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## **The Mongol City of Ghazaniyya: Destruction, Spatial Reconstruction, and Preservation of the Urban Heritage<sup>1</sup>**

Hülegü Khan (r. 1256-1265), a grandson of Chinggis Khan, founded the Ilkhanate in Iran in 1256 as the southwestern sector of the Mongol Empire. Mongol campaigns in Iran in the thirteenth century caused extensive destruction in different aspects of the Iranians' social life and built environment. However, the political stability after the arrival of Hülegü intensified the process of urban development. Along with the reconstruction of the cities that had been extensively destroyed during the Mongol attack, the Ilkhans founded a number of new settlements. Their architectural and urban projects were mostly conducted in the northwest of present-day Iran, with some exceptions, for instance the city of Khabushan in Khurasan which was largely rebuilt by Hülegü and the notables of his court.<sup>2</sup>

In western Iran, Hülegü firstly focused his attention on the reconstruction of Baghdad, but following the designation of Azerbaijan as the headquarters of the Mongols, his urban development activities extended to this region. Maragha was chosen as the first capital of the Mongols and the most

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<sup>2</sup> In addition to Hülegü, Ghazan Khan also erected magnificent buildings in Khabushan. According to Rashid al-Din, the great idol-temples founded by Ghazan Khan and the way he performed the Buddhist rituals surprised the Buddhist priests (*bakhshīyān*) who lived there; Rashid al-Din, Roshan, and Musavi, *Jāmi' al-Tawārīkh*, vol. 2, 1254.

well-known architectural project of Hülegü, the observatory, was founded there with the effort of Nasir al-Din al-Tusi (d. 1274), the famous scientist and astronomer. Tabriz and Takht-i Sulayman developed during the reign of Hülegü's successor, Abaqa Khan (r. 1265-1282). Under Abaqa's successors, Arghun Khan (r. 1284-1291) and Gaykhatu (r. 1291-1295), the Ilkhanids broadened their construction activities and founded several new cities rather than focusing on the renovation of the existing ones. The best-known case was the city of Arghuniyya in the vicinity of Tabriz. Nevertheless, nothing remains of most of these cities since they were mainly built near the location of their seasonal camps without consideration for the infrastructures essential to urban life.

During the time of Arghun's son, Ghazan Khan (r. 1294-1304), a comprehensive construction program was implemented that, despite the earlier schemes, took into consideration all the necessary components of a prosperous city and the welfare of its inhabitants. Rashid al-Din Tabib (d. 1318), the famed Persian statesman and historian of the thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Ilkhanid court, praises Ghazan Khan for this program and confirms that the system designed by the Ilkhan was better than anyone would think possible since all the technical and financial issues of the work were handed over to the most reliable experts.<sup>3</sup>

The architectural undertakings led by Ghazan Khan culminated in the city of Ghazaniyya. The city is the first major urban center that was planned and constructed by an Ilkhan from the outset and, thus, denotes the political and religious doctrines of Ghazan Khan as the founder as well as the group of Persian viziers and Mongol elite who assisted the Ilkhan in his undertakings. The foundation of Ghazaniyya is considered a turning point in the history of the presence of the Mongols in Iran. The building of the city demonstrates the transformation of the Mongol elite from nomadic conquerors to administrators of an urban society. This undertaking shows how Mongol officials, in spite of their

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<sup>3</sup> Rashid al-Din, Roshan, and Musavi, *Jāmi' al-Tawārīkh*, vol. 2, 1370.

nomadic heritage, had come to appreciate the importance of establishing a political, administrative, and commercial urban center.

The neighborhood of Ghazaniyya in modern-day Tabriz marks the site of the city of Ghazan Khan. Various natural and human forces have contributed to the deterioration of the city throughout its lifetime, to the extent that the current urban landscape lacks any visible fourteenth-century structure except for architectural fragments and shards of potteries, bricks, and tiles, which are still unearthed accidentally in the process of construction projects. This research looks into the major events which substantially ruined the architectural integrity of Ghazaniyya. It discusses how the current state of the city, despite the severe process of destruction, still represents the last traces of the fourteenth-century city. This study also raises the question of whether understanding of the past can rescue the last pieces of Ilkhanid Ghazaniyya from complete destruction, the pieces which are scant but indicative of the historic city lying underneath the current Ghazaniyya.

