

magazine

- [News](#)
- [Sports](#)
- [Business](#)
- [Opinion](#)
- [In depth](#)
- [Out and about](#)
- [Culture](#)
- [And finally](#)
- [Listings](#)

archive

[Search](#)

about us

- [Our mission](#)
- [Advertise](#)
- [Internships](#)
- [Contact us](#)

RSS FEED

PRINT EMAIL

Thursday March 24, 2005

Dream of green

the al azhar park looks gorgeous, but can it live up to its lofty aspirations?

By Ursula Lindsey and Issandr El Amrani

A patch of clean and peaceful grass is a rarity in Cairo. What little green space is available is all too often fenced off by over-zealous authorities or reserved for the privileged few who can pay club membership fees. City residents tend to find their nature where they can: ahwa owners split the sidewalk in front of their establishments to plant ad-hoc gardens, and families bivouac on median strips and stroll under the dusty foliage along the Nile. But this may change thanks to the creation of Al Azhar Park. While questions remain about access and affordability, many Cairenes of all social classes agree that the development of the luxurious green oasis at the heart of a decaying historic neighborhood is a step in the right direction.



Sunset at the Al Azhar Park

Source: Ursula Lindsey

The park, a 30-hectare project whose official inauguration takes place on 25 March, is the largest public park to be built in the city in over 100 years. It is also part of a first-of-its-kind urban renewal project for an exploding city in which landscape architecture and urban planning remain vague concepts at best.

Seif Al Rashidi, an urban planner who has worked on the project since 1997, says that "the idea of the park was in the first instance to provide a facility that the city lacked. And choosing to provide the facility here in a historic area which had been decaying was a conscious decision that this would help the area improve."

The park's creators envisage a green lung for Cairo. They also hope the project will revitalize the surrounding neighborhood and be a unique space in which Cairenes of different social backgrounds can mix. But whether the park will live up to its lofty ambitions remains to be seen.

Related stories

- [Life outside the garden walls](#)
- [Golden dynasty](#)
- [A short history of green](#)

**A grand undertaking**

The Al Azhar Park is the result of 20 years of work by the Aga Khan Trust for Culture's Historic Cities Support Program, an initiative that addresses conservation issues in the cities of the Islamic world. The Aga Khan Trust for Culture, perhaps best-known for its Aga Khan Award for Architecture, is the brainchild of the current Aga Khan—the title given to the spiritual leader of the Nizari Ismaili community, an offshoot of Shia Muslims.

The Aga Khan launched the Al Azhar Park initiative in 1984 during a conference on the future of Cairo, after noting that the city lacked any major public green space. The Trust surveyed Cairo for a potential location for the park and settled on a barren expanse bordered by Salah Salem Street, Al Azhar Street and a buried medieval city wall—an area that had been a garbage dump for hundreds of years, and been used as a storage area for a government-owned construction company and as stables for the Egyptian mounted police.

"When we started with the park, the challenge was unbelievable," says Maher Stino who, along with his wife Laila Al Masry Stino, runs the Egyptian landscape architecture firm Sites International, which designed the park. "It was a dump, full of garbage and debris. The soil was like powder. You'd walk in and your feet would sink into the soil until your knees."

The actual implementation of the project, however, was delayed until the late 1990s as the U.S. Agency for International Development finished construction on three large water tanks intended to serve the local neighborhoods. The delays resulted in an expansion of the project's scope. In the 20 years it took to move the park from concept to reality, the project grew to include the restoration of the nearby Fatimid wall and of several buildings in the neighborhood of Darb Al Ahmar just beyond the wall, which contains one of the highest densities of Islamic sites in the city. And the restoration project led to the creation of a social development program that included renovating dwellings along the wall and providing a number of services to the



**Bear with us**

The staff at *Cairo* appreciates your patience as we work out the wrinkles. We will be settling into our regular Thursday sales spot over the next couple of issues. Meanwhile, look for us at your favorite coffee shops and bookstores.

Ads by Goooooogle

**Controversy: New Urbanism**

How much should government regulate urban planning?  
[www.action.org](http://www.action.org)

**Urban Nutrition Inc.**

Quality products with immediate results. Live longer and healthier.  
[www.urban-nutrition.com](http://www.urban-nutrition.com)

**Urban Planning News**

An Independent Fee Based Monitoring Service For Business Professionals.  
[www.inboxrobot.com/Urban](http://www.inboxrobot.com/Urban)

**Primo Moda Fashions**

Stylish modest long tops, coats, suits and maternity fashions  
[www.primomoda.com](http://www.primomoda.com)

community.

