Traditional Islamic cities unveiled: the quest for urban design regularity

by Jorge Correia and Muath Taher

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Abstract

Traditional Islamic cities have generally gathered orientalized gazes and perspectives, picking up from misconceptions and stereotypes that evolved during the seconf half of the 19th century and were perpectuated by colonialism. More recent scholarship has shed light on the urban organization and composition of such tissues; most of them confined to old quarters or historical centres of thriving contemporary cities within the Arab-Muslim world. In fact, one of the most striking features has been the unveiling of layered urban assemblages where exterior agents have somehow launched or interrupted an apparent islamicized continuum. Primarly, this paper wishes to search for external political factors that have designed regularly geometrized patterns in medium-sized Arab towns. For that, two case studies from different geographies - Maghreb and the Near East - will be morphologically analysed through updated urban surveys. Whereas Nablus (Palestine) ows the urban matrix of its old town to its Roman past, in Azemmour's medina (Morocco) it is still possible to track the thin European early-modern colonial stratum. However, both cases show how regularity patterns challenge Western concepts of geometrical design to embrace levels of rationality related to tradional Islamic urban forms, societal configurations and built environment. Urban morphology becomes a fundamental tool for articulating the history with me processes of sedimentation and evolution in order to read current urban prints and dynamics. Thus, the paper will also interpret alternative logics of rational urban display in Azemmour and Nablus, linked to ways of living within the Islamic sphere.

Keywords: Islamic cities, urban form, urban design, Nablus, Azemmour

Introduction

In the 1870s, French writer Gustave Flaubert defined an Orientalist in the figure of the well-traveled man.[1] During the nineteenth century, the East represented the realm of exoticism, fantasy and mystery. Literature and painting provided perfect vehicles for fertile explorations of the unknown. In Europe, the poetry of Victor Hugo or Gérard de Nerval and the canvases of Eugène Delacroix, among others, fashioned visions of the Oriental world. A voyage to the Orient was considered a step back in time, towards the remains and ghosts of Western history, however, critics have argued that Orientalism produced only a factory of stereotypes.

Orientalist tropes that came to coalesce around the notion of the 'Islamic city' well into the 20th century were based on a static, unchanging type of city. This derived neither from some originating city form or representation, nor from some established set of rules or ordinances to be found in the culture. Instead, the Islamic city was a negative construct, born of the projection of otherness: what was not the western, the modern, the capitalist.

One century after Flaubert, Palestinian-American academic Edward said proposed a much wider concept of Orientalism, defining the term as a product of the West characterized by a patronizing attitude towards Middle Eastern, Asian and North African cultures,

often manifested in the imagery of the Islamic world.[2] A scholarship on urban studies soon joined this thread. Works of revision of the orientalist approach emerged through the holding of conferences and scholarly meetings that brought together academics from different backgrounds, including from Arabic and Turkish countries.[3] Even earlier, Brunschvig's seminal article 'Urbanisme medieval et droit musulman', in 1947[4] was still orientalist, because of in the way it defined the urban form of Islamic cities as 'irrational'; or without any planning.[5] Nevertheless, it represented the starting point for modern studies on the Islamic city by acknowledging that cities were the consequence of the administrative organization of the Islamic society, which determined the construction of urban forms. Still, the work of Jean Sauvaget might be considered orientalisted from the perspective of the classical legacy of Syrian cities.[6] In fact, while underlining that Damascus old city plan gets its orthogonal performance from the Hellenistic period; this author developed scientifical procedures, which are based on morphological and archaeological evidence. Moreover, he exposed the clash between geometrical oriented design and the Islamic devir of the city, whose urban reconfiguration has been intertwined with the societal organization.

This is the main question of the paper: to analyse the confrontation of external factors that have drawn regular urban patterns with the evolutional metamorphosis of cities in the Arabic-Islamic world.

Method

In fact, when one enquires a corpus of a large Arabic city situated from Morocco to Iraq, from Syria to Yemen, the major features of urban structure appear fairly constant and then exhibit a certain rationality; which is justified speaking in terms of a 'coherent' urban system.[7] As a result of uniform legislative guidelines, an almost identical socio-cultural framework, created by Islam, similar climatic conditions and construction techniques within most of the Islamic world; the production of remarkable similarities in the approach to the city-building process. This resulted in the frequent occurrence of the familiar beehive urban pattern throughout this vast geographic area, though deviations did occur, of course.

In order to present the argument in a structured, yet summarized way, two towns will be examined as case studies. Even if the share a current circumstances; both being inhabited mainly by Muslim population, Nablus in Palestine and Azemmour in Morocco offer two distinctive realities. Located respectively in the East and West of the Mediterranean basin, their histories witnessed different stages of evolution (Figure 1). Regular geometrical planning inputs differ on chronology, yet the reaction of centuries of Islamic domination presents similar characteristics. Thus, these cities must be understood not only in a physical sense but also in a cultural and social context; in a specifically given time and for a specifically group of given people.

A contemporary reading offers a morphological turn in both architecture and urban studies through a careful examination of design plans and evaluation of the lifestyles of its inhabitants.[8] This study will use updated surveys to conduct an urban morphology analysis. After a brief urban history for each case, the research will focus on the extraction of a grid for the planning, for either in an initial or intermediate time period. Whereas the Roman past still articulates the urban matrix of Nablus's old town, in the medina of Azemmour it is still possible to trace back the thin Portuguese colonial stratum. For retrospective readings of these town's urban layers, a careful analysis of its street layout and plot system needs to be carried out. Urban morphology methodologies allow clues specific for the reading of important urban clashes occurred in the past and for the understanding of the contemporary palimpsest.

