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# The Old City and the Beautiful Park, a Contemporary Urban Tale

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## **La vieille ville du Caire et le beau jardin, un conte urbain contemporain**

### **Résumé**

Il était une fois, au Caire, une vieille ville problématique, jusqu'à l'apparition d'un beau jardin qui la métamorphosa en un panorama historique : telle est la trame d'un conte urbain du XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle. Dans un contexte de références à la mondialisation et à la patrimonialisation, l'aménagement *ex nihilo* du prestigieux parc al-Azhar, en surplomb du patrimoine monumental des quartiers anciens du Caire, a mobilisé et combiné des emprunts aux registres égyptien, arabe et islamique, ainsi qu'au vocabulaire urbanistique mondial et au crédo du développement durable. Depuis ce vert belvédère, la ville ancienne, au travers de l'avènement d'un panorama rédempteur, se donne désormais en spectacle à la capitale égyptienne, et en modèle à une aire culturelle de référence.

## **The Old City of Cairo and the Beautiful Park, a Contemporary Urban Tale**

### **Abstract**

Once upon a time in Cairo, there was an old city with problems, until the arrival of a beautiful park that transformed it into a historical panorama: this is the framework of a 21<sup>st</sup> century urban tale. Within a context of references to globalization and the increasing importance of heritage, the *ex nihilo* development of the renowned Al-Azhar Park, which overlooks the monumental patrimony of the old sections of Cairo, mobilized and combined elements borrowed from Egyptian, Arab and Islamic registers, as well as, world urban vocabulary and a creed of sustainable development. From this green belvedere and with the coming of its redemptive panorama, the old city now presents itself as a performance to the Egyptian capital, and as a model to a cultural place of reference.

## **The Old City of Cairo and the Beautiful Park, a Contemporary Urban Tale**

Today, the area of reference in the Egyptian capital is the old city of Cairo<sup>1</sup> but, until the end of the 70's, it was viewed, as a group of districts irreducibly lacking modernity. It incarnated, like a social allegory, the *fond de la ville* (*Qa'a al-Madina*) (*The Depths of the City*), the title of a story by Youssef Idris from 1959. Since then, like numerous other historical centers, the center of Cairo has experienced a long history of diverse actions, either initiated or sustained, that have contributed to its improvement and increased prestige of its image. This simple process, as far as it is concerned, was marked by certain key events that constitute milestones in a schematic history of its representations from the 60's until today.

### **Preamble: a quick look at contemporary representations of the old city of Cairo**

We begin this story in 1968, at the dawn of the millennium celebration of the founding of Fatimid Cairo (969-1969). The Committee in charge of the festivities voted on a project of a car park near the Al-Hussein mosque requiring the destruction of several monuments. The proposal was rejected by only one vote. In 1979 the old city was recognized as a world heritage site by UNESCO and this was clearly a foundational event that gave the old city the qualifiers of “Islamic” and “Fatimid” based on the prism of its urban and architectural heritage. The term Fatimid, which continued to be used and was made official, is still used today. At the same time, strong efforts made to eradicate drug trafficking in the central districts of the old city between 1974 and 1981 demonstrated the desire of authorities to bring normalcy to this area. Along with this, the talent and recognition of the writer Naguib Mahfouz (winner of the Nobel prize for literature in 1988), greatly contributed to the renown and recognition of the old city of

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<sup>1</sup> The “old city” refers here to the territory that was urbanized before the modern city was founded in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, its surface area is about 700 hectares and its population approximately 400,000 inhabitants.

Cairo by the media since it was the inspirational matrix of his work. Through the success of a “mahfouzian” world and this international distinction, the Gamaliyya district was considered the “Nobel quarter”. In a completely different register, the earthquake of October 1992 would bring up the question of patrimony and highlight the old districts. The media presentation of the fragility and deterioration of the historical monuments peaked interest in the old city and made it a challenge. In 1996, the High Council of Antiquities made public a monumental inventory, and the designation by UNESCO of Cairo as cultural capital of the Arab world for that year led to various unprecedented events in the old center. Lastly, in 2005, the Al-Azhar Park was inaugurated, which will be presented here.

