Custodians of the Two Holy Mosques and More:

Saudi Arabia's Treatment of the Past in Relation to Urban Heritage and Concepts of Modernity

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Part 1: Urban Heritage, Wahhabism, and Modernity

Embedded in the idea of modernity is the image of the city skyline, with skyscrapers towering over bustling streets. One need only look to the buildings of Dubai or of Riyadh to note that the Middle East has not escaped the equation of urban development through Western architecture and design with modernization (Al-Rasheed and Vitalis 2004: 1). Urbanization and modernization have become inseparable in present conceptualizations; both terms include the idea of a definitive break from the pastoral, decidedly less progressive and developed past. This traditional/modern dialectic is reified in the reconstruction of cities in Saudi Arabia. If modernity is considered to be "an incomplete project" (Habermas 1998: 8), then certainly the destruction of specific sites, architectural styles, or urban plans in contrast to the sometimes apparently arbitrary preservation of others are the wrecking balls and building blocks of this project. To explain the aforementioned seemingly arbitrary nature in which expressions and valuations of modernity have developed, one must turn to the politics of identity and nationalism, two concepts intimately connected to religion in the Middle East. Saudi Arabia faces this dialectical clash of tradition and modernity in a unique way, being the Arab state that enjoys perhaps the best relationship with Western powers and benefits from the decidedly modern commodity of oil, yet also maintaining one of the strictest institutionalized forms of Islam in the world and a monarchical government. In some cases, the Saudis have adapted their modern beliefs to encompass their traditional past; in others, the past has been forced to adapt to Saudi modernism.

It has been argued that Islam is a religion of urbanity and that since its inception, Islam has had a settling effect on previously nomadic peoples as it necessitates cities

(Abu-Lughod 1987: 156). It is of note, however, that this idea seems to have been first purported by Western scholars who did preliminary surveys of Arab cities as they developed them during the colonial era (Abu-Lughod 1987: 156-160). The colonial legacy has been hard to erase from the urban landscape of many Middle Eastern nations. Even if a nation escaped direct imposition of Western-style buildings during the colonial era, most could not escape the indelible mark of Western aesthetic values left upon them. In the 1950s, as Iraq went about developing the city of Baghdad, it commissioned the help of an architect who embodied the progressive Western aesthetic, Frank Lloyd Wright (Bernhardsson 2008: 88). Saudi Arabia, however, never shared this same legacy of direct Western imperialism. The closest to a colony that Saudi Arabia has ever been was during the period that it was under Ottoman rule, and this is an era that the Saudis have actively chosen to erase from their cultural memory rather than emulate (Finn 2002).

The reason that the Arabian Peninsula has long avoided direct colonization is also the reason is has long resisted urban planning and development: until as recently as the 1950s, Saudi Arabia was a feudal and tribal society composed of nomadic clans and a generally rural sedentary population (Shuaibi 2001: 180). The unification of the peninsula under Ibn Saud following the capture of Riyadh in 1902 marks a historic point in the national imagination; it is only after this date that "Saudi" became a nationality and therefore it is from this point forward that a nation could be constructed.[1] The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) lacks any true universalizing past before this point, save for Islam. Islam was, however, almost too universalizing to allow for individual nations

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[1] See Al-Rasheed, 2004. The author relates a notable quote from a Western scholar on p. 196: *"During the centennial celebrations, all talk was of the 'liberation' of Riyadh by Ibn Saud. One was led to imagine that the British or the French had been there."*

after the fall of the Ottoman Empire (Samman 2007: 131). Mecca could not be a universal city in all respects, it needed to function as a symbol of Saudi nationalism, yet still draw pilgrims and ensure Arabia's place at the center of the greater religion. With this in mind, the Saudis adopted Wahhabism, their own particular form of Islam, to inform their nascent nationalism (Al-Fahad 2004: 36). The new state "exploited religious notions of purity that referenced early imagery and notions of Islam and redefined them to serve nationalist, rather than religious initiatives" (Samman 2001: 139).

Wahhabism infuses every aspect of Saudi government and daily life, including their attitude towards archaeology and cultural heritage. If the activities of construction, destruction, and preservation in Saudi Arabia are to be understood, the Wahhabi ideas about idolatry, veneration, and reification of Qur'anic principles must be considered. The movement identifies problems it finds with modern Islam, such as a perceived "excessive cult of Muhammad" and "the worship of saints and reverence for their shrines" (Hourani 1983: 37). It also situated itself in direct opposition to other forms of Islam, especially Shi'ism, which facilitated a stronger form of nationalism focused on the supremacy of Saudi Islam in comparison to other, lesser forms. Religion, though not often associated with modernity, gives individuals "clearly defined identities and existential security" (Habermas 1998: 7). Combined with the polarization of the "other", so successfully applied to identity formation in other places, the nationalist project on the peninsula was successful to such a degree that it caused a re-thinking of the past, both ancient and more recent.

