

Reviving the Caravanserais

Adaptive Reuse of the Wikala of Qansuh al-Ghuri in Contemporary Cairo

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Abstract

This paper examines the adaptive reuse of the Wikala of Sultan Qansuh al-Ghuri, a 16th-century Mamluk¹ caravanserai situated in the historic centre of Cairo. Originally conceived as a multifunctional commercial and residential complex, the Wikala (caravanserai) was strategically integrated into a broader religious and civic endowment that included a mosque, *madrasa* (school), *khanqah* (monastery), and *sabil-kuttab* (public fountain). Following a prolonged period of neglect, the building underwent substantial restoration in the early 2000s and has since been repurposed as a vibrant cultural centre hosting craft workshops, traditional performances, and community events. The study investigates the building's historical transformations, situating its adaptive reuse within broader debates on heritage conservation, sustainability, and urban resilience. A comparative analysis is conducted of similar structures that remain extant in Cairo. Through a combination of archival research, spatial analysis, and field documentation, the paper explores how the project harmonised historical integrity with contemporary functional requirements. Particular attention is paid to the restoration of architectural elements, such as *masbrabiya* (lattice window) and stone portals, while also addressing the challenges associated with integrating modern infrastructure within a heritage context. The case of Wikala al-Ghuri exemplifies the potential of adaptive reuse to revalorise historic assets, foster community engagement, and contribute to the economic revitalisation of urban districts. Furthermore, it raises critical questions about the roles of public policy, cultural memory, and participatory conservation in maintaining historic structures in rapidly transforming cities, such as Old Cairo. This contribution ultimately advocates for a model of adaptive reuse that surpasses preservation for its own sake, emphasising instead the dynamic reinvention of heritage to support inclusive, resilient, and culturally grounded urban futures.

Keywords: Adaptive Reuse, Cultural Infrastructure, Urban Regeneration

Introduction

In the dense fabric of Old Cairo, the Wikala of Sultan Qansuh al-Ghuri stands as a material palimpsest of Cairo's Islamic past. Constructed between 1503 and 1505 as part of an ambitious *waqf* complex², the wikala fulfilled commercial and residential functions in support of adjacent religious institutions (Williams 2018). The Mamluk conception of urbanism, which integrated economic and spiritual life, is vividly embodied in this multifunctional ensemble. Wikalas (urban caravanserais) were not merely passive containers for trade; they served as critical nodes in the waqf-based urban structure of Mamluk Cairo, generating

revenue for mosques, madrasas, and charitable foundations while shaping the city's socio-economic infrastructure. Located near al-Azhar Street and close to the larger religious complex (Fig. 1), the Wikala al-Ghuri exemplified this dual role of economic productivity and religious patronage, as part of a larger endowment that included a mosque, madrasa, sabil-kuttab, and a mausoleum. However, like many historic structures in Cairo, the wikala suffered from neglect, inappropriate use, and physical decay throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Raymond 2000). It was not until the early twenty-first century that the building received systematic conservation and a new lease of life. The adaptive reuse project initiated by the Egyptian Supreme Council of Antiquities transformed the derelict site into a cultural centre that now hosts traditional performances, artisan activities, and educational events (Salah 2002). This relationship is characteristic of the dense, mixed-use urban fabric that typified the city at the time, where demographic pressures and waqf policies shaped architectural strategies. The Wikala of Sultan Qansuh al-Ghuri embodies the sophisticated urban composition of Mamluk Cairo, where religious piety and commercial pragmatism were interwoven into the city's physical and economic structures.

The Typology and Function of the Wikala

The caravanserai was a vital typology of urban architecture in medieval Islamic cities, functioning as a resting and trading post for merchants and their merchandise (Behrens-Abouseif 2007). Unlike rural caravanserais along trade routes, urban wikalas were seamlessly integrated into the city's commercial arteries. The Wikala al-Ghuri exemplifies the typological characteristics of a Mamluk urban caravanserai: a monumental entrance portal leading into a central courtyard surrounded by arcaded galleries, with storage spaces

