

Multi-dimensional Urban design approach for public space provision within modern residential areas in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia

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Abstract

The decline of public realms within modern residential areas in Jeddah (MRAJ) raises conceptual and practical issues about the responsiveness of modern spatial planning and design practices to local context. Moreover, it raises the question of the effectiveness of the public sector in managing public space provision. This article draws on an exploratory study undertaken in public spaces within three residential areas. Our main purpose is to understand how the current state of these spaces came about, with the further aim of developing a multi-dimensional intellectual approach which may ultimately inform urban design principles for any future provision of this amenity.

Keywords: Urban design; urban management; Residential areas; Public space provision; Saudi Arabia

1. Introduction

Since 1953 in Jeddah, a city enjoying the first of several economic booms after World War Two and the beginning of commercial oil production in the country, a diverse array of plans and strategies has been engendered. These have all aimed to regulate city growth and to protect public spaces in the city (**Figure 1**). This accelerated development process necessitates the incorporation of modern urban planning and design concepts to meet a growing demand for new residential areas and public services. Consequently, many land subdivisions involving speculation occurred over a short period of time and pushed outward into the peripheral areas of the city. These spatial planning and management practices have led to fragmentation in the layout of modern residential areas and the deterioration of public spaces within them. This spatial fragmentation, together with a highly mobile and heterogeneous population, has deprived inhabitants of the level of socialisation that had been associated with traditional communities and has caused a breakdown in one of the mechanisms of crime prevention (i.e. natural surveillance combined with self-policing). Such practices have increased residents' perceptions of vulnerability to criminal and sub-criminal activities, as well as to actual levels of anti-social behaviour. In addition, residents are exposed to higher levels of risk from traffic, noise, and other urban hazards. Consequently, individuals (or at least those within certain sectors of society) have withdrawn from public life, and life in general has become more insular, inward-looking and home based.

Our problem is that the practice of public space provision within the MRAJ does not correspond well to its users and context.¹ These spaces have not only reduced socialisation for inhabitants, but have also become a public burden and a continuous drain on urban life. The main purpose of this study is to gain insight into the everyday life experiences that govern the present situation of these spaces, with the aim of developing an analytical model that will, in the end, shape urban design principles for the future provision of this amenity. At the outset, this study recognizes that there are numerous definitions, interpretations, and dimensions of public space which are unaddressed by the contemporary practice of public space provision. In the light of this, our study raises two main questions: how can we establish an analytical framework that might effectively contribute to the creation of successful public spaces? And to what extent are the contemporary public spaces within the MRAJ appropriate to their users and the local context? To address these questions, this study has adapted a multidimensional model of urban design which investigates the 'dynamic multiplicity' of public space from the perspective of providers, regulators and users (Madanipour et al. 2001; 2006).

To obtain the information necessary for this model, field work took place during the period from 18 June to 10 September 2006 and the period from 25 December 2006 to 16 January 2007. During these periods, the decision was taken to investigate a small number of public spaces located in selected neighbourhoods and to

¹ This study adapts the term 'public space' to refer to residential urban spaces that have the element of collective public life, whether the spaces be designated as domestic, such as local streets, pavements, pedestrian routes, linear commercial spaces and children's play areas, or as civic public open spaces such as neighbourhood playgrounds and parks.

utilize mixed methods to acquire statistical, quantitative results from a sample consisting of 390 participants. Moreover, we carried out in-depth interviews with over thirty individuals who represent different actors related to public space provision. These included local authority officials, city planners, architects, developers, knowledgeable sources, and influential people in Jeddah, in order to explore those results in more depth.

