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Essay

The importance of urban renewal in the historic district for the development of Greater Cairo

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"We are losing our identity and history. Leaving Cairo in this current situation is no less tragic than the theft of Iraqi heritage during the American attack in 2003" (Serageldin, 2007). The dramatic nature of this comparison underscores the assertion underlying this thesis: that the historic district is rapidly losing the vitally important role it has traditionally played within the context of Greater Cairo.

The origins of the old Islamic quarter in the city of Cairo stretch back to the Umayyad dynasty in the 8th century A.D. The city was consolidated into Al Qahira ("Cairo") after the conquest of the Fatimids in the 10th century (969-1171). Today, the historic city center is in drastically poor condition. Except for the restoration of the most significant monuments, such as the al-Azhar and al-Hussein mosques, and the measures successfully carried out by the Aga Khan Trust for Culture to restore and renew the Darb al-Ahmar quarter, vast portions of the old Islamic quarter are plagued by the decay of building fabric, partially unpaved public spaces, very high population and occupancy density, a largely predominant lower class and informal commercial structures. As a result of its socioeconomic segregation, extremely dense traffic and poor real estate policies, even the historic quarter that dates back to the 19th century, commonly known as Khedivial Cairo ("Royal Cairo"), is in an extreme state of neglect today.

The historic district of Cairo, defined in this paper as encompassing the old Islamic city bounded by the Fatimid and Ayyubid city walls as well as 19th-century Cairo, is not one single homogenous entity. Urban development throughout its various epochs led to overlaps, transformations, breakages and interweaving in its urban structure. In 19th-century Cairo, construction and development was adjacent to and interwoven with the old Islamic city. Numerous passageways broke through, piercing the urban landscape and, lined with newly constructed buildings, were established as streets throughout the historic quarter (Scharabi, 1989:54ff). Despite the interwoven nature and transformations of various architecto-nic and urban structures that came about in the historic district as a result, the sum of it all is a unique, invaluable cultural treasure that proves all the more fascinating the longer it is explored. Mohamed Scharabi states of it, "Cairo's multifaceted, multiform appearance today is the result of an extraordinary collision between the Orient and the Occident [...] how is it plausible that the place we call Cairo, the unchanging city of al-Qahira ("the victorious"), was able, despite all changes, to emerge from this collision?" (Scharabi, 1989:11) Today, despite initial successes in terms of urban renewal, this historic district is greatly endangered, both in terms of its physical structures and its significance as the vital core of Greater Cairo.

The goal of this paper is to clarify the dramatic threat of endangerment facing the historic district of Cairo within the context of the city as a whole and to highlight approaches to renewing the historic district that build upon the specific local require-



Fig. 1    Basic layout of the old Arabic Islamic quarter and the 19th-century historic quarter (Scharabi, 1989: 137)

ments to be met and that draw upon locally based experience gleaned within the framework of ongoing urban renewal projects. The questions that appear most central and which guide the discussion in this paper are as follows: What role can and should urban development within the historic district take in connection with the development of Greater Cairo? What strategies can be used in pursuing the urban renewal of Cairo's historic district to accommodate both its significance as a historic center of culture and its daily use as an urban space by modern inhabitants of Cairo? In addressing these questions, what is most important in terms of possible action to take and areas in which that action might be taken?

## The historic district as a focal point

Cairo contains various core historic sites, sites where the city saw its beginnings, as well as new towns and small satellite cities branching off from Greater Cairo; substantial development to the city's informal settlements has also take place since the 1950s. Because of this history, Cairo features a polycentric urban structure comprising various city quarters and settlements that, over time, have developed their own vividly unique characteristics. The thrust of Cairo's identity today is provided not only by the historic district but also by the city's unique positioning along the Nile and the Pyramids of Giza. This identity is also supplemented to some extent by the district centers at the core of some of Cairo's 20th-century city quarters, such as the heart of the Heliopolis suburb marking the location where the suburb was founded and the new "Star Center" at the heart of the largest mall in Egypt, also settled within the Heliopolis suburb.

In order to come to a better understanding of the situation facing the historic district, we will first examine Cairo's various development phases and physical structures and then summarize some of the most important statistics

in connection with Cairo's growth into a megacity. The urban structure of Cairo as a whole can be subdivided into the following three areas:
-        First, the historic quarter east of the Nile; forming the core of the city today, it expanded concentrically between the mid-19th and mid-20th centuries to encompass the islands in the Nile and the districts within the city center that lie west of the Nile.
-         Second, the highly dense, informal settlements arranged in a ring around the city center; to a great extent, these were built atop the fertile farmland of the Nile Valley and Nile Delta after the 1960s.
-        Third, the suburbs, large settlements, satellite cities and new towns formally planned and built after the beginning of the 20th century; these are primarily located in the non-fertile desert areas to the east and west of the city center.

With its clearly drawn distinctions between public and private areas and its strongly defined functional divisions, the structure of the Islamic old city conforms to the hierarchical pattern typical of old Arabic Islamic cities. The most important public locations and spaces are the city gates, the central mosque area and the streets connecting them with the bazaars. Between these axes are the individual city quarters, which, in turn, have their own centers with mosques and bazaars. The individual residential quarters and neighborhoods, some of which still today exhibit a private, protected atmosphere, are connected to them via alleyways. The historic quarter of Cairo, however, was not developed according to any pre-designed urban planning. The old Islamic city was fleshed out around the basic core formed by older settlements constructed under the Fatimids (969-1171). Comprehensive expansions to the historic quarter followed under the Ayyubid dynasty (1171-1250). While the fundamental underlying structure was retained throughout every stage of the historic district's halting course of development, as of the beginning of the 19th century under Muhammed Ali Pasha, the process of urban renewal and expansion led to partial alterations as streets were established during the

process of constructing new buildings and expanding existing ones. In the same way, numerous additional stories constructed atop buildings as well as measures taken in the last decade to repair and replace portions of buildings have also led to a considerable degree of alteration. The 19th-century urban development described above took place to the west of the old Islamic city and conformed to the primarily orthogonal, methodically planned European urban structures common to the 19th century. Typically, the buildings constructed at that time were highly dense townhouses, largely closed and 25 to 30 meters high.

During the reign of Isma'il Pasha (1863-1879), European architects planned and laid out large portions of what is today the city center and also laid out the primarily open structures of Zamalek, at the time a villa district, on the northern islands in the Nile River as well as the Mohandessin district to the west of the Nile. Following that, at the beginning of the 20th century, the Garden City villa quarter was erected on the eastern bank of the Nile. The suburbs farther from the city center, such as Heliopolis and Maadi/Helwan, were also founded during this same time. Following the contemporary developments in European urban planning, these new settlements were cultivated as areas for the wealthy and middle class (Ifa, 2006:36).

