# THE DIPLOMATIC QUARTERS IN RIYADH: A WESTERN-SHAPED NEIGHBOURHOOD IN AN ISLAMIC CITY?

**Maria Margarita Gonzalez Cardenas**

*Prince Sultan University*

Riyadh, the capital of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, is a complex relatively young city. One of its major districts was built ex-novo during the eighties as part of a governmental input to define Riyadh as capital of the Kingdom. Albert Speer III and Partners thus designed the Diplomatic Quarters (DQ) as an enclave built in a major spot on the Valley Hanifa, in a proximity to Riyadh's first urban settlement. DQ's urban fabric, landscape, and major core have been locally and internationally recognized as a main example of local identity. The paper analyses the DQ's urban planning by highlighting the elements that leads to the interpretation of identity, such as landscape integration, district configuration and mostly the Major Core's urban spaces and typologies. The paper will question the validity of the identity discourse, and will show the DQ challenges facing Riyadh's modern urban planning. Finally, this paper expects to raise awareness on the need to revisit from a historical perspective a main district in one of the fastest growing cities in the world.

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DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.7480/iphs.2016.1.1213

## INTRODUCTION

In the southwest area of Riyadh, following the valley known as *Wadi Hanifa*, a district for diplomats raises as an oasis in the dessert. Built during the eighties, this urban development known as *Hay Al Safarat*, has limited access and connections within the city. Organized in two wide tree lined boulevards, that smoothly follows the contour escarpment, once inside the Diplomatic Quarter (DQ) a variety of buildings housing worldwide embassies have in common a fence that isolates them from the main alignment[1]. However, only half kilometre from the main gate, a fortress like building appears showing traditional architectural aesthetics: three floors height mud colour fortress with zipper like parapets, adorned with relatively small windows. This area known as the DQ's Major Core rests enclosed by tall walls, and only accessible through pedestrian gates located in specific points: two clock towers placed on the opposite extremes of the core, and the fortress' main gate. This gate is a right angle threshold leading to the main plaza named *Al Kindi*. Relatively less important accesses are surrounding the core, and connecting the parking areas. Like a city within the city, this Major Core recycles elements of local traditional architecture and urban spaces.

Riyadh is the capital of one of the biggest twenty economies in the world: the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The kingdom has become largely urbanised, with a surmounted rate population's percentage of 91.5% in urban areas[2]. Evolving in an extremely short period of time into an urban society, many of the Kingdom's cities were designed following a National Planning agenda on the heads of mainstream urban planners: Georges Candilis for Dammam, Kenzo Tange for Mecca City and Contantinos Doxiadis for Riyadh.

Developed under the *Dynapolis* conceptual idea, Riyadh streets were strategically oriented to Mecca, representing according to Doxiadis "a symbol for a Moslem city" and a place "governed by the spirit of Arabia."[3] A later master plan reintroduced the radio centric organization to control urban growth. Finally, a metropolitan plan MEDSTAR has been implemented since 2010, specifically oriented to solve urban sprawl as well as to enhance citizen's appropriation.

Many local scholars have raised questions about Riyadh's lack of identity, but for now there is no common conclusion.[4] The lack of identity seems to be a conflict originated since the implementation of a modern urban fabric disregarding traditional social habits and beliefs.[5] The road oriented urban fabric built in the late sixties emphasized low housing densities, and encouraged the disappearance of street social interactions in an increasingly car dependent society.

Riyadh has become according to the World Bank, one of the fastest growing cities in the Middle East[6]. At the same time it is looking to become a major financial hub in the Gulf area.[7] Within this context, the Diplomatic Quarters built in the 1980s aside of any master plan, has been pointed out by local scholars as an example of Riyadh's urban identity. Indeed, this simple appointment raises questions related to the environment and the appropriation of this specific district. How has this large-scale planned environment become a main example of identity? Which are the urban and architectural elements that enhance this interpretation?

## RIYADH AND THE ISLAMIC/ORIENTAL IDENTITY

The discussion about city's identity and its relation to the urban fabric in the Saudi Arabian context achieved its peak during the late seventies, decade known as the years of the oil boom, when scholars were insisting in going back to the "traditional urban languages and valid features of architectural heritage."[8] The rebirth of traditional architectural images was emphasized in Riyadh with the design and construction of Qasr Alhokm, a judicial quarter often refer as an example of a cultural context's construction.[9] The construction of this district revealed the strength of Arriyadh Development Authority as urban contractor and regulator. It runs in parallel with

the establishment of the Aga Khan Award (1977), which according to Al Naim, "encouraged traditional Islamic practices in the contemporary architecture of the Muslim World."[10] In addition, such ideas concurred critical regional analysis, lead by Kenneth Frampton[11].

