

**'Al-Mouled' as a Cultural Greenway:
A new developing tool in the Egyptian context**

Dr. Hossam Fathy Ahmed¹, M.S.C. Hoda Salah Ismail²
¹*Cairo University, Faculty of Regional and Urban planning*
²*HA & Associates*

Introduction

Egyptian context

Egypt's heritage is of worldwide interest and importance due to its continuity over a period of more than five thousand years. It encompasses various aspects of human civilization and represents a cultural as well as a natural heritage of national and international value. This wealth of archaeological sites, architecture, arts and folklore reflects the many stages of Egypt's rich past, giving it the rich diversity that we see now. But, unfortunately, this context is deteriorating due to massive development trends, unplanned urban expansion, unclear planning strategies, lack of awareness of importance of landscape planning in conserving this context on both academic and practical levels and finally because it is being dealt with as isolated attributes, thus neglecting its spatial distribution, resulting in an absence of character and identity of place.

Although the Egyptian government, represented by the Egyptian General Organization for Physical Planning and the United Nations Development Programme, is taking positive action in preparing new master plans for cities, these master plans are, unfortunately, falling under the same rules, thereby ignoring the natural and cultural contexts between one city and another, and with limited financial resources available for implementing the plans.

Al-Mouled

Al-Mouled is one of the most significant folkloric events in Egyptian cultural heritage. It is a native religious event that celebrates the birth date of an honourable religious icon of fame (Bakr, 1999). Egypt consists of approximately five thousand villages, cities and deserts, each celebrating one Mouled or more annually, which means that Egypt celebrates more than one Mouled daily, gathering millions of local people and tourists, for a duration that varies from one week to three weeks (Mosad, 2008).

Al-Mouled is not just a religious celebration; it is also a recreational outlet where sports, competitions, social gathering, singing and dancing take place, as well as economic activities, giving social vitality and economic prosperity to the hosting place (Bakr, 1999). There are two kinds of Al-Mouled: (1) a mobile event that has

an origin and a destination, (2) a non mobile event that takes place in front of the grave, church, mosque of the religious icon of fame.

Though considered a significant social and economic event among Egyptians, it has not been taken into consideration before as an important input in the planning process, its spatial configuration having been neglected. In addition, there is insufficient provision of services, accommodation and open spaces that are able to absorb the participants at these events, resulting from poor urban planning and social problems which lead the government to sometimes reduce the duration of, or even cancel, the event.

This could be summed up as the lack of an integrated, flexible planning framework that acknowledges Al-Mouled as a potential input in the planning process.

Literature review

Greenways definition

Greenway planning has grown steadily in popularity in the planning and design professions as an efficient and socially desirable approach to open space planning (Linehan, Gross, Finn, 1995). From a review of recent literature on greenways in landscape planning Jack Ahern gave the following definition of greenways: “Greenways are networks of land containing linear elements that are planned, designed and managed for multiple purposes including ecological, recreational, cultural, aesthetic, or other purposes compatible with the concept of sustainable land use” (Ahern, 1995).

Throughout this definition, Jack Ahern has discussed two main characteristics of greenways. Firstly, the spatial configuration of greenways is primarily linear. Secondly, linkage is a key greenway characteristic that defines the greenway and relates it to the larger landscape context, often at multiple-scale levels (Ahren, 1995).

Flink and Searns (1993) also gave a comprehensive approach to planning, designing and developing greenways, where they mentioned that to start and define a study corridor for your greenway there are two important aspects that must be taken into consideration. Firstly, a theme – what will be the corridor’s primary function? Who will use it? If the future use of the greenway is not already obvious from its physical features, you will need to come up with a theme or primary vision (Flink and Searns, 1993). Secondly, to define a study corridor there must be a point of origin and point of destination that make logical sense. Usually, this involves selecting a major natural or built feature, or historic property that is known to most of your community (Flink and Searns, 1993).

