



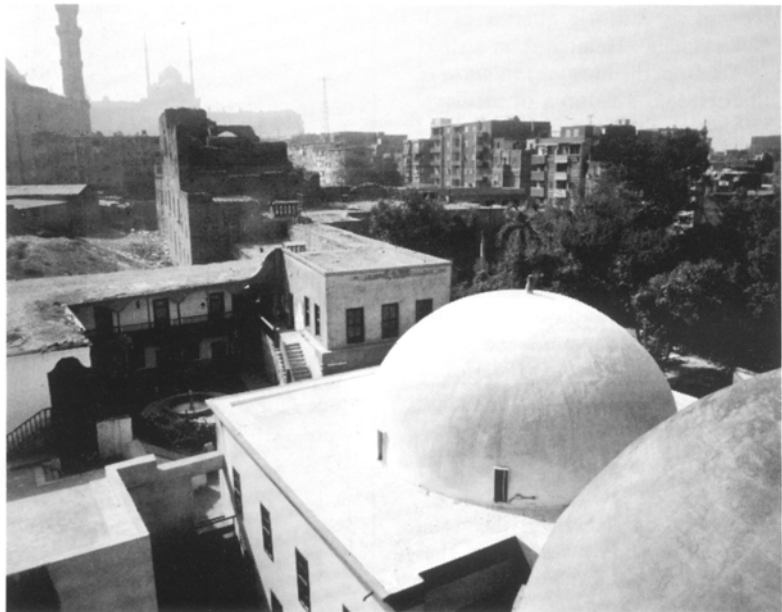
The Aga Khan Award for Architecture

Conservation of the Mevlevi Sama'khana Cairo, Egypt

<i>Architect</i>	Giuseppe Fanfoni Roma, Italy
<i>Client</i>	Egyptian Antiquities Organization Cairo, Egypt
<i>Consultant</i>	Scuola Orientale dell'Università di Roma "La Sapienza" Roma, Italy
<i>Contractor</i>	Centro Italo-Egiziano per il Restauro e l'Archeologia Cairo, Egypt
<i>Completed</i>	May 1987
<i>Site area</i>	3'850 square metres
<i>Ground floor</i>	256 square metres
<i>Total floor</i>	628 square metres
<i>Costs</i>	not available



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The restoration project of the badly damaged Sama'khana complex, an 18th century theatre and monastery of the Mevlevi Whirling Dervishes order, was launched in 1979, after an agreement between the Italian Institute of Culture and the Egyptian Antiquities Organization. The programme was also set up to train

students of the Cairo and Helwan Universities as well as personnel of the Egyptian Antiquities Organization in the various techniques of restoration. Besides accommodating the Restora-

<i>Building type</i>	071
1989 Award Cycle	1086.EGY

1. & 2. View from above before & after restoration with the Yazbak Palace and the Citadel in the background

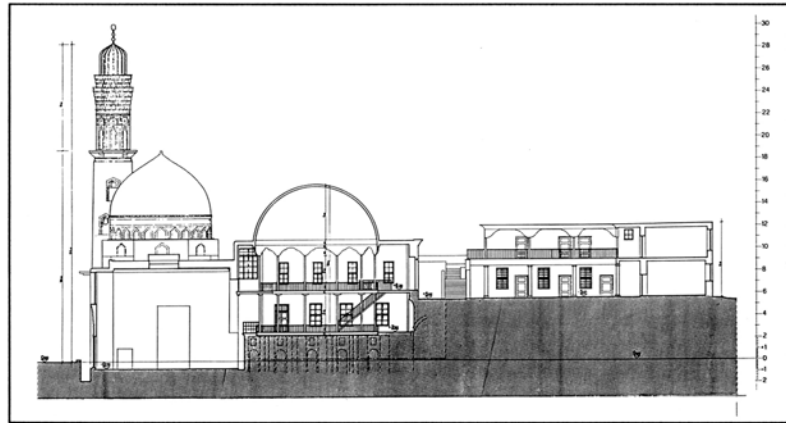
tion Centre, supervised by Italian experts, the complex will be used for cultural activities involving the local community. Over the span of the restoration period, the pace of work had to be slackened (or even brought to a stand still) on several occasions for lack of sufficient funds.

