

## Papers

---

# Sustainability in Al Darb Al Ahmar District: An Egyptian Experience

*Haysam NOUR*  
*PhD Student*  
*Polytechnic of Milan*  
*haysam.nour@mail.polimi.it*

### ABSTRACT

Urban centers with historical and cultural significance are being seen as cultural assets with high potential to produce power to and assist local development. However, there may be two kinds of approaches that deal with urban heritage: on the one hand, for a long period of time, there was a traditional approach that was commonly adopted. It tends to favor the physical heritage and consider it as the main priority and an end in itself.

On the other hand, there is another approach which is more integrated that deals with the complexity of urban rehabilitation and conservation, as a complex cultural, social, technical, economic and institutional task, that calls for equally wide ranging measures which need to be applied logically to the delicate grain of the physical and social fabric of historic cities.

Within this context, one of the cases of rehabilitation projects in Historic Cairo will be discussed, which is the case of Al Al-Darb Al-Ahmar district. Since the year 2000, the Aga Khan Trust for Culture and its partner funding agencies, with support from the Governorate of Cairo and the Supreme Council of Antiquities and with the direct participation of the area's residents, have developed a series of projects on the eastern edge of Al-Darb Al-Ahmar that adopted the integrated approach which combines social and economic initiatives with physical improvements. For instance, the strategy include micro-credit programme for business development and housing rehabilitation, employment-generation, as well as direct investment in the restoration of monuments, the re-use of historic buildings, and the improvement of small-scale infrastructure and open spaces.

Accordingly, this paper is divided into three main parts: the first part discusses the philosophy adopted in the project and how it tackles different problems simultaneously. Secondly, the evolution of this philosophy on the ground will be introduced. Finally, since researchers are never satisfied, reflections and concerns about some issues on both strategic and operational level will be discussed. My paper is based on the main literature published about this project, the annual reports as well as my personnel experience within the project since I had the opportunity to join it as an intern from September to November 2009.

## Papers

---

### CONTENTS

- Theory vs. implementation
- History of the project
- Philosophy
- Evolution
- Reflections
- Conclusion

### THEORY VS. IMPLEMENTATION

Within this paper, I am not going to write a lot about sustainability in its broad meaning; however it might be important to approach the case after defining some concepts. Globally, till the 1970's, the urban rehabilitation concept was mainly concerned with the protection of monuments. Accordingly, the aim was to preserve the buildings neglecting any further deterioration in social and economic aspects. After that, from the 1980's and till nowadays, the dramatic changes on the global arena has led to many changes in the way international organizations, public and private sectors consider heritage. New interests have aroused in the possible benefits of investing in historic districts on social and economic levels.

Rojas & Castro argue that the effective and useful intervention in urban heritage conservation must not only rehabilitate the physical fabric of the historic centers, but also revitalize the social and economic processes that can make efficient use of the stock of buildings and infrastructure and maintain them properly. Lessons drawn from past practices have indicated that achieving these goals requires significant changes in the social valuation of the urban heritage. Further, they require a "*mise en valeur*" of institutional mechanisms capable of promoting partnerships among different actors. (1) Briefly, to realize this integrated approach, some concepts should be set: first, a deep understanding of the urban dynamics affecting the fabric may be considered as a crucial step to achieve a real protection of historic centers. Secondly, historic districts must be integrated into the economic and social life of the surrounding context. Finally, building capacity of communities to enable them of valuing and protecting their cultural heritage requires balancing diversity and inclusion so that a cohesive mix of socio-economic groups can be reestablished, and the cycle of poverty and environmental degradation can be reversed. (2)

## Papers

Unfortunately, Egypt is still in the first phase, since the Egyptian authorities still consider historic districts as a field of hard interventions in the first priority. Most of the interventions are within the traditional approach of restoring the monuments, renewing infrastructure, painting facades of the houses, but the idea of comprehensive and integrated plans is quite absent. That's why the case of Al-Darb Al-Ahmar is quite interesting, since it's one of the very rare examples of urban rehabilitation in Cairo, and Egypt in general, that has adopted this comprehensive vision.