Cultural context within greenway planning

Cultural context is revealed as the human interaction with the natural environment during the evolution of a community. Typically, the cultural core of a community is usually the place where the most social, recreational, religious or commercial activities take place (Fabos, Ahern, Lindhult, 1993). Since these places are frequently used and visited by local people and tourists, maintaining good visual and physical quality and promoting potential recreational opportunities can not only be vital for the local economy, but would also enhance the cultural uniqueness of the community (Fabos, Ahern, Lindhult, 1993). Greenways with historical heritage and cultural values attract tourists and provide recreational, educational, scenic and economic benefits, providing high quality housing environments at greenway edges for permanent and seasonal housing (Fabos, 1995).

Goal of understanding Al-Mouled and greenway potential

Throughout this literature review, greenways represent a strategic multipurpose planning approach that links and protects cultural sites, meanwhile providing people with outdoor recreation, resulting in economic and social development, with a linear spatial configuration that must have a theme, a point of origin and a point of destination. Moreover, Al-Mouled is one of the most significant folkloric events in Egyptian cultural heritage; it is a multipurpose event that gained its cultural popularity among Egyptians due to the religious, recreational and economic activities that take place during the event itself. As for its main characteristics, it has a theme with a linear spatial configuration that has a point of origin and a point of destination. Therefore, Al-Mouled can be considered as a native greenway in the Egyptian context that can be used as a framework skeleton for greenways in Egypt.

Main Objective

present a comprehensive planning framework based on Al-Mouled as a native cultural, religious and recreational greenway could act as a developing tool on an appropriate planning level, to serve development realistically in terms of available financial resources, administrative and organizational complex factors, maintaining in the same time place's heritage and highlighting its character and stimulating other elements of the place in the same time.

Methods

A case study for Mouled *Al- Sayeda Nafesa* will be presented to emphasise the main objective of the research through four main phases:

1. Description of the study area on both micro and macro scale, to develop a broad understanding of the study corridor within its context and to provide a broad base of background information about particular problem in hand.

2. Inventory and analysis of the existing conditions seeking an overall understanding of the main structure of which the study corridor is composed.
3. Questionnaire to define the attitude and the willingness of the residents to maintain this event.
4. Set of planning, design and management recommendations for the study area as a means of satisfying the research main objective.

Description of the study area on macro scale and micro scale

Mouled *Al-Sayeda Nafesa* is located in the Greater Cairo region – the capital of Egypt. It stretches for about four kilometres between the districts of *Al-Sayeda Zienb*, Al-Khalifa and Masr Al-Qadema in an area called Old Cairo known for its extensive concentration of historic buildings, some of which are designated by UNESCO as world heritage sites (Gadou, 2009) (Fig. 1).

In spite of the historical importance of the study area, it is considered as a slum area that suffers from urban planning, environmental, social and economic problems. There are many other Mouleds within the study area that vary from mobile to non mobile events, which are financed and organized by the residents and lovers of Mouleds, where they construct tents for participants coming from other cities, offering them food and accommodation (Fathy, 2006).

Although many conservation and rehabilitation events took place within the study area, Al-Mouled as an event was not taken into consideration in the planning process which led to maximising the existing problems that the study area already suffered from (Gadou, 2009; Fathy, 2006).

4.1.1. Mouled Al-Sayeda Nafesa main circulation

Al-Sayeda Nafesa is a member of the *Prophet Mohamed* family. Mouled *AL-Sayeda Nafesa* is one of the principal Mouleds in Egypt which millions of local people and tourists from East Asia celebrates it annually. It is a mobile event that passes by four main stations:

(1) *Hassan Al-Anour* mosque (her father and a member of *Prophet Mohamed* family), (2) *Ali Zien Al-Abdin* mosque and grave (member of *Prophet Mohamed* family), (3) *Al-Sayeda Zienb* mosque (member of *Prophet Mohamed* family) and ends in front of *Al-Sayeda Nafesa* mosque (Fathy, 2006) (Fig. 1).

