

THE "URF" AND ITS ROLE IN DIVERSIFYING THE ARCHITECTURE OF TRADITIONAL ISLAMIC CITIES

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The 'Urf', or customs, in various Muslim societies had a very important role in establishing a framework of accepted norms of behavior operational in its own terms at the level of the community. As a result, each region of the Muslim world, sometimes comprising a number of distinct communities, developed a local distinctiveness in the way certain societal activities are conducted, including building activity. A primary reason why local customs thrived was the recognition by Muslim legal scholars of the importance of the Urf as a mechanism of societal behavior, and was thus accepted as one of the sources for the law. This was a basis for its institutionalization in each community. This paper explains the Urf from the vantage point of Islamic jurisprudence, then discusses its implications on building practice. This is supported by illustrative examples to convey the impacts on architecture at the local level. It also attempts to put forward a theoretical basis for the phenomenon of unity and diversity prevalent in the architecture of traditional Muslim societies. The paper also addresses lessons from this insight for contemporary building and urban design, and suggests areas for further research associated with this topic.

INTRODUCTION

What is the 'Urf'? The following are definitions put forward by a number of Muslim scholars:

- What is accepted by people and is compatible to their way of thinking and is normally adopted by those considered to be of good character — Al-Ghazali (d.1111 A.D.).¹
- Action or belief in which persons persist with the concurrence of the reasoning powers and which their natural dispositions agree to accept as right — Al-Jurjani (d.1413 A.D.).²
- A habit or a way of doing things that is constantly repeated, and which settles well and is accepted by people considered of good character — Ali Haider (d.?).³
- What is customary to a people and which they follow in their sayings, acts and in what they reject — Abdul-Wahab Al-Khallaf (d. 1956 A.D.).⁴
- The habit (or custom) of a people in their sayings or acts — Mustafa Al-Zarka (born 1904 A.D.).⁵
- What is customary to a people and which they follow in their living pattern — Abdulaziz Al-Khayyat (born 1923).⁶

As evident in the latter three definitions the trend is for more open-endedness on the part of contemporary scholars. One reason for this is the fact that writing on the Urf as a distinct topic and theory is a recent phenomenon. One of the early treatises which is often cited by contemporary scholars is that by Ibn Abdin — who completed his treatise on Urf in late 1827. This is a very recent date considering the long history of Islamic jurisprudence. The later scholars realized that the Urf's status within the Fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence), is as complex as other areas in jurisprudence. As a result their definitions are guarded and open-ended.

The authors of the four well-known and extensive studies on Urf are listed chronologically:

- Mohammad Amin Effendi known as "Ibn Abdin," treatise dated 1827.⁷
- Ahmad Fahmi Abu-Sanah, treatise published 1949.⁸
- Mustafa Ahmad Al-Zarka, treatise as part of a book, published 1945, revised 3rd edition, 1952 includes comments on item 2.⁹
- Abdulaziz Al-Khayyat, treatise completed and published 1977.¹⁰

The first treatise written in the early 19th century and the latter three from mid to the start of the fourth quarter of the 20th century — a span of only 150 years.¹¹ The first section of this paper owes much to Al-Zarka and Al-Khayyat's treatises.

The second section of this paper discusses the implication of the Urf on building practice in the traditional Islamic city, and how the Urf contributed to the distinctiveness and character of each city through the details of its built form and architectonics. To the knowledge of the author this is the first attempt to do this, and because of it, this paper should be viewed as exploratory in nature. The ideas presented can, no doubt, be further scrutinized and developed.

Finally, in brief passages, lessons from the traditional Islamic city in terms of the workings of the Urf are presented. Those observations should be of interest and benefit to those involved in contemporary city planning and urban design in other cultures. The paper concludes with suggestions for further research.

URF IN ISLAMIC JURISPRUDENCE (FIQH)

Some scholars refer to the verse 7:199 in the Quran as the basis for sanctioning the Urf. The translation of the meaning of this verse is best rendered by this author as: *Take things at their face value, and bid to what is customary [or accepted by local tradition], and turn away from the ignorant.*¹² Thus the Fuqaha saw in this Quranic verse a clear sanction for accepting the Urf, and it constituted the seed for a tree of knowledge which was later developed by them as one of the pillars for interpreting and developing the law.

The main points and observations which are extracted from the literature are intended for their relevancy to building activity. Thus what is discussed below should be primarily viewed in light of the purposes of this paper.

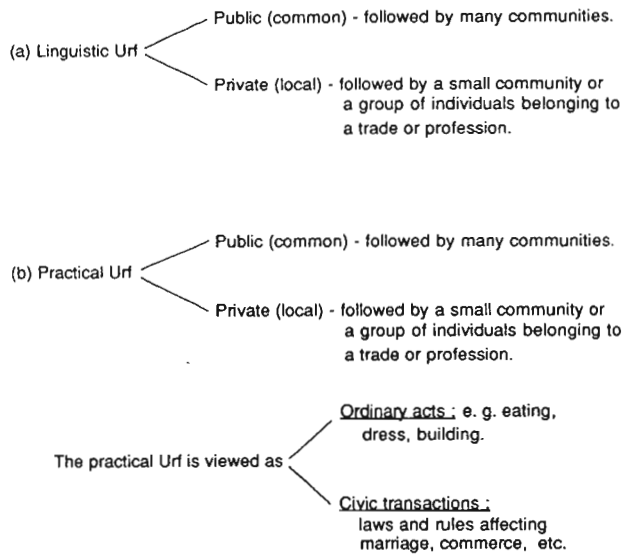
The origin of a habit (Ada) is initiated at the individual level. For every act there must be an impetus or reason. This impetus could be external to the individual, or it could emanate from within. So if the person feels content with his act in response to the impetus (whether it is external or internal), and if it is repeated, then it becomes a habit (Ada). If others find this habit agreeable and repeat it by imitation and it spreads in the community, then it becomes a custom or Urf, i.e. the habit of the group or community. Therefore every Urf is a habit (Ada), but not every habit (Ada) is Urf.¹³

As with a habit or act in response to an impetus, we find the same applies in language. A group of people who share a common activity such as in the trades or professions develop a language composed of a vocabulary of terms to ease communication between members of that group. In some instances these specialized terms become known to that part of the larger community who are interested or involved in aspects of that group's activities or concerns. The terms then become part of the local Urf.¹⁴

The Urf can be initiated by order of the local authority or by its encouragement.¹⁵ Or it can be inherited from previous generations, as occurred with the perpetuation of certain pre-Islamic customs. Or it can evolve locally in response to certain conditions or changes in the milieu of the environment.

Habits (Adat: plural of Ada) and Customs (A'raf: plural of Urf) get embedded in people and become part of their being and culture. The Fuqaha recognized that to require people to abandon their customs is a very difficult and anguishing process.¹⁶ Thus we find that an aspect of the human trait is resistance to changes in habits and customs.

It was recognized early on in Islam that not all habits and customs were good. Many would be offensive to Islamic values and teachings. Thus the necessity emerged in the eyes of the Fuqaha (plural of Faqih: a specialist in Fiqh or Islamic jurisprudence) to develop a theory or reasoning to deal with this situation, i.e. how to distinguish by logic and reason between acceptable habits and customs and those which needed to be rejected because of incompatibility with Islam. The ul-



The above can be designated in chart form, thus :

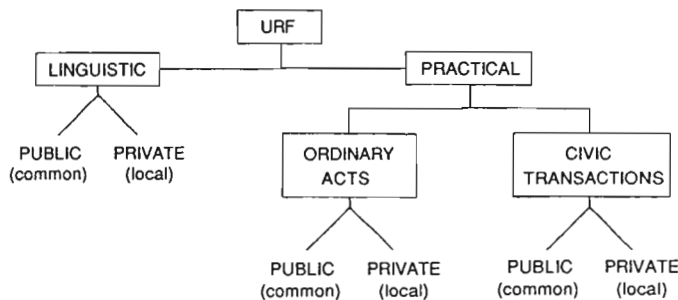


FIGURE 1. Designation of the Urf according to Fiqh scholars.

itimate purpose for the Fuqaha was to develop the necessary framework to help in formulating rational decisions and judgments when faced with questionable habits and customs.¹⁷

Essentially the Urf is viewed by the Fuqaha as related to:

Linguistic , and

Practical (a way of doing something). And it can be designated as Public (A'm) Urf or Private (Khas) Urf. The former is that which is commonly followed by an established large community or by many communities. Whereas the latter is that which is followed locally by a small community or a specific group of people belonging to a trade or profession within a community.¹⁸ These designations can be shown to interrelate as in Figure 1.

