REVIEW ARTICLE

Contrasting perspectives on the Arab city

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Two themes that are figuring prominently in current discussions of cities in the Islamic world are heritage and the transformation of urban form. This emphasis was apparent in the First International Conference on Urban Heritage in Islamic countries, held in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia in May 2010. Fundamental to these topics is the matter of how the cities in question should be defined. Some refer to them as Middle-Eastern cities, others as Arab cities, and yet others as Islamic (or Muslim) cities. The first tends to be a description applied by those who emphasize geographical perspectives on urban form, whereas the second is favoured more by authors primarily interested in culture-specific aspects, and the third by those having especially socio-religious interests. Whichever label is applied, it must be emphasized that these cities are no longer isolated territories: they are becoming part of a global urban network. New layers of 'universal' values are intermixing with, and sometimes at tension with, traditional ones.

Two collections of essays on the Arab city edited by Yasser Elsheshtawy, a much discussed book by Hisham Mortada, and an earlier study by Stefano Bianca provide insights into these relationships. Before discussing these books, it is helpful to place them within the existing body of morphology-centred literature.

The research context

The current transformation of urban form in the Middle East, particularly in Arab cities, is a potentially major, though somewhat neglected research topic. Those who have addressed it have tended to explore either the relationship between social structure and urban environment or that between architecture and redundant typologies (Ragette, 2003; Raymond, 2002). Hence we have a number of very partial views of Arab cities, any one of which tends to hide the wide range of variations that exist. There is also a tendency to interpret the city as essentially a product of religious conception and practice (Al-Hathloul, 1998; Al-Sayyad, 1991; Eben Saleh, 1998; Hakim, 1986). A further problem is that, since Morris (1996) defined the framework of Middle-Eastern cities and their morphological features, a number of studies have considered Arab cities as largely static (Ragette, 2003; Tadgell, 2008). There is also a literature that has presented Arab cities as resembling their portrayal in fiction such as *The Arabian*

Nights.

Early works, such as those by Hitti (1973) and Ardalan and Bakhtiar (1973), were in some ways quite liberal in their thinking. Hitti attempts to detach the morphological aspects from the religious ones, notwithstanding the fact that his book is primarily about the religious and political history of cities. Ardalan and Bakhtiar include a degree of contemporary interpretation and projection.

In the 1980s there was a shift towards a more conservative political stance. Discussion seems to have become trapped between two approaches: namely, on the one hand, explaining the city and its evolution with reference to a religious framework and, on the other, explaining the city in terms of such influences as rituals, customs and traditions, and the effects of climate. Whilst the first regards any recent development or approach as a threat to the harmonious and sacred entity of the Islamic city, the second tends to lack analysis of the dynamics of transformation. Thus studies of the form of Arab cities generally neglect the notion of change and the impact of global dynamics.

A progressive view

The recent collection of essays on *The evolving Arab city*, edited by Elsheshtawy, moves beyond these two approaches. In his own contribution, Elsheshtawy himself positions the debate on Arab cities within the wider context of urban studies. He distances himself from the view that the Arab city can only be examined in the context of a particular geography and culture (Lapidus, 1967), or from a socio-religious standpoint (Grunebaum, 1962) or a vernacular-regionalist one (Hourani and Stern, 1970). He stresses the problematic terminological distinction between the 'Arab city' and the 'Middle-Eastern city', pointing out that correct usage of these terms is contingent upon context. He emphasizes the paradoxical nature of these cities, whereby a great many Saidian stereotypes relating to traditional oriental architectural features (Said, 1979), such as 'minarets, domes, maze-like

alleys and the exotic sensuality behind the veil-like mashrabiyas' are alongside unprecedented urban sprawl, major highways, skyscrapers and malls (p. 3). The qualities that are traditionally associated with the Islamic city – such as simplicity, modesty, homogeneity, equality, privacy, rurality and uniqueness (Montequin, 1983) – tend to be eschewed by Elsheshtawy.

The greater part of this book tackles the notions of urbanization, globalization and networking, which are common to urban settlements practically worldwide. From the beginning Elsheshtawy questions the status of Arab civilization today in terms of its creative capacity in literature, the arts and science (p. 12). Moreover, unlike the emphasis on religious texts in existing writings, he refers to Wolff, Sassen and Marcuse. Rather than concentrating on the uniqueness of the Arab city, he explores flows, networking and degrees of connectivity, using examples from Amman, Beirut, Riyadh, Kuwait, Manama, Doha and Abu Dhabi.

