

# Kabul's Urban Identity: An Overview of the Socio-Political Aspects of Development

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## Summary

When passing through Kabul today, it is obvious that huge glass facades have been introduced as a new element in the urban appearance of the city. It seems that many commercial and private buildings sparkling like glass palaces in the mud-brown landscape of Kabul represent a new modernity. In fact, since the fall of the Taliban a new era has started, one that is different from the past. The first steps in modernising the city started in the early 20th century, but these failed because the modernisation process was so fast and radical. During the reign of Nadir Shah (1929-1933) and later that of his son, Zahir Shah (1933-1973), a policy of carefully opening to progress followed, which left traces in the urban development of Kabul. With the invasion of the Soviet Army, urban development gained more ideological aspects. This process was interrupted by heavy fighting during the civil war (1992-1994) when Kabul suffered from severe destruction. With the invasion of the Taliban in 1996, Kabul was enclosed in a vacuum. Following their fall from power, the reconstruction process started in 2002; Kabul then witnessed a development it had never seen before. The capital of the country, the city seemed to be an open gate for new influences due to modern ideas and developments.

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later that of his son, Zahir Shah (1933-1973), a policy of carefully opening to progress was followed, which left traces in the urban development of Kabul. With the invasion of the Soviet Army, urban development gained more ideological aspects. This process was interrupted by heavy fighting during the civil war (1992-1994) when Kabul suffered severe destruction. With the invasion of the Taliban in 1996, Kabul was enclosed in a vacuum. Following their fall from power, the reconstruction process started in 2002; Kabul then witnessed a development it had never seen before. The capital of the country, the city seemed to be an open gate for new influences due to modern ideas and developments.

Many contradictory ideas are involved in the reconstruction process. The discrepancies come from different policy-makers in the government, e.g. mujahideen, the Taliban and Westernised Afghans on the one hand and a huge number of returnees and migrants who suddenly increased the population of Kabul on the other. Kabul is now a city with a variety of urban identities that mirror different social and political aspects of development.

## 1 Kabul: manifestation of power and reign

Kabul, the capital of Afghanistan, has its own historical, social and political characteristics.

Ancient Kabul was mentioned by Ptolemy as 'Kabura' and its residence as 'Kabulitae' in the middle of the second century (Kohzad 1958). In the 16th century, Babur made Kabul his capital (Kohzad 2005). He fell in love with his new capital and embellished it with seven big gardens, viz. *Bagh-e Shahr-ara*, *Char Bagh*, *Bagh-e Jelaw-Khana*, *Orta Bagh*, *Bagh-e Soorat-Khana*, *Bagh-e Mahtab* and *Bagh-e Ahoo-Khana*, plus three more small gardens around it (Kohzad 2005). Babur's last wish was to be buried in one of his gardens in Kabul. Since his interment, the garden has been known as *Babur's Garden*. It can be visited to this day. After Babur's death Kabul lost its status as a capital until the reign of Timur Shah (1772-1793). As a result of tribal and family rivalry, he moved the seat of the capital from Kandahar to Kabul (Farhang 1993). Kabul has preserved its position as the capital of Afghanistan ever since then despite seeing many regime changes.

Initially, there were few signs of urban development there as the kings and amirs took little interest in the matter. In Timur Shah's case, for example, his mausoleum exists, but there are no other historical buildings that can be attributed to him. And later on, his many sons were mainly busy competing with each other for the control of political power. In 1880 when Amir Abdurrahman Khan took power, he built his own palace – Qasr-e Bagh-e Bala (Upper Garden Palace) – in a Moghul style of architecture to represent his reign. Later he built another palace in memory of his reign, the so-called *Arg* in the middle of the city where he moved. The architecture of the Arg was influenced by British building style. Amir Abdurrahman was the first person to introduce foreign architectural styles to Afghanistan. Despite the many

wars in which the capital has been involved, both of the palaces have survived to this day. And since Abdurrahman's reign, the *Arg* has been used by many governments as a presidential palace, including Karzai's government today.

