In spite of its inscription as a World Heritage Site in 1979, Historic Cairo was not given enough attention and individual buildings were suffering neglect, serious deteriorations and lack of maintenance. During the early phases of the design of Azhar Park, new light was projected on the adjacent neighbourhood of Darb al-Ahmar; as the Park hills provide views of a number of magnificent heritage edifices. With its medieval structures, with the domes and minarets amid the dense urban fabric, the Darb al-Ahmar district invites visitors of the Park to come and explore the jewels of Islamic art and architecture.

The conservation projects of the Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC) in Darb al-Ahmar started with two minarets in the vicinity of Azhar Park, that of Umm al-Sultan Shaaban Mosque (1368–69) and that of Khayrbek Mosque (1502–20). Both minarets had lost their upper parts as a result of the devastating 1884 earthquake. Collapses and reconstructions of minarets were not unknown to the history of Cairo. Despite attempts to reconstruct them in 1941, the minarets of Umm al-Sultan Shaaban and of Khayrbek mosques waited until 2003 to recover their integrity, when AKTC, on the basis of historic documentation, started with the Supreme Council of Antiquities in Egypt not only to restore them to their original shape but also to restore and revive the skills and the craftsmanship of artisans whose crafts were, and still are, in danger of being lost.

The technical challenges required multidisciplinary inputs from foreign and local consultants, historians, conservators and archaeologists in order to study Mamluk architecture, especially minarets, and develop adequate designs. These activities included regular conservation activities, such as documentation, condition assessment, fine conservation, architectural and structural conservation, presentation and publication.

The successful reconstruction of the minarets signalled the potential for social change brought by conservation and was followed by the complete conservation of the Umm al-Sultan Shaaban Madrasa and Mosque while the Khayrbek complex was restored and conserved. After restoration was completed in 2006, Umm al-Sultan Shaaban Mosque was returned to its original function and is currently being used as a mosque for the community. The madrasa spaces, neglected and empty before the conservation project, also provided an excellent opportunity for new religious and educational uses. The activities included the restoration of the madrasa spaces, the stabilization of the complex and the installation of lighting and sound systems and the design and construction of new ablution areas. Training was provided for local craftsmen and conservators in the course of the process and the restored mosque was finally returned for use by the community.
The 14th-century Umm al-Sultan Shaaban Mosque was restored by the Historic Cities Programme. The minaret had lost its upper part as a result of the devastating 1884 earthquake. It was returned to its original shape on the basis of historic documentation.

Opposite page:
Conservation and restoration work has continued at the Khayrbek Mosque complex, with work on Alin Aq Palace in the foreground, a ruined structure to be reused as a museum.

reuse option for community-based activities. Agreements between AKTC and the Supreme Council of Antiquities were signed in order to reuse these edifices and hence bring life to them and revive their functional integrity, paving the way for many other organisations to follow this example. The reuse integrates the ‘monuments’ into their context and offers a variety of possible functions in the building that encourages local groups to use them and also to take care of their maintenance. As restoration work could not be complete without looking after the environmental needs of residents, conservation of individual monuments was closely followed by infrastructure and urban upgrading of its context.

In a secondary stage, the success of AKTC’s conservation activities attracted donors, such as the World Monuments Fund, and the American Research Center in Egypt through a grant from the United States Agency for International Development, to partner with AKTC for new projects in the Darb al-Ahmar district, such as the Tarabay al-Sharify Mausoleum (1503), Adam Mosque (1348) and Aqsunqur Mosque (also known as the Blue Mosque, 1345–1652).

To date, the impact of the conservation of the majority of historic landmarks in Darb al-Ahmar has to be measured as an integral part of AKTC’s regeneration plan including other physical and social interventions. Impacts can be listed as follows and have:

- reversed decline of monuments’ condition. Projects have ensured the long-term structural stability of the edifices, conserving their authenticity and reinstating their architectural integrity by addressing the problems stemming from decades of neglect;
- established a technical reference of quality in the field of conservation and were the cradle of future local heritage specialists;
- improved environmental and social conditions of the neighbouring community;
- monuments play an important role both for their historic and artistic value as well as for their symbolic, spiritual, and community importance. Conservation can only become sustainable if the social and economic fabric is being simultaneously revitalized and if secondary physical assets, forming the bulk of the urban fabric, are being rehabilitated, together with a provision of basic social services;
- created an economic stimulus for the local market by job creation, local construction suppliers and training opportunities, not only improving income levels but raising awareness towards heritage preservation and introducing new conservation methods in the field. This has also created a critical mass of change in the perception that both residents and visitors have of the area;
- and created visitor circuits along connecting streets between important tourist attractions in Cairo such as the Citadel, the Bab Zuwayla area and Azhar Park.
Background

BRIEF HISTORY OF PROJECT SITE

Amr ibn al-Aswad, a former governor of Egypt under the last Mamluk sultan al-Ghuri, was appointed as the first Ottoman governor of Cairo following the Ottoman conquest of Egypt in 1517. Khayrbek Mosque, a religious and funerary complex, was built between 1532 and 1534. It was originally a mausoleum and had fallen into a state of decay. The Ottoman houses were equipped with brick and plastering facilities and all buildings provided with electricity and lighting fixtures.

PROJECT RISKS

Challenges

Planning issues

Excavation works around the monuments produced a large renoised open space showcasing the Tarabay mausoleum. Located at the future south entrance to Azhdar Park, this was designed as a resting place for visitors equipped with gramaed and benches. A retaining wall securing the cluster of monuments and the landscaping of the lower level (at the monuments’ base) were lawyer planned and constructed.

