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REPUBLIC OF YEMEN

CULTURAL HERITAGE BUILDING BLOCK

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Republic of Yemen
Cultural Heritage Building Block

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CULTURAL HERITAGE BUILDING BLOCK

This note is based on a desk review of information which was made available through the preparation of the Historic City Project, preparation completed in FY99, and the Cultural Heritage Sector Note, issued in August 1999.

A. OVERVIEW

1. CULTURAL HERITAGE IN YEMEN

Yemen is world renowned for its architectural heritage. The unique vernacular architecture of the original “skyscrapers” in the cities of Sana'a and Shibam, the dam at Marib from the fifth century BC, numerous mosques dating back to the days of the Prophet, and the fortified mountain villages all present the fascinating and diverse heritage of Yemen.

The unique quality of Yemen’s historic environment is found in urban and rural areas that have extraordinary homogeneous and practical forms of planning, construction and detailing of buildings. The urban environment often consists of tall buildings which are close together to provide shade from the heat of the sun. The urban organization has grown out of practical consideration for the convenient relationship between the markets and residential areas, and for access and defense. The towns and villages were often built in defensible locations with the urban structures closely reflecting the topology of the land. This has led to settlements with great individuality and reflecting the historic pressures and unique social relationships and conflicts, which have been such an enduring characteristic of Yemen’s long history. Furthermore, until now, Yemen has been late in developing a modern economy and in absorbing the industrial and socio-economic practices of other developed countries. This has preserved the unique cultural and historic qualities of the towns and cities.

Nevertheless, the historic environment does not comply with the requirements of the modern world. The inhabitants cannot find solutions for a healthy and safe environment in the old buildings, with modern levels of standards. The type of construction currently used requires repair and maintenance with traditional material and techniques, renewed on a regular basis. This conflicts with seemingly modern solutions which use concrete and other new techniques, seems to be more sustainable, and less labor-intensive. Therefore, the new modern way of living, and methods of construction can seriously erode the physical and social historic environment, and weed out traditional building skills.

Role of international community. Donors, such as UNESCO, Dutch, German, Swiss, and French organizations have pursued extensive research in specific areas, leading to important data collection and operational work. Donors were very active in the 1970s and 1980s in providing preservation and rehabilitation assistance,

targeting, in particular, the three cities listed in the World Heritage: Old Sana'a, Shibam and Zabid. In the 1990s, financial aid decreased to diminishing enthusiasm after the euphoric start, and also due to economical and political problems with which Yemen had to cope after the Gulf War and the civil war in 1994.

The American Center for Yemeni Studies and the French Center for Yemeni Studies (*Centre français d'études yéménites*), have an important bibliographical collection in their own libraries, mainly in response to university research. Recently, the German and Dutch cooperation has strengthened their presence through an active development program. Nevertheless, thus far, investments have mainly been done opportunistically, based on available funds and on the individual initiative of the donors. Even in a city like Old Sana'a, the restorations completed over the last decade have not changed the overall picture as they are an island in an ocean of needs.

2. TOURISM

International tourism has fluctuated extensively over the last decade. The peaks and troughs in international tourist arrivals are attributed to the widespread media coverage of Middle East, and more specifically Yemen, political unrest and military activity. Events such as the Gulf War, the reunification of North and South Yemen, the North/South Yemen crisis, civil strife, and kidnappings, combined to create a negative image of Yemen and the Middle East in the major international markets.

The late 1980s saw a healthy growth in Yemeni tourism, with annual growth rates averaging at 13.5 percent between 1987 and 1989. The Gulf War brought about a decline of 20.5 percent in 1990 and 15.8 percent in 1991. The North/South Yemen crisis of 1993 and 1994 resulted in 52 percent drop in tourist arrivals between those years.

Profile of international tourism demand. In 1996, the number of international tourists was close to 80,000, and the total income from tourism was US\$55 million (International Tourism Investment Conference 1997). The figures increased in 1998 to 96,000 visitors with a return of almost US\$80 million. The majority of international tourists come from Europe, mainly from Germany, France, Italy, and the U.K. According to the official statistics, tourists from Europe accounted for up to 63 percent in 1998 (GOY 1999). The average stay is 5.5 nights, with an average expenditure of US\$825. Between 1994 and 1998, the number of tourists almost tripled.

