

## Islamic Housing between Yesterday and Today

### Perumahan Islam antara Semalam dan Hari Ini

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#### Abstract

This paper discusses the quintessence of Islamic housing against the backdrop of some fundamental laws of history and civilization. It calls for properly comprehending and reviving the Islamic housing phenomenon within the context of studying the subjects of history and critical thinking. The paper concludes that the house institution occupies an extraordinary place in Islam. It is a family development centre and, as such, a microcosm of Islamic culture and civilization. The prospect of reviving Islamic housing is an arduous task. Its successful implementation will revolve around the following thrusts: creating a comprehensive built environment educational culture, upholding and integrating into the former the ideals of *tawhīd* (Allah's Oneness) and the rest of Islamic teachings and values, and introducing the principle of unreserved following in religion and unrestricted inventing in sheer worldly matters. The importance of studying history is discussed first. Then, the relationship between Islamic housing and critical thinking is dwelled on. And finally, in the light of the findings in the first two sections, some prerequisites for contemporary Islamic housing are discussed.

**Keywords:** Islamic Housing, History, Critical Thinking, Islam, Muslims.

#### Abstrak

Kajian ini memperbincangkan kesucian perumahan Islam terhadap beberapa undang-undang asas sejarah dan tamadun. Ia menegaskan untuk memahami dan menghidupkan semula fenomena perumahan Islam menurut konteks mempelajari subjek sejarah dan pemikiran kritikal. Kajian ini menyimpulkan bahawa sebuah rumah mempunyai kedudukan tinggi dalam Islam. Ia merupakan sebuah pusat pembangunan keluarga dan dengan itu sebahagian budaya dan ketamadunan Islam. Untuk

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menghidupkan semula perumahan islam adalah satu tugas yang sukar. Kejayaanya akan menurut perkara-perkara berikut: membina suasana budaya pelajaran yang menyeluruh, menegakkan dan mengintegrasikan kepercayaan kepada *tawhid* dengan pengajaran Islam yang lain dan memperkenalkan prinsip-prinsip yang tidak terpelihara dalam agama dan tidak diwujudkan dalam hal-hal duniawi. Kepentingan mempelajari sejarah dibincangkan dahulu. Kemudian, hubungan antara perumahan Islam dan pemikiran kritikal dipertahankan. Dan akhirnya, berdasarkan penemuan dalam dua bahagian pertama, beberapa pra-syarat untuk perumahan Islam kontemporari dibincangkan.

**Kata Kunci:** Perumahan Islam, Sejarah, Pemikiran Kritikal, Islam, Orang Islam.

### Introduction

The Islamic house is a microcosm of Islamic culture and civilization. Achievements and successes in both Islamic housing and Islamic civilization are interrelated, one leading to, or originating from, the other, irrespective of which one exactly is the cause and which one is the effect. Islam is a total life-style. The house phenomenon, and all the sectors related, directly or indirectly, to it, is the ground for living and practicing the most essential segments of human existence on earth, and, as such, the ground for living the most essential segments of the Islamic worldview, *sharī'ah* (law) and ethics. The house dominion is where people rise and fall, that is to say, where people either succeed or fail in managing and conducting the most crucial aspects of their lives. Housing is where the epicenter of the rise and fall of cultures and civilizations lies. Thus, some of the chief causes of the decline of Islamic civilization, if properly examined, could be related, one way or another, to the complex subject of housing and its own decline and causes. Similarly, some of the main cures and catalysts for the revival of Islamic civilization could be found right in the ambit of the subject of reviving genuine Islamic housing. Indeed, Islamizing the housing education and practice of Muslims today could be a turning point, as well as an engine of growth, insofar as a total recovery and revival of Muslim cultural and civilizational consciousness and involvement at a world stage are concerned. This paper attempts to shed more light on that prospect. Some parallels between the

housing of Muslims yesterday and today will be drawn, and the conceptual as well as practical implications for the creators and users of Islamic housing will thoroughly be discussed.

### **The Importance of Studying History**

While calling for a revival in contemporary Islamic housing, Muslims often cast a glance towards history and how the Muslims of some past generations had handled the same issue. It is therefore of paramount importance that today's Muslims view and assess correctly the achievements of their predecessors in the field of architecture, in general, and housing, in particular. Understanding the present predicaments of Muslims with regard to housing depends very much on this first step. This is a normal and desired course of action. However, some cautionary steps ought to be taken.

It should immediately be stated that this scenario will not be feasible if Muslims either remain ignorant about their own history and civilization, or are relatively acquainted with the same but with a knowledge that is often served in so many forms, often distorted ones, by their former colonial masters. Ignorance, it follows, is one thing, but a distorted knowledge is totally something else. Both are appalling, but the latter, without doubt, is worse than the former. They both mislead and ruin a person; however, while ignorance sometimes needs no more than a spark to make a person come to terms with his dismal condition, and to swiftly embark on filling up that glaring cavity inside his self, a distorted or a corrupted knowledge, on the other hand, having left no glaring intellectual cavity inside a person, blinds, deafens and deceives him, so he becomes blindly contented and proud, hence receptive neither to criticism and reassessment of his precarious position, nor to new vistas of knowledge and new ideas.

