

Greater Khartoum

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Sudan

For many people the mention of the Sudan brings up images of famine, war, child soldiers in the south and slavery and ethnic eradication in the Nuba Mountains.

For those who know more about the country maybe what is remembered are the ruins of hundreds of small pyramids scattered on the desert plains of Nubia, the uniqueness of its art and architecture, and the sophistication of its building methods. Or maybe the more recent art of house decoration in Old Halfa, drowned by the waters of the Nile after the construction of the Aswan Dam, or the ruins of the Turkish town of Sawakin on the Red Sea. In Western Sudan what is fascinating for foreigners is the nomad way of life that has remained largely unchanged.

Yet, still, the most vivid images remain those of human suffering in the south.

The Sudan is called 'the land of a million square miles' by its people. There are 596 tribes speaking 115 languages and the country has a population of approximately 34,400, 000 people (1999 census). It gained independence in 1956 from British/Egyptian rule. It has one of the longest running civil wars in Africa, on and off since 1955.

The country, like many others, inherited extreme poverty and social upheaval from the colonialists. It has a national debt of \$20.3 billion (1996) and an exchange rate that decreased from 6.96 Sudanese Pounds to a dollar in 1991 to 2413 Sudanese Pounds to the dollar in 1999. Sudan is dependent on its agriculture (cotton, gum arabic and sesame) and its large animal wealth. What is interesting to note in recent statistics showing industries development during the 90s is that the production of textiles and flour has gone down considerably, while cigarettes and soft drinks have gone up. There is also an emerging arms industry.

The country consists of the tropical south and the arid north. The Nile is the country's greatest asset and life exists along its banks, populations thinning out as one moves to the arid areas to the west.

Greater Khartoum

The capital of Sudan consists of the three towns of Khartoum, Omdurman and Khartoum North or Bahri. It is located at the confluence of the White and Blue Niles. The population is about 6, 000, 000. Before the 1984 draughts it was estimated that the region had 1.8 million refugees of famine, civil war and from neighbouring countries.

In 1988 Khartoum was again hit by a natural disaster of massive proportions when exceptionally heavy rains flooded the province and caused great damage. The economic repercussions of the above incidents never fully ended. In 1989 the democratic government was overthrown in a military coup, the same military government that is in power today.

The centers of power in Sudan were actually Meroe of the ancient Kush Kingdom, and Soba of the Christian Kingdom of Alawa (10th C). The Funj then came to power in 1504 with their capital in Sennar, further south on the Blue Nile. Even though fisherfolk remains have been found in the Khartoum region dating 8000 years back, the capital was a 19thC creation of the Egyptians and dates back to 1834. The following is a brief overview of its development (relevant to the concerns that are being dealt with in the workshop):

- Systematic system of segregation and planning by the British in 1904; planned as a series of union jacks, streets take precedence, established as the administrative capital; collapsed and became a ghost town when:
- Omdurman was created by the Khalifa Abdullah after the fall of Khartoum in 1885 guided by the Mahdi, here the morphology of the town followed the village examples in the rest of the country 'houses take precedence- the streets take care of themselves', very efficient and vibrant markets and rural networks, it was partly depopulated after the Battle of Karari in 1904
- Despite the fact that there were older settlements of people who were descendants of a religious man from Tuti (Khogali), Khartoum North (Bahri) was a product of the early days of the Condominium. It was the railway terminus from Egypt and has always retained the character of being the 'worker's town'. It has the largest industrial area of the three towns.

A tour of the three towns will expose one to the social, cultural and economic complexities of the situation in the Sudan.

