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The Challenges of Urban Transition in Yemen: Sana'a and Other Major Cities

ROMAN STADNICKI

Abstract: Although urbanisation remains low in Yemen — 32% in 2010 — the 2000s were marked by strong urban growth in most regions, as well as by various changes that deeply affected Yemeni cities, economically, politically, and socially. After describing the current state of urbanism in Yemen, including the processes of urbanisation and the parts played by political and economic actors (local, national, and international), the paper examines the consequences of urban transformations for society by observing how Yemen's particular urban characteristics are adjusting to new forms of globalised urban development. It concludes that the assets, just as much as the limitations, of Yemeni cities, as well as their regional and international roles, should be highlighted as a reminder that the economic and political frames of these expanding cities are unstable, especially in the context of the 'Arab Spring', which has affected the whole country.

Keywords: Yemen, Sana'a, city, urban transition, urban development, metropolisation

1 Introduction

Yemen is the most populous country of the Arabian Peninsula (about twenty-five million inhabitants), but is also the least urbanised. Nowadays, one in three Yemenis lives in a city compared with one in four in 1994. Yemen is still very rural, but since the 1970s it has also

been a place where cities have grown very rapidly,¹ due to strong natural population growth and the exodus of hundreds of thousands of people from the countryside. The transition process from a rural to an urban society that is taking place in Yemen is prompting a general re-organisation of the country and implies deep changes at the political, economic, and social levels.

Some of these changes are discussed in this article (in Section 3). First, we examine how public authorities try to adapt to the consequences of massive and uncontrolled urbanisation. Local governance in Yemen — restructured in 1983 with the creation of a municipality in Sana'a (<amānat al-*asima*, Capital's Secretariat), and in 2000 by a law on decentralisation — is struggling to find its autonomy, legitimacy, and an adequate strategy. Secondly, we look at how urban space is being completely restructured through commercial activities. Commerce is very responsive to trade (the main component of the urban economy in Yemen), and appears as a relevant indicator of the changes and paradoxes in these urban areas. Thirdly, we consider the ways in which towns are adapting their particularities to new forms of urban modernity. In their current form, and despite their uniformity and consistency (as a result of their entry into modernity), it will be found that Yemen's cities are not completely free from the urban dynamics (such as the preponderance of social hierarchies and tribalism) that characterised them before they expanded beyond their encircling walls.

The article begins by looking at the characteristics of the urban explosion in Yemen. This increase is strongest in Sana'a, but is also evident in the secondary cities, especially those located in the former North Yemen.² We also note the morphological and functional

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¹ Troin, “La croissance urbaine au Yémen: caractéristiques et conséquences”, in *Le Yémen contemporain*, ed. Leveau, Mermier, and Steinbach (1999).

² Regardless of Yemen's urban history, retracing its unique position in the Arabian Peninsula is not the aim of this article. The past splendour of cities like Zabid, famous for its

specificities of large urban areas in contemporary Yemen, their assets on the regional and international stage, but also their shortcomings — which make it clear that the economic and political foundations of these fast-growing cities, like the country they belong to, are both unstable and fragile (see Section 2 below).

We also wish to establish whether Yemen has, over the past few years, been embarking on a new urban era. Beyond the main demographic and economic changes related to its urban transition, we believe that Yemen is currently experiencing the phenomenon of a so-called ‘faltering’ or ‘incomplete’ metropolisation. This uncompleted aspect of the metropolisation process is due mainly to the vulnerability of Yemeni urban structures (including weak local governance and national and regional infrastructure undermined by several years of political instability before and after the 2011 revolution, along with weak strategies for economic development, as well as social and environmental crises). It also prevents Yemen’s capital from ascending to the ranks of globally connected cities (based on functions as diverse as finance, trade, coordination, innovation, training, research,³ etc, all of which are lacking in Sana’a). However, during this ‘incomplete’ metropolisation process, important forms of urban transformation are appearing, and are especially noticeable through the evolution of business activity, as well as forms of hybridisation which, according to Guy Di Méo,⁴ lead to the creation of identities in new urban areas. This gives Yemeni cities relevance as laboratories for assessing the effects of urban transition in a developing country undergoing modernisation.

