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Who Rules the Street in Cairo? The Residents Who Build It

By **MICHAEL KIMMELMAN**

CAIRO — The telltale signs in post-revolutionary Egypt are not just the riots and rapes, the mega-traffic snarls and sectarian battles. There is also the highway ramp in Ard El Lewa.

After [the revolution two years ago](#), working-class residents of that vast informal neighborhood, tired of having no direct access to the 45-mile-long Ring Road, took matters into their own hands. In the absence of functioning government, they built ramps from dirt, sand and trash. Then they invited the police to open a kiosk at the interchange.

Even for Cairo, do-it-yourself infrastructure on this scale is unusual. For years, the government of Hosni Mubarak turned a blind eye as millions of poor Cairenes built homes without permission on private plots of agricultural land in places like Ard El Lewa, greasing the palms of bureaucrats for basic services.

But since the revolution, the pace of illegal construction has only exploded, like so much else here. Along with the spread of graffiti and of street vendors clogging the sidewalks downtown, this explosion is either a sign of post-revolutionary populist empowerment or of chaos, depending on one's perspective. Egyptians seem to be wrestling over which every day.

A struggle — and also a race — pits the forces of collapse against the halting emergence of a new urban class, born in the aftermath of the revolution. Egyptians have long been experts at fending for themselves in a top-down system where the president ruled by fiat and the government was unaccountable. But now they must improvise as never before.

This means that Egyptians are figuring out anew how they relate to one another and to the city they have always occupied without quite fully owning — figuring out how to create that city for themselves, politically and socially, as well as with bricks and mortar. Headlines have naturally focused on the macro-battles, but the bird's-eye view does not always reveal what is happening at street level, on corners and in neighborhoods, where daily life today means navigating new relationships with fellow citizens and the spaces they share.

As Omar Nagati, a young Egyptian architect and planner, put it the other day: “This was always a revolution about unjust urban conditions and about public space. The ramp is just one example. People now realize they have the right to determine what happens on their own streets, to their own neighborhoods. So there's a battle of ownership throughout Egypt: over whose space this is,

and who determines whose space it is.”

Egypt, it's clear on the ground, is not just [Tahrir Square](#). Cairo is not everywhere, all the time, in turmoil. The city can surprise you. I recently visited Darb al-Ahmar, where I had been told an outrage was playing out as ruthless developers illegally demolished old houses to throw up cookie-cutter apartment blocks.

“There's no law enforcement, and there's so much drama now just getting through the day here, that most people can't worry about such things,” lamented Yasmine El Dorghamy, the exasperated editor of [Al Rawi](#), Egypt's heritage review.

With a colleague, Mona El-Naggar, I went to see for myself. We found Muhammad Said hanging out on a street corner. A skinny 19-year-old in a T-shirt and flip-flops, slouching on a red scooter, he volunteered to show us what had recently been built. The neighborhood is a rabbit warren of many blind, dirt alleys. Mr. Said led us down one alley after another, past mounds of rubble and collapsing wood-beam-and-brick houses, historic but decrepit. Some other young men appeared. They seemed to know Mr. Said. They began to follow us. There were no police around.

Mr. Said headed down a narrow passageway that dead-ended in the courtyard of an old house, a sunless air shaft strung with drying laundry. Why are we here? I demanded.

Many families live crammed together, Mr. Said answered. The people tearing down old places have been known to offer residents money to leave and new apartments, he said. “When you live together in a tiny room and someone offers you something better,” he wanted to tell us, “who would turn it down?” That was his point. This was not an outrage, but an opportunity — and a clash of interests among classes in a society being forced to legislate and reinvent itself.

The sad truth is that little of architectural quality has been built in Cairo in decades, no useful lessons learned from other big capitals, no progressive approaches to city planning embraced under Mr. Mubarak or the Muslim Brotherhood. Government officials promise urban improvements but peddle outmoded ideas about sweeping away informal neighborhoods: ridding the city of its poor while erecting skyscrapers to produce Dubai on the Nile for the well-to-do.

Many Cairenes who can afford it continue to flee to gated communities. Mr. Mubarak's government built highways to speed the wealthy out of town. I visited an older one of these settlements, [Katameya Heights](#), a golf resort with a little shopping village where the signs are in English and preposterous Roman villas hide behind walls of bougainvillea. Katameya Heights could be in Florida or Southern California. Since the revolution, real estate values have been rising in these gated developments, whose allure remains a life that is quiet, slow and green in a megalopolis that is none of those things.

At the same time, the protests in Tahrir Square, as Mohamed Elshahed, the young editor of

[Cairoobserver](#), an online magazine, told me, “introduced thousands of people of different classes, from all over the city, to each other and to an urban alternative to the Cairo of suburban developments. The revolution was partly about rediscovering the city on foot,” he said.

“People came to Tahrir and wandered the streets of downtown,” he continued. “Most of the middle class had known it by driving through it.”

May al-Ibrashy, an architect, agreed: “What’s definitely changed is that, before, in Cairo someone always used to dictate where you were allowed to sit and walk, what you were allowed to do or say. This new right to express yourself in the street is not minor or a luxury.

“The street was not really public space,” she added. “Now it is.”

And so Egyptians are fighting over the rules of the road. Progressive young architects and planners may be needed here, but there are a few starting to demand the right things, talking not about demolishing informal areas but about learning from those neighborhoods, seeing them as resources and solutions — collaborating with residents, tinkering with construction methods and materials to allow for more light and air in apartments, wider streets to accommodate emergency vehicles. These forward-thinking Egyptians view the neighborhoods not as endless slums but complex cities in themselves, home to entrepreneurs, government officials and many young educated Cairenes; and they recognize that the future of Cairo will require grass-roots organization.

And patience.

It is happening, here and there. [Imbaba](#), a neighborhood once nicknamed the Islamic Republic of Imbaba and more populous than Manhattan, has its upscale pockets. But it is mostly a sprawling metropolis of redbrick and concrete buildings on narrow, dirty streets navigated by speeding three-wheeled tuk-tuks, and overflowing with shops. The other evening, Khaled Atef, a round-faced, beefy lawyer, presided over a committee meeting in a closet-size basement room in Imbaba. He leads a neighborhood coalition of the post-revolutionary community groups called popular committees. Competitors complain he is a mouthpiece for the Muslim Brotherhood. But he and his committee have gotten things done since the revolution, occasionally with the Brotherhood’s help.

The committee got the Brotherhood to pay for fixing an impassable road, enlisted volunteers as traffic monitors, cracked down on black marketeers selling cooking fuel at extortionate prices. And it holds political education classes, which Mr. Atef insists are unaffiliated with any party — bottom-up initiatives, focused around urban change.

“If we get more involved at the community level, we can rise together,” Mr. Atef said, greeting neighbors after the meeting.

“We had much bigger dreams two years ago, and we are all disillusioned and demoralized now,” said Mr. Nagati, the architect, speaking for many Egyptians. “But there’s still an opportunity to set the terms for a new city, even if the efforts may have to be small scale and guerrilla style for the moment.

“Cairo is in a state of becoming,” he said. “We just don’t know what it’s becoming yet.”

Mona El-Naggat contributed reporting.