- It will be noticed that, many old building styles have been camouflaged by arches and tinted glass. This gives a hint to the trends to firstly, create an 'Islamic' identity and secondly, to resemble the rich, oil producing countries of the East.
- A typical street scene in Khartoum will no doubt include the modes of travel and public transport, mostly the 'boks' ('bakkie') and the 'ragsha', rickshaws, a recent import from India. Tin structures along the roads are used as cold drink stalls, bookshops, etc. It will be noticed that the roads are very broken down and rainwater drainage systems (open ditches) are poorly maintained. This is a description of even the most 'prestigious' residential areas in Khartoum- one is always exposed to the poverty.
- It will be noticed that plots are generally large with open courtyards surrounded by high walls for privacy. People have, in many cases, added barbed wire to the top of these walls due to increased crime recently. The houses are mostly low, modest one-storey structures. Walls are usually solid structures, with large doors that are colourfully decorated. There is a strong differentiation in plot sizes, building materials and building placement within the plot and building heights in the different areas, expressing a strong control of development through legislation that segregates between different economic groups.
- In new buildings, a pretentious style is emerging indicating strongly ideological authority and control.
- The capital seems to be stagnant in all fields of development, yet, there appears to be a thriving building industry. Some say it is due to 'uncreative entrepreneurship'. Most likely it is due to the fact that many people have fled the difficult economic situation in the country, and are sending money back to be used in the most reliable of investments. The political and economic situation does not encourage other investments in production due to instability, political and legislative restrictions. Many of the finished buildings remain empty, awaiting the return of the owners from abroad. They are cared for by 'kafirs' (not derogatory) who live in tents or shacks on the premises. This creates an interesting social dynamic and an unusual mix of urban and rural, rich and poor.
- One will no doubt notice the strong religious sentiments in the country that are expressed through various forms. 'Khalwas' or Koran teaching schools still retain importance in Khartoum. Dervishes are an explicit expression of Sufi sentiments that reside deep within any Northern Sudanese person. But then militant Islam is also evident, a relatively recent concept in Sudan.
- There are fine examples of colonial architecture and strong Turkish influence, but what is interesting is that the authorities are changing the Turkish names of buildings, or re-vamping whole interiors to give them an 'Islamic' character. There are many naïve attempts at re-writing the country's history and denying its past.
- Old buildings in central Khartoum have a degree of elegance and appropriateness to them, some are designed in what is known as the Khartoum Style, yet, this 'western' commercial centre is obviously in decay through neglect. Numerous commercial centres have been developed elsewhere, one of them just south of the old centre and called ElSuq ElArabi. These traditional suqs are what keep the three towns of the capital functioning, they are the economic hubs. The western systems of commerce, roads, service networks, banks, laws, etc. have broken down, become dysfunctional. They have been replaced by the more effective rural network systems: 'As a result of failure of the urban economic mechanism, development and change has now to be self-generated based on an intact family system

which proves to be effective in family-based small businesses and sharing resources as a self-generated insurance...'

Globalisation operates in different ways in Sudan, where one cannot 'find a McDonalds on every corner', yet, even the most remote villages depend on what their sons send from abroad. Unlike Omdurman, Khartoum is a conglomeration of a variety of people who are there to trade, work or wait for opportunities abroad, rarely to settle in the true sense of the word.

- Across the river in Omdurman, the large government buildings and the mosques along the Nile Bank contrast strongly with the rural character of the town with its alleyways and 'suqs'. The traditional markets are dependent on strong unofficial networks with neighbouring countries and the rest of the country. They are the most popular of all the markets and are run by people who are in most cases originally from Omdurman. To the west of this traditional centre are two vibrant economic hubs, the first being Suq Libya. This was established in the 70s by lorry traders who brought goods across the border from Libya. Further west is Suq Elnaga, the cattle market of the western Sudanese nomads.
- Khartoum North has a completely different character to the other two towns, with its large industries and it has also been the experimental ground for housing schemes on large scale for workers. Again the economic hubs are its traditional markets, the largest being Suq Saad Gishra. Like in Khartoum and Omdurman, this Suq depends on 'suitcase traders', here the goods coming mostly from Egypt, Syria, Saudia Arabia.

Greater Khartoum is growing uncontrollably, especially along the riverbanks. Travel distances are very long. One of the major concerns is that the capital is becoming an environmental drain to the rest of the country, a parasite, surviving off the wealth of the rest of the country.

Another serious problem is that planning policies are:

- promoting the class system through segregation
- they are resulting in low densities, wasted land and expensive, unsustainable infrastructure
- they are promoting prejudice against traditional building materials
- they limit innovation in design, layouts are climatically inappropriate and monotonous
- they are not promoting communal development
- promoting inappropriate zoning of activities

The above is having many negative implications on the environmental situation in the capital where functions are dislocated, the rivers are being seriously polluted and urban sprawl is uncontrollable. There is no coordination between different authorities and recommendations usually conflict in content. Many environmental surveys that have been carried out in the rest of the country to assess the degree of resource degradation, have come to the conclusion that the demand in Khartoum has to be constrained.

It is difficult to imagine improvements being made without a long period of political stability, yet, many times the environmental damage inflicted is irreversible.