

SHELTER AND CONSERVATION IN AN URBANISING ISLAMIC WORLD

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Almost the entire Muslim world is part of the Third World and, like the rest, is rapidly becoming urbanised. Most of its major cities have an annual growth rate of four to six per cent. Together, the populations of Istanbul, Cairo, Tehran, Karachi, Dhaka and Jakarta grow by an average of nearly 400,000 every year, and this figure will continue to increase in the foreseeable future. Most Islamic cities do not have the infrastructure to accommodate such large increases in population, which for the most part are poor, nor do most Islamic governments have the financial and technical capability to tackle the repercussions of rapid urbanisation through conventional approaches. Radical or innovative approaches or 'models' are rare, and seldom scaled up because conservative planners, bureaucrats and uninformed politicians who dominate the professional and political scene in most Islamic countries find them difficult to comprehend or support. In addition, the institutions and manpower necessary to scale up these models do not yet exist. Their creation requires not only dedication and love, but also consistent lobbying of politicians, bureaucrats, professional organisations and academic institutions.

The Islamic cities have not only expanded, they have also developed into modern industrial and trading centres that accommodate contemporary facilities such as airports, railways, road transport systems for people and cargo, and the enormous support and service systems sector that accompany these activities. In the majority of cases, much of this development has been partly *ad hoc* and has taken place in or close to the historic city centres. It has been accompanied by

massive environmental degradation and changes in land use. This has destroyed the scale and character of the old city centres and endangered, if not yet destroyed, the architectural and cultural heritage of Islam.

Apart from economic activity and the development of related infrastructure, the two major requirements of today's Islamic cities are the delivery of housing to low-income communities and the protection of the historic city from physical degradation and destruction.

Almost seventy per cent of the housing demand in the major Islamic cities is for the poor – a problem nearly every government has tried to tackle. They have built subsidised housing units and large sites and services projects. They have created housing banks and taken loans from bilateral international agencies for funding their shelter programmes. Technical assistance has been sought from the developed world for framing their housing policies, and some have even politicised the housing issue. In spite of these efforts, the supply and demand gap for shelter in the formal sector is increasing in actual numbers, even when it is declining in terms of percentages.

There is a number of reasons for this. The scale of the housing programmes is too small when compared to the demand. The cost of development is far too high for the target groups to afford. The procedures for acquiring a plot of land are cumbersome and involve complex bureaucratic procedures in societies where the relationship between officials and the poor is, in most cases, one of mutual hostility and suspicion. For people who still manage to

acquire a plot, there is no technical advice available for house building, which often must conform to by-laws and building codes that are inappropriate and expensive for poor and sometimes illiterate families. In short, housing strategy in the formal sector is not compatible with the culture, sociology and economics of low-income communities.

Then there is the issue of house-building loans for low-income groups. Rules and regulations of the housing banks find the very poor not loan-worthy. In addition, almost all loan programmes are for building houses, not for the purchase of land, whereas the major requirement of low-income groups in the Third World is the acquisition of land on which they can incrementally build their own shelter. Research has also shown that small loans with a short-term repayment schedule of two to three years can be recovered from the poor, whereas larger loans with a fifteen- to twenty-year repayment period have to be written off since default is common and a 'loanee' often disappears after selling his plot or house. All loans in the formal banking sector of Islamic societies are fairly large and are repayable in twelve- to twenty-year terms.

In the larger Islamic cities there has been a real estate boom in recent years. This has increased the cost of land considerably and made it difficult for housing projects for low-income groups to be appropriately located. It has also meant that much of the land reserved for, or allotted to, low-income families has been purchased by speculators, a fate that an increasing number of housing projects is meeting.

The failure of the formal sector to provide housing for

low-income groups has led to the development of an informal sector that caters to the needs of the poor, and its strategy is compatible with their culture, sociology and economics. Many Islamic countries have initiated programmes of regularisation and upgrading of the settlements that have been created by the informal sector. However, much of this development, once regularised, is also subject to speculation, uncontrolled densification and commercialisation, in violation of building by-laws and zoning regulations.

