

Mosques of Cairo

Marvelous models of Islamic architecture

Cairo-Mouchira El-Fishawy

Throughout its history Egypt remembered the cities which were once the capital. When King Mena unified the two frontiers: the Meccan and maritime of the country, in 3400 B. C., he made Menef the capital (close to al-Jezza). It remained the capital until the invasion of Egypt by Alexander the Macedonian in 332 B. C., when the Alexandrian city in the north became the capital of Egypt in Roman times.

In 18 A. H. (639 A. D.), the Moslem armies penetrated and conquered Egypt under the leadership of Amr Ibn Al As and the town of Al Fastat was made the capital. The governor Jawhar Squalli, decided in 359 A. H. (969 A. D.) to call it Cairo by developing it so that it could

compete with the city of Baghdad which was built by the Abbasids according to a marvelous, beautiful, architectural model. The history of the mosques of Cairo is full of rich, magnificent, Islamic architecture. The Amr Ibn Al As Mosque in old Cairo, was the first mosque to be built, just after the conquest of Egypt in 21 A. H. (641 A. D.).

Al Azhar Mosque

Al Azhar Mosque is one of the oldest mosques of Cairo. Jawhar the Sicilian began its construction in 360 A. H. (970 A. D.). It is 150 m in length and took three years to complete. From the time it was built until now

it is a mosque which has played a role in the religious, social, political and cultural life and history of Egypt.

This mosque built by the Fatimides, was named "Al Azhar", in reference to the daughter of Prophet Mohammad (Peace Be Upon Him), Fatima-Azahra (God Blesses Her). During its long history of more than thousand years, Al Azhar has seen many restorations, renovations and extensions: among them the restorations carried out by Ad-Dhahir Bibriss. Sultan Kanswa Al Ghouri proceeded soon after his confirmation as a ruler in 906 A. H. (1505 A. D.) to add a minaret with two spires that has a unique Islamic character and it is one of the most beautiful minarets in the world. Sultan Abou Al-Nasr Qaytabay made several improvements: a large basin, a beautiful place of ablution with a fountain, a public drinking water supply and a Quranic school to learn Quran and teach religious sciences. Two rooms were subsequently added for the teaching of Shari'a (religious law). Al Azhar developed through the centuries to become an Islamic university where its faculties teach specialized Islamic subjects. Today it is called " Al Azhar University " ➤

جامع محمد علي الكبير.

The Mohamed Ali Al Kabir Mosque.



The Mosque of Ibn Toloun.

جامع بن طولون .

Al Azhar Mosque played an essential role in the Egyptian national movement. Religious speakers ignited the revolt against the colonizers at various times and several demonstrations started from the mosque; such as the famous sit-in during the time of the "Revolt of Cairo" against the French occupation of Egypt (1798-1801). French troops entered Al Azhar, igniting public opinion against the French.

The Mosque of Ibn Toloun

The mosque is one of the marvelous achievements of Ahmed Ibn Toloun, the first sultan of Egypt. He was born in Baghdad in 220 A. H. (835 A. D.) and educated in Samarra, Iraq. Khalife Al Moatamed Ala Allah appointed him governor of Egypt. It took three years to build the mosque which was completed in 263 A. H. (878 A. D.) at a cost of 120,000 dinars. The mosque, 80 m. in length, resembles in its broad outline the Amr Ibn Al-As Mosque. It differs from most mosques as it has arcs rather than minarets. It was not influenced by Roman or Byzantine architecture. The walls of the mosque are adorned with Quranic verses in beautifully coloured, Kufic calligraphy (Kufa is a city in Iraq). It has an original spiral minaret, which is regarded as one of the oldest minarets of Egypt. It resembles the Iraqi mosque in Samarra called "Al Malwiya" (The Spiral), - one of the archetypes of Abbasid architecture.



The Mosque of Ibn Toloun.

جامع بن طولون .

Al Hakim Al Kabir Mosque

This mosque was completed by the Fatimid Sultan Abu Mansour after his confirmation as a ruler in 1013 A. D. Its construction started under the reign of his father Al Aziz Bi Allah in 990 A. D. It was strongly shaken by an earthquake and was rebuilt by Sultan Ad-Dhahir Bibris in 707 H (1307 A. D.). The architecture closely resembles that of the Ibn Toloun Mosque; they are both made of bricks with stone minarets.

Al Aqmar Mosque

The Al Aqmar Mosque, built in 1125 A.D., does Fatimid architecture proud due to the exquisite decoration at the front. It is located at Al Moiz Lidine Allah (previously Annahassine). ➔



The mosque has a magnificent site at the top of Al Muqatam mountain in Cairo. Built in 1356 A. D., it is regarded as one of the great achievements of the 14th century: its plan is superb, forming a new, large wide esplanade. Its originality comes from its large dome, its high walls, its luxurious doors and the abundance of ornaments, which resemble bee hives that play tricks on the eyes and make it internationally famous. It is one of the most beautiful architectural achievements of the Mamlouk period.

