ABSTRACT

Watering the Thirsty: Preserving the Sabīls of Historic Cairo

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The act of providing water to the thirsty is considered extremely noble in Islam. In Islamic civilization, this led to the evolution of the sabīl, or charitable water dispensary. In Cairo, the sabīl emerged in the fourteenth century, evolving into an elaborate construction absorbing diverse architectural styles. It attracted patronage from a wide range of wealthy Caïrenes who sought to perform a righteous deed fī sabīl Allah (in the way of God) while asserting their social status.

Over the course of six centuries, sabīls dispensed water from cisterns filled and replenished with Nile water by the saqqās (water carriers). They were an integral component of the water supply system of Cairo until the introduction of piped water in the nineteenth century. For this reason, as well as various social and urban changes that began around the same time, numerous sabīls were razed or left to deteriorate.

Today, over one-hundred sabīls survive in the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Historic Cairo. While a few well known examples have undergone conservation, most are unused and in poor condition. This raises the question, how can the sabīls of Historic Cairo be preserved? This study adopts a multidisciplinary approach to answer this question, including elements of history, design, conservation, and planning. It concludes that sabīls are potentially useful buildings that can be integrated back into the lives of Caïrenes and play a role in the revitalization of Historic Cairo. In order for this to be realized, Egypt must reconsider its preservation policies.