JEDDAH: A "WISE OLD CITY" FACING THE CHALLENGES OF URBAN REQUALIFICATION?

Elena Maestri

Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore (UCSC), Milan (Italy)

1. Introduction

History, culture and architecture are strictly interrelated. Jointly they express the change in social and physical traditions, affecting the issue of continuity and crisis of people's identity in urban environments. This fact is particularly evident in the southern/eastern Mediterranean and in the Gulf. As regards the Arabian Peninsula, within the cultural-historical debate at the dawn of the new century, the "city" and its "territory" represent essential keys to the reading and re-reading of local history: thus, the field of urban studies is increasingly used as a new methodological tool to trace the roots of modern statehood, the evolution of a certain community/polity, and the socioeconomic development process. Balances and imbalances related to the dynamics and forces of a traditional *dawla* – a tribal state conceived as authority and power, but without fixed borders – intertwine with the local environment and social system. Therefore, academic studies investigating the town model in Arabia from pre-oil to oil era, as an urban tribal settlement first and as a "recipient of modernity" and then "a focal point for the reclaiming of an Arab-Islamic identity" (Fuccaro, 2001: 175), cannot ignore the existing interconnections in the processes of urban growth and transition from a traditional *dawla* into a modern state with definite territorial boundaries. A critical discourse deals with the "Gulf city model" that emerged from the transformation of the *medina* – the "traditional town" – into the "oil city". The planning of new suburbs around the old settlements throughout the region was deeply influenced by Western urban concepts and ended up being perceived as an imposition of foreign planners, ignoring local culture, lifestyle and habits, and adding to social contradictions and divisions (Al-Nakib, 2016: 5).

Within the interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary approach of historiography, it is interesting in particular to see how history and architecture increasingly meet and how they share, though with differing objectives, the analysis of settlement patterns and urban centres. The built environment and architectural solutions in historiography become clues aimed at investigating traditional political and social organisation

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and structures, as well as the economic development of the oil era in the 20th century, considering the exceptionality of the phenomenon and the exponential growth of urban population that came with it. In this sense, the case of Saudi Arabia is quite significant, as the proportion of urban population rose from 10% to 77% in 40 years, due to some major factors, acting in a similar way in all the Arab Gulf countries. These major factors are represented by urban pull factors (the city as the centre of redistribution of oil-revenues in the *rentier* system of the "oil economy"), rural and Bedouin environments' push factors and the affluence of foreign labour (Al-Hathloul and Edadan, 1995). Western and global forces have undoubtedly been affecting the development of modern cities over the most recent decades in Saudi Arabia and in the rest of the Gulf, although Islam and tradition still play their own role in the post-modern "neo-patrimonial" cities as well as in the growing "industrial cities".

With regard to Jeddah in particular two questions arise: can the revitalisation of its historical identity and architectural legacy contribute to the liveability of the city? Is there the necessary attention to the new patterns of behaviour of local communities and their changing identity? We are referring to the "cultural core": symbolic spaces expressing this "cultural core" can become part of a renewed discourse on the link between architectural heritage preservation and identity issues. Saudi intellectuals within the National Dialogue agree on the fact that the youth are facing an identity crisis in the country, and the solution is not in the promotion of artificial urban environments glorifying traditional culture, while archaeological and historical sites are neglected and historical buildings demolished (Al-Fassi, 2010: 22). Local identity expressions are not a static phenomenon and, as such, they should be taken into more consideration when urban structure conservation and adequate planning are concerned. The first steps taken in the historical district of Jeddah are certainly important, but they are just the beginning of a process that needs more efforts to make the cultural dimension of architectural heritage a pivotal aspect both in wider requalification of urban spaces, and in communication to the youth of a deep sense of pluralistic values and symbols in the past of their "nation" (*al-watan*).

2. Conservation of symbolic historical spaces "making identity"

The discovery of oil in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia in the early 1930s quite surprisingly had its first important impact on the urban growth in Jeddah, at a distance of more than 1,200 km from the oil fields. The country's sedentary population was less than 50% at that time and it was distributed in a few towns, villages and the so-called *hijar*, settlement centres established by King Abdulaziz at the beginning of the 20th century with the uneasy political objective of sedentarising the nomads, and to develop at the same time their Bedouin qualities in order to create a military force (Fabietti, 1982: 188). Political detribalisation emerged as a process soon followed in the 1950s by the first efforts to centralise the state, which led to the development of Riyadh as the new political and administrative centre of the kingdom, but Jeddah was certainly the first most important city in modern Saudi Arabia: the first ARAMCO office was opened in one

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of the most beautiful houses in the town's historical district, al-Balad, while in 1947 the demolition of the wall here opened the way to the following major radical changes.

