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DINA SHEHAYEB

BACKTRACKING TO SUSTAINABLE URBAN DEVELOPMENT AND WORKING WITH LOCAL COMMUNITIES:

THE AL-DARB AL-AHMAR PROJECT IN ISLAMIC CAIRO

Interview with Dina Shehayeb by Pierre-Arnaud Barthel

How did that happen that you worked on the project?

I came back in Cairo with my PhD in Environmental Behaviour Studies (EBS) and my dissertation was about urban design theory and methodology; an attempt to mainstream the behaviour and meaning components of the built environment. I came back to Cairo and thought I would never be hired to do this kind of work. And soon, a colleague of mine, Ashraf Botros, called me. He was my classmate at university in architecture, and worked for the Aga Khan. The Aga Khan project at Al-Darb al-Ahmar had established an office in 1997 to address the park design and the rest of the project in the neighbourhood. It was really very preliminary. The team depended on a huge report by UNESCO and they had five people occupying two or three rooms in a building owned by the governorate, at the end of al-Azhar Street, at the beginning of the mound which is now the Azhar Park. The park area used to be the historic garbage; 1000 years of garbage processing. So I met Francesco Siravo who was the person in charge under Stefano Bianca¹ and he asked me to explore two things: first to know more about peoples' willingness to stay or leave in the

1. Stefano Bianca is a Swiss architectural historian and an urban designer. Bianca has been published in the fields of Islamic architecture, cities, gardens and arts. He is currently working as Director of the Historic Cities Support Program of the Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC) which promotes the conservation and re-use of buildings and public spaces in historic cities of the Muslim World.

area, and secondly their affordability. From the beginning of the project, the approach was socio-economic revitalization of the entire area, the trendy way of area conservation. The Aga Khan was already working on the historic wall and certain monuments in Al-Darb al-Ahmar and the Park itself. So I drafted a proposal and started becoming their consultant in 1998. This continued until the opening of the Park in 2005 when the office of five people had become a full-fledged company with 200 employees, the local branch only, which was Aga Khan Cultural Services - Egypt, AKCS-E. That's how I was affiliated with them and for those six years I used to go once a week and spend the whole day usually, sometimes until after dark, in al-Darb al-Ahmar.

In 2005 the "Community Development Company", a daughter company of AKCS-E, was created for sustainability. The current head is an ex-army general, and of course, his main value is coordination with the local government, and police. He makes things happen and he stops things from happening thanks to his connections. On the other hand, he has little to do with the programs themselves, and before that you had someone like Mohammed Mikawy who was excellent. The project grew during the time of Mikawy who is a construction management engineer and a professor at Ain Shams University.

LEARNING FROM THE CITY-DWELLERS: EXPERIENCING NEW TYPES OF STUDIES

Can you present your expertise for the project?

So the initial studies, the first round, I conducted a demographic survey, to which I added a special questionnaire. Classic demographics and a lot of questions about who does what, when and where; about everyday life. I hired professional sociologists to conduct it, I trained them, we did a sample test, very classic. When I looked into the results of this first survey it was 100 households in the first action area Aga Khan had decided for many reasons. I was involved in deciding what criteria to use to choose first interventions, you know we wanted visibility and concentration of efforts so they will impact decision makers and politicians, but also we wanted to start with relatively manageable cases; a mix of partial owner and tenant occupied residents, not all tenant situations, or the poorest in the neighbourhood, also the the houses with architectural integrity or some worth, so there were many factors. In parallel, the AKCS-E team conducted a physical survey of the first action area along Darb Shoghlan. They had the ground floor plans of all buildings, so this was a layer that I used along with my random sampling within a cluster of course. Within it there was random sampling of the 100 households.

Looking at both data, the physical survey as well as the demographic survey, and this activities survey, I chose 15 rich cases, to conduct what I call “lifestyle assessment”. That was an invention, of getting deeper into everyday life activities, to understand their willingness to stay and their willingness to invest in home improvements. It starts very benignly, you know, asking people where they wash their clothes, when, where is the washing machine? You know they pull the washer from a certain place, they put them all in the hall in the apartment. Sometimes there are three washers. How do they dispose of the water, how do they clean, and what do they do when visitors come over? All kinds of little things. And these things put together reveal a lot about how people think about their dwelling, their alleys, their neighbourhood, and their community. It reveals their priorities and it that there are dual values of judgement: “among ourselves our lives are ok”. But they also say: “we dislike being exposed to outsiders; you want them to come and see us living in this shitty place?!”

