



City Space and Social Values: A Lesson from the Past of Historical City of Tunis, Tunisia

Hamza ZEGHLACHE ^{a*}, Nadir ALI KHODJA ^a

^a *Laboratory of Mediterranean Architecture, University Ferhat Abbas, Setif1, ALGERIA*

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ABSTRACT

Theory that emerges and tends to impose a new urbanity and liveability is that of Ecopolis of the future - ecologically clean city-which focuses on the concept of sustainable development while giving priority to the relationship between economic, social development and quality of life in the built environment. Traditionally cultural aspect of urbanism contains components with an appropriate sacred cosmic symbolism and an urbanism of social consensus between residents, government and professionals in the creation of the Ecopolis. The empirical focus of this paper is the city within the Islamic cultural tradition. This paper is an attempt to grasp the cultural conception of the Medina of Tunis, Tunisia and the traditional urban regulations by a study of classical religio-architectural treatises of Islam. This article will discuss the approach and the lesson we can learn from the traditional modele in a time of ecological crisis and high urbanization.

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1. Introduction

The centre of the Medina is represented by the congregational mosque, called *Jamaa el Kebir*. The great mosque is the central element around which a network of commercial and market streets is organized; next to it is the palace of the Bey, Dar el Bey. Immediately west of the palace, is the Kasbah the fortified citadel. The Kasbah includes in a linear respectively the Medina's warehouse, Makhzen, the heavily fortified princely residence which houses the political administration and the court, and finally the military station. Along these aligned features, the Great Mosque is the departing point of the central spine which represents the major religious, commercial and political institutions of the Medina.

*Corresponding author (H. Zeghlache). Tel/Fax. +21336620010 E-mail address: zeghlach@yahoo.fr.
©2015. International Transaction Journal of Engineering, Management, & Applied Sciences & Technologies. Volume 6 No.2 ISSN 2228-9860 eISSN 1906-9642. Online Available at <http://TUENGR.COM/V06/081.pdf>.

The great mosque, as the principal central organizing element, is the connecting point of the four main commercial and market streets that lead to the main gates of the Medina. By its location, and its use as a centre of high learning, the great mosque is the referential point people use for directing themselves around the Medina.

1.1 The Market Streets: The Souks

The commercial and market streets which surround the Great Mosque and also extend to form the main streets which surround the Great Mosque and also extend to form the main streets are arranged with aligned “shops” grouped according to the symbolic values given to the nature of goods being traded. These symbolic values consist of the more sacred to the less sacred, working outward from the vicinity of the great Mosque to the edges of the city. In the immediate vicinity of the great mosque are the booksellers and binders, followed by the sellers of candles, incense, perfumes, bags of musk, henna, and cloth related to religious ceremonies such as marriages, circumcisions, etc... Then comes the market street of the sheshiyya (a red hat which became very popular in Tunisia after being introduced during the seventeenth century by the Andalousian immigrants); a symbol of nobility, followed by ‘shops’ of jewellers, leather workers, slipper makers, tailors, and rug and tapestry salesman. Next come the copper-smiths, potters, saddlers, basket makers, butchers and the fish market. The different market streets consist of adjacent rows of ‘shops’ each segment or short row consisting of one craft. It should be noted that the kind of smell, voices; and noise help the walker to identify and locate the different kind of trade. Frequently the market streets are covered and have street gates that can be locked at night.

1.2 The Residential Quarters of the Medina:

The medina is divided into many residential sections called hara (originally the hara is a group of houses, today the hara if a quarter of the Jew). In addition to private houses, each one of these harat (plural for hara) has its Musdjed, a small public space for everyday prayer, school, and public bath. Each hara is bordered by main commercial streets. A system of spatial hierarchy which goes from public to private spaces within the hara consists of narrow, crooked, side streets and cul de sac giving access to the residential units.

A hara encompasses a group of houses with residents who live in extended families. The social structure is reflected in the spatial pattern which is characterized in the location pattern of interaction and proximity to the sacred centre of the city. Within these harat, houses are adjacent one to another, wall against wall. Open spaces around the entrances of houses are called Zanga and are semi-private or collectively owned space.

