

# Books & the Arts.



Minarets and crumbling rooftops above the main street of Historic Cairo, the city's foundation east of the Nile, 2007

FREDERICK DEKNATEL

## The Revolution Added Two Years

by FREDERICK DEKNATEL

In Cairo, there is a street named after the Arab League. It's a grand boulevard that cuts through Mohandiseen, a neighborhood built in the 1950s to house engineers and other civil servants, whose ranks swelled during the 1960s with the guarantee of employment under the state socialism of President Gamal Abdel Nasser. These days, the boulevard is lined with luxury car showrooms, drab mid-rises and fast-food chains, all forming the commercial spine of an upscale area too expensive for most clerks and bureaucrats. Last December, on one of the quiet streets that radiates off the boulevard, I visited the office of an

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architect named Dina Shehayeb. A professor at the Housing and Building National Research Center in Cairo, Shehayeb also runs her own firm, which focuses on community-based development and the revitalization of historic areas. The deadly street battles of late November between the police and unarmed protesters on Mohamed Mahmoud Street near Tahrir Square had ended, and the attacks on protesters by military police outside the People's Assembly near Tahrir were a week away. Cairo was relatively calm. But in her office, Shehayeb spoke heatedly of a city transformed during the reign of the recently deposed president, Hosni Mubarak.

"We had thirty years of the government pushing us to informality," she said, alluding to Cairo's vast "informal" areas: dense urban districts built without official planning or permits, often in cheap red brick and con-

crete on agricultural land that once formed the Nile's flood plain. Some two-thirds of Cairenes live in informal areas, the urban reality in a country where the government has never provided enough housing; during Mubarak's three decades of power in Egypt, state assets and land were sold off in a costly dream of turning Cairo's desert outskirts into satellite cities and gated suburbs. But Shehayeb was also talking about Mohandiseen, where someone with money and connections can skirt lax planning guidelines and build a tower on a street of low-rise buildings. "It was governance by informality, articulated and made ambiguous on purpose," she said. "Things were always done with vagueness, uncertainty and contradiction."

Shehayeb then lashed out at the latest master plan for the city, "Cairo Vision 2050," which imagines Egypt's capital as

a high-rise delirium modeled on Dubai, with crowded informal areas and neglected Nile-side neighborhoods replaced by glass towers and an abundance of green space. As for the city's "heritage" areas, from its belle époque downtown to its medieval core, home to an unrivaled concentration of historic Islamic architecture, they would become a vast "open-air museum." Drawn up by the General Organization for Physical Planning (GOPP), part of the Ministry of Housing under Mubarak, Cairo 2050 (as it's also known) was promoted as the "strategic urban development plan" for Greater Cairo, the sprawling urban area that includes three governorates, some 17 million to 20 million people and no mayor. Urban management

## The corruption of the Mubarak era is far from over, even if he and his two sons sit in prison.

falls instead to governors, often retired generals appointed directly by the president and given the rank of minister. Never made public, Cairo 2050 was presented at conferences starting in 2008, to consultants and advisers like the United Nations Human Settlements Program (UN-Habitat), and to investors in an Egyptian real estate market dominated by Gulf petrodollars.

The plan called for the massive decentralization of the capital, one of the densest cities on earth. Ministries and state institutions would move to the desert near New Cairo, one of the satellite cities to the east built under Mubarak, while millions of poor residents living in informal areas would be relocated to housing in an ever more distant stretch of desert. Snippets of the plan soon emerged in the local press. Bird's-eye-view renderings of Khufu Avenue—a runway-size boulevard with dedicated bus lanes running in a line from the heart of Mohandiseen to the base of the Giza Pyramids—convey nothing of contemporary Cairo, a hectic modern capital with major infrastructure, housing and planning needs that is nevertheless depicted by the Egyptian and Western media as a traffic-snarled, smog-choked jumble of slums.

