CONSERVATION OF HISTORICAL ENVIRONMENT/ A CASE OF NABLUS

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ABSTRACT:
The conservation of the national heritage is of great importance to the Palestinian people in general and to the people of Nablus in particular. It has been a major concern during the last two decades.

Due to the political and cultural conflict in Palestine, terms like identity have special meaning. This issue of identity, with its different symbols and forms, came in the middle of this conflict. The conservation of cultural heritage affords a sense of identity and pride in the past performance of the ancestors. Since architecture is to be considered as one form of the material culture, it is necessary to maintain the Palestinian architectural heritage.

This research attempts to outline the conservation and rehabilitation efforts in the historic city of Nablus, and try to put proposal for an overall plan of implementation and design-guidelines for those agencies and local community groups, which should work in partnership in the development process to ensure successful results.

1.0 INTRODUCTION:
Historic cities are witnessing deterioration in their built environment as a result of the new demands for spaces within their limited fabric, the growth in traffic densities, and the changing pattern of activities (Abdulac, 1982). However, these changes affect historic cities in two ways. Socially it is manifested in the need for new buildings and structures and the demand for services and amenities, and structurally it is manifested in the presence of decay, when the fabric of a town ages and begins to deteriorate and is no longer capable of efficient use.

In fact, this is the case of the historic city of Nablus (situated 60 km north of Jerusalem), which suffers from different matters.
Firstly, the impact of the Israeli occupation represented with its last invasion, where many valuable historic buildings are demolished. As a result to this action most of the original dwellers in the historic city moved out to the new and more modern parts of the city (Fig. 1).

Secondly, the new construction work was carried out without any attention to its suitability to the existing urban fabric, in terms of style, building materials, finishes or details (Fig. 2).
Thirdly, the rent controls discouraged owners from improving or upgrading their buildings. Moreover, many large houses (old palaces) were left empty (Touqan, 1995).
Finally, and in relation to the last point, is that some of the owners wanted to demolish and reconstruct their buildings, expanding and adding floors to existing buildings to maximize their profit without obtaining municipal approval.
On the other hand, efforts by the Municipality of Nablus to make studies and survey works for the possible way to conserve the historic city. Despite its limited resources, fund and equipment, the Municipality succeeded in restoring some bits and pieces in the historic city. Its main concern at the beginning was to reduce the cause of danger by restoring the most deteriorated buildings. Then, its work became more selective, concerning on some features in the historic city. They restored many drink-fountains, some public baths and vaulted pathways (Fig. 3).

In fact, the Municipality action concerning the improvement of the built environment was tremendous but without any clear plan or defined policy for conservation. Therefore, the thrust of this research is to analyze these problems facing the historic city of Nablus, in addition, it will attempt to outline a policy and a structure for the conservation of the built environment.

1.1 REASONS FOR CONSERVATION

There are a number of good reasons why we should conserve the built environment.

- The first is the realization that old buildings often do their job better than new ones.
- A second reason, old buildings are generally more efficient in energy conservation than new ones.
- Thirdly, the actual work of rehabilitation or conservation costs in energy terms a mere fraction of new building (Worskett, 1975).
- Lastly, and relating to the last point, is the fact that rehabilitation is labor-intensive. It creates employment and keeps both the small and large builder busy, whereas comprehensive redevelopment and tower blocks rely for more on factory-made parts and mechanical assembly, which only the few large builders can manage (Reynolds, 1976).

1.2 CONSERVATION OBJECTIVES

Any development process should have the following objectives:

- To conserve the physical character that the area has.
- To maintain or improve the social viability of public spaces.
- To identify and conserve those structures in the historic city possessing architectural or historic significance and their immediate surroundings.
- To enhance the economic viability of businesses in the historic city in order to safeguard the employment base of the residents.
- To improve the quality and availability of public services.
- To organize traffic in the historic city in such a way that pedestrian movement is unhampered.
- To improve public transportation serving area residents.
- To plan in a way that involves representatives of all responsible agencies and all effective groups.
- Finally, to strive for maximum cost recovery in all the objectives above.
Therefore, the process of “Development” includes:

A- Demolition: buildings that have to be removed because of their bad physical condition, and they are unsafe. In the spaces created by demolition, new activities can be provided.

B- Renovation: those buildings that have sound overall structure but lack necessary equipment require adding more fittings, altering plan layout and increasing the height of a building by adding more storeys. Through reconstruction, these buildings must be upgraded to a modern standard.

