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The Iconic “Wekala” in the Urban Patterns of Historic Cairo: Spatial Dynamics Between Urban Image, Typology, and Contemporary Life

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Abstract

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To understand and read a city and its transformation through time, it is fundamental to study its origin, geography, connections, and patterns, as well as the shape and form of its physical spaces today. Through these studies, the urban identity – defined by cultural life and economy – becomes a significant element of urban life. Therefore, the historic importance of trade and commerce hubs manifests itself in the form of urban-architectural landmarks, exemplified by the case of Historic Cairo, host of the archetypal “Wekala” typology, the focus of this research. How does the Wekala’s spatial configuration and integration within Historic Cairo’s medieval city pattern remain unchanged in over seven hundred years of transformation, adaptation, and reuse? In the contemporary megacity of Cairo, these spaces, located within the listed UNESCO World Heritage Site of Historic Cairo, are preserved, restored, and revitalized into touristic attractions, far and away from their initial mixed-use state, balancing private accommodations, public shops, and supplementary merchant stores. Decoding how these Wekalas, their visual identity, connection to community, and spatial integration into such an iconic context, change through time – by mapping and visual perception studies – deepens the literature on visual identity and spatial dynamics of a uniquely adapted architectural typology.

Keywords: Cultural Heritage; Image of the City; Historic Cairo; Caravanserai; Urban Community.

1. Introduction

Historic cities cannot be read merely as inherited physical fabrics; they are living spatial systems defined as much by rupture and adaptation as by continuity. Their legibility stems from the constant friction between urban form, economic activity, and the everyday social practices that inhabit them. From this perspective, architectural typologies are not neutral containers, but active spatial records of shifting cultural and commercial tides.

In Historic Cairo, the *Wekala*, or urban caravanserai (a graphic representation from the 19th century is presented in Fig. 1), stands as a critical commercial typology. Historically, these courtyard structures collapsed trade, storage, and accommodation into a single, intensely public form. While many *wekala-s* survive today as recognizable landmarks, their original mixed-use nature has been fundamentally altered by state restoration, informal appropriation, and shifting tourist economies. This raises a pressing question for urban studies: “How does a historic typology hold onto its spatial identity when its social and symbolic functions are entirely overwritten?”

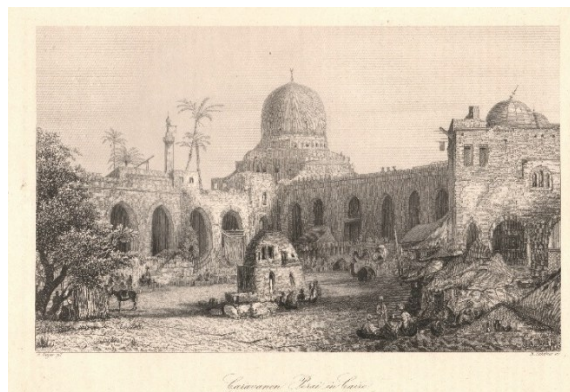


Figure 1. Caravanen Serai in 1850 (Geyer, 1850).

Much of the existing literature treats the *wekala* either as a static piece of Islamic architecture or a monument to be preserved, often sidelining its contemporary socio-spatial dynamics. To address this methodological gap, this paper offers a comparative reading of selected *wekala*-s through their physical accessibility, visual image, and current patterns of use. By merging urban mapping, spatial analysis, and field observation, the research asks how the *Wekala*'s spatial configuration remains legible within Cairo's medieval fabric despite centuries of reuse. Ultimately, this study moves away from monument-based preservation, positioning the *wekala* as an adaptable urban container and an active lens for reading the changing spatial logic of Historic Cairo, or even *wekala* as an ever-active space for place-making practices.

1.1 Cairo. Historic Cairo AS A CONTEXT AND FRAME

1.1.1 The urban pattern and significance of Historic Cairo

The contemporary mega-city of Cairo is considered to be a rapidly growing city, as discussed by David Sims in his work and research on the urban growth of the city of Cairo in *Understanding Cairo*, where Cairo is considered to be composed of many different districts with different dynamics (2011); overall, it is a vibrant and emerging city. Within these districts lies Historic Cairo, which has maintained its unique character through the time, helping cement Cairo as the “City of a Thousand Minarets” (NHK, 1979). As introduced by the Egyptian Ministry of Antiquities (now the consolidated Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities, or MoTA), Historic Cairo is the place where General Gawhar al-Siqilli proclaimed the foundation of the new capital of the Fatimid Caliphate, Cairo (or *al-Qahira*, *lit.* “the Victorious”), which thusly became the fourth capital in Egypt's Islamic Period, after al-Fustat, al-‘Askar, and al-Qatai’ in 969 C.E (Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities, 2019). Historic Cairo and its many neighbourhoods are an overall still intact medieval city (Fig. 2), which has lived through the diversity of successive Islamic ruling periods, along with the subsequent impact of changes in both urban planning tactics and architectural design choices, as has been noted by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, or UNESCO, below:

Historic Cairo still reflects its complex ‘medieval’ urban layout, which was respected and enhanced in later eras, to reflect its role as a political capital and to accommodate population growth. Its cohesive traditional urban scene combines elements of four capitals of Islamic states. Cairo was founded as the headquarter of the Fatimid Caliphate in 969 AD. During the Ayyubid state (1176 AD), the citadel was established as the headquarters of government. The Mamluk state (1250-1517 AD) saw the expansion and extension of Cairo's cohesive urban fabric outside the walls of the Fatimid necropolis to encompass the earlier cities of Fustat (642 AD), Al-Askar (750 AD) and Al-Qata'i (879 AD) in which the mosque of Ahmed ibn Tulun (876-879 AD) is sited, with its spiral minaret and symmetrical arches opening on to a vast square court. Subsequently Cairo became the most important city of the Ottoman Caliphate (1517-1805 AD). (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2026)

Having recognised “absolutely unquestionable historical, archaeological and urbanistic importance” in Historic Cairo, UNESCO further clarified that this importance was based on: several monuments being considered “incontestable masterpieces”, being a material witness to the international strategic, scientific, economic, and political importance of the city in the medieval period, and containing many streets and old dwellings which have maintained themselves since their formation, accordingly documenting “forms of human settlement which go back to the Middle Ages” (UNESCO/WHC, Special Projects Unit by World Heritage Centre, 2026). This integrity has led Historic Cairo to be considered by the UNESCO to have Outstanding Universal Value, or OUV. As the term implies, OUV refers to cultural or natural significance that is so great that it becomes worthy of protection by all peoples universally for present and future generations (Court et al. 2022, p. 60). This recognition has placed Historic Cairo as a World Heritage Site (WHS) on the UNESCO World Heritage List, as one of six cultural heritage sites officially recognised in Egypt, and one of the five first added onto the list in 1979 (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, n.d.).



Figure 2. Left to right: Schematic map of Historic Cairo and its surroundings, *Plan particulier de la ville, État Moderne I*, pl. 26, 1809, from the *Description de l'Égypte*, and *Map of Cairo Showing Mohammedan Monuments*, 1924 (Jomard, 1809; Warner, 2004/2005, pp. xvi, 16, 27).

