

The *Rab'*: A Type of Collective Housing in Cairo During the Ottoman Period

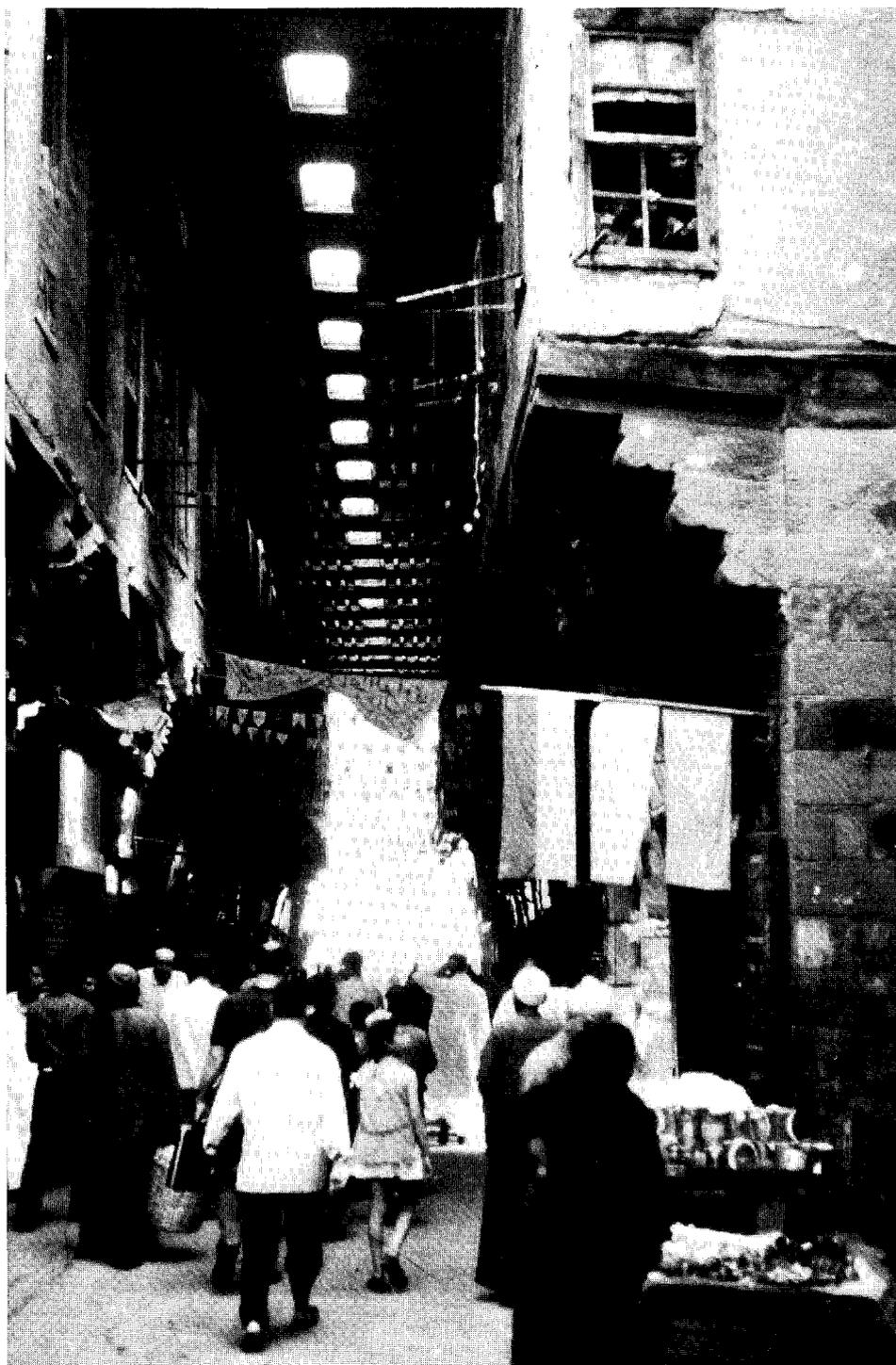
André Raymond

Our knowledge of housing in Cairo during the Ottoman period from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century is uneven. Various sources (*waqf* documents in particular) furnish detailed descriptions of important residences such as mansions and palaces. It is possible to examine numerous extant buildings of this type.¹ Unfortunately, we have little information on "average" dwellings. Although great variety exists within this building category, the general concept remains fairly constant. The private house of the Ottoman period opened onto a secondary street or cul-de-sac. A corridor gave access to an interior courtyard. Windows opened either on this or, in the case of important dwellings, the arcades of a *maq'ad* (loggia). The house was often two or three stories tall and included a closed reception room, the *qā'a*. These houses were located in areas near the central commercial districts inside the Fatimid region of the town (Qāhira).

