Field Report

Suakin: On Reviving an Ancient Red Sea Port City

ABDEL RAHI M SALIM

The island town of Suakin served as a gateway for trade and culture on the East African coast of the Red Sea for centuries. After a new harbor, Port Sudan, was built nearby in 1905-1909, the town was largely abandoned. Since that time attempts to save its architectural relics have alternated with periods during which people have become resigned to the fact these treasures would be left to deteriorate. Over the years a lack of funds and legal obstacles have largely prevented the implementation of preservation and reconstruction proposals. This paper describes a new proposal, with a different approach and strategy, aimed at overcoming these recurrent obstacles. Suakin can still be revived despite the extent of its decay.

The ancient city of Suakin, twin city to Jeddah across the Red Sea, was once a prosperous trade center, but it lost its importance as the principal port of Sudan when a new harbor, Port Sudan, was built to the north between 1905 and 1909 (fig.1). The reason given for the replacement of Suakin was that its harbor, which could only be reached by a narrow passage through dangerous coral reefs, was not adequate for new steamers. The construction of the new port meant Suakin faced a future of decay. After World War I, Port Sudan became home to most of the region’s businesses, firms and merchants, and by the end of the 1930s Suakin island had been completely deserted, and very few people remained in the Geyf, the mainland part of the city.

Suakin was originally built on a flat, oval-shaped island, about 750 m. long and less than 500 m. wide, located inside a narrow inlet to the Red Sea, and connected to the mainland by a causeway (figs.2,3). Its role as a major port derived from its connections with inland areas and the Nile Valley by way of caravan routes via Berber and Kassala. For centuries trade was carried on through Suakin with countries in Europe, the Far East, and...
Arabia. Caravans of as many as 1,000 camels would arrive at the port with Sudanese products (e.g., cotton, hides, gum arabic, and ivory), and leave with industrial goods, spices, perfumes, silk, rice and sugar, brought to Suakin by ship (FIG. 4).

Over the years Suakin also developed cotton factories and handicraft workshops. Its mosques served as places of worship, education and enlightenment; and its school, built in 1892, was the first of its kind in Sudan. Furthermore, Suakin achieved special sentimental value in the Muslim world and for the Sudanese people, since it served as a gateway to Islamic culture. Today it is still the most convenient port of embarkation for many West African Muslim pilgrims on their way to Mecca.

Considering this historical significance, it would seem there would be little need to justify a project for its revival. However, all the schemes that have been tried since 1933 to save the city have failed. Two main issues have defeated these efforts: scarcity of funds, and legal obstacles. Funding problems have stemmed primarily from the limited financial resources of the Sudan government and the fact that its Department of Antiquities has never tried to involve others, not even the people of the town, in the restoration efforts. Suakin has also never been listed as a World Heritage site, a designation that would enable the government to benefit from international donations. Meanwhile, in terms of legal difficulties, two issues have repeatedly surfaced: a restriction on spending government money on private property; and the inability of the government to reach a settlement on land ownership with Suakin’s remaining inhabitants.

Because of repeated failures to preserve the town, many people today may consider Suakin totally lost. But careful survey has shown that there are still significant buildings on Suakin island, and many others in the Geyf, which may be successfully repaired or preserved. These findings were confirmed in a report by a UNESCO mission in September 1993, led by Barry Lane and including the author.

A renewed effort to preserve the town would be particular-
ly timely today, since the opening of a new harbor at Suakin in 1991 has further endangered the old city. Settlers and land speculators are rushing to get hold of every piece of land in the area, including the old townsite, and if moves are not taken quickly to save what remains, historical Suakin will disappear forever.

Fortunately, a new scheme, “A Proposal for the Revival of the Ancient City of Suakin,” has already drawn the attention of the Sudanese authorities to the fact that new settlements should be planned outside the boundaries of the old city. The new proposal has also tried to draw attention to the need to carry out urgent repairs on fast-deteriorating buildings and protect the remaining antiquities.

