

THE REUSE OF A HAMMĀM AS A PUBLIC SERVICES CENTRE--HAMMĀM SUQ EL GHEZAL ; TOWARDS A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE

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Abstract

The hammam in Islamic countries still occupies a very important urban and social place in the heart of the inhabitants. Even though, it is not as used as it used to be, it is considered as a monument; which is part of the Islamic heritage. People assume that "the hammām will not disappear socially. It also constitutes an intangible heritage; customs and traditions which still persist until today, as is the hammām. It is still related to festivals; it is engraved and fixed in the residents' memory. This traditional building used to be a central place for social life and cultural heritage with complex urban and societal relations. Besides its cultural heritage values, the hammām is an integrative part of the locals' life as well as an example of architectural heritage. Nowadays, although it still has a "warm" place in the heart of the inhabitants, the hammām seems to have lost its function and activities. This paper presents scenarios for the adaptive reuse of hammam Suq El Ghezal as a public service centre in Constantine. It also outlines strategies for adapting the hammām features to contemporary Islamic life in North Africa.

Keywords:

Hammām; heritage; sustainable future; clients; re-us

Introduction

Historical background of the city of Constantine

Often called Cirta, Constantine is a real window to Algerian history. Constantine is situated in North-East Algeria, slightly inland, at about 80 kilometers from the Mediterranean coast. This ancient city is spectacularly set upon a stone mountain overlooking the Rhumel Gorges, some 200 meters below, and at an altitude of 640 metres above sea level (Fig 1). Until today, the deep ravine runs right through the city, creating a dramatic effect and many beautiful sites. Several bridges and a viaduct cross the ravine (Fig 2). Founded by the Carthaginians, Constantine was originally settled by Phoenician migrants and renamed in the 4th century of the Roman Empire, who rebuilt the city to its original splendour after it had been levied. It was then conquered by the Arabs in the 7th century, receiving the name of Quasantinah. The coming of Arabs did not change the city structures very much, but Arabic houses and buildings are added.

Since 1529, it was discontinuously part of the

Ottoman Empire and ruled by a Turkish Bey (Governor). Salah Bey who ruled the city between 1770-1792, greatly embellished it and

built the majority of the Islamic buildings, still visible today (Fig 3 and 4). Spatial and Historical Analysis of hammām Suq El Ghezal



Figure 1: Constantine sets upon a "rocky mountain." (Source: Laboratoire LVP 2008).

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The old parts of the medina are dominated by narrow, winding thoroughfares and traditional buildings. The medina is surrounded by the modern city, with its French colonial style buildings, as well as newer quarters with modern Algerian buildings. The Casbah, a Roman fortress, the 18th century Mosque of Sidi el-Kattani and a 19th century Bey Palace are Constantine's

most important landmarks. And the city itself bears so many conflicting architectural and urbanistic styles. French buildings constitute the facades of main streets hiding the inner original traditional fabric and buildigs. The traditional Arab medina has narrow faceless unadorned streets with no windows on the street and only small doors that open into the most opulently ornamented courtyards. The medina public spaces have been imprinted mainly during the colonial period and the main breaks which have introduced European urban style inside the medina created differentiated quarters.



Figure 2: Longest Stone Bridge in the World, 1200m, Sidi Rached (Source: Laboratoire LVP 2008).



Figure 3: Bey Palace, (Ottoman Building), Constantine, (Source : Author, 2008).



Figure 4: Courtyard of Bey Palace, Constantine, (Source : Author, 2008).

Spatial and Historical Analysis of Hammām Suq El Ghezal

Hammām Suq El Ghezal is one of the most popular Turkish baths of Constantine. It is located in an important historic area of the medina; the commercial Suq El Tadjar district.

Hammām Suq al-Ghezal was built between 1827 and 1835, during the Ottoman period. It was completed just two years before the French took over in 1837. It is a modest but relatively well maintained hammām. The hammām is located on a back alley, in the heart of the

medina, close to the main suq and the Ahmed Bey Palace, which is one of the major remaining Ottoman buildings in Constantine (Fig 5).

