

# The Practice of Home in Old Cairo: Towards Socio-Spatial Models of Sustainable Living

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The article investigates the practice of home as an everyday system for sustainable living in Old Cairo. The idea of home in this historic urban space has long involved fluid socio-spatial associations and made efficient use of space-activity-time dynamics. As in the past, an individual's sense of home may here extend beyond or shrink within the physical boundaries of a particular house, as spatial settings are produced and consumed according to time of day, gender association, or special events. The article argues that architects working in this context must understand the dynamics of this complex traditional system if they are to develop locally informed, genuine designs that build on everyday spatial practices. Work by the architect Salah Zaki Said and by the Historic Cities Program of the Aga Khan Trust for Culture is described to illustrate the potential of such engagement, especially as it contrasts to more abstract architectural proposals.

*Man's relation to locales, and through locales to spaces, inheres in his dwelling. The relationship between man and space is none other than dwelling, thought essentially.*

— Martin Heidegger<sup>1</sup>

In its October 2009 issue, the *Journal of Architectural Education* featured an article by the New York architects Reese Campbell and Demetrios Comodromos that proposed a radical vision for the future of the *hawari* (alleyway communities) of Old Cairo: a “speculative skyscraper that verticalizes the complex interrelationship of informal social networks and urban/civic form.”<sup>2</sup> Campbell and Comodromos's proposal followed from the architectural historian Stefano Bianca's theory that traditional Islamic urban form took shape around prototypical patterns of behavior.<sup>3</sup> Based on this work, Campbell and Comodromos may

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have been aware of the complex association between spatial organization and social and behavioral patterns in Old Cairo. However, their design reduced the community to a spatial and morphological abstraction, in a layered stratum of services and land uses that ascended in social significance to the mosque at the top.<sup>4</sup> They then claimed the design would “simulate the complex social interactions and norms present within the medieval fabric of Islamic Cairo,” utilizing accepted characteristics that had been “reinforced in the subconscious of the population over centuries.”<sup>5</sup>

Campbell and Comodromos’s claims notwithstanding, their plan for a vertical arrangement of services — mapping street patterns and irregular plot shapes onto the external form of a skyscraper — involved questionable decisions regarding the socio-spatial complexity of Old Cairo’s everyday life.<sup>6</sup> In this sense, their proposal recalled Zygmunt Bauman’s notion of liquid modernity, in which a distant authority (the architect, in this case) decides the destiny of people living thousands of miles away — sometimes without ever having visited them.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps, work like this may contribute to design theory, but it is equally representative of a contemporary practice in which the architect is increasingly isolated from the dynamics and peculiarities of context.<sup>8</sup> Such intellectual interventions also must be scrutinized with regard to practicality. In this case, one might ask: Is it even relevant to life in Old Cairo, with its inherited practices; or does it belong more to the architects than to the setting?<sup>9</sup>

The thesis by the German philosopher Martin Heidegger, quoted above, appears precisely relevant in this case. For Heidegger, the relationship between man and space was about the act of dwelling. He saw this as a process of making spaces that reflected man’s understanding of his position in the world — a comprehensive act, loaded with inherent relationships between man, locale, and produced space.<sup>9</sup> Architects, in Heidegger’s view, were principally concerned with mathematical space (physical settings), while the act of building (making space) was similarly of little interest.<sup>10</sup> It was the understanding of locale that was key to man’s process of dwelling.

Old Cairo is a place that reflects these concerns intimately. The medieval core of a city dating to 696 AD, it is comprised of a group of *hawari* (sing. *harah*) — predominantly residential communities formed around narrow, nonstraight alleyways and incorporating a limited amount of commercial activity. Each *harah* is characterized by the spatial order of its shared public space — the alleyway — as bounded by its entrances/gates and lined by attached lowrise houses. But it is also defined by a distinct social structure, cultural identity, and shared responsibility for local security (FIGS. 1, 2). Each *harah* represents a community — that is, in Richard Jenkins terms, “a powerful everyday notion in terms of which people organise their lives and understand the places and settlement in which they live and the quality of their relationship.” It is thus a “collectivity” that is more than “the sum of its individuals.”<sup>11</sup>



**FIGURE 1.** *Haret al-Darb al-Asfar*, a typical Cairene *harah* defined by the surrounding continuity of houses: “A path closed by masonry.”



FIGURE 2. The zones of Old Cairo and its hawari today.

The typical relationship between socio-spatial setting and architecture in Old Cairo has further been described by Stephen Kern as comprising a “path” that is “closed by masonry.” “The Egyptians conceived of space as a narrow path down which the individual soul moves to arrive at the end before ancestral judges. Their most distinctive constructions are not buildings but paths enclosed by masonry.”<sup>12</sup> As Kern observes, the value of individual buildings is overshadowed by their role as a boundary to the main space of activity and social life, the alley.

In Old Cairo it would thus be naive to suggest that everyday life could be easily analyzed either qualitatively or quantitatively, or that its complexity could be abstracted into a simple form or arrangement of services based on a visual or stylistic taxonomy. Indeed, sociologists and anthropologists have undertaken intensive investigations in Old Cairo and on its periphery to understand the working of its communities.<sup>13</sup> Likewise, patterns of living and their architectural manifestations have yet to be fully mapped due to their complex synchronization. Typically, this emphasizes commercial and industrial life in the mornings and family and communal social life in the afternoons and evenings.<sup>14</sup> In this sense, Old

Cairo suggests Peter Saunders and Peter Williams’s notion of home as an intertwined “socio-spatial system” that is “not reducible either to the social unit of the household or to the physical unit of the house, for it is the active and reproduced fusion of the two.”<sup>15</sup>

Building on intensive historical investigation, fieldwork, interviews with residents and architects, and the spatial analysis of everyday social activities, this article records and analyzes the notion and practice of home in Old Cairo as a traditionally rooted practice of everyday sustainable living. It then advocates a practice of architecture that responds to the local understanding of home, and that challenges the standard premises of spatial and morphological design. The article develops two main strands of thought: it discusses the notion and practice of home in Old Cairo in an attempt to interrogate its socio-spatial complexity and significance and sustained sufficiency; and it reviews the practice of architecture in Old Cairo in order to evaluate the value of contemporary interventions. In conclusion, it proposes a form of architecture as socio-spatial practice that can be informed by the everyday practices of home in Old Cairo.

