
Master Jury's Citation: For a noteworthy attempt to deal with the problem of urban public housing in a sensitive and humane fashion. The Hafsia quarter represents a considerable effort in achieving the scale of the old medina, sensitively inserting new "infill" housing into the urban tissue of the medina. The use of the covered suq as a device for linking the two parts of the medina separated by the demolished quarter, while simultaneously screening off the large-scale buildings from the new development, is also excellent.

On the other hand, the project is surely flawed: physically in its detailing and execution, socioeconomically in its inability to cater to the needs of the lower-income residents of the medina. Yet such shortcomings are not unexpected in a first attempt by the Tunisian authorities in dealing differently with the problems of urban housing in the medina. Subsequent phases of the program will build upon the experience gained in this first step of a continuing search for culturally sensitive and economically viable design solutions.

Objectives. The reconstruction of the Hafsia quarter is the first large-scale renovation project of its kind in an Islamic country. The aim of the project was to reconstruct a residential and commercial sector of the medina of Tunis that would maintain the character of the old city and at the same time provide suitable housing for the poor from neighboring areas.

Historical Background. Located east of the central area of the medina, the Hafsia is the former Jewish quarter of Tunis. During the colonial period its original inhabitants began to desert this sector for newer European areas. In 1928 the French authorities declared the Hafsia quarter a health hazard and between 1933 and 1939 many of its buildings were demolished. Further destruction occurred with the bombing of the site during the Second World War. While some construction did take

Pages 84–87: Reconstruction of the Hafsia quarter in the medina of Tunis, with contiguous courtyard houses separated by winding alleys, is a milestone on the road to a more appropriate urban architecture. At the same time, white walls with small shuttered openings continue the local tradition.
place in the years following the war, renewed demolition oc­
curred during the 1960s and a population of poor immigrants
settled into the remaining derelict houses, causing overcrowd­
ing and further decline.

Site. The site of the Hafsia quarter is almost flat, with a very
gentle slope of 1 in 100. It is somewhat protected from the
northern and western rain-laden winds by the topography of
the medina. The soil is a mixture of clay and limestone, with
the water table lying 1 to 1.5 meters below the ground.

Local Architectural Character. The architecture of the area
surrounding the Hafsia is traditionally characterized by court­
yard houses and narrow winding alleys. Its aesthetic and his­
torical value, however, is not as high as that in other parts of
the city, and it is also less well maintained.

The modern buildings bordering the site include three 4-
story apartment buildings, a market, two schools, a children's
club, and a recently completed social club.

1: The plan shows the snaking form of the Suq el-Hout with the
eleven house types, mixed to avoid monotony. 2, 3, 4, 5: As the
section and views indicate, the suq is of the traditional vaulted form.
The aerial view (3) shows the low, spreading nature of the de­
velopment in contrast with the other, adjacent modern buildings.

Access. The former Suq el-Hout, a pedestrian route running
north-south, has been severed by a straight east-west vehicular
avenue linking the modern quarters of Tunis to Achour Street
through Bab Carthagena. This avenue had already attracted
development west of the suq (market) in the form of tall,
modern apartment blocks.

Brief. The brief focused on the reconstruction of the Suq el-
Hout with about a hundred shops. Its structural frame was
designed to allow for flexibility in the allocation and size of
shops. A further twenty-two shops were to be constructed ad­
jacent to the dwellings and facing a pedestrian street, with
private offices for professionals provided above them. Ninety­
five housing units were also planned, some with central court­
yards and others with only a garden or terrace.

The brief as well as the design concepts were elaborated
by the Association de Sauvegarde de la Médina (A.S.M.).
The functional requirements of the quarter were defined by
the A.S.M.'s multidisciplinary team after a survey of the
neighboring population's needs. The survey included detailed
studies of the income levels and social backgrounds of the fu­
ture inhabitants, their requirements regarding the internal or­
ganization of dwellings, and a commercial report on the shops
needed outside the suq.

Existing pedestrian routes were to be continued, with the
An examination of 900 applications clarified the requirements of potential inhabitants even further. These included a preference for a quiet housing area, separated from the noisy commercial district and throughways; independent housing units with private entrances; and courtyard houses with the internal circulation protected from winter weather, with the reception area and living room near the entrance, and with the kitchen and more private area toward the back. Since some of the requests were contradictory, they could be satisfied only through the provision of several different types of houses. Each type was defined by its floor area and by the inhabitants’ income level as well as their needs and aspirations.

The nature of the shops outside the suq was also decided by a survey. The shops were to include a restaurant, a café, a laundry, a barbershop, a shoe-repair shop, and a photographer’s studio. Offices for lawyers, dentists, and other professionals would be placed on the floor above.

Design. The politicians as well as some local and foreign architects and planners would have preferred a high-rise solution following the then-prevailing Western models. Despite their opposition and despite the abandonment of rehabilitation plans for neighboring areas, the design was developed according to the guidelines set by the A.S.M.

The politicians insisted, however, on attaching greater prestige to the operation by eliminating the poorest applicants. This meant that the housing standards had to be raised during the course of the project. Eleven house types were defined, ranging in area from 60 to 163 square meters, and assembled in different configurations. The four main types were courtyard houses on one level, courtyard houses on two levels, row houses with individual enclosed gardens, and row houses built adjacent
to the suq. None of the courtyards overlooks the interior of the house.

