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The rehabilitation of the Dar Al-Consul complex – a journey from endangered historical buildings to a liveable cultural hub

Region	Middle East and North Africa
Award Scheme	Shanghai Manual
Themes	Housing Land Others Regeneration Rehabilitation Youth & Livelihoods
Sustainable Development Goals	Goal 10 - Reduce inequality within and among countries Goal 11 - Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable
New Urban Agenda Commitments	Sustainable and Inclusive Urban Prosperity and Opportunities for All Planning and Managing Urban Spatial Development

Summary

Initiated in 2014, the restoration and rehabilitation of East Jerusalem's Dar Al-Consul complex has strengthened local cultural and civic identity, whilst enhance social cohesion, enhance opportunities for local youth and promote inter-cultural dialogue and exchange among local community members.

Background and Objective

Jerusalem is an ancient city with a long history and rich culture; however, the city's growth and development has been slowed due to prolonged and complex conflict. Since 1967, rapid settlement expansion has resulted in the fragmentation of Palestinian space, with many Palestinian neighbourhoods enclosed by settlements and service roads that have severely restricted their urban expansion and access to land. Where currently under occupation according to international laws, East Jerusalem is subject to ongoing issues of zoning and land grabbing, violations that affect the existence and livelihoods of Palestinians in the Old City. According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 35 per cent of East Jerusalem has been confiscated for Israeli settlement use with just 13 per cent of East Jerusalem zoned for Palestinian construction, whilst at least a third of all Palestinian homes in East Jerusalem lack Israeli-issued building permits which are difficult to obtain, putting up to 100,000 residents at risk of displacement. Some 1,400 houses and other structures in East Jerusalem have been demolished by Israeli authorities, and at least 180 Palestinian households are at risk of forced migration due to settler activities, especially in the Old City, Sheikh Jarrah and Silwan neighbourhoods. Many families therefore lack sufficient space to live with some completely void of housing and at risk of displacement. In addition, many residents in East Jerusalem are short of public services and infrastructure including public spaces, adequate transportation systems, education and health facilities with 76 per cent of residents living under the Israel-defined poverty line. Compounding this, the dropout rate of students in East Jerusalem was 13 per cent as of 2011–2012, far exceeding the 1 per cent rate in the west of the city. Clearly, multifaceted restrictions have deeply impeded local social, economic and environmental development, therefore calling for robust strategies to improve East Jerusalem's urban living environment, increase access to essential facilities, provide livelihood opportunities for the local youth and promote sustainable economic development. Located in the heart of the Old City, the Dar Al-Consul (house of the Consul) civic and residential complex (DAC) lies at the crossroads of history. With its foundations established during the Mamluk period, arched halls accommodating the Prussian Consulate, and its rooftop currently home to multiple families, the complex is a living embodiment of Jerusalem's enduring richness. Operating as the Prussian Consulate for three decades, the upper floors served as the consul's domicile whilst the remainder was used as a political and cultural centre for Prussian activities. In 1882, the property was transferred to the Latin Patriarchate in Jerusalem. Today, DAC serves as a forum for the diverse community of Jerusalem; a hub for Palestinian culture and society, influencing and inspiring action to champion the Palestinian narrative and cultural world, connecting with local Jerusalemites to expatriate professionals and international travellers to share the cultural legacy of the city. As one of the custodial properties of the Old City, the complex is a powerful heritage site bringing significant cultural value to local people and visitors. The urgent need to protect and revitalize this symbolic area was further highlighted when the Old City of Jerusalem was put on the List of World Heritage in Danger by UNESCO in 1982. In April 2011, the twenty-third session of the Governing Council of UN-Habitat passed resolution 23/2 confirming the rehabilitation and urban renewal of the Old City with a specific focus on land and housing to improve the human settlement conditions of Palestinians. Since 2014, UN-Habitat has guided a complex rehabilitation project for DAC, initiated as an eight-year project to enhance Palestine's cultural and civic identity; integrate sustainable models of residential and urban environmental development within the Old City; enhance the



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Old City functionality and service offer to its residents and visitors; and promote education continuity and entrepreneurship among Palestinian youth. DAC's renovation has been vital to preserve the local heritage site, leveraging its unique historical architecture and archaeological features to meet modern, eco-friendly approaches to support sustainable development and management. The project has provided a model of preserving and illustrating history in a location which is already recognized as a world heritage site, revealing layers of history in the city, illustrating the Palestinian narrative and existence as well as increasing their cultural and civic identity. In line with the SDGs and the New Urban Agenda, DAC has worked to ensure the equal rights of all people to the benefits of the city through the provision of essential services to Palestinian residents, a marginalized community in the Old City. The project has especially benefited older families living in the DAC complex, providing them with access to public space, and youth through the provision of career services, business incubators and media centres.