1.3 The House:

Each house consists of two or three stories and faces streets or the *zanga* with a white wall that is broken only by the entrance door. Sometimes the houses have projection of the second floor chamber built over the streets. Within the same lane, *zuqaq*, the entrance doors of the houses do not face each other, with the result that no-one entering or leaving his house can look directly into someone else's. One enters the houses from the *zuqaq* through a crooked entrance in the form of vestibule called *skifa*. The *skifa* leads to the *wast-el-dar*. The *wast el dar*, which literally means the "center of the house", is an open sky courtyard around which the internal spatial arrangement of the rooms and other spaces of the house is organized. By day, light for the rooms is provided by the *wast el dar*. On the first floor, the paved *wast el dar* connects the room of the head of the family (the father), the guest room, the kitchen, the well of the house, and the water room. A stairway located in the corner of the *wast el dar* leads from the first floor up to the upper floor where all bedrooms and other spaces, such as storage rooms, open into a gallery surrounding the open courtyard below. In many cases, the stairway leads up to the rooftop terrace. A small wall surrounding the terrace obstructs one's view into the neighbor's courtyard. Even though this wall is not high and would not technically obstruct one's view, it is not appropriate for a neighbour to view another neighbour, and the low wall is intended to be sufficient to guard a neighbour's privacy. In other words, the terrace wall is a visible form of social values that one has to keep one's gaze low enough as not to spot a neighbor. Within this rooftop terrace, a broad view of the quarter and the Medina is offered. The houses have more or less the same height within each *hara*.

2. Relationship between the Structures of the Medina

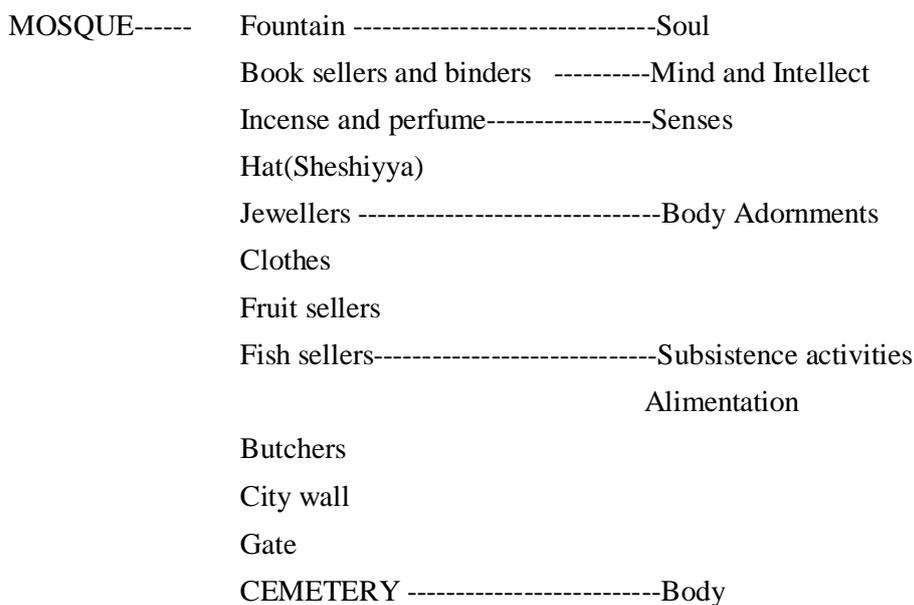
The Medina's structure is represented by the East-West oriented central-complex spine extending from the central mosque, the market streets, and the extended boundaries such as the cemeteries. In this section, the main idea is to unravel the meaning of the Medina's spatial arrangement by carrying an analysis in which space is treated as a result of a cultural process embodying the insights into social space. This analysis is carried further in order to grasp the model that informed the Medina's spatial arrangement of Ideas. In dealing with the social use of goods in both modern and traditional cultures, Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood stated, 'the same for space? Harnessed to cultural process, its divisions are heavy with meaning: (...)'. The vistas are not fixed: nor are they randomly arranged in a kaleidoscope (...)(Douglass, and Isherhood, 1979).

