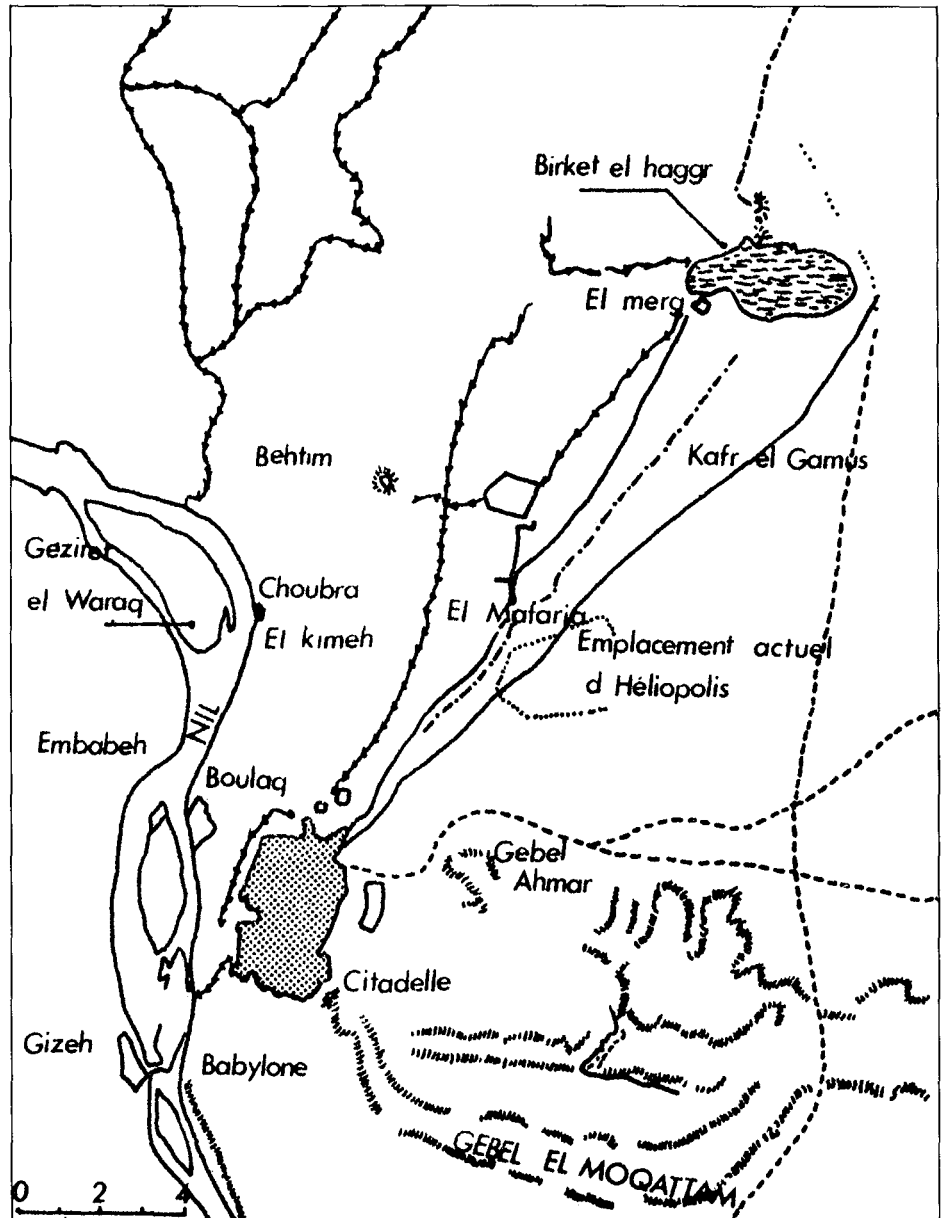


Robert Ilbert

Built in 1906, Heliopolis, with its population of more than two hundred thousand inhabitants, has become today one of the poles of development in Greater Cairo.