Following the moving of the capital to “Khedivial Cairo” in the 19th century – what is colloquially referred to as Downtown Cairo by locals (*transl. West El Balad, lit. “centre of the country/city”*) – Historic Cairo maintained its uniquely tightknit urban fabric to a large degree, which has in turn preserved within it many outstanding examples of historic monuments of different types, including those of mosques, *sabil-s* [*subul*] (water cisterns), *madrassa-s* [*madares*] and *kuttab-s* (schools), *bimaristan-s* (community hospitals), *souq-s* [*aswaq*] and *khan-s* [*khanat*] (markets), *qaysariyya-s* [*qayasar*] (markets for one particular type of item), *funduq-s* [*fanadiq*] (hotels/hostels), and of course, *wekala-s* [*wekalat*] (Cairene urban caravanserais). That all of these diverse functions are integrated equally into the urban mass of Historic Cairo without disturbing the scale, fabric, and context of the city is considered to be a ‘unique feature in the Islamic world’. This heightened proximity and diversity encouraged economic activity via local crafts, and the legacy of this remains in the many streets and public spaces which are named after craftspeople who would have historically plied their trade and then traded their goods within these spaces, and of which some are still practiced in the area today. These include El-Nahhasin (the copper workers), El-Megharbelin (the grain workers), and El-Shamaa’in (the candlemakers/wax-workers) (Moussa, 2026, pp. 21, 23–24; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2026; Waly et al., 2022, p. 231).

Historic Cairo’s significance is so great that the potential for deterioration of the urban fabric led UNESCO’s World Heritage Centre to collaborate with MoTA and local experts in July 2010 to document the extensive heritage of the area, in order to achieve three key objectives: preparation of a conservation plan for UNESCO-recognised Historic Cairo and its buffer zone, including within it the necessary management plan required for all UNESCO WHSs under World Heritage Operational Guidelines, establishment of the institutional framework necessary to promote sustainable urban conservation between all involved stakeholders, and the creation and maintenance of a shared information platform facilitating urban conservation (UNESCO/WHC, Special Projects Unit by World Heritage Centre, 2026).

Caroline Williams’ research within *Islamic Monuments in Cairo: The Practical Guide* (Chapter 2 – Architecture and Ornamental Summary, 2002, pg. 21-34) provides an architectural and ornamental summary for both religious and secular buildings and their decorations so as to make them recognisable. Through her summarised timeline of Historic Cairo, we see the most significant elements and their impact on the architectural form and style of the buildings in the area.

Early Islamic: 750-969 C.E. – having the notable cornerstone of the Mosque of Ibn Tulun, Early-Islamic monuments have architecture which is inspired by the architecture of the area of Samara, located in present-day Iraq.

Fatimid-Ayyubid: 969-1250 C.E. – one of the most important innovations of the Fatimid period was the introduction of stone masonry; the Fatimids are also credited with the earliest examples of domes, now found in Cairo, and still a part of the present-day skyline.

Mamluk (early, middle, and late): 1250-1517 C.E. – an era of experimentation and innovation; domes, bricks, madrasa-s are iconic elements; from this period, monumental doorways were introduced along with the typical Cairo minaret, considered nowadays still a very significant mainstay of the Cairo skyline; by the later period of Mamluks – when they gained more power – the city was already densified and built up, consequently, new buildings had to be integrated into irregular spaces between existing structures and streets.

Ottoman: 1517-19th century – the Ottomans brought from Türkiye an influence that changed the variation of mosques, minarets, and decorative aspects related to garden aspects (e.g., painted flowers decorated the ceiling) and underground spaces were augmented.

1.1.2 Space, Form, And Types Of *Wekala-S* Through Time

It is fundamental after understanding the urban historical context and pattern in which *wekala-s* came to exist, to go through the spatial arrangement, characteristics, and functional uses of artifacts overall, and to identify the morphologies of *wekala-s* in particular over time.

[Typology is an] approach that isolates the attributes of the architectural coherence, identifies them as characteristics, in order to then compare them with similarly abstracted attributes from other contexts and to define similarities or differences. Since Quatremère de Quincy at the latest, the history of architecture has described this kind of approach by the term typology, and understands it as the abstraction of formal attributes into a principle, called type, that describes the commonalities of a series of different, but historically concrete models. From the beginning, this systematic and abstracted view includes the possibilities of a guideline for action beyond literal imitation (“imitation par principe”) as well as a tool for comparative architectural criticism. (Lack, 1995, p. 93 f., as cited in Pfeifer & Brauneck, 2008, p. 8)

As discussed in the book chapter “Typology” by Pfeifer & Brauneck (2008), what can be referred to as the architectural definition of “typology” has undergone a continuous redefinition and evolution since at least the late 18th Century, with the modern understanding of architectural or building typology evolving as it passed hands between researchers such as Quatremère de Quincy, Rafael Moreno, Aldo Rossi, Roberto Venturi, and more. *Type* as a concept can trace its roots much further back before the association with the terminology known now, with predecessor discussions on type as a concept related to buildings extending to Vitruvius’ writings (Madrazo, 1995, p. 3).

To summarise Pfeifer & Brauneck’s elaboration, (2008, p. 10), architectural objects such as buildings present a duality: a single building responds individually to its surrounding contextual and cosmological traits; its tangible existence means that a certain level of complexity is inherent to it underneath which the building cannot be simplified further. However,

buildings will also conform with others of similar traits, uses, ideas, or forms; whether stylistically, functionally, or morphologically, architectural typology is both singular and communal. As the construction process which creates architectural objects has repetition ingrained within it, reflecting the patterns and repetitions ingrained in human perception, typological understanding of architectural forms and spaces is rooted in perceptual deduction and recall of communal experiences.

While Aldo Rossi would go on to develop further the understanding of typology by delineating both morphological typology classification and classical definitions of type – e.g., understanding that a courtyard is intrinsically a threshold space with certain qualities (à la the frisson of walking through a door frame), while also maintaining a courtyard’s morphological definition of a void space surrounded by other closed spaces (Rossi, 1984, as cited in Pfeifer & Brauneck, 2008, p. 13), Rossi’s understanding of type has been further defined by Petruccioli (1999, p. 8) in four aspects: the city presenting a fragmented image composed of different times and eras, the increased anchoring of type to symbolism and emotional resonance of buildings, the synecdochical significance placed on certain example buildings as representation of entire architecture types, and the valorisation of the “site”. Thus, the development of type to include context as well is crucial to the understanding of the caravanseraï typology, and eventually the Wekala typology as well.

Furthermore, Rafael Moneo synthesises that typology cannot be defined with only function or needed use; instead, architectural type is a lens through which form, use, memory, and meaning are filtered into a legible hierarchy (Moneo, 1978, p. 23-45, as cited in Pfeifer & Brauneck, 2008, p. 14).

Briefly, type has been defined by Petruccioli (1999, p. 7) as “the organic sum of the characters of the buildings in a limited area and in a given time”, and this is a useful shorthand with which to integrate all the layered viewpoints above into a helpful link with the characterisation of caravanseraï typologies; one that integrates the caravanseraï’s physical characteristics, cultural and historical significance, and contextual position – nevertheless, a simplified definition of the *wekala* typology is clarified in Williams’ *Islamic Monuments in Cairo*, in which she defines the *Khan* or *Wekala*, considered by her to be similar enough as to have the same definition (Fig. 3), as “an inn for traveling merchants built around a courtyard, with stables and warehouses at ground level and living accommodations above.” A well-restored example to be discussed later, the *Wekala* of el-Ghuri, is just down the street from al-Azhar. Egyptian *wekala*-s as a typology originated from Fatimid times (circa 900s CE) (2002, p. 22).

