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*Assessing urban development after the “Arab Spring”: illusions and evidences of change.*

**R. Stadnicki, L. Vignal, P.-A. Barthel**

In 2010-2011, from small and medium cities like Sidi Bouzid (Tunisia) or Deraa (Syria) to capital cities like Cairo, Tunis, Manama (Bahrain) or Sana'a (Yemen), cities were at the forefront of the political and social mobilizations of the “Arab Spring”. These mobilizations were based on the rejection of the coercive policies of the regimes, some of which have since collapsed while others remain in power (Bennafla, 2013). More generally, they were rooted in societies whose social structures had undergone profound change over the previous decades as the result of the demographic transition, of the diffusion of literacy, but also of the generalization of urbanization (Pagès, Vignal, 2011). It is the object of this special issue of *Built Environment* to explore the urban roots and the dynamics of the contestations that took place in the Arab region since 2011 onwards, as well as to reflect on the challenges that this new era opens for urban studies. The authors of this collection of articles are looking at dynamics of change and resistance, but also at emerging factors, settings, actors, that might unfold new prospects for the urban in the future.

This special issue thus gives in-depths analysis focusing on the 2011-2013 period but also going back in time whenever necessary, looking at elements of long-term transformation, of continuity, as well as of rupture. This is the reason why we use with caution and with quotation marks the metaphoric qualification of the “Arab Spring”, crafted by the western and global media sphere, in both the title of the introduction and of the special issue itself.

***Before the « Spring »: The transforming Arab city***

The massive shift towards urbanization translated into a radical transformation of the modes of production of the urban fabric and the urban experience in the Arab countries. Over the last two decades, Arab cities underwent indeed massive physical transformations under the combined effects of two main factors. First, the insufficiency of the policies implemented by the ministries and (para)public agencies, and thus the limits of the action of the State to provide for the urban social demand in terms of housing, services, and economic resources (employment), led to the explosion of illegal/informal housing and illegal/informal economy. Second, the (limited) liberalization of the Arab economies translated, in the non-oil countries, in a policy of *laissez-faire* that put the emphasis on new sources of investments. Private investment in the production of private elitist cities or economic territories was presented as a solution to address the important challenges faced by growing and impoverished cities and economic development. The investments were important; the transformations of the cities sometimes major: the private cities that mushroom on the desert fringes of Cairo are among the driving forces behind the three-fold extension of the agglomeration since the 1990s. However, the spread of private exclusive cities, touristic resorts, industrial zones, technology villages etc. has not been able to tackle the more challenging issues faced by the huge

majority of the city dwellers such as the lack of jobs, of functional educational infrastructures, of available health infrastructures, etc. At the national level, the concentration of investment in big cities and in specific economic sectors (like tourism) contributed to the deepening of imbalances of territorial development. In other words, the rentier-based urban economic model, in particular as experimented in the 1990s and 2000s through the “mega-projects” approach, is a major source of shortcomings and failures of the governments of the region.

Accompanying the urbanization of the Arab region, the diffusion of major urban services, like electricity, changed the daily experience of the inhabitants of cities. It contributed to transform the relationship between dwellers and authorities, as Eric Verdeil reminds us in his article exploring the link between energy provision in the Arab region and the politicization of urban issues. Other changes affected the way urban dwellers live in the city too: increasing commuting served either by private transport services, individual cars, or (mostly) failing public transportation; the restructuration of the commercial distribution networks – supermarkets, shopping malls; the increased share of industrial products in the daily consumption and more generally the premises of mass-market consumption (Vignal, 2007), etc. These various examples remind us that cities in the Arab region did not wait the events of 2011 to undergo large-scale physical changes as well as important changes in their societies (Signoles, Sidi Boumedine, El Kadi, 1999; Boumaza, 2005; Souiah, 2005; Denis, Vignal, 2006; Ababsa, Dupret, Denis, 2012; Elshestway, 2004, 2008; Zaki, 2011).

