



# Waking the Sleeping Tiger

*Cairo's Other Revolution*

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# Waking the Sleeping Tiger

## *Cairo's Other Revolution*

**D**owntown Cairo couldn't function without Tahrir Square. Streets pour into the dilapidated roundabout from virtually every direction in the city. It is ringed with buildings of historic and cultural importance, from the soft reddish façade of the Egyptian Museum on one side to the imposing Mogamma, the Egyptian state building and hub of Cairo's bureaucracy, on the other.

1

But it is not just the physical qualities that have made Tahrir Square one of the most important public spaces in Egypt. It is the collection of people from all sectors of Egyptian society. Gone are the days of the square as a mere roundabout. Now one can find virtually all walks of life protesting, talking or simply milling around. From middle-class suburbanites living in new desert cities surrounding Cairo to young revolutionaries who live in the immediate vicinity, Tahrir feels like a slice of everything the city has to offer on any given day. It is bustling, stifling, oppressive and uplifting all at once.

On protest days, which happen with regular frequency, street vendors sell everything from flags to underwear made in China, while disgruntled Cairenes climb tall street lamps and lead chants against the new regime. Street battles often rage blocks away on the side streets jutting out from the square. It is a fluid, encompassing and electric environment.

The area around Tahrir is constantly buzzing with revolutionary agitation. In cafés like the famed **Café Riche**, intellectuals muse on the direction the revolution is taking, while activists live in tents on a grassy patch at the square's center. On a recent morning, protesters waited in line for tea alongside people doing their morning shopping. In fact, one can encounter deadly street clashes on one street and families strolling down another. It's a scene that would have been impossible in pre-revolutionary Egypt.



For the past two years, Tahrir Square has buzzed with the constant presence of protestors. In September, when this photo was taken, crowds were demonstrating against Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi.

It's no exaggeration to say that Tahrir Square has emerged as a living laboratory for the social shifts sweeping Egypt's densely populated capital city. As the revolution entrenched itself in Egyptian society, street vendors — once tightly controlled by the old regime — moved into the square, at first to sell flags and water. Flags gave way to goods of all shapes and sizes, from flat screen televisions to underwear. Today, that market has overtaken the blocks surrounding the square, with back streets serving as veritable outdoor malls, dominated by vendors and shoppers at all times of the day and night.

The scene marks an incredible departure from the past. Under former president Hosni Mubarak, street vendors were aggressively targeted in line with a program to “civilize” Cairo's image as a tourist wonderland. Law enforcement officials were empowered to break up unlicensed vendors, which resulted in widespread corruption and a sense of injustice among those in the trade. Today, Egypt's new president Mohammed Morsi is attempting to continue where his predecessor left off, proposing harsh laws that would include up to six months in jail for convicted vendors. But while these laws may have quelled vendors before the revolution, these days they are

organized and unwilling to cede public space to the whims of an autocratic leader. The city's people have begun to reclaim their space.

“The state has been saying forever that we want to tarnish its image,” one vendor said, unwilling to give his name because of the danger it could put him in. “But we are simply working people that have a right to be here like everyone else. Look at all the people in Tahrir. We can be here as well.”

The 2011 Egyptian revolution, which resulted in the ousting of Mubarak and the country's first democratic elections, brought with it profound changes to the nature of public space in Egypt's major cities. In Cairo, a 3,000-year-old city of more than 20 million unofficial residents, the revolution facilitated a new debate about the relationship between the city and its people. Egyptians reclaimed their city through simple actions of self-possession — vendors carving out space in a public square, activists painting walls and building new park benches, residents creating new solutions for age-old transportation difficulties.

“People have a new sense of ownership with the city,” said Omar Nagati, an Egyptian architect and planner who has documented the effects of Egypt's ongoing revolution on the urban environment. “They feel that they have the right to say what will happen with their streets and public spaces. This is not just in Tahrir Square. This is happening in every neighborhood of Cairo.”

## LIBERATION SQUARE

Tahrir Square is, in many ways, the natural starting point for a rethinking of Cairo's relationship to its urban landscape.

The square took shape in the late 19th century as the brainchild of Ismail Pasha, an ambitious and forward-looking leader who controlled Egypt from 1863 until 1879, when the British toppled his government. Pasha envisioned Egypt's future as a modernized, urbanized “Paris on the Nile.” The square, a modern traffic roundabout styled after spaces the ruler had observed in Western Europe, was central to that vision. Located in the heart of downtown Cairo, with the Nile River bordering its western side, Tahrir has more than 20 streets pouring into it. The square was named for its ruler until 1952, when it would become a symbol of a completely different sort of movement.

