

Urban metamorphosis and Islamic Architecture in the time of globalization: Utopian realities and challenges

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Abstract:

Over the past few years, the Arab world has seen a great shift from non-urbanized deserted lands into intensively urbanized cities. Technology was a powerful tool, and it became used excessively to design highly complex designs, and to “manufacture” the image of millennium cities such as Dubai. Those ‘cities bubbles’ are being inserted into a global system, driven by capitalistic powers. Nowadays, there is less inspiration from hidden roots and complex systems of articulation of the Islamic/Arabic architectural pattern and model. There is an urging need to establish a critical thinking vis-a-vis the excessive consumed built environment, system of values, and the lack of creativity. As globalization is becoming a standard of life, a different exploration of today’s ideologies is needed, and thoughtful inspirations are to be brought to the table. Our need for this study is also related to the lack of knowledge in this field, and more specifically within Muslim thinkers, city planners and designers. Architects and researchers on Middle East have been discussing the issue of urban fantasies and the utopian visions in Arab countries. They also detailed urban ills and the loss of environmental, cultural and functional aspects, as well as the issues of cultural identity.

Achieving modernity in our globalized world is a real challenge which might not always succeed. An interesting focus for our research can include studies of the metamorphosis of excessively globalized cities in the Arab world. This study would be an interesting response to several questions, and it will examine the urban and architectural fabric in the Islamic world, discussing whether or not colonization was replaced by globalization, and analyzing how excessive consumption, in a broader sense, has changed our spaces into meaningless realities. A long tradition of architectural complexity, aesthetics and sustainable friendly features need to be studied in depth. These different studies would establish new bridges and bodies of knowledge not only for local architects and designers, but also for western professionals, and globalization can be turned into an advantage, at that point.

Keywords: *Globalization, Islamic Architecture, Arab world, complexity, utopia*

Introduction

A city is both a dream and a reality. Italian writer *Italo Calvino* stated in his book *invisible cities* “Cities, like dreams, are made of desires and fears, even if the thread of their discourse is secret, their rules are absurd, their perspectives deceitful, and everything conceal something else”. Cities are

the perfect example of paradox and require a lot of focus to interpret their different sides and to clearly define their aspects. Urban spaces might be in some cases so absurd that they reflect nothing but a mixture of oppositional different desires. The image of a city does not seem as positive as it looks like; it is a place of integration and interbreeding, of blooming and relegation, and sometimes of operation and dysfunction. We can obviously notice that danger is stalking the city as it is stalking the surrounding nature and its components, as well. Industrial areas are growing and starting to invade our natural sites (huge sites for nuclear industry, for steel fabrication). Therefore, whether we like it or not life is becoming hazardous in those areas. Historical facts describe this phenomenon which has spread out excessively after the appearance of machines in modern industrialized countries, and continuously is killing our sites and our cities which have become out of control.

The theory of a city, an urban space, or an industrialized area has excessively spread out into our societies and it has expanded aspects comparing to our past history. Roads and highways as in Dubai, Doha or Casablanca have become excessively huge, cars are so massive in number, and buildings are higher than ever using a lot of glazing and being supposedly “sustainable.” Traffic congestion is the consequence of deficient transit use, or of people’s reluctance to walk or bike. War is a prominent feature of that danger and weapons, aircrafts, and bombs are threatening our life, environment and cities as in Iraq or Palestine, as well. Today people feel more subjugated to those elements than to nature. Within globalization, huge masses of people all over the world live in big cities (8,026,454 inhabitants in Cairo, 2009 census meaning a density of 31,582/km²) and feel satisfied with their lives as they are “democratically” inserted into the group, the buildings, and the urban diversely insignificant spaces. People feel safer being a product of a consumption society, a repeated pattern developing a new label of “same people”, “same thoughts”, “and same minds”. Our environment as a whole and as a participant is completely or partially ignored. The postmodern human being is immersed in the world of consumption and thrown inside it from childhood. He is stuck in a constantly maintained representation. Urban spaces are also excessively “consumed” in today’s world and in our Arab cities. Our beautiful cities of the time of Cordoba and “Al Andalus” have shifted into big blocks of concrete or large transparent facades ignoring energy savings issues. All features of man kind’s brain are manufactured and controlled by media and new politics and consciousness is partly sleeping. Shall we question society? Life? Cities?