As this paper indicates, the new scheme has attempted to learn from the failure of previous efforts. In particular, its philosophy has been to seek the revival of the city, not merely the preservation of its historic structures. Past schemes met local resistance because they attempted to deal only with historical relics, not with a living city. In the drive merely to save buildings, building owners were told they could not alter their structures because of their historical value. This created an atmosphere of distrust between the inhabitants and the Department of Antiquities.

By contrast, the present scheme not only aims to preserve relics but to construct new buildings within the tradition of Suakin. Furthermore, it recognizes the rights of owners, and it provides consultants to work with them to preserve the historical character of the city. So far, owners have shown great interest in the project and have been willing to participate in the various committees formed to initiate the project (FIG.5).

In terms of fund-raising, the present scheme has also taken a new approach, one that involves both government and nongovernment institutions. It is hoped that such an approach will open doors for local and international involvement. Many organizations and foundations dedicated to the preservation of world heritage now exist (e.g., the UNESCO World Heritage list, the Aga Khan Trust — Historic Cities Program, and the Organization of Arab Cities). Friendly governments with projects in Sudan have also shown interest in the Suakin proposal.

**CLIMATE, HISTORY AND GEOGRAPHY**

Suakin’s Red Sea coastal plain, bordered by mountains inland and coral reefs and marshy lagoons out to sea, has a desert-like climate. The plain is 700 km. long and 10-25 km. wide and is covered with scanty grass and bushes. In autumn, north monsoons reach the mountains, and heavy rains supply the region with sufficient water reserves.

To the south, higher mountains provoke more rainfall, feeding Khor Baraka with enough water to carry a great load of silt to Tokar Delta. Here, the irrigated plains have been producing cotton since the nineteenth century. In winter the climate is very pleasant, similar to that of the Mediterranean region, and monsoons can bring fresh cool breezes and rain from across the sea. But in summer the climate changes and becomes similar to the hot, humid climate of the Indian Ocean. At this time, monsoons may bring hot sandstorms out of the desert.

Though the documented history of Suakin begins after the rise of Islam, many sources mention that it has had a long and important history in the region. For example, Peter Vine and Hagen Schmid wrote:

*The Red Sea ports have a lengthy history sometimes going back thousands of years. They have been greatly influenced by international events so that their development until very recent times has owed more to external influences than to internal policies. A case in point is Suakin on the Sudanese coast.*

Much of Suakin’s early history is still obscure because the site has never been subjected to careful archaeological research. But Suakin is mentioned in many historical accounts and travel stories, and it is believed its settlement dates to before 3000 B.C. At this time it was a harbor and trade center in the Land of Punt, with which the ancient Egyptians maintained strong commercial connections. Later, in the tenth century B.C., it is assumed Suakin harbor was used by the fleet of King Solomon of Jerusalem. M.S. Dirar has also mentioned Suakin in connection with the Ptolemies of Egypt and the Romans, both of whom captured the city to secure maritime trade routes between their empires and the Far East.

It is thought Suakin acquired its name sometime between 750 and 950 A.D. Its history from this time is closely linked to Islamic and Arab cultures, especially those of the Mamluk and Ottoman periods. Contacts between the city and Islam are believed to have existed since the first Muslim immigrants stopped at Suakin on their way to take refuge in Abyssinia. It is reported that Muslim rulers sent envoys to Suakin to convert the people as early as 960 A.D. In 1215 the Sultan of Egypt sent an expedition to capture the city and place it under Egyptian Muslim rule. According to Vine and Schmid, “Suakin retained this position as the principal port of Egypt on the African coast of the Red Sea until Port Sudan was built at the beginning of this century.”

![FIGURE 5. Meeting with the people of Suakin.](image-url)
Great changes took place in the Red Sea ports during the sixteenth century. Politically, in the early part of the century Suakin was subject to Sudanese rule under the founder of the Fung Kingdom, Amara Dungus. But after the Turks took control of Egypt in 1516, they pushed south to Massaua, Suakin and Jeddah, and drove the Fung away.

