

Celestial spheres

The assemblage of buildings commonly referred to as the complex of the Mawlawi (Mawlawi) Dervishes is situated at the foot of the Citadel, near Sultan Hassan Mosque, along the ancient axis of Al-Shari' Al-Azami (the Great Street) which linked Cairo to Ibrahimi and today runs beyond Bab Zuweila to Bab Al-Futuh. The complex's best known feature is the Yahuk Palace on the eastern side of the area, which was built and enlarged several times, under Qutub, Yahuk and Asghar, between the 14th and 15th centuries. The western side of the complex, facing Al-Suyufiya Street, includes the Mausoleum of Hassan Sadaga, the minaret, and the madrasa of Sa'ad, partially re-used by the Mawlawi Dervishes, who built their Sama khana (the Hall of Listening) above it.

The whole area was given to the confraternity in 1607 by Prince Sina, and they, in various phases, adapted the existing buildings to their needs. "writes the architect who restored the complex, Giuseppe Fanfani, head of the Italian-Egyptian Centre for Restoration and Archaeology, in *The Restoration and Conservation of Egyptian Monuments in Egypt* (The American University in Cairo Press, 1992).

While generally preserving the existing structure of the Yahuk Palace, the Mawlawi Dervishes added a new wing on Al-Suyufiya Street, which allowed direct access to the outdoor garden and the reception area, and comprised eight square cells for the monks attached to the convent of the order.

The Sama khana is a circular area, symbolically surrounded by a dome. Other functional spaces are arranged around it, such as "the 'theaters' area, the orchestra, the places for the recitation of the Qur'an and the Mawlawi verses, and finally the Mausoleum," writes Fanfani. The presence of a minaret was also sometimes used as a mosque, and that its layout may have been superimposed over that of the mosque. In general, the Sama khana had two functions: that of a mosque, for prayer and veneration of the saint buried in the mausoleum; and that of the "theater" in which the listening rite was performed. The floor plan, therefore, was arranged to reconcile two purposes.

BATTILING THE ODDS Unlike some monuments of Islamic Cairo which are being restored in recent time, using state-of-the-art methods and tools, the rehabilitation of the Mawlawi complex has taken years. A long-term project, it suffered from a chronic shortage of funds. The group of Italian experts (scholars, technicians, artists and students) who undertook the project under the guidance of Professor Giuseppe Fanfani is now working under the umbrella of the Italian-Egyptian Restoration Centre (CIPE), the group's official title since 1985.

Restoration of the architectural complex, which comprises several buildings dating from different eras and designed for different purposes, began in 1979, initiated by contributions from the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The project, the headquarter of Fanfani and Carlo Marzulli, the director of the Italian Cultural Institute in Cairo, was initiated through an agreement between the Italian Cultural Institute, Cairo University, the Egyptian Antiquities Organisation and Professor Fanfani, who contributed two months of summer holidays from his teaching job at the University of Rome, working on the restoration every year.

In 1984, the agreement was extended as the result of the intervention of the Direzione Generale per la Cooperazione allo Sviluppo of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the University of Rome (La Sapienza). These two bodies offered to set up a *center-accademia* (center for professional training) in the Studium of Fine Arts in Cairo, which offers a four-year work-study programme, participated in the restoration of the Sama khana of the Mawlawi Dervishes, which was achieved in 1988.

The Sama khana was only opened to the public ten years later, since extensive restoration of the foundations of the mausoleum below it was necessary.

INJECTING NEW LIFE Like most historical monuments and archaeological sites in Egypt, the Mawlawi complex posed a particular problem related to the geological origin and physical-chemical properties of the building materials, the geological characteristics of the soil, the geographical and social features of the environment, and recently, pollution caused by industrial waste. Occasional catastrophic events can increase the effects of these permanent factors, causing the decay and eventual loss of hundreds of monuments.

