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Developing Affordable Housing Ecosystems World Wide

SEARCH



*Our thinking about
affordable housing*

THE SLUM YOU NEED

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By: [David A. Smith](#)

They're called zabaleen, [after an Arabic phrase meaning 'garbage people'](#), and you wouldn't want to be one:



Most of the inhabitants of Garbage City are Coptic Christians.

[An estimated 60,000 – 70,000 Zabaleen](#) live in an area known locally as Garbage City, and are mostly descendants of poor farmers from Upper Egypt who settled in the city in the 1950s. By virtue of their being Coptic Christians and of their occupation, the zabaleen are discriminated against, and face compounded hardships brought about by the pervasive corruption and kleptocracy of Egypt's governance. Since they're not Muslims, social services provided by Islamic organizations are not extended to them as well.

But their lives, which until four months ago were merely difficult, have now become even harder, for as the [Boston Globe](#) reported last June, the Egyptian government decided their mode of living represented a health hazard – a result which has had remarkable unintended consequences that tell us something profound about slums.



Zabaleen pigs, before they were slaughtered

CAIRO – A bent man walks with a sack of garbage draped over him, hiding all but his legs as he lopes up the hill toward women and children with quick hands and shrewd eyes for spotting things of value.

Trash trailing off him, he teeters around a corner and disappears into a parade of bent men. Sacks drop and flies gather in dark, humming whirls. Hands scrape plastic and rip cardboard, but a sound is missing.

The squeal is gone.

Pigs are not to blame for the so-called swine flu, which in any case has not been found in this hilltop slum, but trucks flanked by armed police have come anyway and hauled away the pigs.

Raised by Coptic Christian garbage collectors who fattened them with trash and sold them to non-Muslim butchers, the animals were **among the 300,000 pigs the government ordered corralled and culled**. Their silence means that what scant prosperity there was amid these cliffs has vanished.



A zabaleen boy and his family's pigs, in the time before

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[The rules say I can change the rules, including this rule »](#)

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