Due to its extensive trading activities, especially with the Far East and Europe, Suakin increased significantly in size at this time and gained fame as an important port and commercial center. In his study of the Red Sea style, D.H. Matthews wrote:

_The Turks . . . improved and enlarged the port, and it was described by Don Juan da Castro as one of the richest cities of the East. He described the island and harbor as it is today. He compared it to Lisbon: with more than 200 ships waiting in its harbor to unload large quantities of goods._

In 1540 a Portuguese fleet led by Stefano da Gama, trying to take control of Red Sea trade routes, attacked Suakin, plundered the town, and sailed away. But thereafter the Portuguese, who had discovered India, merely attempted to divert trade to Europe away from the Red Sea.

Suakin remained under unbroken Turkish rule until the revolution of the Sudanese Mahdis in 1881. The Ottomans eventually came to exert the strongest influence upon the architecture of the Island. But in 1889 British troops invaded Sudan and took control of Suakin. And in 1905 the British started to build Port Sudan. Suakin was left to decay, its only activity being as a seasonal port of embarkation for African Muslim pilgrims bound for Mecca. In 1905, when the town was at its height, its permanent population was 10,500 (FIG.6). Symptomatic of its decline in following years was the drop in its population to 4,000 by 1929. Today all the town’s inhabitants live in the Geyf, and Suakin island is deserted.

**PLANNING AND TYPES OF BUILDINGS**

Suakin was once a typical Islamic city in terms of planning and architecture. Major social events, business, and administration were practiced at its center, where its _suk_, mosques, and government buildings were situated. A main street led across a causeway from the mainland through the Gordon Gate to the _suk_ and the island’s two major mosques. Surrounding this core, densely built-up groups of houses were balanced by open spaces of varied dimensions and forms. Winding, narrow lanes created a typical Arab street fabric (FIG.7).

Privacy, the main requirement of Islamic residential patterns, was strictly observed. For example, in planning, the city evolved a system of dead-end streets that limited through traffic by strangers. In architecture, the _mashrabiyah_, a wooden screening device that regulated the intake of wind and light, was used to ensure privacy. The compact layout of buildings and the system of narrow lanes (a result of the limited area of the island) allowed buildings to shadow one another and limited the dust carried from the desert by summer monsoons. The narrow lanes also served as ventilating channels for cool breezes from the sea.

Though the architecture of Suakin is similar to that of many other Islamic cities in character and general features, it once had its own special quality. This was representative of a vernacular building tradition that dominated towns along the Red Sea coast. D.H. Matthews confirms the view that social and climatic conditions played a major role in planning and shaping the town’s architecture during the different periods of its history. He has also written that the town is a characteristic example of what he has called “the Red Sea style.”

According to available records, the architecture of Suakin can be categorized into three main types. The oldest consists of buildings such as Beit El Basha and Khorshid House (FIG.8), which display a scale similar to that of the two mosques on the island. These houses and mosques may date from the fifteenth or sixteenth centuries — a time when Suakin was particularly prosperous. In this type, the ground
Islamic way of life in which extended family groups lived together and in which the activities of men and women were separated. In many cases one family's house might have occupied an entire street.

The second type of building characteristic to the city was a type of three-story house. The mashrabiyyah — or the roshan, as it is called in the Red Sea region — is a typical feature of this type. Since the mashrabiyyah is characteristic of Mamluk architecture, this indicates the second type of structure originated either during or after the Mamluk period (the thirteenth to sixteenth centuries). Hansen thinks the majority of Suakin houses actually date from the Ottoman period (sixteenth to nineteenth century). Examples of this second type of structure are invariably higher than the minarets of the island's two old mosques. This also indicates that they were built later, because of the rule in Islamic planning against minarets being lower than surrounding buildings.