At that time, local scholars do not hesitate to recognize main elements of the so-called Islamic City, in order to nourish the neo-traditionalist debate. Some publications will highlight the clues of Saudi traditional architecture and urban features, making appear clock towers or warning and defence walls as main characteristic structures of the Saudi urban environment[12]. However, it is well known that such features are present in the Islamic ottoman environment, and therefore such ideas turned to be a contemporary interpretation of colonial cities in the region.

Indeed the Islamic city as urban space has been the centre of numerous analysis and controversies. Jane L. Abu-Lughod's paper written in 1987 is one of the first critical regard to the generalizations previously raised by orientalists. At that time, Abu-Lughod, along with Eugen Wirth, Besim Selim Hakim and Jean Claude Garcin[13] insisted on the conformation of the Islamic city through a morphological process based in legal, political, cultural and religious systems, differentiating an Islamic City from an Oriental one. No specific physical features were related to the Islamic urban fabric.

More contemporary analysis highlighted how much privacy issues are extremely important in the Islamic city, perhaps as much as architectural ones.[14] In fact, as Raymond explains, there is no possible description related to a "Muslim" city, as many orientalists tried to prove during the fifties.[15] Therefore identity is the ability to adapt an urban form to local climate and social conditions. Thus, the road system and the cul-de-sac (found in the ancient east), the house with central courtyard (found in the hot climate cities of the Antiquity), and the division of the city in quarters (found in oriental cities with a variety of monotheistic religions such Damascos), are not urban elements related exclusively to the Islamic city. On the contrary, the *souq* as a central business district is probably "the only and fundamental distinctive criterion for the Near Eastern City, which can be considered as Islamic cultural heritage."[16]

After the introduction to the Islamic city, it is difficult to highlight the urban and architectural elements representing the idea of identity in Riyadh's DQ. Developing an artificial version of the Islamic urban fabric, a limited version of critical regionalism, and a modest premature version of New Urbanism Theory, this paper draws a caution attention to this artificially planned settlement.

## THE DIPLOMATIC QUARTERS IN RIYADH: AN ENCLAVE IN THE QUEST OF IDENTITY.

Riyadh is a contemporary city that has no morphological particularities. Developed aside a fertile valley, the "most significant natural feature in the region"[17], the city has two heritage enclaves difficult to identify in the contemporary urban landscape. The first one, Al Diriyah, an old traditional town of mud houses build in both sides of the valley. The second one is the wall of the ancient city and its fortress Masmak, the place where King Abdulaziz Ibn Saud restored his power over Riyadh and will later established the country. Despite its other urban Islamic features, such as mosques and minarets, the city can be compared in terms of physical landscape with any other motor age metropolis in deserted landscapes, such Houston.

Riyadh's urban planning history has followed a sequence of trials and errors. First efforts to establishing Riyadh as capital were not particularly favourable towards the urban space. The first important date is 1953, when King Abdullah ordered to move all ministries from Jeddah to Riyadh, leading the construction of a large housing area known as Al Malaz.[18] Isolated form the previous urban fabric, Al Malaz was original planned as a big "modern" community inspired in the Home Ownership Loan Program developed during the thirties by Aramco

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(Saudi American oil company) in North East Saudi Arabia.[19] The district in Riyadh contains a central park, and metropolitan services such a football stadium, a hospital and a zoo. Nearby the railway station, Al Malaz did not turn to be the modern centre that the government was expected to develop. Instead, the construction of the airport on the north of the city encouraged the urban sprawl. Al Malaz construction marks the very first time that Riyadh was adopting a gridiron urban pattern including detached villas as main housing typology. The city will later adapt this as a unique typology with an always-growing need from people to use their homes as an expression of their personal and social identities.[20]

During the so-called oil boom phase of Riyadh's urban development,[21] the idea of enforcing the city as the capital of the kingdom was perhaps the strongest commitment coming from the central government. After the plan developed by Doxiadis in the late sixties, and its further development lead by the French National Enterprise SCET, the city has been in a fast process of urbanisation that did not stop private urban sprawl developments, and enhance to continue building the already adopted detached housing typology. The modern urban space full of roads and cars, as Menoret has pointed out "turned individuals into mere cogs in a disciplinary mechanism"[22].

