Urban Conservation in the Islamic World
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First of all, I would like to express my gratitude to our Iranian hosts for this opportunity to come to the old city of Yazd and to engage in a dialogue on urban conservation issues. Exchanging experiences in a field as complex as the rehabilitation of historic cities is always fascinating. While the specific conditions may vary from country to country, many common issues and problems emerge: these being the leitmotivs, as it were, of an endeavour to be shared by professionals, local communities, administrations and interested institutions.

Yesterday’s site visit to the old quarters of Yazd confirmed my conviction that historic cities have in a way remained (or have become) villages in privileged locations, in other words, local areas at the heart of rather anonymous, rapidly developing urban agglomerations. Today these ‘urban villages’ are subject to all sorts of powerful pressures. Let me just mention some of the most obvious and ubiquitous factors:

- the impact of vehicular traffic and corresponding disruption of the physical and social fabric of the city;
- speculative real estate trends linked with vehicular accessibility which introduce new land-use hierarchies and disparities within the urban fabric;
- new standards of services, facilities and sanitation which usually are neither adapted nor integrated to the historic fabric;
- the demographic changes often involving the emigration of the wealthy local bourgeoisie from the historic centre to new residential suburbs, and, reciprocally, the immigration of a poorer rural population flocking into the historic centre as a location of choice;
- overcrowding of a poor population in an often neglected historic housing stock with lack of maintenance;
- proliferation of uncontrolled semi-industrial activities in the historic city centre;
- and, perhaps most importantly, the loss of ‘image’ and prestige of the historic centres vis-à-vis the glamour of sometimes misconceived ‘modernity’. This attitude results in a dramatic lack of investment by the private and the public sectors, denying the historic city the means it would need to evolve and transform from within, that is, following its own premises and potentials.

Yet, in spite of their relatively small size and all sorts of physical and social decline, it is these ‘urban villages’ which often remain the only custodians and dispensers of cultural identity in the met-
Finding the productive middle ground between two sterile extremes is therefore essential for any cultural development effort, if it is to become fruitful. For one can neither afford to dispense with the creative sources of culture nor disregard the material benefits of an appropriate, domesticated type of development. However, producing a creative interaction between cultural and development issues is just another matter of abstract strategies and procedures. It can only be achieved pragmatically in a case by case through emphatic immersion in concrete situations, through grounding actual projects in the realities of specific places and specific communities.

This means, on the one hand, promoting development by mobilising internal cultural processes, in other words, by designing projects which are rooted in the life of local beneficiaries and which can be sustained by them. On the other hand, it also means strengthening culture through adapted development impulses which rely on appropriate and affordable technological tools, provided they can be absorbed and managed by the actual stakeholders, the people directly concerned. To be successful, the rehabilitation of historic cities therefore has to go beyond mere restoration of monuments and other physical interventions. It must help generate active and relevant inner forces of local cultural and local communities. It must strengthen their capacity to creatively bridge the gap between past and future – in ways which are coherent with their own traditions and make the best possible use of their cultural and environmental assets.

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A for tracing the conceptual context within which the work of the Historic Cities Support Programme (HCSP) is taking place, let me now explain the operational parameters of the Programme within the Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC) and the larger Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN).

