



Cities to be tamed? Standards and alternatives
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Ard al-Liwa Park Project: Towards a New Urban Order and Mode of Professional Practice

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Since January 2011, Cairo and many Egyptian cities have witnessed a breakdown of security apparatus and the relative absence of state enforcement institutions. Such condition has enabled the exponential rise of community initiatives, in both measure and kind, rendering a fluid urban landscape in state of flux. This paper aims at understanding the new typological relations between formal and informal areas and modes of development within this period. It discusses the process of designing, legalizing and negotiating different authorities for a community park at Ard al-Liwa, an area lying on the margin between the formal and informal parts of the city. The paper is anchored in the specificity of the project and its strategic location, which lends itself to a broader framework for development. Through a community-based design process, it investigates the role of the architects and planners in the regeneration of the informal city, and suggests that new modes of professional practices.

Keywords: Separation, Integration, New urban order

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A Context and Introduction

For the past 18 months Cairo has been experiencing a process of urban transformation unparalleled in its recent history on two different levels: changes on the ground and a new mode of urban citizenship. Many Egyptian cities have witnessed since January 2011 a breakdown of security apparatus and a relative absence of state enforcement institutions, generating an exponential rise of community initiatives, in both measure and kind, and creating a fluid urban landscape in state of flux. And while ‘informal interventions’ have been a hallmark of Cairo public space for decades, new genre of informality has emerged taking advantage of state vulnerability and increasingly empowered communities.

In addition to the physical transformations resulting from marches, protests and street battles, Cairo’s neighbourhoods and public spaces have all been subject to a process of informal encroachment, taking advantage of the absence of law enforcement. Individual and communities, on the other hand, have been empowered and emboldened by the overthrowing of the regime, challenging authorities and reclaiming their right to the city and public space. Both phenomena are interconnected and may best be illustrated by concrete examples, where local communities are taking the initiatives, changing their urban environments and reconstituting their meaning.

Building on the experience of Ard al-Liwa Community Park, this paper aims at highlighting the significance of an emerging urban order, redefining the role of professionals and academics amidst a fast-changing urban landscape. The paper suggests ways in which such model may offer an alternative developmental approach to informal areas in Egypt and other cities in the developing world, where states have become increasingly unable to cope, both economically and politically, with the magnitude of the informal urbanization process.

Types of Informal Initiatives

This project falls within a new typology of formal-informal interface, and has been recognized as a prime example among many other case studies being documented during the past 18 months.³ They range from the simple encroachment on sidewalks and streets, horizontal and vertical extensions to existing structures and premises, building on state land or privately-owned agricultural tracts, to the construction of highway exits and other infrastructure projects entirely by local community effort.

To understand the significance and extent of such phenomenon, one needs to go back to the weeks and months immediately after the Revolution.

The so-called popular committees, which had been formed in almost every street or neighbourhood to defend their homes and properties when security forces had a total meltdown, had subsequently evolved into broader coalitions of youth and active citizens gradually shifting their focus and mandate from security questions to development and awareness-raising efforts. In the absence if active and transparent bodies of local governance, these coalitions or initiatives have become an alternative forum for debating and negotiating competing interests and often conflicting priorities in such communities.

A distinction could be drawn between two levels of interventions. The first include individual efforts and encroachments on public space, such as tea stands, food stalls, street vendors and informal parking regulations, whereby many shop owners and some residents ‘reserve’ the area outside their premises as their own, or at least for the exclusive use of their customers/guests.

³ Reference to Nagati, O. and Stryker, B., ‘Archiving a city in flux: Cairo’s evolving Urbanism pre and post-Revolution’. Research in progress funded by Ford Foundation.



The second level, however, involves interventions by groups or communities, which entails higher level of collaboration and coordination, and often more complex network of fundraising and organization. In some cases, the type of interventions also involves more sophisticated construction or engineering systems, such as the construction of mega sheds, raised platforms or ramps. Two examples of the latter are worth noting.⁴

Lino's Café used to be a roadside tea stand similar to tens of others scattered on both sides of the ring road and many other major highways. During the months after the revolution, the two brothers Ali and Mutwally and their bro-in-law Hatem, began to construct a more elaborate “resting point” for truck and microbus drivers by offering a full coffee-shop services and snacks in a more elaborate seated and shaded area. The location, which is less than a 100 meters away from their residence in Izbit Khayrallah informal neighbourhood, was carefully chosen at the “bridgehead,” where a locally constructed stairway leads up to an informally organized microbus stop. The station is, thus, a natural hub for both riders and drivers offering an excellent business opportunity.

