

# The Formation Of The Historical Center Of Mecca



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## Abstract

This paper is devoted to study the formation of the historical center of the city of Mecca from its beginning to its formative stage that, in my view, took place by the extension of the Abbasid Khalifa al-Mahdy, where its architectural identity was formed and marked its order in space. This paper will focus upon the purpose of choosing the site of the city, the conditions of living, the process of formation of the historical center and its urban context. It will argue that the holy shrine (al-Ka'ba الكعبة) and al-Masjid al-Haram, were and still are the major elements that governed the development of the historical center and the urban planning of the city of Mecca. Furthermore this paper will prove that the historical center of Mecca was reduced in those two elements.

This paper will also demonstrate that key architectural concepts and notions - like: centrality, architectural identity, order in space and public participation were coined within the formation process. So much so this paper will disclose the techniques of conservation and preservation that were coined, too, in the said process like: replacement of material, demolishing and reconstructing, protection and credibility.

In so doing an attempt will be made to explore the role of the holy Quran in setting out the site of the historical center and documenting the process of building al-Ka'ba. And the contribution of al-Azraqiy in his book *Akhbar Mecca* and other related sources, in recording and documenting the construction and reconstruction of al-Ka'ba. And the extensions of al-Masjid al-Haram, in order to explore and highlight the architectural key concepts and techniques of conservation and preservation.

## Introduction

This paper is devoted to study the formation of the historical center of Mecca, from its beginning to its formative stage, that in my view took place by the extension of the Abbasid Khalifa al-Mahdy الخليفة العباسي المهدي (169-170 AH – 785-786 AD), where its architectural identity was formed and marked its order in space. This paper will focus upon the purpose of choosing the site of the city, the process of formation of its historical center.

It will argue that al-Ka'ba الكعبة (the holy shrine) and al-masjid al-haram المسجد الحرام were,

still are, and will be the two major elements that governed the development of the urban planning of the city of Mecca. Furthermore this paper will prove that the historical center of Mecca was reduced in those two elements.

This paper will also demonstrates that key architectural concepts and notions like centrality, architectural identity, order in space and public participation were coined within the formation process. It will disclose the techniques of conservation and preservation that were coined in the said process.

In so doing an attempt will be made to explore the contribution of the Arab historian al-Azraqi الأزرقى in his book *Akhbar Mecca* and other related sources that recorded and documented the the construction and reconstruction of al-Ka'ba and the extensions of al-masjid al-haram.

### *The city of Mecca*

Mecca is the first holy city and the second and permanent qibla قبلة (shrine) in Islam. It was found by the will of God as place for worshipping. The site<sup>(1)</sup> of the city was chosen by God. The progeny of Abraham was the first settlers<sup>(2)</sup> in the city, in spite of the fact that the site of Mecca was not fit for urban life where no water <sup>(3)</sup> and plantation.

Al-Ka'ba was the first building<sup>(4)</sup> built in Mecca that marked its order in space and formed its urban setting. It constituted the focal point in the city. Houses and markets spread informally around it until the fifth century AD when its governor, namely, Qusay Ibn Kilab قصى بن كلاب preplanned the city, where he divided it to *riba'* رباع (single *rub'*=a residential district) and gave each tribe of Quraish قريش (the tribe settle in Mecca) one *rub'* ربع; and built *dar an-nadwa*<sup>(6)</sup> دار الندوة (the city hall or the assembly hall of Mecca).

Al-Azraqi indicated that houses of Mecca were built circular<sup>(7)</sup> in plan cylindrical in form in order to be distinguished from al-ka'ba. This rule was breached by a citizen of Quraish who built his house square in plan and cubic in form, Quraish was worried about the consequences of breaching the rule of the formal type of the architectural fabric of Mecca, which according to al-Azraqi, was not allowed or permitted for any of its building from overlooking<sup>(8)</sup> al-Ka'ba. Therefore one may argue that planning of Mecca was governed by laws and rules from the

fifth century AD. This planning was refined and continued in Islam as I shall be highlighting in the following discussion that will be devoted only to the historical center.

