



**HAL**  
open science

# An Urban Revolution in Egypt?

Roman Stadnicki

► **To cite this version:**

Roman Stadnicki. An Urban Revolution in Egypt?. Egypt's Revolutions Politics, Religion, and Social Movements, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, 9781137563200. 10.1007/978-1-137-56322-4\_13. halshs-01235419

**HAL Id: halshs-01235419**

**<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-01235419>**

Submitted on 2 May 2022

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

## **Chapter Twelve**

### **An Urban Revolution in Egypt?**

**Roman Stadnicki**

The “formal city,” the areas of cities designed and planned by public services, has been partially obstructed since 2011. The revolution appears to have put an end to the urban projects that had been negotiated between the highest offices of state and an oligarchy of businessmen controlling real estate. This was the case, for instance, of the “Greater Cairo 2050” plan from the Mubarak era, which had been created in the spirit of international competition and the conquest of the desert. In addition to the postponement of major projects before President Sisi came to power, every institution involved in their development became lethargic, including those responsible for planning, who were threatened with lay-offs, local authorities who did not get involved, as well as public and private real estate developers paralyzed by their financial difficulties. The army still closes access to city centers—where protesters assemble—by building walls, verifying the identities of pedestrians and drivers, and impeding road maintenance.

The “informal city,” the unregulated urban sector, has continued to grow, however. In certain areas, real estate speculation has never been so intense. This can be seen in the increased elevation of existing buildings and in new individual home construction. Builders and investors admit having benefited from the fall of the Mubarak regime to more easily bypass

planning regulations. The informal economy was less severely impacted by the crisis and has provided the activity needed to sustain “subaltern urbanism” in these areas.<sup>1</sup>

After a detailed report on the current activities in these two urban groups, formal or informal, this chapter focuses on the potential for re-launching Egyptian urbanism. The emergence of new debating zones, both physical and virtual, the proliferation of urban activists from a civil society in the process of being rebuilt, and efforts made by universities to change their architecture curricula, are catalysts for new initiatives within a context of political turmoil.

### **Inertia, Postponement and Obstruction: A Threefold Crisis in Egyptian Cities**

#### *Urbanization Neglected by Politicians*

The period between 2011 and 2013 was a period of complete inertia in decision-making in Egyptian urban design. Although improved urban living conditions were among the demands of the Tahrir Square demonstrators, they remained a secondary concern during the parliamentary and presidential elections in 2011 and 2012.<sup>2</sup> No real references were made to a general urban policy during the political campaigns, as most presidential candidates aligned themselves with demagogic rhetoric surrounding consensual values, such as protecting the environment, universal access to public services, and the eradication of urban poverty, without suggesting any changes in the urban development model created under Mubarak.

---

<sup>1</sup> Ananya Roy, 2011, “Slumdog Cities: Rethinking Subaltern Urbanization,” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, vol. 35, no. 2: 223–238.

<sup>2</sup> Dana Kardoush and Meredith Hutchinson, 2012, “The Lens of Land,” *Cairofrombelow*. Available at <http://cairofrombelow.org/2012/07/07/the-lens-of-land-egypt/> (accessed February 1, 2015).

However, they all agreed to criticize conflicts of interest, corruption, and the *laissez-faire* atmosphere that dominated urban spaces prior to the revolution. Predictably, Ahmed Shafiq, the former regime candidate and Mohamed Morsi's opponent in the second round of the elections, remained even more discreet on this subject after being implicated in money laundering and corruption.<sup>3</sup>

Mohamed Morsi multiplied his electoral promises before being elected,<sup>4</sup> including promises to reduce traffic, construct a million subsidized housing units, and organize local elections. The promise of local elections was postponed indefinitely, which many observers saw as the Muslim Brotherhood's first betrayal of their democratic commitment. In a politico-administrative system in which municipal institutions are non-existent and the local administration is overseen by the central government,<sup>5</sup> local elections would have given political status to local governance, something that Mubarak had always declined to do. As discontent was rising in public opinion in 2012, the MB saw a growing risk of dispersing its local voter bases.

---

<sup>3</sup> Shafiq was specifically incriminated in the sales of state land, below market price, to private actors. He was also implicated in the construction of shopping centers in the Cairo and Sharm el-Sheikh airports. These have never generated any revenue.

<sup>4</sup>In the Freedom and Justice Party electoral program for the parliamentary elections of 2011, urban development appeared as the third priority in the chapter "integrated development," after human and economic development: <http://fr.scribd.com/doc/73955131/FJP-Program-En> (accessed February 1, 2015).