At the other end of the social spectrum (and geographically on the outskirts of the town) was poor housing. This is not well understood due to the lack of contemporary description or remains which might encourage archeological investigation. Although the *hāra* (residential quarters) of Cairo offered many houses conceived on a reduced scale after the model just described, there were also many groups of houses called *hawṣ*.² These consisted of poor dwellings built around a common courtyard. Jomard described this kind of semi-rural dwelling as "large courtyards or enclosures full of four foot tall huts where throngs of poor people lived crowded together with their animals."³

Between these two extremes lie the collective residences, the importance of which has only recently been acknowledged. They are of two main types. The first, the *wakāla* or *khān* (caravanserai), was used as lodging for a transient population (travellers, foreign traders, military people, etc.). As a place of wholesale trade it also performed an economic role.

The *rāb'* (plural, *ribā'*) is a very original but lesser known type of tenement



Cairo, Egypt. street scene outside the rab' of Riḍwān Bey

Photo: A Raymond

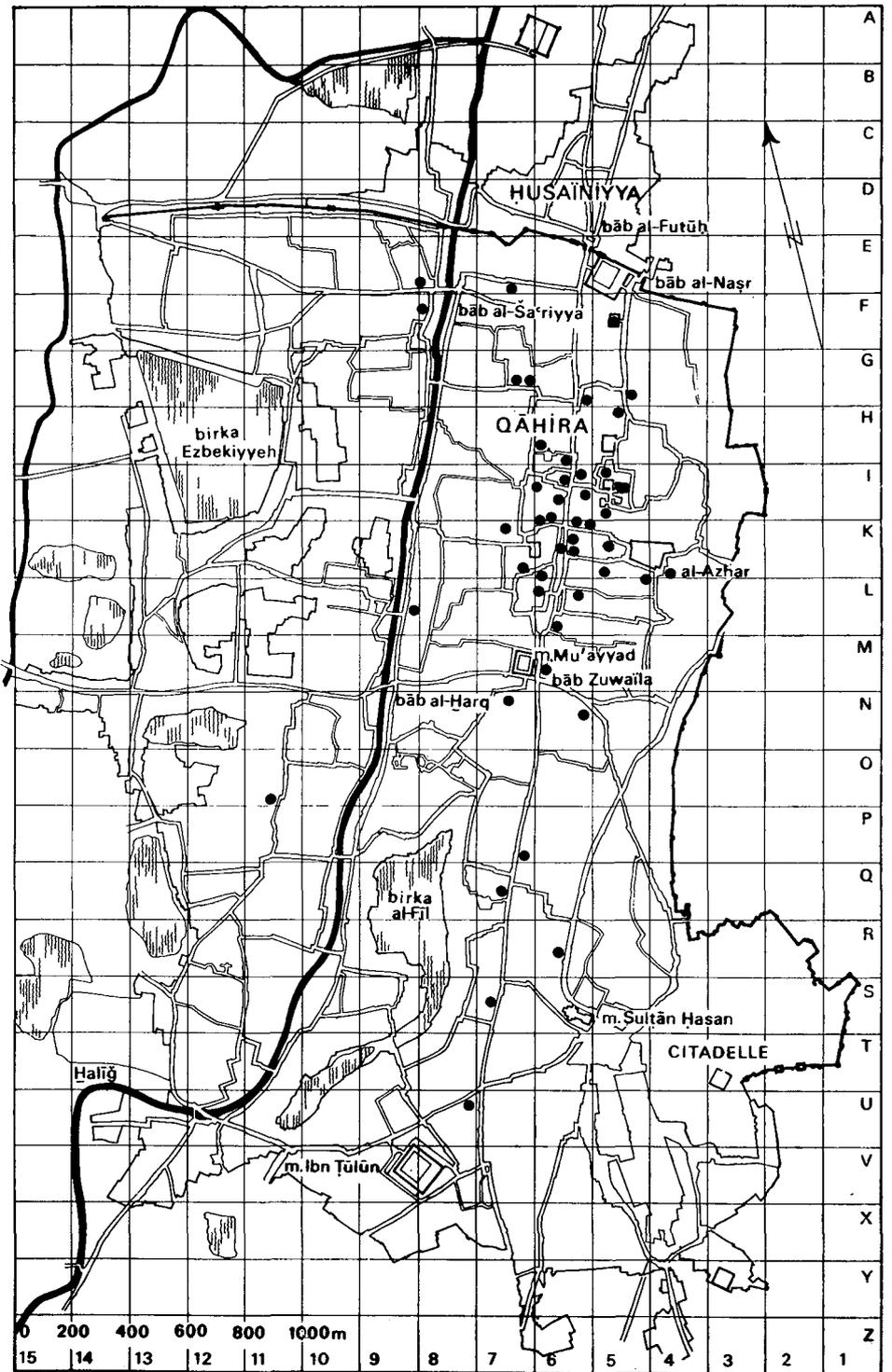
building. Recent studies by Laila 'Ali Ibrahim have shed some light on the *rab'* of the Mamluk period.⁴ Here we are dealing with a traditional structure; the oldest specimens go back to the middle of the fifteenth century, but texts mention the existence of the *rab'* in Fustat and Cairo at a much earlier date. It continued to play an important role in the daily life of Cairo's citizens until the middle of the nineteenth century.

