

## Al-Azhar Park: Conservation, Heritage, and Sustainability

**ABSTRACT:** Despite seemingly aesthetic concerns, conservation projects present opportunities to directly improve the well-being of present day communities. In the 1990s, the Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC) revitalized the 500-year-old dumping grounds of al-Darassa into one of the only green spaces in Cairo, renamed al-Azhar Park. An exploration of AKTC's conservation methods reveals how al-Azhar Park was integrated into the surrounding urban fabric as a functional, socio-economic resource for neglected neighbouring communities. The Park thus uses socio-economic outreach as well as the conservation of a once-buried Islamic Fatimid architecture to celebrate and uplift a Shi'i Muslim community whose histories and experiences have been continually overlooked. The socio-economic revitalization and affordance of community spaces for action and interaction demonstrates a conservation praxis that challenges heritage discourses that continually prioritize history rather than living communities. This project works to expand beyond traditional aesthetic and historical concerns by offering new possibilities for conservation spaces to foster living heritages by centering community voices and their wellbeing. The immense success of al-Azhar Park proposes a transition to community-oriented perspectives within urban planning and conservation in which present-day communities are valued, supported, and 'preserved' just as much as their histories.

The Aga Khan Trust for Culture, an agency that seeks to foster cultural heritage through the built environment, aimed to build a multifunctional green space in the congested urban fabric of Cairo, Egypt (Fig. 1).<sup>1</sup> The site chosen by the AKTC in the heart of the urban centre was located between the historic Fatimid city, the Ayyubid wall, the citadel to the south, as



**FIGURE 1.** Gary Odette, *Aerial View of Al-Azhar Park with Darb Al-Ahmar on the Left*, digital photograph, Aga Khan Development Network. <https://the.akdn/en/resources-media/multimedia/photographs/creating-urban-oasis-al-azhar-park-cairo-egypt>.

well as Mamluk and Ottoman architecture nearby. This choice of location presented an opportunity to revitalize the Islamic heritage in the area while also merging the historic elements of the city with the post-medieval settlements (Figs. 2.1, 2.2, 2.3). The ultimate goal of the project was to foster social cohesion through leisure, nature, and a connection to history.<sup>2</sup>

The most striking aspect of this project is the historic connection between the Aga Khan himself and the site. The Aga Khan, the imam of the Ismaili Shi'i community, claims descent from the Shi'i Fatimids. The site of what was to be the sprawling green space of al-Azhar Park in Cairo was a dumping ground. For 500 years, it was known as al-Darassa, left forgotten and filled with rubble and debris.<sup>3</sup> The history of this site can be traced back to the Fatimid period in which it attained a catastrophic and traumatic valence. The Fatimid caliphate, from the 10<sup>th</sup> to the 12<sup>th</sup> century, ushered in a period of prosperity in their dynastic capital of al-Qahirah, characterized by economic stability and rich cultural productions. The stability of the caliphate was secured through the sacral authority of the Fatimids as they claimed direct descent from the Prophet Muhammad, according to Shi'i Islamic doctrine. The Fatimids entombed the remains of their ancestors in Turbat al-Za'faran (the Saffron Tombs) in their caliphal city of al-Qahirah, now known as Cairo, which served to declare their sacral lineage and legitimize their right to rule. In 1171, the last Fatimid

