

The old town of Mogadishu

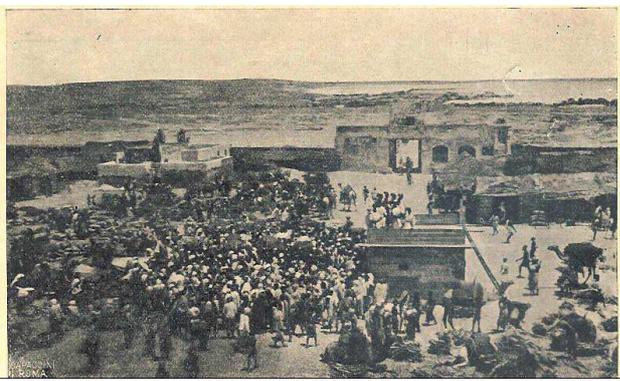
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(English translation revised by Maria Mines)

Why Mogadishu stone town is not listed as a World Heritage Site?

This paper attempts to draw the attention of international institutions and scholars towards the historic districts of medieval Mogadishu. The two medieval historic districts in Mogadishu are Shangaani and Hamarweyne. Shangaani is almost totally destroyed and its reconstruction requires a new strategy. In this paper I will examine only some aspects of Hamarweyne district, with the sole purpose to make international institutions and cooperation aware of the problems of our heritage preservation. Now, this ancient town center is threatened, due to environmental degradation and development pressures.

Mogadishu: the first “freight village” in the Horn of Africa.



Mogadishu in the early 1900s. The market inside the walls and near the main gate. It should be noted that the height of the front door was supposed to allow the passage of camels with their loads.

A brief introduction is necessary.

East Africa has been for many centuries the focus of an active maritime trade system involving countries bordering the Indian Ocean. Probably the Banaadiri were the first people who created this formidable sales network. But, the Banaadiri, even before being entrepreneurs were missionaries. Thanks to them, Islam spread all over the Horn of Africa. They travelled throughout empty savannahs risking their lives to get to small communities. In other words, Banaadir, before being a trading center was the base from which departed the Jaama'at Tablliighii: the

missionaries of Islam. The fame of Mogadishu (and other coastal stations, such as Marka, Baraawe, Kisimayo) in the past centuries was not due to the exploitation of any mineral resources as none has ever been found in its territory. At least until now. Its economic welfare was rather due to the genius of Banaadiri to have turned the city into a commercial bridge between the populous Ethiopia and the Arab countries and India. The import of goods from the Middle East and India, as well as American fabrics, tobacco, rice, sugar and the export of African products such as coffee, myrrh and ivory created the fortune of the Banaadir cities. The Banaadiri had already understood, many centuries ago, that "Ethiopia" meant millions of people who had to eat and get dressed and also meant millions of people producing goods that could be exported. And that's how an extraordinary sales network was invented and built, extending from the Horn of Africa to India. And today as the various local governments in the country are preparing for the strengthening of port and road services to Ethiopia, it seems that everything is taking the same direction of the strategic vision set by Banaadiri many centuries ago. In other words it could be said that the Banaadiri formed the first "freight village" in the Horn of Africa.

Therefore, goods produced in Arab countries or in India were shipped to Mogadishu and stored within the walls of the city. Subsequently importers, who were also shippers, prepared caravans of camels to Ethiopia. The caravan routes that were mostly practiced were Mogadishu - Awdhegale - Bur Hakaba - Revai + El Bardaale - Luuq.

The first studies to develop freight villages were conducted in Germany in 1932, although their development is much more recent. The goal of a freight village is to concentrate flows of goods and improve the national and international logistics networks. Therefore, even if these centres do not have commercial purposes, they are the link between the world of production, transport, logistics and the distributor. These activities were carried out so much for centuries in Banaadiri cities that they were referred to as "commercial emporiums". But while the freight village is opened only to specialized operators, Mogadishu, however, was opened to the public. In other words it was a hybrid between a logistics centre and a shopping centre, always imbued with a religious spirituality that made it much more human. The commercial organization of the coastal cities and particularly the one of Mogadishu was so developed that it even overshadowed their characteristics of urban centres inhabited by people with a strong identity and culture. Little are now the remains of the fame that attracted international travellers, such as Ibn Battuta, but the structure of the medieval city (Hamarweyne and Shangaani) is virtually intact.