The legitimacy of the Urf — The Urf is viewed by the Shari'a (Islamic Law) as an important basis for rulings and judgments, particularly decisions and judgments based on the knowledge and understanding of a locality.

Legitimacy of the Linguistic Urf. It is accepted that the localized language and its vocabulary should be used as a basis for rulings, judgments and/or disputes. This is so even if certain Urf terms have different meanings in classical Arabic (from which some of the terms might be derived). Thus the Fuqaha acknowledge the Fiqh principle that: *The basis for truth is the proof of custom.*¹⁹ This posture by the Shari'a has encouraged the legitimization of the local dialect or "slang" in adjudicating disputes and resolving conflict. In this way there was no reason to impose, for instance, the spoken classical Arabic in the courts of various regions of the Islamic world. This also meant that judges (qadis) had to be well versed in the nuance of the local language and the people's customs as a whole.

Legitimacy of the Practical Urf. The opinions and writings of Fuqaha clearly demonstrate that both branches of the practical urf (i.e. ordinary acts and civic transactions) are used as a basis for decisions, rulings and judgments, provided that the particular Urf (which is used for such a basis) does not contravene any stipulation of the Shari'a. There is a well known Fiqh principle attributed to Sarkhasi: *That which is established by Urf is like that which is established by the*

texts. Article 45 from the Majallat al-Ahkam al-Adliyah stipulates the principle: *Stipulating by the Urf is like stipulating by the texts.*²⁰

The nature of a ruling which is based on the Urf can change if the Urf changes with time. Thus rulings must reflect the Urf as practiced and understood in a specific time and place. Therefore, a judgment based on a specific localized Urf is only implemented in that particular locality and cannot be emulated by another community with different customary conditions.²¹

For the Urf to have legitimacy it has to meet the requirements of all of the following conditions²²:

- The Urf has to be popular and consistently followed by the majority in a community.
- The Urf has to be currently alive, and if it changes then it cannot be used for justifying or unjustifying previous decisions or acts. In other words the legitimacy of an Urf is constrained by its currency.
- When the Urf is used as a condition or as a basis for a judgment or a decision, it must not contravene a pre-existing stipulation or agreement, as this can void its legitimacy.
- The Urf must not by its use abolish or cancel a ruling from the texts or a principle of the Shari'a. This could occur in one of three situations:
 - (a) It could collide with a specific Shari'a ruling from the Quran or Sunna.
 - (b) It could contravene a general ruling from the texts (All written sources of the Shari'a).
 - (c) It could differ with an opinion(s) derived by Ijtihad (Independent Reasoning).

For each of these three situations the Fuqaha have developed guidelines for determining the legitimacy of any kind of Urf — be it linguistic or practical and whether it is common or local.

The preceding text briefly explains how the Urf was viewed by the Fuqaha and its place in the Science of Fiqh. Implicitly it also indicates how it used to be implemented.²³

IMPLICATIONS ON BUILDING PRACTICE

The implication of the above observations on building practice in the traditional Islamic city was direct and its manifestations evident in any city, particularly if viewed comparatively to other Islamic cities across space and time. Elsewhere this author has alluded to the Urf²⁴ but in this paper he will elaborate more on the implications and address its manifestation in built form. But first there are a number of observations and issues which need to be addressed before examples are presented.

At which scale of the built environment can we look for the manifestations of the Urf? On the whole the smaller the scale the more evident is the impact. Although in some instances we also find the effect on the larger scale. See the examples in Figures 3, 5, 6, 7, and 8.

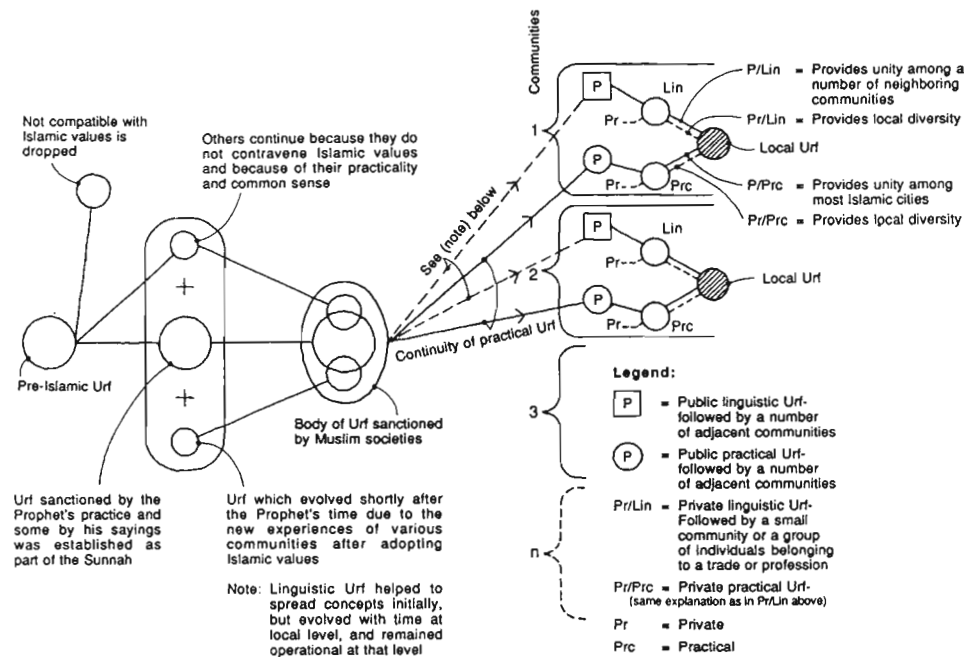


FIGURE 2. A conceptual diagram of the Urf's contribution to the phenomenon of unity and diversity in the built environment of traditional Islamic cities.

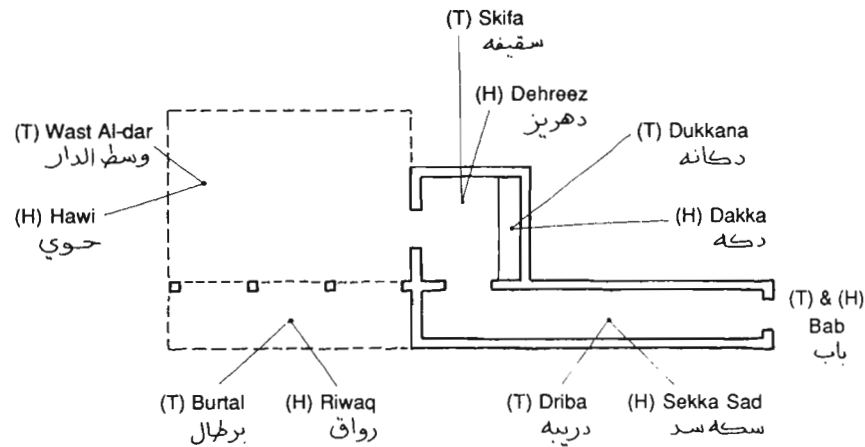
Related to the first observation, the evidence indicates more prominence at a scale where individuals' decisions and building craftsmanship occurs. This is especially true in housing areas at the scale of the cluster and progressing down from that scale to more details.²⁵ Refer to Figures 3, 5, 6, 7, and 8.

The Urf is dynamic, i.e. it changes with time, but because of the conservative nature of people relative to their habits, the rate of change tended to be slow. In the traditional city the relative unchanging nature of building materials and technology converged with conservatism to minimize change in the Urf of building practice. Such as the persistent Urf of curving the corners of buildings to facilitate the movement of animals carrying a load. The use of pack animals continued until the advent of the car (see Figure 6).

Although there was much contact between urban centers in the ancient Islamic world which resulted in the transfer of ideas, such influences were manifest in private works of the wealthy classes and in public buildings controlled by individual patrons or the authority. Where Islamic law was operational on a day to day basis, such as in housing areas and the market places, influences from the outside, if any, were moderate. This was largely due to the respect accorded to the localized Urf.