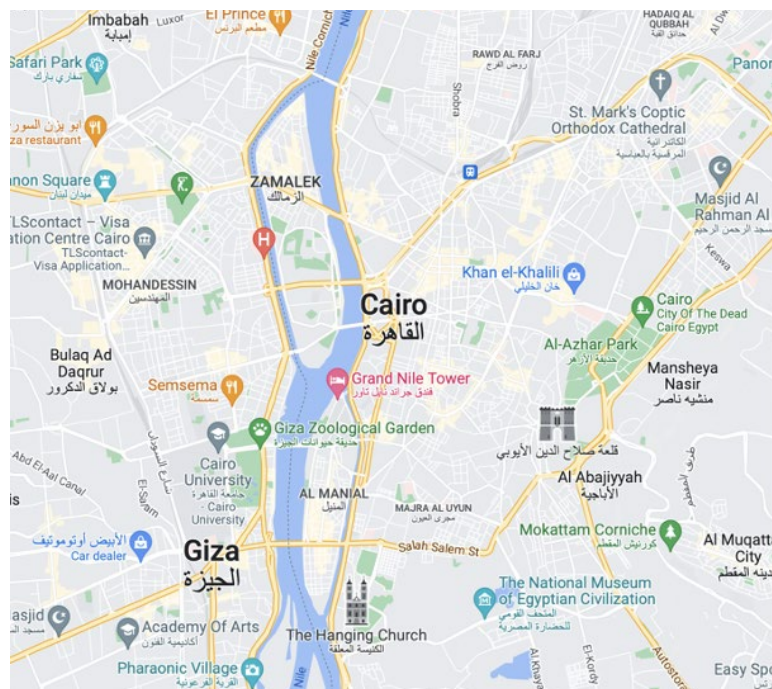


FIGURE 2.1. Present-day Cairo. Google Maps.



FIGURE 2.2. Fatimid Cairo.



FIGURE 2.3. Plan of Al-Azhar Park, in Cameron Rashti, 'The History of Al-Azhar Park's Development. Challenges and Opportunities,' in *Cairo: Renewing the Historic City*, ed. Philip Jodidio (Munich: Prestel, 2018), 59.

caliph was deposed by a rivalling dynasty, the Ayyubids, that sought to erase Fatimid influence from Cairo, and restore orthodox Islamic doctrine within the state and society at large. Two centuries later, Cairene historian al-Maqrizi recounts the disinterment of the Fatimid ancestors from Turbat al-Za'faraan.<sup>4</sup> Their bodies were thereafter discarded onto the rubbish piles of al-Darassa by a Mamluk Emir in condemnation of Shi'i doctrine and Fatimid authority.<sup>5</sup> This disinterment transgressed Islamic beliefs regarding the sanctity of the deceased and their burials, and became a moment of profound loss in the history of Cairo. Furthermore, this moment is a single event in a long, traumatic history of religious persecution and legacies of violence against the Shi'i community which continues into the present day.

The Aga Khan's mobilization of the various project agencies resulted in the revitalization of al-Darassa from a site of personal and historic loss, creating a green space for all of Cairo's residents. Rather than relive a traumatic history, the Aga Khan's agencies and their work honours lost historic Islamic visual languages by restoring their physical forms as the setting for al-Azhar Park. The restoration of a distinctly Shi'i Fatimid architectural history does not erase the trauma resulting from the loss of ancestral remains or the legacies of violence that permeate until the present day. However, the conservation project asserts that the community's history, which has been continually overlooked and marginalized, is worth remembering and celebrating.

Launched in 1995, the project was later completed in 2005.<sup>6</sup> The project's integration of an irrigation and water system to support the vegetation in the arid climate, combined with the removal of tonnes of debris and the grading of the land into elevated planes, transformed al-Azhar Park into a paradisiacal space with a magnificent vista over the city (Figs. 3.1, 3.2, 3.3). The robust water management system was funnelled into the punctuating rivers and fostered the Park's lush vegetation (Fig. 4). Moreover, the space's monumental walkway created a transcendental experience for the viewer by evoking an Islamic architectural lineage of cosmic alignment (Fig. 5). By merging Islamic architectural languages with natural and functional elements, the Park provided a respite in nature for Cairenes. However, the Park and the restoration of a lost Islamic past was only one facet of the Aga Khan Trust for Culture project. The revitalization in al-Azhar Park supported a complementary social and urban revitalization in the nearby historic, residential district of Darb al-Ahmar on the western border of the Park (Fig. 6).



