REGENERATION OF HISTORIC CAIRO & THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

Saleh Lamei

Abstract

Conservation projects of historic urban areas involves the restoration of monuments side by side with cultural, social and economic development of the inhabitants along with the promotion and enhancement of the commercial and handicraft businesses. This task is carried out within the framework of a master plan taking into consideration the direct setting as well as the overall environment of historic Cairo due to the involved impacts on the area where the efforts of rehabilitation and enhancement are being carried out. Therefore, the public participation is a cornerstone in the process of rehabilitation of historic areas or historic towns.

Key words: Urban rehabilitation, public participation, awareness

The restoration of historic buildings is not our topic of discussion at the moment; however, I would like to stress that the conservation projects of historic urban areas involves the restoration of monuments side by side with cultural, social and economic development of the inhabitants along with the promotion and enhancement of the commercial and handicraft businesses. This task is carried out within the framework of a master plan taking into consideration the direct setting as well as the overall environment of historic Cairo due to the involved impacts on the area where the efforts of rehabilitation and enhancement are being carried out.

Figure 1: Sultan Hasan Mosque- next to the Citadel –Cairo.
Therefore, the public participation is a cornerstone in the process of rehabilitation of historic areas or historic towns as Article (27) of the World Heritage Convention states that:

1. The State Parties shall endeavor by all appropriate means and, in particular, by educational and information programs, to strengthen appreciation and respect by their peoples of the cultural and natural heritage defined in Articles 1 and 2 of the Convention.

2. They shall undertake to keep the public broadly informed of the dangers threatening this heritage and of the activities carried on in pursuance of this Convention.

Accordingly, the relevant agencies must organize public gatherings in order to present the facts, details, amount of work involved and costs required for such operations and also distribute leaflets to the inhabitants and set up exhibitions to give the population the opportunity to have an in-depth awareness of the problem.

The public awareness can be raised by means of public media, education at schools in the historic area, establishment of communication with the owners of the buildings in the area and formation of committees whose function is to provide assistance to the owners of buildings and explain the dimensions of the process of urban enhancement and find solutions and mechanisms for their implementation on the buildings located within the historic urban texture. Therefore, operational guidelines must be set up in a clear and uncomplicated manner for restoration and maintenance so that the buildings are kept in good shape within the framework of an integrated environmental study to prevent environmental and acoustic pollution in the area.
Also, a plan must be designed for the management of the historic area along with a future overview (at least a five-year plan) to emphasize the emotional, cultural, social and economic values inherent in the cultural properties. Such values shall be defined in terms of priorities since the mission of the heritage site has to be respected and maintained. The sources of finance must also be specified given the fact that the process of planning, programme preparation and budgeting is an integrated operation that has to be continually revised in order to be compatible with the plan and manner of implementation. In addition to that, the maintenance programs and the duties and responsibilities of the maintenance body must be indicated.

Furthermore, the historic area management plan must include management procedures and systems and identification of the responsibilities so that not to have multiple supervision – as it is the case now – to avoid conflict of decisions and streamline the process of decision-making.

The management programme must, however, be periodically upgraded to comply with the appropriate use of cultural heritage areas and to provide answer for all questions pertaining both to the existing and new buildings, the conditions related to the various activities and the methods of illumination, pavement and shop signs and methods of advertising as I have noticed in my visit to Al-Moez Street that 90% of the shops, particularly those enclosed between Bāb-al-Futūḥ and as-Sīlahdār Mosque are mainly selling hookahs (narghile) which is, in the first place, a business hazardous to health (smoking) and, secondly, is not compatible with the authenticity of the area in respect of the traditional handicrafts that used to be there (brassware artisans, for example).

![Figure 7: Al-Moez street - shops selling hookahs (narghile)](image)

![Figure 8: Al-Moez street - shops selling hookahs (narghile)](image)

There are still some shops whose activities are not compatible with the nature of the heritage area. Having talked with the residents and the shop owners, it was revealed that there have been no channels of communication with them in order to identify their needs and problems and they have not attained up to this moment the desired outcome whether socially, culturally or economically.
It is worth mentioning here that a hotel was built in this neighborhood eight months ago, containing seventeen suites, the cost of each is Euro 200-240 (EGP 1,600-2000) per night for accommodation and breakfast!!

It is also noteworthy to point out that the conservation of the heritage areas by means of maintaining the urban heritage cannot be performed in isolation from the intangible heritage but must be combined into one single conglomeration together with the cultural heritage to reinstate the spirit to the memory of the location (UNESCO Document of Intangible Heritage/ Nara, Japan, 2004).

We also recommend that a programme for cultural tourism be made in the area so that to guard against the occurrence of damage to the heritage by collaboration with the inhabitants to safeguard the integrated image of the area. Furthermore, we recommend formulation of a programme to improve and enhance the handicrafts and to emphasize the authenticity of the handicrafts that were common and widespread in the area across the various historic eras witnessed by the historic city and to provide the artisans with soft loans through banks and with promotion and support by the government for the organization of exhibitions to market the handicraft products locally, regionally and internationally. In this context, I should point out to the Tunisian experience in this field where the sales of the handicraft products account for 5% to 6% of the gross national income of the state. It is also worth mentioning here to refer to the World Bank’s cultural and social programmes encouraging and supporting this trend of reutilization by providing grants and financial support to the cultural heritage within the framework of its development programmes extended to nations.

We must not forget the role of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in the area since they are the closest in communicating with people and raising their awareness and encouraging entrepreneurs to invest in tourism and the proper employment and the adaptable reuse of the historic buildings in historic Cairo in such a manner that it is compatible with the conventional building styles and techniques according to specific standards set by authorities responsible for the cultural heritage so as to prevent their deterioration in the future.

To sum up, the process of urban development in the areas of heritage must be accompanied by a sustainable development process in order for the cultural heritage to satisfy the community’s needs whether in the field of education or culture and to support the economic development as well as improve and promote the handicrafts with the aim of raising the social,
economic and cultural standards of the citizens and establish a deeper understanding of the role of heritage in the life of present-day man.

I hope I could have explained with these few words the steps that must be followed side by side with the process of conservation of cultural heritage in order to resuscitate life on full scale to the historic area of Cairo which has always promoted and enriched the minds and souls of mankind all over the world and in order to create sustainable development whose ultimate aim is to restore the intimate relationship between man and built heritage to preserve the cultural heritage and to enhance the residents' standards culturally, socially, economically and increasing tolerance and understanding between mankind.