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The Hammam – the Islamic bath as an example of urban “glocal” socio-economy

The hammām, the traditional Islamic bath is a cultural heritage with a living socio-cultural and economic tradition and an example of good practice for combining different challenges. The institution of public baths is spread over a geographically wide area – from the Mediterranean area to oriental countries and even China – but refers to a common understanding about its function within the settlements. Hammams in urban contexts were investigated in the HAMMAM study in case study hammāms in Islamic cities like Ankara, Cairo, Constantine, Damascus and Fez, in a multidisciplinary approach - from architecture, restoration, socio-cultural aspects to economy.

Results from this study show that the Hammam appears on the one hand as a “global” traditional institution with a common collective memory spread over a wide area and on the other hand a very well adapted organization to local social functions (Kolb, Dumreicher, 2008). There is a common understanding of how to use and what to do in the hammam: users as well as people, who do not use hammāms, described similar habits and traditional rituals contributing to a collective memory. The aligned traditions and habits which are practiced and the specific objects used inside the hammām, contribute to make all these aspects part of common understanding. Therefore it’s a place providing time, space and opportunities for individuals to share social activities, habits and traditions on a weekly or monthly basis within the community. Also the idea is still present, that the hammam contributes to the local social welfare system. The bath is open for rich and poor residents, and traditionally has an entrance fee, which is available for everyone, and assures individual as well as collective health. The hammam is subsidized from the wealth and balancing social disparity within the community providing social security for poor residents and local money exchange within a cultural heritage in urban context.

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