Inventory and analysis

Throughout the inventory and analysis, the following elements were identified: land-use assessment, cultural and historical resources, access and transportation (Fig. 1).

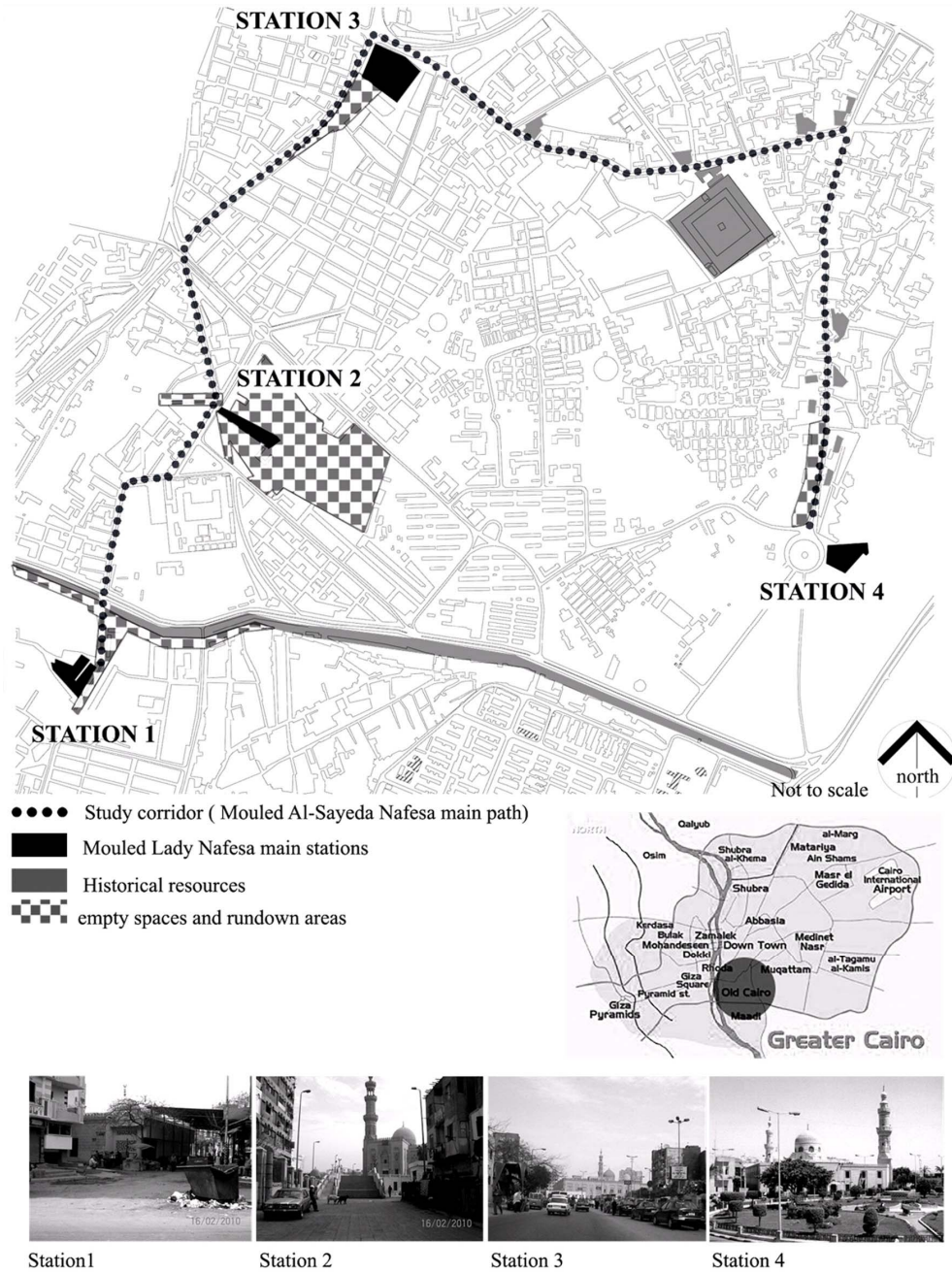


Figure 1. Mouled *Al-Sayeda Nafesa* path and main stations, Inventory of the most Important elements along Al-Mouled path

Questionnaire

Sixteen residents were interviewed to get a full image of the Al-Mouled, its main activities, where it takes place and, finally, who finances and organizes this event.

