

Taz Palace: Reflections on a Hidden Treasure

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Abstract:

Through a closer reading of diverse contemporary sources, this paper provides an insightful investigation of Prince Taz unique palace that stands majestically at the heart of Medieval Cairo. It casts light on the historical significance of this palace where successive layers of the past (Mamluk, Ottoman and Khedival) meet with the present and merge harmoniously together. Due to the absence of any catalogue of the palace, the paper also seeks to provide tour-guides with the essential information they direly need to know while arranging guided-tours inside it. Over and above, the paper aims at valorizing this long-shrouded heritage that was miraculously restored in recent years, nevertheless it remains on the edge.

A time-machine palace:

The Palace of the Mamluk Emir Taz (that carries no. 267¹) is a richly textured site of overlapping histories. No wonder, it offers its visitors a fascinating journey through time and a feeling of originality emerging from those signs of age that appear everywhere inside.

It is considered one of the very few surviving examples of medieval residential palaces owned by the ruling Mamluk elite. It was originally built in the 14th century around 753 H. /1352 AD by the Mamluk Emir Saif Al Din Taz Al Nassiry². It was called then "Dar Taz"³ or the mansion of Taz because of its grandeur and splendour.

It was seemingly built on that grand style to befit the eminent status of Emir Taz's wife Khawanda Zahraa the daughter of Sultan Al Nassir Muhammad whom he married in 752H.⁴/1351 AD.

Emir Taz bought several houses that were initially standing on the site which he chose to build his palace. He got the consent of some of its owners and forced others to sell their houses to him against their will. Then he demolished them⁵ all to erect his own palace. The renowned Mamluk Emir Manjak al Youssefi, who held many titles at that time like the deputy of the Sultan, supervised himself the construction of the palace till its completion⁶. No wonder, Taz palace's entrance looks very similar to that of Manjak's partially ruined palace located at the corner of Suq *al-Silah* Street⁷ in Cairo.

In its heydays, a special banquet was held inside Taz Palace in honor of the Mamluk Sultan Al-Salih Salih (1351-1354AD) who descended down from the citadel to attend it together with other grandees and prominent Mamluk Emirs. The Sultan's descent from the citadel to visit one of his Emirs was an unprecedented favor which he had bestowed on Taz who in return gifted him 4 well-bred horses of best stock equipped with golden saddles⁸ on this occasion.

During the Ottoman period, the palace became the last station for deposed Walis or governors before they left Egypt. Since, they had to wait in Egypt till their personal fortunes were calculated in accordance with Ottoman regulations, they habitually spent this waiting period that preceded their departure in this palace like Khalil pasha who moved to it in 1709⁹AD.

In the same manner, former Ottoman chief eunuchs who were responsible for the Imperial harem widely known as (Kizlar Agasi or Dar Saade Agasi) used to stay in it. According to Ottoman norms, when a new Sultan rose to the throne of the Ottoman Empire, he would remove the chief eunuch of his office to curtail his prodigious influence on the court and typically send him to Egypt¹⁰ where he would spend his last years. Such a practice amounted to a disguised exile meant to oust former chief eunuchs and drive them away from Istanbul. After their relocation in Egypt, they would become superintendants of the Imperial waqfs of the Holy Cities of Mecca and Medina known as "Awqaf al-Haramyn"¹¹. Apparently, this appointment was no more than a preventive measure to appease them lest they should disclose some of the harem's secrets. This

new position secured for them considerable wealth in Egypt where they used to reside in this palace as previously mentioned or nearby in the so-called "Darb Al Aghwat" quarter.¹²

During the second half of the 17th century, one of those chief eunuchs named Ali Agha Dar Saada used the wealth he had amassed in Egypt to renew and remodel parts of the palace. He even left his name inscribed on some of its walls as will be discussed later, and annexed a charitable Sabil-Kuttub building (that carries no. 268 in the index of listed Islamic monuments of Ministry of Antiquities) to it in 1677AD. The Sabil was a charitable water fountain built initially to provide water for the passersby without charges while the upper floor was used as a Quran school where poor children received free elementary education and learnt to recite the holy Quran at the hands of a sheikh hired by the founder. He endowed some of his fortune to maintain it and left a waqfiyya deed¹³ for this purpose. To guarantee the sustainability of this sabil-kuttub endowment even after his death, he added a series of shops at the façade of the palace to generate money from renting them.

Over years, the palace had markedly deteriorated once again. By the time of Muhammad Ali, it was even used as storage for military equipments¹⁴.

During the reign of Khedive Ismail (1863-1879), the palace witnessed a renaissance at the hands of an enlightened woman this time. This woman was one of Khedive Ismail's wives whose name was Gasham Aft Hanim. She was truly an early feminist who championed women's right for education in Egypt. No wonder, she devoted her time and fortune to realize this end. She decided to build the first school for girls in Egypt¹⁵ after getting the consent of her husband. Being on charge of the department of waqf institution and schools then, Ali pasha Mubarak was commissioned to carry out this project. He chose the badly damaged palace of Taz that was inhabited at that time by some poor people and was used as a stud for animals to transform it to a school after making necessary modifications¹⁶. He fixed up the damaged parts, renovated the Miqaad and the qaas and built a new building that divided the courtyard. At last, the school was inaugurated in 1290 H. / 1873 AD and it was called Sufiyya School¹⁷. It opened its doors to girls from all classes of the Egyptian society for free. The school soon worked with its maximum capacity because 200 girls were enrolled in it while another 100 places were later added¹⁸ to admit more of those girls flocking to it.

