

محاضرة الدكتور / صالح لمعى

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## Historic Cairo: Causes of Deterioration and suggestions for Preservation

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Above all other Arab capitals, Cairo is distinguished by its rich architectural heritage, perhaps epitomized in the buildings of the Circassian Mamluk period, when the Cairene architect was clearly aware of human scale in the design of buildings and streets and was fully acquainted not only with a range of visual elements, but also with the means of emphasizing them and inter-relating them with surrounding streets and buildings.

Travellers of the middle ages praised the beauty of Cairo's buildings, though some complained of the crowds in its greatest street, the qasabah, the present Sharia M'izz lidīn Allāh, its "spine", a focus for industrial, commercial and religious activities. Ordinances of Muhammad-Ibn-Qaitbāy and Al-Ghūry demonstrate that until the Ottoman conquest in 1517, the state took responsibility for the upkeep and beautification of this street and others, while major buildings along them were maintained by their respective waqfs. (1)

Negligence may have begun with the Ottoman, when some of the buildings were perverted from their original functions and consequently lost the financial support provided by the theim waqfs; actual deterioration may have begun when spaces within those formerly endowed buildings were converted into lodgings. (2)

To attribute the deterioration of historical buildings to supposed ignorance on the part of the original builders—either a specific ignorance of methods of protecting them against dampness caused by rain or subsoil water, or a general ignorance of construction rules—would be absurd. The kinds, types, and sizes of the stones, for example, were variable according to function, stones used in the foundations and lower parts of buildings being different both from those of the upper

parts and from those used for flooring (balāt kaddān). Different mortars

were used, depending on relative exposure to water, with damp-proofing mortar, made of lime and burnt brick dust or lime, mud and timber ashes( black pan mortar), being used for water reservoirs and roofs.(3)

During the nineteenth century the State became aware again of the grave danger threatening this precious heritage. A committee for preservation of the Arab antiquities was formed at the end of 1881 AD and the first legislation for their protection was issued two years later. In accordance with the conceptions that then prevailed, the Committee determined the architectural importance of buildings and carried out restorations with special concern for the structures themselves, largely ignoring the areas surrounding them. Restorations have been made more recently by the Department of Antiquities and the General Organization for Antiquities, but have not been sufficient to prevent the continuous deterioration of historical buildings or even the disappearance of some of them. The register issued in 1951, for example, included 622 buildings, of which about 100 have disappeared in the last thirty years, while the remaining ones have deteriorated badly. It is evident that mere legislation has not been enough to protect priceless cultural property.

From my experience, I would summarize the causes of deterioration as follows:

1. LAKE OF PUBLIC CONCERN FOR ANTIQUITIES

It has been observed that public concern for antiquities is minimal. The alienation of the citizens from their heritage may be due to their feeling that the individuals who erected the buildings in the first place never truly belonged to their homeland. Most registered buildings, moreover, are left unused and therefore the inhabitants of the areas around them do not benefit directly from them.



sion for light traffic to serve the commercial buildings in the area only during certain hours - should be regarded as one of the most important measures to be taken to preserve such areas.

2) DETERIORATION DUE TO ENVIRONMENTAL CIRCUMSTANCES.

These circumstances include:

- a) accumulated dust on the ceilings and walls, which damages painting and decorations;
- b) Contaminated and polluted air in the area due to transportation and industry inside or nearby, which has caused serious damage to the stones;
- c) Change of subsoil water levels which has caused unequal settlement in parts of buildings in the area;
- d) humidity from subsoil water and rain, which, because of lack of con-

3) DETERIORATION CAUSED BY GOVERNMENTAL MEASURES (of the lack thereof)

- a) The State reallocated the wacfs for such buildings, leaving insufficient financing for maintenance and restoration.
- b) The multiplicity of state departments supervising the historical buildings-some of which are subject to the Waqf Ministry and others to the Antiquities Organisation-results in inconsistent policies and waste of time in exchanging correspondence between various governmental bodies.
- c) Certain political actions in the sixties have resulted in the lodging of great numbers of inhabitants in historical buildings after the collapse of their dilapidated houses, which has resulted in the misuse of such buildings.
- d) The renting out of some of the historical buildings to the private sector has introduced incompatible activities, which do not harmonize with the original function of the buildings and have caused serious damage, e.g. in al-'Gammāmīz district a sabīl is used as a carpentry workshop, while in al-Azhar and al-Gamāliya district wakālat are used as waerhouses, workshops, and factories.

