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INTRODUCTION: URBAN ACTORS PUT TO THE TEST BY THE EGYPTIAN TRANSITION¹

Translated from French by Thibaud Smerko

Three years have passed since the 2011 revolution led to the fall of the Mubarak regime. This lapse of time has given the contributors to *Egypte Monde Arabe* enough perspective to see more clearly through the events and players of the transition in Egypt. Specifically, this new issue is dedicated to urban players – government authorities, planners, and citizens –, their inclusion in the mechanisms of change set in motion in 2011, their repositioning on the professional and political scenes, and their new *modi operandi*.

With hopes to reassess urban dynamics in light of the major political and social changes that have shaken Egypt since the 2011 revolution, this issue reports on the mutation of urban action and the “imaginary urban planner”² in one of Egypt’s most critical periods in recent history.

1. The author would like to thank Leïla Vignal (Rennes II University) and Pierre-Arnaud Barthel (Marne-La-Vallée University) for their valuable help throughout the long editorial process. Bernard Rougier (Director of the CEDEJ), Thibaud Smerko, who read over and translated some of the articles, Rana Kotb, Maha Galal, Anne-Elise Jolicard, Samuël Poisson, and Hala Bayoumi also contributed to making this issue possible. A very warm thanks to them, as well as my colleagues for their help in evaluating the articles.

2. “By “changing imaginary urban planner” (*“imaginaire aménageur”* in French), we mean all new and open representations, meanings, pervasively present or recurring ideas, references, and orientations, etc., implicit or explicit, contradictory but complementary, which now appear to be structuring urban practices” (Chalas, 2004).

Before delving into the heart of the matter, we will focus on the current Egyptian urban context in which local players take part, rethink their strategies and tactics, occasionally express resistance, and engage in their various struggles.

CITIES REFLECT THE POLITICAL, ECONOMIC, AND SOCIAL CRISES EGYPT HAS BEEN GOING THROUGH SINCE 2011

The postrevolutionary period is synonymous with decision-making inertia with regard to urban planning³. Even though improving living conditions in urban areas was one of the demands of the 2011 protests, urbanization remained a matter of secondary concern during the legislative and presidential campaigns of 2011 and 2012⁴. Subsequently, as part of their electoral platform, the Muslim Brotherhood would be castigated by the urban community as a whole (inhabitants, urban planners and architects, NGOs) for, on the one hand, having stayed the course of neoliberal policies implemented by Mubarak, and, on the other hand, for having encouraged the creation of regional inequalities. This criticism appears to be a result of unfulfilled election promises to improve transportation, the cancellation of municipal elections, opaque low-income housing policies⁵, and coercive measures taken towards the inhabitants of informal areas, etc. It was not until the return of the army to the political arena, in the summer of 2013, that we witnessed the reactivation of major infrastructure projects: highways, bridges, roads, the construction of social housing, etc. Replacing the relevant ministries (Ministry of Housing, Ministry of Local development, etc.), in January 2014, the army 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 pounds⁶ to rehabilitate thirty “slums” in one year. These projects are carried out by companies with direct or indirect ties to the Egyptian army, without any bidding

3. Estimated at 60-70%, the share of the Egyptian urban population living in self-built and non-regulatory areas (Sims, 2010) shows that government action in this area before the revolution must also be qualified. Almost exclusively engaged in the construction of private and secure new cities in the desert, supposed to decongest the capital, government action by Sadat and Mubarak has been, at best, able to provide basic services *a posteriori* (electricity and water) in some these informal settlements, at worst to “invisibilize” or to destroy installations produced claiming the route of road infrastructure (highways and urban ring road), or invoking health or natural hazards.

4. Kardoush, Hutchinson, 2012.

5. For more on this topic, see Yahia Shawkat’s article in this issue.

6. Approximately 36 million Euros.

process, thus putting the army at the heart of Egypt's development and reconstruction strategy⁷.