The Egyptian Revolution of 1952 ended the country's monarchy rule and occupation by the British. Following the overthrow, the nation's new leader, Gamel Abdel Nasser, renamed the square *Tahrir*, meaning liberation. In the years that followed, Egypt fell into cycles of corrupt leaders and dictators, during which authorities invested heavily in the area around Tahrir as a showpiece for Egyptian progress and an attractive destination for tourists. Handled like a sleeping tiger, Tahrir's public space was carefully controlled. Under Mubarak, even the smallest gatherings were outlawed in the *midan*, as it is known in Arabic.

Given this history, it made sense on January 25, 2011 that thousands would choose

### Toxic Air



the square as the site of revolution — the place to make the demand for the removal of their autocrat leader heard.

With each change in power since the revolution, those in control, whether it be the military or Morsi, have attempted to assert authority in Tahrir under the cover of cleaning the square. Just as city officials in New York used beautification and cleanup as means to clear Zuccotti Park of Occupy Wall Street protesters in 2011, Egyptian state and city officials have tried to quell the revolutionary movement at Tahrir through landscaping projects. At times, it has moved like a peculiar game of cat and mouse: One day, activists set up camp in the square. The next, government officials

plant garden patches in the dusty center, where tents have risen. Within a few days, the garden again turns to dirt, any hope of plant life trampled by activity.

“The authorities are trying to clean up the square and make it as if things are okay,” said Sherine Tadros, the Cairo correspondent for Al Jazeera English. But, she said, “the fact that it keeps going back to the sort of bare land shows that the country is not moving on.”

Underlying Tahrir’s history is a subtle battle over the control of space in Cairo. From the beginning, leaders have used the square to reinforce their vision of the nation and its future. Now, Cairo’s people have laid claim to the square by erecting field hospitals, covering walls with political graffiti and allowing street vendors free rein to sell their goods. They have even set up their own checkpoints — in place to this day — to ensure that regime loyalists don’t attempt to wreak havoc from inside the protests.

To all this, government authorities have responded with attempts to reclaim Tahrir, raiding the square with clouds of tear gas and erecting walls on side streets.

Looking beyond Tahrir, Cairo’s urban structure has long reflected the conflicting political aspirations of the Egyptian people, colonial rulers and autocratic dictators. From the British colonial cosmopolitanism of kings Fuad and Farouk, the official last monarchs of Egypt, to the modernist housing projects erected by Nasser in the 20th century, Cairo is a city built by competing narratives.



Residents of the long-neglected 20th Street neighborhood banded together to build a highway ramp so to improve connectivity between their neighborhood and downtown Cairo. The DIY on-ramp will shorten commutes and make travel across the city much easier.

Since the revolution, a new narrative has gradually begun to take hold. It's a story that elevates the voice of people long relegated to Cairo's forgotten slums, a story about how one of Africa's largest cities — Cairo places second to Lagos, Nigeria — will adapt to a changing climate and indeed, a changing world.

## ON-RAMP INTERVENTION

Everyday thousands of commuters fly past vast informal neighborhoods lining Cairo's 72-kilometer Ring Road on their way into the center of the city. Just like highways leading into downtown city centers in the United States, Ring Road passes long-ignored neighborhoods of Egypt's capital. The only evidence of these are makeshift bus stops haphazardly lining the highway.

If you were unlikely enough to get a flat tire on Ring Road and had a quick glance over the side of the highway, you would see a vast informal city complete with 12-story apartment buildings. Flocks of livestock share dirt roads with motorcycles, old cars

and occasionally large trucks. Café owners place small tables in the middle of the traffic mess and patrons sip tea amid the bustle. With no paved streets and flocks of sheep clogging busy thoroughfares, this *ashwaiyaat*, known as 20th Street, seems like an unlikely place for an urbanist revolution. But with no assistance from government or any other authority, this year the working-class residents of this area built their own highway exit.

That's right, a highway exit. It connects other, more affluent parts of the city to the 20th Street neighborhood, long isolated from the rest of Cairo despite its immediate proximity to Ring Road.

