

Past and present spatiality of Manama and Muharraq historical centres in Bahrain Kingdom

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Abstract

This research tries to understand why the historical centres in two cities within the same region, and within the same culture have developed differently. It looks at two cities in Bahrain Kingdom, Muharraq and Manama historical centres as a case study. The changing urban conditions within the historical city centres has resulted in one of those cases, Manama historical centre, in the loss of important spatial characteristics. For instance, the Suq in the historical centre of Manama, which used to be the most integrated urban element has lost its position in the contemporary urban fabric of the city. However, in other cases, such as Muharraq, the Suq is still thriving, and has a manifest spatial importance.

This study is based on a comparison of the two historical city centres, founded in a similar historical and geographical context to understand whether the spatial organization of the city conveys the rationale behind the performance of the city, independent from – or along with – other factors. The above subjects have given rise to the following questions: Is there any differentiation in the spatial organization of the two cities from the same cultural background? What is the logic behind the spatial configuration of each city?

These matters rarely have been answered by an analytical approach, therefore this paper will attempt to answer some of these questions by adopting the space syntax methodology in order to analyse and investigate the two cities in Bahrain Kingdom – Muharraq and Manama historical centres as a case study. The investigation will begin by comparing the measures obtained from an axial analysis at two historical periods, in 1933 before any modern transformation and in 1951 the beginning of modern period respectively.

The initial hypothesis of the study is that, beyond the similarity in historical and geographical context, this striking difference between the spatial change in these two cities that are otherwise so close, might be related with the fact in the former the historical centre has been isolated from the modern developments while in the latter we can see a growth process where the historical centre is globally more connected to the new developments.

The adopted methodology in this research, space syntax, investigates the configurational properties of urban structure by measuring the relationship between each component of the urban system and all other components. Meanwhile, it attempts

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to associate the spatial structures and urban systems. The initial results showed that: firstly, the values for Muharraq historical centre are considerably lower than Manama historical centre in both periods 1933 and 1951; secondly, the differences between the syntactic values from 1933 to 1951 increase from more local factors (such as connectivity) to more global values (such as Rn integration) in Muharraq city, while in Manama city the local factors are almost constant and decrease from local factors to global factors.

The initial findings are; firstly, that the two cities hold various degrees of syntactic structure, although they share common spatial characteristics. The second result, however, reveals that cities of the same urban genotype share more common characteristics at a local level but when they grow to a larger scale they tend to show more global variations, still within their specific range of variation.

The comparison between the two historical centres of Manama and Muharraq city in Bahrain Kingdom between 1933 and 1951 indicate that Manama's historical core has been to some extent isolated from the rest of the city while Muharraq's historical core is more connected to the new developments. This is confirmed by the correlation between local and global integration syntactic values, which support the initial hypothesis.

The spatial structure of both cities can be revealed by the differentiation of urban spaces through the local or global configuration of the urban grid, and through the differentiation of part-whole correlation among major urban areas it become clear that, in 1933 both cities were highly correlated in the centre, where the maximum legibility is needed, but it became less significant in approaching the residential areas, where privacy and retirement is expected. On the other hand, in 1955 the centrality shifted from the centre to the edge in both cities regardless of the different function of each core.