Chapter 2
Urban Structure in Islamic Territories

Abstract In this chapter of the historical part, part I identifies socio-spatial and cultural aspects of the historic towns. It considers historic towns as a collection of homogenous neighborhoods including structural and functional elements typical of Islamic towns inside and outside Iran. Integrated neighborhoods were bounded together by ties of climate, culture, custom and beliefs, and art. The comparative study in this chapter shows structural similarity between some African, Asian, and Iranian cities, but as shown in Chaps. 3 and 4, Iranian cities in the hot arid environment, because of clarity and character of desert life, demonstrate a legible structure.

**Keywords** Islamic towns · Comparative study · Climate and culture · Homogenous neighborhoods · Earthquake

In general, in Islamic territories, the city is being considered as a collection of homogenous and integrated neighborhoods (Fig. 2.1). For centuries, there is a slow pace of change of traditional society. Integrated neighborhoods were bounded together by ties of climate and culture, custom and beliefs, and art.

In special cases, power was the principle shaping factor. The design of the old city of Baghdad in the Early Islamic period was more for power than for people. The city here is a clear manifestation of power into a circular form. The Abbasid Caliph al-Mansur in 762 founded the city 32 km from the remains of Ctesiphon, the historical Partian and Sassanian city, as follows:

> …al-Mansur wrote to every city to send engineers and people acquainted with building, surveying, and mensuration. Engineers, architects, and land-surveyors from Syria, Mosul, Western Persia, Kufa, Wasit, and Basra were gathered together, and not until thousands of men had been assembled did the work begin. Tabari says that the plan of the city was first traced on the ground with lines of ashes, for al-Mansur wished to see its actual form. The plan was circular, with four equidistant gateways named after the city or province towards which they opened.[1]

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[1]For detailed information of the city of Baghdad, see Creswell (1958), pp. 161–182. And on the point of view that design of Baghdad continued the royal tradition of Persia see Spiro Kostof, *The City Shaped,* op. cit., p. 184, and also D. Huff, *A General Study…* , op. cit., p. 181.

Fig. 2.1 The Moslem city as
a collection of homogenous
areas (Rapoport 1977)
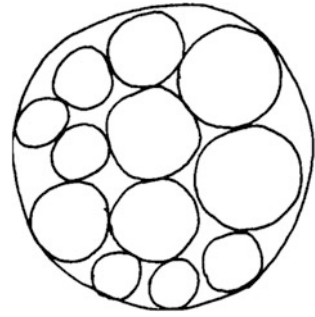
The palace and mosque were in the center with streets oriented from the four gates toward them. The round city shape is derived from Ardashir-Kurra/Firuzabad, Sassanian capital third century. Centrality here expresses political power, and the concept is that everything emerges from the center. Here, power overcomes climate as the principle shaping factor in the hot arid zone city.

Spatial form of some of the Asian and African cities is also structurally significant. About the ancient city of Antioch/Antakya[2] in Asia Minor, founded in 300BC, Rapoport writes:

…as recently as 1934, there were many specialized areas…, ethnic and religious residential quarters… independent, self contained and exogamous. Within the quarter one knew everyone and felt safe. Twenty-seven of the 45 quarters were Turkish and grouped in one area of 18,000 people [i.e., there was a hierarchy of grouping]; Christian and Arab quarters were even more differentiated, subdivided and varied and in the case of Arab areas, even more introverted.[3]

Also, in Damascus with several layers of history, the city was structured according to the integration of quarters which:

…was divided into Souk areas and other quarters along ethnic, religious and other lines, subdivided into microquarters; each was a miniature city with all services—mosque, baths, bake oven and market—the same elements and organization as the whole city…. In North Afghanistan, in a town like Akapruk, even today each ethnic group and Moslem sect has separate quarters,… In traditional African cities there is a similar pattern. Thus in Nigeria there are regional tribal divisions, while cities are divided into quarters of the different groups and the heterogeneous population is grouped by ethnicity, religion, occupation and social status…. Yoruba cities are divided into areas of extended families comprising hundreds of nuclear families. All people within a neighborhood are closely related and adjoining areas are also related, although less closely. The city is thus a hierarchical system

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[2]Antioch was founded about 300 BC by Seleucus, one of the Alexander's generals.