Saleh Talaia Mosque

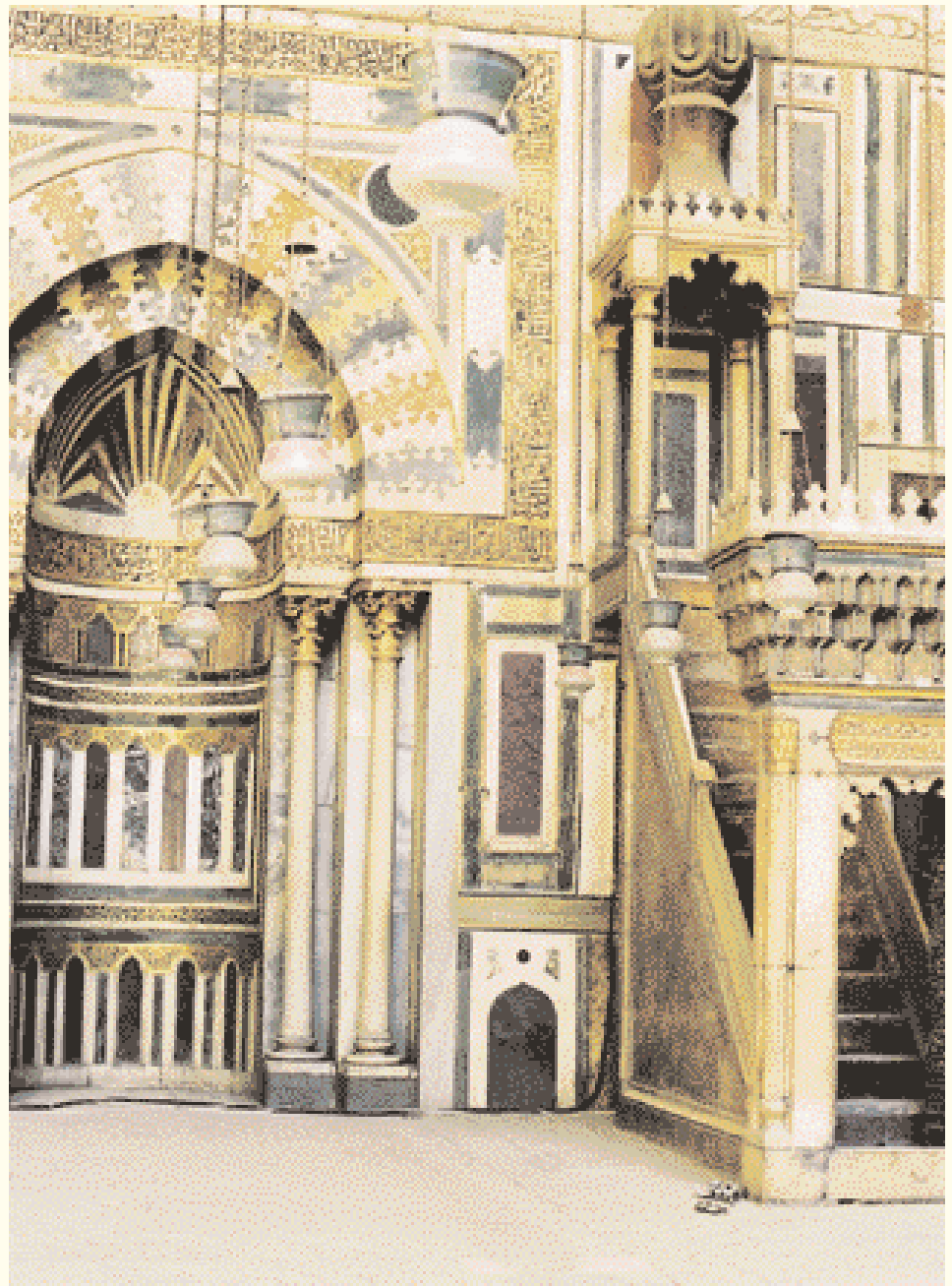
Constructed in 555 A. H. (1160 A. D.), this mosque is in "Maydane Bab Zouela" opposite one of the gates of Fatimid Cairo. It is regarded as the last monument of the Fatimids in Egypt. It was built four meters above ground level and has shops underneath. This method of construction is referred to as "the suspended mosque".

