

# **THE BAYT AL-RAZZAZ PALACE: AN OPPORTUNITY FOR A NEW DIRECTION IN URBAN CONSERVATION IN MEDIEVAL CAIRO**

W. BROWN MORTON III

Prince B. Woodard Chair of Historic Preservation  
Mary Washington College, Fredericksburg, Virginia

## **SUMMARY**

The Bayt -al Razzaz Palace, constructed from the late 15th-century through the late 18th century in the heart of medieval Cairo, is presently empty and in many areas derelict. However, the structure and its two large courtyards present an exciting opportunity to demonstrate a new direction in Cairo's urban conservation: an ambitious mixed-use rehabilitation program to reintegrate the site into its present economic and social context.

## **HISTORY AND DESCRIPTION**

Bayt al-Razzaz is an abandoned 178-room urban palace in the Darb al-Ahmar neighborhood of medieval Cairo. The property of the Egyptian Supreme Council of Antiquities, it is listed in the [Index to Mohammedan Monuments](#) as Monument No. 235.<sup>1</sup>

Bayt al-Razzaz (pronounced BATE -AL- RA-**ZAZZ**) is located at 56, Bab al-Wazir Street. It is not a single building but a complex of interwoven structures erected over a four-hundred-year period on all sides of two internal courtyards, originally separated by an alley.<sup>2</sup> Architectural evidence suggests that two residences were joined to form a single palace sometime in the 18th century .

The first reference to what is now called Bayt al-Razzaz is a deed of the Mamluk sultan Qayt Bay, who reigned from 1468 to 1496. The deed, dated 895 Hegira. (A.D.1490), established what is now the eastern section of the palace as a charitable trust or *waqf*.<sup>3</sup> The text refers to an "antique reception room", as well as a "new reception room."<sup>4</sup> This suggests that Qayt Bay enlarged and improved an earlier structure.

The principal carved-stone doorway in the eastern courtyard, known as the Qayt Bay doorway, contains two carved cartouches and a band of carved script which states, " *Glory to our lord, the sultan and very noble king, Aboull Nasr Qayt Bay, that his victory may be glorified.*" The doorway is not dated; however, it is commonly believed to have been constructed about 1480.<sup>5</sup>

The structures surrounding the eastern courtyard have been modified and embellished since the late-fifteenth century, principally during the Ottoman period, 1517-1805. Two rooms are dated: a first-floor reception hall or *qa'a*, Room 143, is dated 1640; a second-floor *qa'a*, Room 214, is dated 1780.

The evolution of the structures surrounding the western courtyard is less clear. The current appearance of the western courtyard is strongly Ottoman; however, some scholars suggest that the present structures are built upon the foundations of medieval buildings or may be, in large part, Mamluk structures extensively remodeled in the Ottoman period.<sup>6</sup> A second Waqf deed, dated 1818, refers to "the original place, to which the mentioned two parts belong."<sup>7</sup> The palace, including both courtyards, appears to have become the property of the Razzaz family in the late-eighteenth century.<sup>8</sup>

Ownership and use of Bayt al-Razzaz from c.1820 to the present is unclear. During this period the palace declined from being one of the most splendid Ottoman residences in Cairo, through an interim phase as a subdivided residential and commercial tenement, to abandonment. From 1977 to 1984 Dr. Paul E. Walker, executive director of the American Research Center in Egypt, initiated a preliminary planning effort to rehabilitate Bayt al-Razzaz. As part of this effort, Dr. Adel Yassin, an architect, developed additional plans, partial elevations, and sections of much of the palace.

Bayt al-Razzaz presents exterior elevations onto public thoroughfares in only two locations. A three-story elevation, including the formal entrance to the eastern courtyard, fronts on Bab al-Wazir Street. An engraving of this elevation was published in Paris by the French delineator Pascal Coste in 1839.<sup>9</sup> Measured and drawn in Cairo between 1818 and 1825, Coste's work represent the earliest known image of Bayt al-Razzaz.

The only other street elevation is the now-collapsed entrance gateway to the western courtyard on Souk al-Silah Street. All other elevations face one of the two courtyards or the alley. Thus, a passerby has few visible clues to the extent and quality of what lies hidden: virtually two city blocks of urban fabric in the most densely developed sector of medieval Cairo.

Bayt al-Razzaz has 178 rooms on four levels. All portions of the complex are of load-bearing masonry construction. Most of the palace has a ground floor, and first floor. A second floor exists over only one-third of the palace. A few rooms in the eastern courtyard are located on a third floor, inaccessible because of collapsed stairways.

The plans of the originally separate palaces surrounding the eastern and western courtyards appear to have been similar. A large north-facing reception porch, or *maq'ad*, was located on the south side of each courtyard. On the east side were the principal residential spaces,

including the women's quarters, or *haramlik*. On the west side were stables and guest quarters, and on the north were storage and service areas.

