

Stefano Bianca

URBAN FORM IN THE ARAB WORLD: PAST AND PRESENT

Zürich: vdf, 2000. 348 pp, Paperback, ISBN 3-7281-1972-5.

Can one gain knowledge from a diatribe? Can *any* book that contains a lifetime's first-hand experience yet, based on this experience, separates things into two neat camps, systematically painting one side in the darkest of colors while uniformly extolling the virtues of the other side, be of any use to a scholar or a student at the start of this new multicolored millenium? This is the dilemma that I found myself pondering as I waded through this frustrating book.

Stefano Bianca has worked as an architecture, planning and preservation expert in the Arab World since the mid-1960s. Over the years, he was affiliated with the planning institute ORL at the Swiss federal technical university ETH in Zürich [this book was published as part of ORL's collection]; some of the studies in this book involved students from this institute. More recently, he worked for the Aga Khan Trust for Culture in Geneva to set up its Historic Cities Support Programme. The raw material for this book is drawn from this long experience working in the historic core of some of the most important ancient *and* contemporary cities in the Arab World, from Fez to Aleppo. Moreover, this work usually took place in very sensitive political settings, featuring some relations of power that were reflected in projects to transform the built fabric of these cities. To add even more interest, the projects on which Dr. Bianca focuses in this book were all undertaken in the late 1970s and early 1980s, a period when the paradigmatic shift in attitude towards the management of historic tissues was just starting to reach the Arab World; indeed, one could say that he was part of this new wave that was to bring about a (partial) attitudinal change that was to revolutionize the planning for older cities in this region. Writing, based in such personal experience, on such a critical transitional period would thus be in itself fascinating reading.

Dr. Bianca did draw on this experience to write this book. The result does contain a fascinating window on the intents and results for the plans for inner cities in the Arab World, during a particular period. The book is also very well illustrated, the layout is attractive, and the writing is fairly flowing. Yet the book is deeply flawed, mostly because Dr. Bianca unfortunately chose to write another type of book. It is not really about urban form in the Arab World. For several reasons, a more appropriate title may be the one the author used for the ninth chapter in it: "Structural Conflicts between Traditional Islamic Concepts and Modern

Western Planning Methods". I will first explain why this title reflects more closely the content of the book; then I will present some of the reasons for my great frustration with the book, given these contents.

Firstly, the book is not really about urban form itself; rather, it is about the great clash that Dr. Bianca sees under way between "the traditional Muslim philosophy of life" and "the secular beliefs of modern Western civilization" (p. 9-10). He only uses the production of urban form as an illustration of this monumental and structural conflict. Secondly, while the book title refers to the Arab World and most references are indeed to this linguistic and cultural region, "Arab" is thoroughly supplanted in the text by "Islamic". This is represented here, not just as a religion and an ethical system, but as a "general connotation for a traditional *Weltanschauung* fundamentally different" from Western concepts, ideologies and models. What interests him most is that Islam "involves an entire social order and has developed pragmatic rules of conduct which permeate all aspects of daily life" (p. 184). Thirdly, these rules are reflected in and produce a clearly defined built environment. While "the manifestations of Islamic architecture are not based on explicit formal prescriptions and have varied considerably..., from an early point in history..., there is a specific Islamic quality which becomes apparent in every appropriation and adaptation of pre-existing architectural and artistic heritage... The respective regional styles of Islamic architecture are not necessarily linked by formal resemblances, but they show inner affinities which are clearly based on related customs, patterns of use and corresponding structuring principles" (p. 10). Fourthly, the doubly dichotomous attitude found in this chapter title – traditional versus modern, and Islamic versus Western – underlies the whole book. While he occasionally acknowledges that these binary representations may be too generalizing ["the author may be forgiven for accentuating the dialectics of this controversy" (p. 190)], he still firmly believes that there are some fundamental differences between the two warring camps. This is indeed what that ninth chapter seeks to do: to show the numbers of ways in which "Islamic tradition" and "Western modernity" clash: different concepts of development, economy, community structures and institutions, planning, land use, circulation, urban form, architectural form, and aesthetics.

