Introduction to the Islamic City

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Abstract

Islam is seen by many scholars as an urban religion, which favours communal practice on individual worship. Although, piety is the only source of appraisal, it is widely accepted that most of Islam's teaching is best practised in an urban setting. It is not surprising that Islam made particular emphasis on the form and design of the city enabling it a greater functionality and responsiveness to meet the socio-economic and cultural needs of the community. This article presents an analysis of the spatial and functional arrangements of the Muslim city and assesses their socio-cultural meanings.

General Introduction

The penetration of Islam to various lands in Asia, Africa and Europe had an irreversible and overwhelming impact on urban development. Islam according to Fischel (1956) and Hassan (1972), is an urban religion. Religious practices, beliefs and values especially those relating to organisation and authority, emphasised the social gathering and discouraged nomadism and dispersing. Early Muslim towns, such as those of the Maghreb like Al-Fustat, Tunis[1,] and Rabat[2.] were erected to preach Islam, playing the role of "Citadel of faith" (Fischel, 1956, p.229). They were dedicated to receiving new converts, in similar way the Medina received migrants from Makkah. Hodgson (1974) called them Dar-El-Hijra, a place where Muslims came to put into practice the Islamic life, and through them Islam spread to North Africa, the whole African continent, and southern Europe. Consequently, a number of thriving towns emerged due to this religious role.

By the 9th century AD, this prestigious (religious) role was replaced by political motives as various parts of the Muslim World broke their traditional link with the main Caliphate in the East. Local divisions and conflicts, in addition to continuous raids of the nomads, have created a process of urban decline. In this context, Sjoberg (1960, p60) wrote:

> **"We must, if we are to explain the growth, spread, and decline of cities, comment upon the city as a mechanism by which a society's rules can consolidate and maintain their power and, more important, the essentiality of a well-developed power structure for the formation and perpetuation of urban centres".**

These unstable conditions undermined the survival, growth and birth of towns, which were the battle ground of these divisions and disputes. The rise of a new capital was often achieved at the price of existing ones. Ibn Khaldoun commented on these events saying in his Muqaddimah:

> **"...see all the lands which the rural and Nomads (Bedouins) have conquered in the last few centuries: civilisation and population have departed from them."**

Stability was not regained until the arrival of the Ottomans in 16th century. In a desire to revive the old Caliphate, as well as to defend against Spanish and Portuguese occupation of North African Western coast, the Ottomans were enabled to control most of the Muslim World (except Persia, Arabian penesula and Morocco) in. They brought peace, security and prosperity, the main ingredients for urban recovery and growth. Once again numerous new towns emerged ond others expanded considerably, thriving mainly on Ottoman trade. With increasing power of 17th century imperial Europe, the main role of these towns was to provide military enforcement for Ottoman resistance against European domination of the Mediterranean Sea. These efforts exhausted local resources causing another cycle of urban decline. By the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Muslim cities experienced periods of wide spread disease and famine (such as those witnessed in North Africa). That was followed by falling in the hands of colonial powers. The final event was the death sentence for the traditional Muslim city through the introduction of new alien morphological, socio-cultural and economic characteristics. The European town created new situation and slowly emptied the Muslim city from its functional viability. After independence, Muslim countries, in their quest for development, adopted a policy of modernisation leading to further alienation of the little left of the traditional Muslim city (figure 1).

Figure 1. Historic Algiers showing the dense built form
reflecting social solidarity and cohesion.

Design Principles of the Muslim City

A number of factors played decisive roles in ordering and shaping the plan and form of the Muslim City. In addition to the influence of local topography, and morphological features of pre-existing towns, the Muslim City reflected the general socio-cultural, political, and economic structures of the newly created society. In general this involved the following:

1. **Natural laws:** The first principle that defined much of the character of the Muslim city is the adaptation of the built form and plan of the city to natural circumstances expressed through weather conditions and topography. These were expressed in the adoption of concepts such as courtyard, terrace, narrow covered streets and gardens. Such elements were designed for coping with hot weather conditions dominating the Muslim environment.

2. **Religious and cultural beliefs:** The religious beliefs and practices formed the centre of cultural life for these populations, thus giving the mosque the central position in spatial and institutional hierarchies. The cultural beliefs separating public and private lives regulated the spatial order between uses and areas. Thus, the town plan consisted of narrow streets and cul-de-sacs separating private and public domains, while the land use emphasised the separation of male and female users. Consequently, economic activity that involved exchange and public presence was separated from residential (private dwellings) use and concentrated in public areas and in the main streets.

3. **Design principles stemmed from *Sharia* Law**: The Muslim city also reflected the rules of *Sharia* (Islamic Law) in terms of physical and social relations between public and private realms, and between neighbours and social groups. The privacy principle was made into a law which sets the height of the wall above the height of a camel rider. This as well as the laws of the property rights, for example, were all factors determining the form of the Muslim city (see Hakim, 1986 for more details on these aspects).

