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Rehabilitation of Asilah

Asilah, Morocco
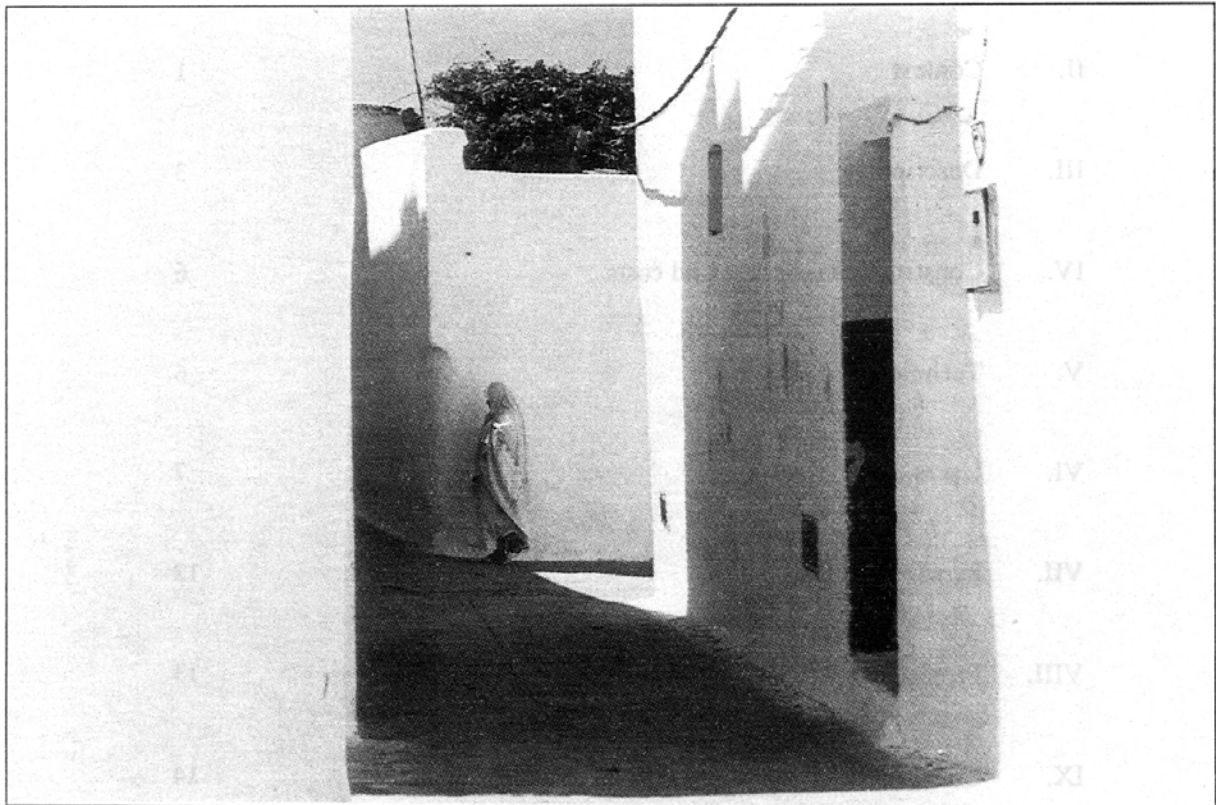
Patron
Mohamed Benaissa & Mohamed Melehi
Asilah, Morocco

