

Life and Spatial Structure in Saqqara Village, a Settlement Adjacent to Archaeological Site (Vol. 3): Townscape and Living

Eriko OKA*, Yu FUKUMOTO**, Kanako NARUSE** and Sayo IMAI**

[Abstract]

This survey in Saqqara, which is the third year, was carried out to investigate the landscape resources, especially the beltway surrounding the old town in the Saqqara Village. The beltway in the Saqqara Village is elliptically curved and lined with various types of shops, new and old houses of more than 100 years old. Artistic and enchanting beauty is created here, with narrow alleyways leading from the beltway. Along the beltway, we often see traditional and original cultures, which attract the interests and curiosity of the visitors. Furthermore, mosques as well as tombs of heroes are scattered throughout the village. The native people, however, do not seem to appreciate the landscape resources, and we have confronted a difficult situation to provide them with incentives for conservation of landscape resources. Since this village is adjacent to archaeological sites, we like to propose to improve the urban infrastructure of Saqqara, reserving its original culture, and to introduce this place as an enchanting tourists' area.

1 The Objectives and Background of the Study

Saqqara, the most significant archeological site in Egypt, which features the Step Pyramid, among other pyramids, is located 17 km south of Egyptian capital of Cairo. The village closest to this site is an agricultural settlement, Saqqara, situated on the flood plain of the Nile River. Having established suburban agriculture, Saqqara Village is a large producer of various vegetables and fruits, which are delivered to Cairo. On the other hand, due to its vicinity to the capital, the people of Saqqara can simply take buses to go to work in Cairo, which has caused a shortage of farmers back in the village. Many people engage in tourism and excavation and restoration of ruins.

The Saqqara ruin site has attracted excellent scholars from European countries, including France and Japan, who are dedicated to excavating and restoring the ruins there. As many as 1,500 Saqqara villagers are hired to work there every day, mostly managing the ruins, selling local goods, and offering physical labor for excavation and restoration. The infrastructure in Saqqara Village is not properly maintained; there is drinking water, but no facilities for sewage water, which is currently collected by

* Faculty of Environmental and Urban Engineering, Kansai University, Japan

** Graduate School of Science and Technology, Kansai University, Japan

septic trucks and dispersed into the ground. In addition, although there are waste disposal facilities and each household is supposed to make a contract with agents to have them collect their waste, the locals, in reality, drop off their waste in riverbanks designated by the government authorities, who then remove the waste from these sites regularly. As a consequence, general waste, disposed building materials, and livestock waste are left on the streets, which is believed to elevate the street level by 10 cm every year.

This is our third study in Saqqara following the ones carried out in 2009 and 2010.

The study in 2009 revealed that 1) Saqqara is an oval-shaped settlement, surrounded by a street, 2) the beltway is lined with stores and wide enough for cars to pass; whereas inside the settlement are narrow allies, 3) outside the beltway are rigid-frame concrete houses with brick-walls, which are residences of the affluent population, who own cars and engage in jobs like tourism, and 4) there are townhouses designed for male-dominant, multiple-unit families.

In the 2010 research, we received support from the local government, who shared with us their planning map for the village. According to the hearing with the local government, 1) the area surrounded by the beltway is the old town, and outside the beltway is sprawl, which has developed recently, 2) the extent of population growth and suburban sprawl have become greater than expected, while the infrastructure in both cities, such as streets, sewage facilities, and waste disposal system, is underdeveloped, 3) the plateau of the old town is composed of community streets for public use and private streets that come to an end, and these two kinds of streets look almost identical to outsiders, 4) many houses in the old town are over a hundred years old, some of which are 1 m lower than the ground level, 5) households in the old town tend to move to the outside of the beltway as they become rich, which results in many abandoned houses and a high rate of aging population in the old town, 6) although many households in the old town engage in traditional agriculture and the raising of stock, there are also single, unemployed elderly people, who live by themselves, and low-income households, who can only afford to rent a room. These room renters, as our study this year found out, recently migrated to Saqqara from another village.

The objective of our study this year is to propose a vision for the future of the village of Saqqara, a settlement next to the ancient burial ground, which will be opened to foreign tourists. Promoting tourism in the village is expected to advance the upgrade of the infrastructure, including the streets and the sewage system. Research was conducted on the landscape resources around the beltway surrounding Saqqara Village in order to explore the possibility of developing tourism in the village and to explore the challenges that are most likely to arise.