### **Ghazaniyya: Rise and Fall**

According to Rashid al-Din, Ghazan Khan had an interest in construction and many people (*hizārān hizār*)<sup>4</sup> were engaged in the work of building due to this interest (*‘imārat-dūstī*).<sup>5</sup> Mentioning several building projects that were being conducted across the Ilkhanid territory, he gives a detailed description of Ghazan’s architectural undertakings in Tabriz to which he refers to as *dār al-mulk* or *dār al-salṭana*.<sup>6</sup> The city wall had been destroyed and many houses had been built far from the main body of the city. By order of the Ilkhan the new wall was constructed enclosing old Tabriz and its surrounding buildings

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<sup>4</sup> Rashid al-Din and Jahn, *Tārīkh-i Mubārak-i Ghāzānī*, 204.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 201.

<sup>6</sup> It is important to note that Rashid al-Din uses “*dār al-mulk*” exclusively for Tabriz not Ghazaniyya. His preference for this appellation was not possibly due to the fact that Tabriz was a more important city than Ghazaniyya. In my view, the “*dār al-mulk* of Tabriz” possibly extended beyond the boundaries of the city. Although Rashid al-Din clearly differentiates between city of Tabriz and Shanb, “*dār al-mulk*” might simply refer to Tabriz and its environs including Shanb and the Rab‘-i Rashidi.

and gardens. Thus, the area of Tabriz expanded extensively under Ghazan. Moreover, another city, larger than old Tabriz, was founded in Shanb that surrounded the charitable foundation (*abwāb al-birr*)<sup>7</sup> and its gardens, and was called Ghazaniyya.

Rashid al-Din mentions that Ghazan Khan was inspired by the tomb of Sultan Sanjar at Marv (built in 1157), one of the greatest edifices of the eastern Islamic world, and built his mausoleum in Shanb that was much more majestic than Sanjar's tomb.<sup>8</sup> His contemporary historian, Vassaf al-Hazra (d. 1329), stresses the grandness of the mausoleum by expressing that 14,400 laborers participated in the construction of the building of whom 13,000 workmen worked continuously and 1,400 workmen were hired to help them.<sup>9</sup>

The mausoleum of Ghazan Khan was encircled by the *abwāb al-birr* of Shanb-i Ghazan. Vassaf enumerates the twelve buildings forming the charitable foundation as follows: mosque, *khānqāh*, Shafi'iyya and Hanafiyya (two residences and religious schools for the followers of the schools of Shafi'i and Hanafi), *dār al-shafā'* (hospital), *bayt al-mutivallī* (custodian's house), *kitāb khānih* (library), *raṣad khānih* (observatory),<sup>10</sup> *ḥukmīyya* (a residence for *ḥukamā* and teaching *ḥikmat*),<sup>11</sup> *huḏ khānih* (cistern), *bayt al-sīyāda* (a residence for *sayyids* and *sādāts*, the descendants of the Prophet Muhammad), and *garmābih-yi sabīl* (public bath).<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> *Abwāb al-birr* is a general term used to refer to such charitable foundations. The Arabic term means "the gates of piety".

<sup>8</sup> Rashid al-Din, Roshan, and Musavi, *Jāmi' al-Tawārīkh*, vol. 2, 1376.

<sup>9</sup> Vassaf al-Hazra and Ayati, *Tahrīr-i Tārīkh-i Vaṣṣāf*, 230, n. 2.

<sup>10</sup> According to Rashid al-Din, after visiting the observatory of Maragha, Ghazan Khan ordered to build an observatory next to the *gunbad-i 'ālī* and the *abwāb al-birr* of Shanb; see Rashid al-Din, Roshan, and Musavi, *Jāmi' al-Tawārīkh*, vol. 2, 1296.

<sup>11</sup> *Ḥukmīyya* is possibly the same place to which Rashid al-Din refers as *bayt al-qānūn* (the house of law); see Rashid al-Din and Jahn, *Tārīkh-i Mubārak-i Ghāzānī*, 211.

