

OBSERVED

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ORGANIZATION
Aga Khan Development
Network
www.akdn.org

PROJECT
Aslam al-Silahdar
mosque

Cairo, Egypt

Work on the 14th-century Aslam al-Silahdar mosque only began at the urging of locals.



AL-AZHAR PARK
This 74-acre park is known as the green lung of Cairo. The medieval Ayyubid wall and al-Darb al-Ahmar district sit on the park's west side.

Spirit of Community

A mosque in Cairo is restored for—and by—locals.



ASLAM AL-SILAH DAR MOSQUE
Before the Aga Khan Development Network restored the mosque (below), its western facade (far left) was dingy and damaged. Now the entrance (left) shows rich color and detail.



Five years after opening, Cairo's Al-Azhar Park has surpassed all expectations. Built by the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) on top of an ancient dump, the miraculously lush 74-acre park is among the biggest in a city with 18 million people and one of the world's lowest ratios of green space per inhabitant. It is also the linchpin of an extensive historic-preservation and community-development effort in Al-Darb al-Ahmar, the vibrant, impoverished neighborhood just across the ramparts of the newly excavated medieval Ayyubid wall. Its projects include the restorations of several mosques, mausoleums, and 17th-century Ottoman houses, most of which were completed

by the end of last year. But work on the 14th-century Aslam al-Silahdar mosque, which reopened last October along with a renovated public square and ten rebuilt shops, only began at the urging of local residents.

Dina Bakhom, the project's preservation manager, says residents approached AKDN's team of restorers as they were working on the Umm al-Sultan Sha'ban and Khayer Bek mosques to ask if theirs could be spruced up too. "It was just a natural process," she says. "We were finishing up and had already trained a lot of people. Plus, we realized that Aslam al-Silahdar contained a number of elaborate **continued on page 24**

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SPIRIT OF COMMUNITY continued from page 22

“We don’t go out of the area for resources. So the project involves a heavy economic advantage for the area.”



The hall and courtyard (right) showed as much dirt and wear as the exterior. The decorated ceilings, walls, and floors all had to be cleaned. Replacement lights (below) were made by local craftsmen. Left: Conservators work on cleaning a 14th-century wooden cupboard.

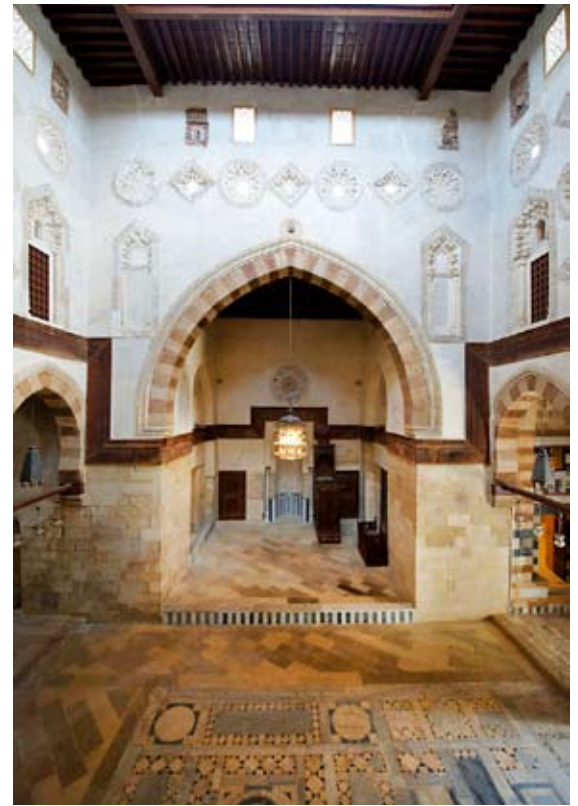


decorative elements, such as the marble carvings at the entrances.” As a training ground for local artisans, the restorations are encouraging a revival of traditional skills. “We don’t go out of the area for resources,” says Sherif Erian, CEO of Aga Khan Cultural Services Egypt. “Most of the wood and marble workshops come from the community, as do the brass-lantern producers and the workers. So the project involves a heavy economic advantage for the area.” Local participation also increases the likelihood that the buildings will be well cared for in the future.

As the mosque approached completion, it became clear that its dilapidated public square and the shops opposite it also needed help. But convincing the suspicious shopkeepers that nothing would be demanded in return for rebuilding their stores took at least a few meetings. “We asked them to estimate their monthly income and gave them the cash to cover the three-month construction period,” Erian says. “Now they want to sell touristic stuff, which will be more profitable.” The influx of visitors will be another economic boost to the area, now a treasure trove of pristine historic monuments and a link to the key sights of Islamic Cairo.

“The opening of Aslam Square caught the attention of government officials, and they are encouraging us to do more,” Erian says. “So our focus in the coming year will be more public spaces and shops.” The next phase of the ambitious neighborhood project, which has included new health and community centers, is the Museum of Historic Cairo and a commercial complex to sustain the park economically. A plaza will connect to an illuminated promenade along the top of the historic wall, overlooking both the park and the teeming quarter on the other side. But the modest Aslam al-Silahdar—the legacy of a mere emir rather than a sultan—stands as a symbol of the true strength of AKDN’s Historic Cities

program, which is transforming Muslim urban centers as diverse as Zanzibar, Delhi, and Khorog, Tajikistan. “One of the big successes we have had in Cairo,” AKDN’s Sam Pickens says, “was to convince city authorities not to clear the poor people away from the medieval wall and to let us restore their housing so that they could have a stake in the benefits coming out of the ensuing revitalization.” In other words, the greatest thing AKDN has done is to prioritize the city’s human assets over its enduring monuments. ○/✱



STUCCO RESTORATION

Conservators clean decorations in the courtyard (far left) and on the apex of the domed mausoleum (middle left). Missing and damaged elements of a window were repaired using traditional techniques.