REHABILITATION OF ASILAH

ASILAH, MOROCCO

Client: Local Population and Municipality of Asilah.
Patrons: Al-Mouhit Cultural Association (Mohammed Benaissa and Mohammed Melebi, founding members),
Asilah. Completion date: 1978 and ongoing

The town of Asilah is strategically located on the shores of the Atlantic Ocean, on the north-western tip of Morocco. It lies forty-two kilometres south-east of Tangiers in fairly flat countryside. It is an old town with walls and ramparts dating to the Portuguese occupation of Asilah, when it was used as a trading post. There is a natural harbour on the north-west side of the town. Inside the walls, the town follows the pattern of most old Arab medinas in the Mediterranean area, with courtyard houses lining the narrow alleyways. Some Spanish influence is evident on the facades of the houses especially in the style of the balconies.

The project began after the return of Mohammed Benaissa to this, his home town, in 1968. He had been absent for twenty years. He bought a house in Asilah, renovated it, and began to live in it. The town, by all accounts, was a mess. It was filthy, the removal and disposal of the town’s garbage was inadequate, and the streets were not paved. Asilah had no pharmacy or doctor, and the electricity lines and water mains were insufficient and out of date. Electric cables had been installed by the Spaniards in 1926.

To improve his town, Mohammed Benaissa and his friend Mohammed Melebi, a painter and the President of the Moroccan Painters Association, decided to run for office. As soon as they were elected to the Municipal Council they initiated a study on the state of the town’s cleanliness. They discovered that the eleven garbage collectors with their donkeys spent most of their time knocking on people’s doors and asking people to give them their garbage. As there was no money in the Municipal coffers to change the system, they decided that the inhabitants of the town had to be involved, and made to participate in its improvement. Residents were asked to put their garbage outside their houses, ready for collection; this they did. It was from this humble beginning that the rehabilitation of Asilah started.

The next step was to improve the external appearance of the town. As both patrons of the project were involved in the world of art and culture they invited their artist friends to come and paint some walls in the town. In 1978 eleven painters accepted and participated in this exercise. Children helped, and they too were incorporated into maintaining the ‘beauty’ and the cleanliness of the town by competitions, prizes and gifts which were given to those who showed the most promise. Older people were also involved, and within a
short space of time the whole population of the town was activated. The next move was to convince the Town Council to pave the streets, and rather than have the normal plain paving, Mohammed Melehi developed an artistic pattern of curved lines forming a series of waves. His reasoning was that the children of the town should have something beautiful to contemplate and walk on. These designs were adopted, and carried out.

With this successfully behind them, the two patrons decided that they should organise an annual summer art festival. It was named 'Asilah's Cultural Festival' and an association, The Al-Mouhit Cultural Association, was established to organise it. No sooner were these associations founded than they immediately clashed with investors who were interested in building tourist hotels and complexes and encouraging an 'International Festival' to bring the tourists to Asilah. Benaïssa strongly opposed this policy as intrusive and disruptive of the cultural integrity of Asilah. The conflict became a national one, and initiated a debate on the extent that a society should be willing to go to generate income from tourism. Benaïssa insisted all along that any project that did not include the local people’s full participation, and which did not generate an income for them, would not benefit the town. Only the foreign investors and their local backers would benefit from such a project. The role of the local population would be relegated to that of photographers’ models. Under combined pressure from the media and local population, the touristic hotel project failed to get a start.

Benaïssa transformed the festival into a musin, or season, thus relating it to religious and cultural activities of the town. The Spanish Government gave the Raissouni Palace to the project, and Benaïssa restored it for use as the festival’s headquarters. Participants of the festival were also to be housed in the palace. In 1978 the first group of writers, thinkers and painters were invited for the inaugural summer of cultural activities in Asilah. The following year the King gave his blessing to the project, and officially asked the government agencies concerned to help Asilah. In 1983 Benaïssa became the President of the Municipal Council of Asilah, with Mohammed Melehi as his assistant.

The main objective of the project was the renovation and rehabilitation of the town of Asilah. This was to be funded by the cultural activities of the festival which were to be aimed at a Moroccan audience. The festival would also generate work and income for the local population. By providing the labour force or producing the materials, the people and the children of Asilah were made to actively participate in all aspects of their town’s development. The project’s hope for the future was that pride in their self-reliance would motivate the people of Asilah to become responsible for the upkeep, the general well-being, and future improvements of their town.

The improvement and extension of infrastructure including running water, sewerage and electricity was one of the many functional requirements of the new town, as was the restoration and rehabilitation of historical buildings such as the
Portuguese fortifications, the Kamra Tower and the Raissouni Palace (early twentieth century). The construction of new houses within the old city were to replace those beyond salvation, while the public spaces were to be re-arranged for commercial activities, such as a market place. A new port was to be created and decorative pavings and murals designed by local artists were to be introduced.

The rehabilitation programme also included the transformation of the Raissouni Palace to accommodate art studios, workshops for children, laboratories and a hall for cultural gatherings; the building of the Hassan II exhibition centre and the creation of an open-air theatre within the old Portuguese walls, a hall for film shows, and an exhibition space for the plastic arts.

The campaign began by calling on all professional, educated people, and their relatives who had property in Asilah to renovate it, keeping within the traditional methods and modes. This call was answered with great enthusiasm by the local house owners as well as by Moroccan intellectuals and artists from elsewhere. Even expatriate Moroccans came flocking to Asilah to buy, and to renovate. As a result construction in Asilah has almost doubled during the last decade, already resulting, according to Benaïssa, in the renovation of about sixty per cent of Asilah's buildings. Official town records show that ten to fifteen dwellings are renovated each year, and this in a town that only comprises twelve hundred houses within its old walls.

