

Book Review

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The Walled Arab City in Literature, Architecture and History.

*By Susan Slyomovics Ed. Frank Cass, London and Portland Or. 2001, pp 165 (HB)
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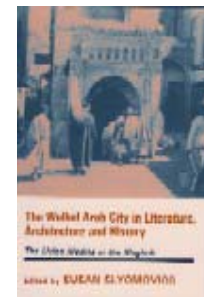
What is meant by the city *in* literature and history, or architecture *in* the city or *of* the city is understandable, but what about the *city in architecture*? As a physical construct, city is a collection of streets and buildings - some of which may be architecture. Architecture not only exists *in* the city, it actually makes the city. City is a product *of* architecture, as cooking is of the kitchen – and just as cooking exists *in* the kitchen but not the kitchen *in* the cooking - architecture is *in* the city, not the city *in* architecture.

Having cleared that, this is an interesting book in more ways than one. It is a collection of seven selected papers originally presented at the Tenth Annual American Institute for Maghrib Studies (AIMS) Conference ‘*The Living Medina: The Walled Arab City in Architecture, Literature and History*’ held in 1996 at the Tangier American Legation Museum – TALM. The Museum building, given to the United States by Sultan Sulayman in 1821 for its legation, is located in the centre of historic Tangiers, and one of the aims of the conference was to encourage the preservation and revitalisation of the historic area around the building.

With an emphasis on historic continuity as being central to urban regeneration, the aim of the conference was to analyse the North African *medinas* under several categories in order to uncover their topographies at a given time in history, to identify typologies based on their location and function, to investigate past urban life so as to understand the dominant groups and social classes which shaped them, and to study the rules and laws which long ago regulated lives and buildings in these cities. This has been done by studying a number of *medinas* as they are at present and then, working backward in time and using oral and textual sources, peeling off the layers of urban history in order to understand their evolution.

From its earlier Arabic name as *madinah*, the historic cities of the Maghrib have been given many names: *medina*, *kasbah*, the Arab quarters and *al-madinah al-qadimah* - the native and the old city to distinguish it from the newer colonial enclaves - the walled city, historic city, and in more recent studies, as the Arab and Arab-Islamic city. The selected papers included in this book present a number of case studies from Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, and Libya.

In her study of Tangier, historian Susan Gilson Miller chooses to study the *medina* through its use of water at the end of the 19th century when “Moroccans opposed innovation not only to thwart European political and economic interests, but also to preserve a system of values



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threatened by technologies beyond their control.” (p.155) By studying how water was then used for daily life and for rituals and symbolic purpose, the suggestion is not only to recreate the functional, sacred and social character of the medina, but also to involve new approaches to the concept of ‘the Islamic city’.

Taking Fez as the archetypal *medina*, Diana Davis and Denys Frappier – geographer and veterinarians - analyse the evolution of its architecture by taking into account the muscle power of the animals – the donkey, mule and horse – which provided the economic and transport infrastructure for the city. The conclusion here is that the revitalisation of Fez and other North African *medinas* ought to continue using the equine transport - albeit with better care of the animals - instead of replacing it with expensive, noisy and polluting cars and scooters.

Djilali Sari, a geographer and historian, examines a number of Algerian *medinas*: Nedroma, Mazouna, Cherchell and Biskra – where the historic urban cores were destroyed by the French colonisers - to speculate about the potential role of these *medinas* in the reconstruction of Algerian culture and identity. As an anthropologist, Susan Slyomovics describes how the Jewish people who left the old town of Tlemcen in Algeria in 1962 replicated their spatial memories in the later building of their synagogue in Paris.

Through his examination of two neighbourhoods – the *houma* - in the Tunis *medina*, Justin McGuinness, a planner, underlines the importance of historic sounds and textures of the streets for conservation initiatives for the *medinas*. In her study of the walled city of Tripoli in Libya, anthropologist Mia Fuller looks at how, during their colonial control between 1912-43, the Italians built and lived in their segregated modern quarters while enjoying the picturesque *medina* and using the most repressive policies in the rural areas.

Altogether, these essays offer interesting even if fragmented insights into how these *medinas* once evolved and functioned and how they were destroyed, degraded or preserved through colonial interventions. Studies such as these – fixed in time and conducted within the confines of diverse and specialist subjects - have their limitations, and these essays are no exception. While the knowledge of the 19th century water supply and of the street smells and textures of the past, or how the *medinas* functioned over a century ago may well be of academic interest, it is indeed doubtful whether it will help towards a better understanding of ‘the Islamic city’ - itself an Orientalist category - or how to deal with the present pressures and realities in these *medinas*.

By itself, continuing the equine modes of transport - donkeys, mules and horses – will hardly help expecting women, sick children and the elderly to get to the hospital. After all, why should the residents of these *medinas* be doomed to a pre-industrial past anymore than those living in York, Assisi or San Gimignano? All over Europe, many such small towns - about the same size as the North African *medinas*, and thriving destinations for cultural tourism - continue to effectively co-exist with their past without losing the benefits of the present. Why is it that western specialists and scholars continue to insist that the only way for the non-western peoples to be culturally authentic is for them to live and act as if the 20th century never happened for them? Similarly, when reading about the spatial memories of the departed residents of Tlemcen helping shape their new synagogue in Paris, it is difficult to escape the parallel with the Palestinians whose urban history and space - including the names of their towns - have been systematically destroyed and mutilated for over half a century.

By their very nature, cities are always dynamic and never fixed in time. Urban history may be a good teacher, but it seldom provides all the answers. Living cities demand new skills, ideas and innovation which, while being sensitive to what has gone before, are essential to meet the changing needs and necessities of their citizens. The choice of the seven papers included in this collection is itself rather curious: five are from American scholars, one from a British scholar based in Paris, and only one from the Maghrib. Of the remaining sixteen papers presented at the conference - but neither included nor given titles, references or even a short summary in this book - fifteen were presented by scholars from the Maghrib. We shall never know what they had to say about the future of their *medinas* once built and for long well looked after by their ancestors.