The works of the devils

The local people come here as a tourists to see "the works of the devils". People do not know that Banaadiri were not only businessmen but that they also were intrepid navigators, architects and craftsmen. These works are a great relevance for the maritime history of this city. These works show that skilled people were leading the building of marine structures for the accommodation of boats and for the loading and unloading operations.



Three images of the spiral staircase carved into the coral reef. At the bottom, there is a well carved doorway in the rock.

These works show that skilled people were leading the building of marine structures for the accommodation of boats and for the loading and unloading operations.

A small promontory named Fiinta in the Abow Huseen coast will begin our first research trip in the district of Hamarweyne. On a bank of coral rocks, near the mosque Haaji Ali, that recently has been restored by the Turks, there is a

beautiful hidden spiral staircase, carved into the coral rock of the ancient harbour. The speed with which I saw some kids get on and off that staircase convinced me that the architect who designed it had already made other steps of this type. May be wooden ones, like the one of masjid Jaama'a, but handmade. Further down the promontory, along the coral reef, we find a square hole carved into the rock. In a wall of the hole there is a circular opening where the seawater is able to flow when the level of the sea rises. Also in that area, there are other evidences of more serious works like the clean break and straight of a long stretch of the coral rock. The proportions of a spiral staircase, the doorway at the bottom, the small basin with a circular hole and the cuts to create docks for



Small basin in the reef.

mooring small boats, are not the work of apprentices. Why did the inhabitants perform this so demanding work? Was this the best point of the coast? Only a more detailed investigation of the type of seabed in that area will clarify this hypothesis.

A few meters from the fish market, a building not worthy of valuable fish brought in fresh by the fishermen, we hit into an alley that takes us inside the neighborhood. In this alley it is possible to see something like the *sabatt*, common especially in the city of



In the coastal area of Aboow Huseen many traces of the work of the past are clearly visible. The coral reefs are cut perfectly. It seems they had the intent to create docks for mooring small boats.



Another square hole on the top of the coral reef.

Baraawa. The *sabatt* is a hanging passage between two houses located on opposite sides of the same street. Under the passage, there is a walled door with corroded doorframes and their carved motifs still legible. Among these buildings with ruined walls and lime plaster now ivory but still clinging to the walls, you can see the blue sea which gives it the beauty that is vanishing within the dirty and moldy moss-colored sidewalls. Then comes a succession of narrow streets that certainly knew better times and recent tragedies. Mogadishu, as any city in the Banaadir, was born first in the head of its architects before it was actually built. All the streets and houses set closely together were not born at random but followed a clear

plan and strategy. The city had to be defensible even by a few armed men, but first of all it had to fulfill its function as a domestic and international city of trade.

The buildings are close enough so that the routes network that develops inside the district



The *sabatt* is a hanging passage between two houses located on opposite sides of the same street.

is constantly in the shade. The alleys seem beds carved by streams between the blocks of buildings. Slinking behind the stalls of merchandise, passing under the *sabatt*, snaking in front of the numerous workshops and sometimes hiding suddenly between two buildings without a way out. Those white monoliths, from two to four-story high, were made with the intention of creating a network of ways inside the district. The buildings play with the sunlight and provide shady ways. In modern times, the success of the shops of Hamarweyne, in addition to the attractive prestige of



Another *sabatt* inside a court. This one is difficult to find.

the old buildings, was due especially to the cordiality offered by the shopkeepers in those streets. The absence of criminality inside Hamarweyne, the fact that the alleys were suitable only for pedestrians allowing mothers of the whole neighborhood to bring along

their kids, made those ways adorable for the customers. This is the only place where the pious frankincense, which ascends from small braziers placed near the doors of the shops, was not immediately dispersed by the wind. The Angels had the time to get close and protect everyone from the evil spirits.

