

Stone Town is located on a triangular peninsula

#### The Stone Town of Zanzibar - Conservation of a difficult heritage

Zanzibar has an exciting history. The tropical, fertile island on the east African coast was the destination of numerous sailors, traders, conquerors and explorers. The regular monsoon winds moved the sailing dhows across the Indian Ocean and along the coast. The Portuguese dominated this region, before they were driven away by the Arabs from Oman. The Arabs were so delighted by the overwhelmingly green island, its strategic position and the excellent natural harbour, that in 1832 their Sultan decided to move the capital of his dominion to Zanzibar. The fabulous rise of Stone Town began.

The Arabs brought their own culture and style of architecture, but the building materials were locally produced. The basic material is coral stone, built into masonry walls with a mortar of lime, sand and red earth. The thickness of the walls, up to 60cm, creates a cool climate inside, and with niches, arches and pillars a specific atmosphere and interior architecture. The coral stones were burnt for lime and the lime used for whitewashing the buildings. Slabs and roofs were constructed with mangrove poles and a thick layer of stones and mortar on top. The narrow, winding bazaar street with commercial activities in the ground floor and residential use in the upper floors was the predominant urban pattern.

The busy trade of the Arabs with goods from all over the world, the profitable export of spices, ivory and slaves created a prosperity, which made Zanzibar both politically and commercially the principal town in East Africa. A shadow of this wealth can still be seen in many of the fine old buildings and palaces. In contrast to the African population in the rural areas, grew a cosmopolitan population in town, with Arabs, Indians, Comorians and a few Europeans. The architecture of Stone Town represents the mixture and amalgamation of these different cultures.



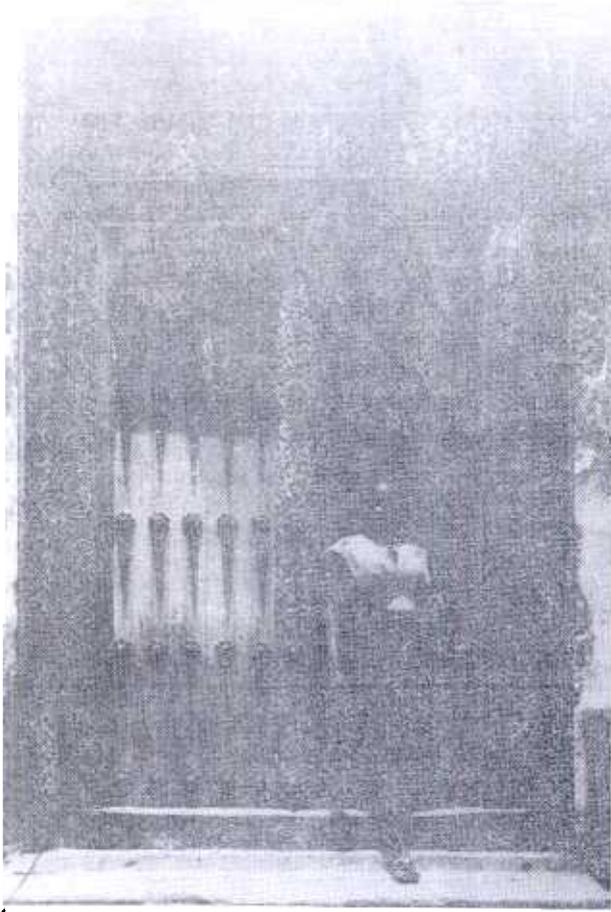
Town map (source: UNCHS-Habitat, *The Stone Town of Zanzibar. A Strategy for Integrated Development*, 1983)

In 1890 the Sultanate of Zanzibar was proclaimed a British Protectorate. The administration established an excellent infrastructure and a strict system of building control in Stone Town. During the process of decolonization the British favoured the one sided Arab oligarchy, so that they could proclaim independence as an Arab Sultanate in december 1963. This was a provocation for the Africans, the majority of the population. They overthrew the Sultanate in the Revolution of january 1964. Three and a half months later Zanzibar and Tanganyika formed the United Republic of Tanzania.

The ruling class of Arab landlords and Indian merchants was expelled from Stone Town. Many people left the country. Their abandoned houses were confiscated by the new Government and the poor population from the rural areas moved into the houses. All investment in Stone Town stopped and the new inhabitants and the new administration only lived on what others built before, and neglected maintenance. The regular whitewashing every year, the checking of mangrove poles, the replacement of broken roofing sheets and gutters was not done any more. Once moisture and water has penetrated the building, it decays very quickly. The mangrove poles rot and the slabs collapse. Every year about ten houses collapsed and some of the inhabitants lost their lives.

