

The Future of Past Tense: a Cultural and Studies Centre for Gondar

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Foreword

The town of Gondar, in Northern Ethiopia, has won the prestigious status of a classified UNESCO world heritage site, in 26 October 1979, mainly because in it stands the castle compound locally known as the *Atsie Fasil Ghimb*. This palace compound encapsulates much of the country's political and religious history between the mid-seventeenth century and the mid-nineteenth century, when Gondar was the capital of the Christian kingdom of Abyssinia.

Since the time of its classification by the UNESCO, the local authorities have expected that status to be an intervening factor in a long desired reversal of the decaying fortunes of the town. But, despite the promises of urban development and architectural restoration that were aired during and after the UNESCO classification, the whole process of renewal has yet to begin in earnest¹.

When one first visits the "Fasil Ghimb", the lingering impression is that this is a pleasant, clean but uninformative space - it offers but little historical feedback, both to the outside visitors and to the local population.

The feeling of discomfort doesn't wither away, but deepens rather, when one becomes acquainted with the dense documentation that was produced to pave the way for practical restoration of the site. True, what has been tried and done by the local Department of Culture, Tourism and Information, under the supervision of the Authority for the Research and Conservation of Cultural Heritage (following the directives of the ETH/74/014 Project), was anticipated and suggested in diverse UNESCO and UNDP studies and reports (Angelini, 1971; Angelini and Mongin, 1968; Burrows, 1974; Hill, 1979; Aalund, 1984).

¹ The troubled recent history of the town and region, and of Ethiopia as a whole, between 1974 and 2000, is an important factor to understand the failed promises of the cultural restoration that seemed to be implied by the UNESCO classification (see: Donham, 2002: 1-8; Clapham, 2002: 9-32; and Marcus, 2002: 242-4).

The Fasil palace proper² and the palace of Queen Mentewab³ are now restored and made ready for a variety of future uses. The stone walls of the “Bäkaffa palace”⁴, which were splitting and in dire risk of collapse, partly due to the concrete ceiling that was put in place by the Italian military during their occupation of the town, between 1935 and 1941, have now been propped and are set to be restored soon.

But be it because of lack of resources, of political conditions or of a focused functionality, it is clear that the non-religious architectural heritage standing scattered inside - and outside - the compound doesn't communicate well with the present generations - the so-called “Baths of Fäsilädäs”⁵ and the Municipal Library building being noted exceptions. The various projects referred to above and the present conservation and research activities generally ignore such considerations as the need to fully develop an approach that would holistically value Gondar's material and immaterial cultural heritage as a potential development factor for the town and region.

This happens because there is an almost total lack of structured and systematic research, and of a multidisciplinary formation of knowledge based on this important architectural and structuring feature of the town. Difficult access to primary sources on Gondar, and little contact with contemporary international research methods and practices, make it difficult to develop a critical assessment of its history and culture.

It happens also because there is a lack of public awareness of the potential for sustained development of Gondar's cultural heritage, and up until very recent times there were no political, economical and social conditions to put such programmes in place. Today, the town is faced with dramatic changes in its social, demographic and economic structure, caused by the poor sustainability of traditional agriculture and the development of local industries, which induces a continuous flow of immigration to the town and to other urban centres. As a result, traditional life, with its oral memories and its forms of knowledge tend to disappear quickly, and the time is pressing to collect, register and study the rich cultural peasant and urban traditions.

Positive signs of a greater commitment on the part of the national, regional and local authorities have been emerging, though. An original idea by Fasil Ayehu (ex-head of the DoCTI of Gondar, presently at the Amhara Regional Bureau of Culture and Tourism, in Bahir Dar) and Manuel João Ramos (anthropologist from ISCTE, Lisbon), to create a Cultural and Studies Centre in Gondar, was presented in 8 March 2002, at a *Workshop on*

² Built by king Fäsilädäs, sometime between 1632 and 1650.

³ The 18th century Mentewab, the wife of king Bäkaffa, was co-ruler of the kingdom during the childhood and reign of her son Iyasu II.

⁴ Emperor Bäkaffa ruled between 1721 and 1730.

⁵ The baths are used today during the festivities of the Temkat, or Epiphany, when the pool is filled with water, and blessed by the Bishop of Gondar.

*Appropriate Urban Planning Methodology for the Revision of Gondar Master Plan*⁶, which took place inside the castle compound. It was discussed with enthusiasm with different local, regional and national authorities and, subsequently a more cohesive proposal (presented below) developed.