### *The historical center*

Al-Azraqi indicated different stories<sup>(9)</sup> about building al-Ka'ba and many attempts about the formation of the open area around it that known in Islam as al-masjed al-haram المسجد الحرام.

الحرام. Ever since al-Ka'ba was built, it constituted together with the area surrounded it the historical center of Mecca; and the ritual focal point of the Islamic world or as called in Arabic language *qibla* القبلة (shrine).

Al-Azraqi indicated that al-masjid al-haram was in its very beginning "just an open area around al-Ka'ba, surrounded by houses from all sides"<sup>(10)</sup>. It was not defined by territorial means of its own, except the doors that were found among the adjacent houses to al-Ka'ba. In other words, al-masjid al-haram was not an independent building on its own, that had its own urban setting and order in space, that gained in a later stage; in spite of the fact that al-Ka'ba constituted its center with its sacredness and remarkable cubic formal identity that differ from all buildings in Mecca as I indicated earlier.

However, the merging of al-Ka'ba with the area around it that formed al-masjid al-haram and constituted the core of the historical center of Mecca extended over a long formative process and many attempts as I indicated earlier.

Each attempt represented a new addition to the area of the core of the historical center and played a rule in forming its architectural identity, emphasizing its urban setting and strengthening its order in space.

The first in the chain was made by Omer Ibn Al-khattab عمر بن الخطاب <sup>(11)</sup> where he enlarged the area of al-masjid al-haram by buying the houses adjacent to it, demolished them, added their area to al-masjid and built a wall around it. This wall marked the first territorial means of al-masjid al-haram, that set out and defined its beginning as the historical center of the city of Mecca.

The second and third additions <sup>(12)</sup> were similar to the first one, but the third that made by Ibn Al-Zubayr ابن الزبير was defined by very well-known urban elements of Mecca, like *dar an-nadwa*. What so unique in this addition was

not just its regular form and neatness but because Ibn Al-Zubayr<sup>(13)</sup> made portion roof for al-masjid al-haram. It was from the roof that its architecture began to mark its order in space and emphasized its identity as historical center. It was enriched, enhanced and strengthened by the fourth and fifth additions<sup>(14)</sup> that were made by Abed al-Malik Ibn Marwan عبد الملك بن مروان and his son al-Walid الوليد. Where they enlarged the area of al-masjid and increased its height. Al-Walid completed the roof and brought al-masjid, as a focal point (in the architectural fabric of the city of Mecca), to its full representation as the core of the historical center of Mecca.

Al-Mansur<sup>(15)</sup> المنصور in the sixth addition doubled the area and elevated the representation to the core of the historical center by building a minaret and constructing a trench under the entrance of al-masjid to prevent flood from entering it.

Two other additions<sup>(16)</sup> were made by al-Mahdi (AH 158-169/ AD 775-785) in the first of them *al-qadi* القاضي (judge), who was in charge for those additions, extended the eastern part of al-masjid to *al-mas'a* street شارع المسعى. By this extension *al-qadi* brought the addition in the eastern side to an end until our time (AH 14 – AD 2007) where a new one is taking place as I shall explain later. Furthermore, this addition this particular side brought the core to the historical center to a well-defined order in space that resulted from a final urban setting with well-marked territorial means. And ended the addition in the three other sides to well defined urban elements, like the minaret and some markets.

The latter addition of al-Mahdi<sup>(17)</sup> المهدي was due to the unorganized form of the first one which left al-Ka'ba outside the center of the compass round area of al-masjid. He ordered *al-muhandisun* المهندسون (single *muhandis* مهندس = engineer) to demolish the southern wall of the new addition and reconstructed it deeper south in order to recentering al-Ka'ba in the middle of the compass round (*at-tawaf* ساحة الطواف) area, in spite of the high cost of this work that resulted from rehabilitation environment in the south side by transferring the flow of the valley and avoiding the flow of the annual floods. He also constructed a new minaret.

By the addition of al-Mahdi (figure-1) that ended in the year (AH 170/ AD 786), according

to Al-Azraqi, al-masjid al-haram, the historical center of Mecca, developed from a limited open space around al-Ka'ba defined negatively by other architectural territorial means (the houses of Mecca) to a well-defined architecture that had its own territorial means, marked its urban setting and drew its order in space.