### HISTORY OF THE PROJECT

The amazing fact about that project of rehabilitation of Al-Darb Al-Ahmar district is that it was not in the intention of neither the Egyptian authorities nor the Aga Khan Trust for Culture to develop a rehabilitation project in that area. (Fig.1) The story started even before the foundation of the *Historic Cities Support Programme* which is responsible of urban rehabilitation in the Aga Khan Trust for Culture. The story came up in 1984 with a donation from the Aga Khan to Cairo citizens to construct a park in the city. Due to many reasons, the project was delayed for almost a decade. Then, the selection of the site of the park had inspired the *HCSP* in 1996 to develop an urban rehabilitation project in the adjacent part of the park in Al-Darb Al-Ahmar district. (3)

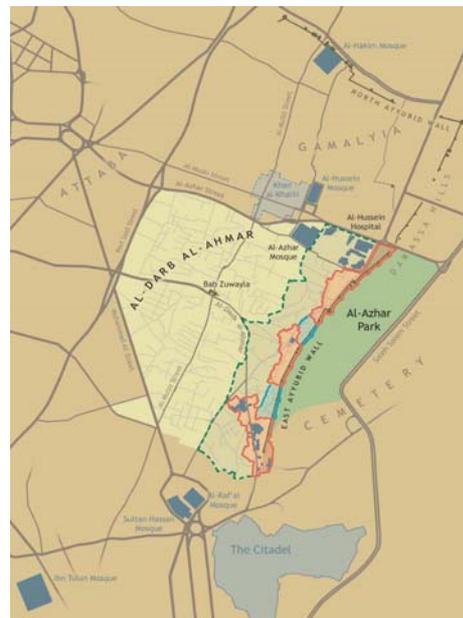


Figure 1 Al-Darb Al-Ahmar District within historic Cairo and intervention areas (4)

### PHILOSOPHY

The strategy of the project was based on two parallel dimensions: on the one hand, a dimension deals with the built environment merging all conservation activities with planning and rehabilitation ones. On the other hand, a dimension deals with non physical aspects, especially, social and economic issues.

#### Physical Dimension

This dimension tries to tackle the main physical problems within this district through four main actions that vary from planning to detailed implementation.

##### Gearing physical planning to the requirements of the district

Well, this was a two dimensional approach, on the one hand it worked with authorities on national and local level to ensure the difference between the district with its medieval urban tissue and the rest of

## Papers

---

the modern city. Consequently, this kind of approach needs very detailed surveys covering both physical and socio-economic aspects. On the other hand, it tried to invite the local communities to join the decision making process, and accordingly build the trust with residents, which is not common especially in those areas that had suffered from a very long history of top-down policies. Eventually, declaring the area a conservation area subject to special treatment and the establishment of an ad hoc task force for the continuation of the planning and management were crucial issues to demonstrate the public commitment to the rehabilitation of the district. (5)

### **Housing rehabilitation**

Housing stock in Al-Darb Al-Ahmar was in a very bad condition at the beginning of the project. For instance, about 30% of the historic fabric was subject to demolition orders from the municipality. Furthermore, 16% of the area properties were vacant ruins and unimproved plots. Accordingly, a dual strategy was being pursued, to facilitate the gradual rehabilitation of existing residential units on one hand, and to promote the redevelopment of ruined buildings, vacant plots and blighted areas into new housing on the other. Pilot studies took place in the area to explore the communities' intentions. Those studies had shown that local residents do not only intend to stay in the area but they have also a willingness to pay for the rehabilitation. However, the rehabilitation of existing houses was the Aga Khan Trust for Culture's primary focus, but rehabilitation was complemented and reinforced by new developments in order to meet the need for more housing, which was in short supply throughout the district. Additionally, technical solutions and innovative institutional and financing schemes were created to facilitate the implementation phase. (5)

### **Improving public open spaces**

Generally, Public spaces are one of the first urban components to experience a high level of degradation in historic districts. In Al-Darb Al-Ahmar, the case was the same even with some harmful uses in some cases. Accordingly, wide range of discussions with the local communities took place to set a strategy of upgrading in order to improve the quality and appearance of public spaces in the district. Possible improvements ranged from basic space planning, pavements, lightings to a whole redesign of public squares and street markets. (5)