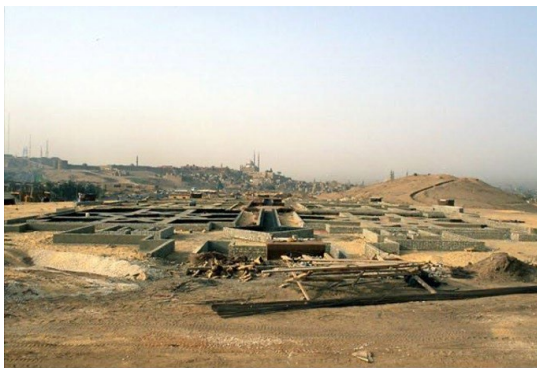


**FIGURE 3.1.** Aerial view looking south along the western edge of the park during grading works, digital photograph, 2000, Archnet. [https://www.archnet.org/sites/5003?media\\_content\\_id=24660](https://www.archnet.org/sites/5003?media_content_id=24660).

**FIGURE 3.2.** Preliminary testing of suitable plants and planting for an arid climate, digital photograph, 2000, Archnet. [https://www.archnet.org/sites/5003?media\\_content\\_id=24667](https://www.archnet.org/sites/5003?media_content_id=24667).



**FIGURE 3.3.** View looking south across the northern (restaurant) terrace during the construction of water channel and pools, digital photograph, 2003, Archnet. [https://www.archnet.org/sites/5003?media\\_content\\_id=24934](https://www.archnet.org/sites/5003?media_content_id=24934).



**FIGURE 4.** The central formal garden looking south towards the citadel of Cairo, digital photograph, in Cameron Rashti, "The History of Al-Azhar Park's Development. Challenges and Opportunities," in *Cairo: Renewing the Historic City*, ed. Philip Jodidio (Munich: Prestel, 2018): 60-61.

**FIGURE 5.** Christian Richters, Formal garden area, palm avenue and water channel, digital photograph, Aga Khan Development Network. <https://the.akhn/en/resources-media/multimedia-photographs/creating-urban-oasis-al-azhar-park-cairo-egypt>.



**FIGURE 6.** Aerial view over the park, looking west across the central section towards the Darb al-Ahmar neighbourhood, digital photograph, 2005, [https://www.archnet.org/sites/5003?media\\_content\\_id=46076](https://www.archnet.org/sites/5003?media_content_id=46076).

This paper will seek to identify the ethical responsibilities that we, as urban historians and archaeologists, have to the communities in which we work in *and* with. I will also explore the ways in which sustainability outlook allows for the activation of conservation spaces beyond aesthetic concerns and toward liveability. Lastly, I will examine how conservation projects, through the example of AKTC, can transform sentiments of loss, death, and decline into cultural memories that celebrate the living histories of an urban community.

By discussing al-Azhar Park, I will present a new model for conservation centred on sustainability, and ultimately, urban equity. As a concept, sustainability is defined as the wellbeing of a community which operates as a multi-layered system and is nurtured on each of its levels in order for the community to sustain itself.<sup>7</sup> With this framework in mind, al-Azhar Park reinterprets the traumatic Shi'i Fatimid past by monumentalizing its architectural language as the site for the project's hands-on efforts that provides socio-economic support to urban communities. The project understands that the history of this area is an essential facet of the community, however, its efforts in bolstering the self-determination of the present community demonstrates its commitment beyond history and into the present as a living heritage. The recontextualization of Cairene and Islamic architecture seeks to foster new spatial meanings, cultural reflections, and expressions for its visitors, both connected to and moving beyond historical linkages, resulting in the creation of a new living history within the urban fabric. Moreover, the site's ability to uplift the wellbeing of present communities thereby challenges and expands discourses of heritage beyond the aesthetic and historic; it asserts that conservation projects have the ability to become functional resources which afford communities the power to determine and create their heritages in the present and future. Ultimately, AKTC's dual approach of architecture and community outreach demonstrates that a community's history and its present day communities are both of value.

