An aerial, high-contrast black and white photograph of a city's street grid. The grid is dense and somewhat irregular, with a prominent diagonal street cutting through the lower half. The text is overlaid in the upper-middle section.

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UNIVERSITI SAINS MALAYSIA

SCHOOL OF HOUSING, BUILDING & PLANNING, USM  
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# DYNAMICS OF EVER-EXPANDING MODERN URBANISM AND ENDANGERED CULTURAL SUSTAINABILITY OF URBAN HERITAGE IN MIDDLE EASTERN CITIES

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## ABSTRACT

*In the era in which world has suddenly and seriously confronted an energy crisis at global scale, the indirect impacts of such devastation on culture and tradition are rarely investigated. This paper discusses the importance of the relation between material culture and the ways, in which energy is utilized and converted into artefacts, -greatest of which is considered to be the city itself-, by various societies in different localities. It is argued that the sustainability of traditional urban culture, which is essential for an ecological way of living in the cities of the world in future, is significantly threatened by the massive urbanization process undergoing around the globe. Patterns of human daily life and perception within the city is being irreversibly altered to an extent that urban-architectural heritage is destroyed. The issue is tackled with specific reference to the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia where the conflict between financial, thus urban development and traditional culture of urbane living is almost clearly observed. The study unveils the mechanisms of such conflict in terms of urban morphology.*

**Keywords:** *cultural sustainability, urban heritage, urban fabric, urban morphology.*

## INTRODUCTION

The world has faced a sudden and seriously a global energy crisis at a grand scale since the last two decades of the twentieth century. Thus, for the last three decades, scholars, scientists, particularly from environmental disciplines are struggling to force developers, managers, decision makers and administrators to lead the way towards an escape from inevitable disastrous outcomes of the ongoing process of unsustainable development (Barton, *et. al.*, 1995). However, the indirect impacts of such devastation on culture and tradition have not been fully explored yet. Loss of contextual characteristics and local identity is also considered as an issue of sustainability, particularly in terms of sustainability of a culture. Cultural dimensions of this disastrous process will be investigated by social scientists in disciplines of humanities. This paper discusses the significance of the close ties between material culture and the ways, in which energy is appropriated by people in different societies as well as in various locations and converted into artefacts, -greatest of which is considered to be the city itself. It is argued that the sustainability of traditional urban culture is essential for an ecological way of living in future where cities will dominate the settlement pattern all over the world. It is claimed, in this study, that sustainability



of traditional urban culture is significantly threatened by the massive urbanization process undergoing around the globe. It is aimed 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 implemented so gradually and discretely that it is almost unnoticed and even welcomed by the native and local people. Here, the matter is tackled with specific reference to Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia where the clashes between financial progress, thus urban development and traditional culture of urbane living can clearly be observed (Parssinen & Talip, 1982). The study will address mechanisms of such conflict through the analysis of the aspects of urban morphology in this area.

Along this objective, the article will start by elucidating the traditional urban context to reveal its humane and ecological dimensions. An overview of the urban history will be conducted so as to identify attributes of sustainability in the morphology of urban form. The relation of social structure and daily practice of urban life with the architectural environment is assessed by analyzing how traditional urban culture is constructed and evolved ecologically in time.

#### **Traditional Urban Texture; an Ecological Culture of Human Settlement Pattern**

Traditional urban context is assumed as a physical container of people (Lefebvre, 1992) welcoming the nature and sustainable way of life in places (Raymond, 2005) where people are concentrated in contrast to modernist cities where concentration of people works against the natural dynamics of nature and ecological balance on earth. Traditional Arab cities have been developed over a large course of time and various transformations have occurred in their historical formation and characteristics (Eben Saleh, *et. al.*). The morphological as well as visual characteristics of Arabic cities will be examined in order to define their salient features (Morris, 1996). The study starts with a brief overview into the historical development of Arabic cities in order to explore the existing urban patterns which later were shaped into the contemporary cities of our time. This historical evolution will be tackled as parallel procedures between the formal aspects of urbanism, architecture and socio-cultural aspects of urban living (Niblock, 2005). Three major successive stages can be identified in the urban history of Arab cities that contributed to the traditional and vernacular morphology: Islamic Period, Colonial Period and Modern Period.