The language used to describe the imposition of the rule of Ibn Saud and the integration of Wahhabism is inherently modernist in nature. The period before Ibn

Saud's capture of Riyadh is often identified as "the second *jahiliyyah"²*, or age of ignorance, and the time during and following Ibn Saud's rule is known as the *nahda*, meaning renaissance or awakening (Al-Rasheed 2004: 184). Jürgen Habermas' article (1998) on modernity shows that modernity is inextricably linked to ideas of renaissance and enlightenment. By this definition, Wahhabi/Saudi governance of the peninsula is both a nationalist and a modernist project, one that requires a definite break from both the pre-Saudi/pre-Wahhabi past as well as the pre-Islamic one. This tension between breakage and preservation plays out in how the Saudis view their heritage in relation to their major urban centers, such as Riyadh, Mecca, and Medina and how they relate to international society on issues of cultural heritage and archaeology.

Riyadh: Building a Modern Capital

In the 1950s, Riyadh was a provincial population center of 5,000 inhabitants, more of a desert oasis village than a city. Al-Dirriyah, a city about 15 kilometers northwest of Riyadh, had long been the capital of the Najd (central) region of Saudi Arabia and was the birthplace of Wahhabism. The city was rendered unlivable after multiple battles fought between the Saudis and the Ottomans, forcing the relocation of the capital to Riyadh in 1818 (UNESCO Report 2006). Riyadh had no real cultural or political significance to the state before the capture of Riyadh by Ibn Saud in 1902 (Al-Rasheed 2004: 183). At the time of its capture, the walled city lacked notable landmarks save for the main mosque and Qasr al-Masmak, the mudbrick fortress that the governor of the city lived in. As Riyadh expanded, the true questions for the Saudi government in terms of urban heritage was to what extent the traditional layout of the city should be

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² The first *jahiliyyah* is the time before the introduction of Islam and it ended in an awakening brought on by the Prophet Muhammad.

preserved, how the two large landmarks should be incorporated into the urban fabric, and what reference, if any, new architecture would have to the city's past. These questions arose at a time when modernism was sweeping the Middle East and cities across the region were struggling to fit their own cultural values, such as the strict separation of genders in public spaces, into Western-style city plans (Al-Sayyad 2008: 258). The rapid rate of population growth and the sudden influx of oil money, combined with nascent ideals of nationalism and the fashionable nature of Western modernism shattered the traditional urban fabric in the 1950s, producing a sort of "pseudo-modernism" (Al-Sayyad 2008: 258). In subsequent decades, the Saudis would attempt to rectify the damage they had done to traditional Riyadh, partially by restoring specific parts of it, preserving Al-Dirriyah, and attempting to remap the city according to the collective memory of locations rather than reviving the original structures and city layout (Shuaibi 2001: 184).

The Masmak fortress held particular significance to the Saudi creation of "civic myths" (Al-Rasheed b. 2001: 27). Built in 1865, it represented provincial control over the city and its capture by Ibn Saud marks the beginning of the period of unification in Saudi Arabia (ArchNet). According to the Saudi historical narrative, Ibn Saud and a group of his followers invaded Riyadh under cover of night and infiltrated Masmak, waiting for the governor to appear from his quarters at dawn, at which point they killed him and claimed sovereignty over the city (Al-Rasheed 2004: 184). After its capture, the fortress was used for munitions storage but because it figures so prominently into the national narrative, its restoration was seen as a crucial way to champion the power of the Saudi state and it was inaugurated as a museum detailing the building of the state in 1995 (ArchNet). It is interesting to note the level of Saudi veneration of this site,

encouraged by the royal family, when the same royal family discourages and actively destroys sites of religious veneration on the peninsula as a result of their Wahhabi beliefs. Many religious authorities in Saudi Arabia have brought up this issue of apparent hypocrisy, especially during the time of the centennial celebrations of the capture of Riyadh in 1999.[3] Some protested that the glorification of political figures or sites through things like the centennial celebrations were *bida'* (innovation), denoting that it is an activity anathema to pure Islam, or Wahhabism (Al-Rasheed 2004: 186). Yet the centennial celebrations went on as planned, and the Masmak fortress was transformed into the cultural center of historic Riyadh. In this case, nationalism subsumed strict religious doctrine, indicating that the political stability of the state and unification of the nation are of paramount importance in Saudi Arabia.