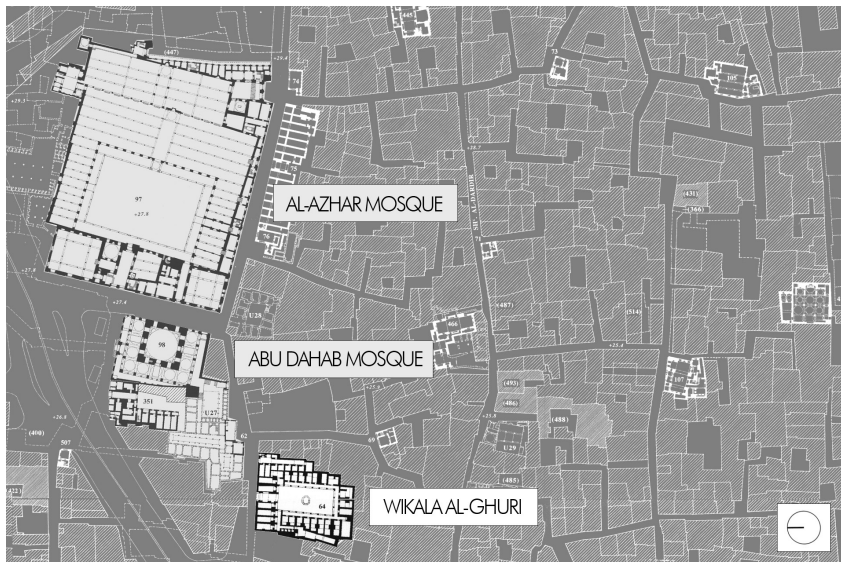


Fig. 1. The site plan of the Wikala al-Ghuri and the nearby religious complex, Cairo (Manlio Michieletto, 2025)

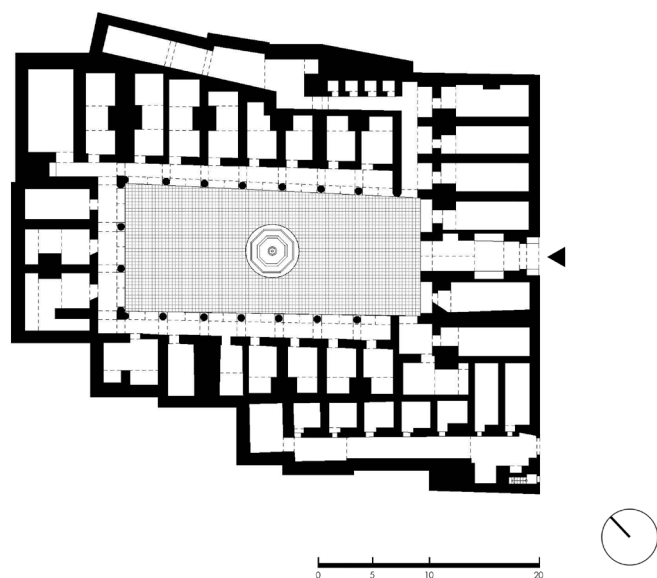


Fig. 2. Ground floor plan of the Wikala al-Ghuri. Cairo (Manlio Michieletto, 2025)

located on the ground floor and residential units on the upper stories (Fig. 2). The main elevation features a tri-lobed entrance arch that leads into a passage opening directly onto the courtyard. This courtyard, centred on a marble fountain, was designed to attract clients while facilitating trading operations (Fig. 3). The lower two floors housed more than twenty vaulted storage rooms with pointed stone arches, whereas the upper floors served as independent residential units, each comprising two levels. Notably, the intermediate level—hidden between floors—contained kitchens and storerooms, illustrating a rare spatial feature that highlights the Mamluk emphasis on functional hierarchy and privacy. One of the most distinguished architectural elements is the ensemble of 29 *mashrabiyyas*³—turned-wood lattice window screens—many of which remain in their original form. Supported by wooden brackets, these *mashrabiyyas* offer both visual access to the courtyard and internal privacy, underscoring the sophistication of residential planning in Mamluk architecture. The caravanserai typology in Cairo shares fundamental similarities with structures along the Silk Road in Anatolia and Central Asia, where these multifunctional hubs provided both commerce and accommodation for travelling merchants. In Anatolia, particularly during the Seljuq and early Ottoman periods, caravanserais were often monumental complexes with dual functions—open courtyards for seasonal trade and enclosed vaults for protection against weather and threats (Dabanlı, Şimşek 2023, 91–94). Seljuq caravanserais often combined open courtyards and covered halls to accommodate seasonal usage, integrating defence mechanisms, mosques, and platforms for loading and unloading animals (Nossov 2013). Similarly, in the Bukhara Khanate, caravanserais evolved into fortified institutions