While the AKTC deals with many promotional aspects of architecture and the built environment in general – for instance through the Aga Khan Award for Architecture (AKRA), the Aga Khan Programme for Islamic Architecture and the entwined Asian Music Initiative – it is also actively involved in the restoration of historic buildings and conservation of historic cities. Accordingly, the HCSP was created to become the technical implementing agency of the Trust for all physical and social rehabilitation programmes in selected sites of the Islamic world. These projects are mostly funded by H.H. the Aga Khan. Funding and technical implementation being with the same organisation is a comparative advantage which has induced many other donors to provide funding for HCSP projects. Through the AKTC, the HCSP is also part of the larger Aga Khan Development Network, which includes, among others, the Aga Khan Foundation and the Aga Khan Fund for Economic De
The HCSP's most prominent feature is its integrated character of its projects, combining interactivity and many different disciplines and concerns. While conservation and restoration of monuments and landmark buildings are central concerns, they are not the only concern. The adaptive reuse of restored buildings—wherever possible—is considered from the beginning. In order to keep the building alive, provision is made for the physical intervention, which is made to communities 'own' the building and generate income for future operation and maintenance. Planning the future development and improving the urban context of restored historic buildings is equally important. Problems of land use, vehicular access, sanitation and location of economic activities have to be considered, and all sorts of interventions from conservation to modern infill and sensitive redevelopment need to be defined and controlled. In connection with the urban context, rehabilitation of private housing in the historical centres is an essential issue, in order to keep the city live, maintain an active social fabric and sustain the residents' commitment to their place of recreation and working. Direct funding of private housing improvement is often impossible and hence appropriate technical assistance, financial incentives and replicable pilot projects are required.

A rather important theme of HCSP projects is the upgrading and enhancement of public open spaces as an essential element in historic cities, which connect monuments, houses and public facilities, and can provide a focus for social and cultural activities and strengthen the sense of civic identity and pride. Investments in public open spaces and parks can renew the 'bad image' of complete districts and act as a catalyst for collateral private and public investment in historic areas.

A part from physical improvement projects, the HCSP in most project locations pursues associated socio-economic development activities and local capacity building. Such projects may include the promotion of local skills and crafts (sometimes as an offshoot of restoration activities), vocational training, small enterprise support, placement of unemployed labour, micro credits, projects in the fields of health, women and youth affairs, promotion of cultural tourism and corresponding events. In many cases, they are linked to the need of restored or rehabilitated buildings located in the context of communities concerned. This can also give rise to the formation of new local associations and NGOs, which become directly involved in the sustainable cooperation and management of their heritage and their built environment.

Training and institution building are also major concerns in the constitution of the Aga Khan Cultural Service Companies’ local affiliates of the AKTC and the HCSP in important project locations, which are associated with the implementation and management of project activities under the supervision of the headquarters in Geneva. They are also assisted by a roster of international experts in various technical fields whose prime task is to train capable local professionals and motivate them to carry on.

So far, the Historic Cities Support Programme has been pursuing revitalisation projects in seven quite different regions of the Islamic world: in the Northern Areas of Pakistan, Zanzibar, Samarkand, Cairo, Mostar (Bosnia Herzegovina), Syria and Afghanistan, including over twenty distinct projects, some of them interconnected and mutually reinforcing. In general, HCSP interventions are planned very pragmatically and while they start from an overall vision, they do not proceed according to abstract, preconceived schemes. Rather, they are based on gradual incremental growth in response to actual needs. Perceived opportunities and feed-back from field experience in involvement in single projects, locations or regions tend to expand in order to constitute the critical mass for positive change. If an environment is found to be responsive, the mountainous areas of the Islamic world: in the Northern Areas of Pakistan, Zanzibar, Samarkand, Cairo, Mostar (Bosnia Herzegovina), Syria and Afghanistan. Historically, the Northern Areas of Pakistan have been considered as part of the old Central Asian Silk Route, which was inaccessible to vehicular traffic until the construction of the Karakoram Highway in 1978. Increased accessibility coupled with the impact of tourism, has induced a rapid transformation of local societies and economic patterns, which calls for strategic development visions and procedures capable of steering ongoing rapid change.