In fact, both contexts have evolved to current -day urban forms where alternative logics of rational urban display, linked to ways of living within the Islamic sphere, require a careful interpretation. Finally, a dialectic synthesis will sum up the main aspects of agents, tools and procedures of planning with an Islamic framework over 'foreign' Cartesian legacies.
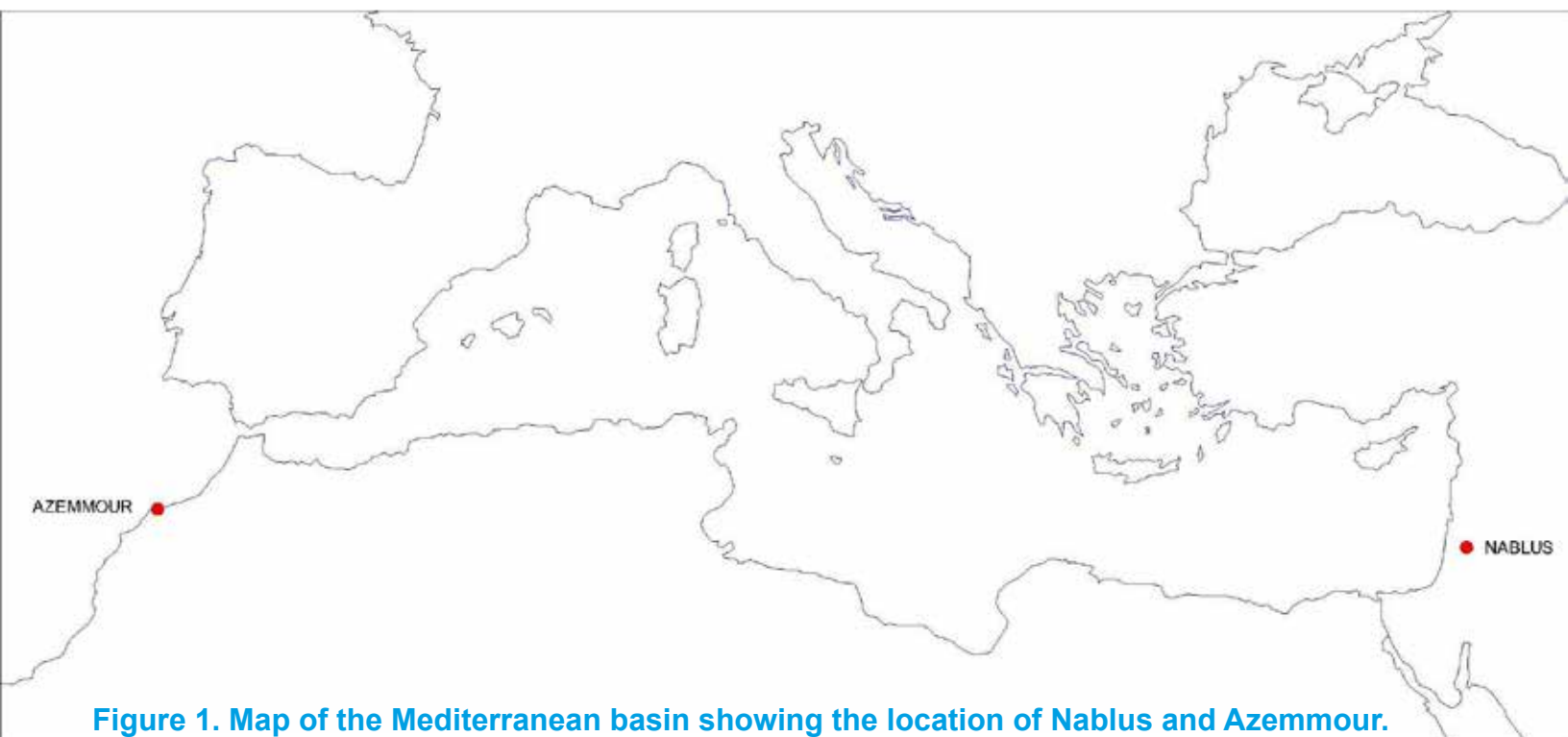
by Jorge Correia and Muath Taher

Figure 1. Map of the Mediterranean basin showing the location of Nablus and Azemmour. © Correia & Taher.

Case study 1: Nablus, Palestine, *Historical background*

Nablus is located in the northern part of Palestine. The city lies in a narrow valley between two mountains, making it the most important opening in a mountainous range.[9] (Figure 2) Historically, this position has conferred to Nablus the status of a junction for ancient trade routes: east-west, linking the Jordan valley to the sea coast and Egypt; north-south, connecting Damascus to Jerusalem.[10]

This situation made Nablus a cradle for different civilizations. While archaeology shows that the first permanent human settlement was established in the fourth millennium BCE, the city's current location derives from the Romans; Emperor Vespasian decided to build a new city in 72-73 CE and called it Flavian Neapolis.[11] As a prosperous city, many urban building were added to its structure, such as a theatre, a hippodrome, a basilica, and baths.

In 636, Nablus was conquered by Muslims. bacause of their pronunciation of the word "Neapolis" it later changed it to "Nablus". In this period, Nablus prevailed as an important trade and political centre. The Arab geographer al-Muqaddasi Nicknamed it little Damascus. The city was presented as a commercial hub, with paved streets and surrounding fields of olive trees.[12] Except for the break period of Crusader rule between 1099 and 1187, which left an ethnic mixture of Muslim, Christian and Samaritan population. Nablus continued to thrive under the Muslim rule through Ayyubid,[13] Mamluk and Ottoman empires well into the 19th century, not only as a market city but also a soap producer.

