



Monuments and the Neighborhood Exercises of Scale in Cairo's Contemporary Preservation Enterprise

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Abstract

Cairo lies in the center of an Egyptian identity crisis. At once razing existing housing settlements and developing desert land for new neighborhoods, cities, and even a New Administrative Capital (NAC), Cairo has also begun to reckon with its historic resources as a crucial component, and sometimes economic catalyst, for urban redevelopment.

Introduction

Ever since 2013, redevelopment projects in Egypt have operated under the aegis of Abdel Fattah al-Sisi. Al-Sisi, painting himself in election posters and commemorative plates with the image of Muhammad Ali and Abdel Nasser, has tacitly acknowledged that historic images contain political power.¹² His infrastructural campaigns have crossed paths with historic resources in multiple ways. In two projects, the urban renewal of informal housing settlement Maspero Triangle and the redevelop-

ment of Al-Warraq into "Horus Island," Al-Sisi has superimposed a modernist city onto historically significant land, removing all historic emanations that are deemed disorderly or insignificant. The few structures which are tasked to remain—often mosques and archaeological artifacts of great antiquity—provide valuable insight into what is deemed acceptable (i.e. profitable and productive) heritage for preservation. In one exceptional case, the so-called "New Suez Canal," Al-Sisi has directly expanded upon the scope of an existing historic resource. Though this specific project proved to be an economic failure, this model of historic preservation would be repeated in projects by the Aga Khan Trust for Culture which, in its own words, sees the "safeguarding of cultural heritage as a springboard for human development."² The methods by which heritage resources, including buildings, urban patterns, and daily activities, are reworked into a redevelopment narrative constitute the second half of contemporary preservation practices in Cairo.

This dynamic is further complicated by the architecture of Egypt's modernist heritage.

1 - Ali Alraouf, "Phantasmagoric Urbanism: Exploiting the Culture of Image in Post-Revolutionary Cairo," in *Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review*, Fall 2019, Vol. 31, No. 1 (Fall 2019), 73.

2 - Aga Khan Development Network, "Aga Khan Sees Safeguarding of Cultural Heritage as a Springboard for Human Development," October 22, 2015, <https://the.akdn/en/resources-media/whats-new/news-release/aga-khan-sees-safeguarding-cultural-heritage-springboard-human-development>

Modernist buildings in Cairo—often designed by Egyptian architects who had studied abroad³—suffer exclusion from listed heritage due to being not old enough (at least 100 years according to Law 117/1983 or being modified over time. Meanwhile, listed buildings suffer from expensive restoration requirements, limitations to building re-use, and may be demolished for the aforementioned reasons.⁴ Mohamed Elshahed, the author of the region's first scholarly survey of modern architecture, *Cairo Since 1900 An Architectural Guide*, states that “the bulk of Cairo's modern buildings worth protecting have already disappeared” as of 2020.⁵ The Ministry of Culture, focused on artifacts of the more recent past, cedes modern heritage to private interests. Private sector restoration privileges commercial areas, such as Imad al-Din street, preserving structures built as recently as the 1920s. For these reasons, the preservation of modern architecture is of unfortunate little relevance to urban-scale preservation practice.

Until recent history, preservation practice in Cairo followed historic trends that can be traced to Isma'il Pasha. Select monuments of great antiquity were preserved on a building-by-building basis, with encroachments and non-monumental historical properties removed in the name of improved cleanliness and circulation. This approach to preservation would persist until at least the 1990s with the Historic Cairo Restoration Project (HCRP).

This paper will address the evolving philosophies of urban-scale preservation in Cairo as they are expressed in the preservation of monuments. While Al-Sisi's wholesale demolitions of housing settlements are presented

under the guise of developing historic neighborhoods, these projects do not place heritage at the forefront of their narrative. Two projects, the HCRP and the Aga Khan Trust for Culture (“the Trust”)’s Urban Regeneration of Darb al-Ahmar, highlight contrasting principles of monument-led urban preservation between a governmental authority and an international, philanthropic organization.

Legal Frameworks for Preservation in Cairo

Law 117/1983 on Antiquities Protection, Egypt's first law for the protection of historic resources, was created to cease the foreign trade of Egyptian artifacts uncovered by foreign archaeological expeditions. In effect, it defined historic property, whether moveable or real estate, as such: “the product of Egyptian civilization... since the pre-historic ages and during the successive historic ages till before 100 years.”⁶ As mentioned earlier, this limited definition of historic significance excludes Cairo's modernist heritage. This law also afforded the Supreme Council of Antiquities (SCA) “exclusive authority concerned with all that is related to antiquities' affairs at its museums and stores, at archaeological sites and areas, over or under earth's surface... The Council undertakes exploration and excavation in lands even if owned by others.”

Despite its apparent limitations, Law 117 officially established Cairo's medieval, Islamic heritage as being worthwhile for government protection. As recently as the 1960s, Islamic Cairo had been “uncharted territory,” even for a student of Islamic art and architecture at Cairo's American University.⁷

3 - Mohamed Elshahed, “The ‘White City’ and Egypt's Modernist Heritage,” *Cairoobserver*, April 28, 2012. <https://cairoobserver.com/post/21938918144/the-white-city-and-egypts-modernist-heritage>

4 - Mohamed Elshahed, *Cairo Since 1900 An Architectural Guide* Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2020, 23-25.

5 - Elshahed, *Cairo Since 1900*, 25.

6 - Egypt, *Law No. 117 of 1983 as Amended by Law No. 3 of 2010 Promulgating the Antiquities' Protection Law*, Official Gazette, February 14, 2010, reprinted by UNESCO, https://media.unesco.org/sites/default/files/webform/mhm001/egypt_law3_2010_entof.pdf

7 - Caroline Williams, “Reconstructing Islamic Cairo: Forces at Work,” in Singerman, Diane, and Paul Amar,

Law 144/2006 Regulating the Demolition of Non-Dilapidated Building and Establishments, and the Preservation of Architectural Heritage establishes the regulatory framework for listing and governing significant historic buildings, including those that are privately owned. Permanent committees, including both government representatives and university faculty of architecture, engineering, history, arts, and related fields, meet once per year to establish a proposed list of historically significant buildings. Buildings deemed in need of restoration must be repaired at the state's expense, with building occupants evacuated as needed⁸. Though the assignment of historic resources appears at least partially a scholarly exercise, the enforced restoration appears as an infringement on personal property rights at worst and, at best, a piecemeal solution which ignores larger historic landscapes.