Regarding the second state of affairs where some Muslims possess some knowledge about the history of their cultures and civilization, most of such knowledge, however, had been misconstrued and, in some in-

stances, even corrupted by the interferences of the colonial masters and their allies, and in such a state had been served to the Muslim minds, both young and old, in schools, colleges and universities. Those colonial masters, it stands to reason, must have often had a number of covert goals and agendas behind the dissemination of such a knowledge. Even if they had none, and were somewhat sincere in their undertakings, they, in the final analysis, rarely could remain completely neutral and unprejudiced, something which is quite natural and expected if we consider the nature of humans as well as the nature of the colonizer-colonized relationship. In the best scenario, the colonial masters, despite their intermittent somewhat sincere efforts, still remained short of grasping the essence and spirit of Islam, as well as the nature and profundity of its imprints on history and life in general. Still however, this is sufficiently a bad situation that inevitably leads to equally bad results.

Nonetheless, Muslims ought not to blame anyone but themselves for their present predicaments. At the same time, they ought not to play blame or finger-pointing games. There is neither time nor reason for that, because such a thing is uncalled for and is a serious spiritual failing. It brings more harm than benefit, recklessly consuming the limited time, energy, resources, willpower and zeal of people. Muslims need to pick themselves up, dust themselves off, and as a unit and in a confident mode, start moving forward. They must accept that their fate lies in their own hands, not in the hands of others, whoever they may be. Allah says “*Allah does not change condition of a people until they change their own condition*” (The Qur’an, 13:11). It means people are the architects of their own (mis)fortune. What lies beyond human capacity, Allah will take care of it. The true independence, freedom, cultural and civilization- al creativity, productivity and contentment of Muslims can come about only as a result of a fusion of faith, right education, hard work and perseverance, which will be woven with the threads of a comprehensive excellence culture.

In doing so, Muslims should remember an underlying rule which both the Holy Qur’an and history clearly bring to light. That rule is: in order for a person to know and diagnose his present state, he must know

his past; and for a person to be able to chart his future course, he must know both his past and present conditions. This applies to the fates of societies more than anything else. Indeed, any other approach is a flawed and misleading course of action. It denotes one of the plainest paradoxes that one can adopt. It is a self-deception and self-hypocrisy. The disposition of a present condition, in a person or a society, owes much to the past conditions that preceded it. Also, the disposition of future conditions will always owe much to both the present and past ones and how people handled them. People who are ignorant about, and indifferent towards, their history are people with a fake identity. They possess no real life orientation and mission, and they regularly waver in some of the most consequential things in life. Their civilizational undertakings, at best, are shortsighted, myopic and superficial, often serving not their own interests, but the interests of those parties and groups to the rhythm of whose political or economic currents they swing.

This situation is similar to a seriously sick person who visits a doctor. Undoubtedly, the only way for the person's illness to be properly and quickly cured is that he informs the doctor about what had transpired earlier: what he had eaten or what unusual he had done or had happened to him. The doctor will ask if the person had similar, or some other serious, illnesses in the past and how he coped with them. He will ask, furthermore, whether the person is allergic to certain medications. Knowing the medical history of the person's immediate family members will also be crucial to the doctor. Only when the doctor becomes well acquainted with all these matters will he be able to correctly diagnose the illness and proceed with an effective therapy for the ill person. Any failure in properly diagnosing the person, either due to the doctor's ignorance of the person's present and past conditions, or due to some misleading information given to the doctor, will inevitably lead to a failure in curing the person from his disease. As a result of this failure, sometimes a wrong therapy may lead not only to the prolonged suffering of the patient, but also to deterioration in his condition. It may even lead to his death.

As far as the subject matter of housing in Islam is concerned, studying its history will bring multiple benefits. They will all revolve around discovering how and why the early Muslims were able to evolve such astonishing and sophisticated housing systems and designs that effortlessly integrated into their fold the worldview, values and teachings of Islam together with the many requirements of the climate, environment, culture, technology and engineering of the day. Islamic housing was a source of pride to Muslims. It was a testimony that they lived up to the requirements of the vicegerency mission placed on their shoulders. It will not be an exaggeration to even say that Islamic housing was a testimony of the success of Muslims in this world, which is a prelude to success in the world to come. Islamic housing was always one of the best sources of the legitimate worldly pleasures to Muslims, too. It was arguably one of the greatest gifts and blessings provided for them in this world, which was capable of endlessly giving most. Thus, a genuine Islamic house is described by many, Muslims and non-Muslims alike, as a paradise on earth.

