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### Guest Editorial

## Urban Caravanserais

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This special issue, “Urban Caravanserais,” examines an architectural and urban phenomenon that has shaped cities, commercial networks, and social life across a vast geographical area for centuries. Although caravanserais are commonly associated with long-distance trade routes and interregional mobility, their urban variants developed as complex institutions embedded within the economic, spatial, and cultural structures of cities. From the historic bazaars of Iran and Anatolia to the funduqs of Fez, the wekalas of Cairo, and the commercial buildings of Nicosia, these structures have assumed diverse forms while maintaining their fundamental roles as places of exchange, accommodation, production, storage, and social interaction.

The idea for this special issue emerged from the need to establish stronger connections among the numerous typological variants of urban caravanserais developed in different geographical, cultural, and historical contexts. Previous studies have demonstrated the significance of individual buildings and local caravanserais networks. However, systematic comparisons among these variants—and particularly investigations into how caravanserais patterns evolved in response to different urban, cultural, economic, and social conditions—remain comparatively limited.

The papers collected in this issue address this research gap by examining caravanserais not merely as isolated monuments but as active components of urban systems. Collectively, the contributions explore their relationships with bazaars, streets, neighbourhoods, commercial networks, public spaces, and patterns of everyday life. They also investigate the challenges associated with abandonment, adaptive reuse, conservation, and contemporary revitalization.

The intellectual foundations of this special issue were reinforced by the keynote address delivered by Professor Nada Es Sallak during the ICCAUA conference. Her presentation highlighted the importance of funduq typologies in shaping the urban structure of Fez-Medina. The funduq has contributed not only to the physical formation of the medina but also to its commercial, social, and cultural life. Many of the relationships historically supported by this building type remain relevant to the contemporary urban dynamics of Fez. Consequently, developing appropriate conservation and rehabilitation strategies is essential for the comprehensive regeneration of the city’s tangible and intangible heritage.

The special session brought together scholars working across a broad geographical spectrum, including Iran, Türkiye, Egypt, Morocco, Cyprus, and Italy. The resulting contributions demonstrate that the urban caravanserais cannot be understood as a single, homogeneous architectural category. Instead, it should be approached as a flexible and evolving typology shaped by local traditions, political transformations, commercial practices, environmental conditions, and changing patterns of urban life.

In “Iranian Urban and Regional Caravanserais: Processes of Change and Strategies for Future Revitalization,” Mazyar Abaee examines the principal formal and functional characteristics of Iranian caravanserais, culminating in an analysis of the Vakil Caravanserais in Kerman. The study challenges approaches that treat Persian caravanserais as a uniform architectural category. It argues that regional and urban caravanserais followed fundamentally different trajectories of historical and spatial development. Regional caravanserais primarily supported intercity movement and long-distance commercial networks, whereas their urban counterparts became integrated into the economic and social structures of cities. By distinguishing between these two categories, the paper provides a more precise foundation for developing context-sensitive conservation and revitalization strategies.

Shabnam Golkarian's contribution, "Caravanserais as Semi-nodal Spatial-Economic Elements in the Urban Structure of Tabriz's Historical Bazaar: A Morphological Analysis Based on Spatial Syntax," investigates the spatial relationships between caravanserais and the historic bazaar of Tabriz. Through a morphological and spatial-syntax-based analysis, the study interprets caravanserais as semi-nodal elements within the broader commercial network of the bazaar. Their relative locations, accessibility, and connections with surrounding routes reveal how commercial activities were organized within a highly integrated, place-based urban system. The paper further contrasts the interconnected character of traditional bazaars with many contemporary commercial environments, which frequently operate as introverted and fragmented structures with weaker relationships to their surrounding urban contexts.

The Anatolian context is addressed by Dilan Kakdaş Ateş in "Caravanserais and Urbanization in Anatolia: Spatial and Functional Perspectives." The paper presents a typological and historical examination of caravanserais during a period in which this building form became increasingly prominent throughout Anatolia. It explains how caravanserais located within urban centres gradually acquired functions associated with trade, storage, production, cultural activities, hospitality, and tourism.

The study also critically evaluates contemporary transformations resulting from adaptive reuse. Although new functions have contributed to the continued use, maintenance, and survival of many historic caravanserais, inappropriate interventions have sometimes weakened their original spatial characteristics, architectural integrity, and historical identity. The article therefore outlines possible approaches through which adaptive reuse can support long-term preservation without erasing the defining qualities of these buildings.

The changing urban identity of Nicosia is examined in "Lefkoşa as Caravanserais' City," by José Manuel Pagés Madrigal, Grace Jdeed, Sadiq Osman Elmi, and Mashair Khalid Eltayeb Abdelbagi. The article interprets the development of urban caravanserais in relation to the city's changing political, spatial, and social conditions. Particular attention is given to the transformation of Nicosia from a Venetian-patterned walled settlement into a city possessing many of the defining characteristics of an Ottoman urban centre. The study also considers the subsequent appearance of Greek commercial typologies, particularly stoas. These structures may be interpreted as more open variants of the caravanserais, directly connected to public streets and adapted to increasingly specialized commercial functions. By documenting caravanserais that have become disused, substantially altered, or threatened with disappearance, the authors reveal the vulnerability of this aspect of Nicosia's architectural heritage. The paper further discusses how the political division of the city and the events of 1974 disrupted long-established social, spatial, and commercial relationships.