Within this context of trial and error, the DQ was built in the eighties as an early seventies initiative to complete the establishment of Riyadh as the capital of the Kingdom (Figure 1). Designed as an exclusive environment for diplomats, the district covers an area of 800 hectares, and was expected to house a population of 25000 inhabitants.[23] Originally planned and supervised by an urban established bureau, Arriyadh Development Authority, the quarter is divided in 5 housing clusters around the major linear core, adapting to main landscapes features: the DQ is surrounded on the west by a branch of the Wadi Hanifa, and has been strategically separated from the main highway according to a precise landscape design reusing land construction debris[24]. Relatively isolated from the rest of the city, the strategic location helps to preserve the security levels that this area needs.

Designed by a team lead by the German architect Albert Speer (third), it included the german landscapers Bodeker, Boyer and Wegenfield; and the local consultant firm Al Beeah group. The original master plan's completion took more than 8 years, and will later include a necessary revision in 2005. The urban morphology that the DQ recreates is based on a hierarchy of roads, distributed in a systematic organization around a central park, which is reproduced in five different districts with similar characteristics. These roads are visible and easy to recognize according to different scales: two wide tree lined boulevard, aligning the Major Core and embassies; secondary roads housing mainly apartment buildings, and ambassadors residences, leading to district major parks, where the Friday mosque is located; and dead-end-roads leading to pocket parks and aligning a limited groups of detached and row houses. In addition, a network of pedestrian paths is supporting walking distance connections, especially to religious buildings and sport arenas, reducing the use of cars. The built area includes different housing typologies, either detached or in a row, that during the eighties clearly responded to architectural local requirements such avoiding excessive exposure, both visual and solar. However all houses and apartment buildings are separated from the urban space by a fence. Recent typologies show a more westernized approach, in which windows are neither preventing visual contact nor solar radiation.

At first glance, this enclave is built using morphological elements of the "traditional Arab city" as stated by Albert Speer III[25]. However, as explained before, the idea of cluster is not a form of the so-called Islamic urban fabric. The dead-end-roads, designed to develop the idea of living in a neighbourhood, barely set common norms in terms of vicinity. If Islamic societies organized themselves in communities[26], the DQ is far from developing the idea, as long as it enhances the construction of detached houses surrounded by fences, like in the rest of Riyadh, having as a result an urban place of invisible people, even if multiple nationalities are coexisting together. It is indeed a high quality built urban environment, but a lifeless space.

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FIGURE 1  Diplomatic Quarters Original Plan.

On the contrary, DQ parks are organized in a systematic way, having the main park at the centre of the cluster, visibly connected to dead-end-roads' pocket parks, and to peripheral medium size parks (Figure 2). The last ones are connected through pedestrian pathways recreating the idea of natural open-air promenade surrounding the enclave. Main and peripheral parks are the most active and attractive spots in the DQ, and have become popular among visitors destinations, hosting citizens of all origins during the weekends. Landscape design was thus achieving a critical regionalism version of the typical Arab city. The parks were designed following a precise recognition of climatic and natural local features, an implementation of local materials and flora, in addition to understanding the cultural landscape of contemporary Riyadh: a city in the dessert where foreigners are an important engine of the society.

DQ's construction process has not finished yet, giving the perception of loneliness in many of its main areas. If having a souq and a central business district are part of the Islamic city's identity, they will be found in the DQ's major linear core, designed by the local consultant company Al-Beeah.

FIGURE 2   Diplomatic Quarters Clock Towers at the Major Core Entrances.



FIGURE 3  Diplomatic Quarters Clock Towers at the Major Core Entrances.



FIGURE 4  DQ's Major Core internal courtyard. In this particular case the corridor becomes a balcony to avoid women's exposure.

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FIGURE 5  Al-Kindi Plaza during a weekend celebration.

## DIPLOMATIC QUARTERS- MAJOR LINEAR CORE.
## BUILDING A TRADITIONAL CENTRE

Encouraging higher densities and compactness, the DQ's major linear core is perhaps one of the rare spaces in Riyadh in which different cultures coexist together. If new rules are set up all over the DQ, they become evident in the major core: no dress codes are enforced (female black coat –*abbaya*- is not a must), besides being a gender segregation free zone.

Housing only 20% of the DQ's residents (approximately 4500 residents) the urban fabric in this area works as a high-rise scale building, but it careful reduces the impact of collectiveness and promotes the benefits of proximity. The Major core works as a fortress only accessible for pedestrians (Figure 3). Architecture clearly exhibits traditional elements mentioned before. But urban space on the contrary encompasses a reinterpretation of the modern block apartment building dividing the corridor to include an urban space. Corridors are connected to public courtyards (Figure 4), and the main square, Al Kindi Plaza, where the major mosque and shopping areas are located, enhancing a vibrant social space (Figure 5).