The units were standardized to facilitate the design and implementation of the project, but the types were mixed so as to avoid repetition and monotony. A few special house types such as bridge houses spanning the pedestrian street were also included. Certain traditional architectural concepts were retained, such as white walls contrasting with colored openings and a small window set just above the exterior doorway to light the interior.

Structure. The housing units and shops were built with a post-and-beam structure (because of the water table) while the suq was designed with a concrete frame supporting concrete vaults. In general in situ concrete was used for structural members and brick for the exterior walls and internal partitions. The floors were constructed of brick filler blocks covered with concrete and paved with terrazzo tiles. Exterior walls were rendered and painted.

Assessment. The buildings integrate well with the old city, and the quarter is not easily identifiable in a rooftop view of the medina. The scale, shapes, and colors are also discreet when viewed from the preexisting traditional streets to the north. Unfortunately a substantial amount of abandoned land, especially to the south, still surrounds the new housing.

Anticipating the possibility of such changes by homeowners as the external addition of rooms or roof terraces, the architects provided a certain flexibility in their plans and overdesigned to accommodate such additional loads. The transition to these houses is gradual, starting from the fully public external areas, through the internal semipublic streets and squares and semiprivate gardens, to the fully private house areas. The irregular layout and the bridge houses provide a variety of views and even more a degree of formal complexity. The orientation of the gardens of the L-shaped houses protects them against rain-laden winds from the north and west, while the courtyards of the other houses are naturally sheltered.

As for utilities, the project was due to be connected to city gas mains at the end of 1983. Although electrical and telephone cables were initially buried below the street, anarchic connections have proliferated along the walls and across the streets.

There is a variety of shops along the length of the Suk el-Hout differing in size, length, width, height, orientation, and lighting. The suq also serves as a barrier separating the new residential area from the existing tall apartment blocks and the large-scale facilities to the west. The specialization intended for the other shops did not materialize, and many of them sell cheap clothing. Unfortunately the provision of offices was a failure, and most have been converted to dwellings or storage areas. The commercial life of the quarter nevertheless is quite vigorous.

Conclusion. Before its reconstruction the Hafsia was socially a relatively undesirable living area, and most of its current inhabitants would have preferred to live in a villa in one of the city’s suburbs. Yet the comparatively low cost of the quarter and its location near the city center were attractive incentives, as were speculative motives in certain cases. Only a few of the inhabitants chose to live in the reconstructed quarter for its aesthetic qualities.

The first objective of the project, that of maintaining a harmonious relationship with the existing urban morphology, has been largely attained. The second one, of providing appropriate housing for the poor from neighboring areas, has been almost a complete failure because the houses were allocated according to income and solvency rather than need or previous residence in the area. Consequently only the wealthiest members of the neighboring communities could afford the quarter. A majority of the buyers came from areas outside the medina and belonged to more affluent social sectors.

By 1978, one year after completion, 80 per cent of the wealthier inhabitants had already modified the plans of their houses, eliminating or adding partitions, moving entrance, kitchen, or closet doors, and rearranging storage areas. Also

6: A typical window with shutters. 7: The ground- and second-floor plan of the row houses. 8: The living room of one of the wealthier inhabitants. Political pressure eliminated the poorest applicants and allowed a high-income group to modify house plans.
16 per cent of the units had been subdivided into smaller independent units, either by the poorer inhabitants to generate additional income or by wealthier landlords for speculation. Furthermore 25 per cent of the residents had undertaken extensions involving up to three additional rooms, and 31 per cent of the units were shared by two or three households.

These modifications to the original plans generated problems. Although the architects had made allowances for some alterations, half the additions made were not anticipated and caused friction between neighbors over sunlight, ventilation, and views. In some respects, however, these extensions and modifications help to make the project a living neighborhood rather than a frozen monumental design.

The reconstruction of the Hafsia quarter, while architecturally unspectacular, demonstrates the will of the Tunisian authorities to check the gradual destruction of the medina. In 1975 the medina had 140,000 inhabitants and 15,000 dwellings covering an area of 270 hectares. The scale of the problems of the medina are immense and have led to the consideration of several renovation projects following Hafsia. One, known as Hafsia 2, has been officially adopted by the Tunisian authorities with financial support from the World Bank. There is every evidence that lessons have been learned from the first phase, especially at the socioeconomic level, and that the same mistakes will not be repeated in the Hafsia 2 project. This evidence can be found principally in the new renovation concepts and principles that the project embraces:

1) "Integrated" projects. All architectural, urban, demographic, socioeconomic, and employment data should be simultaneously taken into consideration.

2) User participation. Financial and institutional incentives should be given to private owners to undertake rehabilitation.

3) "Urban continuity." Renovation areas should not adjoin derelict areas but should be entirely surrounded by rehabilitation zones.

4) "Social solidarity." In order to displace as few as possible of the urban poor already living in the neighborhood, the incoming, more affluent inhabitants should pay a higher share of the costs.

5) Replicability. To ensure the spread of the rehabilitation projects to the rest of the medina, appropriate funding and agencies should be set up and cost recovery of expenses should be as high as possible.

The Hafsia 2 project combines the sale of properties to private developers with the cross subsidization of rehabilitation loans for the deteriorated residential structures. It meets the needs of the urban poor and at the same time shows a respectable economic rate of return on invested funds.