

# THE PRESERVATION OF HISTORIC CAIRO YAŞ HBĀK PALACE - MADRASA OF SUNQUR SA'DĪ - MAWLAWI TAKIYYA

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The Italian presence in Egypt has a long history, but was particularly significant at the time of the most important developments in the history of the country, and contributed greatly to the formation and preservation of a cultural identity. At the decisive turning point, marked by the actions of Muhammad'Alī (1805–1845) for the setting up of the constitution of an independent Egypt, the Italian contribution was decisive and principally given by the spontaneous and personal actions of single individuals, at a time when a politically united Italy did not yet exist. It was a participation which, by its character and development until to the present day, seems to be linked to a certain affinity and understanding which exists between the two peoples.

In his book *L'opera degli Italiani nella formazione dell'Egitto moderno* (Italian involvement in the emergence of modern Egypt), Sammarco underlines the fact that Count Carlo Rossetti, already noted for his goodwill towards the Egyptian people, was the most authoritative and trusted counsellor of Muhammad'Alī during the organisation of an autonomous Egyptian state.

The building of the Suez Canal was also a decisively Italian undertaking, led by the engineer Luigi Negrelli, which operated against the interests of other nations who saw in the realisation of this project both the loss of maritime control and the loss of colonial power in Egypt; it was Negrelli's official report of September 1858 which allowed Khedive Isma'īl to give the go-ahead for the work which culminated in the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, the canal remaining today one of Egypt's primary economic resources.

After 1882, during the period of English occupation, the role of the Italians, by then present in all levels of Egyptian society, was important in order to guarantee that the country progressed in parallel with developments in European civilisation. In this period, Italian artists, architects, technicians, and workers contributed directly not only to craftsmanship, but also to the construction of buildings and monuments and to urban planning in general. They were no less represented in the parallel activity of restoration and preservation organ-

ised by the Comité de Conservation des Monuments de l'Art Arabe.

This committee, which was set up by a decree of Khedive Tewfik in 1881, included numerous Italians in its membership and used Italian firms and Italian technical skills in many operations of restoration and conservation. From the very beginning there were two sub-committees, one for drawing up an inventory and the other for the study and conservation of the monuments. Between the years 1913–18, the committee's rules for the protection of the monuments of the Arab period were revised by the Italian M. Piola Caselli, the Sultan's counsellor, who drafted the 1918 law of Fuad I relating to this. The inventory of monuments which had to be under the care and preservation of Cairo, made after the passing of the 1918 law and referred to in the 1921 report of Achille Patricolo, the Italian architect who was then chairman of the committee, listed 504 buildings of importance for Arab art, of which 410 came under the jurisdiction of the High Council for *Awqaf* (Religious Endowments), fifteen were the responsibility of the Government and seventy-nine were in private hands. The list also included, for reasons of chronology, twenty other buildings on account of their Coptic art. An incomplete inventory listing sixty monuments of Arab art and twenty-four Coptic monuments was drawn up for the Provinces.

The Comité fulfilled its role in this way until 1953, when, following complex political changes, it was absorbed into the Coptic-Islamic section of the Egyptian Antiquities Organisation. The work carried out by the Comité was remarkable, and even today, for those who are interested in this sector, each basic documentary reference has to be researched in the literature and in the activity the committee was carrying out in that period: forty volumes of documentation and technical reports bear witness to the great commitment and efficiency of the Comité in the field of the conservation of the Egyptian monumental heritage during more than seventy years of activity.

Unfortunately, the Comité was dissolved just at the time Italy was beginning to define the theory of restoration, under Cesare Brandi, and, fol-

lowing the initiative of Giulio Carlo Argan, setting up the first schools of art and restoration. These two projects were setting in motion lively research into conservation techniques, an activity developing rapidly throughout Europe, starting with the "Athens Charter" and the "Italian Restoration Charter" of 1931, which preceded the 1964 "Venice Charter" still in force today.

The Egyptian institutions continued to have formal scientific and academic ties with other international research groups. In practice this helped to maintain some continuity of international contact, in the commitment of professionally organised foreign archaeological expeditions working on Egyptian soil. One outstanding contribution in this context was the important programme, unique in place and time, for the saving of the Nubian monuments following the construction of the second Aswan High Dam. This project involved Egyptians and foreigners working together at every level, and among the most committed of the foreigners were the Italians. In fact, they were able to pay particular attention to the scientific and methodological aspects of the restoration itself. In connection with this, a course leading to a diploma in restoration, established in the Faculty of Archaeology at Cairo University in 1976, was very important. Experts from various countries were sent for, including the author of this article, from Italy. The urgency of a commitment to restoration and preservation regarding the urban environment, and particularly, Islamic Cairo, then emerged from the marked phenomenon of demographic concentration tied up with the evacuation of the Nubian people. This was highlighted by the "Congress for the saving of Islamic Cairo" sponsored by UNESCO in 1980, and the inclusion of the historic centre of the modern metropolis on the list of world heritage sites.

Cairo has in fact become one of the most densely populated cities in the world. From just 600 thousand inhabitants at the beginning of 1900, the population reached 2.3 million inhabitants in 1952, and 10 million in 1982. The density of habitation today has exceeded 14,000 inhabitants per square kilometre, all in



204. The sama'khana seen from the monastery.

205. The old city of Cairo between the mosque of Muhammad 'Alī and, in the foreground, the Hotel Semiramis and the modern city.

206. Aerial view and skyscrapers in the old quarter between the mosque of Ibn Tulun and the mosque of Muhammad 'Alī.



an area just 0.3% of the extent of Egypt. The city is thus redoubling its population at ever increasing rate, within an urban surface increase of just a third with respect to the demographic increase. This phenomenon has involved many aspects of the old city whose development, from the time of the Arab conquest of Babylon (639–41), was interrupted only towards the middle of the nineteenth century. Until then the city of Cairo had developed, among various events, on a south-north axis in the same area, from the first settlement of El Fustat (641) to that of El Kahira Fatimida (founded in 969). From 1869 onwards, the development of the modern city to the west of this area promoted by Khedive Isma'il, who aimed at achieving a city built according to western urban planning, relegated the old city to increasing isolation from the most productive and representative urban activities. On the other hand, this allowed the ancient urban fabric, which despite two "lacerations" produced by the great highways of El Azhar and Muhammad'Alī, to survive intact. All this has made Old Cairo, which witnessed the Ayyubid, Mameluke and Ottoman empires succeed each other through history, the Islamic world's richest city in terms of historically representative Arab monuments. The urban decentralisation plans of Isma'il did not, however, hamper the degradation of Cairo due to the related demographic increase, particularly in the Old City, among ever poorer classes. The decentralization inevitably caused arbitrary reconstructions of the buildings as well as uncontrolled heights, which in turn contributed to environmental decay made worse by the lack of regular maintenance and inadequacy of the infrastructure which by then was expected to provide the necessities of life. The fact was that, among other reasons, the pressure of tourism with its huge economic attractions has meant that general maintenance and attention was always directed towards the areas with the more ancient remains of the Egypt of the Pharaohs. This itself has, in a certain sense, distracted public interest from the native Islamic heritage which, being still "lived in," is much more subject to alienation and degradation. The political urgency to save, as much as possible, this cultur-



207. Panorama with the mosque of Muhammad 'Alī- in the background.



al and artistic heritage, which relates to both Islamic tradition and the story of humanity, was in fact recognised only a few years ago. From the 1970s onwards many nations have wanted to make their own contribution to the preservation of Islamic Cairo, looking to collaborate, despite many practical difficulties, with the Egyptian authorities. The difficulties arise primarily from the lack of suitably qualified local labour capable of working on a professionally conducted, scientific restoration. Italy also decided to take part in the international collaboration promoted by the UNESCO appeal, and the then Director of the Italian

Cultural Institute, Professor Carla Burri, sought the assistance of the Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs, and the Italian cultural and academic environment, in a project to help save the so-called Theatre of the Whirling Dervishes (the Mawlawī *sama'khana*) which Professor Burri had visited by chance and found in an abandoned state in a densely populated area of Old Cairo. It is a very exceptional building, of great artistic and historic interest, but restoration would be difficult because of the fragility of the structure, then on the point of collapse. There was also, at that period, insufficient financial support even to

study the building properly and outline a project for its restoration. The work of the recovery of the building, which is part of a vast historic monumental complex, was able to begin thanks to the setting up of a *cantiere-scuola* (on-site school) to teach about building methods, linked to the University of Cairo, where the author of this article, whose initiative this was, had been invited to lecture. The *cantiere-scuola* was the first of its kind in Egypt, and many Italian craftsmen, technicians, and restorers have now worked there alongside Egyptian personnel, seeking to promote, in every field and at all levels, an incli-





nation to recover that capacity for craftsmanship which, scientifically based, constitutes the essential tool of any work of restoration or preservation. In time the work became much broader and was supported by an Italian association, the CFPR (Centro Formazione Professionale Restauro), which now organizes the training courses in restoration with the support of the SCA (Supreme Council of Antiquities).