Back to the roots – Islamic Architecture

Throughout history, Islamic art and architecture had risen with the rise of Islam and they spread out from central Asia (Ancient Khorasan¹) to Andalusia² (Southern part of Spain today). From the time of the Prophet of

¹Also spelled *Khurasan*: a historical region and realm comprising a vast territory now lying in northeastern Iran, South Turkmenistan, and northern Afghanistan. *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

²Arabic: *Al-Andalus*, name given to a nation and territorial region also commonly referred to as *Moorish Iberia*. The name describes parts of the Iberian Peninsula and Septimania governed by Muslims (given the generic name of *Moors*), at various times in the period between 711 and 1492. "Andalus,

Islam, Muhammad, to the time of the three Caliphs (rulers) and later during the time of Ummayyads³, the religion of Islam was spreading and architecture was powerful, and it was spreading to new lands, where cities were flourishing as a consequence of their unique and rational urban characteristics. Islamic Architecture can be defined as the architectural styles that have been evolving from the rise of Islam to today, including both religious and secular styles. Geographically, Islamic architecture would include many styles of design, where architects borrowed and adopted different methods of design. This includes Persian style, Ottoman architecture, Moorish architecture, Indo-Islamic architecture, Sino-Islamic, Malay-Indonesian, and many other styles that flourished starting from the 7th century. The architectural style is based on the architecture of mosques, forts, tombs and palaces, which was later extended to be used in buildings of less importance including domestic architecture. Islamic design can be distinguished through calligraphy and geometric patterns, features that have always shown repetition, radiating structures, and rhythm, thus highlighting the idea of the infinity of the one creator, Allah. Furthermore, the use of large domes, minarets, and courtyards is intended to convey the image of power and domination. Arabesque is a unique complex decorative style that is used in Islamic architecture, and often associated with calligraphy. It is, indeed, vegetal design consisting of full...and half palmettes [as] an unending continuous pattern...in which each leaf grows out of the tip of another (Ettinghausen et al., 2001). Geometric art has been a very representative symbol of Islam, and for an exceptional work of artists and craftsmen. The abstract definitions and logical consistency of the geometry had been seen as pointers to a perfect world underlying gross reality, and hence to the perfection of god. (Abas, J., 2001). How far did artists, designers, and architects in the Muslim world, progress?

Imagine if we travel through the past, from the time of *Ibn Battuta*, a Moroccan Berber traveler, to today's contemporary world of millennium cities (e.g. Dubai). We will certainly question the process that led to this complex loss and deeply enrooted alteration, but also to the enigma of cities trying to match an unidentified international image. Islamic architecture has seen a great shift, from sustainable and highly complex structures to superficial boxes, with a strange and ill character. For decades the urban spatial configuration in Arabia has seen a great shift, from sustainable and highly complex structures accommodating the



Figure 1. Roof Hafez Tomb, Shiraz, Iran.

al-", John L. Esposito (2003), *Oxford Dictionary of Islam*, Ed. Oxford University Press.