Urban spaces, transformed by the so-called "oil urbanisation" era, are certainly more and more complex nowadays in Saudi Arabia, and they are facing new serious problems imposed by development, modernity and demographic growth. Jeddah is no exception. Encouraging cultural experiences within urban spaces without borrowing from the past simply out of nostalgia can effectively create new links between civil society and political society, between new generations and old ones, while representing solid contributions to overcoming stereotypes and forging constructive understanding between the dwellers with both common and different cultural backgrounds (nationals and expatriates).

Identity is a dynamic social phenomenon: the creation of artificial recycled urban environments clashes with the new ways people find to express their preferences in their home and urban environments in modern spaces. Architects and institutions certainly have responsibility for affecting people's choices, but identity cannot be revived by mere reproduction of the traditional past in urban realities, and new factors have been emerging as crucial determinants in the eyes of some Saudi architects and planners at the beginning of the new century. Houses are less and less affordable for the younger generations in all the major cities of the kingdom, and the use of innovative and/or flexible construction materials different from concrete, such as wood, that may be more adaptable and environmentally friendly, are debated by some local architects focusing on future planning and re-planning of the existing residential settlements. A reduction of the house size and a better quality of life within the neighbourhoods might compensate for the high costs of innovative construction techniques and materials (Al-Naim, 2006: 158). Within this perspective, an accurate balance between technological development and the preservation of ancient traditions and environments can bridge the past with the present and the future in a sensible way, and build a pathway towards a new form of human security and sustainable growth. Both form the basis of order, stability and cultural development.

During the second half of the 20th century – especially since the 1970s – Saudi Arabia gradually sped up the traditional knowledge transformation process and then opened the door to the present transitional stage of the "post-oil" and globalisation era, with its ICT revolution. A modernisation process going beyond purely outward and material hypermodernity is a major challenge in the region. The urgent need to try and reconcile the positive aspects of tradition and modernity comes to the fore, as the preferred way to avoid generational conflicts and internal divisions, which can easily lead to exacerbated social problems. In this sense, tradition representing the constructive memory of the past emerges as a valuable starting point to look ahead, focusing on the building of the youth's identity and character. A debate has been emerging since the 1970s in which some Arab intellectuals, while questioning the local situation, tried to adopt "Western culture" and "Western paradigms". The conflict between tradition and modernity started attracting the attention of leaders, academics and scholars.

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The resilience of urban environments in the light of a more balanced growth within cultural and historical spaces in a city that may be able to adopt some "wise" solutions has become a more relevant topic and it has been assuming particularly interesting tones in Jeddah, with special reference to the integration of cultural, environmental, economic and social aspects as a fundamental ingredient of any sustainable development. At the beginning of the new century, such a debate in the city is considered an expression of rising cultural awareness.

Throughout history Jeddah and its port have been inherently associated both with maritime trade and the Islamic pilgrimage (*hajj*). In *The Travels of Ludovico de Varthema*, the Italian traveller who, according to his records, visited the town between 1503 and 1508, Jeddah is depicted as "a city of very extensive traffic" with "very beautiful houses, as is the custom in Italy" (Winter Jones and Badger, 2010: 52). Nowadays the old houses of the historical district are not the same ones seen by de Varthema, but they were built in the same settlement between the 18th century and early 20th century; they still represent very interesting models of the most ancient construction techniques and materials of the Hijaz, as they are built of wood and stone from the coastal region, a coral aggregate known as *hajar al-bahar/hajar al-manqabi* (madrepore). Most of them are still dilapidated, but they represent the most ancient "soul" of the city to be saved in the view of a small but determined group of Saudi intellectuals willing to "awaken" institutions and civil society at the beginning of the new century.