It was during the 1950s and at the 1952 founding of the Republic of Egypt that Cairo's massive population growth began. Set off by natural population growth as well as massive rural-to-urban migration, this population swell in Cairo continues still to this day. Under the reign of President Nasser (1954-1970), the comprehensive socialist programs started for the purpose of building homes focused predominantly on areas east of the city center and led to the construction of multiple-story apartment buildings. This phase of urban development, which lasted from 1952 until the Six-Day War with Israel, was the first phase of city expansion after independence. Forced industrialization and an increasing drift from rural areas to urban centers was accompanied by the emergence of informal settlements,

which, due to the lack of apartments in the 1960s, rapidly increased in number and size and led to the large-scale movement of refugees from the Sinai and Suez following the Six-Day War. A massive increase in density in the remaining quarters at the heart of the city began in the 1970s (Kenawy, 2005:11). Former villa suburbs gave way to highly compact city quarters. The continual dearth of apartments and ongoing rural flight led to a further increase in and compression of informal settlements. Of the living units constructed between 1970 and 1990, 80 % are found in informal settlements. A strategy of decentralization was adopted at the time as well in order to counteract the increasing densification and expansion of Cairo, and attempts were made to create satellite cities in a 35-90 km radius around Cairo's city center. Until today, however, Cairo's inhabitants have exhibited a preference only for the new towns that have some kind of connection to the city center and are a part of the settlement areas ensconced within Greater Cairo, such as the "6th of October" in the west and the "15th of May" in the south. A second phase of city expansion began in the mid-1990s with the planning of New Cairo City in the
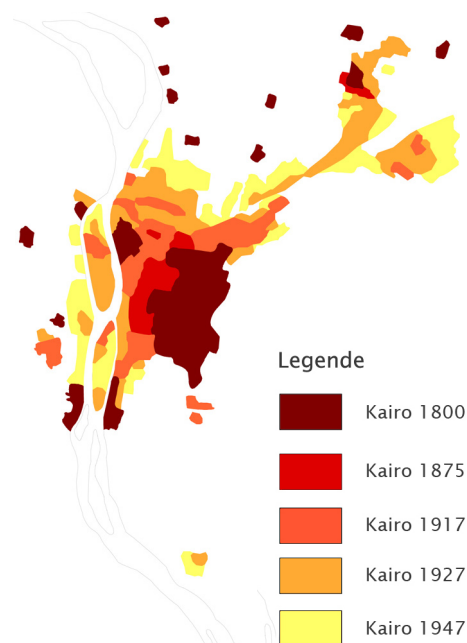


Legende

■ Kairo 1800

■ Kairo 1875

■ Kairo 1917

■ Kairo 1927

□ Kairo 1947

*Fig. 2    Expansions to Cairo's urban landscape, 1800-1947 (mapped out by the authors)*

eastern portion of the city and the extensive expansions to the "6th of October" district. The construction projects that were part of these expansions, which were carried out on the basis of market demand, comprised gated communities for the wealthier segments of the population and middle-class apartment buildings as well as larger office spaces, shopping areas and the like. There was nothing developed between these different areas to provide a sense of transition or spatial connectedness.

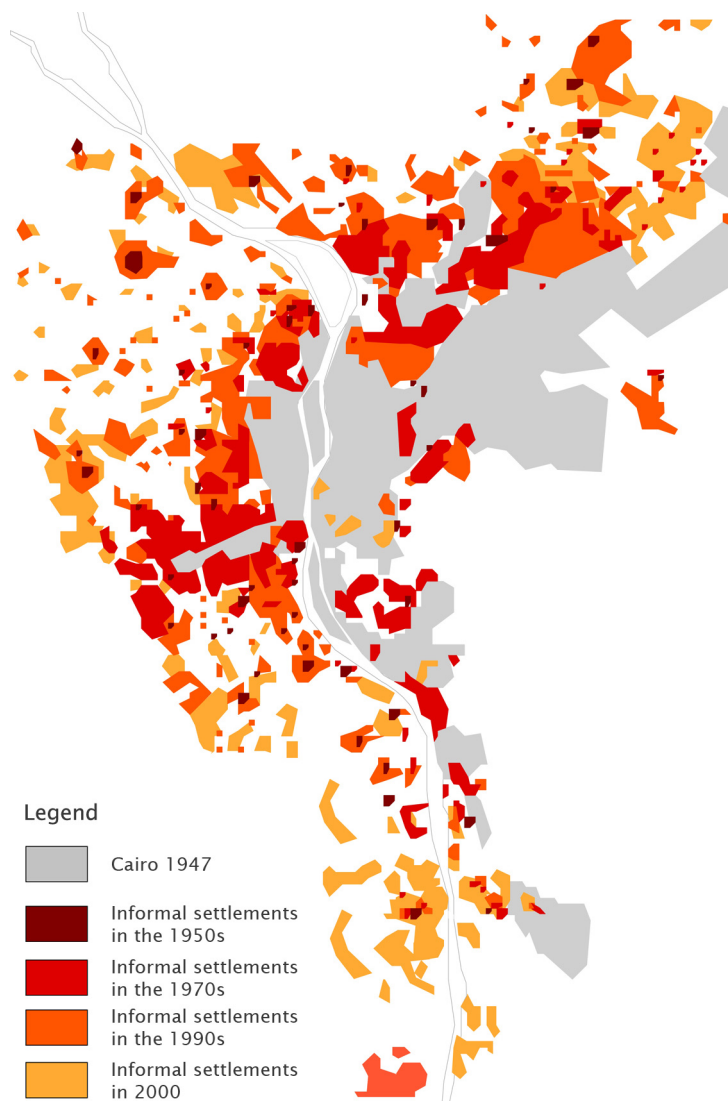A glance at the most relevant data regarding socioeconomic development

is needed in order to gain a more detailed overview of the challenges involved in the urban renewal of Cairo's historic district. The exact population of Greater Cairo remains unknown; estimates vary between about 15 million and more than 20 million inhabitants, with approximately eight million living at the core of the city and another eight million in the further agglomerations. At some 16 million inhabitants, Cairo encompasses approximately a quarter of the entire population in Egypt, which numbers about 80 million. Based on calculations that the city center encompasses 210 square kilometers and contains eight million inhabitants, its approximately 35,000 inhabitants per square kilometer make the population density of Cairo among the highest in the world. Cairo's annual population growth of about 4 % is considerably lower than its demographic growth of 2.6 %, attributable to continuing rural flight into the cities. The Ministry of Planning predicts a further population growth of 35 million inhabitants by 2025 for the entire Nile Delta region (Ministry of Planning et al, 2004:4). With its average per capita income of 1,300 USD per year (CIA, 2007), Egypt is classified as a developing country. A look at the division of the total national income according to the various segments of the population reveals that Egyptian society is a two-tier society, with 86 % of the population poor and a mere 14 % of the population having access to more than 75 % of the national income (Habashi, 1996:14). This income gap is also demonstrated in the stark duality of the class division within the society of Cairo; around 30 % of the city's inhabitants live comfortably while 70 % are situated within the poorer class. Among the latter group, a further 30 % live from a good 50 Euros per year (as of 2006). This group clearly falls below the poverty line of 80 cents per day as introduced by the World Bank.

