Urban Rehabilitation of Historical Areas: The Asilah Medina

Khalid EL HARROUNI
Professor, Ecole Nationale d’Architecture, BP 6372, Rabat Instituts, Morocco

ABSTRACT

The Asilah medina profited during the two last decades from a series of cultural rehabilitation initiatives by Al-Mouhit Cultural Association. But today the medina offers a striking contrast between areas of thriving cultural and artistic activities, and a degraded historical built environment. Fortunately, a significant measure of protection and management is currently in the final stages of application: the Plan d’Aménagement et de Sauvegarde de la médina d'Asilah, 2009. The overall rehabilitation strategy for Asilah medina is to alleviate the constraints through an intervention program, especially the historic monuments and buildings, the urban environment, the housing stock, the social and economical development, which can not be launched without seeking adequate tools (institutional, financial and technical) for their implementation. The municipality places the stakeholder participation, including social participation in housing rehabilitation, the public and the private actors investments at the core of its implementation strategy. The city council sets a program of emergency intervention on deteriorating historical built environment (ramparts, walls, bastions and gates), housing units threatening collapse, infrastructure and urban facilities.

INTRODUCTION

The medina, historic urban area, is the oldest section and the historic heart of some Moroccan cities. Various international bodies have instituted policy to save historic monuments and even entire cities: The Global Charter of Historic Cities adopted by ICOMOS in 1987, the 1972 adoption by UNESCO of a convention to protect built and natural history, both include Morocco's medinas (Fez, Marrakech, Meknes, Essaouira, …) in their scope of preservation. In the 1980s UNESCO acknowledged the cultural significance of several old towns in Morocco by including them in the UNESCO world heritage list.

The historical and cultural characteristics of Asilah medina are one of the principle sources of the Asilah’s city richness, occupying a strategic position in the Tangier-Tetouan Region, which is involved in the new dynamic of economic and social development occurring in the north of Morocco. The geostrategic situation makes this region a centre of development with national and international influence.

Asilah is situated on the north western tip of Morocco's Atlantic coast, and located 42 km southeast of the town of Tangier. Its population is of approximately 30 000 inhabitants that live fundamentally of fishing, agriculture and tourism which is rapidly becoming an important source of income. The northern Atlantic coastal area falls into the Mediterranean climate zone

---

2.- Marrakech (1985). Capital of Morocco, both under the Almohades (12/13th century) and again under the Saadiens (16/17th century). The medina, surrounded by 12th-century walls, is known for its high Koutoubia minaret. In 2001, UNESCO acknowledged the original and spectacular activities of Djemaa El Fna and its cultural significance by including this place in the UNESCO world heritage list.
3.- Meknes (1996). Founded in the 11th century by Almoravid rulers as a military town, Meknes became a capital under Sultan Moulay Ismail (1672-1727), the founder of the Alaouite dynasty.
bringing mild wet winters and dry warm summers. Visitors are attracted throughout the year by Asilah's pleasant climate and centuries-old buildings, but for two months each summer it is the centre of one of Morocco’s most important artistic festivals.

The importance of its medina is reflected through several factors: the medina, a little geographical area of 7 hectares, is characterized by its remarkable centrality, its homogeneous aspect and its originality compared to others medinas. Its principal urban components are: the fortifications of Islamic and Portuguese origin (walls, bastions and doors), the districts, places, streets and residential and religious buildings with a historical and architectural interest.

