

ALLEYS' ROLE IN CULTURAL PRESERVATION WITHIN ISLAMIC URBAN DESIGN PRINCIPLES

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ABSTRACT

The alleys of traditional Islamic cities have historically played a significant role in shaping urban life, fostering community engagement, and preserving cultural and religious values. This research investigates the role of alleys in cultural preservation through the lens of Islamic urban design principles. The study examines how alleys in cities like Fez, Marrakech, and Cairo serve as vital connectors of social and cultural activities, maintaining Islamic values such as privacy, community harmony, and spatial hierarchy. These findings are contrasted with the modern-day alleys of Kuala Lumpur, where rapid urbanization has altered the traditional functions of these spaces. By combining qualitative and quantitative data collection methods, this study aims to explore how the design of alleys in Islamic cities serves not only as a functional urban element but also as a living part of Islamic heritage. Through comparative analysis, the research proposes recommendations to reintroduce Islamic values in modern urban contexts like Kuala Lumpur to rejuvenate its alleys, making them more culturally vibrant and socially active. Ultimately, this study underscores the importance of urban alleys in cultural sustainability and community well-being in cities while thriving in Islamic values and lifestyle.

Keywords: Alleys; Islamic urban design principles; cultural preservation; Islamic values; social and community.

1. INTRODUCTION

Islamic cities are known for their unique urban layouts, which reflect the cultural, social, and spiritual values of the people living there. A key part of this structure is the system of alleys that connect different parts of the city while promoting values like modesty, privacy, and community (Serageldin, 2005). These alleys are not just walkways, but spaces that encourage social interaction and a sense of belonging. Cities like Fez, Marrakech, and Cairo have preserved the cultural importance of their alleys through thoughtful design. In modern cities like Kuala Lumpur, however, rapid urbanization has reduced the traditional roles of alleys, leading to a loss of social interaction and cultural meaning. This research will explore the historical importance of alleys in Islamic cities, compare them to the current situation in Kuala Lumpur, and suggest ways to revitalize them while respecting Islamic architectural principles.

There are four main objectives for this research; 1) To investigate the role of alleys in the cultural, social, and architectural landscape of historic Islamic cities. 2) To compare these findings with the alleyways of Kuala Lumpur to examine how modernization has altered their role. 3) To propose a framework for revitalizing Kuala Lumpur's alleys in a way that aligns with Islamic urban design principles.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

2.1 Literature Review

The literature review examines Islamic urbanism, the socio-cultural roles of alleys, and the impacts of modernization. It will analyze key studies to understand the effects of urbanization on Kuala Lumpur's alleys and explore successful revitalization strategies from other Islamic cities, emphasizing the need to preserve alleys for cultural identity and social cohesion.

2.2 Case Study Selection

Three major Islamic cities, known for their well-preserved urban cores and alleys, are chosen for comparative analysis: 1) **Fez, Morocco**: With its labyrinthine streets and rich architectural heritage, Fez provides an exemplary case of traditional Islamic urban planning. 2) **Marrakech, Morocco**: Another historic city known for its compact alleys, bazaars, and communal living. 3) **Cairo, Egypt**: Particularly the older quarters such as Al-Darb al-Ahmar, which contain narrow, winding alleys that preserve communal and religious life.

Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia is selected as the contrasting example, as its rapid modernization has altered the role of alleys in urban life. The study focuses on alleys in three historically significant Islamic cities — Fez, Marrakech, and Cairo — as the comparative models in understanding the study of alleys in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

2.3 Architectural and Spatial Analysis

Detailed architectural documentation of the selected alleys is gathered. For each city, spatial configurations, connectivity, and the roles of these alleys is mapped using Geographic Information Systems (GIS).

2.4 Field Surveys and Interviews

This phase focuses on Kuala Lumpur where field surveys include photographic documentation and mapping of the city's alleys, comparing their form, function, and use to the alleys of Fez, Marrakech, and Cairo. Qualitative data is collected through field observations, and interviews with residents, users and urban planners.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Literature Review

The role of alleys in Islamic cities has been explored in urban studies, architecture, and cultural preservation literature. Known as *zaqaq* (alley) or *derb* (alleyway), alleys significantly shape the socio-cultural and religious dynamics of traditional Islamic urban environments. The literature review focuses on three thematic areas: Islamic urbanism and design principles, the socio-cultural significance of alleys, and the challenges posed by modern urbanization.

Islamic Urbanism and Design Principles

Islamic urban design is influenced by Shariah law, emphasizing privacy and community interaction. Scholars like Besim Selim Hakim (1986) and Stefano Bianca (2000) discuss how alleyways serve as transitional zones that balance individual and communal needs, maintaining modesty by preventing direct sightlines into homes.

Socio-Cultural Significance of Alleys in Islamic Cities

Alleys function as cultural and social arteries within cities. Kostof (1991) and Grabar (1973) illustrate that alleys in Fez, Marrakech, and Cairo facilitate daily activities and reinforce social norms based on Islamic teachings. In Fez, alleyways host small trades and foster interconnectedness, while Cairo's alleys integrate street markets, serving as vital spaces for social and economic exchanges. Nasr (2005) emphasizes that these public spaces embody the concept of *baraka* (blessing), preserving Islamic cultural values.

Modernization and the Decline of Alleyways

Recent scholarship examines the impact of rapid urbanization on alleys. Erzen (1993) notes that modernization has marginalized alleys, especially in Kuala Lumpur, where Western planning models prevail. This neglect has resulted in social disintegration, as alleys no longer serve their communal purposes. Dovey (2013) argues that ignoring alleyways leads to urban fragmentation and decreased community engagement.

