

*Ronald Lewcock*

One of the most remarkable things about the Islamic World is that there are still many urban societies functioning essentially as they were twelve hundred years ago. It would be hard to duplicate this phenomenon anywhere in Europe — nor in many other parts of the world. Of these functioning “mediaeval” cities, none is more surprising a survival, and none more remarkable in the extent of its activities and the range and splendour of its historic monuments than the old city of Cairo.

Among the reasons for its extraordinary preservation is that, unlike many other great cities, its “modernising” and “westernising” developments which have taken place during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have happened off-centre, away from the heart of the historic city. The new centre has been sited on land which had been made available by the steady movement of the bed of the Nile towards the west during the previous half-millennium. As the Sharia Muhammad Ali became the focus of fashionable life, the earlier focus, the Sharia Mu’izz li Din Allah, retained its function for the more traditionally-minded inhabitants, the artisans, craftsmen and tradesmen who had lived, since the eleventh century, around the *suq*, together with the great emirs and the ulama and scholars of Al-Azhar, the greatest university mosque of the Middle East.

So it was possible, when I first visited Cairo in 1953, to walk for miles along narrow streets, into which a motorised vehicle penetrated only with difficulty (even the horse and mule-drawn traffic could barely move, for the lands were being used as workshops and the main thorough-fares thronged with crowds), the overhanging houses on both sides were generally intact up to the fifth or sixth floors. No major war had devastated the mediaeval buildings as had happened so recently in Europe, and where the half-timbered buildings had collapsed, they had been replaced in recent decades by others of fundamentally the same character, making allowance for the odd concession to fashion. The same sorts of people, engaged in the same concerns



*The main streets of old Cairo served for a number of commercial and community activities.*

*Picture: courtesy of R.B. Lewcock*

and pursuits, lived out their lives here as their ancestors had done for countless generations.

By 1953, the last of the upper echelons of inhabitants, the leaders of government and business, were moving out, or had already moved out, to the newer areas to the north and west, and their great houses were converted into workshops and apartments. The religious monuments, too, would have been similarly neglected and in a poor state of decay, partly because of the steady deterioration of the *waqf* system of maintenance in the previous century, had it not been for the exertions of the Comité des Monuments de l'Art Arabe, which had been extraordinarily active since its foundation in 1880. This body of enthusiasts undertook the annual maintenance and rehabilitation of virtually all the mediaeval monuments of Cairo. So it was that in 1953 the monuments generally seemed intact, covered with dust and crumbling, it is true, for after all it can hardly have been envisaged when they were built that they would last so long. But many of the major buildings recorded by the historians were still there, to be seen and experienced: in itself an extraordinary fact! The largest city in the Arab world from the tenth century, and from the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries the largest in the Islamic world, still existing and with much of its built form — and its way of life — intact.

The pressure of events began to catch up with it in the 1950s. A long list of calamities began. Firstly, a whole quarter close to the Khan al-Khalili was cleared for the creation of the Al-Azhar of Al-Hussein Square, involving the destruction of many hundreds of buildings.

Secondly, rent control was introduced, fixing the rents at levels below those that are economic for the maintenance of such old houses as comprised the majority in the old city.

Thirdly, the water supply and sewerage systems, laid down in the latter part of the nineteenth century, began to fail; that is, to fail more seriously than had been the case hitherto. There had always been water lost

into the ground, but now the wastage began to be massive in volume.

Fourthly, new building regulations began to be enforced, especially on public buildings.

These required large setbacks, changing narrow streets into wide thoroughfares, open to the heat where the concentrations of life and activity were substantially lowered.

Fifthly, the government began to embark on a large-scale rehousing programme taking over existing areas of traditional houses and replacing them by tall apartment buildings, sited with only the barest relationship to the old streets or the traditional patterns.

Yet another change, with far-reaching consequences, was the abolition of the old Comité, and the taking over of its functions by the government. Although the latter had its share of enthusiasts, they were subject to the budgets, rules and limitations of the bureaucracy, and only for brief periods were they able to equal the efforts of their predecessors.

