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Access Regulation in Islamic Urbanism:
The Case of Medieval Fès

SAID ENNAHID

Islamic urbanism is characterised by a clear-cut separation between the public and private domains. This demarcation permeates both the architectural and social structures of the Islamic urban society. In this article, four hierarchical levels of settlement will be studied: 1) the courtyard house, 2) the house compound, 3) the quarter, and 4) the city. Each hierarchical level of settlement will be examined in terms of the social, ethnic or occupational group that resides in it, and the structural manifestations of access regulation. Medieval Fès offers an excellent case study of this type of investigation. It was the object of numerous studies by archaeologists, historians, ethnographers, and architects. Furthermore the city epitomises the Islamic prescriptions of access regulation in an urban setting.

One of the defining features of Islamic societies is the social and architectural demarcation between the public and the private spheres. Islamic urbanism reflects the social and religious prescriptions of insuring that each member of society enjoys full rights to a secure and inviolable private space. A full account of these social and religious prescriptions is beyond the scope of this study and, instead, it will analyse the various settlement units within the Islamic urban society in order to determine the structural mechanisms designed to respond to these prescriptions. In other words, it will investigate how access is regulated in Islamic urbanism and discuss the implications of such regulation on society and on the architecture and urbanism of the Islamic city.

Medieval Fès offers an excellent case study for this type of investigation. The urban history of the city is well known from a number of historiographical, ethnographic, archaeological, and architectural studies. The urban structure of medieval Fès also epitomises the almost sacred requirement of Islamic urbanism to ensure a secure and inviolable private space for its citizens. In this study, access regulation will be analysed at four hierarchical levels of settlement within an urban setting:

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The courtyard house is the smallest unit of settlement within the Islamic urban structure. It is occupied by a nuclear family composed of a husband, his wife and their children. One of the Arabic words for this type of dwellings is *sakan*. And it is not a coincidence that this term shares the same etymological root with the Arabic word *sakīna* meaning peacefulness and tranquillity. The Muslim dwelling is thus the ultimate haven for privacy and security. Several passages from the Quran and several Prophetic Traditions clearly set the rules for the proper Muslim behaviour in terms of access to private space. For example: ‘Believers, do not enter the dwellings of other men until you have asked their owner’s permission and wished them peace.’ (The Light 24:27). Even more specific prescriptions, in fact a detailed code of behaviour, were decreed as to access to and conduct within the most important house in Islam, the house of the Prophet in Medina:

Believers, do not enter the houses of the Prophet for a meal without waiting for the proper time, unless you are given leave. But if you are invited, enter; and when you have eaten, disperse. Do not engage in familiar talk, for this would annoy the Prophet and he would be ashamed to bid you go; but of the truth God is not ashamed. If you ask his wives for anything, speak to them from behind a curtain. This is more chaste for your hearts and their hearts. (The Confederate Tribes 33:53).
However, the prescriptions found in the Quran and the Traditions of the Prophet were only meant to provide the spirit of the law that needed to be elaborated on through Islamic jurisprudence. In other words, the Quran and the Sunna (the normative behaviour of the Prophet) did not outline the specifics of how space was to be regulated and negotiated in Islamic society. In the course of Islamic history, Muslim judges and jurists were faced with numerous grievances for which there were no provisions in the primary sources of the *shari'a* (the Quran and the Sunna). Urban growth and the need for more and more valuable building space was a direct cause for many cases of litigation among urbanites.

The following examples illustrate how Islamic Law resolved some of the questions related to the organisation of space while providing every guarantee to ensure that a person’s privacy was maintained intact. Islamic Law forbids one to open his door or window facing his neighbour’s house, thus forcing the latter to make extra arrangements to secure his privacy. The entrance door of a house has to deviate at least one metre from the facing entrance door of one’s neighbour so as not to have direct view of the latter’s corridor. If a window must be opened for lighting and/or ventilation, it has to be placed above the line of vision to prevent any indiscreet view into the neighbour’s house.¹

The structural implications of such provisions resulted in a domestic space that is both hermetically secluded and almost completely introverted.