³Second of the four major Arab caliphates established after the death of Muhammad. It covered more than five million square miles, making it one of the largest empires the world had yet seen. Blankinship, Khalid Yahya (1994), *The End of the Jihad State, the Reign of Hisham Ibn 'Abd-al Malik and the collapse of the Umayyads*, State University of New York Press, pp. 37.

human and social dimension to superficial boxes, with a strange and ill character. Dominant planning ideologies, and specifically modernism did not prioritize public spaces, pedestrians were neglected, and architectural trends have increasingly shifted towards remote, introvert and indifferent structures (Gehl, 2010). Breath-taking structures, high-rise buildings and shimmering skyscrapers resemble to an artificial pearl created in the middle of a wide gulf and a desert, where nature is forgotten and trapped inside the urban jungle. Large bay windows, great views on the Arab Gulf, and a large-scale transparency are repetitively monotonous aspects of the whole urban scene. In those areas, people are living in a “fly-by” world, defined as a world of brands and capitalism. People are guests in their homes, and strangers in their own milieus. Scholars and academics in the Arab world agree that the only way out of the state of underdevelopment is to learn from the west and to assess critically our own values and beliefs- a fact made urgent in the post 9/11 era (El Sheshtawy, 2004).



Figure 2. *Futuristic Dubai.*

Most cities are not controlling technology, but technology is shaping the city and making of it a repetitive uncreative system in some cases. Rapid urban systems and the advancement of technologies have caused a widespread standardization of the built environment, denying the cultural identity of human settlements and the local identity of unique heritages is being replaced with standard methods of construction, materials, and international styles. Not only architects but also planners have been showing a particular interest and trying to explore new ways of bridging cities and regional cities with world cities, which helped architects to analyze and criticize the negative regional and local

impacts of such globalization (Lo and Yeung, 1998). Architects typically find themselves in a situation where they have to deal with the past in the future, and where they have to adapt new technologies by acting both locally and globally to produce a powerful form of modern development inserted into their urban context.

The Middle East: Metamorphosis of a Desert

Dubai is a coastal city which used to be a “peaceful” harbor for fishermen and traders. At the turn of the twentieth century, houses were being built in clay in Dubai, and in 1956 the first house using concrete was built (Gabriel, 1987). Later, an unexpected construction boom was driven by high oil revenues, and the dream of the Millennium city has grown and became a major hub in the Middle East and global center. Economic affluence, technological advancements, and government land-use policy were three factors which contributed to this growth (AlShafieei, 1997). However, the

question here is, how was modernity defined at that point? Was it defined by the western meanings of modernity regardless of an area's complex and entrenched heritage, or did modernity-innovation take into account the Muslim's rich and diverse heritage? We might be living in a time of confusion where "highly advanced" standards are "inserted" into less determined and unshaped environments. Is the whole complexity and richness of Islamic architecture to be redefined and effectively (re)explored, or is it to be considered as fruitless and to be classified in archives as the "old" and not adoptable to the current 'brand'? "Has globalization replaced colonization as a threat to the heritage and identity of the Middle East city of the 21st century?" (El Sheshtawy, 2004). If we take a deep look at the prosperous history of Muslim culture, we can notice that social, economic, political and planning schemes were powerful at that age, and thus were efficient forces which drove these communities to bring new changes and unique characters.

If we study the existing heritage, we can notice that the Medina of Tunis, for instance, classified as a UNESCO world heritage, has over 700 monuments including palaces, mosques, mausoleums and fountains dating from the time of Almohads and the Hafsid. In India, a great piece is the *Taj Mahal*, a highly detailed master piece offered by Mughal emperor Shah Jehann to his wife *Momtaz Mahal* as an expression of love. Until today, 358 years have elapsed since its construction, but it is still standing as one of the most beautiful buildings in the world and stands as the symbol of love and unity. Its purity highlights its uniqueness.