Alley Revitalization and Urban Revitalization Strategies

Efforts to revitalize alleys aim to reconnect them with their historical roles. UNESCO projects in Fez focus on making alleys more accessible while preserving their integrity. Similarly, revitalization in cities like Dubai and Istanbul integrates traditional aesthetics with modern functionality. Panjaitan, Pojani and Darchen (2020) advocate for policies that accommodate historical alley preservation in rapidly growing Southeast Asian cities.

The literature underscores the vital role of alleys in upholding Islamic cultural values and social cohesion. Islamic urban design principles have historically ensured a balance between privacy and community life, supporting local economies. However, in modern cities like Kuala Lumpur, alleys have lost much of their significance due to urbanization. This research seeks to propose a framework for rejuvenating Kuala Lumpur's alleys by integrating traditional urban design principles with contemporary revitalization strategies.

3.2 Comparative Study

The study reveals significant contrasts between the role of alleys in traditional Islamic cities and in modern Kuala Lumpur. While alleys in Islamic cities are carefully integrated into the urban fabric, they have largely lost their cultural and social functions in Kuala Lumpur due to modernization.

Below is the table showing the comparative analysis:

Table 1. Comparative analysis between the four cities.

City	Function of Alleys	Cultural Role	Architectural Elements
Fez	Pedestrian movement, privacy	Connects religious and community spaces	Narrow, winding, shaded alleys
Marrakech	Social interaction, commerce	Enhances community bonding, privacy	Curved pathways, decorated walls, limited width
Cairo	Mixed-use (residential, social)	Religious processions, local economy	Complex, organic networks
Kuala Lumpur	Vehicular access, storage	Limited cultural role, some recent rejuvenation	Wider streets, less privacy focus, irregular design

Reference: Tabulated by author (Nizar, 2024)

Preservation of Islamic Values in Alleys

In Fez and Marrakech, the alleys serve dual purposes of ensuring privacy for homes while acting as vital social spaces. The curve in the alleyways preserves the modesty of residents, reflecting the Islamic principle of safeguarding one's private life from public view. The careful management of sightlines, where streets bend or turn to avoid direct views into homes, is a defining feature of Islamic urban design. In contrast, Kuala Lumpur's alleys lack this sensitivity to privacy, often being retrofitted for vehicular traffic and storage.

Social and Community Engagement

Traditional Islamic alleys are communal spaces, fostering interaction between neighbors while providing access to mosques and markets. In Cairo's Al-Darb al-Ahmar district, for example, alleys are active with community members engaging in everyday activities like commerce, religious events, and socializing. In Kuala Lumpur, however, modern planning has largely removed these functions, but recent efforts in alley rejuvenation, such as the transformation of back alleys in Bukit Bintang, indicate a growing recognition of their potential for community engagement.

Below is a graphical representation of the social interaction levels in each city's alleyways, indicating a sharp decline in social activity in Kuala Lumpur alleys compared to Islamic cities:

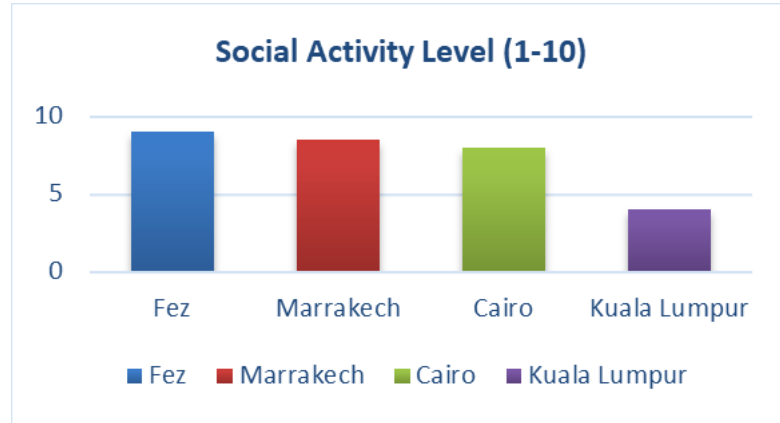


Figure 1. Social Activity Level of the four study areas.

The bars for cities like Fez, Marrakech, and Cairo shows higher social engagement (Fez 9; Marrakech 8.9; Cairo 8), while Kuala Lumpur’s shows low social activity level (4), reflecting its underutilized, less socialized alleyways.

Potential for Rejuvenation in Kuala Lumpur

Kuala Lumpur’s alleys, despite their current limited use, offer a significant opportunity for urban planners to reintegrate Islamic urban design principles. By learning from cities like Fez and Marrakech, where alleys play an essential role in daily life, Kuala Lumpur can foster social cohesion and privacy through thoughtful alleyway design. There are already projects in place to beautify alleys through murals and urban art, and by incorporating Islamic design principles, these spaces could also reclaim their cultural and social significance. The results show how the neglect of alleys in Kuala Lumpur has diminished their role in community life. By incorporating Islamic urban design principles— such as narrow walkways that promote human interaction, shaded areas for rest, and enhanced privacy—Kuala Lumpur can transform its alleys into vibrant, culturally meaningful spaces.

4. CONCLUSION

This research highlights that alleys in Islamic cities are not merely functional spaces but integral parts of the urban fabric that reflect Islamic values such as modesty, privacy, and community cohesion. Cities like Fez, Marrakech, and Cairo have maintained the cultural and religious significance of their alleys, while modernization has stripped Kuala Lumpur's alleys of much of their social and cultural functions. By reintroducing Islamic urban design principles, Kuala Lumpur’s alleys can once again become spaces for community engagement, privacy, and cultural preservation. This study provides suggestions for urban planners to reconsider the role of alleys in contemporary cities, drawing inspiration from historic Islamic urban centers.

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