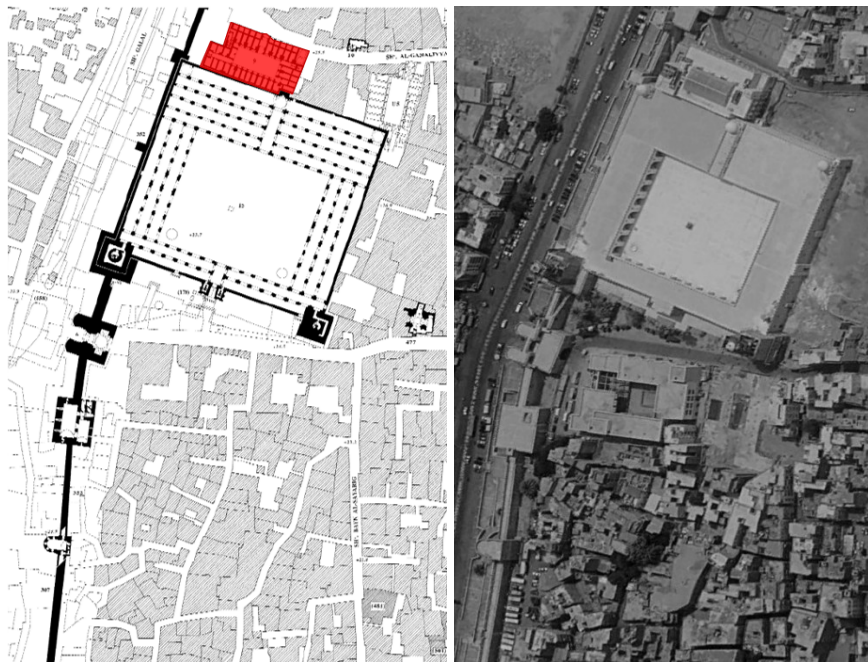


Figure 3. Left: *Wekalet* Qaitbey, location elaborated on map of the *Monuments of Historic Cairo* by Warner (2004/2005, pp. 73, 88), right: satellite map, courtesy of Airbus via Google Earth, of current-day location of the *wekala*.

1.1.3 Discussing Regional Caravanserais

Caravanserais were not just architectural structures, but also economic centres where goods, ideas and cultural influences were exchanged between different peoples and civilisations. Their location on key trade routes made them an integral part of medieval trade and exchange. (Deljavan & Çinar, 2023, p. 27; Volichenko et al., 2024, p. 27).

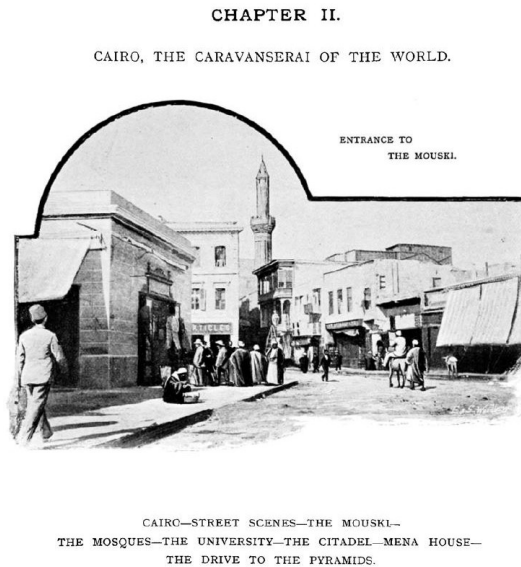


Figure 4. Chapter 2 of the book *Pyramids and Progress*, depicting Cairo as the “Caravanseraï of the World” (Ward, 1900/2015, p. 15) .

Caravanserais were worldly places (Fig. 4), and were of course not exclusive to Egypt; in fact, discovered caravanserais span along the historic Silk Road, particularly so as the “Silk Road” actually became a network of many well-developed trade routes by land and sea, and revenues increased along these routes in turn; accordingly, the number of caravanserais grew with the number of merchants, fulfilling a need for daily stops along a merchant’s way to protect their wares. So, their construction intensified starting from the 10th century until the 19th century particularly across Central Asia. By this point in time, caravanserais extended towards the west along the Mediterranean basin, including North Africa, and within Europe such as in Russia, and Eastern Europe; caravanserais were also present along the eastern ends of the Silk Road, including the Indian subcontinent and China, and in between, including of course Central Asia as previously described, but also Türkiye and the Caucasus region – in any case, many of these caravanserais still exist in some shape to this day (The UNESCO Silk Roads Programme, 2026).

Although many caravanserais still exist to this day, most of those remaining are little more than ruins of clay or stone, only relevant to historical and archaeological research and cultural tourism (National Geographic Society, 2023; Polvonov, 2021, p. 84). Caravanserais at their height were anything but, presenting a cosmopolitanism predating the term by hundreds of years through the diversity of people who would exchange knowledge, goods, and culture through sheer proximity, modelling the same patterns of our contemporary cities. This lively cultural exchange between merchants, missionaries, scholars, soldiers, and more traveling in both directions (East-to-West; West-to-East) and staying all in the same places meant that understanding of different habits and customs, news and stories, religious beliefs and practices, culinary arts, even languages, had a powerful effect on the voyagers passing through. Absorbing distinctive experiences from these socio-economic and cultural mosaics led to impacts which can still be observed and studied at present on the region’s cultural practices and collective existence (National Geographic Society, 2023).

Due to the intensification of caravanserai construction in support of these thriving merchant routes, there are many examples of caravanserais in Central Asia, including Turkmenistan (Doyakhotin), Azerbaijan (Bukhara), Uzbekistan (Rabat-i Malik), and Afghanistan (Polvonov, 2021, pp. 81–84). They were located along the Silk Road starting from pre-Islamic times in order to protect merchants from attacks, with a common architectural typology consisting of a rectangular courtyard surrounded by outer lower walls; the shape of the void and therefore adjacent mass would change, e.g., Bukhara Caravanserai in Baku, Azerbaijan has an octagonal courtyard, and Volichenko et al. have noted many caravanserais in Khorezm, Uzbekistan with uniquely circular shapes (2024, p. 27). The intensity of fortification of the caravanserai would depend on the protection needed from risk, e.g., the Rabat-i Malik caravanserai is a repurposed fortress, with an attached tower, the caravanserais of the Silk Road had much in common (Polvonov, 2021, pp. 82–83). The presence of caravanserais is noted even further into Western Asia and the Middle East, with examples from the Seljuk Period (11th-14th centuries) – built along merchant routes to protect travellers and provide them with services and accommodation – documented in Türkiye, Iran, and Syria (Deljavan & Çınar, 2023, p. 27).

Central Asian caravanserais typically had oriental-inspired elements to their architectural style, certainly including open courtyards, but also including additional elements such as ornamental and patterned walls, along with domed and vaulted ceilings, all inspired by a mixture of Central and West Asian architectural design styles; according to Volichenko et al., these would include historically Turkmen, Persian, and Mongolian styles in particular (2024, p. 26). However, much like other caravanserais regionally, they were also designed to host merchants and traders on the move, and their spaces were designed accordingly, with temporary shelter and accommodation for guests both human and animal – through buildings with rooms for human stays, warehouses for merchant goods, livestock and other animals’ stables and stalls, and some measure of fortification. All in all, efficiency in the handling of these guests’ stays optimised transportation of merchant

caravans, increasing customer-trader interaction and thus economic activity, and reducing transport costs through proficient well-maintained hospitality and transportation infrastructure (Volichenko et al., 2024, p. 26).

