Social health in the Arab city

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الصحة الإجتماعية في المدينة العربية

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الجانب العمراني للمدينة الصحية هو جانب غني عن الإيضاح، غير أن المدينة الصحية يمكن الاستفادة منها في تعزيز الصحة الاجتماعية، أو بعبارة أخرى تعزيز الجانب الروحاني والسلوك الأخلاقي وما إلى ذلك. فهل باستطاعة المخططين والمعماريين أن يعاونوا في تحقيق هذا النوع من الصحة المرتبط بالسلوك الإجتماعي؟ الحق أن هذه الدراسة لا يزعم كاتبها أن شكل البناء يمكن أن يؤثر بالفعل على الأنماط السلوكية لسكان المدينة، وإنما يطرح بعض طرائق التصميم المعماري الحضري المستوحاة من الفن المعماري للمساجد ذات القيمة التاريخية في المدن العربية التقليدية. كما يتناول الكاتب بالدراسة بعض المقترحات الرامية إلى تحسين وتعزيز الصحة الإجتماعية في المدن بالإعتماد على طرق الإعلان الحديثة.

The physical aspect of a Healthy City is obvious, but Healthy Cities can also be used to promote social health—spirituality, moral behaviour, etc. Can planners and architects help in attaining this type of health which is tied to social conduct? The paper does not go as far as suggesting that the built form can actually control the behavioural patterns of citizens, but rather develops some urban design techniques inspired by historic mosque architecture in traditional Arab cities. Suggestions for improving and promoting social health in cities based on modern methods of advertising are also considered.

Santé sociale dans une ville arabe

L'aspect physique d'une "Ville-santé" est évident mais les "Villes-santé" peuvent aussi servir à promouvoir la santé sur le plan social - qualité spirituelle, conduite morale, etc. Les planificateurs et architectes peuvent-ils contribuer à instaurer ce genre d'équilibre et d'harmonie qui est lié au comportement social? Le présent article ne va pas jusqu'à suggérer que la forme de construction peut en fait influer sur les comportements des citoyens mais expose plutôt certaines techniques d'architecture urbaine s'inspirant de l'architecture historique des mosquées dans les villes arabes traditionnelles. Des suggestions en vue d'améliorer et de promouvoir la santé sociale dans les villes, basées sur les méthodes modernes de publicité, y sont également examinées.

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Introduction: Social health versus physical health of the city

Usually when we talk about healthy cities we mean clean pavements, a strong network of streets, efficient infrastructure, plenty of green areas, and well-designed houses. In all these aspects, we tend to regard the health of the city in terms of *physical* health. In this article, I propose to look at another aspect of city planning: how it can affect the citizens' *social* health, which includes public behavioural patterns, moral standards, degree of sociability and level of piety. Within Islamic jurisprudence, a healthy physical environment cannot substitute for social health. The paper will attempt to show how social health can be attained using the cityscape as a medium for its dissemination.

In the Holy Koran, there are at least seven instances that describe communities building superior cities, but, unfortunately, they refuted the presence of the Creator [*1*]. The result was the deterioration of their civilizations. Magnificent palaces were built on plains, and homes carved out of rocky mountains: sophisticated irrigation systems were created, and outstanding gardens. All these one might wish to see in a Healthy City today. Nevertheless, these achievements were not enough to guarantee the survival of their communities.

Ibn Khaldun's rise and fall of cultures

These anecdotes of scripture no doubt represent extreme cases in which advanced civilizations were punished for their poor social health. This inspired Ibn Khaldun, the fifteenth century Arab philosopher, to introduce his theory of the rise and fall of cultures. In the first phase of the society, Ibn Khaldun tells us, religion is "the most powerful force in the creation of civilization, and its commands are the most effective instruments for preserving it" [*2*]. Accordingly, society grows in power, develops its sciences, and prosperity prevails. In the final stage, society reaches a period of contentment, rulers are uncreative, enjoy the pleasures of life and forget the basic doctrine that caused the development of their society in the first place. Social health reaches its lowest level, solidarity among citizens weakens, and prosperity diminishes by time. Eventually, the decay of the culture occurs [*3*].

