Debates about historic preservation are frequent. What exactly can be done to improve a city whose sedimentary layers are so complex as to defy any obvious clarification? In an area where day-to-day life and monuments are intertwined, should the two be somehow separated, allowing the historically significant to stand apart from the mundane, or is such a fabric too delicate to re-weave? This conundrum exists in the fullest sense in the Darb al-Ahmar area of Cairo, selected by the Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC) as the site of one of its most ambitious rehabilitation programmes. The obviously integrated approach to al-Darb al-Ahmar’s difficulties already presented in this book may seem to be derived from an almost inevitable logic, and yet, elsewhere in Cairo, storms rage over how the historic city can coexist with the demands of tourism and the rights of residents. The ambitious Historic Cairo Restoration Programme launched by the government in 1998 is meant to restore 157 monuments in an eight-year period. According to an internal report prepared for UNESCO by a monitoring mission sent to Cairo in August 2001 and published by Al-Ahram Weekly in February 2002, "this rapid undertaking also creates the imminent risk of making mistakes in a very delicate balance between the current needs of a fast-growing urban community and respect for authenticity and unique heritage values". When the nine-hundred-year-old Bab Zuwayla, one of the main Fatimid gateways to Cairo, was restored under the supervision of Nairy Hampikian recently (the project was carried out by the American Research Centre in Egypt (ARCE) with $2.8 million in funding provided by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID)), it was announced that the government is "planning to transform the whole area into an open-air museum, as part of the larger Historic Cairo rehabilitation project. One aspect of this project would involve the removal of slums and workshops, which it has been assured, would take place in cooperation with the area inhabitants and traders. ‘Compensation will be provided for every family and trader because we do care about people, and not just about monuments,’ a representative said." The intervention of the AKTC in al-Darb al-Ahmar obviously does not espouse the view of the historic area as an “open-air museum”. Instead, a substantial effort has been made to reintegrate monuments as complex as the long-buried Ayyubid wall into the life of the community. This is being done not only by opening connections into the new Azhar Park, but also by renewing housing and monuments that abut the wall or even sit partially on top of it at one point. And rather than seeking to move residents and local workshops to some undefined new location, this project takes on the training of local craftsmen in the traditional arts of carpentry and stonework that they no longer fully master.
Cairo has seen other rehabilitation projects that seek to deal with some of the underlying problems of the city. The Zabbaleen Environmental and Development Programme initiated in 1981 targeted the group that collects and transports a large part of the six thousand tonnes or more in solid waste generated by the city every day. Coptic Upper Egyptian agricultural workers who migrated to Cairo in about 1930 and settled in tin houses in Imbaba, the Zabbaleen, moved to Moqattam in 1970 and re-erected their squatter houses, gradually transforming them after that into stone structures. Without running water or much electricity, these people lived in appalling conditions, with their basic, essential skills unrecognised by most authorities. First conceptualised by the Governor of Cairo and the World Bank in 1976, the project was launched when Environmental Quality International (EQI) received a grant from the Ford Foundation to assist in upgrading the living conditions of the Zabbaleen. Another major participant in the Zabbaleen Environmental and Development Programme was the Zabbaleen Gameya, first established by the late Bishop Samuel, Bishop of Social and Ecumenical Services of the Coptic Orthodox Church, as an association that represented the interests of the settlement. The government of Egypt, in cooperation with the International Development Association of the World Bank, financed a concomitant project for the construction of basic infrastructure and facilities to upgrade the Moqattam settlement. A route extension programme devised by the NGO Oxfam added eight thousand homes to the routes of the Zabbaleen system. Despite the recent decision by the government to call on foreign refuse collection services to relieve the solid waste problems faced acutely in areas like al-Darb al-Ahmar, this attempt to improve the life of some of Cairo’s poorest residents shows that the AKTC is not alone in seeking to carry out the delicate task of improving conditions while allowing people to live with their own heritage and neighbourhood. One interesting facet of this project is that it has served as the model for a similar initiative carried out in the Payatas squatter area located to the north of Manila in the Philippines.
Islamic, or medieval, Cairo is an area of narrow streets, covered markets and crumbling old buildings. Of all Cairo, this large neighbourhood most evokes its past, and, as photos taken in the nineteenth century show, it has in many ways changed little in the modern era. It has inspired many writings, from the *Arabian Nights* to the more recent works of Nobel laureate Naguib Mahfouz. It is in this area that the tradition of the city, from the Fatimids to the present, is concentrated. Although the northern part of the medieval city, where the Khan al-Khalili is located, has seen the arrival of many more tourists than the southern zone, historic Cairo has surely been greatly undervalued as opposed to Pharaonic Egypt. Instead of clearing the workshops and residents to make way for an “open-air museum”, the AKTC and others have made a wager that their efforts can improve life and preserve an environment that is truly steeped in history. Although it was until recent years a centre for the drug trade, al-Darb al-Ahmar is home to a deeply rooted community. About eighty thousand people, many of them related by marriage, live and work in this area where real unemployment rates may not be as high as most estimates imply. Studies carried out by Dina Shehayeb at the behest of the Aga Khan Cultural Services-Egypt show that, contrary to many assumptions, the population of al-Darb al-Ahmar consists mostly of persons born in the area (seventy-two percent) with only seven percent having been born outside Cairo. Their illiteracy rate (nineteen percent) is lower than the Egyptian urban average (twenty-six percent), and the male unemployment rate is about eighteen percent. Household income, on average $1,052 per year (based on the exchange rate of LE4.65 to the US dollar in June 2002) appears to be considerably lower than known averages for the city of Cairo: $2,570 in 1993, when the exchange rate was then LE3.50 to the US dollar. With the arrival of Azhar Park it is certain that the circumstances of the Darb al-Ahmar residents will change. The obvious fact that they live in the very heart of Cairo, and not at its abandoned edge, has been underlined not only by the historic preservation work done on the Ayyubid wall and within the community, but also by the creation of the highly symbolic park at their doorstep. Rather than being recent immigrants as was long assumed, these people have their place in Cairo’s future.

