Egypt has 15.5 million inhabitants living in precarious buildings in what is known as informal settlements. Informal settlements whether in planned areas within cities or on hand-claim lands (squatters), surround and infiltrate the capital, Cairo. Since the seventies, government policies have ranged from the extension of inadequate amenities and infrastructure networks to complete neglect-till-dilapidation. However, since 2014, demolition and eviction (the 'bulldozer' strategy) has dominated the scene. In 2017, Cairo Governor identified over 89 areas as ‘extreme-risky’ and slated them for demolition. This study proposes to conduct an ‘ethnographic audit' of the built environment in three 'extreme-risk' settlements. Unlike official audits, which identifies risk as deficient building specifications and universalizes risk assessment and burden across communities irrespective of their heterogeneity and differential capacities to bear risk and mitigate hazards, the proposed design a) combines indicators of the distribution of goods and risk with indicators of the distribution of individual capabilities (opportunities + agency), b) integrates qualitative and quantitative (including GIS) data on six dimensions of vulnerability to risk: income, work and employment, chronic health issues, education and training, housing specifications and tenure status, and community-specific socio-cultural institutions, c) allows us to assess the burdens of risk and potential hazards not as a blanket value but relative to individual household and community’s different capabilities and vulnerabilities, d) is a community-based risk assessment that sensitizes both participants and researchers to recognize and reflect on their identity biases, if any. This nuanced audit allows us to juxtapose and compare placed-based narratives of livelihoods against macro-structural factors and support our attempt to recover diversity of built environments in order to re-conceptualize equity and justice.

The study argues that the texts of existing laws regulating Cairo’s urban built environment including those on risk, planning and building specifications seem poised to alleviate physical risks and ensure future risk mitigation. However, when seen from the ground-up i.e. from the livelihoods and worldviews of the people under risk and when studied within the context of the primacy of the real estate sector and juxtaposed to a slew of recent prohibitive laws on public space and public gatherings, those same ‘bare acts’ and their associated institutional practices could mean stripping citizens from the right to shape and appropriate the city. It could mean the evacuation of Cairo from neighborhoods ‘organic’ to the city’s environment and the obstruction of not only environmental justice – however defined – but also the latent human and built environment assets, and for that matter ‘real estate’ values, that residents and the city as a whole can capitalize on.