Ms Elisabetta Horvath, in her work "I centri commerciali integrati", pointed out that the

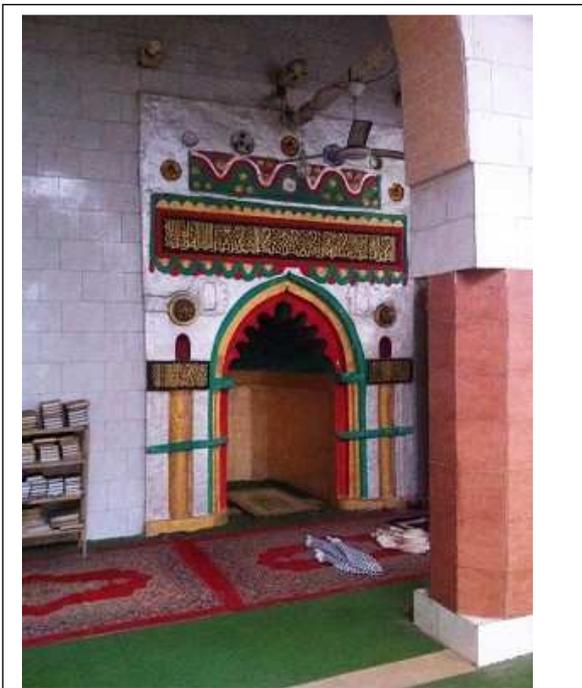


The oldest mosque Jama'a (636H/ (636H/1238 AD).

road network of the Arab souks, covered with tents, mats and cloths of various kinds, has created a public commercial space, which is totally interior, anticipating somehow the large modern shopping centers. But, with the important feature to avoid the loneliness of "periphery" effect. "In the souk, because of the transparency of the material used to protect the ways from the sun like grilles and tents, the lighting is soft and generally uniform. The result is a public place entirely interior that somehow anticipates, albeit with all the formal differences, functional, ideological, modern



Masjid Jama'a. Inscription above the doorway of the minaret.



Mihraab of masjid Jama'a.

buildings grouped in large multifunctional spaces, also completely internal, with shops, restaurants, offices, sport equipments. One of the earliest and most famous examples is the base of the Rockefeller Center in New York, but in comparison with this center avoiding the isolation of the surrounding urban fabric". The malls or shopping centers of the West consist of a set of different businesses and services grouped and arranged in an area managed with uniform criteria. Even in the historic districts of Mogadishu, the various needs are assured by a wide presence of small shops, attires, shoes, sellers of sweets, bread, groceries, fruit stalls, spare parts for machines, goldsmiths, barbers and restaurants. But it is a comparison that could be very reductive because the strong spirituality that has always pervaded this neighborhood for its many mosques, has hampered a mindset oriented to mere consumerism.

Not far from the *sabatt* we find the square where the oldest mosque of Mogadishu, the Jaama'a, still stands (636 A.H./1238 A.D.). I've been informed by an elder eyewitness that the *masjid* has a buried floor. During the restoration works, they found an entry to an underground floor. But what has surprised them, according to the elder witness, is that the ceiling of the room was not supported by



The left panel of the *mihraab* of *masjid* Jaama'a. The coloring in gold on the writing in relief allows a clear reading of the inscription.

wooden beams. It was similar to modern ones of reinforced concrete. After this discovery the entry of the room has been walled to prevent hazards in the event of collapse.

The writing on the *mihraab* is in Arab style "Shiraazi" while the one on the entrance of the tower is in a different style. It is obvious that they were built in two different periods. It's important to date the dishes inserted in the wall. It seems that some are new and perhaps of little historical value. We must make sure that

the "restorers" do not touch anything of antique value and leave the old dishes in place even if they are broken and seem "bad" in the eyes of non-experts.

