

THE ARAB HOUSING PARADOX

Middle East Decision Makers Must Address the Spiral of Informal Settlements

By David Sims

The city of the developing world will be the defining feature of global demography in the twenty-first century. This fact is creating new and uncomfortable challenges for which conventional wisdom about urban planning and management is largely irrelevant. Chief among these challenges is the phenomenon of informal housing systems whose scale, complexity and resilience to formal means of control bedevil countries in Africa, South America and most of Asia.

Also called extralegal, spontaneous or non-authorized housing, informal urban development can be narrowly defined as processes that contravene urban land use plans, subdivision regulations and/or building permit regimes. Much is written about the phenomenon: analytical, prescriptive, and even confused and pejorative—including unhelpful generalizations that equate the dynamic of informal urban development with the creation of slums, shantytowns and *bidonvilles*, with their deplorable and even inhuman conditions. As is often the case, trying to make glib global generalizations is counterproductive, and the reality varies dramatically from region to region and country to country. The discussion—as well as attempted solutions—is most extensive in the South Asian, Southeast Asian and South American contexts.

In Arab countries, where the phenomenon is usually called *munatiq 'ashwa'ia*, or random areas (or, in Syria, *manatiq mukhalifa*, illegal areas), such urban processes have become, in the last forty or fifty years, an important if unwelcome component of many Arab cities. Looking at the nature of urban informality in these cities and the largely unsuccessful struggles to suppress or accommodate it illuminate much about the contradictions inherent in applying Western-inspired models of planning, financing and regulation by Arab governments and their supporting elites. It also helps expose the paradox of why the pervasive efforts of the international development establishment to offer more nuanced and inclusive approaches toward informal urban development have had so little effect, in spite

▷ Informal housing, Giza, Egypt, Dec. 9, 2011. *Carlos Cazalis, Corbis*



of its huge scale, popularity and obvious advantages as a generator of durable, affordable housing solutions. A glance at Egyptian cities where these contradictions are most evident, as well as in urban areas of Syria, Yemen, Jordan and Tunisia, can yield insights that go beyond technical analysis and implicate as obstacles the stubbornly high modernist approaches of Arab regimes in their search for political legitimacy.

Cairo to Casablanca and Beyond

In some of the larger urban agglomerations in non oil-dependent Arab countries, informal urban development now accommodates at least half the resident population, and in many others it represents a sizable minority of the total population. Informal settlements, which have existed at least since the 1970s, have tended to establish themselves on the urban fringes or around existing satellite towns and villages, and these have been absorbing both rural migrants and lower-income households decamping from poor conditions in the city centers. Most informal areas have been provided with basic infrastructure and services, although coverage and standards are everywhere much lower than in the established formal parts of cities. One important feature is the progressive development of these areas over time, with residential densities continuing to increase as existing plots of land are further subdivided and as additional floors are added to buildings.

Solid information about the extent and characteristics of informal urban development is lacking in most cities, and even definitions are much debated. Curiously, most of what is known about the phenomenon comes not from municipal or national authorities but from small studies carried out by foreign development agencies and institutes. The former seem for the most part to either ignore the phenomenon or try, usually unsuccessfully, to stop it, without any attempts to assess the scope or understand the dynamics. In any event, in no Arab country is there an exhaustive body of knowledge about informal housing and informal settlements. What is known remains very much partial and piecemeal.

Egypt seems by far to have the most extensive informal urban development of any Arab country, and it is increasing at a very rapid rate. In mapping studies carried out first for Hernando De Soto's Institute for Liberty and Democracy in 2000 and subsequently for the World Bank in 2008, it was found that informal development, starting in 1960, had at the time of the Census of 2006 accounted for roughly a third of the built-up area and, remarkably, had become the residence of over 62 percent of Greater Cairo's population. And, even more remarkably, of the additions to the agglomeration's population between 1996 and 2006, 78 percent was absorbed into these areas, both in existing *'ashwa'iat* and in the informal peri-urban fringes of Giza and Qaliubia governorates. In contrast, formal Cairo absorbed less than just 7 percent

of this growth, and the government's much-hyped new towns in the deserts around Greater Cairo only accounted for 15 percent. By 2011 it was estimated that of Greater Cairo's 18 million inhabitants, some 12 million or almost 67 percent were to be found in informal areas.

