

Architecture as a Symbol of National Identity in Afghanistan

Myth and reality in the reconstruction process of Kabul

There is a strong connection between the heterogeneous linguistic, ethnic and religious culture of Afghanistan and its varied landscapes of mountainous areas as well as desert and steppes. Afghanistan's architecture is influenced by this cultural and natural environment. It reflects the country's checkered history and thus is marked by Persian, Indian and Central Asian influences. Not only has every period, Iranian-Zoroastrian, Indian-Buddhist or Islamic, made its mark on the country's cultural "make-up", but every new occupying power tried to remove the heritage of its predecessors (Knobloch 2002, p.12). The capital Kabul today mirrors the country's often dramatic and mostly violent past.

During his reign *Amir Abdur Rahman* (1880–1901) confirmed the emergence of an Afghan nation state by developing a distinguished architectural style in the capital Kabul. In his buildings, e.g., the palace at Bagh-e Bala, he included many decorative elements and cultural influences derived from Indian and European styles. This was a departure from the traditional Afghan architecture which normally exposes only one facade (Dupree 1977, p. 16 f.).

The traditional way to build Afghan farmhouses, the so-called "Qalas" (Figure 1), reflects the in-

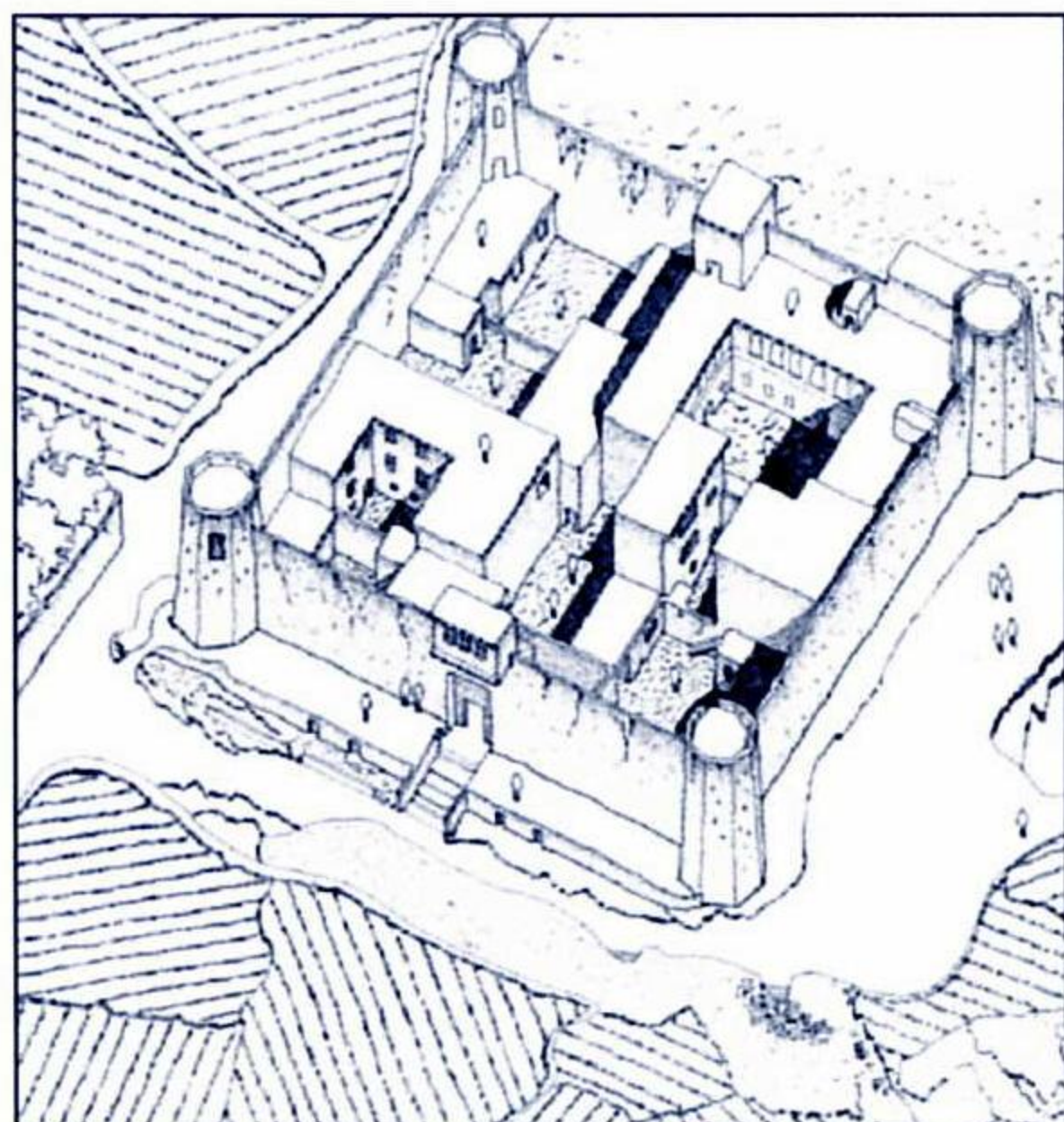


Figure 1: Scheme of an Afghan "Qala"

Source: Szabo 1991, p. 188

ward-looking, self-protecting family society. As Dupree (1973, pp. 248 ff.) mentioned mud walls like "mud curtains" are built around houses and villages for protection against the outside world. In literature this so-called "purdah principle" is derived from the Persian term for curtain and is a characteristic of the Afghan way of living in many respects. This reflects not only the division between private and public as part of the Islamic pattern of life, but it also emphasises the kinship of Afghan individuals referring to a complex loyalty system. This is based on a system of personal relations to the group members (family, tribe, ethnicity, nation; Figure 2). Such an import of foreign architectural trends continued under the subsequent rulers *Amir Habibullah* (1901–1919) and especially King *Amanullah* (1919–1929). But foreign architecture became a symbol of failed governments because in the perception of many Afghans there was no government with a lasting stability.

Under the reign of *Nadir Shah* (1929–33) and then his son *Zahir Shah* (1933–73), a planned development of the capital Kabul began

