

SYRIA

REHABILITATING THE OLD CITY OF ALEPPO

A holistic and participatory approach to the regeneration and restoration of the old city of Aleppo is designed to create a vibrant and 'living' city at the same time as conserving its architectural heritage.

The city of Aleppo (Halab) in northwest Syria has a history of over 5000 years as a trading centre linking the river Euphrates and the Mediterranean coast. The old centre of the city is characterised by more than 10,000 two storey houses of lime sand brick with inner courtyards where lemon trees, jasmine and roses scent the air. There are many centuries-old mosques and monuments, bathhouses and schools, as well as the central 13th century citadel of the city. The city is a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Over the last 50 years, however, the old city has gradually fallen into disrepair as its wealthier residents have moved to new suburban developments in areas with car access and better infrastructure and as 'modern' planning approaches were introduced to the medieval city.

Early in the 1950s, for example, a new master plan brought major roads into the historic fabric of the old town, causing considerable damage. Apart from the destruction and abandonment of historical buildings, these new roads isolated whole neighbourhoods, and unsympathetic multi-story buildings sprang up along them. In addition, the lack of investment in the old city meant that infrastructure, and thereby living standards, deteriorated.

Since the beginning of the 1980s the city council has been searching for ways to protect the heritage of the old city whilst allowing it to develop as a living city. Earlier plans for the destruction of large areas were abandoned and new, stricter regulations were developed to limit the demolition of traditional buildings. In 1993 Aleppo City Council put into motion a



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15-year rehabilitation strategy and development plan with assistance from the German government and Kuwaiti Arab Fund. The plan, which embraces economic and social development as well as physical infrastructure, was prepared through a consultative process of public meetings and planning workshops to ensure citizens involvement.

The first phase (1993-97) involved a survey of the city's problems and drawing up a development plan for the entire city. A scheme for upgrading infrastructure and the refurbishment of 200 buildings, with loans advanced to 170 residents to restore their houses, was piloted in three action areas. Phase two, completed in 2000 and phase three, which followed, have seen the continuation of these activities to include the whole of the old city. These phases have



been marked by increasing involvement of residents in decision-making.

The programme includes on-the-job training and study tours for municipal technical staff to help build local capacity. Tendering and contracting procedures for local contractors have been adapted and rationalised and innovative techniques for infrastructure works have been developed to suit the local weak soils and the narrow streets of the city.

The loans to individual households are managed through an 'emergency fund', which gives three-year

interest free loans of around US\$ 900 to households. Eligibility criteria take into account the level of dilapidation and whether the building represents a threat to public safety. Residents are encouraged to undertake repairs themselves to save costs and to encourage an ethic of self-help housing repair. Loans are therefore complemented by technical assistance to enable residents to undertake structural repairs themselves. In addition, a 'Rehabilitation Fund' offers five-year loans of up to US\$ 3,350 for the restoration of historically or architecturally important buildings.

The initiative is a systematic effort to conserve the built heritage of the city at the same time as improving the quality of life of residents. Integrated and long term planning approaches, coupled with efforts to build local technical and management skills, help to ensure that this process is sustainable.