Abdurrahman's son Habibullah I (1901-1919) was very interested in modernisation. He introduced a postal service, photography, electricity, cars and the telephone (Tanin 2006: 23). On visiting Europe, his son Amanullah Khan (1919-1929) was impressed by the progress and modern technologies of European cities like Berlin, Paris and London. He developed the idea of a capital that should be dignified for a king. He was offended by the dirt, dust and maze of streets and bazaars in Kabul and dreamed of building his new capital like modern European cities. Six kilometres from the city centre he laid the cornerstone for Darulaman Palace, which reflected the name of its princely founder. He engaged European engineers and craftsmen to build his vision of a new capital in stone and plaster. Amanullah imagined himself ruling his nation from Darulaman Palace, which was located on a hill. In his work about the king, Wild described Amanullah's vision as "a centre for governmental institutions in big circular blocks, with central courtyards integrating the entrances to the different departments" (1932: 89-92). Clerks were supposed to live in modernity and luxury, and the surroundings ought to reflect the famous capital of a modern nation, the king believed. Lodging houses should be built, and sweeping roads and large parks were intended to symbolise generosity.

Amanullah's attempts at modernising the city's infrastructure were welcomed by the population of Kabul. He established a new currency, the 'Afghani' (Rubin 2002: 54), which replaced the former Kabuli rupee. It is interesting to see that the people of Afghanistan still use the term ('Rupee') in informal talk and business at the bazaar. The word 'Afghani' is only used in formal contexts in writing and by the media. The success of the new currency encouraged the king to expand his reform to cover social and cultural life by changing traditional clothing to Western costumes, banning the veil (*pardah*) and even forcing his subjects to behave like Europeans. For example, men had to wear European hats and clothing, and even greetings had to be expressed in a European manner: while greeting each other, men had to tip their hats instead of saying the common "salam aleikum". Amanullah's attempt to expand his reforms to the traditional social system was too much for the people, however. Led by religious groups, they protested against all of his modernisation reforms. In the end – in 1929 – the King was forced to flee to Italy and live there in exile. Today, Darulaman Palace reminds everybody of the failure of overly ambitious dreams.

## **2 Destruction of symbols of urban identity as a result of conflicts**

With the British invasion that caused the first Anglo-Afghan war (1842-1845), the destruction of the capital, Kabul, became an aspect of war. In revenge for the massacre of a British army unit by Afghan tribesmen during their withdrawal from Ka-

bul to Jalalabad in 1842, a British expedition invaded Kabul and blew up the great *Char Chatta Bazaar*. This bazaar had been constructed in the 17th century during the Moghul reign of Ali Mardan to meet the trade requirements of the Indian Moghul dynasty. This more than 200-metre-long bazaar consisted of four arcades (*char chatta*) whose walls were covered with "stucco decoration studded with mirrors, and whitewashed with a special solution containing bits of mica to make them sparkle" (Knobloch 2002: 161). With an open octagonal courtyard with fountains surrounding the bazaar, it was not only the main commercial centre, but also the most important place for communication in Kabul.

The destruction of the National Museum during the civil war (1992-1994) is another example of the obliteration of an important symbol of national identity. The National Museum stood in the firing line of the fighting fractions of the mujahideen groups. Hit by rockets and bullets, it was partially destroyed. A fire destroyed many of the treasures of history, and looting caused many others to be lost. All in all, 80 per cent of the Museum's national collection suffered this fate (Knobloch 2002: 45).

In accordance with their interpretation of Islam, the Taliban started the destruction of all historical monuments regarded as being non-Islamic in 2001. They destroyed the famous Bamiyan Statues as well as the remaining statues inside Kabul Museum. They even destroyed the Minaret of Chakari, one of the most important monuments of the first century A.D.

On a brighter note, the mujahideen government moved some of the monuments from the National Museum to more secure places (e.g. storehouses of the Ministry of Information and Culture) in the initial phase of the civil war. This was partly at the suggestion of the Museum staff. These monuments survived the destruction plan of the Taliban since the staff of the Museum and the Ministry were able to hide them from their eyes.<sup>2</sup> It is interesting to note that after the fall of the Taliban, the Museum personnel managed to put the broken pieces of statues back together again and repair some of them.