The Saudi relationship to the rest of the city of Riyadh is often characterized historically as being marked by embarrassment. The walls of the city were torn down in the 1950s, as it was assumed that no modern city needed to be protected by mudbrick walls from roaming bands of nomads, regardless of their historical significance (Clark 1999). At this time, most of the city was built of extremely fragile adobe and by consequence, most of the buildings had to be repaired immediately following every rainfall (Shuaibi 2001: 183). Old buildings were replaced with new ones built mostly of stone and concrete, and public housing projects and apartment buildings went up in place of traditional homes; public housing became epidemic in the Middle East between the 1950s and 1970s and destroyed many traditional neighborhoods across the region (Al-Sayyad 2008: 258). These buildings were entirely unsuited to the familial structures

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[3] The information about the capture of Riyadh comes from Madawi Al-Rasheed's chapter "The Capture of Riyadh Revisited", 2004, p. 183-198.

of the locality and many sources on the subject recount stories of families taking matters into their own hands and altering the public housing units to revert them back to being more traditional.

On top of these residential problems, the government also rerouted the entire city by cutting large boulevards where there had previously been no roads and cutting off traditional streets. The city grew with increasing oil revenue, but formalized Saudi city planning failed to keep pace, which created problems of traffic congestion and decentralization (Shuaibi 2001: 183). To remedy this, the government, somewhat ironically, brought in many Western architectural firms to redesign the city, much as had been done in Baghdad in the 1950s as discussed in the previously mentioned article by Magnus Bernhardsson. The plan for Riyadh was that ancient and traditional structures were not to be preserved, but the functions they had performed were meant to remain localized in the same area in which the buildings had previously stood. In this way, the government hoped to "restore the values and memories of its historic city" (Shuaibi 2001: 184).

Another manifestation of this idea of preserving national memory is the Saudi efforts to preserve and renovate Al-Dirriyah, the former capital.[4] It is a site easily accessible from Riyadh, making it conducive to internal tourism. Like the Masmak fortress, the site's virtue to the state lies in its place in the constructed historical narrative. For this reason, it has been proposed by the Saudi state to UNESCO for consideration as a World Heritage Site. After the redesigning of Riyadh, Al-Dirriyah became the only remaining example of original Nadji architecture, which the Saudis

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[4] All information and quotations in this paragraph come from the Saudi proposal of Al-Dirriyah to UNESCO, found on their website.

argue means it is the "blueprint model for Islamic cities", one of the only remaining places that showcases the traditional architecture that many modern cities are modeled after. In reality, the paradigmatic nature of the buildings and the layout of the city is contended, but due to its importance to the Saudi historical imagination, it is one of the only open archaeological sites in the peninsula.

This approach to cultural heritage is unique in the way that it in no way values sites themselves, but rather prioritizes the vague idea of "cultural memory" and its preservation. Gwendolyn Wright, in her article on the development of Riyadh, shows that the bringing of Western architects to the Gulf region resulted in architectural forms and ornamentation that was stereotypical, known as "cut-and-paste" design (Wright 2004: 234). That is to say, Western architects brought their own ideas of what was Islamic and what was Arabian and then applied these models to Saudi buildings, regardless of their grounding in historical fact. The result was a hybridization of architecture in Riyadh. It is a city where Western-style malls are billed as replacements for the typical *souqs*, or marketplaces. Prince Sultan ibn Salman ibn 'Abd al-'Aziz Al Sa'ud heads an informal group of architects in the kingdom and asserts, "tradition must be thought of as dynamic", though he acknowledges "the current generation in Saudi Arabia lacks a fixed point of reference for its own heritage" (Facey 1999). It is this lack of any uniformly accepted idea of history and tradition, caused by the great pace at which Riyadh and Saudi Arabia as a whole developed[5], that has allowed for the sometimes haphazard destruction of the urban fabric.

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[5] Wright notes that at one in the middle of the 1970s, the government was issuing an average of seventy building permits a day in Riyadh. (2004: 234).