It goes without saying that each of these successive historical eras had left its indelible imprints on the palace and shaped its identity and characteristic features.

The founder's top-down story:

The founder of this palace was Taz ibn Qatfaj¹⁹ Ibn Abd Allah²⁰ (referring to his servile origin) Al Nassiry. He was originally one of the Mamluks of Sultan Al Nassir Muhammad Ibn Qalawn²¹ who ruled for three reigns (1293–1294AD), (1299–1309AD) and (1310 -1341AD). Therefore, he was attributed to the Sultan and was even called "Taz Al Nassiry" after him.

It seems that Taz had started his career as a cup-bearer of the Sultan and was assigned for tasting the Sultan's food and drinks first. This can be deduced from his blazon that takes the shape of a cup on the middle field of a shield²² and which appears on one of the walls of the harem of his palace.

His star shone bright especially after marrying one of Al Nassir Muhammad's daughters. Undoubtedly, becoming the Sultan's son-in-law had left the road wide open for him to rise up in ranks. Besides, his first wife whom he outlived left him a fortune after her death in 745 H. /1344AD. It was quite a massive fortune as it was estimated with 500,000 derham²³ which must have also multiplied his power. It seems that after his first wife passed away, he married another daughter of Al Nassir Muhammad in 752 H²⁴/1351AD so as to stay in the lime light. On the occasion of his second marriage, the Mamluk Sultan Al-Salih Salih (1351–1354 AD) conferred on him 300,000 derham as a wedding gift and held for the couple a big wedding ceremony to suit their high status²⁵.

It is worth of mentioning that marriage was typically used to reinforce ties and enhance solidarity inside the Mamluk institution. Most of all, it consolidated the patron-client relationship over which their institution rested. As such, mamluk sultans and emirs arranged the marriage of their sisters, daughters and freed slaves to their former mamluks. This was a common practice meant to bind the mamluk to his original master by "the delicate silk robe of the bride in addition to the usual ties --in mamluk institution"²⁶

No wonder, al-Nassir Muhammad tried hard to create a web of such relationships among his Mamluk emirs and his children²⁷. His son Al-Salih Salih followed his footsteps too. This policy that had been successfully implemented during the reign of these two sultans continued throughout the life-span of the Mamluk institution.

It is not surprising that Taz was soon promoted to become "Muqqaddem Alf" or the foremost of 1000 Mamluks under his leadership in 749 H/1348 AD. Shortly after, he well-established himself as "Amir Majles"²⁸ or lord of the audience and exerted a prodigious influence inside the royal court. At the same time, he was among those six emirs who used to run the country undisputedly during the reign of Sultan Al Muzaffar Haji²⁹ (1346–1347AD) and were referred to as Umraa al mashura³⁰.

To be more precise, he dominated the political scene in the country together with Shaikhu and Sarghatmash³¹. Suffice to say that he was among those Emirs who ended Sultan Al Nassir Hassan first reign (1347- 1351AD) and deposed him. Then they appointed in his place his brother Al Salih Salih (1351–1354 AD) whom Taz held the reins of his horse up to the citadel and placed him on the throne³².

He also made a coalition with the same powerful Mamluk emirs Shaikhu and Sarghatmash³³ to aggrandize his power. However, this alliance short-lived. The preferential treatment which Taz received from Sultan Al-Salih had spurred him to dissolve this coalition and seek absolute power. Accordingly, he became the sole decision maker³⁴ in practice and overshadowed the Sultan himself. Nevertheless, Taz remained very close to Al-Salih who bestowed countless favors on him. It was evident that the sultan enjoyed Taz's company as a friend at night and turned to him as a consultant at day time³⁵.

On the other hand, Taz never failed him. Whenever he was entrusted with a mission, he accomplished it successfully. One can safely say, he utilized his superb fighting attributes to serve the Sultan's interests. This was best manifested when he suppressed a rebellion that broke out in Hijaz in 752H/1351 AD. In response, the Sultan gave him at his return 200, 000 dirham as a reward for his tremendous efforts there³⁶. He also suppressed a serious rebellion that erupted at Bahnasa and Fayum³⁷ and went out to crush the bandits from Arabs of Atfiyah who used to cut the roads³⁸. It comes as a little surprise that he was held in high esteem among his peers at large.

On a personal level, Taz was described in contemporary chronicles as a tall handsome and brave-hearted horseman who was benevolent and highly revered man of learning³⁹.

However, Taz's envied status didn't last for long. After deposing al Salih Salih and the return of Al Nassir Hassan again (1355–1361), he was promoted to become the secretary of state or "dawdar kabir". However, it seems that Taz's mounting power had alarmed Al Nassir Hassan who wished not be reduced to a mere puppet and feared to be deposed again. As a result, he tried to check Taz who manipulated his power. Thus, Taz soon fell out of favor. His heated rivalry with other prominent emirs must have added its quota to his downfall likewise. They worked hard to shatter his power as a charismatic leader and to deport him from Egypt. Therefore, he was given the governorship of Aleppo⁴⁰. However, he was soon removed and lost his position during the second term of office of Al Nassir Hassan. To his chagrin, he was taken in chains first to Al-Karak and later to Alexandria where he remained in prison for almost three years⁴¹ where he suffered a lot.