<sup>5</sup> Sara Ben Néfissa, 2011, *La vie politique locale: les mahalliyyât et le refus du politique*, in Vincent Battesti and François Ireton, *L'Égypte au présent: inventaire d'une société avant révolution*, Arles: Sindbad/Actes-Sud, pp. 343-366.

The financing of subsidized government housing also appeared to be a source of problems for the government. Tariq Wafiq, Minister of Housing and Urban Communities until Morsi's overthrow in July 2013, admitted this in a televised interview three months earlier:

The problem is that a large part of the funds that the state disburses to support the subsidized units never reaches the beneficiaries (...). I hope that we will have the necessary public funds to build 140,000 housing units the first year, 175,000 the next year, and so on. This year, we will not be able to build 140,000 units, but we will build 1,000 as a trial run. This policy is important for us. However, in the years to come, I would have preferred financing policies proposed by the citizens themselves, who would pay in advance and in installments to become the owner of their homes.<sup>6</sup>

Shortly after his election, Morsi had promised to have 1,000,000 new housing units built within 5 years in 22 cities in the country for the working-class population. But it can be argued that these promises were principally aimed at placating the more modest social strata in preparation for future elections. This program, in truth, was only a copy of the National Housing Program launched by Mubarak in 2005 and seemed unrealistic even if revised downwards.<sup>7</sup> The significant number of vacant housing units (estimated at 30 to 40 percent in Cairo) shows that the emergency lies less in building new units than in regulating the entire housing sector and perhaps regulating real estate speculation. Further, this vast social housing policy scarcely seemed to involve private developers and builders. As a consequence, they still only answer the demand from higher social groups, a segment that offers higher profit

---

<sup>6</sup> See the full interview published on the *Carnets du CEDEJ* website:

<http://egrev.hypotheses.org/713>

<sup>7</sup> Yahia Shawkat, 2014, "Mubarak's Promise. Social justice and the National Housing Programme: affordable homes or political gain?" *Egypte Monde Arabe*, vol. 3, no. 11.

margins.<sup>8</sup> Finally, this policy did not associate a plan for transportation infrastructure. In fact, the construction of new social housing projects on vacant lands belonging to the state or army on the outskirts of urban areas has isolated populations that cannot afford cars or public transportation.<sup>9</sup>

The improvement of traffic conditions in the major cities is another of Morsi's electoral promises that was not kept. Twenty percent of the bus drivers working for the public Cairo Transport Authority went on strike in late 2012 to obtain salary increases and better recognition of their work by the Minister of Transport. On a number of occasions in 2012 and 2013, service stations throughout the country were unable to meet demand, as rumors of a sudden gas price hike due to the threat of an end to costly subsidies of basic commodities created panic and widespread shortages. At the same time, automobile accidents allegedly caused more fatalities than the confrontations that have taken place since the revolution.<sup>10</sup> Private minibuses compete against public services, while also remedying their shortcomings;

---

<sup>8</sup> The private sector seems capable of investing in social housing on land purchased cheaply from the state. This has been observed in the Haram City experiment, in the new district of October 6, and developed by Orascom. The architectural quality of the Haram City housing has been recognized by the inhabitants, although the project is not yet complete. There has been criticism of the small surface of the apartments and their isolation from commerce and employment, however. (Omnia Khalil, 2012, *Egyptian Urban Action*, short movie screened at the Awan Contemporary Art Space, Cairo).

<sup>9</sup> Public transportation costs skyrocketed in 2012 and 2013, along with rising natural gas and gasoline prices.

<sup>10</sup> Mohammed Elshahed, 2012, "Road Rage," *The Cairo Review of Global Affairs* no. 6, pp. 30-31.

they are also frequently involved in accidents because drivers take risks to save a few minutes on their routes.

In every one of the key urban sectors—housing, transportation, and local democracy—institutional inertia appears to have dominated during the Morsi era. However, the multiplication of announcement effects revealed the importance of urban areas in the discourse of the MB, albeit belatedly.

*Political and Economic Actors in Suspense and... in Conflict*

Beyond government inertia with regard to urban policy, most public and private actors involved in urban development in Egypt are experiencing backlash after the political turmoil.

The projects of the General Office for Physical Planning (GOPP), the government agency in charge of land-use planning, seem to have been suspended since Mubarak's fall from power. Gamal Mubarak, the son of the ousted president, had envisioned the master plan of "Greater Cairo 2050," promoting urban renovation. The purpose was to increase the city's competitive edge at the global level, but many members of the governments in power since 2011 have disparaged a project that has not yet had any visible effect. This strategic document was also partially replaced by a new planning document entitled "Egypt 2052" whose goal, according to Tariq Wafiq, former housing minister, was to decentralize government aid to the territory in favor of secondary cities neglected by the previous regime.<sup>11</sup> A former executive of the

---

<sup>11</sup> In a televised interview (see above), the former minister said: "This centralization promotes the emergency demands, as all work opportunities are in Cairo. So this is the result of a high level of demand in a small space, with limited economic perspectives creating a price increase."