Client
Local Population & Municipality of Asilah
Asilah, Morocco

Completed
1978 ongoing

I. Introduction

The benefits of the rehabilitation of Asilah can be classified in four areas or groups of people in the following order: 1) the physical entity of the city, its infrastructure, streets, trees, and buildings, 2) an intellectual group, or al-Mouhit Cultural Association, 3) the civil servants of the government and 4) the local residents. A group of intellectuals who share the same convictions and are headed by Mohamed Benaissa (who later became Minister of Culture) tried to promote the town and make Asilah a prominent cultural centre in Morocco. To a large extent they have succeeded. Thus, painters, poets, musicians and intellectuals from abroad and mostly from Morocco and North Africa participate in the summer festivals (*moussems*). The government was prompted, if not pressurised by the festivals to improve the town's infrastructure. The town's physical entity is now much improved. The civil servants are enthusiastic about the rehabilitation works and are much impressed by their Municipal Council President who became Minister of Culture. They are implementing exactly what they were told by the Minister. In this way, the ideas of the intellectual group are being transmitted if not imposed on the town's residents and physical elements. The Minister, who is neither an architect nor a planner, means well; however, because of the lack of finances, he has no clear physical planning programme but rather strategies and philosophic views (if not dreams) that are beyond the vision of most government officials and definitely beyond those of the residents. Most local residents are at a loss. Those who own property benefited financially. Others were hit hard; their children are migrating as the town discourages all the non-cultural industries. Apart from two months in the summer, the town's youth is under-employed for ten months resulting in many social problems such as drug abuse. The 20'000 local residents who live and think in a simple way have no library or college at their disposal (only recently a secondary school was built); in short, they are left behind culturally. They cannot participate in the cultural activities as they are usually employed during the summer when the town's 20'000 residents host some 150'000 tourists). In other words, the people of Asilah serve those who enjoy culture. Even if corruption is involved, what the Mouhit Association activities, the struggle of Benaissa and the local residents' participation did for the town's infrastructure is impressive and deserves recognition.

II. Context

a. Historical Background

After leaving his home town, Asilah, for twenty years, Mohamed Benaissa came back in 1968, and bought and renovated a house inside the town of Asilah where he currently lives. The house was bought for less than US$ 1'000. It is said that before 1976 the town was a mess; it was very dirty. Garbage was to be found everywhere and rats proliferated. To improve his town, Benaissa and his close friend Mohamed Melehi decided to run for election. When they became members of the town's Municipal Council they initiated a study on cleanliness in the town. They found out that the eleven garbage collectors of the town were using donkeys to collect garbage for the municipality and loosing over 70% of their time knocking at doors and asking people to give them the garbage. Thus, they asked all the residents to put the garbage outside the houses, ready for collection, to save the time of those eleven men. This worked.

Benaissa and Melehi's first concern was the town's cleanliness and, as there was no money available, they decided to invite the people to participate. Mohamed Melehi who was a well known artist as well as the president of the Moroccan Painters Association, and Mohamed Benaissa who loved art, decided to invite artists to paint some walls in the city. In April 1978, eleven painters accepted the invitation and participated with children in the painting of some walls. Children were then told that their community had become beautiful and that this beauty should be maintained by keeping these areas as clean as possible. In this process, gifts and prizes were given to the children through competitions, hoping that residents would appreciate the town's murals and

maintain the town's cleanliness. Older people wondered what was happening and they were informed that their town had taken a special significance for those painters. Benaissa recalls that within one week all the residents started cleaning the town; "It was really magnificent" he said.

The next move was to convince the municipality to pave the streets by using artistic patterns (curved lines forming waves were developed by M. Melehi) rather than the usual dull square patterns so that the children could walk on something beautiful. When this succeeded, Messrs Melehi and Benaissa decided to organise a summer festival and name it as "Asilah's Cultural Festival". To do that, they established a association and named it "Al-Mouhit Cultural Association".

Al-Mouhit Cultural Association came in conflict with a group of Tunisians who were associated with the Safir hotels and wanted to organise the "International Festival of Asilah". They wanted to invest in a hotel on five hectares of land, which Benaissa opposed strongly. His reason for opposing the hotel's construction was that the festival should be based on the town's capabilities and should respect the town's values. "How can they use culture as a pretext under which they bring singers and dancers in to a conservative town?" Benaissa argued that bringing famous musical names was not culture; it was business. In 1978, the conflict reached its peak and Benaissa insisted that he did not want Asilah to become a zoo where tourists dressed differently from the residents, would photograph the town's people. "We cannot commercialise people's way of life and environment", Benaissa said. After his visit to the Prime Minister, Benaissa gathered the people near al-Asaba gate, lay down on the ground and said "over my dead body" to mobilise the town's people. The Safir Hotels stopped advertising in the Western Media for the "International Festival of Asilah". Benaissa, who was a media man and knew how to handle the situation, counter advertised; the conflict then created a national, and to some extent an international debate, attention focusing on a basic question: to what extent should a society give up its values for tourism in order to generate income? The conflict around Asilah became a favourite subject in the media and Benaissa took advantage of this. He insisted that any planning for tourism that would not draw on the resident's participation would be disastrous. His argument was supported by studies made on tourism in the Mediterranean countries. Thus, the project of the Safir Hotel failed. Benaissa then started generating funds to continue the town's cultural activities and renamed the festival as *mussem* since this name is more related to cultural and religious activities. He then retained the Raisouni Palace from the Spanish government and restored part of it to host the cultural activities as well as to accommodate the participants. Writers, thinkers, painters, etc., were invited and the first summer cultural activities of Asilah were held in 1978.