## ARCHITECTURE AND THE PRACTICE OF HOME: ARE THEY RELEVANT?

The study of the contemporary home has always been problematic — in terms of what is meant by the term, what its boundaries are, and how it is defined.<sup>16</sup> Home is one of those humanistic ideas that corresponds better to the concerns of environmental psychology and social investigation than to professional design discourse or the need for physical determinacy. As studied in different volumes, the sense of home has been associated with personal perceptions of safety, security, comfort and passion.<sup>17</sup> It thus implies the maintenance of a stronghold territory, in which certain measures of control and defense are continuously at work. This fits with sociological investigations of human territoriality as “the relationship between an individual/group of people and particular physical settings that is characterized by a feeling of possessiveness, [and] attempts to control the appearance and the use of space.”<sup>18</sup> According to Elia Petridou, however, home also connotes a place more than a space.<sup>19</sup> And from this perspective, experience, memory, feeling, interaction and context are more relevant than form, size, or precise dimension. Home is, hence, an everyday notion that is, according to Henri Lefebvre, at the center of human life, architecture, and urban experience.<sup>20</sup>

From the perspective of the present investigation, home must be seen as an ambiguous term that retains different meanings within different contexts. Its inclusive meaning may reflect the physical parameters of a residential space (house, dwelling); place (neighborhood, town); environment (domestic life); or social determination (community). Indeed, from the tenth century, the English word “home” has been used to describe a broad range of notions, from a village or a collection of dwellings to the intimacy of a single household.<sup>21</sup> However, in Arabic it has other associations that are applicable within the context of Old Cairo. “Home,” in Arabic, is *bayt*, a term whose proper meaning is a covered shelter where one may spend the night.<sup>22</sup> In Arab cultures the concept of home thus stems from the need for security: it describes a place where people may feel safe during the hours of darkness. This original connotation further emphasizes how the concept is not bounded by specific physical forms; rather, it may be applied to a room, a house, a community, or even a city.

Residents in Old Cairo, mostly, refer to the *harah* as their home. They can change places within it, but they can never leave. “The *harah* is my home; we are born here and we shall die,” one resident asserted.<sup>23</sup> The *harah* is seen as a stronghold territory that is defensible and secure against external intrusion. Historically, any additional building in it thus required the agreement — or, more precisely, the nonobjection — of its residents to be constructed. Typically, a new building could also only be used for the activity for which it was designed.<sup>24</sup>

The perception of the *harah* as home represents a long-rooted practice in Old Cairo, according to which the individual house and its locality are merged into a larger shared terri-

tory. Using the terminology of Saunders and Williams, it is “a crucial locale” in the sense of a “setting through which basic forms of social relations and social institutions are constituted and reproduced.”<sup>25</sup> This sense of home implies a dynamic arena that responds to contextual socio-cultural changes and is not bound by particular functions. According to Mary Douglas: “It is a localizable idea. Home is located in space but it is not necessarily a fixed space and does not need bricks and mortar. It can be a wagon, a caravan, a boat, or a tent.”<sup>26</sup>

From the opposite point of view, however, the *harah* can be understood as a product of architectural decision-making — a social phenomenon built out of physical forms. The *hawari* of Old Cairo are thus like any other urban structure, built house by house, building by building. This sense of physical place is what allows the history of the community to be linked to its buildings, and every inhabitant’s memory to be indelibly inscribed in space. This association is particularly powerful given the strange ability of spatial memory to conjure up a dense web of images, particularly in association with areas adjacent to one’s house.<sup>27</sup> Architects tend to see their role as being to devise innovative forms, and they often play down the importance of context and its everyday power. At least this is what one might take away from the proposal by Campbell and Comodromos, mentioned above: even when the *harah* is the context, architects tend to advocate highly artistic and intellectual products.

In his article “The Social Construction of Space,” Peter Blundell Jones criticized twentieth-century architectural practices as being increasingly incompatible with everyday building. As he wrote, their “influence on works of high-architecture seems generally to be drifting ever further from everyday building as they become increasingly the vehicles for displays of individual virtuosity demanded by a market in images, and less and less concerned with habitation.”<sup>28</sup> According to Jim Kemeny, by the end of the century the design of buildings (homes, in particular) had become largely disconnected from the social, political and economic needs of their inhabitants. Architectural design instead had become principally concerned with spatial and economic aspects of the unit of accommodation — the house — and its environmental performance.<sup>29</sup> In other words, in modern society, house and household are comprehensible and convenient terms of analysis, while the notion of home is more challenging and unpredictable.

Over the past three decades, however, researchers have also started to study the socio-spatial organization of the home as an integrated whole. They have thus begun to argue that sociological and anthropological insight is required to understand and design residential environments properly.<sup>30</sup> The human ecologist Roderick Lawrence, for example, has studied the development of eating habits, food preparation, and dining rituals, which he saw as fundamental to home organization, as agents of change in English and Australian houses.<sup>31</sup> It has now been commonly accepted that a house’s different

zones may be purposefully reproduced from one setting to another as a way to reproduce distinct domestic patterns and cultures of living. Amos Rapoport has demonstrated that the frontage of a house may be naturally extended as a semi-private space that becomes an inseparable part of the home.<sup>32</sup> And Christopher Alexander has recognized two key issues that mark a successful home: its ability to express the uniqueness of each family and family member, and its ability to connect its inhabitants with other people and the society at large.<sup>33</sup>

#### TOWARDS A METHODOLOGY FOR OLD CAIRO: SOCIAL SPHERES AND PART-TIME SPACES

Home cannot be understood except in terms of journeys and daily trips to and from it, and in terms of it being a point of reference for everyday life.<sup>34</sup> Due to the complexity and interconnectedness of the *hawari* of Old Cairo, notions of space alone thus have very limited applicability when it comes to understanding how people manage their daily social and spatial activities.<sup>35</sup> The fieldwork underlying this article, therefore, conceived of the practice of home in Old Cairo as involving an interactive combination of three elements: human action and behavior, spatial order, and temporal arrangement. Based on collected data, interviews and observation, the research thus sought to link social and anthropological analysis to an understanding of the spatial order of *hawari* communities. It built on the notion of a “social sphere” as “a relational domain that reads social interaction within particular spatial settings during particular moments in time.” This notion has been extensively, but implicitly, used to describe human activities, habitual practices, and rituals.<sup>36</sup> However, in this case it allowed researchers to explicitly consider situations in which private and public activities become interconnected and overlap. In this sense, the research recalls Richard Sennett’s analysis of the workspace as a place where people act out of a psychology of privacy in reaction to the predominantly public patterns of the modern world.<sup>37</sup> In general, the presence of the private within public life affects both the perception and organization of social space.<sup>38</sup>

