



1992 Technical Review Summary
by *Jamel Akbar*

1140.EGY

Cultural Park for Children

Cairo, Egypt



Architect

Abdelhalim I. Abdelhalim
Cairo, Egypt

Client

Ministry of Culture
Cairo, Egypt

Completed

1989

I. Introduction

The cultural park for children is a 2.5 acre ensemble of cultural facilities for children, located in Sayyida Zeinab, Cairo, an old and vibrant community of approximately 1.5 million people. The park includes libraries, studios, computer and video games, playgrounds, fountains and several settings for theatrical and performing arts. In addition, a 180 m long strip of cultural facilities open onto the neighbouring Abu el-Dahab Street. The street facilities include an outdoor cafe, a street fountain and vendors, seats, a community room and library, a prayer space, a large festival plaza, book-shops, artisan shops, a clinic and other community services.

The original plan of the park included a children's museum and a theatre, but these were not built. At a later date, a modified version of the theatre was hurriedly built before the official opening ceremony. This structure was completed after the nomination of the project. It was not designed by the same architect and the quality of the building detracts from the overall quality of the facilities. It is not included in the evaluation of the project.

The significance of this project lies in the evolution of the design process and the interaction with the local community as well as the architecture of the structures.

II. Context

a. *Historical Background*

The site of the cultural park is the remains of El-Hod El-Marsoud garden, which dates to the late Mamluk period in Cairo. The site was part of Berkhat El-Fil, one of the large ponds which characterised Medieval Cairo. Later, the site was reclaimed and developed as a park. Recently, several sections of the park were in use as government buildings, municipal and commercial facilities. In 1982, the Ministry of Culture sponsored a national competition for the design of the "cultural park for children" to provide cultural facilities for the community, and to serve as a national centre for children's culture. The project under evaluation is the outcome of several developments and modifications to the selected winning design.

b. *Local Architectural Character*

The character of the area is very rich. The adjacent fabric is composed of different urban configurations and offers several layers of architectural expression. The site is surrounded by historical and residential buildings which represent every era of the urban and architectural development of Cairo. Ibn Tulun Mosque with its spiral minaret and clear geometry is less than 100 m to the south, and dominates the axial vista which leads to the site. A string of Mamluk monuments surrounds the park; the tomb of Salar and Sangar-al-Gawli school, with its unique twin dome; Sarghatmish Mosque and Madrasa; and Shaykhun complex. In the distance, one can clearly distinguish the imposing forms of Mohammad Ali mosque, Sultan Hassan and Rifa'i minarets and many other landmarks. Against this rich variety of monuments stands one of the most complex urban fabrics in Cairo. Residential blocks which date from the Ottoman and late Mamluk periods can be seen side by side with "modern" and more recent buildings. Despite this great variety, the "whole" is unified by the topography of this fringe area of the old city, cliffs and slopes, and the areas surrounding the site known as Qal'at al-Kabsh, where Ibn Tulun built his mosque and the early settlements of Al-Qatai'. Different zones and municipal regulations restrict building activity in the area. Many of the street façades, particularly those in Abou el-Dahab street immediately adjacent to the site, are protected by these regulations. Building materials used in the context of the site are mostly limestone for historic buildings, with brick and reinforced concrete for residential buildings.

c. *Climatic Conditions*

Temperature	Max. 41°C	Min. 12°C
Relative humidity	Max. 75 %	Min. 50 %

d. *Immediate Surroundings of the Site*

To the north, the site is bounded by Abou El-Dahab Street, which is a continuation of El-Hod El-Marsoud Street. Both of these streets form an important part of the historic fabric of the area. Qadry Street, a relatively modern thoroughfare, defines the site boundary to the east, and offers a vista along its axis toward the minaret of Ibn Tulun Mosque. Qadry Street offers a short - cut between two important medieval routes: Marrassina to the south of the site links the Citadel Square to Sayyida Zeinab Square; Port Said - formally El-Khalig El-Masry - links Sayyida Zeinab to al-Azhar and other northern parts of the old city. All of these streets and thoroughfares are now subject to major infrastructure development and traffic modifications. Abou El-Dahab Street is formed of several residential blocks with some institutional and industrial buildings. A municipal act that dates from 1936 controlled upgrading and development of new buildings. This has largely conserved the architecture of the street which dates from the early 20th Century. Several government and public buildings surround the site to the east and south. These include a late 19th Century hospital, the municipal headquarters for the district, a training centre for fire and emergency services, and a more recent children's hospital south of the site. Unique examples of institutional and industrial architecture from early 1900's have been conserved. Yet most of the buildings which surround the site offer different degrees of delapidation, although the façades of Abou El-Dahab street and some of the institutional buildings were upgraded in the context of the park project. The initiative to upgrade some areas around the site is viewed as the commencement of a much wider process of upgrading which has been formalised by the local district authorities in co-ordination with the park designer. These proposals have recently been approved for implementation.

e. *Topography of the Project Site*

The site is flat, and surrounded to the south by the cliffs and slopes of Qal'at al-Kabsh, and to the other sides by flat areas which contain residences.

III. Description

a. *The Rise of the Programme*

Three main conditions can be cited here:

- The need for children's cultural facilities in Egypt: late in the 1970's, the Ministry of Culture created a specialist centre for children's culture. One strategy of the centre is to promote the development of culture and learning among children through play and leisure. The Cultural Park for Children was the first formulation of this strategy. The park is to be developed as a prototype for other, similar facilities (parks) across the country.
- The tremendous deterioration of the urban environment in all of the traditional quarters of Cairo - as well as in most of the large cities in Egypt - suggested the priority in terms of the location of the park facility at Sayyida Zeinab. As one of the most established, and most populous communities in Cairo - 1.5 million people -, Sayyida Zeinab provided a very vivid challenge and context in which to set the project and from which to establish future policy.
- The loss of green space and the abuse of existing parks made El-Hud El-Marsoud garden an excellent choice for the project which promises to reverse this deterioration. The garden was badly used, and had been violated by squatters and criminals, and was the focus of illegal

activities. Though the surrounding community is considered as poor, it is well represented in the government and in politics. The chairman of the National Centre for Children's Culture at the time of the initiation of the project is from the area. These factors combined to reinforce the choice of site and community.