Another thing that was very important was that in the survey, 100 percent said they would not invest one pound in home improvements. But then you ask in the same survey: “how much did you spend in the last five years, and what did you repair, how much did it cost you, whose decision was it, who did you bring to do it?”, you realize that they are investing, but that they are using local contractors with little know-how, and so the results are unsatisfactory; useless. They re-do the floor and it sinks again. They re-plaster a wall and it swells out with humidity again, because the problems are deeper than that. So first we discovered that people have the willingness to invest, and during the “lifestyle assessment” inquiry that I conducted with the 15 families, some of them reached 10,000 Egyptian Pounds per apartment; they were willing to pay that much and stay in their location.

And then when you ask them about alternatives that they have experienced, or very close family members have experienced, all of them have either directly experienced informal housing and new cities, or, a sister, a brother, a son, a daughter has. This comparison was crucial for them to realise how much they value where they live now. For social reasons, for cultural reasons, for psychological reasons; physical comfort, social support, economic and social benefit gained from proximity of home to work, the support of having relatives and people you know all around you. It saves money, it comforts psychologically. One of my outcomes from these studies was the perceived values by residents in the area, and there was a solid list that is multidimensional, and with what they have, they get more value for cost living in al-Darb al-Ahmar than anywhere else.

What was the perception of the role the Aga Khan could play for the city-dwellers?

To simplify I explained that this is a Muslim Indian guy, who is very rich and he funds a masters program at MIT on Islamic architecture. He funds disseminating knowledge about Islamic cities. They find that very positive. He is interested in Cairo, in the Al-Darb al-Ahmar because of that. The conservation of the area as a whole is of value. Sometimes I had to explain more and said that: “the houses you live in, this type of architecture, with stone, with wood is quite efficient regarding the thermal comfort and prevents high electricity bills. Your streets are cooler than the streets that we have in other neighbourhoods” and so on. And so they kind of realise. You see the media is not telling them that, instead they always highlight new materials as the ‘best’ the most ‘prestigious’. When we were talking about the role of the project, they said they wanted technical advice and support. So the next step was the willingness to participate in the Housing Rehabilitation Program-to be, the difficulties of who will be able to join such a program, and people who won’t, how can we handle their cases also came about, You start looking at the challenges of actually having all the inhabitants of one building, participate in a program, of affordability, of tenant-owner relations. So my second task was mobilizing the community.

MOBILIZING THE COMMUNITY OF AL-DARB AL-AHMAR

How did you design the rehabilitation program? Did you decide before a master-plan?

The best thing that the Aga Khan did was not to design the Housing Rehabilitation Program in advance. We were still in the study stage, but we were talking about implementation. Implementation started in 2001 with the first house. And the process of the Housing Rehabilitation Program was first drafted in 2003. We had already worked on 10 buildings! We had already run into the problems of multiple inheritors. One building could have more than 50 heirs and you need, by law, the approval of 75 percent of the owners to do anything in it. You have the hassle of having a lot of buildings that are listed in the District, which is local government, to be demolished. Basing the process on real application has a lot to do with the success of the project.

Where and how did you choose to start?

Mobilizing the community was done after they felt that they could trust this foreign entity. We also decided that from the selection of houses we studied in the first action area, intervention should be on application basis; residents should want to improve their home this way. For the five first houses, we targeted the cases; we approached them, invited them to come in, there was no imposition, whatsoever, not even in the first house. But we targeted them marketing the idea of matching funds and rehabilitation. They were not all owner-occupied; there was one all-tenant situation, so you have outsider stakeholders such as owners there. The five first houses were not in miserable condition; not something in a very poor demolished condition, moderate, with reversible damage from previous improvement attempts, with some historic integrity, and architectural value and linked together. This is important because there is the “domino” effect. These houses often have common walls and are like a string, stuck together. It would be much easier, safer structurally and yield higher visual impact if our first intervention were all in a row. You cannot work on one house individually; it is unbelievable how the houses are intertwined. We targeted also visibility, because you want it in a place where impact is high, where it will be seen by the community in the neighbourhood, as well as the governor, the president, the Aga Khan, whoever.

