

## The living past

An international conference on restoration has been planned for early 2002, and

---

A nation without a past can have no future. But is it only the past that we should protect when seeking a better future? Is it only the symbols of a lost glory that we should emphasise, while overlooking the existing cultural and social matrix?

Critics charge that the current revitalisation projects aimed at upgrading Cairo's historical areas do not address the above questions, and therefore fail to engage with important debates. Enthusiastic attempts to conserve the historical areas erupted in the mid-1990s. Since then, the conservation machine has moved swiftly: the numerous billboards bearing the names of construction industry giants are sufficient indication of the frenzy of activity. Any Egyptian would recognise these names as those of huge contractors, usually responsible for building bridges, housing projects or highways. Their profile in conservation work, especially on historical areas and the restoration of Islamic monuments, is not quite as high.



**Restoring monuments without taking into account their cultural and social context will deprive the area of its significance** *photo: Randa Shaath*

---

This begs the question: have these contractors sufficient awareness of the meaning of restoration? Have they read the international charters on restoration and conservation? Do we not need a local charter for restoration, adapted to the Cairene context?

The debate introduced several years ago by *Al-Ahram Weekly* has focused on the appropriateness of restoration projects in Islamic Cairo. It has also examined urban conservation as a whole -- the wider approach that covers complete areas through the restoration of the monuments, as well as the development of the local communities.

Before actually undertaking conservation work, we need to ask: what do we conserve, and why? The purpose of conservation, as stated in the ICOMOS (International Council on Monuments and Sites) New Zealand Charter of 1992, is to care for places with value for the cultural heritage -- their structures, materials, and meaning.

The importance of cultural meaning, however, is often overlooked by urban conservation projects in Cairo. Culture cannot be reduced to historical remains, and cannot be protected only by the restoration of monuments or the streetscape. The ICOMOS Washington Charter (1987) for the conservation of historic towns and urban areas emphasises this point, stating that the conservation of historic towns should be an integral part of a "coherent policy of economic and social development and urban and regional planning." Superficial beautification, obviously, is not enough. We may call it revitalisation, but it is merely museumisation; and this is a grave threat to Cairo's historical areas, which still pulsate with the activities of everyday life.

We do no good to historical areas by restoring their monuments and evacuating the inhabitants. Al-Ghuriya is unimaginable without the textile trade, which has been there since the 14th century, when Al-Maqrizi mentioned it. Textile merchants have worked in this area since before the Ghouri complex was built. Even today, many families from Cairo (but also from the rural areas) come to Al-Ghuri to buy bridal trousseaus and household fabrics. Such a vibrant tradition, which is an integral part of our non-physical heritage, will be erased if the textile shops are removed from the area. Only the restored wall will remain; the essence of the area will have vanished.

This brings us to our second question: why do we conserve? The obvious answer is, to safeguard the heritage. Well, just what is the heritage? According to the Krakow Charter (2000), one can only define the way in which the heritage may be identified. Social plurality entails a great diversity in the way the community understands the concept. An idea like that of patrimony cannot be defined and classified by officials and planners. Here, the problem is that we lack a system of values and definitions that could guide urban conservation projects. That is the conclusion reached by a symposium and workshop titled "Approaches and Mechanisms of Urban Conservation Projects in Historic Cairo," held at the Italian cultural centre in September. Along with the lack of guidelines, the symposium deplored the absence of appropriate community involvement - - an essential element of comprehensive conservation, as stressed in all international conservation charters.

This is evident in Mar Girgis, where no appropriate studies were carried out before heavy construction machinery was brought in. Subsequent interventions do not seem to have taken the local community into account: wooden screens do not offer the inhabitants enough privacy, and an amphitheatre is being used as a playground for goats, while trash is dumped in the flower boxes. Dangerous cracks have appeared on the walls of the houses as a result of one of the revitalisation projects implemented in the area.

In Gamaliya's Al-Darb Al-Asfar, a pilot restoration project focused on three rare surviving examples of domestic architecture: the houses of Al-Seheimi, Khurazati and

Mustafa Gaafar. The area would have required a comprehensive urban conservation scheme, but the project did not address the degradation of other houses. The façades were painted beige and the main sewage system was overhauled to prevent infiltration. The project team and some residents established an NGO to develop the community, but its activities came to an end a little over a year later. The street was made into a pedestrian zone -- a measure taken automatically as part of any urban upgrading activities in Cairo -- but, while families surely welcome the step, workshop owners and shopkeepers have complained that it segregates their work from its wider economic context. Nor are these people willing to change their activities, becoming sellers of souvenirs and providers of tourist services. Tourists do not visit Al-Darb Al-Asfar as often as they do Sultan Hassan or Khan Al- Khalili; and now, when the flow of foreign visitors has all but dried up, there is less incentive than ever to reconvert.

It is important to remember that conservation projects affect not merely walls but also people who have close socio-cultural and economic ties with the areas they inhabit. It is not realistic to contemplate evacuating all the residents of Fatimid Cairo, or even the Gamaliya area alone. Conservation, after all, is a tool -- not an end in itself.

*\* The writer is a PhD candidate at the School of Architecture, Edinburgh College of Art, Scotland.*

 [Recommend this page](#)

#### Related

[Making room for history 4 - 10 November 1999](#)

#### stories:

© Copyright Al-Ahram Weekly. All rights reserved  
[weeklyweb@ahram.org.eg](mailto:weeklyweb@ahram.org.eg)



[War](#) | [Egypt](#) | [Economy](#) | [IT](#) | [Region](#) | [Opinion](#) | [Interview](#) | [Culture](#)

[Features](#) | [Living](#) | [Travel](#) | [Sports](#) | [Profile](#) | [People](#) | [Time Out](#) | [Chronicles](#) | [Cartoons](#)

Search for words and exact phrases (as quotes strings),  
Use boolean operators (AND, OR, NEAR, AND NOT) for advanced queries

[ARCHIVES](#)  
[Letter from the Editor](#)  
[Editorial Board](#)  
[Subscription](#)  
[Advertise!](#)

WEEKLY ONLINE: [www.ahram.org.eg/weekly](http://www.ahram.org.eg/weekly)  
Updated every Saturday at 11.00 GMT, 2pm local time  
[weeklyweb@ahram.org.eg](mailto:weeklyweb@ahram.org.eg)

  
Al-Ahram  
Organisation