

Sam Ibn Nuh Mosque



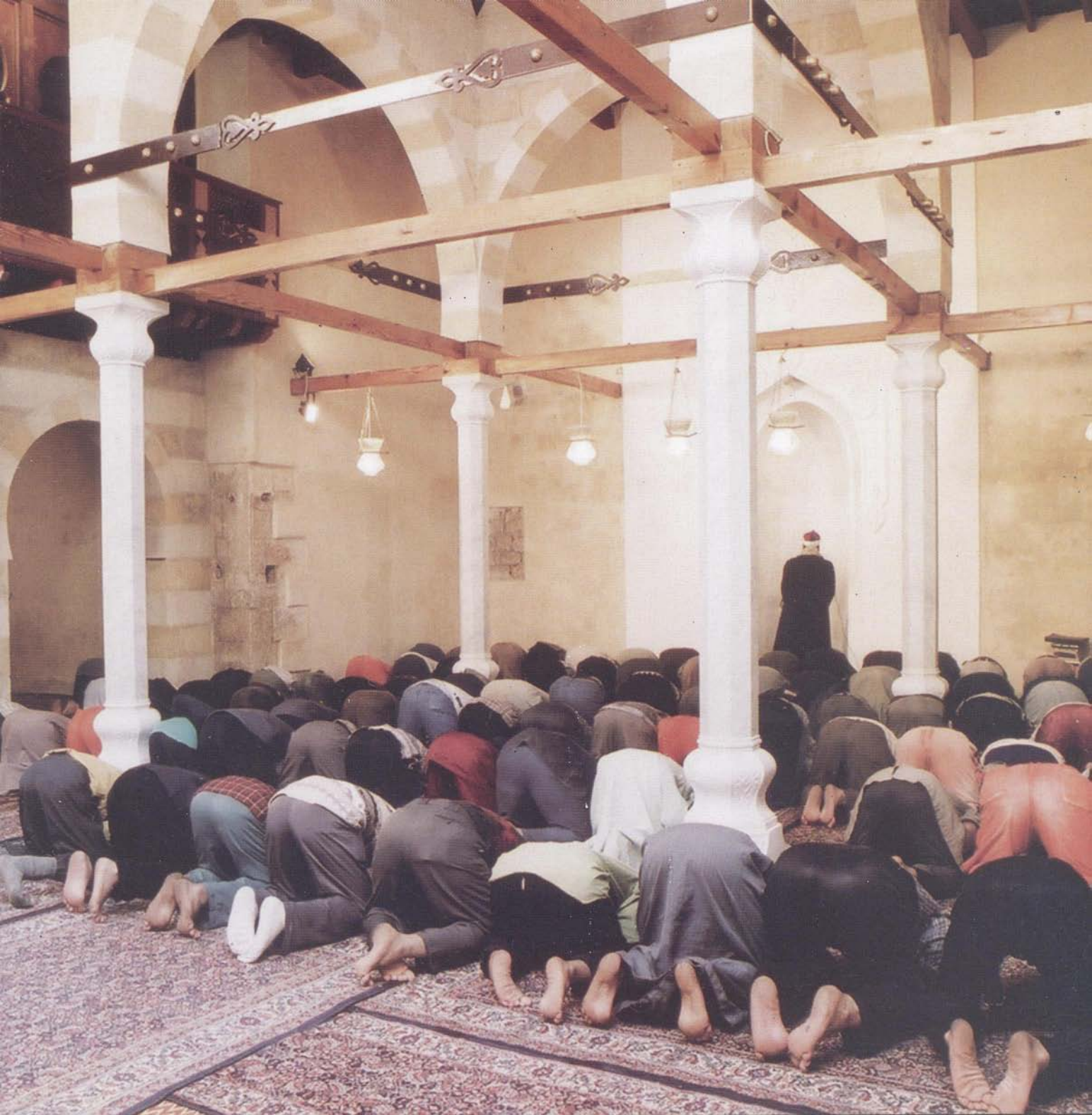
Community Support Project, Cairo, September 2000-November 2001

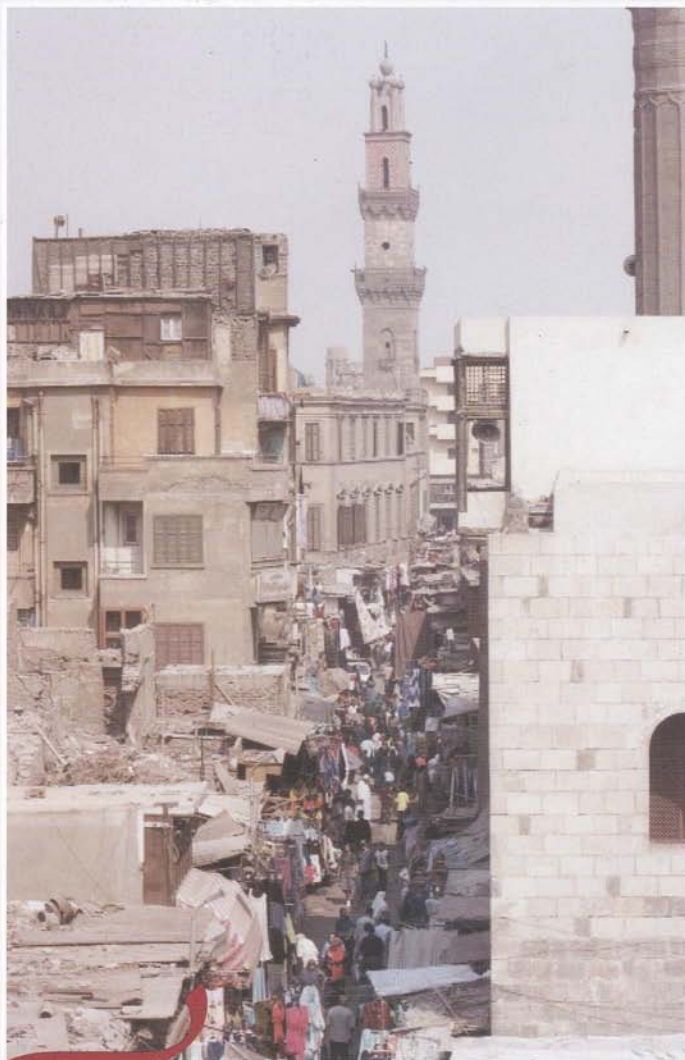
The
Sam Ibn Nuh Mosque
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This is a story of an episode in the centuries-old history of a small neighborhood mosque in the heart of Cairo, and in the life of the community that the mosque serves. Nobody knows why the mosque is dedicated to Sam Ibn Nuh (Shem, the son of Noah), but like the Ark, it welcomes and protects those who come to it.

Cairo – The Mother of the World – is now an immense city, home and a place of work, trade and amusement for more than seventeen million people. But its mediaeval core, (full of splendid works of architecture, of the scent of incense, of dazzling sunlight, colorful streets, and picturesque sights), has never lost the link with its past – thanks to its people. Some have been here for generations and remember a lot of the city's history; some came recently and blended into the colorful crowd. All are vivid characters and personalities; all know one another and each one's family and relatives.

The Mosque of Sam Ibn Nuh, an oasis of tranquility in the bustle of the medieval city's main street, has been serving its neighborhood community since centuries before Columbus set sail or Michelangelo made his first sculpture. A neighborhood mosque is not only a place of everyday prayers. Here, people can gather, chat, or just rest. Here, they recite the memorized verses of the Qur'an every afternoon; here, their children learn; spiritual advice can be sought from a shaykh; news and stories can be exchanged.