### **A unique experience**

Entering Al Azhar Park for the first time is a powerful experience for Cairo residents used to small and rather plain neighborhood parks, or to the good-natured but run-down chaos of large public spaces such as the Cairo Zoo. "I've been there twice and it's amazing," says 22-year-old Sayyed Kofta, a resident of nearby Darb Al Ahmar.

Situated on a hill that rises above the houses that surround it, the park is an expanse of manicured lawns, pristine fountains, marble and sandstone walkways and elegantly arranged flowerbeds. The skies actually seem to part over the area, and a strong fresh breeze usually blows from the North. Egrets, small falcons and other birds have migrated from the banks of the Nile to enjoy the park's small streams, and couples and families sit on the grass. Young people play sports or engage in clamorous adolescent banter on the circular field at the park's southern tip.

The park has a view of the Citadel complex and overlooks the City of the Dead on one side and the Darb Al Ahmar area on the other. From the look-out hill, children from Darb Al Ahmar point to their houses below, while off in the distance, the landmarks of Cairo's downtown area are visible. It is a rare and almost disorienting experience to survey Cairo in this way; what is usually an immediate and all-encompassing reality becomes a distant and grand spectacle.

A wide path descends along the park's central axis, a luxurious restaurant at its highest point (which during the holy month of Ramadan was fully-booked every night for iftar by corporations and foreign embassies, and which has been patronized by Gamal Mubarak, Prime Minister Ahmad Nazif and the former crown prince of Jordan). The Fatimid archways and chic understatement of the large sandstone restaurant morphs into this 250-meter promenade facing the Citadel complex, with a central canal taking water on a gentle downhill slope to a fountain at the bottom. This walkway is what Stino calls the "spine" of the park: "A very important line of reference, very powerful, that will connect the park from the north to the south and... which will have the highest activity of people." At night the promenade is lit up by lights on top of slender, custom-made pillars of stone.

According to Vincent Battesti, an anthropologist who studies gardens in Cairo, the traditional Arab garden—a private space in which one hears the sound of running water and eats freshly picked fruit—"satisfies all the senses." The Al Azhar Park doesn't quite go that far, but as Stino points out, the park's design is meant to evoke certain elements of classic Arab gardens, such as the Andalusian Alhambra complex: water, aromatic plants, citrus trees and geometric paving patterns are all used to maximum visual and auditory effect.

The overall affect is of cool spaciousness and luxury rarely found in the surrounding city. According to Battesti, "it's a garden made to impress." The anthropologist points to the grand avenues, lined with royal Cuban palm trees, which are "typically the palm trees that are used everywhere in the world for luxury hotels and grand villas."

Some of the landscapists and architects who worked on the park have in fact also created five-star resorts along the coasts of Sinai and the Red Sea. While certainly beautiful, their tasteful nouveau-Islamic creations can hardly compete with the surrounding genuine period architecture, ennobled and decayed by the passage of time. It is somewhat ironic that while the bordering neighborhoods, whose century-old minarets and domes are surrounded by shoddily built concrete buildings, only attract the odd tourist or Islamic history buff, the derivative buildings of Al Azhar park are drawing the cream of Cairene society, which is happy to admire the vista across the artificial lake, gorgeously illuminated at sunset.

### **Ripple effects**

In 1998, the Aga Khan told an interviewer: "In Cairo we have made a major investment in a public park and are studying its impact on the peripheral population, in the hope that we can cause a well-directed, beneficial ripple effect."

In the beginning, the residents of Darb Al Ahmar were fearful of being wiped out by something more like a tidal wave of re-development. Al Rashidi says, "They weren't really convinced that what we were doing was trying to create a park out of this large rubbish dump. At the back of their heads they always thought: Oh, they probably want to evict us and have some major redevelopment plan for this area, but they don't want to tell us about it." But now the skeptical residents are satisfied with the results.

Manal Al Sayyed, a 40-year-old housewife who lives in the Aslan Mosque Alley in Darb Al Ahmar, says the park "used to be only dust, trash and a place for addicts. But now it is full of green plants and roses."