When Mubarak fell during the Arab uprisings in February 2011, Cairo 2050 did not fall with him; UN-Habitat and GOPP have been drafting an update. "It is curious, and an indication of GOPP's isolation, that the organization and its parent, the Ministry of Housing, continue with this work in spite of mounting criticism from both Egyptian and

foreign quarters," writes David Sims, a long-time urban planner and economist in Egypt, in a new postscript to his authoritative book, *Understanding Cairo: The Logic of a City Out of Control* (2010). A year ago I met Bassem Fahmy, the project manager of the Strategic Urban Development Plan for the Greater Cairo Region, at UN-Habitat's office in a cheerless tower in Dokki, near Mohandiseen. Leafing through a draft of Cairo 2050 on his tidy desk, Fahmy described the updated plans as tied "much more to reality. You cannot just present nice pictures with perspectives that are unrealistic...kind of like Dubai." He admitted that some of the original plans represented "fantasy work, a kind of marketing," and that certain mega-projects, like Khufu Avenue, were "totally confused. It will not see the light." But the cover of the draft on his desk included a rendering of a huge roadway—much wider than the Champs-Élysées, the planners' self-expressed model—

terminating below the Pyramids, along with a few stock images of contemporary Cairo. The revised plans, Fahmy said, "will see the light, after public engagement," and with UN-Habitat as a consultant. He cited questionnaires, focus groups and public presentations at which residents were shown images of the proposals. In the original Cairo 2050 plans, however, GOPP claimed to have consulted 1,800 "key officials, planners and thinkers" through two conferences, "28 specialized workshops," four symposiums, and four surveys covering between 3,000 and 5,000 households in Greater Cairo.

"This was the promise of a Mubarak presidency: economic prosperity through real estate," says Dina Shehayeb. For her, the corruption of the Mubarak era is far from over, even if Mubarak and his two sons, Gamal and Alaa, now sit in Tora prison, along with the ministers whose prosperity Gamal Mubarak's liberalizing economic reforms had assured. "Those ministers in jail are just scapegoats," she insists, because Cairo 2050 "is about legalizing conflicts of interest and sanctioning personal benefit."

In June 2012, Mohamed Morsi became Egypt's first freely elected civilian president. An engineering professor and ranking Muslim Brotherhood bureaucrat, Morsi campaigned on a platform tied to the Islamist movement's social justice policies. Officially banned but tolerated under Mubarak, the Brotherhood

has built and operated schools and clinics in poor urban areas that the government neglected or abandoned altogether. Like other Islamist parties in the Arab world, it filled a welfare gap in an authoritarian state that had increasingly cut public subsidies, sold state assets, and otherwise operated a crony economy under the auspices of economic liberalization. The platform for the Brotherhood's political arm, the Freedom and Justice Party, decries the corruption of the old regime, but less so its economic policies. On urban development in its so-called Nahda (Renaissance) Project, the FJP promises to redistribute the population density of Egypt's 80 million to 90 million people and "get out of the Nile Delta valley to new regional growth areas."

What this means in practice is vague, but the promise is consistent with the policies of past governments, which devoted their budgets and resources to alleviating Cairo's demographic challenges by building out into the nearly 96 percent of Egypt that is desert. The construction of new satellite cities, beyond the natural borders of the Nile flood plain that bounded Cairo for a millennium, also reflects a broader governmental obsession with massive building programs as social policy. Nasser made huge outlays on modernist public housing blocks, industrial towns in the desert outside Cairo and, most prominently, the High Dam in Aswan—promoted as a sign of Egypt's postcolonial independence and modernization. Nasser's successor, Anwar el-Sadat, shifted the focus of Cairo's desert to housing, where worker communities would rise up in new satellites east of the metropolis; Sadat also tried to turn downtown Cairo into Houston on the Nile, in the words of anthropologist Farha Ghannam, its high-rises either government ministries or American chain hotels.

The pace of Cairo's desert urbanization accelerated under Mubarak, as state land—much of it controlled by the military—was sold to private developers in an era of so-called economic reform that began in 1991, when Mubarak agreed to a structural adjustment program with the International Monetary Fund. On stretches of rocky, barren terrain, Egyptian and Gulf developers raced to build villas, malls, gated compounds and golf courses with names like Dreamland, Beverly Hills, Moon Valley and Madinaty ("My City"). Meanwhile, closer to the Nile, where most people lived, residents of informal areas bribed local municipal officials in lieu of applying for a building permit, or to gain access to plumbing and electricity. A section of Duweiqā, one of Cairo's poorest shanty-

towns, collapsed in 2008 in a rock slide that killed 119 people; the area was bulldozed and its residents promised new housing that never materialized. The same year, the World Bank and the International Finance Corporation, in their *Doing Business Report*, named Egypt the “world’s top reformer.”

