

# CAIRO: GROWTH OF A GIANT



Photo: Guy Parent

**W**ith its nine million inhabitants, Cairo is the virtual metropolis of Africa. Grappling with the secondary results of phenomenal demographic growth, Cairo is also an overpopulated city. Three million people enter and leave the Egyptian capital every day, bringing its daytime population up to more than 12 million.

The city comes alive at the first flush of dawn. People flood into the centre from all the outlying suburbs. Buses, jam-packed by the time they leave the periphery, do not even bother to stop as they approach the city centre. People get on and off buses however they can, which means by running after them. The terminus at Tahrir Square in the heart of Cairo takes on the appearance of a fair to a foreigner. Pedestrians, cars, buses and trucks are all jumbled into a whirligig.

However, there are very few accidents. Cairenes are excellent drivers and they seem to have developed a sixth sense at the wheel of their cars, as if being shut into them for hours on end had taught them new dimensions of

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patience and resignation. One very rarely sees anyone behave in an aggressive way or lose their temper. What is tiring is that the city has not banned the use of horns. The result is an increasing cacophony of beeps, bleats, and blasts unrivalled in any of the world's great cities.

"But it's always like that," says Gamal, an official at the Ministry of Agriculture, who drives a taxi outside office hours. "Besides, there's the construction work on the subway!"

The famous subway, which even the greatest optimists do not expect will be running before 1988, should at least make it possible to decrease the downtown traffic a little. "But the construction work isn't going fast," says Gamal. "You always run into the ruins of something or other here." There are more than ruins in the path of the Cairo Metro. The surface geography is characterized by groundwater at very shallow depths and an uncertainty about how the ground will behave in response to excavation. Any settling caused by the tunnels would have serious consequences

for the heavily built over city above. A cooperative project between the University of Alberta in Canada and Ain Shams University in Cairo, funded by IDRC, will provide direct measurements of ground movements and stresses during construction to provide information needed to alter structural designs.

So while waiting for the subway, people here get by as best they can and put up patiently with the discomfort of dust and carbon monoxide. One interesting phenomenon is that Cairo probably has the highest concentration of university graduates or civil servants as drivers per taxi than any other country. Mohammed has a BA in Business from Cairo University. Abdul works at the Ministry of Housing. Omar has been an accountant in Persian Gulf banks at

lem is to live in government housing. The rent asked per month is one Egyptian pound (a little more than one Canadian dollar). On the other hand, you have to get used to lawns that double as garbage dumps, and to leaky pipes, erratic electricity, and open sewers.

Professor Madiha el Safty of the American University of Cairo comments that most moderately priced housing is built by the government; however, while the population of Cairo tripled to reach nine million, no more than an average of 30 000 housing units could be built per year. The main reason for this, says Prof el Safty, was the war against Israel, which monopolized national energy. After the Yom Kippur war in 1973, the whole Suez Canal Zone had to be rebuilt. All the resources of the construction industry were concentrated on that job. The situation did begin to improve in 1981, but the rate of construction is still far behind the needs of the population.

The result is that what housing does exist is enormously in demand and prices keep on rising. Real estate speculation has played a part too; the few construction sites still available have reached impossible prices. At Heliopolis and Nasser City, which are the new "in" upper-middle-class suburbs, one can find modern apartments, only two or three years old, standing empty. Their owners refuse to sell them. They are simply waiting for prices to go up.

Dr Mongi explains: "It's the inevitable result if the stock is limited and demand very high." But what if those who put up buildings were forced to sell all housing as soon as construction was completed?" "Then builders would stop building." That expresses the whole of modern Egypt, born of *infitah*, the economic policy started up by the late President Sadat in a spirit of liberalism. Let the laws of the market operate, encourage private enterprise, limit government interference, and only intervene when it is needed for the restoration of equilibrium. But the State's incentives policies are not always very effective. For example, in an effort to relieve automobile traffic and avoid endless commuting travel, the government passed a law to facilitate housing exchanges between people living in the suburbs and working downtown and those living downtown and working in the suburbs. Nothing came of it and there is just as much traffic in both directions



Old Cairo (above), and the new Cairo (opposite): chaotic growth

a salary 20 times higher than people earn in Egypt, but since he returned to Cairo, he too has been driving a taxi so as to last out each month. For the rest of his time he works as a cook in one of the big hotels. Another problem, and a crucial one, is housing. Because of the tremendous pressure of population, Cairo is suffering from an appalling housing shortage. The hardest housing of all to find is housing at reasonable prices. "You can scarcely ever find an apartment for rent here," Dr Mongi of the National Planning Institute explains. "Generally speaking one has to buy in Cairo. Here, as anywhere else, the prices vary depending upon the size and district wanted, but everyone in Cairo will tell you that whatever the district and the amount of space one wants, all prices are similar in one thing — they are exorbitant. You can easily pay \$1000 (Canadian equivalent) per square metre for an apartment in Cairo," says Dr Mongi. "Calculate it for yourself, a 5-room apartment with an area of 100 square metres will cost you \$100 000. In a place where the average annual income is barely more than \$700 a situation like this is an absolute nightmare."

