

**A new vision of Cairo's "City of the Dead":  
The promotion of a policy of sustainable local development and  
valorization of the cultural heritage through Integrated Relational  
Tourism**

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**Abstract**

The City of the Dead, the largest and most ancient cemetery of Cairo, since the ninth century, has hosted many "inhabitants", starting from the massive immigration from rural areas bordering Cairo, and then in response to the impressive and massive urbanization that, combined with a constantly increasing demographic index, made Cairo a metropolis with an unsustainable density, producing, besides other effects (traffic, pollution, soil consumption, etc.), a huge number of homeless.

In a world in which homologation of cities, disguised under the term development, hides the slavish acquisition of imported development models, it is important to work to defend uniqueness and difference and to convey it to governments, whether local or national, as a framework of a policy, based on their resources and identity, which is the only way to attain a real and sustainable development. Within the bounds of this trend lies this International Action-Research project "Living in the City of Dead"; an Italian-Egyptian bi-lateral project between the Polytechnic of Milan and the University Ain Shams in Cairo.

The purpose of the project is to overcome the partial and reductive vision of the City of Dead as a "plague" of Cairo and have it reconsidered as a means of extraordinary resource, either cultural or ethno-anthropological. Thus the primary aim of the project is about valorising it as cultural heritage to preserve with all its social, architectural and environmental systems, viewing it as an experimental context on which it is possible to test new strategies and development models for the Cairo of tomorrow.

The project is structured on several levels: starting from a detailed study of the site, its problems and potentiality, it proposes the structuring of governance processes leading to a new Vision (project) and to the definition of relevant policies for the City of the Dead: policies in which the inhabitants are considered an active part in the retraining processes.

Moreover, on a parallel plane, field work with the inhabitants is put forward, to assist them to form into a recognizable Association and to develop a circuit of Integrated Relational Tourism within the City of the Dead. This point arises from the firm belief that this kind of intervention can generate new informal micro-economies, capable of gradually improving the inhabitants' socio-economic conditions.

Consequently, this is a project with a strong trans-disciplinary approach, which weaves into one the themes of valorisation of local heritage, both material or non material, of

the policies designed to pursue a sustainable and lasting development through new ways of interactive planning and of tourism as a bottom-up development engine. The paper outlines the project, the working methods and the first results achieved.

**Key terms:**

- *Cultural heritage*
- *Sustainable tourism*
- *Vision*
- *Bottom-up development*
- *Strategies of re-development*

**A unique world context**

Situated in the heart of Cairo there lies the City of the Dead (al Qarafa or al Maqabar), the largest and most ancient cemetery in the city and one of the biggest Islamic necropolis in the world, a site of culture and the destination of pilgrims as far back as the X century. From the XIX century onwards, the tombs, monuments, mosques and schools have seen numerous “inhabitants” make them their home, at first primarily because of the massive flow of people from the rural outskirts of Cairo and later in answer to the imposing urbanization and ever increasing demographic expansion that has made Cairo a metropolis of an unsustainable density and has led to, among other things (traffic, pollution, consumption of the land & soil, etc.), an enormous quantity of homeless. The City of the Dead is thus considered a “slum”, one of the most extensive informal areas of the city, institutionally and publically stigmatized due to the co-habitation of the living and the dead. In reality, it is a very unusual slum, one which is the curator of a huge and very precious historical-architectural heritage and which is at the same time quite a unique, cultural habitat, the only one of its kind, where a varied local society and its specific cultural lifestyle due to the sepulchral character of the location, “brings life” to the City of the Dead, in direct contrast to the degradation and ruin of the latter. This complex ensemble of characteristics, whether anthropological, social or architectural, constitutes something seen nowhere else in the world, the roots of which, both due to morphology and aspects of a social and religious nature, penetrate deeply into the layer upon layer of culture and history which washes over Cairo, and that notwithstanding the difference of opinion over the merits of the co-habitation itself, forms an undeniable matrix of values that give the area its characteristic identity. Town planning has until now undervalued this exceptional material resource and has ignored or discredited the socio-anthropological side of the argument, preferring to favour demolition and relocation of the cemetery area and its inhabitants in parts of the desert which are far away from the town centre, leaving only the “monumental landmarks”. The guidelines of the most recent Strategic Plan Cairo 2050, for example, foresee the preservation of anything that is classed as having “cultural relevance”. This means that the focal point of the debate lies in deciding exactly what is defined as a culturally significant object, a part of the historical-cultural heritage of a city, and moreover, what approach is to be taken, given the contrasting theories on redevelopment of historical sites. The crux of the matter in question, in short the basis over which there is

disagreement, is closely tied to conservation, redevelopment and re-integration of the historical-cultural heritage in an urban context, in all of its possible shapes and forms.

