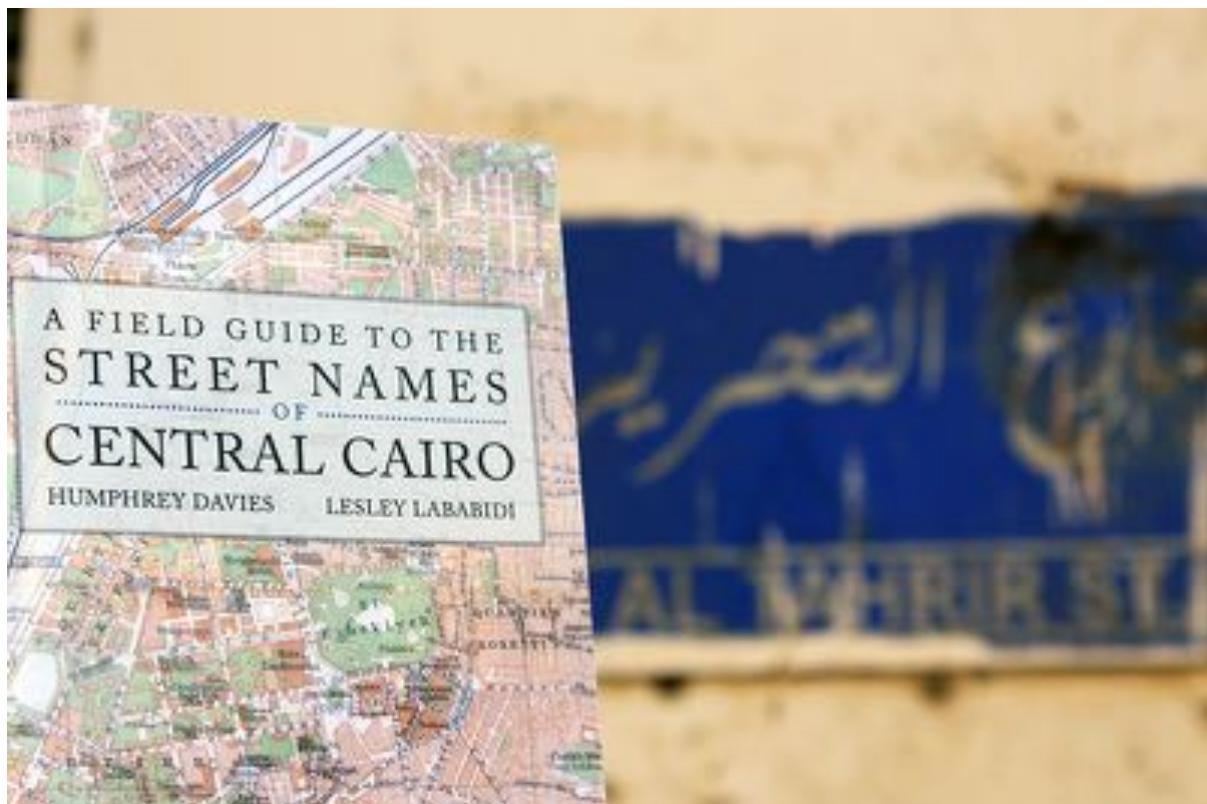


Lesley Lababidi takes us through her journey of compiling *A Field Guide to the Street Names of Central Cairo*, showing us how this complex encyclopedic guide to over 600 street names took shape in ways both expected and unexpected.

An award, an email, a coffee, and a question were the steps that led to my co-authorship of *A Field Guide to the Street Names of Central Cairo*. It was January 2013 and I had just read that Humphrey Davies, whose work I had admired over the years, had been awarded the Banipal Prize for Arabic Literary Translation for *I Was Born There, I Was Born Here* by [Mourid Barghouti](#), one of my favorite books. I asked around for Humphrey's email and sent him a short congratulations note. Humphrey answered on the same day with a gracious reply and an invitation for coffee. A month went by before we met at a popular café. We ordered coffee and Humphrey asked, "Would you be interested in the idea of a guide to the street names of Cairo"?



Seriously? How does one react when presented with such an incredible opportunity? (A) Jump up and do a jig?; (B) clear one's throat and make a studious comment?; or (C) just say, YES. Although A was what I felt and B would have been more appropriate, my answer

was C. Humphrey laid out his ideas for a guide to Cairo's street names inclusive of the boundaries of the 1867 "Esma'ilia Project"—the area encompassing the el-Tawfiqiya and el-Azbakiya districts and the island of el-Gezira. It was an extraordinary chance to build on research begun in previous books. Although I didn't know at the time the level of detailed research and organization that would be required, it was crystal clear to me that if this book were ever to be compiled and published it would be groundbreaking, and I wanted to be a part of it.



Beginnings are sometimes fraught with fits and starts and this project was no exception. There were prior projects to finish and family commitments to tend to. We also had to carry out a broad-based survey of available maps and materials, as well as spend whole weekends walking the streets and photographing street signs to allow us to build up a working database of facts and figures. Nearly two years passed before Humphrey submitted our book proposal to AUC Press. Then, on April 30, 2015, we signed the book contract and the field guide project became a formal reality.

