

Preserving the Old “Ksar” of Bou Saada - Algeria

Diafat, A; Dr. Madani, S.
Laboratoire PUViT, Université Sétif 1, Sétif, Algeria

Abstract: *This study aims to highlight the built and cultural heritage of the old Ksar in Bou Saada while looking for developing its economic potential. It also intends to contribute to the promotion of cultural tourism activities and improve the quality of life for the local community.*

Historically dating back to the medieval period, the “Nakhla Mosque” is the initial core and a main landmark in the city. Four factors were determinant in the foundation of this holy city: water, security, agriculture and religious spirit. Today, it is crumbling under the rapid urban growth and the weight of a rampant demography; more than eighty thousand inhabitant.

A historical and morphological analysis is used to understand the physical and cultural aspects generating the local environment, as well as the facts behind the sustainable urban development of this secular Saharan town. The expected results lead to identify appropriate regeneration strategies.

Keywords: *Built Heritage, Cultural Heritage, Economic Development, Sustainability, Strategic Planning, Bou Saada.*

Introduction

Historic urban centers are special places not only due to their cultural heritage, but also due to their urban pattern. These old urban fabrics are suffering from squalor. For a long time, this heritage is crumbling under the weight of poverty and absence of rehabilitation works necessary for their maintenance and improvement. These historic centers are losing their traditional character as relevant measures are not taken. There is a need to preserve the heritage of Ksours in the South of Algeria. (see Figure 1)

The Ksar is a human settlement, peculiar to the populations in the Saharan environment. It is also a traditional urban form in the walled cities of this region. Regarding its construction rules, the Ksar in relationship with the palm grove is the most adequate built form for the local climate. The layout follows an organic principle implying various scales of environmental appropriation: building scale (private houses and public amenities), social or familial scale (cluster of houses surrounding the dead end), urban unity scale (buildings along an axis – Zkak - or around a square – Rahba - a separate unit for the group), city or Ksar scale (regarding their structure and hierarchy, the articulated entities lead to the emergence of a center that can be identified and recognized by the community).



*Figure 1: Old urban fabrics are suffering – inside the Ksar.
Source: the authors, 2006.*

Background

Many civilizations settled in Bou Saada and its region: the Romans, Arabs, Turks and French. The first building in the oasis is a Mosque called "Djamaa El Nakhla". It culminates the Ksar that dates back to the medieval period. The demographic growth of the Ksar led to an archetype of the Islamic city. The everyday survival of the residents was determinant for the localization of the Ksar through a water resource (Oued/river) and an ideal crossroad for cultural and economic exchange.

During the Turkish Regency, the spatial structure was composed of Ouled Attig and Achacha quarters. Then, the urban fabric expanded as far as more houses were built in accordance with the population growth of the locality. When the French came in 1848, Ouled Attig tribe was already on the upper part of Bou Saada, while the Mouamine in the lower. Thus, the walls surrounded the Ksar against the new invaders. In 1860, the European quarter "Plateau" was founded next to the Military camp and the "Rahba" became the "Colonel Pein square". It is a typical Saharan city founded in the thirteenth century; it owes its prosperity to its position advantageously chosen in the foothills of Oulad Nail on one of the routes followed by most of the nomads. There used to be a place for a fairly large trade exchange through many Jews and Mozabites. Lush Palm grove, yet situated in a semi arid zone but boasts of torrential flood regime of the Bou Saada River and the slightly magnesia water sources.

As a gateway city, Bou Saada is a marvelous oasis at 250 km south of Algiers along the National Road N8, offering the closest Saharan specimen, complete with palm groves, sand dunes, white koubbas (cupolas) and camels. The Oued (River) Bou Saada, flowing at the foot of a huge cliff before dying in the Chott El Hodna used to sustain palm trees along a three kilometers ribbon, is no longer able to supply all the multifarious activities. Water is often rationed in the city, while the new quarter that has sprung up round the textile factory has further aggravated the problem.

The original village lies in the valley's lowest part; narrow lanes of the smiths ascend to the Djemaa Sidi Brahim, one of the many mosques, from which the view overlooks the whole oasis. Three simple tombs lie under the whitewashed koubba in the middle of an abandoned cemetery; the French painter Etienne Dinet, whose work is represented in the Museum of Algiers, was so impressed by the charming Bou Saada that he lived there for some 40 years after becoming a Muslim.

In the mid twentieth century, Sidi Mohamed Ben Belkacem founded a Zaouïa at El Hamel, thirteen kilometers southwest of Bou Saada on the National Road N46. This Soufi brotherhood soon acquired a great reputation as a center of Islamic studies. The simple but graceful dazzling white koubba is surrounded by six irregular cupolas. (see Figure 2)



Figure 2: A model of Zaouia el Hamel.
Source: the authors, 2006.

The French colonial quarter is a result of the French occupation that took place in November 1849. The town is an expanded settlement and its population is a mixture of races due to its nodal position at the crossroad of fundamental ways between the Zab, M'zab and Tell that made of it an important caravan center.