2 The Space Structure of Saqqara Village and the Beltway

Our previous studies have shown that Saqqara Village is composed of an isolated old town, a beltway surrounding the old town, and the new urban area outside of the beltway. As pointed out by Hareedy (2011), this is a common structure of an Egyptian settlement on the bank of the Nile River, as is urban sprawl, where an urban area uncontrollably expands outside of a beltway.

We found in our study in 2009 that there are a variety of stores along the beltway, whereas no stores can be seen in the old town, as shown in our 2010 study. Therefore, the beltway is more open to public. The alleys in the old town, on the other hand, which can be a slope or steps if leading to the center of the oval plateau, are less than 4 m in width, which is wide enough for people to pass by each other, but not for cars to pass through. We also found in 2009 that some of these alleys are utilized for communal purposes, and other streets with dead ends at the residence are used for private purposes. Therefore, foreign tourists can walk rather freely along the beltway. We decided to investigate the landscape resources of Saqqara Village from the viewpoint of the beltway.

3 Landscape Resources in Saqqara Village

The landscape resources from the viewpoint of the beltway of Saqqara Village are 1) the beltway itself, 2) the alleys stretching from the beltway into the old town, 3) the mosques with a minaret in the old town, 4) old houses along the beltway, and 5) tombs. Each of these resources will be described in the following paragraphs.

3.1 The Beltway

The beltway surrounds the isolated old town. The width of the street is not consistent; some parts are wide, providing an open space, and some other parts are narrow because of the houses closely built across the street. Due to the constant curves, different landscapes appear one after another as people walk along, which is enjoyable. Some houses built across from each other have an upper structure that extends out and connects the two buildings, creating a tunnel-like space on the street. The beltway offers a great variety of landscapes.