Privacy being the main issue in the DQ major linear core, the urban design introduces different levels to accommodate the public sphere. Thus town houses are located on the first level, in a semi private-public scale placing shops and offices on the ground floor. This level of privacy is achieved thanks to the housing typology combined with urban elements. As shown in figure 6, upper pedestrian connections are designed to establish the level of privacy that the Islamic city could demand. In addition, it ensures the feeling of living in a community. With no physical distances between the houses, the neighbourhood enhances social interaction.

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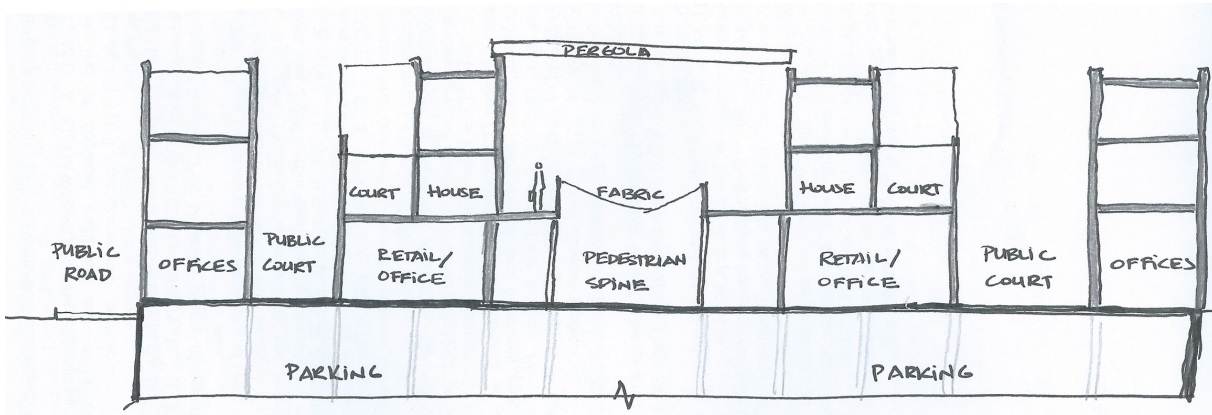
FIGURE 6 Major Core's organization section.

The upper levels have such a degree of privacy, that women, who are usually in the private Islamic household, can risk of avoiding to visit the lower public level. The upper level areas corridors are connected with bridges completely protected and covered from external views. In a kind of local balconies and wall screens (*mashrabysa*), small openings allow women to see downstairs, but not the opposite. In some spots, the public spaces have been covered with fabrics and pergolas to reduce the extreme sun radiation, and at the same time to enhance the privacy of the housing units. It preserves a climate comfort in summer and in winter. On another hand, the house shows as well a higher level of privacy. When the door is in front of the corridor, an anti-chamber preserves the private space, which sometimes becomes an open-air lobby with the townhouse's door in the opposite direction.

Finally, the cars are separated from the housing level, located exclusively in the basement, and having no direct contact with the housing units. However it solves circulation clearly as long as all housing units are connected through elevators and emergency stairs within the parking area, and corridor to access houses open to the sky which give an idea of being in the city and not in a building. The car thus disappears from the urban landscape, solving within the limits one of the biggest problems of the city: mobility, and specifically, female mobility. Environmental quality is thus achieved by reducing car-contact as much as possible.

The fortress with sandy looking like mud walls, and the urban space that separates public from private spaces, are the main clues to understand the scholars' local interpretation of identity. However, going deep into details, the major core is more an early promotion of New Urbanism ideas. The paradox of this building resides in the fact that it is deliberately looking to appear as a longstanding handmade architecture: no sharp edges, *Sharfat* or zipper like parapet to promote air movement, housing and office door no higher than 2 meters, no apparent concrete frame (lintels) for windows or doors. As a conclusion, using new materials to regress time, as if identity was only a museum reproduction.

## THE TOWNHOUSE TYPOLOGY: ASSERTIVENESS IN AN ECONOMIC BOOM?

From outside, the housing building follows the physical description of a fortress, with the house's external walls almost completely solid. The triangular shape openings that worked in the traditional Najd plateau house as weather regulators, in its Major Core comes often as small openings, minimizing the street views.[27] In addition this shape is repeated on top of the building as an archetypical element [28]reproducing homogeneity and a sort of vernacular pattern.

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FIGURE 7 Major Core's pedestrian connection. Townhouses are accessible only from the first level. Even at that level, privacy and climate control is keep as much as possible, avoiding large openings.

The building offers an atypical housing lifestyle for Riyadh. Neither a compound, nor a suburban detached house typology, the townhouse contributes to build a housing fabric in which services are not apart (Figure 7). With a housing average density a lot higher than any other area in Riyadh, the major linear core contains a housing typology that responds accordingly to dessert climate conditions. Since Riyadh has suffered from using imported housing typologies that barely respond to local culture[29], the housing units are in this case responding to local constraints.