One year ago, during some restoration work, the third *mihraab* was discovered in the left side of the mosque. Now the *mihraabs* number three: one is at the right and the other at the left of the central *mihraab* with inscriptions. The last *mihraab* was walled. The debris were removed and now it is visible. The question is what was the function of the two *mihraabs* at the sides of the main one? Ms Elisabetta Horvath, in her work "I centri commerciali integrati", pointed out that the road network of the Arab souks, covered with tents, mats and cloths of various kinds, has created a public commercial space, which is totally interior, anticipating somehow the large modern shopping centers. But, with the important feature to avoid the loneliness of "periphery" effect. "In the souk, because of the transparency of the material used to protect the ways from the sun like grilles and tents, the lighting is soft and generally uniform. The result is a public place entirely interior that somehow anticipates, albeit with all the formal differences, functional, ideological, modern buildings grouped in large multifunctional spaces, also completely internal, with shops, restaurants, offices, sport equipments. One of the earliest and most famous examples is the base of the Rockefeller Center in New York, but in comparison with this center avoiding the isolation of the surrounding urban fabric". The malls or shopping centers of the West consist of a set of different businesses and services grouped and arranged in an area managed with uniform criteria. Even in the historic districts of Mogadishu, the various needs are assured by a wide presence of small shops, attires, shoes, sellers of sweets, bread, groceries, fruit stalls, spare parts for machines, goldsmiths, barbers and restaurants. But it is a comparison that could be very reductive because the strong spirituality that has always pervaded this neighborhood for its many mosques, has hampered a mindset oriented to mere consumerism.

Examples of friezes that connect the Banaadiri and Swahili cultures

Around the *masjid* Jaama'a there is the largest number of old doors. Almost all hopelessly ruined but some still show their decorations.

The question of the true origins and development of East African door-carving styles remains unresolved, but these types of doors are indisputably considered as a testimony of the Swahili culture. These portals that had spread among the palaces of the rich Banaadiri have now completely disappeared although around the Jaama'a mosque there are still some quite intact ones. The carving of these portals is a clear confirmation that before the Italian colonization Mogadishu (like all the cities of Banaadir), was culturally

linked to the Swahili coast and shared the same symbols. And we have to remember that the Swahili culture is the result of centuries of international trade between East Africa, the Arabian peninsula, the Indian subcontinent, and South-East Asia.



This doorway is located in the street that leads from the masjid Jama'a to the Garesa. Currently the room behind the door is used for storage of bananas. A fate worse than getting the local portal beside it has been turned into coal deposit.



Portal that is located in an area near the Jama'a.



The portal on the left is currently in Hamarweyne while the portal on the right was photographed perhaps in the Shangaani district in the early 1980s. However it helps us to imagine how he could appear before of damages.



Internal door massive and unusual that is located inside a home.