The challenge the Lino's brothers faced was not only extending electricity and water connection to the new premise, something that was overcome by extending a cable from the nearest light post and providing small water tanks, but rather the sloped retaining wall flanking the ring road from both sides in this area. They devised a simple and affordable engineering solution to level it out, creating a raised platform accessible from the highway, which was later covered by a makeshift wooden shed (the latter gets elaborated upon every time I pass by it). The innovative ‘engineering solution’ was so successful to the extent that it was immediately copied 50 meters away, typical of the *modus operandi* of informal development based on the multiplication and optimization through trial and error.

The second example is *Al-Mi'timidiya Exit*—an informal on and off ramps constructed in the three months after the fall of the former regime. It is located in the stretch between two formal junctures: 26th July Corridor, about 1 km to its north, and Saft al-Laban Corridor, 2 km to its south. The informal area of al-Mi'timidiya had evolved from a rural settlement to a fast-growing residential area further west to the informal belt around the city's western and northern limits. It has, thus, ‘fallen outside’ the ring road when it was constructed at the turn of the twentieth-first century, in part to delineate a new city limit and contain further encroachment on fertile agriculture land by informal housing development. As such, the community of al-Mi'timidiya had no linkages to the city other than passing through the whole informal belt from west to east and then crossing the railway at limited access points.

The ring road, which literally over-passed the area for a decade, offered a rare opportunity for a vehicular access point. And while this idea, and probably a clear scheme has been percolating for a long time in the minds on the community leaders, it was only during the time when the security apparatus collapsed and the state was most vulnerable that the moment of execution arrived. The project, which costs around a million Egyptian Pounds (one quarter of the amount it would have cost if constructed by the government), required the mobilization of all resources al-Mi'timidiya community could muster.⁵ Some contributed with cash, while others in kind, donating material, machinery, labour and know-how.

Once the piles of garbage and debris have been removed, four ramps were constructed copying the existing exits nearby and adopting similar techniques and ‘adjusted’ codes.

⁴ Some of these examples have been presented in Omar Nagati, “Informalization as an urban revolt: Reclaiming space, reproducing ‘order’,” as part of a Post-Graduate Conference: *Re-evaluating the Postcolonial City: Production, Reconstruction, Representation*, University of Leeds: 2nd -3rd of February 2012.

⁵ Based on an interview with Abdel Nasser Abou Musa, community leader, key member of al-Mu'timidiya Baladna NGO, and one of the organizers of the Mu'timidiya Exit. Personal interview with Omar Nagati, December 2011.



The process of construction was meticulously documented and edited in a formal presentation material, sent to the governor and police chief in Giza, inviting them to inaugurate the project—something that they did willingly, celebrating the heroic deed by the revolutionary citizens and assigning the area under the highway as a traffic police point, thus lending legitimacy to what would otherwise in a different time and place be deemed a criminal act.

The two cases discussed above are part of a whole range of other examples that illustrate a new mode of urban order, whereby individuals and communities are taking the initiative, imagining and implementing their dreams of a city, the making of which they had long been excluded. Not only do they challenge the urban status quo, offer alternative, but often invite professionals, architects and planners, and policy makers in subsequent stages to join them *on their own terms*, in what could be viewed as a process of public-private participation from below. The Ard al-Liwa Park project is yet another testimony of this inverted model.

