Reconciling conservation and development is a prerequisite for achieving improvements in the quality of life in environmentally and culturally sensitive places. It calls for the introduction of appropriate new functions such as the reuse of historic structures, improvement of services, urban regeneration of public open spaces, community supported rehabilitation of historic housing districts and the creation of parks.

Successful parks inspire residents, provide joy to viewers, and foster civil society in the important realm of leisure and connection to nature and one’s environment. They become the settings for families to come together, novels, films and festivals, and are often the containers for memories of a society.

The involvement of the Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC) in Egypt began with the Aga Khan’s decision to donate a park to the citizens of Cairo, in 1984. Soon thereafter, the thirty-hectare site on al-Darassa was selected, because of its enormous potential as a ‘lung’ at the very centre of the historic Old City.

The site is surrounded by the most significant historic districts of Islamic Cairo. To the west are the Fatimid city and its extension, Darb al-Ahmar, with their wealth of mosques, madrasas and mausolea, signalled by a long line of minarets. To the south are the Sultan Hasasan Mosque and its surroundings, as well as the Ayyubid Citadel. And to the east is the Mamluk “City of the Dead”. The hilly topography of the site, formed by debris accumulated over centuries, now provides elevated viewpoints dominating the city and offers a spectacular 360° panorama over the townscape of Historic Cairo.

Following a major programme of debris removal and master grading involving the excavation and off-site disposal of more than one million cubic metres of fill, and the creation of specialized plant nurseries to identify the best plants and trees for the soil, terrain and climate, the experience of the site has been radically changed. The design makes maximum and skilful use of the site’s location, elevated topography and unique vistas overlooking Historic Cairo. Transformed from hills of rubble, Azhar Park is a natural, organic landscaped area with an array of amenities next to a dense, urban community and medieval monuments.

The Park is marked by walkways, pools, hills, informal picnic spaces, formal gardens and amenities. Its vegetation varies from dry, succulent plants on the...
western slopes to lush, grassy meadows with shade trees, to formal gardens and, finally, to bustan-like orchard spaces. The variety of species, particularly native Egyptian plants, establishes a new benchmark for park spaces in the region. At Azhar Park, historical models of Islamic gardens are evoked in the form of symmetrical layout, inner and outer zones, the defining medium of pools and fountains, and important axes.

The Park is held together by a formal axis or spine that itself is tied together along its entire length by a water channel providing an additional and traditional theme from Islamic gardens. Water fountains and pools are dispersed and lead, ultimately, to the freer form of the lake in the south meadow. Gardens and pavilions in the classical Islamic tradition, surrounded by geometrically planted orchards, enhance the arrival point on the edge of the lake. The central pathway, accompanying alleyways and series of formal gardens are anchored at each end by the Citadel View Restaurant and Lakeside Café, which act as internal landmarks. A network of informal pathways surrounds the more formal areas and leads through all levels and corners of the site.

Left, an aerial view of 2000 shows the site after debris removal and master grading.

Right, by 2006 the Park has become a much-needed “green lung” for overcrowded Cairo.
The design of the Citadel View Restaurant (above) is inspired by Fatimid archways, whereas the design of the Lakeside Café is adapted in its interpretation of Islamic architecture.

Challenges

PROJECT RISKS

A project of this complexity requires coordination with government partners. Azhar Park presented a new model of cultural development both for AKTC and for the Government of Egypt and necessitated the need for legal agreements and approvals with regard to public partners and the QOCS/GSRS for the design and implementation of a park on this site: a legal and technical agreement with the Supreme Council of Antiquities for the restoration of the Historic Wall, and coordination with the Government of Cairo to determine the site's eastern boundaries. Additionally, there was a large geotechnical risk with respect to the unstable and poorly consolidated soils and extreme slopes which required grading and special substructure drainage systems.

SITE CONDITIONS

The site soils were highly unstable due to the lack of compaction of the man-made fills. The Park design and landscaping had to accommodate and address steep slopes, highly saline soil and ongoing encroachment of landfills. The Park design and landscaping had to accommodate and address steep slopes, highly saline soil and ongoing encroachment of landfills. Due to the poor geotechnical conditions, there was a required subsurface drainage and collection systems.

ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERNS

The greening of the site presented a significant horticultural challenge due to soil conditions and the need to irrigate such a large area, where some of the areas are steeply sloping. The project necessitated the establishment of an on-site nursery in which, over several years, plants, trees and ground cover appropriate to the site conditions and climate were propagated.

INFRASTRUCTURE

The site required more than 1000 cubic metres of water daily for irrigation purposes; a 7500-square-metre Historic Wall was provided to serve as a safety reservoir as well as a Park service. The permanence of high levels of irrigation of parks in Cairo is a necessity for a comprehensive lighting system. Irrigated green spaces required subsurface drainage and collection systems.

BUILDING CONDITIONS

Due to the poor geotechnical conditions, there was a need for specially prepared sub-bases for硬scapesurfaces, terraces for impervious zones and piling support for all substantial buildings.

Significant Issues and Impact

DATA COLLECTION/SURVEYS

Site surveys originating from aerial and terrestrial survey were digitalized; numerous geotechnical surveys and soil tests were carried out with Cairo University and foreign partners; research on existing parks in Cairo was undertaken with the assistance of Shawki Association (Egypt).

MASTER PLANNING PROCESS

A project of this nature required careful public review (paradise and vehicular); validation and circulation studies; park facility programme development; infrastructure load projections; feasibility planning, and construction logistical analysis.

PLANNING ISSUES

Gates and special areas were subject to detailed planning, including pedestrian access and circulation, presentation circuit, rehabilitation of houses encroaching on the Historic Wall, promenades on the ramps and at the base of the Wall and rehabilitation of interior galleries and passages.

HISTORIC BUILDINGS/MONUMENTS CONSERVED

As a corollary to this project, the excavation, documentation, conservation and realization of the adjacent, 1500-metre Historic Wall was carried out by an AKTC/ARC/C/4 team in coordination with the Supreme Council of Antiquities.

NEW BUILDING FACILITIES

Azhar Park was designed by Sites International (Egypt). The entity gate and Lakeside View Restaurant was designed by Rami el-Dahan and Soheir Farid Architects (Egypt). The Lakeside Café was designed by Serge Santelli (France).

COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT/PROGRAMME

The Park project was closely coordinated by AKTC/ARC C/E with the two related HCP projects under the Area Development umbrella: the conservation of the Historic Wall and Cai magnetic economic projects. The entire Area Development Project was the subject of careful coordinated planning and the sharing of technical knowledge and resources.

VOCATIONAL TRAINING/CAPACITY BUILDING

In the construction phase of the Park, training and employment of surveyors and site labour was sourced from the adjacent community and was competitive. A certain amount of the wood furniture was made in the Dar el-Ahmar carpentry workshop. During operations, the Park has employed a large number of nearby community residents in its operations division.

RELEVANT CODES/STANDARDS ADOPTED

Master grading and surveying, done by local contractors, was internally supervised and coordinated by a project management team. Site work, landscaping and construction have followed Egyptian building codes. Conservation of the Historic Wall was completed in accordance with international charters.

LESSONS LEARNED

The project was pioneering in terms of testing and identifying solutions for the greening of sharply inclined and unstable soils; irrigation systems with below-surface clay and membrane lines and drainage collection; the development of special control fill-sub-bases for hardscapes; the propagation and transplantation of large areas of ground cover; plants and trees; a sophisticated blending of a landscaped site with a historic district in terms of access, views and compatible architecture; and the development of a detailed operational plan which would ensure the Park’s sustainability. Azhar Park has become a precursor to many subsequent projects in HCP’s parks portfolio. It offers lessons in planning, design, feasibility studies, linkage to adjacent community development initiatives and operations under a ‘Public-Private Partners’ arrangement, and now serves as a model for other HCP projects in their conception.

Partners

PUBLIC PARTNERS

Governorate of Cairo.

Authoritative Framework

A protocol agreement between the Governorate of Cairo and AKTC was signed in 1990. A Public-Private Partnership Agreement between the Governorate of Cairo and AKTC for the management and operation of Aqhar Park was signed in July 2007.

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The design of the Citadel View Restaurant (above) is inspired by Fatimid archways, whereas the design of the Lakeside Café is adapted in its interpretation of Islamic architecture.