

A Brief History of Green Spaces in Cairo

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After the overwhelming first sight of the magnificent pyramids, the next impression a first-time visitor to Cairo receives when coming in by plane is of an ochre sea spreading below him/her on both sides of the Nile, with very small dots of darker colours that do little to alleviate the dull monotony of the landscape. This is modern Cairo, sprawling across miles and miles of former agricultural and desert land and made up of densely laid out buff-coloured buildings with few green spaces between them. The only green is along the banks of the river and on the island of Gazira. These unalleviated expanses of tan are perplexing, to say the least, for a city lying at the apex of the bountiful Nile, one of the mightiest rivers in the world and the greening agent of its own valley. It is also misleading, insofar as it convinces urban and landscape students that Cairo has always been a toneless city with no gardens or parks, when historical records unmistakably suggest otherwise.

In fact, the city of al-Qahira (Cairo) was originally founded around a *bustan*, which, in modern terminology, is the equivalent of a park. When the Fatimid army arrived in 969, its general Jawhar al-Siqilli was charged by his master, Caliph al-Muizz li-Din Allah who remained back in Ifriqiyya, to establish a new royal city. The general chose an area almost two miles north of the then capital of al-Fustat around the Bustan al-Kafuri and laid out the royal enclave that came to be known as al-Qahira. The Bustan al-Kafuri was a sizeable *jardin de plaisance* planned by Kafur al-Ikhshidi, the slave ruler of Egypt between 949 and 968, immediately before the Fatimid invasion, who was unjustly defamed by al-Mutannabi, the most eloquent master of Arabic poetry. This original siting of al-Qahira is rarely remembered, especially since the overcrowded area of al-Muski at the heart of historic Cairo,

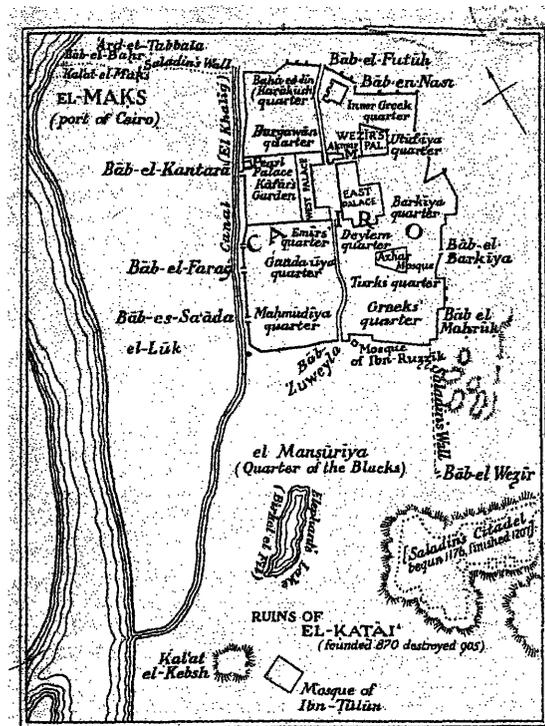


Fig. 12. Plan of Fatimid Cairo with the Bustan al-Kafuri, after Paul Ravaisse.

where the *bustan* once stood, today betrays no hint of its verdant past (fig. 12). The Bustan al-Kafuri was soon incorporated into the Fatimid Western Palace, built by Caliph al-Aziz (975-996), where it more or less maintained its function as a *jardin de plaisance*, this time in a genuine royal context. After the fall of the Fatimids in 1176, the palace enclosure was parcelled out and built over by the Ayyubids. In the next century and a half, at least four major charitable complexes (of the sultans al-Kamil, Qalawun, his son al-Nasir Muhammad, and Barquq) and two amirial palaces (those of Baysari and Salar), in addition to a number of *hammams* and *khans* (urban caravanserais), occupied the largest part of what used to be the Western Fatimid Palace and its gardens. The only vestiges that remained of the palace are found today in the ruined *iwans* (open-ended, vaulted spaces) and courtyard of the once prosperous Bimaristan of Qalawun, or hospital, built in 1284,