Results

Inventory and analysis

The inventory of land use indicates that the main structure within the Al-Mouled path is residential, with 90% of commercial use within the first floors, in addition to three open markets occupying a portion of the road network within the Al-Mouled path, rundown areas, empty spaces sometimes used as parking areas and cemeteries.

The inventory of historical and cultural resources indicates a big concentration of historical resources, more than 30 of which represented by domes, palaces, mosques, graves and markets are from 876 to 1780, mostly concentrated between the third and fourth stations within the Al-Mouled path; these resources are not visually perceived, suffer from bad construction conditions and are not well connected spatially.

The inventory of accessibility and transportation indicates high traffic density all along the Al-Mouled path, all roads are two-way with different widths varying from 7–9 m between the first station and the second station and 3–5 m between the third station and the fourth station. Finally, the main stations of the Al-Mouled path have indications of visual and historical value, yet the first and second stations are not visually perceived from the Al-Mouled path. All that could be summed up in the poor urban context and the need for physical modification of existing land use.

Questionnaire

When interviewing the 16 residents, all residents emphasized the importance of Al-Mouled as a religious and recreational event. They also said that during this event the roads are converted to pedestrian-only use and that they use the surrounding empty spaces along the main stations for accommodation and services. They said that there are many other Mouleds that they celebrate weekly and that they finance and organize these events themselves. They all agreed they considered Al-Mouled as an important input in the planning process.

Set of planning, design and management recommendations

The planning, design and management recommendation of this study is the process of applying the results of the inventory and analysis and questionnaire to the specific goals of the study outlined in the main objectives.

The research suggests a greenway planning unit with criteria that extend to include all residential blocks, open spaces, rundown areas, road networks and historical

resources that are in direct contact with the Al-Mouled path, which varies in width and form according to the surrounding context, offering spaces for Al-Mouled activities, recreational activities for residents and tourists facilities; and studying the possibility of turning existing vehicle networks into pedestrian trails, while considering the transportation strategies for the study area; incorporating national tourism strategies for the study area within the greenway planning unit, to raise interaction between tourists and the local community, thus enhancing economic and social development; involving local residents in all phases of greenway planning, design and management, getting benefit from their support for these events; and, finally, such projects must incorporate private sectors, public sectors, academic experts in greenway planning and transportation, social experts, economic experts and residents in the preparation of more detailed studies for the Al-Mouled path and the availability of a future greenway network within the study area (Fig. 2).