Mahmoud al-Saidi

Fruit Seller

Mahmoud and Ahmed, father and son, are the owners of the fruit stand at the entrance to Harat al-Rum.

Sixty years ago, Hag Mahmoud, now 80 years old, came from Sohag to work in Cairo. Selling fruit had been the profession of Mahmoud's father in Upper Egypt, and Hag Mahmoud followed the family tradition.

Mahmoud recalls that when he came to Cairo, the Mosque of Sam Ibn Nuh was derelict. In the 1950's, he and some people from the neighborhood started to take care of the mosque in order to restore proper dignity to the place of their daily prayers.



Ahmed al-Saidi

Fruit Seller

Ahmed works in the profession of his father Hag Mahmoud, and he is also teaching it to his son, now a schoolboy. They want their children and grandchildren to carry on their expertise and continue the family enterprise. The fruit business is doing well and Ahmed has great hopes for future.

Ahmed, always present at the corner of Harat al-Rum Street, guards his family business and the whole district as well. There is not much in the everyday life of the area that escapes his attention.

Ahmed and his father are always proud to show the rebuilt mosque to their friends and to visitors.



Miha

Embroideries Producer

"Miha" is the name by which Muhammad al-Hakim is known in the neighborhood. His ancestors came to Egypt from Morocco. He was born in Harat al-Rum fifty years ago. There he grew up and married two women who gave him nine children. Some twenty years ago he developed an interest in embroiding and gradually it became his profession. His business has expanded, but he still enjoys working with his hands. Beside this daily work, Miha's other job is organizing traditional parties and weddings. It was his work to set up everything for the mulid that marked the opening of the mosque.



Ragab Abdel Latif

Cotton Garments Seller

Neharak Abyad! -"May your day be white!"- and a broad smile is the way that Am Ragab, 52 years old now, greets passers-by on the street. His stall is right on the left side of the entrance to the Mosque of Sam Ibn Nuh. Am Ragab's family, originally from Menufiya, came to work in Cairo in the 1950's. A recent widower, he lives with his five children in a house he owns in Harat al-Rum. As a child he had to quit school and to work in different places for living. When he was 28 he started to work selling cotton garments and has earned a modest living from the business ever since.



The Mosque of Sam Ibn Nuh attracts so many people that during Friday prayers, they overflow onto the street, although there are many other mosques nearby. More women than usual come to pray here. In 2001, Barbara Drieskens, a cultural anthropologist from Belgium, interviewed members of the community, to determine why the people of the neighborhood are so strongly attracted to the mosque and consider it especially significant, although it lacks the features typical of other similarly venerated mosques. *It was necessary – she wrote – to look beyond the evident, for different meanings.* People who work in the area consider it practical to have this mosque so close, but the study has identified many more reasons.

Age and tradition

Sam is our forefather; we all descend from him. People referred to the ancient age of the mosque and its aura of a very long history. For those who come to pray here, more important is that so did their fathers and mothers, and their parents before them. This continuity in space provides an anchor in the rapidly changing life of the city.

Almost home

The users of the of Sam Ibn Nuh mosque ascribed to it all the qualities of a home. It is comfortable and restful, and provides peace of mind, even more than could be found at home. The mosque protects the people in it, and it is itself protected. Another home-like quality is cleanness, both physical and in the sense of a ritual purity.

The blessings of water

In a way, the mosque fulfills now the function of the *sabil*, which once provided clean and free drinking water. The presence of a common ablution area has a practical aspect, but water has a symbolic meaning as well for the users of the mosque. The blessings of the water are threefold: it is useful, it is pure, and it is a gift: what is offered as charity carries blessings both for the giver and the receiver.

Knowledge

People valued the mosque as a place where Islam is practiced, and also as one where religious knowledge is shared. Lessons about Islam were given every day, once a week for women too. Anybody can seek advice at any time. Many couples come to solve their disputes and often the *shaykh* is able to reconcile the two parties.

Harmony

Ta'álif means harmony, familiarity, and mutual affection. This quality was explicitly mentioned as a special value of the mosque. The way it fulfills different needs of the community makes it into a place that ties people together.





On 9 June 1999, people gathered in the Sam Ibn Nuh mosque for the evening prayer, as they always had. Soon after they left, a large section of the roof collapsed. Providentially, no one was killed or injured. But in an instant, the focal point of the community's life had turned into a heap of rubble.

The next morning, a committee of engineers inspected the site. The authorities decided that the building was unsafe and should not be open to the public. But the congregation of the mosque did not want to accept the loss of their traditional place of worship. They appealed to the conservation project that I was directing in the historic building next door for help in keeping the mosque open. After the disaster, the conservation team installed emergency shoring in the mosque to prevent further collapse, which would also have endangered the neighboring monument. With this protection in place, I could guarantee to the authorities that the structure could be safely used by the public. The prayers continued, but the goal was to reconstruct the roof and bring the mosque back to normal operation. However, this was far beyond the financial means of the local community.

Why Did It Collapse?

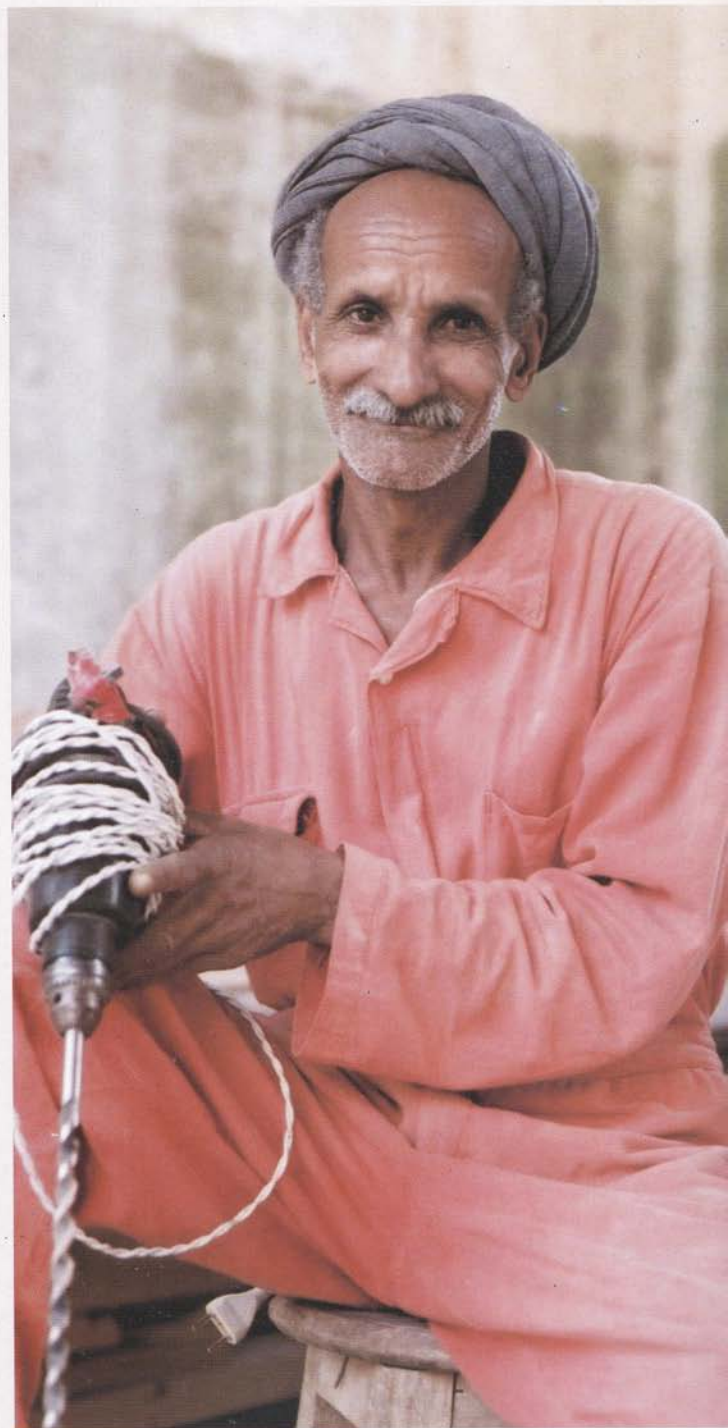
The underlying reason for the collapse of the roof was differential ground settlement caused by groundwater. Rising groundwater has been an acute problem in Historic Cairo since the late 1970's, and it causes severe damage to historic monuments. Like all surrounding buildings, the mosque sits on fill, accumulated over centuries to form a nine-meter-thick layer. When the groundwater level changes, the fill begins to settle, often unevenly. The installation of a new sewer under the street, although beneficial in the long term, added to the immediate instability. The whole front section of the complex of buildings, which date from 1819, and include western walls of the mosque, started to lean and detach. This movement caused the steel beam supporting the roof to slide off its support on the wall. The impact of the collapse bent and twisted the 30-centimeter tall beam into a piece of scrap metal.