Law 119/2008 Building Law (Urban Harmony) attempts to remediate this issue. Not only applicable to designated "heritage" areas, the act establishes the creation of a zoning plan that enforces not only "urban harmony" through unified land use, but a sophisticated and ambitious study of existing lot dimensions, setbacks, and proposals for green spaces, public transportation, and facade regulations in color, material, and architectural features.⁹ The newly established National Organization for Urban Harmony (NOUH) is expressly given the power to designate "areas of peculiar value." The inclusion of properties deemed significant by Laws 117/1983 and 114/2006 is prominently listed as a top criterion for

designation, alongside areas that "reflect a phase" of development, that are associated with historic events and figures, that are part of an otherwise important "hub or path," or contain a valuable natural resource.¹⁰ In addition, one criterion simply states that an area may be of peculiar value if it contains "unique natural or cultural value for a group of present or past people." While the expanded definition of historic resources under Law 119 seems remarkably similar to the liberal historic designation guidelines of the United States (see following image), the vague and open-ended wording of certain criteria identifies the policy as being a weak legal framework for identifying historic resources. Instead, it provides the state with total authority to prohibit private property in these areas from being "erected, modified, heightened or restored, nor temporarily or permanently occupied" if they fail to meet Urban Harmony standards.

eds. *Cairo Cosmopolitan: Politics, Culture, and Urban Space in the New Globalized Middle East* Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2006 <https://www.egyptarch.gov.eg/sites/default/files/pdf/Books/Cairo%20%20%20Cosmopolitan.pdf>, 269.

8 - Hassan Fahmy, "Egyptian Legislations in Relation to the Rehabilitation of Historic Cairo," In *Urban Regeneration for Historic Cairo* 8World Heritage Centre, 2013), 9.

9 - Fahmy, "Egyptian Legislations in Relation to the Rehabilitation of Historic Cairo," 11.

10 - 10 Ibid., 15.

The Areas of Peculiar Value

The areas of peculiar value can be proposed according to one or more of the following criteria:

- 1) The area shall have a unique architecture, aesthetic value, road system or urban characteristics that reflect a phase of urban or historic development
- 2) The area shall include listed monuments according to Law 117/1983, or building of peculiar value as inventoried by Law 144/2006 that influence the overall architectural quality of the area
- 3) The area shall be associated with cultural, historic, political or military events, reflecting economic, social, artistic or functional values or containing an established scientific or historic indications or information in any of these fields
- 4) The area shall be associated with very important event or figures that clearly influenced such area along the history of the country
- 5) It shall be the hub or path that leads to important uses, buildings or areas of peculiar value
- 6) The area shall be of unique natural or cultural value for a group if present or past people
- 7) The area shall have natural value with aesthetic features, natural forms or unique geology or shall be natural reserve according to Law 102/1983 and Law 4/1994.

A property being nominated to the National Register may also merit consideration for potential designation as a National Historic Landmark. Such consideration is dependent upon the stringent application of the following distinct set of criteria (found in the *Code of Federal Regulations, Title 36, Part 65*).

NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARKS CRITERIA

The quality of national significance is ascribed to districts, sites, buildings, structures, and objects that possess exceptional value or quality in illustrating or interpreting the heritage of the United States in history, architecture, archeology, engineering, and culture and that possess a high degree of integrity of location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling, and association, and:

1. That are associated with events that have made a significant contribution to, and are identified with, or that outstandingly represent, the broad national patterns of United States history and from which an understanding and appreciation of those patterns may be gained; or
2. That are associated importantly with the lives of persons nationally significant in the history of the United States; or

3. That represent some great idea or ideal of the American people; or
4. That embody the distinguishing characteristics of an architectural type specimen exceptionally valuable for a study of a period, style or method of construction, or that represent a significant, distinctive and exceptional entity whose components may lack individual distinction; or
5. That are composed of integral parts of the environment not sufficiently significant by reason of historical association or artistic merit to warrant individual recognition but collectively compose an entity of exceptional historical or artistic significance, or outstandingly commemorate or illustrate a way of life or culture; or
6. That have yielded or may be likely to yield information of major scientific importance by revealing new cultures, or by shedding light upon periods of occupation over large areas of the United States. Such sites are those which have yielded, or which may reasonably be expected to yield, data affecting theories, concepts and ideas to a major degree.

Fig.1 - Comparing Egypt's "areas of peculiar value" criteria under Law 119 and the United State's criteria for National Historic Landmarks (from National Park Service. *National Register Bulletin: How to Apply the National Register Criteria for Evaluation* (NRB 15). Washington, DC U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 50. https://www.nps.gov/subjects/nationalregister/upload/NRB-15_web508.pdf)

Monuments and Beyond: Brief History of Urban-Scale Preservation in Cairo

Urban-scale preservation in Cairo can be traced to at least 1980, when UNESCO released a study of Islamic (also called "Old" or "Historic") Cairo. While the study identifies urban issues in the realm of infrastructure, transportation, and land value, preservation efforts were directed towards "six key clusters comprising significant

monuments or architectural ensembles."¹¹ Out of the six clusters, Al-Mu'izz and Bab al-Wazir would later become subjects of the HCRP and Aga Khan Trust projects, respectively.

11 - Urban Regeneration for Historic Cairo (URHC) First Report of Activities. *Action Plan*. Cairo: UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2010/2012, 15, https://www.urhcproject.org/Content/studies/EN_ActionPlan.pdf

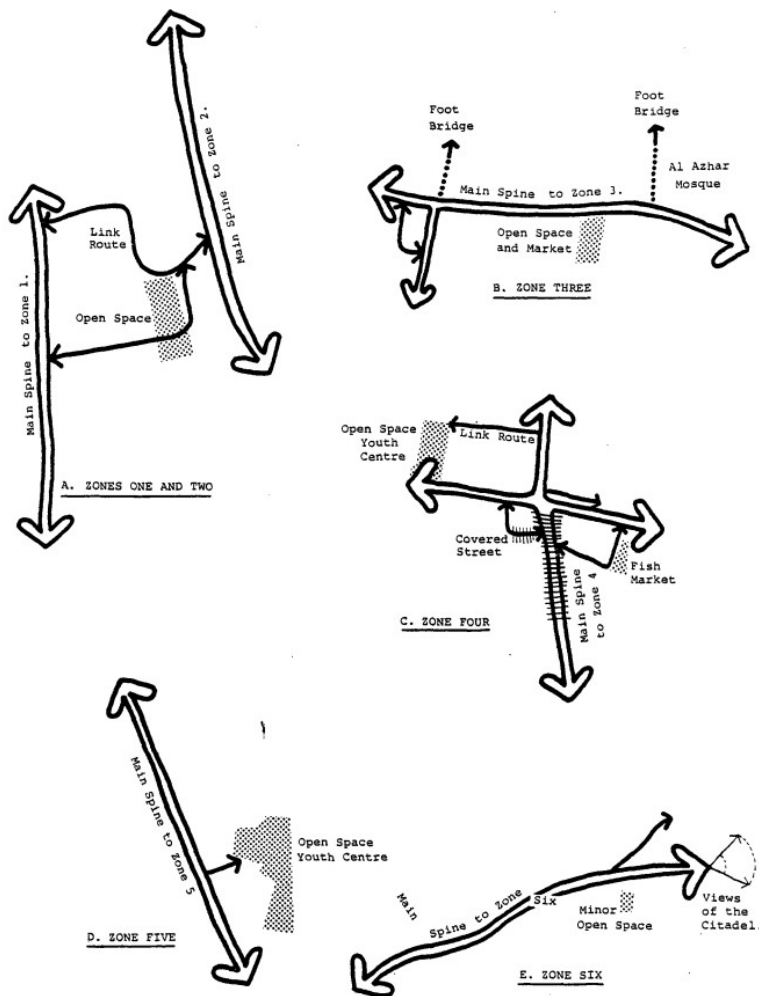


Fig. 2 - Six zones identified by the 1980 UNESCO report as containing significant monuments worthy of preservation efforts.¹² The zones are: (1) Al-Mu'izz Street, (2) Sharia Al Gamaliyya, (3) Al-Ghuriya, (4) Bab Zuwayla, (5) Sharia Bab al-Wazir, and (6) Ibn Tulun Mosque to the Citadel.