In terms of method, the research involved a survey of contemporary houses and the periodic observation of outdoor social, commercial and cultural activities. Field investigation further included nonstructured interviews with residents, as well as with shopkeepers and workers. These interviews took place within everyday settings: in the shop, along the sides of the alley, and in the house. To verify whether activities and rituals were of longstanding, the research included documentary investigation dating back to 1800, a time when the urban structure of Old Cairo was fully formed. Patterns of activities and everyday life in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were traced through the accounts of contemporary historians such as Edward William Lane, Clot Bey, and the diaries of Gerard De Nerval — accounts which were

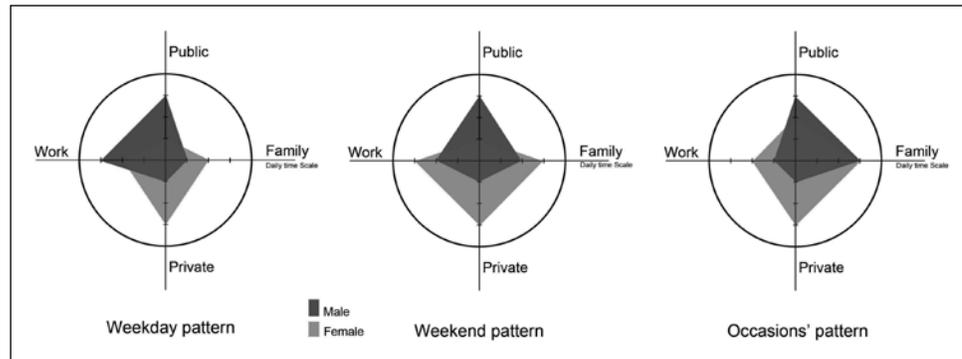
verified through comparison to contemporary local accounts by residents such as Abdul-Rahman Al-Jabarti.<sup>39</sup> Images and descriptions taken from these historic narratives were then compared to observations of the contemporary spaces and houses in Old Cairo to draw a socio-spatial model of enduring everyday patterns of activity.

Fieldwork and narratives of residents’ daily lives revealed five principal activities in the *harawi* of Old Cairo: sleeping, eating, socializing (indoor/outdoor), entertainment, and work. While socializing and entertainment were found to be fluid practices which could be merged, the other three remained consistent in terms of setting (time and space). With the exception of work, which might also take place outside the *harah*, all the above activities were found to occur predominantly in what I call the territory of home. Following the natural diversity of social groups, the pattern of activities varied depending on the social hierarchy and spatial organization within which the activities were arranged. For example, the research found that, among ordinary men, meals (the act of eating) often took place in the alley in zones dominated by popular culture, while families of higher social standing tended to eat in private dining spaces within their individual houses. However, on certain occasions, all community members shared meals and activities that could shift between private living spaces and shared alley space. This system of living was also explicitly described in the narratives of Lane, Clot-Bey, and in the early-twentieth-century accounts of Stanley Lane-Poole; it is also referred to frequently in Naguib Mahfouz’s trilogy (volume one, *Palace Walk*, in particular).<sup>40</sup>

Based on the interviews and investigated narratives, a diagram was developed to display synchronized activity-space-time relationships based on the occurrence of certain activities, or time-space occupations, and whether they were dominated by males or females (FIG. 3). This classification of living patterns was based on several variables: the type of activity (work, entertainment, socializing, meals, sleeping); the nature of space (extended public [the city], local public [shared alley], semi-private [space in front of the house], semi-public [guest space inside the house], private [domestic family space], and sacred [sleeping space]); and the time of day and year (night, evening, day, weekend, season and occasion). The diagram shows in dark gray the dominant everyday activities that were observed, at what time, and who participated in them (males or females) (FIG. 4). This investigation was particularly helpful in highlighting the social-spatial traffic and the spaces of greatest social significance. For example, it showed that evenings are dominated by social activities that take place in the alley space with friends and neighbors — a finding which challenges the preconception that there is an association between evening and the use of private space. Similarly, it showed how the private spaces of houses open up considerably and merge with the alley at times of special occasions and festivities.

On the other hand, each activity in the *hawari* of Old Cairo appeared to take place only within a relevant social do-

**FIGURE 3.** Daily routine in al-Darb al-Asfar, Gammaliyyah Quarter. Daily practice as determined through the three elements of social spheres: human (work-family), spatial (private-public), and temporal (daily time scale). The diagram shows the active social spheres of both males and females in the harah.



main. This, however, might shift during the day, extending to occupy certain spaces for a short time, before moving to other locations. The interchangeable nature of private and public activities within the same space introduced another concept — “part-time spaces” — according to which particular locales might be quickly transformed to suit different purposes. To allow this, spaces and their elements and components need to be mobile, flexible, and easily changeable. The notion of part-time space, in this sense, reflects the dynamic nature of social activity spheres that develop and transcend boundaries and thresholds. Thus, what may be prohibited in the evening (e.g., visits to women’s quarters) may be allowed in the morning, as the location of boundaries and thresholds changed according to accepted social practice. Such a system necessitates flexible and mobile furniture, such as light mattresses, cushions, and tables that allow for easy and quick readjustment, a strategy inherited from earlier generations.<sup>41</sup>

SUSTAINABLE LIVING, CONTINUITY, AND THE NOTION OF CHANGE IN OLD CAIRO

At the heart of sustainable living patterns is the fact that change is inevitable in human life, both culturally and socially. This study defined sustainable living as the ability of a community to manage its resources and available spatial settings to elaborate new systems and organizations that respond to changing needs and the challenge of time. During the process of change, complex constructs (such as home) may be decomposed to its preliminary elements, then reconfigured and reorganized in new forms suitable to emerging needs and demands. This process may be slow, unnoticeable, and in constant flux.

In the context of Old Cairo, *hawari* communities developed, over centuries, the sustainable notion of a collective home, in which boundaries between individual houses were seen as less significant than the collective territory. While the

**FIGURE 4.** The structure of the practice of home in Old Cairo. The interdisciplinary methodology as developed in the form of socio-spatial models.

