

The People Behind the Projects

Euromed Heritage IV > Interview with Andreas Oberenzer

Putting the hammam back at the heart of the community



■ **Andreas Oberenzer,**
Hammamed deputy
project coordinator

Once a centrepiece of the Islamic city, the hammam is at risk of dying out as a living public space. **Hammamed**, a €1.19 million three-year project under the EU-funded **Euromed Heritage IV** programme, is fighting to reverse the trend. In an interview with the ENPI Info Centre, deputy project coordinator Andreas Oberenzer explains how Hammamed is engaging with local residents to put the hammam back at the centre of the community.

Q: What is the project trying to achieve?

The hammam is one of the key elements in the traditional Islamic city, historically playing an integral role in public life, a place serving multiple purposes – hygienic, social, and religious. Today, it is in danger of disappearing. Across the region, hammams are falling into disuse, and while some buildings may have been restored, often they have lost their function.

We want to bring them back to life, and make them work again within their historical and social context; we want to bring people back to the hammam, especially young people, reconnecting the building with its unique social function in the neighbourhood.

Q: How does it achieve its objectives?

The project conducts specific actions for two selected hammams, Hammam Ammuna in Damascus and Hammam Saffarin in Fez. We aim to raise awareness of the hammam as a common cultural heritage in the Mediterranean through public activities, conferences and workshops, open days and exhibitions. We are planning two big events around World Water Day on 22 March, in Damascus this year and Fez in 2011 – with films and exhibitions, and an open day, where people can speak to the experts, the hammam manager, the staff, tour through the neighbourhood, and see how the hammam is embedded in society. At the same time, the project is producing an architectural guide on issues for rehabilitation, and a business and management plan for hammam managers, with web-based business plan tools to ensure feasibility. By pooling the knowledge we have accumulated, we are able to share the tools to turn hammams into successful business ventures. In this way, the good practice generated through actions on specific hammams can be transferred and extended across the region.

Q: What is the impact on the citizens of partner countries?

Our workshops are bringing people from the neighbourhoods into the hammam, and we have had a very good response. In Damascus, we brought scouts, two groups, boys and girls aged between 12 and 17, and showed them through the whole experience. Most had never used the hammam before and said afterwards they would love

This is a series of interviews with leaders of projects funded by the EU's Regional Programme, prepared by the ENPI Info Centre.
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to come again and to bring their parents and friends.

On the hammam exhibition days we are asking people to bring personal items that may relate to the hammam, reconnecting the space with personal objects that carry meaning across the generations.

Q: What are the challenges you face in its implementation?

One of the main challenges is simply social and economic evolution. For many people, the hammam was perceived just as a bath, and now with running water in every home, it has lost its hygienic raison d'être.

At the same time, there was the religious factor: many imams raised their voices against women using the hammams. We have worked a lot with women to break the taboo – with the help of elderly women who were carriers of the tradition, opening people's eyes to rediscovered rituals – women for example used to go to the hammam in ritual ceremonies before their wedding, and then 40 days after giving birth.

Q: What do you consider as your most important achievements?

Both the hammams, in Damascus and Fez, were in a very bad state. Building on the work of our earlier project, HAMMAM, we have managed to bring both back to life and through our activities local people are coming back. In Fez, the Seffarine Hammam had been closed for rehabilitation in the period between the two projects, and, recognising the contribution we could make, work was actually stopped for four months to allow us to contribute our knowledge.

What we are doing is working on three levels: addressing the physical restoration, and the sustainability of hammams as a viable business operation, while at the same time re-establishing their role as a meeting place in the neighbourhood.

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Euromed Heritage IV

Contributes to the exchange of experiences on cultural heritage, creates networks and promotes cooperation

<http://www.euromedheritage.net>

Participating countries

Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Occupied Palestinian Territory, Syria, Tunisia

Objectives

Based on the objectives defined in the "Strategy for the Development of Euro-Mediterranean Heritage: priorities from Mediterranean Countries (2007-2013)", it focuses on the appropriation by the local populations of their cultural heritage and favours access to education and knowledge of cultural heritage. It supports a framework for the exchange of experiences, channels for the dissemination of best practices and new perspectives aimed at the development of an institutional cultural environment.

Timeframe

2008-2012

Find out more

Hammamed webpage > <http://www.euromedheritage.net/intern.cfm?menuID=12&submenuID=13&idproject=48>

Budget

€17 million

EuroMed Heritage IV fiche > www.enpi-info.eu/mainmed.php?id=243&id_type=10

ENPI Info Centre – Culture thematic portal >

www.enpi-info.eu/thememed.php?subject=10

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