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REHABILITATING EL-SAKAKINI PASHA'S PALACE AS A MUSEUM OF ARCHITECTURE

BY

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ABSTRACT

[AR] إعادة تأهيل قصر السكاكيني باشا كمتحف يروي تاريخ العمارة
يُعاني قصر حبيب السكاكيني من الإهمال السيئ الذي كان حافزًا كبيرًا للباحث لإيجاد حلول قابلة للتنفيذ لإعادة تأهيله وإعادته للحياة مرة أخرى. يهدف هذا البحث إلى تحويل القصر إلى متحف. يُعتبر قصر حبيب السكاكيني من أهم القصور المصرية لإتباعه لأسلوب في يُعرف باسم «الروكوكو». يتسم هذا القصر بموقعه الفريد بحي الظاهر والذي كان مليئًا بالحياة حتى وفاة السكاكيني باشا الذي فُقدَ ميراثه. يُعد استخدام الأدبيات السابقة لجمع وتحليل البيانات حول القصر نقطة الإنطلاق لهذا البحث. علاوة على ذلك، تهدف الدراسة الميدانية للقصر إلى زيادة فهم واقعه الفعلي لتطوير نهج مناسب يُنظم إعادة تأهيله كمتحف. كما قدمت بعض الصور الوثائقية للقصر معلومات قيمة حول القطع القليلة من أثائه المتبقي. وفي النهاية ساعد البحث التجريبي للباحث علي تطوير مناهج جديدة ومبتكرة لتحويل القصر إلى متحف. سوف يُساعد تحويل القصر إلى متحف في الحفاظ علي معماره التاريخي الرائع. تُقدم هذه المقالة أفكارًا، وموضوعات، وتقنيات عرض متحف لتسليط الضوء على أهمية القصر والحفاظ عليه للأجيال القادمة. كما شجعت قيمة القصر الفنية، و تصميمه المتميز، و زخارفه المميزة الباحث على تطوير مقترح لتحويله إلى متحف للهندسة المعمارية بدلاً من استخدامه كبنك، أو فندق، أو مدرسة والذي قد يجرد من سياقه التاريخي وهويته. ويُقدم البحث هذا المقترح إثراءً لخريطة المتاحف بمصر.

[EN] The palace of Ḥabīb El-Sakakini is suffering badly from neglect; a condition which was a big motivator for the researcher to investigate possible solutions to rehabilitate the building. This research aims to convert the palace into a museum. Because it follows the *Rococo* style, the palace is considered one of the most important Egyptian palaces. It is uniquely located in the *al-Zāhir* district. The palace was full of life until the death of Sakakini Pasha and his inheritances were lost. The starting point of this article is considered to be the previous literature's usage for collecting and analyzing data about the palace. Moreover, the study of the palace aims to increase the understanding of its actual situation to develop an appropriate approach for organizing its rehabilitation as a museum. Furthermore, documentary photos provided valuable information about its few remaining furniture collections. Finally, empirical research helped the researcher develop new and innovative strategies for transforming the palace into a museum. Transforming the palace into a museum will help the palace preserve its historical and outstanding architectural design. This article presents ideas, themes, and exhibition techniques to highlight the palace's importance and preserve it for the next generations. Additionally, the palace's artistic value, unique design, and distinctive decorations encouraged the researcher to develop a proposal for converting it into a museum of architecture rather than using it as a bank, hotel, or school, which might strip it out of its historical context and identity. The article presents this proposal in an attempt to enrich the Egyptian museums' landscape.

KEYWORDS: Architecture, El-Sakakini Palace, El-Sakakini Pasha, museum, museum exhibition, Museum of architecture, style of art.

I. INTRODUCTION

The Palace of Ḥabīb El-Sakakini has a unique architectural style and colorful decorations that make it distinct and fantastic in Cairo's skyline [FIGURE 1]. It is characterized by many architectural details; garlands, statues, and other sculptures everywhere¹. Unfortunately, the abandonment of the palace started after its owner's death and his grandchildren; its walls and paintings were cracked, most of its fountains deteriorated and its statues were broken or lost. This inadequate status urged the Antiquities Authority (nowadays, Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities), in cooperation with the Ministry of Health temporarily occupying the palace as a health museum, to start its joint restoration project².



[FIGURE 1]: Skyline View of Sakakini Palace

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/best.places.egypt/permalink/5775404869148577/>

Accessed on 05/07/2022.

