SOCIO-ECONOMIC REVITALIZATION IN OLD CAIRO: A HERITAGE INITIATIVE IN THE CONTEMPORARY MUSLIM WORLD

By

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to examine the potential of cultural resources as a platform for socio-economic development of Muslim communities around the world. In doing so, it will address how these cultural assets can be called upon and used as a basis for effective development of these communities, at a time of far-reaching political and economic transformation. The paper will also explain how the citizens of a district in Cairo, Egypt, the Darb al-Ahmar community are engaged in this work, thereby preserving their dignity, abilities and creativity, but also the integrity of these cultural resources.
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Introduction

Cultural heritage is the outcome of human experiences within a dynamic social context. Its tangible and intangible aspects are among the most fundamental sources of social solidarity, world views, beliefs, practices, and aspirations. It is the basis of social mobility and the matrix within which change is facilitated. As such, cultural heritage cannot be ignored in any serious effort toward human and economic development.¹

Given the onset of the Arab Spring,² little has been achieved towards a socio-economic revival of the communities of the Muslim world, be it in the Middle East, the Southeast Asian region, Africa, or Central Asia. However, this is not to say that it is not possible to begin the process of economic rival. Rather, it is about how these cultural assets can be called upon and used as a basis for effective development of the communities, at a time of sweeping political and economic changes.

This paper addresses the potential of cultural resources as a platform for socio-economic development of Muslim communities. Using the example of a community in old Cairo, Egypt, the paper will explore the historical context of the Darb al-Ahmar and the work undertaken by the Aga Khan Trust for Culture, to conserve and mobilize the tangible heritage assets.
towards sustainable development. In doing so, the paper will also demonstrate how the citizens of the community are engaged in this work, thereby preserving their dignity, capabilities and creativity, but also the integrity of these cultural resources.

Whether through neglect or willful destruction, the disappearance of physical traces of the past deprives us of more than memories. Spaces that embody historic realities remind us of the lessons of the past. Investing in cultural initiatives represents an opportunity to improve the quality of life for the people who live around these remarkable inheritances of past great civilizations.  

The protection of one’s identity in a tangible manner has become increasingly important to many in the Muslim world over the last few years, particularly with the increasing ignorance from (both within and outside of Islamic communities) that exists and surrounds the faith of Islam – ignorance that stems from a misunderstanding and misinterpretation of Islam. One of the world’s three Abrahamic religions, Islam is viewed by many in the western world as not only a faith (with a billion followers) but also as a phenomenon. What this means is that not only is it a faith that encourages discourse amongst its followers in their personal quest for spiritual enlightenment, but that as a spiritual, religious and social practice, it has also advocated political and social progress from the time of its birth in

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the early seventh century. The encouragement of the dissemination of knowledge and intellectual exchanges that so characterized the faith in its early years, began to disappear when Islam’s political and economic hegemony started to decline in the far-reaches of the empire, in Spain and the boundaries of modern-day France and Austria.

The reasons attributed to this decline of intellectual thought and science in the Muslim world at a time when Europe was emerging from the Dark Ages are many. However, the most plausible explanation for this decline appears to be that in the process of helping Europe overcome its isolation from the intellectual processes that began to gradually seep into European society, the Islamic world began to struggle to overcome the “progressive emancipatory historical unfolding”\(^4\) known as modernity. This western definition of modernism, where the individual was autonomous and free from tradition, began to clash with the Arab world’s “inability to historicize the past and its dependence on tradition”\(^5\). The interpretation of the Islamic faith within different cultural contexts and not solely an Arab one is an important issue. Although Islam is a unifying faith in the belief of one God and the acceptance of the Prophet Muhammad as his Messenger, it does indeed cross many cultures and in contemporary times many national

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boundaries. Simultaneously, it potentially comes up against some significant cultural differences. The following examples highlight the importance of cultural differences within the broader context of Islam. A monument depicting human features in one culture goes against the ethos of the more conservative interpretation of the Islamic faith (such as Wahabbism) where such expressions are prohibited as it is deemed to be idolatry in nature. Whereas it is acceptable within the Indian Islamic cultural context where depictions of human features are perceived as simply capturing history, to be preserved for future generations as visual images. It was this very dependence on tradition that is now becoming the basis in which socio-economic progress is being advocated.

The desire to preserve the multitude of cultures that exist within the Muslim world has grown exponentially over the last 10 years and is simply not an attempt to garner sympathy or attract donors. Rather, it is a journey to create an awareness of these different cultures and to promote them in a manner that enhances not only the living conditions of the Muslim inhabitants, but also the dignity in how they live. In trying to embrace the changes within the parameters of the Islamic faith and the cultures within which it is practiced, an investment in cultural and heritage initiatives represents an opportunity to improve the lives of those who live in areas that
were and are a part of one of the greatest civilizations in the world. With the active participation of the community, cultural and heritage investment can bring about economic development, which in turn revitalizes the social and economic fabric of that community. By increasing opportunities and promoting self-reliance, the cultural and intellectual isolation currently felt throughout the Muslim world can potentially be turned into a positive phenomenon.

**Heritage as a Basis for Social and Economic Development**

Given that there has been a growing trend in realizing the potential of using culture and heritage as vehicles for social mobilization, it seems only fitting that due attention be given to the further exploration of this emerging and significant development. The relevance of cultural heritage in the development of a community means that the very concept of what development should be is also slowly changing. It is no longer solely about pursuing economic goals. It is also about improving the circumstances and environment of a community – in a sustainable manner that would also allow them to live in dignity and within the social fabric with which they are comfortable. By focusing on the development of a community in an urban area in a developing country, this research shows that the concept of
development goes beyond the economic parameters. It reaches into the social and cultural realms of a community and its inhabitants.