High impact, propaganda was one of the key things that helped in mobilizing and selling the idea to the residents. It was on a one-to-one basis in people’s homes, when we were talking on a very open level, honestly, about the situation in Egypt. I told them “if you take advantage of such projects and stay, you can benefit”. First question they said: “what if we invest money in improving our homes, and then in the District there are plans from the 70’s to demolish 30 meters along the historic wall, the al-Darb al-Ahmar side to make way for a road”. And I said “in this project we have one advantage: the international profile of Aga Khan. It will help. They have media power, they publish books, they can have it on TV, it will be written in the papers”. I told them the example of al-Darb al-Asfar². Al-Darb al-Asfar was always in the papers

2. Al-Darb al-Asfar is the name of an alley in Gammaleyya just north of al-Darb al-Ahmar still in Historic Cairo. There a string of 3 listed monuments were renovated and to compliment them, a rehabilitation project improved several, less significant, heritage buildings across from the monuments as well as the alley paving and furniture.

as an example of being a wonderful experiment of improving historic buildings, and I said “when you get positive media coverage, no one will remove you. Not this governor, not the following one. It will be public opinion, it will look very bad”. And this reassured them, it was number one guarantee.

The second mobilizing element was taking panoramic pictures from the park, it was not the park then it was still under construction. There were heaps of dust, everybody was complaining, there was big equipment moving that was shaking the houses. There was constant dust, more than usual because its being unsettled, removed. So they were really complaining and I had to guarantee them that this was temporary; that it would lead to very positive things. It was essential to keep engaging the community constantly, to let them know what’s going on. So when we took pictures of the panoramic view, I mounted them on cardboard and showed them to the 15 first families in a meeting in the site office... It was a small circle, it was not a big event, and I told them “seriously, if Susan Mubarak is invited to the opening of this park, which she will be, and she stands there, during construction or something, this is what she will see of you guys. These are the backs of your houses; they gave their backs to a garbage heap for hundreds of years. Would you blame her if she said “poor people, we have to move them to new cities, to better housing?” You can’t blame her”. And they were convinced. I took pictures of the facades and the interior of the neighbourhood from Darb Shoghlan, from Aslan square, and showed the contrast: it’s an amazing contrast. There is another step further when you take pictures of interiors, home interiors. They’re so much better and so well kept compared to outside facades. Not all, but the majority.

The demographic survey results, and this mobilization, everything led to the conclusion that you have 70 to 75 percent of the population of such this district who are very well able to engage in such a project and invest and improve in every way; economically, in training, in job seeking, empowerment, everything. And you have 25 to 30 percent who are beyond enablement; they need sheer help. These are the poor, elderly, one-room dwellers, so ignorant, so helpless, in such a pitiful health condition where you have to have scenarios to carry them along with you. And you had one or two of these every other building, in the ground floor, in a cellar. How are we going to handle these? There were suggestions from the occupants and from the community themselves. In one building they said “we’re going to carry the share of the elderly lady who occupies one room”. So in one building they actually paid for this woman’s share by floor area and they had suggested it. There was a lot of scenarios.

From 2001 to 2003 the 10 houses we rehabilitated were tests from which we realized what the housing program procedure, finance mechanism and everything should address. We knew exactly the affordability. We had a case where we start with certain instalments and then the husband dies. He died on her and she had a new-born baby and she couldn't work and she had other kids and was not so young. And all of a sudden, what can we do to help her continue paying the instalments for the housing? So we introduced other mechanisms to compliment the housing finance, programs of social assistance, micro-credit to increase income, whatever is needed to help such situations. There were complications in tenant-owner relationships. There were some tenants who didn't have contracts. In one case where the owner was living in the same building, and the woman is there for 20 years but there is no contract. The owner graciously wrote a new contract; a long-term one for 10 pounds a month. This sounds like a miracle no one would believe. But this happened. This was a community really reading a chance into something, and working without scenarios that you see in other contexts of "grab and run" and maximum profit, what you can call "*thakafat al goua'a*", the culture of poverty. The same people who'd do that in a different context. This project set a context which made the community use its potential and decide among themselves to operate them really to the maximum benefit of the community.

IMPLEMENTING THE REHABILITATION PROGRAM

Tell me about the first house you took to test your program...

I personally think that Egyptians in such neighbourhoods have a lot of problems. They are survivors, they are intelligent, and they are very resourceful in finding creative solutions. And I entered humbly saying we don't know what we should do. Let's do it together, and it worked. News travels very fast, you don't need to make a community meeting of 100 people. You need to meet people in small groups or individually, and the word is going to spread. And of course we started with an influential resident; al Hagg Maged, God grant him health. The first one who had the courage to give the property deed to the Aga Khan company. His relatives and co-owners were telling him "are you crazy? You give them the original deed of the house". And he wrote the contract for the tenant who didn't have a contract, Om Mona. The Aga Khan Foundation owes him. He is a retired director, who worked at CAPMAS³. He's paralyzed, and he lives at home with his wife and his son, the whole family of his

