This paper consists of two complementary and loosely related parts. The first section, which I will entitle Culture, Environment, and Sustainability consists of three observations and a hypothesis about the interrelation between culture and the environment, and its dynamics of change, development, and sustainability. This hypothesis will serve as a theoretical and philosophical framework for the second part, in essence, an account of a ten-year-old experiment in linking the culture of a local community in Egypt to a major environmental and landscaping project. The community is Sayeda Zeinab, a vibrant but poor community of some 1,000,000 people in the old district of the city of Cairo, Egypt. The project is the planning, construction, and maintenance of the Cultural Park for Children in Sayeda Zeinab, a facility of two and a half acres which includes, among other things, a children’s museum, an open-air theatre, a library, playgrounds, and several gardens.¹

The theoretical framework and the account of the project will hopefully work together to illustrate an approach to a community-based planning and development process which rests on understanding and reconstructing age-old processes of development indigenous to most, if not all traditional or pre-industrial communities, while remaining completely rooted in the socio-economic and technical realities of today.²

The aim of this paper is to draw scholarly and professional attention to the importance of understanding local cultures as mechanisms for sustaining human solidarity and creativity in the context of the design and development processes. This is a tool, which when fully
understood can, be mobilised to enable, empower, concretely and creatively engage local communities in the conception, production, and regeneration of their environment. The focus on landscaping is not an accidental or ephemeral aspect of present hypothesis, but is an essential part of the theoretical framework. As the account of the park will show, gardening in particular and landscaping in general can be a model and a focus for the reinstitution of this age-old process of regeneration.

I: Culture, Environment, and Sustainability

All living communities have their own culture with a set of norms and mechanisms shared by members of the community to establish and regenerate their identity and creative energy, and to re-establish their sense of solidarity. In traditional or pre-industrial, pre-modern societies, these cultural mechanisms were closely related to the creation and maintenance of the environment and its sustainability. In industrial and post-industrial societies, this relation seems to disintegrate. In such a context, a mode of environmental production prevails, where the conception, production, and maintenance of the environment is separated from the culture of the community. In the
post-industrial context, the miserable failure of this material and excessively rational mode, which bases its triumph on the separation of culture from production, is apparent.

The position presented in this paper is that one can go beyond the industrial mode and become increasingly aware of models which work to mobilise, enable, and empower human resources and link them to the conduct of the affairs of life. This is becoming more apparent with the creation and maintenance of the environment, where the emphasis is placed on regeneration and not strict accumulation. It is in this context that I am arguing that certain cultural mechanisms can be used to help integrate the production of the environment with the culture of the local community. My argument and hypothesis rests on a three-fold observation:

· Culture has been and will continue to be the prime mechanism for the sustenance of a healthy environment and maintenance of vital community life. It is culture which has helped scores of communities, throughout the ages and until recently, to establish their identities, express their needs, and manage their resources in the most creative way possible. This vital function of culture has been integral to the creation and maintenance of the physical environment around the world.

· While rituals in general might appear to be the cultural mechanism to link community to the creation and sustenance of life, a particular class of rituals and ceremonies has arisen around certain buildings and productive operations in which the technical act of building or production is integrated with the symbolic and social dimension of the culture. It is this class of ritual which appears to link and address acts of building and landscaping to the social and cultural life of the community. This can be seen in archetypal form in the classical example of the Trobriand gardens in the South Pacific, as beautifully described by Malinowski, where the ritual acts of gardening amount to a blueprint for the planning and maintenance of all the compo-
nents of the gardens and the environment of the community. These rituals act as mirrors of the productive acts, establishing the mindset of the community for future actions. The case of Yemen is extremely illustrative as well. Marvellous towns were built in the highlands, maintained, and transformed over centuries into terraced gardens. Land, water, and the natural elements become the prime domain of this ritual operation, which may be called the regenerative process of building.

For scores of communities, building ceremonies and rituals serve as mechanisms through which the order of the community is identified and expressed in the production of the environment. From roof construction among the Berbers in the Atlas Mountains in Morocco, community gardening in Niger, barn raising in rural America, land subdivision in Mexico, and house decoration in Nubia, the creative energy of the people is released and community resources and skills regenerated. It is these ceremonies and rituals that kept the vital relation of the community with the environment intact and sustained. On the other hand, institutional mechanisms such as building liens and regulations, environmental measures and other regulatory mechanisms, while helping to maintain the environment or to keep it within
certain bounds of regularity and fitness, cannot guarantee the engagement of the community in the sustenance, health, and goodness of the environment.

It is within the bounds of these three observations that my basic hypothesis is formulated as follows:

- Up until recently, over two thirds of the world’s population lived in communities where the production of the environment was, until recently, regulated by such production and building rituals.

- Today, with few exceptions, the life and environment of these communities are regulated by an imposed, top-down process of planning and production which draws its principles from sources alien to the community and its cultures. The result is apathy, underdevelopment, and immense waste and destruction of the environment and its resources.