Following the Ottoman Empire's collapse, a British mandate was installed in the region in 1917. Ten years later, the city witnessed a violent earthquake which destroyed some of its most recognisable landmarks. As a consequence, many families started to build further away, engaging the city's booming expansion.[14] Between 1948 and today, the city has lived under different political scopes, Jordanian rule to Israeli occupation or current Palestinian administration.

Summing up, Nablus old town urban fabric has been the result of many historical metamorphoses (Figure 3). Besides cultural and/or economic vicissitudes, both natural catastrophes (such as earthquakes), or belligerent conflicts (like the latest 2002 invasion), have had a strong impact on what today is called the old town. Known for its history and tradition, this core neighborhood of an expanding

Figure 2. View of central Nablus and its old town quarters. © Correia & Taher.

Figure 3. Plan of Nablus' old town.
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larger city still shows a structured and layered sequence.[15] Today, Nablus can be considered a typical example of an Arabic-Islamic city, in its urban morphology and built environment.

From classic to Islamic

Besides this fact, Nablus street layout is still quite indexed to the Roman period, when it was one of the biggest Roman cities in the region. (Figure 4) Classical linearity can still be read in a street network; owing its matrix to the Roman grid plan. While former Neapolis had been established in a clear east-west linear conception, today Al Jama' Al-Kabeer and Khaled Ibn Al-Walled streets' prevail as unquestionable reminders of the former *decumani* directions. These were right-angled crossed by secondary streets, the main one being the *cardo* close to where the great mosque stands nowadays. Some sectors north of the former *decumani* main streets have kept their geometrical regularity.Present-day old town seems to lie on only the western half of the once big walled Roman city. Centuries

by Jorge Correia and Muath Taher

of Muslim cultural domination have endured a continuous process of adaptation of the classical urban heritage as a response to cultural and social requirements. Today, Nablus old town is composed by six quarters (Yasmina, Gharb, Qaryun, Aqaba, Hableh, Qaysariyya) connected by the inherited street network, yet adapting it to a public-to-private gradation. (Figure 5) Main transformations have occurred inside this quarter structure, according to space hierarchy. Streets continue to trace the Roman grid but adjust levels of privacy. In fact, the spatial configurations inside residential quarters, as well as house design plans, have evolved to consider privacy and neighbors rights as the main urban criteria. Houses were organised around a semi-private alley called *hosh*. It is traditionally shared by houses of the same family; a *hosh* acquired the family name and was inhabited by the family members.

The street visual character or level of light and shade can tell much about its character in a traditional Islamic city and for Nablus that couldn't be more accurate. Main public streets provide a place for economic, social, and cultural activities. The functions of a commercial street are trading and negotiating displayed goods, as well as sitting and entertaiment of the clients by the shop-owners. As major thoroughfares they relate to the Roman legacy and were privileged by the

Ottomans upon the setting of the *souk* [market]. They also added the clock tower in the beginning of the 19th century, which reinforced visually the public street structure.

From these major axis, another street level starts, going towards the residential and private districts. Mostly these streets are still characterized by commercial activities but time has twisted them slightly from the Roman period. They are narrower and more organic, most of the buildings on these streets are multi-storeyd. Often residential units are on the first floor with indirect entrances (from a side entrance or through a set of stairs).

The private street function within a quarter is played by a *hosh* most of the times. On the one hand it grants accessibility for residents and, on the other, it restricts mobility by keeping strangers and outsiders out; ensuring safety and privacy for its residents. Residential streets act as devices serving the social order in its desire for privacy and exclusion, serving as platforms for social activities among neighbors and providing safe sheltered areas for the children playgrounds.

Qaysariyya quarter example

All the characteristics mentioned before for the general interpretation of Nablus urban morphology apply to Qaysariyya quarter

Figure 4. Roman street layout of Flavian Neapolis (Nablus), according to *Nablus, Enduring Heritage and Continuing Civilization,* 2011. © Correia & Taher.
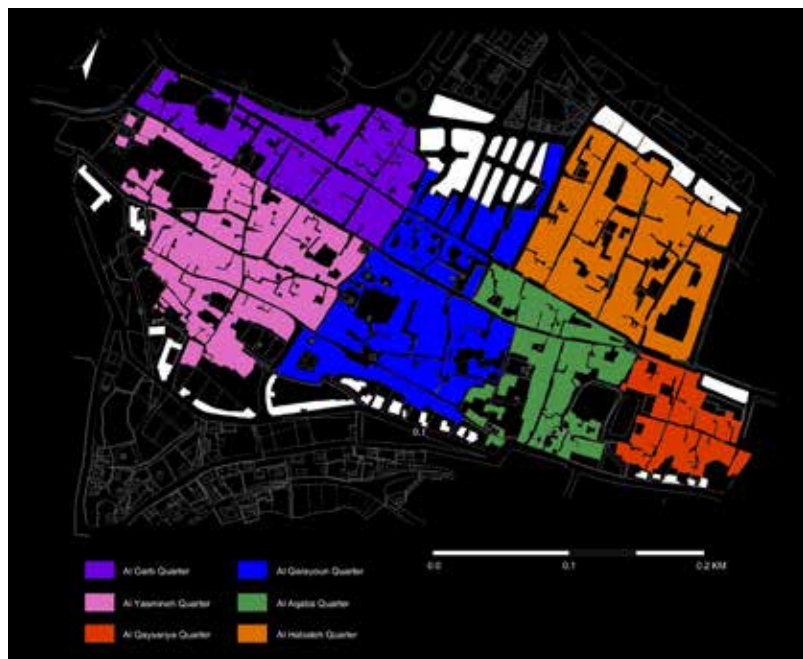

Figure 5. Plan of Nablus' old town quarters. © Correia & Taher.

as if it was an optimal sample of the urban transformations the city has passed by. This quarter is considered one of the oldest in Nablus,[16] located in the southeast part of the old town, and it exposes a clear example of the gradual transformation that the Roman urban layout has suffered to suit its Muslim population since the 7th century.