This process of formation continued until our mean time, and seems likely to keep on. Many additions were made after al-Mahdi, particularly during the Mamluk المماليك and Ottoman العثمانيون eras. But the most remarkable additions were made and are still making by the Saudi Kingdom. All these additions, as shown in (figure-2) and (plates-1,2,3,4,5,6), brought al-masjid al-haram to its contemporary urban setting and order in space, and strengthening it, as the historical center of Mecca. Currently new additions are taking place in all sides of al-masjid al-haram. It is interesting to note that those additions and extinctions made *al-mas'a* street inside al-masjid al-haram instead of being its eastern border, as shown in (figure-2) and (plate-1,3,6). The point at issue here is that those additions, particularly the one east *al-mas'a* prove that additions of al-masjid al-haram had no limit; and prove that al-masjid al-haram is the dominant building in the center of the city, that reforming it in the course of time-according to its function and requirements as a *qibla* قبلة (shrine) for all Muslims to be the historical center in itself and not just the core element in it.

My conclusion is based on the great number of houses, markets and roads that were demolished to meet the need for each addition. This in turn prove that al-masjid al-haram as the historical center of Mecca is the major element in the planning of Mecca, that shaped and is still shaping its urban structure and govern its future growth.

Furthermore, it might be right to say that the historical center of Mecca is partly govern the urban structure of all Islamic cities and communities. Because mosques in these cities must be oriented towards the historical center of Mecca as shown in (figure-3).

Finally it's interesting to note that the growth and the formation process of the historical center of Mecca propagated and revealed principles and key concepts<sup>(18)</sup> in Islamic architectural discourse like: function, centrality, territorial means, order in space,

identity, public participation, environmental control, neatness aesthetic and many others.

Most important in the formation process is its rule in coining principles of conservation and preservation<sup>(19)</sup> like: *tarmeim* ترميم (conservation), *'idhafa* إضافة (addition=to add new construction to an existed one), *tajdeid* تجديد (to make the old new), *kal` wa-tabdeil or 'izala wa-'i`ada* قلع وتبديل أو إزالة وإعادة (taking out or demolishing and replacing either by the same material or by new one), *raq`* رقع (to replace deteriorated elements with new ones) *hadm wa-'i`adat bina'* هدم وإعادة بناء demolishing and reconstructing. And many others where there is no place to enumerate them in this paper. But strictly speaking architectural discourse and urban planning in general and *al hifadh al-mi`mari* الحفاظ المعماري (architectural conservation and preservation) in particular were originated in Islamic architecture; and the formation process of the historical center of Mecca played a remarkable rule in coining them.

### Conclusion recommendations

In the course of discussions I traced the formation process of the historical center of Mecca that brought it to a marked identity and clear order in space. And I referred to other additions that continued until our mean time that enhanced and enriched its identity and strengthened its order in space.

My conclusion is that the growth of the historical center in the past and present was subject to Islamic ritual requirements (function) and not as a response to modernization needs as in other Islamic cities. In fact modernization was implemented and instrumented to serve the cause of function of the historical center and not to ignore or overcome it. And here is the uniqueness of the historical center of Mecca of being the central element that govern its planning in the past; and will keep governing it in the future. Hopefully this unique case will be instrumented in all Islamic cities.

Furthermore I indicated the rule of the formation process in coining principles and key concepts in Islamic architectural discourse, conservation and preservation that were resulted from those additions that brought the historical center to its contemporary urban setting and order in space.

I recommend strongly, the need for, widening the area of the compass round (*at-*

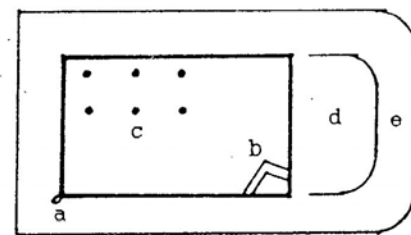
*tawaf* (ساحة الطواف) by eliminating the Ottoman extension. And increase number of openings all around al-masjid al-haram.