The following analyses are based mainly on qualitative research carried out between 2006 and 2009 (for a PhD thesis in geography about the characteristics of urbanisation in

early Islamic university, or ancient Mocha, main port and preeminent marketplace for coffee, is not evoked; today both are small, fallen cities. Nor are the many small and middle-sized towns that follow the main traffic arteries (Dhamār, Yarīm and Ibb, on the Sana’a-Taez axis), that are structured in constellations around main urban centres (west of Sana’a: Al-Mahwīt, Shibām-Kawkabān, <Amrān, etc.), or that constitute micro-urban areas (Seyoun, Shibam, Tarim) discussed in detail here. Attention is given largely to the country’s contemporary urbanisation and to its most important cities (Sana’a, Aden, Mukalla, Taez, and Hudaydah).

³ Lacour and Puissant, *La métropolisation: Croissance, diversité, fractures* (1999).

⁴ Di Méo, “Identités et territoires: des rapports accentués en milieu urbain?”, *Métropoles* 1 (2007).

Sana'a⁵), and during February–March 2011 to update the original data. So-called “comprehensive” interviews⁶ were carried out with government officials, including the directors of the municipality of Sana'a, while semi-structured and informal interviews were held with private economic actors (traders, investors) and inhabitants of the new urban outskirts of Sana'a as well as a few other large cities. This approach combined “micro-analysis”,⁷ which helps in understanding how observation of spatial practices and individual experiences provides a gateway to the social and symbolic dynamics of a wider group, as well as the “player approach”,⁸ which enables identification of the main players at work, along with analysis of their methods, and the relationships and antagonisms among them. All these aspects helped to capture the varied subtleties of the urban setting.

INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE

Figure 1: Major Cities of Yemen today

2 The Urban explosion in Yemen

2.1 *The origins of urban growth*

The migratory phenomenon in Sana'a and other secondary cities of the country is massive. During the 1970s, two simultaneous phenomena — crisis in the rural regions⁹ and the opening-up of the country's economy¹⁰ — encouraged temporary or definitive migration to urban centres in Yemen and its neighbours. For example, Saudi Arabia's geographic and

⁵ Stadnicki, *Nouvelles centralités et recompositions socio-spatiales dans le Grand Sana'a (Yémen)*, PhD thesis (2009).

⁶ Kaufmann, *L'entretien compréhensif* (1996).

⁷ Revel, *Jeux d'échelles: la micro-analyse à l'expérience* (1996).

⁸ Crozier and Friedberg, *Actors and Systems* (1981), p. 454.

⁹ Due to delayed modernisation of agricultural techniques and a lack of arable land.

¹⁰ After the 1962 Revolution, which also ended the thousand years of rule by *imams*, Yemen shifted from a tribal and rural economy to a capitalist economy. The country witnessed a time of relative prosperity during the 1970s, mainly due to remittances from Yemeni migrants in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf countries.

cultural proximity and the possibilities for speedy enrichment prompted the migration of over a million Yemenis.

In 1975, the three largest cities of North Yemen (Sana'a, Tuez, Hudaydah) represented only 15% of the total population. The 1975 census highlighted the low weight of Sana'a (135,000 inhabitants) compared to the total population, but also foreshadowed a reversal of the general demographic trend. A survey of 18,000 households in Sana'a revealed that they were aware that the city offered better living conditions, such as easy access to health care, below average mortality rates, high levels of employment, etc.¹¹ Moreover, preservation of the urban standard of living was closely linked to investments made by expatriates working in Gulf countries. Most of the capital that these migrant workers brought back was absorbed by the construction industry, and this generated unprecedented dynamism, especially in the main branches of the urban economy in Sana'a, Ibb, and Tuez, as well as in the Hadramawt cities.

Sana'a grew fast during the 1980s, thanks to the persistence of the rural exodus, but the city's growth exploded during the following decade as it benefited from new migratory flows. First, in retaliation for President Saleh's pro-Iraqi positions during the Gulf war, Saudi Arabia expelled all Yemenis. But after returning briefly to their villages, some of the migrants joined the rural exodus that had begun to flow in the 1970s.¹² As a result, the outskirts of the city during this period grew very fast, being centred around cores of unplanned residential areas where these populations had settled, without being assimilated by the State's rare territorial and urban planning schemes. Second, the reunification of Yemen, declared in 1990, increased the centralisation of power in Sana'a, which was chosen as the country's only capital city. These phenomena attracted urban populations that already possessed significant economic assets. These two events confirmed the domination of the capital over Yemeni territory, with its sphere of influence extending as far as Aden.