The word *rab'* is frequently met with in the Arabic sources and in archival documents. M. Clerget has given the *rab'* a precise definition:

The tall tenement building or *rab'* is . . . really a specialty of Cairo . . . The *rab'* is a kind of furnished hotel where up to ten or fifteen apartments can be rented, each lodging up to ten people. It corresponds to the Roman *insulae* and is located along the main streets or their immediate vicinity between the main bazaars. Rarely does it have a courtyard . . . The shops or warehouses for merchandise frequently occupy [the ground level]. Ordinarily there is no communication between the ground level and the other levels . . . It is hard to know exactly the maximum height of the *rab'* during times of overpopulation . . . During the Turkish period . . . [travellers] mention . . . two, three, and sometimes four stories.⁵

The Location of the Rab'

By searching the archives of the *maḥkama* or Religious Courts of Cairo we located forty-six *rab'*s: thirty-six situated inside Qāhira, seven in the southern sector, and three in the western sector of the city.⁶ More than three-fourths of the *rab'*s were located inside Qāhira, along main commercial streets in the vicinity of the main *sūqs* of the town (Baīn al-Qaşrain, Ghūriyya, Khān al-Khalīlī, Jamāliyya). This distribution corresponded to that of the *wakāla* (caravanserai). Significantly, there were no *rab'*s in the *ḥāra* region, the poor housing areas of Qāhira. In the



Map showing location of rab's in Cairo

Source: A. Raymond

southern sector, the *rab's* were for the main part concentrated either along or in the vicinity of the main street leading from Bāb Zuwāila to the southern limit of Cairo. In the western sector, which was mostly residential, there were only three *rab's*: two were located in the neighbourhood of Bāb al-Sha'riyya, one of the main commercial centres in Cairo.

Thus the *rab's* were limited to areas of high economic activity (commercial and artisanal). The distribution resembles that of private residences belonging to shopkeepers and artisans. As will be seen below, the inhabitants of the *rab'* were indeed average artisans and shopkeepers who had their shops and workshops in these areas. The *rab's*, however, were built along main streets whereas private houses were usually located at a distance from the *sūqs* along small streets or in adjacent culs-de-sac. The *rab's* were in fact often linked to the *wakālas*. There were fewer *rab's* in the western region, as this was a residential district with both poor and elegant quarters and fewer specialized commercial centres

The Inhabitants of the Rab'

We cannot determine with any certainty the number of *rab's* in Cairo. The forty-six which we have found in the archives represent only a partial sampling. Al-Jabartī mentions the probably fairly numerous *rab's* which were located in the region of al-Azhar, in Ghūriyya, and in Bunduqāniyyin. A number of still extant *rab's* must be added to those mentioned in the *maḥkama*.⁷ Since a number of *wakālas* included *rab's* in their upper stories,⁸ we can infer that the actual number of *rab's* exceeded a hundred, each of which could lodge between one hundred and one hundred and fifty people.

The inheritance register for Cairo for the years 1776 to 1798 lists as *rab'* inhabitants twenty-nine out of the 334 individuals whose residences are mentioned in the documents. This represents a proportion of 8.7 percent, but the real proportion was

certainly higher. In Qāhira, where most *rab's* were located, twenty-three out of 173 individuals, or a proportion of 13.3 percent, were *rab'* inhabitants. If we extrapolate, we may conclude that as many as 15,000 people were *rab'* inhabitants out of an overall 1798 population of 250,000.

Concerning the socioeconomic status of the *rab'* inhabitants, our calculations show that the median inheritance of the twenty-nine cases during the years 1776 to 1798 came to 22,646 *paras*.⁹ The median inheritance of the 334 individuals studied for the same period was 109,101 *paras*. We therefore conclude that *rab'* inhabitants were comprised of members of the lower middle class population of artisans and small shopkeepers, situated at equal distance from the "proletariat" of Cairo (itinerant workers, craftsmen) and the upper middle class (mainly fabric merchants or cafe owners).

The range of social status among *rab'* inhabitants was, however, wide. A thread (*ghazl*) merchant from Ramla (inheritance at 692 *paras*) and a saddler from Asyut (inheritance at 1,335 *paras*) were among the poorest. A textile merchant (*tājir*) from Aleppo (inheritance at 214,941 *paras*), a bathkeeper (inheritance at 131,578 *paras*) and a coffee merchant (inheritance at 69,323 *paras*) were among the richest. But these were exceptions. Most of the *rab'* inhabitants (seventeen out of twenty-nine) had an inheritance between 5,000 and 50,000 *paras*, well within the limits of the Cairo middle class.