Actions and Implementation

The DAC rehabilitation project was initiated by the Custody of the Holy Land (CTS) and jointly managed and implemented with UN-Habitat and Al Quds University (AQU). A EUR 6.47 million grant was provided by EU to finance the project, with project work staggered over three continuous phases of engagement. The primary task of CTS was to protect properties within holy sites and serve local communities through housing projects, ensuring properties were restored in line with their historical character. As an integral vision, rehabilitation work thus built upon the historic value of the complex, adopting a sensitive approach to enhance its history whilst suiting the contemporary requirements and specific needs of residents, users and visitors. As an education institution, AQU were primarily responsible for conducting high-quality research, providing solutions to any challenges that were presented and fostering talented members of youth through various projects and departments. Underlining the project, the cooperation between CTS and AQU promoted the common goal that the DAC rehabilitation project set out: to improve the living conditions of Palestinians in the Old City of Jerusalem, enhance Palestinian culture and civil identity, and revive the underperformance of the DAC complex as a real estate asset to become the cultural and social centre of Palestine. The first phase of the project spanning January 2014 to September 2017, included works centred on the ground floor, originally a debris-filled 720 m² space with hazards including unstable foundations, dangerous structural beams and columns. Following structural interventions and consolidations as well as the unearthing of hidden rooms, passages and niches, the space was converted into a 1,200 m² civic centre acting as a hub for a range of visitors and youth. Here, the business development plan and its associated actions included a package of activities and unique commercial uses, filling a gap in the services offered inside the Old City and helping attract tourists and visitors. Accordingly, the project made use of the premises' strategic location in the Old City's Islamic Quarter, as well as the historic character of the complex to promote Palestinian identity. Such a development vision merged a convenient living environment with the residents' original sense of identity and pride, building their resilience to ongoing local social and political stresses. In addition, 23 old residential units were fully restored with improvements made to their structural foundations, the rehabilitation of unsafe electrical and dysfunctional mechanical installations, as well as the provision of electricity, water, solar water heating, sanitation, tiling and painting work, and the installation of new aluminium windows and wooden kitchens. Three community courtyards in the upper floors were rehabilitated for indigenous Palestinian local culture, social and seasonal events. Open spaces were also integrated accommodating private courtyards and domestic gardens. With the integration of modern amenities and open space rehabilitation, these original houses became more liveable which positively impacted the lives of residents (particularly the elderly), affording them residency in Jerusalem at little to no cost whilst providing them with a safe and strong sense of community, increasing their sense of identity. Phases two and three built upon phase one from May 2018 to October 2021. Phase two restored 13 residential units integrating additional families into the complex, affording them modern amenities within the rehabilitated ancient structures – a complete transformation from previous conditions where issues of humidity, hazardous tiling, electrical and mechanical installations, and worn-out carpentry, aluminium and plumbing fixtures were commonplace. Rehabilitation of the two remaining community courtyards was also finalized including their landscaping and integration of safety guards where located directly above Khan El-Zeit Street. These works unlocked a total of 208 m² of replenished open space across the complex; key spaces in which residents and visitors can now interact in a safe environment. Phase three concluded the archaeological excavation and preservation, and five main findings are now on display onsite giving life to the Roman, Byzantine, late Islamic and Mamluk times through elements such as cisterns, mosaic floors, private baths and water channels. To conclude works on the ground floor, modern and unique eco-friendly systems were installed through a simple but tranquilizing interior finish, offering visitors an escape from the norms of the Old City. There is a firefighting system installed behind the stone vaults, underfloor heating and a geoplast layer to uplift the tiles allowing for ventilation, a smart electrical control system, and unique pointing and plastering techniques to minimize humidity. As a sustainable process, the rehabilitation actions have therefore ensured sustainability through an energy-efficient, eco-friendly design. The rehabilitation has also respected and promoted local traditions and indigenous materials and techniques. UN-Habitat worked closely with local Palestinian architects, engineers and other skilled-labour force of CTS technical staff and Palestinian sub-contractors. These professionals also worked in collaboration with families to ensure an inclusive process of restoration, taking in their considerations and ensuring them temporary relocation whilst works were underway. To form the core ecosystem of the DAC community and civic hub, a local team initiated development of three interconnected operational spheres designed specifically for DAC in the second half of 2021 with the aim of providing unique learning opportunities, coaching and practical outputs to serve the Old City's future aspirations. In the first three months of operation, they served more than 1,000 beneficiaries (67 per cent female, 42 per cent youth and 5 per cent senior citizens) in the form of community and civic services. The three operational spheres included the Tourism, IT and Media Centre (TIME) which served 253 beneficiaries (98 per cent of whom were children and youth). TIME integrates a tourism centre, a virtual museum and museum gallery space, a retail and shopping area, and bookstore with activities revolving around virtual reality (such as extended reality) and augmented reality dedicated to DAC and the Old City conducted via lectures,