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¹ This could contribute to the theocratic control of society, which could result in a society that is not only introverted but also controlled by the religious authorities.
Beside the entrance door, there is rarely any opening onto the street with the exception of the occasional masharabiyya (a grille of lattice woodwork). The courtyard functions as the primary source of lighting and ventilation to the domestic unit. Being an essentially introverted space, the Islamic house does not reveal its secrets and charms to outsiders. In fact, the exterior of Islamic houses is totally deceiving with its high and blank walls which form the dark and tortuous alleyways so characteristic of the médina of Fès.

At the level of the individual house the main architectural feature used to regulate access to the interior is the bent-axis corridor (Figure 1). This angled entrance ensured that no direct view onto the house was possible. The bent-axis entryway opens onto one of the corners of the central courtyard around which open all the main rooms in the house. The bent-axis entryway and the central courtyard are the most characteristic features of Maghribi and, arguably, all Islamic domestic architecture. These features are ‘religiously’ maintained regardless of the constraints of building space since we found them even in houses of very small size. However, both features are not purely Islamic innovations. They are found in earlier architectural traditions, such as Greco-Roman domestic architecture in North Africa. Mantoz states that the bent-axis corridor is not a Roman creation but rather a Greek or even a possible oriental creation. While in Greek houses the bent-axis entryway is a common feature, Roman houses found in Italy rarely show this architectural feature so widespread in North African architecture. Roman houses open into the atrium that can be seen without obstruction from the outside. It is not clear as to when and how this architectural feature was adopted by North African architects. Golvin and Marçais attribute an oriental (western Asia, Mesopotamia, and Persia) origin to the bent-axis entryway. Golvin correctly points out that it is unlikely that the adoption of the bent-axis entryway in North Africa was a Greek influence since the Greek presence in the area was too sporadic to leave such a lasting mark. Finally, the bent-axis entryway is not an exclusively domestic feature in North African architecture. It is also found in military architecture in the form of the avant-corps.

The central courtyard or the Moroccan wast ad-dâr is also a feature that was adopted from pre-existing architectural traditions. The Roman atrium and its precursor the Greek peristyle bear a striking similarity to the central courtyard of the Islamic house and it is very likely that they were used as a blueprint by Muslim architects. Beside its role of providing the Muslim family with a space that is architecturally open and socially restricted, the central courtyard also responds to specific climatic conditions. In areas with a very short rainy season and a long, hot, and dry summer, the courtyard is an efficient cooling and ventilation device. It retains cool air trapped at night and releases it during the day when it is most needed. A small
FIGURE 2
MEDIEVAL AL-BASRA
A HOUSE COMPLEX WITH THREE ROOMS AND A BENT-AXIS ENTRYWAY

courtyard is preferred to a large one since the former continues to be in the shade for a longer period of time during the day; it helps to retain a lower temperature inside the house. The same principle applies to the layout and width of the streets and alleyways of the medina. They are kept narrow and winding with high walls to protect the houses from dust-laden winds and to reduce the time during which the exterior walls are exposed to direct sunlight and to prevent the wind from chasing out the cool air trapped at night. The layout of the houses themselves as blocks of aggregated domestic units helps reduce to the minimum the time during which the exterior walls are exposed to direct sunlight.

The anatomy of domestic space in medieval Fès is well documented and detailed descriptions of several houses in the city exist. In the description of al-‘Umari (1349 AD), the central courtyard holds a prominent place in the layout of the house: ‘suivant un plan uniforme: deux salles se faisant vis-à-vis, dressées sur des piliers de pierre ou de brique; des chambres surplombant la cour de la maison; devant elles, des vasques, dans lesquelles l’eau court; puis cette eau sort dans un bassin situé au milieu de la cour.’

The earliest examples of the bent-axis entryway are documented primarily through archaeological evidence. Excavations at the Idrisid city of al-Basra (9th–11th centuries AD) uncovered a large domestic unit, which is considered to be one of the oldest Islamic houses in Morocco (Figure 2).