[3]For a basic study dealing with man–environment studies of urban form and structure, including Asian and African cities, see Rapoport (1977), p. 252, and on comparative analytical study of culture in many Asian and Western countries, see Rapoport (2005).

Fig. 2.2 Tripoli. The main structural elements of the old city *a* Citadel, *b* Mosques, and Madrasahs (map redrawn from Warfelli)

of houses, compounds, neighborhoods and clusters of neighborhoods of related people: these are closely built and larger spaces separate less closely related groups.[4]

In addition to the spatial organization of African cities, such as Tripoli, we find a structural similarity between some African, Asian, and Iranian cities. The main structural elements include citadel, mosque, Madrasah, Bazaar, and Neighborhood system. Some of these cities have changed, but have preserved their main spatial structure. The present city of Tripoli is built on the ancient site Oea (Fig. 2.2). The history of the inner core goes back to pre-Islamic Roman times. The city was conquered by Arabs in 642–643, and we do not have much information about the structural elements at this period. Only we know many elements including mosques and madrasahs were built gradually along the main structural passageway near the sea. According to the old sources, the city could boast of beautiful houses, baths, and markets.[5]

A comparative look at the famous Middle Asian Cities such as Bukhara and Samarkand is also important (Figs. 2.3 and 2.4):

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[4]A. Rapoport, op. cit., pp. 252–253. Also for an enlightening master work on a historic city, see Ross Burns, *Damascus,* Routledge, 2005.

[5]On the history and structural elements of Tripoli, see Warfelli (1976), pp. 2–18.
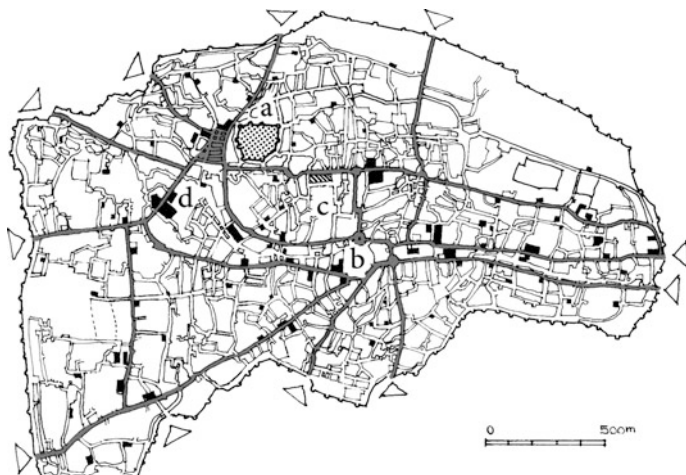
Fig. 2.3 Bukhara. The main structural elements of the old city: *a* Citadel. *b* Bazaar. *c* Friday mosque, *d* Mosques, Madrasahs, and Mausoleum (map redrawn from Giese)

Fig. 2.4 Samarkand. Two main section and structural elements of the old city: *a* Islamic old town. *b* Russian new town. *c* Citadel. *d* Mosques and Madrasahs. *e* Cupola Bazaar Charsu (map redrawn from Giese)

… Most of the old structures still existing at Bukhara originate from the second half of the sixteenth century… Bukhara presents structural and functional elements typical of an Islamic-oriental town of the Iran-Turanic region. These are: (1) The Friday Mosque; (2) the Bazaar; (3) the Citadel; (4) the cell and blind-alley structure of housing quarters with their interdependence of family bonds as well as ethnic, religious, and corporational relationships; and (5) the compact wall with its town gates, enclosing the town compound and separating it from the rural environment.

The location of these elements and their relationships to each other correspond to their importance and functions in town life. In the center of the town, there is the Friday Mosque. The bazaar district follows suit. Adjacent, but distinctly separated from the bazaar, is the extensive area of the living quarters. The three independent, functional elements are formally united by an enclosing wall.

