From its origins as an outpost of the Achaemenid Empire, the repeated strengthening of the Citadel of Qala Ikhtyaruddin, and the setting out of a walled settlement by the Ghaznavids, the city of Herat has had a turbulent history. Situated at the crossroads of regional trade, in the midst of rich irrigated agriculture, the area has been a prize for successive invaders. The city became a centre for Islamic culture and learning during the reign of Timur, whose successors commissioned several monumental buildings, but it then fell into decline under the Mughals. Considered part of Persia during the Safavid era in the eighteenth century, it was not until 1863 that Herat was incorporated into the emerging Afghan state.

The distinctive rectilinear layout of the city of Herat was delineated by massive earth walls that protected the bazaars and residential quarters that lay within. This was the extent of the city until the middle of the twentieth century, when administrative buildings were constructed outside of the walls to the northeast. In time, wealthier families moved away from the densely-inhabited historic fabric into suburbs that spread across what had been gardens to the north. The historic quarters remained home to some 60,000 people by the time that unrest broke out in 1979, resulting in the depopulation of the western quarters, where traditional buildings soon fell into disrepair or collapsed and infrastructure was looted or damaged. It was not until 1992 that clearance of mines and unexploded ordnance began, enabling families to resettle in the war-affected historic quarters and begin the process of rebuilding.

With a rapid increase in the urban population since 2002, pressure on central residential neighbourhoods has intensified, even though the state of infrastructure and the few public facilities result in poor living conditions for most inhabitants. In many cases, returnee families who had become accustomed to modern dwellings while in exile have demolished their traditional homes and, in the absence of building controls, built incongruous concrete structures, dozens of which now rise above the skyline of the Old City. Residential areas that adjoin main roads are rapidly being commercialized, with the construction of multi-storey ‘markets’ which have both an environmental and visual impact on the historic fabric.

In order to address these transformations, the programme of the Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC) in Herat has since 2005 involved processes of documentation, building conservation and upgrading, in parallel with measures to

Herat Area Programme

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In order to address these transformations, the programme of the Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC) in Herat has since 2005 involved processes of documentation, building conservation and upgrading, in parallel with measures to
strengthen the capacity of and coordination between key institutions. Given the pace of change, one of the first priorities was to map the historic fabric and establish systems for monitoring demolitions and new construction. A survey of more than 25,000 residential and commercial properties in the Old City, undertaken in 2005–06, yielded important information on the current urban environment, and this has now been mapped and linked to a database, which has proved to be a useful resource for identifying priorities for intervention and could also be invaluable for physical planning.

The prime focus of AKTC’s conservation work has been on two clusters of historic fabric, extending across the Bar Durrani and Abdullah Mesri quarters, where investments have been made in the conservation of key public buildings – mosques, cisterns and bazaars – as well as historic houses. A system of small-scale grants and building advice was also established, aimed at enabling some fifty owners of traditional homes to undertake basic repairs, which has resulted in improved living conditions while protecting the integrity of the historic fabric. As well as safeguarding historic property, these projects have provided a platform for the training of craftsmen, while demonstrating the potential of conservation and adaptive reuse in a context where there is a growing tendency to demolish historic property and ‘redevelop’.

At the centre of one such cluster lies the domed Chaḥar Suq Cistern, constructed in 1634, which, along with smaller cisterns, remained the primary source of water for inhabitants of the Old City until the 1970s. The massive structure supports a brick dome that spans nearly twenty metres over a square reservoir which, at the time of initial surveys, was filled with domestic waste. Extensive repairs were carried out on the war-damaged dome and the masonry substructure that had been weakened by encroachments from adjoining shops. An urban square has been created in front of the north entrance, after the relocation of shops that had encroached on this area. Since its conservation, the Chaḥar Suq Cistern has been in regular use for cultural events, including exhibitions and music recitals.

Of the other cisterns that have been conserved in the Old City, one is being used as an art gallery, another is being converted into a public library, while another serves as a study space for students of a madrasa. Among other initiatives aimed at promoting the adaptive reuse of historic buildings is the Karbasi House, now a school for traditional music and crafts, and the Yu Aw Synagogue that is now used as a kindergarten. Among the thirty other public buildings that have been conserved in the Old City are the historic conservation of religious buildings
Conservation of public buildings
Full-scale residential conservation
Small-scale residential repairs
Public access and infrastructure improvements
Public space upgrading

1. Qala Ikhtyaruddin
2. Chaḥar Suq Cistern
3. Mark Gremen and Mosque
4. Urban Upgrading
5. Karbazi House (Aga Khan Music Initiative School)
mosques of Hazrat Ali and Khaja Rokhband as well as several shrines, synagogues and a hammam or bathhouse. The largest single project to be undertaken in Herat by AKTC is the conservation of parts of the historic Citadel of Qala Ikhtyaruddin, where work began in late 2008 and is due for completion at the end of 2010.

Together with conservation of historic homes, these initiatives have provided opportunities for training in traditional construction and decorative techniques. Among the most significant of these dwellings is the Attarbashi House, which dates from the early twentieth century and retains distinctive northern and southern ranges of rooms (for use in summer and winter respectively), arranged around a courtyard. Traces of decorated plasterwork and intricate lattice orosi screens were found in a partially collapsed section of the house, which has been reconstructed, along with a small hammam for use by the family. To the south, in the Abdullah Mesri quarter, a very unusual painted mural was discovered in 2008 in the Ghulam Haider Posteen Doz House. Once the home of a wealthy family, the complex was found to be in a poor state of repair, and conservation work is under way on the structure, following documentation and stabilization of the mural.