Nondescript mounds of dirt and sand mixed with trash, roughly 10 feet high, sit comfortably next to the highway overpass, forming entrance and exit ramps. Stray cats and dogs rummage through these homemade ramps as cars and large trucks fly by. Once the dirt highway exits were in place, residents simply moved the concrete

7

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*“What I saw in Tahrir made me want to change my physical environment.”*

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safety barriers to create their new entry point.

On a recent Tuesday morning, traffic on the informal exit continued at a frenzied pace, with drivers treating it no differently than any other street ramp in bustling Cairo. Nearby residents began to build highway exits of their own, marking their newfound place on Cairo's major traffic artery — and an emerging connection to the city center.

“What I saw in Tahrir made me want to change my physical environment,” Ali El Ashraf said through a translator at his new café next to Ring Road. El Ashraf was instrumental in convincing neighborhood residents to build the makeshift exit. Six months after it opened, his modest café is packed throughout the day with the new traffic. “I could not be doing this kind of business without the highway exit ramp.”



Cairenes are frustrated with the slow pace of progress in their city.

“This exit has cut down our travel time to the center of the city by nearly two hours,” El Ashraf continued. “It was a risk to build, but now other neighborhoods are doing the same thing. They are popping up all over Cairo now.”

From a planning perspective, the explosion of unmarked, dirt-mound highway exits is a nightmare. But while the community-made infrastructure may not be as sleek or environmentally conscious as some urbanists would have it, there is no doubt that the residents of 20th Street have responded to limited mobility and connectivity in a way that demonstrates true community resiliency.

“When they ignore us, what should we do?” one man said between sips of sugary tea at El Ashraf’s café. “If people can take over Tahrir, we can address our needs as well. Mubarak wanted to erase our existence, and now that he is gone we have the power to say that we are here. ”

Under Mubarak, none of these informal neighborhoods were connected directly to Ring Road as a way of keeping them out of sight. For residents, this meant long transit times to reach downtown Cairo. But on a simple level, this is a grassroots solution to an urban problem ignored by the city.

Public space is being challenged and reclaimed in other unexpected ways.

The filmmaking collective **Mosireen**, a play on the Arabic words for “Egypt” and “determination,” was born out of a desire to document the revolution and its development on the streets of Cairo. With one of the **most popular YouTube channels in Egypt**, Mosireen holds regular public screenings throughout the city. Most recently, it held one of its “Cairo Cinema” events, which involved projecting a film on the vast exterior walls of the presidential palace in the lavish suburb of Heliopolis.

“The power of the Internet during the Egyptian revolution is undeniable,” said Omar Robert Hamilton, a British-Egyptian filmmaker and member of Mosireen. “But we feel like in order to really bolster the power of the Internet, we have to be in the streets, with the community in public spaces around Cairo. Public screenings in places like Tahrir are the ideal way to do this.”

At a recent documentary screening in Tahrir Square, there was barely enough space to contain curious onlookers. From street vendors to families strolling by on their way across downtown, the video sucked people in. After one short film, shot in Cairo at the height of the revolution in January 2011, an older Egyptian asked one of the Mosireen members where he could find the movie. A discussion ensued about YouTube. The older man had never heard of the website.

## A MASTER PLAN FOR CAIRO

The long arm of the old regime remains difficult to escape. Mere steps from the Nile riverfront, tucked quietly behind a line of five-star hotels, slum neighborhoods known simply as “the Shacks” have begun to make their needs heard. Nestled in the prime location between the river and downtown, their land is some of the most valuable in Cairo. Since 2005, they’ve been the target of aggressive business interests keen on revitalizing downtown Cairo and transforming the city into a global destination. The quest to purchase the Shacks land is loosely connected to **Cairo 2050**, a master plan which sees the Nile waterfront as a sort of Dubai-like promenade built amid one of Africa’s most congested urban areas.

In 2008, the Egyptian government under Mubarak’s leadership proposed Cairo 2050 as an audacious way to address Cairo’s lack of green space, infrastructure and housing problems while promoting its image as a global city. With the expressed goal of bringing total urban development control into the official hands of Mubarak’s bureaucracy, Egypt’s General Organization for Physical Planning took control of the