### **Reuse of monuments and historic buildings**

This part is the most common in all rehabilitation projects; however the reuse is always accompanied by bureaucratic problems that lead to abandon the buildings after the phase of restoration. In Al-Darb Al-Ahmar, the area is too rich to face the same fate. Just to give an idea, the area includes 65 registered

## Papers

monuments by the Egyptian authorities as well as hundreds of unregistered buildings with special architectural and aesthetic characters. The project started mainly with three complexes which have now different functions. For instance, *Khayerbek Complex* which is a late Mamluk and early Ottoman complex and which includes a Palace, Mosque, Sabil and Kuttab and the surrounding open space, hosts offices and meeting rooms for planning and vocational training units. Another example is the *Darb Shoghlan School*, which is an early 20<sup>th</sup> century building, is currently used as the headquarter of the Al-Darb Al-Ahmar Community Development Company. (Fig.2) The last example is *Umm Al-Sultan Shaaban Complex* which is a Mamluk building that includes a School, mausoleum and Sabil. It hosts now offices and meeting rooms for the employment unit of Al-Darb Al-Ahmar Community Development Company. After the realization of these projects, new wave of restoration is taking place in other monuments and buildings such as the *Aq-Sunqur* mosque which is known as the Blue mosque. (5)



Figure 2 Darb Shoghlan School before and after rehabilitation (4)

### Non-Physical Dimension

This non-physical dimension may be considered as the main difference between this project in Al-Darb Al-Ahmar and most of the other rehabilitation projects in Cairo. It includes two main actions.

#### Encouraging Socio-economic development

This part may represent the real difference between this project and any other projects in Cairo. This part took place on three main dimensions. First, it was very important to generate employment since it's one of the main problems in the districts. ; it is noted that the total number of unemployed in AL-DARB AL-AHMAR is 2,000 people according to the governmental data of 2005, while in the base line study which was held by the project in 2003 it was found that the unemployment rate was 10% of the total population. (6) Generating employment took place through two simultaneous mechanisms. On the one hand, a lack of coordination was taking place between both sides of labor market; accordingly, a *counseling unit* was set to guide job seekers for available opportunities. On the other hand, *increasing the employability* of the residents and especially young people was another mechanism for generating employment. This was achieved through affording training opportunities in the different workshops which had led to long-term employment in many of the cases. Additionally, other training opportunities were available during the restoration of the Ayyubid wall. Secondly, *micro-credit* was another way to support the socio-economic development of local communities, especially women, with limited loans to

## Papers

---

start or improve income-generating activities. (5) Finally, *basic social services* include education, health and solid waste disposal.

### **Investing in community organizations**

From the very beginning of the project, the importance of the community awareness, and self-governance was clearly recognized. To this effect, the creation of two organizations was promoted, a business association and a family health development center. In addition to their role in supporting the community through services, they involved other NGO's already set in the area considering them as a key stone in diffusing awareness. Another feature is the foundation of Al-Darb Al-Ahmar Community Development Company which should work as a self-sustained private sector initiative working mainly, mobilize resources within the locally identified needs. This company, that was realized few years after the start of the project, is responsible for setting its own strategies, fund raising and inviting new public and private stakeholders. (5) This approach also is a new one in the effort of creating a sustainable environment for the rehabilitation project. However, analyses and some concerns about the role of this company will be discussed later.

## **EVOLUTION**

Within this part, the evolution of the philosophy will be discussed in both physical and non-physical dimensions. Shedding light on this evolution will afford a clear picture about the success and sustainability in this project. However, to cover all the aspects one may need tens of pages accordingly an overall will be presented then a sample of the activities will be discussed in more details.

