

*Nawal Hassan*

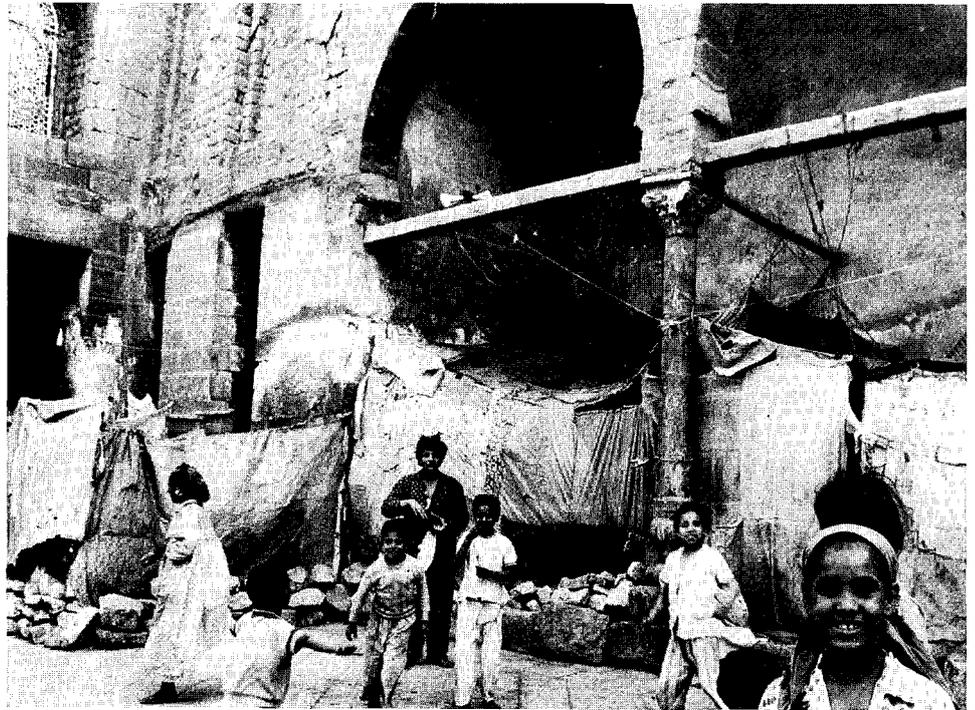
My own cultural centre is situated in the heart of the Fatimid section of Cairo. We have concentrated our efforts on the area where the centre is located, but have tried to develop policies which could be applied to other areas of old Cairo. The areas we are interested in are the Gamalaya quarter and the Darb al Ahmar. Our idea has been to try to determine what are the important pressing social needs, policies and practices for our Ministry of Culture to adopt (apart from any plans for physical restoration).

Let us start with the immediate needs of the community in terms of operating and improving social services. Our first priority, as I saw it, was to help those people whose dwellings have collapsed. It is one of the lowest income areas in Cairo, and the buildings are very old and in very poor shape. Great numbers of people have to leave their accommodations in this part of the city, either because their houses collapsed or because they are being evicted.

The laws do not adequately protect the poor in these quarters from speculators. Business people buy houses for extremely low prices and tear them down to make room for apartment buildings. The people have no alternative but to move into monuments in the area, usually historic mosques. Thus, the problem of providing adequate housing for the people and preservation of historic monuments is interrelated.

In Cairo, there are about a quarter of a million people who have come from the countryside and live in historic buildings, cemetery areas, superstructures of the tombs or air raid shelters. It is a problem that has to be attacked on a larger scale. We can try to solve the problem in our own area and provide a model for the Ministry of Housing. It wants to build in the area, but finds it too complicated. Presently, people are moved to the far outskirts of the suburbs of Cairo. They lose the place where they were socially and economically integrated into a community.

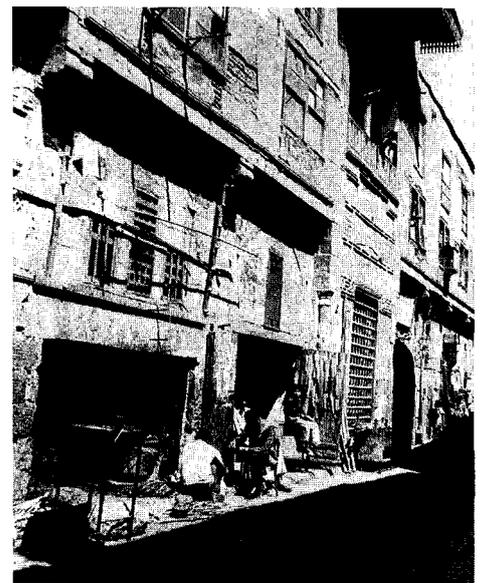
The way to do this properly is to look closely at the traditional forms of housing



*Cairo, Egypt interior of a traditional mosque, now inhabited due to the city's housing shortage  
Photo: N Hassan*

to see if the function is still appropriate for contemporary social needs. As an example, look at the traditional *rab'*. Let us consider one in particular. Built in 1610, it has not been restored, yet is still in good condition. The ground floor has a workshop, which was always the case. There is an entrance to the living quarters, and a separate entrance to the *wakāla* or the *khān*, a commercial area. Another important feature is a fountain (*sabīl*). Usually these structures were on the sides of the buildings, less frequently in the centre. The *rab's* or *wakāla* were income-bringing, and the income was used to support the religious school (*kuttāb*) and the fountain. These *rab's* of Cairo were built of duplexes or even duplexes with mezzanines, a very modern conception when we think about it. They are really quite adequate for contemporary needs.

In the 1610 complex people have moved into the business area and are now bring-

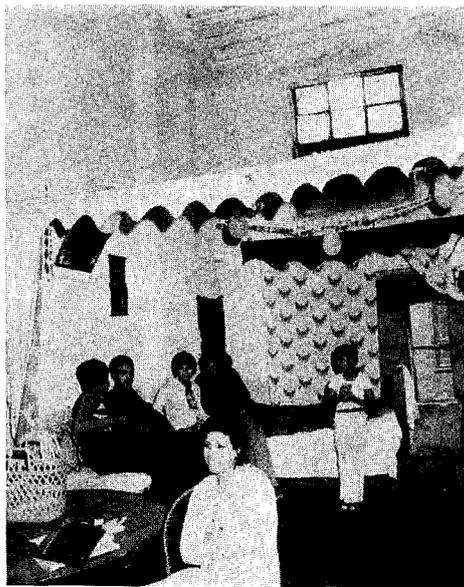


*Cairo, Egypt exterior of a rab'  
Photo: N Hassan*



Cairo, Egypt: entrance to the living quarters of a rab'

Photo: N. Hassan



Cairo, Egypt. interior of a flat

Photo: N. Hassan

ing water into it and making small changes for sanitary and living accommodations. The building belongs to the Ministry of the Awqaf, which, of course, does not spend a penny on upkeep because the income from it is minimal. The tenants pay seventy piasters (one dollar U.S.) per month for rent. When we asked them whether they would prefer to be in a government housing development or this type of housing if the price were the same, all answered that they preferred this type because of the spaciousness and of the adaptability of the old design.

In this area of Cairo three-fourths of the *wakāla* have been torn down and the Ministry of Housing has built what it considers to be modern accommodations. They look like little cubes. To preserve the rest of these historic buildings, a concerted attempt must be made to bring adequate services into them. With even minimal upkeep they could become viable, even desirable housing for lower income groups.

All problems are interrelated when it comes to historic cities. There is no use restoring a monument if sewage is bad, especially when the sewers continue to flood the ground floor that is below the present street level.