During the Islamic Period, in addition to mediaeval features of their contemporary cities, the following characteristics have developed throughout the urban settlements in the areas dominated by Islamic culture. As Islam spread from central Arabia to Morocco and Spain in the west, and India and Indonesia in the east, building styles blended into the basic forms and spaces with an emphasis on symmetry and



unity of space in all directions, even though the buildings had adopted a quite number of features from the local architecture. In parallel with formal harmony, a sense of unity, equilibrium, and peace have also started to emerge in the urban form of Islamic cities.

The community characteristics from the beginning of the seventh century to the end of the eighteenth century are established, on the grounds of the will not only to use local materials and the local scenery, but also to respond to local climate. Moreover, city formation was coming into terms with the basic principles of Islamic architecture of communal order (Khan, 1978). In addition to the religious mosque architecture as the leading figure in urban form, houses and clusters of houses were also the determining components of the traditional urban fabric in Muslim cities. As a matter of fact, due to the particular attitude of Islam towards formal civic institutions (no *waqf organizations* etc.) and its subtlety regarding the expression of power in form of monumental public buildings with the exception of grand mosques, civic architecture has always been a significant aspect of the urban tissue.

One of the salient forces in the formation of the urban fabric was the concept of family privacy and the role of women in the family as well as in the society. Therefore, a very unique network of spatial configuration has emerged. This configuration was based on a special way of juxtaposition of the public, semi-private and private spaces. In this society, men and women did not socialize together outside the immediate family environment. Therefore, the buildings utilized outer courts dedicated to various levels of social interaction among men. On the other hand, there were other inner environments which are designed as separate and distinct from the former courtyards. These isolated inner courtyards and surrounding spaces were dedicated to women only or to the entire inner family. The inward-looking courts of such buildings were invariably designed to create a sense of serenity, peace and beauty with delicate play of water flowing throughout the court, evoking a sense of paradise on earth. These courts not only provided the intimacy of space in these building complexes, but also served as a mechanism of climate control (Khan, 1978). These semi-private and private inward-looking courts in the same building are rarely similar. The spaces differ from one another in regard to shape and proportion; each assumes its own identity and functional justification. The notion of (social as well as ontological) unity manifests itself directly throughout the morphology of Islamic city (Slyomovics, 2001). Formal uniformity prevailed throughout the architecture of the city simply because there is no distinction in Islam between the sacred and profane. The all-embracing nature of the religion also made possible the integration of all forms of social activity, and thus all types of architectural forms. In the morphology of the Islamic city, spaces of worship became interrelated with spaces of education as well as those for private living and cultural activity (Nasr, 1978).



During the Colonial Period, on the other hand, the process of natural and humane evolution has changed its character. With the injection of Westernization into the Arabian Peninsula, which manifested itself in two phases, namely Ottoman Era and Colonialism after WW I, Western way of urban planning have spread with an *(sometimes clear and sometimes hidden)* agenda of implementing its own philosophy, and thus its own culture on the formal and social structure of the existing Arab city. The duality of material and spiritual realms which was intrinsically embedded in the philosophy of Christian religion and Western civilization has started to assert itself on the city and administration. Despite the humanist ideals of the Renaissance and Western enlightenment, political leadership on Arab city during Colonial Period, became deviated from humane and spiritual objectives, as did arts and science, and concentrated on managing the citizens' welfare rather than addressing social and cultural matters. Furthermore, with the scientific advances in the West, human intellect was focused into creating rational instruments for increasing man's control over the earth. This was a turning point in diversion from ecological way of living in cities. Thus, injection of Westernization to this geography was its first break up with sustainable urban culture of traditional Arab city.