The phenomenon of diversity within unity so apparent in traditional Islamic cities can be interpreted thus:

Unity was achieved by the initial concept of urban formation which the Arabs brought with them from Arabia to the various geographic regions whose people embraced Islam. This concept had a very ancient history in the Near East region, and from the sketchy evidence available the same system with some modifications was followed during the Prophet's last ten years in Medina. His sayings regarding a number of issues which related to building activity reflected a process of



(T) = Tunis region, Tunisia

(H) = Hofuf region, Saudi Arabia

Driba Sekka Sad	A primary entrance vestibule or private lane owned by one house or shared by two or more houses. Occasionally a gate (Bab) is found at the entrance.
Skifa Dehreez	A secondary entrance lobby with entry doors placed so that no one can see directly into the courtyard.
Dukkana Dakka	Built-in bench. Traditionally the male owner or occupant of the house received casual visitors or salesmen.
Wast Al-dar Hawi	Private courtyard open to the sky in the center of the house.
Burtal Riwaq	A colonnaded gallery off the main courtyard, giving importance and sun-protection to the room behind it. This gallery could be on one, two, three, or four sides of the courtyard.

FIGURE 3. The linguistic Urf of two regions distant from each other. The vocabulary is different but they are for the same spatial/organizational elements. However, the style and architectonics of these elements are distinct to each region. Thus we find the unity in the concepts of space and organization and the diversity in the linguistic and practical Urf which produce the specific characteristics of the region's architecture and built form.

reinforcing certain pre-Islamic building practices which were accepted as part of the localized Urf in Medina.²⁶ But because some of those customs were traced directly to the Prophet's sayings and deeds, they became enshrined as part of the Shari'a texts. They were thus legitimized on two levels: (a) they were part of the Sunnah (the Prophet's sayings and deeds), and (b) they were also localized Urf. It is at the level of their legitimacy as part of the Sunnah that they spread across the Islamic world and contributed to the process of unifying the character of Islamic cities²⁷ (see Figure 2).

Diversity was achieved due to the recognition by Islamic law of the localized Urf in both its forms: the linguistic and practical. The Shari'a recognized and protected the local vocabulary developed by those in the building trades. The terms which evolved locally had an influence in sustaining the continuity of specific local building practices and their peculiar characteristics. This was because a term from such a vocabulary tended to integrate the form and function of the physical component and its purpose as utilized in that specific locality.²⁸ This continuity was also sustained by the conservative nature of traditional Islamic society (see Figure 3).

FIGURES 4A, 4B, 4C. The distinct physical organization of Islamic cities — the initial formation of these cities followed a common concept of territorial allocation and land utilization supported by a unique system of distribution of responsibilities among all the actors involved in the decision-making process affecting building activities. This concept was spread to the far reaches of the Islamic world during the early centuries of Islam. The resulting distinct physical characteristics maintained itself despite the processes of growth and change across the centuries. This concept and its system of implementation is a prime factor which produced the phenomenon of unity among the multitude of cities in the Islamic world. A phenomenon which persisted to the early decades of this century.



FIGURE 4A. The southern part of Cordoba in southern Spain showing the river to the south and the great mosque at the lower left corner of the sketch. After a map dated 1811 reproduced in E.A. Gutkind's *International History of City Development: Vol III, Urban Development in Southern Europe: Spain and Portugal*, The Free Press, N.Y., 1967.

As for the practical Urf, Islamic law recognized the local peculiarity and ways of doing things of a group of individuals belonging to a specific trade or profession, as in the building trades. Thus the Urf of that trade in a particular locality was respected by the Shari'a. This occurred through the legitimization of decisions resulting from the Urf in cases of disputes or litigation. This state of affairs tended to perpetuate and guard the distinctiveness of local building practices and by extension the resulting built form.

Further amplification to the observations in the preceding paragraphs above is related to the issue of the relationship of Meta-principles and guidelines to localized Urf practices. Elsewhere this author has elaborated on principles and behavioral guidelines which affected the shape of the traditional Islamic city.²⁹ Those were general principles and could also be viewed as common Urf guidelines, i.e. Urf practice which is common to most communities and regions. They were followed in most Islamic cities and tended to generate the similarities we find common amongst those cities. Whereas localized Urf practices were distinct to a specific urban center or to a group of settlements within one region. Those localized practices helped to produce the distinctiveness and thus micro characteristics of each city or settlement.

An important observation can now be stated: that the *nature* of Islamic law when considered with its interface with the Urf and its framework for decisions — which has resulted from that interface — show the flexibility of this system of law. It is very sensitive to local conditions. It

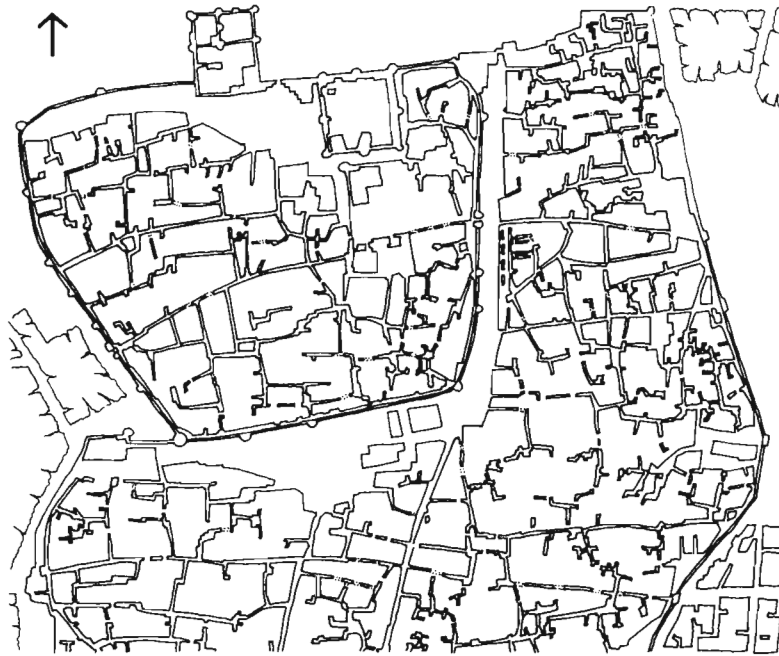


FIGURE 4B. A partial map of Hofuf in eastern Saudi Arabia based on an aerial photograph dated 1935. The Al-Kut district surrounded by its own wall is shown on the upper left of the sketch. After a map by C.P. Winterhalter in his dissertation titled: *Indigenous Housing Patterns and Design Principles in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia*, Swiss Federal Institute of Technology, Zurich, 1981.

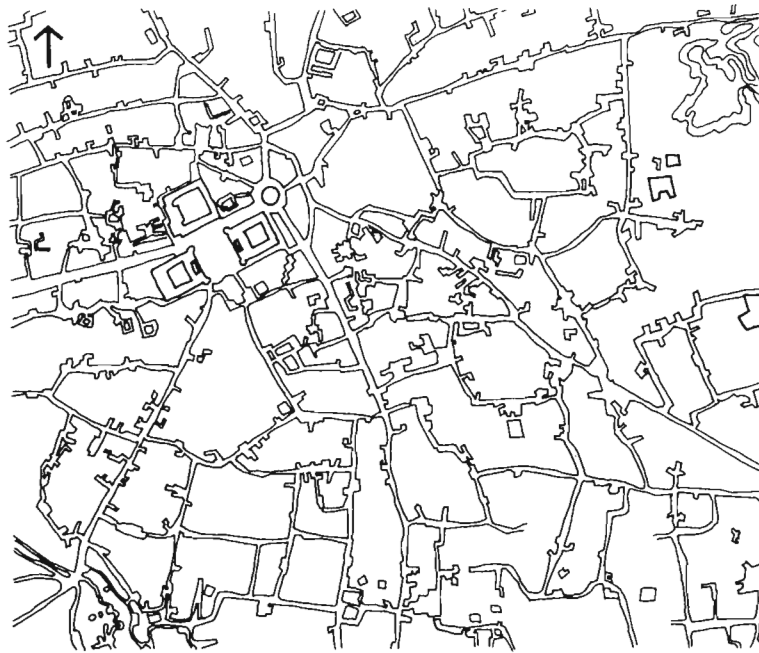


FIGURE 4C. The central part of Samarkand according to a geodesic survey of 1868, the year the city was incorporated into the Russian Empire. After the map reproduced in E.A. Gutkind's *International History of City Development*; Vol. VIII, *Urban Development in Eastern Europe: Bulgaria, Romania, and the U.S.S.R.*, The Free Press, N.Y., 1972.