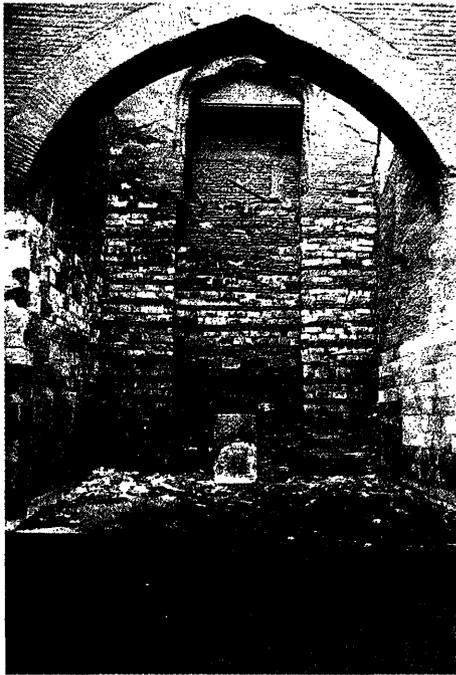


Fig. 13. *Shadirwan* from the Fatimid Western Palace, now in the Bimaristan of Qalawun.

whose coffered wooden ceiling with painted animals and floral motifs, and marble *shadirwan* (wall fountain) still stand in what is believed to be original Fatimid *iwans* (fig. 13). Of the Bustan al-Kafuri nothing remains.

But the Bustan al-Kafuri was not the only famous *bustan* in the history of medieval Cairo. The proximity of the Nile river allowed the powerful and wealthy during the Fatimid, Ayyubid, and Mamluk periods to exploit its eastern bank — and to a lesser extent its western one — and the borders of the several seasonal ponds that formed after its annual flood in the low land west of the city, to establish huge *basatin* for their recreation. Most famed are the Basatin of Sayf al-Islam (a brother of Salah al-Din al-Ayyubi) which lay to the west of where the two magnificent mosques of Sultan Hasan and al-Rifa'i stand today and extended towards the no longer extant Birkat al-Fil (Pond of the Elephant). The Basatin of Sayf al-Islam were called the gardens of Abbas in Fatimid times and were appropriated by Salah al-Din's family along with most other Fatimid properties. Other famous *basatin* existed on Rawda Island in the middle of the

Nile facing al-Fustat which developed in the early Mamluk period on the ruins of a short-lived late Ayyubid citadel. The Rawda citadel was first built by the last Ayyubid sultan of Egypt, al-Salih Najm al-Din Ayyub (1240-1249), as a place for him and his loyal troops to retreat from the more official Citadel of Cairo. The majority of structures inside it and along its walls, including the towers which overlooked the Nile, were either residential or pleasure structures. The sources mention belvederes (*manazir*; sing. *manzara*), porches (*maq'a'id*; sing. *maq'ad*), and residential halls (*qa'at*; sing. *qa'a*) located along the two sides of the Citadel facing the river. Opposite the Citadel, and later on its site after its abandonment, many *basatin* were developed in the early Mamluk peri-

od. The memory of these *basatin* is preserved primarily in the *waqf* (endowment) documents of buildings that were erected on their sites and in the accounts of *literati*, who describe many festive settings in them with ceremonial, recreational, literary, or amorous aims. From these descriptions emerges an image of verdant gardens with both decorative and fruit trees and some light pavilions scattered across the landscape.

