

Chapter 1

Literature Review

1.1. Introduction

This chapter discusses the rationale for this research work emphasizing the importance of Muharraq as a unique Islamic town in the Middle East whose vernacular architecture, local customs and traditions are still perceptible in the town, which is worthy of being considered as a world heritage site. This chapter also explains the reasons behind the delay in realizing the importance of the town and protecting its historical significance and heritage, even though the modern urban conservation practices began over half a century ago in Europe. It also enunciates prevailing religious reasons and other factors responsible for the loss of heritage in the Middle Eastern Islamic towns.

At the outset, the chapter introduces the Islamic town; how they are identified by their history, tradition, society, art and customs, emphasizing their individuality and making them unique from cities in Europe in terms of urban design and architecture. It explains in comparison to European historic towns how Islamic towns have their own identity in terms of stylistic buildings typical of vernacular architecture, and urban morphology guided by basic principles of the spirit of Islam in which a town has a characteristic market place and a wall surrounding the town, a congregational mosque for social gathering, and a military base.

Finally this chapter explains how rapid modernization and European methods of development are denigrating the principal values of Islamic towns and specifically Muharraq, which is one of the surviving Islamic towns with tangible and intangible

heritage values that could still be salvaged if appropriate measures are undertaken immediately. It asserts the fact that modern urban developments designed as individual projects have little or no urban design relationship with each other, suggesting a very depressing outlook on the current state of conservation and ensuing loss of Islamic heritage towns. Even though master plans have been developed based on a variety of demographic data, they lack a coherent urban theme in their relationships, undermining the implicit characteristics of the Islamic towns under consideration.

1.2. An Islamic town

The concept of an Islamic city with principles and guidelines for the building process originated from Medina in South-western Saudi Arabia in 622 AD when the Prophet Mohammad established the first Islamic town, which is also the place of origin of Islam. The development of urban space and buildings were focused on housing and access. The necessity of such guidelines evolved in order to resolve conflicts between neighbours and bring peace and harmony into the society. These guidelines to resolve such cases matured into Islamic laws (Hakim, 1988).

The Prophet Mohammad envisioned the spread of Islam based on a powerful vision of human purpose by establishing a clan-oriented value system, a space in which men could pray together and live in closed communities (Wheatley, 2001). Subsequently, Islam spread in conjunction with building of cities; by regulating urban society and defining basic elements of urban culture. In the surviving Islamic heritage towns, typically the ancient core of the city is referred to as the Islamic towns, as these parts of cities preserve some characteristics of an ancient Islamic township which are lacking in the modern expansions of the same city (Acun, 2002).

The basic elements of Islamic cities have been a congregational mosque, suq or a market place, narrow winding streets, and buildings with central courtyards. Typically

an Islamic town had two main parts – (i) the core, which controlled the politics, religious and culture activities and (ii) the residential areas, surrounding the core of the town. The core used to be the political centre with prominent buildings on the hilltop or in some dominant positions. The residential neighbourhoods were based on ethnicity, professions, and occupations, with wealthy communities, leaders and skilled craftsman occupying position close to the core while the ordinary people, comprising craftsman and tradesman such as shoe-makers, iron-smiths, sail-makers, lived around them or the periphery of the town. Also, each community was usually formed around a central mosque with people living in smaller groups bound by family ties, common origin or occupation. Furthermore, each neighbourhood even though it did not possess full autonomous characteristics like European cities during the Middle Ages, still possessed some autonomy as the heads of each community acted as intermediaries between the community and the state (Acun, 2002).

1.3. Laws of Islamic Cities

The Islamic cities conformed to a unique urban fabric, building designs and environment, which were guided by rules of conduct that originated from the Islamic law or *Fiqh* and tribal conventions and customary law or *Urf*. These rules were recently discovered through the study of old manuscripts that were mostly published in the Arabic, Persian and Ottoman languages. These laws strongly dictate urban morphology and social conduct for societies apart from other general religious guidelines (Ben-Hamouche, 2009).

