

REVERSING THE DECLINE OF A HISTORIC DISTRICT

Francesco Siravo, Senior Project Officer, Historic Cities Support Programme



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Darb al-Ahmar is a densely built urban triangle in the heart of Islamic Cairo. It is located near the prestigious al-Azhar Mosque and the popular Khan al-Khalili, historic Cairo's principal bazaar, and is bordered by the Azhar Street, the Darassa hills and the north-south spine of Darb al-Ahmar Street. Today, the area is the focus of much public interest, and is on the verge of major changes induced by a number of large-scale projects, such as the construction of the Azhar Street tunnel and pedestrian square between al-Azhar and al-Hussein, the development of new parking and commercial facilities near al-Hussein Hospital ("Urban Plaza") and, last but not least, the creation of the 30-hectare Azhar Park on the Darassa hills, a strategic location between the Fatimid city, the Mamluk cemeteries and the Citadel.

Furthermore, the old city has recently become the focus of more and more restoration projects, thanks to an ambitious programme financed with a special fund granted by President Mubarak and implemented by the Egyptian Ministry of Culture. This programme includes some 50 monuments in the heart of the old city, some of them close to Darb al-Ahmar. In Darb al-Ahmar itself, the Aga Khan Trust for Culture has initiated the restoration of the thirteenth century Ayyubid city wall and a number of other monuments described in this chapter.

These developments will dramatically improve the image and importance of the old city of Cairo over the course of the next several years. They are indeed expected to attract many new visitors and bring significant economic benefits to Darb al-Ahmar. But they also present serious risks for an area which is both socially and environmentally fragile. Unless held in check and properly channelled through a conscious planning effort, speculative pressure may soon result in a pattern of uncontrolled development in the area, leading to the expulsion of both the current residents and the existing activities, and thus paving the way for a total substitution of the traditional urban fabric. The common, though incorrect, perception of Darb al-Ahmar as a haven for crime and drug-related activity may also sustain radical concepts of intervention aimed at clearing and sanitising the district, thus further contributing to irreversible transformation. Awareness of these potential risks prompted AKTC to initiate, in parallel with the

Roof-top view of the Aslam neighbourhood in Darb al-Ahmar illustrating the dense existing housing fabric, much of which is in poor condition and in need of upgrading.



View of the main spine of Darb al-Ahmar, taken in the 1920s and, opposite (p. 37), a typical neighbourhood street as it appears today.

strategic programme, a plan of action to guide future interventions in the district.

ISSUES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Darb al-Ahmar suffers from the weaknesses commonly found throughout Islamic Cairo (and many other historic city centres in developing countries), the combined result of a series of social, economic and physical factors:

- Low family incomes and an economic base that often lags behind development in newer parts of Cairo;
- A deteriorating housing core resulting from unrealistic planning constraints, pending demolition orders, limited access to credit and widespread insecurity of tenure;
- Continued deterioration of monuments and historic structures;
- The consequences of the 1992 earthquake and a lack of public investment and regular upkeep of city infrastructure; and
- The absence of essential community facilities and services.

But the district also has significant strengths and opportunities that are the source of the area's vibrant character. These strengths are the result of the district's closely integrated physical and social fabric, namely:

- A traditional layout and pedestrian orientation where housing, open spaces, commerce, mosques and places of social gathering are integrated and create a highly cohesive urban environment;
- An outstanding collection of mediaeval monuments and historic buildings;
- A dense residential core where neighbours help and depend upon each other;
- A well-established community with a population largely employed in productive activities; and
- An important pool of skilled workers and small enterprises.

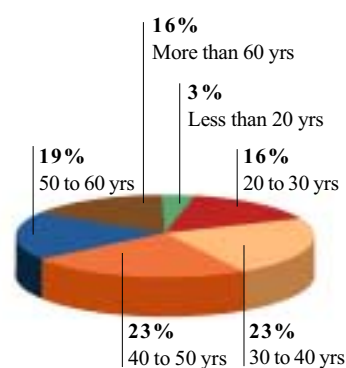
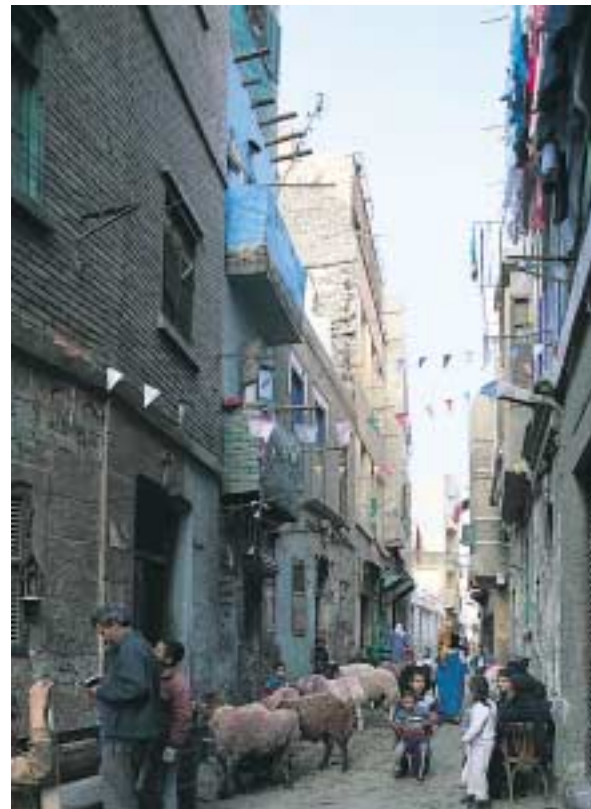
These positive characteristics defy commonly accepted stereotypes of Darb al-Ahmar, which is often perceived as a slum area where residents are presumed to be recent immigrants occupied in marginal activities, and where traditional values and a sense of community are supposedly lacking. Very much to the contrary, AKTC's survey shows