The focus on destroying and rebuilding that has been prevailing elsewhere in the Gulf is opposed in an effort to avoid the worst results of Mecca, where the tallest clock tower, Abraj al-Bait, rising like Big Ben in the heart of the Muslim world and towering 600 metres over Al-Haram Mosque, has become emblematic of a frenzied construction boom in the name of mega-projects in the holiest site for Muslims, sparing neither the house of Khadija, the first wife of the Prophet Muhammad, razed to build public lavatories, nor the house of Abu Bakr, destroyed to build a Hilton hotel. The need to prevent the same mistakes as other restoration projects carried out in Dubai and elsewhere in the region is emphasised too. Despite the weakness of institutional and governmental support in this direction and the people's very limited sensibility, the campaign to preserve the authenticity of al-Balad seems to be gaining further support within the state's most recent strategy aimed at promoting cultural tourism in the kingdom. Local intellectuals like Sami Angawi, well-known architect and founder of the Hajj Research Centre, and Sami Saleh Nawar, General Director for Culture and Tourism at Jeddah Municipality, contributed to enhancing the impact of the campaign aimed at sensitising people and institutions to "save al-Balad". Thus, the revitalisation of this area began to be conceived as an open space in which to live, work, pray and be entertained with high-quality infrastructure, services, museums, craft working shops in historical buildings, etc. The process has just begun and, as expressed by Sami Saleh Nawar, "the frustration comes when you perceive great indifference on urban preservation among most Saudis, and most specifically among many owners of historical houses".[1] At the least, unprecedented awareness is growing of the fact that a different model needs to be promoted for Jeddah, the model of a city where spaces in the old district should be re-evaluated as

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"third places",[2] not only because they are well restored and full of charm: they can be both the heart of the city and bear witness to a past which, with its everyday life and most symbolic spaces, can intertwine with modernity and technology without losing authenticity. The whole design of re-evaluation is thus moving on the basis of accurate surveys, by planning the restoration of the smallest architectural details too, in order to obtain homogeneous and harmonious results, when and where possible.

All of that seemed to be mere utopia in the kingdom only a few years ago and full homologation with the "Dubai model" seemed to be unavoidable. After the inscription of Jeddah on the UNESCO World Heritage list in 2014, no doubt the "save al-Balad campaign" has become less isolated in the country, which gives some hope of changing things, although the "on-site situation continues to be worrying" due to the enduring risk of collapse of several buildings. Technical and administrative teams started working jointly to rehabilitate an area marked by degradation, but the new plans and studies to develop the district, to preserve its distinct local architecture and to promote cultural initiatives demand more funds and the intervention of the central government for an emergency budget is requested (SCTN, 2017). Huge challenges need to be addressed: local private sector involvement is still too limited in upgrading the area, where improvements clearly remain partial. Nevertheless, one cannot ignore the fact that something new has been maturing in Jeddah. Some recent initiatives, despite their fragmentation, are renewing the cultural and commercial role of al-Balad and its symbolic historical spaces. So the revitalisation process of these spaces and their architectural legacy can effectively contribute to sustainability, provided it is pursued more thoroughly, which means more active involvement of the local private sector as well.

All the same, the first steps taken to save al-Balad are well exemplified by some spaces that are worth mentioning. Coming from the Al-Alawi *souk*, the Al-Shafi'i mosque certainly stands out, being one of the most interesting mosques in the city and the oldest one. It was conceived according to the Fatimid school of architecture and the level of the mosque's courtyard is clearly lower than the street level, which has risen over time. Its single minaret (Figure 1) was built in 1251, at the time of a Rasulid ruler of Yemen, al-Malik al-Muzaffar, who is known for his patronage of the arts and monuments. Restored by an Indian merchant in the first half of the 16th century the mosque is still characterised by wooden columns and capitals in its courtyard, attesting to the Indian style of this first restoration (King, 2011: 8). In 2012 the Chief of the General Authority for Tourism and Antiquities announced the government's sponsorship of a restoration of Al-Shafi'i, which started only after careful archaeological surveys in order to avoid the mistakes made in previous restorations in the country. The discovery of an earlier *mihrab* and the unblocking of the windows in the *qibla* wall are two significant outcomes of very accurate studies (Abbas, 2014: 11). This is a positive result of coordination between the protagonists of the "Save al-Balad" campaign and institutions: the preservation of the original buildings' materials and forms is a "wise" priority supported by the work of Sami Nawar and his group, who managed to find a way to implement their ideas in this unique architectural space (Al-Abyadh, 2014).

2. The concept of "third place", conceived as a means to promote mutual knowledge and more social cohesion by networking societies, has recently been studied and emphasised within the College of Environmental Design at the King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals (KFUPM). Thanks to Dr Adel S. Al-Dosary, Dean of the College of Environmental Design at KFUPM, in discussion with the author in Milan, September 2016.

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Figure 1.