Beyond this government inaction in urban policy during the 2011-2013 timeframe, most of the players involved in the development of Egypt – whether public or private –, bore the full brunt of the country's political upheaval. Besides the high turnover issue in the relevant ministries (Housing, Transport, Environment, etc...) and governorates, Egypt's official planning agency (General Office for Physical Planning) was also forced to replace a large number of its upper level staff after their resignation and/or dismissal, thus preventing the implementation of various master plans produced by this institution before and after the revolution.

Beyond the intricacies of the country's political transition, a major economic crisis has impacted urban constructions. The 25% drop in profits⁸ in 2011 of Arab Contractors – the main state-owned construction and real estate company – exemplifies the difficulties faced by firms in this sector after the revolution. Similarly, the large Egyptian real estate companies (Sodic, Ehaf, Bahgat Group, Orascom, etc.) complain of significant delays in the implementation of real estate projects, like the new Westown and Eastown neighbourhoods, located in the new cities of 6th of October and New Cairo, respectively, on the outskirts of Cairo. Price inflation of building materials⁹ and soaring land prices increase the effects of the crisis on property developers. With their usual contacts at the head of the state now replaced and the increased complexity of their relationship with high-level officials (disputes over the land zoning for example) such companies have been forced to change strategies.

Finally, the major cities of Egypt today carry many marks of a post-revolutionary period dominated by street clashes and a strong military presence in the city: damaged buildings, the presence of tanks and barricades, stone walls preventing rallies, closed intersections, etc. Cities, especially their centres, have become arenas for showdowns between police and citizens. This has resulted in a broadening spectrum of the urban struggle in the country (shifting confrontations, new forms of urban dissent, broadening the scope of activism, etc.)¹⁰.

7. Talon, 2013.

8. Oxford Business Group, 2012.

9. The cost of steel increased 5.6% from 2011 to 2012, and the cost of cement increased by 6.6%. (Oxford Business Group, 2012).

10. Stadnicki, 2014.

MULTIDIMENSIONAL CRISES DO NOT DISRUPT THE MAIN FORM OF URBAN PRODUCTION, I.E., UNREGULATED URBANISATION

Taking full advantage of the decline in political control in the months that followed the revolution, the «refuge» provided by the informal economy, and, to an even greater extent, the real estate market in a time of economic crisis, some residents seem to have developed new self-organisational capacities¹¹. This is particularly the case in the fields of construction, trade, and transport in informal areas but also outside. In Cairo, the increase in the number of minibuses that do not pay taxes, as well as the proliferation of street vendors, is not confined to the informal areas alone. Indeed, there has been a spread of informal economic activity in the entire metropolitan area, particularly in the city centre and around Tahrir Square (increase of street vendors, return of the illegal *tuk-tuk* scooters to the Governorate of Cairo, etc.), a paradox, considering the significant presence of the Armed Forces in these areas.

However, few accurate studies and little data exist regarding the expansion of informal areas after 2011¹². Yet, this expansion, both a horizontal and vertical one, is considerable. It has resulted in the expansion of existing buildings (add-ons or extra storeys to legal or illegal buildings), the increase in illegal *ex nihilo* constructions, and an increase in collective modes of occupancy (squatters) of land and/or of vacant buildings. D. Sims showed, using superimposed aerial photographs, that from 2011 to 2012 the annual number of new constructions was 4.5 times greater than from 2003 to 2011 in certain sub-districts of Giza (one of the three governorates of Greater Cairo)¹³. Once again, regarding Giza, M. Elshahed evokes a “senseless real estate promotion”, which results from the division of agricultural land and its sale by bypassing land regulations and taxation, all in a record time in the total absence of control¹⁴. Meanwhile, the Governorate of Alexandria recognized that the number of buildings constructed without proper authorization grew at an annual rate 2.5 times higher than prior to 2011.

11. Barthel, Jaglin, 2013.

12. The Ministry of Agriculture published in the press (Al-Ahram 6 March 2013) the following information: since the revolution, 29,486 feddans (about 118,000 km²) of farmland are said to have been built on without a permit.