### **Physical Dimension**

On the one hand, planning process tries to cover all the district not only pilot areas. Accordingly, plot by plot surveys for all the divisions of the districts to document the existing area conditions were completed, surveys included land use, fresh water, sewage, and electrical distribution systems, building heights and conditions, circulation and parking. An integrated conservation-based master plan for the entire district was developed and approved by Cairo governorate. All architecturally significant buildings were documented and their descriptive list was submitted to the committee of National Organization for Urban Harmony. On the other hand, designs for infrastructure of open spaces such as potable water network, sewage, electricity and pavements were completed for a number of squares and streets. However, some of them are waiting the approval of the local authorities. (7)

## Papers

---

### Housing Rehabilitation

Through technical and financial packages in 2004, , the residents were provided with: 11 m<sup>2</sup> increase in commercial spaces representing 10% of the total rehabilitated commercial spaces, 350 m<sup>2</sup> increase in residential spaces representing 17% of the total rehabilitated residential spaces, 3 new commercial activities in rehabilitated houses or in the intervention area, 3 customized financial packages to increase residents' financial conditions and 9 new families moved to the area in newly reclaimed or added residential spaces. On the other hand, housing rehabilitation programme had a positive externality on the economic level. Obvious economic growth took place in the area affording job opportunities through everyday activities of more than 300 workers and craftsmen practicing their daily life in the area either by renting houses, dealing with existing services, or even sitting on coffee shops. However this can not be considered as an act of sustainability. Gradual integration of local craftsmen and small scale contractors, in addition to job opportunities created through development of existing activities and more population moving into the area should have led to more sustainable effects on the area. (8)

In 2006, an increase of 39m<sup>2</sup> in commercial spaces and of 381 m<sup>2</sup> in residential spaces took place. Additionally, 22 new livable spaces with access to natural ventilation and / or lighting were afforded. This resulted in 12 families moving to newly reclaimed or added residential spaces. As an externality, a 200% average increase in rent values in 4 newly rehabilitated buildings took place.



Figure 3 Sample of Housing rehabilitation (6)

In total, 18 full rehabilitation interventions were completed. (Fig.3) (6)

In 2008, 13 buildings were fully rehabilitated. Basic services were very important within this action, accordingly 23 kitchens were added to flats originally lacking such space creating a possible extension for enriching family life. Ventilation was another crucial concern for the health conditions of the residents, accordingly, more than sixty windows, doors and light wells were created to address this dimension. (7)

### Non-Physical Dimension

Varieties of activities took place under the umbrella of this dimension. One of the main features is the deep involvement of local NGO's in some activities such as illiteracy eradication, solid waste and women

## Papers

---

programmes. This feature is one of the main preparatory phases for the civic society to sustain the project after the end of the operational phase. Another feature which is closer to local community is the application of a health insurance scheme for more than 1700 worker. (7) This feature strengthens the trust between the project and local residents since a big number work in jobs where accidents take place frequently such as carpentry. However in turn two actions within encouraging socio-economic development will be discussed in more details.

### Employment

Employment sector is one of the most important component of the project. As mentioned before it works on two main levels: counseling and training. In 2004, due to the counseling activity, 143 applicants were employed in various locations, as the women's involvement reached 41%. On the training level, 112 applicants were trained, 50 men and 62 women, in technical and vocational fields such as accounting, networks, software and carpentry, within this number, 37 applicants were employed after their training of which 43% are women. Additionally, 150 training centers and workshops were cooperating with the programme which increases the network of the project and the capability to cooperate in the training and employment fields. (8)

In 2006, 595 people were recommended for employment opportunities of which 200 are females. This number represented 6% of the total number of unemployed inhabitants in the entire district. 226 people were employed on long-term basis in and outside the district of which 84 are females. 73 more people found employment on their own following the training and counseling sessions they received through the project. (6)

In 2008, 153 beneficiaries from the local residents were trained on various skills with 59% of them female. Training included knowledge of computer skills, accounting, public relations and secretarial skills. 58 of the beneficiaries had successfully obtained job opportunities where 60% females occupied them. Additionally, the programme issued 662 reference letters, 175 candidates of which were successfully placed in various jobs, including customer relations, security, accounting, secretarial work, receptionists, treasurers, maintenance, quality control, teaching, lawyers, cashiers, marketing and sales staff. Monthly incomes of those hired impressively reported an increase within the range of 500 to 1000. (7)

### Microcredit

For the microcredit, the project is growing and improving each year. For instance, in 2003, only 376 loans have been disbursed for income generating activities. In 2006 it reached its peak with almost 2088 loans, however, in 2008, this number decreased to reach 1600 loans. Nevertheless, this decrease may

