

The History and Fate of al-Darb al-Ahmar

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*What to think of this confused labyrinth, as large, perhaps, as Paris or Rome,
of its palaces and its mosques that one can count by the thousand?
Without a doubt, all of this had once been splendid and marvellous,
but thirty generations have passed on; everywhere the stone crumbles and the wood rots.
It appears that one is travelling in a dream in a city of the past...*

Gérard de Nerval, *Journey to the Orient*, 1851

In AD 969, following the Fatimid conquest of Egypt, a new urban settlement was founded specifically to house the Fatimid court and those related to it; originally called al-Mansuriyya, its name was later changed to al-Qahira – Cairo. Although designed as a walled royal precinct, Cairo was not totally inaccessible to the public. Thriving markets catered to the population at large, most of which lived to the south-west, in Misr-Fustat, an urban settlement located close to the Nile and developed following the Arab conquest of Egypt in the seventh century around the Roman fortress of Babylon. As an extended palatial complex, Cairo, although physically separate, was socially and politically part of the earlier settlement, which even then remained the nucleus of urban agglomeration in economic, administrative, and religious terms.

Accounts of the elaborate rituals and festivals of the Fatimid court stress the importance of sites outside the walled city, even in early times. This, as well as the existence of other earlier settlements to the north, such as Matariyya, meant that there was a populated zone stretching from Misr-Fustat all the way north of the city walls, comprising distinct areas that were nevertheless interconnected.

The area now known as al-Darb al-Ahmar is located just outside the southern walls of the Fatimid palace-city and had originally been cemetery grounds for its residents. In the eleventh century, a period of drought and famine led to the impoverishment of Misr-Fustat, and the exodus of most of its population to the area around Cairo. By then, the city had already expanded, and a reconsolidation of the city walls between 1087 and 1092, during a period of civil strife, involved the enlargement of the original walled precinct to incorporate these newly developed urban areas.



Fig. 23. Al-Muayyad Bimaristan (or Hospital), c. 1420.

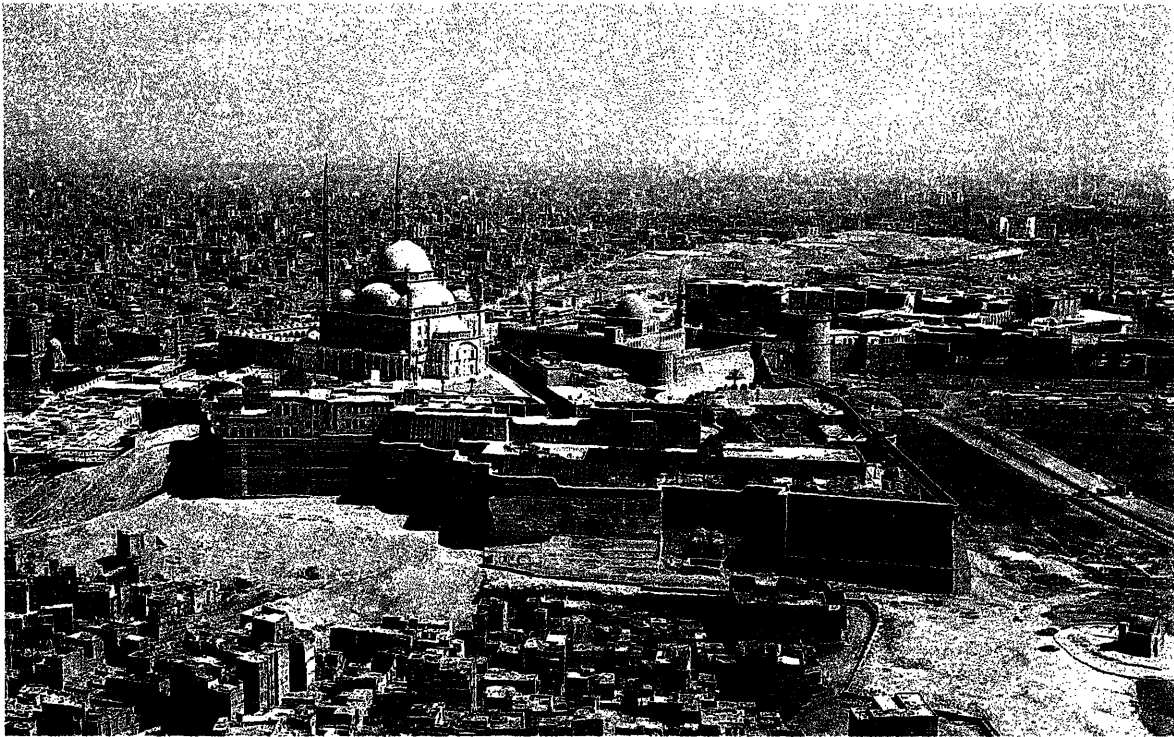


Fig. 24. View of the Citadel, Cairo.

