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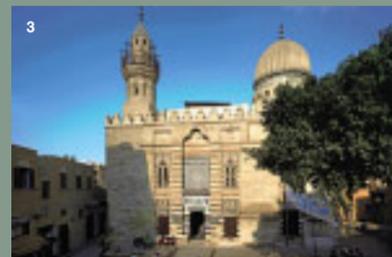
FEATURED CASE STUDIES



DARB AL-AHMAR SOCIAL PROJECTS



DARB AL-AHMAR URBAN REGENERATION



DARB AL-AHMAR MONUMENTS



AZHAR PARK



HISTORIC WALL

Programme Scope / Objectives

In 1997 AKTC embarked on the creation of a 30-hectare public Park in the Darb al-Ahmar district of Historic Cairo. The project also included the restoration of the 12th-century Historic Wall and the rehabilitation of monuments and landmark buildings in the area. These efforts are complemented by the 'Darb al-Ahmar Revitalization Project' aimed at improving the area's living conditions through integration of the built environment with social and economic interventions. Additionally, the Cairo portfolio includes the 'Urban Plaza Project' comprising a hotel, a multi-storey parking facility and a shopping area.

Preceding pages:

The central walkway in Azhar Park, Cairo, looking towards the Citadel of Cairo in the distance.

# Cairo Area Programme

In the Old City of Cairo, the activities of the Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC) started with the reconversion of a vast barren site (a hilly rubble-dump between the Fatimid city and the Mamluk cemetery) into a thirty-hectare urban Park with many visitor facilities. The Park has all of the geometric elements of traditional Islamic gardens and features soft-shaped hills and a small lake. A network of informal pathways surrounds the more formal garden areas and leads through all levels and corners of the site. The Park combines both widespread leisure areas inviting people to meet, to rest and to picnic on the ground, and more sophisticated facilities such as the Citadel View Restaurant on the hill and the Lakeside Café. The design of the Park provides the visitor with a dramatic and rich visual experience not available in any other area of Cairo.

Currently, Azhar Park receives more than two million visitors a year and has proven to be a catalyst for urban renewal in one of the world's most congested cities. Additionally, the Park manages to provide its visitors with an accommodating public space of quality that caters to different social and economic classes, while encouraging their integration. This has been achieved through tactful management and operation policies that offer the residents of Historic Cairo a reduced entry fee, while ensuring that the Park facilities provide quality services to different community classes and groups.

The Darb al-Ahmar neighbourhood, directly abutting the Park, is socially and physically depressed, but still features a lively and cohesive residential community. Over the past few decades, Darb al-Ahmar has gone through a spiral of decay affecting the living conditions of its inhabitants. This was primarily due to the decline in social status of the historic city since the early twentieth century because of the exodus of the local bourgeoisie into newer urban districts. Another reason behind this decline was the lack of a coherent urban management system that could deal effectively and appropriately with the particular problems and intricacies of the Historic City. Currently, several mosques, old palaces, historic houses and public open spaces have been, and are being, rehabilitated in an effort to make them accessible to the local community and visitors.

The most prominent of these are the sixteenth-century Khayrbek Mosque with the adjacent *sabil kuttab* and an attached eighteenth-century house, the fourteenth-century Alin Aq Palace, Umm al-Sultan Shabaan Mosque and Madrasa, Aslam Mosque and Aqsunqur Mosque (the Blue Mosque). These all



The minarets and domes of Cairo seen from Azhar Park: in the foreground, the dome of the Khayrbek Mosque complex, with the domes and minarets of Sultan Hassan and Rifa'ai mosques behind.

