Cairo’s Urban Growth and Its Impact on the Historic City

JIM ANTONIOU

Cairo’s clamour is partly attributed to the exuberance of its citizens, but mainly to rapid growth, leading to overcrowding and acute congestion. Over the last fifty years, Cairo has grown alarmingly, from a city of two million inhabitants to today’s Greater Cairo agglomeration with a population of more than sixteen million. How has this explosive growth taken place in such a relatively short period of time in the capital’s long history and what impact has this had on the historic city?

THE MAKING OF GREATER CAIRO

As defined in 1982 by the General Organisation for Physical Planning, the Greater Cairo Region is located within the jurisdiction of three Governorates, namely Cairo to the east of the River Nile, Giza to the west and Qalioubia to the north. Each Governorate is now administered by its own local government and is headed by an appointed Governor. The area allocated is vast and includes all of Cairo Governorate and most of the extensive Giza and Qalioubia Governorates. The latter two include rural areas and small towns, with little relation to the extent of Greater Cairo. Thus, the actual built-up area covers some three hundred square kilometres and is the fifteenth largest metropolis in the world.

At the beginning of the Second World War, Cairo was contained within its traditional core, consisting of the historic area and its expansion of the European developments on the west of the old city (that is, today’s downtown area). Expansion also took place along two axes: Rod al Farag and Shubra to the north and Abbasiyya, Ain Shams and Heliopolis towards the north-east. Maadi and Helwan to the south were then small isolated settlements. Similarly, there were few developments across the River Nile, with growth restricted to the traditional villages of Giza to the southwest, and Dokki and Aguza to the west.

At the end of the war, as a result of free spending by the allied forces, Cairo’s economy enjoyed a boom period. Basic infrastructure was by then in place, including roads and bridges, water and sanitation systems and power grids. The city was thus ready to begin expanding on a scale never before experienced in its history.
By 1947, migration to Cairo had been heavy and with the city’s population expanding at an annual rate of four percent, the result was acute overcrowding in the existing housing stock. Yet, until that time, Cairo did not have an independent local administration; nor was there a planning framework with a guiding master plan. Various central ministries and utility concessions controlled urban affairs issues until the Municipality of Cairo was created in 1947. Later, in 1960-1961, the Municipality was transformed into the Housing and Utilities Directorate of the Governorate of Cairo.

Between 1947 and 1967, Cairo grew rapidly, mainly on private agricultural land. Public housing construction began in the early 1950s, carrying substantial direct subsidies. After the 1952 Revolution, new laws reduced rents on new, as well as existing, housing units. Large numbers of Cairo’s residential units (some fifty-two percent) still remain under rent control at extremely low rates. In particular, many of the dwellings in the historic city are subject to rent controls, leading to a lack of care and maintenance.

In 1956, a master plan was prepared for Cairo, emphasising the need for expansion into the east and west desert flanks. Nasr City, an ambitious desert fringe project to the east was launched by the Government in 1958, followed by further urban expansions in Heliopolis, Ain Shams and Maadi.

By 1960, the city had grown to 3.4 million people (with Greater Cairo having a population of 4.5 million). The main axis of growth continued towards the north, where the wide Delta plain was suitable for urban use. Expansion also took place in new industrial areas such as Shubra El Kheima to the north and by way of public housing projects on agricultural land. Urbanisation also took place on the west bank of the Nile, with notable additions to Maadi and Helwan in the south.
The 1967 war with Israel and subsequent events had the crucial effect of freezing formal types of development in the capital by the Government. However, although urban plans were shelved, the demographic growth of Cairo continued unabated, with the informal sector gaining momentum. Small private land owners, independent contractors and would-be homeowners contrived to circumvent building and zoning regulations. The informal sector also included squatters on Government land in the desert. Eventually, due to the country's chronic housing shortage, this essentially illegal sector became so large that the Government turned a blind eye to much of its activity.

By the beginning of 1974, Egypt's economic condition changed dramatically for the better. The oil price rise provided opportunities for Egyptians to work in new wealthy countries in the Middle East, including Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Libya. Expatriate earnings created an unprecedented cash-based economy, allowing Egyptians at all levels of society to benefit, including blue-collar workers and their families and other groups who were attracted to live in informal areas. Over the next few years, an overwhelming eighty percent of additions to Cairo's housing stock were illegal. The Government was forced to take notice and a series of decrees also made it illegal to build on agricultural land and discouraged encroachment on State, mainly desert, land. Nevertheless, these interventions had little effect in controlling the informal growth of development.