### **3 The impact of foreign assistance on the development of Kabul's urban structure**

Nadir Shah (1929-1933) and his two brothers Hashim Khan and Shah Mahmood (1933 to 1953) who exercised power learned from Amanullah's failure. They pursued a very slow and cautious policy on introducing modernisation. The capital started to expand very slowly in this period; the poor economy of the country could not afford any big development programmes. As for the rapid changes and development, these happened during the Daoud premiership (1953-1963). This was when Kabul attracted the interest of the Western and the Eastern blocs, each of which was trying to gain more influence than its opponent. Both the East and the West invested

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<sup>2</sup> Interview with some of the staff of the Kabul Museum during our visit in September 2006.

intensively in Afghanistan. As a result of this competition, many large-scale projects were carried out in Kabul and other parts of the country. Being the capital, Kabul was the focal point of this activity. At that time Kabul expanded into its rural surroundings. Large areas that used to be agricultural land were turned into urban areas. They were called *kart*, which imitated the French word meaning "quarter, neighbourhood", like Kart-e Seh, Kart-e Char, Kart-e Naw, Kart-e Mamoorin, Kart-e Parwan, etc. The government bought the land from the farmers to distribute it among its officials as plots. The government provided infrastructure like roads, streets, electricity and water utilities. The owners of these plots had to build their houses according to the municipality's requirements.

The USSR invested more than the West in many aspects. A larger group of young Afghans were sent to the Soviet Union for educational purposes than those sent to the West. Once they returned, they were employed in governmental institutions such as the army, the police force, civil administration and factories. The Soviets built a large number of factories in the country as well as in Kabul, e.g. Silo and *Fabrik-e Khanasazi* ("House-Building Factory"). The Khanasazi factory was authorised to build kindergartens, schools and new buildings for ministries. This company also built a housing complex that was totally new to Kabul in a district that used to be called Zindaban. A symbol of modernisation, the new housing complex was officially named Nadir Shah Mina in honour of the Royal Family. The citizens of Kabul called it "Mikrorayan", however. It was a sixty-block housing estate containing 11,000 residential units. This apartment complex included a 500-seat cinema, a mosque, kindergarten, restaurant and a shopping centre (Dupree 1973: 636), plus a swimming pool.

Since rural people used to live in *qalas*, traditional mud farmhouses surrounded by a wall, and urban people used to live in one- or two-storied houses with a court (*Khana-ye Hawilidar*), the new housing style did not appeal to the majority of people. Dupree (1973: 638) predicted that younger Afghans who wanted to break out of their traditional family ties would probably like to live there, and this is exactly what happened. A large group of young Afghans were sent to the USSR to be educated in the 1950s and 70s and once they returned, they were employed in the governmental institutions mentioned above. The Mikrorayan became a favourite housing style for this group.

The government distributed new apartments or land like the *Kartes* to its officials. Most of the employees preferred to receive land, however, because they were then able to build their homes on it according to their own customs. Mikrorayan became attractive for young employees, especially those educated in the USSR, as we have already seen. Later during the communist regime (1978-1992), Mikrorayan was expanded into four sections (Mikrorayan 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th). Mostly, members of the party were allowed to live there. Even Russian diplomats lived in these flats.

Besides expanding Mikrorayan, the communist regime also built more apartment complexes in response to the increasing demand for housing among the military, the police and security staff. The new housing quarters were named after the various security forces, e.g. *Blokha-ye Hawayee* (air force blocks), *Blokha-ye Amniyat* (security blocks) and *Blokha-ye Polis* (police blocks). In the long term, the communist regime was trying to change Kabul into a Soviet model city. More and more block systems appeared in other parts of Kabul like *Blokha-ye Qargha*, *Blokha-ye Khana-sazi*, *Blokha-ye Sra Mina*, *Panjsad Famili* and *Nawad Famili*.

Poor residents of Kabul who couldn't receive any privileges from the government built their own quarters in the city and usually did this on the hillsides despite government prevention. These people built their houses overnight and the government destroyed them during the day. Once the poor people had succeeded in building their unplanned houses, their quarters were called *Zour Abad*, which means a 'quarter built with force'. They built their mud houses in a traditional way without any infrastructure like streets, power and water.

