

# HOUSING IN THE SAND AND SOCIAL INERTIA; A CASE STUDY FROM SAUDI ARABIA

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## INTRODUCTION

There are many kinds of war. They span from typical military conflicts to socially and politically charged environments, from fiscal colonization to ghostly war about information and the internet. But what about the fear of a possible war? Could housing initiatives be connected to that? What kind of design methods and standards as well as processes would that specific case entail? What other factors would add pressure towards studying and implementing housing projects in this context? What could be the possible measure of such projects' eventual assessment?

This paper commences with a hypothesis concerning that fear of a possible spreading of the so-called Arab Spring in the Arab Peninsula, and namely the Saudi Kingdom, triggered a massive state funded housing project. It will be argued that in such a case, where the overall project is basically founded on the dubious ground of political tactics, success is unlikely to happen. Focusing of the ambitious case of Saudi Arabia's Ministry of Housing (MoH), the whole argument will be discussed and gradually unfolded within the political, social, cultural, economic and technical-design conditions of such an endeavor, both before its launch-conceptualization and throughout its implementation. At the end of the day, housing and urban planning stereotypes seem to prevail and justify their title. Paradoxically though, their role in reinforcing social cohesion and political stability is acknowledged and exploited through standardization. Inertia by choice.

## State-funded housing initiatives in the KSA

Thirty years ago, the urban expansion of Riyadh and other big cities in Saudi Arabia was being fueled mainly by real estate land speculation. The urban sprawl and the non-contiguous and leapfrog development of the KSA cities was the direct result of massive urbanization creating an urging demand for housing and commercial facilities<sup>1</sup>. Paradoxically enough, it was a strictly centralized political act that defined the market's control on housing development, while denying the municipalities and their offshoot communities' substantial powers, and underestimating the looming financial, socio-political implications of sprawl<sup>2</sup>. As F.A. Mubarak (2004) states, "Such outward growth, as in most other Saudi cities and towns, can be seen as suburbanization without suburbia".

In the mid-eighties, the government attempted to control the expansion of undeveloped sub-divided land and to slow down the urban growth introducing the Urban Growth Boundary Policy. Three urban

development spatio-temporal “limits” (Phase I - 1995, Phase II- 2005, Phase III- beyond 2005) were employed for Riyadh as a growth management tool aiming mainly to:

1. control urban sprawl by encouraging infill development where utilities were generally available;
2. reduce cost of infrastructure provision through better coordination tied to commonly agreed phasing;
3. preserve the natural environment around the cities.

The same decree extended the scope of the study to the hundred largest municipalities of the Kingdom.

Today, ten years after the "release" of Phase III, that bold initiative is deemed a success from many aspects<sup>3</sup>, though it failed to avoid the formation of "white lands" and to control house prices in the metropolitan areas. The current MoH project, in most cases, focuses on the empty lands left as a by-product of the Phase II and III in the cities all over the country. Other initiatives addressing different scales, specific topics and tools, and working in parallel to the MoH Housing project are: the National Spatial Strategy, the Real Estate Development Fund (REDF), the Land Information System (LIS) and later conversion to GIS, and the Metropolitan Development Strategy ArRiyadh (MEDSTAR).

### **Hypothesis**

This paper argues that the ongoing (though currently threatened) MoH national project is a direct product of the underlying social, political and economic crisis in the KSA. Housing shortage and rapid population growth, together with other severe social failures, such as unemployment, frantic urbanization, unclear processes of political representation and negotiation, cultural ambiguity and immigration define the common ‘hot’ social ground on which the Arab Spring social unrest at the MENA region burst and the Saudi MoH project was conceived. In addition, the MoH project had to be developed in hand with the national spatial and housing development context, which, clearly, inherited a set of severe challenges to it in terms of administrative, technical and cultural obstacles colliding with the specific planning and design processes. As a whole, this massive project was, since its initiation, a critical testing ground for the whole of the Kingdom and its capacity to develop and implement its intentions.