The proposal is, in short, to locate a Cultural and Studies Centre in *Ras Sihule Mika'el's* palace, which would become an integrating body to promote cooperation between local, national and international researchers, in view of a better understanding of Gondarine civilisation.

One word should be said about the proposed location of the centre. It stems from the premise that, to this day, the historical urban structure of Gondar evolves around the imperial castle compound and the interpretation that Italian urban planners made of it, when they introduced a colonial style tentative grid system centred around an avenue-like street and a tertiary sector Piazza of Italian flavour (see plan below).

Important for the choice of the location of the proposed Centre is that it would help rehabilitate the decaying area overlooking the social centre (the Piazza), that it stands between the Italian administrative buildings and the town's historical centre (the palace compound), that the Ras Mika'el palace is in good state of conservation, and that it stands outside the compound, and thus its working and living areas would be less dependent on archaeological and conservation limitations.⁷

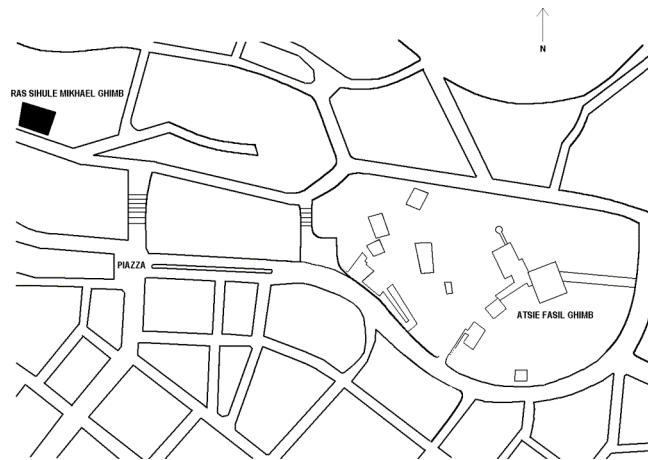


Fig. 1: Uptown Gondar and the palace compound

⁶ Organized by the Amhara Regional Bureau, the Department of Architecture and Urban Planning of the University of Addis Ababa, and the Graduate School of Media and Governance, of Keio University.

⁷ For an alternative proposed location for the Centre, see: Kal, 1983.

The transformation of the palace of *Ras Sihule Mika'el* into a cultural and studies centre would help revitalise the uptown area of Gondar, making it a sort of conceptual entrance - or interface - to the Atsie Fasil Ghimb, both for tourists and for the local population.

The adaptation of a historical building that has, throughout the centuries, changed function and that has an ambiguous and difficult identity⁸ is proposed with knowledge that previous equivalent adaptations have been successfully tried in different historical sites around the world.

Given the interest publicly expressed by Amhara regional authorities in this proposal during the afore-mentioned Workshop, its materialisation should occur in such way that it converges with the conservation and development strategies that are presently being decided upon, and that will dictate the revision of Gondar's Master Plan⁹.

PROPOSAL: A CULTURAL AND STUDIES CENTRE FOR GONDAR

1. Project Abstract

The following is a draft proposal to establish a cultural studies centre in Gondar town. This centre is supposed to be established at the *Ras Sihule Mika'el* Palace, which is one among the Gondar UNESCO World Heritage Site's monuments. The Palace is currently under direct possession of the Department of Culture, Tourism & Information for North Gondar and is presently not in service, although it has become a visitable place in the recent months. The owner of the alleged cultural study centre should be a Foundation, with a board of administrators comprising representatives of local and regional authorities, private patrons and international representatives.

The estimated total cost of the project will have to comprise the cost of the adaptation of the Palace to this purpose, the cost of the necessary equipments and furniture and the cost of implementing the necessary services.

2. PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Name: - Establishing the "*Gondar Cultural and Studies Centre*".

Location: - Amhara National Regional State, North Gondar Zone, in Gondar town.

Type: - The project is meant for new public service in living premises.

⁸ In recent times, during the "red terror" that afflicted Gondar, it was there that the military questioned, tortured and killed the regime's political opponents.

⁹ See, namely, the NUPI Report on Gondar's Master Plan (NUPI, 1995) and the papers presented at the *Workshop on Appropriate Urban Planning Methodology for the Revision of Gondar Master Plan* (Gondar, March 2002).

3. PROJECT BACKGROUND

The seventeenth-century Imperial City of Gondar was the political capital and the cultural heart of the Ethiopian highlands until the middle of the nineteenth-century. Today, the town is the administrative capital of the North Gondar Zone in the Amhara National Regional State. Within the Zone there are 18 administrative sub-zones. According to the Zonal Planning and Economic Development Department's estimates in the year 2000, the total population of the Zone is 2,685,000 among which 1,329,500 are female and 1,355,500 are male, and around 167,000 are dwellers of Gondar town. The overwhelming majority of the region's population are subsistence farmers and cattle herders.