3. This authority conducts the census and other data bases and statistics.

son. He's educated, of course. He is someone who knows about law and his rights, and even has the reputation of being shrewed and tight with money. His brother lives in the same building but he is completely dependent on Hagg Maged financially and everything else, so he is the brain of this family. And so when he started by putting his hands into that of the project, and giving up his house for rehabilitation, it had an impact in the community. When it was done and people saw the result it had a snowball-effect of people wanting to join. So we targeted the entire block and tried to convince them hard, but we never forced because there has to be a written consensus from all residents and they have to apply, then we make a cost estimate and decide with them how much down payment, and how much monthly instalments, but they pay the instalments together. So if one can't pay, they have to pay as one person: all the building's occupants. We were helping to solve problems of people who can't afford, of an elderly woman who was in a cellar, who moved out because she had dementia; she was completely not well, in a pitiful condition. So she was moved into another one-room dwelling in the same street, but we found a solution to pay the money for her without giving it to her abusive son. We gave her compensation money to be able to live in better conditions, but very, very close. It was a flooded cellar with no bathrooms, she was in deep "doo-doo" this woman. There were others where we helped them. I was the one who asked for a lawyer to come into the housing team, because of the legality of tenant-owner negotiations. And there were some owners that we had to go to where they lived in new cities. A lot was invested in the social mediation.

You want to work with communities, you have to be attentive and work at a fair tempo. There were crises. The police came... it was not easy... we went through a lot. One example: we were discussing having a passageway to the park through one of the houses along the historic wall; through its backyard. We stayed months working on this with them. The architects of the project wanted to speed up the process and there was resistance from the residents of the house and neighbours rallied with them and threatened project architects... I was called in to mediate for this, showing economic and social benefits. After a highly tense meeting in the project site office the residents hosted an iftar in their home, and reconciliation was achieved, thank God. I was quite scared, and during reconciliation, they said "someone like you we can deal with. We can't deal with the Aga Khan architects and managers like we can with you". It takes time to work with communities. Another incident was when one owner woman in a participatory design session with me\ talking about changes in the building, suddenly stood up and threw the tea in our face. I went with her and spent time with her in her house, because we wanted peaceful relations.



Figure 1– The Ayyubid historic wall and the encroachments before restoration and rehabilitation (Aga Khan, 2000).

About environment and structure, did you assess the buildings?

When there was a workshop in a building I asked the Aga Khan to bring an environmental specialist to come in before we do the rehabilitation to make sure that if there is any breach of environmental law, it will be fixed in the rehabilitation, so that we don't consolidate and extend the life of a building that is in violation with environmental law. We did that for 600 plots in the first action area. Everything that was physically surveyed was also environmentally assessed, and with very positive results, we were very surprised, about air pollution, about noise, about everything... sewerage, waste. The concentration of workshops is not high enough. Because you have the residential mix the industrial waste is diluted, in the sewerage for example. We have one tannery and of course you can smell ammonia. But it's not big enough and it's alone in the middle of the residential fabric. And so they only found two activities, two small metal melting workshops that were polluting, but for all the carpenters, everything else was okay.



Figure 2– The Ayyubid historic wall restored and houses rehabilitated (Aga Khan, 2009).

So we had to make sure we had good ventilation in the workshops, and fix the floor so that to avoid any liquid leaking through its tiles. In parallel we were looking deeply into which houses to start with. They commissioned another consultant to do a structural assessment of a selection of houses where we were targeting to market the Housing Rehabilitation Program. And they did a catalogue; it's not one of their publications, it has two-three pages per building, by building number, around 200, that summarized results from multi-dimensional studies. So we could see who we could target which buildings, which people. I triangulate data. I do behaviour observation studies. I do qualitative studies of people's lifestyle; how they live their daily life. I do quantitative research, with a survey questionnaire. I did much of that for the Agha Khan project and it has benefitted the project improved lot for example in devising the financial scenarios for the Housing Rehabilitation Program. And the work that the Aga Khan did, the physical survey of the housing and open spaces, together it was much more rigorous than anything done before.

And what about NGOs on-site? What is successful to work with them for the program?

