



Cairo Blooms

**ONCE WRITTEN OFF AS A WASTELAND,
CAIRO'S AL-AZHAR DISTRICT HAS BEEN
RECLAIMED AS AN URBAN OASIS**

When the city of Cairo was rebuilt and laid out by the Fatimids in 969–974 (358 Hijri), and named al-Quahira (“the Victorious”), 20 percent of it—roughly 30 hectares—was devoted to open space. East of the al-Mu’izz palace, horse-riding grounds were turned into a royal park and garden and a large central space to the west was dedicated to military parades and religious gatherings. A dozen years later, the al-Azhar (“the Radiant”) mosque and theological college were built (989). During the Fatimid, Ayyubid, and Mamluke periods, Cairo was one of the most advanced cities of learning in the Islamic world, evident today in its many magnificent landmark buildings.

By the mid-twentieth century, however, population pressures and high-rise construction built to meet the consequent demand had made it one of the largest and most complex cities in the world. Today greater Cairo is home to some 17 million people. Compounding this growth has been an urban dynamic characterized by disinvestment in the city center areas—particularly in the maintenance and development of housing—and an influx of people, which has created stresses in the urban fabric that have relegated many people to lower standards of living.

In light of these developments, many believed the city was fated to continue in a downward spiral, one day becoming one of the world’s largest urban slums. In 1984, in response to this scathing assessment, The Aga Khan Trust for Culture set out to prove the pessimists wrong, believing that deteriorating conditions could, in fact, be reversed and that positive change could be sustained—if only the right plan was adopted. So strong was his commitment to the project, His Highness the Aga Khan personally agreed to finance the creation of a park within the Egyptian capital.

At that time, the city was confronted by the array of contemporary development challenges faced by many cities, not least population pressures, a decline in the quality of housing, and the attendant problems these conditions create. Despite these challenges, the question of how to reconcile conservation and development was a fairly new one.

It was clear that Cairo needed more green space. One study found that the amount of green space per city inhabitant was roughly equivalent to the size of a footprint—one of the lowest proportions in the world. Yet where could such space be found? The only central location that was of suitable scale and that lent itself to rehabilitation was the derelict Darassa site, a 30-hectare, 500-year-old mound of rubble in the inner city, between the eastern edge of the twelfth-century Ayyubid city and the fifteenth-century Mamluk “City of the Dead.”

Despite scepticism, local authorities approved the choice of the site and the first plans were drawn up. The work was delayed by the integration into the park site



**AMONG THE MOST AMBITIOUS
URBAN RENEWAL PROJECTS,
THE BUILDING OF THE AL-AZHAR
PARK TRANSFORMED A VAST
WASTELAND INTO A LUSH GREEN
PARK. THE PARKSITE, BELOW,
AS IT APPEARED IN 2000.**

of three large freshwater reservoirs, each 80 meters in diameter and 14 meters deep. But in 1990 a protocol was signed between the Aga Khan Trust for Culture and the Governorate of Cairo that led to new plans taking into account the water tanks.

While the neighboring district of Darb al-Ahmar was poor, it featured one of the richest concentrations of Islamic art and architecture in the world. The challenge was to revitalize this heritage in ways that turned traditional notions about cultural monuments on their head—that rather than being a drain on resources, they could be a stimulus for social and economic development.

Moreover, the park project would serve as a case study for a variety of development challenges, ranging from environmental rehabilitation to cultural restoration. The objective was to create models of development that could be replicated in many other settings, and in particular, the historic cities of the Islamic world.

The park site posed several technical challenges. It had been a debris dump for over 500 years. This required excavation, grading, and replacement with appropriate fill. More than 765,000 m³ was taken out of the park and 160,000 m³ was used as fill elsewhere on site. A further 605,000 m³ was subjected to geotechnical treatment (sieving, washing, etc.) and mixed with 60,000 m³ of special sand and topsoil to enable the site to be covered with a layer of “good” soil from 0.5 to 2.0 meters deep. A total of 1.5 million cubic meters of rubble and soil were moved, which represents over 80,000 truckloads.

To correct high saline levels in the soil, “sweet sand” and top soil were mixed into the top layer, with corrective additives such as compost sulphur and calcium superphosphate. Salinity at present is between 8,000 and 13,500 ppm, which is high for most plants, but will decline as the salts are flushed out by irrigation. During testing stages, many plants died because of the salinity, and had to be replaced with less-sensitive varieties.