Bringing those who are interested in cultural activities from different parts of the world prompted other governmental agencies to improve Asilah's infrastructure. As Benaissa said, there was nothing in Asilah; Asilah was not prepared; there was no pharmacy nor even a doctor; in one instance over 100 people died of typhoid fever. The next year (1979) Benaissa was summoned to Rabat and was questioned by the King: "What are you trying to do Benaissa?" Benaissa explained that cultural activities should not be centralised and that culture is often associated with leftist groups and that it should not be that way. The King was convinced and supported him and gave instructions to government agencies to help Asilah.

Up to 1983, all activities were carried out by al-Mouhit Association. They say that the municipality was against the festivals. Sometimes municipal workers purposely disconnected electricity in the theatre.

In 1983, Benaissa became the president of the Municipal Council of Asilah for six years. M. Melehi became his assistant. Of the 21 members of the Municipal Council, 18 are members of Benaissa's political party (*Hizb al ahrar*). Thus, they are now in total control of the town.

b.   *Local Architectural Character*

In terms of building spaces, there are two types depending on the siting. Outside the old town, a typical two storey floor plan is used and a few rooms around a small court that is often covered. ARchitects seem to respect the users' requests and the same floor type is being used by most architects with some alterations. The houses are lined on 8-20 m side streets that lead to other narrower (3-6 m) streets. The streets are planned by the municipality and the floor plans that were designed or signed by architects are approved by the municipality too. The resemblance between newly built dwellings suggests the development of a new controlled vernacular. Inside the old town, courtyard houses are arranged to generate the typical compact organic fabric with its narrow and occasional dead-end streets; there are few or even no overpasses. Some Spanish influence is evident on the façades of some houses, eg. balconies. Shared water wells and their accessibility is perhaps the most interesting feature of Asilah. There are no signs of gates inside the old town denoting the town's obedience to its rulers, while its defensive walls signify the ruler's desire for independence. The strategic location of Asilah, because of its natural harbour has influenced its morphology.

c.   *Climatic Conditions*

Typical Mediterranean weather which is dry with moderate temperatures in summer and cool and rainy in winter.

d.   *Immediate Surroundings of the Site*

The plains and hills around Asilah are generally farmland. There are no factories. To the north, lie lovely sandy beaches that are utilised as summer resorts. The immediate southern shore line is not as sandy. Squatter settlements (*mixik*) lie to the south-east of Asilah. In the Atlantic ocean to the north-western side of the old town, there is a line of rocks which creates a natural harbour. This is perhaps the reason for Asilah's importance in history. The old harbour is currently being rebuilt to serve as a commercial port and marina. With the exception of a few developments, the road connecting Rabat and Tangiers defines the towns at the eastern border. Around the Portuguese defensive walls, there was a water canal that has been transformed into a market place and a street on the eastern side, and coffee shops on the northern side.

e.   *Topography of the Project Site*

The town of Asilah is located on the Atlantic Ocean on the north-western tip of Morocco. It is 42 km. south-east of Tangiers and 26 km away from Tangiers' Airport. The site of Asilah is fairly linear with a slope averaging 10% towards the hills on the east; these run parallel to the coast. Within the walls of the Portuguese town the site is quite flat.

III. Description

a.   *The Rise of the Programme*

The organisation of the first cultural festival in 1978 helped al-Mouhit Association to renovate a section of the town ramparts and to restore and transform large portions of the luxury Raissouni Palace into a palace of culture. Gradually, the whole town was being converted to accommodate cultural activities and industries.

b.   General Objectives

The main objective was to renovate the town of Asilah with the users' participation to accommodate cultural activities. For example, each year 500 children compete in two groups to clean the beach of Asilah. If the residents want to pave their street, they have to supply either material or labour. According to Benaissa, the important issue is not whether the town can build its infrastructure or not, but rather to make the people participate and thus appreciate what they do. "We want to inculcate in the residents the concept that they did the work so they will feel responsible for it; otherwise we will never finish improving the town," Benaissa said.