Caravanserais also had strategic geographic placement, in further response to the need for protection from raids and attacks, by being usually placed not far outside the nearest urban agglomeration or settlement. Their entrances were limited, usually to one major entrance and exit embedded within the encircling protective walls, much like a fort as previously discussed. These gates could then be closed with heavy chains and guarded by personnel through the night, protecting the people and merchandise inside from criminals (National Geographic Society, 2023). A notable example of increased fortification can be found in Syria. As caravans took routes which passed through important cities notable for trading, such as Aleppo and Damascus, Syrian caravanserais included higher walls and towers much more regularly than caravanserais in other areas, providing higher security and integrated defence mechanisms. Construction of these caravanserais, by stone, bricks, clay, or other locally available materials, led to them having stable and heavy structures which were resilient to both weather and attacks (Volichenko et al., 2024, p. 28).

Each region along the Silk Road and beyond developed its own understanding of the caravanserai, with designs of the architectural form and ornamentation filtered through different geographic and cultural factors unique to the local region. This is reflected in the architectural conformation of the physical space and ornamentation presented. Areas with Muslim influence had distinctive attributes including arched entrances (in various shapes, depending on the prevailing style, such as trilobed during the Mamluk period in Egypt), domes, colonnaded halls and loggias, while East Asian caravanserais, are presumed to be more influenced by Chinese architectural practices (Moussa, 2026, p. 278; Volichenko et al., 2024, p. 28).

Regardless of regional differences in construction and space, however, inside the caravanserai did not feel as intimidating to its users as the outside would have; instead, the inside with its open public spaces, where visitors could engage in rest, conversation, and both commercial and cultural exchange, would have felt more like an inn – animals would be stabled within their own section, there would be a cooking area with an open fire, and if the caravanserai was large enough, there would be prayer areas (or an integrated prayer room) and a public bathhouse integrated within as well. This large-scale hub of public activity would be contrasted with the more private lodgings of staying merchants, usually placed on the second floor of the caravanserais (National Geographic Society, 2023). The meeting of these travellers, and their movement across many of these institutions as they travelled with their goods, facilitated and enhanced the commerce and culture of the region as a whole (Volichenko et al., 2024, p. 28).

1.1.4 Role Of Commercial Use In Historic Fabric

The historic significance of trade to the evolution of cities through time cannot be understated, as many cities' development can be tied to commercial use via markets and merchants. Indeed, markets were more than just places of trading, but also public hubs of life where people met, caught up with each other, public affairs and other events, and were entertained by travelling artists and musicians. The development of these cities, where they had historic cores founded upon these commercial needs were in much the same way caravanserais appeared along trading routes, responded in part to merchants' needs for accommodation, water facilities, storage, kiosks, shops, and other display areas, where taxation of these goods and further required fees contributed to the commercial growth of cities, which subsequently contributed to the physical growth of cities as diverse, metropolitan hubs. Their physical conformation as streets in the heart of the urban settlement surrounded by shops has roots in antiquity throughout the region, with significant "covered bazaar streets" (*bazaar* being the Persian equivalent term for *souq*), described in Asian and Arab cities, in many cases connecting the cities gates together in the cardinal directions (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Turkmenistan, 2001).

This centralised approach, where cities had commercial life at their core, is clear in the development of Historic Cairo, along the historic *Qasaba* (lit. "Sugarcane", a long, thin, stick-like plant similar to the shape of bamboo, but here meaning "Boulevard"). Originally hosting political and palace activities due to its proximity to the homes of the ruling class as *Bayn Al-Qasrayn* (lit. "between the two palaces"), the location was first used for ceremonial purposes, giving the centre of Cairo an almost holy sheen, to the point that visiting emissaries and ambassadors kissed the ground before stepping into the enclosed open-air spaces of the area. As noted by Raymond, historian Maqrizi noticed that movement of peoples near the palace was heavily regulated, particularly at night, where "fifty horsemen kept watch at night near the palace gate."; this meant that the axis would be closed at night by chains, only to open again for public use after dawn was called (1993/2000, pp. 53, 55). As Cairo grew and expanded beyond its beginning Fatimid boundaries, the *Qasaba* proved to be a lasting fixture in the city, always a hub of commercial and cultural activity, with the city always growing around it as a linear centre, as Raymond notes below:

The importance of economic functions in organizing the city is remarkably highlighted in Cairo by the Qasaba's enduring role as a central artery. Lying between the two palaces, the Great Avenue was conceived by the Fatimids as having a primarily political function but over the centuries became the center of Cairo's economic life. In the Ottoman period, the growth of economic activities devoured a portion of Qahira, as it were. The zone of religious and cultural activities, centered around the Mosque of al-Azhar but also around the great religious foundations of the Qasaba, was deeply embedded in the vast complex of commercial and artisan activities. (1993/2000, p. 251)



Figure 5. Bazaars of Silk Mercers, Cairo (located at el-Ghuri Complex); artwork by David Roberts, lithographed by Louis Haghe (1846–1849), digital image available via the Library of Congress.

The important contribution of David Robert’s artistic oeuvre as a visual representation of tangible heritage at the end of the 18th century and beginning of 19th century cannot be understated, as it highlighted the core of the contemporary Historic Cairo as a lively hub of commercial activity, and the role of such nodes as Al-Ghuri Complex (pictured in Fig. 5) in the city, the country, and the region of the Middle East. The urban life scene is represented in the space as between the two walls of the Sultan al-Ghuri complex, which remains roofed over till today. Used at the time as a market for silk traders, it also acted as a host for city-dwellers to gather, discuss, drink coffee, in parallel to working and trading goods.

Around the same period, other Orientalists were providing a visual documentation of Historic Cairo as a core of the city (Fig. 6). Western artists were fascinated by the area, as they considered local marketplaces to be bustling places of exotic architecture – an open courtyard of street life. However, as noted by Waly et al., “Orientalist paintings had reductive undertones, many of them painting similar scenes to flatten the image of major cities such as Cairo into simplified, profitable images.” (2022, pp. 88–89)



Figure 6. A selection of four significant Orientalist paintings of Historic Cairo from one of the best contemporary literary collections, circa 1800s, highlighting the vibrancy of the street life atmosphere, the movement of people on foot and by animals, and the colour of the buildings in the daytime (left to right by: Alberto Pasini, Frank Catano, Robert Talbot Kelly, Zacharie Charles Landelle), adapted from (Waly et al., 2022, pp. 88–89).

Therefore, an important point to remark on the Orientalist movement relates to the way the place has been decorated and interpreted by the artists as a simulation of reality. At the end, this movement communicated manipulated images which fit within the Western ideal of Eastern settings such as Cairo. Through the examples of Fig. 6 above, different scenes by different Orientalist artists present different scenes and different dynamics. As Waly et al. further note:

Some Orientalists simply named their paintings by the name of the subject city, that is why we find many paintings just named “Cairo”, and the scenes presented in such paintings are diverse, between streets, souqs, or city panoramas and skylines. Some paintings were given additional names by galleries when received to sell, in most cases by adding words such as “Oriental Portrait”, “Oriental Street”, “Oriental Scene”, etc. We cannot ignore this inclination; if it was

explicitly for marketing purposes by using terms which had gained admiration over the past two centuries, it also carried implicitly Orientalist goals of stereotyping the East and generalising traits on a heterogeneous group of countries, cultures, and even ethnicities, at the same time striving to gain the maximum benefit from an ignorant and backwards East. (2022, pp. 88–89)

Whether the attraction was to hubs of activity such as the *wekala-s*, or famous markets and *khan-s* such as Khan el-Khalili, which transcended their role as engines of trade and commerce as further centres of cultural exchange, authenticity in capturing this environment required looking beyond the fantastical, iconic image and understanding the atmosphere on a deeper level.