The only monuments in Asilah protected by the series of statutes and regulations, the most recent of which is Royal Decree No 2-95-892 of January 24, 1996, which imposes controls over any work of demolition, alteration, extension, and reconstruction of listed buildings, are the ramparts of Asilah, which have been legally protected since 1996 as a historic monumental ensemble.
The medina of Asilah counts 5 districts. Its principal streets are those which connect gates/doors to gates/doors. The other streets are organized according to the north-eastern and south-western orientation, while crossing the medina in its length and its width and serve the residential districts and the commercial streets. Its Kasba, rectangular citadel dating from the Portuguese period, was formerly a fortified town surrounded of walls which sheltered the residences of the governor and the chief of the Portuguese army. Currently, it is an open space little built containing some dwellings, cultural equipment: the Hassan II International Meeting Centre and the Large Mosque. During the two last decades, the medina of Asilah profited from a series of cultural initiatives and from a marked movement of rehabilitation and restoration, which made it possible to conserve some of its historical and architectural heritage and to generate positive impact and repercussions on the very whole city and on the tourism activity development.

But today, Asilah medina offers a striking contrast between areas of thriving cultural and artistic activities, and a degraded historical built environment. The most serious problems include the deteriorating residential zones, the degradation of the historical built environment (ramparts, walls, bastions and gates), the transformation of traditional handicraft activities into partially mechanized small-scale manufacturing, the problem of the traffic and parking in the surrounding urban fabric, and the sea water pollution due to the discharge of the urban sewages and domestic waters without any preliminary treatment. In front of this situation, a safeguard master plan of the medina is establishing: the overall safeguard strategy for the Asilah medina is to alleviate the above constraints through an action program which can not be launched without seeking adequate tools (institutional, financial and technical) for its implementation.

---

3 Rehabilitation of Asilah, by Al-Mouhit Cultural Association, 1978
4 Plan d’Aménagement et de Sauvegarde de la Médina d’Asilah, 2009
The project dealt with a comprehensive development vision of the medina including the Master Plan and Safeguard of the traditional urban area, covering the whole district of the former walled city and to reinforce its urban and cultural identity. The global development objectives are declined in the following components:

- Development of the historic monuments and buildings rehabilitation and restoration programs;
- Improvement of infrastructures, urban facilities, accessibility, circulation and parking;
- Social and economical activities development;
- Improvement of the medina environment, the cultural and tourism development.

All these components have to be achieved in the next five years, and the project will have a positive impact on the development of the medina of Asilah, but in terms of financial indicators, the achievement of a project of such a size is not always fully met. It is necessary to generate many synergies of actors (local authorities, the municipality, public and private investors) against these problems and constraints, in order to have a possible and feasible response to the challenges of the components development, even under difficult conditions.

![Figure 4: Places and Streets network](Source: Etude Architecturale et Plan d’Aménagement et de Sauvegarde de la Médina d’Asilah)

THE REHABILITATION PROJECT BY AL-MOUHIT CULTURAL ASSOCIATION

**Historical significance**

The walls, most representative buildings and most of the constructions inside the medina area, ran the risk of collapse during the seventies. The streets were not paved; sewage flowed only regarding the law of gravity; rubbish was collected by eleven donkeys that knocked on the doors with their snout. Overhead power lines dated from 1926, erected during the Spanish protectorate period…. But the destiny of Asilah changed tack: Worried about the degradation of the city, some members of the civil society started putting forward solutions designed for
the restoration of the old part of the city. These actors decided also to organise an artistic festival every summer: The Cultural Moussem of Asilah. The cultural association “Al-Mouhait” was created that same year to organise the events of the festival.

The rehabilitation project of Asilah by Al-Mouhit Cultural Association started in 1978. Historical sites such as the Portuguese fortifications, the Al-Kamra Tower and the Raissouni Palace (an early 20th century structure was the home of Ahmed-Raissouni, one most of the most well-known pirates based in the area) have all been restored and several public spaces have been re-arranged for commercial activities. The town was gradually being provided with basic infrastructures: the streets were paved, the old houses renovated; always following their craft patterns.

Main activities and events of the festival (every year, from the beginning of August till the end of the month) include:
- Wall paintings.
- Engraving workshops.

Shows: Poetry readings, concerts and dance shows from all around the World, as well as traditional and contemporary Moroccan ones.
- Conferences, lectures and forums of debate and dialogue among intellectuals of any tendency. Artistic creation, architecture, urbanism, and many other disciplines are discussed.