<sup>12</sup> The public bath has been mentioned in the *Tārīkh-i Mubārak-i Ghāzānī* (Rashid al-Din and Jahn, *Tārīkh-i Mubārak-i Ghāzānī*, 211) while in the copy of *Tārīkh-i Vaṣṣāf* edited by Ayati one finds a question mark instead of the twelfth component of the pious complex; see Vassaf al-Hazra and Ayati, *Tahrīr-i Tārīkh-i Vaṣṣāf*, 230.

Ghazaniyya was a prosperous city during the reign of Ghazan Khan and his successors, Öljejtü (r. 1304-1316) and Abu Sa' id (r. 1316-1335). Following the disintegration of the Ilkhanids in the mid-fourteenth century, however, Tabriz and its environs including Ghazaniyya lost their political and economic centrality, although the accounts of early-fifteenth-century travelers still reveal the partial prosperity of the city after the fall of the Ilkhans. For instance, Ruy González de Clavijo (d. 1412), the ambassador of Henry III of Castile to the court of Timur (r. 1370- 1405), who visited Tabriz shortly after Miran Shah's (Tamerlane's son) rampage in 1399, writes that:

Tabriz is indeed a very mighty city rich in goods and abounding in wealth, for commerce daily flourishes here. They say that in former times its population was even greater than it is now, but even at the present day there must be at least 200,000 householders within the city limits, or perhaps even more.<sup>13</sup>

Although Ghazaniyya barely appears in the fifteenth-century chronicles, the frequent references to the city and its charitable complex in the accounts of Safavid historians one century later show that Shanb-i Ghazan and the endowments of Ghazan Khan were still of great importance long after the death of the Ilkhan. During the early decades of the Safavid dynasty, the endowments of Ghazaniyya were supervised properly by the custodians who were often appointed by the Safavid state. Mir Abu al-Wali, a zealot Shi' i jurist, and his brother Mir Abu Muhammad were appointed as the custodians (*mutivallīs*) of the endowments of Ghazan Khan (*awqāf-i Ghāzānī*) by the Safavid sultan, Shah Tahmasp I (r. 1524-1576). Mir Abu al-Wali was previously the custodian of Imam Reza shrine in Mashhad and was later delegated the custodianship of the shrine of Shaykh Safi, the Safavid dynastic shrine in Ardabil.<sup>14</sup> The management system of the endowments of Shanb-i Ghazan suggests that the complex must have been venerated alongside the most honorable Shi' i and Sufi shrines at least during

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<sup>13</sup> Clavijo and Le Strange, *Embassy to Tamerlane*, 153-154.

<sup>14</sup> Iskandar Beyg, *Tārīkh-i 'Ālam-ārā-yi 'Abbāsī*, vol. 1, 148.

the reign of earlier Safavid sultans in the sixteenth-century, although this religious/spiritual significance did not last long.

In the sixteenth and early seventeenth century, Tabriz was the main scene of the battle between the Safavids and the Ottomans for more than thirty years. Ghazaniyya was also extensively destroyed during the wars. Under the events of 1609 (1018/19 AH), Iskandar Beyg, the historian of the Safavid emperor Shah Abbas I (r. 1588 to 1629), reports that since the edifice of Shanb-i Ghazan in Tabriz built by Pādshāh Sultan Ghazan, and the *madrāsas* and *khānqāhs* constructed around the lofty tomb of the deceased *pādshāh*, were a fortified place, it struck Shah Abbas that the Ottomans might use the buildings to attack the fortress of Tabriz. He thought they might fortify it with military equipment and guards and return there so that it would be difficult to recapture it. Therefore, Shah Abbas sent cannons, guns, and food to Shanb-i Ghazan and designated a group of reliable guards to protect the complex.<sup>15</sup>