These few milestones can be identified as having punctuated and woven a process of enhancement, as if, with hindsight, constituting a coherent whole that participated in making an emblematic collective territory from a plurality of problematic places. The old city established itself as an entity and symbol, it became identifiable with a landscape. From archaic it was promoted to historical; from the outside to the heart of the city, its hierarchic position in the geography of the capital is a reflection of this. Therefore, the old districts lost little by little images evoking extremes, both spatial and social. These were taken on by other sections of the capital, particularly the auto-constructed peripheral areas. The districts previously considered almost anachronistic in a capital desiring to be modern are now “places of memory”, their present and their future are the subject of speeches and actions. Their deterioration, expressed as national suffering, is a recurrent theme in the media. These areas are depicted as virtual conservatories of the *ballad*<sup>2</sup> facet of the Egyptian identity. The old districts, whether *Islamic* or *Fatimid*, are those that melt into and ensure the specificity of Cairo today; globalization has exacerbated these particularities, which, formerly hidden, are today proclaimed.

### **The park that was missing from the city**

As a major and single great operation concerning the entire old city of Cairo (even if in reality it concerned an adjacent project), the development of the Al-Azhar Park (named

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<sup>2</sup> *Baladî* means “from the country”, but it also denotes that which is traditional and popular.

for the great mosque in the district with the same name) was a unique and novel project that consisted in the creation *ex nihilo* of a park. Conceived of as a “panoramic platform” overlooking the monumental historical heritage, this green rectangle borders the eastern border of the old city, practically along its entire length. It was officially inaugurated by Mrs Suzanne Moubarak in March 2005 in the presence of His Highness the Aga Khan, initiator and sponsor of the project<sup>3</sup>. The park was built and financed by the *Aga Khan Trust for Culture* (AKTC)<sup>4</sup> and it covers an area of thirty hectares making it the largest park in a capital<sup>5</sup>, that elsewhere lacks parks and gardens. The number often cited to demonstrate this shortage is thirty square centimeters of gardens per inhabitant, and the image associated with this is a footprint.

Designed respecting Islamic traditions and inspired by Andalusian and Persian gardens, the park uses references locating Cairo at the center of a cosmogony referring to a golden age and a “golden geography” of Islam. The first mention of the project was in 1984, after a seminar on the urban growth of Cairo organized by the Aga Khan foundation. According to the report of the AKTC director, it was a “visionary urban project”<sup>6</sup>. Visionary in every sense of the term because it was in 1984 while contemplating the landscape of the old city from the terrace of the home of the architect Hasan Fathy<sup>7</sup>, that an “anomaly in the urban landscape”, (the hill of ruins of Darasa), struck the Aga Khan... In the two decades that followed, the building of the park had to overcome numerous administrative obstacles and its construction was the result of colossal work, in particular the landscape renovation of the site. The inaugural speech by the Aga Khan described this as building on the history of Cairo (*Al-Qahira* —the Victorious), which was founded by Al-Mu’izz, in 969. More than a thousand years

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<sup>3</sup> Extracts from a speech given by the Aga Khan at the inauguration: “*In our excavations and our historical investigations, I constantly have been reminded that we were touching the very foundations of my ancestors, the Fatimids, and the pluralistic history and intellectual profile of this city and this country to which they contributed so profoundly*”. “*I am very humbled by the opportunity to return to Cairo, founded over a thousand years ago by the Fatimid Caliph Al-Muiz, to build on that history. Thirty-five generations later, through the work done here by my institutions, it is my prayer that this park will be a continuing contribution to the people of this great city.*” Source: press file from the AKTC site, [www.akdn.org](http://www.akdn.org).

<sup>4</sup> The cost of the project is estimated to be thirty million dollars, cf. <http://www.alazharpark.com/>

<sup>5</sup> There is paid access to the park; even if there is a range of prices (foreigners, nationals, etc.) with the lowest prices being for local people, they are still prohibitive.

<sup>6</sup> *Cairo Revitalizing a Historic Metropolis*, p. 11.