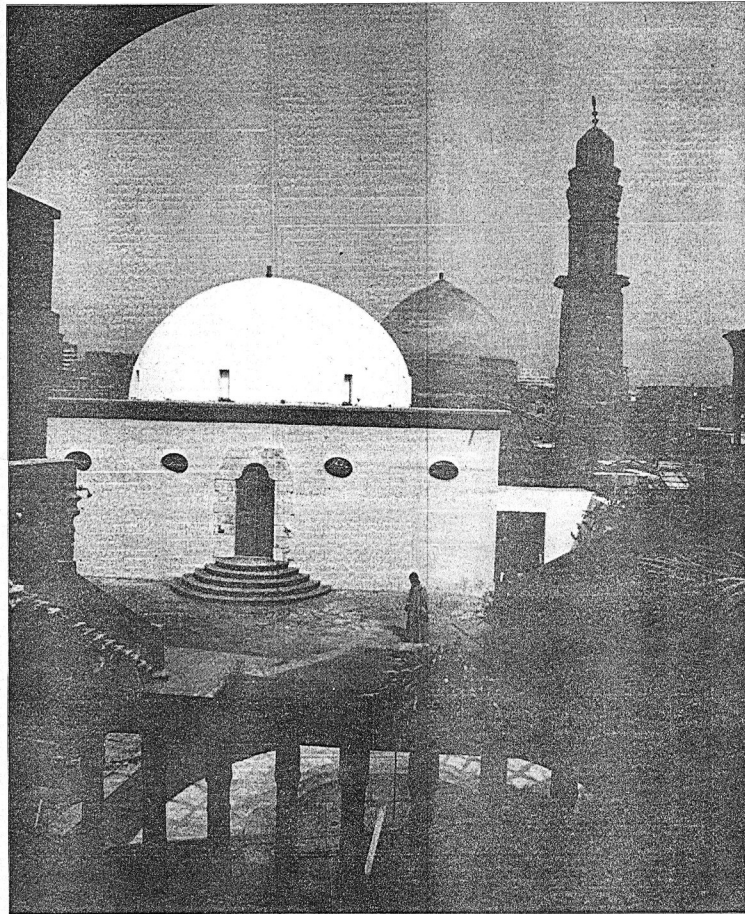
Professor Fanfani has initiated a programme of research at the CIPE, which includes data gathering and analysis of the main causes of architectural deterioration and the testing of various restoration techniques, particularly in relation to the control of moisture damage and protection of humidity or ground water absorbed by the walls and foundations of the buildings. He has applied these techniques to the conservation and restoration of the Mawlawi complex.

The injection system (consisting of the injection of special water-proof resins) was experimentally successful in the restoration of the walls of the open hall of the Sa'ad of Al-Madina and the walls of the Sa'ad of Hassan Sadaga, on which Fanfani is working now. In the Mausoleum, the walls of the open hall of the wall with a special blade - made in Egypt in 1979, the son of the great mystic, Ibrahimi, the son of the order lived in the world... these might include women as well as men."

The Mawlawi Dervishes are the order which seems to have attracted the attention of investors, probably because of the "spectacular" nature of their rite; they are generally described as "whirling" dervishes.

The order originated in Turkey. Its founder, Jalaluddin Akbari, was born in Balikh, in Afghanistan (then Khurasan) on 30 September 1170, the son of the great mystic, Ibrahimi, the son of the order lived in the world... these might include women as well as men."

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settled in the Turkish town of Konia, where he died in 1223. His tomb is still a place of pilgrimage for people from all over the world.

"Compared to Francis of Assisi for his sensitivity and Jacques de Villeroy for the profundity of his expression, he is considered the greatest mystic poet of all times," writes Fanfani in a publication issued by the centre on the occasion of the inauguration of the Sama khana (22 July 1988). It is during the 16th century that Sufism experienced a period of particular efflorescence. Many political and cultural celebrities became associated with the Mawlawi order, which eventually acquired the role of an influential elite. In the 17th century, the order was entrusted with the inventory of the new Sultan and, following Ottoman territorial expansion, a number of Mawlawi centres were established throughout the Muslim world.