Projects in Hunza and Baltistan include the restoration of several old forts and palaces (such as Baltit and Shigar) and other landmark buildings in conjunction with the rehabilitation of traditional settlements, as well as promotion of traditional crafts and construction techniques. Villages and neighbourhoods which were in danger of being deserted in favour of dispersed modern construction in the fields are being rehabilitated through the active involvement of residents—a fact which not only locates cultural awareness efforts, but also helps preserve the precious architectural and landscape heritage and reduces costs for infrastructure provision. Preserving local identity and at the same time introducing contemporary living standards (including sanitation) has been the key to the ongoing cultural development process, which is undertaken with the active involvement of the local population. Environmental planning strategies to preserve specific cultural assets in the light of
growing tourism are now being implemented through new local institutions such as Town Management Societies and Cultural Heritage Trusts.

In Zanzibar, the focal point of the Old Stone Town, one of the few truly cosmopolitan cultural sites in Eastern Africa (pls. 85, 86). It had its heyday in the eighteenth century when it became a meeting point between Omani, Indian (and, later, European) traders. Today, the Old Stone Town has been preserved and is a major tourist attraction.

Within the Old Stone Town, the conservation and restoration of the former Old Dispensary, the Old Customs House and the conversion of the former Extelcom Building have been completed. In the meantime, a conservation plan for the Old Stone Town has been prepared in cooperation with the Stone Town Conservation and Development Authority. A number of community-based housing improvement projects are being carried out to demonstrate the feasibility of traditional low-cost repair and maintenance techniques — a key issue for the survival of the Old Stone Town. A new urban design plan and an economic strategy are currently being prepared for the revitalization of the complete historic waterfront as a significant civic open space which, once enhanced, would spark further rehabilitation efforts in the Old Stone Town.

The historic city of Cairo is arguably the most important historic city in the Islamic world. While it has lost much of its pre-industrial urban fabric, its wealth of important monuments from various successive eras is still visible. The pressures emanating from the eighteen million-person metropolis on the historic city centre are enormous (particularly in terms of roads and vehicular access) and remaining green areas have become extremely scarce.

The involvement of Cairene residents in the rehabilitation of the historic waterfront began with the conversion of a wasteborne site (a filthy rubbish dump between the Fatimid city and the Mamluk cemetery) into a thirty-hectare urban park with many visitors facilities (pls. 75-77). This landscaping project will not only bring relief to the densest metropolitan agglomeration, but will also help transform the neglected adjacent old city and mobilize resources for its rehabilitation. Apart from the landscaping effort on the park slopes, 1.5 kilometres of the formerly buried twelfth-century city wall were brought to light and are now being restored. Near the wall and inside the district of al-Darb al-Ahmar, several mausoleums, old palaces and historic houses are being rehabilitated in an effort to revitalize the existing architectural heritage and make it accessible to the local community as well as visitors. In conjunction with physical upgrading, a wide range of socio-economic initiatives have been launched to provide residents with new opportunities, including training, employment, micro credits for small enterprises, health centres and women's associations. Many restored buildings are being reused for community purposes, in order to enhance the identification and solidarity of residents with historic buildings. Owners and tenants are also being provided with technical assistance, small grants and loans for housing improvement.

In Samarkand, another landmark city of Islamic architecture, the monuments have suffered from the stripping of their historic urban context and from their discontinued use (or conversion into museums) during the Russian period (pl. 81). Even the colonial and the modern city centre are in need of more conservational spaces.

In an effort to close these gaps through appropriate infill projects, the ESC has assisted the municipality in preparing a new master plan for the Timurid city, including urban design proposals for the revitalization of both the historic and the modern city centre. In addition, a number of pilot projects have been carried out in cooperation with local residents to demonstrate how the historic neighbourhoods can be upgraded without the need for wholesale demolition and excessive redevelopment.

The war-struck city of Mostar is a rare example of a partly Muslim city in Europe, with a long tradition of inter-cultural exchange and cooperation which came to an abrupt end with the collapse of former Yugoslavia (pls. 81, 82).

Projects here concentrate on the rehabilitation of the historic neighbourhoods adjacent to the famous Old Bridge (which is being restored by the joint efforts of UNESCO and the World Bank) and on the restoration of a number of key monuments destroyed during the civil war. Within the framework of a comprehensive master plan for the old city, several historic buildings and open spaces have been restored in close cooperation with the local authorities and residents, reclaiming the unique character of this multicultural city.