FIGURES 5A, 5B. The Sabat — an air-right structure bridging a public-right-of-way is a concept designed to provide additional space for the building to which it is attached. Islamic law recognizes this concept and there are specific guidelines governing its implementation. It is used in most Islamic cities, acting as an element of unity. The local Urf in each city shapes its architectonics and thus contributes to the phenomenon of diversity.



FIGURE 5A. View of a Sabat in Tunis. The columns supporting the structure on the left indicate that it belongs to the building on the right of the sketch. After a photograph by the author taken in the mid-1970's and published in his book *Arabic-Islamic Cities: Building & Planning Principles*, KPI, London (79) 1986.

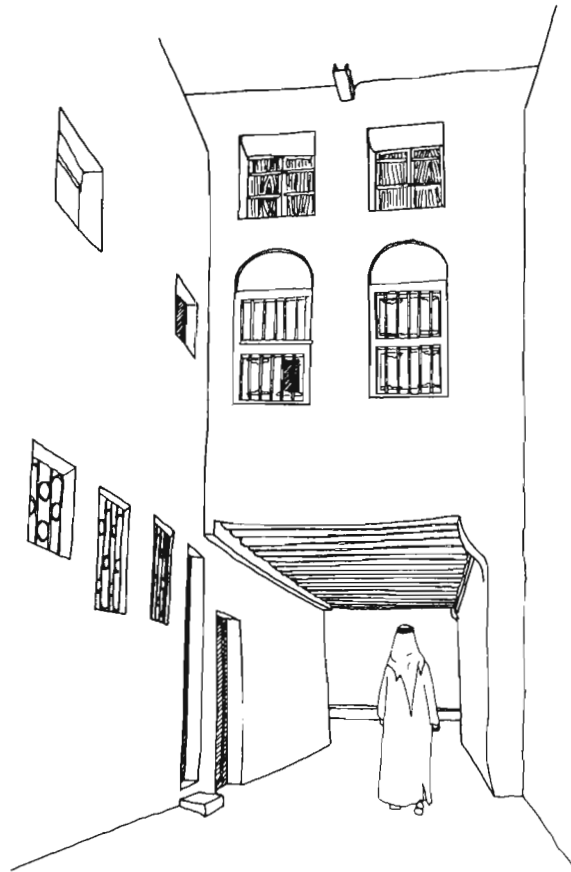


FIGURE 5B. A Sabat in Hofuf, Saudi Arabia. Palm tree trunks are used as the main structure for support, distinctly different from the structure and building materials used in Tunis. The treatment of windows is also different. After a photograph taken by the author in early 1986.

accords legitimization and protection to a locality's customs and practices and thus contributes substantially to the identity of a place through the individuality of its place-making process and its resulting built form (see Figure 2). Elsewhere the writer discussed another facet of Islamic law which further contributed to distinctiveness of place making. It is that guidelines for building activity and decisions emanating from this system of law are performance/intent oriented and proscriptive in nature. The ramification of this attribute alone is enormous on the quality of the built environment.³⁰

FIGURES 6A, 6B. Curving the corner of buildings which are located on public streets — a convention practiced universally in Islamic cities, towns and villages. It might have roots in pre-Islamic periods. A curved corner allows easier negotiation when turning by the rider of beast which is carrying a load, such as a camel, horse or donkey. This element contributed to the phenomenon of unity. However, its specific design and architectural treatment was governed by the local or regional Urf, contributing to diversity.

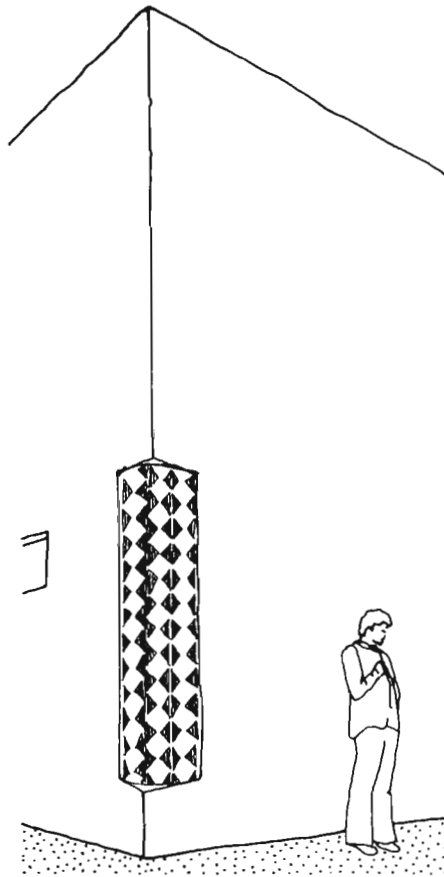


FIGURE 6A. A corner of a building in the village of Sidi Bou Sa'id north of Tunis. This example shows the enhancement of this practice by decoration, in this case with black and white inter-locking tiles. After a photograph taken in 1975 and published in *Sidi Bou Sa'id, Tunisia: A Study in Structure and Form*, edited by B. Hakim, Technical University of Nova Scotia, Halifax, 1978.

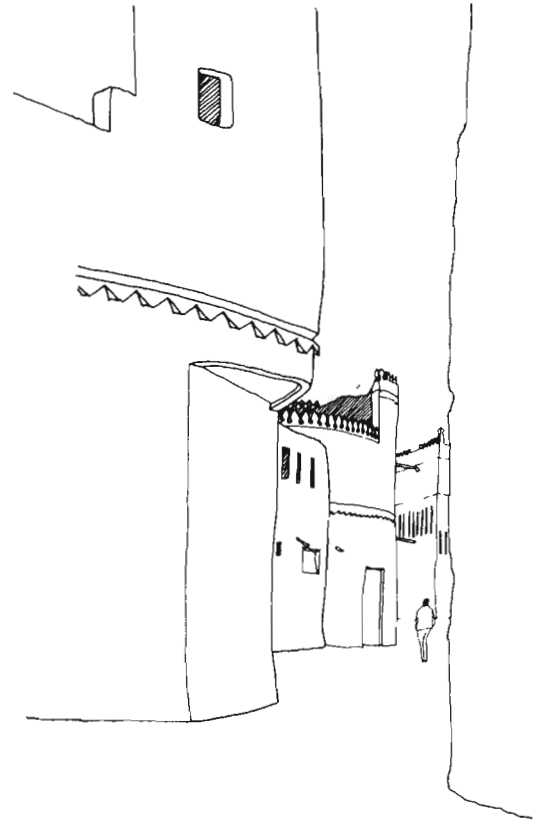


FIGURE 6B. The corner of this building in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia is treated in a more pragmatic manner, "slicing" the building to the required height and even allowing the decoration to continue around the corner. After a photograph by John Amarantides estimated to be taken in the 1970s.

SOME LESSONS FOR CONTEMPORARY URBANISM AND URBAN DESIGN

Due to the dreary sameness which resulted in our cities worldwide under the banner of "progress" and "modernism" during this century — particularly spreading after WW II, we find now that a backlash has resulted within a time frame of one generation, in just over 30 years. This is manifested under different slogans depending on the culture and country. In the Islamic countries we recognize it under the banner of demanding an "Islamic" identity in architecture and urban design.³¹ Some of the Arab countries call the same thing under the banner "Arab Architecture."³² In the West, particularly in the United States, the term "Critical Regionalism" is used for

FIGURES 7A, 7B. Design enhancement of main doors — one of the important concepts applied universally in Islamic cities is the design enhancement of the main doors of buildings, often supplemented by elaborate decoration if the owner could afford it. The main door was the primary element of the building's elevation where intentional design is applied. A clear element of unity, whereas the local Urf created the diversity, where each region developed specific design approaches and decorative motifs.