The Project Context: Ard al-Liwa and the Park Site

Ard El-Liwa is a ‘typical’ informal housing development on the agricultural belt on Cairo western periphery. Dating back to at least three decades, it bears the characteristics common to many other informal developments: high density, substandard infrastructure, insufficient public services and poor connection to the city at large. One of the latest studies of Ard Al-Liwa estimates its population to about 300,000 inhabitants occupying around 470 acres, and rendering its density to an average of 638/acre.⁶ The area is located to the west of al-Muhandisin District, an upper middle class neighbourhood that has witnessed a real-estate boom during the 1980s and 1990s, and is separated from which by the regional railway to Upper Egypt and al-Zomor irrigation canal. Up to the 1970s, as cadastral maps illustrate, the area has been predominately agricultural fields that began to rapidly transform into informal housing as a twin city, dependent on al-Muhandisin in both its economy and in terms of public services. In the late 1990s, along with the neo-liberal policies adopted by the cabinet then, the programs of new private development on the city’s desert edges were gaining momentum.

A new network of infrastructure was constructed at the turn of the century, including two major freeways, the Ring-Road and 26th July Corridor, defining the boundaries of Ard al-Liwa from the west and north respectively. The intersection of both highways constitutes one of the major traffic junctures approaching Cairo from the west, defining the outer limit of the Ard al-Liwa and rendering it most visible for daily commuters as well as travellers to Alexandria and the Mediterranean Coast. Ard al-Liwa, in short, is delimited by three major urban transportation corridors, which have been drawing the city limits between the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. These corridors have also been paradoxically contributing to both Ard al-Liwa’s misfortune and its potential development opportunities. On the one hand, they define its borders and limit its accessibility and connection to the city proper. Their close proximity, on the other hand, offers visibility and potential public attention, something that other informal areas are lacking.

The Site: Straddling the Gap

One of the only remaining undeveloped sites—partly due to the fact that it is owned by the Ministry of Awqaf (Endowments)—is a strip of 12-14 acre parcels parallel to a key transportation and irrigation corridor that defines the western limits of ‘city proper,’ while separating planned/formal districts to its east from informal districts to its west.

⁶ Statistical data based on reports by GOPP 2009, ISFD 2011 and GOPP 2012 (ongoing survey).



The site remains a rare opportunity to accommodate lacking services and establish active interface between the increasingly segregated formal and informal developments on its both sides.

In the community's imaginative geography, the site has for years served as a potential container to accommodate many of the services lacking in Ard al-Liwa, as well as an untapped reservoir of open land for recreational facilities and green areas. Throughout the past few years, there has been a number of schemes, dreamed or actually charted on paper, to resolve some of the chronic issues surrounding the site, such as the congestion and traffic hazards at the railway crossings, the street vendors and informal transportation hubs, as well as environmental and sanitary concerns due to the piles of garbage dumped into al-Zomor Canal. Some of these community initiatives are to a large extent technically credible and have in fact been communicated with different levels of authorities, but were mostly stalled for lack of financial support and political will.⁷



Figure 1. The Awqaf parcel, an aerial view of the project site (Hamdy Reda, 2011)

The Ministry of Awqaf has designated this site to develop a large housing development scheme comprising fourteen blocks, including five affordable and nine upscale apartment buildings. By the end of 2011, all necessary approvals were acquired, and the site preparation process began in late March 2012.⁸ Local community leaders, waking up to sounds of bulldozers, stood for what they viewed as their right to decide the fate of such precious land, which they considered to be hijacked by investors and state cronies.

⁷ Throughout the process of documenting earlier visions for the site and its surroundings, the design team has identified a number of developmental projects that had been proposed by local individuals and associations, such as Hanaa Gad, *Fasil wa Nurasil*, Graduation Project, Cairo University 2011, and Abou Farouk, *Proposal for the Railway Crossing Area*, unknown date.

⁸ Egyptian Ministry of Awqaf, Projects' Department (2009), *Housing project on Waqf Mohamed Sinan, Ard al-Liwa*.

Empowered by ‘revolutionary spirit,’ they not only stopped the construction process, but also managed to escalate their demands through media and local MPs, who helped arrange a meeting with former Prime Minister, Kamal El-Ganzoury. The latter acknowledged the failed purpose of such housing project and endorsed their demand for an alternative vision of recreational hub and service facilities.

The success of this community initiative could thus be ascribed to their persistence on two parallel tracks. On the one hand, it has been a result of a cumulative process of developing visions for this parcel over the past few years. This envisioning process, on the other, was compounded by organized efforts to confront government plans to build more housing blocks.

