



The Sustainability of Urban Heritage Preservation

The Case of Aleppo

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**Inter-American
Development Bank**

Institutional Capacity
and Finance Sector

DISCUSSION

PAPER

No. IDB-DP-125

August 2010

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Inter-American Development Bank
2010

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Abstract*

The old cities of Aleppo in the Syrian Arab Republic, Shibam in Hadramaut/Yemen, and Sibiu (former Hermannstadt) in Romania are threatened by physical, social, and economic decay. As Aleppo and Shibam are listed on UNESCO's World Heritage List, and Sibiu applied for this status in 2006, there is international interest and commitment to preserve these cities and to support them in finding ways for a viable future. Public Authorities, NGOs, and inhabitants face challenges in preserving historical buildings and social and cultural structures that have been growing over hundreds, even thousands of years, in all their colorful variety. At the same time, they must create an adequate environment for living and working in these places. Physical preservation alone could turn the old cities into huge museums; hence, a comprehensive approach of preservation and development must focus on improving the living conditions of the inhabitants as well as sustaining economic viability of the locations. At the same time, it must focus on making these historic sites better places to live while building on given physical and social structures turns out to be the most appropriate way of preserving urban heritage. The German Agency for Development Cooperation (GTZ) supports those cities, as well as others, in this effort. This discussion paper puts a focus on the strategy of integrated conservation and development adopted in all those projects (case examples refer to Aleppo).

Keywords: Aleppo, Sibiu, Shibam, Preservation and Development of World Heritage Cities, Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (GTZ GmbH).

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Introduction¹

For many years the German Agency for Development Cooperation (GTZ) has supported urban rehabilitation in the old city of Aleppo. GTZ offers financial and technical assistance to local administrations, civil society organizations, and the inhabitants to help them make use of the history and the socio-cultural authenticity of these places, which in turn promotes further investments, both public and private, in the conservation and modernization of the homes, buildings, infrastructure, and public spaces. GTZ cooperates with public authorities, local institutions, international development agencies, and the residents of Aleppo in the integrated development processes, which includes the financing and implementation of a comprehensive package of interventions, such as strategic development instruments; urban planning; renewal of technical and social infrastructure; improvement of environmental conditions and social services; upgrading and development of public space; restoration of monuments; traffic management; microcredits to enable the poorer sections of inhabitants to restore their houses; local economic development; tourism; and community and cultural development. Assistance also focuses on strengthening the local capacities for urban management to pursue a balanced and careful policy in rehabilitating the old cities, to take measures for revitalization, and to secure additional sources of funding. All three projects have set standards in the respective countries for innovative city planning and urban development, in particular in terms of preservation and development of historic cities.

¹ Details about the Aleppo case can be found at <http://www.udp-aleppo.org/oca/toolkit>

Urban Cultural Heritage: An Asset for Development

The urban cultural heritage recounts the history of the city, the people and religions, and the social and cultural transformations. This can be seen in the spatial and economic structures of the cities and their buildings and monuments. It can also be seen in the people who live and work there. Today the historic city centers are the distinctive features of these cities. In addition to offering intrinsic cultural value, the centers fulfill important functions in modern urban development. They foster identity and create the city's image, and, when carefully modernized and well managed, they can greatly contribute to the economic opportunities for the entire city.²

Aleppo: Arial View



Threats and Challenges

During the first half of the twentieth century, these cities had just begun to spread beyond the city walls. In 1920, Aleppo had around 200,000 inhabitants, whereas today almost three million people live in that city. In a time span covering just three generations, the old cities of Aleppo, Shibam, and Sibiha have evolved from cities to historic city centers. As a consequence, they bear witness to economic, social, and cultural change, which threatens to compromise their cultural heritage and identity. Though

² For example, the historic center of Aleppo gives a positive image to the old industrial city, attracting tourists and eliciting positive associations that can be used to promote products “made in Aleppo” (e.g., famous soaps, olive oil, and textiles).

different in size—the old town of Shibam has 4,000 inhabitants, Sibiu has 40,000, and Old Aleppo has 120,000—, each of them is a comprehensive urban socioeconomic system, a city within a city. The mechanisms leading to physical decay are, however, comparable. Migration streams and demographic trends have dramatically altered the social structure of their populations during the past 50 to 80 years. Additionally, public authorities concentrating on the development of new and modern areas have neglected them for decades. As a result, technical and social infrastructures have dilapidated due to insufficient maintenance; more residents have moved out; and original housing stock is abandoned or has been used inadequately for commercial or other functions. In general, the living, housing, and business environment is deteriorating.

Rehabilitation: An Integrated Approach of Conservation and Development

Public administrations and inhabitants are facing a double challenge: on the one hand the urban fabric shall be preserved and the genuine socio-cultural variety, which has evolved over hundreds if not thousands of years, shall be kept alive. But conservation of buildings and monuments alone would not save these old cities; the result would be a “museification” weighing heavily on public budgets and freezing development opportunities. In the cases at hand, further decay would simply be postponed. On the other hand, an environment needs to be created where the architectural and socio-cultural heritage is brought into line with the needs of future generations without compromising the urban identity. It turns out that only a combined strategy of conservation and development can save such urban ensembles from further deterioration. A comprehensive approach of rehabilitation encompasses conservation *and* development, and it must take into account the necessity of improving conditions of day-to-day life for the residents as well as the economic viability of the historic city centers. The first is subject to physical improvement, conservation, and general attractiveness for residential purposes. The second seeks to stabilize economic vitality and diversity, a variety of urban functions, and income facilities for residents. As a whole, the approach should improve public perception and re-create a positive image, which is a major factor for people to stay, for businesses to invest, and for visitors to come.

