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The importance of cultural dimensions in the design process of the vernacular societies

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Reviewing the thought of modernity and its impacts on architecture is based on the reconsideration of cultural differences among communities. It is an approach to remedy the consequences of applications of modern architectural theories in dealing with the vernacular societies. This research focuses on the significant role that cultural characteristics play in creating designs for such communities. Therefore, it represents the concept of considering patterns of events in the employment of the communal psychological dimension through the process of design. This research is divided into two phases: highlighting the various definitions of the key terms in the study, and analyzing the mechanism that considers the cultural characteristics of represented communities; Shibam in Yemen, Edfu in Upper Egypt, and Draa in Morocco. The main objective of the research is to use the vernacular prototypes and patterns to reach a design that is most culturally and environmentally adapted.

1. Introduction

Since the beginning of time, human communities have taken various forms of the primitive forms, transforming into the collective pattern of activities and living in small communities. According to Lynch, inhabitants have long associations with some parts of those communities. They imagine it as a place permeated with memories and meanings [1].

On the other hand, it is believed that the inflation of modern architecture in our communities seems quite similar to what is happening in communities of modernity in other parts of the world. It has recently enhanced competition among our communities in increasing this modern trend neglecting, at the same time, our cultural dimension that gives it character. Yet, before escalating the negative aspects of this phenomenon, we need to pay more attention to the following points. Firstly, the construction has been made in an intense modernist movement, which hardly considers the importance of heritage as a part of the capitalist ideology.

Western communities have witnessed a large wave of designs that reject stereotyping in construction while emphasizing both popular tastes and architectural heritage. There is a new tendency to make the community a set of integrated small units that meet most of the human needs. In addition, there has been a wave of contemporary urban solutions prevailing in our communities [2], “Fig. 1”.

Secondly, there is an urgent need for sociologists to study the effects of the negative social and psychological outcomes produced by the cultural wave of urban modernity. The experience of other communities has shown that the presence of high-rise buildings next to underprivileged housing groups and vernacular communities has led to the eruption of violence.

Thirdly, in communities built for low-income groups, there has been a need to move away from prototypes and repeated models that allow taking into account the sensitivities of individuals and the diversity of uses and vernacular cultures. Urban communities are special organizations that serve the social, psychological and aesthetic goals of the individual and the communities rather than only address the economic efficiency [3].

This trend fosters the quality of life and place making. In addition, it retrieves the thought of urban communities. These communities include various activities, which give many options for people living an urban lifestyle in comfortable and enjoyable places. It drives the communities towards the utopian community, within the variety of uses, people, forms and meaning [4].

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According to the “American Institute of Architects (AIA)”, ‘the twenty-first century will bring the systematic analysis of vernacular architecture to address a number of lessons that can be used in new contemporary attempts.’ (2015) Therefore, through representing samples of vernacular communities: Shibam (in Yemen), Edfu (Upper Egypt), Draa (Morocco) and finally Dinajpur (Bangladesh), the research is interested in interpreting this type of architecture. It aims to illustrate how to accommodate the cultural particularities and confirm the cultural effect on the collective psychological dimension, and to identify the activities and spaces, which vary from one community to another.

The term “Vernacular architecture” was widely used in the 70s to designate indigenous, architect-less, low-tech, and mostly popular architecture. Possible influences on the formation of vernacular types can be sensed practically in climate and local, social structure and religious beliefs, technological expertise, economics, taste, precedents and models. Therefore, this research represents the definitions of community’s culture, urbanization, and environment as a background. That shows the relationship among those concepts [5].

1.1. The community’s culture

In their A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions, U.S. anthropologists A.L. Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn cited 164 definitions of culture. Among those definitions are “learned behavior,” “ideas in the mind,” “a logical construct,” “a statistical fiction,” “a psychic defense mechanism,” “the ability of an individual to influence, motivate, and enable others to contribute toward the effectiveness and success of the organizations of which they are members”. In this learning objective, culture is defined as “the learned beliefs, values, rules, norms, symbols, and traditions that are common to a group of people”.

The Folk culture may be recognized through the understanding of the collective experience of the society. It can be seen in the interrelations between man, nature, place, time, myths and legends. Therefore, such efforts of conservation might stress in-depth study of the context not only with its physical but also with non-physical aspects that reflects the cultural values, and identity. To achieve a successful conservation process in our historic and vernacular built environment, cultural values should be understood on a wider basis [6].

This research will refer to two aspects out of those definitions. Firstly, it will discuss a group of spiritual, physical and intellectual traits and characteristics that distinguish a specific community inside a society. It comprises all creative activities as well as the construction, the way of living, human rights, obligations and individuals’ relationships. Secondly, it will highlight the output of interaction between a specific community and its surrounding environment throughout a specific period that is sufficient for it to meet its physical and emotional needs. Moreover, it has taken a distinctive framework, characterizing that community through the accumulation of human experience to form cognitive and creative patterns in the form of traditions, customs, and other mythical beliefs. [7], “Fig. 2”.

1.2. Urbanism ‘umran’

The content analysis of some online literature finds out that in Egypt the word ‘urban’ and ‘urbanism’ both are translated into Arabic as ‘Umran’. The term ‘urban’ is used to describe all types of human community whether it is informal community, rural, Bedouins in the suburbs, mountains, wilderness, deserts or sandy areas. In addition, it represents the human community in the regions, villages, towns and community either it/they are planned or not. Implicitly, the concept of the word ‘Umran’ carries the meaning of a multitude of people in any place on earth doing any person’s activity. At the same level, Wirth defines ‘Umran’ as a relatively large and dense permanent localization of socially diverse individuals [1].

The concept of the word ‘Umran’ represents the communities and it also describes all types of areas where there is human life on earth. The human community, which is known as civilization/human development, converges with a term known as ‘Umran’. Furthermore, ‘Umran’ is coexistence and residency in an intimate place with an intimate partner and meets the needs and demands for the collaboration temperament on the pension [1].

‘Umran’ represents one of the most important and creative activities, which reflect the traits and characteristics of different communities, particularly those developed in vernacular environments. Urbanization also represents a lifestyle necessary for human existence as a functional aspect. However, in its advanced form, it represents a scope of communal solidarity and advocacy of identity. This results from releasing creative powers and participation of individuals in organized communal expression [7].

It may be analyzed in three main stages: Concept, Design Process, and Product. However, this triplication, after revision and analysis, may be transformed into a framework composed of four aspects: the position from the dynamics of environment (Human, Place, Time, Environment dynamics), sources of creative visions, design process, and design mechanisms [8].

The designer’s stance from the target environment with its varied patterns and the cultural characteristics of community are the only aspects directly related to the research. They refer to the entire pledges and representations taken while acquiring a conscious understanding of the variables and constraints that form the cultural content of the community subject of design. The designer’s stance also indicates the extent of being close to one’s cultural background, the community characteristics, as well as the design response resulting from the designer’s experiences to inform the tools of the design process [9], “Fig. 3”.

1.3. Environment (type and dynamics)

Recently increasing attention on cultural theory has initiated a lot of research on understanding the views of people towards environmental problems. Environmental worldviews serve as lenses to
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