12 - Jim Antoniou, Stefano A. Bianca, Sherif Mahmoud El-Hakim, Ronald Lewcock, and Michael Welbank, *Programme of Participation in the Activities of Member States for the Preservation and Presentation of the Cultural and Natural Heritage*, technical report (Paris: UNESCO, 1980), <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000044624>, 79-83.

The rehabilitation of al-Darb al-Asfar Alley began more than a decade later in 1994. This corridor was a crucial part of the significant al-Mu'izz Street, the main subject of preservation in the Supreme Council of Antiquities-led Historic Cairo Restoration Project (HCRP). The HCRP put urban-scale development at the forefront of its mission. However, among its three goals, to "save listed monuments from deterioration" sits above the goal to "apply a holistic concept of conservation rather than the restoration of single buildings."¹³

After documentation, the restoration of significant buildings began in 1996, including bayt al-Suhaymi (est. 1648), bayt-Mustafa Ja'far (est. 1713), bayt al-Khorazati (est. 1881), and sabil-kuttab Qitas (est. 1630) among 30 other monuments in al-Muizz and 67 monuments beyond. Adaptive reuse was integral to the restoration campaign, with the aforementioned properties and several others seeing new life as headquarters for the Suzanne Mubarak Center for Islamic Civilization, the National Archives of Folklore (established under UNESCO supervision), and other cultural centers providing space for galleries, meetings, concerts, classes, cafes, and tourist services. These amenities, as much as they were intended to be "cultural centers in neighborhoods which don't have any," also served the SCA's goal of an "open-air museum."¹⁴

The architectural scope of the preservation work appeared to include best practices for remediating wood decay, eroded mortar, efflorescence, and weathered stone: namely, repointing with compatible mortar and fixing underlying drainage issues within roofs and adjoining streets. However, some experts and historians voiced concerns about rising water tables, undue and irreversible interventions, and use of unqualified contrac-

tors.¹⁵ A later HCRP project, the 1999 restoration of the Mosque of al-Azhar, suffered from intense sandblasting and acrylic replacement of stucco painting. Some interventions overlap between the architectural and urban scales, such as improvements to trash collection and traffic. Other interventions were clearly imposed as part of an "urban harmony" paradigm, even a decade before the passage of the namesake act. Streets were repaved to achieve a uniform finish, and doors were repainted to achieve a uniform color. In summary, the preservation of Cairo's monuments throughout the 1990s can be attributed to a long-term, aesthetic vision for a historic neighborhood. Monuments preserved along al-Mu'izz became clean yet distinctly old; uniform in color yet bustling with commercial and cultural activities. Historic monuments were treated not only as unique assets, but as an idealized model of what a historic neighborhood could and should be.

13 - Urban Regeneration for Historic Cairo (URHC), 16.

14 - Singerman, Diane, and Paul Amar, eds. *Cairo Cosmopolitan: Politics, Culture, and Urban Space in the New Globalized Middle East*. Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2006. <https://www.egyptarch.gov.eg/sites/default/files/pdf/Books/Cairo%20%20Cosmopolitan.pdf>, 281/82.

15 - Singerman, Diane, and Paul Amar, eds. *Cairo Cosmopolitan*, 278.