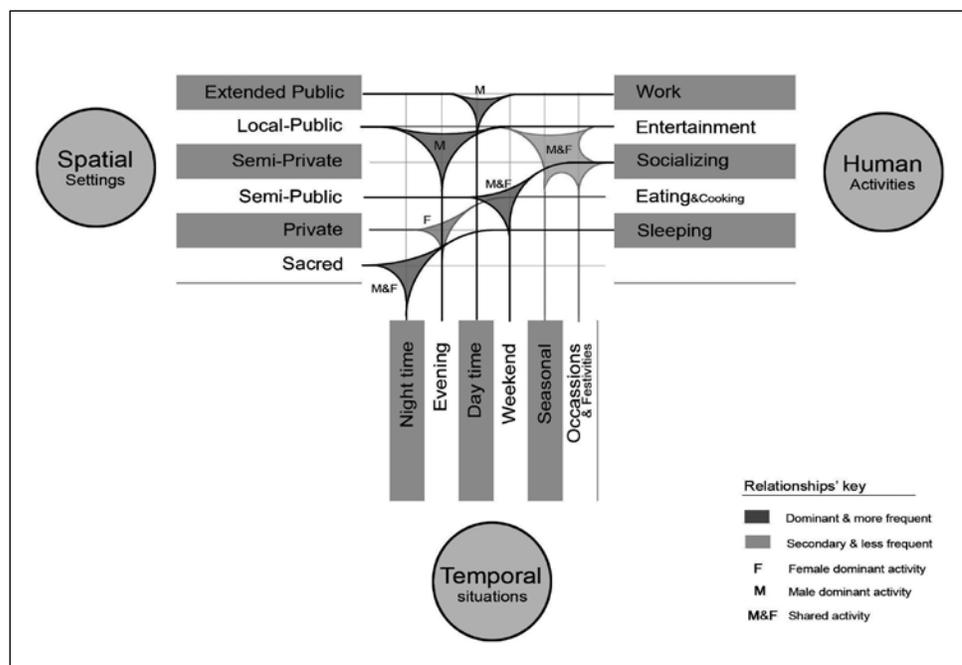




FIGURE 5. Video stills of collective community participation during the transport of wedding furniture to the bride's house (May 2007, al-Gammaliyyah).

boundaries of this shared home were historically barricaded and closed with gates, in the contemporary context borders are more likely to be determined by patterns of activity and by points at which behavior and reactions change. This implies a territory that is built mentally and practiced socially in the minds of its holders.<sup>42</sup> Relaxed communications between men and women, accepted modes of dress, and mutual support during hard times are, for example, all basic principles of this agreement that were described by interviewees during fieldwork (FIG. 5). According to two residents, noncompliance with this code invited a tough response, and could result in collective exclusion of an individual and his/her family.<sup>43</sup>

Practices developed over time, hence, become regularities, which may define transitions from one social sphere to another. This condition may be apparent in the way women and men dress, how freedom of movement and interaction is circumscribed, and how they present themselves in the public sphere. According to one expert in the social dynamics of *hawari* neighborhoods, Dina Shehayyeb:

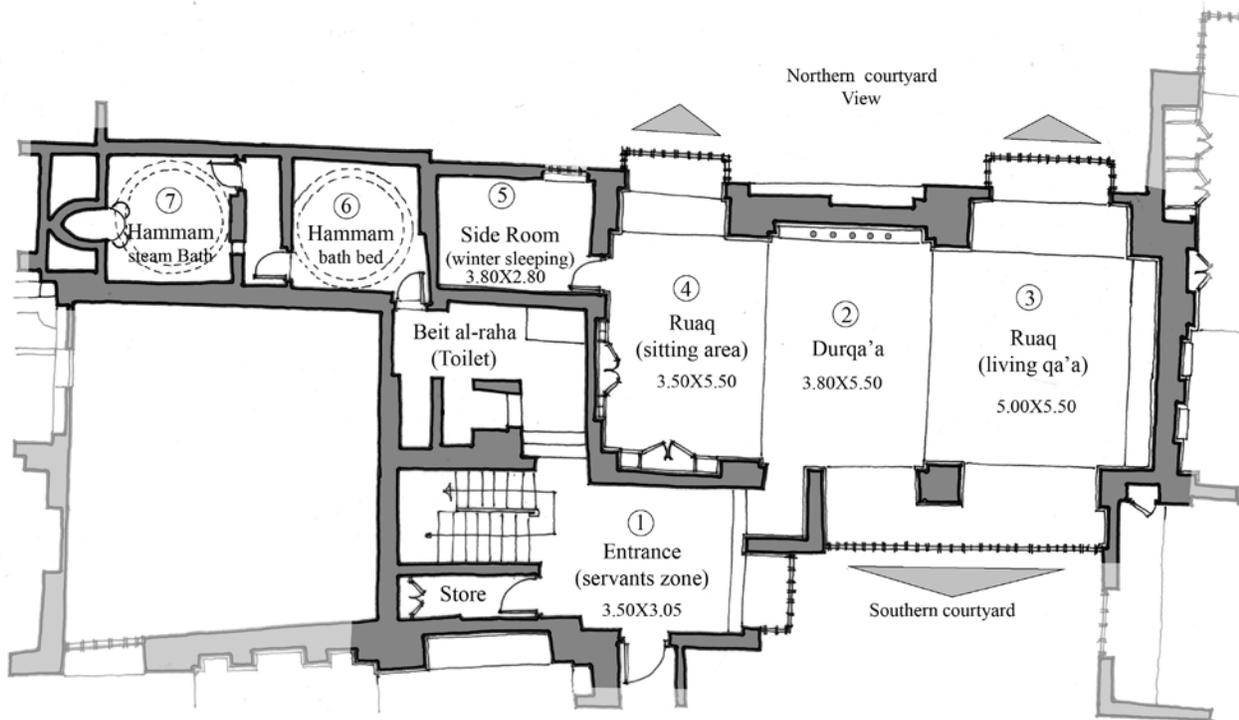
*Within old Cairo, the boundary of home is determined by the way women, in particular, are dressed. They move freely with their home-style informal clothes, within the area they consider a home. Crossing this envisaged boundary requires the dress code and behavior to change. These boundaries, however, are not physically or spatially distinguished. Rather, they are marked cognitively based on a particular social reference, such as a coffee house, where strangers monitor every passer-by, especially women.<sup>44</sup>*

On the other hand, these practices and regularities maintain an unbreakable link with the past. It could even be argued that they have worked against change because they represent a system resistant to compromise. However, the sense of a home territory in Old Cairo could likewise be seen as determined by Pierre Bourdieu's system of objective potentialities. Thus, knowledge of the absolute possibility of people's reaction to an action might control a person's momentary decision-making.<sup>45</sup> According to Bourdieu, such a "socially constituted system" of "cognitive realities and struc-

tures" controls what people do in successive situations during everyday life.<sup>46</sup> One older resident expressed the power of such a local system of objective reality this way: "Young men have to respect our morals and traditions. They know what is acceptable and what is not. If they deliberately cross the limits, we [senior members] stop them, and all the community takes an action against them."<sup>47</sup>

