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The Khan al-Masriyyin restoration project by Swiss architect Frank Beat Keller

The caravanserai* of the Egyptians is part of the architectural heritage of Lebanon and one of the listed monuments of Trablous. The khan was built at the end of the 4th century of the Hijrah, around 1320 A.D, by the Mamluks* who conquered ancient Tripoli, now el-Mina, from the Crusaders*. Because they found the ancient seaport town on the shore of the Mediterranean difficult to defend, they destroyed it and shifted the city of Tripoli 5km from the sea to the foot of what today is Citadel Hill, where a Christian settlement already existed.

There, around the crossing between two important overland routes of that period (Beirouth-Homs and Damascus-Bekaa-Trablous) and close to the ancient crossing of the Abu Ali river, ancient settlements had survived already for thousands of years, even though no remains of them are now to be seen. Pre-Muslim shrines were worshipped where the citadel is today, and services catering for pilgrims' needs most probably operated in this area, which today is the intersection of the Abdul Karim Ouaida Road which cuts westwards through the ancient city and Rachid Karame Avenue which follows the riverside.

The reinvention of Trablous by the Mamluks in the 14th century

Today, Tripoli is the city with most Mamluk architectural heritage, second only to Cairo. Many mosques and medrasas (Koranic schools) were donated and erected in the 14th century, as well as some commercial ones. They were decorated in *ablaq** style, the Syrian fashion of using alternating black and white stones in masonry. When the Mamluks conquered the al-Sham* region (the Levantine crescent) extending from Constantinople, and advanced southwards to Egypt, trade between the two regions started to flourish. Egyptian cotton was traded for meat from the al-Sham area and for goods which came in on the back of camels from Persia and Central Asia via the Silk Road*. The caravanserail was erected and fortified to protect the merchants and their valuable goods for weeks or months until their partners arrived in the nearby port or from the desert.

They stocked and traded their goods on the ground floor of the khan, watered their camels at the fountain in the middle of the courtyard before putting them into the stables nearby, and slept in one of the many small rooms on the upper floor of the khan. The famous Mamluk hammam* (today not in use any more, but a listed monument also) was just across the road. In those times, the arcades on the ground floor were of course open, as they were in all khans in al-Sham and western Asia. Unfortunately no inscription has been found as to the original builders or the founder of the monument. No documentation is available from the 14th and 15th centuries.

Ottoman conquest

It took some two hundred years until the khan appears in the historical documents, being mentioned as a waqf*. We have found property sale contracts in the Tripoli Ottoman* Schari'a* court archives mentioning the khan as founded and given to the awqaf authorities by *Haseki Sultan*, „the sultan's favorite“. She was known and famous in Europe under the name of Roxelane, the legendary Ukrainian girl (c. 1503-1558) who was abducted from her parents and taken to the slave souk in what is now Istanbul. There the Ottoman emperor, Suleiman the Magnificent, bought her as a courtesan, chose her as his favourite in the harem for her skills and nature and consequently as his companion, and preferred her to his legitimate wives. Subsequently, probably around 1521, in his late thirties, after the birth of their first son together, he set her free, this being a condition to be legally allowed to marry her. Thus she became the greatest influence on her husband and in her early twenties was the most powerful woman on earth at the time, having more political and cultural sway than the queens of England or Spain.

Her main interest was the promotion of educational and religious Sufi*-oriented issues throughout the Ottoman Empire, mainly in Istanbul, Damascus, Jerusalem, Cairo and Mecca. She took over and funded charitable institutions from the Sufis and completed the restoration of architectural heritage mainly in the al-Sham area, and in Egypt.

At some (unknown) time during the Ottoman period, the arcades on the lower floor were closed and merged with the warehouses behind. The original load-bearing structure of the khan including the vaults remains mostly intact, only two walls having been removed, and steel beams from the early 20th century take the load today. During the Ottoman period, the souks alongside the ancient and former thoroughfare became more important, and the khan merged into them.

Present situation

Today the ground floor of the former caravanserai is occupied by shops and storerooms; some rooms are empty. Most of them are owner-used, some are let on ancient (colonial*) and some on contemporary rental contracts. A few rooms on the upper floor contain the (rented or squatted) premises of the traditional soapmaker Sharkass (workshop, storage and shop), whilst the others remain empty or are filled with debris. Nobody lives in the khan, and at night it is closed. Generally the building is in very poor shape: the roof leaks; most surfaces, including walls and floors, and the overwhelming majority of the rooms are very dirty and in poor condition, and some are completely abandoned. Only a few (on the ground floor) have been renovated internally by the current owners. Electricity cables, closed circuit TV installations and rusted iron dominate the visual aspect from the outside as well as seen from the courtyard.

