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Life outside the garden walls

The history of Darb Al Ahmar

By Ursula Lindsey and Issandr El Amrani

Darb Al Ahmar lies at the center of an area fundamental to Cairo's historic identity. Next door to Khan Al Khalili, the merchant quarter whose current tourist-trap appearance hides a history as a hub of trade and craftsmanship, and Al Azhar, the world's oldest university and perhaps the most influential center of Sunni Islam, Darb Al Ahmar is a neighborhood with a fascinating past.

It is a warren of mosques, madrasas, regal houses and awqaf--religious endowments left behind by wealthy patrons for posterity--all huddled together, competing for attention from the occasional tourist.

Darb Al Ahmar originated as an extension of Cairo, the city founded in 969AD after the Fatimid conquest of Egypt to house the victorious new elite ("Cairo" is "Al Qahira" in Arabic, meaning "The Victorious"). The majority of ordinary Egyptians were expected to remain where they were in Misr-Fustat, a city that had been founded by the conquering Arab armies of the 7th Century on the site of an old Byzantine fortress.

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The new city, however, drew visitors, merchants and supplicants, and it became clear before long that Cairo would grow beyond its walls. Merchant dwellings and markets soon appeared outside the southern gate of Bab Al Zuweyla.

The expansion continued after subsequent dynasties threw open the old Fatimid city to the general public. In fact, for powerful Mamluks of the 13th century, it became fashionable to build one's town house in the area between the crowded city's southern gate and the citadel built by Salah Al Din--the new seat of power in Cairo. The area between old Fatimid Cairo and the Citadel, bounded on the east by the connecting city walls, became a new exclusive neighborhood--not unlike the neighborhoods of the nouveaux riche that emerged in Giza in the 1970s, in the shadow of then-president Anwar Sadat's villa.

Despite this illustrious history, Darb Al Ahmar and Islamic Cairo as a whole was abandoned in the late 19th century by the Khedives, the descendants of Muhammad Ali, who moved the seat of government to a new Italianate palace in Abdeen and built a new nerve center for Cairo around what is now known as Downtown. While economic and political power shifted to the new European-style city on the shores of the Nile--with its wide avenues and imposing, spacious buildings--Islamic Cairo and its narrow alleys and intricate Islamic buildings remained the favorite setting of some of the masters of 20th-century Egyptian literature, such as Nobel Laureate Naguib Mahfouz and Gamal Al Ghitani.

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