

The Crete Branch of the MGS

December 2023 - Vamos, Apokoronas
Egyptian Urban Landscapes by Doug Langmead

Our Christmas meeting took place in a cosy atmosphere with cake, tea and coffee in the Donkey Cafe in Vamos.

This time Douglas Langmead took us on a trip to Egypt, into a different Egypt we might think of, wealthy, top end luxury developments with large scale landscaping projects. Doug told us about his daily work as a landscape quality manager in northern Egypt, where he is currently working with Emaar on various major projects.

Emaar is the company that built things like Burj Khalifa in Dubai, the tallest building in the world when it opened. The projects in Egypt are basically new towns, or new suburbs, with thousands of villas and flats in each.

Emaar Misr, the Egyptian Division of Emaar Dubai is the foremost developer in Egypt, with six master projects, two on the Mediterranean coast and four in Cairo. Landscaping is a major component of these gated communities, with a significant amount of land devoted to recreation and leisure - golf courses, parks, pedestrian trails, beaches and pools. Lush planting lines all the roads and community spaces, whilst homeowners are free to develop their individual plots. The contrasts with the densely crowded cities and litter-strewn villages is stark. The talk included examples from the developments, discussion of sustainability criteria for selection of plants, planting palettes and irrigation for the various communities.

Brief Background

Doug is an Australian architect by vocation and management consultant by trade, with experience in the Middle East from 1979 to date, at the forefront of landscaping, architecture and urban development. Since early 2022 he has been overseeing Quality Management for Emaar Misr, the Egyptian Division of Emaar.

Doug's introduction to landscaping began with the redevelopment of Nizwa town and souq in the early 1990's. The old capital, Nizwa, inland of Oman's Jebel Akhdar mountain range was developed with urban planning, streetscapes and a pocket park. In 1991 the contract was extended to the villages and Doug designed Marfa Dharis Park along an ancient falaj (irrigation canal) that was subsequently designated a world heritage site.

From 2019 until November 2021, Doug acted in the role of Design Delivery Manager for the Riyadh Development Authority on the \$14B Green Riyadh Program, taking the lead technical review role for landscaping and architecture across all typologies in the entire Riyadh Metropolitan area.

Over the decades, Doug has led the design and construction of palaces for three of the GCC Heads of State, as well as major urban and landscape development projects such as Dubai Dhow Wharfage, redevelopment of Nizwa Town and Souq, Jumeirah Island Two (where 8 mature baobab trees were transplanted from Western Australia to Dubai. An epic 15,000km+ Journey halfway around the world would fill another talk!) and the iconic Jumeirah Beach Residences in Dubai.

Prior to arriving in Riyadh, Doug was the landscape project manager on a large mixed-use marina development in Aqaba in Jordan, following which he undertook the same role on the highly popular Riyadh Front courtyard shopping mall in Riyadh.

Operating as an independent management consultant, Doug established Langmead Associates LLC in Bahrain in 2000, relocating to Dubai in 2012 as Aptitude Management Services LLC.

Today Doug lives in Uptown Cairo on the eastern side of the Nile. His apartment on the Mokattam ridge sits above the city smog, but right on top of the Cairo fault line, overlooking Cairo City (on a clear day!).

The Emaar Projects

Emaar offers six gated mixed-use developments in Egypt, four in Cairo and two on the North Coast. Two of the Cairo developments are on the east side of the Nile, two on the west side; Marassi and Soul are on the north coast, west of Alexandria, benefiting from the Mediterranean climate with mild summers and winters that bring strong winds and rain.

The communities are being developed for wealthy Egyptians from the middle to upper echelons who can afford the lifestyle that Emaar offers. Each development includes as many as 26 access-controlled communities of various types, from apartment blocks to luxury villas. Each enclave offers everything you need to live, including natural landscapes.



The project site in Marassi, North Coast of Egypt

Great importance is placed on having pleasant urban environments, with lush and well-maintained landscaping along all the roads, nature trails and parks threading through the communities and using hedges as well as boundary walls and fences.

All the landscaping in the public domain of the developments is irrigated, however plants are selected for low water demand and all the systems are automated to be as frugal as possible. Plants and trees for the developments are sourced from Emaar's own nursery on the western fringe of the verdant Nile delta.