Being the administrative capital of the zone, Gondar town is the centre of a considerable number of governmental and non-governmental organisations that bring to the region their development programs and services. There are also several small-scale industries, enterprises and a number of industrial plants (a cotton-ginning mill, a meat processing plant, and two beverages factories). Moreover, the town is designated as one of the three industrial towns of the Amhara National Regional State. Consequently, the Government and the Municipality seem invested in developing the town to meet the need of its burgeoning private sector.

The town has four senior high schools and twenty-two elementary schools. It is also a home for a number of institutes of higher education. One of such institutes is the Gondar College of Medical Sciences, which is one of the senior schools of its kind in the country for training medical and paramedical professionals. The other ones are a teacher's training college as well as a newly established vocational institution.

The town and the surrounding countryside villages are home to several imperial buildings and other innumerable monuments that are a testimony to the seventeenth and eighteenth century history of Ethiopia (the Gondar DoCTI has produced an unpublished provisional report of this architectural heritage). This makes Gondar one of the four major destinations that constitute Ethiopia's Historic Route. Tourism, which virtually was at a standstill during the years of the former regime, is now gradually increasing. The airfield, that was formerly accessible only to small aircraft, has by now been developed to an international standard. It is believed that these facilities, together with the extensive historical and cultural heritage of the Zone, shall further the tourism industry in the region.

The current Government, both at the national and regional level, has publicly vowed to preserve and develop the rich heritage of this area. It fully financed the restoration of the palaces of King Fäsilädäs and of Queen Mentewab in the *Fasil Ghimb*, the first and the biggest of the castles in the Gondar palace compound, as well as the restoration of the Baths of Fäsilädäs, in the lower part of the town (with the support of a Norwegian organization).

4. PROJECT RATIONALE

The fundamental political and social changes presently taking place in the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, since the fall of the totalitarian regime of the Derg, has

given a renewed role to the cultural sectors. The sense of cultural identity on the part of the different nationalities in the newly organised regional states has recently risen (partly as a result of the new concept of a ethnically based federative state, adopted in the 1994 Constitution). Thus, the cultural sectors tend to correspond to this newly found desire to assemble and to reconstruct the testimonies and heritages of their indigenous civilisations, and to register forms of livelihood which are in danger of disappearing.

Therefore, since cultural study sectors play their innovative role in the revival of oral traditions and popular ceremonies, the project under discussion will be a positive and integrating response to encourage local communities to support and understand their own cultural values. It will also be an important resource and infrastructure for scholars and visitors from other parts of the world.

5. PROJECT OBJECTIVES

The main objectives of this project are to introduce and develop a multidisciplinary scientific research approach as a step to divulge a better knowledge of the history and culture of Gondar (town and region). This may serve both as a means for cultural animation, aiming at a more participatory involvement of the local population and at supporting the tourist industry, and as a tool for recording traditional and historical values with scientific criteria, to develop knowledge and specialized employment in heritage conservation and presentation.

The online accessibility to its database would be an important part of the potentially rich dialogue between Gondarines, at home and abroad, and with foreign specialists interested in Gondarine studies, which should reflect in a widened publication of research material, in different fields.

The centre should systematise a means of co-operation with university presses and commercial publishers, both locally and in foreign countries – to publish books, booklets, review, videos, tapes, CD's and postcards on different aspects of Gondar. A project called *Encyclopaedia Gondarina* could also be a congregating project for local and foreign specialists.

The Cultural Centre should also promote support for production of films that focus on different aspect and themes of Gondar civilisation, co-produced with Ethiopian and international film producers.

6. PROJECT'S GOAL

An essential goal of this project is to promote and sustain the government's and the local communities' efforts towards preserving and presenting the cultural and historical heritage of Gondar. These shall be done through intra-regional and international co-operation in the area of cultural heritage.