One important feature of this house is a bent-axis corridor which extends at least six metres beyond the bending point, becoming narrower in width. The traces of three holes halfway down the corridor might have marked the location of the main entrance to the house. It is somewhat intriguing that all the rooms in this house are interconnected by a series of corridors instead of opening onto a central courtyard as is the norm in the Islamic house.

Excavations at medieval Qsar es Seghir (twelfth to fifteenth centuries) uncovered 18 well preserved Islamic houses. Almost invariably, all the excavated domestic units follow the classic layout of the Islamic house with a bent-axis entryway, rooms arranged around the central courtyard, and utility rooms (kitchen, storage room, latrines) arranged along the street side of the courtyard (Figure 3). Only house size, building material and decorative techniques show some variability. There is a striking similarity – in plan and elevation – between a number of Islamic houses excavated at Qsar es-Seghir and houses in Fès known from documentary evidence, such as al-‘Umari’s description cited above.

The House Compound

The aggregation of several courtyard houses forms the house compound, the second architectural unit in the hierarchy of settlements within the Islamic
FIGURE 3
MEDIEVAL QSAR ES-SEGHIR
PLAN OF HOUSE 200

Source: Redman 1986, Qsares-Seqhir (note 8).
city. The house compound is occupied by members of an extended family headed by a patriarch. As with the courtyard house, the layout of the house compound is meant to regulate access and ensure maximum privacy to its occupants. At times, this was achieved at the expense of public space, which was consciously encroached on.\textsuperscript{15} The house compound forms a closed architectural complex composed of several individual domestic units sharing a common entryway (Figure 4). This starts from the street and forms a cul-de-sac. The location of a gate at the street results in the cul-de-sac becoming an extra private space used exclusively by the occupants of the house compound. In Fès, the cul-de-sac is an integral component of the quarter structure. In just one single quarter of the medina (the Garnîz quarter) there are no less that 15 cul-de-sacs (Figure 5). Furthermore, spatial analysis of this quarter shows that access to two-thirds of its domestic units is regulated via cul-de-sacs; when an alternative point of access is available, the occupants invariably use the one that opens onto the cul-de-sac.\textsuperscript{16}

Without understanding the social structure of the Islamic family unit and the nature of the kinship relations within the house compound, it is easy to dismiss the profusion of cul-de-sacs in Islamic medinas as a result of ad hoc building practices. This is especially the case for a number of early twentieth century western scholars and travellers whose reference model was the Roman or Greek city with its well-defined orthogonal plan.
FIGURE 5
MEDINA OF FÈS
PLAN OF THE GARNIZ QUARTER

The Quarter

The Islamic city lacks an orthogonal plan which consequently makes it difficult to delimit quarter boundaries. This is especially the case of the médina of Fès where the rigid prescriptions of access regulation actually define the very essence of a residential quarter. A ‘real quarter’, according to Le Tourneau, is the sum of all the cul-de-sacs and small streets that branch off a main artery or lead to one. As opposed to western cities where it is usually the street that marks the boundary between two quarters, in Fès such a boundary is very elusive, especially to outsiders; quarter boundaries are made of a dividing line (ligne de partage) that cuts through the house compounds instead of running around them. For example, two domestic units that abut onto each other do not necessarily belong to the same quarter if they open onto different streets.

The quarter is made of a number of house compounds with a common ethnic, tribal or religious affiliation. One of the quarters of the médina of Fès (the al-makhfiyya quarter) formed an enclave of 86 households affiliated to five kin-related groups. In his influential study on the foundation of the city of Fès, Lévi-Provençal pointed out that the earliest quarters corresponded to ‘ethnic divisions’ including the Sanhâdja, the Lawâta, the Masmûda, and the Ashnîkhan. Each quarter formed a closed microcosm enjoying self-sufficiency in terms of its basic social, economic and administrative needs. The main public facilities, such as a mosque (for prayer and for teaching children the Quran and the basics of religion), a few shops selling basic household items, an oven and a fountain are located within the perimeter of the quarter.