b. General Objectives

- To develop a set of cultural facilities for children in the site of el-Hud el-Marsoud garden. Facilities include a library, theatre, children's museum, playground, green spaces, and other related services and facilities.
- To preserve to the extent possible the existing trees and garden area, and to integrate the new buildings with the landscape.
- To develop an architectural character appropriate for the park and suitable for children.

c. Functional Requirements

The original brief at the competition stage was very general. It included: a library, a museum with permanent and temporary exhibitions, theatre space, playgrounds, and related services. The program suggested no specific relation to the community or the surrounding area. Furthermore, it was specific in the need for a fenced enclosure to avoid vandalism. The initial programme was developed as a result of the competition. The winning entry and its subsequent development to final scheme stage established the following programme:

- An entrance zone and plaza which incorporate elements of the park site into the community space.
- A more open and community oriented concept in the design and use of the library.
- Performances such as arts and music should be accommodated throughout the park. The open space is viewed as a theatrical set used in conjunction with the formal theatre.
- Maximise the use of green and open space by developing tiny gardens attached to all elements of the park.
- Welcome the community by creating a series of spaces along the Abou El-Dahab Street to stimulate links with the community.
- Accommodation of night-time activities in the park such as folk dancing.

This development of the programme was carried out in the design development phase and required substantial evidence and arguments to support this community oriented approach. The development of the design scheme was a device to elaborate on this dramatic programmatic shift. Abou El-Dahab street was closed to circulation to create a pedestrian area intended to stimulate community use and participation. This proposal was later approved through the "Corner Stone Ceremony" (see III E: Evolution of The Design Concept).

d. Building Data

The final design scheme translated the programme into a well defined set of elements and specifications. However, many later changes (see III E) allowed further development of these elements.

They are mentioned in some detail to explain how the programme was constantly modified as the result of community participation:

- *Entrance Plazas:* a series of stone steps and platforms front all entrances. The plazas are arranged as seats and waiting spaces for families, and possible vendors or other street activities. The plazas are continued inside to form distribution and orientation spaces.
- *Open Exhibition and Festival Plazas:* Over 500 m² of outdoor exhibitions, arranged in different platforms, in addition to some 900 m² of main festival and activity area on a plaza which has been planted and, is shaded and provides appropriate seating.
- *The Library and the Media Centre:* The specifications of this programme component changed several times, and it now includes a studio, a reading room, a computer and video room and a roof platform to be developed in the future as an observatory.
- *Palm-tree Boulevard:* a continuous series of platforms paved with gravel and hard stone, organised around a spine of fountains and waterfalls. The boulevard is provided with seats, is shaded, and is equipped to be a place for family and evening activity.
- *Green Terraces and Platforms:* A succession of platforms follow the geometry of the park and cascade in steps 50 cm high. The steps rise to form a maze-like setting, which contains well defined playgrounds and games, and establishes a natural and active edge to the park. The platforms open their activities to the view of the neighbouring houses. This creates the sentiment that the facilities are openly accessible without any compromise to the security of the park.
- *Abou El-Dahab Street Wall:* The retaining walls of the "green terraces" form an edge to Abou El-Dahab street. The final scheme treats this edge as steps and seats, and provides spaces that can be used as vendor shops or kiosks along the street.

A side entrance was introduced on Abou el-Dahab street to link the park to the neighbouring community. This element was used to gauge the client attitude, and the desire of the community to respond to the approach envisaged. The approval of the final scheme by the client, and the community celebration during the "Corner Stone Ceremony" led to a more ambitious effort toward community participation. The entire scheme for Abou el-Dahab wall was developed to include a cafe, fountain, community room, prayer space, five book and craft shops, festival and community plazas, trees and steps.

- *The Museum (not built)* Proposed in the final scheme to include permanent as well as temporary exhibitions. Lack of funds necessitated the omission of this structure from the final project.
- *The Theatre (not built as designed)* Proposed in the final scheme which included a cluster of theatres and services; a very simplified and different version was executed as part of the opening ceremony.
- *The Library, Studios and Video Room:* This element changed its programme and location several times due to pressures from the community, the client and the governorate of Cairo. In many ways, it became a catalyst for the different groups. It was finally placed facing Qadry street. It includes reading rooms, art studios and computer facilities.
- *The Nursery and the Child-care Centre:* Originally a key element of the programme, community pressure groups argued for the library at the expense of the child-care centre based on the fact that poor communities deal with child-care on a co-operative basis and within the community. The library as a cultural service cannot be provided by the community. This argument was accepted.

The total site area, which includes Abou El-Dahab Street, totals 12'500 m². The ground floor area is 6'900 m². The total combined floor area is 7'700 m².

e. *Evolution of Design Concept*

The Cultural Park for Children is a complex project if it is viewed as a "Product", and a significant project if it is understood as a process. The following account attempts to trace the evolution of the design and relies on information gathered during interviews with the architect, the client, the contractor, and members of the community. Project documents and published materials on the park at different stages of construction are used to reconstruct this process. Some unusual events mark the evolution of the design concept and do not reflect the conventional sequence of a typical building process or the categories suggested in the Technical Review Report guidelines.

The Competition Scheme

The scheme is a response to the physical and cultural constraints of the project context. In a deeper sense the competition scheme established the philosophy of the project and the orientation of the design. It acted as the framework for the process that followed. Summarised by the architect in *Mimar* 8, June 1983, this framework consists of four interacting principles:

- *Principle governing the "symbolic" aspect of building, called rhythms:* In answer to the question "what is common between children and the park", the architect proposed "growth" as a theme, with the "spiral" as a symbolic representation of this form. The architect argues that the spiral embodies the laws of growth in nature and gives it expression in culture through many cultural products. Ibn Tulun's minaret is the most clear and relevant example in this case.
- *Principles governing the "formal" aspects of the building, called geometry:* How are symbols transformed into organisation which on one hand preserve the original power of the symbol, and on the other hand provide an order which helps organise various elements and activities? The spiral of Ibn Tulun has been transposed into a horizontal spiral matrix spreading throughout the site. In two interlocking movements, one began from the beginning of the palm tree towards the street, and the other at the far end. This geometry became the formal expression of the spiral as a symbol.
- *Principles governing the "organisational" aspects of the building which is called co-ordinates:* To give the geometry a meaning drawn from the context of the site, and relevant to the content of the programme, a system of co-ordinates substituting the conventional grid was developed. The use of co-ordinates (Ihdathiyyat), is a known technique in traditional buildings in Egypt, and relies on proportion and sacred references such as \emptyset , or the equivalent of the golden ratio. The co-ordinate system of the park was drawn from the intervals between each four existing palm-trees along the promenade, which was seen as the most apparent "measure" of regularity in this particular context.
- *Principles governing the "ritual" aspect of building, which the architect terms as "ceremonies":* This is a key principle to Abdelhalim's work, and his theoretical approach, not only in this project, but in all his works. The idea is based on long-standing research which suggests that building in the context of the community can be identified as a series of operations linked together by events which integrate the technical aspects of building with the cultural process of the community. The scheme defines the process in phases, and each is defined and initiated through a community event (as explained in his doctoral thesis: Abdelhalim, A.I. *The Building Ceremony*. Unpublished Doctoral thesis, Berkeley: University of California, 1978).