In a rather different account of possibly the same event, Mirza Beyg Junabedi, the author of the *Rużat al- Şafaviyya*, says that when Shah Abbas arrived in the environs of Shanb-i Ghazan with his army, he ordered the army to destroy the buildings attributed to Ghazan Khan as he believed that the constructions surrounding the mausoleum of the Ilkhan (*‘imārāt-i Ghāzānī rā ki muḥīṭ-i żarīḥ-i ān pādshāh-i nīk-khāh būd*) could accommodate three to four thousand men. Since the Ottomans had attempted to restore the buildings, they possibly intended to construct a firm fortress close to Shanb-i Ghazan in order to keep an army there to continue the battle against the people of Tabriz. Junabedi emphasizes that during three to four days the group of the Qizilbash (Shi‘i militant group) demolished the whole buildings except for the dome (*qubba*) which was the mausoleum (*żarīḥ*) of Sultan Mahmud Ghazan.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Iskandar Beyg, *Tārīkh-i ‘Ālam-ārā-yi ‘Abbāsī*, vol. 2, 822.

<sup>16</sup> Mirza Beyg Junabedi, *Rużat al- Şafaviyya*, 828.

In the same year, 1609, Iskandar Beyg reports that Shah Abbas decided to build a new fortress in Tabriz and chose the site of the Rab'-i Rashidi in Surkhab Mountain. He ordered to carry building material from the destroyed buildings of Tabriz, particularly Shanb-i Ghazan which had been partially destroyed (*vīrānī bi ān rāh yāfta būd*), to the Rab'-i Rashidi and launch the construction of the fortress in the spring.<sup>17</sup> Shah Abbas' fortress was built on the ruins of the charitable foundation established by the Ilkhanid vizier, Rashid al-Din. Today, among the remains of the fortress, the architectural fragments of earlier buildings are still visible. Some odd remnants of older constructions, such as the grave stones inscribed with semi-legible Arabic verses used inside the walls and foundations of the fortifications particularly catch the visitors' attention. They reveal the type of material transferred to the Rab'-i Rashidi to build the Safavid fortress.

Despite the large-scale destruction of the buildings of Shanb, two centuries later, the Qajar prince Nadir Mirza (d. 1886),<sup>18</sup> observed that the charitable foundation of Ghazan or at least what had remained of it, was still acknowledged as an endowment by the locals of Ghazaniyya. According to his report, the people who lived in the surrounding area did not use the bricks scattered all over the site because the religious scholars called them "forbidden" (*ḥarām*), as they had been endowed in the past. Although the report does not confirm the locals' awareness of the history of the complex or its religious values, it is interesting that the spiritual aspect of the Ilkhan's foundation outlived its physical components. Nevertheless, that was not always the case. In his second visit to the site four decades later in 1884, Nadir Mirza reported that a very small number of sound bricks were left, because of a

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<sup>17</sup> Iskandar Beyg, *Tārīkh-i 'Ālam-ārā-yi 'Abbasī*, vol. 2, 826.

<sup>18</sup> Nadir Mirza was born in Istarabad (Gorgan) but lived in Tabriz for about forty years. Nadir Mirza worked as a bureaucrat in the office of Muzaffar al-Din Shah Qajar (r. 1896-1907) when he was the crown prince and the governor of Azerbaijan. During his residency in Tabriz, Nadir Mirza compiled the *Tārīkh va juhrāft-yi dār alsaltāna-yi Tabrīz* on the basis of his own observation as well as the historical documents preserved in governmental archives or in the private collections of the notables of Tabriz. The book contains valuable information on the social and political conditions of Tabriz during the Qajar era. Nadir Mirza also includes detailed descriptions of some of the historic buildings of the city in the book.

new *fatwā* given by some religious scholars who had built a couple of *qanāt* channels around the site. Since they intended to take advantage of the bricks and stones of the buildings of Shanb in the construction of their own *qanāts*, they announced that the building materials are “permissible” (*ḥalāl*) and, thus, trading them is allowed by the Islamic law.<sup>19</sup>

Along with the wars, many buildings of Ghazaniyya were destroyed in the earthquakes. Evliya Çelebi (d. 1682), a celebrated Ottoman polymath, visited Shanb-i Ghazan in 1640. He compares the mausoleum of Ghazan to Galata Tower in Istanbul and admires the grandness of the building but mentions that one side of the mausoleum had been destroyed in the earthquake when he visited it.<sup>20</sup> The 1641 earthquake also severely destroyed Tabriz and its surroundings. When Tavernier (d. 1689) the French traveler visited Tabriz in 1655, he referred to the tomb tower of Ghazan Khan which was split from top to bottom and the inside of the building had been filled up with the material of the half-ruined structure.<sup>21</sup>