To address the realities of seasonal high temperatures, low humidity, scant rainfall, and strong desert winds imposed on park flora, specialist





A SUITE OF SOCIO-ECONOMIC PROGRAMS CARRIED OUT IN ASSOCIATION WITH THE DARB AL-AHMAR REHABILITATION PROJECT HAVE REVITALIZED LOCAL CRAFTS, INCLUDING LAMP MAKING.

plant nurseries were created, both on site and outside Cairo, to identify the best plants and trees for the soil, terrain, and climate. The nurseries also carried out the propagation of the necessary plants to furnish the park—89 varieties of trees, 51 shrubs, five sorts of grass, 14 climbers, 50 groundcover plants and 26 varieties of succulents. More than 655,000 young plants from cuttings and seed were planted. Most of the lawn was planted elsewhere and brought in as turf. The lawn areas required four metric tons of grass seed. The nurseries contain over two million plants and trees, which can be used not only for replenishing the park's vegetation, but for planting in pots in the courtyards and roof terraces of the historic city, and for sale to garden contractors and visitors.

Most features of the park were based on the traditional use of public spaces in Islamic contexts. It is reflected in the bustan-like orchard spaces, the shaded sitting areas (*takhtaboush*), and the Fatimid archways used in the construction of park buildings, among other elements. Persian and Timurid elements are also reflected in the water channels and fountains.

Reflecting garden traditions in both the East and West, many medicinal and culinary herbs are being planted in the park, including laurel, chamomile, mint, lemon grass, coriander and thyme. A wide variety of roses have been grafted onto *Rosa canina* root-stock to ensure that they will thrive in park conditions. Irrigation of plants and trees is regulated by a special weather station in the park that calculates the water needs based on temperature, humidity, and wind speed.

When the park project began, crenellations of a buried wall

WHEN PARK CONSTRUCTION BEGAN, ONLY THE UPPERMOST PART OF THE TWELFTH-CENTURY AYYUBID WALL, INCLUDING ONE TURRET, WAS VISIBLE. FOLLOWING EXCAVATION AND CONSERVATION, THE WALL IS ONE OF THE PARK'S PROMINENT FEATURES.





THE MINARET OF THE KHAYRBEK MOSQUE, LEFT, WAS RECONSTRUCTED, WHILE A CONSERVATION PLAN FOR THE BUILDING'S EXTRAORDINARY OTTOMAN INTERIOR, BELOW, IS BEING DEVELOPED.



were barely visible above the surrounding rubbish. When the wall was excavated to a depth of 15 meters, however, a 1.5-kilometer section of the historic Ayyubid wall and towers was revealed in all its splendor.

A huge archaeological conservation campaign was initiated. The restoration of the eastern Ayyubid wall, which started in 1999, will continue through 2007. The Aga Khan Trust for Culture has taken the lead in the restoration of the stretch of the Ayyubid wall abutting the Park with the coordination and approval of the Egyptian Supreme Council of Antiquities. Other sections of the Ayyubid wall (north and west of the park) are being restored by the Supreme Council of Antiquities.

Historic buildings in Darb al-Ahmar include some of medieval Cairo's finest historic monuments. There are 65 sites registered by the Supreme Council of Antiquities in the area, as well as several hundred unregistered but architecturally significant buildings (mainly apartment houses). Yet, the Darb al-Ahmar neighborhood was one of the poorest and most populous areas of Cairo, lacking adequate sanitation and rubbish-collection services, with refuse often piled up in the streets and in courtyards. Faced with low rents, absentee landlords invested little or nothing in their buildings, with predictable results: roofs and walls collapsed, the historic monuments came under greater and greater stress, and expectations for the quality of life declined along with physical decay. Yet community and family life remained strong. Small family businesses, including carpentry, tile making, and other small crafts, continued to provide the local population with a living.



A DESIGN COMPETITION WAS HELD FOR THE NEW BUILDINGS WITHIN THE PARK. THE LAKESIDE CAFÉ, ABOVE, WAS DESIGNED BY SERGE SANTELL WHILE THE CONTRACT FOR THE HILLTOP RESTAURANT, RIGHT AND BELOW, WAS AWARDED TO RAMI EL-DAHAN AND SOEIR FARID.

The project for socioeconomic development of the neighborhood was conceived with the idea that the removal of the former dump and its metamorphosis into a park would have a catalytic effect on the general improvement of the district. However, to ensure this result, the project's scope had to encompass the cultural monuments in the neighborhood and the people of this area. This approach took the form of an integrated urban area development plan containing a series of pilot interventions aimed not only at the restoration of landmark buildings, but at wide-based socioeconomic development.