13. Sims, 2013.

14. Elshahed, 2013.

Not only is informal urbanism said to have experienced a boom after the revolution¹⁵, revealing the capacity of “marginal” stakeholders to take advantage of the current political fluidity, but it also created new practices. In an ethnographic study of Manshiet Nasser, J. Furniss shows that those who built without permission (on a quarry) belong to the more affluent segments of the local population, which is largely poor and works recycling waste¹⁶. Furniss adds that, for these investors, illegality does not contradict with ambition to establish a new order in this district – considered by all urban elites as an archetype *ashwaiyya* (informal neighbourhood) – through the construction of good quality buildings with colourful facades.

Thus, the recent dynamics of these “popular neighbourhoods”¹⁷ present informality as a diverse response to the failings of public policy in urban planning. They produce a very mixed urban development, belonging to what Bayat calls the “quiet encroachment” of ordinary citizens¹⁸.

PROFESSIONAL CIRCLES AND ASSOCIATIONS OF ARCHITECTURE AND URBAN PLANNING DISRUPTED BY THE EMERGENCE OF NEW ACTIVISTS OF THE “URBAN CAUSE”

This transformation was possible by both the opening of the field of activism – especially the appearance of the “street activism”¹⁹ after the revolution –, by the diversification and pluralisation of civil society²⁰, and, finally, by the existence of a stream of protests which preceded the revolution and contributed to fixing inhabitants’ expectations and framing their demands²¹. The number of organisations and collectives dedicated to the city has drastically increased after 2011. Through various means, they take action for the protection of public spaces, heritage and environment, but also for housing rights. While no comprehensive urban policy discourse has been able gain significant traction since 2011, these “urban activists” managed to politicize planning issues, engage in various struggles between people and the state and/or the army, but also by making counter-proposals to official planning

15. Let us recall here that informality in Egypt is certainly not a new phenomenon: already in the 1970s, 90% of new constructions were built illegally (Harris, Wahba, 2002).

16. Furniss, 2014.

17. Deboulet, 2008.

18. Bayat, 2013.

19. El Nagggar, 2012.

20. Ben Nefissa, 2011a.

21. See the article by A. Deboulet and B. Florin in this issue.

on *ad hoc* websites²². More generally, the proliferation of spaces for debates, think tanks, exhibitions, blogs, and consulting firms dedicated to planning, are all examples of this appropriation or reinvention of public urban space by citizens who were long-time victims of authoritarian planning. On the Internet, new spaces give a voice to people to criticize government projects, and encourage people to rethink urban planning practices²³.

We frequently speak of the takeover of the “urban issue” by players in Egyptian civil society. This fits in a context of a global social movement that goes beyond the geographic scope of the Arab world and is accompanied by a resurgence of critical urban theories.²⁴ The efforts of teachers and Egyptian practitioners to change perception surrounding careers in urban planning and architecture fit perfectly into the rising trend of critical urban planning issues in the region.²⁵

To discuss the role of the Egyptian urban players in this revolutionary context, along with academic experts, it was necessary that Egyptian urban actors contribute directly themselves. This is the case in two-thirds of the contributions of this issue (mainly in parts 2 and 3), written by movers and shakers (urban planning professional, expert, consultant, activist, and even an entrepreneur) of the Egyptian urban debate²⁶. In this issue, this debate is steered in three general directions.

22. Stadnicki, 2013.

23. See, for exemple, cairoobserver.com, cairofrombelow.org, blog.shadow-ministryofhousing.org, etc.

24. Busquet, 2013.

25. See the articles by N. Elhady and O. Nagati and H. Safey Eldeen in this issue.

26. This meeting between researchers and field workers was made possible through the symposium organised by the CEDEJ in 2012 called “Revolts and transitions in the Arab world: towards a new urban agenda?” It focused on the urban dimension of the major changes currently affecting the Arab world, from the beginning of the revolutionary events of 2011 to the current experiences of democratization and conflict situations in which some societies of the area are still embroiled. See Stadnicki, Vignal, Barthel, 2014, and the agenda:

http://www.cedej-eg.org/IMG/pdf/programme_colloque_cedej_nov._2012_pdf-2.pdf

RALLYING IN/FOR THE CITY

Proclaiming the city as a space meant for contestation and political openness, according to some authors²⁷, is one of the most significant outcomes of the “Arab Spring”. Yet, urban protests in Egypt were born long before the 2011 revolution. A. Deboulet and B. Florin remind us in their article that the political revolution in Egypt is “the unexpected highlight of many social protests”, demanding more justice, “exhibiting themselves in central or outlying areas, but perceived by the dominant players as at the margins of the city”: strikes by textile workers and civil servants; gatherings of people from poor neighbourhoods against forced evictions; farmers on the islands of Cairo resisting against real estate projects; and *zabaleen* (garbage collectors/recyclers) against the privatization of waste collection, etc. These mobilizations, according to the authors, “take a highly political dimension which resembles the struggle for more citizenship”. Although met with unequal responses, these early mobilizations had the merit of setting the tone for the debate, and are now some of the mainstream “public problems” which was communicated through the channels of post-2011 social dissent and is now firmly rooted in the symbolism of revolutionary social protest.

How were these mobilizations reflected in the “founding elections”²⁸ that took place in Egypt in 2011 and 2012? One might be surprised by the presence of R. Bianchi’s article in this issue, as it is more related the precedent edition of *Egypte Monde Arabe* on electoral sociology²⁹. His stimulating and sometimes provocative analysis of the voting results teaches us that the defiant tendencies in urban areas are far from homogeneous. According to him, if the winning vote in favour of the Muslim Brotherhood (and their presidential candidate Mohamed Morsi) in the marginalized urban peripheries does indeed fit into the revolutionary dynamic (through opposition to the former regime candidate, Ahmed Shafiq), this is not the case for the vote in the central districts and/or districts inhabited by the wealthier social classes. These, combined with the “*foulouls*” (leftovers) of the former regime, the Wafd party, the liberals, the secular, and Copts, are said to have been the source of the “counter-revolutionary” movement, which caused –with the support of the army– the overthrow of the first democratically elected government in Egypt in the summer of 2013. R. Bianchi claims to find a similar split at the national level between major cities on one side (mostly anti-Morsi), and the countryside and small towns on the other side (rather pro-Muslim Brotherhood). These divisions (both the urban/countryside and centre/periphery) remain questionable, as they seem

27. Lipietz, Lopes de Souza, 2012.

28. Steuer, 2013.

29. <http://ema.revues.org/3083>

to be ephemeral and blurred in contemporary Egypt³⁰. Nevertheless, as Bianchi states, the “Egypt’s revolutionary struggles were saturated with growing regional and class divisions that undermined any effort at political compromise”. According to the author, these divisions will persist, and, with time, will become more deep-seated, thereby complicating also the possibilities of territorial compromise on a regional and urban scale.

K. Ibrahim and D. Singerman show that the January 25 revolution has, more strongly than in the past, permitted some city dwellers to oppose government decisions they considered spatially and socially unjust and given them easier access to certain urban services. Their goal, through the *Tadamun* programme they created together³¹, is to connect and support all local self-management urban initiatives that emerged after the revolution, whether through the popular committees (*Lajan Sha’abiya*) or in a more spontaneous manner. They would like these initiatives to form a new basis for local governance in Egypt (as was the case in Brazil), which is no longer represented in the central government since the dissolution of the local people’s councils in 2011.

Since 2011, engaged residents – whether through protests, elections, or self-governance initiatives – have been constantly reinventing public areas by developing new means of popular artistic expression, as shown with the development of graffiti on the walls of Cairo³². These artists vary their work according to the political whims of transition/repression, equally talented in rendering works against a backdrop of urban revolt and “contested spaces”³³ as they are with new forms of symbolic appropriation of the city.