At the same time, the scale of the problems being experienced within the old city was growing. Once neglected for a year or two, the monuments fell so rapidly into ruin that their maintenance costs magnified beyond all reasonable hope of realisation. Further delays aggravated the problem.

From 1972 a number of foreign institutes in Egypt began the search for funds to undertake the conservation of one or more individual monuments in collaboration with the Islamic Division of the Egyptian Department of Antiquities. The Polish Centre, the Goethe Institute of Germany, the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, and the Italian Institute of Culture all undertook responsibility for the conservation of individual buildings during the 1970s. The Poles began work on the Madrasa Mausoleum of Amir Qurqumas in the Northern Cemeteries, built in 1506-7 and previously restored in 1883 by the Comité; the Germans concentrated on a number of buildings in the Darb Qirmiz, beginning

with the Mosque-Madrasa of Mithqal built in 1361 and the Tomb of Shaykh Sinan (1585), to which they have since added, and are continuing with, the Madrasa of Tatar al-Negaziya (1348), the Sabil-Quttab of Katkhuda (1744) and the Besh-tak Palace (1334), the whole forming the nucleus of the first "conservation area" in Cairo; the Danes have restored the Madrasa al-Jawhariya (1440) next to the Al-Azhar Mosque; and the Italians have begun the theatre of the Malwawi Dervishes (late 19th c.?), together with the rest of the fine complex in which it was built, the Madrasa of Sunqur al-Sadi and the Mausoleum of Hasan Sadaqa (1315), last restored by the Comité in 1900.

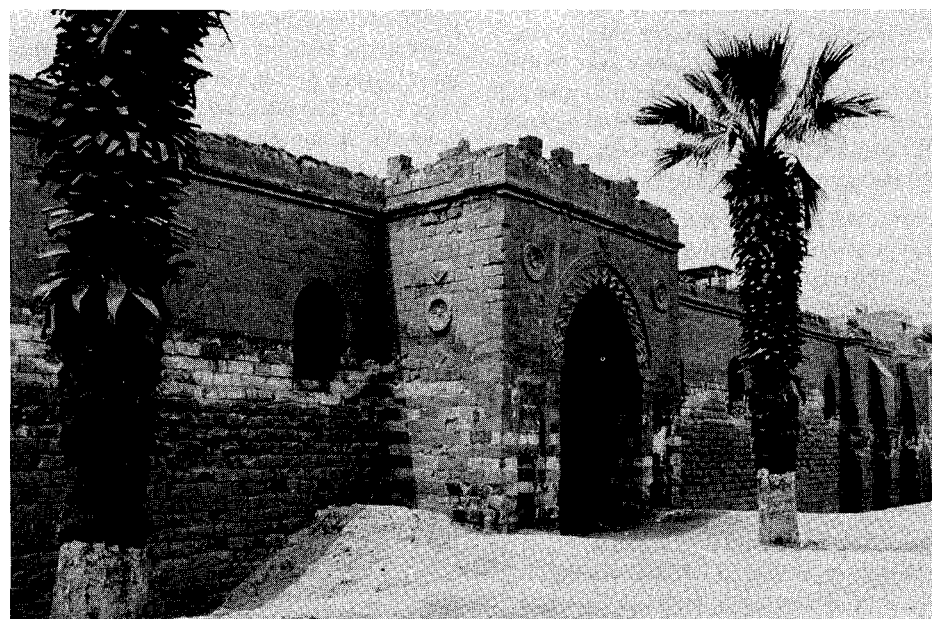
In addition, two Ottoman houses near the Al-Azhar mosque are being restored at Azhar University: the houses of Sitt Wasila (1664) and that of Abd al-Rahman al-Harawi (1731). Unfortunately, the renovation and construction of the largely ruinous Mosque of al-Hakim was carried too far by the Buhra sect from India, with the consequent destruction of the sense of antiquity and authenticity which had previously been its chief quality. The same thing has happened in recent years in reconstruction work at the Mosque of Amr, the first and most historic mosque in Cairo, which has been altered so much by new construction work that its present atmosphere is a travesty of that experienced by the visitor only a few years ago. By corollary, an excess of zeal at the al-Hakim mosque led to the removal to another part of the city of one of the listed monuments next to its entrance, the Mausoleum of Qurqumas (1511), which had added greatly to the richness of the street scene outside the mosque.