GOPP who resigned expressed his regret, however, that the government had never really adopted this new planning document and that dialog between the GOPP and its relevant ministries was prematurely broken off. As a result, most of the institution's managers left between 2012 and 2013, often after being headhunted by international organizations. The former GOPP Director, Mustafa Madbouly, had worked for UN-Habitat, for some time before becoming Minister of Housing in March 2014, while former GOPP number two was leaving for the GIZ (German international cooperation agency).<sup>12</sup>

The major economic crisis that Egypt is currently experiencing impacts the construction sector. The 25 percent fall profits declared in 2011 by Arab Contractors,<sup>13</sup> the leading public construction and real estate development firm, was a symptom of the difficulties the sector faced in the wake of the revolution. The other major Egyptian real estate groups, such as Sodic, Ehaf, Bahgat Group, Orascom,<sup>14</sup> have also faced extensive delays in the completion of

---

<sup>12</sup> In early 2012, UN-Habitat in Egypt created the Development Partner Group on Urban Development, aiming to bring together political, economic and others actor to redefine urban development strategies and the focus of international aid in this field. The GOPP is the only institution not to attend the meetings held in 2012 and 2013, proving once again that it faced major management difficulties.

<sup>13</sup> Oxford Business Group, 2012, *The Report: Egypt 2012*, OBG: Oxford.

<sup>14</sup> According to Mena, the Egyptian Press Agency, the President of Orascom Construction Industries (OCI), holding one of the greatest Egyptian fortunes, left the country in the spring of 2013. The MB, who were then in power, opened an investigation against him for suspected tax evasion. He was thought to have embezzled 14 billion Egyptian Pounds when he sold Orascom Building, a subsidiary of OCI, to the French group Lafarge. The company president returned to Egypt after Morsi was ousted in July 2013.



real estate projects, including the new Westown and Eastown districts located in the new towns of October 6 City and New Cairo. While certain villas in Westown were delivered in 2012, the first stones of Eastown had not yet been laid as of 2014. These disappointing results raise questions about the ability of Sodic, the planner of the two districts, to reach the middle classes and to offer sustainable urban development projects, the two core goals of the projects.<sup>15</sup>

This climate of political and economic strife heightens latent or existing conflicts between the various actors in urban planning and real estate. Thus, real estate developer Sodic blamed the New Urban Community Authority (NUCA)—a state institution responsible for managing new towns in Egypt<sup>16</sup> – for failing to initiate required infrastructure for the construction sites in due time. On the other hand, NUCA blames the army for not beginning to clear mines in this northeastern suburb of Cairo. This is a clear illustration that conflicts between private operators and public powers and between public powers and the army have not diminished in the post-Mubarak era. It also indicates the important territorial dimension of these conflicts and the complexity of allocating roles between the institutions. Relationships between the private sector and the government even appear to have deteriorated under Morsi. Economic actors as well as the Islamist president’s political opponents were highly critical of the government’s lack of action. Orascom executives publicly criticized inadequate public-

---

<sup>15</sup> Pierre-Arnaud Barthel, “Premiers quartiers urbains ‘durables’ dans les pays arabes: enseignements sur une génération spontanée,” *Espaces et Sociétés*, no. 147, 2011: 99-115.

<sup>16</sup> Among the public agencies in charge of urban planning, NUCA has probably been the most absent from the public debate since the revolution. Its legitimacy was more strongly opposed than ever, including by members of the MB, who held the new city policy launched in the 1970s responsible for the failure of urban planning over the past decades.

private partnerships (PPP). State investment in PPPs has diminished since the revolution due to a lack of financing. In addition to partnerships, some private actors are expecting substantial financial aid from the government, without which they could face bankruptcy.<sup>17</sup>

The Morsi government, by asserting its determination to eradicate corruption, openly criticized certain real estate developers (among them the Talat Mustapha Group) concerning land situated in New Cairo (to the northwest) that was intended to be part of the new Madinaty district. Developers were accused of acquiring state lands by circumventing the 1998 law on the public bidding process. These legal maneuverings were common in the past according to the Minister of Housing, who responded by challenging the 1998 law and re-establishing direct sales of state lands without going through the auction system.<sup>18</sup> The minister preferred to set the prices of land to be developed by investors. In February 2013, he thus blamed the auction system for soaring land prices that, coupled with a steep rise in price

---

<sup>17</sup> Osama Bishai, the director of management at Orascom Construction Industries, has declared, “If no immediate action is taken by the government right now to initiate new projects, a major slowdown will be felt (...) in the Egyptian construction sector” (Oxford Business Group, 2012, op. cit.).

