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GATES AS SIGNS OF AUTONOMY IN MUSLIM TOWNS

In 1980 over lunch at Harvard I had a memorable discussion with Oleg Grabar about the Muslim built environment. He advised me to investigate the word *khatta* and its exact meaning and implication for Muslim towns. That advice gave me a key for future essays, among them this study.

Most of the works that have dealt with gates have concentrated on monumental portals such as those to cities and mosques; they range in theme from semiotic interpretations to the geometric innovations of their builders. Gates to shared residential spaces such as dead-end streets have been neglected by historians, mainly because they are not attracted to gates that are neither as elaborately nor as elegantly built as monumental gates are. Here I will argue that residential gates play a role as symbols of control in society and deserve attention because they can contribute to the understanding of the sociocultural structure of societies where they are found.

Contemporary scholars have been misled in their observations of the morphology of streets in Muslim towns; they describe them as either a labyrinth of thoroughfares and alleys, or as they exist today — a network of linear streets organically arranged. But in the past there were gates all over the city that divided this labyrinthine space into many smaller spaces for the exclusive use of particular groups. These places closed in by gates had a function that has been lost today and that affected many aspects of city life. The same traditional physical organization had a totally different quality than that we see

today because the gates have since disappeared (figs. 1–2).

Gates are logically controlled from one side, that is, by those living within the space.¹ Because a family or group of families controlled who went into and out of their gate, the gate was a very important means of maintaining their autonomy; those who lived inside could shut out those coming from without. Doors or gates could be found not only in dead-end streets, but also closing off subquarters, quarters, and whole towns (figs. 3–8). Authority could not penetrate into the places beyond these gates and that explains why they disappeared: they were eliminated by governments. That elimination began with the gates to quarters because those gates were controlled by the largest number of people. In dead-end streets, responsibility was concentrated in the hands of the few residents, making it easier to object to their gate's demolition. In Cairo, for example, in 1798, French soldiers demolished the gates to some quarters and through streets, but the residents of dead-end streets resisted the demolition (some were demolished nonetheless and their wood was sold for firewood). Some of the cul-de-sac gates or traces of them still exist (fig. 9); gates to quarters can often be located from texts:² *darb* refers to the gate for a dead-end street; *daraba* to the gate on a through street.³

In the early nineteenth century, all but a few of the remaining gates were removed by order of the authorities, who claimed that the city was so safe they were no

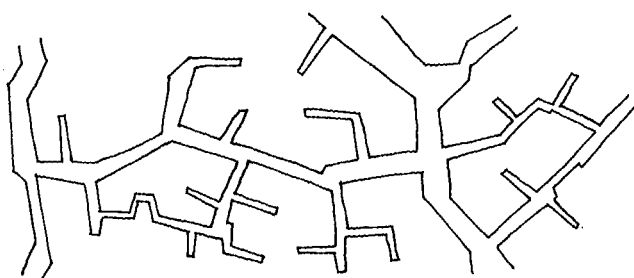


Fig. 1. A sketch showing a street network as it looks today.

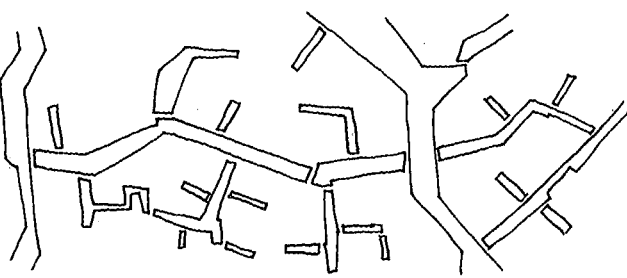


Fig. 2. A sketch showing how streets were separated by gates in traditional neighborhoods.

