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The evolution of planning & urban theory from the perspective of vernacular design: MOMRA initiatives in improving Saudi Arabian neighbourhoods

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Abstract

The vernacular form and physical pattern of settlements in Saudi Arabia evolved under the influence of visible and non-visible forces. Climate, tradition, religion, economic base and political stability are forces behind the overall underlying structure of the vernacular settlements. This article discusses the evolution of planning and urban theory from the perspectives of vernacular design in Saudi Arabia settlements. The evolution of the planning and urban theory of community design in Saudi Arabia is a very controversial theme. The vernacular architectural style can be distinguished easily from the contemporary style. Also, the organic grid pattern can be distinguished from the gridiron pattern used in planning modern neighbourhoods. However, the success or failure of vernacular and contemporary styles and patterns have created recurring arguments among many scholars. On one side, it is quite apparent that the continuity of vernacular organic patterns and styles is an evidence of success in creating secure and safe environment and establishing sense of place. On the other side, the inconsistency of contemporary styles and gridiron patterns is considered as an evidence of failure in creating unsafe and unidentifiable environment. Such an imbalance may result in an influential role of planning and urban theory in the evolution of new form of urbanization in a country like Saudi Arabia. The planning and urban concepts implemented by Arriyadh Development Authority (ADA), the Royal Commission of Jubail and Yanbu (RCJY), and the Ministry of Municipal and Rural Affairs (MOMRA) are tangible evidences for establishing a new approach in planning new neighbourhood. The paper focuses on finding an appropriate urban and design approach for future neighbourhood development. Its main objective is to achieve a balance between the social and physical aspects based on vernacular experiences. Finally, the paper concludes with the notion that a successful planning and urban theory must be based on imperatives based on culture, climate, religion, tradition and technology. © 2001 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Planning; Urban theory; Vernacular design; Saudi Arabia

Introduction

Historically, the development process of residential neighbourhoods in old settlements have always considered privacy, climate, and security as important factors, which affect to a great extent the urban built form. Planners, urban designers, architects and environmental designers are convinced that architecture could or should be a vehicle for attaining social, economic and political objectives (Rapoport, 1983, 1999; Moudon, 1998; Ishteaque, 1987).

This paper argues that the morphology of building forms and the spatial order of the residential neighbourhoods are valid arguments. It reflects the concern for privacy provision, climate treatments and security issues as imperative socio-cultural and physical factors. In addition, the paper explores the methods and ways used by master builders and decision makers to arrange the physical environment. The physical arrangement of urban settings must respond to the needs of the local dwellers and support their normative social customs, and cultural norms and climatic comfort. In fulfilling the community requirements for creating comfortable living environment, the physical elements treatments are used in planning residential neighbourhoods in order to alleviate climatic problems.

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The birth of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 1932 brought new approaches towards the development of neighbourhoods. The newly developed neighbourhoods demonstrate urbanization and modernization as two distinctive approaches. A number of new neighbourhoods with imported urban characteristics has been developed beyond the walls of villages, towns and cities. The privacy aspects and continuation of semi-private spaces in housing clusters continued to be emphasized. The residential quarters did not deviate much from the traditional practices, especially the building materials and techniques. The streets were much wider and straight and tended to form the gridiron pattern.

The discovery of oil has improved ways of living and extended social expectations towards modernization (Al-Mubarak, 1992). Although modernization brought many benefits, it was not without its problems, most notably, the super block which is a new feature in neighbourhood layouts. Schemes incorporating gridiron pattern and individual dwelling units mainly the villa gave unlimited access of space, creating problems with respect to privacy and climate. It must be noted that the notion of privacy in this paper does not refer to protection against intrusion only, as in Western culture, but it also relates to religious, cultural, and social imperatives of the community.

In the early 1980s, two independent governmental agencies developed self-contained communities, which differed in principle from the super block concept with main emphasis on the gridiron pattern in their land subdivisions. The Arriyadh Development Authority (ADA) developed schemes for the employees of both the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Diplomatic Quarter. The Royal Commission for Jubail and Yanbu (RCJY) also developed schemes for Jubail and Yanbu, two industrial cities. The vernacular experience and good examples like these implemented by the ADA and RCJY create good precedents. The urban planning profession seeks genuine improvements in the quality of life, which are very necessary to a society in rapid change. There is a need to develop a planning and urban theory supported by suitable development controls which will generate and regulate an urban environment more suited to offer residents comfort at all levels, admitting that there is currently a schism in the planning and design process between vernacular and contemporary design of residential neighbourhoods.

In order to develop a built environment, which is responsive to the needs of the local residents, one should study notable examples of vernacular settlements in Saudi Arabia and analyse the planning theory behind their evolution as well as newly introduced neighbourhoods. The reappraisal and reinterpretation of vernacular design in traditional residential neighbourhoods can provide professionals with valuable urban-design guidelines. The urban values are key strategies

to establish a new planning and urban theory. The new planning and urban theory will strive to establish renewed dialogue with the cultural roots and traditions and will attempt to resist the mass cultural penetrations of the negative side of urbanization and modernization.

The study is based on visual survey, photographs, field recordings and observations of existing residential neighbourhoods and their surroundings conducted in successive field trips between 1990 and 1999. This fieldwork enabled the researcher to construct reliable data on planning and urban development and build schematic layouts to identify the lessons that one can learn from the experience found in vernacular design and the value of these lessons in building sustainable planning and urban theory of possible implementation in current practice of community development.

Area of study

This study is intended to present a historical documentation of three residential neighbourhoods in three distinctive regions in Riyadh, Jeddah, and Al-AKhalaf (Fig. 1). The evolution of such neighbourhoods is a result of mutual interaction between physical, political, economic, social and cultural factors over a reasonable historical period. These factors have major roles in the design of space and built form of the vernacular settlements of the Arabian Peninsula and newly introduced neighbourhoods.

Three vernacular localities of different climatic zones were chosen for comparison and induction of lessons for later implications (Figs. 2 and 3).

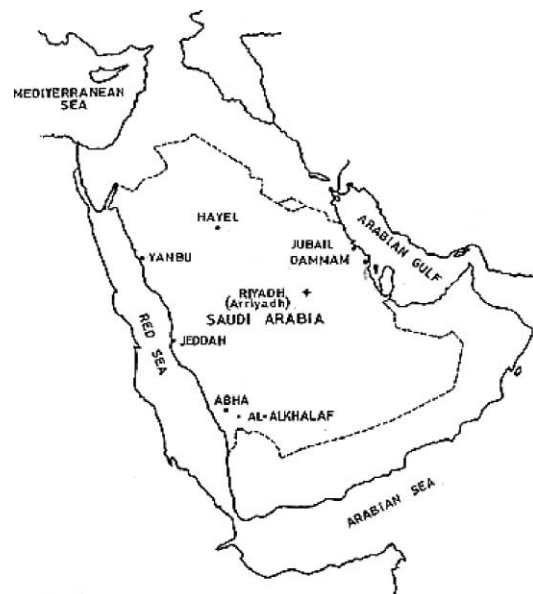


Fig. 1. Map of Saudi Arabia shows the places of investigation.

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