Forty percent of the United Nation’s member states are categorized as “failed democracies,” which indicates that democracies need more than just elections and political parties to be successful. The promotion of good governance and accountability is also vital to developing and sustaining these democracies. As agents of civil society, it is incumbent upon, in particular Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs), to play a central role in encouraging ethical responsibility and productive community development and community capacity building. By acting as role models for accountability and moral behaviour, civil society can play an indispensable role in building these communities whilst simultaneously supporting the development of governments. The development and integration of heritage assets is one of the ways in which civic engagement can be revitalized in the achievement of a community’s socio-economic goals. Many non-governmental organizations like the Aga Khan Trust for Culture are beginning to realize this potential and are beginning to form partnerships with governments and communities, to lead the change. This planning

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6In his new book, Paul Collier, former World Bank Research Director, states that many of the fifty-eight countries that are home to one billion of the world’s poorest people are unable to provide them with governance and accountability, which stems from poor leadership.

7The Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC) is an agency of the Aga Khan Development Network and focuses on the physical, social, cultural and economic revitalization of communities in the Muslim world.
process ensures that it is the local people who are the main actors in this development, with the partnerships acting as enablers, in order to allow the process to take place and ensure its sustainability over the long term, using heritage resources as the tools with which to ensure this development.

“The Islamic world probably has the highest concentration of historic cities of any world culture and you are asking, can this concentration of assets become a trampoline for economic and social development and the answer is very clearly yes.”

Taking a heritage asset and turning it into a platform for social development can have a positive influence on a community’s overall development. Some of these impacts can be felt in the promotion of transparent governance, development of civil society, an increase in economic opportunities, a greater respect for human rights and a sense of understanding and appreciation for the environment. Only by recognizing that there are other intangible factors (such as socio-economic interventions) at play, can a true image of a community be created and its value begin to emerge. This concept, known as Integrated Area Development (IAD), has a goal to connect individual projects with a wider community setting, thus increasing the quality of life for the residents while simultaneously improving the physical aspects of the area. Integrated Area

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Development aims to link smaller projects together in a wider urban context, permitting them to become more comprehensive and better suited to address the various disciplines required to develop communities. This focus on local linkages eliminates the occurrence of multiple coexisting projects within common socio-economic goals or geographic proximity from working in isolation. To better illustrate this concept and understand the extent to which heritage initiatives play in the social and economic development of communities, the revitalization of the Darb al-Ahmar (or Red District) in the old part of Cairo, Egypt is examined.

In 1984, a conference called *The Expanding Metropolis: Coping with the Urban Growth of Cairo* was organized by the Aga Khan Award for Architecture. At the conference, it was recognized that Cairo like other cities in the developing world, was being challenged by a range of present-day development problems such as an increase in population, a decline in the provision of health care services, quality housing, education and rising unemployment. With one of the fastest growing populations over the past 50 years, Cairo had become one of the most densely populated cities in the world. Today, it has a population of seventeen million people – over half of whom live in abject poverty. This stress on the urban fabric in conjunction with declining government and private investment in the area ensured that
people ended up living in urban slums. In the face of all these challenges, there rose the question of how conservation and development was to be reconciled with the contemporary local reality of poverty and slum life.

Although poor, the neighbourhood of Darb al-Ahmar had one of the richest concentrations of Islamic art and architecture in the world. The challenge here was two-fold: first, to turn these monuments into a stimulus for socio-economic development, with the aim that models of development would be created and replicated in other areas of the Islamic world; and second, that the concept of turning a derelict neighbourhood into a vibrant residential and commercial district, would act as a medium for development. At that time, the latter concept (what the writer terms as reverse gentrification) was viewed as being rather bizarre. How could a run-down neighbourhood be turned into a revitalized community whose residents were stakeholders and engaged in the process of its rehabilitation? This concept was eventually carried into the launch of numerous restoration and community-initiated development projects that would include the creation and construction of the al-Azhar park, adjacent to the Darb al-Ahmar district. In one of the poorest and most populated areas of Cairo, the inhabitants of the neighbourhood lived with inadequate sanitation, piles of uncollected rubbish and a general lack of interest from landlords who were
frequently absent and invested little or nothing in the buildings, many of which had historic significance.\textsuperscript{9}

This inevitable decay of the physical environment also led to a decline in the quality of life for the people in the community. Despite these hardships, small, family-run businesses made up of mostly artisans, continued to generate a living for a small portion of the population, which implies that community and family life remained strong for certain social groups. With a population of 200,000, the community tried to imitate the urbanization process in the newer areas of Cairo during the first few decades of the twentieth century. However, these more contemporary forms of urbanization processes were foreign to the area’s social and cultural fabric. The subdivision of large areas of land into cement squares was alien to Darb al-Ahmar’s traditional urban fabric.\textsuperscript{10} Lack of attention to architectural detail to the buildings themselves, mass production in huge factories, new construction techniques that used reinforced concrete as opposed to traditional building materials and a lack of planning when formulating new urban design policies, were strange concepts and practices to those who lived in the community. These new forms were in stark contrast to those (even the poorest) who lived in the narrow alleyways and paid attention to


\textsuperscript{10} Saif el-Rashidi. \textit{The History and Fate of al-Darb al-Ahmar}. (Turin: Umberto Allemandi & C for the Aga Khan Trust for Culture, 2004) 58
the architectural facades of their homes. There was little value in tradition and this was reflected in the rapid urbanization of the newer areas. There are two interpretations of this statement: first, tradition which always held a priority in the lives of these communities was being overcome by challenges faced in meeting the needs of daily living. The importance of culture and the role it played in shaping people’s lives was being taken over in trying to keep up with the demands of modernization (and/or perhaps the perception of modernization as was set by the standards of the West), which held broader appeal and was deemed to be real or the correct form of development within the contemporary world. Second, the growth of housing areas on agricultural lands by independent contractors (who ignored building and zoning regulations), were carried out with the aim of profitability. Consultations with proponents of cultural development, be it architects, building historians, owners of the agricultural lands, et cetera, would have simply taken up time, time that was measured by the profits earned and not by the dismay expressed over the loss of building traditions.