Furthermore, since the January 2011 uprising, informal building all over the metropolis has exploded since any government control has virtually disappeared. Anecdotal information points to a two to threefold increase in informal construction as compared to pre-2011 rates.

Much less is known about the extent of informality in other Egyptian towns, although it would be safe to say that informal areas accommodate in excess of 40 percent of inhabitants in the second city of Alexandria (total population 4.5 million) and probably a higher proportion in the numerous secondary towns in the Delta and Upper Egypt. Practically all such informal development occurs on agricultural land sold by the original owners. Only in the towns of the Suez Canal Zone, where there is ample fringe government land upon which many social and cooperative housing schemes have been built, is the informal urban phenomenon less, probably accommodating just 25 percent of the residential population.

In Syria informal urban development is very common, although the scale is not quite as prevalent as in Egypt. According to a 2008 study carried out by the German Technical Cooperation agency in Aleppo, of a total metropolitan population of 2.4 million inhabitants in 2004, over one million or 40 percent of the population resided in informally developed settlements, mainly on the southern and northern fringes. And it was estimated that the population of these areas was increasing at 4 percent per annum, compared to a citywide average of 2.9 percent. In Greater Damascus, with an estimated population of 4.1 million in 2005, informal development—mainly located in the many small municipalities of the Governorate of Rif Damascus that surrounds the city proper—probably already made up at least 30 percent of the total metropolitan population, and almost all additions to this population were occurring in these areas. Studies carried out by the Institut Français du Proche Orient and by World Bank consultants have shown the many means that informal land subdividers and individual builders used to circumvent the regulations of municipal agencies, in spite of the otherwise strict control that the Syrian regime imposes on society.

In the main cities of Yemen, informal urban development is not, strictly speaking, particularly prevalent, simply because there are few urban laws that are applied. On the books building licenses are required, but these simply involve paying a small fee and there are no subdivision regulations. The only planning mechanisms are the Detailed Neighborhood Plans drawn up in cookie-cutter fashion in central government offices. These offices are supposed to specify land uses and street alignments, but their main

impact is to raise land prices. A study carried out in Sanaa by World Bank consultants in 2007 identified thirty-three fringe areas of the city that were the most deprived but also rapidly developing neighborhoods planned mainly by poor families. These areas alone contained roughly 21 percent of the then-metropolitan population of 2.4 million persons. However, in Yemen's third city of Al-Hodeidah, where all fringe areas are state-controlled desert lands, a World Bank study in 2008 inventoried twenty-three very poor and deprived squatter areas and pockets that, together, already accounted for over 50 percent of the city's 900,000 inhabitants. These informal settlements, which by any definition could be called shantytowns, are an exception to the norm in Arab cities.

It was reported in a 2005 World Bank document that 23 percent of urban dwellings in Morocco were informally constructed. Many more such dwellings could be found in fringe urban areas outside municipal boundaries. Most of this informal housing had been created by *lotisseurs clandestins*, or clandestine land subdividers, which has and continues to result in quite acceptable three- and four-story apartment blocks. A minority of this housing was to be found in dense single-story *bidonvilles*, or shantytowns, for the most part clustered in and around the Casablanca and Tangiers agglomerations. Following the suicide bombings in Casablanca in 2003, the Moroccan government launched a program called *Villes sans Bidonvilles* that targeted the elimination of these pockets through a relocation of inhabitants into new and expensive satellite towns.

In Jordan and Tunisia, urban informality is much less prevalent than in Egypt or Syria. In these small countries the scale of the problem has been less, governments have had—at least until the Arab Spring—stronger police powers to control development, and they had benefited from considerable financial and technical assistance from donors. Both countries have also carried out systematic upgrading of deprived neighborhoods, have well-developed housing mortgage systems and, in general, have been doing the right thing. Yet even in these two countries informal housing exists in many urban fringe pockets and anecdotal information points to a resurgence of unauthorized building in several peri-urban areas. This is especially true in Tunisia, where government figures for 2010 recorded only some 4,000 building violations being issued—representing 10 percent of annual national housing production. However, this seriously underestimates the phenomenon, since a huge amount of informal housing is being built on marginal land outside municipal boundaries or in zones not designated for residential use and not issued with violations, especially within the geographic orb of Greater Tunis.