The Final Scheme and The Corner Stone Ceremony

One of the most exciting and innovative aspects of the evolution of the scheme is the architect's presentation of the images and concept of the final scheme to the community, the client, and the different government officials. In the words of the architect:

"After the competition awarded the scheme to our firm, a contract was signed for design development and construction, funds were allocated for the building, and then nothing happened. The project had been blocked by political-interest groups in the parliament. Several confrontations with officials, including the prime minister and the minister of culture, resulted in an official go-ahead, but still nothing happened. Something was wrong.

We soon realised what it was. We had been trying to defend the project through public meetings and through the media, but the people in the community, the real supporters of the project, had no contact with either. They were cut off from the press and from the power structure, which in any case were confused about the image of the project and argued against its order and character. We realised that we would have to mobilise the community to get the project moving, not just to defend the project but to build it. We looked for an opportunity to do this.

The opportunity came when the Minister of Culture decided to lay the corner-stone of the project during the National Festival for Children, a celebration held in Egypt in November of each year. Some officials, the architect, and representatives of the local community were scheduled to attend.

Normally, a corner-stone laying is completely detached from the life of the community, but we proposed to the Minister of Culture that, in place of drawings, and working models that were usually displayed in a tent on such occasions and which, to most people, were meaningless, a real life-size model of the scheme could be displayed to give the whole community a glimpse of what the project was to look like. The spiral geometry of the fountain, exhibits, museum, and theatre would be constructed in a tent and the platforms and terraces would be marked on the ground by colours. Each element would be mocked-up full scale in its actual place on the site.

In our memorandum to the Minister, we also suggested inviting artists, musicians and folklore dancers to participate. They could propose works suggesting the scheme which could then be performed by school-children from the local community. In this way we sought to restore the age-old function of the building ceremony that had been traditional in Egypt, from the Luxor Temple and the mosque of Ibn Tulun almost up to the present day.

The Minister was eventually persuaded by our scheme though mainly because the ceremony was to be attended by the President and his wife and would draw attention to the significant role it was playing in the development of local communities. The image of hundreds of children playing and dancing around the mock-up park and the full-scale model, while tens of thousands of citizens looked on, appealed to the political instincts of the Minister and he approved.

We began by making a set of drawings that would enable the tent builders to produce a tent overnight. On the site, local officials prepared the grounds for the tents, and contracted schools, artists and musicians. Within eighteen hours, a two-and-a-half acre lot had been transformed from a deserted, run-down site into a fabulous scene of tents that beautifully, if not altogether accurately, reproduced the arrangement of the proposed scheme. The children began to arrive to rehearse on the temporary stage that had been set up. For three or four days hundreds of them gathered in groups to practice, while a choreographer and the musicians worked out the performance to follow the configuration of the scheme. When they could not, we changed the scheme's arrangement. This happened several times and each time the scheme was improved. Instead of the original plan disappearing from sight, it continued to evolve in front of me. I came actually to believe what I had claimed to the Minister, that the great buildings of Egypt were always the result of ceremony. Certainly the performance of this festival added something to the plan that rational designing could not have conceived. The action of the community added a sense of wholeness that would otherwise not have been there". (1)

Landscaping as a Didactic Process

The idea of landscape is integral with the architecture of the park. Two important aspects of the landscape can be cited here. Firstly, plants as part of the didactic process of the park. This was achieved by identifying groups of plants as families, or communities. These groups were planted within defined units as green terraces along the palm-tree boulevard. Each community of plants is complemented by other forms of life: insects, animals, and birds, as well as by an exhibition unit, (Diorama) that illustrates the original habitat of the plants within each "terrace". In addition, a design for an "interactive game" is provided in a manner which relates to the "community of plants". Climbing, subdividing, transformation of colours; themes that concern the ecological units of plants and can form the basis of children's games.

(1) I. Abdelhalim, A Ceremonial Approach to Community Building, in Theories and Principles of Design in the Architecture of Islamic Societies, The Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture, 1988, pp. 144-146.

Secondly, plants are used as an incentive for community awareness and sensitivity towards the environment. From the outset, the scheme was based on maintaining every existing tree, and adding additional trees. Trees were taken as poles for development of open spaces and small gardens around buildings. The construction contract had a damages clause which involves fines for damage to any existing tree. This generated a unique and lively situation during the construction. The same concern is now applied to the street and to the community around the park. In general, trees were selected for functional as well as visual reasons. New trees were provided by government nurseries.

f. Structure, Materials, Technology

Structural System

Reinforced concrete continuous foundation. Loadbearing wall construction with stone vaults and domes for top floors, and reinforced concrete slabs for intermediate floors. Since the site was originally a pond and in order to overcome any possible settlement of foundations and walls, a system of reinforcement has been applied. Single steel bars are laid horizontally at 1.2 m intervals, and vertically at the intersections and corners of walls. The reinforcement does not compromise the loadbearing wall system, and is seen as a contemporary development of the use of timber members to take the tensile stresses, and overcome settlements in traditional limestone construction (see VIII F).

Materials

- | | |
|---------------------|--|
| - Foundation | Reinforced concrete |
| - Walls and Roofs | Limestone |
| - Infill | Limestone, wood work |
| - Render & Finishes | Carved limestone |
| - Floors | Sandstone, limestone and hard basalt or red rock stone |
| - Fountains | Marble and mosaic. |

Construction Technology

Traditional crafts of cut and carved limestone walls, vaults and domes, coupled with techniques for reinforced concrete (see VIII F). The very light reinforcement is used to offset unequal settlement which is anticipated due to the inconsistent nature of the bearing soil.