Another type of open space, the *maydan*, flourished in the medieval period, especially under the Ayyubids and the Mamluks. *Mayadin* became essential urban spaces in Cairo — there were eight of them at one time or another — as everywhere else in the Islamic world where Turkic horsemen ruled and established an equestrian military elite after the Seljuks rose to power in the eleventh century. Although they were all large, open, and covered with grass (*najil* in medieval terminology), the *mayadin* were not meant for the use of the masses. They were royal establishments for polo games and equestrian exercises (*furusdiyya*), the backbone of the Mamluk military organisation upon which the new regime depended. Sultans Salah al-Din al-Ayyubi (1176-1193), al-Kamil Muhammad (1218-1238), al-Zahir Baybars (1260-1276), al-Nasir Muhammad (1293-1341), and Qansuh (1501-1516) are the most famous builders of *mayadin* in the history of Cairo. The most important of these *mayadin*, and the only one that still exists today, is the *maydan* under the Citadel. Planned along with the Citadel itself by the Ayyubid sultan al-Kamil Muhammad for military parades and training, the *maydan* sits almost on the same site as the parade ground built by Ibn Tulun around 876, more than three centuries earlier. To judge from the chroniclers' reports, it had at least three different and interchangeable names: the Maydan al-Qal'a (Citadel Maydan), the Qaramaydan (Turkish for Black Maydan), or the Maydan al-Akhdar (Green Maydan) (fig. 14). It was refurbished by many rulers after the end of the Ayyubid period, most notably by Baybars, al-Nasir Muhammad, and Qansuh al-Ghawri. Al-Nasir Muhammad took great care to ensure its usability all year round and to protect its grass from the scorching heat of Cairo in the summer. He had palm and fruit trees planted in it, presumably along the edges, and a number of wells dug and equipped with waterwheels (*sawaqi*; sing. *saqiya*) for its irrigation. He had it filled in with a special kind of rich black soil (called *al-ibliz*), whence perhaps the origin of



Fig. 14. View of the Qaramaydan today from the minaret of Sultan Hasan Mosque.



Fig. 15. The Sabil-Kuttab of Sultan Qaytbay, 1479.

gone when the urban expansion was redirected towards the desert to the north and east or across the Nile to the west in the twentieth century.

No large open green space existed in the urban core of medieval Cairo, and to some extent this was true of most cities of the central Islamic land between the eighth and nineteenth centuries. This is due in part to the arid climate prevalent in most Middle Eastern regions which made the maintenance and irrigation of a green space a very difficult and costly procedure. In medieval Cairo, which was situated three miles to the east of the River Nile, long aqueducts (*majari*; sing. *majra*) had to be constructed and wells had to be dug at various intervals to provide the Mamluks' *mayadin* with water. No sultan seems to have deemed it worth his patronage to spend money and effort on providing any open public space, and the people did not seem to have expected such an endowment, as they did religious or charitable institutions, and smaller civic services such as *katatib* (sing. *kuttab*, Koranic school) and *asbila* (sing. *sabil*, public drinking fountain) (fig. 15).

Another reason for this lack may lie in the conceptual distinction between private and public space in the traditional city, whereby entertainment and relaxation were kept strictly within the confines of the private domain and the public and communal spaces were devoted primarily to business interactions and worship. In practice, however, this distinction was very hard to enforce, to the chag-

the name of Black Maydan. This *maydan* was first illustrated at the beginning of the nineteenth century on the map in the *Description de l'Égypte* as an enclosed rectangle (approximately 220 x 100 metres) surrounded by stone walls on three sides and fed by at least one watercourse (*qastal*) that brought water from the well of Dar al-Baqar, opposite the Bustan of Sayf al-Islam.

The *basatin* and *mayadin*, however, were outside the city proper. They formed a sort of *cordon vert* in the space between the Nile and the boundaries of the city and around the Citadel (one exception was a *maydan* constructed by Baybars north of Cairo in the area of Hussayniyya). They were routinely the first victims of any urban expansion between the thirteenth and the end of the nineteenth century when the city was growing both towards the river and towards its southern satellite, Misr-Fustat. Except for the Qaramaydan, they had all long been

rin of conservative commentators, all of whom noted with disapproval the scenes of debauchery that arose when people were allowed to gather in public spaces, such as *basatin* and *mayadin*, to celebrate holidays or to partake in royal ceremonies. People are reported to have indulged in all sorts of illicit activities from dancing and singing to drinking, to eating hashish, to frolicking, and sometimes even outright sexual intercourse.

This practice was especially abhorrent to non-Egyptian chroniclers such as Ibn al-Hajj, a fourteenth-century Moroccan jurist who lived for a while in Cairo, and was very critical of what he saw as lax morals on the part of the Egyptian people, *ulama*, and government.