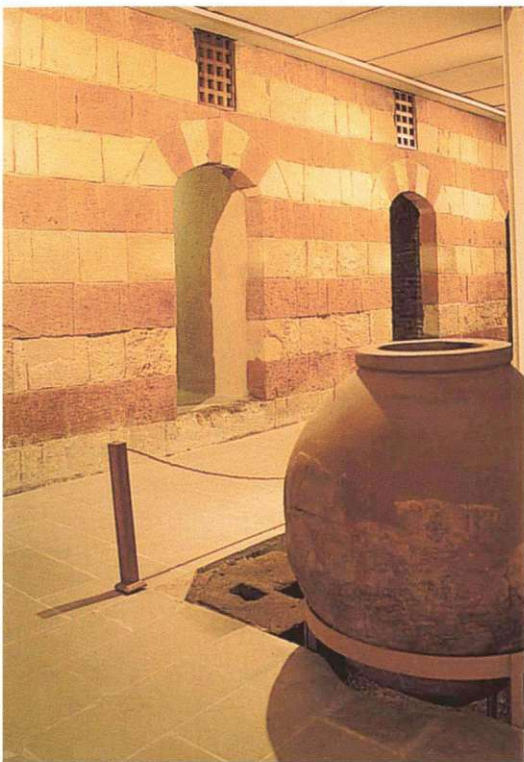
The training activities of the school were developed in parallel with the work to recover the Mawlawi *sama'khana*.

The Centro Italo-Egiziano per il Restauro e L'Archeologia (Egyptian-Italian Centre for Restoration and Archaeology) was founded in 1988 on the occasion of the opening of the restored *sama'khana* to the public and visitors. From then on, the Centre has collaborated in restoration courses at the University of Giza, and at the Fine Arts Institutes of both Cairo and Alexandria. It has also contributed to the setting up of academic courses in the Universities of Qena and Tanta and has given assistance to various Egyptian universities and individual Egyptian students to encourage these concerning restoration in the form of grants to study in Italy. At the same time, the Centre undertook historical and archaeological research throughout the whole monumental area which, as a result of studies and activities, was identified as a conglomeration of inseparable historic buildings, today famous as the Architectural Complex of the Mawlawi Dervishes.

The area in which the Italian-Egyptian Centre is located extends over about 7,500 square metres to the foot of the Citadel of Cairo in the Hilmiyāh quarter near to the mosque of Sultan Hasan. It is characterised by the presence of a two ancient monumental nuclei, partly stratigraphically overlapping. The first is the architectural complex of Sunqur Sa'dī (fourteenth century) comprising a minaret, a mausoleum, and the remains of a madrasa, built over the remains of an earlier architectural structure, dating back to the time of Ibn Tulun (ninth century), and yet older remains, dating back to the first Arab settlements in Egypt. A second nucleus is formed by one of the largest Mameluke palaces in Cairo, originally built by



209. The madrasa of Sunqur Sa'dī found under the sama'khana.



210. The area of the madrasa beneath the sama'khana, set out as a Mawlawi museum.



Qūsūn, then extended to the east by the Emir Yašhbāk and, finally, to the west, by Aqbardī—(fourteenth–sixteenth century). This last extension, according to the archaeological evidence which has emerged so far, also partially extended over the remains of the madrasa of Sunqur Sa'dī.

Between the seventeenth and the nineteenth centuries, within this complex of monumental buildings with other buildings built round and about, the Mawlawi Dervishes erected their monastery (the *takiyya*) making use of part of the pre-existing structure, then abandoned and in ruinous condition.

We do not know exactly when this Islamic religious Order reached Egypt. The Order had its headquarters in Konya (Turkey), and there are Turkish texts which mention journeys made by members of the Order before the Ottoman conquests, leaving the supposition that there might have already been some Mawlawi in Egypt, in some way linked with the mother house.

The first official document testifying to their presence in Egypt is a ministerial act dated 17

safar 1016 (AD 1607) in which the Yemenite Prince Yūsuf Sinān gave them this area of Cairo, together with other valuable gifts in Cairo and the Delta, which must have served to provide income for the maintenance of the Confraternity and the *takiyya* itself. The document sets out the exact sites and boundaries of the four gifts of land in Egypt. One of these is the area of the *takiyya* itself, described in its detailed boundaries. In the same document, the donor also establishes the level of salaries for fifty personnel, making reference to the function each of them carries out in the *takiyya*, then called *Sa'diyya*. This reference leads one to think that perhaps a Mawlawi community was already present, although not yet very well organised, but surely relevant, because of the number of people that the donor cites employed for its community activity.

Archaeological investigations have been able to reconstruct that the large area which the Mawlawi received was at that time a mass of abandoned and ruined buildings. It was the Mawlawi therefore who, inspired by the archi-

tectural characteristics and layout of their mother house in Konia and of other convents of their Order, gradually reconstructed the existing buildings, integrating them with new purpose-built areas for the needs of the Order. It seems, however, that for a certain period after the donation of the area, nothing much was changed and the Dervishes limited themselves to using it just as it was. The restructuring and additions were only effected, perhaps thanks to further gifts, in various stages between the seventeenth and the nineteenth centuries.

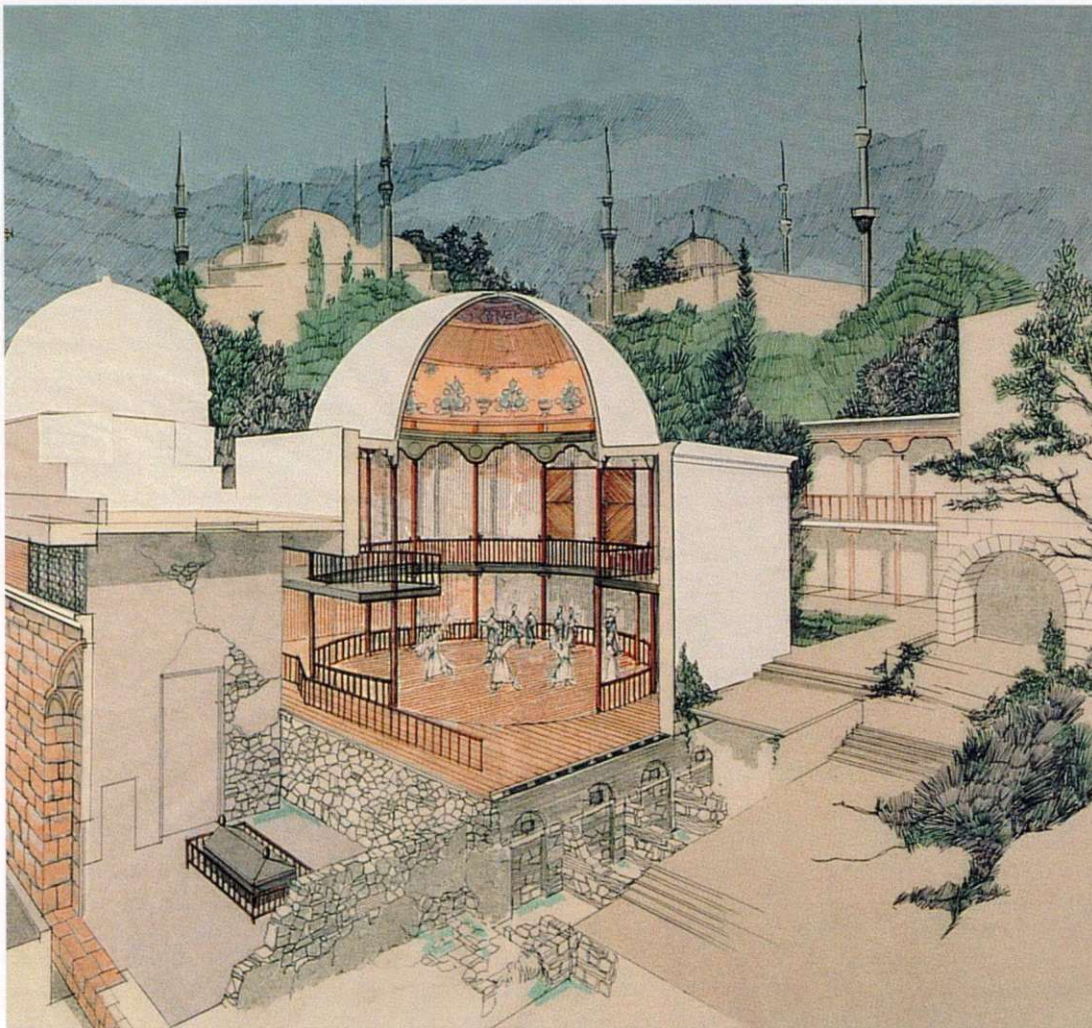
The architectural complex of the Mawlawi Dervishes was developed in the intermediate area between the ruins of the madrasa of Sunqur Sa'dī and those of the Yašhbāk palace, and the pre-existing buildings were adapted as far as was possible to new uses. The building of a new wing on Shāri' el-Suyūfiyya gave the convent direct access onto the street.

