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USER'S IDENTITY WITHIN THE NEIGHBOURHOOD

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ABSTRACT

Assuring the user's identity and his belonging to a communal group is one of the objectives to be reached in new housing schemes. Such an objective is rather difficult to achieve on the level of the neighbourhood.

The size of the neighbourhood is mainly affected by political and economic factors since it consists of a group of users to be served by the elementary or basic school. Such a group of users would reach four to six thousands in case the elementary school is considered (for children between 6 and 12 years old) or eight to ten thousands in case the basic school is adopted (for children between 6 and 15 years old) as it is recommended in Egypt presently. Such large agglomeration of users are in contrast with the socio-cultural studies which call for smaller agglomeration of users in order to assure self identification. Such smaller agglomerations should be clearly identified within the boundaries of the neighbourhood.

Meanwhile, since services are usually the basis for identification for sizes of agglomerations, it seems necessary to understand the relationship between the smaller agglomerations and the different levels of services within the neighbourhood (kindergartens, open spaces for social and recreational activities, etc ..)

The present paper is trying to find out the recommended sizes for smaller agglomerations within the neighbourhood allowing an easy identification for the individual (the user) and the relationship between such agglomerations and the different levels of services.
Introduction

Two main categories of criteria are usually affecting the decisions related to the determination of the proper size of agglomerations within a housing project:

**First:** political and economic criteria. The size of agglomerations is deduced through questions such as: what size of population would be economically served by an elementary school or a basic school? What is the optimum area of a shopping complex economically serving such a population? etc... The answers to such questions are easily quantifiable.

**Second:** socio-cultural and psychological criteria. The size of agglomerations is mainly affected by a softer type of questions such as: what size of agglomeration would allow people to interact, have a sense of belonging and self identify. The answers to such questions are difficult to quantify.

The problem is: are the two sets of criteria in contradiction with each other? Isn't there a possibility to recognize the size of agglomeration (or agglomerations) that would satisfy simultaneously the different types of criteria: political, economic, socio-cultural and psychological?

The interface between the two sets of criteria will be discussed in the present paper. The proper size of agglomerations satisfying the socio-cultural and psychological criteria will be discussed first.

The proper size of agglomerations affected by the political and economic factors will be discussed next in order to recognize the points of reconciliation satisfying the various factors. The results of the discussion will be highlighted through a case study.

**Impact of Psychological and Socio-cultural Factors Upon Sizes of Agglomerations**

Socio-cultural studies for the Egyptian context (1) showed that many factors could affect the interaction between people living in the same area. For instance similarity of background, cultural level, occupation, tradition, homogeneity of income level, education level and many others could affect to a great extent the interaction between neighbours. However, it is believed that such interactions and sense of belonging to a group could be enhanced for smaller sizes of agglomerations not exceeding 800 to 1200 inhabitants specially in case the planning concept is providing spaces and paths where people could meet and undertake some informal and recreational activities. The 800 to 1200 inhabitants (200 to 300 families) represent in a way the well known "Hara" in old Cairo. Such a "Hara" mainly consisted of a pedestrian foot path with ramifications of "cul de sacs" where children could safely play. Within such a size of agglomeration, families and individuals were well known to each other which created a sense of belonging and self identity.

**Impact of Economic and Political Factors Upon Sizes of Agglomerations**

Different types of services are provided within the neighbourhood, educational, commercial, recreational and others. The neighbourhood, by definition, is based on the educational service. It is the agglomeration of people served by the elementary or basic school. Other services for such a population are consequently deduced. Presently, in Egypt, the neighbourhood based on the basic school in reaching a population of 8 to 12 thousands inhabitants. On the level of the smaller agglomerations (800 to 1200 as recommended in the social studies), it is difficult and even uneconomic to
consider educational, commercial or health facilities. However, cultural and recreational facilities could be identified for such smaller levels of agglomerations. The following paragraphs are a trial for the recognition of the proper sizes of population for additional services such as recreational spaces for children, kindergartens, "Kahwa" or coffee shops.

- **Recreational spaces**: the first and smaller public space within the neighbourhood is the one reserved for children and mothers with their infants. Such a space providing a recreational service does not necessitate large investments and could be easily available for smaller sizes of agglomerations not exceeding 800 to 1200 inhabitants. Such a space increases the chances of families' encounters and interactions.

- **The Kindergartens**: in the Egyptian context, the service provided by kindergartens is usually offered by non-working females. Accordingly, a kindergarten is not needed for a population less than 2000 to 3000 inhabitants.

- **The "Kahwa" or coffee shop**: the "Kahwa" in the Egyptian context is a place for men to meet and chat. It is usually provided for a population of 2000 to 3000 inhabitants.

Accordingly, within a neighbourhood, it is possible to identify three levels of agglomerations directed to various types of services.

the first level is related to the basic housing group, the "Hara" providing the first public space for recreational activities directed to a population of 800 to 1200 inhabitants.

the second level is related to the complex housing group consisting of two or three "Haras" with a population of 2000 to 3000 inhabitants served by a kindergarten and a "kahwa" plus a larger open space for families gathering and social activities.

the third level is related to the neighbourhood consisting of three to four complex housing groups with a total population of 8000 to 12000 inhabitants served by the basic school, commercial, health, religious facilities and the larger open public space in direct connection with the mentioned facilities.

The sense of belonging and self identity within the neighbourhood could be achieved in case the various levels of agglomerations are clearly identified in the planning of the neighbourhood. The following case study is a step in this direction.

