



# Urban Activism in Egypt: Emergence and Trajectories after the 2011 Revolution

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Roman Stadnicki

## Urban Activism in Egypt: Emergence and Trajectories after the 2011 Revolution<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

#### <1>

In June 2013, a broad-based social movement broke out in Istanbul just after the announcement of the impending demolition of a public park located in Taksim Square, which was due to be replaced by a memorial and a shopping centre. Since the mid-2000s, Turkey has seen sizeable urban opposition movements denouncing the economic and social consequences of neoliberal urban transformation projects championed by the ruling circles.<sup>2</sup> But for the first time in the Mediterranean region, urban planning served as a pretext for mass social mobilization – whose demands were later expanded to protests against political rigidity, conservatism, deprivation of liberties and increasing inequalities. In Egypt, the opposite occurred. The protests that broke out in 2011 to bring down President Hosni Mubarak and obtain more social justice had, in the months following the revolution, allowed a portion of the youth to engage in a struggle for urban planning reform and to ensure that their claims for justice were also spatial. In Cairo and several other Egyptian cities, we witnessed a rise in urban activism which considers that the revolution must also operate or be reflected across the city and its physical layout. If the 2011 revolution was favourable to this movement's growth, the movement itself is part of a long series of urban disputes (see below) that were already present on the Egyptian blogosphere prior to the revolution, as described by Wael Salah Fahmi.<sup>3</sup>

#### <2>

We can distinguish two main profiles of urban activists: first, urban professionals (architects, urban planners, students) who often hold several positions (universities, consulting firms, media); and second, politicized activists who regard urban issues as a cause of indignation and protest, but who are not urban planners or specialists by profession.

#### <3>

That said, I will not engage in a sociological study of the main players. Rather, I will examine the conditions of

<sup>1</sup> This article is a translated and expanded version of "De l'activisme urbain en Egypte: émergence et stratégies depuis la révolution de 2011", published in *Echogéo* 25 (2013) <http://echogeo.revues.org/13491>.

<sup>2</sup> Petit, Clémence, "Engagement militant et politisation des mobilisations au sein des oppositions urbaines à Istanbul", in *EchoGéo* (2011), <http://echogeo.revues.org/12445> (23 April 2014).

<sup>3</sup> Fahmi, Wael Salah, "Bloggers' Street Movement and the Right to the City. (Re)claiming Cairo's Real and Virtual 'Spaces of Freedom'", in *Environment and Urbanization* 21: 1 (2009), 89-107.

their emergence and the activist strategies of this particular social group, which has shifted a number of lines in Egypt and especially in Cairo.<sup>4</sup> We may wonder, while looking at their "play"-grounds and battlegrounds, how Egyptian urban activists have turned the city into both a place for major urban evolution as well as a site for a possible continuation of the revolution. The strategies of militant urban actors in the transitional and post-revolutionary context in Egypt are here examined as an indicator of ongoing changes in Egyptian society.

#### <4>

Finally, it is important to mention that the phenomenon of the rise of urban activism is not, of course, limited to Egypt, but appears in an international context punctuated by the appropriation of urban issues by civil societies.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, beyond the revolts that took place in the context of the "Arab Spring", urban activism is part of a global social movement that has led to a "return of critical urban development theories".<sup>6</sup> These seem to have been assimilated by Egyptian activists, as evidenced by the reference some of them made to the "right to the city" as described by Henri Lefebvre. In the Middle East, urban activists are not only Egyptian, but also Turkish, Lebanese, Libyan, or Palestinian and Israeli. Local organizations have mushroomed since the 2000s, such as the NGO Bimkom, based in Jerusalem, which aims to counter certain aspects of Israeli planning policy, or the Turkish IMECE movement, which supports residents' demonstrations against Istanbul's major urban projects. If all these movements share common characteristics (such as a rather educated middle class, political leanings to the left, skills in architecture and urban planning), so far they have not been brought together into a common structure. Yet the vitality of their virtual social networks and their occasional presence at seminars and conferences devoted to urban dynamics (organized in Europe and in particular in the United States) increases the opportunities for exchange and interaction between these different actors, as well as the flow of their ideas in the region and beyond.

#### <5>

As Vincent Bourdeau wrote:

Housing, homelessness, squatter movements, reclaiming public space, sit-ins, local citizenship, such are the many struggles that seem to have taken to new measures for protesting (since 1980), not through overarching political demands but through a myriad of public space interventions. In the same

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<sup>4</sup> This article was the result of fieldwork conducted between 2012 and 2013. The fieldwork included interviews with about 15 key players; participation in cultural and scientific events organized by universities, the Centre d'Études et de Documentation Économiques, Juridiques et Sociales (CEDEJ, which was the institutional affiliation of the author between 2011 and 2015, and was co-organizer – with donors UN-Habitat and GIZ – of the seminar *Egypt Urban Futures*, widely open to members of the civil society), or by the players themselves; following developments directly on the ground; and by watching the blogosphere. These surveys were mainly conducted in Cairo. The Egyptian capital hosts the largest number of urban activists in the country. However, this phenomenon is not limited to Cairo, as seen by the references made in these pages to secondary cities, mainly Alexandria and the Nile Delta cities.

<sup>5</sup> Cabannes, Yves, "Le droit à la ville, une perspective internationale", in *Mouvements* 74 (2013), 13-23.