The rapid growth of industries in Egypt, particularly in the large metropolis of Cairo, displaced the smaller communities such as Darb al-Ahmar, whose main economic activities were based on small businesses, for example, coffee houses (that served as centres of social interaction) and
workshops (such as artisan woodworking) and were now no longer the foundation of the city’s exponential growth. The building of manufacturing and mining plants, where new construction techniques replaced traditional building methods and materials, forced the migration of those that lived in the older neighbourhoods to the urban metropolis. This rapid pace of urbanization coupled with the government’s reluctance to invest in the older areas of Cairo, ensured that neighbourhoods such as the Darb al-Ahmar and similar others began to slide into decay and in the cases of some communities complete obliteration.

**Historical Context**

Books on how the current urban situation of Cairo has been created as a result of the past are many, creating a wealth of knowledge about how contemporary forms of development influenced contemporary Cairo but it also brings to light the harsh realities of urbanization on poor and disenfranchised urban areas, and also the destruction of traditional communities and local culture and heritage within modernization. In order for any type of development to take place and improve the lives of the Cairenes, especially those living in crime and drug-addled neighbourhoods, the history of Cairo must be taken into account and a contextual balance created. The capital of the Arab Republic of Egypt, Cairo is one of the most
important religious, cultural and political centres of the Islamic world. It is also considered to be the main centre of the Arab-Islamic civilization, ever since its establishment over a thousand years ago. Cairo is also considered to be a unique city in the Islamic world due to its abundance of antiquities and buildings of historical interest. Located at the apex of the Nile Delta, where the two branches of the Nile River meet, the site of Cairo was a natural choice of all rulers of the Nile Valley since the time of the Pharaohs. Its strategic location and proximity to the fertile banks of the river ensured the growth of any city that existed before Cairo. Arab forces under the command of ‘Amr ibn al-‘As, the religion of Islam was first brought into Egypt in 639 A.D. with very little difficulty. The ease with which Islam was spread, was due to a weakened Egypt (both politically and military) as a result of the battles between the contending Persian and Byzantine empires. After laying siege to Babylon (in the southern part of the Nile Delta), al-‘As set up his headquarters in a settlement just outside of the town, called al-Fustat, the first Muslim city in Egypt. It was here that he also built the first mosque in Africa. Over time, the town of Babylon and the army camp of al-Fustat grew together and slowly developed into permanent cities. In 969 A.D. the commander-in-chief of the Fatimid forces, General Gazi Jawar invaded Egypt and overthrew the previous ruling Ikhshids. He built a new city
between the canal on the west and the beginnings of the eastern desert, calling it al-Mansuriyya, named after the Fatimid caliph, Muizz al-Din. In 974 A.D., al-Mansuriyya was renamed al-Qahira (the Victorious), to commemorate the beginning of the Fatimid rule of Egypt.

The arrival of the Fatimids\(^\text{11}\) in the 10\(^{\text{th}}\) century was seen as a serious development in the political and religious realm of the Islamic world. “For the first time, power in Islamic world was to be the object of a real contest between two caliphates seeking domination at the same time; each of them, that is to say the ‘Abbasid caliphate in Baghdad and the Fatimid caliphate in Egypt, considered itself the rightful ruler of this world.”\(^\text{12}\) To better understand the importance of this claim, it is necessary to delve into the early days of Islam and the controversy generated over the rightful successor to the Prophet. Following the Prophet’s death in 632 A.D, the Muslims split into 2 groups: the Sunnis and the Shi’ites. The former believed that the successor was Abu Bakr, the oldest amongst the Prophet’s companions whereas the latter believed and firmly held that the Prophet had chosen his cousin and son-in-law, Ali to succeed him as both a religious and temporal ruler. Abu Bakr was thus elected as the first Caliph of Islam. Nonetheless, the Shi’ites did not falter in their claim and waited until Ali and his

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\(^{11}\) The Fatimids are the direct descendants of the Prophet Muhammad through his daughter, Fatima and his cousin, Ali.

descendants would be restored as the true successors. The establishment of the Fatimid state in Tunisia in 909 A.D. and their conquest of Egypt posed serious challenges to the existing order. They refused to offer token submission to the Abbasid caliphs (who ruled Egypt at that time), asserting their (the Fatimids) claim that they and they only were the true and rightful heirs of the Islamic community by descent. This is nowhere put more succinctly than by Bernard Lewis in his book, *An Interpretation of Fatimid History*:

Thus the Fatimids gave their distinctive doctrines a central importance in their political system. Ismaili theology provided the basis to the caliphate and denied that of the Abbasids. As long as the Abbasids survived, the Fatimids were engaged in a religious and ideological conflict, in which doctrine was their most powerful weapon. Thus the Fatimids accorded prime importance to the formulation and elaboration of their creed. First in North Africa and then in Egypt, a series of distinguished theologians wrote what became the classical works of Ismaili literature. Most of the authors had served in the Mission and some like Hamid al-Din as-Kirmani and al-Muayyad fi’l-Din al-Shirazi had been its chiefs.\(^\text{13}\)

The spread of the Ismaili faith at a time of great political, economic and social upheaval in the Islamic word, the Abbasid Caliphate (based out of Baghdad) began to weaken. It was recognized that a new authority, a unifying one was needed to save Islam and the Muslims from destruction.

