

# TRANSFORMATION AND PERCEPTION OF URBAN FORM IN ARAB CITY

M.Cetin

**Abstract—** The paper analyzes the ongoing urban transformation and delineates an underlying rationale which enables the comprehension of the current dual character of the Arab city with particular reference to the case of Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia. The re-reading of city form is mainly based on the critical interpretation of the mechanisms of urban morphology in relation to both global economic impacts and associated building boom as well as to the means of perception of urban space particularly by different strata of the urban realm. Thus, urban morphology of Arab city is analyzed as a medium which manifests a gradually increasing discrepancy between the social structure and the physical container of the public realm. Emergent urban scene seems to depict impressions of fragmentation and segregation, whereas the society itself claims to have intrinsic unity, integrity and synchronization. Thus, the paper proposes judicious and critical planning policy instead of the direct import of global urban-architectural typologies.

## I. 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 region of Eastern Province. Kropf [1], in his review of urban morphology studies, draws attention to Conzenian conception of the word *urban* as ‘human settlement’ and the word *form* as a ‘process’ to highlight the social aspect and time dimension in urban analysis. Thus, here, the emerging “discrepancy” between urban form and its social content due to misinterpretation of contemporary urbanization is discussed as a major issue 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 easy mobilization of global corporate sector. 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 foreign aspects into this delicate traditional organism. In result, this organism displays a character that can be almost defined as “discrepancy”, while maintaining its authentic & 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. Therefore the proposed strategy of conservation will be based on the notion of *Critical & Interpretive Synthesis*. Furthermore, the newly emerging urban scene seems to mis-reflect the evolution of Arab society. The emerging urban context portrays a wrong impression of a disintegrated and discordant society particularly via its fragmented morphology. Particularly, solo 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. 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 Eastern Province.

## II. HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF URBAN EVOLUTION

In addition to the definition of urban morphological features that characterize the Arab (or Middle Eastern) City by Morris [2], Eben Saleh [3-6] gives a detailed account of the transformation of Arab city in general, and Al-Hathloul [7] and Parssinen & Talip [8] analyze the transformation of cities of Eastern Province in particular. Therefore, repetition of literature regarding urban history of Arab city will be avoided and the overview will be limited to a morphological summary of urban evolution. Here instead, evaluation will focus on the ongoing transformation within the last decade. Briefly, the transformation of Arab city until the end of 20<sup>th</sup> century can be summarized by a gradual shift from an urban texture of *pedestrian scale* and *formal homogeneity* of the *physical environment* into a fabric of *vehicular scale* and *formal*

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Murat Cetin is with the King Fahd University of Petroleum & Minerals, Dept. of Architecture, PO Box.910, Dhahran, 31261 Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (phone: +90-533-344-9003; fax: +966-3-860-3210; e-mail: mcetin01@gmail.com).

*fragmentation of the physical environment*, thus, from a *social order* based on *total harmony* and *integration* into a *social order* based on *economical & technological dominance* and *social segregation & disintegration*.

Following 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 [9]. Traditional urban culture is seriously threatened by this massive urbanization process [10]. Patterns of daily life and ways of perceiving the immediate urban environment is being irreversibly altered causing urban-architectural heritage to be totally destroyed. However this process is implemented so gradually and discretely that it is almost unnoticed and even welcomed by the native and local people [11]. Particularly with the instruments that are raised by Al-Hathloul [12] (1981), namely grid and urban villa, the coherence of social unity is broken. Besides, dependence on car, which forms the very source of the discrepancy, has not only crippled daily social interaction but also fragmented the urban structure. Moreover, the increasing passion (of administrators and developers) for new technologies [13], 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.

Urban context is the physical container of people [14] and there is a continuous and mutual interaction between this container and its content [15] whereby social logic is reflected on spatial configuration. Therefore, these abrupt contrasts are inevitably reflecting the segregation and alienation of social classes from each other [16] 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 [17] generates an illusion of cultural continuity (*via walls recalling the streets of traditional city*) for upper classes [18] who perceive the city in high speed, whereas a feeling of isolation for lower classes that lives in between gated communities.

The genuine morphological structure of the conventional Arab or Middle Eastern city [19] which used to display organic character with integrated spatial organization, within which, *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 (see Figure 3). Wall, here, also performs as an *interface* between the *plot* which constitutes the basic unit of 'land use pattern' by the social & economic content of the city and the *urban movement network* which regulates how spatial logic is

perceived within 'systematic analysis of city's constituent elements' [20]. 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 exposure 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 vary in regard to different time and context.

### III. PROBLEM OF "DISCREPANCY" BETWEEN URBAN FORM & CONTENT

This rapid process seems to be threatening the established values of local culture and its artistic artifacts 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. Here, it is of particular interest to make sense of the apparent capability of Arab cities to adapt to new conditions. Along this purpose, urban design theories and their methodologies [21] including those based on discourse analysis could be adapted in addition to conventional urban analysis methods. Hence, this section visits 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. Kropf gives an account of these different theories and methodologies with a particular emphasis on both the need for them to support each other and the need for a coordinated approach among them. Considering the current paradigm shift from *stabilized places* to *becoming places* [22,23], the need for a new viewpoint towards cities arises calling a shift towards dynamic evaluation methods. Because, the dynamics shaping urban environments share a common ground on which existing assets are commoditized and spatial configuration is reorganized to allow easy & efficient access and operation of global mechanisms. Therefore, this study applies the critical discourses developed for contemporary city.

