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Conservation of the Urban Heritage to Conserve the Sense of Place, a Case Study Misurata City, Libya

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ABSTRACT

The sense of place can only be achieved if the urban heritage is still intact and preserved whilst accommodating for new development. In the past Misurata city center where the traditional areas and historical significance are located did not have any positive consideration and appreciation from government which, were destroyed to build a new commercial buildings within business district area of city center. This paper intends to highlight on urban heritage "historical significance & activity pattern" that still survive in the city center of Misurata and reflects the sense of place. The study adapted the visual survey field method for data collection and this approach adopted techniques namely photograph and diagrams or maps. The results of the study indicate that there are some urban areas and buildings with historical or traditional significance and conducive sense of belonging and identity that must be renewed, restored, reused and conserved; for instance the marketplace, Allfah Square and the old city center.

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1. Introduction

The concept of conservation touches on the very essence of culture survival. Often defined as maintaining the presence of the past in the present time, it reflects on the need to safeguard the built environment that we inherit so that the future generation are able to appreciate, learned and value their history and the past. Our cities are actually a testimony of our existence and help to build a stronger foundation for the future. The current scene in the development of cities saw a trend towards a bland and uniform modern development reflecting the values and ideals of the modern city. The historic environment, which comprise of the old and historic buildings, traditional street pattern, activities and urban landscape provide a local distinctiveness to our city that reflect our culture and civilization. Their presence is so vital to our sense of place and belonging through their uniqueness that gives each city its own identity. Historic environment also provides a sense of stability to the modern society, whose hectic lifestyle needed an environment to remind us of our purpose in life. The urban heritage consists of all elements that shape the urban fabric including the local people, their activities and way of life. These elements have to be seen in total as they contribute to the character of our cities. Thus conservation efforts must focus on maintaining these qualities so that the whole historic environment is kept as an ensemble. This paper attempts to explore and evaluate the urban heritage “historical significance & activity pattern” that still survive and reflects the sense of place, identity and culture value in Misurata city. The significance of such investigation is that conservation of our urban heritage and buildings of historical significance or areas with tradition or social aspects is one main elements to ensure city characteristics and provide a sense of place that relate to sustainable design. This paper is based on a study that investigates the physical features and activities pattern in Misurata city center and Trablus Street in order to determine the qualities which are conducive for place character and sense of place.

2. Concept of Sense of Place “Genius Loci”

The term 'place' is very rich and has geographical, architectural/physical and social connotations (Canter, 1977). Canter (1977) suggested that a place is a result of the relationship between actions, conception and physical attributes. The geographical concept of place refers to the aerial context of events, objects and actions. This includes both natural elements and human construction in terms of materials and ideals. The concept of 'place' also refers to the integration

of elements of nature and culture and interconnected by a system of spatial interaction (Relph, 1976).

Place means more than an abstract location, it is totally made of concrete things having materials, substance, shape, texture and colour. All these things determine the character and the essence of a place. It is an area where perception is enriched and a person is made aware of the distinctive character of specific localities. Sense of place is the ability to recognize different places and different identities of a place. This concept incorporates imageability, topophilia, attachment and symbolic meaning of places (Relph, 1976). The search for a sense of place permits individuals to relate spatially to the aspects of the urban life they specifically choose to identify with (Banz, 1970). In theory gaining a sense of place means that a person can orient himself in his environment by using all his senses. The ability to acquire a sense of place depends on the degree of familiarity a person has with the place. Since sense of place comes from the attribution of meanings to physical forms, place is affected by people and in return people are effected by places. As a result, there is an interaction with a place rather than a response to place and endows the place with meanings. This is why old and historical places have more sense of place than newer places.

In fact, places that do not relate to any particular period and which are lacking a sense of continuity are uncomfortable environment. Thus, the stability and continuity of an environment act as a therapy to the rapidity and scale of modern social and environment changes. People who are satisfied with their environment will also develop a collective motivation to retain its qualities, where those who are dissatisfied with their habitat may relocate or opt for improvement (Downs & Stea, 1973).