Taz was even blinded⁴² by al Nassir Hassan after pouring hot kohl into his eyes. At last, he was released at the hands of emir Yalbugha at the beginning of the reign of Sultan Al Mansur Muhammed (1361–1363AD). Highly appreciating his glorious past and his outstanding valor, the Sultan warmly received him after his release. In the course of this meeting, Taz who was putting a black bandage on his eyes to conceal them asked the Sultan to allow him to leave to Jerusalem. The Sultan respected his will and let him depart to Jerusalem where he died in 763 h.⁴³ He was probably buried in the mausoleum erected for him there at Tariq Bab al-Silsila where an inscription bearing his name was carved⁴⁴.

That's how the Taz died lonely away of Egypt and away of his elegant palace that remained an eye-witness for the rise and fall of its ambitious founder because of sways of power.

A well-centered Location:

The palace of Prince Taz is located at Sufiyya st. that lies in the densely populated Khalifa neighborhood at the gateway to Medieval Cairo.

According to contemporary sources, the palace was very close to al-Madrasa Bunduqdariyya and opposite to Hammam al-Fariqani (a small public bath at the time) to the right of Saliba St. on the way to Hedret al Baqr⁴⁵ and Zawila gate⁴⁶

This perfectly-chosen location was part of an elite residential suburb called Birket al- Fil. The entire suburb derived its name from the name of a pond that took the shape of an elephant trunk around which people settled. This pond and the like were formed by the water of the Nile during the annual inundation. When the flood receded gradually afterwards, it left the depressions in the ground filled with water which formed such ponds⁴⁷.

Unable to stand the hustle and bustle of Cairo's crowded quarters and in search for plenty of space to erect their grand palaces, Mamluk emirs moved their houses towards the south and settled around Birket al-Fil: "It is partly due to the fact that the area was relatively unbuilt that residents could build such grand structures, and on such grand scales"⁴⁸

That's how the area of Birket al-Fil thrived and continued to flourish over years and up to the mid of the 17th century while a belt of handsome residences⁴⁹ were built there around the pond. Its proximity to the seat of government must have contributed to the development of this area as a chic living quarter. In fact, this site had enabled its inhabitants who belonged mainly to ruling elite to keep an eye on the political scene from their own place and to monitor the political life at a close range.

One must take into account that Al Nassir Muhammad Ibn Qalawn had deliberately motivated his mamluks within his third term of office to build their houses at the area stretching from the Citadel of Cairo to the pond so as to form "a symbolic ring around the royal residence"⁵⁰

By this way, their palaces would emerge as the first defense line of the Citadel where he resided. Furthermore, the expansion of this area served other royal interests: "Strategically, these palaces controlled access to the horse market area (Maydan Rumayla), and defended the royal domain behind it. Aesthetically, they announced the viewer of the royal splendor that would fully unfold as one enters the open square of Rumayla."⁵¹

On the other hand, the beautiful scenery of the area and the blooming orchards that grew in it must have increased its popularity among the ruling elite. It is not surprising that many Europeans who visited Cairo or lived for a while in it were much fascinated with its dazzling beauty. One of them had described the area as follows:

"Nothing is more pleasant than this place filled with water during eight months of the year while during the remaining months it turns into a perfumed garden"⁵²

An overview of the palace:

The magnificence of Taz palace had seemingly grabbed attention to it. The famous chronicler al-Maqrizi described the palace of Taz as: "a well-constructed palace and a quite large stable"⁵³. Some Mamluk emirs had even contributed to the construction of the palace. They brought marble and other building materials⁵⁴ during the construction of the palace as complimentary gifts for emir Taz.

On examining the design of Taz palace, one can easily discern that much concern was given at those days to the physical environment where it stands. Accordingly, many aspects like maintaining privacy and serenity, convenience of space, circulation of air, thermal comfort and illumination quality were all taken into consideration while designing and such residences. By this way, these residences would provide their inhabitants with all their needs thereby render them more relaxed and satisfied. It is not surprising then that each of the architectural elements of the building had its own well-calculated function.

The palace consists of an imposing trilobbed central portal overlooking Sufiyya St. (Fig.1). It is built of ashler stone and heavily decorated with clustered stalactites. The entrance shape and dimensions were of particular significance because they reflected the identity and status of the owner. Built on a massive scale and surrounded with a high enclosure wall, the central portal announced the populace that the owner of this building belonged to the ruling elite.



Fig.1 The central portal

After: <http://www.touregypt.net/featurestories/amirtaz.htm>

To guard the privacy of the inhabitants of such palaces and to channel the flow of its visitors, a small vaulted vestibule known as (dirkah)⁵⁵ was built and equipped with a large stone bench known as (mastaba)⁵⁶ to serve as a waiting place for the visitors before admitting entry into the innermost part of the palace. As such, the visitors' entry would not cause any inconvenience to the inhabitants or violate their privacy.

The arched doorway leads to an open courtyard divided into two small courts by means of a building that was built in the 19th century⁵⁷ when the palace was converted to a school. (Fig.2)



(Fig.2) The courtyard after its division into two parts by means of a 19th century's addition.

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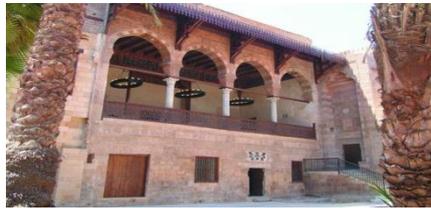
It is worth of mentioning that all the segments of these palaces were built around such inner courts. In other words, the inner courts served as a communication area or a connection between the various parts of such palaces. They were much like the lungs and the vibrant heart of these palaces and the center of movement inside them.

