

Web Text for OCA

Aleppo is one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world. The enormous treasures of urban history, the unique urban fabric, the large traditional souks, the authentic oriental life as well as the large number of remarkable historical buildings and monuments render the Old City of Aleppo (OCA) one of the most beautiful and attractive oriental cities. Today more than 100,000 Aleppinians live here representing 5% of the two million inhabitants of Aleppo City.

During the 20th century the Old City has experienced dramatic changes in its social structure as a result of out-migration of the well-to-do combined with an overall economic decline. As a consequence buildings and infrastructure have deteriorated. Since 1994 the City of Aleppo and the German Technical Cooperation GTZ have been joining efforts, together with other national and international institutions, to preserve and to develop the Old City. The process is highly complex, indeed and must be regarded as a long term task.

- **Introduction**

- **Historic Urban Development**

Human settlement in Aleppo started almost 5000 years ago. The name of the City was first mentioned in the tablets of Ebla in 2250 BC.

As far as the urban structure is concerned some traces of the Hellenistic and Byzantine periods are still visible in the layout of the street network near the Citadel and in the Souk.

The early Islamic and the subsequent Ayyubid and Mamlouk influences further molded the shape of the city, which hosts an array of beautiful monuments. The first expansion beyond the city walls was carried out in the 13th century to the east and north-east of the city, as well as to the south-western part of today's Jedeideh. Nonetheless, most of the survived urban fabric dates from the Ottoman period (1517-1918).

- **Rehabilitation of the Old City**

Since 1994, the City of Aleppo and the German Development Cooperation have been cooperating on the Rehabilitation of the Old City of Aleppo. The project has supported the development, the financing, and the implementation of a comprehensive package of balanced urban conservation and development interventions. This integrated process of rehabilitation has improved the quality of living for the inhabitants, increased the opportunities for local economic development, and strengthened the cultural identity of the old city.

Based on the experience of the Rehabilitation of the Old City of Aleppo, a «toolkit» was created to provide essential information on strategies, procedures, instruments, techniques, and their application in urban conservation and development of World-Heritage Cities.

The present phase of the Rehabilitation project (2007 – 2010) aims at consolidating the rehabilitation process of the Old City of Aleppo. The emphasis is put on developing capacities for promoting, steering, and monitoring the development in the Old City; supporting local economic development; implementing physical improvement measures in different areas of the Old City;

and integrating the Old City into an overall strategy for urban development in Aleppo (City Development Strategy – CDS).

- **Urban Planning**

Based on an extensive data collection from the Old City (1993 - 1994), the Project prepared a Development Plan (DP) in 1997. The DP outlines the integrative approach adopted for the comprehensive rehabilitation of the Old City. Ever since, this plan is used to guide the management of the Project in the planning and development of the OCA.

In addition, the Project elaborated a general Land Use Plan for the Old city reserving specific zones in the OCA for specific uses. The objective is to ensure that possible negative interferences between conflicting forms of use can be limited. At neighborhoods level, the project adopted the Action Areas model, detailed planning for various Action Areas has been prepared; besides, Action Projects of different nature (e.g. social, physical, cultural, etc.) in each Action Area have been implemented.

In 2005 the Project developed a Conservation and Development strategy, to respond to change as well as to the different characteristics of the Old city's neighborhoods. The plan has been accepted by all relevant parties in the Old City.

However, the binding instruments are composed of the general Land Use plan, the detailed Land Use plans, and the specific building code of the Old City.

- **Physical**

- **Upgrading of Technical Infrastructure**

The decay of the water supply and sewer networks is among the main causes for structural damage in the city's historic buildings, as water leakage into the ground soil weakens the foundations. Furthermore, grey water from leaking sewers has in the past found its way into corroded water supplies in some areas, thus seriously impairing the health of the residents.

For this reason and also for insuring 24-h provision of water a complete renewal of both systems in the Old City has been worked out and is being carried out step by step. By the beginning of 2009, 75% of the sewer network and 90% of the water pipes in the Old City have already been renewed. At the same time the phone network is being replaced and street surfaces are being covered with new cobble stone pavements.

Construction techniques and security measures have both substantially been improved. New modes for the maintenance of the various facilities are being introduced.

- **Improvement of Public Open Space**

The role and importance of historic city centers has changed; open spaces have been mainly defined by the introduction of new streets to facilitate motorized traffic, rather than contributing to the social and cultural life of residential neighborhoods. Additionally, in the Old City where the semi-private and introverted structure prevail, open spaces such as little squares, green areas and parking facilities are becoming more and more important.

The rehabilitation and the reuse of available open spaces in the dense and complex urban fabric aims at upgrading these neglected spaces, providing a healthy environment and contributing to the socio-economic wellbeing of the Old City residents. Taking into consideration the characteristic urban pattern of the Old City of Aleppo, upgrading open spaces through attractive modern urban design and landscaping has proven as a vital tool for the generation of a strong 'Old City-awareness' amongst the residents. Up to date, the Rehabilitation Project of the Old City has upgraded various open spaces/places, such as Sahet Al-Hatab, Sahet Al-Almaji, and Sahet Al-Awamid.