It might seem curious to think of the Zabbaleen when viewing the impressive thirty-one-hectare expanse of Azhar Park, and yet, as the texts of Cameron Rashti and Francesco Siravo in this book make clear, the site of the park was the rubbish heap of Cairo since late Mamluk times (the Burji
Mamluks ruled Egypt until their defeat by the Ottoman Turks in 1517 under Selim I: five hundred years of rubble, forty-five metres high or more, the very stuff of history, the layered sediment of Cairo’s life and past. From the rolling green hills of the site today, one monument stands out against the skyline, framed in the windows of the restaurants, aligned with the main axis of the park: Cairo’s Citadel. Between 1176 and 1183, Salah al-Din (Saladin, AD 1176-1193), the founder of the Sunni Ayyubid dynasty, fortified the area to protect it against attacks by the Crusaders, and, since then, it has never been without a military garrison. Originally it served as both a fortress and a royal palace complex. Aside from the Moqattam Hills behind it, this location provides a strategic advantage both for dominating Cairo and for defending it against outside attackers. Moqattam is of course the home of the Zabbaleen today.

Azhar Park offers a view of the city almost as dominant as that of the Citadel itself and from its high points one has to look almost directly down to see partially unearthed remnants of the Ayyubid city wall, restored by the AKTC. This wall was also in part the work of Salah al-Din and it marked the eastern limit of the city. From these hills too, the visitor can clearly see the mosque and madrasa built for Sultan Hasan bin Mohammad bin Qalawun in AD 1356 as a complex incorporating a religious school for the four main sects of Orthodox (Sunni) Islamic thought and a hospital. Closer by still, north of the Citadel and close to the Zuwayla Gate, stands the Aqsunqur, or Blue, Mosque, built by one of al-Nasir Muhammad’s amirs, Shams al-Din Aqsunqur, in 1346. Near the limits of the park a minaret recently restored by the AKTC marks the site of an unusual complex, built first as a mausoleum by the Mamluk prince Khayrbek in 1502. It was this prince who in 1517 betrayed the Mamluk army to the Ottomans, allowing them to take control of the country. Made governor of Egypt as a reward for his treachery, he built a small
mosque next to the mausoleum in 1520. Left standing empty for decades before the recent restoration work began, Khayrbek Mosque is considered an important testimony to the Mamluk-Ottoman transition, and is remarkable because of its unusual architectural configuration. A more recent monument visible from the park on the same axis as the Sultan Hasan Mosque is the al-Rifa'i Mosque designed by Mustapha Fahmi at the order of Khushyar, mother of Khedive Ismail, and completed in 1912 by Max Herz Pasha. Though he was a justifiably controversial ruler it was Khedive Ismail who inaugurated the Suez Canal in 1869, erected the Royal Opera House where Verdi’s Aida was first performed in December 1871, and created the first all-Egyptian Cabinet in 1878. Tempted to create a ‘Paris along the Nile’, he also laid the foundations for modern downtown Cairo in the area originally named Ismailiya. In the remarkable skyline visible from Azhar Park, al-Rifa‘i Mosque, crypt of Egypt’s last dynasty, might be considered a symbol of the transition of the country, however painful, towards the modern world.