<sup>6</sup> Busquet, Grégory, "Question urbaine et droit à la ville", in *Mouvements* 74 (2013), 113-22.

way that the "new social movements" are said to have led to political polarisation in civil society, new urban movements are said to have sprung up, without necessarily having a global, collective, and unified policy vis-à-vis urban issues.<sup>7</sup>

No more unified in Egypt than elsewhere, these "new urban movements" still have some strong local individuals and actions that deserve our attention.

## **Conditions for the Emergence of Urban Activism in Egypt**

<6>

The emergence of urban activists in Egypt is favoured by three factors derived directly from the 2011 revolution: a general opening up of the field of activism, a diversification and pluralization of civil society and the strong urban dimension of the revolution.

<7>

First, the revolution of 25 January 2011 gave freedom to public speaking while contributing to the development of political activism in Egypt. For some, the "Arab Springs" reveal how, on the one hand, large-scale social movements and a culture of protest is no longer the privilege of the "North" and on the other hand, that this experience has transformed ordinary individuals into political players whose activist repertoire has considerably expanded.<sup>8</sup> Francesco Cavatorta adds that the formation of "new spaces of activism" is a remarkable consequence of the Arab uprisings of 2011.<sup>9</sup> This activism takes on many forms. Equally diverse are the means of expression and communication used to give it substance. In addition to protests – commonplace in Cairo between 2011 and 2013 – the body of tactics used by activists grew considerably in those two years: sit-ins, election boycotts, petitions, or calls for civil disobedience (including in Port Said in 2013, which was the first experiment of its kind).<sup>10</sup> At the same time, activism has gained visibility. Without returning to the controversial debate on the digital origins of the Arab revolutions,<sup>11</sup> we may no longer doubt the importance of the role of new media and digital social networks in organizing activism and the diffusion of revolutionary ideology. Similarly, the development of independent media through the creation of new newspapers and television channels marks an important stepping-stone for social struggles and mobilization. On a more basic level, art (performances, street

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<sup>7</sup> Bourdeau, Vincent, Deboulet, Agnès, Cottin-Marx, Simon and Flory, Julianne, "Editorial", in *Mouvements* 74 (2013), 7-12.

<sup>8</sup> Abourahme, Nasser and Jayyusi, May, "The will to revolt and the spectre of the real. Reflections on the Arab moment", in *City* 15: 6 (2011), 625-31.

<sup>9</sup> Cavatorta, Francesco, "Le printemps arabe : le réveil de la société civile", in *Annuaire IEMED de la Méditerranée*, Le réveil de la société civile en Méditerranée (Barcelona, 2012), 83-90.

<sup>10</sup> The call for civil disobedience began in Port Said in February 2013, following the announcement of the death sentence for 21 local football club supporters over a brawl which resulted in the death of 80 people in February 2012. Feeling victimized by the national justice system, residents of Port Said blocked the streets and closed stores for weeks.

<sup>11</sup> Gonzales-Quijano, Yves, "Les origines culturelles numériques des révolutions arabes", in *Le Monde*, 22 March 2011.

art, graffiti) offers an opportunity for individuals to broaden their spectrum of activism, diversify the focus of protests and reach a wider audience.<sup>12</sup> Thus, until the return to military authoritarianism at the end of 2013, we witnessed many variations of activism, regardless of the particular issue sparking the protest: political opposition, anti-militarism, the feminist cause, youth demands, soccer or urban planning, as well as land settlement policies.

<8>

Second, the militant dynamic that affects the key urban players in Egypt cannot be dissociated from the changes taking place in civil society at large. These changes are defined primarily by a rise in the influence of civil society at the outset of the revolution, and later, by deep structural and organizational changes. Several observers have endorsed the theory of "the civil nature of the Egyptian revolution"<sup>13</sup> insofar as it is indeed the people – with no political or ideological leadership and with no real desire to gain power – who sought and obtained the fall of Mubarak. However, this argument assumes the adoption of a broad definition of the term "civil society" – no longer limited to registered NGOs, but involving all social movements carried out by individuals who at any given time are engaged in political and civic activities.<sup>14</sup> The first signs of transformation of Egyptian civil society occurred in the mid-2000s, when it managed to become empowered vis-à-vis the state through the rise of social protests (strikes by textile workers and the press in particular) and by the end of monopoly in the media.<sup>15</sup> Nonetheless, it is indeed the 2011 revolution that marks a formal and conceptual rupture. It revealed the profound gap that existed before the revolution between human rights organizations – such as the ones El Naggar classifies as "elitist activism", which played a minor role in the revolutionary process – and social players with backgrounds in informal "street activism",<sup>16</sup> who were the originators of the popular uprising. Thus, the 2011 revolution somehow marks the transition between a civil society traditionally composed of NGOs that made their debut in the authoritarian context of the Mubarak regime, and in most cases received technical, financial, and ideological support from international donors, and a new civil sector made up of pluralistic and diverse organizations, less formalized, and comprised of individuals who acquired their legitimacy from the streets, the Internet and social networks.<sup>17</sup> It is within this process of change or mutation of Egyptian civil society that the

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<sup>12</sup> Douay, Nicolas, "L'activisme urbain à Montréal: des luttes urbaines à la revendication d'une ville artistique, durable et collaborative", in *L'information géographique* 76: 3 (2012), 83-96.

