

Areas of concern

**Lamu, Kenya: a special Islamic townscape
with a conservation plan and no policy**

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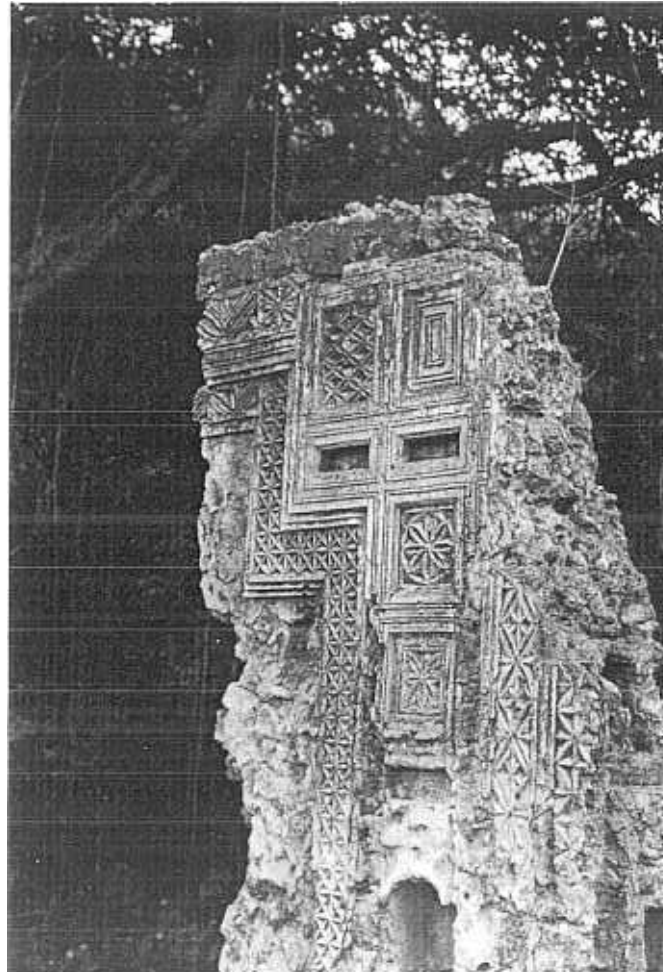


FIG. 1. The richness of carved plaster ('kidaka'), the decorative elements which marked the important inner rooms of early Shela houses, are now exposed to the elements as the older houses crumble into ruins or are engulfed by modern villas.

Shimmering in the tropical heat, the grey and white walls of Lamu rise abruptly from the quay (*Fig. 2*). East Africa's best preserved Islamic townscape retains its identity by the accident of its location in an island archipelago rather than by the policies of government and the actions of planners. Its narrow streets running parallel to the waterfront cannot accommodate automobiles (*Fig. 3*), and its remoteness and general accessibility only by boat and by air have done more to preserve its sixteenth-century pattern than the proposed conservation plan, the first in East Africa, which, although professionally prepared and partly funded by government, has yet to be enacted.

Located on an island just three miles off the Kenya coast, a bone-jarring, seven hour drive along a dirt road (susceptible to monsoon flooding) from the coastal town of Malindi, Lamu continues a 1000 year old urban tradition. But today it has only perhaps half the population of its boom time in the eighteenth century, when it was one of a group of Swahili city states that grew prosperous through trading slaves, cotton, mangrove poles, copra and sesame under loose protectorate arrangements with Oman and Zanzibar.¹

¹ J. de V., *Lamu*
(Guide), J. de V. Allen,
 p. 48, Lamu, Kenya.



From the harbour, Lamu town presents a panorama of nineteenth-century arcades. Their rhythm is the colonial presence of German and English merchants. Behind this waterfront and the crenellated wall lies the older Islamic townscape with its shuttered high-walled houses, narrow alleys, and black veiled



FIG. 3. The main street, running parallel to the waterfront, remains a pedestrian way. The narrow track captures the wind and provides some shelter from the tropical sun.

Behind the verandas and porticos of a largely nineteenth-century waterfront, there resides an older Islamic town of coral houses, whose massed regularity of architectural form and anonymity of exterior wall is cut by narrow alleys no wider than an overladen donkey and punctured by carved doorways that hide an interior architectural richness of carved plaster work (*Fig. 1*). Some twenty-nine mosques help identify the sections of this town, whose principal monument is a nineteenth-century Omani fortress frowning down on an ugly concrete market which imposes itself on one edge of the only square.