Yet all these efforts amounted to only a handful of preserved buildings in the 1970s, out of the 500 buildings listed as important Islamic monuments in the rather conservative estimate of the old Comité. It was against this serious discrepancy that it became apparent that the only hope for preserving the monuments of the old city lay in extraordinary projects which were



*Mosque of al-Hakim before the demolition of the tomb (centre), which was taken away in 1980 in order to achieve the alleged "improvement" of the facade of the mosque*

*Photo: R. B. Lewcock*



*Mosque of Baybars groundwater drawn upward by capillary attraction destroying the stonework*

*Photo: R. B. Lewcock*

aimed at major wide-scale conservation and rehabilitation.

The Antiquities Department therefore approached the UNESCO for assistance in 1978, and again in 1980, following a study by a team of planners, architects, sociologists and conservationists. A plan was presented for emergency action which might ensure that the most important parts of Cairo's Islamic heritage would be saved for the future.

In undertaking this study, an updated version of which is published in this volume, three overriding aims were felt to be of major concern:

- 1) To preserve as much of the physical context and the monuments of mediaeval Cairo as possible, together with its unique character and its sense of age and history.
- 2) To ensure the preservation and rehabilitation of the traditional way of life of the mediaeval city for those who desired it, while allowing others the alternative choice of changing and upgrading their way of life — all conservation and rehabilitation planned were to be conditioned by these aims as primary concerns.

- 3) To achieve a very simple method of implementation for each of these proposals.

With the commencement of these studies, certain dominant aspects of the problems became apparent:

- a) The varying nature of the fabric and way of life in different parts of old Cairo. Besides the Fatimid city, stretching from Bab al-Futur and Bab al-Nasr in the north to Ibn Tulun and beyond in the south, there were the other areas of Fustat and old Cairo in the extreme south, the northern and southern cemeteries, and the "newer" areas of Muski and Bulaq.
- b) The limited nature of the resources and of time available for this pilot study. This led us to the decision that only one of these areas could be dealt with in the pilot study, a decision which we regretted, but which was, given the circumstances, unavoidable. However, the area chosen was that containing the greatest concentration of important monuments, the old Fatimid city.

c) The emergency nature of the action necessary. A large number of the monuments were, and many still are, in a serious state of decay, and the surrounding fabric was actively threatened with destruction and replacement.

d) The limited resources likely to be available relative to the scale of the problem.

e) The need for decisive legal action, to bypass prolonged litigation and the eventual eroding of the whole enterprise.

f) The need for high-level co-ordinated action between all the relevant ministries, the governorate and interested parties to ensure that goals were achieved.

The essentially emergency action necessary led us to set a high priority on the identification of vulnerable zones in the mediaeval city area of the old Fatimid city. These zones were deliberately chosen for action of the grounds that they were integral parts of the living urban fabric, and as such, both more threatened and also more likely to have an effect on the remainder of the old city.

It was felt that it was the uniqueness of ensemble that was the real quality of old Cairo. Individually, the buildings are not all master-pieces, but collectively their character is strong and fascinating. But it was suggested that there were many individual buildings worthy of special efforts, perhaps because they were symptomatic of a characteristic type, or because they possessed fine qualities of their own. Moreover, the impression gleaned from our surveys was that the time may be ripe for a reclassification of buildings on the list to include a number of unlisted buildings of equal or even greater importance than the ones already listed.

