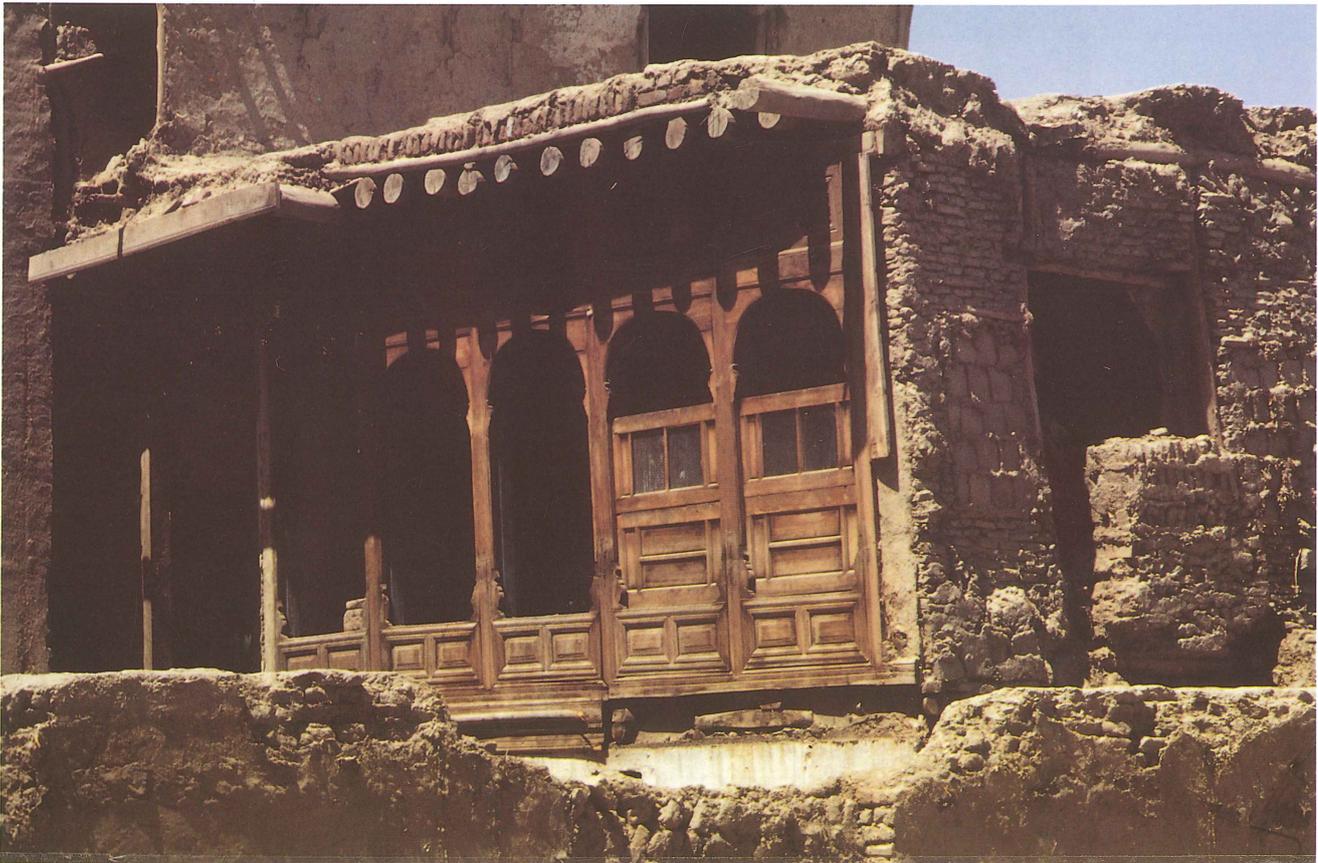


## AFGHANISTAN: UTOPIAN UPGRADING?

Jolyon Leslie reports on the upgrading of an historic neighbourhood in Kabul, Afghanistan where attempts at restoration have to be reconciled with the development needs of a community.



1. Fragments of ruined courtyard houses bear witness to an era of prosperity.

Few of the present-day inhabitants of the old city of Kabul (Share Kunar) can gain any great comfort from the history of the site they inhabit and its remaining buildings. Its recent history has been one of neglect and destruction; the great covered bazaar was systematically destroyed in a British raid in the 1890s, to avenge Afghan attacks. More recently, roads have been driven through the dense fabric of the town, allegedly for reasons of security. This imitates the construction of 'Haussmann'-like boulevards in the 1930s, which destroyed hundreds of homes.