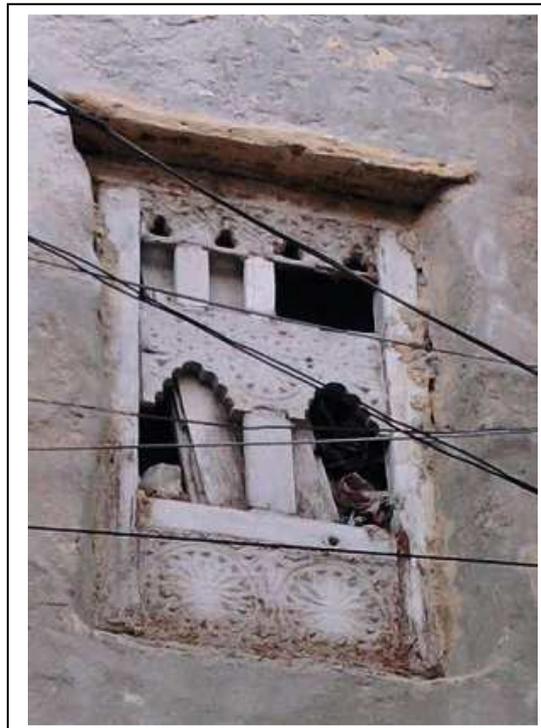
Hamarweyne district. Rectangular friezes with same motifs in different doorway. These decorations all have three rectangular friezes and the same motifs. Having found them in various parts of the district, I suppose they were much appreciated by Banaadiri. Pending experts who read these friezes note that the first friezes are rectangular with straight lintels and so if they are not themselves ancient it means however that they refer to the older style. Curved lines are stylized in the first friezes that refer to the sea, and the rosette symbolizing fertility. Between the concentric circles palm leaves are drawn that symbolize the unity of the family. The frieze is closed by a rope. Therefore, the message of this composition could be read “May Allah grant us unity of the family, fertility and wealth that comes from the sea”



It is a frieze of great interest to the scholars. It is located inside an old house of over 200 years. The frieze has never been removed from his place. It's rectangular and it shows drawings of roses and palm leaves. Do not appear waves.



Ring and boss driven into an old wooden roof beam. A similar ring was also found in the masjid Shiiq Rumaani. It has been lost during the repairing work of the masjid. I've never seen anything like these accessories in any of the old houses of Mogadishu. This heavy iron ring and the boss, that are driven into the roof beams. I have found them in a house with several old wooden beams. The young man who accompanied me told me that he does not know what the ring was for but he heard that the ring was used to support heavy lanterns. I found a second ring in an another room of the building. A similar ring was found in the mosque Shiikh Rumaani.



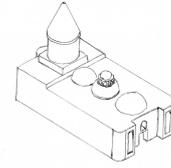
I have found five lovely windows on which the carved design is composed of roses. Sometimes the buildings are not old like the windows or doorframes. For example, one of the rectangular friezes above is located in a building that collapsed about seventy years ago and was rebuilt. The owner told me that he was a child and therefore does not remember if the doorframe is the original one or another.

The old *masjids* of Hamarweyne.



Masjid Fakhruddin. In this photo only the decorative motif of the roof is visible, the wall of a Koranic school hide the masjid that is partially under the ground level.

A few weeks ago was the birthday of the *masjid* Fakhruddin. It had just turned 746 years old! Nobody was aware of this. This *masjid* has some unique characteristics like the decorative motif of the roof and the *mihraab*. There is a very interesting study on the portal of Fakhruddin made by Professor Elizabeth Lambourn and entitled "The decoration of the Fakhr al-D_n mosque in Mogadishu and other



Bukhara (Uzbekistan). The Hasmah Ayub mausoleum and the *masjid* Fakhruddin have a similar decorative motif on the roof.



The sculpture in white marble of the *masjid* Fakhruddin.

pieces of Gujarati marble carving on the East African coast." Lambourn is specialized in the architecture and material culture of the Middle East, South Asia and the Indian Ocean so she is in the best condition to make pertinent connections. The professor suggests several hypotheses on the genesis of this work of art "[...] with Indian communities at many locations along the African coast and a long history of technological influence, the possibility that Cambay carvers moved to Mogadishu in order to execute this commission gains credibility. This possibility gains further weight since the Fakhr al-Din portal is a 'bespoke' element of architectural carving, apparently made for this specific location and according to local taste, not a standardised carving such as a gravestone that could simply be integrated into any location. Whilst the dimensions of the portal and the elements of local (East African) design could have been communicated to craftsmen in Cambay via letters and sketches, in a complex case such as this it may well have been simpler, more precise and less labour intensive to transfer both craftsmen and materials to Mogadishu. Nevertheless, in the final conclusion, without masons' marks and fuller documentary evidence the precise circumstances under which the Fakhr al-Din portal was created remain unclear. What can be maintained is that the unique fusion of Indian Islamic and East African elements in this portal can only have come about through the closest artistic and technical collaboration."