As the area lying immediately outside Bab Zuwayla, Cairo's main southern gateway, al-Darb al-Ahmar was one of the first zones of urban expansion. Thus, in 1160, the Fatimid vizier al-Salih Tala'i, fearing Frankish desecration of the shrine of the prophet's grandson al-Hussein in Ascalon, built a mosque outside the Zuwayla Gate in order to house al-Hussein's relics, indicating that al-Darb al-Ahmar was no longer a truly peripheral zone.

The rise of the Ayyubids in 1171, under Salah al-Din, marked the beginning of a radical change in the urban development of Cairo: Salah al-Din constructed a citadel on a rocky spur slightly south of the walled city. Intended from the onset as the sultan's residence, it was only to become the real seat of power in 1206 under Salah al-Din's nephew, al-Kamil, thereby stripping the original Fatimid settlement of its royal status. It was the construction of the Citadel, more than anything, that shaped the urban development of al-Darb al-Ahmar, as we know it today. The transfer of the seat of power outside the city walls created a clear stretch of urban development to the south, connecting the new seat of power to the old, and giving rise to al-Darb al-Ahmar (as the area in between Fatimid Cairo and the Ayyubid citadel).

One of the most striking features of the Fatimid city had been its *qasaba*, the main north-south thoroughfare, which formed an uninterrupted route between the city gates. The *qasaba*, lined with palaces and other caliphal buildings, was the site of elaborate royal processions, cornerstones of a



Fig. 25. The site of Azhar Park before construction began.

dynasty that had developed complex courtly etiquette. During the Ayyubid period, the *qasaba* was extended southwards to reach the Citadel, thus adding a new, equally prestigious stretch to the road whose buildings were to define elite Cairene society up until the mid-nineteenth century.

The construction of the Citadel also brought about a second, equally important urban development: the extension of the city walls to create an enlarged walled city, known appropriately as al-Qahira al-Mahrusa (Cairo the Protected). The extension of the eastern city wall to the Citadel served to define the eastern edge of al-Darb al-Ahmar. It marked the boundary between the urban area of the new elite, for whom proximity to the seat of power was essential, and the peripheral activities which were equally important for the functioning of the city, but less desirable. Among these were markets for animal fodder and dumping grounds for the city's rubbish, and, a century later, cemeteries.

The location of the cemeteries followed a constant trend in the history of Cairo — established on the peripheries of the metropolis, as the city expanded, they were removed to make way for new urban development. In contrast, the dumping grounds remained a permanent feature of the eastern edge of the city — in a sort of vicious cycle, the mounds of rubbish that accumulated outside the city walls served as a barrier towards eastward urban expansion, which in turn encouraged more and more dumping. This practice continued for centuries, resulting in the creation of formidable



Fig. 26. Al-Muayyad Bimaristan (or Hospital), portal.

mounds of debris, closely resembling natural formations, which dwarfed the city walls and eventually buried them. The Aga Khan Trust for Culture has now converted these mounds into Azhar Park, while the eastern city wall has been exposed and is currently being restored.

The persistence of the Citadel as the seat of power ensured that al-Darb al-Ahmar remained a prestigious area, and a centre of economic and political life during the Mamluk period (1250-1517). In 1250, immediately following the fall of the Ayyubid dynasty, a power struggle at the citadel led to a group of seven hundred Mamluk princes, in opposition to the then-ruler Aybak and thus fearing for their lives, deciding to flee to Syria, from where they would later regroup and return to take over power. The night-time escape took place from one of the eastern city gates, Bab al-Qarratin (burned in the process and consequently renamed Bab al-Mahruq, “the burnt gate”).

As an area whose urban importance spanned many generations, most of al-Darb al-Ahmar’s early residential buildings were destroyed to make way for the buildings of later patrons seeking to build houses, palaces or mosques in an area whose location remained prime. However, a few residential structures remain from medieval times, among them the Alin Aq Palace, a building whose monumental scale is still evident despite its ruined condition, and parts of a house built during the reign of Sultan Qaytbay (1468-1496), incorporated into a later residential structure called Bayt al-Razzaz.

