# Innovative Designs for New Urban Neighbourhoods in Al Ain

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**Abstract**
Al Ain is a city in the United Arab Emirates, south east of the capital, Abu Dhabi. It has a population of about 348,000 [1] from diverse backgrounds in culture, race, religious beliefs, socio-cultural and economic aspirations. This hybrid mix as a melting pot creates inherent tensions within the environment calling for new ways to redevelop the city to capture the spirit of democracy accepting western ideals that come with the increasing number of expatriates and the much valued traditional ideals eschewed by the local population.

This paper attempts to examine the phenomenology of unveiled-veil, the rooted-uprooted, identity, ethnicity and the uncultured culture in the realm of architecture as expressed in the new neighbourhood developments of Al Mada, and Town Square in Al Ain. It examines how the development tackles the conflicts arising from the hybrid population make up of the city of Al Ain through the redrawing of boundaries aimed at making Al Ain a global city. It also examines the role of the private sector in the development and execution of "sustainable" projects with civic dimension enshrined within them.

## 1    Introduction

The city of Al-Ain is located in the eastern region of the Emirate of Abu Dhabi, within the inner desert oasis of the United Arab Emirates. Al-Ain lies about 150 kilometres east of Abu Dhabi, and 130 kilometres south-east of Dubai (Figure 1). It is the regional capital of the eastern Abu Dhabi Emirates and has a unique structure pattern with a low residential density in comparison to other major cities within the UAE. The formation of federation in 1971 and the discovery of oil led to rapid developments and in 1986 a new planning process was established to accelerate its growth and to create and develop new settlements outside the old area. This plan aimed at encouraging the migration of more residents from different tribes in the rural hinterland to live in the city; creating a homogenous social structure by the redistribution of the citizens of UAE within the new residential districts; creating a new social system of solidarity and with common neighbourhood goals among the residents within the new districts.
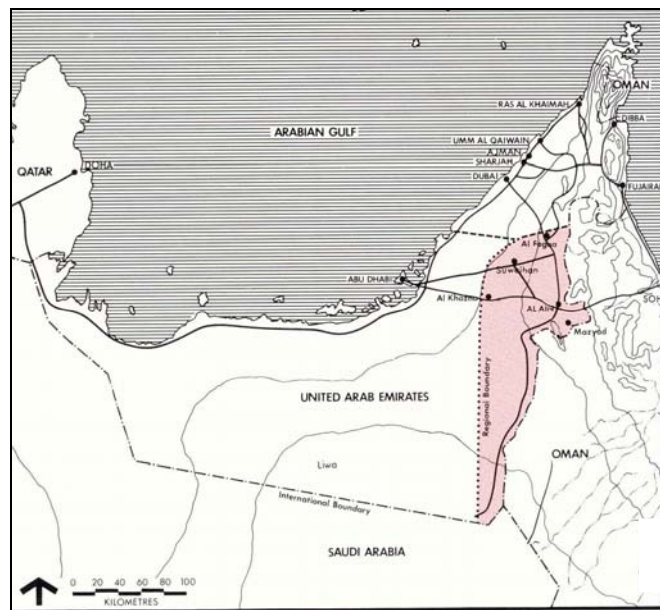
Figure 1:  The Region of the new city of Al-Ain, [2]

In order to study Al Ain's growth and development, themes on relationships of power to the socio-political and cultural and their effects on the urban structure are important. These underlying relationships that transformed Al-Ain from its roots as an oasis village to its current state with existing interactions between the environment, society and behaviour. The developments steming from the socio-political and cultural relationships to the locus of power in the federal government has resulted in policies that are favourable for innovative projects such as Al Mada and Town Square developments.

Webster's Dictionary [3] points out that innovation comes from the root word *novare*, to renew, something newly introduced, new method and customs. Innovation as such can be used in context of regenration, refurbishment, redevelopment and a return to ancient traditions. The master plan of Al Ain targeted various parts of the city for redevelopment and Al Mada and Town Centre projects were as a result of the desire to improve the under used spaces in the city that were once date plantations and parking lots. It also responsed to the desire to increase the retail spaces, rental floors making Al Ain a regional shopping centre and responding to global tendencies of a cultural, recreational and tourist centre that has socially just and democratic. This requires reduction in drive through traffic, increasing public open areas (urban living rooms) and long hours of street activities in keeping with the newly aquired urban lifestyle.

