

THE MUSLIM URBAN HERITAGE — A CASE FOR CARE AND CONSERVATION

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JUST as peoples and nations each have their distinctive history, culture and traditions, the towns and cities which they create and live in have their own particular urban history, social culture and local tradition. Each city is unique, but in an historic city, tradition, society, art and customs combine to emphasise individuality, to make it different from any other city anywhere else. The fate of a civilisation is ultimately reflected in the fate of its cities, for like the people who bring them into being, they thrive and prosper, or wilt and die.

The heritage of a nation, that is, all that constitutes the visible evidence of the accumulated achievements of former generations — be they urban, aesthetic, intellectual or technical — embodies the refined knowledge gained from experience of history and expresses the evolution of its social and political institutions, cultural preferences, technical skills and innovations and artistic concepts. Whenever we observe and experience them, most of us feel a degree of compelling fascination for the historic city, buildings and structures, and are frequently surprised to recognise that the earlier generations had often solved their problems more elegantly than we do and also with a profound degree of craft, skill and sensitivity. A study of a historic city and all that it contains lends us a greater insight and understanding of the constant adjustment of the city to the people and their institutions; and by its very existence, it not only continues to reveal new meaning and interpretations, but also fulfils the historically fundamental need of providing a continuous tradition of human identification with a place and its history. The tapestry of varied architectural styles, crafts and decorations of different generations continue to act as living museums, and by adding their own visual rhythm and richness to the city's image, provide a sense of place and belonging to those who live in it. But, the reasons for the care and conservation of a nation's urban heritage are even more cogent for, with the mutilation and destruction of an important building or district of the city, its culture and part of the nation's urban civilisation and history, disappears forever.

Over the last two centuries, the collective Muslim heritage all over the

world has sustained irretrievable loss from foreign rule and due to lack of care and natural decay; what remains, especially of urban heritage, is under constant threat not only due to neglect, but also from the current policies of large scale urban projects being grafted to the historic heart of many Muslim towns and cities. Sudden and abrupt acceleration into an industrial and technological future, inspired and encouraged, often for its own sake, by the industrially advanced countries, has produced fewer new factory jobs at the cost of many traditional crafts and employment opportunities in the hinterland. The consequent movements of the poor into already congested historic cities, combined with the naturally expanding populations have produced pressures that are rapidly transforming the social and physical structure and appearance of many Muslim historic cities. Due to the speed and intensity of such development and expansion, these changes are all the more dramatic in some countries of the Middle East, where complete historic districts and towns are either altogether abandoned or replaced by incongruous structures in imitating Western example. While people and politicians in the Western countries increasingly grow disillusioned with the social consequences of their modern city and most of its recent architecture, their errors continue to be repeated wholesale in the Muslim countries on an even grander and often more vulgar scale to produce set show pieces of national progress. Recent urban concepts that have undermined the social and ecological quality of the modern western city are already well identified and acknowledged. It is inconceivable that these, when indiscriminately applied to the heart of historic Muslim towns and cities, could be successful or for that matter be a viable basis for the expanding Muslim city. What needs to be acknowledged is, that it is often due to the aims of such progress, and indeed because of this progress, that the thoughtless destruction and violation of the Muslim urban heritage everywhere seems to have become so acceptable and commonplace. Nothing could illustrate the consequences of such aims better than the last few years' urban change in historic Muslim cities, where the danger to the cultural heritage continues to increase in direct proportion to this progress, and provides a lesson in realism of the blind acceptance of such outdated concepts that ultimately result in the arrogant replacement of the achievements of so many centuries.

The multitude of problems that confront the contemporary city are identified by the needs for housing, jobs, schools, transport, hospitals, equality and justice and by the over-riding desire for a fulfilling quality of urban, social and community life. The few physical improvements brought about by the recent developments in the Muslim cities have been achieved at considerable expense to the quality of its social cohesion and organisation. The historic ambience of the city, its community structure, its social balance and life style have in the process depreciated considerably, whilst the visual

image of the Muslim city has been transformed into a caricature of some of the worst elements of the Western city without many of its benefits. The pseudo-images of the modern technological age, with all its international standardisation, social and cultural uniformity and stereotype solutions for all occasions have been accepted by and often forced upon many diverse cultures, lifestyles and climates. The consequent monotonous sterility that is increasingly evident in the Muslim cities, the urban stress brought about by the sudden uprooting of long established social structures and communities, the dislocation and progressive disappearance of traditional craft-based small scale jobs and industries will sooner rather than later lead to the crises of the Muslim City, and those who suspect that such a point has already been reached, at least in some of the large cities, might not be far wrong.