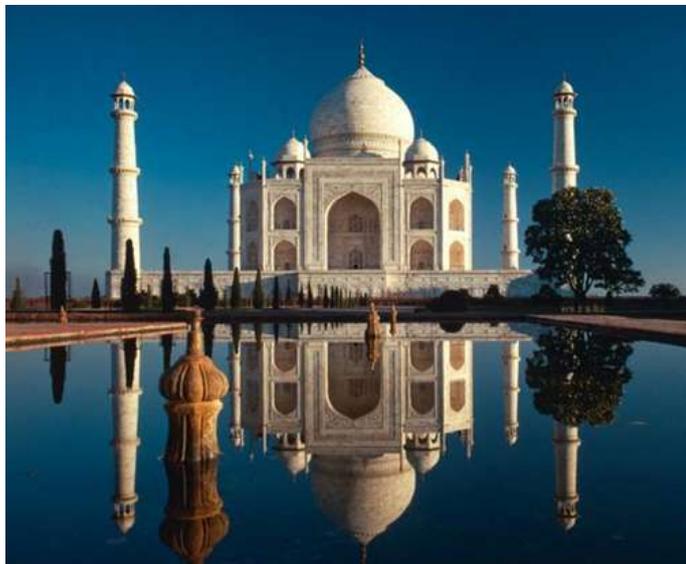


Figure 3. *Taj Mahal, India.*

How far are we from purity and uniqueness today? The level of reflections and the futuristic visions in Islamic Architecture is related to the level of thoughts in Islamic Urbanism, where new theories and knowledge should be adapted and new waves of reflections should relate architecture to intellectualism today, as the couple "Duplay" or the architectural historian and promoter of phenomenology "Perez Gomez" reflected. We would not be able to understand the current of the civilization, unless we are able to understand the historical context, and the accuracy used to discuss urban issues. Also, Architects need more freedom and new professional strategies, where they would be able to lead the societal projects, and where the past is part of the present and also the future. (Hira Magazine, latest edition, 2011).

Global World – Global Culture

Globalization is becoming a key concept that has largely replaced the traditional richness of urban settlements in the Muslim world. The architecture of the Arab world is largely influenced by global forces, even though the term globalization itself did not become popular until the latter

half of the 1980s (Chris, 2006). Today we encounter many different definitions of the concept of globalization. Giddens defined it as the intensification of worldwide social relations that link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events happening many miles away and vice versa (Oncu and Weyland, 1997). The Encyclopedia Britannica also defined globalization as the process by which the experience of everyday life is becoming standardized all over the world (Adam, 2008). Architectural globalization is trapped between two opponents' forces, ones with and others against globalization. The first ones seek to establish traditional links with the past through traditional architecture, repetition of motifs, shapes, and forms that existed for a long period of time without innovation. This movement is an advocate of historical connectivity in architecture, and the preservation of the existing identity. The other group promotes the use of new technologies and materials to develop innovative architectural structures that meet different functional needs. For this movement, it is important to highlight systemization, flexibility, and interchangeability (Lewis, 2002).

If we move from the past, straight to the future, we can think and reflect more about the future of Islamic architecture and the Islamic "globalized" culture. Future means innovation and more investigation to achieve creativity. For the time being, the image of cities in the Arab world is sometimes confusing and sometimes considered chaotic. There is a huge threat and a continuous move toward unidentified standards of modernity in architecture in these areas and cities. We can even go further into identifying such architectural themes as the "non-style" or maybe the "free style" or also "non-cohesive style". Proportions are not followed firmly, materials are not matching and are not created within a general palette and the spirit of the authentic space and style is being part of the past and getting replaced by the spirit of money and capitalistic souls.



Figure 4. Traffic Congestion in Dubai.

At this point, we shall ask if we are going toward the undefined architecture. Or is the Muslim and Arab world losing its identity? Or are we shifting toward a new one? While literature is filled with studies on colonial periods, there is a huge gap when it comes to contemporary global trends-namely globalization, on the urban structure (Alsheshtawy, 2004). The idea of western hegemony is overshadowing the Middle Eastern struggle, an aspect studied by Edward Said in his book *Orientalism*, where he argues with the idea of "western cultural imperialism" (Said, 1979). Jane Jacobs further discusses this idea stating that "globalization does not

signal the erasure of difference but a reconstitution and revalidation of place, locality, and difference" (Jacobs, 1996). This idea of globalization has become a "catch-phrase" usually mentioned in a negative context, and is

generally linked to the loss of urban character, and to a haunted and shapeless world (Alsheshtawy, 2004). Therefore, a “positive” globalization should be examined from more than one perspective, with a focus on the influences of those trends on the spatial organization and the architectural trend.

