A Decisive Moment for the Survival of Historic Cairo

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The Islamic heritage of Cairo was first introduced to the cultural map of Egypt by Edmé François Jomard, a member of the French scientific mission accompanying the Napoleonic Expedition to Egypt (1798 to 1801). In his work, the then 'modern' Cairo was given special attention, receiving a much more detailed map than any previously available with individual buildings historically and architecturally documented and hand crafts surveyed. This encyclopaedic survey of Cairo can be considered a precursory form of large-scale conservation, since it in fact paved the way towards extensive intervention on historic Cairo in 1882, when the Comité de Conservation des Monuments de l’Art Arabe was founded. The Comité developed a systematic set of actions for safeguarding the Islamic and Coptic heritage of Cairo: buildings with historic value were registered as monuments; monuments were rescued from urban invasions that would eventually have led to a risk of their expropriation and the parasite structures built in, on and around them were removed; damaged or missing elements of monuments were restored; details and decorations of historic buildings were documented, preserved, completed, and duplicated repeatedly; dialogue was established between the different bodies involved with the different aspects of monuments—such as ownership, craftsmanship, and financing; finally, the whole process was published in the Bulletins—yearly publications by the Comité. Without doubt, the programme developed and implemented by the Comité can rightfully be considered the greatest attempt at rescuing historic Cairo ever put into operation in modern times.

Today, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, we are witnessing another dynamic thrust aimed at salvaging Cairo’s architectural history. Governmental bodies such as the Governorate of Cairo, the Ministry of Tourism, the Ministry of Housing, the Ministry of al-Awqaf (Endowments), the Ministry of Communication and Trans-

Fig. 104. View of historic Cairo from the Zuwayla Gate looking north.
port, the Ministry of Electricity, and the Water Supply and Sewage Companies are cooperating and combining their efforts under the umbrella of the Ministry of Culture, in order to salvage the cultural heritage of historic Cairo. In 1998, the Ministry of Culture was allocated LE242 million by presidential decree to restore forty-seven monuments out of 450 for the whole of historic Cairo. In parallel, the Governor of Cairo has developed the Darb al-Ahmar Rehabilitation Project, which was initiated in cooperation with the Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC) and, according to unconfirmed press statements, will be executed in five phases at a cost of LE300 million. The Ministry of Housing led the restoration work for al-Azhar Mosque, which was carried out in less than two years. All this newly aroused public awareness and acknowledgment of the importance of historic Cairo should give some satisfaction to those who, for more than five decades, have worried about its survival and the lack of any conservative action, although contrasting feelings do exist vis-à-vis this massive governmental effort.

HISTORIC CAIRO – CONTENT OF A LIVING LANDSCAPE

According to a United Nations Development Programme (and Supreme Council of Antiquities) report published in 1997, historic Cairo occupies a stretch of 3.87 square kilometres of urban fabric accommodating 310,500 inhabitants. Its boundaries are defined by the al-Futuh Gate to the north, Ibn Tulun Mosque to the south, Port Said Street to the west and Salah Salem Street to the east. To this area one must add clusters of monuments outside these borders such as the Citadel, the area around Ibn Tulun Mosque, the Madrasa of al-Zahir Baybars, and so on.

Harmony and discord simultaneously characterise the streets of historic Cairo thanks to its main components, the poles that have paradoxically fed on each other and coexisted through time: the frozen moments of history represented by the majestic domes, minarets, sultanic inscriptions, monumental portals and the mobile world of the living urban fabric represented by the ever-changing non-registered buildings, the people and their daily activities around the monuments. When dealing with historic Cairo, therefore, we have to refer to these essential components.

IMPLEMENTING AN INTERVENTION STRATEGY

Before initiating this extensive intervention scheme, a separate body was formed under the direct authority of the Minister of Culture and working in close collaboration with the Supreme Coun-
cil of Antiquities (SCA). This new body, called al-Qahira al-Tarikhiyya (meaning Historic Cairo), established its headquarters in the old barracks of the Citadel. The group began by gathering the data necessary for the realisation of Phase I of the project. The scope of the scheme lies essentially within two domains:

- conservation of single monuments according to conventional practice;

- urban planning of the historic core of Cairo, as an attempt to deal with the context of single monuments.

