

# **Introduction to the Islamic City**

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## INTRODUCTION TO THE ISLAMIC CITY

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### General Introduction

The penetration of Islam to various lands in Asia, Africa and Europe had an irreversible and overwhelming impact on urban development. This was due to a number of reasons. Islam according to Fischel (1956) and Hassan (1972), is an urban religion. The religious practices, beliefs and values especially those relating to organisation and authority, emphasised social gathering, and discouraged nomadism and dispersing. Early Muslim towns, such as those in the Maghreb like Al-Fustat, Tunis<sup>1</sup> and Rabat<sup>2</sup> were erected to preach Islam, playing the role of "Citadel of faith" (Fischel, 1956, p.229). They were dedicated to receiving the new converts, in similar way the Medina received migrants from Makkah. Hodgson (1974) called them Dar-El-Hijra, a place where Muslims came to put into practice the Islamic way of life, and through them Islam spread to the whole of North Africa, the continent, and southern Europe, resulting in, a number of thriving towns.

However by the 9th century AD, this religious role was replaced by political motives as various parts of the Muslim World broke their traditional unity and links with the main Khilafa in the East and local divisions started. These conflicts, in addition to continuous raids of the nomads have had a direct impact on urban development. In this context, Sjoberg (1960, p60) wrote:

**"We must, if we are to explain the growth, spread, and decline of cities, comment upon the city as a mechanism by which a society's rules can consolidate and maintain their power and, more important, the essentiality of a well-developed power structure for the formation and perpetuation of urban centres".**

The unstable conditions, these disputes created, undermined the survival, growth and birth of towns, as they were the battle ground for these divisions and disputes. The rise of a new capital is often achieved at the price of the existing ones. Ibn Khaldoun commented on these events saying:

**"...see all the lands which the rural and Nomads (Bedouins) have conquered in the last few centuries: civilisation and population have departed from them."**

Stability was not regained until the arrival of the ottomans in 16th century. The Ottomans were enabled to take control of most of the Muslim World (except Persia and Morocco), as a desire to revive the Islamic rule (*Khilafa*), and defend against Spanish and Portuguese imperial invasion in Western coast of Islam in North Africa. Towns thrived on Ottoman trade and with increasing power of imperial Europe in the 17th century, their main role was to provide men, money, and ammunition to the efforts of the war for the domination of the Mediterranean Sea which Istanbul, and behind it the Muslim World, fought many wars against

European powers. These efforts exhausted local resources and caused urban decline. This was followed by the spread of disease in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries before falling in the hands of colonial powers. The last event was the death sentence for the traditional Muslim City through the introduction of new alien morphological and socio-cultural and economic characteristics. The European town created new situation and slowly emptied the Muslim City from its functional viability. After independence, Muslim countries, in their quest for development, adopted a policy of modernisation leading to further alienation of the little left of the traditional Muslim City (figure-1).