that most adults are gainfully employed and that crime in the district is negligible. Furthermore, over 60% of the people have lived in the area for thirty years or more, and almost 20% have been there for more than fifty years. Length of residence was found to be the result not of necessity, but of choice. Most inhabitants feel comfortable and safe in their neighbourhoods. They cite the proximity of family and mosques, as well as the support of their neighbours, as reasons to stay in the area, thus highlighting the very traditional values and sense of community which are said to be lacking. Most importantly, residents view Darb al-Ahmar as their permanent home and are ready to invest their own resources to improve their living conditions. The survey thus demonstrates that the essential pre-conditions needed to implement a housing rehabilitation and economic revitalisation programme exist, and that such a programme can be firmly based on the district's social setting and local resources.

STRATEGIC ACTIONS AND PILOT INTERVENTIONS

Awareness of these positive factors, but also of the area's inherent risks and weaknesses, prompted AKTC to extend its planning efforts into Darb al-Ahmar. In co-operation with institutional partners and local NGOs, both general issues and specific concerns were discussed with national and municipal institutions, neighbourhood representatives, local businessmen as well as with people living and working in the area.

These discussions helped identify general planning policies and a number of pilot projects aimed at the improvement of living conditions through the preservation and careful development of the area. The long-term strategy developed for Darb al-Ahmar focuses on an integrated programme of physical and economic revitalisation in an effort to reverse the present pattern of decay and improve living, leisure and working conditions for residents. This strategy sees preservation as part of a comprehensive rehabilitation process. It envisions a future for the district in which a stable residential core is enlivened and sustained by a capillary system of small workshops and retail activities, supported by essential infrastructure and community facilities, and made more attractive by well-maintained open spaces and monuments. To realise this vision, conditions must be established to sustain and encourage a stable and self-sufficient



A social survey and demographic assessment showed that a high percentage of the population are long-term residents in Darb al-Ahmar.

Darb al-Ahmar is located between the famous al-Azhar Mosque (left) and the hills of the Azhar Park, visible in the background. Direct pedestrian links exist between the Park and the historic spine of Fatimid Cairo, with its many bazaars and old neighbourhoods.

population. In turn, this requires improving the economic climate, addressing community development issues and physically upgrading the area. More specifically, actions must be aimed at creating and facilitating access to sustainable employment opportunities for unemployed young people, providing health and educational facilities, particularly for women and school children, and, above all, strengthening civic groups and local institutions that will steer and sustain future actions in the district. Such socially relevant activities can and must go hand in hand with physical rehabilitation projects, such as restoring and re-using key historic structures and providing for their ongoing maintenance, upgrading open spaces and the urban environment and ensuring their ongoing upkeep, and rehabilitating and improving the existing housing stock and enabling its survival. Both the social and the physical aspects are indeed interdependent and can foster significant synergies.



Implementation of such interrelated activities is sought through a series of pilot projects in specific locations within Darb al-Ahmar, strategically located near the Historic Wall bordering the new Park, particularly along the corridor that is at relatively higher risk of uncontrolled transformation. They take advantage of special opportunities identified during the course of the survey, which focus on individual monuments and historic buildings, on significant public open spaces and on residential clusters, as detailed below. Over the next few years, these pilot projects will offer an opportunity to investigate key conservation and development issues and help identify policies and solutions for physical improvements that can be applied throughout the district. Whether individual monuments, public spaces or residential areas, these projects can be viewed not only as candidates for rehabilitation but also as catalysts for future social and economic revitalisation.



Above: Darb al-Ahmar is a closely knit community of artisans and small shopkeepers.

Below: The Tablita Market in the heart of the historic centre (see p. 45).










REHABILITATION OF HISTORIC BUILDINGS

Historic buildings are plentiful in Darb al-Ahmar, and they include some of mediaeval Cairo's finest and most admired historic monuments. There are sixty-five monuments registered by the Supreme Council of Antiquities in the area, as well as several hundred unregistered but architecturally significant buildings (mainly apartment houses) that determine the quality of this urban context. Their long-term preservation is crucial to maintaining the area's architectural character, and they should play an important role in attracting visitors to the area and in enhancing the life of the district's neighbourhoods. Future development strategies in this sector need to promote the stabilisation and long-term maintenance of these structures, as well as integrate them in the district's social, recreational and educational activities.

