

Alexandria's real estate mafia

Building collapse that killed 22 exposes dangerous construction racket

By Amro Ali

The recent building collapse in the el-Gomrok district of Alexandria took 22 lives down with it into the dust. Yet, for all the tragedy, the collapse and the response followed a familiar pattern. The building owner illegally adds extra floors and the building collapses, leading to deaths and injuries. Outrage follows and an arrest is made as the authorities promise to crack down on illegal developments, but the cycle is repeated elsewhere.

According to residents of Gomrok, the owner ignored previous safety warnings, shunned civil engineers and architects, and bribed his way into adding additional floors.

'Everyone wants to make money'

According to Islam Assem, the secretary general of the Alexandria Tourist Guides Syndicate and a specialist in Alexandria's urban politics, the suspect arrested, Mohamed Ibrahim, was probably not even the owner, but rather a kahool. The term refers to a <fall-guy> who agrees to take on the formal legal responsibilities of ownership and therefore takes the blame in the event of a disaster.

Prospective builders will approach an impoverished person and offer a sum of around LE100,000 in return for a signature on all official papers. When the authorities come for the owner, they arrest the kahool, and the real owner walks away.

A loose network of landlords, kahools, unscrupulous contractors, corrupt district engineers, crooked or apathetic police officers, and hired thugs make up what can be described as "Alexandria's real estate mafia," according to Mohamed Aboelkheir, an architect and lecturer at the Arab Academy for Science and Technology.

Aboelkheir says that in the power vacuum that followed the fall of Hosni Mubarak last year, this real estate mafia went into overdrive. He says they destroyed heritage sites, added new floors to structurally unsound buildings, and built apartment complexes to dangerous heights, often with a tacky Greco-Roman finish. It is difficult to find a street in Alexandria that is not marked by such developments. Speaking to Egypt Independent, Assem popped his head out of the window of his home and counted half a dozen buildings being extended or built.

A few months ago, Egypt Independent challenged a developer in the suburb of Camp Shezar following the destruction of an old villa that was to be replaced with another high-rise apartment complex. "It's a revolution, everyone wants to make money," he replied.

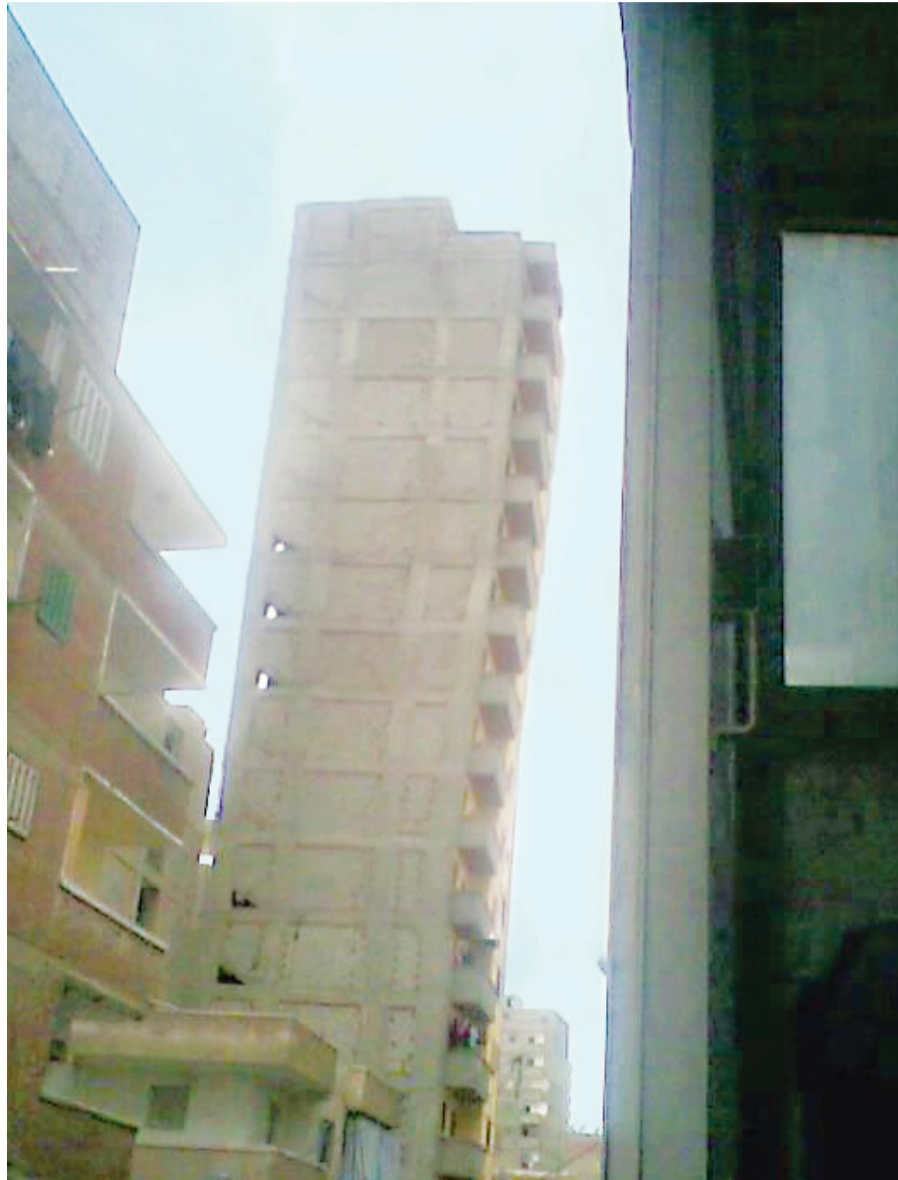
As the presidential elections neared, construction accelerated as workers demolished and built into the dead of the night in an effort to complete buildings before the incoming president assumed authority.

