

THE HAMMĀM - A LIVING CULTURAL HERITAGE

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Abstract

This paper argues that the hammām – the Islamic public bath – has a double value from the point of view of cultural heritage: it is a valuable historical building with a rich architecture and specific cultural phases. It is also a socio-cultural heritage. The HAMMAM EU funded study confirms that within the case study hammāms in five different countries around the Mediterranean, there is a vivid social life and specific washing ceremonies and festive rituals that are still being practiced. Not only did the study presented in this paper examined the architectural value of such a building, but it did also examine the social meanings of the hammām and their contribution to a common collective memory. With its current contemporary social life and its associated practices of traditions and rituals for the washing procedures within the bath, the hammām has the potential to be a "living cultural heritage" and can contribute to a contemporary quality of life for clients, neighbours and visitors. This paper describes the method of photo interview, as a practical visual tool to explore the social meanings of space.

Keywords:

Hammām, cultural heritage, social life, public space, photo interviews.

Introduction

The hammām, the traditional Islamic bath, is a cultural heritage not only from the historical, and architectural points of view, but also for its socio-cultural aspects. The contemporary public baths, investigated in the HAMMAM study (Hammām, Aspects and Multidisciplinary Methods of Analysis for the Mediterranean Region) appear as socio-cultural institutions and provide time, space and opportunities for individuals to share social activities, habits and traditions on a weekly or monthly basis. The hammām case study results showed how the socio-cultural values could be considered along with the architectural and restoration investigations in order to identify good practice examples of a running a hammām today and show how it could operate with contemporary social activities as a living cultural heritage.

Within the HAMMAM study, the social scientists observed meaningful socio-cultural patterns within actually working case study hammāms in different Islamic cities like Ankara, Cairo, Constantine, Damascus and Fez. Although, the institution of public baths is spread over

a geographically wide area, from Turkey to Morocco, there is a common understanding in the region about what a hammām is. Users as well as people, who themselves do not use hammāms, described similar habits and traditional rituals contributing to a collective memory about the hammām. This common understanding of how to use and what to do in this traditional building; the aligned traditions and habits which are practiced and the specific objects used inside the hammām, contribute to make all these aspects part of the rich intangible cultural heritage associated with this building type. In the Mashreq countries, and also in the Maghreb, stories, cultural objects and artefacts which are part of the daily use in a hammām were generally similar and show a common Islamic background and understanding.



Figure 1: The Roof-scape of Sengül Hammām, Ankara 07/06, Turkey, Photo Interview 03 (Source: Authors, 2006).

What is a living cultural heritage?

During the HAMMAM study, the intangible life in the building of the hammām became visible and focusing on this part of the social

life and activities the term of the “living cultural heritage” was created. To speak about a “living cultural heritage”, means to take into account the social living, the intangible which takes place within the architectural building of the hammām as part of the cultural heritage. The term “living cultural heritage” designates the contemporary social life, the traditions, rituals and habits, which are practiced in a traditional bath and which are attached to this building type throughout history. Like the intangible life within the tangible building the living culture of the traditional bathing, peeling and massage with their specific objects and artefacts and associated social interactions, within the historic hammām makes this cultural heritage part of the contemporary social live. Focusing on the “living cultural heritage” and its impact on the daily social life of the neighbourhood within which the bathhouse is located, to the rehabilitation plans of these baths, it is important to make this cultural heritage building a contemporary place that contributes to the life quality of its users, while respecting its historical authenticity and its traditional function as a bath.

The hammām provides the traditional function of bathing, in public and semi public spaces, within a historical heritage building and caters for clients from different social background, coming not only from the immediate neighbourhood of the structure but also from other areas of the city. Sustaining the bathing function is one of the precondition and a necessity for the hammām to be considered as a living cultural heritage; that supports social encounter and social activities for individuals as well as for groups. In order to maintain a social life in the hammām and its neighbourhood, the original functions of bathing and rituals are

combined with the provision of a set of modern services.

