

Aleppo: Bab El Faraj

The importance of townscape in reconstruction



How is it possible to reconstruct a whole city quarter in the late 20th century and at the same time incorporate images which in the past have tended to be the result of accident and haphazard growth? A concern for appearances — the look and feel of a place or of a building — has not been a matter of prime interest to planners and architects trained to think of cities in terms of use, density and traffic diagrams. Such was the case with the last project for Bab El Faraj produced by a team of University architects. It was a project whose diagrammatic nature suggested a set of forms that would have to be imposed upon, and could never be absorbed by, the traditional forms of the old city. The forms would have been quite simply inappropriate, and in calling for a change of attitude which would embrace the principles of townscape, I am of course referring to an appropriate townscape.

What is an appropriate townscape for Aleppo and what is meant by town-

scape? Townscape has to do with relationships. It is the relationship of buildings and features, enlivened by people and by their activities and expressions, as perceived by the static or moving eye. Townscape is not an advocacy for a frozen, museum city, but can enhance the reality of a living and changing city. My purpose is to examine, first, the principles which could lead to a townscape appropriate for the old city of Aleppo and, secondly, to focus on the problems of the Bab El Faraj quarter in the light of these principles and to present in outline proposals for the reconstruction of that quarter.

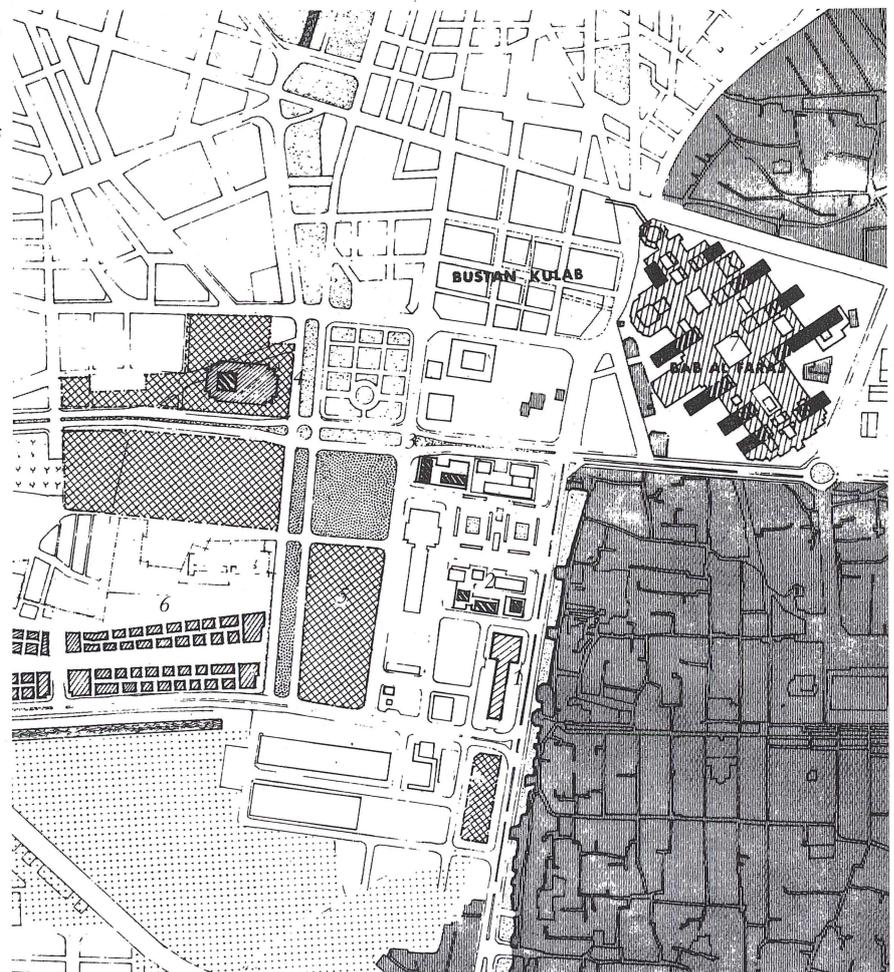
Principles of Townscape

There are five principles of townscape: *High density without height.* Theoretical work carried out at Cambridge in the 1960s under the direction of Sir Leslie Martin showed that a given site could be developed with the same amount of floor area in several different ways —

