

RATIONALITY: BLIGHT OF THE MUSLIM BUILT ENVIRONMENT

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This talk was published in:

O'Reilly, W. (ed.)

Architectural knowledge and cultural diversity

Lausanne, Switzerland, Comportements. pp.127-133

Westernization is an environmental blight because of human rationality. After the enlightenment in the 18th century, human judgment became the demarcating criterion for all scientific and cultural developments including architectural and planning disciplines. The modern Muslim world followed this epistemology, although the built environment is so complex for any human rationality. Thus, the limitation of human rationality developed a narrow environmental knowledge that was imposed on the vivid diverse cultural and geographical regions of the Muslim world through modern and post-modern aesthetic values, industrialization, standardization, professionalism, planning codes and above all capitalism that has its own socioeconomic decision making process resulting in shallow cultural diversities. The paper will argue that the Islamic legal structure is distinctly different. In traditional environments, the Islamic legal structure generated decision making process that empowered end-users who created unlimited environmental solutions to suit their diverse cultural and geographical specificities. Through certain principles developed by the Islamic legal structure, those solutions were screened and then successful ones were imitated resulting in similarities and environmental typologies for each region leading to deeper cultural diversities. The traditional binding yet liberating Islamic legal structure (God's Wisdom as most Muslims believe) has been replaced, ironically, by a contemporary suffocating environmental systems based on human liberty and rationality.

RATIONALITY: THE BLIGHT OF THE MUSLIM BUILT ENVIRONMENT

The title of the colloquium "Architectural Knowledge and Cultural Diversity" raises the following question: Does cultural diversity evolve or it could be created? This paper will argue that genuine cultural diversity could only evolve. But how?

Although issues of this paper are about the Muslim world, they do apply to other cultures. Do we need cultural diversity? The desired answer for most scholars is: yes. Then, Why do we need it? Do we need it to learn from the diverse environmental solutions? Or do we need it to maximize society's gains of its artifacts? For me as a professional the answer is: as each site is different and hence the capabilities of that site is different in terms of geography, climate, building materials and a like, then the proposed environmental solutions for each site should be different, resulting in cultural diversity. If each site's solution has to be different, then which environmental solution should we select? Do we have the means as professionals to select or decide upon the best possible solution? In other words, to have cultural diversity we have to find the most appropriate solution for each specific site. If we managed, then we can talk about environmental richness and have cultural diversity.

But how could we create most appropriate solutions? Contemporary methods usually depends on human rationality either through duplicating past solutions of past societies or, on the other extreme, through inventing new solutions by designers. In most cases both attitudes deal with either pastiching the past, adjusting or even inventing physical or spatial configurations. In all cases, the choices are decided upon by professionals and materializes in end products (building forms, street patterns, etc.). Only recently concepts that affects the process of creating environmental solutions such as participation, empowerment, enablement were introduced.

To give a simple example: if the problem is to arrange a number of chairs in a room for a certain purpose, the known method of seeking solution is to organize a competition to generate the best solution, or selecting from other existing solutions of other sites and possibly adjusting them. The selected solution is then the product of one brain or few professional brains (whether through selection or invention).

However, in the Muslim built environment there was another method that invited all residents brains to work jointly to come out with the best possible solutions for their sites. In our former example, as the capabilities of the residents in other rooms is definitely different, for example their financial capability, or the shape and area of those other rooms is different, therefore, the

appropriate solutions needed for each room should be different, and it could only be genuinely different if it evolved from the site's residents. However, if the sites constraints are similar, the solutions will be similar as in the traditional environments where we could talk about typologies, patterns and conventions.

The places of conflict between neighbors are usually the interfaces between their properties. At these interfaces the conflicts and resolutions between neighbors are played out. They are the boundaries where conventional, personal, deviant and aberrant behaviors came to the surface: the undesirable movement of one resident towards another triggers a situation of conflict. To avoid such conflicts, attitudes of contemporary capitalist societies' laws were the minimization of possible disputing-interactions between neighbors. A typical attitude of its individualistic belief, capitalist societies laws defined and defended properties' boundaries, and devised the needed laws and penalties to control these boundaries. This resulted in eliminating the experiences of the sites' residents from contributing to the accumulation of environmental knowledge.