Tourism and Socio-Economic Development of Bou Saada

In this renowned tourist resort there is, among others, the tomb of El Hadj Nasir Ed Din who is in fact the French painter Etienne Dinet. He reached Bou Saada in 1884, became a Muslim and buried in that place after his death. The Arabic name of Bou Saada means the "city of happiness". It is like a museum of the Sahara and Highlands, it contains all the elements, "providing" a synthesis of life almost Saharan. The city lies on a hill, an amphitheater, a circus at its base surrounded by gardens of palms. A typical Ksar, on a beautiful terrace, a green island amidst a sea of sand, which stands out against the Blue Ridge Mountains with sinking roots into the burning sands of Hodna.

The Ksar itself is divided into several parts corresponding to the seven main sections of the Saharan tribes (see figure 3), with traditional earth bricks houses enclosed by high walls and all surmounted by a terrace. The river flows at its feet in a bed deeply incised between banks.

It is fully bordered by date palms, figs, large beautiful plants, between two mountains with a red top. Here dozens of painters also went into raptures.

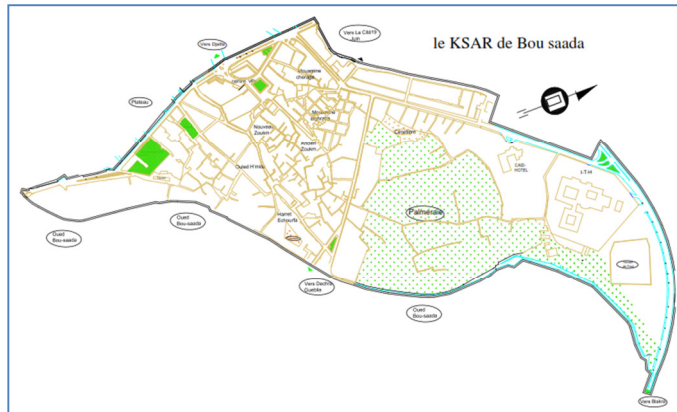


Figure 3: Map of the Ksar
(left: the Ksar and seven tribes, right: the palm groves, bottom: the river Bou Saada).
Source: Master Plan of Bou Saada, 2010.

Bou-Saada may be the only major city in southern Algeria to offer an almost complete touring organization. There are a range of hotels for all budgets, from modest but clean establishment of true luxury hotel like the Caid or Transatlantique Hotels.

The "Moulin Ferrero" is a quite dilapidated mill manufactured in a parade of the canyons happiest effect, fresh water flows along a beautiful garden. Remaining perfect for misanthropic, Moulin Ferrero seems an ideal getaway in the fields of violets and trees of all species along the river. Bou-Saada is still offering excursions on camels, gazelles, the southern cuisine, the expert guides, camel races, bassours contests. The French school, designed by the architect Xavier Salvador, with the "trunks of palm" style is a happy discovery for both modern and local architecture.

The reputation and reality of Bou Saada do not always coincide. But if the tourist destination of Bou Saada is not in question today, and reputation of the beautiful Caid hotel built by Fernand Pouillon is evidence, the economic reality is however needed and herein revealed the typical problems of most Ksours in the Sahara. The image of a small town is reflected by the market regarding the limited farming and handicrafts products encouraged by the diverse tourist potential of the oasis. Seemingly, nothing will happen at the expense of the actual values of the past that embodies the traditional monuments.

From the above data analysis emerges a clearly affirmed urban structure. The network of routes, facilities and trade converge towards the south west of the Ksar and confers it with a small role in the city center. The topography of the site represents a flat ridge that guides most of the pathways.

Conceptual Framework

A strategic planning approach is fulfilled to analyze the Ksar. The methodology used is based on the "SWOT" (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) analysis as a strategic



planning method to assess the key criteria for a comprehensive safeguarding of the Ksar. The expected results will help to identify possible and appropriate revitalization strategies for economic recovery that will guide investments in preserving this historical city, as an essential part of the national cultural heritage.

Regarding the cultural heritage and identity issues, action for the cultural heritage and economic development depends on:

- The span of action that can be undertaken by the institutions to promote pilot projects,
- How can the local community be involved in the valorization of its cultural heritage?
- How to link political action with professional training in the field of management?
- The incidence of culture as motivation for tourists to visit the city,
- The impact of tourism on city's economy.

Cultural tourism and socio-economic development must be high on the agenda. Cultural heritage contributes to the identity and branding of territory. This identity constitutes the base for sustainable and endogenous development. Heritage includes buildings, monuments, landscapes, urban areas, countryside, buried remains and objects. (1)

Pre-requisites constituting the base for sustainable development:

- The primary responsibility of the public sector to act as the custodian of cultural heritage assets in the respect of cultural specificities of the community,
- The appropriation of cultural heritage by local populations.

Revitalization of cultural heritage, as part of an economic and social system, can be provided by the local market, the local museum, the micro firms producing locally culture-based goods, the tourist industry. The local institutions are involved too in the creation of a cultural district.