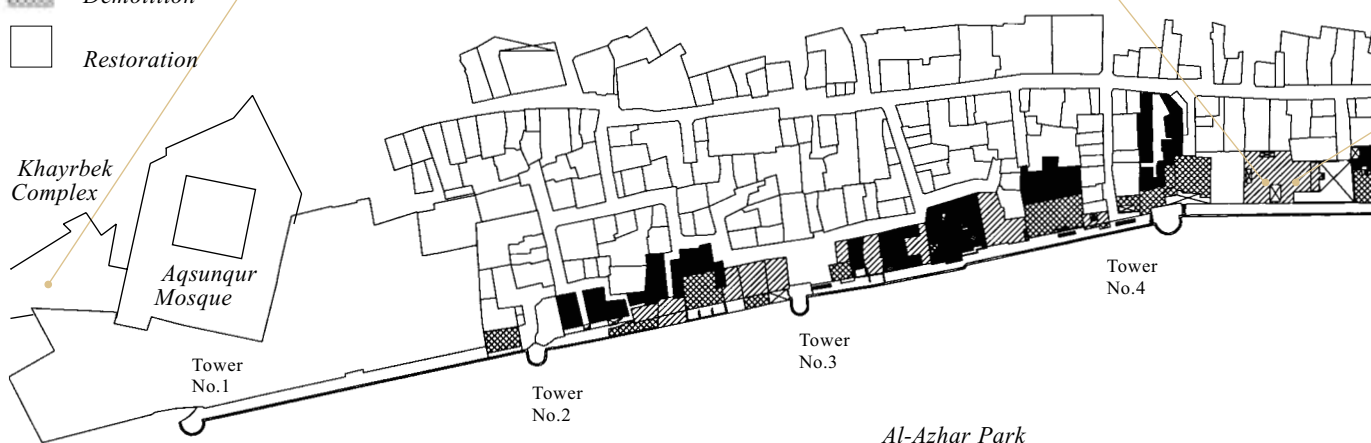
AKTC has targeted three representative projects to fulfil these strategic objectives through practical, direct action: conservation of the Umm Sultan Shaban Mosque, restoration of the Khayrbek complex (composed of several associated buildings) and rehabilitation and adaptive reuse

Proposed Interventions

-  Maintenance
-  Rehabilitation
-  New Development
-  Demolition
-  Restoration

• Interventions to restore the Khayrbek complex and surrounding open spaces.

• Rehabilitation and conversion of the abandoned Darb Shoughlan School into a community facility and visitors centre. (See pgs. 41/43)



of the former Darb Shoughlan School. These initiatives are being undertaken through special agreements between AKTC and the two institutions responsible for these buildings: the Supreme Council of Antiquities, as the custodian of all monuments in Egypt, and the Ministry of Awqaf (Religious Endowments), the actual owner and often user of many monuments. These agreements will help develop partnerships to explore and implement innovative and realistic solutions for preserving Cairo's monuments and historic buildings. Planned solutions range from identifying appropriate restoration techniques to finding compatible new uses and developing the roles these structures will play in Darb al-Ahmar's revitalised physical organisation and social life.



Above: Darb Shoughlan school facility under rehabilitation.

UMM SULTAN SHABAN MOSQUE

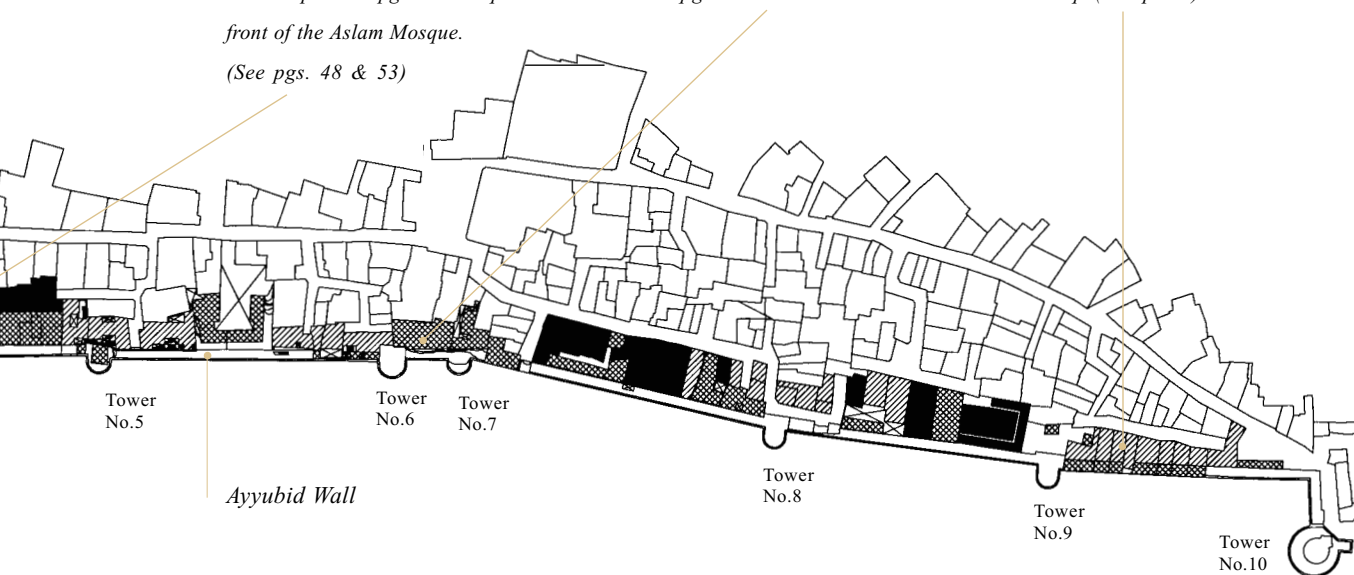
A partial restoration and reconstruction programme has been started for the fourteenth-century Umm Sultan Shaban mosque and minaret. The cracks that appeared at the base of the minaret following the 1992 earthquake led to renewed attention to its structural condition and prompted an investigation into the history and architectural features of the building and its partially collapsed minaret. Fuelling the ongoing

*Opposite page above:
The Khayrbek complex as seen from the Park site.*
*Opposite page below:
The Khayrbek complex from the Darb al-Ahmar side.*

• Credit assistance for housing rehabilitation in the Aslam Mosque neighbourhood and development of a detailed plan to upgrade the square in front of the Aslam Mosque.
(See pgs. 48 & 53)

• Archaeological investigations as a first step toward re-establishing access to the new park via the historic Bab al-Mahruq gate.