It all began at the turn of the century as a very uncommon phenomenon: it was not the result of a rapidly developing private enterprise like Zamalik, nor a speculative operation on the edge of the town like Sakakini, nor again a large residential project like Maadi. By its size (2,500 and later 7,000 hectares), and in its ambition (the creation of a real city with its own multiple services), Heliopolis can be compared to the grandiose schemes of Ismail Pasha or to some of the achievements of the Municipality of Alexandria. The project, cherished from 1905 onwards by the Belgian Edouard Empain had at least three distinctive original features. In the first place, it was built without any assistance from the state; secondly, the new town was to be set up from scratch and built in the desert; and finally, it was the expression of one individual's personal dreams (Empain) and not the outcome of a town-planning project, but the manifestation of a concept very much in vogue at the time, that of the "Garden City". These three features explain both the scepticism with which the project was greeted between 1905 and 1910 and the fascination which its successful implementation exercises on all of us today. Viewed strictly from the perspective of town planning, its success is beyond dispute: a town has come to life in the desert.

Although it took almost twenty years to consolidate, the actual bet had been won during the six-year period between 1922 and 1928. The concession itself, however, was granted to Empain and Boghos Nubar on 20 March 1905 with the Heliopolis Oasis Company being set up on 14 February 1906. The possibility of extending Cairo outside the fertile zones had been demonstrated by a private, foreign and capitalist enterprise in order to provide low-cost, comfortable accommodations and at the same time make a substantial profit. The first buildings began to rise in 1908, at the same time as the first tram route to Cairo



Location of Heliopolis

Source: Besancon, J "Une banlieue du Caire" Revue de Géographie de Lyon, 1958, No 2

was being opened (a distance of about 10 km from the centre of the city). Also during this time the desert had blossomed into an oasis and there was speculation about moving Egypt's first aerodrome, which Empain had decided to build on his concession, further away. Although there were barely a thousand inhabitants by the end of 1909, by 1915 the figure had already risen to 6,210, increasing to 9,200 in 1921 and jumping to a high of 224,000 in 1928.

Edouard Empain was not a philanthropist; his interest in Heliopolis was never intended to display a concern with social matters. Today, however, we find Heliopolis in the centre of our thoughts about urban transformation. This undertaking succeeded not only because it was able to attract potential inhabitants, but because so many of the inhabitants of Cairo have loved Heliopolis and today take pride in considering themselves Heliopolitans. Here was an undertaking which could not have been more colonial (since it was the work of a Belgian financier, built by Belgian, French and British architects, with an architecture which could not but recall colonial exhibitions), but it had been successfully grafted onto the urban structure of Cairo. This undoubtedly colonial appearance was able to set off a process of integration leading to the "universal exhibition town", the "gigantic illusion" and eventually becoming a quarter of Cairo, no less Egyptian than the others.¹

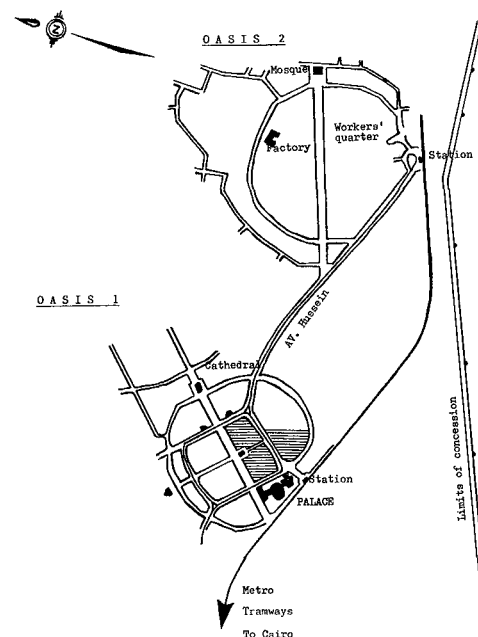
A Foreign Model

When the question was raised in 1930-1931 about organising an International Congress on Town Planning in the Colonies, to be held at Vincennes in France, and to which the Heliopolis Oasis Company was invited to attend, the directors had serious misgivings. After all, Egypt was not a colony, and more importantly, Heliopolis was not a colonial town. A risk was at stake: would participation in the Congress result in Heliopolis being linked in the final analysis

with the work of a Prost in Morocco? In the interests of publicity, however, and after the consent of Tazim and a modification in the name of the Congress, it was agreed that Heliopolis should be represented.² Great emphasis was to be placed, however, on all the features which distinguished Heliopolis from anything to be found in Senegal, Morocco or Indochina, for example. Although the urban links were decidedly foreign, they were not colonial. The governing feature of colonial town planning had always been the differentiation of "European" and "native" poles by careful "zoning", with the two poles complementing each other — usually more of a dream than a reality³. But such was not the case in the plans for Heliopolis.