To achieve these two goals, the planning committee was divided into two separate sections: the first deals with the conservation of single registered monuments and the second with the upgrading of the historic core and with the removal of undesired components.

JUSTIFICATION FOR THE INTERVENTIONS

Reasons for the emergence of the new restoration and urban renewal initiative are varied and complex. It is said by some that historic Cairo has surfaced on the agenda of Egypt for tourist and economic reasons with reports, for example that al-Muizz Street is going to be transformed into a tourist area of national importance, becoming commonplace in the media.¹ The impact of growing international awareness of conservation, national heritage and historic city concepts has surely also played a role. The sheer reality of the derelict state of historic Cairo rendered clear the necessity for rapid, large-scale action for precisely these reasons.

The current state of monuments in historic Cairo has been surveyed in the Ministry of Culture’s publication of the conference, co-organised by the Ministry itself and UNESCO, which addressed this initiative.² Some of the current difficulties can be summed up as follows: a lack of available funds for conservation work; the disaster-prone state of the infrastructure; a malfunctioning refuse disposal system; pollution due to factories in the area; a lack of coordination between the different bodies; a gener-
al failure of the planning processes in conservation activities; a lack of qualified and conservation-conscious supervision on the projects; the absence of properly trained people to work on the conservation projects; a failure to follow up with the maintenance of registered buildings; the absence of a body that has systematically studied urban planning in historic Cairo; the unclear borders of historic Cairo; the absence of legal channels to safeguard the old city as a ‘protected area’; the absence of efforts to register the non-registered buildings; authorities failing to adopt the idea of adaptive reuse of historical and non-registered buildings.

To overcome these and a wider range of technical, social, financial and administrative problems, this intervention was initiated through a separate body and with a new budget so that it could act independently and solve these issues. This new body was designed to pave the way for a general facelift of historic Cairo. The question remains as to whether it will be able to successfully tackle and overcome all the previous problems.

A PRELIMINARY ASSESSMENT OF CURRENT CONSERVATION PROCEDURES
Since Phase I has not yet been completed, any evaluation of it might be considered premature. Despite the problems listed above, some people are still tempted to ask whether this massive intervention was really necessary or not. The quantity of ailing monuments and the complexity of the problems facing these buildings do, though, show the necessity for such concerted action, especially as the slow pace of work over the past few decades added new problems to the existing ones. The advantage of a large-scale intervention also means an ability to ‘think big’, vital when tackling problems of infrastructure. Yet the personal touch when dealing with the individual elements, whether these are parts of the living city or monuments, should not be lost. All in all, I firmly believe that this is a golden opportunity for infrastructure conditions to be improved in historic Cairo, something that the project is already beginning to prove possible.

The press has often viewed these restoration efforts in a rather surprising way, varying between tones of excitement or aggression. To quote a few headlines: ‘A Fatimid Mosque Saved from Water’; ‘Wikalat Bazar’a Soon Renewed’; ‘Breaking the Silence’; ‘The Citadel Gets Rid of the Effects of Time’; ‘Making Room for History’; ‘Destruction of Wikalat al-Kharbotly to Build a Tower and a Commercial Centre’; ‘Historic Sites in Danger’; ‘The Legend of the Centuries’; ‘Endangered Façades’; ‘The Irresponsible Requisition of Islamic Monuments’; and likewise. An absence of updates from those responsible for project management meant that the media had free rein until the 2002 publication mentioned above (in note 5), which served as the first public review of the al-Qahira al-Tarikhiyya project. This publication explained the project in general and gave information on specific monuments either in preparation or under actual conservation, including the urban conservation project. In the future it would be desirable if project management documented and reported the progress of the work to the public in yearly reports, such as those produced...
previously by the Comité. Regular updates on the progress of the overall intervention would also encourage those who are participating in it.