In addition to its political tensions, population growth, overpopulation of fertile areas and related use of natural resources, the greatest problems facing Egypt are its economic weakness and lack of education. Additional problems confronting Cairo include heavy air pollution, daily gridlock within the city and



Legend

Cairo 1947

Informal settlements in the 1950s

Informal settlements in the 1970s

Informal settlements in the 1990s

Informal settlements in 2000

*Fig. 3      Expansions to the informal settlements, 1952-2000 (mapped out by the authors)*

the dilapidated sewage system and rising groundwater level in the historic district. When this is seen in light of the extreme growth of Cairo since the 1950s, the challenges facing the city become clear. Whereas 630,000 inhabitants lived in Cairo at the end of the 19th century, that number had already increased by 1945 to 1.9 million in a space measuring 80 square kilometers. Today, approximately 16 million inhabitants live in Greater Cairo in a space that encompasses 500 square kilometers.

## The historic district of Cairo: Forgotten along the way to becoming a megacity

The primary causes and needs that have led to the desperate situation of the historic city are societal segregation, rental price policies and the neglect to preserve and restore buildings due to cost, erection of informal settlements, traffic developments and a general loss of political power in terms of urban development policy. In addition to the dilapidated condition of the architectonic structures in further areas of the historic district, the loss of significance increasingly affecting the historic city is alarming in terms of urban development. This tendency can also be seen in the 19th-century historic quarter; one way in which this can be seen is the increasing tendency for established institutions to move away from the 19th-century historic quarter.

For example, the Mogamma Building on Tahrir Square, the Egyptian Museum, the German Embassy and the American University of Cairo are all slated for a move to New Cairo City, where the German University of Cairo has already settled. While the decision to place the Egyptian Museum near the Pyramids of Giza, carried out in the 1980s, was made for logistical reasons and out of a need for space, not because of the deterioration of the historic city, it has nevertheless helped to accelerate that same process of deterioration. Furthermore, all the most important real es-

tate investments currently rest outside the historic city district. New hotels are placed in the suburbs, as they are easier to access; for example, the new JW Marriot Hotel Cairo was just built in Heliopolis.

One of the causes behind this development tendency is social segregation. While the flight of the wealthy and influential segment of the population from the Islamic historic city can be traced all the way back to the 19th century, the construction of the first suburbs at the beginning of the 20th century introduced social segregation into the 19th-century quarter during the large-scale suburbanization of upper-class Cairo society as the wealthy moved out of the city center and into the newly built suburbs of Maadi, Garden City, Zamalek and Heliopolis. Rural-to-urban migration was also taking place at the same time, and the population moving into the city from rural areas settled down within the medieval city. The result was social segregation, making the old Islamic city the place of residence for lower-income segments of the population (Mayer, 2001:1001). The poor living conditions and run-down condition of the buildings were hallmarks of this part of the city already at that time, and the gap between the lower-class poor and the privileged upper class has only continued to increase.

With the founding of the Republic of Egypt and the socialist policies of President Nasser, urban development policies underwent fundamental change due to forced industrialization, agrarian and land reforms and the intensive construction of subsidized housing as well as the introduction of restrictive fixed rental prices. The rental costs for historic buildings were frozen at 1950s prices due to the rental price fixing policies. A restrictive upper limit for the rental costs of newly built apartments was also put in place, and rental costs were kept so low by the state that it was no longer possible for owners to earn a living; this, in turn, led to the swift deterioration of numerous buildings (Meyer, 1996:97). The same fixed-price laws for rental costs are still in place today and lead to paradoxical complications on the apartment market. In

some cases, the rental costs set by the market laws for one apartment are 50 to 150 times higher than the rental costs for another, comparable apartment (as of 1998). In addition to rental costs, landlords today demand what is known as "key money," or the apartment is immediately put up for sale. Simultaneous to the enactment of the price fixing laws for rental costs, a law governing the cancellation of rental contracts was put into place, making it impossible for owners to use their property later for their own purposes. On the one hand, the result of this real estate policy is a large number of apartments standing empty for years, as many wealthy people build them for later use or for speculation (Meyer, 1996:102); on the other hand, it means that people in the lower-class segment of society are unable to afford an apartment on the for-

mal real estate market. As of the end of the 1990s, approximately 1.8 million apartments in Greater Cairo stood empty, accompanied at the same time by a dire need for apartments existed and a large number of poor families living in destitute, restrictive conditions (Habashi, 1996:14). "City without apartments, apartments without residents" (Meyer, 1996:97): this statement points out two of the fundamental problems with the urban development policy of Cairo – first, the deterioration of historic buildings due to the neglect to take any measures toward their preservation, repair and restoration; and second, the intensive development of informal settlements on farmland.