Ad-Dhahir Bibris Mosque

Built between 1266 and 1269A. D. its name refers to Sultan Mamlouk Ad-Dahir Birbis. Only Al Azhar, Ibn Toloun, and Hakem Mosques are more beautiful. The plan of the mosque is similar to Ibn Toloun Mosque and is characterized by three main entrances at the front.

The Naser Hassan Ben Naser Mohamed Ben Qallawoun Mosque

It is one of the most beautiful constructions in the area of the fortress of Salah-eddine Al Ayyoubi (Saladin). The mosque has a magnificent site at the top of Al Muqatam mountain in Cairo. Built in 1356 A. D., it is regarded as one of the great achievements of the 14th century: its plan is superb, forming a new, large wide esplanade. Its originality comes from its large dome, its high walls, its luxurious doors and the abundance of ornaments, which resemble bee hives that play tricks on the eyes and make it internationally famous. It is one of the most beautiful architectural achievements of the Mamlouk period. The area of the mosque is about 7900 sq. m, with a 150 m length, a width of 78 m and a 37 m height on the level of its door. Its two minarets highlight the Cairo skyline with a height of 92 m. It associates the solidity of construction and the smoothness of the ornaments and resembles a fortress. ➔



Sultan Hassan Mosque.

مسجد السلطان حسن.



Al Azhar Mosque.

الجامع الأزهر.

The Mosque of Chikhoun Foundation

It stands next to the Sultan Hassan Mosque and was built by Sultan Naser Hassan.

Al Moayyid Mosque

Its name refers to the Sultan Abu Nasr Sheik Al Mahmoudi who was called Al Moayyid and was fond of architecture and arts. It is as beautiful as the Bab Zouela Mosque and is regarded as one of the architectural jewels of the Mamlouk era. It was built in 818-824 A. H (1415-1420 A. D.).

Sannan Basha Mosque

It was built in 1571 on the Ottoman model in the Boulaq area of Cairo, in Assananiya Street (El Balah). It is made of a large square room and a stone Byzantine-style dome. On each of its corners the name of God is written in yellow stone on a background of white stone. On the three sides of this dome, there are halls formed of arches held up by columns supporting semi-circular domes decorated with plaster and adorned with the words "Allah Rabbi" (God is my Creator). To the south-east of the mosque one finds an Ottoman minaret called Masala.

The Othman Katakhada Mosque

It is known as the Kikhiya Mosque and is located near the Opera Square in the center of Cairo. It was built in 1734 by Othman

Katakhada who liked to help the poor. The Kikhiya Mosque consists of an open courtyard surrounded by halls on four sides, with white marble and beautifully colored marble columns. The ceiling is decorated in different colors with gilded oil paint. The mihrab is located at the front of the eastern hall of the mosque and is made of fine marble with two green marble columns over which a grid is adorned with the words: "Allah- Mohammad- Abu Bakr- Othman". Attached to the mosque is a drinking water supply, Quranic school and a bath. Its minaret has the shape of a disc and finishes in the shape of an obelisk.

Arab architecture preserved its luxurious character throughout the time of the Ayyoubides, successors of Salah-eddine Al Ayyoubi, in particular under the reigns of the Mamlouks Sultans which are regarded as one of the best periods of Islamic art, known as the golden age (1250-1715). A decline started in the eighteenth century due to the influence of Western art. The fortress built by Salah-eddine Al Ayyoubi remained the seat of power under the reign of the Ayyoubides and Mamlouks.

The Mohamed Ali Al Kabir Mosque

It is a large mosque which bears the name of its founder, the ruler Mohamed Ali Al Kabir, the founder of modern Egypt. Built in 1830 in

Al Qela'a (the fortress), it is characterized by its domes and minarets of Ottoman style. It is a copy of the Ahmed Sultan Mosque in the Turkish city of Istanbul.

Restoration

All these mosques are living examples of the richness of Cairo whose sky is embellished by the minarets from where muezzins call for prayers five times a day. In two years, Cairo will become a unique Islamic historical city after the completion of the restoration undertaken by the Ministry of Culture which started in 1998, at a cost of £17m. A total of 148 Islamic monuments are being restored, among them the mosques of Amr Ibn Al-As, Ahmed Ibn Toloun and Al-Amir Sarghatmetche, which dates back to the reign of the Mamlouks.

To avoid congestion near the mosques pedestrian walk ways are being built and lined with trees and lamp posts. Thus, Cairo will become a marvelous city attracting tourists and delighting all who visit it.

Not all of Cairo's mosques have been mentioned. They include Assaleh Nejm-eddine Ayyoub, Qaytabay, Berqouq in the district of Bayna Al-Qasrayne, as well as those of Ahl Al-Bayte, such as the Al Imam Al-Houssein Mosque, the Assayda Nafisa and Assayda Zaineb Mosques (God Bless them All) and that of Ghouriya. ■