

## Islam and Urban Development

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From its beginnings, Islam never foresaw nor prescribed formal architectural features or physical urban patterns to be applied. Yet, in contrast to other religions, concerned with only spiritual realities, it has established a complete and homogeneous way of life that covers the temporary domain of man in conjunction with more eternal matters. The Qur'anic message and the exemplary actions of the Prophet have been strong shaping forces, intended to structure and transform the life of the individual *and* the community. Therefore, the social and urban dimension has been essential to the development of Islam.

By providing exemplary and meaningful patterns of life, followed by thousands and hundreds of thousands of believers, each one according to his own capacities, Islam has established a unique type of social order. The cohesion within this social order was the main reason why Islamic societies, over the centuries, succeeded in creating homogeneous urban environments. Shared values, commonly accepted modes of human behavior, and the natural correlation between individual actions produced a strong social network resulting in coherent urban patterns. The integrated or "implicit" implementation of these general rules proved to be a much stronger agent in the production of a unified and harmonious architectural language than specific and much more "explicit" building codes and prescriptions could ever be. The rules of the *Sunnah* were directing and controlling formal physical expressions from *within*, as it were, and they were based on legitimate spiritual foundations, as opposed to abstract man-made laws and rules, which have to be imposed or enforced from *outside* by political authorities of dubious legitimacy. Acting like seeds in the body of human beings, they were able to produce a lively, organically grown unity, quite different from the sterile and monotonous uniformity produced by mechanical application of formal laws or modules.

It has often been remarked that Islamic cities in the Middle East are characterized by a variety of regional building traditions. With the develop-

ment of Islam in time and space, different architectural heritages together with the available craftsmanship had to be absorbed, changing climatic conditions had to be met, and different building materials had to be used. Yet the way in which these potentials and constraints were employed and adapted to comply with the needs of the Muslim community shows the strength of the unifying forces of Islam. While adopting a variety of architectural elements, Islamic architecture in different periods and countries still reflects common patterns of use and close affinities in organizing, subdividing, and articulating spaces. One could, therefore, argue that the unity of Islamic architecture is not primarily materialized in physical shapes but rather in the concepts behind the actual forms. These conceptual forces, which contain the real factors of unity, reveal themselves in how formal elements are used, how they interrelate, and how they are aggregated into more comprehensive urban patterns.

Seen from this perspective, unity and variety by no means contradict each other: The variegation of common themes and principles in the media of different architectural elements is the very way of materializing the essential unity, by producing a lively variety of forms and shapes, all correlated to one another. Unity without a variety of expressions could hardly be apprehended for its very lack of differentiation, which would suppress the chain of analogies needed for grasping the unity behind manifold physical forms. Variety without an underlying principle of unity would result in chaos, and the lack of interrelation between architectural elements would deprive the man-made world of its meaning and inner coherence.

Islam has no fixed metaphysical image of the city such as that of "Holy Jerusalem" in Christian architecture, which was implied in the construction of medieval cathedrals. In its descriptions of Paradise, the Qur'an uses the metaphor of the oasis and the irrigated garden rather than that of built structures. In addition, orthodox Islam does not invest rulers with religious power or with the function of representing God on earth. Their urban settlements and places are, therefore, usually deprived of sacred character. This attitude is reflected in the fact that the city is considered merely as a useful convenience to support the needs of the believers, as a caravansary on the terrestrial journey, to quote an expression by al Ghazālī. Even religious buildings, such as mosques and madrasahs, although they may have developed into great works of art, were not originally conceived as sacred spaces in the sense of the religious monuments of many other civilizations. According to a saying of the Prophet, the whole world is a place for prayer; therefore, any place can be bestowed with a temporary sacred character, by establishing its ritual purity, by orienting it to the Ka'ba, and by performing the act of prayer. Thus, mosques possess a sacred quality in themselves not by the "magic" of their architecture but by virtue of projecting the mind of the believer to the spiritual center of the Islamic universe.