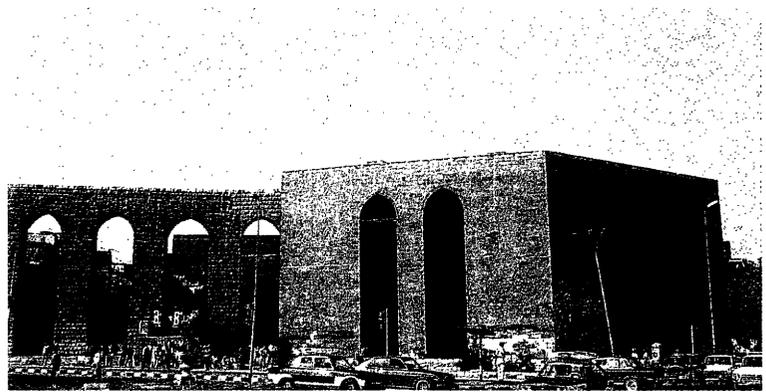


Fig. 16. The *majra* intake tower on the Nile riverbank built by Sultan Qansuh al-Ghawri in the early 1500s.

MEDIEVAL SETTINGS AND FORMS

We know very little about the layout of medieval *basatin* and much less about their patterns of maintenance and use. Irrigation and drainage were among the most important problems facing their designers, and they came up with some ingenious solutions, including aqueducts, subterranean drainage canals, water tanks and *sawaqi*. The remains of the aqueduct of Ibn Tulun in the *basatin* area east of Cairo, the entire waterworks system of wells, aqueducts, and *sawaqi* around the Citadel of the Mountain and the *maydan* of Salah al-Din (formerly al-Rumayla, that is Qaramaydan), and the huge water intake tower of Sultan Qansuh al-Ghawri on the Nile Corniche today, are only the most impressive remnants of the waterways that criss-crossed medieval Cairo and fed its multiple *mayadin* and *basatin*, mansions, *asbila* and public buildings (fig. 16).

Nor are we better informed about the various functions of *basatin* and their double character as both private gardens and public parks depending on the occasion. We have vague descriptions of regular communal outings on festive days, in which rich and poor took part as spectators and sometimes actors. People lined up along the waterways or rented spaces in the tree-shaded *basatin* to observe the activities and celebrations, and take advantage of the occasion to indulge in normally frowned-upon activities, such as dancing and singing, and other diversions, which sometimes bordered on the religiously prohibited. Most notable are the festivals that preserved the memory of pre-Islamic ceremonies, such as the *nawruz* (the Persian New Year and a celebration of spring), the *kasr al-khalij* (the opening of the Nile Canal to mark the peak of the yearly flood, the life-giver to Egypt), and the *Id al-Ghitas* (perhaps an ancient rite of the Nile modified by Christian overtones). They were given an Islamic cachet of sorts, and were occasionally sponsored by the state, especially in times of plenty.