In form and structure, Heliopolis is more of a "garden city" than a "parallel" town. It was designed as an isolated unit, its situation in the desert being intended to reduce to a minimum the risks of a link with Cairo. Its general plan has an obvious affinity with that of Letchworth, designed by Unwin and Parker in 1903 and implementing the theories of Howard.⁴ The ideal town proposed by Howard was to cover 2,400 hectares; Heliopolis, according to its original plan, was to cover 2,500 hectares incorporating industries, wide open green spaces and dwellings of all types, ranging from villas to very small workers' dwellings. "Zoning", clearly in evidence (a quarter with palaces and villas, a quarter with bourgeois apartments and a quarter containing factories and workers' dwellings), did not, however, result in setting up any perceptible barrier (physical or psychological), which was for example the case in some parts of Cairo.

Not unexpectedly, the original design did undergo major changes. There are clear differences between the initial project of 1906 and the final one adopted in 1908. Ideally there were to be two "oases": one residential and catering to tourists (around the Heliopolis Palace Hotel), the other for workers. Because of difficulties generated by the 1907 financial crisis, all efforts (and all construction work) had to be concen-

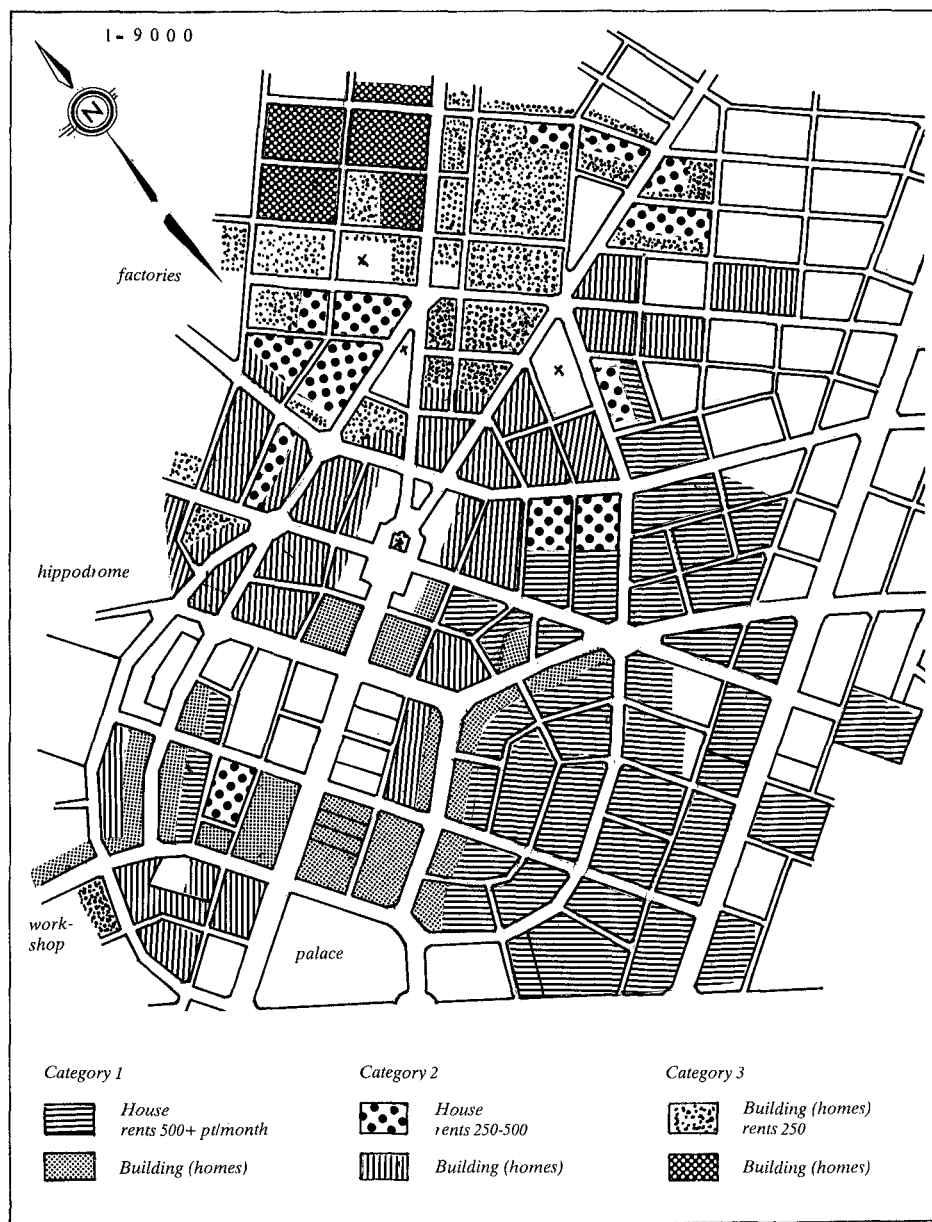


Heliopolis site plan.