The attitude in traditional environments is the opposite, the Islamic legal system maximized the interaction between neighbors on those boundaries which enhanced the process of evolving best solutions.

Although it invited disputes,¹ the party wall between two properties for example, was a common feature in traditional environment because of the Prophet's proclamation that "no one should prevent his neighbor from fixing a wooden peg in his wall,". Muslim's law regarding party walls was affected by this proclamation. For example, is a person compelled to allow his neighbor to fix a wooden beam in his wall?²

This attitude of maximizing interaction between owners of adjacent properties implicitly pulled the residents sharing the party wall to decide together upon the quality of the party wall, its height, building materials, etc.³ The first decision that neighbors have to take is to meet and negotiate

¹ Party walls were a common source of dispute that methods and principles were developed to resolve them by investigating the wooden beams, doors, shelves, the upper part of the wall--such as parapets--and the corners. For example, by examining the joints it could be determined to which side of the wall they were connected. 'Ibn ar-Rami reports a variety of cases which indicate that this dispute was common. 'Ibn ar-Rami, *Kitab al-'Ilan bi 'Ahkam al-Bunyan*. pp. 275-294. For the Hanafi rite see 'Ibn 'Abdin, vol.8, pp. 53-54; for the Hanbali rite see 'Ibn Qudaman, vol. 4, pp. 555-576.

² Differences developed between schools of law in interpreting this tradition: Ash-Shafi'i and 'Ahmad b. Hanbal had the opinion that one should allow his neighbor to fix a wooden beam in his wall, while Malik considers this tradition as advice from the Prophet. However, with the exception of 'Abu Hanifah, most opinions approve leasing the party wall to neighbors so long as the leasing period and quantity of the wooden beams are known. The tradition is related by al-Bukhari, vol. 3, p. 384. Also see Malik in *al-Muwatta*, p. 346; 'Ibn ar-Rami, p. 294; 'Ibn Qudamah, vol. 5, p. 548.

³ These single party walls have always forced the two adjoining parties to communicate. For example, in 456/1063 a dispute took place between two neighbors (A and B) in which the party wall was owned by A, while B has a shelf in

about the wall, its thickness, finishes, etc. In this process of dialogue, neighbors are gaining knowledge of building a wall. A wall that is not designed by outsiders, or by following rules or building codes set by outsiders. A wall that is built by the people of the site reflecting their capabilities. Thus the residents' building experience is enriched. This neighbor who gained an experience from one wall, when building his other party wall will transfer this experience to his other side neighbor. By building the third and the fourth walls the experience will be farther transferred from one neighbor to another and improved upon. To generalize this into city scale, where there is thousands of party walls, this becomes a gradual process of enriching the solution of the site. Thus, there is an evolution of environmental knowledge of that site, because the people made decisions the system of Muslim's society gave users the power or the right to take decisions.

In contemporary environments the opposite is done. For example, if it is found through research by authorities that a certain technique is more appropriate to party walls in a particular region, the use of that technique becomes required by law, and the society will then loses the opportunity of profiting from users' experimentation which could have, through the exchange of experience over thousands of walls, resulted in better solutions. In other words, the built environment can be viewed as an open laboratory in which all users' brains, given the chance to experiment with an element, will find the best solution to a given problem.

Imagine the traditional built environment as a network in which each property owner has a relationship to adjacent owners. The owners of properties in one block relate to each other through water spouts, cisterns, party walls and the right of servitude.⁴ Each block's residents relates to others through rights of openings or even rights of overpasses. This network of rights does not exist in contemporary environment. The law isolates each owner; thus, we often see double party walls, each one of which stands as a reminder of poor communication among discrete individuals as a result of societies laws. In contemporary environments, there are some single party walls, such as the walls between units in a housing project, but these are controlled by housing agencies and are not supposed to be touched by the users. There are also single party walls between neighbors or friends if they agree on them, but these are not the convention.

the party wall with boards projecting out from it. The neighbor wanted to build a room, resting part of the wall on the projecting boards, but neighbor A objected. Al-Wansharisi, vol. 9, pp. 29-30, 58.

