

When Souls and Stones meet in Old Akko
The International Conservation Center

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Abstract: As a World Heritage Site, Akko is a veritable live laboratory for studying and practicing conservation of historic sites and monuments. As an ancient city, once a major crossroad of Mediterranean civilizations, it has a rich and long heritage of oral traditions, social practices, rituals and festive events, as well as traditional crafts, art, music and culture. These aspects have barely been accounted for during development programs of the city. Local and international projects of the newly established International Conservation Center aim at enriching the character of the city by:
*Enhancing the knowledge of the inhabitants of Akko about their city.
*Safeguarding the intangible culture of the city by collecting, researching and reviving local traditions
*Training conservation professionals at the sites of the city
*Serving as a resource for all cultural and historic aspects of the city.

The Old city of Akko was designated by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site in 2001 (World Heritage List 2001). It is a port city with walls, castles, fortifications, churches, mosques and other buildings that tell the story of many glorifiers. The 4,000 years of continuous settlement within the city, has created in it a unique feature of modern inhabitants residing within historical buildings. It is a city with a rare mix of east and west, of authentic sites alongside the remnants of various cultures. The colorful oriental bazaars of Akko, the city walls, the fisherman's wharf and restaurants are all part of the special attractions of the city.

Many nations, cultures and religious movements have left marks on the sites of Akko. Twice in its history Akko became the core of international activities (Shor 1990). In the 13th century it became the capital of the Crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem. The entire city was fortified and divided into quarters. These were inhabited by the military monk orders (the remains of the Hospitallers fortress and Features of the Templar order's fortress are known), the Italian merchant

communes (Genoese, Venetian and Pisa), other merchants, Jews and Moslems. Continual struggles between these quarters were a main feature of the city in this period. Remains of what was the Crusader capital, both above and below today's street level, provide an exceptional view of the layout and structures of the capital of the medieval Crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem.

In 1291 the city was conquered by the Mamluks (Orman 1983). It was then methodically destroyed deserted and left in ruins for hundreds of years.

The present-day city is characteristic of a fortified Ottoman town from the 18th and 19th centuries, with typical urban components, such as a citadel, mosques, khans, and Turkish baths. During this period the city returned to its international glory under the government of Dahar el- Omar and his successor el-Jazar. It was during this period that Akko became the first city in the eastern Mediterranean to be tied into the modern world economy, initially through the demand for cotton in Europe (Philipp 2002). In 1799 el-Jazar successively defended the city against Napoleon's army, which invaded the city, but ultimately failed to conquer it (Shor 1990).

The history of Akko is therefore important, first of all, as the saga of urban civilization (Dichter 1973). By its past, Akko serves as one of the best examples for research of ancient cultures; but at the same time, it is also a good work shop for the study of urban planning combining ancient and modern conceptions of town building. It is also a laboratory for archeologists, historians, sociologists, anthropologists as well as architects and engineers.

Geographical Characteristics

The geographic characteristics of the city are the principal reason for its extraordinary development. Akko is situated in northern Israel at the end of a large bay on the Mediterranean coast. Positioned on international trade routes, Akko developed into a vital trade center in ancient times.

The city is built on a peninsula and is separated from the mainland by a double wall and a broad moat (Kesten 1993). Two harbors are situated along its shore: an outer one and an inner harbor that is enclosed by a breakwater.

Demography

Just before the War of Independence in Israel in 1948 many of the principle Arab leaders and rich residents from the Old City of Akko

fled the country (Garzuzi, 2005). Under the Israeli Law deserted buildings were designated as Absentee Property and are now owned by the Israeli Land Administration (UNESCO Nomination 2000). Years following, Arabs from the surrounding villages moved into these buildings and portions of the Old City were used to house New Jewish Immigrants (Garzuzi, 2005). Additional continuous demographic changes have brought Jewish inhabitants as well as the higher social – economic Arab class inhabitants to gradually abandon the Old City (Waterman 1983). Although it is difficult to arrive at a conclusive number, it appears that the Old City houses somewhere around 5,000-7,000 individuals, all Arabs of low social - economic status most of whom are Muslim, with a small but substantive Christian population.

Legal status of the city and conservation procedures in Akko

The Old City of Akko was formally declared an Antiquity Site by the British Mandate Antiquity Department (British Mandate Record Files) and is now protected in accordance with the Israel Antiquities Law (Israeli Antiquity Law 1978).

The Old Acre Development Company was entrusted the authority to develop and advance the city as a tourist attraction (UNESCO Nomination 2000). Thus the company enhances the entire management of the Old City. The Conservation work in the Old City is carried out by the Conservation Department of the Israel Antiquities Authority according to conservation policies (Sheffer 1997, Sheffer and Alef 2002).

According to the goals outlined in the Nomination of Akko to the World Heritage List community-based tourism has been specified as a main feature of the city: “The master plan for the old city of Akko provides solutions for developing tourism in the city while emphasizing the development of tours in the city, sleeping accommodation, relevant commerce, traffic circulation, and parking both inside and outside the old city. All the development will be made while balancing the needs of the tourists with the needs of the local population" (UNESCO Nomination 2000).