As much as building conservation, however, the upgrading of infrastructure is critical to the future of the Old City of Herat. In order to contribute to the improvement of living conditions, nearly five kilometres of underground and surface drains have been repaired or rebuilt, and more than 6500 square metres of pedestrian alleyways and streets paved to facilitate access through the historic fabric. Together with the building conservation work, this has generated more than 240,000 workdays of skilled and unskilled labour, largely drawn from residents of the Old City, since 2005. Those investments have directly benefited at least half of the population of the Old City, prompting community-implemented improvements in some quarters that were not covered under AKTC’s urban conservation programme.

Aside from the physical challenges facing the historic fabric and the need for additional investment to render the Old City more habitable, the issue of management of the urban environment is now more critical than ever. Despite assurances that new development will be rigorously controlled, and appropriate plans drawn up to ensure safeguarding of the unique fabric of the Old City, city officials seem unable or unwilling to act to halt demolitions or inappropriate ‘redevelopment’. Given that many such officials lack the professional training or experience to effectively manage urban growth in this sensitive context, AKTC staff provide technical assistance to a Commission for the Safeguarding and Development of the Old City of Herat, comprising representatives from key institutions and professional bodies. While it has made limited progress on the reform of systems of building permits and the monitoring of new construction or demolitions, the Commission...
Challenges

PROGRAMME RISKS

While significant progress has been made in conservation of historic property and upgrading of community infra-
structure, the lack of control over private development continues to affect the integrity of the surviving historic fabric of the Old City.

SITE CONDITIONS

Residential areas in the Old City are densely populated, with homes often overcrowded, and access is primarily by means of narrow alleyways. This posed a challenge during the course of both conservation and upgrading works, as did the presence of unpaveded ordinaries.

DEMOGRAPHIC

With an average of 255 persons per hectare, the resi-
dential quarters in the Old City have some of the highest densities in Herat, and there are indications that this is increasing as the value of property race, and families are forced to move into overpopulated homes in what remains the most affordable part of the city.

HOUSEHOLD ECONOMY

A significant proportion of residents in the Old City in-
habits rents, and rely on casual labour for their livelihoods.

STATUS OF HEALTH AND EDUCATION

There are very few educational or health facilities within the Old City, and residents have to travel elsewhere to have access to these services.

AVAILABILITY OF DRINKING WATER AND PROPER SANITATION FACILITIES

More than a third of families in the Old City do not have access to a supply of safe piped water. While there is a system of underground drains, which have not upgraded in some quarters, most liquid waste flows into the 80 open cesspools that lie within the historic fabric.

ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERNS

With extensive war damage and limited access to basic infrastructure and services for residents of the Old City, environmental conditions are generally poor.

INFRASTRUCTURE

A legacy of under-investment in drainage, water supply and electrical networks, coupled with extensive war damage, requires significant investments to achieve even the most basic levels of service coverage for the resident population. Added to this, there are significant technical challenges in laying drains through the dense historic fabric of the Old City.

ACCESS TO OPEN SPACE

Deliberation of and enforcement on open spaces in the Old City is widespread.

BUILDING CONDITIONS

The combination of lack of maintenance and war-related damage means that the bulk of the traditional housing stock is in a poor state of repair.

Significant Issues and Impact

MASTER PLANNING PROCESS

The historic fabric of the Old City has been ignored in the various Master Plans drawn up for Herat since the 1970s and, although there is widespread support for it to be given some form of ‘typical heritage zone’ status, there exists no legal framework in which this might occur.

PLANNING ISSUES

A range of planning proposals for key clusters within the Old City has been drawn up, but none has been formally endorsed. Instead, development takes place in a largely ad hoc manner.

BASELINE STANDARDS

In 2005–06 a property survey was conducted in the Old City, covering more than 23,000 premises. Subse-
quent monitoring within the historic fabric has enabled physical transformations that continue to be tracked.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC INITIATIVES

Some 150 craftsmen have been trained through appren-
ticeships during the course of conservation works in Herat. The generation of employment through AKTC’s conservation and upgrading activities over nearly five years has, therefore, made an important contribution to the urban economy.

CONSERVATION ASPECTS

With many historic buildings in Herat and the environs requiring conservation, efforts have been focused since 2005 on clusters of historic property within the Old City, as well as the Shrine complex in Guzargah, which data from the 1970s end. All works have been undertaken in partnership with Afghan counterparts staff, in order to ensure that both crafts and profes-
sional skills are developed during the course of the works.

QUALITY OF LIFE

Efforts are being made to transform the areas around Qala' Alayhushaind into a public green space.

POST-IMPLEMENTATION PLANS

An Old City Commission has been established during the course of the conservation programme and is offi-
cially mandated to monitor development in the Old City and to oversee future planning initiatives.

Partners

PUBLIC PARTNERS

Herat Municipality, Office of the Governor, Departments of Urban Development, Information and Culture, and Religious Affairs.

PRIVATE PARTNERS

Herat Old City Commission, property owners, business-
men, traders, NGOs, Herat Professional Shura.

COMMUNITY PARTNERS

Community representatives.

Donors

Federal Republic of Germany, United States Embassy, Royal Norwegian Embassy, Prince Claus Fund.

Authoritative Framework

Memorandum of Understanding, between the depart-
ment of Historic Monuments of the Ministry of Information and Culture and AKTC agreed in 2005, covering the urban conservation works in the Old City. Separate agreement covering the conservation work on Qala' Alayhushaind agreed with the Ministry of Information and Culture in late 2005.