Heritage and Sustainability

in the

Islamic Built Environment
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Edited by

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Preface

The globalized vision of world’s cities in the 21st century demands responsible deed on the professions of design and societies at large, as most of the world population progressively move to the major urban centers to join the global market opportunities. Sadly, cities of the world in the past era resulted not only in seemingly uniform and faceless growth but globalization has also destabilized the delicate balance on which many traditional cultures have depended, socially, economically, and otherwise. Included in this change has been the impact on the physical environment of traditional Islamic cities, in the worst-case scenario eradicating it altogether in favor of one more corporate and thus more western, and at best emulating it to achieve a continuity with the indigenous look.

Future patterns of urban development and architecture in Islamic cities demand a critical outlook. Their timeless cultural background and regional identity call for creative planning and imaginative design approaches, taking into consideration those properties that are both physical and nonphysical. Expression is important but so are the rituals and other cultural demonstrations around which space and form are developed. Inquiry into them has already been made but further research and new explorations will need to continue. If we are going to remain vigilant against simplistic interpretation of history and its replication in the form of faux representation then the unique qualities and meanings of space and place will need to survive or at least be well understood. Traditional environments are often marked by an almost near perfect synchronicity between powerful cultural experiences and form, the first both supporting and giving rise to the other and vice versa. What is the nature of this synchronicity and how can it be maintained; these are two of the more critical questions that this book seeks to explore.

The phenomenon of widespread 20th century modernity and its unilateral concepts of “progress” that engendered much of the development priorities across the globe had an overwhelming effect on the programs for building cities and towns everywhere. Its planning philosophies, which fragmented and homogenized patterns of development, have resulted in the isolation and privatization of societies. Gentrification, while not without having a positive influence on the society in which it is developed, has often came at the expense of heritage and truly isolated urban areas.

In particular, the effect of rapid modernization that attracted the desire for Western style modern patterns of development in Islamic built environment calls for critical analysis. The unrestrained process of development and
application of untamed modern technology, not only affected adversely the physical and morphological order of the Islamic cities that are characterized by organic and vernacular pattern of development, but also generated a rift between society’s social organization and a divide between rich and poor, progressive and regressive, upper elite and lower class stratum with much negative consequences. Historically, traditional settlements in the Islamic Built environment were unified and closely knit urban fabric. People enjoyed a sense of security, shared identity, and a common bond with their kin living closely together. These settlements were developed according to a specific cultural requirement that shaped the housing pattern of community and city. These forces were deeply rooted living traditions, together with religious and social philosophies, that constituted the true cause for its physical development. The noted urban sociologist J. Abu-Lughod remarked elegantly to this fact: “one can detect that the process of development in modern Islamic cities are influenced by the Western models of city planning and design, while at the same time the West is reconsidering its design approaches and trying to reinvent concepts and patterns from the traditional cities of post modern era and principles that are similar to those in traditional Islamic cities.”

Sustainability and environmental conservation is another hallmark of the development priorities that will dominate the global and regional concerns of societies across the world as we progress responsibly into the 21st century. It is expected that the Islamic built environment will essentially play a major role in the cause of sustainability and environmental conservation. In light of diminishing global resources and much environmental degradation, the prospect of a new century raises serious questions about the health and livability of future cities. In the last century, or so cities and towns were transformed significantly from a rich and efficient urban fabric to a sprawling low density land uses. This process not only impacted adversely the natural habitat, but also exhausted the vitality of many traditional urban places across the world. Sustainable design by its definition celebrates and creates the ability of communities and wider urban systems to minimize their impact on the natural systems, in an effort to create places that endure. Central to this paradigm is an ecological approach that takes into consideration the safeguarding of not only the natural environment but also the enhancement of human social and historical heritage as well.

Traditional and vernacular architecture in Islamic cities for centuries survived and developed a sense of symbiotic relationship with their surrounding ecology. Their sense of sustainability emerged from having found resonance with nature, its pace, and cyclical progression. They have withstood the test of time and appealed to a variety of functional needs. It was not until the past century that their worth began to subside and this was so due to the way of modern building practices that ignored the limitations of the human condition and began to use excessive technology to shape the built environment. Standardization along with the introduction of mass-produced cheap materials and energy resources, both contributed to the further marginalization of these traditional places.
The traditional cities across the Moslem regions are invaluable repositories of heritage, not only because of their historical worth but because they offer us important design lessons and tangible promise for a holistic approach to the crises of built environment. It is possible to formulate, creatively, a set of design and planning strategies from historic cities that generate and nourish a sense of community and common social bonds but also adhere to the life styles of today where needs and wants are formulated into appropriate physical form. In the words of S. Bianca, “the new patterns of development should be based on an integrated vision of society shared by the community as a whole, and produce creatively a sustained interactive and participatory environment.” Physical and social centers that interweave the population towards a common goal, and—provide a rich cultural experience for its residences, can nourish a healthy community spirit. Through communities we can maintain our sense of identity and avoid social alienation Community gives a way to people to feel affinity, belonging, and pride of togetherness.

The essays in this book represent an up-to-date research and investigation into the varied aspects of heritage and sustainability in the Islamic Built environments. They include a wide array of principles, strategies, and precedents that are instrumental to the design decisions in maintaining the environmental integrity and safeguarding the urban and architectural heritage in Islamic cities. However, the authors of the essays in this book are well aware of the fact that these essays are by no means an attempt to answer all the complexities that involve the design, and safeguarding of environmental and urban heritage in Islamic cities, but rather an attempt to present a concise collection of scholarly research materials to inspire further exploration and deliberation.

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