In the reconstructed mosque, the roof is supported mostly on new, solid foundations, and only partly on the old walls. Micro-piles were used to reinforce the foundations of all leaning walls. Unlike the prior construction, the restored mosque is integrated structurally, with its walls, pillars, and roof solidly bound together to prevent another disaster.



In September 2000, the Royal Netherlands Embassy agreed to sponsor a project to rebuild the collapsed part of the roof in support of the community's efforts. It was a simple intervention, including the building of a new stone wall under the reconstructed women's gallery. All work was done by local craftsmen and workers, using traditional – sometimes nearly forgotten – materials and techniques. When the construction started, it generated much enthusiasm in the neighborhood, and naturally, the desire to renovate the entire mosque. This became possible when in December 2000 the Ford Foundation decided to step in and sponsor the rest of the renovation.

The remains of the old roof were removed. The walls were repaired and plastered; the damaged women's gallery replaced. An experienced structural engineer inspected the building and advised against putting the load of a new roof on the weakened ancient walls. Instead, four marble columns were erected in the prayer hall, supporting stone arches that carried the new roof. The cutting and carving of the columns and arches was a unique opportunity for exchanging knowledge and experience among the local traditional stonecutters, craftsmen who brought in old European techniques, and an Egyptian marble workshop using the latest technologies. Everyone involved learned a great deal from the experience.