### ملخص

#### تشكل المركز التاريخي لمكة المكرمة

هذا البحث مكرس لدراسة المركز التاريخي لمدينة مكة، منذ بداية تحديد موقع الكعبة وحتى مرحلة تشكيله وتكوينه. التي تمت في رأيي بتوسعة الخليفة العباسي المهدي، حيث حددت هذه التوسعة موقع المركز في الفضاء البصري للمدينة، وبداية شخصيته البصرية. وسيظهر البحث سبب اختيار موقع المدينة، وظروف المعيشة بها، وطريقة تشكل المركز التاريخي للمدينة ومحيطه الحضري. وسيبرهن البحث أن الكعبة والمسجد الحرام هما العاملان الرئيسيان اللذان يحكمان تطور المركز التاريخي والتخطيط العمراني لمكة. وأن المركز التاريخي تمحور في الكعبة والمسجد الحرام. وسيبين البحث أن مفاهيم أساسية - مثل: المركزية، والهوية المعمارية، والشخصية البصرية، والمشاركة الشعبية، وتقانات الترميم - انبثقت من مراحل تشكل المركز التاريخي لمكة. ولتحقيق ذلك سيعرض البحث لدور القرآن الكريم في تحديد موقع المركز التاريخي وبناء الكعبة؛ وكذلك لدور الأزرق في كتابه، أخبار مكة وما جاء بها من الآثار، وللمصادر التاريخية الأخرى، التي وثقت بناء الكعبة وتقانات الترميم التي صاحبت مراحل تشكل بنائها وترميمها.

### Appendix



**Figure - 1**

(The historical center of Mecca)

Plan of al-ka'ba and the additions around it until the year (AH 170 /AD 786)