Activity patterns are also affected by the potentials inherent in different spatial layouts. Thus, in comparison with the relatively large traditional courtyard-centered house, the contemporary compact apartment does not afford the luxury of a large multipurpose space. In one such apartment, a resident mentioned that each space therefore had to accommodate several activities according to a strategy of programmed succession and temporary possession. This, however, accorded to inherited customs and living styles. Historically, bedrooms in Old Cairo might have been used in several ways: at night solely for sleeping, but during the day to host other activities such as guests, entertainment, weaving and trade (FIG. 6).<sup>48</sup> Especially in the houses of the lower social orders, women's areas might thus be used to receive male guests during the day, a practice not generally acceptable in more high-profile houses.<sup>49</sup>

According to this principle, the living room in a contemporary one-bedroom apartment might be used to accommodate studying by children in the afternoon, sleeping at night, eating during meal times, and family entertainment in the evening. In addition to this synchronization of usage, some domestic activities might need to move to outdoor spaces while remaining integral to a family's sense of home. Evelyn Early has described such a pattern of active social spheres in one family, where the wife assumes control over the house space, as her castle, where she "spends free time with her women neighbours, and feels content, not neglected," while the husband "comes home only to eat and change his clothes."<sup>50</sup> In this extended version of home, men typically meet, socialize, and sometimes eat with their male neighbors within the alley.<sup>51</sup>

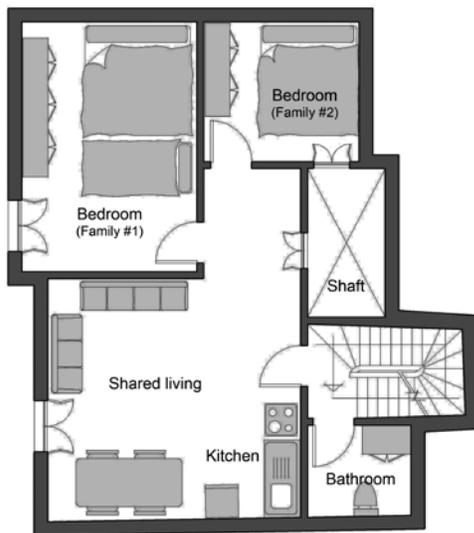


A.

NEGOTIATING CONTROL IN THE COMMUNAL SPACE

The social theorist Max Weber has asserted that it is only in praxis (acts, courses of action, and interaction) that it is possible to trace the essence of a community, group or society.<sup>52</sup> Praxis thus involves in the very activities of everyday life that local actors see as holding no significance of any sort. Michel De Certeau has also written of the association between spatial practices and the quality of space.<sup>53</sup> By investigating simple activities and the way space is organized to accommodate them, it is possible to trace the way the public space is utilized to suit basic social needs and the essence of community.

Eating meals, drinking coffee, and smoking *sheisha* (a waterpipe) are typical activities performed on a daily basis in the alleyways of Old Cairo. Most of those interviewed in the alleyways (men) said they took their meals (mainly breakfast and sometimes dinner) in front of their shops, workshops or houses. A movable dining/drinking table, previously stored away, would be set up to allow this to take place without interrupting public movements. Outdoor space could thus be adapted to provide a sufficient alternative to missing indoor social spaces, which might formerly have been used to host similar activities. Interestingly, the extended sense of home allowed the intrinsic qualities of a private atmosphere to be maintained in open outdoor space. As part of the fieldwork, interviews with men took place in their social venue, the alley, while those with women were conducted in the private space of the home by a female research assistant. On several occasions, however, passersby volunteered to participate in



B.

FIGURE 6. Spatial comparison between A) a harem Qa'a (bayt al-Suhaimy, eighteenth century and B) a contemporary apartment (Building #6 Zuqaq al-Darb al-Asfar in the same harah: similar in spatial order, different in size.



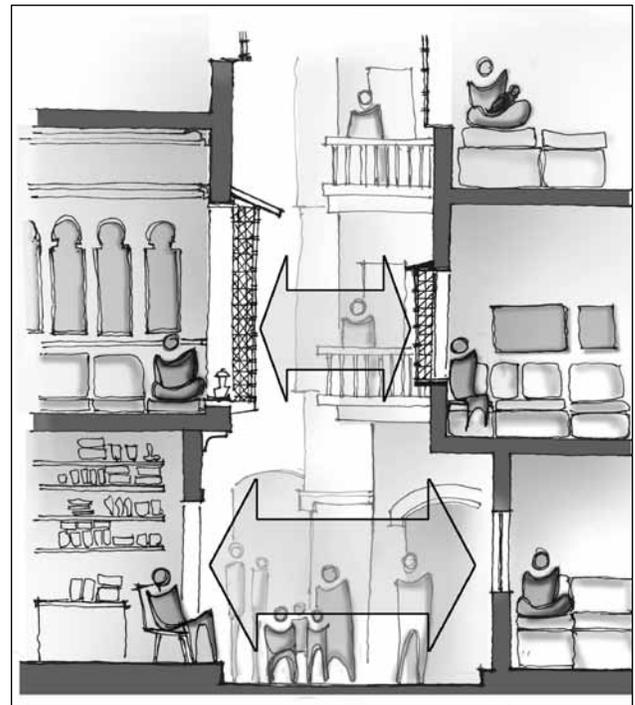
**FIGURE 7.** *Human-product conflict in the alleys. The flow of products through the alleys during the day sometimes interrupts human traffic.*

the discussions and interviews in the alleys. If they were also residents of the *harah*, they believed in their right of intervention once a conversation was taking there.

In general, the researchers observed a complex pattern of space use in alleys throughout the day. In the morning, the alley would be overwhelmed by industrial activities and workers. Their impact was evident through the noise of machinery, gatherings in front of shops, and the flow of products (FIG. 7). However, the dominance of work activities receded in the evenings and on holidays, when local residents took control of the space. Thus, even though work hours might extend into the evening at most shops, the claim of industrial activities on the space was no longer exclusive. Instead, the alley became a venue for interpersonal communication and negotiation.