Lamu retains the vernacular integrity of an Islamic Nantucket in stone rather than wood before the tourist onslaught. It has been preserved partially by its declining economic status, as its port is unable to compete with the deep water draft of Mombasa, which gained the rail terminus from the interior in the late nineteenth century.

Like so many other rare and special places, from Cuzco to Katmandu, from Bali to Isfahan, it is this economic force of cultural tourism which becomes both saviour and savager. Can the scale of two- and three-storey buildings whose consistency creates a unified townscape withstand the economic impact of serious hotel building? Will the rhythm of arcades

along the nineteenth-century waterfront be preserved as new development crowds out the remaining open spaces, ignoring the functions of this space to the existing maritime economy? Will the shopfronts resist the temptation to put up larger plastic signs to attract increased tourists? Will the decline in crafts quality be reversed at a time when it is more profitable to mass produce tourist trinkets? Will the town find the political will to hire a building inspector to review alterations in listed vernacular buildings which go beyond the few 'gazetted monuments' which are currently under protection.

These questions go beyond the good intentions of planning studies, whether funded by Unesco in Peru and Nepal or by the government of Kenya, which commissioned the Lamu report. They depend on the political will to ensure adequately funded implementation.

The Lamu study, coordinated by Usam Ghaidan and a Nairobi University team, and published in May 1976,² clearly defines conservation as 'development causing minimum intervention with the environment to insure that what is valuable to the community is protected, maintained, and used to advantage'. The dilemma is that damage to the fabric of townscape remains incremental and, therefore, is only gradually perceptible to the public. Often without large-scale urban renewal, which is not a problem in Lamu, it is difficult to shock an irate minority into action the way they were in such American towns as Salem and Newburyport, Massachusetts; St. Joseph, Missouri, and Portland, Maine. When a first floor of an ancient house is no longer maintained and gradually caves in, or when three plastic signs obscure the woodwork of an ancient door, do people react in time?

In Lamu, the study ran out of funding before an exhibition of the work could be permanently mounted. Nor has the crucial second phase of the report, which reportedly would have examined the financial feasibility for the recommendations, ever been carried out. It is heartening to note that the old district-commissioner's house, a nineteenth-century mansion on the waterfront, has become a well-maintained museum (Fig. 4) with excellent interpretation of Swahili culture—architecture, crafts, and trade—and that some of the buildings singled out in the study have been purchased by Europeans who are restoring them. However, the major conservation zoning regulations have yet to be enacted or personnel hired.³

The recommendations included the division of the townscape and environs into different zones, with the majority of the old stone houses in the city centre placed in a conservation zone. Within this zone new construction or renovation would be judged on the basis of:

- (a) 'economic benefit' and the assurance that there is no possibility of offence to the life and traditions of the community—rather vague standards at best;

- (b) inappropriate scale or use of materials, including colour;
(c) likelihood of environmental pollution through solid or liquid wastes, smoke, fumes or unacceptable noise levels.

A peripheral zone surrounding the conservation area would supposedly accommodate certain related uses such as hotels and public purpose developments. A green belt which recognizes the predominant land use of plantations or 'shambas' which characterize the land use west of town,



FIG. 4. Lamu, the museum on the waterfront.

would preserve the current sense of definition and access to open space. Other recommendations included: the need for a building inspector for the conservation area; limitation on vehicular traffic including bicycles in the pedestrian passageways; a proposal for a significant town entrance from the waterfront to the market square in front of the fort; sign and colour controls within the conservation areas; establishment of an emergency loan fund to carry out urgent structural repairs; and an expansion of the Antiquities and Monuments Bill to create a new category for listed buildings (which would protect vernacular buildings), including a suggested security deposit from the National Museum to secure bank loans for the renovation of listed buildings.

² U. U., *Lamu: A Study in Conservation*, African Literature Bureau, Nairobi, 1975, and 1976.

³ It should be recorded that Lamu was the scene of a Pan-African workshop on historic monuments in African countries. Financed by the Commonwealth Fund.

Cooperation from the Kenyan government, attended by 48 delegates and 13 observers from 13 African countries.



FIG. 5. Seen from the sand dunes which are gradually encroaching, the sleepy village of Shela, twenty minutes walk from Lamu town, faces another threat to its seventeenth and eighteenth-century architecture. The new houses of the affluent crowd the ruins and the proposed conservation plan accepts the pattern of economic development here. Will a hotel tower some day dominate the minaret of the Friday mosque on the right?