### **Research pathways via Cultural Heritage and development strategy**

What is evident given these considerations is that the subject of redevelopment of historical sites requires an in depth study as a basis on which to work and comprehend the site in itself, in accordance with a “holistic” paradigm. In the matter of the City of the Dead, what emerges from the approach taken is above all how the concept of “monument” can neither be detached from the whole, this minute funereal mesh, nor can it be separated from the complex social system that interacts with it.

In a world where the homologous city, marketed subtly as development, hides the slavish acquisition of heterotrophic models, it is of vital importance that one works to protect individuality and diversity, pressurizing and convincing governments, both local and national, plus the population itself, as to how a policy based on the resources and local identity is the only way to obtain a really concrete, sustainable development.

These are the premises for the international project for research-action “*Living in the City of the Dead*”, a bilateral Italian-Egyptian project sponsored by Diap-Polytechnic of Milan and the University Ain Shams of Cairo, started up in 2008 with the aim of deconstructing the biased and degrading vision of the City of the Dead as the “bane” of Cairo and reconstructing a new “image” that redrafts the City of the Dead as an extraordinary cultural and ethno-anthropological font, and valorizes it as cultural heritage of first grade importance, together with the entire social, architectural and environmental system and as an experimental context in which to try out new strategies for redevelopment and for tomorrow’s Cairo<sup>1</sup>.

Even though there is an abundance of detailed surveys of this area and its prestigious architecture - about 1.000 hectares of mausoleums, mosques, family tombs and graves dating back to many centuries ago, a testimony to the wealth of art and architecture inherent to the cult of death in Egypt – all of which have served to highlight the historical-architectural value and the necessity for preservation and protection<sup>2</sup>, local institutions and government have showed themselves, and still are, very uninterested, torn between a general undervaluation (a specific effect of the more general and long lasting indifference for this historical city) and the stigmatizing or ignorance of a

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<sup>1</sup> For a detailed presentation of the project for research-action, see the essays by P. Bellaviti, “Abitare nella Città dei Morti. Un progetto di ricerca azione per un habitat informale “di eccellenza” and by C. La Mantia, “Sakan Project. Strategie e governance per uno sviluppo urbano cultural based nella Città dei Morti”, in *Territorio* n. 50, 2009, pp. 9-19 e pp. 42-49. There are contributions to this project made by A. Tozzi Di Marco, E. Lazzarino e L. Garibaldo, S. Sambati, A. Colli e M.L. Daglia included in the review “Viaggio al Cairo. Trasformazioni e progetti di una megalopoli del futuro e del suo antico cuore pulsante: la Città dei Morti”, edited by P. Bellaviti, in *Territorio* n. 50, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> In particular, consultation of the long term and detailed research conducted by the French Institut de Recherche pour le Développement (Ird) in collaboration with the Egyptian General Organization for Housing, Building and Planning Research (Gohbpr) between 1985 and 1990, the outcome of which have been recently published in an English edition: G. El Kadi, A. Bonnamy, *Architecture for the Dead*, American University in Cairo Press, 2007.

location that is retained as in decay, dangerous and therefore not presentable to the eyes of the world, owing to the presence of its inhabitants flocking around the sepulchral areas and their monuments. In fact, although the living/dead co-habitation in these cemeteries has a long established background<sup>3</sup>, the presence of this important “immaterial heritage”, socio-anthropological and cultural alike, is in reality completely unknown and overlooked by all policy. Whereas neither maps, charts, detailed surveys on the physical-environmental state of the cemeteries as a whole exist, likewise there are no systematic surveys on the population of the cemeteries available<sup>4</sup>. The implications are that a seriously conducted consensus of the material heritage and also even the most approximate calculation of the number of inhabitants have not been carried out, and are the first thing that any hypothetical future plan for the site must tackle. In reference to the lack of realistic estimates of the resident community, it must be pointed out that there is a vast number of inhabitants and moreover, what emerges from the first socio-anthropological studies performed on the location as part of the Project<sup>5</sup>, is that the population is also very diversified, with people from different regions and social extraction, many of whom have been living in the cemetery for generations. These factors shape a situation which brings together an extremely heterogeneous community and at the same time, to a peculiar local *milieu*, made up of myths, rituals, traditions, knowledge and wisdom and experience, attitudes, practices, activities, all connected to the sepulchral character of the site and more.