Such dual process of resistance and alternative proposals, which is situated within the context of the rising urban citizenship, culminated in an approval on the highest official level, bypassing conventional bureaucratic procedures and classic institutional frameworks necessary for similar projects of the same size. The next logical step was to turn their vision into a blueprint—a master plan according to professional standards and planning codes.

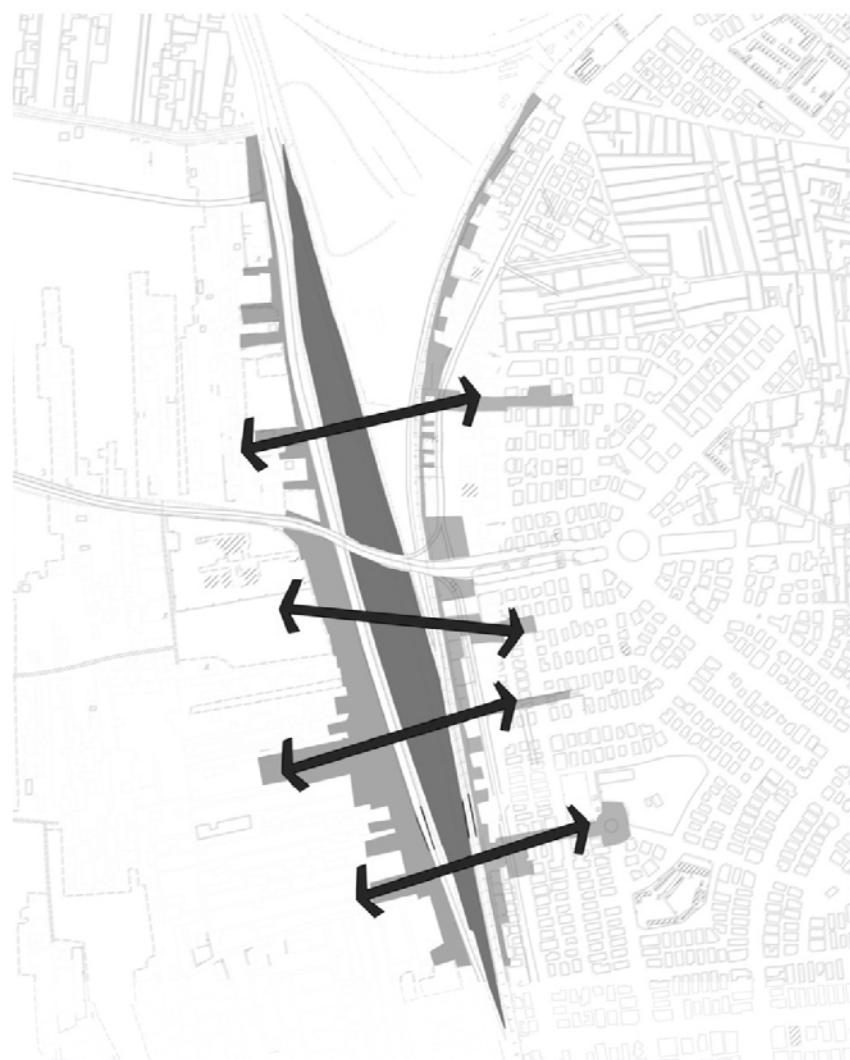


Figure 2. Ard al-Liwa site map (Cluster, 2012)



Planners' Involvement and Project components

Ard Al-Liwa Youth Coalition approached Cluster group, based on earlier engagements and previous experience, requesting to translate their needs and aspirations into a technically feasible planning scheme, and thus turning an oppositional position into a proactive developmental vision.⁹ The latter would then be presented to different authorities and stakeholders, to gauge their interests and win their approvals, but also as a means to consolidate their vision into a real measurable project, which could then be subjected to both technical critiques and financial assessment. The specificity of the site and its strategic location lends itself to a broader framework for development that would address urban issues on multiple levels, from the neighbourhood, district to city scales as follows.