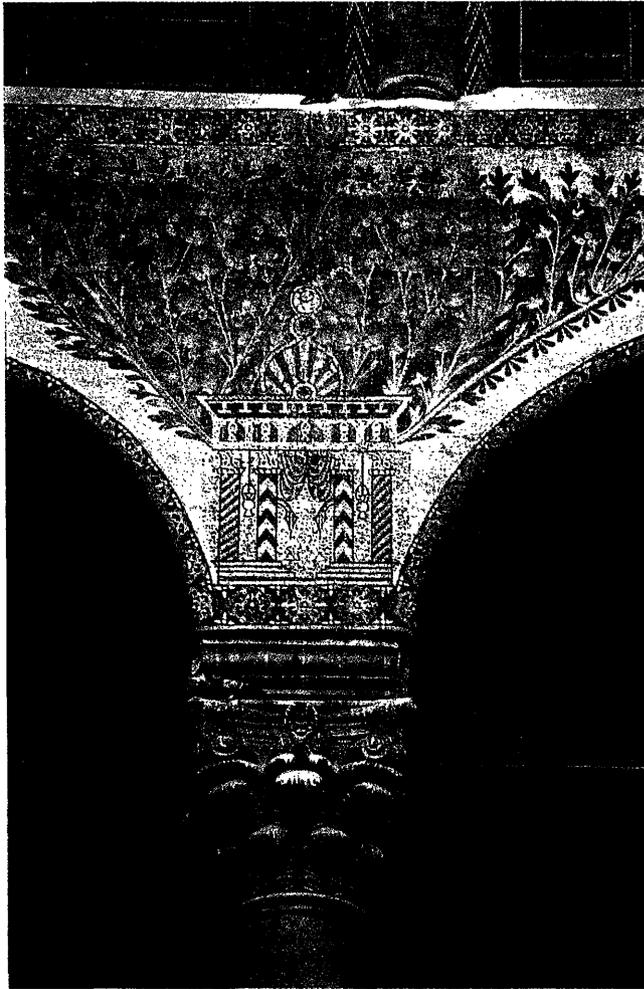


Fig. 17. An early Mamluk representation of a *manzara* in mosaic at the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus.

to have been primarily a pavilion with numerous openings, small and large. But because of their presumably lightweight construction material such as wood and reed, all *manazir* mentioned in the sources have disappeared. The only clues we have of their forms are occasional representations in contemporary Mamluk miniature paintings, such as the fifteenth-century illustrated manuscripts of *Kalila wa Dimna*, the *Maqamat* of al-Hariri, and the *Iskandarnama*, or those rare mosaic representations dating from the early Mamluk period in the Citadel of Cairo, in the funerary dome of al-Zahir Baybars in Damascus, and in the scenes repaired under Baybars and Qalawun at the Umayyad mosque in Damascus (fig. 17).

The word *maq'ad* means “a place to sit” and is usually translated as loggia, but in the medieval Cairene context it appears to have denoted an upper floor or simply a raised rectangular loggia with an arcaded opening overlooking a courtyard, garden, or some other setting. If we can believe the sources, *manazir* and *maq'ad* dotted the medieval *basatin*'s waterfronts in Rawda Island and elsewhere,

On other, less formal and more private outings, rich patrons would organise *majalis* (sing. *majlis*) in their *basatin* for poets, musicians, and literati, who would gather to drink, sing and recite poetry, and indulge in *adab* debates. These *majalis* were not seen as debauched entertainment. Many great learned men enthusiastically took part in them, such as 'Imad al-Din al-Katib al-Isfahani, Salah al-Din's secretary and a trained jurist himself who left us vivid descriptions of the lively *majalis* he attended. Some of these *majalis* took place in the open air, others in tents, and still others in special structures which seem to have been adapted for the particular setting of these *basatin*. Most important among these elements were the *manzara* and the *maq'ad*, both of which first appeared as accoutrements of *basatin* and both were later to inform the development of residential architecture in Egypt.

The word *manzara* is derived from the verb *nazara*, “to look, to watch”, which refers to the structure's basic function as a place from where one looks out, perhaps the equivalent of a belvedere. In Cairene *basatin*, a *manzara* appears

but it is very difficult from the available information to imagine whether they stood alone or in some prescribed formation and what, if any, kind of structures they were attached to. Moreover, the exact architectural difference between *manazir* and *maq'ad* is difficult to ascertain although they were to become very distinct in later times when they both migrated to urban residential architecture and became integral components of the Cairene courtyard house. This process seems to have started in the late fourteenth century