In most cases, the informal settlement areas present the only possible accommodations for incoming rural immi-
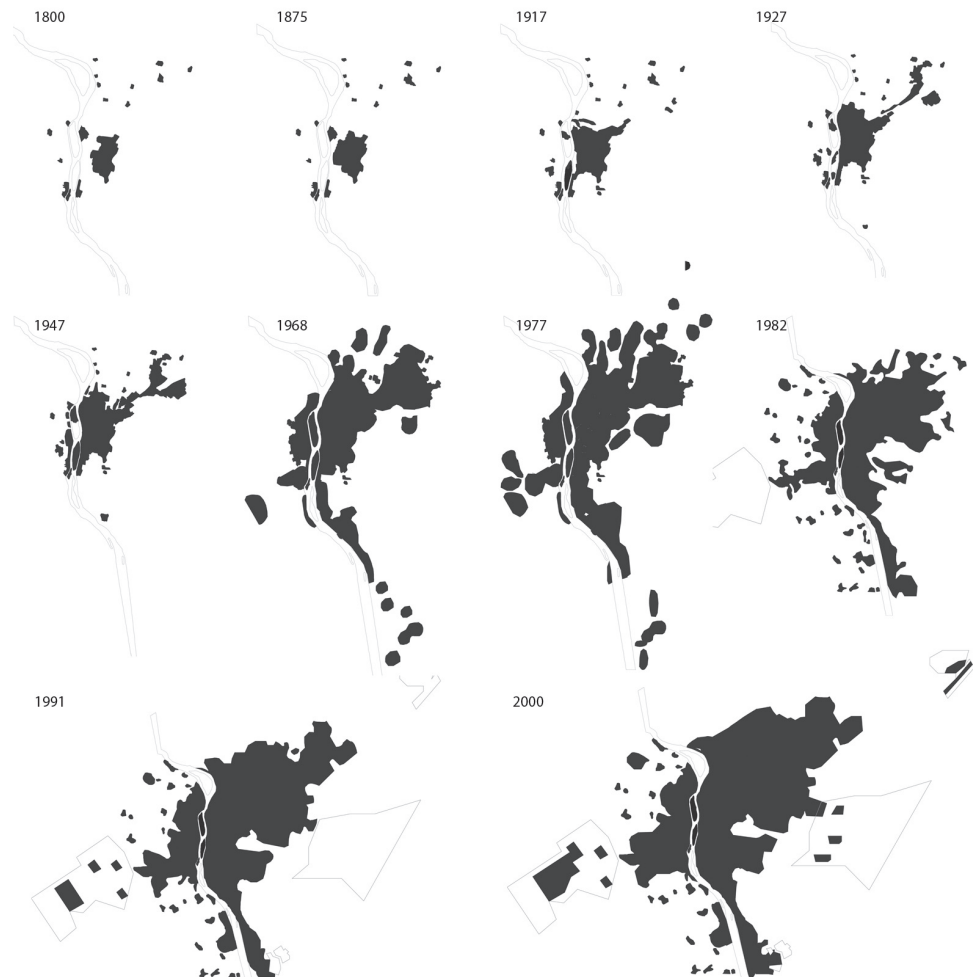


*Fig.4      Expansions to the total area of Cairo, 1800-2000 (mapped out by the authors)*

grants. In terms of their construction, the informal settlements have become highly dense. The prototypical building rests atop a plot comprising 60 to 140 square meters; it is five or even, in extreme cases, ten to fifteen stories high and is constructed using the simplest of means, its precast concrete skeletal frame filled in with raw brick, the building covering the entirety of the property and allowing only two to four meters' width for the connecting alleyways. Today, informal settlements make up a large portion of the area settled in the first belt of outward city expansion, with approximately half the population of Greater Cairo calling them home. The informal settlements in Cairo have an extremely high population density; in most cases, this ratio exceeds 50,000 residents per square kilometer. In some parts, the number of residents per kilometer is more than 100,000, and in some extreme cases, it can be as high as 220,000 residents per kilometer (Sims, 2003:21). Until the 1980s, the informal settlements were ignored within official urban development politics. In 1993, fears of political radicalization in the informal settlements led to the beginnings of upward revaluation strategies. These, however, concentrated largely on the technological infrastructure, and to this day, the living conditions within the informal settlements remain miserable and precarious, with a lack of organizations dedicated to dealing with medicinal, societal and educational needs (Ministry of Planning, et al, 2004:11ff).

Perpetual traffic congestion and thick smog are the order of the day in most places at the heart of Cairo and are a further cause behind the historic district's drop in significance. In addition to the increase in population, the number of automobiles per household, the number of trips per resident and the stretches of road to be covered as well as the driving times needed all increased considerably throughout the 1970s and 1980s (World Bank, 2005:5). During the same period of time, the modal split in Cairo's traffic exhibited a heavy usage of private automobiles, taxies and microbuses (with an average increase from 22 % to 61 % and a corresponding decrease in the use of public

transportation despite the construction of two subway lines – though the bus and tram systems were crudely neglected). In spite of the expansions made to the primary routes of transportation via the construction of new streets and 45 overpasses, the traffic situation did not improve; instead, life along the streets and open spaces under these newly built overpasses quickly became unbearable due to the extent of the damage and destruction they inflicted on the quality of the urban space. This extremely difficult traffic situation is one of the primary reasons for the exit of important cultural institutions from the historic city today; it is no longer



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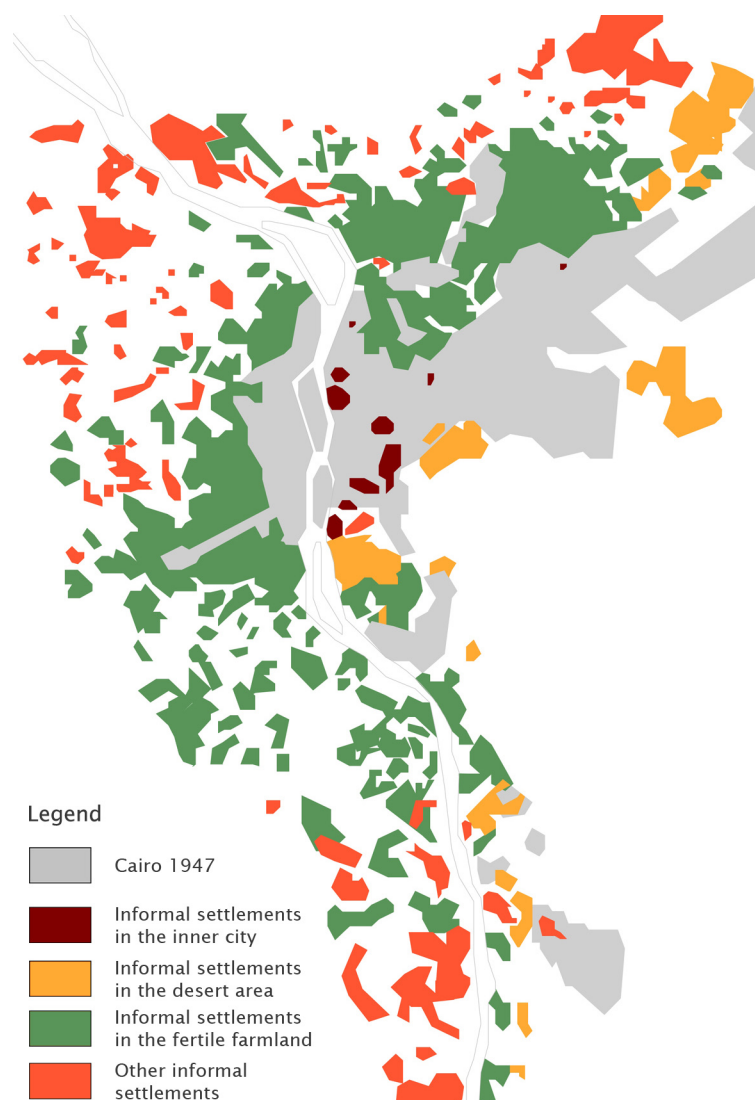| | |
|---|---|
| ⬜ | Cairo 1947 |
| 🟥 | Informal settlements in the inner city |
| 🟧 | Informal settlements in the desert area |
| 🟩 | Informal settlements in the fertile farmland |
| 🟧 | Other informal settlements |