Unfortunately, the old village of Shela, nestled beside the sand dunes on a point south of Lamu, is placed in the 'development' zone (Fig. 5). Perhaps there is already too much political pressure there as the Lamu bourgeoisie and foreign expatriates push their new villas between the ruins of mosques and houses of this important seventeenth-century town. The carved plaster 'kidaka' or niches which characterize the old interiors are exposed to the weather and the bats. Although the new development there, particularly the charming and quietly refined Peponi Hotel, has been respectful of the existing architectural tradition, the future of the area, like that of the larger town of Lamu, depends on the sensibility of individual property owners rather than governmental policy. The expense of importing building materials foreign to island construction traditions and the recent ebb in the flow of tourism because of the Iranian oil crisis, which reduced flights, remain the best preservers of an architectural tradition. An old missionary, the only other traveller this writer encountered on the dusty land route to Lamu, shook his head and said that Lamu was already lost, and had been since the days when it took

three days to walk from Malindi in the 1930s, listening to the roar of the lions beyond the campfire at night. That is one historical point of view! Government policy has removed that remoteness, but it has not intervened to reduce the threat to the architectural specialness of Lamu which increased access makes inevitable.

Résumé

C'est plus à sa situation géographique sur l'une des îles d'un archipel qu'aux règlements gouvernementaux ou à l'action des urbanistes que le paysage urbain islamique le mieux préservé de l'Afrique Orientale doit d'avoir été sauvegardé. Ses rues étroites, parallèles au rivage qui ne laissent pas passer les voitures, son éloignement et le fait que l'on ne peut y accéder que par bateau ou par avion ont fait plus pour la protection de cet ensemble qui date du XVI^{ème} siècle que le plan de conservation—le premier en Afrique Orientale—établi par des professionnels et financé en partie par le gouvernement mais qui n'a pas encore été mis en pratique.

Derrière les vérandas et les porches du bord de mer, pratiquement tous du XIX^{ème} siècle, se trouve une ville islamique plus ancienne aux maisons de corail dont les murs extérieurs nus, souvent agrémentés de portes sculptées, cachent un intérieur décoré de stucs. Le déclin économique de la cité—son port ne peut concurrencer celui en eau profonde de Mombasa—a également contribué à sa préservation. Mais l'essor économique dû au tourisme culturel est venu à la fois sauver et menacer les villes comme Lamu. En effet, à titre d'exemple, les bâtiments de deux ou trois étages ont-ils une chance de résister à l'impact économique de la construction d'hôtels importants? Le rythme des arcades du front de mer sera-t-il préservé malgré les constructions nouvelles qui recherchent de nouveaux espaces et les boutiques résisteront-elles à la tentation de placarder de plus grandes enseignes de plastique afin d'attirer de plus nombreux touristes? L'artisanat retrouvera-t-il sa qualité ancienne à une époque où il est plus profitable de vendre des objets pour touristes produits à la chaîne? La municipalité saura-t-elle trouver l'énergie politique nécessaire à la nomination d'un inspecteur des bâtiments qui contrôlerait les modifications apportées à un habitat qui serait classé—alors que seuls quelques 'monuments listés' sont actuellement protégés.

Ces questions vont au-delà des bonnes intentions du projet d'urbanisation et leurs réponses dépendront en réalité d'une volonté politique qui seule permettra d'obtenir les fonds nécessaires pour imposer les décisions conformes au plan.

Ce plan fut publié en 1976 sous l'égide de Usam Ghaidan et d'une équipe de l'université de Nairobi; il définit clairement la notion de conservation comme 'un développement qui cause le minimum de changements à l'environnement afin de permettre aux bâtiments et espaces qui sont importants pour la collectivité d'être protégés, entretenus et utilisés à bon escient'. Mais les moyens financiers manquèrent avant qu'une exposition permanente du travail accompli fut réalisée et la deuxième partie de l'étude—celle qui devait démontrer la rentabilité de l'opération—ne fut jamais commencée. Il y a bien quelques signes encourageants d'un respect nouveau pour certains bâtiments mais les règlements principaux applicables dans une zone de conservation ne sont toujours pas entrés en vigueur.

