

BOOK REVIEW

The Evolving Arab City: Tradition, Modernity and Urban Development

By Yasser Elshestawy (editor)

Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2008

Reviewed by Alamira Reem Bani Hashim

This edited collection, a sequel to Elshestawy's *Planning Middle Eastern Cities: An Urban Kaleidoscope in a Globalizing World*, is a timely and original addition to the (critically lacking) literature on contemporary Arab cities and urbanism. In particular, the contributing authors attempt to link discussions on the development of these cities with the global city discourse, tying in a variety of perspectives—sociological, political, architectural, historical and more.

The book is divided into two sections: *Struggling Cities* and *Emerging Cities*. The former covers the traditional centers of Rabat, Amman and Beirut, while the latter includes the following cities from the Arabian Peninsula: Riyadh, Manama, Kuwait, Doha and Abu Dhabi. Elshestawy bases this division on geography as well as on a reflection of "a growing reality in the region pertaining to the extent of engagement with globalization."

Setting the stage for the subsequent sections, Fuad K. Malkawi's prologue calls for a new research agenda pertaining to Arab cities. In his chapter, Malkawi notes that the term 'metropolization' should be used "as a heuristic device capturing the transformations which the Arab city is currently undergoing." It is not very clear why Malkawi finds this construction more suitable, although he does make some key arguments about the absence of the Arab city from global city literature, and about cities' 'degrees of metropolization' (i.e. cities in the region play different roles and their importance varies according to their location within local, regional and international networks).

In *Struggling Cities*, Jamila Bargach (Rabat), Sofia T. Shwayri (Beirut) and Rami Daher (Amman) all seem to follow a political approach in their analysis, setting the State and its policies against citizens and exploring the extent to which the ideologies adapted have impacted urban form. As Elshestawy asserts: "All contributions suggest a struggle - the desire to move away from the restrictions of the past and of tradition and to embrace modernity" (p.11).

The second section, *Emerging Cities*, discusses the conscious effort of Gulf cities to assert themselves as world or global cities. Here, Elsheshtawy makes a distinction between cities “which have a more developed encounter with modernity”, namely Kuwait, Manama and Riyadh, and those that are “dormant/emergent cities” (Abu Dhabi and Doha) whose emergence has been slow despite their radical transformation. All of the authors in this section are experts on the cities about which they write and have had a long historical association with their urban development, thus enriching the analysis.

As a researcher of the Arab Gulf region, I not only share the contributors’ concern over the general absence of the Arab city in global city discourse, I am also alarmed at the dearth of academic writing on the urban development of the Gulf cities in particular. The *Emerging Cities* section is one of the first (and most current) attempts to bridge this gap in academia, and it offers a unique insight onto the Arabian Peninsula. It is interesting to observe that within these readings the impact of Dubai is quite strong; even though there was no one chapter devoted to Dubai, almost all the readings alluded to it. Muscat, however, is left out of the discussion almost entirely, though the editor discusses it briefly in the introduction. A chapter on Muscat would have been useful, or at least an elaboration as part of the Epilogue or concluding thoughts on the section, particularly as Elsheshtawy presents a case for Muscat as a model for other Gulf cities (p.21) and then completely abandons this argument. I found myself looking for an elaboration but was disappointed.

Overall, the book is novel, well written and presents solid arguments. Yasser Elsheshtawy may be the most prominent academic writer on the contemporary Arab city today. Both of his books have made, and continue to make, a significant contribution to the fields of urban planning, Arab studies, and beyond. *The Evolving Arab City* is a must-read for anyone interested in critical perspectives of today’s Arab World.