

Journal of Construction in Developing Countries, Vol. 12, No. 2, 2007
Integrating the Islamic Worldview into
the Planning of Neighbourhoods
Spahic Omer

Abstract:

This paper aims to highlight the importance of integrating the Islamic worldview into the aspects of planning, in general, and into the planning of neighbourhoods, in particular. In this paper I shall examine, firstly, the pertinence of the Islamic worldview to the notion of planning neighbourhoods. There we will see that such an enterprise was an integral part of Islamic urbanism from the era of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) till the waning of Islamic civilization. As such, no successful establishment of contemporary Islamic urbanism without integrating the same with the Islamic worldview can ever be possible. Next, the following principles will be discussed: (i) the Islamic idea of

the settlement, (ii) Islam on creating buildings, (iii) peaceful co-existence with the environment, and (iv) Islam on human dignity and fraternity among its members. Discussion on each of the mentioned principles will be followed by briefly analyzing their implications for the planning of neighbourhoods. Some suggestions as to how to make the notion of integrating the Islamic worldview into the idea of planning appear relevant and appealing to the Muslims of today will also be presented. While writing the paper, I have tried as much as possible to draw on the most relevant sources that deal with the theme at hand, the most important of which, certainly, are the Holy Qur'an and the authentic compilations of the Prophet Muhammad's words and actions.

Keywords

: Islam, Muslims, The Islamic worldview, Planning, Neighbourhood

INTRODUCTION

This paper discusses the notion of integrating the Islamic worldview into the planning of neighbourhoods. The nature of the paper is a conceptual and philosophical rather than an empirical one. Hence, some of the paper's conclusions are prescriptive and with no clear focus. The paper does not intend to produce a concrete formula for the integration of Islamic worldview into the planning of neighbourhoods. Nor does it aim to present the solutions for the existing problems of the Muslims with regard to residential planning. Rather, the paper aims to increase awareness, both of the professionals and general public, as to the significance of the subject in question. Thus, the most vital aspects of the theme were dwelled on and from an ideological point of

P
E
N
E
RB
IT
U

N
IV
ERS
I
T
I
S
A
I
N
S
M
A
L
A
Y
S
IA/
63

Spahic Omer

view. The paper neither overlooked nor downgraded the importance of such pressing issues as the definition and chief characteristics of neighbourhoods in history and at present, socio-cultural and economic influences on the development of Islamic neighbourhoods, and the role of the professionals and other relevant parties in the housing industry within the current context. These and similar issues were simply out of focus in the paper.

There is virtually no study conducted on the subject of integrating the Islamic worldview into the planning of neighbourhoods. Thus, the objective of this paper is to partly fill up a significant academic gap and to spur the interest of both the professionals and Muslim scholars on such an important subject matter. There are certainly studies that treat the subject of Muslim neighbourhoods but only from certain limited cultural, social or built environment perspectives. It is almost impossible to find a study that treats the matter from a broader spiritual perspective, integrating the same with and thus adding a new dimension to the rest of social, cultural and built environment perspectives. This research is an attempt towards exactly that direction.

THE PERTINENCE OF THE WORLDVIEW TO PLANNING AND
URBANIZATION

People are both the creators and demolishers of every civilizational accomplishment. They too are the only beneficiaries of civilizational valuable upshots. Similarly, people are the creators and inhabitants of cities. If a city is well-ordered, clean, efficient, corruption-free, balanced, safe, free from stress and nuisance, it is all due to the right conduct, attitudes and mindset of its inhabitants. The same is also reflected when a city's amenities are adequate and accessible, when its environment is conducive towards social interaction and coherence, when it conserves material and energy resources, and when it prevents ecological disruption. The good virtues of a city's inhabitants must have been modelled in accordance with a sound worldview that regulates their relationship with fellow community members, nature (space) and God. All the policies and schemes originated and implemented in this kind of city are merely an expression of the city's upbeat total atmosphere that has been avidly generated and then made pervasive over every department of living.

64

/

PEN

E

RBI

T

UN

I

V

ERSI

TI

SAIN

S M

A

LAY

S

I

A

Integrating the Islamic Worldview

However, if the opposite is the case, that is to say, if the conditions in a city are awful and detrimental to living, who is to be blamed? The demeanor, attitudes and mindset of the city dwellers – everyone in the socio-political hierarchy – as well as ce

ertain policies and their enforcement, are as a rule pointed at as the causes of the trouble. This may be partly true and acceptable, yet a majority of the root causes would definitely be related to the snags in the people's commitment to an adopted worldview (philosophy and vision of life and truth), provided the worldview itself is free of them and other imperfections.

Deviating from an established worldview, or abandoning it completely, has always produced a chain reaction in everything that people do. It follows that all the phenomena witnessed in a community and its urban and rural settlements, irrespective of whether they are good or bad, are reflective of the nature and strength of people's association with a vision and philosophy of life and truth (worldview) on whose principles the community had been established and had been surviving for years. The stronger and healthier the relationship between people and the philosophy of their community (their settlements) the more is it likely that they (their community) will keep moving ahead longer, and vice versa. Therefore, understanding fully all the aspects of the problems that beset a city, linking the symptoms with their root causes, before embarking on a healing process, shall always be vital.