Ibn Khaldun's rise and fall of cultures depends on this simple idea: there is an inverse relationship between the development of a culture and its level of social health. We need not be as pessimistic as Ibn Khaldun, nor do we need to draw a direct analogy between dramatic anecdotes of the Koran and the present time. But it is appropriate to consider the numerous distractions in today's consumer society that threaten desirable levels of social health. We should be able to give adequate attention to social health as we do to the healthiness of the physical environment. Both are indispensable to the prosperity of the Arab city.

The question then becomes how architects and planners can help in disseminating social health. The paper does not go as far as suggesting that the built environment can actually control the behavioural pattern of the citizens, but rather, it can encourage, advocate and advertise for social health.

Advertising for social health in mediaeval Arab cities

It is not enough today to depend on individuals' efforts to improve their own social health in a way that is compatible with Muslim jurisprudence. Professionals have to continue to

advertise for it—an issue that was well-recognized in mediaeval Arab cities. If you were to walk along the main thoroughfares of cities of old, you would notice calligraphic bands carved on the walls of mosques. In many instances these bands contain Koranic verses that continuously remind the public of social health. What is relevant to the thesis is that the bands had the power to attract the viewer, for they were part of the decoration programme of the building. This was evident on the exterior façade of the mosque, on the walls of the main prayer hall and on mihrabs and minarets. Thus, when the viewers were attracted by the contrasting colours of marble, the floral motifs or geometric patterns, they were in the process persuaded to read and appreciate the inscriptions attached to them. They would have been further persuaded by the aesthetic of the stylized calligraphy on a background of floral design. Advertising, in this case, depends on the beauty of executing art (Fig. 1).

Campanella's ideal city

The idea of writing on walls of the city fabric as a means of educating the public was recognized by Western idealists, such as the philosopher of the late Renaissance Tommaso Campanella, who envisioned an ideal city of seven concentric walls. On these walls, he suggested various sciences be exhibited for the public weal. For example, the first wall contained the science of mathematics, as well as traditions of every country. On the third wall, there were families of trees, herbs and fish with specimens and text explaining their habitat and benefits. The fourth wall displayed representations of different kinds of birds, reptiles and insects. Mechanical arts and instruments together with their inventors were depicted on the sixth wall [4]. Exhibiting science on walls made the city an accessible encyclopaedia for the citizens to ponder while conducting their daily activities.



Figure 1 **The use of calligraphy for both decoration and information on an old mosque in Cairo**

Campanella's unique notion of physically moving through the city while acquiring knowledge has an important implication. The city fabric, instead of being just a passive reservoir for consumption of products, is an active agent for nourishing the mind with beneficial knowledge. In mediaeval Arab cultures, this beneficial knowledge, which was publicly advertised, focused on social health. It is this idea that we no longer see in our cities and this idea that needs to be revived.



Figure 2 **Cigarette advertisement associating manhood and control with smoking**

Technique of advertising for consumer goods

In our cities today consumer goods are overwhelmingly what we see publicly advertised. The skill by which a citizen is attracted to a particular product through advertising has become so advanced that we cannot ignore it if we are to advertise for social health. As in mediaeval cultures that used decorative inscriptions on mosques to attract the street viewer to Koranic texts, modern manufacturers use attractive images to sell their products. Take for example cigarette products.

When advertising for cigarettes, images associated with the product often depend on attractive themes that touch a sensitive chord in the psyche of the viewer. For example, images of a cowboy signify manhood, control and strength (Fig. 2). Images of a racing car signify excitement, speed and precision. Images of men either dressed formally or casually in the company of women signify the power of men over women—as long as they use the product advertised. Images of men playing chess mean wisdom (Fig. 3). In this last case, the person who is smoking appears to be winning while the losing player is not smoking and is deep in thought trying to find the right move. With these themes the message is clear: if you buy this brand, you will belong to the club, you will instantly acquire the alleged characteristic.

