Introduction

The city of Cairo is presently caught in a multitude of urban problems, all of which are very much interrelated and linked in what seems to be a vicious circle. Cairo is a city of twelve million inhabitants by day and nine million by night, the difference between the two figures representing the three million who commute into the city during the day. (The figures here are estimated since exact statistics are not available.) The city suffers increasingly from the burden of supporting a steadily growing population at a rate faster than it can cope with in terms of its infrastructure and the services it can provide. This increase in the population of Cairo is attributed to a high rate of natural growth, and an equally high and rapid rate of internal migration. The resulting high population causes, among other problems, an increasing pressure on the urban services.

In this urban dilemma, the problem of housing becomes a major issue consisting basically of:

1) the imbalance between increasing demand and inadequate supply; and

2) the increasing high cost of housing which is partially due to the increase in demand over supply, in addition to the shortage in construction labour and the high cost of building materials.

It is worth mentioning, however, that the deficit in housing units does not include luxury flats since these are available only to the privileged few. In fact, the extensive construction projects throughout the city cater to no more than 20 per cent of the population, and are beyond the reach of people in the remaining social strata. It is even common for members of the upper and upper-middle strata to own more than one flat for investment purposes. Those caught in the dilemma are the middle and lower-income groups who cannot afford high-cost housing. This situation often results in the migration of labour to oil-rich countries, especially among the younger generations whose only prospect to afford housing is through such means.

This paper is an attempt to highlight the major aspects of the issue of housing in Cairo from a social perspective with the hope of reaching a better understanding of the problem from a dimension rarely discussed. The findings draw mostly on field experience in various studies on urban housing in order to focus on a condition that is very real and which continues to exist. The paper first describes the different forms of residence in Cairo, each of which represents a solution to the problem of housing shortage and then attempts to demonstrate the social impact of the problem on the target population.

Public Housing

One feasible solution is an increase in public housing projects (low-cost housing) to help redress the balance between supply and demand and to maintain low cost. However, the present situation of public housing raises many questions. The construction of public housing began in the mid 1950s to provide low-cost housing for those in the lower-income brackets, and who were granted ownership in the last few years of Sadat's rule. Conditions inside the households are generally very poor. Only in those cases where a member of the family has been working outside of Egypt can higher standards of living be found. The difference is usually reflected in the ownership of consumer durables especially electrical appliances, and fresh paint on both the inside and outside of the housing unit which is usually of a colour different from the rest of the building and of the block, making the unit conspicuous and breaking the uniformity of design. However, this newly-acquired "wealth" has little effect on the lifestyle of the members of the household who continue to live under practically the same conditions as their poorer neighbours. The general pattern of living tends to be rural in quality, reflecting the provincial origins of the residents who maintain their own repertoire of rural values and live accordingly, even after having moved to the city. The public housing environment in Cairo is therefore typically provincial.

In general, these areas of low-cost housing are characterised by very poor physical conditions both inside and outside the residential units. Hygienic standards are very low, and maintenance is minimal. To an outside observer, the environment in these areas is no different from that in any slum; in some cases it is abominably inhuman. The spaces between the blocks, initially intended as green areas, such as are to be found in Khalafawy in Shubra, have been turned instead into rubbish disposal and sewage leakage areas, thus transforming them into slums.

Extreme overcrowding is found inside the housing units where it is not unusual to find an average of seven persons living in one room and in some houses even up to as many as twenty people in two rooms. It is also not uncommon that the second generation continues to live in the same family unit after marriage. Such living conditions demand that all available space be made

Low-cost housing, Zainhom
Photo. Abou-Zeid Rageh
use of. In the area of Zainhom, for example, out of thirty families surveyed in public housing, twenty-seven were found to have eliminated the kitchen altogether in order to provide more sleeping space, and the small balcony was made to serve as the kitchen, requiring only a tube-gas stove or kerosene and a few cooking utensils. Differentiation of space is non-existent inside the residences. Any number of activities can be carried out in any one room where people sleep, eat, prepare food, receive guests or study. Chairs can be found next to beds, tables and cupboards. Families with somewhat higher incomes may have a refrigerator in the room used for sleeping and other activities.

The fact that every unit of space is used raises an important question of possible exploitation and sometimes illegal profit-making by the house owners. Such a situation clearly exists in Imbaba where a special design for the middle-income families was implemented in the late 1950s in the form of two-storey villas. Today, with the exception of a few of these villas, one can no longer recognize the original design: the houses have been completely changed, both inside and outside. Annexes have been built in the small gardens and storeys added. The purpose for such changes has been either profit-making or to provide residential quarters for the newly married.