Since the presentation of the UNESCO report, and its discussion in Cairo at the International Conference on the Preservation of Islamic Cairo held by the Egyptian authorities in December 1980, at which the decision was taken to adopt its recommendations, the Egyptian Ministry of Culture and the Egyptian Antiquities Organisation have been reorganised with H.E

Mohammed Abdel Hamid Radwas as Minister of State for Culture, and Dr Ahmed Kadry as Head of the Antiquities Organisation. As a result of their efforts, the vast bulk of the money now being spent on Islamic conservation in Cairo is coming from Egyptian sources. Larger sums of money have been made available by allowing the Antiquities Organisation access to its own revenues, and emergency action has been taken on a number of monuments, including the citadel and the aqueduct. However, the aim of conserving clusters of buildings to preserve their essential ambience has not been adopted.

Although an enormous amount of repair work has been done, the bulk of the activities appear to be cosmetic, repairing surfaces and often merely applying bright coats of paint. The fundamental underlying defects, like rising ground water, which will hasten decay in the future, remain to be dealt with.

The justification for this approach, which has certainly been substantiated by the results, has been the wide-spread quickening of interest in the Islamic monuments among the general public of Egypt. As the monuments appear clean and smartened up, gardens have been created to set them off, and new museums opened, so that today crowds are enjoying monuments which earlier were the preserve of only the most devoted connoisseurs. Perhaps this will pay dividends in the future.

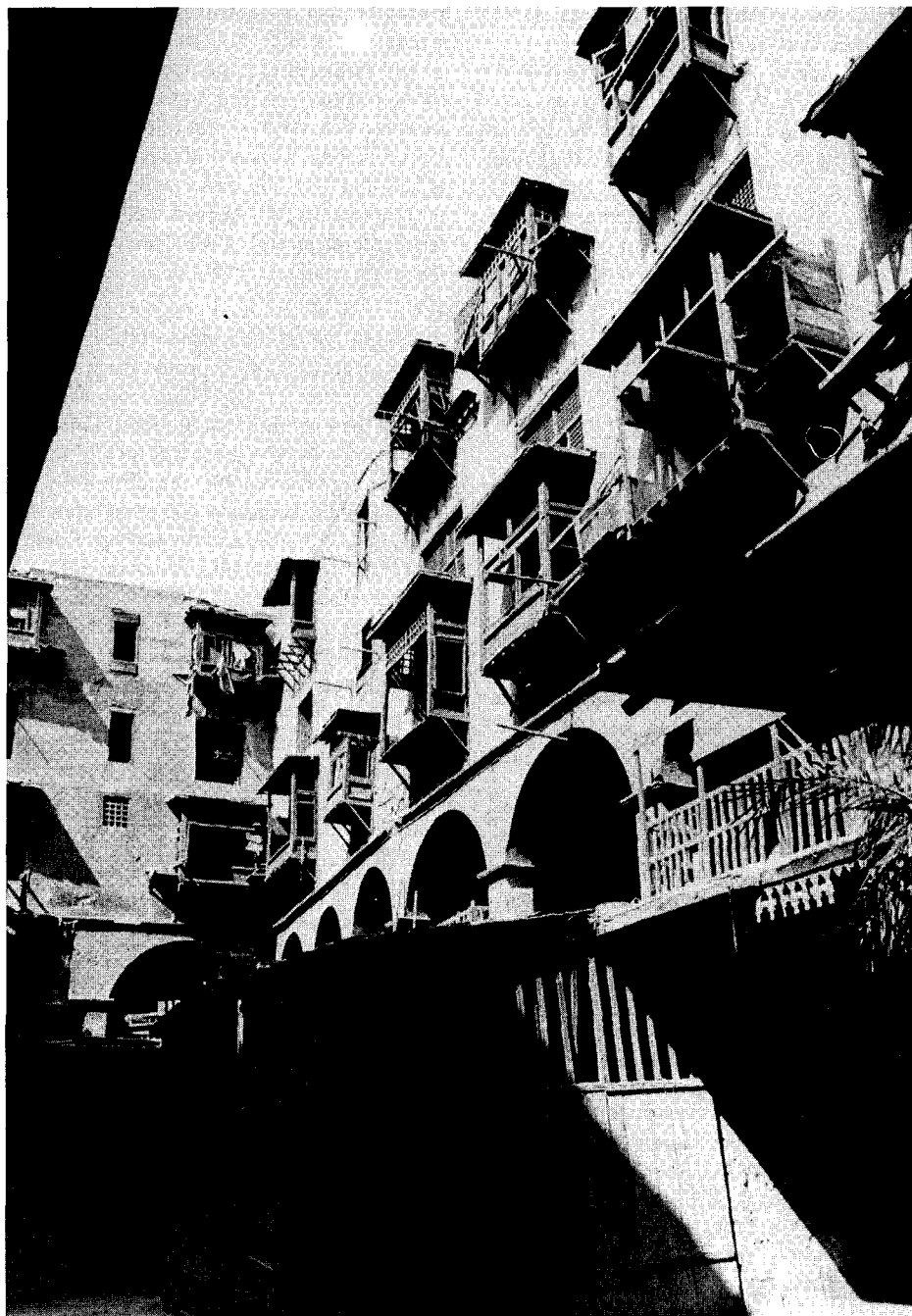
The Governor of Cairo has meanwhile undertaken to institute a campaign of services in infrastructure throughout the whole historic area. The success of this policy is still somewhat far distant, however, as the historic city is specifically excluded from the direct benefits being brought to Cairo by the Greater Cairo Waste-Water project. Indeed, it is thought that the measures being adopted may exacerbate the problem of rising ground water in the area, which has become one of the most serious developments undermining long-term conservation efforts.