From a survey done by the European Union with European tour operators, Yemen, Jordan and Syria are the three most frequently featured Middle Eastern destinations. Oman, Dubai and the other Emirates are poorly represented in the marketplace. Iran and Iraq, being relatively new to the European market, both hold positive potential.

Destination	Yemen	Jordan	Oman	Dubaï	Other UAE	Syria	Iran	Iraq
Features*	95%	90%	35%	37%	28%	84%	40%	10%
Planned		10%	12%	6%	6%	6%	20%	37%

* Percentage of operators featuring or planning to feature a destination.

The tour operators noted that the reasons behind destination popularity levels differed for each destination. Yemen was popular primarily for its architecture and novelty; Jordan for the market interest in Petra and its history; and Syria was popular due to market interest in its archaeology and historical sites. Lack of popularity for destinations such as Oman and the UAE, is attributed to price and limited market recognition of attractions.

B. ROLE OF CULTURAL HERITAGE IN YEMENI DEVELOPMENT

1. POTENTIAL TOURISM DEVELOPMENT: EMPLOYMENT AND PRIVATE SECTOR INVESTMENT

With a revenue of US\$80 million in foreign currency in 1998, tourism, which does not exist for any other reason than cultural heritage, ranked second after oil revenues (US\$1.231 billion). Fisheries are the third most substantial sources of foreign currency with US\$20 million¹. The tourism sector has the most promising growth expectations, and could contribute to creating non-oil revenues, if the cultural assets are protected from degradation and are well harnessed.

Investment in Tourism Projects. During March 1992 to December 1995, new investment projects in tourism totaled 79, with the total investment cost of 24,672 million. Employment in the tourism sector was estimated at 3,984 in 1995. From 1990 to 1994, there was a 36 percent increase in the number of hotels (111 to 173), and the number of hotel rooms increased accordingly, from 3,672 to 5,480. The number of travel and tourism agencies reached 138 in 1994, and employed 4,759 Yemenis and 123 foreigners (GOY 1998). The private sector is currently implementing some projects, e.g., hotels, tourist villages, restaurants, and tourist transportation. As a result of the increase in private activities and the demand for tourist investment by local, Arabic, and foreign capitals, the government has greater confidence in the potential of the tourism sector. In 1998, the Government provided an opportunity to the private sector to invest more than 14.1 trillion YR (US\$141 million), to implement projects in the whole country. Plans for investment include hotels, restoring old palaces to use as resorts and accommodations for tourists, construction of tourist gardens, as well as first class restaurants, coastal clubs, tourist villages, and health clubs.

2. CULTURAL HERITAGE AND THE POVERTY ISSUE

The threats to Yemen's cultural heritage have multiple causes which are mostly related to an increase in the poverty level of the old cities: (i) economic decline, caused by shifting patterns of trading and broader global forces; this is the case in Zabid, where the textile industry declined dramatically, leaving a legacy of unused, dilapidated historic buildings; (ii) pressures of development, lack of adapted urban regulation and inadequate enforcement procedures, which lead to the replacement of the traditional population by immigrants from the rural sector in some areas, while in other areas within

¹ Remittances should also be mentioned as a substantial source since it amounts to US\$1.2 billion in 1997.

cities, such as Sana'a, gentrification could bring about an irreversible change in the city landscape, with the use of non-traditional construction methods, and a definitive evolution in architectural design; (iii) lack of maintenance, as with some of the mud built architecture in Shibam where the impact can be irreversible to one building and can extent to the neighboring buildings. Lack of maintenance can have even a more drastic impact when combined with a strong rainy season (Sana'a in 1999).

If these issues are not addressed during the next a decade or two, the Yemenis and foreigners alike will witness the destruction of Yemen's urban qualities. That destruction will mean that one of the world's most uniquely-built environments, and the skills that go along with maintaining it will irreversibly disappear, even though this may happen in progressive and subtle ways.

