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### Cairo and Riyadh in the reproduction of culture and urban form.

Hiding in some of the largest deserts in the world is the often varying and chaotic form of the Islamic city. Ranging from as far west as Marrakech to as far east as Islamabad, the Islamic city has made a stamp on the region it's often nestled in.

More specifically, the structure of the Islamic city in the Arabian Peninsula (Riyadh) and Northern Africa (Cairo) has resulted in differing urban forms which can be seen through differing embraces of colonialism and Islamic values. Even though each city developed in a different manner over several hundred years, each city's reproduction of culture and a sense of place is passed through the same filter, but with different eyes. Meaning, the original goal was similar, but internal politics, differing views of space and values created two different cities that still hold all the traits of an Islamic city.

After looking through several books and journals of Islamic cities in the Middle East, the problem is the lack of significant change in the urban form and design of the city. While cities like Riyadh, Dubai and even parts of African-Muslim cities like Cairo have exploded with growth and development into modern city design with the introduction of oil revenue into the economy and culture with the advent of skyscrapers not seen since the construction of palaces.

These urban design issues between the two regions are all the more prevalent with some of the conflicts facing a traditional Islamic city like Cairo, which has always had outside influence from the West due to colonialism and its Mediterranean location in

world politics for several-hundred years (Brown, 32). In Cairo, the cultural fabric of the city's major public spaces, such as the city square Al-Ismaïlaya, rely on naming techniques not previously used in city development, causing problems within ruling parties and former ruling dynasties of recent memory (Meital, 860). The naming conventions of public places such as plazas, squares and streets have an effect on the psyche and culture of the city's inhabitants. Al-Tahrir square prior to 1952, bore the name of the nation's former ruling family, with the name al-Ismaïlayyah (864). But with new names, (Al-Tahrir means Liberation,) any previous animosity from the city's citizens of its previous leadership has likely dissipated, bearing a different demeanor on the city as a whole.

However, the city's pre-colonial structure urban form was challenged in the late 1800s in an attempt to reimagine the Middle Eastern past with a Western-invested planned enclave called Heliopolis (Elsheshtawy, 141). This region of Cairo was designed with an imagined classical Middle Eastern design that actually ended up containing elements of Hindi architecture in several places (144). For some time, the suburb of Heliopolis continued the colonial planning method of the Islamic City. Heliopolis' design was loosely based on that of the socialist Garden City theory city (146). But the suburb's planner was a staunch capitalist and pushed for remained space for gardens, clubs and various activities exclusively for Cairo's foreign-nationals and well-to-do natives (Brown 95).



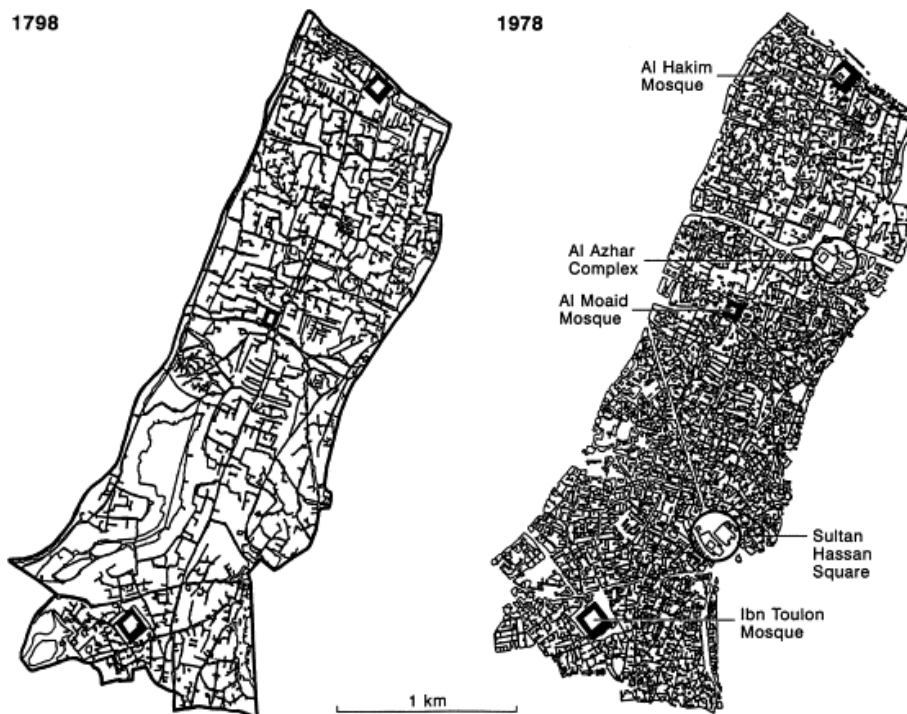
Far East imaginative architecture amidst the planned development of Heliopolis.

Heliopolis was colonial design based on the idea that it would distance itself from the rest of the city by planning in then-outskirts of the metropolitan area. Within the isolation of Cairo's (and in turn Egypt's) ruling class, it led to some, but not significant, tension in the region. But the isolation and the culture completely surrounding it would not entirely last. As the population of Egypt's capital exploded in population growth, Heliopolis' lush gardens were consumed by its urban growth, eventually turning the once posh region into a haven for the city's emerging middle class population (Elsheshtawy, 145). The likely turning point in the function of this planned community shifted after the 1952 coup. This was likely augmented by the original plan to have the city's modern sectors to be constructed on the basis of local railways transportation (145).