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The text establishes the exact boundaries of the *dhikr* (convent) and other donations of land that were given to the order. The text specifies the number of employees, as well as the jobs they performed. The text, explains Fanfani, shows that the Mawlawiyyah had for some time occupied an area bordering the city which was donated to them.

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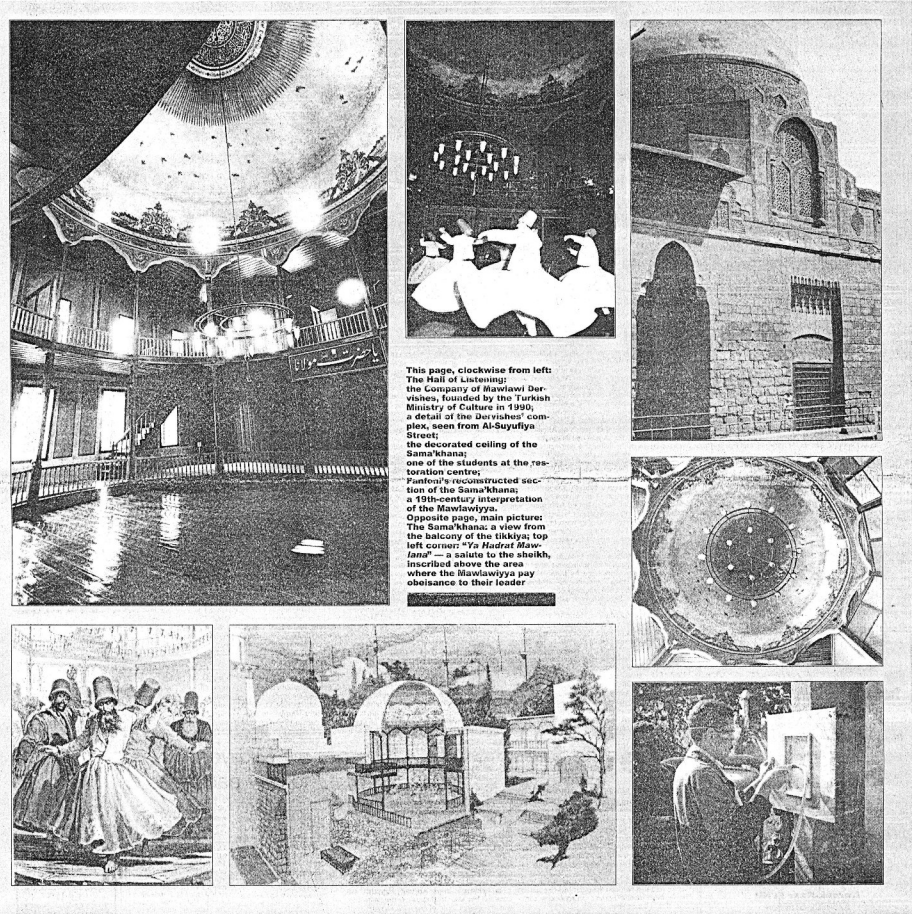
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The Cairo Sama khana, after half a century of neglect and decay, has been restored and was recently opened to the public, thanks to the patient efforts of an Italian architect whose labour of love made it possible for the Company of Mawlawi Dervishes, formed by the Turkish Ministry of Culture in 1990, to perform in the original setting of their order. **Fayza Hassan** reviews the history of the "whirling dervishes" and visits the site of their devotions



This page, clockwise from left: The Hall of Listening; the Company of Mawlawi Dervishes, founded by the Turkish Ministry of Culture in 1990; a detail of the decorated ceiling of the Sama khana; a 19th-century reconstruction of the Sama khana; a view from the balcony of the Ukkaya, top left corner; 'Ye Hadrat Mawlana' - a salute to the sheikh, inscribed above the area where the Mawlawiyyah pay obeisance to their leader

In an *Underlying Geometrical Design of the Mawlawi Sama khana* in Cairo, IPAD, 1980. From that time on, the symbolic meanings of the rite were enriched by the life and work of Jalaluddin Akbari, as well as meditation and the study of Islamic philosophy and the early culture of Islam.

