

### Book Review

## Crisis in the Built Environment The Case of the Muslim City

by Jamel Akbar; Concept Media Pte Ltd, 1988, 261 pp.

Despite this book's orientation toward scholars in the field of environmental design, it contains many environmental observations that are interesting to the casual reader. The originality of this work is that it investigates Islamic principles and processes of managing and operating the built environment by Muslim individuals and parties.

Through his investigation, the author has tried to show that the environment which existed in many parts of the Islamic world was successfully ordered by users to meet their needs and optimize Islamically acceptable behavior. Furthermore, it constituted a model of success for today's crisis of built environments in the contemporary Muslim world.

The crisis of contemporary environment, which is described as Responsibility and Control of the built environment, has shifted from people/users to centralized "formal" government-run agencies. The result of this conversion of roles has negatively affected both the relationship of individuals and groups to the built environment, and the ability of agencies to exercise management of that environment.

The realms of "Responsibility" and "Control" of "territories" and "properties," have been impressively elaborated in the investigation included in this book. Their Islamic significance have also been supported by references to original Islamic concepts and rules. The theme presented is that "responsibility" and "control" have been two fundamental issues which the Qur'an, the Hadith, the Sira, and other Islamic traditions have strongly advocated.

The author develops a study model focusing on three areas: ownership, control, and use. The combination of these three areas have generated five possible relationships or forms of submission which include: *unified* (the same party owns, controls and uses the property), *dispersed* (three independent parties are involved; one owns the property, a second controls it and a third uses it), *permissive* (a party that uses a property and has to deal with the party which owns and controls it), *possessive* (the party that uses and controls a property has to deal with the party which owns the property), and *trusteeship*

(the party that controls the property has to deal with the party which owns and uses it).

A detailed discussion of various forms of submission and the mechanisms that affect the shaping and state of the traditional Muslim environment is presented in the first section. A close link between "responsibility" and the Islamic legal system (Shariah) is established, which includes such Islamic concepts as leasing, preemption, inheritance, acquisitions, ownership and collection of state revenue. The five possible forms of submission are compared. While criticising traditional waqf as largely unsuccessful, he points to the "unified" form of submission as the most desirable state of property. Although he admits that the unified form of submission is not distinguished by jurists as a distinctive form, he claims that all their interpretations and ruling have encouraged this type of property. As a result, he contends, most of the traditional environment was composed of property that comes under this form of submission.

In the second section of the book entitled "**Changes in the Traditional Forms of Submission**," two major changes are described. The first is that the identity of the party has changed since formal bodies, such as the "municipality," have been substituted for private parties (which consisted of people who shared adjacent properties and common local interests). The second major change is that the property itself has shifted from one form of submission to another. These changes have been found to have mostly occurred in two periods; under the Ottoman Empire in the Nineteenth Century and in the Arab world in the Twentieth Century. In concluding this section, the author shows that centralization shifted the relationship between parties from the unified form of submission (from neighbors to the central authority) thus affecting the dialogue between neighbors. As a result, the author feels, most rural lands that were in the unified form were claimed by the state. The mechanisms of revivification that were state-controlled during the Ottoman Empire and which led to the possessive form were totally abolished.

In the possessive form, bureaucratic centralization resulted in properties that are more regulated than those that existed in the Ottoman Empire. Dead-end streets and pasture lands legally shifted from the unified form to the possessive or the permissive forms and were then regulated. Public spaces became the domain of the permissive form where the user was compelled to follow the rules. The traditional covenant relationship between the parties of a leased property were thrown out of balance, and leased property was placed in the dispersed form of submission and in adverse condition.

Essential to the concluding chapters of the book is the third section entitled "**Synthesis of the Forms of Submission**," the five forms of submission are explored together as they often coexisted in the built environment.

In the section entitled **“Growth and Formation of Town”**, the author discussed the decision making process with regard to the growth and formation of towns in the traditional Muslim built environment. He argued that expansion in the Muslim world is generally not planned by a central authority, but has been caused by many local decisions made by users. Scholars, as they eliminate responsibility from their analyses, have misinterpreted the Muslim town to the extent of reaching wrong conclusions. Creswell's conclusion that al-Basrah, al-Kufah, and al-Fustat are characterized by a “chaotic labyrinth of lanes and blind alleys, of tents and huts alternating with waste ground...” is an example of such an interpretation.

Akbar then moves on to positive aspects of environment management in **“Freedom and Control”** which deals with the exploration of the principles that maintain the relationship between parties of different properties. These principles were referred to by authorities in resolving disputes between parties and judgements affected the morphology of the built environment.

Elaborating on the four major elements which determine the characteristic texture of a Muslim built environment, the author, in **“Elements of the Traditional Built Environment,”** gives examples including *finā*, dead-end street, *hima*, and public space such as streets and squares. The principles generated from the fifth section were applied to these elements. According to the author Muslim society placed these four urban elements in the unified form of submission.

The seventh section entitled **“Size of Party Versus Size of Property”** explains the fundamental importance of the issue of responsibility. In a large party, responsibility is ideally distributed among members, thus affecting the state of the “property.” The smaller the property owned and controlled by the using party with no intervention, the more autonomous and optimum will be its synthesis. Five mechanisms were discussed which affect the size of the parties and properties in the traditional Muslim built environment; *Sadaqah*, *Hiba*, inheritance, pre-emption, and selling.

The eighth and last section, entitled **“Consequences of the Shift of Responsibility”** includes a series of comments that explore some of the effects of the change in the model of responsibility. Included as well are the major characteristics of both traditional and contemporary built environments.

Although largely descriptive, this book is a viable and original resource for those concerned with the crisis of contemporary Islamic built environment. Where conclusions were intentionally left open-ended, they should be viewed as a legitimate statement to stimulate further investigation.