Mecca and Medina: Heritage, Sanctity, and Destruction

Saudi Arabia is in a unique position to control modern Islam due to its sovereignty over Islam's two most holy cities, Makkah al-Mukarramh (Mecca) and al-Madinah al-Munawwarah (Medina). The titles of the king include "The Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques" and the ruling family, the House of Saud (*Dar al-Saud)* is known as the "Keeper of the Keys", referring to their access to the Ka'ba shrine in Mecca.[6] Mecca is the destination of the greater *hajj,* or pilgrimage, which all able-bodied Muslims must complete during their lifetime. This means that upwards of two million worshipers converge on Mecca simultaneously (Shuaibi 2001: 182). Medina, meaning "City of the Prophet" in Arabic, is a destination of *umrah,* or lesser pilgrimage, which, though not a requirement, thousands of Muslims complete every year. These two cities are the nexus of veneration in Islam, though as previously mentioned, veneration of physical things is a contentious issue in the Saudi kingdom. The actions of the Saudi government in Mecca find parallels across the kingdom and are a reflection of the same ideology that has caused similar destruction of Islamic sites in Medina.

Control of Mecca has long meant political power in the Hijaz[7], even before the life of the Prophet Muhammad. The Ka'bah, a cube-shaped building, has been a site of religious veneration for thousands of years, meaning that whomever ruled over Mecca reaped the economic benefits of pilgrims and associated religious trade. Islam strengthened the power of Mecca and now, the biggest structural concern for the city is how to accommodate the annual influx of nearly two million pilgrims while still

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[6] See the website for the Saudi Embassy in Washington D.C. for a brief history of Saudi kings. http://www.saudiembassy.net/.

[7] "Hijaz" or "Hejaz" is the name for the Western part of the peninsula. The region contains Jeddah (one of Saudi Arabia's largest cities), Mecca, and Medina and borders the Red Sea.

maintaining a functional city for its permanent inhabitants. However, the ideological issues surrounding the city have often overshadowed any of its physical concerns. Though the Saudis control Mecca in a political way, the significance of Mecca extends beyond the purely political. Historically, the Shi'ites of Saudi Arabia and Iran have raised the strongest objections to Saudi sovereignty over Mecca. The Saudis have fostered an intense rivalry with the Shi'ites and both have different views on how Mecca and the *hajj* are to be carried out in the present day (Samman 2007: 140). This conflict manifests itself in arguments over Saudi building plans in Mecca and their destruction of certain sites to make way for new buildings.

The most important structures in Mecca are the Ka'bah and the Holy Mosque that surrounds it. Mamluk, Abbasid, and Ottoman rulers have expanded the mosque yet at the time when the Saudis inherited it, it was grossly inadequate to accommodate the number of pilgrims visiting the shrine (Shuaibi 2001: 181). The first modern expansion in the late 1950s was meant to be sufficient for growing numbers of pilgrims over the next few centuries, yet it became apparent before it was completed that another expansion was necessary. A British firm was hired to oversee the final expansion, and again, as in Riyadh, "cut-and-paste" Gulf architecture was used so that now the Holy Mosque consists of arcades, minarets, and elaborate "Islamic" ornamentation, "none of which were familiar idioms in the peninsula" (Wright 2008: 232). The same British firm is also responsible for transforming Mecca into an automobile-friendly city, which Shi'ites and another non-Wahhabi Muslims have contended erodes the traditional simplicity of the *hajj* (Wright 2008: 232). Expansion of the mosque, by default, has necessitated a re-working of the city surrounding it. Saudi officials note that the

destruction of historic buildings around the mosque was the only way to allow for its expansion (Shuaibi 2001: 181).

The Saudi plan for the "de-historicalization" of Mecca stems from the Wahhabi belief that the building and decoration of graves or tombs is equivalent to the idolatrous worship of the dead.[8] It is estimated that 95% of the original buildings in Mecca have been razed under the rule of the House of Saud, leaving less than 20 original structures that date to the time of Muhammad (Musaji 2007). The cityscape looks nothing like it did 50 years ago, let alone like it did in 700 A.D., and the global Muslim population has often attempted to stop the destruction of Meccan sites in the name of universal cultural heritage. One needs only to turn to the internet to find hundreds of petitions written by desperate people all over the world, Muslims and non-Muslims alike, pleading the Saudi government not to destroy yet another ancient building. Of particular note is the Saudis destruction of the house of Khadija, the wife of Muhammad, in Mecca to make way for the construction of public lavatories and the demolition of the house of Abu Bakr, one of Muhammad's closest companions, in order to clear land for a Hilton hotel (Howden 2006).