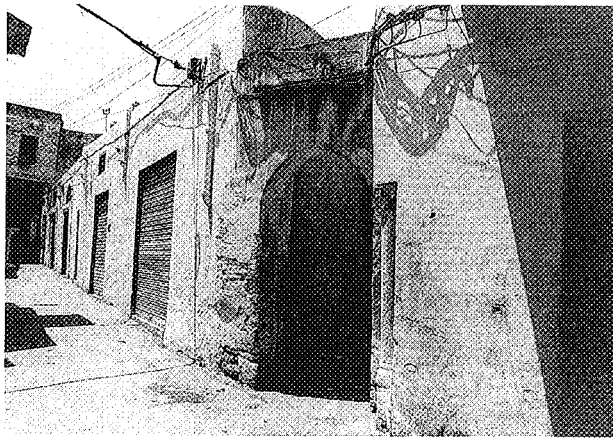


Fig. 3. Tunis. Entrance to a dead-end street once marked by a gate.

longer needed.⁴ When the gates were removed, the spaces behind them became part of the public domain (fig. 10), greatly increasing the proportion of public space in the city. In other words, the physical organization remained the same but private land became more restricted).

Gates to dead-end streets were erected by their inhabitants.⁵ The neighbors would not object unless, for example, abutting walls were damaged by opening and closing the gate. Ibn al-Rami, who lived in Tunis (d. 1334), tells us that it was customary to have gates on streets, and no one objected so long as no damage to neighbors was involved.⁶ Gates to a quarter were also usually erected by the quarter's residents, occasionally at the request of the authorities. In 1459 there were so many thefts that a group of wealthy people built gates to the new quarters of Cairo. In 1497 the governor of Cairo ordered those who did not have gates in their quarters to build them, and the residents did so.⁷ In contrast to the gates of dead-end streets, therefore, gates to quarters were often built for security. Although they were sometimes left open during the day, they were usually closed at night.⁸ During troubled times, when thieves, civil war, or invasion threatened, they were kept closed all the time. During a civil war in Cairo in 1389 the gates were guarded and armed;⁹ watchmen kept late arrivals out unless they could give the password. The responsibilities of the guard were well known and included his not divulging the secrets of the residents.¹⁰

The existence of gates up to the beginning of the twentieth century means that most shared places in a city were controlled by the residents and only minimal space by the authorities.¹¹ The conventions that developed to

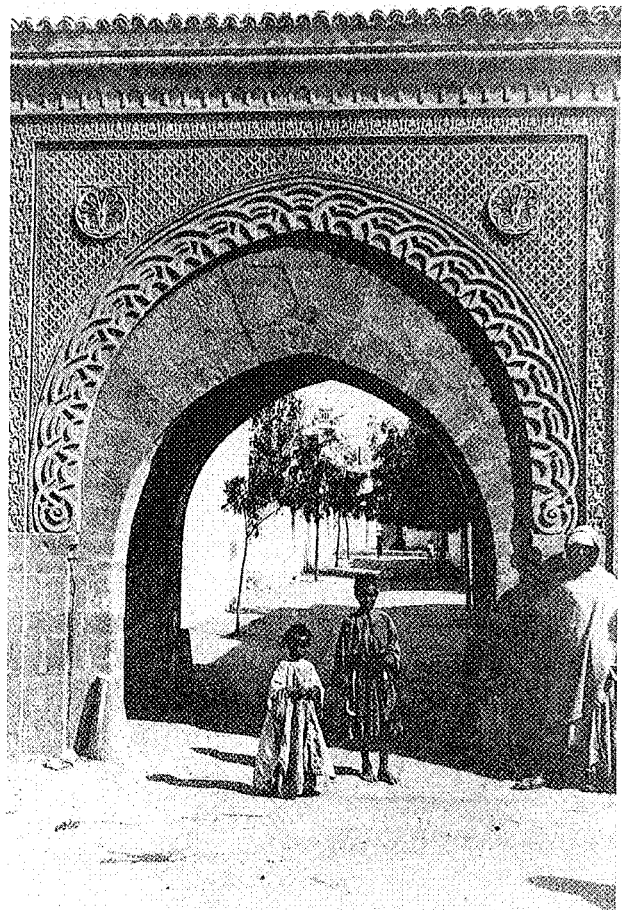


Fig. 4. Casablanca. A gate to a quarter.