C. KEY ASPECTS OF CULTURAL HERITAGE

1. INSTITUTIONS

The main institutions involved in the sector are listed below. Although we lack indicators to measure their efficiency, the main characteristic seems to be that sector management is highly dependent on international donors. Moreover, information coming from main partners point out numerous weaknesses. Efficiency, if any, is impaired by a lack of transparency in regulation enforcement and budget management.

As one of the least influential ministries of the Government, *the Ministry of Culture and Tourism* (MCT), is the lead ministry in the sector. It has included the Ministry of Tourism since 1991, and harbors three of the main organizations which deal with restoration, preservation and tourism development. It is responsible for:

- Implementing basic services projects, such as roads, airports, coastal protection, and installing signs and signals in identified tourist sites;
- Overseeing infrastructure projects, including electricity and water supply and sanitation in the identified tourist sites;
- Rebuilding and repairing the historical and tourist sites and centers which have great value;
- Constructing of new museums and rebuilding/repairing of existing ones;
- Developing the Tourism Authority and improving its abilities in tourism marketing; and
- Giving facilities to the private sector and to investors, in order to increase their investments in tourism activity.

The three main organizations are:

- The General Organization for the Preservation of Historic Cities of Yemen (GOPHCY) stems from a “Council of Trustees for the Preservation and Upgrading of Old Sana’a” created in 1984, and has existed under this format since 1990. It is responsible for the preservation of cities in the whole of Yemen;
- The General Organization for Antiquities Manuscripts and Monuments (GOAMM). Its main objective is the excavation, restoration, survey and preservation of ancient sites.
- The General Tourism Authority is in charge of promoting the image of Yemen and facilitating relations with the private sector, in order to develop tourism.

The Ministry of Construction, Housing, and Urban Planning is divided into three sectors: (a) the housing and urban planning sector, whose main responsibilities consist of providing assistance for low-income housing, through the provision of land at low costs and by implementing basic infrastructure plans. The urban planning sector’s main objective is to develop the National Master Plan and guidelines for the development of all of Yemen’s cities and towns; (b) the construction sector undertakes detail design, and construction supervision of roads and government buildings; and (c) the municipalities and environmental sector is responsible for assisting municipalities in improving solid waste management and environmental health.

The MCHUP plays a critical role in the development planning system of which a component is the conservation and reuse of the great cultural resources of the country. The MCHUP bears the responsibility for ensuring adequate consultation between all agencies that need to give feedback on the suitability of designs proposed by government departments or the private sector.

The Ministry of Endowment, Awqaf, is important to the conservation process since it owns a great deal of property in the historic city centres. It must be included in the co-ordination and area development policies. Naturally, it is protective and claims rights that give it a considerable measure of independence. These rights can remain, but there should be an accepted means of achieving coordination of interests.

Awqaf is the biggest property owner in the old cities. It plays a passive role in the maintenance of its properties. The administration is centrally controlled and collects revenues without planning for maintenance requirements. Instead, the revenues are used for new construction and for administrative expenses.

The Ministry of Water and Electricity (MWE) has become a major problem for preservation of historic cities since the main cause of building damage and deterioration and disfigurement of the old cities are the leaking sewerage and drinking water pipes and ad hoc electricity wiring distribution. MWE, in accordance with MoCT, should examine the principles of conservation planning and detailed architecture, and set standards for the installation of services and give typical and standard design solutions to the public and to the construction industry.

Non-governmental organizations. There are many NGOs in the three cities. They are the core of private enterprise and community initiatives. They are the foundation for interest by primary stakeholders in the quality of life and if given the authority can develop useful interests and responsibilities in the service of the community.

Weaknesses and challenges. Agencies responsible for the execution of policy have overlapping or inadequate responsibility and they lack funds, skilled staff and training to fulfill their management obligations. For example, some geographical sectors such as historic villages are not covered by the current share of responsibility while redundancy exists on other cases, such as monuments located in historic cities. Moreover, the control of city development through construction authorizations is disputed between MoCT and MoCHUP.