• Rehabilitation and new development in the decayed residential blocks along Atfet Asaad and south of Burg al-Mahruq. (See p. 46)





The French photographer H. Bachard recorded the Shaban Mosque before the top of its minaret collapsed in 1884, providing essential information for its planned reconstruction. In the foreground are the typical “mashrabiyya” bay windows of traditional streets in historic Cairo, very few of which remain.

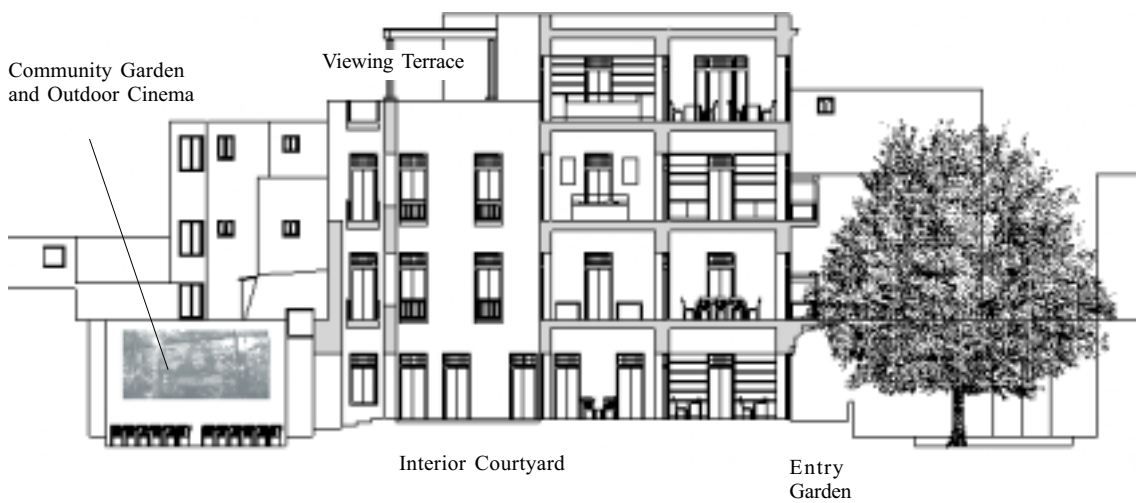
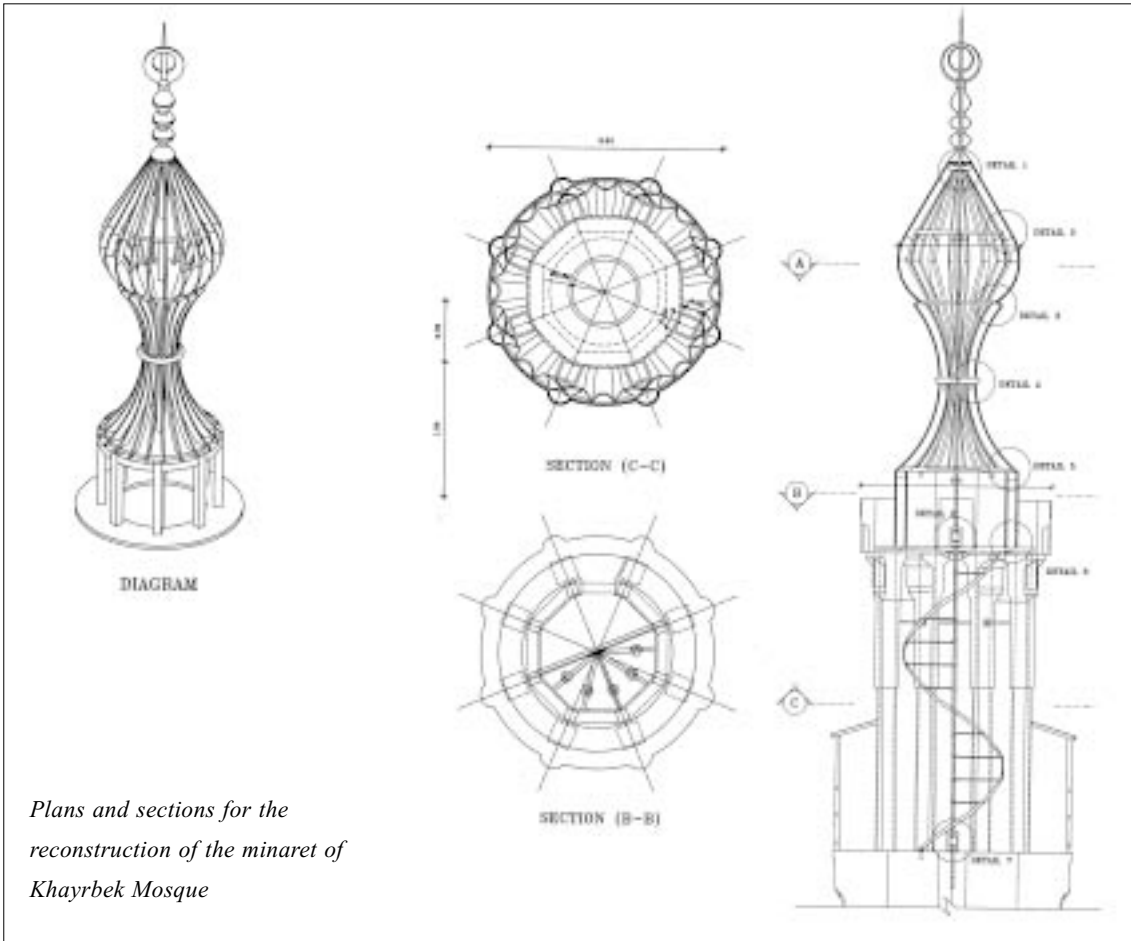
investigation is the need to preserve this landmark and a desire to re-integrate the missing section so that it may once again fulfil its visual and symbolic role in the city. The stabilisation of the roof and reconstruction of the top of the minaret will restore the integrity of Darb al-Ahmar’s streetscape and complete the skyline of historic Cairo, as seen from the Park.