of trade, complete with stables, cisterns, mosques, and even postal stations, underscoring their role as both economic and civic infrastructure (Ergashev 2023). As noted, the Mamluk caravanserai can be viewed not merely as a functional space for trade but also as a reflection of the spatial and ideological convergence among the residential, commercial, and religious spheres. The *wikala* was often spatially and symbolically intertwined with the adjacent urban fabric, similar in spatial logic to multi-unit residences such as *rab'is*⁴, which stacked living quarters above commercial shops to optimise land use and maintain hierarchy. It typically shares urban functions with coffeehouses—both serving as semi-public venues that facilitate encounters, transactions, and cultural exchange (Emami 2016, 29–32). The socio-economic role of these institutions was substantial. Their typological flexibility allowed them to adapt to the shifting urban conditions of Cairo from the Mamluk to the Ottoman periods. The Mamluks exercised tight control over the economy through waqf foundations, which served not only as philanthropic institutions but also as political and fiscal instruments to stabilise urban power dynamics (Levanoni 2001). Within a comparative framework, the architectural diversity and multifunctionality of caravanserais across Cairo highlight key typological distinctions. They maintained a similar duality between utility and ritual through its combination of commercial and residential functions, a liminal space—simultaneously sacred, hospitable, and institutional. Similar complexes are strategically located within the dense Cairene urban fabric and have always been part of a broader waqf system, with revenues allocated to the maintenance of nearby religious structures. The *wikalas* of Bazar'a (Fig. 4) and Sultan Qaytbay (Fig. 5) feature principal façades with *mashrabiyyas* and an arched portal leading into a central courtyard. The building's four-tiered organisation—with lower floors dedicated to storage and upper floors serving as residential units—is consistent with the socio-spatial arrangement characteristic of Mamluk commercial housing. Each residential unit included a kitchen and storage spaces concealed between levels, ensuring privacy and autonomy while reinforcing communal integration through the central courtyard.

Restoration for an Adaptive Reuse

Restoration efforts commenced in the early 2000s under the auspices of the Egyptian Antiquities Organisation, with assistance from international agencies. The intervention aimed to preserve the building's architectural integrity while introducing new functions compatible with its historical character. Conservation activities prioritised structural stabilisation, cleaning of stone facades, and the reinstatement of absent features such as wooden *mashrabiyyas* and *muqarnas* portals. The adaptive reuse programme retained the original spatial hierarchy, with craft shops on the ground floor and upper galleries designated for performance and exhibition. In a notable innovation, the Ministry of Culture converted the *wikala* into a centre dedicated to the conservation of traditional handicrafts, including wood turning and stucco glasswork. It provided on-site facilities for both traditional artisans and contemporary artists. Craft workshops promote traditional skills such as wood carving, calligraphy, and textile production, thereby supporting local artisans and preserving intangible heritage (Shehata et al. 2015). The potential for reuse of historic commercial buildings has gained widespread recognition not only in Cairo but throughout the Islamic world. In fact, the typology and configuration of historic commercial buildings permit their contemporary reuse while safeguarding key heritage elements. The

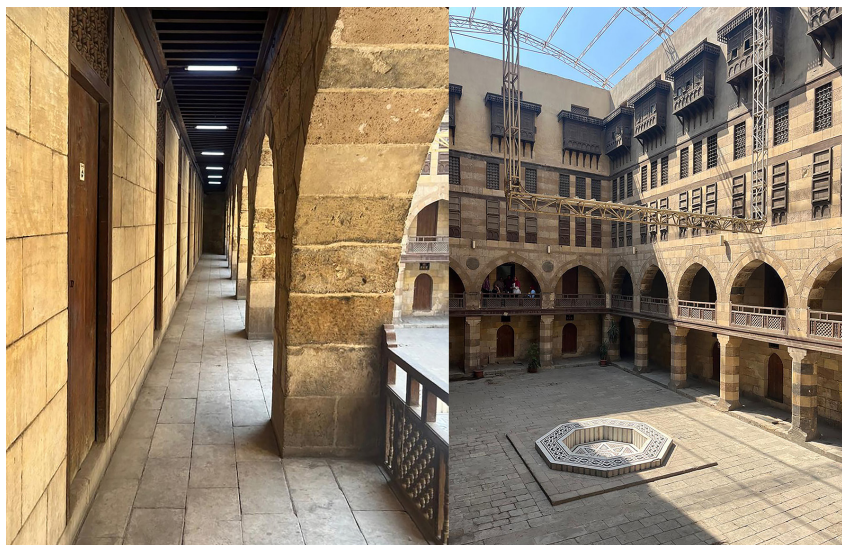


Fig. 3. Views of the first-floor hallway serving the residential units and of the central courtyard after renovation. Cairo (Manlio Michieletto, 2025)

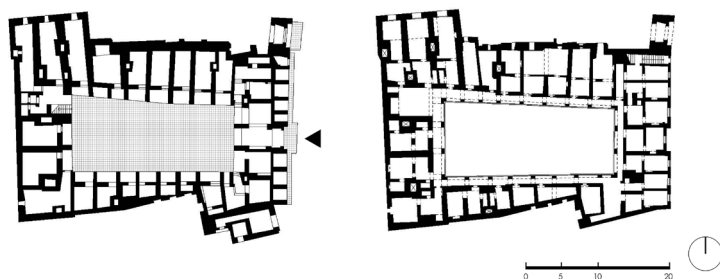


Fig. 4. Ground floor and first floor plan of the Wikala Bazar'a. Cairo (Manlio Michieletto, 2025)