The second type of Suakin architecture is characterized by a standard arrangement of rooms on the different floors. On the ground floor was the magaad, a reception room for guests and for the conduct of business. The ground floor might also contain shops and stores for goods and family belongings (FIG. 9). The upper floors were reserved for private family life, and might consist of different self-contained apartments for the subdivisions of the extended family. Here may be found different sitting rooms for use by family or by women guests. These were large rooms with one or two mashrabiyyahs where women might sit and enjoy the cool breeze while they watched the activities of the street below. Opening to these sitting majlis were other withdrawing rooms, decorated with arched niches. Stores were usually found next to these rooms. On each floor
FIGURE 9. (ABOVE) Historic rendering of the main street through the island's suk, showing buildings of the second historical period. (Rendering by author.)


was also a bathroom with a latrine which was flushed with bath water through a vertical canal in the wall. On the top floors were kitchens, servant quarters, and roofed and unroofed terraces. The dimensions of the principal rooms usually ranged from 5 to 5.5 m. long, 4 to 5 m. wide, and 3.5 to 4 m. high.

The third type of building characteristic to the city is that of the nineteenth century. These were larger in size but lacked the refinement of the older buildings. They rarely had mashrabiyahs; instead, they frequently used projecting balconies. According to Hansen, this change was due to the influence of Egyptian-European architecture. Examples of these buildings are the houses of Mohammed Bey Ahmed and Omer Effendi Obeid, and the Wakkala, or caravanserai (FIG. 10).

Matthews and Hinkel argue that the age of Suakin build-
ings can be distinguished by their height — e.g., older buildings are only one or two stories high. But Dirar doesn't agree, citing a picture by the Portuguese sea captain Don Juan da Castro from 1540 which shows that three-storied houses were common at that time.

Generally, house plans in the city displayed basic Muslim principles. These were based on strict observation of private family life, and meant segregation between spaces for the family and for nonfamily guests and visitors. Usually houses featured an enclosed courtyard bordered by rooms on three sides and by the street on the fourth side.

In some ways, however, the most fascinating feature of Suakin's architecture may have been its mashrabiyahs, with their fine woodwork projecting from the town's whitewashed coral walls (FIG. 11). These offered a magnificent system of shutters and wooden grills to regulate the intake of light and wind. They often made use of fixed panels of halved slats at the top and twelve pairs of flaps which could be opened (all at once or separately). From inside, the mashrabiyah provided a space like a small room. It could be furnished with carpets and cushions where people might sit and enjoy the cool breath from the sea.

In terms of design, the four-bay mashrabiyah was the most common in Suakin — with each bay 1 dina (18 cm.) wide. Five-bay, three-bay, and twelve-bay mashrabiyahs could also be found, and two mashrabiyahs might be linked together with a gulla stand between to hold ceramic jars to cool water. Rare examples also exist of break-fronted mashrabiyahs, which allowed an extra projection from the wall, and there were also circular and polygonal mashrabiyahs. Finally, in narrow streets, where the projection of the mashrabiyah was not possible, large windows based on the mashrabiyah principle were built flush with the wall. This principle might also be used to lock up shops. In that case the upper half could be raised when the shop was open to pro-
vide a sunshade, while the lower half could act as a counter on which to display goods for sale. The fine woodwork of the mashrabiya is typical of a craft developed during the Mamluk period. The small dimensions of the wood used were a clear consequence of scarcity, since all wood had to be imported. Not infrequently, packing cases might be used as a supply.

Despite the presence of the three distinct types of structure in the city, certain building traditions remained constant throughout the town's history. Walls were generally built of coralline limestone, dug from quarries to the south of the island or from the bottom of the sea. These blocks provided an excellent building material. Being porous, they were light in weight, had low heat conductivity, and were easy to cut. Stones used in house construction were about 30x25x30 cm. in size. They were laid as an inner and outer wall, with mud mortar and rubble fill between (FIG.12). Wooden ties were used for stabilization every 1.00 to 1.20 m. These consisted of two laths (about 10x6 cm.) on each side of the wall, connected by traverses each meter. External walls were 80 cm. thick at the first floor, about 65 cm. thick at the second floor, and 45 cm. thick at the third floor. Walls were plastered, both from the interior and the exterior with good-quality thin lime plaster, forming a hard, white, bone-like surface.