Il était recommandé, entre autres, que la cité et ses environs soient divisés en plusieurs zones: le centre avec la plupart des maisons anciennes en pierre formant une zone de conservation avec les restrictions appropriées; dans une zone périphérique, la construction d'hôtels et de bâtiments à usage public serait permise; enfin, une ceinture verte préserverait la définition actuelle de l'agglomération et l'accès à l'espace non bâti. Mais, malheureusement, le village ancien de Shela est situé dans la zone de 'développement' dont le futur sera à la merci de la sensibilité de chaque propriétaire et non du gouvernement. En revanche, des réalités telles que le coût élevé d'importation de matériaux étrangers à la tradition architecturale de l'île et le déclin récent du tourisme dû aux liaisons aériennes moins fréquentes à cause de la crise qui frappe le pétrole iranien sont encore la meilleure protection de cet ensemble architectural.

Resumen

La panorámica urbana islámica mejor conservada de Africa Oriental mantiene su identidad merced al accidente de su emplazamiento en un archipiélago de islas, más que a la política gubernamental o la acción de los planificadores. Sus angostas calles paralelas a la zona ribereña no admiten coches, y su recondución

acceso sólo por mar y por aire han hecho más para mantener su trazado del siglo XVI que la propuesta de plan de conservación, primero del Africa Oriental, el cual, a pesar de haber sido preparado profesionalmente y subvencionado en parte por el gobierno, no ha sido aún sancionado.

Por detrás de las verandas y pórticos de un barrio ribereño básicamente del siglo XIX, existe una ciudad islámica más antigua de casas de coral, a menudo enriquecidas por portales esculpidos sobre muros exteriores lisos que esconden interiores decorados con tallas en yeso. La ciudad ha sido conservada en parte por el declive de su importancia económica, ya que su puerto no puede competir con el calado de Mombasa.

Pero la fuerza económica del turismo cultural se convierte en tanto la salvación como la destrucción de lugares como Lamu. ¿Puede la escala de edificios de dos y tres pisos resistir el impacto económico de construcciones hoteleras en plan serio? ¿Se mantendrá el ritmo de los arcos ribereños a medida que las nuevas construcciones rellenen los espacios abiertos que aún quedan? ¿Resistirán las tiendas la tentación de utilizar grandes rótulos de plástico para atraer a más turistas? ¿Cambiará de signo el declive de la artesanía en un momento en el que resulta más provechoso la producción en masa de chucherías turísticas? ¿Encontrará la ciudad la voluntad política de contratar un inspector de edificios que controle las alteraciones en edificios autóctonos aprobados que van más allá de los pocos 'monumentos del nomenclátor' actualmente protegidos?

Tales preguntas trascienden las buenas intenciones de los estudios planificativos; dependen de la voluntad política de asegurar una puesta en marcha subven-

cionada adecuadamente. El estudio de Lamu, coordinado por Usam Ghaidan y una Universidad de Nairobi, y publicado en mayo de 1976, define claramente la conservación como 'desarrollo que ocasiona una intervención mínima en el ambiente para asegurar que lo que es valioso para la comunidad sea protegido, mantenido y empleado provechosamente'. Pero este estudio agotó los fondos económicos antes de que se pudiera montar una exposición permanente de los trabajos. Tampoco se ha llevado a cabo la crucial segunda fase del informe, que habría examinado las posibilidades económicas de las recomendaciones. A pesar de algunos signos alentadores en el tratamiento de algunos edificios individuales, las principales reglamentaciones de las zonas de conservación siguen sin aprobar.

Las recomendaciones incluían la división de la zona urbana y alrededores en zonas distintas, colocando en una zona de conservación con protección adecuada a la mayoría de las viejas casas de piedra en el centro de la ciudad. Una zona periférica daría acogida a servicios como hoteles y promociones de utilidad pública, y un cinturón verde mantendría el sentido actual de definición y acceso a espacios abiertos. Desgraciadamente, el antiguo pueblo de Shela está en la 'zona de desarrollo', y el futuro del área depende de la sensibilidad de los propietarios individuales, más que de la política gubernamental. Factores como el coste de importar materiales de construcción extraños a las tradiciones arquitectónicas de la isla y la reciente baja de afluencia turística a causa de la crisis del petróleo iraní, que redujo los vuelos, siguen siendo los mejores mantenedores de una tradición arquitectónica.

First International Congress on Architectural Conservation University of Basle, Switzerland, 28–31 March 1983

Organised by the Institute for International Art Festivals, in co-operation with the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) and the International Centre for the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM), the object of the Congress is to create a suitable platform for the regular exchange of all the most recent ideas on the preservation of the architectural heritage. It is intended that a series of biennial congresses will deal with the cultural and historical, as well as the technical aspects of Architectural Conservation, on a worldwide basis. The theme of the First International Congress is:

'Historic buildings, their significance and their role in today's cultural setting'