According to Emad, the 25-year-old owner of a local grocery store, the park "raised the level of the neighborhood, and hired many young people from the neighborhood."

The Aga Khan Trust has reaped additional local goodwill through the extensive development programs it has implemented in the area. Mohamed Al Mikawi, the general manager of the park, says "there was always the idea that the park should become a catalyst for development."

It was only as the project advanced, however, and the Aga Khan Trust learned more about the surrounding community and its needs, that these development plans crystallized. For example, once thousands of cubic meters of dirt were removed from the park hill, the ancient Fatimid wall that runs alongside Darb Al Ahmar was uncovered. The Trust decided to excavate and renovate 140 meters of this wall. As they did so, they discovered that many residents had built

houses abutting the wall. Rather than demolish the houses—the Cairo governorate had already issued orders to do so in some cases—the Trust created a program to renovate them, with residents taking out small loans to contribute to 20 percent of the cost.



When work on the park began, the ancient Fatimid wall that separates the park from Darb Al Ahmar was uncovered.

Source: Aga Khan Trust for Culture

Ashraf Nassef, the program manager of the micro-finance programs, explains that such loans are necessary because landlords (some of whom are locked into charging rents from the 1970s as low as 60 piastres a month) are simply waiting for buildings to collapse so they can rebuild or sell the land.

Nassef's office also gives out loans to local workshops and "a lot of female clients doing small commercial activities from their homes," he says. Darb Al Ahmar is crowded with wood, mother of pearl and leather workshops, which produce much of the merchandise sold in nearby Khan Al Khalili. Recent inflation has hit them hard, and loans are necessary to buy raw materials whose prices have risen. Loans are also given out for family emergencies and large expenditures for education or health.

The Al Azhar Park project's holistic approach, which is sensitive to the needs of the local community and receptive to their input, has affected significant change in the area. Not so long ago, Darb Al Ahmar was known as the refuge of some of Cairo's biggest drug lords. While drugs have not disappeared from Darb Al Ahmar, local drug lords were forced to retreat in the 1990s when a police force, no longer distracted by Egypt's war against Muslim fundamentalists, began to focus on the area. Presumably, the presence of the park staff (one of their offices is off an alley in the heart of the neighborhood) also made policing the area more of a priority. Darb Al Ahmar residents express almost uniform satisfaction with the creation of the park, often describing their neighborhood as "cleaner" now—implying, one assumes, both social and physical improvement.

### Worlds collide

Notwithstanding its evident achievements, the Al Azhar Park has set itself some daunting goals. On the one hand, it was envisaged as a city park that would tackle the lack of large-scale green space in Cairo. On the other hand, by virtue of its location and its commitment to the revitalization of Darb Al Ahmar, it also has a local dimension and a "social conscience." The park also has to contend with the social segregation that pervades all aspects of life in this city.

The very idea of public gardens is a relatively recent one in Cairo. It dates from the 19th century, when the Khedive Ismail constructed several large parks as part of his project to make the city a "Paris on the Nile." These early parks were predominantly places for the upper classes to socialize and relax.

But in the last 50 years, public parks have been in decline. While drawing increasing numbers of working-class visitors, they have been subject to urban encroachment and are shrinking rapidly. Public parks are either shut to the public—like the Ezbekiya gardens, which are open only a few hours a week—or crowded and poorly maintained, like the popular Cairo Zoo.

Many in the upper class have retreated to private clubs. Anthropologist Battesti points out that "since the 1970s, bit by bit the old bourgeoisie doesn't come [to public parks] anymore. And when you talk to them, they say: 'Before it was nice, but now it's impossible.'" The former denizens of Cairo's green spaces, says Battesti, "don't go to public gardens because they're too public."

The result is that while the Al Azhar Park is ostensibly intended to be a destination for all residents of Cairo, there are problems. As Al Rashidi says, "It's difficult to work with people from both extremes. On the one hand people from areas like Darb Al Ahmar need to feel comfortable, and on the other people from the elite need to feel that it is elite enough. It's a difficult balance."

Yet it's one that the park's creators and outside observers feel is very important to strike. "If it remains a garden for the rich," says Battesti, "you'll have the rich looking down on the poor. That's embarrassing."

