CONSERVATION IN THE ISLAMIC WORLD

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The clash between the aims of cultural conservation and the desire for modernisation has become a serious issue in light of the steadily diminishing residues of heritage, particularly in urban areas, leading to an increasing rejection of traditional values by many classes of society. The effects of these clashes are now at their most severe in the cities of Africa and Asia, where until recently the pace of modernisation was slow and societies were conservative. The last decade has seen a marked change in that situation, a change I have been particularly concerned with as an architect active in architectural and urban conservation and rehabilitation in those continents.

The new admiration for Western technology and culture has resulted in a sense of inferiority in many Islamic countries, sowing seeds of doubt about the value of their own achievements. A reaction against traditional society and traditional patterns of living has meant that it is difficult to persuade many people that their own culture is worth preserving. The result of this new feeling is especially profound in architecture. Destruction is produced not only through demolition but, as often as not, through tasteless remodelling and - even if the buildings are preserved - through a complete change in their setting. Multi-storey buildings now cluster around old mosques, which were once the most important and highest buildings in the landscape, their minarets lost amongst the skyscrapers.

Inhabitants of traditional Islamic countries cannot easily be convinced that the value of a building in its old form should over-ride its remodelling in the techniques of Western technology. This is partly because a genuine feeling of humility and modesty makes them underrate their own traditional buildings. The more recently a building was built, the more serious this problem is likely to be. To persuade someone that buildings three or four hundred years old should be preserved is not difficult as they are rare in any case. The problem is to persuade governments and ordinary people that the value of a building is not measured by its age in a traditional society where building traditions and patterns of use have been maintained for centuries without change. A building one generation old can be important, not only as a representative of a traditional style, but because it suits the needs of, and therefore facilitates, the sustaining in an active state of the handicrafts and ways of life of the society.

Contemporary city administrators and regional and urban planners are loathe to become involved in cultural conservation or the adaptive reuse of old buildings, neighbourhoods or city centres: the administrators, because the patterns of land ownership, rehousing, fixed rents and political ramifications among the people are often daunting; and the planners, because almost all their training is in the provision of new suburbs or new towns on virgin sites - they have practically no conceptual training in ways of improving existing urban fabrics of old types. Indeed the gulf between the Utopian ideologies of the new planners and the practical common sense fabrics that have evolved over centuries is extreme. Most planners simply do not know how to make the adjustment; they are unable to perceive, or unwilling to admit, the very real values inherent in traditional patterns.

On a practical level, both the politicians and the planners would generally prefer to clear an area in order to begin anew without all the attendant problems, complexities and unfamiliarities that urban and building conservation involves.

However, the total clearing of an area itself entails political repercussions. Sometimes, to avoid these the politicians and the planners are content with road widening or, even worse, with driving wide roads through traditional areas. Where individual buildings are thought to be of particular value they may be moved out of the way in their entirety (as was the case with the beautiful fourteenth-century mosque opposite Bab Zuwayla in Cairo). More often than not, however, the building is truncated so that a range of its rooms simply disappears completely, and the facade is rebuilt near the centre of its original plan. Where repairs are done to the public buildings or houses affected by road widening, the facades are moved back in this way - or worse, inferior makeshift facades replace the originals.

The effect of wide roads on the traditional fabric is generally catastrophic. The intimacy of the spaces in old cities was a reflection of the ease of interaction among its people, something which is unthinkable, let alone practicable, across wide roads filled with fast-moving traffic or through areas of parked cars. Furthermore, the relatively
narrow streets of traditional cities in hot climates ensured that they were in shade for a large part of each day, and therefore neither the people nor the buildings were exposed to the sun. Narrow sidestreets provided secluded, semi-private access spaces to neighbourhoods, which facilitated a sense of community and the enjoyment of life. With the intrusion of the motorcar, these lanes have become blocked, impassable and alien. Widening them, or knocking down buildings to provide parking spaces, does nothing to restore the communal seclusion and cohesion. In such developments, monuments become isolated instead of part of the continuous urban fabric.

Indeed, one of the characteristics of modernisation is a policy of deliberately isolating monuments that were never meant to be seen in isolation. The sea of parked cars around them is often the coup de grace to their original character.

There are also technical problems introduced by modernisation. Apart from pollution from the noxious gases produced by industry and vehicle exhausts, which accelerates the decay of building surfaces at an extraordinarily rapid rate, there are other alarming effects introduced by the modernisation of the urban environment.