There are some 26 rooms (of 3 to 38 sq.m. each) on the ground floor, and 26 rooms on the upper floor (3 to 20 sq.m. each). The overall surface (not including arcades, passageways and the courtyard) measures some 600 sq.m. on the ground floor and approx. 400 sq.m. on the first floor.

The land registry certificates list almost 300 different owners, some possessing 1 or 2 parts out of 2400 of one defined room, others 2400/2400. Undivided inheritance is frequent. All owners live in or around Tripoli (with one exception), and we have identified one person responsible for each room (representing at least 1201/2400). Some families and awqaf are represented by a lawyer. The Tripoli awqaf administers the traditional Islamic foundations in the city and holds the right to make decisions regarding the use of some two thirds of the rooms concerned, as well as the right to levy a percentage fee in the event of their sale.

The re-use and renovation project: the partners

The project for re-use and restoration has met with a high level of acceptance among local and national stakeholders: the President of the National Directorate of Antiquities in Beirut, the Mayor of Tripoli, and the President of the Chamber of Commerce, Industry and Agriculture of Tripoli and North Lebanon each have signed a letter of intent, stressing their approval of - and the importance of - the project. The Executive Director of the Islamic foundations (awqaf) in Tripoli helpfully lends assistance, as does the Lebanese national institution CDR (Council for Development and Reconstruction) which is commissioned by the Parliament for similar tasks throughout the country. Both support the project with suggestions, advice and by providing all available documentation. The „Université Libanaise, Section III, à Tripoli“ has provided access to academic studies and 2D-plans for an eventual restoration of the khan. The Ottoman court archives in Tripoli have opened their doors to our researchers. The Embassy of Switzerland has offered logistic support.

Syrian refugees capacitation program

The Mayor of Tripoli has agreed to the idea of taking advantage of the renovation project to give Syrian refugees living in Tripoli the possibility of on-the-job training to become renovation specialists, eventually finding work on future restoration projects in Syria.

The re-use and renovation project: schedule

1) By Ramadan 2019:

- Establishment of a list of current owners.
- Nomination of one person representing the interests of each room, including name, address and telephone number.
- Establishment of partnerships in writing, letters of intent, preliminary contracts.
- Drawing of exact architectural plans of the extant building (1:100, 2D, autocad). The same blueprints will later be used to obtain the building permit and for the execution of the works.
- Drawing of 3D modelling and preliminary 3D renderings. These will be part of the business plan.
- Creation of the design for the possible future use of the khan, taking into account the restrictions imposed by the awqaf (no alcohol, etc.; smoking allowed outdoors).
- Drawing up of a business plan for the boutique hotel upstairs.
- On the ground floor, the individual owners are to remain with their shops and warehouses and decide freely about their plans for the future. Hopefully one of the owners will take the opportunity to open a café catering for the hotel guests in the morning (breakfast) and walk-in public during the day.
- No interior renovation on the ground floor will be included in the project, other than bringing water, electricity, media, etc. to each room.

2) By autumn 2020:

- The appropriate legal form for the entity has been established.
- On January 29th, 2020 the owners' association consisting of the representatives of the owners of each and every room of the whole building was founded in presence of a legal representative on the premises of the Chamber of Commerce of North Lebanon, in Tripoli (52 rooms; approx. 42 owners' representatives). At the meeting all stakeholders were updated to the same level of information. After an animated discussion the steering committee was elected. 6 members out of the group of the owners were nominated.
- Transfers of several ownerships and of respective entries in the land register.
- A local lawyer, well connected with the awqaf and the owners' families, has been entrusted to prepare the legal steps involved.

3) In winter 2020/21:

- the officials of the steering committee will be elected: chairman, secretary, keeper of minutes. So the conditions formerly set by the Ministry of Culture are met, and a new letter of intent will document the state of the project and open the doors towards the construction permit.
- From then onwards, the project leader will no longer deal with individual owners but with the steering committee.
- Means of democratic bottom-up opinion-building and decision-making within the owners' association and between this institution and the project leader will be established (bottom-up decision-making and -taking).
- The preliminary project for self-sufficient energy supply by solar power from the roof is elaborated.

4) Until end 2021:

- A professional estimate of the value of every property right on the upper floor will be obtained, and there will be a mediation process in case of disagreement between owners. The aim of such an estimate is the evaluation of incurring rental cost for the future boutique hotel. An appropriate process to deal with the properties of unknown and unreachable owners will be established.
- Exchanges of property and preliminary contracts between the owners on the first floor and a future firm which will run the „boutique hotel“ will be established.
- The project leader (Ethno-Expo Ltd) will draw up renovation and change-of-use plans
- Application for the construction permit to the local municipality
- Approval of the plans by the National Directorate of Antiquities.
- Establishment of building and renovation schedule (step by step).

- Eco-friendly and durable materials will be used.
- The project will become a pioneer in the use of solar energy in North Lebanon and serve as an example for similar projects in the al-Shams region.
- Patrons, sponsors, as well as the funds for the transformation will be found: joint partnership between private investors (the future boutique-hotel owners), Ethno-Expo Ltd. and public funds as well as international aid and contribution funds will be raised.

