ 5 000
Extras: ₦ 10 000

Total: ₦ 250 000 [660 USD] = 50 x MamaG’s rent

In addition to this list, MamaG will have many other costs to cover. burying a loved one in Nigeria is of utmost cultural importance and is a big investment for the families. Sometimes they wait years until the money is raised, meanwhile a debt grows from the compounding daily fees to keep the body in the mortuary.

MamaG will make the best celebration to PapaG’s memories that she can, without a second thought.
When the day arrives, MamaG loads the trunk of a rented minibus with yams and ingredients she would only find in Port Harcourt. She is joined by four of her sisters from her church to head to Eket, the village where the funeral will take place. Following the tradition, PapaG is expected to come back home and be buried in his ancestral village as his father and his father's father were.

In Nigeria, the relations of belonging are much more tied to kinship than to their place of birth or living. The bond to one's ancestral community resists the rural-urban migrations. For instance, if you ask a Port Harcourt resident where he or she is from, it is very likely they will answer with their father's ancestors' tribe, even if they were born and raised in Port Harcourt and never set foot in the tribe's village. This tribalism, so central to Nigeria's identity, is also politically exploited as a way to justify uneven distributions of public resources in favor of this or that group.

On this path to her husband's origin, MamaG and her friends spend three hours — some time in travel, and some time at the uncountable police roadblocks along the way. Although the checkpoints were originally meant to safeguard the roads against robberies and kidnappings, it became a scheme for the corrupt police to extract bribes from travelers. There are so many checkpoints and it's difficult to know when they are entering a new one or if it's just a continuation of the previous one.

Roadblock after roadblock, the minibus keeps going — a Bible on the dashboard and the words "God First" on the rear window.
Day 1 - Thursday

When we arrive at Eket, we are immediately struck by the contrast to Port Harcourt. The rural village is lush and green and the air is clean and fresh. While Mama G unloads the trunk, the Chief appears on a motorcycle to welcome us. He and other village men start to drink hard liquor and socialize in front of the house.

"Gone too soon". A big standing banner with Papa G's picture points to the fact that we are in the right place. The entrance to the family house is decorated with white and blue voiles and hanging beads. In a small altar, another collage picture of Papa G stands among white flowers.

The house is in preparation. A small but very strong man is digging a grave for Papa G. Nearby, other late family members have been laid to rest. Some other men are taking down a banana tree to open space for a tent to be erected in the coming day.

We hear soft rhythmic beats emanating from the back of the house. It's not music, it's the women pounding okasi leaves. In the next five days, they will be cooking non-stop in an effort to feed all visiting villagers and their guests.
A boy cleans the big water tank from inside, he's the only one who could enter it.

Women cook nonstop in the backyard.

Liquid fermented cassava is poured on a stone pan on the fire pit. It has to be continuously stirred until it forms the sticky consistency of fufu. This is a team project, done by 4 or 6 strong arms.

Vapor, fire, pounding beads, chatter. The backyard kitchen is on.
The villagers grab okasi leaves from a nearby tree, wash it and pound it. It’s the main ingredient of their stews. It is strong and gives the stew consistency.

The Port Harcourt women sit around bowls picking water leaves they brought with them in the minibus. This will be the lighter base for the stews.

Soon some rivalry emerges between the groups. An elderly villager woman is visibly resentful of the interference those city women are bringing to her kitchen. Do they think city food is better than theirs? MamaG appears to calm things down. The workload is heavy and they better find a way to work together. They have some hundreds of mouths to feed in the days ahead of them.
The only woman who won’t cook is MamaG. According to tradition, the widow rests until the last day of rites. The reality is that in the days to follow, MamaG will do everything but rest. She will once again find herself managing transactions, requests and conflicts of all sorts. On her shoulders rest big expectations from the village family.

The night is falling and MamaG invites me in to see her bedroom. As the widow, she gets to have a bedroom to herself. With her phone she illuminates a big bed, covered in floral sheets. She is proud of the space she has in the house. She is proud of the beautiful celebration she is putting together with a lot of effort to honor the story she shares with PapaG.
Day 2 - Friday

Around 8am, MamaG heads to the Eket market accompanied by a neighbor man she trusts. He will help her get the best deal for a goat to butcher and offer to the guests.

