

Cairo Urban Grassroots

Posted: September 18th, 2012 | Author: [mikel](#) | Filed under: [Cairo](#) | [3 Comments](#) »

Ard El Lewa is an informal settlement in the west of the Cairo metropolis, built up over the past 30 years on agricultural land, its street layout still reflecting filled-in irrigation canals, towered over by concrete-framed multi-story buildings, just over the tracks from what was the old boundary of Cairo. Soon after the revolution, the local community built, to good standard, on and off ramps to the Ring Road (previously completely disconnected from their community), and successfully advocated for a public park on remaining precious open space that was planned for yet more housing. Yes, they built their own highway ramps! ([not yet in OpenStreetMap](#))

منطقة تختلط فيها عملية جمع القمامة وصناعتها بمنطقة سكنية مما يؤدي الى ضرار صحية لذلك اعتبرت منطقة غير آمنة

مزلتان ارض اللواء هو المدخل الرئيسي مما يتسبب في مشكلة الازدحام وانتشار الانشطة المؤثرة على حركة المارة مثل الباعة المتجولين والتوكبوك

التعدى على الاراضى الزراعية وتجريرها

تظهر الانشطة المختلفة في الشوارع الداخلية حسب كثافة السكان بها وتعمل على توفير احتياجات السكان ولكن اختلطها بمجتمع سكني يؤثر على كفاءة العمران

تقوم الاراضى الفضاء التي احتضت الزراعة منها الى منطقة تجمع للقمامة

تمثل التربة مشكلة رئيسية لانها تؤثر بالسلب على العمران حولها الذي تغير بشكل كبير بحيث اصبح غير مقبول بقائها على هذا الحال

Ard El Lewa Map, with images of urban challenges. Credit: unpublished report by Hanna Gad, Cluster

This is the atmosphere of enthusiasm and possibility that opened up at the very local scale in Egypt in the revolution. Across Cairo, “popular committees” organized to maintain security in their neighborhoods; some of these are evolving to “popular coalitions” focused on improving local neighborhoods through grassroots development. Modern Cairo has been a site of heavily centralized planning, large scale development, and lack of representation for local people in decision making. People did actually make many decisions about their living situation, simply by building informally outside a planning system beyond its capacity to handle the needs of a rapidly expanding Cairo, with estimates of 60-70% of Cairo’s population living in officially informal settlements. The pause of authority in the revolution resulted in countless grassroot initiatives, small and large, to remake the collective city and better serve residents. How this energy will be channeled, into

politics, into restructured local government, or in something quite new, is a question being worked out right now in what seem to be typical Cairene chaotic ways.



Murals painted by local children of Ard El Lewa, their faces and their dreams for the future

Into this potent brew, enter us, novices to Cairo (except the [first OSM mapping party with Abdelrahman back in 2008](#)). A year ago, Ford Foundation offered travel cover for us to come and share our experiences with urbanists, rights groups, and techonologists, and explore how community mapping and reporting technology could support Cairo's changing urban life. Well, lots of our life intervened, and then we waited for the right moment, without presidential elections absorbing attention, and not during Ramadan or the heat of summer, and ended up with the right and latest possible moment for arrival here one week ago. That was just a day before this whole stupid mess with the video and embassy protests broke out, which would seem like exactly the wrong time to come. But as it turns out, Cairo is completely and utterly normal (for Cairo), and where we've worked at Cluster's office, just a couple blocks away from Tahrir Square, you'd have no real idea anything was happening worthy (or really unworthy) of global media frothing.



Cardboard model of downtown Cairo in Cluster's office

In the quick run up to our trip, we reached out and began email and phone conversations with collaborators Cluster, Takween, Megawra, Arab Digital Expression Foundation, Shadow Ministry of Housing, Cairo from Below, OSM Egypt, Meedan, Egyptian Bloggers, and more and others. Cluster have taken on the role of local host, for workshop space and community introductions; and ADEF are taking the lead on the technical side. Awesome to have the interest and welcome from these folks, especially during our rapid, steep and very much continuing education on urban Cairo. We formed a rough plan around collaborative discussion and design of our previous work, the context in Cairo, and a small pilot demonstration and collaboration with residents of Ard El Lewa in mapping and reporting, with whatever results as raw material for possible adaptation and expansion throughout Cairo. Now, things are constantly taking shape and reshape, and we'll have plenty more to say soon.