

Cairo's Al-Qarafa

HOW MANY TIMES HAVE YOU HEARD the media take a virulent stand against foreign reports of life in the cemeteries? It is a facet of Cairo life that we are trained to be ashamed of. The ambiguity that characterises the great cemeteries' relationship to the city is, however, a modern notion, one that has been developing only for the last hundred years or so. A late 19th-century chronicler, Ali Mubarak, an advocate of modern building practices, gave voice to these sentiments in *Al-Khitat al-Tawfiqiyya*, where he criticises the old city's irregular facades and unorthodox mixing of buildings with different functions (such as the medieval complex - which sometimes featured a school, mosque, hostel, and tomb). "Building fronts did not follow a certain geometric order to the extent that they are not distinguishable from the facades of the cemetery *hawshs* [enclosed courtyards]." Mubarak continues his critique saying, "And among the examples of negligence in health related issues was the fact that people were allowed to establish cemeteries in the middle of the city, like those of al-Sayyida Nafisa and al-Qasid. People also buried their dead in their houses and in mosques and *madrasas* [religious colleges]."

Ali Mubarak's arguments are the forerunners of our contemporary views. He saw the city and cemetery as two separate entities that should not mix. In most cases readers today would not question Mubarak's view. Cairo's cemeteries are put forth as sad, depressing places, where we bury and mourn our dead. The difference between Mubarak's views and some current ones, however, is that he recognized that the built-up, lived-in Cairene cemetery was a historical phenomenon. He was aware that this was the tradition in Cairo, but in the spirit of the time, believed that it should be changed because it didn't fit into modern notions of what a city should look like.

What we have now, one hundred years later, is a case of selective memory. The inhabited cemetery is no



Late Ottoman era house opposite the tomb of al Shafi

منزل من العصر العثماني

longer viewed as a tradition inherent to and unique to Cairo. For us it is another face of the congested and crowded city that we have today. People live in the cemetery because there is nowhere else to go. But if we step back and look to the history we find mention of market streets, aqueducts, bakeries, houses, palaces, and pleasure pavilions. Who were these facilities for, if not the living?

The description of the Fatimid caliph al-Amir on the terrace of his pleasure palace in the cemetery, watching Sufis perform, reveals one facet of life of the cemetery. The Fatimid cemetery complex included a congregational mosque, palace, bath, garden, cistern, and bakery—all surrounded by the tombs of the royal family. Suq al-Qarafa, a market street, led to the complex.

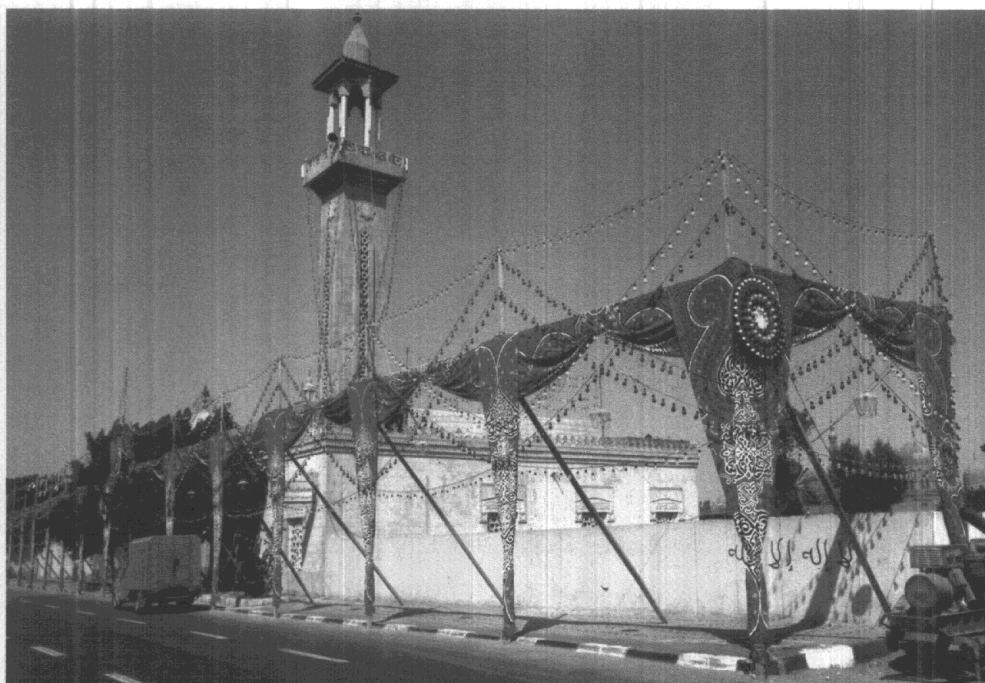
The chance to enjoy music and religious ceremonies was not restricted to the elite. It is documented that the Jawsaq al-Madhara'i pavilion was lit up and visited on religious occasions by a cross-section of the city's population. And this activity dates back as far as the tenth-century.