The Palace of Ḥabīb Sakakini also suffered from the implications of a poor restoration project during the 20th century that affected its historical features³. Nowadays, the palace is still suffering from negligence, which encouraged the researcher to think about proposing a project to transform it into a museum of architecture.

¹RABBAT 2020: 141-168.

²ARCHIVE, *THE EGYPTIAN PRESS* 1990: 21.

³ARCHIVE, *THE EGYPTIAN PRESS* 1991: 3.

Furthermore, the richness of the employed architectural styles and the architectural significance of the palace strongly supported this proposal. This museum would highlight the history and development of architecture using evident and comprehensible museological methods.

II. OVERVIEW OF PALACE'S HISTORY AND VALUE

The distinguished Palace of Ḥabīb Sakakini was built following various styles of architecture including the Rococo style in 1897⁴. It is said that the palace is a copy of an Italian palace that Sakakini Pasha admired, so he ordered an Italian Company to build its replica in Egypt. The features of the Rococo style, which originally emerged in the late Baroque and was rare in Egypt, unlike in Europe at that time, were apparent on the palace's façade, using the floral decorations and the initials of Sakakini's name «HS»⁵. The architectural style and location of the palace showed the strong determination and detailed insight of Sakakini Pasha, who built his palace on a square named after him; an intersection of eight streets in the *al-Zāhir* district, a developing neighborhood northeast of a Fatimid City at that time⁶.

The land of the palace was originally a lake known as «*Turkmen Karaja*» located to the east of *Sultan Bebars Al-Bondoqdary's* mosque⁷. It is claimed that Sakakini Pasha got the land of this lake with the help of Khedive Ismail through a public auction. His land ownership was documented in a decree issued by the Mixed Courts in June 1880. Sakakini Pasha started to dry out the lake in 1892 and prepare it and its surroundings to build his palace. The Pasha lived in the palace till his death in 1923 and hence his heirs till 1952. After his death, one of the heirs dedicated his inheritances to the Ministry of Health, which transformed the palace into a museum; the other heirs gifted the rest of their inheritances to the government. In 1961, the palace was transformed into the headquarters of the Socialist Union and then into an educational museum for health, besides the basement's use as a clinic⁸. Even after the palace was registered as a monument by the Ministry of Culture with decree number 143 in 1986 [FIGURE 2]⁹, it has remained in a state of neglect since the death of its owners¹⁰.

⁴HELMY 2016 : 167.

⁵HEMEDA 2013: 344-357.

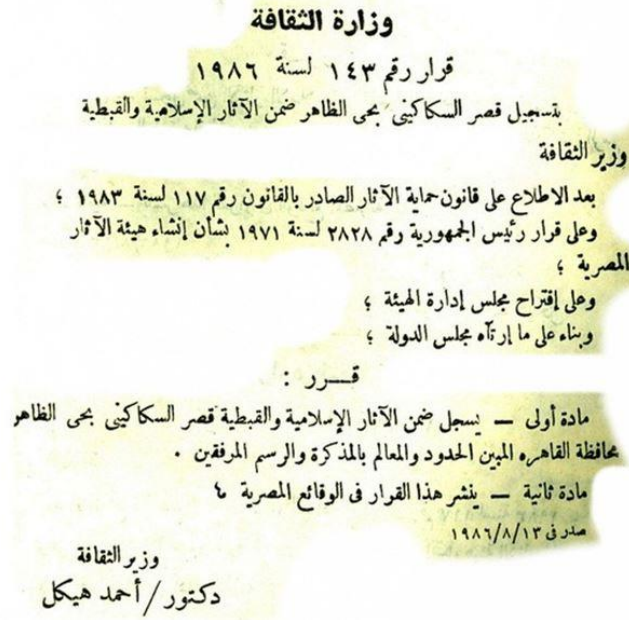
⁶RABBAT 2020:141: 168.

⁷HEMEDA 2013: 344-357.

⁸ARCHIVE, THE EGYPTIAN PRESS 1991: 3.

⁹The Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities.

¹⁰MINISTRY OF CULTURE, CABINET DECISION 1986.



[FIGURE 2]: Registration Decree

In an attempt to rescue the palace, former President Mohamed Hosny Mubarak dedicated one million dollars to a restoration project, but, unfortunately, it was poorly restored; the palace and its doors were painted green and yellow, respectively, distorting its historical features. This painting process ignored the original colors of the palace and the fragile nature of its structural assemblies, like its wooden doors¹¹. There were some other attempts to revive the palace such as the initiative of Dr. Zahi Hawas in 2003, which called for restoring the palace to transform it into a museum for medical sciences. Unfortunately, this idea was never put into action.

