

## INTRODUCTION: A COMPREHENSIVE VISION OF URBAN REHABILITATION

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**T**he Historic Cities Support Programme (HCSP) was set up in 1991 as the operational branch of the Aga Khan Trust for Culture, with the task of implementing conservation and urban revitalisation projects in culturally significant sites of the Islamic World. Such activities are funded by the Trust itself, as well as by other donor agencies.

At its inception, the Programme's main focus was on individual buildings and public open spaces, but it has since gone a long way towards conceiving and implementing a range of truly integrated urban rehabilitation projects. Whether in Hunza, Zanzibar, Samarkand or Mostar, the emphasis of the past few years has been on building up a critical mass of activities around initial restoration or upgrading projects, i.e., on consolidating the projects by creating a self-supporting contextual framework, not only in physical, but also in social, economic and institutional terms. In doing so, the Programme's abiding concern is to demonstrate that well-handled conservation can spur progress, and that an appropriate development can be used to sustain the rehabilitation of historic districts and strengthen cultural identity.

Reconciling conservation and development is a prerequisite for achieving improvements in the quality of life in environmentally and culturally sensitive places. It calls for the introduction of appropriate new functions, i.e., the re-use of historic structures, in order to generate income for the buildings and for the local community. It also requires the improvement of services and public open spaces, community-supported rehabilitation of historic housing districts and open spaces, creation of employment opportunities and promotion of local crafts. Public awareness can be increased through the very process of project implementation itself, once proper participation mechanisms are established. Training opportunities can be provided, residents' participation encouraged and institutional capacity enhanced. It is through the interaction of such goals and activities that it becomes possible to capture and harness the impulses emanating from individual restoration projects and to generate fresh development impulses – forces that not only sustain the initial projects but often succeed in multiplying the effect of positive change and transformation.

*An aerial view of the project site shows the topography of the Azhar Park after master grading (2000). On the edge of the site is the uncovered Ayyubid city wall (12<sup>th</sup> century) and, to the right, the Darb al-Ahmar district. In the distance, two major landmarks can be seen: to the left, Salah al-Din's Citadel and, to the right, the complex of the Sultan Hassan Mosque.*

The array of HCSP projects in Cairo follows this integrated approach and is the Trust's boldest attempt to date to achieve interrelated conservation and development objectives. It is also the most challenging one, due to historic Cairo's towering urban and social problems and complex implementation procedures.

The Trust's involvement in Egypt began with the Aga Khan's decision to donate a park to the citizens of Cairo, following the conference of 11-15 November 1984 entitled "The Expanding Metropolis: Coping with the Urban Growth of Cairo", organised by the Aga Khan Award for Architecture. Soon thereafter, the 30-hectare site on al-Darassa was selected, because of its enormous potential as a "lung" at the very centre of the historic agglomeration. The hilly site is surrounded by the most significant historic districts of Islamic Cairo, all of which are major destinations for visitors to the city. To the west are the Fatimid city and its extension, Darb al-Ahmar, with their wealth of mosques, madrasas and mausolea, signalled by a long line of minarets. To the south is the Sultan Hassan Mosque and its surroundings, as

*The future Park site in 1992, before work commenced, looking to the south. In the distance to the left is the Citadel of Salah al-Din and, in the centre, the minarets of the Sultan Hassan Mosque complex.*



well as the Ayyubid Citadel. To the east is the Mamluk “City of the Dead”, with its many social welfare complexes sponsored by Mamluk sultans and dignitaries – an area which has developed into a dense neighbourhood of its own. The hilly topography of the site, formed by debris accumulated over centuries, now provides elevated view-points that dominate the city and offer a spectacular 360° panorama over the townscape of historic Cairo. On a clear day one can even see the pyramids.

The implementation of the initial Park project, prepared in the late eighties, was delayed, first because the former occupants of the Darassa site (a horse compound of the Cairo police and a storage site of a major contractor) had to be moved, and then because the area, as the last vacant space in central Cairo, was reclaimed by the General Organisation for Greater Cairo Water Supply (GOGCWS) for the construction of three large water tanks, to be constructed with funding from USAID. In a short period, the status of the site thus shifted from a neglected and derelict condition to a strategic resource for the surrounding neighbourhoods and the entire metropolis.