Institutional buildings fared better: maintained by an elaborate system of endowments, *waqf*, and

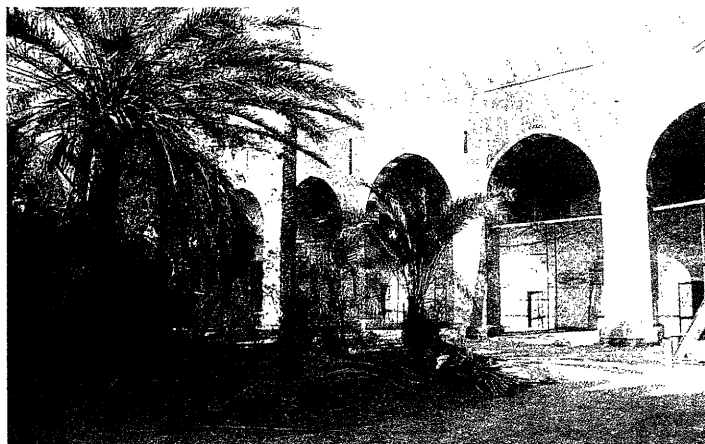


Fig. 27. Aqsunqur, or the Blue, Mosque, courtyard, c. 1350.

in the case of religious buildings, considered to be sacred spaces and therefore indestructible except by the force of time, most still stand today. The Bimaristan of al-Muayyad, a large hospital built c. 1420 in the vicinity of the Citadel, exemplifies the attention paid to the founding of civic institutions by members of the court.

Al-Darb al-Ahmar’s steady urbanisation can best be observed through the changes in the form and size of religious buildings

constructed in the area between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries. In response to the increasing scarcity of land in the centre of the city, mosques evolved from large, symmetrical structures with accommodating open courtyards, to much smaller buildings with ground plans cleverly adapted to fit onto awkward-shaped plots of land. By the end of the Mamluk period, mosque construction in the area was primarily a pious and prestigious act – given the sheer number of mosques that already existed, there was no real social need for new religious buildings.

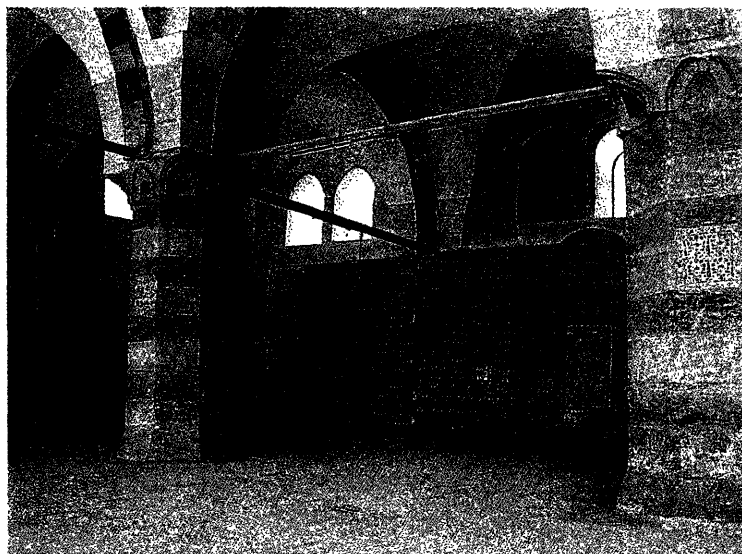


Fig. 28. Aqsunqur, or the Blue, Mosque, tilework.

The construction of important architectural complexes often included the building of multi-family residential units, usually for the poorer classes. This ensured that while al-Darb al-Ahmar remained a prestigious area, it nevertheless housed a very mixed community. It was also an area where quiet residential cul-de-sacs existed alongside vibrant commercial streets and markets. Some of the latter, especially those catering to the military establishment, such as the weaponry and horse markets, had been transferred from the centre of the Fatimid City to al-Darb al-Ahmar for the sake of proximity to the citadel.

