Gated Communities as a Contemporary Expression of Islamic Architecture: Exploring the intersection of Faith, Identity, and Urban Design

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Abstracts: This study analyses the proliferation of closed residential complexes, a popular urban trend observed across many countries. These communities offer a range of housing options and amenities, all secured by fences, gates, and ongoing surveillance. Residents enjoy exclusive services and recreational activities that foster a sense of safety and privacy. Access to these communities is tightly controlled through rigorous security measures. The ongoing debate around economic inequality has spurred discussions for and against these gated developments. Yet, they persist and attract diverse residents from various income levels and nationalities. Government incentives aimed at foreign investment have also contributed to their expansion. This study suggests that the concept of enclosed residential communities in the Middle East has historical roots in Islamic cities, highlighting how past influences have shaped contemporary urban development.

Keywords: Closed Complexes, Gated Communities, Islamic Cities, Urban Trend, Socioeconomic Disparities.

1. INTRODUCTION

The idea of closed complexes, referred to as gated communities in the Middle East, is an old Islamic notion since the establishment of the first Urban Islamic settlement, Basra, then extended to the foundations of Islamic cities and suburbs in ancient cities. This notion was derived from the organic pattern of Islamic cities with narrow, closed streets and private roads, which prevented Anonymous from entering these streets. In addition, cities had gates closed during the night, when epidemics spread, or even during civil wars or external invasions. Some of these streets and gates still stand and can be seen in Cairo, Damascus, and other cities. These gated streets provide safety and privacy for their residents; nonetheless, they do not segregate people based on their financial or social status. On the contrary, they share common city facilities such as markets, mosques, churches, etc.

The use of the term (gated community) is an inaccurate expression. The correct term to be used is closed or gated architecture, as it expresses a group of buildings surrounded by a fence or a wall with one or multiple gates to give residents some privacy and isolation from noise and external movement. In contrast, the first expression implies that a gated community is an intellectually closed society from the rest of the city. Nevertheless, closed architecture is intellectually open to the community yet socially and physically interconnected through streets and closed alleyways, which provide security and privacy. Gates were provided to limit or prevent anonymous and outsiders from entering internal streets and alleyways.

Closed Architecture can be a small group of buildings or a residential area with numerous buildings, amenities, streets, and recreational facilities. This phenomenon has become a distinctive feature of housing projects in the modern city. The main reason for this phenomenon might be the increase in the city's population and the synthesis of ethnic, religious, social and cultural groups, which made it challenging to attain comfort and privacy among residents, especially in crowded residential settings. In addition to fear of intruders, thieves, or other insecurities such as accidents, crime, or danger.

Gated architecture has become one of the temptations for housing projects and companies specialising in developing residential offerings since it provides a quality lifestyle, security, and a variety of amenities, in addition to sufficient maintenance levels at a relatively reasonable cost. Furthermore, other developers market their projects by offering permanent residencies, citizenship, or other benefits such as medical insurance, free study, and other temptations. This phenomenon has provided multiple choices offered by private developers and investors, making them compete in providing numerous options and features for buyers to attract local and international investors.

2. Planning History of Islamic Cities

To understand the history of gated Architecture, it is essential to shed light on the history of Arabian cities and their urban planning form. Historically, Arab cities were profoundly impacted by the religious life and social institutions spread out in the city. The spread of religious nods within the city was always associated with markets and retail outlets on the one hand and with open defined spaces for prayers on the other hand. These nods were embedded in the city's urban fabric and defined the architectural form of Islamic cities. It is crucial to comprehend the sacredness of these places as they have imposed their powers and defined the city connecting points, and also have – indirectly – organised people's movement and interactions. The effect of sacredness has protracted over to houses and residential areas, as houses were either surrounded by walls or were built in-ward, i.e., internal courtyards and open spaces where rooms were viewed internally towards the open space, providing daylight and privacy. Figures (1&2) are typical houses spread out in the Islamic cities.
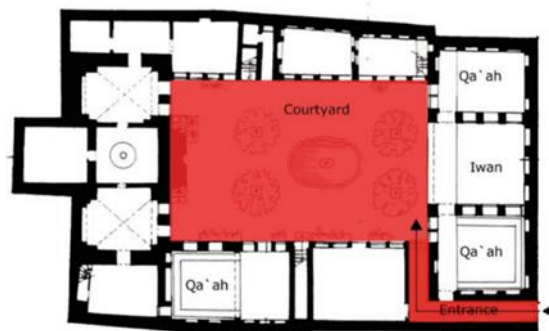