control this shared space can be determined by examining legal cases involving agreements and disputes among the residents. A dead-end street was legally owned by the people who shared it; no individual was allowed to make any change — such as opening a shop or projecting a cantilever or overpass or digging a well — without the consent of all the other inhabitants, that is, those who owned property abutting the street and had access to it.¹² Two principles governed the resolution of disputes among neighbors. The first was that if a neighbor made a change and the others did not object, approval of the action was assumed. In one case, a person cut a door into a dead-end street that had fifteen dwellings, and no one objected. Eight years later, some residents did object, but the judge ruled that their silent acquiescence had lasted so long that their right to object had lapsed. Had the period been less than eight years, their objections might have been considered.¹³

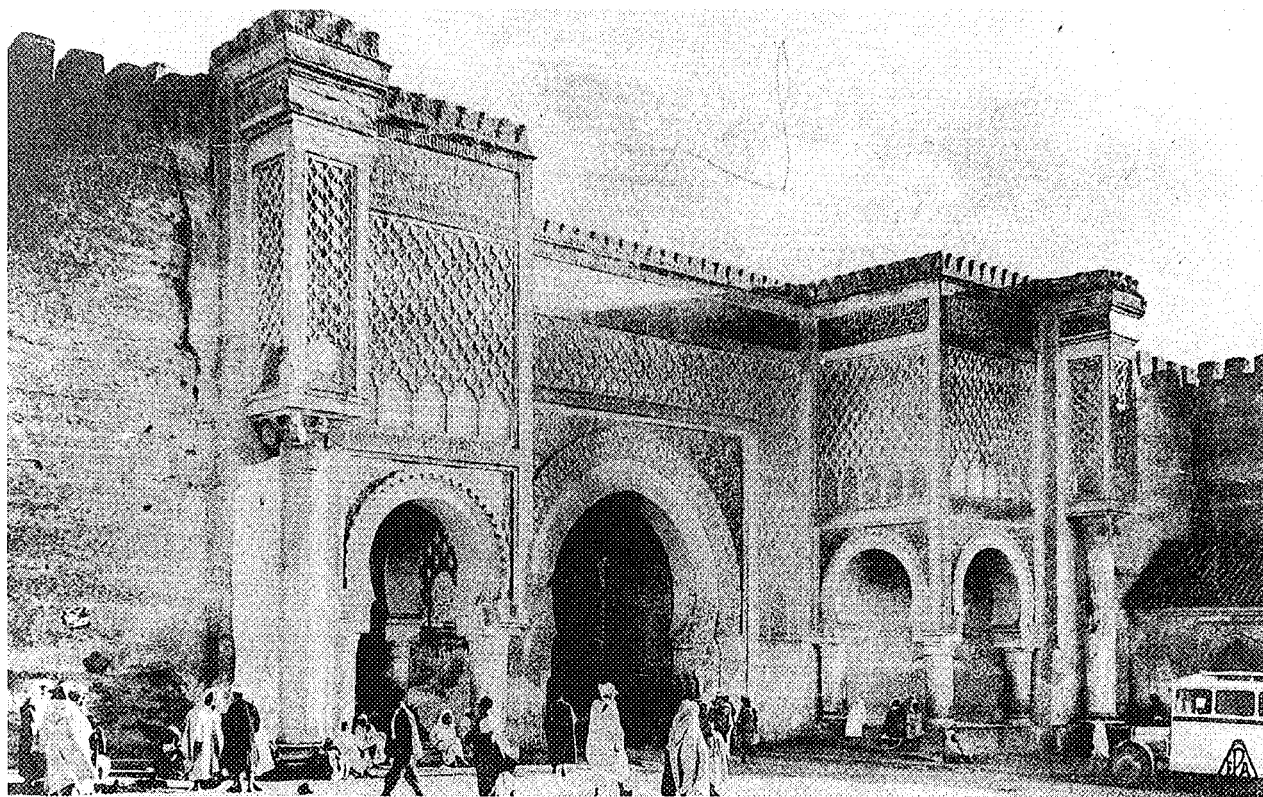


Fig. 5. Meknes. The Gate of Mansour, a city gate.