- e) The resources and capabilities of the Antiquities Organization have been limited, despite the great number of historical buildings in Cairo. Accordingly, the Department of Antiquities has been unable to protect historical buildings against the trespassing of either the private citizens or the State departments that take possession of them.
- f) Despite the existence of a Documentation Centre for Islamic Antiquities, at least 200 monuments lack any record, while the present record is incomplete and unscientific.
- g) Present legislation is inadequate. Even the law in force since 1983 provides only for the protection of each monument itself without considering the surrounding area, sets no conditions for new buildings in the area, and is limited in its determination of what constitutes architectural value to exclude the twentieth century. What about the situation of the elements of high aesthetic value created during this century? Shall we leave them until the end of this century or the beginning of the next without any care, until they too can be recorded as historical buildings?
- h) The bad situation of the infra-structure system and therefore damage caused by sewage water.
- i) Using portland cement mortar, which is brittle and creates a bond stronger than the building-lime or sand stone instead of using lime mortar. Cement mortar can cause deterioration as result of the different coefficient of expansion and differing porosity of the building materials and the mortar.

The basic problem is to concentrate -first of all - awakening public interest in the preservation of our cultural heritage. This can be done as follows:

1. By promoting public awareness of antiquities through the mass media.
2. By including the cultural heritage in the history syllabus in schools, thus enabling students to get acquainted with their history and civilization. Instruction should be supported with well-prepared trips to visit museums, buildings, areas, and sites.



3. By arousing interest in Islamic architectural studies at the Faculties of Engineering and Arts, propoting an acquaintance with aesthetic values and modes of expression and with the architectural and visual aspects of urban design.

On the governmental level the Documentation Centre should be supported with specialized persollee and transforme' into a scientific centre aiming at collecting and organizing all information related to the nation's Islamic heritage, such as manuscripts, documents, and historical sources available in several Departments. The capacity of the Engineering Department should meanwhile be consolidated to enable it to make accurate and complete drawings of the buildings and of the historical areas, supported with photos. Let us note again that there are at least 200 historical buildings without any recording at all; while for other buildings few drawings have been made since the last century, during the early existence of the Committee for the Conservation of the Monuments of Arab Art.

The formation of an architectural- archaeological committee is strongly advised. Such a committee was once available but without any specialization in the heritage. It was of negligible effect and has ceased to work since 1975. The new committee would be specialized in the Islamic heritage and would examine all new projects in Islamic Cairo, with the aim of finding a new architecture connected with the Islamic styles. Standards, heights, and the general appearance of the buildings should be determined, to find a new urban fabric which can integrate and harmonize with old one.

The issuance of decree prohibiting the passage of vehicles and transforming all historical areas into pedestrian ones - with prevision for light traffic to serve the commercial buildings in the area only during certain hours - should be regarded as one of the most important measures to be taken to preserve such areas.

It should also be taken into account that schools for craftsmen should be established to train them in the old crafts, which have been pressingly needed during the restoration work carried out recently by foreign missions in Islamic Cairo. The school of craftsmanship at Wakālat al-Ghūrī has not achieved its objective of training sufficient skilled workers.

Finally we should ask ourselves these important questions: what is the object of preserving our cultural heritage? Would rehabilitation be merely for the sake of preserving the historical buildings themselves, or can a total process of urban renewal and revitalization be implemented? Can the public thus be convinced of the importance of such a project? Rehabilitation should not impede development, but should aim to create an integrated and harmonious environment in keeping with the distinct Islamic Egyptian character of the area.

Some may wrongly suppose that we are proposing to revive Islamic architecture by repetitive use of the same old forms and elements (as happened in Europe in the 19th century, for example, with the "Gothic Revival."). In our case we would try to preserve the principles and values of our Islamic architecture, but integrate their elements into a new architectural language. A study of the architectural and urban evolution of the area will increase our understanding of how this integration may be accomplished. The architecture in the area is the product of a continuous tradition dating to the foundation of Cairo in 358/969, a tradition interrupted only in the middle of the nineteenth century when the state turned away from its traditional heritage and attempted to embrace modern European civilization, dominated by the concept of progress.

Despite a various and eventful history and the cultural changes that have accompanied it, there had been little change in the physical environment. The essentially distinct Egyptian Islamic character of the heritage is expressed in architectural styles which, though diversified in each era, had blended the centuries into a harmonious and integrated whole. Even during the Ottoman period the few buildings that were added did not interfere with the predominantly Egyptian Islamic flavour of the city. (4)

What has taken place during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is in fact the breaking of a chain of continuous tradition that had lasted for a thousand years. Foreign fashions overwhelmed the area and drastic changes in the physical environment took place, demolishing all previous aesthetic concepts and values and thus creating a gulf between man and the environment in which he lived, leading to the present critical situation.

The conservation and preservation of buildings, and the rehabilitation of historical areas are not new to us, but if the preservation of our cultural heritage is to be connected with the rehabilitation of Islamic Cairo, it should be carried out according to concepts based upon the deepest realities of Egyptian society. In other words, we cannot adapt theories applied in Europe, or even in the rest of the Arab World. Egypt has its own unique identity and style of living as well as its own unique social, economic and political systems.



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