### **Socio-Political background**

In the summer of 2015, following the recent decline in the price of crude oil and the large fiscal spending packages that were announced earlier in the same year, the government budget deficit caused project layoffs all over the Kingdom. Almost simultaneously, IMF announced that Saudi Arabia's economy is teetering on the brink and may run out of financial assets within the next five years if it maintains its current policies<sup>4</sup>. The government decided to freeze its funding on contracts in order to preserve liquidity, among them many projects related to urban planning, infrastructure and housing. It seems that the "Post-oil boom phase"<sup>5</sup>, the current phase of urban development in the KSA, reaches its end.

According to the latest statistical releases<sup>6</sup> the population growth rate rose and remained high during the last five years at 2.55% (2014), while the non-Saudi nationals reached 33% of the total population. The last three decades, the total population increased from thirteen million and five hundred thousands in 1985 to thirty millions in 2014; the official projections<sup>7</sup> add another seven millions until the year 2025. The greater metropolitan areas of Riyadh, Jeddah-Makkah-Taif, and Damman-Khobar are still

receiving a huge number of domestic and international immigrants every year, following an urbanization process that never actually slowed down.

The Kingdom's ruling class enjoys colossal wealth, but the country is also home to a large number of poor families mainly in rural areas, and middle-class unemployed young people who realize that they will not enjoy the comfortable life that their parents have led so far. The fact that, almost two thirds (67%) of the Saudi nationals are below twenty-five years old, coupled with the unemployment that reached 11.7% among Saudis in 2014, reveals a shadowed future for a significant percentage of the population.

Despite the efforts to curtail the suburbanization pace of the metropolitan surroundings, and the initiatives/measurements aimed at holding housing prices down, big cities still suffer from the existence of deliberately undeveloped areas ("white lands"), while 60% of Saudi families do not own their own homes<sup>8</sup>. Rising rents have made it difficult even for middle class people to afford housing, a fact that, according to real estate experts, is one of the underlying causes of the social unrest and the resulting political turmoil that has spread across the MENA region during the Arab Spring of 2011.

Under the increasing pressure of the factors presented above, the authorities have undertaken some really ambitious initiatives during the last decade. Among them, projects related to education (Schools and University projects), employment (Saudization, Feminization), transportation (Public Transportation Projects in Riyadh and Jeddah) and social housing (Ministry of Housing Project).

### **MINISTRY OF HOUSING**

#### **The MoH Project**

The foundation of the Ministry of Housing was an extremely promising and strategically chosen political act. In terms of semiotics and appearances (highly valued within the given cultural context), the use of the word "housing" – isolated from any other adjacent terms (in full contrast to all other Saudi Ministries) – was intended as a straightforward message directly addressing the common feeling and the people's fundamental concern for one of the hottest topics since the oil boom; namely, the ability of the state to meet the increasing housing demand in this rapidly urbanizing society<sup>9</sup>.

The MoH would accumulate some scarcely allocated minor authorities and host other existing initiatives of the real estate sector. MoH has been directly responsible for the management of residential property in the Kingdom. Furthermore, MoH would fully absorb the Real Estate Development Fund, right after the Fund's authorization to increase the amount per home loan to be provided to beneficiaries, from 300,000 SAR to 500,000 SAR. However, other key players would remain active, retaining intersecting areas of control. The Ministry of Municipalities and Rural Affairs (MoMRA) is one of them. That "divide and conquer" method, especially in the real estate sector was highly criticized for holding responsibility for the control of the land values and the contrasting segregation of the urban areas through this silent ongoing gentrification<sup>10</sup>.

To dissolve all shadows and capitalize on the momentum of its founding, MoH announced its first and main project at the first month of its existence: the design and construction of one hundred "cities" (or developments) containing 500,000 houses country-wide<sup>11</sup>! The initial budget was set at 250 billion SAR. Most of the project sites lie in undeveloped rural areas, with only a few planned on suburban plots near the major cities (Riyadh, Jeddah, Damman). The country was divided in five parts: North, South, East, West and Riyadh. An international firm took over this last piece. The other four pieces were awarded to three consultancies (with the local one receiving two pieces: the north and the south one).

Initially, numbers sounded dazzling, and the respective strategies were highly aggressive. MoH would build the entire cities, including the houses themselves. However, when the dust settled down, the project has proven itself to be extensively problematic.