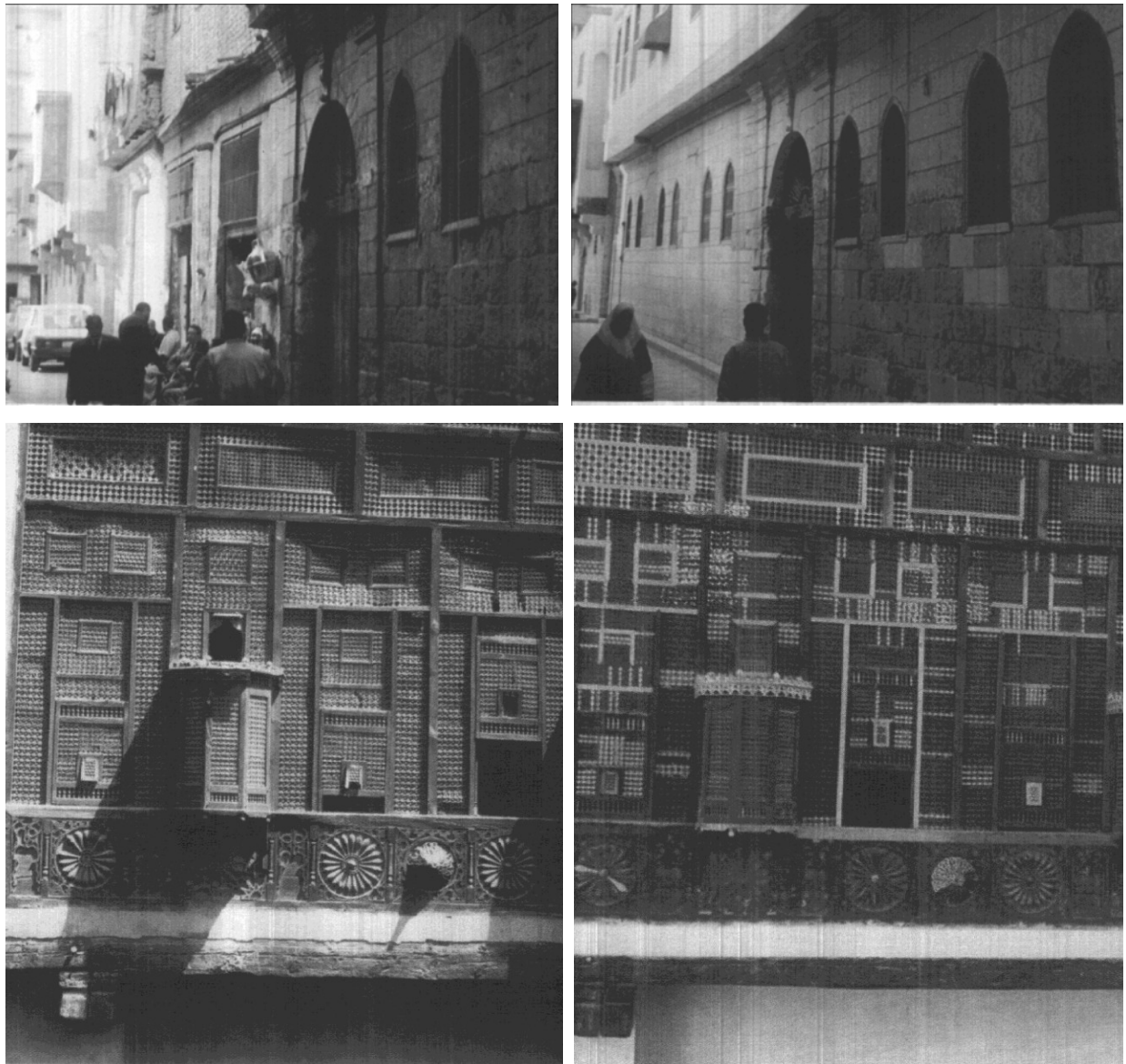


Fig.3 - Before (left) and after (right) preservation of the Bayt al-Kourazati and Bayt Mostafa Gaafar (top) and mashrabiyya of Bayt al-Siehmi (bottom). Photos from Galal Bada, "Historic Cairo: 50 Years of Projects, Planning, and Non-Implementation."

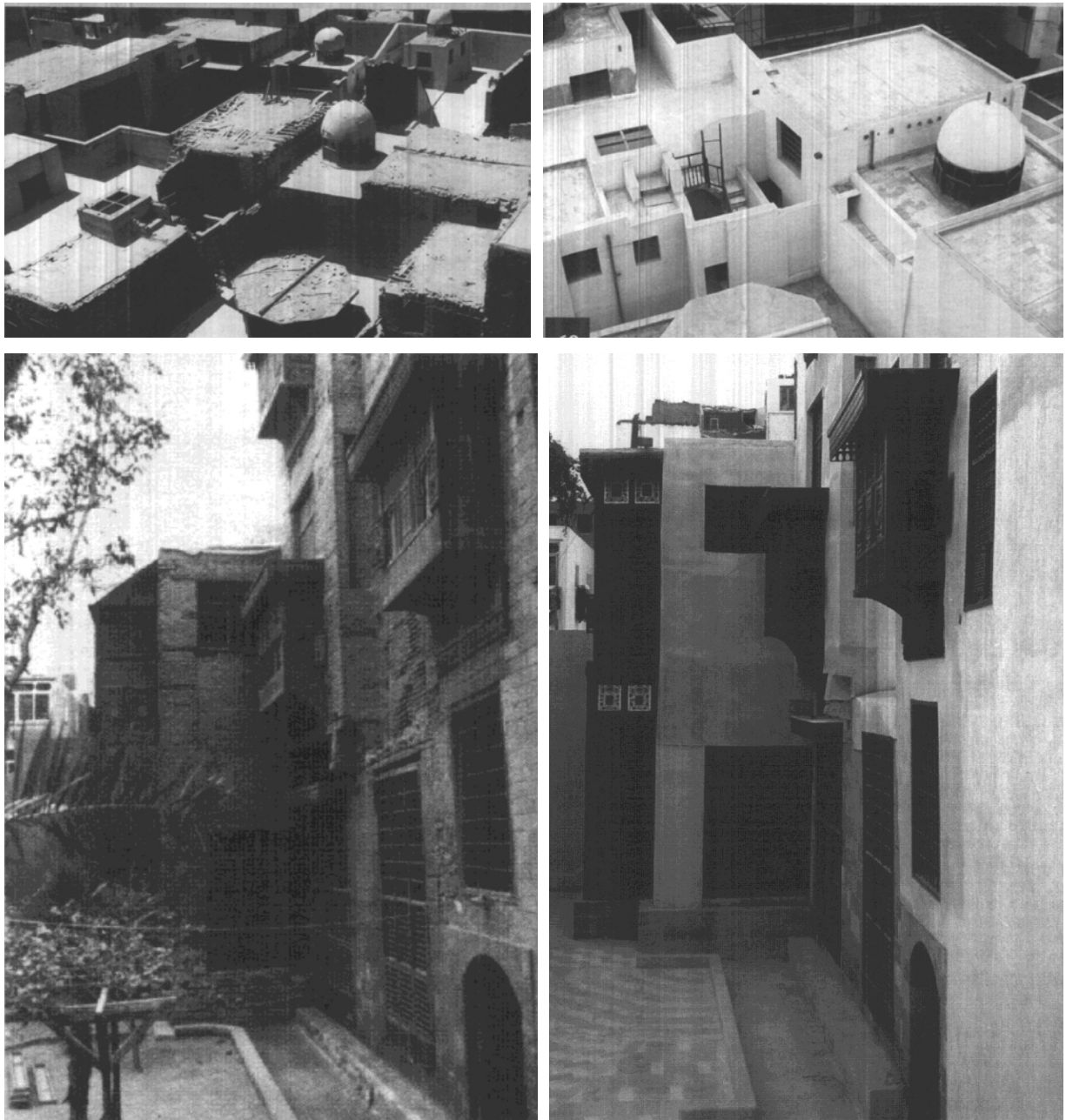


Fig. 4 - Before (left) and after (right) preservation of the Bayt al-Siehemi, aerial view (top) and north courtyard (bottom).

Restored vs Restoring: Urban Development via Monument Preservation Processes

In 2004, the Aga Khan Trust for Culture completed Al-Azhar Park. The philanthropic organization, particularly through its Historic Cities Programme, advertises its mission as using “culture as a springboard for development.”¹⁶ The park is a historic monument in its own right, being a collage of new, historically-inspired buildings atop archaeological land and surrounded by the 12th-century Ayyubid Historic Wall. Its prime position in the center of several historic districts would allow the Trust to rehabilitate further neighborhoods, including the Fatimid neighborhood of al-Darb al-Ahmar.