Space and Social Interaction

The space and the spatial surrounding materialised in the building is the built environment for the human being in general, social interactions between individuals and a space and opportunity for specific cultural rituals. The space is an important environment creating a certain atmosphere, which can support or contribute to a social interaction between individuals.

The authors work with the hypothesis that the physical places are strongly interlinked with the social interactions within a community (Dumreicher, Kolb 2008). The hammām building contributes with its architectural features to a unique experience and provides with the sound of water, the natural lighting filtered through the pierced domes and vaults, the steam from the hot water and the smell of spices and soaps a special and unequalled atmosphere.

Body and soul within the architectural building of the hammām

The hammām is a specific building that provides for the human body a warm and steamy atmosphere with hot and cold water, light and dark places for washing, and contributes to healing by supporting the body function of sweating as well as providing the service of scrubbing and massaging the entire body. The traditional bathhouse is a place where clients take care of their body, with different levels of exposure to others, depending on their religious beliefs and rules. With its traditional body and beauty treatments, the traditional hammām can

be considered as a good support for personal wellbeing and preventive health care. Within the HAMMAM project, it was clear that the case study historic hammāms and their contemporary usages are places which are strongly associated with the cultural interpretation of the body. In the contemporary Islamic society the rules of the body treatments and the behaviour codes especially for women are more and more influenced by religious beliefs and practices. The hammām as a place for health and body treatment is a good indicator for the changing behaviour codes. Although the case studies are located in different countries, all clients interviewed describe the use and the non-use of the hammām in connection to body, health and acceptance of the women's role. The individual is supporting his or her personal health and hygiene by using a hammām, but it is also a collective place, a place for social contacts. The hammām in its collective function is also a semi public meeting place, especially important for women.

The Method of Photo Interview

In the HAMMAM study, the authors were observing the daily life perspective of the hammām as perceived by the clients and residents of the neighbourhood. The main research question was, how does the local and neighbouring urban population integrate the different functions of the traditional bath in their daily life and how does the hammām contribute to the perception of life quality? How does it support the quality of life in the neighbourhood? Within the selected five case study sites, the authors were investigating the social aspects of the relationship of the local people and the local community to the case study hammām.

After the field visits to the case study sites, the original hypothesis that the hammām should be maintained as a living institution that continues not only the tangible, but also the intangible heritage, was now supported by the finding that the hammām needs maintenance, but also changes to adapt to the contemporary requirements. New services, new standards are expected worldwide, and the hammām has to relate to these new expectations in order to continue to fulfil its role in a contemporary society.

In this study, the authors applied the empirical method of photo interview (Harper, 1987; Wuggenig, 1990) as the main data generating instrument, in addition to empirical observation methods such as qualitative interviews and participatory observations. The photo-interview is methodically seen as a tool of the visual sociology, combining social patterns and spatial impressions of a local area. The photo-interview represents a participatory approach and studies the local importance and meaning in a bottom up approach. It avoids any bias that can result from the researcher's guiding principle when collecting the data, as this relies entirely on the activity and the view of the photo-interviewees in taking photos of the hammām and its neighbourhood. Thereby the photo can be seen as a potential of visualisation (Kolb 2007) and supports the communication in the interview and the overall research process. For the photo interviews, selected people in the neighbourhood took their own photos of their district and gave an interview where they made a narrative about the sites which they photographed.

The photo interview is one of the rare sociological methods able to create a relationship between

spatial and societal realms. Within the material, the photo represents the local space, gives a concrete image of the mapped material and the social situation, and the interview text gives a first interpretation of meanings and relevancies. The meanings of the local residents become therefore clearer and are the focus of this research. These results were confronted with a possible scientific approach to the specific research questions. The basic scientific interpretations were based on the theory of sustainability, as defined by Levine et al (Levine, Dumreicher, Radmard and Yanarella, 1999) and the theoretical frame of "Seven Fields of Spatial and Social Encounter" (Dumreicher & Kolb, 2006). The definition of sustainability gave the basis for a combination of spatial and societal approaches by binding the sustainability approach to a local place within its actual physical or abstract territory (Levine, Dumreicher, Radmard and Yanarella, 1999).