Courtesy of R. Ilbert

trated on the first oasis. This setback forced Empain and his architects to search for an alternate solution whereby the considerable funds already invested in the enterprise could be saved and still achieve his real goal: to demonstrate that the desert was as profitable and habitable as the banks of the Nile. That perhaps was the reason why Empain turned his attention to what was being built in Europe at the time, hence his choice of "garden cities".

Whether it was a "garden city" or a "satellite town" does not appear to be as significant as the fact that it did not result in yet another "colonial town". Admittedly, it had a foreign flavour, but its alien characteristics were not viewed as a reflection of imperialist aims in bringing foreign forms. Though in the beginning of the century much was said about the historical character of the country, nobody was thinking about autonomous forms of development.⁵ Still there is no denying the "imported" appearance of the model as is suggested,



Heliopolis' distribution of housing.

Courtesy of R. Ilbert

for example, by the pattern of daily life which seems to evolve from the centre of town, close to the cathedral. The whole urban structure was organised around an enormous hotel (at that time the largest and most luxurious in the world), the cathedral and other Christian churches, the clubs, the race course and Luna Park (one of the world's first).

The principles applied in planning the new town were those just being introduced in Paris, as for example in the Quartier Dauphine. The height of the buildings, the number of storeys and the percentage of ground to be occupied were strictly regulated. The width of the roads and the truncated corners at the crossings were calculated on the basis of regulations which took into account (even in 1906) vehicular traffic. Neither did the arcades have anything Egyptian about them, even though the same design had been used previously in the Sharia Mohammed Ali (in the citadel). The inhabitants were more likely to wear a tie rather than a *galabieh* and to frequent the Sporting Club rather than the mosque.

The new town owes its survival to its communication routes. As the first buildings were going up, the Metro was being built — little more than a rapid tram, but which brought Heliopolis within a few minutes of travel time from Ataba. In addition, a wide road was opened on the other side, thus rendering the town self-sufficient, while still closely linked with Cairo by what could be considered at that time ultra-modern means of transportation. The inhabitants also enjoyed preferential rates, making it quite feasible to work in the centre of Cairo and live in Heliopolis, which accordingly became one of the preferred areas of residence for officials as well as professionals. But the one aspect which brought out clearly the originality of the model is that Heliopolis was a creation which — both in structure and its forms of development — was similar to the type of experiments being carried out at that time in Belgium, Britain and France.



*Heliopolis Palace Hotel,
Photo R Ilbert archives.*



*Detail of the Palace Empain
Photo R Ilbert archives*

Forms of Adaptation

The need for defining the type of creation that was Heliopolis is not a question of screening the violence of the antagonisms aroused, nor of reducing Heliopolis to a particular type in the history of town planning, but rather the need to guard against over-simplification. It would be wrong to see Heliopolis merely as a collection of pseudo-Oriental chateaux like the one which Baron Empain had built for himself whose design was based on a part of a Temple of Angkor on a reduced scale. And it would be equally wrong to claim that the new town was just another centre for the bourgeois "consumer" which descended on Egypt between 1900 and 1950. Viewed demographically, the general composition of the new town shows that, on the whole, the population represented was typically Egyptian right from the start. At least half of the inhabitants were local including, in 1925, 20 per cent Europeans (in particular Italians and Greeks) and a large number of Levantines (about 30 per cent).⁶ However, from the standpoint of religions represented, the figures obtained in no way compare with those of the Egyptian average (the Christian element, for example, being greatly over-represented).