c.   Functional Requirements

The major philosophy (according to officials) is that culture should be regarded as a source of income for the local population. However, this income should come from Moroccans as foreign tourists reside in large hotels that are owned by outsiders; they do not benefit the local population as much. Moroccan tourists, who buy food, are the ones who bring profit to the local small businesses who employ residents. Last year (summer 1988) some 150'000 people visited Asilah, 90% of whom were from universities. They resided in private houses, on roof terraces and balconies. Thus the functional requirements should first concentrate on:
- the improvement and extension of the infrastructure, including running water, sewerage and electricity;
- the restoration and rehabilitation of historical buildings such as the Portuguese fortifications, the Kamra Tower and the Raissouni Palace (an early 20th century structure);
- the construction of new houses within the old town to replace the dilapidated structures;
- the re-arrangement of public spaces for commercial activities such as the market place at the foot of the fortifications;
- the introduction of decorative pavings and murals designed by local artists.

d.   Building Data

The city started a campaign calling on professionals, educated individuals and their relatives who had property in Asilah to renovate their property using traditional vocabularies. Many intellectuals and artists from Asilah or other parts of Morocco, or expatriates are buying and renovating property in Asilah. Thus, construction in Asilah almost doubled in the last decade. According to Benaissa, approximately 60% of Asilah's buildings have been restored or renovated. Each year (according to the town's officials) 10 to 15 dwellings are renovated within the old town which comprises 1'200 dwellings!

On top of a hill that overlooks Asilah (where the King Muhammed V on his way to Tangiers stood and asked for independence on April 10th 1947, an open air theatre designed by Youssef Melehi is being constructed; close to it is the Summer University of Mu'tamid Ibn Abbad for the Afro-Arab Forum (Colloques de l'Université d'Eté al Mu'tamid Ibn Abbad et du Forum Afro-Arabe).

The rehabilitation programme also included:
- transforming the Raissouni Palace to accommodate art studios, workshops for children, laboratories and a hall for cultural gatherings;
- building a site housing the Hasan II exhibition centre;
- the provision of an open air theatre in the old part of the town within the Portuguese walls, and of an area for film shows and permanent exhibitions of plastic arts.

e.   Evolution of Design Concepts

Response to Physical Constraints

The town growth is very controlled. There are no new complexes, hotels or resort areas. The town wants to re-use the existing physical environment through restoring it. For example, since 1981, al-Mouhit Association decided to renovate every year the sanitary facilities of a least 10 houses belonging to poor people. For each house the cost is MDH 940 (US$ 1 = MDH 8.24). The residents of those houses then live with relatives during the summer and rent their houses for about MDH 2'000 - 3'000 per month and thus have an average monthly income of about MDH 500.

The newly-built private houses occupy irregular plots left after the partial or total demolition of older structures. The new houses usually integrate elements salvaged from the ruins such as door-ways and arcades.

Landscaping

Asilah is quite rich in open spaces outside of the Portuguese walls. Within the old town, landscaping is mainly found in courtyards. Communal public spaces are painted (murals) adding to the beauty of the spaces. Doors of houses in narrow streets are usually open, and children and sometimes women sit in the doorway. Outside the old town, some dead-end streets are used as living spaces for the community where plants and chairs are placed. Roof terraces are really impressive. Much of the house activities are conducted there. The rehabilitation of Asilah has respected this need. Although a person standing on a roof terrace has a view of all the surrounding roof terraces because of low parapets (a situation that most decision-makers do not like), the municipality has not tried to force people to raise their parapets.

f.   Structure, Materials, Technology

Structural System

New houses are built of reinforced concrete columns and beams; others use load bearing brick walls and partitions. There are also load bearing stone walls. Reinforced hollow-tiles are used for the floors of new buildings.

Materials

Concrete and hollow bricks are prevalent in new constructions. The façades are rendered with cement covered with lime. Finishes include red deal and cedar woodwork, and traditional ceramic tiles (*zellij*). Marble and other expensive materials are quite rare.

Construction Technology

Most renovation and restoration works have been conducted by local master masons and workers using traditional construction techniques and materials. Technology is fairly simple as the town is short of traditional builders and skilled labourers.

Building Services, Site Utilities

The town depends on the city of Tangiers for its electricity and water. The electric cables that connected Asilah with Tangiers and were installed by the Spaniards in 1926 were renewed in 1980. There are two water towers that distribute water collected in tanks coming from Tangiers. From the 1'700 telephone lines available, the town has utilised 320. There are 92 telex numbers. Thus most utilities are sufficient.

