

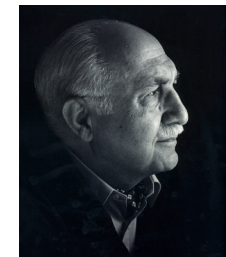
## *La trascendente dimensione delle città*

### *The transcendent Dimension of Cities*

*Presi tra passato, quando le credenze religiose tradizionali strutturavano la maggior parte delle visioni del mondo, e l'attuale regno della quantità e del consumismo materiale, che sta minacciando l'esistenza stessa della vita sulla terra, rimaniamo in trepida attesa della prossima fase ancora sconosciuta della coscienza umana per contribuire a mitigare le emergenti sfide della vita. Così, gli esseri umani esistono in una situazione di transizione che è precaria eppure piena di potenzialità. In questo panorama, l'articolo si concentra su due domande meno impegnative, tuttavia cardine, per quanto riguarda i nostri ambienti urbani: "Quali sono i fondamenti trascendenti che hanno dato i natali ed hanno sostenuto storicamente le grandi città del Medio Oriente negli ultimi dieci millenni e che cosa possiamo imparare da loro che possa informare e influenzare le trasformazioni olistiche e i modelli di vita delle nostre città di oggi ed il loro futuro?"*

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*Caught between the past when traditional religious beliefs structured most world views and the current reign of quantity and material consumerism that is threatening the very existence of life on earth, we remain in anxious anticipation of the yet unknown next phase of human consciousness to help mitigate life's unfolding challenges. Thus, human beings exist in a transitional situation that is precarious and yet full of potential. Within this panorama this paper focuses on two less challenging, yet pivotal questions regarding our urban environments: "What are the transcendent foundations that have given birth and historically sustained great cities of the Middle East over the last ten millennia and what can we learn from them that may inform and influence the holistic transformation and life patterns of our cities today and their future?"*



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Parole chiave: **Cosmologia; Ecologia; Metafisica; Spazio; Trascendente**

Keywords: **Cosmology; Ecology; Metaphysics; Space; Transcendent**

*Learning to manipulate clay, stone, marble, and wood, man penetrated their properties, and his techniques gave expression to his aspirations toward the divine. In architecture, environmental harmony was known to the Chinese, the Indians, the Greeks, and others. It produced the temples of Karnak, the great mosques of Islam, and the cathedral of Chartres in France.*

*Hassan Fathy*<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

In the course of human cultural and scientific development, we can identify five transformational phases of history to the present.<sup>2</sup> From the Paleolithic and Neolithic we evolved into the phase of the Classical-Traditional cultures of the great religions. In the last five hundred years we have gradually transformed into the Scientific-Technological phase and have now reached a threshold where the dominance by science and technology under the control of modern corporations and their reign of quantity and material consumerism is now threatening the very existence of life on earth.<sup>3</sup> Yet, we are still hesitant to awaken to the fact that for a species to remain viable, it must establish a niche for itself that is holistically beneficial both for itself and for the wellbeing of its surrounding context.<sup>4</sup> This “beneficial niche” needs an attitudinal

change, a transformation to what some have termed an emerging Ecological Age that may succeed the Technological age and foster a deep awareness of the sacred presence within each aspect of the universe and man’s integral part in this web of existence.<sup>5</sup>

Caught between the traditional past of religious beliefs and the yet not fully formed and comprehended new cosmology of the next phase of human consciousness, human beings exist in a transitional situation that is precarious and yet full of potential. Traditional Abrahamic religions have taught that the Divine is transcendent to the natural world; therefore they hold that we must negate the natural world as a locus for the meeting of the Divine and the human. This makes the conception of the natural world as merely an object to serve man’s material needs and this attitude has led to the plunder and near destruction of the natural resources of the earth by contemporary society.<sup>6</sup> In Islam, this tendency is somewhat mitigated since man’s responsibility toward the natural environment evolves from his role as God’s *Khalifa* (inheritor or vicegerent) on earth. In this regard the Quran says, ‘He is that has made you inheritors in the earth: if, then, any do reject, their rejection (works) against themselves.’<sup>7</sup> The Hadiths frame this responsibility within the two principles: unselfish utilization of natural resources

and preservation of the natural balance as good stewards of nature.<sup>8</sup> However, even these worthy cultural precedents are mostly not heeded in contemporary thought and action by decision makers in the Middle East and the rest of the Islamic world.

Perhaps, the social revolutions being experienced around the world and most recently over the last two generations in the Middle East, highlighted by the recent “Arab Spring,” are testaments to the material pressures of a world that has multiplied to seven billion population and is now 50% urbanized; water and food supplies have become increasingly more scarce; and issues of income discrepancies, unemployment, financial crises, and civil injustice characterize a growing number of contemporary societies. Faced with these daunting, disruptive forces, we seem to have no common ground visions or functional cosmology to guide us to viable solutions. Yet, at no time in history have humans had such access to the vast qualitative and quantitative knowledge made available to us that could discipline and generate sustainable new directions for a noble human survival.

