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**Egyptian dream takes shape in alien suburbs; Idealized housing rises on the sand, an escape from crowded Cairo.**

[HOME EDITION]

Los Angeles Times - Los Angeles, Calif.  
 Subjects: Suburban areas, Gated communities, Housing developments  
 Author: Ashraf Khalil  
 Date: May 22, 2007  
 Start Page: A.1  
 Section: Main News; Part A; Foreign Desk  
 Text Word Count: 1413

Document Text

It's sandstorm season in Cairo, one of those humbling days when the desert wind known as the khamsin seems determined to reclaim the city.

A hot, mustard-colored haze engulfs the capital. Residents seal up their windows, and those who venture outside don surgical masks or clutch tissues to their faces against the tide of sand, flying garbage and urban grit.

The same sandstorm blows outside Tarek Atia's suburban dream home. But here, about 25 miles east of Cairo, the wind, even the light, feels different.

"The air is cleaner, isn't it?" Atia says, stepping out of the unfinished villa in a gated community called Katameya Residence. "It's not mixing with the car fumes and other stuff."

Atia is one of the pioneers of a new suburbia cropping up on the edges of Egypt's gridlocked and deteriorating capital. Their dream: a little peace, fresh air and a yard to call their own.

With luxury developments sporting names like Golden Heights, Swan Lake and Royal Meadows, Cairo's new suburbs promise an idealized vision of an appealingly alien lifestyle.

"It has to have a Western feel," says architect Hisham Bahgat, who helped design several of the developments, including Katameya Residence.

"They're selling an image of a life."

They're also, at times, pushing the boundaries of aesthetics, and provoking a debate over whether these ersatz and elite fringe cities will destroy Cairo's appeal.

Homes in some of the new communities combine red Mediterranean tile roofs, splashes of pastel colors, Roman columns and sheets of shimmering glass, like grafts taken from random pages of Architectural Digest.

Future University, one of dozens of new private schools dotting the suburbs, looks like a spaceship meshed with a half-scale model of Rome's Colosseum.

Bahgat's architectural firm partner, Ahmed Fahim, describes the aesthetic using an Egyptian colloquialism: "Fish, milk and tamarind." A huge mess.

After a fitful start, suburban construction is progressing nonstop, as is the debate over whether these new communities will help Cairo or finish it off. Critics argue that the building boom sets the stage for unprecedented social divisions.

"You can live in these areas and be totally detached from Egypt," said Manar Shorbagy, former director of the American Studies Center at American University in Cairo. "It's going to work like it did in the U.S. -- wealthy suburbs and deprived and abandoned inner cities."

But even American University, which educates the children of Egypt's richest and most powerful, is about to move to the suburbs.

Egypt has always been a place of rigid class divisions, but until now the wealthy often lived in or near the same neighborhoods where they grew up, sometimes turning modest apartments of their youth into lavish palaces.

"We have never seen this kind of division," Shorbagy said.

"It's the Americanization of Egypt."

Dozens of suburban housing developments east and southwest of the city are up and running; the complex where Atia lives is a boomtown.

But most look like Lakeview: one section lushly landscaped and most of the rest a cluster of unfinished villas and acres of raw desert, surrounded by an

ornate wall. Visitors to Lakeview step through gates flanked by artificial waterfalls into a mini-utopia, complete with man-made lake, walking trails, romantic waterside gazebo and Roman-style amphitheater.

The first tenants, according to the sales staff, should be moving in later this year. The first three phases sold out, and homes in Phase 4 start at \$740,000.

Cairo's shift toward suburbia has been in the works for decades.

Former President Anwar Sadat launched a plan in the 1970s to create autonomous satellite cities and draw people away from crowded Cairo.

Many of the developments never became more than factory towns. The only one regarded as a success is October 6 City, about 25 miles southwest of the capital and home to more than 200,000 people.

The government changed strategy in the mid-'90s, turning over suburban development to the private sector and selling vast tracts of state-owned land to investors at sweetheart rates.

"The idea was to help empty out Cairo," Fahim said. "But now the picture's been turned upside down."

Luxury communities with names like Beverly Hills and Greenland popped up around October 6 City, but that boom stalled in the late 1990s, a victim of economic stagnation and the reluctance of naturally tightknit Egyptians to forsake family bonds in the city.

In 2003 a new construction push started, this time centered on a patch of desert known as New Cairo, east of the capital.

"The first people went and proved it could be done, and then people started imitating and it reached a tipping point," Atia said.

The Atias (Tarek, wife Inas and sons Omar, 8, and Ali, 6) moved to New Cairo in 2003, in part to help Ali's chronic asthma. Home for the last four years has been a rented two-story home in a complex called Rehab.

"We joked that we were going into rehab from all the pollution and problems of Cairo," said Atia, a former journalist now working as a media development specialist.

"We didn't mind the extra drive in exchange for the peace of mind," said Atia, who still marvels that his home is surrounded by "an actual white picket fence!"

Rehab has gone from ghost town to self-contained suburb, with restaurants, shops, a pool, six mosques and a church, plus housing that ranges from apartment blocks to villas.

As one of the original residents, Atia has watched as newcomers have occasionally struggled to adjust to suburban life. At one point, several neighbors complained about a resident who was raising chickens and goats.

This year, Atia decided to invest. He bought a 3,000-square-foot home in nearby Katameya Residence for about \$176,000, from a real estate speculator who paid about \$70,000.

"People who bought early have made a killing," he said. "I should have taken the plunge four years ago."

Atia sees a bright future for the suburbs: acres of office parks, shopping, culture and a commuter railroad to Cairo. His goal is to help create community newsletters and local radio stations. Having been raised in the suburbs of Washington, D.C., he sees parallels all around.

"I think New Cairo is going to look like Tysons Corner and the area around it," Atia said. "Over there is going to be McLean, with all the high-end villas."

Atia has no fear that suburban development may hurt the fortunes of Cairo.

"Cairo would survive if half the people left. It would be better," he said.

Others aren't so sure.

Older suburbs like October 6 City, which was state-planned, resulted in a settlement of mixed incomes. But New Cairo is an almost exclusively private-sector creation.

"If it was your money, would you build housing for the poor?" asked Bahgat, the architect. "You're going to build a compound full of villas."

While experts debate the sociological implications of Cairo's exodus, there's little doubting the idyllic appeal of life outside the city.

After dinner at home in Rehab, with his kids hustled off to bed, Atia led a visitor outside.

The day's sandstorm had subsided, a haze lingering only around the ornate streetlights. There were no traffic sounds, no crowds and no exhaust fumes, just the unmistakable smell of freshly cut grass.

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What you get for the price

A comparison of models in a suburban Cairo home development called Lakeview, above, and those in a development called Bougainvillea at Portola Springs in Irvine:

Development (Cairo)

Credit: Times Staff Writer

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