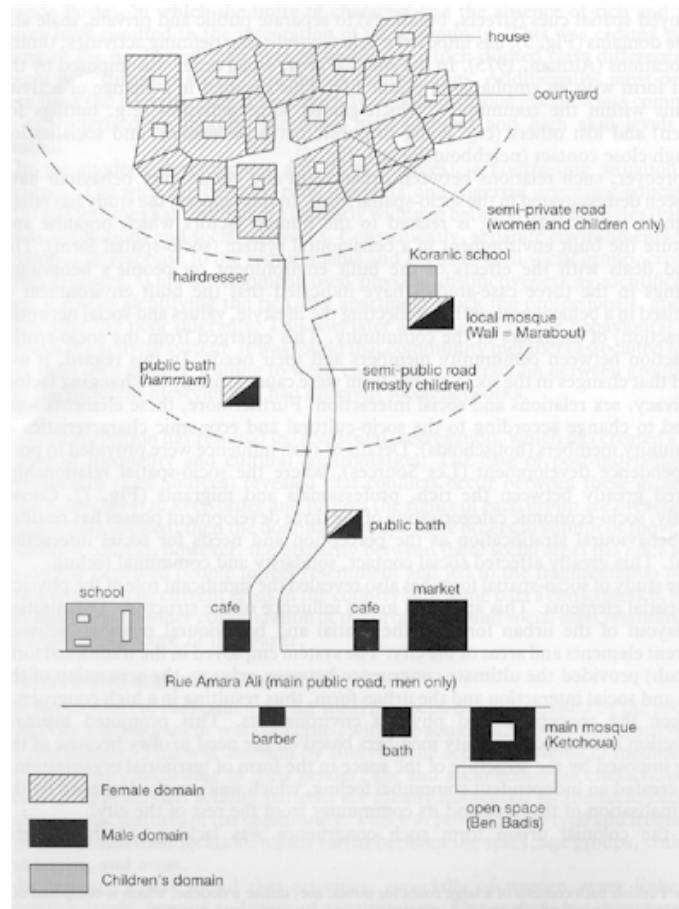
**Figure 1. Historic Algiers showing the dense built form reflecting social solidarity and cohesion.**

### **Design Principles of the Muslim City**

A number of factors played decisive roles in ordering and shaping the plan and form of the Muslim City. In addition to the influence of local topography, and morphological features of pre-existing towns, the Muslim City reflected the general socio-cultural, political, and economic structures of the newly created society. In general this involved the following:

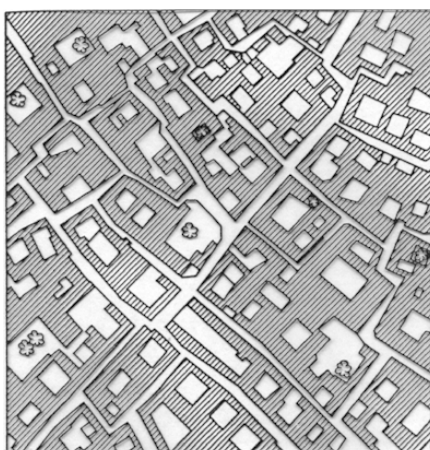
1. **Natural Environment:** The first principle that defined much of the character of the Muslim city is the adaptation of the built form and plan of the city to natural environment expressed through weather conditions and topography. These appear in the use of courtyard, terrace, narrow covered streets and gardens that are design means for coping with the hot weather.

2. **Religious and cultural beliefs:** Religious beliefs and practices were the central base of the cultural life for these populations, giving the mosque the central position in spatial and institutional hierarchies. The cultural beliefs, which separated public and private life, regulated the spatial order between uses and areas. Thus, the town plan consisted of narrow streets and cul-de-sac separating private and public domains, while the land use emphasised the separation of male and female users. Consequently, economic activity that involved exchange and public presence was separated from residential (private dwellings) use and became concentrated in public areas and in the main streets.
3. **Design principles stemmed from *Sharia* Law:** The Muslim city also reflected the rules of *Sharia* (Islamic Law) in terms of physical and social relations between public and private realms, and between neighbours and social groups. The privacy principle was made into a law which sets the height of the wall above the height of a camel rider. This as well as the laws of the property rights, for example, were all factors determining the form of the Muslim city (see Hakim, 1986 for more details on these aspects).
4. **Social principles:** The social organisation of the urban society was based on social groupings sharing the same blood, ethnic origin and cultural perspectives. Development was therefore directed towards meeting these social needs especially in terms of kinship solidarity, defence, social order and religious practices (figure 2). Such groups included; Arabs, Moors, Jews and other groups such as Andalusians, Turkish, and Berbers as in cities of the Maghreb. These were reflected in the concept of quarters known as *Ahiala* (in the Mashraq) or *Huma* (in the Maghreb). Factors such as extended-family structures, privacy, sex separation and strong community interaction were clearly translated in the dense built form of the courtyard houses (figures 3&4). The social organisation of the urban society was based on social groupings sharing the same blood, ethnic origin and cultural perspectives. Social and legal issues were taken over by religious elite (*Olema*) who lived in central places close to the main mosque (the main public institution), and the public life where disputes mostly arose. The shift of political power from the *Shura* (democratic) system of early Islam to authoritative regimes especially under the Ottomans resulted in transferring the political quarter from the centre to the edge of the city in the form of a fortress (citadel) to provide better protection for the rulers.