The Islamic heritage of Syria is rich and complex, as it is often built upon (or reused) pre-Islamic structures of Roman-Hellenistic, Byzantine or Crusader origins. Due to historic circumstances and topographic opportunities, Syria features a large number of citadels, some of them isolated, some of them now in the heart of historic urban agglomerations.

The Syrian Directorate of Antiquities requested the ESC to provide technical assistance and training for the conservation of the major citadels in Al-Lepe, Ma'arif (pl. 84) and Qadid Sabaheddin. The ongoing conservation work on the monuments is now being complemented by the establishment of detailed site management plans, as well as environmental studies aimed at controlling and enhancing development in the surroundings of the historic forts, two of them being located within an urban context, and one in a pristine natural setting.
In Afghanistan, an age-old cultural heritage has been under threat due to decades of political unrest, religious and ethnic conflicts, and interventions of foreign powers. In terms of Islamic culture, Afghanistan occupies a pivotal position, being an offshoot of Persian culture and a springboard for the Mughal accomplishments in India.

After the end of the civil war, an agreement was concluded by the AKTC with the Interim Administration to restore, rehabilitate and upgrade a number of important historic buildings and public open spaces in Kabul. These include the Park of Babur (the eldest Mughal 'paradise garden') and the Timur Shah Mausoleum, an important landmark set in the midst of the old markets and adjacent to a former garden and the Kabul riverbanks (pl. 79). Rehabilitation efforts have also been initiated in the historic residential neighbourhood of Ashkan i-Arefan in cooperation with local residents. Similar efforts are being considered for the heart of the old city of Herat, around the Chahar Suq area.

Having presented the current portfolio of the Programme, it should be said that the HCSP has no ambition to systematically cover complete regions, let alone the whole of the Islamic world. Rather it proceeds by selecting a limited number of project locations in the expectation that they will enable the Programme to demonstrate how a small-scale but integrated project set-up can be brought to fruition by a number of interactive initiatives rooted in the respective local community - or, in other words, how mutually supportive efforts in various domains, focused on a clearly identifiable stakeholder group of people, can coalesce into a critical mass and spark self-propelling cultural development. While the initial investment often has an experimental character and involves heavy training components by external experts, everything is done to make later phases of the project as replicable as possible, maximizing the use of local expertise and reducing project costs. Later phases of work also tend to show higher enrolment of local resources, as the demonstration effect has convinced people of the feasibility and can stir productive competition between local communities.

For illustrations of restoration projects by the Aga Khan Historic Cities Support Programme (HCSP), please refer to pls. 75-86.
Restoration projects by the Aga Khan Historic Cities Support Programme (HCSP) in various locations.

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HCSP, aerial view of the site for Azhar Park under construction, Cairo, Egypt, 2000.

HCSP, main spine, Azhar Park, Cairo, Egypt, 2004.

HCSP, the Ayyubid city wall (12th century) bordering Azhar Park, Cairo, Egypt, restored in 2003-ongoing.

HCSP, Khayrbek Complex (16th century) located between the Darb al-Ahmar spine and Azhar Park, Cairo, Egypt, restored in 2003-2005.


81. HCSP, Lakshita House, Mostar, Bosnia-Herzegovina, restored in 2002.

82. HCSP, Muzagugolic House, Mostar, Bosnia-Herzegovina, restored in 2002-2002.

83. HCSP, housing upgrading with the dome of the Guri Emir, Timur's funerary mosque and tomb, in the background, Samarkand, Uzbekistan, 1998.

84. HCSP, Castle of Masyaf (12th century), Masyaf, Syria, restored in 2002-2004.

85. HCSP, Zanzibar Old Stone Town, Zanzibar, Tanzania.