Even rich, oil-dependent Arab countries are not immune to the phenomenon of informal housing, although the scale is considerably less, as certain anecdotal information shows from Saudi Arabia and Libya. For example, the devastating flash floods in

Jeddah in 2009, which destroyed thousands of homes and caused at least one hundred deaths, exposed the fact that the whole affected area had been designated a flood wadi reserve but had been completely built over by low-cost, informal construction. A number of real estate developers and municipal officials were eventually jailed. And in 2009 the United Nations Human Settlement Programme (UN Habitat) engaged a consultant to assist the Libyan Urban Planning Agency to come up with a strategy to address the uncomfortable fact that masses of inhabitants of Tripoli were ignoring the city's carefully crafted growth plans (again made by foreign consultants) and were leapfrogging south into the main agricultural belt where very nice homes and villa compounds could be built, illegal as this might be.

Do-It-Yourself Homes

All informal housing in Arab countries has been built in the last forty or fifty years and, with a few exceptions, the informal housing stock is made up of multistory houses and small footprint apartment blocks that are remarkably well-built and durable. This fact sets urban informality in Arab cities dramatically apart from the shacks and shantytowns normally found in Asia and Africa and in most of Latin America. Some commentators have gone so far as to postulate that Arabs have a cultural affinity to make every effort to build solid housing that will last for generations, even if it is far beyond their means and even if it takes many years. It is true that tiny pockets of precarious shantytowns have emerged in some Arab cities, but in all cases these began as opportunistic squatting on marginal lands where land tenure is very insecure. The Arab norm, in contrast, is to purchase private agricultural land, thus land tenure is quite good and is recognized as so by the surrounding neighbors. Arabs are also known to squat on state desert land, but in large enough numbers that quickly provide a critical mass of people that confounds attempts by authorities to remove them.

An important feature of informal housing in Arab countries is that it is built or occupied mainly by low- to moderate-income families and, through the resulting market of units for rental or sale, represents the most affordable housing solutions to be found within Arab cities. It is sobering to think what the situation in Arab cities would be today had there been no informal housing.

There are many advantages inherent in informal housing processes. A small parcel of land can be found (which may not be the case in regulated areas), and the price per square meter will normally be much cheaper. The process is incremental, with land acquisition usually preceding construction by many years, and with construction itself being carried out in stages, that is floor by floor or even room by room. This fits well with family finances that are often irregular. There are no banks or government or corporate entities involved. The substantial extra costs associated with meeting

subdivision and building codes can be avoided (procedural expenses and taxes as well as physical costs). A higher exploitation of land parcel is possible, in terms of building heights and floor-area ratios, than in controlled areas.

Furthermore, a family that manages construction itself can do away with formal contractors, employ unregistered laborers or relatives and shop for the cheapest materials. Studies in some countries have shown that under this owner-builder process construction costs can be reduced by at least 30 percent compared to fully compliant contractor-built housing. And since it is likely to be the builder's family and his relatives who occupy the finished housing units, it is very much in his interest to ensure that the construction process results in a structurally sound building.

Although the creation of housing is the main aim of informality, another advantage of the process is that it allows for the creation of ground-floor businesses and workplaces. As informal settlements mature, considerable commercial, service, and even petty manufacturing activities become common, to the extent that in many such areas a very significant number of job and business opportunities are generated. And the high residential densities in informal areas support commercial life and, parenthetically, very sustainable pedestrian modes of transport. In other words, these areas do not remain marginalized dormitory settlements but take on most if not all of the heterogeneous attributes of urban life.