The reluctance of directly investing buildings, or actually any man-made structure, with divine reality is rooted in the Islamic rejection of idolatry and in the deep concern for avoiding any kind of action in which man would compete or interfere with the sole Creator, whose essence is beyond material figuration and whose acts are inimitable and unforeseeable. This attitude had far-reaching implications with regard to architecture and to the arts, inasmuch as the goal could not be to directly represent the qualities of God and his universe in artistic works. The only legitimate representation is that of the word of God, the letters and words of the Arabic language, which constitute the verses and rhythms of the Qur'ān. The active commemoration of these words through daily recitation, prayer, or works of art provide human existence with guidance and meaning.

Within this coherent cultural context, the function of architecture and the arts is to remind, to evoke, and to praise the omnipresence of the Creator, without subjecting the Divine to the limitations of the human perspective. The most tangible visual evocation is given by the means of calligraphy, the noblest of arts in Islam, because it directly transmits the Qur'ānic message. It is, therefore, natural that calligraphy acquired supreme importance in Islamic architectural decoration, taking the place reserved for mural paintings or sculpture in other civilizations. Together with calligraphy, abstract floral and geometrical patterns were developed to evoke the structuring forces of creation, to provide a sense of infinity through variation and repetition of the interfaced forms and to highlight the principles of unity through integration of individual elements into an all-encompassing total pattern.

These artistic modes of expression were the most congenial to Islam and were developed to perfection with many regional variations. They became inseparable from architecture and were prime factors in establishing a coherent and meaningful urban environment, not only in major public buildings but also in the domestic sphere, in fact in any crafted object of daily use. Thus they imprinted the specific atmosphere of the Islamic city, as it were, with their sense of both modesty and exclusiveness, realism and spirituality.

Looking at the urban development of Islam in history, we face a paradoxical situation. On the one hand, Islam by constitution was not dependent on certain types of buildings or urban settlements, and in fact the nomadic and tribal element was instrumental in the expansion of Islam not only in its early stages but also in later periods. On the other hand, the spread of Islam around large parts of the Mediterranean did by no means destroy the surviving urban civilization of the late Roman-Hellenistic period, as was the case in large parts of Europe, where the invasion from the east disrupted the continuity of urban life for several centuries. In fact, the Arab invasion led to an almost miraculous revival of that urban heritage under new spiritual prerogatives, due to the integrative forces of Islam and its capacity of absorb-

ing, assimilating, and transforming the pre-existing cultural heritage.

To Ibn Khaldun, the balance of forces between the nomadic life and urban culture and their mutual impact was a basic feature of Islamic culture. According to his *Muqaddimah*, urban florescence is the goal of civilization, for it is only in a sedentary way of life that culture can fully materialize through the steady development of the arts, the sciences, and trade. However, the sheltered life of urban society contains the seed of its own destruction, which grows stronger as higher stages of civilization and greater wealth are attained. But eventually stagnation and decay call for the influx of fresh forces capable of inducing order and cohesion. According to Ibn Khaldun, these qualities are inherent in the desert people, as the tribal organization, developed under the constraints of severe exterior conditions, contains all the essential ingredients of urban organization in nuclear form.

Consequently, to Ibn Khaldun the Bedouins not only are at the opposite pole from the world of the city, but they are its origin and prerequisite, for they represent the forces on which cities depend without being able to produce them: pure faith, proud codes of honor, social ties, and vital strength—all qualities that succumb within a few generations, once their owners take up a sedentary life. In its often violent contacts with cities, nomadism ensures the reinvigoration of urban culture and the necessary changes in the ruling dynasties. It provokes periodic destruction of worn-out structures as well as political and spiritual renewal.

This cyclic renewal has proven to be a recurrent factor in the urban development of Islam, for even after its establishment the Arab-Islamic empires were repeatedly invaded by tribal and nomadic societies such as the Turkomans and the Berbers. Many of these new dynasties founded their own new settlements or palatial cities; in some cases they adopted existing cities as their capital. Sometimes existing cities were left to decay and the seat of the government shifted to other places, underlining the temporary and transient character of these foundations.

Ibn Khaldūn also pointed out that the latent shaping forces of nomadic societies gained their maximum momentum only when directed by the uniting religious creed of Islam, which superseded tribal rivalries and the untrammelled life of the desert. Enormous energies otherwise lost in interior conflicts were made subservient to the achievement of a common goal, as was the case with the Prophet's community in Madīnah.