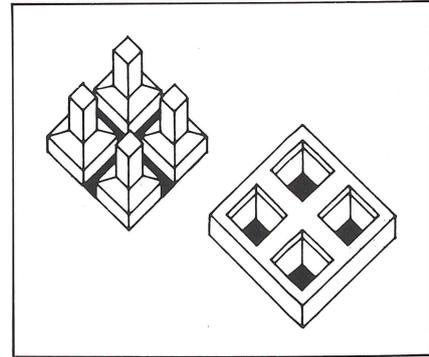
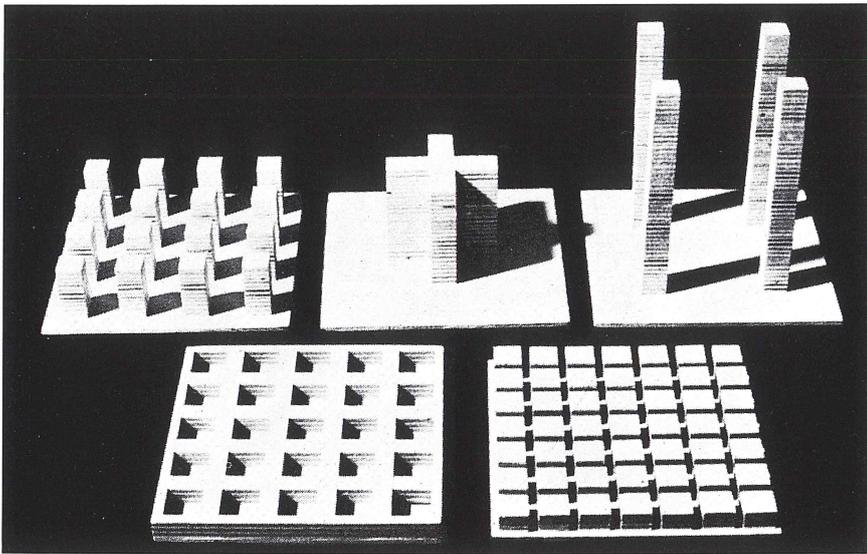
Portion of map showing Aleppo city centre area and Bab El Faraj zone. Credit: UNESCO, 1980.

-  Buildings up to 4 storeys
-  Buildings from 5 to 10 storeys
-  Buildings over 10 storeys
-  Comprehensive municipal development
-  New public parks

1. Taxi terminal
2. Office towers
3. Chamber of Commerce
4. New City Hall
5. Highrise building complex
6. Low income residential development
7. Bab al Faraj project



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Kenneth Browne.



Left: Models showing theoretical studies of the same amount of floor area developed in different ways on the same site. Credit: RIBAJ, May 1967, p. 196. Above: Sketches illustrating the "hollow square" form as opposed to high-rise "pavilions". Credit: RIBAJ, May 1967.

high-rise, medium-rise and low-rise. On the same site and resulting in the same floor area, you could have, for example, Le Corbusier's single 60-storey Cartesian Skyscraper, or 49 separate eight-storey blocks. But, more interestingly, you could also have an eight-storey development around 25 courtyards providing a dramatic increase in the open space available and in the use that can be made of this¹. A more precise way of making this comparison between what Martin called the "pavilion" and "hollow square" forms is to say that the "hollow square" form places the same built space on the same area of land in exactly one-third of the total height of the "pavilion" form. It follows, of course, that there is no need to build high in order to achieve high densities.

The traditional Arab town, with its "hollow square" forms or courtyard houses, usually not more than two-stories high, is a perfect example of high density without height. A more recent example, which is still being built, is the Architectural and Planning Partnership's Kadhimiya project in Baghdad (see MIMAR 6 pp.68-69). Here the Kadhimiya shrine, previously deprived of its urban context to make it into a free-standing monument, is again being surrounded with two-storey housing and commercial development.

If blocks of an inappropriate height are introduced into a traditional low-rise town, there are severe penalties to pay — penalties which far outweigh the quick commercial gain derived from the new buildings. These are the infringement of privacy, the destruction of the micro-climate and the destruction of the tradi-

tional townscape. The problem becomes more acute on a sloping site as in Salihiye at Damascus. Salihiye climbs up the hill, and with one- or two-storey houses it was possible for the family in the house above to have a view over the city. Nowadays, when four-storey blocks of apartments are built, they not only wipe out the view several tiers of older houses above, but make it impossible to continue that principle, because the view for the families living in the lower apartments is permanently blocked.