There are four variations of the same townhouse typology, but in all cases they work as a compacted shell. The house follows the courtyard typology implemented in harsh climates all over the world: houses are inverted towards a courtyard in which social life happens.[30] The courtyard allows minimum solar radiation, and at the same time reduces the excessive heat, having only three of the four sides built. Each house's courtyard is a narrow space no bigger than any other room. Openings towards this court depend on the room's location: either living or dining, rooms have large sliding doors facing north, making the courtyard an extension of the social space. In addition, the house indoors' spatial segregation that has been recognized as imported if not imposed by the government[31], can be easily avoided if needed.

The housing building and the townhouse typology thus offers privacy levels by reconsidering the place of pedestrians and its difference with other public spaces, including corridors, pathways, and roads. The levels of privacy are therefore achieved in the way that intrusion from the outside world is limited. Accesses to the houses are minimized to certain spots recreating the idea of living in an apartment community. This physical separation works effectively isolating the private housing accesses from the public space.

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As a conclusion, housing spaces could be similar to Riyadh's traditional houses, but they have been configured in different ways. However, the identity of an Islamic city cannot be analysed from the housing's private space. There is the image of the city, meaning the external perception of the private sphere that counts for all. In that respect, with only 50% of Saudi population among DQ residents[32], the recognition of the DQ as part of Riyadh's identity remains in the photogenic attraction of its major spots.

## CONCLUSIONS

The Diplomatic Quarters is an essential place in the city. Highly recognized and valued by the local community and by scholars as a place that reconstructs the city's identity, it turned to be extremely successful in terms of attraction. During the weekends, main spots as Al Kindi Plaza and district parks are usually full of visitors. Locals and foreigners have found in the DQ urban spaces that the city does not offer, among others a social freedom prohibited in every sphere of the society.

The paper has shown that DQ's major core's townhouse building is indeed readapting typologies climatic appropriated, besides the private-public level differentiation that secures privacy issues exclusively found in Islamic Societies. In addition, the pedestrian structure works emphatically to worldwide movements of environmental impact reduction, showing effective solutions for harsh climates. If the DQ parks are capturing the very essence of the territory, climatic, visual and formal, and achieving a real correspondence with the environment, the DQ's major core built a climatic, visual and formal space suitable for it.

However, not all urban elements are participating of the DQ identity recognition. First, the five district housing units continued to be detached and isolated by fences, encouraging Riyadh's most criticized elements associated to its lack of character. As a result, roads surrounded by fences do not facilitate social interactions as expected; despite the presence of community design strategies such pocket parks in dead-end-roads. Second, external reproduction of historical elements reduces the DQ major core's architecture to a mere reproduction of a formal identity. The historic Islamic city achieved values that should be rethought in a contemporary way. Reproducing architectural elements will not guarantee the preservation of Islamic traditions, and will promote artificial understanding of a formless need: cultural recognition.

One remained question is the potential influence that the DQ has had in Riyadh's current urban fabric. Should the city be built with this kind of fortresses all over the space in order to preserve its Islamic identity? Could the DQ become a role model as a typical building block for Riyadh's 21st century urban society?

Despite the high quality of its construction, the DQ remains nowadays a quiet and isolated district, secluded under a strict access control support by terrorist threats. The number of visitors decreased since 2003 terrorist attacks, making of the DQ a photogenic identity historical reference for a large majority of Riyadh's citizens.

## Disclosure Statement

I, Margarita Gonzalez Cardenas, declare that I have no conflict of interest to declare.

## Notes on contributor(s)

Margarita Gonzalez is an architect and assistant professor at Prince Sultan University. She holds a masters degree in history of architectural and urban project, and a PhD in Urban Studies. She has been previously awarded by EHESS, FURS, and recently by the Organization Women in Visual Arts based in Madrid Spain for a Studio Design project conducted in Riyadh. She is currently interested in Riyadh's urban open spaces, and women's city space appropriation. Margarita is expecting to publish her first book on 2017. Previous publications include the translation of Le Corbusier's conferences in Bogota among others.

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## Image Sources

Figure 1: Arriyadh Development Authority.

Figure 2, 3, 4, 6 & 7: Margarita Gonzalez, 2016. Please notice that Figure 2 is not included yet.

Figure 5: Al Beeah Group Architects. www.beeah-info.com

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THE DIPLOMATIC QUARTERS IN RIYADH: A WESTERN-SHAPED NEIGHBOURHOOD IN AN ISLAMIC CITY?