

Preface

HIS HIGHNESS THE AGA KHAN

We stand today confronted with starkly different visions of the future of historic cities. At a time when our heritage, the anchor of our identity and source of inspiration, is being threatened with destruction, by war and environmental degradation, by the inexorable demographic and economic pressures of exploding urban growth, or by simple neglect, there can be no doubt that it is time to act. Will we allow the wealth that is the past to be swept away, or will we assume our responsibility to defend what remains of the irreplaceable fabric of history? My answer is clear. One of our most urgent priorities must be to value, and protect, what is greatest in our common heritage. Breathing new life into the legacy of the past demands creativity, tolerance and understanding beyond the ordinary. The Aga Khan Trust for Culture has accordingly sought to identify three “themes of concern” that correspond to the challenges we face. First, there must be an effort to protect, restore and skilfully reuse the heritage of the past. Second, we must address the pressing needs for social development and community buildings in a Muslim world all too beset by poverty. Third, it is essential to identify contemporary architectural expressions of quality, the best efforts at capturing the opportunities of the present and defining our aspirations for the future.

Since it was founded by my ancestors, the Fatimids, in AD 969 (AH 358), Cairo has been one of the great centres of Islamic culture and civilization. Despite its rapid growth in modern times, it still boasts an unrivalled group of monuments and historic areas. These buildings and neighbourhoods stand as a nearly indelible testimony to Cairo’s past, but I believe that they are also the key to its future. Today, with its nearly twenty million inhabitants, the contemporary metropolis clearly poses the full array of development problems. It raises in the most acute terms the question of how to create links between this rich heritage and the demands of today’s world.

The seeds for our cultural engagement in Cairo were first planted at a seminar more than thirty years ago. An enormous dumping ground of debris had developed over the centuries and surrounded one of Cairo’s poorest neighbourhoods. We made an effort to create a state-of-the-art green space: al-Azhar Park. That effort soon extended into a great archaeological adventure, uncovering and restoring some of Cairo’s oldest buildings. The twelfth-century Ayyubid Wall, for example, was almost completely covered in debris. We could not even tell how long it was! Today, thanks to work on site, important remains of the Fatimid and Mamluk Walls have been discovered and preserved. The minarets of Khayrbek and Umm al-Sultan Shabaan, like other landmark structures, were badly compromised. Six centuries of wear and tear had taken a toll – one that was difficult to reverse, especially given the vast array





Above, vista along al-Azhar Park's main spine towards the Citadel of Cairo.

Right, al-Azhar Park's formal garden and the Citadel View Restaurant.



of heritage sites in Egypt that were competing for scarce resources. Nonetheless, with the approach of a new century, the work of restoration and social development began here in the Darb al-Ahmar neighbourhood.

Our efforts here have been built with a great many partnerships – with the Egyptian government, the Governorate of Cairo, the Supreme Council of Antiquities, the World Monuments Fund, the Social Fund for Development, the Swiss Egyptian Development Fund, the Ford Foundation, the French Institute for Oriental Archaeology, and the people of al-Darb al-Ahmar. It has truly been a “team” effort – joining a host of local, national and international players. The Aga Khan Trust for Culture strives to approach such opportunities through a multi-tier, multidimensional strategy, drawing on experts not only from fields such as archaeology, conservation, restoration and engineering, but also from the worlds of finance, tourism, education, sanitation and public health – among others. The cultural components of such projects are numerous, varied and much less finite than most other development initiatives. The Trust, therefore, remains engaged with its projects.

Seven major monuments were restored in al-Darb al-Ahmar, and three public open spaces were created. We can take pride in the nearly twenty million visitors who have already come to al-Azhar Park. We can talk about how one thousand people were employed directly on this work, while another sixteen hundred were assisted in finding other long-term jobs. We can refer to the 175 craftsmen who were trained in restoration skills, while another two thousand people finished other forms of technical and vocational training. The overall impact on the quality of life in this community has been palpable. Disposable family income in al-Darb al-Ahmar increased and literacy rates climbed. And the impact will continue to ripple out beyond this community. For example, hundreds of young Egyptians have been trained in restoration by some of the world’s best experts; and they have gone on to create autonomous teams that can take on restoration projects anywhere in Egypt.

I wish to underscore another central motivation for this work. Through revitalization, we hope to preserve an extraordinary panorama of Islamic history, from the Fatimid caliphs to the present. At a time when fractures in the unity of the *umma* are so highly visible, I see such projects as particularly hopeful. They are important symbols for the identity of all Muslims; sources of pride for the entire *umma*. And let us be reminded, too, that in undertaking this work, we are not only attending to Islamic heritage, but also preserving an essential part of the patrimony of all humankind.