Some religious figures were scandalized by the ostensibly religious but really quite secular activities that went on. Objections ranged from complaints about frivolous behaviour to calls for the domes towering above graves to be removed as they were not in accordance with strict Islamic tradition. Yet the cemetery not only survived this bad publicity but flourished.

Those who continued to object to "alternative" activities in the cemetery were appeased by developments that occurred under the Ayyubids. Motivated by an interest in stamping out the heterodox strand of Islam, Shi'ism, this late 12th-century dynasty established orthodox *madrasas* and placed them strategically in the cemetery - a centre of religious tourism that was associated with revered saints both dead and alive.

A huge complex named after the Ayyubid leader Salah al-Din was built on the site of al-Imam al-Shaf'i's tomb. It included a *madrasa*, *hammam* [bath house], bakery, and shops. Students from throughout the region flocked to study in this *madrasa* and its counterparts in the city and cemetery. The community of religious scholars and students helped establish a more "respectable" society in the cemetery.

Under the Central Asian Mamluk dynasty who superseded the Ayyubids, Sufi communities were instituted as another ideological and functional social pole in the cemetery. The patronage activity of the Mamluk sultans resulted in the erection of the gracious domes that characterize the cemetery. These patrons had no qualms about mixing



Moulid preparations brighten up the street

التجهيزات للمولد النبوي لإضفاء الإضاءة و البهجة للشارع



Gate to hawsh - an informal variety of adaptive reuse

بوابة مؤدية للحوش



Al-Sarai hawsh from the Autostrade

منظر لحوش السراي من الأوتوستراد

the religious with the secular, the dead with the living, to the extent that they made provisions for a horse and camel market to be established there. A new extension, al-Sahara', was established around a Sufi burial ground.

Thus, Cairo's cemeteries have never been totally "dead" places. Nonetheless, the city's population growth in the latter half of the twentieth century has resulted in fundamental changes in its character. The zones designed and meant for the living have always been differen-

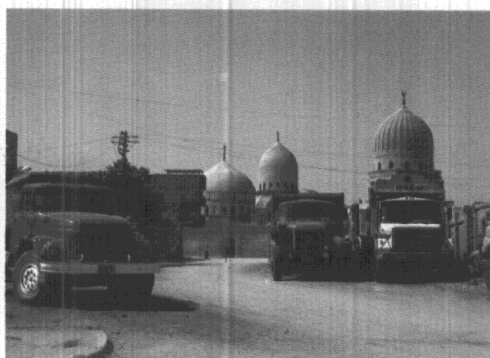
tiated in form and arrangement from the cemetery *hawshs*, which provide temporary accommodation for the owners of the *hawshs* and at most, accommodate a caretaker and his family on a long-term basis. The case we see now is that the *hawshs* have been taken over by the overflow from the city. The main streets of the cemetery, particularly the streets leading to Imam al-Shaf'i and the complex of Qaytbey, still reflect a more urban character defined by shops, houses and workshops.

The educational and Sufi foundations, along with the flow of religious tourism, provided economic bases that the cemetery dwellers could subsist on. Permanent establishments like bakeries, baths and markets provided essential services, while weekly, monthly and seasonal commercial establishments catered to the needs of its more transient visitors whose flow increased during *mulids* [saints' days]. The popularity of the cemetery among scholars and religious tourism ensured its survival.

The problem facing us today in dealing with the cemetery is twofold. The first concerns living people's use of

spaces designated for the dead. Ultimately the best solution would be to provide an alternative and move residents out. The cemetery, however, is still less populated and has more open spaces than shantytowns like nearby al-Duwayqa. Given the choice between al-Duwayqa and al-Imam al-Shaf'i, it is not surprising that the cemetery dweller would chose the latter. A 1990s study, *The City of the Dead*, about modern immigrants to the cemetery shows that while they enter with trepidation, afraid of staying in a place with dead people, they gradually develop a sense of belonging or at least a practical acceptance of the status quo. Residents also usually come to realize that life in a desert settlement - as successive governors have proposed to them - would be worse. The cemeteries offer a sense of community and proximity to Cairo's economic hub.