Urban identity in the Muslim World

In some Muslim/Arab cities in the world, there is a jungle of concrete which we can also qualify as an urban ghetto. When we walk through cities like Dubai, Tunis or Doha, we are amazed by the transition of styles from what is defined as modern, to what is a mixture or more of an attempt to join the “tradition of the past” to the “new of the west”; we can even notice a certain repetitive style which can be qualified as “popular” but we cannot define its roots or its links to Islamic architecture. In this context of disorder, we can even talk about the “non-standardized” or “the non-identified” as a new form of expression in those contexts. From concrete, we switch to bay windows, then to marble, sometimes to wood, and from blue to orange and then to yellow and last to a sort of brownish palette. According to some researchers Dubai is ‘perhaps the world’s fastest-growing global city and intercontinental hub’ but it is also ‘a non-Arab society planted in the heart of Arabia’ (Hirst, 2011).

In cities like Tunis or Dubai, there is a wide range of styles which can be matching different tastes of people “democratically” inserted into the society. In some neighborhoods of the capital Tunis, we find all tastes. From the rectangular balcony, we move to a circular one, or sometimes even a semicircular one, where dimensions keep changing within the same street. Unity and cohesiveness as defined by the roots of architecture are being replaced by economy and separation. The unity of Islamic architectural masterpieces (e.g. Mimar Sinan and the mosques of Istanbul) is being forgotten, unquestioned and replaced by a mixture of none matching styles. The questions which come to our minds at this point are: are we experiencing a new era of “decadence”, or is it some kind of “positive” revolution in architecture? Not only are we struggling within our societies, political corrupt systems and altered cultural values, but also within our architectural background and the urban environment surrounding it.

Today, the revolution is happening in all life aspects in the Arab and Muslim world, so can that be a continuity of the revolution and an emerging ‘architectural Arab spring’ toward the revival and the pure exploration of the highly complex architecture and art in the digital age? The revolution is happening in all aspects of our societies including social, political, and economic sectors; therefore architecture needs to be questioned and revitalized in terms of aesthetics, sustainability, and insertion into the urban fabric. Harmony needs to be redefined and found to ensure a visual continuity of the urban character of our contemporary cities in the Arab and Muslim world. In an era of great political and social change, architecture is a crucial element that addresses the ills of contemporary society, lying at the root of social unrest (Le Corbusier, 1989). Buildings of the Islamic and Arab world should not simply reflect a passive change of social conditions, but they should be active elements toward the change. Buildings themselves ought to be ‘revolutionary’, and to act as active social condensers (Cooke, 1995). Aesthetics are a very powerful form of expression that illustrates reality, and can be a force for struggles toward freedom. Architecture has a

power to operate as a major force of change, as it is embedded with economic, political, and social powers. For Georges Bataille architecture not only reflects the politics of an epoch, but also has a marked influence on the social. Architecture needs to be highlighted as a real expression of the nature of the society (Bataille, 1999).

If we look at the Middle East, Dubai is considered as a Miracle but in the same time as a risky choice for the future of architectural design in that area as well as for sustainability. One of the main reasons to that is the economic-oil based power which has driven these changes and again the society of consumption which is considered as highly "altering" both the public space and the type of design in the world. While these projects, Dubai, are admirable in their sheer scope and ambition, they tend to highlight the downside of globalization. They emphasize 'polarization' and 'exclusiveness', an unfortunate by-product (AlSheshtway, 2004). The growing and fast economic and social changes in Dubai over the past few decades have been staggering. What was a trading port has morphed into a global city, garnished with glamour and glitz. The rulers of Dubai changed it into a branded-city through its iconic constructions (Ali, 2010). In the past ten years, Dubai has emerged as a global and very important city in the world. The architectural and urban design of Dubai has independently emerged as very international making the city stand by cities like Tokyo, New York, and Sydney. Dubai is becoming a kind of fantasy for everyone, a world of endless indulgence, a heaven of satisfaction. Despite all the comfort that Dubai has been offering, it is considered a nightmare on an ecological level. Dubai is not practicing sustainable finishing anymore, and is continuously replacing it with carbon emissions. Their footprint has been growing along with the growth of Dubai's wealth. In 2008, the Worldwide Fund for Nature's Living Planet Report pegged the UAE's ecological footprint at 9.5 global hectares per person, number one in the world. Residents of the UAE and Dubai consume more water and electricity and produce more waste per capita than nearly anyone on the planet.