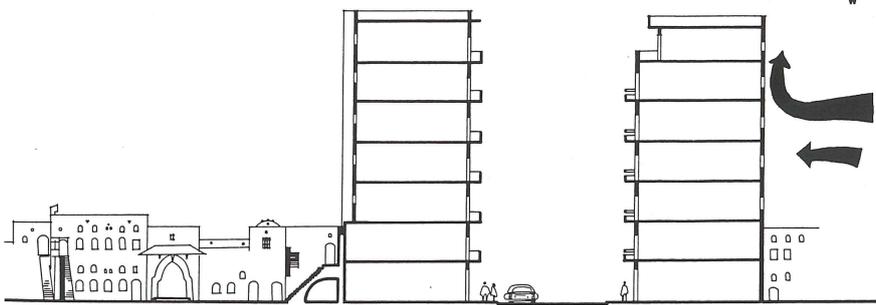
Continuity and contiguity. The courtyard plan, used widely in every kind of building throughout the Arab world, inevitably produces in urban conditions continuous walls and one building touching and merging with the next. This in turn produces urban scale and character, as well as space between and within buildings — streets, alleyways, small squares and courtyards — which are readily appreciated as space. The unbroken wall on the public side and the courtyards on the private side, with the internal spaces facing inwards on to these, also help in achieving privacy and in protecting both internal and external spaces from the sun.

The more common alternative, the "pavilion" form or free-standing block, is not only more wasteful of land in the sense that you have to build three times as high in order to achieve the same density, but also produces as open space a perimeter strip which is much less private and generally less useful than inner courtyard. Block development lacks urban scale and character and cannot satisfactorily define the space between

buildings. Block development also exposes the external walls of the buildings to the heat of the sun.

The informality of public space and the formality of private space. The typical Arab town is an aggregate of formal private courtyard space, with the streets as informal left-over space along the natural lines of communication. The tortuous streets of old Aleppo are the result of this organic process, helped along no doubt by the need of surprise in defence. From a visual point of view both the tortuous street and the rectangular courtyard of mosques, *madrassas*, *khans* and houses are essential contrasting elements of the townscape which need protecting. It was wrong, therefore, to import the European formality of public spaces by making use of the minaret of the Great Mosque in Aleppo as a terminal feature to an axis — a street — at the other end of which is a roundabout with a fountain. Instead the principle of irregularity of the Arab town, or of the medieval European town — the sudden revelation or the gradual unfolding of a minaret or dome — should have been exploited and should now be developed in the reconstruction of the Bab El Faraj quarter. It is equally wrong, if one accepts the principle of formality in the private courtyard space, to allow this space to be unbalanced and overlooked by new buildings.

Mix of people and uses. The tendency of modern development is to separate and to concentrate. Uses which were traditionally mixed in one building are each given their own separate building, while buildings of similar use, say industrial or



Above: Elevation showing the consequences of high-rise construction in old quarters - the climato-logical disruption in old houses caused by high-rise buildings. Drawing courtesy of Jean-Claude David.



Left: Aleppo, 1983: Khan al-Wazir (1682) with a modern block rising above its roofline.

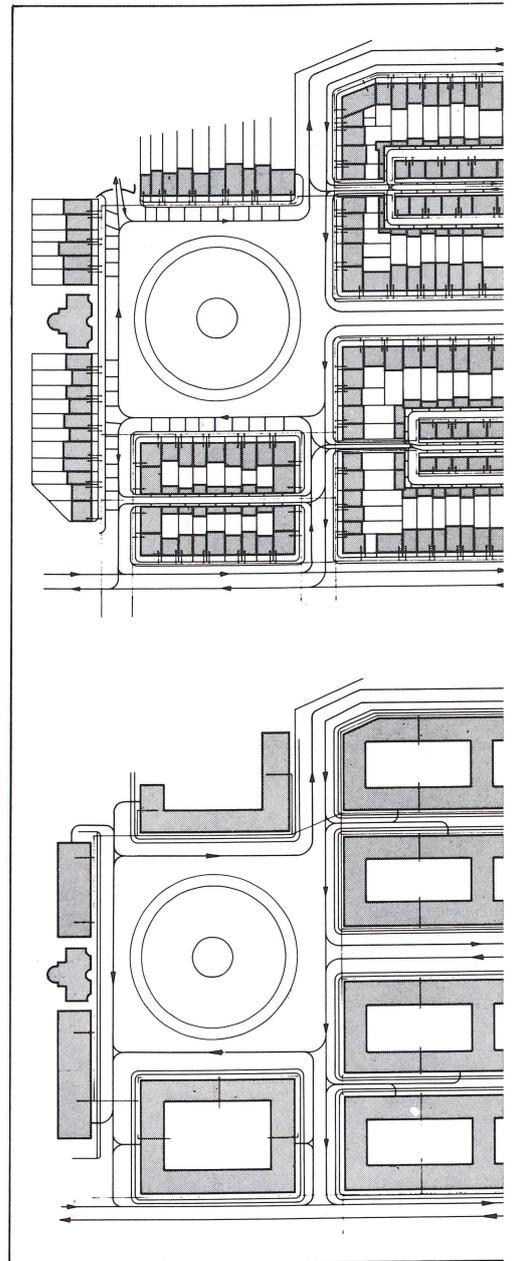
cultural, tend to be grouped together. This tendency results in specialised zones — the business zone which is dead at night or the cultural zone which is dead by day. Housing is itself separated into the different income groups, or into public and private sector housing. Yet in the Middle East we have in the *souk* the most developed example of mix. The *souk* is of course the physical expression of a particular culture, and the extent to which the *souk* maintains its vitality and remains the basis of city life is a measure of the strength of that culture. If T.S. Eliot was right in maintaining that “no culture can appear or develop except in relation to a religion,”² it would explain why Western cultures were now diffuse and weak, while Islamic cultures remained relatively strong. “In a healthy society,” says Eliot, “... the artist, the poet, the philosopher, the politician and the labourer will have a culture in common, which they do not share with other people of the same occupations in other countries.” The *souk* traditionally embraces all these occupations. It houses the young and the old, the rich and the poor. It contains large and small houses, schools, mosques, hamams, shops and industry — all cheek by jowl. The attractions of another kind of life, of Western origin, centred on the suburban