7. PROJECT'S ACTIVITIES

The following shall be the major activities to be carried out:

- Maintaining and adapting the *Ras Mika'el* Palace for the purpose of this project;
- Developing a multidisciplinary research programme. The main areas of research to be promoted through the Gondar Cultural Centre would be: history, archaeology, anthropology, sociology, geography, linguistics, musicology, ecology, architecture, urbanism, art, handicrafts, botany, forestry, etc. Comparative urban history studies (in Ethiopia, Africa and Middle East) could be a thematic area of international interest;
- Working out appropriate means to enable the project to incorporate a community participatory approach in its programmes (data collecting, educating and animating, etc.);
- Developing a computerised database on Gondar history and culture;
- Establishing online computer accessibility to the cultural study centre (the proposed site would offer scanned documentation, an online library, and would be connected with local and international libraries, archives and databases);
- Promoting cultural and scientific animation (exhibitions, theatre, films, workshops and conferences, etc.);
- Developing tourist routs in the region as a consequence of the research and the animation programs of the Cultural Study Centre, etc. The Centre would promote free courses, workshops and seminars - training in art, culture, history, architecture, etc. not only on Gondar but on any other study areas that may be considered relevant and complementary;

8. INPUTS

The financing of the Centre (both of its infra-structure and its activities) should come from public (local, regional and national) and private bodies. International patrons (UNESCO, World Bank, etc.), NGO's and foreign governments are to be considered important financial supporters. Academic and research institutions, both national and foreign, will contribute to the development of the Centre with training, knowledge formation and capacity building.

9. EXPECTED OUTPUTS

A proper knowledge gaining centre, which would update the information supply in Gondar history and culture should be an output of this project. The centre should serve the local communities to better understand and exercise their own culture and widen international awareness towards Gondar as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Gondarine manuscripts, icons, architectural plans and photos, oral and written literature (legends, epic, poetry, song,

etc), ethnomusicology, biographies of major Gondarine figures; film and video collections, would be available locally and via the Internet. The Cultural Centre should also include a multimode amphitheatre (to promote local and foreign theatre, cinema, dance and music concerts), exhibition hall and museum. Participation of the local population in the effort of collecting cultural data is a fundamental part of the process, and a means to ensure their continuing adherence to the project.

A website in the internet, that would be maintained by local technicians would give online information on the Centre, its collections, its database, and divulge news on events promoted by the Cultural Centre and other institutions in Gondar town and region. This website would also promote links to other relevant cultural, academic and artistic centres and events in Ethiopia.

The Centre's research and animation activities will promote specialised employment, will develop tourism on a sustainable basis, would support education at various levels, and will serve as a key feature in an integrated urban development of the town.

10. BENEFICIARIES OF THE PROJECT

The peoples of Ethiopia as a nation in general, and the local communities of Gondar area in particular, should be the main beneficiaries of the project. The Gondarine Diaspora, the international intellectual community, the countries cooperating with Ethiopia, and the non-specialized visitors should also be among its beneficiaries.

11. PROJECT COST

The costs for maintenance of the castle, for furnishing the centre, for travel & allowances, etc., still have to be summarised here in reference to their sources.

A special consultant commission must be contacted to produce the necessary financial projections.

12. EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITY

All employment opportunities that the project may directly create should abide to the condition of developing local capabilities. Hence, all created jobs suppose specific and continued training in the following areas:

- Computers and database management
- Conservation and curatorship
- Cultural animation and tourism
- Education, guidance and research
- Internet design and web mastering
- Multidisciplinary research in social and human sciences
- Printing and publication

13. PROJECT MANAGEMENT

This sub-topic can only be made more elaborate and clear in accordance with a future negotiation on the roles of the main concerned bodies, especially that of the domestic government and nongovernmental organizations, which will define its organizational structure and day-to-day management. This, being a sound indicator of its sustainability, has to be very rigorously conceived by the proper authorities. A possible solution to run the cultural centre would be the constitution of a foundation, chaired by a administrative board (where the town, the zonal, the regional authorities would have a permanent seat, and which would also include the main financial patrons) and an international scientific committee. The activities of the foundation and the centre would be carried out in such way that they could properly evaluated and audited in a regular basis.

14. IMPLEMENTATION SCHEDULE

The summary of the project's plan of action in terms of its individual work categories has yet to be established, in accordance with the main concerned bodies.

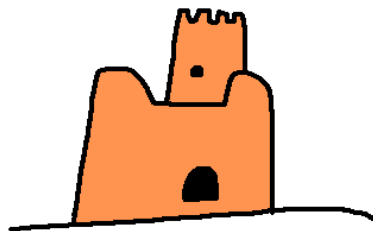
15. SUMMARY

This draft proposal to establish a cultural studies centre in Gondar town, supposedly at the *Ras Sihule Mika'el* Palace, one among the Gondar UNESCO World Heritage Site's monuments, aims at a sustainable development of Gondar town and region, by promoting its cultural tourism capabilities and deepening research in the areas of historical, anthropological and architectural heritage.