Similarly, despite great variety in the professions practiced by *rab'* inhabitants, most were small shopkeepers and average artisans: four tobacco merchants, three shoemakers and saddlers, three lace-makers, five weavers and textile merchants, two tailors, two spice merchants, etc. These were individuals whose social status was as modest as their material situation. Al-Jabartī mentions "the people who live in apartments" (*sukkān al-ṭibāq*) when he refers to professions of fairly low status (*wakāla* doormen and itinerant snuff dealers).¹⁰

We should note that there were relatively few non-Egyptians among the *rab'* inhabitants. Among the twenty-nine individuals mentioned for the period between 1798 and 1801, there were three Turks, one Maghribi, and one Syrian. In contrast to the *wakāla* or *khān*, the *rab'* was not a temporary residence for transient people, but a type of fixed lodgings for Egyptians.

Even though we have only little information on this point, we assume that most *rab'* residents were tenants.¹¹ Although many *rab's* belonged to the *waqfs*, others were owned by individuals. In general, the *rab's* represented a common type of economic investment in Cairo, and their owners expected to receive substantial revenue in the form of rent. For lack of information we cannot estimate the average amounts of revenue, but we do have a relatively precise idea about the value of the individual apartments (*ṭabaqa* or *makān*): 3,945 *paras* (constant) in 1690; 3,360 in 1696; 4,093 in 1752; 3,600 in 1785; 7,200 in 1785; 15,318 in 1792; 3,240 in 1797. The average price was about 4,000 *paras*. Although modest when compared to the price of private houses, this represented a rather substantial portion of their owners' inheritance: for a tobacco merchant, 3,600 from a total of 8,783 *paras*; for a confectioner, 7,200 from 8,791 *paras*; and for a spice merchant, 3,240 from 13,897. Thus the possession of a *makān* in a *rab'* could mean an investment comparable to a shop.

The Structure of the Rab'

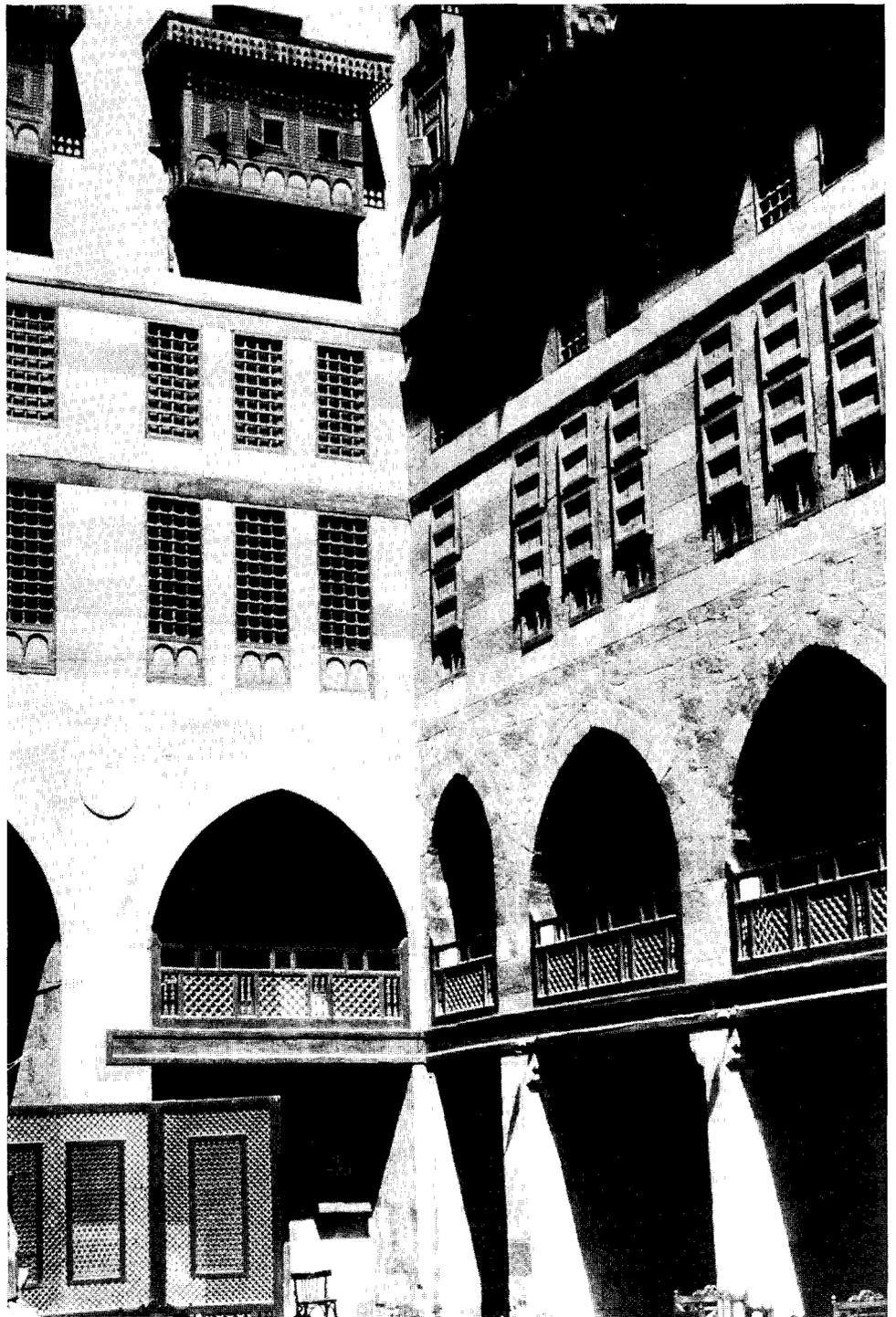
Although research has been carried out concerning the architectural design of individual residences and *wakāla*, regrettably few studies have been undertaken with regard to the structure of collective dwellings. Both documentary and archeological sources, however, provide ample scope for investigation. Many *waqfiyya* describe *rab's* in detail. In Cairo there still exists an appreciable number of independent *rab's* or *rab'-wakālas* presently inhabited by a poor population.