Within this panorama and the limits of this article, my interest is to focus on one pivotal question related to the future of our urban built environments: How can holistic approaches to ecological spirituality inform and influence the form and life patterns of

current and future cities in the Middle East? What is the potential of the city to spiritually uplift the human spirit, contextualize and symbolize our shared "human condition," accommodate inclusive communal activities and rituals that give meaning to our lives, and provide connections to knowledge and understanding of the transcendent dimension of existence in architecture and the urban setting?<sup>9</sup> Perhaps, one way to do that is to look at positive examples in the past and elicit key design principles; observe the shortcomings of this subject in the present; incorporate the vast new knowledge available to us about ecological urbanism and then proceed to suggest what innovative design paradigms might help produce the sustainable and spiritually inspired city sublime of the future in our region of the world? What have been the holistic environmental, social, cultural, economic forces, and urban design policies that have produced the sublime places, the beautifully vital cities of the world, and the architecture that we cherish and are transformed by?

Once we have explored and understood the elements of such transformative places that produce in us a sense of "wondrous awe" and integrated them with new criteria of ecological spirituality, we may proceed in the next phases to study how these considerations, as basic principles, might help produce the transcendent city of the

future and rehabilitate our existing cities. Within the limits of this short essay, might it be possible to glean some lessons of what has been the role of spirituality in the more memorable and beautiful built environments of the Middle East? What are the highlight 'spiritual' foundations that have given birth, sustained, made grow, and (when lacking) caused the death of cities in this region over the last ten millennia?

*Once upon a time, we (Geographers) had this ridiculous argument: 'Was the first city a market, a storehouse, a temple or a fort?' Paul Wheatley challenged that notion, arguing that 'Religious and cultural factors may have been just as important as economics in turning cities into cornerstones of modern society.' They were products of 'Cosmo-magical thinking'.*  
Paul Wheatley<sup>1</sup>

## Selected Case Studies

### *Gobekli Tepe*

The recent excavations of Gobekli Tepe, located in the mountains of the Kurdish districts of southern Turkey at the headwaters of the Tigris River and dated from 9600 BCE, are regarded as an archaeological discovery of the greatest importance since they could profoundly

change our understanding of a crucial stage in the development of human societies.<sup>11</sup> It seems that the erection of monumental complexes was within the capacities of Neolithic hunter-gatherers and not only of the latter sedentary farming communities in Mesopotamia in the third-century BCE, as had been previously assumed. In other words, as excavator Klaus Schmidt of the German Archaeological Mission puts it: "First came the temple, then the city," a revolutionary hypothesis but one that will have to be supported or modified by future research. The site contains 20 round, (now) subterranean structures (four of which have been excavated). Each stone building has a diameter of 10-30 meters with massive T-shaped limestone pillars decorated with carved animal figures. The tallest are 6 meters high and are the most striking feature of the site. (Fig. 1) These temples articulated belief in gods only developed 5000 to 6000 years later in Mesopotamia. As described in an article in National Geographic entitled: *The Birth of Religion*<sup>12</sup> at Gobekli Tepe the need to share awe for the divine or give thanks to the ineffable may have propelled the building of mankind's first sacred spaces and thus the nucleus of a settlement. The article proposes that it may not have been the accumulation of goods and wealth during the Neolithic time (as today's narrative goes), but the deep and



Fig. 1 - Excavations of Gobekli Tepe Site, Turkey, 9,600 BC

Source: Photograph courtesy of Zhengan, 2012, Wikimedia Creative Commons Attribution- Share Alike 4.0 International License

pure desire to be with others in a profoundly and spiritually inspiring place that was at the root of man's first settlements. The impulse to return to being at oneness with their origins, and also being many in collaboration and peace, may have been the spiritual source.

### Mecca

Between the volcanic peaks of the Sirat mountains in a desert valley of the Hijaz region of Arabia, Islamic tradition has it that it was Adam who laid the foundation of the *Bait Al Atiq* (the Ancient House), the *Ka'ba*. It was to this holy house that Ibrahim was later guided to leave his wife Hajra and their infant son, Ismael. Ibrahim was then given the task of rebuilding this sanctuary for mankind, with the help of Ismael.<sup>13</sup>

Over time, the various pagan Arab tribes of the region would declare a truce once a year and converge upon Mecca in an annual pilgrimage to pay homage to the ancient shrine and to drink water from the adjacent, sanctified Zamzam Well. Here disputes would be arbitrated, debts would be resolved, and trading would occur at Meccan fairs. These annual events gave the tribes a sense of common identity and made Mecca an important spiritual focus and a city of trade for the peninsula.<sup>14</sup>

Mecca was the birthplace of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) in 570 CE

and the place where the *Quran* was first revealed to him. Therefore, it is regarded as the holiest city of Islam and the annual pilgrimage of the *Hajj*, the rituals around the *Ka'ba* and the rites of *Safa* and *Marwah* are obligatory for all able Muslims. The rite of *Tawaf*, a circumambulation around the *Ka'ba*, is accomplished through seven counter clockwise, circular movements; three times at a racing gate and four times at walking pace. Historically, this ritual, open space has been defined by the *Masjid Al Haram*, originally in the shape of a circle, and then extended as an octagon, followed by a square and in the fourteenth-century by the Great Ottoman Mosque designed by Sinan.<sup>15</sup> The site remained more or less in this form until major extensions were made in the twentieth and twenty-first-centuries to accommodate the growing number of pilgrims.