The first performances were centred on the themes of death and the awakening to universal values. The music to which the dervishes danced may therefore have referred to the call to paradise, and the Sama, as performed by Akbari at the death of Shamsa Tabriz (the leader of the order) may be related to the *dhikr*, or the seven circumambulations of the Ka'ba or of a saint's tomb. Later interpretations stressed the Sufi cosmological ideology instead, in which the *dhikr* represents the universe heavily veiled by the darkness of the world, which the dervishes, as the Sufi represent respectively the starry heaven or the soul of the aspic world (*malakut*), the sun or the spirit of the power world, the moon or the secret of the divine world

and finally the world of the composed elements. The Mawlawi dervishes, performing the Sama' rite, annihilate illusory existence and, awakening to the music, are gradually absorbed into cosmic harmony. Geometrical shapes, the circle and its centre in particular, which mirror the unity from which all things emanate, as well as Pythagorean and Platonic abstraction from the base of the Mawlawi philosophy, later enriched by contact with cultures absorbed by Islam during its expansion.

The Sama' ceremony was two-fold, including the "dhikr" on one hand and the veneration of mystic's tombs found within the confines of the Sama khana on the other. These two aspects can be said to have been interdependent from the moment of the mystic evolution of Jalaluddin Akbari, who performed the Sama' rite at the death of Shamsa Tabriz, explains Fanfani. The veneration of the deceased, which seems to have been a component of the Sama', then came to acquire a particular cosmic symbolism.

Some initiates, through this symbolic performance, succeeded in drawing the spectator

in, allowing them to perceive (*qamu*) means to hear or listen) the mystic sense of the laws which regulate the multiple aspects of cosmic harmony.

WHISPERS OF THE PAST: In *Mosques and Customs of the Modern Egyptians* (East-West Publications, London, 1978), E.W. Lane comments the remembrance of the Mawlawi Dervishes in Cairo in the 1830s. Attending the birth feast of Al-Husseini, Lane was able to observe the rites of dervishes of "different nations and different orders" on one hand and the veneration of mystic's tombs found within the confines of the Sama khana on the other. These two aspects can be said to have been interdependent from the moment of the mystic evolution of Jalaluddin Akbari, who performed the Sama' rite at the death of Shamsa Tabriz, explains Fanfani. The veneration of the deceased, which seems to have been a component of the Sama', then came to acquire a particular cosmic symbolism.

Squeezed into the front row between four women, one of whom apparently had her nose buried in music, which it may have found its way due to the excitement of the moment, or the thickness of the crowd... Lane witnessed the various phases of the *dhikr* which the Mawlawiyyah were performing... and after, when the whole party sat to rest. They rose again after the lapse of about a quarter of an hour, and performed the same exercise a second time."

According to Fanfani, the settlement of the Cairo *dhikr* must have had a provisional character at first, as the occupants seem to have continued themselves with assigning new functions to the existing edifices, devoting a temporary space to the Sama khana. The later phases of building activity around the present Sama khana, however, can be dated to the first half of the 19th century. Fanfani believes that it was the last such building to be erected by the order, and probably the last still in existence after Akbari, closed all the order's Turkish complexes in 1925.

There is some speculation as to the actual date at which the Cairo khana was closed, and, while a few historians estimate that this event took place in 1916, Fanfani quotes an article by Mai Zayida in *Al-Ahram*, dated 13 June 1928, which refers to the presence of the Mawlawiyyah confirmed by the existence of a recording of their music made at the Congress of Arabic Music of 1932. Finally, the date inscribed above the entrance of the convent refers to its use in 1905 as a guest house by the *Gam'iyya Khawariyya* (Well-Being Association).