The negative political burden and image Stone Town had as the former seat of a feudalistic system made it difficult for the Government, to accept the town as a cultural and historical heritage of international importance. Only in the late seventies the Government acknowledged the rapid deterioration as a problem and asked some foreign countries and organizations for advice and assistance. First of all foreign consultants started to point on the hot issue with the local authorities and initiated a cautious discussion on reforms and pragmatic solutions.

On request by the Zanzibar Government the United Nations Centre for Human



One of the famous carved Zanzibar doors

A typical narrow street

Settlements (Habitat) commissioned a feasibility study with a careful analysis of the situation. Strategies and proposals to overcome stagnation and decay of the town through revitalization with trade, manufacture and tourism and changes in housing policy and administration were elaborated. Yet the proposals were so comprehensive and ambitious, that nobody seemed to know how to bridge the gap between the existing situation and the proposed programme. Another feasibility study with more technical details and project proposals was prepared in 1985. This resulted in a project application of several million Dollars for the conservation of the Stone Town. But again the ambitious strategy made donors hesitate and the expectations for financing of the project were not realised.

With the assistance of bilateral aid from the Norwegian Government a small pilot project was started in 1983. A house in a bazaar street, with abandoned shops on the ground floor was rehabilitated and prepared for the accommodation of workshops for traditional handicrafts, woodcarving and sandalmaking. The building, basically in arabic style but with timber decorations and a door of indian style was an ideal object to train the forgotten techniques of traditional design and workmanship. Decorations on the fascia boarding, windows and a carved door were carefully restored, after overcoming the scepticism of the craftsmen. A new internal stair and a gallery was built in traditional design, with decorated balustrades, using carved east african teak wood. It is probably the first stair of this type built in the last three decades, because concrete replaced timber as the construction material.

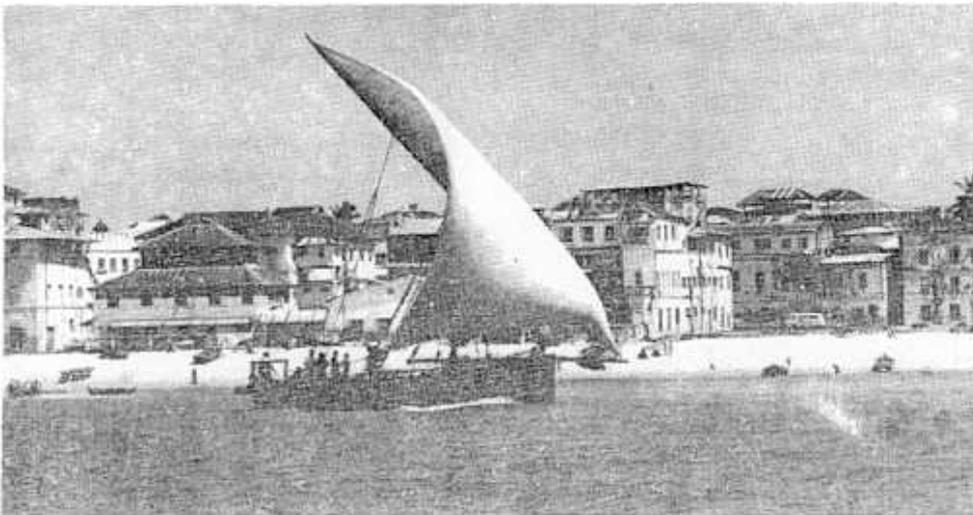
The pilot project disclosed a problem, which future restoration projects may face as well. The tenants have to evacuate the building, before work starts,

but nobody in the Government feels responsible to give them alternative accommodation. The project can't take off or delays and every planning proposal can be an unreliable calculation. This makes active and preventive planning extremely difficult. In many dangerous houses action was only taken after the houses started collapsing. The tenants run away and a new investor can then start to rebuild the ruin.