The town, with its residences, souks, and lodgings for pilgrims, had grown contiguous to the *Masjid Al Haram* in a compact and human scaled urban form. However, during the most recent, vast expansions of the *Masjid Al Haram* and the related city developments, Mecca has lost much of its sacred landscape, its human scale and some of its historical structures and archaeological sites. Today, more than 15 million Muslims visit Mecca annually, including several million during the few days of the *Hajj*. (Fig. 2a, 2b)



Fig. 2a - Tile with Great Mosque of Mecca, Turkish glazed tile, 17th C  
Source: Courtesy of Wikimedia Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Updated License

### *Jerusalem*

The Old City is symbolically the archetypal "City on the Hill". Situated at the ecological threshold between Mediterranean and desert bio-climatic regions, the hillock location lies in a basin bounded by the Mount of Olives and Mount Scopus that run north-south. Immediately to the east of the walled city is the Kidron Valley, and to the west and south, the Hinnom Valley. With over a 5,000-year history, this Holy Land, with Jerusalem at its center, is sacred to the three great monotheistic religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam - which means it is the site of sacred pilgrimages for more than a third of the world's population. The urban form is characterized by environmentally adapted, compact limestone building volumes of one to three stories terminating against the sky with domes, vaults, minarets, and steeples organized spatially around public and private courtyards and squares to which access is gained by shaded, winding pedestrian only pathways. The rich textures, small and human scaled parts of the city are contained by massive city walls that are punctured by seven gateways leading to its four quarters, near the center of which sits the historic Church of the Holy Sepulcher and the Dome of the Rock with its golden hued cupola. The special aura of the Old City has had much to do with

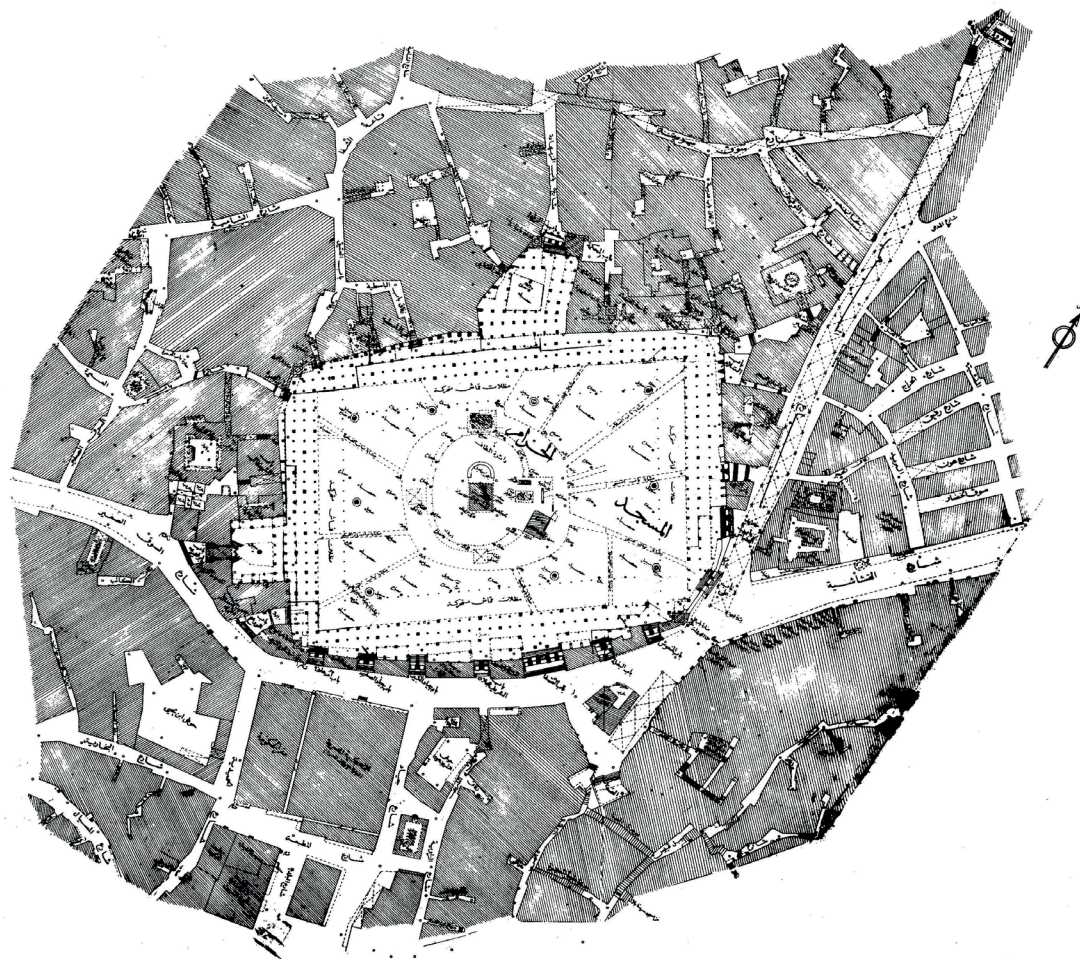


Fig. 2b- Plan Drawing of Mecca, 1954  
Source: Courtesy of the Author & ACE

the balanced social patterns and behavior of its residents of all faiths, ethnic origins and income groups who have followed a rather traditional and pious way of life. This traditional way of life, together with its related rituals, life forms, and images are subject to the changes of contemporary opportunities and maintains its vitality precisely because it is not static.<sup>16</sup> (Fig. 3)