Going back to interactivity, I think that in this era we need to think and foster positively some sort of creative societies, where different cultural aspects are being displayed and where creativity and much more investigation are the keys to the design field. There is a constant need of in depth studying of questions regarding new emerging technologies as well as understanding of the built, cultural, social, technological, and political environments. How does all that interact together? And how we, as designers and planners, can reshape the urban environment both physically and digitally, and implement urban art and installations? How does that affect the social/political/aesthetic and make of the city, place an icon? How does the landmark emerge and reflect human conditions, and how can urban art and installations reflect human's changes, revolutions, Diaspora? Is art limited to a celebration, or can art be a memorandum of all time? Architectural links different environments in our lives including the metaphysical environment, philosophical, and cultural ones. Identity of the architectural system is one of the healthiest approaches to a better world, where people feel connected with some part of their environment, and feel very responsible to protect it. Local architecture in the Muslim and Arab world is struggling with the problem of assimilating globalization into its traditional cultural heritage, due to the fast modernization movement, where the image of the future is only borrowed from the west, and where the cultural heritage becomes linked

with the past, backwardness, and poverty. Polarization of both conservation and modernization is more likely leading to an aggressive architectural image, and a technology driven systemized environments.

Advanced studies in this particular area are needed to specifically specify how the urban character of an Arab city has been driven into a voided and speechless character. Studying Arab cities (e.g. Dubai, Tunis, Sana'a, Cairo, Beirut and Jeddah), will give us a deep insight into these "transitional" rich and complex societies, though transition, as a matter of fact, is to be diagnosed with a high level of accuracy and observation. The Middle Eastern city of the 21st century is unfortunately not well approached and studied, even when we look at today's publications. Professionals' aim and challenge is to study this point further, and discuss the set of issues which created this state of identity loss both physically and psychologically. The needed goal is to review the existing literature on this subject, and to expand a socio, religious, political, economic and cultural patchwork of related issues. Also, it is potentially important to explore the existing dialogues between the Middle Eastern city of today, and the current globalization trend, and its different impacts. Architecture should be seen differently in consideration to its context, and cultures should be "reassessed" in order to create a whole continuous system of values. The structure of what is considered as ordinary today is to be re-evaluated and the roots of its mutations are to be revealed. Technology as a participatory element is a key factor for change, a radical and rich change where we can bring the useful and the agreeable together, in order to enhance the image of the cities in the Middle East, and to further challenge and explore the potential character that resides in its very unexplored but wealthy urban characteristics.

Conclusion

Today, in the Arab and Muslim world, we are in need of environments that connect and promote residents, as well as place identity. Architects and planners need to take into consideration the importance of acting on a global and a local level. Threats can also come from architects and designers fascinated with the west or only producing buildings that can be built anywhere in the world. It is very critical to enhance the image of the Middle East through promoting local history by respecting the local style as an open gate for an extended reflection toward an innovative progressive but local design. Interaction with the advanced sciences and technologies should work to enhance the roots of the local identity, and address the place where the project is being built reflecting local cultures and connecting them with a global mainstream. From their global position and reflections, architecture should be very thoughtful and should work on reinforcing the Arab/Muslim identity while remaining open to global interactivity without harming the system, or bringing odd elements to it. Both consciousness and maturity are very needed to balance our local identity with new models of built environments and techniques that exist to serve us and our heritage, and not the opposite.

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