C- Preservation: the goal of preservation is to maintain buildings that bear distinctive, traditional features of human settlement, and are valued as pieces of architectural art. These buildings are desirable in terms of their detailing, structure, and building materials.

1.3 CONSERVATION PROBLEMS

Conservation has its own benefits for the whole country in general and for the immediate area in particular. On the other hand, it has its own costs and consequences. It is useful to state the cost and consequences of such an intervention, because the thorough analysis of these problems can be helpful in defining policies that will minimize these problems.

These consequences can be identified as follows:

1. Land Ownership

This is the most difficult aspect of any project that affects the development process. For development to be feasible the owners have to come to some agreement with the authorities or the government to expropriate the land.

The question arises, however, whether a government has the right to expropriate the land from its owners for development. For example, the decisions of courts in the Muslim World arose over dilapidated buildings or wall that were threatening to collapse. The court ordered the owners to torn down the structure and rebuild them (Hakim, 1986). Problems arise when the person is too poor to rebuild his structure. In such cases, the judge usually gives a sort of lease to someone willing to rebuild the building. He then holds the lease for the number of years he needs to get his investment back within a certain percentage of interest, but the original owner retains the title, and the building will be eventually turned back to him. But if the owner refuses, then the government is still free to expropriate the land for compensation.

2. Motor Car

The main aim of development is not only to preserve the historic character of the urban fabric, but also to inject it with compatible modern services and community facilities in order to enhance its fabric and ensure its future. Among the services and facilities needed in the historic urban fabric is the motorcar. There comes a point when the urban system does not keep pace with contemporary needs. For example, the roads in the historic fabric were adequate 100 years ago, when
all the inhabitants had horses and carts, but this form of transportation is out of date (Hakim, 1986). But no one can ignore the need for ambulances, fire fighting, and garbage collection vehicles in the historic urban fabric. In addition, the families in the historic city, like all families of other parts of a city, have the right to enjoy the benefits of modern technology. But the impact of the motorcar reduces the safety of people, contributes to environmental crises by spewing carbon dioxide and other poisonous chemicals, and leads to traffic congestion (Lichfield, 1989).

3. Privacy

The intrusion of other buildings into one’s private space is not welcomes anywhere, but the feeling is so much stronger in Muslim societies that Muslim jurists have developed laws that protect physical privacy (Hakim, 1986). In general, the matter of privacy gives rise to problems when dealing with an area to be developed, and great care should be taken in the design schemes for both new buildings and the improvement of existing buildings. Old historic cities were organized in the form of neighborhoods for living quarters and small businesses, so imposing new activities such as offices, cultural centers, cafes, and etc. for each quarter and neighborhood through development will affect the social life of the area (Reynolds, 1976).

4. Identity

Historic centers contain the essence, or the spirit, of a culture, as it acts as a collective memory for a society in terms of shared attitudes and common patterns of life. Therefore, it is a source of identity and inspiration. Previous generations have usually been able continuously to change and develop a city without causing irreparable breaks in the urban system because interventions were usually not massive and were spread over long periods of time (Antoniou, 1981). Today, by contrast, we are faced with two extremes of intervention that are in reality conditioning each other. At one extreme are the new large-scale development promoted by the dynamics of today’s economy and realized with the immense recourse of modern technology (Lewcock, 1986). They introduce an alien scale and alien functional requirements into historic cities. At the other extreme, and as a reaction to the first, are the attempts at conservation that are often sterile because they do not consider the requirements of a living city.

5. Financial Approach

Usually development costs a lot of money in modernizing and reconditioning the whole urban fabric. The question is: Who is getting the benefits? The next question is: If the residents are getting the benefits, is there some way of making them pay?
A rational approach that should be adopted in relation to this difficulty is an analysis of the cost and benefits to be derived from each possible activity (Serageldin, 1982). The result of this calculation will determine the allocation of resources among the various activities.
After discussing the problems facing the conservation of the built environment in historic cities in general and in Nablus in particular, the next part will discuss the development concept and the policy for conserving the built environment in the historic city of Nablus. After presenting the problems that face most historic city in general and
the Historic City of Nablus the next part will present the concept for rehabilitation that should be adopted to conserve the built environment of Nablus heritage.

2.0 DEVELOPMENT CONCEPT

After discussing the problems of the historic city of Nablus which can be divided into two groups: The first is that of social, functional and economic problems, such as the housing with low quality and a negative image, the social segregation of low-income bracket individuals in the city center and the great number of empty buildings. The second group of problems concerns the physical and aesthetic shape of the historic center.