Titus Burckhardt, for example, wrote that the inner courtyard of an Islamic house “is an image of paradise; when it contains a fountain and watercourses which gush forth to water trees and flowers, it does in effect recall the descriptions in the Qur’an of the abode of the blessed.”<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that inner courtyards in Islamic residential architecture and planning were always featured prominently, perhaps more than any other component of the house. This was so because of the multiple functions and benefits that domestic courtyards offered, such as, manipulating weather conditions and getting the best out of them, privacy protection, constant interaction with the environment and outer space, entertainment and recreation.

Hassan Fathy, as cited by Gianni Scudo, went so far as to say that the Islamic (Arab) courtyard house was “a microcosm linking, in space and time, land and sky through the symbolic meaning of its compo-

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<sup>1</sup> Titus Burckhardt, *Art of Islam*, (London: World of Islam Festival Publishing Company Ltd., 1976), p. 191.

nents”.<sup>2</sup> He said: “The four walls of the courtyard represented the four columns carrying the dome of the sky. The sky is then drawn down into intimate contact with the living rooms by reflecting it in a basin which has the form of a dome on squinches. Thus, nature and space are brought into the town-house by their transportation into architectural forms and by symbolism.”<sup>3</sup>

When Isma'il al-Faruqi spoke about the arresting preference of Many Muslims in the past for an extended family, as well as about the life in Muslim houses where the former was enclosed and facilitated, he inferred that the reasons for that were purely educational, psychological, recreational and spiritual, clearly spelling out the nature and dynamism of the roles and functions of the house institution in Islam. Al-Faruqi concluded that those Muslim houses which facilitated and promoted the notion of an extended family ensured, among other things, the proper and uninterrupted upbringing, education, socialization and acculturation of the young. And it is not a secret that the lack of a proper upbringing, education and acculturation of many young Muslims is one of the main problems faced by the Muslim community today, and one of the main obstacles on the way of a Muslim cultural and civilizational awakening.

Al-Faruqi wrote: "The Muslim family suffers from no generation gap as three generations live together. Thus, the socialization and acculturation of the young is always complete, guaranteeing the transmission of tradition and culture with as little adulteration as possible. Here, the past is genuinely in touch with the present and the future. Another crucial advantage of the extended family is that it provides its members with instant company whenever he desires it. And there are usually enough to choose from, according to the prevailing mood. There is always somebody ready to play with, to joke with, to discuss with, to contemplate with, to cry with, and to hope with. This is a crucial prerequisite for mental health. The extended family never lacks a child element, an adult ele-

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<sup>2</sup> Gianni Scudo, “Climatic Design in the Arab Courtyard House”, in *Environmental Design: Journal of the Islamic Environmental Research Centre* 1-2, (1988), 82-91.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

ment, a feminine element, a masculine element, an elderly element wiser and more experienced than all others."<sup>4</sup>

While the Islamic housing of the past filled Muslims with pride and happiness, it was filling many non-Muslims with awe and admiration. For example, following the return of the crusaders from Palestine and Syria, who interacted more closely than ever before with the cultures and civilization of Muslims, many spread tales of the refreshing gardens, private and public, of the holy land. It was then and through the returning crusaders that the concept of the domestic courtyard, or the outdoor room in the house, came to the European culture. The Islamic domestic courtyard, together with the concept of the Islamic garden, was thought to be "a literal evocation of the joys that await the pious in the afterlife".<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Isma'il Raji Al-Faruqi, *Al-Tawhid: its Implications for Thought and Life*, (Herndon: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 1995), p.137.

<sup>5</sup> Susan Zevon, *Outside Architecture*, (Gloucester: Rockport Publishers, 1999), see Introduction by Walter Chatham, p. 10.





(A residential area in the old city of Jeddah, Saudi Arabia)



(Architectural conflicts, or incompatibilities, between yesterday and today are evident virtually everywhere in the Muslim world. An apartment building with several “traditional” elements and features reflected on the glass façade of a nearby “modern” commercial building in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia.)

### **Reviving Islamic Housing and Critical Thinking**

It goes without saying that the only way forward for Muslims, while holding fast to the guidance of the holy Qur’an and the Prophet’s (s.a.w.) *sunnah*, is to critically and thoroughly examine both their past and present-day conditions, the findings of which will have to constitute

the core of their educational systems, socio-economic and political philosophies, as well as any reformatory and revivalist tendencies and movements. Such an ethos will shape their unique and respectable identity, and the identity of all that is associated with them.

As a segment of studying the Muslim history and Muslim society, studying the history of Islamic housing will enable Muslims, professionals and users alike, to critically and aptly analyze the causes and conditions which led to abandoning the housing systems and styles, partly or completely, which epitomized the belief system, values and ideals of Islam in favor of some other alien philosophies, values and principles. They will be in a position to grasp the extent of the relationship between a regression in Islamic housing and the other Muslim social, political, economic and spiritual setbacks, one influencing and aiding the other. They, furthermore, will be able to critically assess and come to terms with the conspicuous insufficiency of authenticity and genuine value of present-day housing styles and systems which Muslims have adopted: how much (in)compatible with Islam and the Muslim ethical and spiritual preferences such styles and systems are, where they have come from and how, and finally, if they are what Muslims really want and crave for.