As though this accumulation of great monuments would not have sufficed, it should be noted that the park is named after the great al-Azhar Mosque, located slightly north of the Darb al-Ahmar area. Al-Azhar was created by none other than Jawhar the Sicilian, Fatimid founder of Cairo just after his conquest in 969. Al-Azhar, meaning “the most flourished and shining” in Arabic, was dedicated to Sayeda Fatima al-Zahra’, daughter of the prophet Muhammad, from whom His Highness the Aga Khan descends. It is only natural then, that this great new park in the heart of Cairo, close to its Fatimid roots and created by the present Aga Khan, should be called Azhar Park.

Despite its location so close to the wellsprings of Cairene history, it was a daring gesture to decide to build on top of more than five centuries of rubble. As Cameron Rashti explains elsewhere in this volume, the very nature of this sedimentary accumulation was a challenge to any construction or to the growth of plants. And yet, almost more than any monument, the debris of the great city is the trace of its life, not a burial ground but the natural accretion of human activity. As circum-

Fig. 126. An unsigned general view of the Citadel, c. 1880.
The site of Azhar Park is visible to the upper right of the Citadel.
stances would have it, the south-eastern edge of Azhar Park coincides with the Bab al-Wazir cemetery. Though this area is not visibly inhabited at present, it is a part of what Westerners have called "the City of the Dead". Built on the refuse of centuries, neighbour to the final resting place of countless Cairenes, almost literally encircled by traces of each major phase of the history of the great metropolis, Azhar Park is an affirmation of life and respect for the past. It is an invitation to view the future with a combination of optimism and respect for those who have gone before.

Turning the dusty, uninhabited sediment of Cairo into a living park has been a task of vast proportions involving many persons. Project leaders such as Stefano Bianca and Cameron Rashti of the Historic Cities Support Programme (see full list of acknowledgements at the end of the book) have led the way, but the architects and landscape designers are the ones who have truly left their mark on Azhar Park. Though others went before them, Maher Stino and Laila Elmasry Stino of Sites International have now assumed the task of the landscape design. The essentially axial layout, pointing views towards the Citadel in particular, was conceived before the arrival of Sites, but much of the peripheral architecture (kiosks, administrative offices, and so on) was designed by Maher Stino and his group who are based in Cairo. "We have sixteen million people," he says, "and we have almost no open space — nothing. We want to help the public understand what a park is and how to appreciate plants and nature. We also want something unique to Cairo. We don't want a copy of London's Regent Park." Limestone-block retaining walls that call on the expertise of local masons are a recurring element throughout the design, and great attention has been paid to the particularities of the site, where water supply and run-off are sensitive issues. On the eastern side where the topography is given to gentle slopes and there are no neighbouring residential areas, a design with large grass areas and flowers gives an oasis-like feeling of freshness and greenery. But the steeper western façade, near al-Darb al-Ahmar and the Ayyubid wall posed the problem of potential water accumulation and was thus planted with more desert varieties, including trees whose seeds were brought from Arizona by project horticulturalist El Saady Mohamed Badawy.
merous fountains, especially near the two restaurants, undoubtedly recall the traditions of the Islamic garden, but here too Maher Stino avoids direct citations, preferring to allow modernity to be the guiding rule. The very scale of the landscape and horticulture effort speaks of the courage and will necessary to turn these hills into a real contemporary garden.

The two restaurants described in Robert Ivy’s text in this book are the main architectural features of Azhar Park aside from its strong landscape design. It is interesting to note that the two facilities, respectively designed by the Egyptian architects Rami El Dahan with Soheir Farid and the Frenchman Serge Santelli, are quite different in their concept and aesthetic assumptions. Dahan, a disciple of Hasan Fathy, worked, amongst other projects cited by Robert Ivy, with the American proponent of post-modernism, Michael Graves, on El Gouna’s Sheraton Miramar Hotel, a curious fantasy that Graves portrayed as “not Egyptian and not purely me”. In describing the Hilltop Restaurant that Dahan designed in Azhar Park, the architect speaks of the architecture of Fatimid mosques as a source of inspiration, but stresses that even with its load-bearing stonework the heart of the structure is a functional, modern core. This warm architecture that he calls “monumental” will surely appeal to large numbers of park visitors who may look here for signs that their own traditions have been respected. Though ‘post-modernism’ or historicism are out of fashion in America, Europe or Japan, it was necessary in Azhar Park to make it clear that contemporary Egyptian ideas and workmanship have their place in the heart of Cairo.

