

Historic Cairo : Causes of Deterioration and Suggestions for Preservation  
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Cairo is distinguished by its rich architectural heritage. During the middle ages the qasabah, the present Sharia M'izz Lidin Allah, was its "spine", a focus for industrial, commercial and religious activities. Ordinances of Muhammad-Ibn-Qaitbay and Al-Ghury 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 their waqfs; actual deterioration may have begun when spaces within those formerly endowed buildings were converted into lodgings. (2)

The deterioration of historical buildings can be attributed to :

1. LACK 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.

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) Changes of subsoil water levels which has caused unequal settlement in parts of buildings in the area. All old buildings were built as a load-bearing system. The foundation level varies between 2.50 to 3.50m from ground level. Soil investigation shows :
  - \* first layer 4-5 m debris.
  - \* second layer 5-12 m of sand-clay mixture.
  - \* third layer 12-20 m sand layer of different grades.

The ground water table in the old city varies from 20,00 up to 0.50m below the street level.

This difference in the water table is only due to the different levels of the city contours.

- d) Humidity from subsoil water and rain, which, because of lack of continuing and effective maintenance, is infiltrating walls and ceilings.

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

- a) The State reallocated the waqfs 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-Gammāmiyā district a *sabil* is used as a carpentry workshop, while in al-Azhar and al-Gamāliya district wakalas are used as warehouses, 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 Dept. of Antiquities has been unable to protect historical buildings against the trespassing of either the private citizens of 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 for the protection of each monument itself without considering the surrounding area, sets some conditions for new buildings in the area but is limited in its determination of what constitutes architectural value to exclude the twentieth century. Although during the nineteenth century the State became aware of the grave danger threatening this precious heritage. A committee for preservation of the Arab antiquities was formed at end of 1881 AD and the first legislation for their protection was issued two years later. The register issued in 1951, for example, included 622 buildings, of which about 100 have been disappeared in the last thirty years. It is evident that mere legislation has not been enough to protect priceless cultural property.
- 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 sandstone 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.

My proposals to overcome the present situation are :

1) On The Public Level :

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 :

- a. By promoting public awareness of antiquities through the mass media.
- b. By including the cultural heritage in the history syllabus in schools, thus enabling students to get acquainted with their history and civilization. Instructions should be supported with well-prepared trips to visit museums, buildings, areas and sites.
- c. By arousing interest in Islamic architectural studies at the Faculties of Engineering and Arts, promoting an acquaintance with aesthetic values and modes of expression and with the architectural and visual aspects of urban design.

2) On The Governmental Level :

- a. The Documentation Centre should be supported with specialized personnel and transformed 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.
- b. The capacity of the Engineering Department should meanwhile be consolidated, to enable it to make accurate and complete drawings of the building and of the historical areas, supported with photos.
- c. The formation of an architectural-archaeological committee is strongly advised. This 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.
- d. The issuance of decree prohibiting the passage of vehicles and transforming all historical areas into pedestrian ones -with provision 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.

- e. 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.
- f. Instead of using cement mortar, different original mortars should be used depending on relative exposure to water, such as lime and burnt brick dust, or lime, mud and timber ashes (black pan mortar) being used for water reservoirs and roofs.(3)

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.

In our case we would try not only to preserve the principles and values of our Islamic architecture, but also integrate their elements into a new architectural language.

It should be carried out according to concepts based upon the deepest realities of Egyptian Society.

It should be mentioned the great effort, which has been done during the last five years by the Egyptian Antiquities Organization under the leadership of Dr. Ahmed Kadri in the field of restoration, conservation and preservation of the Islamic architectural heritage all over Egypt.

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Historic Cairo: Causes of Deterioration and Suggestions for preservation

By: Prof.Dr. Saleh Lamei Mostafa

Cairo is distinguished by its rich architectural heritage. Deterioration of historic buildings can be attributed to three major factors:

- 1- Lack of public concern for antiquities.
- 2- The environmental circumstances represented in: accumulated dust, polluted air caused by traffic and industry, inadequate infra-structure system and humidity from subsoil-water and rain.
- 3- Lack of Governmental measures such as: multiplicity of State Departments, lodging of inhabitants in historic buildings, using historical buildings for incompatible activities limited resources for restoration.

To overcome this situation, I propose:

- 1- Awakening the public awareness through mass media and arousing the interest in Islamic architectural studies at schools of Architecture.
- 2- On governmental level, the Documentation Centre and the Engineering Dept. should be consolidated, preserve the urban fabric by determination the standards for rehabilitation of historic areas and transforming all historic districts into pedestrian ones.

Le Caire est distingué par son riche architectural héritage. Détérioration des bâtiments historiques peut être attribuer à 3 facteurs majeurs:

- 1- Manque d'anxiété public pour les antiquités.
- 2- Les circonstances de l'environnement représentées dans l'accumulation de la poussière, de l'air pollué causé par le trafic et l'industrie, le système insuffisant de l'infrastructure et l'humidité par l'eau terrestre et pluie.
- 3- Manque des mesures gouvernementaux: comme la multiplicité des départements gouvernementaux, logement des habitants dans les bâtiments historiques, utilisé les bâtiments historiques pour les activités incompatibles et les ressources limitées.

Pour surmonter cette situation, je propose:

- 1- Eveiller l'attention public à travers le mass média.
- 2- Sur le niveau gouvernemental, le centre documentaire et le département d'Ingénieur doit être consolider; préserver le tissu urbain par la détermination des standards pour la rehabilitation et transformer tous les régions à d'autres pour les piétons.

La Rehabilitation ne doit pas empêcher le development mais créer un intégral et harmonie environnement pour préserver les principes et les valeurs de l'héritage Musulman.