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\(^{13}\) Bernard Lewis: *Interpretation of Fatimid History*, (Cairo: 1969) 9
The rulers of the Fatimid empire filled that void. As in all things great, the rule of the Fatimids came to an end in 1171 A.D. when Salah al-Din invaded Egypt and established his rule.

Over the next few centuries, Cairo saw many rulers and gradually grew to become the industrial and commercial centre of the region. However, this changed when the Ottomans conquered Egypt in 1517 A.D. Reduced from its status as the hub of the region to merely being a provincial capital of the Ottoman empires, Cairo underwent a rapid decline. A contracting economy, huge taxes, lack of cultivation of the lands and most importantly, the development of new zones north of Cairo around its interior lakes of Azbakiyya and Birkat al-Fil, led to a movement of the aristocrats from the two dominant quarters of the walled city of Cairo, al-Jamaliyya and al-Darb al-Ahmar. The arrival of Napoleon to Egypt in 1798 also brought with it, the processes of ‘modernization’ and ‘reform’.  

14 Muhammad Ali, the Albanian soldier appointed by the French to govern Egypt, set about to transform Cairo, in alignment with the wishes of its new masters, the French. He introduced cotton and attempted to modernize the education and administrative systems. In addition, he also ‘cleaned’ up the mess created by Cairo’s rapid urbanization. New main streets were built and leveled were the

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rubbish mounds that had collected around the city’s walls and the residue used to fill some of the disease-breeding interior lakes.

The ensuing years saw European planning concepts increasingly influence the urban panorama. During the latter third of the 19th century, significant changes in the city were made under the rule of Khedive Ismail. The digging of a new canal (the Ismailiya Canal) opened more dry land between the city of Cairo and the newly stabilizing banks of the Nile. The ruler’s new palace and incentives of cheap land to those willing and able to build drew the wealthy in droves. The eagerness of the wealthy natives from these neighbourhoods to imitate the colonizers’ consumption patterns had a dramatic impact on the older quarters of Cairo.

In the process, the older quarters became neglected and degraded, as new migrants from the countryside joined the poorer population left behind, subdividing the large homes of the departed rich into cubicles, unable to maintain them, and eventually spilling out to the cemeteries east and south-east of the city.\textsuperscript{15}

Resources were dedicated to developing the new quarters - from paving the streets to the provision of gaslights, piped water and sewers as well as the consumption needs of the wealthy in the form of exclusive grocery stores and shops selling imported goods and luxury items. Although the old quarters did not lose their economic functions such as handicrafts and

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid, 28.
processing and distribution of foods, these were items that were sold to Cairenes of a similar social class. The same could not be said of its architectural heritage, which was dying a slow death brought on by neglect, poverty and overcrowding.

Today, His Highness Prince Karim Aga Khan, a direct descendant of the Fatimids and spiritual leader of the Ismaili community is a pivotal force in the revitalization of Cairo. His attachment to Cairo is not based purely on its history. Rather, his work stems from the issue of how to creatively connect heritage with the prospects and demands of the constant flux of modern life – a question often on his mind ever since he established the Aga Khan Award for Architecture over 20 years ago.16 His establishment of the Aga Khan Development Network and its agencies, work to better the prospects and quality of lives of the people in the developing world, particularly in Asia and Africa, without regard to origin, creed or gender. The agency tasked with pursuing urban revitalization is the Historic Cities Support Programme (HCSP), a branch of the Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC). Through investment of the cultural heritage of the local communities as well as the rehabilitation of historically significant structures, the welfare of the residents can be improved.

At present, old Cairo is at the heart of the metropolitan area and poorly joined to the downtown central area of Cairo and its main streets. Its commercial and economic activities are not properly amalgamated, thus taking away from its urban character. In addition, public decision-making is fragmented and major decisions are often made at a higher level, which almost always puts it in conflict with the physical and socio-economic homogeneity of old Cairo. As a result, this schism between local and centralized decision making has affected the entire appearance and well-being of the city. Living conditions are steadily deteriorating, as is the quality of life caused not only by the pollution in the air but also in a physical manner – with growing piles of waste and debris. These forms of pollution also have a negative impact on the monuments of which old Cairo has the largest concentration of in the Islamic world. Most of the businessmen in old Cairo are not environmentally conscious, nor do they particularly care about the inhabitants, who as employees (of these businessmen) occupy these structures as tenants. Due to their low income and poor status, these residents are more concerned with finding affordable housing and employment than with the fast decline of their local environment.
During the first few decades of the twentieth century, Darb al-Ahmar tried to copy the new urban developments of Cairo. The 1950s and 1960s saw the rise of large-scale industrialization in Egypt. This placed the community in a precarious commercial position – one where its small-scale enterprises and workshops were no longer seen to be the basis of the city’s economy. In addition, the younger generation of the community were leaving to find better opportunities in newer Cairo, thus leaving behind a generation that although needing to maintain the social fabric of the community, were hard-pressed given the lack of income and motivation to preserve their living environment.

