

# Islamic oasis

A huge project in the middle of Africa's largest city has transformed an old rubbish dump into a beautiful public park and has revitalised an entire neighbourhood. TOBY MUSGRAVE journeys to Cairo to learn more

PHOTOGRAPHY BY TOBY MUSGRAVE

**C**AIRO IS A MAGICAL city. A place where East meets West, where minarets jostle with modern tower-blocks, where sparkling hotels rise above traditional homes. It is not only the capital of Egypt, it is also the largest city in Africa, with a population estimated at 17 million (possibly as high as 25 million).

It was the Fatimid caliphate (the **Shia Muslim** dynasty, originally from what is now Tunisia) who, having conquered Egypt in the late 10th century, established a new capital around 972 and called it *al-Qahira* ('the victorious'). Back then, Cairo was verdant

and lush, but by the late 20th century it had one of the world's lowest proportions of urban green space: one study estimated that the amount of public space per person was 20sq cm – barely a footprint.

Many people think of gardens and open space as a Western preoccupation, but they are part of Islamic culture; some of the earliest known were situated in the Middle East. Clearly Cairo's paucity needed addressing.

In 1984, His Highness the Aga Khan, the hereditary **Imam of the Shi'a Imami Ismaili Nizari** and founder and chairman of the Aga Khan Development Network, decided



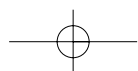
Al Azhar Park (top) offers fine views across Cairo. Its serene Lakeside Café (above) offers a cool vantage point, shaded by *Phoenix* palms



Evening is a favourite time for locals to visit the park; shade trees (above) eventually will shelter visitors from the scorching Egyptian sun



Al Azhar Park occupies an elevated position situated near Cairo's old city walls (above), the restoration of which forms part of the project. The Palm Promenade (top), a wide walkway flanked by ranks of mature *Roystonea regia* (Cuban royal palm) leads at one end to the **Citadel View** Restaurant set atop a terrace reached by steps either side of a water cascade. The path forms a spine that terminates, via a dog-leg, at the Lakeside Café. The scale of the development can be appreciated better from above (left); its large lake and 'floating' Lakeside Café is in the foreground





## INTERNATIONAL GARDENING

to fund the US\$30 million needed to create a new park for Cairo's citizens.

The park eventually opened in 2005 and has been a spectacular success. During day-time, it provides ample scope to sit, relax, picnic and play, but as the sun sets, especially during the Islamic holy month of Ramadan, the park comes to life. Families and friends gather to enjoy the cool of the evening in such pleasant surroundings.

### Rising to the challenge

Construction of the park began in 1997. The chosen site was an area of 30ha called **Al Darassa**, to the east of the city centre, just outside the eastern edge of the Ayyubid Wall (part of the city's 12th-century fortifications), and adjacent to the famous Al Azhar Mosque and University.

While the location covers the site of one of the original Fatimid gardens, it had, for the past 500 years, been used as a rubbish dump, the debris accumulating to such an extent that what had once been a level site was now a steep-sided hill. Indeed, the rubbish had so contaminated the soil that nothing would grow.

During the next eight years, 1,500,000cu m of soil were shifted; some 765,000cu m were removed, 605,000cu m were moved, cleaned and returned to site, plus an additional 80,000cu m of fresh topsoil was imported.

The park was designed by a local company, Sites International, which took advantage of the location's elevation and wonderful vistas of the city. Its varied topography has allowed



The broad terrace by the **Citadel View** Restaurant has a formal planting scheme reminiscent of a Persian carpet (above). Plants for the park are raised in a nursery outside the city (below left)

for a range of different styles within the space. The vision was to create a practical, modern space that fused together complementary yet distinct geographical and temporal influences into a unified whole.

The three main buildings were the object of an international competition: Egyptian architects created the entrance and the **Citadel View** Restaurant, while the Lakeside Café is the work of a French firm. Designers drew on Muslim architecture and garden design from different eras and places: the archways of park buildings are Fatimid inspired, Persian influence is evident in the water rills and fountains, while the Mogul concept of 'floating buildings' is used for the café.

### Taking a promenade

The central feature of the park is a walkway, serving in design terms as a 'spine' running the length of the site from the **Citadel View** Restaurant to the Lakeside Café. Following the tradition of many Islamic gardens, water is used as a central element in Al Azhar Park: it acts as a cohesive theme and introduces movement and sound, as well as keeping the air cool.