Marassi, Street view with planting

Uptown Cairo

The flagship of Emaar's Cairo developments is Uptown Cairo. Sited on Mokkatam Ridge, 7km east of the Nile and about 300m above it, the development is nearly 6km end to end and up to 1.5km wide with a total area of about 420Ha. The rocky and rugged natural landscape posed a challenge for the developer and enormous effort has gone in to terraforming and transforming the outcrops to create 17 communities overlooking Cairo City. An 18-hole golf course threads through the valleys. Construction began 15 years ago and will continue up to 2035.

Major issues exist with ground stabilization before you can landscape, and plastic lining with drains to evaporation ponds underlie all the irrigated areas to prevent water from settling and weakening the ground. The richly landscaped roads and golf course stand in stark contrast to the barren, rocky and crumbling ridges.



Uptown Cairo...



... and downtown Cairo

Mivida

Mivida is a very popular mature development of about 360Ka, in an upscale area about 30Km to the east of the Nile. It has been subdivided into about 28 different communities, ranging from stand-alone villas to multi-storey apartment blocks and is home to more than 2,000 families. The mix includes office buildings, shopping centres, schools, a large central park and a leisure area arrayed around a lake.

Cairo Gate

Cairo Gate is a 58 Ha development to the Northwest of Cairo at the beginning of a new toll road that now links Cairo to Alexandria. Construction commenced in 2021, with the first tranche of villas to be released in late 2024. It contains four residential neighbourhoods, a multi-storey mixed-use town centre, a Recreation Centre, mosque and community centre. Landscaped community areas thread through each community, as well as tree-lined roads and public gardens.

Bell Vie

Nestled 30 Km to the west of the Nile in the New Zayed area of Cairo, Belle Vie is meticulously designed to create a joie de vivre experience that lives up to its name 'the beautiful life' in French. The 200Ha development is in the early stages of infrastructure, but will ultimately intertwine lush, green landscapes with romantic homes that feature exquisite architecture, evoking a sense of sophistication, culture, and prestige.

Marassi - El Alamein, North Coast

Marassi commenced a staged development plan covering 660Ha along a bay west of El Alamein in 2010. A 10 km long internal road links 18 separate communities, four 5-star hotels, golf course, streetscapes, Laguna marina, water park, boutiques and of course, high security. Doug worked on the latest portion to be developed: a marina and breakwater covering about 40Ha with nearly 5km of waterside promenade.

The Owners are wealthy Egyptians who escape Cairo in the summer and so those villas are occupied for only 3 months a year. Everybody can develop their own plot with their own ideas of gardening. The main public landscaping contains of formal plantings and hedges framing the roads.

Soul, North Coast

Soul Luxury Beach Resort is a pioneering 250Ha development on the southern shore of the Mediterranean 30 KMs further west from Marassi. It is envisioned to transform a barren stretch of shoreline into a place that instills a sense of belonging, inspiration, and peace amidst one of the world's most stunning natural beach landscapes in the North Coast.

Work is currently in progress on terraforming and infrastructure for Phase 1.

Emaar Nursery

Emaar has set up its own nursery to supply the projects with a good and sufficiently large selection of planting material. The 5-hectare nursery is located in the fertile Nile delta. Simple greenhouses with plastic liners have been built.

The nursery mainly grows shrubs and ground cover plants.

Horizontal, straight wires 150 metres long are stretched for the trees. The trees are then placed along the wires and tied up to keep them straight. This means that no tree stakes are required.

Trees are planted in wooden buckets embedded in the ground, depending on rainfall. Grasses are grown in plastic bags and succulents and ground cover plants planted in tubs half sunk into the ground. Some of the plants have plant passports.

A team of landscape gardeners determines the plants required for each project.

The nursery also has pigeon lofts, which have a long tradition.



Emaar nursery and the pigeon lofts

Other Nurseries in desert climates for Comparison:

Nutrient Mat Propagation - Riyadh

- Nutrient mats, set out on concrete with low water consumption
- Creates a microclimate just above the floor with a low mist > enables plants to grow

Sahara Forest Project - Aqaba

- UN sponsored project
- Growing plants in soil cylinder
- Filled with soil, with a tube going into it, a bit of drip irrigation, uses seawater for cooling, pump seawater through evaporative coolers, desalination process
- Solar power, ecologically sound

The water issue

All green areas are irrigated. The water for this comes from the Nile, but unfortunately there is already a water shortage there too.

For the future, it would be desirable for such projects to be realised as part of a sustainable planting programme with local and drought-resistant plants.