Looking closer at the community outreach elements of the project, the nearby neighbourhood of Darb al-Ahmar experienced declining infrastructure, high levels of emigration, and a lack of services and opportunities for its residents.<sup>8</sup> As part of the project, the AKTC provided housing rehabilitation, business and crafts development services, education initiatives, health services, and social development programs in Darb al-Ahmar (Figs. 7.1, 7.2, 7.3, 7.4).<sup>9</sup> In some instances, residents were enlisted and trained to help with the conservation efforts (Fig. 8).<sup>10</sup>



**FIGURE 7.1.** Computer classes as part of AKTC's engagement in vocational training, digital photograph, in Jurjen can der Tas, "Community Development," in *Cairo: Renewing the Historic City*, ed. Philip Jodidio (Munich: Prestel, 2018): 151.



**FIGURE 7.2.** Community healthcare provided in a clinic established in a historic ottoman house restored by AKTC, digital photograph, in Jurjen can der Tas, "Community Development," in *Cairo: Renewing the Historic City*, ed. Philip Jodidio (Munich: Prestel, 2018): 154.



**FIGURE 7.3.** Environmental education for Darb al-Ahmar youth, digital photograph, in Jurjen can der Tas, "Community Development," in *Cairo: Renewing the Historic City*, ed. Philip Jodidio (Munich: Prestel, 2018): 152.



**FIGURE 7.4.** Vocational training in traditional woodworking, digital photograph, in Jurjen can der Tas, "Community Development," in *Cairo: Renewing the Historic City*, ed. Philip Jodidio (Munich: Prestel, 2018): 156.





**FIGURE 8.** Craftsmen and trainees from Darb al-Ahmar working on the cleaning of the delicate stucco reliefs of the Khayrbek minaret in Darb al-Ahmar, digital photograph, in Stefano Bianca, "Introduction," in *Aga Khan Historic Cities Programme: An Integrated Approach to Urban Rehabilitation*, 56.



**FIGURE 9.** Roof gardening explained by an AKTC community worker, digital photograph, in Jurjen can der Tas, "Community Development," in *Cairo: Renewing the Historic City*, ed. Philip Jodidio (Munich: Prestel, 2018): 150.

Moreover, the Park's spatial linkage to Darb al-Ahmar through city gates encouraged residents to use the space and its facilities. The residents were thus equipped with the skills and services they needed to sustain their socio-economic wellbeing, as part of a total urban revitalization (Fig. 9).

Over centuries, Cairo was subjected to conservation practices from colonial authorities which continually dispossessed, displaced, and disrupted the modes of life present in the urban community. AlSayyad discusses the traumatic history of conservation under colonial bodies such as the Comité De Conservation des Monuments de l'Art Arabe who justified the demolition of small businesses and other buildings they considered "intrusions" onto historic sites which they sought to "conserve."<sup>11</sup> Al-Azhar Park and the community outreach project demonstrates an alternate mode of urban planning. In this instance, AKTC, as a sympathetic and local entity with historic ties, provides conservation and community outreach that supports a self-sufficient mode of living through community-oriented work and consultation.<sup>12</sup> This alternate mode of urban conservation seeks to make conservation functional and meaningful for a community by addressing community-specific issues through the heritage project itself.<sup>13</sup> The affordance of safe homes and street spaces, green spaces in a congested urban area, employment opportunities, vocational training, the repurposing of historic buildings into social facilities are several ways that the project respects the community's values and addresses their needs (Figs. 10.1, 10.2, 10.3, 10.4, 10.5, 10.6, 10.7, 10.8). The conservation of historic buildings from the Mamluk, Ayyubid and Ottoman period for the use of the Darb al-Ahmar community demonstrates how the restoration of Islamic architectural languages celebrates Cairo's past. These spaces are now the setting for the revitalization of the community's socio-economic wellbeing in present and future years, allowing history to become revitalized as part of a new living heritage.