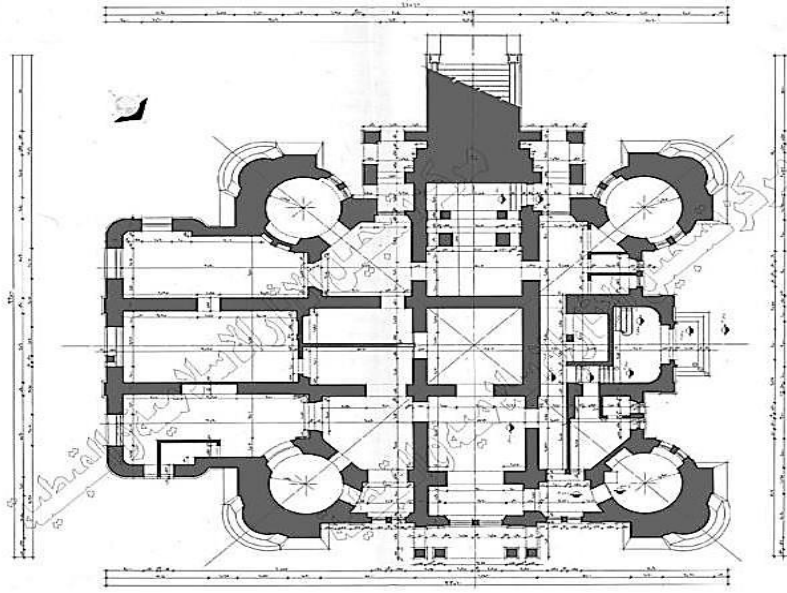
Palace's Description

Sakakin Pasha built his palace, consisting of the basement and about fifty rooms spread among its floors, on about 2698 square meters [FIGURE 3]¹². The palace is surrounded by iron railings and a small garden decorated with some statues. There were around 300 statues distributed in many places in the external façade of the palace as well as inside it. Two lion alabaster statues decorate the palace entrance before its main wooden door. This door leads to a decorated rectangular hall that opens to other rooms decorated on their ceilings and walls [FIGURE 4]¹³.

¹¹ARCHIVE, *THE EGYPTIAN PRESS* 1991: 3.

¹²*THE ISLAMIC & COPTIC REGISTRATION CENTER OF ANTIQUITIES AT THE CITADEL, MINISTRY OF TOURISM AND ANTIQUITIES.*

¹³SULEIMAN 2013: 54-55.



[FIGURE 3]: Plan of Sakakini Palace

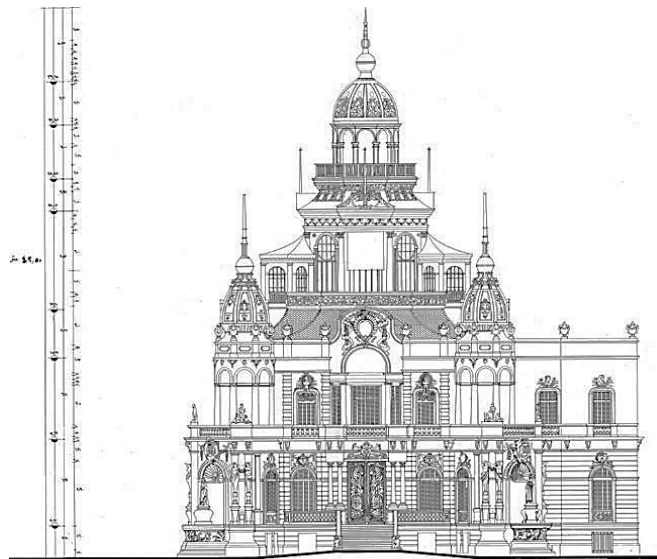


[FIGURE 4]: Decorated Hall© Taken by the researcher 01/ 04/ 2022

The external façade of the palace is very richly decorated and takes the shape of squares occupied by four circular towers. These towers are cupped with ribbed round domes at the four corners. In addition, there is a central dome located above a tiered octagonal pavilion.