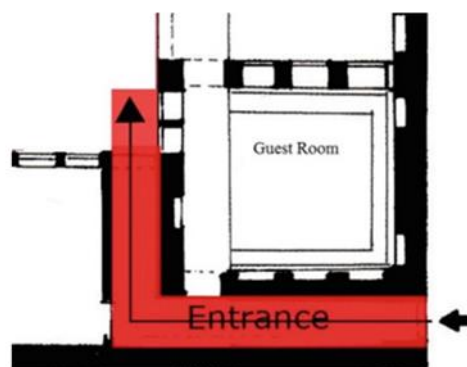**Figure 1.** *Typical courtyard house design. Amro and Bahauddin (2015)*

Figure 2. Typical Guestroom design. Amro and Bahauddin (2015)

This form of houses and residential districts has embedded sacredness and complete privacy, which was empowered by religion and the religious nods which organised the everyday lifestyle of people and inhabitants. Houses were protected from the main roads and outsiders by walls; then, a clear hierarchy formation was created to segregate visitors from private rooms when entering the house visually. The concept of privacy and hierarchy prevailed in the Arab cities where both concepts bounced on each other. In other words, roads connecting the city are narrowed down to alleyways and sometimes to dead-end routes, leading to private houses. The hierarchy of

roads and streets has imposed a gradual filtration system, which has controlled the movement of anonymous pedestrians around private houses and residential dwellings.

People were allowed to move freely within the main streets and roads that led to the city's main nods or markets; however, movement to private houses would be through narrow alleys, which led to specific homes. This implies the control of the surrounding houses' owners on the alleyway rather than the control of governmental agencies, as shown in Figures (3 & 4).

Figure 3. Typical courtyard cluster with a dead-end alleyway. Bianca (2000)

Figure 4. Aerial photograph of Baghdad, Iraq. Taken between 1920-1934. (Granger Historical Picture Archive)

The idea of separation and privacy prevailed in a way that has controlled the urban planning and urban fabric of cities; nonetheless, robust connectivity and interaction between residents and neighbours was identified in the planning of Islamic cities through a fully integrated network of roads and streets which interconnected neighbourhoods together from one side, and between people and public and social activities (such as mosques and markets) from the other side. This robust relationship between residential dwellings and the mosque in a neighbourhood has formed the city fabric and the movement of people. Al Hemaidi (2001) has argued that such clusters and neighbourhoods were still seen in the city of Riyadh in the year 1985, as shown in Figure (5).
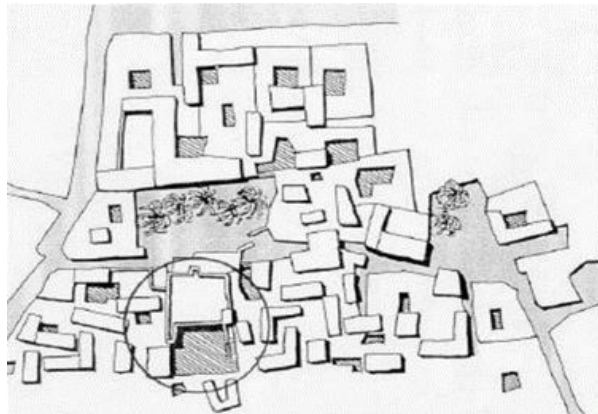

Figure 5. Typical neighbourhood in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia 1985. Al Hemaidi (2001)

From the above description of the power of privacy and separation, this concept was reflected in the Islamic neighbourhoods in the Arabic cities; in other words, the separation between private and public spaces was noticeable while this separation has defined city planning based on function, zones and population. Each zone (private or public) was controlled by the people occupying that area; this has led to social collaboration and integration between the society serving the same principles, empowering the neighbourhoods. As indexed by Abu Lughod (1987), residential areas were empowered by their inhabitants regarding security and safety. Each residential neighbourhood was led or supervised by one big family and was surrounded by other families from different levels and standards, which has implicated vivacious homogeneity and coherence within the society and has created a self-defence sequence where males and young boys were the guardians of that neighbourhood. The coherence, state of hierarchy, and self-defence have empowered Islamic neighbourhoods with independence and liberation. During any state of threat, external intrusion, wars, or diseases, neighbourhoods had the power to control such inference by closing the gates and deploying men and boys as the protectors of the neighbourhood. This process has defined the Arabian city's neighbourhoods and patterns and has implied a notable urban planning principle without the need to deploy plans and regulations.