Actually, the inner courts formed a typical feature of Islamic architecture whether during the Mamluk period or the Ottoman one. This is largely due to the fact that houses open into the inner courts and gardens⁵⁸ in the design concept of traditional domestic Islamic architecture. This design concept sprang out of their environment and its severe climatic conditions. In other words, the use of inner court was a perfect architectural solution⁵⁹ they developed to overcome the prevailing harsh conditions of their environment. These courts helped in regulating temperature inside houses and maintaining a thermal balance as well as ensuring renewal of air and good ventilation: ".....depending on the automatic flow of air, cold air, being heavier than warm air, would move downwards during the night in the yard, making the yard and the spaces around it cool and humid into the late hours of the day....The internal yard also secures continuous automatic ventilation inside and outside the house, based on the same concept of automatic air flow from parts with high pressure (greater thermal balance), to parts with lower pressure (lesser thermal balance, hotter)"⁶⁰

The use of vaulted roofs in some halls inside the palace performed the same function. They used to cool the places during summer time while keep warmth during winter time, thus provided comfort to residents all around the year. To one's surprise, the construction technique of such vaulted roofs had survived in Egypt from the time of ancient Egyptians⁶¹.

The backyard was designated as a service area for performing domestic activities and for housing dependencies and annexes of the palace. Among those annexes that were very likely to exist in such grand palaces were the kitchen⁶², the Farshkhane for storing beddings, Tishtkhane for storing laundry vessels, Rikabkhana for storing saddles, bridles and similar equipments..etc.)⁶³

The Miqaad or the loggia was a summer reception hall where the owner of the palace customarily received his male guests. It is originally a raised arcaded hall resting on three marble columns with neo-Corinthian⁶⁴ capitals and reached through a staircase. It is oriented towards the north so as to receive the northern prevailing wind⁶⁵ and direct it inside to cool the place. It overlooks the inner court and is open from one side. It is also surmounted with a protruding wooden canopy to provide shade and protect the guests from direct sunrays during daytime. (Fig.3)



**Fig.3 The summer Miqaad overlooking the inner court. After:
http://archnet.org/sites/6152/media_contents/55939**

This miqaad was a later addition as it was added during the Ottoman period⁶⁶ by Ali Agha Dar Saada when he resided in the palace in the 17th century. The miqaad has a magnificent polychromed ceiling made of wooden rafts and painted with gold and lazurite. It is richly decorated with floral and geometrical patterns. Just below the ceiling, one finds elaborate decorative bands of inscriptions including some verses of the holy Quran of Surat Al Fath, as well as the name and titles of Ali Agha who revitalized the palace in 1089 H. according to the date that was carved on the frieze (however the date is now missing). It also has a supplication statement for Ali Agha reads as "Kan Allah Lahu"⁶⁷ or "May Allah be with him and support him". The adjoining rooms also have beautiful decorated ceilings and friezes of writings beneath with some verses taken from the famous poem of "Nahj Al Burda" written by Al Bausairy⁶⁸ in praise of Prophet Muhammed (peace and prayers be upon him). Decorating the rooms with verses of this particular poem was seemingly very common during the Ottoman period as for example in the House of Sehemy which is located at Al Darb Al Asfar and dates back also to the Ottoman period.

In addition to the Miqaad, the palace has a number of elegant Qaas for receiving visitors. Obviously, the construction of multiple qaas was a recurrent feature likely to be found in large Mamluk residences⁶⁹.

Among these qaas, the one that occupied the lower floor which served as the main reception hall. It is also known as salamlik or men's section. It consisted of two iwans situated opposite to each other and a lower part called durqaa in between⁷⁰ where the servants used to stand while serving eminent guests as well as a polychrome marble inlay fountain to soften the air. Bathrooms and latrines are attached to it to serve the guests.

The harem or women's quarters inside the house or better say the family area is located on the upper floor. It consists of a large hall that leads to a number of side rooms. The hall is divided into two Iwans and a durqaa⁷¹ topped with a graceful dome that rests on octagonal squinch known as shoukhsheikha and supplied with eight raised windows to well-circulate the air inside the hall and provide good illumination. Furthermore, it symbolizes the sky in popular culture while the eight sides represent the eight angles supporting the throne of God⁷². This dome was entirely reconstructed during the restoration of the palace in the same old technique.

The harem has also three round ocular windows that looks like a full moon, therefore they are called "Qamariah" after the Arabic word for the "moon". Bands of writing carved on a wooden frieze decorate the walls there. The blazon of Taz appears at the center of the band. It takes the shape of a cup (since he started

his career as the cup-bearer of the sultan and the taster of his drinks). The text carved there gives the name and titles of Taz. (Fig.4)



Fig. A wooden decorated ceiling flanked with a band of writings below showing Taz cup blazon.

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Attached to the harem, one can find the upper bathrooms and latrines that had small perforated domes with stuccoed colored glass. The bathrooms whether the upper or the lower ones consist of three sections: the first section is the outermost one and is known as Maslaj or the cold room where they used to take off their clothes. it leads to the second section known as Beit awwal. it is a warm room that acts as a transitional chamber while the last section which is the inner most one is called Beit al-Harara⁷³ or the heated room. this gradual exposure to temperature was meant to protect the bathers from catching cold.

On the vaulted roof of the lower bathroom, one finds some holes taking the shape of conical alveoles to allow the evacuation of water vapour and lighten the place. Two latrines are annexed to the bath and accessed through two small arched doors⁷⁴.

A water wheel that was used to supply the house with its needs of water and feed the bathrooms was recently discovered. The place where the wheel stands is well-insulated by means of special kind of baked bricks and waterproof mortar called Khafiqi⁷⁵ to prevent water leakage. Water runnels that were used for the drainage of water can also be seen around.