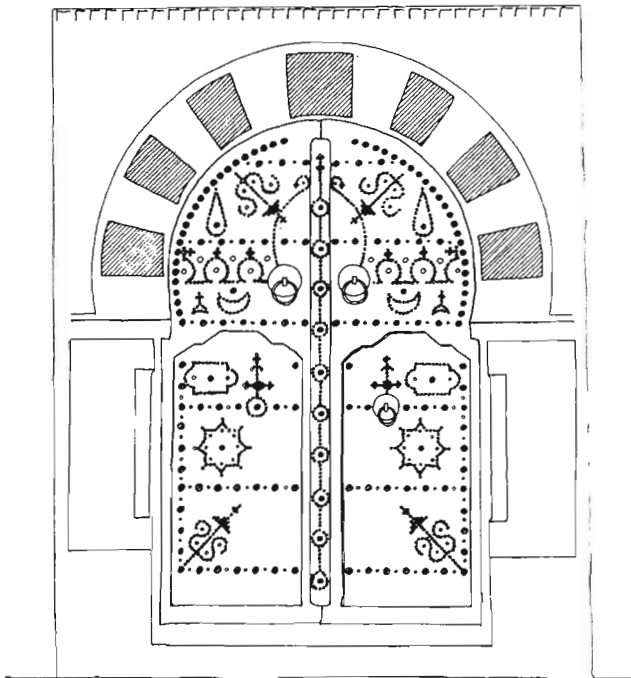


FIGURE 7A. A main door to a house in the village of Sidi Bou Sa'id, Tunisia. People in this village practiced the Urf which was predominant in the city of Tunis and its environs. The decoration is achieved by nails of two types: (i) large nails holding the door's structure together, and (ii) small nails for surface decoration of various motifs. After a photograph taken in 1975 and published in Hakim, B. (ed.) *Sidi Bou Sa'id*, 1978.

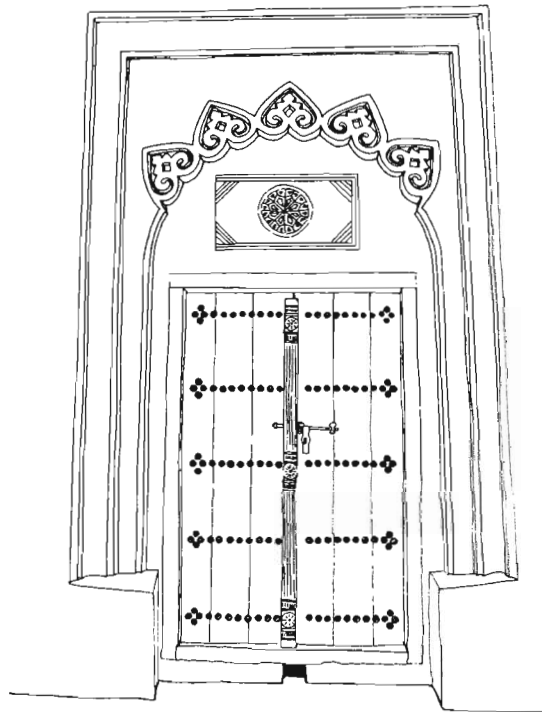


FIGURE 7B. A main door to a house in Al-Kut district in Hofuf, Saudi Arabia. The elegant gypsum decoration above the door is typical of this region's Urf. Structural nails are commonly exposed and form part of the door's visual character. After a photograph by Mashary Al-Naim taken in 1990.

this purpose.³³ This is particularly significant because this backlash and strong feeling against sameness is occurring in a large country with a strong culture and embedded institutions, aided by the mass media and powerful advertising capabilities.

If regional identity and character is accepted as an important attribute for cities, habitat and architecture, then the strategies and methods to achieve that become an important concern. Here the careful study of the experience of other cultures, particularly in history, can be very valuable.³⁴ The workings of the traditional Islamic city can provide us with needed insight.

FIGURES 8A, 8B. Decoration of internal walls — the concept of decorating the walls of primary rooms is common in many Islamic cities. The type and nature of the decoration however was distinct to each region and sometimes to a specific town. This concept contributed to the phenomenon of unity and diversity.

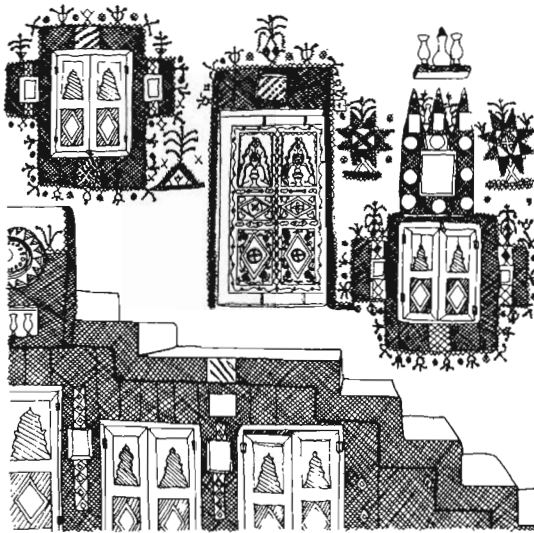


FIGURE 8A. The central room of a house in the oasis town of Ghadames, Libya decorated for the occasion of marriage. The hatched areas of the sketch represent the original red color used traditionally for wedding decorations. After a photograph by Professor Intisar Azzouz of Al-Fateh University in Tripoli, Libya, as published in the illustrated presentation "Mimar Gallery" in *MIMAR 1*, 1981, pp. 17-23.

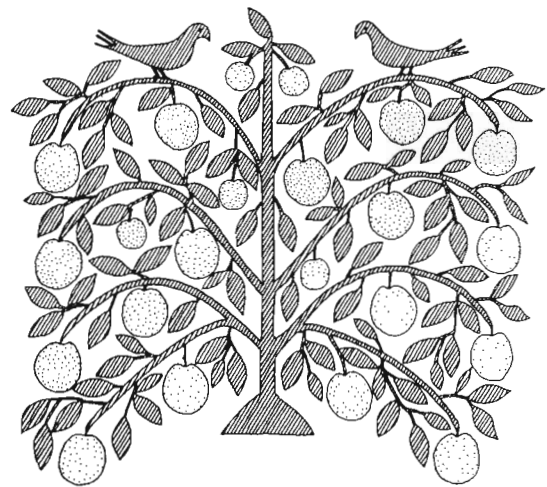


FIGURE 8B. A wall mural of a fruit tree with birds perched on the branches. This particular design was found in a house in Hofuf, Saudi Arabia and is a symmetrical design of an orange tree with two birds. It is approximately five feet tall. The trunk, branches and leaves are painted dark green and the oranges are in a mustard-yellow color. It is possible that this design was inspired by the Quran which mentions the abundance of fruit trees in Paradise. After a photograph taken in the 1970's, from King Faisal University's slide collection. Photographer unknown.

It has been over five years, from the mid-1980s, since Kenneth Frampton published ideas for designing architecture at the local level with qualities that "resist" the hegemony of what he calls 'universal civilization.' Although his suggestions are, in the view of this author, far from being comprehensive, they are nevertheless in the right direction and need to be taken seriously.³⁵ If we consider the last observation (in the first paragraph of this section) as addressing the 'what' of the problem and implicitly 'why' it occurred, then this note on 'Resistance' should be viewed as the basis for developing a framework for working out 'how' appropriate alternative(s) may be achieved. Again the experience of the traditional Islamic city can offer us insight into an alterna-

FIGURES 9A, 9B, 9C, 9D. The persistence of the Urf in contemporary times — examples from Dammam, Saudi Arabia. After photographs taken by the author in June 1989 in the "District 37" housing area, with the exception of photograph 9A taken in early 1986. This district was developed in the 1980s. The basis for development of this and similar housing areas in Saudi Arabia is described thus: municipal planners subdivide the land, the plots are then allocated to individuals who are then responsible for building their houses according to municipal regulations and requirements of the Real Estate Development Fund which loans the funds, interest free, to the owners. The system of subdivision which was earlier imposed by the government divides the land into plots of approximately square shapes averaging in area of 580 square meters with a requirement of setbacks from all sides and a maximum allowable footprint area of 60% of the plot. Almost all of the house designs are based on the use of exterior windows which has resulted in overlooking problems. People have responded by developing counter measures which have evolved into contemporary customs (Urf).