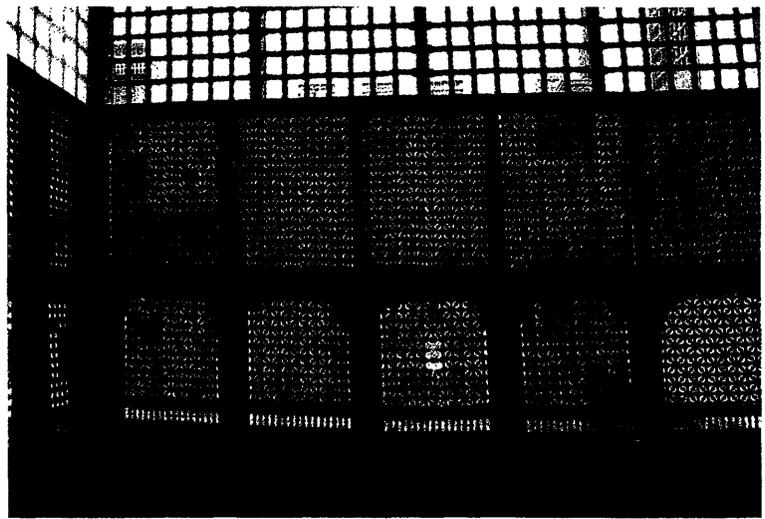


Fig. 18. A *mashrabiyya* in the Zahabi House in Cairo, c. 1634.

around the time when the rule passed from the Qalawunids to the Circassian Burjis under Sultan Barquq (1382-1400). Huge suburban *basatin* were slowly being replaced by smaller urban plots in the Mamluk Burji (1382-1517) and later in the Ottoman period (1517-1805). This development, no doubt related to the shrinking base of wealth for the ruling amirs with the change of the Mamluk power structure, could also have been affected by the expansion of the city towards the ponds and the Nile bank. It resulted in the interiorisation and urbanisation of the *bustan*. This in turn restored the courtyard to its former central position, a position that it had lost during the Ayyubid and early Mamluk periods when huge urban mansions, such as the palaces of Amir Alin Aq (1293), Amir Bashtak (1334-1339), and Amir Qawsun (1337) had only small, service-oriented courtyards. Their main reception halls generally turned their backs on the courtyard and looked towards the outside street or *birka* (pond) depending on their location. The situation was reversed in Burji and Ottoman residences. The major reception halls and rooms were arranged around, and opened onto, the large, planted courtyard with their very few openings to the outside heavily shielded by *mashrabiyya* (fig. 18). The new arrangement became clear from as early as the middle of the fifteenth century as shown in the plans of the few remaining palaces from the time of al-Ashraf Qaytbay (1468-1496) and Qansuh al-Ghawri (1501-1516), especially the palace of al-Razzaz (major phase of building in the late fifteenth century).

Not surprisingly, the two architectural elements, the *manzara* and *maq'ad*, made a forceful appearance in Burji urban palaces. They migrated from open-air settings to the courtyard house and became the common reception spaces in the Ottoman palaces, probably as a consequence of the transposition of the *bustan* to the residence, and its reduction to an urban garden. From the fifteenth to the nineteenth century every mid-sized Cairene house boasted a *maq'ad* with at least two arches, and larger houses sometimes had up to five arches as in the case of the *maq'ad* of Amir Mamay (1490)



Fig. 19. The *maq'ad* of the Suheimi House in Cairo, c. 1796.