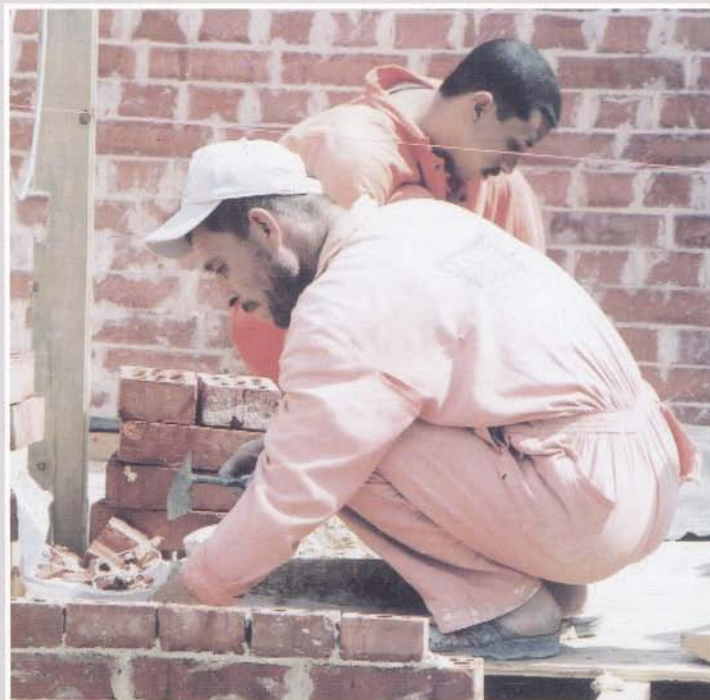


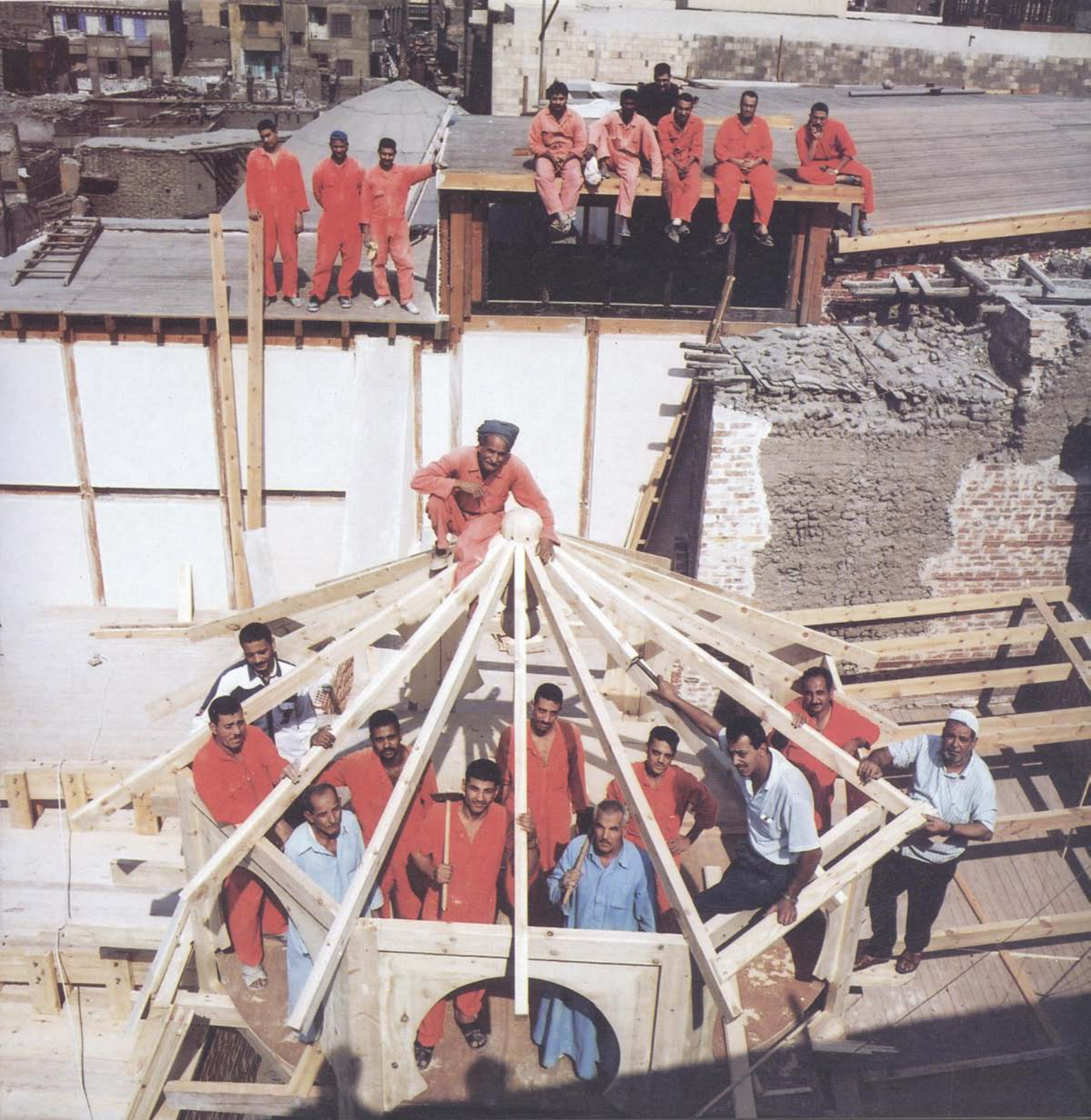


Local Craftsmen

The mosque was rebuilt using traditional materials and techniques, and therefore people doing the work had to know traditional crafts. Many of the craftsmen working for the project had learned their trade from their fathers. The carpenters, stonecutters, plaster casts makers, bricklayers, brought into the project skills and knowledge transmitted over many generations. Many of them live in the neighborhood.

The area that encircles the mosque abounds in small workshops where the same craft has often been practiced at the same location for centuries. The local blacksmiths, woodworkers, masters in brass, stucco, or stone supplied the mosque with iron and brass fittings, built the pavilion over the central columns, provided doors, floors, wooden balustrades and more.

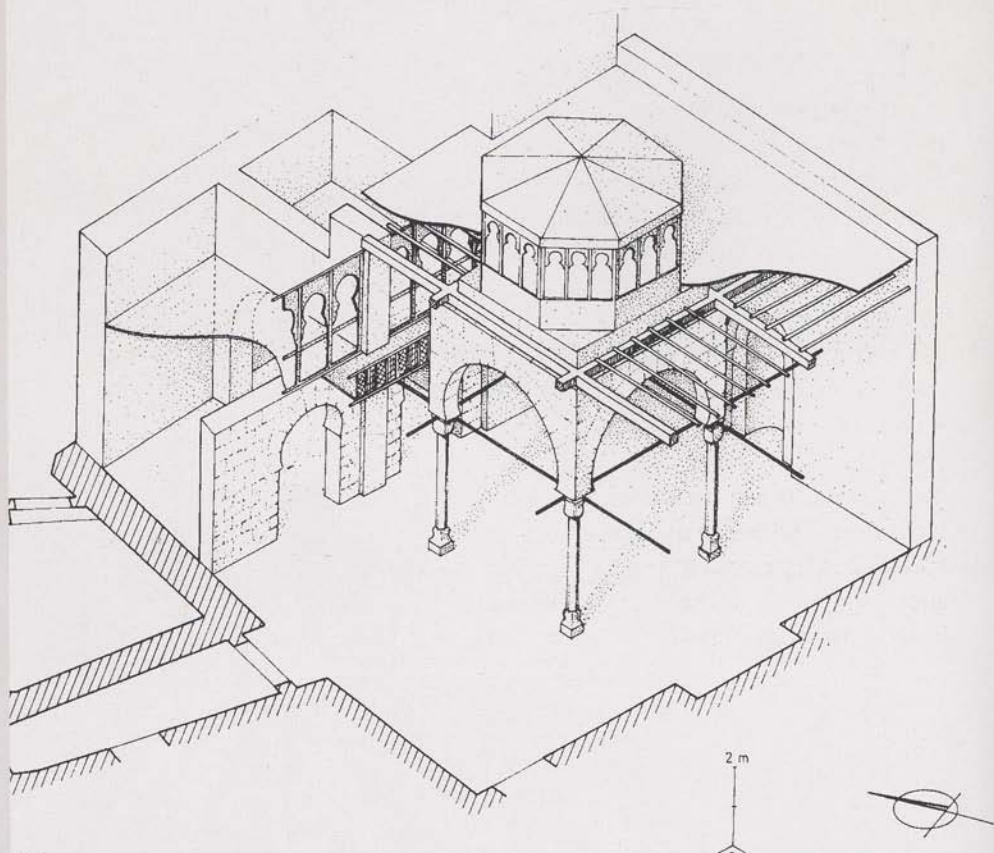




How Old Is the Mosque?

In the early fifteenth century, the famous chronicler al-Maqrizi wrote: *On the edge of the market of the saddle-makers is the mosque (...) called Sam Ibn Nuh, and next to it there is Bab Zuwayla.* The mosque was ancient by that time. Its location suggests that it already existed when the present formidable gate of *Bab Zuwayla* was built in 1092. Muhammad Ibn al-Banna, who died in 1195, is known to have taught Qur'an recitations here. The mosque is, then, among the oldest in Cairo, in continuous use for probably a thousand years.

Nothing however is known about the architecture of the early mosque, nor of its later fate. When in 1819 Muhammad 'Ali constructed his ornate *sabil* and school complex, the new façade incorporated the entrance into the small mosque behind. Parts of its walls date to earlier times, but nothing of architectural merit was preserved. Before the collapse of 1999, the mosque was a modest, simple building that had acquired its form in the early twentieth century. It was shaped by the practical needs of the community, rather than by artistic inspiration. The mosque has now been rebuilt following a new design.



MP

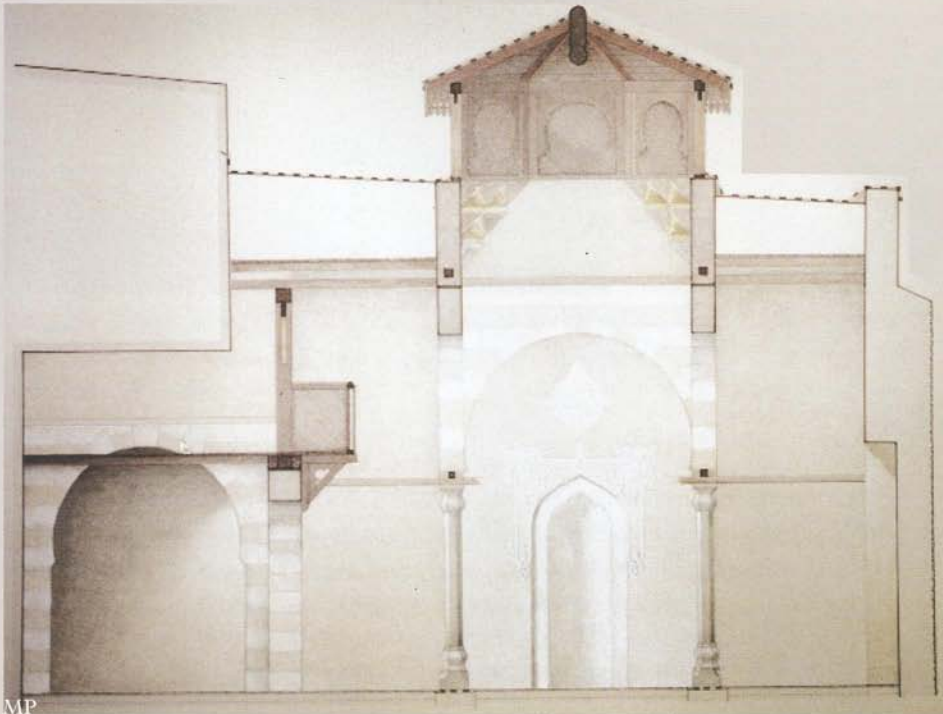
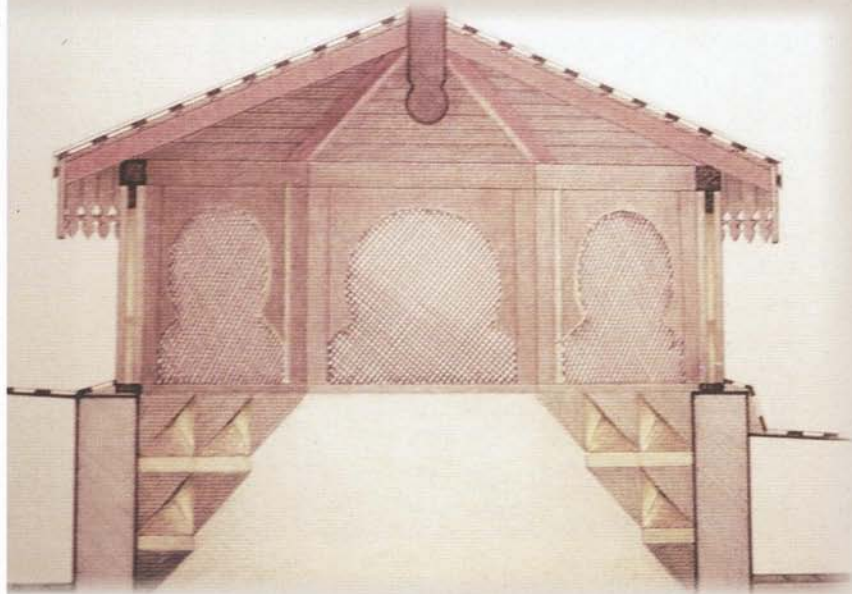