In addition, Arab cities face nowadays the same challenges as other cities in the world among which financiarization, land speculation, increasing of social inequalities, urban fragmentation etc (Denis, 2011). International competition make them look more and more alike other emerging metropolises (Sassen, 2011; Beaugrand, Le Renard, Stadnicki, 2013), with high-end globalised landscapes next to informal and mostly impoverished neighborhoods. Confronted to social unrest, the choice the governments of the region could face could be between going on with “business as usual” and crony capitalism, or developing an urban agenda based on the general interest, social accountability, transparency, shared decisions with empowered local powers, private sector and civil society. However, as the real-estate-based economic model and the rentier entrepreneurial mentality are very much embedded in the urban economy of the Arab world, it seems very much likely it will require much effort and political will to shift away from the pursuing of old approaches. It is for instance *a priori* striking that neither the financial crisis nor the revolutions impacted negatively the construction industry and the real estate in the region. In Tunis or Cairo, high-end residential projects are indeed still attractive for investors bidding on the continuing growth of new peri-urban middle classes (Dahmani, 2013). The prospects for a new economic model creating new opportunities to invest in other sectors than the piling up of the housing stocks seem therefore remote (Schlumberger, Matzke, 2012). However, in the meantime, ordinary urban dwellers take advantage of the current period of confusion and expectation to revert to the self-organizing alternative strategies they long-developed to compensate the failures of the State. This is very visible for instance in the boom in informal construction that followed the 25-january revolution and the relaxation of the political and security order in Egypt (Sims, 2012), a phenomenon that Valérie Clerc describes for Damascus as well in her article for this special issue.

### *Arab Cities after the « Spring », the objectives of this special issue*

The revolts laid bare the depth of the social and territorial inequalities or social ruptures that developed in the different countries of the region – although with differences from one country to another – and in particular among as well as within their cities (Lipietz, Lopes de Souza, 2012). They reflected the exhaustion of development models mostly based on the capture of land rent by economic elites with close ties to the political leaders. They revealed in that sense the frustration of populations confronted with the disappointing results of so-called “national development policies” (economic, social, human, urban etc) promoted by governments over the years and their inability to tackle the territorial and urban dimensions of the new political challenges. Therefore, it is possible to posit that with the Arab Spring, it is also the legacy of the urban and territorial policies of the “ancien régimes” that was put under a new scrutiny. Interestingly however, a relative limited number of academic publications have been dedicated to the cities *per se* within the prolific literature on the Arab Spring onwards. This modesty in the literature is by itself a question addressed to the scholarship, as the cities were and still are at the very centre stage of the political contestation. It is as well, indeed, a reflection of the treatment of the urban question by the regimes themselves, and of the decades-long marginalization of those (academics, experts, activists) who would come up with alternative proposals. *A contrario*, we consider that analyzing the uprisings of the early 2010s in the Arab world through the lens of the urban dynamics allows room for understanding current complex and unfolding political and social processes of transition.

The origin of the special issue is the international colloquium “Revolts and Transitions in the Arab World: Towards a New Urban Agenda?” organized by the CEDEJ (Centre d’Etudes et de Documentation Economiques, Juridiques et Sociales) in Cairo, in November 2012<sup>1</sup>. The aim of this conference was to discuss the urban dimension of the political changes occurring in the Arab world, from the origins of the 2011 revolutionary episodes to the present experiences of transition towards political democratization, in a context of deep socio-economic crisis. The articles collected in this special issue are therefore based on a close follow-up of the practices, discourses and policies taking place in the urban realm in the countries of the Arab Spring (Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria) or affected at some degree by the revolutionary “wave” (Morocco, Jordan, Kuwait). The texts reflect in-depth analyses of strategic territories (informal areas, mega-projects), or reviews of urban policies (in a holistic perspective), or explore a precise sector (energy or housing). Many of them touch upon issues of governance, of participation, of the role of civil societies. Finally, some articles focus on specific cities or countries whereas some others have a more regional approach. Their authors, coming from all walks of academia or expertise (geographers, urban planners, sociologists, economists, and historians) all indicate that in Arab countries, the urban question is far from being peripheral to the political one.

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### ***The struggle in the city, the struggle for the city: city as a revolutionary site***

The articles of the special issue *Arab Cities after the "Spring"* analyze the cities of the region as "privileged sites for capturing and comprehending the social and historical nature of dissent expressed by struggles" (Allegra et alii, 2013). In the context of the "Arab Spring", they explore both the place and the role of the city as the site of the struggle but also as the stake of the struggle (Kanna, 2012). They indicate in the light of the uprisings that cities from the Arab region are disputed and "contested spaces" (Singerman, 2009).

In revolutionary times, the struggle in the city enacts physically the competition between different political and/or urban orders. The territories of the contestation are therefore contested territories as well. It was illustrated in the organization of the repression (from the regimes that remain in power or from transitional governments) in many occasions since 2011, in Egypt, in the Gulf, and dramatically in Syria. The objective of the repression here is to reinstate an exclusive political, physical and military order on the city. The Pearl Square in Manama (Bahrain), where demonstrators would meet up, was torn down and cordoned. Walls were erected in Cairo city centre to close streets and control access of Tahrir Square. Until now, checkpoints are set on each of the main roads of Damascus, and entire neighborhoods or small to medium cities are bombed and/or in rumbles. However, beyond the security issues that remain a crucial trigger for the intervention of the army or police in public spaces, the disputes and contests in the urban realm can also be mediated through the monarchy (a symbol and a system) as in Morocco, or through the necessity to achieve a new Constitution based on social and political compromises, as is the case for instance in Tunisia.