(a) al-hajar al-aswad

(b) stair

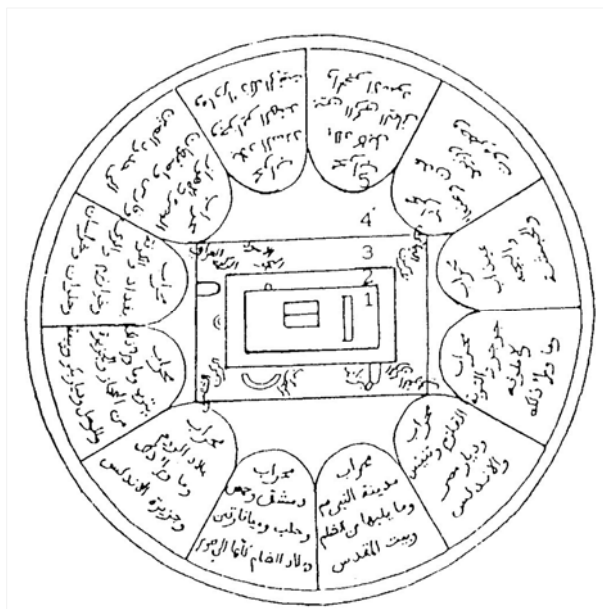
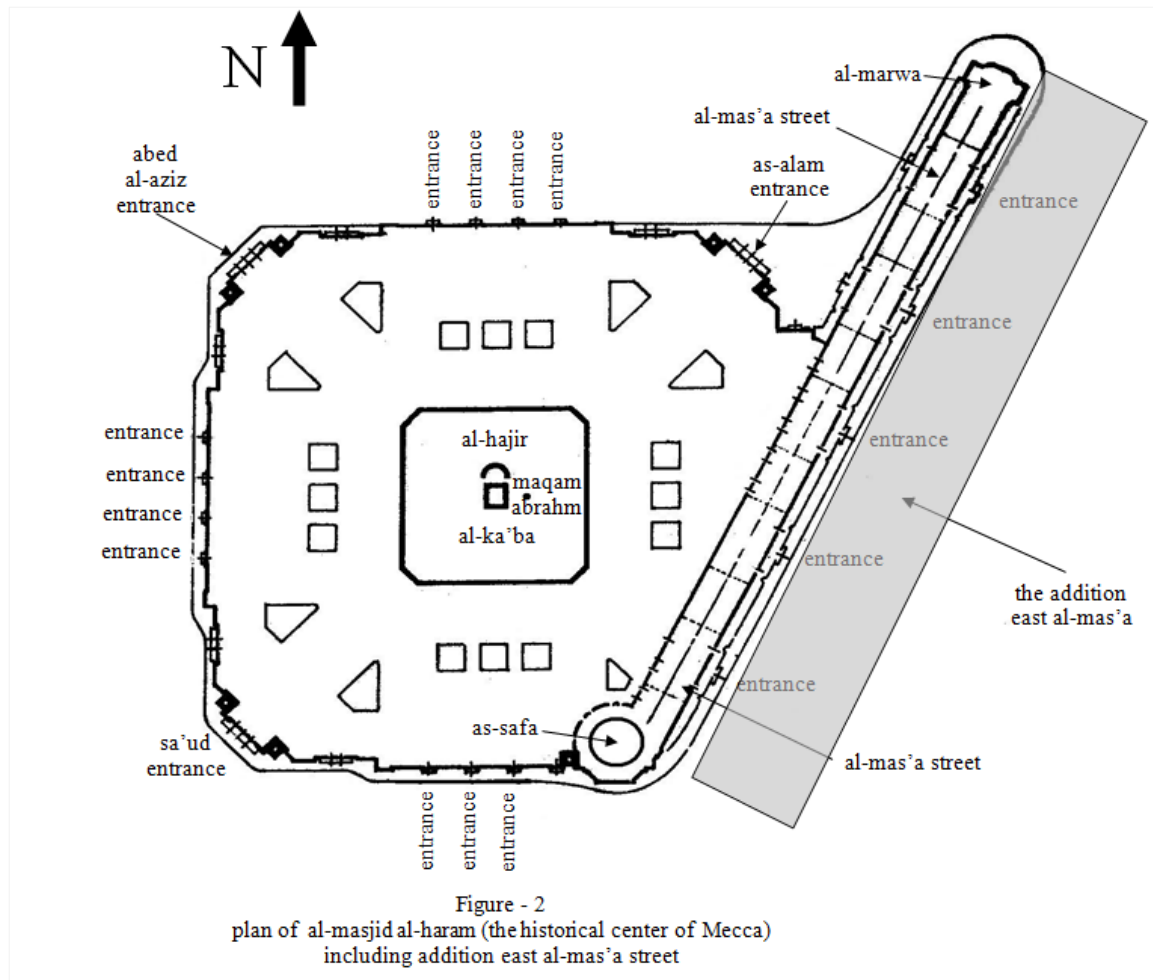
(c) pillars

(d) al-hijr

(e) al-haram

*Note:* this drawing is copied as illustrated by al-azraqi





- (1) al-Ka'ba  
(2) al-masjid al-haram  
(3) City of Mecca  
(4) Haram of Mecca  
(5) The world

Note: the drawing is copied as illustrated by al-qazwini

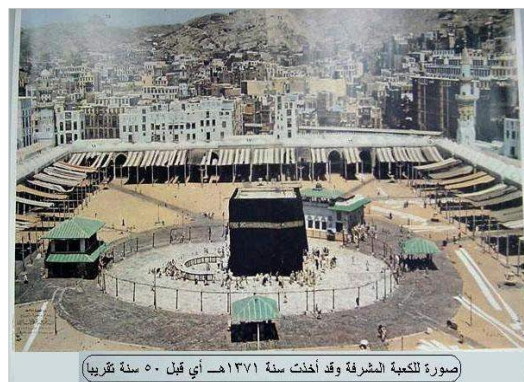




plate – 3

The historical center (AH 1428 / AD 2007)



plate – 4

The historical center  
The addition east al-mas'a street  
(AH 1428 / AD 2007)

Plate – 5

The additions of King Fahad in the west of  
Al-haram & the addition east al-Mas'a street