Figure 7. Pascal Sebah, *Magasin d’antiquités*, undated [c. 1881]. [The shop of antique dealer and cabinet-maker Gaspare Giuliana in Cairo]. Albumen print. 19.69 × 26.04 cm Minneapolis Institute of Art, 82.57.71. Gift of Charles Herman (Volait, 2021).

At the end of the 19th century, trade in the city evolved beyond remaining at certain points, to using the streets and their interfaces as shops and storefronts became commonplace. This can be seen in Fig. 7, where we highlight the work of the famous photographer Pascal Sebah (c.1881), where he captures the daily life of one such shopkeeper – the shop of antiquities dealer Gaspare Giuliana in Cairo, whose presence reflects the emerging trade of “old and new Eastern artifacts” (Volait, 2021). The shop offered “a random assortment of old and new handicrafts, mixed with folk art (such as appliqué textiles, known as *khayyāmiya*, and puppet figures)” (Volait, 2021), showing a continuity in the old and new handicrafts on offer since the origin of the Cairene *khan* in 969 C.E.

With the urban organisation of the city set by Gawhar El-Siqilli from the beginning of the city’s foundation during the Fatimid era, it is clear that the *Qasaba*, along with the *Shari al-Azam* (lit. “the Greatest Street”), were the north-south axis of Cairo at the time. This highway of sorts, which was widened several times through successive periods of Islamic rule (e.g., Mamluk, Ottoman, etc.), was intersected from the start by secondary streets leading to various military housing settlements in the Fatimid period; these camps and the spaces between them and the major axis would eventually grow to become the city’s various districts and neighbourhoods, allowing commercial use via businesses, shops, and caravanserais to permeate the city. By the middle to late Mamluk period, around the 15th century, these three commercial functions had overflowed into the neighbouring areas beyond this axis, and Cairo grew into a metropolis of its time, rich with commerce-based activation (Raymond, 1993/2000, pp. 54, 122). Maqrizi’s account details an economic centre of Cairo, a historic “central business district” collecting artisans, craftspeople, and businesses, where along the *Qasaba* he counts 48/87 (~55%) Cairene *souq-s*, and 44/58 (~76%) Cairene *wekala-s* or urban caravanserais. The number of *wekala-s* would increase exponentially over a relatively short time; by the Ottoman period, there would be 360 counted, an increase greater than seven-fold. Furthermore, the *Qasaba* itself had its surface area grow from 38 to 55 ha., an increase of almost half the surface area through approximately the same time (Raymond, 1993/2000, pp. 155, 218).

1.1.5 Introducing And Mapping The *Wekala-S* / *Wekalat* Of Cairo

Since Mamluk times, the function, architectural form, and urban placement of the *wekala* had not changed significantly. Whereas other public-use typologies had lost relevance or further usage by the Ottoman period, including the *funduq-s* and *qaysariyya-s*, the *wekala* name, most likely originating from the Arabic term *dar al-wekala* (lit. “house of the [depot] agency; depot hall), gained prominence as the name for Cairene caravanserais. Even more extraordinary, their typological formation had also remained the same – with storehouses on the ground floor, lodgings on the first floor, and residences above. However by this point in time, the population of Cairo’s traders and merchants, and craftspeople and artisans, had increased intensively; much of this population – almost 5% of those living in the late 18th century –

resided in Cairo's *wekala-s*. Due to the sheer number of *wekala-s* needed and constructed, they were built simply and without ornamentation, and located as described in Fig. 8 (Raymond, 1993/2000, pp. 158, 259, 270).

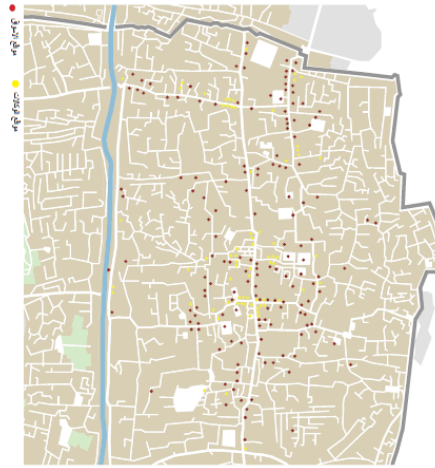


Figure 8. Left: Map of *Wekala-s* (in yellow) and *Souq-s* (in red) in Historic Cairo (Raymond & Wiet, 1979; Waly et al., 2022, pp. 231, 233).



Figure 9. *Vue de L'okel Zoulfiqar*, colour plate XLIV from Pascal Coste's "Architecture Arabe..." (Coste, 1839).

Sabil-Kuttab and Wekala of Dhu Al Fuqqar (Fig. 9), L-shaped space from here to the next corner belonged to the *wekala*, appeared in the Waqf of the Sultan MMua'yyad Sheikh, *wekala* may date back to the 15th century, now ruins, artwork is an extraction of the sense of the spatial image, in 18th century, it was one of the Cairo principal centres for the trade of coffee, which by the 17th century had taken the place of the spice trade", the ground floor was used as storerooms, second floor and third floor were used as apartments for traders, and the third floor *rab'* or tenements that provided permanent rooms for the workers at in the quarter; at the time it was built, it occupied a surface area of 2,625 m². (Caroline Williams, Chapter 11 – Al-Azhar Square to Bab al-Futuh and Back, pg. 213).

1.2 Status Of The Artifacts Today

Today, the *wekala-s* of Historic Cairo occupy vastly different realities within the urban fabric. While some continue to anchor local commercial life, others have been repackaged as cultural venues, tourist attractions, or private redevelopment projects. This fragmentation mirrors a larger morphological shift happening across historic cities: a steady move away from active production and exchange, toward consumption and display. Through this lens, the contemporary *wekala* reveals how historic typologies are continually overwritten by shifting economic and institutional agendas. We can read the current state of these structures by looking at the friction between their physical condition, economic role, and social vitality. The contrasts are often stark. Architectural survival, it turns out, does not guarantee social continuity. A *wekala* might be beautifully restored yet sit entirely disconnected from the daily life of the street, while another might be physically deteriorating but remain a vibrant, deeply embedded hub of local commerce.

To explore this dynamic, this study focuses on a cluster of *wekala*-s along and around the Muiz Street axis, a zone where the tension between heritage, tourism, and everyday life is highly concentrated. The selection includes Wekalet El Ghuri, Wekalet Qaitbey near Bab al-Nasr, Wekalet Qaitbey near al-Azhar, Wekalet Bazara'a, Wekalet El Shorbagy, and Wekalet Seliman Agha El Selehdar. Rather than attempting an exhaustive inventory, these cases were chosen as a comparative sample that captures a full spectrum of contemporary conditions: from formal cultural reuse and high-end redevelopment to informal appropriation and market continuity.

By reading these structures comparatively, a critical question emerges: does the *wekala* still operate as a genuine node of public life, or is it flattening into a detached image of heritage? Ultimately, this paper argues that the contemporary significance of the *Wekala* relies on far more than preserving its physical masonry. Its true value, and its future as a heritage typology, depends entirely on its spatial logic and its capacity to remain accessible, socially active, and economically integrated within Cairo's urban core.

2. Materials and Methods

How do we measure the transformation of a historic typology? This research steps away from purely monument-based documentation, adopting a qualitative approach that reads the *wekala* as a living spatial system. By combining historical reading, urban mapping, visual analysis, and field-based observation, the methodology traces how these structures negotiate their transition from medieval caravanserais to their contemporary, often contested, iterations.

