Stefano Bianca

Urban Conservation in the Islamic World
The Aga Khan Trust for Culture

Given the complexity and the overwhelming size of the problem of historic cities in the Islamic world, it is not easy to cover the subject in a few pages.

However, generalising may also help bring into focus the essential issues: While the specific conditions may vary from country to country and from city to city, many common issues and problems emerge with regard to urban conservation and development. Historic cities in the Islamic world have in a way remained (or have become) villages in private gardens (i.e., the centre of rather anonymous, rapidly developing urban agglomerations).

Today, these «urban villages» are subject to all sorts of powerful pressures. Let me just mention some of the most obvious and ubiquitous factors:

- the impact of vehicular traffic and corresponding disruption of the physical and social fabric of the city;
- speculative real estate trends linked with vehicular accessibility which introduce new land-use hierarchies and disparities within the urban fabric;
- new standards of services, facilities and sanitation which usually are neither adapted nor integrated into the historic fabric;
- the demographic changes involving the emigration of the wealthy local bourgeoisie from the historic centre to new residential suburbs, and, reciprocally, the immigration of a poorer rural population flocking in to the cities and adopting the historic centre as a location of choice;
- crowding of a poor population in a partitioned historic housing stock with lack of maintenance;
- proliferation of uncontrolled semi-industrial activities in the historic city centre; and, perhaps most importantly,
- the loss of «image» and prestige of the historic centres vis-à-vis the glamour of sometimes misconceived «modernity». This attitude results in a dramatic lack of investment by the private and public sectors, denying the historic city the means it would need to evolve and transform from within, i.e., following its own premises and potentials.

Yet, in spite of their relatively small size and all sorts of physical and social decline, it is these «urban villages» which often remain the only custodians and dispensers of cultural identity in the metropolitan agglomerations mushrooming around them. Apparently a technology-driven development—regardless of the material progress it brought—has been unable to build upon (let alone replace) the cultural matrix from which historic cities have emerged and from which they drew their spiritual dimension, visual qualities and emotional comfort.

Facing this situation, we cannot avoid asking: why have historic cities—which used to be lively, creative and continuously evolving urban entities—suddenly become «historic»? What is the rationale for the rather sterile type of conservation, which would freeze still-functioning buildings and urban districts like museum artefacts in an arbitrary stage of their evolution? Is there an alternative to rampant decline, eventual wholesale demolition and alien replacement?

One could argue that the conventional conservation approach is nothing else than the shadow of a single-minded concept of modernisation and «progress»—the logical response to it. Both attitudes are indeed interdependent—and even synonymous, inasmuch as they have equally lost sight of the holistic essence of human existence and of culture as a primordial driving force of human life. This brings us right into the heart of the problem: the fatal dichotomy between «conservation» and «development», which acts like a dissolving agent in the complex, composite body of any living traditional culture, as soon as it becomes virulent.

Traditionally, culture always had a multi-dimensional quality because of its capacity to interweave material, emotional and spiritual concerns in successive loops of creative evolution. Its products thus had, by nature, the imprint of organic growth—similar to a beautiful garden, to use a convenient metaphor. Technological progress, in many cases, involves a reductionist approach based on abstract, rational procedures, isolated material concerns and exclusive economic considerations, which tend to ignore the richness of human potential and aspirations. If not inspired and balanced by other factors, technology-driven interventions can thus become highly destructive, particularly if they draw their energies and dynamics—as it often happens—from disintegrating the complex web of local culture. No wonder that such abuses often result in the emergence of economically striving, but spiritually lifeless «urban deserts».

Thus, through its very limitations and excesses, an aggressive type of narrow-minded, dogmatic development automatically calls for the antidote of an equally rigid conservation approach and the induced polarisation causes both sides to lose out. Excessive development—particularly if based on alien philosophies—finds itself inevitably to set roots in the social ground and to acquire deeper meaning and truth, i.e., to engage people with their hearts and minds. Meanwhile, excessive conservation can suffocate and sterilise living cultural expressions, and can eventually become abortive to the creative impulses of a living community. Both extremes lead to a loss of real cultural presence: they deprive societies of the vital juices which could generate a self-reliant, «organic» spiral of internal evolution.