Still, it is important not to take an overly romantic view of informal urban areas and ignore the disadvantages found in many of them. The lack of any control means that the public interest—in terms of open spaces and parks, land for schools and other services, even minimally acceptable street widths—will suffer greatly. Also, over time an informal area can become seriously overbuilt, with many apartment units lacking sufficient air and light. And older areas may acquire a drab and monotonous appearance that affronts the sensibilities of those for whom the urban aesthetic is all important.

Allure of High Modernism

It should be obvious that the huge scale and continuing popularity of illegal or unauthorized housing in many cities of the Arab world indicate that something is lacking in state responses to the phenomenon. After all, informal urban processes have been around for decades and it would seem impossible for high-level government officials to ignore their massive weight. These officials themselves would likely say that they have in place strict laws and programs to prevent new informal housing and offer attractive alternative housing solutions to those of limited incomes, very much a carrot-and-stick approach. These officials might also add that they have adopted a policy of upgrading the infrastructure and services of existing informal neighborhoods wherever possible, and of relocating inhabitants to new housing estates if demolition and

clearance are unavoidable. These responses sound quite logical, but their effectiveness throughout Arab countries has proven very elusive.

All Arab states have a large set of laws and related regulations, decrees and circulars that control urban development and construction carried out by private individuals and companies, in almost all cases using legislation adopted either from their former colonial masters or from European models. Building codes aim to ensure that buildings are safe and provide reasonable space, light and ventilation. Subdivision laws set minimum standards for plot sizes, road widths, utilities and public spaces. Urban plans designate allowed land uses, major rights of way for transportation and maximum building heights. (In some cases regulations may also specify particular building styles and facades.) In addition, there are laws that define private property and the means of its registration and transfer, and another set of laws that prescribe the evaluation and imposition of property taxes.

In all cases, this compendium of legislation specifies in detail the government agencies, committees and officials that are responsible for applying regulations and monitoring compliance, as well as the associated bureaucratic steps and fees. For most planning, subdivision and building rules, it is local government (municipalities for the most part) that are charged with such enforcement. It is they who are on the frontline, so to speak, in the struggle to prevent illegal subdivision and construction. Unfortunately, these bodies are almost invariably underfunded and their staff poorly qualified and grossly underpaid. Commonly, inspectors don't even have access to vehicles to cover their large and growing territories. It is no wonder that they rarely inspect and that bribery is rampant. In fact, a position in building control departments is seen by many as a very lucrative post that is much sought after, however predatory it may seem. And in almost all countries once an illegal structure is finished and inhabited it becomes next to impossible to evict inhabitants, mainly because of the threat of resistance from the community and a cultural aversion to tossing people out into the street. It is no coincidence that informal housing tends to cluster together and creates a critical mass that makes collective eviction a political nightmare. And those building informally have learned how to circumvent the control system, even where it is applied. Building at night and during holidays is common, as is screening a building site from view or hiring gangs to block roads and create diversions. Sometimes people are paid to sit in unfinished buildings simply so they appear occupied. And building owners will take advantage of weak coordination among state authorities, for example by acquiring an electrical and water connection or a dubious title deed as part of a paper chase to prove legitimacy.

It is interesting to note that the only large and rapidly urbanizing Arab country where informal settlements were practically unknown, at least in the major cities, was

in Iraq under Saddam Hussein. The main factor was his use of the country's considerable oil wealth to develop extensive and heavily subsidized subdivisions and housing estates that practically all citizens could afford. But another factor that certainly discouraged official connivance of informality was the fact that corrupt practices in local as well as central government were punishable by summary execution.

In effect, the stick approaches that are applied by most Arab governments to prevent informality have been, shall we say, not up to the mark. But what about the carrot alternatives? Most Arab countries have national social housing programs that offer low-cost housing for families of limited means and in theory should represent an affordable alternative to informal housing. These programs have been in place for decades in Morocco, Tunisia and Egypt and to a lesser extent in Jordan and Syria. However, such housing schemes have never been on a scale that would come anywhere near meeting gross demand, and in any event the selection of beneficiary families has been bureaucratic and arbitrary, with those 'most in need' rarely qualifying. In the 1980s and 1990s social housing units in some countries were heavily subsidized, making them very affordable, but at the same time they represented a huge drain on national budgets. More recently, social housing programs such as those carried out by La Société Nationale Immobilière de Tunisie and under the Egyptian National Housing Program have shifted to become more financially viable, although the near-market prices of units have put them far out of reach of the lowest-income families and in fact have become attractive to the emerging, modern middle classes.