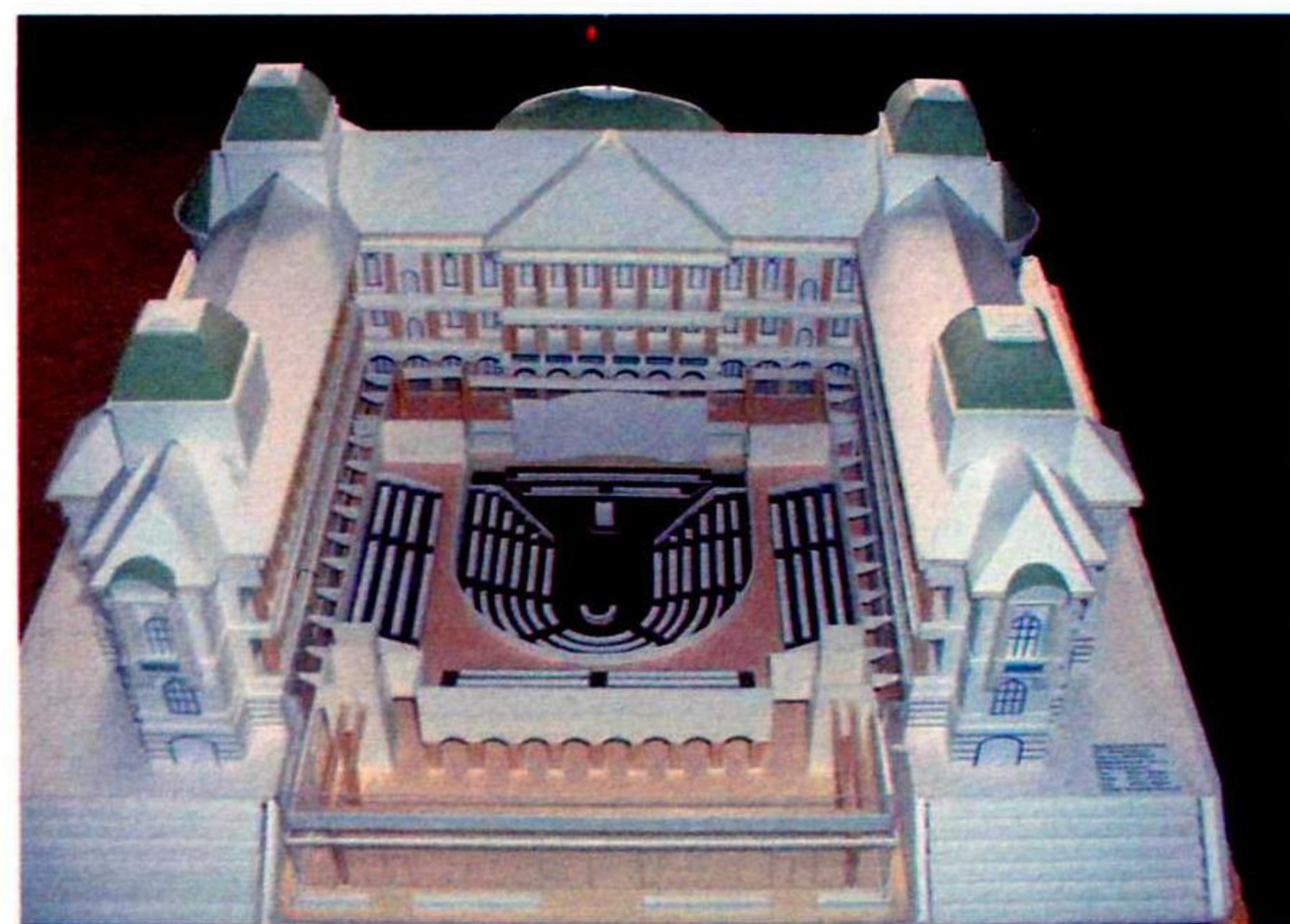


Photo 1: Model of the new Dar-ul-Aman Palace

Source: Faruqi 2002

which continued up to the Soviet occupation (Habib 1987, p. 32 f.). The beginning of the civil war in 1992 marked a phase of severe destruction. The reign of the Taliban ended such war-induced destruction but the regime was committed to a policy of eliminating non-Islamic architectural symbols.

Destruction and reconstruction: a principle of Afghan identity?

Looking back on the architectural history of Afghanistan, a recurrent phenomenon has been the targeted destruction of important cities, towns, buildings and places as a symbol of the power of new rulers. Already in the provinces of Kapisa and Ghandara the Hephthalites (425–566 A.D.) persecuted Buddhist religious communities and destroyed their monasteries. *Chingiz Khan* razed the cities of Balkh and Merv and also ruined the tomb of Sultan Sanjar at Merv (Knobloch 2002, p. 32 f.). To mark his rule he also destroyed monuments of Islamic civilisation as well as basic infrastructure, such as irrigation systems and cultivated land.