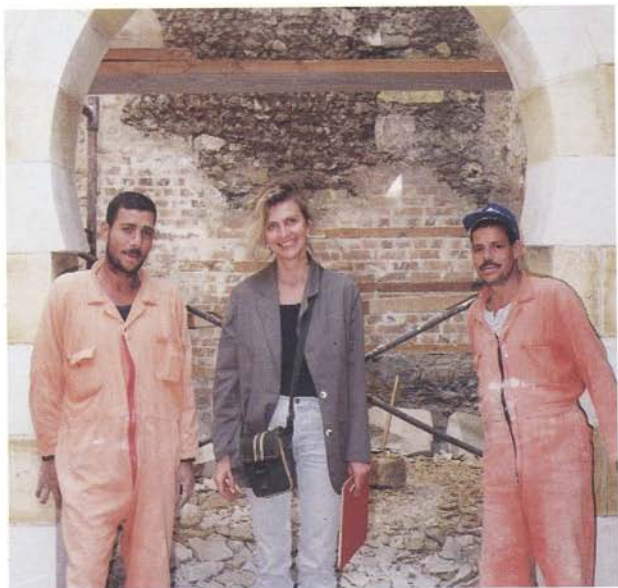
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Historic Or Modern?

How does one find an appropriate form for a building that is simultaneously centuries old, yet essentially modern?

Numerous factors had to be considered: the constraints of space, the expectations of a traditional community, the adjacent listed monument, and crumbling walls all around. The building had to be structurally consolidated, and its weakened outer walls relieved. This made internal supports necessary. The columns supporting the roof, the wall underneath the women's gallery, the arches in the entrance corridor, all have structural function. The architectural forms resulted to a great extent from the decision to use traditional materials and building techniques. The design uses idioms and patterns of the traditional Islamic architecture of Cairo but in a simple, geometric form, without imitating any particular, historical period or style.





Agnieszka Dobrowolska is a conservation architect who has lived and worked in Egypt since 1993. In the past few years, she directed three American Research Center in Egypt conservation projects in Historic Cairo, close to the Mosque of Sam Ibn Nuh. She designed the architecture of the new mosque and also planned and led the project, volunteering her work.

When Dr. Grzegorz Bogobowicz defended his Ph.D. thesis on modern technologies in concrete construction, he probably did not expect that he would be restoring subtle structural balance to endangered historic monuments. In the years since, his expertise has saved a number of fine historic buildings in Cairo from collapse. He also managed to include the Mosque of Sam Ibn Nuh in his busy schedule.



Experts specializing in erecting marble columns are a rare commodity. Fortunately for the project, Dr. Wojciech Kofařaj re-erected dozens of toppled and shattered antique columns during the twenty-plus years when he directed the restoration of the Roman site of Kom el-Dikka in Alexandria. He used the experience in expertly assembling and aligning the columns that support the roof in the Mosque of Sam Ibn Nuh.



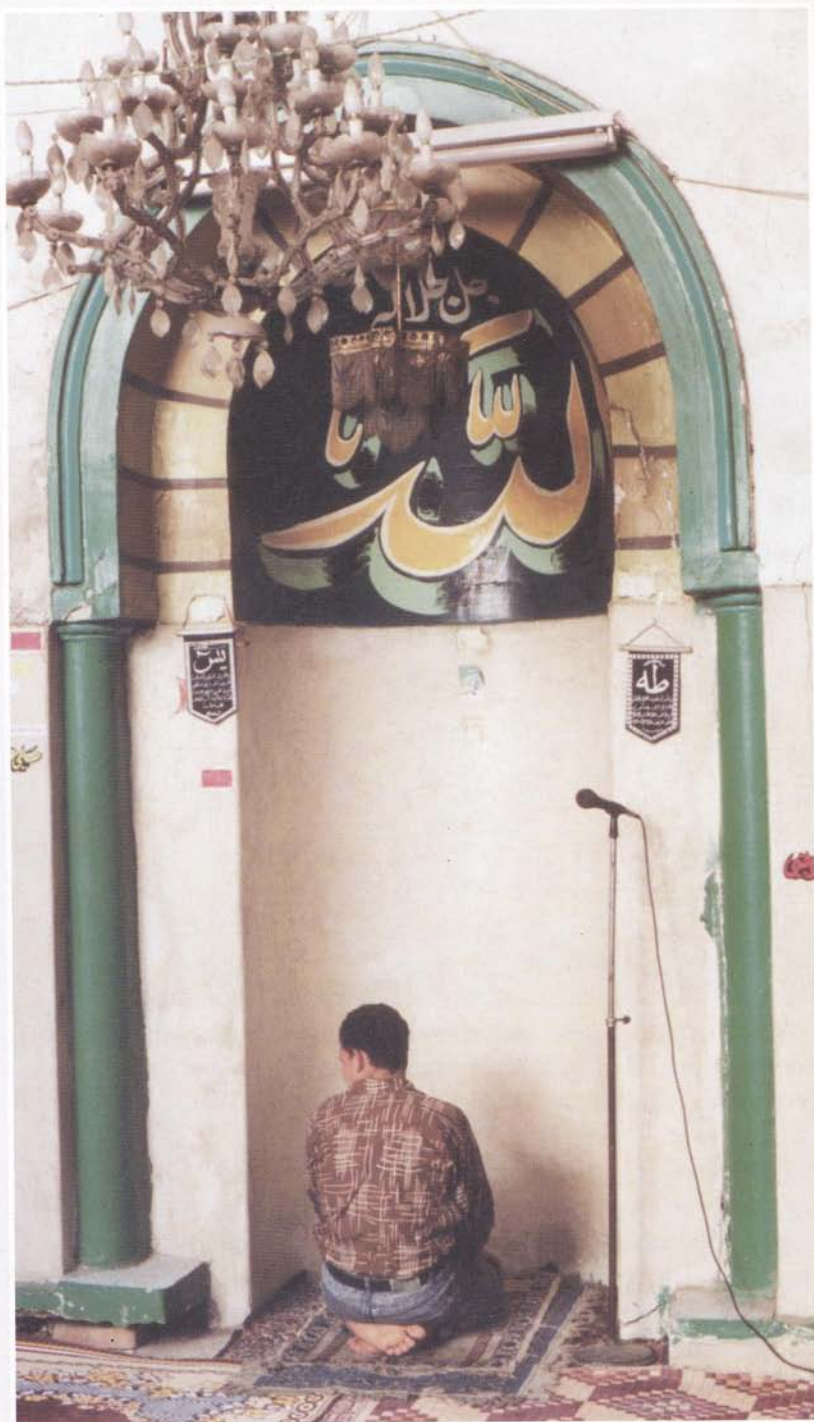
Stefan Balding and Sven Walter, members of the German stonecutters' guild, came to the project as journeymen. Following a medieval tradition, they complete their professional training by traveling from town to town to learn secrets of their trade in distant places. They obey strict rules of the guild during their journey, including the prescribed traditional dress.