Lacking money, the other way of solving the housing prob-

as before.

In fact, one gets the impression that the government is, in a way, overwhelmed by the size of the task or, at least, caught short. A good example of this state of affairs is the construction of houses without permits in the city. It is estimated that about 80 percent of construction in the last five years has been done without authorization from the municipality. Construction is going on everywhere: on the roofs of buildings, in the avenues, in what used to be open green spaces, or even on farmland. This absence of permits casts a quite particular light on accidents such as the one in which a sizeable multi-storey building quite simply collapsed, killing a dozen or so of the tenants. Rumour had it that the builder tried to save money by speculating on the quality of the cement.

Another case which well illustrates the anarchic state of housing developments in Cairo is that of the City of the Dead. Hundreds of thousands of people have reportedly taken up residence in the necropolis city, which is nothing more nor less than a huge cemetery. Certainly, the use of the cemetery as a refuge for the living is a strange reversal

of things, and is even stranger when one learns that there is an elaborate network for leasing and subletting in the City of the Dead.

"What is even more serious" says Prof el Safty, "is that Cairo is in the process of becoming ruralized; the numerous inhabitants who arrive from the countryside bring rural habits and ways of thinking with them with the results that some districts of Cairo are little more than large urban villages." The countryside is transported to the city, intact.

Another phenomenon appeared towards the end of the 1970s — luxury apartments for the new economic elite. More than anything this is a symbol of the changes in Egyptian society brought about by the *infitah* economic policy. "The gap between rich and poor has increased considerably in the last few years," Dr el Safty explains. "The new economic policy led to the appearance of a new class of entrepreneurs, nouveaux riches, who copy their lifestyle from Western society." While the fortunate few who are members of this class have risen, most of the population of Cairo is grappling with a rising cost of living and housing which they either cannot afford or which is unhealthy, with endless traffic jams, and ever more extravagant patterns of consumption based on the developed country model.

Solutions do exist for the supply, transportation, and housing problems. There is talk of settling the desert to the East of Cairo so as to avoid encroachment on arable land. The government has built a complete city in the closer suburbs for graduates returning from university study abroad. This is an effort to stop the brain drain, and housing there is very cheap. In every direction the suburbs are growing rapidly. Private firms have shown an interest in collective transportation, which used to be a government preserve. Microbus taxis travel the streets of Cairo everyday and relieve the serious gaps in public bus service. But if a city overflows and so quickly transforms itself into a megalopolis, there is so much to be done. "What do you expect?" says Dr Mongi. "We have ideas but the problems increase faster than we can cope with them..." □

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## SQUATTER MARKETS

Feeding a city that is growing at a rate of more than four percent a year is no easy task, and the challenge of keeping Cairo's nine million inhabitants supplied with fruits and vegetables has become more than the city's formal outlets can manage. In recent years, a large number of informal markets have sprung up to meet the demand. The squatter markets, as they are called, are located on land that is meant for other purposes — for example, areas under traffic overpasses are popular spots because they offer shelter from the sun and rain, and channel busy pedestrian traffic. The squatter merchant stakes a claim by setting up camp on the site, and proceeds to do business in a more or less uncontrolled manner.

Urban administrators have expressed concern at this, yet they are forced to acknowledge that the fruits and vegetables distributed through these vendors are providing a vital source of low-cost food for the urban poor. As they search for appropriate policies and legislative measures to deal with the problem, however, city officials have been hampered by lack of hard data on the markets, the merchants, and their share of the trade.

In an effort to fill this gap in knowledge, IDRC agreed to support a study proposed by the Urban Development Unit of the Social Research Centre of the American University in Cairo. The overall aim of the study is to describe and analyze the livelihood of urban squatter market vendors in Cairo in order to arrive at an understanding of their role in the food distribution system.

Five research sites selected to represent a range of neighbourhoods, both poor and affluent, and a variety of produce will be examined. The investigation comes along at a crucial period in the city's history, when a number of food-related issues are being reconsidered. Although fruit and vegetable production has increased immensely in recent years, it is not meeting the urban demand. There is dissatisfaction on both sides of the equation: Cairo newspapers carry stories of fruit sellers refusing to bring their produce into the city until prices rise; there are extreme shortages of common vegetables, like onions, and other produce (such as strawberries) is exported for foreign exchange.



Squatter market under roadway: low-cost food comes to the urban poor

Photo: Guy Parent