The research on the use of alley space also revealed that male residents tended to spend a great deal of time in the public space at night. In addition, during events such as weddings and funerals special arrangements were made for the entire community to be mobilized, and for the public sphere to be transformed to serve the needs of a particular family. Rituals on these occasions required a physical capacity beyond the capacity of individual apartments, requiring that private space be extended into the alley and into neighbors' houses. These uses of outdoor space were particularly associated with the character of many *harawi* as lower-income communities. Among the city's upper-middle-class population, such events might take place in specially designated but costly indoor spaces such as hotels, community centers, or social clubs.<sup>54</sup>

Such merging of spaces both reinforces the notion of a collective home and supports social integrity and cohesion. However, in architectural terms, it challenges the assumed conventional spatial order of contemporary houses, derived principally from the expectation that each residential unit will be independent and self-sufficient. As such, the architectural image and physical characteristics of Old Cairo have little to reveal to architects or outsiders about the actual practices of daily life. For its inhabitants, these are structured around individual, mutual and collective social interaction, restrained habits and behaviors, and historically rooted traditions and moral values (FIG. 8). In comparison, the spatial layouts and house forms are marginal to the constitution of a sense of home. To a large extent the research found that in Old Cairo today the system of living is able to adapt to spatial limitations through a system of synchronized activities, part-time spaces, and merged venues.



**FIGURE 8.** *Typical section of a Cairene alley, showing a multilayered arrangement of social interaction at higher levels, while public traffic dominates at the ground level.*

## PRACTICING ARCHITECTURE IN HOME TERRITORIES

In *Remaking the Modern: Space, Relocation, and the Politics of Identity in a Global Cairo*, Farha Ghannam provided a revealing anecdote about the relevance of formal architectural design to places such as the *harawi* of Old Cairo:

*People dismissed my question as irrelevant when I asked about having an architect who might help in designing the new additions [of a house]. “What for?” was the answer. “The contractor and the builder (usta) know what should be done.” It is this continuity and rupture between the plans of the state and the practices of the people that I have been trying to emphasize.<sup>55</sup>*

Architecture, unlike other design activities, is a situated process determined by a specific site and a certain socio-cultural context. As such, it cannot be isolated or limited in terms of influence. Moreover, according to Thomas Dutton, architecture “is never capable of completely reproducing its own existence, for it is a primary medium for dominant institutions to manifest forms and images through which their power will be communicated and legitimate.”<sup>56</sup>

Architecture is also not like social sciences, which limit their scope of inquiry to constructing subjectivity; rather, according to Susan Bickford, the creation of the built environment involves the generation and entrenchment of a form of intersubjectivity.<sup>57</sup> To practice architecture is thus to elaborate an environment that governs such social interaction and communication. Linda Hutcheon has argued that by “its very nature as the shaper of public space, the act of designing and building is an unavoidable social act.”<sup>58</sup> Hutcheon has further argued that architecture reinstates a dialogue with the social and ideological context in which it is produced and lived. Successful architecture, accordingly, requires that the practitioner understand the nature of the environment and give proper consideration to the everyday lives and social norms of potential occupants.

With few exceptions, most architects during the twentieth century did not take these issues into consideration in the design of buildings/houses in Old Cairo. Of course, not all of them took such highly intellectual or theoretical positions as Campbell and Comodromos. But their work still demonstrated a separation between architecture as a profession and people’s practice of home.

Today, if building regulations were to be strictly adhered to in Old Cairo, as architects might advocate, there would be great disruption to the practice of home and local system of living. For example, according to the chief housing engineer in the planning department of Hai-Wasat (the district in Old Cairo), regulations enacted over the past two decades would require new buildings to contain a garage at ground level, despite the fact that the area’s alleyways could scarcely accommodate the passage of even a small car. One response

to such problems is for people to use fake drawings to gain needed permits, and then build something entirely different. New regulations imposed by the National Organization for Urban Harmony (NOUH), formed in 2000, have further restricted the possibility of innovation and creativity. Concerned primarily with image, they have introduced strong restrictions on building facades, in an attempt to mandate typical openings, styles and materials.<sup>59</sup>

A prevalent complaint among architects interviewed as part of the research was the lack of interest in their services in Old Cairo. They claimed residents typically saw no need for professional intervention if it was bound by regulations and design standards. In an area that retained a continuity of building tradition based on informal processes, the contractor/builder was assumed to be the expert and major player. Indeed, as one architect asserted, for many “the presence of an architect is a problem-making not a problem-solving strategy. Architects limit the margins of any freedom that such people currently enjoy through the formal processes of design, strict adherence to the regulations, and prevention of illegal building activities.”<sup>60</sup>

However, some architects who have worked successfully in Old Cairo have developed sensitivity to issues of context and the shared notion of home. Despite critical issues of professionalism and building standards, they have developed alternative methods that are flexible enough to be informed by local customs, rituals, and sustainable systems of living. I turn now to two such examples of architectural practice in Old Cairo: Salah Zaki Said’s rehabilitation of old homes in the medieval city, and the extended project in al-Darb al-Ahmar led by the Aga Khan Trust for Culture.

## THE EMERGENCE OF SOCIO-SPATIAL PRACTICE IN OLD CAIRO

The emergence of socio-spatial practices in Old Cairo owes much to the prominent architect Salah Zaki Said, whose work during the 1990s reflected, for the first time, consideration for a sense of home that combined physical characteristics with lived experience. Said tried to integrate these concepts in practice by establishing a socially responsive architecture, whose main purpose was to ensure outcomes that reflected the pattern of people’s lives in local traditional contexts — or, as he called it, “the lived space.”

*The study of domestic architecture is actually the only way to relate to everyday life of the people. Naturally we can tell about the customs and habits of the people easily by studying the nature and organization of living spaces in domestic architecture. . . . We need to give stress to and find out about the roots of Egyptian architecture, not only by studying large monuments but also by studying people’s habitat and domestic architecture in general.<sup>61</sup>*

The house of Sokkar in the Bab al-Wazir area of Old Cairo was rehabilitated by Said's team in 1995.<sup>62</sup> And later this project was extended to include four more houses in the same area. The making of home in this case involved making useful lived space, facilitating people's activities in a secure and safe environment that conserved the cultural value of existing buildings. In this work, Said conceived of the value of home as composed of two principal features: social elements (its residents) and economic value (its cost).<sup>63</sup>