The second principle was that the existing configuration of a dead-end street formed the basis for resolving disputes. Any new change had to be made with the agreement of all members. If some neighbors wanted a change and a single person objected, the change could not be made.¹⁴ If, however, the change was not in the dead-end street, but would affect it, then the consent of all inhabitants was not required. If a house owner opens up a door abutting the dead-end street to which he previously had no access he gained the right to participate in the use and control of the dead-end street. In 1360, Ibn al-Qattan, a judge in Tunis, was asked to render a decision in a case in which a houseowner abutting a dead-end street, but with no access to it, had objected to the door one of his neighbors had made to gain access to the dead-end street. He answered that as long as the objecting neighbor had himself no access to the street, he had no right to object.¹⁵

The convention governing the opening up of a new entrance, then, was that no door could be opened without the approval of all partners. If it was a question of repositioning a door — if an individual wanted to open a

new door and seal the old one — he could do it even if others objected, but the door could only be located in a place closest to the entrance to the dead-end street. Since relocating the door farther from the entrance would give the individual the right to penetrate deeper into the dead-end street and would therefore affect more of his neighbors, it could not be allowed without their consent.¹⁶

If an individual owned two houses back to back, each of which had access to a different dead-end street, and he made the two houses into one, then it was legal for him to use both dead-end streets. However, it was illegal for the owner to create a passageway between the two houses so that he could reach one of the houses from both dead-end streets, because this would give the residents of each house the right to use a dead-end street to which it did not otherwise have access.¹⁷ Judging from legal cases, a house with access to two dead-end streets was considered particularly convenient, as it provided a shortcut from one side of a quarter or a town to the other, and this increased its property value.¹⁸

Still other conventions developed among the resi-



Fig. 6. Casablanca. Gate separating two districts.

dents of the shared place. Most traditional towns were compact, with little public space, and private property was often found behind shared places. This situation required conventions that allowed the residents of the enclosed properties to pass through shared places to reach the public domain. Otherwise the residents controlling the shared place would dominate the ability of other residents to pass through it. Easement rights that served this purpose were well known to the public and eliminated any friction between neighbors caused by the location of gates.¹⁹ It was an important feature of the Muslim city, since to create an efficient environment with minimal public space, the properties were arranged to fit one inside the other, and this would otherwise have caused problems among the residents, had easement rights not existed to provide access to the innermost property owners. Today, however, this access has been achieved by demolishing gates and creating an environment of little territorial depth.

Neighbors of shared places resolved their disputes²⁰ through discussions that brought neighbors together and

resulted in socially homogeneous quarters. The quarters in Muslim towns functioned as a unit because the residents came from the same tribe or profession²¹ or had some other common tie, whether a common village, religious sect, ethnicity, or special craft, suggesting that the territorial organization generated social homogeneity.²²

Traditional neighborhoods marked by gates, such as markets, squares, streets, and culs-de-sac used to be named after those who lived or plied their trade there: for example, the quarter (*harat* or *mahallat*) of Najjarin (the carpenters), the quarter of Saqqayin (water carriers), and the quarter of al-Yamaniyya (the Yemenis).²³ Today, however, governments have changed these territorial names to street names. In 1847, for example, a decree changed the territorial names in Cairo by numbering and naming streets to make it easier for outsiders to find their way.²⁴

The gates that marked a common place in traditional environments implied shared responsibilities for its maintenance for all those within; conventions governing that maintenance were also well developed. For exam-



Fig. 7. Tetuan. Gate separating two districts.

ple, repairing and sweeping the channels for waste water in Tunis was the responsibility of each house in turn, that is, the resident of the first house had to repair what was in front of his house and help repair what was in front of the second; the residents of both the first and second house shared the responsibility for helping the owner of the third house to repair his section, and so on. Everyone was compelled to cooperate.²⁵

The dead-end street was used as a kind of living room for the residents around it. As shown in fig. 11, an individual had to pass through the gate of a town to enter place 1, then to pass through a second gate to enter place 2, and so on. Horizontal lines indicate boundaries between places that would have had gates: 1 designates the most public, 2 a shared place for quarter residents, 3 a dead-end street, and 4 a dwelling, but 2 and 3 can also be