Certainly, in terms of Islamic housing, a serious and in-depth self-evaluation is urgently needed at all levels of the Muslim presence, and the above-raised questions represent some of the core issues that must be investigated and solved. What Muslims need today is a culture of critical, independent and visionary thinking, as well as a culture of an audacious initiative, creativity and change. What is needed is a culture of comprehensive excellence, as well as a culture of intellectual and cultural enlightenment and elevation. What is needed, when all's said and done, is to translate the teachings, values and principles of Islam onto life realities, because all of the above-mentioned factors that are required are what Islam promotes and stipulates as the prerequisites for the creation of a genuine culture and civilization. Anything put forth other than this is a distorted, or at best, a questionable, version of understanding Islam. Islam, it follows, promotes a keen following in religion and endless innovation

and originality in civilization, an integral part of which is the built environment with housing as its nucleus.

It defies logic that some housing systems, designs and styles were excellent, yet the best ones, for many centuries and then, suddenly, they started to seem obsolete, old-fashioned and impractical. For example, how come that the concepts of the Islamic Arab, Turkish and Malay houses were the ideal solutions for hundreds of millions of people in the Arab, Turkish and Malay lands, and for hundreds of years, satisfying their unified religious and diversified cultural, environmental and climatic prerequisites, but today such concepts have become outmoded and irrelevant? As a result, we dismiss such outstanding and total housing solutions and styles of the past as merely traditional and vernacular, reducing them to museums, pages of history books and, at best, to some rare appearances in some remote indigenous regions where the currents of Western materialistic modernization is yet to arrive and sweep everything away. Isn't it better for Muslims, for example, to be true to themselves and talk about modernizing, adapting and modifying, if need be, their own housing styles and designs which proved excellent and compatible for centuries, without compromising the philosophy, spirit and fundamental qualities of such styles and designs, rather than to let themselves, their culture, history and more than a few fundamental religious precepts down, and irresponsibly embark on importing some alien housing styles and designs which stem from another life philosophies, worldviews and cultures?

If, admittedly, some of the Islamic housing styles and designs somewhat failed to cope with dramatic changes in the Muslim world during a couple of last centuries, and were sluggish and irresponsible to rapid advancements in modern science, technology and engineering, that in no way renders them outdated, worn-out and worthless. The problem simply was part of a bigger picture; it was part of a total decline in Islamic society and its cultures and civilization. Hence, the matter of Islamic housing in a recent history ought to be viewed, approached and solved as such, that is, as part of a bigger picture, or a problem. The problem, as a matter of fact, was never that of Islamic housing. The problem always was, and

still is, linked to Muslims and how they actually coped with and responded to the growing Westernization and colonization challenges that targeted their culture and identity. Successfully restoring Islamic housing today, as both a concept and sensory reality, therefore, can only be viable if the same is regarded as part of a wide-ranging Islamization initiative. It cannot be treated independently, away from the rest of major Muslim problems and challenges.

According to Youssef el-Sayebi “there are (by and large) two types of housing prevailing in the Islamic world: the typical Arab Islamic housing and the modern Western housing type. Both types have their own impact upon the lives of their inhabitants. Ideally, the designer of such housing projects must be of a high artistic inspiration based on the Islamic guiding principles, traditions and customs in order to initiate the positive impact of housing on the development of the Muslim individual. Far from such idealism, our Muslim world suffers from a severe mixture of alien Western architectural types. That is basically the result of our neglecting or misunderstanding of the Islamic civilization heritage, despite the presence of highly qualified architects in our world. Or, is it a dialectic mixing up we are living in? The government will have to take the initiative for the encouragement of the adoption of the traditional architectural type for individual housing, instead of the high-rise apartment buildings. It also will have to consider the general climatic conditions.”<sup>6</sup>

Indeed, the main reason for the Islamic housing problems is many Muslims’ ignorance of Islam and the history of its peoples, coupled with their abandoning of many fundamental values and laws of Islam, prolonged colonization and the onslaught of the Western materialistic modernization and culture. The reason is a drastic change in the mind-set and attitude of many Muslims, their feeble and shallow intellectualism and wisdom, as well as their poor and disoriented, or even completely flawed,

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<sup>6</sup> Youssef El-Sayebi, *Housing Problems in the Islamic City*, (pp.135-142 ); Inside: *Housing in the Islamic City*, Proceedings of a Symposium held in Ankara, Turkey, on 21-25.7.1984. Proceedings prepared by: Center of Planning and Architectural Studies, Cairo.