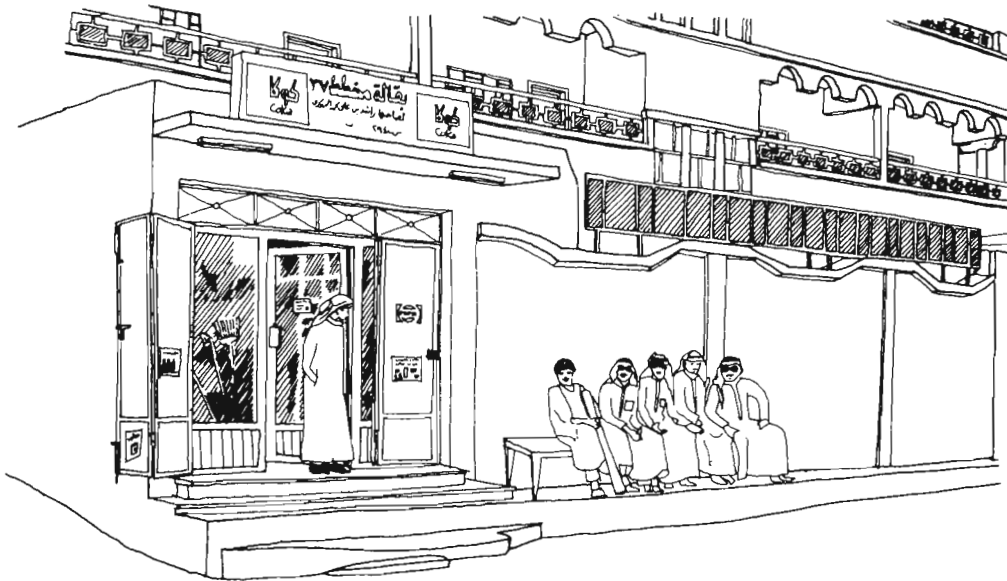


FIGURE 9A. A corner of a house which shows the use of five recent customs: (i) conversion of the garage into a shop. This is a popular Urf especially if the location is suitable; (ii) the use of the bench (dikka) near the shop for visits; (iii) the use of high perimeter walls for privacy and security; (iv) the use of colored glass panels located on top of fence and balcony walls for additional privacy protection from opposite neighbors; and (v) the use of arch motifs, in this case in the balcony, to express allegiance to Islamic culture. A prevalent linkage in the minds of the popular sector.

tive framework, including the specifics of its mechanisms that was operational for over one thousand (1000) years. The following briefly addresses some of those lessons.

One of the key lessons is in the framework of the distribution of responsibilities among all actors involved in the creation, maintenance and changes in the built environment. This might be called the System of Production, or for short 'the System,' which involves the following questions: How is land distributed; how is space allocated; what is considered public and what is private; how do the public/private spheres interrelate; who is responsible for what? In cases of disputes, what is the mechanism of control and authority in resolving conflicts; who is responsible for land subdivision — and in design decisions: what is the role of the community and the user in the process?³⁶ These are the type of questions which need to be carefully studied in terms of what is occurring now and how it used to occur in the traditional Islamic city. It is only after careful analysis and understanding of the two systems that any fresh strategies can be formulated. The experience of cities in other cultures where a high level of quality in the built environment was achieved, need to be scrutinized for comparison so as to increase the sampling from which we can draw inspiration and specific lessons.³⁷

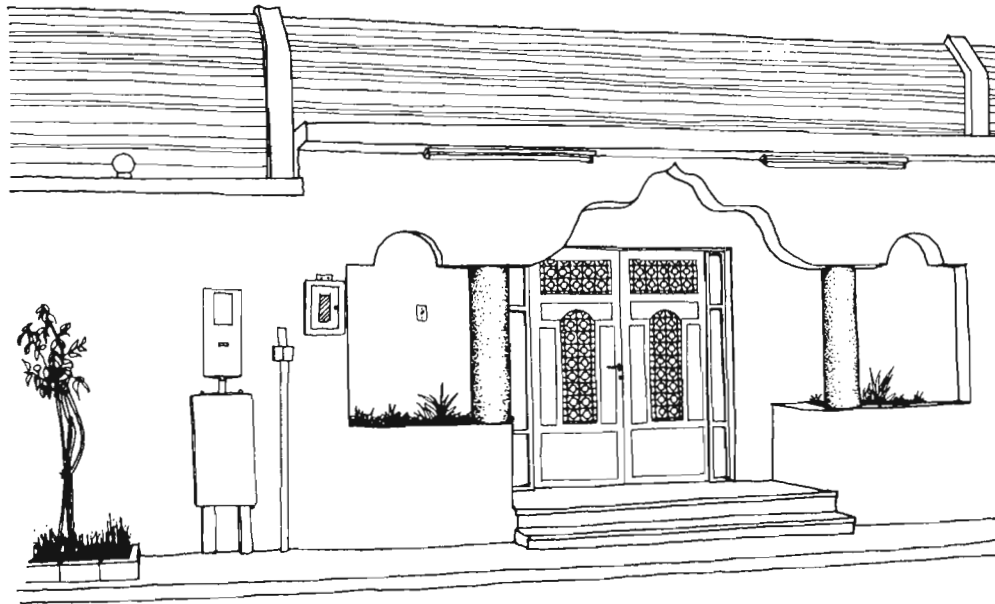


FIGURE 9B. The persistence of the Urf enhancing the front door to the house with a special design (see Figure 7). Since the front door has become part of the perimeter fence wall in the contemporary situation, people have shifted their attention to the front gate for special treatment. This has now become a strong Urf in most of Saudi Arabia, and a great variety of approaches and designs have evolved.

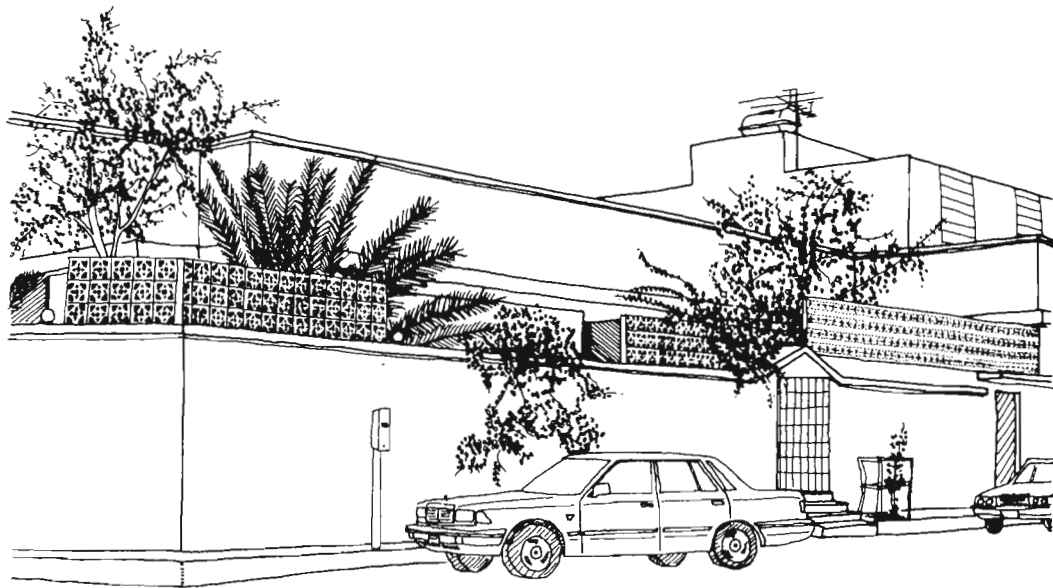


FIGURE 9C. This example shows that the owner has responded to the visual corridors of opposite neighbors by increasing the height of his fence wall only in those locations where it is necessary. Most people however respond by increasing the height uniformly.