### **Administrative setbacks**

In a housing crisis, time can only inflate the situation as an auto-catalyst. Thus, despite the apparent urgency in announcing and approving schemes and projects, little was done in terms of administrative infrastructure. The bureaucratic issues that had to be tackled were underestimated. The need to satisfy the population's increasing housing needs and quench any thoughts of discontent towards the ruling family had to come with unprecedented speed and reflexes. Thus, it collapsed under the weight of habit and the present bureaucratic structures and processes. The consultancies awarded with the MoH project were able to launch studies and conduct their first stage of design work two years after the Ministry's founding; a rather disappointing amount of time spent for a project of such a magnitude and political importance<sup>12</sup>. Jurisdiction problems were also apparent. The MoMRA already had some minor housing projects of its own, targeting at the same objectives as the MoH. Clashes were unavoidable. Furthermore, a set of standards set by MoMRA were used by MoH as the basis for its project. This set however was only covering several essential issues of influence and control (i.e. Mosques positioning), deriving from the Doxiadis' plans for the Superblock neighborhoods of Riyadh<sup>13</sup> and reinforced by a suppressive central state.

The social and cultural singularities of Saudi Arabia were colorfully displayed in the process of the project's plot allocations. This was a highly political process, in which several provinces – less dedicated to Riyadh's standings – were provided top priority regarding the MoH project implementation, in an effort to improve the popularity and influence of the royal family. The southern mountainous provinces (i.e. Asir, Abha) were amongst the first ones to be included in the process. After having been approved by the central state, each Municipality had to provide candidate plots for the designing firm to evaluate. The review process and the final selection was more a political process rather than a technical one. Still, in the most rural and remote areas, seemingly revoked laws of acquiescence, reinforced by oral Bedouin traditions, proved to be superior to any Ministerial plot decrees. In many occasions, visiting groups of engineers – accompanied by local officials – were prohibited to step on what seemed to be reclaimed as private family land, even under the threat of deadly weapons. In such cases, the subsequent negotiations between the Municipalities and the individuals would then last for many months and usually end up in land exchange arrangements.

### **Technical impediments**

Obstacles of a more technical nature resulted in non-scientific and dubious site analysis studies. Digital information was elusive or simply non-existent, as many Municipalities still work on hand-drawn maps and plans. This would include both spatial information and statistics. In some extreme cases, the exact boundary lines of plots were empirically described, resulting consecutive clashes between adjacent property owners, local and central authorities and the subcontracting topographers. Statistics were also poor. Inevitably, all proposals were based in assumptions and lump figures. Other vital information was also missing. A logical decision to exclude residential uses from any “wadi” (dry riverbed that floods rarely year-round but with catastrophic results) and to create buffer zones was not supported properly, since a cohesive national river/wadi digital registry was missing. Hydrologists had to work on sometimes highly elusive wadis in flat lands. And hydrology models would sometimes arrive even later than the master plan approvals, resulting in major losses in time, budget and design efforts.

In some special cases, the whole project sequence wouldn't even reach the topographic survey and the overall site analysis. Access to sites allocated close to the borderline to Iraq (in the north) and to Yemen (in the south) was banned by the military for security reasons.

However, the most important impediment was the lack of national standards. As aforementioned, initially the standards of another Ministry were applied. But they were only dealing with Mosque positioning issues, underlining the importance of religious control over any logic of walkability, clustering, land-use distribution and implementation budget. In terms of architectural design, individual western engineers on the assigned firms were the ones to import standards from their own countries. This led to even the most conservative local Saudi communities being now accustomed to a "western-like" villa typology. In parallel, the introduction of the automobile as an element of the identity of the "modern" urban classes took advantage of the non-referential modernistic street grid<sup>14</sup>. Standards concerning design issues also expanded to the presentation templates of the master plans of the project. Combined with the minimum experience and credentials of most MoH supervising-approving engineers, it was easier for each firm to impress their client and impose their own set standards even to the rest of the firms participating in the project. Only some key elements would be decided by the MoH, in full compliance with the central political approach on social behavior and aesthetics.



Figure 1: MoH Project site: Tathlith. A paradigm of disregarding topography (hills and wadis).