The NGOs as far as my work is concerned I had nothing to do with them. My only experience with them was something totally different from the housing program, when the project tried to establish a business association, it turned sour. The same people, the big merchants of Darb al Ahmar, I've met them a couple of times because one of their programs later was institutional capacity building and empowerment through NGOs. They fought among themselves. My opinion here is not professional. It is not my expertise, but from my knowledge of the community NGOs are an alien form of social organization, of community organization. It gives them power they're not used to. It's outside the frame of cultural norms. Within the frame of cultural norms you have the same merchants dealing with each other without paper, without IOUs (I owe you). It's a medieval way of working. Regarding paying back the housing loans, people did paid them regularly especially that it was a collective thing, like all residents of one building have to pay together, so it was like shameful not to, unless it was a serious problem like a woman's husband died, and all of a sudden she had no more money. But otherwise people did not defect. When they are sure they are getting the benefit there is this positive collaboration. They do a lot of positive collaboration together. At the smallest scale in order to clean the building or share the rooftop. Workshops do it all the time to bring raw material or even share power tools.

IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF OPEN SPACES

And you worked as well on the public spaces?

Yes. Not just on the buildings. The open spaces it was postponed several times although it was in the beginning on the agenda. Since the beginning I did behavioural studies and annotated plans of salient activities, how people use the Darb Shoghlan street and Aslan square. And there were previous studies, and there were other studies after of how people appropriate space and why. For example, there is a place for people to sit outside, in the most breezy, cool spot, watching the movement along the main axis, which is Darb Shoghlan street, where you have the wind coming, so there is a place where the breeze can be felt the best. It is a spot where the vantage point is best. Your back is protected from someone spitting on you, and it doesn't have to be a bench. It can be a high sidewalk, anything. But you have to have these minimum requirements, you have to have a good climate, and you have to have a spot from which to watch what's going on. In different parts of old Cairo where you have restricted right of access, the right of way is from 3 to 4 meters. If it gets wider, people appropriate the rest. It barely takes the two-way cars, they almost touch. Its like an unwritten rule, everyone knows it, but nobody talks about it. That was the work on open spaces. We did also a 3-D model, and we did participatory work on the design of Aslan Square.

That was another point I wanted to bring up. For the Aslan square, for the workshops, how did you organize the participatory approach for the design?

You talk with every single person in that square. The residents, the passers by, the residents around it, who are permanently looking out of their windows and being seen from the square, and all the shops. And this you talk about in depth... long talks. Very long. Not about what they want to be done, but about what is happening and why. What is the future, for them and their business. All the stories. This helps a lot. The participatory design is almost like a check. You have to do your homework. You don't want to go around and say "what do you want to be done? I'll do it for you". No, you have to do research. And you get to know the people and why they do things as much as you can. And then you translate this into possible solutions. You show the people and discuss, with the 3-D model and the participatory work. But it doesn't start at the beginning with the participatory design. This was a huge success in my opinion. The implementation of the open space program



Figure 3— Works to reshape Azlan square (P-A Barthel, January 2009).

depended on funding. Aga Khan gets funding from other sources to implement parts of its projects. Its not all Aga Khan money, it has Swiss Fund, Ford Foundation as so on.

What was the participatory approach to redesign the Tablita market?

Tablita was another story. Aga Khan had partners (the Community Development Services referred to as CDS), who were doing the social bit, and the NGO capacity building, and employment, and training: it's more a classical development project recipe. Regarding the Tablita market, they had someone from CDS who did a needs assessment with the merchants of the market, for 6 months they did the research. They drafted out a report, reported all opinions, and the text covered problems, aspirations, advantages, disadvantages, wants and needs. So it was the language of problems and preferences. And then they gave this report to the architects to make a design. But the social scientists and architects from Aga Khan started fighting. They were very dissatisfied and didn't understand each other. They called me in, and I read the needs assessment report. I actually re-analyzed what was in that

report. I didn't do any research with the merchants. I sat twice with Fatima, the lady who conducted the discussions and every clause or sentence or quote I would ask her "who said that?", because I wanted to know who held the power positions in the *souq*. Is it the sheikh, his son? Is it someone who sells the fruits, or the poor woman who sells the herbs? So that to put certain statements in context and to avoid over-generalized statements because only one person had said them. I re-analyzed them in terms of "functional opportunities", which is the concept I developed in my PhD, and translated this report into guidelines for design, design objectives, and it worked. I was so excited I couldn't sleep!

Now what we had was a lot of conflicting data. For example, the question about the boundary of the market (*souq* in Arabic). Should it be solid, shut or open? And you get both answers. Some people want this and some want that. And the problem was with this assessment was that the researchers never asked why. Why do you want it? What do these people want from the design of the market? What I do is like a tree analysis, so you have a lot of little bits and pieces that can be grouped into categories. I reached seven big design objectives, and you tie them through hints of what was said to elements in the design; the structure system, the boundaries, the separation between stalls...that are touched or that are effective in achieving this objective. Once I laid this out in front of the architect, he did an amazing job. He did much better and he developed two alternatives. Now to check these solutions we had two participatory sessions with the merchants. By the book. I teach how to do participatory design but it was the first time I do it. In one session I got a mix of the upper power people and in the second a mix of the lower one, which is a mix mainly of the women vendors and one or two men, who sell small things. You cannot mix people across power status in one session, the less powerful will never speak out in front of the others.