*Fig.5*     *Typologies of informal settlements (by the authors)*

*Fig. 6      Extent of the formal city expansions (by the authors)*



Legend    ▧ Cairo historic district    ▧ Cairo today    🟧 Informal settlement    ▧ Formal urban expansion area
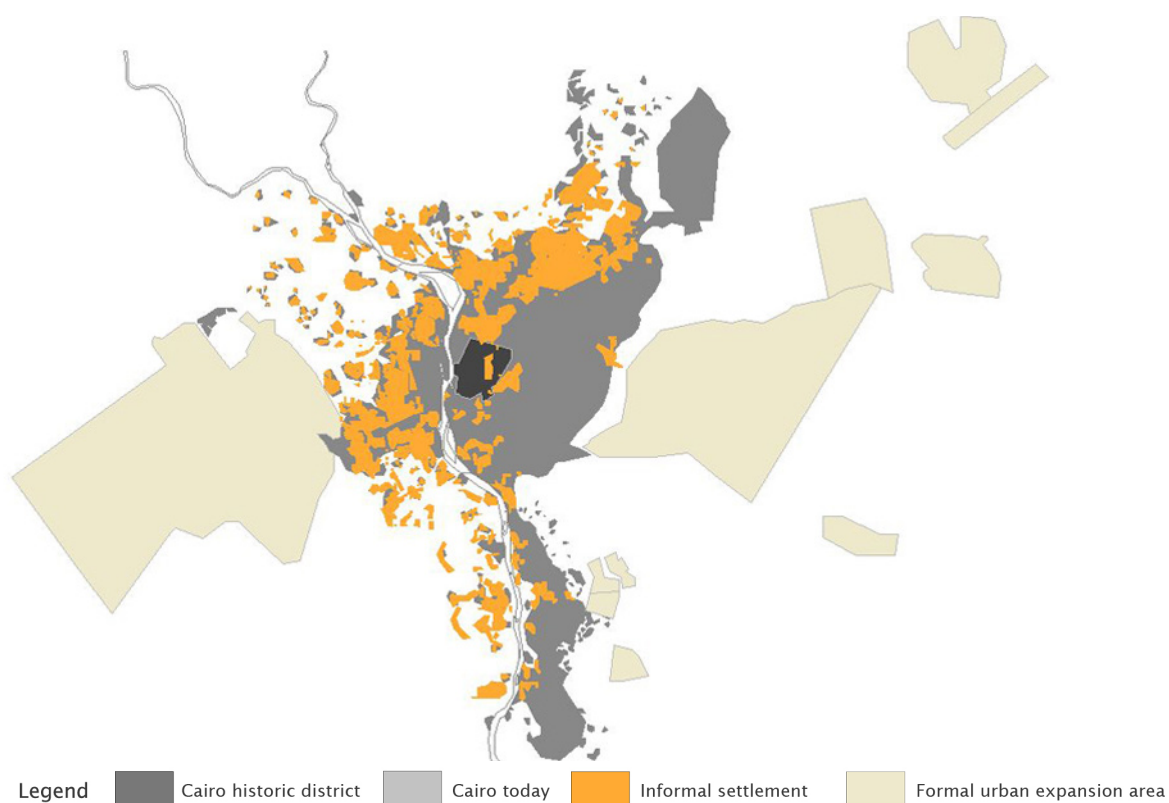
*Fig. 7      Settlement structure of Greater Cairo (by the authors)*

12      The historic district of Cairo: Forgotten along the way to becoming a megacity

possible to guarantee a reliable means of transportation in reaching these institutions.

Urban development policy since the 1980s has been limited to attempts to halt the informal development of settlements on farmland, to tax the new towns for urban renewal in desert areas, and to bring about an improvement in the living conditions in poor and underdeveloped parts of the city (Ministry of Planning, et al, 2004:4). The fact that the urban renewal of the historic district and urban development of the city center is not even on the list of priorities in creating urban development policies has had its effect; an overall loss of political power in terms of urban development policy development, however, has played a significant role as well. During the second phase of urban expansion, which began in the 1990s, the large areas slotted for city expansions, including 6th of October City in the western part of the city and the far-reaching areas built in New Cairo City in the eastern part of the city, were to be developed. To this day, however, only the first planned portion of this development has been realized. The main focus of the official urban planning for New Cairo City is limited to plotting out a grid for the primary network of streets while keeping a distance of one to two kilometers between each street and regulating the general zones for respective land use. For the most part, the development plots within this main network of streets in New Cairo City are to be apportioned to private real estate developers, who then realize plans for middle- and upper-class living spaces. Despite the considerable size of the district, larger commercial spaces and industrial settlements are not envisioned. The fact that the police academy and the German University in Cairo as well as numerous other private schools and facilities for higher education have been built in New Cairo City seems to indicate that it is the preferred location for educational institutions. New Cairo City – which is 350 meters above sea level, is situated in the desert and has a moderate climate in comparison to the center of the city situated in the Nile Valley – is slotted to be developed by 2050 in such a way that it can ac-commodate a total of 2.5 million inhabitants. At this point, no public transportation system is in the planning.

An escalation in polarization can be seen in the overall development process of Cairo. The historic district is increasingly losing its most significant institutions, and the continual neglect of its buildings is simply serving to reinforce its decades-old societal segregation. At the same time, the extensive informal settlements are being developed as close as possible to the city center, right alongside the existing city structure and infrastructure, while the official city expansion underway is located far from the city center, in the desert areas to the west and east of the city center. The fact that the informal settlement areas are populated by the lower class while the official settlement areas are populated primarily by the middle and upper classes only serves to propel the tendency toward social and economic regression in the historic city and in the city center, which are losing their significance as core areas integrating the entire city into a coherent whole.

## The historic district today

The overall situation of Cairo's historic district today in terms of urban planning can accurately be described as terrible; however, this dire state of affairs is made apparent in different ways within each respective area, varying according to how individual settlements are structured and integrated into neighboring urban spaces. The historic district can roughly be divided into the medieval portion of the district, marked by its Arabic Islamic influences, and the 19th-century quarter, built according to the European standards of the time.