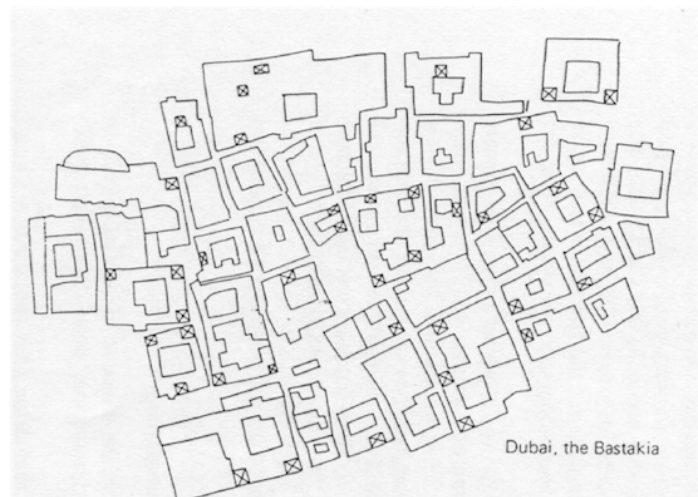
**Figure 2. Socio-Spatial form of historic Algiers (Casbah) showing its general responsiveness to the needs of the community.**

Source: Saoud (1997)



**Figure 3. Traditional building patterns in the old city of Kuwait.**

Source: Beaumont et al. (1988, p.207)