As far as Islam is concerned, neighbourhoods serve as the incubators of constructive ideas and schemes that are epitomized in the characters and conducts of the people. Hence, both the Holy Qur'an and the Prophet's Sunnah paid so much attention to the notion of neighbours – their rights and responsibilities, as well as to the roles and significance of housing, mosques, roads and public spaces which make up neighbourhoods (Hakim, 1988). Of these, the house institution, together with the mosque, occupies the most important position. Central to the quintessence of all the components of a neighbourhood is certainly the comprehensive and enduring worldview of Islam. While developing the city-state of Madinah, the

Prophet (pbuh) and the first generation of Muslims demonstrated in a powerful and practical fashion the Islamic view of the subject at hand (Spahic, 2004). Neighbourhoods, it could be deduced, account for a microcosm of Islamic culture and civilization in that individuals and families bred and nurtured therein constitute the fundamental units of the Islamic community (

ummah

), Neighbourhoods have a potential to take up the role of an educational and training centre able to produce, in concert with other societal establishments with the house institution in the forefront, individuals capable of

P
E
N
E
RB
IT
U
N
IV
ERS
I
T
I
S
A
I
N
S
M
A
L
A
Y
S
IA
/
65

Spahic Omer transforming the whole communities they belong to. From their houses and neighbourhoods, while interacting with the outside world at different levels and in different

capacities, the same persons would contribute, somehow or other, their decent share to making this earth a better place for living. By the same token, if misconstrued and their role perverted, neighbourhoods have a potential to become a breeding ground for virtually every social disease, which if left unchecked could one day paralyze entire communities and drag them to the bottommost.

THE ISLAMIC IDEA OF THE SETTLEMENT

When the name Madinah (the City) was given to the Yathrib area following the Hijrah, such was not done at the dictates of chance. It was a deliberate move reflective of the developments within the young Islamic community headed by the Prophet (pbuh). Indeed, the advent of the new Islamic worldview and those who had already exemplified it in their thoughts, words and deeds to the Yathrib area implied the advent of a whole bunch of new concepts and philosophies. Of them was the idea of the settlement.

In addition to being relatively that which the settlements is and would always be thought of, the settlement in Islam, more importantly, stands for the ground for the people's interaction with Allah the Creator and Lord, space, the environment and, of course, with themselves at various levels, given that the settlement is a scene where they live, work, play, learn, worship, rise and fall. The outcome of these and other activities which the people engage themselves in settlements, especially urban ones, is what we call cultures and civilizations but which vary by reason of the principles and values on which they rest, as well as by reason of the objectives intended to be thereby achieved. Hence, it was very much suitable for the name of the prototype Islamic city, i.e. Madinah, to be derived from the word tamaddun, which denotes civilization.

One of the derivations of the word Madinah (the City) is the Arabic verb dana ('Abd al-'Aziz, 1992) as well, which means to obey, to submit (to), to owe allegiance (to). From there is the word din

which means religion, faith.

Thus, the city in Islam is dubbed Madinah so as to signify the Islamic pivotal precept that man is a vicegerent on earth and has not been created except to abide by and absolutely submit to the will of the Lord of the universe.

It follows that every Islamic city and, indeed, any form of the Islamic settlement is a hub of worship (serving).

Worship ('
ibadah

) in Islam is a wide concept encompassing each and every action of man, irrespective of its nature and the level where it might be undertaken, on sole

66

/

PEN

E

RBI

T

UN

I

V

ERSI

TI

SAIN

S M

A

LAY

S

I

A

Integrating the Islamic Worldview

condition that God is intended to be pleased thereby and the divine norms pertinently conformed to. In such cities, Allah – be He exalted – is the only absolute authority and His words of guidance remain a source from which virtually everything as to managing this terrestrial life originates.

Accordingly, the job of th

ose who are entrusted to

administer such cities and settlements and rule over their

populace would not exceed the

perimeter of what is right

and the most efficient implementation of what has been

already prescribed, in order to preserve the religion, self,

psychological and intellectual strength, progeny and

wealth of their subjects. In ot

her words, their task would be

but ensuring the masses their general wellbeing by finding
a feasible and effective
modus operandi
of putting into
operation the set of infinite standards and values

(Ibn Taymiyah, 1992).

Moreover, neighbourhoods with all their facilities
assist people in discharging the diverse worship activities of
theirs. In Islam, the notion of worship is a universal one
encompassing every action of men (Qur'an, 51:56). Having
said this, the process of creating excellent neighbourhoods
can be transformed into an act of worship as well.

The Implications of the Islamic Idea of the Settlement for
Planning Neighbourhoods

The implications of the Islamic idea of the settlement for
planning neighbourhoods are rather ideological. Of them is
that the planners and users of Islamic neighbourhoods
perceive the latter as both the fields and means for the
implementation of Allah's
commands. Creating decent
houses and neighbourhoods thus stands for a societal duty
the neglecting of which, partly or totally, accounts for a
wrongdoing. This is so because possessing a decent house
which will be surrounded by a decent neighbourhood
could be seen as falling within the necessary minimum the
lack of which may cause one not to be able to rise to the
requirements of the vicegerency task for which people
have been created. When we say this we have in mind an
Islamic dictum according to which if an obligation (wajib
)

cannot be performed without something, the latter then
becomes an obligation (wajib
) itself.

Thus, planning and creating neighbourhoods is a
very serious task. It is about
giving people some of their
fundamental rights, executing
a religious obligation, and
contributing to an appropriate, or otherwise,
implementation of the message
of Islam. The corollary of
all this is that the Muslim

planners, and all the other professionals in the field of built environment at large, must enhance considerably their knowledge of Islam – its Shari'ah and worldview. This may appear as a daunting task to many, however, needless to say that it is incumbent upon every Muslim – male and female – to know the rulings

P
E
N
E
RB
IT
U
N
IV
ERS
I
T
I
S
A
I
N
S
M
A
L
A
Y
S
IA
/
67