- Preservation and Adaptive Reuse of Historic Buildings)

There are no less than 240 classified historical monuments located in Old Aleppo - a wealth and a burden at the same time. They require maintenance and many of them need to be restored or rehabilitated. On the other hand, they are a great potential for economic, social, cultural and tourism development.

Therefore, the Project for the Rehabilitation of the Old City elaborated a comprehensive monuments maintenance and development strategy including proposals for their potential uses, their management and their funding. The Shibani building (former Franciscan School) which is used as social and cultural center including a permanent exhibition about the activities of the Rehabilitation of the Old City demonstrates the effort of the Project in this area.

In addition, the project restored the reception room in the Seyf al Dawle School Building (former dwelling of Aleppo's Wali); the room represents the decorative elements of 1800 and includes marvelous wood works and paintings.

- Housing

The Old City of Aleppo encompasses a large housing stock. There are about 10000 private houses, out of which more than 3000 of which require urgent structural repairs to avoid dilapidation entailing further out-migration of Old Cities' residents.

In the interest of preserving residential use by improving living conditions in the Old City, house owners and tenants are given financial and technical support for rehabilitation purposes. In addition, successful applicants are exempt from municipal building permit fees.

In order to monitor implementation and guarantee the application of international standards, specific building guidelines have been developed and made mandatory for beneficiaries of the housing funds. By the beginning of 2009, the fund has financed 688 cases.

- Community

- Social Infrastructure

Within a given context, education, health, religion and social services are among the most relevant factors that reflect citizens' behavior. Preserving the resident of the old city of Aleppo in their neighborhoods requires the availability of a sound social infrastructure. While access to religious and social services are most likely offered within the vicinity of the old city, services such as health and education fail to satisfy the demand of the old city's residents.

Based on needs assessments, the Project improved the social services in the Old City through the creation of new health points and kindergartens in different parts of the historic center. In addition, the Project renovated about 20 vacant schools and made them operational. Other social services, such as training are offered through the Shibani Social and Cultural Center, which is run by the Directorate of the Old City.

- Participation

The significant quantitative improvement of the citizens' participation in urban planning could be considered as a step ahead toward a full involvement of the old city's residents in building up their communities. This ideal corresponds to the Project's objectives in involving the residents in planning as well as in implementation. The Project introduced participation in a manner that any intervention would be preceded by an informative stage and ended up with an evaluation of its progress. In addition, the Project keeps the residents informed about the implementation phase.

Since 1994, the Project is involving the citizens in the planning of measures and is promoting individual initiative in the redevelopment process. Plans are explained and solutions sought together in workshops and public hearings. Neighborhood projects are addressing residents directly and encouraging their active participation in the redevelopment measures; after all, it is their immediate environment that is at stake.

- Awareness Raising

In particular, public awareness is an essential element in upgrading the environment management in the old city of Aleppo.

The Project has carried out a campaign against noise in specific areas in the old city as well as in the surrounding neighborhoods. Initially, this campaign was based on the participation of the concerned public institutions and organizations. The main objectives of these participations were to project the noise problem, ease the agreement on the proposed curative measures and to ensure the adoption of the required supportive regulations to reduce the noise level. As a result, this campaign -the first of its kind in Syria- has drawn the attention of the citizens, the concerned authorities and the local media to one of the main environment pollutant in the old city.

As to waste management, the Project has launched a campaign in Action Area-3. Divided into two phases, the results of this campaign revealed a commitment by the majority of the residents to participate in such action.

- Cultural Events

Since 2002 the GTZ has been organizing cultural events, meetings and gatherings at Shibani in cooperation with the Directorate of the Old City as well as local and international partners. Eventually the initial dedication - culture and spirituality - has returned to the building. Local and international artists have performed there, seminars and workshops been held, and thousands of people have visited the permanent exhibition about the rehabilitation process. In addition, music concerts and festivals have been organized in some of the rehabilitated parts of the Old City, such as Seif Al-Dawle School, Sahet Al-Hatab and the place in front of the Citadel.

In 2003 school-children from Old Aleppo outlined in a number of drawings their visions of living here. Parts of this marvelous array of drawings have been on display in a special exhibition. Due to the success of this activity, it was replicated in 2006.

These cultural activities are part of the rehabilitation effort and contribute to strengthening the positive image of the Old City.

- **Traffic**

Due to the historical importance of the old city of Aleppo and the density of its urban fabric, the traffic problems cannot be solved only through an expansion of the streets' patterns and the creation of parking spaces. Changes in the land use (relocation of some activities); in addition to the adoption and the application of complementary traffic regulations are essential to stop the deterioration of the traffic situation.