In her article, Valérie Clerc analyses the recent trends in urban planning in Damascus. New projects are on the table of the public authorities, based on former plans of urban renewal (i. e. demolition and reconstruction) of informal and peri-central neighborhoods of the city. When the uprising started, the plans were suspended for a short period, before being back on the agenda. In their new version, they aim specifically at the peri-central and peri-urban neighborhoods held by the opposition where most of the destructions take place. For Clerc, the planning options that are currently taken into consideration by the local authorities overlap with the military targets of the regime. They amount therefore to what she frames as an "urbanism of war".

In Libya, the article of Françoise Clément and Ahmed Salah shows another version of the new urban conflicts in the region. In this country, the long-term territorial impacts of the 2011 revolution are deep: the emergence of a confederation of semi-autonomous cities seems to challenge the model of a centralized Nation-State (Romanet Perroux, 2013). Locally, the militias confront the newly born associations of the civil society for the control and management of the cities.

The struggle for the city is obviously multifaceted. One of the dynamics of popular mobilizations, as showed by different articles in this issue, is the struggle to get the city back to its citizens, and in doing so the city is reinstated as a political stake. Therefore, the claim of the city as a space for contestation, political reframing, and elaboration of new prospects can be considered as one of the main outcomes of the Arab Spring (Lipietz, Lopes de Souza,

2012). Enrique Klaus, in his article documenting the graffiti that colonized the walls of Cairo since the very early days of the revolutionary movement, shows how this street art, until then unknown as such in Egypt, is “a prolongation of the revolt”. In the winter 2011, and with variations since according to the ups and downs of the political transition/repression, the strategic use of the “spots” by activists and artists for graffiti reflects both the geography of the revolt and a symbolic appropriation of the city. Graffiti plays as well the role of an alternative media and of a pictorial memory of the struggle exposed to the city dwellers. But because of the still ongoing process of political transition in Egypt, the graffiti can also be perceived as the permanent reenactment of the contestation through the gaze of the by-passer.

Covering the walls with graffiti is therefore part of a new claim of the city, coming from stakeholders previously excluded from the urban public space. It represents in itself a fundamental shift away from decades of tight control of a public space shaped by security agendas, economic interests, and the political monopoly claimed by the regimes in the region. Getting the city back is in that sense one of the most significant gains of the revolutionary movements, as suggested by Farah Al-Nakib in her article on the unprecedented demonstrations that took place in Kuwait city in 2011 on the centrally located Irada Square. In her writings, she equates the physical occupation of Irada Square to the repoliticization of a city centre that has been deprived of all its political attributes by very aggressive urban planning policies and the eviction of its inhabitants. She interprets the mobilization of the Kuwaitis in Irada square as a claim for social and spatial centrality, a physical enactment of “the right to the city” conceptualized by Henri Lefebvre – a right that Kuwaitis lost after the discovery of oil and the transformation of their capital into a « modern » city. The struggle in the city is here a struggle for the city.

### ***Urban policies and projects: change or continuity since 2011?***

This issue of *Built Environment* aims as well at reflecting on some of the challenges for urban development, policy and planning in the Arab World after the “Spring”. It questions the possible of elements of change in the urban policies and projects, the institutional settings or the governance of the urban and territorial issues. Such an exercise is of course perilous as the transitions are still taking place (in particular in Tunisia and Egypt) or as war is raging in Syria. However, here and there, the authorities have taken punctual initiatives in order to respond to social discontent. But more generally, the articles of this collection point to the absence of critical assessment of the legacy of previous policies. They indicate that a before/after approach is not always relevant to our understanding of the urban changes. And in some cases, the papers reveal important elements of continuity over the recent.