3. The Concept of Urban Heritage Conservation

Conservation “means all the processes of looking after a place so as to retain its cultural significance” (Burra Charter Article 1.4). “Conservation encompasses the activities that are aimed at the safeguarding of a cultural resource so as to retain its historic value and extend its

physical life. There are conservation disciplines that address different kinds of cultural resources. All share a broad concept of conservation that embraces one or more strategies that can be placed on a continuum that runs from least intervention to greatest; that is, from maintenance to modification of the cultural resource. All operations are designed to understand a property, know its history and meaning, ensure its material safeguard and, if required, its restoration and enhancement.

The term 'heritage' is used widely in a variety of contexts. Traditionally, the word 'heritage' relates to the natural environment, buildings and monuments, the arts, social customs and traditions. Man's contribution to the natural environments has resulted in buildings and monuments of significant historical value, which can be broadly termed 'the built heritage'. According to UNESCO in 1972 conference the heritage is classified into two categories; firstly the Cultural Heritage, which involves a monument, group of buildings or site of historical, aesthetic, archaeological, scientific, ethnological or anthropological value. Secondly, the Natural Heritage, outstanding physical, biological, and geographical features; habitats of threatened plants or animals' species and areas of value on scientific or aesthetic grounds or from the point of view of conservation (UNESCO, 1972). Building conservation generally involves the renovation of old structures, which could bring them back to fulfilling their original function by contemporary standards or adapt them to new uses. Sometimes a building could be stripped down to its historic façade to act as frontispiece for a new function space. "Urban culture indicates human heritage. It gives worldwide reasons for living in congested cities. Aesthetic is basically for human pleasure while historical quality need to be determined through careful analysis. The aim of urban heritage conservation is to retain its character" (Nahoum Cohen, 2001). Montgomery (2001) argued that all good cities have distinctive identities and character.



Figure 1: Ancient city of Misurata that was destroyed to rebuilt new phenomena of commercial and official blocks. (Source: <http://misurata.com.ly/news/index.php>).



Figure 2: Colonial building damaged during war should be restored and retained “Recent issue.”

4. Background

Over the past four decades Libya not only has witnessed tremendous missing in terms of urban heritage conservation, but unfortunately has witnessed also the destruction of some of the buildings or sometimes a whole area that organized as a traditional, historical, significance and cultural values. In 1980s the government decided to bring down the ancient city of Misurata and rebuilt commercial tower blocks. Since the historic core is strategically located in the hub of the Central Business District, they have been the focus for speculative commercial development and subjected to intense pressure for change (Figure 1). Currently, there are some colonials buildings and other areas such as the marketplace that reflects the social interaction and activities which faced the destruction during the war in the Trablus Street and other areas (Figure 2). These places mentioned are the historical or traditional core that contributed significantly to the sense of place in Misurata city, which must be considered in future for any development or reconstructions through the architectural qualities, townscape and exciting activities that provide the life and charm of our cities (Figure 3).



Figure 3: Marketplace, must be rehabilitated and conserve as a social and cultural aspects reflecting the sense of place "Recent issue".

5. Method

This study is based on two main categories below (Figure 4):

1. Literature review which describes some point of views that relate to the urban heritage, place, conservation and urban design. This is to obtain a theory synthesis about urban heritage conservation and sense of place.
2. Field survey which applies the theory synthesis to the real condition of place or city. This is to know the opportunities that ensure sustainable design for future development and conservation of the city character.

6. Discussion

6.1 The Threats

The value of historic environment lies on its authenticity and the way in which its fabric is kept intact. The historic core contributed significantly to the sense of place in our cities through the richness of its architectural qualities, picturesque, townscape and exciting activities that provide the life and charm of our cities. It is also the place that reflects the true culture and the people and their presence has influence on the survival of the culture. A study of the old town centers in Libya that dated from 1980s until now revealed a lot of worrying trends that threaten the life could possibly lead to the death of our historic environment. These threats can easily be categorized into the following groups:

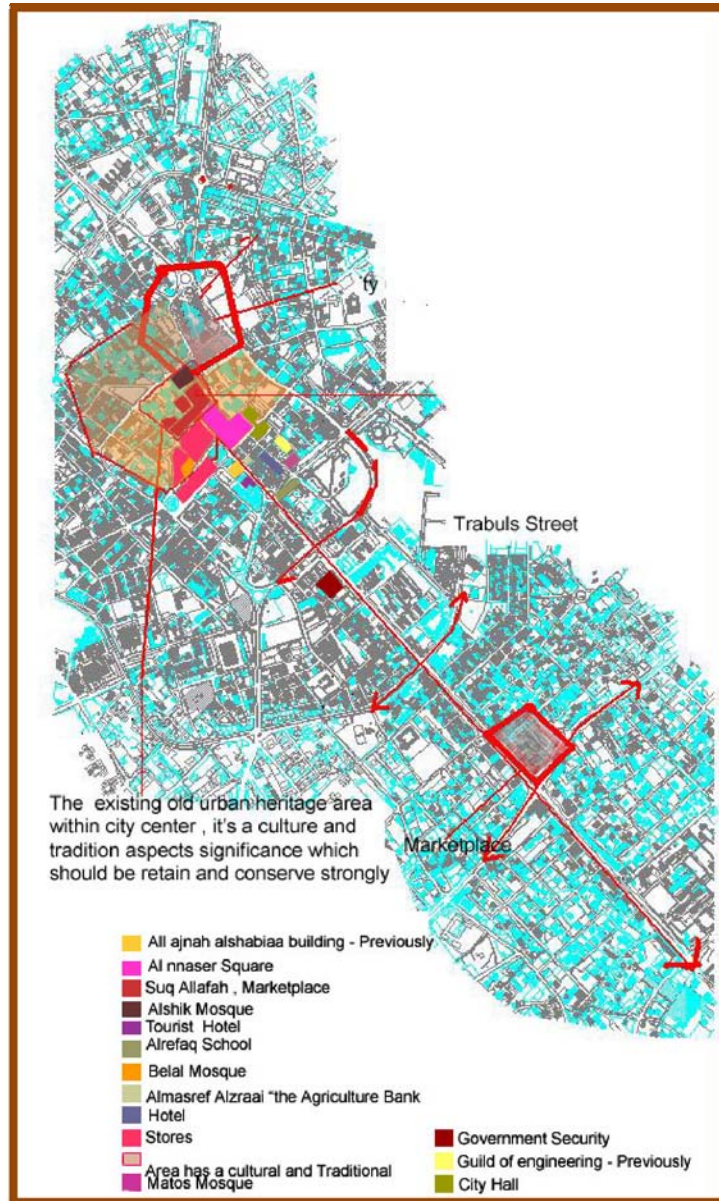


Figure 4: Layout of Study Area in Misurata shows the significant and historical buildings location . (Source: Master Plan of Misurata, Cityhall).

6.1.1 Disruption of the Urban Pattern

The historic core unique urban pattern of fine grain even texture has been disrupted by the invasion of the office tower blocks and residents blocks by altering the grain and texture (Figure 5). The danger of allowing large scale commercial development, if not designed sensitively, within the fabric of the historic core is that they might act as a cancer that could in the end destroy what still survive from the fabric of the historic environment. This is because such

*Corresponding author ((Ibrahim Abdallah Shinbira). Tel/Fax: +218-0512762646. E-mail addresses: shinbira_2006@yahoo.com. © 2012. American Transactions on Engineering & Applied Sciences. Volume 1 No.3. ISSN 2229-1652 eISSN 2229-1660 Online Available at <http://TuEngr.com/ATEAS/V01/253-264.pdf>

development may attract insensitive speculative development and inflating the land values within the city center of Misurata. This will make the historic and traditional buildings no longer economically viable to be located where they are at the moment.



Figure 5: Changing grain and texture through invasion of modern commercial development not sensitive to the scale and proportion of the tradition core center.



Figure 6: New development attacking the Alshik Mosque (Historical Significant) and the traditional core within the city center.



