

Darb al-Ahmar Monuments

CAIRO, EGYPT

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



Conservators clean a wooden frame from the mausoleum of Aslam Mosque.

Opposite page:
Above, a view of Khayrbek Mosque from the Historic Wall.

Below, restoration work is being undertaken on the upper roundel in the mausoleum of Aslam Mosque.



Project Scope/Objectives

The scope of these projects included documentation and condition surveys, structural stabilization, and architectural and fine conservation and restoration. This was coupled with archaeological excavations and surrounding landscape work where necessary, along with 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 mosques were 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.

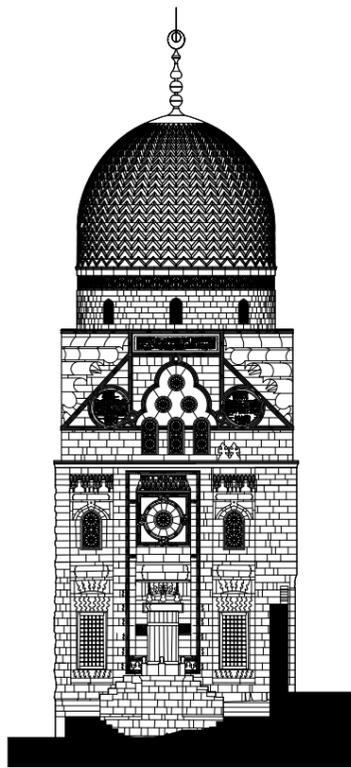
Opposite page:
Conservation and restoration work has continued at the Khayrbek Mosque complex with work on Alin Aq Palace in the foreground, a ruined structure to be reused as a museum.

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 organizations 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), Aslam 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;



10 m



A drawing of the elevation of the Tarabay al-Sharify complex (left), seen under scaffolding and undergoing conservation and cleaning in 2006 (right).

- 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.



Above, the wooden *minbar* and the interior of Khayrbek Mosque complex have undergone thorough restoration.

Below, a view of the interior of Aqsunqur Mosque (known as the Blue Mosque) during restoration in 2009.

Overleaf:
An interior view of Aslam Mosque after restoration.



KHAYRBEK COMPLEX

Background

BRIEF HISTORY OF PROJECT SITE

Amir Khayer Bek, a former governor of Aleppo 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 1502 and 1520 adjacent to Khayer Bek's residence, the Alin Aq Palace (13th–14th century). The *sabil* (public water source) of Janim al-Hamzawy (1532) was erected nearby, as were two Ottoman houses (17th century). In 1884, an earthquake caused serious damage to the top of the Khayrbek Mosque minaret, leading to the collapse of its pavilion. In 2002, in coordination with the Supreme Council of Antiquities (SCA), AKTC started reconstruction of the upper part of the minaret and a conservation project involving the entire complex and adjacent structures.

Challenges

PROJECT RISKS

The project targeted a variety of buildings dating from different periods, involving a wide range of materials, techniques and interventions. The reconstruction of the upper part of the Khayrbek Mosque minaret was a major concern, as it is one of the few extant minarets with an upper pavilion made of timber.

SITE CONDITIONS

The Khayrbek complex site covers more than 8000 m² and is located on a major route between the Citadel and Bab Zuwayla. The site is adjacent to a community sports club that caused some damage and trespass on the premises.

INFRASTRUCTURE

None of the Khayrbek complex buildings had adequate electrical and lighting systems. The Ottoman houses had no water supply, drainage or toilet facilities.

BUILDING CONDITIONS

The various buildings on the site suffered from neglect and had fallen into a state of decay. The Ottoman houses were occupied by squatters. Historically, the Mosque was never used as a place of worship due to an inaccurate *qibla* orientation and hence was rarely visited. Alin Aq Palace was in ruins.

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 topographic gridding and rectified photography. 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, Alin Aq Palace, the *sabil* of Janim al-Hamzawy (1532) and two Ottoman houses. The houses were equipped with toilet and plumbing 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 minaret; all other architectural and fine conservation activities were carried out with direct labour recruited and supervised by AKTC professional staff.

NEW TECHNOLOGIES INTRODUCED

The minaret's base structural damage was addressed using steel anchors acting as tie beams, a technique that required the expertise of a specialized contractor.

RELEVANT CODES/STANDARDS ADOPTED

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

Partners

PUBLIC PARTNERS

Supreme Council of Antiquities.

Donors

World Monuments Fund, American Research Center in Egypt.

Authoritative Framework

The Supreme Council of Antiquities and Aga Khan Cultural Services-Egypt (2001–10), World Monuments Fund and the Aga Khan Trust for Culture (2001–03), 'Reuse Agreement' (The Supreme Council of Antiquities and AKCS-E; 2004–14).



TARABAY COMPLEX

Background

BRIEF HISTORY OF THE PROJECT SITE

The project site lies on the southern side of Azhar Park, just outside the Historic Wall. The buildings on site include

the mausoleum and *sabil* of Tarabay as well as the *ribat* of Azdumur. Tarabay al-Sharify was purchased as a slave by Mamluk sultan Qaytbay, and subsequently freed and appointed *amir* in the late 15th century. Azdumur was also purchased by Qaytbay, and appointed to a number of governmental positions. He built his tomb on the northern side of the mausoleum of Tarabay. There is no documentation regarding the relationship between Tarabay and Azdumur to explain why their mausoleums were constructed in such proximity.

Challenges

PROJECT RISKS

The *sabil* was structurally in a very dangerous condition and shored up for a number of years before the conservation project began.

SITE CONDITIONS

The cluster of monuments is located in the cemetery of Bab al-Wazir, 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 unappreciated and inaccessible to visitors.

Significant Issues and Impact

PLANNING ISSUES

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

HISTORIC BUILDINGS/MONUMENTS CONSERVED

Conserving the cluster of monuments of Tarabay Mausoleum, Azdumur Madrasa and Tarabay Sabil and excavating the exterior archaeological remains was the project's aim. The process of documenting, dismantling and reconstructing three sides of the *sabil*'s structure challenged the project architects and craftsmen, illustrating the mastery of the medieval workers who first assembled the *sabil*.

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.

CONTRACTING METHODS

All architectural and fine conservation works were carried out with direct labour recruited and supervised by AKTC professional staff. The retaining walls were designed by a specialized consultant and implemented by an external contractor.

RELEVANT CODES/STANDARDS ADOPTED

The conservation project followed all the international conservation charters and guidelines. For other aspects, including hardscapes, landscapes and new construction, the Egyptian Code for Construction was adopted.