They are rapidly deteriorating and require urgent study. Consequently, the aforementioned studies by Laila 'Ali Ibrahim on the Mamluk *rab'* and Mona Zakariya on the Ottoman *rab'* are of great importance.

Laila 'Ali Ibrahim's research shows that the structure of the *rab'* has undergone little change from the earliest preserved specimens (Inal complex in the northern cemetery, 1451–6; *rab'*-*wakāla* of Ghūrī, 1504–5, *waqfiyya* no. 64; *rab'* of Khair Bey, 1523, *waqfiyya* no. 292) through the Ottoman *rab'* of the seventeenth and mid-eighteenth centuries (*rab'* of Riḍwān Bey, 1638, *waqfiyya* no. 996; *rab'* of Ibrāhīm Agha, 1645, *waqfiyya* no. 952; three *rab'*s of 'Abdarrahmān Čāwīsh, 1746, *waqfiyya* no. 941) This remarkable permanence indicates that by the end of the fifteenth century the structure had reached an equilibrium. It proves that the *rab'* was a perfect adaptation to precise needs. It further points to the stability of the socioeconomic conditions in Cairo from the fifteenth to the eighteenth century. However, only a detailed study of extant *rab'*s and *waqf* documents will show to what extent there was continuity and evolution in the development of this monument.

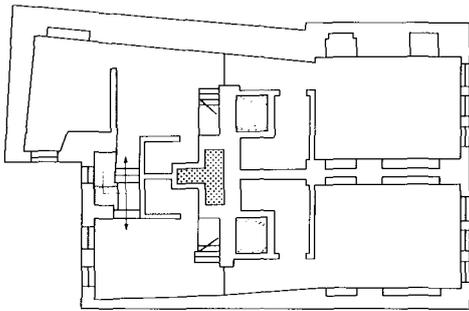
The *rab'*s of the Ottoman period are of two different types. In the case of the *rab'*-*wakāla*, a *wakāla* occupied the ground floor and the lower levels of the building while a special entrance gave access to the *rab'* on the remaining floors. Numerous specimens of this type can be found in Cairo, and they are often mentioned in the *waqfiyya*. The other type was the independent *rab'*, of which a superb specimen exists in the Tabbāna quarter. In spite of differences in conception, the fundamental elements of these two structures are identical.

The number of apartments varied with the individual *rab'*. The *waqfs* offer descriptions of *rab'*s containing from seven to thirteen and nineteen *maskan* or *sakan*. In the *rab'*-*wakāla*, the apartments were generally built along a corridor and laid out in pairs. The individual apartments,

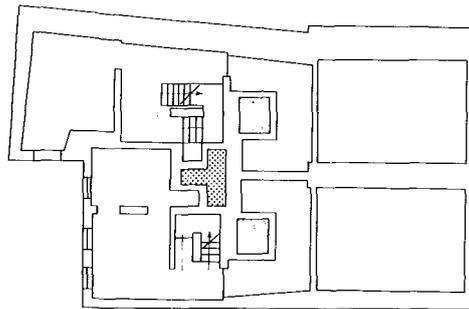


Cairo, Egypt: *rab'*-*wakāla al-Ghūrī*

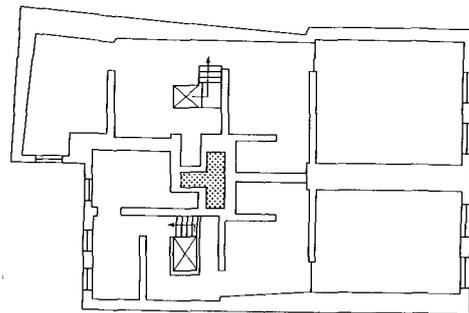
Photo: A. Raymond



First floor



Mezzanine



Second floor

Plan of an apartment in the rab' of Tabbāna

After M. Zakariya



Cairo, Egypt: rab' of Tabbāna

Photo: A Raymond

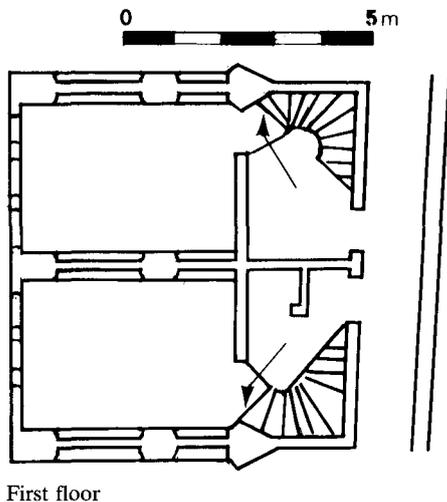
occupying two or three levels, had interior stairways and terraces. The windows opened onto the interior courtyard of the *wakāla* or, as was often the case, the exterior façade. In the independent *rab'* the ground level was ordinarily occupied by shops and warehouses. Stairways gave access to the apartments on the first floor. These occupied two or three levels connected by interior stairways.