4. **Social principles:** The social organisation of the urban society was based on social groupings sharing the same blood, ethnic origin and cultural perspectives. Development was therefore directed towards meeting these social needs especially in terms of kinship solidarity, defence, social order and religious practices (figure 2). Such groups included; Arabs, Moors, Jews and other groups such as Andalusians, Turkish, and Berbers as in cities of the Maghreb. These were reflected in the concept of quarters known as Ahiaa (in the Mashraq) or Huma (in the Maghreb).

Factors such as extended-family structures, privacy, sex separation and strong community interaction were clearly translated in the dense built form of he courtyard houses (figures 3&4). The social organisation of the urban society was based n social groupings sharing the same blood, ethnic origin and cultural perspectives. Social and legal issues were taken over by religious scholars who lived in central places close to the main mosque (the main public institution) and the public life where disputes mostly arose. The shift of political power from the Shura (democratic) system of early Islam to authoritative regimes especially under the late Ottomans resulted in transferring the political quarter from the centre to the edge of the city in the form of a fortress (citadel) to provide better protection for the rulers. Examples of these provisions are found in north African cities under the name of Casbah or Qasabah.
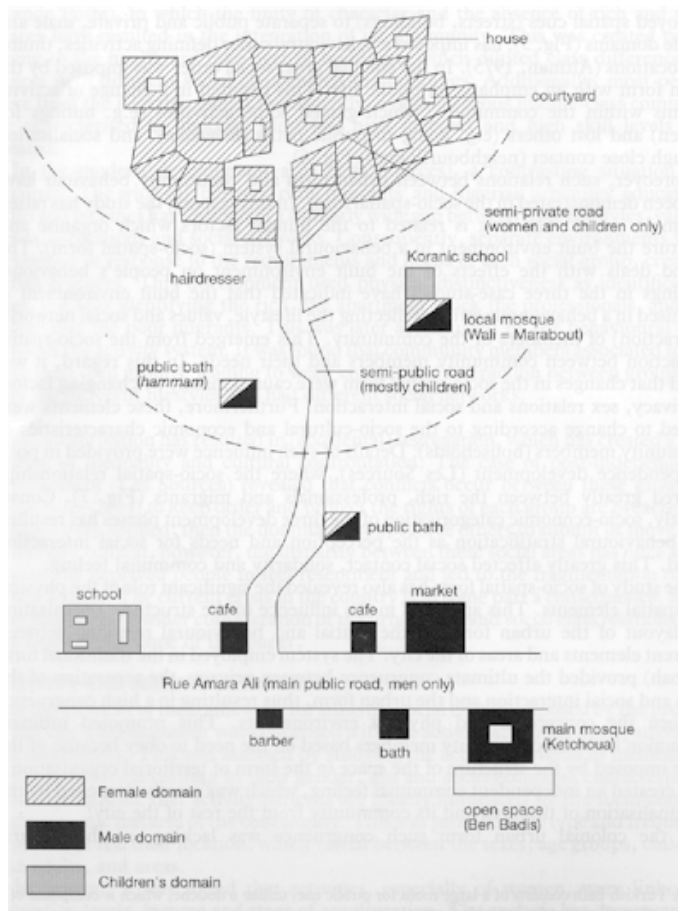
**Figure 2. Socio-Spatial form of historic Algiers (Casbah) showing its
general responsiveness to the needs of the community.**
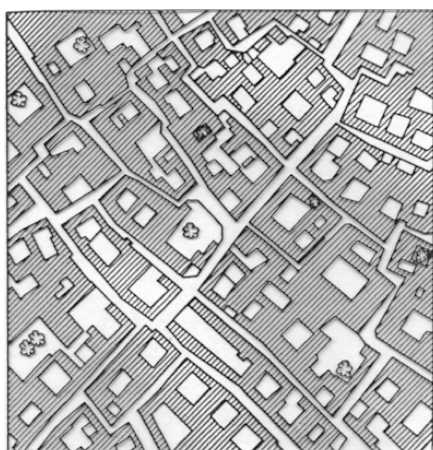Source: Saoud (1997)

**Figure 3. Traditional building
patterns in the old city of Kuwait.**
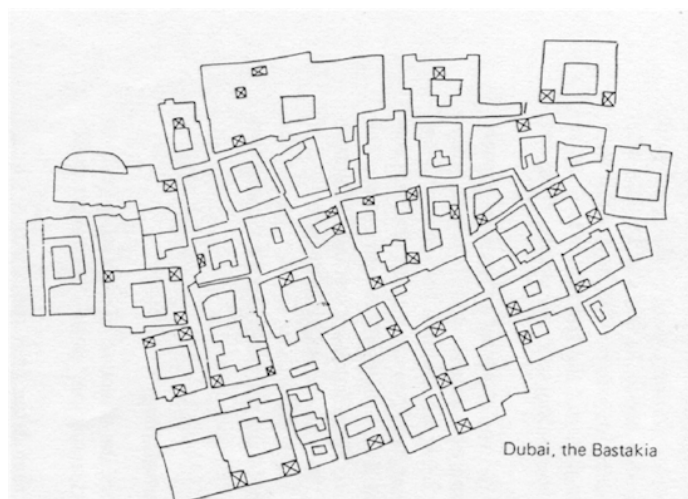Source: Beaumont et al. (1988, p.207)