![Diagram of mashrabiya structure](image1)

Likewise, the construction of roofs and floors remained consistent. These were built of poplar beams, placed at 39-40 cm. intervals, with their ends laid on the walls. In older houses, floors were formed of different layers. First, a grid of twigs 2-4 cm. thick and 2 m. long (or in some cases reeds tied together with palm-frond strings) were laid over the beams. This was then covered with a palm-frond mat, sometimes with a colored pattern. Over this was laid a 15 cm. layer of mud, rubble and lime. Finally, a finishing layer of lime mortar (the same as used for finishing the walls) was spread over the floor surface to form a bone-like cover 1-2 cm. thick.

The above type of construction explains why the buildings of Suakin were able to survive so long, and why — once maintenance was neglected — they started to crumble so fast. Since the buildings' foundations bear directly on the coral rocks, these do not seem to have had anything to do with the structures' failure. And as long as water could be prevented from penetrating to the mud mortar, the walls would stand firm. But when maintenance was neglected, water penetration caused swelling, cracking and disintegration in the walls. Penetration by water also caused roof and floor beams to decay and break. These appear to be the two main reasons for the failure of Suakin buildings.

PREVIOUS EFFORTS TO PRESERVE AND RESTORE SUAKIN

Though Suakin was largely abandoned after the construction of Port Sudan, it was never completely forgotten. Attempts to save its relics have alternated with periods of resignation that these treasures would be allowed to disintegrate.

The issue of preservation and restoration has surfaced a number of times. As early as 1926, E.C.C. Balfour, governor of the Red Sea province, wrote to the central government asking for funds to maintain decaying buildings. And in 1927 the governor of the province was empowered to destroy or repair, at owners’ expense, buildings which had become unfit (even though this power only extended to rendering a building habitable or safe, and did not necessarily cover restoration). Next, in 1933 A.S. Redfern, Commissioner of Port Sudan, suggested that some building owners in Suakin should receive government support to repair their structures. This policy was refused by the government on grounds of financial stringency. However, in the same year the Department of Antiquities selected 25 buildings for occasional repair. Then, in 1937, in accordance with Section 59 of the Suakin town regulations, some streets were closed because of the danger of falling buildings.

In the period between 1940 and 1950 D.H. Matthews, an architect in the Public Works Department, and Professor of Art J.P. Greenlaw provided valuable documentation of Suakin. Matthews wrote reports about the situation of the town's buildings and published articles about the Red Sea style. Greenlaw documented Suakin's building in a number of drawings published later in a book, *The Coral Buildings of Suakin*. In 1955 Matthews wrote that “the structures are nearly all in very sound conditions, and their collapse is due to lack of maintenance.”

Between 1950 and 1955 Matthews divided the buildings of Suakin into four classes: A) buildings of exceptional interest or those in extra good conditions which should be preserved; B) buildings which, while not structurally perfect, should not be allowed to deteriorate beyond their present state; C) buildings which should be maintained as ruins to conserve the general pattern and character of the town; and D) walls up to first-floor height which should be maintained to suggest the former street layout and give a sense of enclosure.

Several Commissioners of Archaeology in Sudan since World War II (R.L. Shinnie, 1949; J. Vercoutter, 1958; T.H. Thabit, 1968; Negm Ed Din M. Sherif, 1972-1976) have tried to obtain government support for the maintenance of Suakin. But their efforts have largely failed because of the two problems already mentioned: lack of government funds, and the legal prohibition against government funds being spent on private property.

