

New Life for the Medina of Tunis

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WHAT THE PROGRAMMES HAVE ACCOMPLISHED

Quite recently, the notion of the historical centre of a city has been superimposed on that of the historical monument. Today, the concept of valuing and protecting ancient city cores, together with the idea of heritage conservation, includes not just exceptional buildings, but also the contextual value of their location. In Tunisia today, heritage is no longer considered only as a cultural value, but also as a means towards progress and development.

It is not easy to protect sites that are steeped in culture and history and that are deeply rooted in the memory of the population, and to integrate them into a so-called 'modern' world, one that is mechanised and continually developing technically. Inspired by the examples of numerous other Mediterranean towns, Tunis has risen to this challenge. Tunis is without doubt one of the best-conserved Muslim Arab cities. With its twelve centuries of history, the Medina of Tunis contains numerous Islamic monuments: at the end of a street, one can discern the slim silhouette of a minaret or a dome covered with the green tiles of a *zawiya*. Uninterrupted walls extend the length of even streets, where a nobleman's residence stands out with its rich stone surrounds and majestic nailed door.

A living testimony to Muslim urbanism, the residential areas of the Medina have remained relatively unchanged since the end of the eighteenth century. In 1979, UNESCO declared Tunis a World Heritage site. The town is characterised by its dense network of streets, alleys and cul-de-sacs leading to closely-knit patio houses. The architectural contribution of the 1850-1950 period is felt particularly in added apartment structures and official buildings that are situated on boulevards built on the site of the ancient city walls and in the suburbs. With its 270 hectares and more than one hundred thousand inhabitants, the Medina provides not only a record of the past, but also an immense developing area whose future forms an integral part of the main area of the Tunisian capital.

Since the 1960s, the Medina has attracted immigrants and travellers from rural areas, many of whom were ill-equipped for urban life, and this factor, amongst others, contributed to its decline: the decomposition of urban structures, deterioration of buildings (palaces and residences) and the decline of economic functions. It is important to study the course of action taken thus far, to examine both the positive and negative factors, in order to draw up solid future plans and programmes.

These actions will rapidly reach beyond the mandate of historical monuments to develop into proposals for integrated intervention and a protection policy based on two main themes.

Firstly, the protection of the monumental heritage in conjunction with the development of cultural tourism, this being a fundamental economic policy of Tunisia. Numerous monuments have been restored in recent years, the restorations have included mainly religious monuments (mosques, *zawias*, and so on), ancient Koranic schools (*madradas*) and a few important residences, all of which reintegrated various collective enterprises (headquarters of associations, socio-cultural amenities, learning centres, and so on) which were capable of adapting and integrating into the structure without disfiguring it.

Secondly, the protection of the building heritage with social aims, amongst others, that of developing the socio-economic structure of a living Medina, fulfilling an important role in housing and craftsmanship of monuments. In recent years, considerable investment has been made in the infrastructure, amenities and housing in the Medina: the Hafsia project, financed partially by the World Bank in the scope of the third urban project; the Kasbah project with the construction of a large underground car park; and finally the sanitation project of the *oukalas* assisted by the Arab Fund for Social and Economic Development (FADES) and reinforced today by the construction of a new headquarters of the Town Hall in the centre of the Medina, set in a strategic and historic site of the Kasbah.

These projects have had an impact on the Medina, as much on the architectural, urban, social and economic fronts, as on its heritage plan. They have enabled entire zones to be selected under the improvement plan of the Medina as areas for restructuring due to their dilapidated state, and especially to develop directives for improving social housing, resulting in the creation of various financial, legislative and technical institutions, capable of intervening to resolve problems. They are conceived as integrated projects, bringing together several components such as renovation, rehabilitation, and improvement of infrastructures, together with the creation of employment.

Proof of the relevance and performance of these projects can be seen through the presence of the two international financial institutions, International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD) and FADES, who, for the first time in their history, provided financing for the housing rehabilitation project of a historic centre. A coherent approach to the restructuring project of the Hafsia area has succeeded in reversing the process of degradation which has been ongoing there since the beginning of the twentieth century, and has succeeded in improving the area's infrastructure while strengthening the traditional urban fabric of the Medina. This project, which has twice won the Aga Khan Award for Architecture, has also been successful in reviving commercial activities in the area, and it has replaced or restored some of the housing in ruins and encouraged communications between residents from different social classes.