The levels at which the book frustrated me are numerous. First and foremost, having chosen to structure his entire book through the lens of this double dichotomy, these divisions will seem doubly problematic to many readers. The sharpness of the dichotomies seems to reflect a *Weltanschauung* without nuances in the author which does not match the fluidity, complexity and heterogeneity of cities both in the Arab World and in the 'West'. While an occasional overgeneralization may be useful, a book-length set of black-and-white portraits of the World past *and* present [Islamic good, Western bad] is reproachable. Beyond this overall, fundamental flaw, these dichotomies are worrisome at many finer levels. The thesis does not reflect newer thinking about 'the invention of tradition', the 'construction of modernity', and the like. It also contains serious internal contradictions; for instance, talking of these ancient cities simply in terms of "Islamic cities" whose tissue is derived from "the basic principles of Islam and their social, spatial and artistic implications" (title of chapter 2) falls apart when considering that most of them have long contained other non-Muslim groups, and that the quarters in which these groups lived and worked were usually undifferentiated architecturally and urbanistically from the Muslim quarters. Moreover, the book is fraught with double standards related to the central dichotomies. While ancient adaptations of underlying towns are described in positive terms in chapter 3, the hybridization that characterized Arab cities in the past two centuries is referred to in strictly negative terms in chapter 8 as a "creeping Westernization".

This contradiction comes through when it is time to go from a dichotomous diatribe on the evils of 'Western modernity' to real-life reflections of a Western expert practicing for years in this region of 'Islamic tradition'. The starkness of the differences between the two worlds as portrayed up to that point make the chasm between the two appear unbridgeable; indeed, he disparages past attempts at spanning the two. Yet Dr. Bianca concludes chapter 9 by moving 'towards reconciling tradition and modernity': "any attempt to achieve a new synthesis would have to adapt and transform foreign concepts and tools to meet the specific needs of contemporary Muslim societies under changed outer conditions, thereby sustaining cultural continuity in creative ways" (p. 215). This seems like a worthwhile challenge – one that he takes on in

difficult circumstances in five cities in chapters 10-13: Mecca, Medina, Baghdad, Fez and Aleppo. This was undoubtedly the richest part of the book to me, although (or because?) it described heartrending tales of trying to mend urban fabrics that had been devastated by past urban development operations, most often only to be set aside for even further devastating operations. Yet hovering above these chapters like an acrid smell is the memory of all those divisive chapters that preceded them. The complexity of the situations related in these case studies belies the disjointed worldview conveyed in the pseudo-philosophical treatise that precedes them. Even the plans and designs proposed for these cities don't match the principles outlined earlier.

While the case studies represent the highlight of the book, a serious reservation must be expressed about those too. In chapter 8, Dr. Bianca paints a scornful picture of the actors involved in producing the 'Westernized' urbanism of contemporary Middle Eastern cities, including technocrats, elites, autocratic leaders and foreign experts, who combined in an "unfiltered adoption of alien development modes" (p. 174). Yet the stories he conveys in the four case-study chapters all involve the same actors, albeit at a later point in history, with the author himself being a key actor in the redevelopment of some historic quarters. This is a facet that he neither recognizes nor analyzes. Moreover, while he does address some of the subtleties of the power relations in the context within which he operated, he acknowledges neither the general political setting of more or less autocratic regimes, nor some of the parallel events in the relation between regime and society. The most glaring example may be the case that otherwise appears in the most favorable light among the five stories he tells: Aleppo. No mention is thus made that, within the period in which he was involved in urban design there (1980-86), while a fundamental attitudinal change was taking place in the way the authorities handled the old city, not far to the south, the fabric of another historic city (Hama) as well as its population were both decimated in 1982 by the same regime.

A final remark on the book needs to be mentioned. The author makes it clear at the outset that most of the work on the book was undertaken in the early 1980s, that the writing took place a decade later, and that it took nearly another decade before the book could be ready, mostly because of his continued professional

activities in this region. He thus acknowledges on p. 19 that the resulting manuscript itself has become “historic”. This becomes apparent at times; this is indeed a book from the 1980s which carries a publication date of 2000.

So to go back to my initial question of whether a book such as this one can be of use, and to address this in particular to an audience interested especially in planning history, I would have to give a partial yes. Chapters 4-7 provide a well-written analysis of the ‘historic Arab-Islamic city’ and how they come together into an urban fabric; with some qualms, they could be quite usable in a classroom context. Chapters 10-13 provide a very interesting memoir of sorts of a foreign expert’s involvement in urban redevelopment in a critical hinge period when a significant shift was erratically occurring. As for the remaining chapters, it may be of greater use for discourse analysis than for planning history.

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This book review first appeared in Planning
Perspectives, Volume 17, Number 2, April 2002, pp
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