Contributing instruments to the promotion and conservation of heritage in Bou Saada:

- Education and access to knowledge as key factors of the promotion of cultural heritage,
- Sustainable cultural and site seeing tourism,
- Urban rehabilitation of the ksar and adaptive reuse of buildings.

The necessity of training courses on policy making and on the economics of heritage:

- To build the awareness of civil society in cultural heritage matters,
- To develop the local building capacity and aim at training trainers, setting training methodologies and producing educational materials.

Other helpful tools deserve awareness; such as cultural events on the site and in relation with the local cultural heritage elements, animation activities, educational campaign and promotion of thematic days to awaken students and scholars.

Ecotourism is a challenge now for the development of Bou Saada. The link between culture and tourism is the most visible aspect of the contribution of culture to local development.

When tourism is identified as part of an overall development strategy, it imposes the identification, protection and enhancement of historic resources.



When heritage tourism is done right, the local residents experience a renewed appreciation for and pride in their local city and its history. The influence of well-planned and well-managed local tourism programs extends to improving the local economy and enhancing the quality of life for local residence. (2)

Tourism promotes new productive and commercial activities in the field of cultural heritage: hotels, restaurants, publications, arts and craft, high quality museum souvenirs, guide services. However, the environmental challenges of tourism and the side effects of its activities should be part of the urban development strategy of the city.

In Bou Saada, sustainable tourism will play a vital role in the success of tourism development if all stakeholders are involved in economic development towards a common goal of both enhancing the economic impacts of tourism, while ensuring environmental protection and preserving different heritage assets of the town. Priority issues are circulation and linkages, image and identity, economic conditions, architecture and streetscape, future development and infrastructure.

Analysis for a Comprehensive Safeguarding of the Ksar

City revitalization is not only limited to monuments, but to a larger scope of old buildings, also dwellings, that can be renovated and re-used for other purposes previously unforeseen. This in turn has many indirect socio-economic impacts and improves the area's image and reputation, which acts as a magnet to businesses.

Nevertheless, there are common problems to face:

- Commercial interests predominate when dealing with poverty and the absence of legal protection of buildings is a threat for cultural heritage,
- Often the property is not interested in rehabilitation and the owners are not open to action.

An action program should be set to:

- Create innovative institutional and financing programs and incentives to be used to facilitate implementation as well as providing direct incentives for the residents,
- Introduce indirect incentives in the form of employment opportunities, neighborhood facilities and training in traditional construction and rehabilitation work.

Preservation can be the tool to create a future in which a stable residential core is enlivened and sustained by a widespread system of small workshops and retail activities, supported by essential infrastructure and community facilities and made more attractive by well-maintained open spaces and monuments. (3)

Improved living conditions will promote a stable population and the kinds of productive activities that come with a steady demand for goods and services and aim at facilitating the gradual rehabilitation of existing residential units and promoting the redevelopment of ruined buildings.

Results



Investing in culture can catalyze economic development. Capitalizing on the resourcefulness of local people to repair buildings, clean and replace old facades, and install new facilities. The project of rehabilitation must be based on two main lines: the safeguard of cultural heritage and social real estate. Upgrading the built environment in Bou Saada is a good challenge to be overcome by:

- Rehabilitation of historic buildings: their long-term preservation is crucial to maintaining the area's architectural character and attracting visitors to the area,
- Reorganization and maintenance of public spaces: upgrading street paving, public lighting and signage, as well as facades and storefronts can do much to attract and enhance commerce,
- Housing improvement: a dual strategy can be pursued, the gradual rehabilitation of existing residential units and redevelopment of ruined buildings and vacant plots into new housing.

The aim of rehabilitation work is to offer a decent work space for the many artisans now accommodated in decaying buildings, improving their working conditions and their output. Real possibilities of undertaking micro-projects to improve the day-to-day life of the population will emerge and local architectural heritage will be recovered.

A Cultural Centre may also provide all the necessary information and organizes guided tours and events to discover the history of the Ksar and its evolution through the centuries.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Institutional co-ordination and community involvement within a gradual process of economic improvement and physical rehabilitation must be viewed in the light of conservation and revitalization needs. Community involvement can achieve lasting results in Bou Saada.

A few important issues:

- Public goods include cultural heritage; therefore the role of the public sector at central and local level as custodian of cultural heritage assets is extremely important,
- Civil society organizations need to be involved at different scales in the consultation and planning of investments.

Local communities should share the benefits so that social development returns may be obtained:

- Secure the wider dissemination of project activities to the civil society through the allocation of specific funding, and promote the preparation of educational material for school children and the civil society,
- Encourage closer contacts between training programs and public/private employers in cultural heritage,
- Ensure that proposed projects include not only plans for immediate results, but also include studies on foreseeable impacts,
- Encourage the emergence of networks of specialized local enterprises in the conservation of cultural heritage,
- Preserve and disseminate local and traditional know-how.

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ISBN: 978-84-697-1815-5



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