Based on the analysis of accomplished surveys, planning results and on existing proposals regarding traffic condition and problems, the Project has elaborated a general traffic concept for the Old City. This concept aims at preserving the existing urban fabric, freeing some areas from private motorized vehicles and insuring pedestrians' safety, reducing the transit traffic, securing good accessibility and providing parking spaces.

The Directorate of the Old City is implementing this concept gradually. However, the relocation of public functions from the area surrounding the citadel has already improve the traffic in the Old City and in that area in particular.

- **Environment**

- **Environmental Protection**

The Old City of Aleppo has adopted an integrative strategy to improve the environmental conditions. Environmental improvements have been achieved in a number of ways such as reducing traffic, awareness-raising campaigns, waste collection, planting trees in courtyards and in public squares. These measures are backed by studies on noise and air pollution. The City of Aleppo is the first city in Syria to have established a comprehensive Local Agenda 21 program, witnessing Aleppo's commitment in the global endeavor to preserve nature and to secure natural resources for future generations.

On the other hand, small businesses in the Old City are generally located near residential or mixed areas. However, this urban development is normally leading to a disproportionate high environmental stress. This has led the initiation of a special fund at the base of "Local Grant" up

to 100.000 DM for helping the Small and Medium sized Enterprises (SME). The fund main objective was to help SMEs improving their environmental performance and management as a step with regards to the environment in the Old City. This has engaged the promotion of new production process and the introduction of new techniques in order to raise environmental standards in different type of businesses.

- Waste management

Industries, workshops and residents of the old city participate in the dirtiness of their environment. This is due to the absence of surveillance, lack of penalties and mainly to the acquired bad habits of the citizens. Besides inadequate garbage collection helps the spread of insects and rodents and affects the tourist potential of the old city.

In 1999, a cleanness operation within AA3 was strongly supported by the population and successfully implemented. This action was preceded by the distribution of informative leaflets to promote this act and persuade the residents to participate in this campaign; consequently, it was followed by the installation and the distribution of waste containers in the concerned area. Divided into two phases, the results of this campaign revealed a commitment by the majority of the residents to participate in such action. Other effort, such as the competition entitled "our neighborhood is the most beautiful" was launched in 2004.

- Economy

- Economic initiative

The decline of the traditional textile production and trade in Aleppo is clearly visible in the souks of the Old City. Traditions that have survived for centuries are disappearing and the traditional knowhow is in danger of being lost forever. The documentation of still existing textile techniques and pattern hence is a starting point to reverse the decline.

The Economic Initiative aims at opening up economic opportunities in the Old City of Aleppo in the sector of traditional textile production. In addition it aims at preserving and revitalizing traditional textile crafts through design support, innovations in the manufacturing process and professional internal and external marketing strategies.

The focus on traditional textile production as a pilot in economic development has emerged in 2008 and is planned to take the lead in project implementation in 2009. Accordingly, the EI has initiated cooperation with the University of Halle/Germany in the areas of textile archiving, the development of a textile network, and training of design of needlework women in support of the Agha Khan Foundation. Furthermore, the EI has established contacts to a variety of different governmental and non-governmental stakeholders in the field of traditional textile production.

- Tourism

The Old City has an immense potential for cultural tourism. 5000 years of history and a unique urban fabric which is almost intact, as well as the typical oriental flair and vivid social, cultural and economic traditions made the UNESCO declare it a "World Cultural Heritage Site ". Carefully developing this tourism sector is part of the overall rehabilitation strategy. Tourism is regarded as a vital tool for the improvement of the local economy and helps to generate a self-confident "Old City - awareness" amongst the residents.

However, possible negative effects must be avoided. In an urban cultural heritage a tourism development strategy must ensure that tourism activities are in line with the purpose of urban preservation. It is of vital importance to find the right balance between "marketing the city for tourism", and the privacy of residents and the authenticity of life there. "Tourists feel comfortable where residents feel at home" is the central guideline for a long term policy of tourism development in Old Aleppo. This vision is borrowed from the German city of Heidelberg, with which a co-operation agreement has been achieved in order to support tourism development in the Old City of Aleppo.

- **Information Management**

By putting maps and other kinds of spatial and attributed data into digital forms, GIS allows to display geographical data and to anticipate alternative development scenarios in more transparent ways. The use of GIS has been put into an open framework of information dissemination and of making urban data available to the widest possible range of users.

A Geographic Information System (GIS) enables the project team to produce the thematic maps and analyze the available data to define the planning needs (health care maps, school maps, infrastructure maps, and historic preservation records). In the technical infrastructure work, GIS is used to document the new sewer and water networks; also, it is used to monitor their maintenance by controlling dates of repair, location of problems, frequency of their occurrence and personnel responsibility. With respect to the management of the housing funds, GIS enables team to keep record of loan contracts and to monitor work progress.