

Heritage for the future

The Aga Khan Trust for Culture is restoring historic buildings in cities across the Muslim world. While culture can be a catalyst for development, urban poverty remains a massive challenge.



ANP / Gavin Heller

What is the Aga Khan Trust for Culture and where does it work?

The Aga Khan Trust for Culture is part of the Aga Khan Development Network. This network, founded 50 years ago, brings together 80,000 people working for many private and non-profit organizations. It is headed by His Highness the Aga Khan, the 49th hereditary Imam of the Shia Ismaili Muslims. The member organizations work without regard to faith, although most projects aim to improve the quality of life in societies where Muslims have a significant presence.

About 90% of the Trust's work goes into its Historic Cities Programme. It was started in 1992 to promote the conservation and re-use of buildings and public spaces in historic cities. Of all UNESCO's world heritage sites, one-third are located in the Muslim world. That says a thing or two about its incredibly rich heritage. But for decades, and sometimes centuries, many of these sites have been succumbing to decay. Countless old mosques, palaces and town houses, city walls and gardens are in a dismal state. The sad fact is that culture becomes a luxury when social and economic needs are not met.

In other words, it seems you have no shortage of work ...

Indeed. We have so far had extensive projects in eight very different settings – from Mali to Pakistan, from Bosnia to Zanzibar. In 2002, we started on the rehabilitation of the old Asheqan-i Arefan neighbourhood of Kabul, Afghanistan. A cluster of beautiful houses, some 300 years old, has since been restored. Elsewhere in the Afghan capital, the 16th-century Baghe Babur, the oldest Mughal garden, has been cleared of debris and other remnants of war. The shrine and water channels have been restored, the terraces planted, and it is now once again a place where people come for leisure or cultural events.

Our first landmark project was in Egypt, where we helped create a city park on a 30-hectare mound of rubble that for 500 years had been a rubbish dump. Al-Azhar Park is now a popular open space in this frantic city. Moreover, it has proved a powerful catalyst for urban renewal in the neighbouring district of Darb al-Ahmar, once one of the poorest districts of Cairo.

Jurjen van der Tas is deputy director of the Historic Cities Programme of the Aga Khan Trust for Culture. Before taking up this position in 2003, he was director of policy and programming for the Aga Khan Foundation UK. Between 1991 and 2002, he worked at Oxfam Novib as programme officer for local development initiatives in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Bangladesh and the former Soviet Central Asia. In the late 1980s, he was agricultural advisor to the project planning unit of the Federal Bank for Cooperatives in Pakistan. Van der Tas has an MSc in tropical agricultural development from the University of Reading, UK.

Interview by **Ellen Lammers**

Does your approach differ from those of other organizations involved in conservation efforts?

In most of our projects we work with national and local governments, local investors and international organizations such as UNESCO or the World Monuments Fund. We have distinguished ourselves through our holistic view of the importance of cultural heritage. Cultural sites are the tangible markers of our history. As such, they play an important role in raising people's self-awareness and shaping their identity.

Yet for us the relationship between culture and development is just as important. We believe that conservation and restoration projects will only prove sustainable if they tackle socio-economic development at the same time. Our projects therefore go beyond mere technical restoration. We take on the rehabilitation of a building or historical site in ways that spur social and economic benefits for the people living in its vicinity.

This means that we try to involve local people in the work, which is not always easy. They are often very poor, living in run-down old parts of town. Their vulnerability makes them suspicious, and they often feel threatened by the prospect of change. The reason we want them on board is that we want to sustain the social fabric of an area. What you often see is that after renovation, wealthier people move in, pushing out the original inhabitants. Market forces are strong, but we try hard to avoid this 'gentrification'.

How else do you try to make a difference?

We usually make a long-term commitment to the areas where we work and help people renovate their houses, even if they have no particular historical value.

When restoring Baltit Fort in Hunza, Pakistan, for instance, we used the restoration to generate new employment opportunities. Of course the specialized restoration work is carried out by experts, but at the same time we set up vocational training to remedy the lack of good craftsmen. Once the restoration projects in Hunza were completed, Town Management Societies were charged with defining future strategies and creating local institutions to operate and maintain the restored landmark buildings.

In Mali, the restoration of the famous Great Mosque in Mopti (see photo) included on-the-job training for craftsmen in traditional earth-building techniques and in new

restoration methods. We also helped set up a brick manufacturing facility to produce street paving blocks made of sand and recycled plastic bags. For such efforts we link up with other organizations and sometimes bilateral donors.


What questions does your work raise for researchers?

My questions relate to the issue of urban poverty. We have built up a reputation in the field of conservation and restoration, and we know our trade. But what proves much harder to get a grip on, is the often desperate situation of people who live in the neighbourhoods where we work. It seems to me that many of the interventions in cities are in fact based on the accumulated wisdom of *rural* development. But the problems of urban and rural areas hardly compare.

Urban unemployment will be one of the most pressing problems of this century. Again and again, we find that people want jobs, to feel useful and 'in the game'. But mostly this is because, unlike in rural areas, everything in the city needs money. All services must be paid for in cash, and in overcrowded slums and neighbourhoods there is no space for growing even basic vegetables.

One question that researchers should tackle is how poor people in the city generate an income, and how do they spend it? Such questions have been largely ignored because they are so difficult to answer when dealing with the messy realities of cities in developing countries. But we need answers if we are to get a better understanding of the conditions of urban poverty – and better solutions.

We try to help a little by revitalizing old city areas and making sure that the restored buildings are re-used. We believe that these cultural centres must become an active part of the community, not simply serve as isolated tourist attractions. In Egypt, we managed to get approval from the Supreme Council of Antiquities to establish a medical clinic in a restored Ottoman palace. We have a vocational training centre in the *madrassa* of the Um Sultan Sha'aban complex. Both of these monuments are now serving the local community, as well as helping to enhance a sense of pride in the cultural heritage. ■

 A longer version of this interview can be found at www.thebrokeronline.eu