Choosing the local place as a starting point for the sustainable future scenarios was a necessary basic condition and an anchoring point. By focusing on local identities and their social perceptions, the authors were able to bring up diversified as well as specific characteristics that can furthermore serve as examples for larger activities, in the same place or somewhere else. These findings are in line with the theoretical statement that sustainability is local: "sustainability happens at a specific place – the living environment of a settlement within its region, including living patterns and creativity of the tenants" (Levine, Dumreicher, Radmard, and Yanarella, 1999). The authors worked with the underlying paradigm that there is a strong conjunction between the physical places and the social interactions within a community, and

that encounters in the neighbourhood and appropriation of public space demonstrate this process.

Within the HAMMAM investigations, the authors held five to eight photo interviews in each of the five case study cities, supplemented with several qualitative interviews and field observations within the interdisciplinary field visits. As a whole, 562 photographs were taken by local people representing the visual data material, some of them were discussed in an interview. Those interviews were transcribed in their original language in a word by word transcripts (English, Arabic, Turkish and/or French). This data collection generated a daily life perspective to each case study site of the hammāms in a visual form by taking photographs, and in verbal form within the interviews. This field work process of the photo interviews produced an intense contact between researchers and interviewees. The interviewee brought his or her approach to the world of the researcher. The reliability of this data is high because of the high involvement of the interviewees. This data material is the empirical basis for an analytical interpretation figuring out the following results and answering the local patterns under a socio cultural view. The photos were important outputs and the photos as well as the interview texts were data material for the sociological and linguistic interpretation. Within the sociological approach the authors focused on manifest and latent aspects – represented in photos and interviews - following the interpretation of objective hermeneutics (Oevermann, 1993). The following sections of this paper give an overview of relevant results of the HAMMAM study.

The Building of the Hammām and its Social Life

There is a common understanding of the hammām as of an important cultural value. This is undoubtedly the case for the old generation – the grandparents, especially the grandmothers, and is transmitted to the young through story telling. For older clients, the hammām is part of their value system and they can clearly argue why they find it so attractive to go there regularly not only because of the architecture of the building and the environment it provides but also because of the rituals associated with its usage. These particular clients have been using the hammām since they were children and they have a rich personal experience and a common social experience in using the bath. It is clear that the hammām is also a carrier of a common collective memory, even for those who have never used it personally, but know of it through their grandmother or grandfather experiences and stories. This knowledge not only includes the weekly or monthly event of going to the public bath but also the special events associated with the use of the hammām before major religious and family celebrations such as pre-wedding ceremonies when specific dishes and sweets are brought to the hammām and consumed after bathing. The hammām is therefore, a place where a number of cultural traditions rooted into the Islamic history are still present and practiced. As such it is still a place for a living socio-cultural tradition in addition to its role supporting cleanliness body relaxation, treatment and beautification..

The hammām as a place for body and health

The hammām is a special place for the body and the architectural settings serve this specific

body experience. It is a place where traditional washing ceremonies can take place including scrubbing the body to remove dead skin and massaging it but also where specific body treatments are applied for rheumatism and back pain. Furthermore, the hammām plays an important role in providing the washing facility for religious purification before the Friday prayer and for women's beatification before wedding – The hammām is a place for the individual body and health embedded in collective social interactions and rituals.

An important aspect that was mentioned by the interviewee was that the hammām should be a clean and safe place. Maintaining a good level of cleanliness was found to be a challenge in most of the case study hammāms as well as providing contemporary standards of health and safety. The traditional bath is also seen as a good place for improving health, where the body is well treated and health condition promoted. The role of the staff is therefore of paramount importance in ensuring that good standards of cleanliness and safety are maintained. Furthermore, clients expect the availability of other services within the historic public bath such as a hairdresser and a fitness facility as these are found in contemporary beauty centres.. Therefore the introduction of new services within the historic hammāms could form an additional asset and attract more clients.