“Financial stabilization and structural adjustment were intended to generate an export boom, not a building boom,” Timothy Mitchell writes in *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-Politics, Modernity* (2002). “Egypt was to prosper by selling fruits and vegetables to Europe and the Gulf, not paving over its fields to build ring roads. But real estate had now replaced agriculture as the country’s third-largest non-oil investment sector, after manufacturing and tourism.” Mubarak turned Cairo’s desert cities into a luxury real-estate market, much of it speculative and driven by Gulf investment, which made Egypt’s political economy increasingly dependent on the region. According to Adam Hanieh of the School of Oriental and African Studies in London, as of January 2012, half

political scientist James Scott calls “authoritarian high modernism,” a state-led development logic which presumes that rapid modernization and social order—a shift through industrialization and urbanization—can be realized with sweeping projects imposed by a cadre of planning authorities. Cairo 2050 was the latest such scheme, even if it veered well into fantasy with its costs—not only budgetary, but also social and political costs for the millions it would displace. Sims sees the scheme as an example of the government’s “continued penchant for the manufacture of unrealistic dreams.”

**A**boul-Fetouh Shalaby teaches urban planning at Cairo University and coordinates the FJP’s committee on urban development and housing. Like many Brotherhood technocrats, he has multiple degrees: a PhD from Cardiff University in Wales and a master’s in urban planning from the University of Nevada. “I lived in Reno for two years,” he told me with delight. When asked about Cairo 2050, he had a ready reply: “It was politically driven for the benefit of certain investors and power groups. It was centered around the very idea of investment and maximizing profit.”

Shalaby detailed the nature of the police state under Mubarak, mobilized to protect corrupt and exclusive economic interests. “They used the security state to control, impose and force their own ideas and their own urban plan. This is why I call it a businessmen’s government.”

But immediately after, Shalaby admitted that, despite his criticisms of Cairo 2050, not “everything in it is all wrong.” The mistake of the Mubarak regime was not just devising a fanciful urban plan from “a businessmen’s government looking for fast revenue,” but also concentrating too much on Cairo. “Most of the desert cities were established on the periphery, but were managed together as one continuous urban area,” Shalaby said. “This actually caused more burdens on the existing infrastructure. Those settlements were meant to be independent cities, but ended up being dormitory outskirts for the rich. They didn’t have any economic basis to be real cities.” Shalaby added that the FJP aims to invest resources, “whether private or public sector, to open new developmental avenues outside the congested valley—to establish, in the real sense of the word, new independent settlements.”

In his October Paper of 1974, which

launched Egypt’s economic liberalization and signaled its strategic shift from Soviet ally to American client, Sadat proclaimed: “After all these thousands of years, and in view of the rapid increase in the population and the new life sought by them, the life of the Egyptian people cannot remain confined to the Delta and the narrow valley of the Nile.” Speaking before Parliament in 1996 to launch the Toshka project, Mubarak declared that “the conquest of the desert is no longer a slogan or dream but a necessity dictated by the spiraling population growth. What is required is not a token exodus into the desert but a complete reconsideration of the distribution of population throughout the country.” The FJP is upholding these policies. “We’re looking at the current existing urban context not to add to it, but to make it less dense,” Shalaby told me, “by attracting people outside of the congested valley to the barren desert, to undeveloped areas.”

For all of its social justice policies and history of persecution and imprisonment, the Brotherhood presents a prosperous, business-friendly face to Egyptians and the world. Behind the technocrats and professors like Shalaby, who described his party as one of “gradual change,” stand the group’s millionaires. One of them is Khairat al-Shater, the Brotherhood’s powerful deputy and leading financier, who was barred from the presidential election because he served time in prison under Mubarak; another is Hassan Malek, who started a software company with Shater in the 1980s and currently operates the Egyptian branches of major Turkish furniture and clothing chains. Malek drafted the FJP’s economic policies, which advocate continued privatization along with the requisite condemnation of the corrupt old regime. Last spring, Shater addressed foreign investors at the American Chamber of Commerce in Egypt with familiar free-market talking points. Ahead of a subsequent trip by executives from nearly fifty American companies last fall, Deputy Secretary of State Thomas Nides—who traveled with the trade delegation to Cairo—told *The New York Times* that the Brotherhood’s leaders, focused as they are on deregulation to spur a moribund economy, “sound like Republicans half the time.” Nides added, “Our goal is to send a very strong message to Egypt that the government understands it’s not just about assistance. It’s about growth and business.”