The hammām is also adjacent to a large trade alley which is famous for the jewellers' workshops; known as the Rassif area. Nowadays, the Suq El Tadjar neighbourhood represents the heart of the Medina in specific and the Rock of Constantine in general. It provides several urban functions to the medina from being a cultural and tourist attraction, an industrial and services activities pole, a residential area and a spiritual centre.

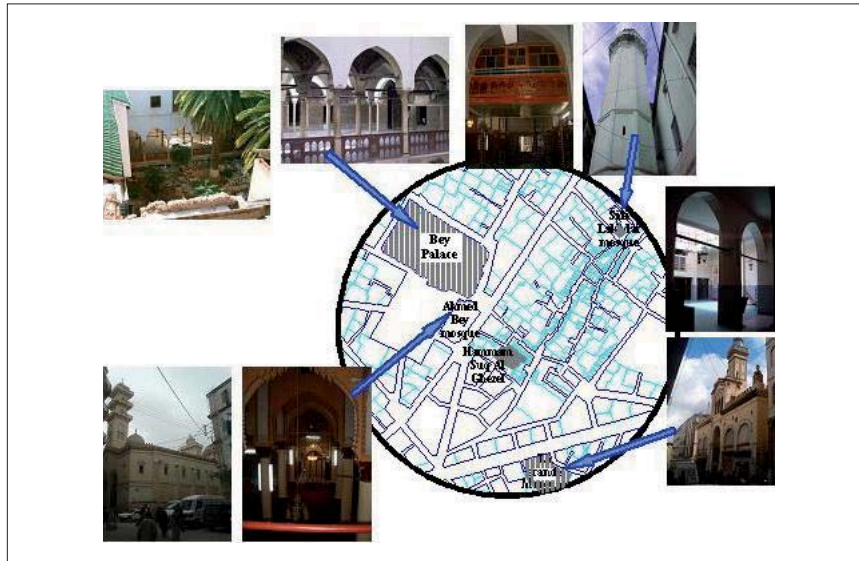


Figure 5: Localization of Hammām Suq El Ghezal Near the Bey Palace, the Big Mosque and Other Monuments in the Medina (Source: Laboratoire LVP, 2006).

Similarly to other hammāms in the Maghreb region, in North Africa, and the Western countries, the spatial organization of the bathing spaces of hammām Suq El Ghezal is not as complex as it is the case in the hammāms of the Mashreq (Middle-East) countries. It has a simple

organization based on a linear progression of rooms (Fig 6) with varying temperatures; the sitting or rest room (Fig 7A and 7B), the cold room (Fig 8A), the warm room and the hot room (Fig 8B).

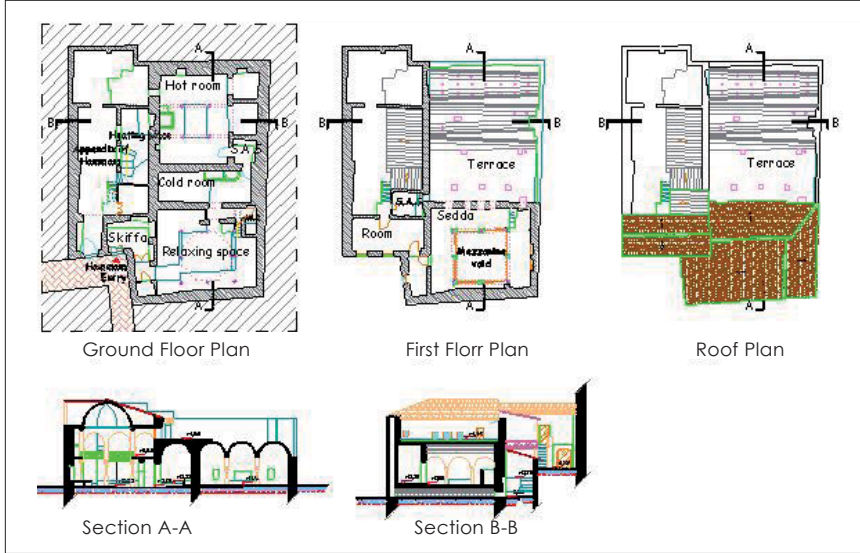


Figure 6 : Plans and Sections of Hammām Suq El Ghezal. (Source : Laboratoire LVP 2006).