In 1977, the New Town policy was launched and came to dominate both Egypt's urban development discourse and its budgetary allocations. With this policy, the Government hoped to reduce
overcrowding and improve the housing problem in Cairo and other urban centres, while at the same time protect agricultural land. Nevertheless, infrastructure costs for new towns were substantially higher than in Cairo. Similarly, the cost of living in new town housing was more than the typical household income in the capital and certainly much more costly than living on the periphery of the city. Consequently, the industrial blue-collar workers for whom these new towns were essentially intended found that such housing was too expensive for their needs. Ironically, new apartments are plentiful on the capital's market. However, prices are beyond the means of the average middle-income family and, hence, the mass of people with limited means.

By 1981, the housing deficit was officially estimated at 1.6 million dwellings, corresponding to the needs of more than a third of the city's population. The lower income groups, being in fact outside the housing market, resorted to informal housing construction, through self-help on land without services. Some fifty percent of all private housing at that time was constructed on this basis. However, as a result of a reduction in remittance incomes from Egyptians abroad, the number of informal developments began to fall. Greater Cairo's annual growth rates fell from 3.1 percent (1961-1975) to 2.7 percent (1976-1986), followed by 1.9 percent (1986-1996). Even so, by 1996, a total of over seven million inhabitants was estimated as residing in informal areas within Greater Cairo, representing sixty-two percent of the total population, corresponding to almost fifty-three percent of the total build up of residential land. Over the last ten years, an area of thirty-seven square kilometres of agricultural land is taken annually for informal housing. Industry is also moving away from the centre to the fringes of Cairo.

The main extent of informal settlements has occurred in the west and north parts of Greater Cairo (that is, Giza and Qalioubia Governorates respectively, amounting to a total of eighty-one percent) and less in the south-west, in Cairo Governorate where urban development is relatively stable (accommodating the remaining nineteen percent). These informal areas also suffer from a chronic lack of basic public services, including infrastructure and community facilities and also inadequate ac-

Fig. 7. Aslam Mosque, an important community node in al-Darb al-Ahmar, was once at the forecourt of one of the city gates on the eastern wall.
cessibility. Moreover, due to the accommodation crisis, the decision on where to live for most families is one which is made once in a lifetime, making housing mobility marginal in Cairo.

THE METROPOLITAN AREA
A series of updated master plans were prepared over the last twenty years as part of an effort to address the capital's rapid growth through physical planning and urban management. The recurring themes of these plans have been the supply of housing, either through upgrading or new construction; the improvement of the traffic and transportation network; and the development of the socio-economic factors affecting employment and poverty.

Tramlines between the centre and the expanding suburbs first increased the extent of the city along transit routes. With the increase of vehicular traffic in the last three decades, the metropolitan area more than trebled. Over the last twenty years, more than one thousand kilometres of new roads
have been constructed in Greater Cairo, with ninety percent in desert areas. As Cairo extended into the desert, reliance on flexible transport became essential. Today, twenty-five thousand mini-buses carry 1.2 million people every day, while private vehicles account for only thirteen percent of all daily trips. Cairo now relies for access on new thoroughfares, flyovers and the new Ring Road, the 100-kilometre-long perimeter of the city, thus changing the pattern of urbanisation in the desert.

Further improvements were initiated in 1990, with the Economic Reforms and Structural Adjustment Programme, aiming towards a rapid rate of self-sustaining growth. The Programme demanded critical structural reforms to the public sector, including the delivery of public utilities, as well as an appropriate urban management environment. To that end, the ‘Homogeneous Sector’ (HS) concept was conceived with the objective of organising Greater Cairo into smaller self-sufficient units, while encouraging decentralisation by creating within these units employment, transportation links and public or private centres. However, rehabilitation plans and objectives for the various sectors did not reach an implementation stage.

Within the metropolis, HS I covers an area of 6.5 kilometres across and 9.5 kilometres from north to south and contains 1.5 million people. Its boundaries are within the railway line to Upper Egypt to the north and the Ring Road to the south, with the River Nile to the west and the Moqattam Hills to the east. This central area provides employment for a major part of Greater Cairo and most of the decision-making establishments in the country (government departments, company headquarters, business and trade activities, tourism and commerce). In addition, this sector contains the significant components of historic Cairo that make up the urban heritage. Transportation routes serve this sector along the Corniche Road and Qasr El Aini on the north to south direction, Port Said Street to the west and north-west and the Salah Salem Street and the Autostrade...
to the south and east. On an east to west axis, there are the streets of al-Azhar (and the new tunnel route), Salah Salem and the Ring Road. The Metro runs close to the Nile and continues in a north-east direction.