Afterwards, industrial revolution and the resulting capitalist economy replaced former nobles with new bourgeoisie, and pushed rural immigrants to move into booming urban centres. This significant socio-economic transformation process has definitely caused century-old patterns of local identity and human solidarity to be loosened and destroyed. During the Ottoman period, particularly between the 16<sup>th</sup> and the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Arab cities resisted the Western influence and, to a great extent, managed to preserve the above defined authentic urban morphology. However, the Ottoman Empire, during the late-Ottoman period, acted as a filter and transmitter of Western influences, into Muslim countries through imperial architecture with Byzantine components, decorative elements of Classical, Baroque and Rococo styles. This trend also started to influence other major capitals of the Arabian Peninsula. The second stage followed the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire after World War I and Western intervention into Middle East. At that point in time, the physical development in most Arab traditional cities was based on the Western model of "new towns". The urban interventions were either superimposing the new city on the old historic fabric or setting up completely new colonial cities on virgin land, without any interaction with existing urban structures. This process damaged the genuine urban culture which envisaged an ecological and human way of living in cities.

Later, in Modern Period, which refers to the era after WW II, the final wave of westernization was influential. This period can be characterized, in summary, by the appearance of the United States of America as the new Western superpower on the scene of world politics as well as the political struggles for independence



anywhere in the Third World (Stevens, 2005). In the Arab region, the new independent nations were already established towards the end of 1950s with their planned governance structures, procedures and the artificially created national patterns and economic patterns, which had become dependent on international trade systems of capitalism (Sennett, 2005). At this era, housing emerges as the main concern where the loss of traditional skill and the local modes of production are felt. Traditional processes have started to be replaced by the import of expensive building materials and industrial construction techniques. Moreover, a speculative construction market and a rigid public administration provided the full control over the housing sector. Thus, such a mechanism made Arab cities to be dependent on foreign real-estate and construction companies in the name of solving the housing problem of working masses. Furthermore, along with the pumping of western technological advances into the markets of the third world and increasing demographic pressures on these cities, high rise buildings also became a necessity for Arab city rather than a choice. Along another path, other urban morphological instruments are also in charge for altering the outlook of these cities. Al-Hathloul (1981) analyzed how the orthogonal grid system as a street pattern and the villa as a housing type were introduced into the country as well as modernist zoning regulations, which guaranteed the continuity of envisaged physical environment for the transformation of Saudi Arabian cities. They were implemented over the existing organic structure of the traditional city which was once in harmony with nature due to its continuous, homogenous and integrated configuration of masses and voids, connected with shaded pathways, and articulated with wind towers etc.

Thus, in sum, the character of traditional cities was determined by the organic growth of houses, integrated with other urban functions such as; shops and other business buildings, organized around the community mosques as the focal landmarks. In addition to wind towers, the minarets as the vertical articulations (Hakim, 2008), and also a few domes, appears as the primary contrasting elements distinguished within the continuity of the horizontal roof-scape lying over the accumulated masses & volumes. Khan (1978) associates this characteristic to the salient feature of these cities having a clear unity between the sky and the earth. Hence, this can be considered another ecologically driven feature of the urban form. Therefore, traditional Arab city was characterized by; not only a coherent urban fabric with the sequential hierarchy of space from the public, semi-private and private spaces serving the maximization of family privacy, but also by a dense townscape built on a pedestrian scale (King, 1998). When moving through this highly articulated complex, the visitor experiences a distinct feeling of spatial continuity transcending the limits of individual buildings and connecting the various realms of public life integrated with nature and cosmos (Bianca, 2000, p.198-211). Consequently, an urban fabric at human scale which used to be unified and integrated urban



morphology directly reflects a humane way of living once dominated this territory (Figure1).

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.

### **Modernist Urban Fabric; a Global Culture of Human Sprawl**

Following the three successive waves of Westernization, the Arab city is facing the latest, and probably a post-modern phase of global development which significantly alters the underlying structure of the urban morphology (Elshestawy, 2008). Traditional urban culture is seriously threatened by this massive urbanization process (Tafari, 1976). 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 (Sennett, 1977). 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 that was once in harmony with nature. Particularly with the instruments that are raised by Al-Hathloul (1981), namely grid and urban villa, the coherence of social unity is broken. Besides, dependence on car has not only crippled daily social interaction but also fragmented the urban structure. Moreover, the increasing passion (of administrators and developers) for new technologies (Kultermann, 1999), 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 (Figure2). These abrupt contrasts inevitably causing segregation and alienation of social classes from each other (Lubeck & Britts, 2002) whereas the traditional society was based on uniting 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 of vehicular speed which creates a further fragmentation and segregation between