The residents display affection and respect for the famous dead among which they live. But the pride of having notable neighbours turns to humiliation when the residents are confronted with the appalling lack of services where they live, the negligence of the authorities and the



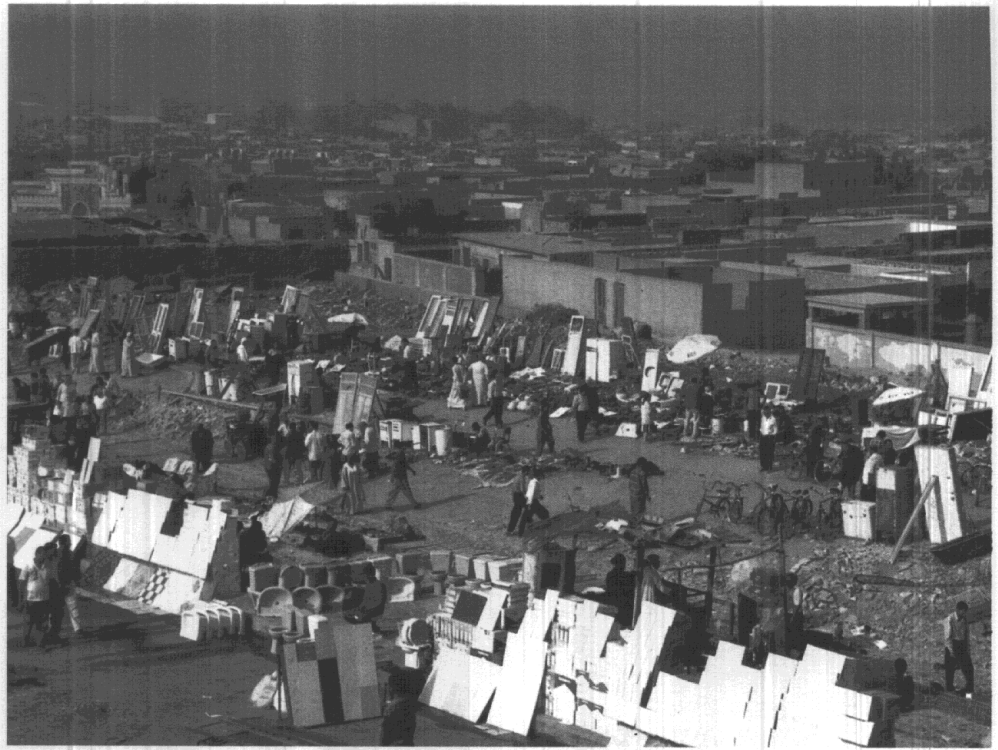
A truck-stop where once there was a camel stop

موقف شاحنات كان
يوما مكان للجمال

constant battling against people's narrow-minded preconceptions.

In the past, an understanding of the uniqueness of the place and a general reverence for its dead and living saints benefited the average dweller. The inhabitant was guaranteed a respectable living from touristic and educational activities in the area, while the interest of the country's rich and powerful in the area helped enhance living conditions, and in turn the self-esteem of the cemetery dweller.

Our appreciation of the cemetery now is more cultural than religious. It is an appreciation of what the place represents — a continuity of history in form and function. The cemetery is a repository of forms and decorative details and monuments that are much better preserved than the city proper. It is no coincidence that the main street, al-Sahra', still has an Azhari Secondary Institute, and that situated in the same area where the



Suq al Goma' from the Autostrad

منظر لسوق الجمعة من الأوتوستراد



Residential meets funerary architecture

التلاقي المعماري للمساكن مع المقابر



Amir Kabir Qurqmas Complex

مجمع أمير كبير قرقماس

Hajj caravan used to park is a truck parking lot. Even Cairoland, the amusement park, built where al-Qarafa al-Kubra had been, is a kind of continuation. Mamluk polo grounds were always on the outskirts of the cemetery, and people would picnic there to watch the games and listen to religious singing.

But these scattered examples are not consistent enough to erase the stigmas of cemetery-living, and this is what needs to be changed. We need to free ourselves of this new and modern stigma attached to the cemetery, epitomized by the words Umar 'Abd al Akhir, former Cairo Governor, when he said, "The city of the dead has to be removed from the living heart of our capital. Children in these centuries have grown up with the sound of wailing and tears. It is

inhuman, and every Egyptian should be ashamed for allowing their misery to continue." Rather, we should embrace the cemetery's unique nature and work to improve on it.