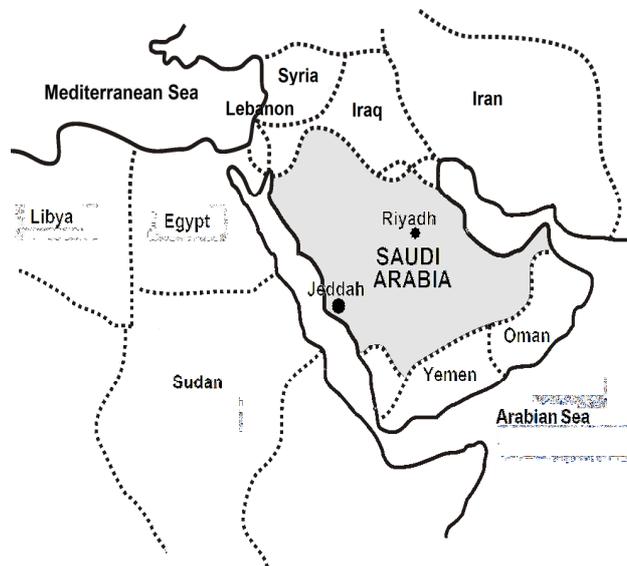


Figure 1: Geographical setting of Jeddah

2. The decline of public realm

Recent research on the current changes in the role of public spaces and their consequences has indicated that there is a shared sense of dissatisfaction about the state of modern urban areas, particularly with the quality of public spaces within contemporary residential environments. In explaining the reasons behind this dissatisfaction, some researchers (e.g. Lynch 1960; Jacobs 1961; Alexander 1966; Lefebvre 1974; Friedmann 1998; Hall 2002) linked the problem of these spaces to macro-spatial planning practices and methods of regulating larger-scale urban developments which failed to provide desirable social environments. Others (e.g. Sitt 1945; Whyte 1958; Cullen 1971; Newman 1972; Appleyard 1981; Gehl 1987; Lang 1996) highlighted the deficiencies in micro-spatial planning, design, and architectural detail, and explained how these morphological attributes affect the quality of public life. Others (e.g. Banerjee and Loukaitou-Sideris 1992; Carr et al. 1992; Rakodi 2001; Madanipour 2006; Punter 2007; Carmona et al. 2008) indicated that the problem of public spaces is not only related to the way in which the urban environment is planned or designed. The absence of appropriate public space management must, they argue, be considered as a key reason for an experience of decline within these spaces.

From the socio-cultural-psychological-institutional point of views, some writers (e.g. Habermas 1962; Lefebvre 1971; Harvey 1973; Relph 1976; Canter 1977; Castells 1977; Rapoport 1977; Sennett 1977; Lang 1996) argued that the decline of the public realm was not only affected by the imposition of modern city planning, but was also influenced by a product of non-spatial forces such as modes of human experience, changes in the political economy, social ecology, lifestyle, fear of exposure to strangers, and the complexity of urban life in general. Overall, the literature in relation to the decline of the public realm reveals multiple opinions among critics; different writers from different perspectives maintain their own conception of public space and advance specific frameworks to address this issue. Theoretically, then, as Madanipour (2006) puts it, for urban designers to play a more influential role in enhancing the public realm within modern residential areas, a scrutiny of the objective spatial qualities and the socio-cultural experience combined with a critical interpretation of space-society relationships is urgently needed for understanding the 'dynamic multiplicity' of the nature of public spaces. The emerging public spaces within contemporary residential areas, with all their social, institutional, and spatial dilemmas and contradictions are the context of this research (**Figure 2**).