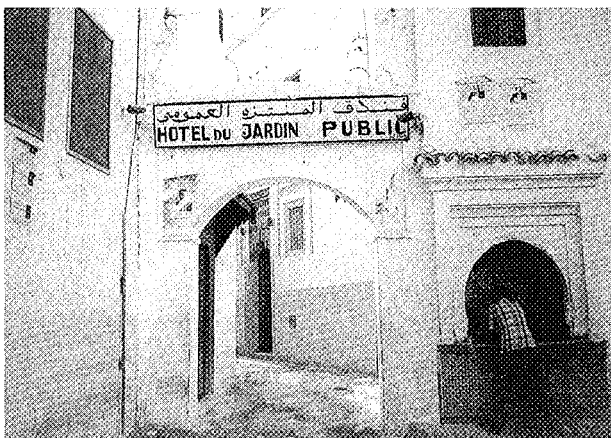


Fig. 8. Fez. Gate in a residential quarter.

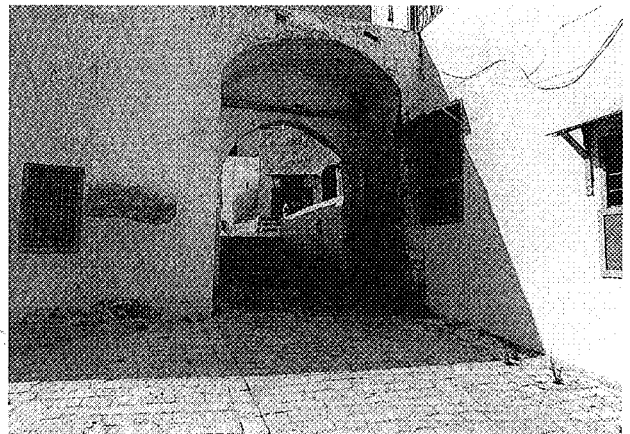


Fig. 9. Sidi Bou-Said. The most common trace of a gate is the upper part of a wooden frame with holes on both sides.



Fig. 10. Tunis. Gate that was eliminated transforms the private space into a public one.

dwelling since some houses could be entered from places 1 and 2. In the figure, 1 is the public space for 2, 2 the public space for 3, and so on. Conversely 4 is the private space for 3, 3 the private space for 2, and so on. This hierarchy has disappeared today (fig. 12), because the quarter as a territorial organization has broken down; this breakdown ended the shared responsibility among neighbors, reduced communication between them, and

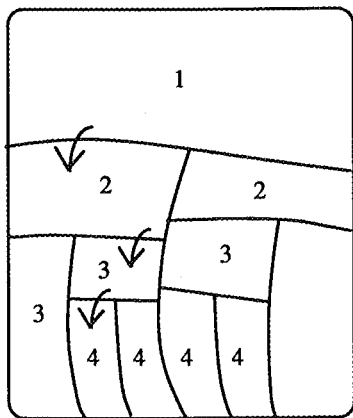


Fig. 11. In the traditional environment, the dead-end street was used as a kind of living room for the residents around it.

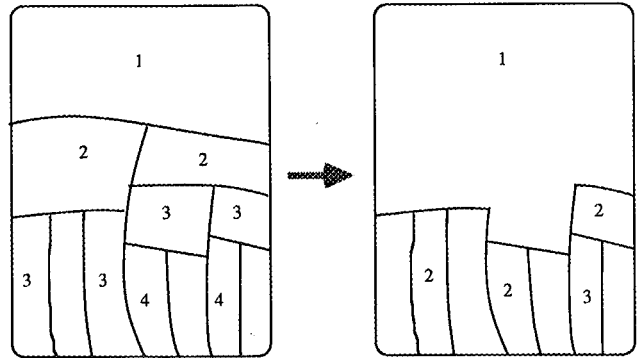


Fig. 12. The disappearance of gates turned a deep territorial structure into a shallow one.

altered the entire social organization. Conventions governing maintenance were forgotten. Quarters are no longer homogeneous; dead-end streets are no longer living rooms for the community, but have become merely passageways to reach the outside world. Maintaining such places is a burden on the authorities, and increases the costs for society at large. Today cleaning streets, for example, has become the task of the municipality, and as a result users litter them with impunity. When the users knew that keeping the streets clean was their task, they were more careful. Gates showed the limits of that territory, and as boundary lines they helped keep the city clean.