<sup>13</sup> Ben Nefissa, Sarah, "Révolution civile et politique en Egypte. La démocratie et son correctif", in *Mouvements* 66 (2011), 55-58

<sup>14</sup> Abd el Wahab, Ayman, "The January 25<sup>th</sup> Uprisings: Through or in spite of civil society?", in *IDS Bulletin* 43: 1 (2012), 71-77.

<sup>15</sup> Ben Nefissa: (see FN 13), 55-58.

<sup>16</sup> El Naggar, Mohamed Hussein, "Human Rights Organisations and the Egyptian Revolution" in *IDS Bulletin* (43: 1, 2012), 78-86.

<sup>17</sup> The opposition, or at least the distinction recently made in Egypt between NGOs and what constitutes social movements (which can be roughly categorized under the acronym CBO: Community-Based Organizations) is often much stronger elsewhere. We are reminded of this by Cabannes: (see FN 5) with the Brazilian context, where there is said to be a "project approach" supported by NGOs, which is opposed to the "procedural approach" carried out daily by the CBOs.

urban activist movement was founded during the two years following the revolution.

<9>

Third, it has been shown that the Arab revolts in general, and the Egyptian revolution in particular, have deep-seated urban origins.<sup>18</sup> Occurring in a region with urbanization rates of more than 70 per cent, the revolutionary episodes can be seen as purely urban occurrences. These revolutions use cities as their theatres; their motivation can be attributed to a lack of access to housing and urban services, among other deprivations; their methods consist of the reappropriation or reinvention of urban public space – confiscated by decades of authoritarianism. It should be added, in the case of Egypt, that urbanization embodies the now widely discredited neoliberal practices of the Mubarak regime (privatization of urban operations, real estate speculation, a laissez-faire policy of informal urbanization). But even so, a stream of resistance movements appeared before the 2011 revolution: rallying of residents in neighbourhoods against forced evictions in the late 2000s; farmers on the islands of Cairo protesting against the real estate projects; *zabaleen* (garbage collectors/recyclers) protesting against the privatization of waste collection.<sup>19</sup> These elements can be understood retrospectively as harbingers of the 2011 uprising, giving it a very strong territorial and urban dimension. These circumstances as a whole explain why, nearly four years after the revolution, urban planning has remained a matter of major social concern. However, in each of the key areas of urban development (such as housing, transport, local democracy) decisive action has been scarce.<sup>20</sup> Admittedly, the proliferation of advertisements for flagship measures, including low-income housing projects, shows that urban planning ultimately began to find its place in the Muslim Brotherhood discourse (they were in power until July 2013).<sup>21</sup> This also spawned a new set of issues: criticism of government inaction is replaced by criticism of the orientation of urban policies considered too reminiscent of the Mubarak regime. The issues that consume the urban activist community show that political changes in Egypt demonstrate the "revolutionary potential of urban space".<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Pagès-El Karoui, Delphine, Vignal, Leïla, "Les racines de la 'révolution du 25 janvier' en Égypte: une réflexion géographique", in *EchoGéo* (2011), <http://echogeo.revues.org/12627> (23 April 2014); Verdeil, Eric, "Villes arabes en révolution : quelques observations", in *Métropolitiques* (2011), <http://www.metropolitiques.eu/Villes-arabes-en-revolution.html> (23 April 2014).

<sup>19</sup> Deboulet, Agnès and Florin, Bénédicte, "Mobilisations pré-révolutionnaires au Caire : quand les habitants des quartiers populaires (se) manifestent", in *Egypte Monde Arabe* 11 (2014), <http://ema.revues.org/3263> (23 April 2014). More generally, in the cities of the "South", people did not wait for the coming of democracy to defend their interests, put pressure on institutions and negotiate for their urban rights with the city officials involved in urban planning: Legros, Olivier (ed.), *Participations citadines et action publique. Dakar, Rabat, Cotonou, Tunis, Jérusalem, Sanaa* (Paris, 2008).

<sup>20</sup> Stadnicki, Roman, "Egypte : une révolution urbaine?", in Bernard Rougier and Stéphane Lacroix (eds.), *L'Égypte en révolution(s)* (Paris, 2015), 271-90.

<sup>21</sup> Date of their removal: see details in conclusion.

<sup>22</sup> Kanna, Ahmed, "Urban Praxis and the Arab Spring. Beyond the Pathological City?", in *City* 16: 3 (2012), 360-68.

## Typology of Urban Activists in Cairo

### <10>

In 2013 in Cairo there were over a hundred registered organizations addressing manifold urban issues, against only 20 organisations immediately following the revolution. In addition, at the time of investigation, there were many unregistered and spontaneous organizations. Without claiming to be exhaustive, it is possible to distinguish between three broad categories of urban activists in the Egyptian capital.

### **Mainstream and "human rights" organizations whose actions are only partly based on improving living conditions in the city**

### <11>

In this first category we mainly find human rights organizations that existed before the 2011 revolution. Nonetheless, it is useful to distinguish between those that had an urban component in their original remit and those that were not initially dedicated to urban struggles, but became so post-2011.

