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Between Tradition and Modernity: the Hammams

Tradition and modernity, memory and reality, and tangible and intangible meet in a suggestive place that merits to be rediscovered and studied more deeply: the hammam. Notwithstanding social and political changes that have sometimes profoundly affected its significance and function, the hammam has preserved all its vitality and may prove to be a formidable tool of social integration and requalification of the Medinas and historical centres of Mediterranean cities where, for a long time, it represented an essential social and architectural element.

Heidi Dumreicher, founder of the Oikodrom-Institut and Project Co-ordinator of the project “Hammamed – Raising awareness of the Hammam as a Cultural Heritage for the Mediterranean and Beyond”, tells us more...

(material collected by Giuliano Salis)

What are the problems that led you to conceive Hammamed and what needs does the project intend to address?

We started based on the assumption that although the notion of the hammam is quite widespread across Mediterranean societies, it does not go beyond quite a superficial level of information, especially one that does not take into consideration the important social function that the hammam had and continues to have today. We have pondered over the answers we need to provide in order to preserve this heritage and to avoid its loss and deterioration, and to verify examples of an existing hammam that has survived as a living institution and thereby to draw lessons that would be valuable for other cases.

Based on the analysis you carried out in different Mediterranean countries, what is the general situation of the hammam?

There are sometimes quite important differences from one country that have to do with the political and social systems in place, and more particularly in reference to the phenomenon of fundamentalism and modernity. Traditionally, the hammam is a feminine space but in certain countries it is discouraged or prohibited to women for reasons of social opportunity, or it is considered as something outdated and belonging to the past and thus not meriting preservation. About twenty years ago, we could find hundreds of hammams in Cairo yet today there are not even six. On the other hand, in Morocco we noted that the hammam as an institution is very much present and alive, and that even in the newer districts or those under construction, it is quite ubiquitous. The situation is similar in Constantine in Algeria, where the old hammams are abandoned despite their patrimonial value, but they are considered part of the urban development plan in the quarters under construction; although they are modern structures that from a strictly architectural point of view are of no great interest, from a social and traditional perspective they remain relevant. It is here that we have met women who, following a traditional ritual, came here to recover forty days after childbirth.

The hammam strongly recalls traditional practices yet it is also a tangible presence in present-day living: how do these dimensions interplay?

The tangible and intangible dimensions in the hammam are inseparable, because it is an integral part of the collective memory. People recall having gone there for the first time with their grandmother, or approached nudity for the first time: one is confronted with one's own past in a quite vivid way. We have seen the case in Turkey, where people take the bus for over an hour to go to the hammam, telling us that it is part of their tradition, their history. At the same time, the hammam is a place that we cannot disassociate from its context, the quarter or the city. Often people tell us that they changed the hammam in order to follow the person who offers the services. They are not interested in the architectural value of the place but rather in the person who performs the massage and the established relationship between them. In Damascus, a women's hammam which was in very bad condition and which, for religious reasons, had been eventually transformed into a men's hammam, occasioned a debate on opportunities for women to attend the hammams. We consulted with the quarter's inhabitants and religious representatives, and following this consultation, and taking into consideration the interest of the population, the proprietor of another hammam decided to purchase it, restore it and re-open it for women!

What are the hammams that you will work on and how?

First, we'll work with hammam Ammuna in Damascus, where we have already worked and where we count on drawing examples of best practice to disseminate and replicate with other hammams in the city. We will develop an environmentally friendly heating system based on the principle of renewable resources and for which the owner has already provided funding. Next, the hammam Saffarin in Fez; we are in the process of identifying the owner, which is not always simple: sometimes it is the city, sometimes the inhabitants or the managing agent...We will work with the managing agent on the elaboration a management plan, which would allow him to maintain reasonable fees for the quarter's inhabitants, but which would be sufficiently lucrative to enable him to continue with his operation and also invest in the restoration of the building. Following that, we will identify and make contact with other managing agents of hammams in Fez and try repeating the experience and applying best practices we have developed. Moreover, we have an exhibition project in the districts in which we want the inhabitants to participate by contributing objects and personal effects related to the practices of the hammam. We need to pass on to them the message that the hammam is a place of relaxation and encounters and that it is necessary for the city, thereby changing its negative image of a dirty and dilapidated place. Finally, we will work with the Tambali hammam in Cairo, closed at the moment and that we wish to preserve.

What are your wishes for the end of the project?

That the hammam and other institutions that constitute the traditional component of the Southern Mediterranean town, like public fountains but also bakeries and other businesses for examples, contribute to make life in the Medina possible while improving its quality; most importantly we want to incite the inhabitants to return, and settle there. I often hear from colleagues and people from intellectual backgrounds that they would love to work and spend time in the Medina, but that living there may be complicated in terms of mobility, children environment or access to emergency care, for

example. The risk for the Medina is that it could be reduced to a touristic environment or to one inhabited by persons coming exclusively from rural areas, thereby losing the richness and diversity of a population that make these spaces really alive.

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