The whole complex—although not related to an initial project and partly conditioned by the use of pre-existing structures—finally reached an organic configuration and a functional log-





211. The dome of the sama'khana during restoration, with the Citadel and the mosque of Muhammad 'Ali in the background



212. Perspective vertical section with the inside of the sama'khana and the area of the excavations.

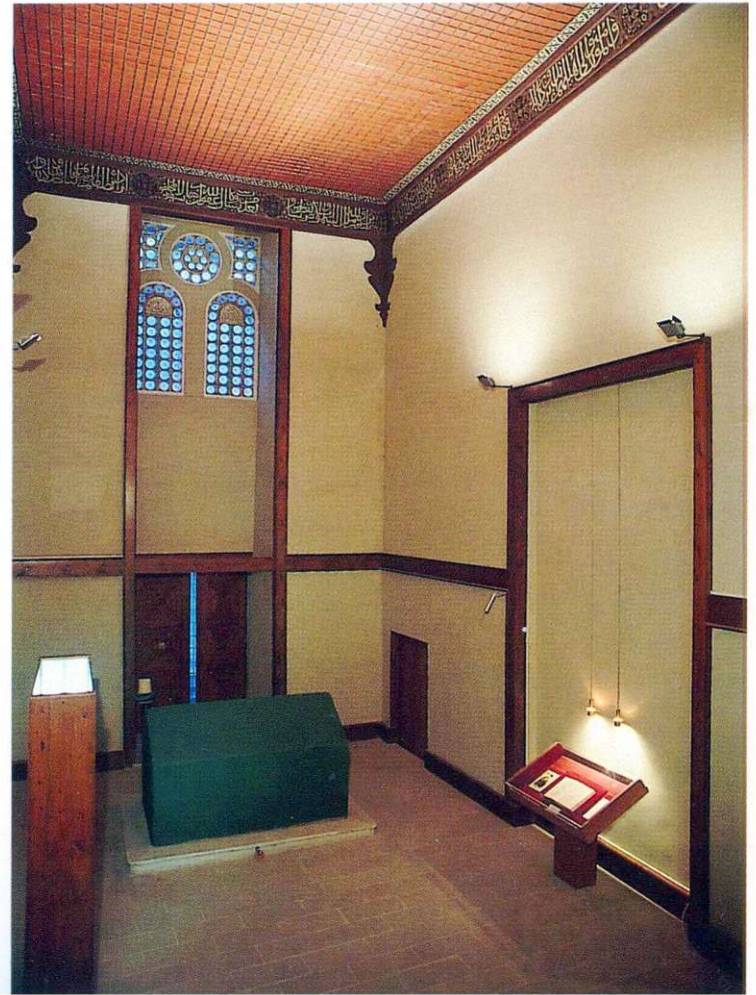
ic and expressive connection of the various components. They are four blocks of buildings which, like curtains, each control and circumscribe the space of other four sectors: 1) the *religious area*, with the *sama'khana* and the mausoleum; 2) the *monastery proper*, made up of individual cells built around a garden with a fountain in the middle, as at Konia; 3) an *area for normal daily activities*, with places for meetings and prayer, the refectory and the kitchens; 4) the *public area*, with *reception areas* that define the complex on the street in which there is also the entrance to the *takiyya* and the great Aqbari garden, where pilgrims were welcomed and the poor who came seeking food were nourished.

At the centre of this architectural complex is, one of the few in the world still entire in all its parts, the *sama'khana*, the central element of the *religious area*.

The *sama'khana* was the first element the Centre restored. It was built entirely in wood, with the exception of the perimeter walls, and was topped by a dome which, with a diameter of 10 metres and a structural thickness of only 10 centimetres, is among the largest wooden domes ever made in Cairo. The structure, completed in the nineteenth century, represents the peak of evolution of such architecture, and is the planned result of a proportional system where volume and space have specific symbolic meanings relating to the mystical dance of the Mawlawi and to the philosophical thinking of Islamic origin. Having been built at a height of 3.50 metres, re-using in part the pre-existing walls of the Sunqur Sa'di madrasa, it called for particularly complex restoration work because of the archaeological investigations necessary to find out more about its historic relationship with the madrasa and other buildings in this architectural complex.

Sunqur Sa'di lived during the time of the Sultan Nasr Muhammad Ibn Qala'un in a period of particular well-being and wealth for Egypt in which, as the historian Maqrizi notes, many individuals, in the context of power conflicts, gave themselves over to unbridled luxury and pleasures both legal and forbidden, whilst others, withdrawing from all this, dedicated themselves to Sufism, art and science. Building ac-





tivity during this period therefore increased by the erection of schools and mosques, to such an extent such that it was decided to set up a chancellery for architectural work. Maqrīzī describes the Prince Šhams ed-Dīn Sunqur Sa'dī, *nakib* (representative) of the Mameluke sultans, as a pious and very rich man, who used his wealth honestly, committing it to social works and the development of agricultural and building activities. The documents attest that Sunqur Sa'dī had many large buildings erected and also founded a village, El Nahariyya, with a mosque and a mill, which prospered rapidly and which still exists today in the area of El-Gharbiyya, half way between Cairo and Alexandria. Finally he built the

madrasa, the most important architectural achievement of his life, in the region which Maqrīzī indicates in his times as Hedret el-Bakar, outside the walls of El-Kahira, on the El-A'zam road (eleventh century), the principal axis which connected the city to the Ibn Tulun mosque and to the countryside (El Fustat), at the place where this axis took on the name Shāri' el-Suyūfiyya

The architectural complex Sunqur Sa'dī built was made up of a madrasa or Koranic school, a *ribat*—a sort of hospital or centre of assistance for women who were orphans, widows, and the elderly, and, finally, the mausoleum in which he wished to be buried. His wish to be buried in this mausoleum was, however, nev-

er realised: serious disagreements arose between Sunqur Sa'dī and the proprietor of the great palace alongside the complex of buildings he was constructing, Qūsūn. This powerful individual had close links with the Sultan Ibn Qala'un, and forced Sunqur Sa'dī to flee abroad, to Tripoli in Syria, where he died in AD 1328 (728 h.). His splendid tomb was used several years later by Sheikh Nasr ed-Dīn Sadaqa and his grandson Hasan Sadaqa, and the mausoleum is still called today after the latter.

