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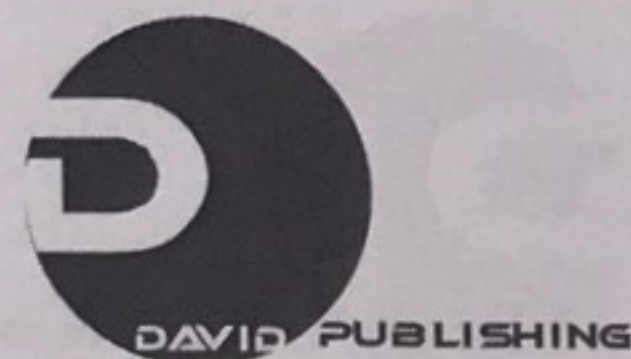
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# Trends of the Transformation of Urban Form in Arab Cities with Specific Reference to Al-Khobar

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**Abstract:** The paper analyzes the current trends of urban transformation and delineates an underlying rationale which enables the comprehension of the current character of Arab city with particular reference to Al-Khobar. The city form is subjected to a re-reading arguments of which are based on critical interpretation of the mechanisms of urban morphology in relation not only to the impacts of global economy and building boom but also to the means of perception of urban space by different strata of the urban realm. Thus, urban morphology of the city is studied as a medium which manifests a dissociation, and thus duality, between social structure and its physical container. The paper further argues that uncritical import of urban and architectural typologies seem to create a peculiar type of urban-architectural forgery that is usually reduced to skin-deep façade mimicry. Particularly, solo performances of shiny high-rise buildings and sharp contrasts of street fronts between main arteries and back streets depict impressions of fragmentation and segregation. The emerging urban-scape that can be associated with the cultural and economic leap in Arab regions today is critically evaluated. Thus, the paper proposes judicious and critical planning policy instead of direct import of global urban-architectural typologies.

**Key words:** Urban transformation, Arab city, morphology, duality, conservation, public realm.

## 1. Introduction

The ongoing rapid transformation of urban environment in major cities of Arab countries is analyzed here with particular reference to Saudi Arabia and specifically to the city of Al-Khobar. The emerging “discrepancy” between urban form and its social content due to misinterpretation of contemporary urbanization is discussed as a major danger facing the cities of Saudi Arabia. Economic crisis in the west seems to have major ramifications in Arabian Peninsula in the sense that capital has shifted to Middle East. The problem is that the ongoing economic rivalry in the region reveals its manifestations on the fast and, thus inevitably, imprudent development in urban transformation activities. Moreover, regional politics change the roles of Middle Eastern countries whereby Arabic cities emerge as new markets. Consequently, those cities are gradually

restructuring themselves for western firms to be easily mobilized. The fact that social and physical body of the problematic organism, named here with the general term “Arab City-Scape”, seems to be easily subject to mutation under the pressure of these winds of globalization appears as a major problem. This mutation is mainly realized by intensive injection of mostly (though not always) foreign aspects into this delicate well-rooted traditional body. As a result, this organism displays a character that can be almost defined as “discrepancy”, while maintaining its authentic and iconographic imagery. This paper questions the amazing capacity of this well-rooted conventional structure of society to adapt to contemporary conditions so quickly and easily.

Re-interpretation as well as conservation of existing urban-architectural heritage plays a key role in the arguments developed in this paper. Therefore, this paper takes an ominous stance towards imposition of alien spatial instruments, at the peril of the treasures of local identity particularly on a land once has cradled

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the establishment and continuity of successive civilizations. This understanding should obviously not only focus on monumental and institutional heritage but also embrace civic heritage that forms the basis of urban fabric. Therefore, heritage conservation should further include genuine, authentic physical and spatial traces of civic fabric of the society. Meanwhile, however, the clear and present danger of urban-architectural forgery reduced to skin-deep façade mimicry of oriental and arabesque features made of contemporary materials should also be avoided. Because such a tendency, in the name of reproducing traditional architectural features and icons out of context, appears to result in an Arabic version of distorted eclecticism that can be observed in Disneyland Architecture or in Las Vegas Strip Architecture. Needless to say, the background, sources, roots and aims of this type of architecture are obviously totally different from socio-cultural context of these cities. Therefore the proposed strategy of conservation will be based on the notion of Critical and Interpretive Synthesis [1].