Figures 7a and 7b: Hammām Suq El Ghezal, Undressing Room. (Source: Author, 2006).



Fig 8A and 8B Hammam Suq El Ghezal Hot and Cold Room. (Source: N.Refay. Hammām Project, 2007).



Hammam Suq El Ghezal Today

It became obvious through the HAMMAM research project that the traditional hammāms in the medina are still very important as the local residents perceive them as important landmarks. Some of them are still being used, for health, hygiene and beautification reasons. They have also become an important traditional act which constitutes the intangible heritage. These reasons emphasize the socio-cultural meaning and role of the hammām as an important sign of the users' culture. It is a monument at both tangible and intangible dimensions.

The hammām operates seven days a week throughout the whole year. The women time slots are during the morning from 08.00 to 13.00, while the men time slots are from 14.00 to 18.00. However, it is facing a multitude of difficulties and is struggling to keep its importance in the medina.

The local residents aspire to reactivate it, re-introduce former activities which have disappeared such as marriage celebration, 40th day after giving birth etc. and introduce

new contemporary ones. They would also like to reinforce its former meanings; such as the symbol of solidarity, collectiveness, and neighbourhood support and an important informal information point.

However, the habits of the local residents have changed; the hammām is not considered anymore as an important social meeting place, as people have other places to meet. Clients have less time to spend in the hammām, so new practices are appearing, such as taking a quick bath before going shopping in the Medina.

The hammām with its traditional meaning and form is under the threat of disappearance. It is being replaced by modern smaller baths with "douches" meaning private cubicles with showers. Furthermore, the lack of control in hygiene and cleanliness constitute another threat to the survival of the hammām facility. The introduction of contemporary private bathrooms, as well as new sport centres with sauna and steam rooms put additional pressure on the traditional use of the hammām.

One of the main problems is that the hammām as a business is no longer seen as profitable. Therefore hammām managers do not invest in the maintenance and renovation of these structures, putting at risk the buildings themselves with some being under the threat of collapsing. In addition to all the reasons listed above (i.e. hygiene, non adequate opening hours especially for women, the appearance of new modern hammāms with more facilities) another reason is the change that has occurred in the society in relation to the perception of the human body. According to some new religious interpretations (social field work on hammām

Suq El Ghezal, laboratoire LVP, 2007) the use of hammāms is forbidden by religion because of the possibility of exposing one's body. It was argued that religious law required that women be covered from navel to knee when among other women; Eventually that was the only condition where they were permitted the usage of the hammām.

The practice of the hammām confronted the "Ulemas" with the sensitive question of physical nakedness. While limiting access for women, who could go only for valid purposes (birth, sickness), it was also necessary to ensure the sexes were strictly segregated: male and females bathers had to wear full-length loincloths. The doctrine, established by the 3rd/9th century, was hammered home in later centuries by jurists of all schools, for it enabled them to speak out on believers' sexuality and to define moral order in keeping with the Shari'a. (Benkheira, 2007).

But things are changing and the hammām is gaining a new significance. It represents the elements of the Islamo-Arabic tradition that needs to be rediscovered and re-appropriated. Furthermore, the hammām is considered as a necessary supporting residential amenity, as it acts as a set-up for different and varied activities. It is used as a (social club" by women especially in the week ends; and as a dormitory for some seasonal workers. Hence, the activities going on in any place have a strong impact on its image and values attached to it. The hammām is also seen as a potential basis for the social coherence with it being a major central space/building in the neighbourhood.

