

Egypt

EVERT SCHREUR

'The Musafirkhana was beautiful. It gave you a feeling for work. You were surrounded by nice woodwork, calligraphy and coloured glass windows. You were in the centre of Cairo, but you didn't hear any noise.' Painter Mohammed Abla is soft-spoken yet very angry. Standing in the courtyard of the burned Musafirkhana palace in the heart of Islamic Cairo, Abla sighs and moans. For 21 years he had his studio in this late 18th-century Ottoman palace. In the '60s, the then Minister of Culture, Sarwat Okasha, had decided in a fit of wisdom to provide studios for artists in the Musafirkhana.

Last October the building burned down and Abla lost 90 per cent of his work. With real estate speculation thriving in the neighbourhood, Abla thinks it was arson. 'The government people say the fire started by a burning rubbish pile in the alley outside. They promised an investigation. I do not believe them. For them the Musafirkhana was just number 20 out of many other numbers. They don't care. Corruption has no feeling.'

Whether arson or negligence, the loss of the Musafirkhana is a case in point in the steady decline of the old Fatimid city of Cairo. On a list of 622 monuments drawn up in 1950, the Musafirkhana was registered as number 20. At the time the list included some 130 buildings that did not exist anymore. They were listed deliberately to meet the UNESCO criterion of 600 historic buildings to secure for the city of Cairo the status of 'world heritage'. Since 1950 another 20 to 30 buildings on the list have been demolished. During the Nasser era, preservation of Islamic architecture was a non-issue. In those days the Egyptian Antiquities Organization had an annual budget of LE600. In the Gamaliyyah district of Islamic Cairo several monuments were demolished to make room for schools. In the '70s and '80s, the notion of preservation finally dawned upon the authorities. However, most attention was given to Egypt's pharaonic past. It was only after the 1992 earthquake – which caused only minor damage – that the government felt challenged by the Islamists, notably the Muslim Brotherhood, to start paying attention to the country's Islamic architectural heritage. The most manifest initiatives, however, were taken by Ismailis from abroad who felt strongly attracted to the old capital of the their medieval Fatimid caliphate. Apart from the Agha Khan Foundation, a group of Bohras from Pakistan and India raised capital to refurbish the Al Hakim Mosque – named after the disputed Fatimid caliph – in an Indian sub-continental style, with outlandish white stone battlements. By 1998, the Antiquities Organization – meanwhile renamed the Supreme Council for Antiquities – had its budget for Fatimid Cairo raised to LE247 million.

Still very little has been done to save the city from total collapse. The problems are numerous. Especially in Egypt there is no public debate yet on what restoration should be.

Critique and self-critique are taboo. All experts involved in the politically sensitive preservation business, Egyptians and foreigners alike, are only willing to talk on condition of anonymity.

The administration of Cairo's Islamic monuments is chaotic. Most buildings are owned by the Ministry of Awqaf – religious endowments. No rental is collected, apart from the odd two piaster a month for workshops established in some monuments. Quite a few buildings have been turned into schools and are the property of the Ministry of Education. Responsibility for maintenance and restoration, however, rests with the Supreme Council for Antiquities, under the Ministry of Culture. Finally, there is the Cairo Governorate, the Ministry of Housing, Utilities and Public Works, and the Ministry of Interior (traffic). At a lower level are the various departments of utilities, such as water sup-

National Heritage Cairo Style



PHOTO: NICOLAAS H. BIEGMAN. FROM: EGYPT: MOULIDS, SAINTS AND SUFIS

ply and sewerage. All these services either refuse to cooperate or engage in some form of horse-trading. The result is stagnation and decay.

The physical situation of the old city is desperate. The streets are so packed with people that they have to work in shifts. As one expert observes: 'You have somebody who is selling *fuul* in the morning, then he moves away and in his place comes a man who sells sweets. Every single square meter is used. The pressure is so high that even if you remove these people you'll have other people very soon coming back. In front of the Sabil Mohammed Ali, on the main north-south thoroughfare of the old Fatimid city, there are clothes stores on the street. The shopkeepers hang their items from makeshift scaffolding. It is like the interior of a big shop and you cannot even pass. Right behind them there is a big empty lot, which can be a wonderful market area. The city has so much unused space, obviously because there is total mess in legal issues.'