It is important to note that by overcoming tribal divisions the Prophet established the basis for the supranational character of Islam which eventually effected tribal and racial distinctions, much in contrast to Judaism, where the message is reserved to a "chosen people." This fact was one of the reasons for the success of Islam, for its embrace by a large number of races and nations, and for the rapid development of urban civilization in the centers of

ancient cultures. It is also the reason why it is possible to speak of a certain type of “Islamic city,” which is characterized by patterns of community structure and lifestyle shared by different regions and by populations of different racial origin.

In comparing Islamic urban development with the formation of European cities (which began only in the late Middle Ages), one finds a striking difference. In Europe, the dynamic forces behind the sudden growth of new towns were due to political factors, such as the struggle for new rights, liberties, and privileges, which resulted in the establishment of an urban bourgeoisie independent from the clergy and the nobility. In Islam, this type of class struggle had very little or no importance because of the greater balance established by its social order. The fact that Islam had no institutional clergy and that it provided a very specific model of daily life based on the *Sunnah* and the social order established by the Prophet (SAAS) in Madīnah, meant that there was from the outset an intangible body of right and rules protecting the individual and the community from the potential arrogance of misled rulers.

The eventuality of infringements did of course exist, and as Ibn Khaldūn points out, it had to be accepted as an unavoidable evil in the necessary imperfection of worldly existence; the laws of gravity, as it were, could not forever be suspended, as during the “period of miracles” in the Prophet’s (SAAS) time. However, abuse was limited due to the fact that the Qur’ān and the *Sunnah* and the laws derived from them were the sole constitutional elements of the Islamic state, and rulers had no other base of legitimacy for their actions.

Embedded as it was in the *ummah*—the supranational community of the followers of the Prophet—the Islamic city never laid claim to communal or sovereign independence as European towns did in the late Middle Ages and afterward. The inhabitant of the Islamic town consequently did not feel as a townsman or citizen in the Western sense, but as a member of the *ummah*, which gave him a basis beyond his clan and which promised him both temporal comfort and eternal salvation. The attachment to the *ummah* is more than a mere figurative idea: it had a very concrete meaning and validity as long as the world of Islam obeyed its own laws. Every Muslim was thus free to move about within the community in its widest sense, to settle wherever he wanted, and to engage in trade, teach, and learn. Provided he had the necessary personal integrity and knowledge, all functions were open to him in Islamic society—even the very highest such as that of a judge or a minister.

The spirit prevailing in the *ummah* meant that the importance of the individual town was assessed soberly: a simple living-space allocated to its inhabitants. For precisely the fact that the town had no significance in itself made it possible to establish urban life as part of a more comprehensive, a more universal concept of human life. Since temporary facilities and institutions, seen against the background of timeless existence, were not considered

absolute values, the idea of the town did not absorb too much of human concerns. Spiritual energies were reserved for the only object worthy of worship and full engagement: *Lā ilāha illa Allāh*. This attitude prevented Muslims from the utopian search for perfection in man-made institutions. It also provided the urban community with strong social cohesion, derived from the common direction of human acts and thoughts toward a higher goal.

The awareness of the transience and ultimate inadequacy of earthly institutions and the distrust shown toward abstract organizations and their autonomous development has a double aspect: what is denied to institutions is expected all the more from human beings as responsible agents of higher purposes. In the traditional Islamic town most administrative services (which have taken on such menacing proportions in modern Western society) are performed by way of direct personal connections and mutual obligations within the various social groups. Human relations and all forms of personal agreements, contracts, and understandings are thus of vital importance for the existence of Islamic towns.

For the Muslim there is above all an implicit contract between Allāh as the Creator and Supreme Ruler of the universe and the seed of Adam, who have committed themselves to lead a life of obedience to Him.<sup>1</sup> It was also a pact that united the Prophet (SAAS) with his first followers in Madīnah. Likewise, the allegiance of any community to its ruler was thought of as a contract, one that was normally renewed and confirmed week by week by including the ruler's name in the Friday prayers. For his part, the ruler made agreements with the men he chose to assist him, for these were not considered permanent officials but personal holders and executors of a temporary commission.

