

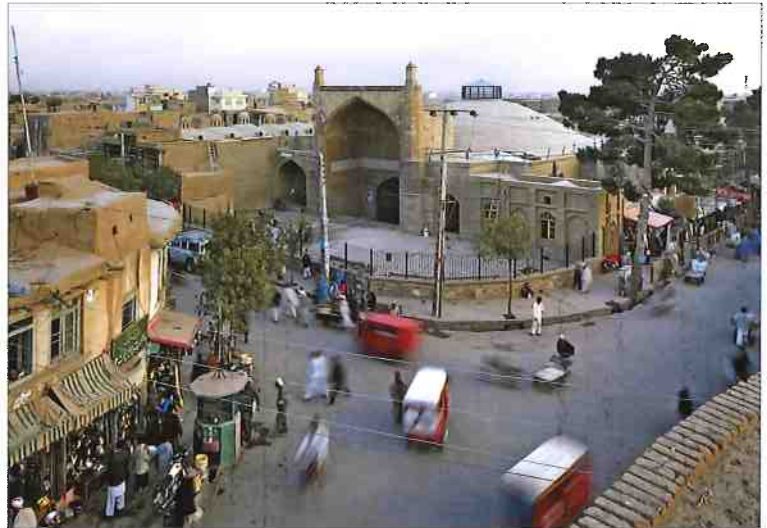
## Urban Conservation in the City of Herat

Aga Khan Trust for Culture – Afghanistan

SINCE ITS ORIGINS as an outpost of the Achaemenid Empire, the city of Herat has had a turbulent history, demonstrated by the repeated strengthening of the Qala-e Ikhtyaruddin Citadel and the building of a walled settlement by the Ghaznavids. Situated at the crossroads of regional trade and in a rich and irrigated agricultural area, the region has long been a prize for successive invaders. Herat became a centre for Islamic culture and learning during the reign of Timur, whose successors commissioned several monumental buildings, but it later fell into decline under the Mughals. Considered part of Persia during the Safavid era in the eighteenth century, it was not until 1863 that Herat was incorporated into the emerging Afghan state.

The distinctive rectilinear layout of the city was delineated by massive earth walls that protected the bazaars and residential quarters that lay within. These walls defined the extent of the city until the middle of the twentieth century, when administrative buildings were constructed outside the walls to the north-east. The historic quarters were still home to some 60,000 people when unrest broke out in 1979, resulting in the depopulation of the western quarters of the city. Traditional buildings fell into disrepair or collapsed, and infrastructure was looted or damaged. It was not until 1992 that the clearance of mines and unexploded ordnance began, enabling families to resettle in the war-affected historic quarters and begin the process of rebuilding.

As a result of a rapid increase in the city's population since 2002, pressure on the central residential neighbourhoods has intensified, even though the state of the infrastructure and the few public facilities have resulted in poor living conditions for most inhabitants. In many cases, returnee families who had become accustomed to modern dwellings while in exile have demolished their traditional homes and in the absence of building controls have built incongruous concrete structures, dozens of



which now rise above the skyline of the Old City. Residential areas that adjoin the main roads are rapidly being commercialized, with the construction of multi-storey 'markets' that have had both an environmental and a visual impact on the historic fabric.

In order to address these transformations and in partnership with the local authorities and the Afghan Ministry of Information and Culture, since 2005 the Aga Khan Trust for Culture's (AKTC) programme in Herat has involved activities for documentation and building conservation and upgrading in parallel with measures to strengthen the capacity of and the co-ordination between key institutions. Given the pace of change, one of the first priorities was to map the historic fabric and establish systems for monitoring demolitions and new construction. The prime focus of the conservation work, supported by the Governments of Germany, the United States, and Norway and through the Prince Claus Fund, has been on two clusters of the historic fabric extending across the Bar Durrani and Abdullah Mesri quarters, where activities have been carried out to

**Fig.1** | The Char Suq cistern complex was restored by AKTC as part of an urban conservation programme supported by the German Government.

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**Fig. 2** | Conservation and structural consolidation work was undertaken on the Abdullah Ansari Shrine Complex in Gazurgah with funding from the German Government. The work ensured the safeguarding of one of the most important religious sites in Herat.  
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**Fig. 3** | Restoration work on the Qala-e Ikhtyaruddin Citadel in Herat was carried out by AKTC from 2008 to 2011 with support from the Ambassadors Fund for Cultural Preservation of the US Embassy.  
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conserve key public buildings – mosques, cisterns and bazaars – as well as historic houses.

A system of small-scale grants and building advice has also been established aimed at enabling some fifty owners of traditional homes to undertake basic repairs, and this has resulted in improved living conditions while at the same time protecting the integrity of the historic fabric. As well as safeguarding historic property, the projects have provided a platform for the training of traditional craftsmen, while also demonstrating the potential of conservation and adaptive re-use in a context where there is a growing tendency to demolish historic property and redevelop.

However, the upgrading of infrastructure is also critical to the future of the Old City of Herat. In order to contribute to the improvement of the inhabitants' living conditions, nearly 5km of underground and surface drains have been repaired or rebuilt, and more than 6,000 square metres of pedestrian alleyways and streets paved to facilitate access through the historic fabric. Together with the building conservation work, since 2005 this has generated more than 240,000 workdays of skilled and unskilled labour, largely drawn from residents of the Old City. Such investment has directly benefited at least half of the population of the Old City, prompting community-implemented improvements in some quarters that were not covered under the AKTC's urban conservation programme.

Aside from the physical challenges facing the historic fabric and the need for additional investment to render the Old City more habitable, the issue of the management of the urban environment is now more critical than ever. The AKTC has provided technical assistance to a Commission for the Safeguarding and Development of the Old City of Herat comprising representatives from key institutions and professional bodies. While some progress has been made in involving the communities themselves in the safeguarding of historic property, the absence of effective leadership has handicapped these initiatives.

The challenge for the AKTC programme has been to find a balance between meeting often urgent conservation needs, while at the same time addressing poor living conditions and simultaneously strengthening institutional capacity. This requires work at a variety of levels: with central government in Kabul to promote administrative reform and accountability; with local government to promote the rule of law, effective co-ordination and basic professional standards; among the wider Afghan professional community to raise awareness and build partnerships; among community representatives to assist in the implementation of rehabilitation work; and among donors and international organizations to draw attention to the threats posed to the fragile historic fabric of the Old City of Herat. ■