The festival’s success brought an overhaul of Asilah’s infrastructure and restoration of 60% of its buildings; the town was designated a National Monument and, in 1989, received the Aga Khan Award for Architecture. The project was noted for its sensitivity in treating buildings as living fabrics and in creating a partnership between local and outside skill. The idea of restoration has also been expanded to include sustainable urban conservation efforts in the Asilah rehabilitation project.

Thirty years afterwards the town attracts artists - Moroccan as well as foreign; not only during the period when the festival is being held, but all year round.

Figure 5: The Portuguese fortifications: the Sqala and the Al-Kamra Tower

Figure 6: The fortification (walls and bastions)
Physical description

The historical area contains different styles of architecture including traditional, neo-traditional, modern and renovated buildings. These different styles are given in Figure 8.

The architecture house in Asilah medina consists of courtyard houses arranged in a compact and organic urban fabric with narrow streets. Spanish influence is noticeable in some of the house's facades. The key elements of the rehabilitation project included a general cleaning up and beautification of the town. This included the restoration of historic structures such as the defensive walls, the Raissouni Palace, and the Al-Kamra Tower; the rearrangement and improvement of public spaces such as market areas; the improvement of the infrastructure and urban facilities and lastly, the regulation of any new construction in the medina.
The town is known for the picturesque white buildings of Portuguese and Spanish style, with their brightly decorated walls along the blue coastal waters. A wavelike pattern of street paving was created to beautify the streets: streets and places of exposed granite.

The basic services and the infrastructure for electrical energy, drinking water, telephones and sanitation was improved; the last percentage data from 2006 dwellers enquiry are: 99% of dwellers have access to electricity power; 94% of dwellers have access to network drinking water supply, 3% using wells, and 3% have no access to this base service; 99% of dwellers have access to sewage collection and disposal and 1% using cesspools as a sanitation mode. These basic services and infrastructure have all contributed to the growth of tourism and, in general, the rehabilitation of Asilah is an immense accomplishment as is the creation of the cultural festival.

**Building Structures and Materials Construction**

New construction is limited to space within the walls, mainly on lots where the original structure cannot be saved. These new buildings are constructed in a similar style and manner as the historic Portuguese and Spanish buildings. Materials such as doors and window frames are salvaged from the structures to be demolished and then recycled into the new buildings. Modern materials and methods of construction are also used for the new buildings. Reinforced concrete columns and beams are used, with the occasional use of some load bearing brick walls and partitions, and load bearing stone walls. Traditional floors are constructed out of hollow bricks and IPN metal beams of ceiling. The most common material for walls is concrete and hollow bricks. The exterior walls are then mostly cement with a lime wash. Traditional ceramic tiles, zelij, or cedar woodwork are the common finishing materials. The renovation and restoration work on the other hand has been done with mostly traditional materials and methods of construction. Local masons and craftsmen do the majority of the work.

According to the visual examinations in building pathology of 2006, 83% of the built environment units are between good and average state (pink and yellow colours in Figure 9), 12% are deteriorated (red colour), 1% of buildings are threatening ruin or is at risk of collapse and 4% are destroyed (black colour).

![Figure 9: Building pathology in Asilah medina]( Source: Etude Architecturale et Plan d’Aménagement et de Sauvegarde de la Médina d’Asilah)
New Mutations and Spatial Changes

New functions were given to historic areas. The Raissouni palace is transformed into the Palace of Culture. It was restored and changed into studio spaces for the visiting artists during the festival; a large gathering space for the community was also created. An open-air theatre was constructed in the old section of town within the Portuguese walls, and a new harbour is being rebuilt to serve as a commercial port and marina. There are basic issues of restoration/rehabilitation or preservation in the redesign of the town harbour. It is in the process of being redesigned to be a working port as well as a marina area.

