



Historical treasure. The courtyard of the Hanging Church with its twin towers.

(Provided by Hassan Abdel Zaher)

South Cairo church offers insight into Egypt's Christian history

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Cairo

Saint Virgin Mary's Coptic Orthodox Church – better known as Al Muallaqa (“the Hanging Church”) – in southern Cairo is considered the jewel of the historical treasures of Egypt's Coptic Christian community.

Dating to the third century, the church has been of interest of visitors for years and is a piece of art that implies meaning, faith and historical depth. The church, probably the oldest in Egypt, derives its popular name from its location atop the southern gatehouse of a Babylonian fortress. The church's nave hangs above a passageway.

Visitors climb several steps to the church's iron gates in an ascent that probably represents spiritual elevation. The gates are under a pointed stone arch that creates an inspiring demarcation between the church's interior and the outside world.

After passing the iron gates,

visitors can admire the sanctuary's beautiful twin bell towers that date to the 19th century as well as the front of the building. The towers stand proudly behind a narrow courtyard that leads into the outer porch that was built in the 11th century.

The church's fascinating past makes it one of the bastions of the Coptic Christian church in Egypt. It has been rebuilt several times since the seventh century, with the most extensive restoration taking place during the tenth century.

“Deep under each part of this church there is an interesting story of the evolution of Christianity in this country,” said Bishop Julius Ava Mina, the general supervisor of southern Cairo churches. “This is what makes this place unique and important for the history of the Christians in Egypt.”

In 1047, the Hanging Church was designated the official residence of the Coptic Orthodox pope when the Egyptian capital was moved from Alexandria to Cairo under the Muslim conquest.

Around the same time, Pope

Christodolos caused controversy within the Coptic Church by choosing to be consecrated at the Hanging Church. His decision set a precedent, and thereafter several patriarchs chose to be elected, enthroned and even buried at the Hanging Church. Today, the seat of the Christian pope is in a north-western Cairo church where Pope Tawadros II has his office.

The Hanging Church was probably the first to be constructed in Egypt in the basilican style, which originated in ancient Rome. It looks totally new today thanks to the many restorations it underwent, the last of which was completed in 2011.

The church is perhaps most famous for its icons, of which 110

are displayed within its walls. Many of the icons decorate sanctuary screens and were painted between the eighth and 18th centuries. The oldest and most sacred icon, known as a “Coptic Mona Lisa,” depicts the Virgin Mary.

The main altar screen is made of ebony out of which ivory juts to show Coptic Cross designs that date to the 12th and 13th centuries.

Girgis Fawzi, a 33-year-old civil servant and regular parishioner, said he never fails to admire the church's interior.

“Every corner has its own beauty,” Fawzi said. “The beauty of the icons, the different sections of the church and the historical value of each of these corners make me a strong fan of it.”

Many of the Hanging Church's original artefacts have been removed and are on display at the nearby Coptic Museum, which contains hundreds of pieces from the Greek, Roman, Byzantine and Ottoman eras.

The Coptic Museum was founded by a Christian politician Marcus Simaika Pasha. Many

artefacts showcased at the museum were also donated by Egypt's Christian community.

A few metres from the Coptic quarter stands Egypt's and Africa's oldest Islamic house of worship, Amr Ibn al-As Mosque. The huge mosque was built in 642 on the site where Amr Ibn al-As, the commander of the Muslim army that conquered Egypt that year, is believed to have erected his tent.

The mosque and the church confer unmatched spirituality on the area. They offer a historical record of Egypt, which experienced Christianity, then Islam and continues to harbour adherents of both religions.

“The two houses of Christian and Islamic worship are a reflection of Egypt, a country that in the most part functions as a melting pot of faiths,” said Ehab Hamdi, a tour guide. “They confer cultural, tourist and religious riches to the place that can be hardly matched elsewhere.”

Hassan Abdel Zaher is a Cairo-based contributor to The Arab Weekly.

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Egyptian architect battles to preserve city's heritage

Karen Dabrowska

London

The whole of Cairo is under threat, paying the price of modernisation and rising property prices, said Egyptian architect Omnia Abdel Barr, co-founder of the “Save Cairo” campaign.