The twin economic bases, tourism and education, are a good place to start. The architectural heritage still present in the cemetery can be used to draw tourism to the area. The buildings need to be restored and reused. Al-Azhar University is constantly expanding its campus in nearby Medinat Nasr, and some of the buildings of the cemetery could serve as part of its campus. This would be an ideal place for students of Islamic art and architecture or history to study, even live. A building like the Complex of Amir Kabir Qurqmas currently being restored by a joint Polish-Egyptian mission

was originally constructed as a teaching and residential establishment.

If the restoration of these buildings is accompanied by a study of the urban history of the area, open-air museums could be created in the more interesting excavation sites that would further attract tourism to the area. The simple step of adding the cemeteries to the standard itinerary of travel agents would automatically rejuvenate the area. By reviving educational, touristic, and research oriented activities that were originally part of the dynamics of the cemetery there are potential opportunities for the inhabitants to improve their standard of living.

*Photography by
May Ibrashy*



قرافة القاهرة الحية

يعتبر سكن الناس في القرافة جزءاً من الواقع الحي للمجتمع القاهري الذي اعتدنا استنكاره و النفور منه. وقد بدأت هذه الظاهرة في القرن التاسع عشر مع دخول مصر في العصر الحديث ومحاولات بعض المثقفين والعلماء الالتزام بأفكار جديدة مستوردة حول شكل المدينة الحديثة وتخطيطها. فيصور هذه الظاهرة "علي مبارك" في كتابه الخط التوفيقي حيث رأى المدينة والقرافة مكانين منفصلين تماماً وأنتقد ألفة سكن الأهالي في القرافة كما استنكر دفن الموتى في البيوت والمساجد والمدارس.

ولكن اذا تصفحنا بعض كتب التاريخ نجد ان القرافة كانت دائما مليئة بالحياة وكانت تقام أسواقاً وقناطراً ومخابزا وبيوتا وقصورا وملاهي فلمن كانت هذه المنشآت ان لم تكن للأحياء؟

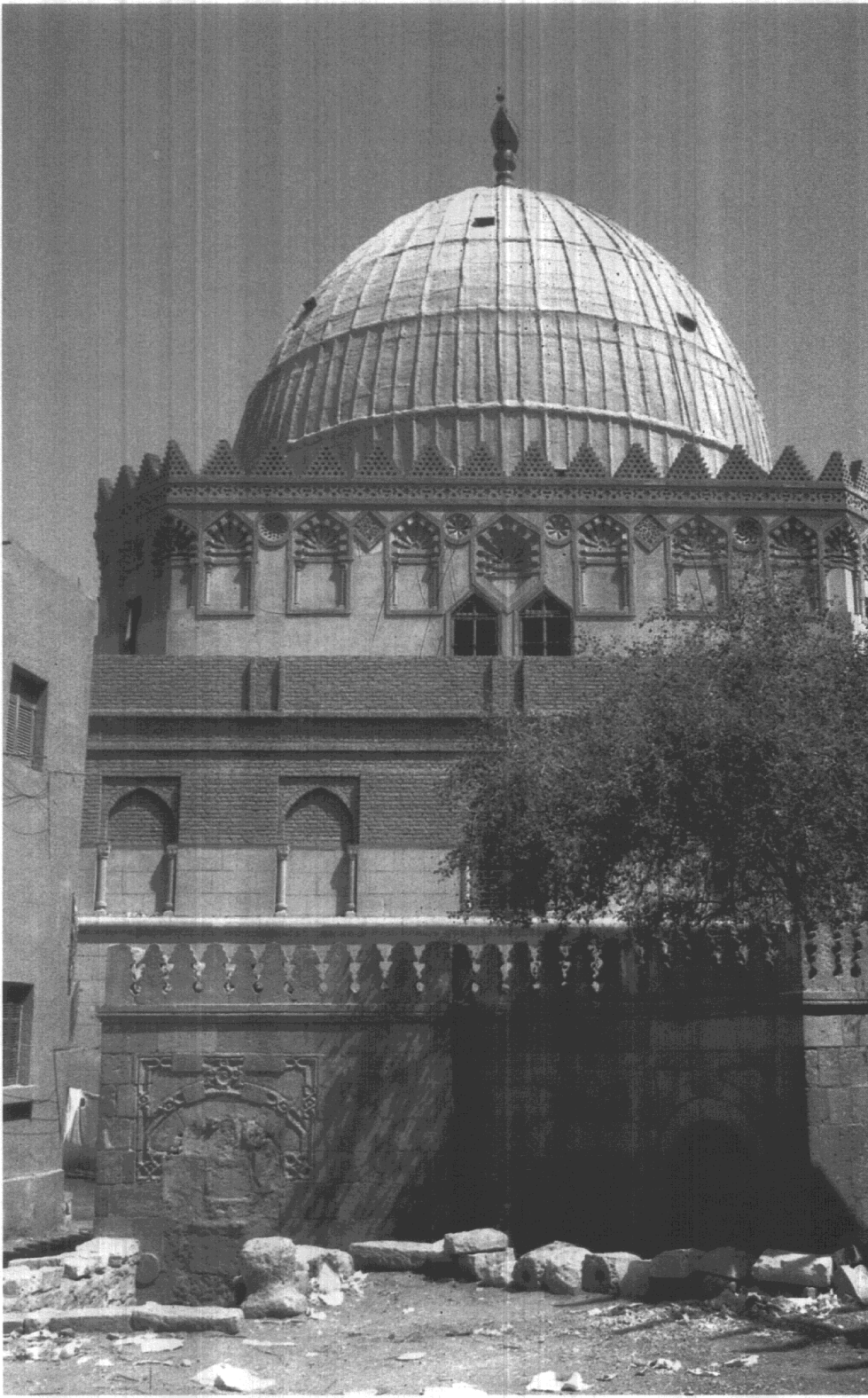
ففي القرن العاشر تحت ظل الدولة الفاطمية كانت تقام بعض المراسم الدينية والحفلات الموسيقية في القرافة ويحضرها سكان القاهرة من جميع الطبقات، ونجد أيضا أن الدولة الأيوبية قد أنشأت واحدة من أهم مدارسها في القرافة وهي مدرسة صلاح الدين، كما أسس بها سلاطين المماليك فيما بعد زاويا صوفية وسوق للخيل وللجمال.