spiritual tendencies. Consequently, in terms of housing, the situation became disturbingly so dismal. Many Muslims became so impaired by the causes of the fall of Islamic culture and civilization, and were so blinded by the disingenuous and shallow alternatives served instead, that they became in the end incapacitated from seeing how inappropriate and inconsistent their imported housing systems, designs and styles were. They could not see that such designs and styles were foreign, some even looked weird and awkwardly improper when juxtaposed with the backdrop of the Muslim contexts. Due to the enormous importance of housing in life, those foreign housing designs and styles clearly served as a hindrance to Muslim reawakening and a proper acculturation.<sup>7</sup>

It is truly amazing why we can't see and then properly judge these things, but we can see very clearly and then can properly judge many other aspects of civilization. For example, if a person in a tropical or a hot-dry desert climate, with his own unique weather conditions, indigenous culture and religious preference, were to completely abandon his native dress style in favor of a foreign one, which evolved as a result of the impact of sets of totally different indigenous cultures, religious preferences and weather conditions, such as – for example -- the cold continental four-season climate, that would appear to most people as weird, impractical and even ridiculous. Everyone will be able to see that and know why. That would be so because the newly adopted style of clothing of the person in question would betray the requirements of local cultures, local ecological factors and weather conditions. The person's behavior would be regarded as absurd and unnatural, hence improper. It simply would not go well with the overall conditions of the contexts in

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<sup>7</sup> See: Rouhi Al-Sherif, *Solving the Housing Problems for Poor Groups in Islamic Cities*, (pp. 249-266); *Housing and City Planning Problems in the City of Tehran*, by a representative from the municipality of Tehran, (pp. 155-160); Inside: *Housing in the Islamic City*, Proceedings of a Symposium held in Ankara, Turkey, on 21-25.7.1984. Proceedings prepared by: Center of Planning and Architectural Studies, Cairo.

which he lives. The adopted dress style would eventually cause the person a feeling of discomfort, incongruity and incompatibility.

Thus, if a person walks under the scorching sun in the streets of -- for instance -- Dubai, Doha, Kuwait City, Riyadh, Cairo and Khartoum, all representing the hot-dry desert climate, or in the streets of Kuala Lumpur and Jakarta, both representing the hot-humid climate, and he wears, for instance, a dress that is normally worn in the places of the cold continental four-season climate, his actions would be regarded -- and rightly so -- as eccentric, mismatched and, by some, even ridiculous. In most of the mentioned cities, furthermore, if an adopted foreign dress style clearly violated some clear-cut rulings of Islam, it would be regarded as offensive and disrespectful to the beliefs and sentiments of a majority of population. An immediate change, or an adjustment, to the dress style, would, in all likelihood, be required from the person in question in most of the mentioned cities.

At the same time, however, adopting a foreign housing design and style, partly or completely, in the same Muslim metropolises, which evolved somewhere else in the West -- for instance -- as a result of fluctuating, often cold, continental weather and other environmental factors, foreign cultural orientations and penchants, as well as different belief systems incompatible with Islam -- that, unfortunately, will not be regarded as strange, unsuitable and ridiculous a life pattern. To make things worse, there will be even those who would see that as a sign of modernization and progress. The proponents of this life phenomenon would normally espouse that Islam either has nothing to do with the matter in question, or it does to some extent, but there could be no out-and-out conflicts and discrepancies between the two.

Moreover, while a foreign dress style that does not respect the Islamic tenet of covering the '*awrah* (parts of the human body that must be properly covered in certain situations and under certain circumstances) will be frowned upon by many and in most of the referred to Muslim cities, a foreign Western housing style and design which not only does not respect the subjects of the '*awrah* of the body and the '*awrah* of the house and family institutions as well as human life in general (various

levels of the privacy right among the family members and visitors), but also through its design and layout it promotes their outright violation – that, in contrast, will rarely be frowned upon, let alone rejected and substituted with better and more appropriate alternatives.

Also, as another example, if a person within the unique cultural, ecological and religious contexts of his life were to completely abandon his native cuisine in favor of a foreign one, which evolved as a result of totally different cultural, environmental and religious contexts, his actions, too, will be looked upon as weird, inappropriate and ridiculous.

Undoubtedly, this principle of inevitable diversity, due to the diversity of life contexts and conditions, applies to virtually all aspects of culture and civilization. It even applies to the ways people conduct their political, economic, social, family and leisure activities. Calling for unity and standardization in sheer cultural matters would be extremely unfair and aberrant. It would be tantamount to betraying the human nature and instinct. Thus, people ought to be always mindful of cultural and life diversities and their inevitability, in turn appreciating, conforming to, and trying to get the best out of it for the sake of ensuring their earthly well-being.

