Project Scope / Objectives

The scope of the intervention includes documentation and conservation of historic buildings, together with the reclaiming and landscaping of public green space. Basic infrastructure has been upgraded, while the development of craft skills measures to enhance household livelihoods and support for neighbourhood planning initiatives are also within the programme.
thought to date from the mid nineteenth century and required stabilization of the entire structure. Historic photographs of the dwelling enabled the project team to ascertain the original decorative scheme, on which basis war-damaged parts of the internal moulded plaster decoration – including a series of recessed niches or chinikhana used for the display of porcelain – and timber screens within the main space on the first floor were restored. Here, as in other conservation projects, the documentation of the building has enabled a better understanding of the diversity of construction and decorative techniques used in the Old City over the past 120 years.

Even with some of its finest historic buildings restored, living conditions for many residents of the Old City remain poor, with widespread overcrowding and limited access to services within homes. The rehabilitation of traditional bathhouses or hammams, many of which were no longer operational, offered a means of improving family health and hygiene. For instance, the war-damaged domed structure of the hammam in the Shuturkhana neighbourhood was entirely rebuilt, and the traditional hypocaust system of heating its semi-subterranean spaces was rehabilitated. Reopened in late 2006 and managed by private operators, the hammam is used by more than 150 residents a day on average, and generates revenue that is used for upgrading public infrastructure in the surrounding area.

As part of efforts to improve living conditions for the residents of the Old City, nearly six kilometres of underground and surface drains have been repaired or rebuilt over the past eight years, while an area of more than 22,000 square metres of pedestrian alleyways and streets have been paved within the historic fabric.

The opportunities provided for residents to develop their skills and to find employment have been as important as the physical outcome of the conservation and rehabilitation work in Asheqan wa Arefan and adjoining residential neighbourhoods in the Old City. To date, nearly 320,000 workdays of skilled and unskilled labour have been generated among communities in the Old City, while more than 150 young men have undertaken apprenticeships as carpenters, masons and plasterers, working alongside highly skilled Afghan craftsmen. As part of an initiative aimed at improving family livelihoods, more than two hundred women from the neighbourhood have attended courses in tailoring, embroidery and kilim-weaving, along with literacy classes.

Phasing 2002 → ongoing
Challenges

PROJECT RISKS
Growing pressure on city-centre property presents a continuing threat, as does the absence of a coherent framework for urban development for Kabul as a whole.

SITE CONDITIONS
With some of the highest densities in the city, and access primarily by means of narrow alleys between fragile traditional homes, conservation and upgrading faced significant logistical and technical challenges.

DEMographics
All more than 300 persons per hectare, the historic quarters have some of the highest recorded residential densities in Kabul. Surveys indicate a 15% increase in residential population in District 1 between 2003 and 2005 alone.

HOUSEHOLD ECONOMY
With nearly half of households occupying rented property and two thirds of families dependent on a single income (usually derived from casual labour), the Old City is one of the poorest areas in Kabul.

AVAILABILITY OF DRINKING WATER AND PROPER SANITATION FACILITIES
The piped water network in District 1 suffered extensive war-related damage, and more than a third of families rely on public sources, where contamination is common. There is no mains sewage.

INFRASTRUCTURE
Decades of under-investment in drainage, water supply and electrical networks, coupled with extensive war damage, means that significant investments are required to achieve even the most basic levels of service coverage for a fast-growing population in District 1.

BUILDING CONDITIONS
Lack of maintenance, together with war-related damage, results in the bulk of the traditional housing stock being in a poor state of repair. Added to this, high levels of occupancy in subdivided homes pose a challenge to efforts to improve living conditions.

Significant Issues and Impact

DATA COLLECTION/SURVEYS
Since 2004, regular baseline surveys have been conducted in District 1, covering more than 30,000 people.

MASTER PLANNING PROCESS
The historic fabric within District 1 is designated for comprehensive ‘redevelopment’ in the various Master Plans drawn up for Kabul since the 1960s, but is now widely acknowledged to merit ‘special heritage zone’ status – even though there is no urban heritage policy to frame this.

PLANNING ISSUES
While several proposals for the rehabilitation of the historic quarters of Kabul have been drawn up since 2003, none has been formally adopted, nor have ‘neighbourhood plans’ been officially endorsed.

HISTORIC BUILDINGS/MONUMENTS CONSERVED
Since 2002, more than a dozen public buildings and 15 historic homes have been conserved within a cluster of historic fabric in the Old City.

COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT/PROGRAMME
All conservation and upgrading activities have been undertaken in close collaboration with community representatives, who have also served in managing and securing contributions to certain projects.

VOcATIONAL TRAINING/CAPACITY BUILDING
More than 100 craftsmen have been trained through apprenticeships during the course of the conservation work, and some 60 women continue to take part in vocational training.

PARTNERS
PUBLIC PARTNERS
Kabul Municipality, Ministries of Urban Development, Information and Culture, and Religious Affairs, Kabul Old City Commission.

PRIVATE PARTNERS
Property owners, businessmen, traders.

COMMUNITY PARTNERS
Community representatives.

Donors

Authoritative Framework
Memorandum of Understanding’ between Kabul Municipality, the Ministry of Information and Culture, and the Aga Khan Trust for Culture signed in 2002 for urban conservation programme in District 1.