Socially, Heliopolis was always stamped with the image of the ruling class. The large numbers of Egyptian officials were due at least in part to the difficulties encountered by the Company between 1907 and 1911, when the two-oasis project had to be abandoned, and which resulted in accommodations being offered to the government at very low prices in order to fill the new buildings. But this setback was once more the promise of success, marking the transformation of a tourist city into a real town. In addition, the design of Heliopolis with its variety of buildings attracted Egyptians of all classes and the often considerable financing opportunities made available enabled purchasers to find in Heliopolis what they could not find elsewhere

Thus it was that the new town came to be

used as a stepping stone by the new bourgeoisie, an important factor to be considered since it partly explains the success achieved by Empain among the new middle classes in Egypt during the 1920s. To move to Heliopolis meant, in a way, integration into a new western pattern of living without, however, “going over the border” into an excessively homogeneous, completely foreign quarter. The slightly affected architecture of the town — oriental even if in pseudo-taste — projected the image of a “modern” type of town but, nonetheless, “Egyptian” in character.

What we regard today as a simple play on shapes could at that time pass as a search for authenticity. One may well smile at the pseudo-Mamluk arches and the pseudo-Arab domes, but viewed in the context of the attitudes of the period, we see that this type of decor was not so much a veneer as a deliberate attempt at adaptation as was the case, for example, with architect Ernest Jaspar’s idea of reviving in the facade of the Heliopolis Palace Hotel the traditional rhythms of Arab architecture.⁷

This attempt at adaptation is clearly reflected in the efforts made by the Heliopolis Company to create the types of dwellings that would be compatible with their inhabitants. The first buildings built by the Company were dwellings for workmen employed in constructing the residential areas. But this type of accommodation was soon found to be unsuitable. The two-storey blocks with a connecting frontage of small rooms and shared sanitary facilities became instead the preserve of Italian or Levantine workmen, since the transplanted Egyptian peasants did not find the conditions they needed. Several research studies had to be carried out in order to determine the “ideal basic habitat”, if necessary extendable, which would provide the fellahin with a satisfactory environment. The studies were conducted from 1915 to 1921, each one refining the results of the preceding one as in 1916, for example, when a decision was made to build *mushrabiya*s with windows, but the frequent deterioration necessitated a return to more customary openings. The

large buildings also gave way to small semi-detached houses on 25-45 sq. m. with two rooms and a court-yard. The height of the windows was changed so as to preserve an intimate atmosphere and in some buildings the apartments were re-arranged moving the kitchen and introducing a *salamlik*.

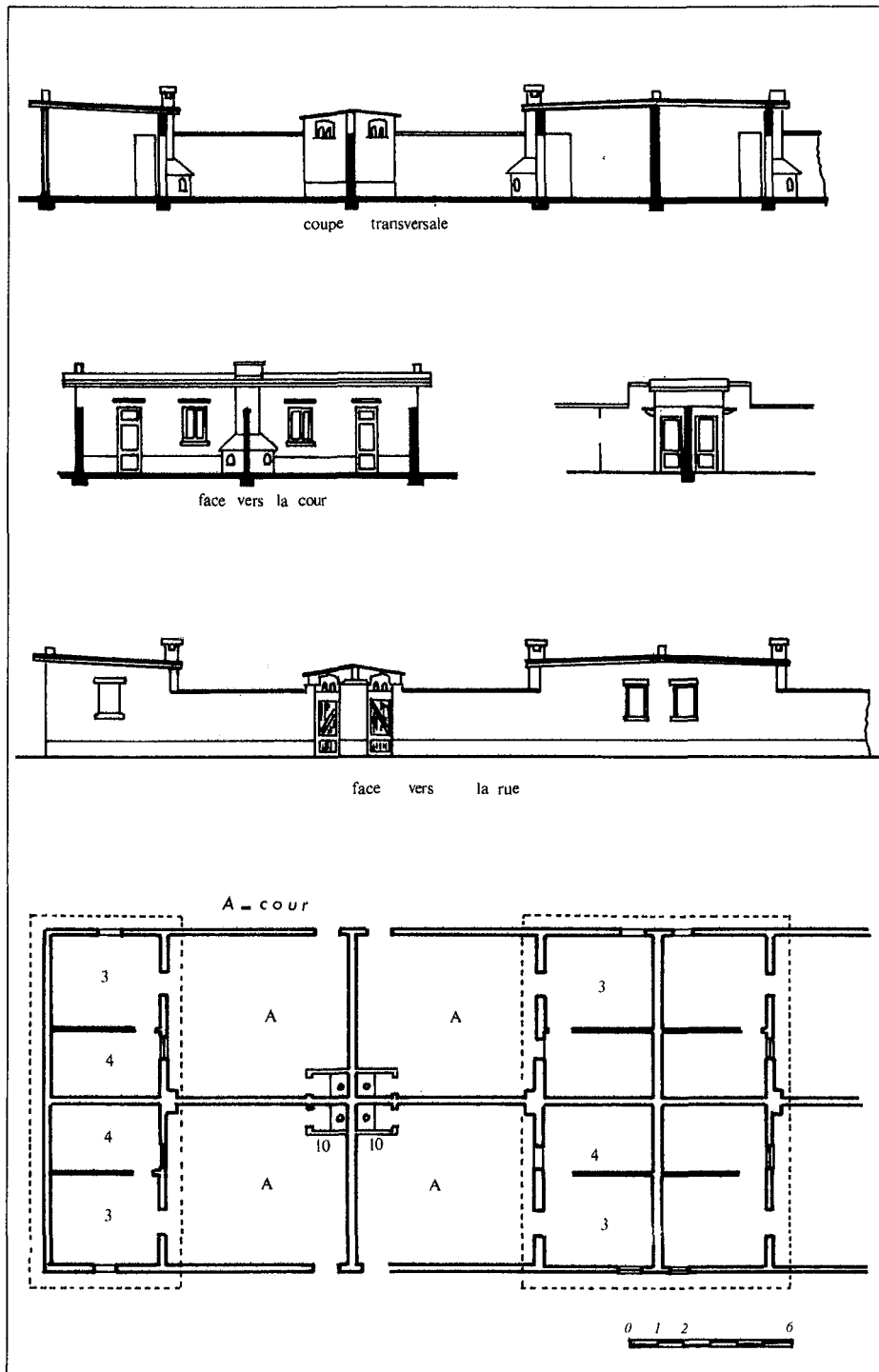
The results of this research were reflected even in the names given to the buildings. We find, for example, “distributions for Europeans and Syrians” and “distributions