The Islamic laws were consolidated and established by the fourth century of Islam or 900 AD. The scholars at that time agreed to freeze the laws by reaching a consensus that from that time onwards no one could individually question these laws and all future activities must be confined to these guidelines. Subsequently, even though new

challenges were inevitable they were tackled with traditional tools within the purview of an established legal system (Ben-Hamouche, 2009).

The religious orientation and establishment of laws governing day-to-day activities differentiated the Muslim conquest. The expansion of the Muslim religion led to the establishment of major cities based on Islamic principles which led to the establishment of the concept of downtown or the religious, administrative and commercial public centres, separated from the residential areas. The commercial spaces and residential neighbourhoods were connected through an intricate street network clearly distinguishing a hierarchy of social spaces as public, semi-public, and private. The basic concepts behind this type of urban architecture, planning, design principles were five intrinsic values of Islam which included (Lockerbie, 2011):

- focus on the internal, cohesive family and its values,
- consideration for neighbours and the wider society,
- a lack of ostentation,
- a distinction between public and private spaces and realms, and
- Conservation of the environment and the wise use of its resources.

1.4. Current State of Islamic Cities

Numerous Islamic cities were established by Arab leaders in various parts of the Islamic and non-Islamic world during the sixth and seventh centuries. Although the local traditions and the towns' pre-Islamic history must have influenced their characteristics, Islamic scholars believe that cities founded in the western Islamic world, Libya to Spain, were the purest in terms of principles of Islamic laws (Hakim, 1988).

The urbanization and industrialization since the discovery of oil in many cities across the Middle East and other parts of the world triggered massive population growth,

migration, unemployment, and associated problems. The migration from the older parts of Islamic cities brought about major social and physical changes. The indigenous families that have high income or rising income moved to modern and comfortable houses and moved outside of the ancient urban fabric. This resulted in traditional houses being rented to low-income groups or abandoned and empty areas being used as parking lots. The influx of population into these old quarters exhibited a completely different family model mainly with low income and unrelated to local indigenous communities. In this process the core of the town began to wear out due to the changing of the physical and communal environment, lack of economic status and attitude towards realization and protection of heritage towns.

This sudden burst of accelerated urbanization and industrial and technological advancements has brought about new factories and job opportunities at the cost of traditional crafts and employment. These brought about two major setbacks – the burgeoning local affluent population moved towards more new and modern developments abandoning old traditional areas to the mercy of the poor population. The old areas which were already congested began collapsing under a naturally expanding population of low wage workers communities, resulting in complete social and physical transformation of historic Muslim towns and cities.

This growth and development in the Middle Eastern towns, transformed historic quarters with modern incongruous structures imitating the western trends. In fact, the scale of transformation is being considered proportional to the progress of the nation, significantly endangering its heritage. The justifications for this change are the problems associated with contemporary towns such as the need for better housing, jobs, schools, transportation, hospitals and better social and community life. It is arguable that these improvements have denigrated the historic ambiance, community structure, social balance and lifestyle, transforming the visual image of the Muslim city

with a caricature of some of the worst elements of western cities without any advantages to the transformations.

Throughout history, the planning of towns has been transformed through evolution and adoption of new ideas and technologies. However, those changes tended to be brought about incrementally by additions, alterations and adjustments to what was already there, thereby maintaining the identity, intentionally or not, of the place in terms of its culture and society. In other words, progress maintained a manifestation of its original culture, history and identity. But since the post war period, the pace and emphasis of such changes and progress has been through the destruction of existing structures and morphology of towns by building modern structures that are radically different to the existing architectural styles. These changes are in turn obliterating the traditional characteristics of Muslim towns with their mosques, forts, buildings, traditions and crafts; which all had played a major role in the progress and development of those towns. Furthermore, the well-organized urban morphology and subdivisions based on professions and culture, providing a conducive environment for a coherent society for the overall development of the town largely disappeared.