In his introductory chapter, 'The great divide: struggling and emerging cities in the Arab world', Elsheshtawy sets out his dialectical approach (p. 2), which is also the basis for the main sections of the book. In a chapter on 'The new Arab metropolis: a new research agenda', Malkawi discusses the idea of metropolis in terms of its potential to provide insights into urban form in the Middle East. In another section of the book, on 'struggling' cities, the recent transformations of Amman, Beirut and Rabat are discussed by different contributors. In a further section, new and emerging metropolises in the region are considered in relation to recent worldwide political and economic developments.

In Elsheshtawy's earlier edited book, on *Planning Middle Eastern cities*, the significance of the notions of identity, hybridity, colonization and globalization is discussed to support the parallelisms between cities from different locations over very long periods: Algiers, Baghdad, Sana'a, Tunis, Cairo and Dubai provide the evidence.

Akbar's introduction to this earlier book provides a controversial perspective on the

underlying principles of land ownership rights according to Islamic law. Having in his previous work drawn attention to the crisis of the Muslim city (Akbar, 1988), he provides new perspectives on how the Arab city can accommodate radical change. He explores how the impact on land ownership of the nuances of public right of access to assets below the ground affects the capability of Islamic cities in the Middle East to cope with globalization. He also discusses the fact that Islam does not recognize any borders between countries. This contribution by Akbar, in which he discusses the forces reshaping Arab cities, is a major contribution to the insights provided by the book.

The last two chapters are particularly important, especially two subsections within 'Cairo's déjà vu'. Entitled 'Heliopolis: a European vision of Orient' and 'Dreamland: an Oriental vision of Occident', they show the aforementioned duality in thinking about Middle-Eastern cities. The chapter on Dubai, a city that has become a phenomenon as well as the basis of a term (the Dubai effect) (Kanna, 2008), also illustrates how the cities under discussion are shaped by forces outside their immediate surroundings.

Traditional standpoints

The book by Mortada could scarcely be more different from Elsheshtawy's two edited collections. For him Middle-Eastern or Arab cities are direct translations of Islamic codes and laws into physical form, excluding almost all other aspects of the formation of cities. Furthermore, these Islamic tenets and their translations into the built environment are constants, immune to change. Mortada emphasizes the notion of socio-spatial hierarchy as a salient characteristic of Islamic cities. Thus there are parallels here with the standpoints of Oliver (1983) and Grabar (1994), who look through purely socio-cultural lenses and thus tend to legitimize such formal attributes of these cities as geometry, typology and morphology that might accommodate diverse cultural characteristics.

The book begins with an introduction to the System of Transliteration to acquaint the reader with Islamic principles. This is followed by Mortada's own perspective. After consideration of the traditions of Islam and its laws, there are separate chapters on the traditional Islamic social framework, and the traditional Islamic physical framework, in both cases focusing on principles and dimensions. The concluding chapter is on 'Islam and modernisation: principle versus materials'. Although Mortada begins with the promise of avoiding explanations in terms of rules (p. xix), modernization and Islam are regarded as opposites (p. 128). His view of the city is conservative, static and compartmentalized.

Since Wirth (2004) has drawn the attention of readers of this journal to the lack of European, particularly German, work in Mortada's bibliography, it is appropriate to conclude with consideration of a book by Bianca that claims (p. 7) to include German scholars' views. This is a visually appealing book. However, although the tone is somewhat subtler than that of Mortada, Bianca also adopts a socio-religious standpoint on the Middle-Eastern city. It could be seen as an attempt to bridge the gaps between the past and the present, and between theory and practice, to which Nasser (2002) subsequently drew attention in her review of Bianca's work. The book adopts an initially conservative, conservationist stance, ignoring contemporary dynamics. For Bianca, the Middle-Eastern city is a fragile artefact under the pressure of modernity, whereas for Mortada the Islamic city is incompatible with modernity. Frequently referring to the Quran and various texts from Islamic '*sunnah*' and '*fiqh*', both books associate the Arab city with nothing else than Islam. Bianca's position may at times seem judgemental: seeking reconciliation of tradition and modernity by an approach to the problem that is strongly influenced by 'Western' models. To some, his book may therefore seem speculative in its approach and conclusions, if not provocative to non-Western readers.