There are, of course, obvious disadvantages to traditional territorial organizations for our contemporary needs, but does this justify the rejection of the traditional patterns in toto and their replacement by modern ones that do not recognize the proliferation of territories and its ramifications?

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NOTES

1. Gates could separate two territories of the same level — for example, a door between two houses which is controlled from both sides — but this was quite rare. For details, see John Habraken, *Transformations of the Site* (Cambridge, Mass., 1988), pp. 24–29.
2. For details, see Jamel Akbar, *Crisis in the Built Environment: The Case of the Muslim City* (Singapore-Leiden, 1988), pp. 164–73.
3. Ibn Mansur, *Lisan al-Arab al-muhit*, ed. Y. Khayat and N. Marashli, 3 vols. (Beirut, n.d.), 1: 961. Terms for gates varied from one region to another. Ibn Taymiyya, a Hanbali jurist (d. 1328) who lived in Damascus, used the word *mashra'* to refer to

- the gate of a dead-end street; in Tunis, Ibn al-Rami (d. 1334) called the same thing a *darb*. But a *darb* could also designate parts of the gate; al-Wansharisi, a Maliki jurist who also lived in North Africa (d. 1508), used the word to refer to the frame of the gate. Maqrizi (d. 1414) used it in Cairo to refer to the whole territory within the gate: "I used to live in the *darb* of al-Atrak [the quarter of the Turks]." Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmu' fatawi al-Shaykh Ibn Taymiyya*, 36 vols. (Morocco, n.d.), 30: 11 (henceforth Ibn Taymiyya); Ibn al-Rami, "Kitab al-i'tan bi ahkam al-bunyan," *Majallat al-fiqh al-Malki*, ed. A. al-Dawdi (Morocco, 1982), p. 336 (henceforth Ibn al-Rami); Ibn 'Abdin, *Rad al-muhtar 'ala al-dur al-mukhtar*, 8 vols. (n.p., 1966), 5: 446 (henceforth Ibn 'Abdin); al-Wansharisi, *al-mi'yar al-Mu'ayyad*, 12 vols. (Morocco, 1981), 9: 7 (henceforth al-Wansharisi); al-Maqrizi, *Kitab al-mawa'iz wa al-I'tibar*, 2 vols. (Cairo, n.d.), 2: 37 (henceforth Maqrizi).
4. Hasan 'Abd al-Wahab, *Takhtit al-Qahira wa Tansimaha* (Cairo, 1957), p. 36 (henceforth al-Wahab).
 5. For example, al-Wansharisi reported a case from Taza, Morocco, in which the gates of some quarters were demolished because of a conflict between two groups. Later the people wanted to finance the rebuilding of the gates that led to the market from the revenues of some shops that had been donated as a pious foundation. When the jurists were asked whether this was possible they allowed it on the grounds that the gate would make the shops safer; al-Wansharisi, 7: 79.
 6. Ibn al-Rami, p. 336.
 7. 'Abd al-Wahab, pp. 35–36.
 8. For a festival in al-Fustat in 941 in which most of the population participated, it was reported that the streets were exceptionally kept open after dark. Normally gates of quarters were closed two hours after sunset, and gates of dead-end streets were closed just after sunset (Akbar, *Crisis in the Built Environment*, p. 169).
 9. During a period of political instability in Cairo in 1517 the gates were again guarded; Goitein, "Cairo: An Islamic City in the Light of the Geniza Documents," in *Middle Eastern Cities*, ed. I. M. Lapidus (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1969), pp. 80–96. 'Abd al-Wahab, p. 36.
 10. See, for example, *Thalathu Rasa'il Andalusiyya fi adab al-hisbah wa al-Muhtasib*, ed. E. Levy-Provençal (Cairo, 1955), p. 33; 'Abd al-Wahab, pp. 35, 37.
 11. Goitein, referring to al-Fustat, concludes that "the [Geniza] documents do not contain a word for public square, which can only mean that there was none" (Goitein, "Cairo: An Islamic City," p. 86).