That virtually everything in human life, including the way people look like and the languages they speak, is greatly influenced by natural elements, i.e., by the way the heavens and earth have been created and operate, Allah, the Creator and Sustainer of everything, says in the Qur'an: "And among His Signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the variations in your languages and your colors: verily in that are Signs for those who know" (al-Rum, 22). Placing the words "the variations in your languages and your colors" after the words "the creation of the heavens and the earth" implies that the ways the heavens and earth have been created and function hold sway over the ways people conduct much of their life affairs. As there are permanent and immutable rules and laws of physics, similarly, there are permanent and immutable rules and laws of culture as well, as there are permanent and immutable laws and rules of human ethics and morality, etc. From this unity of truth, which is akin to the roots and trunk of a healthy tree, springs out diversi-



ty of cultural and civilizational expressions and achievements, which is akin to the brunches, leafs and fruits of the same tree. Each brunch, leaf or a fruit is independent, a world on its own; however, they all are tied to the same source, the tree's roots and trunk. Surely, unity in diversity is the ethos and a hallmark of Islam and its *tawhidic* worldview.

The words “verily in that are Signs for those who know” in the above-mentioned verse from the Qur'an, represents an invitation to man, Allah's vicegerent on earth for whom everything thereon has been created and to whom everything has been subjected, to explore and at the same time adhere to those Signs, i.e., the permanent laws and paradigms of life. The same Signs (laws of existence) man is to scrupulously observe and conform to in all of his dealings and pursuits while on a quest for the realization of his honorable earthly mission. Man is not to rebel against, or to defy, his own nature, and the nature of things that surround him. Man, and everything that he does, needs at all times to be pragmatic, rational, “natural”, and nature or creation-friendly.

Without doubt, because of this practical and intrinsic character of Islam and its attitude towards, and appreciation of, the inexorable cultural and civilizational diversity in the world, people's customs and traditions (*'ādāt*) and customary usage (*'urf*) are regarded as a source of the rulings of the Islamic law (*sharī'ah*) where there are no explicit texts from neither the Qur'an nor the Prophet's *sunnah* specifying the rulings. It is also a requirement in making people's customs (*'ādāt*) and customary usage (*'urf*) a source of *sharī'ah* rulings that there are no contradictions between them and the contents of the Qur'an and *sunnah*. About the meaning of custom and customary usage Muhammad Abū Zahrah said: “Custom is a matter on which a community of people agrees in the course of their daily life, and common usage is an action which is repeatedly performed by individuals and communities. When a community makes a habit of doing something, it becomes its common usage. So the custom and common usage of a community shares the same underlying idea even if what is understood by them differs slightly.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Muhammad Abū Zahrah, *The Fundamental Principles of Imam Malik's Fiqh*: <http://ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages/ABewley/usul12.html>.

And about the reasons why *'ādāt* and *'urf* are deemed the appropriate sources of *sharī'ah*, in absence of explicit texts from the Qur'an and *sunnah* and when there are no conflicts between the *'ādāt* and *'urf* and the latter, Muhammad Abū Zahrah said: "Many judgments are based on *'urf* because in many cases it coincides with public interest... Another reason is that custom necessarily entails people's familiarity with a matter, and so any judgment based on it will receive general acceptance, whereas divergence from it will be liable to cause distress, which is disliked in the judgment of Islam because Allah Almighty has not imposed any hardship on people in His *dīn*. Allah Almighty prescribes what normal people deem proper and are accustomed to, not what they dislike and hate. So when a custom is not a vice and is respected by people, honoring it will strengthen the bond which draws people together because it is connected to their traditions and social transactions, whereas opposition to it will destroy that cohesion and bring about disunity."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.



(“Traditional” houses in Istanbul, Turkey)



(A “traditional” residential area in Ghadamis, Libya)

### **Some Prerequisites for Contemporary Islamic Housing**

Islam is a complete way of life. Its values and teachings, together with the teachings of Prophet Muhammad (s.a.w.), whose primary task was to explain to mankind and put into practice the precepts of Islam, are universal and timeless. The significance of Islamic built environment is universal and permanent too, in that the philosophy that it embodies is the Islamic one. However, such is the nature of Islamic built environment that it is receptive to both advances in science and technology and the dictates of people’s living conditions. Since Islamic housing is fundamental to Islamic built environment, this conceptual blueprint applies to it as well.

It is an imperative in relation to housing that Muslim professionals always remember this verity while trying to revive and sustain the notions of the Islamic house and Islamic housing. In so doing, Muslim professionals are bidden to, firstly, identify the general Islamic guidelines and principles pertaining to the phenomenon of housing. Next, they need to be fully aware of the implications of the dilemmas and challenges their time and the diverse regions in which they live entail. They cannot be trapped in a historical episode, overly romanticizing it and attempting to emulate the housing solutions the Muslims of that particular period successfully evolved. If something was the norm during a period and in a particular ecological setting, such by no means can be the same in every subsequent period and in different ecological settings. Technological advancements rapidly change. Demands of different eras fluctuate, even under the same ecological conditions. Climate exigencies must be painstakingly heeded. And, lastly, human psychology also changes with the change of time and space posing a number of exigencies of its own. No housing plan and design which served as a solution for an age and place can be simply “parachuted” to another age and place without properly modulating it to its rigorous environmental, socio-cultural and economic requirements. To do that is to betray the dynamic spirit of both the common sense and the perpetual message of Islam. Blind and ignorant imitations and following, even in sheer religious matters, are categorically rebuked by Islam.