Domesticated type of development

Finding the productive middle ground between two sterile extremes is therefore essential for any cultural development effort, if it is to become fruitful. For one can neither afford to dispense with the creative sources of culture, nor disregard the material benefits of an appropriate «domesticated» type of development. However, producing a creative interaction between culture and development is not just a matter of abstract strategies and procedures. It can only be achieved pragmatically, case by case, through empathetic immersion in concrete situations, i.e., through grounding actual projects in the realities of specific places and specific communities.
This means, on the one hand, promoting develop-
ment by mobilising internal cultural pro-
cesses, i.e., by designing projects which are root-
ed in the life of local beneficiaries and can be sus-
tained by them. On the other hand, it also means
strengthening culture through adapted develop-
ment impulses which rely on appropriate (and af-
fordable) technological tools, provided they can be
absorbed and managed by the actual stake-
holders, i.e., the people directly concerned. To be
successful, the rehabilitation of historic cities the-
therefore has to go beyond mere restoration of mu-
ments and other physical interventions. It must help
re-activate and release the vital inner forces of
local cultures and local communities. It must
strengthen their capacity to creatively bridge
the gap between past and future — in ways which are
coherent with their own traditions and make the
best possible use of their cultural and environ-
mental assets.

The Historic Cities Support Program

After tracing the conceptual context within
which any intervention in historic cities in the
Muslim world has to place itself, let me now
explain the operational parameters of the Historic
Cities Support Programme (HCSP) within the
Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC) and the lar-
ger Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN).

While AKTC deals with many promotional
aspects of architecture, culture and the built en-
vironment in general — for instance through the
Aga Khan Award for Architecture, ArchNet, the
Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture and
the Central Asian Music Initiative — it is also ac-
tively involved in the restoration of historic build-
ings and conservation of historic cities. Ac-
cordingly, HCSP was created to become the tech-
nical implementing agency of the Trust for all phy-
sical and social rehabilitation programmes in se-
lected sites of the Islamic world, these projects
being mostly funded by His Highness the Aga
Khan. Funding and technical implementation
being with the same organisation is a compara-
tive advantage which has induced many other do-
nors to provide co-funding to HCSP projects.
Through AKTC, HCSP is also part of the larger
Aga Khan Development Network, which inclu-
des, among others, the Aga Khan Foundation
and the Aga Khan Fund for Economic Develop-
ment. This means that it can rely on the interaction
between culture and development by benefiting from
the Foundation's track record in health, educa-
tion and rural development projects, as well as from
micro-credits and tourism investments provided by
AKFD.

HCSP's most prominent feature is the inte-
grated character of its projects, combining inter-
actively many different disciplines and concerns.
While conservation and restoration of monu-
ments and landmark buildings are central con-
cerns, they are never done in isolation. The ad-
aptive re-use of restored buildings — wherever possible — is considered from the beginning, in
order to keep the building alive, provide meaning to the physical intervention, make local com-
nunities «own» the building and generate income for future operation and maintenance. Planning
the future development and improving the urban context of restored historic buildings is equally
important.

Problems of land use, vehicular access, san-
titation and pollution in historic centres (HCSP) are
inherent, and all sorts of interventions from
conservation to modern infill and sensitive rede-
glevelopment need to be defined and controlled.
In connection with the urban context, rehabilitation of
private housing in the historic centres is an es-
sential issue, in order to keep the city alive, main-
tain an active social fabric and sustain the resi-
dents' commitment to their place of living and
working. Direct funding of private housing im-
provement is often impossible and hence appro-
priate technical assistance, financial incentives
and replicable pilot projects are required.