Yet the most important single factor responsible for the decline of historic cities in the Islamic world of today may well be of a psychological nature. It consists of prevailing negative prejudices and attitudes towards the depressed image of historic districts – some of them reflecting Western concepts of Modernism.\(^\text{17}\)

Conservation of monuments may be primary to the conservation of historic cities, yet the latter is fundamentally different in the sense of a singular moment of preservation. Whereas the former can be isolated and conserved up to a certain form, the same cannot be said of historic cities, which are in a state of constant evolution. Taking into account the habits of its residents, it has to be maintained in a sustainable manner, one that is respective and

\(^\text{17}\) Ibid., 71.
reflective of its important historic and environmental characteristics. The creation and maintenance of historic landmarks and public spaces cannot be singularly attained by simply ‘modernizing’ these sites. They need to be conserved in tandem with other contemporary services such as social facilities, housing, schools, health centres to name a few. It is a multi-faceted institutional, economic, social, cultural and technical rehabilitation process. Although a modern metropolis with western-style administrative services, the various municipalities that make up Cairo rarely have the public service apparatus to tackle with the intricate and complex problems of the old city. The social profile of old Cairo has changed, with the movement of the former wealthy residents of its neighbourhoods to modern urban developments north of Cairo.

A vital residential district with many artisans, small enterprises and a strong social cohesion, al-Darb al-Ahmar suffers today from poverty, inadequate infrastructure and a lack of community services. Although endowed with sixty-five registered monuments and several hundred historic buildings, its residential building stock is in very poor condition due to the area’s low family incomes and an economic base that often lags behind other parts of Cairo. The deterioration of the buildings is exacerbated by the imposition of unrealistic rent controls, counter-productive planning constraints and limited access to credit. The common perception of al-Darb al-Ahmar as a haven of crime and drug-related activity generates easy support for plans calling for radical clearance and ‘sanitising’ of the district,
thus posing yet another threat to the survival of the historic urban fabric.\textsuperscript{18}

A reversal of this poor image thus becomes the starting point for any organization attempting to intervene in the rehabilitation of any historic city, particularly in the developing world. The restoration and reuse of heritage landmarks or public spaces, the revitalization of the resources and abilities of the communities need to be harnessed, thus uncovering new opportunities towards a reversal of this existing image. Living under the constant threat of eventual demolition and displacement, has resulted in a prevailing environment of general disinvestment and lack of trust amongst the residents of these communities. This has to be overcome by creating confidence-building programs that are able to tap into the potential of these neighbourhoods through the existing heritage assets present and by calling upon the residents’ sense of cultural pride and identity as well as the communities’ solidarity.

\textbf{Aga Khan Development Network}

Given the presence of difference actors in this revitalization process, to what extend do they depend on and influence each other in the

\footnote{\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 177.}
development of the area? Established over 50 years ago\(^\text{19}\), the Aga Khan Development Network is comprised of development agencies that are private, international and non-denominational, working to better the lives of people in the developing world by improving their living conditions and sourcing opportunities. This is done by identifying the services needed, providing them (some in the form of having access to opportunities) and assessing their effectiveness. Each of the organizations has an individual mandate that ranges from the health, education, architecture, rural development and the promotion of private-sector enterprise fields. In collaboration, these agencies work towards a common goal – the building of institutions and programs that are able to respond to the challenges of socio-economic and cultural changes in a sustainable manner. Today, the Aga Khan Development Network has grown beyond its initial geographical area and the scope of their work, to operating in 30 countries around the world and employing about 80,000 people, most of who are based in the developing countries where the Network is operating. It is important to note that the Network and its individual agencies function by engaging the local populace at all levels. The projects that the Network are involved in are required to meet strict criteria for organizational, managerial and impact

\(^{19}\) Some of the Network’s organizations were originally created in the late-nineteenth century by the present Aga Khan’s grandfather, Sir Sultan Mahomed Shah, to meet the needs of the Ismaili community in South Asia and East Africa, where they predominantly resided.
development. This is achieved by building clear objectives into its projects, with the end goal that the institutions and programs created, become self-sustaining long after an agency of the Network has completed its mandate. The creation of partnerships between organizations external to the Network in both the Western and Eastern hemispheres, serves to strengthen and provide a support framework within which these institutions and programs can function.

Founded in 1988 and based in Geneva, Switzerland, the Aga Khan Trust for Culture (an agency of the Aga Khan Development Network – AKDN) focuses on the physical, social and economic revitalization of communities in the Muslim world by using heritage as a development platform. Its programs are many and the more well known ones include the Aga Khan Award for Architecture, and the Historic Cities Program. Although inter-related, each of the programs have specific geographical areas within which to address the Trust’s main objectives and conduct workshops, seminars, publications and the media to encourage dialogue and disseminate outcomes. This diverse mandate also creates greater awareness and appreciation for diversity and the strength of pluralism not only within

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20 The AKDN is comprised of a network of agencies that include environment, health, education, architecture, culture, microfinance, rural development, disaster reduction, the promotion of private-sector enterprise and the revitalization of historic cities. AKDN agencies conduct their programmes without regard to faith, origin or gender. See http://www.akdn.org
the Muslim world but also in the West. Established in 1992, the Historic Cities Support Programme (HCSP) undertakes specific and direct interventions in the field of conservation and urban rehabilitation of historical buildings and spaces, that serve to spur socio-economic development. It also works to create an awareness that cultural development and socio-economic needs can be mutually supportive. Using state-of-the-art restoration and conservation techniques in tandem with urban development principles, the Historic Cities Support Programme tests new approaches with community based institutions and entrepreneurial initiatives, to build sustainable local resources on a long-term basis. Since its creation, the Historic Cities Support Programme has built up an enviable portfolio of over 20 projects in different urban and rural areas of the Islamic world. Some of its project partners and monetary contributors include the World Bank, the Getty Grant Program, the World Monuments Fund, the Ford Foundation and various other Swiss, Norwegian and German bilateral aid organizations. It identifies, plans and executes projects by working with a series of local service companies as partners in the implementation of these projects with the ultimate goal of having the partners operate as self-sustaining community organizations. An important point to note here is that in an

21The AKDN and its agencies operate on the premise that unless invited by the government of a country to undertake various activities, it will not initiate any of its programs otherwise.
operational capacity, the Historic Cities Support Programme fits its role to the needs of each project and community.