The necessity to safeguard this historic traditional building in its urban context becomes

essential. Hence, to provide a sustainable future development for the hammām, it is very important to activate and launch the restoration process of this building. It is essential to revive the traditional social activities which used to take place in every space –outside and inside- of the hammām. People are curious about their past and tradition, and clean baths would attract as much local people, men and women, as they would attract tourists and foreigners (Atassi, 2007).

Different methods should be applied to revitalize the hammām to its former practices for hygiene and health. New acceptable additional services could be introduced, as it is the case in newly built hammāms, but it is essential to keep prices at reach for the local users, in order to sustain its socio-cultural and economic activities. This improvement must be at the request of the local community and not only as an investment in tourism development.

Maintaining the economic diversity of the clientele is very important in order to sustain the use of the hammām by a large spectrum of the population living in the Medina. The privileged location of hammām Suq El Ghezal in the heart of the Medina, could enhance the visibility and the accessibility of the hammām. The old historical medina had the chance to preserve its original dense fabric through centuries and it is important to keep the social and economic structure of the historic quarters that are facing gentrification at many levels (Atassi, 2007, p15).

It became evident that the hammām is not only a space with architectural features, but a microcosm with its own typical social life, including norms, values and social rules that

are typical for the space called hammām (Dumreicher, 2007). This reflects partly the social importance in the neighbourhood, but it is also a place demanding its specific social rules. You come to the hammām as a person with your own societal background, and how to use this space has its specific rules that generate social practices. It is a space with inherent contradictions: a semi public space with many very discrete and hidden characteristics. A place where the “secret, the “not outspoken” has its stake – but the rule of the hammām on the other hand, is publicly known, so that people are able to deal with this very specific societal institution. Also the reputation of the hammām is continuously under discussion and the rumours of the place and the ongoing life in the hammām is narrated amongst clients and non clients (Dumreicher, 2007). It shows that the hammām is a place where the transition from traditional settings towards modernity and a contemporary way of life can be observed: the tradition of a religious place for cleanliness, social coherence is still visible in hammām Suq El Ghezal (Dumreicher, 2007).

For all the preceding reasons, it appears evident and necessary to open up different perspectives for the future of this traditional historic building for a sustainable use with contemporary standards and modern facilities. The aim is to develop future scenarios according to the parameters of strong sustainability.

Previous sociological research on the hammāms of Constantine (Dumreicher, 2007) perceived the future of the city of the Rock and the hammam as an establishment of an ongoing multiple, alternative, and sustainable scenario-building process. It proposes and investigates a variety

of “what-if” options. These options would range from business as usual, to various preservation options, to preservation plus sustainability, to the more radical unsustainable proposals, but always with an accompanying analysis or systems-modelling. This will help indicate, in the case of the latter, what the direct consequences would be in the implementation of such a radical approach, (Dumreicher, 2007).

Hammām Future Concepts

The hammām still has a meaning for the culture and tradition; some rituals have been kept and are still celebrated. However, the majority of them are simply preserved by nostalgia. People highlight the socio-cultural meaning of the hammām, as a social anchor within the neighbourhood and its positive impact on health, but they do not use it anymore. Although they want to keep the traditional “historic” hammam, they look for new hammams with more features and better hygienic conditions. Using a historic hammāms needs a certain attitude and expressive behaviour. Going to bath in the historic hammām relates to the social class (therefore still have a need to go there for societal reasons) or appreciating its culture and sanitary value.