Traces of walls were found in most old Arabian cities, and these walls were part of the master plan features enforced by privacy and hierarchy, as explained above. Cities were divided by narrow alleyways, and houses were surrounded by walls, creating gated interconnected neighbourhoods through streets and alleyways connecting people to the city's main nods. Bianca (2000) explained that the Islamic city was represented by an unrestrained number of nods connecting multi-focal roads and not a typical grid of streets and plazas, as shown in Figure (6).

Figure 6. Typical Arabian city planning. Amro and Bahauddin (2015)

On the other hand, the Islamic city implies the concept of gated Architecture as it confirms the primary design principles of gated communities: Privacy, Safety, and security. The formation of the Islamic city was based on the form-follow function, which means the city was based on the functions of prayers. Markets were built around mosques and separated by plazas and open prayer areas. These were considered the public areas defining everyday function and community interaction. These public areas were connected with the residential (private) zones with streets that led to alleyways to effectuate the filtration of anonymous people heading to private residential neighbourhoods, which performed as an open/ closed gated community with its gates and self-defence system. Figure (7) reflects a city in Saudi Arabia in the 1980s where traces of walls and fences dominate a neighbourhood.

Figure 7. *Old neighbourhood in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia 1985. (Al Hemaidi 2001)*

3. THE DEVELOPMENT OF GATED ARCHITECTURE

The idea of closed or gated Architecture appeared at the beginning of the twentieth century as an alternative to closed cities, surrounded by high and impenetrable walls to defend residents from external invasion. And this was the case in many cities where walls still exist, or part of the fence or wall is still standing, such as the city of Istanbul, which was a role model for defensive cities. However, these defensive cities have faded with modern military technology, where fences or fortifications can't stand against them, and the need for some immunisation against thieves, intruders, and heavy and noisy traffic became imperative. The idea of closed housing or even closed suburbs has a long history in Islamic architecture, where it was intended to isolate tribes or groups that have different habits and affiliations and to give some privacy to groups that have common affiliations and habits, enhance interaction between the populations and reduce friction between different population groups. These groups were in the form of tribes known in the Arabic world, whereas Tribal affiliation is still evident, even in contemporary cities.

The first example of these cities with their different tribes is the city of Basra, which was built during the reign of Caliph Omar bin Al-Khattab in the 15th year of Hijrah (660AD). The city was divided into sections, where a particular tribe inhabited each suburb, and the inhabitants of this city converged either in the common market, the great mosque that mediates the city, or the communal garden. Each suburb had its streets and alleyways that were on three levels: the public street, 40 meters wide for general pedestrians and traffic; then the 20 meters wide street encroaching through the neighbourhood or suburb; and finally, the private and closed streets of the residents of that neighbourhood of 6 meters wide which can be closed at night or prevented traffic even during the day for the general population of the city. The organisation of streets at these levels is the general character in various Islamic cities, such as Baghdad, Samarra, Fustat and other ancient cities that still sustain some planning patterns until now.

Furthermore, commercial streets were categorised as a specialty to avoid conflicts where they were closed or guarded during the night. In addition, merchants' and manufacturers' houses were situated on the second floor of their shops as part of the city planning. And this was the case in Khan Al-Khalili market in Cairo and Al-Hamidiyeh market in Damascus Figure (8). Hence, this can still be seen in several markets of Aleppo and other Arab cities today.
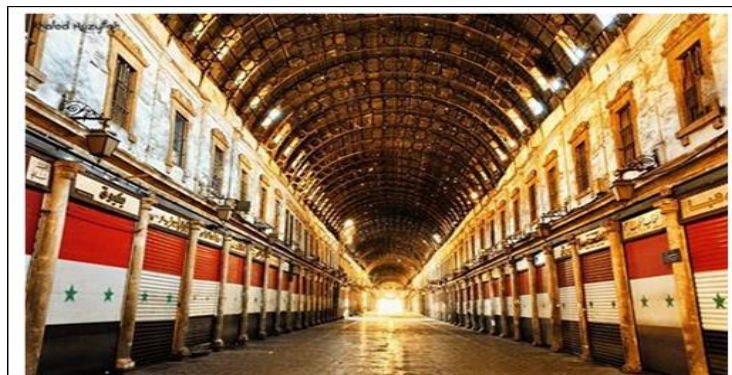