The pace of modernization, is taking a heavy toll on this unique heritage; and social structure and the dislocation of traditional craft and traditions are reaching towards a point of no return, where they might eventually lose their identity, history and traditional values for good. If the traditional characteristics of the Muslim town are to be preserved, then perhaps the old and traditional Muslim values should not be viewed as outdated or a matter of shame. On the contrary, they should be considered as a matter of pride. . The components of a Muslim town should be considered as vital assets and symbols of its continuity which must be protected by all means (Malik, 1979).

The following text presents the history and current state of some major Islamic towns.

Mecca

Mecca is the first Islamic town established by the Prophet Mohammad in 630 AD. The Prophet Mohammad was a successful merchant in Mecca, which was a well-established trading and religious centre on the barren Arabian Peninsula. This city had long been influenced by Hellenistic and then Roman rulers. Its population included pagans, Jews, and after the second century, Christians (Hitti, 1973).

Mecca and the other trading cities of the Hejaz, in the north-west corner of the peninsula, lacked the strong agricultural roots which were common to most early cities. It was a dry, unforgiving climate afflicted with suffocating heat, with only commerce as the basis for its economy (Wheatley, 2001). Most Meccans were descended from the Bedouin, who wandered the vast expanse of the Hejaz in search of grazing land and water for their flocks. Organized into clans, the Bedouin supplemented their meagre incomes by protecting or raiding caravans. These clans were frequently contentious, respecting only basic family-based loyalties. Ibn Khaldun noted that such strong links were natural outgrowths given the harsh environment of bedouin life (Ibn Khaldun, 1958). By the early decades of the new millennium, some of these clans settled in cities such as Mecca and started their own caravans, profiting from the growth in trade between the Levant and Yemen. Mecca slowly grew into a settlement of as many as five thousand inhabitants.

Muhammad, a member of the Qurayshi, one of the more powerful clans at Mecca, grasped the need of an order to replace the chaos of the blood feuds inherent in the society. He started a system of belief, Islam, which had both a religious programme and a system for social justice and order. Muhammad's ideas were initially derived towards the traditionally weaker members of society. He demanded that women, long subject to abuse of all kinds, be protected from harsh treatment. Men were limited to four wives unlike previously, when wealth was the only limiting factor. They were also

commanded to treat them with proper respect. The poor, too, were to be protected and alms-giving became a necessary expression of faith (Hitti, 1973).

Perhaps the most far-reaching aspect of Muhammad's message was his notion of a greater community bound by a single faith. This concept overturned both traditional pagan worship and the ancient primacy of clan affiliations. In 622, the Prophet Muhammad and a handful of followers were forcibly moved out to Medina which was largely a Jewish colony, where he received recognition for his monotheistic message (Hitti, 1973). Swelled with new converts, Muhammad's forces occupied Mecca in 630. The Arabs, once a feuding group of clans, now became a single, highly motivated people (Ibn Khaldun, 1958).

After Muhammad's death in 632, his successors, called caliphs, determined to implement the Prophet's vision. The Muslim epoch represented a new beginning in urban history. Spreading through the Near East and North Africa and into Spain with remarkable energy between the seventh and ninth centuries, Islam broke dramatically with the long-standing traditions of classical urbanism. The primacy of faith was evident in the layout of Islamic cities: instead of the classical emphasis on public buildings and spaces, mosques now arose at the centre of urban life (Ibn Khaldun, 1958).

The immutable factors governed by Shari'ah laws and mutable factors imposed by urf and environmental factors resulted in an Islamic way of life. The mutable factors include political, climatic, geographic, geologic, technological and economic factors while immutable factors were restricted to the religious requirements of Islam. A change in one or more factors means turbulence in the others. Thus, the integration of these factors in traditional Islamic communities produced urban architecture with a single purpose of continuity of Islam and not of any particular style. The same characteristics were reflected in the towns and villages in the region such as the

Islamic traditions, social characteristics and interaction governed by Islamic laws. And urban morphology reflected the underlying ideology that each part of the town is a whole within itself with well-organized street patterns (Saleh, 1998).