The participation of the community, training of local professionals and community institutional building are essential factors in any project that the Programme undertakes – the end goal being positive change and local capacity building. By identify projects that have recognized conservation potential, the Historic Cities Support Programme defines opportunities, prepares feasibility studies and shapes approaches to proposals for submission to both local and international investors (including the Trust itself). This identification process is undertaken as an initial step to stimulate socio-economic and cultural revitalization within these communities and works to not have them dependent on external support after a certain period. In this sense, the development created through the Historic Cities Support Programme aims to build local long-term capacity. Other development factors – community support, commercial potential and pioneering institutional structures - that enable the sustainability of conservation possible are also engaged. Successful projects include the restoration and revitalization of Samarkand (Uzbekistan), Forodhani Park and Old Stone Town in Zanzibar, the Great Mosque of Mopti in Mali and three major citadels in Aleppo, Masyaf and Qalat Salah ed-Din in Syria.
The need for an integrated approach became especially important in the case of Darb al-Ahmar due to the sheer complexity and magnitude of the rehabilitation process. It was important to incorporate a wide range of professional disciplines and corresponding intercessions. This mutual interaction was a requirement in order to ensure that this approach was reflected in all the layers of the process. The diagram below is a simulation of this approach and its importance in addressing the revitalization of Darb al-Ahmar.  

![Diagram](image)

**Figure 1**

Each of the above disciplines and corresponding interventions represent the necessity of providing a suitable framework for the process but also for

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23 Ibid, 72
future generations to refer to when the process needed to be repeated. The non-disruption of vital features of the urban form required the deployment of tools and techniques that offered maximum viability. Thus the improvement of housing and infrastructure, the conservation and reuse of heritage buildings as well as the creation and maintenance of public open spaces, all served to provide the platform for socio-economic development. To maintain and ensure the long-term feasibility of this process, it was necessary to build and strengthen the institutional support systems. In other words, if the local communities were unable to be convinced of the empowerment of community restoration, then no amount of support provided by the central government or international aid organizations was going to be enough, capacity has to be built within the local people.

According to the Historic Cities Support Programme, intervening in old Cairo was perhaps the biggest challenge that the programme ever faced. The overwhelming presence of cultural monuments aside, poor socio-economic conditions, deficient services and infrastructure, lack of green spaces, rising ground-water table and poor maintenance of both residential and commercial buildings coupled with a growing population made community rejuvenation a challenge of enormous proportions. Cairo’s highly-centralized government with very little to no decision-making power
delegated to the local administrative units made it even more difficult to overcome the division of tasks and functions on the project site. As a result, the Aga Khan Trust for Culture and its local subsidiary, the Aga Khan Cultural Services-Egypt (AKCS-E) embarked on a comprehensive urban revitalization project for Darb al-Ahmar with its funding partners – the Egyptian Swiss Fund for Development, the Ford Foundation and the World Monuments Fund. By physically upgrading the commercial and residential structures, part of the socio-economic development of the community would be realized. The other aspect of the project would involve the training of the local inhabitants in preserving their skills and developing new ones as well as the provision of services through local government partners. This turnabout or buying into the project on the part of the government was important as it signaled a willingness on the part of the government to acknowledge its limitations in terms of providing services to a burgeoning population. By forming a public-private partnership (PPP) with the Aga Khan Trust for Culture, the city government was placed in a better position to share the responsibilities of providing to its citizens. It also gave the community the opportunity to take responsibility in becoming more self-sufficient in terms of being accountable for its environment, both physical and socio-economic. This engagement of the community is a very important
aspect in any project undertaken by the Network’s agencies. It is interesting
to note that there have been many well-intentioned attempts over the past
decades to revitalize the old city of Cairo by the United Nations Educational,
Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the United Nations
Development Programme (UNDP) as well as the Egyptian government.
However, none of these attempts have been realized given that the role of
NGOs has never been fully implemented in practice, although agreed to in
theory. These past failures have made the undertaking of this particular
project by the Historic Cities Support Programme even more interesting
since the Programme’s current activities have been viewed by many (in the
community, government, private and NGO sectors) as an attempt to bridge
the gap posed by the various public and private organizations. By closely
cooperating with the Cairo Governate, the Supreme Council of Antiquities\textsuperscript{24}
and the Awqaf Department (Religious Board), the Historic Cities Support
Programme has also managed to garner maximum community participation
and involvement.