The Egyptian Business Development Association, a new 400-member trade group headed by Malek, represents this emerging Islamist business class—men who distin-

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of the twenty-six most valuable real estate developments in Egypt—those worth more than \$100 million—were fully owned by Gulf-based conglomerates. In fact, Gulf-based companies held 80 percent of the value of all real estate projects under development.

The landscape of a city long defined by its natural desert borders was transformed. A Cairo University thesis by Rania Rashed—cited by Khaled Adham, an Egyptian professor of architecture at the United Arab Emirates University—estimates that Cairo’s recent eastward and westward desert expansion under Mubarak totaled some 300,000 acres. Half of the eastern and the western desert, beyond the Pyramids and Sphinx of the Giza Plateau, were set aside for high-end residences, from villas to gated communities. But the building boom extended well beyond Cairo. In 1996, Mubarak launched the “desert reclamation” project of Toshka, a failed scheme to irrigate a vast stretch of desert near Sudan and conjure up a “second Nile Valley” that would accommodate the world’s largest farm, to be run by a California agribusiness owned by billionaire Saudi prince al-Waleed bin Talal.

Such mega-projects exemplify what Yale

guish themselves from the corruption of the Mubarak era with the language of values, ethics and revolution. “The spirit of the EBDA is different because it was established after the revolution,” said Osama Farid, a co-founder of the group and its head of international relations, in a recent *Financial Times* profile. The soft rhetoric is the only assurance, however, that the EBDA and other groups like it won’t become clubs of patronage and cronyism, replacing Gamal Mubarak’s coterie with a larger group of investors and industrialists with close ties to the Muslim Brotherhood and the Morsi government. Farid’s career took off with the fortunes of his construction company in the housing boom of the 1970s; the FJP’s current development ventures seem linked to his own business concerns. The *Financial Times* ended its profile by describing him as “filled with passion about building a new Egypt, and eager to talk about ideas to develop the Suez Canal region. He urges the launch of initiatives to jump-start housing construction and create jobs for the country’s youth.”

This doesn’t sit easily with critics in Egypt. The journalist Wael Gamal, in an op-ed in *al-Sborouk*, a Cairo newspaper, noted that the FJP’s electoral platform was the most straightforward in its adherence to neoliberal tenets, as well as the only one “based on attracting billions of dollars in foreign investment for infrastructure projects.” Ahmed Mansour, a legal researcher for the Housing and Land Rights Network at the Habitat International Coalition in Cairo, was more direct: “If you look at [the FJP’s] urban proposals, they use the same terms that the Mubarak regime used in the past. It’s the same urban planning exactly. They have the same vision as the Mubarak regime, copy and paste.”

In 2005, running for re-election in what would turn out to be his last presidential campaign, Mubarak touted an ambitious housing platform even though his victory would be assured in a vote rigged by his ruling National Democratic Party: 500,000 new affordable housing units were to be built in just six years through the National Housing Program, half of them on state land in the desert exurbs of Cairo. But what Egyptians called “the president’s promise” catered to the crooked economy overseen by Gamal Mubarak and cronies like Ahmed Ezz, a billionaire steel tycoon and former high-ranking NDP official who ran the Parliament’s budget committee. The government contracted real estate developers—the builders of the villas and

compounds of Cairo’s speculative desert frontier, who formed part of the new economic elite around Gamal—to construct these units. In *Understanding Cairo*, Sims describes attending a 2009 conference on “Affordable Housing in Challenging Times,” hosted at the five-star Semiramis Intercontinental by the Ministry of Investment and the Mortgage Finance Authority. Along with glossy brochures for villas, sprawling apartments and “iconic malls that attract the world’s top brands,” the conference panels addressed subjects like “Moving Down the Price Pyramid” and “Can Good Margins Be Made in the Affordable Housing Market?” Any reference to affordable housing was merely a nod, Sims writes, “a kind of recognition that, in tough times, maybe going a little down-market might find some customers who, in the halcyon boom times of 2006 and 2007, would have been ignored.”