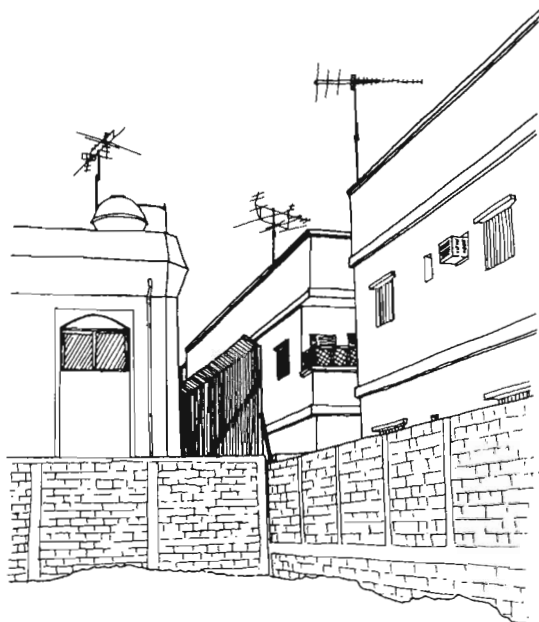


FIGURE 9D. With the requirement of setbacks from all sides and the necessity of opening windows for light and ventilation, people have responded by erecting light-weight walls, mainly of corrugated metal, to prevent overlooking. This is now a common Urf widely used in Saudi Arabia.

As to the nature of the tools and mechanisms which directly affect the contemporary built environment — it is absolutely essential to evaluate those carefully and not take for granted their various stipulations. Sometimes it is in the details (or fine print) of these controls that the root of many of our problems reside. Elsewhere this writer has discussed the differences between contemporary Western zoning and planning tools with those that were operational in the traditional Islamic city. The impacts on the quality of the built environment of these two very different types of systems is enormous. The lessons of the Islamic city is particularly critical in this regard.³⁸

The following question needs to be briefly addressed: How does the Urf apply in the case of new building types, new materials and new urban functions? The case of contemporary Saudi Arabia might illuminate the answer. Here deeply rooted social customs such as the concern for privacy persists and manifests itself in new solutions in response to the new practices of land subdivision and built form configurations resulting from imported regulations, such as the setback requirements for individual houses from plot boundaries. The illustrations in Figure 9

clearly show the ramifications — these have in turn generated new customs (Urf) in dealing with the recent changes in land use and building materials. It should be noted that the “new Urf” is primarily the invention of the users in the face of changes.

Unfortunately the public sector’s performance is dismal in dealing with the changes brought about by new building types, materials and urban functions. It responds with negative practices and methods, facilitating the degradation of the quality of the built environment. This is primarily due to the clash resulting from imported ideas and associated regulations (dictated by the central government on the local level), with embedded deep rooted customs. Users deal with this problem on a day to day practical basis resulting in adaptations which might or might not be ideal. Whereas the public sector, comprised of appointed municipal officials with little or no experience or training, deal with such problems at a distance and in a superficial manner.

AREAS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

This paper should be viewed as a first draft in dealing with the Urf as an important factor in shaping the traditional Islamic city. It has covered the basic concepts of the Urf within the Fiqh

and the ramification of that status on its legitimacy in the day to day decision making process as affecting building practice. The importance of both the 'linguistic' and 'practical' Urf is stressed, and how each type reinforced the other in building, thus helping to perpetuate a local system across long spans of time.

In view of the issues which the paper has covered, three important areas of research need to be undertaken so that understanding of this topic is further enhanced.

Research of traditional cases based on the Urf, both in the records of local qadis (judges) and in the writing of muftis (specialists on law). This is primarily a literature search. Urf courts were operational in North African countries during the French occupation. The records of those courts need to be carefully examined for cases related to building disputes. Some of these courts, such as in Tunis, continue to function. What is interesting to establish is the nature of the Urf rulings. How deviant, if at all, were they from the principles of the Shari'a and what was their impact on built form and the manner local identity was perpetuated? This type of research is particularly important, since the records of, say the last two hundred (200) years, will coincide closely with the on-ground situation of the built form as it stands now. Assuming that can be physically examined — without resorting to elaborate archaeological techniques — then the results will reflect very closely to what occurred within the time-frame indicated, even though some foundation outlines may date back to very early configurations. The use of successive aerial photos since the early decades of this century is an important tool for such a study.

Field research of selected and representative traditional Islamic cities is essential. These field studies could document the design language (linguistic Urf) which was operational, and the actual physical configuration and arrangements which the vocabulary of the local design language referred to. The results will provide us with a good sampling of the local linguistic Urf which was operational in a specific time and place. As mentioned earlier in this paper, the local design language was used by the community at large and was recognized by the Shari'a in resolving local conflicts arising from building activity. Comparative study of the results of surveys of a number of cities from different regions of the Islamic World would enhance our understanding and appreciation of the built form qualities of those cities. The results of this type of research will also illuminate the design decision-making process underlying the built form and the changes that have occurred over time.

Changes brought about by increasing modernizations due to new building types, new materials, and new urban functions in contemporary times, and the impacts these changes have had on the traditional Urf, be it practical or linguistic, need to be the concern of serious study in numerous Islamic cities. Such research should address among other things, the phenomenon of the clash resulting from imported and imposed (by central authoritarian governments) land use techniques and associated regulations with embedded local practices and systems of decision-making on the culture of the people and the resulting quality of the built environment. It should also address means of modifying or changing regulations to make them sensitive to local conditions and the values shared by the population. A careful study of people's responses to modernization and contemporary changes is essential. This will illuminate the culture's priorities in the face of imposed and/or desired changes in the built environment.

If this paper has opened a new window on the workings of the traditional Islamic city and has broadened our general understanding of the processes of urbanism and urban design, then it has achieved its purpose.

NOTES

1. Abu Hamid Muhammad bin Mohammad Al-Ghazali (d. 505 A.H./1111 A.D.), *Al-Mustasfa min'Im Al-Usul*, 2 Volumes. First printed by al-Amiriyah Press, Cairo 1322 A.H./1904 A.D.
2. Al-Jurjani (d. 816 A.H./1413 A.D.) *Al-Ta'rifat*. The translation from the Arabic is by R. Levy from the article 'Urf' in *Encyclopedia of Islam*, 1st ed., Leiden and London, 1913-1934.
3. Ali Haider (d. * ?) *Durar Al-Hukkam: Sharh Majallat Al-Ahkam*. (written in 1875), translated from Turkish to Arabic by Fahmi Al-Husaini, Dar Al-Kutub Al-Ilmiyah, Beirut, First Printing 1991. (*) Year of death could not be located, but if he had written this book in his 50s, then the latest date of death would be within the first decade of this 20th century.
4. Abdul-Wahab Al-Khallaf (d. 1956 A.D.) *Im Usul Al-Fiqh*. 1st ed. 1942, Dar Al-Qalam, Kuwait, 15th Printing, 1983.
5. Mustafa Ahmed Al-Zarka (1945) *Al-Madkhal Al-Fiqhi Al-Am*. 2 Volumes, 3rd revised ed. 1952 - 10th Printing 1968 by Tarbin Press, Damascus.
6. Abdul Aziz Al-Khayyat (1977) *Nadariyat Al-Urf*. Maktabat Al-Aqsa, Amman.
7. Mohammad Amin Abidin, known as "Ibn Abidin," (d. 1836 A.D.), "Nashr al-Urf fi bina bad al-Ahkam 'la al-Urf," in *Majmu't Rasa'l Ibn Abidin*. 2 volumes, Printed by Dar Ihya al-Turath al-Arabi, Beirut, n.d.
8. Ahmad Fahmi Abu-Sanah, *Al-Urf wa al-'Ada fi Ra'y al-Fuqaha*. Al-Azhar Press, Cairo, 1949.
9. Part five of Volume 2 entitled "Nadariyat al-Urf" in the reference cited in note 5 above.
10. Reference cited in note 6 above.
11. The author has come across other sources of interest: an article "Urf and Law in Islam" by Farhat J. Ziadeh, pp. 60-67 in *The World of Islam*, edited by James Kritzeck and R. Bayly Winder, Macmillan & Co. Ltd., London 1959. It is short and useful for clarifying the semantic history of the term. There is a short section on the Urf, pp. 110-118 by Mohammad Faruq Al-Nabhan in his book *Abhath Islamiyah*, published by Mu'asat Al-Risalah, Beirut 1986. This is particularly illuminating for the working of the Urf in North Africa. That area's Fiqh and Urf traditions is fully covered by Abdulaziz Binabdullah in *Mu'alimat al-Fiqh al-Maliki*, published by Dar al-Gharb al-Islami, Beirut 1983.
12. This verse and many others and numerous sayings of the Prophet are fully documented as Appendix 1 in this author's book: Besim S. Hakim, *Arabic-Islamic Cities: Building & Planning Principles*, Kegan Paul International, London [1979] 1986, 2nd hardback edition 1988. Verse 7:199 appears on page 144.
13. Although the writer has benefited from a number of sources in developing the first section of this paper, he has for the sake of being brief only made specific reference to M. Al-Zarka's book cited in note 5 above. The material in that book is divided into sequentially numbered paragraphs. Cited below are the number of paragraphs rather than the page numbers, as those differ by edition.
14. Al-Zarka (cited in note 5), paragraph 477.
15. For a discussion of the contrast between Urf as people's customs and Urf as dictatorial top down rulings, see F.J. Ziadah "Urf and Law in Islam," cited in note 11.
16. Al-Zarka (cited in note 5), paragraph 479.
17. Ibid., Paragraphs 480 and 508 to 533.
18. Ibid., Paragraphs 484 and 486 to 490.
19. Ibid., Paragraphs 493 to 495.
20. Ibid., Paragraph 496.
21. Ibid., Paragraph 502.
22. Ibid., Paragraphs 503 to 509.