Figure 4. Old city of Dubai (the Bastakia)
Source: UNESCO (1981, p.27)

Morphological components of the Muslim City

The debate over what is the Islamic city or whether an Islamic city had existed at all is still very much taking place. Lapidus (1969) for example argued that the Arab Muslims did not settle exclusively in new towns. Some settled in the existing ones as well as in villages. He added further "**the Arabs gave a certain impetus to Middle East urbanisation without causing a general increase in the level of urban development and without identifying cities with Islam**" (Lapidus, 1973). Hamdan (1962) shared this view arguing that towns in the Islamic period were an extension of the pre-existing ones and some of their morphological features were inherited and others emerged through the process of convergence. There is a growing confidence among archaeologists and urban researchers that Roman street pattern and insulae layout, in particular, had a great influence on streets and building plots of the medina in Maghreb (Tunis for example). Brown (1986) pointed out the reluctance to employ explicitly the concept of a Muslim city due to the concern over the "Orientalism" perception of it. King (1989) noted that the notion of the Islamic city originates in the west, that it is "defined in difference" to Western city. Other Scholars such as Eikelman (1981), Hakim (1976) and Al-Sayyed (1991) see the Muslim city as an entity with distinctive form and characteristics. The same debate has extended to the identifying features and characteristics and whether they are typical to be applied to all Islamic cities or unique to particular regions. This dilemma is widened further as many stereotypes for the typical Islamic city were produced reflecting the area and the city being studied. However, there is a general consensus (among scholars) that the Islamic city has the following (typical) features:

1. **The main Mosque:** It occupied the heart of the town and was usually surrounded by the Suq (market) as the case of Zaitouna mosque in Tunis and central mosque in Isfahan. This was where weekly Friday prayers were held and attached to it there was the *Madrassa* providing religious and scientific teaching.

2. **Suqs:** Located outside the main mosque provided the economic activity in the town. Goods sold were usually spatially distributed corresponding to their nature. Sacred items such as candles, incenses and perfumes were sold close to the mosque as well as items that would be sold by booksellers and binders (Marcais, 1945) while the rest of the goods were found at a further distance. The central area was also the gathering of other public activities such as social services, administration, trade, arts and crafts and baths (Hammam) and hotels (Funduq and Waqala).

3. **Citadel:** Also known as Casbah, representing the palace of the governor, the citadel was surrounded by its own walls and constituted a district on its own with its own mosque, guards, offices, and residence. It was usually located in the high part of the town near the wall.

4. **Residential Quarters:** They were described by Eikelman (1981) as clusters of households of particular quality of life based on closeness (Qaraba) which is manifested in personal ties, common interests and shared moral unity. They were usually dense and each quarter had its own mosque used only for daily prayers, Quranic school (Madrassa), bakery, shops and other first necessity objects. They even had their own gates which were usually closed at night after last prayers and opened early morning at early prayers time such was the case of Algiers and Tunis (figures 2 &3). They were also ethnically organised, Muslims grouped in quarters and Jews in others so that each group could practice and celebrate its own cultural beliefs.

It is worth noting that whilst this multi-ethnicity was physically represented in the city in the form of clusters, it was economically and socially assimilated through a sophisticated judicial system which secured equality for all groups. This was highly emphasised by the Quran: **"So judge between men with justice and do not follow desire"** (26:38), and by the Hadith: **"O people, verily your Lord and Sustainer is One and your ancestor is one. All of you descend from Adam and Adam was made of earth. There is no superiority for an Arab over a non Arab nor for a non-Arab over an Arab; neither for a white man over a black man nor a black man over a white man except the superiority gained through God-consciousness (Taqwa). Indeed the noblest among you is the one who is most deeply conscious of God…"** (from the Farwell Speech of Prophet Muhammed (pbuh), see Hamid 1989, pp131-132).

5. **Street network:** Connecting between these quarters and to the central place was a network of narrow winding streets consisting of public and private and semi-private streets and cul de sacs.

6. **Wall:** A well-defended wall surrounded the town with a number of gates.