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clubs and interactive-based sessions. In collaboration with UN-Habitat, virtual reality sessions were co-led by Intertech, a private sector company and local NGOs in Jerusalem. An Education and Professional Innovation Centre (EPIC) was also established in which training and learning services were provisioned along with productivity and co-working, incubation, start-up, enterprise, entrepreneurship and career services serving approximately 650 beneficiaries. Elements such as digital marketing and social entrepreneurship were offered as well as a STEAM (science, technology, engineering, arts and mathematics education) summer camp led by AQU's Business Centre for Innovation, Technology and Entrepreneurship (B-CITE). The third sphere was the Culinary and Food Experience (CAFÉ) providing practical experience to 8 young chefs via a series of 20 sessions headed by a renowned local chef in Palestinian cuisine. Including the creation of a full-service bakery, a bistro and a food festival, the programme served over 150 beneficiaries including rehabilitation site labourers, a senior citizens home and an orphanage, as well as participants at TIME and EPIC training sessions and the DAC inauguration event. Support Services were also integrated as a supplementary service offering event space, a mini-auditorium and lodging (via private partnership). As a key enabling component, the development of the civic centre was pivotal in facilitating knowledge and careers guidance facilities for young people. The centre provided them with an invaluable space equipped with modern communication tools to gain knowledge, skills and strengthen self-expression. Youth development programmes have helped to support careers pathways, guiding them through the process on entering formal employment. It is important to note that where many Palestinian youth suffer from isolation and limited opportunities for development, the design and functionality of the civic centre created a setting which afforded them an area to engage in diverse and free social and cultural interaction with the activities available. Interactions are directed to focus learning and education from Palestinian entrepreneurs and young professionals as well as operational staff and international visitors. The programme also enhanced exposure and connection to regional and international capacity building initiatives and employment opportunities, supporting those graduating from Palestinian universities to overcome some of the existing barriers that reduce their access to entering the formal job market. Such action leveraged the experience, existing programmes and networks of diverse stakeholders. Through the provision of thematic services combining local and historic identity with modern functionality and interpretations, work helps to establish a new sustainable, economically viable and eco-friendly development and operational model offering a diverse variety of civic, commercial and tourism facilities. Focusing on providing civic services for commercial returns to local youth, services reflect social and cultural values and traditions. UN-Habitat's specialized team worked in close collaboration with the rehabilitation of CTS technical team as well as staff and students from AQU to establish an integrated programme of functions and activities based on the needs assessment of target beneficiaries and market surveys. Accordingly, programme development focused on the modern expressions of culture such as media, cuisine and arts, as well as contemporary gateways of knowledge exchange and exposure. The project established the foundation to connect and partner with local Palestinian entrepreneurs from the private sector and helped develop a business model to ensure operational viability and sustainability. The implementation process exemplified a multi-layered approach to capacity building focused on Palestinian youth in particular. Such action was also key to help stimulate local economic viability and rehabilitation in the Old City and East Jerusalem. The project placed strong emphasis on helping young people acquire new skills and knowledge to enable them to operate and manage a range of civic and business activities. With a concerted effort to build the capacity of new university graduates from AQU, the project formed a team of six local students living in the Old City whereby through weekly meetings with the project management team, they were chosen to lead research work for the DAC project under the guidance of AQU and UN-Habitat. Through the duration of the project's initial operational phase, five young people were employed in operational capacities at EPIC, TIME and CAFÉ. Subsequently, across phases two and three, a large proportion of student and youth engagement was dedicated to on-site rehabilitation during operational work with participating students from the departments of archaeology, architecture, business and economics. AQU architecture students completed a 3D physical model of the complex, as shown in figure 76, during the construction phase with a total of 37 students participating in the project renovation and 325 students in operations. Where training was offered to newly graduated students to guide them into work placements, they were also provided with a UN-Habitat certified certificate of completion in addition to university accreditation for their involvement in the DAC project, opening up doors for their future employment. More specific careers guidance was also offered focusing on elements such as CV writing, interviews, internships, time management and public speaking as well as functional English speaking, project planning and report writing, of which the first session was conducted in July 2021 serving 109 youth beneficiaries. Tailored job support programmes were also curated along with training opportunities affiliated to initiatives implemented by the AQU project department. Here, connections and co-training was made with university's ongoing initiatives with Informatica Company, Otermans's Institute, Jerusalem High Tech Forum, Intertech Company and Qasr Al-Hambra initiatives – the predominant centre of attraction for entrepreneurship initiatives in East Jerusalem. AQU's B-CITE incubation unit has provided professional development counselling services and training for nearly 700 students in technical courses such as digital marketing, as shown in figure 77, Python programming, the Internet of Things, web development and Microsoft AL fundamentals. Additional members of the labour force were also linked to the rehabilitation works where required, with ongoing training courses of the Welfare Association made available on historic building restoration. The success of the DAC complex rehabilitation project will serve and be promoted as a reference for similar projects in the future. Moving forward, the essence of the project has cemented itself on a higher scale in Palestine, where a new project – Quality Urban Development for Sustainable Interventions: Rehabilitation for Revitalization from 2022–2027, now aims to improve the socio-economic conditions for Palestinians in the Old City of Jerusalem through the rehabilitation and revitalization of further historic sites in a movement to catalyse integrated urban regeneration.