In the six years of Mubarak’s final term, the houses became another grand unrealized dream, as well as a sop to the construction industry (including Ezz’s steel monopoly). The units that were built remain mostly unoccupied, priced far above what most Egyptians can afford and located on a distant patch of desert land accessible only by car (just 11 percent of Cairenes own one, Sims notes). And even “years later, no one’s really sure how many of the 500,000 units actually were built,” said architect Yahia Shawkat, who runs a blog called the Shadow Ministry of Housing. “I have estimates of anywhere from 60,000 to maybe 400,000 units that are mooted to have been completed.”

Yet barely two months after Mubarak stepped down, the Egyptian government, through the holdover minister of international cooperation, Fayza Abul-Naga, announced a new round of public housing to international donors. Called the National Social Housing Program, it was based on Mubarak’s plans for a second round of the “president’s promise,” this time double the size: a million units built in six years, at a staggering annual cost of \$3.34 billion and overseen by the Housing Ministry, the Housing Development Bank, and the New Urban Communities Authority (the powerful planning authority that administers the satellite cities. Sims said that NUCA is run like a “secret society”; Shawkat called it a “black box”). Over half of the new program’s budget was to come from international donors—an unprecedented amount, higher than any previous donor-financed program in Egypt. Yet it was promoted as

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“part of a rescue/stimulus package to help put the Egyptian economy back on track,” one that “utilizes the construction sector of Egypt—which is known to spur other economic sectors.”

Sims reports that the donors politely demurred, requesting an initial housing strategy with actual details. But the “president’s promise” 2.0, quickly dubbed the “million-units program” in the Egyptian media, remained a priority for the transition government. The FJP’s new housing minister, Tareq Wafiq, a professor of urban planning at Cairo University who directed the party’s housing committee and drafted the urban components of the Nahda Project, has promoted the million-units program as part of a

## Boulaq Abul Ela is a portrait of government neglect in the shadow of glass towers.

national development plan known as “Egypt 2052,” an updated series of regional master plans of which the earlier version—reportedly now referred to as “Cairo 2052”—was a component. (“The revolution added two years,” Mansour joked.)

**A**li El-Faramawy, a former senior human settlement officer at UN-Habitat who helped craft the original Cairo 2050 plan, is the million-units program’s technical adviser. He also directs the Informal Settlement Development Facility, a fund established with the pledge to upgrade and safeguard informal areas. The ISDF identifies “unsafe” areas that must either be demolished or “redeveloped.” So far it has identified over 400 (which house an estimated 850,000 people), and 116 of these are in Greater Cairo, according to Amnesty International. “It is not clear what criteria were used to decide which areas were more ‘unsafe’ than others,” Amnesty reported. “Nor is it clear why only 404 areas were deemed ‘unsafe,’ given that people in all informal settlements lack security of tenure and usually face other risks identified by the authorities as criteria for designating areas as ‘unsafe.’” Amnesty commended the motives behind the ISDF but warned that it was “being developed and implemented in ways that fail to respect the human rights of residents” through forced evictions, upon which plans like Cairo 2050 depend.

Some of the areas deemed unsafe in Cairo are located in Boulaq Abul Ela, a historic

Nile-side neighborhood and former port that housed a palace of Mohamed Ali Pasha in the nineteenth century. Today, its crumbling buildings are home to thousands of poor families, a picture of government neglect in the shadow of the glass towers that front the river—among them the Cairo World Trade Center and its adjacent Hilton hotel, and the Nile City towers, a joint Egyptian-Saudi development that includes shopping malls, a movie theater, corporate offices and a Fairmont hotel. Nile City’s Egyptian developer was Orascom Construction, part of the huge Orascom holding company run by the billionaire Sawiris brothers—Nassef, Samih and Naguib—who founded the secular, free-market Free Egyptians Party in 2011. Under Cairo 2050, this line of towers would expand to absorb Boulaq and transform it into the Maspiro Central Business District, named for the nearby Maspiro state television building, with gardens stretching along the

Nile. The threat of eviction has lingered since the towers went up. Last summer, after Egypt’s highest court dissolved Parliament, the governor of Cairo ordered an eviction notice for the area’s “shack-dwellers,” to be carried out by police.