## Papers

---

be referred to the global economic recession that started in 2008. (6) (7) (9) On the gender level, in 2004, 25% of loans were dedicated for females, in 2006, this percentage grew to reach 40% and reached its peak in 2008 with 49,9 %. (4) (6) (7) In December 2008 the total number of loans distributed was 9,239 loans with the total value of LE 27,680,500 with an average size of loan LE 2996. (7)

## REFLECTIONS

In this last part, I'll discuss two issues: on the one hand, factors of sustainability that are already taking place in the project, on the other hand, I'll shed light on some weak points that might help to improve the performance in the near future.

### Factors of Sustainability

There is a lot to say here however, I would like to focus on four factors.

#### Participation

This factor is the real guarantee for sustainability. In Egypt, this concept is not common in urban development, which had impeded the take off of the project. Nevertheless, now after 10 years things started to be different. Residents now believe in the transparency of the procedure, because they have seen concrete outcomes. I am not arguing that people have changed totally, but building trust is a long term strategy and currently it is going on. However, due to my participation in different activities, I can argue that, generally, this participation is based on personal trust between local resident on the one hand and officers and coordinators of the different programmes on the other hand. This *personalization* of the relation is another common feature of the Egyptian society, accordingly, there may be a very important role for project's coordinators to sustain the project which is to *mature* this relationship and relate people to the common aims not to persons.

#### Flexibility

It's one of the crucial factors for sustainability in long term projects, since the global conditions in 2000 were quite different than the current ones. This flexibility is traced within this project in many fields: first, a *structural flexibility* was clear after the establishment of Al-Darb Al-Ahmar Community Development Company to manage the project as a separate entity from the Aga Khan Trust for Culture. Additionally, structural flexibility allows separation of departments and the creation of new ones responding to the needs. On the one hand, microcredit was separated from the Al-Darb Al-Ahmar Community Development Company to be a separate entity. On the other hand, by the end of 2009, a new department was initiated for local craft business development as a part of the economic development

## Papers

---

programme. Secondly, *operational flexibility* enables the different programmes to get benefit from different resources. However, this kind of flexibility may be considered as a double sided weapon because on the one hand it can bring new funds for specific projects; on the other hand it may lead to a deviation in the overall goals.

### Partnerships

From its first days, the project is working to emphasize on the culture of partnerships, this is clear in the wide range of partners that are currently involved in different programmes. First, the *public sector* is widely involved through Cairo Governorate, many departments from the ministries of culture, endowment and education. Secondly, the *private sector* is involved in many activities through cooperate social responsibility and consultancy. Fortunately, private investments in commercial or touristic activities are still weak which gives time to strengthen local economy. Finally, *the civic society* may be considered as the backbone of these partnerships since it's one of the goals of the project to reinforce it. Different NGOs from inside and outside the district are involved. Furthermore, universities started to join the arena not only through the traditional way of doing architectural and social researches but also through developing new designs with local workshops. This idea was developed between the Al-Darb Al-Ahmar Community Development Company and the German University in Cairo by the end of 2009.

### Fund Raising

Well, this is the endless task and the turning point of any development project. In Al-Darb Al-Ahmar fund raising takes an advanced priority with a strategy that takes into consideration the diversity of resources as well as the amount of the funds. Accordingly this last factor is integrated with the previous two since it works on the flexibility of the programme to attract funds from different organizations from different disciplines as well as creating new partnerships. The donors vary from public funds especially for infrastructure and restoration to local and international private funds and NGOs for social and economic developments.

### Threats for Sustainability

Within this part I'll shed light on some points of weakness that may affect the sustainability of the project in the near future.

## Papers

---

### Strategic Level

On the strategic level, the position of the project within the context of historic Cairo specifically and the whole city of Cairo is not so clear. For instance, the Egyptian ministry of housing is developing a strategic plan for 2050 for the whole region which takes into account the built heritage of the city. However, it seems that this plan is coming again with the traditional approach of hard interventions. Accordingly, the integration between this project and all that is happening in the city should be paid more attention for the sustainability issues.