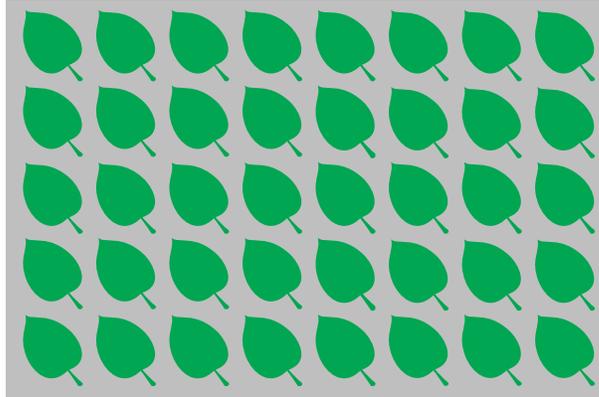
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## Cairo Green Space Deficit

Cairo resident average  
amount of green space



International standard  
minimum of green space



 = 0.3 of a meter

Sources: Egyptian Ministry of Housing, Infrastructure and New Communities/Next City

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10

project. Without any public input or process, the administration released a detailed plan necessitating mass evictions and slum clearance.

At the core of the Cairo 2050 master plan are large malls, high-rise apartment complexes, immense new boulevards and promenades along the Nile River. Massively scaled, highly expensive and catering to global consumers, the renderings look more like projects in Qatar and the United Arab Emirates than anything now in Cairo. The resemblance is intentional: Planners are hoping to attract more foreign capital as well

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as tourism. Even Tahrir Square — perhaps especially Tahrir Square — was earmarked for a fancy facelift as part of the national rebranding effort, projected to have cost billions of dollars.



Mohammed Elshahad, a trained architect, started the blog *Cairo Observer* to further the conversation about the city's built environment.

11

International organizations like the United Nations and even the government of Japan backed the plan initially, seeing it as a positive step toward sustainability. Yet since its inception, problems have plagued Cairo 2050; most urgently, what to do with the hundreds of thousands of people living in informal settlements on land targeted for redevelopment.

At first, government authorities responded to criticism with a proposal to move poor residents to the outer reaches of new desert cities surrounding Cairo. But these new cities, cut off from the city center and without adequate public transit, have proven to be an unfit replacement for informal neighborhoods on the Nile. It is no surprise that most residents simply refused to leave.

The urban collective *Cairo From Below* has made fighting Cairo 2050 a priority since the revolution in 2011. To the activists — an international mix of urban planners, students and policymakers — the plan will mean a continuation of policies that have created massive economic and environmental injustices in the city. The plan, they say, fails to recognize neighborhoods like the Shacks, and as a result promises to only aggravate existing disparities. Many fear that its goal of revitalizing downtown Cairo would mean abolishing the vendors that have brought life back to the streets.

Given the close connection between Cairo 2050 and Mubarak, many say that the plan will remain only a vision and not be fully realized in the post-revolutionary climate in Egypt. However, the structures that Cairo 2050 solidified — the ability of foreign business interests keen on developing land occupied by informal settlements to bypass Egyptian law through high-level connections in the Cairo governorate — remain steadfast.

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*“We’re like fish. This is our water, and if you take us out of the water then we will die.”*

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“After nearly two years, we have yet to formalize a new system or order in the city of Cairo,” said Mohammed Elshahad, an MIT-educated designer who, in 2011, launched [Cairoobserver](#), a website about the city’s built environment and history. On a recent Friday, a post on the site headlined “[The City and the Constitution](#)” detailed the impact of Egypt’s lively ongoing constitutional debate on the urban environment.

12

The rhetoric of empowered residents doesn’t just exist on Cairoobserver. One feels the energy whether inside the Nile City development — one of the many new complexes which broke ground during the early halcyon days of Cairo 2050 — or on the nearby, neglected streets of the Shacks, where rebar juts out of the walls and electricity wires buzz loudly overhead.

Based on nearby land values from several years ago, Nagati, the architect and planner, estimated that the Shacks land is now worth upward of 30,000 Egyptian Pounds per square meter (roughly \$4,500) and, given its underdevelopment, is prime for large-scale real estate projects like Nile City. As powerful business interests set their sights on the area, the battle for control of the space intensifies. Residents have complained to local journalists of attacks by people associated with the Nile City development project, and the violence has only intensified as time goes on.

Meanwhile in the courts, residents fight to uphold their land rights against claims by the city. In one hopeful sign, community groups, known as popular committees, have been formed to combat Cairo's history of ignoring the informal neighborhoods. Working together with civil rights activists, residents have drafted plans to bring in their own resources, from gas to fresh water. The idea, residents explained, is to remain off the grid, yet with the self-sufficiency of a sovereign community. Just like protesters in Tahrir Square, residents of the Shacks are digging in their heels for a long and bitter battle with Egyptian authorities. This one just happens to be urban in character.