Fragments of ruined courtyard homes today bear witness to an era when Share Kunar was prosperous. Timber-framed

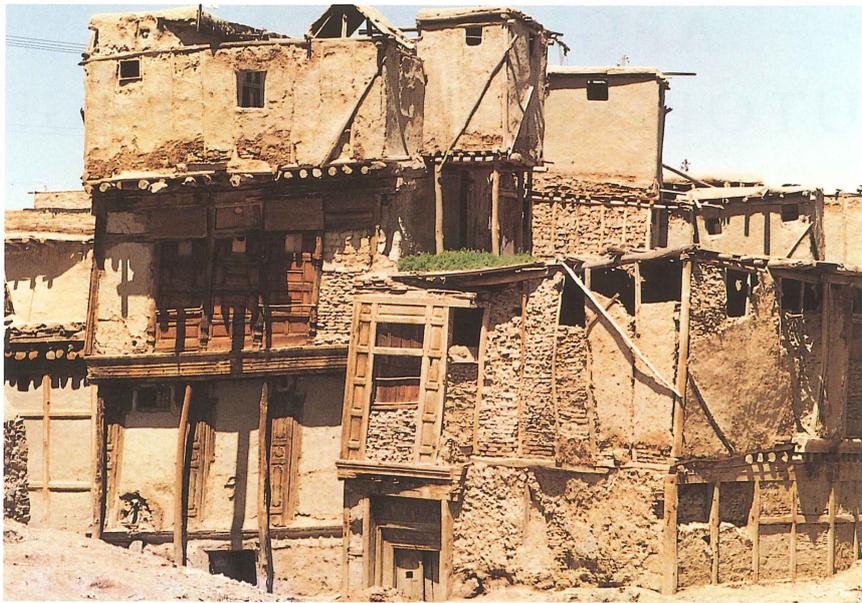
construction with brick infill helped to resist frequent earthquakes, and fine-carved timber screens ensured privacy for the occupants. Now the planners propose to raze the area and build apartments (with a 'commercial zone' replacing the bazaar) as part of their futuristic master plan for the city.

Most of these once-grand homes are now crowded with poor families, living at the very margins of urban life. Residence in Share Kunar is often a first step in a long process of resettlement. Many families have been forced from rural homes as a result of the fighting; they come to the city in search of work and some degree of security. They are forced to rent rooms in some of the worst conditions to be seen in a city which is

poor by any standards. Single homes have been adapted to house ten or 12 poor families, many of whom rent a single room for five or six people. Water supplies are limited and sanitation is rudimentary. The nearby bazaar provides a livelihood for some, but also now threatens their security as more 'ruined' homes are bulldozed to make way for more profitable serais for the storage of goods. For a lucky few the process of resettlement might end in the construction of a basic home on illegally-occupied land elsewhere in the city.

The predicament of Kabul today is common to many other developing cities, with urban migration exacerbating problems of land shortages and inadequate services. During the form-

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ulation of a project aimed at resettling communities affected by the war, Share Kunar was the starting point for surveys to explore the issue of displacement. Given the massive population movements from war-torn villages, the focus of the resulting project (implemented by the UN Centre for Human Settlements) is rural. It is clear, however, that contact with urban communities is essential to our understanding of the issue of resettlement. As long as villagers feel insecure, programmes to stem urban migration are futile. The present aims are to improve urban living conditions for the most marginal groups and also to promote the rehabilitation of rural areas from which migrants originate.

The constraints on change are many, with poor tenants only too aware of their vulnerable position in the urban environment. If they are outspoken in their demands for improvements, they might

*2. Few of the present-day inhabitants can gain great comfort from the history of the site that they live in.*

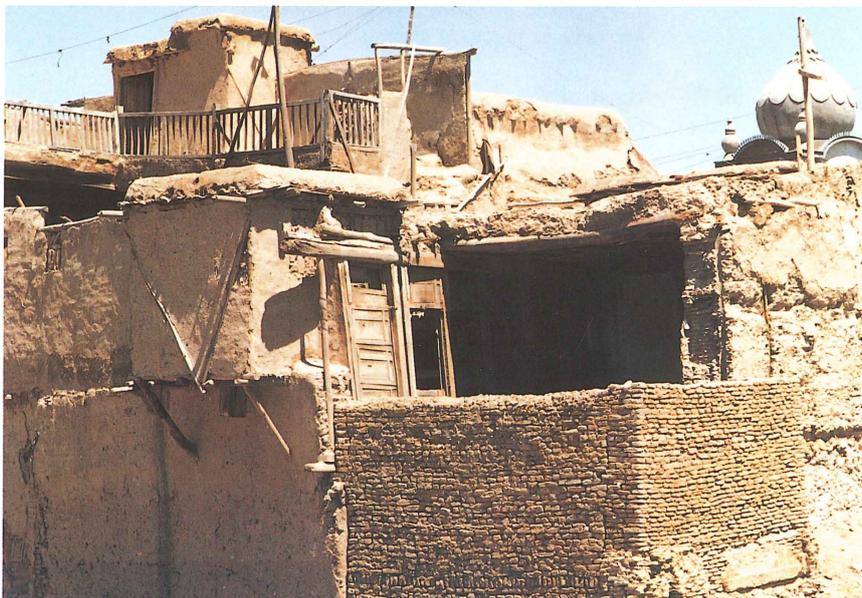
lose their rights to occupy precious space close to a source of livelihood in the bazaar. Even those who have built their own homes are threatened by eviction, where they have squatted on land. If the area is significantly improved, tenants are likely to be forced out by the higher rents that will then be demanded by landlords.