From then on the shift to a capitalist economy affected the whole country by bestowing an increased economic role on the cities. On a national level, the road network

¹¹ Allman and Hill, "Fertility, Mortality, Migration and Family Planning in the Yemen Arab Republic", *Population Studies* 32.1 (1978), pp. 159–71.

¹² According to Stefan Norra, who conducted research in the 1990s, 200,000 of these migrants took root in the urban area of Sana'a; a majority of them (600,000) went up to the rural zones of the Sana'a basin. Some of these zones are now included in the urban fabric. These urban figures contrast with that of 56,000, proposed by the Plan Office in 1991: Norra, *Sana'a Urban Ecology Study* (1994).

improved, as a result of a substantial infrastructure development policy which was aimed at expanding trade, stimulating all economic activities, and connecting the various urban centres (such as ports and coastal towns to the interior and secondary towns to the capital). Locally, huge roadside markets came into existence due to improvements in motorised transport (Dhamar, Bajil, etc.), which resulted in a modification of the country's urban framework. On an urban level, new districts appeared in the suburbs, shaped by all-purpose souks or "retail corridors"¹³ with a strong resemblance to western-style shopping malls.

1.2 Technical challenges and planning stakes

Nowadays Yemeni cities are facing a series of urgent problems, with the major preoccupation being unprecedented demographic pressure. Until the 1960s, Sana'a was a small town of 80,000 inhabitants, just as it had been at the beginning of twentieth century.¹⁴ According to official sources, its population jumped from 135,000 inhabitants in 1975 to nearly one million in 1994, and in 2004, Sana'a was home to 1,800,000 inhabitants. The growth rate in secondary towns has been as remarkable as in the capital, having reached 10% annually between the 1980s and the 2000s. It is probable that Aden, Taz and Hudaydah each contains over 600,000 inhabitants today, the population in Taz and Hudaydah having doubled between 1994 and 2004, while Mukalla has around 400,000 inhabitants (see Table I). However, from daily observation of building construction and from recent aerial photos, it can be assumed that most of the official data are probably underestimated. Furthermore, the census has failed to account for high birth rates.

This heavy demographic pressure causes major issues, including the question of water resources, and control of unregulated urban sprawl. First, the issue of water supplies is extremely troubling. Between 1985 and 1995 groundwater levels decreased by five metres per annum,¹⁵ and it is calculated that Sana'a only has a few years' supply remaining. Today's water supplies, which are still provided by private traders who fill individual customer's tanks, result in very strong social and economic segregation. Because of water's limited

¹³ Troin, "Sana'a: géographie d'une explosion urbaine", in *Sana'a hors les murs*, eds Grandguillaume, Mermier, and Troin (1995), p. 31.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Morsi, "La crise de l'eau au Yémen", *Averroès* (2010).

availability, households in Sana'a connected to the public water distribution network receive supplies only once a fortnight.¹⁶

Secondly, the slopes of Mounts Nugum and Aybān in Sana'a, like Jebel Sabir in Taz and Jebel Shamsān in Aden, have been densely built upon without any intervention by the public authorities (see Figure 2). Between 1990 and 2005, the informal settlement population in Yemen's urban areas grew by 229%, and today it is estimated that 70% of urban residents live in informal areas and slums.¹⁷ Housing built on slopes and other inaccessible spaces is not seen as a major problem, but governmental infrastructure is definitely a challenge. Lack of infrastructure and services in these suburban areas is truly disturbing since there is no water supply, electricity networks are always illegal, and there is effectively no public transportation. Meanwhile, certain areas, such as the rocky mountains of Faj <Attān in southwest Sana'a, are entirely covered by huge villas and houses for tribesmen and the elite.

Almost everywhere, the public authorities have proved to be incapable of containing urban expansion within precise boundaries, or even of establishing a planning policy. This may be explained by an over-staffed administration and a lack of coordination between national and local players (i.e., those who are theoretically in charge of urban planning and management).¹⁸ Consequently, Yemen still lacks clear land records and details of speculative

¹⁶ UN Habitat, *The State of Arab Cities* (2012).