The Oukalas project, partially financed by FADES, has contributed to the renaissance of the Medina. One notes with satisfaction the beginnings of a return to this historic town. The progress of this important national project has been followed closely by the President of the Republic since it began in 1990. It was created with the aim of accomplishing:

- the recovery of rental accommodations in a state of collapse. To this effect, more than 1300 households evacuated from 256 *oukalas* have been rehoused in three stages by the Municipality to the satellite cities created to accommodate them;
- 404 buildings (thirty of which belong to the Municipality and the State) are the object of the rehabilitation and restoration programme. A credit facility of fifteen million dinars has been allocated to owners for renovation of their buildings, with an interest rate of five percent and repayment over fifteen years.

Buildings which are of architectural and/or historical interest are proposed for restoration under a re-allocation programme run by cultural or social collectives.

PROPOSALS AND PERSPECTIVES

Following this assessment and report, consideration was given for the adoption of a new strategy in continuation, and complementary, to the ones already complete or in the process of completion, notably those projects of social interest, such as the Hafsia and *oukalas*.

The selected strategy relies mainly on the strengthening of the first concept presented, namely the preservation of monumental heritage, since we believe today that after having resolved the sanitation/decay problems and controlled the deterioration process we can gently modify our policies to extend to cultural entertainment, the improvement and reconciliation of this heritage with contemporary life. To achieve this, a two-point plan is proposed:

- first, adequate legislation regarding the classification of historic monuments and a protection plan;
- second, the recognition of the value of monumental heritage with respect to:
 - urban aesthetics;
 - the promotion of culture;
 - the promotion of cultural tourism;
 - economic promotion;
 - resolving traffic and parking problems.

The first concept poses no problems – new legislation is underway and a protection plan is being elaborated. The second concept, however, is more complex to develop, and requires an effort on the part of decision makers, adequate financing and expertise equal to the high level of expectations.

We are party, therefore, to a well-expressed desire on the part of the towns' leaders to link monu-

mental heritage to urban development of the city. Several attempts have been made to transform buildings which until recently were in a state of ruin (religious buildings, *madradas*, *fondouks* [market places], palaces and abandoned residences) into places of prestige, alive with art and culture and contributing to the socio-economic promotion of the city.

Consequently, we find ourselves surrounded by an important stock of monuments of architectural or historic interest, belonging to the State or the Municipality as a result of the Oukalas land and social rehabilitation project, and for which an adequate programme is essential.

OPERATIONAL APPROACH FOR THE CULTURAL AND ECONOMIC PROMOTION OF THIS HERITAGE

The fundamental approach to appreciating this heritage is to restore it, and to follow a new relocation programme if the original function no longer exists. Conversion to another use enables a restored monument to survive and to play an important role in the development of a city. Interest in cultural tourism and the culture of the Medina has grown in recent years, and it has gradually become a favoured site in the Tunis area for ambitious cultural projects. Cultural hubs have begun to form around the restored areas. These are cultural areas but also attractive spaces capable of stimulating the creation of visitors' itineraries leading to the restored and reused monuments. This is particularly true in light of the trend for public amenities to return towards the heart of the old town (Festival de la Médina, Musée de la Ville, Musée de la Broderie).

It is important to encourage the development of refined tourist accommodation (elegant, privately-run hotels and luxury hotels), to avoid the Medina becoming merely a brief stopover point on the guided tour circuits. Some fifty monuments have been identified, indexed and studied. Concise project files have been drawn up for each building which detail their presentation, provide a diagnostic appraisal, record restoration work and also propose reallocation depending upon the site's capacity, its typology and its geographic position in relation to the cultural and tourist centres developing in the Medina and which need reinforcing.

This provides a brief outline of an urban development plan and attempts to describe the problems encountered during restoration/re-conversion, especially in the planning stages, an important period before any intervention. How can we rise to the double challenge of development and conversion? Planning is clearly of considerable importance in this process, and consideration needs to be given to the type of activity, the type of building and the choice of amenities to be housed within these historic sites. We hope to find solutions to all these questions by studying the different approaches and methods of similar cases experienced in other towns in the region.

For illustrations of projects in Tunis, the reader is referred to pls. 42-48.

42-44. Association for Safeguarding the Medina (ASM), reconstruction of the Hafsia Quarter, Tunis, Tunisia, 1986.



43.



42.



44.



45.

45. 46. Association for Safeguarding the Medina (ASM), Oukalas Project, Tunis, Tunisia, 1996-ongoing



46.



47.

47. Association for Safeguarding the Medina (ASM), Al Montaciriya Kindergarden rehabilitation, Tunis, Tunisia, 1998.



48.

48. Association for Safeguarding the Medina (ASM), Douar El-Hicher School extension, Tunis, Tunisia, 1998.