Both early palaces were distinguished by a series of elaborately designed and decorated reception rooms, or *qa'a*. Some *qa'a* were for male guests, others were located in the *haramliks*. *Qa'a* are typically rectangular in plan and have a central section called a *durqa'a* for general circulation. At opposite ends of a *qa'a* slightly raised floors form platformed areas known as *iwans*. The ceiling height of the *durqa'a* is often higher than the ceiling height of *iwans*. Marking the vertical division between the *durqa'a* and the *iwans* are carved and decorated supports, or *kurdis*. A *kurdi* is somewhat similar to an arch in a nineteenth-century European theater's proscenium. In the high ceilings of some *durqa'a* are found skylight lanterns known as *shukhshakhas*. The most elaborate *shukhshakha* at Bayt al Razzaz, in Room 10, has a 12-sided, wooden cupola.

Many of the principal rooms in the eastern courtyard overlook Bab al-Wazir Street, whereas, none of the rooms in the western courtyard overlooks a public street. The western courtyard features an ingenious system of air shafts that rise vertically from the ground floor to the roof. Their purpose is to allow fresh air to circulate to adjacent rooms and control excessive temperature and humidity. The eastern courtyard does not have an extensive system of air shafts. Both buildings incorporate design features intended to accommodate human comfort in a hot, desert environment, including projecting window bays, roof overhangs, and interior widow bays.

Most ground floor walls are constructed of dressed or rubble stone, while most of the rooms on the upper floors are of brick, brick with horizontal wood timbers, or a mixture of brick and rubble stone. Additions and changes to the building are rarely in dressed stone and frequently of brick or a mixed material. A few interior partitions in the western courtyard and two sides of the skylight of the principal *qa'a* are constructed of wood framing with wattle and daub.

On the exterior elevations the dressed stone walls have been left exposed or painted in alternating red and white stripes. Other exterior walls have been stuccoed and painted many times. Much of the exterior stucco has fallen off. Most interiors have been plastered and painted at some time.

The palace has flat roofs constructed of layers of mortar laid over horizontal sheathing boards placed directly on the ceiling joists of the rooms below. Without exception, these roofs are leaking, severely deteriorated, derelict or collapsed.

The window bays are of two major types: either projecting or flush with the wall, with a variety of sash. The most spectacular are known as *mashrabiya*. Bayt al-Razzaz has some of the finest surviving examples of this sash. This small-scale wood spindle sash that comes in a dazzling range of geometric patterns and is one of the glories of Ottoman Cairo architecture.<sup>10</sup> It is commonly found in portions of the palace reserved for women and allows a person sitting close to the window on the interior to see without being seen from outdoors.

The most common window sash at Bayt al-Razzaz is large-scale wood-spindle sash that forms a widely-spaced rectangular grille. It permits the free flow of air between two rooms or a room and the exterior and provides a degree of security.

A rare and beautiful type of window sash found at Bayt al-Razzaz is made of gypsum and colored-glass. This fragile and easily damaged sash is a specialty of Ottoman design. Unlike European stained glass, where the design is drawn onto the colored glass itself and the pieces of glass are held apart by lead comes, at Cairo the pattern is cast into a flat gypsum panel to represent the stems, leaves, and petals of flowers, shrubs or fruit trees. On the interior face of the gypsum window the “ribs” are often carved after casting, to enhance their final shape and silhouette. Small pieces of colored glass in different hues are individually glued to the flat back of the gypsum ribs, covering the voids. The glass pieces are then fixed with a thin wash of mortar. When seen from within a dark room on a bright day the effect is of a jewel-like splash of color against black. These windows are found only in the *qa'a* on the upper floors associated with the *haramlik*.

Bayt al-Razzaz also contains several rooms with breathtaking polychrome painted decoration on wood architectural elements, either painted directly onto the wood support or onto finely woven cloth panels that are glued to the wood support. The decoration may be geometric, floral, or in some instances, script from Sufi poetry. In one room, dated 1640, the script is painted raised gesso. The painted decoration’s fullest expression is to be found in the most important rooms.

By 1995 Bayt al-Razzaz was virtually abandoned. Three artisans had small workshops on Bab al-Wazir Street. One shop fills what was the original main entrance to the eastern courtyard. The Supreme Council of Antiquities and a local contractor used some of the ground-floor rooms for storage. Four rooms on the first floor of the eastern courtyard functioned as a dormitory for some Supreme Council of Antiquities workers. An 81-year-old caretaker lived in the eastern courtyard and one storage room.

## **THE CHALLENGE OF MIXED-USE REHABILITATION**

The abandoned Bayt al-Razzaz palace, a major historic resource in Islamic Cairo, faces a most uncertain future. The sheer size of it has proved daunting to previous preservation initiatives.

What should happen to Bayt al-Razzaz?

The day is long over when any country can afford to isolate its historic buildings from the daily life of the neighborhoods in which they are located. Except for those few buildings that are of such historic or artistic importance that they must be museums. Most historic buildings can be successfully reintegrated into the life of their community, and given new and exciting uses. Most historic buildings were constructed to shelter a human activity useful to the community, and many of them are capable, with adequate planning and care, to do so again.