The Incremental Development Scheme of the Hyderabad Development Authority in Pakistan, which has received an Aga Khan Award for Architecture in this cycle, has tried to follow the strategy of the informal sector in delivering land and services to low-income communities. It has also tried to overcome the other administrative and social constraints that governments face in dealing with the issue of shelter for the poor. So far, however, there are no projects that have dealt with the problems of densification and degradation of regularised informal settlements.

Low-income communities are now increasingly living in the degraded centres of historic Islamic cities. These city centres, often called 'old town' or 'walled town' by the inhabitants, are of two categories. The first occurs when most contemporary city functions move to the new areas of the city, of which the old town is not made an integral part. In this case, the old town is abandoned. Its traditional system of providing urban services and their maintenance and operation falls apart due to the social and economic changes that have taken place in all Islamic societies over the last

century. When the élite also leave for the new city, the old town loses its political power. Consequently, modern urban services are not developed properly; over time, marginalised groups and activities move in, and the ancient town decays.

In this case, conservation of the old town involves not only the restoration and re-use of historic buildings, but also the provision of contemporary infrastructure; a return to political importance; the creation of awareness and respect among the community regarding the historic nature of the town and a sense of belonging to its history; and the creation of institutions, regulations and by-laws to make this possible and to sustain it over time. These conditions have been met in Old Sana'a and Bukhara.

In the case of cities where contemporary development and city functions have developed in the old town, this has led to considerable environmental degradation due to densification; the development of a services sector for transportation; development of manufacturing, storage and warehousing; as well as the departure of the élite, community institutions and administrative functions to the new city. In such cases, the old town is an integral part of the contemporary city. Its conservation is part and parcel of a larger city planning exercise involving the development of transport systems and relocation of important manufacturing and commercial functions. In the Islamic world, no successful project of this nature has been developed.

In this context, the decision to conserve and the development of related legislation is – irrespective of opinions to the contrary – a political act. Its success depends on the political

strength of the lobbies pressing for it and the receptiveness of the administrative and legislative agencies. Their receptiveness is related to the development priorities of these agencies, the educational and class backgrounds of the decision makers, and, more recently, on the pressure that can be exerted on these agencies by international loan organisations who play an increasingly important role in development-related decisions in Third World countries. The development of criteria for conservation work itself, on the other hand, is a local technical exercise. Given political will, adequate training and experience, professionals and local bodies can, over time, master it. However, relating the conservation plan to larger economic and social realities and their physical repercussions, and developing relevant and institutional support for it, is a far more complex affair, and it is here that almost all conservation efforts collapse. This failure is more often than not the inability to see conservation as a smaller part of a larger regional and city planning exercise that involves and empowers people in the process.

Shelter and conservation issues are becoming increasingly important in an urbanising Muslim world. The technical aspects of these two issues are far less important than the social and institutional aspects. One can even say that when shelter and conservation programmes educate and empower communities – build new institutions that are compatible with the reality of Third World societies; change the perception of and involve politicians in the programmes; and bring about change in university curricula in order to produce professionals to replicate the programmes – these issues are

far more important than technically perfect projects that do not accomplish such programmes.

It is not out of context here to mention that, by and large, Islamic societies today belong increasingly to the contemporary world and have contemporary values and aspirations, the so-called debate between ‘liberalism’ and ‘fundamentalism’ notwithstanding. Communities demand and struggle for education (especially education for girls), water, sanitation, social services and the benefits of modern civilisation, such as satellite television and mechanised transportation. When someone falls ill, one will still pray at a mosque, but the patient will be taken to a doctor and not to a traditional *hakim*. When a child is sent to school, it is preferred that he learns English so that he may do better in his future life, even if the parents are strongly religious or nationalistic. It is this pragmatism of contemporary Islamic societies on which a new world and its theoretical parameters can be constructed. But this can only be done if it is acknowledged that liberalism and fundamentalism in the Muslim world are ‘Siamese twins’ and not entirely separate entities.