

"A Viewpoint"

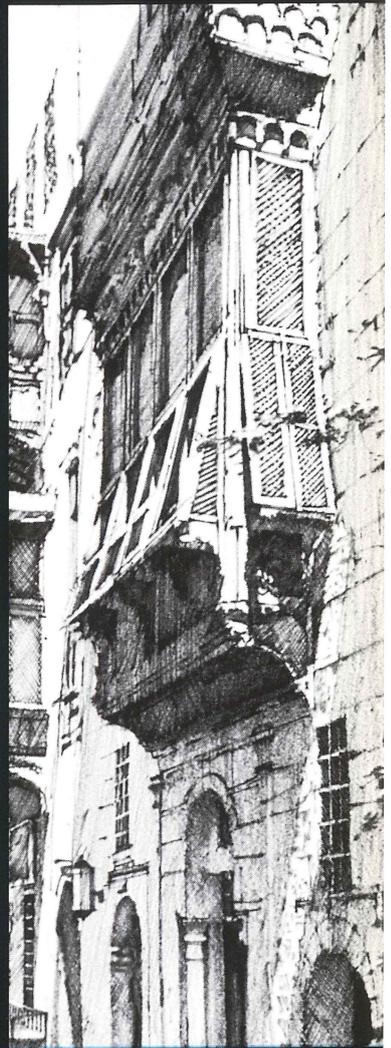
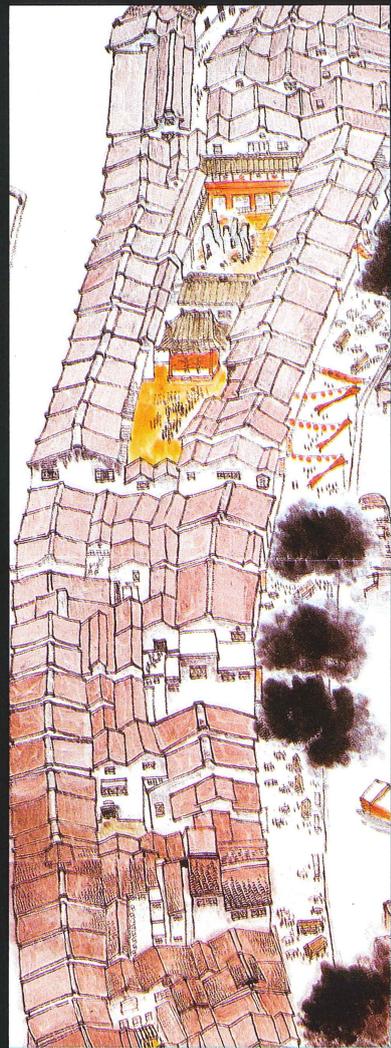
The yearning to bridge the past and the present is an appeal from the heart in which buildings of the past are perceived as being the manifestations of a particular culture. The past, in so far as it lays the foundation for future architectures, is of great importance in assisting us to understand our own cultures. Even though present and future environments are MIMAR'S main concern we recognise the need to achieve a complementarity between the past, present and future. To achieve this complementarity requires great care especially in understanding *what* role can be played by professionals and the skills required for the tasks at hand. In recent years there has been a great deal of interest in conservation — UNESCO in conjunction with national governments has supported the restoration of major monuments: Mohenjadaró, Borobudur and Abu Simbel — and appeals to "save" the old cities of Lahore, Fez and Cairo, among others, have been launched. Unfortunately these efforts are not seen in the context of development, but viewed as special elements within the process of urbanisation.

Conserving old buildings and neighbourhoods is important for maintaining continuity, but in the rapidly modernising societies of the Third World conservation is often equated with conservatism — as looking back and not as looking forward. This view of regarding conservation as isolated projects removes the

building processes away from their real economic and cultural basis. I believe that conservation is important (especially of historically important structures) but even more so is the *adaptive reuse* of buildings and neighbourhoods. I would suggest that it is not sufficient simply to restore a building, but to restore, readapt and reuse structures within their particular context — in an order ascending from interior to exterior, from facade to street, from street to street furniture and from street to neighbourhood. In Developing Countries this approach should also be tied to policy planning; overall urban or village land-use, and the practicability of any action plan, given the available financial and technical resources.