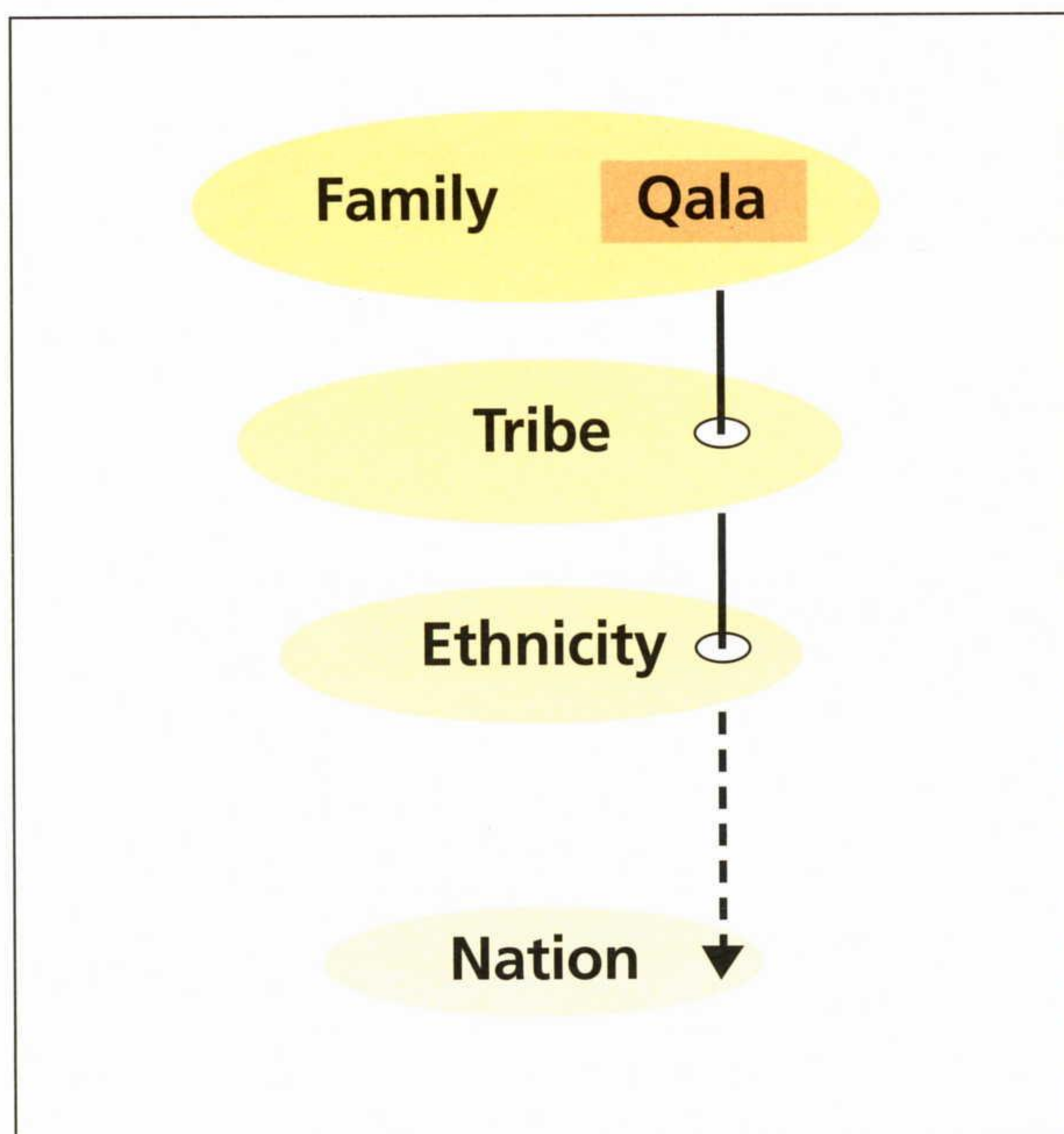


Figure 2: Hierarchy of personal loyalty system

Design: Issa 2006

Similarly during the colonial wars with Britain, the British army used the destruction of important buildings as a punishment for Afghan resistance. As revenge for the massacre by Afghan tribesman of a British army unit during their

withdrawal from Kabul to Jalalabad 1842, a British expedition invaded Kabul and blew up the great Char Chatta-Bazaar. This bazaar had been constructed in the 17th century during the Mogul reign of Ali Mardan to meet the trade requirements of the Indian Mogul dynasty. The construction style and material had enabled the form of the bazaar to be easily adapted by the Afghans. This more than 200 m long bazaar consisted of four arcades (char chatta), and the walls were covered with "stucco decoration studded with mirrors, and whitewashed with a special solution containing bits of mica to make them sparkle" (Knobloch 2002, p. 161). With an open octagonal courtyard surrounded by fountains, the bazaar was not only the main commercial centre but also the most important place for communication in Kabul. The British thus destroyed not only a beautiful bazaar but a part of Kabul which was regarded as a symbol of the Afghan nation.

Another example of the destruction of an important symbol was that of the National Museum of Kabul between 1992 and 1994. It stood in the front line of fighting factions in the civil war (see Figure 3 in the article by Dittmann in this edition) and was hit by a rocket and heavily damaged. A fire destroyed many of the treasures of history and looting did the rest. About 80 % of the museum's collection vanished (Knobloch 2002, p. 45). In this case the attack on Afghan identity came not just from the destruction of an architectural facade but from the looting of a cultural heritage.

The most infamous destruction act to represent power was that of the Bamiyan statues by the Taliban in March 2001. Despite international warnings the Taliban blew up the symbols of a major Buddhist site nearly 2,000 years old. In the vicinity of Kabul the Taliban also destroyed the Minaret of Chakari, one of the most important monuments of the first century A.D. because it did not accord with their understanding of religion.

These few examples show that the destruction of cultural symbols and important buildings did gain new significance. In a country where peace was and is very fragile, people might consider it a better survival strategy to hide behind anonymous architecture than living in an exposed landmark building which may be targeted by fighting groups in a next stage.