The conditions found inside these former villas are virtually inconceivable. The area below the staircase is used as additional rooms and small kitchen areas are partitioned in such a way that drinking water can be carried to each of the rooms. The inhabitants can no longer recognize the original layout within the houses and the proliferation of several squatting settlement in the area. This resulted in the building of unlicensed houses and the proliferation of several squatting settlement in the area. In this way, Dar al-Salam became a preferred site for informal housing projects, their development proceeding without any kind of systematic or formal planning.

Compared to the conditions found in other public housing areas, those in Dar al-Salam are much better. One is led to wonder, however, as to the feasibility of this type of housing in serving the needs of the residents in the context of private versus state ownership: Studies have revealed that, in the case of private ownership, inhabitants adapt more readily to their environment, both physically and socially; whereas in the case of state ownership, they tend to adjust their environment (physical and social) to suit their needs and/or living conditions. It would therefore appear that private ownership helps the residents develop a sense of belonging; but living in publicly owned dwellings prevents them from developing this sense of belonging.

Informal Housing

The term, "informal housing", covers a wide range of housing types. It includes not only many squatting settlements spread over different parts of Cairo but also other forms of unlicensed constructions. The criterion of differentiation between "formal" and "informal" is therefore the licence and, as such, the scope of informal housing becomes very wide, estimated at 80 per cent of all building construction in the last five years.

One case of informal housing in Cairo is well-illustrated by Dar al-Salam. It is a typical example of what results from encroachment on arable land by informal and squatting housing, a situation which has been worsening in the last decade due to the urban sprawl. The district, originally an area of rich fertile land ideally suited for agriculture, extends to the south of Cairo towards the Maadi district and indents from the Nile River almost to the edge of Mokattam and the Bassatin area. Up to the 1960s, this area was basically agricultural and rural in character. Since the sixties, however, it has undergone significant changes in its ecological structure and socio-economic framework. This area has attracted several industrial enterprises — Nasr Television, print shops tile factories, etc. — which had their plants built on both sides of the Misr-Helwan agricultural road, thus absorbing an increasing number of labourers.

The actual urbanisation of Dar al-Salam started in the 1970s, subsequent to the increasing migration of labourers to other Arab states. The area became an attractive target for the returning migrant workers who were able to save money and came back to Cairo looking for residences. Dar al-Salam was ideal for investing in new construction sites because of its proximity to Cairo and the cheaper land prices compared to districts within the city. But this resulted in the building of unlicensed houses and the proliferation of several squatting settlement in the area. In this way, Dar al-Salam became a preferred site for informal housing projects, their development proceeding without any kind of systematic or formal planning.

Emergency housing, Dwekah
Photo: Abou-Zeid Rageh.
The fact that low-cost housing has not been able to meet rising demand is due to many reasons, including the increasing number of rural migrants to the city and the increasing number of Cairenes whose homes have fallen to ruin and who are provided temporary shelter by the state until more permanent residence could be found. Because of the already existing shortage in housing, these two categories of the target population — the rural migrants and the homeless — are forced to seek an alternate solution in the form of squatter settlements. Although there are some inside the city, squatter settlements are located mainly on the outskirts of Cairo where the living conditions are usually very poor. Dwellings are built by the inhabitants using whatever material is available either for temporary or permanent residence.

As is the case with all forms of informal housing, squatter settlements are considered illegal even though they are imposed on the urban fabric by the needs of the people. Their construction is a fait accompli with which the state has to cope in the presence of an existing shortage, which is resolved by this pragmatic approach.

One squatter area with "legal" status (since it was provided by the state) is in Zainhom close to public housing, and which shelters a large number of homeless families whose houses have fallen to ruin. Some of the families have been living there for as long as twenty years although the dwellings were built of different materials and were meant to be only temporary.

The Zainhom squatters' reactions to their poor living conditions (overcrowding, sewage overflow, public toilets and bathrooms) is paradoxical. Some resent being there and are eager to find a new residence. Others, are reluctant to leave since the monthly rent for the unit is only one pound (which they refrain from paying in most cases) with electricity and water provided free of charge. This group continues to live in the units remaining quite satisfied with the conditions, and may even go so far as to build annexes or additions.