The Ottoman conquest of Egypt in 1517 marked a new phase for al-Darb al-Ahmar. The rulers of Egypt were now Ottoman governors, posted to Egypt for a limited period of time, and thus with political aspirations in Istanbul rather than Cairo. As such, while the seat of power remained at the Citadel, the transformation of Cairo from the capital of an empire to an Ottoman province meant that the sponsorship of the large-scale complexes that had characterised al-Darb al-Ahmar decreased considerably. Architectural patrons found new, more resourceful ways of leaving their mark upon the city. The appropriation, and subsequent ‘Ottomanisation’ of the fourteenth-century Aqsunqur (or Blue) Mosque by an Ottoman official, Ibrahim Agha Mustahfazan in 1650, is a case in point. Instead of constructing a new mosque, the patron simply added blue Turkish tiles, a distinctly Ottoman feature, to a well-located Mamluk building on al-Darb al-Ahmar Street, thereby symbolically transforming it into an Ottoman building – his own.

While the founding of monumental religious buildings declined, the high value given to charitable work ensured that the patronage of smaller-scale projects continued. The Ottoman answer to

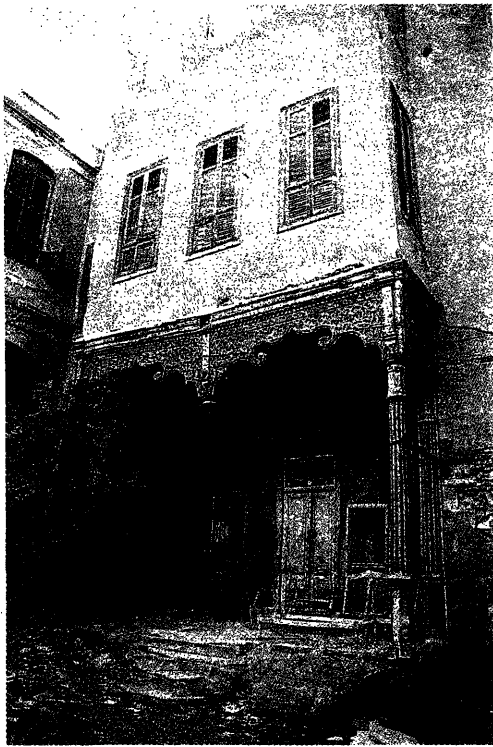


Fig. 29. A 19th-century mansion.

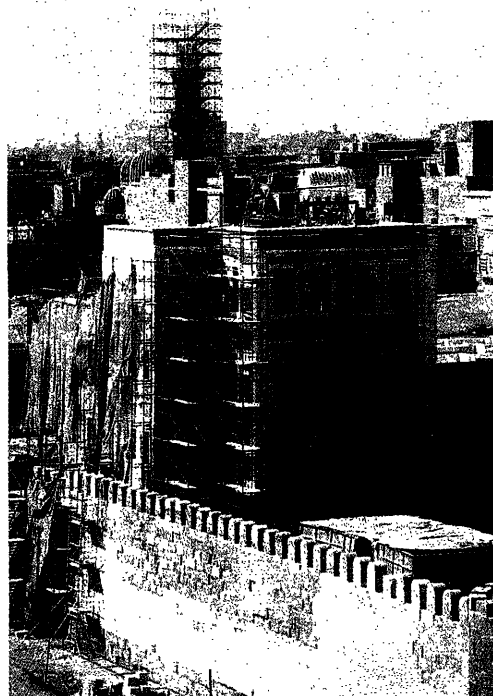


Fig. 30. Early 20th-century residential building, to become the future Darb al-Ahmar community centre.

the expansive Mamluk foundations were *sabil-kuttab*s (water fountains surmounted by Koranic schools), which were relatively inexpensive to build, required tiny plots of land, and served a social need. In parallel, the building of residential structures in al-Darb al-Ahmar proliferated to meet the demands of an expanding population. Thus, Ibrahim Agha Mustahfazan, the same patron who appropriated a Mamluk mosque for reasons of economy, had no qualms about constructing a series of residential and commercial buildings on al-Darb al-Ahmar Street — a decision probably grounded in an understanding of the considerable value of such property in light of its excellent location.

Despite new political allegiances, the architecture of Ottoman Cairo remained by and large true to a local tradition which had developed over centuries to meet the specific conditions of a dense urban fabric. By the eighteenth century, open spaces within the city walls were few and far between. Even the city gate, which in 1250 had permitted the flight of the dissenting Mamluk princes, had been blocked by residential construction.