<sup>18</sup> This decision was nevertheless strongly criticized by the opposition for involving private—and therefore non-transparent—arrangements that would not give all developers an equal chance. Khaled Ali, former presidential candidate, believes that this decision would only contribute to an increase in pre-existing corrupt practices. Bassem Abo Alabass, “Housing ministry calls for reinstatement of controversial land law,” *Al Ahram online*, 2012.

of construction materials,<sup>19</sup> increased the sense of crisis among real estate developers. The replacement of their contacts at the head of the state and the complexity of relations between them necessitated a change of strategy.<sup>20</sup>

### *Militarization and Shutdown of the Urban Space*

Cairo, like other large Egyptian cities, now bears many signs of heavy military presence and of street battles between law enforcement forces and revolutionary youth. This rivalry is a constant in city centers and has contributed to the generalized immobilization of Egyptian cities, both at the institutional and physical level.

Since the fall of Mubarak, the army has occupied the central areas of Cairo to the point of establishing a policy genuinely aimed at controlling and shutting down the city. To prevent rallies, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces attempted to block off access to Tahrir Square. They ordered stone walls to be built and reinforced with barbed wire on most of the roads leading to this symbol of the revolution and approaching the nearby Ministry of the

---

<sup>19</sup> The price of steel rose by 5.6% between 2011 and 2012, and the price of cement by 6.6 percent (Oxford Business Group, 2012, *op. cit.*).

<sup>20</sup> In an interview with the author, an executive of the construction company Ehaf acknowledged that the company was going through a peculiar period during which it had to rethink the totality of its modes of action, since “the incarceration of 90% of its official clients and former contacts.”

Interior.<sup>21</sup> The militarization of downtown Cairo has given the Egyptian capital a war-zone feel and had two major consequences on the practices and representations of space.

First, the walls in the city center (the number of which have varied between four and ten since November 2011), have forced pedestrians and drivers to modify their routes. This phenomenon was reflected in extremely heavy traffic jams on the Corniche and in the Abdine district, the only two possible passages around Tahrir Square that allow crossing from one bank of the Nile to the other. Although Tahrir is not as central as it once was, due to the removal of cultural institutions and economic activities towards the suburbs, it remains a major intersection of the capital's traffic routes. Forbidding access to the Square therefore creates gridlocks in the adjacent central areas because they cannot absorb all the urban flow.

Second, this strategy of closing off areas is contrary to the function of open forum and place for human interchange such as that performed by Tahrir Square during the revolution.

Through this strategy the army was able to destroy its first symbol, in a matter of a few months. The romantic idea of the square conveyed by the “Arab Spring” had also been tarnished by “thugs” (*baltagi*) and others, such as drug dealers, who took advantage of the military repression of protesters to settle there before being chased away by the police in the summer of 2012.

In 2013, the construction of a new series of stone walls around the US and British embassies blocked access routes to the Garden City district and to Tahrir Square, displacing the clashes to new areas. This is how the Corniche, running the length of the Semiramis and Shepheard hotels, became occupied in March 2013 by gangs of young troublemakers. There were daily fights, either with the police or among themselves, using cobblestones and teargas, causing

---

<sup>21</sup> CEDEJ, “Murs,” in *Les Carnets du CEDEJ*, 2013. <http://egrev.hypotheses.org/755>

(accessed February 1, 2015)

significant damage, both human and material, including roads, shops, and hotels. The appearance of new battle sites in Cairo, Port Said, Tanta, Ismailia, among others, as well as of a new category of delinquents composed of “Ultras,” anarchists (Black Blocs), or simply “rebels without a cause” broadened the perspective of urban struggle in Egypt.

In August 2013, the army increased its presence in towns by again imposing a curfew and a state of emergency after evacuating the two squares in Cairo, Rabia al-Adawiya in Nasr City and Nahda in Giza, occupied by the MB since Morsi was ousted in July 3, 2013. The presence of rock blocks on the main arteries and the limitation of mainline and subway trains hampered the mobility of the people of Cairo in general and Morsi's supporters in particular. Such excessive security measures also prevented those who lived in provinces traditionally supportive of the MB, such as Fayoum, Upper Egypt, and the Alexandria Governorate, from joining Islamist demonstrations, which were running out of steam.<sup>22</sup>

### **A New Momentum for Informal Urbanization?**

#### *Informal Housing in Egypt: An Exception Becoming the Norm*

Informal neighborhoods, locally known as ‘*achwa’iyyat*, are the main forms of urbanization in Egypt. In Cairo, these neighborhoods house 63 percent of the inhabitants in 17 percent of the urbanized area and are reported to have absorbed 78 percent of the demographic growth between 1996 and 2006.<sup>23</sup> Their population is heterogeneous and not necessarily destitute. The constructions, which are built of brick, are very remote from the morphology of slums.