All over the world, we have made the mistake of making lists of our historic buildings and then, for all intents and purposes, removing them from circulation. We turn our historic buildings into corpses, dead spaces in the daily life of the street, where nothing useful to the local community is happening and where, after a while, nobody cares.

This makes no economic sense and it makes no social sense. Think of the economic investment we already have in our existing buildings! The stones are already in place. Shouldn't we strive to use and reuse these buildings over and over again?

Think of the stories, the history, and the beauty already in our existing buildings. Shouldn't these stories, this history, this beauty be shared on a daily basis with the very people who live every day of their lives with these buildings. Is this treasure meant to be only for visitors who spend one hour there, rarely, if ever, to return?

My own work for over thirty years in my own country has been to encourage the rehabilitation and re-use of our own historic buildings. This kind of conservation work is my passion. Being co-author of the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation, our national standards for the proper treatment and care of historic buildings being put to new uses,

My dream, my vision, for Bayt al-Razzaz is that it will be brought back to life and placed at the service of the community where it stands. I want to see every square centimeter of it back in use.

In a neighborhood where there are few gardens and playgrounds for children, I would like to hear the sound of children playing in a new garden, a new playground, in the western courtyard.

I would like to see the great rooms of the palace preserved, restored and reused as places where people can grow in their skills...perhaps to receive further training to protect the great heritage of Egypt?

I would like to see the many rooms in Bayt al-Razzaz, that can be adapted for business or office use, to be turned to that activity so that the palace is seen as a positive economic force in its neighborhood.

In short, I want Bayt al-Razzaz to be the standard bearer for a renewed effort to reintegrate a great people and their great story. For this effort to be a success, the inspiration for it must rise directly from the hearts of the people. And this effort must make sense to the people.

Those of us from elsewhere, (who come and who go): we can provide encouragement and assistance. But the vision (without which all people perish)...the vision for Bayt al-Razzaz as the center-piece for a renewed community... where the very stones themselves speak daily to the people with a message of shared respect, shared trust, shared history and a shared hope for a healthy tomorrow... in which all the children of the neighborhood will have a very real opportunity to burst into full-bloom as human beings.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

From August, 1995 until May 1996, W. Brown Morton III was awarded sabbatical leave from Mary Washington College to develop an existing conditions report for the Bayt al-Razzaz Palace and other conservation reports with a sub-grant from the Egyptian Antiquities Project of the American Research Center in Egypt under a USAID grant pertaining to the preservation of historic resources in Cairo.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Index to Mohammedan Monuments Appearing on the Special 1:5000 Scale Maps of Cairo* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 1980).

<sup>2</sup> Limited archaeological excavation undertaken in 1978 by the American Research Center in Egypt uncovered traces of foundations between the eastern and western courtyards that suggest that the two residences were separated for many years by a common alley. See original pencil sketches, and ink-on-paper architectural drawings of Bayt al-Razzaz prepared by Dr. Adel Yassin, architect, 1978, in the American Research Center in Egypt, Egyptian Antiquities Project office. 2, Midan Kasr al-Dubara, Garden City, Cairo, Egypt.

<sup>3</sup> Mohamed Hossam el-Din Ismail Abdel-Fatah, "Arba' Biwut Mamlukiyah Min al-Watha'iq al-Othmaniyah" [Four Mamluk Houses from Ottoman Deeds], *Annales Islamologiques*, Tome XXIV (IFAO, 1988): 68-73. Publication of selections from the Al-Ashraf Kayt-Bey Waqf Deed No. 886, 895 H (1490 AD)

<sup>4</sup> Qayt Bay Waqf Deed No. 866, page 260 line 13 and page 261, line 1.

<sup>5</sup> Revault, J. and Maury, B., "Palais et Maisons du Caire du XIVe au XVIIIe Siècle," Vol. I, Palais d'al-Razzaz in *Mémoires Publiés Par Les Membres de l'Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale du Caire*, Tome XCVI (Cairo:1975): 42-43., and Walker, P. and Yassin, A. "Restoration of the Bait ar-Razzaz", in *Islamic Cairo: Architectural Conservatio and*

---

*Urban Development of the Historic Centre* (aarp), Meinecke, M., ed. (London: Deutsches Archäologisches Institut; Abteilung Kairo, 1980): 60.

6 Revault and Maury, 53-54, Walker and Yassin, 60.

7 An incomplete English translation of this waqf deed No. 1709 is filed in the ARCE archives.

8 Revault and Maury, 34.

9 Coste, P. *Architecture Arabe ou Monuments du Caire, Mesurés et Dessinés, de 1818 à 1825, par Pascal Coste* (Paris: Typographie de Firmin Didot Frères, 1839), Plate XLVII. One elevation appears to be substantially correct. The section and three plans do not correspond convincingly to what can be observed now. This discrepancy raises questions of Coste's images of Bayt al-Razzaz.

10 Williams, C. *Islamic Monuments in Cairo: A Practical Guide, 4th ed.* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, (1993), 268.