However, since 1985 the city obliterated 95% of its heritage structure, most of which were over a thousand years old, owing to the fear of any reverence given to historical or religious places of significance which may give rise to idolatry (Howden, 2005).

Algiers

The Kasbah or town of Algiers is a unique Islamic town established in 4th century BC with vernacular architecture, traditional urban fabric and close communities. It was inhabited by various tribes, Romans, Byzantines and Arabs. Finally the Turks made a large part of Algeria dependent upon the Ottoman Empire, but Algiers remained protected from its influence. The modern city was constructed from 1516 to the 17th century, which was characterized with Turkish and Arabian architecture, with immensely decorated interiors of houses, winding streets, with an extremely high density of built-up areas. However, the European incursion and their lack of understanding of Arabian customs and lifestyle and implementation of their urban style lead to severe destruction of traditional fabric. The first attempts to save the city came in the 1920s when part of city was salvaged from the ravages of destruction, but the real action from the Algerian authorities came only in the 1970s, when the city was classified as a historic site and authorities embarked on a massive protection and restoration mission (UNESCO, 1992).

Damascus

In 661, the caliphate abandoned Medina as their political capital and moved to Damascus, a city more suited to handling the administration, communication, and commercial needs of the expanding empire. In contrast with Mecca or Medina,

Damascus lay in a fertile region, nourished by the Barada River, which flows from the mountains of Lebanon (Hitti, 1973; Lababedi, 2008).

Damascus broadened the exposure of the Arabs to other cultures. It was a great cosmopolitan city, home to various Christian sects and Jews. Under Islam, these 'peoples of the book' were allowed to practise their faiths, often far more freely than under the former Byzantine rulers. The cosmopolitan character of Islamic urban life also spurred the growth of trade and the elevation of arts and sciences (Wheatley, 2001). Rulers developed elaborate commercial districts, with large buildings shaded from the hot desert sun, with storerooms and hostels for visiting merchants. The new rulers built large libraries, universities, and hospitals at a pace not seen since Roman times (Hourani, 1970).

The new urban spirit extended well beyond the walls of Damascus. Basra in Iraq, Fez and Marrakesh in North Africa, Shiraz in Iran, and Cordoba in Spain all testified to the imagination of the new world order. Cordoba was described by one German nun as the jewel of the world. So great was the cultural pull that in Cordoba, complained one 9th century Christian scholar, few of his brethren could write Latin adequately but many could 'express themselves in Arabic with elegance and write better poems in this language than the Arabs themselves (Wheatley, 2001).

1.5. Conservation Challenges in Islamic Cities

The urban conservation movement began in the second half of the twentieth century when it was realized internationally that historic urban areas are part of the built heritage. Historic town conservation has become a populist issue with the realisation that urban tissue is as important as the monuments that it surrounded, which was earlier significantly ignored. This realization led to a conscious urban conservation movement in Western Europe with the Charter of Venice, signed in 1964, stating –

“The concept of an historic monument embraces not only the single architectural work but also the urban and rural setting in which is found the evidence of a particular civilisation, a significant development or an historic event” (Jokilehto, 2005).

The concept of modern conservation practise evolved, with interest in picturesque buildings, in England known as preservation (Orbasli, 2000). And the International commitment to the historic value of urban areas was realized from 1966 with the Bath Symposium, where the ‘principles and practice of active preservation and rehabilitation of groups and areas of buildings of historical or artistic interest’ were articulated. In the Symposium it was emphasized that architectural and town planning issues are important to prevent historic areas from being transformed into lifeless museums. And the European Architectural Heritage Year, 1975, asserted the significance of built heritage protection of historic centres, and launched several pioneering projects.