Several principles of construction seem to be constant in both cases: the grouping of two apartments to form the basic unit, the vertical disposition of duplex or triplex apartments served by interior stairways, the juxtaposition of different volumes, and the inclusion of a *riwāq*, the principal

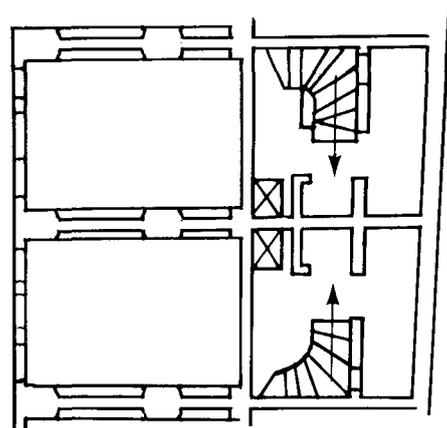
reception room generally situated on the first level and occupying a double vertical space.

Two examples will illustrate these general considerations: the *rab'* of 'Abdarrahmān Čāwīsh in Khaṭṭ al-Wazīriyya,¹² and the *rab'* of Khair Bey.¹³

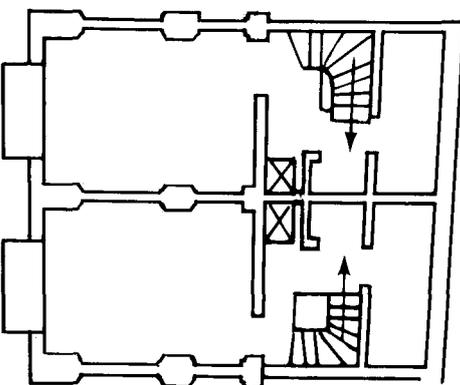
The *rab'* of 'Abdarrahmān Čāwīsh was situated above the *wakāla* of Khaṭṭ al-Wazīriyya, which was comprised of four shops and seventeen storehouses (*hāşil*). The entrance to this *rab'* was adjacent to that of the *wakāla*. There were nineteen lodgings (*sakan*) along the corridor (*majāz*): five opened on the eastern façade (*sharqī*) of the *wakāla*, seven on the courtyard of the *wakāla*, six on the



First floor



Second floor



Third floor

Plan of an apartment in the rab'-wakāla al-Ghūrī
After L. Ibrahim

northern façade (*baḥrī*), and the nineteenth had no openings (*ḥabīs*). The door of each lodging opened onto a vestibule (*fasaḥa*). Each *sakan* was comprised of a *riwāq*, an alcove (*khizāna nawmiyya*), a kitchen (*maṭbakh*), and the latrines (*kursī rāḥa*). A staircase led to a terrace (*saṭḥ*). Although we lack the exact dimensions, we know that the apartments were small and consisted of only two levels.¹⁴ In the *rab'-wakāla* of Ghūrī, studied by Laila 'Ali Ibrahim, we find that the apartments, organized on three levels, were of two types with areas of $30 + 36 + 36 = 96 \text{ m}^2$ and $25 + 30 + 30 = 85 \text{ m}^2$. Assuming comparable dimensions, the apartments of the *rab'* of 'Abdarrahmān Čawīsh would have had an area of about 60 m^2 .

The extant *rab'* of Khair Bey, built during the first years of the sixteenth century (the *waqfiyya* is dated 1523), consists on the ground level of fourteen *qā'a*, probably for commercial purposes, and a passage leading from the eastern façade (opening on Tabbāna) to the western façade where the doors of the apartments are located. The *rab'* includes fifteen *riwāq*. Fourteen are served by seven staircases each leading to a landing (*basta*). On each landing there are two doors which give access to two apartments. A corridor (*dihlīz*) links various rooms (*baīt azyār*/room containing water jars; *kursī khalā'*/latrines), and a *riwāq* (5 m x 3.5 m) which occupies two levels (height 4.5 m) and has six windows overlooking the main street. The *riwāq* has an *eyvān*, a *dūrqa'a*, and an alcove (*khizāna nawmiyya*). A staircase leads from the *dihlīz* to the second level where a *ṭabaqa* is located. A staircase also gives access to a terrace (*saṭḥ*). The interior area of the apartments of the *rab'* measures 52.5 m^2 per level or approximately 160 m^2 for the total surface.