Site

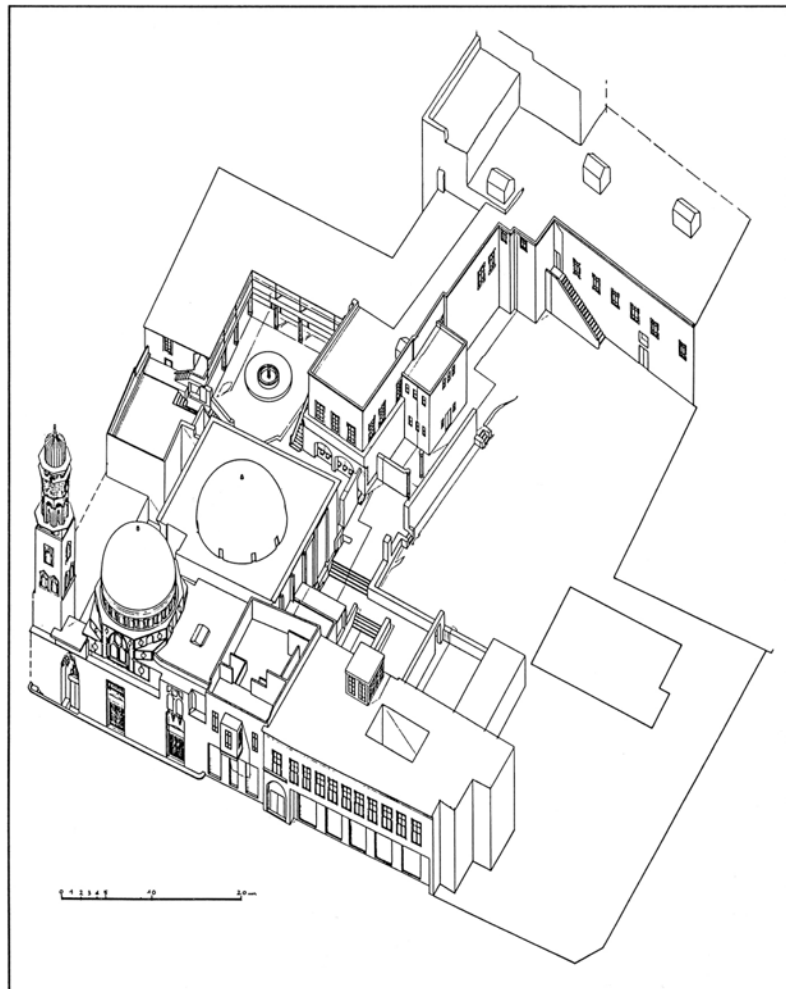
The cluster of structures which make up this complex range from the early Mamluk period (the *madrasa*/mausoleum of the Emir Sunqur Sa'di/Hasan Sadaqa built in 1315 and the Palace of Yazbak Aqbardi dating to the 14th century) to the late Ottoman era (the Mevlevi Sama'khana built in the 18th century). The *madrasa* and mausoleum of Emir Sunqur Sa'di and their adjoining minaret line as-Suyufiyya street, in the historic quarter of al-Khalifa (today's Helmiyya), at a short distance from the mosque/*madrasa* of Sultan Hasan. This area of medieval Cairo which lies beyond the Fatimid walls was developed in the Mamluk period, with the nearby pond of the Birkat al-Fil and the old Khalig al-Masri (canal). Nowadays, it is a densely populated urban district experiencing growing infrastructural problems, notably those of water infiltration and over-burdened sewerage systems, both of which seriously endanger the numerous Islamic monuments dotted around this area.

Functional Requirements

The works consisted of the total restoration of the Mevlevi Sama'khana, preceded by thorough excavations of underlying structures.



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3. Section

4. Axonometric view of the Mevlevi complex

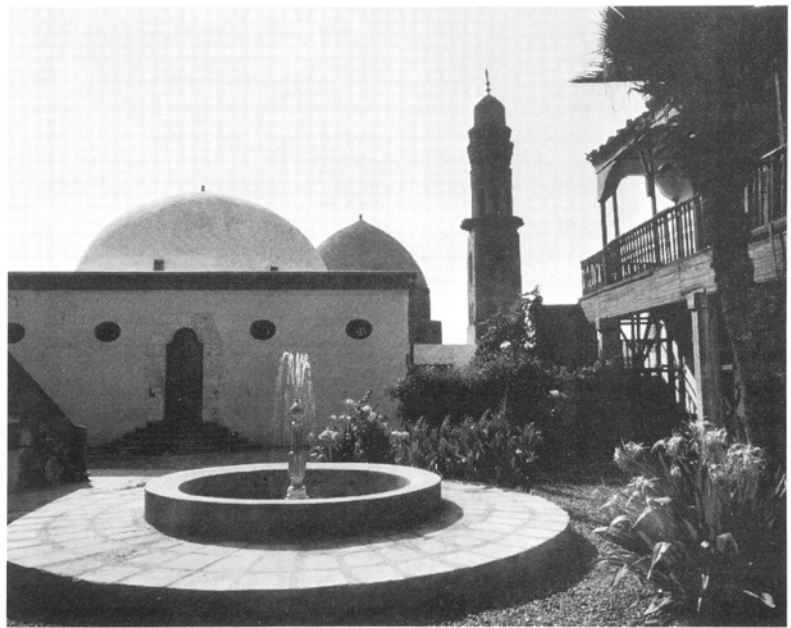
Description

The Mevlevi theatre and monastery were built behind the mausoleum of Sunqur Sa'di, over the *sahn* and south-eastern *iwan* of the *madrasa*, of which only the north-western *iwan* remains - it was originally built on a 4-*iwan* plan. The remains of the Yazbak Aqbardi Palace lie beyond the dervishes' theatre.