The quarter keeps two main crossing axis as traces of the Roman grid street network, a sort of mini *cardo-decumano* cross-shaped system (Figure 6). One of them was most probably part of a columned classical street, thus a lively and important street in Antiquity. Dividing the quarter in four smaller sectors, the process of adaptation and transformation is very clear. While the cross remains as the main structure for public circulation within the quarter, connecting it to the rest of the old town, each fourth sector was invaded by a dead end *hosh* in order to establish a second degree of urban distribution (Figure 7). Catering private houses, act as their extensions or semi-private lanes, shared by neighbours whose houses are accessible only by the very same *hosh*. In terms of urban design, the result seems confusing to external eyes, but

order prevails within this configuration. From the household to the cul-de-sac alley, from this to a quarter's public canal, and through this to the main commercial artery, life is defined by codes of Islamic social conducts, privileging diverse seclusion degrees.

Case study 2: Azemmour, Morocco, *Muslim city interrupted*

Azemmour is a small town on the mouth of river Oum er-Rbia in Morocco (Figure 8). Its present size doesn't match the magnitude and importance of its past, especially as far as architectural and urban aspects are concerned. The city's urban configuration can be summed up as an Arab-Muslim continuity interrupted by a thin layer, yet extremely relevant: the Portuguese occupation from 1513 to 1541.

Azemmour suffered intense processes of urban growth and shortening for nearly one thousand years. Although its origins are unknown, it is certain that the site evolved to become a riverside urban assemblage in the Middle Ages. In its heyday, when the Almohad dynasty dominated northwestern Africa, the city occupied a much larger area than today's precinct. Both aerial

Figure 6. Plan of Qaysariyya quarter in Nablus, showing the Roman street layout. © Correia & Taher.

Figure 7. Plan of Qaysariyya quarter in Nablus, showing the *hosh* system. © Correia & Taher.

by Jorge Correia and Muath Taher

Figure 8. View of Azemmour from the river Oum er-Rbia. © Correia & Taher.

views and the survey of the remaining ruins help draw a large round perimeter encircling which, nowadays, is an extended portion of the extramural town, passing by Sidi Bou Chaib mausoleum, a memorial place (Figure 9).

A second Islamic phase reduced the former surface to a rectangle, known today as medina or the historical heart of Azemmour. The collapse of the subsequent Marinid dynasty maritime advancement and the tendency to lose dynamism in its urban centers would have caused the city's downfall; walled but with much smaller dimensions. This new and smaller perimeter was punctuated by several square towers, a typological feature still visible on the western side. Georg Braun's image shows an urban wall interrupted by several towers, and a city in which several minarets of the mosques can be observed (Figure 10). This would represent Azemmour's features shortly before the Portuguese arrival, a rectangle containing approximately the same nine hectares of the current intramural town.

By the end of the 15th century, Azemmour would become part of an historical Portuguese settling process that comprised several towns in Northern Africa having started in 1415. Although the city was already considerably smaller than the original, circular-shape from the Almohad area, upon the conquest in 1513, Christian occupants decided another surface short cut. This procedure was known as 'atalho' and it was

applied to all Portuguese conquests in Northern Africa where existing Islamic cities were shrank due to military sustainability issues. Showing a deeply rational spirit, this technique led to a radical analysis of the seized cities, reducing and regularizing them geometrically, electing areas closer to the sea, the preferred communication channel for the Portuguese, and reassessing their internal disposition. Usually it also implied erasing sectors not selected by the 'atalho' for the Portuguese settlement.

The narrow Portuguese stratum has irreversibly marked the urban image of the town at a time when urban concepts and practices were being modernized through the experience with the founding of medieval new towns and the renovating hygienist spirit underlying an announced modernity in Europe. The search of a new identity related to a new lord and creed induced strategies of regulated urban design.

Clash of urban models

The 'atalho' imposed a secant wall to the inherited city in order to shorten both area and perimeter. Out of the elongated shape along the river, the Portuguese decided to keep only its northern sector, roughly a third of the previous surface. It would become known as 'castelo'

Figure 9. Aerial view/plan of Azemmour, showing current medina walls in black and probable Islamic Medieval perimeter in color (based on Google Earth). © Correia & Taher.

Figure 10. *Azaamarum* **(Azemmour) in the early 16th century, in Braun G., Hogenberg F., Novellanus S. (1572),** *Civitates Orbis Terrarum* **I, Koln: Apud Philippum Gallceum / Apud Auctores, tome I, fol. 57-57v. © Correia & Taher.**

by Jorge Correia and Muath Taher

[castle] or 'vila' [town]; due to its small urban size, there was no need to separate a specific castellated area from the rest of the residential area. Today it corresponds to the Kasbah/Mellah quarter in Azemmour. (Figure 11)

Since the castle/town area appears described as abandoned upon the Portuguese conquest, with only some ruined houses,[17] it doesn't seem the use of inherited constructions inside the castellated perimeter would have been a resource, with exception of the mosque converted into a church. Thus, it seems reasonable to assume that the establishment of a *new town* on almost an empty ground or with just a few built constraints.[18] The town captain devised an intervention plan and the proposal became effective in a letter to the king in which the layout of paved streets for houses with a good threshold, with special care placed on the town's cleansing and public health.[19] The speech, pointed toward a regulated urban design, displaying a pioneering effort at modern hygiene.[20] Out of the plan was the area to the south of the cutting wall introduced by the 'atalho', today called Medina. By the time of the Portuguese takeover, the Arab residential density of the city was already concentrated here. However, the drastic plan to completely erase this built tissue doesn't seem to have been fully carried out and the sector was even called "*old town*".