Friedmann [4] points out that urban planning and development can be understood to be the increase and spread of values and institutions that enhance the ability of a society to generate and successfully cope with the continuing change. The rate of change in itself being a function of the level of social interaction, information exchange and communications which in turn is a function of the physical and spatial structure of a city (neighbourhood). It should be bourne in mind that both social and cultural perceptions are learnt and as such changes to the environment will affect human behaviour and the environment, calling for a sensitive approach to building design and urban planning in order to maintain the necessary balance in nature. Harvey [12] sees urban development and as such neighbourhood development, as a social process structured by man. He argues that innovative design ought to promote sustainabilty through the mode of production and social organization, and as such

the cordination and intergration between various social groups in a community is essential to gurantee its survival and success.

## 2 Residential Typology in Al Ain

Al-Ain has a unique pattern of land use that is similar to most of the cities within the Gulf region on one hand and different from any other developing city within the region on the other. Haggag et al [5] carried out a field survey identifying four types of recognizable residential housing types; rented apartments; rented single family houses, both typically occupied by non-citizens expatriates; semi-detached family houses (*Shabiat*); and large residential houses or villas on large lots occupied by citizens of UAE.

The first residential type is predominant within the CBD and also close to Sanaiya, and is composed of mixed use units containing commercial and residential apartments for low-income and single family middle-income non-citizen residents, and are characterized by small urban blocks of about 30 m x 30 m with a maximum height of 17 m (equating to 4 storeys above the ground level with a 3 metre lane separating the blocks). The typical hierarchical zoning is vertical with the commercial establishments on the ground floor, offices on the second and the third and fourth floors as dedicated residential units. The second type is located just outside the CBD, and is characterized by semi-attached, two storey houses for middle-income non-citizen residents with plot areas in the range of 30 m x 30 m to 60 m x 60 m with an average density of 15 dwellings per hectare. The third residential type the *Shabiat*, is occupied by the low and middle-income citizens are located a few kilometres away from the central area of the city and are characterized by low residential density in the range of 3-5 dwellings per hectare. They are generally one storey detached houses with a variety of lot sizes. The high-income citizens mainly occupy the fourth residential type located on the periphery of the city, away from the CBD. This sector is characterized by large residential lots containing large single family residences with a very low residential density in the region of 1-2 dwelling per hectare.

The innovative neigbhourhood developments currently being carried out in the CBD and areas close to CBD deviate from the typical above in that several lots are consolidated to form super blocks. Krier [6] points out that small blocks are a result of the maximum exploitation of urban ground caused by great density of activities, and as such the higher the number of streets on a relatively small area the greater the length of commercial façade. This apparently stems from a highly intense urban culture and socio-economic exchange.

## 3 Al Mada Residence and Town Square

Al Mada development (Figure 2) is of courtyard typology very much of the order of traditional courtyard housing including the large Arabian courtyard house or castle (Figure 3). This typology combines the advantages of a compact yet easy to maintain living quarters with communal outdoor spaces. Al Mada complex is a modification of its type in that the traditional Arabian courtyard building is inward looking yet this is outward looking. It is a hybrid of the suburban house and the city palace, thus housing private gardens between the boundary wall and the units on the ground floor. Polyzoides et al [7] points out that courtyard typology buildings have central regular configured public open spaces as means of access to private areas. The public activity correlated to the courtyard landscape to direct movements, screen dwellings and as embellishments with vehicular access being peripheral. The courtyard typologically is a place of either contemplation or access and Al Mada tries to merge the two together having access on the periphery and coffee terrace raised up above this street overlooking one of the three entrances and towards town square. Unfortunately both developments,

the town square and al Mada turn their backs to each other in confrontational manner very much like the traditional Arabian residence hiding its precious space in the centre like the pearl (*lulua*)