A place for traditional rituals

The hammām is a venue for a number of traditional rituals linked to major events in the life of a woman. It is a place where the strong ties to the spiritual and religious values are manifested through a living tradition. It is a place for female

rituals, as women use the hammām before their wedding, forty days after the birth of a child, and before specific religious festivals such as the end of the fasting month (Ramadhan), and the Aid El Adha. Besides the traditional rituals for the wedding ceremony that are linked to the public bath, there are other occasions when women choose the hammām as their special place for celebrating a special event and sharing a festive meal. Beside the function of bathing the hammām is also a place where family, relatives and friends meet and come together. It used to be the only public social space where women could meet other women outside their homes without being controlled by a male family member such as a father, an older brother or a husband.

The interpretation of the social traditions and rituals practiced in the hammām are strongly influenced by some current interpretations of the religion. In times of the forbiddance to show the body in a semi public space, the hammām can become a shunned place. As a secular institution, in a period where society undergoes growing fundamentalist religious interpretations, the hammām turns into an immoral place ("haram"), where nudity is presented in a forbidden mode. The accepted societal role of women, the treatment of the body and the religious interpretation of the body has a significant influence on the decisions of using or not using the hammām. Even if it (the hammām) has been part of the Islamic city for centuries and is still a place where tradition can be experienced, some current interpretations of what is allowed and not allowed in Islam have made it a forbidden place to go for some people. The behaviour patterns in the public bath vary a lot according to the religious background in the

country and in the neighbourhood: in a rather fundamentalist context, the hammām visit stands for ablution and purification before the prayer, especially for the Friday prayer. In the context of the contemporary lifestyle in each location, it is a focal place where some societal changes become visible.

The staff of the hammām

The quality of staff contributes highly to the perceived quality of a hammām, even more than its aesthetical and architectural features. The service provided by the facility staff is an indication of the quality assurance of the treatments being provided. With their normative social role of control they establish the codes of behaviour and are guarantors for the social integrity and the cleanliness within the bath. Hammām staff establishes the codes of behaviour and guarantees for the social acceptance of behaviour inside the hammām. Some of the rules are communicated to clients in the form of posters with clear rules for the usage of the facility. However, there are also hidden rules that provide a framework for a what is considered as an acceptable behaviour, finding a fine balance between the need to control clients and the fact that the hammām is a place for relaxation and well being. Many members of the staff are aware of their place in society based on their work in the hammām. They take over responsibility for the actions of their clients, providing the context and rules for a well working public bath.

Together with the management, the staff have the opportunity to create a safe place for the experience of wellbeing in the hammām, although the building is sometimes situated in an neglected urban context. Results of the

HAMMAM study show that the staff is trained in a learning by doing approach. The old techniques of washing and body treatment, or cultural ceremonies etc. have been partly researched within this study and could be used, as part of hammām staff training program. The staff of a living cultural heritage hammām, should be knowledgeable about the traditions of using the hammām and familiar with its cultural value. They should be properly trained in providing services such as the traditional body scrubbing treatment using the "kese", hair removing treatment using Agda and Sabunlana and body massage. They should also be trained to cater for traditional ceremonies within the hammām by arranging for traditional food, music and dancing.



Figure 2: Inside the Hammām, Constantine 05/2007, Algeria, Photo Interview 01 (Source: Authors, 2007).