According to Aboelkheir, the construction mafia have a back-up plan if they fail to successfully bribe the authorities. "If the authorities attempt to demolish the illegal extra floors, or the whole building, the owners will pre-empt this by selling the highest floors first," he says. The strategy makes demolition legally problematic for the authorities.

Furthermore, according to Assem, the penalty for unapproved construction can start at LE500,000, which the owner can offset with one of the apartments sold.

In March, Egypt Independent interviewed a building owner in the middle class suburb of Cleopatra Hamamat who narrated a recent phone conversation between himself and a developer. The developer offered to add "up to 12" floors to his five-story building, and make them both "a lot of money."

"That is dangerous," the owner responded,



A spate of building collapses in Alexandria have highlighted the city's construction rackets

Walls of Alex blog

"the space and structure will not tolerate such a heavy load on it, nor can you obtain a licence." The developer replied, the owner said, that they would not need to worry about the licence. When the owner asked what would happen to the current tenants, the developer had a ready answer. "We will give them a paper to say they will get an apartment, but we won't give them anything; the paper will not be legally binding," he reportedly answered.

In this case, the building owner refused the deal. But, he says, many others do not.

Shifting foundations

Mohamed Adel Dessouky, architect and member of the Alexandrian Architectural Heritage Conservation Committee, documents Alexandria's real-estate crisis on his Walls of Alex blog. He tells me the recent collapse in Gomrok was because "it lacked any sort of structural foundations, built without any engineers or consultants, just an ignorant contractor ... We reported hundreds of cases to the army in 2011, but they did not take any action. They are the ones to blame."

"These people [owners and contractors] have no idea of the soil properties that may cause a building to collapse if the foundations were not designed properly, if they were even designed at all," says Aboelkheir.

The rushed building is itself dangerous, says Egyptian-American engineer Nabil Ahmed. "It takes at least ten days for the foundation and a floor's cement to dry and solidify, yet 17 floors are built in three months with materials that are not even original," he says. "We are talking about a high risk of collapse."

In the Gomrok case, the building fell onto three other homes and destroyed the local bakery that provides for the district. This also left butane gas pipes buried beneath the rubble that could explode.

It used to be the case that unauthorised construction was largely limited to impoverished areas, yet in the past year and half, it has spread throughout Alexandria.

"What if an earthquake struck Alexandria?" asks Dessouky.

During the 1992 Cairo earthquake over 350 poorly constructed buildings collapsed, mainly in informal settlements. However, Aboelkheir, Dessouky, and Ahmed are unanimous that an earthquake in Alexandria today would cause collapses crossing the city's socio-economic fault-lines. "God save us," Dessouky mutters.

Even putting aside the risk of collapse, in design terms, the buildings are a disaster, according to architects and engineers. Aboelkheir and Ahmed point to the lack of proper ventilation, sunlight, garage space, and the added pressure on a district's utilities, transport capacity, parking, and already suffocated public space. Aboelkheir calls them "coffin apartments."

Responsibility and solutions

At a roundtable meeting in April that included the city's governor Osama al-Fouly, academics, experts, and activists to discuss the wildcat construction problem in Alexandria, Fouly claimed that he has been signing a staggering 150-180 orders a day halting illegal construction. He says he has sent a document to Cairo listing 12,300 violations, but complained about lack of cooperation from the armed forces and Interior Ministry.

According to the State Information Service, President Mohamed Morsy has assigned a committee to investigate the collapse of the Gomrok building.

Assem says that the real estate mafia is more than just an Alexandrian problem. "It always comes down to decision-makers looking for quick and temporary solutions, never planning ahead and considering the problematic future scenario, let alone how to shift course onto sustainable development," he says. ■

Alexandria: recent building collapses

Loran

24 December 2007

The owner had built a seven-story building in 1982 without a permit, although she later secured a license, but then illegally built an additional five stories.

Thirty-six people were killed, and three injured. More lives would have been lost had it not happened in the morning when occupants went out to work and school.

Montazah

4 and 6 February 2011

A newly finished 14-story building collapsed on 6 February, taking five lives. Two days before, a 10-story building collapsed in the same suburb, killing two people despite the fact that it was evacuated by authorities.

Hadra

12 December 2010

A clothing factory collapsed in the impoverished neighborhood, leading to the death of 26 workers and 10 injuries, including child laborers earning less than LE7 a day. The victims' families blamed the tragedy on "bribes" which they claim the factory owner paid staff at the local council in exchange for turning a blind eye to the hazardous state of the facility that was built in 1965 without a license.

Fleming

7 October 2008

Twenty-one people died and seven were injured when a four-story structure collapsed at approximately 1 am. The 53-year-old building was illegally modified in 1997 with the addition of two extra floors. There was a court order two years before to demolish the extra floors but it never happened. Subsequent court orders for renovations and structural alterations were ignored.

Mahatet al-Raml

22 March 2012

In the heart of the city, a five-story building collapsed, killing three and injuring three more. Sensing the collapse, the residents evacuated themselves shortly before the building fell. Despite authorities ordering the eviction and demolition of the building on previous occasions, the case was delayed until it was too late.