### <12>

Thus, a number of fairly broad-based developmental and human rights organizations engage in providing social services, home improvement and street maintenance (Resala, Habitat for Humanity, Misr al kheir). Others fight against evictions, forced relocations, corruption and illegal rental contracts (Egyptian Centre for Economic and Social Rights, Housing and Land Rights Network, Amnesty International). Most of these kept a low profile during and after the revolution.<sup>23</sup> Mohamed Hussein El Naggar reminds us that their mission is less concerned with revolutionary activism than with aiming to bring about far-reaching reform of the tools and policy strategies used to promote human rights.<sup>24</sup> Their track record in each of the above areas of intervention, however, is often considered by a number of new activists to be lacking. They often blame them for proximity to the Mubarak regime, the lack of focus of their fields of action, their disconnect from the people, or their reliance on foreign funding and agendas.<sup>25</sup>

### <13>

Is it to deter and/or prevent such criticism that some human rights organizations engaged in urban struggles in 2012 and 2013? We have seen the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (<http://eipr.org/en>), and the No Military Trials for Civilians group (the first to challenge military tribunals for civilians) get involved in the struggle between

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<sup>23</sup> During the Tahrir clashes of 2011, some of these large NGOs nonetheless supported the revolutionaries, by transforming their premises into makeshift clinics rather than elaborating strategies of dissent: Egyptian Human Rights Advocacy Centre, Egyptian Centre for Economic and Social Rights, etc.

<sup>24</sup> El Naggar: (see FN 16), 78-86.

<sup>25</sup> Interview with Y., March 2013. He adds, referring to some major NGOs: "It's about time, in Egypt, that we stop discussing the conditions of the poor in conference rooms at 5-star hotels!"



the army and the people of Qursaya Island, located in the centre of Cairo, when the army tried to dislodge them by force in November 2012. As such, these organizations provide residents with legal support, media coverage and revolutionary legitimacy. The April 2013 acquittal of a few dozen of the island's inhabitants is a likely consequence of such support. For these militant organizations, which are not specifically devoted to urban issues, the participation in this struggle for the right to occupy inhabited land, as well as their involvement in other conflicts that opposed the state (or the army), on behalf of the residents of informal areas (e.g. in Bulaq-Maspero, see below) represented an opportunity to reconnect with post-revolutionary political struggles.

**Individuals and/or organizations whose actions can be likened to a more or less long-term fight for their "right to the city"**

<14>

The second category of players is comprised of those focused only on urban campaigning for urban rights to the city in a Marxist dimension. This can be understood as a right to challenge urban policies, the right of access to land, housing, key urban services, and the right to citizen participation.<sup>26</sup> Here again, a subdivision is needed between activists who engage in immediate struggles and resistance through often coercive direct action, and those considering more indirect and longer-term action.

<15>

The pioneering organization in this field, both in the short and long term and direct and indirect action, is the Egyptian Centre for Housing Rights. It was founded in the mid-1990s, when the Bulac-Maspero district in central Cairo was the focus of mass evictions. As explained in her interview with Agnès Deboulet, Manal al-Tibi, the founder, became engaged in housing rights when the concept was not yet in use in Egypt.<sup>27</sup> In addition to the demonstrations against evictions in the 2000s, the Centre claims to have led the call to include in the 2008 urban planning law the right to alternative accommodation in case of eviction. In this organization's footsteps, similar organizations appeared: the Right to Housing Initiative launched in 2012 by Yahia Shawkat (author of the blog *The Shadow Ministry of Housing*), and Egyptian Urban Action, founded by architect Omnia Khalil, both seeking to show that evictions still continue in informal neighbourhoods. Yet the methods for expressing dissent have evolved since the revolution. For example, photographic exhibitions and documentaries aim to valorize self-constructed housing in poor neighbourhoods, and in doing so, to change the way authorities perceive this phenomenon.

<16>

Housing activism was also marked in October 2011, by members of a group called New Urban Communities

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<sup>26</sup> Lefebvre, Henri, *Le Droit à la ville* (Paris, 1968).

<sup>27</sup> Deboulet, Agnès, "Le droit au logement, école de la contestation. Entretien avec Manal al-Tibi, responsable du Centre égyptien pour les droits à l'habitat", in *Mouvements* 66 (2012), 79-88.



Youth Alliance. For several days, they occupied dozens of vacant homes in 6<sup>th</sup> of October City, a new town located on the outskirts of Cairo, before being ousted by the army. The squatters accused the New Urban Communities Authority – a public body responsible for new cities – of assigning these housing units (presented as "social" by the government) according to "subjective and non-transparent criteria" and seeking to make a profit by renting them out at above-market prices.<sup>28</sup> Independent press coverage of this operation revealed the dysfunction of this social housing project – already observed by Bénédicte Florin.<sup>29</sup> More generally, coverage also shed light on the arbitrary management of new cities by the New Urban Communities Authority, a product of the previous administration, which to this day has yet to be put under scrutiny.