---

<sup>22</sup> See the chapter by Bernard Rougier and Hala Bayoumi in this book.

<sup>23</sup> David Sims, *Understanding Cairo. The Logic of a City without Control*, Cairo/New York: The American University in Cairo Press, 2010.

Access is reinforced by an extremely efficient informal public transportation system of carriages, motor tricycles, and pick-up trucks. Real estate speculation and trading is highly dynamic in these areas and a real contribution to the urban economy.<sup>24</sup>

For this reason, the *'achwa'iyya* should not be seen as proof of a generalized housing crisis, but rather as a response from the working classes, and sometimes even the middle classes, to “policies of neglect”<sup>25</sup> that have dominated since the 1970s. More broadly, the development of the informal housing sector is closely tied to the authoritarian nature of the political regime,<sup>26</sup> in which urban inequalities are predominantly the product of clientelistic and segregative practices *vis-à-vis* the working classes. Mubarak’s government was so focused on

---

<sup>24</sup> As Eric Denis has argued, “in this mix, we can find the active concentrations of sub-standard housing, which in many ways, hold considerable promise of promotion. We can also find the precarious convergence of nearly impossible social mobility and survival as a day-by-day concern. All nuances are possible.” See Eric Denis, “Le Caire: aspects sociaux de l’étalement urbain,” *Egypte Monde Arabe*, no. 23, 1995: 77-130. Y. Elsheshtawy took this idea further when he wrote about cities throughout the Arab world: “Informal urbanization enriches the lives of city inhabitants and in many ways strengthens cities’ livability,” Tasser Elsheshtawy, “Introductory Article: The Informal Turn,” in *Informal Urbanization – special issue, Built Environment*, vol. 37, no. 1, 2011.

<sup>25</sup> Judson W. Dorman, *The Politics of Neglect*, PhD Thesis, London, SOAS, 2007.

<sup>26</sup> Asef Bayat, “Un-Civil Society: The Politics of the Informal People,” *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 18, no. 1, 1997: 53-72.

building new towns in the desert,<sup>27</sup> meant to relieve congestion in the capital, that it failed to control the urbanization of private farming plots on the outskirts of Cairo. This phenomenon was connected to the mass migration both from the Suez Canal zone after the 1967 war and from Upper Egypt and secondary towns in the Delta. Government action consisted, at best, in *ex post* provision of basic services (electrical and water) to certain neighborhoods, and at worst, in “erasing” or destroying existing installations, arguing that they stood in the way of planned transportation infrastructure such as bypasses and urban highways, or referring to health risks and natural hazards.<sup>28</sup>

#### *Acceleration of Informal Urbanization since the Revolution*

In parallel with the institutional, economic, and physical obstructions that affected the “official” city, informal urbanization appears to have intensified since 2011. Some residents took advantage of diminished political control following the revolution and developed new skills in the construction, trade, and transportation sectors.<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>27</sup> The planning of new towns in Egypt still continues. One proof is the construction of New Fayoum in the Fayoum Governorate, which hopes to create a new economic and residential center in the region but operates at only 25 percent of capacity.

<sup>28</sup> In particular since the 1992 earthquake alerted public opinion to the fragility of construction in non-regulated districts.

<sup>29</sup> In Cairo, the increase in the number of minivans that do not pay taxes on transportation of people as well as the multiplication of street vendors since the revolution are not restricted to the informal districts (*‘achwa’iyya*). There has been a notable propagation of informal economic activity in the cities, and particularly in the downtown area around Tahrir Square, paradoxically in those areas controlled by the army (a rise in number of street peddlers,

There is very little data on the expansion of informal districts.<sup>30</sup> Horizontal and vertical expansion has nevertheless been considerable, with the acceleration of the three principal patterns of informal urbanization in Egypt: the extension of existing constructions (additions or raising of legal or illegal constructions), illegal *ex nihilo* constructions and collective occupation (squatting) of land and/or empty buildings.