villa and the motor car, is now threatening the integrity and strength of the *souk*.

In Edinburgh, Craig’s New Town of around 1760 consisted of a hierarchical pattern of roads and spaces — the main axial road terminating in squares at each end, secondary roads on the edges with development on one side only; cross-roads and mews. Every type of person could live here and every type of activity could take place here — the aristocrat and professional along the main roads and in the squares; the merchant in the cross-roads; the labourers and servants in the mews. Inevitably today not many people live here any more, but the area remains alive with shops, offices and restaurants, and no modern development has been allowed to upset the traditional pattern and scale.

Traditionally uses have tended to overlap. Living accommodation is over shops; workrooms are over living accommodation; shops or small industries are inserted into ground floors of public buildings, and so on. Such is Mayfair, Covent Garden or a Middle Eastern *souk*. But when we try to build it, we find it too difficult for a variety of reasons. The scale of the units tend to be too large; building and fire regulations are against us; the demands of security are against us; and above all it goes against the grain to design something that looks as if it had evolved over the centuries.

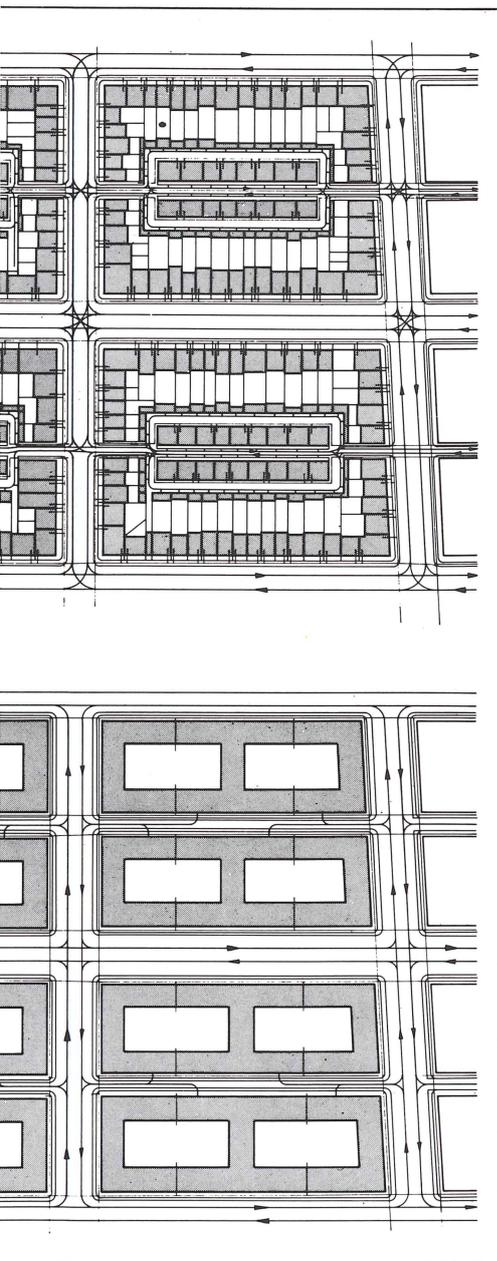
Scale and frequency of movements. Movement in cities, by which I mean the movement of both pedestrians and vehi-