Views from in front of the restaurant over the park to the distant **Ayyubid** Citadel complex are magnificent. Closer by is a broad

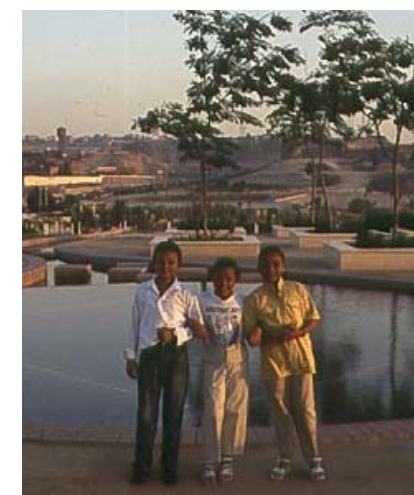
terrace with a centrally-aligned water rill and fountains, juxtaposed with formal beds. Beyond this terrace, visitors descend via steps on either side of water cascades (or *chini-kana*) to the Palm Promenade, on which the park's main entrance is situated. Opposite this entrance is the feature that local children – most of whom have never experienced a garden – enjoy most: a series of jets shooting up through paving, offering ample opportunity for a good soaking.

Towards the end of the Palm Promenade a narrow rill in the middle of a broad path descends a gentle slope to a scalloped bowl fountain. The path then turns towards the café with its floating appearance, built out over a lake. Here the path is flanked by a shady orchard of fruit trees (or *bustan*).

The lake serves as a reservoir, fed with Nile water, which is filtered and pumped through the Park's 10km of irrigation lines. Also flowing into it is the cascade that tumbles over rocks from a raised seating area. Here, the tree canopies are woven together to create a horizontal shade (a *takhtaboush*).

Away from the 'spine', the design becomes more informal; wide paths allow visitors to progress around the park with ease. Trees and palms cast welcome shade, and the massed plantings in sinuous beds make a colourful contrast to lawns grown from no less than four tonnes of grass seed.

Experimentation was needed in the early stages to find which plants would succeed on the site's poor soil. Some 325 different plant taxa are now cultivated: succulent *Agave*, various palms such as *Washingtonia*, *Phoenix*



*dactylifera* (date palm) and elegant *Roystonea regia*, as well as *Plumeria* (frangipani) with its fragrant blossom, *Cassia javanica* (a leguminous tree with showers of pink flowers), lavender and bedding including *Tagetes* and *Verbena* can all be seen, as well as many plants native to Egypt. To produce all the plants required – more than 650,000 have been planted – a nursery was established three hours drive to the north of the city.

### Breaking social barriers

It is heartening to observe how the park transcends social barriers; many visitors are from the adjacent Darb al-Ahmar neighbourhood, one of Cairo's poorest. It has been a deliberate policy to charge these residents a small entrance fee (there is a sliding scale according to status) to engender a sense of responsibility and ownership, for things given gratis are taken for granted. The policy has worked: the park receives 4,000 visitors daily,



and it is uplifting to see how much pleasure it gives to those who have never had a garden.

Perhaps this sense of ownership also has its roots in what the Al Azhar Park Project has become. One of the project's triumphs is the way in which the local community has been involved. Local artisans, for example, made the furniture and many of the fittings for the restaurants as well as the marble benches within the park. Others have trained to become gardeners, kitchen staff or assistants on the eight-year archeological project to excavate and restore a 1.5km stretch of the Ayyubid Wall, which was buried to a depth of 15m by the 500-year-old rubbish mound.

What began life as a project to design and construct a park has grown into something much larger as Al-Azhar Park has spread its munificent roots far into the Darb al-Ahmar neighbourhood. The project has offered the Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC) an opportunity to work with residents and has

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• See also the website of the Aga Khan Trust for Culture: www.akdn.org/agency/aktc.html

The park has proved to be a great success from a social viewpoint. After the sun sets, families and friends gather to enjoy the fresh evening air (below); water used as a linking feature helps to further cool the atmosphere – the park at this time provides great relief from the heat of the day, especially in summer.

Children are especially fond of the park; they enjoy its fountains and open space it provides as many come from homes without any kind of garden or open outdoor space (below left)

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