Building Services, Site Utilities

The project resulted in major upgrading and some re-construction of all site infrastructure and services: electrical, sewage, water supply and telephones. The utilities of the site itself are designed and constructed - as explained by the contractor - as a heavy duty, low maintenance, durable system. Spinkler irrigation and drainage systems were developed for all planted areas.

g. Origin of Technology, Material, Labour Force and Professionals

- Technology is all local.
- Materials are all from Egypt. Limestone is from Helwan, Ismaïliyya and Aswan, while marble and granite are from Sinai and Aswan. Glazed tiles are from Cairo. Cement and steel reinforcement are from Helwan.
- Labour force: Craftsmen are from the Bassatine community, the Tulun community and the Darrasah community. Construction: Workers are all Egyptian from Upper Egypt.
- Professionals are all Egyptian.

IV. Construction Schedule and Costs

a. History of Project, Citing Dates

Competition	June	1983
Final scheme & corner stone ceremony	Oct.	1983
Commencement of construction	Jan.	1987
Completion of all buildings	Oct.	1989
Official opening of all facilities	Nov.	1990

b. Total Cost and Main Source of Finance

Although the initial cost was EGP (Egyptian Pounds) 1'350'000, in 1985, the total cost for all elements with the exclusion of the theatre and rear fence is EGP 1'900'000 which is equivalent to USD 572'289 at the rate of EGP/USD 3.32. The cost of infrastructure was EGP 200'000, labour EGP 379'500, materials, EGP 1'270'500 and professional fees EGP 50'000.

c. Comparative costs

The cost of the project is considered below average in relation to other similar or typical buildings of this type in Egypt. The cost per m² is EGP 275. This is based on areas which include buildings as well as landscaping and terracing.

	Cultural Park (Egyptian Pounds)	Average (Egyptian Pounds)
Cost per m ² for buildings	500-750	275-400
Platforms & Terraces	100-200	200-350
Landscaping & Planting	50-75	100-150

d. Maintenance Cost

Building maintenance is low. Limestone repair, cleaning, and surface reparations every 5-10 years would cost EGP 2-3 per m³ at today's prices. Electro-mechanical maintenance is average. Landscaping and plantation is covered by local garden nurseries and staffed by the ministry. Gardeners, supervisors and horticulturalists - at low cost. With the exceptions of some toilets, despite the very low cost of maintenance, the park is in good shape after two years of operation. However, incentives and substantial funds are needed to operate the programmes and maintain equipment for the different activities.

V. Technical Assessment

a. Functional Assessment

As furniture is not designed or selected to fit the space configurations, such as arched windows, one occasionally remarks awkward junctions between pieces of furniture and interior walls. On the other hand, and with the exception of a few elements on Abou el-Dahab Street such as the mosque and the cafe, all elements function well.

The buildings are designed to enhance the educational rôle of the park. As the park is situated in the midst of a poor community, it offers poor children the opportunity to play in a beautifully arranged space lined with trees and flowers in a district that lacks natural elements. Children climb over the various structures, while teachers uses the variety of forms provided to

demonstrate the principles of geometry involved in the design of domes, arches, walls and vaults. When I asked: "How can you claim that this building serves Muslims when you have space which allows teenagers - boys and girls - to mix together and be alone in some spots? One might argue that this is not Islamic ! Did the design ever consider this aspect ?" The answer was: "Our society accepts mixing teenagers. It is not our task to change society's values. But more importantly, we are not interested in the superficial aspect of Islam; rather, we are interested in the deeper structure of culture, which is crystallised in epistemology. These groups of arches will raise questions about al-Khwarazmi's contribution to mathematics, for example. Thus, this is an entry to the child's perception of knowledge. When I asked if the children might fall from the high wall of the spiral, the reply was: "Walls are not that high and thus any fall will not cause injuries. Thus far, we have had no such incident". One clear observation is that the park is becoming an art workshop for the schools of the district. Pupils can express their creative abilities in an atmosphere generated from their own cultural heritage. This would, as the expert from the Ministry of Culture argues, stimulate that which is original and distinct of style.

b. Climatic Performance, Lighting, Ventilation, Acoustics, Orientation.

Major activities take place outdoors and are dependent upon weather conditions which are pleasant, except in summer when most activities take place in the late afternoon. Covered areas and stone walls with wind catchers make the temperature bearable even in summer.

Abdelhalim has taken the spiral-shaped minaret of Ibn Tulun as a symbol of growth appropriate for both children and the park. The spiral as a form is the organising principle for the design. This is most apparent in the fountain situated near the park entrance. Teachers can use the movement of water in the fountain to explain geometry. Ramps run all over the buildings and make it possible for children to examine at short distance the exteriors of the domes and arches. Next to Abou el-Dahab street is a series of spaces organised by the spiral order as dioramas to house exhibits to educate children about human interaction with natural phenomena such as water, rocks and air.

c. Choice of Materials; Level of Technology

One of the important contributions of this project is the choice of stone in construction, and the choice of a construction method to utilise craftsmen and adapt their skills to contemporary methods of the construction industry.

d. Ageing and Maintenance Problems

The park constructions are quite new; thus ageing and maintenance problems are not in evidence. As all materials are durable and well constructed, one would not anticipate problems with this aspect of the project.

e. Design Features: Massing and Volume, Articulation of Spaces, Integration into Site, etc.

Abdelhalim favours an approach that reconciles traditional architectural forms with modern needs. He argues: "Once you start looking for the creative capacities within local communities, then you will have to resort to traditions. Traditions are envelopes. They are reservoirs of creativity" (*Cairo Today*, November 1989). This philosophy associated with community participation resulted in a design which respects and integrates with the site. For example, the two-storey building of the library was placed on the southern side adjacent to the dull façade of the public building, while low-scale facilities are placed on the northern side, thus leaving exposed the façades of the renovated residential buildings to all the park visitors. These early 20th Century façades were not pleasant to look at before renovation, and the logical decision at the time would have been to place the three-storey buildings so as to hide the façades.

When one looks from the minaret of Ibn Tulun Mosque to the serenity of the courtyard, one is reminded of paradise. When one looks in the opposite direction, toward the park, one views the imbalanced picture of the present structures suffocating one another. The park is skilfully used as a breathing space between the buildings.