The chronology of change in urban policies is uneven from one country to another. For instance, the Tunisian revolution and the fall of the hyper-centralized Ben Ali regime gave way to a rapid political consensus on the inscription of decentralization and empowerment of local powers in the future Constitution. On the contrary, the Egyptian transition so far shows an obvious inertia from both army and the majority of political parties to implement a new framework promoting decentralization. In addition, there is a striking continuity between

Hosni Mubarak and Mohamed Morsi<sup>2</sup> administrations regarding the « politics of neglect » (Dorman, 2007) vis-à-vis informal urbanization (Stadnicki, 2014). And not much innovation took place in terms of policy: the policy of social housing launched by the Muslim brotherhood's Secretary of State Tarek Wafiq was actually initiated under the last government of Hosni Mubarak. As were Morsi administration proposals for territorial development (e.g. the massive development of the Suez Canal region), essentially revamped from the plans of the Master Plan "Cairo 2050" of the Mubarak regime. Alternative political visions were never on the agenda, and even the laws on decentralization, much talked-about over the last ten years, could not see the light. Pierre-Arnaud Barthel and Leïla Vignal, in their article on the mega-projects in the Mediterranean Arab world, indicate that the most corrupted businessmen were arrested, the most controversial projects were cancelled or suspended, or that in Morocco instructions were given by the King to pay more attention to the social content of others. However, they show that neither the drawback of some of the big investors and developers from the Arab Gulf since the financial crisis of 2008, nor the voices of activists, urban experts, or the local mobilization of the populations led so far to a dramatic inflexion in the urban policy. The model of urban development based on mega-projects projects (Barthel, 2010 ; Dorman, 2013) is not superseded yet, although in some cases a more integrative methodology is being experienced on several key projects, for instance in Tunisia (Sfax-Taparura, Lake of Tunis), or in Morocco where proposals to "integrate" the informal areas nearby the Bou Regreg project are tabled.

Elements of continuity and rupture are both present in Morocco. In her article on the legacy of urban policies in Morocco, Pascale Philifert comes back on the limits of the last decade of economic and political reforms as exposed by the "February 20<sup>th</sup> Movement". She shows that since November 2011, the newly elected islamist-led government has not changed rapidly the top-down approaches that dominate urban action. The inability of the policies to reach beyond the physical development/regeneration aspects is still there, as well as way assessments of projects are conducted (e.g. the "*Cities without slums*" program launched in 2004 and evaluated with both positive and negative impacts by O. Toutain in Barthel, Jaglin, 2013) focusing merely on quantitative results that on their ability to meet social demand. But positive signs indicate evolutions in governance reforms, like the new "politique de la ville" (which aims at creating better convergence between sectorial policies in cities), the "régionalisation avancée" (aiming the empowerment of elected regional councils) and the new "plans communaux de développement", i.e. strategy, action and financial plans that municipalities have to set up to channel in funding. The complexity of the task is obvious. In his article on the place of territorial and urban reform questions in the political manifestos of the new parties of post-Spring Tunisia, Sami Y. Turki underlines the cultural, political and technical obstacles that such inclusion requires, although issues of unequal territorial development have very much been at the forefront of the revolution, the demands of the population, and the medias. There is also discrepancy between the chronology of reform and the rhythm of political transition. Regarding decentralization for instance, once the Constitution implemented, it will take several years to promulgate the laws and decrees to

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<sup>2</sup> Mohamed Morsi was elected end of June 2012 and destituted the 3rd of July 2013 following a military *coup* that was supported by the majority of the Egyptian population.

enforce the laws that will regulate the new competences of the local powers, their financing, the training of the elective representatives, the creation of “territorial” civil servants, etc. For such reforms, the time for change is long.

In Egypt, one year of Muslim Brotherhood administration constitute a short period to evaluate the results of a political domain – urbanism and territorial planning – that never reached the top of the list of priorities of the first democratically elected government of the post-Mubarak era. Twelve months have been enough however to coalesce both the urban population and the community of experts (architects, planners, NGOs) against the Morsi administration. They denounce the fact that the new administration did not show any political will to redirect the urban/territorial policy of the Mubarak era and address urban challenges. Faced by the repression of the army since august 2013, the Muslim Brotherhood seeks to re-root itself in the impoverished urban peripheries in which it worked clandestinely for decades on and built up political legitimacy as well strong networks and territorial control. However, it is precisely from these neighborhoods that rejection is the strongest, as if disillusion is proportional to the hopes raised by the election of Mohamed Morsi in June 2012.

### *The urban as a cause*

The output of post-revolution transformations is yet not so much a shift away from former urban politics than the shaping of other dialectics between political change and urbanization. Eric Verdeil analyzes for instance in his text the fact that the urbanization of certain issues (in this case, energy provision) leads to their politicization through the implementation of new material and social settings. In that sense, the energy transition that took place over the last twenty years in Jordan and Tunisia led to a reordering of the social and spatial urban orders and provided for the political empowerment of new actors, among which the dwellers and all the range of non-institutional actors.