Using an in-depth study as an example, Gezirat Mohamed in Giza, David Sims has used superimposed aerial photographs to show that annual new construction was 4.5 times higher in 2011 and 2012 than between 2003 and 2011.<sup>31</sup> Most involve horizontal extensions and additions on the outskirts of a neighborhood built by the inhabitants. However, the raising of existing buildings is less visible in aerial photography. Surveys in one Cairo district (Khosous, Qalyubiya Governorate) in the northern peri-urban areas that underwent unbridled

---

reappearance of tuk tuks (motor tricycles) despite the ban on them within the Cairo Governorate, etc.). People are speaking out against evicting them, particularly within the Cairo Governorate. In the past, this process had significant consequences: “The old method of chasing them and confiscating their goods had catastrophic consequences, because they buy their goods on credit and have to pay back the big traders. But they need to be organized, especially in busy streets where they disrupt the traffic.” Interview with Khaled Mostafa, spokesperson for the Cairo Governorate in *The Egyptian Gazette*, February 12 2012). Evictions have increased since al-Sisi’s election in 2014.

<sup>30</sup> The Ministry of Agriculture published information in the press (*Al-Ahram*, March 6, 2013) indicating that since the revolution, 29,486 *feddans* (equivalent to about 118,000 km<sup>2</sup>) of farmland have been built on without permits.

<sup>31</sup> David Sims, 2013, “Trends in Informal Areas Development since January 2011,” paper given at the *Egypt Urban Future* colloquium, CEDEJ/GIZ/UN-Habitat, Cairo, unpublished.



growth since the 1990s, have revealed that on the scale of a single block, buildings have been raised by an average of three stories since 2011. The new floors are not systematically occupied, but they represent the consequence of intense real estate speculation that developed during the previous decade in a climate of collusion between investors and local officials, and that affects every single Cairo district.

Furthermore, the number of new individual constructions on land that had not yet been built on has also increased significantly, according to the data provided by the Alexandria Governorate. The administration in fact identified 9,497 units constructed without building permits between January 1, 2011 and June 30, 2012, as compared to 12,356 between January 1, 2006 and December 30, 2010, revealing an annual rate more than doubled after the revolution. The decrease in policing in developing urban areas, and the safe-haven status offered by the informal economy, and even more by the real estate market, as the economic crisis hits the country with full force,<sup>32</sup> are the two most likely explanations for this growth.<sup>33</sup>

Lastly, the collective occupation of empty land and buildings is more difficult to assess but also appears to have increased, as have the crackdowns they are subjected to. The media have

---

<sup>32</sup> It is important to recall that the global economic crisis increased the importance of the informal economy, as jobs are axed in other activity sectors. See Jean-Pierre Cling, Stéphane Lagrée, Mireille Razafindrakoto, and François Roubaud, *L'économie informelle dans les pays en développement*, Paris: AFD, 2012.

<sup>33</sup> “The owner building an informal individual construction, who has never depended on the state, always avoiding the bureaucracy and relying more on interpersonal and micro-local relationships, does not seem to feel a sense of risk.” See David Sims, 2012, “Un nouvel espoir pour les quartiers informels du Caire, à la suite de la révolution de janvier?” *Villes en développement, Bulletin du Partenariat Français pour la Ville et les Territoires*, no. 91: 3-4).

widely covered the conflicts that opposed the residents of Qorsaya, an island in the center of Cairo, and the police in 2012 and 2013, with the army enforcing its property rights on those lands. On this basis, the army has regularly carried out evictions since 2012, leading to a number of casualties among residents, while the military tribunal sentenced twelve residents to prison in February 2013. Similarly, squats of empty buildings have increased, notably in the new town of October 6 City, where housing left unoccupied is common. In this case, too, crackdowns are immediate and violent. These events have been covered by the media and were considered by most citizens to be an extreme form of social and territorial injustice that became catalysts supporting initiatives for housing rights.

### **The Opening of the Debate, and the Rise of Urban Activism**

Cairo residents have never been more mobilized than between 2011 and 2014 to compensate for the deficiencies of the public sector, particularly in unregulated districts, from which state agents have almost completely disappeared since the revolution. People's committees first formed as a means of guaranteeing order and security after the departure of the police forces in January 2011. Later, in many informal districts, committees broadened their activities to respond to residents' needs, including waste collection, traffic organization, conflict mediation, health, and infrastructure repairs.<sup>34</sup> In some cases, the committees were able to pool resources, as in Ard al-Liwa and Ezbet Kheirallah, to obtain the right to occupy lands abandoned by investors to develop collective facilities, such as dispensaries and access roads to the Cairo bypass, opening-up the neighborhood.

---

<sup>34</sup> Idem.