As for the Ottoman sabil-kuttab that was built later and incorporated in the palace, it stands at the eastern end of the palace. It consists of two floors, the lower one served as a water dispensary, while the upper one served as a Quranic school. Its façade is adorned with Mushahhar where alternating courses of red and yellow stones were used in its construction and crowned with a wooden sunshade. The sabil has a large iron-grille window while the name of Allah⁷⁶ appears five times on some of the grilles in scattered places (Fig.5).



(Fig. 5) The façade of the sabil and its iron grilled window. After: ww.eternalegypt.org/

The sabil has a polychrome marble floor and a breathtaking wooden ceiling. The ceiling is gilded and painted in blue and bottomed with a lower frieze of writings that includes some verses of the Holy Quran (verses from 5-7 of Surat al-Insan) as well as the name of the founder and his titles (Ali Agha Khazindar Dar Saada) as well as the date of its establishment (1088 H.)⁷⁷

It is quite clear from this brief description of the palace's structure that attention was paid to very minute details so as to maximize its degree of preparedness to serve the needs of its residents.

Reflections on the palace architecture:

Taking a close look into the palace architecture, one can safely say that it tells in stones the story of the Mamluks and the enigma of their institution. Furthermore, it reveals some of their hidden secrets.

One can safely say, it communicates a number of messages to public the most important of which is Mamluks' elitism and undisputed leadership. Actually, Taz like the rest of the mamluks was much concerned with maintaining and enhancing his public image through proper self-presentation.

The verticality of the building⁷⁸ meant to emphasize the high status of its owner. It stretched upwards to convey the impression of loftiness and superiority to all passers by. One must take into account that Mamluks in general had a striking tendency to self-exaltation⁷⁹. Therefore, they used audio-visual symbols to mirror their supremacy and exclusiveness.

On the other hand, the fort-like shape of the palace together with the high walls and the massive portal reflect the endless fears of the Mamluks and their dire search for security.

It is quite evident that the instability of the Mamluk institution, the cut-throat factionalism that characterized it as well as the contention for power that was accompanied with acts of brutality⁸⁰ had all rendered the mamluks vulnerable and insecure. Such feeling of insecurity that stemmed from the jungle law that governed them must have embittered their lives.

To get over their worries, they took all possible measures to safe-guard their position and protect themselves against any possible attack. This was clearly manifested in the palace architecture.

The presence of a secret backdoor at the southern end of the palace overlooking Sheikh Khalil side alley and referred to as "bab sir"⁸¹ served as an emergency exit in case of any armed attack confirms this view. In the same vein, the palace also included a service quarter that comprised granaries and magazines⁸² where they used to store food. There was also a water source (a well, two water wheels and an underground cistern, Fig.6) to sustain the palace at rough times. In other words, the palace emerged as a self-sustaining unit to withstand any siege that might be imposed on it one day.



(Fig. 6) A water wheel that used to feed the palace with water in the past.

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presence of a large stable (now converted into a huge art gallery) provides an ample proof of Mamluk's obsession with power acquired through horsemanship. In fact, horsemanship was their very honor and their uncontested area of expertise. In addition, it was the hallmark of their regime that gave them a feeling of distinctiveness⁸³. For the same reason, mamluks were reluctant to dismount of their horses in the streets⁸⁴ in front of public eyes. Therefore, they used to ride through the entrance that opens into the courtyard as in Taz palace.

The palace's tragedy:

The Sufiyya School that was opened in the palace during the reign of khedive Ismail was initially a boarding school where both the students and the teaching staff (15 teachers including the principal) used to stay in dormitories⁸⁵ inside this historical building. This must have adversely affected it.

After the transfer of this school to Mubtadayan St. in 1889⁸⁶, the palace continued to serve as a school building for long. It hosted other schools later like al- Muhammadayah School and later Al Helmeyya high

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school for boys since 1934. Over years, this last school was moved to another place and the palace that became a property of the Ministry of Education was turned to an enormous storehouse⁸⁷.

This was the time when the palace received a lethal blow that caused its sharp dwindle. Obviously, its large space had enticed the officials of the Ministry to convert it to a depot to store huge amounts of text books and old classroom desks. These heavy weights had formed extra loads that seriously affected the foundation. The rising water table, the lack of maintenance and the change in the surrounding local community⁸⁸ together with the random increase of housing nearby which led to seepage of waste water of the adjacent sheikh Khalil alley as well as the long-term misuse of the building itself⁸⁹ had all posed grave threats that contributed to the notable deterioration of the palace. Nevertheless, the palace had survived all such vicissitudes till October 1992 when a strong earthquake struck Egypt. It measured 5.9 on Richter scale and caused the worst damage ever to the monuments located along Saliba St. and nearby⁹⁰. One can safely say it was the last straw that left the palace in a frightful condition due to the serious cracks that threatened the walls and spelled its ruin.

In spite of the urgency of the palace situation in the aftermath of the earthquake, regretfully, nothing was done to save it. On the contrary, the palace had gradually become a "garbage dump"⁹¹ filled with junk and dead animals and a parking lot for old cars. This outspoken aggression on the palace and striking negligence to its condition continued till the disaster of March 2002 when one of the palace's walls collapsed⁹² over a neighboring house located at sheikh Khalil alley. Such partial collapse had alarmed the Supreme Council of Antiquities that realized at last the immense magnitude of the threat that imperiled the palace.