Since Sudanese independence, a number of studies have been made of the town in conjunction with efforts by the various Commissioners of Archaeology. A French consultant architect from UNESCO visited the town in 1958. His estimation for preservation was 75,000 L.S. In 1968 F.W. Hinkel, an architect from the GDR, made a further report on Suakin. His scheme for preservation and maintenance benefited from Matthews' earlier work, but the local and international response did not meet expectations. The next appeal to "Save Suakin" was launched in 1970. And in 1972 UNESCO sent a consultant architect, E. Hansen, who benefited from the Hinkel scheme and adapted it to the further level of decay at the time. About fifteen of the old buildings were selected for preservation at that time, and a similar number were selected to be preserved as ruins. Together these structures were intended to form an open-air museum dedicated to the history and culture of the town.

Despite these earlier efforts, the deterioration of Suakin continues rapidly. The earlier schemes are now difficult to follow, and in some ways they may have become completely unrealistic. According to Hansen in 1972:

All these attempts show in the most moving way the eagerness of the authorities and private persons to preserve this important historical site, and at the same time, the complete impossibility of obtaining funds from a state budget which is essentially taken up by the immediate necessities. In the meantime the decay of Suakin is progressing according to the logarithmic scale common for all decay and is now in the last steep phase. During my stay in Suakin, when the first rains were falling, I witnessed daily the collapse of parts of masonry. This is probably the last report to be written on the preservation of Suakin. In few years there will be nothing more to preserve."
During his last visit to Sudan in 1976 the German architect Hinkel was asked again by the Commissioner of Archaeology to study the situation of Suakin. Since decay had taken a further toll on buildings, Hinkel arrived at a new proposal for the town that called for creation of a historical quarter on the northeast corner of the island comprising 2.6 ha and placed emphasis on preservation of buildings from the early and middle periods in the island’s architectural history.

The arrangement and layout of the quarter would incorporate the following ideas: that the most interesting buildings from an architectural point of view would be selected for reconstruction (a chance that had not existed earlier); that the composition of the new ensemble of houses would reflect the original situation on the island and allow visitors to feel as if they were part of a historically grown community; and that as many of the existing buildings as possible would be kept and preserved in the area, either by repair work to original structures or by re-erecting houses on their original foundations. Since the quarter was supposed to be “typical,” it had to include a number of features, such as a market area, shops, coffeehouses, houses of different styles and heights; busy as well as quiet areas; and streets, open spaces, and squares. The mass of the government buildings and the island’s two mosques were to be used to assist in the creation of a vivid and colorful ensemble.

The 1976 effort was the last scheme to date for the preservation and restoration of Suakin. And, as with all previous efforts, it suffered from the same two problems: lack of government funding and legal issues related to land ownership.

**THE PRESENT SCHEME**

The idea for the current effort was born in the late 1980s, when the construction of a new port at Suakin was coming to an end. At that time, local people were beginning to speak of the change that would take place in the standard of living as a result of the new harbor, and land speculators were beginning to move in. Since Hinkel’s work in 1976, old Suakin had been almost completely forgotten, and had become a virtual ghost town — its valuable buildings crumbling into heaps of rubble. The rich merchants of the island had long ago moved to Port Sudan and other cities, leaving only the poorest of inhabitants to occupy the deteriorating houses (the number of the town’s inhabitants was estimated at 20,000, most all of whom worked in Port Sudan). After several visits to the site and careful study of all the previous work, a different approach and strategy to the problem of the city’s revival was established.

The first step was to present a preliminary study to the Sudan government, the people of Suakin, and the UNESCO and UNDP offices in Khartoum showing that a revival project was feasible. Following this work, all parties agreed that urgent action was needed to preserve what was left of the town and devise a development plan to improve the life of its inhabitants. Next, committees of different levels (local and national), including important national figures and representatives of the people of Suakin, were formed.