The first studies carried out revealed a rich interwoven pattern of lifestyles which each group of this society leads in its sector of the cemeteries, giving rise to a multitude of living conditions and carving out of the nothingness the space and amenities essential for everyday life and co-habitation, through a conspicuous ensemble of informal uses of open spaces, for example the road which is utilized as “a meeting point, distribution of services (temporary shops and stalls, nomad mechanics, micro restaurants and cafés...), parties and ceremonies (weddings and funerals and wakes), recreation area (football, kites...), animal breeding ground (donkeys, goats, sheep, cows, chickens...)”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Traditionally temporary residential use was foreseen for the cult of the deceased by the families concerned and the semi-informal presence of groups of residents charged with the duty of funeral management or as guardians of the tombs was allowed, as were temporary stays by pilgrims. These forms of residence have been joined over the course of the last century by a large population of evicted agricultural workers, vagabonds and homeless, who have occupied the graveyards and other or have created new makeshift homes inbetween the tombs.

<sup>4</sup> The estimates for the population of the CdM have always been very variable, ranging from tens of thousands of inhabitants declared in the official consensus, to the 800.000 and more that Mike Davies (2007) talks about, while recent research carried out at the site puts the figure for residents in the cemetery areas in the region of hundreds of thousands (from 200 to 400.000).

<sup>5</sup> We refer especially to the survey conducted by the anthropologist Anna Tozzi Di Marco in the area from 1998 to 2005. Cfr. A. Tozzi Di Marco, *Il giardino di Allah. Storia della necropoli musulmana del Cairo*, Ananke, Torino.

<sup>6</sup> From the chapter “Abitare lo spazio”, by Luca Francesco Garibaldo, from the Report of the International Workshop *Dentro Città dei morti. Insediamenti Informali e strategie di sviluppo*. On this argument, see also the article by Lazzarino and Garibaldo in the review “Viaggio al Cairo...”, cit.

In the City of the Dead it's really easy to spot the "localized" mind" that La Cecla talked about (1988-2000, 1993), that is a capacity and a culture to live in a space that conforms to one's necessity in terms of its richness and adequateness, even if this space has not only not been designed for residential living, but had, conversely, been planned for the burial of the dead.

Taken as a whole, the living conditions and life itself in the cemeteries are by no means similar to those usually seen in the *slums* in Cairo and worldwide and can even be said to be better than those of other "formal" quarters of Cairo, for example the more ancient parts now in decay, from which, by no coincidence, part of the population now residing in the cemeteries hails. Quantity and quality of living space, provision of formal and informal amenities, and opportunity for economic support, all of these make it an informal siting that can be defined "virtuous" or "excellent"<sup>7</sup>. From whichever angle you look at it, the City of the Dead appears as a very special environment whose character and value are the result of the multiform bond between the dead city and the living one. Bonding which, however, is full of contradiction: the function of the cemeteries as habitat can be seen as the care of the location and preservation of its particular culture, but at the same time can be pinpointed as the cause of the erosion and disassembling of its nature, the sepulchral environment having been transformed into a disorderly aggregation of informally constructed residences.

### **Interlaced relationship and research studies**

Any project for research and intervention in this type of area must, thus, pit itself against the complex and sometimes contradictory background of relationship that exists between the "stone of the city and the living city" (Cellamare, 2008). The preservation and valorization of the City of the Dead must be envisaged as an integral part of conjecture made concerning this relationship and of the combined assessment of the differing values of heritage— architectural, social, cultural, and environmental - that it holds. The simplified (and violent) solution such as completely "clearing" the cemetery areas of its inhabitants and transporting them to some of the *new towns* in the desert — as is often bandied around by town planners — would not only endanger the integrity of the socio-cultural patrimony tied to the cult of the dead strongly embedded in the local community, but would also compromise the possibility for the preservation, care and livability of such a vast architectural heritage, so fragile and so fundamentally "urban". What's more, it's an urban environment that urban planning itself, conversely to what was proposed, has contrived to create:

*"Opinion in the upper echelons of the government is divided over what to do about the cemeteries. The extremists want their residents cleared out into the desert — an unrealistic solution that fails to take into account the social, financial, and cultural costs of such an operation. The pragmatists, in contrast, see the 250,000 house-tombs*

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<sup>7</sup> The same conclusion was reached by the analysis of the case study City of the Dead done by M. Falletti in the essay "Cinque zoom sul Cairo. I progetti attuati e quelli in via di attuazione", in "Viaggio al Cairo...", cit., pp. 85-95, an opinion shared also by E. Sommariva, "Abitante tra i morti. Viaggio nei cimiteri abitati del Cairo", in *Domus*, n. 880, 2005, pp. 46-65.