Figure 7: New development is alien to traditional shops in terms of architectural qualities, scale and proportion.

6.1.2 Disappearing Townscape

The unique townscape qualities of the traditional architecture, social activates and their human scale are lackluster and slowly going to disappear as a result of modern development encroaching into and within the vicinity of city center of Misurata. In addition, many original buildings were destroyed through insensitive set-back policies with intention of developing the city during the last thirty years (Figures 6 &7).

6.1.3 Changing Activity Pattern

The charm of the historic environment is to a great extent due to the variety of activities taking place, enriching our sensory experience of the townscape through the stimulation of colours, smell, sight, sound and moods. The market related activities can still be seen in the old city center such as Sog Allfah, narrow roads market in center core and the marketplace that is located in Tubules Street reflect the true nature of our society which must be considered by conservation efforts (Figures 8 & 9). However, these activities are facing tremendous changes by the policy of large scale commercial buildings development which makes the area disrupted by traffic jam, car park, townscape disappearing and changing activities pattern (Figures 10& 11).



Figure 8

Vitality of activities that enriches our sensory experience of old center townscape.

The creative use of the traditional streets support the human activities.



Figure 9



Figure 10



Figure 11

Erosion of public spaces and design of new structures within the existing fabric.

6.2 The Prospects

There is no denying that conservation of the urban heritage has significant impact in giving a place its identity. The meanings often associated with familiar and historically significant places provide a sense of stability and security to urban dwellers. These qualities are important to secure the cultural survival of a society. Still, it could be questioned at what cost, considering the heritage value of the activities that occurred there before.



Figure 12: Buildings in the historic center, does not get any conservation efforts. Sog Allfah

6.2.1 Increase in Tourist Attraction and Revenue

The economic gain of conservation efforts can be seen through the increase in the tourist attraction of the historic and actions that reflect culture and social activities of the city as is observed in old Tripoli (Figure 12). It is a widely accepted knowledge that historic environment has a tremendous attraction to tourists who are more interested in the local culture as compared to its modern counterparts (predominantly international style). Thus through conserving the historic fabric and the urban heritage, revenue can be achieved if the environment is conserved whilst accommodating to the tourists' needs for services and facilities. Over patronizing the historic quarters by tourists should be avoided at all costs as it can destroy the sense of place, which attracts the tourists in the first place. This calls for effective urban managements and planning for the tourism industry when dealing with historic environment.

6.2.2 Providing Life to Obsolete Building Stocks

The derelict buildings in the historic quarter can be seen through restoration of these building and adapting it into the use that could benefit from the presence of the tourists. Such projects not only provide new life for these old buildings but also has the added value of being of historical and architectural significance to the city (Figure 13). This value is not found in new buildings, as

meanings and associations are stronger in buildings that have been around for a long time and thus become a familiar part of the environment for the residents.

Conservation projects, if conducted in the manner can easily turned a blighted area of dilapidated buildings into a vibrant and charming place in the city center. The beauty of conservation as opposed to preservation is that it is looking for new ways to ensure that the historic environment becomes relevant in the modern times.



Figure 13: Restoration and rehabilitation can be helpful to consolidate the old city center core of Misurata, to relieve the sense of place and to keep the inherited features for new architecture.

7. Conclusion

The challenge that we faced is to ensure that future development of the historic quarter will not destroy the heritage value that gives the places its uniqueness and heritage value. This can be done by adopting a sustainable approach when dealing with development in places of historical, architectural and cultural significance. Sustainable development can be defined as development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. This involves the protection of not only basic resources but also the cultural heritage and thus conserving this environment will be leading towards a sustainable environment for the future generation.

A sustainable approach in conserving the urban heritage means that the interrelationship between historic environment and the natural environment and between these and wider economic and social issues will be given due consideration. This environment can be resulted from particular activities or from attractive historic, culture, architectural, landscape or townscape features. Area with an attractive character and strong sense of identity or sense of place must be maintained, conserved and enhanced and, where practicable, other areas are upgraded to provide an improved sense of identity and place.

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