Historic buildings/monuments conserved

Conserving the cluster of monuments of Tarabay Mausoleum and the mausoleum of the Prophet was the project’s aim. The process of documenting, de-mering and reconstructing three sides of the mausoleum and the construction of a pavilion was carried out by external contractors.

Vocational training/capacity building

The team working on the Tarabay conservation project was previously trained by AKTC. This project offered the opportunity to deepen acquired skills.

Relevant codes/standards adopted

The conservation project followed all the international conservation charters and guidelines. For other aspects, the Egyptian Code for Conservation was adopted.

Significant issues and impact

DATA COLLECTION/SURVEYS

Historic photographs and drawings dating from the 1880s were collected before the project started. Architectural surveys were performed using a combination of photogrammetric and 3D modeling techniques. The project was methodically documented throughout the construction phases. A set of as-built drawings and photographs was handed over to the authorities upon project completion.

HISTORIC BUILDINGS/MONUMENTS CONSERVED

The conservation project targeted Khayrbek Mosque and Mausoleum, Al Aq Palace, the mausoleum of Jawhara al-Hamawy (1532), and two Ottoman houses. The houses were equipped with brick and plastering facilities and all buildings provided with electricity and lighting fixtures.

VOCATIONAL TRAINING/CAPACITY BUILDING

This project was among the first AKTC conservation projects in Egypt. Local and foreign experts were consulted in order to provide the adequate and necessary information and training to the team involved. 120 local residents and craftsmen were trained throughout the project’s duration.

Contracting methods

A contractor was hired for the reconstruction of the mausoleum: all architectural and fine conservation activities were carried out with direct labour recruited and supervised by AKTC professionals. The retaining walls were de-mered and reconstructed by an external contractor. The water supply, drainage and toilet facilities were likewise planned and constructed.

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PROJECT RISKS

The site was structurally in a very dangerous condition and satisfied for a number of years before the conservation project began.

SITE CONDITIONS

The cluster of monuments is located in the cemetery of Bab al-Dibis, relatively distant from public passage. Consequently, the area and the monuments were neglected for a number of years.

BUILDING CONDITIONS

All the buildings of this cluster of monuments were in a very poor state due to either serious structural problems or neglect. Despite splendid architecture and decoration, they were unsanctioned and inaccessible to visitors.

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the Mosque and the entire area. It has suffered damage from rising ground
water, the loss of material, especially the blue tiles, and the accumulation of grime on the facade and interior.

**Building Conditions**

The mosque, a site of earthquake-related structural issues, has suffered from the problem of rising groundwaters, which can cause damage to the structural integrity of the building.

**Significant Issues and Impact**

- **Public Participation**: The Supreme Council of Antiquities and the Aslan Mosque Cultural Services-Egypt formed the Aslan Mosque Heritage Foundation and the Aslan Mosque Trust for Culture (2001–07), which played a significant role in the conservation of the mosque.
- **Significant Issues and Impact**
  - **Data Collection/Surveys**: Historic photographs and drawings dating from the 1880s were collected before the project began. Architectural surveys were performed using a combination of topographic gridding and rectified photography. The project was methodically documented throughout the construction phases. A set of detailed drawings and photographs was produced.
  - **Planning Issues**: Egypt’s Supreme Council for Antiquities translated a previous study on the site into the MSAF in 1980, indicating that it was the original ablution area.
  - **History of Project Site**: The Mamluk Sultan Shaban of the late 14th century constructed the mosque. It is located near the site of the Blue Mosque.
  - **Brief History of Project Site**: The conservation project followed all the international conservation charters and guidelines. For other aspects, the Egyptian Code for Construction was adopted.

**HISTORIC BUILDINGS/MONUMENTS CONSERVED**

Conservation of the entire monument of the Umm al-Sultan Shahban complex was the main objective of the project, which ensured the reinstatement of the project light, however, the project was not handled over to the authorities upon completion.

**New Building Facilities**

The conservation project followed all the international conservation charters and guidelines. For other aspects, the Egyptian Code for Construction was adopted. The reconstruction of the minaret was a challenging engineering project, which required the reinstatement of traditional masonry, but modern structural techniques to guarantee the stability of the minaret.

**New Building Facilities**

The rehabilitation of the minaret was a challenging engineering project, which required the reinstatement of traditional masonry, but modern structural techniques to guarantee the stability of the minaret.

**Community Involvement/Programme**

A number of meetings were held with neighbourhood residents to discuss and implement the conservation work. The project was methodically documented throughout the duration of the project.

**Vocational Training/Capacity Building**

The project was methodically documented throughout the duration of the project. The new building facilities were created to provide the adequate and necessary information for conservation work. Local residents and craftsmen, numbering more than 120, were employed and trained throughout the duration of the project.

**Public Partners**

The implementation team working on the Aqsunqur conservation project had been trained during the Mashaal Mosque’s status as a community gathering point. Over time, it has suffered from neglect and degradation.

**Plumbing and Sanitation**

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**Building Construction**

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**Building Condition**

As with most of Darb al-Ahmar today, the Darb al-Ahmar community around the complex is affected by serious environmental impacts, such as traffic, dust, and leaking infrastructure and absence of public open space. The aim was to rehabilitate and save the minaret. However, the building suffered from neglect and degradation.

**Planning Issues**

Structural and architectural interventions were required to stabilise the minaret. The project plan also included an important component of infrastructural improvements. All electrical and sound systems were re-placed and made more compatible with the historic nature of the fabric. The rehabilitation of the minaret was completed using a combination of traditional and modern techniques to guarantee the stability of the minaret.