Chapter 1

The Myth of Knowledge-Based Urban Development in the Middle Eastern Cities: A Multilayered Analysis

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ABSTRACT

A decade ago, Middle Eastern cities and particularly Gulf cities rushed into the implementation of knowledge-based urban development and knowledge cities as models for development and progress. Unlike the Western models of knowledge and creative cities, Middle Eastern cities attempts were characterized by the mere construction of technologically advanced yet isolated urban entities with the hope that they are promoting the same concepts essential for knowledge cities: integration and dissemination. By analyzing key projects selected from the Middle Eastern context, the chapter concludes that the common failure resulted from transforming these projects into gated communities fully isolated from the city and the community.

INTRODUCTION

Advances in information and communication technologies (ICTs) are inevitably making societies and cities increasingly knowledge-based. In the 21st century, more than ever before, cities around the world bank on the knowledge of citizens, institutions and enterprises. It creates local spaces and professional environments, which offer the quality of life to the citizens who are seeking to cope with the challenges of modern life in a competitive world. The nature of city development changes accordingly as activities in the knowledge sector are becoming more important and they require conditions and environments which are different from commodity-based manufacturing activities (Knight, 1995). Castells (1996 and 1998) has argued that a new type of society is rising in our contemporary cities due to the consequences of the information revolution. Evidently, scholars, planners and decision-makers have started to debate
the need for a new urban planning approach in order to achieve a development that is sustainable and knowledge-based (Castells, 1994; Hall, 2004). The value and the relevance of knowledge-based urban development (KBUD) stems from the dire need for an alternative ways of planning cities to better face the unprecedented challenges of contemporary time.

Within the Middle Eastern and Gulf cities, the objective of developing a knowledge-based economy is clear and well declared as stated in their strategic visions. The plans of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) States bank on the diversified and knowledge-intensive economies. Principally, the emerging Gulf cities Kuwait City (Kuwait), Manama (Bahrain), Doha (Qatar), Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah (UAE), and Muscat (Oman) exhibited a commitment towards adopting the knowledge economy principles. The same was echoed in the rest of the Middle Eastern cities with different levels of focus including Cairo (Egypt), Khartoum (Sudan), Riyadh (Saudi Arabia) and Morocco. It is also extended to include evidences of KBUD in Iran and Turkey. Yet, such effort needs to be examined to answer the important question, are those development plans realistic? Most of Middle Eastern cities have a lot in common; primarily; language, religion. Yet, contextual differences are so radical. Hence the chapter is also geared towards understanding how political, cultural, social, and economical factors will facilitate or rather hinder transforming a Middle Eastern city into a knowledge one. The common understanding of planning and cities evolution suggests that cities develop organically over hundreds of years. Particularly in the case of Gulf cities, they were able to provide a solid example opposing this conceptual interpretation of gradual urban development. In the last few decades, contemporary Gulf cities expanded rapidly in terms of size, buildings, infrastructure, and population. Another crucial research investigation is related to the demographic structure. While most of the Middle Eastern cities experience normal increase in population, during the last decade, Gulf cities became poles of attraction for people coming from almost every part of the world to generate more income and secure their futures. Workforces from different levels, backgrounds and ideologies are pouring into these cities. The percentage of foreigners in Kuwait city and Muscat is around 60-65 percent. In all of the other cities, the percentage is about or higher than 80 percent. The situation is more serious in Doha as the expatriates form around 85 percent while in Dubai, more than 90 percent of the population are expatriates. Research questions like how newly emerged Gulf knowledge cities will engage their inhabitants (locals and expatiates) positively and creatively? is of an essential significance. Knowledge cities main principles like equity, transparency, equal rights, and minority groups’ consideration should be reinterpreted in the light of the existing yet controversial Gulf cities demographic structure.

The economical, political, social and cultural changes which took place in the context of the last decade suggest that radical changes are needed to cope with the aspiration of communities particularly young generations around the Middle East. Middle Eastern cities are struggling to be part of a movement of change and development. For instance, discussing the economical factors dynamics in the last decades might reveal interesting conclusions. The protests of the youth (Also documented as the Arab Spring) which started in Tunisia in the end of 2010 and traveled through the Middle East, all the way to Bahrain, emerged from the lack of decent life, absence of social justice and lack of dignified sense of citizenship. People in most of the Middle Eastern cities realized that they were manipulated and betrayed. In the same time, the rich Middle Eastern countries, basically located around the Arabian Gulf are becoming fully aware of the necessity for diversifying their economical bases. They have been trying to move from an oil-based economy towards a more multi-dimensional one that will help them surviving the inevitable dry up of their oil resources (Alraouf, 2008). Other cities that are located in the rest of the Middle East have also realized that a new paradigm is approaching where the typical production of physical commodities
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