DISCUSSION PAPER

by

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on

Cyrus Mechkat's

THE METROPOLIS IN ISLAMIC COUNTRIES

Discussion Paper on the "Metropolis in Islamic Countries"

I have chosen to divide this discussion into four sections all
of which aim at providing a summary analysis of the subject at hand.

1: Why Urbanize:

The growth of urban settlements is not a historical accident,
it is a conscious effort in the progress of human civilization.
Even with the many problems associated with the (mismanagement of
the) urbanization process, the city has been found to be a
superior form of human living organisation. We mention below
some of the reasons:

A: The Generative City: The city has the responsibility of
generating and diffusing knowledge and information to all segments
of the society and in all parts of the country. The diffusive
effect of the city is evident because of its focal and central
role in collecting, generating, and distributing information.

B: The Transforming City: Cities have successfully moulded their
citizens in a deeply-felt, continuous socio-cultural process.
This is also called the 'liberating effect' because of the
impact of the city on eroding class rigidity and tradition-based
social order.

C: The Mobilizing City: The system of organization and infra-
structure in cities has allowed for a rapid and continuous
mobility of factors of production; i.e., labor, capital, raw
materials, products, etc. This explains the concentration of
major industrial and service organizations and enterprises in
the cities. It also explains the high degree of economic
efficiency associated with urban activities. Many studies have,
for example, proved the positive correlation between the level
of urbanization in a country, and its per capita annual income.

Therefore, societies with a high level of urban populations generally have high levels of per capita income. An additional reason for this correlation is that production in the cities can benefit from externalities, economies of scale, and other factors.

D: The Decision-Making City: Cities have become the power-base in the different societies. The concentration of the decision-making machinery in cities have enabled societies to take decisions regarding the different issues they face. Such a power-base may be elected or otherwise depending on the system.
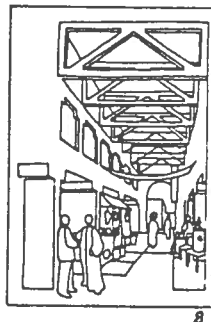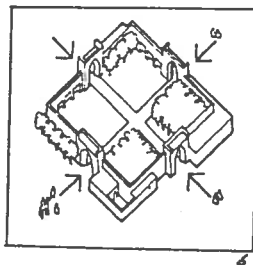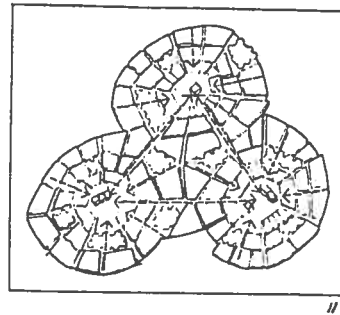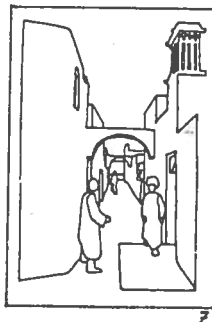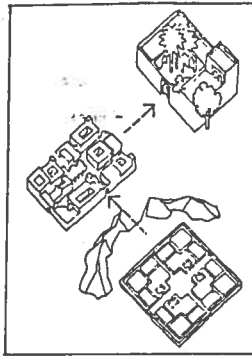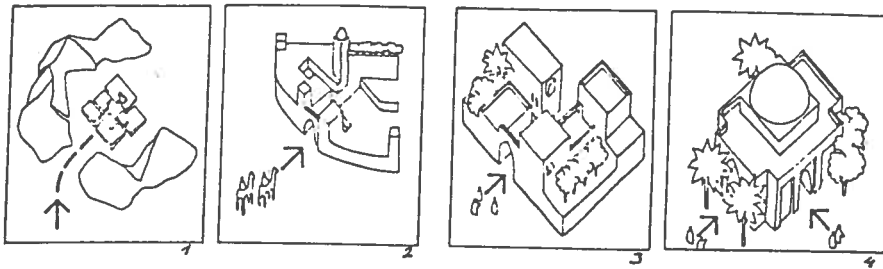
It is therefore possible to understand the urbanization process that has become the norm in all countries of the world.
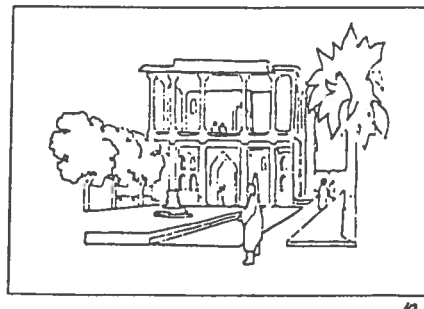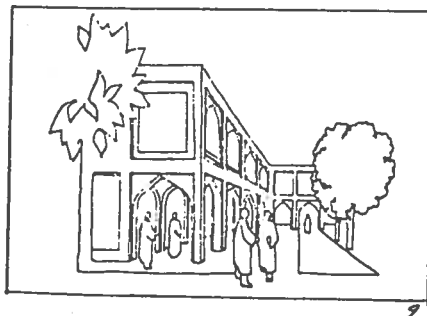
2: The Islamic Heritage:

Cities ihave existed in the Middle East for nearly five thousand years. While many of the ancient cities have perished, the pattern present in modern cities reflects an older form of settlement, notably going back to the Islamic period. Therefore, "land use and land tenure in Moslem countries and regions cannot be fully understood unless they are placed within the context of Moslem land law"[1] and Moslem way of life. The Islamic connection is evident from the/physical urbanization pattern itself, in addition to to the socio-cultural value structure. Thus, "the presence of fortified towns and medinasis a distinctly Islamic influence"[2] on African cities, which in the Middle East is reflected in the "self-contained quarter districts which is a charateristic of old Islamic patterns"[3]

The architectural structure of Islamic cities is relatively simple: "It encompasses a central mosque, surrounded by a market district (the souk), and an area beyond, of skilled craftsmen. From this point, a very densely settled residential area spreads outwards."[4] A typical Islamic settlement is reproduced below:

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SPECIFICATION DES LIEUX · PRATIQUES

1 ACCES (PORTE - ARC)
CONÇU COMME ELEMENT ARCHITECTURAL ES-
SENTIEL A L'ECHELLE DE LA REGION DE LA VILLE,
2 - DU QUARTIER
3 - DE L'ENSEMBLE DE CONSTRUCTIONS,
4 - D'UNE CONSTRUCTION.
5 HIERARCHIE + CONTINUITÉ SPACIALES
ENTRE LE QUARTIER, L'ENSEMBLE DE LOGE-
MENTS ET L'UNITE D'HABITAT
6 CROISEMENT (A L'AIR LIBRE OU A L'ABRI)
AMENAGE SUR DEUX AXES DE MOUVEMENT,
TRAVERSANT UN JARDIN (UNE PLACE..),
7 CHEMINEMENT PIETONNIER
CREANT OMBRE SUR PARCOURS,
8 BAZAR
CREANT ESPACE COUVERT LINEAIRE,
9 ARCADES
CREANT SOLUTION TRANSITION ENTRE
ESPACES INTERIEUR ET EXTERIEUR (ICI : PLACE
ET BAZAR)
10 PORCHE PORTANT OMBRE + FRAICHEUR
SUR CONSTRUCTION
11 FORMATION QUARTIERS
SOURCE MINISTERE LOGEMENT + AMENAGEMENT URBAIN

Source: Prof. Cyrus Mechkat: "Teheran, de la Ville Islamique a la
Metropole Contemporaine", in La Ville Arabe dans L'Islam,
(CERES, Tunis et CNRS, Paris, 1982), p. 513.

In the above sense, the Moslem city reflects the religion-centered socio-cultural values imposed on the urban architectural design. To express this phenomenon, Oleg Grabar say, "The Moslem city reflects in its organic social structure, a foundation of personal relations based on a common social and religious denominator."[5] In addition, Islamic cities of the Middle East, because of the climatic circumstances, have developed an additional common charateristic. **Dr.** Youssef Belkacem describes this phenomenon in the following extract:

> "The climatic adaptation is represented by compact urban groupings of medium-height buildings weaving a dense and continuous tapestry of structures, exposing only the roof tops and part of the facades to the harsh sunlight. This principle is based on the ratio of maximum volume of interior space for a minimum of exterior surfaces. If the houses are not grouped together, they resemble a compact cubic shape with miniaturized openings, as in the K'sour of the Dades valley in Morocco, or like the urban houses of Jeddah, of Mecca, or of Yemen. The same principle applies to urban spaces, where deep alleyways, cool and narrow, predominate shaded pathways covered with trellis and awnings. The covered street is transformed into a souk, tunnels covered by cupolas which provide shelter, light and ventilation for areas of commerce and trade." (6)