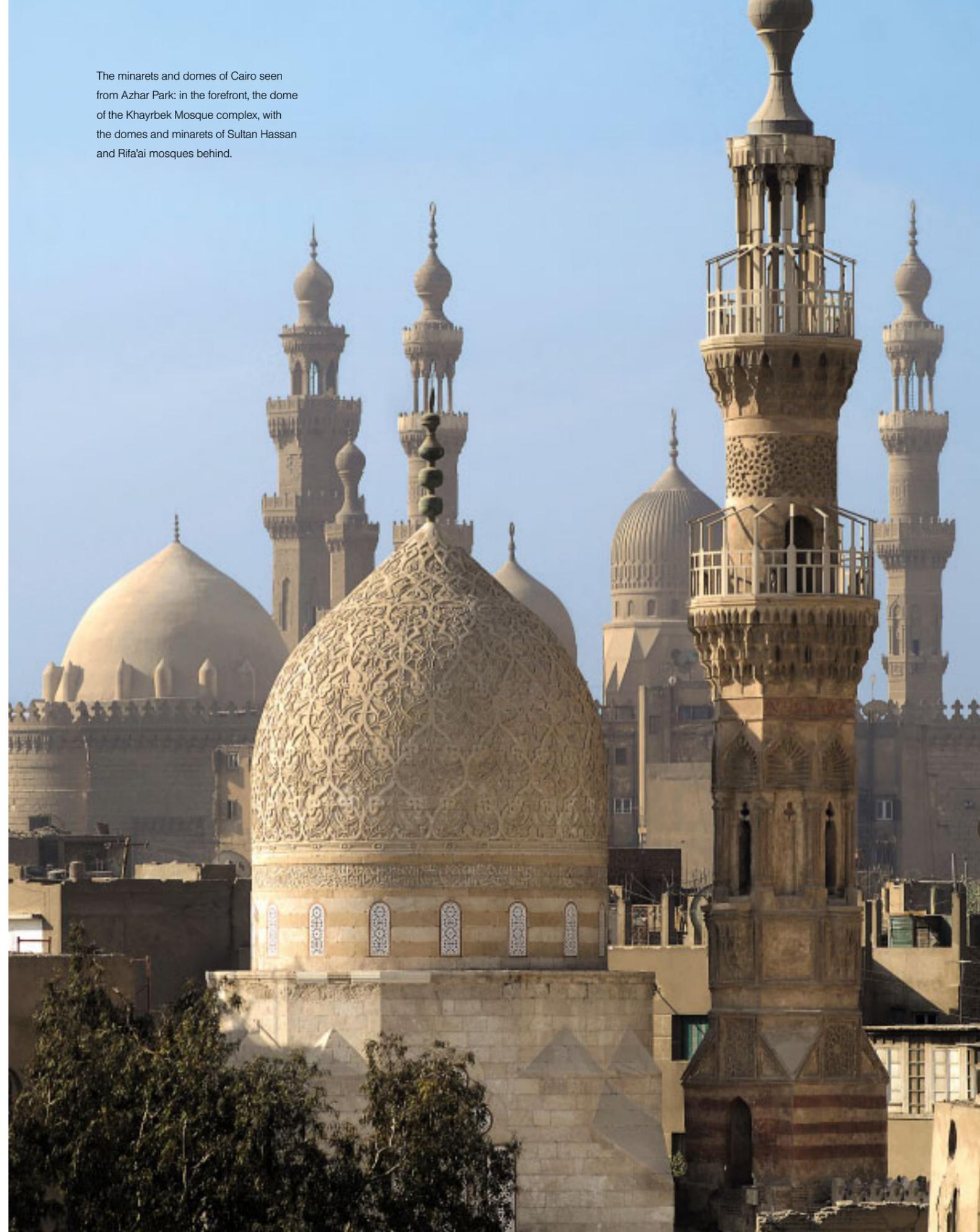


The Historic Cities Programme works to improve the lives of the residents of Darb al-Ahmar, a district close to Azhar Park. Above, engineers and planners study the Darb al-Ahmar Master Plan. A craftsman, below, works on the restoration of the decorative inlay of a door at the Programme's wood workshop.

represent significant assets of the Darb al-Ahmar community. Some of them are located adjacent to the Park. Many of these restored structures are reused for community purposes so as to enhance the identification and solidarity of residents with historic buildings and their district. In conjunction with physical upgrading, a wide range of ongoing socio-economic development initiatives have been implemented, beginning in the year 2000. The objective is to provide residents with new opportunities, including training, employment and micro-credits for small enterprises. Special programmes are targeting health issues, women's affairs and environmental problems. House owners and tenants are being provided with technical assistance, grants and micro-credits for upgrading their premises, and many local enterprises are now benefiting from the physical rehabilitation activities.

The uncovering of the formerly buried Historic Wall, with its enormous gates, towers, and interior chambers and galleries, is in itself one of the most important archaeological discoveries of the past decades relating to the Islamic period in Egypt. Over 1300 metres long, the Wall forms a distinctive third element of significance between the Park and Darb al-Ahmar, providing an interesting enclosure and backdrop for the Park, as well as a monument which can be visited. It physically separates the Park from Darb al-Ahmar and the Old City, but also acts as an attractive visual and functional connection, offering opportunities to visitors to enter the city from the Park, and vice versa. Over the centuries, the houses and monuments built against the Wall on the city side became an integral part of Cairo's urban and social history. Selective removal of encroaching elements was taken into consideration as part of the restoration process. Alongside this process, a valuable archaeological site was uncovered, bringing with it the development of a museum and visitor centre.