Finally, the adaptive reuse of our cities must be part of an organic process integrated into the normal physical planning activities of governments and local bodies. It should relate to the man in the street — the user of such spaces — and involve the community, without which it will never be able to be maintained. And above all, adapted older environments should be compatible with contemporary ways of living and with the changes that are taking place if such buildings and areas are to be more than just museums or monuments to the past and are to have some meaning for the future.

Hasan-Uddin Khan



Aleppo: A struggle for conservation



On the night of September 28, 1983, 250 people, including speakers from fourteen nations, gathered in the courtyard of an ordinary Arb house in the Bayyadah quarter of the old city of Aleppo *intra muros*, for a concert of traditional Arab music. The event was part of the International Symposium for the Conservation of the Old City of Aleppo, held during the last week of September.

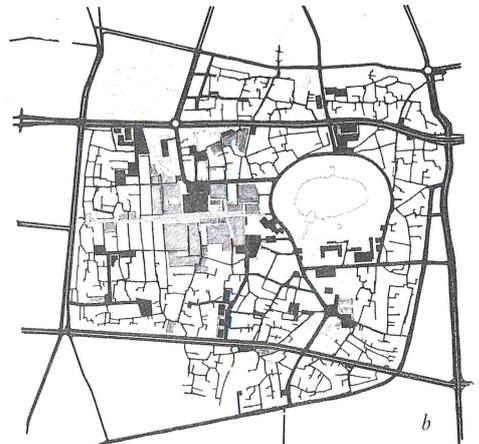
This particular house and a few hundred others in this quarter would have been subject to demolition to make way for a thirty-metre wide street, called for in the 1974 Master Plan, drawn up for the Municipality by Gyoji Banshoya, a Japanese planner. In fact, two-thirds of the east-west relief road, along with the north-south axis leading to the Great Mosque, has been executed, leading to the destruction of a very large portion of

Farefrah and Bandarah, which were the richest and best preserved residential quarters of the old city. The remaining portions of these quarters were isolated and surrounded by multi-storey blocks on both sides of the new roads.

The Symposium was the culmination of years of effort by the conservationists to save the traditional fabric and cause the abandonment of the Master Plan. The house in Bayyadah remained naturally tucked into its preserved neighbourhood, dominated by the powerful presence of the ancient citadel nearby.

Aleppo possibly owes its existence on this particular site to two natural elements — a small water source, the Kuweik River, and a natural *tell* for defence. Historians differ about the date the

Below: Bahram Pasha Mosque surrounded by the organic fabric of the old city with the covered souks of the Madinah in the foreground.



Text by **Adli Qudsi**.
Photographs by
Dr. Ihsan Chiite.

Aleppo intra muros: a) Existing network for vehicular and pedestrian movement around and inside the walled city.

b) Vehicular traffic network proposed by the Masterplan of G. Banshoya. Source: UNESCO report.



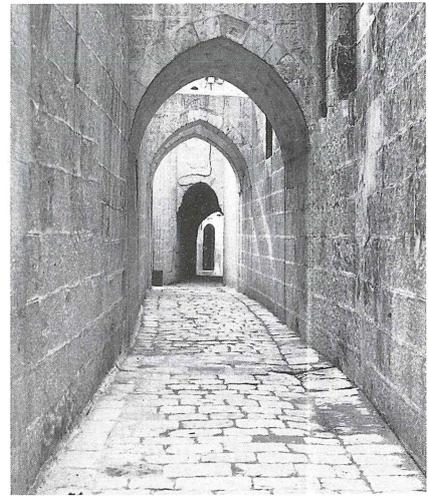
tell became a fortification, but it was well before the Seleucid period (3rd century B.C.). Although the city increased in importance during this period, acquiring the gridiron street pattern apparent in the Medina's commercial centre of today, it experienced its strongest architectural and artistic prominence during the Ayyubid period of the 12th and 13th centuries. Important mosques, *madrassas* and *bimarestans* were constructed. The citadel acquired higher walls, new towers, a majestic entrance, and a throne room and a royal palace within.