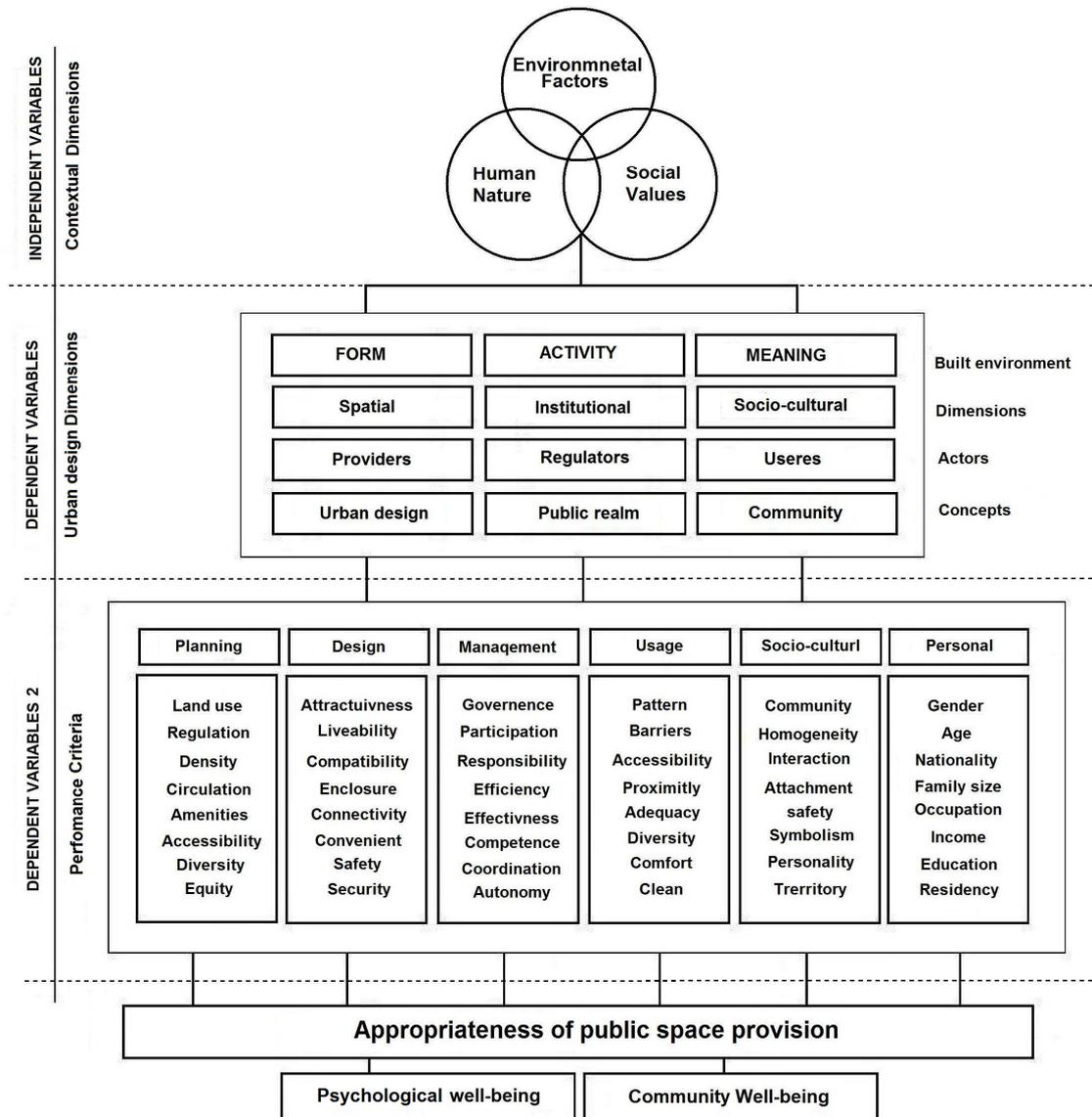


Fig 2: The research conceptual framework: a multi-dimensional urban design model

3. Findings- discussion

Based on the data provided by respondents in the three case studies, it can be concluded that most people in the residential areas that were selected as case studies have suffered from increased geographical distance, with a decreased frequency of socialization and communal activity. The visual survey showed some curious differences in public space provision between the different residential areas. Spatial characteristic, building density, social factors and the quality of maintenance may account for these differences. Neighbourhoods with medium density such as al-Salamah (129 persons per hectare) were more likely than those with high density such as al-Sharafeyah (more than 200 persons per hectare) to possess a number of features that support residents' activities in outdoor areas.

This can be attributed to the proximity of public spaces to residential clusters and to the moderated and socially mixed nature of the neighbourhood (Figure 3). It can also be attributed to the fact that high density areas have a problem with a lack of public spaces such as local parks or children's playgrounds. The streets, which are dominated by traffic, are the only areas which can be considered public spaces. Additionally, the parks and play areas which are provided within the cluster of high-rise housing in al-Sharafeyah suffer from the problem of extraordinary overcrowding and have also experienced high crime rates and anti-social behaviour (Figure 4). In contrast, neighbourhoods with low density areas such as al-Shate'e district (18 person / hectare) suffer from the presence of some empty open spaces.

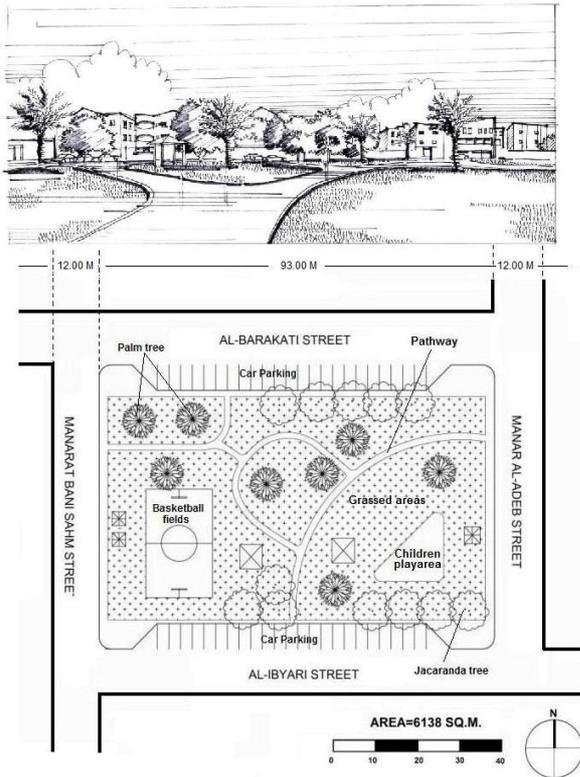


Fig 3: The basketball Park in al-Salamah district provides an example of urban parks within medium residential area.