Another important theme of HCSP projects is
upgrading and enhancement of public open spa-
ces, an important element in historic cities, which
connect monuments, houses and public facilities, and
provide a focus for social and cultural ac-
tivities and strengthen the sense of civic identity
and pride. Investments in open public spaces and
parks can reverse the «bad image» of complete
districts and act as a catalyst for collateral priva-
te and public investment in historic areas.

Apart from physical improvement projects, HCSP in most project locations pursues associa-
ted socio-economic development activities and
local capacity-building. Socio-economic projects
may include revival and promotion of local skills
and crafts (sometimes as an offspring of restora-
tion activities), vocational training, small enter-
prise support, placement of employment la-
bour, micro-credits, projects in the fields of
health, women and youth affairs, promotion of
cultural tourism and corresponding events. In
many cases, such projects are linked to the re-
use of restored or rehabilitated buildings located
within domain of the communities concerned. This

e

Fils succède père
Colloque SSMOCI-EPFZ

Le 9 mai 2003 une quarantaine de personnes
se sont réunies à Zurich dans les locaux de la
Sternwarte, l’ancienne Observatoire, pour se
pencher sur le phénomène du transfert de pou-
voir dans les pays arabes à l’époque contem-
poraine. En effet, plusieurs pays arabes (Jor-
danie, Maroc, Syrie) ont connu récemment un
changement de chef d’état. Par ailleurs dans
trois pays arabes au régime républicain (Égyp-
te, Libye, Iraq jusqu’en mars 2003) un dirige-
ant longtemps au pouvoir serait en train de
préparer son fils à la succession. Le transfert de
pouvoir dans les monarchies actuelles re-
présente-t-il simplement la continuation d’une
tradition ? Comment interpréter le phé-
nomène de « monarchisation » du pouvoir dans
des pays comme la Syrie ou l’Égypte ? Et le
changement de chef d’état, signifie-t-il l’intro-
duction de réformes politiques, économiques ou
sociales ?

Peter Sluglett a fait un tour d’horizon des
monarchies dans le monde arabe d’aujour-
d’hui, soulignant que leurs structures avaient été
élaborées au XXe siècle sous l’influence de l’
Angleterre ou de la France et établissant des
parallèles avec des monarchies ailleurs. Les in-
terventions suivantes ont porté sur des cas spé-
cifiques. Ainsi, Alan George a indiqué le peu
de marge de manœuvre qu’a le jeune président
syrien Bashar al-Assad, dans le système poli-
tique et économique sclérosé qu’il a hérité de
son père. En Égypte, comme Robert Spring-
berg a montré, le Président Mubarak est en
train de préparer la succession de son fils, ga-
rante de stabilité et de la continuité de l’équipe
gouvernante, mais au prix des concessions en po-
litique étrangère que les États-Unis demandent
de lui. Mais quand en Libye l’ancien révolu-
 tionnaire Qadhafi destine son fils à lui succé-
der, ce serait selon Mossef Dajzari, un pas
autant vers la genèse de l’État que vers la sta-
bilité politique. Jean-Christophe Augé a relevé
comment le roi Abdallah a choisi dans la péri-
ode de crise actuelle de mettre l’accent sur le
sens de l’identité jordanienne pour renforcer la
cohésion de son pays. Pour le Maroc, Abdal-
hay Mouden a contesté la théorie traditionali-
ste utilisée d’habitude pour analyser la monar-
chie marocaine, relevant que le roi Mohammed
VI a su donner à des gestes symboliques con-
ventionnels une nouvelle signification. Enfin,
Viktor Kocher a brossé un tableau plutôt som-
bre de la capacité de certains régimes de la
région à s’ouvrir à une participation plus large des
citoyens à la politique.

Hilary Kilpatrick
can also give rise to the formation of new local associations and NGOs which become actively involved in the sustainable operation and management of their heritage and their built environment.

Training and institution-building are also major concerns in the constitution of the Aga Khan Cultural Service Companies - local affiliates of AKT and HCSP in important project locations which are entrusted with the implementation and management of project activities under the supervision of the headquarter staff from HCSP Geneva. They are also assisted by a roster of international experts in various technical fields whose prime task is to train capable local professionals and motivate them to carry on.

