Darb al-Ahmar Urban Regeneration

Despite its central location, valuable cultural assets, strong community ties and active community of artisans, Darb al-Ahmar, a historic inner-city district of 100,000 residents, is one of Egypt’s most distressed neighbourhoods. Over the past decades the area has been suffering from social, economic, cultural and environmental deterioration resulting in general urban decline that has led to the gradual loss of irreplaceable social, economic and cultural assets. The immediate causes of this decline can be grouped in two major categories. First, socio-economic causes including low incomes and lack of housing finance mechanisms, together with a weak level of community mobilization, sense of ownership and participation. And second, institutional causes including a lack of governmental interest or awareness of heritage and urban conservation concepts; complicated legal procedures, planning constraints and outdated plans; and limited access to appropriate technical support and lack of technical know-how and conservation standards.

These obstacles primarily stem from different social and institutional factors. The social factors include the decline in social status of the historic city since the early twentieth century due to the exodus of the local bourgeoisie into newer urban districts. The institutional factors include the lack of a coherent urban management system that could deal effectively and appropriately with the particular problems and the intricacies of the historic city. In turn, social and institutional factors have lead to this rampant physical decay of Darb al-Ahmar over the past decades.

The situation was aggravated due to the absence of public funding for the improvement of infrastructure, services and social facilities on the one hand, and the weak level of private investments on the other. In addition, Darb al-Ahmar inherited a 1973 Master Plan that was in flagrant contradiction with recognized urban conservation practices. According to this plan, major highways were supposed to penetrate Darb al-Ahmar. This plan, if implemented, would have led to the demolition of significant parts of Darb al-Ahmar’s urban fabric.

Several attempts have been made in the past to reverse the spiral of decay in different parts of Historic Cairo. As far as individual monuments were concerned, most of these projects have succeeded. However, attempts at large-scale area...
The area's revitalization has included Azam Square, seen in 2009 before and after intervention. The square now hosts many public events and the shops facing it have undergone rehabilitation. Conservation covering whole districts such as Darb al-Ahmar never went beyond the paper stage, since some of these attempts did not consider enough the intricacies of the physical and socio-economic realities that caused this decline in the first place.

In order to reverse this decline, the Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC) along with its different partners, has been working in Darb al-Ahmar for more than a decade, initiating the Darb al-Ahmar Revitalization Project (ADAARP) with the overall objective of initiating a series of activities aimed at bringing long-lasting improvements in the socio-economic status and living conditions of the Darb al-Ahmar community. The project's strategy for complimentary local development aims at upgrading Darb al-Ahmar's physical assets on the one hand, and social and economic development of the local community on the other, as two complementary goals to achieve total development of the district.

This occurs through increased public and private investments, incremental change and strengthening of the available socio-economic capital. However, this process remains incomplete without the capacity building of local stakeholders to achieve long-term sustainability. This situation calls for a long-term step-by-step regeneration process carefully intertwining planning, rehabilitation and conservation activities with socio-economic initiatives. Accordingly, the ADAARP encompasses the rehabilitation of important monuments and landmark buildings in Darb al-Ahmar, together with extensive social and economic development programmes, including apprenticeship, micro-credit, health care and housing rehabilitation.

Since its inception, the ADAARP was not committed to rigid blueprints and results fixed in advance, but offered a flexible framework that would be continuously confirmed or revised by the feedback received from the field. Rather than relying on preconceived, top-down strategies and implementation schemes, it developed the project substance by working from the bottom up. Through this process, the ADAARP has been able to resolve some of the complicated legal procedures, planning constraints and outdated plans through: working with different community groups; promoting models of leadership through policies rewarding collective communal efforts; and addressing lack of technical know-how and standards for rehabilitation of traditional structures through development – with local crafts-standards for rehabilitation of traditional structures through development – with local crafts.

Difficulties have also been addressed by means of: community-based planning through participatory design with different community groups; promoting models of leadership through policies rewarding collective communal efforts; and promoting gender equality through sensitive design and planning measures catering for different groups, especially women.