The aftermath of a French invasion of Egypt in 1798 led to the rise of Muhammad Ali, an Albanian general in the Ottoman Army, as *wali* (governor) — giving him virtual autonomy though nominally a vassal of the Ottoman Court in Istanbul. This resurgence of local power spearheaded by a dedicated reformer, coupled perhaps with an openness towards new ideas following three years of French presence in Egypt, heralded a cultural revival for al-Darb al-Ahmar. Important members of Muhammad Ali's army were granted plots of land in the area, which led to the construction of palatial mansions and palaces. These were often a synthesis between local spatial tradition, the architecture of the Balkans and Turkey, which was familiar to Muhammad Ali and his entourage, and the decorative vocabulary popular in Europe at the time.

This cultural revival was short-lived, however; in the 1860s Muhammad Ali's grandson, Khedive Ismail, visited Paris and, amazed by the development of the city since his days as a student there, returned to Egypt with visions for a new, European-style capital. Ismail moved the seat of power from the Citadel to Abdin Palace, constructed in his newly created Ismailiyya quarter west of the historic city, thus effectively ending al-Darb al-Ahmar's seven-hundred-year-old role as a centre of political, cultural and economic activity.

The effects were not immediately apparent, yet a building boom in the 1880s must have marked the influx of bourgeois merchants eager to live in the area — a move due in part to al-Darb al-Ahmar's still-illustrious reputation, and facilitated by the gradual exodus of the city's political elite to the new Ismailiyya quarter. Al-Darb al-Ahmar still retained a sense of economic vitality, however, and even the most grandiose houses of the late nineteenth century had shops built along their main façades. Despite widespread eclecticism, architectural standards remained high; attention to space, proportion, and architectural detail was evident, even in the more modest buildings. In keeping with local historic urban trends, the grandest houses were generally located on main thoroughfares or adjacent to popular shrines, especially those associated with members of the prophet's family such as Fatma al-Nabawiyya. Poorer families tended to live in the narrow alleyways abutting the eastern city wall.

The first few decades of the twentieth century saw al-Darb al-Ahmar attempting to emulate the new quarters of Cairo. Sporadic urban development schemes involved the subdivision of large estates, into regular grid-like blocks, totally alien to the area's traditional urban fabric. Yet, fortunately, urban projects of this type remained rare. In the 1950s and 1960s the rise of large-scale industrialisation meant that areas such as al-Darb al-Ahmar, whose commercial activity was based on small-scale enterprises and workshops, were no longer seen as the basis of the city's economy. While many local industries did in fact continue to function, the new trend was for mass production in huge factories located in newly developed industrial areas.

New construction techniques, using reinforced concrete, began to replace traditional building materials, and 'modernist' urban design policies came into effect. While innovation had always been an important factor in al-Darb al-Ahmar's development, earlier modernisation attempts had still maintained strong links to the past. The new mindset, however, saw little value in tradition, and the impact of this was profound.

THE FATE OF AL-DARB AL-AHMAR

The last century has been a paradoxical century as far as al-Darb al-Ahmar's development is concerned. On the one hand, diligent efforts to conserve historic buildings by the Comité de Conservation des Monuments de l'Art Arabe (an Egyptian government body founded by khedivial de-



Fig. 31. Demolition for a street widening scheme.

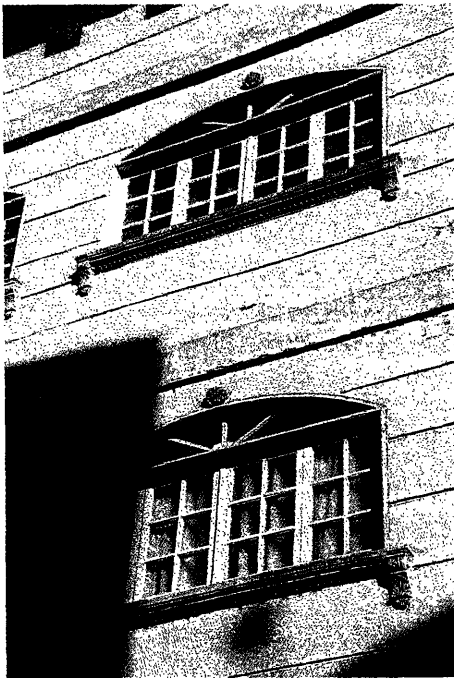


Fig. 32. 20th-century pseudo 'revivalism'.

cree in 1882), ensured the preservation of the area's historic buildings, many of which had fallen into a state of disrepair. Encroachments on derelict property (resulting from a demand for housing or work space) were common, and the idea of clearing these encroachments from prominent historic buildings, erroneously considered as isolated monuments, developed. Such a policy, which at the beginning of the twentieth century saved many valuable historic buildings from disappearance, was codified into an article in the Egyptian Antiquities Law, with devastating results. It gave rise to a misguided idea that all listed buildings should be free-standing, prompting widespread demolition of buildings abutting so-called 'monuments'; an idea especially inappropriate in a city whose entire architectural tradition developed in response to high urban density, and whose most ingenious buildings were designed as part of a closely-knit urban fabric.