Man is a natural planner and all through history has planned for his own changing needs and for the needs of those around him. His towns and cities have been subject to continual 'progress' and 'modernisation', evolving, adapting and assimilating new ideas and technologies. The changes came about through additions, alterations and adjustments to what was there before and in a way that continued to allow each place its own expression of culture and society. The infinite variety and diversity of mankind is identified by cultural preferences, modes of social behaviour and interaction, rationale, intellect, beliefs, history and sense of space, time, colour, texture and environment; and in the fulfilment of their ideals and aspirations. Progress must have its roots in the established culture, history and identity of the place. It would indeed be an incredible human imagination that could devise a universal model applicable to everyone, everywhere. Admittedly, the changes and 'catching up' called for since the end of the Colonial Period were much greater than ever before and the reasons for change now are much more powerful, but the path to this change and progress does not necessarily lie through the destruction and ruin of all that has been achieved through history. Progress and development — be it economic, industrial, social or urban — can no more be achieved solely by the destruction of existing buildings, towns and cities, than it can be achieved by merely building new structures. The development and a satisfying standard of living is not merely a matter of erecting buildings, factories, tower blocks and supermarkets and the supply, availability and consumption of consumer goods. It must relate to the ultimate quality of Man's total environment, and in a way that is worthy of human life and conducive to its cultural and social fulfilment.

The collective Muslim heritage — of mosques, monuments, forts and palaces; of architecture and urban settlements; of sites, landscapes, routes and highways, whether of natural beauty or significant in history; traditional arts and crafts and locations of indigenous industries; all have a

unique and positive role in the strategy of social and urban progress and development. Properly repaired, renovated, refurbished and maintained, they could proudly form central foci and landmarks which not only have social and economic benefits, but also could continue to provide unique opportunities of study and enjoyment. Such a policy of care and thoughtfulness towards the historic city will provide their architects, planners and craftsmen with a firsthand knowledge and understanding of some of the basic and fundamental principles involved in the creation of cities which are not only beautiful and full of sensory delight but also human in scale and true symbols of social and urban progress. It is from this increased understanding that the genuine sources of imagination will eventually emerge to express the contemporary society and give 'modern' form to its city. The formlessness and chaos of the modern Muslim city and the rapidly disappearing social and visual coherence of its historic areas have their underlying origins in the ill-conceived and misunderstood application of imported town planning concepts, and by now it must be convincingly evident that these have failed the test of time. What is now required is a solid determination to build around the established strength of the history and culture of the Muslim heritage and not around other peoples' second-hand furniture and castaway ideas. If there is a Muslim way of life and society, then there must be a Muslim way of the city and urban life that is expressive of this society and reflects its fundamental unity and social cohesion.

All that is historic, traditional or 'old' is not necessarily outdated and irrelevant — it has just been there that much longer. A couple of wires for electricity and telephone, a couple of pipes for water and sanitation and a little repair to their structural fabric is all that acres of historic districts in the Muslim cities ask for to fulfil most of the modern needs, retaining their existing communities and, in the process, gaining a new lease of life. Thus equipped, and upgraded, their continued existence will not only cease to signify Muslim backwardness and rigidity, but also may begin to reveal some profound 'modernity' awaiting discovery from such a rich and varied tradition of the Muslim Ummah. That the Muslim heritage exists is no matter for shame or apology, as is often represented, it is a matter of great pride that such rich and diverse achievements of Muslim history and civilisation cover a great part of the globe. What must be a matter of grave concern to all is that it continues to exist in such a state of ignominy and universal lack of care, and in constant danger of imminent destruction by the very forces of change that now seek their identity and culture through frivolous imitation of other peoples discarded notions of progress. It needs to be acknowledged that the historic towns and cities are vital assets and symbols of continuity of the Muslim culture and that they are in urgent need of upgrading and renovation to fulfil today's expectations and ideals. But just

as cities all through history have adjusted and renewed themselves to meet the changing needs of their populations, there is now no reason whatsoever why sensitive and informed rehabilitation and conservation should prevent desirable change or suppress in any way the creativity of its present generations. The existing stable and economically interdependent communities could thus continue to add to the ambiance of the historic city and be saved from the social upheaval inherent in the present approach, whether of disregard or of mass development. What is required is quite simple and readily obvious. It calls for a positive determination to eliminate conflict between the new and that which is to be retained, an overall strategy to maintain social and cultural continuity amidst everyday change, a well thought out plan to enable both the historic and the new to exist side by side and to ensure that whatever changes do take place, relate to each other and enhance each other's social and physical character. From more than a century's conservation experience in scores of European towns and cities, it is abundantly clear that to provide decent housing, essential services and transport within the historic areas, there is no need to go through an orgy of wholesale destruction and redevelopment that is now evident in many Muslim cities. The use of the motor car within the historic centres and the desire to eliminate traffic congestion by progressive demolition and road widening has caused irreparable damage to the historic fabric of cities and, here again, worthwhile lessons could be learnt from the Western cities, where the historic centres are being increasingly made traffic free and accessible to improved public transport systems only. The ultimate answer lies in the management of the nation's urban heritage and the will to decide what is more important, and where the motor car stops and the City of Man begins.