After the fall of the communist regime in 1992, Kabul's population experienced a sudden increase. For the first time in more than two decades of war, the doors of Kabul were opened to a huge number of people. Many of the emigrants who had been living in Pakistan and Iran, including mujahideen supporters and their families, came back to the city again. This boosted the demand for more housing. Kabul was no longer a city in which communists mainly lived, but now mujahideen moved into the capital. In the period of mujahideen government, they were the ruling elites of Kabul while most of the high-ranking communist rulers left the capital and the country. New groups of people entered the city who had been living outside the country for more than two decades. Most of them had not lived in the capital before. After becoming the rulers of Kabul, more and more mujahideen came to reside in Kabul. They introduced a new social identity to the capital. What made them different from the Kabulis was their physical appearance as they wore traditional clothes – *Pirahan wa Tumban* (long trousers with a long shirt) with a *Pakol* and *Dastmal* (round hat and scarf), which were the symbol of Afghan mujahideen during their armed struggle against Soviet occupation. The same clothes were used before the mujahideen entered Kabul and were mainly worn on informal occasions, at weekends, on public holidays, etc. Western (i.e. US and European) clothes were commonly worn on official or formal occasions. Another big difference was the long beard each member of the mujahideen cultivated. In fact, it was mainly the younger mujahideen who had such beards. The younger Kabulis used to shave their beards, but the older inhabitants kept theirs – as a symbol representing greatness that attracted other residents' respect for their elders (*Rish Safed*).

The urban culture soon put up some resistance to the newly imported one. This became especially apparent when the mujahideen officials changed themselves accord-

ing to the Kabuli staff of administration. The younger generations of mujahideen who enrolled at schools and universities soon integrated into urban society.

Although the mujahideen consisted of a large number of different political factions, they nevertheless managed to establish a government. But due to the different political ambitions of each group, fighting broke out after a few months. This fighting was mainly between those who controlled the government and those who had been removed from office. Between 1993 and 1994 the civil war mainly took place in the capital, where it reached its climax. Huge areas of Kabul that had been able to survive the decades of war were now destroyed or severely damaged. The central part of Kabul, including Mikrorayan 1st, Jadda-e Maiwand, Shahr-e Kohna, Kart-e Seh, Kart-e Char and Karte-e Mamourin, became battle fronts along the River Kabul and were badly damaged (Dittmann 2005). At this time the heavy fighting forced a large number of citizens to leave Kabul. When the mujahideen government expelled the opposition from the capital, reconstruction started on a small scale. Governmental buildings like the Ministry of Higher Education, Kabul University, the Institute of Medicine, the Polytechnical Institute and University of Umahatul Mo'minin (now the Pedagogical University) were mainly reconstructed and reactivated.

When the Taliban were in control of Kabul in 1996, they did not conduct a reconstruction programme of any sort. However, small reconstructions projects were carried out by NGOs who managed to work in Kabul despite Taliban restrictions. Although there is no official data available on this period, the size of the population seems to have declined to a very low figure (less than a million).

#### **4 Aspects of urban identity among the city population**

Being the capital of Afghanistan, Kabul has been a magnet for members of a multitude of ethnic groups (Arez 2005). In the course of time, a social group has evolved with ideals and a lifestyle beyond the traditional cultural patterns that is quite different from any other city in Afghanistan. The members of this group are called "Kabulis". They express their uniqueness in their attitudes and the way they express things physically as well (Dupree 1975). They can be understood as the original inhabitants of Kabul, who define themselves more through their social status of being urban Kabulis than through their traditional family relationship. A characteristic of the Afghan way of living is the very close kinship of Afghans based on a system of personal relations to group members (family, tribe, ethnicity and nation) (Issa 2006: 27). This means an Afghan born in Kabul still belongs to his or her father's home town, for instance. So if this person's father comes from Kandahar, then he or she will refer to him-/herself as a "Kandari". Thus Kabulis defines themselves as urban residents.

Urban Kabulis typically speak Dari as their mother tongue. As a symbol of modernity they appreciate European clothing styles (Ali 1969) and are usually well and often secularly educated. They normally work in the administrative, commercial or

service sectors. Formerly, this group was mainly located in the northern area of the old town in the residential area around the royal castle (*ark*), and later in Shahr-e Nau, a district predominantly built in Anglo-Indian bungalow architecture (Hahn 1964). Some Kabulis studied abroad and had experience with foreign cultures, and some had close relationships to the royal dynasty. In the 1970s this helped them to move to the newly planned district Wazir Akbar Khan. This is now mostly a residential area for diplomats since the urban Kabulis rent out their houses while staying abroad.