The development of modern Cairo has always had its roots in additive-style of colonial architecture. The areas surrounding the flood plains of the Nile were eventually built on, and engineered to avoid flooding of the newly constructed districts (Brown, 80). But beyond the pastiche of the modern core, lay the unchanged chaos of the Islamic

medina. Often described as “Old Cairo,” the pre-Napoleonic core of Cairo has still somewhat maintained its relative disorder to the Western eye. When Napoleon and his armies arrived in Cairo in the early 1800s to set up a port to rival the Naval power of the British at the mouth of the Nile, he began to establish camps in the city of Cairo, and map the city as to better understand it’s strategic strong points (Sutton, 76).

This map exemplifies the medina structure power of pre-Napoleonic Cairo compared to post-1952 coup Cairo in 1978:



Comparison of 1798 Cairo (left) to 1978 Cairo (right.) Sutton, 74.

In the map, note the density of the medina surrounding the Al-Moaid, Al-Hakim, and Ibn-Touion mosques. Even for long-existing metropolitan areas like Cairo, much of the urban structure was centered on mosques like even some of the smallest pre-Western cities in the Islamic world. A road leading to Al-Azhar University in the northern region

of Cairo slices right through a dense loop-and-lollipop region once existing 200 years earlier, showing the growing importance of it as a religious, educational, and cultural locale in the city.

The medina on the east bank of the Nile, shown in the graphic, thrives on the main arterial walkway running north to south that is still present from the previous urban structure prior to the Napoleonic contact (81). This main road and walkway thrives on the on the curiosity of tourists wanting to see a practically unchanged region of Cairo and an example of an old medina. This environment, filled with vendors, shops, services for area residents and restaurants serves as both a cultural spine of this old region while concurrently serving the needs of its local residents. This “old” area of Cairo does not show signs of the remained histories and landscapes of the Dreamland Park and other recent entertainment-based tourist zones of Cairo (Elsheshtawy 146). It is an example of an unchanged urban form that while chaotic at times, is still able to serve its needs to its regionally rooted residents and tourists. It’s ability to function as a place for unspecialized manufacturing and services is shown in its density relative to the size of the rest of modern Cairo, housing roughly 500 more people per square mile than the rest of the city (Sutton, 77).

Since the Ottoman Turks conquered most of Northern Africa and Southwest Asia in the Middle Ages, it had often turned giant cities in the region to secondary assets to the Empire. With the Turks conquering Cairo in the 1500s, the government centralized in Istanbul transformed the city’s urban form and culture forever. Not until the English left Egypt in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century did Cairo gain its autonomy. But in Cairo’s 1000 year history, it has always maintained its “natural” resource of tourism for housing one of the original

Seven Wonders of the World (Saqqaf 34). The draw of Cairo's history proved as a worthwhile investment beyond its excellent placement along the Nile. Neighboring Giza and Luxor, two major regions associated with the classical history of Egypt, while unurbanized, are still reliant on the core of Cairo for complete comprehension and understanding of its heritage (Sutton 72). Without the aid of minarets and monuments within the city, the full-force of the city's non-Muslim past is always peering from its triangular horizons.

Cairo bears the mark of thousands of years of outside influence and the existence of small pockets of Christians and Jews, Riyadh, the capital of Saudi Arabia, does not include such evidence of even the smallest of religious tolerance.

The oil-rich kingdom of Saudi Arabia prides itself in its capital of Riyadh. While the history of Riyadh points to a strict adherence to Islam in culture, government and religion, the influx of oil money and Western architecture and design change the culture surrounding its capital.

Given the strict nature of the Kingdom of Saud headed in Riyadh, outside influences, and activities in places other than home or work in Saudi culture are limited. Urban youth segregated by sexes by way of religious police limiting the availability of movie theaters, clubs and restaurants, large streets and boulevards constructed in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century give way to a mutilated-third place in the city of Riyadh (Associated Press). Segregated groups of men and women are relegated to their cars on main roadways they try to attract the each other outside the bounds of Sharia religious police with the use of Bluetooth cell phone technology, which allows its users to send messages directly to a phone within a certain range without the aid of a cell tower.

In the ever-increasing urban size of Riyadh, the practice of culture and life outside the bounds of religious law affect both the design of housing units, but also the way its residents interact with each other. While cities like Cairo and Marrakech still show traits of being an Islamic city, their distance relative to the center of religion shows in some of the lax practicing of religious laws in the social realm. Only in a major city near the core of Islam will firm moral and religious laws be practiced strictly. As a result, walls often separate families and men from each other in practically every place beyond the safety of the home. This may prove as a growing cultural problem with the ease and accessibility of information with the Internet and the large population under the age of 20.

This lifestyle limits the participation in activities in the city for its residents, especially with the broadening metropolitan area that necessitate the use of a car for transportation around the city. With the emphasis on urbanization of the periphery of Riyadh (Al-Hemaidi, 81), the density of its population had fanned into the desert and into places not previously populated over the city's history.