**Figure 4. Old city of Dubai (the Bastakia)**

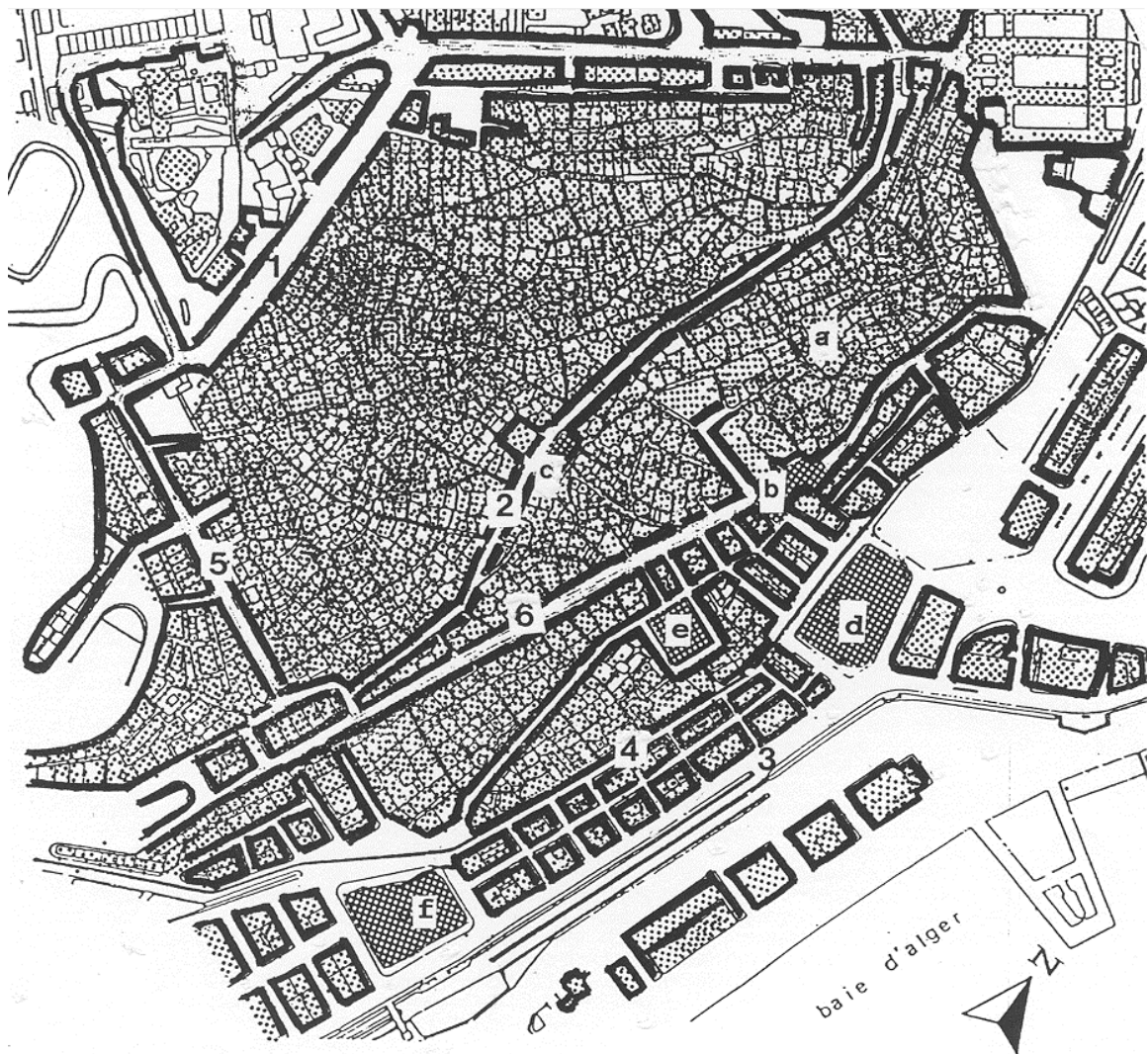
Source: UNESCO (1981, p.27)

### **Morphological components of the Muslim City**

The debate over what is an Islamic City or whether an Islamic city had existed at all is still active. Lapidus (1969) for example argued that the Arab Muslims did not settle exclusively in new towns. Some settled in the existing ones as well as in villages. He added further **"the Arabs gave a certain impetus to Middle East urbanisation without causing a general increase in the level of urban development and without identifying cities with Islam"** (Lapidus, 1973). Hamdan (1962) shared this view arguing that towns in the Islamic period were an extension of the pre-existing ones and some of their morphological features were inherited and others emerged through the process of convergence. There is a growing confidence among archaeologists and urban researchers that Roman street pattern and insulae layout, in particular, had a great influence on streets and building plots of the medina in Maghreb (Tunis for example). Brown (1986) pointed out the reluctance to employ explicitly the concept of a Muslim city due to the concern over the "Orientalism" perception of it. King (1989) noted that the notion of the Islamic City originates in the west, that it is "defined in difference" to Western City. Other Scholars such as Eikelman (1981), Hakim (1976) and Al-Sayyed (1991), see the Muslim city as an entity with distinctive form and characteristics. The same debate has extended to the identifying features and characteristics and whether they are typical to be applied to all Islamic cities or unique to particular regions. This dilemma is widened further as many stereotypes for the typical Islamic City were produced reflecting the area and the city being studied. However, there is a general consensus that the Islamic City has the following features:

