

DIY Infrastructure in Egypt

A people-power revolution unleashes urban ingenuity.

JESSE WALKER | 5.2.2013 3:02 PM

Michael Kimmelman has a [fascinating piece](#) in *The New York Times* on how the informal districts of Cairo have been faring since the Egyptian revolution. He leads with an anecdote from the neighborhood of Ard El Lewa, where residents, "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."

Egypt has long been home to DIY communities, Kimmelman explains, but "since the revolution, the pace of illegal construction has only exploded." He doesn't think the timing is a coincidence:

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."...

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.



Needless to say, all that grassroots activity has inspired some [less enlightened reactions](#) as well.

Elsewhere in the Times: The same edition of the paper includes an article about the similar "[unauthorized colonies](#)" of New Delhi, India.

Elsewhere in Reason: A year before the Arab Spring began, I tried to draw a link between people-power revolutions and illicit Third World neighborhoods in [this article](#). And Robert Nelson wrote extensively about such districts in [this 2005 review](#).