'Kabuli' is not a term that refers to an ethnic group, but to an urban identity. Originally, this was comprised of Tajiks<sup>3</sup> who referred to themselves using a geographic designation rather than a kin-tribal relationship (Dupree 1973: 183). They therefore differentiate themselves clearly from the Shamali Tajiks, whose name is used to describe the people who migrated from the northern province of Kabul and Shamali and who mainly settled in the north of the city of Kabul in the districts of Khair Khana and Kart-e Parwan. Other ethnic groups usually referred to the regions and provinces they or their parents and ancestors were born in. This means that Hazaras were still Hazaras and Pashtuns were still Pashtuns, even if they were long-term residents of Kabul (Gouttierre 1992: 63). Another group of Kabulis we can find are those who once lived in the more rural areas of Kabul. They can be named "rural" Kabulis. Although they are mainly farmers, they feel related to the urban societal group and live in traditional farmhouses, so-called *qalas*. They provide for Kabul's population by taking fresh fruit, vegetables and meat to the bazaars and streets of the city.

With the start of rural-urban migration in the mid-1960s, significant numbers of new groups entered Kabul. The migration process was initiated by employment opportunities; it developed steadily and did not stop during the Soviet occupation or during wartime. Although ethnic groups have come into close contact with each other through migration, their main ties are built on kinship as well as their ethnic roots and regional relationships. Migrants usually join a group that has already been established in the city. Here they have the possibility to interact with members of the same group in a reciprocal system of understanding. They become part of very close communities with their own systems of social welfare and the co-operative support they need for self-identification, and traditionally occupy separate areas of Kabul. The migration process gave rise to competition between different groups. On the one hand, the Kabulis started to overcome their differences regarding tribal and ethnic belonging. And on the other hand, with population growth accelerating, ethnic segregation and stratification became a characteristic feature of Kabul's urban structure. Besides the Tajiks, most of the other ethnic groups who have always been there such as the Pashtuns and Hazaras are now growing in size. The settlement patterns of these groups are interesting, being largely dictated by the regional position of their

<sup>3</sup> See Gouttierre 1992: 63. Dupree 1973: 183. Rubin 2002: 30, 303.



home provinces. The majority of these ethnic groups look to settle in areas of Kabul that are close to the main roads that connect them easily with their home provinces. The advantage of being able to visit their families in the province more easily is regarded as being more important than the option of cheaper accommodation. Shamali Tajiks, for example, have mostly settled in north Kabul in the area around *Khair-Khana*. Pashtuns from Khost, Logar, Paktika and Paktiya have largely settled in the southeastern area of Kabul (Issa 2006).

## 5 Competing local, regional and western inspirations in the current rebuilding process

The fall of the Taliban in 2001 and the establishment of the new government created future perspectives and new hope for rebuilding Afghanistan. The reconstruction of the capital, in particular, drew the attention of both the government and international donors. Since that time Kabul has attracted so many returnees – especially for security reasons – that a unique population boom has taken place. In 2004 Kabul's population increased to 2,799,300 (Afghanistan Statistics Yearbook 2004) and nowadays an estimated 4 million people live there.

Since reconstruction started in 2002, the evolving ethnic segregation in Kabul has taken on a different aspect. Kabul has attracted a great deal of attention in terms of rebuilding and new construction projects. A host of different ideas and opinions are involved in this process. Three main groups of Afghan citizens can be identified in the process of reconstruction:

- those with a local perception: Afghans who stayed in the country in wartime and who have preserved their own ideas about living. They are less influenced by external ideas.
- those with a regional perception: Afghans who migrated to neighbouring countries, e.g. Pakistan and Iran, and who returned with new perceptions and knowledge of different lifestyles
- and those with a Western perception: Afghans who returned from exile in Western countries, e.g. Europe or the USA, and who have imported Western ideals about life.