In 2008, the year the ISDF was established, Mubarak’s rubber-stamp Parliament passed a new Unified Building Law (UBL), which introduced to Egypt the concept of “land readjustment,” a term that UN-Habitat promotes as a means of improving infrastructure and services through the regularization of land tenure in informal or unplanned areas. When applied to the “upgrading” of informal areas as outlined by the ISDF, however, land readjustment can mean the wholesale replacement of urban fabric and the displacement of residents, with the 2008 planning law providing the legal framework. The law expanded a previous eminent domain decree from 1990 on “Expropriation for the General Interest,” permitting the government to seize private properties—most often in informal areas—for “works of general interest,” from roads and infrastructure to anything broadly defined as serving the public good. The law allows “compulsory land acquisition” and provides compensation to displaced residents, though the Egyptian media are full of stories of Cairenes who were relocated to substandard public housing in the desert and never given full compensation.

The UBL also established the Supreme Council for Urban Planning and Develop-

ment, directly under the office of the prime minister, “with membership from all concerned ministries and authorities.” The council has a greater role in planning, but allows no effective public participation. Since its inception, it has been responsible for, among other self-interested regulations, attempting to establish a new law on the sale of state land in the weeks before the uprising. Under the proposal, four bodies would be responsible for administering and developing such plots, including the council itself along with the State Land Authority, the State Land Protection Authority and “any official with legal jurisdiction over the land in question, such as provincial governors.”

In December 2009, Prime Minister Ahmed Nazif, who oversaw the most feverish pace of privatization during Mubarak’s final presidential term, expanded the definition of “works of general interest” to include all building removals from informal areas classified as unsafe. “Forced evictions are justified under ‘compulsory land acquisition’ for public use. But whose public use?” Yahia Shawkat asked. “And which public? That’s always an issue. How you get these laws passed, and how you get compulsory purchase orders, has to be changed. They need to happen on a much more transparent, much more relevant level.” Shawkat sees the ISDF and a plan like Cairo 2050 as the government’s solution to a saturated real estate market. Having overbuilt the desert outskirts—along with the Mediterranean coast, on land also controlled by the military—the GOPP and its consultants are now eyeing central districts, either near the Nile or near valuable historical sites. The obstacle, to the government planner, is that most of these districts are informal, long neglected and home to thousands of underserved poor residents. “They are only profitable if you raze them,” Shawkat says.

**T**wo major Egyptian institutions, the Ahly Football Club and the Ministry of Culture, loom over the southern end of Zamalek, a leafy island in the Nile in central Cairo. The ministry occupies an enclosed compound that stretches across the narrow half-mile island. The Cairo Opera House, built in the 1980s with Japanese aid, commands the fenced-in area, which is home to the drab architectural expressions of a swollen bureaucracy: the Supreme Council of Culture, the Cultural Development Fund and the Palace of Arts. What was Cairo’s exhibition grounds in the 1920s has become the quiet campus of the state’s cultural buildings, spread among a

parking lot caked with sand and paved walkways with little shade, and rarely opening their doors to the public.

Last winter, at the cafe on the steps of the Supreme Council of Culture, I met Mohamed El-Rashidy, the technical director of a ministry-led restoration scheme known as the Historic Cairo Project, which sought to revive Cairo's crumbling medieval core by turning it into "an open-air museum." The project centered on al-Muizz Street, the *qasaba* (or traditional commercial and ceremonial spine) that cuts through the urban fabric and is named after the tenth-century Fatimid founder of Cairo, the Caliph Muizz Li Din Allah. The area known as Historic Cairo, a UNESCO-designated world heritage site, is just under four square kilometers of the city's foundation to the east of the Nile. It is home to an unrivaled concentration of medieval Islamic architecture, much of it lining al-Muizz, along with an estimated 310,000 people, many of them poor, some living three to a room.

Among architects and urbanists in Egypt, a so-called "open-air museum" conjures images of Luxor, where the former governor, Samir Farag, along with the Supreme Council of Antiquities, a branch of the Ministry of Culture, has tried to unearth and reconstruct a 2.4-kilometer "Pharaonic avenue" lined with pedestals thought to be the bases of sphinxes. The modern nineteenth-century town was developed over the so-called Avenue of the Sphinxes, along with nearly every settlement and civilization since Pharaonic times. The only way to restore the avenue was to raze the town and displace its residents, which the authorities did with bulldozers—and then promoted the removal as a public good. The American architectural firm Abt Associates designed the original plan for the "restoration of the Avenue of the Sphinxes," which will connect the Luxor and Karnak temples. Farag, a former chairman of the Cairo Opera House, opined that the project would turn Luxor into "the largest open-air museum in the world" by 2030. When asked by *Time* about the protests from displaced residents, Farag replied: "It was very difficult to convince the people that this master plan is for the sake of them."