Kabul: searching for a vision for the capital

King *Amanullah's* (1919–1929) vision of a modern Afghan capital has gained new symbolic meaning in the context of today's reconstruction. King *Amanullah* wanted a capital fitting for a king. He was offended by the dirt, dust and maze of streets and bazaars in Kabul and dreamed of a new capital in the modern style. Modernity for *Amanullah* meant importing construction styles from foreign countries, especially western countries (with the exception of England, being the biggest enemy of Afghanistan). Six kilometres from Kabul he created the district "Darulaman" (= House of Aman). He employed foreign engineers and craftsman and the French architect *Godard* with the task of fulfilling his dream of a new capital Kabul built in stone and plaster.

Wild (1932, pp. 89–92) described *Amanullah's* vision as "a centre for governmental institutions in big circular blocks, with central courtyards integrating the entrances to the different departments". Clerks should live in modernity and luxury and the surroundings should reflect the famous capital of a new nation. Lodging-houses should be built, sweeping roads and big parks should symbolize generosity. And the king saw himself ruling his new Afghan nation from the Darulaman Palace which was constructed in the typical European palace style of this era. The Palace was built on a hill (see Photo 9 on Map Insert) to enable the king to survey the activities of his citizens, and a small railway



Photo 2: Green glass facade of the Golden Star Hotel in Kabul

Photos: K. Yamaguchi

line was constructed to connect Kabul city with Darulaman to bring visitors and foreign business people to the miraculous city.

Influenced by the ideas of *Kemal Pasha* in Turkey, King *Amanullah* enforced modern approaches in society: for example, he removed the veil constraint for women and allowed them to go to school. With the reform of the traditional governmental and societal system, resistance from the traditional powers increased. In 1929 the king fled to exile in Italy. Darulaman was never completed, and the skeleton remained to remind everybody of the failure of overly ambitious dreams.

At the beginning of the reconstruction process in late 2001, an Afghan architect living in Germany took the initiative to reconstruct the Darulaman Palace in its function as a parliamentary building. Under the heading “From symbol of Monarchy to the cradle of Democracy” he planned to rebuild the Darulaman Palace (*Photo 1*) and later to rebuild the Darulaman district. Like the German Reichstag the newly rebuilt palace was intended to provide the Afghan parliament with a solid

home instead of the tents that housed it at the big Loya Jirgah in 2002. The courtyard of the palace was to be covered by a glassy cupola. The Afghan interim government welcomed this idea and took over the protectorate of the Darulaman Foundation which was initiated in Germany.

However the problems of fund-raising and the long construction period led the Afghan government to accept other initiatives as well. In the race for project funding, which opens opportunities for further political influence, the Indian government pledged approximately US\$ 25 million in 2005 for a new parliamentary building. The former king *Zahir Shah* supported the idea that the new parliament building should symbolise the partnership between the “world’s largest and newest democracies” (*Varadarjan* 2005). This building is supposed to be located near Darulaman and will include a House of the People, a Senate with more than 400 seats and a mosque for praying between the sessions (*Bhattacharya* 2005). The foundation stone for the new parliamentary building was laid in August 2005 in an official ceremony. It is

named “the green building” and will combine traditional Islamic architecture reflecting the region’s cultural heritage with modern amenities.

International efforts for the reconstruction of Kabul

In September 2002 an international conference on “Kabul and the National Urban Vision” was held in the Afghan capital. The topics included the preservation of the heritage of Kabul, revitalisation of the old town and the reconstruction of Char Chatta Bazaar as well as issues of urban transportation, urban management and planning, urban infrastructure and services. The problems of rebuilding Kabul, a war-torn city with an increase of population that would make it a mega city soon, led to another meeting hosted at the University of Karlsruhe in Germany in July 2003 (*Grotsch* 2004, pp. 17–27). The workshop was titled “Urban Planning in Disaster Regions, Supplying the Urban Realm: The Case of Kabul”. Its aim was to analyse the problems of rebuilding and to seek ways to bring back an identity for everyone in Kabul.