The 'Urban Plaza Development Project' is designed to be a mixed-use retail mall and commercial car park facility, situated on a site of approximately 17,900 square metres in the Old City of Cairo. The site is bounded on the east and south by Azhar Park, on the west by the old Historic Wall of Cairo, and on the north by al-Azhar Street. A landmark building for Cairo, it will create a new entrance to Azhar Park.





Azhar Park is situated in one of the most important parts of Cairo; the Citadel is seen to the left and the Historic Old City to the right.

## Background

### BRIEF HISTORY OF PROGRAMME AREA

Following the Fatimid conquest of Egypt in AD 969, the city of Cairo was founded to house the Fatimid court. Between 1087 and 1092, the city walls were expanded to incorporate an area to the south, now known as Darb al-Ahmar, located between the then future citadel and the old seat of power in the walled city. The wall defined the eastern edge of Darb al-Ahmar and the boundary between the urban area of the new elite and the dumping grounds for the city's rubbish. Over the course of centuries formidable mounds of debris accumulated, known as the al-Darassa Hills, dwarfing and eventually burying the city walls.

The early decades of the 20th century saw Darb al-Ahmar attempting to emulate the newer quarters of Cairo. New construction techniques, using reinforced concrete, began to replace traditional building materials, and 'modernist' urban design policies came into effect. The al-Darassa Hills remained uninhabited until the late 20th century. In the early 1990s, this site was selected by AKTC for the construction of Azhar Park, an idea that emerged in the 1980s following a seminar on the expansion of the city of Cairo organized by AKTC in 1984. Work began in 1997, following the construction of three major water reservoirs on the site by both the Government of Egypt and USAID.

## Challenges

### PROGRAMME RISKS

Income-generating activities such as Azhar Park and the Urban Plaza significantly contribute to the financial sustainability of the Cairo projects, but the institutional

sustainability of these interventions represents a major challenge. The current capacity of both governmental and non-governmental agencies in the area requires intensive support to ensure the institutional sustainability of the project's approach.

### SITE CONDITIONS

The Park's site represented a major challenge given the unstable nature of its soil and the fact that the Historic Wall was almost entirely buried beneath five centuries' worth of debris. Despite its central location, Darb al-Ahmar is not as densely populated as other areas of Cairo. It includes a significant number of monuments and low-rise traditional buildings connected by narrow streets and alleyways.

### DEMOGRAPHICS

Between the mid 1970s and mid 1990s Darb al-Ahmar witnessed an almost 50% population decrease (from 146,000 to 78,000 inhabitants). The average household size in Darb al-Ahmar is five persons and 78% of the residents are tenants. More than 70% of the residents have been living in the area for more than 20 years. The bulk of the decrease occurred at the age of marriage, since members of the new generations preferred to seek better social and economic opportunities in other Cairo neighbourhoods. Due to the significant decrease of population, the area includes a number of empty plots and ruined buildings.

### HOUSEHOLD ECONOMY

The economically active represent 30% of the population out of which 56% are involved in production-related occupations (small-scale industries and workshops), 28% in the services sector, 16% in the commerce sector and only 2% in professional occupations. In 2003 the annual average income per capita

was US \$207 (17 times lower than the average for Egypt as a whole).

### STATUS OF HEALTH AND EDUCATION

On the household level, residents suffer from health problems mainly related to deteriorated living conditions such as inadequate infrastructure, increased dampness and lack of natural light and ventilation. On a more general level, Darb al-Ahmar lacks quality health services especially in the area of maternity and early childhood problems.

### AVAILABILITY OF DRINKING WATER AND PROPER SANITATION FACILITIES

Almost all houses in Darb al-Ahmar are connected to drinking water and sanitation services; quality, however, is an issue, especially regarding drinking water.

### ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERNS

In Cairo, the per capita share of green space is meagre. Aside from environmental hazards related to the deteriorated condition of existing infrastructure, Darb al-Ahmar also lacks adequate solid waste management services.

### INFRASTRUCTURE

While the Park's site included some recently added infrastructure mainly related to water reservoirs, the infrastructure in Darb al-Ahmar was inadequate after many years of neglect. Only in the past decade has the government paid some attention to upgrades. Consequently, the majority of households are now connected to infrastructure utilities but investments in water, sewage and electricity networks only impacted major streets. Cul-de-sacs and alleyways, where the majority of the population lives, still suffer from inadequate connections mostly implemented by residents.

## Phasing 1997 → ongoing



### ACCESS TO OPEN SPACE

The quality of public spaces has diminished, unless they are gated or exclusive to certain society groups. Open spaces in Darb al-Ahmar mostly consist of small nodes at road intersections or leftover spaces due to the demolition of older structures. These few open spaces, in addition to the existing street network, suffer from continuous deterioration, use of inappropriate finishing materials and interruption by vehicular movement. The possibility of providing a quality public space that caters for all social and economic classes and encourages their integration was a challenge for Azhar Park.