The sewerage system (*al-wadi al-har*) is still a problem. In the past, each district had its own network. When the town was supplied with water, those networks were flooded and were then enlarged. The problem consists of discharging the waste in the Atlantic ocean in front of th town and thus polluting the harbour. In 1983 a study was made to resolve the problem, but nothing has been done.

g.   *Origin of Technology, Material, Labour Force and Professionals*

Asilah's success is largely due to the initiative of the local residents. Most involved human resources and material resources are local. In some cases materials are brought from Tangiers. Only few of the municipal workers are not from Asilah.

IV.   Construction Schedule and Costs

a.   *History of the Project, Citing Dates*

The rehabilitation started in 1978 and is ongoing.

b.   *Total Cost and Main Source of Finance*

The total cost is not known. The sources of financing restoration works are varied as the Minister himself put it: "I am a professional beggar". The town seeks all kinds of funds. For example, the Portuguese government financed some of the renovation work as the town was a Portuguese trading post in the late medieval period (in 1471 the Portuguese occupied Asilah or Zili as it was known then). This year, Shell gave the town 200 garbage barrels. In general, the town's budget increased from MDH 1'800'000 before 1978 to MDH 10'900'000 in 1989. The budget includes all the maintenance works of the town and employees' salaries.

V.   Technical Assessment

a.   *Functional Assessments (Use)*

Since Asilah is frequented by people interested in culture who are often not wealthy, the town, they say, is quite safe.

The rehabilitation strategies of building non-residential cultural infrastructure to benefit the local residents has succeeded and the building of hotels has been avoided. All property owners benefited. This led to land speculation and those who did not own property suffered. Meanwhile, the cultural infrastructure is fully used for three seasons (fall, winter and spring). There have been no attempts to utilise them for other usages.

Those who visited Asilah before the construction of the new harbour and the residents are complaining about the loss of the natural romantic harbour. There is no beach any more, no fishing boats, no waves at sunset and thus a major feature of Asilah has been lost in this respect. Many residents commented that the port's site was not well chosen because the train station is 2 km north of Asilah (it will be difficult to transfer goods and passengers). Another factor is the port's construction time that has taken over three years so far. No one seems to know when construction works will finish as the contract between the Moroccan government and the Romanian construction company was based on exchanging phosphate with the Romanian government.

The town lacks basic cultural elements such as a library and a school of Fine Art.

The Summer University of al-Mu'tamid Ibn Abbad for the Afro-Arab Forum, as its name suggests,is used during the summer by outsiders, only because the residents are busy earning their living during that period.

b.   *Climatic Performance, Lighting, Ventilation, Acoustics, orientation, etc.*

The houses that were visited by the TR and nominated for the Award (designed by Youssef Melehi) have basic problems. Most houses were changed by their users immediately after occupation. In one case, the owner opened a window onto the courtyard because the design did not provide one. In another case, a hallway was added. These changes are not the result of conceptual differences or a change in the users' needs, but design mistakes. In one house, there were too many doors resulting from the inappropriate positioning of spaces. In a second house, arches of all types and sizes were used unjudiciously. In a third house, a toilet ventilates through the staircase! Generally, woodwork is not elegant. The TR has visited many houses in Asilah which were much better than those nominated. The TR photographer as well as the other Technical Reviewer seem to share this opinion.

c.   *Choice of Materials; Level of Technology*

The photos taken during the rehabilitation works that were shown to the TR demonstrate the inhabitants' participation in most works in public spaces (streets and sidewalk pavings, landscaping and sewerage networking). The choices of materials and level of technology are appropriate with the exception of a few buildings such as the cultural centre and the theatre where non-local materials and perhaps advanced technologies are used.

VI.   Users

a.   *Description of Those Who Use or Benefit from the Project*

According to the 1982 Census, the population of Asilah was of 18'000 people; currently, it may be of 25'000 inhabitants. The population in the old town is 4'000 - 4,500.

Asilah's income comes mainly from the following sources: summer activities; trade between the countryside and local residents on market days (Sundays and Thursdays); from those who are employed in other major cities, and finally from people who have migrated. The average income per family was less than US$ 50/month in the 1970's. Now it is approximately US$ 140 month.