The project rehabilitation in its success has improved the infrastructure of the town and given the residents a sense of pride and a greater access to income, but the cultural festival does not enrich the culture of the residents. It is stated in the Aga Khan Award Technical Review that the two months (August and July) of the festival are the major source of residents' annual income. However, the socio-economic make-up of the town has changed as well. The influx of a certain social category including intellectuals, artists and even expatriates who responded to local actor’s plea for help in the rehabilitation created a new group of residents. Renovated houses rented during the festival are now attracting new residents from outside the region. Thus, as a result of the rehabilitation and the festival's success, there is also now a growing concern that the increase in the upper-class population will raise the rents of the poorer residents on newly valuable land.

MASTER PLAN AND SAFGUARDE PROJECT OF ASILAH MEDINA

The project dealt with a comprehensive development vision of the medina including the master plan and safeguard of the traditional urban area, covering the whole district of the former walled city to reinforce its urban and cultural identity, re-establish a coherent urban form in the medina and to link it with the surrounding structures.

Figure 10: The Master Plan and Safeguard study field
(Source: Etude Architecturale et Plan d’Aménagement et de Sauvegarde de la Médina d’Asilah)
The global development objectives are declined in the following components and subcomponents:

**Historic Monuments and Buildings Rehabilitation**

The objective is to improve the living conditions and to preserve the historical buildings. This component includes the following sub components:

The restoration operation of the historical buildings including public buildings, historical ramparts, Skala (fortified building) and traditional houses.

The restructuring operation which concerns the surrounding the historic walls and their monumental gateways, from Sea Gate to Lakrikia tower. The intervention concerns also the creation of pedestrian itinerary between the shrine of Sidi Al Assily and El Houmar gate with the reorganisation of the accesses and parking situated in the south of the medina.

Intervention on housing units threatening collapse: Some houses present a high risk because of the threat of collapse of their physical structures. Buildings threatening collapse require emergency action involving both the public and private sectors. Beyond consolidation and critical repairs, the municipality lacks the technical capacities and political must enforce building codes. Priority is given to emergency repair of housing units threatening collapse and fronting on improved roads and tourist circulation routes.

The requalification operation of the medina’s central quarters and places which have lost their social and economical roles: Abdellah Guennoun place, Ben Khaldoun place, Sidi Mbark place, Sidi Ben Aissa place, … . It must protect the urban context and the sense of the place, revitalize the economic base of the old city, and meet the legitimate expectations of its local population, by injecting some commercial activities and some urban facilities: social, educational and handicraft professional training equipments.

**Infrastructure and Urban Facilities**

The success of the revitalization of the medina is greatly associated with the up-grading of its infrastructure and urban facilities which include the following:

- Swage system: water supply and sanitation are important basic needs affecting the quality of life and productive efficiency of the medina population. Provision of these basic services continue to be among the core activities of urban local bodies. The municipal council and Amendis\(^5\) are the main actors in the improvement of water and sewage systems. However, there is the problem of sea water pollution due to the discharge of the urban sewages and domestic waters without any preliminary treatment. The morphology of the Asilah city made state that the sense of out-flow of the sewage network and the pluvial flows is unfortunately the Atlantic sea. These dismissals in the sea are an important source of pollution of the city and the quality of fishing and bathing of its beaches. The solution is the sewage treatment through the realisation of a wastewater treatment plant.

\(^5\) Amendis, operating company under Veolia Water (51%), has been present in Tangier-Tetouan since 2002, through public-private partnerships for water distribution, electricity and wastewater concession management. Privatisation of public services has taken place in several sectors in Morocco: water, electricity, sanitation, solid waste, … under the model known as «Gestion Déléguée» (Delegated management). Concessions are considered to be a form of delegated management under Law 54-05 related to the delegated management of public services.
• Electricity: the public and private actors played a major role in the electrification of the whole medina. Public lighting, electricity and telephone networks have increased the number of businesses and the tourism activity.