The religion of Islam requires "absolute pervasiveness of God (Allah) as an essential tenet and the establishment of justice among people and the elimination of all forms of discriminations based on race, wealth colour or power" as noted by Mafti (1981, 16) [8]. This makes the religion non-discriminative in the tenets of lifestyle and spiritual practice as worship includes any activity performed during the day. Thus religious beliefs, cultural habits and traditions are some of the most influencing factors for the design of neighbourhoods. The collective social function is for the community to function as a coherent entity without discriminations. As such the advent of new neighbourhood typology it can be argued is not in keeping with the basic tenets as they have physical barriers in form of gates and guards.
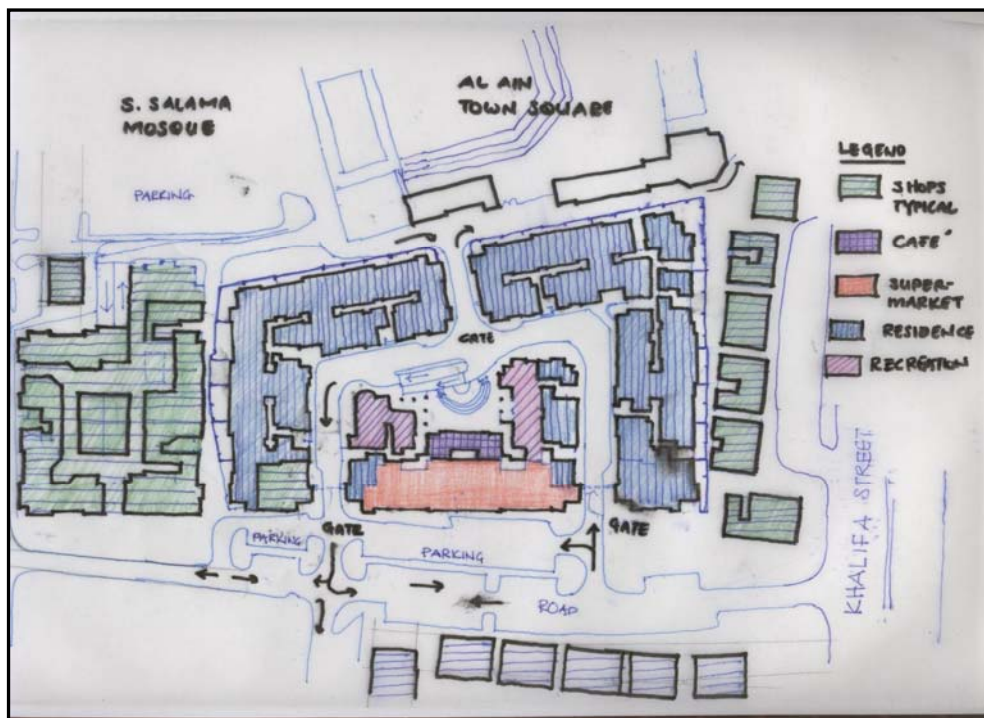


Figure 2: Plan of Al Mada
Source: Diar Consult, Abu Dhabi

The innovations seen in Al Mada developments have its root in Ebenezer Howard's "The Garden City" of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Howard's ideas were to have a far-reaching implication for the growth of cities and development of suburbs during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. It is however important to point out the settings within which Howard's radical proposals were made. England was going through a period or age of what I call "repentant industrialism" after having suffered from the socio-economic and cultural shock as a consequence to the industrial revolution resulting in cities being seen as an affront to nature. The British love for the countryside led to the development of hatred for the nineteenth century factories and slums that resulted from the Industrial Revolution and thus easily accepted Howard's ideas.

The typology of Howard's proposals was rather two-dimensional considering only the Plano-metrics and social aspects of the urban planning. It was very much suited to the physical qualities of the suburbs of a small town with routine commerce sustained by a limited standardized supply of goods.

Harvey [12] argues that the understanding of space and its complexity is through the social process and Mills (1959, 5) further points out that the sociological imagination resulting from this process enables the understanding of the meanings to life within the historical context in a global era. The public spaces are the arenas for social and cultural intercourse, the links for interconnectivity, which in Howard's typology was viewed as bad. This resulted in houses designed to be either introverted, opening instead to lush sheltered backyards or large lots with a single-family unit stepped back from the street. The streets thus became seen as wasteful and later led to the transformation of the traditional block to the super block such as Al Mada (Figure 1), expensive lots that are a preserve of the rich; hence Howard ended up creating an unsustainable economically segregated society despite the initial grand social agenda.

The relationship between buildings and their settings within the urban framework is important in the quest for the advancements of public art. The prominence and dominance of some buildings (*res publica*) over others (*res privata*) is important leading to the need to protect, or enhance their approaches. The urban morphology or footprint of an urban setting enables the reading of the political agenda of the regime that developed it. The urban space or piazza in front of prominent buildings can for instance be read as the arena for the power shift through space and time, leaving hybrids in its trail during the changes in regimes and through shifting goals. These arenas are public interiors, places where events such as military parades, civil protests and many other manifestations take place, an *ecclesia* of sort. In Al Mada development the courtyard could be for instance used as an evening theatre stage or even for casting movies, while the Town Square can be used for sporting activities such as roller skating, figure skating especially with the existence of the installed musical theme fountain. This could transform it to a more vibrant public arena that what it currently is at the moment. The approach to the piazza in Town Square development is hidden at the moment behind walls and also is not well contained by building whose height is not proportional to its width. It also sort of competes with the open square fronting the mosque now used as a car park thus both squares begin to lack definition.