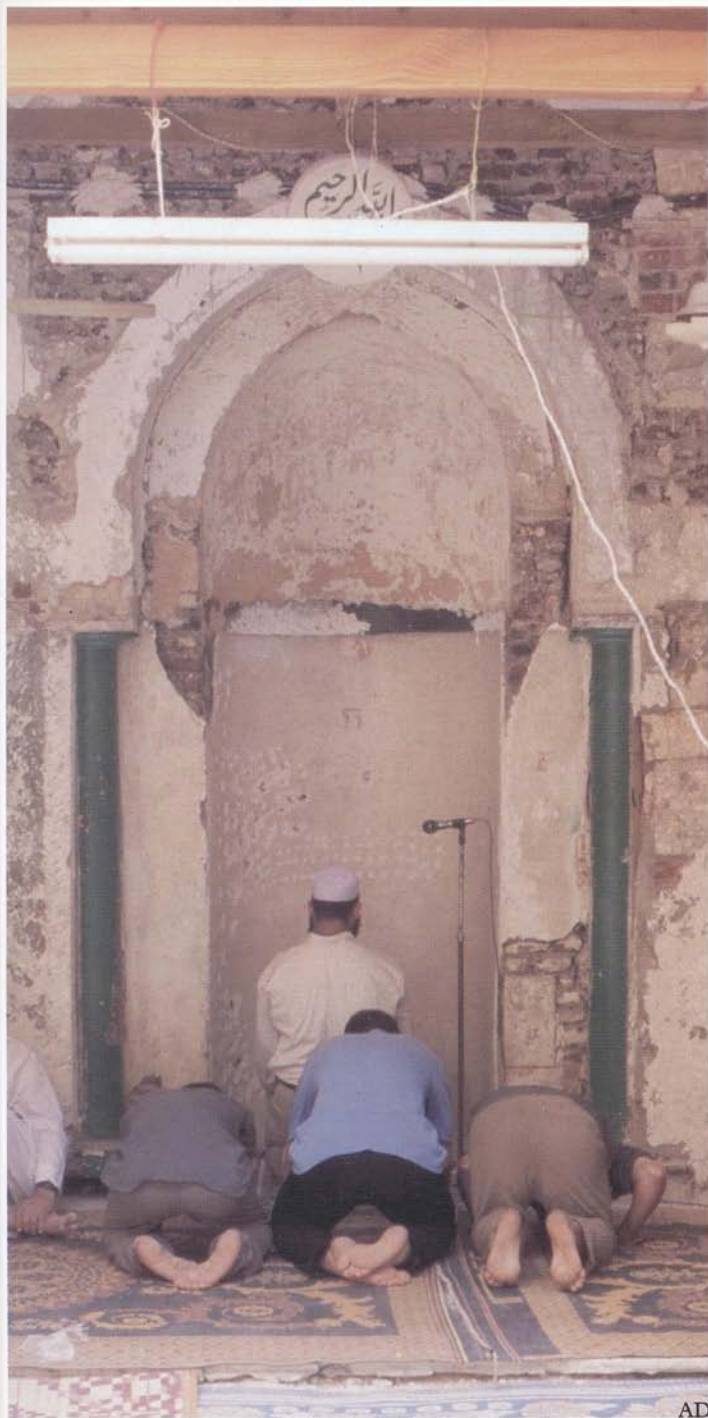
Patrick Godeau's past work as a journalist, degrees in Arabic language and in philosophy, eighteen years of living in Cairo, experience in producing photographic records of numerous historic monuments in Egypt, easy manner with people, indefatigable industriousness, boundless ingenuity, and hard work combined to result in the photographs that document the project, and illustrate this booklet.

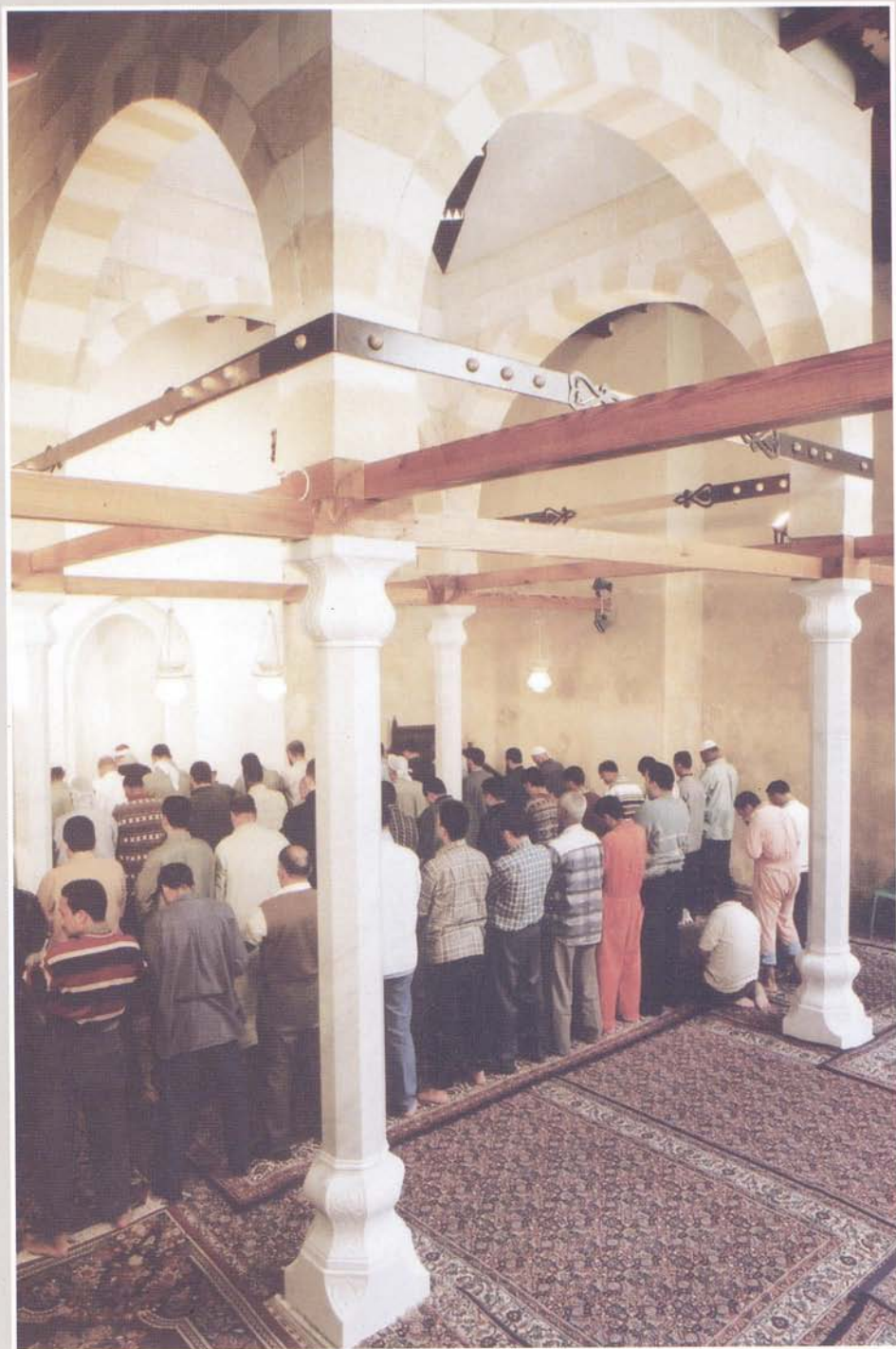
Dina Bakhoun was the project's assistant manager. Her training as an engineer was useful in managing the construction site; her studies in Islamic historic architecture helped in dealing with historic material; her fluent command of five languages was an asset in the multinational team. But an asset no less important for the project, was her enthusiasm, cheerfulness, and sense of humor, which endeared her to the neighborhood community.