The architect managed to attract the poor residents to the park through the use of elements such as the park façades which connect with the neighbouring community through several alley-ways. The transparent façades of the park which is filled with seats, shops, entrances, ramps and windows managed to attract residents to participate in park activities and to be part of it; yet at the same time, the boundaries of the park are well defined and respected, and protect the park from vandalism. To visually and physically merge the surrounding area with the park while controlling the boundaries, the architect has developed solutions that vary from one spot to another. Design decisions are different in each section of the park. Most often, architects tend to unify such decisions, as this facilitates the implementation of the project. In the Cultural Park for Children, the diversity of decisions is linked by the principles of rhythms, geometry and co-ordinates.

VI. Users

a. Description of Those Who Use or Benefit from the Project

The users of the park are mainly children who attend elementary and intermediate schools. They are given short afternoon courses in computers, painting, and music. There are also short morning courses for groups of students brought from the schools of the district.

b. Response to Project

All users, neighbours and officials love the project and are proud of it. However, the major contribution in this section of the report is the Abou al-Dahab Street Development.

The Corner Stone Ceremony produced two results: the first is the radical modification of the scheme by the inclusion of Abou al-Dahab Street as part of the project; secondly, it resulted in the vital participation of the community and the reinforcement of the initial gesture toward community participation. As Khaled Asfour suggests (*Mimar* 36): "the garden's ceremony marked the beginning of a design process; accretionary in nature, and interactive with the community. Consequently, Abdelhalim transcends the boundaries of conventional approach - looking at history as an end product - and merges into a living process of design philosophy. He began by adding a series of services at the north-western side of the garden in response to the events of the ceremony. He worked on over-ruling the expropriation law that had prevented the renovation of the houses overlooking this street since 1949 !

On reaching a compromise with legislative officials in this matter, he restored confidence to the community; after which they could safely upgrade their houses without threat from the law. Consequently, the entire street façade was renovated in less than a month ! ". (2)

This effort required a very unusual involvement in the legal and institutional aspects of the community: by the inclusion of the street into the domain of the project, another level of complexity has been introduced to the process. Street utilities, infrastructure of the city, and zoning ordinances had to be dealt with. Extensive effort was necessary to co-ordinate between the many agencies of the city, and sometimes, on a national scale. For example, a formal "protocol" was signed between the Ministry of Culture, the governorate of Cairo, and the local council to oversee the process of development of Abou el-Dahab street. This protocol, it is suggested, is the first of its kind in the recent history of urban development in Cairo.

It legitimised the acts of development and construction in the street and gave the community a voice in the process, thus establishing a precedent in the city.

The governor of Cairo - for instance - issued a decree which permits the residents of any street to elect a board among themselves, and to formally register in their local district. The board will be entitled to raise funds and receive grants for any upgrading activities within their street. The Abou el-Dahab Street Board is the first application of this decree. Despite many difficulties, Abou el-Dahab street development could be seen as a very positive outcome which opens the design and construction process to the complex aspects of the community and city processes.

VII. Persons Involved

Many persons were involved. The former Minister of Culture, the late Mr. Abd al-Hamid Radwan, was supportive of Abdelhalim. Craftsman Fathi and craftsman Ashour devoted much of their talent and effort to this project. These are the most important names.

Jamel Akbar
Cairo, May 1992

Appendix 1

Summary of an evening discussion held with some acquaintances of Halim Abdelhalim, the architect of the project. Participants are drawn from the intellectual community.

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Part 5	Mr. S. Al Gabarti
Part 6	Dr. A.M. Elmesseri
Part 7	Mr. A. Abdel Wahab *

* *Notes of Parts 1, 2 and 7 are written in Arabic and attached separately (by the end of the text).*

INTRODUCTION

**By: Dr. A.M. Elmessire
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Ain Shams University**

I first met Dr. Abdelhalim some 10 years ago, among a group of dissatisfied Egyptian intellectuals; from different specializations, who were all concerned with the theme of the indigenous and the imported. I remember him saying something about architecture and about a park and he referred to a spiral. It all sounded very special, but it all stopped at that.

Then five years later he came to Riyadh to give a lecture on a park, and I thought that he will be talking about his dream once more. But, instead he gave a lecture about the Park - for it all was already materializing. What deeply delighted me is his daring approach to reality and to his own art-vision can become reality, and, in the process, the vision itself is modified.

Such generous openness between artistic. vision and concrete reality is so difficult to achieve, more so in the case of Dr. Abdelhalim, considering his clarity of vision, his intense interest in paradigms and epistemology, all of which usually make for abstract clarity that could prove impervious to modification and reinterpretation.

I started inviting my friends to come and look at the Park, to see possibilities materializing and potentialities actualizing, to see theories as a guideline for reshaping reality and for improving the lives of people, not as encrustations that disempower communities and ultimately prove to be means of self glorification for the theorist.

I remember Mr. Mohammed Hassanein Heykal saying, after having visited the Park, that it all goes to prove that "Misr Walada" (lit: Egypt is fertile, it gives birth to original minds all the time).

I asked a group of friends who had visited the Park to come and compare notes, regarding their response to the Park.

Following are some of these responses.

PART 3
By: Dr. Hoda A. Hegazy
Associate Professor
Social & Philosophical
Foundation of Education

SIGNIFICANCE

- 1- The Park is situated in the midst of a rather chaotic and ugly environment, therefore, its beautiful design and its unique compositional quality may enhance the child's general appreciation of beauty.
- 2- In choosing Islamic architecture in designing the garden, the architect has made such style meaningful, significant and alive for the child. After visiting or' playing in such a garden, he may come to realize that Islamic architecture is not confined to mosques, monuments or graveyards, it is something he could belong to and enjoy.

Functions

- 3 -The garden affords the poor child a chance to play in a safe, beautifully arranged space, lined with trees, flowers and grass, in a city where natural scenery is very hard to find. It also affords the culturally deprived a chance to climb and explore the lines, geometrical shapes, colors, which make up the design of the garden.
- 4 -The garden could also serve the schools in the neighborhood in several ways.
 - a) It could serve as a playground for the schools in the area, a badly needed service in overcrowded schools with one yard for the children to play.