The following scenarios will try to cope with these problems:

The development concept should be divided into three scenarios:

1. The first scenario:

This scenario is based on the presumption that the action of the Municipality of Nablus should restrict to renovating public spaces. The result of such scenario is that the historic center remains animated, while the negative results are the loss of quality and historic substance.

2. The second scenario:

This scenario is that of active municipal policy “top down”. “Top down” policy is directed at clear goals, big steps and scaled-up investment. The positive result is that the preservation of the cultural heritage is guaranteed. No disfigurement is expected from new buildings. The potential offered by un-built areas remains unchanged. The negative result can be seen in economic crises when the municipality is under pressure to act, but no funds are available to support this action. This scenario is in general questionable, as positive conditions appear unrealistic. Minor fluctuations in conditions can lead to much mis-investment or to unfinished projects.

3. The third scenario:

This scenario of the policy of “small steps” is seen as most realistic. The policy of small steps can react quickly to fluctuations in conditions. The positive or negative trends in conditions affect the speed with which development measures can be carried out. They do not, however, alter the principle. “Think global, act local”. The presumption of this scenario is that the urban planning policy is based on a principle concept, which is open and can react to changes in conditions, interests and initiative. Global goals are brought into harmony with concrete possibilities.
In this scenario the effect of possible disinvestment or construction errors is not so dramatic. The municipality is responsible for initiating information campaigns and coordinating the activities of the inhabitants. Continuity is guaranteed and “bottom up” initiative encouraged. The negative result could be that major monuments comprising the cultural heritage do not quite fit into this scenario (Fig. 4).

2.1 MASTER PLAN

For development of the built environment in the historic city of Nablus to be workable a master plan should put down. This master plan and in relation to the three scenarios mentioned above should comprises the conservation concept and defines the urban planning regulations for building alterations and future use. This master plan should be a synthesis of “cultural heritage”, “physical state of building substance” and urban fabric. The physical building parameters and public and private space as well as the functional framework and requirements made on the historic city. The plan is an instrument tailored to meet the specific requirements of the historic center of Nablus, aimed at guaranteeing its optimal development as formulated in the long term model and in the development concept.

The master plan should defines the areas in which major buildings of public interest maybe constructed or important monuments are to be preserved, adapted or reconstructed in line with the regulations on the conservation of historic monuments. This plan will highlights those sites that are desolate or in ruins and which are suitable for new building on the part of the municipality. Regulations concerning the use of the building in the various quarters of the city will continue to be determined according to the value of the area in question from a cultural and historical point of view. This plan will protect public spaces-squares, streets and the area surrounding major monuments and historic elements by defining construction boundaries. Areas of land which have not been built on and gardens as well as courtyards should also protected from construction or their uses should defined. Those peripheral areas of the historic city, which guarantee visual contact with the historic city and views from neighboring zones into the historic city, must be treated with particular care. Special importance should place on the ability to perceive the visual physical boundary of the historic center. Possible additional parking spaces for residents and visitors should also be defined in the master plan, which should also guarantees optimal pedestrian access to the historic center. A further important part of the plan is to increase the amount of vegetation in the area and in the public spaces in the historic center.

2.2 LEGAL REGULATION

The aim of these regulations is to conserve the valuable buildings and to create the necessary framework for adequate architectural contributions to the historic ensemble. The measures described below apply not only to the conservation of the external appearance but also to the very fabric of the buildings. In addition, the attempts here are to establish a balance between conservation and redevelopment goals as it can guide and control transformation in the historic districts and reduce the pressure from modern
development on the conservation area. These regulations are divided into three phases as follows:

**Phase 1:**

Historic cities should be divided to zones that make the development process more easily. These zones are as follows:

- **A-** Zones with high concentration of historic monuments and a high percentage of houses in excellent condition and with important cultural elements. In these zones only restoration should be permitted.

- **B-** Zones where houses and historic elements are of lesser important. Replacement of buildings should be subject to strict regulation conforming the old city’s standards in design, material and function.

- **C-** Zones with low concentration of historic buildings dilapidated housing. Such zones are to be reserved for other activities with the same planning regulations as in zone B.

The following regulations, which have been, informed the above zoning blueprint:

**1: Central Areas**

- In the central area of the historic city of Nablus the restriction of on-street parking is essential to avoid the widening of streets. Cars must be parked somewhere if the shopping center is to thrive (Lichfield, 1989).

- Public transport should be used to reduce private vehicles movement in the historic city.