2. POLICIES

Conservation. There is no legal definition or regulation that covers the concept of the “conservation area,” apart from the Republican Decree no 29 concerning Antiquities where article 11 requires “GOPHCY and GOAMM to set up a special register reserved for archaeological areas, ancient remains, and historic buildings, groupings of historic buildings and historic human settlements...” The principal control given over a conservation area is the prevention of demolition of property without consent. There are no laws, regulations or guidance documents in Yemen to assist the surveyors in their task of designating conservation areas. The preservation of areas of important historic, aesthetic and cultural value is the prime objective of the designation of “conservation area” status. There are a great number of areas that qualify for this classification in the many towns of Yemen.

The designation of conservation areas is the quickest and cheapest way for the Government to initiate control over historic areas that might not always contain buildings of great individual merit but which will have significant value to the history of the area and to the present community.

Construction. There is a need for regulations covering standards of construction for: (a) habitable rooms, overall structures, and urban utilities; (b) the material used, bringing together the use of traditional materials and compatible modern ones; and (c) safety measures which will be more frequently required for tourism development.

Land tenure and ownership. There is a strong informal sector involved in the recording of changes in ownership of land and property. The system, though, is not efficient and does not conform to the law. The principal authority, the Agency of Survey and Land Administration should therefore improve the land registration system.

The law of Local Administration which is under preparation is of utmost importance to coordinate existing efforts, give local governments a sense of commitment to conserve and reuse their heritage, encourage participation of communities, and improve their sense of ownership.

D. MAIN ISSUES

The strong potential development of the sector is in jeopardy because of the absence of appropriate decisions. The urgent requirement for preservation and conservation entails a need for laws and enforcement, a multidimensional and intergovernmental approach, and an optimized use of resources generated by international tourism for the benefit of CH protection. The main issues are, therefore, the following:

- ☞ Urban management. Strengthening of urban management has been acknowledged as a priority in Yemen. Indeed, most of the cities require a better infrastructure, stronger urban regulations and their appropriate enforcement, increased mobilization of local communities, and economic incentives. The city strategies should encompass the specificity originated by traditional architecture and social wont of historic cities.
- ☞ Cross-sectoral approaches. Intervention in culture should not be limited to specific actions relevant to the Ministry of Culture and Tourism. All sectors and programs should be concerned, and all partners should recognize the need to integrate a cultural framework in their project proposals. Several examples are listed:
 - MoCT needs to develop a role as advocate, propose new regulations, and develop technical advice through availability of competent architects for public construction. The Ministries of Education and Health, for instance, should be vigilant in selecting traditional architecture for the construction of public buildings under their responsibility, which bring benefits in terms of investment cost and climate adaptation.
 - By introducing cultural heritage components, programs for vocational training within the Ministry of Labor could participate in maintaining a minimum level of traditional skill among construction and public work enterprises. Moreover, an increase of private sector awareness on the need for protection can have a direct effect on architectural and technical choices made by owners.
 - Unanticipated discovery of cultural property. As in most countries, an appropriate regulation on cultural property issues would provide adequate protection of remains that may have archaeological or historical value, found during works involving highways, dams or urban development.

- An assessment on policies of other ministries should emphasize positive or negative effects on cultural heritage. For example, the Ministry of Housing does not give loans for renovation, which creates a clear obstacle to heritage protection.
- ☞ Coordination with international donors. The donors are now expecting a comprehensive framework which would facilitate decision-making in an integrated way, and would create synergy. A matrix of proposed measures could be based on objectives, priority ranking, and indication of potential financiers.

E. DEVELOPMENT GOALS AND PROSPECTS

The cancellation of the Historic City Project in FY99 provided an unexpected opportunity to reveal the Government's keen awareness about the need for cultural heritage preservation. Its major objectives are:

- Improve knowledge of the heritage. This has started with the launching of an inventory of sites and monuments on a pilot area, and should be expanded to a countrywide survey;
- Preserve the most renowned cities and places from anarchic development and irreversible damage to heritage; and
- Develop tourism in a controlled and well-managed way as a potentially important source of foreign revenues, and use part of the benefits for better conservation of cultural heritage.

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