As verbalized by UNESCO nearly 30 years ago, the Trust identified infrastructure and income as the structural problems underlying Darb al-Ahmar’s underdevelopment. However, they also identify the “severe deterioration of monuments and private housing” as a development issue, while the neighborhood’s social and architectural cohesion were listed as economic assets.¹⁷ Within the same sentence, the Trust espouses both its work in “micro-credit for business development and housing rehabilitation” and “direct investment in the restoration of monuments.” Further elaborating, the Trust states:

The historic fabric and its preservation are central to this programme, but not as something frozen in time, like a museum, or commercialised as a tourist attraction. Rather, the old buildings and traditional social ties are seen as a

*resource for positive change, as they embody the very essence of the place with its complex stratification of spaces and uses.*¹⁸

The execution of this philosophy can be evaluated in the Trust’s work in Bab al-Wazir, the southern section of Darb al-Ahmar consisting of medieval mosques and historic homes established between the 13th and 19th centuries. The project astutely began by identifying not monumental buildings, but monumental architectural elements—the minarets of Khayer Bek and Um al-Sultan Shaaban. The Trust asserts that the minarets “form positive focal points” for visual improvement.¹⁹

The Khayer Bek minaret provides an axis to which a new neighborhood gateway would align. The gateway, leading to al-Azhar, weaves al-Darb al-Ahmar and other discreet pockets of historical identity into the larger tapestry of Historic Cairo using the technique of historic monuments connected by linear visual pathways. Individual housing rehabilitation is chosen “according to location with respect to the open spaces earmarked for upgrading and the historic and architectural value of the houses in question,” further enhancing the viewshed qualities of monumental structures.²⁰

16 - Aga Khan Development Network. “Aga Khan Sees Safeguarding of Cultural Heritage as a Springboard for Human Development.” October 22, 2015. <https://the.akdn/en/resources-media/whats-new/news-release/aga-khan-sees-safeguarding-cultural-heritage-springboard-human-development>

17 - Aga Khan Trust for Culture. *Cairo: Urban Regeneration in the Darb Al-Ahmar District—A Framework for Investment*. Geneva: Aga Khan Trust for Culture, 2005, 2.

18 - Aga Khan Trust for Culture. *Cairo: Urban Regeneration in the Darb Al-Ahmar District*, 3.

19 - Ibid., 39.

20 - Ibid., 33.

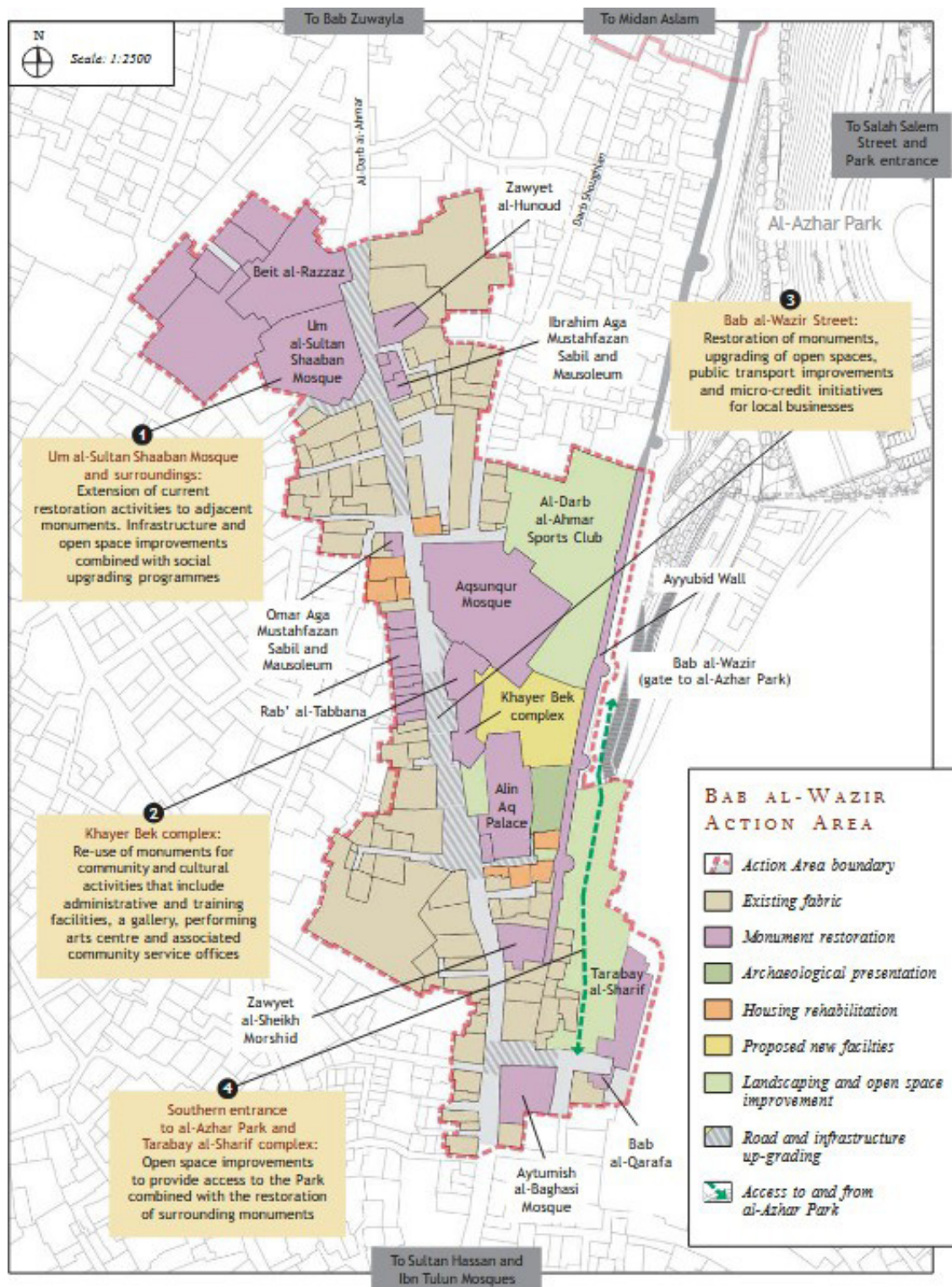


Fig.5 - Aga Khan Trust for Culture preservation plan for Bab al-Wazir.



Fig. 6 - Before and after the reconstruction of the Um al-Sultan Shaaban Mosque minaret. From the Aga Khan Trust for Culture. *Cairo: Urban Regeneration in the Darb Al-Ahmar District—A Framework for Investment*. Geneva: Aga Khan Trust for Culture, 2005, 42.



Fig. 7 - (Left) Restoration of a Khayer Bek mashrabiyya screen in a wood conservation workshop. (Right) “Painstaking” restoration of the decorated shaft of the Khayer Bek minaret.

