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Transformation of traditional dwellings and income generation by low-income expatriates: The case of Hofuf, Saudi Arabia

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This study aimed to examine the degree and the stages of transformation of the traditional dwellings of Hofuf that are changed into market places. They exhibit three different physical shapes namely discrete, linear and focal. It also claims that despite limitations the domestic spaces of these buildings are transforming mainly for economic reasons and for income generation as a survival strategy of the occupants. An attempt to evaluate these economic activities in the domestic spaces is evaluated within the context of the potential to accommodate new functions.

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Introduction

The processes of globalization have had enormous impacts not only on national economies but also on the physical reshaping of contemporary urban centers (Robertson, 1992). The rapid physical transformation of older, traditional centers is now taking place in many Third World cities. National as well as international migrations are creating potential new markets, and what has been termed a *global village* is creating new job opportunities (El-Shakhs and Shoshkes, 1998; Mahmud, 2001). There are two advantages arising out of such transformations; first, new enterprises are creating new job opportunities and alleviating employment problems to some extent; second, the transformation of older dwellings provides space for income generation for many low-income households as a survival strategy.

Hofuf, as a Muslim city with unique characteristics, has a substantial number of traditional buildings in the old center that are now transforming into modern commercial places. On the one hand, the residences are changing and becoming places for income generation, while on the other, the traditional Souk or Bazaar is also transforming into a modern commercial setting. In search for the reasons for such transformation of traditional buildings, some scholars have identified a number of reasons such as, the social structure of the family [which is changing from extended to nuclear]; the diminishing of the guild system; the diversity of employment and the mobility of the people; the maintenance of traditional dwellings; the emergence of developers and their attractive housing compounds with all modern facilities; and finally the potential of the traditional dwellings to be converted into rental units for expatriate workers (Flanagan, 1990; Knox, 1987).

The housing industry in Saudi Arabia (and in Hofuf in particular) has experienced major changes during the last four decades. Transformation from the

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traditional to the modern way of living for the Saudis is a compromise between accepting modernity and keeping their religious and cultural values. Shukri (2002) pointed out that since the discovery of oil, the society was exposed to rapid economic growth coupled with an unprecedented influx of foreign expatriates who have laid the economic infrastructure on which modern Saudi Arabia rests. In addition, Al-Solaiman (2004) has pointed out that the increase in the crude oil revenue beginning in the 1970s created a boom in the national economy, bringing a sharp rise in national and household income. This increase encouraged the government's program for providing free plots, and REDF loans have made it possible for many Saudi households in Hofuf to build new, "bigger and better" dwellings. That is one reason why traditional Saudi landlords have moved out from the old city center to the newer development areas and gradually transformed the old dwellings for various economic enterprises. Besides serving as rental units and income generating spaces, these houses also provide an antidote to the major housing shortage for the vast number of low-income expatriates which neither the government nor the municipality could handle alone.

In Hofuf, major transformations occurred in three exclusive forms namely, in the domestic spaces; along the streets on the ground floors; and demolition of the old fabric and reconstruction of the shopping malls. This research on the traditional fabric and its transformation to a real estate market in Hofuf is based on the assumption that the economic factor is the main shaping force that brings the flexibility to accommodate commercial enterprises. This study will also incorporate the reasons for transformation of the traditional dwellings and will evaluate its development in terms of the physical layout.

Islamic market places and transformation

Islamic market places mainly contained three specific kinds of structures, such as a network of covered streets *Souks*; a securely gated and covered edifice called a *khans*; and the urban equivalent of the *caravanserai*¹ (Eleanor, 1978). Any Muslim settlement with a market also had a congressional mosque which used to be the landmark of the market place. The Islamic bazaar is the defining feature of an Islamic town and the commercial backbone of the urban fabric. In some Muslim cities, the bazaar is the open air market place in a designated area whereas in some cities it is enclosed space with roof and vaults. However, Islamic markets are now trans-

forming not only in the context of physical shape and appearance but also by the nature of the modern consumer societies.

The downtown market place is the most active part of an Islamic city, an arena of public commerce fulfilling both social and economic functions. The segregation of goods and trades is characteristic of Islamic markets, an arrangement that can be traced back through the Byzantine era, when markets were usually located around the congregational mosque, and back—in precisely the same arrangement and serving the same functions—to the classical *Agora*, with its surrounding public buildings and colonnade market streets. With the effect of climate, Islamic cities were shaped over streets, named "souks", which are the main spaces where the urban outdoor activities took place (Figures 1 and 2). In time, the souk was covered and became a "covered bazaar" which still function as a market place in the traditional city centers such as Istanbul, Buhara and Isfahan (Bianca, 2000).

In the past in Muslim cities, the market places were exclusively male dominated; this has been changed in the recent past and they are now more popular among the women and children. The mushrooming growth of big shopping malls and hypermarkets are though the most prominent features in a city landscape. Today, they provide not only shopping but also recreation and entertainment facilities for every age group. Therefore, the concept of the market places of the Islamic cities has also gradually

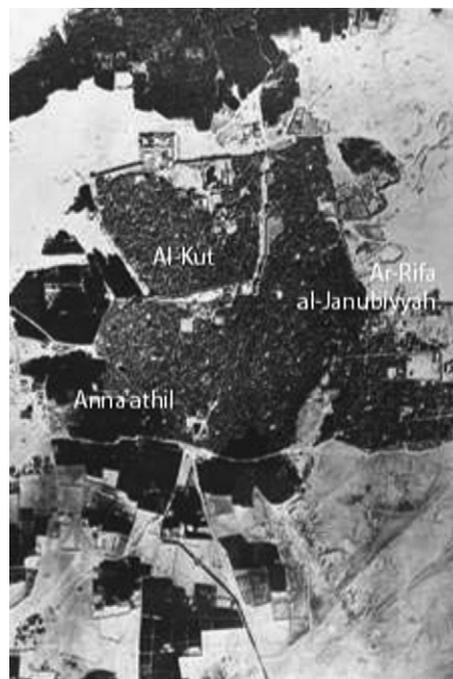


Figure 1 Hofuf in 1990, showing the city core with three traditional neighborhoods. Source: Courtesy of the Documentation center, College of Architecture, K.F.U.

¹ Caravanserai are places for merchants or businessman who used to travel for trade and these places for economic activities were placed in the well-organized routes in Islamic cities, in later time, khans or qaysariyya, an oblong hall, roofed and colonnaded structure were also built for similar purposes (Eleanor, 1978).

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