¹⁷ Cities Alliance, World Bank, Government of Yemen, Capital's Secretariat of Sana'a, *Sana'a: a City Development Strategy* (2010), pp. 13–4.

¹⁸ Yemen's Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation is in charge of planning and mobilising external resources. Urban land is administered by the Ministry of Finance's Department of Public Domain and the Ministry of Public Works and Highways. The General Authority for Lands, Survey and Urban Planning is responsible for urban land inspections, surveys, layouts, and planning, while the Ministry of Planning delegates the General Organisation for the Preservation of Historic Cities as the competent authority with regard to planning matters and the protection of Yemen's historic cities. At the local level, the country is divided into twenty-one governorates, made up of twenty provincial municipalities and 326 district municipalities. The city of Sana'a has its own administrative structure — the Capital's Secretariat created in 1983. Equivalent in standing to a governorate, the Secretariat has been allocated a portion of the powers previously held by the Sana'a Governorate. In an environment already rife with difficulties due to decentralisation, this inevitably creates conflict between the two institutions.

land banking. Even if builders sometimes work in agreement with certain suburban landowners (also members of tribes in neighbouring governorates) most housing blocks have been built illegally, while rural populations often build on land that is owned by the army or is considered as *waqf*.¹⁹ But one must also consider the numerous steps involved in legislative reform to legalise and acknowledge the urban status of these districts. In practice, regenerative measures are not systematic, and in their attempts to force the inhabitants of informal settlements into a new and acknowledged orderliness, the authorities turn to ‘camouflage’ procedures by establishing symbolic services and amenities (refuse collection, mosque building, etc.), and trying to regularise their status. A supply of new legal tools is of the highest priority (see Section 3).

Table I: Population evolution in main cities of Yemen between 1975 and 2004

INSERT TABLE I HERE

INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE

Figure 2: Hārat al-Layl, informal area, northwest of Sana’a (by Roman Stadnicki)

3 A ‘faltering’ metropolisation

Sana’a today is at the top of the Yemeni urban pyramid, probably with over two million inhabitants, along with the four regional capitals: Aden, Mukalla, Taz, and Hudaydah. The population gap between the capital and the secondary towns is tending to decrease, even if the latter are not all growing at the same pace. At the heart of a process of metropolisation which can be described as ‘faltering’, Yemeni cities in general, and Sana’a in particular, nevertheless show that a city can acquire metropolitan attributes by spontaneously and progressively integrating an accumulation of demographic and economic factors into the urban fabric (e.g., high demographic pressure, services sector of the economy, segregation of migrants, etc.).

3.1 Sana’a: an ‘incomplete’ yet polarising capital

¹⁹ Property dedicated to pious purposes. It refers also to the office of religious affairs (*al-Awqāf*), set up especially for the management of pious legacies or foundations.

As the strengthened capital of a unified Yemen, Sana'a is located at the country's main crossroads. It hosts the most important educational institutions and most of the country's high command functions (political power, headquarters of big companies, etc.). More than other cities in Yemen, it is also experiencing a strong phenomenon of 'satellisation', being in fact a constellation of several urban and suburban centres, with smaller villages like Shamlan, Al-Rawda, Dār Salm (see Figure 5) which remain integrated within the metropolitan system, thanks to the networks formed recently by the traffic created by the workers. However, this network of secondary centres that is capable of connecting to the heart of the city, is not enough to allow Sana'a to escape from its "incomplete capital status".²⁰

The insertion of Yemen's capital into the global economy is a laborious process (as it is for the whole country which became a member of the World Trade Organisation at the end of 2013). Sana'a is not really part of the international division of labour, and its contribution to techniques and innovation is still limited. Although the city accounts for 21.6% of total employment and 30% of Yemen's industrial base,²¹ its means of production are nevertheless not very diversified. The service and retail sectors — composed mainly of small craft companies — are developing to the detriment of the industrial sector. Moreover, productive sectors rely on a cheap workforce and do not employ skilled personnel; a significant need for modernisation and training is expected. Very few local companies have real international connections, and despite new lines of economic policy that promote massive liberalisation and a withdrawal of the state, the growth of the private sector remains quite limited, although developments have been seen in customs exemptions, administrative simplification, and ease of earnings repatriation since the investment law of 1991.²²

²⁰ This expression, used for the first time in the 1960s in France by the geographer Michel Rochefort, refers to urban areas cut off from one or more drivers of growth, based on a loosely-structured regional area and suffering from a lack of autonomy [Rochefort, *Le défi urbain dans les pays du Sud* (2000), p. 20].