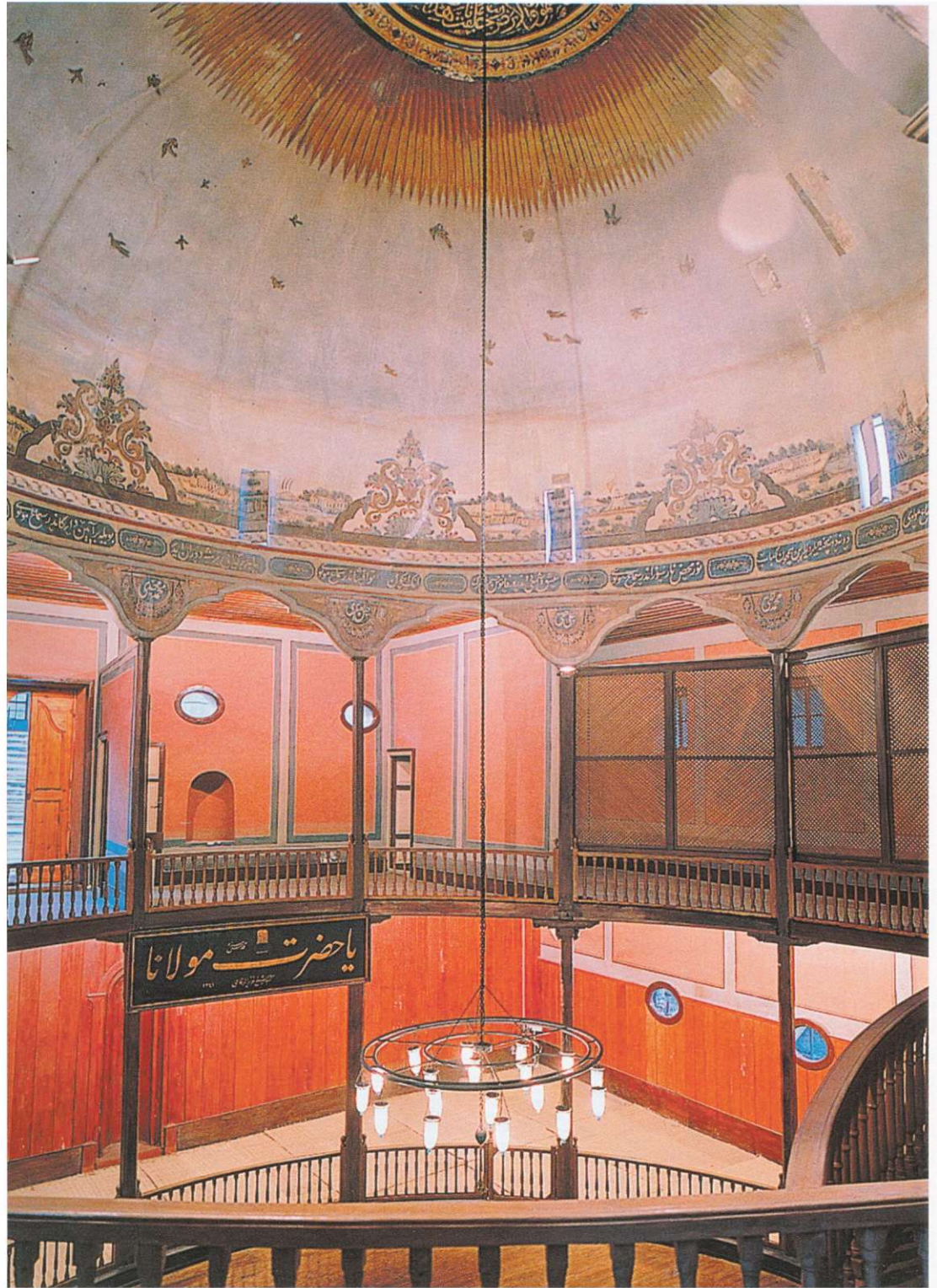
The madrasa must have been greatly admired at the time and perhaps, because of the richness of the decoration still visible today in the annexed mausoleum, gave rise to rivalry and



215. Inside the mausoleum of Hasan Sadaqa.



216. View inside the sama'khana.



jealousy. Not far away from this complex, on the bank of the great Birket el Fil pond, Sunqur Sa'dī also built a mosque which, according to Makrīzī, was destroyed by Prince Al Tawashi Saad Eddin Bashir in order to build in its place a madrasa which had to be more beautiful than that of Sunqur Sa'dī. Built in AD 1360 (761 h.) it also had a library attached to it. Unfortunately this too, one of the most charming madrasas of its period, was destroyed and all that remains today is a single *iwan*.

The mausoleum and the remains of the madrasa of Sunqur Sa'dī were probably the first headquarters of the Mawlawi Dervishes in Cairo. This choice could have been suggested both by its proximity to the government headquarters in the Citadel and by the presence of the mausoleum where the brother of the famous mystic Said el Badawi was also buried. He was the founder of the famous Egyptian confraternity which is named after him. The Mawlawi confraternity, in conformity with the thinking of their founder, were not only toler-



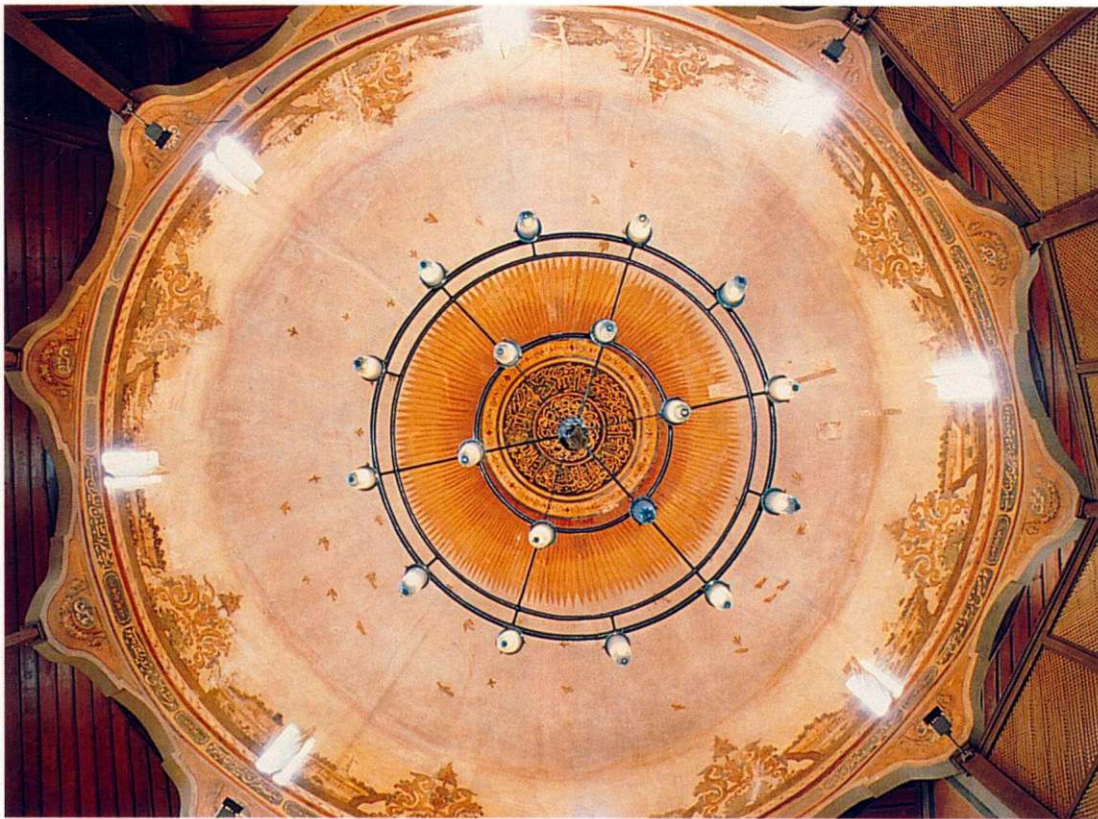
217, 218. The Mawlawi Dervish sama' ceremony held in the sama'khana of Cairo in 1998.



ant and accepting of other mystical movements and religions, but the presence in the same tomb of people worthy of devotion, even if not themselves affiliated to the Order, was a determining element in the rite of the Mawlawi dance itself. This dance, according to tradition, originally made reference to the demonstration of the grief of the Order's founder, Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī (died 672/1273), over the death of the master Shams Tabrīzī and to the Muslim rite of walking in circles around the tombs of its saints.

