

ICOMOS

INTERNATIONAL COUNCIL ON MONUMENTS AND SITES
CONSEIL INTERNATIONAL DES MONUMENTS ET DES SITES
CONSEJO INTERNACIONAL DE MONUMENTOS Y SITIOS
МЕЖДУНАРОДНЫЙ СОВЕТ ПО ВОПРОСАМ ПАМЯТНИКОВ И ДОСТОПРИМЕЧАТЕЛЬНЫХ МЕСТ

WORLD HERITAGE LIST

N° 385

A) IDENTIFICATION

Nomination : Old City of Sana'a

Location : Governorate of Sana'a

State Party : Arab Republic of Yemen

Date : December 31, 1985

B) ICOMOS RECOMMENDATION

That the proposed cultural property be included on the World Heritage List on the basis of criteria IV, V and VI.

C) JUSTIFICATION

The city of Sana'a, capital of the Arab Republic of Yemen, located in a sumptuous mountain valley setting (average altitude 2,200 m), proudly displays the harmonious masses of its lofty, narrow houses of several stories, and its hammams, samsaras and slender minarets topped with ribbed domes which from afar mark the location of mosques.

The most commonly used material, earth in different forms - pisé or brick - reinforces the phenomenal coherency between a consubstantial architectural style and its natural environment. The ochre of the buildings would blend into the bistre-colored earth of the nearby mountains were it not for the touches of greenery of the "bustans", spacious gardens scattered throughout the city and, especially, the brightly-painted chalk white decoration on the upper part of the facades and minarets that define and outline one of the most remarkable urban landscapes in the world.

This city, a fine example of artistic and pictorial quality, is now viewed as a homogenous ensemble, though its history covers a period of over 2,000 years. Given official status in the 2nd century B.C. when it was a Yemenite kingdom's outpost - the vast Ghumdan Palace was built at that time - Sana'a, meaning "fortified place", was associated with all the major historical events which took place in Arabia Felix : the site of the cathedral and the martyrion constructed during the period of Abyssinian domination (525-575) bear testimony to Christian influence whose apogee coincided with the reign of Justinian.

Yet the remains of the pre-Islamic period were largely

destroyed as a result of profound changes in the city from 628. Beginning with the early years of the Hegira, Sana'a became a major centre for the spread of the Islamic faith. The Great Mosque, considerably embellished under the reign of the Umayyad and Abbasid caliphs and by the Yemenite governors, is said to have been constructed while the Prophet was still living, with materials recovered from the Ghumdan Palace and the Cathedral.

In the 11th century, in his work Tarikh Madinat Sana'a, Ahmed Al Razy mentions in a description of the city, 106 mosques, 12 hammams and 6,500 houses. These impressive figures might be considered an element of poetic licence were it not a fact that they correspond almost exactly to a 1975 monuments inventory (103 mosques, 14 hammams, 29 madrasas, over 6,000 old houses).

It therefore appears that the successive reconstructions of Sana'a under Ottoman domination beginning in the 16th century respected the proportions and balance of the medieval city while changing its appearance. At the same time, a new city grew up to the west of the first settlement and is contiguous with it. The new city covers a similar surface area.

The houses on the old city of Sana'a are of relatively recent construction -most are barely two centuries old- and are traditional in structure. The ground floor built of stone houses provisions and livestock. A staircase leads to the upper floors which normally comprise, one floor above the other, a large common room, which served as a meeting room for business affairs; the diwan, used exclusively for festivities and family gatherings; smaller, private living quarters; and, last, on the top floor, the mafraj, a room where men meet in the afternoon. Large windows line three walls of the room forming a kind of loggia. The only differentiating feature of these tower-like houses is the size and number of floors (as many as nine), and the quality of the ornamental and painted decoration of the windows, friezes and copings.

Preserved from change throughout the centuries and until 1962, the historic city of Sana'a, like most medinas today, increasingly suffers from facilities and an architectural style poorly adapted to living conditions in a modern capital. Many dangers threaten Sana'a, such as overcrowded streets, inadequate or saturated water supply and sewage systems, real estate speculation lying in wait to take over the untouched "bustans", replacement of traditional buildings by concrete buildings, etc.

Within the framework of the International Campaign to

safeguard the city of Sana'a, inaugurated by the Director-General of UNESCO on December 19, 1984, many reports of experts have recommended viable solutions to the pressing technical, aesthetic, economic and social problems faced by the city.

ICOMOS takes this occasion of the nomination of the old city of Sana'a for inclusion on the World Heritage List to emphasize the exceptional value of this cultural property, and its extreme vulnerability. The old city of Sana'a should be included on the World Heritage List on the basis of criteria IV, V and VI.

Criterion IV. Within its partially preserved wall, it offers an outstanding example of a homogeneous architectural ensemble whose design, and detail translate an organisation of space characteristic of the early centuries of Islam which has been respected over time.

Criterion V. The houses of Sana'a, which have become vulnerable as a result of contemporary social changes, are an outstanding example of a unique, traditional human settlement. Countless studies on the houses of Sana'a by urban specialists, architects and historians should not be a pretext for their destruction, even partial. The beauty of the urban landscape of Sana'a, whose overall appearance should remain intact, attests that they should be preserved integrally.

Criterion VI. Sana'a is directly and tangibly associated with the history of the spread of Islam in the early years of the Hegira.

Inclusion on the World Heritage List of a threatened urban centre poses many problems of delimitation, safeguarding, management and prospective research which the Committee has already examined with respect to Tunis (1979), Fez (1981), Shibam (1982) and Marrakesh (1985). ICOMOS further notes that the case of Sana'a is particularly complex due to the existence of two sister cities linked by the fortified ensemble of Al Mutwakil which forms the intermediary link of the urban ensemble.

In 1986, only the old city to the east appears to be able to be conserved and managed as a whole. In the western city, successive UNESCO missions noted irremediable cases of destruction and numerous alterations which have increased in number in the last few years. However, the ancient Jewish quarter in the southwest corner of the walls could be included in the area set out for inscription. This delimitation would correspond exactly to the area recommended by Ronald Lewcock in his 1982 report to UNESCO.

It would also be advisable to define a large buffer zone to preserve the natural setting.

While noting that the measures recommended by all concerned UNESCO experts adequately respond to the situation, ICOMOS nonetheless questions the efficacy of including this site on the World Heritage List in view of the dangers threatening this unique city in both the short and medium term.

The most appropriate response to the situation, and for the intrinsic quality of this cultural property, would probably be to include it on the List of World Heritage in Danger.

ICOMOS, April 1986.