- b) The garden could also become a big art workshop for the schools, where pupils could give expression to their creative abilities in an atmosphere permeated by their cultural heritage, which could perhaps stimulate originality and distinctiveness of style. It may also be a good chance to bring in the garden the various craftsmen to teach children who like to learn some of the disappearing crafts, associated with our cultural heritage.
- c) The reading area or the library of the garden could afford a chance for the children, especially the culturally deprived, to come and read and/or to borrow books - for this way the child may realize that reading and learning are not necessarily associated with schools and exams, but an enjoyable activity that affords him pleasure and knowledge.

PART 4

By: Ms. Mervat Ragab
T.V. Newscaster

One theory that can be said about Dr. Abdelhalim's project is that it restored self-confidence for the poor who constitute more than one third of the inhabitants of Al Sayyeda Zaynab District.

They were always poor, but in the past they did not have any sense of inferiority, nor did they feel that they had to catch up with anybody . But, somehow things changed, they started feeling that they are abandoned and that the buildings they live in are *athar* , namely monuments, traces or relics. If these "*athar*" are in good condition, they are preserved, then become a tourist attraction, if old and dilapidated, they become garbage dumps. Their buildings lost any interesting cultural value, ceased to be a center that radiates cultural values that give them self-respect and self-esteem.

The poor lost all bonds and ties with their cultural ecology. The high stone walls, the round vaults, the domes and architectural forms that fit perfectly their environment, have become a source of embarrassment and irritation. Thanks to the dense exposure to Western media and modes of thinking. Their homes have become "*athar*", traces of a past they want to rid themselves of, relics, a garbage dump.

Now, Dr. Abdelhalim's cultural Park makes a different statement altogether. Here is a building made of stone, high walls, vaults and domes, here is a building similar to the ones they are from and perhaps live in, built by one of their contemporaries, a modern architect who received his education in the West, yet, comes back to use their

language, telling them that the words are theirs, the grammar is theirs and it is all quite beautiful in itself and exquisitely fitted to their environment. The statement even tells the poor of Al Sayeda Zeinab District that their architectural idiom is something that the rich can admire and emulate.

Self-confidence is thereby restored. The poor of the District are beginning to notice that the Park has high stone walls, spiral staircases, a courtyard similar to the ones they have in their own homes. The rehabilitation of the architectural idiom is a rehabilitation of a lost selfhood. The poor can begin to discover that the potential for revival is latent in them and their homes and nothing needs to be imported. Development is then seen as something springing from within, a fulfillment of a living selfhood, rooted in the past, active in the present, and looking forward to the future.

Mrs. Ragab ended on a personal touch. She first referred to the people who worked in the project and how undoubtedly it transformed their lives. She then said that even though she never actually lived in Al Sayeda, she nevertheless lived nearby, and Al Sayeda has always symbolized something she could never figure out. The Park has made her understand the content of the symbol.

PART 5

**by: Mr. S. Al Gabarty
A Senior writer & journalist
at Akhbar El Yom Newspaper**

What does the garden mean to the people living around it? This is the basic question I have asked myself. Let us explore first the response of the intended recipients: the children I understand that they call it: "*Geneinat Goha*" (Goha's garden). The name "*Goha*" denotes for the Arab a world of mirth and of ambiguity (lovable ambiguity) which the children cannot find in the world outside the garden. They can have fun in its spirals and what seems to them its labyrinths. Everyday, they discover something new, a discovery that satisfies something deep down in them. They learn from the nature and art (architecture and library). I saw a child crying because he was denied entrance to the Park, and when I intervened on his behalf, and managed to get him in, he rushed into a world of freedom for him. I noticed that the very same children, who are experts at vandalizing Government property, are doing their utmost to preserve this Park, their Park. They can relate to it, make use of it, find themselves in it, and, therefore, it is not the property of the others.

As for the grownups, the Park was a radical challenge at the beginning; for it redefined their habits of thinking and of seeing. I once asked a man about his impressions about the Park, he said: "Are they building a new cemetery, or what?" in reference to the white stones of the Park. It all goes to show that the Islamic and Arab architectural idiom has been confined to tombs and mosques. To see the same architectural style used to build a Park for children was a bit disconcerting. However, the Park was built, and the same man was

seen sitting in Abu Al-Zahab Street praying on his prayer carpet there, and then relaxing with his friends. When I asked him about his feelings, he answered: "I feel comfort here, and it does not cost anything", really meaning that the Park has become part of his life style, not well defined, separate place from his daily universe. The poor of the District hold their wedding parties in the street, for the street has become what is called *Dar Munasabat*, (Lit: house for occasions), that is a place where people can hold their weddings and funerals. And what about the two masons: Amm Ashure (The mason) and Fathi Al Nagar (The stone-cutter). They two rediscovered themselves and the nobility of their profession. They discovered that the building they are contributing to, with their art and labour, is different from the modern ones. Modern building, they say, are built to be demolished and removed. Theirs is a building built to last, "Something that would live for us, and for our children".

Now, what I will conclude with, might sound somewhat presumptuous, but I will say it nevertheless. I consider the Park some kind of an architectural sanitarium, where artists and young architects might come to retrieve their own heritage and cultural specificity, to see it alive once more, to see the Arab fountain, the mosaics, lanterns, woodworks, etc.... . It is a prayer in color!

PART 6

**by: Dr. A.M. Elmessire
Professor Emeritus at
Ain Shams University**

Even though all the respondents are interested one way or another in art and architecture, it is significant that none of them dwelt on architecture in itself, it is always viewed as part of a larger context (social, economic, cultural, etc.....).

This is the point where all views converge. Perhaps this is the point where I should start. The conception of art that underlies the Park is nothing, if not open-ended. Nothing in Dr. Abdelhalim's world is self-referential; the complete circle for him (symbol of an organic closed-system, of complete status, of endings which are identical with beginnings, end of history, etc....), is alien to him. It belongs either to the world of defunct pagan gods, or mad secular men who aim at total control. The complete circle is power run mad, a shape with an imperialist center that sucks everything unto itself.

The complete circle is the best expression of the pantheistic system, where God dwells in his beings, merges with them, loses his identity and autonomy, the whole system being a cosmic monism, that reduces all levels to the One.