The Mawlawi Dervishes looked after the tombs just as they did the mausoleum and the other surrounding remains. In 1892 the Comité de Conservation des Monuments de l'Art Arabe decided, on the base of report number 136 of the technical committee, dated August 25, 1892, to include the *Coupole et Minaret du Tékiet el Maoulaouieh* on the list of monuments to be conserved. This is in fact the cupola of the mausoleum of Hasan Sadaqa and the nearby minaret, which at that time represented the only complete remaining elements of





the madrasa of Sunqur Sa'dī (fourteenth century). The buildings were assigned the number 263 on the Comité's list. Attention had been drawn to the importance of these buildings by the Mawlawi Dervishes themselves, the proprietors of the area in which the remains of the madrasa were to be found and where the Dervishes themselves had built their monastery. From this point on, the Comité gave direct support and advice whenever necessary and possible to the plans the Mawlawi were already making for the conservation of the remains of the madrasa, right up until the Order left the site, and until finally, in 1953, the care of Egyptian heritage monuments dating from the Arab period passed from the Comité to the Egyptian Antiquities Organization.

The first efforts at conserving the mausoleum of Hasan Sadaqa were planned and carried out by Achille Patricolo, head architect of the Comité, who published his report on the work in the *Comptes rendus des exercices 1915–1919*.

In the same period the major restoration work on the stucco of the mausoleum was undertaken. This was followed by regular checks and maintenance by the Comité. One of the last of these, in 1933–34, involved the restoration of the street entrance and the façade of the mausoleum. This work was planned and carried out by Ernesto Verrucci Bey, the famous Italian architect from Force in the Marche, who moved to Egypt in 1897, where he was trusted with increasingly important commissions. Commissioned initially by the Greek-Roman Museum, then by the Ministry of Public Works, Verrucci was later in the service of King Fuad and finally Head Architect of the Royal Palaces and at the same time a member of the Comité de Conservation des Monuments de l'Art Arabe.

Despite the commitment and the attention the Comité paid to the study of the conservation of the remains of the architectural complex of Sunqur Sa'dī, it was not possible to ob-

tain enough archaeological evidence to elucidate the original plan of the madrasa. Only the western *iwan* was visible, beside the mausoleum, and of this, the upper part with the double ceiling and the floors above were a much later addition. Patricolo in his report concludes: "It would have been interesting, from the point of view of being reassured as to whether vestiges of the parts which had disappeared still remained, to undertake archaeological investigations. But this brought with it numerous difficulties, of which the most serious was the presence of the Dervish *takiyya*, called al-Maoulawiyah, built on the east of the ancient part, just where, probably, the madrasa had stood." In fact the *sama'khana*, the principal building of the *takiyya* where the Dervishes performed their ecstatic dance, was built above the central courtyard of the ancient madrasa, at a level almost three metres higher. An archaeological excavation would therefore have endangered the structure of the *sama'khana* itself.

Only today, after the long and complex programme of archaeological work by the Italian-Egyptian Centre and the restoration and consolidation of the *sama'khana* building, is it possible to bring to light the remains of the madrasa. This project was carried out without removing, even temporarily, any structural part of the overlying buildings. Thus, the whole internal structure of the *sama'khana* was suspended on scaffolding and the work below ground was carried out in successive phases which, conducted methodologically with respect to stratigraphic and archaeological criteria, revealed the remains of the ancient madrasa and even lower, more ancient, levels. The structures of the *sama'khana* extended right down to the lowest level of the excavation, and part of the project was to build a new support structure which would ensure the support of the *sama'khana* on new foundations so as to leave a wide area free for people to visit the remains of the madrasa of Sunqur Sa'dī.

The madrasa turned out to be a very particular example of Bahrite Mameluke architecture with two *iwans* facing each other on the shorter sides of the courtyard. This in fact repeats the late Ayyubidi motif attested in the madrasa of El Salih Negm el Dīn (1243 AD)





where, for the first time, four *iwans* were built, but by doubling two equal bodies, of two *iwans* each, joined by a minaret; compared to this, the madrasa of Sunqur Sa'dī is equal to one of the two facing bodies. The archaeological excavations also revealed structures more ancient than the madrasa itself: a fountain (*fiskiyat*) and, at a lower level, a well, with the remains of a large jar beside it, evidently used for storing and distributing the water drawn from the well when the area was used for animals. It was not possible to take the archaeological investigations any lower down than this

level because of the presence of water. Some integration with the remains of the madrasa in the northern part, and the total absence, on this side, of any brick paving with which the fountain was covered, led the team to think of an intermediate phase of use for the ruins by the Dervishes before their more radical restructuring. Perhaps it served only as a passage connecting the mausoleum with the convent and garden where, according to several historical texts, the first dance was performed before the construction of the *sama'khana*.

Historic documents attest that the *sama'khana*

was built in 1809. However, the poor quality of the building materials used and the intrinsic fragility of the building, due to the reuse of older structures not properly checked to ensure their efficiency, have made many subsequent interventions necessary.

In an early period the building was full of light. The south wall, which dates back to the madrasa of Sunqur Sa'dī, used all the openings in it belonging to the madrasa itself; the doors of the first floor as well as the windows on the second floor, had been blocked in at a later period for stability reasons, and we reopened



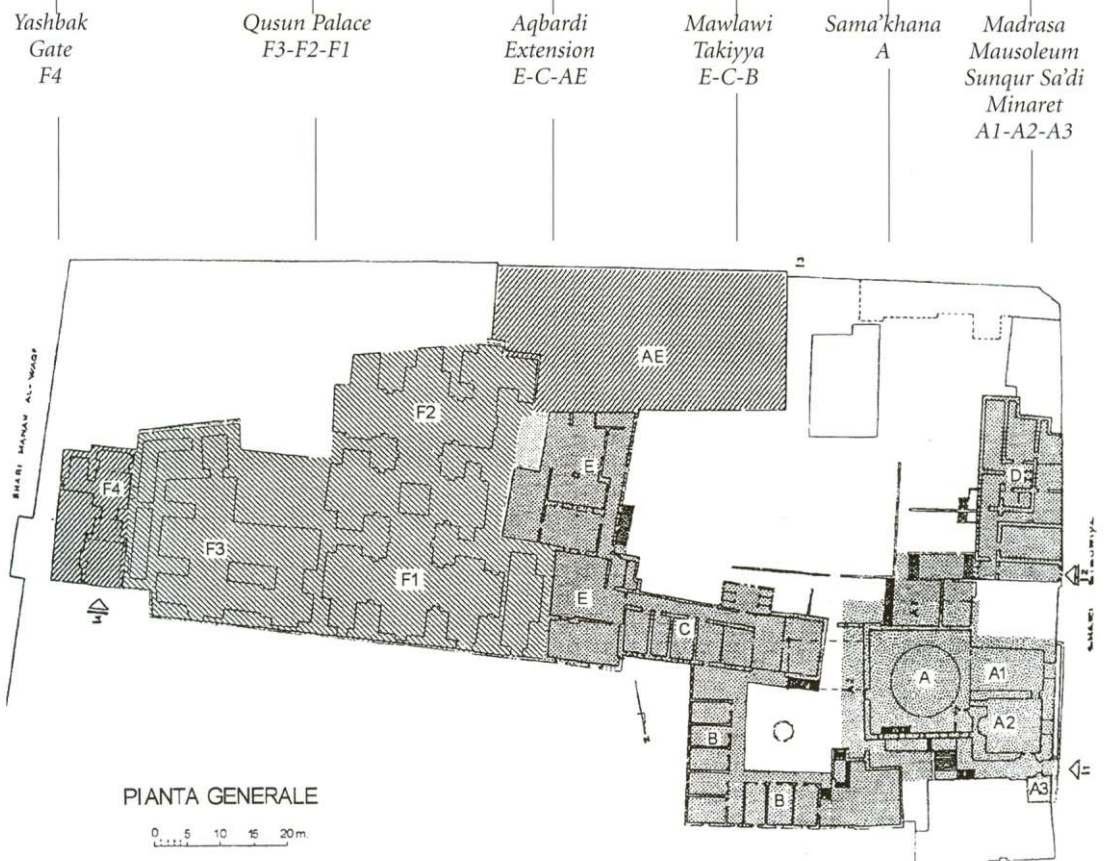
221. Panorama and plan with indications of the monuments that comprise the monumental complex.

them after the structural consolidation of the building. Inside, everything was coloured in either white or ivory, outlined in blue and red. The dome, completely white, with a single central medallion carrying the date 1857 (period of Sa'id Pasha, 1854/63) was lit by eight symbolic windows. These windows were also closed up in a later period, to strengthen the structure, and the dome was then painted with landscapes. The inside of the building was repainted with the colours we see today, which followed the pattern of the original decoration in frames.