Asilah's growth has been very tightly controlled. No hotel complexes or resort areas are allowed; the town prefers and wants to re-use the existing physical environment by restoring and upgrading it. Since 1981 the Al-Mouhit Cultural Association has annually renovated the sanitary facilities of ten houses belonging to poor people. Each house costs MDH 940 (US $1 = MDH 8.24) to improve. In summer the owners can rent out their houses to visitors or tourists for about MDH 2-3,000 per month while they stay with relatives.

New houses in Asilah are now built of reinforced concrete columns and beams although some use load-bearing brick walls and partitions. There are also load-bearing stone walls. Reinforced, hollow tiles are used for the floors of new buildings. Concrete and hollow bricks are the most common materials used for walls, while the facades are generally rendered with cement covered with a lime wash. The finishing can include cedar woodwork, as well as traditional ceramic tiles (zelj). Marble and other expensive materials are rare. These new houses are built in plots left empty after the demolition of the original old houses. They frequently integrate elements salvaged from the ruins — doorways, window frames and arches are the most popular elements collected.

Most of the renovation and restoration work has been carried out by local master masons and workers using traditional construction methods and materials. The technology is fairly simple as the town does not possess skilled labourers.
The project started in 1978 and is ongoing; the total cost is therefore unknown. However, the town's budget increased from MDH 1,800,000 before 1978 to 10,900,000 in 1989. This gives some idea of the costs since the increase includes all the maintenance costs of the town plus the salaries of the employees. The town is continuously looking for external money to help with the restoration process. For example, the Portuguese Government financed some of the renovation work on the old town, and Shell Oil company gave the town two hundred garbage barrels.

The whole town of Asilah has benefited from its rehabilitation. In 1982 the population of the town was eighteen thousand; today it may be as high as twenty-five thousand, out of which only four to five thousand inhabit the old town. The average income per family was less than US $50 a month in the 1970s; today it is approximately US $140. Most of the town's people are quite proud of Asilah, and of the fact that during the last decade it has become well known to all of Morocco and even internationally, especially after winning the Aga Khan Award. They are pleased and feel lucky that they have better water, electricity, and sewage systems than before, and a telephone network that works. On the other hand they feel intimidated by the summer cultural activities, and say they are too sophisticated for them, 'above their level' in the words of a local inhabitant. Other complaints range from the costly price of the festival tickets, to dislike of the wave patterns of the murals, or even to the un-Islamic aspects of some of the cultural events, and the loss of their beaches through the building of a new port. These first charges are refuted by the Town Council who say that they distribute six hundred (out of two thousand) tickets free of charge to those who really cannot afford to buy them.

The most serious charge against the project seems to be that presented by many of the poorer residents of the old town who say that they have been forced to move out because of the high costs of upkeep demanded of them for their old houses. The land value was five MDH per square metre prior to the creation of the summer festival, and no one was buying. Now the land values have risen sharply and people are benefiting by selling their houses, or selling small plots within their property to help restore the rest. Benissa defends the ideas and policies of the Association by saying 'we changed the people's income without changing their behaviour, preserving the origin of the soul while developing the appearance'. He also states that Al-Mouhit gives financial aid to help those who cannot afford the renovation of their property. However, typically, and as in other developing countries, the people of Asilah, especially the young, do not want to dirty their hands. They want to have an office job or work in a leather factory, emulating what they think is the bourgeois European thing to do. They do not want to accept manual jobs.

Each summer Asilah is inundated with thousands of tourists and visitors, 150,000 of them. They stay in the hotels and rent the houses, they eat in the restaurants, and boost the...
commercial activities by buying the local crafts. A multitude of services are generated by this yearly invasion, of which the local people are the chief beneficiaries. During these summer months they accumulate the resources that help them to survive for the rest of the year when the economy is moribund, and the people fall back on their old ways. For a few months each year the town, its municipality and people are dragged out of their lethargy by the remarkable vision of Benissa, Melhi and their friends.

By providing the infrastructure, a sound economic basis, the necessary know-how, and the professional knowledge and good sense of its members, the Al-Mouhit Cultural Association hopes to keep on helping and educating the people, especially the youth of the town. Today, the town is clean, its streets are paved and electricity and telephones work. Even though the problem with the sewage has not been completely resolved, the plans for upgrading it are there.

However, danger is still present in the shape of the speculators and builders who keep up the pressure on the people to sell. They want to take advantage of the unique situation of the town to build new houses, to change and modernise the town, in fact to urbanise it. That, of course, would destroy Asilah. It is, therefore, of the utmost importance that an urban rehabilitation plan for Asilah be made by a specialised team. This plan would then have to be accepted by all parties concerned, including the town and the Ministry of Awqaf, and then placed under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Interior. Without an official policy the town of Asilah could easily lapse into the same nightmarish scenario that has afflicted and destroyed so many scenic spots on the Mediterranean. Tourism can bring great economic benefits to an area. It can also just as easily destroy, killing the goose that lays the golden egg. It has to be carefully regulated and controlled.

The horseshoe arch, which is identified with the Magreb, is echoed throughout public and private spaces; OPPOSITE, FROM ABOVE: The combination of a hot, dry climate most of the year, and proximity to the ocean means that there are frequently spectacular sunsets at Asilah, with pinkish-red hues transforming the relative severity of white walls.