In September 1993 a UNESCO mission led by Barry Lane, and including the author, was sent to Suakin. Their findings were compiled in a report that is presently under UNESCO consideration. UNDP participation has also been sought, since the project is not only concerned with the preservation of relics but with the triple goal of helping alleviate poverty, rehabilitate a decaying environment (using traditional material and techniques), and bring life to a historical cultural site.

An immediate priority has been to convince the Sudan Department of Antiquities to take two steps. One was to perform urgent repairs to the few remaining intact buildings to stop their final deterioration. Fortunately, this step has been taken. The other has been to have Suakin listed as a site in the antiquities ordinance and the World Heritage List.

Since the strategy of the new scheme combines restoration of the historical city with the development of a living community, a new categorization of structures in the town has been devised.

**The First Category.** Even though a first impression of Suakin is that its level of deterioration is so vast as to preclude restoration, careful studies show there is much of Suakin that may still be preserved. On both sides of the main street leading from the Kitchener Gate on the mainland to the Gordon Gate on the island and through the island’s suk are buildings of various functions that are in good enough shape to be restored. All five mosques and two zawias are in restorable condition, and all except one are still in use. Furthermore, on the island there are other valuable buildings such as the Law Court, the two main mosques (Hanafi and Shafai), and a few houses such as those of Mohammed Bey Ahmed and Sayed Sahloul that might be preserved and restored to their original shape (FIG.13). But time is critical, and delay may spell the final disappearance of such unmaintained buildings (FIG.14).

**The Second Category.** In the second category are grouped buildings that have almost disappeared, but about which there is enough information to make reconstruction...
possible (FIG.15). This will involve rebuilding collapsed buildings to their original form by collecting correct and relevant historical information from which to prepare project documentation and design. Such information can be compiled by different methods and from a variety of sources. Material may be collected on site by means of photos showing the existing conditions of buildings and sketches and drawings elaborating on their remains. Literature describing Suakin might also be collected and studied, with special attention to old photographs and drawings of buildings. In addition, there are a number of sources for plans, photographs and written descriptions of Suakin's buildings both inside Sudan, abroad, and in private collections. Among the places such information might be obtained are the School of Oriental Studies, Sudan Archives (Durham); the photographic collection of the German architect Hinkel; the photographic collection of the Sudan Ministry of Information; the photographic collection of the Khartoum University Library; the drawings of Prof. Greenlaw; and family albums, oral descriptions, and information collected through interviews with old inhabitants of Suakin.

Reconstruction of the town might be made easier by systematic standardization and repetition of building elements typical of old Suakin buildings. Many old Suakin houses and mosques, big or small, had the same dimensions, proportions and details. Greenlaw noticed, for example, that "These little houses contained the characteristic details of the larger houses; recessed wall-shelves, arranged in threes with ventilators at the head of each; ornamented door-hoods, paneled doors, and simple, undecorated lattice-work windows." The use of standard dimensions and repeated forms facilitates easy, quick reconstruction, and has been used for the reconstruction of historic districts in the past. Some of the best examples of this strategy date to the period after World War II. Individual buildings and whole parts of cities have been reconstructed in this way in the cities of Warsaw, Zanzibar, and Mostar.

The Third Category. Many of the historical buildings of Suakin have totally collapsed, leaving behind no information whatsoever to help in their reconstruction. Here there is nothing to preserve or to rebuild, and these ruins should be cleared away and replaced with new buildings or open spaces. The type of new structures that will be suitable will depend on a number of factors and on suggestions arrived at through consensus among the different legal and social committees. Such decisions should be expressed clearly in an action plan. The careful handling of the first and second categories and the decisions made for their future and the future of this third category will set the basic elements for the future master plan of the new city of Suakin.

The Fourth Category. Finally, there are buildings in the city today that have been built by the authorities or by individuals using modern materials and methods, and which are foreign to the architecture of the city. For example, a few bungalows of colonial type, built of cement blocks and roofed with corrugated iron sheets, were built for the Fisheries Department without any consideration or respect for the historic city. These bungalows were built right in front several of the largest buildings — the Shinnawi Wakkala (caravanserai) and the Gordon Gate, the only entrance to Suakin island — and should be removed.