**Darb al-Ahmar**

As previously mentioned, the depressed image of historic cities and
negative attitudes towards it is far from true in the case of Darb al-Ahmar. A

\textsuperscript{24} The government authority on all heritage assets of Egypt.
survey carried out by the Aga Khan Trust for Culture showed that most adults in this neighbourhood were employed and that crime was negligible. Over sixty percent of the residents have lived in the area for thirty years or more and almost twenty percent have lived there for over fifty years.\textsuperscript{25} These residents had been living in Darb al-Ahmar not out of necessity but out of choice. They felt comfortable, safe, lived within the traditional social fabric of family, faith and community. The residents were ready to invest their own resources to improve their quality of life but only if the support they needed was readily available and did not entail them having to sacrifice their cultural traditions. What this means is that the local government were not forthcoming in taking the initiative to provide financial and training support. Thus by investing their own resources, there were no guarantees that the results would be viable and / or sustainable over both the short and long terms, seeing how there had been a lack of government involvement since the 1950s. Locals were also adamant that they be consulted and engaged in every step of the process, with the end goal that they would be ultimately responsible for the maintenance and sustainability of their community. In unlocking its potential of becoming a vibrant residential and commercial area, Darb al-Ahmar was also viewed as a catalyst for change and that was

\textsuperscript{25} Francesco Siravo, Urban Rehabilitation and Community Development in al-Darb al-Ahmar. (Turin: Umberto Allemandi & C for the Aga Khan Trust for Culture, 2004) 177
not necessarily always a positive one for the local community. Locals were concerned that contemporary development could encourage increased public and private investment, leading to uncontrollable development of the area, thus resulting in a new wave of emigration of residents to the new city. This gentrification process was a challenge that the community of Darb al-Ahmar could not afford – it would mean the loss of the social fabric of the community, which was an intrinsic part of the residents’ lives. The locals needed to know and believe that the revitalization process was going to be in keeping with their existing fiscal, social and communal situations in mind. For example, locals wanted to make sure they would be able to own the buildings that they had resided in for over half a century and not be pushed out as a result of emigration or rejuvenation. Through a sense of common identity, the social and work lives of the residents in Darb al-Ahmar are inseparable. The ties, both work and familial are strong.

Keeping the above factors in mind, the Aga Khan Trust for Culture launched a complete urban rehabilitation program for the neighbourhood of Darb al-Ahmar in 1996. Its long-term strategy involved focusing on two balanced objectives: first, physical upgrading of residential and commercial buildings and second, socio-economic development of the community.

This strategy is consistent with the AKTC’s belief that synergy between physical improvement schemes and
community development is essential for launching a genuine process of urban rehabilitation, capable of producing results that can become sustainable and eventually independent of external inputs.

This alignment of objectives also harnessed funding from the Aga Khan Trust for Culture’s partners – the Egyptian Swiss Fund for Development, the Ford Foundation and the World Monuments Fund. By reversing the pattern of decay and improving the living, social and working conditions of its residents, the strategy was able to incorporate preservation as part of its rehabilitation process. Simply physically upgrading the area was not enough. It was important to also improve the economic climate and address community development issues, which in turn would inspire the people to take pride in their neighbourhood and to eventually become accountable for its sustainability. Over the centuries, the commercial and residential structures in the Darb al-Ahmar had become an integral part of Cairo’s urban and social history. Tearing down these structures would have gone against conservation philosophy and practice and exposed the neighbourhood to unwanted development processes such as mass housing projects undertaken by private housing development corporations. By conducting in-depth investigations of social conditions as well as a plot-by-plot study, approaches to conserving the buildings were made so that the residents of these buildings were not displaced. The removal of unsafe structural
additions, introduction of new building regulations and the lifting of outdated planning limitations, were some of the more defining modes of intervention used to deal with the rehabilitation of the structures. In 1999, detailed surveys were carried out along the eastern boundary of al-Darb al-Ahmar, showing the increasingly dilapidated conditions of the residential housing. This was in part due to limited access to housing finance and insecure tenure, a serious issue in Darb al-Ahmar where over thirty percent of the housing is subject to demolition. Forceful abandonment of these homes by the residents has created a growing problem of squatters in the peripheral areas of Cairo. In turn, the non-existence of public services and limited infrastructure and the absence of moral and social fabric, had caused a breakdown in community ties and relationships. In 2002, the Aga Khan Trust for Culture implemented a dual strategy as part of its larger revitalization effort: a gradual rehabilitation of existing residential units alongside the redevelopment of decrepit buildings, vacant plots and ruined areas. The initial study carried out in 1998 showed that majority of the residents wished to stay in the neighbourhood and were willing to contribute to the rehabilitation costs in a sizeable manner. This strategy allowed people to stay in their homes while simultaneously providing an opportunity for
these residents to use their skills to rebuild these buildings, thus generating income to meet the costs associated.

What is important to note here is the following: that the whole process was about *socio-economic* revitalization as the main priority. The other factors (as seen in the diagram below) included in the planning strategy were synonymous to the successful implementation of this process. It was paramount that social activities were balanced with the physical rehabilitation projects. Often, cultural resources around the world have attracted excessive numbers of visitors by becoming commercial commodities, resulting in uncontrolled tourism. This was taken into account when the revitalization process began and it became important to employ a consistent management strategy. The restoration and reusing of key historic structures, maintenance of them as well as the creation and upgrading of open spaces were seen to be interdependent and able to encourage further synergies. 26 How does one reconcile the tourism generated by the commercial vibrancy of a neighbourhood with the traditional life of that community? Answers were not (and still aren’t) always readily available but efforts have been made to establish programs and experiences to enhance the changing role of the development of the neighbourhood. Some of the

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26 Ibid., 179
initiatives include taking tourists through defined paths that feature the archeological, historical and cultural elements of the past and how they relate to the present. A space to hold exhibitions and other cultural activities has been established and provides a gathering point for both the community and the tourists with a better insight of local culture and traditions.