Instruments and Procedures

Managing a Process of Urban Rehabilitation

The old cities at hand have a future only when residents and local businesses continue to invest in buildings and enterprises. The basic conditions and promotion instruments are put in place in partnership with local public and civil-society institutions. Municipal authorities must be enabled to

independently steer the process of redevelopment to be sustainable. This leads to the strengthening of technical skills in urban planning and management of urban development and the development of organizational structures and technical and financial instruments that are adapted to local conditions.

Conservation and Development Planning

A comprehensive set of planning instruments and a regulatory framework needs to be put in place to plan, supervise, and steer the process. This includes a general integrated development approach, strategic conservation and development plans, land use plans, detailed plans, building codes and guidelines, and other instruments. Beside permitting authorities to do the job, a concise regulatory framework and enabling instruments will generate confidence among potential investors, be they residents who intend to restore their houses or enterprises that invest into buildings and businesses. A climate of trust and perspective is important for creating a critical momentum of endogenous development.

Renewal of Technical Infrastructure

Decades of neglect by municipal authorities resulted in serious decays of water pipelines, sewer systems, and street pavements, one of the main reasons for the inhabitants and businesses to abandon the old towns. The renewal of the technical infrastructure directly improves living conditions for residents. Moreover, new and constant public spending and engagement create a sense of confidence among residents in the site and lays again the basis for private and public investments.

Securing Homes and Historical Fabric: Restoration of Residential Houses

The residential entities—traditional courtyard houses in Aleppo, multi-story mud-houses in Shibam, half-timbered houses in Sibiu—need to be maintained and improved to preserve the residential function in the historic quarters. However, most residents living in the old towns are low-income families, and cannot afford regular maintenance of their houses. This leads to the structural deterioration of the housing stock. Since most residents do not have access to the formal banks, the projects have established microcredit schemes, and municipal administrations assist applicants free of charge with technical advice for restoration or maintenance. These housing programs largely enable people to stay in the old city, which is important in maintaining their identity.

Assets of the Old Towns: Crafts and Restoration of Monuments

The classified historic monuments are prominent but often neglected symbols of cultural heritage. When empty and dilapidated buildings are restored and prepared for social or cultural uses, they

become again appealing for a wide public. In parallel, traditional crafts skills can be revived, and newly created job opportunities can contribute to the local economy.

Live in Public Urban Spaces: Urban Design and Traffic Management

Urban planning and urban design projects allow the upgrading of public space and the recovery of the quarters. The living conditions can be improved with the creation of new open spaces and the rehabilitation of squares, which enhance the image of the old town. In many cases such interventions encourage residents and shop owners to participate in the rehabilitation process and embellish their properties. Measures for traffic reduction and privileged access for residents, clients, and visitors increase the attractiveness of the historic center.

Businesses in the Old Town: Securing the Local Economy

Economic competitiveness of old towns in comparison to other areas is crucial with regard to their development perspectives. In fact they have a future only if they can hold their own in the economic structure of the urban agglomeration they are part of and remain, or become attractive as, business locations. Though physical rehabilitation alone largely contributes to this, it is important to support the competitiveness of the local economy within changing economic conditions. The projects support municipalities in attracting small and medium enterprises to locate in the old cities or encouraging them to stay.

Where Residents Feel at Home: Tourism Promotion

The potential of tourism is not sufficiently exploited in all three towns—a chance and a risk at the same time. The aim of an integrated tourism promotion strategy is to ensure income opportunities on the one hand, without compromising their most important tourism-related assets on the other: the local character and authenticity. Strategies are focused on promoting cultural tourism that does not conflict with local needs, behaviors, and preferences.

Making the Neighborhoods More Beautiful: Urban Environment

Environmental conditions in the old towns are affected severely by increasing pollution from industry and traffic. This affects the inhabitant's health and reduces the attractiveness of the sites. Measures to improve environmental conditions include the new technical standards for industries and households, adapted waste collection systems, and campaigns for the creation of public awareness concerning environmental issues.

An Old Town Worth Living In: Social and Cultural Infrastructure

Due to changed living demands and lifestyles, the social infrastructure has to be renewed to create a pleasant living environment for old town residents. Preschools, schools, health care services, playgrounds, and other facilities are being established and adapted to the specific needs of the quarters. Cultural events enrich the social life in the old towns and generate a positive public perception among inhabitants and visitors.

From Awareness to Involvement: Community Initiative

In terms of population, in the rehabilitation process the people who live and work in the old towns are the main target and their participation starting in the early stages of decision-making processes helps avoid conflicts and fosters commitment and community initiative.

Conclusion

Long-term public commitment has created new confidence among residents and businesses—a basic condition to encourage private investments into houses and commercial buildings, which is the major part of the historic buildings stocks. In cases in which historic city centers are not only clusters or islands of buildings that have survived destruction, deterioration, or speculation, but entire urban systems with functioning economic, social, and cultural relationships—cities within cities—it is crucial to keep the functional mix alive and healthy. An integrated approach, which includes the conservation of buildings and monuments, should seek to improve conditions of daily life, thus encouraging people to stay in the historic centers. It must also strengthen the local economy and maintain the diversity of urban functions.