These socio-economic and conservation revitalization efforts adopt a model of sustainability that offers holistic and long-term modes of support to a community. Specifically, by being equipped with economic opportunities and safe living conditions, the residents can now take part in self-directed economic growth and social engagement within their community and the wider urban fabric. Moreover, the community has gained a new sense of self-determination and agency over their communal wellbeing, empowering them to create their own living heritages and histories based in new opportunities for connection and growth. Moreover, the project protected the community by negotiating with local authorities



**FIGURES 10.1 [left] & 10.2 [right].** Aslam Square before and after AKTC's upgrading intervention, digital photograph, in Jurjen can der Tas and Francesco Siravo, "Urban Renewal," in *Cairo: Renewing the Historic City*, ed. Philip Jodidio (Munich: Prestel, 2018): 174.



**FIGURE 10.3.** Opposite view of the same square showing a restored building now reused as a cafeteria, digital photograph, in Jurjen can der Tas and Francesco Siravo, "Urban Renewal," in *Cairo: Renewing the Historic City*, ed. Philip Jodidio (Munich: Prestel, 2018): 173.



**FIGURES 10.4 [left] & 10.5 [right].** An example of housing rehabilitation in al-Darb al-Ahmar: a building prior to rehabilitation (left) and the same building afterwards (right), digital photograph, in Jurjen can der Tas and Francesco Siravo, "Urban Renewal," in *Cairo: Renewing the Historic City*, ed. Philip Jodidio (Munich: Prestel, 2018): 181.



**FIGURES 10.6 [left] & 10.7 [right].** The advanced level of deterioration in housing stock and open space, digital photograph, in Geoffrey Salkeld, "Change and Continuity in a Historic Urban Settlement," in *Cairo: Renewing the Historic City*, ed. Philip Jodidio (Munich: Prestel, 2018): 188.



**FIGURE 10.8.** Restored wall and restored Darb Shoughlan school converted into the community centre, digital photograph, in Jurjen can der Tas and Francesco Siravo, "Urban Renewal," in *Cairo: Renewing the Historic City*, ed. Philip Jodidio (Munich: Prestel, 2018): 178.



to stop illegal demolitions, protecting the livelihood and spatial integrity of the neighbourhood.<sup>14</sup> In the same vein, the residents allow the Park to thrive by participating in the facilities offered and gathering in its space; this social engagement from the residents and any visitor sustains the Park, fulfilling its function as a space for community gathering.<sup>15</sup> These interconnected webs of sustainability that rely on shared social responsibility, sympathy, and connection encapsulate a useful model for urban planning moving forward.<sup>16</sup> With this in mind, we must think about how positive space entitlement through urban equity is an essential component that incentivizes visitors to care for the space and one that provides new insights into bilateral relationships between site and community.

Al-Azhar Park is also able to support sustainability in its transcendence of class divides. In Cairo, spaces often operate as tools to include and exclude certain social groups, namely with the wealthier in Cairo having sole access to green spaces which are typically accessible only through paid, exclusive memberships. In contrast, lower classes are relegated to other meeting spaces in the city that are public and free to access, such as coffee houses or city squares. Al-Azhar Park mediates this issue by providing everyday people with an accessible green space. Furthermore, the multifunctionality of the Park welcomes visitors from all walks of life to partake in activities and enjoy the natural space. This creates a sense of social cohesion through equal access to space and fulfils basic human needs through recreational activity and facilities.<sup>17</sup> This social equity encourages the performance of multiple forms of cultural expression through acting and community interaction in this single space from all residents, allowing for new reflections and conceptions of identity that build upon and perhaps beyond the historical lineage cultivated by the site, thereby birthing a living heritage rooted in a united urban community (Figs. 11.1, 11.2).