²¹ Cities Alliance, World Bank, Government of Yemen, Secretariat Capital of Sana'a, *Sana'a* (2010), pp. 13–4.

²² Destremau, "Tendances et perspectives de l'économie yéménite", *Revue du Monde Musulman et de la Méditerranée* 67 (1993).

Today, it seems that in terms of political direction, Sana'a is torn between the development model of the Gulf, and the reinforcement of its own heritage protection policy.²³ On the one hand, private and public actors openly draw inspiration from the development models of neighbouring countries (such as road infrastructure layout like those in Gulf cities; partnerships with Kuwaiti real estate companies, especially in the west side of the city; mall projects, etc). However, they do not have the same technical, financial, and fiscal means as Gulf countries.²⁴ Construction projects of this kind, mainly realised in the Gulf by Asian migrant workers, take much longer to achieve in Sana'a.

On the other hand, public authorities lean increasingly towards protection of Yemen's architectural heritage, under the influence of protection campaigns launched by UNESCO twenty-five years ago, and with the idea of benefiting from the positive economic consequences of such international recognition.²⁵ But here again, organisational structure remains a big issue, especially because the various institutions concerned (State, Capital's Secretariat, General Organisation for the Preservation of Historic Cities, noted above) have no

²³ The Sultanate of Oman, one of Yemen's neighbours, is experiencing a similar dilemma. As a member of the Gulf Cooperation Council, its financial resources are twenty times those of Yemen's in terms of GDP, and its architectural and natural heritage is far more present than that of its Gulf neighbours, thus enabling it politically to carry out modernisation of its infrastructure and preservation of its heritage.

²⁴ Yemen is not a member of the Gulf Cooperation Council. Though it filed for membership in 1999 and was welcomed by Qatar and Oman it was rejected by Saudi Arabia. While the prospect of accession to the GCC would allow Yemen to overcome the economic crisis in which it is immersed, Saudi Arabia was able to postpone admission until 2016. Officially, it suggests that Yemen still needs to pursue the timid reforms initiated in 2005 and overcome structural deficiencies in the financial and public sectors in particular. In reality, Saudi Arabia fears that the GCC might become "distorted" by the accession of a poor and heavily populated democratic country that experienced considerable unrest in 2011.

²⁵ UNESCO funded a large number of operations to restore buildings in the old city of Sana'a, which led to a sharp increase in tourism during the 1990s. Private individuals (who were owners of buildings, either restored or converted into hotels) benefited more than the public at large, including the General Organisation for the Preservation of Historic Cities, which was created in 1990 to manage and redistribute UNESCO aid.

real dialogue and no coherent overarching political project at the Greater Sana'a level.²⁶ The preservation requirement seems to prevail over other priorities in urban planning. Interviewed about his conclusions following his leadership of the Capital's Secretariat from 1999 to 2005, Al-Kuhlāni immediately stated: "Sana'a is a very important city because it is a very old one.... It needs rules to preserve it as it is".²⁷ In reality, public authorities cannot afford their preservation policy, which remains deficient, despite a political rhetoric that reveals a good mastery of "best practices" in terms of urban heritage (such as emphasis in government speeches on citizen participation in redevelopment projects, and the environmental approach to urban planning in accordance with international standards, etc.).²⁸

In such a context, it is difficult to imagine how Sana'a could become a centre of influence in the Arabian Peninsula; it neither complements nor really competes with other cities in the region. Its major infrastructural problems lead some to believe that a change might be needed in the location of Yemen's capital (since its high altitude complicates not only the supply of resources such as desalinated water, but especially its diminishing aquifer reserves). Marked by the 2011 revolution, Sana'a still represents the authoritarian government of Saleh and his army and, as the current capital, is also increasingly challenged by South Yemenis who would like to move some administrative functions or even the capital itself to Aden or Mukalla.

