Programme Scope / Objectives

AKTC’s role is to survey and document three Ottoman houses in Damascus’s Old City, and then preserve, restore and rehabilitate them for reuse as a boutique hotel. The project aims to illustrate the potential for beneficial change and to create architectural prototypes that strengthen typical Damascus structures against seismic activity. Overall, this is an attempt to create an asset for sustainable tourism in Damascus that can inspire urban regeneration in neighbouring areas.

Considered one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities, Damascus displays in its urban fabric the remains of the successive civilizations inhabiting its site, the latter being, before contemporary times, the Ottomans, who have profoundly marked the city during their four hundred years of presence. Among the most significant palaces constructed during the classical Ottoman period in Damascus are Bait Sibai and Bait Nizam. They are typical Syrian courtyard residences, the result of intensive reconstruction works after the earthquake of 1759 and refurbished several times according to the fashion of the time. Instead, Bait Quwatli, built in 1868, contemporary to the arrival of telegraph communication and rail transport, shows Western influence adapted to the local taste and construction methods.

The involvement of the Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC) in Damascus commenced in the last quarter of 2008 following the signature of project framework agreements in August 2008. AKTC and the Tourism Promotion Services of the Aga Khan Fund for Economic Development (AKFED) embarked on the development of two hotels of distinct nature: one converting the Aleppo municipal Serai dating from the early twentieth century; the other in the Old City of Damascus reusing three historical palaces – Bait Sibai, Nizam and Quwatli – that were carefully restored prior to conversion into a boutique hotel.

The properties, owned in the past by prominent Damascene families, had become government owned in 1974 and since then, in spite of temporary use as film sets or for receptions and high-profile events, had deteriorated to the point of collapse. Although major restoration was carried out by the authorities on Bait Sibai and Bait Nizam in the 1980s and on Bait Quwatli in the early 2000s, lack of use and maintenance led to rapid damage. When AKTC initiated architectural surveys and condition assessments, the analysis revealed that much of the damage was related to lack of use and maintenance. The buildings had also been subject to a large number of recent alterations.

The conceptual approach to the conservation of the palaces and adaptive reuse as a boutique hotel associated a cultural dimension of heritage conservation aimed at conserving the authenticity of the fabric and at ensuring long-term conservation and a for-profit activity of hospitality, providing economic opportunities...
Background

BRIEF HISTORY OF PROJECT SITE
Damascus, with six million inhabitants, is considered one of the world’s oldest continuously inhabited cities. This site is profoundly marked by 400 years of Ottoman presence. Bait Sibai and Bait Nizam are typical Middle Eastern courtyard residences, the result of intensive reconstruction works after the earthquake of 1759. Bait Quwatli, contemporary to the 19th-century arrival of telegraph communication and rail transport, shows Western influence adapted to local taste and construction methods.

Challenges

PROJECT RISKS
New uses for historic buildings might result in rising prices in the neighbourhood, and consequently induce gentrification. Socio-economic programmes are intended to balance such reactions. Heavy vehicular access, intensive commerce and a recent increase in international tourism can undermine the historical value and monumental qualities of the site.

SITE CONDITIONS
The Old City of Damascus remains an important centre of urban activity.

INFRASTRUCTURE
Parts of the site’s infrastructure date to the Roman era, but most of its electricity, water and sewage networks were built during the French Mandate period and require upgrades for future needs. Sewage and water leakage is seeping into and damaging the historic built fabric.

BUILDING CONDITIONS
Bait Sibai and Bait Nizam have undergone previous conservation works, using methods such as cement repair and synthetic varnish that damaged the historic fabric. Bait Quwatli was used as a school and a Palestinian refugee camp before being abandoned, and is today in very poor condition.

Significant Issues and Impact

DATA COLLECTION/SURVEYS
A comprehensive architectural survey of the three houses was conducted by a local team of young professionals, trained in total station and rectified photography.

HISTORIC BUILDINGS/MONUMENTS CONSERVED
In addition to Bait Sibai, Bait Quwatli and Bait Nizam, neighbouring remnants of an Ayyubid wall and a public fountain were included in the conservation project.

NEW BUILDING FACILITIES
Two modern, but obsolete structures were replaced by new buildings to accommodate the site’s infrastructure while displaying a form and scale more appropriate in design for the Old City.

VOCATIONAL TRAINING/CAPACITY BUILDING
The architectural survey and restoration project included conservation workshop in stone, wood, plaster and paint. It provided several recently graduated architects and other building professionals with an opportunity to acquire skills required for monument preservation, a field with potential in a city that includes a World Heritage Site.

CONTRACTING METHODS
Conservation work on areas with significant decorative or morphological value was carried out by labor directly recruited by AKTC. Reconstruction works were left to contractors under AKTC supervision.

Donors
Tourism Promotion Services.

Authoritative Framework

Partners

and social development in the area: employment, training, open-space upgrading and tourism. Conversion into a hotel facility, therefore, not only continues the previous use of the palaces as private residences but also guarantees to the authorities that the asset will be managed and maintained.

In functional terms, the large culturally-sensitive halls, located mainly on the ground floor around vast courtyards, are used for public functions, while the first-floor spaces were converted into high-standard guest rooms. To minimize the impact of modern hotel services in the existing buildings, a large portion of back-of-house, technical services and guest rooms were accommodated in two new buildings designed on adjacent plots in substitution of two obsolete concrete buildings: an elementary school and a fire brigade.

The Syrian authorities view this project as an opportunity to set high standards in the country for adaptive reuse initiatives in sensitive buildings, a booming trend in Syria that poses quality challenges. Thus, emphasis is given to project methodology and process, calling for a large variety of specialists, both Syrian and international, and an important component of training and capacity building of local professionals and craftsmen.

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