Using the case studies established along the al-Muiz Street spine as listed in the introduction, the focus of this method is heavily comparative. The aim here is not for a comprehensive catalogue of Cairo's *wekala*-s; rather to use this specific sample as an analytical lens to decode the broader socio-spatial processes acting on the city.

To do this systematically, each case is interrogated through the same set of criteria:

- **Position:** Location and integration within the urban fabric
- **Status:** Typological legibility and physical condition
- **Interface:** Visual identity and public accessibility
- **Urban Social Life:** Current patterns of social use and economic activity

These shared metrics allow us to move past isolated architectural critiques and build the comparative matrix presented in the results section, directly mapping how different *wekala*-s survive, adapt, or disconnect from their urban context.

2.1 Historical and Typological Reading

Thus, research begins by situating the *wekala* within the broader commercial morphology of Historic Cairo. Unlike rural caravanserais built along isolated travel routes, the Cairene *wekala* was deeply embedded in the dense urban fabric. It was a courtyard-based infrastructure designed to negotiate between the chaos of the public *souq* and the controlled, secure environment needed for trade, storage, and lodging. By reviewing architectural history, archival data, and heritage studies, this stage establishes the *wekala*'s original spatial logic, its proximity to gates, mosques, and commercial axes, serving as a baseline to measure its contemporary transformation.

2.2 Urban Mapping

To understand how these structures operate today, mapping is used to physically and strategically locate the selected *wekalas* within the al-Muiz Street and Khan al-Khalili networks. This is not just a geographic exercise; it is a typomorphological reading. We observe different profile pedestrian flows, street edges, and internal-external relations to answer critical spatial questions: Is the *wekala* still anchored to active commercial life, or has it become an isolated island within the city? Does its original courtyard-and-gallery configuration remain legible despite its modern use?

2.3 Visual Perception Analysis

The *wekala* is not just a physical structure; it is an urban image that has been constantly reinterpreted. Because heritage is profoundly shaped by how it is seen, this stage traces the building's visual evolution across four distinct mediums:

- **Orientalist Paintings & Drawings:** Rather than treating these as factual documents, we read them for their "gaze." They reveal how Cairo's commercial spaces were historically framed for external audiences, emphasizing atmosphere, density, and the exoticism of the bustling courtyard.
- **Early Photography (19th & 20th Century):** While offering stronger documentary evidence of façades, commercial displays, and structural decay, these framed views still reflect specific antiquarian or colonial interests. They are crucial for showing the *wekala* when its architectural form and active commercial life were still inseparable.
- **Architectural Documentation:** Plans and elevations strip away the romanticism to reveal pure spatial organization, circulation, façade rhythms, and public-to-private sequencing. This helps isolate the stable typological elements from the shifting layers of use.
- **Contemporary Media:** Present-day photographs, street mapping, and tourist images capture the fragmented reality of the modern *wekala*. They reveal how the space is consumed today, whether as a sanitized heritage backdrop, a deteriorating informal market, or a high-end boutique investment.

2.4 Socio-Spatial and Economic Observation

Contemporary analysis is important in assessing each *wekala* across three dimensions: physical condition, social accessibility, and economic role in current time. We treat accessibility as the ultimate indicator of success. A building that is beautifully restored but locked behind gates offers limited value to the everyday city, while a deteriorating structure

that still hosts local trade remains socially vital. By observing who uses these spaces, and who is excluded, one can reach subliminal information about the local community and intended use of space. It is crucial whether contemporary reuse supports community life or simply serves a disconnected tourist economy.

2.5 Comparative Synthesis

Finally, the research synthesizes these observations into a comparative matrix. By evaluating the selected case studies against one another, recurring patterns and contradictions emerge. This approach allows us to map the distinct trajectories the *wekala* is taking today: from formal cultural reuse and high-end heritage rebranding, to informal commercial appropriation and complete closure. Ultimately, this comparative framework suggests that the survival of a heritage typology cannot be measured by physical preservation alone, but by its capacity to remain socially and economically embedded in the living city.

3. Analysis and Results

3.1 The *Wekala-s* of Historic Cairo

3.1.1 Point of View of the Research in Historic Cairo in the Present Time

The selected Cairene *wekala-s*, are all in close proximity to Muiz Street; as the historic *Qasaba* axis and before that the *Bayn al-Qasrayn* area, this arterial road's importance has already been explored in depth in section 1.1.4, and its gravitational pull attracted not only commercial activity and cultural life, it also had a steady presence of the Cairene urban caravanserai referred to as the *wekala*. The following *wekala-s* are selected based on their proximity to the main axis of Muiz St., and concurrently their presence as of the time of writing, as many of Cairo's *wekala-s* historically have not lasted tangibly to the present day. The chosen *wekala-s* present different dynamics which are observed in more detail above in section 3.4, and these dynamics have been categorised into three layers below: physical, social, and economic. By observing the ongoing physical state of the selected *wekala*, the study observes deeply the different states of closure, rebuilding, renovation, continued existence and use, repurposing, appropriation, and deterioration. The social layer observes the liveliness and use of the *wekala-s*, whether they are open for use or closed, whether they are lively, and how so (used primarily for economic activity, or cultural/artistic activity). The economic layer observes the presence of economic activity specifically, and which clientele are targeted in the *wekala's* use, whether they are specifically high-target clientele, informal users. The interconnectivity of each layer presents a complete picture of each *wekala*, where out of six significant *wekala-s* studied, three were found to continue to host public life, while the other three were either closed for renovation, repurposing, or otherwise closed to public use or visitation.

3.1.2 Urban Mapping of the Selected *Wekala-s* along the lifeline of Muiz St.

Fig. 9 below is our graphic representation of our selected cases for analysis of *wekala-s* in and around Muiz St., which present different characteristics, scale and dimension, and connection with the very crowded, attractive, and touristic spots in Historic Cairo. Our chosen elements respond to the aim of our research, which is to study the different socio-spatial dynamics through different visual sources through the time, and linked with the very general overview of our research. The aim of the research is not to classify everything, rather to see how *wekala-s* can be used today in the social fabric and as an interpretation of the contemporary cultural landscape. As the social fabric and cultural landscape are two interrelated layers of the city, especially in Cairo, this historical context presents an opportunity to study intangible heritage as another important key aspect to a complete interpretation of identity of the historical city (Domosh et al., 2026).