The residents are quite simple, humble, hospitable and religious. The town did not have most of the basic infrastructure till recently. Up to 1979 there was no secondary school. All government agencies were centralised in Tangiers. Users had to travel to Tangiers to connect to the town's water network for example. Now, there is a local administrative body for most civil affairs.

b. *Response to Project*

Most users are proud of their town that became known only eleven years ago to average Moroccans. They are also proud and feel lucky that a minister, they say, managed to put pressure on other governmental agencies to bring them water, electricity, sewerage network and telephone. On the other hand, the majority are not happy with the cultural activities. They feel that these activities are too sophisticated and above their level.

When users were asked about the murals (*jidariyyah*), their immediate answer was: "What do you mean, this is art," as if art was a subject that they should not discuss if they did not study it at school. They were reluctant to give an opinion. For them, art is just like Madison Avenue advertising. They say that it is beyond their knowledge. However, when they are convinced that art is for all to enjoy, they give amusing answers that demonstrate that this type of art is alien to them. Most people do not like the waves that were developed by Melehi on most paintings, posters, murals and pavements. An embroiderer who is proficient in generating orthogonal motifs (Layla Kh. who is influenced and appreciates the embroidery of Fez) would have preferred geometrical shapes to waves.

Even schools have paintings that students did not understand or appreciate. In the school of Wadi al-Zahab, the art teacher, Mr. Qadmiri, did the paintings on the walls. When students were asked whether they liked those murals and why, they answered that because they were painted by their teacher they should like them; as if they were supporting the national soccer team.

An old man commenting on a mural near the town's main square on the *zawiya* of Sidi Ali wondered how the mural and *zawiya* were religiously compatible. He continued that "those artists develop their paintings" (concept) while sleeping or in the bathroom and then we poor residents have to live with them for the whole year. They (the painters) go away during the year; we are the ones who live with those strange lines and colours... Asilah is a cultural jail."

Trying to create a distinguished character for the town resulted in imposing building rules which the residents did not appreciate. A user was complaining that they imposed on him the use of green roof tiles. He argued that this was not a tradition from Asilah, but from Fez.

Abd al-Hadi said that the municipality is issuing more and more rules each year to preserve the town. He complained that poorer people cannot improve their houses and satisfy regulations at the same time. Thus, they are moving out and new wealthier people, who are mostly outsiders such as painters and poets, are moving in the town and improving the buildings; or on the contrary poorer families move in and accept the situation as it is with no renovations. In both cases the town is losing its original residents.

All users complained about not being able to attend the festivals. "Tickets are quite expensive for local residents" they say. They are between MDH 5 and 30 depending on the show. They argued that they are not benefiting from the summer festival activities. Even those who make money during summer prefer saving it to spend it during the ten dead months.

There is a discrepancy of income and activities between the two months of summer and the rest of the year. One person who has a degree in pharmacy, and who was lucky to find a job as a waiter, told us (TR and photographer) that we were the only clients of that restaurant that day. He ex-

plained that in summer, they usually work from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.; then they close for one hour for cleaning and continue till 1 a.m. He stressed that all tables were occupied and people had to wait for their turn.

Some interviewed young men were unhappy, because the goal keeper of the National Moroccan Team suggested constructing a factory to make leather-jackets; his request was rejected by the municipality "to preserve the town as a cultural centre for artists". They claim that such a factory could have provided them with the jobs they needed.

An old man who has two sons working in France and Germany said that he wished job opportunities were available in Asilah so that his family would be united again. He strongly argued that a city based on culture is nonsensical; "not everybody can be a "cultural person" (*rajul thaqafi*) or even understand culture and live from it".

A religious person (Mustapha M.), who lives just outside Asilah, thinks that the Minister's ideas are against Islam in some respects. He argued that paintings, poetry and lectures are fine; but what about the dancing and singing at night, when men and women can mix freely which is forbidden in Islam. He said that most of those attracted by Asilah's cultural activities are either liberated Moroccans or expatriates who transmit their liberated values to Asilah's conservative society. He asked the TR why Muslims imitate the western culture in easy superficial things such as dancing and not in manufacturing advanced machines. His answer is that because it is easier to dance than design and build a machine. He continued that Asilah (the meaning of Asilah in Arabic is original) is no longer Asilah: "in the past you could see nothing of a woman except her face and arms, but now you may see everything on the beach; what a shame!".

