7. Conservation in the Historic District of Jeddah

Abdulla Y. Bokhari

Jeddah is a growing Saudi Arabian seaport on the eastern shore of the Red Sea. Its remarkable history and tradition led its citizens to call it "the Bride of the Red Sea," but by now "dowager" might be the more appropriate term, since it has reached the stage in life when not just cosmetics, but face-lifting operations are called for. It is some of these rejuvenation efforts that I shall consider here.

Jeddah dates back to pre-Islamic times, but little is known of its history before the reign of the third caliph, Uthman ibn Affan (A.D. 644-56), who ordered the rebuilding of the town in A.D. 646 as a port for Mecca and as a commercial center. It handled the supplying of the Holy City with goods from India, from Egypt, and from southern Arabia. Since then Jeddah and Mecca have always been mutually dependent in fortune and destiny.

With few interruptions Jeddah remained a prosperous port and trade center in spite of interventions by the Dutch, the British, and the Portuguese. It also remained a walled city for about a thousand years. Its first wall, which surrounded the city on its three land sides, was presumably built by the Persians toward the end of the tenth century to protect the city from hostile nomads; and its second, which added a sea wall, was completed in 1111 either by the Mamluks themselves or by one of their vassals, to protect the town from the Portuguese. This second set of walls remained in place until its demolition in 1947 to make way for the expansion of the city.

That expansion had begun immediately after World War II, when Jeddah enjoyed a commercial and financial boom inspired both by the substantial increase in the number of pilgrims arriving at its port and by large oil revenues. After the wall's demolition the town grew in all directions, but mainly along the Mecca and Medina roads, since the city was confined to the west by the Red Sea and to the east by the mountains: the valley in which it is located is only twelve kilometers at its widest point and in some places is as narrow as five. In the nineteen-fifties the natives of Jeddah began to leave their traditional houses in the inner town in favor of these new outlying suburbs. The richest families moved first along the Mecca road; when that area also began to become crowded, they then moved north along the seashore, where higher humidity made living in that intensely arid atmosphere more comfortable.

In the decade 1947-57 the city finally shed its medieval characteristics to cope with modern life; the population had increased from about 24,000 inhabitants in 1948 (just about the time the wall was removed) to 106,000 in 1959, to 381,000 in 1971, to 561,000 in 1975, to about 1 million in 1978, to 1.2 million in 1982. By the mid-fifties the urgent need for new housing had already led to the erection of the first apartment buildings in Jeddah and to the substitution of concrete for the traditional coral blocks as the major construction material.

When these new building materials—reinforced concrete, steel, and glass—were introduced, the construction of traditional houses ceased, and architecture assumed a different aspect. As in less than three decades the modest trading town was transformed into the vast sprawling metropolis, its spectacular growth was unfortunately controlled only by the application of bits and pieces of various planning principles that mixed Haussmannian ideals with technocratic and utilitarian principles. For the most part development simply reacted to the demands and pressures of modern life, and in the process the valuable and viable qualities of old Jeddah were forgotten. There was no time to realize that the juxtaposition of old and new, and the functional and physical integration of both, can have its advantages. Instead, the traditional sections of the city were either removed or left to deteriorate, while Western-style residential and commercial districts were built on the periphery.
In the beginning, lack of integration of new and old could be attributed to the speed at which modernization had to take place, and especially to the need to provide for the numerous newly introduced automobiles with adequately wide avenues. But as the tastes and the life of the people changed, it simply became too late to attempt any physical or even functional integration of the old with the new ways of doing things. Now Saudi Arabia is trying to retrieve those remnants of an earlier time that can still be rescued, and to preserve at least some of the traditional quarter of the old town before it is too late.

The first step was taken in 1970 when the office of Robert Matthews, Johnson Marshall was retained to draw up an initial master plan for Jeddah, and in 1973 they submitted their work. It was then given to the firm of Sert, Jackson for revision and updating, while Robert Matthews was entrusted with studying the historic core of Jeddah and suggesting some steps toward preserving and revitalizing it.

Matthews proposed maintaining about 51.1 hectares of the old town with a target population and employment figures of 45,000 and 65,000, respectively. The area was increased by the municipality, to extend from behind the old town down to the Cornish Road, which is built on land reclaimed from the sea. Within the existing intricate system of narrow pedestrian and vehicular routes, RMJM proposed creating a series of landscaped areas with plants, fountains, benches, and pavements of granite and marble. The car parks within the conservation areas were to be hidden by trees and hedges. To illustrate how these conservation principles would be applied to a typical cross-section of local buildings, RMJM selected a group of buildings from various periods for a demonstration study. They suggested adopting them for use as cafes, restaurants, and shops and a few of these have since opened for business.