### 5.1 Local perceptions

The traditional way to build Afghan houses reflects the inward-looking, self-protecting family society. As Dupree (1973: 248) mentioned, mud walls like "curtains" are built around houses for protection against the outside world. In the literature on this topic, this so-called "*pardah* principle" is derived from the Persian term for curtain and is a characteristic of the Afghan way of living in many respects. Not only the traditional farmhouses are built in this way, but many of the city houses refer to this system, too. A typical Kabul house is a one- or two-storey building with

a small courtyard and is surrounded by a high mud wall. In fact, urban planning plays an important role here. The government distributed the plots through the municipality of Kabul with the result that most of them became the property of its employees. The quality of construction depended on the social status of the owner: if he was rich, he could construct his house with relatively stable materials, e.g. cement or baked bricks. Otherwise the people built their homes using traditional, cheap raw materials like mud and wood. In a bid to start a new life after the war, most of the people whose houses were destroyed rebuilt them in the traditional way.

## 5.2 Regional perception

When the Afghans returned from neighbouring countries to Kabul, many found their old homes had been destroyed. Some rebuilt their houses in the traditional way. Because of the high demand for housing, some owners took the opportunity to sell their plots, which often went to mujahideen commanders. Many of the men whose social status had improved during migration built their houses in a style inspired by the regional housing system. This mainly includes the returnees from Pakistan and Iran who introduced a new housing style to Kabul following the demise of the Taliban.

When passing through Kabul today, an observer will see a large number of private houses fitted with coloured glass facades and decorative ornaments. A typical feature of these glass facades is that it is impossible to see what is going on inside. This "modern, new style of housing" gives one the impression that the owners are able to afford it. If one asks people on the street about these houses, they will say they mainly belong to commanders.

## 5.3 Western perception

Many Afghans who have returned from Western countries are currently playing an important role in the reconstruction process. They provide new ideas about how official buildings should be represented. At the beginning of the reconstruction process in late 2001, for example, an Afghan architect living in Germany ([www.darul-aman.net](http://www.darul-aman.net)) took the initiative to reconstruct Darulaman Palace in its function as a parliamentary building. He planned to rebuild Darulaman Palace in line with the theme "from a symbol of monarchy to the cradle of democracy" and wanted to rebuild the whole Darulaman district later. Like the German Reichstag, the newly rebuilt palace was intended to provide the Afghan parliament with a solid home instead of the tents that housed the *loya jirgah* in 2002. The courtyard of the palace was to be covered by a glass cupola. The Afghan interim government welcomed this idea and took over the protectorate of the Darulaman Foundation, which was initiated in Germany.

However, the problems of fundraising and the anticipated long construction period led the Afghan government to accept other initiatives as well. In the race for project

funding, which opens opportunities for further political influence, the Indian government pledged US\$ 25m for a new parliamentary building in 2005. The former king, Zahir Shah, supported the idea that the new parliament building should symbolise the partnership between the "world's largest and the newest democracies" (Varadarjan 2005). This building is supposed to be located near *Darulaman* and will include the House of Commons, the Senate with more than 400 seats and a mosque for praying between the sessions (Bhattacharya 2005). The foundation stone for the new parliamentary building was laid in August 2005 in an official ceremony. It is named "The Green Building" and will combine traditional Islamic architecture reflecting the region's cultural heritage with modern amenities.

An example of a commercial building in the modern Western style is Kabul City Centre near the Shahr-e Nau Park. The first mall in Afghanistan was opened in 2005 and was initiated by an Afghan businessman. It represents a typical Western shopping mall with several floors. In the basement there is a "food court", which is similar to those in many malls in Europe. Visitors are able to move to any floor from the basement using glass elevators. Shops offer everything from jewellery to modern clothes. The mall represents exclusivity; most of the offered goods are not affordable for ordinary Afghans. Yet despite this, many people still come to visit Kabul City Centre. The escalators, in particular, are a very special attraction because they are the first ones ever to appear in Kabul (Cooney 2005). To enter the mall, everybody has to pass through a security check. This creates a protected area where visitors can enjoy a little luxury. Women are able to move freely in the mall, and the food court is now becoming a place where men and women can meet in a public space. While only men met at the coffee shop in 2005, women also started to meet in the mall the following year.