1. For its immediate context, the site would provide Ard Al-Liwa and surrounding informal areas with services and open spaces lacking in such densely populated and underserviced areas. Through a number of workshops with local community representatives, a design brief was developed including major public amenities, such as health, education, vocational training, sports and recreational facilities and municipal services.
2. On a larger scale, the site location offers a rare opportunity to restructure the distorted relationship between informal and formal parts of the city, from one of marginalization, exclusion and dependency, into one of integration and interdependence. The project could thus be viewed as a bridge or meeting point between two districts: Al-Muhandisin and Ard al-Liwa, on its both sides. Lateral connections, such as bridges and elevated pedestrian passageways, as well as common plazas and gardens are proposed as the principal planning framework for the park project.
3. Thirdly, on a city scale, the project falls within a grand urban transportation corridor, which would potentially be converted into a major green spine as part of a network of greenways in the city at large. Such network would promote alternative environmentally friendly modes of circulation and rapid transit lines. The project thus aims at turning the generic condition of dilapidated infrastructure corridors on rapidly urbanized agriculture tracts in many other parts of the city along stretches of informal development, transforming peripheral conditions into central green arteries.

The project's planning concept is thus anchored in the larger question of informal development in Cairo, and aims at addressing a complex set of planning issues on multiple levels that would transcend immediate local needs of Ard al-Liwa. The project also positions itself within the newly emerging urban order, whereby individuals and communities are taking the initiatives, then inviting professional and planners and policy makers on board, thus challenging the former models of 'citizens participation,' and redrawing the balance between the state and its urban citizens.

Negotiation with the Authorities

The initial stages of the design process involved intensive sessions and workshops with local community representatives to develop a program for the project and translate their needs and aspirations into a design brief.

⁹ CLUSTER: Cairo Lab for Urban Studies, Training and Environmental Research is an urban design and research platform based in downtown Cairo.



Once a preliminary conceptual design was ready for discussion, the next step involved a series of meeting with stakeholders, local and governmental authorities, as well as international development agencies and potential donors. Each time the process of approval gets stalled, due to a change of cabinets or because of political turmoil, talking to media proved very useful to increase pressure on authorities.

The scope of design process followed a number of stages, including a) identification of all previous studies for the site and surrounding context; b) developing a design brief through a number of participatory workshops with community groups and translating their needs and aspirations into an area program; c) establishing a broader conceptual framework for the site and surrounding context, on local, district and city scales, each to address a number of planning issues and specific design priorities.

Due to the site location and its immediate juxtaposition to a number of infrastructure lines, the formal approval process had to be negotiated with multiple ministries and authorities, such as the Ministry of Housing, the Ministry of Transportation, the Ministry of Irrigation, the Ministry of Awqaf (Religious Endowments), and the Ministry of International Cooperation, as well as the General Organization of the Physical Planning, which has to ratify any future plan in accordance with its own strategic plan of the area, and the Giza Governorate, which will eventually be the owner of the Park project. For negotiating approvals and exploring funding possibilities, representatives from the community and the design team organized a number of meetings with local authorities whose stakes in the project may facilitate or otherwise block such unconventional bottom-up initiatives. The team also explored preliminary fund-raising possibilities by engaging key national and international agencies with specific interest in the development of informal areas.

One of the main challenges facing the formalization process in this project has been the fast-changing political landscape. During the past 18 months, Egypt witnessed three cabinets, changing governors and three national elections for both assemblies and the presidency. These changes, often coinciding with major turmoil on the ground ranging from rallies to street battles and burning of public buildings, were often accompanied by shifts in political ideology or at least government's attitude and priorities towards projects of this size. This in turn has often resulted in stalling earlier momentum for approval and formalization of the project. Conversely, each new cabinet tried to repackage ongoing or potential project under its platform of development. The *Nahda* (Renaissance) program by Freedom and Justice Party is a case in point.¹⁰

Architectural Expression and Landscape Strategy

In addition to the basic planning premises outlined above, and once a preliminary master plan was approved by the highest political authorities, it became clear that such conceptual design scheme is not very useful to communicate with local communities and engage different forms of media.¹¹ In order to develop an architectural expression that could be presented to a wider public beyond the circle of experts and official, the planning team embarked on a process design development of architectural and urban forms derived from local context.

¹⁰ Under *al-Nahda* program, members of Freedom and Justice Party have forming committees in professional institutions, inviting those with "success stories" to present their ongoing projects or potential visions for development. Many of these have been re-presented to the public as part of FJP's program.