HISTORIC CAIRO

The historic components, which still survive to this day, consist of uniquely separate areas. This heritage includes to the south, Old Cairo, containing the city's pre-Islamic origins and al-Fustat, now an archaeological area and mainly uninhabited since its destruction in AD 1168. In addition, there is the Citadel, the largest and best-preserved fortification in the Middle East, and the south and north-east cemeteries, which contain significant architecture to Islam. In addition, the historic city has the largest concentration of Islamic monuments in the world. All these districts have been on the UNESCO International Heritage List since 1979. Alas, Bulaq to the north, once the commercial port for the Ottomans, with many important buildings of that time still standing, was inadvertently omitted from the List. Moreover, the areas listed by UNESCO are neither with demarcated boundaries, nor specific context.

Each one of these areas has its own concentration of monuments. Old Cairo, located towards the south part of HST, refers to the enclosure of the Roman fort. It covers an area of thirty-three hectares and today less than one hundred people live there. The numerous buildings and structures located on this site are from a variety of historic periods and include Roman remains, a synagogue and many important Coptic and Greek Orthodox churches, as well as the Coptic museum.
Today, al-Fustat covers an area of almost one hundred hectares and is considered by the Supreme Council of Antiquities (SCA) as an important archaeological site, representing the first Islamic city in Africa. It contains crucial information relating to living conditions during the early development of the city. Others, however, see it as a valuable piece of real estate in a city where demand for land is acute, particularly due to its vicinity to the capital's centre. Almost the whole site is surrounded by land already built on, or land prepared for building. Consequently, there is constant pressure to build in this area, which so far has been resisted.

The Citadel, with its location being a major focus to any overall design of the historic components, covers an area of about twenty-three hectares and dominates the historic city, while offering magnificent views as far as the Pyramids at Giza. Moreover, the Citadel, together with the Moqattam Hills, overlooks the city. Within the famous walls, there are several important listed buildings, making the Citadel a major tourist attraction.

The cemeteries are divided into two major areas. The south cemetery is to the east of al-Fustat and the north cemetery is to the north-east of the historic city. There has always been a tradition (for religious and scholastic reasons) of the living residing among the dead. Now, due to acute population pressures, more than two hundred thousand people are said to live and work around the tombs. Demographic pressures and a lack of housing have resulted in considerable building activity close to the monuments. Here, multi-storey constructions have taken place, with high densities, narrow streets, commercial and industrial activities, but with inadequate services.

Bulaq is at a distance of 1.5 kilometres north of the historic city, where today some forty thousand people live and are employed in workshops (often remnants of historic buildings associated with the port), now dealing with iron works and the motor trade. Here, too, there is considerable pressure for commercial redevelopment, due to the area's proximity to the Corniche Road, creating the most dramatic contrast between old and new architecture.

THE HISTORIC CITY

The historic city is at the heart of the metropolitan area and adjacent to the downtown business district. It has less than one percent of the sector's area (3.87 square kilometres) and twenty percent of its population (some 310,500 people). It is located within five qisms (security jurisdictions), namely, Bab al Sharia, Gamaliyya, al-Darb al-Ahmar, Khalifa and Sayyeda Zeinab. The city has experienced demographic changes during the last few decades (for example, from 433,000 in 1966 to 310,500 in 1996 and still declining). These shifts have been due to an initial population growth as a result of agricultural reforms in Egypt, followed by a significant decline due to a rapid housing expansion, both formal and informal.
Moreover, public management is fragmented, which implies that any unified and equitable administrative decision has to be taken at the Cairo Governorate level. Thus, public decision-making at the district level may be in conflict with the physical and socio-economic homogeneity of the historic city. Administrative reform, uniting the historic city in one municipal jurisdiction is therefore lacking.

Today, the historic city is poorly grafted into the downtown central area of Cairo and its thoroughfares. Major routes such as al-Azhar Street still divide the historic core into two parts and the unsightly overpass continues to facilitate east-west connections to and from central Cairo (in spite of a new 2.6-kilometre-long tunnel crossing in the same direction). The historic city’s commercial and economic activities are not integrated and the urban character it offers is not qualitatively compatible with central Cairo’s needs.