### Fez

The city was founded by Berbers on a bank of the Fez River in the Atlas Mountains in 789 CE. Fez, which features a Mediterranean climate, with hot dry summers and chilly wet winters, might well be the largest and most enduring medieval Islamic settlement in the world. With its compact, courtyard texture of built forms, it is ecologically well adapted and sustainable in its context. It is indisputably Morocco's spiritual and cultural heart. Fez is considered to be the soul of Morocco, "the last bastion of what Morocco really is." You need only watch the daily procession of candle-toting mourners entering the tomb of the city's founder, Moulay Idriss II — believed to be a great-great grandson of the prophet Mohammed — to feel the city's connection to its past. Kairouyine mosque, one of the oldest and largest in Africa, was built together with the associated University of Al-Kairouyine in 859 CE. Fez's Golden

Age was in the fourteenth-century, which still continues to pervade the spiritual life of the country. Few places on Earth seem so imbued with buried meanings: in the patterns of hand-knotted carpets; in the tattooed faces of Berber peasant women; in the cosmic swirls of carved plaster in its architecture; in the voices of traditional Sufi and Gnawa singers; in the techniques of expert craftsmen; and in the ingredients of its cuisine.<sup>17</sup> (Fig. 4)

The city plan follows the rule of five concentric rings: at the center are the religious places; after those are the working places like the souks; next the residential areas; and finally the walls of the city, beyond which are the gardens, orchards, and cemeteries. Some 30,000 craftsmen ply their trades in small stores and back-alley workshops. For the Sufis, Islam's most mystical followers, Fez has long been a hallowed land. The nooks of the medina are filled with Sufi sanctuaries known as *Zaouias*, where brotherhoods meet, worship, and sing. Their musical chants are the soundtracks of Fez, the sonic analog of the city's deep spirituality.

### Isfahan

Isfahan is situated in a hot/arid, fertile valley between two mountain ranges in north-central Iran. These ranges act as macro scale walls whose melting snows

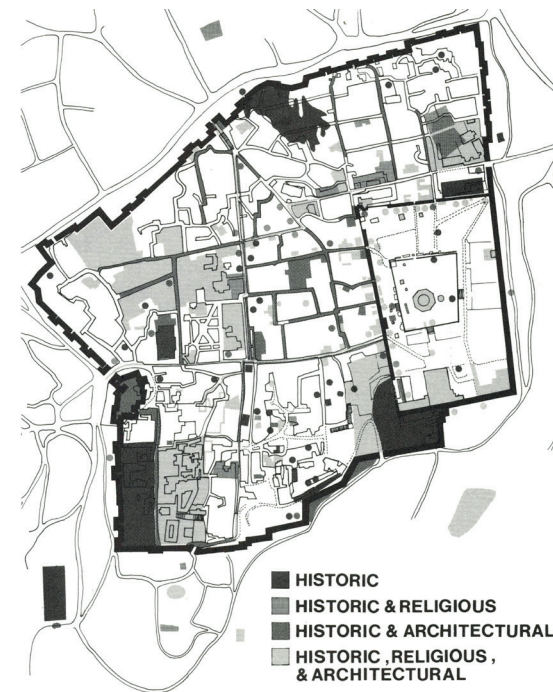


Fig. 3 - Plan of Old City, Jerusalem, 2,000 BC  
Source: Courtesy of the Author

nourish and define a regional place (*Makan*) through which a great river, the Zayandah Rud, runs adjacent to which the positive shape of the city has evolved from pre-Islamic times. The historical growth and change of Isfahan from the tenth-century Seljuq period through to the seventeenth-century Safavid period of Shah Abbas I, where its population grew to nearly 600,000, and up to the present time, manifests the accrued realizations of its citizens for over a period of nearly eight hundred years. The special architectural and unique urban beauty of the city owe greatly to the encouragement of its Safavid rulers, who were both Shiite Muslims and descendants of the Safawiyya Sufi Order who perpetuated certain symbolic and formal concepts for the built environment. The city also flourished due to the presence of many Persian, Christian, and Jewish scholars, artists and craftsmen. That which is perceptible today of the traditional city is a rich tapestry of coherent, transcendent urban forms. It is a spiritual coherence based upon faith in permanence within change, the hidden within the manifest, and, above all, the profound sense of unity within multiplicity. Within this historic panorama, sixteenth/seventh-century Isfahan is considered as a supreme example of the superconscious level of harmonic order making, in



Fig. 4 - Morocco, Medina of the City of Fez, 789 AD

Source: Courtesy of Michal Osmenda, 2011; Wikimedia Creative Commons Attribution- Share Alike 2.0 Generic License



which a sense of total order on both the macroscale and the microscale has been communally manifested in a time-space synthesis.<sup>18</sup>(Fig. 5)

It can be seen in Isfahan that the major systems of the city were the responsibility of those who governed, while the “in-fill”, or body proper of the city, remained in the domain of the populace. But this traditional society created cultural boundary conditions within which all the city’s inhabitants acted. Taken at their various levels of individual comprehension, they acted within a spiritual framework that motivated an ecological balance through an insistence on the study of nature and her mode of operation at the same time as it inspired and united the creative realizations of that society.