The Park cultivates this historical lineage through the architectural monumentalization of an Islamic architectural past that thereby declares a shared Cairene history for all residents to gather around. The Park's architectural languages evoke the Fatimid garden typology associated with their caliphal city and the lasting image of the historic city today. The water management of the Park, through its visual forms of glimmering lakes and rivers that flow through the green space, its role in sustaining the horticulture of the space, and connotations of stewardship by way of environmental engineering recalls the rich cultural memory of the Fatimid



**FIGURE 11.1.** A hillside lawn enjoyed for moments of relaxation, digital photograph, in Cameron Rashti, "The History of Al-Azhar Park's Development. Challenges and Opportunities," in *Cairo: Renewing the Historic City*, ed. Philip Jodidio (Munich: Prestel, 2018): 57.



**FIGURE 11.2.** Children's entertainment, digital photograph, 2008, Archnet. [https://www.archnet.org/sites/5003?media\\_content\\_id=62154](https://www.archnet.org/sites/5003?media_content_id=62154).

pools, lakes, and fountains that accompanied the garden typologies of their dynasty (Fig. 12).<sup>18</sup> These Fatimid ideals of stewardship and visual delight in nature are thus reimagined in al-Azhar Park, evoking deeply held Qur'anic visions and Islamic languages of paradise. Moreover, the Fatimid belvedere was a keystone of their caliphal city, being placed throughout the garden spaces to provide elevated lookout points over a space. At al-Azhar Park, we see the belvedere placed throughout its elevated planes to provide visitors with visual access to the entirety of Cairo, merging the historic city with the modern fabric through a Fatimid spatial tool (Figs. 13.1, 13.2). The pathways of the Park bisect its curving hills, recalling the ceremonial walkways of the Fatimid caliphs through their city and gardens whilst also providing transcendental vistas over the city. Overall, Fatimid gardens were a place of connectivity between the caliph and his people in a ritual context.<sup>19</sup> We see this same spirit of social connectivity reimagined in al-Azhar Park, aimed towards interconnection between visitors themselves.

Through the honouring of this past, the public heritage site acts as a visual articulation or “mnemonic device” of a cultural memory,<sup>20</sup> which transcends social divisions of class and asserts a united urban identity.<sup>21</sup> For instance, the belvederes present an unobstructed panoramic view of the entirety of Cairo which reaffirms a positive space entitlement for all viewers. From these belvederes, visitors can see Cairo's City of the Dead and numerous mausoleum-madrasa complexes that exist between homes and shops, hearkening to a Cairene architectural vocabulary that has commemorated death for centuries in the urban fabric. Through memorializing the prosperity of their caliphal city as the site for new community activity and crystallizations of identity, the traumatic and catastrophic sense of loss that al-Darassa symbolized is transformed into new opportunities for unity amongst the people of Cairo. Cairenes are invited to become immersed in this Shi'i Fatimid history as part of a living and shared heritage. While this trauma cannot be instantly or entirely healed by the Park, its real promises of connection, work in socio-economic revitalization, and monumentalization of a historically neglected past demonstrates to these marginalized communities that their identities and their wellbeing in the present are important, visible, and worth celebration.

In January of 2011, a revolution and subsequent political unrest led to inflation and a series of uncontrolled building developments, some of which occurred in Darb al-Ahmar (Fig. 14).<sup>22</sup> Buildings next to the Ayyubid wall and the Park became lucrative and are noted as being structurally dangerous whilst having a damaging effect on the community's view to



**FIGURE 12.** *The lakeside cafe and its lake in the southern meadow*, digital photograph, in Cameron Rashti, “The History of Al-Azhar Park's Development. Challenges and Opportunities,” in *Cairo: Renewing the Historic City*, ed. Philip Jodidio (Munich: Prestel, 2018): 62.



**FIGURE 13.1.** *Park's Green Spaces*, digital photograph, 2009, Archnet. [https://www.archnet.org/sites/5003?media\\_content\\_id=89324](https://www.archnet.org/sites/5003?media_content_id=89324).