Aleppo lost a great deal of its political importance during the Mamluke and Ottoman periods, but many prominent monuments were constructed nevertheless. In the 16th and 17th centuries Aleppo reached the peak of its commercial importance. It was the third largest city in the Ottoman Empire and commanded an outstanding position in east-west trade.

The Levant Company and the British Factory were set up in Aleppo in the 16th century. The French and Italians

established a large commercial presence shortly after. The residential districts continued to expand within the walls and broke out into new suburbs. The largest and best preserved suburb, Jdeideh, sprang up north of the walled city and became the Christian quarter. Today it still contains the most beautiful houses in Aleppo.

In the Master Plan, Jdeideh was also endangered by the continuation of the north-south road axis and by the widening of most of its major alleys. In 1980, a UNESCO report, dealing with the problems of the old city as a whole, devoted a full chapter to Jdeideh. The report, entitled "The Conservation of the Old City of Aleppo", was prepared by a team of experts, headed by the well-known Swiss planner, Stefano Bianca; and included Jean-Claude David, the French geographer and historian who worked in Aleppo under the auspices of the French Institute of Arab Studies and who offered all his documents and immense knowledge of Aleppo's history and buildings to the project.

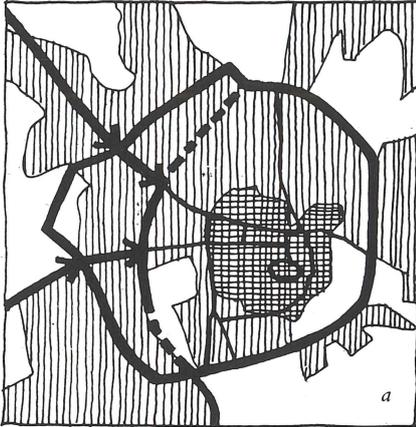


Left: Aleppo, the majestic entrance of the citadel.
Above: A tortuous alley in Jdeideh.

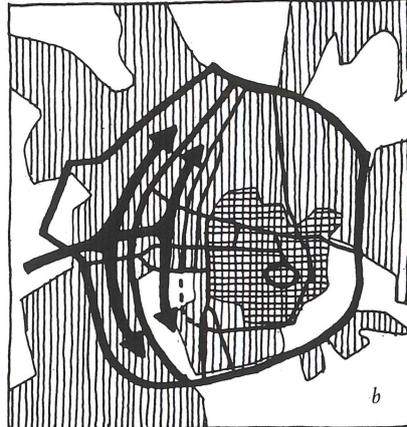
The report's alternative plan for Jdeideh advocated the abandonment of the north-south road axis and its connections, and called instead for a policy of service zones located in the badly dilapidated sections on the fringes of the neighbourhood. New construction in the service zones would strictly adhere to building codes designed to keep it in total harmony with the existing fabric, while providing the suburb with the needed public services, such as schools, shopping and parking. This plan has now been adopted in its entirety by the new city administration.

The UNESCO report dealt primarily with the problem resulting from the clash between the drive for modernisation and the desire for conservation. The relative obscurity of Aleppo since the 18th century, due to the loss of its commercial importance, culminating with the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, has helped preserve the old city. The increased contact with the West, and the establishment of the first western-style municipality in 1868, led at the end of the 19th century to the growth of Aziziah, Jamiliah, and Ismailia, districts to the west and north-west of the old city. The Ottoman administration transformed the moat round the city walls into a major street, linking the walled city with its suburbs and destroyed most of the walls in the process.

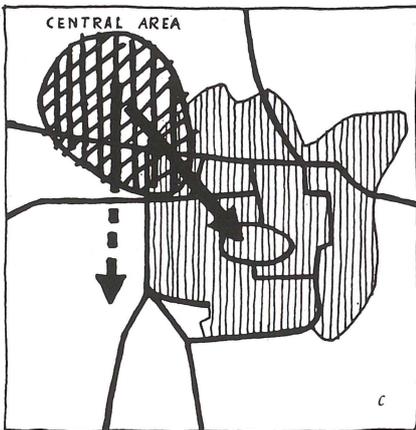
The first town-planning schemes were produced under the French administration by R. Danger and M. Ecochard in the 1930's. They proposed new areas which would have imposed a street grid cutting through the old city.