Furthermore, the newly emerging urban scene seems to fail in reflecting the current transformation of the Arab society. In other words, it is misreflecting its evolution. The emerging urban context, particularly via its fragmented morphology, portrays an impression of a disintegrated and discordant society. Particularly, individualistic performances of glossy buildings and abrupt dichotomy of street fronts between main arteries and back streets – almost next to each other, seem to portrait very misleading impressions of fragmentation and social segregation in the society. However, Arab society is characterized by a unified, integrated, harmonized and synchronized public realm [2]. Thus, the genuine urban-architectural language that reflects this harmony is very attractive. Disneyworld or Las Vegas Strip Architecture, too, might attract tourists in specific context since they are the authentic products of the context they are formed within. However, other cities (like Arab cities) should avoid replicating this type of populist products. They rather should keep them in a

distance to highlight their own assets. In this paper, the emerging sensory urban-scape in the current urban building boom that can be associated with the cultural and economic leap in Arabian Peninsula today, is critically evaluated by means of examples selected from Al-Khobar. Hence, this study proposes judicious and critical planning policy which integrates urban conservation into its own body.

## 2. Historical Overview of Urban History

At this point it is appropriate to comment on the history of urban evolution. Having exposed to substantial change in a relatively short period of time in terms of progressing from one stage to the other by successive generations, Arabian Peninsula and its culture is also suffering from the problem of loss of identity. Middle Eastern countries, in general, had to go through a sudden and destructive process rather than a gradual transformation whereby old and new values are reciprocally balanced and digested [3].

As a result of the analysis of traditional urban texture, two interrelated issues can be identified – pedestrian scale and formal homogeneity of the physical environment. These two salient features are representations or physical manifestations of a social order based on total harmony and integration. Therefore, this paper suggests that such social awareness and its architectural container form the cultural identity of the traditional Arab city which seems to have started blurring with the recent urban developments. Therefore, the next step is to examine a sudden leap that cities went through from the line of natural evolution they hitherto had followed, and to analyze the acceleration in the implementation of modern urbanism which diverted the direction of such natural evolution of the traditional urban culture all around the Arabian Peninsula, particularly in cities of the Eastern Province. Following the three successive waves of Westernization, the Arab city is now facing the latest, and probably a post-modern phase of global development which significantly alters the underlying structure of the urban morphology [4]. Traditional urban culture is seriously

threatened by this massive urbanization process [5]. Patterns of daily life [6] and ways of perceiving the immediate urban environment is being irreversibly altered causing urban-architectural heritage to be totally lost. However this process is implemented so gradually and discretely that it is almost unnoticed and even welcomed by the native and local people [7]. Nevertheless, implementation process is so gradual and friendly that it is almost unnoticed and even welcomed by the native and local people at the peril of their culture. Particularly with the instruments that are raised by Al-Hathloul [8], namely grid and urban villa, the coherence of social unity is broken.

Besides, dependence on car, which forms the very source of the discrepancy will be discussed below, has not only crippled daily social interaction but also fragmented the urban structure. Moreover, the increasing passion (of administrators and developers) for new technologies [9], new materials lead alien building typologies and architectural forms to jut out of the harmony of existing urban context. In other words, the ongoing rapid urbanization under the pressure of the dynamics of global economy seems to create immense contrasts regarding: human & monumental scale, horizontal & vertical forms, walled & open settlements, luxurious & dilapidated buildings right next to each other in the morphology of Arab cities. These abrupt contrasts are inevitably causing segregation and alienation of social classes from each other [10] whereas the traditional society was based on uniting all members of the society no matter which class they belong to. Surprisingly, it can be observed that this fragmented structure can only be perceived as a continuum in vehicular speed which creates a further fragmentation and segregation between the segments of the society. This duality of perception of the same city [11] generates an illusion of cultural continuity (via walls recalling the streets of traditional city) (Fig.3) for upper classes [12] who perceive the city in high speed, whereas a feeling of isolation for lower classes that lives in between gated communities. As a result of the analysis of contemporary urban fabric of the

traditional Arab city, two interrelated issues can be identified: vehicular scale and formal fragmentation of the physical environment. These two emerging features appear to represent the physical manifestations of a new social order based on economical and technological dominance and social segregation and disintegration. Therefore, this paper suggests that such a social negligence and its architectural container threatens the cultural identity of Arab city.