### Architectural, Aesthetic, Social and Cultural issues

So, if speed and efficiency are the key answers, could the question be: is there any room for high-end architecture and aesthetics? And if yes, could it successfully express the social and cultural outcome both desired by the Saudi state and the users of the projected developments? But, who will the users be? This project lacks the most important of all pre-studies: A social study concerning the end-user, and the pursued social context. One that would support the double transition, from a nomadic life to a permanent settlement and from a rural life to an imaginary bourgeoisie. One that would provide and potentially differentiate the true needs of the communities in terms of locality and would adjust to specific, customized properties of age, employment, culture and climate. Such a study was never part

of the big picture, either due to the urgency of the project or purposely in order to promote a uniform, nation-wide urban identity that would serve the political agenda of the state.

Could this imply that the individual receiving such a ‘modern villa’ would happily denounce his/her own voice, will and preferences? Originally yes, since this was one of the major master plan objectives: “to have equal plots with equal accessibility in order to promote a sense of a compact community and justice in the eyes of God and the Government”<sup>15</sup>. So, even when local authorities pushed the MoH for faster and more palpable results (for the satisfaction of the people) and MoH decided to abolish the villa design and concentrate on the design/implementation of the infrastructure, locality principles didn’t apply.

Another particularity was the fact that the lack of standards (in all disciplines involved) was often replaced by the introduction of negative standards, or things to be avoided, directly by the MoH officials to the designers. Most of them were concerning the road network, though their implications would extend to the overall urban morphology produced. The most glaring example was the specific order to avoid designing crossroad junctions. To the designers’ surprise, the reason for that directive was not related to driving safety concerns addressing the higher accident risk the crossroads would imply. Instead, a religious symbolic perspective was presented, solely based on the bird’s eye (“google earth”) view of the development. This was indicative of the central state’s strong intention to forge a superficial, uniform behavioral pattern for its civilians, by tampering with and reproducing urban design stereotypes as a means of social manipulation.



*Figure 2: From mild and organic urbanism to cultural cacophonies (source: Apostolos Kyriazis archive and Saudi Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities – top right).*

### **Master Planning**

All aforementioned issues were constantly stalling – if not discarding the main project’s time schedule, creating vicious circles of communication between the planners and the supervising bodies. Nevertheless, the Ministry founded the master plans to moving sand and trapped its end-users to yet

another real estate dead end. The stereotypes used may only benefit superficially but in the long run, laze and subjugate the citizens to an unsustainable life style, to political sloth and social inertia.

### **Concept Formalism and Zoning**

Provided that all analysis studies were submitted, approved and consisted of no prohibitive information, the concept stage was to be designed and submitted for each site. One concept alone would be selected to proceed to full design. Hence, the road network, residential plots, community facilities and public spaces would have to be displayed in a free-hand way of minimum information displayed and main statistics estimated. However, the MoH definition of a concept was limited to a “Google Earth” perspective, disregarding the natural context, topography, orientation, views and all sustainability factors addressed at the urban scale. Formalism was unavoidable, with symmetrical approaches being forwarded.

Zoning was also on the MoH desirables list, since its clarity would guarantee equality amongst all villa owners and better control of the public spaces. The main Utility stations would fit at the corners of the plots neglecting the topography (at a point that “the water tower can stay at the lowest point, we can afford more pumps”) and disregarding any neighboring development/ land use, pedestrian passages or existing mixed use areas.



Figure 3: MoH Project site: Bisha. A symmetric vision, completely isolated from its urban context.

### **Urban sprawl, urban stereotypes and social inertia**

So, is there any intentional infliction of such housing stereotypes in a project of this magnitude? Or was this the only choice available? The absence of options in plot dimensions and housing typologies and the unexplained perseverance on the “western” villa typology<sup>16</sup>, combined with the prohibition of crossroads and other technical issues, resulted in a seamless, uniform, monotonous urban morphology, barren of density fluctuations, where cars can reach everywhere and walkability is a notion both unexplored and obsolete at the same time. This urban sprawl would provide the easy way against all achievements on local traditions and sustainability<sup>17</sup>. It sanctifies the individualism of the single plot – western villa approach (with all its privacy amendments), flattens any character displaying initiative under the justification of equality and enchains the users.