- Any environmental plan in context of these developing communities should be taken as an opportunity to re-establish the relation between the culture and the production of its environment. The responsibility of the architect in any public project in this context is to re-establish that relation; hence, the fundamental task of architecture is to try to understand local life, and search for the mechanisms that bridge the gap between technology and society, the material and spiritual, and become once more vital to communities in the process of the rejuvenation of their identities. Architecture should not be used as a tool to disenfranchise and control communities into neat tidy plots, but should render building as an activity for the rejuvenation and empowerment of communities. The role of the architect and his responsibility should be to understand and interpret culture, and change society through his architecture.

A garden, park, or a small landscape project can be a valuable instrument to trigger and set into motion a community-wide process which...
can uncover, re-establish, and perhaps reseal the gulf or the rupture caused by modernity and industrialisation, and reaffirm the culture of the that community and the production and sustenance of its environment. It is in this context that I describe in the following part an account of the creation of the Cultural Park for Children.

II: The Cultural Park for Children

The Children’s Cultural Park is located in the heart of the Sayeda Zeinab district of Cairo. Although it is one of the oldest, most densely populated, and poorly maintained quarters in Cairo, it is also one of the most vibrant and lively. Named after Prophet Mohammed’s granddaughter, the Sayeda Zeinab community draws strength and pride from its reservoir of history. No more than a few hundred yards from the park are the Ibn Tulun and Sayeda Zeinab mosques built during the Tulunid era. Both are among the many great buildings in the area that embody, in form, some of the power, vitality, and meaning of the community. This vitality has for centuries been annually replenished with the moulid, a remembrance festival for Sayeda Zeinab. During the weeklong festivities, the identity of the community is reaffirmed and regenerated through scores of ritual as well as productive acts.

The site of the park itself was built upon the remnants of an older, dilapidated garden called Al-Hod Al-Marsoud which dates back to the Mamluk period. A virtual wasteland in the midst of a concrete jungle, the garden was monopolised by street gangs and generated a sense of danger in the area, alienating the community and contributing to the general state of decay of the physical environment. Local children would occasionally gather to play but even their activity was restricted to the borders of the park, rendering it more part of street life than to park life. Only during the Sayeda Zeinab moulid celebration was the garden reclaimed by the community, bringing people and activities momentarily back into the two-and-a-half-acre plot. It is this
colourful metamorphosis of the area by the people which powerfully illustrated the potential for the garden’s adaptive reuse that could extend beyond the moulid.

Such are the ingredients that provided inspiration for the transformation of the park. The organisation and form of the park was drawn from the interpretation of the spiral form of the minarets of the Ibn Tulun mosque. Clearly visible from the site, the minaret’s spiral symbolised the idea of growth and was taken as the main theme for the children’s park, giving form to what is common to both children and parks - growth and life. Reinforcing this theme is the evocative imagery of a tree provided by the Ibn Tulun minaret. Looking down from the minaret into the magnificent serenity of the mosque’s courtyard, with its majestic arches and compassionate shade, one is re-
minded of a rawdah, or garden, as the image of paradise. Resting in the middle of the courtyard is the fountain for ablutions, whose water reaffirms the symbolic and functional image of the garden. Here the metaphor between a mosque and garden becomes inescapable.

Looking out in the other direction from the minaret, however, the illusion quickly loses its effect. The garden is strangled on all sides by buildings. The terrific imbalance in the structure of the community is striking. In designing the park, the question became how to reforge this balance and translate the organising principle of growth concretely: in short, how to develop an architectural scheme that is ordered in accordance with community symbols and patterns. The response was to make the design process itself accretionary. The plan contained two layers of design thought.

The first layer is the formal layout inspired by the spiral pattern whereby the components of the project are organised around the palm-tree promenade. The existing trees of the earlier Al-Hod Al-Marsoud garden were maintained and reinforced, becoming the main axis for the conceived geometry of the park. Every tree became a pole, a point in the matrix; the whole is turned in a field of energy activated by the power of the transformed symbol of the Ibn Tulun
The starting point of this geometric order is, fittingly enough, also the place for water, the source of life and growth. The end point is a lone tree at the other extremity of the palm-tree axis. The site is then organised in stepped platforms following the geometry created by the spiral. The platforms move upwards toward the middle of the site to form an arena-like park, and then they turn in the opposite direction forming a downhill arrangement towards the end of the site where the museum is located. The theatre is situated at the turning point of the two movements. Those three elements, the water point, children’s museum, and the theatre are the main poles around which sets of activities, and hence meanings, are created within the realm of the park.

The second layer is a circumstantial layout resulting from the ceremonial process. The building process was organised in a series of events, each of which combined technical work with cultural aspects of that particular operation. The park was built in stages, and the precise shape of each stage was defined as the work progressed. This granted us the manoeuvrability to wed conventional architectural design tools with the active participation of the community.