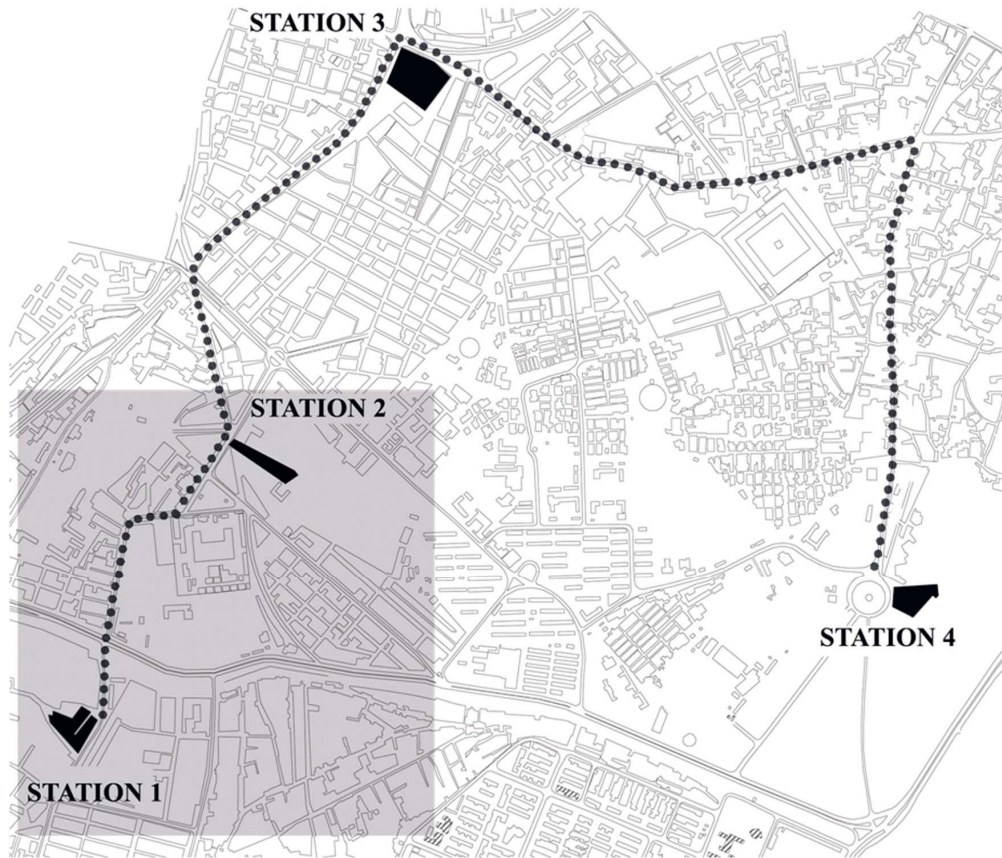


Figure 2. Portion of the suggested greenway planning unit between station 1 and Station 2 of Al-Mouled path

Discussion and Conclusion

The importance of preserving cultural heritage lies in its significance as an essential element that reflects and identifies the character of places. Since these places are frequently used and visited by local people and tourists, maintaining good visual and physical quality and promoting potential recreational opportunities can not only be vital for the local economy, but could also enhance the cultural uniqueness of the community (Fabos, Ahren, Lindhult, 1993).

In a country such as Egypt, rich in cultural heritage, greenway planning with its different types and scales could act as future developing arteries enhancing and preserving the cultural heritage and identity of places, while achieving community development. This research has introduced Al-Mouled as a framework skeleton within greenway planning for the first time, in an attempt to benefit from its significance among Egyptians and emphasizes the importance of public participation within planning processes, which is one of the main steps of greenway planning as well. A case study was presented as a model of how to apply the research main objective in planning these greenways and to present guidelines for future studies.

Greenway planning must also integrate tourism planning policies, taking more actions and more studies on how to benefit from greenway planning as an application in enhancing tourism which presents one of the top national income financial resources.

References

- Bakr, A., 1999; *Al-Mouled in Egypt*, pp. 20, 21, 26, 65.
- Gadou, H.M, 2009; *Use of Airborne Laser Scanning (ALS) for 3D Modelling in Dense Urban Areas*, Journal of urban research, Faculty of regional and urban planning, pp. 1, 5-13.
- Fabos, J.GY; Ahern, J., 1995; *Greenways: the beginning of an international movement*, Amsterdam: Elsevier, pp. 5, 134.
- Fabos, J.GY; Ahern, J.; Lindhult M., 1993; *Black stone Heritage Greenway Planning and Community Development*, pp. 93.
- Fathy, H., 2006; *Greenways in Egypt as a conservation approach for natural and cultural, Historical heritage landscape and resources*, pp. 249-250, 264.
- Flink. C. A.; Searns R. M., 1995; *Greenways: A Guide to Planning, Design, and Development*, Washington, DC: Island Press. pp. 11, 17-45.
- Linehan, J.; Gross, M.; Finn, J., 1995; *Landscape and urban planning*, Volume 33, Issues 1-3, pp.179.
- Mosad, R., 2008; *Al-Mouleds and Sufism in Egypt*.