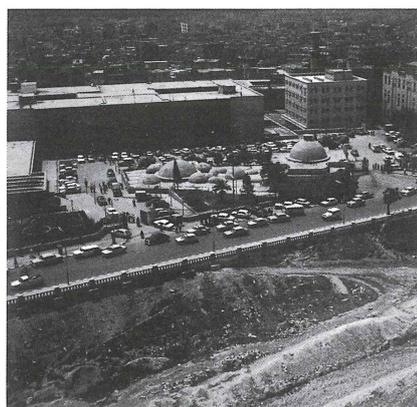
Top: Plan of Craig’s Newtown, Edinburgh, Scotland (c. 1760) showing scale and diversity of building types and the hierarchical pattern of roads and open spaces.

Above: Identical area of Craig’s plan for a section of Edinburgh hypothetically developed with superblocks of 4 storeys.

cles, is largely determined by mix. If in a given area there is a lot of mix — a lot of small-scale activity — there will obviously be more movement than if the same area is re-developed with a handful of superblocks. Take, for example, the same section of Craig’s New Town in Edinburgh. There is a gridiron of streets, but these are not all of equal width and importance. They are carefully graded,



from the grand avenue down the centre to the mews with their coach houses, nowadays transformed into garages. But interestingly, these mews encircle a block of artisans' dwellings which, no doubt, originally included a good deal of small industry. The gridiron of streets forms city blocks with up to about 15 houses on the long sides of each block. This means that, counting the block of artisans' dwellings in the middle, each block has on it between 60 and 70 buildings, all in the form of terrace houses, each house with a front door on to the street and a back door on to the mews. Many small buildings or units means many entrances, and the more entrances there are, the more frequently they occur



Aleppo, 1983. View from the citadel with new High Court building and City Council offices. Hammam is left isolated in the centre.

along the street, the more movement there will be.

If we now consider the identical area re-developed with super-blocks, of roughly the same height (4 storeys) it is clear that the mix of people and uses could never be as great, even if some of the super-blocks were offices and some apartments. Since we cannot turn our back on the need for super-blocks and the possibility of having to insert large units into the historic city, we should at the very least break up these large units at street and first-floor level with small-scale uses that enliven the street, like shops, cafés, bars, small industries. It is also clear that the movements in the streets will be dramatically reduced. Each super-block, for instance might have four entrances and, as there are two super-blocks per city block, each city block would have eight entrances, instead of between 60 and 70.

This theoretical exercise can be demonstrated in practice in Aleppo. South of the Citadel there are two such super-blocks, the Courts of Justice and the City Council Offices. They stand apart from other buildings and in each one is concentrated a single use. They are fundamentally hostile to their environment in the sense that they are set back railings and are incapable of generating street activities.

The Bab El Faraj Quarter

In considering the re-construction of the Bab El Faraj quarter there appears to be three main problems:

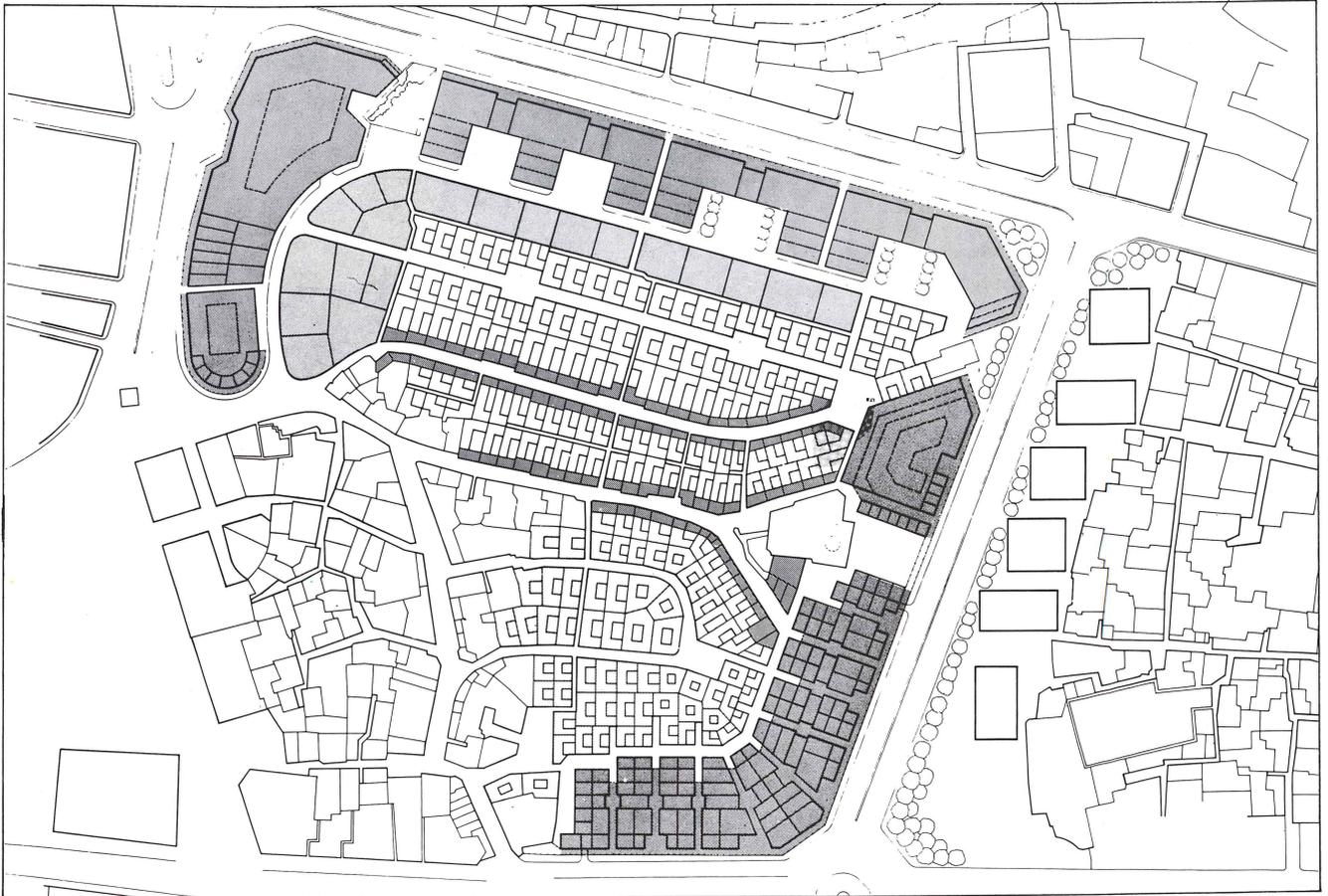
- (1) The fact that the area is a wedge which penetrates the old city;

- (2) how to handle the surviving part in the south-west and how to incorporate the existing historic monuments, including the recently discovered city walls in the north-west;
- (3) how to deal with the edges, where the development borders on wide modern streets of European inspiration.

The fact that the Bab El Faraj quarter is a wedge which penetrates the old city. The area lies within the city walls, by which it is bordered on the north and west sides. But to argue that it lies therefore on the edge of the old city is to ignore the existence to the north well-preserved Christian quarter of Jdeideh. So the Bab El Faraj quarter is wedged between the old quarters of Jdeideh and Aqabah. The modern roads which surround it on two sides penetrate further into the old city together with the inappropriate seven- or eight-storey development which they have attracted along their flanks. To bring the modern city into this wedge, as was proposed by the team of University architects, would isolate Jdeideh and so condemn it to at best a lingering death. The project also implies, as Stefano Bianca has said, "a major threat to the old city, due to its scale, to the activities it involves, and to the architectural style it has adopted."³

An alternative approach, which Kenneth Browne and I are here putting forward, incorporates the five townscape principles while at the same time accepting the wide modern streets which already surround the area, and providing for today's needs of vehicular access and circulation. It has been developed in three dimensions because we felt that this was necessary to illustrate the principles and not because we wished to present a rival project to UNESCO.