<17>

Thus, urban policies and management in general have prompted activists' concerns. This is evidenced by the development of organizations and collectives to defend the interests of the Qursaya inhabitants,<sup>30</sup> or of Bulaq-Maspero. In Bulaq-Maspero, a collusion of interests between the government and real-estate developers is blamed, as well as the forces of gentrification that produced the construction of high-rises on the Nile, resulting in the gradual destruction of the existing structures in informal areas. Moreover, the specialized blogosphere showed great concern with the iconography surrounding the Cairo 2050 project. Conceived during the Mubarak era with international competitiveness and the conquest of the desert in mind, this project has now been more or less abandoned for lack of funding. Images of the Nile banks lined with glass towers – largely inspired by the urban model in force in the Gulf – are targeted and challenged online by highly engaged activists. Beyond looking to criticize existing planning documents, the collaborative blogs Drawing Parallels (<http://drawingparallels.blogspot.com>), Cairo from Below (<http://cairofrombelow.org>), Cairo: the Multi-schizophrenic City (<http://cairomsc.blogspot.com>) and The Shadow Ministry of Housing (<http://blog.shadowministryofhousing.org>) seek to influence national planning policy. Today such blogs and their proposals constitute real alternatives. Other organizations advocate sharing of experiences and expertise as crucial solutions to putting an end to top-down urban policies. This is the case with Badilab (<http://baladilab.com>), founded by a team of architects, and Megawra (<http://megawra.com>), administered by the Egyptian NGO Built Environment Collective, which aims to organize workshops and seminars, and to design activities to promote collaboration among users, professionals and students in the building sector.

<18>

Other initiatives focus more on the medium to long term than on immediate results. We must therefore address

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<sup>28</sup> Interview with M., Cairo, December 2011.

<sup>29</sup> Florin, Bénédicte, "Des cités nassériennes aux villes nouvelles du désert : la fin du logement social ?", in Vincent Battesti and François Ireton (eds.), *L'Égypte au présent, inventaire d'une société avant révolution* (Arles, 2011), 129-44.

<sup>30</sup> Madoré, Marianne, *Mobilisation d'habitants : le cas de l'île de Qursaya en Égypte*, Master's thesis (Sciences-Po/Rennes, 2013).

the rise of organizations defending corporatist interests, modelled on unions. For example, on 26 September 2012, Cairene street vendors created an independent union to ensure continuation of the rights they had acquired after the revolution, particularly in terms of presence in public spaces. Meanwhile, the *zabaleen* already had an equivalent organization since 2004, called Spirit of Youth. After the revolution its leader, Izzat Naim, did not hide his political ambitions and his desire to transform the organization into an official union.<sup>31</sup>

<19>

Citizen participation in urban planning was another increasingly popular theme with urban activists in Egypt, who wished to join in the "collaborative urban turning point" that had been taking place on the international scene for a few years.<sup>32</sup> In Cairo, Takween (<http://takween-eg.com>) is at the forefront of this issue. Originally specialized in the restoration of informal settlements, its members led a double political battle in 2013: inclusion of the concept of the right to housing in the new Egyptian constitution, and, through the *Tadamun* programme, to have the new urban community-based organizations (CBOs) recognized by the government as "community representatives" capable of carrying out strong initiatives in the absence of local governance.<sup>33</sup> Other organizations even design participatory urban planning projects, such as the NGO Remal – creator of the leading model, the Egypt 712 – or the Cairo from Below collective, which launched a call for projects titled *Our Urban Futures* (figure 1). More generally, the creation of websites and newspapers (*Cairoobserver*, *Cairo Resilience*) has produced new spaces that give a voice to citizens, criticize government projects and encourage a rethinking of urban planning practices. Cairoobserver (<http://cairoobserver.com>) is a pioneer website run by Mohamed Elshahed, which publishes a number of interviews with people in different neighbourhoods of Cairo (figure 2). The interviews are highly critical on topics such as access to services and mobility; however, they also reveal the willingness of those interviewed to participate in debates on urban planning in Egypt.

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<sup>31</sup> Barthel, Pierre-Arnaud and Monqid, Safaa, *Le Caire, réinventer la ville* (Paris, 2011).

<sup>32</sup> Douay: (see FN 12).

<sup>33</sup> Ibrahim, Kareem and Singerman, Diane, "Urban Egypt: On the Road from the Revolution to the State", in *Egypte Monde Arabe* 11 (2014), <http://ema.revues.org/3281> (23 April 2014).

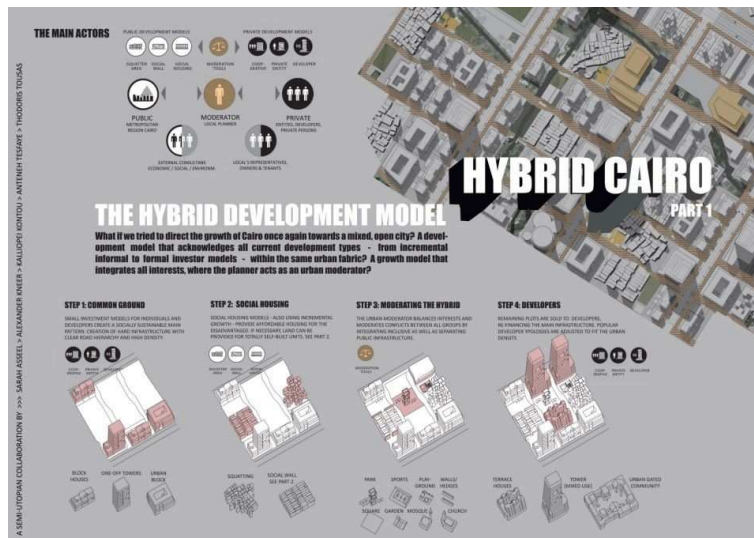


Figure 1 – An example of a reply to the call for bids by "Our Urban Futures", published on the blog Cairofrombelow.org

