

Middle East
AHMED SEDKY

The historical city centres in the Middle East are very well endowed with artefacts and significant architecture. The urban fabric found within these rich contexts can be said to be the binding force of cultural heritage, along with the social qualities and values that are integrated into these urban environments. Yet modernity, globalization, and many other vehicles of radical change have severely affected the traditional urban phenomena of the Middle East. Urban conservation has therefore become imperative, surpassing the typical limited concerns of the restoration and preservation of historical buildings in the region.

Regional Cooperation of Urban Conservation in the Middle East

■
**Anbar Office,
Headquarter of
the Committee of
the Revitalization
of Old Damascus.**



■
**A deteriorating
traditional
wooden house
away from tourist
areas, near
Istanbul
University.**



■
**Modern
architecture with
a traditional
image,
Sulaymaniyya
Mosque Area,
Istanbul, Turkey.**



■
**The neo-Islamic building of
Mashiyakhat al-Azhar and the location
of the air-condition factory Al-Azhar
Tunnel, Al-Azhar Square, a very prob-
lematic area, the Revitalization of the
Fatimid Cairo Project.**



■
**Major conservation project of Suq
Barghut Area, Beirut. An example
of the private sector conservation
projects focusing only on the physical
aspects of the area.**



■
**Al-Nasr Road,
a few metres from
the walled Old
City of Damascus.
Old demolished
buildings and
complete
historical areas
eroded before
the new
development.**



Conservation in the Middle East today is generally meant for complete quarters. Several projects have been conducted in the region to confront the swift deterioration of certain areas. The crucial questions now being posed relate to how urban conservation should be carried out and even how to define it within the specific Middle Eastern context: Is it a kind of wide restoration that covers entire buildings and streets? Is its effectiveness determined by whether a synchronic approach to preserving the past is employed? And if not, if we involve people, namely the occupants, in the area of the conservation process, thus inciting urban regeneration, to what extent can we intervene? Another valid question concerns the criteria to be used in evaluating such projects.

An exploratory approach was taken in carrying out the present research, the aim of which was to compile contextual considerations of urban conservation that can emerge from a deep understanding of the studied phenomena, their potentials, problems, and possible answers. Therefore, surveying the conservation conceptions and built-environment problems of different cases proved to be the best tool for exploring the meaning and the actual problems of urban conservation in the Middle East.

It is vital to find a common base for various urban conservation considerations or guidelines. The latter term can tend towards rigidity, whereas the very nature of the conservation process implies variety, including regional variety. This often leads planners and professionals to function in a very speculative mode when responding to problems or suggesting intervention during both the design and implementation phases of urban conservation projects.

In order to avoid presuppositions and to maintain a contextual base for all potential considerations, a naturalistic paradigm of research has been followed, while the exploratory approach allowed for the problems to be defined and answers to be suggested with respect to the given data.

An initial expedition to Istanbul and Antalya, Turkey, was followed by another to the Fertile Crescent Region (financed by the Barakat Trust, UK). These were accompanied by a pilot study of the ongoing 'Revitalization of the Fatimid' project in Cairo. The study covered the projects that have been carried out in the following cities: Amman and Umm Qais (Jordan); Damascus and Aleppo (Syria); Beirut and Tripoli (Lebanon); and Cairo (Egypt).

All of these countries share several similarities, both culturally and in terms of the development process. They were the first to be exposed to European influences before and after colonialism. Moreover, religious and political bonds have played a substantial role in creating strong interaction among different cities of this entire zone of the Middle East even since before the Mamluk Period (1250-1517 AD). It is for this rea-

son that these countries were chosen for the initial phase of the present inquiry – a choice which offered maximum consistency in terms of the urban environments of these countries' historical quarters – almost all of which are experiencing threats to and deterioration of their traditional urban fabric.

Such an undertaking requires deep awareness of the potential and requirements of the given contexts, and the relevant ecological and demographic systems. It is necessary to develop a framework proper to urban conservation, which can only emerge from such awareness. This, however, necessitates the accumulation and integration of knowledge and experiences gained from the various ongoing and completed urban conservation projects in different parts in the Middle East.

What is needed is regional cooperation among the many professionals involved in the urban conservation processes of the Middle East. A forum could contribute to such cooperation by encouraging discussion and presenting the experiences and plans of those involved. Initially, the meanings of the historical quarters, their present function, and what they mean within their contemporary context would have to be clearly defined. Urban conservation as such should also be defined. Furthermore, questions about the type of intervention necessary for sustainable and effective conservation should be raised.

Such an undertaking responds to the strong call for establishing a regional committee on urban conservation, composed of coordinators as well as research members representing each of the concerned Middle Eastern countries. All coordinators with their associated teams would have the task of maintaining contacts and cooperation with the local institutions and NGOs. There are several real attempts already underway to realize this goal. Regional events can also secure the exchange of information as a step towards synthesizing a regional charter on urban conservation.

A practical step has been taken to organize the First Regional Conference of Urban Conservation in the Middle East, under the auspices of the Jordanian University of Science and Technology (JUST) to be held in the fall of 2001. The main objective of this event is to establish a regional link among the professionals and activists in the field and to pave the way for the much-needed accumulation of experiences in the field. ◆

*Ahmed Sedky is a PhD candidate at the School of Architecture, Edinburgh, UK. His research focuses on the contextual considerations of urban conservation in the Middle East. He is also the co-organizer of the First Regional Conference of Urban Conservation in the Middle East (see Academic Meetings, p.39).
E-mail: sedkyahmed@hotmail.com*