KHAYRBEK COMPLEX

The Khayrbek complex and adjacent structures are another monumental ensemble in AKTC’s programme. Named after Khayrbek, the first Governor of Egypt after the Ottoman conquest, the complex was built in several stages during the Mamluk and early Ottoman periods. The stabilisation and partial restoration of the complex includes the thirteenth-century Palace of Alin Aq, the Khayrbek Mosque and Sabil-Kuttab, a ruined Ottoman house and surrounding open spaces. AKTC plans to re-establish the extraordinary urban value of this ensemble, which lies at the southern end of the Azhar Park, in close proximity to the Blue Mosque, through a combined programme of restoration (the Historic Wall and the Khayrbek Mosque and Sabil-Kuttab), stabilisation of the ruins (Palace of Alin Aq), adaptive reuse (the Ottoman house) and environmental and landscape improvements. The entire complex could eventually provide a setting for recreational and cultural events and provide a focal point in the district, for residents and visitors.

DARB SHOUGHLAN SCHOOL

Finally, the rehabilitation of the former Darb Shoughlan school, an early twentieth-century building located along the Historic Wall, offers an opportunity to introduce a community centre in a context that sorely lacks public facilities. The objective of the adaptive re-use proposals for the former school is to take advantage of the building’s close proximity to the Historic Wall and the future Park, as well as its potential, given its location and size, to serve the community. This led to the idea of re-using this large structure as a combined community and visitors centre. An orientation and exhibition space and a rooftop café with views of the Park and the Citadel will accommodate visitors, while residents will find recreational as well as family, educational and community services in the building. Some of the activities and services will produce revenue for the future operation and maintenance of the community centre.



Cross-section of the former Darb Shoughlan School (see p. 41), parallel to the adjacent Ayyubid wall. The restored building is to be converted into a community centre.



Enhancement of deteriorated public open spaces is needed to improve the quality of community life in the neighbourhoods, as well as to attract visitors interested in the history of Cairo.



PUBLIC OPEN SPACES

Public open spaces are poorly maintained and deteriorating throughout Darb al-Ahmar due to a lack of planning and investment in public infrastructure. Their deterioration may also be attributed to the fact that it is unclear what purpose they are to serve and who is to be responsible for their maintenance. In the future, a clear understanding of how these spaces are to be utilised within the community, and how they can be brought back to full use, will be essential if they are to serve civic purposes effectively and be maintained properly over time.

Toward this end, AKTC has carried out detailed surveys in Darb al-Ahmar's neighbourhoods and discussed with residents ways in which the current uses can be discontinued when harmful, or maintained and improved when desirable. Plans target not only major and highly visible spaces, but also commercial streets and small neighbourhood squares that play an important role in the quality and appearance of public spaces in the district. Proposed interventions, to be carried out with the involvement of the district authorities and the development of self-help initiatives, focus on a variety of these spaces:

Commercial streetscapes. Possible improvements range from basic space planning to accommodate conflicting activities, to upgrading street paving, public lighting and signage, as well as façades and storefronts. While these improvements by themselves do not generate economic activity, they can do much to attract and enhance commerce;

Important public squares and public concourse areas. These often require comprehensive reorganisation and space planning. Improvements in these highly visible spaces can do much to enhance the image of the area and attract visitors;

Small neighbourhood squares. These are found throughout the inner blocks of Darb al-Ahmar, often associated with tombs of saints and community mosques. These spaces can be targeted for simple low-cost improvements, designed to encourage informal contact and community life.

Aslam Square is an example of a small neighbourhood square targeted for improvements by the AKTC team. Interest in this area stems from its proximity to Bab al-Mahruq, one of the principal historic gates that

existed along the eastern side of the Ayyubid city wall and which was later blocked. In the past, the gate was connected to Aslam Square and, from here, to the important thoroughfare leading to the Fatimid gate of Bab Zuwayla. With the creation of the Azhar Park, this old connection will be re-established and Aslam Square gradually equipped to serve both as a pedestrian link and as a forum for commercial activity and social interaction in the closely knit Aslam neighbourhood.

Archaeological excavations have started near Bab al-Mahruq as a first step to re-opening the old connection with Aslam Square. Future actions foresee the involvement of local residents in an improvement scheme for the square that includes elimination of informal vehicular parking and the upgrading of public utilities, paving and lighting. The scheme will be complemented by a façade improvement programme of the residential and commercial buildings around the square, as well as selective restoration of the Aslam Mosque facing the square.