The macroscale orders of the primary movement system of the bazaar, the secondary organic movement pattern of the residential pathways, the tertiary order of waterways nourishing paradise gardens, together with regional bioclimatic dictates, constituted unique design determinants. The microscale orders of social conduct, oriented space (to Mecca, to the solar path and prevailing wind directions), the concept of positive space continuity of form making, the world of relevant symbols (shapes, geometric/arabesque surface patterns, color and calligraphy), in conjunction with materials and traditional adaptive

technologies, established a superconscious design basis that served as a point of departure for the individual within which to act. Here, then, a definite rhythm was set into motion which generated the central theme of the city’s composition while allowing for a myriad of related variations – a theme so powerful that it directed for centuries the general urban pattern and aesthetic motif, its growth, its harmonic transformations and renewal.

*We find ourselves to be most truly human when we are raised to the level of the divine. Thus in a single act we accomplish the double movement of entering into ourselves and going out of ourselves which brings us back to the paradisiacal state for which we were originally created.*

*Where is this place? It is not a place, it is God.*  
Thomas Merton<sup>19</sup>

### Key Principles of transcendent Cities

From these brief glimpses of some of the most sublime cities in the Middle East, we may observe some key characteristics that may point toward the perennial principles for achieving greater urban transcendence in our future cities and possible means of transforming and uplifting the existing

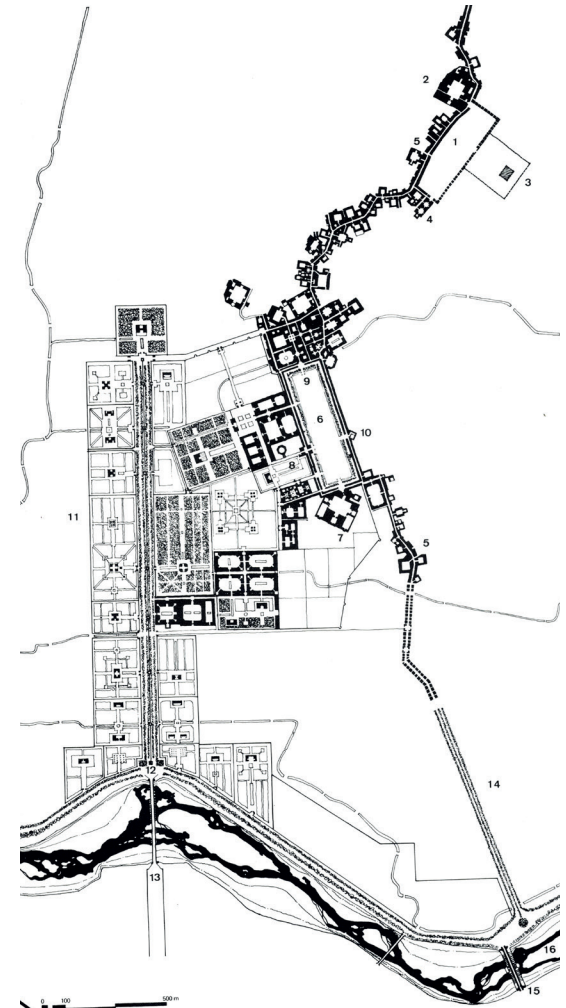


Fig. 5 - Isfahan, Iran - Plan of the Growth of the City 10th -17th AD  
Source: Courtesy of the Author

fabrics from the phenomenal and spiritual decay into which most have fallen. It might be asked: Can the surge of religious movements today in the Middle East also bring a resurgence of spiritualism, or is the potential of that dimension overshadowed and stifled by radical fundamentalism?<sup>20</sup> The answers depend upon the level of illuminated consciousness brought to the question by each person, the supportive and inspired leadership provided in those societies, and the creative imagination of its poets, artists, and architects to utilize the perennial wisdom of their inheritance.

### The Structure of Being

Traditional man tends towards a mode of comprehension, which provides both a metaphysical and phenomenal interpretation of life. This complementary interpretation affects all of his perceptions because it begins by situating him in the universe. Initially, this interpretation determines his awareness of cosmic space as an externalization of the macrocosmic creation, which is analogous to his own microcosmic self. This traditional Hermetic concept forms part of the world view incorporated into the Islamic perspective, a view in which the space of the universe is structured on a phenomenally manifest macrocosm and a metaphysically hidden microcosm,

each containing five great divisions. The Microcosm of human nature is conceived as being structured in concentric circles consisting of the body, the soul, the heart, the spirit and an ineffable essence. Similarly, at the core of the Macrocosm lies the Essential Nature of the Absolute in its un-manifest, indescribable quality. This Essence manifests itself outwardly toward the phenomenal world and human nature through a series of Archetypal stages. Henry Corbin observed that Archetypes serve as symbolic veils that both hide and reveal the Divine Essence.<sup>21</sup> (Fig. 6)

### Orientation in Space

In such a structured space, man knows where he is and it provides him with a strong directional sense. It is only with reference to the heavens, the rising and setting sun and moon, the rotation of stars and the prevailing breezes that the infiniteness of space can be quantifiably and qualitatively grasped. The order of the spheres and their movements through the six directions of north, south, east, west, up (zenith) and down (nadir) constitute a primary coordinate system within which all creation is situated. The quality of "Place Making" in the Islam is further enriched by the terrestrial magnet of the daily direction of ritual prayer toward Mecca.<sup>22</sup>