About 3 years ago the Government changed its policy towards economical liberalization by relaxation of import restrictions and encouragement of private investment. An astonishing high purchasing power was put in motion. Many abandoned shops were reopened and repair work started. Numerous construction sites developed. Since then Stone Town has been rediscovered by the population as an economical asset and place of investment. But as a historical and cultural asset it is not yet fully rediscovered. Most of the construction work is done in poor quality of craftsmanship, neglecting conservation aspects and aesthetical criteria. Charming windows with wooden shutters and elegant proportions are replaced by glass louvres, wooden balustrades replaced by plain asbestos sheets. The fine lime plaster decorations are spoilt by rough cement plaster.

Attempts of the Government and the Municipal Council to control the building work with building regulations are almost a failure. Most of the building inspectors, architects, homeowners and building contractors do not yet fully understand the sense of conservation. The enforcement of building regulations by law is not taken serious by the population, after the Government itself has neglected Stone Town for so many years. The only realistic strategy at the moment is to convince and educate the people by positive methods, by showing attractive examples and demonstration houses, to prove that conservation and preservation of the old building style is worthwhile because of its beauty, functionalism and economy.

With increasing understanding of the problem, more awareness that Stone Town is an attraction for tourists and the hope to attract foreign assistance, the Government decided to create an institution only dealing with conservation. The "Stone Town Conservation and Development Authority" (STCDA) was established in 1985. The new institution is working under the Ministry of Water, Construction and Energy. One of the first tasks was, to implement a programme of selling Government houses. Buildings in bad condition, mostly one family residential houses confiscated after Revolution, were sold to the tenants for cheap prices. But with the condition that all necessary repairs would be undertaken within a period of 2 years. To date more than 80 houses have been sold and most of the new owners took immediate action and started repair works. The proceeds

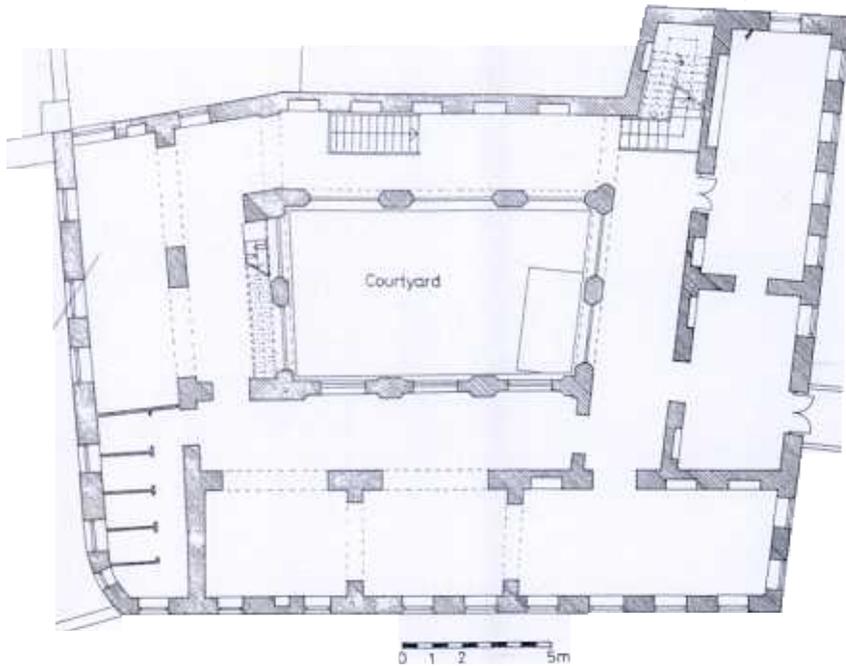


Dhow at the sea-front

of sale finance the budget of STCDA and are reinvested into conservation projects.

For accommodation of STCDA's own offices an old building to be rehabilitated should be identified. Again this was difficult, because all houses are occupied with tenants. Finally a forgotten building, which was only accessible through a broken window was rediscovered. The building has a courtyard inside with typical open arcades around, which gives cross ventilation and a natural cooling to all rooms. The thick walls, columns, arches, window niches and plaster decorations give the rooms a representative appearance. The mangrove poles with a maximum span of 3,5m determine the long proportions of the rooms.