3. The Modern Evolution:

The second half of the twentieth century witnessed the explosive growth in the size of Middle Eastern cities. The phenomenal rate of urban growth, which surpassed a 10% growth per annum, has left much of the Middle East with a majority urban population. Virtually new cities have sprang out of nowhere - at seaports, at cross-roads, at the foot of mountains, and just about anywhere. The dramatic expansion of old cities and the

creation of new ones could have provided a unique opportunity to re-create the architectural grandeur that has so characterized the Islamic civilization. With a cherent and well-integrated urban development plan, the renewal of the original and authentic urban heritage could have been made possible. Instead, an opportunity has been missed. An uncontrollable rural exodus which has forced rapid urbanization has haphazardly expanded the cities through-out the region. The result is the present set of lqrge urben ettlements of unmanageable size - Cairo, Istanbul, Teheran, Karachi, Ankara, Alexandrie. And the result is that cities of unique architectural heritrges have nearly lost their uniqueness and have become just another city on the map - Baghdad, Damascus, Isfahan, Jeddah, etc.

The present pattern of urbanization pays tribute to two major phenomena: a) the nuclear family; b) the automobile transportation. Relations in the Moslem countries are based on personal understanding usually parallel to blood relationships. The overall pattern of living, therefore, has been the extended family system. The families grow larger and larger until they become a tribe. The modern urbanization process has done away with this. Given that the automobile has become the principal (if not the only) means of transportation within the city, car traffic imposes its order upon the organization of urban space. "Thus roads are built first, and the remaining tissue is later filled in as well as possible."[7]

A similar deterioration has taken place in terms of the materials used in house construction. The local materials which have proved to resist the harsh climate as well as the passage of time have unfortunately been replaced with imported glass, cement, steel, etc; all of which is far less durable. The situation has deteriorated further with the coming of mass-housing models which use primarily pre-fabricated concrete pieces. As a result, Islamic cities have lost much of their Moslem nature, except for small isolated quarters.

4. Prospects:

The over-riding pattern of urban development is the source of many worries; notably, will the cities of the Middle East lose their local identity and become like any other cities in the West? Professor Cyrus Mechkat is very hopeful. "If only for the peculiar climatic conditions and the strong Islamic revival - inluding urban architecture - the cities of the Middle East are bound to evolve in a different way." Yet, a conscious effort will be needed to achieve this objective.

The Islamic pattern of city planning, although much reduced, still survives, even in Western cities. The difference is that the mosque which occupied the central location has been replaced by a fountain, a garden, a monument, etc. However, if the area surrounding the center of the quarter were to be converted into "pedestrian zones", then the Islamic model would be complete. Many city planners have already started encroaching on the territory of the automobile, and the intention is to expand the "pedestrian zone " as in Baghdad , Sanaa, and Damascus. It may just be the time for architects and city planners - in collaboration with the relevant professions, come up with a comprehensive Islamic model for the quarter and the city in which a harmonious human life is possible.

FOOTNOTES:

(1) <u>Urban Land Policies and Land-use Control Measures: Volume I: Africa</u>, (United Nations Publication, 1973, New York), page 27.

(2) <u>Ibid.</u>, page 12.

(3) <u>Urban Land Policies and Land-use Control Measures: Volume V: the Middle East</u>, (United Nations Publication, 1973, New York), p. 17.

(4) <u>Ibid.</u>, Volume VII: Global Review, page 22.

(5) Oleg Grabar: "Cités et Citoyens" in <u>L'Islam: d'hier à aujourd'hui</u>, by Bernard Lewis (ed.), page 110.

(6) Youssef Belkacem: "Bioclimatic Patterns and Human Aspects of Urban Form in the Islamic City", in <u>The Arab City</u> by Ismail Serageldin and Samir El-Sadek , (proceedings of a symposium held in Medina , Kingdom of Saudi Arabia during 28/2 - 5/3/1981), p. 3.

(7) <u>Ibid.</u>, page 10.