The Portuguese occupation lasted until 1541. The Arab takeover returned Azemmour to its pre-European perimeter of a rectangular and elongated walled town (the Kasbah/Mellah and the Medina quarters together).[21] The town also grew beyond the walls with a continuous expansion towards the Muslim mausoleum landmark of Sidi Bou Said, 'recovering' the original surface of Azemmour's huge medieval area.

In short, less than three decades of Portuguese presence in Azemmour were sufficient to instil rudiments of regulated urbanism, still felt today in the area matching the Portuguese *new town*, currently the Kasbah/Mellah quarter, especially when compared with the current sector of Medina, the *old town* of the Portuguese time.
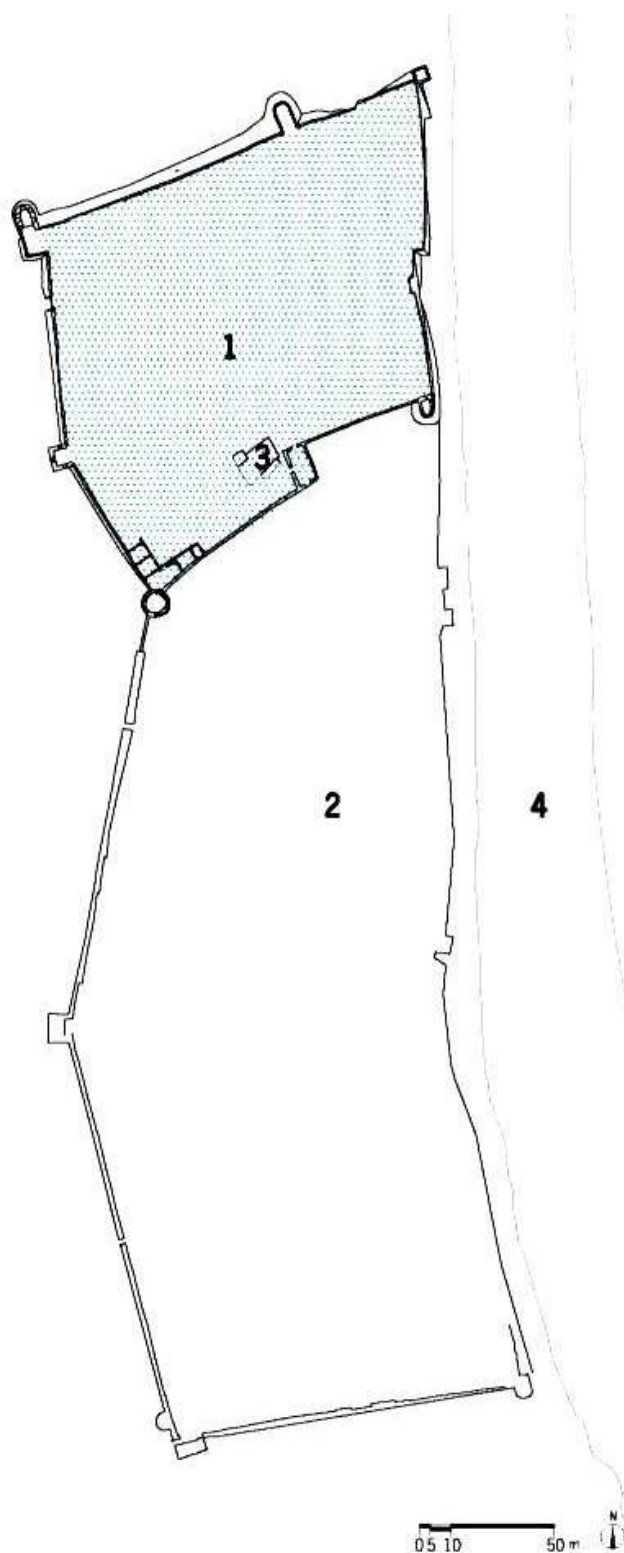