The project has also been able to address lack of technical know-how and standards for rehabilitation of traditional structures through development – with local craftsmen – of a body of knowledge on cost effective and appropriate rehabilitation techniques; in addition to dissemination of this knowledge through technical manuals and training activities. On the other hand the ADAARP has been able to address economic issues such as low incomes and lack of housing finance through the introduction of a housing finance mechanism offering grants and loans.

Civil society issues have also been addressed by means of: community-based planning through participatory design with different community groups; promoting models of leadership through policies rewarding collective communal efforts; and promoting gender equality through sensitive design and planning measures catering for different groups, especially women.
This wide scope of intertwined activities could not be implemented without the active participation of the community and its individual members. The housing rehabilitation programme was an opportunity to demonstrate the latent potentials of public-private partnerships. Following the implementation of the first demonstration projects, a competitive situation was created among the owners and tenants who increased their own financial participation to reach up to fifty per cent of total rehabilitation costs. Meanwhile, a total of 320 apartment units have been restored. And due to its innovative and integrated approach towards addressing housing rehabilitation problems in historic areas, the Darb al-Ahmar urban rehabilitation programme was selected by UN-HABITAT in 2008 as a ‘Best Practice’ for improving the living environment.

These efforts were also complemented by the construction and rehabilitation of public buildings. These buildings have been turned from underused ruins or empty shells to vibrant nodes of community activities. The adaptive reuse of such buildings provided the area with public services that were much needed by the local residents. Indeed, this was an opportunity to rely on local craftsmanship and human resources to provide appren- ticeship activities, eventually leading to sustainable job opportunities. The purpose of these interventions was not limited to physical rehabilitation or direct economic benefits, but also extended to restoring the community’s self-esteem and confidence. This was possible when the community members, as well as other stakeholders, soon came to realize that the area’s latent resources, if tactfully identified and properly utilized, can become valuable community assets, spearheading the areas’ overall socio-economic and physical development.

ADAARP efforts also extended to the public realm where major public spaces and corridors linking Asfar Park and the area’s major attractions were upgraded. Through the open space and infrastructure programme it was possible to improve the existing utilities’ networks, directly impacting the residents’ public health and living conditions. Enhanced public space treatments and designs were developed and employed, in participation with different community groups, in order to provide quality public spaces for the residents as well as the area’s visitors. As a result, the area started to regain its economic viability and has become an attraction for local investments in terms of housing activities and new business opportunities. In order to provide an overarching, more formal framework to these grassroots rehabilitation efforts, a conservation plan for Darb al-Ahmar was developed by the ADAARP along with its partners. The objective was to reverse and replace the existing 1973 Master Plan with its disastrous proposals. As a result of continuous cooperative efforts, a new plan was developed and ratified by the Cairo Governorate in 2005, laying the institutional foundations for a more sensitive urban rehabilitation process in Darb al-Ahmar.

For more than a decade the endavour of the ADAARP was not free of obstacles. Indeed, it was full of challenges at different levels. If it has proven anything, the ADAARP experience has shown that positive change in underprivileged urban areas is possible. It is possible if a long-term vision is in place, flexible operational frameworks engaging different stakeholders on various levels are employed, and finally, if local communities are trusted to lead that change.

Background

BRIEF HISTORY OF PROJECT SITE
Darb al-Ahmar is a densely populated district in the heart of historic Cairo. Despite its valuable cultural assets, and especially an active community of artisans, Darb al-Ahmar is one of Cairo’s most distressed neighborhoods. Ove

Challenges

PROJECT RISKS
Although the project contributed to the rehabilitation of essential housing, infrastructure and public open spaces, the area still suffers from the ongoing demolition of traditional buildings in the absence of clear conservation policies. The project is working to encourage private investments in the area, while guiding the revitalization process through appropriate urban conservation planning and implementation mechanisms.

SITE CONDITIONS
Darb al-Ahmar includes a significant number of monumen
tary and low-rise traditional buildings linked by narrow alleys and lanes, as well as a number of empty plots and ruined buildings. The street network and its few public open spaces (mostly noisy at night) lead to intersections or plots where a building is demolished, thus making the area’s environment uncomfortable, unsafe, and lacking green areas. Conservation treatment were developed to fit with the area’s traditional style, ensuring that new interventions are integrated and respectful to the area’s cultural and historical identity.