segments of the society. This duality of perception of the same city (Cohen, 2002) generates an illusion of cultural continuity (*via walls recalling the streets of traditional* (Figure3) for upper classes (Baudrillard, 1995) who perceive the city in high 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 two interrelated issues can be identified; vehicular scale and formal presentation of the physical environment. These two emerging features appear to present the physical manifestations of a new social order based on economical & technological dominance and social segregation & disintegration. Therefore, this paper suggests that such a social negligence and its architectural container threatens the sustainability of traditional cultural identity of Arab city.

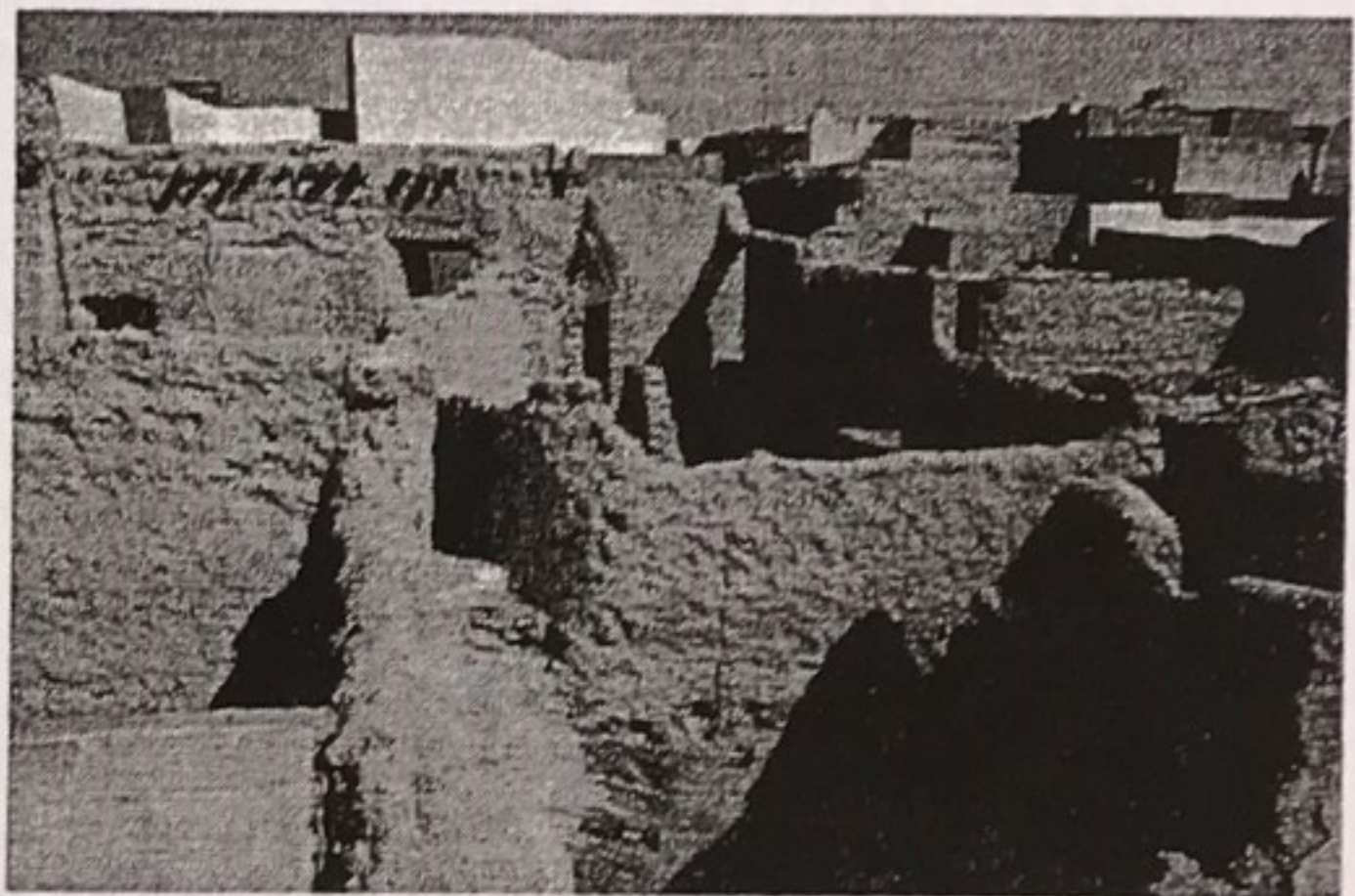


Figure1: Traditional City



Figure2: Contrasts in Khobar

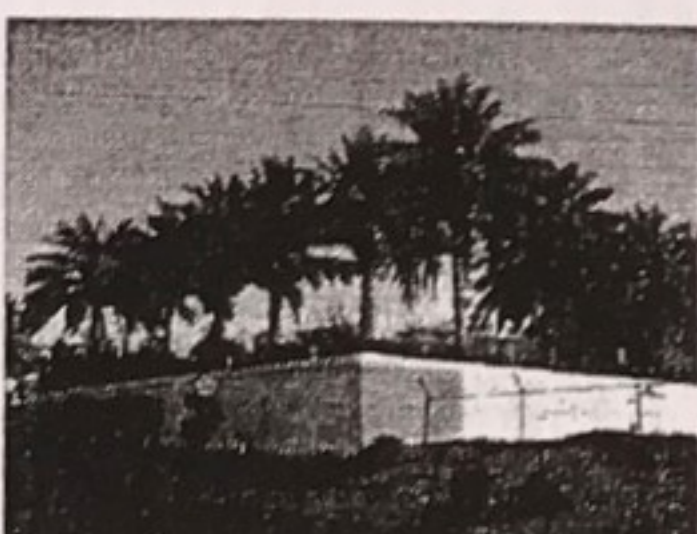


Figure3: Fragments of walls



### **Transformation of Urban Culture; Disintegration of Public Urban Realm:**

As analyzed in previous sections, 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. Like many metropolitan cities all over the world, 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, can be named amongst the major failings of the modern cities (Al-Naim & Mahmud, 2007) for Arab cities. Despite the various comforts that such processes provide for certain section of the social strata, urbanization by such means clearly brings up a diversity of disadvantages particularly for those who are at the lower levels of the social stratification. Micro environment for these parties of the society is dilapidated, disordered, unconnected to the rest of urban services and public realm (Trancik, 1986)). Urban poor or under-paid are not very well taken care for, whereas it would be automatically handled in an Islamic society. 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 for sustainability in terms of maintaining a communal culture in which a true passion for nature and ecology can flourish. 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 and nature 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 in a manner, and also reverse the process before it becomes too late.