CONTESTING URBAN POLICIES

Egyptian urban society seems to be affected by severe malfunctions. In part, the result of decades of political negligence helps up to understand the 2011 uprising. From this point of view, redefining urban policies to be catered towards the needs of urban dwellers will be an important step in Egypt’s political reconstruction and that of other Arab countries affected by the revolutionary phases. This explains the strong

30. E. Denis, 2007, speaks of a “plethora of cities on the soil” which were developed mainly by the rural underclass. He also noted that 20% of “the urban” actually live in “urban villages” of more than 10,000 people – a phenomenon he calls “ruralopolis” – while the weight of some large cities tends to stagnate.

31. <http://www.tadamun.info/?lang=en>

32. Klaus, 2014.

33. Singerman, 2009.

involvement of certain players in the debate on spatial planning in the first months after the revolution, as shown by R. A. Mahmoud and A. S. Abd Elrahman in their article. Like others before them, the authors note the failure of planning policies since the 1950s, “that do not correspond to the popular ways of inhabiting the territory”³⁴. The authors see the year 2011 as a “turning point for urban planning”. On the one hand, in 2011 the government decided to abandon the controversial “Cairo 2050”, “urban dream of the old regime”, and replaced it partly with the “Egypt 2052” master plan – less focused on the capital’s competitiveness than the idea of decentralization. On the other hand, alternative planning and development documents (Egypt Vision 2030, Egypt 712, etc.) have been developed by stakeholders from civil society by following the participative ideology that widely resurfaced with the revolution. While moderately innovative for some, and relatively utopian for others, these new projects nevertheless embody “a challenge to the former regime’s planning policy, and also to the planning policies undertaken by transitional governments since 2011”. In a way, the Egyptian revolution is also fought in the arenas of spatial planning.

Mr. Nada, meanwhile, using unique empirical material, gives a very precise account of the inapplicability of the urban regulations in force in Egypt. But the contribution of his work is even wider. Very knowledgeable on Egyptian institutions, he starts by identifying urban public action that he classes into three broad categories: policies limiting urban sprawl applied in the context of a long-term master plan; designing “blueprints” on the micro-urban scale to organise the development of a particular site; and the application of a betterment levy. He then shows that problems are not so much due to the political and legal instruments as to a series of governance issues. These problems (he mentions seven) originate primarily from the inability of various Egyptian governments to implement something other than “informal decentralization devoid of any political process”³⁵. Mr Nada writes: “The lack of the government capacity to achieve intended outcomes from the policies investigated in this research cannot be understood without critical examination of the long history of centralization and its impact on actors’ behaviour at the different levels”. Mr. Nada’s argument is supported by the rhetoric of various official players (officials from ministries, governorates, and the planning agency) who, in the context of the revolution and the freeing up of public speech, are extremely lucid and self-critical. These realizations call for urgent reform of territorial administration in Egypt.

In his sectoral approach dedicated to housing policy, Y. Shawkat raises another problem, that of continuing deficient public policies after the 2011 revolution, namely the “National Housing Programme”

34. Denis, 2011.

35. Ben Nefissa, 2011b.

(*Iskan Mubarak al- Qawmy*) launched by Mubarak in the last years of his reign. Following what B. Florin has already noted, the failure of “abusive policies of so-called ‘social housing’” in Egypt since the “Nasserist cities” of the 1960s³⁶, Shawkat shows, with supporting data, that the National Housing Programme has not achieved its stated goals. Despite a large number of housing units built in just a few years (around 380,000 units between 2005 and 2012), “the NHP has missed all of its social targets”, particularly in terms of accessibility, spatial distribution, habitability, and availability of services. According to the author, the main problem comes from a flawed governmental definition of “low-income population”, to whom this project was meant to help the most. This definition “excluded all those who have informal jobs, and embedded middle-income government employees”. These specific mechanisms illustrate the general climate of ignorance towards the needs of the population and a housing policy primarily based on media hype. Finally, the author, known in Egypt for his activism in favour of housing rights, is concerned with the lack of questioning by the transitional governments of these selective methods for allocating subsidized housing despite the requirements in terms of “social justice” made by the youth of Tahrir. He interprets this as evidence of the persistence of vote-catching and non-transparent political practices up to the highest levels of government.