More generally, this special issue reflects the importance of the place taken by urban issues and urbanism in general in the debates of the civil society from 2011 onwards. The article of Sami Y. Turki indicates how central is the territorial question in the post-Spring political debates in Tunisia, and how these debates allowed new categories of actors to intervene in the public scene, and in particular the ambiguous emerging category of the ‘experts’. In Kuwait, Farah Al Nakib articulates the rediscovery of the centrality of the city by demonstrators in Irada square and the politicization of the city to the activism of a group of young architects, Arabana.

This phenomenon of *urban activism* is part of a more global social movement based on critical urban theories, inspired for instance by the work of Henri Lefebvre (Busquet 2013) and its “right to the city”. However, in Egypt, as well as in Tunisia, Lebanon, or Palestine, this *urban activism* or « street activism » (El-Naggar, 2012) considers that revolution is also an urban process and has to be pursued in the city and through the planning of the city (Bayat, 2013; Stadnicki, 2013). Elsewhere local organizations mushroomed too since the 2000s. It is for instance the NGO Bimkom, based in Jerusalem, which aims to counter Israeli planning policy; or the Turkish IMECE movement, which supports Istanbul inhabitants’



demonstrations against major controversial urban projects such as the ones that the events of Taksim Square put into the forefront of the medias (Montabone, 2013). In Tunisia, the first « Assises pour le droit au logement » (Meeting for the right to housing) were organized in 2013 by the association Doustourna. Doustourna (*our constitution*, in Arabic) had also taken part in the elaboration of a constitutional draft, back in august 2011, in which the « Right to housing » was introduced.

***Conclusion: Focusing on the temporalities of change***

Arab urban societies are marred by major dysfunctions, fruit of decades of political negligence. Issues of governance and democracy are increasingly part of the urban question, and urbanization should put the city back on the political agenda of the post-“Arab Spring” era. The mobilizations of the “Spring” are a reminder of the political centrality of the urban in the societies of the Arab world. Through their struggle, the demonstrators as well as the activists involved in urban issues brought back politics in the city. They challenged and competed with the established political and urban order. In that sense, the “Arab Spring” can be read as an urban revolution too. In the coming years, the redefinition of urban policies oriented towards the needs of the cities’ inhabitants and including their voices will be or may be undertaken in Tunisia. For Egypt, the perspective of a shift in the priorities of public policies and of a change in the rentier economic model is still uncertain. Inertia and economic interests are difficult to dislodge.

Temporalities of change reflect gaps and iterations. They are not gradual, nor do they have a teleological orientation. They face resistances, drawbacks, and uncertainties. In-depths reshuffling of the hierarchy of powers, shifts of the mindset of the decision-makers, and transformation of the administrative and political bodies to embrace new solutions are all long-term processes of change.

In that perspective, the Arab Spring could be the trigger for a profound rethinking of urban studies of the Middle East. One of the lessons of the Arab Spring is possibly that the old bottles of neo-orientalists approaches that look at the cities of the arab-islamic area through their ‘cultural’ specificities should definitely be stored on the shelves of history (Allegra et alii, 2013). Another one is to frame urban studies in the Arab world within a more global analytical and conceptual framework, as well as building more comparative approaches to discuss the region and its cities. Finally, this special issue indicates that after decades of tight control, the urban question is back in full force as an issue for mobilization, a tool for political empowerment, and an issue of and for democracy, even if uncertainties remain. It is a central question for the inhabitants of the cities, and constructed by the civil society as a cause. Could that be the symptom of the development of new ways to articulate urban identities and belongings in the Arab world? What we see is new and alternative forms of urban citizenship emerging from everywhere: from the organizations of civil society in the cities of Libya, to Jordan and Tunisia where access to services give new instruments for action to the urban dwellers, to take only two examples of this special issue. One could also reflect on the local councils organized mostly by civilians in the opposition-held areas of Syria (Kachee, 2013; Vignal, 2014).

This collection of articles is part of the effort to draw new perspectives: social mobilizations, governance issues, design of new policies and projects, new guidelines defined by the decision makers, all of these will be materials to analyze. Collaborations through alternative platforms accompany these new discussions. Two of the contributors, Farah al-Nakib and Eric Verdeil, participated to the launch in the fall of 2013 of the « cities » page of *Jadaliyya*, a leading website of critical information and debates on and in the Arab world. The launch of this page is a stepping-stone of the much needed « de-westernization of urban studies » (Choplin, 2013). It is a welcomed indication that the revolutions of the Arab peoples have also an impact on the intellectual and academic *milieu*.

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