### BUILDING CONDITIONS

The Park site included some minor public structures that were either removed or incorporated in the Park's overall design. Monuments and major public buildings in Darb al-Ahmar were in a state of decay due to the protracted absence of public investments. Moreover, existing housing stock suffered from severe deterioration owing to a lack of regular maintenance, complicated legal procedures, lack of technical know-how, unrealistic rent controls, low-income levels, multiple ownership and insecure tenure.

## Significant Issues and Impact

### MASTER PLANNING PROCESS

Darb al-Ahmar inherited a governmental Master Plan in 1973 that favoured major demolitions in the neighbourhood to introduce wide roads for vehicular traffic, especially along the eastern Historic Wall. If implemented, the results of this plan would have been catastrophic to the physical, social and economic fabric of the area. Realizing the implications of the plan, AKTC, along with its institutional partners, succeeded in replacing it with a more sensitive conservation programme ratified by the Cairo Governorate.

### PLANNING ISSUES

While Azhar Park followed a formal planning approach with clear planning and design objectives, and hence clear implementation procedures, the adjacent neighbourhood projects followed an action planning approach to address urban planning issues adopting a

more flexible process. The project worked on implementing these action plans using an integrated approach that encompasses restoration of key monuments and public buildings together with housing rehabilitation and the upgrading of infrastructure and public open spaces.

### BASELINE STANDARDS

Along with various sector-based surveys and studies carried out since 1998, the project conducted a major baseline survey in 2003 covering the entire area of Darb al-Ahmar (13 *shiyakhat*, 100,000 inhabitants). The results were used as the base for a post-implementation survey carried out in 2008 in seven core *shiyakhat*, shedding light on the project's impact over this period of time.

### SOCIO-ECONOMIC INITIATIVES

Since the project follows a multi-input integrated approach towards urban revitalization, socio-economic initiatives are a core element of the process. Besides the built environment programmes, AKTC works closely with other agencies (Aga Khan Foundation and Aga Khan Agency for Microfinance) on a wide range of social initiatives: health, education, support to civil society organizations, and environment; in addition to a range of economic initiatives including access to micro-credit, business development, vocational training and employment.

### CONSERVATION ASPECTS

Restoration of key monuments in Darb al-Ahmar was an indispensable component of the project. During the course of the project a significant number of these buildings were restored including the eastern Historic Wall, the Madrasa of Umm al-Sultan Shabaan, Aslam Mosque, the Khayrbek complex, Alin Aq Palace, and the Tarabay al-Sharify complex in addition to a number of Ottoman and early 20th-century buildings. Restoration went hand-in-hand with programmes to raise the local community's awareness of the monuments' value, in addition to the training and capacity-building of local craftsmen in order to generate employment opportunities.

### QUALITY OF LIFE

Azhar Park presented a rare opportunity to provide a major public space of quality to benefit Cairo's inhabitants. Since the mid 1990s, and following the project's

inception, Darb al-Ahmar's population decline started to reverse. A 2009 post-implementation survey showed that literacy figures have slightly improved. Chest disease and allergies have decreased significantly between 2003 and 2009. Rheumatism and poor hearing also showed significant decreases. These improvements might be attributed to the housing interventions and their impact on the area's lifestyle, not to mention completion of construction activities at Azhar Park.

### POST-IMPLEMENTATION PLANS

Both Azhar Park and the Urban Plaza projects are managed through long-term agreements with the Government of Egypt. Neighbourhood activities are currently in their third phase, during which the majority of the programmes and initiatives are meant to be phased out and handed over to the appropriate governmental and civil society organizations. Project sustainability is achieved financially through increasing support from Azhar Park's surplus revenues along with finance generated from other neighbourhood activities, such as the project's Darb al-Ahmar carpentry workshop.

## Partners

### PUBLIC PARTNERS

Governorate of Cairo, Supreme Council of Antiquities, Ministry of Awqaf Authority, Cairo Cleaning and Beautification Agency, General Authorization for Literacy and Adult Education, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Solidarity.

## Authoritative Framework

Cooperation protocol agreements with Cairo Governorate, The Supreme Council of Antiquities and the Egyptian Awqaf Authority (Islamic Endowment). 'Al-Darb al-Ahmar Revitalization Project' (Phase 2) was implemented according to a tripartite agreement between AKTC, Cairo Governorate and the Egyptian Social Fund for Development.