At an early stage, all projects need to confront the expectations that have been raised through discussion or surveys. In the case of Share Kunar, contact with projects might be the only hope for some to improve their living conditions. Hopes for radical change (land, new homes) lie

*3. Single family homes have, in many cases, been adapted to house 10 or 12 poor families.*

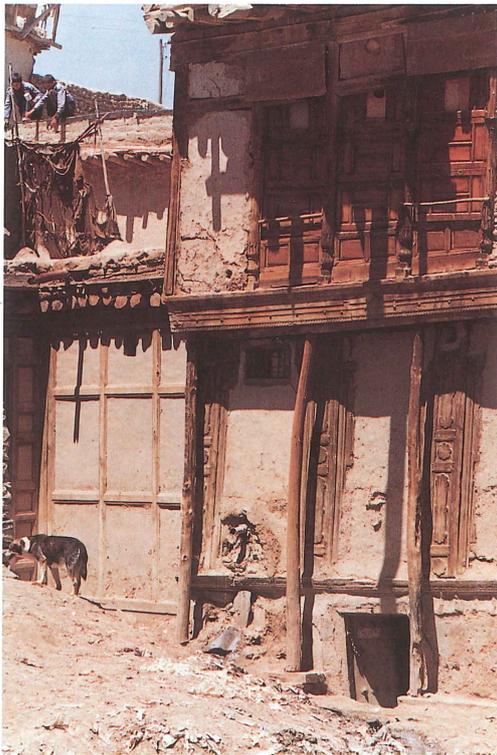
behind every discussion about simple upgrading measures (pipes, taps, cement). A single visit to document some of the remaining homes (to follow on the work done by Rafi Samizay and others in the 1970s) drew immediate attention to this. Community leaders were sent to lobby for their neighbourhood, even before projects had been outlined. In the present circumstances, high expectations will persist no matter how 'consultative' an approach is adopted.

From the start of an approach to a community, our interest is presented as a commercial one; for many this is more easily understandable than philanthropy. The outcome will be a contract being signed, with both sides as equal partners in the deal. Negotiations take place with a small group of inhabitants who traditionally represent the neighbourhood. The municipal authorities are informed about projects, but are not contractually



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4. Timber framed construction with mud brick infill is vulnerable when not regularly maintained.



5. Poor tenants are only too aware of their vulnerable position in the urban environment.

involved. In negotiating the contract, minimum project inputs (cement, pipes) are consciously traded against the resources available in a community (labour, stone) until a deal is struck. By putting prices on the various inputs, there is a clear understanding of obligations. This may have helped to minimize the expectations from the project; that it might have something better to offer. The community is informed of the responsibilities taken on by the neighbourhood group, to encourage accountability.

The options for improvements in Share Kunar are limited. The municipal authorities have designated the site a slum. Thankfully, there are not at present the resources or the intention to transform the area into an official 'museum-city' or to build apartments (both of which would displace the inhabitants).

The original intention of work in the area was to 'engender an awareness of its historic value within the community and among decision-makers, as part of the process of upgrading'. The reality, of course, is quite different. History is not a priority for war-affected families in Afghanistan, especially the poor of Share Kunar (or those trying to manage the city). A sense of the historic value of the site will need to be carefully reconciled with the needs of those who inhabit the area, and those who make decisions.

Differing perceptions of the value of

Share Kunar have so far been accommodated by the choice of non-controversial projects. This has allowed time to establish a feeling of trust in the area through extended contacts with the communities and the authorities. A further outcome has been to get tacit agreement to a year-long moratorium on municipal demolitions of 'illegal' homes. This will allow the communities a year in which they can themselves improve their environment. The only way to convince sceptical officials will be to show them project accounts; to demonstrate how small endeavours might reduce the burden of urban improvements on official budgets. The finished schemes will provide the communities with ammunition in their lobbying for security of tenure, either as squatters or as tenants. This is perhaps one of the most delicate parts of the process, for it is seen by some to legitimize or 'encourage' squatting.

Project activities have been actively supported by those communities which stand to gain from improvements. In one case, a water supply scheme was thrown out in favour of improvements to the steep (and ice-prone) paths that lead to hillside homes, and up which all goods have to be carried. The degree of participation witnessed in such small projects seems to bear out hopes that outwardly poor communities are not necessarily dependent, and will contribute to change

when it is beneficial to them. A clue to this involvement might lie in the limited scale of activities undertaken. For this reason, no overall blueprint for the area has been prepared or discussed.

We are unlikely, however, to face the same enthusiasm for the preservation of old homes if restoration is the principal aim of any project. Most of the historic buildings are felt (by both their inhabitants and the authorities) to be long past their useful life. By beginning to improve its worth as an area of housing, we hope to achieve recognition of the value of Share Kunar as an historic area, and to link the two aims by means of practical projects. In conjunction with work identified by inhabitants as a priority, the first stage of repairs might begin on the older mosques in the area. This could lead to the saving of the few abandoned houses and conversion for communal use as schools or clinics. This might provide a vehicle for public education in the traditional techniques used in constructing homes, and how they were used in the past. While some valuable history might be lost in such a process, it seems essential if the projects are to deal with people rather than monuments.

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