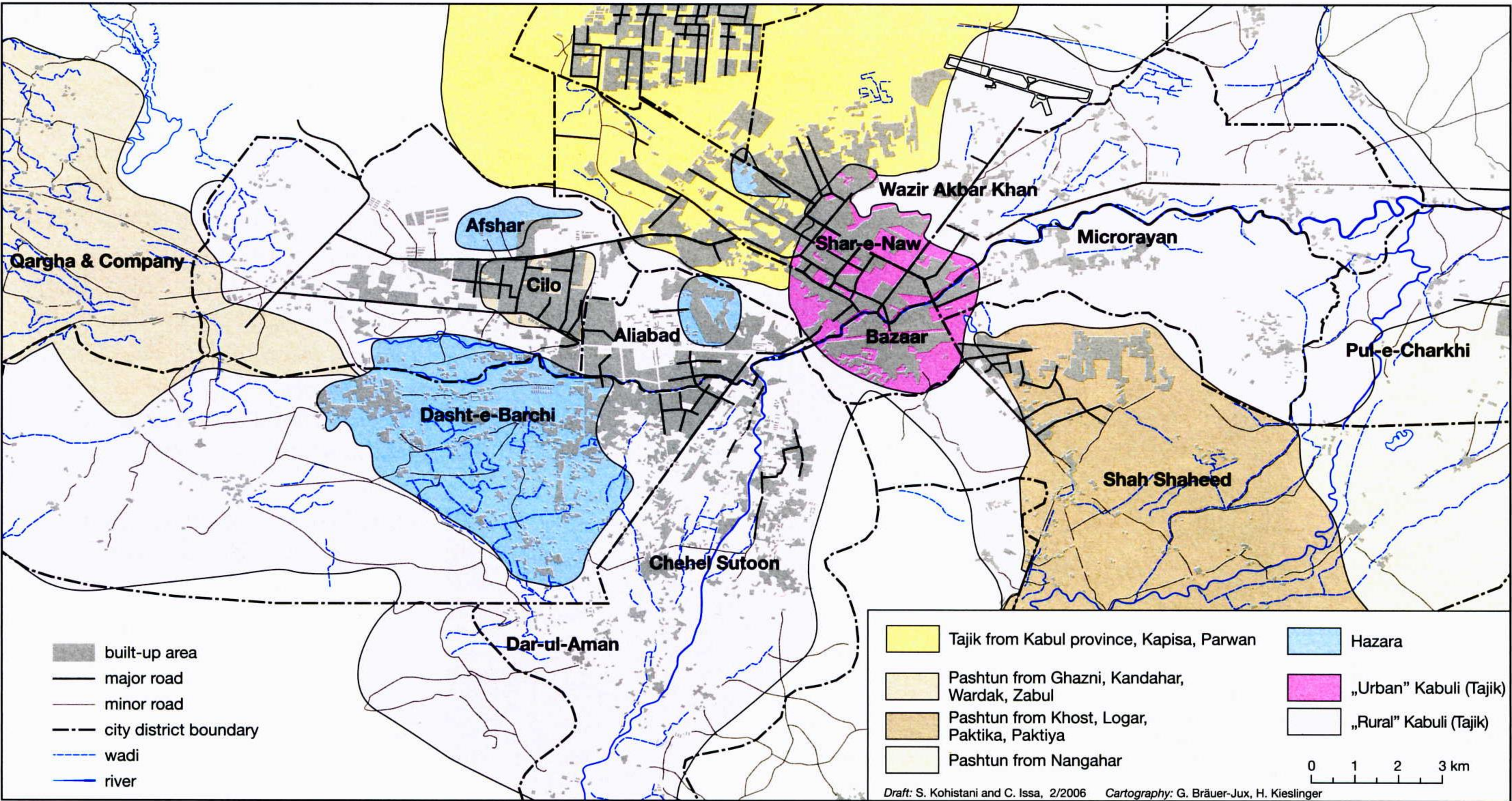


Figure 3: Kabul’s “urban culture” as represented by different ethnic groups (see Textbox)

Design: Kohistani and Issa 2006

A focus of the meeting in Karlsruhe was the role of the old city between tradition and modernity. One example that came up was the development of a square-system as the initial focus for neighbourhood development. Also deadlock street patterns as a typical element of an oriental city were considered in order to re-establish neighbourhood communities. Squares with fountains were intended to activate the redevelopment of the centre (*Grotsch* 2004, p. 34 f.). Hybrid systems and structures were seen as a strategy to connect the old with the new and were intended as powerful elements of a “new urbanism” of extreme contrasts.