Sacrifice

A big guy is showing off sharpening knives; below him, a goat anatomy lesson.

After much heated discussion, they settle with ₦13,000, and the goat is loaded onto a motorcycle destined for MamaG’s home.

With the help of her friend, they choose a decent sized goat and start the bargaining.

MamaG walks towards the back of the market, where the living goats stay.
More people are arriving from Port Harcourt. The backyard kitchen is getting busier as almost 30 women are cutting, stirring and pounding. In a corner, the goat innocently sleeps tied to a pole. Around 4pm a man comes to bring it to its fate.

The goat is laid on the ground in the front yard, not far from PapaG’s empty grave. While a man holds its legs, the other cuts the throat. A quick, deep guttural sound. Then a vivid red stream floods from her open neck, in high contrast with the brown dusty ground. The dead goat is hung on a stick from its head. The men cover it with dried leaves and set the whole thing on fire. Moments later the leaves disappear into ashes and the goat silhouette reappears behind the heavy white smoke. The scene is impactful and sacred.
The butcher is serious and precise, every limb and every organ is carefully separated. He braids the intestines delicately and stores it in a small plastic bag. This is his payment.

Another man approaches the scene to figure out the portioning. The goat meat won’t be cooked there, it is to be shared among the neighbors as a gift to welcome MamaG’s presence in the village and open the funeral festivities.

Beats are heard in distance. They are getting louder. A group of colorfully dressed ladies are approaching the house in formation, singing and playing agogo.

While we watched the goat in the fire, Michael’s phone rings. He is the head of the local team. As he answers it, he learns that one of his young trainees had passed away. We visited V.I. Khelly at the hospital in Port Harcourt the day before traveling to Eket, he was breathing with a lot of difficulty and the illness was unknown. Like him, many young Nigerians lose their lives due to all sorts of diseases that could be treatable, if they had minimal access to a decent health care system.

V.I. Khelly was a talented rapper and a cook. He would have been the subject of this research but as he got sick, he couldn’t take part in it anymore. The Chicoco film team had the chance to say goodbye and tell him that they will miss him on this trip. We can only imagine how this adventure would have been with him.
Tonight is the vigil and nobody will sleep. A diesel generator powers the huge sound system and the front of the house becomes a stage with a band and DJ playing until the next day. Vendors sell hard liquor and hard boiled eggs on towels set on the floor. People from all over the village are coming by, and they need fuel for the night.

In a room ladies pray around a decorated catafalque matching the blue and white motifs. It’s empty and waiting to receive PapaG in the morning.

The fire pits in the backyard are constantly fed with more wood to make jollof rice.

That night, Harry arrives at the village in a bus he rented with friends from Port Harcourt. He hands me the outfit that he and the family tailor have made. A few days earlier, when we met to record his work at the shoe workshop, I mentioned I inadvertently had only brought jeans and sneakers to the trip. These wouldn’t be suited to his father’s burial, so they took my measurements. They made a beautiful pair of sandals and a black and blue dress, the same colors Harry and MamaG would wear for the burial. I felt immensely honored.
MamaG, Harry and PapaG's daughter from a previous marriage, all three wearing tailored outfits with the same patterns, stand around the coffin to say goodbye to their beloved patriarch. MamaG is sobbing, it's the first time we see her like this.

Funeral

It's dawn, the sound system is still blasting, and most of the people who came by the other night went home to rest. Not MamaG and her steady friends, though. Sleep is not important for now.

The car parks, and the Chief welcomes PapaG into the compound.

Around 9am, sirens approach the house. It's the ambulance from Port Harcourt arriving with the body.

Day 3 - Saturday

Sleep is not important for now. MamaG and her steady friends stay in the room, sobbing, it’s the first time we see her like this.

The coffin is taken outdoors to the center of the front yard, and the pastors open the rites.

Guests are arriving again from all over. Hundreds of people sit under the tents set up in the front yard and across the street. They all receive a program at the door of funeral services. There are many more to come.

The widow says the last words and invites everyone to a last dance in celebration of her late husband's life. MamaG leads a dancing crowd around the coffin, across the front street and then back.
Time has come. A group of men carry the coffin to the open grave. They lower it in with the help of colorful patterned textiles, and Harry throws the first shovel of earth. PapaG is an ancestor now.
300 lunchboxes with jollof rice and water sachets are distributed among the guests. For the closest acquaintances, soup and fufu is waiting in the backyard kitchen.