Inside and outside – and the entrance of the hammām

The entrance of a hammām follows hidden rules and is much less visible in the urban fabric than that of any other public buildings. The entrance is usually located in a back lane that

is not very frequented so that a discrete usage of the hammām is possible. For the specific needs of privacy for women, the social control should not be exercised by a man – not even by a shop keeper in front of the hammām entrance. A piece of cloth is usually hung over the hammām's entrance to indicate its usage by women and prevent men from entering the building. In some of the case study, the women's entrance is discreet and is accessed from a back street. In Damascus case study, the new shop is located directly opposite to the hammām's entrance and was reported by interviewees as a nuisance. Women respondents mentioned being "observed and controlled" when entering or leaving the building. It is frequently mentioned in many traditional stories and songs that the hammām make women more beautiful and no men should see this beautification. However, some women interviewees in Damascus complained about situations, where some men can observe female clients, who are about to enter or leave the hammām, breaking some traditional codes of conduct. This shows the changing social situations in the contemporary context which is not only affecting the environment outside the hammām but also inside it. An incident was mentioned by various interviewees; where a mobile phone was used inside the bathing spaces provoking discussions in the whole neighbourhood. The incidence that a mobile phone could be used for taking photos in a hammām started a vivid reflection about the proper behaviour in and outside the public baths, especially for women. There is a large spectrum of what is allowed and not allowed inside the bathhouse, and this is mediated by various religious rules and interpretations specific to situations and cultural contexts.

The Hammām and its Meaning for the Neighbourhood

Focusing on the local process within its societal and spatial frame in several case studies, like Cairo and Damascus, the theoretical framework of "Seven fields of spatial encounter" has been adopted for use in this study (Dumreicher, Kolb 2008). The daily life practice gives a strong impact to the usage of space. The public squares, the spaces in front of shops and other buildings, the streets, all of the spatial surroundings create the possibility for social life practice. The existence of the place contributes to the development of a social life based on its local identity and emotional co-ownership. According to these concepts, the possibility to live and act in an existing spatial environment affects the individual's feelings its relationship to this specific place and influences its social usages. "Emotional Co-ownership is a strong attachment to a place that results in an interest from local citizens in the perpetuation of the valued qualities of the place. Most often this attribute is found in an empowered citizen who is involved in the decision making process of her or his locality." (Dumreicher, Kolb 2003: 246).

As observed during the HAMMAM project field work, the institution of a hammām is often established as a central building in the neighbourhood and supports its social and economic activities in many ways. There are several social functions that the traditional public bath takes over for the neighbourhood on individual level but also in a collective responsibility. It is a meeting point for neighbours and a specific meeting place for women with their children, family members and friends. It is also a place of personal hygiene for the

craftsmen and workers of the neighbourhood. In the urban context, the hammām constitutes an important urban facility of the medina, alongside the sabīl, the mosque, the bakery, the library, and the madrassa (Coranic school).

The hammām is connected to its neighbourhood in many ways, and without it (neighbourhood), it could not serve its traditional functions. In the context of the five case studies investigated, various social activities were found to take place in the hammām. These included networking between women and intra-generational exchanges between different peer groups. It was also found that economically the hammām is a place where goods are sold and can have a flexible entrance fee to support the underprivileged people of the neighbourhood. Socially, it is a building which is strongly valued by the residents in the neighbourhood: good and bad news spread over from the hammām into the quarter: - social events, new job opportunities, the last marriage or when something goes wrong. For instance when there is pollution from the hammām's heating system, the whole neighbourhood is informed. The hammām is therefore an important access to information centre in the quarter.

A meeting place within communities

The hammām is a place of intra-generational exchange for the different groups. Old people go there with their own friends; the young generation shares it with their peers. Besides the traditional rituals that are linked to the public bath, there are other occasions when people choose it as their special place for arranging a meeting, such as a place that a group of business people can hire for an evening to strengthen the cooperation between employees in the

company. As mentioned by the interviewee in one of the case study, when a family member who lives in a far away country, comes to visit her or his family, a special visit to the hammām is organised as one special event. As a meeting place for the community, the hammām is a central building in the neighbourhood and it is supporting the surrounding social and economic activities, shops and small workshops..