AVAILABILITY OF DRINKING WATER AND PROPER SANITATION FACILITIES
Most houses have poor natural light and ventilation, and lack dedicated kitchen spaces and private toilets. Most water connections are made of lead, a highly toxic material.

INFRASTRUCTURE
Over the past decades, the government invested in infra-
structure upgrades in water, sewage and electricity networks on major areas. Cu-du-oa alleys and alleysways, where the majority of the population lives, still have inadequate connections mostly installed by residents. Substantial stretches of road, pavement and open space were in need of levelling and repaving. Water leaks undermine the structural stability of residential buildings, especially traditional structures.

BUILDING CONDITIONS
Lack of regular maintenance and technical know-how, complicated legal procedures, unrealistic rent controls, low-income levels, multiple ownerships and inaccessible premises have all contributed to the area’s deterioration of the existing housing stock. Traditional residential buildings as well as newly built structures have fallen into disrepair due to a lack of municipal follow-up on construction activities.

Significant Issues and Impact

DATA COLLECTION/SURVEYS
Physical surveys have been carried out since the pro-
gramme’s start and from the baseline of an extensive GIS database concerning Darb al-Ahmar.

MASTER PLANNING PROCESS
The main Master Plan for the area, dating to 1973, was rethought upon the agreement reached to create Asfar Park. Certain elements of this plan, however, have periodically come to the fore, particularly with regards to the proposed widening of roads to encour-
ge a smoother flow of vehicular traffic in the area. The Darb al-Ahmar Master Planning Unit, created by the project during the course of the second phase, prepared a plan for land use, application of appropriate building guidelines and traffic regulation. This plan was partially approved at a district level and now serves as a guide-
line for future developmental activities.

PLANNING ISSUES
The ‘Housing Rehabilitation Programme’ was designed to reverse the overall decline in the built environment while improving living conditions in both residential and workshop spaces. The project assessed the infra-
structure conditions in various locations in order to replace inadequate utilities networks with upgraded, environmentally safe materials. Through the ‘Open Space and Infrastructure Upgrading Programme’ comprehensive technical specifications for sidewalk treatment were developed to fit with the area’s traditional context. These were implemented in strategically located public spaces, including Darb Shoukry and Alin Aq Palace.

COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT/PROGRAMME

The project follows a multi-input integrated approach towards urban rehabilitation, and community-based 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 Microcredit) on a wide range of initiatives impacting health, education and support to civil society organisations, and environment.

VOCA TIONAL TRAINING/CAPACIT Y BUILDING

The project’s economic initiatives included providing access to micro-credit, business development, vocational training and employment. The built environment project focused on generating training and employ-
ment opportunities through the implementation of con-
servation and construction activities.

Partners

COMMUNITY PARTNERS

Tenants and property owners, community-based organiza-
tions and partners (WCW Architects; Mihanehewa Associa-

Donors

Canadian International Development Agency, Caritas (Egypt), Damier Cocoa (Egypt), Dony and Spicy Food Kafay Foundation, Egyptian Construction Federation, Egyptian-Swiss Development Fund, Embassy of the Federal Republic of Germany, Fondation GIZ (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit), Global Environment Fund/United Nations Development Programme, Gwada Institute, Integrated Care Society, Egypt Industrial Training Council, Industrial Modernization Centre, Ministry of Economic Affairs, the State of Baden-Württemberg (Germany), KFW Entwicklungsbank, Mosor- aiy (Egypt), Mubarak Kohl Initiative, Near East Foundation – Centre for Development Services.

Authoritative Framework

Cooperation protocol agreements with Cairo Govern-
orate, The Supreme Council of Antiquities and the Egyptian Antiquery Authority (Islamic Endowment), the Darb al-Ahmar Rehabilitation Project (Phase 2) were implemented according to a Tripartite agreement between AKTC, Cairo Governorate and the Social Fund for Development.