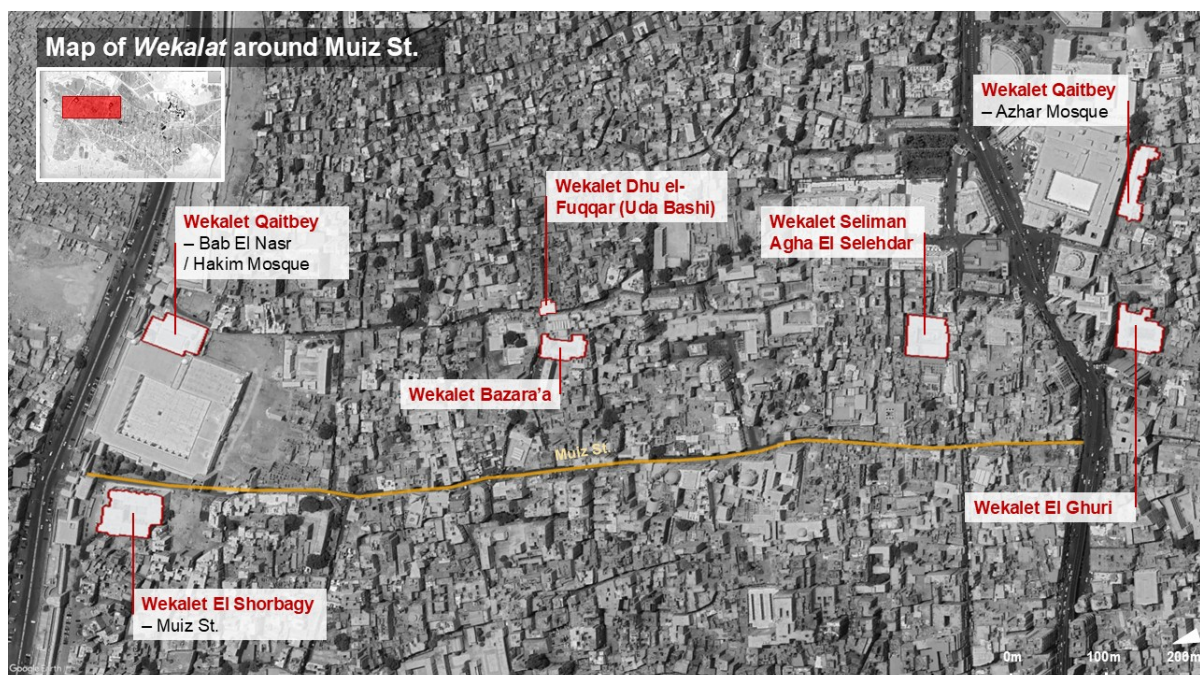


Figure 10. Map of *Wekalat* around Muiz St., overlay developed by authors over Maxar Technologies/Google Earth satellite imagery.

3.2 Visual Transformation Through Time

During the 20th century, the status and condition of some of our selected *wekala-s* in Historic Cairo showed the typical condition of neglect and abandonment. How these spaces became from very vibrant and active nodes of the commercial and socio-economic life of the city – such as the colourful interpretation presented by Orientalists in the 19th century – the figures below present a visual documentation of the transformation of the status of the *wekala-s* to one of neglect, abandonment, and deterioration through the last one-hundred years. This can be a typical process sometimes, as the *wekala-s* underwent the cycle before recognition, renovation, and rehabilitation in the case of Historic Cairo, particularly so because some of the buildings have since been demolished, destroyed or looted, while others have been significantly altered with restoration or rehabilitation (Fig. 10, Fig. 11). This is why in our research we included and considered photographic documentation as a precious part to the process of the interpretation of the value of these *wekala-s* through the time.

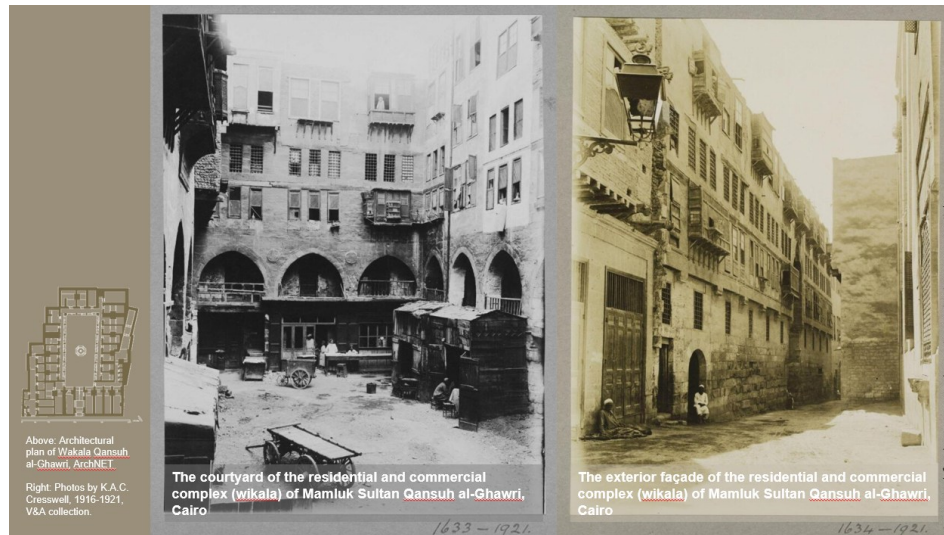
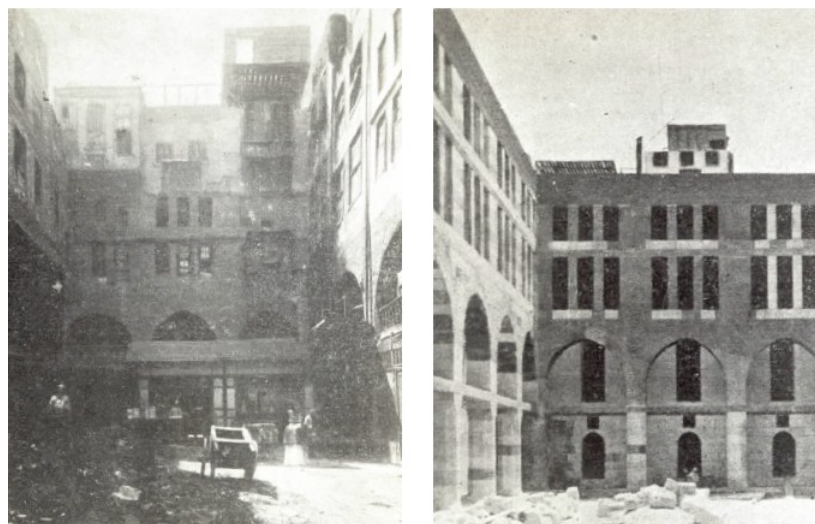


Figure 10. Composite by authors showcasing the state of the physical space of *Wekalet El Ghuri* ca. 1916-1921 (Cresswell, 1916–1921a, 1916–1921b).



could provide a ground for the clustering and organization of these meanings and associations. Such a sense of place in itself enhances every human activity that occurs there, and encourages the deposit of a memory trace.

— Kevin Lynch, *The Image of the City* (1960, p. 119)

Historic Cairo has remained a very attractive point for artists and photographers, and as another way to interpret the city, the written and illustrated work of Jim Antoniou is an important visual document which perceives the street life surrounding these monuments. His work promoted the area through sketches, plans, and maps to scale, enabling visitors to walk through the historic city, compare different monuments, and make sense of what they see. Along the route he marked as important to highlight the most significant landmarks of heritage, the work included *Wekalet* Qaitbey, where the quality of the façade was highlighted, along with the poor state of its use at the time in the 1990s as a tenement (Fig. 12). The value of this research generated attention, and attracted people to walk through Historic Cairo, perceive the area differently, and reconnect the community to the heritage and urban identity of this area.



Figure 12. Along with *Wekalet* Qaitbey (left), Antonio also remarked on *Wekalet* Dhu el-Fuqqar or Uda Bashi (right) as another landmark *wekala*, which dealt coffee and spices, and was one of the most significant commerce hubs in Ottoman Cairo. At the time of this publication in the late 20th century, this *wekala* was also in a poor condition; at his time of writing, only the façade remained intact (Antoniou, 1998/2002, pp. 39, 48).

Studying the area today, has shown different conditions and statuses of the artifacts of the *wekala*-s, in terms of the liveability, the quality, and the use and adaptation of the spaces assuming different configurations – becoming commercial spaces once more, or transforming into performing spaces or touristic services, such as hospitality. Anyways, curiously the *wekala*-s today are becoming social nodes again.

For example, *Wekalet* Seliman Agha El Selehdar has been reactivated through informal appropriation by local shopkeepers as a marketspace not too far from Khan el-Khalili (Fig. 13). This informal, bottom-up approach has not precluded the *wekala* from hosting commercial life as it would have done in the past, although there is still visible deterioration.