The spatial arrangement of the Medina of Tunis embodies a realm of social values of what Emile Durkheim called the collective 'conscience' or 'consciousness'. As socially constructed,

the Medina's space has been conceptually related, for social and ritual use of it, to a symbolic classification of religious/social values in which the units such as heaven, earth, and underworld are related. This links these units and makes the Medina a world of extended interpretation in terms of Islamic values.

The way the different structures of the Medina of Tunis are ordered is first explored in its metaphorical relation with the individual person. The different sections of the medina reveal different aspects and attributes of the human body.

The central Mosque is considered as the centre of higher learning. In its vicinity are the book sellers and binders; (most of the books are Islamic literature). This arrangement represents the human mind and intellect. The markets that follow represent respectively, the human senses and their participations in the cultic worship and rituals; followed by the markets of human body adornments. Next, at the vicinity of the wall of the Medina, are the markets that represent the subsistence activities and the alimentation of the human body. Beyond the Medina's wall are the cemeteries, the recipients of the dead body. This arrangement of the market streets represents the human body in prone position with the head being the central mosque.



The mosque with its central position, play an important role in the ordering of the Medina. The mosque is considered as a light beacon whose light directs the spatial disposition with diminishing intensity (the intensity is considered as gradient of Islamic symbolic values) toward the outer parts of the Medina.

In these circumstances, the central mosque's role in ordering the Medina is linked to this belief. The cemeteries of the Medina are conceptually placed outside the city beyond the city walls.

As the central mosque represents symbolically the point at which earth and haven meet, the water emerging from this point, overflows the city in the form of rahma, ‘consecrated goods’, through the market streets, completing the cyclical pattern, MOSQUE—MARKETS—CEMETERY—MOSQUE.

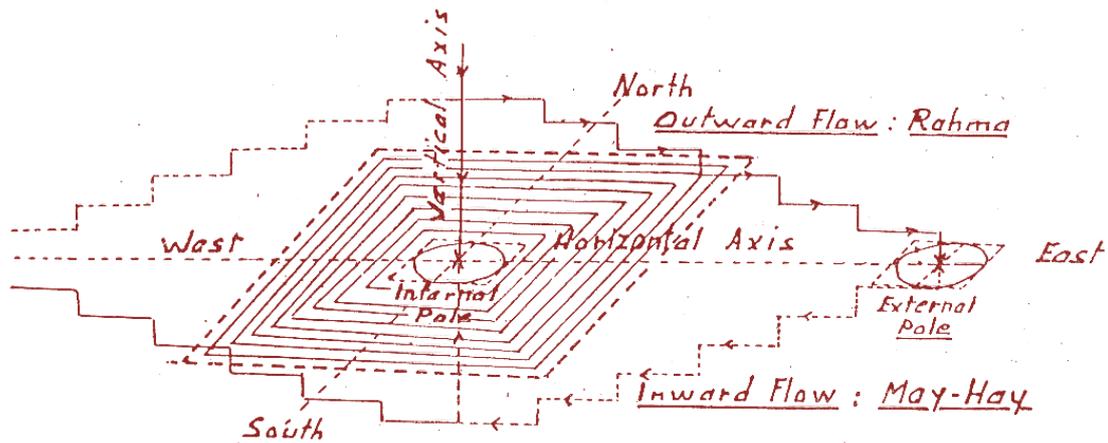


Figure 1: relationship between the structures of the Medina

The central – complex spine extending from the central mosque toward the west edge of the Medina, is equally ordered with diminishing intensity toward the outer part of the Medina. At the vicinity of the mosque/palace are the corps of officials—the administration of the bey and the court, followed immediately by the military administration. Then comes the citadel of army troops at the limit of the Medina’s west edge, followed by an open space (The Kasbah or Casbah) extending beyond the Medina’s wall.