The negative consequences of a conservation policy that failed to see the larger urban picture were exacerbated by planning policies that overlooked the specificities of historic areas — a detrimental combination. In general, over the last century, planning schemes were developed by government officials poorly acquainted with the character of historic areas like al-Darb al-Ahmar, and unaware of their value as unique urban environments. Plans to widen existing streets, usually developed by arbitrarily drawing lines across a map of the area, with little thought given towards the social and urban consequences of such decisions, were common. Such schemes, developed with the intention of improving accessibility, have contributed to the destruction of al-Darb al-Ahmar's urban fabric, and if allowed to continue will completely obliterate its urban character, turning a valuable historic environment into a text-book example of 1960s planning ideology.

Fortunately, in recent years, awareness towards the value of historic areas has increased. However, the discrepancy between the intent and the result of policies affecting the development of al-Darb al-Ahmar is startling. While building codes stipulate that new construction must be sympathetic to the architectural traditions of historic Cairo, 'architectural traditions' have been interpreted to



Fig. 33. Bab Zuwayla Street, by Robertson and Beato, c. 1860s.



Fig. 34. Bab Zuwayla Street, 1987.



Fig. 35. "Rue du Carré", by Zangaki, c. 1880.

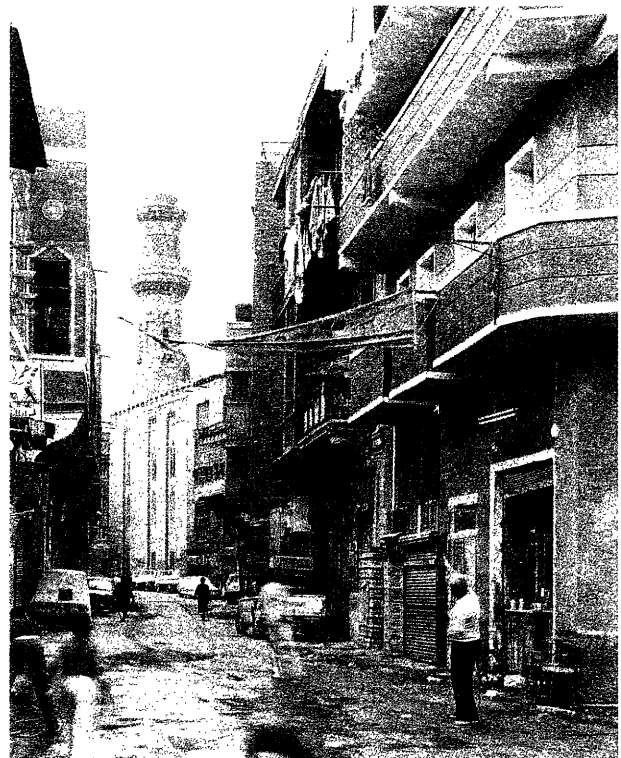


Fig. 36. View of al-Darb al-Ahmar Street showing Umm al-Sultan Shaaban Mosque, 1986.

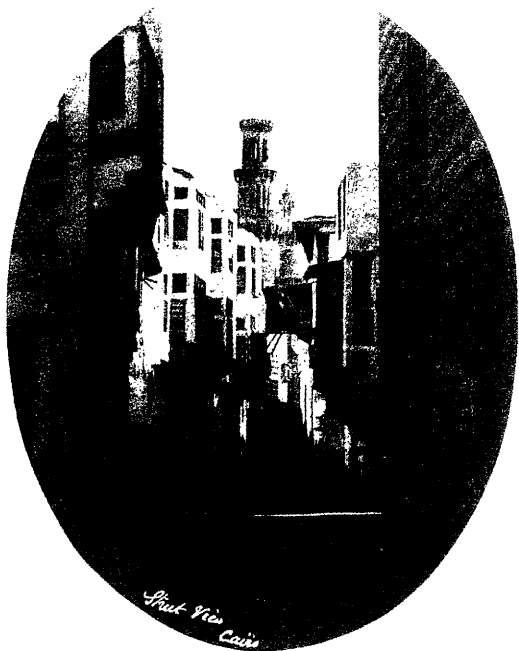


Fig. 37. Street view, Cairo, by C. G. Wheelhouse, 1849-1850.