Residents thus benefit from new means of action and lobbying the government for greater recognition of their rights. Members of civil society, such as activists and academics, whose public speeches have multiplied over the past months, are also helping.<sup>35</sup> A typology of the different organizations, which grew out of or became more visible after the revolution, can be established: “traditional” development organizations such as NGOs, focusing on improving social services and housing and street maintenance (*Resala*, *Habitat for Humanity*, *Misr al ghayr*, etc.); human rights organizations that combat evictions, compulsory relocation, corruption, and illegal leases (*Egyptian Center for Economic and Social Rights*, *Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights*, *Housing and Land Rights Network*, *Amnesty International*, etc.); and, more recently, organizations focused on urban issues and the development of alternatives to official urban planning.<sup>36</sup> For example, eight organizations have combined to develop a project for a “Habitation Constitution” that they then submitted to the “Committee of 50”, which claimed to have taken it into account in drafting the new Egyptian Constitution

---

<sup>35</sup> There currently appear to be over 100 recognized organizations in Cairo dealing with the city from all perspectives; there were only 20 after the revolution. Galilia El Kadi, “Le patrimoine à l’épreuve de la révolution,” paper given at the seminar, *Sociétés civiles et gouvernance en situation transitionnelle: Egypte, Tunisie*, STDF/IRD, Cairo, unpublished, 2012.

<sup>36</sup> Nevertheless, a trend has pulled these different organizations closer together. They have also benefitted from strong media coverage, which has led to increased technical and financial support. The community of sentiment developing around urban issues promotes broader debate and the rise of activism. Roman Stadnicki, “De l’activisme urbain en Égypte: émergence et stratégies depuis la révolution de 2011,” *Echogéo*, no. 25, 2013. Available at <http://echogeo.revues.org/13491>; DOI: 10.4000/echogeo.13491 (accessed February 1, 2015).

approved by referendum in January 2014. The revolution therefore appears to have created leverage for the politicization of civil society organizations that have evolved, in a few months, from being defenders of the urban environment to leading political and social actors.

Another striking fact is that certain associations and NGOs have distanced themselves from international donors, calling into question the long-standing relationship of dependency in both financial (subsidies) and ideological (dissemination of “good governance” principles) terms. On March 20, 2013, a significant event took place in Cairo illustrating these detachments. NGOs—*Bank Information Center*, in partnership with the housing rights program developed by the *Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights*—organized a conference on the consequences of the World Bank policy and programs, on urban spaces in Egypt. In particular, this conference involved a showdown between Yahia Shawkat, an architect, researcher and creator of the *Shadow Ministry of Housing* blog, and representatives of the World Bank. Shawkat reached the conclusion that despite the billions of Egyptian pounds invested, the World Bank was apparently unable to meet the targets it had set (and that it developed in the report *Egypt 2006-2009, Country Assistance Strategy*) and even less, the expectations of the inhabitants. The architect blames the World Bank for modelling its strategy on the Egyptian government’s (development aid for new towns, for instance) and minimizing the informal dimension of the urban economy (private minivans used for public transportation, *zabalin*<sup>37</sup> for waste, etc.) that in fact compensate for the state’s deficiencies in terms of public services.<sup>38</sup>

---

<sup>37</sup> The name given to ragmen.

<sup>38</sup> However, Philip Jamie Furniss wrote that two major pioneering projects of the World Bank in Egypt, – *First Egypt Urban Development Project* in 1977 and *Greater Cairo Urban Development Project* in 1982—relied heavily on rehabilitating the informal sector

Criticism of donors is part of the emergence of the public debate that began in Egypt following the revolution<sup>39</sup> and that reveals the passing of the baton from civil society—traditionally organized into NGOs that started out in the authoritarian context of the Mubarak regime with the technical, financial and ideological support of international organizations—to a less formal “urban activism” that includes people who gained legitimacy via the Internet and social networks and who belong to multiple associations rather than just one. This is one of the consequences of the Arab revolutions, which enabled “new openings for activism”<sup>40</sup> involving, in Egypt, a change in the basic nature of organized civil society.

More generally, increasing numbers of forums for debate, think tanks, exhibits, web sites and design offices dedicated to urban issues reveals the re-appropriation and even the reinvention of public space by citizens who were for too long the victims of an authoritarian urbanism.

---

(infrastructure development, support to waste collectors, etc.): Philip Jamie Furniss, 2012, *Metaphors of Waste: Several Ways of Seeing “Development” and Cairo’s Garbage Collectors*, PhD Thesis, University College, Oxford.