*The future Park site in 1992, looking towards the northeast. In the background is the “City of the Dead”, with the mausolea of many Mamluk sultans and dignitaries, highlighted by domes and minarets.*





*The southern section of the Ayyubid city wall and the adjacent Mosques of Aq Sunqur (“Blue Mosque”), and Khayrbek.*

*Above: Conditions in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. (David Roberts)*

*Centre: Conditions in 1992 show the wall buried beneath heaps of rubble and debris.*

*Below: The wall emerges during the site works in 2000.*

Based on a protocol between the Cairo Governorate and AKTC signed in 1990, a new start for the project was made, which now had to integrate the water tanks as part of the Park design. The time prior to the completion of the water tanks in 1995 was used for developing a new master plan, with the help of Sasaki Associates, Boston, for a thorough investigation of the complicated soil conditions and horticultural tests (see chapter 3), and for the operation of a preliminary on-site nursery. Earthworks and mastergrading began in 1997 while the detailed design of the Park continued, with a view to taking best advantage of the site’s opportunities. The aim of the Park design was to provide a lively contrast between flat and hilly sections of the site, formal and informal planting patterns, as well as lush vegetation in focal areas of the plain and dryer stretches on the slope toward the city. The “spine”, which holds the complete Park design together, is a formal axis with a water channel and accompanying alleyways starting at the northern hill above the central water tank and pointing towards the citadel, the key landmark dominating the site. The axis then bends towards the minarets of the old city and leads to a small lake on the large lower plateau of the site. Gardens and pavilions in the classical Islamic tradition, surrounded by geometrically planted orchards, enhance the arrival point on the edge of the lake. A network of informal pathways surrounds the more formal areas and leads through all levels and corners of the site. Together, the various components of the Park design will provide the visitor with a rich and varied experience.

By 1996, when the Trust took over the site from the Cairo Governorate, the Historic Cities Support Programme had developed a more comprehensive approach to urban rehabilitation. Thanks to His Highness the Aga Khan’s vision and support, the Cairo project, initially limited to the Darassa site, was thus gradually extended to include the rehabilitation of the fringe of the adjacent Darb al-Ahmar district and the restoration of a number of key monuments defining the skyline of the historic city as seen from the Park site. This means that the construction of the Park is acting as a catalyst for a whole range of associated rehabilitation projects in its surroundings.

The Darb al-Ahmar rehabilitation projects, presented at the centre of this report, have been planned and designed in order to take advantage of the dramatic reversal of the conditions along the historic city resulting from the Park initiative. A former backyard of the Darb al-Ahmar district, used over centuries for disposal of rubble and debris, the Darassa site

has now, almost overnight, been transformed into a forecourt of the historic city. The dynamic potential released by this sudden turnaround is being channelled and harnessed to underpin an in-depth rehabilitation process in the catchment areas of the Park and along the main pedestrian accesses through the old city. In the long term, the rehabilitation process also needs to be sustained by co-ordinated actions in specific focal areas, thus allowing the rehabilitation process to radiate into adjacent zones of the old city. The specific programmes developed for Darb al-Ahmar are far from being limited to the conservation of monuments or physical upgrading. They deliberately associate and interrelate physical interventions with socio-economic development, training, community participation, institutional capacity-building and creation of new employment, thus maximising the economic dividends from the Trust's involvement in the area for the local residents. The keystone of this combined conservation and development strategy will be the establishment of a local "Darb al-Ahmar Development Corporation", as a vehicle for continued involvement of all stakeholders in the area. The Trust was fortunate to find other donors, such as the Egyptian-Swiss Development Fund and the Ford Foundation, who subscribed to the combined physical and socio-economic rehabilitation and are generously supporting the current activities.

During the massive re-grading of the western Park slope descending towards Darb al-Ahmar, the formerly buried Ayyubid city wall of Cairo was re-discovered and partly excavated along the western edge of the historic city. This wall, with its gates, towers, and interior chambers and galleries, is in itself one of the most important archaeological discoveries of the past decades relating to the Islamic period in Egypt. Moreover, it will form a distinctive third element between the Park and Darb al-Ahmar, providing an interesting enclosure and backdrop for the Park, as well as a monument which can be visited. It physically separates the Park from Darb al-Ahmar and the old city, but also acts as an attractive visual and functional connection, offering opportunities to visitors to enter the city from the Park, and vice-versa.