Figure (8) Hamidiyeh market in Damascus

4. TYPE OF GATED ARCHITECTURE

The closed complexes in the United States have been classified into three categories based on an extensive study of these complexes, which included several millions of residences in different regions: lifestyle, prestige, and security zone communities reflected in several types:

The first type might be in the form of a group of villas, small villages, or resorts, which includes retirees and people with common tendencies, where they participate and share the benefit of common facilities such as playgrounds, pools, and gardens. The second type is distinguished by its appearance and reflects prestige, luxury, privacy, and monitoring. This type is intended for the wealthy and influential social group, preventing entry to other people. The third type is intended for middle-class residents to obtain privacy and safety within the city. This type consists of a group of buildings inside the city that is walled and monitored and has common services such as gardens and swimming pools. The fourth type of gated architecture, which is the closed streets on one side, is a simplified type of these suburbs that gives some privacy to the residents and prevents the random passage of pedestrians and cars. Access is intended only for the residents living in these areas. Residents may block the streets with temporary barriers to achieve these benefits. A fifth type of gated architecture is related to the garden city and appeared in the early 1900s as they reflected closed suburbs, which was one of the theories of contemporary planning. The city was regarded as a group of these suburbs, each containing the basic needs of schools and markets. A group of residents inhabited them with a specific number, not surrounded by walls or barriers, and most users are suburban residents.

This has provided residents with an effective way of socialising while providing some privacy. This theory has spread in different cities, such as London and Cairo. Consequently, notable suburbs with different classes of society, such as professionals, engineers, and doctors, appeared in Arab cities and other cities. New suburban cities in the U.S. are often significant developments mainly planned as hundreds of thousands of units with commercial, retail, institutional, and even industrial facilities. Entire gated architecture projects appeared in several states, such as Valley-Nevada, and are expected to add 60,000 residents by 2005. These places represented security and independence in the areas where the population was searching for safety from crime, drugs, and traffic.

From the reviewers' point of view of the literature and published papers, the most critical factors that have distinguished these groups are Jobs, features, security barriers, amenities, various facilities, type of population, location, suburb size, and state policy. In addition, some countries started to prevent such gated architecture as they contradict their traditional legacy, as in China. It is believed that gated buildings segregate the community based on social classes, especially the affluent individuals, from interaction with other segments of society. Lin (2019) suggested developing a new prototype that encourages physical interaction within an integrated urban fabric consistent with traditional Chinese city planning.

5 CLOSED ROADS IN ISLAMIC CITIES

The preconception of privacy in any Islamic city has the ultimate precedence for individuals and residences; thus, the highest authorities may not violate this privacy. Legislations were extracted from Islamic law to maintain this privacy and have been reflected in the designs of residential neighbourhoods and streets. Such privacy restrictions did not limit closed grouping from social interactions and gatherings. Figure 9 reflects two closed neighbourhoods in old Cairo.
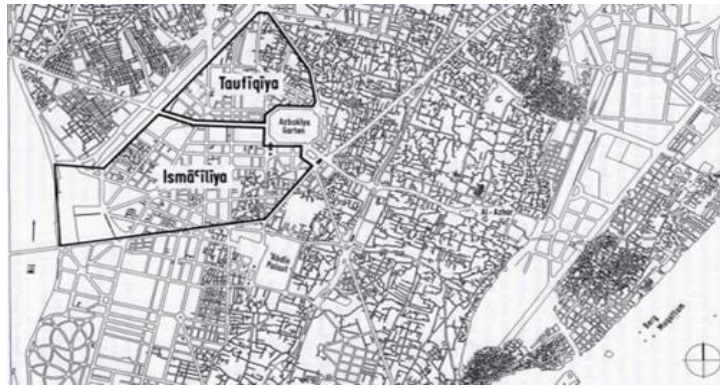
Figure (9) Plan of Old Cairo

The closed street model is a combination of multiple dwellings that only homeowners have the right to enter, in addition to their rights to prevent any intruders, including the authorities and state, from entering, as owners have the right to protect and control these streets Figures (10 & 11) Without any gates, strangers in these streets will recognise and feel they don't belong to this area and will be treated as outsiders or "a man who has lost his way". This expression was expressed by one of the Orientalists: "That is why it is not reasonable for someone during the day to go to these neighbourhoods in search of a man in his residence, and it is uncommon in eastern countries for someone to go to visit a wife or a daughter of a friend in his home. Therefore, if a foreign man or a stranger from this place enters, the one who meets him imagines that he has lost his way".