- As the historic city population is going to increase after development, additional shops, offices, and multi-storey car parks to correspond to the increase of population. The construction of these new large-scale buildings away from the existing historic buildings will preserve the scale, and setting of the existing streets. Whilst there is strong aesthetic advantage in this proposal and this sort of proposal may divert the pressure for new roads and car parks away from the historic city, it will also divert the trade upon which smaller establishments rely.

**2: Residential Areas**

The following should be done to traditional houses, which are situated on the side of a main road carrying heavy traffic night and day, where living in them is inconvenient as a result of traffic, noise, and fumes.

- The use of double-glazing and even air conditioning, and screening by fences and trees can soften the effect of a poor external environment.

- If the environment standards cannot be improved, permanent changes of use may make the buildings a better investment. For example, office accommodation might be allowed to replace residential uses.

- If new storey is going to be erected above the existing building, then a setback of the new storey from the street should be used to reduce the apparent height of the building.
Traditional building materials, which give a sense of unity, should be used. Adopt the same formality of style, architectural details, a similar proportion of window to wall if it is difficult to produce the same quality.

3: Town / Landscape Relationship

- The land that surrounding the historic city should be retained rather than to be abandoned and filled with rubbish (Worskett, 1975). These lands should provide public open spaces, sport grounds and other large-scale buildings.
- In providing car parks in these areas multi-storey car parks are visually acceptable than open ground car parks, which damage the fabric of the city.

4: High Buildings

The height and spiky outline of a mosque is the focus of interest over the whole city, new buildings must maintain the dominance of the mosque and respect the skyline. These mosques and their minarets, act as signposts that determine the identity and legibility of the historic city when seen from outside.

Phase 2:

This part deals with new buildings, addition, structural alteration and the treatment of measures contrary to regulations. These should fit in with the appearance of the respective town quarter. The regulations are based on the principle that the shape and construction of new buildings should reflect the period in which they were built and should enrich the ensemble.

A fundamental part of the bylaw is the protection of green areas and private gardens. The bylaw guarantees the documentation of the valuable building fabric. The Municipality of Nablus and the Architectural department at An-Najah National University shall create and keep records of the stock of buildings located within the protection zone. These records shall comprise photographic documentation, and any existing plans.

Phase 3:

This phase describes the composition and tasks of the expert commission. The commission shall have the task of delivering expert opinions before any regulations concerning building projects submitted are promulgated, it shall be involved in an advisory capacity in building procedures and shall deliver expert opinions before any regulations are promulgated in connection with building applications in the protection zones.

The Expert Commission comprises representatives of the Municipality, of the regional government of the West Bank, of the An-Najah National University and of the association of engineers. The wider the spectrum of organizations involved, the more weight is attached to decisions (Cantacuzino, 1989).

This phase comprises also regulations on ceilings, windows, shop entrances and canopies, roofs, walls and advertising.
CONCLUSION

The historic city of Nablus is a heritage of the Islamic world in particular, and the world in general. The visible permanence of the traditional townscape must be protected in order for the coming generations to learn from it.

The development and conservation of its urban fabric requires concentrated and continual efforts on several levels. At the level of planning it is first of all a question of adopting restrictive measures that prohibit any new building within the historic center, which is incompatible with its urban fabric. Although urban planning cannot improve living conditions in any direct way, it does have indirect ways of affecting them. The arrangement of infrastructure, the cleaning up of the water system, the improvement of inner-urban connections by public transportation, the planned arrangement of collective facilities and similar measures will put the city on a more equal footing with the newer quarters (Reynolds, 1976). Without these improvements, there is little chance that the historic city will once again become attractive enough to retain its present more prosperous inhabitants or to attract new ones, and their presence is essential for the maintenance of its economic equilibrium.

At the level of urbanism and architecture, it is important to transpose the planners’ options into forms compatible with the structure and morphology of the urban fabric. It is at this concrete level that the dual imperatives of development and of preservation must be reconciled. The inherent conflicts between them must be resolved step by step, with continual reference to the inhabitants and to the architectural framework.

Finally, conservation is not a question of “modernizing” the historic city, nor is it a question of mummifying an urban body at a given stage in its history, nor even of an archaeological reconstitution of a past state. It is the heart and soul of the body that must be revitalized and protected against the impact of temporal circumstances, either through neglect or deliberate destruction.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


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Fig. 3: The municipality conservation work in the historic city,(Nablus Municipality,1998)
Fig. 4: The Developmental Concept for conservation in the Historic City, (Source: The author).