Another open space improvement project relates to the Tablita Market on the main pedestrian axis linking the heart of the Fatimid city with the Azhar Park (see picture page 39). Here, an uncontrolled proliferation of street vendors, poor management and deterioration of environmental conditions have led to a situation where the market was under threat of being completely removed – with disastrous consequences for the local community. A new project to contain and reorganise the vendors within an enclosed new market hall has now been prepared by AKTC in close cooperation with vendor representatives and in consultation with the Cairo Governorate, in an attempt to resolve the deadlock and to provide a suitable architectural solution for this sensitive vacant space.

HOUSING IMPROVEMENTS

Housing improvement projects complete the group of pilot initiatives foreseen by AKTC and constitute the most relevant demonstration of the viability of the historic fabric, at least in the eyes of the residents. As the best antidote to depopulation and decline, they are essential if Darb al-Ahmar is to remain self-sufficient. Detailed surveys carried out along the eastern boundary of Darb al-Ahmar show the worsening conditions of the residential fabric due to limited access to housing finance and insecure tenure, a problem in many historic cities. Those forced to abandon their houses and shops cannot find affordable alternatives in the same area. If the present pattern of disinvestment



*Above: Archaeological excavations near Bab al-Mahruq.
Below: Rehabilitation of deteriorating 19th-century housing stock is urgently needed.*



Improving old houses along the Historic Wall is particularly important along the edge of Darb al-Ahmar.

Left: Schematic rendering of existing conditions in Atfet Asaad. Right: Schematic rendering of the integrated pilot project, showing improved conditions after selective removal of encroachments on top of the wall. Physical and social rehabilitation of housing goes hand in hand with the wall restoration.

persists, it can only pave the way for further deterioration and the eventual demise of irreplaceable social, economic and cultural assets. It will also deprive the district of the critical mass of inhabitants needed to sustain the area's social and economic life.

Improved living conditions will promote a stable population and the kinds of productive activities that come with a steady demand for goods and services. Better housing is the basis for reversing the current decline and preserving the area's traditional social and urban fabric. For these reasons, AKTC, as part of its larger revitalisation effort, is giving priority to the identification of policies and programmes that will ameliorate housing in the area. A dual strategy is being pursued, aimed at facilitating the gradual rehabilitation of existing residential units and promoting the redevelopment of ruined buildings, vacant plots and blighted areas into new housing.

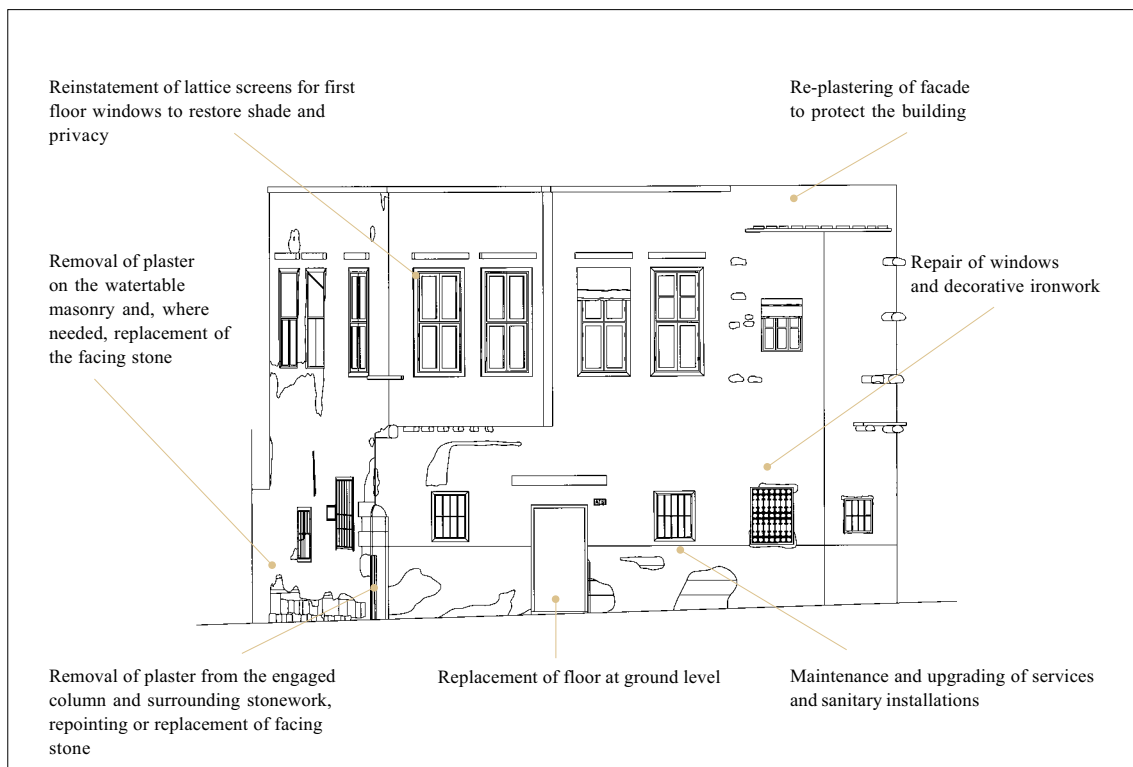
In 1998, AKTC launched a pilot study of 125 plots and buildings in Darb al-Ahmar's Aslam neighbourhood to find out what kinds of improvements are needed and how best to intervene. At the same time, the study was used to ascertain residents' interest in remaining in the



district and their willingness to contribute to the rehabilitation of their homes. The results of the study show that essential rehabilitation costs could be met largely by the residents themselves, without having to depend on very limited public resources. Creating the conditions for upgrading occupied buildings and helping people to afford to continue living in their homes not only reduces the threat of abandonment and irreversible decay, but also saves the government the considerable social and economic expense associated with relocating entire households to other parts of the city.