How does one begin something of this magnitude? The planning and organization needed had the potential to be overwhelming and, as with almost any successful co-venture, it was crucial to agree upon the vision, both short- and long-term, with my co-author. Also as with almost any successful co-venture, there is usually one leader and we agreed that this should be Humphrey. This resolved any tiebreaking issues.

The first step was to focus on the process not the end result.

‘Location, location, location’ applies to the workspace, too. Creating an adequate workspace is often an overlooked aspect of getting a project up and running. The *Field Guide* needed a room of its own with limited distractions and space to spread out maps in chronological order as well as reference books and materials cataloged for quick referral. Good wifi and a reliable computer were also vital. After hours of fieldwork, having a space to which to retreat and gather together pieces in this jigsaw-like project was essential to keeping organized.



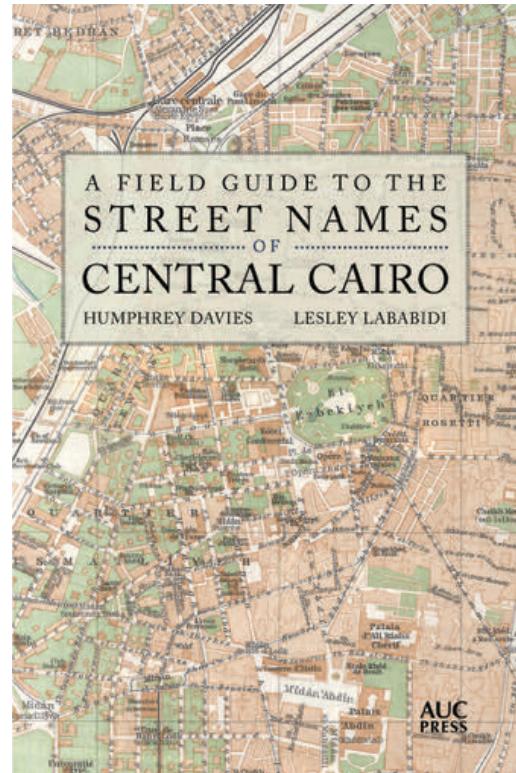
Consistency was similarly essential. ‘Who, what, when, and where’, were the key questions we aimed to answer for every entry, even if it was often a struggle to find all the information we wanted. Early on, Humphrey and I discussed style. We debated ways of

listing a street’s timeline—origin to present, or present to origin? We dug through libraries and second-hand bookstores, scoured the Internet, talked to historians, anthropologists, urban developers, and residents, and, in some cases, even asked to see electricity bills when a street name eluded us. Often, one small detail, a single clue, would unravel the history behind a street and present us with an unexpected bonus. Take, for example, our search for the identity of one Sheyam el-Shaf‘i, of Nafezet Sheyam el-Shaf‘i (‘the Sheyam el-Shaf‘i Pedestrian Overpass’). The only clue we had was that this name appeared on a map—it was near Share‘ Ali Ebrahim and linked a bridge and street from Qasr el-‘Eini Medical School in el-Manyal to el-Munira. Unable to find any further sources, I thought that a trip to the medical museum at Qasr el-‘Eini campus might reveal some answers. It didn’t, but as luck would have it, I met Mohamed, a medical student, as I was leaving the museum. He was curious to know why I was on campus. It turned out that he had heard the name Sheyam el-Shaf‘i but could not think where, so he decided I should meet the Vice Dean of Students. Within minutes I was in

the office of Dr. Hala Salah el-Din Talaat. I explained my quest, at which point she proceeded to provide me with a biography of Sheyam el-Shafi. She also presented me with an incredible book on the history of the Qasr el-‘Eini school–hospital, with the names of all the prominent teachers and doctors who had taught and practiced there since the school’s foundation. Bonus! We found relevant information about other mystery persons.

With time, a spreadsheet took shape. We focused on the period from 1800 to 2006, which corresponded to our map collection. This step produced a simple timeline for each street. For example, according to maps dated 1870, 1880, 1890, 1930, 1952, 1958, and 1980, Midan Tahrir’s name changed seven times. (Later we would confirm yet another name change.)

And we kept copious lists. Always concerned with the multitude of details we had to grapple with, the project’s many moving parts, and the possibility of information slipping out of the text, we unabashedly listed everything—the dagger list (our joke for streets that we eventually removed because they fell outside our designated geographical boundary); the no-hoper’s list; the informal names list; the map list, and the ever-present list of street names. Our lists revealed stories of lives lived in glory, avarice, ambition, accomplishment, virtue, and vice. Whoever thought *Game of Thrones* was intriguing has not yet read *A Field Guide to the Street Names of Central Cairo* with its stories of kings and heirs, ministers and officers, ousters and coups, singers and assassins, and sultans, Sufis, immigrants, and conquerors.



By Lesley Lababidi, co-author (with Humphrey Davies) of *A Field Guide to the Street Names of Central Cairo* (AUC Press, 2018)