23. The presentation in the first section is adequate for the purposes of this paper. For a fuller discussion the author refers the reader to the treatises — all in Arabic — of Ibn Abdin (cited in note 7), Abu-Sanah (cited in note 8), Al-Zarka (cited in note 5) and Al-Khayyat (cited in note 6).
24. See Hakim, *Arabic-Islamic Cities* (cited in note 12) and the article by this author "Islamic Architecture and Urbanism" in *Encyclopedia of Architecture*, Vol. 3, pp. 86-103, John Wiley & Sons, Inc., New York, 1989.
25. See Hakim, *Arabic-Islamic Cities*, pp. 126 & 127, and B. Hakim (ed.) *Sidi Bou Sa'id, Tunisia: A Study in Structure and Form*, Technical University of Nova Scotia, Canada, 1978. Available now from Books on Demand, University Microfilms International, Ann Arbor, Michigan, U.S.A.
26. For a complete discussion of the principles and behavioral guidelines which helped to unify the character of Islamic cities, see Hakim, *Arabic-Islamic Cities*, pp. 18-22. Two illustrative examples are cited here: (1) the Prophet's stipulation of 7 cubits (3.20 meters) as a minimum Right-of-Way for through public streets to allow two fully loaded camels to pass — is due to the fact that it was an implicit Urf because the camel had become the primary mode of transport about 300 years before the Prophet's time; (2) the Aqd or wall bond for the identification of ownership of walls meeting at right angles. For a full discussion of the Aqd see footnote 78 on page 174 of the author's book, first cited in note 12 above.
27. One of the elements which established this unity was the predominant use of the concept of a building surrounding its open courtyard, especially for houses — despite the fact this plan arrangement is not suitable for cold climates experiencing heavy snowfall. But because of its legitimacy as part of the Sunnah, we find its application and use in distant cities like Kabul in Afghanistan where heavy snowfall is experienced rendering this model inefficient and cumbersome for its users.
28. See Chapter 2 "A design language: urban and architectural elements" in Hakim: *Arabic-Islamic Cities*. Pages 98-101 are comprehensive tables of terms which were the common linguistic Urf in Tunisia.
29. See Chapter 1 "Islamic law and neighborhood building guidelines" in Hakim, *Arabic-Islamic Cities* for a complete discussion of these principles and behavioral guidelines.
30. See Chapter 4 "Conclusions" in Hakim, *Arabic-Islamic Cities*, and Hakim "Islamic Architecture and Urbanism" in *Encyclopedia of Architecture* (cited in note 24 above), especially pp. 97 to 102.
31. The early 1980's (ushering the year 1400 A.D. and the 15th Islamic century) witnessed a number of conferences, such as the 'International Symposium on Islamic Architecture and Urbanism' held in January 1980 at King Faisal University, Dammam, Saudi Arabia. The first awards of the Aga Khan Awards for Architecture were given in 1980, and the seminars sponsored by the Awards Program were held in various locations. Shortly after that the King Fahd Award for Islamic Architecture was launched — for students work only. Magazines appeared addressing this concern, such as *MIMAR* which is funded by the Aga Khan, and *AL-BINA* which is privately published in Saudi Arabia.
32. The term "Arab Architecture" is not valid, whereas "Arab-Islamic" is. This author has discussed the basis for this terminology in the Introduction of his *Arabic-Islamic Cities*. The Arab League and its organizations tend to promote this designation. In Iraq a conference was held in September 1980 entitled 'International Symposium on Arab Architectural Heritage and our Contemporary Architecture.' Then in February 1981 a conference sponsored by the Arab Towns Organization entitled 'The Arab City' was held in Medina, Saudi Arabia. The bi-monthly journal *al-Madinah Al-Arabiya* was launched in the early 80's and is published by that organization.
33. This term was first postulated by Alexander Tzonis and Liane Lefaivre in 1981, and subsequently codified by Kenneth Frampton into a theory (references are cited in note 35 below). Recently two International Seminars on "Critical Regionalism" were held. The first in January 1989 at the College of Environmental Design, California State Polytechnic University, Pomona, followed by the second at the Delft Technical University in Holland in June 1990. A third seminar is planned to be held in 1991 at the Milan Polytechnic.
34. This author has been teaching an introductory course in History and Theory for undergraduate architecture students since 1986 at King Faisal University, Dammam, where the emphasis is on uncovering principles and patterns which have occurred in various cultures. For details refer to his paper "Teaching History by Searching for Emics and Ethics" published in proceedings of 77th Annual Meeting of the Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture, held in Chicago, March 1989, pp. 167-180. It was subsequently published in *Design Studies*, Vol.12, No.1, January 1991, pp. 19-29. The course was one of three winners of the American Institute of Architects (AIA) 1990 Education Honors Award.
35. The two pertinent articles by Kenneth Frampton on this topic are: (1) "Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance" in *The Anti-Aesthetic*, edited by Hal Foster, Bay Press, Washington, 1983, and (2) "Place - Form and Cultural Identity" (in Italian and English) in *Domus* #673, June 1986, pp. 19-24.

36. A number of people have addressed these issues, such as John F.C. Turner in his various articles on housing, and especially in his seminal book *Housing by People*, Marion Boyars, London 1976. More recently by N.J. Habraken in a theoretical treatise entitled *Transformations of the Site*, Awater Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1983. This author has addressed some of these issues as part of a larger framework of concerns in the article "Recycling Positive Aspects of Tradition in Contemporary Cities: Some Issues for Consideration," in the proceedings of *The Second International Conference on Urbanism in Islam*, held in Tokyo, Japan, November 1990. A revised version is published in the journal, *Cities*, Vol.8, No. 4, November 1991, pp. 274-277.

37. Christopher Alexander and his colleagues have tried to do this by amalgamating ideas rooted in various cultures in their extensive collection of patterns as published in *A Pattern Language*, Oxford University Press, N.Y., 1977. For how some of those patterns exist in an Arab-Islamic village, see the Conclusions, pp. 154-160 of *Sidi Bou Sa'id: Tunisia* (cited in note 25 above).

38. See the author's articles "Islamic Architecture and Urbanism" in *Encyclopedia of Architecture* (cited in note 24 above) and "Recycling Positive Aspects of Tradition in Contemporary Cities: Some Issues for Consideration" (cited in note 36 above).

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AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Besim S. Hakim, AIA, AICP, has extensive experience in architecture and urban design as a professor/scholar and as a consultant/practitioner. He was educated at Liverpool University, U.K. and at Harvard. He has practiced and taught in Canada, the U.S., and the Mid-East. His teaching experience started in 1967 at the Technical University of Nova Scotia, Halifax, Canada and he has also lectured and taught at numerous universities in the U.S. and abroad — including, for several years during the latter half of the 1980's, in Saudi Arabia. Professor Hakim has published extensively in professional literature, and received a Citation for Research in 1987 from *Progressive Architecture* for his book *Arabic-Islamic Cities: Building and Planning Principles*. He was also awarded the American Institute of Architects 1990 Education Honors Award for a course he has been teaching on the History/Theory of Architecture.