Figure 11. Plan of Azemmour showing the 'atalho' (downsizing) intervention, 1. Portuguese atalho area or *new town,* 2. Excluded area or *old town,* 3. Church, former preexisting mosque, 4. River Oum er-Rbia. © Correia & Taher.
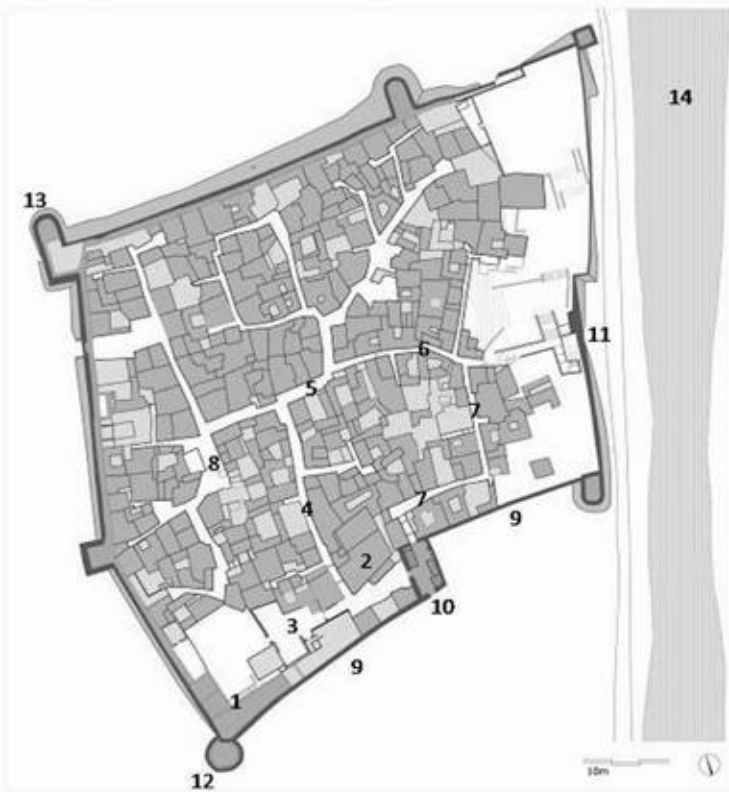
Figure 12. Plan of the Kasbah / Mellah neighborhood in Azemmour, former Portuguese castle/town, 1. Captain's House, 2. Mosque, former Portuguese church, 3. Main square, 4. *Derb Touamia,* **5.** *Derb Kasbah***, 6.** *Derb Mellah***, 7.** *Derb Souika***, 11. River Gate, 8.** *Derb Sidi ben Abdallah***, 9 'Atalho' wall, 10. Town Gate and Bastion, 11. River Gate, 12. Bastion of** *São Cristóvão* **[Saint Christopher], 13. Bastion of** *Raio* **[Thunderbolt], 14. River** *Oum er-Rbia.* **© Correia & Taher.**

Reading colonial urban prints

During the Portuguese period, the castle/town was organized in two clusters (Figure 12). Uptown, around the town's main yard or square, there was the Captain's House, the main church and the main gate to the exterior. Downtown, near the river entrance, gathered three trade supporting buildings[22]. 'Rua Direita' [main street] connected both clusters, which can still be traced in today's *Derb Mellah*, part of *Derb Kasbah* and *Derb Touamia* streets, and led to a certain regularity of parallel and perpendicular streets. But while this L-shaped axis is still vital for the quarter's circulation, it is more difficult to read

the rest of Portuguese former *new town* plan. Taking into account changes caused by centuries of Islamic presence after 1541, an attentive examination of fabric plots can point other directions.

Through an attentive and accurate survey[23] one can identify a few remaining empty canals amidst houses with similar widths to long shaped occupied lots. These elements indicate traces of former streets, revealing not only how they were obstructed by later structures, but also how parts of that primitive street layout have become cul-de-sacs. By cleaning the plan of such obstacles, it is possible to recover a series of long rectangular shaped blocks. (Figure 13) The two most regular and central blocks show propensity to standard measures around 30 *braças* for the long side and 10 for the top side,[24] adjusting themselves to the topography.

This urban stratum enlightens the intentions of the plan to establish six rectangular blocks in Azemmour. It was a feature of the Portuguese urban morphology that had been consolidated during the funding and expansion of the Kingdom of Portugal, in the Middle Ages, in several new establishments and additions of villages and cities.[25] Practices range from the tradition of drawing and building *bastides* in late medieval Europe. Although the Kasbah/Mellah quarter's built environment has been completely renovated, an architectural survey of houses shows how the central area remains the most ancient as it was most likely to be renovated in first place after the Portuguese withdrawal.

Islamic urban reconfigurations

Like the Qaysariyya quarter in Nablus, the Kasbah/Mellah quarter in Azemmour is the result of a sedimentation process. Here, four and half centuries later, Portuguese traces are faded in a street system that has supressed several secondary canals. Eventhough the European layout has lasted, like the rest of the Medina quarter the street layout is in accordance to a hierarchical network. From main streets to cul-de-sacs leading to each house, Islamic urban culture is significantly more related to social aspects of private life than to geometrical questions of regularity. Like the *hosh* for Nablus, the existence

by Jorge Correia and Muath Taher

Figure 13. Azemmour: architectural survey of the Kasbah/Mellah quarter with a hypothesis about the Portuguese urban fabric. © Correia & Taher. © Correia & Taher.

of dead end *derb* shows a tendency to conduct the pedestrian towards less public and more private areas of circulation (Figure 14).

Essays of mapping households only accessible by these semi-private lanes present a different dimension of the urban fabric. As most of the urban traffic only uses the major throughfares (*shar'* or *tariq*), those linking important areas for commercial or religious purposes (eg. market, mosque, gate), there is a side of the town that is just lived by the immeadiate neighbours of a determined *hosh* or *derb* (Figure 15). Built for pedestrian movement, traditional Islamic cities show a gradation from public to private, from *halal* – what is allowed or profane – to *haram* – what is fordidden or sacred.[26] These cultural dimensions work as filters at different levels of the urban structure or the building composition. The courtyard represents the private spaces of a house, its domestic haram, and it is the basic spatial unit in the traditional Islamic city. Its regular geometry abandons the supposed disorder of the street. Since the cultural matrix of Islam favours enclosed spaces, courtyards of

mosques are therefore the semi-public squares the city rarely possesses.