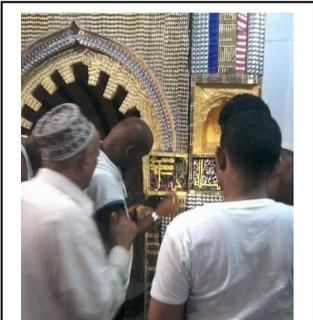
Mihraab in Rasiini (near Kisimayo) entirely carved into a block of stone (design by Luca Zapparoli).

We know that the Banaadiri are a multiethnic people and so it's no wonder if inside of them were dispersed groups of technicians originating in Cambay. However, it is useful to note, that decorative patterns similar to that of the mosque of Fakhruddin are located in the mausoleum of Chasma Ayub in Bukhara (Uzbekistan). Also in one of the islands in the south of

the country called Rasin exists a *mihraab* entirely carved in a block of stone. In those

areas live Banaadiri and this could mean that such bold sculptures had become a cultural heritage of Banaadiri and that some designers were coming also from the parts of Bukhara.

Master Buuwe Aba Ali



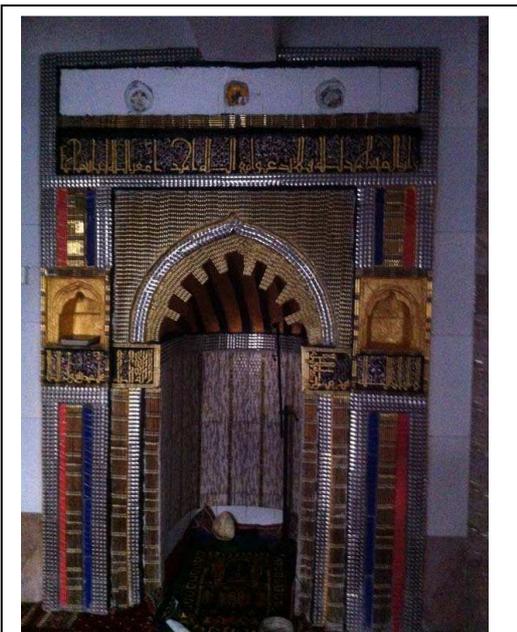
Master Buuwe Aba Ali and his collaborator.

The mosques of the historic centers of Mogadishu deserve to be studied apart by a pool of specialists. I will mention only a few episodes to remind how many extraordinary stories are hidden in those sacred walls that resisted all tragedies.

I am inside the *masjid* Muhammad Taani, close to Jaama'a in location and age. The difficult and particular style of written *Shiraazi* on the *mihraab* attests this antiquity. I came on the recommendation of master Buuwe who is in front of me with his collaborators, all focused on the *Shiraazi* writing in stylized Arabic. The master is standing near the *mihraab* despite a pain in his leg. He cannot stand up for long. He leans on a stick. Gazing on the black stone he carefully scrutinizes. At some point he begins to

caress the little beds of leaves. With the index he follows a curved line. "It is a **ه** (*ha*). Take it and do not let it escape" he tells the talented pupil who has come from abroad. The young man draws a circle with his finger and looks puzzled the master saying "It is a flower *baaba* Buuwe". "Don't worry it is the "ha". I've already seen it in the *Jamia*", replied master Buuwe. After having highlighted it with red chalk, the pupil replies "I got it". The search continues with discussions lasting several minutes in case someone is not convinced. Once they have discovered the meaning of the letters highlighted with red chalk they paint them with a golden tint. The men all work for free. They all are in the service of Allah. They endure fatigue and pain with dignity. Slowly, from the lawn of stone, out of leaves and stylized flowers, emerges the writing of the ancient Reer Hamar: Arabic style *Shiraazi*.