While rapidly disintegrating their 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 [24] 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 [25] 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. Again, Kropf [26], referring to Lynch [27] this time, accentuates the significance of the notion of perception in urban morphology studies. In that context, in Arab cities, of 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 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 (Figure 1); remarkable disparities between big high-rise buildings and small scale low-rise buildings built next to each other; disturbing contrapositions between shiny, 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 (Figure 2) and poor neighborhoods laid out next to it; the thought provoking discrepancy of the fancy neighborhood next to immigrant quarters where basic facilities and services are not provided.

Doubtlessly, vague yet enigmatic character of the current Arab city lies in these contradictions. The element of *wall* is 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 are 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.



Fig. 1. Contrasts between main & back streets; big and small scale buildings

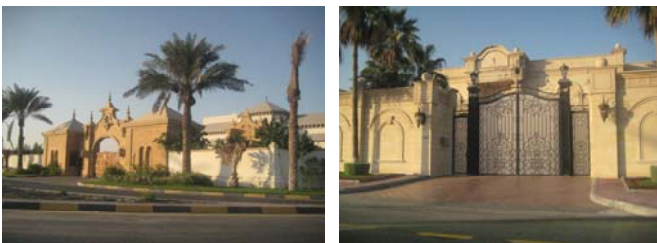


Fig. 2. Small Palaces that belong to higher income groups in Eastern Province

The dichotomous morphologies usually point out 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. Various scholars (Massey, Dovey, Guattari) have already pointed out the possibility of parallelisms between the changes in the identities & personalities of the citizens and those in the physical environment in regard to current postmodern status of contemporary city. They also consider this multiplicity 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 notion of "Hyper-reality" in creating a simulation whereby ills of this new way of transformation are disguised [28]. So, contemporary post-structuralist philosophy helps us to explain complex and ambiguous state of ongoing process in Arab cities. The discursive methods of their philosophy unveil underlying motives behind the vague, formless, and dual structure, or double-identity<sup>1</sup> 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 traditional way of living, whereas *road* appear as the manifestation of the concept of "speed" that determines contemporary way of living (Figure 3). If one intends to read the city over the conflict of these two concepts, Virilio's [34] 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 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 macro scale (Figure 4). 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 overall structure of the fast-spreading city. This

<sup>1</sup> Theories that explain both spaces and structural systems of cities with simultaneous and conflicting conceptual couples such as, *Tree* [29] – *Rhizome* [30] *Striated / Smooth Spaces* [31] or *Two Fold* [32], explains the issue of polarization [33] emerging in the globalizing cities.

virtual continuity of the wall seemingly covers social differences whereas the traditional city used to actually perform this function in reality, not by covering but healing social problems. Thus, the conflict with old and 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.



Fig. 3. Wall and road as dominant and clashing features of old & new city



Fig. 4. Map showing the fragmented walls creating different perceptions of the city at different speeds

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

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. 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 agents of global urbanization. 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.

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 being modernized 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. Despite the various comforts that such processes provide for particular strata of the social strata, urbanization by such means clearly brings up a diversity of disadvantages especially for the lower levels of this stratification<sup>2</sup>. 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. Along 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, and also reverse the process without any further delay.

#### IV. 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 discrepancy 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

<sup>2</sup> Micro environment for these sections of the society is dilapidated, disordered, unconnected to the rest of urban services and public realm [35]. Urban poor or under-paid are not very well taken care for, whereas it would be automatically handled in an Islamic society.



sustainability. In conclusion, the emerging *sensory urban-scape* in the current urban building boom that can be associated with the cultural and economic leap in Arab regions (*Arab Renaissance*) today is critically evaluated with references to Saudi Arabia and cities of Eastern Province. The well-disguised trickery of rapid urbanization as the agent of globalism is argued against the notion of 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 significance of the close ties between material culture and the sustainability of immaterial culture is accentuated throughout this paper. 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. Therefore, a critical stance and interpretive approach is suggested for synthesising old and new urban instruments.

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**Murat Cetin** was born in 1969 in Ankara, Turkey. He studied architecture at Middle East Technical University where he received his B.Arch and M.Arch degrees. He received his PhD degree from University of Sheffield where he was awarded a governmental scholarship.

He worked as assistant professor in Balikesir University and Yeditepe University in Turkey. He conducted various design projects some of which are awarded and funded research projects besides his teaching duties both on conservation and design theory as well as design studios. He directed various international workshops. He published various articles, papers and book chapters. He currently teaches in KFUPM in Dhahran in Saudi Arabia. His current research interests include urban morphology, urban transformation, urban conservation and history and theory of urban design.

Asst.Prof.Dr. Cetin is a member of the Chamber of Architect (UIA).