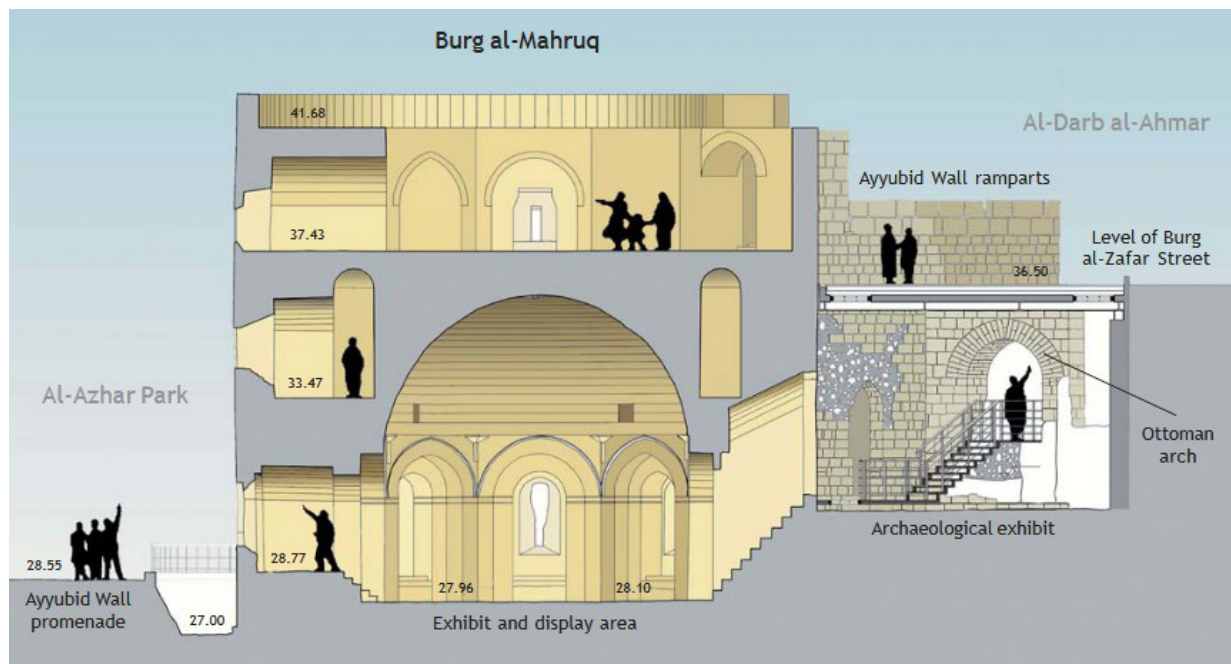


Fig. 8 - Aga Khan Trust for Culture proposed section through Burg al-Mahruq.

As well as providing visual connectivity, the Trust emphasizes the role of high-profile restoration projects in supporting traditional crafts, creating local jobs, attracting “visitor” presence and otherwise stimulating economic activity. The Trust’s plans for computer and reading literacy classes follow *after* its plans for vocational training of carpenters and stonemasons.²¹

Monumental preservation has become not only a container for community amenities through its end results, but a vehicle for community development through its process. Buildings of different eras are joined not only through close and distant space, but through shared pools of knowledge and craftsmanship.

Another rehabilitation project, the Burg al-Mahruq, interprets the stratigraphy of Cairo’s historic resources in a direct and didactic manner. The tower, formerly a defensive fortification, remains as the most prominent feature of the Ayyubid Historic Wall. Its earth, however, contains even more ancient remains, including an archway, street paving, and cemetery. Serving dual purpose as both archaeological exhibit and vertical circulation, the structure takes on new life as a metaphorical and literal gateway between the historic Darb al-Ahmar and the historicized, false history of Al Alzhar Park. Primarily a visual spectacle, its sole social amenity—an amphitheatre on the park side—uses Burg al-Mahruq as a “very suggestive backdrop.”²²

21 - Ibid., 11-12.

22 - Ibid., 21.

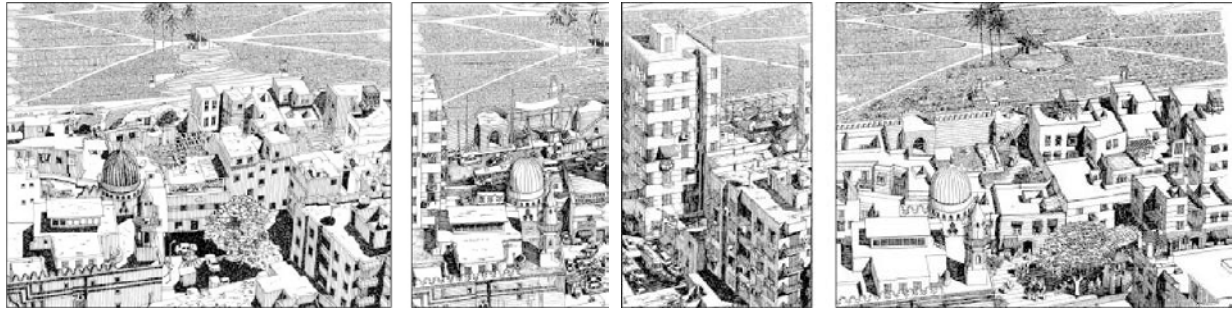


Fig. 9 - (Left to right) Aslam Square in its present condition (c. 2001), “worst-case” scenario (with page break in the center), and “best-case” scenario. From Aga Khan Development Network, *Al-Azhar Park in Cairo and the Revitalisation of Darb al-Ahmar*.

At the same time, preservation philosophy had moved beyond the wholesale demolition of informal housing for curatorial purposes. The informal and encroaching housing developments along the Ayyubid City wall were largely preserved in accordance with “today’s prevailing international conservation philosophy” and to avoid “dangerous development pressures.”²³

All buildings were classified according to their use, condition, date, and physical connection to the Ayyubid Wall. While some buildings were removed, these decisions were based on new preservation principles of historic authenticity, structural integrity, interior character, and reversibility. This marked the victory of a new wave of preservation practice that directly opposes Law 117/1983’s requirement to clear the space surround-

ing a monument. Yet principles of Urban Harmony were not fully abandoned. The following images present a new, complex vision of an ideal historic neighborhood: crowded with buildings but only of a certain height and type, streets filled with activity, and facades rehabilitated to showcase stone joints in some buildings and to hide them in others.

Al-Azhar Park stands as the origin of the Darb Al-Ahmar revitalization campaign as well as one of Cairo’s most complex iterations of historic preservation. As preservation activities grew in Cairo, High Highness the Aga Khan would assert that “in keeping with the general strategy for HCSP projects. . . the Park construction, as well as the Historic Wall conservation, could and should also act as stimuli for the rehabilitation of Darb al-Ahmar.”²⁴

23 - Stefano Bianca, “Introduction: A Comprehensive Vision of Urban Rehabilitation,” from Aga Khan Development Network, *Al-Azhar Park in Cairo and the Revitalisation of Darb al-Ahmar*. Geneva: Aga Khan Trust for Culture. <https://static.the.akdn/53832/1640331437-cairobrochure.pdf>, 12.

24 - The Aga Khan, Preface from Aga Khan Development Network, *Al-Azhar Park in Cairo and the Revitalisation of Darb al-Ahmar*. Geneva: Aga Khan Trust for Culture. <https://static.the.akdn/53832/1640331437-cairobrochure.pdf>, 3.



Fig. 10 - Elevations of Atfet Asaad Alley before and after rehabilitation. From the Aga Khan Trust for Culture.