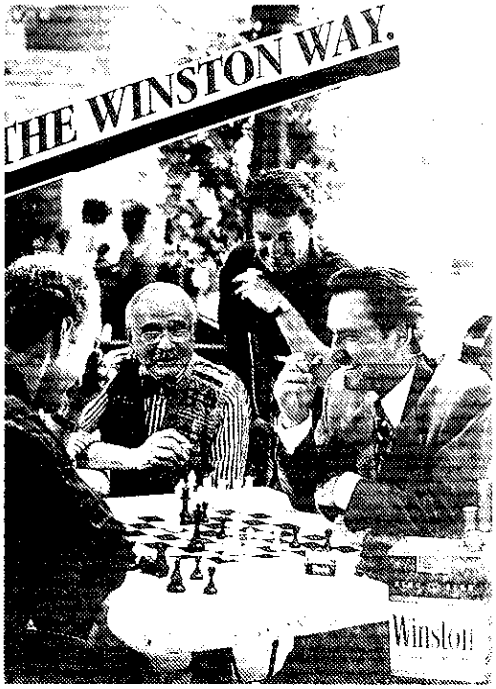


Figure 3 **Cigarette advertisement associating wisdom with smoking**

Advertising for social health through billboards

Advertising works, and companies spend a great deal of money on this type of aggressive promotion to increase their sales. Thus if we are interested in increasing social health in cities we should be equally aggressive. Prime locations in the city, such as public squares and important intersections should be allocated for billboards that advertise for social health, and the Prophetic traditions calling for public morality would appear on these billboards. This type of text could also be part of the façade design of villas and walls overlooking streets. Attractive calligraphy, bright colours and neon lights are just a few techniques that could be used to capture the attention of the viewer. Even the use of electronic billboards that advertise through moving and flashing text should not be overlooked.

Social health in old cities

Advertising on walls, along with other mass media techniques, is a way to disseminate social health; another, is through the actual design of neighbourhoods. In old Arab cities, social health was preserved to an extent because of the high level of sociability among neighbours, which is less present in our modern societies. This revered sociability was facilitated by a hierarchical system of space autonomy ranging from public to private. Such a system governed the design of cities. In the private section of the cities, families of one neighbourhood had considerable control over their built environment and were able to interact with one another without being threatened by strangers. This hierarchical system of spaces was sensible to vehicular movement, for the latter was not so threatening to pedestrians in terms of scale and speed (Fig. 4).

Social health in neighbourhoods today

If we look at neighbourhood design today, we can see in many cases that it is no more than a grid design primarily intended for the easy passage of automobiles (Fig. 5). In this setting, prospects for favourable levels of social health among neighbours are poor. For there are no common places that invite children to

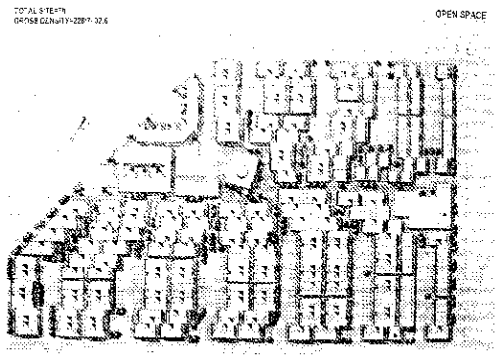


Figure 4 **Plan of the traditional city of Hasa showing the hierarchical system of spaces**

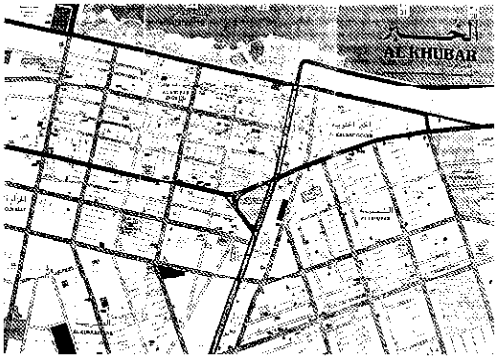


Figure 5 **Plan of Khobar in Saudi Arabia reflecting the modern grid network of roads**