It is time that Muslims all over the world were reminded that their cultural heritage and patrimony requires no apology. It is time that they ceased to look upon their historic cities and structures as useless dumps of history to be tolerated until these can be bulldozed and replaced by glossy imported images. The urban history and its social organisations are irreplaceable assets, placed in their trust, not to be undermined, squandered and swept away, but to be utilised positively to reinforce their on-going progress and development. It is often that such pleas for the urban heritage are considered to mean the keeping of all that is old, and this indeed is a gross misunderstanding. The basic aim of a conservation policy for the heritage is none other than the sensible good housekeeping of the nation's artistic and cultural possessions by continual and aware screening of a valuable heritage from the irrelevant bits and debris of the past. Each generation has its own intellectual need to examine, to interpret and to understand its own history to establish a view of themselves in context with the world around them. The

living and visible evidence of their past offers them unlimited scope to perceive and realise the vitality of their own culture and it is essential that a broad rather than a narrow perspective of their heritage is conserved.

The proper time to take a full and systematic stock of the collective heritage is NOW — before it is really too late. Now is the time to decide what is necessary and desirable to keep and then to devise a long term policy of pan-Islamic co-operation for the heritage to be planned and integrated into the strategy of development and desirable change. The heritage and its related qualities that enrich our lives need to be sensitively planned and require many complex and specialised skills, technical competence, scholarly research and thorough understanding of local environment and culture. It must be sadly recognised however that such skills and facilities are in limited supply at present, and a comprehensive urgent programme of appropriate training and research will need to be implemented. Organisations of varying skills, structures and technical resources do exist in some of the Muslim countries and could be co-ordinated and rapidly built upon to create a joint pool of resources for exchange of information, know-how and training.

After more than a century's foreign rule and political domination and decades of intellectual and social stagnation, and indeed cultural humiliation, there is at present increasing evidence of disillusionment with their modern condition of life among the present generation. They now desperately seek their self respect and identity, perhaps too violently at times, through the strength of their own culture. The profound variety and richness of their collective tradition and heritage, which have either eluded the previous generations or have often been misunderstood by them, can release fresh vigour and vitality for them to generate new ideas and vision for the future. They cannot escape from their everyday environment, and whatever environment they have, affects every moment of their lives. Climbing other people's staircases and living in other people's houses is no way to building a new society or restoring self respect and self-confidence to a civilisation. They must go back to the source of their own culture and history to refresh and renew their energies or be doomed to a future that will never be theirs. An urgent expression of good intentions and an act of positive will towards their collective heritage is long overdue from the Muslim peoples and their Governments. The very first essential step, that may begin to lay a foundation for a continuing policy of care and understanding, must begin with collective action at a Pan-Islamic level so as to inspire and give a lead to individual Governments to formulate a national policy and establish appropriate strategies for conservation and up-keep of the heritage. Some basic roles and responsibilities of the essential organisations that must be found at a Pan-Islamic, national and local levels might

suggest themselves as follows:

1. The establishment of an International Commission for the Islamic Cultural Heritage

Ideally, such a Commission should be an independent and non-political body of aware, questioning, thinking and thought-provoking men and women of outstanding competence and scholarship in the heritage and conservation related disciplines and skills. The essential role of the Commission should be to establish practical policies and strategies for the care and integration of the heritage into modern life and feedback and monitoring of the results in translating the collective Muslim desire for the conservation of their heritage. Some of the other aspects that the Commission will need to consider and implement may include:

- A. Sponsoring of special studies into establishing a Muslim view of heritage and conservation and its essential role in the artistic and cultural lives of the Muslim Societies.
- B. Systematic identification and grading of the heritage and continuous care of outstanding monuments; urgent appeals to Governments for action in cases of danger and sudden threats and monitoring of archaeological sites for systematic discovery of new items.
- C. Encouragement of research in subjects fundamental to the understanding of Muslim History, culture, arts and crafts by scholarships, grants, fellowships and travel stipends.
- D. Collection of information of existing administrative facilities and professional skills and technical backup in Muslim countries to establish a resource pool for exchange.
- E. Maintenance of a register of Muslim know-how in the related fields and establishment of a programme of student/teacher exchange, seminars and meetings in conservation centres in different countries for exchange of ideas, experiences and understanding.
- F. Educational research to establish appropriate courses and formation of unified career structures to attract students of high calibre.
- G. Maintenance and regular publishing of a directory of Muslim Heritage in each country, including those in foreign possession and in countries no longer under Muslim Governments. The entries should include essential information of historical, artistic and architectural background as well as cross references, current and planned research in Colleges, Universities, Libraries and environmental research institutes thus avoiding duplication in research and assisting in planning future research programmes.

2. National Heritage Trusts

National Heritage Trusts, with the overall responsibilities for policy implementation and co-ordination should be established in each country. Composed mainly of the people from the country concerned, the Trusts, with their first hand knowledge of prevalent attitudes and conditions of the country, will be best suited to establish national policies to achieve maximum co-operation from all concerned for the best results. The essential functions of these national organisations might be:

- A. To explore ways and means and to allocate appropriate resources to implement heritage conservation policy.
- B. To collect and maintain comprehensive measured, photographic and documentary records, arrange its systematic publication for educational purposes and for its inclusion in the Central Islamic Archives.
- C. To organise, supplement and expand the existing administrative and technical resources to meet conservation programmes.
- D. To liaise with information media and agencies, radio and television in the production of educational programmes for national networks and for exchange between the countries to increase public awareness and understanding and to arrange permanent and travelling exhibitions for information and exchange of ideas.
- E. To liaise with the educational and museum authorities and other related disciplines to outline a syllabus for environmental education and heritage programmes and help in producing educational materials for schools, colleges and universities.

3. Local Heritage Organisations

It is at the levels of the region, the city and the town in each country that most of the actual conservation and fieldwork will take place and on these organisations will depend the ultimate success of the programme. In addition to the necessary technical staff, these organisations should work in conjunction with the nearby schools of Art, Architecture and Crafts for the maximum involvement of students and young people. Wherever possible, opportunities should be availed to enlist local community leaders, general public and local craftsmen still conversant with traditional skills and understanding of local materials and climate. An extremely important function of these bodies could be the systematic detailed study, grading, listing and discovery of the heritage items, and their active integration into the development strategy for the region, city or town.

In view of the great variety and richness of cultures, traditions and ethnic variations in existence in the Muslim countries, considerable detailed work at the local levels will be necessary to ensure that maximum energy, effort

and co-operation is generated at the grass roots level. The aims of the policy makers should be to inspire, guide, assist and to inform so that the public awareness of the value of heritage itself generates its own momentum by involving the Muslims at all levels of their everyday lives.

The care of well recognised elements of the heritage is perhaps readily apparent and obvious. A different and often more serious situation arises when dealing with commonplace buildings and elements of everyday life, which for one reason or another prove to be of sociological and historical significance to the town or city in which they exist. Their contributions to the town's identity in history, sense of place and belonging, social structure and lifestyle are bound and interwoven in the overall arrangement of the historic town itself. The enhancement of such a settled lifestyle and the ambience of the place must ultimately form the very core of meaningful conservation and should in each instance be carefully considered and evaluated.

Two extremely important aspects which will have a profound effect upon the eventual success or failure of a conservation policy cannot be overstressed. Firstly, that the policy will require active participation of an informed public and the creation of a favourable climate of public opinion to back up government action and national legislation and, secondly that no policy of care and conservation will prevent the destruction of the Muslim historic city as long as the administrators and governments continue to see the Western style large-scale development as symbols of achievements and prestige, and without a fundamental change in this attitude, any such policy is doomed to failure.

Left to normal procedural and legislative processes of the many countries, the establishment of a comprehensive policy towards the Islamic heritage may prove slow and time consuming. Some of the finest heritage has already passed into the many foreign museums and archives and what remains is under constant threat. There already are well recognised and identified historic buildings and monuments, towns, cities and sites all over the Muslim world which have been in need of care and attention for a considerable time. Might it be too much to ask the governments everywhere to make an urgent and most welcome gesture of Muslim solidarity to initiate a number of Pilot Projects in each of the countries so as to demonstrate what can be done with a little inspiration, will and effort? Results and achievements of such a programme may not only awaken the much needed public interest, but also may prove a fitting salute to the forthcoming Hijra centenary celebrations and perhaps speak louder than the glorified exhibitions and publications of selective illustrations of their rapidly dwindling and dying heritage.

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