Fig. 11 - Photo captioned with, "This food stand in Bab al-Wazir is one of the many popular cafés and restaurants which give the street its vibrant and lively character." Its irregularly painted facades, modern garage door additions, and uneven street paving are not seen as having a negative impact. From the Aga Khan Trust for Culture.

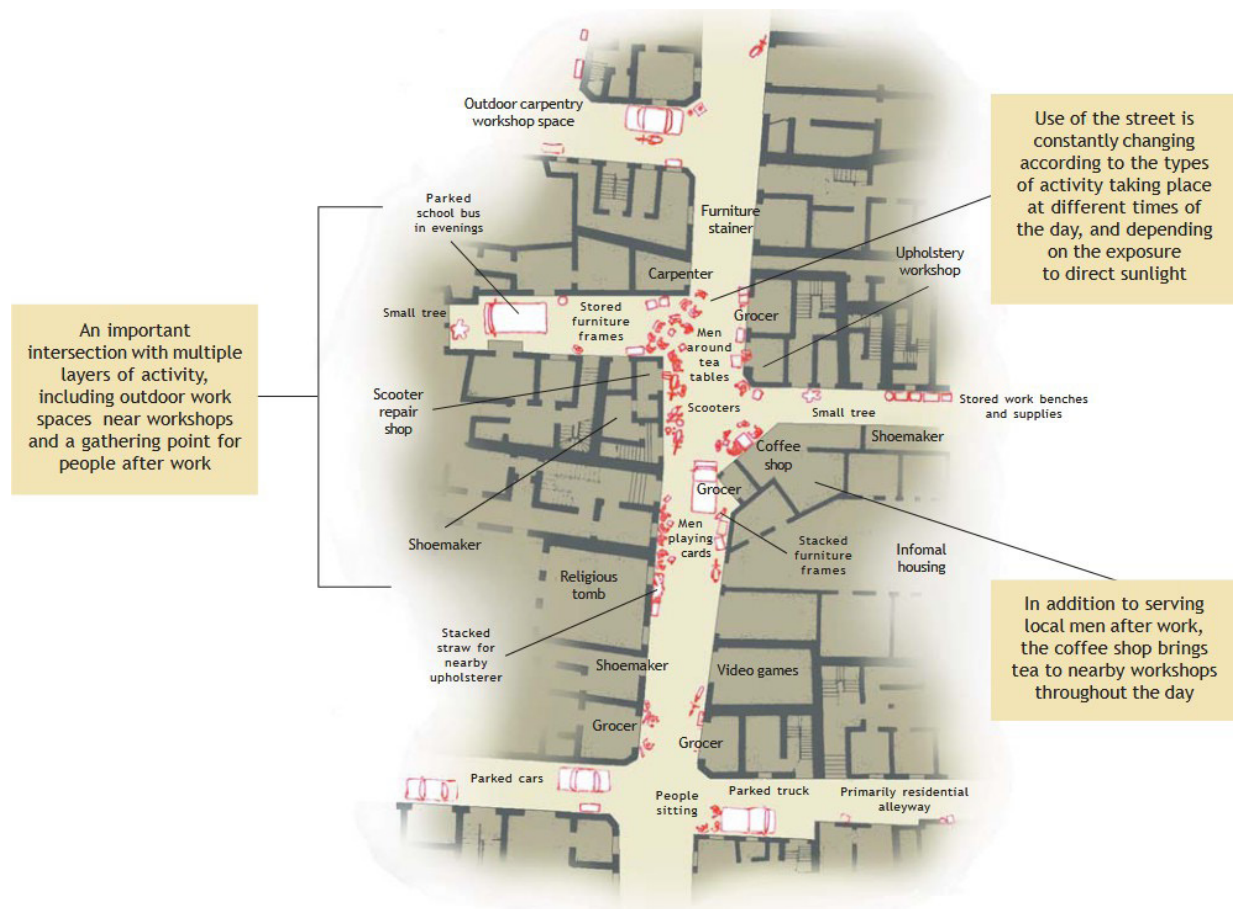


Fig. 12 - Analysis of Darb Shouglan Street. Used to preserve the “character of the area” along proposed interventions. From the Aga Khan Trust for Culture.

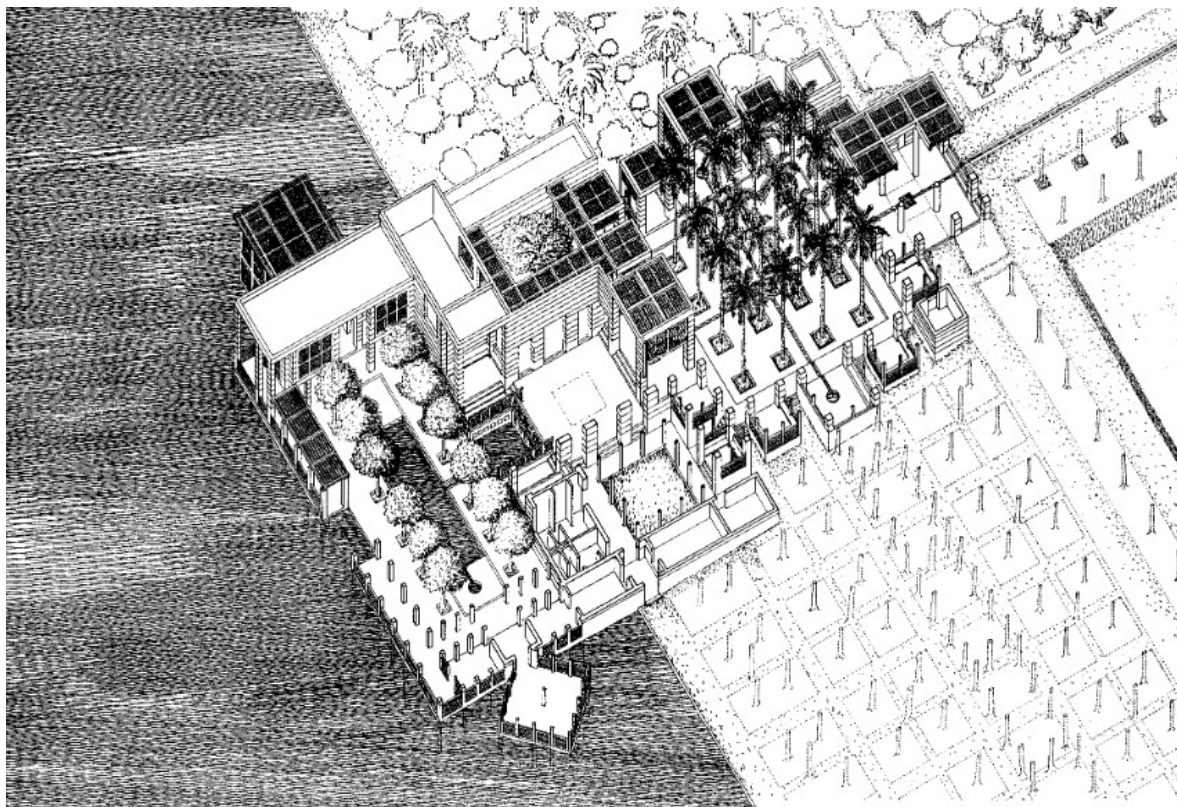
The park, however, was initially conceptualized as a donation for Cairo within the 1984 conference, “The Expanding Metropolis: Coping with the Urban Growth of Cairo.”²⁵ The site was chosen before the discovery of the Ayyubid city wall. Treated as a clean slate (though it was actually a garbage dump), the hilly landscape provided panoramic views of multiple districts of historic Cairo, and occasionally even the pyramids 10 miles away.