In the médina of Fès, the Jews had their own separate quarter called the mellah. According to the fourteenth century Ibn Abi Zar‘, Idriss II gave permission to the Jews who came to the newly-founded city of Fès to build their own quarter close to the northern section of the city walls in exchange for an annual poll tax of 30,000 dinârs. Interestingly, Le Tourneau recorded the toponym of funûd-l-Ihûdî (the warehouse of the Jew), the name of one of the quarters in the neighbourhood of Bab Gisa, the northern gate of the city. Under the Marinids, due to growing insecurity, the Jewish population of Fès was relocated to another quarter near the king’s palace in the newly built Fès-Jdid.

The Jewish quarter consisted primarily of merchants and artisans. The Jews of medieval Fès enjoyed a great deal of religious freedom and financial and administrative autonomy. They had their own police and tribunal. Obviously, the jurisdiction of these institutions did not extend beyond the periphery of the mellah. The layout of the Jewish quarter did not respond to the same social and religious requirements as its Islamic
counterpart. In fact, the main concern for many inhabitants was simply to find a viable building space. In other words, the Jewish population was too big for the space it was assigned. According to Le Tourneau, 8000 Jews were living in Fes at the beginning of the twentieth century.\(^{27}\) This is a large population size for a site of about six hectares\(^ {28}\) (18 inhabitants per household in 1936). Most space was used for building and only a tiny portion was left for streets and alleyways. Domestic units were several storeys high with windows opening onto the street. To use Le Tourneau’s words, the rule was to gain in height and density what was lacking in surface area.\(^ {29}\) To understand the layout of the Jewish quarter one has to search for variables other than religious and social prohibitions, such as the historical circumstances surrounding the settlement and later relocation of the Jewish community in Fes, and the nature of the social and political status of this community within a pre-dominantly Islamic city.

The City

The city constitutes the highest hierarchical unit of settlement in Islamic urbanism. Access to the city is controlled at the central level (prince, governor, or military official). In order to build a city wall complete with parapet, watchtowers and a surrounding ditch (as in, for example, the city of Baghdad), a central authority is needed to mobilise the necessary workforce, to supervise the construction, and to maintain and control such an elaborate access regulation apparatus.\(^ {30}\) Access regulation, however, can also be discussed in terms of private and public space, as well as in terms of the layout of the city’s road system. The strict rules regulating access to the different settlement units resulted in large areas of the city becoming restricted or private space, and a complex road system that was both introverted and exclusive. Several scholars have noted the high ratio of private (interior) space to public (exterior) space within the Islamic city.\(^ {31}\) A study of three categories of land use at medieval Qsar es-Seghir (streets/plazas, residential/commercial building, and civic buildings) shows that the upper Islamic levels at this city have proportionately more interior residential space (76 per cent) than the corresponding Portuguese level of the city (70 per cent). Streets and plazas in the Islamic levels occupy less space (21 per cent) compared with Portuguese levels (27 per cent).\(^ {32}\) Redman and Anzalone argue that ‘...although 6 per cent more exterior space in the Portuguese community is a small change compared to the internal variability that existed within each town, the pattern of excavated areas in the Portuguese level consistently having more exterior space than those of the Islamic levels below appears to be meaningful.’\(^ {33}\) It is possible that these figures are less dramatic than expected because the Portuguese
FIGURE 6
PLAN OF TIMGAD

occupation at Qsar es-Seghir only partially modified the pre-existing urban structure of the Islamic city. In other words, higher ratios of public to private space are to be found in cities in Portugal contemporary with Qsar es-Seghir.

The road system of the Islamic city was not laid out according to a preconceived plan. As stated by Le Tourneau: ‘Moslem cities in North Africa were not laid out according to street plans; the location of the streets was determined by the arrangement of the buildings’. The Islamic city is in this regard in total contrast to its Roman counterpart. A classic plan of a Roman city is made of a square or a rectangle crossed by two perpendicular axes running north–south and east–west (Figure 6). The north–south and east–west main streets are the cardo and the decumanus respectively. The city gates are located equidistant from the point where the cardo and the decumanus intersect. The overall plan formed a chessboard with secondary streets parallel to the main axes and the settlement units forming the squares of this chessboard.

