It is an honor and a pleasure to be part a “Guest of BJ” at this Conference on her work, and to introduce her film on Cairo, a city in which we both spent many years, and which we both loved.

B.J. Fernea is primarily celebrated for her pioneer volumes on women and family in the Middle East. Thus a film entitled Living with the Past: Historic Cairo would seem a departure for her. But as with so many ideas and achievements in BJ’s life, this film, first shown in 2001, was ahead of the curve. She took topics – such as heritage, conservation, tourism, and socio-economic urban contexts – that up to 2000 in Cairo had been primarily discussion or action points for academics, institutions, and government ministries - and gave these topics a human face, one that an audience at large could readily appreciate and understand.

Cairo was first represented visually to the middle class of the Western world by 19th century artists. David Roberts came to Egypt in 1838 and was the first professional artist to make images of the Islamic monuments in Cairo. The film uses his image of the Bab Zuwayla. Here are the Ayyubid walls east of the Darb al-Ahmar as Roberts drew them. Other artists also depicted monuments along the street. These Orientalist artists specialized in scenes of everyday moments. They concentrated on aspects of the culture novel to the Western world, such as bazaar commerce, Muslim prayer and snake charmers. These images, wonderful in many ways, are also skewed and false, and have been severely criticized for their self-serving optic.

In her concern for the city and its people, BJ might seem to continue in film the work of the Orientalist artists, but instead of a colonialist portrait of Egypt, BJ’s vision is warmly human. She aimed for the honest and the real. She concentrated on the similarities and ties between East and West rather than on the strange or different. In the film, the outrage expressed by the Cairene resident over the flooded bedroom is also felt by the Western viewer.

While Historic Conservation was not her field, BJ quickly understood that at the beginning of the 2nd millennium the preservation practices of the international community were moving away from a concern with just the single major monument to the need to conserve its surrounding area. There was an acceptance that cultural heritage management, that is, the preservation of the monuments, was linked to the sustainable development of the people who lived around them. BJ took these relatively new conclusions and presented them in human, narrative terms.

The film’s starring role goes to the Darb al-Ahmar, the Red Road, a 1,000 year old artery around whose mile length half a million people share space with at least 15 major monuments whose age range from 1100 to 1850 AD. It is from this intertwining of monuments and people, and the decay of infrastructure that she creates her story: a story that is relevant on many levels.

The Darb al-Ahmar is the movie’s specific focus, but the contextual mix of stone grandeur and decaying living conditions is also characteristic of other neighborhoods of Historic Cairo, as well as other heritage cities of the Middle East. The film does an admirable job of advancing its twin argument: that monuments without their historical and social context become empty museums, while the people who are themselves one of the primary layers in the urban context must be given an upgrade to survive.
When funding for the filming had been approved, BJ asked me to give her an architectural and historic background on the Darb al Ahmar since I had been studying the Islamic monuments of Cairo since 1965. In February 2001 I spent three weeks in Cairo with BJ and Bob in the apartment they had rented on the West side of Zamalek overlooking the houseboats moored on what is called the little Nile. The apartment was on the 12th floor, with a living-dining room, spacious enough to accommodate the interesting and varied group of people who invariably dined with us: old friends and collaborators from the 1960’s, graduate students fulfilling their own Middle East careers, local intellectuals, institutional sponsors, community contacts and new devotees. While BJ was out doing her pre-movie-crew-arrival planning, Bob functioned as her invaluable aide-de-camp. He provided computer expertise, saw to all the things that went wrong with the apartment, procured cases of wine and beer, backstopped BJ when a male voice was needed, and even bought and arranged flowers. The Ferneas were an efficient team, and they knew how to make working with them lively and fun.

I had known BJ for 30 years as a friend but this was the first time I had seen her in action at a creative level, and I was deeply impressed by the functioning of her quick, agile, exploratory, retentive mind. I remember the day in February when we first walked down the Darb together. We started at the Citadel end and walked toward the Bab Zuwayla. I took my task as “heritage” consultant seriously, and with enthusiasm and explanations pointed out to her the noble buildings, the slender minarets, the needy marble decoration that lined the route----, but each time it was the human action on the street that caught her attention and imagination.

Even so, after a few walks, along the Darb al-Ahmar BJ soon felt overwhelmed by the material on restoration issues and problems. They were more than she could cope with since her main focus was to be on the living people in the area. She thus wisely outlines the story with three main monuments whose circumstances are told by three different agents of change: the restorer, the resident, the institution.

The first monument to appear is the Bab Zuwayla, the 11th century southern gate of the founding Fatimid city, and it is Nairy Hampikian the chief restorer who, while introducing some of its main restoration problems, with great animation, situates the structure as one layer of an on going historic-social development.

Next Hisham Mahmoud, brings to life the late 15th century Mamluk Complex of Qijmas al-Ishaqi further down the street. When it was built, this multi purpose religious endowment combined mosque, Koran school, water dispensary and tomb, and thus served the local community in several ways. Hisham, the cobbler, works in one of the many shops built into the façade of the mosque. Since the 12th century, shops have been part of the endowment, or waqf, of many Cairene mosques. Their rents helped pay for the upkeep of the mosque and the employment of its personnel. Thus, in addition to its religious and spiritual ties, the mosque was economically linked to the community. This intimate connection between the buildings and the community is movingly demonstrated by BJ’s focus on Hisham.

The last major monument to be introduced is the length of 12th century city walls at the southern end of Darb al-Ahmar discovered as a result of the excavations for the establishment of al-Azhar Park, the gift of the Aga Khan Cultural Trust, the last agent of change. What initially started as “a thirty acre park as a gift to Cairo” ended up as the most remarkable urban conservation and development project in the modern history of
the city. In describing the work and hopes of this new community outreach model/plan/action, BJ looks to the future and the encouraging possibilities that derive through microfinance, education and institutional concern.

*Living with the Past: Historic Cairo* is more than a film. It is also a book, on the verge of appearance which will be distributed by Washington University Press. The book contains 28 chapters. Sixteen of the chapters describe aspects of the Darb al-Ahmar in Egyptian History, while the remaining 12 chapters discuss its place in the 21st Century. Many of the chapters were written by participants featured in the film while others are by specialists in the field.

Finally, since the film was previewed in November, 2001 and we are now in October, 2009, I shall end with an update of images of the area taken two years.