Recent restorations and unexpected finds:

The fear of losing an invaluable part of Egypt living heritage had spurred the Ministry of Culture to which the Supreme Council of Antiquities was subordinate at that time to move promptly to save whatever could be saved of this crumbling palace. This rescue mission costed (US\$ 3,232,760) and was carried out by the Committee of Historic Cairo team together with some foreign experts. It lasted for three years from March 2002 till October 2005.⁹³

The restoration process included reinforcing the inclining walls, treating the cracks as well as dismantling the parts that were liable to fall down so as to stabilize the ramshackle building. Then the foundation was strengthened and injected with damp proofing chemicals after the debris was removed. Furthermore, the decaying parts were repaired with the help of the old pictures of the palace preserved in the archives⁹⁴. The missing parts like the dome of the harem were reconstructed in the same old technique (Fig.7) and the walls were re-plastered with materials that were compatible with the original materials used⁹⁵.



(Fig.7) The newly-constructed dome of the harem.

After: http://archnet.org/media_contents/55928

Equally important, the causes of the deterioration that befell the palace were thoroughly examined. The team found out that the new additions built when the building was used as a school suffered high levels of humidity which badly inflicted the wall. Besides, they were shocked to find that the leakage of the decaying sewerage network of the neighboring alley had reached one and half meter above the ground level of the palace⁹⁶ which necessitated immediate action to get over this big challenge. Accordingly, these old

installations were replaced by new ones to avoid leakage in the future while the accumulated waste water had to be drained as fast as possible.

Many findings were discovered in the course of the restoration works. They were mainly buried under the debris or were intentionally blocked and concealed from sights (like the water wheels and the fish pool)⁹⁷ for the safety of the students when the palace served as a school.

In addition, the old water supply system of the palace, the cistern, earthen water runnels, upper and lower baths, animal drinking troughs, a fountain⁹⁸ and a marble column with Corinthian capital were discovered while clearing the site. Other fragments together with small objects and artifacts were also discovered and displayed in situ within the "Splendors of the Mamluks" exhibition held inside one of the palace's halls.

Among these objects are shubuks (smoking pipes), cannon balls, jars, part of a pulpit as well as some manuscripts.⁹⁹

It should be noted that the restoration team had strictly observed the recommendations of Venice Charter for the Conservation and Restoration of Monuments and Sites¹⁰⁰ during their work. Therefore, they retained parts of old masonry and traces of previous physical changes of the building¹⁰¹ that took place in the past. The monumental work of Revault and Muray produced in the late seventies had been a helpful guide for the restoration team¹⁰² because it contained lengthy accounts of all parts of the palace.

That's how the palace that was on the verge of extinction was miraculously restored. It is not surprising that the restoration works that had been undertaken inside the palace were hailed by ICOMS in its report on conservation works of Historic Cairo: "The expert reviews some successful restoration projects such as Beit Sitt Wasila, Prince al Amir Taz Palace, Sabil-Kuttab of Mohammed Ali Ismail....."¹⁰³

A cultural venue:

The palace has been converted to a cultural center that hosts cultural events as well as activities and workshops (in music, drawing, acting and others)¹⁰⁴ designed mainly to preserve national identity and revive Egyptian heritage. Literary salons are also held inside the palace that became a destination for intelligentsia. An artistic museum was lately opened inside the palace for the renowned Egyptian painter Injy Aflatun(1924-1989)¹⁰⁵. Undoubtedly, this new addition enriches the experience of the palace's visitors; it tracks her long artistic journey and celebrates her political activism. Moreover, it points out areas of significance change in the course through exhibiting a huge number of her artworks that were produced on various stages of her professional career. This museum is truly a sincere attempt to pay tribute to the memory of such a great artist.

Much to one's surprise, the palace remains in the shadows in spite of its historical value while the numbers of its visitor are still very limited even after the recent restorations. The local inhabitants who live nearby hardly visit it or benefit from the activities that take place inside it. Therefore, more efforts should be made to spread awareness of the palace among locals so as to attract them to it.

Conclusion:

The palace of Prince Taz had acquired over centuries a special significance as it holds layers of time within its walls. Such a long life-span of the palace together with the patina of years that emanates from every corner had given it an aura of authenticity rarely equaled elsewhere. In other words, it possesses all the potentials that are capable of creating a memorable experience for its visitors. Nevertheless, the palace remains deserted while only very few visitors find their way to it. The improvement of the urban texture surrounding palace might lead to very positive results in this regard.

Notes:

¹Urban Regeneration Project for Historic Cairo, Study on the Monuments in the Action Area (Cairo: UNESCO, World Heritage Centre, 2014), 118.

²Taqī al-Dīn Ahmad ibn ‘Alī al-Maqrīzī, *al-Mawā‘iz wa-al-Itibār bi Dhikr al-Khitāṭ wa-al-Athār* (Beirut: Dar Al Kutub al-Elmiyah, 1418 H./1997AD), 3: 134-135.

³Ibid., 3: 134-135

⁴Taqī al-Dīn Ahmad ibn ‘Alī al-Maqrīzī, al-Sulūk li-Ma‘rifat Duwal al-Mulūk((Beirut: Dar Al Kutub al-Elmiyah, 1418 H./1997AD), 4: 137

⁵al-Maqrīzī, al-Mawā‘iz , 3: 134

⁶Ibid., 3:134

⁷<http://archnet.org/sites/2181>; <http://archnet.org/sites/4187>

⁸al-Maqrīzī, al-Mawā‘iz , 3: 134-135

⁹<http://www.tazpalace.gov.eg/?q=node/10>

¹⁰Jane Hathway, "The Wealth And Influence Of An Exiled Ottoman Eunuch In Egypt: The Waqf Inventory Of Abbas Agha", Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient, Vol. 37, No. 4 (1994), 293.