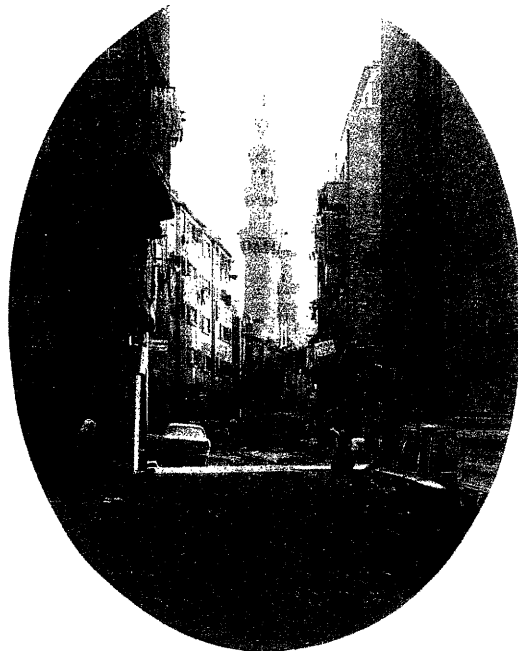


Fig. 38. Street view looking south down al-Darb al-Ahmar Street, showing Aqsunqur Mosque and Khayrbek, 1987.



Fig. 39. Street view in Cairo, by Francis Frith, 1856-1859.



Fig. 40. Southern end of al-Darb al-Ahmar Street, showing the mosque of Aytмыш al-Bagasi, 1986.

mean building façades incorporating arches and 'Islamic'-looking stuccowork. No real attempt has been made to truly understand what in fact local architectural traditions are, nor to develop a building code that is sensitive to the urban conditions of areas like al-Darb al-Ahmar.

Equally worrisome is the tendency to value historic areas only for their potential as a tourist venue. While sustainable tourist development can stimulate al-Darb al-Ahmar's economy, the type of tourist development generally envisioned for historic Cairo is to replace viable local industries with souvenir shops and bazaars. Such an idea is driven by the desire to turn what remains of the medieval city into an Orientalist painting come to life — an unrealistic, socially destructive, and economically unsound proposition.

Nevertheless, the attractiveness of such a radical idea is understandable given the seemingly hopeless state of affairs in areas like al-Darb al-Ahmar today. Gradual impoverishment, declining infrastructure accelerating building deterioration, and the inadequacy of essential services such as waste collection and drainage systems are among the area's chronic problems.

Yet, all of these conditions belie the fact that al-Darb al-Ahmar remains an extremely vibrant, commercially productive area of Cairo. It benefits from a socially cohesive population of long-term residents, many of whom are involved in the area's numerous industries and workshops, focusing predominantly on furniture production, shoe making and inlay-work. With appropriate guidance many such industries, especially carpentry, have proven capable of producing high quality products, much demanded today in an age when the shortcomings of cheap mass production have become apparent. Despite fifty years of decline, al-Darb al-Ahmar's built environment has numerous redeeming qualities: its closely-knit urban fabric has helped maintain a strong sense of community identity, and its turn-of-the-century buildings, with their courtyards, light wells and large windows have the potential of creating markedly more attractive, healthier conditions than new, cramped apartment buildings. Further, the predominance of two- and three-storey buildings ensures that although highly urban, al-Darb al-Ahmar is not overpopulated.

For all its potential, al-Darb al-Ahmar's current state may make regeneration appear overly optimistic. The revitalisation process is in fact a long and challenging one, requiring concerted efforts, institutional support, and a great deal of perseverance. To many outsiders the prospects seem bleak. Yet, Cairo in 1842, while being described by Gérard de Nerval as a "city of the past", was in fact at the dawn of a golden age. Tremendous technological advancement, cultural development, and intellectual enlightenment were to transform a comfortably Ottoman city which seemed to have complacently accepted that it was past its prime. There is no question that al-Darb al-Ahmar has seen better times. But the mechanism for sustainable regeneration and long-term revitalisation has been set in place, and the future looks promising.