This forgotten palace was originally part of the Sultans family residence. In 1927 it was converted into an "Arab Girls Hostel". Probably for protection of the girls the main entrance was blocked and only a hidden entrance in a palm garden could be utilized. After the Revolution the building was converted into a primary school, but in 1978 completely evacuated and closed because of an accident. An agreement with the Ministry of Education was arranged that



The former residence of the Sultans family, future office of STCDA

1.floor plan



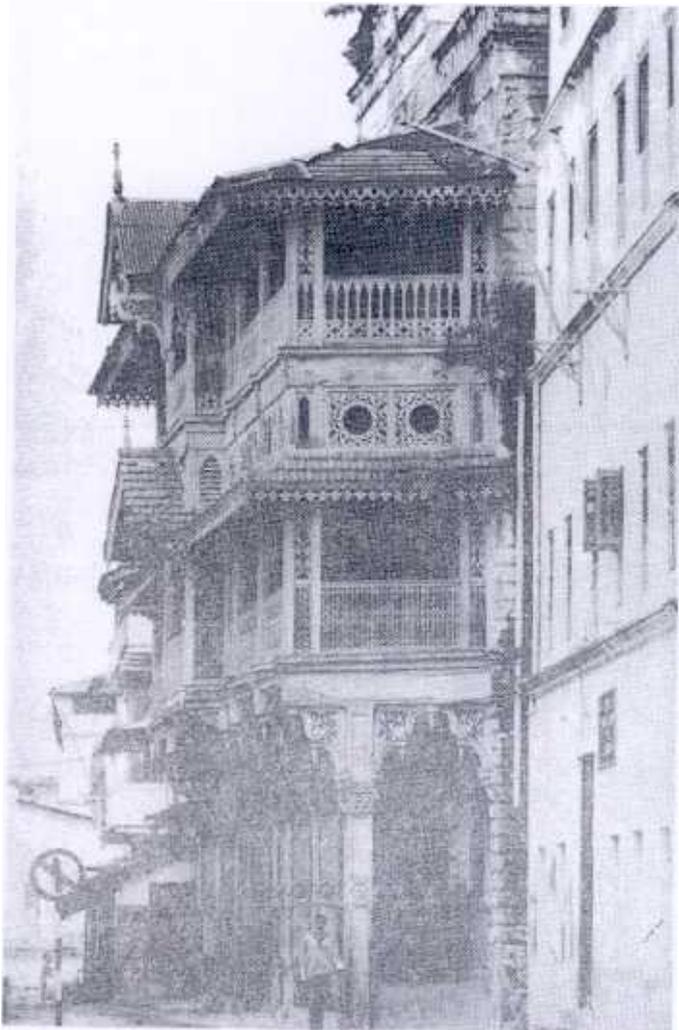
Section

STCDA could take over the building. Not many changes are needed to convert the building for office functions. Apart from general repairs and maintenance only the removal of partition walls, which block some of the arches and corridors is needed to recover the original layout.

It is estimated that the building is around 90 years old, because it stands on a plot where an old and famous Sultans palace, "Beit el Sahil", was located. The British Fleet bombarded this palace in 1896, when a quarrel over the succession of the Sultan broke out. With the pressure of this attack the British helped their candidate to take over power. Old photos show that "Beit el Sahil" was completely destroyed and was never rebuilt. Instead a palm garden was put on the site and only a side building, the building which is existing today, was rebuilt.

There is no doubt that the main burden of revitalization and conservation of Stone Town can only be carried by private investors. Government assistance and foreign assistance can only support and stimulate this proces. The economic liberalization and the subsequent beginning of revitalization in recent years gives some hope that the negative trend is turned into a positive development. But it may take generations, to widen the attitude of the population towards this heritage from a purely economical attitude to a deep understanding of conservation.

Author: Ulrich Malisius, architect, Zanzibar may 1987.



The former Khoja  
Ismaili Dispensary

## The Stone Town of Zanzibar - Conservation of a difficult heritage

### Summary:

Zanzibar has a rich history, having been the cosmopolitan focus of arab, african, indian and european influence on the east african coast. The Stone Town, mainly built in the 19. century during a boom of trade with spices, ivory and slaves represents many individual historical buildings but also an undisturbed historical environment as a whole. It has survived until today, despite of many changes. Zanzibars period as a British Protectorate brought a good administration and infrastructure to Stone Town, but stagnation and decline of trade already affected the development of the town.

The Revolution in 1964 created a radical socio-economic change followed by the abandonment, confiscation and negligence of many houses. Subsequently many of them collapsed. In recent years the Zanzibar Government as well as the international community got more aware of the danger to loose this cultural and historical heritage. With the assistance of the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (Habitat) a comprehensive feasibility study was carried out and a strategy to counter the decline by adjustment measures in the political, economical and administrative sector elaborated. But the expectations for financing of the ambitious project proposals were not realised.