In result, morphological structure of the conventional Arab or Middle Eastern city [13] displays organic character with integrated spatial organization. Within this spatial structure, wall emerges as a dominant and binding feature of traditional Arab city regarding privacy and religious order. Whereas, road appears as a new feature of contemporary city. The polarization among these two features will constitute the basis of our reading of the city. Following this brief morphological overview, a consummative overview of sociological structure reveals that the society is on a transitory phase from a homogeneously conservative society to heterogeneous and liberal society. Hence, the rapid exposition to this comprehensive transition usually causes economic polarization and cultural clashes between two value sets which can also be observed in the physical morphology. In most of the cases, the society develops various types of split personality, oscillating between bipolar ends of the range of cultural value sets. In other words, conception of as well as behavior both in public and private realms varies in regard to different time and context.

### 3. Problem of "Discrepancy" between Urban Form and Content

This rapid process seems to be threatening the established values of local culture and its artistic artefacts although this process is welcomed by public as well as administrators since it symbolizes progress and integration to what is called the First World. Nevertheless, the argument here is that an essential alteration under the disguise of this rapid transformation is being implemented so evanescently

and surreptitiously that it is barely spotted and almost saluted (Fig.1).

It is of particular interest of this paper to make sense of the apparent capability of Arab cities to adapt to new conditions. With this purpose, state of the art urban design theories and their methodologies based on discourse analysis will be adapted in addition to conventional urban analysis methods. Therefore, this section will start by visiting up to date urban theories that explain city as a self-organizing organism rather than a static design product controllable by the single hand of the planning authority. Considering the current paradigm shift from stabilized places to becoming places [14, 15], the need for a new viewpoint towards cities arises calling a shift in methodologies in the direction of dynamic evaluation methods. The examination of cities under the impact of global urbanization requires the use of similar lenses to those used in analysis of contemporary global metropolitan areas. Because, the dynamics



Fig. 1 Manifestations of well-disguised agents of globalization.

shaping both type of urban environments share a common ground on which existing assets are commodified and spatial configuration is reorganized to allow easy and efficient access and operation of global mechanisms. Therefore, this study will apply the critical discourses developed for contemporary city to those cities at stake. While rapidly disintegrating in terms of urban spatial configuration, Arab cities are rapidly integrating to the global system with the seemingly contrary rhetorical claim of maintaining the traditionalist structure. An alternative reading regarding the multiple personalities of cities [16] is necessary to give meaning to this intriguing evolution of Arab city today. One must also note that modern society and science totally restructures our spatial intelligence [17] via reshaping not only the spatial structure but also our spatial conception through interactive procedures of the two. Therefore, the aspects that are expected to intrigue us gains a totally new function and meaning. In that context, in Arab cities, with specific reference to Eastern Province, the relation between wall and road appears to have been reconfigured in a totally different way by being detached from their genuine, conventional uses and meanings.

The current state of Arab city exhibits the following dichotomies in the urban context: abrupt contrasts between main streets that are surrounded by luxurious stores, hotels, offices and showrooms and side streets that are poorly treated although they are located right next to each other; remarkable disparities between big high-rise buildings and small scale low-rise buildings built next to each other; disturbing contrapositions between shiny, glossy, high-class buildings and old, low-quality and dilapidated buildings laid next to each other; furthermore, huge contradiction between the well-maintained, well-protected, rich housing compounds that are reminiscent of oasis next to deserted lands; the severe distinction between a diamond-like chain of small palaces and poor neighborhoods laid out next to it; the though provoking discrepancy of the fancy neighborhood next

to immigrant quarters where basic facilities and services are not provided, etc.. Doubtlessly, vague yet enigmatic character of the current Arab city lies in these contradictions. The element of wall can be seen repeating every now and then within these alternating order of physical dilemmas throughout the city. Also, very wide highways dividing the city in various directions is also a recurrent figure in the formal structure of the city. Thus, the morphology of the current city can be summarized with scale, texture and formal (horizontal/vertical) contrasts.