After, and only after, every guest is served, MamaG and her son eat. Far from the fuss outside, they quietly share a plate of okasi soup on top of the big floral bed, dipping fufu balls in it with their hands. From now on it will be like this, just the two of them.
Mamie's special day table

1. Water sachet
2. Okasi soup
3. Fufu
4. Hand washer
Day 4 - Sunday

The house is quieter now. The day started later and people are still recovering. Only a few closest relatives and friends have stayed around. MamaG is proud and at the same time relieved. She fulfilled so many expectations and now she can finally rest assured she made a beautiful and memorable ceremony. Her prestige is clear as so many people left their routines aside and came from far and wide to attend the event, reinforcing the bonds of her community of friends and family. MamaG knows what she’s doing:

- I am making history in this town.

Final rites

Day 5 - Monday

MamaG is cooking for the first time after she arrived in the village. She vigorously pounds cassava in a wooden pestle in the backyard.

By the other side of the house, a group is pounding the ground where PapaG was buried in order to stabilize it and prevent erosion. When they are done, a tray of dried fish and a plate with some Naira bills are laid on top of the grave. Ladies begin to sing and play agogo around it. Everybody eats the fish afterwards.

Another goat is sacrificed and apportioned among the neighbors. This is the last duty MamaG has to cover before she can close the rites and leave the village to return to Port Harcourt.

Finally, MamaG is ready to be disconnected from any remaining links with the deceased husband in the physical world. He won’t be able to come after her and she will be free to move forward in her life. She sits on a bench in front of the house and a woman starts cutting her hair straight to the roots while the other females watch it. MamaG looks serious, eyes far away. As the hair is falling, she is careful to collect everything. When her hand is full, the women choose a place close to the grave and bury the hair.

That’s the end of a chapter.
COVID-19
The stories of MamaG, Eva and Gihan were captured from December 2019 to February of 2020. Shortly after this work was completed, the world was faced with the COVID-19 pandemic. We were grateful to have an opportunity to share these stories and gather this content before the pandemic. We had an opportunity to catch up with the women in the fall of 2020 to learn more about their experiences and the impact of this pandemic on their lives.
MamaG’s son set up a video call on his cell phone so we could talk. The internet connection was very limited, but after a few attempts we were able to see MamaG’s smiling face. It was late at night and she was coming home from work. The Flyover Market had just reopened after months of shutdown. The government closed every big street market in Port Harcourt, without offering any alternatives for the people whose livelihoods depended on them. Illegal night markets started to pop up around the city. MamaG would go to one such market to buy her food, leaving at 2am, carrying a torch to light her way. If the police were to catch her, she would either have to bribe them or she would face getting arrested, but she was covert and able to sneak through successfully.

Are you afraid of contracting COVID?
MamaG: No. I’m very healthy. God is taking good care of us.

How do you see the future of yourself and your family?
MamaG: My future, my own future and Harry’s, is very bright, because we have God on our side.
Eva

When we caught up with Eva, we learned that she continues to be a key leader in her community. COVID-19 caused chaos throughout Guadalajara as people strived to cope and understand the pandemic. In the midst of this chaos, families in Lomas lost access to their water supply, a supply that they used to illegally divert from the main pipes that run at the borders of the community. Eva organized a protest in front of the city hall, and as a result the government sent a few water trucks for the community to use during quarantine. The community still does not have running water, but this action guaranteed that the most urgent need was met.

In addition, Eva now has a router and a laptop so communication was easier than expected. She had just graduated from preparatory school and now she dreams to enter college to study fashion design.

Are you afraid of contracting COVID? 
Eva: I fear nothing. I’m very brave.

How do you see the future of Lomas del Centinela? 
Eva: I ask God for a lot of wisdom and strength because I want to see my community changed and improved. If there’s no community you can’t improve. We have to hold each other’s hands to move forward.

How do you see the future of you and your family? 
Eva: I feel proud and I feel sad because my children are grown ups, but my grandchildren... I don’t know what waits for them. I want it to be something good, something better, that we are ready, but to know, I don’t know. I don’t want to give up. I wanna continue with the activities in the community so they have something to fight for and to live for.