¹¹ On July 25th 2010, Prime Minister El Ganzoury approved the Park Project and instructed in the ministries and authorities involved to work all administrative details, such property swapping, custody transfer, financial allocation, infrastructure considerations.)



This process involved analyzing and decoding the elements of the architectural language of informal urban conditions through a multi-level framework, including the urban block, the typical architectural unit, as well as detailing features. In addition to engaging local modes of architectural expression, the study also aims at a critical understanding of the agricultural and landscape development in informal areas.¹²

Starting with urban scale, the first level of analysis focuses on the housing block, and investigates the process of formation of this fabric whereby the patterns of the irrigation grid and land subdivisions inform and often offer a guiding principles for residential areas. Most of the identified patterns are more or less rectangular. And it is common for individual agricultural parcels to be as small as one *qirat* (175 square meters). Multiples of holdings are normally arranged in small irrigated agricultural plots, with strips separated by small irrigation channels. These channels become then converted into access lanes separating urban subdivisions. Larger irrigation and drainage canals link these rectangular strips, and often have dikes on both sides reserved for pathways and for canal cleaning. As development in an area intensifies, these canals are eventually filled in and become the main streets, serving as both traffic collectors and major commercial and service corridors.¹³

Identified urban patterns, including block size, street network, and hierarchy of services, are thus primarily based on the agricultural and irrigation grids, generating such highly dense and expansive informal settlements. The urban subdivision of narrow rectangular plots also generates a somewhat standardized apartments building type. This typical block is then analyzed in terms of footprint, number of facades, light wells and ventilation systems, heights and number of units, as well as proportion to street width and other neighbouring open spaces.

Finally, the study aims at identifying key architectural detailing features that would capture the character and aesthetic vocabulary, starting from typical windows, balconies, stairwells, and skyline as well as generic elements defining the roof-scape, such as minarets, pigeon towers and satellite dishes. The process of learning from the informality intends to help develop an urban language and modes of architectural expression sensitive to its surrounding context—one that would capitalize on the process of accretion and millions of trials in such rich reservoir of local knowledge. In so doing, it hopes to offer lessons and performance-based standards that could then be further tested and systematized, potentially contributing a to a contemporary urban and architecture language in Cairo.

Conclusion

Ard al-Liwa Park Project offers an opportunity to engage new modes of practice as well as alternative forms of urban and architectural expression. On the one hand, the process whereby the project was conceived, negotiated, and approved, defies the classic “participatory planning” as well as the hailed public-private partnership (PPP) models. Instead, it suggest an a framework whereby the community takes the initiative, proposes an alternative vision to governmental plans, then invites architects, planners, and policy makers on board, in a truly bottom-up model of development.

¹² While informal development in Cairo has taken place on both the desert land and the agricultural land, the scope of the above study focuses on those built on agricultural land, which accounts for around eighty percent of all informal developments. Ard al-Liwa exemplifies a typical case of this typological pattern. See Sims, D. (2003), The Case of Cairo, Egypt, in United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-HABITAT) & UCL Development Planning Unit (Eds.) *Understanding I4: Case Studies for the Global Report 2003*, (Cairo: UNDP)

¹³ For more analysis of this urban typology on agricultural land, see Elkadi, G. (2009), *Al-Tahddur al-'Ashwa'i*. (Cairo: al Majlis al-A'la lil-Tarjama wa-al-Nashr) and Sims, D. (2010), *Understanding Cairo: The logic of a city out of control*. (Cairo: AUC Press)



Secondly, the strategic location of the project straddling the formal-informal divide provides a rare opportunity for planning interventions that would not only respond to many of the needs lacking within underserved informal areas, but also potentially help restructure the distorted relationship between formal and informal parts of the city, from one of dependency, marginalization and exclusion, to one of integration and interdependence.

Lastly, the project attempts to offer a platform to test new urban and architectural language that are distilled from the reservoir of local knowledge and building tradition in informal housing areas. Such tradition has for decades been dismissed as illegitimate and chaotic. If implemented, Ard al-Liwa project could potentially stand as an example for an urban revolution in the making.

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