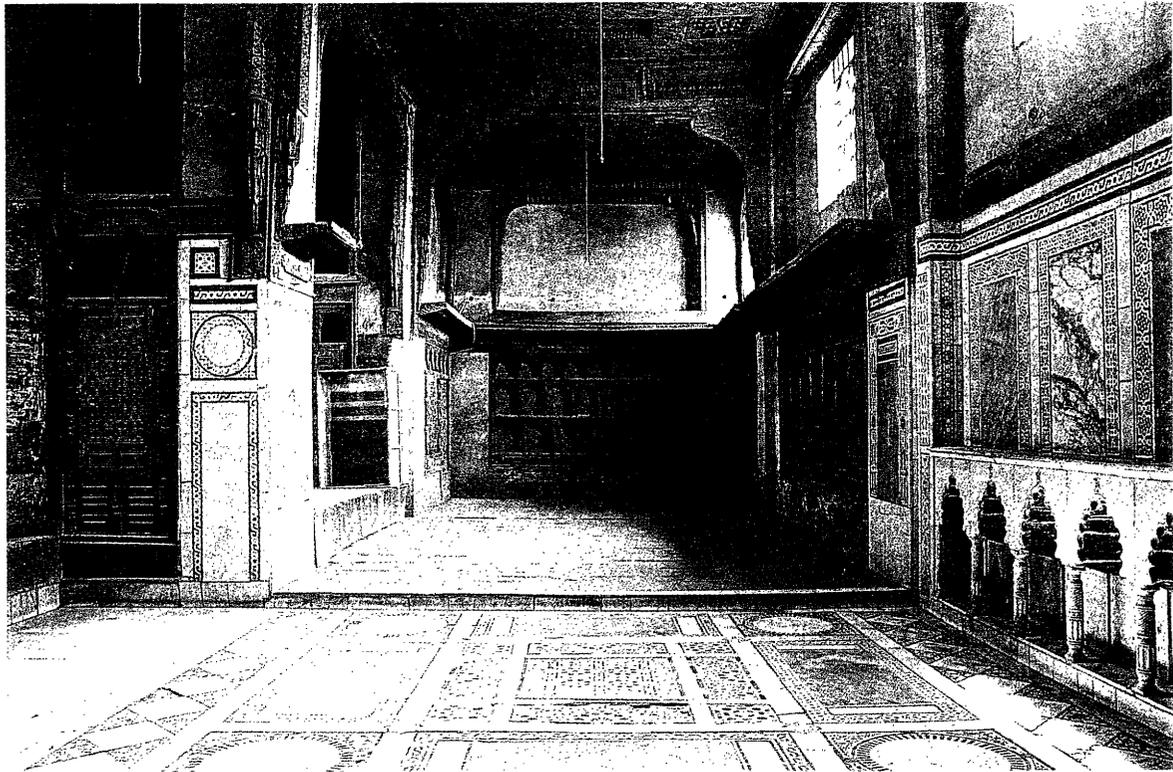


Fig. 20. The interior of the *manzara* of the Musafirkhana in Cairo, between 1779-1888.

(fig. 19). The *manzara* adaptation to the new urban setting is less clear, since a *manzara* is architecturally very similar to a common *qa'a*, with its raised *iwans* and central *durqa'a*. In the Ottoman period, it appears that the term *manzara* was used exclusively to designate a first-floor *qa'a* which opens onto a courtyard and is used solely for receiving male guests. The most famous of these *manazir* can be found in the Ottoman mansions of the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries such as the Suheimi House, the Zahabi House, the al-Harawi House, and in the ill-fated Mus-



Fig. 21. View of the *majlis* in the Shubra Palace, designed by Pascal Coste, 1820.

afirkhana which unfortunately burned down a few years ago. They were characterised by shallow fountains with single-stream jets, usually located in the middle of their central *durqa'as* (fig. 20).

Gardens began to be laid out in the otherwise functional courtyard that always existed in Cairene palaces and residences beginning with the ninth-century Fustat houses. They contained flowers and medicinal herbs, evergreen trees, and palm trees and vines. Their flowerbeds were sunk both for aesthetic and irrigation purposes. (A good example is in the Zahabi House, begun in 1634). The palace was given an introverted composition centring on its verdant courtyard. This could hardly have been seen from the street, and the inevitable impression many pre-modern visitors had was that Cairo was an overbuilt city that lacked green, open spaces.

NINETEENTH-CENTURY DEVELOPMENTS

The situation was partly and inconclusively improved by the new *basatin* established in the nineteenth century by Muhammad Ali, his sons, sons-in-law, and grandsons (primarily Tusun, Ibrahim, Said, and Ismail) following the draining of the seasonal ponds to the south and west of the city and the stabilisation of the riverbanks on both sides. These royal *basatin*, endowed with palaces and used both as *jardins de plaisance* and as orchards, plantations, and nurseries, were the sites of the first true westernising gestures in residential Cairene architecture (most noteworthy among them are the palaces of Shubra and Gazira; fig. 21). The first among them appear to have been the two no-longer-extant palaces, Qasr al-Rawda and al-Qasr al 'Ali (1835), that Ibrahim Pasha, Muhammad Ali's son and successor, built on land granted him by his father on Rawda Island and in Bustan al-Khashshab, on the eastern bank of the Nile. They followed on the heels of very timid attempts that appeared in Alexandria where Muhammad Ali Pasha built his first residences *à la grecque* and in the Citadel of Cairo where he built his more official Jawhara Palace and Harim Palace, completed between 1814 and 1827.