Kabul has to be the “role model” but it can only survive if there is a regional compensation between city and rural areas. Historically the idea of modernizing Afghanistan through Kabul has failed as pointed out above. But now a chance for a balance between Kabul and regional development is seen. Given that many of Kabul’s inhabitants are people who have recently migrated from Afghanistan’s provinces (*Textbox*), experimenting with “urban agriculture” forms that use traditional construction methods would be an interesting aim.

Involved in the rebuilding process are Afghan, international and non-governmental organisations.

Kabbani’s (1992, p. 64) claim that “(...) a culture of reconstruction is needed – one that advocates tolerance, dialogue and acceptance of differences in a flexible framework of government and planning in order to accommodate competing and sometimes conflicting concerns” seems to be very relevant in the Afghan context. Since rebuilding has started the discussion about a master plan for the development of Kabul is not finished, and a solution seems to be as far away as ever. While the debate about national urban visions and the integration of master plans by experts goes on, the citizens of Kabul have already started rebuilding their city.

New architectural trends in Kabul

When passing through Kabul today it is obvious that huge glass facades have been introduced as a new element into the architectural mix of Kabul. Interestingly mosques in particular are fitted with coloured mirror glass. For example the big Friday mosque Eid Gah is completely fitted with green mirror glass, and the Yaqub mosque in Kheirkhana has blue windows. Typical of these coloured glass facades is the fact that from the outside it is not possible to see what is happening inside. In this way, the facades

are contributing to the inward-oriented way of Afghan living.

Many commercial and private buildings are distributed like glass palaces in the mud-brown landscape of Kabul. They are quite contrary to the rest of the city, and they astonish the observer. More and more private houses are being built in this “new modern style” which expresses the fact that the owner is able to afford it. If one asks people on the street, they will tell that these are mainly the houses of commanders.

Near the Shar-e Nau Park another architectural attraction has arrived, the Kabul City Centre. The first mall opened in 2005 and was initiated by an Afghan business man. It represents a typical western style of mall with several floors. In the underground a “food court” is established which is similar to many malls in Europe. Visitors are able to move from the underground to every floor using glass elevators. Shops in western style offer everything from jewellery to modern clothes. The mall represents exclusivity as most of the goods offered are not affordable for ordinary Afghans. Despite this, many people come to visit Kabul City Centre (*Photo 3*). The escalators in particular are a very special attraction because they are the first ones ever to appear in Kabul (*Cooney* 2005).

Beside the traditional way of construction new imported techniques have appeared. Not far away from the president’s house, the ark, a new mosque was built using Iranian construction techniques. Steel girders were used as the scaffold of the roof to simplify the construction process. Between the steel girders the roof was covered with traditional bricks which were reinforced with a mass of mud and gypsum.

Conclusion

Architecture can be a significant expression in the search for national identity or national unity. In discussions about the ongoing reconstruction process in Kabul, many ideas and visions about re-



Photo 3: New Kabul City Center

Textbox: Citizens of Kabul and the building of an urban identity

Kabul has long been a magnet for members of a multitude of ethnic groups, and it developed into a city representing its uniqueness both in attitudinal behaviour and in physical expression (Dupree 1975, p. 1). An urban society evolved which was based on social elites and intellectuals who developed ideals, life styles and aspirations beyond traditional cultural patterns. Members belonging to this group are called "Kabulis". They can be understood as the original group of Kabul's inhabitants who define themselves more through their societal status of being urban Kabulis than through their regional relationship. Although this group is composed mostly of Tajiks, they differentiate themselves clearly from the "Shamali-Tajiks" which describes the people who migrated from the northern province of Shamali and who have settled mainly in the north of Kabul (Figure 3).

A typical "urban" Kabuli would speak Dari as his mother tongue. He might appreciate European clothing styles (Ali 1969, pp. 89–91), was usually well and often secularly educated and normally worked in the administration, commercial or service sectors. Formerly this group was located mainly in the northern area of old town in the residential area around the royal castle (ark), and later in Shahr-e Nau, a district predominantly built in Anglo-Indian bungalow architecture (Hahn 1964, pp. 24–27). Some Kabulis studied abroad and experience foreign cultures, and some had close relationships to the royal dynasty. In the 1970s this helped them to move to the newly planned district Wazir Akbar Khan. It is now mostly a residential area for diplomats since the urban Kabulis rent out their houses while staying abroad.