Busts of Ḥabīb Sakakini and his wife, in addition to four pairs of different-age children's statues, are scattered on the handrails of the first-floor bedrooms' balconies. One of the most noticeable and elaborate elements of the façade's decorations is the four maidens' statues representing the four seasons [FIGURE 5]¹⁴.

¹⁴The Islamic & Coptic Registration Center of Antiquities at the Citadel, Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities.



[FIGURE 5]: Front Façade of the Palace

Each statue is standing alone on a large urn inside a niche taking the shape of a seashell flanked on each side by a pair of caryatides [FIGURE 6]. The arrangement of these four statues softens the sharp square edges of the palace to give it the effect of an octagon. Moreover, the top of each niche is decorated with the two Latin letters «H» and «S» in four different styles indicating the initials of Ḥabīb Sakakini's name. In contrast, his full name is inscribed above the western entrance of the palace in Arabic, along with the date, 1897, of building the palace. [FIGURE 7].



[FIGURE 6]: Overview and Corner Niche of Sakakini Palace© Taken by the researcher 01/ 04/ 2022



[FIGURE 7]: The inscribed name of Sakakini and the date of building above the entrance© Taken by the researcher 01/ 04/ 2022

III. SUGGESTED VISION

This part of the article proposes some affordable ideas, objects, themes, and exhibition techniques that could be applied in the palace after adopting the proposal of transforming it into a museum of architecture. All the proposed ideas and suggestions have considered the ancient history of the palace and its unique architectural significance. Accordingly, the idea of its transformation into a museum of architecture was very well studied and was deliberately chosen based on the strong consistency between being a museum of architecture and its unique architectural style and decorations. This would leave the needed space for its visitors to contemplate the palace's beauty, its distinctive decorations, and its architecture. The following themes and exhibition ideas would help in achieving this goal.

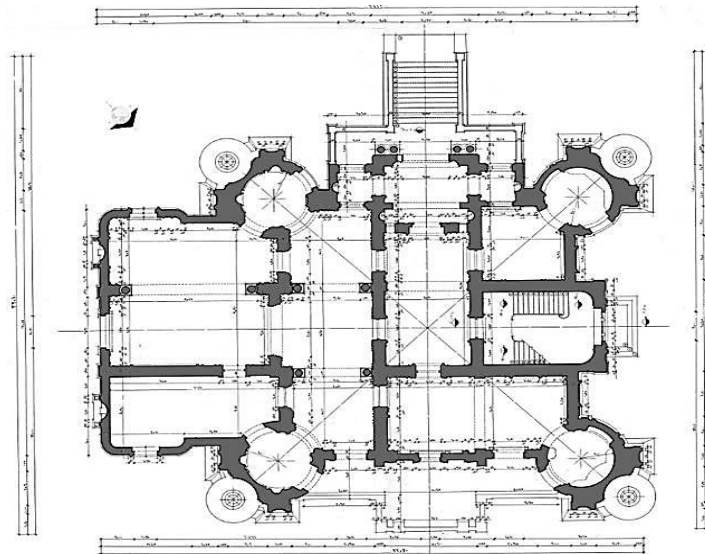
1. Exhibitions of the 19th Century's Various Styles of Architecture

Before the French expedition to Egypt, the architecture in Egypt was affected by the local style which emerged from the previous Islamic eras' styles and the Ottoman styles. After evacuating the French expedition from Egypt in 1802 and mandating Muhammed Ali to rule Egypt in 1805, a new generation of openness to European and Western architectural styles was started. Implementing these new architectural styles required skilled artists who came to Egypt to generate different styles¹⁵. Egypt witnessed many architectural styles transferred to

¹⁵MAHFOUZ 2017: 732-753.

it, especially from Europe during the 19th century. These styles became part of our cultural identity, representing living landmarks on Egyptian land.

It is therefore recommended to set up several museum exhibitions for each architectural style at the «Museum of Architecture». These exhibitions would display the artistic features and adopted techniques of these styles by exhibiting and elaborating on some established historical structures in Egypt and maybe comparing them with examples from abroad at some points. Locating this exhibition at the palace's ground level is recommended here to be the starting point for elaborating the purpose of the museum of architectural development [FIGURE 8]¹⁶. Among the most important architectural styles that were transferred to Egypt are 1) the Gothic Architectural Style, 2) the Renaissance Architectural Style, 3) the Neo-Classical Architectural Style, 4) the Baroque Architectural Style, and 5) the Rococo Architectural Style¹⁷. These styles were used in the palaces following the European style of art and architecture, like the Baroque Style that has found its way and spread in Egypt¹⁸.



