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Building a Livable Urban Environment: An Analysis of Post-Modernist and Islamic View-Points

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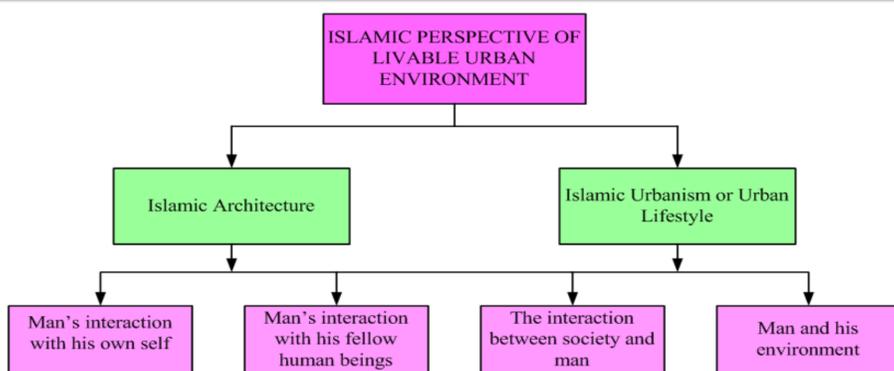
ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to analyse comparatively postmodernist and Islamic views on the constituents of a livable urban environment. The 21st century has witnessed an increasing urbanization of human settlements, especially in the emerging economies of the developing world. In the wake of such rapid rate of urbanization, both the physical landscape and social aspect of the urban environment are similarly undergoing rapid transformations. Against this backdrop, the paper seeks to examine three cardinal and defining features of urbanization. These include *urban architecture, urban lifestyle or urbanism and urban violence*. Based on its insistence on human reasoning alone, postmodernist urban architecture, for instance, has been heavily critiqued for its lack of socio-cultural and religious infusions. Religious elements of the urban environment appear crucial in the Islamic doctrine. And the lack of which may not qualify an urban environment to be described as livable from Islamic stand-point. For this reason, the authors will discuss thoroughly, from both perspectives, the three important building blocks literally of a livable urban environment, highlighting their similarities and differences. Finally, the concept of an 'Islamic Urbanism' will be deliberated as it can be used to fill the gaps in the Western idea of a livable urban environment.

INTRODUCTION

This paper analyzes postmodernist and Islamic views on the concept of a livable urban environment. Its central objective concerns evaluating selected postmodern features of a livable urban environment from Islamic standpoint. From the outset, it is worth noting that an environment that supports people's ability to fulfil their economic, socio-cultural, aesthetic, safety, and spiritual needs is worth inhabiting. Such an environment can be described as livable to a very large extent. However, the questions arising here are: How many of our 21st century urban centres can reliably support the above listed human welfare needs? How many of them have considered working on the spiritual dimension of urban life? Difficulty in providing sufficient answers to the above-raised questions underscores the difficulty inherent in determining the exact parameters of a livable urban environment.

CONTRIBUTION OF THE STUDY



ISLAMIC PERSPECTIVE OF LIVABLE URBAN ENVIRONMENT

Islam is a religion revealed to Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, and to all humanity. It transcends geographical and regional, ethnic and cultural boundaries. It shows clear signs for the guidance of humankind to judge between right and wrong. It exhorts fundamental facts that enable us to comprehend the Absolute Reality, the world, human existence, human interaction and relationship. This includes the architectural designs of our buildings as well as the ways we conduct our life in the urban setting. In this chapter, we will dwell in details on how Islamic worldview, which is based on *tahwidic* paradigm, shapes and influences the Muslim understanding and appreciation of structural design and the ways Muslims should conduct their lives in the urban cities.

ISLAMIC ARCHITECTURE

Islam is a comprehensive worldview and way of life. There is no aspect of life that has been neglected in Islam. Practicing Islam means practicing all fundamental principles of Islam, which cover all spheres of human lives. Islam connotes not only the prescribed rituals such as the five daily prayers, giving almsgiving, but covers also philosophical, civilizational, ideological, and cultural issues. The subject of architecture, thus, is not excluded from the Islamic tenets (Omer, 2009, p.2). "Islamic architecture, then, can be defined as a platform to practice the Islamic teachings. It facilitates, fosters, and encourages the worship activities among Muslims" (Omer, 2009, p. 3).