Conclusion

By prioritizing the preservation and renovation of historic buildings, the DAC rehabilitation project has showcased the importance of preserving and reinstating the cultural value and symbolism of the area's historical heritage infrastructure. Heritage sites around the world possess precious historical and cultural value and hence strong development potential. It is important for urban practitioners to adopt sensitive approaches to rehabilitation in regard to



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these key assets, placing great importance on their intrinsic value to local communities as well as their design and functionality. In this sense, urban practitioners must understand the value of regenerating not only the physical design of historic buildings in line with their original tradition but also their functionality, use cases and connection to the community in which they belong. Where DAC has catalysed social change through its direct connection and contribution to social needs, it has also increased the voice of the Palestinian narrative in the Old City, and now serves as a core hub of programmatic initiatives led by stakeholders throughout Jerusalem. It can therefore be understood that protecting heritage buildings serves only as the foundation of heritage protection, and only by acknowledging people as the founders and guardians of such historic assets, can rehabilitation deliver long-term sustainability and impact on the ground. The rehabilitated DAC complex provides a modern space for young people in the city to learn, acquire skills and freely express themselves through multicultural exchanges and interactions. Where issues such as social marginalization and isolation are widespread in urban communities globally, civic centres provide highly valuable spaces for local community members of all ages, backgrounds and gender. Where citizens can use DAC's modern facilities to organize and participate in a variety of activities as well as exchange ideas and learn from each other, this can not only help community members and visitors to better understand the cultural heritage and diversity of the city, but also help promote sustainable inter-cultural exchanges and social development on a wider scale. The restoration of DAC has emphasized the importance of imparting skills and knowledge related to the protection of cultural heritage. This process stems from the open exchange, dialogue and cooperation of experts, scholars, front-line practitioners and local youth members. A team of international and local experts provided continuous professional exchanges and public activities on a local level. Participating scholars integrated their work experience into case studies and shared them in various classes on building rehabilitation whilst engineers involved in structural work also published a conference paper on the DAC project case. In the process of project implementation, students were encouraged to carry out various activities related to their major subjects. These practical opportunities have promoted the continuous education, career development and entrepreneurial progress of local Palestinian youth, which are essential to reducing poverty, increasing resilience and enhancing long-term prosperity. The participation of students and diversified organizations also strengthens the connection of tourists, the DAC complex and the Old City. Where many of them have subsequently visited and worked with the local communities, DAC and the Old City have gained popularity, as well as increased visibility of the local culture.