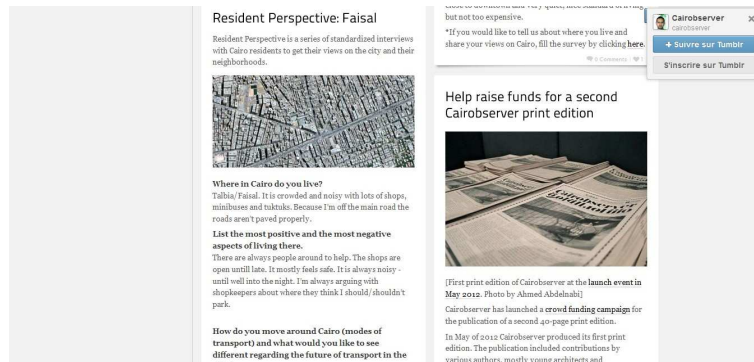


Figure 2 – Screenshot of the Cairoobserver.com blog, August 2013

## Individuals and/or organisations whose actions are related to the protection of the urban environment and the common good

<20>

The third category in this typology is the defenders of the common good and quality of life, whose actions are mainly directed towards the preservation of heritage, environmental protection and the development of public spaces. The degradation or even destruction of some architectural landmarks of Cairo (the Institute of Egypt, Muhammad Ali Pavilion in Shubra, Ispenian and Casdagli villas) – as part of the revolution's collateral damage – led some architects to alert and mobilize the authorities and the population via newspaper articles, Facebook pages, or newsletters (see *io weekly* by the architect Shaimaa Ashour). Campaigns to rescue the architectural heritage of particularly vulnerable cities, such as Port Said and Alexandria, have also been launched, notably by the Megawra and Heritage Egypt organizations. In the domain of heritage, civil society activism is relatively old, with the 1992 earthquake having sparked a general awareness. Since 2011 we have seen the creation of new collectives, their rejuvenation, as well as a renewal of forms of dissent expressed in demonstrations, human

chains, and trials.

<21>

Samuël Poisson observes the same trends among environmental activists.<sup>34</sup> Among the new players is Greenarm. In addition to promoting modes of sustainable transportation, it seeks to unify environmental activism in Cairo. Collectives promoting permaculture and vegetable gardens on rooftops have also increased, although they remain low profile. Meanwhile, the Habi Centre for Environmental Rights, which has existed in Egypt since 2001, contributed to promoting the concept of environmental rights when attempting to stop the construction of a polluting fertilizer plant in Damietta in 2011.

<22>

Finally, many players argue for the free usage and sharing of urban public spaces. As such, urban planners aspire to participate in the regeneration of the city centre by "de-privatizing"<sup>35</sup> it and increasing publicity (through conferences, meetings) to sway the powers that be. The Downtown Contemporary Arts Festival (D-CAF) (<http://d-caf.org>), launched in 2012, sets up events, with help from other artist groups, in interstitial places downtown (old buildings, rooftops, storefronts, alleyways) and month-long public performances, by organizing plays, concerts and other types of performance. Finally, activist art is also practised through graffiti on the walls built by the army around Tahrir Square between 2012 and 2013 to prevent gatherings.<sup>36</sup> The group No Walls, formed in March 2012, aims to transform the walls – veritable urban boundaries – into "virtually opened spaces" through *trompe l'oeil* paintings, thus transforming them into idealized public spaces (figure 3).



<sup>34</sup> Poisson, Samuël, "Les mobilisations discrètes des mouvements environnementalistes au Caire", in *Confluences Méditerranée* 85 (2013), 129-40.

<sup>35</sup> Interview with O., December 2012.

<sup>36</sup> CEDEJ, "Murs", in *Les Carnets du CEDEJ* (2012), <http://egrev.hypotheses.org/755> (23 April 2014).

## **An Evolution of Urban Planning Inspired by Urban Revolution**

[<23>](#)

Can we say that urban activists in Egypt are effective change makers of the settings in which they operate? The most significant changes, it must be recalled, are primarily demanded by the ordinary people, and led to the fall of Mubarak (in 2011) and of Morsi (in 2013). In this period of great political instability and economic crisis, the people have fought for the basic functioning of their informal urban areas. Unclassifiable in the abovementioned categories, the popular committees (*lajan sha'abeya*), which were formed spontaneously during the revolution, played a considerable role. These committees were created primarily to ensure the safety of citizens and law enforcement after the departure of the police in January 2011. Later, they expanded their scope of action by seeking to satisfy their residents' very diverse set of needs, such as garbage collection, traffic organisation, conflict resolution, health, and infrastructure repair.<sup>37</sup> In some cases these committees joined forces, for example in Cairo's Ard al-Liwa and Ezbet Kheirallah neighbourhoods, and were able to obtain the right to occupy land abandoned by investors and to develop community facilities, such as clinics and bypass access to highways, thus opening up access to their neighbourhoods.

