

## Book Review

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### **Urban Form in the Arab World: Past and Present**

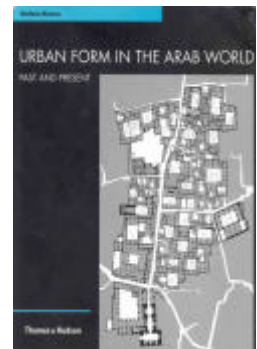
*Stephano BIANCA(2000) NY-USA: Thames and Hudson  
ISBN 0-500-28205-6*



This is not another history book on architecture in the Islamic world but a rather significant contribution to the understanding of the roots of the current problems of historic centres Arab cities, based on the author's professional experience in cities such as Aleppo, Fez, Baghdad and Mecca.

The book is divided into three parts.

The first part highlights the basic principles of Islam and their spatial and artistic implications. The author rightly argues that " *Islam did not prescribe formal architectural concepts, it moulded the whole way of life by providing a matrix of behavioural archetypes which by necessity generated correlated physical patterns*"



An analysis of specific building typologies such as the residential unit, the mosque and the related welfare buildings encountered in the urban architecture of Islamic Arab cultures is carried out. Such an analysis reveals that despite the great range of local and regional varieties, there are common conceptual and functional issues and clear shared values transpiring through the variety of architectural forms.

The structure of traditional urban fabric as a whole is then analysed and discussed in the case of Aleppo and Fez to demonstrate that there is a unique symbiosis between religion educational and social and commercial functions as expressed into the volumetric assimilation of the mosque into the central compound.

The second part of the book discusses the clash between tradition and modernity and problems and incompatibilities caused by the impact of modern Western planning and design models both in philosophical and practical terms. Colonial interventions on the historic city whether through the superimposition of the new city on the old historic fabric or the setting up of a completely new colonial city on virgin land took place without seeking any interface with pre-existing urban structures. This is further aggravated by the attitude of today's decision makers who are rarely provided with technical approaches and institutional tools which could demonstrate the viability of alternative more appropriate models of intervention.

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The third part of the book attempts to explore alternative approaches, which could reconcile traditional principles with contemporary needs. This is done through the case studies of projects carried out by the author in Mecca and Medina, Baghdad, Fez, and Aleppo.

The conclusion of the book concentrates on the issues of local cultural identities as materialised in the built environment. The author argues that *“modern ideologies and their related technologies have sapped the shaping forces of cultural identity and that cultural identity as an evolutionary chain of creative tradition, can only be sustained from within”*