<sup>39</sup> The increasing distance between civil societies and donors cannot, however, be generalized, as is shown by the strong influence of the German international cooperation agency (GIZ), through its *Participatory Development Program in Urban Areas*, on the majority of Egyptian official or unofficial actors. Today, they are campaigning for the participative processes in urban design to be applied. See Safey Eldeen Heba, 2014, “Informal Areas: Shortcomings and New Perspectives in Post-graduate Programs,” *Egypte Monde Arabe*, vol. 3, no. 11.

<sup>40</sup> Francesco Cavatorta, 2012, “Le printemps arabe: le réveil de la société civile,” in *Le réveil de la société civile en Méditerranée, Annuaire IEMED de la Méditerranée*, Barcelone,” IEMED, pp. 83-90.

On the Internet, new spaces give voice to the inhabitants, criticize governmental projects and call for a new conception of urban practices. *Cairoobserver*, a pioneer web site run by Mohammed Elshahed, has published many interviews of inhabitants of different Cairo districts. These interviews are highly critical on the issue of access to services and mobility and express the interviewees' will to re-conquer the urban space. Some even sought to contribute to the debate on territorial design in Egypt.<sup>41</sup>

Architecture and urban planning schools also play a part. University of Cairo and Ain Shams University students are invited by their teachers to contribute during their studies to the design of a new urban order in Egypt founded, notably, on citizen participation. Some teachers try to alter the curriculum in such a way that students integrate the social and economic aspects of informal districts by involving citizens.<sup>42</sup> The intention is to draw on the skills of the city dwellers, those who live and make the city on a daily basis, to develop a new vision of Cairo and to make the city a model of innovation and urban resistance, rather than a symbol of poor development practices. These reflective and self-critical considerations regarding the professions of architect or academics in architecture schools warrant further study to highlight the role played by professionals of urbanization in contemporary Egypt.<sup>43</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The various initiatives generated in urban society (NGOs, experts and practitioners, teachers, activists, ordinary citizens) could provide the foundation for a new definition of "grassroots"

---

<sup>41</sup> See also the web sites *Cairo from Below*, *Badilab*, *Megawra*, *Drawing Parallels*, *The Shadow Ministry of Housing*, etc., which are attempting to influence territorial policy and are real sources of new proposals.

<sup>42</sup> Safey Eldeen, 2014, *op. cit.*

<sup>43</sup> See special report no. 11 (vol. 3) of the magazine *Egypte Monde Arabe*.

urban development in Egypt. They follow some urban experiments in Egypt since the 2000s (eco-district projects, new programs for the rehabilitation of architectural heritage, invention of a seal of environmental quality, promotion of car-pooling and cycling, etc.), revealing the inclination of many actors to promote sustainable development.<sup>44</sup> The development of these practices will continue only with support from government and international donors such as the World Bank, AFD, BEI, and GIZ.<sup>45</sup>

However, the major issue facing the new government is adopting a vision capable of taking citizens' expectations into account. Decades of *laissez-faire* and authoritarian urbanization have reinforced feelings of land tenure insecurity and social injustice in the most densely populated megalopolis in Africa. During the MB regime, the city was not considered as an object of political discussion. Will the al-Sisi government be capable of defining a genuine land-use planning strategy beyond intermittent provision of services that would reverse the neo-liberal trend of the Mubarak era? In low-income districts, there are significant expectations among inhabitants that had seen Islamist political machinery appear at a local level and had hoped to be more favored by it. Although the executives of the *Informal Settlements Development Fund (ISDF)*<sup>46</sup> had offered assurances that they would no longer carry out evictions or systematic destruction, in the meantime, the Islamist Prime Minister,

---

<sup>44</sup> Pierre-Arnaud Barthel, Safaa Monqid, *Le Caire: Réinventer la ville*, Paris: Autrement, 2011.

<sup>45</sup> Some observers are pessimistic, arguing that international aid policies have shown too few signs of change since the beginning of the Arab uprisings. Yousry Mustapha, 2012, "Donors' Responses to Arab Uprisings: Old Medicine in New Bottles?" *The Pulse of Egypt's Revolt*, *IDS Bulletin*, vol. 43, no.1.

<sup>46</sup> The institution in charge of the management of informal districts.

Hicham Qandil did not hesitate to confirm his intention to cancel the decree legalizing the installation of utility networks (water and electricity essentially) in the neighborhoods built without authorization.<sup>47</sup> This is a clear indication of the inconsistencies inherent in the political narrative concerning city planning since the revolution, as well as of the lack of relationships between the various relevant authorities. This sparks doubt and anger among the citizens. At least, this is what could be inferred from the new rise in social tensions up until 2014: Public transportation and waste collection strikes, protests against evictions, and conflicts between dwellers and real-estate developers.

---

<sup>47</sup> *Al Ahram*, April 22, 2013.