¹¹Ibid., 293

¹² Ahmad Shalabī Ibn ‘Abd al-Ghanī al-Hanafī al-Misrī, Awdah al-ishārāt fī-man tawallá Misr al-Qāhirah min al-wuzarā’ wa-al-bāshāt al-mulaqqab bi-al-Tārīkh al-‘aynī, ed. A. Abd al-Rahim (al-Qāhirah: Maktabat al-Khānjī, 1978), 187.

¹³Waqfiyyas Records, doc. no. 129, Waqfiyyah deed of Ali Aga Dar Saada dated First of Rabie al-Awwal 1090 H./ 12th of April 1676 AD, preserved in the Ministry of Awqaf Archives.

¹⁴ [Alī Mubārak](#), al-Khitāṭ al-Tawfiqīyah al-jadīdah li-Misr al-Qāhirah wa-mudunihā wa-bilādihā al-qadīmah wa-al-shahīrah (al-Qahira: al-Matba‘ah al-Kubrā al-Amīriyah, 1304H./1888AD), 2: 46.

¹⁵ "Inshaa Madrasa lel Banat", al-Waqae al-Misriyya, August 1873, issue. No. 519.

¹⁶Mubārak, al-Khitat, 2:46.

¹⁷Ibid., 2:46.

¹⁸Ilyās al-Ayyūbī, Tārīkh Misr fī ‘ahd al-Khidīw Ismā‘īl Bāshā min sanat 1863 ilā sanat 1879(al-Qāhirah: Maktabat Madbūlī, 1996), 2:206-207

¹⁹Shihāb al-Dīn Ahmad ibn Hajar al-‘Asqalānī, al-Durār al-Kāminah fī a‘yān al-Mā‘ah al-Thāminah, (Hāydarābād al-Dakkan : Matba‘at Majlis Dā’irat al-Ma‘ārif, 1349H.), 2: 214.

²⁰ Taqī al-Dīn Abī Bakr Ibn Ahmad Ibn Qādī Shuhbah, Tārīkh Ibn Qādī Shuhbah , ed. ‘Adnān Darwīsh (Dimashq : al-Ma‘had al-‘Ilmī al-Faransī lil-Dirāsāt al-‘Arabīyah, 1977) , 3:208.

²¹al-Maqrizi, Durar al Uqud al Faridah fi Tarajem al-Ayan al-Mofidah, ed. Mahmud al-Jalili (Dar al Gharb al Islami, 2002), 2: 198

²²L.A. Mayer, Saracenic heraldry: a survey (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1933), 228.

²³al-Maqrīzī, al-Sulūk, 3: 431

²⁴Ibid, 3: 431

²⁵Ibid. , 4:137

²⁶Daniel Crecelius, The Roots of Modern Egypt, Chicago: Bibliotheca Islamica, 1981, 117

²⁷Frédéric Bauden, "The Sons of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad and the Politics of Puppets: Where Did It All Start?", Mamluk Studies Review, XIII(2009), 73

²⁸al-Maqrīzī, Durar, 2:198

²⁹Ibn Hajar al-‘Asqalānī, al-Durār al-Kāminah, 2: 214

³⁰Ibn Taghrī Birdī al-Atābiki, al-Nujūm al-Zāhirah fī Mulūk Misr wa al-Qāhirah(al-Qāhirah : al-Mu‘assasah al-Misriyah al-‘Ammah lil-Ta’līf wa-al-Tarjamh wa-al-Tiḥā‘ah wa-al-Nashr, 1963-1971), 10:190.

³¹Ibid., 10: 291.

³²al-Maqrīzī, al-Sulūk, 4:139

³³Ibid., 4: 155

³⁴Ibn Hajar al-‘Asqālānī, al-Durār al-Kāminah , 2: 214

³⁵al-Maqrīzī, al-Sulūk, 4: 138

³⁶Ibid., 4: 134-135

³⁷Ibid., 4: 184

³⁸Ibid., 4: 137

³⁹Ibn Qādī Shuhbah, Tārīkh, 3: 208-209.

⁴⁰Ibn Taghrī Birdī, al-Nujūm al-Zāhirah, 10: 301

⁴¹Ibid., 10: 307.

⁴²Ibn Qādī Shuhbah, Tārīkh, 3:209

⁴³Ibn Taghrī Birdī, al-Nujūm al-Zāhirah, 11:4, 15.

⁴⁴Mayer, Saracenic heraldry, 228.

⁴⁵It is the palace built by Al Nassir Muhammad for keeping the animals that operate the water wheels see Mubārak, al-Khitat, 2:44

⁴⁶al-Maqrīzī, al-Mawā‘iz , 3: 134

⁴⁷Nadia Fouad Younes, The Evolution of Birkat al-Fil (From the Fatimids to the Twentieth Century), 2.

⁴⁸Ibid.,52

⁴⁹Andre' Raymond, Cairo, trans. by Willard Wood(Harvard University Press, 2000) , 275.

⁵⁰Nasser O. Rabbat, The Citadel of Cairo: A New Interpretation of Royal Mameluk Architecture, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1995, 237

⁵¹Ibid, 237

⁵²Agnieszka Dobrowolska& Jarosław Dobrowolski, The Sultan's Fountain: An Imperial Story of Cairo, Istanbul, and Amsterdam (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2011), 70.