5) 2022/23:

- Execution of the transformation, scheduled renovation of the exterior (with as little disruption to the individual shop owners on the ground floor as possible).
- Transformation of the first floor into a boutique-hotel including a small portion for the factory outlet of the incumbent soapmaker.

6) 2024:

- Opening ceremony. End of Ethno-Expo Ltd.'s commitment.

* **Notes** (for better understanding of circumstances described above; no scientific accuracy claimed):

Khan, caravanserai: Guesthouse and warehouse for caravans, including merchants, attendant personnel, camels, goods). Normally fortified two-storey buildings with few openings to the exterior, arcades on both levels facing a large courtyard, and reinforced gateways. Different services for the accompanying personnel and water for the animals were offered. On the ground floor the goods were stocked overnight or for longer periods behind locked doors, and attendant personnel slept under the arcades. On the upper floor merchants and caravan leaders slept in small rooms on their own mats.

Normally caravanserais were provided on all major caravan routes between Asia Minor, Persia, and West Asia down to the Mediterranean (and up into the Balkans), as well as at the destination points, e.g. in major inland and port cities. The caravanserais lost their importance only after the disappearance of camel caravans as a vehicle for transportation. Normally camels lay in the courtyard, and adjoining stables (as in the Tripoli khan) were uncommon.

Mamluks: The first Islamic conquerors trained young men from inner Asia to become military staff and administrative personnel, which were used from the 12 century to govern provinces, mainly in the al-Sham area and Egypt (as well as in India). In 1260 the Mamluks defeated the Mongols who had invaded from the East and conquered large areas, including Damascus, and thereafter became the most important rulers in the area – until the Ottoman period.

Crusaders: Sons of medieval European nobility who attacked and subjugated the Islamic states on the eastern shore of the Mediterranean with the support of the Roman Catholic church (conquest of Jerusalem 1099). By 1300 they were driven back out of the area by the local arabs.

Ablaq: A technique in masonry, alternating (mostly) black basalt ashlar with creamy-white (mostly) limestone ones to produce decorative effects on a facade. The technique seems to have originated in Syria and was most popular among Mamluk architects who used it mainly on entrances, vaults, etc., and as colored bands between light-coloured parts of facades. The crusaders brought it to Europe and made it popular around 1300, e.g. in Pisa and Florence. In the 19th century it was used in Marseilles and the US.

Al-Sham: is the Arabic term to designate what Europeans - depending on their ideological standpoint - call the Levantine region, the Near East, the Middle East, or the Orient. It extends roughly from Istanbul to Cairo and from Haifa to Damascus.

Silk Road: The term designates a network of caravan routes from China via Central Asia to Persia, Damascus and the ports of the Eastern Mediterranean.

Hamam: An Arabic public bath in a closed building with cold, cool, lukewarm, warm and hot steam-filled bath rooms, used by one sex after the other according to a schedule which became obsolete with the widespread installation of private showers.

Schari'a: The Islamic legal system of rules and sanctions, based on Koranic and later sources, as well as the court where decisions are taken according to this law. In Lebanon it applies in the field of personal law: marriage, divorce, child care, heritage, etc., whereas for other lawsuits secular law and courts (based on the French example) are applicable. The register of the schari'a courts is not filed in thematic order but looks similar to a diary, so lawsuits about the splitting of an inheritance, property sales and alimony issues are listed in an day-to-day order in the files – in earlier centuries including also crime cases.

Waqf: Privately-established foundations administered under schari'a law normally concerning a real estate property (small or large) and dedicating its revenue (the rent paid) to a specific purpose (e.g. the salary of a muezzin, the cost of food given to the poor in a specific guesthouse, a Koranic school, the maintenance costs of a specific mosque, etc.).

Ottomans: An empire growing steadily from about the 13th century. Its beginnings were in an area which today is part of Turkey, and it then expanded southwards to Arabia, eastwards almost to Vienna, and far into Central Asia. The Ottoman Empire became a major player after conquering Constantinople in 1451. The Lebanon remained part of the Ottoman Empire until the end of World War One (1918).

Sufi: Brotherhoods or congregations of spiritually oriented followers of Islam, focused on meditation, prayer and mystics. Sufi brotherhoods possessed, and still possess, buildings and real estate in Tripoli to cater for their followers, and to help the poor.

Colonial era: When the Ottoman Empire collapsed in 1918, the winner nations England and France took over most of their inheritance in the Arabic world as mandates from the „Union of Nations“. France governed the Lebanon from 1919 to 1945 and installed modern institutions. During those times, Tripoli became the gateway to Syria: it prospered and grew dramatically. City planning, the protection of national heritage, a land register and civil law came into existence in this period.