Rashidy described the Historic Cairo project in the words of Farouk Hosni, the longtime minister of culture (and Hosni Mubarak's longest-serving minister), who recently joined the ranks of ex-ministers and officials charged with corruption: "When you look at al-Muizz Street from an airplane, Hosni said, you only see a narrow line. We need to expand that small line."



The restored thirteenth-century complex of Sultan Qalawun on al-Muizz Street, 2011

And so, for the last dozen years of Mubarak's rule, al-Muizz Street was dug up by workers from the state's largest construction companies, such as the Arab Contractors, a partially state-owned giant that seems to build everything in Egypt, and Wadi al-Nil, which is operated by the General Intelligence Services, otherwise known as the Mukhabarat.

With the power of a presidential decree, the Ministry of Culture was allocated an unprecedented budget for the project: an estimated 1 billion Egyptian pounds (over \$150 million) to restore al-Muizz's Islamic monuments, and also to lower the street to its original level, repave it, replace a sewer system and renovate other buildings along the street, which became a pedestrian-only zone. But there was a problem: the contractors specialized in poured concrete, not painstaking preservation work, and they were criticized for hasty, careless restorations of the 800-year-old mosques, whose entrances were affixed with marble plaques commemorating the patronage of Mubarak, first lady Suzanne Mubarak and the governor of Cairo. The new, "revitalized" al-Muizz Street officially reopened in 2010, in a ceremony attended by the first lady, the sidewalks aglow with recessed orange and purple Italian lighting. "To revitalize this street is to revive authent-

city and to resurrect it is to save the true meaning of civilization," Hosni declared in the introduction to a ministry publication on the project, which transformed a row of monumental Mamluk mosques and mausoleums into urban lanterns.

"The project was tailored for contractors attached to the government, and only open and competitive for companies with a huge capitalization," said Nairy Hampikian, an architect and preservationist who was one of the project's consultants, speaking to me at a Francophone cafe in upscale Heliopolis. May al-Ibrashy, another architect on the project, whom I met outside the northern city walls beyond al-Muizz, said, "There was no transparency, as with most things in Egypt." There were limits to the questions a consultant could raise about the project on-site. Referring to Wadi al-Nil, the Mukhabarat company, Ibrashy said, "You can't really criticize them, can you?"

As in Luxor, the open-air museum didn't put out the welcome mat to everyone. The urban businesses catering to the poorer workers who moved into Historic Cairo since the flight of the wealthier residents in the 1960s—carpenters, wholesale fruit and vegetable sellers, and small metalworkers—were pushed out to make way for tourist cafes offering more *shisha* than its residents could

have wanted. The museum has walled out of the neighborhood certain people and livelihoods, and it reflects the practice of architectural preservation in Egypt, with its narrow focus on “monuments”—the government’s favored term for valuable historic buildings. Inherited from the colonial era, the term suggests buildings devoid of local use, to be protected from Egyptians and preserved for the visiting tourists. But after the eighteen-day uprising that ended Mubarak’s presidency, the tourism industry took a nosedive, and the economy with it. Throughout 2011, al-Muizz Street was quiet, especially the *shisha* cafes (although the cars returned, since the police who enforced the pedestrian-only zones were gone). Needless to say, the Muizz project, with its huge but opaque budget and administration, was never open to public participation or review.

When asked about this, Rashidy took a drag of his cigarette and said simply, “The people are benefiting,” then quickly repeated the mantra. It wasn’t a dodge so much as a stark reminder of how the Egyptian state, from its urban planners in the Ministry of Housing to preservationists in the Ministry of Culture, views the management of a metropolis like Cairo and many of the people who live in it. Shawkat expressed this institutional attitude another way: “To the government planners, it’s actually much better to work in the dark, outside of the public scope, and get something done—and then say, well, they’re doing it for the greater good.”