Figure 13. The informal nature of *Wekalet* Seliman Agha El Selehdar presents itself through appropriation of the ground floor storehouses' interface by shopkeepers, used to display their wares, much as it might have been when the *wekala* was created (El Abd, 2025a, 2025b).

For example, *Wekalet* El-Ghuri has been transformed today into a cultural centre and performance space, to revive special traditions of the culture through different forms of art (e.g., arts, music, dance, poetry and prose, etc.), such as Sufi dance, traditional music, or in special times of the year like Ramadan, particular performances like *tanoura* (Fig. 14).



Figure 14. A *tanoura* dance show taking place at *Wekalet* El-Ghuri (Egypt Time Travel, 2025).

In both cases, these are considered must-see attractions for classical tour operators and mass tourism, and at the same time they are becoming spots for alternative tourism initiatives in heritage and cultural landscapes to discover Historic Cairo such as urban photo walks and thematic walking tours on heritage.

4. Discussion

The comparative reading of the selected *wekals* confirms that the contemporary survival of a historic typology cannot be measured by physical conservation alone. Architectural preservation does not automatically generate social vitality. Instead, it is observed a profound uncoupling of form and function: while the *wekala* remains spatially recognizable within Historic Cairo, its social and economic roles have been drastically rewritten. A beautifully restored structure may sit completely disconnected from the rhythm of the street, while a physically deteriorating, informally appropriated space continues to pulse with local commerce. Ultimately, the *wekala*'s meaning is no longer static; it is constantly being negotiated between local life, the production of heritage imagery, and shifting market values.

Wekala Name	Physical Observations	Social Observations	Economic Observations
El Shorbagy	New project (boutique hotel)	Opening Soon, N/A	Active, targeting high clientele
Qaitbey North	Renovated with major changes	Closed, N/A	Pending
Bazara'a	Temporarily closed – limited information	Closed, N/A	Pending
Seliman Agha El Selehdar	Informally appropriated, deteriorating	Lively	Active, Informal commercial use
Qaitbey South	Relatively stable	Market	Active, Informal commercial use
El Ghuri	Renovated, formally used as arts centre (supported by gov't)	Lively, commercial, touristic	Active
Dhu el-Fuqqar (Uda Bashi)	Only façade remains intact	No interior space observed, N/A	No space for activity inside, Lively street outside

Figure 15. Comparative Matrix of Chosen *Wekala*-s, developed by authors.

4.1 Heritage Revaluation and the Changing Economy of the Wekala

Historically, the *Wekala* operated as a vital economic infrastructure. Its spatial logic, the central courtyard, controlled thresholds, and commercial edges, was a direct architectural response to a mercantile city. Today, economic logic still dictates the *Wekala*'s survival, but the *type* of economy has fundamentally changed. We are witnessing a decisive shift from trade-based urban infrastructure to heritage-based revaluation.

This revaluation is not a single, uniform process. At Wekalet El Ghuri, the historic courtyard has been repurposed for curated cultural consumption and performance. El Shorbagy points toward high-end boutique hospitality, turning heritage into an exclusive spatial commodity. Meanwhile, Seliman Agha El Selehdar and Qaitbey South demonstrate a stubborn commercial continuity, remaining anchored to local, everyday markets.

Because these forces state-led restoration, tourism, private investment, and informal survival overlap so unevenly, one must be careful when discussing gentrification. Without granular data on displacement and rent, it is more accurate to describe this process as *selective heritage revaluation*. What is undeniable, however, is the radical shift in the user profile. A space once defined by merchants, workers, and local trade networks is now increasingly populated by tourists, investors, and event spectators. While not inherently negative, this diversification fundamentally alters the publicness of the *Wekala*. Publicness is not simply a matter of open doors; it is defined by who feels entitled to use the space and how it serves the surrounding urban fabric.

Furthermore, in the context of a UNESCO-listed environment, heritage is increasingly consumed visually. Through cultural events, tourist itineraries, and digital circulation, the *wekala* is often flattened into a scenographic backdrop. This presents a critical challenge for Historic Cairo: if heritage recognition reduces a lived, working city to a visual spectacle, the deeper typological significance of the *wekala* is lost. Economic activation is absolutely necessary to save these structures from decay, but we must critically ask *what kind* of economic value is being produced, and *who* it ultimately serves.

4.2 Mechanisms of Transformation

Change in Historic Cairo does not happen linearly. The transformation of the *wekala* is driven by a series of overlapping mechanisms, each producing a different friction between physical form and social life:

- **Formal Restoration and Cultural Reuse:** While stabilizing the physical structure and elevating the building's visibility, restoration alone is insufficient. When adapted into cultural venues, these spaces can successfully reactivate heritage, but they risk shifting the courtyard from a node of everyday public life into a stage for event-based, visitor-oriented consumption.
- **Informal Appropriation:** Often occurring outside the boundaries of formal heritage planning, everyday practices by local shopkeepers keep the *wekala* socially and economically alive. The paradox here is clear: informal occupation may obscure the architectural purity of the building, yet it preserves the original commercial spirit of the typology far more effectively than a closed, sanitized restoration.
- **Market-Led Redevelopment:** When heritage is leveraged as an investment strategy, often for boutique hospitality, it brings crucial financial rehabilitation but inevitably introduces social filtering. The building is saved, but it ceases to function as shared urban infrastructure, becoming a branded, exclusive asset.
- **Closure and Suspension:** Perhaps the most damaging condition, structures that are closed pending intervention interrupt both physical and social continuity. An inaccessible courtyard becomes an empty heritage void, stripping the *wekala* of its role as an active urban interface.

Across all these mechanisms, the core issue remains the relationship between spatial configuration and human life. The *wekala* should not be evaluated through a simplistic binary of preservation versus decay. The reality is that an informal market may be physically compromised but socially robust, while a restored monument may be visually pristine but socially dead.

For future adaptive reuse strategies, this means the *wekala shall be treated* as a living socio-spatial system. The goal is not to freeze it in an imagined past, nor to surrender it entirely to the visual economy of tourism. The challenge is to preserve its fundamental capacity to host life ensuring that it remains a place of encounter, exchange, and spatial continuity within the evolving fabric of Historic Cairo.

5. Conclusions

After this journey through the time and space of the heritage of Historic Cairo, we can conclude some final reflections about these specific landmarks and artifacts in the city. It is important to note the value of the *wekala-s* as a part of the composition of the city, and the way this research studies the change of the image and transformation through the time underlines the change through the time of the perception and experience of the historical context, of which the visual documentation in different forms remains for further observation and study. Therefore, we can affirm that the identity of the *wekala*, created as a commercial space in the city, remains in the function and character nowadays; but along its history, the Cairene *wekala* has also been adapted and integrated according with the needs of the society, as urban transformation can occur in response to any urban challenges. This shows the capacity of this typology to remain a meaningful part of the urban dynamic through the time. If a city can be considered an ecosystem, the *wekala* is clearly an integral organism to this city's development; hence, it has remained resilient through the centuries.

As a final reflection, we can link with Kevin Lynch's theory on the Image of the City, where he presented five elements to decipher the identity of the city through its evolving image. Within this framework, *wekala-s* can act as both nodes and landmarks, capable of staying through uninterrupted continuous development.

Nothing is experienced by itself, but always in relation to its surroundings, the sequences of events leading up to it, the memory of past experiences... Every citizen has had long associations with some part of his city, and his image is soaked in memories and meanings.

— Kevin Lynch, *The Image of the City* (1960, p. 1)

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