3. Political Aspect of Space:

The central idea I am concerned with is the political allocations of space within the city in Islamic cultural tradition. In Islamic worldview the function of government, as represented by the king’s (*Sultan’s*) role, is to assure the harmonious coordination of the natural beings in the universe and to protect the interests of the community. The idea of perfect harmony is reached by the elevation of religion to the status of sovereignty. Therefore, religion, as a true overlord of the community, is politics itself.

Within the conceptualisation of the city, the duty of the king is to sustain religion by building sacred edifices such as the mosque, his palace, and other facilities, and to protect them by building fortifications, such as moats, ramparts, and city gates. The king’s support of religion is extended to the city and the region by building a central point in his city (i.e. the capital city)—the central mosque. This process is intent on the layout of the city. At the social level, the settlement of the population is made within different circles having a common centre, the central

mosque, departing from the central complex spine. The radiuses of different circles are diminishing with the increasing proximity to the central complex spine. It is the function of the government to assure this process by a spatial arrangement which sustains and supports the idea of bringing the king and people into a perfect harmony. This spatial arrangement is a principle of order and wholeness. The social and cosmic order depends on the virtuous qualities of the ruler. In these circumstances, the ruler is a mediator between the human and the divine worlds. The spatial arrangement as it is linked to the king's role, keeps the city and the kingdom in prosperity diverting natural disasters. Furthermore, the well being and prosperity of people depend on the ruler's Hikma, or wisdom which in its turn is linked to Rahma (consecrated goods).

4. Ritual Intensity of the House

This section deals with the intensity the house is charged with during ritual time. The rituals that are held in Tunis are various and can be classified into two categories. The first category of rituals are the ones that are held in lunar months, such as the Aid-el-Kebir (also known as the feast of the ram); the celebration of the twenty—seventh day of the fasting month RAMADAN ~ and the celebration of the end of RAMADAN the Aid-El-Fitr the ACHOURA~ day, the tenth day after the lunar new year's day; and the MOULOUD~, the Prophet's birthday. The second category of rituals are the ones which are held occasionally, such as the wedding ceremony, the circumcision of a boy, the birth of a baby, the return of a member of the family from the pilgrimage to Mecca, and the death ceremony of a member of the family. In all cases of ritual the house is charged with an intensity in which the inside and the outside of the house lose their clear—cut spatial separation and attain a balanced similarity. The internal (vertical symbolic pole) house gains mobility through a mediating horizontal axis. This process can be seen as an “inside out” and an “outside in” of the house.

The wedding ceremony is an example of ritual in which there is a state of similarity between the outside and the inside of the house. The preliminary stage of the wedding takes place in the mosque where the father of the groom will meet the father of the bride (In some situations the TALEB the priest of the mosque, is asked to come to the bride's father's home). The bride price is fixed during this stage. The next stage is the wedding ceremony, which is held in the bride's home.

The preparation for the wedding ceremony is made by cleaning and painting the house. Generally the next—door neighbours offer the use of their house, silverware, and furniture for the wedding feast. During the feast the house is open to the guests. The groom and his male friends (some of them are bachelors) have access to the room in which only women, including the bride, are grouped. In this situation, music and sensual songs are performed. Women and men perform dances for each other. During this ritual situation the bachelors accompanying the

groom seek their future wives. It is crucial to note that this male—female interaction is hardly acceptable during non—ritual time. The opposition between male and female in every—day life is inverted during ritual time.

The inside and the outside of the house during this ritual time are mingled, and this is through the appearances of women other than the bride in their best walking—attire outside the house in the street. In this public situation, women who usually wear a veil in the street, appear with no veil and wear ceremonial dresses, perfume, and make—up. Furthermore, they publicly perform songs dealing with sensuality and music. During the ritual situation, the participation of the house is represented by the shifting aspect of its internal central space. The inside as well as the outside of the house are illuminated by clusters of lamps. The cords of lamps are extended from the house and attached to the other side of the street. From these cords are also hung small flags and pieces of silk. These decorations stay for the ritual duration, which is several nights.

