

Involvement of the Aga Khan Historic Cities Programme (AKHCP) in the urban regeneration process in Afghanistan began in Kabul in 2002 and in Herat in 2004, as part of the Aga Khan Development Network's contribution to the wider process of recovery and development in the country. While half a decade is a relatively modest period in the timeline of such ancient urban settlements, it is perhaps apt that the Programme pauses if ever so briefly to take stock of how far our initiatives have come from their point of origin, and how the enabling measures agreed with the government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and its key municipal agencies have contributed to what is an ongoing restorative process.

Urban regeneration in historic cities is perhaps one of the most intellectually and technically challenging enterprises that society as a whole and the urban planning community in particular can engage in, even under peacetime circumstances. Embarking on this multi-variable, multi-stakeholder and multi-phase process in a post-conflict situation such as Afghanistan has experienced in recent decades has been both a humbling and morally compelling mission. In the face of such wide-scale loss of urban housing, services and infrastructure – the basic elements of civic order – urban planning often can appear to be as much an act of faith as a technical undertaking.

Mediating between the global and the particular, the Historic Cities Programme has responded in Kabul and Herat, as elsewhere in its portfolio, with passion for the underlying cultural history of these historic environments and a sober sense of realism about present urban challenges. Sober because, while urban regeneration deals with the local, the causes of decay and failure are often, as seen here, regional, national and international as well. The underlying principle of the Programme's initial engagement, in the face of such collective suffering and urban destruction, has been that initial steps towards the urban regeneration of Kabul and Herat must tap the remaining vestiges and symbols of what were the cultural 'high points' of local achievement, using these as anchors in local area initiatives while engaging communities in a restorative planning and redevelopment process.

The programme selected three initial starting points for urban engagement in Kabul: the zone around and including the war-damaged Timur Shah Mausoleum, the historic residential district of Asheqan wa Arefan, and Baghe Babur, the garden retreat and ultimate resting place of the Mughal Emperor Babur. Since the early 16th century, this landmark garden has shaped Kabul in ways direct and indirect and left an urban landscape prototype that was to have lasting impact through continued refinement on the subcontinent. The three selected anchor points are significant as they have symbolically staked out a wider bound of territory pivotal to the urban identity of Kabul and served as poles around which its urban communities have coalesced and survived, transmitting their urban 'genetic code' through to the present day.

Historic Herat, instantly discernible from a nearly fully intact square intramural plan with cardo and decumanus, features an urban fabric in which the organic whole rules over individual structures. In Herat, the Programme has undertaken surveys and local area planning initiatives in the traditional quarters of the old city adjoining two historic cisterns currently being restored, and select remedial works for elements in the nearby Abdullah Ansari shrine at Guzargah, an historic complex and pilgrimage site to the city's northeast. In place for a shorter period, AKHCP initiatives in Herat have been shaped by the overriding objective to develop, with the Old City Commission, the institutional means to safeguard this historic city's main asset,



its spectacular visual and spatial integrity – weakened by the earlier periods of conflict and now ironically threatened increasingly by the larger, extramural forces of global capital and trade.

The following chapters provide detail on the Historic Cities Programme’s technical assistance to the Kabul and Herat Old City Commissions as well as area planning, monument conservation and site interventions launched in both cities to date. The project’s strength has depended on the intellectual and technical skills assembled within a team of dedicated and field-based urban and community planners, architects, historians, archaeologists, craftsmen, surveyors, and community and municipal representatives, working within painstakingly defined local initiatives on the understanding that only local actions, undertaken in co-ordination with local stakeholders, can have truly lasting impact. The work described in this brochure is testament to the dedication of this team who, together with the thousands of workers engaged on various sites, have braved regular security incidents and other adversities in the project’s course. This publication also allows AKTC to acknowledge the very significant level of collaboration – technical and financial – on the part of its many development partners in these initiatives, described in the credits on page 70. This brochure will have gone beyond its original intent of stock-taking if a larger set of resources is subsequently brought to bear on the myriad areas requiring attention.

The urban regeneration and community redevelopment processes initiated to date are not to be considered ‘finished product’ in the common sense. Urban planning is not an enterprise that is ever ‘completed’ in the sense normally associated with discrete projects, and continuous attention is required to consolidate and stabilise hard-won results. Cities have historically survived through their civilising and practical functions and have evolved as those functions have changed. As shown poignantly below in the case of Afghanistan, irrespective of specific local physical expression and historical development, our urban heritage is inextricably bound to our culture and prosperity: we neglect it at our peril.

