

Cleaning...Egyptian Style

By Robert Kravitz

Recently, I took a trip to an area of the world I had always wanted to visit, Egypt. Like many people, whenever documentaries about Egypt's pyramids, tombs, and temples are shown on television, I am glued to the TV, amazed at how these giant and meticulously built edifices could have been constructed thousands of years ago. Many Egyptologist and construction experts are still stymied to this day at how these structures could have been built without the computers and construction equipment we have today.

However, having spent virtually all of my adult life in the cleaning business—owner of three contract cleaning companies and now a writer for the industry—I could not help but notice how many of Egypt's



facilities, such as hotels and public as well as private buildings, are cleaned. We traveled to three of Egypt's major cities—Cairo, Aswan, and Luxor—and in each I discovered

something noteworthy about how facilities are maintained in Egypt.

Although there were many similarities to the ways facilities are cleaned in the States, I soon discovered there were also many differences. The differences often centered on the quality of service provided in different facilities, the equipment used, and the professionalism of the cleaning workers.

Overall Impression

Ancient Egyptians were fastidious about cleanliness and it appears this fastidiousness has been passed on for thousands of years. Home cooking areas were usually kept very clean, as were toilet facilities, whether in the home or shared with others.

They washed their bodies regularly, especially before meals, which is part of the Semitic (Moslem and Jewish) tradition. Perfumed oils were regularly applied to the skin after bathing for both men and women. Both sexes, but especially women, took extra steps to make sure their hair was washed regularly and anointed with oils and fragrances.

This focus on cleanliness is visible by the way many of Egypt's buildings and cities look today. For example, even though it has more than 20 million people, Cairo is an amazingly clean city. This is also true of Aswan and Luxor, which are much smaller with populations under 400,000, as well as many of the other places we visited.

However, I did notice differences in how various areas of our hotel were cleaned, differences that I found throughout Egypt. This taught me a lot about how Egyptians view

groups of people and the cleaning provided to particular groups.

For instance, in Cairo we stayed in a hotel that has two 25-story towers. One is less expensive, about 30 years old, and its interior, carpets, and furnishings have changed very little in that time. The other is about five years old, much more expensive and luxurious, with all the amenities expected of a first-class hotel.

In the old tower, the rooms were not only old but also not that well maintained. There was “dirt,” for lack of a better



word, on the bathroom’s floor. I also noticed little things such as switch plates and telephones had not been cleaned or cleaned well in a very long

time. (This is a big concern to visitors because “foreign” germs and bacteria can be easily spread from soiled switch plates and telephones).

The carpets in corners and behind doors needed a detail vacuuming—all of which told me the rooms in the older tower were getting a “hit and miss” cleaning. Additionally, the housekeepers, which are all male since Moslem countries frown on females working, were not that friendly or professional in appearance or in the way they performed their duties.

However, in the new luxurious tower, the rooms were spotless. The cleaning crew wore uniforms similar to what waiters might wear in an upscale restaurant. They were also very friendly and service oriented. As an example, I dropped a bracelet made of stones in the shower that broke into little pieces. The housekeepers just happened to be in the hall as I was leaving so I mentioned it to them. Immediately, they dropped everything to clean not only the shower but also the entire bathroom top to bottom before me.

Possibly the disparity between the two towers is because in Egypt, as in much of the world, there is a big distinction between first class and second or third class. First class gets the attention and a much higher quality of service and service worker; the other classes just get a “quick once over.” I found this to be true in other public facilities as well.

Cleaning Equipment

In many parts of Cairo and throughout Egypt, it is common to see cleaning workers using a *ma'asha*, a broom with two- to three-foot-long bristles that curve at the bottom. Instead of sweeping back and forth or side to side, workers use the *ma'asha* as many cleaning workers in the United States are taught to use a backpack vacuum cleaner, employing rounded movements as they walked forward. Usually the *ma'asha* is used outdoors to sweep sidewalks and common areas, but it is also used in large public facilities such as airports and train stations.

What might come as a surprise to many U.S. cleaning workers is that upright vacuum cleaners are rarely used in Egypt. In fact, I cannot remember seeing either an upright or a backpack machine anywhere.

Instead, canister vacuums in all shapes and sizes are very common, not only in Egypt but throughout much of the Mid-East and Europe. I know of no explanation for this except that possibly, because Egypt was once a British Colony and because canisters are commonly used throughout England, it is a custom that has been passed on and continued over the decades.

As with many U.S. hotels, the common areas of our hotel were contracted out to a private cleaning contractor. Their main cleaning task was to clean and polish the marble hard-surface lobby and walkway floors and stairs every night. Most of the floor equipment used was comparable, if a little older, to what one might see in the States.

However, one thing stood out: in most instances, the floor machines used were far too small for some of the tasks they were required to perform. Instead of ride-on or walk-behind equipment or rotary machines with 20-inch or larger pads, most of the machines were only 13- and 17-inch models. The reason for this may simply be that wages for most jobs in Egypt, including cleaning, are very low and larger cleaning equipment is very expensive. Even though it takes more time, effort, and expense to use a floor machine that is far too small for the task at hand, because the cost of labor is so low and the machines so expensive, it may not be worth the added expense of selecting a larger and more costly machine.

Professionalism of the Cleaning Worker

As already discussed, I did notice a big difference between the cleaning workers and their professionalism in the first-class hotel tower as opposed to the older tower. We saw this as well at the famous Egyptian Museum. The floors in most of the first-floor common areas were not well maintained and

the displays were dusty. However, to visit some areas of the museum, visitors must pay a rather hefty entrance fee. In these areas, the displays and floors were much cleaner and well maintained.

Watching the contract cleaning crews working in two of the hotels we stayed in was very impressive—and revealing. The best way to describe it is that it looked like a military operation. The cleaning workers were the privates and the full-time supervisors were the lieutenant generals. In the Cairo hotel, whenever the supervisor barked an order, and he barked often, the workers would stop whatever they were doing and stand at attention. The supervisor at another hotel we stayed in was not as commanding, but it appeared the same military pecking order between the workers and the supervisor was present here as well.

Throughout Egypt, I rarely saw any building, private or public, that I would call “dirty.” Their heritage as a people concerned about the importance of cleanliness is obvious. This is not to say that everything was fastidious for I did venture into one rather poor neighborhood in Luxor with many outdoor groceries and butcher shops that was disturbingly grimy. But taken as a whole, most observers would probably agree that the cleanliness of buildings is considered very important.

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