[FIGURE 8]: Palace's Ground Level Plan

The palaces' architecture and styles that would be exhibited at the «Museum of Architecture» are diverse and of great value. The Palace of Muhammed Ali in Shubra as well as his Gawhara Palace in Salah El Din Citadel are examples that adopted the *Romy* style, which followed the Islamic rules, in their architecture, imitating the vast palaces of Turkey¹⁹.

Most of the 19th century's Egyptian palaces combined more than one architectural style along with reviving some of the old styles. This diversity came to Egypt due to many historical reasons like wars, expeditions, and foreign artists coming from different countries to work in architecture. These important reasons affected the architectural styles, enriching this part of the exhibition with diversity and variety that can attract all architecture lovers.

¹⁶The Islamic and Coptic Registration Center of Antiquities at the Citadel, Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities.

¹⁷ABD ELRAHMAN & ELNABARAWI 2021: 100-120.

¹⁸MOUSA 2019: 718-733.

¹⁹IBRAHIM 2022: 46-64.

The Sakakini Palace, as a case study of this paper, reflects this diversity in using European, Ottoman, and Islamic styles of architecture²⁰, making it an excellent venue for setting up the «Museum of Architecture». The rich details of architecture and the mix of styles in the Palace of Sakakini Pasha should be highlighted through a standalone museum exhibition to interpret it to its visitors and the local community.

The researcher suggests presenting several models that would display international representations of historical palaces built in diverse architectural styles, including the Gothic, Renaissance, Neo-classical, Baroque, and Rococo Styles. One example that applied the same method is the Linköping Castle and Cathedral Museum in Sweden, where visitors can imagine the whole process of building the castle through a 3D model, [FIGURE 9], which reflects the building methodology that dates back to 900 years, including its transformation from a bishop's castle to a royal castle following the Renaissance style²¹.



[FIGURE 9]: Linköping Castle & Cathedral Museum model, https://lsdm.se/?page_id=484
Accessed on 10/06/2022.

Another example is the City Museum of Stuttgart in Germany, which presents interactive models to enrich visitors' knowledge with diverse information about the city and its buildings. The museum exhibits interactive multimedia models for the city of Stuttgart to reflect the life inside the city, including its streets and buildings. Among the models of the buildings are some white models [FIGURE 10], which included the representation of the Solitude Palace using an exciting way with the visitors that let them discover the meanings of the objects themselves. These multimedia stations provide visitors with in-depth information according to their interests and from diverse perspectives on interactive and touchable surfaces²².

²⁰HELMY 2016: 185-202.

²¹LINKÖPING CASTLE & CATHEDRAL MUSEUM WEBSITE: «EXHIBITIONS AT LINKÖPING'S CASTLE AND CATHEDRAL MUSEUM», in: <https://lsdm.se/kontakt/>, accessed on 10/06/ 2022.

²² STADTPALAIS- CITY MUSEUM OF STUTTGART WEBSITE: «JANGLED NERVES, WORLD-ARCHITECTS.COM- PROFILES OF SELECTED ARCHITECTS», in: <https://www.world-architects.com/en/jangled-nerves-stuttgart/project/stadtpalais-city-museum-of-stuttgart>, accessed on 10/07/ 2022.



[FIGURE 10]: Tactile Interactive Models, <https://www.world-architects.com/en/jangled-nerve-stuttgart/project/stadtpalais-city-museum-of-stuttgart>, accessed on 10/07/2022

2. El- Sakakini's Life and Biography Exhibition

At the age of sixteen, Ḥabīb Sakakini, who is of Syrian origin, came to Egypt from Damascus to work as a day laborer in Port Said and later worked as an officer in the Suez Canal Company, and hence, the rich story of a businessman from Levantine began. It was said that Ḥabīb Sakakini gained most of his wealth due to his work as a contractor for Khedive Ismail. Regardless of the reality of the primary source of his wealth, Ḥabīb Sakakini succeeded in owning a very exceptional palace as a center point of a square named after his name in *al-Zāhir*, located northeast of the Fatimid city in Cairo²³. Ḥabīb Sakakini Pasha (1841-1923) became among the close people to De Lesseps who entrusted him with the responsibility of drying swamps and ponds in Cairo. He did not stop at these positions; he took another direction to the construction field until he became very popular and skilled in it.