The "rural" Kabulis are those inhabitants who have long lived in the more rural areas of Kabul. Mainly Tajik farmers live in Qalas, and they guarantee the daily livelihood of Kabul's population by bringing fresh fruits, vegetables and meat to the bazaars and streets of the city.

With the start of the rural-urban migration in the mid-1960s, significant numbers of new groups entered Kabul. The migration process was initiated by job opportunities; it developed steadily and did not stop during the Russian occupation or during wartime. Although ethnic groups come in close contact with each other through the migration, their main ties are built on family kinships as well on their ethnic roots and regional relationships. Migrants usually join their related group already established in the city. Here they have the possibility to interact with members of the same group on a reciprocal system of understanding. They become part of very close communities with their own system of social welfare and the cooperative support they need for self-identification. As such they occupy particular areas of Kabul.

With population growth accelerating ethnic segregation and stratification has become a characteristic of Kabul's urban structure (Figure 3). Beside Tajiks significant numbers of most of the other ethnic groups are now represented, such as Pashtuns and Hazara. The settlement patterns of these groups are interesting being largely dictated by the regional position of their home provinces. The majority of these ethnic groups settle in areas of Kabul which are close to the main roads that connect them easily with their home provinces. The advantage of being able to visit their families in the province more easily is seen as more important than the option of cheaper accommodation. For example Shamali-Tajiks have mostly settled in North Kabul in the area around Khairkhana. Pashtuns from Khost, Logar, Paktika and Paktiya are settled mainly in the south eastern area of Kabul.

This migration process accelerated after the fall of the Taliban in 2001. The evolving ethnic segregation in Kabul gained a different aspect as now most of the refugees coming to Kabul include also many people from the villages. Until now many migrants have considered Kabul to be a place to earn money and to live but not as a hometown. It has remained a long time challenge for Kabul to deliver substitutes for the kinship-related reciprocal network of these groups.

During war time Kabul's citizens were mainly busy with survival. Today Kabul is in the fourth year of reconstruction and yet still many households are not regularly provided with electricity. So even today people are busy with just caring for their daily livelihoods and with reconstructing of their dwellings.

Another big problem is the slow progress on the reconstruction of streets. Currently, many of the main streets are rebuilt or in progress, but most of the smaller streets look like beaten tracks and are a challenge for drivers and cars. When passing a street a pedestrian has to be careful of the "Dschuis", the Afghan term for the open drainage system. The drainage of many houses in Kabul, especially in the old town, ends in a tube which stands out of the wall of a house, and excrement falls directly into a Dschui which passes the house. Other drainage pipes run underground, but these also end in a Dschui. These Dschuis are dangerous not only because they are foot traps for pedestrians, but because of the dirt (bacteria) and smell they produce. Together with the extreme air pollution, these are the environmental circumstances experienced by the citizens. This, added to the exploding price of living, especially for renting accommodation caused by the "New Great Game of construction aid" (Dittmann 2004, p. 66–71), renders the living situation more difficult. To overcome these difficulties is one of the biggest challenges.



Photo 4: Inside view of Kabul City Centre



Photo 5: Safi Landmark Hotel in Kabul

building the capital arose. Kabul is a prime city in Afghanistan. It exerts a strong pull factor encouraging people from all over the country to settle here. Although Afghans are aware that up to the present there are still problems with the supply of water, power, drainage, waste and traffic, they

have taken the initiative themselves and started rebuilding their homes.

The many facets of architectural design which are now arising beside the traditional mud buildings symbolize an expression of hope for a better future. Although the traditions of kinship and community relationships are key factors of Afghan personality, it seems that citizens accept the idea that the architecture of official buildings should represent modernity and openness. The Kabul City Centre or the planned parliament building offer good opportunities to meet people in public space.

The new diversity of architecture, which is quite often a contrast between old and new, reflects the conglomerate of different Afghan identities seeking to catch up with modernity while at the same time preserving their traditional way of life. While intellectual discussions about visions of Kabul's future are going on, international and national participants in Kabul's reconstruction process should bear in mind how much the recent wars have left a mark on Kabul's citizens. The first priority should be to fulfil the essential infrastructure needs of the population. This gives people a perspective and a feeling that Kabul could be their hometown and a city which can develop in future. And it might draw people into discussions about Kabul's urban future in which Afghans should be more involved than they are at the present stage. ■

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