Riyadh has a relatively new urban problem. In cities like Fez, Cairo and Marrakech, where segments of the local population reside within the clustered and old medina urban space, Riyadh's centuries-old urban core is in a demise to expansive urbanization into the desert that left the mud walls for the first time in 1930's (Choquill, 42). This leaves the poor foreign workers who make up a large part of Riyadh's population in the old core. This ill-maintained region that appears to be forgotten in Riyadh's pre-oil past leaves a disparity in the social-economic class system of the city, and creates a health hazard for those left in this old region (Al-Hemaidi, 185).

In the modern era of Riyadh, guest workers from South Asia contribute greatly

the population total of the growing urban area (al-Hathloul, 13). So much that the number of foreign workers is in the millions in Riyadh.



Pie chart of the percentage of foreign workers residing in Riyadh

Due to strict laws by the government in Saudi Arabia, Riyadh is able to manipulate and regulate the foreign workers in the city with no problem. Because most of the labor is unskilled, in areas like construction and service, local Saudis are taken out of the equation. Many of the foreign nationals hail from locations such as the Philippines, Yemen, Pakistan and Thailand (Attiyah, 279). The Kingdom Tower, the piercing skyscraper in the heart of Riyadh, was built on the need of foreign workers living within the city (Elsheshtawy, 170). The pride of the Kingdom Tower by Saudi nationals could be somewhat strained as the symbol of the capital is not a byproduct by its own labor force or citizens, but by the sweat of often-exploited foreign nationals within their country. Many of the foreign nationals reported that they chose a city like Riyadh to better their standard of living, even if it means enduring a differing culture than their own.

With 55 percent of the foreign workers in cities like Riyadh mistreated by their

bosses or employers (Attiyah, 275), the large segment of population can be somewhat of a cultural and governmental threat to the functioning order of Riyadh. But because most of these individuals simply want to make a better life for their families, the willingness to speak-up against abuses is diminished for fear of job security. Due to bait-and-switch tactics in the sponsor program bringing foreign nationals to Riyadh, some have become trapped in the country left to live off meager wages in regions like the old medina of the city (276).

With women and foreign workers socially cast out in places around Riyadh, the development of the city appears to greatly favor those residents who are men and Saudi, leaving the cultural landscape of the city tailored specifically to the practice of Wahhabi Islam. However, in an almost ironic twist, foreign nationals (whether unskilled laborers from Asian nations or American and European business investors) have molded the 20<sup>th</sup> Century form of Riyadh. Through the contracting of design, construction and investment of its landmarks to non-Saudi nationals it leaves a dichotomous relationship of the modern, Western-like urban space used in a manner seen often in medinas elsewhere in the Muslim world, which have not changed for several hundred years.

However, in the future, the sustainability of Riyadh's strict moral and religious laws will be challenged by the inherit problems associated with expansive suburban sprawl and the psychological issues that can be associated with it. The changing nuclei of the suburbs (Hakim, 1996) will result in a fragmented urban space that can turn Riyadh into a massive megalopolis in the desert faced with problems of adequate water, food and sewage control.

The focus on the richness and spectacle of architecture in the Middle East in such

places as Riyadh, Dubai and Doha, a problem is put in the face of identity for the world of the historic Islamic city and how space is used by its citizens. The clustered medina structure of older cities in the Islamic world that focused on the richness of the interior design, and a focus on the mosque, is challenged by the grandeur of enormous free-standing corporate structures that in turn produce the polarization of economic classes not seen in the Islamic city prior to the expansion of Western colonialists (Al-Hemaidi, 190). With more and more people pushing to the iconography of the single-family house, the medina structure diminished, pushing apart separate economic classes to different urban nuclei that was once shared by all in the medina.

This problem is also evident in the expansion of Riyadh with its massive jump in population over the course of 100 hundred years (Al-Hathloul, 15). The medina structure, comprising only a minute part of the relative size to Riyadh, resulted in the once-traditional urban space that exemplified the Muslim religion to be almost forgotten in the capital city of the nation which lays claim to the home of that religion due influences of oil money.

The growth of other Islamic cities which often had outside influence, often seen in North Africa and the Eastern Mediterranean, did not explode in population in the manner that Riyadh did. Cities like Beirut and Cairo maintained a solid expansion of growth over several hundred years to come to its current urban spaces.

The changing face of the Muslim city could give way to changes in cultural practices in its urban spaces that would allow both sexes to equally participate in the city's offerings of public space; it would also take a major shift in the practice of Islam, which dictates both religion and government to its followers.

Either way, the Islamic city's culture and urban form, which covers a region spanning two continents, varies by its location and role in the world relative to its surroundings. Cairo's historic metropolis has celebrated more than 1000 years of culture and tradition through some balance of its function as an urban and tourist center on a world scale, as opposed to the rigid form of Riyadh, which only recently began accepting visas from foreign travelers for recreational uses. However, Riyadh's emergence as a city connected to the growth and wealth of the oil industry cannot be understated into its explosion of residential and urban expansion.

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