The two developments, Al Mada and the Town Square butt each other too closely yet are in tension with neither yielding its contents to the other. Their property boundary wall has turned what might have been an active shopping lane into a dark unattended alley merely used as access to either property with gates and no assurance of access. The Town Square development lacks the geographical or spatial form that causes its spatial of consciousness to be reduced. Both developments are private properties that pretend to provide public amenities, veiled yet unveiled, cultured yet uncultured. They perhaps reflect the existing tension that underlines the uneasiness with which the regional culture immersed in tradition tries to merge with the western ideals as expressed and lived by the increasingly large expatriate community that occupy the Al Mada Development.

The traditional *insula* as Krier [6] points out has great number of entrances on the ground floor ensuring that the streets are not merely spaces for distribution and orientation, but are for social exchange and integration. Al Mada is innovative designs for the 21$^{st}$ century perimeter block in Al Ain, but unfortunately is an organism with competing interests in distribution corridors that compete with the streets. It reduces the street from being the arena for socio-cultural exchange to mere access to private spaces beyond.

The development is huge though not in keeping with the traditional building. It is rather modernistic in approach as carved out single object building and perhaps might have been more successful as at least four buildings, though morphologically 10 buildings would have been more realistic. The desire for the gateway access control is rooted on forced privacy requirements a notion that within the city is not enforced but suggested. It creates what Murphy (1999, 24) points out is unsustainable environment in

which the residents are passive citizens rather than active citizens thus leading to decay of the neighbourhood instead of growth.
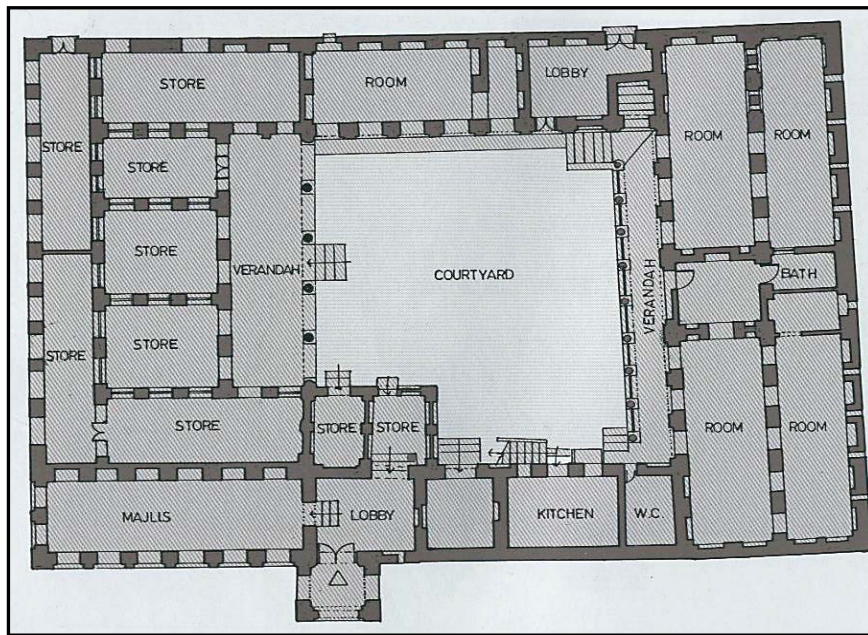


Figure 3:   Plan of Mohamed Sharif House
Source: Elements of Traditional Architecture in Dubai: Dubai, Dubai Municipality, 1996 (A-8)

Westfall (1999, 20) argues that urban architecture (including neighbourhood) either assist or impedes the seeking of fulfillment of aspirations of living in congruence with highest social justice as found in nature. He further points out that as such wisdom, truth and reflection are gained through the lens of healthy skepticism coupled with sharp dialectic enquiry in others opinion. This leads to the implication that an innovative and sustainable neighbourhood fosters the dialectic by accepting citizens' use its corridors, urban living rooms engaging it without destroying it and drawing from Plato in the Republic (368-375) argues that, qualities of justice and injustice are not from the individual qualities of the objects (buildings in this case), but arise out of their arrangements. The quality of the individual buildings is not what fosters social justice, but it is their innovative disposition within the neighbourhood that allows for sustainable engagement of the citizens through a wide variety of range of activities on the ground floor along the pathways and periphery of the square. Al Mada development as much as is a recreation of the traditional in both plan configuration and elevation embellishments still falls short in providing sufficient range of activities that can sustain socio-cultural urban lifestyle. (Figure 4)

The use of the nineteenth century institutional typological building for the design of Al Mada has led to the creation of exclusive organism with private system of distribution, thus breaking down the dialectic between the building type and the public space purportedly enclosed [6]. It has created corridors symbolizing and accepting the repression, restriction of access to and from Town Square via the property.