Figure (10) Old Cairo market

Figure (11) Market views

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Gates were built on private streets and closed entries from one side, as the gates would be closed at night after evening prayers and during the day in the event of wars and unrest, as happened in Cairo in 923 and during outbreaks of epidemics and diseases. It was prohibited to enter the city for whatever reason. Gates and entries to these streets symbolised warning signs for foreign intruders regarding the boundaries of these neighbourhoods, and this control provided residents with safe feelings.

Gates were heavily constructed with iron and laminated with one or two layers, nailed with iron nails, then bolts placed inside the thick wooden plot carved into the wall to prevent the opening of the gates to improve durability. When there is a gate defect, the street residents rush to rectify it, or one of the residents donates the repair cost after obtaining the judge's approval. Such incidents were documented by the Supreme Court and in the records of these courts. On certain occasions, guards were used to protect these gates and paid from the residences. These private streets closed entrances, and gates were a strong bulwark against the attacks of thieves and even external occupation, as happened during the French occupation in Cairo, where gates were destroyed and the streets opened by force. These private streets and closed roads were among the most important reasons for preserving the population's lives in the civil war in Lebanon in 1976, as confirmed by some specialised research in urban design.

6. Special Laws and Regulations

Islamic laws and legislation have preserved the privacy of these streets, defined their laws at different levels, organised the relationship between members of the groups that inhabited these streets, and defined the relationship between them and the city's authorities. These laws have appeared since the beginning of Islam, and there are various books and articles about them. This legislation has exposed even the most minor details in the mutual relationship between adjacent buildings, the relationship of these buildings with the streets, the rights of passers-by, and the privacy of residential neighbourhoods. There was a team of Mohtaseb (who monitor roads and markets) and a group of specialised engineers whose role was to provide technical reports to the courts and judges to decide on violations committed by residents, whether infringing on the urban organisation or different roads. Examples of those engineers include Ibn Rami, a construction expert whose role was field visits and reporting to the courts. He wrote a book on building laws and regulations that deals with various provisions of organisation and construction relationship between adjacent buildings, and the provisions of streets and the rights of homeowners.

CONCLUSION

In summary, closed communities have gained popularity in contemporary architecture. This design concept entails the creation of enclosed areas that only property owners can access. The primary objective is to safeguard residents' privacy and protect them from external threats, including intrusion and theft, which aligns with the fundamental principles of Islamic architecture. This principle of closed architecture finds its historical roots in the earliest Islamic cities, notably exemplified in Basra and Kufa during the first century of the Islamic calendar. Cities and residential areas have integrated and modified specific traits throughout Islamic lands. Currently, locations like Jerusalem, Cairo, and Damascus still possess traces of these characteristics. These regions are recognised for their narrow streets and passages that are solely accessible to inhabitants. Gates reinforce these areas, and they are safeguarded during night hours and hazardous times, occasionally with the assistance of employed guards. Despite the influence of contemporary global architectural trends, these enclaves have succeeded in conserving their distinct features. Jerusalem boasts streets named after the original inhabitants, like the Jewish Quarter, the Armenian Quarter, and the Moroccan Quarter. These areas are safeguarded by regulations, laws, and directives rooted in Islamic jurisprudence. This includes well-documented building laws aimed at preserving privacy while upholding rights. To ensure adherence, a team of overseers and engineers is responsible for implementing these laws and rectifying any violations.

Upon examining historical records, it is evident that the regulations dictating the organisation of Arab and Islamic cities of the past remain pertinent and valid in contemporary times. The practice of segregating residential areas to ensure the inhabitants' personal safety, protection, and privacy remains a crucial and significant one.

List of Abbreviations

Not used

Declarations

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