Mr. Ahmad Buqa, who was formerly a soldier in the Spanish army and quite outspoken was angry with the Minister. His opinion is definitely subjective because the municipality did not allow him to build on his land that is strategically located near the main entrance of the old town, to the north-east of the main mosque and opposite the cultural centre. He proposed to build nine houses using a "Moroccan style of architecture" but his request was rejected. He wondered how a town could have festivals while its youths were purposely unemployed. He insisted that those who make money during the summer are mostly foreign investors; even the few lucky residents who rent their property in summer do not make enough to support themselves for many months. He challenged the TR to find any factory, even a small one in the town. He mentioned that a relative of his, Mr. Alami tried to build three factories but was not allowed to, since the town is a cultural area. He wondered what was the good of cultural activities if they are to stop progress.

Answers to Comments by Benaissa

Following are questions that were addressed by the TR to Benaissa. His replies are summarised. The purpose of including this is to give an idea of the man who is in control; and secondly it is a chance that should be given to Benaissa to refute users' criticisms.

Benaissa says that he is trying to keep a humble relationship with the people of his home town. He visits the fishermen who were his school follows. He explains that they call him by his first name (Si Mohamed). He is perhaps the only Minister who parks his car out of town and walks to his house. He comes almost every Thursday and spends Fridays and Saturdays in Asilah.

Question   They say that you are not allowing people to build?

Answer   We started twelve years ago. There is a development, but it is slow. As a responsible person, I am not allowing building activities. I always say that I walk as if I was riding a bull. We prefer to postpone things rather than destroy the environment with buildings that are not suitable. We do not want to repeat what has happened on the Costa del Sol (in Spain). We have a complete study that covers the area between Asilah and

Tangiers. Old cemeteries (100 years old) could have been used by some as sites for building. We have classified them as garden-cemeteries so that no one can build on them. We use all possible ways to create a slow natural growth of the city.

I tour the city each morning while the people are sleeping and take notes of what is needed in the town. We meet with the residents and listen to their comments and solutions; they often have good solutions; if we can afford their solution we will do it, otherwise they are asked to participate.

We have some political opponents; this is natural; but they are not opposing cultural activities. They do not criticise our restoration of the city wall for example. In the beginning there was some criticism such as how can we paint walls when poor people are living behind these walls. Let us reverse the situation. If we did not paint the walls, would there be no more poverty?

The port, since the 15th century is in the same location. Many opposed constructing a new port in that same location. The mayor rejected proposals for the marina to be anywhere except in its original location. There was a meeting with the fishermen, the Ministry off Tourism and all concerned parties, even the construction company, to discuss the site and the plan of the port.

Regarding the comments on the port's site Benaissa says:
In the Muslim world, there is something strange, those who ask for a thing are the ones to oppose it; and this is a sign of growth in the societies that have a heritage. How can we keep things as they are and change them at the same time. We have to impose things sometimes.

Question   Most young people complained that some initiatives to create employment opportunities were not allowed. This has created an unemployed youth and brought many problems such as drug abuse. I (the TR) have met some girls who complained that young men migrate from the town and thus get married outside town or abroad.

Answer   Unemployment is an international problem; it relates to many factors that are not particular to Asilah as a town. To invest in factories one needs infrastructure which the city does not have. How can we build a factory when we have no electricity in some houses or even a single physician. Asilah is 40 km. away from the third largest industrial area in Morocco (Tangiers); why create a new industrial centre? We are trying to create an industrial zone but we do not have sufficient capital. However, we want non-polluting industries that can be related to cultural activities such as embroidery and publishing. Firstly, we are trying to provide infrastructure. For example, high-ranking government officials who work in the town of Asilah live in Tangiers and commute daily. Thus we are building 100 dwellings for them. I have helped many young people to get a passport (getting a passport is quite difficult in Morocco) to work abroad, thus a major source of income to Asilah comes from abroad. For example, three brothers working in Europe have built a hotel. We hope that the port will create many jobs. On the other hand, the industrial zone, which will be 7 to 10 sq km, will attract "cultural" industries such as publishing, ceramic and pottery. In Egypt, everything is in Cairo, nothing is outside. We would like to avoid this centralisation in Morocco and Asilah will be a centre for "cultural" industries. Finally, we, the members of the municipal council are not planners; most members are simple people such as teachers, and we are doing our best. thus we brought the concerned people from other government agencies such as the Ministry of Commerce and Industry; we spent one year studying the concept of the industrial zone. They were against it. Why do we have to destroy a nicely preserved town? But they were convinced by the ideas of "cultural" industries. We are trying to bring infrastructure to that area. Our other problem is that the inhabitants of Asilah refuse to accept manual jobs. They want offices. When the city walls were restored, we brought labourers from out of town.