It is a widely-held notion that only substantial intervention by the government along with a huge infusion of private and public capital, can simple initiatives such as the creation of employment opportunities be produced. In the case of Darb al-Ahmar, the Aga Khan Trust for Culture used a low-key approach. It had been their experience that it was not necessary to create new jobs to generate employment. Creating and facilitating employment opportunities for the younger generation, developing a methodology for the preservation of artisan skills (that was a dominant feature of the neighbourhood), provision of health and educational facilities, were all important factors that needed to be taken into account before embarking on the revitalization process. The building and strengthening of civic groups and local institutions to lead and govern future actions also needed to be established. What was necessary was to connect the residents with existing employment opportunities. As a result, a job placement and counseling service was set up in the neighbourhood, leading
to many young people being gainfully employed. Training on the job was also used to prepare the younger generation to become employed and eventually take over the businesses or create a sub-division involving new tools and techniques, such as traditional construction pertinent to the future maintenance of old Cairo. The reestablishment of artisan crafts and skills was fast disappearing and the training dispensed by the older residents ensured the viability of developing independent capabilities and longer-term employment opportunities. Through the establishment of a lending and credit-recovery program, the Aga Khan Trust for Culture has been able to help set up businesses, especially for women, to start income-generating activities and allow people to do what they do best, such as enabling a single mother to buy an oven so as to provide baked goods to the local workers. The conservation of the structures also provided a continuing training ground for both the local artisans and international conservation experts on what the most appropriate restoration techniques could be used. In turn, this created a resource base of traditional building crafts and small enterprise development. This creation of income and income-generating activities allowed the residents to become more aware of their cultural traditions and went a long ways in restoring civic pride, a sense of community awareness and self-governance. What is meant by self-governance is that people were
able to share their problems and identify solutions either as individuals or as a collective group. This in turn enabled them to become active participants in their communities rather than being passive and waiting for government intervention. For example, the creation of the Darb al-Ahmar Business Association and the Family Health Development Centre are two such organizations. They have also been providing support for other NGOs who are partners in building community cohesiveness and engaging local resources in revitalizing the neighbourhood.

With the housing process underway, it was also recognized that public open spaces was important to the aesthetics of a neighbourhood and to encourage informal contact and community life. Spaces were identified but had been poorly maintained and had deteriorated over time. This deterioration may have also been part in due to the fact that it was not clear as to what purpose they were to serve and who was responsible for their maintenance. After identifying the areas where improvements to upgrade street paving, public lighting and signage as well as small neighbourhood squares scattered throughout the area, the Aga Khan Trust for Culture began to select areas for improvement. At time of writing, two areas had undergone a revitalization process: first, Aslam Square, which was gradually equipped to serve as both a pedestrian link to the adjacent al-Azhar Park and as a
forum for social interaction and commercial activities. Second, the rehabilitation of Tablita Market – a propagation of street vendors and worsening environment conditions threatened its very existence with grim consequences for the local economy, as it was located on the main pedestrian road linking it to al-Azhar Park. In an attempt to find a solution, the Aga Khan Trust for Culture together with the help of the vendors and potential investors, prepared plans that called for an enclosed market space and a reorganization of the vendors.

The re-usage of monuments and heritage buildings completes the planning strategy for the Darb al-Ahmar district. Their long-term upkeep is important to the preservation of the architectural flavour and quality of the neighbourhood. To date, three projects had been selected for restoration and rehabilitation: Khayrbek complex, Umm al-Sultan Shaaban Mosque and the former Shoughlan Street School. A partnership between the Aga Khan Trust for Culture and the Supreme Council for Antiquities has led to a series of agreements to develop and put in place creative and realistic solutions towards the preservation of these cultural assets. From identifying suitable restoration techniques to receiving permission to adapt these assets on a partial basis for community events, it is hoped that these buildings will present a setting for recreational and cultural events and a gathering point for
the community as well as visitors to the area. At time of writing, no other information was available on what type of work has been carried out to date.

**Moving Forward**

What does the future hold for Darb al-Ahmar, seeing how it has proven to be a link between the past, present and the future of Cairo? It would have been all too easy to accept the dilapidated conditions of this district or to embark upon an expensive and alienating policy of radical change. However, an alternative plan was sought and used – one that involved the direct engagement of its residents, community groups and local institutions. The gradual rehabilitation and restoration of existing buildings and infrastructure as well as a phased improvement of the entire neighbourhood, proved that the social fabric can become the driving and sustainable force of any revitalization efforts. With the advent of the Arab Spring and the uncertainties faced by the new government in power, will this integrated approach towards restoration of other areas of old Cairo be abandoned? In 2011, many residents expressed discontent with some of the outcomes of the project. They felt that there had been too much focus on the east of the neighbourhood along al-Azhar Park. Residents felt that they would have liked to see the rehabilitation programs also take place on the main streets of the neighbourhood like Dar el-Wazeer. In addition, the
housing rehabilitation program had been stopped due to the lack of funding. A shift in funding priorities resulted in an increased focus on children, women and the environment. Since the revolution, residents of the community have taken to adding extra floors above the number of authorized floors, with blatant disregard for heritage protection and sustainability. With the gradual exit of the Aga Khan Trust for Culture and its partners, it is not enough to have just the community and its organizations be responsible for the maintenance of the neighbourhoods. Although it is not clear whether government support would be forthcoming or whether it was a good idea to have them involved, nonetheless, the revitalization of Darb al-Ahmar is seen as a model. A model of the viability of alternative, community-based development, where residents are not afraid of change and to take charge and broaden their horizons. As Ahmed Biblawi, the environment coordinator of al-Darb al-Ahmar Community Development Company (CDC) stated, “I don’t know where I will be working when we reach the end of the exit plan. But I am sure, and so are most of my colleagues, that I will be working for a similar project,” he concludes.27

27 Hugo Massa, Community Approach to Rehabilitation of Historic District, Egypt Independent, Thursday, August 11, 2011
References