A small pilot project, the restoration of a single house, sponsored by bilateral aid was implemented and shows first results.

After the Government changed its policy towards economical liberalization, investment in the private sector increased and various building activities started, thus contributing to the revitalization and conservation of Stone Town. The still existing potential of manufacture, trade and handicrafts and the future potential of tourism can be utilized to encourage a self-reliant conservation process.

Building control and enforcement of building regulations were neglected after Revolution, attempts to reintroduce control instruments showed to be very difficult now.

The Government of Zanzibar decided in 1985, to establish a new institution only dealing with conservation, the "Stone Town Conservation and Development Authority". The first task of the new institution was, to sell Government houses in bad condition to the inhabitants. The prices were cheap, but with condition to undertake all necessary repair works. More than 80 houses were sold and most of them immediately repaired.

Yet the technical and aesthetical quality of work is not satisfying. A long process of education and change in mentality is needed to turn the purely economical attitude of the population into a deep understanding and appreciation of conservation.

The Conservation Authority could find an abandoned old palace, formerly part of the Sultans family residence. Conservation work on the building was started recently and after finishing the work the new institution will move into the rehabilitated building, to be used for its own offices and head-quarter.

Author: Ulrich Malisius, architect, Zanzibar may 1987

La vieille ville ("Stone Town") de Zanzibar - conservation d'un héritage difficile

Résumé:

Zanzibar a une histoire riche, ayant été le foyer cosmopolite des influences arabe, africaine, indienne et européenne sur la côte de l'Afrique de l'Est. La vieille ville, principalement construite au 19. siècle durant la prospérité du commerce des épices, de l'ivoire et des esclaves, présente de nombreux bâtiments historiques mais constitue aussi un ensemble historique en tant que tel, qui s'est conservé jusqu'à nos jours, en dépit de nombreux changements. La période du Protectorat britannique apporta une bonne administration de la vieille ville et une infrastructure corrente, mais la stagnation et le déclin du commerce avaient déjà affecté le développement de la ville.

La Revolution de 1964 créa un changement socio-économique qui se traduisir par l'abandon, la confiscation de nombreuses maisons et la négligence à leur égard. Aussi beaucoup d'entre elles se sont effondrées. Ces dernières années le Gouvernement de Zanzibar ainsi que la communauté internationale prirent davantage conscience du danger de perdre cet héritage culturel et historique. Avec l'assistance du Centre des Nations Unies pour l'Habitat, une étude complète de faisabilité été effectuée et une stratégie a été élaborée pour s'opposer à ce declin par l'adoption de mesures dans les secteurs politique, économique, et administratif. Mais le financement initialement prévu d'un projet ambitieux n'a pas été réalisé.

Un petit projet pilote, la restauration d'une seule maison, parrainée par une aide bilaterale a été menée à bien et constitue un premier resultat.

Après que le Gouvernement eut changé sa politique dans le sens d'une libéralisation économique, les investissements dans le secteur privé ont augmente et diverses activités ont démarré dans le bâtiment, contribuant ainsi à la revitalisation et à la conservation de la vieille ville. Le potentiel existant encore en matière d'artisanat, de commerce et les perspectives du tourisme peuvent être utilisées pour encourager un processus de conservation autonome.

Le contrôle des bâtiments et le renforcement de la législation en la matière ayant été négligés après la Revolution, réintroduire des instrument de contrôle s'avère très difficile maintenant.

Le Gouvernement de Zanzibar décida en 1985 d'établir une nouvelle institution consacrée seulement à la conservation, la "Stone Town Conservation and Development Authority". La première tâche de cette institution était de vendre aux habitants les maisons du Gouvernement en mauvais état. Les prix étaient bas, mais assortis de la condition d'effectuer toutes les réparations nécessaires. Plus de 80 maisons ont été vendues et la plupart d'entre elles immédiatement réparées.

Toutefois, la qualité technique et esthétique du travail n'est pas satisfaisante. Un long processus d'éducation et de changement du mentalité est nécessaires pour que la population parvienne à une connaissance et à une appréciation satisfaisants de la conservation.

La Conservation Authority a pu acquérir un ancien palais abandonné, jadis résidence de la famille du sultan. Les travaux de conservations du bâtiment ont démarré récemment et lorsqu'ils seront terminés, la neuve institution s'établira dans le bâtiment réhabilité, ou elle installera son siège et ses bureaux.

Auteur: Ulrich Malisius, architecte, Zanzibar mai 1987.