13

Demonstrators protesting President Morsi face against Egyptian authorities on a side street off Tahrir Square.

When I visited the Shacks, residents were notably reticent and unwilling to talk about their situation with a foreign journalist. However, one recently **told the liberal daily *Egypt Independent***, “People here look out for one another.”



14

Architect and planner Omar Nagati collaborates with a growing group of urbanists out of a shared office space in Cairo.

“We’re like fish,” another said. “This is our water, and if you take us out of the water then we will die.”

## THE DEMON AND THE DREAM

Like other megacities, Cairo can feel like it has grown beyond the needs of human existence. On virtually every level, the city challenges visitors and residents alike. The air is terrible, the traffic is maddening, the food can be questionable and, given the amount of informal building going on, even an elevator ride can feel like a life-threatening experience. With its estimated 20 million people and hazy sprawl, the sheer size of the city forces people to change how they interact with it. You can’t speak of one Cairo, but of many different Caïros that form the backbone of a larger urban landscape.

The revolution that transformed Egypt politically has unleashed a torrent of fresh ideas for the city’s future. Most were never discussed openly under Mubarak. “In 2010,

there was no shortage of people that had ideas to engage with the present, but there were no venues for discussion,” Elshahad told me. “The climate was repressive and there was no one interested in what they had to say government-wise.”

Two years after the revolution, deep questions remain about where to go with the conversation — and what to do with the city’s newfound energy. The residue of Cairo 2050 pervades the halls of city government, and powerful business interests continue to guide realities from Tahrir to the Shacks. Yet attempts to incorporate informal neighborhoods and improve democratic access to the urban environment are proving to be among the most dynamic changes taking shape in the city. Already, people have started demanding a new master plan that addresses the issues being raised in places like 20th Street and the Shacks. Such a plan would ostensibly replace Cairo 2050 with a vision that reflects the demands and voices that have become audible over the past two years.

15

“If we wait until Egypt reaches a level of true political reform to implement a new master plan for Cairo, then we might be waiting for another 10 years,” Nagati said. Elshahad agrees. A problem for Cairo, he said in a recent interview, is that there is no structure to nurture the nascent movement to better the city.

But with or without that structure, ultimately the test will be whether authorities and citizens are able to look at these informal claims to space with a new a mindset, that sees them as part of the solution for democratic urban planning and not the problem. It is not a zero-sum solution. But with revolutionary sentiment still lingering in the country, the time is ripe for a more democratic urban awakening in Egypt.

To Nagati, Cairo is a city in flux, and the transition is one that will take time. “It is exactly the demon and the dream place to be right now,” he said.

The haphazard informality of the revolution, at times its Achilles heel, could prove to be exactly the spirit needed to kick start an inclusive debate about Cairo’s urban future. A city with a long history of informal building, infrastructure and settlement, Cairenes are, for first time, embracing the true reality of their city. This transformation in thinking is now spreading throughout the region, from Doha to Ramallah, in the form of design collectives and debates about urbanism in the Arab world. This spring, a conference about urban planning in the region’s cities will be held in Doha. There is no question Cairo will be well represented. >

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR & PHOTOGRAPHER



**Joseph Dana** is a multimedia journalist based in the Middle East and South Africa. He is the Jerusalem correspondent for *Monocle*, covering everything from political developments in the West Bank to cultural events in Tel Aviv to elections in Egypt, with a focus on urbanism. His print work has appeared in *Le Monde Diplomatique* (German, English), *GQ* (Germany), *Salon*, the *London Review of Books*, *Tablet*, the *Los Angeles Review of Books* and *The Mail & Guardian*, among other international publications. Dana is associate producer of Just Vision's East Jerusalem short film series *Home Front: Portraits from Sheikh Jarrah* as well as Just Vision's documentary *My Neighbourhood*.



**Cliff Cheney** is a photographer, journalist and coffee drinker based in Cairo, Egypt. He earned an M.A. in photojournalism at the University of Texas at Austin, where his interest in the Middle East and the lives of its people was nurtured by elective studies of Arabic, Architecture and Islamic law. Cheney's journalism has appeared in many major news outlets including *WSJ.com*, *BBC World Service*, the *Huffington Post*, *USA Today*, the *Dallas Morning News* and *Sports Illustrated*. His photography is represented by ZUMA Press Agency.