• Urban facilities: the Ministries of National Education, Social Affairs and Islamic Affairs have to adapt their equipments norms to the historic building capacity, and then they have to built equipments or to transform some buildings into social, educational and handicraft professional training equipments. One of the suggestion of the master plan and safeguard project concerns some buildings which can host after their rehabilitation, the handicraft activities: the Tama Guilana school could be transformed into the handicraft professional training institute, and two caravansaries (foundoks) can be reused as handicraft exhibition spaces.

• Emergency and liaison circulation networks have noticeable impact on the communication and transportation networks in the medina.

• Traffic reorganization: the traffic network has to be improved especially surrounding the historic walls and their monumental gateways.

• Accesses and parking: the accesses reorganisation will facilitate enormously the parking of cars outside the pedestrian road network, and will contribute to the increase of the economy and real estate value of many parts of the medina because of the easy accessibility.

Figure 11: Dismissals in the sea

Figure 12: Parking surrounding the historic walls
Social and Economical Activities Development

This action includes the revival of the handicraft activities, such as the sewing, the whipping the Bronze handicraft activities and also some artistic crafts from designing women. The intervention concerns also the reorganisation of the commercial activities and the support of the artistic and cultural activities through the re-arrangement of public spaces for these activities.

Around the Portuguese defensive walls, the canal and the street on the eastern side are transformed into a market place (Ahfir Souk) and coffee shops and some restaurants in the northern side. The Municipality and the Master Plan and Safeguard of Asilah medina propose, after the rehabilitation and restoration of the walls, the transformation of the Ahfir Souk and the trench into a recreation and pedestrian place for local population and tourists.

Figure 13: The Ahfir Souk surrounding the Portuguese defensive walls

Figure 14: The Ahfir Souk re-arrangement Project
(Source: Etude Architecturale et Plan d’Aménagement et de Sauvegarde de la Médina d’Asilah)
**Improvement of the Medina Environment and Tourism Development**

The quality of the environment and bathing waters is one of the main criteria tourists use when selecting a holiday destination. The objectives of the sanitation project are based on improving the continuity of essential services, restoring the quality of bathing waters and ensuring the efficient collection and treatment of wastewater.

Other proposed actions related to the improvement of the medina environment and the tourism development include:
- The re-arrangement of the green areas and the graves surrounding the medina.
- The reorganisation of some places by creating some guest houses and small hotels in the Abdellah Guennoun place and Ben Khaldoun place.
- The rearrangement of the medina cornice and the trenches.
- Establishing tourist tours for promoting the historical monuments of Asilah medina. It is possible in the context of this action, to suggest the two following tourist paths:
  1) The path of the ancient city, and its results from the Kasba gate towards Al-Kamra tower and the Raisouni palace then Lakrikia tower situated in the southwest side of the walls. This tower faces the sea and is frequented every evening at sunset by Asilha’s inhabitants as well as foreigners. From this site we get a privileged view of both the houses and the Sidi Mansour tombs. Thereafter the tourist path passes through Sidi Taieb street and heading towards Sidi Mbarak street, then the trade street reaching Abdellah Guennoun place. And from this place, the tourist path passes through Sidi Ali Ben Hamdouch street reaching Sidi Ben Aissa place and heading towards Al Houmar gate.
  
The tourist tour allows to visit the historical monuments inside the ramparts.
  2) The Ramparts path which results from Lakrikia tower, from the external side, heading towards Lalla Rahma tower. Thereafter it passes through Al Houmar gate then the Kasba gate and finally the sea gate. That the external defence walls and the field surrounding the medina will have been visited including the trench and the shrines.

![Figure 15: The tourist paths: 1) The ancient city and 2) The ramparts](Source: Etude Architecturale et Plan d’Aménagement et de Sauvegarde de la Médina d’Asilah)
References