Work has been initiated on many of the forty-seven monuments targeted by the project. To evaluate the practice of 'single monument conservation', the following questions must be answered. Are the basic problems being resolved? Are the technical shortcomings of previous conservation projects being studied, evaluated and overcome? In the case of the al-Darb al-Asfar project, the answer is yes, since the infrastructure in this alley has been completely renewed. If these standards of infrastructure were to be applied to the rest of the city, the 'large-scale project' would be able to achieve its goals.

Administrative problems seem to have been resolved at least in part. Direct dialogue between the different parties involved under the umbrella of the Ministry of Culture seem to be achieving miracles in some cases. Yet there is great controversy as far as conservation activities are concerned. The main criticism is the time factor. Conservation projects need to be allowed to establish a certain rhythm and time of their own if they are to be successfully carried out according to international standards, since conservation is painstaking and should not be attempted on compressed schedules. It is true that the main success of this massive intervention lies in the short time schemes it has proposed for the achievement of the whole plan, but modification of the timetable might relieve pressure and improve the quality of the work. It is also necessary to force contractors to include and respect proper conservation expertise. It appears that project management has been considering these issues and more time has been gained to rethink and improve methodology.

In this context, some urgent matters need to be addressed:

- the discipline of the conservation of historic buildings in Egypt makes no clear distinction between codes governing general construction contractors and specific constraints to be respected when dealing with conservation. In the meantime, international conventions have established unified codes and specifications for materials and methods to be used for historic buildings. These were based on an analysis of past errors, the inadequacy of certain types of materials in the context of the old fabric, their incongruity in the long run, and a number of other lessons learnt from
earlier interventions. Since there is currently a great deal of reawakened emphasis on conservation in Egypt, it is impossible to ignore these international conventions and an Egyptian code for contractors practicing conservation must be urgently drawn up;

- as the discipline of the conservation of historic buildings is developing, and as the awareness of the range of problems facing old buildings is widening, new types of experts are joining the ranks of conservation specialists. A handbook listing reliable worldwide contacts to be consulted on special issues should be created;

- today, the extent to which high technology can be applied to the conservation of historic buildings is unlimited. But, for the past two decades, the new tendency in the West has been to use traditional materials and building methods whenever possible, rather than making unnecessary use of technology. Conservation of Cairo's historical buildings (and Egypt's antiquities in general) is torn between importing modern technology, and the traditional ways of restoring historical buildings. Training centres should be developed to upgrade the quality of traditional craftsmanship;

- the very term 'monument', used automatically to identify all buildings more than one hundred years old, needs to be questioned. In 1881, members of the Comité initiated a 'list of monuments' in which all buildings that were historically, aesthetically, and/or culturally, worthy of protection, were registered. The chosen buildings were identified as 'monuments' under one category, varying from each other only in the date of their construction. 120 years have passed since this chronological categorisation was drawn up and still monuments are classified according to this basic subdivision relating to the correspondence of their construction date to the different political periods of Islamic reign in Egypt. It is high time to rethink the categories of buildings worthy of protection. As viewed from conservators' and town planners' perspectives, the actual conventional subdivision is now meaningless;

- professionals in Egypt are torn between restoration and conservation, between introducing or excluding high technology, and selecting construction codes to fulfil the specifications for the conservation of historical buildings. A unified code should govern these dilemmas;
- in spite of a thirst for unified codes governing the practice of conservation, it must be stressed that through the practice of 'single monument conservation' a unification of interventions is taking place. Unified codes are important for preventing the use of forbidden materials and methods in conservation, but this does not mean that unified solutions to the apparently similar problems facing all monuments should be accepted. It is true that within similar types of buildings located in the same past and present environmental conditions, similar problems are manifested. Yet each building has its own pulse of resistance and rhythm of ageing; accordingly, each has its specific problems. Therefore, it seems obvious that a tailored intervention must be found for each case. To achieve the goals of the project does not mean giving the same medicine to all the patients in the hospital.

Fig. 111. Porch under the Zuwayla Gate; now a busy passageway in the street.