How to handle the surviving part in the south-west, and how to incorporate the existing historic monuments, including the recently discovered city walls in the north-west. A final decision on what to do with the surviving part in the south-west must depend on a proper survey. From superficial observation only it would appear that many of the buildings could be rehabilitated and extended, while, others might have to be replaced with new buildings designed in sympathy with what is there. The proposal for this part, therefore, is to maintain the existing street pattern and generally modernise the ex-

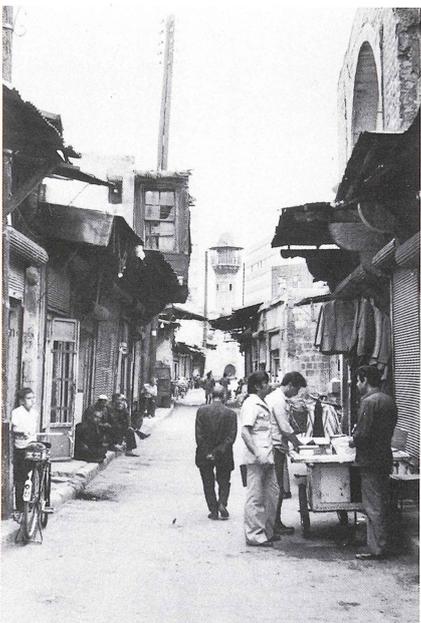




Left: Plan for future development of Bab El Faraj quarter as now proposed.

Left, below: Plan of Bab El Faraj as it exists in 1983 after demolitions.

Above: Existing urban fabric in Bab El Faraj. A mosque is on the right and commerce on the left. Right: View down the same narrow shopping street after the authors' proposed restoration.



Above: Another street before proposed restoration.

Above, right: Architects' conceptual drawing after restoration.





Above: Vacant lots surrounding a mosque in Bab El Faraj after demolitions.

Right: View after the proposed reconstruction of a small square in front of mosque.

Below: View of existing 9-11 storey blocks on Abd El Munem Riad Street, Bab El Faraj.

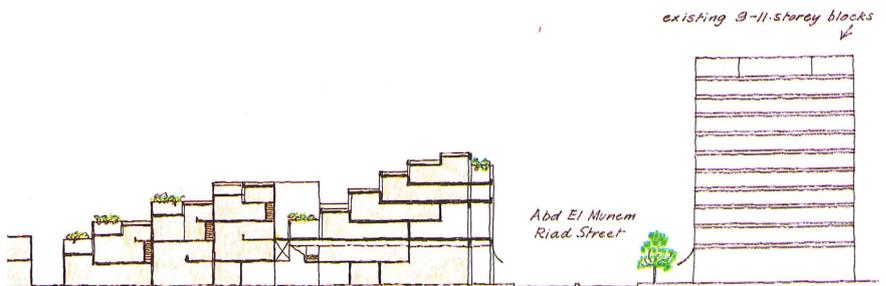
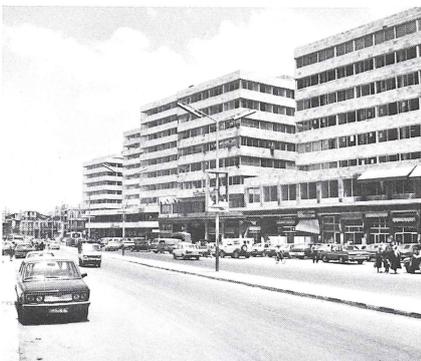
Below, right: Section through Abd El Munem Riad Street showing proposed new residential blocks relating to lower development behind and to the existing high-rise blocks.



Small Square in front of Mosque

isting structures. Within a number of planning restrictions — on height, for example — it would be reasonable to allow market forces to operate. The re-development of the rest of the quarter would provide enough incentive.