*as housing stock for the homeless, some of whom were subsequently moved in by Governorate decree. The ambiguity of the state position on the matter is reflected by the ongoing cemetery infrastructure work: 'Twelve tombs on a single cemetery street have a telephone, obviously installed by a public company, and the neighbourhood has water and electricity, six schools, two fire engines, a drugstore, and public transport. Every sector is guarded by two police officers. And the residents of the hawshes denied a mains connection fetch drinking water from the four public fountains installed in 1975'*<sup>8</sup>.

In an attempt to deal with the articulated complexity of the case of the City of the Dead, the research-action project came up with the following general goals:

- \_ the promotion of the valorization of this unique urban environment to the world, by implementing an intervention, both locally and internationally, of support for the recognition and reinforcement of its architectural, social and environmental patrimony;
- \_ the favoring of the spread within the resident community of awareness of said patrimony, with particular attention to lifestyles and habits that could damage or aid its preservation, to 'ritual beliefs' connected with the rites of the funeral and the socio-cultural set up which has to now acted as a passage from generation to generation, and which could today crumble away or be reactivated through its clash with modernity;
- \_ to propose a change in the current conditions of the City of the Dead with a view to improving some aspects of the social life and financial means of the inhabitants through the redevelopment of the residences and amenities and the growth in loco of job opportunities.

To turn these multiform objectives into real life, concrete research and action strategies, a substantially eclectic approach has been taken to the study and intervention, an approach that foresees a mixture of various professions and expertise, that is open to different points of view, strategies for action, methodology and tools, with the conviction that tabling such a difficult theme and environment as the one in question, the City of the Dead, requires a combination of diverse opinion and the activation of as many points of "attack" as possible. Compared to the previous research project done by the group co-ordinated by Bonnamy ed El Khady, more intent on identifying and cataloguing the historical-architectural patrimony, the project "*Living in the City of Dead*" is aiming to focalize mainly on the relationship between this patrimonial heritage and the resident community, by adopting a stance that blends together the spatial and social viewpoints, both on the scale of interpretation and drafting and on the implementation of the intervention, the scope of which is to promote not just the preservation of the material *heritage*, but to also enhance the valorization of the community, living standards and all that is inherent to the practices, beliefs and abilities therein. The project is divided into three action strategies which are linked in series:

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<sup>8</sup> G. El Kady, A. Bonnamy, cit., p. 268.

*Survey - Communication - Networking and participation.* The project operates at different levels: starting with a trans-disciplinary study conducted directly on site and on the resident community (spatial and social scenario), on its problems and potential, explored through quantitative and more especially, qualitative research methods, a structure for the process of governance is put forward, involving local institutions, other stakeholders and communities which leads to the definition of a new vision of the planning and policies relating to the CdM: policies which see the inhabitants vested with an active role within the redevelopment process.

### **A pilot project: IRT and development of the community**

Aimed at seriously "experimenting" the various instances, the approach and the potential within the research-action, the first pilot project has been laid out to trigger and verify the possibilities for sustainable tourism on the site of the cemeteries, which should act both as a springboard for the recognition of the location's value and of the resources which are housed in the cemeteries, in addition to fulfilling the role of a reason for the local community to be drawn into the task of valorisation. Meanwhile, parallel to the research, there is field work being carried out among the inhabitants to assist them in setting up their own association which will be able to exploit business opportunities in the sector of Integrated Relational Tourism specifically for the CdM, in the belief that an intervention of this kind can generate new informal micro-economies capable of gradually raising the socio-economical conditions of the inhabitants.

