RESTORATION

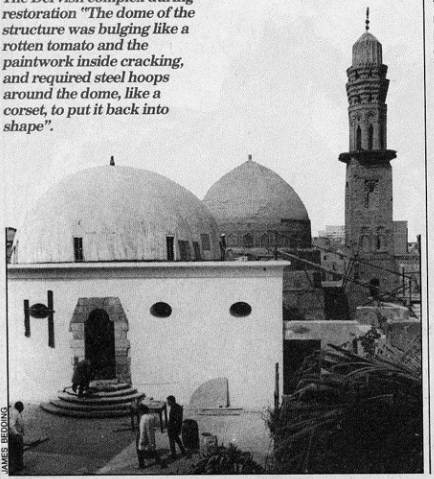
Cairo monuments: basis of new cooperation

The city that once boasted a thousand minarets is in danger of losing many of them. In an attempt to arrest large-scale deterioration an Italian-Egyptian centre for restoration has been established for the benefit of both foreign and local students. James Bedding *writes from Cairo.*

Ranged at the foot of Saladin's towering 12th century citadel are some of the finest monuments of Islamic Cairo. Once the centre of the medieval walled city, this area is now poor, run-down, over-crowded and crumbling. Of the alleged one thousand minarets Cairo once boasted, many are just abandoned ruins.

Recent years however, have witnessed a greater interest in restoring some of these gems. Immediately below the citadel lie the twin mosques of Hassan and Rifa'i, the former, recently restored, one of the finest medieval buildings in the city, the latter the burial place of King Fuad and the last Shah of Iran.

The Dervish complex during restoration "The dome of the structure was bulging like a rotten tomato and the paintwork inside cracking, and required steel hoops around the dome, like a corset, to put it back into shape".



JAMES BEDDING

Close by on Helmia Street, formerly the main thoroughfare of Cairo but now narrow and potholed, a ruined facade conceals a hive of activity. On a site that housed at various times a mausoleum, theological college, princely palace, dervish monastery and a hospital, 50 craftsmen as well as students of restoration and a team of Italian experts have set up a "workshop-school". There have been many foreign groups, that have done restoration work under the supervision of the Egyptian Antiquities Organisation (EAO). Their primary aim however, has been to restore rather than to teach. The Italian-Egyptian Centre for Restoration aims to create a team of local experts that will use the restored complex as a base from which to restore other monuments in the area. The suburb is now crowded and dilapidated, but the project, led by Professor Giuseppe Fanfoni of the Oriental School of Rome University, hopes that restoration of the monuments to their former condition, will also have some beneficial effect on the neighbourhood. "We see restoration as part of a wider development process," says Fanfoni.

It all began in 1975 when Cairo University began a much needed course in restoration and invited Professor Fanfoni to teach it. At around the same time Dr Carla Burri, the Director of the Italian Cultural Centre in Cairo, stumbled on the dervish monastery, one of only three of its kind in the world, but on the verge of collapse. Restoration would involve a variety of techniques from different disciplines as well as some innovative solutions to technical problems. It was the ideal place in which to set up a workshop-school. From the early days of the project, when lack of funds allowed only three months' work a year, the restoration, as well as the level of expertise among the craftsmen, has come a long way. With the completion of the dervish dance hall at the end of April, the project will enter Phase III: with the cooperation of the Italian Dipartimento per la Cooperazione allo Sviluppo, the restorers will set up arts workshops for training the students in various disciplines and create scientific labs for much of the analytical work that up to now has had to be carried out in Italy.

When work began in 1975 the most pressing task was to save the dervish sama'khane, which was on the brink of collapse. This building is the focus of the complex, and was the site where dervishes performed their famous dance, said by some to be the mystical-symbolical interpretation of the movement of the cosmos. With the Ottoman conquest of Egypt in 1517 came the Sufi order of monks. Representing the mystical wing of Islam, they were highly respected by their Turkish rulers and soon developed a large community in Cairo. Thirty eight were involved in the sama' ceremony alone, including orchestra, dancers and prayer reciters; with staff and servants to run the monastery, the community living on the site must have numbered some 50 members.

Restoration of the sama'khane gave plenty of opportunity for students and craftsmen to learn restoration techniques. The dome of the structure was bulging like a rotten tomato and the paintwork inside was badly cracked. Steel hoops were strapped around the dome, like a corset, to force it back into shape. Delicate painting restoration was needed inside the dome. Hossam Amin, one of the students involved, is about to

complete his master's degree, based on his painting work there. "It's the only place in Egypt where I can learn these techniques," he says.

When the hall is finished in April the team will turn to other parts of the complex: the remains of the theological college, under the present-day dance hall; the adjacent mausoleum, and the rambling Mamluk palace of Prince Yazbak, part of which was used as accommodation for the monastery. The dervishes continued to use the complex until as late as 1942; after which, part of the site was used as a hospice and a clinic for the poor, even during the early years of restoration. When the building 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, workshops for carpenters and metalworkers, and the lab that is currently being set up.

There is a real need for qualified experts in restoration in Egypt. The recent shake-up in the EAO following the Sphinx scare, when many blamed poor restoration techniques for damage to the statue, has highlighted the need for a well-trained local workforce.

This is exactly what the centre hopes to provide; and in 1982 they scored their first major success when Haggagi Ibrahim obtained his doctorate in restoration as a result of his practical experience at the centre. Phase III envisages a major expansion in the workshop-school's activity. Both graduate students and technical experts from the EAO are offered training courses, with the possibility of scholarships to Italy to study there.

Many other foreign groups have been involved. What makes the project unusual is the emphasis placed on teaching. "If I came here with ten foreigners to restore a monument and only involved local workers for carrying the buckets, none of the skills will have been passed on. Of course it's easier, and quicker, to restore yourself than to get others to do it, but that isn't the point of cooperation." Involving others can require great patience, and even special materials: 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.

"Ultimately," says Fanfoni, "we will have this centre, which we have restorerd all together, and a team of local restorers which will be able to work on other monuments in the area." There is certainly plenty of work to be done. Palaces, mosques and tombs all over Cairo are in urgent need of restoration. Much good work has already been done, by the EAO and foreign groups working with them

As important as the restoration, says Fanfoni, is the awareness that such work brings to the community. People live in very cramped conditions, alongside goats, sheep, donkeys and chickens; and there is no proper drainage system. One of the problems encountered during restoration was the high water table: within 50cm of ground level the team came across stagnant drainwater.

One of the side-effects of restoration, believes Fanfoni, is an understanding of better, more hygienic ways of living. "That is why the centre is here, and not in one of the rich areas of Cairo," says Fanfoni. If some of the concepts involved in creating a suitable environment for restoring a building rub off on the community, then the work will have been justified. "It's not so much the effect of restoring the monument that counts," he argues, "but how much you contribute to improving the material conditions of life." ■

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KESTER J. EDDY

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