The minaret of Al-Shafi'i mosque, external view before restoration (author, 2009).

As for the historical houses of al-Balad, a lot still needs to be done. The fact that these houses demand both careful restoration and regular upkeep, as a consequence of the climate and of corrosion by salt in the air and the soil (Vincent 2003: 411), makes things even more difficult, because most owners do not have incentives to do that and the institutional support remains very weak. Huge challenges are there, but no doubt the square in front of the Nasif House (Bayt Nasif) and the Nasif House itself are two significant examples of preservation that "make the identity": the ancient cannon in front of the Nasif House stands out as a testimony to the ancestors' resistance and success against the raid by the Portuguese in 1517 (Figure 2), and it is included within a project of beautification of the area, where the Nasif House, now a museum (Figure 3), is reconfirmed as an architectural and symbolic space crucial to the history of Jeddah in the early 20th century. Well-known urban personalities used to meet there and, under the influence of the cultural ferments of the 19th century in the Ottoman Empire, they developed their own discourse on Hijazi Arab Islamic nationalism, before the occupation of the Hijaz by Abdulaziz Al Saud in 1925. The latter made his headquarters there, while the owner of the house, Muhammad Nasif, declared his loyalty to him (Al-Rasheed, 2013: 10). The specific identity of the Hijaz comes to the fore

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with its cultural distinctiveness in this home environment where history and architecture meet and merge, while linking the home environment with the surrounding urban context (Bosworth, 2007: 223).

Figure 2.

Square with the ancient cannon, symbol of resistance against the Portuguese in the 16th century (author, 2012).

The owners' willingness to collaborate and the necessary regulatory framework to enhance the social function of more historical houses are prerequisites for further architectural legacy re-evaluation: the most recent decision to convert another merchants' house, the Sharbatly House, into a museum and cultural centre for poetry seminars and art exhibitions (Al-'Isa, 2014) and the enforcement of the new Building Regulation for the historic area by the Municipality of Jeddah in 2017 are expressions of a slow but ongoing process. Historical houses with their unique style, materials and decorative elements and paintings express family and collective identity within this process, reconfirming Jeddah's special role throughout history, both as the port of Mecca and as a lively centre of commerce and cultural exchanges between Asia, Eastern Africa and the Mediterranean. Quoting William Facey, "teak for the ornate filigree screens on the *rawasheen* balconies of Jiddah's old houses symbolizes both the trade with India and the cooling breezes that once blew that trade to its harbor…" (Facey, 2005). A new process has started in al-Balad, which demands a new vision for the city as a whole.

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Figure 3.

Bayt Nasif, restored façade with mahogany filigree balconies (rawashin, sing. ruwshan), decorative and symbolic elements developed both to respond to climatic needs and to express perceptual identity (author, 2012).

3. "Oil urbanisation" and present challenges to a holistic approach

Development, city growth and urbanisation financed by the oil-based economy in the kingdom since the second half of the 20th century had a clear impact on the built environments of the second largest city in the kingdom, despite its distance from the oil fields, as already hinted. Since the 1950s the city started attracting both Saudi citizens from rural and Bedouin contexts and foreign labour from Arab and non-Arab countries: Jeddah's growth was rapid, as it reached 110,000 inhabitants in 1960 (up from 24,000 in 1948), while the expansion of new areas led to the progressive establishment of both planned and unplanned settlements till the end of the century.

The regular streets of the new districts with their "villa type" houses and the modern buildings made of cement and concrete, the glittering shopping malls either in the "American style" or in a "recycled traditional style", and the new mosques built to be impressive, and yet often lacking adequate upkeep and care, like the "floating mosque" on the Northern Jeddah Corniche (Figure 4), give the city a distinctive appearance, far from the old Jeddah and the most authentic historical identity of the original settlement. The wide modern streets beautified by the enormous sculptures and compositions at the crossroads, creating an "open modern art museum", are something unique: they are the result of careful beautification projects of the new urban spaces,

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supported by Muhammad Sa'id Al-Farsi, engineer, artist and mayor of the city in the 1970s. The involvement of both Saudi artists like 'Abs al-Halim Radwi, who realised 32 works over about 35 years and of other well-known Arab, Muslim and Western artists, like Darwish Salama, Hisham Punjabi and Lafuente, emphasise the original opening of the city and its inhabitants to cultural influences arriving from far across the sea (Al Resayes, 2010: 56), within an approach marked both by positive awareness of the dynamism of identity in the modernisation process and the fruitful collaboration of local artists and supportive authorities. Such an achievement in modern urban spaces is certainly no little thing when we consider in those years the contemporary proliferation of unplanned settlements, and the progressive degradation of "old Jeddah". No doubt the city expansion has been marked by the planning of new residential neighbourhoods in the "Western style", with little or no consideration for cultural, identity and environmental protection, but the most serious problems came with the uncontrolled urban growth that still severely affects sustainability issues in the city, making it far from a "wise old city". Some dysfunctions, related for instance to limited sewerage and waste collection in certain areas, need adequate solutions.