As a consequence, streets are sided by many blind facades, symbols of intimacy and privacy, and often consoles hanging from upper storeys. In both case studies, one can still observe the application of rules referring to medieval traditions. The concept of *fina'* is a key element, an open space surrounding or bordering a certain household whose usage is given to the owner. By other words, the *fina'* translates into a daily practice of preferable loading, unloading or animal tying and parking by the owner, meaning a virtual extension of the house towards the public space. Therefore, the effective use of *fina'* contributed to narrowing lanes and interrupting perspectical alignments. The reverse projection of this urban right of usage to the upper floor led to the building of *sabat* or *qantara*, meaning superior passages over streets. (Figure 16)

Figure 14. Example of *hosh* in Nablus's old town. © Correia & Taher.

The result are compact clusters of residential buildings. Bird's eye views portrait assemblages, yet allowing the identification of exceptional elements appearing in the skylines - minarets. What minarets actually signal are compact boroughs or quarters gathered around a mosque, called *mahalla*, *ḥawma* or *khitta*, the social organization of the urban sphere with its own services.[27]

Conclusion

In summy, one would be tempetd to say that despite specific historical exceptions, such as Islamic takeovers of classical planned cities or European colonial inputs, long and linear street perspectives were unusual. While this is true, it also asserts for different readings of the urban. It also requires different readings according to the diverse cultural identities. It also challenges the notion of regularity, traditionally interpreted as geometric design, which is reinforced even more with the orthogonal planning. Regularity perceived by outsiders cannot rely other than on rational coding; whereas regularity read from a perspective form an insider the inside might indicate alternative logics of urban order. Indeed, one of the distinctive feature of Islamic culture is that it has given birth to a comprehensive and integrated cultural system by meaningfully embedding the religious practice in the daily life of the individual and the society. While Islam

Figure 15. Azemmour: global plan of Kasbah/ Mellah and Medina neighborhoods, showing hierarchy of streets and housing clusters only accessible by cul-de-sacs. © Correia & Taher.

Figure 16. Example of *sabat* in a *derb* of Azemmour's medina. © Correia & Taher.

by Jorge Correia and Muath Taher

did not prescribe formal architectural concepts, it moulded the whole way of life by providing a matrix of behavioural archetypes which have generated correlated physical patterns.[28]

Interdependence between the members of the community were strong enough to coordinate individual decisions in a natural and flexible way, thus producing an organic whole out of a sum of individual acts of building. There was no formal scheme which would give in advance a rigid global of forthcoming developments. Planning was limited to mere regulating and adjusting processes, in order to prevent possible individual infringements on the right of neighbours and on the interest of the community.[29] Due to the strength of customs and of self-evident tacit agreements, there was no need for explicit building codes and it dispensed the need for many formal institutions. Orientalists were also very negative in this point, claiming little administration in the Muslim city, denying the existence of communities (*tawa'if*), of institutions such as the *waqf* or *hubus*, or agents like the *muhtasib* or the *qadi.*

Within the process of building and urban development, the roots of the structure and the unity prevalent in the vast Islamic world are the product of the *Fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence): the mechanism interpreting and applying the value system of the *Shari'a* (Islamic divine law which derives from the holy *Qur'an* and the *Sunnah*).[30] Hence all the cities inhabited predominantly by Muslims share an Islamic identity which is directly due to the application of *Shari'a* values in the process of city building. Both the vocabulary and design language and the *Fiqh* mechanism tended to perpetuate and sustain urban forms and the organizational/planning systems. Despite political and military interferences, Nablus and Azemmour state these values today, even if they are more than 4000 kms apart.

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Endnotes

1   *Dictionnaire des Idées Reçues* by Gustave Flaubert (1821-1880) was published in 1913. To enlarge this quote with further considerations, please adress to : Perez, N.N. (1988), *Focus East: early photography in the Near East (1839-1885).* New York : Abrams.

2   Said, E. (1978), *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon Books.

3   First, a colloquium in Oxford in 1965, published in 1970 by A. H. Hourani and S. M. Stern, taking a vernacular-regionalist standpoint, was followed by one organized by Robert B. Sergeant in 1980, both called 'The Islamic City', or the symposium held in Medina called 'The Arab city, its character and Islamic cultural heritage' in 1982, very well participated. In 1986, the seminal book by Besim Selim Hakim was published, titled 'Arabic-Islamic cities: building and planning principles', establishing the ground-breaking systematization of the knowledge so far, seeking the derivation of the urban structure of cities, still generically defined as Islamic, in Islamic law. Together with Andrè Raymonds, in a prior 1984 publication 'The great Arab cities in the 16th to 18th centuries', have represented a cornerstone of urban studies on the subject.

4   Brunschvig, R., (1947), 'Urbanisme medieval et droit musulman'. *Revue des Études Islamiques*, 127-155.

5   For further critique, adress to paper 'Some Historiographical Notes on the Islamic City' by Giulia Annalinda Neglia in *The City in the Islamic World* (2008). Leiden/Boston: Brill, pp.3-46

6   Sauvaget, J. (1949), 'Le plan antique de Damas', *Syria*, 26, 314-358.

7   In André Raymond's paper 'The spatial organization of the city' in *The City in the Islamic World* (2008). Leiden/Boston: Brill, pp. 47-70. In many cases, this coherent system still relates to the medieval formation period; later, the period from 16th century to the beginning of the 19th would mean virtually an Ottoman domination for all the regions, the exception being western Maghreb and parts of the Arabian Peninsula.