Another government mechanism that should in theory lessen the demand for informal housing are programs that provide financial packages to ease the burden of purchases on the formal housing market, usually through mortgage systems. Most of these imply subsidies and have limits imposed to help lower-income families qualify for modest units. These programs, along with the required legislation and a host of players (banks, brokers, assessors and foreclosure agents) have been in place in Tunisia and Morocco for decades and were emerging in Egypt in the 2000s. In every case these were based on Western models and have received considerable foreign donor support. Also, in every case they require registered properties, borrowers with steady incomes and strong enforcement of foreclosure. Only in Morocco and Tunisia have a significant number of lower-income families acquired housing units under these mortgage systems. In Tunisia this has been achieved mainly through the subsidized program Fonds de Promotion des Logements pour les Salariés; as the name implies, those without steady, provable incomes cannot apply. Also, Tunisia's relative success was partly due to the simple fact that the market cost of borrowing was quite low and stable. In contrast, a main factor that has made mortgage finance unattractive in Egypt is that interest rates must be kept high, now well above 14 percent per year—which means

that over the life of a mortgage a family will end up paying installments whose total value is over three times the cost of the dwelling. Another factor that makes housing mortgage systems unpopular, one that is found in all Arab countries, is an aversion to incurring debt, especially debts that are locked in for fifteen to twenty years. Religious injunctions against usury also discourage many.

The prevention of informal housing through laws and police power have had little success in Arab countries, and neither have programs that offer alternative, formal paths to affordable housing. Yet another determining factor that encourages informal housing is the high and costly standards implicit in formal planning and building control regimes. The physical standards relating to land exploitation and structures are themselves expensive to comply with, and additional heavy costs relate to the procedural requirements needed to conform fully with legislation. Seen from the point of view of a low- or even middle-income family, these costs are imposed without any apparent justification, and such extra costs seem superfluous in their herculean struggles to mobilize funds. It should be added that in no Arab country have simplified, lower standards been adopted for popular areas that would suit the small footprint and modest types of housing most prevalent under informal processes.

Empowering the Poor

Arab government responses to the informality phenomenon have been disappointing, to say the least. This is in spite of the fact that over decades a solid narrative has developed among Western academics and professionals that sees tremendous value in the informal dynamics of the struggles of individuals and families in the cities of the developing world to house themselves. This narrative influenced multilateral and bilateral aid agencies and led to a number of attempts to encourage governments to take a more nuanced approach to the phenomenon. Proponents of this approach argued that there are ways to harness the informal dynamic and guide it toward creating formal, legal neighborhoods where poor and moderate-income families, including small entrepreneurs, can progressively create affordable and appropriate housing at little cost to the state.

It could be said that the narrative began in 1966 with the appearance of a seminal paper by British urban planner John F.C. Turner called “Uncontrolled Urban Settlement: Problems and Policies,” prepared for the UN Centre for Housing, Building and Planning. Based on Turner and his team’s investigations of land invasions in Peru, the ideas soon gained international traction, and by the late 1970s and 1980s had spawned a number of programs and pilot projects supported by donors in several developing countries. These were mainly ‘sites and services’ projects on urban fringes where small land parcels were prepared with infrastructure for families to build their own

dwelling progressively. Parallel initiatives were developed for in situ upgrading where existing informal neighborhoods were provided with lacking infrastructure and services and land titles, and only minimal or no demolition and resettlement. However, by the 1990s sites and services schemes had fallen into disfavor, partly due to the reluctance of host governments to devote precious land and resources to them, and partly due to donor fatigue toward projects that took long time spans to succeed and which incurred a host of bureaucratic problems. On the other hand, in situ upgrading of slums and older informal areas has gained in popularity in many developing countries, usually with donor support.