A PRELIMINARY ASSESSMENT OF CURRENT PLANNING PROJECTS

As far as urban planning projects in the historic core are concerned, the intervention scheme is still in its initial stages, but indications from preliminary projects suffice to predict some of the future trends. For the first time in Cairo an organisation is in charge of the detailed study and proper management of the living urban fabric around single monuments, an element that previously did not exist. Until very recently, and with the exception of the AKTC projects in al-Darb al-Ahmar and the Zuwayla Gate, historic Cairo has been treated as an arena for historical buildings only with no attention being paid to the surrounding urban context that brings the city and its monuments to life. The non-registered buildings as well as all the commercial, educational, recreational and social activities, together with living conditions, were usually ignored. This approach is now changing and 'single monument conservation' projects, such as the 'al-Darb al-Asfar' and 'al-Fustat' projects, are already adopting wider urban perspectives and attending to both monuments and the living quarters around them. The existence of urban planners within the same decision-making body as the single-monument restorers is a major achievement, which, if managed properly, will enable proper area action plans to be established dealing with complete districts of the historic city—plans that will take into consideration both the body (the built environment) and the soul (the inhabitants) of historic Cairo.
There appears to be an attempt to focus on Fatimid Cairo (delineated by the first walled city of the Fatimids). This tendency can be seen in the attempts to connect the interrupted remains of walls marking the formerly non-existent borders of the Fatimids’ al-Qahira, listed in the following observations:

- the project on the northern wall of al-Qahira, including the conservation of the al-Nasr and al-Futuh gates and the extensive rebuilding of the northern wall, will re-create the northern borders of Cairo;

- the western side of Fatimid Cairo is already bordered by Port Said Street, built on the same location as the former Khalij Misri canal. Port Said Street has lately been the object of much attention: the tram that passed down the middle of the road was eliminated and the road was widened accordingly; the monuments on this street are under conservation;

- on the eastern side, two projects are underway. On the southern side of al-Azhar Street, the AKTC is working on the thirty-hectare Azhar Park, described earlier in this book. This park, which is bordered on its western side by the remains of the Ayyubid extension of the walls, will act as a border to Fatimid Cairo. Meanwhile, a second project has already started to uncover the remains of the Fatimid walls, which run northwards to meet the eastern extension of the northern Fatimid wall. When finished, these two will define the core of Fatimid Cairo with respect to the rest of the historic city;

- on the southern side of the city, the modern Ahmad Maher Street marks the southern border of Fatimid Cairo. Remains of the southern wall are still visible behind and between the houses on the eastern side of the Zuwayla Gate, but no project has yet been launched there.

It must also be noted that major efforts are being made to define and enhance the points of access to Fatimid Cairo. This is clear from the following actions:

- the tunnel project running underneath al-Azhar Street from Salah Salem Street to Opera Square will turn al-Muizz Street into a pedestrian zone. This will allow the original main spine of the Fatimids’ al-Qahira to be restored as a continuous internal (pedestrian) street;

- north of the new Azhar Park, near the entrance of the tunnel from Salah Salem Street, the AKTC, in cooperation with the Cairo Governorate, is building an ‘Urban Plaza’ with integrated underground car parking. This building, together with the neo-Islamic-style buildings of Dar al-Ifta on the other side of al-Azhar Street will mark the entrance from Salah Salem Street;

- at the entrance to the tunnel from the west, there is a project to rebuild the Old Cairo Opera House, which burned down in the 1970s. The present car parking structure will have to be demolished since it stands on the location of the former opera house;

- on the northern border of the isolated city, cemeteries of the al-Nasr Gate area were partially removed to make way for a motorway, a garden and, perhaps, hotels. This will be a pleasant approach to the old city from the north.
Fatimid Cairo will thus be well delineated through the execution of these projects. The precise identification of the borders of an urban area marks the first step towards the preparation of a proper, controlled urban development plan. This project has the potential to create an access-controlled environment in which developers and planners will enjoy working. It is to be hoped that once the borders are identified, the areas inside will be re-documented and, with the help of new laws, any projects will be tightly controlled, so that whatever is planned is likely to be realised. This has been a major problem for urban planning in historic Cairo. Because things change so rapidly between the time they are documented in order to prepare plans and the time of execution of these plans, the documentation on which they were based no longer corresponds to reality. Consequently plans lose their efficiency and in some instances become unworkable and remain purely theoretical.
Once again, the mere existence of an urban planning body studying and working solely and systematically on feasible urban plans for historic Cairo is a major asset for the Old City, abandoned to neglect and dilapidation for more than a hundred and fifty years.

