

The Challenge and The Response

François Vigier

In preparing our mid-point lectures, rather than attempting to comment directly on what has been said, my colleague Ismail Serageldin and I have chosen to share with you some personal thoughts that this seminar has brought to mind. We have organised them around four major issues which have relevance not only to Cairo but to other expanding metropolises of the Third World:

- 1) the need to arrive at a more coherent regional pattern;
- 2) safeguarding the urban heritage;
- 3) improving institutional and financial mechanisms; and
- 4) the implications of rapid urbanisation on the design professions. I shall now address the first of these two issues and Ismail Serageldin will treat the other two.

Need For a More Coherent Regional Pattern

The implications of recent growth in the Greater Cairo Region can be summarised as follows:

- A multi-directional expansion of the built-up area is causing the loss of precious agricultural land and prevents the efficient distribution of public services
- Rising densities in the central areas over-tax the infrastructure and create a sharp

deterioration in the living conditions of a growing majority of the urban population.

- The doubling of the urban population by the year 2000 will further compound today's problems.

Indeed, the problems faced by Cairo and other cities of the Third World are unprecedented in history. Demographic pressures, and an endemic shortage of financial resources and administrative and professional cadres have created a situation whereby the dynamism of urban growth is outstripping the ability of all levels of government to deliver the services expected of them. In the three years or so since my visit to Cairo, it has grown by one million, more than the total population of the twin cities of Boston and Cambridge. We can cite numerous examples demonstrating the magnitude of the problem, and the growing gap between the demand and resources, giving each other the thrills that children get when telling ghost stories. Instead, let us take a more constructive attitude and look for the lessons to be learnt from these seemingly horrifying problems.

In spite of severe overcrowding, it is worth noting that the majority of people are not sleeping on Cairo's streets and that the number of shanties is relatively low. Dr Rageh informs us that although the costs for land and construction are slowly rising, 80,000 dwellings are built annually in the

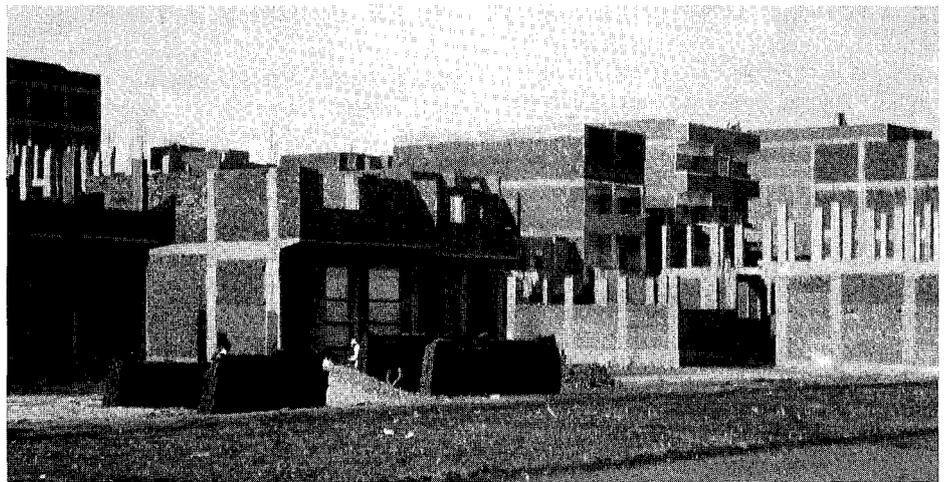
Greater Cairo Region. Admittedly, this number comprises a broad qualitative range: 80 per cent are constructed illegally and about half are either transformations or additions to the existing stock rather than new construction.

Unlike many of my colleagues, I find this phenomenon an extraordinary demonstration both of the existence of hidden economic resources, and of the energy and imagination demonstrated by the people to solve their own housing problems. What is deplorable, of course, is that these informal developments are destroying valuable agricultural land and they are occurring in such a seemingly haphazard fashion that they contradict the objectives for the future embodied in public policy, from regional master plans to building regulations.