### **Spatial Reconstruction**

The picture of the main body of Ghazaniyya derived from limited literary and physical evidence is quite blurry. Despite the city, the charitable complex of Shanb-i Ghazan is a relatively well-known architectural ensemble thanks to the description of its buildings and their endowments given by Persian historians and European travelers. The illustrations of it in manuscripts also shed some light on the arrangement of the buildings inside the compound and their spatial relation with the tomb of Ghazan. For example, a surviving miniature painting from the *Jāmi‘ al-Tawārīkh*, probably produced in the fifteenth-century in Herat, depicts the pious foundation in Shanb. The illustration shows the round or

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<sup>19</sup> Nadir Mirza, *Tārīkh va Juḡhrāfiyā*, 101.

<sup>20</sup> Evliya Çelebi, “Sīyāḥat-nāmih,” 289.

<sup>21</sup> Melville, “Historical Monuments and Earthquakes in Tabriz,” 166.

possibly square tomb-tower located in a courtyard and enclosed by a row of buildings the façades of which are decorated by tile-works and inscriptions. Outside the complex, three architectural elements attract our attention: a minaret, a tall building, and a dome-like structure which could be either the cover of a building or a huge tent.

While walking through the current urban fabric of Ghazaniyya barely brings back the memory of the medieval city, examining the site from altitude would be a more fruitful exercise. The 1968 aerial photograph gives a rather clear view of the original layout of the Ilkhanid city as it is reflected in the textual and pictorial records of this period. The most noticeable feature in this image is the concentric pattern of the area: two incomplete circles distorted by urban constructions in this part of Tabriz which worked as two major streets. A mosque (the grand mosque of al-Mahdiyya) located almost in the center. The outer circle, working as the main street of the precinct today, encircles the residential units of Ghazaniyya. The two circles are divided into four quarters by two perpendicular streets although just two of the quarters have survived up to the present time.

Considering the extant visual and textual materials representing Ghazan's foundations in Ghazaniyya during the Ilkhanid period, as an initial hypothesis, one could interpret the current urban structure of the site visible in the 1968 aerial photo as follows: the inner circle marks the approximate area of the pious foundation of Shanb-i Ghazan with the tomb of the Ilkhan at its core, and the outer circle shows the edge of the main city of Ghazaniyya. The circles themselves possibly indicated the walls enclosing the charitable complex as well as the city. The two perpendicular streets were likely to be the roads connecting the suburbs to the main city and subsequently to the pious complex through the four gates in the outer wall. Interestingly –and despite the fact that modern constructions are increasingly spreading across the neighborhood during the last few decades– the satellite image taken in 2018 still represents the same configuration just described in the 1968 photo.

The mosque of al-Mahdiyya, which still exists in the site, must have been built on the ruins of an earlier mosque, possibly one of the buildings of the central pious complex of Shanb-i Ghazan. The inscription on the portal of the mosque is read as follows:

In the name of God, and Praise be to God, and *Ṣalawāt* be upon the prophet of God and his innocent descendants. Ghazan Shah founded this mosque in 700/1300. The building was destroyed by earthquake in 1133/1721. This humble servant, Abbas-Ali bin Haji Muhammad-Hassan, built a public bathhouse (*ḥammam*) in 1345/1926 with the aid of Mashhadi Hassan and the locals and endowed it (dedicated its revenue) to this mosque and the other mosques of the neighborhood, and this cupola (*tāq*) was built in 1351/1932...<sup>22</sup>

The dark stones used in the lower parts of the external walls of the mosque seem to belong to an earlier building. Some of the stones carry the marks which were possibly put by stone carvers in carving workshops. The content of the inscription as well as the location of the building speculatively suggest that the mosque must have been part of the central pious complex of Ghazaniyya.