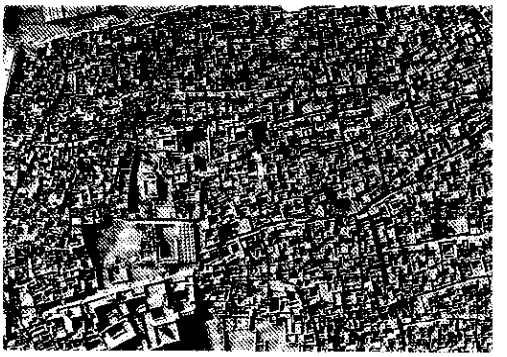


Figure 6 **Aerial view of a city fabric showing the uncomfortable way to a mosque**

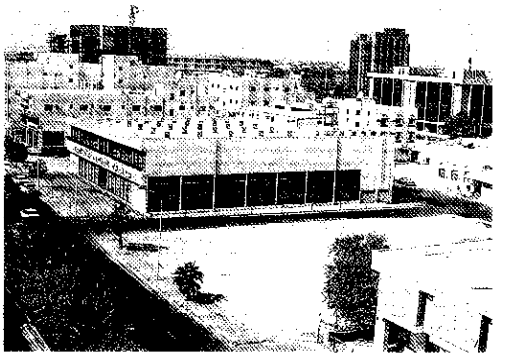


Figure 7 **A compound showing the central position of the mosque and other facilities**
Design produced by Mohammed al-Neimi during the Housing Studio of 1994, in the Department of Architecture, King Faisal University

play, no outdoor spaces for possible gatherings of mothers if weather permits, no pedestrian walkways for people to conduct daily errands, etc. To do the smallest activity, a car has to be used, thus hampering efforts towards possible socialization among neighbours. In this grid, green areas are placed in the central isles of main streets just to please the car driver. Trees, if found on side walks at all, are widely spaced in order to have a visual impact on a viewer in a car, not a pedestrian (Fig. 6).

Social health in a compound design

If we compare a neighbourhood in a city fabric with a compound that contains a limited number of families, we note a difference. In the latter, the sense of community is stronger. There is the opportunity to stroll casually in a comfortable environment, to sit and socialize with neighbours, to walk to the shopping area, mosque and kindergarten without being threatened by car movement. A typical design in compounds is based on the separation of car circulation from the pedestrian network as much as possible. There is a ring road for cars that gives birth to secondary roads and cul-de-sacs in a systematic way. This allows for possible erection of a continuous network of walkways that start from the doorsteps of each house and collect in a main pedestrian route. The latter links with the central facilities of the compound (Fig. 7).

In a compound setting, a person experiences shaded walkways, the smell of flowers, sight of fountains playing and relaxed outdoor spaces. The compound environment that makes it so pleasant to walk to community facilities is similar to the cowboy who makes it so attractive to smoke a cigarette.

One of the facilities located on the main pedestrian square is a mosque. By connecting this route with secondary walkways, there is a chance for each person to meet and socialize with a group of neighbours going in the same direction—acquaintanceships are bound to occur over time. The walk is not more than ten minutes and the way passes through playgrounds, causing children to see adults walking to the mosque on a daily basis. In this case, advertisement for social health is through the repetition of a desirable act—such a basic



Figure 8 **Shaded walkway providing a favourable environment for socialization**

technique of persuasion—that eventually marks in a child's mind an example to be emulated (Fig. 8).

Walking to the mosque is just one out of many facets of social health a compound setting can facilitate. Why is such design only limited to compounds? Why is it only limited to a small percentage of the society? Can this system for neighbourhood design be provided for the general public? Can't municipalities think of legislation that disseminate these ideas instead of the mechanical grid of roads primarily oriented for car movement?

Conclusion

To conclude, I have argued that social health is an indispensable criterion for the ultimate health of the city. It is the responsibility of professionals to advertise social health using aggressive techniques similar to those adopted by manufacturers selling their products. Advertising social health can be done not only through billboards and calligraphy bands, but also through neighbourhood design that facilitates a sense of community among dwellers.

References

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