

MODERNIZATION, RESTORATION AND REHABILITATION OF OLD CITIES IN EGYPT

When we use the word Cairo, we are not speaking of that city which was founded by the Fatimids after their conquest of Egypt in 969 A.D. and which they called Al Qahira considering it as their capital. It was separated from former Islamic capitals to the south by a wall. These earlier cities were Al-Fustât, founded in 641 by Am-Ibn-El-As the Arab conquerer of Egypt, Al-Asker founded by the Abbasid governor, Salih-ibn-Ali in 750, and Al-Qatali, founded by Amed-ibn-Tulûn in 868. What is meant by Cairo is the great city of the middle ages which had grown not only to embrace all these capitals but to extend beyond them in Ayyubid, Mamluk, and Ottoman times, thus uniting them in one metropolis.

Within these ancient parts of Cairo is to be found a long series of Coptic and Islamic monuments dating from the Umayyads, Abbasids, Tulunids, Fatimids, Ayyubids, Mamluks, Ottomans and the Muhamed Ali Dynasty. They possess a great variety of styles, characteristic of the development of Coptic and Islamic architecture. Yet we cannot say that any one quarter has one style peculiar to it for the city's growth has been continuous.

New buildings have constantly been erected while old ones have been restored and added to, so that some of them are a fascinating mixture of the styles of different periods.

Nevertheless, no specific care was bestowed upon their preservation before the 19th century, before the year 1881 to be exact, when a committee for the preservation of Islamic monuments was set up by virtue of a decree dated 18 December. The second clause of the decree defined the Committee's task as being :

1. To specify the ancient Islamic monuments that were of historic or architectural importance.
2. To safeguard these monuments and to preserve them from decay, notifying Ministry of Waqfs (Religious Endowments) of these repairs Needed.

3. To study the plans and drawings of the required restorations, to approve them and to superintend the carrying out of the work.
4. To deposit all drawings in the library of the Ministry of Waqfs and to inform that ministry of the antiquities that needed to be removed to a museum for their preservation.

In the course of time this committee next came under the Ministry of Education then under the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities, and now finally under the Ministry of Culture. In accordance with the terms of the original decree it set out to take all necessary steps for protecting the monuments from destruction by repairing and restoring them. It was not responsible for preserving the character of the ancient quarters as a whole nor did it supervise the planning of new streets except when those plans affected ancient buildings. In that case it studied the plans in order to ensure that they should not have an adverse effect. If necessary, it might remove an ancient structure from one site to another or object to the plan and require its modification, especially if the monument was of outstanding importance. Only rarely it would agree to the demolition of a classified monument.

Interest in the preservation of the original character of a historic quarter as a whole appeared only recently, when the Higher Council for Arts Literature and Social Sciences formed a Sub-Committee of the Committee of Architecture and the Committee of history and archeology. It studied the means of preserving the character of the old quarters of Cairo and issued its recommendations in 1960. These came under two heads; - the first concerned the lines of demarcation, while the second dealt with the means of preserving the ancient character.

As regards the lines of demarcation, the Council recommended the necessity of preserving the following areas and streets.

1. Fatimid Cairo
2. Preserving the existing width of main streets in other quarters beside which monuments are situated. These streets are :
 - a) Shâri al Khayâmiyah from Bab Zuwaylah to Shâri al Qala'ah.
 - b) Darb al-Ahmar, al Tabânah, Bâb al-Wazîr, Sûq al Salâh.
 - c) Shari as-Sûyufiyah to Shâri as-Salibiyah as they are.
3. Maintaning the present form of Midân Salâh-ad-Din.

These streets are all in old quarters outside Fatimid Caïor.

As for preserving the original character the Council recommended :

1. Keeping the lanes and streets of Fatimid Cairo to their present width and preserving its ancient form and style.
2. Giving no permits for new buildings except after consultations with the Antiquities Department and obtaining its approval of the plans submitted to the Municipality together with the application of the would be licensee.
3. Buildings in Fatimid Cairo and on the above mentioned streets should be subject to certain restriction such as that they should be Islamic in style, have a suitably coloured facade, and be no more than 15 metres high.
4. Any building erected in front of or beside an old building should not be higher than the older one.

A number of Committees were formed to study these recommendations some ad-hoc and some stemming from Cairo's planning Committee, all being established by ministerial decree. The first decree was n°156 for the year 1967 issued by the Minister of Housing. It was to study the demarcation already laid down for the monumental side of Shari Mash'had al-Husayni, that past situated between Shari Mash'had al Husayni and Shari al-Azhar in order to decide its fitness for the project and its possible effect on establishments of a special character or of antique value in the Khan al-Khalili area.

