Bab Qinessrine Park

The Bab Qinessrine Park project is the result of a previous engagement by the Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC) in the conservation of three historic citadels in Syria over 1999 – 2005, including the Citadel of Aleppo and the planning and redesign of the latter's urban Perimeter space. This first phase of engagement by the Trust in Syria was marked by the inauguration of the Citadel of Aleppo by His Highness the Aga Khan in 2008. The seventeen-hectare site of the future Park lies in a strategic location, just outside the city's historic walls, and takes its name from the south-western gate itself. The site is just a hundred metres from the Grand Mosque and traditional souk and only another forty metres from the Citadel of Aleppo.

The proposal for the redevelopment of the mostly barren site into a municipal Park was one advanced by the Government of Syria following a visit of high-level officials to Azhar Park in Cairo (see p. 310). Similarities between the former condition of the site in Cairo and that of Bab Qinessrine are striking: in their pre-existing states, these two sites represented mostly marginalized inner urban land, just outside the historic city walls, adjacent to economically challenged but vibrant communities, with considerable topography and poor soils. The Syrian authorities were keen to apply similar methods used in Cairo to this disadvantaged but central site.

Beyond the above-mentioned physical constraints, impediments to the project existed in the site's western edge where mid-rise multi-family housing blocks had experienced differential settlement, a large percentage of which had already been condemned, residents relocated and the buildings demolished. A remaining series of buildings await similar evacuation. Park design proposals also need to take into account the mosque and small cemetery located on the site's north-western corner and two known caves which run roughly north-south in the chalk strata below the site.

As is often the case, certain site constraints can be advantages, such as the high elevation of the central part of the site which affords views northwards towards the city gate and the Citadel. With careful master grading, the site will allow for a three-dimensional landscape with terracing of planted and walking areas and facilities that will provide interesting views over the city and city walls.

A bird’s-eye view from the main retail spine shows the upper plateau, the lake and Bab Qinessrine Gate in the distance.

Opposite page:
The area where the Park will be developed is currently in a state of neglect.
The Park’s Master Plan design has been entrusted to the Cairo-based practice, Sites International, landscape architects for Azhar Park.

The Park design consists of two major zones with distinct design themes. The first zone occupies the northern area of the site alongside Bab Qinessrine Gate’s approach road, consisting of a series of courtyards and low-scale retail modules arranged on both sides of a wide promenade punctuated with pools and fountains and lined with trees. Designed to accommodate large numbers of strollers and to provide diverse retail and food and beverage outlets, this zone will allow the Park to generate funds for its ongoing operations while screening the northern parking zone from the main park area.

The second and far larger Park zone consists of the sloping areas of the site, designed to provide areas for leisure along curvilinear paths and terraces. At the northern end an amphitheatre has been set into the slope at the eastern end of the main promenade, facing the historic city gate itself. The higher areas of the Park to the south will contain a small lake, a playground for children, a café and, at the highest point, a restaurant with indoor and outdoor seating for residents and tourists.

The Park design process has been accompanied by careful deliberation and planning with the Governorate of Aleppo regarding an appropriate future management system for the Park that will safeguard the quality and finish of the completed project. The Trust has entered into a ‘Memorandum of Understanding’ whereby the Park will be designed, built and then managed by the Trust for a period of time, allowing the management system to be put in place and operated in the best interest of park users, the city of Aleppo and neighbouring communities.

As the Park planning and design proceed, AKTC is in close coordination with the Aleppo authorities in the development of a series of proposals that aim at enhancing the quality of life in the adjacent communities. A socio-economic baseline survey has been undertaken to assess the present quality of life indicators and to identify the highest priority needs, and a community-based office has been set up. Consistent with other AKTC projects in inner city areas, the Park and socio-economic projects will be coordinated to provide a multiplicity of linkages and benefits across the project areas.