These initiatives, which commenced only in 1966, started showing dramatic results in the early 1970s when conservationist started to change the approach to ‘development’ in inner-city areas. Worldwide, interests were also awakened and the United Nations, under UNESCO, and other international bodies, started publishing recommendations on historic conservation, enhancing the conservation of culture and community within the urban context. In 1976, reports published in Warsaw and Nairobi, stated that: The conservation of historic towns and urban areas is understood to mean those steps necessary for the protection, conservation and restoration of such town areas, as well as their development and harmonious adaptation to contemporary life (Orbasli, 2000).

In the Middle East however, the concept of conservation has been known to humans in the pre-Islamic Arabian Peninsula, known as *hima* or protected place (Alison, 1983). Initially the term was used for protection of land with pasture where no construction

was allowed and even the land could not be used for commercial purposes. However, this concept of conservation remained restricted to the type of lands that became known as reserve forests in modern times.

In the Islamic world the prevalent strong religious ideology has prohibited preservation of any form of structure or space for the fear of idolizing the structure or place. Consequently the urban heritage began to vanish rapidly following the sudden outburst of modernization. And over the last century, the collective Muslim heritage all over the world has sustained irretrievable loss due to the lack of a positive attitude towards preservation, foreign rule and proper care. Whatever remains is under constant threat not only due to neglect, but also from the current policies of large scale urban projects being grafted on to the historic heart of many Muslim towns and cities (Cetin, 2010).

However, in the recent past there is an emerging realization in the eastern part of the Middle East that the protection and conservation of heritage is vitally important. Studies over the last few decades have demonstrated some of the major economic impacts of heritage conservation: - 1) jobs and household income; 2) heritage city revitalization; 3) heritage tourism; 4) property values; and 5) small business incubation. (Rypkema, 2008).

1.6. Conclusion

The history of Islamic towns demonstrates several key characteristics –including the carefully crafted architectural expression despite the topographic differences, societal qualities that were the bases of development, practicality and efficiency which were the core distinguishable features, and the physical output was rather homogeneous and compatible with the environment. The towns demonstrate brilliant, ethical, fair and

simple ideas, inevitable during that time, which were the essence behind such urbanism.

The study area for this work also has a long history and over two centuries of Islamic influence. Underpinning this research work is an assumption that not just architectural heritage but also cultural, traditional and other intangible values are an integral part of an Islamic town, which is unequivocally relevant for the town of Muharraq. And with the economy of the country no more dependent upon oil resources, the significance of alternate sources of economy becomes critical and the historical value of Muharraq is one which has potential for economic benefits.

Muharraq heritage suffered consequent to a prevalent religious attitude towards protection and restoration of elements of heritage importance and extraneous developments by destroying the past. The Government of Bahrain realizing the significance, Muharraq began to take preventive measures in the late 1980s' but most of it failed to protect the urban morphology and cultural heritage of the town due to improper conservation practices and focus on important buildings only. These conservation and preservation measures are continuously suffering setbacks due to a dwindling indigenous population and lack of adequate information, research and documentation of the heritage, which in turn is resulting in improper conservation objectives.

So, this study aims at aggregating historical facts about Muharraq, exposing its Islamic heritage values and establishing proper conservation and preservation methods in order to salvage tangible and intangible values, and reinforce the connections between socio-cultural and environmental characteristics of the town which had established its values in the past as a unique Islamic town.

The approach towards protecting the heritage of Muharraq requires, firstly, an accurate understanding of the originality of construction techniques, homogeneity of urban style and fabric to prevent disharmony in the urban skyline due to the construction of multi-storey buildings. Secondly, it is essential to introduce Islamic guidelines based on *Urf* or urban Islamic laws to safeguard the privacy of each house with sustainable development so that it attracts its original inhabitants back to the town reinforcing its cultural heritage. Finally, salvaging and reconstructing some of the old heritage buildings would help improve the local economy by boosting heritage tourism and reinvigorate some lost glory and significance for future generations. The next chapter discusses in detail about the town of Muharraq, its history and heritage, tangible and intangible, in the context of this work.