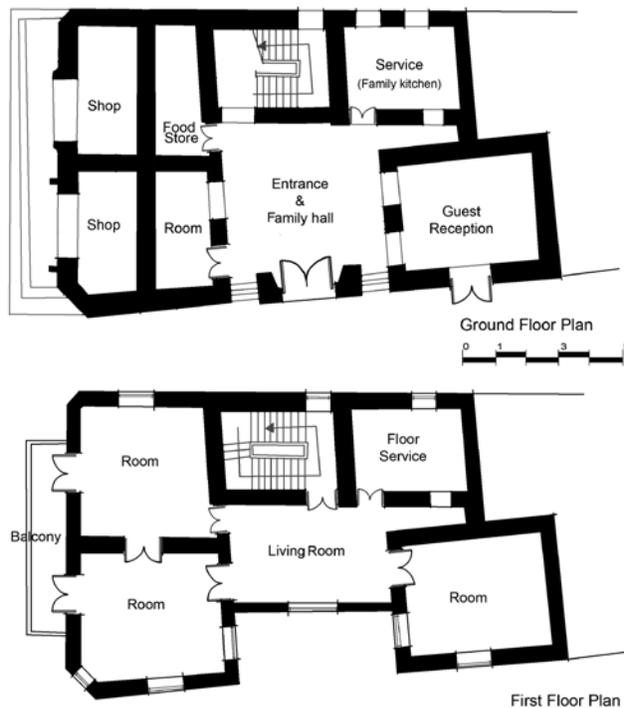
Said started the work at Bab al-Wazir by analyzing patterns of everyday life and routine. This, in turn, informed a comprehensive analysis of people's daily needs. The team's response to this information was to develop a spatial layout that responded to these patterns (FIG. 9). Said's major contribution, then, was to resolve structural problems, rather than impose a predetermined design style. His loyalty to the practice of architecture as lived experience led him to work at the fundamental and organizational levels to restore the building as a useful component of the shared home.

Said's work was pioneering in the emergence of an architecture of home in Old Cairo wherein the agenda stemmed from local everyday routine. This practice of making homes, as a consequence, supported Said's approach to the preservation of cultural history in the form of valuable buildings as lived history. Said understood the intrinsic nature of traditional communities in Old Cairo and the association between private and public spheres.

SPATIAL PRACTICE FOR OLD CAIRO

Departing from the comprehensive approach toward design services favored by many architects, the al-Darb al-Ahmar rehabilitation project led by the Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC) aimed to empower local inhabitants by supporting them financially and technically to restore the structural safety of houses and reorganize their living spaces to better suit their needs. The case of several houses in Darb Shoughlan provides a good illustration of the project's goals. Bayt no. 5 in Haret El-Ezzy, for example, was replanned, with some spaces omitted or merged, and others added.<sup>64</sup> Realizing the strong association between the houses and residents, community and inhabitants, the project used traditional social ties as a resource for positive change. This strategy was intended to embody the essence of place, identity and culture, based on everyday patterns and interaction. According to the project documents: "Preserved and respected for their intrinsic qualities, the monuments, old buildings and traditional open spaces must be integrated into the everyday life of the residents and reconnected to the complex, multidimensional social and cultural character of the area."<sup>65</sup>

As part of the author's fieldwork, the everyday situation in one of the project sites in al-Darb al-Ahmar, could be portrayed as follows:



A.



B.

FIGURE 9. A. Floor plans of Bayt Sokkar, a reflection of the traditional living style. B. Exterior of the building. Photo by Bassma Reda.

*A family living in a single room, their immediate neighbours live in two bedrooms and both share the same kitchen which lies outside their apartment. The only clean water source is in the alleyway among many livestock. One bathroom in bad condition exists at every level and is shared by a few families. The sanitary services have collapsed, and waste water is running into the street. The building is deteriorating due to the flow of waste-water that attacks ground-level load-bearing walls. Residents have no other place to move and don't have enough cash for the repairs.<sup>66</sup>*

In such situations architects must liberate themselves from the constraints of design standards at the same time they must reject the clearance option and work toward the production of feasible homes.<sup>67</sup> The spatial order in such multifamily living units is frequently confused, and the idea of home is blurred. For example, intersecting patterns of movement may hinder the privacy of supposedly private paths (bedroom-bath, living-kitchen). In one house targeted by the AKTC work the logical reordering of such a confused system involved planning each unit to comprise living/sleeping space(s) augmented by two basic service spaces: a kitchen, and a bathroom (FIG. 10).

Reflecting typical arrangements in Old Cairo's communities and accepting the absence of a complete suite of social spaces in each house, the architects engaged in the AKTC effort, however, could also capitalize on the inherited social organization to make use of alley space as a haven for public and social activities. Such professional adjustment represented a creative strategy to deal with an unconventional and loaded situation. But it required comprehensive knowledge about everyday patterns of activities, family structures, and shared as well as individual needs in Old Cairo. Based on gathered information, every level in the house was ultimately replanned to suit residents' needs and to provide each family with their required level of privacy while capitalizing on the *harah* for semiprivate activities.

Critics of such practices could raise issues of stylistic quality, architectural image, and the collective character of the home. In this regard, the buildings, although not noteworthy as individual works of architecture, are of historical significance for two reasons: their simple facade treatments are representative of an important type of Cairene architecture; and they establish a coordinated order through such elements as modular patterns, entrances with stone arches, and ground-floor sandstone walls (FIGS. 11, 12).<sup>68</sup> But what mattered to the residents was the flow of indoor-outdoor activities they allowed. Even personal safety and the hygienic quality of the environment were secondary concerns to social cohesion and the presence of a supportive and secure community. Such priorities were ultimately a professional obstacle for the architects, who saw little creative benefit to rehabilitating and reproducing homes without also being able to have a stylistic

impact.<sup>69</sup> For this reason, critical analysis of the final product remains problematic because of an inability to agree on appropriate criteria of evaluation.

#### PRACTISING ARCHITECTURE AND THE PRACTICE OF HOME IN OLD CAIRO

During the Egyptian Revolution in January and February 2011 police were largely absent from the streets of Cairo. However, during this time communities across Egypt mobilized to form *lijan sha'biyyah* (public patrols), whose job was to guard residential areas against attack by criminals and gangs. These public patrols were a creative and immediate response to a sudden collapse of the national system of security. It was surprising how quickly the patrols were formed and how efficiently they managed to maintain security across a nation of more than 85 million people. The practice of collective defense of a shared home was clearly still present in the collective memory of Egyptians, and in reviving it, they were merely recalling a deeply rooted tradition at a time of need. In the absence of former determinants of social hierarchy, everyone had a role to play in ensuring local security, with businessmen, doctors and intellectuals attending to their duties and shifts.

The question this article has raised is how such practices can be addressed by the architect during the design process. One important step will be to acknowledge the centrality of home and everyday shared practices to the way we use and organize space. This knowledge is central to the development of meaningful design.