**Planning and Design of the First Community at El-Obour City - A Case Study**

The previously discussed concept represented a theoretical background for the development of the first community at El-Obour City. The first community consisted of four extended neighbourhood (or four local areas). Each neighbourhood is for a population of ten to twelve thousands on an area of about sixty acres. The first community was mainly directed to low income groups and the housing policy was encouraging the new settlers to invest in their housing units. Accordingly, it was recommended to provide a parcelization scheme with plots of small areas within the affordability to pay of the low income groups. The plots were less than 150 sq. meters, the coverage areas were not to exceed 60%, and the height not more than three stories.
Planning and Design of the Basic Housing Group

In an extended neighbourhood of ten to twelve thousands inhabitants, it was necessary to have a clear identification of smaller sizes of agglomerations. Hence, the basic housing group concept, the "Hara", has been adopted. Such a "Hara" was directed for 800 to 1200 inhabitants grouped around the smallest public open space reserved for children and mothers with their infants. The recommended sizes of plots had an impact on the shape, proportions and dimensions of the "Hara".

As mentioned earlier, the plots were to be less than 150 sq. meters. However, the proportion of very small plots (less than 100 sq. meters) to relatively larger plots (between 100 and 150 sq. meters) was questionable. It was necessary to have an approach to planning and design allowing the easy switch from very small plots to larger ones, and vice versa. Two alternatives to the parcellization of the "Hara" were proposed:

- the first alternative: the intervals between lines of infrastructure are 36.00 meters allowing small plots less than 100 sq. meters to be achieved.
- the second alternative: the intervals between lines of infrastructure are 54.00 meters allowing plots of 100 to 150 sq. meters to be achieved.

In order to provide the flexibility of interchangeable solutions on the level of the "Hara", it was necessary to be able to adopt the first or the second alternative within the same area reserved for a "Hara". Calculations showed that an area of 108 x 216 meters would be appropriate for a 800 to 1200 inhabitants "Hara". Such an area could be parcellized according to two scenarios:

- a 36.00 meters planning module could be adopted identifying the recommended routes of infrastructure. Different layouts could be suggested as shown in figure (1).
- a 54.00 meters planning module could be used for the recommended routes of infrastructure serving larger plots. Different layouts could be proposed as shown in figure (2).

The various options for the "Hara" are having the same floor area ratio and same density. Thus, in case a "Hara" (or group of "Haras") needs to be replaced by a different option for questions of offer and demand, such a replacement will not entail changes in the basic infrastructure network surrounding the "Haras". The only changes will be within the area of the "Hara", i.e. for the minor ramifications which are usually left for later stages of development.

The various options suggested for the "Haras" are mainly different in the relationship of their inner network to the more complex network of the neighbourhood. The entrance to the inner network of the "Hara" could be from two opposite roads, two perpendicular roads or any other alternatives. Moreover, the strict dimensions of the "Hara", the 108 x 216 meters are subject to modification to adapt topographic constraints.

The type of services provided within the "Hara" is just the recreational and social services expressed in the smallest public space reserved for children and mothers. Paths within the "Hara" are pedestrianized. Motorized traffic is only allowed on the roads surrounding the "Hara". Internal network only allows car traffic in cases of emergency. Car invasion could happen within
time, however the clear existance of "gates" to the internal network allows a better control of such an invasion.

The 108 x 216 meters "Hara" is representing the basic housing group which by juxtaposition and combination would form more complex groups within the neighbourhood

Planning and Design of Complex Housing Groups

The "Hara" being the basic housing group within the neighbourhood, other levels of agglomerations are probably needed before reaching the level of the neighbourhood.

As previously mentioned, according to Egyptian norms in case of low income groups, a kindergarten and a "Kahwa" or coffee shop are usually needed for a population of 2000 to 3000 inhabitants.

Accordingly, as shown on figure (3), a group of three basic "Haras" has been recommended for that type of services. The pedestrian foot paths within the "Haras" are leading to a public space larger than the spaces of each "Hara". The larger space is hypothetically at a central location to the three "Haras". The kindergarten and the "Kahwa" would be outlooking such a communal space.

Planning and Design of the Neighbourhood

The neighbourhood is consisting of four complex groups of "Haras". As shown on figure (4), the four complex groups are surrounding the major public open space of the neighbourhood. The various educational, commercial, religious and other services would be in relationship with such a space.

The physical layout of the neighbourhood is thus reflecting very clearly the various sizes of agglomerations for the inhabitants without being in contradiction with the type of services to be provided for them.

The individual could have a sense of belonging and self identity within his "Hara", his "complex housing group" and his neighbourhood.

Conclusion

Assuring the users' identity and his sense of belonging to a communal group cannot be easily achieved on the level of a neighbourhood consisting of 8000 to 12000 inhabitants served by the basic school. Socio-cultural studies are calling for smaller sizes agglomerations not exceeding 800 to 1200 inhabitants. Accordingly, such smaller sizes of agglomerations should be clearly identified within the boundaries of the neighbourhood.

References


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FIG. 1
POSSIBLE OPTIONS FOR THE LAYOUT OF A BASIC HOUSING GROUP
(PLANNING MODULE 54.00 METERS)
FIG. 2
POSSIBLE OPTIONS FOR THE LAYOUT OF A BASIC HOUSING GROUP
(PLANNING MODULE 36.00 METERS)
FIG. 3
POSSIBLE OPTIONS FOR THE LAYOUT OF A COMPLEX HOUSING GROUP

A COMPLEX HOUSING GROUP OF
3 HARAS (OR BASIC GROUPS)
PLANNING MODULE 54.00 METERS

A COMPLEX HOUSING GROUP OF
3 HARAS (OR BASIC GROUPS)
PLANNING MODULE 36.00 METERS
FIG. 4
LAYOUT OF THE FIRST NEIGHBOURHOOD AT EL DOBOUR NEW CITY.