The schemes they came up with were interesting and well studied, but expensive. To implement them, after the buildings to be preserved and revitalized or restored were agreed on, Matthews did detailed drawings at a scale of 1:50 with full-sized working drawings of 1:10 and 1:5, and prepared reports and sketches. The scheme was then put out by the municipality to contract. The total cost of implementing it was estimated by Robert
Pls. 6-7 Refurbished family houses and new pavement in the old town

Fig. 1 Conservation in Jeddah, project areas

Fig. 2 The dotted line encloses the area designated for conservation and restoration.
Matthews at about $400 million, to be spread over a ten-year period. More than half the cost—about 750 million Saudi riyals, or $200 million—was the estimated cost of conserving the 537 listed buildings and the 62 listed building groups. All the buildings had to be purchased.

While the scheme itself is very ambitious and shows great initiative on the part of the municipality of Jeddah, its implementation must be carefully and judiciously supervised because building and land speculation can easily disrupt it. Building codes and regulations are also still loose, and have yet to be fully formalized and enforced. When the municipality was established, only social codes governed building construction; virtually no building codes or regulations existed, and the city had to start from scratch.

The building material once used all over Jeddah was coral block covered with a lime plaster that was made from burning coral block. Wooden beams provided level courses and some reinforcement. The entire wall was then cemented with clay taken from the lagoon. Only parts of the buildings constructed in this manner have so far been renovated or restored. New pavements have lately been added everywhere, and the walkways and streets are consequently very clean.

collapsed already, and are yet to be removed. In some old houses air conditioners hanging out of the windows indicate that the houses are wired for electricity, but they probably have no plumbing because of the difficulty in introducing water and sewer pipes into this dense settlement. By now, of course, if the municipality should decide to introduce sewers and supply water to these buildings, the new streets would have to be demolished and rebuilt again. Recently built structures provide an element of aesthetic discord, as do the new electric street lights that have replaced the old gas lamps.

Historic preservation is not an end in itself, and is in fact of little value to Saudi Arabia. The attempt at physical integration of the old and the new has also proved to be almost impossible, even futile, in Jeddah, because changes in almost all aspects of life, whether technological, economic, or administrative, lead to misinterpretations of the traditional. Architects, designers, and administrators try to copy the elements of traditional buildings. Regulations even encourage this by enforcing the use of some traditional architectonic elements, resulting in architectural forms and solutions that are at the same time pretentious and naive.

The municipality is paying for all the renovation that is being done, and the private sector is not really involved at all. To achieve functional integration, public and private initiatives ought to join in the effort. The business community, administrators, intellectuals, and professionals must work together to achieve the desired revitalization of the historic center and to find ways to keep the traditional core alive, viable, and vital and to prevent its further depopulation and deterioration. It cannot be left solely to the municipality. Many of the old buildings could easily be rehabilitated for uses such as public libraries and restaurants. Some historic houses could be rented or purchased by companies and restored as offices (at present this is not permitted). Not until people are attracted to the old town, however, will the old core be functionally integrated in a way that will allow it to survive within the overall fabric of the city. Saudis are seldom seen in it now; there is little to attract them there.

While the municipality spends immense amounts of money to revitalize old Jeddah, citizen participation

Pl. 9 New pavement, new lighting, and new planting to beautify the old town and add to its character

Pl. 8 High houses of the “Red Sea” type, built in coral rock and timber (photo: Ronald Lewcock)
remains as minimal as private-sector participation. Citizens ought to share in the decision making, express their views, and exercise some control over the shape of their city environment hand in hand with appropriate legal instruments and joint public and private effort. It is very unfortunate that until now the public has been largely unaware of what it could accomplish.

Almost all the old houses are owned by prominent city families. Because the old town was so densely built up, it has the same ownership complications as any traditional medieval city. It is difficult to determine boundary lines and sometimes to trace all the legal owners. As a result municipal regulations forbid owners to sell their property or to tear the buildings down. Their participation is therefore essential for reviving the area.