The architecture of Rami El Dahan is one solution to the question of what to build today in Cairo in a modern environment that is surrounded by history. Another is offered by Serge Santelli in his Lakeside Café. Though not located as high above the city as the Hilltop Restaurant, the lakeside facility benefits from an even more spectacular view towards the Citadel, the Sultan Hasan Mosque and the other great monuments. Seemingly afloat on an artificial lake that is used as a reservoir for park irrigation, Santelli’s structure is essentially modern in appearance with some reference to the principles of Arab design. It is almost as though the view from this vantage point offers enough history for the architect to be able to express himself in the vocabulary of today. A vista open to so much of the past of Cairo indelibly marks this as a point of transition between the past and the fu-
ture. Not originally part of the park’s design, Santelli’s Lakeside Cafe aims to be its real gathering point. Though monumentality is not really an issue for Santelli, this location in itself is a concentration of past and present so powerful as to make the cafe a kind of monument in spite of itself—a monument of hope.

Yes, modern design, respectful of local tradition, can open new directions both for architecture and for thinking about the ancient city. In the face of projects like New Cairo, a recent development outside the capital that is nine times the size of Manhattan, it is essential to affirm that another vision of modernity can take hold here. Described by one critic as a “Middle-Eastern version of outer Houston, with mega-supermarkets, concrete apartment buildings and even a golf course blooming from the desert”, New Cairo need not be the fate of the great city, whose historic core risks being converted into an ‘outdoor museum’, or razed to make way for soulless high-rise buildings. By daring to undertake the ‘impossible’, creating a modern park where before there was only dust and rubbish, and delving deep into the real problems of al-Darb al-Ahmar, affirming its life and character, the AKTC has done nothing less than to open a path between past and future that does not rob the people of their heritage in favour of some kind of sterile consumerism, or worse, an enforced exile in the desert of a New Cairo.

As the authors of this book demonstrate, the task is not an easy one, nor is each initiative assured of success, but the methodology employed here can surely be applied elsewhere. Moreover, the exemplary nature of the project is undoubtedly the issue at the heart of this work. Historic preservation and indeed construction as ambitious as that undertaken in Azhar Park require an investment in time, funds and energy that is considerable, but is there not today an urgency to use these sedimentary layers of past eras as a true foundation for understanding and future growth? As His Highness the Aga Khan asked at the recent inauguration of the Humayun’s Tomb Gardens in India: “What, then, of the deeper values that we risk abandoning under the dust of our own indifference, or that might be crushed to rubble by our own destructive human forces? In the troubled times in which we live, it is important to remember, and honour, a vision of a pluralistic society. Tolerance, openness and understanding towards other peoples’ cultures, social structures,
values and faiths are now essential to the very survival of an interdependent world. Pluralism is no longer simply an asset or a prerequisite for progress and development; it is vital to our existence. Never perhaps more so than at the present time must we renew with vigour our creative engagement in reviving shared heritage...”

In his text for this book, Seif El Rashi-di quotes Gérard de Nerval (Voyage en Orient, 1842) who called Cairo “une cité du passé, habitée seulement par des fantômes, qui la peuplent sans l’animer” (a city of the past inhabited only by ghosts who fill it without giving it life). Like other great cities of the world, Cairo has enormous problems, but its sixteen million inhabitants make it very much a city of the present. Built on the ruins of eras past, surrounded by the ghosts of Cairo’s origins and history, Azhar Park and the Darb al-Ahmar rehabilitation project are investments in the future of the city. They are affirmations of the value and interest of a population and a place. Whatever their difficulties, al-Darb al-Ahmar and the Azhar Park site are so much a part of the heart of historic Cairo that there is no other valid solution but to breathe life into them as this project is doing. Other megalopolises may have been more ‘efficient’ at wiping out traces of the past, but most never had a past as rich as that of Cairo. The rehabilitation and construction undertaken by the AKTC in the Egyptian capital do not seek to ‘clean up’ the city but to open the way to what will come, while celebrating the past. For those who will follow and who understand, like the opening in the Ayyubid wall linking al-Darb al-Ahmar to Azhar Park, this is a gateway to the city of the future.

Fig. 130. A photograph taken in November 2003 from Azhar Park looking towards al-Darb al-Ahmar and the modern skyline of Cairo. Here the past, present and future of the city meet.

1Al-Ahram Weekly, 18-24 September 2003, Issue no. 656.