Indeed, one of the striking characteristics of the exploding metropolis is its chaotic appearance resulting from high densities, frenzied construction (ranging from major public works and skyscrapers to informal housing), and the congestion of people generated by inefficient traffic and commuting patterns. To the orderly mind of a western-trained planner, the situation is as bewildering as trying to predict the future.

A story is told of a well-known international transportation expert who was asked by the Cairo Governorate to prepare a traffic improvement plan. After months of thorough study and computer simulations of the situation, his report was brief: "According to all international standards, not a single vehicle should be able to move in downtown Cairo today; that any movement occurs at all is a miracle. I therefore advise you to do nothing." The moral of this probably apocryphal tale is not that the traffic of Cairo is ruled by *ifris* more powerful than the *djinns* that inhabit computers; but that the norms and theories embodied in western traffic models may simply not be applicable to Cairo or to other large cities of the Third World.

Whether speaking of regional planning strategies, housing or traffic patterns, it is my belief that the standards and theories currently used in the West are largely



Uncontrolled development on the north-west fringe of Greater Cairo

Photo: Mona Serageldin

irrelevant and may even be counter-productive to solving the problems of a city such as Cairo because:

- they were developed as remedial measures for cities that were already past their expansionary peak, and not for those trying to cope with high rates of growth;
- they subsume an income distribution that allows a spectrum of individual choices radically different from that of Cairo;
- they embody attitudes toward the city that grew out of different cultural contexts;
- they demand resources which may be manageable in wealthy industrialised countries but which are not present in most other countries; and
- they embody theoretical blueprints of a desirable future, to be achieved in a systematic manner.

Our response to the challenge of rapid urbanisation must be the finding of new solutions that specifically address the unprecedented phenomenon that is Cairo. These solutions must:

1) *Focus on the dynamics of the present situation*, rather than prescribe a standard model for the future. The demographic

pressures of urban growth, as well as social ties and values are all evolving, and tastes are changing. Nearly 120 years ago, the Khedive Ismail proclaimed, perhaps wistfully, that "Egypt is now part of Europe", thereby promoting the westernisation of a new Cairo. There is no need for such a statement today. Egypt is part of the world community and its intellectual resources argue that it can and must find its own solutions, compatible with *both* its cultural tradition and the need to address contemporary issues.

2) *Utilise and direct the energy* that is so evident in its people who have demonstrated the ability to finance and build shelter for themselves and for others. Instead of viewing the dwellings that are now built illegally as a blot on the urban landscape or a slap in the face of bureaucratic rules and regulations, government should provide the infrastructure and public facilities and services needed that are indispensable in a dense urban environment. A situation where the housing being built by people is not serviced because it is illegal or built in the wrong place is counter-productive.

3) *Arrive at a highly efficient expenditure of scarce resources*, both human and mate-

rial. If the energy of the private sector is to be utilised efficiently, the government must regain control of the directions of growth. The reasons for this are pragmatic in that without centralised co-ordination spatially specific projects undertaken by the private sector tend to result in additional time and expense in building and providing infrastructure.

I would argue that any urban policy one of whose major components is to retrofit vast and ever-growing unserved areas is a losing proposition, unless it is complemented by a policy that encourages the informal sector to settle in areas that can be serviced efficiently, if not now then at least in the foreseeable future.

Because informal settlements locate according to their own rationale (i.e. according to the availability of affordable land, proximity to a source of water, jobs or public transportation, their incredible vitality contributes to an increasingly chaotic regional land use pattern as primary infrastructure system planning is forced to react to development trends rather than be an effective guiding force. Yet, one can well imagine that the contribution of the informal sector could become a valuable asset if it is properly integrated within a coherent regional strategy, a strategy that would of necessity include:

- a co-operative relationship between the public and private sectors in housing, the former concentrating its resources on public services and facilities;
- co-ordination, among such sectorial policies as transportation, sanitation and job creation;
- land transfer, registration procedures and building regulations that legalise private housing production rather than relegate it to an illegal or semi-legal status;
- the incorporation of intermediate technology solutions that would be easily upgradeable.