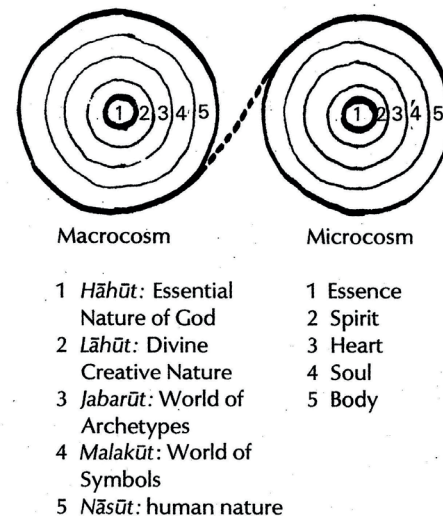


Fig. 6 - Macrocosm/Microcosm Diagram  
Source: Courtesy of Diagram by the Author

## The Sense of Place - Sustainable Urbanism

When order in cosmic space is achieved, the interpretative mind seeks regional order. Here adaptation to environmental context, the impact of memorable natural settings, such as distant mountain peaks, ocean views, river valleys, unique landscapes – the *genius loci* of a place – inspires and motivates the primary setting out of the urban form, its density and texture, and its pivotal visual axis.

While bioregions of the Middle East have certain geographic boundaries, they also have certain mythic and historic modes of self-identification. This bioclimatic cultural identity can form the basis of a spiritual ecology for our cities – both the emergent new urban centers and the self-healing retrofitting of our existing cities. The most difficult transition of consciousness will be to change from our current anthropocentric world view of progress to a bio-centric norm.

### Ancient Origins

Somehow the more ancient the origins of a city's founding date, the more imbued are these urban places with a cosmic consciousness, perhaps due to the influencing motivations of the founding fathers, whose mystical participation with life was more pronounced than ours today, while being equally conscious of



security and defensive motivations in their city locations. What about new cities that will characterize so much of the new urbanism? As the world population continues to increase from the present 7 billion to more than 9 billion over the next 50 years, more than 60 % will live in urban centers. Here modern science and astronomy's search for humanity's and the earth's cosmic origins may provide some direction for answers. Can the cosmic story of the "Big Bang" and the drama of the expanding universe theory provide a new and profound narrative to impact city forms? Certainly we know that historically great cities became the abstract manifestations of man's world views, spread large upon the surface of the earth. Commencing with the most ancient archaeological discovery of Gobekli Tepe, through to the Elamite cities of Chogha Zanbil and onto Ecbatana in North West

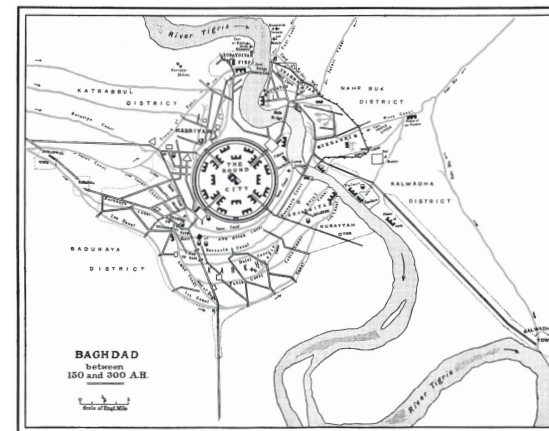


Fig. 7 - Chogha Zanbil Ziggurat, Dur Untash City, Iran 1,250 BC  
Source: Courtesy of Pentocelo, 2008; Wikimedia Creative Commons Attribution- Share Alike 3.0 unported License

Fig. 8- Baghdad, Iraq - Circular City of Caliph al Mansur, 762 AD  
Source: Courtesy of William Muir, 1883; Wikimedia Creative Commons Attribution- Share Alike License

Iran to the circular city of Baghdad by Caliph-al-Mansur and Heart, Afghanistan in the twelfth-century CE, the geometric city was a recapitulation of the diagram of the conceptual structure of the universe, as understood at the time. (Fig. 7, 8, 9)

The quest was to manifest the idea of unity (*tawhid*), but the contemplative mind can also conceive of unity in multiplicity and multiplicity in unity, as evidenced by the dynamically harmonic, linear order of the cities of Isfahan and other Iranian cities in the sixteenth-century.<sup>23</sup>(Fig. 10)

Can such contemporary macrocosmic consciousness motivate new city forms, while also accommodating the microcosmic scale of the individual, the family, and the social unit of the neighborhood?

### Sacred Paths, Places of Religion & Pilgrimage - Places of Knowledge

Without exception all the cities cited above shelter one or more sacred sites, shrines, or religious places of pilgrimage. Thus the sanctity of spirituality pervades their key places and the boundaries of sacredness resonate throughout their urban precincts. Their sacred pathways or historic routes weave throughout the fabric of the city.<sup>24</sup> Often, over time such cities have also become places of knowledge and centers of academic learning and become associated with a certain sense of wisdom.