Reer Hamar is another name for the inhabitants of the historic districts. Buuwe is a great expert able to pull out the inscriptions hidden among the floral decorations and a connoisseur of this calligraphic style that the Reer Hamar called *Shiraazi*.



The *mihraab* of *masjid* Muhammad Taani.



From the lawn of stone, with leaves and stylized flowers, emerges the writing of the ancients.

The mystery of the ceramic tile of the *masjid* Shiikh Rumaani.



Ceramic tile of the *masjid* Shiikh Rumaani. A brilliant blue inscription in *naskh* in relief writing on a cream background. The strokes of turquoise that highlight the letters, enhance the tile. The tile was probably part of a larger frieze.

It is not easy to find this mosque. It can be reached through winding pathways. During the recent renovation two important artifacts were lost: a piece of wood on which was engraved the date 822H / AD1419 and an iron ring hanging from one of the old beams that was replaced. The ring was similar to those I found in one of the old houses in the neighborhood and was used to hang heavy lanterns. Placed on the wall of the *mihraab*, almost invisible, this beautiful ceramic tile was found recently. The transliteration into Latin characters is "Z KH L D U". Several people agree that it is very likely that these letters are only a part of a longer text.

Masjid Haaji Muusa (*Adayga*)

In Hamarweyne and Shangaani there are other ancient mosques that hold significant surprises. But we have to study them in time with the help of real experts before renovations, otherwise, although executed in good faith, they could cause irrecoverable damage. For example, the current *mihraab* of *masjid* Haaji Muusa known by the name of *Adayga*, is different from what I saw in a photo from 1973. However, fortunately, it seems that the ancient writings on top of the *mihraab* are still the original ones. The nickname "*Adayga*" comes from a type of tree (*Salvadora persica* (Chiov.) Cuf.) that bears this name and that grew in the mosque to the point that its giant branch partially barred the door. To enter the mosque you have to bend because of the branch that obstructs the door.



Mihraab of the *masjid* Shiikh Rumaani



Mihraab of the *masjid* Adayga



Decoration of the mihrab of the *masjid* Adayga.



The giant branch of the "*aday*" tree at the entrance of the *masiid*.

The mystery of the Banaadiri vestibules

The vestibules placed before the entrance of old houses, almost like little towers, have



View of the left side of the Bandar vestibule.



It almost seems that the building has a second vestibule.



This building on the waterfront was probably a vestibule.

aroused the curiosity of many scholars. Since 1832 they appear in the drawings of the French traveler G. Revoil. We do not know what their precise use was. In the historic district of Shangaani there were plenty of them. It is supposed that they had the function of grit chambers and that is to separate the sand by the fresh air which was then conveyed into the interior of the building. While sharing this hypothesis, looking at them closer, they could also have had other purposes that have yet to be identified.

However this is the last remaining example. The building which it belongs to is impressive and is a four-story building. I could not photograph the front projecting part because they are constructing around it. The risk run by this building is that the owners could eventually cover the forepart building spaces on the side.



This picture of 1930 would refer to the same vestibule.



Right Side View of the Bandar vestibule.

Some urgent problem



After a heavy rain in an alley that leads to the area of the mosque Jaama'a.

The historic district of Hamarweyne needs serious restoration work in order to preserve its ancient identity. The district does not have disposal systems for rainwater and every time it rains heavily we assist to scenes like those showed in the photos.

Lately individuals have built sidewalks with broken tiles. As well as ugly and unsightly, they constitute a serious hazard to pedestrians because they are slippery. Administrations should prohibit this kind of tiles and remove the existing ones. It is necessary to plan an uninterrupted waste disposal in the streets because they are so narrow and winding that they could be a vehicle for serious diseases.