Mutual obligations were also created by the close neighborhood connections stressed by the *Sunnah*, as well as by the old tribal feelings that survived in the town and produced, through the formation of "houses" and quarters, effective nuclei of communal life. Similar bonds were implied by the association of craftsmen and tradesmen in professional organizations, a typical urban phenomenon for which a nomadic past offered no parallels. Such unions hardly had the same political and social objectives as the later European guilds, but they had ethical standards of their own, effective social welfare systems, and often esoteric traditions. A comparable role was played by the Sūfī brotherhoods, which in some cases constituted the supporting spiritual structure of a single corporation, in other cases extended through many different trades and social classes.

Each of these groups was able to act as a self-contained and self-regulating

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<sup>1</sup> Louis Gardet draws special attention to the importance of the pact in his *La Cité Musulmane* (1954).

organism. The tribal leader, the chief of the clan, or the *amir* commanded unchallenged authority in his circle, as did the head *Şūfī*. Most of the professional associations had their own recognized courts to settle internal disputes, while the fraternities were pledged by their own objectives to avoid conflicts. This again helps to explain the striking limitation of central civil power and the absence of highly developed administrative systems in the structure of the Islamic city.

In the foregoing, I have deliberately avoided discussing specific physical features of the Islamic city, as this would imply an extended analysis which is beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, I have concentrated on the normative social and cultural framework, and on the attitudes that were largely responsible for generating the patterns of historic Islamic cities such as Dimashq, Aleppo, Fās, or Baghdād. These urban structures are widely admired for the coherence and the human character of their environmental qualities, which modern cities have so far failed to provide. However, they are considered by most as part of a past that is gone forever and not as a living heritage. Accordingly, the usual approach in dealing with these historical cities is an archeologically minded conservation and not a creative search for continuity under changed conditions. Here we come to the crucial issue of today's situation in urban developments. There may be some individual new buildings here and there in which Islamic principles are perpetuated, but there is no complete modern urban environment that reflects the Islamic way of life. Ironically, some of the most orthodox Arabic countries have developed the most abrupt contradiction between total adherence to Islamic moral codes, on the one hand, and replacement of the traditional environment by Western-type cities, on the other. It is only in the last few years, after the inadequacy of imported models became evident, that new attempts toward re-establishing some sort of local tradition have been made.

The problem of the cultural gap is, however, an immense one, and the factors that led to that situation are well known: the sudden break of continuity since colonial times, sometimes followed by an even stronger culture dependence on the West after political autonomy; new technologies and modes of production which no longer allowed for restricted local markets; the demographic explosion during the last few decades; an overwhelming dominance of Western ideologies in education and information; and corresponding major changes in lifestyle. In view of the tremendous impact of these factors the question arises whether anything worthy of the name "Islamic city"

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<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of physical planning principles, see the author's "Stadtebau in Islamischen Landern," ETH, ORL-Publications, 44, Zurich, 1980, and "Traditional Muslim Cities and Western Planning Ideology," in the Symposium volume, "The Arab City," Riyādh, 1982.

will be able to survive or develop anew, and whether the traditional interaction between a specific culturally and religiously determined lifestyle and a corresponding urban environment can be restored. For without the existence of a decisive spiritual shaping force structuring the life of the community and without its appropriate reflection in the built form, no coherent urban civilization can be established.

It would be far too simple to assume that the problems pointed out above can be resolved by the sole intervention of architects, well intentioned as they may be. These are issues involving the collective responsibility of society as a whole. They cannot be tackled from the "periphery," as it were, but only from the center, by regenerating the vital forces of the community. It is only by making use of these inner forces that a society will be able to respond to outside challenges, to absorb, adapt, and transform the achievements of foreign civilizations without losing its own identity. Establishing a new cultural synthesis through selective and meaningful use of the "raw material" of today's modern civilization is indeed the major challenge Islamic societies face today. In importance, this challenge is comparable to the situation during the early days of Islam, when the community was confronted with the wealth of Greco-Roman civilization and had to forge an unmistakably Islamic culture under its own spiritual premises.