⁴ The cistern, for example, is an interesting element that established a relationship between neighbours. To give one case, 'Ibn al-Barra' was asked about a dispute in the town of al-Mahdiyyah, where a man bought the ground floor of a house on the condition that for twenty years he could collect the water from the gully in the upper floor in his cistern. Years later he sold the house. When the time lapsed the upper owner wanted to change the direction of the gully but the owner of the ground floor stopped him. Al-Wansharisi, vol. 8, pp. 428-9.

Another example from the traditional environment that transformed the environment into a laboratory of generating environmental solutions from users' brains is the Prophet's tradition: "Neither *darar* nor *dirar*" which translates as: "there should be neither harming nor reciprocating harm"; or "there is no injury nor return of injury."⁵ This saying was interpreted to mean that one may alter the built environment so long as the alterations cause no harm to others, and was used constantly by Muslim authorities to evaluate the legality of individual actions. People might initiate actions, such as elevating a building, which could disturb the owners of adjacent properties and then challenged by affected owners. In the absence of municipal rules or codes, each change was treated as a unique case and judged by referring to this principle. This process led to the evolution of genuine solutions.

Darar is what an individual benefits from at the expense of others, such as, for example, changing a residential property to a factory whose noise or effluent will harm neighbors; *dirar* means an action which harms others with out benefiting the acting individual, such as opening an unneeded window to look at the neighbor's yard. *Dirar* has also been explained as harming oneself so others will be harmed.⁶ The usage of the tradition as a legal tool suggests complete freedom of action for residents if others are not damaged. It also implies the refusal of intervention by outsiders in the decisions of owners regarding the internal organization. One can make changes within his property so long as no damage is caused to others. The only actions that an individual may not execute are those which affect neighbors properties physically, such as knocking or hammering on their wall, or those which affect the residents of the adjacent property--for example, by intruding on neighbor's privacy--even if the intrusion is not physical. The tradition implies physical and moral control.

In an interesting case al-Wansharisi (d. 1508) reported that a person wanted to establish a stable in a ruined area which he owned. The area was quite large, bounded by streets on two sides, a stable on a third and a protesting neighbor on the fourth. The owner of the ruined area was asked to build a room nine handspans in width with a wall two handspans thick, to prevent the damage of vibrating the protesting neighbor's wall.⁷ Many other cases suggest that the degree of success in counteracting damage did broaden the limits of the users' control. This positive mechanism prevented damage to the adjacent property, although limiting the concerned individual's decisions

⁵ Related by 'Ibn Majah, Malik and many others; *al-Muwatta* of Imam Malik Muwatta, p. 346.

⁶ The definitions are by Al-Qurtubi who adds that the tradition may imply preventing the person from harming his neighbor (*darar*) and the reciprocating harm between neighbors (*dirar*). 'Ibn 'Abd ar-Rafi' (the judge of Tunis, d. 733/1333) relates that *dirar* is "to harm yourself, so others will be harmed;" 'Ibn ar-Rami, p. 299.

⁷ Al-Wansharisi, vol. 9, p. 8. 'Ibn ar-Rami, pp. 306-307.

regarding the internal organization of his property--he might, for example, have to build a room abutting his neighbor's wall to counteract the vibration of his change. Through this process, the potentiality of the physical environment was increased, new solution was developed, which, if successful, becomes a pattern or typology or model and gradually the knowledge of making a dwelling is created by the people of the site.

One could think of a society where individuals could act without seeking initial permission and when the damage is felt the action will be challenged, in such situations users' initiative is maximized and thus solutions are unlimited; suitable ones will prevail resulting in conventions or typologies or patterns. In other words, the best solution will evolve.

Factors contributing to the establishment of conventions are numerous; three seem to be the most important ones. The first is need: people tend to change the physical environment to fit their needs. This seems to be an innate tendency of human beings. The second factor is user ingenuity: users who live on a site and experience its constraints often invent their own solutions. The third contributing factor is the convincing example. Users trust things if they see them work; a working solution easily spreads.