All in all, the municipality is doing its best to restore the historic center of Jeddah, but that effort, however energetic, will not be sufficient so long as the preservation or conservation effort does not involve the total city. The architecture schools also have to assume some of the responsibility: instead of teaching students to design in the style of Corbusier or Frank Lloyd Wright or the Beaux-Arts, they ought to be teaching them to preserve traditional areas and integrate them with the new structures that they are about to design in a way that will preserve the dignity of Saudi tradition and the city's character and life.

Discussion

QUESTION: When the municipality buys houses in the old district, do they have to pay development rights to the owners? In other words, if land is purchased to build a ten- or twenty-story high-rise, would the municipality pay more for the property than the structure on it is worth?

BOKHARI: The government can either buy property or take it by eminent domain; the first is the more common. A committee assesses property and land value, and that is the amount paid to the owner of the building. Something like 70 percent of the population, not only in Jeddah but all over Saudi Arabia, have profited from government land-purchasing schemes, and some have even grown rich.

ISMAIL SERAGELDIN: We should thank Dr. Bokhari for returning us to the topic of this seminar, which is not preservation or conservation per se, but adaptive reuse. In your presentation, you mentioned that it would be very desirable if some firms would restore old houses for office use, but then you added, “At present, this is not permitted.” Apparently there are policies, well-intentioned or not, that prohibit adaptive reuse. Since it is implicit in your statement that the functional integration of the old into the new requires locating economically productive activities in the old city to generate employment opportunities and so forth, could you please explain what the obstacles are to relocating firms in the old city?

BOKHARI: When people began to object to the destruction of the traditional areas, the municipality halted all development in the old city: they prohibited tearing down any more buildings, they prohibited sales, they prohibited alteration. Anyone owning a house in the historic center of Jeddah had to ask for the municipality's permission even to alter it in any way. If the municipality had any plans at all to restore that building, they would forbid the owner from selling or altering it. While this might appear obstructive, it is really an effort to lead the way. The municipality is planning, for example, to restore an important building in Jeddah and open a prestigious restaurant there.
Projects like this are intended to show people what can be done with restored buildings in the hope that it will inspire people to imitate them.

COMMENT: I am afraid there is no possibility of bringing a group comparable to the original inhabitants back to the old houses, unless it becomes fashionable to keep a flat in town along with a villa in the suburbs. For that reason I see no possibility of interesting people in solving the problems of the historic area. Most of them would gladly demolish those houses, and replace them by the sort of thing with which we are all familiar. Nor do I think the central area is Jeddah's biggest problem. It would be nice if somebody were willing and able to buy those houses and keep them alive, but the real problems are in the outskirts of town, in those crash housing projects one finds around the old airport. They harbor the really serious social problems. Preserving a few beautiful old houses would be nice, but it hardly has top priority.

COMMENT: The old city is now inhabited by foreign workers. I see operating here something of the negative attitude of many Saudis with respect to the old city: first, it is old, and they are now modern citizens of the modern world; and second, it is inhabited by foreign workers, toward whom their attitude is not one of equality. Those two attitudes stand in the way of the people having anything to do with the old city, whether it involves living there themselves or preserving it through appropriate commercial reuse. If regulations are removed they will let those buildings go to ruin until they collapse and leave the owner with a free hand. The bottom line of restoration is whether one can afford it. Obviously the government of Saudi Arabia can afford it.

BOKHARI: Regulations in Jeddah do not prevent the owner of the building from restoring it. But if he tries to delay the process of preservation or restoration after he has been given the green light, then the municipality will purchase the building. I too would demolish a building that would otherwise represent only conservation for conservation's sake. But conservation for the sake of reuse, of revitalization, of functional integration should be done.

QUESTION: What percentage of the population of Jeddah lives in this area and is affected by the regulations of the municipality?

BOKHARI: A very low percentage; the number probably does not exceed 20,000 to 25,000, and Jeddah has a population of over 1.2 million. The housing stock in Jeddah is more than capable of absorbing the population of its historic center.

QUESTION: Are the new constructions in the area commissioned, or just handed out by bid? If they are commissioned, does the commissioning agency use architectural integration as one of its major criteria? Or is it just after a good-looking building?

BOKHARI: The new buildings are all privately owned, and design or other restrictions on new construction are very limited, although attempts are being made to establish some building codes and regulations. Apartment buildings are privately owned and built by contractors; their construction is controlled to a certain extent. But control is also often misguided: for example, the government passed a law requiring the use of arches, wood, and latticework wherever possible (that is, adding mashrabiyas and so forth) with unfortunate results. Unless it is well thought out and well formulated and codified, regulation can be almost as damaging as no regulation.