Gihan / Nada Al Shazly

The Dawar Kitchen is slowly and steadily recovering from a strike. During the strike, they lost almost all of their important clients. In addition, due to the pandemic, there were no more events to cater for. This, coupled with people’s bias against and fear of food cooked in poor communities, has made for a very challenging time. The kitchen was able to use their savings to allow the women to stay at home for the worst 3 months of the pandemic and later the kitchen pivoted their business to start catering for families with children who were studying from home.

The kitchen, which already had very high standards of hygiene, is now even more rigorous. The women have to keep physical distance while cooking. The big communal meal, the happiest part of the day, is unfortunately suspended until further notice.

Gihan stopped working at the kitchen. She has a new partner, someone she might want to marry, and he does not want her to work. Her children continue to do well despite the hardships of the pandemic.

For this work addendum we interviewed Nada El Shazly, the head manager of the Dawar Kitchen.

Are the women in the Kitchen afraid of contracting COVID? 
Nada: At first they were wondering, they were skeptical. They were talking about it as something very distant. They seemed like they didn’t have any idea or scientific information of the nature of the pandemic. I saw them again in May, during Ramadan, at that point the women shared more accurate information. Women shared stories that people in Ezbet Khairallah were getting more clean or concerned with hygiene and they took care of stuff out of fear from Corona. But they would still think I’m overreacting when I keep wearing the mask all the time. You know, these days they are taking it easy, not so cautious anymore, but everyone in Egypt is like that now.

How do you see your future and the Dawar Kitchen? 
Nada: These recent events of the Corona and how people reacted, this series of events, they made me realize that, you know, Cairo is very alive. It’s full of this life force, strong and overwhelming. Maybe we had some resilience that made us survive on the mental health level from this wave. I’m grateful that we are surviving so far and I hope we keep surviving and get back to normal very soon.
Immersive installation
This work captured a fragment of Eva, Gihan, MamaG and their communities’ stories. This tiny fragment, as little as it is, it is still vast and poses challenges for retelling the story to a diverse audience from very different backgrounds.

The possibilities of immersive media seems like a natural path to explore. With the audience’s bodies surrounded by images and sound, the installation provides a glimpse to those worlds so far from our own. The aim is to create an experience based on feelings and sensations. Something as close to a journey in a new territory as one can get.

Immersive videos, a physical 3D printed model and a soundtrack work simultaneously to tell the stories, swinging from the food plate to the planet, from the absolute mundane to a surrealistic recreation of places and events.

**Narrative arch**

Procuring, preparing and eating food together are the three acts of a meal that are so universal and so particular at the same time. Using this as an overarching system to organize the 20 minute experience, the narrative runs through the lives of the three characters, sometimes simultaneously, sometimes individually.

The experience is divided in 4 parts:

**Intros:** An introduction to each woman and their cities.

**Trade:** Follow the three characters in the chaotic local markets as they acquire the ingredients.

**Cook:** An intimate moment in each kitchen.

**Eat:** The meal is served. People eat and celebrate together.
The installation is composed of:

a. 3 Full HD projectors mapped onto the walls.
b. 55" LCD monitor underneath a transparent 3D model of the 3 countries.
c. Stereo speakers.
d. Media server.

All the tests for this installation were done in the physical space of MIT Media Lab, where the team had to comply with COVID-19 safety measures. Therefore, there were no user testing conducted for this phase of the research.

An experimental style of 3D storyboarding was developed during this work to coordinate the content creation with the team.

Study plan for exhibition at Venice Biennale

The installation is composed of:

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All the tests for this installation were done in the physical space of MIT Media Lab, where the team had to comply with COVID-19 safety measures. Therefore, there were no user testing conducted for this phase of the research.
From plate to place
1. Tables at work

2. Tables with family
Gihan’s table for a work day meal is so densely populated by plates and dishes that we can barely see the tablecloth. It’s a lot like Ezbet Khairallah. The informal areas of Cairo are incredibly dense. There’s little in-between space, and the streets are so narrow that the sky is hardly seen.

Density in Islamic culture is not something to be defeated, but an aesthetic quality. In Islamic art, for example, every single space is filled with geometries and calligraphic inscriptions, nothing is left empty. One possible reason for these preferences may derive from the natural features of Egypt in which the urbanized areas along the Nile represented the good life and pleasantness of civilization, in the very opposite spectrum of the empty, hostile and fearful desert.