In Arab countries sites and services had only a short life, mainly restricted to Egypt and Jordan. The first scheme spun out of the Ismailia Master Plan prepared by British consultants with financing from the UN Development Programme, in which Turner was involved. The main project, begun in 1978, was the Hay Al-Salam neighborhood developed on state land on the immediate fringe of the city. With only a small amount of foreign technical assistance, the area was fully planned and progressively developed by the Governorate of Ismailia for citizens to build their own housing with only minimal controls. Better called a ‘sites and *then* services’ project, it was a resounding success. The required infrastructure and services were largely auto-financed through land sales, considerable individual investment in housing was attracted, and the area grew to house almost 100,000 inhabitants within less than twenty years. In spite of this, the project had virtually no subsequent demonstration effect on the Egyptian government, which continued its romance with expensive new towns in the desert and with heavily subsidized public housing, in spite of the fact that at the same time informal housing was becoming the defining feature of Egypt’s urban landscape.

In the 1980s there were a number of sites and services neighborhoods developed by the Urban Development Department (UDD) in Jordan, with massive World Bank financial and technical support. These however were so bureaucratic that they practically killed the very informal dynamic they were trying to attract and were never replicated. Currently pro-poor policies of the Housing and Urban Development Corporation (the successor to the UDD) are restricted to housing finance and ways to stimulate low-cost housing production by the private sector. This last objective has recently become quite a popular approach in a number of Arab countries, but getting the private sector to build and market affordable housing units has everywhere proven almost impossible without significant subsidies.

It should be added that there was one successful sites and services project in Yemen. The Sawat Saawan project in Sanaa began in the early 1990s, was promoted and financed through a World Bank loan and included housing construction loans to beneficiaries, all of whom were government employees.

Urban upgrading has had a somewhat better track record than sites and services in the Arab world, although efforts have been nowhere near the scale required and areas that had been upgraded have frequently reverted to the old status quo. Only in Tunisia has such upgrading been comprehensive and notable for its success, mainly through the *Agençe de Réhabilitation et de Rénovation Urbaine*, although even it has been unable to keep up with the recent proliferation of informal areas in the peri-urban fringes of main cities. In Egypt foreign donors and a couple of elitist non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have tried various upgrading initiatives in a few informal neighborhoods of Cairo and Aswan, but these have had virtually no demonstration effect, and it seems that efforts have aimed more at advancing donor feel-good agendas of community participation than any concrete change on the ground. In Jordan and Morocco there have been small upgrading efforts promoted by the World Bank, and preparations for more were under way in Yemen prior to the uprising in 2011.

The recognition of the value of progressive informal housing as part of any solution to urban housing problems in developing countries is still alive and well, at least as part of the global development narrative. An admirable report was prepared by Patrick Wakely and Elizabeth Riley for the Cities Alliance (an arm of the World Bank) in 2011 called “The Case for Incremental Housing.” It argued convincingly that informal incremental development, where low-income people develop their homes and neighborhoods often to surprisingly high standards, can be justified in economic, financial, social and governance terms and, given the scale of the urban housing affordability challenge, is practically the only way forward. Unfortunately, as is often the case with development literature, it seems that this paper was largely a self-referential exercise among the already convinced. For example, of the twenty-two institutions referred to in the report, thirteen were donor agencies and Western universities, seven were international NGOs and institutes, and only two were banks or agencies in developing countries.

Curse of Ambivalence

The paradox is stark. Tens of millions of Arabs live in informal urban areas and millions more are added to these areas and to new ones every year. All indications are that the pace is increasing. Most of these areas suffer from a host of infrastructure, basic service and employment problems, not to mention poor transportation, near-total exclusion from political processes, the taint of illegality and at best condescension from a sizable segment of their fellow citizens. Virtually all past and present attempts by government, donors and NGOs to improve the livelihoods of residents do not affect more than a tiny fraction, and viable formal housing alternatives have and continue to attract only a miniscule subset of housing demand. At the same time more and more sprawling informal areas are being created on urban fringes, and it seems the

only response is to subject them, eventually, to upgrading initiatives that are always too little and too late. And, we should add, until now the Arab uprisings, which have set in motion dramatic political changes in many ways, have not at all included any fresh approaches to the issue of informal housing.