Fig. 9 - Herat, Afghanistan - Plan of the City after P.W. English  
Source; Courtesy of the Author from Ardalan & Bakhtiar, *The Sense of Unity*, University of Chicago Press, 1973 [after P.W. English "The Traditional City of Herat, Afghanistan" Paper, 1970]

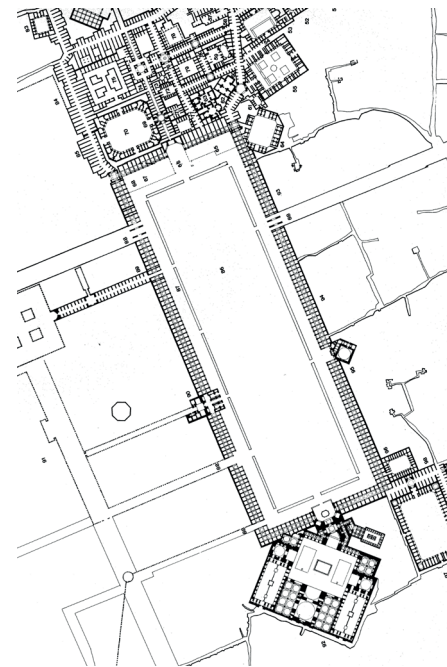


Fig. 10 - Isfahan, Iran - Plan of Bazaar and Maydan i Naghsh i Jahan, 17th C. AD  
Source: Courtesy of the author

This aspect has naturally created city nodes of student life that give these cities an active, artistic, and intellectual vigor.

### Urban Space - Public Realm - Paradise Garden - Human Scale

The positive and vital concept of space generates many of the cities cited. This concept that space, not shape, should lead in the generation of form is one of the characteristics of these great cities. The dense urban fabrics of these cities, such as those in Isfahan, Iran, are often complemented by public realm places, be they linear bazaars, open plazas or public gardens; they honor the pedestrian and bow to the human measure. (Fig. 11) They are walking cities; cities of scalable motion and human activities where speech, song, and music may be heard; they are organic, living urban entities of mixed use, averaging about two to four story volumes of compact courtyard textures, shaded pathways and unexpected vistas, at times focused upon symbolic architecture of quality.<sup>25</sup>

### Multi-cultural integrated Communities-Significant political History & economic Vitality

The quality of openness to multiculturalism where people of different faiths can commingle is another characteristic of a



numinous city where the cosmopolitanism, the universality, and the mosaic of world cultures living side by side, activates the uniqueness of such cities. Perhaps the common ground of a deeper foundation of spirituality, beyond the particularities of a given faith, is a vital characteristic of the sublime city. Yet, these are not monastic cities. On the contrary, they contain sensual and artistically motivated centers; they are often seats of political power or of regionally significant influence;<sup>26</sup> they are thriving economic places characterized by such city components as the *Souk* or *Bazaar*, as exemplified by the *Khan el Khalili* in Cairo (Fig. 12)

### Quality Architecture

“The process of creating Archetypes” is one definition of the purpose of architecture. All other definitions generate mere buildings that lie qualitatively

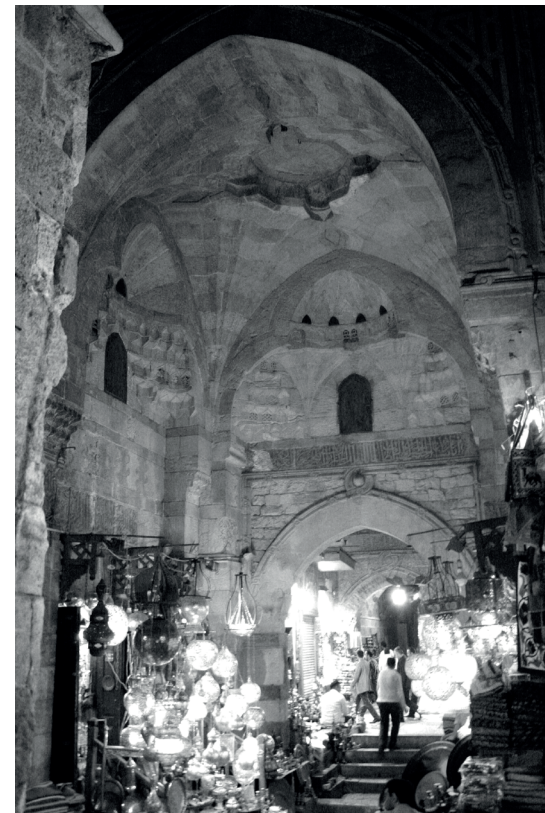


Fig. 11 - Isfahan, Iran- Positive Space of Maydan i Naghsh i Jahan, 17th C. AD Source: Courtesy of the Author from Ardalan & Bakhtiar, *The Sense of Unity* (photograph by E. Schmidt, *Flights over Ancient Cities of Persia*, University of Chicago Press, 1940)

Fig. 12- Cairo, Egypt, Khan el Khalili, Bab al-Ghuri, 16th C. AD Source: Courtesy of Joel Suganth, 2009; Wikimedia Creative Commons Attribution- Share Alike 3.0 unported License

and aesthetically at levels far below, if conceived within a pyramid with quality on top and quantity on the base. Cities that have nurtured the beautiful and the good, in Aristotelian terms, glow with a subtle elegance not determined by material wealth spent upon them, but by the essence of their conception and realization. Here proportion, the use of numbers and geometry recall the Archetypes, as in the Platonic "world of hanging forms" or in the Islamic terminology, the *Alam-i-Mithal*.<sup>27</sup> The Hermetic traditions of alchemy provide the architect with guidance for the use of matter and its transformation from basic heaviness to elegant lightness, through a depth of understanding of the proper use of symbols, colors, mathematics, and geometry situated in elegant Paradise Gardens, such as the seventeenth-century Bagh-I Fin, Kashan. (Fig. 13)