The individual projects

Since its inception in 1992, the Historic Cities Support Programme is or has been pursuing revitalisation projects in seven quite different regions of the Islamic world, i.e., in the Northern Areas of Pakistan, Zanzibar, Samarkand, Cairo, Mostar (Bosnia), Syria and Afghanistan, including over twenty different projects, some of them interconnected and mutually reinforcing. In general, HCSP interventions are planned very pragmatically, and while they start from an overall vision, they do not proceed according to abstract, preconceived schemes. Rather, they are based on gradual incremental growth in response to actual needs, perceived opportunities and feedback from field experience. Involvement in single project locations or regions tends to expand in order to constitute a critical mass for positive change, if the environment is found to be responsive. In all project locations, community participation, training of local professionals and local institution-building are essential components. While overall agreements with central government authorities are usually sought for HCSP projects, the actual work proceeds in close cooperation possible with local government and stakeholders. Many other institutions, such as the Getty Grant Program, the World Monuments Fund, the Ford Foundation, the Swiss, Swedish and Norwegian bilateral aid organisations and the World Bank have provided co-funding or collateral funding to HCSP activities.

In the Northern Areas of Pakistan, HCSP activities are focused on the high valleys of Hunza and Baltistan, in the Karakorum range. This whole area, a part of the old Central Asian Silk Route, was inaccessible to vehicular traffic until the construction of the Karakorum Highway in 1978. Increased accessibility, coupled with the impact of tourism, has induced a rapid transformation of local societies and economic patterns, which calls for strategic development visions and processes capable of steering ongoing rapid change.

Projects in Hunza and Baltistan include the restoration of several old forts and palaces (such as Baltit and Shigar) and other landmark buildings in conjunction with rehabilitation of traditional settlements, as well as promotion of traditional crafts and construction techniques. Villages and neighbourhoods which were in danger of being deserted in favour of dispersed modern construction in the fields are now being rehabilitated through active efforts of residents - a fact which not only boosts cultural awareness efforts, but also helps preserve the precious terraced landscape and reduces costs for infrastructure provision. Preserving local identity and at the same time introducing contemporary living standards (including sanitation) has been the key to the ongoing cultural development process, which is undertaken with the active involvement of the local population.

Environmental planning strategies to preserve specific cultural assets in the light of growing tourism are now being implemented through new local institutions such as Town Management Societies and Cultural Heritage Trusts.

In Zanzibar, the focus is on the Old Stone Town, one of the few truly cosmopolitan cultural sites in Eastern Africa. It had its key days in the 19th century, when it became a meeting point between Omani, Indian (and, later, European) influences merging in the Swahili culture. Political upheavals in the 1960s resulted in major demographic and socio-economic changes. Many of the beautiful old houses from the Omani period have been partitioned and are in lack of proper maintenance.

Within the Old Stone Town, HCSP has completed the restoration of the former «Old Dispensary», the «Old Customs House» and the conversion of the former Extecon building - formerly empty landmark buildings on the waterfront now being put to new uses, some of them related to tourism. In parallel, a conservation plan for the Old Stone Town has been prepared in cooperation with the Stone Town Conservation and Development Authority. A number of community development projects are being carried out to demonstrate the feasibility of traditional low-cost repair and maintenance techniques - a key issue for the survival of the Old Stone Town. A new urban design plan and an economic strategy are currently being prepared for the rehabilitation of the complete historic waterfront as a significant civic open space which, once enhanced, would spark further rehabilitation efforts in the Old Stone Town.

The old city of Cairo is arguably the most important historic city in the Islamic world. While it has lost much of its pre-industrial urban fabric, its wealth of important monuments from various successive dynasties is unrivalled. The pressures emanating from the 18 million-persons metropolis on the historic city centre are enormous (particularly in terms of roads and vehicular access) and remaining green areas have become extremely scarce.