8   More recently, regional approaches began to tell the differences within the general abstraction of the Srab-Muslim world. Paolo Cuneo's book 'Storia dell'urbanistica: il mondo islamico' in 1986, represents the most systematic work on the history of the cities and different regions. One year before, Torres Balbas had indicated the way, aiming at just one region in *Ciudades hispano-musulmanas,* using archaeology as a source too. More recently other scholars such as Stefano Bianca in 2000 with 'Urban form in the Arab world : past and present' are concerned with the urban renewal of Islamic cities, also adopting a socio-religious standpoint on the Middle-Eastern city, or Hicham Mortada in 2003 with 'Traditional Islamic principles of built environment' going back to the question of Middle Eastern or Arab cities as direct translations of Islamic codes and laws into physical form, excluding all other aspects of the formation of cities. Attilio Petruccioli's 2007 book 'After amnesia : learning from the Islamic Mediterranean urban fabric' proposed a reading of the urban fabric using epistemological tools developed in the field of morphological and typological studies. The following couple of years saw the partition of conference proceedings again, organized or highly indebted to names mentioned before such as 'The city in the Islamic world', which have considerably contributed to update the state of the art.

9   Al Fani, I. (1999). *Nablus in Roman and Greek civilizations*. Nablus: Nablus muncipality.

10   *Nablus, Enduring Heritage and Continuing Civilization*. *The revitalization Plan of the Old City*, 2011. Jerusalem: Welfare Association, p. 30.

11   Flavian was named after the royal family and Neapolis meant 'new city' in ancient Greek. For more details, see: Arafat, N. , 2012. Nablus: City of Civilizations. Nablus: CHEC Cultural Heritage Enrichment Center.

12   Arafat, N. (2012). *Nablus: City of Civilizations*. Nablus: CHEC Cultural Heritage Enrichment Center.

13   For Nablus's Ayyubid period, address to: Kalboneh, A (1992). *The history of Nablus, 2500 BC-1918 AC*. Nablus: V1.

14   *Nablus, Enduring Heritage and Continuing Civilization*, op. cit., p.37.

15   Arafat, N., op. cit.

16   Idem.

17   *Letter from Rui Barreto to Manuel I,* 21 February 1514, published by Cénival, P., ed. (1934), *Les Sources Inédites de l'Histoire du Maroc, Première série - Dynastie Sa'dienne - Archives et Bibliothèques de Portugal*, t. I. Paul Geuthner (Paris), pp. 489-501.

18   Master Diogo de Arruda himself soon requested land to build houses inside the castle; see *Idem,* and also 'Pagamentos à gente de ordenança e aos trabalhadores das obras da cidade e do castelo,

1514/1516' (AN/TT, Núcleo Antigo, cód. 765, fls. 107, 117, 125v, 134, 154, 175, 197, 207).

19   *Letter from Simão Correia do the king*, 3 October 1516, published by Cénival, P. *et al.* ed. (1939), *Les Sources Inédites de l'Histoire du Maroc, Première série - Dynastie Sa'dienne - Archives et Bibliothèques de Portugal*, t. II (1), Paul Geuthner (Paris), pp. 37-40.

20   Moving away from the narrowed street system built by the Muslims that the Portuguese observed in their Maghrebin conquests, the urbanism was now more attentive to public space. Matching the Manueline tendency of the time, terms such as "arruar" [to make street] or "calçar" [to pave] were employed for example. Furthermore, military architecture played a complementary role in this process. Adapting parts of the previous Islamic fortified system, new wall segments and bastions were geometrically disposed in order to create an efficient defense system and a homogeneous safe area around them, targeted through fire.

21   Actually, the present location of the main mosque of the Medina quarter suggests pre-determined geometry reasoning since the virtual lines linking opposite extremities of the walled perimeter cross exactly at the mosque's main gate. Furthermore, this spot originates circles that touch or define relevant angles of the wall, thus inferring new interpretative hypotheses and ways of research for macro-spatial relationships in Islamic context that go beyond the purpose of this article. Nevertheless, urban regular geometries should be interpreted with extreme caution.

22   The downtown cluster assembled the factory, the accounting offices and the customs house: "(…) e ha porta da rybeyra feita hum cays, e a alfandega e feytoria logo pegada com ela (…)". See the letter of captain Simão Correia mentioned, 3 October 1516.

23   The survey was conducted within a broader Portuguese research project called «Portugal and South Morocco: Contacts and Clashes» in partnership with the Direction Régionale de la Culture - Doukkala-Abda, in Morocco.

24   One *braça* corresponds do circa 2,2 meters. For further insight on the Portuguese medieval measurament units, please address to: Cunha, Rui Maneira - *As medidas na arquitectura, séculos XIII-XVIII. O estudo de Monsaraz.* Casal de Cambra: Caleidoscópio, 2003.

25   See: Trindade, L. (2008), *Urbanismo na composição de Portugal.* Thesis (PhD). Universidade de Coimbra.

26   On the subject of these two poles, see: Petruccioli, A. (1990), *Dar al-Islam.* Bruxelles: Pierre Mardaga, p.38.

27   For further insight, see: Cuneo, P. (1986). *Storia dell'urbanistica : il mondo islamico.* Roma: Laterza, p. 92

28   Bianca, S. (2000), *Urban form in the Arab world : past and present.* London: Thames and Hudson, pp. 22-23.

29   See Stefano Bianca's paper 'Traditional Muslim Cities and Western Planning Ideology: an outline of structural conflicts' in *The Arab City, its character and Islamic cultural heritage* (1982), p.39. Also, Mortada, H. (2003) in his *Traditional Islamic principles of built environment* offers a thorough analysis of such rights.

30   Hakim, B. S. (1986). *Arabic-Islamic Cities: Building and Planning Principles.* London: KPI, pp. 137-138.

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