Architectural historian Sadia Shirazi astutely identifies the site’s unique character as lying within the earth itself: a landfill of archaeologically significant antique ceramic

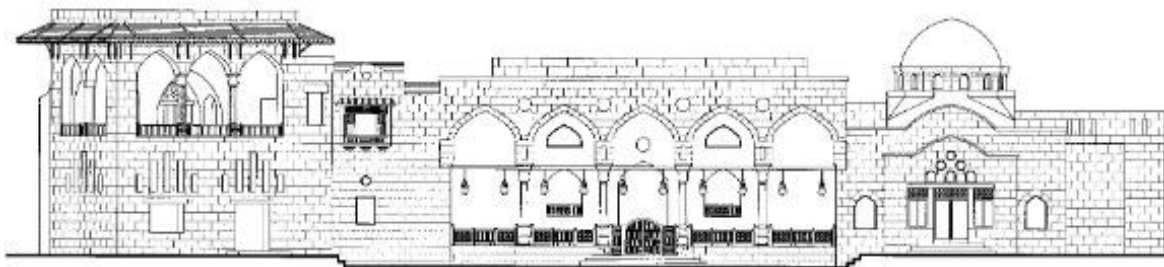
25 - Bianca, “Introduction: A Comprehensive Vision of Urban Rehabilitation,” 8.

shards. Indeed, the sensitivity of a preservation project may be judged on how it approaches the ground. At Al-Azhar, the buildings flat above the ground, referencing a disembodied Islamic past, while the hilly landscape is reformed into a French, axial boulevard. The Lakeside Cafe and Pavillion, designed by French architect Serge Santelli, is composed of geometric pavilions with some historically inspired details, such as screens referring to mashrabiyya panels. But their relationship to the ground is ignored. In the landscape, Shirazi notes the “surreal addition” of palm trees, evoking a royal presence though inappropriately dotted along a hilly landscape rather than at the low point of a valley or oasis.²⁶ In neighboring

26 - Sadia Shirazi, “Architectural Reading: Cairo’s Al



Restaurant South Elevation



Restaurant North Elevation



Fig. 13 - Serge Santelli, lakeside pavilion at Al-Azhar, axonometric view and elevations. From Aga Khan Development Network, *Al-Azhar Park in Cairo and the Revitalisation of Darb al-Ahmar*. Geneva: Aga Khan Trust for Culture, 28; 31.

Darb al-Ahmar, attention is instead paid towards the sky, marked by two minarets which form another axial relationship. At Al Mu'izz, the ground is repaved as a means to "urban harmony." The most sophisticated interpretation of the ground comes from the Burg al-Mahruq and greater Ayyubid Wall: an explicit archaeological project with didactic value in exposing the earth.

Increasingly Modern Monuments and Preservation Futures

In "Urban Transformation: Social Control at al-Rifa'i Mosque and Sultan Hasan Square," author Yasser Elsheshtawy describes a separate HCRP campaign located south of Darb al-Amar. As has been criticized in aforementioned preservation campaigns, the project sought to highlight the al-Rifa'i mosque as a tourist destination, replete with a ticket gate, security officers, signs, and a clear space for photography, all at the expense of Cairenes who had been using the space. The gates were introduced in 2000, and the space had become desolate by 2003.²⁷ More than the Aga Khan Trust's depiction of a colorful food stand, Elsheshtawy enumerates the reasons why the space was successful in fostering social liveliness: (1) the offering of a space for undefined leisure and walking ("fusha"), not attached to a particular residence and without the negative connotations of a coffeehouse (ahwa); (2) wide streets allowing room for both actors and spectators, especially

as a space for unmarried people to meet and socialize; and (3) accommodations for outdoor-to-indoor activities, such as weddings, engagements, and feasts among the lower-class (as the middle- and upper-class typically celebrate in a hotel).²⁸ Though reliant on urban context, none of Elsheshtawy's descriptions require a harmonized, uniform street wall or a cleverly adapted historic monument. In fact, the qualities that create a lively, historic square may be its unprogrammed space, openness and closedness that reflect evolving social dynamics, and interactions between indoor and outdoor space.

While Islamic monuments have evolved from being uncatalogued to focal points of preservation campaigns, private-sector preservation has moved to an even more recent past: Cairo's belle-epoque. This invented term spans Egypt's pre-revolutionary, British protectorate period, approximately 1870 to 1952. The concept of preserving an eclectic, Western-influenced architectural heritage began with the 1984 Aga Khan Foundation conference's discussion of Heliopolis, though actual preservation activities remained private and minor. After the 1992 earthquake, however, press attention turned to protecting medieval and belle-epoque structures alike. Their historic status became official with the 1997 government-led inventory of historic buildings, which captured belle-epoque buildings.

Restoration of individual buildings was funded significantly by private actors, such as consulting firms, entrepreneurs, and businesspeople, while the governorate of Cairo initiated a restoration project to save one flooded building, the 1928 Stock Exchange designed by Georges Parcq. The repaving of roads and other surrounding urban-scale rehabilitations were privately funded. In effect, at least within a neighborhood with sufficient capital the government is able to initiate preservation projects for a single monument which will be followed by private-sector investment in the surroundings. But first, a monument must be declared a monument. The heritagization of increasingly contemporary buildings and glorification of the protectorate period was led by

Azhar Park," *Bidoun*, accessed May 4, 2026, <https://www.bidoun.org/articles/architectural-reading-sadia-shirazi>

27 - Yasser Elsheshtawy, "Urban Transformation: Social Control at al-Rifa'i Mosque and Sultan Hasan Square," in Singerman, Diane, and Paul Amar, eds. *Cairo Cosmopolitan: Politics, Culture, and Urban Space in the New Globalized Middle East* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2006) <https://www.egyptarch.gov.eg/sites/default/files/pdf/Books/Cairo%20%20Cosmopolitan.pdf>, 297.

28 - Elsheshtawy, "Urban Transformation," 302/307.

cultural elites, promoting TV shows, films, galleries, and literary events glorifying the “good old days.”²⁹ Private interest not only provides financial backing for preservation projects, but provides the very definition of a historic territory.

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