Darat al-Funun [1]

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PROJECT BRIEF

When renovation works started in 1992, the first house was in a critical condition. The main floor had by then been deserted for 15 years, and the last occupant of the basement, an elderly woman had passed away. Only in the small shop on the street that passes east of the Darat al-Funun was a modest workshop of carpentry; the rest, the house and the garden with its archaeological remains, were dormant under a layer of decaying eucalyptus leaves.

Renovation, or adaptive re-use, was based on principles that were kept in mind throughout the intervention phase and are still, nowadays, of great importance in the management and presentation of the Darat al-Funun.

With minimum intervention, changes were limited to those, which help synchronize the new function of the buildings with heir inherent qualities. A lack of proper renovation know-how is subjecting most of Amman's architectural heritage to harsh treatment such as severe scrubbing, sandblasting, and painting of stone facade. Such acts of compulsive whitening are responsible for the effacing of a vital feature of stone workmanship - chisel marks. This insensitive treatment is not only responsible for erasing forever traces of traditional stone tools; it also inflicts irreversible damage since the crust of the stone is set on a course of perpetual decay.

The stone elevations of the houses of the Darat al-Funun were left untouched. They retain the fragile marks of tools that were once held in hands of strength and skill. In these elevations resides a hand-written text, the footprints of chisels that once rang under the impact of the hammer, and the identity of an individual stone-mason.

Architecture can be seen as a record of past decisions. New decisions can be added, provided that they do not erase, distort or overpower previous ones. New intervention at the Darat al-Funun was kept visible and with maximum reversibility.

When the new addition of the library was conceived, a special structural system was chosen. The addition was built out of concrete blocks to make a clear contrast with the old parts, avoiding the use of stone, which might have created an unpleasant mimicry. Contrast between the outer walls of the old building and the library addition above was limited to the texture of walls, without a great difference in color, to give the sunlit elevations the chance to play with the shadows. A thin tint of soil, taken from the Darat al-Funun garden, was applied, in order to tone down the new plaster. To avoid the concentration of loads at corners, the new addition was built without the use of columns. The load-bearing walls, built of semi-hollow concrete blocks, kept the addition light, evenly distributing weight on the old walls below, and reversible, so that should the library be dismantled, no heavy machinery would be needed.

The fact that the Abdul Hameed Shoman Foundation has chosen to renovate three of the old houses of Amman to become the Darat al-Funun gives a clear message, celebrating Amman's architectural heritage and resisting fashionable expansions. The traditional character of Jabal Weibdeh has been enhanced, in a way which gives the community and the very neighborhood a renewed sense of cultural value.

AREA	LOCATION	DATE	CLIENT
Main Building 620sqm Blue House 285sqm	Jabal Al-Weibdeh, Amman, Jordan	1991	Abdul Hameed Shoman Foundation

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