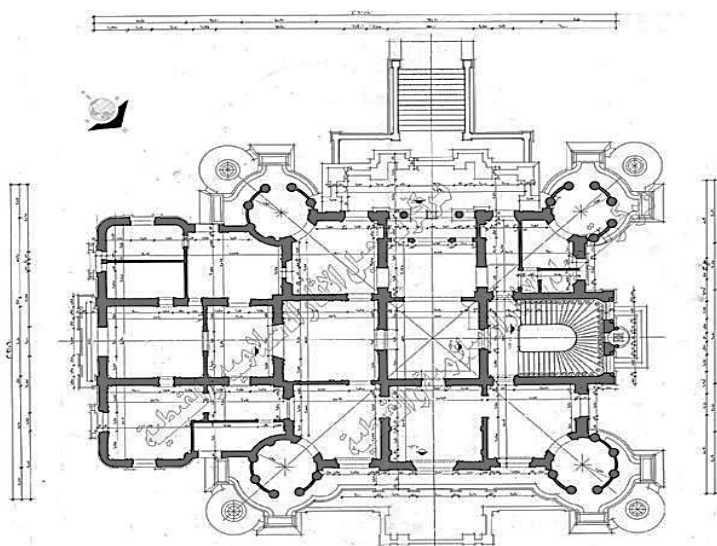
His talent reached Khedive Ismail, who decided to use his experience by handing him the duty of finishing the construction of the Opera House under the supervision of the Italian architect Pietro Avoscani before the opening ceremony of the Suez Canal. Sakakini developed the work-with-shift system that reached eight hours for each worker per day with twenty-four working hours a day. His innovative suggestion at that time proved its credibility and success, and the Opera House was opened at its planned time on November 19th, 1869. Sakakini had many other achievements during his lifetime, which led the Ottoman Sultan Abdelhamid to grant him the title *Bey* and then *Pasha*.

His success and accomplishments continued until he died in 1923. His intelligence and skills are advantages that made him distinguished in Egyptian history²⁴. All this history could be highlighted in an exhibition in the «Museum of Architecture» that tells the history of the palace's owner and his contributions to Egyptian Architecture through his palace in the *al-Zāhir* neighborhood. It is suggested here to set up this exhibition on the palace's first floor

²³RABBAT 2020: 141: 168.

²⁴SULEIMAN 2013: 54-55.

[FIGURE 11]²⁵ after handling the 19th century architectural styles at its ground level to be a transforming point for visitors to get in touch with the history of the palace's founder.



[FIGURE 11]: Palace's First Floor Plan

ARCHIVAL PHOTOS

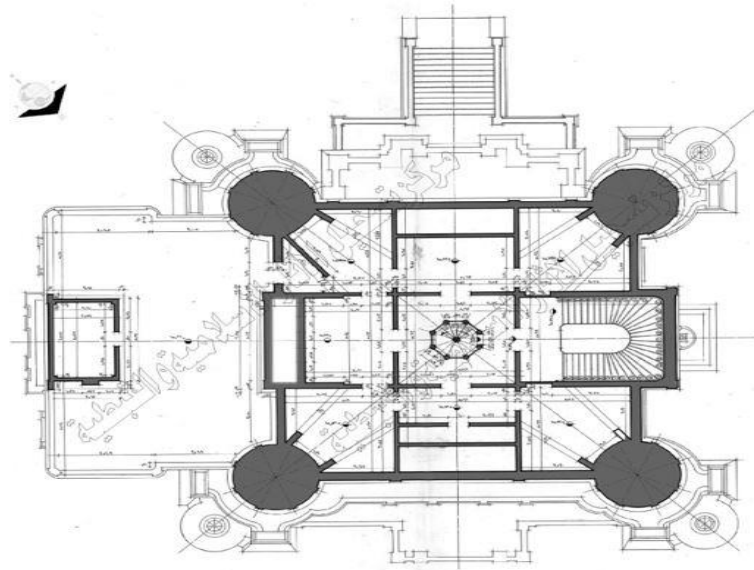
Setting up an exhibition for some of the archival photos is among the suggested ideas of the researcher. It is recommended to set up a museum exhibition that aims to document the original architecture of Sakakini's Palace through some old photos taken, whether inside or outside the palace. These photos can also greatly assist the restoration process, in addition to their value in creating a nostalgic atmosphere among visitors. Moreover, using such archival images, the exhibition can reflect some of Sakakini's memories and special occasions with his family. Some pictures of Sakakini and his family would also be exhibited to keep their images alive in the visitors' eyes as the core theme of the palace.