Initially, when we were first awarded the scheme following the design competition held by the Egyptian Ministry of Culture, the local residents were, if not uninformed, confused and suspicious about the whole project. Although the project made waves with the media, the people in the community who should have been its real supporters were removed from it. The issue became how to enlist their involvement, how best to transform them from passive observers to active participants in the design and construction of the park.

The opportunity presented itself when the Minister of Culture decided to hold the cornerstone-laying ceremony during the National Festival for Children, a celebration held yearly in Egypt during the month of November. Normally such ceremonies are dull affairs attended by bureaucrats politely standing by, along with the architects...
and some local representatives. Rarely are the general members of the surrounding community invited. For this reason, we proposed to the Minister of Culture that a community festival be held where the project’s facilities could be mapped out on a large-scale, canvas model representing the geometry and configuration of the scheme. Local artists, musicians, and dancers could also be invited and propose works suggesting the scheme which could then be performed by school children from the local community.

The result was the creation of a setting that enabled the community to see what was being proposed and to get involved. Rather than peering at meaningless plans, charts and miniature models, guest officials and the surrounding community found themselves facing a real-life situation. The building ceremony was thus not simply an empty ritual but a dynamic process where the static order of the original blueprint became flexible. Actual communication was established with local residents and creative decisions regarding how best to integrate the project into the community ensued, giving legitimacy to the process. Ideas and images emerged for the park that would not have transpired in the sterile environment of an architect’s drawing office.

As a consequence of the building ceremony, a number of services catering to the community, such as a corner cafe, a small mosque, an ablution fountain, stores, and workshops were added to the plans for the northwestern side of the park. The park wall, rather than preventing access, as is common in Cairo, became permeated by a series of openings to allow access to cultural facilities beyond. Again, in order to create a practical link between the service strip and abutting neighbours, the side street was pedestrianised. In addition, the Cairo Governorate was successfully lobbied to overrule an old expropriation law that prevented the renovation of the houses overlooking this street. Once residents were assured that their homes were not going to be demolished, they set about repairing their apartments, thereby upgrading the entire area.
Not only did the design festival actively engage residents, but the construction process also brought together skilled craftsmen with architects as partners in the building process. At a time when the dominant mode of production places primacy on control and efficiency of management and costs, the use of craftsmen in the era of mechanisation sadly becomes obsolete. For this reason the use of stone represented not only a building material appropriate to the surrounding environment, but also a meeting point for carpenters, formworkers, steelworkers and surveyors, i.e., typical members of a contracting crew with traditional craftsmen.

A full-scale model was constructed for each element, with the craftsmen present to advise on the materials and techniques involved. These models were then used as patterns for carving stone and building vaults and arches. This made it possible to combine the skill of the stonemason and his instinctive knowledge of geometry and measurement with the technician’s ability to work from written instructions and drawings. The combination also made it possible to innovate. Craftsmen were able to regain lost skills and build upon their knowledge base, thereby reducing the gap between their skill and knowl-
edge, while technicians were able to add advanced skills to their ordinary tasks of steel reinforcement and water proofing.

The Children's Cultural Park in Sayeda Zeinab represented an experiment to do away with the artificial separation between the steps of conception and design and those of execution. In order to allow the community's identity to emerge in the park, a break had to occur in the control normally exercised by conventional architectural practices. Mechanisms were created that allowed the process of building to occur incrementally or gradually, allowing for change and adjustments that can mesh the aspirations of a community with the potential provided by their surrounding environment.

It has been four years since the park was finally completed and it remains to be seen if the experiment is durable and replicable. The ultimate test of any community development project is the degree to which its targeted beneficiaries claim the project as their own.

In our case, the surrounding community became vibrant with activities. Residents upgraded their homes, street weddings and festivals became once again a feature of the community. For two years they
celebrated the impact of the park in improving their environment. But something went wrong. The euphoria did not last. Official neglect by local authorities and the lack of institutional mechanisms at the community level to make up for this neglect led to the gradual deterioration of the street. With no regular maintenance, elements like street lighting and regular garbage collection disappeared.

As a result, the area once again appeared deserted and invited acts of vandalism from outside the area against the park. Drugs and prostitution, after being driven away for two years, reclaimed the territory. The proposed studios, shops, and community cafe along the side street, which were initially met with the much enthusiasm, failed to materialise due to government bureaucracy and now their establishment is looked on with scepticism and doubt.

In response to formal mismanagement and the general sense of apathy in the community, some members chartered a community-based organisation called the Abu Dahab Street Association to address these problems. Since its establishment earlier this year, the association has helped improve security in the area by lighting the streets once again and ensuring that they remain so. Garbage is now regularly collected. Income-generating projects were initiated along the street. Although it still remains to be seen the extent to which they can mobilise the community in general to lobby officials for a wider role in the park and the operationalisation of the park’s studios, shops and community cafe, initial results are promising. All these are positive indications of a community trying to have a bigger say in the nature of their surrounding urban environment and make the impact of the park in upgrading the area sustainable.

FOOTNOTES