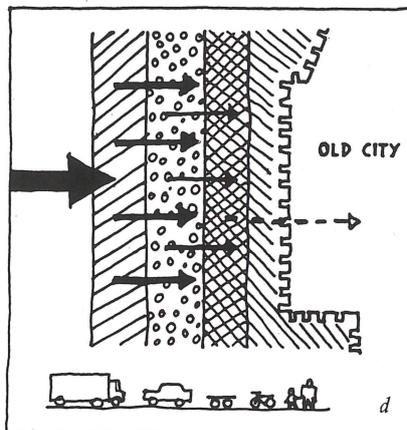
UNESCO Report 1980 — Recommended scheme
a) Improve existing ringroads for maximum use as protective device to shield old city from traffic.



b) Improve north-south arterials for use as "barrier" to channel traffic away from west-east axis flowing into old city.



c) Shift centre of gravity of new town to avoid conflict and offer larger development potential for new centre.



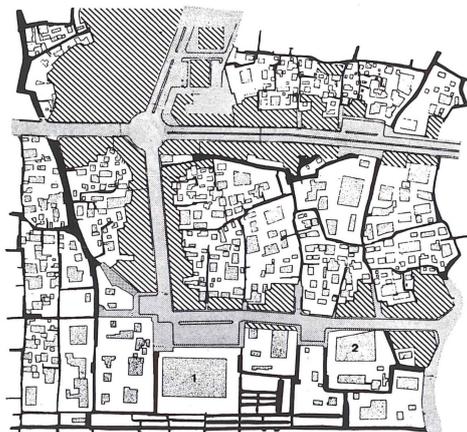
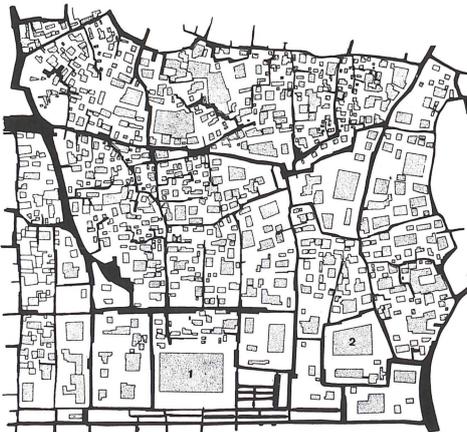
d) Articulate transition zones as "filters" between new central area and old city.

The proposal was never implemented, but a new and more dangerous Master Plan was laid out in 1954 by the French architect, André Gutton, for the new Syrian Municipality. Although the author claimed that he wished to protect the historical character of the townscape, (a sentiment which was nevertheless peppered by the dangerously romantic notion that the proposed east-west road cuts would make a connection, as he put it, "de la mer au désert"), it is apparent now that most of the destruction of the historic fabric and its replacement by inappropriate development stem from this Master Plan.

Gutton's plan gave way to Ban-shoya's in 1974 with a few insignificant changes. Important portions of both plans were executed between 1954 and 1975, causing the total destruction of 42 hectares of the historic fabric and the encirclement and deterioration of even larger areas. The final stage of the Master Plan was ripe for execution in 1978 when serious resistance by conservationists (official and private) began.

The first success of the conservationists was to persuade the Department of Antiquities to register the whole of the old city *intra muros* as a national monument, thereby, freezing the execution of the Master Plan. The Old City Committee, a mixed group from the Department of Antiquities, the Municipality and the private sector, was then formed and asked to resolve the conflict between

Comparative maps of the area north of the Great Mosque (scale 1:5'000) showing change and demolitions as occurred since 1945. Farafra, Bandarah and Great Mosque areas. Source: UNESCO report.



