

## The Mevlevi's house

**Giuseppe Acconcia** goes Sufi

On 20 May, the Sama Khana of Syoufiya Street, at Al-Helmia Al-Gedida, hosted the amazing Turkish dervish dancer Ziya Azazi. It was one of the events of the Spring Festival organised by the NGO Al-Mawared Al-Thaqafi, and it took place inside the old Tekkaya. On 8 May the experimental folk Czech violinist Iva Bittova and the Iraqi oudist Anwar Abudragh started the evenings of the festival with an interesting concert. Professor Giuseppe Fanfoni spends his days inside the marvellous Sama Khana. He is professor and restorer of the Rome university "La Sapienza" as well as director of the Ciera (Italian-Egyptian Centre for Restoration and Archaeology).

Why does he consider this Islamic monument important? "The Sama Khana is the best example in Egypt of the symbols of the Mevlevi rite: circles determine the section and the plant of this structure. When men build a place in relation to its functions they respond to 'design' criteria. 'Design' starts when men produce objects not existing in nature, for instance with the production of arms. After the Second World War, Walter Gropius started talking about 'social design': the object should fulfil a social function. The Sama Khana was already born with a social target, conferring the shape of the function to which the building was assigned".



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But how did the close relationship between Fanfoni and this magic place start? "My first time in Egypt was in 1962 for the relocation of the Abu Simbel Temple. I came back for a training course on restoration at Cairo University (1975-1979). In those years the former director of the Italian Institute of Culture, Carla Burri, saw a dome in old Cairo. The doors were walled up, the place was used as an old dervish home after the Ataturk ban [on Sufi rites]. 'We should save that little theatre,' she used to say. I told her that we at least needed scaffolding for the dome. And so, Haggag Ibrahim, now President of the Archaeological Department of the University of Tanta, started looking for small beams with a cart in near-by construction sites. Workers from Helwan came to start the work. From the beginning I sought the involvement of Cairo University, with a project to train young restorers. Students participated in the works until 1984. At the same time the Italian cooperation was involved. So in 1988 the restoration of the Sama Khana was completed, with the help of 500 persons, among them students, restorers and workers. After that, we started the excavation and restoration of the old madrassa. I obtained funding by the Italian law 212/92 for an amount of Euro 400,000, supported by a project of the University of Bologna. But I mortgaged my home in Italy to have the money in advance."

Why did Turkish Sufis build the Sama Khana here? "Dervishes came to Egypt with the Ottoman conquest at the end of 1500. In 1595 they obtained this centre for their rites on part of the Madrassa of the Emir Sunqur Sadi. In 1615 the dervishes became the owners of the whole area. So they started restoring ruined buildings after the 1300 escape of the Emir. They built the Sama Khana near the Mausoleum of Hassan Sadaka, a nephew of Sunqur Sadi: they took him to be a Sufi of the Tanta school. At the beginning they performed their rites outside, later they adapted the building to their needs modelling their work on the Konya tekkayas. In 1856 they built the Sama Khana, according to the dates of the internal paintings. Although they used existing structures, they created a new building useful for their symbols. They walled up the dome windows and made a wood covering."

Giuseppe Fanfoni, 69, is a genial man, restorer, architect and painter. "I'm preparing an exhibition on my works. When I was young at school they asked me to paint the Battistero of San Marco Pontecorvo (FR). And I did a remarkable job. So I started as a painter. Later I developed my restoration techniques: technology should only support work on the structure."

How did he apply his techniques to the restoration of the Sama Khana? "For instance, here we injected the walls with consolidation material but only where there was damage. We did it in such a way that anyone can infer and deduce what the place was like before we intervened. We did not close the eight windows, we just placed frames. And so we can close and open the windows and see the dome in two ways. We tried to find the old madrassa of Sunqur Sadi. Now it is possible to see the central courtyard. The old building has the same structure as the Sultan Hassan Mosque, with two iwans. We also found bricks from an old fountain, dated to the time of Ibn Tulun. Underneath we discovered a well. Syoufiya Street was a cow's alley: the well was used for breeding animals. And so, in a small alley we found the complete story of the development of old Cairo".

Nowadays the Sama Khana hosts conferences, concerts and seminars. Twice a year dervishes come from Turkey to present their performances in a symbolic place. This project has become a point of reference for Egyptian restorers of Islamic monuments in Cairo.