QUESTION: You mentioned that the municipality did launch educational programs to alert the public to the importance of preserving the historic buildings. Were these programs successful? If not, why not? Second, are the regulations governing preservation and conservation of historical buildings made on a regional or a national level?
BOKHARI: Conservation and preservation/restoration programs are administered on the municipal level. Every city in Saudi Arabia has launched an effort to preserve, conserve, and restore its remaining traditional buildings. Programs also exist on the national level, within the Ministry of Education’s antiquities department, whose present head is very enthusiastic about preserving and reusing traditional buildings, in Riyadh and in Jeddah, for example, as museums. Whether these programs are successful or not I cannot really judge, but I think they are moving in the right direction and are finding receptive ears both on the administrative level and among private individuals. Some are perhaps going too far, imitating and copying, rather than just preserving. Architects are designing houses by copying old ones or imitating them in an obvious way.

QUESTION: You mentioned that there are 530 buildings on the list to be preserved by the municipality of Jeddah. Are they going to be reused as restaurants, museums, and office buildings only, or as houses as well? And if they are to be used for housing, who will live in them? Will the foreign laborers be left there, or will the policy be to try to convince the rich families who own them to move back into them again?

BOKHARI: Obviously not all the 530 houses can be used for restaurants and offices. The municipality probably does not even yet know what it will do with all of them. Some have been designated for office space, some as restaurants and coffee houses; one is being considered for housing the future small national museum of Jeddah. I suspect most will be restored for use as one-, two-, or three-family apartment buildings. In that case, after the municipality restores a building the owner is free to decide whether he wants to live in it himself or rent it out to other people.

QUESTION: I see very little incentive here for encouraging the owners to develop these houses. Would it not be more realistic for the city to acquire and develop some of them as a tourist area?

BOKHARI: I do not believe that developing Jeddah as a tourist attraction is a possibility. We may have the largest tourist season in the world during the Hajj, but I do not otherwise see Jeddah in that role. Still, considering that Jeddah can anticipate millions of pilgrims every year, perhaps that is one of the things that the municipality might look into.

QUESTION: You mentioned that foreign laborers live in ten families to a dwelling that had once housed a single Saudi family. This suggests tremendous congestion in the area. What will become of the ten families who are living in a house if it is turned into a single-family dwelling or office space, for example?

BOKHARI: Inside the historic town, there is no space for expansion, if that is what you mean.

QUESTION: No, I was asking whether expansion was built into the reuse plan. If an old building collapses, will it be replaced by a similar structure? Or will a high-rise apartment be constructed there to take care of the surplus population? If an old building is refurbished, will it then be returned to single-family or other restricted use regardless of the numbers living there now?

BOKHARI: If an old building collapses, it will usually be replaced by a multi-story apartment building.

QUESTION: Will it be occupied by the same ten families?

BOKHARI: No, I do not think it will be occupied by the same families, but that is just a matter of speculation.
COMMENT: I understand urban renewal, renovation, redevelopment to be for upgrading areas, but in this case it seems essentially to be window-dressing. What the municipality has already invested just in marble pathways would better have been given to those people who do not have enough money to maintain those houses. That would have solved two problems: the poor living conditions of the people and the dilapidation of the house.

JOHN WARREN: I too feel the municipality has got its priorities turned around the wrong way. It seems to me that they ought to have dealt with the buildings first and the streets second, as we are doing in Baghdad. Upgrading the buildings attracts people.

BOKHARI: The situation is totally different in Baghdad. In Saudi Arabia we are dealing with private property; the municipality has to buy it before it can touch it. I gather that in Baghdad you are dealing entirely with public property.

RENATA HOLOD: It was my impression that the streets were paved without upgrading the services under them, without putting in new sewerage lines, new water lines, new electricity, and telephones, and what have you. Is this correct?

BOKHARI: Electricity is usually provided. The provision of other utilities depends upon availability and feasibility.

HOLOD: But the municipality did not put new trunks through the old city, as far as you know? It was only a paving effort, the total impact of which was to clean up the streets, a sort of beautification program?

BOKHARI: This was part of it. In any case all those buildings have septic tanks, so they really do not need a sewer system. Many have water supplied by the city. So although it was a beautification effort, a first step to attract the people back to their traditional houses, the municipality also provided services, at least to some extent.