TOWARD AN ISLAMIC URBANISM OR URBAN LIFESTYLE

In discussing the subject, Islamic urbanism, one has to understand first the idea of social life from the Islamic standpoint. Social life, according to Islam, is the arena where individuals carry out their mission, translate it into action and accomplish their obligation to God, their fellow beings and to society. It is a social arrangement which provides conditions conducive to bringing to completion human obligations. It creates a distinct setting that reflects the absolute power of God as well as gives priority and preferences to His commands. It also sets up a state of servitude to Allah and this leads to His followers who struggle to accomplish the Divine mission and establish Divine order on the earth.

CONCLUSION

The paper examined the three main constituents of a livable urban environment. These elements have been elaborated at length from postmodernist and Islamic perspectives. The postmodernist attempts to build a livable urban environment solely from the "secular" points of view, which are devoid of religion. This is totally rejected in the Islamic stand-point. Ethical and religious considerations need to be infused into our ways of building a liveable urban environment so that equilibrium can be maintained in the society. It will create a balance between material and non-material conditions, encourage equitable utilization of natural resources for the benefit of humanity, promote justice, ensure fair play and help humans to operate in this world according to Divine guidance.

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SOCIAL INTERACTION OF A MAN IS DIVIDED INTO FOUR CATEGORIES. THE CATEGORIES ARE:

1. MAN'S INTERACTION WITH HIS OWN SELF:

A man has the responsibilities to his own self. He must refrain himself from being carried away by his own desire. He is also responsible to cleanse his desire and appetite and purify them so that they will not lead him astray from the guided path. If he is able to do that, then his individual responsibility is completed. For Islam, man is ever a watcher over his own soul; to teach, to control, and to lead it to the blessed path.

"Serene soul! Return to your Lord well pleased with Him and He will be pleased with you. Enter among My servants. Into My Paradise" (Al-Quran, al-Fajr: 27-30).

2. MAN'S INTERACTION WITH HIS FELLOW HUMAN BEINGS:

Every individual, from the Islamic perspective, is charged to perform their own duties. This is significant because man is encouraged to look after the welfare of his neighbours and the other members of his community. It is their duty, for example, to visit his sick neighbour and to offer any assistance to the family in order to reduce their burden. Not only that, if he sees any of the members of his community were to commit any wrongdoings, it is his duty to inform and to correct them as this will stop them from continuing to commit it.

3. THE INTERACTION BETWEEN SOCIETY AND MAN:

The community is to blame and to be punished in this world and in the world to come if passively accepts evildoing by some of its members. Even though the majority of the people in society were not corrupt, but merely accepted the corruption passively, Allah still counted their destruction justifiable. If the evildoing it not being stopped, then the society is exhausted, decayed, and on the way to its end. Allah the Almighty says:

"The believers, men and women, are Auliya' (helpers, supporters, friends, protectors) of one another; they enjoin (on the people) Al-Ma'ruf (i.e., Islamic Monotheism and all that Islam orders one to do), and forbid (people) from Al-Munkar (i.e., polytheism and disbelief of all kinds, and all that Islam has forbidden)" (Al-Quran, at-Tawbah: 71).

4. MAN AND HIS ENVIRONMENT:

Man is expected to have a harmonious relationship with his environment. Though environment is meant for man to utilize for his immediate needs, man is not allowed to destroy his environment by simply cutting down all trees to construct his place of stay or work. Man should strive to strike a balance in fulfilling his needs for development and maintaining the ecosystem of his environment. This requires ethical consideration in our development plan and action. By doing so, he is able to prevent any natural calamities such as landslide and global warming, thus will provide a livable urban environment. Allah the Almighty says:

"Evil has spread over the land and the sea because of human deeds and through these God will cause some people to suffer so that perhaps they will return to Him." (Al-Quran, ar-Rum: 41).