This type of dichotomous urban morphology usually points out the physical symptoms of segregation and conflict. Nonetheless, these major symptoms in urban environment of transforming Arab cities seem to be ignored if not being unnoticed. As a matter of fact, it is very interesting to observe how easily traditional fabric is destroyed and even erased in such a traditional society. On the contrary, alien features are absorbed into this body at the expense of destroying itself (It is notable that American cities which our current cities take as model for development have gone through the very same phases). Various scholars [14-16] have already pointed out the possibility of parallelisms between the changes in the identities and personalities of the citizens and those in the physical environment in regard to current postmodern status of contemporary western city. They also consider these multiplicities of identities as a typical globalist instrument. If this is the case, which connotes an even more serious and vital problem in terms of culture at stake, urbanization policies have to be reviewed. Faced with the dichotomy of preserving a deep and stratified cultural heritage on the one hand, and creating a new glamorous (yet superficial) physical stage set for the new way of contemporary living, planning bodies seem to have (deliberately or subconsciously) developed a strategy of masking the ills of this transformation from the public gaze in order to prevent reaction. This possibility matches quite well with Baudrillard's [12] notion of "Hyper-reality" in creating a sort of simulation

whereby ills of this new way of transformation are disguised. So contemporary post-structuralist philosophy helps us to explain the complex and ambiguous state of the process ongoing in Arab cities. The discursive methods of their philosophy unveils the underlying motives behind the vague, formless, and dual structure, or double-identity [14, 15, 18, 19] of newly emerging cities. Thus, they allow us to become aware of the mechanisms that temporarily blind or rather hypnotize us during this massive transformation.

As pointed out above, wall emerges as the expression of the notion of "privacy" that determines the traditional way of living, whereas road appear as the manifestation of the concept of "speed" that determines the contemporary way of living (Fig. 2). If one intends to read the city over the conflict of these two concepts, Virilio's [20] accentuation on the notion of speed in the perception of modern city, raises the issue of the difference between the "static perception" and "dynamic perception" of the city. Doubtlessly, different social groups have different speeds within the Arab city. Thus, upper social classes and urban elite seem to utilize, and hence, perceive the city by jumps and leaps between certain locations. Their high speed travel visually and thus cognitively connects the actually fragmented parts of the wall, creating a "simulation" of a continuous walled (traditional) city whereby all values of Arab culture are conserved at



Fig. 2 Wall and road as dominant and clashing features of old and new city.



macro scale (Fig. 3). Yet in micro scale, the cracks in between these fragmented parts of the wall have the capacity to grow larger and destroy the integrity of the overall structure of the fast-spreading city. This virtual continuity of the wall seemingly covers social differences whereas the traditional city used to actually perform this function in the reality, not by covering but healing social problems. Thus, the conflict with the old and the new, or in other words, between wall and the road is tackled in such a way that the conflict is disguised by contemporary means of urban perception, that is to say by speed.

Hence, in this paper, it can be claimed that sustainability of traditional urban culture is significantly threatened by the massive urbanization process undergoing around the globe. It is intended to demonstrate that many patterns of daily life as well as