Order n° 365 of 1914/1967 set up a committee of experts in architecture, history, archeology, arts and commerce its restudy the plan for Fatimid Cairo. Its purpose was :

1. To study the projected plan for Fatimid Cairo and the restrictions on buildings on that site.
2. To discuss this plan and the restrictions in order that the committee might suggest changes in them that would safeguard the character of the site and at the same time not deprive it of necessary modern services, as well as proposing architectural regulations that would have to be considered when erecting new buildings on it.

On 27/8/1967 the Minister of Housing issued order n° 874/1967 forming a committee to study how to preserve the ancient character of Cairo's quarters. This committee was composed of members of the Architecture Committee of the Higher Council of Arts, Literature and Social Sciences, members of that Council's Committee of History and Archeology, members of the committee for Architectural Design and Planning, and the higher Planning Committee for Great Cairo.

This Committee advert:

To study the recommendations of both the Architecture Committee and that of History and Archeology which had been issued in 1960 concerning means of preserving the ancient character of Cairo's quarters. It was to give its opinion on them and to make its own recommendations of what points should be considered when renewing the plan for the old quarters of Cairo while not depriving it of modern public services.

To define more clearly the regulations that should be followed when permitting new buildings in these quarters.

In due course these committees made their recommendations. The most important committee was that formed by order n° 374/1967 to study the recommendations of both the Architecture Committee and that of History and Archeology. This studied the actual situations in these quarters. It visited them and their monuments and considered the recommendations made by the other committees concerning lines of demarcation, original character and restrictions on new buildings. It concluded its work by making a number of recommendations that dealt with the preservation of ancient monuments and of parts of ancient sites, their general maintenance and the renovation and safeguarding of their design.

We are here interested in those concerning the preservation of ancient monuments, the renovation of a site; and the safeguarding of its character. Many recommendations dealt with the preservation of ancient monuments, the aim of being to preserve them, to vacate them to care for their cleanliness and maintenance, and to lay down a policy with detailed executive programmes for preserving them.

When considering the plan of the old quarters and how to preserve their character, the committee divided that plan into two parts.

The first part contains most of the ancient monuments. The committee was quite clear about this and stipulated that it was the responsibility of the planning authorities to safeguard the lines of demarcation of the streets and lanes in this part. No change was to be made except in opening up some inner squares that would keep to clear the area and reveal its special character.

The second part is that which surrounds the first one. This is well situated for serving the site as a whole that is there that public services such as schools, hospitals, gardens and so on, should be established so that their size and height should not detract from the character of the first part.

The Committee suggested making two main streets passing west to east, one on the northern limit of the area the other on the southern.

As for preserving the general character of the monuments in any one area, the Committee admitted that this could not be done since the monuments as a group do not belong to any one period. Therefore, any architectural plan and design apart from detailed planning and design of individual monuments must consider the monuments of one area as a group.

This imposes a heavy responsibility upon the architects. In consequence, the Committee recommended the formation of a technical office that would include qualified architects and specialists in archeology and the fine arts. This office should be responsible for planning initial architectural designs of the buildings and of details of existing facades in each part of the area, especially in the first part mentioned above.

The Committee was led to make these divisions by the extent of the area containing ancient monuments and by the fact that many of its buildings have lost their ancient character.

After Cairo, the next town to arouse the interest of the authorities for its historical importance was Rosetta (Ras-hid). Many of its quarters have preserved their original quality. It has many ancient buildings, and these, unlike those in Cairo, have been little changed. The Antiquities Department has there followed a similar planning policy.

It requested that the authority, responsible for re-planning Rosetta should ask its opinion on any planning project so that the ancient buildings, and the general character of the town might be preserved.

In carrying out restoration and preservation work, the Department has been careful to maintain the original quality of the buildings by using materials similar to those used in former times. It is the insufficiency amount of funds that hinders this task. This insufficiency arises from the magnitude of the task. There are some 590 ancient buildings in Cairo and 174 in the provinces. All of these are in need of money that is not available at a time when every piastre has to be used for economical, agricultural and industrial development

The cost of repairing the ancient Coptic and Islamic monuments has been estimated at L. E. 3.500.000. Also, the number of competent workers in this field is few. However, the Department has drawn up a ten year plan for repairing and

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