In traditional environments, these three factors flourished through several mechanisms: First, collective solution seeking. Resolution of the conflict among neighbors did not consider damage that the acting individual inflicted upon himself. If a newly-created door is proved to cause damage by exposing the neighbor's privacy, the creator must seal the door or change its position. How he accomplished this was the acting individuals problem. Residents gain different experiences from such critical situations. Each action has to deal with its unique constraints to find proper solutions, and this widens the range of the society's experience. The different uses of environmental elements in different locations for different purposes reveal new potential for the society. In other words, if the built environment is viewed as a laboratory in which users inflect and experiment with an element, ultimately someone will find the best solution and that solution will spread. Contemporary regulations narrow the range of such experiences.

Second, action precedes permission. In traditional environments the acting individuals did not ask for permission, they made a change, and if the neighbors experienced damage, there was a judgment as to whether the change should be permitted. This gave people a chance to try different solutions.

Third, refinement through conflict. Conflicting interests between individuals enjoying maximum control refined the conventions. If a person wanted to change the function of his property into a mill, but knew his neighbors would object, he might, if the site was very suitable for his

function, try to counteract the damage or convince the neighbors to let him continue anyway. There are positive and negative aspects of the site that he, as a miller, can only experience. If these aspects are worth fighting for, he may win. Other millers may join him, gradually transforming the neighborhood. In this case, the decisions were made by those who experienced the place and thus decided the locations of industries within the town, not by the authority's planners with their statistics, charts and predictions. There is a functional evolution in locating industries, as well as in all other aspects of the traditional environment. However, if the miller could not transform the property, it may be because the site is more suitable for a residence, and the residents therefore stood firmly against such a transformation. In other words, the forces between residents' interests often decided the proper morphology and function of the traditional environment within the town's constraints. This is why some Muslim towns resemble each other in the way they allocate functions, although they were not planned or controlled by authorities.

One may argue that the same principle holds nowadays where industries are very damaging. If the users have power and realize the severity of chemical damage caused by a plant, they will eliminate the damage by compelling the plant to counteract the damage or move. And we all know about corrupt decision-makers or strong lobbying by industries against users.

When we observe many individuals acting similarly, we recognize convention: users using the same building materials, locating spaces in similar positions, etc. Thus we may define convention as the sum total of similar individuals' actions over a certain period of time in a certain site. However, people change, life-styles change, the constraints of sites change, and so, in turn, conventions should change. Therefore we should not derive forms, morphologies, rules, explicit canons or patterns from traditional environment (as some professionals do). Conventions can not be made, they evolve.

Traditional Muslim environments changed gradually and harmoniously because those in control of convention were composed of the members that were subjected to it. Thus consensus among acting individuals was achieved. When regulations did not exist, residents had to settle disputes by dialogue. Successful inventions and applications by users were transmitted to others through dialogue within a society that pushed for more experiences. Thus conventions were reinforced. This is why we observe strong, coherent conventions in traditional environments. Although the nature of conventions may differ from one region to another, the degree of coherence of convention is similar in all traditional environments. In one town, ground floors may have no windows, and only a few small ones are found on upper floors; in another town, large openings with wooden screens are found all over the facades. In other words, each region or site has its best

solutions implemented. There is depth in environmental knowledge of each site, thus we can claim the existence of cultural diversity.

In contemporary environments, however, no conventions are needed. The regulations developed by a central authority according to its professional norms and values reduce the influence and role of residents. By minimizing communication, individuals are isolated, resulting in weak conventions. In short, the more control outsiders have, the weaker convention will be. The less control imposed by outsiders where users enjoy much control, the stronger convention will be. Centralization is destructive to conventions.

Because of the strong conventions in the traditional environment, the selection and distribution of elements by different users of a site was relatively similar, with courtyard houses, overpasses, bent entrances, etc. Over time, each region developed a certain model of a dwelling. For example, the qa'a house in Medina has very specific relationships between elements that repeat themselves in most houses, with variations to suit the sites. The qa'a itself is always divided into three bays. Most, if not all, regions have their own traditional dwelling, each with its own specific model. Through trial and error, those who lived in the area generated the model. This is observed most clearly in the case of traditional climatic solutions in different regions. The same climatic principles may apply, but each region, even every town, has its own well-adjusted climatic solution to meet its exact cultural and environmental needs. Once the convention or model is developed, it is difficult for individuals to violate it. Only the best inventions prevail. Thus the principles of the traditional environment that gave freedom to individuals also generated binding conventions. Freedom was framed by convention.