As the construction proceeded, the community members were watching closely, observing, discussing the work, sharing opinions. They were not just observers, though. The active involvement of the community was perhaps the most valuable aspect of the project. People helped as each one could. Sometimes this involved volunteering their time and labor when extra effort was needed. Sometimes, cleaning or guarding the site after the day's activities, helping solve logistical problems. As the project neared completion, financial contributions and volunteer work on specific tasks intensified: people helped lay the new floor, built the balustrade of the women's balcony, bought and installed new lighting and floor carpets. All the time, even in the midst of construction, the mosque remained open for prayers.







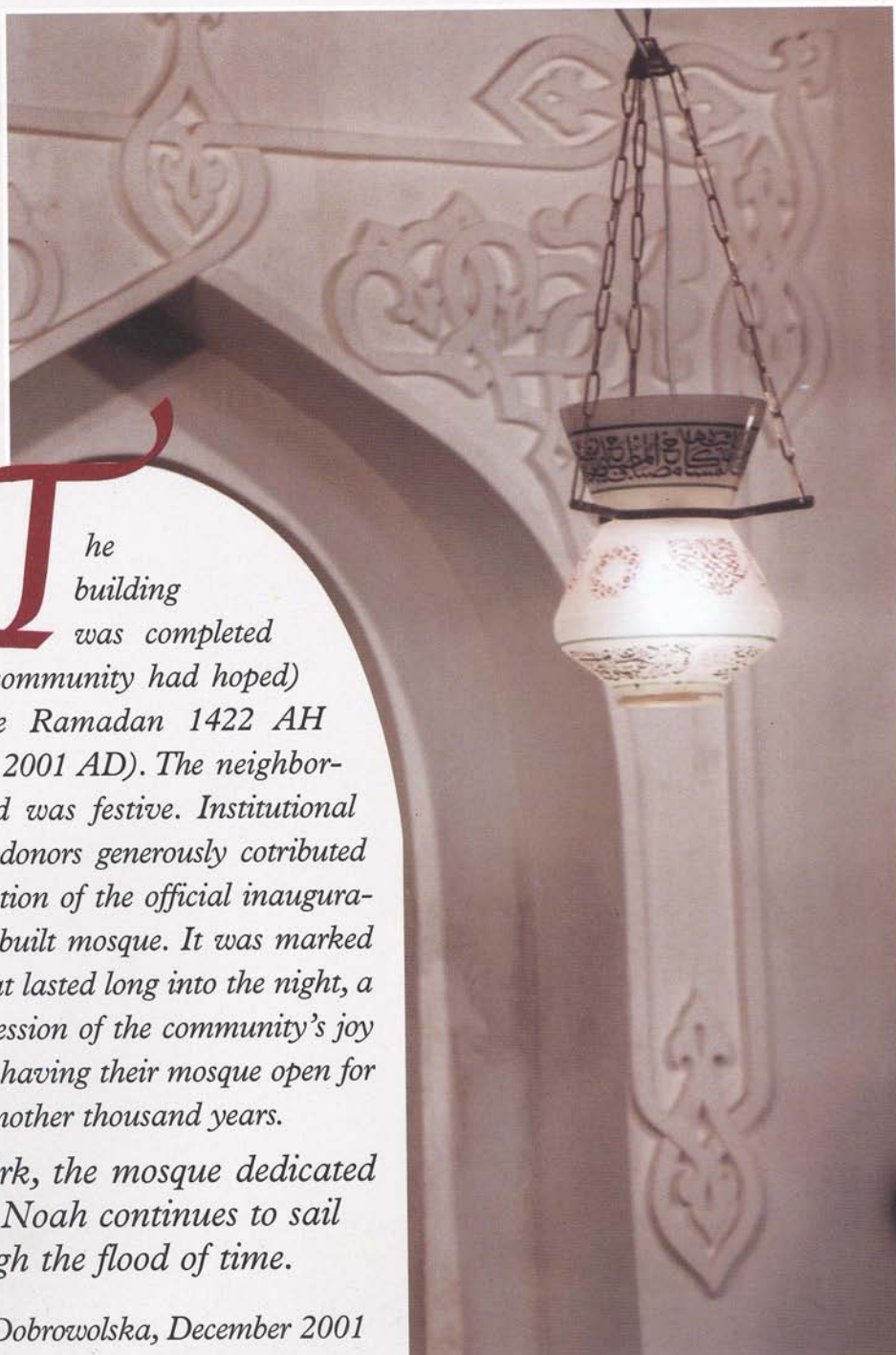


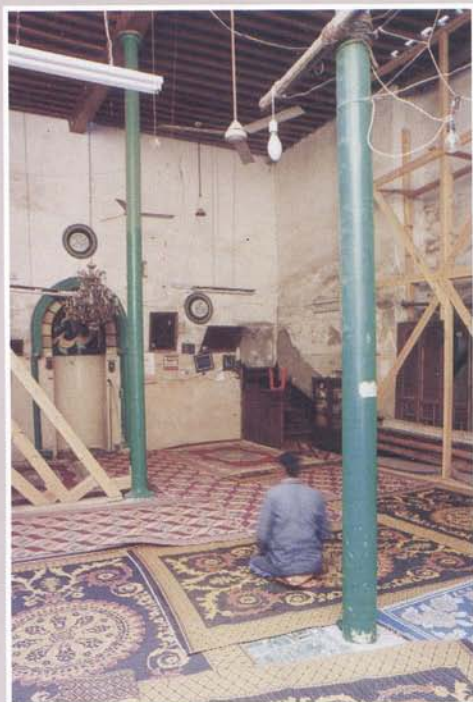
*The
building
was completed*

*(as the community had hoped)
just before Ramadan 1422 AH
(November 2001 AD). The neighbor-
hood's mood was festive. Institutional
and private donors generously cotributed
to the celebration of the official inaugura-
tion of the rebuilt mosque. It was marked
by a feast that lasted long into the night, a
jubilant expression of the community's joy
and pride at having their mosque open for
prayers for another thousand years.*