1. **The main Mosque:** It occupied the heart of the town and was usually surrounded by the Suq (market) as the case of the Zaitouna mosque in Tunis and the central mosque in Isfahan. This was where the weekly Friday prayer were held and attached to it was the Madrassa providing religious and scientific teaching.
2. **Suqs:** Located outside the main mosque provided the economic activity in the town. Goods sold were usually spatially distributed corresponding to their nature. Sacred items such as candles, incenses and perfumes were sold close to the mosque as well as items that would be sold by booksellers and binders (Marcais, 1945) while the rest of the goods were found at a further distance. The central area was also the gathering of other public activities such as social services, administration, trade, arts and crafts and baths (Hammam) and hotels (Funduq and Waqala).
3. **Citadel:** representing the palace of the governor, the citadel was surrounded by its own walls and constituted a district on its own with its own mosque, guards, offices, and residence. It was usually located in the high part of the town near the wall.
4. **Residential Quarters:** They were described by Eikelman (1981) as clusters of households of particular quality of life based on closeness (Qaraba) which is manifested in personal ties, common interests and shared moral unity. They were usually dense and each quarter had its own mosque used only for daily prayers, Quranic school (Madrassa), bakery, shops and other first necessity objects. They even had their own gates which were usually closed at night after last prayers and opened early morning at early prayers time such was the case of Algiers and Tunis (figures 2 &3). They were also ethnically organised, Muslims grouped in quarters and Jews in others so that each group could practice and celebrate its own cultural beliefs.

5. **Street network:** Connecting between these quarters and to the central place was a network of narrow winding streets consisting of public and private and semi-private streets and cul de sacs.
6. **Wall:** A well-defended wall surrounded the town with a number of gates.
7. **Exterior:** there were the cemeteries (Muslim and Jews cemeteries), a weekly market just outside the main gate where most animal suqs were held in addition to private gardens and fields.



**Figure 5. The Europeanisation of the traditional Islamic City of Algiers started by the French (1830-1962) in an attempt to eradicate the Islamic identity and now this beautiful city suffers from continuous neglect. Source: Saoud (1997)**

## **Conclusion and Contemporary Relevance**

The Muslim City, with the above features, had a cultural, social, political, and economic logic in terms of physical fabric, layout, and uses that can provide a lesson for modern planning and design practices. The Muslim City can be easily adapted to meet modern functionality and living standards and maintain its high congruence with our natural, religious and socio-cultural needs. In this case, it is still very relevant and viable to today's urban requirement of our society, a fact which was already approved by a number of scholars such as Abu-Lughod (1987) and Hassan Fathi's vernacular architecture projects in Egypt.

How far do present Muslim cities reflect the vitality and responsiveness of the traditional "Muslim city"? The absence of any correlation between the Muslim design principles outlined above and the morphological characteristics of our modern cities is the main reason behind the economic, social and identity crisis of our urban communities. This crisis cannot be demonstrated better than in cities of the Maghreb, especially Algeria where cultural and identity disputes reached the point of crisis greatly affecting the security situation there (figure 5). There is an urgent need to apply these principles but in a modern context to bring our cities back to the Muslim life.

## **NOTES**

<sup>1</sup> Tunis was used as an administrative centre, and a garrison town subordinate to Quairawan. Its main role was to supply the Islamic army conquering Sicily and southern Italy. Meanwhile, the *Zaytouna Mosque* and university were preparing religious teachers to preach and teach new converters, while others being sent to Andalusia, Cordoba, and Sicily. Since the *Aghlabid* reign (9th century), Tunis took over from Quairawan and became the capital of the province of Tunisia (*Ifriqya* as it was known then), and a centre of religious orthodoxy. It remained so until the colonisation times. Tunis also had a multi ethnic composition translated in a number of quarters. These included Arabs, Jews, Andalusians, and number of Italians, Maltese , and other minorities.

<sup>2</sup> Towards the end of the 12th century, Yaqub Al-Mansour (the third Sultan of Almohads, between 1184-1199) founded Rabat. He decided to make from a fort, used by his predecessors and named Ribat El-Feth, a royal town. The city was therefore used a garrison station to defend the Sultan against hostile Berber tribes in the region (around Rabat).

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