The International Conservation Center

With the designation of Akko as a World Heritage Site, it became essential to restore the city to its former grandeur and to revive its role as a crossroad of cultural history.

In recent years, architectural and historic conservation has become an issue of growing concern and focus in Israel. Moreover, new regulations and legislation have led to the need for trained personnel to

work alongside architects and public institutions in devising and upholding accepted standards of historic preservation. To help meet the needs in this field, the Israel Antiquities Authority has joined forces with the Old Akko Development Company and the Akko Municipality to found a new International Conservation Center. The Center is situated in the Old City of Akko, a veritable live laboratory for studying and practicing conservation of historic sites and structures as well as researching oral history and traditional cultural aspects of the city. The Center aims to provide training in all preservation and conservation professions. It will serve as a place of study for researchers in the field, as well as for students, from Israel and abroad, offering hands-on conservation experience.

At the base of this idea is the notion that cultural heritage consists of two aspects – built heritage (physical evidence) and intangible heritage. To date most of the research studies have emphasized the physical evidence of the city. Historical research and archeological studies have dealt mostly with Crusader evidence attempting to understand the layout of the ancient city. Since 1991 the Israel Antiquities Authority has concentrated on documentation of Ottoman buildings in the city. This is due especially to continuous conservation work on the historical sites of the city. This integration of historical, archeological and architectural work is the guideline for present developments in the city.

The importance of safeguarding the unique intangible heritage of the city has been recognized by all the development authorities working in Akko. Despite this, few academic studies have tackled this theme. It has been addressed mostly by few local passionate inhabitants in a popular manner. Most results of these works have been published in Arabic only, with a limited circulation. A first attempt to concentrate on intangible aspects of the city was carried out within the framework of the Wye River People-to-People Program. This program took place between 2001 – 2005 under the auspice of the Zinman Institute of Archeology (Haifa University) and the Israel Antiquities Authority. The aim of the project was to document public buildings in the city using various sources which included oral history, interviews, local archives and historical sources. The first results of the research were published in the book "Shared Heritage of Akko: Preliminary Draft Report Vol.1" (Shared Heritage, 2004) which is the first of its kind about Akko.

The need to safeguard the rich, longstanding local cultural heritage has led the Center to develop public and community programs. These are aimed at involving Akko inhabitants of all ages and backgrounds,

and by so doing, strengthening their pride of place and local patriotism. Research programs target all cultural heritage values of the city; those identified during the nomination of Akko as a World Heritage Site, and intangible values which have not yet been fully identified. These include oral traditions and expressions, performing arts traditions, social practices, rituals and festive events, as well as traditional crafts and artistic objects, decorative arts, costumes, musical instruments and the like – past and present. As yet, studies have identified unknown folklore connected to sites in the city (e.g. stories about monsters connected to underground spaces), customs and traditions (e.g. when a child loses its first tooth it is customary that it visits all neighbors and distributes a special type of sweet), name places used by local inhabitants but unknown to the authorities, and information about local traditions and crafts.

The addition of these aspects to the large existing collection of records and documentations will lay the foundations for a local cultural library. The library will help put the richly historic, mixed city of Akko, once a major crossroad of Mediterranean civilizations, on the international map.

Programs developed to date in the center include: **Entrepreneur Training in Traditional Crafts**, so as to revive these and at the same time generate a source of income for talented, unemployed persons;

Training of Tourist Rangers to serve as guides for unique tourist trails in Akko, which are not included in the standard tourism package;

Annual Akko Produce & Crafts Fair, comprising four major elements: exhibition and sale of local products, craft workshops, special tours and competitions to promote tourism and conservation;

Series of Lectures and Courses on Akko and its rich history, open to the inhabitants of the City. Throughout the year; Training on Historic Building Maintenance and Conservation, focusing on historic residences in Old Akko;

School Projects such as heritage classes, specialized workshops and focused tours for students of different ages.

The International Conservation Center is situated in a spacious, two-storey, 19th century residence. The building's massive pillars, supporting impressive vaults, suggest that part of the structure may date back to the Crusader period, when this sector formed part of the autonomous Pisan Quarter (Cocks 2007). The upper floor, which housed one of the wealthy families of Akko, is complete with architectural elements typical of a Lebanese house, i.e., a central hall plan, where the rooms open up to a central salon, decorated with marble floors, pillars and decorative wooden ceilings. In recent

decades, the building housed a youth hostel, later vacated. Neglect and improper use have damaged the structure and its special features.

The Center will, undoubtedly, make a significant contribution to strengthening local residents' pride in their city, motivating them to take a greater interest and play a more active role in conserving, developing and promoting their city its built and cultural heritage. Moreover, the institution will create a bridge and link between the city's diverse ethnic groups, through greater knowledge and understanding of each other's history and culture, and joint activities on behalf of their shared city.

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