Fig. 22. Cast iron arcades remaining from the Gazira Palace in today's Marriot Hotel.

The royal *basatin* cordoned off the urban agglomeration from the west and south and spread to the areas formerly occupied by the seasonal ponds of Azbakiyya, al-Fil, al-Ratli, and Qasim-Bey, the newly formed island of Gazira, and the west bank of the Nile at Giza and Imbaba. No developments were initiated in the east where the Mamluk North Cemetery (al-Qarafa al-Kubra) and the slopes of the rocky Moqattam Hills hindered construction and where water was scarce and hard to procure. They each had a palace or a

pavilion, and sometimes more than one, built by a member of the royal family.

With very few exceptions, these *basatin* did not last long. The state bankruptcy after the extravagant reigns of Said (1854-1863), and especially Ismail (1863-1879) and mounting urban pressure from the phenomenally growing capital city at the turn of the twentieth century forced their apportionment for development. They ultimately formed the framework upon which much of modern Cairo was developed including the posh quarters of Tahrir, Munira, Manial, Zamalek and Aguza. Consequently, only truncated remnants of what must have been huge parks are left in the Azbakiyya Garden; in the Maydan al-Tahrir area where the two palaces of Dubara and Ismailiyya once stood; in Garden City, which once formed part of Ibrahim Pasha's plantation and High Palace (al-Qasr al 'Ali); in the Gazira Club, Marriot Hotel, and the Fish Garden, all pieces of a much larger park attached to the Gazira Palace that Ismail completed in 1868 in time to house the Empress Eugenie whom he invited to attend the inauguration of the Suez Canal; and in the Orman Gardens (today the Giza Zoo) and the nearby University of Cairo, both standing on the grounds of the Gazira Palace, also built by Ismail (fig. 22).

In recent decades the rapid and chaotic growth of the city has accelerated the destruction of even the very small green spots left from the earlier days around some of the old villas in the same quarters that once formed parts of larger parks. Many of the left-over palatial gardens and the verdant promenades along the river banks have been given away to exclusive luxury hotels and expensive clubs and restaurants after the economic opening-up (*infitah*) of the 1980s and 1990s. Even the small patches of agricultural land on the left bank of the Nile which were forgotten amid urban incur-

sions in the Haram (Pyramid) and al-Muhandisin areas have disappeared in the last few years under the pressures of an ever-swelling population with its unrelenting demands for more housing, more roads, and more shopping malls.

In conclusion, what are we to make of this brief history of green spaces in Cairo? Clearly, there is no particular model to be recovered as far as the layout of *basatin* or *mayadin* is concerned. The khedivial *basatin* were imported wholesale from Europe with varying degrees of success in adaptation to the local environment. (One particularly successful import were the Banyan trees brought from Bengal to line the roads circling the Gazira [present-day Zamalek] when it was made into the park for Ismail's palace). These *basatin* also depended on a system of patronage that is impossible to replicate today. But these traditional *basatin* and khedivial parks offer many architectural and horticultural elements that can be reintroduced, not out of nostalgia alone but also because they function well within the prevailing environmental and social constraints of Egypt. Thus, *maqā'id* and *man-azir* can form the basis of a typology of indigenous architectural elements of landscaping and viewing. Similarly, medieval irrigation tools and techniques and native plants could be incorporated in the design of parks both as claims to an 'authentic landscape' and as tried and proven good solutions for sensible use of water and soil, for shading and greening, and for decoration.

But the most important lesson to be learned from the historical record, in my opinion, is related more to a strategy for survival than to the actual design of new parks. *Basatin* and *mayadin*, and later on small villa gardens disappeared because they offered attractive sites for the development of much more profitable real estate. Speculators and contractors as well as state agencies responsible for housing saw in them obvious targets, already plotted and irrigated though neglected, disputed, and therefore easy and cheap to acquire. They were in a way the victims of their own success. Can we devise a design strategy – in addition to the much-needed legal and zoning devices – that would insure the survival of parks in the heart of the ever-growing metropolis? That is the real challenge facing the new generation of Cairenes.

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