7. **Exterior:** there were the cemeteries (Muslim and Jews cemeteries), a weekly market just outside the main gate where most animal suqs were held in addition to private gardens and fields.
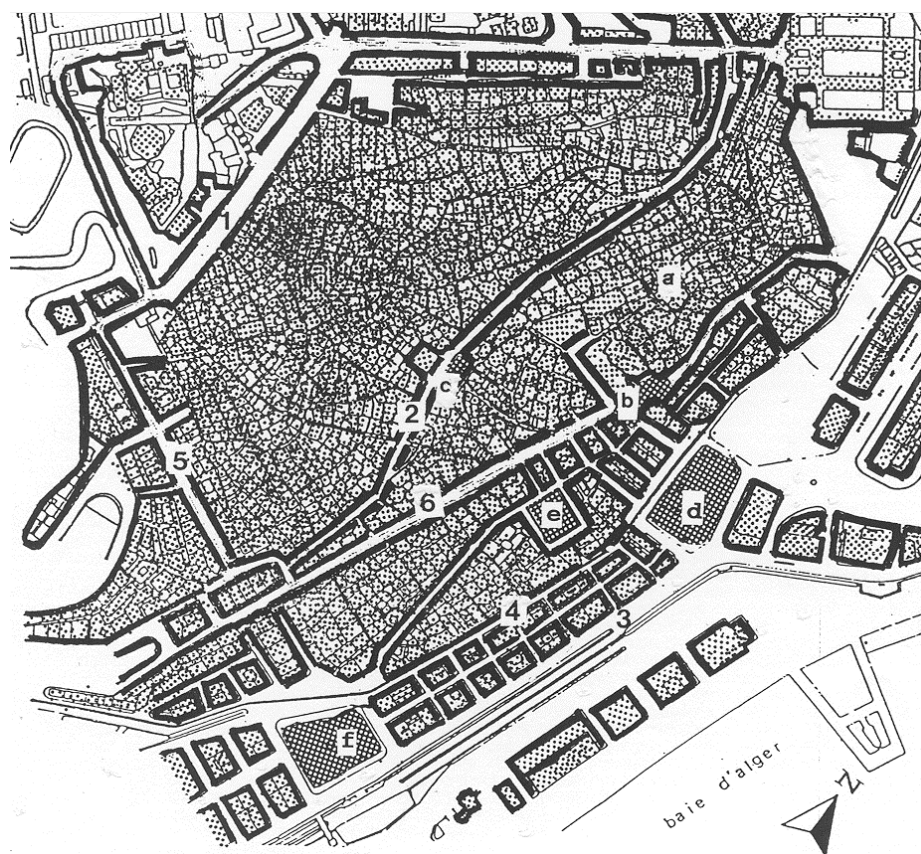

Figure 5. The Europeanisation of the traditional Islamic City of Algiers started by the French (1830-1962) in an attempt to eradicate the Islamic identity and now this beautiful city suffers from continuous neglect. Source: Saoud (1997)

Conclusion and Contemporary Relevance

The Muslim city, with the above features, had a cultural, social, political, and economic logic in terms of physical fabric, layout, and uses which can provide a lesson for modern planning and design practices. The Muslim city can be easily adapted to meet modern functionality and living standards and maintain its high congruence with our natural, religious and socio-cultural environment. In this case, it is still very relevant and viable to today's urban requirement of our society, a fact confirmed by a number of scholars such as Abu-Lughod (1987) and Hassan Fathi's vernacular architecture projects in Egypt.

How far do present Muslim cities reflect the vitality and responsiveness of the traditional "Muslim city"? The absence of any correlation between the Muslim design principles outlined above and the morphological characteristics of the modern Muslim cities could be the main reason behind the economic, social and identity crisis of the urban communities. This crisis cannot be demonstrated better than in cities of the Maghreb, especially Algeria where cultural and identity disputes reached crisis point greatly affecting the security situation there (figures 5). There is an urgent need to apply these principles but in a modern context to bring our cities back to the Muslim life.

NOTES

[1] Tunis was used as an administrative centre, and a garrison town subordinate to Quairawan. Its main role was to supply the Islamic army conquering Sicily and southern Italy. Meanwhile, the *Zaytouna Mosque* and university were preparing religious teachers to preach and teach new converters, while others being sent to Andalusia, Cordoba, and Sicily. Since the *Aghlabid* reign (9th century), Tunis took over from Quairawan and became the capital of the province of Tunisia (*Ifriqya* as it was known then), and a centre of religious orthodoxy. It remained so until the colonisation times. Tunis also had a multi ethnic composition translated in a number of quarters. These included Arabs, Jews, Andalusians, and number of Italians, Maltese , and other minorities.

[2] Towards the end of the 12th century, Yaqub Al-Mansour (the third Sultan of Almohads, between 1184-1199) founded Rabat. He decided to make from a fort, used by his predecessors and named Ribat El-Feth, a royal town. The city was therefore used a garrison station to defend the Sultan against hostile Berber tribes in the region (around Rabat).

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