وفي هذه العصور كانت السياحة الدينية بالإضافة الى المؤسسات الصوفية التعليمية توفر ما يكفي من بنية اقتصادية واجتماعية يعيش بها المقيمون في القرافة ويزدهر بها المكان نفسه.

إن زيادة عدد سكان القاهرة اليوم قد أحدث تغييرات أساسية في طبيعة القرافة عنها في الماضي الا انه كان يوجد فرق ما بين المناطق السكنية والمباني المخصصة للموتى وبين المناطق المخصصة للأحياء من حيث الشكل والتصميم والاستعمال. أما اليوم فقد ضاع هذا الفرق والأماكن وقد إستولى المهاجرون الباحثون عن الرزق في مدينة القاهرة والذين لا يجدون مكانا آخر يصلح للسكن على الأماكن التي كانت مخصصة لدفن الموتى.

والحل الأفضل لهذه المشاكل هو نقل السكان المقيمين بهذه المناطق لمكان آخر، الا ان المعيشة في القرافة بالنسبة لكثير منهم أفضل من المعيشة في المساكن الحديثة الصحراوية التي أقترحت من قبل وذلك لقرب القرافة من مركز المدينة الاقتصادي والاجتماعي.

وربما نجد حلاً آخر لهذه المشكلة في اعادة تنشيط وتطوير القرافة نفسها من خلال أنشطة تعليمية وسياحية وثقافية كانت أصلاً تشكل جزءاً لا يتجزأ من الحياة في القرافة، وذلك في محاولة ادماج القرافة في النسيج المدني مرة أخرى والذي سيوفر فرصاً لسكان القرافة ويحسن مستوى معيشتهم.



Tomb of Imam al Shafi

مقام الإمام الشافعي

تستخدم بعض مباني القرافة كفضول دراسية أو حتى كسكن للطلبة وخصوصاً لدارسي الفن والتاريخ الاسلامي.

ولكن تبدأ الخطوة الأولى لأي مشروع هي مسح السمعة التي تتعلق بالقرافة والسكن فيها لكي نقوم بتطويرها وأحيائها.

و يعد التراث المعماري الذي تحتويه القرافة من طرز معمارية إكتسبتها من عدة عصور تاريخية والتي توجد أحياناً في حالة أفضل من مثيلاتها داخل المدينة نفسها عنصراً جاذباً للسياحة، كما يمكن ترميم وتطوير بعض المباني المميزة بحيث تصبح متاحف أو مراكز ثقافية يزورها السياح والسكان معاً. فعلى سبيل المثال فإن جامعة الأزهر التي تقع قريباً من القرافة في مدينة نصر قد