And there is reason to be concerned about the park's inclusiveness. The main gate on Salah Salem Street—intended for visitors arriving by car—has been the only available entrance since the park's informal opening in September 2004. A gate at Bab Al Wazier, on the southern end of the park, closest to the Citadel, opens on 25 March, but pedestrian access from Darb Al Ahmar and Al Azhar street won't be available for a year or more. Park manager Al Mikawi says the delay is because the entrances from Darb Al Ahmar will be through historic gates in the Fatimid wall, and it will take time to restore them and receive the appropriate permissions to build entrances there. But Battesti says that even when they open a door on Darb Al Ahmar, "it will be a secondary door. The main door is on Salah Salem, on the side of the parking lot, on the side of people who have a car. It's not at all planned for people who are on foot."

Ibrahim Abdel Kader, a 65-year-old resident who lives in an alley on the edge of the park, agrees. "They have to make a gate for the park from Darb Al Ahmar itself. I can't go to Salah Salem just to get to the park, when I am separated from it by just a fence," he says.

Another hotly debated aspect of the park, unsurprisingly, is financial. Admission to the park is LE3-5 (depending on the day of the week) and LE1-2 for Darb Al Ahmar residents. While some residents say this price is acceptable, others disagree. Sayyed Mostafa Al Menshawy, a 67-year-old carpenter from the area, points out that "When I want to have a day off with my children and grandchildren, it will cost me a lot, as it is LE2 for us residents of Darb Al Ahmar. But when I go to the zoo the entrance tickets is only LE0.25."

The restaurant and café are also expensive by most local residents' standards, although there are plans to allow vendors of cheaper snacks and drinks into the park.

### Uncertain future

The main reason the park charges an entry fee—and houses the restaurant and café—is that, according to park management, the facilities need to be self-sustaining. Park manager Al Mikawi explains that "due to the lack of resources with the Governorate of Cairo, it was felt that the park should not be a burden, the park should be able to create enough revenue... that the governorate would not have to search for funding for the maintenance and the upkeep."

There is an evident concern on the part of some of the Al Azhar park team to ensure that the new park—which they have spent so much time and energy perfecting—is not "ruined" by Cairo's multitudes or by careless management. According to Stino, visitors to the park often express concern over its future. "People have total lack of trust that there's going to be proper maintenance and operation to keep the park as it is," Stino says. "All their experience is that things start well and then they go down the drain because of lack of proper maintenance. So this is the biggest nightmare to the people and to us, of course." There are plans to form a board of trustees—which would include members of the Aga Khan Trust, governorate officials and notable public figures—to keep a watchful eye on the park's functioning.



According to one estimate, the average green space in Cairo for each resident of the city is less than 30 square centimeters, the size of a footprint.

Source: Sites International

When it comes to the park's potential to be a social melting pot, bringing together Cairenes from widely separated social and economic strata, its creators are cautiously optimistic. Al Rashidi notes that "parks, as public spaces, are an ideal place for different social and economic groups to be able to use the same space and feel that they're one society, that they don't always have to exist within their microcosms, which is often the case in Cairo. I think as it is, the park is used by different groups of people who have different interests."

According to surveys by park staff, 8-10 percent of visitors are from Darb Al Ahmar. While on weekdays the park's guests are mostly middle class, on a Friday afternoon there are working-class families from as far away as Menshit Nasr and Maadi. They picnic comfortably on the

grass—tea thermos at the ready—while wealthier patrons lunch at the restaurant nearby.

Al Rashidi says this is the beginning of the park's life and that it will take time and adjustments for it to achieve all its goals. Jeff Allen, a planner and designer working at the park, also says it will take time to evaluate the park's effectiveness and sustainability. "This isn't really success yet," he says. "Success is five or 10 years from now."

### To visit:

Salah Salem Street, Cairo; 510-3868/510-7378; [info@alazharpark.com](mailto:info@alazharpark.com)

[www.alazharpark.com](http://www.alazharpark.com)

Hours: 10 am to midnight (2am during the summer)

Entrance fee: LE3 on weekdays and LE5 on weekends for Egyptians, LE10 for non-residents

Copyright © 2005 Cairo Magazine

Cairo values your feedback.  
Please send comments on this story to [letters@caiomagazine.com](mailto:letters@caiomagazine.com).