How can this state of affairs be explained? First, it seems that most Arab governments are preoccupied, even mesmerized, by the physical appearances of modernity and look to Western cities or to dazzling Dubai, Singapore and Shanghai for inspiration and emulation. In the past some may have looked at the ordered regimentation of socialist cityscapes as models, but now all faith is put in the miracle of the corporate real estate sector—both domestic and transnational—to build and transform their cities, especially if such transformation is bankrolled by Gulf Arabs. The needs of a city's common people may receive grudging attention in government pronouncements, but the messy, chaotic and complicated reality of urban informality is the antithesis of the kinds of urban order that in a modern city should prevail. Better to ignore or wish away the phenomenon and concentrate on what can be controlled: formal, mainly corporate modes of urban planning and development. And better to frame urban informality as simply the product of those who are ignorant, uneducated and backward.

This, in a way, is understandable. The legitimacy of an Arab state, as the vanguard or at least the guiding hand of progress and development, is entwined with the application of its laws and norms. By definition informal urban processes contravene a host of these, and what government wants to explicitly admit that it has lost control? In addition, important sectors of the economy depend to a large extent on the demand created by formal urban development and the cozy relations with government such development generates. From construction to manufacturing and from finance to the professions—those who are part of these sectors can be counted on to enthusiastically support the state's rejection of and biases against informality.

But these are not sufficient explanations. Why have the considerable efforts of the international community over decades to influence the policies of Arab governments had so little traction? One can understand the mindsets of older officials in government structures who are incapable of absorbing uncomfortable ideas that do not come directly from their superiors and for whom informal areas are an anathema that cause nothing but headaches. But younger professionals both inside and outside government have been heavily exposed to the alternative narrative. Not only have innovative urban projects that demonstrate how to accommodate informality been supported and financed by donor agencies in most Arab countries, but large and continuing efforts have been made by donors and institutes to train young Arab architects, planners and engineers to grapple with the complexities of rapid urban growth. Thousands

of such degree holders have either gained graduate educations from Western universities or have been sponsored to attend diploma courses in specialized institutes in such places as London, Rotterdam, Berlin and Cambridge, Massachusetts, usually with the specific aim of returning to their countries with their newfound orientations. Some universities in Arab countries have recently also launched similar courses. Moreover, donor agencies have, under the rubric of capacity building, sponsored thousands of in-country as well as out-country training courses, symposiums and conferences on effective tools and policies of sustainable urban development, to which key municipal and ministry officials are always invited.

And what are the results of all this education and capacity building? The more astute Arab professionals with graduate degrees—who demonstrate an understanding of urban complexities and have good foreign language skills—are usually quickly employed by international or bilateral donor agencies themselves, where they pursue comfortable and rewarding careers. But for others, it seems whatever new orientations they might have acquired are quickly lost or put aside upon their return to their countries or to their old jobs there. There is simply no appreciative audience, and their career prospects, whether in government or more often in local consulting firms and academia, are not likely to benefit from propounding what only the very few want to hear. In any event, it is extremely rare that they are in a position to influence urban policies. After all, the real decision-makers are either non-professionals—usually former generals, successful businessmen and parliamentarians—or engineers who are already members of the ruling political elites. It is precisely these people whose accumulation of power depends upon their obedience to the modernist ethic and the conviction that only the corporate system, sometimes in combination with the army or super-state agencies, can deliver it. One needs only to look at the hyper-modern urban makeover schemes and mega projects that have been advanced for Cairo, Tunis, Amman, and Damascus to see where most attention of those in power is placed.

Of course there are dedicated academics and professionals in every Arab country who recognize that the high modernist status quo will never address the real issues of Arab cities, but these are few and their voices are rarely heard. One can only hope that freer environments and new political spaces coming from the Arab uprisings will allow for a more appreciative audience. And one also hopes that the same expanded political space will allow the disenfranchised scores of millions who live in urban informality and who are—or soon will be—the majority of the potential electorate in many cities to fully articulate their demands. After all, isn't social justice what these revolutions are all about?