

## ANNUAL REPORT: HERITAGE & COMMUNITY – DOCUMENTING THE “CITY OF THE DEAD”, EGYPT 2014 FIELD SCHOOL

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After a day of work, students and Egyptian volunteers rest on the steps of the mediaeval mosque of Sultan al-Ashraf Qaitbey in the midst of the neighborhood that they documented.

The vast Muslim cemeteries of Cairo – sometimes called the "City of the Dead" – are a unique urban environment that includes some of the city's most valuable medieval architectural monuments. Unlike Western cemeteries, its mausoleums are huge multifunctional religious complexes that permanently employed a considerable number of people, so the "City of the Dead" has always also been a city of the living. Today, the cemeteries are home to numerous living communities that often practice traditional crafts. Students participated in the documentation of physical and social aspects of this area within the project of conservation and restoration of the *hawd* building (literally, a *drinking trough* - a charity endowed to provide drinking water to animals) that was erected by Sultan Qaitbey in ca. 1472. Working side-by-side with Egyptian peers, students learned about the architectural and urban history of a traditional Middle Eastern city, and about principles of architectural conservation and adaptive reuse.

A crucial objective of the course was for students to grasp the workings of a Middle Eastern historic city. Students were introduced to the unique and complex environment of Cairo – the "Mother of the World"—so they may experience themselves what the author Ursula Lindsey aptly summarized: *"a fascination with the medieval city that confirmed what I'd always suspected: Cairo was not a city but a universe"*.

Students engaged in guided walks through different districts of the historic city. They visited Cairo's main attractions, and they also walked through literally miles of lanes and alleys that are seldom, if ever, visited by tourists. These byways, where traditional ways of life are still practiced, contain masterpieces of historic architecture and have preserved traditional spatial layout and social structure. The eight walks covered most of the significant historic quarters of

Cairo. The students visited grand congregational mosques and small neighborhood ones, churches and a synagogue, fortifications and merchants' houses, venerated shrines and humble workshops, tombs of the royalty, urban caravanserais – and more.

For the visits to be meaningful, they were preceded by a series of lectures presenting urban development and architectural history of Cairo. Walks were followed by more classroom lectures and on-site talks about documentation and conservation of cultural heritage in Egypt and related subjects

The students were introduced to the architectural conservation work carried out by ARCHiNOS Architecture ([www.archinos.com](http://www.archinos.com)) in the "City of the Dead" on a building within Sultan Qaitbey's funerary complex. Working hand in hand with Egyptian peers, field school students documented the urban and social fabric of the historic neighborhood that surrounds Sultan Qaitbey's iconic mosque. They updated the available maps and recorded information on especially designed record sheets, to include the building's condition, height, materials and construction type. The students also recorded information about the local community in relation to the built environment, i.e. the number of families and people in each building, the ways in which the buildings are used, and the traditional crafts practiced in the local workshops. The collected data is now being incorporated into the interactive web site created as part of the conservation project. It is intended to promote cultural tourism in the area and contribute to the preservation of traditional crafts practiced there.

The documentation part of the course was followed and complemented by the students' individual research assignments. Each student was offered a choice of a different historic building. Students were tasked with updating plans and annotating them with present functions of different spaces, making a systematic and comprehensive description of the structure, and recording its present condition. For library research, students used the resources at the American Research Center in Egypt and the Polish Archaeological Centre. Aided by Egyptian volunteers in obtaining access and logistics, and in interviewing people on the sites, students were able to gather valuable, unpublished information.

Students were housed at the guest rooms of the Polish Archaeological Centre close to ARCHiNOS Architecture headquarters where lectures and off-site documentation activities took place.

The field school took place during the Egyptian summer, which made it physically demanding. Activities took place in temperatures sometimes reaching 110°F. The 2014 program coincided with Ramadan, the Muslim holy month of fasting, which logistically complicated the operations. However, Ramadan added to the attraction and interest that Cairo offers.