Whereas city development and population pressure take their toll, the actual cause for the crumbling of monuments is rising groundwater levels. The process has been going on for more than 30 years. Contrary to popular thinking, it has nothing to do with the Aswan High Dam. In fact the groundwater is up to several metres above the Nile. This is exclusively due to the leaking of water pipes and sewers. Incidentally, this explains why daily water usage per capita in Cairo amounts to an estimated 400 litres, whereas, for instance, in the Netherlands it is 130 litres.

Just off Bab Zuwayla, beyond the Fatimid enclosure, is the 12th-century mosque of Salih Tala'i. The mosque is surrounded by a two-metre deep 'moat'. The bottom of this 'moat' is

simply the original street level. Since the 10th century, when Fatimid Cairo was laid out, the city has been rising through the continuous dumping of dirt on the streets. This thick layer of urban fill sits like a sponge on top of the original silt layer. Until last year when a sewer was built from Bab Zuwayla to Bab Al Khalq, the 'moat' of Salih Tala'i was a stinking pool. Unfortunately the US-funded Greater Cairo Waste Water Project has still not been extended to Fatimid Cairo.

Meanwhile water levels keep rising. One expert predicts lakes on the streets of Cairo in the near future. As all buildings are made of limestone, the groundwater penetrates through capillary reaction up to two to three metres above street level. The water evaporates, the salt stays, and starts to attract more water. The salt crystallizes within the stone. This means expansion. Stones turn into powder. Buildings crumble away. In addition, there is aggressive air pollution and the effects of heavy traffic. The inner city has been left to rot.

However, on a recent visit to the old city, President Hosni Mubarak made the on-the-spot decision, 'like all his wise decisions', that the preservation of Fatimid Cairo should be sped up. Over the coming years, the inner city is to be turned into an 'open-air museum'. All governmental, commercial and residential uses that conflict with the requirements of preserving antiquities are to cease. As one long-time observer of dying Cairo sneers: 'This is their concept of preservation; they want to turn Cairo into an Islamo-Disneyland. Anything they think of as historical value is to be locked up and used as a display for Western tourists.' It is the same idea European archaeologists had about pharaonic temples: Clear them from inhabitants, remove everything that is not orig-

inal – that is, every element of subsequent use – and open it to the public as a museum. This became the accepted idea of what a monument is. In the case of the pharaonic heritage it seems to make sense but now the Egyptian authorities try to apply it to the Islamic city as well. The Antiquities Organization treats monuments as isolated structures. They are no longer dealing with something that is a part of the surrounding city. Even if you have 600 Islamic monuments, there are still some 9000 buildings within the old city and most of them are of some historic value and not registered as such.

On the other hand, all experts call for enforcing stringent building codes, that is, controlled development sympathetic to the old city fabric. They are furious with the concept of sterilizing the city by moving out 'offensive' sights such as the onion and garlic market in front of Al Hakim Mosque and to replace it with tourist shops selling busts of Nefertiti.

Right in the heart of Islamic Cairo stands Qasr Bashtak, a huge Mamluk palace. The building was restored by the Germans in the '80s. It was supposed to be a cultural centre for exhibitions and concerts. It never worked. Besides, how many cultural centres, exhibition rooms, and museums can you have in Cairo? The only chance for the city fabric to survive is if the buildings remain part of the liv-

ing city, as they once were. This means servicing with piped water, sewerage and electricity, and that requires cooperation among government agencies headed by jealous bureaucrats unwilling to yield power.

And then there is traffic. In the '80s a fly-over was constructed over Al Azhar Street, right into the heart of Islamic Cairo 'to ease congestion'. Of course traffic only got worse and now a tunnel is being drilled under the old city. The contractor managed to start tunnelling exactly on top of the old eastern city wall that had been covered with urban refuse over the centuries. When they hit a tower dating back to Salah Eddin, the authorities immediately fenced off the site, forbidding entry to archaeologists, not even for one day. However, people of the Agha Khan Foundation, who have their office nearby, managed to videotape the demolition from their rooftop.

Some experts wonder whether the government will decide to tear down the fly-over once the tunnel is finished. Others are more cynical: 'They will never regulate traffic. All the talk about pedestrian zones and electric delivery cars is sheer fantasy.' The verdict on the preservation of Islamic Cairo can only be harsh. Countries like Turkey, Syria and Tunisia rank much higher than Egypt in taking care of their heritage. And it is even more disturbing that no one has any recipe to change the course of matters. ♦

Evert Schreur is a free-lance journalist living in Cairo, Egypt.