This ritual can be seen as an inverting act that makes the liberation of the inside as ‘closed’ space by means of an ‘inside out.’ The ritual is a process which creates a balancing similarity against the differentiation of the introversion and the extroversion of the house. For example the women’s performances of music and songs and the disappearance of the constraint of veil in the public space mean their appropriation of the outside space of the house and by extension their symbolic possession of the open space, the street.

During the ritual time the house sees an “outside-in” as well. The act of males breaking into the women’s room inside the house is seen as an acceptable complicity.

4.1 Ritual as an exemplification of the political

This part elaborates on the idea that the Medina is charged with a ritual intensity with identical transformations that the house is involved with during ritual time. Literature about Tunis which goes back to the pre— colonial times shows that one of the most important public rituals was “La Fete de l’Achoura,”(Chebbi, 1973) the celebration of the tenth day after the lunar new year’s day. Writing in French Mohamed Ben Slama, a nineteenth—century chronicler reported in his text, “... Un grand festival se deroule sur la place de la Kasba. C’etait une des habitudes de notre ville...” (Chebbi, 1973)

The plaza of the Kasba, where the festival was held, was a part of the Medina’s central complex which was made up of the central mosque El-Zitouna, the ruler’s palace, the princely residence, the political administration and civil official buildings, and the military administration and the army citadel. Benslama in describing ‘la fete de l’Achoura’ wrote,

« On rassemblait sur cette place, les instruments de musique, les fruits et les choses gaies. On y vendait aussi ce qui intéressait les enfants: Objet provoquant le rire ou appelant au jeu ainsi que des images. La place se transformait en un souk animé fréquenté par une foule nombreuse. » (Chebbi, 1973)

In this plaza were assembled musical instruments, fruits, and things for amusement. They also sold anything that amuses children: funny things for provoking laughter, or calling on them to play, as well as images. The plaza was transformed into an animated souk {market place} frequented by a large crowd.] (Translation mine).

Here the association of the plaza with an animated souk, market place, is of special significance. The market represents the place of interaction between the city population and the population outside the city. The markets that are held weekly and annually are known in Tunisia to be the places in which people of different areas of the state interact and communicate through the exchange of goods. Jamil M. Abu—Nasr, in dealing with the economical aspect of the Tunisian state in the eighteenth century stated that,

At the [weekly market which is held at the foot of Djabal (mont) Wislat] the settled people of Djabal Wislat sold the cloaks and other woven articles made by their women as well as ropes and brought from the tribesmen who came to the market (the Ku'Ub and Awlad 'Awn) meat and other provisions. At [the annual market which is held at Bu Sadira near Baja the tribesmen, especially the Drid, brought their animals for sale, had clothes made for them by tailors who came from Baja, and brought various articles offered there for sale.] (Abu Nasr, 1982)

Drawing from Alfred Gell's analysis of the Indian Tribal markets symbolic significance, the weekly and annually Souks in Tunisia represented "a map of social relations in the area." (Gell, 1982).

Furthermore, the chronicler describe an image used in this festival, "Les habitants découpaient une image en forme de chameau surmonté d'une tête humaine. Ils la promenaient dans les rues en tirant des coups de feu, en jouant du tambour et en faisant du vacarme." (Chebbi, 1973) [The inhabitants designed an image in a form of human—headed—camel. They would carry it out and display it in the streets while firing shotguns, playing drums, and making noises.]

This image, the human—headed—camel, according to the chronicler is called 'le chamelon de la Achoura,' the Achoura's camel. The chronicler mentioned that during this festival the inhabitants of the city ate El-Flat, a dish made of bread, sugar, and oil. The inhabitants had also to sacrifice and eat a bird, i.e. a hen. According to the description, the festival of Achoura seems to have been a ritual which started in the plaza of the Kasba and then overflowed through the

streets of the entire Medina. Some other rituals were also held in the plaza of the Kasba with the participation of the ruler (the Bey), who distributed food to poor people; « Le jour de la commémoration de la naissance du Prophète, le bey servait à tous les pauvres de l'açida sur la place de la Kasba. »(Chebbi, 1973)

[The day of the commemoration of the Prophet's birthday, the Bey would distribute in the plaza of the Kasba açida (wheat) to the poor (translation mine).]