The Sama'khana is a wooden structure which occupies a 15x15m square and features a central circular area reserved for performances and surmounted by a 10.65m/diameter wooden dome. Two levels of circular galleries line the height of the central performance hall and are supported on slender wooden columns. The sandstone walls were cracked in some areas and the interior surface of the dome was plastered and painted with landscape scenes. Due to water infiltration and dampness, these paintings were flaking off and some parts of the dome itself were crumbling.

Excavations were carried out for the consolidation of the foundations and revealed the *sahn* of Sunqur Sa'di's *madrasa*. A system of support was placed under the Sama'khana's floor to enable visitors to see the perfectly preserved remains of this part of the *madrasa*. Scaffoldings were set up to allow the repairs of the wooden structure and to support the dome's inner shell during the restoration of the paintings. These scaffoldings were erected according to local methods, using wooden sections tied with ropes to avoid metal clamps which have to be hammered: undue vibrations would have further damaged the brittle and flaking painted plaster.

The cracks in the wooden structure of the dome were partially tightened to restore its original shape and all the wooden ribs were treated and reinforced; the original columns of Lebanese pinewood supporting the interior structure and dome underwent a similar treatment. The paint-



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ings were carefully restored and a mechanical system to open the eight windows of the dome was devised to preserve the later decorations they display. The major works, including consolidation of the walls and insula-

tion from rising dampness were completed by May 1987.

5. *The Sama'khana seen from the Mevlevi Cloister*

6. *South elevation of the Sama'khana seen from the garden of the Yazbak Aqbardi Palace*



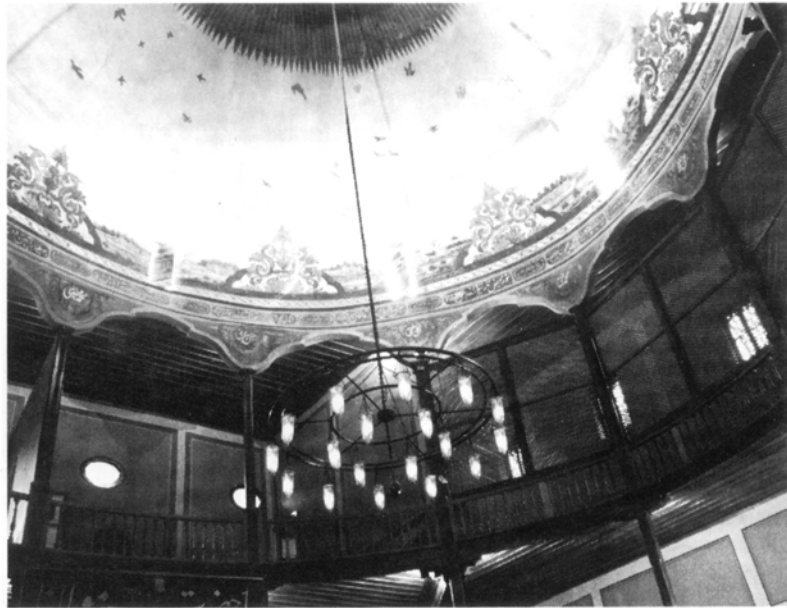
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Project Significance

The Sama'khana is the only surviving monument of its kind and function in Cairo and its restoration therefore takes on additional significance. The careful rehabilitation of the earlier, underlying structures of the Sunqur Sa'di *madrasa* and their accessibility to the public further adds to the merit of this project, which has succeeded in bringing to light the superposition of various monuments; this illustrates the successive uses of space in cities with as many layers of occupation as old Cairo. The didactic function of the Restoration Centre will certainly initiate further restorations in the Khalifa district.

Construction

The building is made of stone and brick external walls dating from different periods, with an internal timber structure and a plastered timber dome. The old stone foundations were consolidated by injections of a composition similar to the original mortar. The brick walls were strengthened with epoxide resin, while new columns support the central excavated



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area of the theatre which has been reconstructed. The original wooden beams and boards have been treated and re-used, and a few severely damaged elements were replaced altogether, and can be identified by their slightly different colour. Walls have been lime-plastered and painted

with natural pigments. 85% of the 20% skilled labour was local.

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7. & 8. Interior views after restoration showing how the dome paintings were conserved

9. Interior view before restoration

10. The dome during restoration