“What is happening in Cairo is happening to all the historic cities in Egypt,” Abdel Barr said in her lecture “The Cairo We Lost,” delivered in London.

She pointed out that in Egypt there was no equivalent to the United Kingdom's National Trust or English Heritage dedicated to the preservation of historic sites and buildings and there was no political will to preserve the urban fabric of Cairo's historic downtown and eastern section. “The attitude among politicians is let it die, we will build another one,” she said.

Cairo was founded after the Arab conquest in the seventh century. Famous for its mosques, madrasas, hammams and fountains, Cairo became the centre of the Islamic

world, reaching its golden age in the 14th century. In 1979, UNESCO proclaimed historic Cairo a World Cultural Heritage site with 600 monuments.

“Cairo is many cities together, including Fustat, the Abbasid City, the Ayyubid City, the medieval city and the Ottoman City,” Abdel Barr said. She quoted 15th-century Egyptian historian Taqi al-Din al-Maqrizi, author of “Al-Khitat,” saying: “Alas, everything is lost except for very little, deteriorated, ruined and destroyed.” Abdel Barr said the statement is as true today as it was when Maqrizi made it.

Other historians and architects lamented the destruction of old Cairo. In 1864, French architect Arthur Rhone said: “It is done, the most beautiful city of the old eastern world will become banal and European like so many others.”

In 1840, British architect James Wild sketched the houses in old Cairo as he feared they would soon be demolished and, in 1843, British painter Richard Dadd painted houses in the old city.

“I searched for those houses but did not find them,” Abdel Barr said.

In 1869, an Islamic museum was

built and an index of Cairo's monuments set up. In 1881, the Khedive Tawfiq established a committee responsible for the preservation of Islamic and Coptic monuments in Egypt as a body within the Ministry of Awqaf.

Abdel Barr described how the monuments were isolated in a no man's land. “There is only one house left near the Ibn Tulun mosque. The government is saving the monuments but destroying the city. Moreover, banks are not giving loans for the restoration of historic houses,” she said.

● **While co-operation between conservation organisations in the Arab world “is a bit difficult,” an “Egypt Heritage Network” was set up on the national level.**

The Save Cairo Campaign, which is fighting to prevent the further destruction of historic Cairo, lamented in a statement that “the state issues demolition orders for dilapidated or life-endangering old buildings instead of ordering their restoration.”

“The hardest attack on historic buildings took place during the months that followed the 2011 ‘Arab spring’; some buildings were demolished and others were built within heritage building boundaries, disregarding any technical requirements, especially in the area of al-Darb al-Ahmar. While the law bans the construction of any buildings higher than three stories in the area, 12-storey towers were being erected.”

The campaign had some successes, including saving Bayt Madkour historic building in al-Darb al-Ahmar, which was listed for conservation in 2010. A post-“Arab spring” government had inexplicably delisted it. The house dates to the 14th century, the interior had several exceptional architectural attributes but because of its run-down facade, a decision was issued to pull it down.

“Aided by local authorities keen

on the preservation of historic Cairo, we were first able to obtain from Cairo Governor Galal Saeed a decision to halt the demolition for one month,” Abdel Barr said.

“We inquired about the possibility to buy Bayt Madkour and opened a bank account under the name of the ‘Egyptian Association to Save Heritage’ to collect donations. An advertisement was recently filmed inside the house, as the film director spotted its special character. Now that the demolition of Bayt Madkour is halted for good, we are awaiting funds to start restoration.”

While co-operation between conservation organisations in the Arab world “is a bit difficult,” an “Egypt Heritage Network” was set up on the national level, Abdel Barr noted.

“We have Save Alex in Alexandria, then we decided we are going to call ourselves Save Cairo, then there was Save Minia and Save Port Saeed, then Save Assiut, so all these ‘saves’ are together under an independent network and we have meetings to discuss how we can help each other. Nonetheless, it is very difficult for civil society organisations to work in Egypt,” Abdel Barr added.