In the district new buildings are being constructed. On one hand it is positive because it means that there is a growing confidence in the future. However, the type of new constructions should be in harmony with the historical sites. For example, the coating of exterior walls with colorful tiles distorts the original characteristic of the whitewashed lime

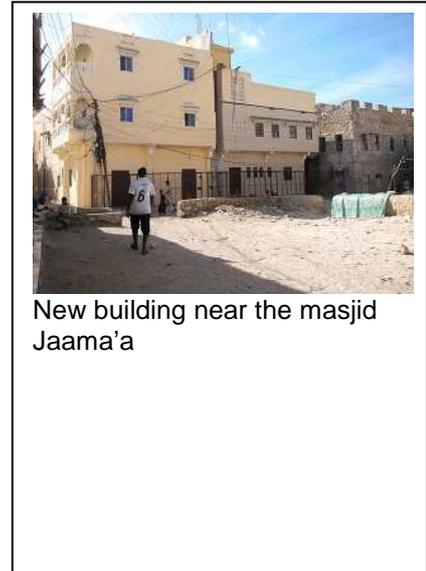
walls. Also the distances between buildings are no longer respected and this could cause difficulties for the fire department in case of fire. In short, in order not to create too many problems for citizens already hit by so much hardship, true professionals are needed for a competent restoration and a fitting new urbanization.



Another alley in district Hamarweyne after a rainfall



Shards of tiles on the pavement of the old town of Hamarweyne. This system is catching on in Mogadishu on sidewalks and the pedestrian places is a major threat to the safety of pedestrians because they are very slippery.



Proposal to found an “Institute for Conservation and Restoration”

The district Shangaani is almost entirely destroyed and its people are not able to reconstruct what has been created in several generations over the centuries. Only with the cooperation of other countries would a solution be possible. The problems of Hamarweyne are very serious but you can still save this piece of ancient history still standing. I believe that these problems can be addressed by first creating a research center for the recovery of these two areas of great historical importance not only for Somalia but for the whole of Africa. It is necessary to create an institution similar to the Italian Superior Institute for Conservation and Restoration (L'Istituto Superiore per la Conservazione ed il Restauro)” that is a single organism where a team of experts (historians, architects, archaeologists and other skilled worker) carry out researches, training and systematic activity of restoration together. In Mogadishu, there are very few skilled building workers. In the last twenty years many professional skills have been lost and so there is an urgent need for centers where building workers are trained in proper restoration and maintenance technique for coral stone, wood and other traditional building materials used in the historical cities of the whole country. These centers must be created with the help of international cooperation and management. Only this way we can have the professional international and local teams needed to draft a plan for technical assistance and the manner in which funding for this project can be obtained. It is important to have the cooperation of countries that have faced problems of reconstruction of city centers because it will avoid unnecessary mistakes. The communities of these two districts have been impoverished by the long instability that has affected the country. They are now

fighting for their survival and are not able to deal with any plan of reconstruction on their own hence the need of institutions promoting the search for a solution to help these communities rebuild their homes and to revive these historic districts that are the symbol of a nation which building began over a thousand years ago.

The historic district of Hamarweyne needs very serious restoration work to enable it to preserve in time its ancient urban identity. The district does not have disposal systems of rainwater and every time it rains heavily we assist to scenes like those described below. Lately individuals build sidewalks with broken tiles. As well as ugly and unsightly they constitute a serious hazard to pedestrians because they are slippery. Administrations should prohibit this kind of tiles and remove existing ones.

Alberto Arecchi, an Italian architect, specialized in the study and application of appropriate technology, who taught at Somali National University in the years between 1975 and 1990, already recommended taking the historic districts of Shangaani and Hamarweyne as a cultural reference for the capital Mogadishu, quote: "In 1960, at the time of independence, Mogadishu possessed a number of attributes favorable to its development as a capital city. As its center, Hamarweyne and Shangaani could provide a fertile cultural reference. Outside the city, there was the village concept. The land within the city was municipality owned and therefore immediately and fully available. However, it was wrongly supposed that the European city could be juxtaposed onto Somali culture and social habits. This false assumption, combined with the demographic explosion which followed independence and has continued to accelerate, have caused the city never realized its true potential".