<sup>7</sup> Hassan Fathy (1900-1989), the famous Egyptian architect, author of *Construire avec le peuple* (1970) (Construct with the People), ardent defender of traditional and mud brick architecture, and winner of the Aga Khan award for architecture in 1980.

later, or according to him, “thirty-five generations” later, it perpetuated the initial Fatimid action<sup>8</sup>. In this way, it appears uninterrupted through a demiurge project, coming from a continuous “post Fatimid” urban period, and reweaving an urban landscape without a snag. The people responsible for the project, as well as the media, visitors and other writers, all emphasize the previous state of the site and its repulsive appearance (“vacant lot”, “hill of debris”, “dumping ground”, “hill of rubble”, “spillway of garbage” “dump”), accenting the spectacular character of the metamorphosis, and the antithesis of before and after (“breath of fresh air”, “paradise”, “haven”). Therefore, the strange area noticed by the Aga Khan was thus eradicated or dissolved, but it became the place from which the old city was (re)constructed into a smooth and unified urban landscape, or into a solid landscape pattern.

The Al-Azhar Park is a unique addition to the original space, but it is less presented as an additional creation than as a formula inspired by nature and by the same structures as the Fatimid city “of which a fifth of the surface area did not have buildings”<sup>9</sup>. As a result, the project could be considered as putting the city into conformity with, or into phase with, the initial ideal city. Located between the Ayyubid wall (restored at the same time) and the Mameluke cemetery, the park filled a kind of historical and spatial hole, the unoccupied site of Darasa. At the extreme limits of the city, where the city appears to dissolve at frayed edges and at the borders of the cemeteries, the addition of this urban layer established a new order and abolished the dead-end situation that prevailed at that time<sup>10</sup>. An intrusive element in the geography of the city, it made itself a “great project”<sup>11</sup>, which by intervening on the model of the place also changed its structure. The great project produced edifying and significant landscapes: a proposal that interpreted and reinvented an element of the site, here a hill, furnishing new

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<sup>8</sup> Karim Aga Khan IV, born in 1936, is the present imam (spiritual leader) of the community of Ismaili that is made up of about fifteen million people in various countries. Isma'iliya is one of the branches of Shi'ism which considers Isma'il (son of Ja'far Al-Sadiq), who died in the 8<sup>th</sup> century, to be the seventh imam. In their line, the Fatimids, get their name from Fatima, daughter of the Prophet and wife of Ali.

<sup>9</sup> According to the dossier summarizing the project, available on the site [www.akdn.org](http://www.akdn.org).

<sup>10</sup> Cf. the story *Au fond de la ville* (In the Depths of the City), from the end of the 1950's, that describes a journey from west to east through Cairo, from the chic residential district of Zamalek to the borders of the old city. The main character, at last, arrives where today is located the park: in the very “depths of the city”, an “indefinable” place where “devastation reigns” and where everything mixes together: crumbling buildings and mounds of rubble, garbage and dust, with houses and tombs not far away.

<sup>11</sup> Elsewhere it is described as a great project, by the Governor of Cairo, M. Shehata, in his preface to the book about the Park (*Cairo Revitalizing a Historic Metropolis*, p. 11). The text begins by “Many years ago, Cairo used to be a city of parks and gardens”.

horizons. The abutment becomes a mirror; a new section of the town appears. The park came into being in 2005, but the place where it was built was previously “nonexistent”, it was a formless, sometimes anonymous, area that was unclear and seemed to float over various maps of Cairo. There was a rectangular spot that was white or sometimes of a promontory green, where the map legend might be placed. There was nothing, an absurd and even incongruous nothing, in an extremely dense city. The park, therefore, imposed itself on a territory, with neither liabilities nor past, at the very limit of the city. The empty lot without history, like an absurd parenthesis, was instantly forgotten; all that remained were a few distant memories, those of an area where vagrants wandered above the city in certain novels by Naguib Mahfouz. On the contrary, the Al-Azhar Park, this new place, has been and still is praised by the media. It has gotten into travel guides and has its own page in *Wikipedia*<sup>12</sup>: praise is unanimous<sup>13</sup>. Even if it appeared almost impromptu, it was constructed as if the park had always been there, as if its existence was considered evident. It slipped in beside the “unavoidable”, blending in with the pre-existing and it wrapped itself in the topography of Cairo's high places: “Nowhere else are the different strata of the city as skillfully exposed as in Al-Azhar Park that offers an extraordinary view of Islamic Cairo”<sup>14</sup>. It is one example, among others, where one may suggest that it is the park that organizes, stratifies and gives meaning to the city, and makes it a place exhibited and of exhibition. The park is one constructed without age, imitating its environment; the no man's land has thus become a novel place and a layer that joins the pieces of the city.

