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# The architectural form and landscape as a harmonic entity in the vernacular settlements of Southwestern Saudi Arabia

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## Abstract

The paper aims to describe the architectural form and landscape as a harmonic entity in vernacular settlements of southwestern Saudi Arabia. The qualities of vernacular settlements and their integration and responsiveness to the physical, social, economic and cultural environment are demonstrated in this study. The socio-economic activities and customs in southwestern Saudi Arabia are presented as part of the historical process. The paper looks at the major elements of the vernacular villages and landscape as cultural-specific images. While appreciating this, the author laments the way this harmony has been disrupted not least aesthetically as a consequence of modernism which had an impetus on changing life style and social expectation. The cultural-specific images involve direct relationships between the architectural and urban forms as systems and events that are taking place in or around that form. One thesis is that each element of the vernacular village and landscape is linked to an image that shapes and influences human behavior and appreciation, thereby helping to shape larger environmental patterns. Beyond the meaning that specific elements inherit, they have functional and economic values. As a result, their visual qualities are believed to be effective in enhancing behavior through their visual attributes. One of the most important conclusions is that, there are many features of modern village extensions and landscape elements that enhance the interaction with the physical environment that ordinary citizens value, and there are elements of the vernacular villages and landscape that people regret to lose, such as ‘qasabahs’, weekly markets, cultivation of terraces, etc. This is in spite of today’s, modern planning and design techniques that are being sought to produce new architectural forms and landscape elements. Any attempt to substitute vernacular forms without taking into account the values that the older forms held is considered a failure of adopted modernist attitudes. © 2000 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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## 1. Introduction

In many parts of the world the loss of vernacular elements in the physical environment, and their replacement by exotic imported types not always in harmony with the culture of those societies, has happened too often, and little attention has been paid to the subject. At the outset there are those certain inherent qualities in vernacular architectural forms and landscape which have been present in the culture for a long time. Certain formal qualities derived from simple numerical relations based on the human figure and celestial bodies produce a cultural symbolism which has only recently been discarded (Pocock & Hudson, 1978). The vernacular environment, at any point in time, is as much a part of cultural heritage as is art, literature and music. At the same time, just as new art forms are developing, so are new architectural forms and landscape. The loss of vernacular forms is not only a cultural loss, but also has adverse and often irreversible effect on the way of life of the society concerned. If societies are to preserve parts of the vernacular environment and adapt them to conform with the more positive aspects of modern life, the end result should not be to produce a 'museum in the open' for the sake of visitors, but to preserve the integrity and values of the community itself and upgrading facilities to comply with modern standards. The reduction of importance of cultural specific architectural forms and landscape is substituted by modern planners and designers by beautification objects which began to dominate the open spaces and roads of modern urban developments. This is a characteristic of the modern tradition and especially the deterioration and virtual disappearance of the public domain (Curran, 1983).

Saudi settlements pulsate with history and traditions nurtured by many years of communal living against a backdrop of a harsh life. The vernacular environment of southwestern Saudi Arabia is characterized by prominent architectural forms and landscape of an archetypal nature which were built for highly practical purposes. These forms are associated by behavioral activities of context-specific nature observed in weekly markets, warning and defense towers, fortified houses, agricultural fields and forests. Their architectonic forms create harmonic entity associated with distinctive human activities and interaction patterns. The interaction between humans and their environment has been well recognized by professionals (Al-Soliman, 1990).

Unfortunately, newly introduced architectural forms and landscape has often happened at the expense of what already exists. Professionals tend to regard the existing vernacular environment and landscape as expendable in favor of the new, irrespective of its value, character and of what they represent. An emphasis is concentrated on the product rather than on historical continuity. This tendency is regrettable because creative effort can connect the new to the old. The process involves renewal of old forms, a transformation of the known or an invention of a new. It is part of the knowledge that eventually all things must change and allow individuals to participate in the making of meaningful forms. For example, vernacular forms were in continuous piecemeal transformation under the initiative of those who actually occupied, controlled and used the form, whereas modern forms are often designed by professionals from outside the culture.

In this regard, the fate of vernacular features in settlements and landscape is gloomy. The new architectural forms in Saudi Arabia have uprooted the usage of some vernacular forms such as warning and defense towers and weekly markets which once possessed significance in function. When these structures lost their principal function, people were not ready to maintain them. As a result, most of these structures were destroyed and the few that remain are often left unused. So far, new construction which honors traditional physical forms has largely been limited to fake

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