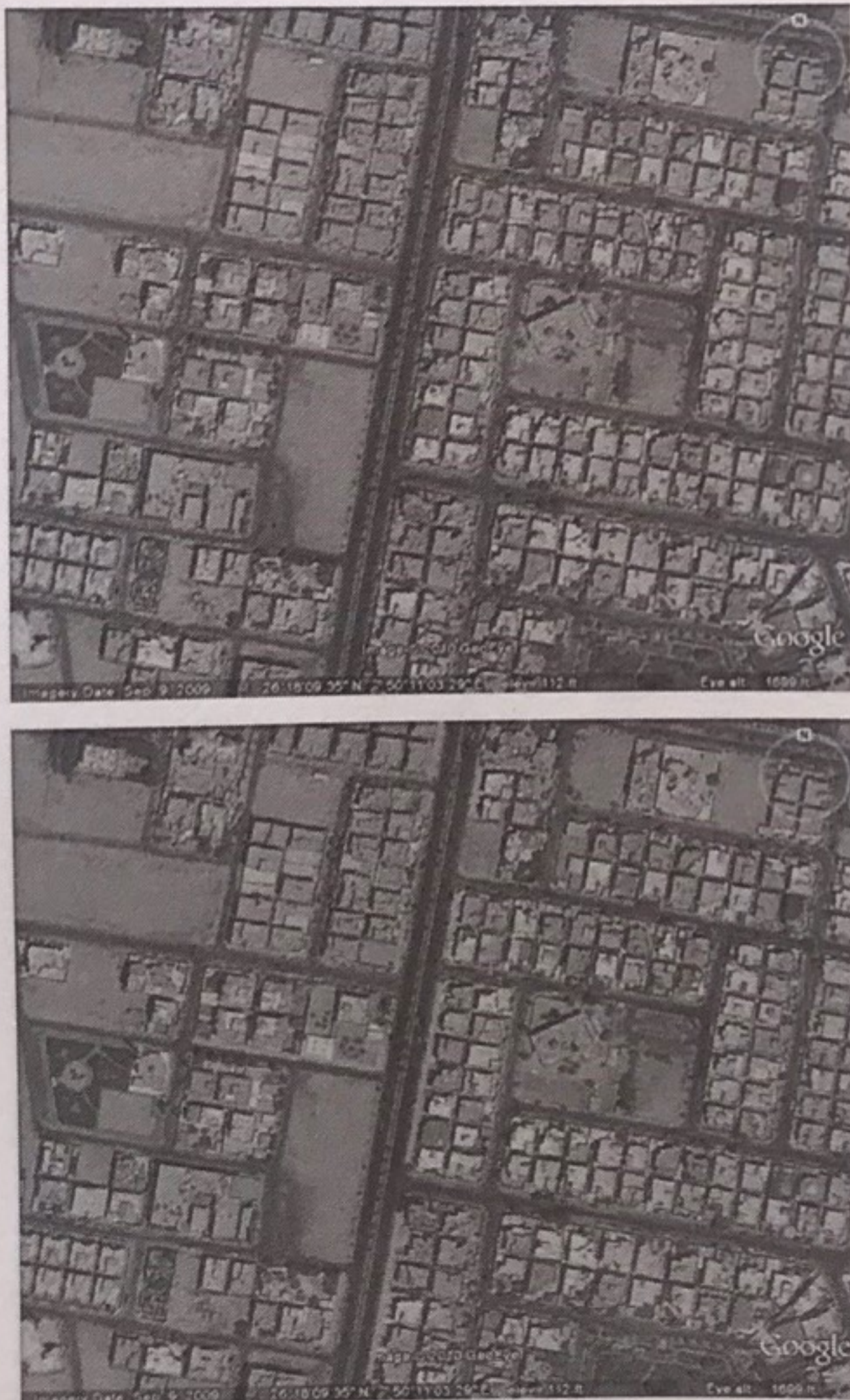


Fig. 3 Map showing the fragmented walls creating different perceptions of the city at different speeds.

ways of perceiving the immediate urban environment is being irreversibly altered for humans to an extent that urban-architectural heritage is almost destroyed. However, this process is being implemented so gradually and discretely that it is almost unnoticed and even welcomed by the native and local people. At this point the following section will focus on the instruments of this disguise in terms of architectural and urban features.

As a matter of fact, globalization deploys a legitimized process that is well designed to control the existing and (plausibly) resisting organism by paralyzing it with appropriate instruments that can be seen as symbols of progress. This process is basically type of urban spyware with the target of a new form of establishment that can also be named as Neo-Capitulation or Neo-Colonization. As introduced at the beginning, Middle East is going through a political process by which the roles of countries in the region change whereby Arabic cities emerge as new markets. Under the light shed by this view, those cities had to be gradually restructured for global corporations to be freely mobilized. Naturally, this intervention had to be accomplished smoothly. This soft intervention can be defined as a Post-Fordist socio-economic operation to which cities not only willingly but also overenthusiastically surrender. Obviously, such an operation requires very well-disguised (secret) agents of global urbanization (see Fig. 1). Among them, high speed transportation systems consisting of constructing highways and importing automobiles, high and glamorous buildings equipped with latest technology and material, all of which are again imported from the Western countries. Needless to say, all these products and materials, which are marketed in Arab cities, are branded in the West and manufactured in the East with the cheapest labor costs possible.