It is preferable that the second floor [FIGURE 12]²⁶ would host this exhibition to let visitors get in touch with the real life inside the palace. After obtaining information about architectural styles and the palace's founder, this floor was chosen as an intermediate station. Furthermore, the *al-Zāhir* district is famous for the prominent public figures who lived there and enriched Egyptian culture²⁷. It is suggested here also to dedicate an archival photos exhibition room that displays those public figures and their significant accomplishments. Moreover, this palace was documented in some TV shows, and it would be of great value to show short movies combining shots filmed inside or outside this palace.

²⁵The Islamic and Coptic Registration Center of Antiquities at the Citadel, Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities.

²⁶The Islamic and Coptic Registration Center of Antiquities at the Citadel, Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities.

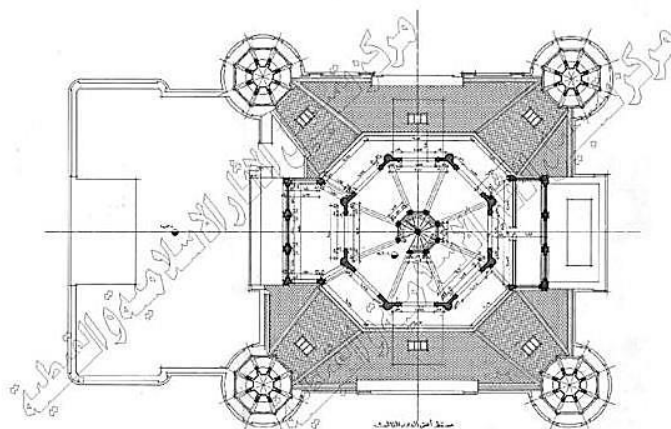
²⁷SULEIMAN 2013: 54-55.



[FIGURE 12]: Palace's Second Floor Plan

Imitating Real Furniture through Augmented Reality Technique

After introducing some archival photos to the visitors on the second floor, it is recommended here on the third floor [FIGURE 13]²⁸. To present an actual image of the palace's original furniture through the augmented reality technique. One of the relatively new methods that the heritage industry seeks to use for exhibitions and attracting new visitors is augmented reality²⁹. Augmented reality is a visualization technology used to reconstruct the ruined heritage to afford good imagination of the past and to preserve it from being lost. Visitors can apply and use it during their tours through a rich database and a strong internet connection³⁰. This method aims to provide computer-generated and real-time images in a live view, creating an almost lifetime experience of reality.



[FIGURE 13]: Palace's Third Floor Plan

²⁸The Islamic and Coptic Registration Center of Antiquities at the Citadel, Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities.

²⁹TSCHEU 2016: 607-619.

³⁰VLAHAKIS 2001: 584993-585015.

The value of using augmented reality in the heritage field is excellent. It can afford a real-time experience and an enjoyable atmosphere through visitor's interaction with augmented reality shows³¹. The Palace of Sakakini Pasha was once inhabited and full of life. Every part of the palace, including furniture, was a witness to a lot of memories. The palace still houses a few objects from its original furnishings, such as a wooden partition [FIGURE 14], a heater [FIGURE 15], a wooden bookshelf affixed to the wall [FIGURE 16], and a large wooden cupboard [FIGURE 17]. To bring the imitation of the original palace back to life, these few objects would be used to build the palace's original stenography beside the use of augmented reality³². Imitating the lost real furniture of the palace through augmented reality would keep a vivid picture of the palace for us and the next generations. It is also an affordable idea that will not cost a lot of money and would preserve the authentic picture of this palace.



[FIGURE 14]: Wooden Paravan

©Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities, Unpublished Documentary Report.



[FIGURE 15]: Heater



[FIGURE 16]: Wooden Library Affixed to the Wall

©Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities, Unpublished Documentary Report.