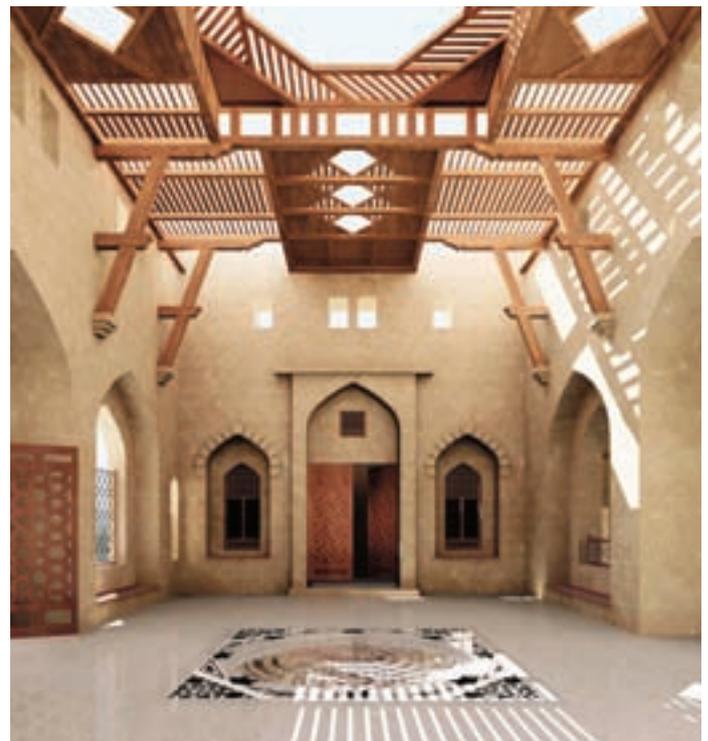
The AKTC targeted three representative projects: conservation of the Umm Sultan Shaban Mosque, restoration of the Khayrbek complex (composed of several associated buildings), and rehabilitation and adaptive re-use of the former Darb Shoughlan School. These initiatives are being undertaken through special agreements between the trust, the Supreme Council of Antiquities, and the Ministry of Awqaf (Religious Endowments).

The fourteenth-century Umm Sultan Shaban mosque and minaret restoration project focused on the stabilization of the roof and reconstruction of the top of the minaret, as well as repair of damage caused by the 1992 earthquake.

The stabilization and partial restoration of the Khayrbek complex—named after the first Governor of Egypt after the Ottoman conquest—includes the thirteenth-century Palace of Alin Aq, the Khayrbek Mosque, and Sabil-Kuttab, a ruined Ottoman house, as well as surrounding open spaces. The entire complex is expected to provide a setting for recreational and cultural events and to provide a focal point in the district for residents and visitors.

The rehabilitation of the former Darb Shoughlan school, an early twentieth-century building located along the historic wall, involved extensive renovation of a structure that was gutted. The building provides the space for a community center in a context that sorely lacks public facilities. The re-use of the building will also feature office space.

By the close of 2003, a total of U.S. \$3.25 million had been spent on the socioeconomic rehabilitation projects in al-Darb al-Ahmar. Of that,



half came as a grant from the Egyptian-Swiss Development Fund, 30 percent from the AKTC, and 20 percent was contributed by the Ford Foundation and the World Monuments Fund.

Many training programs have been implemented in conjunction with restoration and rehabilitation interventions on the Ayyubid Wall or in restoration projects in the district. Specifically, building tradesmen—masons, carpenters, plumbers, and electricians—have been given product quality training provided by local master craftsmen and technicians as well as a handful of foreign experts. Park construction has also stimulated the rediscovery of lost skills, such as the restoration of the intricate traditional windows (*mashrabiyya*). In the restoration process of the Darb Shoughlan School, which was once a gutted building, the need for floor tiling matching the original tiles led to the rediscovery of a forgotten opus sectile technique. The tile maker has revived the process, raised the quality of the tiles to the required standards, and has sparked interest in exports to Europe.

The three new buildings within the park—the Hilltop Restaurant, the Lakeside Café, and an entrance building—were the object of a competition between seven international and Egyptian architectural firms. The Hilltop Restaurant was designed by Egyptian architects Rami el-Dahan and Soeir Farid. The Lakeside Café project was awarded to Serge Santelli, Paris. The park itself was designed by Sites, an Egyptian company. All buildings have masonry bearing walls with a high sand-content limestone cladding, marble and stone pavements, and marble and ceramic tiles. All the park buildings rest on piles or rafts. Nearly all materials used are of Egyptian origin, as is all the furniture, much of which was made by local carpenters in Darb al-Ahmar.

To carry out this ambitious program, The Aga Khan Trust for Culture brought together institutional partners, local non-governmental organizations, municipal institutions, neighborhood representatives, local businessmen, and people living and working in the area. Together, they have proven the naysayers wrong and ensured a brighter future for Cairo and themselves. Things can, in fact, change if only one has a plan. ■



STONE MASONS, ABOVE, CLEAN AND CONSOLIDATE THE MINARET OF THE FOURTEENTH-CENTURY UMM SULTAN SHABAN MOSQUE, WHICH WAS DAMAGED IN THE 1992 EARTHQUAKE. A GARDENER, BELOW, TENDS PLANTS IN ONE OF THE PARK'S MANY NURSERIES.