Under the category of informal housing appears that unusual phenomenon of residence known as the city of the dead. It is a well-known fact that Egyptian culture is characterised by a deep concern for the after-life, a belief reminiscent of ancient Pharaonic civilisations, hence the construction of luxurious cemeteries. Today the need for shelter has driven many a homeless family to seek refuge in one of these cemeteries which are known to shelter hundreds of thousands of the population of Cairo.

All normal community functions and services can be found in the city of the dead: shops, mosques, street vendors and markets which are held on a regular basis. Although operating illegally there is renting and sub-letting services available for those seeking residences.

The Social Impact of the Housing Shortage

The housing problem in Egypt is normally approached as an economic issue. The fact remains, however, that the problem also has a social dimension which cannot be underestimated. The impact has been felt in the changing structure of the Egyptian urban family. The traditional extended family is now of the nuclear type. Present-day urban conditions, however, are restoring the traditional form of residence which is resulting in a trend back to the extended family, though in a somewhat altered fashion. Since newly-married young couples cannot afford the high cost of a flat, they continue to live with their parents, thus combining more than one nuclear family. They may be of different generations, as in the case of the parents and their offspring living together, each with his own family; or they may constitute only one generation after the parents die and the household is occupied by the siblings, each with his own nuclear family.

The structure as such is no longer of the traditional extended type where authority is vested in the father, constituting a close-knit unit, economically and socially. It is rather a collection of separate nuclear families who have nothing in common except for the residence, and consequently...
lack the cohesion, solidarity and pattern of authority that characterised the traditional structure. Each of the nuclear families leads a separate life, with all the household activities such as cooking, laundry, eating, etc. performed separately and each family being restricted to its own living space. Tensions often arise in this form of residence where the level of overcrowding is high.

The return to the extended family in the city is but one social consequence of the shortage in housing, another is the increasing number of delayed marriages. The average Egyptian couple engaged to be married normally finds it difficult to afford a flat and, unless they were fortunate to have worked in an oil-rich country, may have to wait for years. When the engagement period drags on, it is highly probable that the relationship will come to an end. In some cases, the couple does marry, but continues to live separately, each with his and her own family. This form of marriage has become very common in the last decade where neither family can provide the couple with living space. The situation is further aggravated when the young couple decides to have children, usually soon after the marriage, a typical situation in a culture which highly values children.

Such problems are experienced by the middle and lower strata of society and result in much discontent among youth. The difficulty, sometimes even the impossibility, of acquiring a residence — a basic human necessity — can trigger-off a whole spectrum of hostile feelings among the young, whose prospects for the future are already dim in the midst of a multitude of problems, both economic and social.

**Conclusion**

The issue of housing should be assessed in terms of the target population. But who constitutes the target population? This question is very difficult to answer at present since the indices normally used in stratifying society do not coincide.

The typical family of the target population is large, the average being five or six individuals living in two rooms. The mother is illiterate, or in a few exceptional cases can read and write but has not gone beyond primary education, and does not hold a job. The husband has reached intermediate level education and is a labourer or a minor government employee. The children are in different levels of education, the eldest being in technical school or university if it is economically possible. In most families, however, the children start working at an early age after they finish primary school, and are usually employed as apprentices. The family lives on a severely limited income which barely provides the basic needs for survival. It is common to find at present, however, individuals in this stratum whose income has risen higher than that of university graduates, especially among skilled labourers. University graduates, particularly recent ones, are therefore included in the target population of low-cost housing by virtue of their low income. Since the *raison d'être* of this form of housing is to provide shelter for the lower-income stratum, it is a major concern for both state and beneficiaries. Yet the fact remains that the pattern of living, essentially in the use of domestic space, is very much determined by the level of education of the residents. Studies have shown that education, especially the university degree, is a significant factor in differentiating between the life-style of individuals.

Income has not appeared as relevant factor in this respect, since individuals with a high income, but who are without a university degree, continue to live in very much the same manner as those with a low-income the only point of differentiation being the acquisition of goods and luxury items among the former group. Nevertheless, it becomes crucial under the existing conditions of a housing deficit and income inconsistencies to consider income the major criterion for selecting beneficiaries for low-cost housing. Allowance for differences in life-style can be made by the provision of a "core" house with the basic utilities to allow for future expansions according to the residents' financial conditions. The emphasis here would be on self-help schemes, especially as the experience of informal housing has proved successful in this respect. Also under consideration, because public housing has not satisfied residents' needs, is the possibility of providing built units in which the interior details are left to the occupants. In this way, each family designs the interior domestic space to suit its own needs and in accordance with its pattern of living.