The *Citadel*, residence of the *secular reign* (khan, beg), is a structural part of the encircling wall as in Samarkand, or as in Bukhara, located at the periphery of the town's economic and spiritual centre, but in any case not in the middle of the city. As a rule, it is a self-contained district, mostly built on elevated ground and protected by walls.

The *Friday Mosque*,… the town's spiritual and religious centre, is located in the center of the town; in Bukhara, in its immediate vicinity are the Kalyan Mosque, …, and the Kalyan minaret, closing the open forecourt used for assemblies and executions between mosque and medrese to the south.

Analogous to the central business districts of Western cities, the *Bazaar* of large Islamic-oriental town is the centre of economy and finance, connecting closely knit organizational and financial systems of wholesale trade and retail business, (stationary and ambulant), private and public services, crafts, and finance institutions. Within the bazaar, which in contrast to West-oriental towns, does not consist of a closed-in, frequently lockable, spatial area, but presents a more linear structure; the various branches of business are gathered in narrow lanes or sections; the respective branches do not occupy random sections of the lanes, but depending on their rank in business and the attractiveness of the site are in specific locations considerably affected by the proximity of the Friday Mosque.

Spatial order is also displayed in the housing area encircling the core of the town, i.e., the Friday Mosque and the bazaar. It is divided into innumerable living quarters (cells) occupied by groups adhering to the same religion, nationality, and corporation under the protection of community life.… In large Islamic-oriental cities like Bukhara, Samarkhand, Kokand, or Tashkand, there are sub-centers of various kinds as well as their main central bazaar.[6]

In historical Iranian cities, the city form demonstrates a legible structure. This structure has been so organized that each neighborhood had one center shaped in a proper location, considering the harsh climatic condition of the hot arid environment. All the neighborhood centers were connected to the city center through main passageways.[7]

In many of these cities, the citadel as in the old Tehran located near the town's economic and religious center including the bazaar area with complicated and connected spaces.[8] But, in some cases as in the city of Bam, it was a self-contained, defensive, and protected element located on a height. In the 2003 earthquake, the city of Bam and the historical walled old town including the citadel were totally destroyed[9] (Figs. 2.5 and 2.6).

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[6]For an analysis of spatial structure of two important Middle Asian Cities, see Giese (1979), pp. 145–165.

[7]In next chapter, neighborhoods and neighborhood centers in several typical cities in the hot arid zone of Iran are presented. Appropriate distance between neighborhood centers is notable.

[8]The first complete drawing of spatial structure of Tehran bazaar, including caravanserais, saras, mosques, and schools, was made by the author after field survey, for the *First Detailed Plan of Tehran*, at the office of the Mayor, Tehran Municipality in 1972. This drawing was introduced in Tavassoli and Bonyadi (1992), p. 62.

[9]For a considerable first study on the historic Citadel of Bam, see Nourbakhsh et al. (1976).
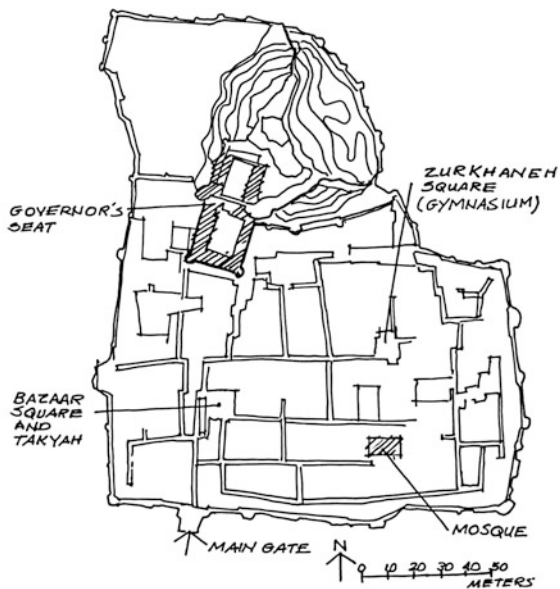
Fig. 2.5 Bam. a Main structural elements of the old town (plan based on Noorbakhsh). **b** The town fortification before the 2003 earthquake

Fig. 2.6 Bam. After the 2003 earthquake: **a** Bazaar area. **b** Shrine. **c** The old citadel

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