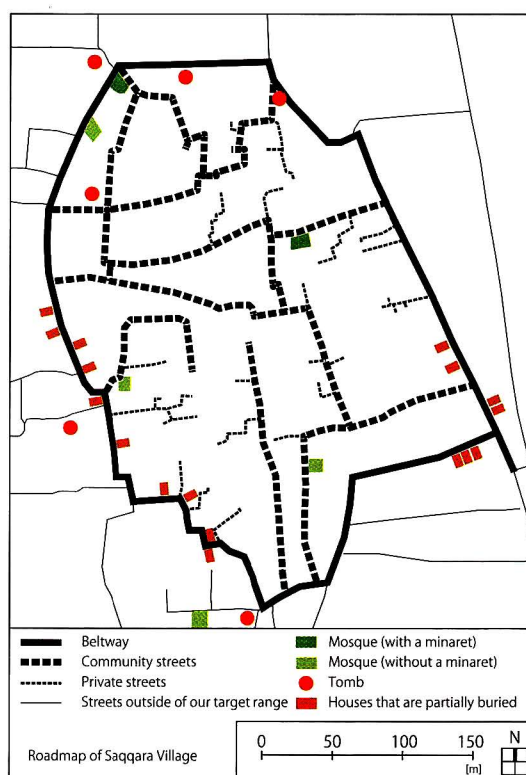


Fig. 1 Landscape resources in the old town of Saqqara Village

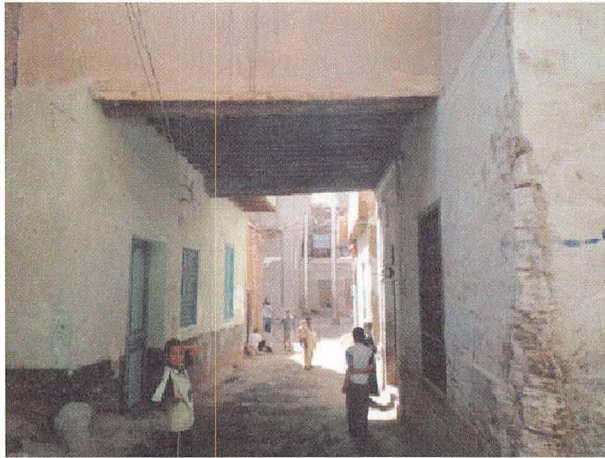


Fig. 2 A tunnel-shaped house on the beltway

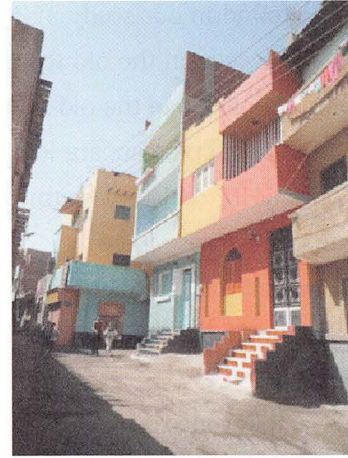
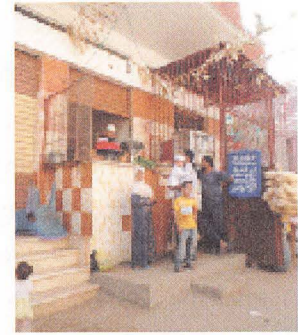
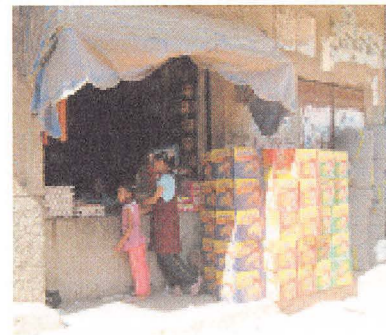
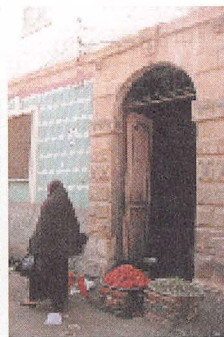
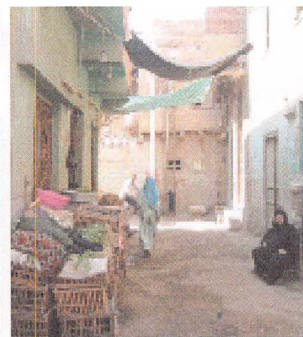


Fig. 3 Newly constructed colorful buildings

Some of the buildings along the beltway are over a hundred years old, and some houses outside of the beltway are colorfully painted. Some say that the streets in Saqqara Village go up by 10 cm every year. Although this may be exaggeration, it is true that the street level rises every year due to the fact that debris from the teardown of old houses is generally broken into smaller pieces and spread out onto the street. Because of the rising street, newer houses have a staircase outside the front door, which provides the beltway with another attractive landscape. Local people sit down and congregate on these staircases, or they display their products for sale. The older houses will be discussed later.



Items are hung under the eaves.



Items are displayed on the side of the street and at the front door of a house.

Some people have built a store counter in their house.