These acts were internationally condemned, yet the Saudis show no sign of stopping. Skyscrapers now tower over the Holy Mosque, and the urban plan for Mecca has been compared to that of Dubai, the Gulf model for Western-style explosive urban growth. Mecca has historically been a hybridized city, with people travelling from all over the world to visit its shrine. In the words of Khaldoun Samman (2007: 5), Mecca

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[8] Brandeis University produced a detailed collection of papers on the origins of Islamic, and specifically Wahhabi, grave construction and visitation rules that enumerates the Saudi theological justification for destroying important Muslim graves. See "From Visiting Graves to Their Destruction", 2009.

has achieved symbolic status for "civilizational imagined communities", an application of Benedict Anderson's idea of the nationalist imagination to explain the transnational one. For millions of people, Mecca represents resistance to particular nationalisms and is a testament to the universalizing capacity of Islam. A city such as Mecca or Medina, which has great symbolism in its own right, cannot without controversy fall to the nationalist aspirations of a single state. The Saudis have attempted to impose their plan of modernization fueled by oil wealth upon the two cities in order to make them more "Saudi" and less universal. They have homogenized the cities, eliminating their historical hybrid particularities in order to incorporate them into their own national narrative, making them Saudi cities first and sacred cities second. This homogenization has carried over into the *hajj*, as the Saudis have regulated orthopraxy during the *hajj* according to their Wahhabi beliefs, sometimes going against generally accepted practice. As early as 1929, Egyptians were denied the ability to practice their particular *hajj* rites and 30 of them were killed in Mecca as a result (Howden 2006). Then in 1987, Iranian Shi'ites rioted in Mecca in protest of Saudi impositions on *hajj* rites and 400 were massacred (Samman 2007: 140). It seems in the case of Saudi Arabia that the blood of pilgrims and the ruins of sacred sites are not enough to halt the marches of modernism and nationalism.

Self-Exhibition: Conclusions about Saudi Urban Heritage and Modernity

The evolution of Saudi Arabian cities follows patterns of "modernization" seen elsewhere in the Middle East, though combined with politically mandated religious fanaticism, this modernization occurs at the cost of archaeological sites. The re-thinking of the peninsula's traditional cities such as Riyadh and Mecca by the Saud family reflects nationalist aspirations within a type of exhibitionary order, the urban exhibition. An

article by Timothy Mitchell enumerates the objectification of Middle Eastern culture by the West, a phenomenon that has occurred in Saudi Arabia, though it is promoted by both the Western architects called upon to redesign Saudi cities and the Saudis themselves. Mitchell gives the example of a Cairo street that was constructed in Paris for the "Exposition Universelle" in 1889 to illustrate the objectification of the Orient. He writes of how the Cairo street was the projection of the idea of Cairo that Parisians wanted to see rather than a direct reference to reality; it was "not merely of *an* Egyptian alley, but rather *the* typical Egyptian alley" (Colla 2007: 3). The Saudis have taken this same idea of exhibiting the typical aspects of a place and applied it to their own cities. They have followed Western blueprints of boulevards and skyscrapers to exhibit their modernism and used a strange mix of Islamic design[9] to exhibit their solidarity with the Muslim world, finding their own national architectural and urban vernacular somewhere in the meeting of these two concepts of modernity and religion. Religion, nationalism, and modernity are three powerful concepts that fully dictate Saudi Arabia's idea of tradition, and any site that falls outside of the realm of promoting these concepts finds itself in danger of being demolished or, at the very least, not preserved.

Tourism is almost non-existent in the peninsula, making it complicated to discern whom exactly the exhibit of the Saudi Arabian city is for, though it seems meant to impress both pride in their nation and respect for the powers of the government upon Saudi citizens. The majority of foreigners who do enter Saudi Arabia find themselves either on pilgrimage or looking for work, both urban-centered activities. The exhibition of Mecca, specifically, shows the millions of Muslim pilgrims from around the world the

[9] Gwendolyn Wright notes that elements of architecture from periods and places like Seville and Mughal India have been used in Saudi Arabia in their construction of an Islamic type (2008:236)

power of the Saudi state to both control their religious practices and transform even the most sacred of cities. In total, the three aforementioned concepts of religion, modernity, and nationalism are all utilized for the single goal of strengthening Saudi power and therefore it is these three concepts that are exhibited, through their unique city plans and treatment of tradition, in their most populous urban centers.

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