Question   It seems the ideas of artists are imposed on the town by those who decide; the waves, for example, which M. Melehi like are all over the place. Traditional patterns were not the invention of one person, they were the outcome of the small inventions of many craftsmen and they were refined over time.

Answer   We do not impose patterns on people. The two types of waves on the town's street-tiles were developed by two painters. Other patterns are now produced by other painters to be used in other streets. Another factor is that people like to imitate. Many people imitated my house door. M. Melehi's windows were also copied.

Question   But in Muslim towns users used to make all the decisions; there were little external interventios!

Answer   The situation is now different. In Fez, streets had no pavements. People will not care about public spaces. We have to do it. For example, we banned the use of garage doors that are not made of wood. People do not usually recognise what is good for them. Some time ago, the idea that each town should have a unique colour was accepted by officials in Morocco. A governor decided that the town of Larache (300'000 inhabitants) was to be white and blue while Asilah was to be white and gray. I refused this at that time. I urged the residents to use different colours.

Question   I do not understand, for colours you rejected centralisation and for garage doors you advocated centralisation. What are the criteria for distinction?

Answer   Life is a balance between freedom and laws. At the same time when societies advocate freedom in universities, they create new laws to control it; this is my answer. We care about beauty, that is why we are not centralised in colour; meanwhile we try to keep materials' nobility, we think wood is more noble than metal. Metal is not indigenous, and to preserve heritage we have to do this. In Italy, archaeologists are more powerful than the President. It is sad that most towns allow cars into the city centres; Asilah is the first town in Morocco that does not allow cars in the old town. However, we have provided other infrastructures. The equation is: how can we preserve the origin of the soul while developing the appearance? I think this is the purpose of the Aga Khan Award for Architecture. The Ministry of Planning made an important study five years ago about Asilah's festivals and found out that the cigarettes sold during the two months of summer in Asilah are equivalent to one year's consumption; regarding bread, the two months' consumption is the equivalent of two years. We changed the people's income without changing their behaviour, and not like Marbella (Spain) where people's behaviour changed. We do not have 5-star hotels like other major tourist areas. We are not against Sheraton hotels. They should come when the environment is ready. My hope is that Asilah will be someday like Marbella, but an Islamic one. We have concerts and music from Germany; but at the same time we are conservative. For example, this March we will hold a workshop about the *salafiyyah* movement in North Africa in which many religious scientists will participate.

Question   Many residents are moving out of Asilah. They say that it is expensive to renovate houses or it is profitable to sell because of land speculation.

Answer   We tried to inform the inhabitants that by moving out they are transforming Asilah into a colony. We used this so people would sense the value of their city. People are responding to us and renovating their property. We are helping those who cannot afford it. In a small town a rumour becomes true in no time. For example, people say that I have bought Asilah for myself. The fact is that I bought two houses for my daughters so no dispute would arise in the future between them and I have bequeathed my own house as a museum. But those who need money will always justify

their need and sell their property. When there were no festivals, the land value was MDH 5/sq m and no one bought land. The festivals gave the people a break. Some sold parts of their property in order to renovate other parts.

Question   Some of Asilah's residents complained that they do not have the time or the money to attend the cultural activities in the summer even though, in some cases, seats in theatres were available? They claim that culture is limited to those who can afford it!

Answer   This is not true. We usually distribute 600 tickets out of 2'000 available free of charge through the Municipal Council members to be given to those who cannot afford them in their districts. Secondly, nothing should be free, even art. Those who complain are complaining about not being able to attend musical events. Music is not all we have; culture is not only music, and there is music on the radio in any case.

VII. Persons Involved

The rehabilitation programme was started by Mohamed Benaissa and his friend Mohamed Melehi (not Youssef Melehi). Later, they were joined by the painter Farid Belkahia. The municipality and most government officials were not supportive before 1983. Benaissa said: "There is a very thin link between the Municipality and the Mouhit Cultural Association. The whole process started with the association; it was not started by the city. On the contrary, the city was against us. From 1977 until 1983, the whole town was totally against us. So we were working in parallel."

Jamel Akbar
Dammam, 9 May 1989