Here, the density represents abundance, security and community, exactly what those women find in the Kitchen.

MamaG’s table on a work day meal is surrounded by wooden benches, like in a little fortress. The market is where she spends the greatest part of her day and where she has her place of prestige. With the furniture she delineates her territory, marking a piece of land and taking ownership of it. In addition to that, the arrangement impedes the flow of people behind her working desk, providing her a level of protection as she deals with large sums of money all day long.

The possibility of having some area for herself in the market is crucial to give MamaG some space to breathe, as she lives in a tiny rental room in a crowded tenement. The density in Port Harcourt doesn’t come from aesthetic preferences, but from the pure necessity of maximizing the use of any available infrastructure.

Even though MamaG has many close acquaintances in the market, she eats alone. Her meal time is tightly compacted in her working shift, and the situation doesn’t leave much room for slower shared meals. Also, by separating herself from others during the eating time, MamaG reinforces her role as a respected figure that her duty as a banker demands.

Eva’s table in a work day meal is a big aluminium countertop at a public market stall. She shares the table, not the meal, with other people that just like her, are coming from the periphery to work at the center. The long table, where strangers sit a few feet away from each other, reflects Guadalajara’s sprawl, a type of urbanization with adjacent yet disconnected neighborhoods.

For a resident of the sparsely populated Lomas del Centinela, which has few groceries stores and limited access to water and electricity, it’s much more convenient to eat at a stall close to work after the long commuting journeys. The spacious public markets are government subsidized, which guarantee the access to infrastructure to prepare affordable and delicious fresh food that would be hard to prepare at home.
2G. Dense core

Gihan’s table on a weekend with her family is as densely organized as the table she shares with her colleagues. In this case, the taste for lavish crowdedness also extends to the house which it’s covered in beautiful carpets and curtains.

Here, however, the table is not a table in the strict sense, it’s a tray laid on a pillow over the carpet. It’s set just before the meal and removed once everybody is done. The room in the small flat shifts between two functions, living and dining, allowing the maximum area to be applied for each use at different times.

The room would accept a larger eating surface, but the small tray adequately accommodates both mother and children as they intimately eat on the floor sharing the dishes. The nuclear family and domestic life are the center of the Islamic society and, in Gihan’s case, it’s even more evident as she faces ostracism from other relatives and social circles due to her divorce.

Her family is her core, and this meal illustrates it. The meat is at the center of the circular tray, with the side dishes radially placed around it, all of them on top of a round pillow that is surrounded by the four family members, who sit equidistantly. Beneath them, a big carpet with symmetric patterns implies the perfect spot for the tray to be placed. It’s just slightly off center though, to line up with the TV.

2M. Migrating queen bed

MamaG’s table at her husband’s funeral was a big bed. It was in the bedroom assigned for her in his family village house, while all the other guests would sleep on the floor in shared rooms. At this event, MamaG was the central character, the city widow returning to the ancestral village. Once again her prestige is revealed by the location of her meal.

The migration from rural villages to urban centers is a common pattern in Nigeria. Traditions such as funeral ceremonies are crucial to reinforce and maintain the link between both parts of the family—the ones who moved and the ones who remained. The body should be buried in the village, symbolizing its role as the ancestral ground. For the city people, who moved to pursue economic advancement, it’s expected that they share the benefits of the social and financial capital they have acquired.

MamaG quietly shared this meal only with Harry, despite the presence of their dear ones in the event. It reminds us that this event is not purely a celebration, but implies duties to the hosts. The widow and the son can only dine after all the guests are served and, after they eat, they quickly get back to event management.

2E. Varillas de la esperanza

Eva’s table arrangement for Christmas dinner was decided on the spot. The acquiring of ingredients and the cooking required a lot of planning in advance from her, but the table set up itself was figured out just before the meal. Eva made some space in a corner of her sewing area and the family stood around it, since the two story house didn’t have a dedicated dining area.

This improvisation doesn’t bother Eva, she sees it as a temporary condition. Even though the house has been under construction for the past 20 years, it eventually will have the dining room completed and they all will be able to sit around a big table together.