The existing historic monuments are



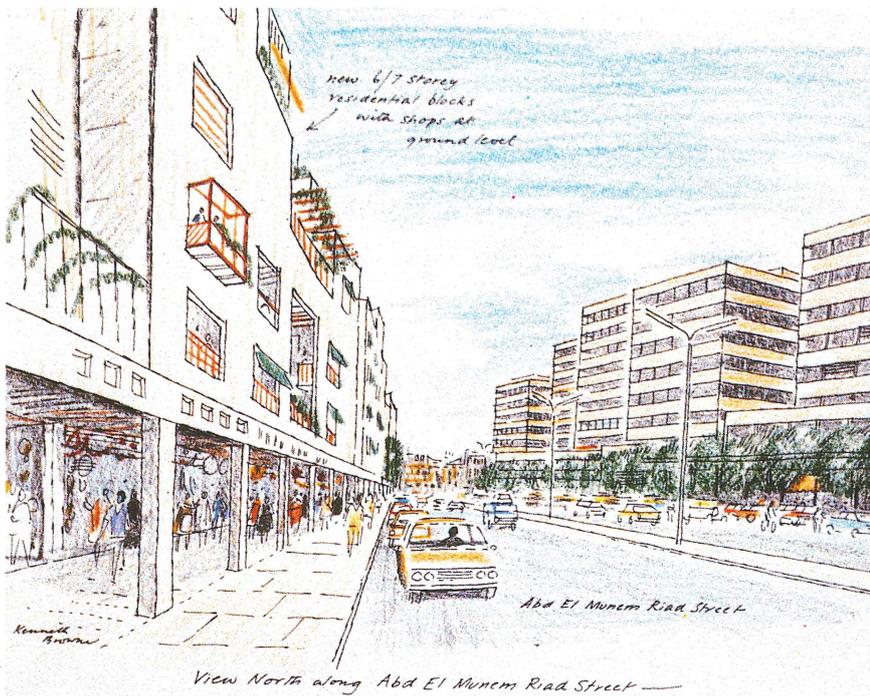
Section through new residential block

few — two mosques and the beautiful remains of an old house. The mosques with their minarets stand at opposite ends of a long curving street which bisects the area from west to east. The proposal is to rehabilitate the buildings at the western end of this street, where they appear to be in reasonable condition, and to reconstruct them along the eastern section, thus preserving the line of the street and retaining the townscape value of the curve. Indeed the decision to recreate this street to a large extent determined the layout of the parallel streets on either side. A gap in the new buildings fronting Abd El Munem Riad Street is also proposed to allow a view of the dome and minaret of one of the mos-

ques, as well as a way through for pedestrians.

For the remains of the old house a courtyard is proposed which could be related to a café or restaurant, forming part of the commercial area along Abd El Munem Riad Street. Similarly, the city walls would become an important public exhibit at their northern end, off Khandak Street. Being at a lower level they would have to be reached by means of steps and platforms. The remaining length of wall would have to be thoroughly surveyed and recorded before being covered in by development. It could of course, remain accessible underground for both archaeologists and the general public.

How to deal with edges, where the development borders on wide modern streets of European inspiration. One of the weakest aspects of the scheme proposed by the team of University architects was the way it ignored the existing street pattern. Its diagonal axis, which had nothing to do with the street pattern of either the old or the new city, resulted in a large amount of open land on two opposite corners of the site, at the junction of Abd El Munem Riad Street and Khandak Street, and along Motanabbi Street. Our proposal is to accept the new streets around the perimeter and to make the most of them by building up a solid frontage with an arcade at pavement level. Along Abd El Munem Riad Street



Architects' conceptual drawing of new and existing urban fabric.

there are already ten- or eleven-storey office blocks on the east side. Along Motanabbi Street the existing blocks on the south side are six- or seven-storey, while the somewhat earlier existing buildings on the north side of Khandak Street are only three-storey. The problem was how to respond to the recent rather high buildings which already exist and at the same time relate to the development in the middle of the site which would be mainly housing, small shops and light industrial, built to the traditional courtyard pattern and rising to no more than two or at most three stories.

Our solution has been to make use of a section developed by Arup Associates for the Bab El Sheikh project at Baghdad. This consists of shops and offices on the two lower levels (with parking either at first-floor or basement level), and stepped courtyard housing accessible from a pedestrian deck at third-floor level and above. The housing varies in height from six to two stories across the depth of the site, with the two-storey housing at the back relating in height to the rest of the housing in the middle of the site. Two such blocks are proposed, one large block turning the corner of Motanabbi and Abd El Munem Riad Street, and one smaller block to the north in Abd El

Munem Riad Street. The shops at pavement level perform the vital function of bringing life to the street.

Along Khandak Street three four-storey office blocks are proposed, and these also step down to two storeys at the back. At the western edge at Bab El Faraj we suggest a 200-bed hotel and a public building for cultural use, which could perhaps be related to the nearby library.

The site is provided with a main vehicular access point at Bab El Faraj and a secondary access off Motanabbi Street. There is parking within the blocks along Motanabbi and Abd El Munem Riad Street, on three underground levels at the western end of the site, and on the surface in several small squares within the site.

The intention is that the girdle of buildings round the site — the mixed-use blocks, the offices, the hotel and the public building would be initiated and financed by government. The interior of the site and the rehabilitation of the south-western part, on the other hand, would be left to private enterprise and to market forces, without over alignment, height, materials.

¹RIBA Journal, May 1967 pp. 191-200. Architects' approach to architecture — Sir Leslie Martin.

²Notes towards the Definition of Culture by T.S. Eliot. London 1948.

³The Conservation of the old city of Aleppo, by Stefano A. Bianca and others. Unesco 1980.

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For many years 'townscape' editor for the Architectural Review, Kenneth Browne is an architect and town planner, and consultant to several British firms involved in national and international projects.