**FIGURE 13.2.** *Viewpoint with view to the historic city*, digital photograph, 2008, Archnet. [https://www.archnet.org/sites/5003?media\\_content\\_id=62147](https://www.archnet.org/sites/5003?media_content_id=62147).





**FIGURE 14.** Below, post-2011 unauthorized apartment building construction in proximity of the historic Wall, digital photograph, in Geoffrey Salkeld, "Change and Continuity in a Historic Urban Settlement," in *Cairo: Renewing the Historic City*, ed. Philip Jodidio (Munich: Prestel, 2018): 185.

the Park.<sup>23</sup> Most of the community programs were handed over from the AKTC to several local entities in 2013; the Park continued under the Aga Khan Cultural Services, a separate agency from the AKTC.<sup>24</sup> Lastly, the Park itself continues to charge visitors for admission fees, complicating seemingly simple assertions of accessibility and the levelling of class divides. These events raise a variety of questions regarding the limitations of these urban development programs, particularly regarding the afterlife of the programs, their funding and management, and the limited authority of conservation agencies over land and buildings in comparison to governmental bodies, for instance. The reality of land and economic pressures reflect the complex socio-economic circumstances faced by the residents and serve as critical questions to inform future projects.

The implementation of urban planning and community initiatives are further complicated through various studies conducted in the decades after project's completion. For instance, Ashraf Salama's survey indicated that "18% of visitors do not see the connection" between the project as a positive urban intervention and its promotion of cultural awareness of Cairene heritage.<sup>25</sup> Although this appears to contradict the ideas presented regarding the recognition of shared cultural memory, I argue that the survey demonstrates the seamless integration of the Park into the everyday lives and spatiality of the urban community. In this way, Al-Azhar Park

exemplifies a successful conservation project that expands beyond historic concerns for its visitors and operates as a functional resource for its community members, fostering a living heritage.

I do not aim to overlook the significant evocative effect of history or its role in shaping conceptions of identity or culture. However, as my paper and the AKTC, through their work in socio-economic empowerment, strives to assert, the success of conservation projects should no longer be ascertained using metrics of a space's historic educational capabilities. These distinctly Western discourses of heritage privilege the past and its unchanging quality. Ultimately, this narrative dispossesses power from, and results in the neglect of, present day communities, their experiences, and the spaces they invest meaning.<sup>26</sup> Conservation projects should be guided by a commitment to fostering new heritages, cultural expression, and spatial meaning apart from these Western, hegemonic ideas of heritage. Thus, I will use this study to highlight that Cairo's communities are effectively exercising their self-determination and agency by creating new histories as legitimate arbiters and authorities of their own living heritages within the Park, in whichever manner this takes shape, both attached to and divorced from past histories. For these reasons, the AKTC project is an immense success. It meaningfully challenges rigid heritage discourses, transforming conservation projects from a mechanism of colonialism in urban space to a tool of empowerment and self-determination in the hands of the community themselves. At the same time, it fosters a lasting positive effect on the material reality of the Darb al-Ahmar residents. Ultimately, AKTC's work presents a viable and sustainable praxis for other urban development and conservation projects moving forward.

Al-Azhar Park demonstrates how our histories can be brought into conversation with our lived experiences today as part of a sustainable future, with its architectural memorialization of a lost Islamic past birthing a new, living heritage. The bridging of the past into the present is accomplished through the project's prioritization of urban equity. This enables the urban population, of all socio-economic backgrounds, the spatial access to participate in a process of cultural co-creation, allowing an Islamic history to live on in the present for all Cairenes. In the face of the insurmountable challenges that urban communities must navigate across the globe, these perspectives in conservation, urban planning, and beyond, demonstrate the immense potential found within a community-centred praxis, and its essential role in building a sustainable and shared future.

## NOTES

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