Eventually, as discussed above, the Arab city has been transformed from a humane fabric which was pedestrian in scale, harmonious and integrated in terms of urban space, into a new and inhumane fabric

that can be defined as vehicular and monumental in scale and spatially fragmented as a result of global urbanization processes. Like many metropolitan cities all over the world, Arab cities will soon start feeling the failings of modernization via mechanisms of, alienation, depression, and increasing health problems of citizens, growing traffic congestion on the motorways, increasing environmental pollution, isolation in the suburbs, agglomeration of certain socio-economic classes (i.e., poor, migrants, etc.) on downtown, dilapidation of the city centre, increasing crime rate, etc. [21]. Despite the various comforts that such processes provide for particular strata of the social strata, urbanization by such means clearly brings up disadvantages especially for lower levels of this stratification [22]. The roots of such deformation can easily be searched through the recently injected urban ingredients into the once unified, integrated harmonious body of urban community. It is clearly observed in the urban scene of Arab cities that rapid urbanization via alien architectural instruments definitely causes the loss of public realm which is very crucial in maintaining a communal culture. There is an urgent need for an emphasis on the issues of preservation and conservation of urban heritage as well as vernacular architecture, in urban planning, for reconstructing the broken ties with past which spiritual and social values regarding community were essential aspects of urban living. With this purpose, local administrators as well as scholars and professionals must not only immediately understand the role of urban design as much as literature, movies, TV, internet in the invasion and destruction of local culture for current rebuilding of traditional Arab city in a manner, and also reverse the process without any further delay.

#### 4. Conclusion

As discussed in above chapters, the Arab city has been transformed from a humane fabric which is pedestrian in scale, harmonious and integrated in terms of urban space, into a new and inhumane fabric

that can be defined as vehicular and monumental in scale and spatially fragmented as a result of global urbanization processes. This paper unveiled the global transformation process of double-coding in urban morphology by means of differences in speed and its associated perceptions by different parties of the society. This process suggests a cultural distortion which has to be reversed by sophisticated strategies. It is of interest for how long the duality and polar pressures can be concealed by devious global urban planning instruments that are based on multiple readings of the city at different speeds. Nonetheless, as argued above, the morphological cracks emerging in the actual (dis)continuity of the wall may have already started an underlying process outcomes of which are yet to be seen. It is important to address this problematic issue from different perspectives such as social stability and economic sustainability. Therefore, it is once again shown that, particularly in tourism industry, genuine and unique architectural characteristics of the specific locality are certainly preferred to various contemporary urban or architectural elements which can be seen anywhere on the world. In conclusion, the emerging sensory urban-scape in the current urban building boom that can be associated with the cultural and economic leap in Islamic regions (Arab Renaissance) today is critically evaluated with references to Saudi Arabia. The well-disguised trickery of rapid urbanization as the agent of globalism is argued against the notion of hybridization through conservation of both urban morphology and intangible cultural aspects. Thus, the paper proposes judicious and critical planning policy which integrates urban conservation into its own body. The question is whether it is possible to restructure and develop the urban spatial configuration without being imprisoned or entrapped by the deadlocks of the modern transformation in such a geography overwhelmed by the rich and strong heritage. Clearly, achieving this target is not impossible at all despite all drawbacks of contemporary urbanization. Nonetheless, such a strategy should also avoid the pitfalls of

copying artefacts of former centuries. Neither it should intend creating a new physical order looking like old which is a falsification of history and authenticity within a new era cultural, technical, social and economical aspects of which are totally different.

The significance of the close ties between material culture and the sustainability of immaterial culture is accentuated throughout this paper. In other words, intangible assets of Saudi Arabian culture, its folklore, the dances, wedding ceremonies, cuisine, coffee and coffee-houses, formal and informal gatherings, shopping and recreation habits are the issues which cannot be separately tackled from its urban-architectural envelope. Arab heritage is a cultural entity with an identity of its own. Thus, such a critical planning program should not only focus individually on single buildings, but also on context. Particularly, in the light shed by above-analyzed problem of fragmented city and its role in the disintegration of culture, emphasis must be put on the totality of context and accumulation values rather than fragments which can only give the illusion of a preserved culture. Also, all types of architectural forgery reduced to skin-deep façade mimicry of oriental and arabesque features made of contemporary materials that result in distorted eclecticism, as discussed above, are dangerous instruments within sensitive historical organism. Therefore, a critical stance and interpretive approach is suggested for synthesising old and new. Obviously, it requires a sound basis of knowledge on which this criticism and interpretation can be performed. It includes complex processes regarding decisions about: what to use, what (or not) to eliminate, what to abstract, what (and more not) to copy, as well as discussions of how to adopt, abstract, graft, inject new, as well as how to distill essences of the old.

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