Through the constant practice of home, we produce and consume the spaces in which we live. This happens through the frequent rearrangement, merger, and division of available space. By looking closely at the pattern of daily activities and the way furniture is synchronized, architects may discover the practice of contemporary home. In Old Cairo this revealed the notion of part-time arrangement, an efficient system of space management that is at work on a daily basis. The research showed the system of part-time usage to be especially practical when spaces are not sufficient to accommodate all activities at one time. In these examples, space and time essentially became associated within the organization of the social sphere.

An understanding of part-time spaces could be beneficial to the design of new high-density residential environments. Acknowledging the flexibility of the social sphere could liberate architects from restricting spatial requirements and enable them to design shared social venues, multipurpose spaces accommodating the temporal synchronization of daily activities. This could be an especially important strategy in designing residential communities for working families or households where work is accomplished in the home.

This article has asserted that the *hawari* of Old Cairo provide a comprehensive and historical construct of the idea

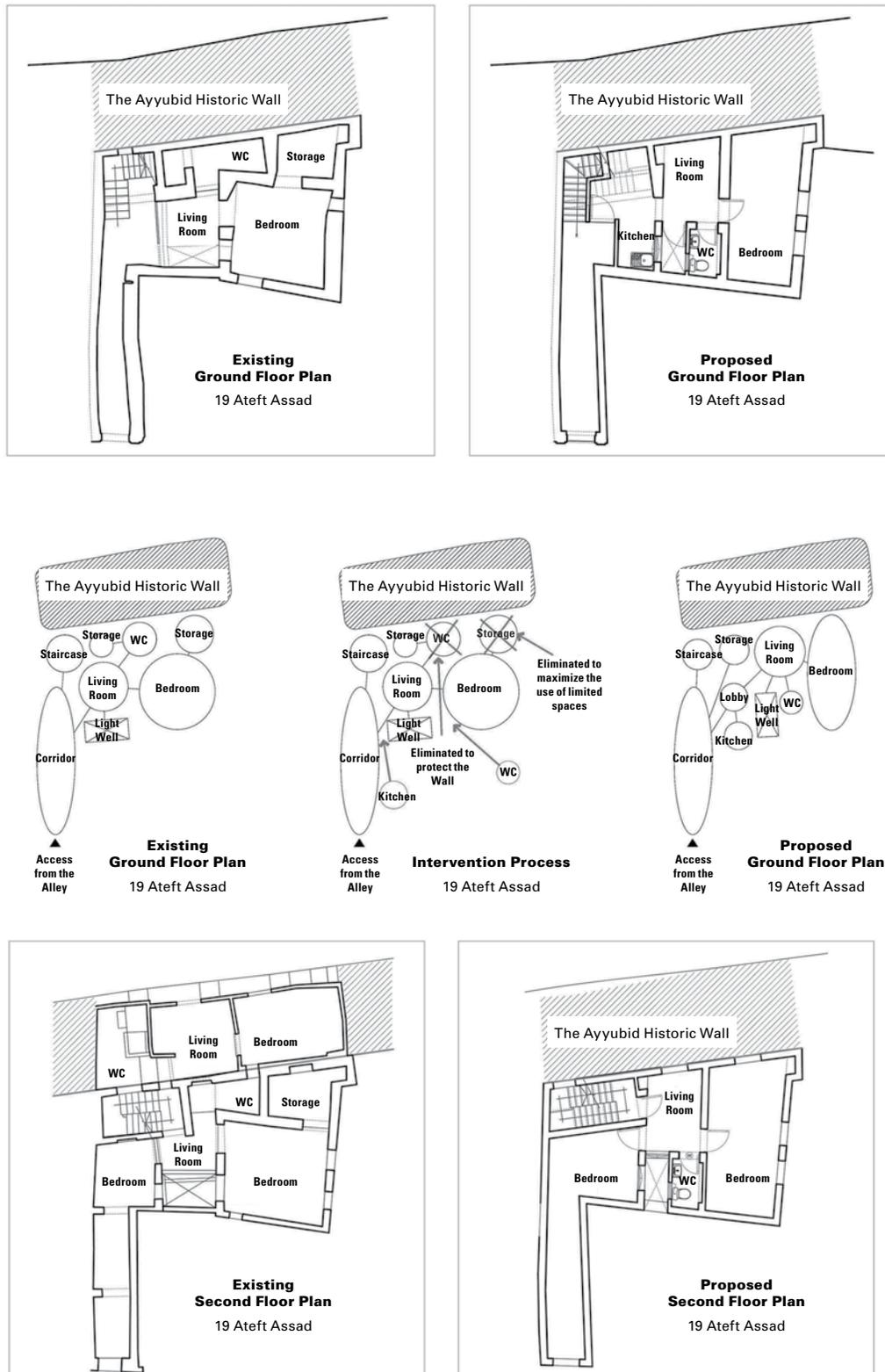


FIGURE 10. Stages of professional intervention, al-Darb al-Ahmar project. Documentation, analysis of existing uses and problems, and development of proposals based on residents' needs and possibilities. Courtesy of Aga Khan Trust for Culture, 2009.

of home, represented and manifested in the dynamics of everyday life and its socio-spatial associations. To remain positive agents of change, architects need to learn the history and processes by which Cairene homes have evolved in response to everyday needs. Present professional knowledge is lacking in terms of making lived spaces that are peculiar to a traditional context such as the old city. A new architecture of home in Old Cairo, thus, needs to embrace a collaborative socio-spatial practice, in which architects learn the dynamics of local contexts and help provide effective responses to daily needs. In this sense, creativity and innovation in architecture might be more strategic and more responsive.



**FIGURE 11.** Renovated building facade in Atfet Hozayen, al-Darb al-Ahmar. The photo shows the clear modular style and the retained ground-floor stone-arch entrance. Courtesy of Aga Khan Trust for Culture, 2009.



**FIGURE 12.** Al-Darb al-Ahmar project. 15,17 Atfet Hozayen, before and after renovation and stabilization. The historic Ayyubid wall is on the left. Courtesy of Aga Khan Trust for Culture, 2009.

## REFERENCE NOTES

Several quotes used in this article were extracted from transcribed interviews with residents, architects or officials conducted by the author and associated researchers from 2006 to 2009. These are referenced in standard format as follows: [Interviewee code. Number of Interview. Year of Interview]. [R] refers to residents, while [I] refers to intellectuals (a category that includes officials, architects, academics, and social workers). A complete report of this fieldwork is available as Mohamed M. Gamal Abdelmonem, "The Architecture of Home: An Investigation of the Practice of Home in the Context of the Hawari of Old Cairo, 1800–2009," Ph.D. diss., Sheffield School of Architecture, June 2010.

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All images are by the author unless otherwise noted.