There is a long-term decline in the appearance of the historic city. Living conditions continue to deteriorate, with small-scale manufacturing industries, including metal welding, aluminium and
copper smelting, timber yards, marble cutting and vehicle repair yards. These intrusions create air, noise and visual pollution, seriously affecting the quality of life and having a negative impact on the many monuments. Solid waste and debris are widespread on the streets, on various plots and around the ruins.

The majority of the entrepreneurs in the historic city are not environmentally orientated and their interests are limited to the use of the ground floor of buildings. Absentee landlords, as a result of rent control rules, do not maintain their houses, which are occupied by employees. In turn, residents, due to their low income and poor status, are more concerned with affordable housing and employment opportunities and less with the deterioration of their residential environment. The city contains some thirty thousand squatters (almost ten percent of the population), without security of tenure, living in shacks, on vacant plots and ruined buildings.6

The historic city also contains 313 listed monuments, with 274 such buildings owned by the Ministry of Waqf (MoW), responsible for religious trusts. Thus, although the SCA is obliged to restore the monuments, the MoW owns the land as well as the monuments, most of which are rented out to individuals. In addition, the Governor of Cairo has issued Decree No. 257 (1980), which requires fifty metres of empty space around each monument, thus exposing façades not meant to be exposed while allowing for the deterioration of the surrounding buildings. The overall impact of this Decree, if implemented, is likely to transform the unique urban qualities of the historic city into an archaeological park.

The city has attracted numerous rehabilitation, preservation and restoration studies, proposals and projects, through Governmental, bilateral, and multilateral efforts. Their success has been mainly limited to the restoration of individual monuments by various foreign missions and the SCA. Some forty-seven Government sponsored restoration projects are currently underway as part of a programme to restore 157 monuments over the next eight years, mainly executed by four large contractors. This sudden burst of restoration activity has left many buildings embraced in scaffolding. A limiting factor is that those responsible for the well-being of the monuments are reluctant to adopt the concept of sympathetic reuse and with limited funds and expertise there is little preventive maintenance. As a result, buildings are restored by a variety of sponsors but remain locked and empty.

Meanwhile, comprehensive attempts at area rehabilitation, both as master plans and action plans, with the involvement of the community have not had any implementation success to date. Moreover, a legally defined geographic area does not exist as a designated conservation and active zone on to which the Government and other agencies can focus.
At present, a major effort is being undertaken by the Aga Khan Trust for Culture to provide a model for community development in the Darb al-Ahmar area of the city. Here, the embodiment of community aspirations is combined with rehabilitation and restoration, with links to the adjoining Ayyubid wall and the new Azhar Park.\textsuperscript{7}

Thus, the historic city remains the crumbling core of the largest city in Africa. Yet, literally hundreds of impressive monuments still remain standing along the thoroughfares, although many have already been lost. Here, liveliness, charm and a rich variety of visual delights are available to the visitor. With its medieval flavour, the historic city remains a place where local people take part as characters in a never-ending novel by Egypt's famous novelist, Naguib Mahfouz. Here are found noisy children from a nearby school, black-clad old women shuffling to and fro, men in rumpled galabiyyas making exaggerated gestures and pretty girls smiling shyly down from broken mashrabiyya windows.\textsuperscript{8} Sadly, in Europe's historic cities, similar scenes have long since been 'restored' through gentrified façades and smart boutiques. But a walk through Cairo's medieval core can be the same exhilarating experience it must have been several centuries ago.

\textsuperscript{1}Peter Wang, \textit{Housing}, Middle East Construction Report on Egypt, November 1981.
\textsuperscript{2}David Sims, \textit{Residential Informality in Greater Cairo}, Egyptian Centre for Economic Studies, Cairo 2000.
\textsuperscript{3}Cairo Almanac, \textit{The Encyclopaedia of Modern Egypt}, 2003.
\textsuperscript{7}Aga Khan Trust for Culture, \textit{Darb al-Ahmar Project, Urban Rehabilitation and Community Development in Historic Cairo}, AKCS-E 2001.
\textsuperscript{8}Jim Antoniou, \textit{Historic Cairo: A Walk Through the Islamic City}, The American University in Cairo Press, Cairo 1998.