Fig 4: The apartment tower park in al-Sharafeyah provides an example of urban parks within high density residential areas.

In terms of public space management, the findings indicated that some of these spaces are negatively influenced by severe financial difficulties which the public authorities have experienced in the provision of public services since the onset of the decline of the welfare state and the rationalization of public investments. The lack of maintenance and public investment for public spaces within the residential areas results in fewer users and makes them repel rather than attract people (**Figure 5**). The stark reality of the situation was exacerbated by an irresponsible attitude on the part of residents towards the disposal of domestic waste and other uncivilized activities such as littering and vandalism, together with the illegal use of public places (**Figure 6**).



Fig 5: Jeddah, Neglected public spaces within al-Sharafeyah and al-Salamah districts.



Fig 6: Jeddah, some citizens dispose debris beside the bins.

The result also shows that the role of local communities in constructing and maintaining processes of public spaces within their residential areas is minimal. This is because municipality professionals and their contractors usually determine the outcome by deciding what should be provided, where and when. We have also seen some differences between public spaces in individual case studies. Whereas the majority of public spaces lost their significance as places in which people could gather, socialize and entertain, in some residential areas, such as al-Shate'e district, these spaces gave heart to the community and helped to increase cohesion among its inhabitants (**Figure 7 and 8**). In this respect, our findings allow us to argue that the quality of public spaces within modern residential areas can be effectively enhanced by people participation in the maintenance and management of these spaces.

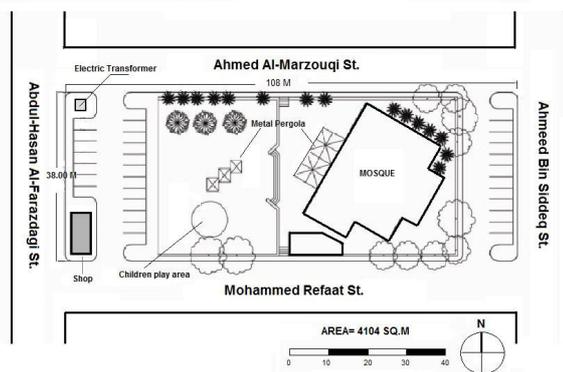
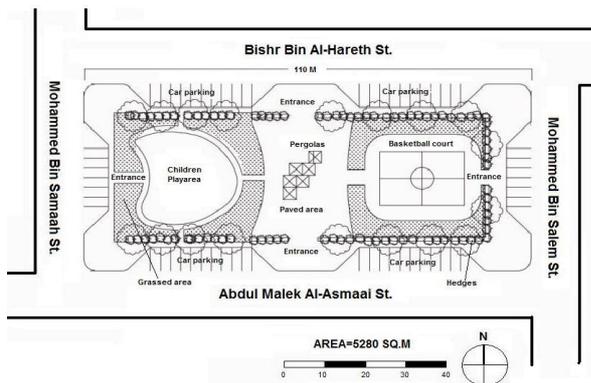


Fig 7: Jeddah, a public space in al-Shate'e developed by the residents in a way that responds to their expectation and reflects their status.

Fig 8: Jeddah, a plaza in al-Shate'e (low density), most of the residents interviewed perceive it as impersonal, ugly and too formal.

4. Conclusion: the need for a multi-dimensional urban design approach

The problems of contemporary public space provision in Jeddah raise important questions about the role of local and central authorities, as well as other stakeholders in addressing these issues. In practice, it is unrealistic to attempt to sustain an effective administrative system and urban design and planning schemes if they do not take full account of the prevailing social values, institutional frameworks, and resource constraints within a broader system of urban development management. Therefore, in order to deliver more satisfactory amenities and contribute to the enhancement of the public realm, we need to establish a holistic conceptual framework which integrates theoretical and operational perspectives. This integration can be achieved by using a multi-dimensional urban design model, investigating how these spaces are produced, constructed, renovated, and maintained spatially, institutionally, psychologically, and socially. A clear understanding of the local context, of what services the community requires, and why they are to be provided would not only contribute to the enhancement of public life but may also address other social concerns such as antisocial behaviour and vandalism. As hypothesized in the literature (e.g. Madanipour 2006; Punter 2007; Carmona et al. 2008), the providers and regulators of public spaces within this context need to understand firstly, the present situation of these spaces and secondly, the relative dimensions that might affect the practice of public space provision.

5. References

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