On another front, the relation between the Aga Khan Trust for Culture and the Al-Darb Al-Ahmar Community Development Company should be defined more precisely since there is quite a big difference between *supporting* and *guiding*. Certainly, the Aga Khan Trust for Culture is a very important support for Al-Darb Al-Ahmar Community Development Company especially because in Egypt the experience of these kinds of cooperates is quite new. However, sustainability can be achieved and assessed only when the managing company is fully responsible for its plans and decisions.

### Operational Level

First, more detailed and professional analyses should be done on spatial, environmental, social and economic levels. Those analyses, such as impact analysis, are crucial for the next period especially before the private sector starts to show interests in investing in the area. Detailed documents are generally missing in Egypt for bureaucratic and cultural reasons; accordingly, it's a good moment to do that since the project has built trust with both public authorities and local residents.

Additionally, there might be a problem of estimation in general which is easily traced in the annual reports. In some programmes results are less than 70% of what was expected while in others results are more than 200%. Fast-Paced Change is the common feature of the era; accordingly, it's comprehensible that in *some* cases results may have some positive or negative deviations. However, the duplication of this incident several times in different departments with big gaps rings a bell for the efficiency of the planning process itself.

Finally, a common problem in big projects is the focus on the daily work forgetting the overall goal. In development projects this may be a fatale mistake since you loose the sense of the integrated dimension and it becomes different projects in the same area rather than one project that has different fields of intervention. To avoid this kind of problems, there is another important role for managers and coordinators which is to take officers and young employees from the narrow picture and show them the overall one till they get used for that.

## Papers

---

### CONCLUSION

Through this paper, I tried to shed light on one of the very unique experiences of urban rehabilitation in Egypt which is the rehabilitation of Al-Darb Al-Ahmar district in historic. This project is unique in Egypt because it adopts an integrated approach that tackles spatial as well as socio-economic problems. It has been seen that the project has many fields of sustainable success through the different fields of intervention; even though the space didn't allow me to consider all the stories. Accordingly, it may be argued that there are main factors that have led to those results summarized in four points: participation, flexibility, partnerships and fund raising. However, on both strategic and operational level there may be other issues that need more attention and assessments.

### ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Well, I wouldn't be able to develop this paper without the support of many people. First, from the Al-Darb Al-Ahmar Community Development Company I would like to thank Mr. Ali Abdel-Aal, Mrs. Gehan Aly, Ms. Passent Nossair, Ms. Yomna Khalil and Mr. Hamza Iraqi. From the Aga Khan Trust for Culture-Egypt, I would like to thank Mrs. Rawya el-Dabi. However, I would like to express my deep appreciation and gratefulness to Eng. Ahmed Saeed who was my real support during my internship in the project and who was doing a lot of effort to create opportunities for me to learn more about it.

### REFERENCES

- (1) Rojas, E., and Castro, C.: "Lending for Urban Heritage Conservation: Issues and Opportunity", No. SOC— 105, (1999) Inter-American Development Bank
- (2) Serageldin, M.: "Preserving the Historic Urban Fabric in a Context of Fast-Paced Change", in "Values and Heritage Conservation", J. Paul Getty Trust, 2000
- (3) Bianca, S.: "Introduction: A Comprehensive Vision of Urban Rehabilitation", in "The Azhar Park project in Cairo and the conservation and revitalization of Darb Al-Ahmar", Imprimeries réunies, Lausanne, Switzerland, 2001
- (4) Aga Khan Trust for Culture: "an Integrated conservation and development strategy" in "Cairo: Urban regeneration in the Darb Al-Ahmar district" Edizioni s.r.l., Rome, Italy, 2005
- (5) Siravo, F.: "Urban Rehabilitation and Community Development in al-Darb al-Ahmar" in "Cairo: Revitalising a Historic Metropolis", Umberto Allemandi, Turin & C. for Aga Khan Trust for Culture, 2004
- (6) Al-Darb Al-Ahmar Revitalization Project, Annual report, 2006
- (7) Al-Darb Al-Ahmar Revitalization Project, Annual report, 2008
- (8) Al-Darb Al-Ahmar Revitalization Project, Annual report, 2004
- (9) Al-Darb Al-Ahmar Revitalization Project, Annual report, 2003