While taking hold of the general Islamic guidelines and principles with reference to creating Islamic housing, on the one hand, and while studying the physical needs of different times and situations so that the former can be accurately understood and applied, on the other, Muslim professionals in reality perform a degree of *ijtihad*, i.e., forming an independent opinion or judgment within the framework of an available text. In doing so, if one excels, one receives two rewards from Allah, but if one for whatever reason fails to deliver, after he had tried his best, one is

bound to receive one reward from Allah, as propounded by the Prophet (s.a.w.) in one of his traditions.<sup>10</sup>

Based on this tradition, in no way can a serious, enlightened, accountable and willing person be a loser as far as the execution of matters ordained by Allah is concerned. Verily, this divine assurance should serve to Muslim architects, designers and planners as a starting point to look carefully and critically at the state of Muslim residential architecture and planning and how houses and other residential units in the Muslim world are planned and designed, as well as to start contemplating the prospects of finding much better solutions which will be inspired by and infused with the values of Islam, and will be responsive to the exigencies of different times and regions.

At the start, Muslim housing professionals ought not to be bound by a single historical structural model, device or a solution. The past is to be viewed all the time as such, i.e., the past. It is to be neither excessively venerated or idealized nor completely disregarded. The past must be put in its true perspective with such notions as wisdom, pragmatism and practicality leading the way. In their daunting search for contemporary Islamic residential architecture and planning, Muslim architects, designers and planners should be driven by a clear principled vision, a free spirit and an insatiable thirst for ingenuity, which must be shrouded in strong determination, self-belief and quest for excellence. However, should some modern structural devices or solutions appear to bear a resemblance, partly or totally, to the ones used in the past, one is not to shy away from reviving them within the existing contexts. The history of Islamic residential architecture and planning is not to be looked down at as entirely outmoded and worthless. As we are against blind and ignorant imitation of the past, we are likewise against disengaging ourselves from it and completely ignoring the numerous lessons that we can learn therefrom. Indeed, much can be learned from history because the protagonists of any historical episode, while solving their problems, possessed the

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<sup>10</sup> Al-Bukhārī, Muhammad ibn Ismā'īl, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, Kitāb al-I'tiṣām bi al-Kitāb wa al-Sunnah, Hadīth No. 6805.

same vision and objectives as we do today while solving the problems of our own. On the other hand, however, we have to be extremely mindful and selective as to what exactly to benefit from history, in which areas and how far we are to emulate our predecessors, because most of their problems were the product of the circumstances under which they operated, whereas our problems are the product of the circumstances under which we operate. Hence, seldom can their solutions be utterly ours.<sup>11</sup>

There is no such thing as standardized Islamic housing that can be reproduced anytime and anywhere. If truth be told, there is nothing as such in the whole orb of Islamic built environment. Therefore, Muslim architects, designers and planners should not hesitate to unleash their burning Islamic spirit, desire, imagination and creativity in order to conceive and create such an architectural tradition in the sphere of housing that will be compatible with the requirements of both the Islamic religious message and modernity. Undoubtedly, the given solutions will have to vary from one region to another, somewhere more and somewhere less. But the essence of all the possible designs, including those adopted as the best solutions in history, will remain one, on account of the same worldview and the same religious spirit and foundation that underpin the presence of Muslims and bind all the Muslim peoples regardless of their different geographical locations, cultures and historical appearances. Whatever conceptions and forms are eventually given to such residential architecture and planning, the same is absolutely qualified to be dubbed “Islamic”. Owing to its location, sheer exterior, or association with a historical moment, no house, or any other building, can be more Islamic than others. What matters, imperatively, is the total function and utility, that every building is imbued with the soul and purity of Islam, and that it stands for a personification of the Islamic values and principles insofar as the fulfilling of a building’s functions and roles is concerned.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Spahic Omer, *Islam and Housing*, (Kuala Lumpur: AS Noordeen, 2010), p. 224-248.

<sup>12</sup> Spahic Omer, *Islamic Architecture: its Philosophy, Spiritual Significance and Some Early Developments*, (Kuala Lumpur: A.S. Noordeen, 2009), p. 35-38.

Muslims should evolve today housing systems and styles that are in harmony with their people, their environment and their religious preferences. They should reject a blind following of their past because such is an exercise that is counter-productive, stifles ingenuity, and leads to a sturdy thinking and judgment degeneration. This leads to a retreat to the Islamic architectural and planning past and to an excessive and impractical idealism. This, at the end, can result in superficial, bogus and tasteless hybrid residential buildings where traditional elements of arches, domes, courtyards, calligraphy and abstract decorative elements, are tastelessly and awkwardly grafted onto modern residential buildings. To an insightful observer, such buildings appear strange and even comical, lacking a true identity, substance and originality.

