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Restoring Afghanistan

*A tour of Asheqan wa Arefan.*By **BY ANN MARLOWE**

Afghanistan is not quite ready for tourists. But when it is they will stand here, at the edge of Kabul's Old City, preparing to explore the area of a couple of square miles known as Asheqan wa Arefan. Though from a distance Asheqan wa Arefan looks downtrodden, on closer inspection it contains many lovely 18th- and 19th- century wooden houses, sensitively renovated over the last seven years by the Aga Khan Trust for Culture.

Home to about 22,000 mainly poor Afghans, the neighborhood in central Kabul, like much of the city, has ancient roots. It bears the name of two brothers whose grave dates from the ninth century. On the steep hillside above is an old Islamic period mausoleum and, higher still, the remnants of a Buddhist stupa.

"The municipality thinks it is a slum," says Jolyon Leslie, the head of the Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC). In the absence of tourism in the Old City, the AKTC, a nonprofit founded by a hereditary leader of one of the largest Shia Muslim sects, is working to preserve Afghanistan's heritage for those who live among it. Afghan architects have done the design work, supervising Afghan artisans.

The AKTC is best known for its restoration of Baghe-Babur, or Babur's Gardens, now once again a popular Kabuli park with as many as 60,000 visitors monthly in the summer. This high-profile project provided one million man days of labor and trained 100 skilled workers.

But the AKTC has been working quietly south of the Kabul River on projects that few besides the residents of the neighborhood see. After the artisans finish, the houses are simply returned to their owners, with the stipulation that they take care of them. This is more radical than it sounds, for Afghanistan is a low-trust society where no one gives—or expects—something for nothing.

The AKTC has installed, for instance, five kilometers of semicovered drains to replace fetid open sewers, renovated 12 historically significant houses in full and 70 more lightly, and rehabilitated two parks. All of this has cost less than three million dollars.

A few days after the Afghan election, Mr. Leslie showed me around Asheqan wa Arefan. "This is probably the poorest area in the city, and also probably the most surveyed area," he said. The AKTC has produced an extraordinarily detailed map of the neighborhood—this in a country that hasn't had a population survey in 40 years.

Inhabited by low-grade civil servants up until the 1980s' civil war, the area is now much less prosperous. Perhaps half the residents are renters, doubling or tripling up in what used to be single-family houses. Many are new to the area, or even to Kabul.

The houses in the Old City were built of wood, the better to withstand earthquakes, such as the massive quake of 1842 that destroyed the Bala Hissar, or High Fortress, Kabul's ancient citadel. They often incorporated pieces of older buildings (I saw some Mogul marble column bases) and were "not intended to last forever," in Mr. Leslie's words.

One restored house, the Akram house, which boasts an 18th-century wing with juniper woodwork, houses sewing classes for women, sneaking in literacy training on the side. ("They won't come just for that, there has to be some immediate economic benefit," Mr. Leslie explained.) At the six-acre Bagh-e-Qazi, or Garden of the Judge, one of

two parks AKTC has worked on in the Old City, AKTC removed hundreds of trucks of waste which had been dumped illegally, filled in with agricultural soil and planted trees in rows, all at a cost of about \$100,000. Work has been guided by a photograph of the area in the 1980s.

The houses surrounding the park are mainly two- and three-story concrete structures from the 1950s and 1960s. "What constitutes a historic building?" Mr. Leslie continues. "It should be architecturally or socially interesting, or have the support of locals. For example, that pink-colored mosque over there. It's not very old, but for the locals, it's a monument."

Within the Old City, families take pride in their renovated dwellings. Unfortunately this doesn't extend to the littered alleyways outside. Municipal garbage pickup is only once every two weeks, and there are no municipal garbage cans on the street for trash (though where the AKTC has provided them, they are used and the street is noticeably cleaner). And there's a cultural habit of seeing the street as no one's responsibility.

The AKTC has also been active in Herat's Old City, 400 miles away. Herat has the greatest concentration of historic buildings in Afghanistan and was a popular traveler's destination along the '60s and '70s hippie trail. The AKTC has restored 13 historic houses and portions of one important site, the Gozargah Shrine, on the outskirts of the city, and the enormous 14th century Citadel, or Arg. But its civilizing mission can be fully appreciated in the group of more modest projects in the Old City, including two centuries-old underground water cisterns, a shrine dating from 846 A.D., two synagogues, a covered bazaar and several houses.

On a scorching August day, AKTC engineer Daud Sadiq and Herat project manager Habib Noori took me on a tour from the secluded Old City residential neighborhood to the public buildings they worked on. I saw how traditional Afghan architecture must have provided a cloistered but gracious way of life. Dalats, or long covered arcades, together with the tall walls of family compounds, shade parts of the street from the summer sun, much as they do in Tuscan hill towns. The Old City was degrees cooler than the concrete of the newer parts of town, and since the winding narrow streets discourage car traffic, it was quiet and free of diesel fumes. For the first time in 12 visits to Afghanistan, I saw that there might be homegrown solutions to the country's urban woes.

Ms. Marlowe writes frequently about Afghanistan. She is also the author of two memoirs including "The Book of Trouble" (Harcourt, 2006).