One of the most visible of the technical problems, as well as one of the most serious, is the extent to which dampness is rising to unprecedented levels in the buildings. The reason for this can be stated very simply in each rapidly growing city: as the population density has gone up, water has been made available to more people in much greater quantities than ever before; but the infrastructure for draining that water out of the various areas of the city has usually not been supplied, or, if it has, has not been adequate in size or standard.

Consequently, the water draining into the ground creates a new 'perched' water table on top of the fine layer of clays accumulated from centuries of human habitation. This new water table gradually rises up to the point at which it causes damage to the buildings. In many cases the water is continually coming out at ground level to create pools in the streets. Water rising in the walls causes tremendous damage; add the fact that it is water polluted with acids from human and animal excrement and the problems increase. This is clearly, then, a major problem that must be solved in conserving buildings or rehabilitatating an old area, because the cost of rectifying it represents a major part of the total cost of any conservation or rehabilitation programme.

Another problem confronting efforts at conservation is traffic circulation. Not only does vibration destroy the individual buildings, but the increased number of motorised vehicles has tyrannised pedestrians and the narrow market streets have become impassable. Cars and trucks are parked everywhere, blocking the passages. Yet means have to be found of allowing cars and delivery vehicles into the old cities. One method being tried out is to allow...
traffic to a very limited number of streets in the old city and to limit the access of vehicles in the rest of the streets in the same area to restricted times at night and in the morning. Whether these policies are enforceable in many of the Islamic countries is another matter.

On a more hopeful note, this may be the place to interrupt this catalogue of disasters with the observation that all of the issues dealt with so far are also experienced and solved in non-Islamic countries. In the effort to Westernise, the Islamic world tends to overlook the fact that many Western countries are actively engaged in protecting their past and are making huge efforts to preserve their traditional environments. Germany, Holland, Italy, France, Poland, Czech and Slovak countries, to name but a few, have confronted and largely solved many of their seemingly intractable problems.

To return to the issues confronting conservation, deterioration from lack of maintenance is yet another major concern. Buildings constructed in the traditional ways in the Islamic world were meant to be maintained. It was an accepted part of life that, after the rains, repainting and replastering would be needed to repair any water damage, for if this was not done every year, deterioration would be extraordinarily rapid. Now annual maintenance is no longer an accepted part of life, and the consequences are severe. First the roofs decay, then the corners crack and fall away because the walls have been damaged by the rains. In no time at all fairly respectable multi-storey buildings become ruined single-storey structures. They are left as single-storey buildings and not allowed to totally collapse, simply because shopkeepers and craftspeople occupy the ground floor, and their rent in most traditional societies represents the bulk of the profit on a building investment. It is therefore in everyone's interest, including the owners', to maintain the ground floors. They waterproof the floors of what were once the first storeys (i.e., the ceilings of the ground floor), which have consequently become the roofs of the buildings.

Nor is this process limited to unprofitable rental buildings, where decaying structures can be attributed to the grasping mentality of landlords who allow their buildings to decay because the rents are too low. It is happening to some of the major monuments of Islam. In Cairo, probably thirty percent of the waqf properties in the old city are shrinking storey by storey; some have already reached the ground-floor level, with ghostly walls rising up three or four floors. In one waqf property in Cairo, in the canvas-makers' suq near the Bab Zuwayla, the upper levels of the suq—once beautifully designed and comfortable waqf houses—have all been allowed to decay. Yet this suq has always been regarded by everybody concerned with conservation in Cairo as one of the major monuments. We must come to terms with the principle of annual maintenance if we are going to talk about preserving and upgrading Islamic cities.

Natural disasters also pose more than just the obvious conservation problems. We tend to think only of immediate problems and ignore potential ones. In many areas of the Middle East, for example, flooding is frequent but not usually very serious as it can be controlled with diversion dams. Once every thirty, fifty or one hundred years, however, a major flood occurs. Everybody knows there will be one because the city has been washed away regularly once or twice a century for a thousand years. Nobody does anything about it, however, and one of the first priorities of any conservation scheme should be to take steps to anticipate the problem. Similarly, although there may not have been a major earthquake for decades or centuries, history tells us that they are possible throughout most of the Islamic world. Conservation efforts need to anticipate this possibility as well.

Land tenure in Muslim societies, as we know, is very different from that in the West. One of the ways it differs is that the people used to be responsible for the maintenance of the street in front of their houses. Street cleaning was a traditional task of the inhabitants of the abutting houses. These customs have rapidly fallen away in the last twenty years—in some places as recently as during the last six or seven years. In many old cities the inhabitants say, 'We're now living in modern states, we have powerful central governments, why should we continue to perform such tasks?' And so the litter accumulates, and the best intentioned efforts of municipal governments to provide cleaning and collecting facilities have yet to succeed.