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If the visibility of the changes brought about by urban activists is not instantly noticeable, it is nevertheless clear that a number of important social, sociological and cultural evolutions can be classified into four major trends: politicization, emancipation, publicizing, and professionalization.

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The first of these trends is the experience of politicization. While no truly comprehensive urban policy discourse emerged under the Muslim Brotherhood's reign,<sup>38</sup> urban activists were able to politicize planning issues. Indeed, activists engaged in various struggles by involving local residents and their struggle against the state and/or the army, but also by making counter-proposals to the official urban planning agenda (see above), including criticism of the highest echelons of the General Office for Physical Planning (the government agency responsible for the development of Egyptian territory).<sup>39</sup> Thus, the new rulers of Egypt can no longer ignore civil society's demands in the urban domain. According to some of the activists who organized events against evictions, one result of these demands is research conducted by the Informal Settlement Development Fund (the public body responsible for the renovation of informal settlements) for on-site alternative housing solutions for vulnerable

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<sup>37</sup> Sims, David, "Un nouvel espoir pour les quartiers informels du Caire, à la suite de la révolution de janvier? ", in *Villes en développement*, Bulletin du Partenariat Français pour la Ville et les Territoires 91 (2012), 3-4.

<sup>38</sup> Stadnicki: (see FN 20).

<sup>39</sup> Interview with K., April 2013.

neighbourhoods, rather than in new settlement cities.<sup>40</sup> We may also measure how the revolution has been a politicization lever for a number of civil society organizations, such as Takween (see above) and the Tadamun programme for example, which, in a matter of a few months, went from having a marginal role in improving the quality of buildings and the urban environment to that of a player seeking to exert significant political and social influence (participation in the constitutional process).<sup>41</sup> Takween builds an increasingly close relationship between professional practice and political engagement. Its founders, who are regularly invited to Europe and the United States, embody a model of Egyptian militancy receiving favours from academics and professionals from around the world, as well as from international donors. With these different examples, it is clear that we are experiencing a transformation of the "repertoire of collective action"<sup>42</sup> due to the increasing number of opportunities available to urban activists to challenge and intervene in the public debate.

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The second major change is the empowerment of urban activists vis-à-vis the dominant actors (governments, international organizations, powerful NGOs). On 20 March 2013 an event held in Cairo illustrated this takeover of urban affairs by the population. Organizations – the Bank Information Centre, in partnership with the Right to Housing Initiative programme of the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights – organized a conference on the impact of World Bank policies and programmes on urban space in Egypt. They came to the conclusion that, despite the billions of Egyptian pounds invested, the World Bank had apparently failed to meet the targets it had set for itself, let alone the inhabitants' expectations. They accused the World Bank of having built its strategy on the one favoured by the Egyptian government (with help for the development of new cities, for example), while minimizing the share in the urban economy of the informal sector (private minibus transit instead of public transformation, *zabaleen* for waste management), which is actually an agent for substituting gaps in public service. The World Bank was given an opportunity to justify its actions during this debate – a first in Egypt, illustrating the profound changes resonating through local civil society (see above).

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By publicizing, we mean both the reappropriation of space and public debate – accelerated by urban activists – and public support, through the publicity that activists receive from the media. Initially, urban activists aspired to provide a genuine public space for citizens who for too long had been victims of an authoritarian and neoliberal urbanism that had reduced the space open and accessible to all.<sup>43</sup> The organization – in cultural centres, cafes, on sidewalks – of artistic and scientific events devoted to urban practices and the sharing of space, relayed by

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<sup>40</sup> Interview with Y., March 2013.

<sup>41</sup> Takween became famous in late 2000 for having painted the facades of homes in a popular neighbourhood.

<sup>42</sup> Tilly, Charles, "Réclamer Viva Voce", in *Culture et conflit* 5 (1992), 109-26.

<sup>43</sup> In her novel, Ahdaf Soueif writes that Cairo revealed itself to her through the revolution. It was with the revolution that Cairo ceased to exist as a repulsive and declining city in her eyes: Soueif, Ahdaf, *Cairo, My City, Our Revolution* (London, 2012).



many blogs and specialized websites, strengthened the activists' socio-spatial project. Consequently, their engagement became widely supported by the media, including the mainstream press (*Al Ahram*, *Masry al Youm*, etc.), which ensured them high visibility and attracted positive public opinion. Among the urban activists, some have emerged as prominent intellectual figures and are regularly invited to host public debates along with certain political opponents and writers.

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Finally, the urban activist current has also influenced the way in which the professions of urban planning and architecture, as well as education and research in this field, are regarded. This is only natural, given that most of the activists that we met were well trained in these areas in universities in Egypt, Europe and the USA. University students from Cairo and Ain Shams are thus called upon by some of their teachers to design a new urban order in Egypt, notably based on citizen participation. Heba Safey Eldeen, who teaches urban planning at Misr International University, is trying to change the content of educational programmes so that students – future leaders of the country – integrate the "social and economic aspects" of informal areas while developing new methods that include inhabitants.<sup>44</sup> Equally remarkable is the work of architect Omar Nagati. The "Learning from Cairo" conference, which he organized in April 2013 on the campus of the American University in Cairo, has set itself the tasks of producing a decidedly critical discourse of existing policies and of learning the skills of the inhabitants who live and make up the city on an everyday basis, especially in informal settlements, in order to develop a new "vision" for Cairo and thus change the city from a symbol of underdevelopment to a model of innovation and urban resistance. A collective he created has also formed the Cairo Urban Initiatives Platform (<http://cuipcairo.org>). It lists institutions that are developing knowledge of the city as well as direct and indirect actions to improve the urban condition in Egypt (figure 4).

