

Learning from Cairo | Mada Masr

*Mada Masr has just published my review of two new books about Cairo that focus on the relationship between political upheaval and the urban environment. [CLUSTER's](#) book *Archiving The City in Flux* is an excellent, eloquent introduction to informality -- the many ways that Cairenes use public spaces despite, or outside, government regulation -- in the city.*

Nagati and Stryker argue that what happened in January 2011 was the result of “decades of the urbanization of injustice.” What happened after the uprising was the temporary breakdown of the state’s heavy-handed presence, for better and for worse. One informal neighborhood took the unprecedented step of connecting itself to Cairo’s ring road by building its own access ramp. Others have taken advantage of the chaos to engage in less civic behavior, from petty crime to riding motorcycles on sidewalks.

The proliferation of street vendors in downtown Cairo — where they occupy growing swaths of the sidewalk and the street, poach business from shops and blast music from speakers — is one of the case studies included in “Archiving the City in Flux.” It is a hugely contentious issue and a litmus test for people’s political attitudes and their class prejudices. For some, street vendors represent a much-dreaded lower-class chaos (interestingly, they attract a level of disapprobation that triple-parked Mercedes don’t seem to). For others, they are “the people,” struggling to make a living and challenging the authority of the state.

The CLUSTER team’s work exposes the unfair stigmatization of lower-class informality while not romanticizing every example of people laying claim to a bit of this crowded, competitive city as an act of admirable political subversion. Their approach is empathetic yet empirical. They measured what percentage of sidewalk in downtown Cairo is occupied by street vendors (64 percent). They created a map showing where marches to Tahrir originated from, and they catalogued the changing products sold there (from cotton candy to gas masks to, during extended sit-ins, pillows). They used time-lapse photography to document how sidewalk stalls evolve throughout the day. They drove along the ring road charting where microbus stops, tea stalls, mechanics and staircases have been created by the local communities that were originally encircled but not served by the freeway.