Another aspect of land tenure—joint ownership due to inheritance—poses still other problems. Even buildings regarded as national monuments can be privately owned, and private ownership can involve so many members of a family that the protection and maintenance of the monument can be prevented through lack of agreement or for want of a single person to take responsibility.

In promoting conservation as one of the aspects of the Aga Khan Award, the organisers have attempted to focus attention upon the need to address such problems. Awards are given to projects which have developed conservation strategies which promise to be successful, and might therefore be studies as models for other projects. Some of these are discussed below.

The Shah Rukn-i-Alam tomb in Multan, Pakistan, dominates the city from a site high on the former citadel. Its dilapidated state, before conservation was undertaken, had a depressing effect on an ancient but vital city of craftsmen and artists. The tomb was conserved by architect Walli Ullah Khan in an exemplary fashion, using traditional techniques almost exclusively. A major effort was made to locate craftsmen who understood the ancient techniques of tile making and even more important, to locate sources of the mineral deposits for the unique coloured glazes of the craftsmen who originally made tiles for the tomb, six hundred years earlier, one such crafts-
man was found, and using his knowledge it proved possible to revive a craft which seemed completely lost. The unique heritage of the tomb decoration was restored in all its original glory. This work was preceded by the most painstaking reconstruction and strengthening of the original structure and repair of its brickwork. Although the tomb has been so thoroughly restored that some of its patina of age has been lost, the great achievement of the conservation project was twofold: a major medieval craft industry in Multan has been revived and continues to flourish, and the tomb today is revealed for the first time in centuries as one of the great achievements of Islamic architecture on the Indian subcontinent.

The Azem Palace in Damascus occupies a historic site in the ancient suq area close to the great Omayyad Mosque of al-Walid. As the largest accessible private dwelling in the historic centre, a focus for the revival of arts and crafts as well as a museum of traditional culture, its deplorable condition had become a symbol of decline in the old city. It was the dedication of the curator of the museum in the palace, Shafiq al-Imam, which led to its successful conservation. He supervised each stage of the work and undertook the location and training of the craftsmen employed on it. The result is the return to its full beauty of one of the most magnificent examples of the legendary Damascus Islamic palaces.

The third award was to a scheme that was actually intended by its sponsors, the German Archaeological Institute in Cairo, to have a direct impact on urban rehabilitation in the old city. By selecting five historic buildings for conservation in one traditional quarter, they hoped to provide the people of the neighbourhood with encouragement to undertake the renovation of their own houses. It was thought that such a seed planted in the old city might grow and spread to other areas. Here, the conservation work was initially undertaken by an architectural historian, Michael Meinecke, who achieved remarkable success with the first building to be renovated, the Madrasa al-Aniki. Subsequently, a young architect, Philip Speiser, joined Dr Meinecke on the work and completed the projects. The work of this team was characterised by the great care taken to locate and use the last of the master craftsmen surviving in Cairo, and by the willingness of the architects to learn traditional techniques and implement them wherever possible. It is notable that the money received from the Award was itself used to undertake another major conservation project adjoining the earlier work, the renovation of the Madrasa of Mohammed Nasr.

The first project for the conservation of an entire old city centre to receive an Aga Khan Award was that of Mostar in Yugoslavia in 1986. Here, one man, Dzhiaz Pasic, who had formerly been a regional conservation officer, took the initiative by forming an organisation, Stari-Grad, which persuaded the municipality of Mostar to waive taxes and concede control of services in a small area on either side of the famous single-span bridge crossing the Neretva River. While the buildings and streets were being brought back to the appearance they had a century earlier, the bridge itself was thoroughly studied and conserved. The demonstrable success of this first phase made it relatively easy for Pasic to persuade the authorities to grant him the same opportunities in a further thirty buildings surrounding the first zone. The enthusiasm engendered by this phase in visitors and townsmen alike enabled him to further extend his operations until, at the outbreak of the Yugoslavian Civil War, the entire area of the seventeenth-century town was part of the conservation scheme. By conserving, renovating and in a few cases, reconstructing, the old commercial and residential buildings of the town, Stari-Grad was able to finance conservation work on streets, services and public monuments. This demonstration of the self-sustaining ability of urban conservation was unfortunately brought to an end by the conflict in his country, with Mostar suffering more damage than many other centres. It is to be hoped that the strong condition to which the buildings had been returned will have reduced the damage they might otherwise have received, and that the example of Stari-Grad's work will inspire the eventual restoration of Mostar and many other towns like it in that country.