While being an architectural feature in its own right, the city wall cannot be dissociated from the abutting Darb al-Ahmar district. Over the centuries, the houses and monuments built against the wall on the city side became an integral part of Cairo's urban and social history. Selective removal of encroaching elements is being undertaken, but a wholesale demolition of the historic housing stock attached to the



*The central section of the Ayyubid city wall.*

*Above: The Park site as it appeared in a photograph from the 1920s.*

*Centre: Conditions as encountered in 1992.*

*Below: Conditions in 2000, after master grading of the Park.*



*A small square in front of the Aslam Mosque, adjacent to the Ayyubid city wall. Demolition of the houses between the wall and the square and the introduction of a large new road would destroy the social fabric and the cultural value of this place. (See also illustration on p. 52/53.)*

city wall would contradict today's prevailing international conservation philosophy and practice, and might introduce undesirable and dangerous development pressures. Therefore, the project made a careful plot-by-plot study along the Historic Wall, defining appropriate modes of intervention for each building within the larger framework of the Darb al-Ahmar conservation and rehabilitation plan. The goal is to take advantage of the stimulus of the upgrading brought by the Park and at the same time impose clear building regulations and redevelopment models, in order to achieve a balanced rehabilitation process on this critical edge of the city facing the Park.

Apart from the Park project, the Historic Wall and the Darb al-Ahmar rehabilitation project, a fourth component proposed to the Cairo Governorate is an "Urban Plaza" development on the north-eastern corner of the site, adjacent to the busy al-Azhar road. This portion of the site, easily accessible and close to the Khan al-Khalili markets, has obvious commercial potential, while it is too separate from the upper Park plateau and too noisy to be part of the landscaped areas. A commercial building with shops, offices and an integrated car-parking facility was proposed for the site. Considering the demand for car-parking space in this zone of the city and the opportunity to create an income-generating commercial facility to support future Park maintenance and enhancements, the Cairo Governorate accepted the basic concept.

The planning of this area, however, was complicated by the discovery of the totally buried northern section of the Historic Wall. Following its excavation, the HCSP project team suggested shifting the site of the Urban Plaza slightly eastwards, to the northern edge of the Park site, as now shown in the revised master plan (see page 27). The basic idea of establishing a combined commercial and parking complex on the urban edge of the Park has thus been retained. It will enable the future operation, maintenance and enhancement of the Park to rely on an additional source of income (other than the entry tickets) and to become self-sustainable by adapting a well-known traditional concept in Muslim societies – the "waqf" model used for important public facilities donated to the community. The same idea is behind the inclusion of income-generating facilities within the Park, such as the hilltop restaurant and the lake-side café, which enhance particular areas of the Park and provide additional attractions for visitors.

To conclude this brief overview of AKTC activities in Cairo, it should be mentioned that the Trust, in co-operation with the World Monuments Fund, New York, is also engaged in the restoration of a number of key monuments in the area, such as the Umm Sultan Shaban Mosque and the Khayrbek complex, which are in many ways related to the Park, to Darb al-Ahmar and to the historic Ayyubid wall. These projects, through the reconstruction of the missing top section of the respective minarets, are essential for preserving the historic skyline of Cairo, as seen from the hills of the Park. Through the re-use of restored building components and improved public open spaces, they will contribute to the revitalisation of the Darb al-Ahmar district. Moreover, they will provide attractive transition spaces leading from the Park, through the wall and into the old city, thereby allowing visitors to experience the Historic Wall from both sides.

By bringing together and interrelating all the activities outlined in this introduction, the Cairo project clearly stands out as the most complex, important and significant component of the Historic Cities Support Programme. The Park project itself is in many ways a unique undertaking. The restoration of the Ayyubid wall is an equally distinctive endeavour, particularly considering its intermediate location between the Park and the historic city. The Darb al-Ahmar initiatives are somewhat different, inasmuch as they involve a *process*, rather than finite building activities. Thus they fall more in line with the typical urban rehabilitation approach now being pursued by the Programme. By the very fact of linking area-wide physical rehabilitation with socio-economic development, they assume an exploratory pilot role for future HCSP activities.

While all the works on the various components of the project are ongoing at the time this brochure is being published, I wish to express my deep gratitude to the entire technical team of Aga Khan Cultural Services- Egypt (AKCS-E), the Trust's implementing agency. Under the leadership of Ossama Hambazaza (Park project) and Mohammed el-Mikawi (Darb al-Ahmar), the dedicated staff has accomplished an enormous amount of work over all these years of exploration, preparatory studies and first steps of implementation. Unfortunately, it is impossible here to mention individually all those who have contributed, but the last page of the brochure features the names of the principal staff members and consultants who have been involved over the years.



*Schematic design for the “Urban Plaza” (1), on the northern edge of the Park site. The triangle along al-Azhar Street (2), with the newly discovered section of the Ayyubid wall, is to become a sunken archaeological park. A proposed rearrangement of vehicular service access into Darb al-Ahmar will allow the creation of a pedestrian zone along the northern end of the excavated Ayyubid wall (3).*