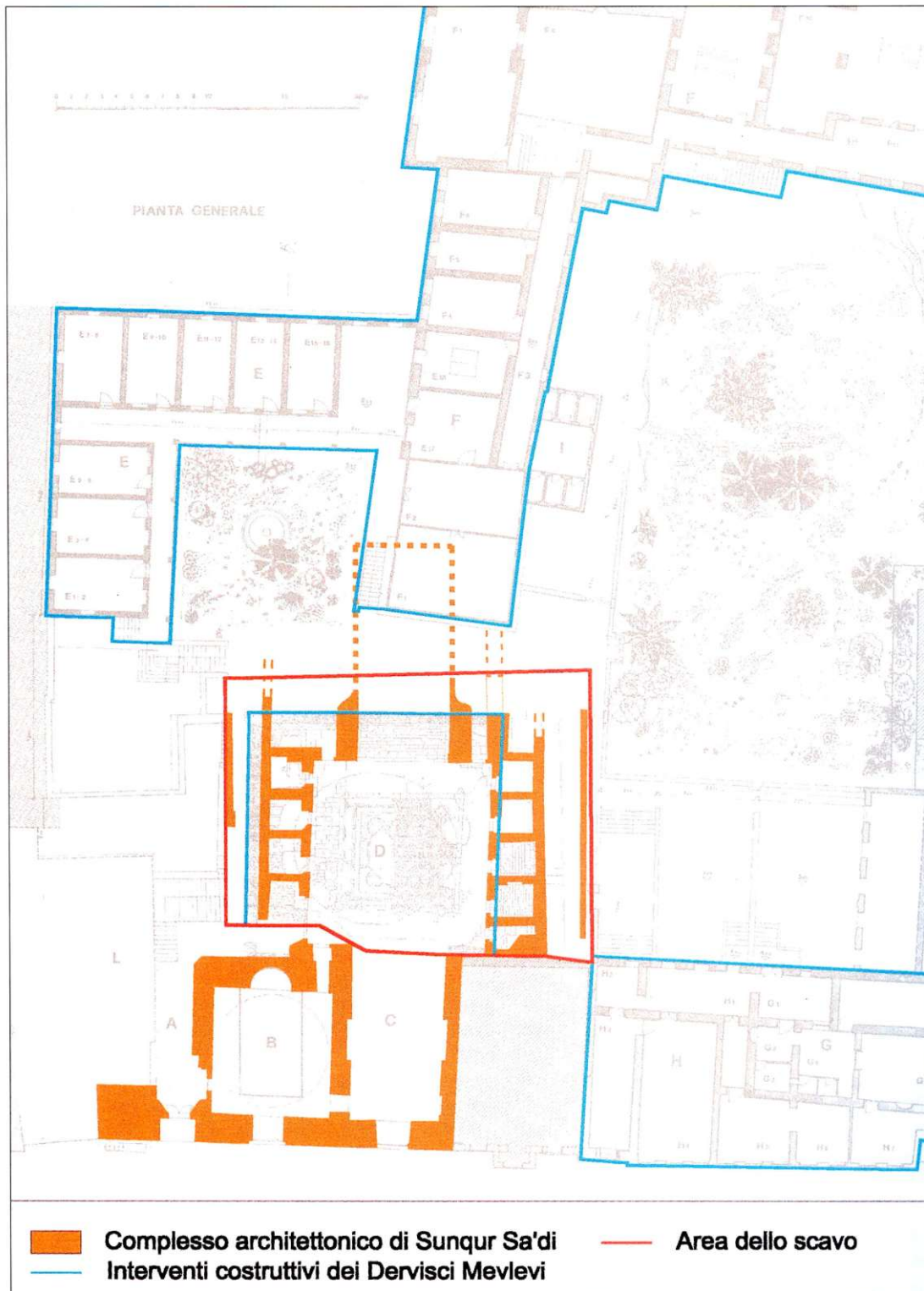
The restoration work followed the final phase of use of the *sama'khana*, as this was the most complete and homogenous from a documentary point of view. We made certain to document *in situ* the aspects characterizing the various phases of use of the building, restorations undertaken and the differentiation of the levels of the structure over time by respecting the visual harmony linked, as has been said, to its historical moment. The re-used part of the south wall of the madrasa of Sunqur Sa'di, was conserved, on the outside, with the original bricks visible, so that it is now possible to see in their pattern the original doors and windows of the ancient cells. The inside was restored to the time of the Dervishes and the original wooden ground floor has been preserved.

As far as the paintings of the dome are concerned, some parts have been left to show the preceding pictorial phases, while the sky has been covered by a veiling which allows a homogenous vision, allowing one to imagine the tonal variations beneath and the healed lesions themselves that document the history of the building. Finally, in order to respect the integrity of the context of the landscapes depicted throughout the dome after the walling up of the windows, the paintings represented on them after they were walled up were restored on rotating frames, operated by a steel cable which opens and closes all the window spaces together. This mechanism also allows the observer to see the original architectural conception of the dome, recovering its original function and its particular cosmic symbolism.

Despite the substantially poor structure of the building and the adaptations using pre-existing







older architectural structures, the *sama'khana* of Cairo represents the final period of the historic development of this particular type of architecture.

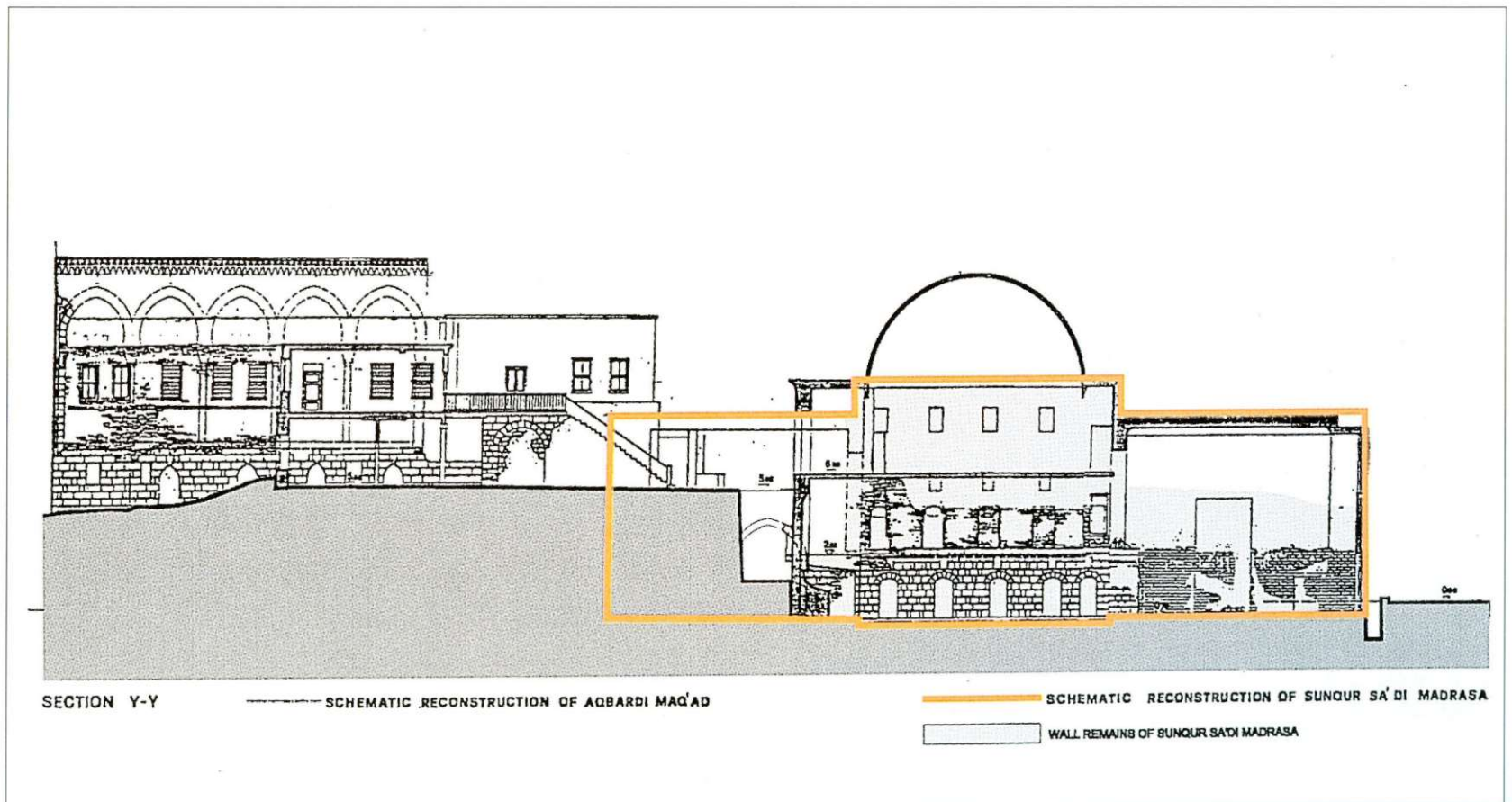
*Sama'khana* means “the Hall of Listening” where the *sama'* takes place, that is, listening to the celestial sounds of the cosmos.