All across the non-extensive literature concerning housing in Saudi Arabia there are even fewer reports on the true reasons of the benchmarking transitions reshaping the region: from the local vernacular courtyard house to the western villa with permanently curtained windows<sup>18</sup>, from the organic volumetric arrangements and the windy sikkak to rectangular plots of 6m high walls<sup>19</sup>, or from

the bustling souqs to indifferent, geometrically perfect but soulless public spaces<sup>20</sup>. Especially the adoption of the villa conveys a stereotype experienced in the USA during the similar car and consumption boom in the sixties, detached however from all “sleeping cities” criticism and being seemingly unable to go through all similar social conquests ever since. The superficiality on the use of imported stereotypes reveals a diverse society in transition and its high inertia. But despite the fact that the sustainability scene globally argues for solutions based on locality and tradition<sup>21</sup>, the Saudi state somehow relies on a state of apathy and negation while willing to ensure its political stability. Inertia by force.

### **Ineffective renegotiation**

Even if most of the bottlenecks of the project were orally explained at the presence of the Ministry officials, there was no mechanism established to tackle them. Administrative issues were partially resolved through individual efforts and personal contact, as accustomed. However, technical and architectural obstacles were too fundamental to bypass and had already been embodied into the local system of urban governance and personal relations.

Since the first major inefficiency indicators had been visible, the Saudi government has made several convulsive attempts to modify things: The Ministry hired (2013) one of the four original companies for consultation regarding design approvals, without however unifying design standards or proposing a system for their regular revision<sup>22</sup>. Also, the Minister’s position, a highly political choice made by the royal family, was reassigned two times since MoH founding<sup>23</sup>. Nevertheless, all these gestures were only targeting the program’s efficiency rather than its qualitative parameters.

Still, the pressure on the supply side for middle and low class housing remains unaddressed. For the full agenda of the Saudi state since the oil boom was hinging on supporting the real estate monopolies through irrational urban growth strategies and on sustaining extreme levels of social segregation<sup>24</sup>. What the MoH project represents on a country-wide scale, some recent developments concerning the major Saudi cities reflect the other side of the real estate coin: After fueling the land market speculation and being threatened by a potential fiscal and social collapse, the Saudi government recently decided an unprecedented measure wave for subsidies’ cut, including an “undeveloped urban land tax”<sup>25</sup>. The details and asterisks of this late effort are still undisclosed, however it is quite doubtful that the real estate oligarchies (including members of the government) will eventually indemnify and redeem themselves for decades of exploitation or that the commercial prices will become low enough for a wider social specter to afford.

### **CONCLUDING REMARKS**

It wasn’t the chronic high unemployment rates, extreme social segregation and scanty housing options themselves but the fear of an expansion of the Arab Spring phenomena that would jeopardize the political status quo in Saudi Arabia in 2011 that triggered the founding of a special Ministry of Housing and the launch of an unprecedented public housing program countrywide. Indirect evidence supporting this hypothesis (discussed by everyone but the officials) is the sketchiness of this endeavor at all levels. Administrative conflicts, cultural side-effects and technical inadequacies were constantly in the picture. But, despite the theoretically updated input from western firms and engineers participating, the Government insisted on forwarding specific urban stereotypes by the introduction of obsolete standards. The proposed urban morphology, barren of any social, economic and environmental sustainability factors – vital for such a demanding environment – and of any architectural and urban design elements of cultural significance and continuity, was only serving the

central state's purposes to individualize, flatten and control communities and to depoliticize the public agenda<sup>26</sup>.

Apart from the total failure of the project, it is proven that a publicly funded social housing program may succeed only by actively engaging the end-users along the process and by providing a speculation-free environment for all key players. Furthermore, when sustainability is the question in such demanding environments, locality and tradition can be the answer.

Unfortunately, this project was founded on sand – easily stirred by the wind. The endogenous reaction to any change has proven too strong to intercept. Concerning the latter, this was an intentional choice. This echoing failure however must become a valuable stepping stone for the introduction of more civic rights and social participation to large-scale projects.

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