Safeguarding the Urban Heritage

Here is a topic that is particularly complex. Dr Abdelhalim quite properly called to our attention that the first half of this century witnessed the creation of a number of major architectural landmarks, the work of Egyptian architects searching for a national expression as part of the struggle for independence. Professor Ilbert also reminded us that even such European implantations as Heliopolis left their mark, an important one, on the Cairene landscape. Today these landmarks are being threatened for reasons similar to the ones that are threatening the mediaeval city: the rising value of the land and its strategic location within the metropolitan region.

It may be relatively simple to protect one individual building, be it mediaeval or modern, but much more complex to conserve and revitalise an entire area strategically located between the central business district and three expanding developments. In spite of thriving economic activities and a strong social structure, the narrow streets and dense urban fabric of the mediaeval city cannot but be seen as an obstacle to an efficient and rational metropolitan system.

The very beauty of the Old City, however dilapidated, poses special problems. If the conservation of monuments is something readily agreed upon by everyone, rehabilitating the urban fabric is an even more controversial issue considering the technical aspects and costs to be incurred. The number of major plans proposed over the years to improve east-west movement through the mediaeval city, of which the elevated highway on Al-Azhar Street is the latest, exemplify the pressures at work. There are two opposing schools of thought on the subject.

The first argues that the fabric of the mediaeval city must be conserved as well as the monuments, not only to provide a proper setting for the monuments, but to preserve a living example of one of the great, if not the greatest examples of Islamic urbanism.

The second advances the argument that only the monuments need be safeguarded; and that most residential structures less than 100 years old offer unsanitary living conditions for their inhabitants and freeze valuable land next to the city centre. The great European capitals — London, Paris, Rome — did not hesitate to demolish their mediaeval fabric and replace it with broad avenues and stately buildings we admire to-day. It can even be argued that insisting on preserving the entire mediaeval city may be little more than intellectual colonisation providing another exotic sight for wealthy tourists to enjoy before going back to their air-conditioned hotels. As Dr Doris Abu-Seif pointed out, the attachment of the majority of the urban population to the mediaeval fabric has yet to be demonstrated. They may gladly trade the dilapidated historical environment in which they live for better housing and better community facilities.

There is still, however, a third position which could be advocated, a middle position which I call *planned evolution*. By this I mean that:

- 1) The economic integration of traditional activities into the modern sector must be continued: e.g., provide for better transportation, but on a scale that will not overly disrupt the traditional fabric.
- 2) New construction should be encouraged, but according to guide-lines that are clearly articulated and compatible with the existing environment allowing for a gradual change in scale.
- 3) The attitude of benign neglect toward the mediaeval city which has persisted since the Khedive Ismail must be replaced with one which gives it at least as much attention as to such prestigious projects as the new cities. The examples shown by Professor Lewcock demonstrated that relatively modest interventions might well restore individual buildings not only as monuments but as an integral and useful component in the life of a neighbourhood. If coupled with residential rehabilitation, the mediaeval city will not be frozen as a



View of Sultan Hassan and Al-Rifai Mosques from the Citadel

Photo François Vigier

“nostalgic environment”, but its evolution parallel with that of the rest of the city will be made possible. The Gamaliya project may well provide a proto type of this approach.

4) Involving the inhabitants in this process will not only increase their awareness in their urban heritage, but may help immensely in ensuring the on-going maintenance that must accompany any rehabilitation strategy if it is to be more than an ephemeral effort.

This last point applies also to new developments, formal or informal, and not only to the mediaeval city. Perhaps the most disturbing aspect of rapid urbanisation is the gap which develops between people and institutions, when traditional social ties of mutual responsibility toward a shared environment are replaced by a transfer of these responsibilities to municipal authorities. The pressures of rapid growth and the myriad problems facing the municipal authorities raise fundamental questions about

their ability to discharge these responsibilities efficiently without the co-operation of the people, although, as we already pointed out, there are successful examples of this in such recent up-grading projects as the one in Helwan.