Of first importance to this project are the following aspects:

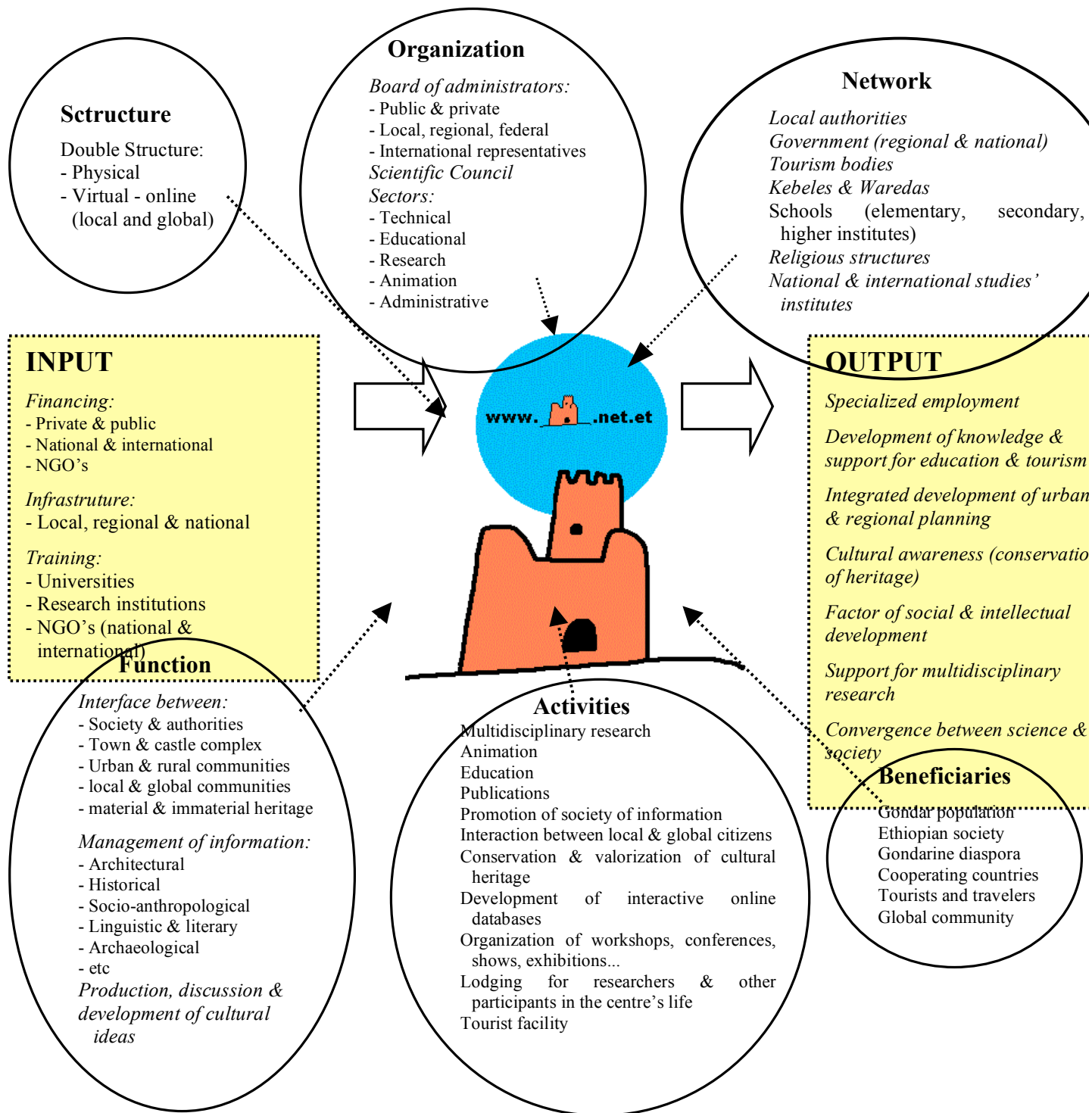
- To create a stable infrastructure that may allow an increased level of local and national awareness towards cultural and historical heritage of Gondar;
- To develop a sound basis for international multidisciplinary cooperation in the area of Gondarine studies;
- To promote economical and cultural development and support job creation by establishing a dynamic centre for cultural tourism activities.

PROPOSED LOGO:



Gondar Cultural and Studies Centre:

Nature: Centre for the production, management, discussion and transmission of cultural information and ideas; an instrument for cultural awareness and integration of cultural aspects in urban planning and development



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