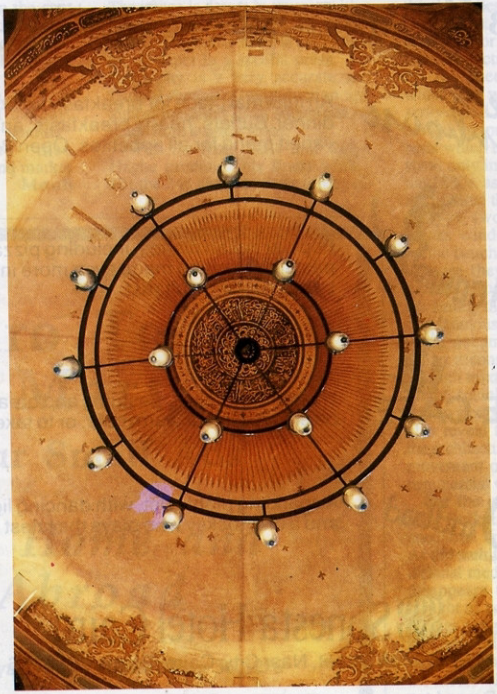
MYSTICAL PROPORTIONS

— And how they were recreated —



THE DOME OF THE SAMA'KHANE REFLECTS FANFONI'S AIMS: TO SHOW THE APPEARANCE OF THE ORIGINAL BUT NEVERTHELESS TO SHOW WHICH AREAS HAVE BEEN RESTORED.

At the foot of the Citadel runs Helmia Street, crowded, potholed, and noisy like many other streets in the medieval quarter of Cairo. Chickens, goats, children, Jawa motorcycles and Mitsubishi pickups all fight for the right of way in a street that lean-tos, shacks and street stalls have all made progressively narrower. Yet, Helmia street has known better days. Lined with some of Cairo's finest mosques and most sumptuous palaces, it used to be one of the main thoroughfares of the Islamic city.

Now, just below the newly restored Sultan Hasan complex on Helmia Street, behind an unassuming Mamluk facade propped up by scaffolding, a unique experiment in restoration takes place. Led by Professor Giussepe Fanfoni of Rome University, a team of Egyptian and Italian craftsmen is busy excavating, rebuilding and conserving the site--a dervish monastery that dates back to the 17th century.

This, however, is no ordinary restoration scheme. Fanfoni's task is not merely to restore the monastery, but also to establish and operate a school for training local students and craftsmen who will later go on to work on the myriad of other buildings that need to be saved from the effects of aging, pollution and human incursion.

Fanfoni is adamant that the effects of the program on the level of local expertise is at least as important as the restoration work itself. This is why as much of the work as possible is carried out by local craftsmen. "If I come here with ten foreigners to restore a monument and only involve local workers for carrying the buckets, in two or three years the monument will start to crumble again. Not because it was done badly but because no technical expertise has been passed on. Of course it's easier, and quicker to restore yourself rather than to teach others to do it, but that isn't cooperation," said the genial pipe-smoking Fanfoni. Involving others can require great patience. Special materials have to be used: soluble paints, for example, so that if students make a mistake, the work can be erased and repeated. "In the end it's not the job done but the workers that count." says Fanfoni. "This is what development is all about."

Fanfoni also envisages other long-term benefits. As the local craftsmen work to restore the monuments, they gain an understanding of the environmental factors which are detrimental, not only to buildings, but to public health as well. One example is the water table which is only 50 centimeters below ground in the medieval quarter due to the absence of a drainage system--something which is more than just a threat to the historical sites. Fanfoni maintains that the principles involved in restoration rub off on people's thinking and can eventually improve their lives. "You can change people's attitudes by introducing the concept of a more hygienic way of life," he said. "That's why we have the center here, and not in Zamalek or in the desert."