### **From the past let us make... a panorama**

Adjoining and adjacent spaces, the park and the old city, despite having contrasting natures, seem to participate in a game of reciprocity of their common qualities. The beautiful park makes the old city beautiful, and in return the city makes the park an

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<sup>12</sup> [http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parc\\_Al-Azhar](http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parc_Al-Azhar) “Al-Azhar Park, 22 February 2010. Here is the text from the French Wikipedia site: “Al-Azhar Park is the most recent and one of the most beautiful parks in Cairo; this park was formerly an abandoned lot where garbage from the Egyptian capital was dumped. Financed by the Aga Khan, it opened in 2005. Located just north of the citadel, it offers a magnificent view overlooking the Saladin mosque and to the west the entire old city of Cairo.”

<sup>13</sup> For example, in *Wallpaper City Guide, Cairo*, Phaidon, Paris, 2008, in the section “24 hours, the best of the city in a day”, the Park is proposed as the place to start visiting the capital.

<sup>14</sup> *Wallpaper City Guide*, Cairo, 2008.



exceptional historical and patrimonial area. The belvedere park becomes the metaphor for the panoramic city in a systematic and exclusive relationship. In addition, this logic explains the fact that the enormous restoration operations, previously punctual and sectorized, were also done along an axis parallel to the wall, marking a line that is visible and readable in the park. The creation of the park offered the entire old city, in a virtual way, as an object or symbol to those who would have liked, but were unable or unwilling, to visit it. From there, the city can be traveled for most of its length, along a contemplative itinerary, a promenade oriented north-south, as the historical central axis of Qasaba, (Al-Mu'izz Steet), where a large part of the monumental heritage of Cairo is located. From the heights of the park and the advantage of its environment, the old city spreads out in a panorama. Henceforth, numerous wealthy residents of Cairo, not accustomed to the working class districts, spend time in the area and its establishments (cafes and chic restaurants) and take in the old city. Of course they do this at a distance and only from its eastern side but from a close location. The majestic main entrance and the spacious parking areas are located on the eastern side of the park, along the Salah Salem motorway. Only one gate in the wall (Bab Al-Mahruq), almost hidden and below the park, connects it to the old city. There is, therefore, an explicit park side access to Cairo and another toward the courtyard, like a skylight view of the old districts.

Clinging to the city's hillside, the park has not changed the old city, but it has nonetheless transformed it and made it more compact. It is the reflection that made it a landscape. As the promontory belvedere closest to the old city, the park generated new perspectives, creating harmonious and striking viewpoints. A "historical skyline", the overhang, the detachment and the verdant foreground make up an overall ideal landscape. Stepping back a little is also sufficient to render the old city less heterogeneous, more historical, more present but less in the present. From there, the uniqueness of the buildings is erased to favor a view that is landscaped and monumentalized. "The city-panorama is a "theoretical" (visual) representation, in fact a picture that has the possibility of forgetting or not knowing practices"<sup>15</sup>. The old city is, henceforth, available, accessible and globalized: constructed and scattered monuments are at last collected in the same picture, an ordinary frame has become the texture of the panorama, silhouettes of palm trees in the foreground put rhythm to mineral sequences

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<sup>15</sup> DE CERTEAU, 1980, p. 141.

in the background. The city becomes a landscape brought back to a generic essence, an arranged and stabilized composition.