For the past decade, the Arabic Islamic portion of the historic district has been threatened by various structural problems related to its construction, including the rising groundwater level, the infiltration of pollutants into the fundaments from a largely rotted-out sewage system, and the high level of air pollu-

tion, which particularly corrodes stones and brickwork when accompanied by high humidity and temperatures. For the most part, the historic monuments, the city gates, the most important mosques and madrassas as well as the citadel areas and other important architectural constructions on the southeastern rim of the old medieval quarter have been preserved and restored. The main streets within the Arabic Islamic historic quarter, which host the bazaars, rest between these historic buildings and architectural structures,



Fig.8    Old Arabic Islamic quarter (WARNER, 2005), yellow: Quarters Darb al-Ahmar

corresponding to the original urban structure of the old city. These main streets in the historic district are in reasonable condition. While the central public spaces along these main roads have largely been preserved, e.g., the Midan al-Hussein, located between the al-Hussein and al-Azhar mosques, the continuations of these historically important axes have merely been paved over with asphalt in some places, while in other places, nothing has been done at all. Nearly all the visitors to the old medieval quarter traverse only the central areas of the historic district and the main axes. The bazaar areas and merchants found there offer a simple fare of standard day-to-day goods in addition to products of interest to tourists. The buildings along these axes are also in fair condition, as are those along the main north-south axis of the historic district, traversing the Sharia El-Muizz Li-Din Allah between the gates of Bab al-Futuh in the north and Bab Zuweila in the south. However, the situation has become especially precarious for residential quarters located off the main axes, where the historic district is marked by partially unpaved alleyways; deserted, empty and decaying buildings; and a considerable amount of remodeling and reconstruction, leading to the replacement of invaluable, historically significant constructions with rudely built new ones and the frequent, abrupt breakup of time-old structures with the addition of five or even more stories. The district's population is very poor. David Sims, in his paper in the UN Habitat Report on Human Settlements, partially defines these areas as unofficial settlements of the type "Deteriorated Historic Core" (Sims, 2003:6). Due to the narrow alleyways, the impenetrable nature of the traditional alleyway system and the poverty of the population, only very little motorized traffic is found within this area of the historic district. In contrast, the streets that have broken their way through the old medieval quarter are overcrowded with motorized traffic. The situation has become extreme on the Sharia al-Azhal, which bisects the area between the al-Hussein and al-Azhar mosques and within the entire old medieval quarter in an east-westerly direction and offers very few possibilities

for pedestrians and others on the road to cross. Conversly, this breakthrough of the Sharia al-Azhar as a street provided one of the few and most important east-west thoroughfares in this area of the city center.

While the neglect of the old Arabic Islamic quarter can be traced all the way back to the urban expansion of the 19th century, the decline of the old 19th-century quarter that can be seen today first began in the 1950s with Egypt's independence. A large portion of the magnificent residential and commercial buildings dating back to the 19th century are in such poor condition today because the necessary measures were not taken to preserve and restore them. Empty residences are rife, sprinkled liberally through the blocs of buildings, which are also marked by the considerable renovations that have obliterated and covered over their original historic façade and created new buildings stretching up fifteen stories or more. Generally speaking, very little value is placed on historically significant groupings of buildings within the old 19th-century quarter. While various individual buildings and groupings of buildings have been restored, such as the Omar Effendi department store on Sharia Rushdi Pasa, these present the exception. The overload of traffic has caused a particularly large amount of damage to public spaces. Strong conflicts emerge in connection with this, and the struggle for public spaces reveals itself not only in the continuous, daily traffic jams and the extreme amounts of smog but also in the way pedestrian walkways are fenced off from automobile thoroughfares. Pedestrian crossings, such as the one in front of the main train station at Ramses Square, are blocked off with chains that are opened by police only once the pedestrian stoplight has turned green. Particularly hard-hit are the public plazas, which have lost nearly all of their original decorative and residential character through the construction of main traffic thoroughfares and the overpasses and pedestrian bridges that have been built atop them.

The role that the historic district of Cairo plays today for the entire megacity is defined primarily by the unique, histori-cally important groupings of buildings within the old medieval Arabic Islamic quarter as well as the downtown character and feel of the old 19th-century quarter, with its collection of famous institutions as well as the few remaining distinctive culinary and commercial institutions; also, the area around the main train station gives the historic district some definition as an important traffic junction. The al-Azhar Park, too, which rests east of the old Arabic Islamic quarter, has played an important role within the larger context of the city as a whole since it was finished in 2004. Some distinguished institutions still remain established within the old 19th-century quarter as well, such as the Abdeen Palace (today the official residence for the president of the republic); the Museum of Islamic Art at Ahmad Maher Square, representing the most significant art collection of its kind; and the Ezbekiya Gardens at Opera Square. Also remaining in the downtown area of the historic district are unique culinary institutions such as Café Riche and the old Groppi coffeehouse formerly frequented by Nagib Machfus. However, the number of good cafes, bars and restaurants in the historic district is very limited when the size of the city is taken into account and the historic district is compared to other districts within Cairo. And, while the old 19th-century quarter is an important center of commerce to this day, its business standard is largely restricted to cheap goods and production. Numerous hotels can still be found downtown today as well; but again, a good number of these hotels reflect a very low to average standard, and the expensive hotels are found outside of the historic district, such as those on the banks of the Nile; and today's first-class hotels are being built outside the core of the city. Though the intersection at Cairo's main train station, the Ramses Railway Station, continues to prove vital in terms of transportation, the area's overuse and lack of preservation has led to a disintegration of the characteristics that formerly told of its urban planning. With the development of the al-Azhar Park through the Aga Khan Trust for Culture, however, the historic district of Cairo has acquired a new hotspot, one which is significant

for the city as a whole and which presents a remarkable exception within the course of development that has taken place in the historic district in the past few decades. Related developments, encompassing restoration of the Ayyubid city walls and as well as an intensive process of renewal for the neighboring Darb al-Ahmar quarter, will certainly prove valuable in terms of the experience garnered, which will be useful as a reference point for further urban renewal projects.

## Al-Azhar Park and the restorations to Darb al-Ahmar

Because of the shortage of free space in Cairo, the Aga Khan promised a parking place to the citizens of the city of Cairo in November 1984 at a conference entitled "The Expanding Metropolis: Coping with the Urban Growth of Cairo." Already since 1967, the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) has dedicated itself to providing development aid at the local level and serves as the umbrella organization of the Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC), sponsor of the Darb al-Ahmar development project. The three overarching ideas and foundational principles for the projects of the AKDN are aiming for long-term economic development, protecting and supporting social equality, and bringing about a general improvement in living conditions, regardless of the background or religion of the people affected and/or involved. All projects are bound up with local groups, and efforts are continually made to involve further organizations in projects in order to form a critical mass of actors that can guarantee long-term involvement within the project. Within the AKDN, the AKTC's main focus is the physical, social, cultural and economic revitalization of villages and city quarters within the Islamic world (AKDN, 2008). In particular, the programs of the AKTC encompass the more than 25-year-old Aga Khan Award for Architecture and the Aga Khan Historic Cities Programme, which is also supporting the renewal of the Darb al-Ahmar

quarter. The Historic Cities Programme was initiated to provide support for the restoration and renewal of historically important architectural constructions and public spaces while preserving their historic character as a cultural legacy through projects involving social, economic and cultural development.