for Moslems and Copts”, and in like manner, there were workers’ accommodations of the “European” type and of the “MOS” (Moslem) type. There is no need for an ideological analysis of the situation or to point at segregation. It is more important to regard the fact that inhabitants of different types are living together in the same areas as an attempt at adaptation. When all is said and done, the results are there to check: the buildings served their intended



Heliopolis as the manifestation of the baroque.

Photo R Ilbert Archives



Heliopolis. the native quarter, elevation and plan

Courtesy of R. Ilbert.

purpose successfully and, in spite of the extraordinary rise in land prices in Heliopolis, they still do today. Accommodations specially adapted to workers' needs were a matter of general concern at the time. The Municipality of Alexandria, for example, had developed, even before the Société d'Héliopolis, a plan for eliminating *échéchés* (shanty towns) by means of developments suitable for this population. Similar operations had also been undertaken in Cairo as in the Sayyeda Zeinab quarter. The fashion had even caught on among intellectuals, since the *Cairo Scientific Journal* published, in its first volume (1906-1907), two studies on the traditional designs of Egyptian houses in order to help firms eliminate *échéchés*. However, probably nowhere was so systematic an attempt made to place a population in its own "frame" as in Heliopolis, although plans for *salamliks* were relatively wide-spread in Cairo.

Reasons For A Successful Venture

Although the model was foreign, it had not been imposed on a population that was not ready to receive it. Great efforts had been made to avoid the application of purely theoretic principles and the enormous diversity of the clientele (ranging from workmen to the highest levels of the bourgeoisie) had obliged the initiators of this enterprise to use the whole range of architectural options available to them. The unity of the whole derives paradoxically from the play on the different shapes and types of decor; the architects never hesitated to include anything Arab they could find — sometimes with startling results. But the form taken by the new town does not completely explain the success, slow but sure, of the enterprise; it also had to meet irreversible needs. There, undoubtedly, we have the key to its success: the ability to diagnose a need and to meet a demand which began to be clearly expressed from the 1920s onwards.

When Empain launched his scheme, there were many who thought him destined for failure. The directions in which Cairo would expand appeared to be quite clear: once the banks of the Nile had been stabilised, the city would extend in the vicinity of the river and in a northward direction, hence the frantic speculation in land around Bulaq and Gezira. It was also clear that the old city was destined to be the preserve of the proletariat and that the new quarters would therefore be for the bourgeoisie. Empain and Boghos Nubar, however, thought differently: for them the desert was the only possible form of development and the only site where capital could be invested. Concessions in the desert could be obtained from the government for almost nothing, thus compensating for the high costs of development. In addition, the aim was not speculation over the next two to five years, like that of the majority of capitalists operating in Egypt.⁸

The amounts invested were considerable, placing Heliopolis in second place among the Egyptian companies in terms of its capital, after the Suez Canal Company. It was also true that the Company just broke even after 1915, about ten years after the investment was made. Set against this, the Company, by obtaining monopolies such as those of water, electricity or transportation, guaranteed increasing revenues once the development was complete. The slowness of the project served to confirm the wisdom of these deliberate choices. The yield on capital and the quality of the product could not be allowed to come into conflict; as a matter of fact the Company could count on almost 30 years of profit.