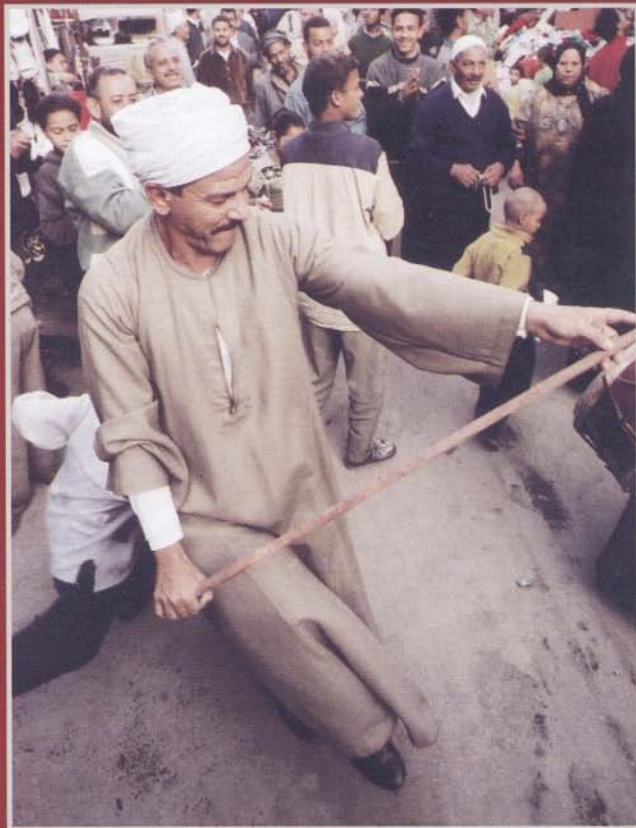
*Like the Ark, the mosque dedicated
to a son of Noah continues to sail
through the flood of time.*

Agnieszka Dobrowolska, December 2001









The *mulid* is a celebration of a saintly person's birthday by people gathering at his or her tomb. Apart from its religious meaning, a *mulid* in Egypt always draws crowds for a traditional feast, a carnival of joyous entertainment, folk art, and popular culture.

There is no tomb in the Mosque of Sam Ibn Nuh. It is a place of prayer for the local community, not a shrine, so the celebration that marked its opening was not a veneration of a saintly *shaykh*, but a festivity expressing the neighborhood's jubilant mood. The street called it a *mulid* anyhow—describing the essence of a popular feast.

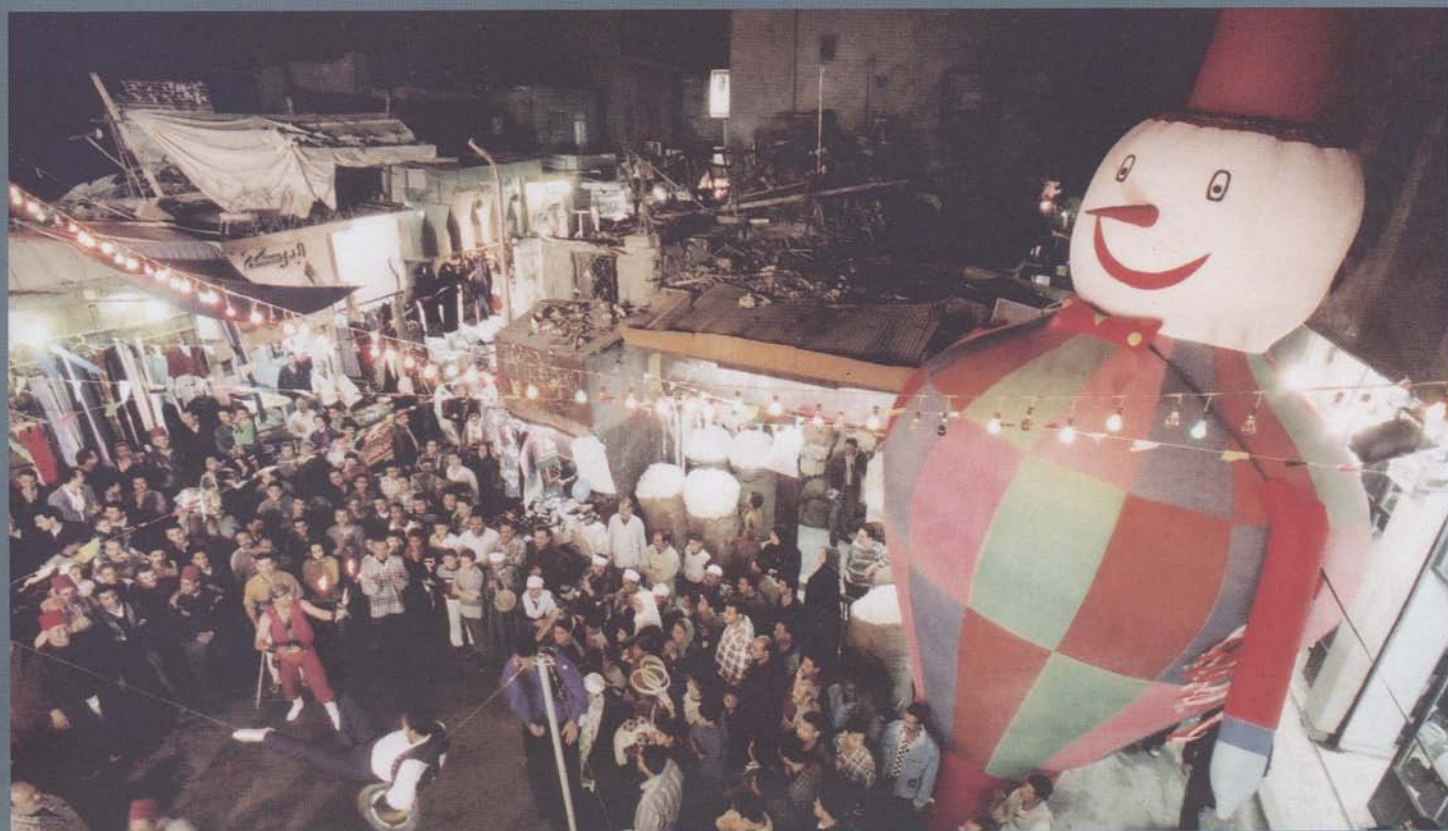
For three days, a band of musicians distributed invitations to everyone in the neighboring streets and heralded the coming event. When it came on November 28, 2001, it began with the Ramadan *iftar* meal for three hundred people. Later, thousands gathered in front of the mosque, on the medieval city's main street, to enjoy musicians, performers, and entertainers until late into the night.

M U L I D !

What a night! Crowds, lights, banners, brightly colored tents, whirling dervishes, tight-rope walkers, jugglers, fire-spitters, stick-dancers, three music bands, a giant air-balloon, a rider on a black stallion, men, women, children, Muslims and Christians, Egyptians and foreigners, distinguished guests and neighborhood peddlers, rich and poor, all celebrating the opening of the re-built mosque.

This event was possible thanks to the generosity of institutional and individual sponsors:

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