Harvey [12] argues that the understanding of space and its complexity is through the social process and as such innovative design becomes the enabler for the understanding of what Mills (1959, 5) identifies as larger historical scenes in meanings to lives allowing for location of self in own periods, the rooting of the individual to own culture tradition, and society in time and space. The innovative design thus enables the residents of the neighbourhood to use their special imagination in recognizing the activities that occur in the space and the transactions that exist between the individuals and the

organization owning the property (developer or client) within the public space so provided separating them. In Al Mada development, the opportunity for spatial consciousness is denied to the polis through the restrictions imposed by the gates and guards to the enjoyment of the transitional spaces such as the coffee shop on way to and from Town Square.



Figure 4: Al Mada
Source: Author, 2005.

## 4 Conclusion

Exclusivity is a behavioral characteristic practiced by various social, economic and political groups in assembling together in exclusion of others either completely or partially. It can be as a result of political policy or desire to discriminate or even driven by fear or perceived fear of the unknown. The exclusivity is maintained through use of political power and sometimes free play of market forces using price of land and cost of constructions as instruments. When Al Mahda project was on the planning stages, the adjacent land and buildings targeted for demolition were cornered into either selling or paying more for rent. The resulting developments were offered at a premium cutting out the previously displaced tenants.

Exclusivity and integration are diametrically opposed to each other and in a global sustainable environment the desire is for social justice within a society. Fadel [11] points out that the physical environment and social interaction in an Islamic city are very intimately linked as it eschews for and advocates for equality and non-discrimination through social cooperation. Harvey [12] on the other hand argues that a good society is not an all inclusive in its concept of social justice and as such it is the existence of principles for resolving conflicting. These rise out of the necessity of social cooperation in seeking the individual advancements by dealing with the manner in which the benefits are divided, and labour is allocated. It extends to the arena of locus of power and decision making authority, the bestowal of social status such as exclusivity and institutional set ups to regulate and control the geographic conscious activities of the city residents walking through such a development as Al Mada and Town Square.

The conflicts that arise out of the two developments very much relates to the design intents expressed in Al Mada through the open pathways, courtyard, and café sitting area / terrace just beyond the café and the linkage to the Town Square. The public would like to freely use these facilities the proprietors of the café, the super market, internet café, and other peripheral shops are seeking individual

advancements that come with increased clientele use while the owners seem to see their use as exclusively for the residents. Sustainable solution to these conflicting claims by the parties involved can only be resolved through application of principles of social justice with the owners of the developments ceding some of their individual rights for public good of the neighbourhood society. A gated community would obviously negate and deny the other members of the neigbhourhood the access to these vital urban activities and also reduce the necessary critical mass needed to sustain such businesses becoming unsustainable.

Fashion also plays a role in creating and maintaining the exclusivity as it is marketed as the hip thing to do, which is by living in such an exclusive district or neigbhourhood. For instant to quote some of the marketing fliers in the free hold section of the papers, "…extraordinary lifestyle to investment opportunity,…your own version of paradise island…" [13]. Adverts in one of the local dailies also promise "…you have not only invested in ultimate property but also acquired the ultimate lifestyle…" The new innovative gated communities are thus promoted into the consciousness of the potential ownership, residents as one of the processes of seeking individual advancement, thus social justice.

The neighbourhood's intimacy and homogeneity is enhanced through the creation of an unconscious intricate network of voluntary controls within the community and not gates by increasing the level of activities on the streets and the duration during which these activities occur, thus calling for a variety of mixes in these activities. Despite these vast mixes one is still able to maintain privacy through the use of clear thresholds or boundaries without resorting to the use of physical barriers and gates that would stop movement from one area to another, but should nonetheless be apparent. Lynch, (1960) identifies these as more of literal reference than co-ordinates leading to an understanding that a neighbourhood is section within the city with common characteristics for purposes of distinction and memory and demarcations that uses typology for distinction between public buildings and private buildings.

Innovative neighbourhoods promotes civic society and are sustainable, combining wisdom of the ancients in tradition and embraces technological advancements without letting technology dominate the lives of the residents. Economakis et al [14] point out that innovative neighbourhoods have clear, delineable public and private realms that combine to form a system of contained streets. The innovative neigbhourhood designs of Al Mada and Town Square developments have potentials to bring about positive social justice, integration, hybridization and global cultural exchange. In its present form it exhibits exclusivity, un-root, veil yet unveiled characteristics. Its gated community is exclusive reminiscent of the 1970s suburbia that we have sadly come to accept does not work.

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