The hammām and its neighbourhood could not be disconnected. The synthesis obtained through this study, suggests that emphasis should be focused on behavioural studies of Suq El Ghezal users and local residents. As seen previously, the hammām is a very specific building with special comfort and hygiene norms. The first step should therefore be to ensure the minimum requirements for a safer environment. Even though there are no emergence of general rules about human

spatial behaviour to help draw up guidelines for designing new hammāms and restoring the old ones, behavioural studies have signalled a whole series of problems which could not be neglected and ignored if we want to re-use the hammām properly and to have a better picture of it, as a dynamic setting. It also provided some methods, which are as follow :

- Observation of people behaviours in places
- Questionnaires, and interviews of people about their impressions, feelings,
- Observation of the 'traces' of activities, signs and other subtle points which constitute significant indices about the manner people really use and evaluate places.
- Analysis of written and pictorial material that has not been produced consciously to evaluate environments, for example travel descriptions, newspaper reports, etc. Such material tend to show how people use environments and how they feel about them.

Indeed, by having a full picture of people's interaction with their environments, the designer will be better equipped for his contribution in the making of a more sustainable environment.

As discussed above, to aim for specific suggestions for a living traditional hammām with contemporary standards (i.e.Suq El Ghezal) is to trans-pass the present and go from past to future, because the hammām had a very important and privileged place in the heart of users in the past. At the present time, things and habits have changed, people are not using the hammām as they used to, it is why this actual period has to be trans-placed straight to the future but with contemporary standards, to fulfil people's needs.

Nowadays, hammām Suq El Ghezal has to be considered as a precursor for reversal of faith in belonging to the neighbourhood, since it is seen as a right. People in Constantine are very much related to the hammām as in other cities of the Mediterranean countries. Injecting sustainability elements (solar water heating, reduce heat loss and consumption, easy accessibility by tram loop etc...) will help this hammām attract people and be an oasis of space, a recreation in a very dense urban fabric, it will act as an acupuncture and a starting point for enhancing the whole medina (Levine, 2007). Combining traditional and craft man-ship with scientific knowledge, successful conservation can be achieved. This will lead to a sustainable hammām activity.

We are sticking to the proto-sustainable (the whole Rock works 100% on renewable energies) historic medina system (Levine 2007). Promote Constantine as an endangered specimen of cities and a world heritage site is the aim and target to raise the new image of both the hammām Suq El Ghezal and its neighbourhood; an ideal hammām and an attractive place, a participating element in the urban development plan using adequate tools to reach people's concepts.

Conclusion

The hammām has to be looked at as a place for both tangible and intangible cultural heritage. It is a carrier of a collective memory; even if someone has never used a hammām, she or he still has an opinion about it and is part of the common Islamo-Arabic "story telling" about this historical institution. Undoubtedly, there is a common understanding of the hammām as an

important cultural value specially for the older generation. For them, the hammām is part of their value system and they can argue why they find it attractive to go there regularly, from its architecture to its specific rituals.

This is, unfortunately not the case for younger generations. They fail to be or become an integral part of the value system. These potential carriers of change – the young intellectuals – see it as a place that had a value for their parents and grandparents, but they often refuse the hammām as a place for themselves and cannot see it as in coordination with their own lives. These carriers of change have developed new value systems, but also new standards for negotiations concerning hygiene, health, architectural standards and services.

The hammām is part of a set of places that have evolved over time and guarantee the liveability of the Islamic Mediterranean city: the public fountain, the public bakery, the coranic-school, the library, the hammām. Among further research questions is how to make hammam Suq El Ghezal a pioneer for other hammāms in the Medina?

More attention and new actions are dealt with such as putting in a new project called "Plan permanent de sauvegarde" (Plan of Permanent Safeguard) of the Medina, where buildings and functions are preserved and rehabilitated. These actions are included into a long list of projects called: Projets de métropolisation de la ville (City Metropolisation Projects), which again enhance participatory system, involve the Medina inhabitants in decision-making and the expansion of protected perimeter. The idea is to work towards a sustainable hammāms with zero

emission, local re-sourcing, no toxic material and renewable energy hygiene according to international standards.

In order to keep public interest for the hammām, a dialogue must be kept open by multiplying conferences, exhibitions, presentations, and "awareness campaigns". The experts and general public have to increase their awareness of the importance of the hammām. The future of the Medina is in its history, and the future of the hammām is in its history too.

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