CONCLUSIONS
In conclusion, three main issues seem to be critical at this stage of decision-making.

Firstly, will historic Cairo lose its soul? Or should it be replaced by a new soul that is more appropriate to its historically justified, high economic value? Within the boundaries of historic Cairo, monuments, non-registered buildings and daily activities must survive and coexist together, although not everyone shares this belief. Some hope for a demolition of all non-historic structures, similar to what happened around the Pharaonic temples at the turn of the century. Others hope for a change in activities, with shopkeepers being given the opportunity to transform their daily activities into tourist ones, or of being removed outside the historic core of Cairo. A third voice suggests the partial evacuation of the city’s historic core. Taking into consideration the segregated mix of activities in the historic core of the city, the creation of a ‘node system’ might ease the tension around these contradictory expectations for the historic core of the city. The concept is to subdivide the Fatimids’ al-Qahira into ‘tourist nodes’ and ‘community nodes’. Each type would develop its own living standards, needs, conservation codes, clientele, and so on. Use of the ‘node system’ would permit the whole city to be upgraded, with each area suited to the level of the needs of the clientele it serves. The fruit seller need not sell gold and Pharaonic statuettes, nor would the neighbourhood bakery be forced to sell baguettes. The ‘node system’ would allow the local community to abide side by side with the tourists: in segregation and yet in a continuous and pleasing connectedness.6

Secondly, is it enough to have registered monuments functioning only as ‘monuments’? The fear of reusing historic buildings by adapting them to appropriate functions needs to be re-examined. Adaptive reuse is the only way to assure the maintenance of certain conserved buildings. The appropriate reuse of monuments has already become a part of the al-Qahira al-Tarikhiyya practice whenever possible as it is only by such reuse that buildings resulting from the intervention in historic Cairo will be protected in the longer term. More laws should, however, establish rules for the re-adaptation process during the conservation projects, the choice of the reuse, and the standards for maintenance after the project and during reuse.

Thirdly, was this massive intervention unavoidable? Yes, massive intervention was inevitable. The situation in historic Cairo was truly lamentable and it was inexcusable to justify the former lack of response by merely counting the huge number of monuments in a bad state, the lack of qualified personnel able to work on them, the infrastructure, and so on. It would also have been inappropri-
ate to ask for the sufficient number of international professionals to deal with the magnitude of monuments in need of rescue. Under these circumstances, local, massive action was obligatory and I believe that this will also represent the chance to build up a new generation of conservators and architects alert to the process of conservation. Indeed, it appears that this is already happening.

Finally, all those who are involved in any way in historic Cairo need to be participants in some aspect of this work. Reasoned discussion is necessary in order to make the best of this intervention, and it is to be hoped that a new way of looking at the old city will emerge from this ongoing dialogue.

1The section describing Cairo is in the eighteenth section of “L'Etat Moderne” (pp. 113-535) in the second edition of Description de l'Egypte known as the Panckouke edition, Paris 1821 and 1829 (26 volumes).
3The Ministry of Culture heads this salvage team since the Supreme Council of Antiquities, a body within the Ministry of Culture, was, and still is, the main organisation responsible for all Egyptian antiquities.
4Al-Muizz Street is in fact one of the main Egyptian attractions in the Pan-Mediterranean 'Museum without Borders' project along with sites in twenty-seven other countries.
5Reasons for the intervention are mentioned in Historic Cairo, Ministry of Culture and the Supreme Council of Antiquities, February 2002, pp. 14-18. In the same publication, photographic documentation clarifies the depressing situation of the city's monuments, pp. 42-194.
6Nairy Hampikian and May al-Ibrashy, "Filling in Gaps Between a 'Monument' and Another 'Monument' in Historic Cairo"—Case study: Proposal for the Rehabilitation of the Area around the Southern Gate and Walls of Historic Cairo, Proceedings of the 5th International Symposium of the Organisation of World Heritage Cities (20-23 October 1999, Compostello, Spain).