### **CONCLUSION**

Consequently, the urban fabric of traditional Arab city was not only coherent shaped with the sequential hierarchy of spaces, but also densely crafted on human scale enabling people to experience a distinct feeling of spatial continuity transcending the limits of individual buildings, and connecting him with not only the various realms of public life but also with nature. In this context, Al-Hathloul (1981) asserts, that the traditional process of reciprocal interaction between the social religious structure and the physical environment within the Saudi Arabian city has been replaced by another process which holds to more prescriptive of form



conventions which are mostly alien to the existing environment and often work to destroy formerly accepted social norms and conventions. Despite efforts of institutions like Aga Khan, IRCICA, ICCROM, ICOMOS and other bodies, the departure from the idea of urban conservation and heritage preservation for the sake of urban progress with glossy building surfaces shining over the skyline of Arab cities against other capitals of the Gulf region appears as the major sources behind the emergent problems in sustaining cultural characteristic of urban *loci* into future. Disciplines of architecture and planning in Arab Peninsula are required to take the responsibility for an urgent and vital mission of a thorough maintenance and restoration of the quality of life in Arab cities. Therefore, the professionals related to the planning of physical environment in Arab cities, as those in other developing countries, should target sustaining a balanced urbanism via an urban culture that puts more emphasis on preservation / conservation of nature and culture rather than pursuit of technological power and economic dominance.

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