This is different from transcendental monotheism where you do not have the One only, but you have the One (God) as well as the many creations of God. God does not dwell in his creations, but he does not withdraw completely from this world (like the Deus Abscondus of the gnostis) There is a distance between Him and his creations. This distance is not a yawning abyss, the aporia of the reductionist deconstructionists. It is rather the space where God interacts with his creations, where He shows His concern and that He cares for man and

nature, providing the world of matter with purpose. The space also guarantees man's freedom and autonomy, it is the area where history unfolds with all possibilities for tragedy and comedy. Given the distance between creator and created, a complete circle is impossible for beginnings never completely match endings, and the ultimate point of reference is outside the world of matter, yet is there guiding it and suffusing it with purpose and meaning. Therefore, a spiral, the imperfect circle, is the perfect form for this epistemology.

Beginning in point A, it is impossible for the human individual to come back to the same point, for in the distance he acts historically, and interacts with the divine. When he comes back, it is not the same time nor the same place, nor is he the same person.

Looking at the Park, that is exactly what we will see. Dr. Abdelhalim claims that when he studied the Park, he found, and behold, a set of trees lined as a spiral. The secularist might say it is mere chance, the religious might claim that it is a miracle, the architect says that it is the genius of the place. Be that as it may, the epistemological spiral coalesced with the natural one to provide the garden with a pattern, the pattern of growth which is not organic (namely an enclosed self referential cycle, repeated ad nauseam), it is rather a process of incredible complexity, almost a mystery child becoming man, the drop of water being a starting point that becomes a fountain, then a current of water that unifies the whole Park and gives life to the trees, and to the child outside . Time and again in his description of the Park, Dr. Abdelhalim comes back to that hypothetical child drinking from the fountain outside, seeing the trees inside, the Ibn Tulun Zuggurat outside and Kadry Street next to him. In the natural human act of drinking, the child learns about the artifices of Islam, about the sublime ways in which God infuses life in his

creations, and about the bustling city of Cairo. Growth here is a realization of the Divine and the human, as distinct from nature, a distinctiveness that implies no antagonism . No imperialist conquest of nature is planned, no pantheistic merging with nature is contemplated, but rather a creative and ennobling interchange between God, man and nature. The natural and the divine do not encroach on the human, and the human does not merge with either.

All of this is written everywhere, manifested in stone, plant and structure. There are trees and floral motifs; wood work, stone and trees; running water and hard stone; garden and building, paradise and city; building and public street; public street with flowing traffic and Abu Dahab Street sheltered, quiet, holy and strictly for pedestrians; the world inside the Park, and the world outside it, with stairs leading from the street to the Park and from the Park to the street.

There are no dichotomies , nor dualities, but interacting pairs that never merge together and that are never reduced to one level external to them. The whole pattern being an echo of the dialectics of God, man and nature, always interacting, but never merging, the spiral without, is the principle within and may God keep us from defunct pagan gods and mad secular men who ask for standardized smooth buildings that leave man without pleasure or pain, without a soul or purpose. A universe totally controlled is a dead universe, a machine, no more .

The respect for the genius of the place is ultimately a homage to the particular, it is an homage to man, for man does not live in the general. When the initial stages of his building were completed, it was decided that the neighboring buildings should be removed, and a street be opened to modern traffic . This they called progress . This he called monumentalization which I translated for him as "*tasnim*" (تاسنيم), turning into an idol . The nation state, since the 17th Century, with

absolute monarchs replacing God, has become a specialist at that. The modern technocrat has replaced the absolute monarch, but he wields more power for his machinery is much more powerful . It all means power for the center and disempowerment of the periphery Dr. Abdelhalim lobbied for a pedestrian street, to join the Park to the community. He persuaded the Government not to monumentalize and persuaded the community to look after the buildings. It worked.

I understand that the Abul Dahab Street was not part of the original project, but it became central to it. Another example of the spiral, where endings never match beginnings, and where a humble approach to reality unlocks the genius of the place, then yields its secrets and treasures.

Apparently, he started developing this improvisation, this openness into reality, into a deliberate technique. After setting up a structure, new relationships emerge that have their own logic, new possibilities open up that need to be explored. Humbly, he learns and explores, he could then introduce a new opening in the wall, could leave a dome unfinished. Solid structures become much more moldable, without losing their autonomy or solidity, a form of spiral interaction between mass and idea (an echo of the ultimate dialects of interaction between God and nature).

The maquette built in the site from Kheyamiya, the ceremony preceding the actual building process, where children and community are invited to participate, to see for themselves before the fait accompli, are all examples of his spiral open-ended structure, of the willingness to be disciplined by the unfolding reality, the true empowerment of a community. But above all, it is the technique of deliberate improvisation in an embryonic form between God, man and

The spiral pattern of openness from art to reality could be discovered everywhere. The masons and stone cutters transformed stones into walls, and in transforming them got themselves transformed, rediscovering lost identity, relearning lost skills. The architect tapped the reservoirs of his cultural religious heritage, developed his idiom, built a structure that speaks a very private language, specific to Islamic culture, yet also of definite universal appeal and value. This language in turn was instinctively grasped by the children playing in the Park and the people looking at it. It moved something in a group of intellectuals when they looked at the Park, their human creativity increased (they were empowered, they became full human beings), and rather than lapse into stereotyping of the building in terms of its mere utility, or its value as a symbol of "progress" or as a tourist attraction, they cast off all of that and dwelled on architecture in relationship to the only thing that it was created for: man, specific man, living in harmony with himself and with his environment. Mason, architect, children, Park, intellectuals speak a common language, because art is not self-referential and the cultural reservoir, the common language of people, was tapped and developed. This is a true community. There is a real bond.

بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم

الاستاذ / محمد مهيب : متخصص فى العمارة الداخلية

لقد كان اقدام د. عبد الحلیم على الخوض فى تصميم و انشاء هذا الصرح الثقافى تحديا حضاريا حسب رأى الشخصى طبقا لما يلى :-

- ان المشروع يخص فى المقام الاول الطفل و هو اهم و اخطر شخصية فى المجتمع ، لانه يمثل مستقبل البلاد و أملها و مانع مستقبلها . و يعتبر هذا مكن الصعوبة و الحساسية فى التعامل مع الطفل لاننا حين نقوم بتهيئة المناخ الصحى و الثقافى و التاريخى الصادق فى تعليم الطفل فأنا و لا شك سوف نحصل على جيل سوى يصلح لقيادة الدولة و يعمل على تقدمها .