Fig. 4 Various types of stores along the beltway in Saqqara Village

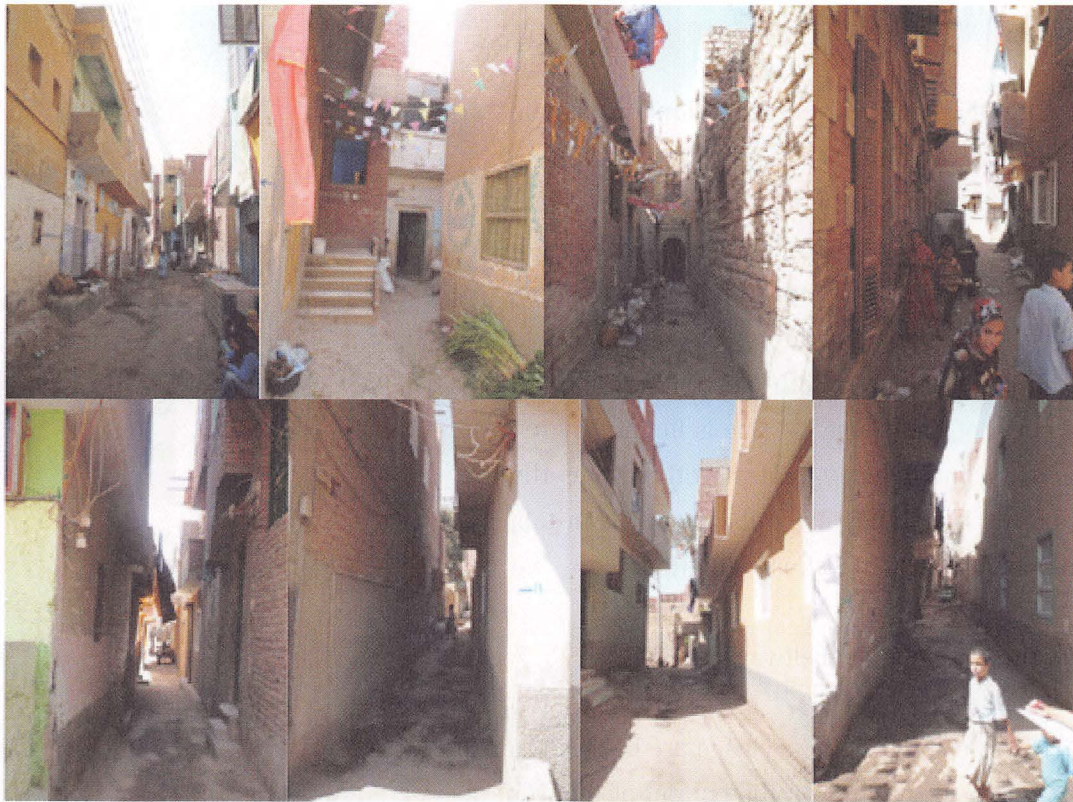


Fig. 5 Alleyways stretching from the beltway into the old town

The study in 2009 revealed that there are many stores along the beltway. Most of these stores sell daily goods for the local villagers. Some houses have a built-in store space on the first floor, and some have the first floor space converted into a store. Regardless of the presence of the above-mentioned staircase, many people use the space outside the front door or under the eaves to display their merchandise. According to the local government, it has been a trend, where house owners on the beltway rent out their first floor and the front door area to be used as a store space. Although a bit of a hindrance to cars and motorbikes, the open-concept stores in Saqqara, which stretch out even onto the middle of the street, create a lively and bustling atmosphere.

3.2 The Alleyways Stretching Out from the Beltway into the Old Town

A number of alleyways stretch out from the beltway into the old town and into the new urban area. The sight of these alleys that come into view as you walk along the beltway is quite fascinating; you might get a glimpse of people going about their daily life, children running around, or large animals like camels passing by. Many alleys are not too sunny due to the houses closely built across the street, creating shadows. The backs of the alleys, on the other hand, usually receive a lot of sunlight. Wondering what might be seen next makes the walk down these alleys an exciting one. These ascending alleys into the old town as well as the old buildings built on both sides are astounding.

3.3 Mosques and Minarets

One of the landscape attractions in Islamic cities, including Cairo, is the mosque minarets. A minaret is a tower attached to a mosque, in which the call to prayer is made. We learned that Saqqara Village has a number of mosques. We saw five, relatively large mosques along the beltway, two of which had a minaret. Both mosques are located in the north of the village — one is in an alley not too far from the beltway, and the other faces the beltway. Although they are only about 15 m tall, they do not fail to catch visitors' attention.

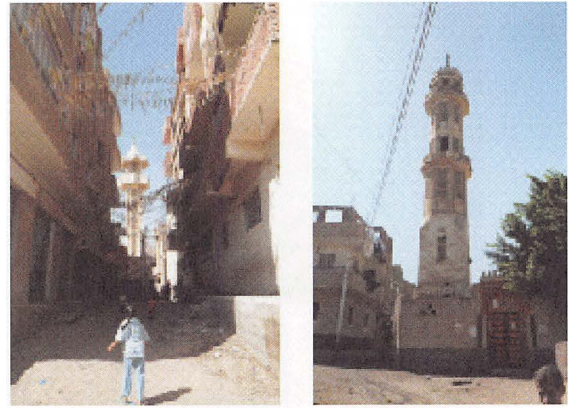


Fig. 6 Mosque minarets

3.4 Old Houses along the Beltway

The streets in Saqqara Village are believed to rise 10 cm every year. This can be seen in older houses where the casings on the bottom of the front doors are lower than the street level. Once you enter a house, the floor level may be even lower than the casing of the door. Fig. 7 shows examples of houses built along the beltway with their front door partially buried into the ground. These houses seem to have been built about 50 years ago, and some of them have beautiful wall reliefs. These houses are also fascinating to foreigners.