HCSP’s involvement in Cairo started with the conversion of a vast barren site (a hilly rubble dump between the Fatimid city and the Maniall cemetery) into a 30-hectare urban park with many visitors’ facilities. This landscaping project will not only bring relief to the dense metropolitan agglomeration, but will also help transform the image of the adjacent old city and mobilise resources for its rehabilitation. As part of the grading effort on the park slopes, 1.5 kilometres of the formerly buried 12th-century city wall were brought to light and are now being restored. Near the wall and inside the district of Darb al-Ahmar, several mosques, old palaces and historic houses are being rehabilitated in an effort to revitalise the existing architectural heritage and make it accessible to the local community as well as visitors. In conjunction with physical upgrading, a wide range of socio-economic initiatives have been launched to provide residents with new opportunities, including training, employment, microcredits for small enterprises, health centres and women’s associations. Many restored buildings are being re-used for community purposes, in order to enhance the identification and solidarity of residents with historic buildings. Owners and tenants are also being provided with essential assistance, small grants and loans for housing improvement.

Samarkand and Mostar

In Samarkand, another landmark city of Islamic architecture, the monuments have suffered from the stripping of their historic urban context and from their discontinued use (or conversion into museums) during the Russian period. Even the colonial and the modern city centre are in need of more convivial spaces.

In an effort to close these gaps through appropriate initiatives, HCSP has assisted the municipality in preparing a new master plan for the Timurid city, including urban design proposals for the revitalisation of both the historic and the modern city centre. In addition, a number of
pilot projects have been carried out in cooperation with local residents to demonstrate how the historic neighbourhoods can be upgraded without the need for wholesale demolition and excessive redevelopment.

The war-struck city of Mostar is a rare example of a partly Muslim city in Europe, with a long tradition of cultural exchange and public cooperation which came to an abrupt end with the collapse of former Yugoslavia. Projects here concentrate on the rehabilitation of the historic neighbourhoods adjacent to the famous Old Bridge (which is being restored by the joint efforts of UNESCO and the World Bank) and on the restoration of a number of key monuments destroyed during the civil war. Within the framework of a complete master plan for the old city, several historic buildings and open spaces have been restored in close cooperation with the local authorities and residents, reclaiming the unique character of this multicultural city.

**Syria and Afghanistan**

The Islamic heritage of Syria is rich and complex, as it is often built upon (or re-used) pre-Islamic structures of Roman-Hellenistic, Byzantine, and medieval periods. Due to historic circumstances and topographic opportunities, Syria features a large number of citadels, some of them isolated, some of them now in the heart of historic urban agglomerations.

The Syrian Directorate of Antiquities requested HCS as part of technical assistance and training for the conservation of three major citadels in Aleppo, Masyaf and Qalat Salih al-Din. The ongoing conservation work on the monuments is now being complemented by the establishment of a detailed site management plan, as well as by environmental studies aimed at controlling and enhancing development in the surroundings of these areas. One of the challenges of this project is to balance the needs of the local community with the preservation of the cultural heritage.

**Conclusion**

Having presented the current portfolio of the Programme, it should be said that HCS has no ambition to systematically cover complete regions, but to focus on the holistic development of the entire Islamic world. Rather it proceeds by selecting a limited number of projects to be executed in the future. One of the key outcomes of the project is the establishment of a network of local partners, who will be able to demonstrate how a small-scale, yet integrated project set-up can be brought to fruition by a number of interactive initiatives rooted in the respective local community – or, in other words, how mutually supporting efforts in various domains, focussed on a clearly identifiable site and group of people, can coalesce into a critical mass and spark a self-propelling cultural development.

While the initial investment often has an experimental character and involves heavy training components by external experts, everything is done to make later phases of the project as replicable as possible, maximising the use of local expertise and reducing project costs. Later phases of work also tend to show higher engagement of local resources, as the demonstration effect has convinced people of the feasibility and can stir productive competition between local communities.