Ten years ago, the Dervish Monastery in Helmia Street was in imminent danger of collapse. The walls of the theater that was used for the famous whirling dance were subsiding, and the dome looked likely to crash onto the rotting floor below. Now , thanks to an Italo-Egyptian program, the theater is restored and open to the public. ***James Bedding*** *took a look at the restoration techniques involved and was impressed by the degree of cooperation between the two countries*

The result of collaboration between the Egyptian Antiquities Organization (EAO) and the Italian Dipartimento per la Cooperazione allo Svilluppo, the restoration center, officially called the Italian-Egyptian Center for Professional Training, is now in its eleventh year. It boasts seven Italian experts and about fifty craftsmen, in addition to a varying number of university students of archaeology and restoration who do stints there in order to gain practical experience. It all began in 1975-76 when Cairo University decided to start a course on restoration on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of its archaeology department. Professor Fanfoni was invited to teach the course. Around the same time, the then director of the Italian Cultural Center in Cairo, Dr Carla Burri, came across the monastery which used to house dervishes from the Mawlawyah sect. The monastery includes a sama'khane, the hall in which dervishes performed their mystical whirling dance ceremony. There are thought to be only three existing sama'khane worldwide and this is the only one of its kind. When it came to Dr Burri's notice, it was in a very sorry state, parts of it in imminent danger of collapse. Restoration would involve a wide variety of different techniques as well as some innovative solutions to problems. The EAO and the Italian Cultural Center settled on a happy solution: to create a work-school where university students could get practical experience and local craftsmen gain an understanding of the scientific background to restoration techniques and at the same time save the monastery.

Work began in 1977. Because of the high water table in the area, one wall of the sama'khane was subsiding, and the whole building was in danger of collapse. The twelve wooden pillars inside the sama'khane had twisted around and outwards. The dome was beginning to flatten like a rotting tomato and bulge out at the base. Long cracks

were appearing on the 19th century painted interior. With little time to spare, Fanfoni's team shored up the walls and belted the dome with steel hoops. Tightening the hoops, the dome was forced into its original shape, as if placed in a corset. To prevent any further slippage, they passed chicken wire under and over the hoops to secure the wooden lathes to which the plaster finishing is secured.

With the dome shell back in shape, the team turned to restoring the interior . This was no easy task, since during its life the dome had been repainted several times and decorated in different ways.In fact this is a problem which has cropped up very often in restoring the dervish complex. Its chequered organic history (see box) makes attempts to freeze restoration to any one point in his

tory totally arbitrary. One solution is to restore different parts of the monument to different periods, and thus convey the idea of the buildings' development. So a large part of the dome carries a motif of birds in flight while other sections show different styles of decoration.

Other more innovative solutions had to be found. Fanfoni's team discovered that, at an early stage, there used to be eight small windows symmetrically arranged around the dome. The number eight is highly symbolic for the Mawlawyah sect because it reflects a divine proportion. The windows would have been an integral part of the plan. But for some reason, at a later period, they were walled in and painted over with a landscape motif. Here again there was room for ingenuity on the restorers' part: Fanfoni's team fitted window frames into the original openings along with a lever and cable system to connect them. Now the pull of a lever can give an idea of the effect the symbolic dome created at two stages of its life.

When students first come to the project, they practise painting-restoration techniques in a studio on site before starting work on the monument. The purpose behind all techniques is the same; to convey an idea of the appearance and style of the original but nevertheless show which areas have been restored. Thus, from the ground the painting inside the dome of the sama'khane appears whole, whereas close up, the visitor can see where the new work has been done. As a rule, the tone of the colors should be lighter in restored work. Special painting styles are also used to differentiate the new work from the old; painting is done in dots akin to the pointillist style or in strokes in contrast to the smooth finish of the original.

Work at the center has come a long way since the early years when it used to be carried on for only three months a year because of lack of funds. Since 1984, the center has run a comprehensive program of scholarships for Egyptian students to travel abroad in addition to its on-site workshops for local craftsmen. On March 6th 1982, the center produced its first doctorate: Haggagi Ibrahim, who studied restoration techniques in Italy, graduated with a thesis on the use of colors and inks in medieval and Ottoman Egypt, based on his experience at the center. Many others have benefited: from the students at Helwan and Cairo universities, to experts and inspectors from the EAO.

With the completion of the restoration of the sama'khane at the end of April, another phase of the center's plans can now begin: the expansion of the arts and crafts workshops, and the setting up of laboratories for much of the analysis which up till now has had to be done in Italy, with great loss of time. Work continues, still under the auspices of the Italian Cultural Center, now under its director, Guido Galtieri. The Sama'khane was inaugurated in July.

THE DERVISHES' ROOMS NOW HOUSE THE PROJECT'S WORKSHOPS.