Plate -6

The current additions in the Yards  
surrounding al-haram**Notes:**

- (1) see: *Al-Qurān al-kariem*. Sūra: 22, verse 26/ Sūra: 2, verses 127, 125.
- (2) see: *Ibid*, Sūra: 14, verse 37.
- (3) see: *Ibid* Sūra: 3, veres 96.
- (4) see: Al-Azraqi, Abu al-Walid الأزرقي (died AH 250/AD 864) *Akhbar Mecca Wa-māja' bihā min al-Athār* أخبار مكة وما جاء بها من الآثار, annotated by Rusdhi Malhas, dar al-Andulus, 2 vols., Beirut, (AD 1983). See: vol. 1/ 33-76.: At-Atabri الطبري (AH 224 – 310/ AD 839-932) *Jāmi al-Bayan fi Tafsir al-Qūrān* جامع البيان في تفسير القرآن, annotated by Mohamad Abu al-Fadul, dar Al-Marif, 11 vols., cairo (AD 1971), see: vol., 1/423-430, vol., 4/6-8. :Shiāb al-din al-Hamawi شهاب الدين الحموي (AH 11 century, AD 17 century) *Thufat al-Akyas fi Tafsir Qulih T'ālā Aen Awal Bait Wudā lil-Nās* تحفة الأكياس في تفسير قوله أن أول بيت وضع للناس, manuscript, al-maktaba az-Zahiriyya, No. 44, Damascus, pp.: 1, 4 - 5.
- (5) See : Al-Azraqi (former reference), vol. 2/233 – 265. Al-Hamawi, Y. ياقوت الحموي (died AH 636/AD 1229) *Mu'jam al-Buldan*, dar sadir, 5 vols., Beirut (AD 1997). See: vol. 5/186 – 187.
- (6) See: Al-Azraqi (former reference), vol. 1/103 – 116. :Al-Hamawi, y. (former reference), vol. 5/186.
- (7) See: Al-Azraqi (former reference), vol. 1/280 – 281. :Al-Abed, B. (1992), *Aspects of Arabic Islamic Architectural Discourse*, delft Technical University Press, Delft, Netherlands, pp.: 107.
- (8) *Ibid.*: Al-Azraqi, vol. 1/280-281. Al-Abed, pp.:107.
- (9) *Ibid.*: Al-Azraqi, vol. 2/266 – 302. :Al-Abed, B., pp.: 90 – 120.
- (10) See: Al-Azraqi, vol. 2/68. :Al-abad, B. pp.: 121. :Al-Qazwini, Z. زكريا القزويني (AH 660-682/ AD 1080-1170), *Athar Al-Bilad wa-Akhabar Al-Ib'ad* آثار البلاد وأخبار العباد, dar sadir, Beirut, no history of publication, pp.: 114 - 121.
- (11) See: Al-Azraqi (former reference), vol. 2/69. :Az-Zarkashi الزركشي (AH 745 – 794 / AD 1344 – 1492) *Ilām as –sajed bi – Ahkam al-masajid* إعلام الساجد بأحكام المساجد, annotated by Abū al-Wafā al-Marāghi, Higher council of Islamic Affairs, Cairo, (AD 1982), pp.: 57.
- (12) See: Al-Azraqi (former reference), vol. 2/69. : Al-Abed, (former references), pp.: 122.
- (13) See: Az-Zarkashi, (former reference) pp.: 57.
- (14) See: Al-Azraqi, (former reference), vol. 2/71. See: Al-Abed, (former reference), pp.: 123-124.
- (15) *Ibid.*, Al-Azraqi, (former reference), vol. 2/74. : Al-Abed, (former reference), pp.: 125.
- (16) *Ibid.*, Al-Azraqi, (former reference), vol. 2/74-76. :Al-Abed, (former reference), pp.: 125.
- (17) : *Ibid.*, Al-Azraqi, (former reference), vol. 2/76-81. : Al-Abed, (former reference), pp.: 126-131
- (18) See: Al-Azraqi (former reference), vol. 1/34 – 309/ vol. 2/68-74. :Al-Azarkashi (former reference), pp.: 48-57, 337. : Al-Abed (former reference), pp.: 86-135.
- (19) See: Al-Azraqi (former reference), vol. 1/203-214. : Al –Abed (former references), pp.: 86-135.