Were the two participatory sessions a success?

Yes. Lots of tiny things were discussed. Before the participatory design sessions we visited 9 fruit and vegetable markets, all over the city, just the Aga Khan team, the CDS team and myself, to assess what's going on and what does and doesn't work. So we did that on our own, and we took pictures and used them in the participatory sessions to show vendors different solutions of how to dispose of waste, and how to store cardboard boxes... and so on. We did that in the participatory sessions: showing them alternative solutions they do not know of. It was



Figure 4— Participatory session with Dina Shehayeb (D. Shehayeb, 2006).

very useful to make them talk. We had the existing map and plan of the market for participants to orient themselves which was very important also. We did not put the architect's solutions. We started playing with participants with loose parts, columns, walls made of white foam easy to fix in the model with pins. Then we were suggesting part of the architecture solution every now and then, but not the whole design, otherwise they won't talk. So these were all successful things. So the architect design actually was refined, and a lot of better solutions came out from the sessions. People were very engaged in the design.

Were the majority of the vendors involved in the sessions?

Yes. For the first session, we invited the 20, we had like 15. We should have about eight, but we had 15. The second one we had 12, mostly the women and a couple of less important men. Just to give you an example, in the first design that the architect had done before my intervention, he had a room for the administration of the *souq*. Such a room, in such a neighbourhood as Al-Darb al-Ahmar would be abused by people who take drugs. The *sheikh* of the *souq* who is its administrative figure is at his stall. And if he convenes with people and meets and discusses, it has to be in the open and visible to everyone.

It cannot be in a room, and it is not acceptable also that he leaves his stall unattended. Other discussions on other issues also happened. Where to locate the chicken guy? How to achieve equal opportunities among all vendors? It was very important. The privilege for those who are close to key entrances. So you have all this discussion about having one or multiple entrances. So we did an atrium where you have light and ventilation and bring focus to the innermost corner to balance the advantages, so when you would enter you would see this otherwise darker corner more and they agreed to that solution. We were suggesting things and they were reacting to them, usually adding new ideas until it was satisfactory to all participants. We wanted the upper floor to be an activity that would generate income to sustain the subsidy of the market and we made a few suggestions so they were saying “no don’t put this, this would fail” or “yes that is ok but you need to so and so....”. All kind of things. We had to talk to the spice shop people, a complimenting activity to their vegetable selling. There were a few shops around Tablita. We’ve seen them in the Heliopolis market as well, and noted where they can be located. We saw it was at the entrances. That is because they have to have a drier place. You constantly learn...

Many things came out, and the solution about the toilet was ingenious. The vendors in the first session didn’t want a toilet, and they all agreed on it, it wasn’t a conflict issue. But it turns out that the women never spoke up because they were underrepresented. The men didn’t want a toilet because they go to the mosque. Everyone goes to the mosque. The mosque closes after *‘ishâ’*⁴ Esha, which is around 9 pm during summer. The market is open until 11:30 pm, so the women don’t have a place to go after that. Men can pee anywhere, it’s a fact in Cairo, so they’re not upset. It seemed their main reservation was that it would be a place to take drugs and people from outside who want to go to the toilet would use it not just the vendors. Same with the garbage waste room. There is a garbage room in the Heliopolis market where the garbage collection truck backs up into a drive-way and is loaded directly from that tiled room. It works very well in the context of Heliopolis because the garbage is actually collected from the households. But this is not the case in Al Darb al-Ahmar. So they said the households will throw their garbage in our garbage room, because of the situation. So they refused that. So it was all according to what you are offering in which context. So going back to the toilet issue, the ladies suggested “why don’t we make one cubicle, one toilet like in a house, like a guest toilet. We’ll lock it and the key will be hanging in front of one of the

4. The last pray during the fall of the day.

women vendors, and the men can go in anytime, any men from the market including the young boys who bring vegetables in bulk from the whole sale market in Obour". In fact, there is a multi-purpose area in the market for *iftar* in Ramadan, for naps, for these kids, they could use the toilet as well, as long as it is controlled by the vendors. And the women added: "we will hire someone to come and clean it, but it will always be locked". And this solved the toilet problem. We went back to the men and asked them about the solution and they said "fine, we don't mind".