Since the cosmos and, below it, the base circle, where the circular dance takes place, are ideal elements, the architectural plan became increasingly defined according to a central plan. Initially the *sama'* was performed in the open air or in a mosque, and thus the *sama'khana* of the mother house itself at Konia reflects the layout of a mosque. The first design for a closed place on a central plan strictly tied to the *sama'* is that of Manisa (fourteenth century) and all successive drawings of the *sama'* show similar places where, around a central nucleus where the dance takes place, other functional elements were developed: the spectators' area (subdivided between an area for important people, an area for women, and a vast public space), the orchestra area, and the mausoleum, which was not always part of the same building.

The whole layout, both ritually and architecturally, lay on two principal axes: 1) in the horizontal axis or *qibla* (that is the direction towards Mecca) the following features were aligned; the *mirhab*, the post where the sheikh of the confraternity sat, the entryway to the circular area for dancing use by the Dervishes, and finally the mausoleum where the predecessor from whom the sheikh had inherited his role as leader of the confraternity was buried; 2) a vertical axis marked by the centre of the circular area (where the sheikh sat after the ceremony with the Dervishes all around him) and the dome, or infinity, from which absolute unity was transmitted into existing reality through the Dervishes dancing with the right palm facing upwards and the left palm facing down.

The symbolism of the ritual of the dance reflected always more precisely the historical development of the spatial configuration of the dancing area, finally determining the planimetric aspect of the architectural building. A symbolic intertwining of geometric elements dic-





tates the area of the *sama'*: the proportional dimensions of the plan and elevation of the building involve every projected and constructed element, from the dome with its eight windows symbolising the four elements of nature and their intermediate stages, to the cube, archetype of the earth which contains it, to the tiniest detail of construction such as the twelve sections of balustrade, made up of eighteen elements which correspond to the eighteen stages which the Dervishes must pass through during their noviciate, meditating in eighteen cells of the convent. It is a tight symbolism which found a spontaneous and natural figurative expression in the flow of the curved lines of the Ottoman Baroque of the structural and architectural details and in the naive paintings of the dome. Studios attention to Sufic thought, and the recognition of the impact that this had had on

the elaboration and historical evolution of buildings, and the recognition of similarities among them, were very important results for the conservation of every aspect of the *sama'khana* of Cairo.

With this edifice Cairo has yet again documented its role as a continuing centre of reference for Islamic culture and religion, and listed among its monumental heritage the final and most complete expression of a very particular architectonic typology.

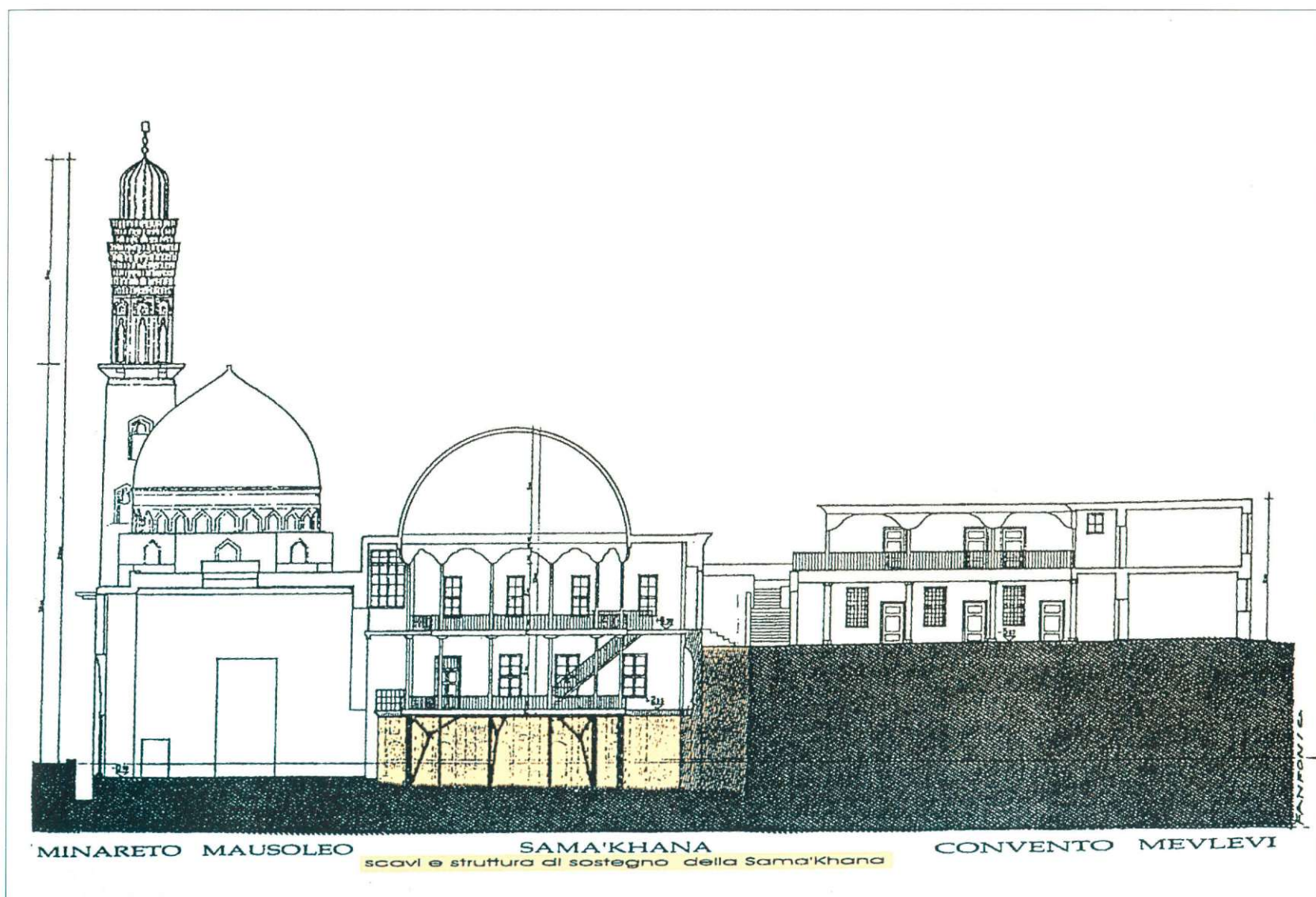
In fact, among the last examples of a *sama'khana* built before the Mawlawi confraternity became extinct, only that of Kutaya in Turkey, contemporaneous with the one in Cairo, presents an equal rigour of symbolic representation in its architectural planimetry; but in Kutaya, because of the specific layout of the building, the *qibla* is not aligned with the mausoleum.