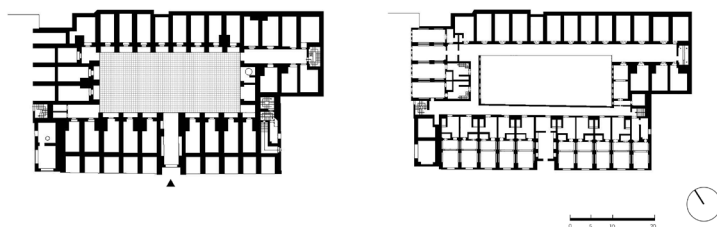


Fig. 5. Ground floor and first floor plan of the Wikala Sultan Qaytbay (Manlio Michieletto, 2025)

wikala's courtyard-oriented layout and modular units facilitated its reprogramming into spaces for performance and exhibitions. This approach aligns with spatial models in which reuse constitutes a transformation rooted in existing typological logic rather than a rupture. The restoration of Wikala al-Ghuri exemplifies this principle, preserving the architectural integrity of Mamluk construction while reinterpreting its functions to address contemporary cultural and social needs. Nevertheless, the revitalisation of Wikala al-Ghuri is part of a broader urban initiative aimed at reactivating Cairo's historic core, especially Al-Muizz Street, where numerous monuments have been conserved and repurposed through a large-scale heritage-led urban renewal strategy. Led by the Aga Khan Trust for Culture in collaboration with Egyptian authorities, this initiative sought to restore individual buildings and to establish a coherent cultural corridor that enhances pedestrian access, social interaction, and local identity. The project focused on lighting, paving, and adaptive reuse to transform underutilised historic spaces into vibrant civic assets (Aga Khan Trust for Culture, 2004). Its role within the cultural landscape of Al-Muizz Street contributes to a network of revitalised monuments that collectively bolster tourism, artisanal economies, and community participation. Ultimately, such contextual strategies illustrate how heritage preservation, when integrated into urban development plans, can foster sustainable growth and spatial justice within historic districts. Since its reopening, the Wikala al-Ghuri has hosted a range of cultural activities under the auspices of the Cultural Development Fund. Weekly performances of traditional Sufi music and dance by the Tannoura troupe have become emblematic of the site's new identity.

Conclusions

The adaptive reuse of the Wikala of Qansuh al-Ghuri represents more than a technical restoration; it is a cultural project that reconnects a historic site with the rhythms of contemporary urban life. By reimagining the caravanserai as a cultural hub, the project underscores the potential to transform heritage into a resource for creativity, sustainability, and social cohesion. It demonstrates how the layered histories of urban architecture can be mobilised to address present challenges and shape resilient futures. The wikala's transformation reaffirms the broader typological resilience of the caravanserai, a building form whose cultural utility has spanned from Anatolia to Central Asia and which remains adaptable to modern civic functions. Moreover, the case of Wikala al-Ghuri illustrates how commercial architecture in Mamluk and Ottoman Cairo served as a prototype for urban expansion and economic sustainability. Ultimately, the Wikala of al-Ghuri exemplifies how a typology rooted in the convergence of religious, commercial, and residential functions can be reinterpreted through contemporary practices. Thus, the Wikala of al-Ghuri joins a typological lineage that extends from the ribats and hans of Anatolia to the wikalas of Cairo—a lineage shaped by political theology, urban trade, and architectural hospitality (Malagaris 2013). It operates as a civic palimpsest, reactivating its Mamluk-era socio-economic logic through the arts and cultural activities of present-day Cairo. The wikala can be seen as a resilient node in a historically layered network of civic and spiritual functions, reimagined to accommodate both memory and innovation, as well as tradition and modernity.

Notes

1. The Mamluk era in Cairo, spanning from 1250 to 1517 AD, was a pivotal period marked by unprecedented urban expansion and the construction of numerous magnificent architectural monuments, transforming the city into a vast and complex Islamic capital;
2. A *waqf* complex is a large, charitable Islamic endowment of property that includes multiple buildings and serves various religious and community purposes. The waqf is held in a charitable trust and cannot be sold, gifted, or inherited, thereby ensuring that its benefits endure for generations. Many of these complexes served as centres of urban life, combining multiple functions such as mosques, schools (*madrasas*), and hospitals (*bimaristans*) within a single architectural structure;
3. *Mashrabiya* refers to an architectural feature: a projecting wooden balcony or screen with intricate latticework that provides shade, privacy, and passive cooling by allowing air to circulate. Derived from the Arabic word *mashraba* (or *sharaba*, meaning “to drink”), its name reflects its early function of holding water jars to cool the air through evaporation;
4. The *rab’a* is a type of Cairene apartment building that was built above commercial activities

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