In addition to the layout of the city, which is still corresponding to the plan of Ilkhanid Ghazaniyya, a large number of pottery shards, brick pieces, and architectural fragments are being uncovered on every corner of the site which are visible vestiges of the medieval city. An interesting example is a piece of brick on which the words “Ghazan Qa’an” is read. The significance of this small piece is that in the contemporary literary sources of the reign of Ghazan, he has been entitled Ilkhan, *pādshāh*, and sultan, but qa’an (khaqan), which means the Great Khan, was commonly used as the title

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<sup>22</sup> There is one misspelling in the beginning of the inscription (الصلاة instead of الصلوة). The end of the inscription is quite illegible:

بسم الله و الحمد لله و الصلوة على رسول الله و على عترته الطاهرين  
این مسجد را در ۷۰۰ هجری غازان شاه بنا کرده بود. در ۱۱۳۳ با زلزله خراب  
شده. این احقر عباسعلی بن حاجی محمدحسن به مساعدت اهالی و مشهدی  
حسن در ۱۳۴۵ حمامی بنا کرده و منفعت او را به این مسجد  
و سایر مساجد دیگر محله مقرر کردیم و این طاق در ۱۳۵۱ ساخته گشت ...

of the khans (Mongol emperors) of the Yuan dynasty.<sup>23</sup> Whether this inscription denotes Ghazan's ambition to reach the position of the Great Khan or it is simply a play on words requires further textual and physical evidence. Another example is a brick shard inscribed with the word "Allah". Rahimi-zadih, Ottoman statesman and military commander, who visited Shanb-i Ghazan in 1585, was impressed by the grandness of the mausoleum (*gunbad*) of Ghazan Khan and found himself incapable of describing the magnificence of the building. He admits that those parts of the building that can be described are one hundred times more than Ayasofya. For instance, eighty-thousand bricks inscribed with the word "Tawḥid" decorated harmoniously the building. He might have referred to these brick works.<sup>24</sup>

### **Preservation: A choice or a priority in planning?**

From its heyday under the reign of Ghazan Khan up until the present time that the last remnants of the Ilkhanid city are being swallowed up by urban development projects, Ghazaniyya has gone through a gradual process of destruction to the stage that the current urban fabric barely hints at its glorious history. This research looked at the destruction phases of Ghazaniyya and the last traces of the medieval city which have survived the destruction. It examined how physical destruction of the city undermined its spiritual significance to the extent that the tomb of the Ilkhan initially venerated as a destination for pilgrimage was overbuilt by later constructions. This research attempted to locate the remnants of Ilkhanid Ghazaniyya spread across the twenty-first-century city in their historic context and interpret them in connection with the incidents that affected the spatial integrity of the medieval city.

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<sup>23</sup> For further discussion on the origin and meaning of the words "khan," "khaqan," and "qa'an," see Rashid al-Din, Roshan, and Musavi, *Jāmi' al-Tawārīkh*, vol. 3, 2359.

<sup>24</sup> Abu Bakr ibn 'Abdallah and Zirak, *Tārīkh-i 'Uthman Pasha*, 111.

The examination of the destruction phases of Ghazaniyya is enlightening about the configuration of the charitable foundation and its surrounding city during the Ilkhanid period and their transformation afterwards. It improves the fragmentary understanding of the architectural and urban features of Ghazaniyya. The formation of a vivid picture of the Ilkhanid city highlights its architectural and historical values. This knowledge can encourage the preservation of the remnants of the medieval city, which is on the verge of thorough destruction.

While an authentic reconstruction of the Ilkhanid city is neither feasible nor technically and economically logical, preservation can be an alternative treatment. Ghazaniyya still reflects the layout of the medieval city. Preservation of its urban heritage, as one of the few remaining examples of Ilkhanid cities, will enable municipal planners to cautiously plan their undertakings in the historic fabric so that future urban development projects would be respectful of the architectural and historical features of the Ilkhanid city. Furthermore, in view of the fact that the residents of the neighborhood are partly aware of the history of the area, preservation could go beyond material aspects of the fabric and restore the collective memory of its residents. Their knowledge of and enthusiasm for their past increases the likelihood of their future collaboration in the preservation of the neighborhood; the fact that should be valued by conservators and municipal planners.

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