The road system in the médina of Fès developed from random circumstances and prior occupation of building space by domestic units. With the exception of a few main arteries leading to the centre of the city, streets constitute in essence an extension of the domestic (private) space or a buffer zone around it. Access to domestic units and residential blocks is restricted by the construction of gates at the point of entrance to streets and cul-de-sacs. Once the gates were closed – at night or during periods of unrest – the city would be transformed into a number of enclaves totally shutting out the outside world.

A schematic view of the road system of the médina of Fès shows a network of streets of descending hierarchical order (Figure 7):

1. Two major traffic arteries (the streets of tâl’ā kabīra and tâl’ā as-sghîra) connecting the city’s core to its periphery.
2. Main streets or durâb, sing. darb (e.g., darb Garnîz) connecting the city’s quarters to the main traffic arteries.
3. Secondary streets connecting blocks of house compounds to the main streets.
4. Cul-de-sacs or driba (the smallest unit within the road system) connecting house compounds to secondary streets and to the rest of the road system.

The Garnîz quarter in the médina of Fès offers a good illustration of how these constituents were actually laid out within a residential block (Figure 5). This quarter is connected to the rest of the city by
1. a main street (darb Garnfz) measuring about 5 metres at its widest point; it represents the heart of the quarter where all commercial and social activities take place,
2. three secondary streets ranging in width between 1.5 and 3.5 metres, and
3. more than a dozen cul-de-sacs, some of which form true bottle necks of 0.5 to 0.8 metres in width but rarely exceeding 2 metres.\(^{39}\) The absence of wide traffic arteries is not surprising since the use of wheeled vehicles was unknown. The inhabitants of Fès circulated on foot and goods were transported either by using men porters or beasts of burden.\(^ {40}\)

This study demonstrates clearly that access regulation and the separation between the public sphere and the family sanctum is the ‘structuring principle’ of Islamic urbanism. Its manifestations are found in every single hierarchical unit of settlement with varying degrees of structural and jurisdictional complexity. More importantly, by identifying the structural mechanisms of access regulation the physical boundaries of social units can be recognised, especially in archaeological contexts lacking orthogonal planning and for which there is little or no documentary evidence.
Conclusion

Two points, however, need to be emphasised. Firstly, the focus on access regulation in Islamic urbanism should not be interpreted as a symptom of Muslim xenophobia or indifference towards public life. Each social unit within the Islamic city, although forming a closed microcosm, was actively involved in the communal affairs of the city as a whole. Secondly, emphasis on the structural (architectural) aspects of access regulation should not overshadow other no less significant aspects of boundary demarcation in the Islamic domestic environment. The family sanctum is also protected against supernatural ‘intruders’, such as the jinn or the evil eye, among other things, through the use of charms and amulets buried under the entrance door and/or pendants (the hand of Fatima or the horse shoe) nailed to it.41 Considering the purely ‘emic’ nature of this type of boundary demarcation, its identification is much more difficult to recognise archaeologically but is no less fascinating a venture for future research.

NOTES

5. Golvin (note 3).
7. In Middle Eastern domestic architecture, in addition to the courtyard (with the occasional iwan), one or more wind towers (malqaf) are used as ventilation devices to divert the outside air-flow into the house interior.
12. Redman (note 8).
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid. p.228.
24. Ibid. p.76.
27. Ibid. p.158.
28. Site area was calculated from Le Tourneau (note 17) Figure 8.
29. Ibid. p.102.
32. Redman and Anzalone (note 31) p.286.
33. Ibid.
36. Le Tourneau (note 17) p.25.
38. Note the location of gates in Figure 5 marked by (x).
40. Le Tourneau (note 17) p.25.