The Mawlawyah dervish tradition dates back to the 13th century. Founded by Sufi poet, Jalal El Din Ar-Rumi who was known as Mawlana , "our master", in Konya in present day Turkey, the sect represents a mystical wing of Islam. Devotees worship through the famous whirling dance in which, to the accompaniment of music and verses chanted from the Koran, dancers in flowing robes spin, one arm outstretched to heaven and the other to earth. The dance has been described as the mystical, symbolical interpretation of the movement of the cosmos.

The Mawlawyah order of monks came to Egypt with the Ottoman conquest in 1517. The country developed a thriving dervish community based in Helmia . The monastery complex would have been used by the dervishes from the 17th century. The community was large enough; in addition to the 38 dervishes involved in the whirling ceremony, there was the imam, who led the five daily prayers, the muezzin and nine others who provided services, from the mat layer and candle cleaner to the cook's assistant and the saqi who took care of the ox which drew the water from the well. This sizeable community was all accommodat-

ed on the site. However,the buildings that exist now in Helmia date from later centuries. The sama'khane itself was built in 1809.

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The structure of the sama'khane reflects mystical proportions that are highly symbolic to the dervishes. The building is cubic, crowned by a hemispherical dome supported by 12 pillars and lit by eight windows. Eight and 12 are both regarded as mystical figures by the dervishes.

Surrounding the circular floor of the sama'khane there used to be a balustrade, behind which sat the spectators. Overlooking the floor, a higher-level balcony ran around the interior of the sama'khane. On one side of it sat the orchestra (a drummer, three flautists and a cymbalist) and on the other side women sat, shielded by mashrabia screens. Nearby was the *na-ti-suf* who recited verses from the Koran and the *masnawihan* who sang Rumi's poetry. On the floor, the dervishes whirled rhythmically around the big candalabra suspended from the cupola.

Officially, the monastery closed down only in 1916; it seems, however, that the sama'khane was still in use as late as 1942. The dervish order in Egypt must have suffered as a result of Ataturk's forced closure of all dervish monasteries in Turkey in 1925. But still, a description of one of the whirling ceremonies appeared in Al Ahram newspaper as late as 1928, and recordings were made of dervish music in 1932 at an Arabic music conference held in Cairo.

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The sama'khane at the Helmia complex is only the latest building in an organic progression. As they dug downwards and outwards, the archaeologists came across much older structures. Instead of resting on its own foundations the sama'khane is built directly on top of a much older structure, the Madrasa of Sunqur Sa'idi. (A madrasa was a mosque which also served as a theological college.) When the team began to work on the collapsing southern wall of the sama'khane above, they were able to excavate, for the first time, the madrasa below. It was very different to what they expected and they hope further investigations will shed new light on that particular period of Egyptian architecture.

The madrasa was built by Sunqur Sa'idi in the 13th century, probably during the reign of Sultan Qala'un, a period of tremendous building activity and the golden age of the Mamluks. Sa'idi was mayor to various Mamluk sultans, and unlike other more worldly officials, worked hard to promote agriculture and the building of mosques and schools.

The period during which Sunqur was in office was one of bitter rivalry between amirs who were vying for succession to the sultanate. When Sunqur fell out with one of them, Amir Qala'un , he was forced to emigrate to Tripoli, where he died in 1328. The tomb, adjacent to the madrasa that he had had built for himself, was left vacant until some years later when Sheikh Nasr El Din Sadaqa and his nephew Hasan, after whom it is named, were buried there.

The dervish complex includes other buildings too. The monastery was built behind the the sama'khane in an area that had earlier been used as a ribat or hospice for women. The dervish complex even included part of Qusun's palace (called Yazbak after a subsequent proprietor), a fabulous building that Qusun built in vast proportions to attempt to outdo his arch-rival, Prince Beshtak.

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After the twilight of the dervish community, the monastery fell into the hands of the Ministry of Awqaf, and from the early '40s part of the site was used as a hospice and clinic for the poor. These continued to function even in the early years of restoration: but when the monastery seemed in danger of collapse, the clinic was closed. Now these same rooms, partially restored, house the studios where students and craftsmen are trained in photographic and painting techniques, the workshops for carpenters and metal workers, and the new scientific laboratory that is still being set up.