The first section of Bianca's book considers the principles and factors that shape the Arab-

Islamic city. The second lays bare 'Clashes between tradition and modernity'. 'The impact of Western models' and 'Structural conflicts between traditional and modern concepts' provide the core substance of this section. There follow four case studies: holy cities, Baghdad, Fez and Aleppo. Here 'Intervention into historic fabric' is discussed. The concluding chapter advocates 'rehabilitation of the historic Muslim city'.

Thus, as noted by Nasser (2002, p. 53), Bianca emphasizes the dichotomy between traditional and modern views, setting out their structural and philosophical contradictions. He is at odds with Akbar's view and is closer to Mortada's position.

Reflections

Reflecting on the four books reviewed in this article, it is clear that the study of Arab cities poses a number of problems for urban morphologists. First, the socio-religious approach, with its underlying agenda of political legitimization (Fuccaro, 2001), is fraught with impediments to objectivity. Secondly, undue idealization of a former urban era is liable to lead to the naivety of advocating a return to some mythical, perfect past state – a problem evident in Mortada's and Bianca's approaches. Thirdly, tackling the concept of *duality* (Cetin, 2010a) or *binarism* (Oliver, 1983), which is such a salient characteristic of Middle-Eastern cities, is far from simple. Neither Mortada nor Bianca offer a solution to the complexities involved.

In relation to the third of the problems, Ardalan and Bakhtiar (1973) draw attention to the binary character of the planning of Islamic cities, which not only involves the imposition of geometric order on natural growth, but also includes issues relating to the role of the political elite vis-à-vis that of various groups within the wider populace. Oliver (1983) emphasizes the dualities observed within Middle-Eastern cities, such as between formal and informal, and between geometric and organic, and Cetin (2010b) adds to these. However, these problematic dichotomies provide issues to be explored using Elsheshtawy's approach.

It is evident that the search for explanations of the Arab city should not be limited to a socio-religious framework. Nor should globalization necessarily be regarded as a negative force, though it is a phenomenon that needs to be tackled judiciously. It constitutes a threat to the uniqueness of cities in the Middle East, which are rapidly homogenizing, but it provides an opportunity for cities to tackle their problems by utilizing knowledge obtained from the study of other cities. As an observer who lived in these settlements and compared them to those in the West, I tend to agree with Elsheshtawy's views: for the majority of metropolitan areas suffer from common symptoms, their unique features notwithstanding. However, the future of Middle-Eastern cities remains uncertain: many of their ills are still not properly understood.

Wirth (2004, p. 126) concludes that a major problem with Mortada's book is that 'rules and texts that are not respected and which exist often only on paper provide no explanation of the built environment of cities in the Islamic world'. Elsheshtawy addresses this defect. He challenges previous assumptions. He addresses the inevitability of change, its speed, and the impacts of globalization. Middle-Eastern cities can no longer be isolated from the main forces shaping contemporary cities.

Central to the works of Elsheshtawy, Mortada and Bianca is the question of how the inherent and newly emerging dualities in Middle-Eastern cities should be tackled. Following different paths, their books display different perspectives on these dualities: to dislike them, in Bianca's case, to ignore them, in Mortada's case, and to accept them and attempt to understand them in Elsheshtawy's case. These different views underline both a major dichotomy in thinking about the Arab city and the dangers of entrapment in this research topic. Fortunately, Elsheshtawy starts and ends on a positive and constructive note: that the Arab city and its form are evolving and the mechanisms required to ensure its survival are operating.

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Elections to the Council of ISUF

In accordance with the Constitution of ISUF, elections to the Council will take place at the Conference of ISUF in Montréal, Canada, 26-29 August 2011. There will be four vacancies to fill. Nominations should be forwarded to Dr Kai Gu, Secretary-General, ISUF, School of Architecture and Planning, University of Auckland, Private Bag 92019, Auckland, New Zealand (e-mail: k.gu@auckland.ac.nz) by 1 June 2011.