Eva and her children, all adults and with partners, share the same roof but not the same routines. They each work in different parts of town, with different schedules and they often eat in their bedrooms, equipped with individual TVs and electric stoves. Once again the sprawl leaks on this table, or the absence of it.

This multi bedroom house is the materialization of Eva’s investment in her family future and her expectations to keep their ties tight. The rebars purposely left protruding from her roof are a symbol of hope and a crown on the matriarchal house.
Concluding remarks

A bed, a tray on the floor, a stall counter, a corner by a sewing machine, a folding table set right before the meal, a plastic table set every morning. All of the six different tables documented in this work were temporary. Yet all of them carry only the most traditional dishes from their respective contexts. This juxtaposition of makeshift and permanent, or informal and formal, is at the core of this work, and was tested through the use of tables as a synecdoche for understanding complex urban systems, specifically as applied to rapidly urbanizing areas of the world.

The physical structures of those communities, which are under constant threat of demolition, collapsing and risks of all sorts, express the ways people manage to work around their lack of access to permanent infrastructure, relying on flexibility to attend their needs in the best way they can. In a sense, life in informal settlements is analogous to the temporary tables. On the other hand, the social ties, family structures, religion and values that fill those spaces are incredibly formal, meaningful and driven by strong traditions, just like the tamales, the afang soup, the kolkas, the fufu, the flat bread and the tortillas that those same tables exhibited as a living museum.

There are many aspects one can observe of the city leaking onto the tables and vice-versa.

Field research framework

Documenting two meals with a subject, one on a working day and one on a weekend day provides a methodology revealing multi-level relationships between private lives in individual households, and the communities that support them. It enables the comparison of two different situations within the same context and therefore broadens the view of life within that community. More importantly, documenting and sharing a meal creates a real chance to bond with the communities as the researcher is seen as a guest.
The analogy of a table and a city offers a potential tool for storytelling as it approximates the complexities of the urban studies to a scenario that is close to everyone. This will be evaluated in future developments of the immersive installation created in this work as the COVID-19 pandemic didn’t allow visitors to experience the piece at MIT. The immersive installation will be displayed at the Architecture Venice Biennale 2021, under the theme “How will we live together?” Originally scheduled for May 2020, the event was postponed one year and had its guidelines dramatically changed due to the pandemic. Any physical interactions with objects and room occupancies of more than two people at a time are forbidden.

We expect that after the deployment at Venice Biennale, a venue with attendance of hundreds of thousands of guests coming from international backgrounds, we will receive important feedback on the effectiveness of this media and storytelling tool. We will use the insights learned from the exhibition to improve the quality of this work and take it to be exhibited in the communities where this research took place in order to facilitate cultural exchange and the generation of new ideas.

At MIT, our work is far from complete. We see the need to bring more of our research to focus on the new challenges of rapidly urbanizing areas of the world. In addition, we are further rocked by the pandemic, looming climate change and political and social unrest. As With(in) informs us, we need to continue to learn, listen and document. Our perspective and our understanding will continue to evolve, and with it, new projects will emerge.
The local teams
Nigeria blew my mind. Every second in Port Harcourt was an adventure and an intense learning process. Everything was so extreme and different from what I knew so far that it was hard to make sense of things in my head, I just had to go with the flow.

There I stayed at the temporary Chicoco headquarter — they are building a new facility to be open very soon. It’s a house, an office, a studio, a farm, a swimming pool for the kids and everything else it might need to be. It’s non-stop coming and going of the many Chicoco trainees, the house keepers, the keeper’s kids, the foreign researchers, the cats, the admins, the repair guys, the chickens... Michael and Ana handle all of this. They head Chicoco and they take care of everything and everyone with immense love and life commitment. They are fueled by some sort of nuclear power generator.

Chicoco comprises the cinema, the radio, the city mapping and the journalism branches. It facilitates young talents from Port Harcourt to develop their own artistic language, critical thinking and professional skills. Chicoco provides their trainees with the platform and the tools to produce brilliant things. Everything they make is original, powerful and technically precise.