Case study analysing how existing buildings can be improved. Interviews confirm that many residents want to stay in Darb al-Ahmar and invest in housing. This trend should be encouraged to avoid expensive and unpopular relocation programmes.

By analysing the quality and condition of both traditional and contemporary structures, the study identifies nine levels of physical intervention in the neighbourhood, subdivided into actions aimed at preserving the historic fabric and actions aimed at transforming individual buildings that are considered inappropriate or structurally unsafe. In addition, the case studies propose a series of models for housing rehabilitation and new construction that take into account residents' lifestyles, income levels and tenure status, as well as innovative institutional and financing programmes which can be used to facilitate implementation.





A recipient of micro-credits for small enterprises has opened a tea kitchen and meal catering service for the local community.

Axonometric view of the proposed new scheme around Mahruq gate, which calls for a new connection between the nearby Midan Aslam and the Azhar Park. (see also pgs. 52/53)



Rehabilitation must be complemented by new development to provide more housing, which is in short supply throughout Darb al-Ahmar. The many plots of vacant land in the area offer ample opportunity: in 1997, a physical survey identified close to 320 vacant ruins and unimproved plots out of a total of 2,000, more than a sixth of area properties. At least part of this available land can be returned to full residential use by encouraging private development, particularly where clusters of ruins and vacant land offer the possibility of building multiple housing units and realising operational economies. In these cases, incentives can be provided using low-interest loans administered through special arrangements with owners (or tenants) and lending institutions. Project staff facilitate interaction between both sides, providing technical assistance and housing finance programmes for low- and moderate-income households. Such schemes already exist for new development, but have never been applied in historic areas. Their adaptation would present special challenges, but also open up new opportunities for high-profile, exemplary initiatives.

AKTC is currently exploring one such opportunity in the area immediately north of the Burg al-Mahruq tower. Here, the high percentage of ruins combined with easy vehicular access present excellent prospects for comprehensive housing redevelopment. In the proposal, special attention is devoted to creating a promising mix of commercial activities and housing, providing different apartment sizes and resident parking and to identifying design solutions that are compatible with the surrounding historic context.

INSTITUTIONAL TOOLS AND LOCAL INCENTIVES

The implementation of these various initiatives, however meaningful in themselves, will only be of limited consequence to the district unless they are accompanied by a revision of the present planning and institutional framework and the implementation of a combined system of incentives and constraints to preserve the physical fabric, maintain the present inhabitants and achieve balanced development throughout the area. To this end, AKTC is in the process of establishing and refining specific mechanisms and tools for future institutional action and local involvement. These include:

- Repealing often counter-productive planning decrees imposed on the district, particularly the demolition orders issued to clear areas surrounding monuments and to make way for vehicular roads that have never been realised. These decrees have created uncertainty about tenure and discouraged residents from investing in the area;
- Declaring Darb al-Ahmar a conservation district subject to special planning provisions, including a conservation and development plan with accompanying building regulations;
- Establishing a dedicated task force charged with the continued planning and management of the area, and, in particular, implementation of individual restoration and rehabilitation initiatives, provision of advisory services and monitoring of building applications and construction activities;
- Providing direct incentives for the residents in the form of investment in the upgrading of public spaces and infrastructure,



*Illegal encroachments on the
Ayyubid wall.*



Above: Participatory discussions with local residents and shopkeepers in front of a model of the Tablita Vegetable Market, an area to be improved.



Below: Women of Darb al-Ahmar meet in the courtyard of the community development office and take notes during a health care lecture.

as well as assistance for home improvements. To this end, AKTC, with support from the Egyptian-Swiss Development Fund (ESDF) and the Ford Foundation, has secured direct financing for pilot initiatives in the Aslam neighbourhood, comprising a selected group of approximately 100 buildings and related open areas;

- Introducing indirect incentives in the form of employment opportunities, neighbourhood facilities and training. Employment-generation incentives include direct recruitment for rehabilitation and construction in the Park and other rehabilitation programmes initiated by the Trust, as well as apprenticeship programmes for workshops in the area, administered by AKTC's partner, Centre for Development Services, Egypt, with financing from ESDF. AKTC has also secured the financing for the establishment of three neighbourhood facilities accommodating community, recreational, and health-related services. Finally, training in traditional construction and rehabilitation work has begun with direct funding from AKTC in the wall restoration pilot project. Training activities are to be expanded with the contribution of other institutions and donors.

These new institutional tools and local incentives need to be established to ensure that a revised planning and implementation framework for the district is in place as soon as possible. Such measures will demonstrate strong public commitment toward the revitalisation of the district and create the confidence needed to mobilise resources within the area. But they will need to be sustained by a comprehensive community development effort if Darb al-Ahmar is to benefit from the present initiatives as well as to generate new opportunities over the long term.