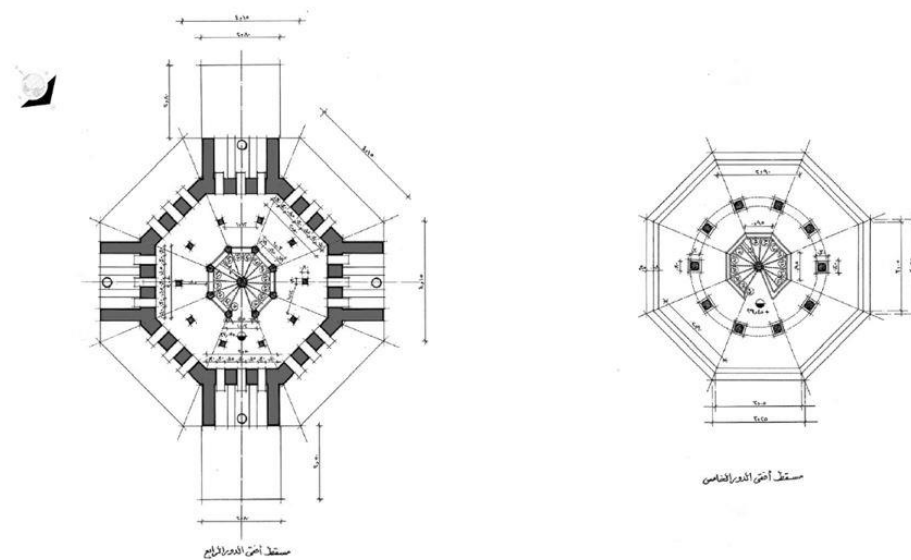
[FIGURE 17]: A large Wooden Cupboard

³¹TSCHEU 2016: 607-619.

³²MINISTRY OF TOURISM AND ANTIQUITIES, UNPUBLISHED DOCUMENTARY REPORT ON SAKAKINI PALACE: 37-38/ 49-50

3. Exhibition about *al-Zāhir* Architecture

In this museum section, the researcher would like to highlight the historical importance of the *al-Zāhir* neighborhood through its architecture on the fourth and fifth floors (towers) [FIGURE 18]³³ of the palace, which would be the last stop while looking at the panoramic view of the district from the palace's highest point. The *al-Zāhir* neighborhood is a vibrant historic district from the 19th- century. Besides the Sakakini Palace, it houses other monuments from Egypt's ancient history until its modern one. It is also a dwelling for diverse religions as it has a synagogue, churches, and mosques that reflect various styles of architecture³⁴. Among these buildings is *al-Zāhir* mosque, the oldest mosque in the district. It is registered as an Islamic monument and was named after *al-Zāhir Baybars*. It was misused a lot throughout history. For example, it was used as a soap factory³⁵ until it was renewed and repaired by the Committee for the Conservation of the Monuments of Arab Art in 1893. The mosque's architecture and many other historical buildings are suggested to be highlighted in the «Museum of Architecture» inside Sakakini Palace. The aim of this exhibition is to focus on *al-Zāhir's* masterpieces of architecture while connecting the local community with their neighborhood and raising their sense of awareness and pride of the area.



[FIGURE 18]: Palace's Fourth and Fifth Floors (Towers) Plan

³³The Islamic and Coptic Registration Center of Antiquities at the Citadel, Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities.

³⁴MOHAMED 2018: 1-53; AL-TAYEB 2018: 304-326.

³⁵AL-JABARTI 1880: 1776; MARZOUK 1950: 91-102.

IV. TRANSFORMATION CHALLENGES

Being in a local area might create a barrier to transforming the Palace of Sakakini Pasha into a «Museum of Architecture». The government should consider this because accessibility is a vital barrier, especially for the tourism sector as a primary source of National Income. Moreover, most stakeholders care more about the most vivid and readily accessible areas for economic purposes.

This issue of accessibility could be addressed by setting up a rehabilitation plan on the city level, not only for the palace itself. Thus, the museum's Egyptian and foreign visitation rates would be increased. Furthermore, the renovation and conservation work cost would be a barrier for the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities if it did not get suitable funds from other governmental or non-governmental grants.

V. CONCLUSIONS

The transformation of Sakakini Palace into a «Museum of Architecture» would raise the awareness of the local community not only about its historical significance but also about the significance of the whole district. This positive environment can help support international and local tourism to the palace, which would, in turn, raise its revenue. This revenue would benefit the country and keep the regular maintenance of the palace. Not to mention that this suggested proposal of transforming Sakakini's Palace into a «Museum of Architecture» would conserve it from further destruction and preserve its original features, architecture, and vivid memory for the next generations. The preservation of this memory would, in turn, save the cultural identity of the *al-Zāhir* district and hence the whole city. Furthermore, the success of this proposal would encourage a wide range of scholars and stakeholders to think about saving other Egyptian historical structures shortly.

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