This use of the plaza of the Kasbah, as a place of performance for the public ritual with the participation of the Bey, shows the interrelatedness of the political system, the society, and the city. This is made explicit by Chebbi Lahbib in his commentary on the relationship between the plaza, the population, and the government. « Un problème d'espace (...)à titre d'exemple, la place de la Kasba, vilipendée parceque lieu de rassemblement des classes populaires (...), est magnifiée quand c'est le pouvoir qui se donne en spectacle an mettant an scène sa charité. » (Chebbi, 1973) [As for a question of space (...) as an example, the plaza of the Kasbah is minimized by being the gathering place of the lower class people, (...) [and] is magnified when it is the power {i.e., the bey which is displayed while demonstrating and showing his charity (translation mine).]

Furthermore, the description of the plaza as a souk, a market, with a vast audience, seems to show that the population Of the region, the kingdom, was participating in this ritual. The image of the human-headed camel which was used in the ritual represented the re-enactment (as a reminder) of the Prophet's consecration of the Medina during its foundation.

5. Conclusion

As the Bey represented God's vice regent (*khaliphat Allah*) on earth, by not only being the maker of the *Rahma* but also the giver of the *Rahma* (such as distributing cereals to the poor), his palace—mosque was conceptually the centre of the kingdom. The rituals, which sera spatially connected with the central—complex, can be considered as mediating axes which express the periodic liberation of an 'inside out' of the closed nature of the structures. In this context, rituals are perceived as an extruded aspect of the 'closed space of the palace—mosque with no walls and ramparts to obstruct their openness. These rituals can be seen as animate symbols in which the Bey is the mediator between the human-world and the divine (or transcendental) cosmos. This process is considered as producing good results, such as the *Rahma*, for the city, society, and kingdom. These results are the cosmic and social orders.

At the level of the city, these rituals show the 'inside out' of the palace—mosque into the Medina. This is seen in the Bey's offering of food, the change in the dietary habits of the

inhabitants of the Medina, the performances of music, amusements, and sounds and images that move from the plaza to the streets of the entire Medina.

At the level of the kingdom, these rituals show an “outside in” into the closed nature of the Medina and the palace—mosque of the Bey. The participation of the outside population of the Medina is seen as the expression of their religious and political loyalty to the centre, the Bey. This process enhances the political and spiritual poser of the Bey.

These rituals show that the Medina’s conceptual periphery moves ‘outside in’ to meet and be absorbed by the ‘inside out’ of the mosque—palace, rendering inseparable the ‘open’ and closed’ space.

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Professor Dr. Hamza ZEGHLACHE received both his Master’s and Doctoral (Ph.D) degrees from the University of Virginia (USA). He has done an interdisciplinary study of Architecture and Anthropology. His present interest is on textual representation of space within the Islamic cultural tradition. He has taught in the Department of Religious Studies at the Florida International University (Miami) under the Understanding Contemporary Islam (American University of Beirut) and the Fulbright Program. Presently he is the director of Laboratory of Mediterranean Architecture and a professor of History of Architecture at the University of Setif, Algeria.



Nadir ALIKHODJA is a teacher assistant in history of architecture at the Institute of architecture and Earth Sciences, university of Setif, Algeria. He has received his master’s degree in architecture from the Ecole Polytechnique d’Architecture et d’Urbanismr, Algiers, Algeria. He is currently in charge of the master program in applied geomatics in architecture at the Institute of architecture of the Unversity of Setif1, Setif. He is a doctoral candidate and is involved in many research projects on geomatics and the use of GIS for urban planning.

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