ACTION AND MASTER PLANS

To achieve its objectives, the new scheme proposes to start
with an action plan and a master plan that will lead eventually to an implementation stage. The action plan should include identification of financial sources, priorities, and a detailed outline of the stages of the scheme.

A comprehensive master plan is essential, one that resolves legislative issues and clearly sets out the roles and relationship of the state and the inhabitants. Beside lack of funds, legal obstacles have largely been responsible for the failure of previous preservation schemes. The plan should include direct instructions stipulating that only traditional methods and materials be used in rebuilding. The original urban fabric, building plots, street layouts, and height limits should also be preserved. The master plan should further set the town zones and the type of development, including provisions for the infrastructure needed for contemporary living. Such a plan will be aimed at achieving a living town with its relics, cultural traditions, and crafts preserved.

The project, as envisioned, has three major stages. The first is concerned with the formation of committees (national and local) and the appointment of management and technical teams. These groups will be responsible for preparing a more detailed strategy and identifying funding sources. They will also begin to address legal problems and building-code issues. The second stage includes research, planning and preparation of project documentation, including action and master plans, detailed zoning, infrastructure design, and a restoration pilot project. The third stage would be implementation.

FUTURE PROSPECTS AND VIABILITY

Today Suakin’s population is composed of a limited number of poor families. But on account of the opening of the new harbor, the number of the town’s inhabitants may eventually double or even triple. If revived, Suakin has sufficient potentialities for the economic and social development and survival of a population of such size. The site has offered excellent living conditions for centuries, and the following additional developments could ensure an economic future for a revived city.

- The new port daily receives vessels from Saudi Arabia and neighboring countries. The free-trade zone in the port is attractive to companies and investors, and the number of pilgrims passing through Suakin is increasing steadily. Port activities are promoting job opportunities for Suakin’s many new inhabitants.
- Businessmen have suggested that the packing industry could be encouraged in the town. Imported and exported goods can be transported in bulk quantities to be packed and distributed from Suakin.
- The Red Sea near Suakin is rich of marine life and coral gardens. The large quantities of fish and crayfish living in Sudanese waters could be exploited. To date, fishing has been an insignificant industry in Sudan because it is unpopular among the Beja nomad population of the region.
- If a fishing industry is developed, cold storage would be needed to preserve the catch until it could be sold. Such cold storage facilities could be used for fresh fruit, vegetable, and meat products coming from inland.
- Suakin continues to be a suitable place for the cotton industry. Its first cotton ginning factory was established in 1876, and was the first of its kind in Sudan. This ginnery depends on the Tokar crop, which is only 60 km. from Suakin.
Experiments by Crossland (1912-1927) proved that the Sudanese Red Sea coast is suitable for pearl farming. A pearl farm was established in Dongonab, providing an adequate harvest with a minimum of supervision.

A local salt industry was established in 1957, and can be developed further. (Industries need to be located far enough away from the historic town to ensure pollution-free environment.)

Though every visitor to Sudan usually visits Suakin, large-scale international tourism should not be encouraged, because it could do considerable harm to the ecology of the site. On the other hand, occasional visitors would be welcome to enjoy the city life and the free port shopping, so contributing to the economy of the town.

The coastal plains at the foot of the Red Sea mountains were once a natural habitat for wildlife. This area can be revived as a reservation for animals and vegetation. There is ample rainfall to support such a project, which will certainly enhance the regional economy.

This fascinating city with all its cultural and economic potential and long history of survival should be given a chance for better future. If the twentieth century has witnessed its sad deterioration, let the twenty-first century witness its resurrection.

REFERENCE NOTES

5. Ibid., pp.60-61.
7. Ibid., p.5.