Also given an Aga Khan Award in 1986 was the conservation of the most hallowed shrines in the Islamic world, the al-Aqsa Mosque adjoining the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem. The Award initiated the restoration work on the dome of the mosque, which had deteriorated so far that water leakage had effectively obliterated the valuable painted decoration on the inner surface. All this was saved, the roof reconstructed, the paintings returned to their former glory, and the work extended to encompass the whole of the rest of the mosque and the structures of the gates and fountains of the Haram beyond. Encouraged by the Award, conservation of the great building of the Dome of the Rock itself is now being studied and considered.

The reconstruction and conservation of the Great Omari Mosque in the Lebanese city of Sidon received an Award in 1989, as did a second urban rehabilitation scheme, that of Asilah in Morocco. Interest in this old city had been generated by making it the focus of an annual Arts Festival, which, though small at first, became the biggest cultural event in Morocco and one of the most important in the Arab world. Impetus and the means to undertake the rehabilitation followed naturally.

In 1992 an Award was given to the strategy adopted in Kairouan in Tunisia of stimulating pride in an historic area and catalysing its rehabilitation through the conservation of key monuments. Funds for the conservation were obtained solely from entrance fees to the monuments. Many of the twelve conserved buildings were modified so
that they could house new functions, such as a school for
deaf children, social services and so on, which would
keep them active in the life of the community and ensure
that their rehabilitation would have maximum repercussion.
The expertise and experiences gained were then
made available for the renovation of private dwellings.
The physical welfare, training and employment of the
inhabitants were improved, as well as the visual attraction
of the city to residents and visitors.

In Istanbul, an initiative of the Towning Organisation in
repairing hotels, villas and small quarters of the old city
and its neighbouring villages received recognition in 1986,
and in 1992 the programme of the National Palaces Trust
in repairing and opening to the public the eight palaces
and thirty gardens of the Ottoman Sultans received an
Award. Each was accorded new functions so that it took a
place in the social life of the surrounding area and city.

The view that conservation is inevitably expensive has
been revised recently in the light of a number of significant
developments. Since the jolt given to the building
industries of Western countries following the oil crisis of
1973, it has been found that renovation of old buildings is
now generally cheaper than the construction of new ones
– resulting in a major turn around in attitudes to rehabilitation
and conservation. To this have been added new
studies by the World Bank and other agencies of the
economic benefits that might accrue to poor countries by
consolidating their building stock, and from the introduction
of innovative policies of incentive to encourage
regeneration in old cities as well as new constructions.

To conclude, we should consider responses to those
sceptics who question the value of conservation in
resource-poor developing societies. In addition to pre-
serving some of the world’s important cultural heritage,
conservation carries four benefits with it: identity, self-
respect, pride and utility.

A sense of identity needs to be generated afresh to
counteract the alienating effects produced in many a
people by the too-rapid changes of modern life. Paying
attention to continuity in the environment can help to do
that. Self-respect is being destroyed as people see their
values and lifestyle being denigrated in favour of imported
ideas; preserving contexts of national or regional lifestyles
may help to build it again. Only one step beyond this is
the positive cultivation of pride in the achievement of
one’s forebears and in the unique heritage that they have
passed on to their descendants.

Social anthropologists reason that culture is a complex
and fundamental part of the human spirit, much of it
appreciated and relied upon subconsciously. It may be
tampered with only at the peril of the whole society. And
many believe that the man-made environment is one of
the major artefacts among the cultural achievements of
society. Hence its conservation is of great significance.

I have put utility last. The benefits of studies of func-
tion come firstly from practical observations of the lessons
of the past: how harsh climates were dealt with; how
people built when there was little choice but to rely on
local materials and technologies; and how social tensions
were accommodated and communal cohesiveness culti-
vated through the forms generated in the environment.
Practical utilitarian benefits may also be achieved by
observing that valuable commercial processes – the
production of crafts and the provision in a traditional suq
of a vast diversity of goods – are facilitated by special
building conformations evolved over centuries. Utilitarian
benefits might also include some investment return
through tourism – although this is a mixed benefit which
needs to be carefully handled.

The clash between cultural conservation and moderni-
sation should be a thing of the past. Today conservation is
seen as being as one with development, an integral and
inevitable partnership. Only in this way will the human
and material resources of a country be fully utilised.