Social and Cultural Transformation of Urban Form: Some Insights from the MENA Region

That socio-cultural dimensions of the city have continuously preoccupied urban designers may sound trivial if not outright meaningless nowadays. We know that stalwart urban design gurus and role models such as Kevin Lynch (1984) had incessantly factored them in as part and parcel of how good cities operate. Be that as it may, incorporating these somewhat intangible or less tangible (or as Lynch believed, "cleverly concealed") values or attributes of efficient urban form seems easier said than done. Christopher Alexander et al.'s (1987) A New Theory of Urban Design, too, identifies "wholeness" as another complex but important dimension of urban form that urban designers need to familiarize themselves more with.

Distinguishing between Lynch's "normative "and "functional" theories of urban form or Alexander's theorizing "wholeness" unfolds some of these taken-for-granted vs. neglected linkages between how cities perform and look. Drawing on some of these woefully neglected yet imperative linkages, Alan Kreditor (1990) also believes that "the demands of societal change" and their linkages to urban form constitutes an important shortcoming in urban designers' education. These societal distinctions in countries with rich historic and cultural heritage that also face rapid growth, i.e., the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region deserve even more attention. This issue of *Urban Design International* brings to light some new insights from Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, and Egypt, located in the MENA region.

Juxtaposing the traditional land use planning that systematically ignores the local social and cultural norms and the form-based codes (FBCs), Faisal Bin Sulaiman and Mohammed Almahmood search for a common ground. Having experienced three transformations over six decades, the authors question the existing planning practices in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. Arguably, while the planning paradigm of Riyadh has revolved around the Western design and auto-oriented design logic, since the 1970s, its socio-cultural values have not changed as much. Women's privacy, for example, remains an important social restriction rooted in cultural traditions that have not been properly addressed by conventional Westernized zoning ordinances. However, FBCs, have shown promising alternatives for adjusting these norms into zoning codes. As authors argue, FBCs in Wadi Hanifa have provisioned ways of incorporating privacy in building design codes, i.e., balconies, sidewalks, parapets, and courtyards. As for safety, lighting, encouraging the eyes on the street, and sidewalks have shored up local security and safety. Using Wadi Hanifa as a case study, the authors discuss the ways in which codes and abstract rules and principles could dynamically overcome the drawbacks of typical land use planning. Codes and abstract principles address the observed changes in the built environment by distributing rights and responsibilities to maintain fairness of socio-cultural values. Communities and city officials mutually operated and handled these codes (i.e., windows or doors facing neighbors, thereby violating their privacy) among themselves. The 3D nature of FBCs provide a range of typologies from urban blocks and the relationship between building forms and volumes to facades and open spaces.

In the second article, Aliaa AlSadaty delves deeper into how socio-cultural factors namely the characteristics of "urban tissue" typologies can affect the urban form. This research too hints at the advantages of adopting FBCs in local zoning ordinances of cities with rich historic urban heritage. The author explores not only the spatial transformation but also the regulatory mechanisms that ensure smooth continuity between the old and new urban fabrics in Bulaq Abdul-Ela in the historic district of Cairo. Context-based developments, as such, seek ways of incorporating socio-cultural transformations within their broader morphological contexts. Highlighting the current missing links between the old and new urban typologies, the authors stress the importance of form-based codes as an effective tool that facilitates such time-honored and context-specific transformations. Applying this method to Bulaq Abdul-Ela, the authors discuss the advantages of using typomorphological processes over the generic development control and zoning ordinances that deepen the discontinuity between the old and new urban fabrics.

In the third article, Khaled Alawadi, et al., explore the indicators of healthy and safe cities, and by doing that find walking as one of their primary attributes. These authors seek to incorporate the interface between local socio-economic and cultural indicators and the built environment (i.e., land use, urban form, and street layout) in Abu Dhabi, the capital of the United Arab Emirates. To foster a set of sustainable development by 2030, Abu Dhabi has committed its masterplan to high walkability standards rather than previous goals that focused on variables including infrastructure, suburban development or commercial /industrial land uses or branding iconic architecture. Focusing on two case studies in downtown Abu Dhabi and administering 160 questionnaires, in both sites, the authors find "greening and shading" as important as other urban form-related variables such as "density, mixed-use, and connectivity" despite hot weather and hot temperatures that typically deter walkability—not to mention that some population cohorts, i.e., labor inclusive immigrants consider walking as their primary mode of transportation there.

Finally, Merham Keleg, et al., reveal yet another aspect of incorporating socio-cultural specificities into built environment attributes in Cairo. More specifically, the lack of green space strategies and policies and a general awareness of its holistic importance motivated the authors of this article to relate to Cairo's sustainable development policies. Conducting semi-structural interviews with multiple stakeholders, they find several untapped opportunities that could play pivotal roles in the future of this city. Like the previous articles, this study also underlines the persistent chasm between Cairo's social and natural and spatial values, requiring a calculated integration between the two. To give an example of some of the social challenges, the authors see what constitutes green space as a key social, cultural, physical, and ecological challenge. Due to its prevalent top-down nature, the authors recommend empowering, encouraging, and supporting the local communities to engage more in greening and maintaining green spaces in Cairo as one way of reducing the current chasm in securing and incorporating green space in the city as well as utilizing it as a placemaking strategy.

References:

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Kreditor, Alan. 1990. The Neglect of Urban Design in the American Academic Succession. *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, 9 (3): 155-163.

Lynch, Kevin. 1984. *Good City Form*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.

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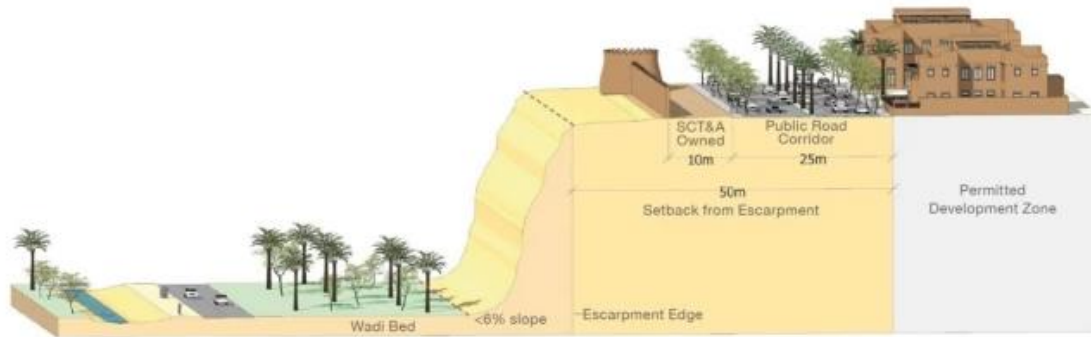

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Figure 4
Source: Faisal Bin Sulaiman and Almahmood Article

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2) **A typological approach to maintain character in historic urban areas**
   By: Aliaa AlSadaty
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3) **Assessing walkability in hot arid regions: the case of downtown Abu Dhabi**

By: Khaled Alawadi, Victoria Hernandez Striedinger, Praveen Maghelal & Asim Khanal
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4) A critical review for Cairo's green open spaces dynamics as a prospect to act as placemaking anchors

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