This sort of dialogue, the same happened with the houses for the housing rehabilitation program. There were multiple sessions with the architect and with the occupants. We decided after the first house or so that residents have to visit their house during the construction period to familiarize themselves and adjust to the changes. After moving back into their house, I would visit them again and conduct a POE (Post Occupancy Evaluation) analysis on their satisfaction. In the first few houses first the type of interior finishing was not satisfactory, and sometimes they wanted to upgrade tiles for example. Some wanted a very lovely bathroom. I told them they had to tell me before. We learnt as we went, us and the residents, and we had the leeway to accommodate what happens naturally, until the project team fully developed the Housing Rehabilitation Program manual in 2004 and this I was always involved in. They continued doing the rehab of housing after 2005 based on application. I had stopped working with them since the beginning of 2005 around the opening of the Azhar Park. In 2009 Aga Khan had achieved more than 100 houses and they had many applications, and more people were coming. They had done scenarios of low intervention, medium intervention, and full rehabilitation. They were reconstructing vacant lots and ruins with different scenarios. There were other programs along the housing program. The micro-finance helped because it helped people increase their income generating activities to pay the housing instalments.

ABOUT THE GOVERNANCE OF THE PROJECT

Can you tell me about the implications of the local government (the district) in the project? And how was this new experimental process received?

The project was done in very close coordination with the governorate and the district. It had to. There is first of all acceptances and welcome between the president and His Highness the prince Aga

Khan, which happens to sustain a project. They meet almost every two years. The governor of Cairo was also happy. The project has always been positively received. Especially the park, because it was always a lot more sparkly than the Al-Darb al-Ahmar project. The governor had no reason to hate it, it cost him nothing. On the contrary, the first time I heard the current Cairo governor speak was at the opening of the Azhar Park in 2005, and he had been briefed about the type of development that's happening in Darb al Ahmar. I heard lots of good from him then and I'm hoping this lesson is deeper than just saying it now that the housing program in particular is ending. It makes me very sad and that is why I want to write about it more because it was a very successful project, which I think is replicable.

It's not replicable from scratch without Aga Khan for sure, but the grounds we covered with this study during the first three years, in knowing what we were dealing with, solutions to cases of multiple ownership, solutions to different tenant-owner relations, old leases and new leases, cases where one tenant cannot pay. Outlining the housing rehabilitation as a process of inquiry, finance, and implementation, is something we do not need to repeat. Any other similar project will not need all of the first three years of exploration. You need much less money. Money is needed for capacity building of local government units which is what happened in Aleppo, in Syria. The hope was that the Egyptian authorities establish special district units, including one for Historic Cairo. In Aleppo I met the unit staff there. They have masters and PhD's in historic preservation, and are guided by GTZ (German cooperation) as well as Aga Khan technical support. So you have a unit that gives licenses, funding in the form of loans to people to repair their homes. It is essential for sustainability to have that at the local government level.

Was a special district created in order to be the key actor of the revitalization of Islamic Cairo?

Within the project after the housing rehabilitation which was all done bottom-up we learnt and put the system and then you needed to set the boundaries within which you establish a special unit entity; a district, a classic local government unit with certain capacities and regulations and procedures to cater to the historic area. You start in Al Darb al-Ahmar and then it would be replicated in other parts of historic Cairo. That was the plan and this never happened.

But why? Because of the Egyptian counterparts?

I don't know. But my guess is also internally, there are reasons in the Aga Khan structure. The international team also, not just locally. It is a multi-dimensional project. It's not just about open spaces and housing, but also about health, education, environment, gender relations, culture, and empowerment. This grew so much that the ones in charge in the organization underplayed the housing component when approaching donors for this third phase that is starting now. They underplayed the housing component as being strictly a physical intervention which most donors do not have on their agendas. It's not true actually. In the post-implementation survey that I did in 2009, (we did the baseline in 2003) we found 146 households of the 189 we had surveyed in 2003 and we wanted to see what happened from 2003 to 2009, in health and everything. And when you ask them in the last question of the questionnaire "what do you think of the 11 Aga Khan programs?", they rated the housing rehabilitation program as the one with the highest impact and highest satisfaction. They perceived its tangible impacts on health and embittering living conditions and expressed its impact on neighbourhood pride. They also realized that real estate value can come up.

So there are no houses left in the rehabilitation? It's completely finished?