The Governor of Cairo is also considering a plan prepared by the Egyptian Arab

Bureau which, if approved, would launch a scheme to be financed with the aid of the World Bank for the intensive rehabilitation of the northern central part of the old city, between the northern Fatimid gates and Bab Zuwayla. This would involve extensive rebuilding of residential accommodations and the resiting of the most noxious industries and warehousing which are alien to the traditional mixed-use in the old city.

It would be desirable if these projects for the extensive rehabilitation of the old city could be paralleled by professional studies so as to ensure a comprehensive conservation of the most important monuments, employing only the most careful and skilled techniques available internationally and following standards recommended in the Venice Charter and the Lahore Principles. Other monuments, which do not appear to warrant such elaborate procedures, might at least be protected for the time being by undertaking all necessary repairs and allowing their adaptive re-use for the general benefit of the community. The balance of choice between these two types of monuments is a delicate one, but it seems that some choice has to be made and such measures adopted, even if only a fraction of the vast wealth of historic Islamic architecture in Cairo is to be preserved for another generation.

As a concomitant to this activity, impartial and thorough research is needed to study many aspects of traditional building methods in Cairo: research into the efficacy of the construction methods for creating foundations, roofs, etc.; and assessment of the ways in which traditional building techniques might be advantageous today if reintroduced, either in their original form, or if modified, by incorporating modern technology to reduce labour costs, to replace rare or expensive materials and to reduce maintenance costs. In the case of certain problems, such as water-proofing roofs and damp-proofing walls near the ground, it may be necessary to begin research into the development of entirely new techniques for the special circumstances of conservation.



*The Wezarat al-Bazara'a* A typical courtyard structure, housing shopkeepers and craftsmen since the Middle Ages until recently, is now derelict.

Photo: R B. Lewcock.

Finally, much thought is needed to determine a philosophical basis for conservation. What kind of conservation is most desirable in Cairo: to preserve the sense of antiquity and ageing at all costs, or to return the buildings to their pristine state? And what attitude should be assumed as we are faced with the immense scale of the problems (involving not only the monuments but the whole traditional urban fabric and way of life) which must far surpass those being confronted by any other city in the Arab world?