The invisible, barely audible urban life has evaporated, being condensed into a simple hubbub that has changed its nature. From there, the stone pinnacle of the canopy of minarets revives the image of the city of the Arabian Nights and the city of numerous minarets. Travel guides return to the long tradition of narration of the panorama of Cairo<sup>16</sup>. This panorama, a slightly blurred image, affirms Cairo as a timeless eastern city.

**Conclusion: “look together in the same direction...”**

Today an urban park is incontestably a consensual place, the ideal backdrop for numerous projections and various possibilities that can be envisioned and referenced in an almost baroque manner. This is true for AL-Azhur Park, a flexible and compatible project that conciliates nature and culture, and presents itself in the creed of sustainable development. It recalls the Andalusians, Persians, and the Arabs, Babylonia, Esfahan and Mesopotamia while remaining Egyptian and from Cairo. It is an area simultaneously expressed and subtitled in local and world languages, claiming itself to be Islamic and universal. Uncommon and masterly, it is contemporary and evolving. It makes the past sustainable and the future historic while being timeless.

If most of the restored sites of the old city are visited by foreign tourists, Al-Azhar Park is of another nature. It is a plebiscite place by the people of Cairo, and, more than that, a novel place to meet in the capital. The park is visited by diverse populations: wealthy and low income families, individuals, lovers, tourists, joggers, students, etc. One comes here for planned group outings, a rendezvous, fresh air, a walk, or a meal at the restaurant *Le Nôtre*. In principal, everyone is subject to the same rules; at the entrance a folded brochure (in Arabic and English) is distributed, sign boards remind the visitor of important things that are forbidden, which are also noted on the back of the ticket. The people of Cairo appropriate the park in diverse ways, and enjoy it in a various manners conjugating the possibilities: breathe, meditate, walk, play, eat, pray, etc. Thousands of

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<sup>16</sup> Narratives by travelers and tourist guides concerning Cairo almost always contained a description of the panorama of the city viewed from the citadel.

photos are taken there each day, with enthusiasm that is evident.

It is necessary, however, to put this view into perspective; the Park is a world of its own where areas of clear distinction are recreated. The standing of the establishments and their prices are a deterrent for the great majority of visitors of the park. The price of a cup of coffee or tea at the restaurant *Lakeside* is about eight times that of an ordinary establishment and the status of the place requires it. In the restaurant *Citadel View*, one observes an additional form of dissuasion: guards keep all who approach the open terrace of the establishment at a distance. Lastly, in the Park, as elsewhere in Cairo, one must not be too demonstrative, as Dina Heshmat testifies: “The place is so well lit and guarded that it is impossible to use it for anything other than strictly bucolic purposes. Every effort is made to avoid any affront to public decency”<sup>17</sup>.

However, the Park is incontestably a new and important place in Cairo. With the coming of a redeeming panorama, it has given another existence to the old city, transforming it paradoxically into a new landscape and returning it to the foreground of the urban horizon. The Park is, thereby, thought of as a single object and as a new instrument of development, and another statement, or even a reactivation, of the architectural, historical, patrimonial and cultural context. The concept of the park is inscribed in a broad spectrum of mythical social periods, its range (implicit and explicit) extends to the imaginary of origins, from the paradise of Islam to the future that today dreams of, that improbable universal future, sustainable green in color. In a general context of globalization and increasing importance of heritage, the project of Al-Azhar Park mobilized, combined and staged references to and borrowed from Egyptian, Arab and Islamic registers, as well as from world urban vocabulary and the creed of sustainable development. From Al-Azhar Park, the old city of Cairo presents itself to the capital as a performance, and as a model of a cultural space of reference: “model of development that can be used in numerous other sites in historic cities of the Islamic world”<sup>18</sup>. Once upon a time, in Cairo, there was an old troubled and inert city until the appearance of a belvedere park that transformed it into a beautiful historical panorama:

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<sup>17</sup> HESHMAT, 2006, p. 18.

<sup>18</sup> Presentation of Al-Azhar Park, from the site [www.akdn.org](http://www.akdn.org).

such is the outline of this 21<sup>st</sup> century urban tale.

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