- ان الموقع المقام عليه المشروع يجاور موقع من اكثر المواقع قدما فى تاريخ البشرية . حيث بدأت مع العصر العباسى الاول عام ٧٥٠ م القرن الثامن و لازلنا عامرة و تزخر بالحياه حتى اليوم . اى ان هذه المنطقة تعتبر من اقدم المناطق الحضارية . كما انها شهدت مولد العاصمة الثانية و الثالثة لمصر و هما العسكر و القطائع و بالرغم من اندثار هاتين العاصمتين الا انه يوجد عديد من الآثار لا زالت قائمة بالرغم من مرور ما يقرب من الف و مائتى عام .. و باستعراض سريع لبعض هذه الآثار الممثلة للعصور المختلفة بدأ من العصر العباسى حتى العصر الحديث . نجد تجاور المشروع لميدان الرميلىة حيث باب العزب و مسجد المحمودية و مسجد قانيبى الرماح و السلطان حسن و الرفاعى . و مرور بشارع الصليبية نشاهد خانفاه الامير شيخوئ و كذلك مسجده و سبيل ام عباس و مدرسة تعزى بردى و غيرهم حتى جامع احمد بن طولون اعلى جبل يشكر و بالانعطاف يمينا نجد موقع المشروع على حدود قلعة الكبش حيث اسفله مسجد سنجر الجاولى و لاجين السيفى و مسجد و سبيل تراز الاحمدى و غيرها ... و غيرها من الصروح المعمارية القديمة و الحديثة

و هذا ما يوءكد صعوبة التحدى الحضارى الذى وضع فيه د. عبد الحلیم الا انه نجح فى حل اشكالية الشكل و المضمون لعمارة المشروع كامتداد طبيعى غير متنافر مع هذا العبق التاريخى الذى يتسم به الوسط المحيط .

كما اكد انتماؤه لمدرسة العمارة العضوية متماشيا مع رائدها فرنك لويد رايت، حيث قام د. عبد الحلیم باحترام كل عود اخضر بالموقع بعد ان قامت فكرة التخطيط الحلزونية على تناغم بين الاشجار و العمارة . كما اثبت باستخدامه لخامة الحجر الطبيعى ، انها خامة لينة ناعمة يمكن تشكيلها فى خطوط انسيابية هادئة ناعمة من التراث .

- و قد تأثر المشروع بالوسط المحيط و احترامه . كذلك لا ننسى تأثير المشروع على المجتمع المحيط به . حيث نجد ان هناك طفرة حضارية حدثت لسكان الحي ، بدأ من عدم اعتداء على الاتار و اللون الاخضر ، و هذه بشهادة مسئولى الحي ، الى قيام بعض الاهالى بأعادة ترميم و دهان مساكنهم . كما ان رئيس الحي اصدر قراره بأنه لن يمنح ترخيص بناء جديد الا اذا انسجمت الرسومات المعمارية المقدمة و طبيعة معمار المشروع .

- كما نجح المشروع فى استقطاب اطفال الحي و المدارس لى تتعدد زيارتهم للموقع . و كذا استخدام اهل الحي للمشروع و خصوصا فى المناسبات السعيدة و اقامة الحفلات و اكتشاف المواهب و هكذا اثبت د. عبد الحلیم بأنه بشر و أنه يعمل للبشر و انه ملك للعصر الذى يعيش فيه متكاً على جذور تاريخية اصيلة ، قدم لها شكلا من اشكال الاحترام و التبجيل .

المعماري

محمد مهيب

هبة رؤوف : معيد بكلية الاقتصاد و العلوم السياسية

مميزات عمل د . عبد الحليم

- ١ - التواصل مع البيئة المحيطة (فكرة الحلزون الافقى ارتباطا بالحلزون الرأسى لمسجد ابن طولون) .
- ٢ - استعمال الخامات البيئية الملائمة للمنطقة الحضارية (الحجر) .
- ٣ - الربط بين العمل آلى و الفنى الحرفى فى عملية البناء .
- ٤ - التفاعل بين التخطيط و الاستكشاف اثناء البناء و التعديل (النسق المفتوح الابداعى) .
- ٥ - التناغم مع الجوار (الشارع المجاور) و ايجاد علاقة عضوية و ليس ذرية .
- ٦ - الربط بين النموذج المعرفى الاسلامى و المعمار بشكل اجتهادى يتجاوز الاشكال الخطية (القباب الكاملة) و يصوغ القيمة المرتبطة بالبناء المعين (الحلزون الافقى رموز للنمو المرتبط بالطفولة .
- ٧ - رمزية المادة ، فالحديقة تدل على ” الجنة ” بذا يجب ان تتضمن الخضرة و الماء ...
- ٨ - ارتباط او ربط الابداع بنفع الانسان العادى .
اي ” الجمالية ” النافعة فى الحياه اليومية .

المستشار احمد عبد الوهاب

رئيس حى جنوب القاهرة

الحديقة تشكل نقطة بدء لانطلاقه فن معمارى اصيل لقد اوحى لنا بأنه يمكن تنظيم الحى بمعنى انه مجموعة من البشر تعيش فى مساكن . فدعونا الناس للمشاركة فى دهان العمارات المحيطة بالحديقة و تنظيف لشارع متعاونين مع الحى ، و مثل هذا التعاون أمر نادر . و لكن من الواضح ان المعمار العظيم قد دفع الناس لتنظيف الشارع ليتلاءم مع المعمار . ثم قام الحى بتشجير الشارع و نوى ان ننقل الورشة الموجودة فى آخر الشارع و تشجيع قيام نشاط تجارى يتلاءم مع الحديقة - بحيث تبعت الحرف التقليدية (طرق على النحاس - طبع على الجلد) و قد فرضنا على المحلات ان تشيد واجهاتها على الطراز الاسلامى ، و بدأنا بمبنى الحى نفسها ، الذى كان بعد ما اقيمت المباني و اعدنا صياغته ليتناسب مع معمار الحديقة و قد بدأ كثير من الناس العاديين و اصحاب المحلات يطورون مبانيهم لتتلاءم مع الحديقة . بل و يلاحظ ان الاطفال فى تعاملهم مع الحديقة يبذلون قمارى جهدهم للحفاظ عليها ، و هو امر يختلف تماما عن سلوكهم العادى تجاه ممتلكات الحكومة و لكن من الواضح انهم و جدوا انفسهم فى هذه الحديقة .

و قد يتمخض كل هذا عن الاقتراح المرفق الذى تقدمت به الى الحكومة المصرية باعادة صياغة

الحى بأكمله .