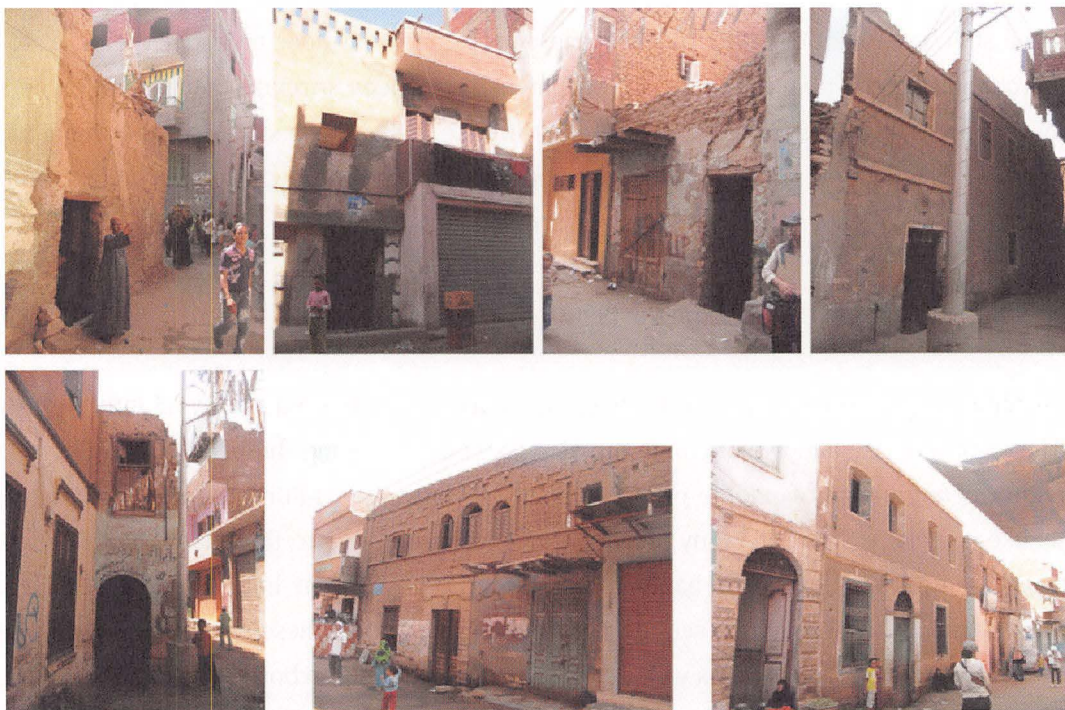
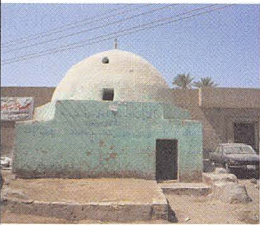
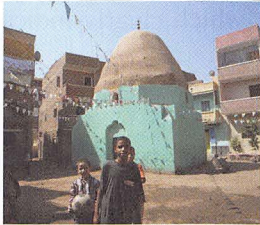
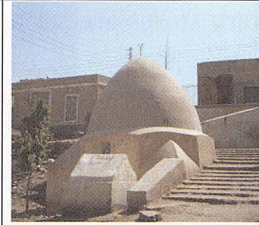
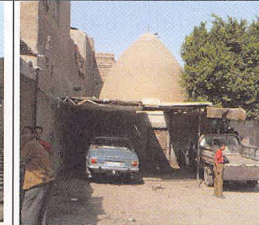


Fig. 7 Houses with their front door partially buried in the ground

For Egyptian men, building a house once they have a family is a sign of success. Therefore, staying in an old house for a long time is not necessarily considered ideal. Older houses are oftentimes homes for single elderly people and home-renters, which is probably why many old houses have been left empty. The increase of abandoned houses is seen as problematic by the local government, but the idea of preserving these houses due to their historic value is nonexistent among the government personnel and the villagers.

3.5 Tombs

There are eight tombs in Saqqara Village; six of them are located in open areas facing the beltway, one is toward the south end of the village, and the last tomb is in a square a few steps away

The name of the tomb	Tomb of Abbas	Tomb of Abdullah Mansari	Tomb of Hammad	Tomb of Hamzawi
				
Who is believed to be buried	A martyr	A martyr	A martyr	A martyr
The description of the site	There is a mosque attached to the tomb on the back. On the elevated area in the front, people have set up tents, under which they sell fruits.	It is diagonally situated in the middle of a square surrounded by houses. There is open space around. It is beautifully painted and obviously well taken care of.	It is a large tomb surrounded by waste that has accumulated over time. The grand building next to the tomb used to be a place where the Quran was taught to children, but it is no longer used.	It is a rather small tomb next to a bakery, situated in the corner of a street. The front door is closed.
Festivals	An annual festival takes place in July or August in the Islamic calendar. The Islamic principles are read out loud.	A three-day festival takes place on August 14 in the Islamic calendar, when the tomb is decorated. Locals serve food for visitors from outside of the village.	There are no festivals.	There have been no festivals since seven or eight years ago.