Similarly, Muslims should reject the invading Western-oriented residential architectural and planning legacy that completely ignores the Islamic spirit, and in the name of the rush for industrial development, which is grounded in some alien-to-Islam belief and value systems, undermines the rich traditional culture of Muslim peoples. This leads to a haphazard and unreserved importation of Western modern housing systems and styles which, too, in the midst of Muslim lands, cultures and peoples, appear bizarre and incompatible, lacking a true identity, substance and originality. Just as blindly imitating the Muslim past, blindly imitating the Western culture and civilization is, likewise-and even more-found objectionable. To the future of Islamic civilization, such is regarded as very damaging, futile and unproductive.

Muslims need to understand the essence of Islam and Islamic residential architecture and planning, and then allow modern building technology and engineering to be a tool in the expression of this essence. Muslims should take advantage of opportunities that new materials and mass production techniques today offer. They have an opportunity to explore and transform the possibilities of the machine age for the enrichment of Islamic housing in the same way that craftsmen explored the nature of geometrical and arabesque patterns in the past. The forms that would evolve from this approach would have a regional identity, a stylistic evolution and a relevance to the eternal principles and values of Is-



lam.<sup>13</sup> A modern Islamic housing should be an ingenious mixture of the worldview and values of Islam, of a quest for excellence and originality, and of the technical resources, inventions and services presented by rapid advances in modern building technology and engineering.

While evolving a modern Islamic housing, Muslims are to look back at their, as well as at other people's, history in order to learn from it for the benefit of their present and future condition, not to blindly imitate it. Their Islamic identity and the identity of their culture and civilization are not to be compromised under any circumstances. Moreover, Muslims, by and large, are to look at the robust Western civilization as a civilization of others, not theirs, and which ought to peacefully co-exist, and on an equal footing, with their own Islamic cultural and civilizational consciousness and programs. While the processes of taking from, and giving to, the Western civilizational legacy have become a necessity nowadays, especially due to the globalization phenomenon and the residues of colonization, Muslims should never end up glorifying and blindly following such civilization. It is incumbent upon every Muslim, male and female, to contribute his/her share towards reviving the glory of Islamic civilization. All their personal life goals and aspirations are to be geared, one way or another, towards the realization of this grand objective.

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<sup>13</sup> *The Future of Islamic Architecture*,

<http://www.islamicart.com/main/architecture/future.html>



(Terrace houses are very popular in Malaysia. Some terrace houses in Kuala Lumpur)



(A house in the village of Orahovica, near the city of Zenica, Bosnia and Herzegovina)

### **Conclusion**

In Islam, the house is a place to rest, relax the body and mind, and enjoy legitimate worldly delights. Within the realm of their houses, Muslims also worship, teach, learn and propagate the message of Islam. Central to the standards by which a house may be categorized as “Islamic” are the holiness and purity of its philosophy, vision, function and utility, accompanied by convenience, efficiency, safety, awareness of the physical surroundings, and anything else that Islam reckons as indispensable

for living a decent and accountable family life. The sheer physical and artistic appearance is therefore inferior and matters only when it comes into complete conformity with the above mentioned criteria. Muslim architects, planners, structural engineers and final users alike, should perceive the house phenomenon as a sheer means, an instrument and a carrier of the spiritual, not a goal itself. Islamic housing is a blend of the belief system, teachings and values of Islam, on the one hand, and the prerequisites and influences of indigenous cultures, climates, topographies, building materials, talents, technologies and economies, on the other. The house institution occupies an extraordinary place in Islam. It is a family development centre. It is a microcosm of Islamic culture and civilization. Islamic housing is a mixture of the heavenly and terrestrial factors and elements. Both sides are extremely important, playing their respective roles. They finely complement and add to each other's strength and operation. Neglecting either of the two poles in Islamic housing inevitably leads to a serious damage in its fundamental nature, at a conceptual or a practical plane. Creating, or Islamizing and reviving, Islamic housing today is anything but a simple task. Some of the most crucial requirements for that arduous mission will be: an excellent Islamic built environment, as well as general educational paradigms; upholding the ideals of *tawhīd* (Allah's Oneness) and the rest of Islamic teachings and values; the institution and implementation of comprehensive and sound housing policies at all levels; steering clear of major transgressions associated with housing; encouraging an endless and total creativity in the spirit of the Islamic concept of *ijtihād*, i.e., unreserved following in religion, coupled with unreserved inventing in sheer worldly matters. These requirements are to be duly taken up by all the protagonists in the field of Islamic housing: professionals, patrons, policy makers and users (people), according to their respective capacities and jurisdictions. In other words, every member of society will have to play a role, due to the universal roles and appeal of housing. Truly, Islamic housing is a microcosm of life. It is a microcosm of Islam and its vibrant culture and civilization.