⁵³al-Maqrīzī, al-Mawā‘iz ,3:134

⁵⁴Ibn Taghrī Birdī, al-Nujūm al-Zāhirah, 10:165

⁵⁵A word of Persian origin consists of two syllables dur which means door and ka which means place.

⁵⁶Janusz Bylinski and James Bylinski, "Darb Ibn Al-Baba: A Quarter in Mamluk Cairo in the Light of Waqf Documents", Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt, Vol. 31 (1994), 211.

⁵⁷Mubārak, al-Khitat, 2:46

⁵⁸Hassan Fathy, Architecture in the Middle East: Past, Present and Future, Egyptian Ministry of Culture and Information: Cultural Center for Diplomats, 1973., 3

⁵⁹Ibid, 3

⁶⁰Ahmed Mahmoud Amin, al-Sinnari House, Bibliotheca Alexandrina, 2014, 89

⁶¹Hassan Fathy, Architecture for the Poor (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 1989), 8.

⁶²Jacques Revault et Bernard Maury, Palais et Maisons du Caire du XIVE au XVIIIe siècle (Le Caire : Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale du Caire, 1977), 2:55

⁶³Bylinski, "Darb Ibn Al-Baba", 214

- ⁶⁴Revault, Palais et Maisons, 2:60
- ⁶⁵Younis, Evolution of Birket al-Fil, 42
- ⁶⁶Revault, Palais et Maisons , 2:58
- ⁶⁷<http://www.tazpalace.gov.eg/?q=node/261> Accessed 12/11/2016
- ⁶⁸<http://www.tazpalace.gov.eg/?q=n261ode/> Accessed 12/11/2016
- ⁶⁹Younis, Evolution of Birket al-Fil, 41
- ⁷⁰Revault, Palais et Maisons, 2:53
- ⁷¹Ibid., 2:55
- ⁷²Fathy, Architecture, 56
- ⁷³Amin, al-Sinnari, 58
- ⁷⁴Revault, Palais et Maisons, 2:55
- ⁷⁵Laila Ibrahim, Dictionary of Monumental and Document Terminology, (Cairo: AUC Press, 1990), 39.
- ⁷⁶Caroline Williams, Islamic Monuments in Cairo: The Practical Guide (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2008), 115.
- ⁷⁷Mubārak, al-Khitat, 6:62
- ⁷⁸Laila 'Ali Ibrahim, "Residential Architecture in Mamluk Cairo", Muqarnas, Vol. 2, The Art of the Mamluks (1984)
- ⁷⁹Doaa Kandil, The Neo-Mamluks in Ottoman Egypt, PH.D Dissertation , (Helwan University, 2005), 97
- ⁸⁰Carl F. Petry, Protectors or Praetorians(Albany: State University of New York, 1994), 174
- ⁸¹Waqfiyya deed of Ali Agha Dar Saada, doc. 129, dated First of Rabie al-awwal, 1090H. Ministry of Awqaf Archives.
- ⁸²Nelly Hanna, Habiter au Caire: Les Maisons Moyenne et set habitants aux xvii et xviii(Le Caire: IFAO, 1991), 52
- ⁸³David Ayalon, Gunpowder and Firearms in the Mamluk Kingdom(London: Vallentine Mitchell, 1956), 62
- ⁸⁴Ibrahim, "Residential Architecture", 56
- ⁸⁵Al- Ayubi, Tārīkh Miṣr, 1: 206-207
- ⁸⁶<http://www.albayan.ae/five-senses/2002-04-04-1,1295019> Accessed 12/11/2016
- ⁸⁷Williams, Islamic Monuments, 114.
- ⁸⁸<http://whc.unesco.org/en/soc/1302>
- ⁸⁹Conservation of Amir Taz Palace Presentation Panels. Courtesy of Architect (Geneva: Aga Khan Award for Architecture, 2007), 3-6.
- ⁹⁰Caroline Williams, "Transforming the Old: Cairo's New Medieval City", Middle East Journal, Vol. 56, No. 3 (Summer, 2002), 459-460.
- ⁹¹Nevine El- Aref, "Most splendid of Mamlukes", Al-Ahram Weekly, 13-19 October 2005 Issue No. 764.
- ⁹²Conservation of Amir Taz Palace, 6
- ⁹³Ibid, 1-5.
- ⁹⁴Historic Cairo Development Project, Palace of Amir Taz (Cairo: The Supreme Council of Antiquities press, 2006), 24

⁹⁵Conservation of Amir Taz Palace, 6

⁹⁶Ibid, 1

⁹⁷Ibid., 1

⁹⁸Ibid., 6.

⁹⁹Nevine El- Aref, "Most splendid", issue No. 764.

¹⁰⁰It is a set of guidelines developed by a group of specialists in Venice 1964 and were agreed upon as an international framework for restoring and preserving historical buildings worldwide.

¹⁰¹Flemming Aalund, Report on the ICOMS reactive Monitory Mission to World Heritage Site: Islamic Cairo(International Council on Monuments and Sites, 2005), 5

¹⁰²Muhammad Nagy (member of the restoration team) in discussion with the author, February 2015.

¹⁰³<http://whc.unesco.org/en/soc/1302> Accessed 10/11/2016

¹⁰⁴<http://www.tazpalace.gov.eg> Accessed 10/11/2016

¹⁰⁵<http://www.fineart.gov.eg/Arb/Musem/Musem.asp?IDS=10> Accessed 10/11/2016