Silvia Covarino, Meryem Kübra Uluç-Tolba, and Minora Hafez examine the Egyptian context in "The Iconic 'Wekala' in the Urban Patterns of Historic Cairo: Spatial Dynamics Between Urban Image, Typology, and Contemporary Life." The paper investigates the wekala as a recurring element within the diverse urban landscapes of Historic Cairo. Rather than considering it solely as an individual commercial building, the authors interpret the wekala as an integral urban organism that has participated in the development of the city's economic, spatial, and social ecosystem.

The article demonstrates that the identity of the wekala remains closely connected to its commercial character, even though its functions, users, and spatial configurations have been repeatedly modified in response to changing social and economic needs. This adaptability has enabled the typology to remain present within contemporary urban life. At the same time, the paper emphasizes that future interventions must recognize the wekala's architectural significance and its continuing role in the collective identity of Historic Cairo.

The urban funduqs of Fez are explored by José Manuel Pagés Madrigal and Khaoula Moutei in "Funduqs in Fez: The Last Transformation of Urban Caravanserais." The study presents a typological interpretation of the funduqs located within the Medina of Fez. It first examines the distinctive character of the medina and identifies the souk and funduq as generative elements within its urban structure. It then provides an overview of the principal structural and functional variants of the funduq found throughout the historic city.

The paper also evaluates different approaches to sustainable rehabilitation, identifying the advantages and limitations associated with contemporary restoration and reuse practices. Its conclusions propose potential lines of action for the integrated conservation of Fez's funduqs. Such an approach requires

attention not only to architectural fabric but also to traditional activities, social relationships, craft practices, and patterns of economic exchange.

The social importance of the funduq is particularly significant. Because of its scale, spatial organization, and close relationship with surrounding streets and neighbourhoods, this building type is often more deeply integrated into the urban fabric than larger monumental structures. Although funduqs constitute a heterogeneous architectural group, they perform a shared mediating function. They operate as a bridge between the scale of major urban landmarks and the finer grain of the domestic city. As repositories of collective experience and everyday activity, they represent a form of cultural heritage that embodies the social memory of the communities that created and used them.

The final contribution, “The Social Life of the Urban Caravanserai in Egypt: A Literary Survey,” by Daniele Salvoldi and Lama Yahya Elshayyal, adopts a distinctive interpretative approach. The article examines urban caravanserais in Egypt, particularly in Cairo and Alexandria, as socially dense and culturally dynamic spaces embedded in the everyday life of the city.

Rather than concentrating exclusively on the caravanserai as an architectural type, the authors draw attention to travel accounts, topographical descriptions, literary narratives, and observations produced by both European and Egyptian writers. These sources provide valuable evidence concerning activities, encounters, conflicts, and social relationships that conventional architectural documentation may overlook. Through an analysis of such incidental narratives, the study demonstrates that the legacy of the urban caravanserai lies not only in its contribution to regional and international commerce but also in its role as a vibrant, complex, and cosmopolitan centre of social life, particularly during the Mamluk period.

Taken together, the seven articles in this special issue demonstrate that urban caravanserais were never merely buildings for merchants, travellers, or commodities. They were multifunctional institutions through which cities organized movement, trade, accommodation, production, communication, and social interaction. Their courtyards, galleries, workshops, storage spaces, and connections with surrounding streets created environments in which local and transregional networks converged.

The contributions also reveal that caravanserais have survived through continuous processes of transformation. Their capacity to accommodate new activities has often protected them from complete abandonment or demolition. Nevertheless, adaptation also presents substantial risks when interventions disregard historical spatial organization, construction techniques, material authenticity, or intangible cultural practices. Conservation strategies must therefore move beyond the preservation of façades or individual architectural elements. They should address the caravanserai as part of a wider urban, economic, and social system.

This special issue represents an important step toward establishing a comparative framework for the study of urban caravanserais across different geographical regions. By bringing together architectural, morphological, historical, literary, and socio-spatial perspectives, it opens new avenues for examining how these typologies developed, how they contributed to urbanization, and how they may be meaningfully incorporated into contemporary urban life.

The preparation of this special issue benefited from the scholarly commitment of all contributing authors and from the institutional and intellectual support provided by the ICCAUA conference. Appreciation is extended to the conference chair, reviewers, editors, and researchers whose efforts made this publication possible. It is hoped that the studies presented here will encourage further comparative research and support more comprehensive, socially responsive, and sustainable approaches to the conservation and revitalization of urban caravanserais.

Guest Editor

Prof. Dr. José Manuel Pagés Madrigal