The projects of the AKTC in the historic district of Cairo include the construction of the al-Azhar Park, the restoration of 1.5 kilometers of the Ayyubid city wall located in the same area, and the renewal of the bordering historic quarter of Darb al-Ahmar. These three interconnected projects began in the mid-1990s with the construction of the 30-hectare park atop a trash dump east of the old Arabic Islamic quarter that had lain fallow for decades. After the digging process unearthed a portion of the former Ayyubid city wall, its repair and restoration was included in the project. Discussions about and plans for the restoration of the city wall led to the decision to incorporate the neighboring Darb al-Ahmar quarter in the project as well. In addition to these fundamental building blocks of the project, the construction of an "Urban Plaza" north of the park is also planned for 2014. These heavily commercial projects are meant to provide long-term support for the park and to safeguard the bordering space for the public (El-Mikawi, et al, 2007). The renewal projects undertaken by the AKTC draw heavily upon the aforementioned individual projects in order to restore and renew various significant monuments and discrete infrastructures within the historic district of Cairo, something particularly applicable in the case of the Darb al-Ahmar renewal project; this can be traced back to the organization's complex and integrative development approach.

The park is especially important because of the extreme dearth of public space in Cairo. Al-Azhar Park is situated west of the old Fatimid district and the residential area of Darb al-Ahmar. In this particular location, the Ayyubid city wall rests atop the site of the former Fatimid city wall. Bordering on the south of the new park is the Sultan Hassan mosque and the Citadel. East of the park is the City of the Dead, a

cemetery also heavily populated with residents. Planning was begun in 1997 after the removal of the trash heap, and the public park was officially opened on March 25, 2005 (Ifa, 2006:65). The unearthed Ayyubid city walls on the eastern side of the park form the physical boundary between the al-Azhar Park and the Darb al-Ahmar quarter. Because the wall, which was erected under Salah al-Din in 1176 and the years to follow, is inextricably connected with the neighboring Darb al-Ahmar quarter, the medieval structure of which remains preserved, a suitable approach had to be found and taken in respect to this structure during the restoration of the wall. Egyptian regulations regarding the approach to be taken to archaeological structures, however, state that historic monuments must be kept freestanding, with a 30-meter gap between them and any other constructions. This, however, contradicted the approach of the Aga Khan Trust to preserve its historic legacy, since the wall had always been connected with the bordering construction, which also included historically significant groupings of buildings such as the Khayer Bek Complex, later restored and today accommodating the "Mother and Child Health Center" and other organizations. So the project was initiated under the category of renewals to the Darb al-Ahmar quarter. During the concept design phase of this historical district renewal project, Cairo archaeologists and preservationists were also persuaded that a physical isolation of the Ayyubid city wall would not be appropriate in this location (Bianca, 2003).

With approximately 90,000 residents, the Darb al-Ahmar quarter is among Cairo's most populous residential areas. Most of the residents are poor. In 2003, the average monthly household income for a family of five hovered around 500 Egyptian Lira (LE), at the time equal to 81 US Dollars. The average monthly expenditures for a living space totaled just 3 % of the household income and averaged about 16.20 LE or 2.60 USD for a family of five (AKCS-E,2003). The economic market infrastructure of the quarter is largely informal, exhibiting various rudimentary trade and repair businesses and the like (Ifa, 2006:65).

65 historic buildings and more than a hundred architectonically significant residences are registered in the Darb al-Ahmar quarter alone (Sivaro, 2001:40). Also important to the project is the fact that 39 % of the households in the quarter have lived in their residences for 10 years or longer; 31 % have lived in their residences for 21 to 40 years, and just 15 % have lived in their residences for less than 10 years. This strong sense of connection to the quarter is also revealed by the fact that 84 % of the residents of Darb al-Ahmar indicate they would like to continue living in the quarter (AKCS-E, 2003).

The urban renewal project for Darb al-Ahmar was begun in cooperation with the Egyptian Swiss Fund for Development, the Ford Foundation, the Kreditanstalt für Wiederaufbau (German federal development bank) and the World Monument Watch. The attempt was made to reach out and include the maximum possible number of the governmental Egyptian administrative agencies responsible (Cairo Governorate, Supreme Council of Antiquities, the Awqaf Department) while at the same time cooperating with local non-governmental organizations and the residents themselves. Although cooperation with the Egyptian administration has proven difficult and has been limited to procurement of the necessary project approvals, and the long-term goal of handing over responsibility for the project to the local Egyptian administration has proven unrealistic at the present time, the cooperation undertaken with various local groups and residents forms an important foundation in carrying out the work of the project (El-Mikawi, et al, 2007).

The Darb al-Ahmar project encompasses the restoration of historically important buildings, the preservation and restoration of residences, renovations to and further development of the technical infrastructure, the establishment of medicinal and social services, granting of microcredits for self-help projects and for preserving and restoring buildings belonging to the applicants, the organization of trash removal and the establishment of institutions for the education and furthering education

of residents in the quarter. The formation of self-help programs fitting to the needs of the residents in the quarter is one of the most essential aspects of the project in order to ensure their continuing involvement. These programs include projects and other measures dedicated to strengthening the social benefits available to the community, from childcare and cultural programs, educational programs and programs for learning how to read to the construction of a community center.

Already as of 2004, the construction of a health center was finished, an old school building restored, and two minarets reconstructed (AKTC, 2005:32ff). This brought about improvements in the technical and transportation infrastructures of the historic district even without delving any deeper into its social and physical structures. With the assistance of residents, small neighborhood plazas were redone, not least of all in order to support and reinforce the social life of the quarter (Schlösser, 2006:34). The needs of the residents were integrated into the planning process by means of an ongoing democratic voting process. During the process of restoring the residences, too, the respective situation of residents provided an important jumping-off point for the work done by the organization

(Ifa, 2006:65). By 2005, 19 houses for approximately 70 residents were able to be restored within the framework of the microcredit program. The restoration of 200 houses is to be finished by 2008. The work of restoring the quarter has also successfully integrated small, local family businesses (such as cabinetmakers, tile makers, carpenters and leather producers). In total, investors will have invested more than 3.3 million US Dollars by the end of 2004 toward the development of the quarter (Ifa, 2006:66). The current goal of the Aga Khan Trust is to reach a "critical mass of 25 % of the architectonic structures" in its restoration work; the accompanying expectation is that a self-perpetuating process of renewal will emerge alongside this (El-Mikawi, et al, 2007).