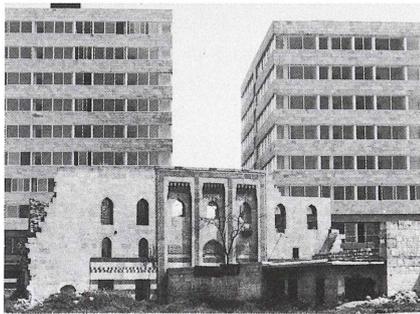
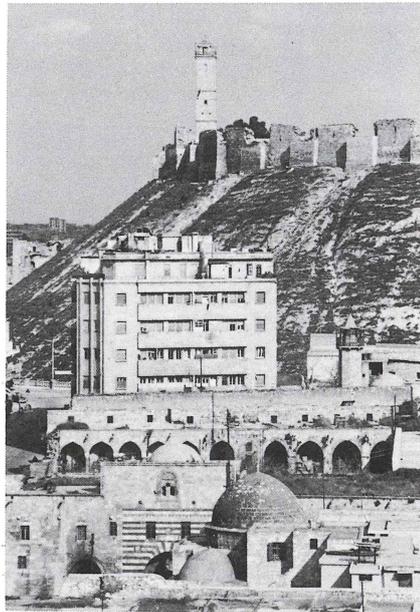
-  New highrise blocks (existing and proposed)
-  New roads cut through the fabric
-  Interior courtyards
-  Traditional pedestrian paths
- 1 Great Mosque
- 2 Khal al Wazir

the Master Plan and the registration decree, and to control all building permits within the historic quarters. The Committee requested UNESCO's assistance via the General Director of Antiquities, and work on the first UNESCO report was started in late 1979.

The Municipality, however, was not satisfied, and tried to enact new legislation that would counter the registration decree, in order to proceed with the execution of the Master Plan. The conservationists, who dominated the Committee, used delaying tactics until the UNESCO report was completed. Fortunately, a new administration took office shortly after. Najji Otri, a member of the city council in the former administration and a staunch conservationist, became Mayor in early 1980. An architect, born and raised in a courtyard house of the old city, Otri knew why its historic fabric must be preserved. The Committee was strengthened and the UNESCO report, which offered guidelines for a new Master Plan and a total conservation scheme, became an important reference in all decisions.

The north-west corner of the old city, the Bab El Faraj area (the subject of the next article by Sherban Cantacuzino) had become isolated by the new roads and was almost totally destroyed by the Municipality in 1979 in favour of a new high-rise commercial development. Construction had already begun in 1982 when the foundations of the Ayyubid walls and the lower portion of a tower were discovered along the western perimeter of the site. All work on the project was stopped; the very form of the new development was opened again to discussion; and UNESCO, with Stefano Bianca again in charge (he was working on projects of a similar nature in the holy city of Madinah and Baghdad) was invited to prepare a new report dealing with Bab El Faraj. The new report, completed in July 1983, proposed in outline how to incorporate and safeguard the remaining historic fabric and new archaeological discoveries, how to preserve the surrounding historical neighbourhoods and how to create a new centre linking the old city with the new.

The discussion on Bab El Faraj involved officials at the highest level of government. The Prime Minister, himself an architect, finally instructed the Municipality to abandon the present project and find a suitable alternative. At a special session of the Symposium,



Left: A commercial tower alongside new road overshadowing Khan Al-Wazir and obscuring the citadel ramparts from below. Left, below: Remnant of a façade in Rajab Pasha Palace destroyed for the Bab El Faraj development, with high rise commercial buildings in the background. Photographs: Dr. Ihsan Chiite.

attended by many officials and a capacity audience, all speakers agreed that the present project should be discontinued and a new one based on UNESCO's recommendations adopted.

As the traditional Arab music and songs floated through the Bayyada house on that beautiful evening, expressing the resurgence of cultural values, as well as elation over the success of the Symposium, it was difficult to realise that the old city remained in great danger.

So unless a new Master Plan is drawn up, a rehabilitation and restoration programme enacted and executed, both private and public destruction due to lax law enforcement stopped, an extensive programme of cultural education, coupled with economic and social incentives for the residents and users of the old city, put into operating — unless the preservation of the old city of Aleppo is given first priority by the local and national administrations, by its people and interested international organisations — future generations will only be able to learn about the old city through books and documents.

Adli Qudsi, a Syrian architect, is consultant to the Akwaff and other government bodies. He has, for many years, championed the restoration and revitalisation of old Aleppo.