The *sama'khana* of Cairo, so fortunately pre-

served, seems therefore at present to constitute the most complete and complex example of the elaboration of Mawlawi Sufi thinking in architecture.

Since 1999, the restoration of the madrasa has been completed, and the whole area beneath the *sama'khana*, with the cells around the central courtyard which was once open to the sky, and the great western *iwan* are open to the public. Historical documents relating to the architectural complex of Sunqur Sa'di and the presence of the Dervishes are displayed here. In one of the cases in the great *iwan* of the madrasa, the *Mathnawī* (book of poetic verses) of Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī is displayed. This was a gift to the Centre made by the Turkish Ministry of Culture on the occasion of the *sama'* held on January 18, 1998, the first held since the closing of the Cairo *takiyya* fifty years before. The exhibition is based on a collection referring to





the Mawlawi in Cairo which has already been greatly enriched by other historical documents relating to the Order, among which are donations from the Istanbul Sema Group whose *sama'* was held in Cairo in July 1998.

The conservation of this particular monument is today ensured by the Italian-Egyptian Centre for Restoration and Archaeology, which works in collaboration with the SCA for the restoration of the whole area through its *cantiere-scuola*, its training activities and the

formation of technicians at every level of competence.

Since 1998 the restoration programme of the Mawlawi architectural complex has been nominated a "Pilot Project" by the General Direction for Cultural Promotion and Cooperation of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Besides being an Italian association involved in restoration, the Centre offers both consultation and direct support in difficult moments. It was heavily involved in the wake of the earthquake

of October 1992 and today carries out much work outside the Centre itself; it has begun a new programme of restoration at the Monastery of Saint Paul near the Red Sea, and collaborates with numerous archaeological and restoration expeditions operating in Egypt.

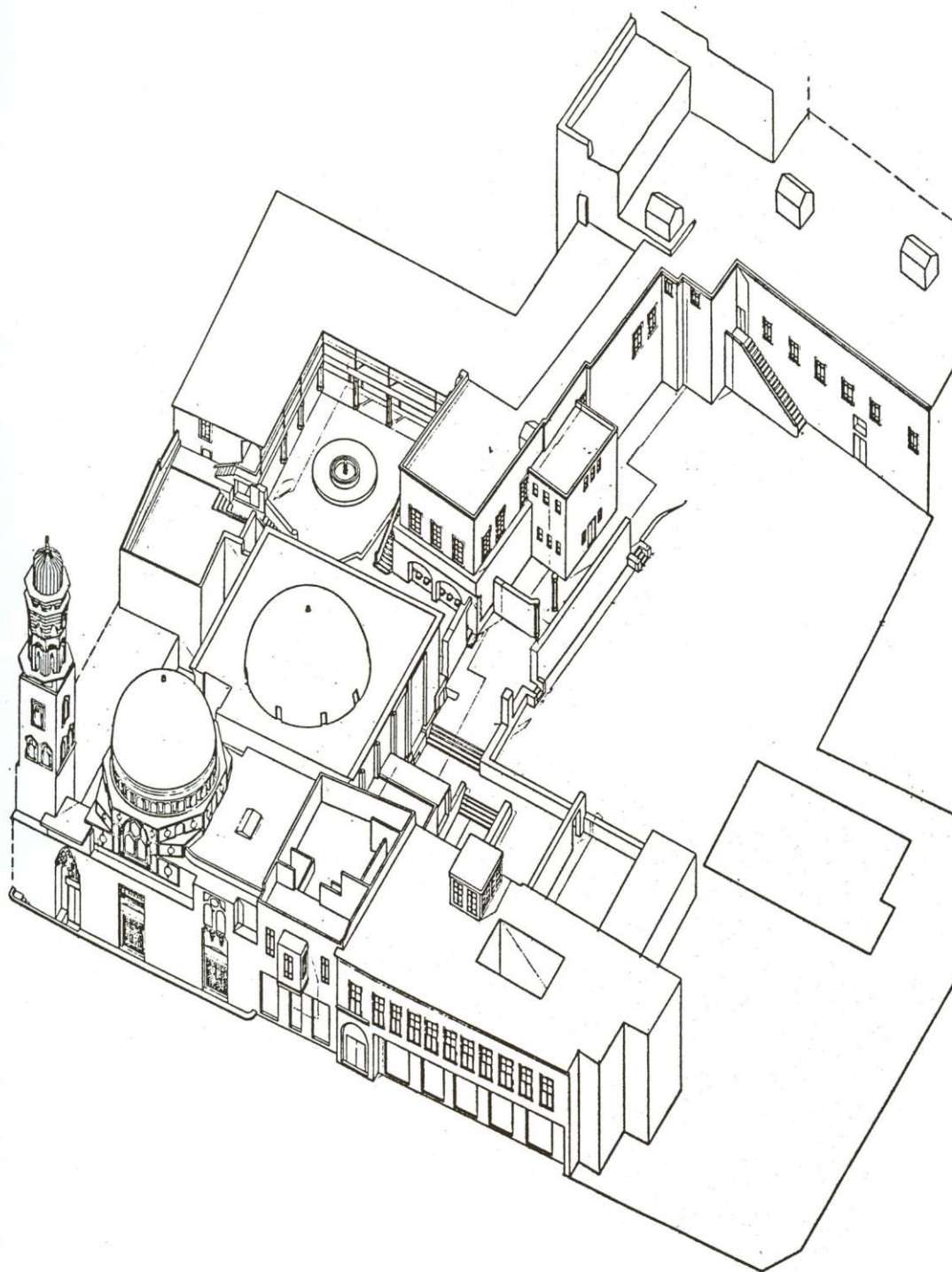
In the field of research in materials and techniques applicable to restoration and archaeology, one of the most complex problems the Centre has tackled has undoubtedly been the elimination of humidity rising by capillary ac-



tion into the walls of ancient monuments. The damage done to the salt-rich building structures by rising humidity, aggravated by high local temperatures, constitutes a well-known problem for all of Egypt's monuments. The seriousness of the phenomenon, and the resulting deterioration of the lithic structures, was scientifically pointed out as early as 1915 by the noted physicist A. Lucas. The architect Achille Patricolo also drew attention to it during the course of the work carried out by the *Comité* on the mausoleum of Hasan Sadaqa in 1915–19. The restoration of walls damaged by rising humidity and the related work of protecting the plaster, carried out with materials and techniques available at that time, alleviated, but did not eliminate, the problem. The situation has become ever more acute with the passing of time and today, because of the demographic increase and the environmental and climatic changes, has become dramatic in all Egyptian monuments and in the historic town centres. The lack of hygiene makes it a serious problem for the health of the inhabitants. In 1988, following the success of dehumidification work during the restoration of the *sama'khana*, it was decided that an operation to block the rising dampness in the walls of the madrasa and the mausoleum must be conducted on the basis of previous studies and experiences.

The project involved cutting into the base of the walls and inserting an impermeable membrane through the thickness of the wall. The project had also been proposed in the same year for the dehumidification of the Great Sphinx of Giza, so work on the madrasa could have provided demonstrable evidence for the success of such a project for the Sphinx. The immediate problem was that in 1988 the CFPR Association found itself in serious financial difficulty and the operation required a considerable amount of money. In fact, at the time there was no commercial equipment capable of cutting through walls of such thickness, but the proposed construction of new elements for increasing the potential of the already very expensive equipment would have further increased the overall cost.

Only in 1992, thanks to the generosity of the





Italian firm Ansaldo, was it possible to acquire the equipment adapted to the technical needs of the project. The operation was carried out for the first time in June of that year on the walls of the mausoleum of Hasan Sadaqa. After the earthquake of October 1992, considering the satisfactory results from this intervention, the operation gradually proceeded throughout the

whole of the mausoleum and the madrasa. This technique was therefore finally introduced into Egypt with great success and is applied today, after consultation with the Centre, on other monuments and buildings of every period, both by restoration missions and local builders. The development of our applied techniques,

the scientific research and the restoration training activities carried on by the Centre, are giving a significant contribution to the continuity of the historical Italian commitment for the recovery and preservation of the monumental heritage and cultural identity of Egypt, in the spirit of solidarity and affinity which has always linked the two peoples.

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