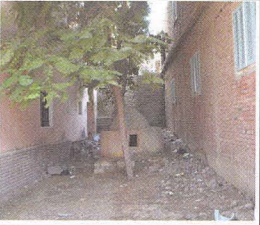
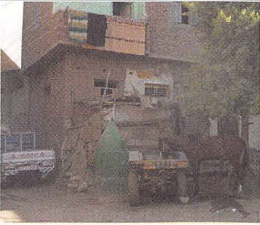
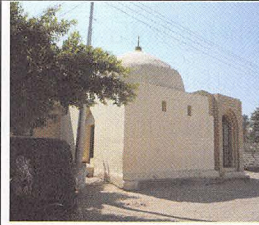

The name of the tomb	Tomb of Ibrahim	Tomb of Bider	Tomb of Sallam	Tomb of Batathy
				
Who is believed to be buried	A martyr	A soldier	A martyr	Unknown
The description of the site	It is a small tomb located in a narrow area surrounded by buildings. The locals do not speak of this tomb much. Waste is piling up both inside and outside of the tomb.	It is a small, nicely painted tomb. The open area around the tomb is used for festivals.	Located in southern Saqqara, this tomb next to a mosque is considered relatively new. It is large enough for a person to go inside. The coffin inside is neatly painted and well managed. Shoes must be taken off when entering this holy place. People come here for prayer.	Located at the south end of the old town, it is a little hill-like tomb.
Festivals	There are no festivals.	An annual festival takes place for local residents.	They have big festivals.	The name is known to the locals, but not its origin.

Table 1 Tombs in Saqqara Village

from the beltway. These tombs are all made of concrete, painted in colors, and come in different shapes. The size of the tombs varies; some are so short you can look down on them, and some are so big you can go inside of them. Each tomb characteristically has an open area around it and a tree right next to it.

We asked the local people the name and the origin of each tomb, and if there is a festival on site. Although people over fifty years old were more or less knowledgeable about the origin of each tomb, younger people were not as familiar with the tombs. We were able to find the origin of seven out of eight tombs. We learned the name of the last tomb, but no one in the village knew its origin. We were told that all of them were Muslim martyrs' tombs except for one, which is the tomb of a soldier who once saved the village. Festivals take place at four of the tombs, two of which are big and offer homemade meals served by the villagers. The other two festivals are Islamic festivals. At one tomb, there have not been any festivals for seven or eight years. As for the last tomb, waste piled up around it. Although there may be a festival, these tombs are now used more for day-to-day business, in which store stalls and temporary stores are set up, which clearly indicates that they are no longer a holy place cherished by the villagers.

4 Conclusion

The beltway in Saqqara Village offers a variety of landscape elements, including stores, old houses, and tombs, along which people enjoy strolling. Despite these ample resources that can attract foreign visitors interested in something traditional and indigenous, the younger generation who went to school after the Egyptian Revolution of 1952 is less interested and concerned about preserving their history and tradition. This echoes the way people in Saqqara see the magnificent, ancient burial site next door; to them it is merely a place for tourists and work, rather than a place through which they can learn about their ancestors, and thus, need to preserve.

Many villages on a flood plain of the Nile with a similar spatial structure to Saqqara's are undergoing changes; the population increase and introduction of cars into general households have resulted in the old city being hollowed out and urban sprawl spreading into the surrounding farms. However, the unique spatial structure of these villages and the fascinating landscapes created by the villagers going about their lives reflect the precious Egyptian style of living that is impossible to recreate.

Tourists are only steps away from Saqqara Village. Those visiting the Saqqara burial ground on a tour bus may not be interested in seeing the village life and landscape, but individual visitors to the burial ground or Memphis may find a detour to an Egyptian village interesting. Opening up a village to foreign visitors in a way they can immerse themselves in a unique village life and landscape will be important. Upgrading the infrastructure such as the sewage facilities, a necessary part of bringing in tourists to the village, will ultimately provide the villagers a better quality of life. A modern and uniform improvement on the infrastructure of Saqqara Village is bound to happen. The local government should understand the importance of maintaining the original spatial structure of

Saqqara Village for the future, and carry out the upgrade in a thoughtful way. The first step is for the government personnel and the villagers to realize that their ordinary landscape is actually something unique and fascinating.

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