During the visit to Port Harcourt I was paired with Chicoco Cinema people. Fingers, Gloria, Grace, Imanny, Prince, Promise and Tekena did the filming, audio recording, and local production of the piece. Starting early, our crew would meet at the headquarters, check the equipment and then head to our unpredictable mission around the busy markets, crowded homes, animal sacrifices and missing trains of Nigeria. I’m very grateful for the chance to learn from them and to have their talent be a part of this thesis.
Mexico made me feel at home. The energy reminded me a lot of Brazil, so similar, yet so different in many other ways. Eventually I noticed that I knew Lomas del Centinela's paths by heart, so much I would be walking around the community covered in white dust. One path I learned very quickly: from the community center to the Circulo de Amigos headquarters.

Edith created the Circulo de Amigos Treffpunkt to support community development in Lomas del Centinela, with its people collectively shaping and setting the future of the place they live in. Lomas is in the beginning of its process to create a local identity and bonds of trust among neighbors. The Circulo foments this process by promoting many cultural, artistic and educational activities to engage the people to make things together. Edith and Eva lead all these activities with a lot of passion and dedication. They are constantly creating new enterprises, such as the Huerto. It’s a farming area by the church backyard with medicinal and edible herbs planted and maintained by the neighbors.

The Circulo de Amigos also facilitates research on mobility at Lomas conducted by the University of Guadalajara - UdeG. Mayra is the head of this research and was key to connect the MIT City Science team with Lomas. Besides this thesis, our research group is involved with a long lasting collaboration with UdeG to understand Lomas and imagine new paths with the community.

Ashley and Charles were behind the lenses there. They are two very talented and dedicated filmmakers who spent entire days moving around Guadalajara. We started early in the morning to film Eva in Lomas, then moved all the way to Guadalajara center to fly a drone over the market, then back to Lomas again to record the local baker making a night batch. The day ended with a shot of tequila while we were copying video off SD cards at midnight. It was tough but a lot of fun; it wouldn’t be Mexico otherwise.
Egypt is a difficult place to access but once you are in, you are in. There you are immersed in overwhelming beauty and surrounded by warm people. In Cairo I was lucky to be adopted by incredible women that took care of me and made this research possible.

Nada is the manager director of the Dawar Kitchen, and she warmly welcomed us into the place she is so proud of. The Dawar Kitchen’s yellow roof can be seen from far away among the brick buildings of Ezbet Khairallah. Under this roof, Egyptian migrant and refugee women have a dignifying job and find a community they can rely on. The kitchen provides them with training to make their own recipes into scalable and well documented recipes to be produced commercially. The menu and the management responsibilities are shared among the team in a participatory way to empower them and provide lasting skills they may apply in future careers.

To film the Kitchen I spoke with different film crews, and after many attempts, I found Sarah. She bravely agreed to join this endeavor despite all the complications Egyptian authorities impose over filming in public spaces, especially in the al-ashwa’iat areas, which they relentlessly try to invisibilize. Sarah became a true “partner in crime”, and didn’t spare efforts to make things happen during the tight time we had, from filming the meals to navigating sheep dealer scams. Sarah brought Menna to the team to film with us and the project benefited from their artistic sensibilities to capture the beauty that Cairo displays in every little detail. During the shootings, Sarah, Menna, Gihan, Nada, the kitchen women and I would share banquets around the big table. The atmosphere was festive, cheerful and it was really a delight to be there with them.
Credits

Protagonists
Eva
Gihan
MamaG

Author
Gabriela Bila Bandeira Advincula

Thesis supervisor
Kent Larson - Principal Research Scientist

Thesis committee
Glorianna Davenport - Visiting Scientist, MIT Media Lab
Hiroshi Ishii - Professor of Media Arts and Sciences

Heads of nonprofit organizations and local institutions

Cairo
Nada Al Shazly - Dawar Kitchen

Guadalajara
Edith Sauer, Angel Ramirez - Círculo de Amigos Treffpunkt
Mayra Gamboa - University of Guadalajara

Port Harcourt
Ana Bonaldo, Michael Uwemedimo - Chicoco Cinema

Film crews

Cairo
Menna El-Azzamy, Sarah Riad

Guadalajara
Ashley Fell, Charles de Graaf

Port Harcourt
Gloria Dandison, Grace Timi, Imanny Cleverstone, Prince Peter,
Promise Sunday, Tammy Daselina, Tekena Fubara

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Music
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City Science immersive installation team
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Thesis review
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