The preservation of old urban spaces and the revitalisation of cultural identity need to be conceived within a more holistic approach that cannot be decoupled from more comprehensive strategies.

Figure 4.
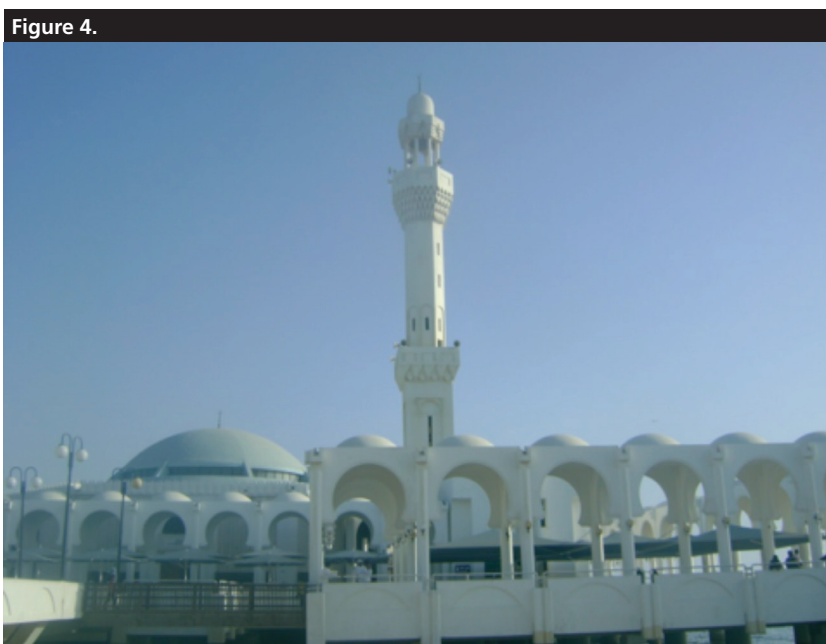
"Floating mosque" (author, 2012).

The initiatives in the architectural and cultural fields, like the ones considered in this study, certainly make Jeddah a positive exception in the Arab Gulf states, but the preservation of old urban spaces and the revitalisation of cultural identity need to be conceived within a more holistic approach that cannot be decoupled from more comprehensive strategies to develop a sustainable urban environment in the metropolis. Al-Balad could represent an interesting pilot project if further initiatives are supported: conservation cannot simply be aimed at creating a "museum district". The provision of renovated housing units is another aspect to be considered that can encourage young Saudis to live in a re-evaluated area with an adequate integration of hous-

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ing, services and commercial activities. Novel insights, regulations and partnerships between the public and the private sectors are needed to face the major problems of all the unplanned and degraded residential areas in the metropolis, housing over a million people, according to Jeddah Municipality estimates of 2009 (Alsharif 2013: 30). The battle is between residents and owners, on the one hand, and the elite contractors and businessmen, on the other, while institutions remain weak: the case of al-Nuzlah al-Yamaniyya slum, for instance, highlights the difficult balance between the Regulations for Developing Slum Areas issued by Jeddah Municipality in 2008 and the cultural dimension of building, living and "producing space" expressed by residents and owners in this and other similar unplanned settlements in the metropolis, where people have found new ways to adapt traditional forms and localise modern forms (Difalla, 2015).

Against this backdrop, the most recent competition for the world's tallest skyscraper, with the Jeddah Tower planned to reach one kilometre in height, certainly emerges as something sterile, clashing stridently with the persistent challenges of the city in terms of sustainable redevelopment of urban spaces, where cultural needs deeply intertwine with social needs. Within this perspective, both the role of local intellectuals and the collaboration of the inhabitants and civil society represent essential elements in any future planning and requalification process aimed at a viable better future, in which the quality of life is enhanced, and at the same time the "soul" of the city is revived in the light of its dynamic identity.

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