## **6 The impact of international efforts on urban identity**

In September 2002 an international conference on "Kabul and the National Urban Vision" took place in the Afghan capital. The inclusion of topics such as preserving the heritage of Kabul, revitalisation of the old part of the city as well as issues concerning urban transport and urban planning led to another workshop being staged, which was hosted at the University of Karlsruhe in Germany in 2003 (Grotsch 2004: 17ff). The aim of this event was to analyse the problems of rebuilding and to seek ways of giving everyone living in Kabul their own urban identity again. The discussion about the role of the old town in Kabul between tradition and modernity was just one activity that took place in Karlsruhe. Typical elements of an oriental city were considered helpful here, e.g. the development of a system of squares as the initial focus for neighbourhood development as well as dead-end street patterns. Hybrid systems and structures were seen as a strategy to connect the old with the new and were intended as powerful elements of a "new urbanism" in the case of Kabul (Grotsch 2004: 34ff). Furthermore, it was emphasised that Kabul should be

play a model role with respect to further development. Using Kabul in order to modernise Afghanistan has failed many times in the past, but modern development does seem possible if there is regional compensation between cities and rural areas. This should be achieved by using traditional styles of construction.

Although reconstruction has already started, the discussion about a master plan for the development of Kabul is still going on. A solution seems to be very distant, in fact. While the debate about national urban visions and the integration of master plans by experts goes on, the citizens of Kabul have already started rebuilding their city.

## **7 Challenges that socio-political developments cause for the urban identity of Kabul**

Since becoming the capital of Afghanistan, Kabul has developed into a unique city. This is easy to explain because as a centre of power and government, important decisions about social, economic and financial development have been made here. Nowadays Kabul is not only the place where central functions are exercised, but it is also on the way to becoming a big melting pot, bringing people with different political opinions, social ideas and a variety of perspectives for the future together. Although the inhabitants have to deal with a host of problems each day, like the absence of power, water, proper sanitation, settlement and earning enough money to get by, they have already started to rebuild their capital, irrespective of any master plans or officially planned development. Opportunity seems to be the guiding factor for urban development at the moment.

The new diversity of architecture, which is quite often a contrast between old and new, reflects the conglomerate of different Afghan identities seeking to catch up with modernity while at the same time preserving their traditional way of life. Many examples of this exist. While one plot is rebuilt with a modern private house on it, which means, for instance, a three- to four-storey house with a decorated facade, a balcony and coloured windows, the house on the neighbouring plot of land might be built in the traditional mud construction style. Whether somebody is able to build a modern or traditional home depends on the opportunities they have, how much money they possess and what personal relationships there are that can be of help.

Urban development in Kabul now reflects many different perceptions and ideas as well as the knowledge involved in the rebuilding process. On the one hand, local, regional and Western ideas influence the reconstruction process, while on the other, it is the government who is responsible for developing a strategy for further urban development and for taking decisions regarding the needs and wishes of the population. The Afghan government consists of various heterogeneous groups such as civilians, communists, mujahideen, Westernised Afghans, Taliban supporters and foreigners (Kohistani 2006), all of whom have different ideas about the reconstruction process, just like its diverse population.

The differences of opinion among these groups have undermined the development of a united strategy for providing settlement and shelter for the increasing population. At the moment, Kabul still has some basic and essential requirements that need to be met, viz. access to water, power and sanitation as well as housing space for its citizens. The London Conference on Afghanistan (31 January to 1 February 2006) resulted in the Afghanistan Compact (Unama 2006). The compact identified three critical and interdependent areas of activities in the next five years after its adoption:

1. Security
2. Governance and Rule of Law and Human Rights; and
3. Economic and Social Development.

The third area focused on the provision of the infrastructure and natural resources. It included the urban development in Kabul. To manage urban development and ensure that its services will be delivered efficiently by 2010, the municipality governments in general and Kabul city in particular will need to strengthen its capacity. The implementation of this plan will ensure the supply of clean water and sanitation facilities for 50% of the households in Kabul. At the same time, according to this compact, by 2010 electricity will reach to 65% of households and 90% of non-residential establishments in major urban areas and at least 25% of household in rural areas.

Although the Afghanistan Compact is another opportunity for Kabul, but the city cannot overcome the challenges it faces with this plan of action alone. The main problem it has is how to develop a unified urban development strategy vis-à-vis the different political and social opinions that currently exist. Preserving the traditional lifestyle of its inhabitants in the face of modern approaches to reconstruction is a further major issue that needs to be tackled.

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