The City of the Dead is already a tourist attraction, even if for the few who go it is essentially limited to only some of the monuments. On the contrary, it could become a "museum park" worthy of a visit and a closer look, as those who have ventured into the cemeteries have already found out. The strategic plan *Vision 2050*, on the other hand, pictures the City of the Dead as a massive archaeological Park where monuments and monumental tombs are embedded in an oasis of plants and trees which links up with the nearby Al Ahzar Park, built by the Aga Khan Trust for Culture<sup>9</sup>. This *vision* of the CdM however entails the elimination of the residential habitat and local community, depriving it of its vital social substrate and culture. If this is what the Government has in mind, and thus become topics to be further investigated and on which to employ the maximum effort with all the stakeholders (representatives of interest at all levels), they fit perfectly into the "negotiated" definition of this concept: what exactly does Park mean? What is the correct strategy for the CdM? Who will protect the rights of the inhabitants? Why can't the "wellbeing" of the inhabitants of the CdM and the "wellbeing" of the entire city be one and the same thing?

What is obvious is the necessity for a methodology, based on a complex interpretation and subsequent recognition of the differing modes of attributing "value", that stimulates the integration of different levels of government and interest, one which can pinpoint and consolidate the precise Vision which the "evolutionary" project for the territory cries out for.

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<sup>9</sup> This instance, sponsored by the powerful private foundation, is the first example of some interest in the regeneration of the historical districts of Cairo, completely the opposite of the entrenched strategy of expansion that is upheld by the powers in Cairo. For a more detailed summary of the project see Bianca (2007) and the article by Falletti in the review edited by P. Bellaviti "Viaggio al Cairo...", cit

The pilot project which we intend to put into operation aims to "put the people in the position to test" and "get people to see" exactly how the inhabitants of these places, their knowledge and their "competence" are the primary and fundamental factors for making the CdM an effective, varied expanse and one which is furthermore a usable and precious cultural patrimony. The project foresees the construction of a series of areas, plus the relevant infrastructure and local support centres which will be a sort of guide for the visitor's trip through the monuments (there is already a network of hotels and other centres for hospitality in the community), but will also include other customary landmarks – tradition, ritual, social occasions, environmental and human landscapes – safely housed in the cemeteries. Such a tourist –based initiative, besides being respectful and compatible with the holy nature of these locations, would provide the key to sustainable development of the local community and the entire city.

### **Other Visions**

In conclusion, we maintain that the City of the Dead must be seen in another light, one's gaze must go beyond the normal boundaries in order to be able to envisage it not as a mass of unsolvable problems, but as a stimulating context from which new opportunities can be drawn and get a closer insight into new development models which relate to and connect identity and evolution. The cultural and physical diversity of the sites have to be the undisputed starting point at which all commitment, development strategy and projects must be targeted.

If you consider it thus, the CdM becomes an exceptional case study, one to be read with avidity and thoroughly understood, and then re-thought as a complex system of resources which are to be interpreted, preserved, integrated, made available to others and divulged to the world. The City of the Dead can and must be considered a structural part of what is known as the "cultural infrastructure" of the territory (Carta, 2002), or that is to say, that collection of pre-existing values to be retrieved and implanted in the definition of so-called *cultural based* development policy, deliberately aimed at attributing a strategic value to the territorial quality and cultural and social identity of the location. Identity, community, culture and diversity become reference models to bear in mind during the pre-ordained and taxing road that one must go down in the process of giving a form to the possible future of these areas: a new Vision for the City of the Dead.

So, one side of the coin is to favour participation because this in turn favours awareness of the common values inherent to the problem at hand, the flip side being that the process must produce a new way of looking at the problem (similar to a negotiation) so that the project is managed according to the rules of the agreed governance, which should go a long way towards preventing private and personal interests from ruining any potential social benefit. Constructing an "action space" is fundamental also for the social sector, that is to say, a methodology aiding its image as a reference point for innovative action, one which is able to ensure a constant commitment to a strategy of experimentation leading towards the goal of sustainable development of the territory.

Many professional disciplines are packed into the general approach of the research project, which weaves together the arguments regarding material and immaterial valorisation of the local patrimony, policies for the attainment of sustainable and long



lasting development through a new style of interactive planning and lastly tourism, seen as the generator of ground up development. Tourism that is in touch with the world, that bases its evaluations on solid knowledge, on the fact that diversity is wealth and on the exchange of culture among the individuals engulfed by the complex system of relationship ingrained in the human being, whether it be a simple welcome or one's hospitality to the everyday life of the community, a priceless mine of experience derived from the interchange of relationship between host and guest. A tourism capable of re-positioning and adding to the wealth in of the vastness of the values which pack the location. A tourism which has its roots in the attributing of value, rather than of "consumption" of local resources, which can be classed in this way as the world's heritage.

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