Conclusions

As *rab'*s housed between five and ten percent of Cairo's population at the end of the eighteenth century, they obviously played an important role in the urban

organization of Cairo during the Ottoman period. It was a type of housing well adapted to high density living as was the case in the centre of the town where it was not possible to spread residences horizontally. As a perfect answer to socioeconomic needs, the *rab'*s of Cairo housed a population economically active in the *sūqs*, stores and workshops of the vicinity.

The existence of the *rab'* raises two issues. The first is on a theoretical level. In his study of Cairo cited above, Clerget remarks that the *rab'* "is a derogation of the customs of Islam and is ill-suited to the physical environment."¹⁵ His second remark is completely incorrect. Concerning the first, it goes without a doubt that the *rab'* of Cairo does not correspond to what is considered the "traditional" dwelling in Islamic regions. This is supposed to display certain well-known characteristics: the segregation of the family secured by the isolation of the house at the end of a blind alley, and an introverted orientation of the residence marked by an interior courtyard and the absence of openings on the exterior. Here one may pass from social and climatic considerations to propositions of a metaphysical nature: for example, the interior courtyard (*samāwī*) is the central element through which communication with the universe can be realized (the "celestial" courtyard).¹⁶

As a collective housing unit comprised of common areas, located on streets with heavy traffic, opening to the outside, and lacking individual courtyards, the *rab'* may be considered a total rupture with "traditional" plans. Should we, for this reason, ignore its existence? I think not, for although a specialty of Cairo, the *rab'* is not exceptional in the Arabo-Islamic world. We know of collective housing in earlier times in Fustat, for instance, as well as vertical housing in other regions such as Yemen.

Consequently, the study of the *rab'* should lead us to revise our understanding of Islamic housing and to admit that the traditional schemata are not valid in all

cases and represent only part of the reality. Moreover, many of the characteristics which form our notion of "Islamic" housing are, in fact, Mediterranean features which correspond to earlier modes from Roman and Greek antiquity. Collective vertical housing corresponds to the *insulae* of the Roman era (and undoubtedly the Byzantine period, too).

The second issue concerns the technical aspects of these structures. In terms of its architecture and its adaptation to a particular way of life, the *rab'* merits consideration on several accounts. First, great variety in the surfaces and volumes of its rooms contrasts with the disastrous uniformity of "modern" residential apartments in the West. One should note in particular the importance of the *riwāq*, the reception room, which generally extends to two levels inside the apartment and which offers a larger setting for family life than the contemporary "living room."

Second, technical problems such as interior circulation and ventilation are ingeniously solved by the use of a series of interior stairways and ventilation columns. Lastly, the general use of a vertical structure, which offers a striking contrast to the horizontal aspect of contemporary collective housing, solves most of the problems related to collective housing in a more satisfactory manner. First, the use of two- or three-level apartments overcomes the traditional aversion to stacking horizontally arranged modules. Second, the vertical disposition of the *rab'* allows a stricter separation of activities by isolating the reception area (*riwāq*) from areas reserved for family life. Interior stairways assure easy circulation and privacy which "traditional" contemporary apartments with their central "patio" do not. And finally, each family has access to a private terrace completely isolated from those of other families. Climatic as well as sociological reasons justify the necessity of such a collective open air space. In contrast, contemporary buildings only afford their residents more or less tiny balconies which are badly isolated from the exterior. These can scarcely be transformed into a space for recreation,

rest, or even chicken raising—a tendency which modern urban planners as well as the authorities find reprehensible.¹⁷

Contemporary architects and urban planners can find a lesson here. The Egyptian *rab'* of the Mamluk or Ottoman period is a typically traditional category of collective housing more suitably adapted to the needs of its population than modern collective housing which incorporates the worst elements of Western architecture. Undoubtedly, the original occupants of the *rab'*s of Cairo, ordinary artisans and shopkeepers, were better lodged in terms of available space and the adaptation of housing to their needs than their descendants who live in the low-rent housing developments which deface the old city and its environs.

Reference Notes

¹ A French team under the direction of M. R. Mantran (E. R. A. 648 of the C. N. R. S.) has studied the palaces and mansions of Cairo. Four volumes have already been published by A. Lezine, J. Revault, B. Maury and M. Zakariya.

² See A. Raymond, "La Géographie des *hāra* du Caire," *B. I. F. A. O.* (Cairo, 1980).

³ E. F. Jomard, "Ville du Caire," *Description de l'Égypte* (Paris, 1822), II, pp. 662, 696.

⁴ In particular, see Laila 'Alī Ibrahim, "Middle Class Living Units in Mamluk Cairo: Architecture and Terminology," *AARP* (December 1978), pp. 24–31. Mona Zakariya, collaborator with the E. R. A. 648, is publishing the *rab'* of Khair Bey in the *Annales Islamiques*, XVI, (1980).

⁵ Marcel Clerget, *Le Caire* (Cairo, 1934), I, pp. 316–317. See also Edward William Lane, *An Account of the Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians* (ed. Everyman's Library, 1954), p. 21.

