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A short history of green

Cairo's parks through the ages

By Ursula Lindsey and Issandr El Amrani

While Al Azhar Park may be a novel project in the Cairo of today, a hundred years ago it would have been one cultivated green space among many. In the 19th century, Cairo was being modeled after European cities, and parks were part of the plan conceived carried out by Viceroy Muhammad Ali and his successors, especially Khedive Ismail, for creating a sophisticated, modern urban space. Today, however, most of the old parks are only a fraction of their original size and dim reflections of their illustrious beginnings, due to neglect and shifting concerns of the state.

The Ezbekiya Garden was once such space. It was a time when money was being made and spent at a rapid rate and the European presence in Egypt was growing. Khedive Ismail had the park built in 1872 as a French pleasure garden. It featured a small lake crossed by bridges, as well as exotic trees and plants, tea rooms, restaurants and shops. The Ezbekiya Garden grew in popularity and, some say, vulgarity for over 50 years. In his Dictionnaire des Coûtumes, Traditions et Expressions des Egyptiens, Ahmed Amin describes the park in its heyday: "The Ezbekiya Garden had become a rendez-vous for debauchery and was full of taverns and cabarets that produced singers of both sexes, where they smoked hash and gambled. The place housed such vices to the point that the name Ezbekiya became synonymous with ... sin." The area just north of the gardens became Cairo's red-light district.

The gardens and surrounding streets became the haunts of British and Australian soldiers during the First and Second World Wars, who after drinking and visiting the women of the neighborhood, were as likely as not to let loose their tension on locals they found in the area. By the time of Nasser's revolution in 1952, Ezbekiya seemed to represent everything decadent, sybaritic and foreign in Cairo, and both ideology and popular sentiment moved against it. The one-time playground of the rich is now squeezed in the middle of Cairo's traffic, and open to the public only a few hours a week.

On the other hand, another of Khedive Ismail's creations, the Fish Garden, remains a favorite destination in Zamalek. It was created in 1871 to house the Khedive's collection of fish and reptiles from the Nile and Africa. It was one of the only gardens created in the 19th century that was actually designed to be a public park. Today it costs visitors LE0.30 for entry.

Another garden that has survived the 20th century is the Giza Zoological Gardens. Started in 1872, again on the command of Khedive Ismail, the garden was originally supposed to be a forest designed by Barrillet Deschamps. But the French landscape architect did not have time to complete project before his death and it remained unfinished for 20 years. Under Khedive Tawfiq, the space was turned into the Zoological Garden. Although it has deteriorated over the last century, the garden and zoo is still a popular Friday destination for families and now costs LE0.25 to visit.

- 1806 – Gardens of the Muhammad Ali Palace (22,750 hectares). The park was given to the Faculty of Agriculture of Ain Shams University in 1963.
- 1830 – Ibrahim Pasha Garden (2,600 hectares). It was created by Ibrahim Pasha on Roda Island. The park no longer exists.
- 1834 – Qanater Gardens (500 hectares). Also created by Khedive Ismail. Only 150 hectares remain open to the public.
- 1868 – Gardens of Gezira Palace (2,200 hectares). Created by Khedive Ismail. What is left of the gardens today makes up the grounds of the Marriott Hotel in Zamalek.
- 1871 – Fish Gardens. Also created by Khedive Ismail, to house his collection of fish and reptiles from the Nile and Africa. The garden still exists on the west side of Zamalek on Abou Al Feda St. and is open to the public.
- 1872 – Ezbekiya Gardens (2,800 hectares). Created by Khedive Ismail. Less lively and smaller today than it first was, but the Ezbekiya Gardens do still exist.
- 1872 – Gezira Gardens. The park was filled with rare plants. It no longer exists.
- 1872 – Giza Gardens (2,750 hectares). Started on the orders of Khedive Ismail, but completed as the Zoological Gardens in 1892 by his son, Khedive Tawfiq.

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