### Transcendent Symbolism

Traditional man has a propensity for symbolic expression, which is deeply ingrained in both the Persian and Arabic languages. In Persian, it is said that a person has *Ham-dami*, or inner resonance and sympathy with the hidden (*batin*) qualities of the creation. Symbols are regarded as the theophanies of the absolute in the relative, phenomenal world. Symbolic forms, which are sensible aspects of

the metaphysical reality of things, exist whether or not man is conscious of them. "Man does not create symbols, he is transformed by them."<sup>28</sup> Thomas Berry notes that traditional man has an intimate communion with the depths of his psychic structure, which is one of the main differences with the psychic functioning of the Euroamerican in modern times. "We have so developed our rational processes, our phenomenal ego that we have lost much of the earlier communion we had with the archetypal world of our own unconscious."<sup>29</sup> However, as the Pulitzer Prize winning scientist Edward O. Wilson writes in *Consilience*: "The brain has a strong tendency to condense repeated episodes of a kind into concepts, which are then represented by symbols."<sup>30</sup> He believes that these genetic, neural activity patterns are representative of the basic unit of particular cultures that he terms *memes*. His research indicates that people tend to gravitate to environments that reward their hereditary inclinations to these memes. "The message from geneticists to intellectuals and policy-makers is this: Choose the society you want to promote, and then prepare to live with its heritabilities."<sup>31</sup> Nicholas Wade in the book: *the Faith Instinct* traces how such a meme, the spiritual or faith quest, became hardwired from ancient times into

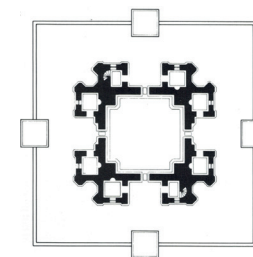
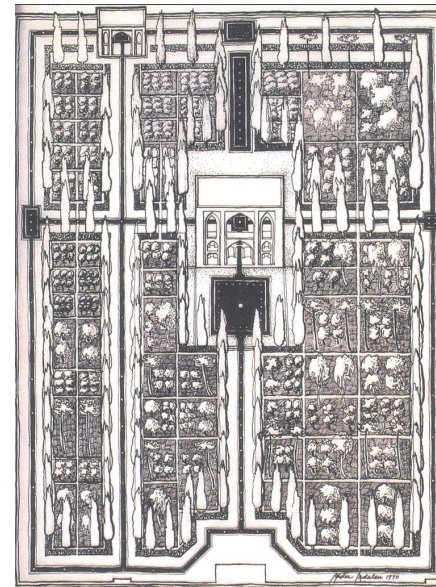


Fig. 13 - Bagh-I Fin, Kashan, Iran, 16th C. AD  
Source: Drawing courtesy of the Author

Fig. 14 - Mandala symbol, as shown in the Mausoleum Plan of Khawaja Rabi, Mashhad, Iran, representing the integration of the parts with the whole.  
Source: Drawing courtesy of the Author

the human genes as an instinct for survival. Despite the rise of secular societies today, that faith continues to be one of the key forces that fortify and maintain the social fabric.<sup>32</sup> Therefore, as the psychiatrist Carl Jung observed, the world of symbols, such as the mandala, the circle, Pythagorean geometries and mathematics, colors, the *Ouroboros*, mythic legends of heroic personalities, natural forces, and the Earth Mother archetype are forever subliminally present for those that have the conscious eyes to see.<sup>33</sup> (Fig. 14) The challenge to our societies of the Middle East is to reawaken to our transcendent heritabilities and the symbolic forms and meanings that help nurture a more relevant and profound quality of urban life.

### Concluding Observations

Such then is the nature and framework of this quest to shift our cities and their architecture from a kind of machine-inspired functionalist aesthetic to a more cosmic, ecological, and spiritually inspired design approach. The resolutions of these values and aesthetic questions remain elusive, but provide profound inspirations for more meaningful answers that touch the individual soul and collective humanity.

*When you become the pencil in the hand of  
the infinite,  
When you are truly creative... design begins  
and never has an end.  
Frank Lloyd Wright<sup>34</sup>*

To truly understand the key issues of sustainability and cultural identity, we need to begin with a cosmic, systemic awareness of the context of human existence on both a tangible, phenomenal level and the less tangible, cultural level. We need to become aware of the particular world views of indigenous civilizations, the *genus loci* of places, and the optimum ecological fit of cities with their context. The mandate for good design is to elegantly realize this holistic vision in physical reality. Such an approach may provide an important methodology by which common ground can be found between the profound world views of traditional civilizations and the highest aspirations of contemporary innovations in art and architecture. Without such a common ground, the new architectural creations lack a sense of place, are environmentally unsustainable, and appear as alien usurpers of an existing civilization, thus causing the identity crisis that is observable in the cities of the Middle East as a whole, and particularly in the new developments of the Persian Gulf region. Instead, the momentum of the new resurgent urbanism

urgently needs to find new ways of designing in harmony with nature and our culture.

*"Every advance in technology has been directed toward man's mastery of his environment. Until very recently, however, man always maintained a certain balance between his bodily and spiritual being and the external world.  
Disruption of this balance may have a detrimental effect on man, genetically, physiologically, or psychologically. And however fast technology advances, however radically the economy changes, all change must be related to the rate of change of man himself. The abstractions of the technologist and the economist must be continually pulled down to Earth by the gravitational force of human nature."  
Hassan Fathy<sup>35</sup>*



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