Contemporary environments, on the other hand, reflect the values and norms of decision-makers rather than the needs of users. The standardization of manufactured materials, similarity of environmental professional values and almost unified curriculums of schools of architecture and planning, to name only a few, resulted in similar solutions to all sites thus fading away cultural diversity.

The Muslim world today is seeking environmental knowledge from past generations where patterns, types, shapes and inventions of the past are transformed into the contemporary built environment. In traditional environment the legal system gave users the power to act through rights such as the rights of servitude, the rights of revivification etc. Fortunately, latest planning theories that are emphasizing concepts of empowerment and public participation are pushing the built environment to a process that resembles the principles of the traditional built environment. However, none of those theories could give people more power without damaging others as it is the

case in the principles derived from the tradition of damage in the Islamic legal system. Planners and Architects are not relaxed with applying such principles since their perceptions as professionals is that the built environment will be chaotic if people acted by themselves. In fact if the people acted the built environment will have its own order which is so complex for professionals to grasp (Akbar, 1988).

The Islamic legal system, or the way rights are distributed among people interacted with past conditions resulting in vernacular solutions. Traditional physical forms such as dead-end streets, minarets, vaults etc. are the result of interaction between rights enjoyed by people (Islamic legal system) and past capabilities. Today professionals are copying these physical elements because of the poverty of our present inventions, because of the nostalgic sense towards the past and they are trying to utilize past forms for our present needs. This attitude, is an insult to contemporary Muslim built environments. The Muslim built environment never lied and it should not lie. When past solutions are implemented for contemporary conditions one might claim that contemporary built environment is lying. It is more appropriate instead of copying end-products of past generations to understand the process through which these end-products were produced. The professional attitude of copying past elements is hindering the evolution of contemporary conventions. The path to appropriate solutions and thus cultural diversity is to allow those processes of Islamic legal system of creating knowledge in the site to operate by the people of the site. The current role of professionalism *per se* does not allow this.

Rationality is the product of the Western culture. Western utopian visions led to new ideas of engineering the society. Modernity, through rationality believed in progress by engineering the society. It is well accepted notion in western cultures that human rationality could decide what is the most appropriate solutions for humans and thus they could be delivered. Therefore, all religious values and principles including environmental ones were rejected even in the Muslim world. For example, professional attitude of copying past forms is in line with postmodern values. The Muslim culture, like all other cultures is subject to western modes of progress. Although the western culture is moving from one paradigm of society-making to another (Marxism/capitalism, structuralism/poststructuralism, modernism/postmodernism), there have always been a great advocacy of the professional role within those paradigm with some diversions. However, the Muslim culture is different. Muslims have their teachings from God which they have to obey. Those teachings do not give solutions, they are principles (like the ones explained), that if followed solutions are evolved. If the Prophet is here today he, most probably, will not forbid Muslims from using the internet. When the prophet moved to Medina he did not order Muslims to change their houses

which were built before Islam. Muslims continued living in their houses, and gradually when their behavior changed their houses were modified accordingly.

The concept of handing full power to users through the principle of damage will be rejected by rational professionalism. How could they allow the people to act and when damage is discovered the action will be challenged. The planning profession stand on the premises that damage should be eliminated and thus rules will be enacted. However, studies has shown (Hall, 1980) that no matter what planners do, there are always negatives to their recommendations and proposals. The complexity of the city is beyond human rationality. Planners always argue that they could deliver good judgments and proper environmental and economic forecasts from their analyses. But those judgments and advices favors some parties, issues and sites over others. In rational thinking making choices is inevitable. Alternative 'A' is more rational than 'B'. But for whom? Those choices has future negative implications that if multiplied could tax the society yet no one could comprehend the loss as the most appropriate solutions are not realized. The argument I am making is that the most appropriate solutions for people can only come from the principles of the creator of the people. Of course, for some, this is dogmatic. This convection is concluded form studying Muslim cities. The call is not for empowerment or enablement, but rather for the acceptance of the principles that give full power to the people without damaging others. One could not think of any environmental principle that could deliver this other than the principle of damage set by the Islamic legal system.

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