The update of Cairo 2050 that UN-Habitat is drafting with GOPP continues to endorse this perspective—and even includes on the cover of its draft document a photograph of al-Muizz Street illuminated at night, along with a rendering of Khufu Avenue. The draft promotes the Historic Cairo project as an initiative “to upgrade El Moez [*sic*] street and transform it into a world-class open museum.” Three photos of the street glowing at night match those that appear in glossy Ministry of Culture publications. The transformation of al-Muizz into a pedestrian zone and open museum, according to the draft, “was carried out in coordination with the inhabitants of the area.”

**T**he chief slogan of the popular uprising that brought down Mubarak—“The people want the fall of the regime!”—was coupled with three basic demands: bread, freedom and social justice. These were not just a rallying cry to get people into the streets, but a concise, elegant

platform for the essentials that a new government must provide. The Mubarak regime had treated state budgets and assets—among them, the military-controlled land that underwrote Cairo’s desert transformation—as private portfolios. Urban control came to mean not just the deployment of the security forces to contain protests, but a network of governing, planning and business interests that grew wealthy building Mubarak’s Cairo.

Mansour at the Habitat International Coalition is part of an emerging group of housing rights activists who argue that little has changed since the uprising. “Housing is not just a commodity or a commercial good,” he told me. “It is a right. It’s a social good. So urban planning should be a social good, too. You are planning for people’s lives, not for a particular category of people at the top.” The urban nature of Egypt’s revolt might seem apparent with every reference to Tahrir Square, but Tahrir itself does not capture the role of the state’s urban planning and development policies in producing cit-

ies of extreme social and spatial disparities. “It’s top-down for a reason,” Shawkat said. “If you look at something like Cairo 2050—if people got in and wanted their way, or wanted their rights, then you’d never have it the way that they’re doing it.”

Mohamed Lotfy at Amnesty International cautioned against dismissing Cairo 2050—as well as the kind of socially destructive urban development that it represents—as simply an artifact of the old regime. “Even if they realize 10 percent of it,” he said, “that would be catastrophic for many, many people.” For her part, Dina Shehayeab recalls that even during the presidential campaign, candidates like Amr Moussa, former secretary general of the Arab League, spoke of plans for a Maspiro Central Business District. “We need to have a revolution in the universities, in planning education, in urban planning and architecture faculties as it is taught and practiced,” Nairy Hampikian insists. “Everything needs a revolution now.” ■

## Off-Key

by MICHAEL O’DONNELL

**G**lenn Gould, the virtuoso pianist and great interpreter of Bach, once described the way recordings of music “insinuate themselves into our judgments, and into our lives,” thereby giving recording artists “an awesome power that was simply not available to any earlier generation.” Listen to a favorite record often enough, and it becomes authoritative; a different interpretation, however fresh and ingenious, arouses suspicion. Is there a better performance of the “Et in terra pax” from Bach’s Mass in B minor than Nancy Argenta’s on the 1986 recording by the Monteverdi Choir and the English Baroque Soloists (for example)? Yet while repeated listening may accentuate our tastes, it does not necessarily refine them. For that we go to the concert hall, where we also encounter risk. A live performance is subject to constraints that a beloved CD or MP3 file is not: differences in interpretation, an off night, a patron’s abrupt cough and, above all, no second takes. But a concert holds various types of appeal that

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### Reinventing Bach

By Paul Elie.

Farrar, Straus and Giroux. 498 pp. \$30.

even a perfect recording lacks. For one thing, a concertgoer does not listen to the music while reading or working or making a daily commute, as we so often do today; a concertgoer can concentrate. Also, a concert is an ephemeral thing that exists for a time and is gone. In those brief moments, anything can happen.

Music in the age of recording is the subject of *Reinventing Bach*, an unusual book by Paul Elie that champions recording technology as the means of survival for classical music generally, and the music of Bach in particular. It is the latest in a wavelet of books by authors with no claim to any kind of musical expertise who discover classical music, fall in love with a composer, and write a book about the experience. Two recent titles are Wendy Lesser’s *Music for Silenced Voices*, about Dmitri Shostakovich’s string quartets, and Eric Soblin’s *The Cello Suites*, a book on one of Bach’s masterworks. Elie owes a considerable debt to Soblin’s research on the history of the suites.

Classical music has experienced years of diminishing ticket sales and the indif-