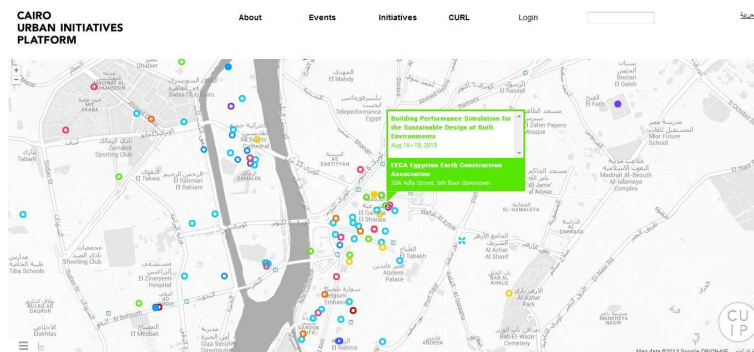


Figure 4: Census of "urban initiatives" in the centre of Cairo, by the Cairo Urban Initiatives Blog Platform; screenshot from 16 August 2013.

<sup>44</sup> Safey Eldeen, Heba, "Informal Areas: Shortcomings and New Perspectives in Post-graduate Programmes", in *Egypte Monde Arabe* 11 (2014), <http://ema.revues.org/3353> (23 April 2014).



## Conclusion

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The cities of Egypt are now experiencing conflicting dynamics: the social and political climate is extremely tense, while urban planning circles have never been so active and imaginative. Of course, we must be very careful not to mix personal hopes with fascination for Egyptian urban activism or change; the situation is very complex and the future is uncertain. A law passed in May 2013 strengthened the supervision of NGOs by forcing them to register with a new government body. This also pushed more activists to distance themselves from official associative structures. Moreover, the intensification of the political crisis in the summer of 2013 and the increase in violence in Cairo between security forces and supporters of former President Morsi seem to have dealt a setback to the efforts of urban activists.<sup>45</sup> There has been less focus on them since this time.

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During Morsi's regime, criticism appeared to be a result of unfulfilled election promises to improve transportation, the cancellation of municipal elections, opaque low-income housing policies, and coercive measures taken towards the inhabitants of informal areas.

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With the return of the army to the political arena, after Morsi's downfall and more officially after the election of General al-Sisi as President in May 2014, the reactivation began of major infrastructure projects such as highways, bridges, roads, and the construction of social housing. The army took over the roles of the Ministry of Housing and Ministry of Local Development, and as early as January 2014 even signed an agreement with the public agency in charge of informal settlements (Informal Settlements Development Fund) in cooperation with the governorates of Cairo and Giza, to disburse 350 million Egyptian pounds to rehabilitate 30 "slums" in one year.<sup>46</sup> These projects were to be carried out by companies with direct or indirect ties to the Egyptian army, without any bidding process, thus putting the army at the heart of Egypt's development and reconstruction strategy.<sup>47</sup> This context is also limiting interventions by urban activists on the ground, certainly for fear of reprisals, as is shown by the increasing destruction and expulsion processes in some informal urban areas at the beginning of 2014, for example in Dar al-Salam area in southern Cairo.

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<sup>45</sup> The removal of the Islamist President Mohamed Morsi was demanded by the 22 million Tamarod (rebellion) petitioners (launched in April 2013) and millions of protesters on 30 June 2013. They accused him of reducing individual liberties and repressing his political opponents. His fall was precipitated by the army on 3 July 2013. Having retreated to two squares in Cairo, pro-Morsi supporters were evacuated by the police on 14 August 2013 during an operation that resulted in the death of more than 1,000 people.

<sup>46</sup> Farid, Doaa, "Armed Forces to Implement an EGP 350m Project for Developing 30 Slum Areas." *Daily News Egypt*, 5 January 2014.

<sup>47</sup> Talon, Claire, "Egypte: l'armée met la main sur les secteurs clés de l'économie" *Médiapart* (2013).

Finally, compared to other forms of activism in Egypt, urban activism is still relatively low-key. Besides the tangible success of certain blogs and the popular support for certain shock-and-awe demonstrations (protests in defence of land rights, for example), the scope of these movements still seems relatively restricted. They can sometimes give the impression of being limited to circles of experts, or even of an in-group elitism, and one activist deplored: "We always see the same people at our gatherings".<sup>48</sup> It is therefore difficult to tell if this movement will be sustainable in the long run and can reach a relatively large segment of the population, and if the changes described above will intensify. Nonetheless, urban criticism always parallels social critique,<sup>49</sup> coupled, in Egypt's case, with a major political and economic crisis. It is therefore a way – for those who dare – to assert fundamental change in the country. The issue, as one activist said, is not so much to find a place in society, but to "create a society in which everyone can find a place". In this sense, Egyptian urban activists participate in the continuation of the revolution on a socio-spatial level.

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<sup>48</sup> Interview with I., Cairo, April 2013.

<sup>49</sup> Lefebvre: (see FN 26).