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. 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 qa'a. These houses were located in areas near the central commercial districts inside the Fatimid region of the town (Qahira).

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 poor dwellings called ḥawq. 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.”

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 wakala or khan (caravanserais), 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 rab' (plural, ribā) is a very original but lesser known type of tenement...
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 mahkama 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 suq’s of the town (Ba‘n al-‘Aṣra‘rān, Ghūriyya, Khān al-Khālijī, Jamāliyya). This distribution corresponded to that of the wakāla (caravansarai). Significantly, there were no rab’s in the ḥāra region, the poor housing areas of Qāhira. In the
The inheritance register for Cairo for the years 1776 to 1798 lists as whose residences are mentioned in the documents. This represents a proportion of 8.7 percent, but the real proportion was indeed average artisans and shopkeepers in the Bunduqaniyyin. A number of still extant houses were usually located at a 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 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-Jabarti mentions the people who live in apartments (sukkān al-ṭībāy) when he refers to professions of fairly low status (wakāla doormen and itinerant snuff dealers). 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.

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 (tabaqa) in 1752; 3,600 paras; in 1785; 7,200 paras; in 1792; 3,240 paras. 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 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-Jabarti mentions the probably fairly numerous rab's which were located in the region of al-Azhar, in Ghūrīyya, and in Bunduqāniyya. A number of still extant rab's must be added to those mentioned in the mahkama. Since a number of wakālas included rab's in their upper stories, 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 Qāhirah, 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. 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 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 archaeological 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’-wakala of Ghūrī, 1504–5, waqfyya no. 64; rab’ of Khātīr Bey, 1523, waqfyya no. 292) through the Ottoman rab’ of the seventeenth and mid-eighteenth centuries (rab’ of Riqwān Bey, 1638, waqfyya no. 996; rab’ of Ibrahim Agha, 1645, waqfyya no. 952; three rab’s of ‘Abdarrādmān Āwāsid, 1746, waqfyya 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’-wakala, a wakala 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 waqfyya. 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’-wakala, the apartments were generally built along a corridor and laid out in pairs. The individual apartments,
The Rab': A Type of Collective Housing in Cairo During the Ottoman Period

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 riwaq, 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 Čāwish in Khaṭṭ al-Waziriyya,12 and the rab' of Khārīr Bey.13 The rab' of 'Abdarrahmān Čāwish was situated above the wakāla of Khaṭṭ-Waziriyya, which was comprised of four shops and seventeen storehouses (ḥāsil). 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 (sharqi) of the wakāla, seven on the courtyard of the wakāla, six on the

Plan of an apartment in the rab' of Tabbāna

After M. Zakariya

Cairo, Egypt: rab' of Tabbāna

Photo: A Raymond
northern façade (bahrī), and the nine-teenth had no openings (habīs). The door of each lodging opened onto a vestibule (fasāha). Each sakan was comprised of a riwāq, an alcove (khizāna nawmiyya), a kitchen (matbak), and the latrines (kursī rāḥa). A staircase led to a terrace (satīf). 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 Ghurī, studied by Laila 'Alla Ibrahim, we find that the apartments, organized on three levels, were of two types with areas of 30 + 36 + 36 = 96 m² and 25 + 30 + 30 = 85 m². Assuming comparable dimensions, the apartments of the rab' of 'Abdarrahman Cawish would have had an area of about 60 m².

The extant rab' of Khāir Bey, built during the first years of the sixteenth century (the waqfīya is dated 1523), consists on the ground level of fourteen qa'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 (baṣā). On each landing there are two doors which give access to two apartments. A corridor (dihlīz) links various rooms (baṭt azyār/room containing water jars; kurt 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 durqa'a, and an alcove (khizāna nawmiyya). A staircase leads from the dihlīz to the second level where a tabaqa is located. A staircase also gives access to a terrace (satīf). The interior area of the apartments of the rab' measures 52.5 m² per level or approximately 160 m² 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 suqs, 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.¹¹⁵ 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 (samawel) 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 riwaq, 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 (riwaq) 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. climactic 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 shop-keepers, 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.


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

7 For example, the rab' of the wakala of ‘Abd Allah Agha (Index no. 306 and located in G5), the rab' of Ridwan Bey (Index nos. 406, 407, 408, 409), and the rab' of Khair Bey in Tabbana (in P5).

8 We have identified 360 Cairo wakalas of the Ottoman period.

9 We use one par a of constant value (base 100: its value between 1681 and 1689).


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

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

14 Another rab'-wakala of ‘Abdarrahman Čawish (waafiyya no. 941, pp. 70–71) consisted of thirteen sakan (two levels). A third (pp. 53–57) consisted of seven mawālik of ‘awqūf entering onto a corridor (majaz). Each sakan had three levels with a riwaq on the first level, a fasaha on the second, and a terrace (fasaha) and a riwaq on the third.

15 Clerget, Le Caire, p. 317.


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

Fathy

I want to add something to the idea of the wakāla. In a sense the qa'a is a transposition of the courtyard house in which we have the courtyard, the two eyvans 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 qa'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 qa'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.