Yes. And this is a pity. There is the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) and other AK organizations, and these started competing internally. Then it gets boring after you've been working for 12 years in the same locality. And they didn't get to the step where local government would pick-up and continue the work sustainably. Besides, the new funding will come for gender, environment and children. It's now a purely social agenda. In my opinion, it is also who is in charge in the Aga Khan which changed the priorities. When Stefano Bianca retired, those in charge today do understand how the physical is linked to the social as well as he. Also, the current direction of funding, to a great extent reflects the global agenda of donors. It's all about the environment; this is where the money lies, so they're going that way. Social housing is not en vogue internationally in architecture. The towers of Dubai are a priority, but not social housing. I know that governorates don't take initiatives in housing. You have to walk them through the initial phases. I know this was the case in Aleppo.

The Cairo governorate wasn't so involved in the project?

No, not really. To rehab a building instead of demolishing it is a legal issue. Sometimes the governorate asked us why we would rehabilitate some of these buildings as they have a demolition decree⁵. So the Aga Khan had to work and do the legal procedure, but the district would allow them as a partner to do both at the same time; rehabilitate it in parallel of putting the legal papers in order. And the Aga Khan was offering all kinds of benefits. The governorate was as helpful as it was told to be. If the district has a problem then the Aga Khan manager has to contact or visit the governorate. The governorate tells the district to allow the process to go on and not obstruct. Local government level has to allow it such a project to happen and the orders to do that usually come from above.

The government has the money. Compare this project to the north of al-Gamaliya project handled by the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development, the alleys that Naguib Mahfouz wrote about, and the 86 buildings that were demolished. How much did the government spend there? 15 million Egyptian pounds in compensation to residents who were forcefully evicted, but discreetly. How much would it have cost to rehabilitate the same 86 buildings with our experience? The first building in Darb al-Ahmar took a long time and it cost a lot of money. But now you have an average of 80 or 100,000 pounds for each building. You also have matching funds from the people so you don't spend the whole 100,000. We have reached matching funds, that is the contribution from building occupants, of 50 percent in 2009 (it had started with 8, then 11, 14, and 25 percent. It then reached 37 percent and now it is 50 percent). Make the maths and see how many buildings would have been rehabilitated with the 15 million. You need a lot of work. But you can fund it. There is the money for it obviously. Get professionals like Kareem Ibrahim⁶ and the team doing consultancy.

5. A plan and decree were approved to demolish the houses in the area located along the historic wall.

6. Technical Director of Aga Khan until end of 2010.

ABOUT SUSTAINABILITY?

What's your vision of urban sustainability through the project?

I understand sustainability simply as something that can go on working without depleting one's resources. Sustainable housing can go on functioning alone, naturally. In every way it's fulfilling what it's supposed to do, so in that way it's working. I see in the way people are living in such neighbourhoods, it's kind of traditional, it's old. For workshops, it's merchant economy, and not global economy. This is dying, because it doesn't have the support to go on. The same as living in these houses. As it is, they are crumbling. People are deserting the old districts, the city. What I say is that in this project you are making a traditional solution evolve, we don't have to say we need to live in a green way, or in this way or that way, this is not the case. We have a way of doing things which has positive aspects. It could be the lifestyle of sleeping on rooftops in summer nights. I'm not living this way. But why should it end when you hit modernization? You don't have a support system to sustain such a way of life. The hammam was functioning activity pattern and building type. What is a modern hammam like? Why can't it be an evolution of the traditional hammam? Some things couldn't evolve if you skipped phases of architecture and activity evolution, if you rode another train. Why not try and put the train back on track, and make it continue further while changing smoothly and deliberately driven by the focused will of achieving the agreed upon goals and objectives?

When we jumped track in the 20th century we gained some and lost a lot. We come from a very rich heritage, all these old cultures; India, Persia, Egypt. Why not make use of them, build upon them? We are letting our heritage die because there is no support system; no recognition of its value. Why? We should let people value it, critically assess it and build on it. This is how I see things. There is no right or wrong, only sustainable means doing what needs to be done in a modest way with minimum damage and maximum utilization of potentials. Why does housing need to be replaced in new cities? It's a burden and we're not doing it right. Social networks and the traditional way of life are systems slowly dying, slowly shutting down. You don't want to end up living in the same house as your parents, but there are definitely advantages in living close by when you have children. Then you need to have intergenerational housing. Why do we have to lose it and then rediscover it? There is organization among the market vendors and it is culture, and they abide by its rules. We

are a culture of no guarantee for the future. The only thing that has longevity here are the social and cultural norms based on the belief system, whether Christian or Muslim. Belief plays a big role. With all community work, it's important that you have a two-way channel of vision and not a one-way one.

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