



The Eastern Mediterranean

HISTORY

The Islamic City

From Southwest Asia, Islam spread west into North Africa and east into India from the 600s through the 900s. Throughout this region, Muslims applied the principles of their faith to the cities they built. More than a thousand years later, the results of this practice can still be seen in the cities of the Eastern Mediterranean.

Despite the chaotic [disordered] appearance it presents at first glance, especially in relation to some of the newer . . . parts of the city that surround it, the [traditional] Islamic city is an entirely rational [sensible] structure. Its . . . narrow streets provide vital shade, they keep down winds and dust, and use up little valuable building land.

In fact, there is a clear logic underlying the city's layout, one that is announced in the holy book of Islam, the Koran [Qur'an]. . . . Although there are regional differences, most towns and cities that have developed under the influence of Islam at any time in the last 1,300 years show surprisingly similar features. These apply to hundreds of settlements . . . from southern Spain in the west, to Lahore in Pakistan in the east. Elements of these ideas can be found in cities as far away as Dar es Salaam in East Africa and Davao in the Philippines. . . .

The main guiding principles of Islamic city planning recognize the need to maintain personal privacy, specify responsibilities in maintaining urban systems on which other people rely, such as keeping thoroughfares or wastewater channels clear, and emphasize the inner essence of things rather than their outward appearance. . . .

The major elements of the Islamic city are easily described. At the city's heart lies the Friday mosque, or *Jami*, typically the largest structure in the city. . . . Close to the *Jami* are the main *suqs* [souks], the covered bazaars or street markets. . . . Within the *suqs*, trades are located in relation to the *Jami*. Closest in are those tradespeople who enjoy the highest prestige [status], such as booksellers and perfumers. Farthest away are those who perform the noxious [unpleasant] and noisy trades, such as coppersmiths, blacksmiths, and cobblers. . . .

Attached to the ramparts [city walls], on which are located several towers and gates, is an immense fortified structure, the *Kasbah*. Usually perched on the highest ground, it was a place of refuge to which the sovereign [ruler] or governor retreated when the main city had fallen to an enemy, or was in the [midst] of a civil war. The *Kasbah* contained not only the palace buildings . . . but also its own small mosques, baths, shops, and even markets.

Everywhere else within the city is filled with cellular courtyard houses of every size and shape, tied together by a tangle of winding lanes, alleys,

and cul-de-sacs [dead ends]. Housing is grouped into quarters, or neighborhoods, that are defined according to occupation, religious sect, or ethnic group.

The most important residential unit in the Islamic city, the courtyard house clearly [shows] the application of the various principles of Islamic city planning. Outside walls lining a street are usually left bare and are rarely pierced by windows. If windows are necessary, they are placed high above street level, making it impossible to peer in. Entrances are L-shaped, and doorways opening onto the street rarely face each other, thus preventing any direct views into the house.

In hot climates, courtyards with trees and water fountains provide shade, but they also provide an interior and private focus for life sheltered from the public gaze. But within the courtyard and the house itself the appearance of plainness often gives way to lavish displays of wealth and decoration. A vividness inside parallels the emphasis in the Koran on the richness of the inner self compared to more modest outside appearance.

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Understanding What You Read After you have finished reading the selection, answer the following questions.

1. How does climate affect the size of streets in Islamic cities?

2. Where can the Kasbah usually be found in an Islamic city? Why?

3. What principles of Islam guided the building of the old Islamic cities? How do their courtyard houses reflect these principles?

Activity

Create an aerial map of a residential section in an Islamic city. Show how the windows and entrances of the houses are located in relation to the street and to other houses.