CHANGING URBAN PLANNING PRACTICES

The third part of the issue contains three contributions from practitioners, each with a specific perspective on the urban revolutionary situation – from the universities where they teach, the consultancies and architectural firms they manage, or the activist organisations in which they participate. Here the authors dare to make concrete proposals for improving urban conditions in Egypt in light of recent political changes. K. Ibrahim reminds us with great modesty, that the new generation of players (to which he belongs) who are strongly committed to urban issues in Egypt since the revolution, actually fit into a current of thought born in the 1940s. The famous architect Hassan Fathy, author of the book *Architecture for the Poor*, is, according to Ibrahim, the first Egyptian advocate of what he calls the “alternative urban development paradigm”. In other words, the practice of urban planning which is “socially engaged, environmentally sensitive, and deeply rooted in Egyptian culture”, such as K. Ibrahim claims, already characterized Fathy’s achievements, as well as those of a number of “against the tide” architects and planners of the 1970s and after. Thus, without belittling the strength of the urban-activist movement that emerged after 2011,

36. Florin, 2011.

Ibrahim situates it in contemporary Egyptian history of urban resistance and “participatory urban planning”. Advocating a “more open, deliberative and accountable urban governance structure”, *Takween*, the consulting firm that Ibrahim manages³⁷, aims to establish a link between policymakers and “local communities” to perpetuate the spirit of Hassan Fathy and resist top-down urban planning – apparently a constant from one transitional government to another.

The three texts in this last section converge towards the same point: the urgent need to reconsider urban action toward popular and informal settlements, on which we mentioned above that they are a “normalized-margin” in urban Egypt. The article by N. Elhady and O. Nagati and then that of H. Safey Eldeen include a new and innovative programmatic dimension. As urban planning teachers in universities, the authors share their thoughts on pedagogy: for Elhady and Nagati, the establishment of planning workshops in the outskirts of Cairo; and for Safey Eldeen, the design of a new focus on urban informal curriculum.

N. Elhady and O. Nagati collected student proposals for neighbourhoods – in most cases popular and informal and usually where the students reside. The objective of this design studio, explain the authors, is to explore the potential of “local initiatives”³⁸ in the development and legitimization of “citizen urban spaces”. This educational experience also allows its instigators to pose a pertinent question: “what would be the future position of architects and planners within such a fluid socio-political transformation, whereby the roles of state institutions, local communities, and other stakeholders, are being redefined and reconstituted?”

Heba Safey Eldeen, engages in a critique of the current teaching methods in Egypt. She condemns the “deterministic” attitude of some architecture schools who consider informal neighbourhoods as areas to be “formalized” in order to conform them to their standard view of architecture. Thus, she seeks to modify the content of educational programmes within her university so that students internalize the “socio-economic aspects” of informal settlements so as to develop working methods that involve the concerned inhabitants. This reflexive and self-critical approach to this field of professional architecture and the teaching of architecture and urban planning is valuable in the context of questioning the established order in any professional environment.

To conclude, this issue of *Egypte Monde Arabe* highlights, among

37. <http://www.takween-eg.com/>

38. These local initiatives are themselves presented as “excellent teaching material” in a book coordinated by O. Nagati and his colleagues (Stryker, Nagati, Mostafa, 2013).

others, two groups of actors to be reckoned with in Egypt: urban planners and development experts on one side, and the “civil society” (NGOs, activists, etc.) on the other. The former, who advocate a more engaged and inclusive urban planning approach, have the opportunity to work towards rapprochement between experts and inhabitants in order to give meaning to the concept of participatory development beyond its “good practice” aspect carried by international organisations. In this context, the new Egyptian university programmes can define a path to follow. The latter group, that of civil society and urban activists, will continue to act as a bridge between the needs of residents and the structures of power (governmental and international donors – often acting in concert).

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