In all the case studies, the architects and urban planners of the EU funded HAMMAM consortium have developed proposals for upgrading the immediate surroundings of the case study hammāms and where appropriate creating communal spaces for cultural and economic activities. They have also proposed the introduction of new facilities within the building spaces such as a small cafe, a hairdresser in order to enhance the services provided and attract more clientele.

Conclusion

The hammām, or the traditional Islamic bath, is a cultural heritage not only from the historical, and architectural points of view, but also for its socio-cultural aspects. It is considered as a living cultural heritage which should be maintained with its original bathing functions, and where possible should not be turned into a museum, shop, café or restaurant. The hammām is a unique context where the traditional culture still exists and is practiced in a cultural heritage building.. For this reason, existing historic public baths could be developed as a living cultural heritage, where social traditions, rituals and habits can be presented in an authentic architectural space. Maintaining the hammām as an Islamic bath with its various functions

for the individual and the communities should be part of the general socio-cultural concept for the rehabilitation of its neighbourhoods. It is part of a common culture and embedded in a wider societal process, such as the interpretation of the body and questions of privacy and hygiene. Obviously the institution of the hammām is affected by contemporary social change and changing living conditions. Therefore the question is how to integrate the historical institution of a hammām into a contemporary way of living. Which elements of the architectural and cultural features should be maintained and which ones should be changed?



Figure 3: Cold Room, Constantine 05/2007, Algeria, Photo Interview 02 (Source: Authors).

There is a strong connection between the socio-cultural practices, the building and the architectural features of the hammām. The accessibility for a wide social spectrum of clients needs to be recognized as a precondition for maintaining tradition and local cultural events as well as introducing new activities. The hammām seen as a cultural institute should offer

choices to a changing society. This means, it could develop a new role according to cultural and religious traditions. As a living cultural heritage, it can offer services like traditional body treatments and ceremonies and specific arrangements of cultural settings like food, music, singing and dancing. The old techniques of washing and body treatment and cultural ceremonies should be further researched and the hammām staff should be trained in these traditions so that clients have the possibility to experience this living cultural heritage.

The physical characteristics of the building play a major role in the future design of new public baths, however, the management aspects referring to the activities and services offered play an equally important role. In a living cultural heritage, the hammām practice could combine traditional experiences with contemporary services. Adapting the public baths to a contemporary standard is necessary so that clients are invited to use it within a healthy setting. Furthermore, the hammām owners need to adapt the concept of management of human resources according to contemporary requirements and standards. It is the staff of the hammām who guarantees personal safety and social management within the groups of clients. In order to establish traceable criteria for a living cultural heritage hammām, a specific staff programme should be introduced supported by the owners but also supported by a governmental agency in order to implement modern standards of hygiene and health and safety. Governmental agencies could make a statement in safeguarding the cultural heritage of traditional public baths, by supporting it with an approved training for the staff and introducing economic incentives. In this way, hammāms will

contribute to the necessary upgrading of the daily life qualities for the dwellers of the rapidly changing neighbourhoods within historic cities.

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Data: The participatory approach of the photo interview generates the view of the local residents to their neighbourhood. The reliability of the data is high because of the relatively high involvement of the respondents. This process of photo interview produces an intense contact between researcher and interviewees. The interviewee brings his or her approach to the world to the researcher and highlights the issues that are important to them. The view of the local people can be seen in the photos; the material gives the frame and contributes to the scientific knowledge. In each HAMMAM case study, we held five to eight photo interviews, supplemented with qualitative interviews and observations. The collected photo material includes 562 photos, photographed by the photo interviewees, showing people and buildings in the neighbourhoods. The interviews are available on word by word transcripts in English, Arabic, Turkish

and/or French. Interviews made on the spot of the hammām field studies. Photo-interviews were carried out by Heidi Dumreicher and Bettina Kolb. Photo-interviews with local experts were referring to their personal photos. The names of the interviewees were changed in order to guarantee their anonymity by using code-names, unless they expressed the wish to be named with their real names.

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