⁶ By Qāhira I mean the Fatimid foundation which is surrounded by the city wall (Bāb al-Futūh, Bāb al-Nasr) in the north as well as in the east and south (Bāb Zuwa'ila), and by the Khalij (canal of Cairo) in the west. The southern sector comprises the area which extends south of Bāb Zuwa'ila and is bordered in the west by the Khalij. The western quarters extend west of the Khalij.

⁷ For example, the *rāb'* of the *wakāla* of 'Abbās Agha (Index no. 396 and located in G5), the *rab'* of Ridwān Bey (Index nos. 406, 407, 408, 409/N6–7), the *rab'* of Khair Bey in Tabbāna (in P5).

⁸ We have identified 360 Cairo *wakālas* of the Ottoman period.

⁹ I use one *para* of constant value (base 100: its value between 1681 and 1689).

¹⁰ 'Abd ul-Rahman al-Jabarti, *'Aja'ib al-āthar fī al-tarājim wa-al-akhbār* (ed. Bulaq, 1880), II, p. 263.

¹¹ It is understandable that the documents do not mention this aspect; in the settlement of inheritances, rents are not generally mentioned, being neither active nor passive.

¹² *Waqfiyya*, Index no. 941. Ministry of *Awqaf*, Cairo, pp. 74–79 (dated 1159/1745).

¹³ *Waqfiyya*, Index no. 292, pp. 94–96, kindly communicated by Mona Zakariya.

¹⁴ Another *rab'*-*wakāla* of 'Abdarrahmān Čawīsh (*waqfiyya* no. 941, pp. 70–71) consisted of thirteen *sakan* (two levels). A third (pp. 53–57) consisted of seven *masākan* entering onto a corridor (*majāz*). Each *sakan* had three levels with a *riwāq* on the first level, a *ṭabaqa* on the second, and a terrace (*fashaḥa*) and a *riwāq* on the third.

¹⁵ Clerget, *Le Caire*, p. 317.

¹⁶ A. Abdel Nour, "Types architecturaux et vocabulaire de l'habitat en Syrie," in *L'Espace social de la ville arabe*, ed. D. Chevallier (Paris, 1979), pp. 82–83.

¹⁷ For a recent example concerning Algiers, see Daniel Jurja in *Le Monde* (October 5, 1979), p. 4.

Comments

M. Serageldin

I just want to add to André Raymond's remarks that Cairo is now one of the most dynamic housing markets. Developments are growing and sprouting all around the city which in a way duplicate this system. The builders build on very small lots, two to three floors high and with almost the same total surface area that you have quoted. I have surveyed several of these houses and they run in between eighty and one hundred square metres for the family unit. They are structured very comparably to what you have shown us.

Grabar

Who paid for the construction of these large buildings? What initial investment was involved? And who received the income from the shops that were in the *wakāla* apartment group? What you are suggesting here is the existence of apartment units with up to fifteen apartments in any one group. We are talking about one hundred and twenty Cairenes of a certain social base having families and living together. Is there any evidence that people who lived in these apartments worked or prayed together or tended to go to the same mosques? Did they have collective activities that separated them as a group from other people within the city?

Raymond

On the first point, who paid for it, I think many of these *rab's* were built in the framework of the *waqfs* in Cairo for the benefit of the mosque or the two sanctuaries of Mecca and Medina or for social work. But I also think that quite a lot of these buildings were built by private

people for investment. As for the second point, I do not think that the people in these *rab's* were homogeneous. I doubt that there was really a community life in these buildings. There could have been, but we need figures for the Ottoman period. Once people study the archives, I think we may find many correlations

Fathy

I want to add something to the idea of the *wakāla*. In a sense the *qā'a* is a transposition of the courtyard house in which we have the courtyard, the two *eyvāns* and the loggia. This provided the occupant with the different kinds of climate which he required. He could be in the shade or out in the open or right inside. With urbanization this has been altered. The centre part of the courtyard was covered and the loggias, which were not demolished, were put somewhere on the courtyard to catch the north breeze.

When we come to the *wakāla*, the same idea, that of interiority, holds. People lived mostly indoors. That is where they had their community space. The idea of the duplex came from the *khāns*. Although the unit is very tiny, it articulates the inner space in such a way that the occupants feel they have more space. Were the apartment covered with a concrete slab roof only three metres high the largest room would measure three by three by four metres and provide little space. With the *qā'a* we have one hundred and twenty cubic metres which provides for cross-ventilation and everything else. Above all, the occupants, who are very poor, enjoy the luxury of the *qā'a*. These are people who otherwise would not have a courtyard with a fountain and so on.

In the triplex, the ground floor is used for reception, the middle floor for the kitchen, and the top floor for sleeping. Again we have the concept of interiority, but in addition, the apartment is cooler. If

you have an apartment on a single level with a flat concrete slab on top, it may be larger, but you never have the same sense of space or ventilation. What Islamic architecture has to contribute is the idea of respect for the whole man. Thus it gives him the luxury of a palace by providing a large interior space.