 12. Ibn Taymiyya, a prominent Hanbali jurist (d. 1328), was asked about a person who bought an upper-floor apartment on a dead-end street and wanted to build a *rushan* (a wooden cantilever) over the street, claiming that he should be allowed to do so because the street had a school door in it. Ibn Taymiyya answered that so long as it was a dead-end he could not build any projection without the partners' consent (Ibn Taymiyya, 30: 8–9).
 13. Al-Wansharisi, 9: 63.
 14. In one case a man owned all but one of the houses on a dead-end street. The owner of the houses built a gate at the street's entrance; the owner of the single house objected even though the gate did not harm him. The judge ordered the gate demolished, but was informed that its owner was out of town, possibly on purpose. He ordered the gate to be taken down and sold to cover the expenses of its dismantling (al-Wanshari, 9: 7; Ibn al-Rami, p. 336).
 15. Ibn al-Rami relates that this custom was known in Tunis (ibid., p. 328).
 16. In one case, the owner of a house abutting a dead-end street, but with no access to that street, had a shop that opened onto it. He tried to cut a doorway from his shop to his house. The residents of the dead-end street prevented him from doing so, and he later sold the house. The new owner attempted to make a door in the same place, but was informed that he did not have the right. A judge from Fez ruled that the new owner should be compensated by the previous owner if he wished, but he could not make a door (Ibn al-Rami), p. 329.
 17. For the Hanafi rite, see Ibn 'Abdin, 5: 446; for the Maliki rite, see Ibn al-Rami, pp. 327–29; for the Shafi'i rite, see al-Nawawi, *Kitab al-Majmu'*, ed. M. al-Muti'i, 13 vols. (Jedda, n.d.), 12: 415–16.
 18. For the Shafi'i rite, see ibid., 12: 413–15; for the Hanafi rite, see Ibn 'Abdin, 5: 446; for the Hanbali rite, see Ibn Taymiyya, 30: 5.
 19. Akbar, *Crisis in the Built Environment*, pp. 33–35, 76–77.
 20. Ibid., pp. 93–128, 151–60.
 21. For example, Lapidus, in his description of urban quarters during the Mamluk period, writes: "The fundamental elements of Mamluk-period social organization — the quarter, the fraternity, the religious community, and the state — seem to have prevailed throughout the Muslim world... Almost universally Muslim cities contained socially homogeneous quarters. In Aleppo and Damascus the basic units of society were quarters, which were social solidarities as well as geographical entities. Small groups of people who believed themselves bound together by the most fundamental ties — family, clientage, common village origin, ethnic or sectarian religious identity, perhaps in some cases fortified by common occupation — lived in these neighborhoods" (Lapidus, *Middle Eastern Cities*, pp. 49, 51).
 22. Ibid., pp. 86–87.
 23. The historian al-Baladhuri (d. 892) gives the name of the dead-end street and of the owner after which it was named (abi al-Hasan al-Baladhuri, *Futuh al-Buldan* [Beirut, 1978]; see, for example, pp. 280–87, 293–96, 353–63). Maqrizi, says that the *darb* [street] al-Aswani was named for (*yunsabu*) the judge Abi Muhammad al-Aswani (Maqrizi, 2: 37).
 24. For example, articles 23 decrees, "The road between the gate of the *darb* [quarter] Abi al-Lif and the street of al-Shikh Rihah should be named Harat al-Saqqayin Street" (Hasan 'Abd al-Wahab, pp. 23–25).
 25. Ibn al-Rami gives a detailed answer to all possible cases depending on the slope of the street, the direction of the flow of waste water, and the number of inhabitants of each dwelling, since a large family would produce more waste (Ibn al-Rami, pp. 366–78).