The substantial successes of the above-presented projects carried out by the Aga Khan Trust for Culture in Cairo were started by tying together the various projects. The construction of the al-Azhar Park has given the area significance in the context of the city as a whole once again and provided it with an attractive hotspot. Along with this increase in the attraction of the district, a feeling of renewal, progress and positive development was able to be brought out in the neighboring quarter



Fig. 9      Downtown Cairo, Sharia al-Azhar (Photograph by the authors)

of Darb al-Ahmar – a feeling also furthered by the fact that the work of building the park included approximately 400 workers that came primarily from Darb al-Ahmar as well as the fact that 35 % of the approximately 250 people employed in the two large restaurants in the park come from the neighboring quarters. In the same way, the restoration of the Ayyubid city wall and of further important monuments, such as the Umm al-Sultan Sha'aban Mosque and the Khayer Bek Complex, provided an impetus in catalyzing the interest of the population in education and work. About 200 people from the quarter were employed in the restoration of the Ayyubid city walls. But it is not only these large-scale model showcase projects and stimulus projects that speak of the success of the steps taken toward urban renewal. The smaller-scale urban renewal projects for private residences and neighborhood plazas nestled deep within the urban setting are just as vitally important; they illustrate that the measures taken toward infrastructural improvements and toward fostering a stronger social fabric within the community and the serious participation of the residents has led to an increase in development possibilities through these local players. Improvements to the living conditions of the residents and an increase in the productivity of

local businesses are already evident in the quarter today (Schlösser, 2006:36). Even if these renewal projects in Cairo encompass just a tiny part of the old Islamic quarter and do not touch upon the larger historic district of Khedivial Cairo, they still provide much-needed impetus for the renewal of the historic district as a whole. The projects serve as demonstrations of the kinds of physical and socioeconomic qualities able to unfold when renewal measures are undertaken and the way in which existing social and economic structures can to be used and developed in order to bring about integrated development.

## Urban renewal: a community task

Despite its loss in significance and its decrepit state, the historic district is the only area in Greater Cairo that bridges the socioeconomic classes of the entire population as a whole to serve as a pivotal location for all, both in terms of day-to-day life and special events. However, this special role is appreciably threatened by the increasing polarization of urban development, whereby



Fig. 10    Al-Azhar Park, Ayyubid city wall and Darb al-Ahmar quarter (Photograph by the authors)

the lower class poor are concentrated within the city center, and by the encroaching development of the informal settlements.

Various initiatives and projects undertaken within the past decades reveal a sense of awareness in modern Egypt of the dangers that the old Arabic Islamic quarter and 19th-century Khedivial Cairo may lose their World Cultural Heritage status. At this point it would be appropriate to take a quick glance at the concept of restoring the entire historic district as it appears within the 1997 „United Nations Development Program," which provides the foundation for a program that has been pursued by the Egyptian Cultural Ministry since 2000. Within the framework of this program, more than 80 individual structures are to be restored and made accessible to visitors (Mayer, 2001:1001). Numerous national and international institutions are also advocating for the preservation and restoration of the historically significant buildings in Cairo. "[...] save Cairo's magnificent buildings and its downtown architectural glory from further decay" was one of the key calls to action heard at the meeting put on by the British Council on May 23, 2007, which focused on the development of downtown Cairo (Serageldin, 2007). However, a broad-sweeping concept for the renewal of the entire historic district – which would not only prove valuable in preserving architectural history but would also serve to foster a lively urban space for Cairo's residents and visitors – has not yet been seen.

However, the example set by the Aga Khan Trust for Culture in terms of development and renewal projects serves as a guidepost, showing how a renewal strategy for the historic district can take shape. It is possible to cull a development approach from the processes at work in integrating the project network for the facilities of al-Azhar Park, the restoration of the Ayyubid city walls and the renewal of the Darb al-Ahmar quarter – an approach coupling selective, property-based investment projects and stimulus projects together with the renewal of public spaces. Drawing from these sorts of "concentrated axes," urban renewal can spread throughout the larger urban context, making its way into more day-to-day quarters and building sites. In other words, urban renewal can be put into practice first in and between locations that are of historical importance; programs can be started for neighboring areas at the same time so they, too, are able to be a part of the initial phase of development and can use and tweak it for their own neighborhood development. Such a strategy is only able to work, however, given a great deal of solid support in bearing forward the weight of the project. Such backing is all the more needed since the city administration of Cairo is not yet in the position to carry out an integrated and complex process of urban renewal, a process integrating national and international institutions as well as local initiatives, interest groups and groups of residents. For this reason, the core aims of urban development should not comprise just a blind focus on the simple physical elements, such as the actual construction work to be done, but should also involve the working development of cultural, social and economic components.

The Cairo city administration is assuming an ever greater role in the urban development of this Egyptian city. The population, however, has been conditioned to take fate into its own hands. This inherent potential for organization at the grassroots level can also be channeled for the benefit of urban renewal. To this same end, lessons can be gleaned from the upward revaluation process of Cairo's informal settlements, where local residents and business owners are being included and motivated to action in this upward revaluation of the miserable living conditions there. This mentality of self-organization forms the basis for every development in the informal settlements. Using and catalyzing existing social and economic networks for the purpose of developing the historic district is one of the biggest challenges involved in urban renewal. However, having said all this, the state is not thereby freed of its responsibility to renew the infrastructure and the public spaces and to reign in the traffic problems. A bottom-up development approach practiced to a li-

mited extent in Darb al-Ahmar will not suffice to bring about the urban renewal of the historic district's array of stunning, historically significant buildings or the revitalization of the historic district's role as the most important pivot point for all socioeconomic groups within the megacity of Greater Cairo. Within politics, both at the national and Cairo level, it is vitally important that the renewal of the historic district be recognized as a priority under the umbrella of urban development and that a fitting political framework be forged for its renewal to take place. The overwhelming dimensions of the tasks involved in renewing the historic district of Cairo surpass the resources available at the local and national levels. Here, too, the international community must take more responsibility than it has until this point, first, by recognizing its singular historical value; second, by recognizing that its socioeconomic and physical structures are representative of a juncture between Orient and Occident; and third, by recognizing that the increased social and cultural polarization of the various population groups within Cairo represents a further danger to the social peace in Cairo and Egypt as a whole.

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