This link between financial interest and the quality of services was an essential element. It was undoubtedly the cause of many abuses in the 1930s, as for example, a cubic metre of water was sold for three times more by the Heliopolis Oasis Company than by the Cairo Water Company. The monopoly was not, however, without its advantages: the first filtration and water purification plans saw the light of day at Heliopolis. The existence of monopolies

also permitted a reasonable increase in land values, so that plots could be developed at prices which were, during the years between 1910 and 1930, within the reach of the new middle class of officials and professionals whose wealth was not based on land.

In the final analysis, it was the practical considerations and economic factors which governed the success of the enterprise, rather than the aesthetic and architectural aspects. The simplicity and moderate cost of the communication networks with Cairo were strong arguments in favour of developing the north-east instead of the banks of the Nile. Although for a long time the closeness of the desert had halted a population which had never felt at ease faced by such vast expanses, the quality of the services offered and the low costs, went a long way to compensate for the inconveniences due to the close proximity of the sand. In addition, the drainage techniques developed by the Company engineers, (making use, in non-built-up zones, of wadis which were normally dry but could play an essential part in the event of heavy rain) balanced out the closeness to the Mokattam which could have transformed the town into a huge mud patch. Finally, the possibility — limited though it was — of finding work on site (in the brickworks, synthetic stone factory, lemonade factory, etc.) helped to set up a whole population of workmen, tradesmen and merchants who were less and less inclined to move to Cairo. By 1920 the majority of businesses were already there.

Under these conditions clearly arises the problem of adapting a new city to one in the process of transformation. The solution appears to be simple. It was because Edouard Empain understood that a new class was emerging from the nineteenth century, and that this class wished to gain access to urban property and to modes of life similar to those of European examples, that he won his bet. It was also because he opted for long-term investment that he was able to show a profit. A colonial enterprise had become an urban success (since the

two terms were not in conflict here) because Heliopolis succeeded in becoming an integral part of modern Cairo. This achievement was due not only to its ability to meet a demand and respond to the irreversible mutations of a society, but above all because it was able to impose a way of life while at the same time leaving a wide margin for individual differences.

Heliopolis was, undoubtedly, a new development. Since 1870 there had been both in Cairo and Alexandria a clearly expressed wish to control urban development. The efforts to provide services were certainly apparent in the Municipality of Alexandria and in the achievements of Tanzim, but Heliopolis remains to be a unique case. As a capitalist and monopoly enterprise, it drew its dynamism from the concentration of interests and powers which destined it to succeed or perish. In all its contradictions, it provides a good image of Egypt at the beginning of this dominated yet creative century.

Reference Notes

¹ For the history of this achievement, see R. Ilbert, *Heliopolis, 1905-1922, genèse d'une ville* (Paris: CNRS, 1981)

² Letters from the company archives, 1930-1931. The final title of the Congress was "Congrès International de l'Urbanisme aux colonies et dans les pays de latitude tropicale". Texts assembled and presented by Jean Royer, D. Nevers, ed., 1932

³ Texts by Lyautey and Prost, in J. Royer, *op. cit.*, Vol. 1, pp. 21 ff.

⁴ E. Howard, *Tomorrow, A Peaceful Path to Real Reform* (London, 1898)

⁵ On the national debate in Egypt, see articles by A. Louca and G. Delanoue in *L'Egypte d'aujourd'hui, permanences et changements* (Paris: CNRS, GREPO, 1977)

⁶ For this study see R. Ilbert, *op. cit.*, pp. 115 and ff.

⁷ R. Ilbert and M. Volait, "Neo Arabic Renaissance in Egypt: 1874-1930" *Mimar* 13 (1984), pp. 26-34.

⁸ A very different attitude from that of Georges Eid, for example, Belgian consular agent, who bet on Empain's failure because he had not espoused the "natural development" of the city