INVESTING IN PEOPLE: THE COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION CONCEPT

Development institutions and non-governmental organisations have gained a better understanding of what makes a successful community. Careful observation shows that inner-city communities, such as Darb al-Ahmar, are made up of people who have common values and goals, and are capable of enlisting and directing the support needed to achieve their aims. A complex and extended system of social relationships forms the basis of this network of mutual support and shared

responsibility that translates into the social capital needed to realise the community's potential. This positive interchange and the process of mobilising internal resources cannot be imposed from the outside; rather, it must be nurtured and developed from within.

Such an understanding calls for a different approach to revitalising distressed communities. Interventions should seek to provide information, contacts and resources that will enhance existing assets and help realise the aspirations of the people most directly concerned. Institutions must move away from the establishment of policies that ignore local needs and resources. Moreover, instead of attempting to promote development through the supply of goods, they should support local efforts, thereby helping communities help themselves. While external institutions and development organisations may be able to kick-start and assist in steering certain development processes, none of Darb al-Ahmar's problems will be solved without the local community, which must gradually take responsibility for its immediate surroundings.

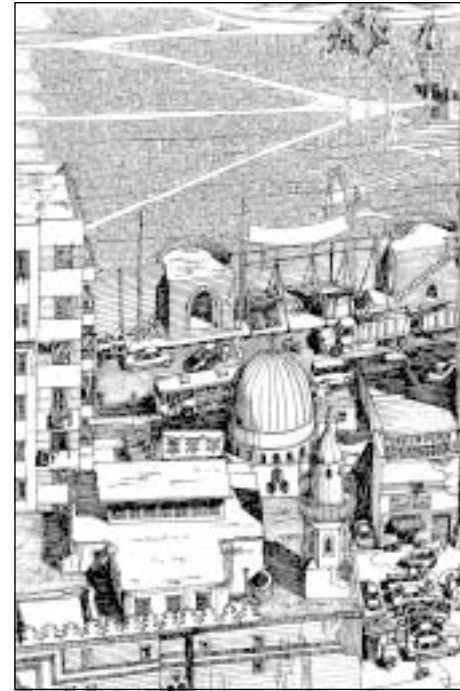
To address this challenge and involve residents and area businesses towards this end, AKTC and its partners, with support from the Cairo Governorate, have introduced the concept of a Community Development Corporation (CDC) in Darb al-Ahmar. This body, which will gradually become an independent, locally based entity, will facilitate co-operation between the government, local NGOs and the private sector. As such, it will operate not so much as a traditional social agency dispensing subsidised services to identifiable target groups, but more as a self-sustaining, community-managed, private-sector initiative. It will activate community resources within the framework of locally identified problems, needs and priorities. It will combine the mobilisation of resources, technical co-ordination, community affairs and institution-building with physical upgrading and environmental improvement activities. Through this work, it will support the community and encourage the development of new entities capable of providing leadership, technical assistance, and management of local resources.

The development of the Darb al-Ahmar Community Development Corporation will eventually offer the critical support needed to help residents become more self-reliant and the community to take greater responsibility for maintaining and developing the district's social fabric and physical environment.



Above: One of the events in the programme, "Women Work Together" (Darb al-Ahmar Community Development Office).

Below: Drawing competition for children in the courtyard of the Community Development Office.



Left: Aslam Square in its present condition, showing signs of decay and the lack of management of public open spaces. At top, the decaying Historic Wall and the beginning of the Park site.

Middle: The worst case scenario showing how further decay and demolition of buildings could negatively affect the Darb al-Ahmar neighbourhood and undermine the linkage between the Park and the neighbourhood.

FUTURE PROSPECTS

The action plan and the pilot interventions for Darb al-Ahmar seek practical and sustainable alternatives to the current dilemma confronting officials and planners in historic Cairo - alternatives that may provide valuable examples for many other historic cities. Often, the only perceived options are either to accept the current decay as inevitable, or to embark upon a costly and socially disruptive policy of radical transformation. Continuation of the present inertia and disinvestment would no doubt condemn the area to ever lower standards of living and the continued deterioration of public services and infrastructure. On the other hand, radical redevelopment fuelled by the projects already under way around Darb al-Ahmar may arouse strong speculative pressures and a pattern of uncontrolled change.

Contrary to these two scenarios, the alternative being pursued in Darb al-Ahmar by AKTC builds on the direct involvement of residents, community groups and local institutions towards a gradual rehabilitation of the existing residential and commercial property and a phased improvement of the urban environment. With strong institutional support and active management of the residents' capacity for direct intervention, the social fabric can become the engine driving



the rehabilitation efforts. Paramount is the conviction that, in the long run, community involvement is the best means of achieving lasting results. This alternative is both wise and achievable: it is far less costly over time than either abandonment or radical intervention; it actively engages the existing social setting and it will not disrupt or alienate the people concerned. It also keeps the historic fabric of the district alive, thus preserving a significant portion of historic Cairo for future generations.

Ultimately, institutional co-ordination and community involvement within a gradual process of economic improvement and physical rehabilitation must be viewed as the necessary ingredients for taking on the manifold conservation and revitalisation needs of historic Cairo. Too often, this task has remained an abstract notion predicated on grand and difficult-to-implement schemes, rather than being pursued through practical rehabilitation efforts based on actual needs and realistic programmes for action.

The results of AKTC's ongoing activities will be important beyond the Darb al-Ahmar setting, as they offer a living model of old city rehabilitation that could be applied in identifying both general policies and practical solutions throughout historic Cairo, and indeed in many other historic cities in the Islamic world.

Best-case scenario showing how the area between Aslam Square and the Historic Wall can be improved without demolition, and how a linkage between the Park and Darb al-Ahmar can be provided.