3.2 *The Awakening of secondary cities*

3.2.1 *Aden: a fragile economic capital*

²⁶ Stadnicki, "Patrimonialisation et fabrication urbaine dans le Yémen contemporain: le cas de Sana'a", in *Espaces urbains à l'aube du XXIe siècle: Patrimoine et héritages culturels*, eds Boulanger and Hullo-Pouyat (2010).

²⁷ Interview conducted in 2006.

²⁸ The Yemeni authorities, like governments of other developing countries, seem to adopt a "belief in a lifesaving methodological procedure that would help cope with the management crisis in urban development" [Navez-Bouchanine and Valladares, "Éditorial", *Espaces et Sociétés* 131 (2007), p. 10].

In spite of the rehabilitation of its port and industrial complex for the laborious establishment of a free zone in the early 1990s, Aden developed quickly during the 1980s and 1990s, as the incredible pressure on land confirms. At this time, the city bore no resemblance to what it had been like under the British protectorate, when it was the only city to have operated according to a strict master plan. As a result of deficient housing and bad management, pressure on land could be observed through the increase of high-rise buildings in the city centre, and the urbanisation of the slopes of Jebel Shamsān. With reunification and the civil war troubles in 1994, symbols of the socialist-Marxist regime disappeared, and growth slowed. This caused the country to enter an uncertain period economically, the effects of which still remain.

Nevertheless, for a decade or more, migratory flows have reached not only Sana'a but also Aden, where most of the migrants (who come from the Taz region) provide a cheap workforce for harbour industries as well as for retail trade in various small construction and catering companies (of three to five workers). Under the influence of migrants from the former North Yemen, some of Sana'a's traditional Yemeni architectural features are spreading, which sometimes produces a rather chaotic mix with Aden's British heritage. This process is made even more rapid by the lack of land regulation.

Aden is now trying to bring back the members of the elite who moved to Sana'a after reunification. The new development programme, conceived by governor Al-Kuhlāni's team during the mid-2000s (2005–11), included plans for new zones dedicated to large-scale property deals, and strengthened connections between the city's various economic centres (free zone, old harbour of Ma'allā, administrations of Madīnat al-Sha'b, petrol refinery of Little Aden), all of which are regarded as attractive for investors in Aden.

Before the reunification in 1990 and the loss of its status as the capital city, Aden was a strong economic centre, and is now attempting to recover its former characteristics. For example, the refinery of Little Aden, built in 1954 by British Petroleum, was modernised by the Yemeni government in 2008: in the same year, the third-largest world harbour operator, Dubai Ports World, signed an agreement with Aden's free port (which received few international shipping companies) with the aim of increasing its container capacity. The fact remains that the few current infrastructure modernisation projects, which include universities, hospitals, hotels, etc. (and are sometimes linked to the organising of the twentieth Gulf Cup of Nations football competition in 2010), did not erase the scars of transition following reunification. It is possible that separatist tendencies in the former South Yemen will pressure

the new government of Sana'a²⁹ to start a pro-active development policy in Aden, which is still widely regarded as the country's economic capital.

3.2.2 *Mukalla in full expansion*

After reunification, Mukalla (unlike Aden) went into a phase of unprecedented urban growth. According to Thomas Pritzkat, its booming real estate market results from two combined factors: the discovery of new oilfields 150 km north of the town in 1991, and the restitution of title deeds to nationalised land shortly after.³⁰ Mukalla, an ancient fishing harbour and the capital of Hadramawt, is now much more than what Jean-François Troin described in the mid-1990s as “a small local capital”.³¹ Thanks to major investments by the Hadramis from Saudi Arabia, there is now a push for urbanisation along the coast that combines houses for the upper classes with tourism complexes. Thus, member countries of the GCC, with whom Yemen wishes to deepen ties, are still easily able to exert their influence.

More and more national and international investors are now turning to Mukalla, as exemplified by the development of two new tourism centres, one on the site of the ancient Bedouin village of Fuwa (twelve kilometres west of the town centre) and the other on the site of two former fishing villages, Rawqab and Bawish (ten kilometres to the east).

3.2.3 *Constant growth of Tuez and Hudaydah*

Located in the south of the former North Yemen, Tuez is the administrative centre of the most populated governorate in Yemen. Since the 1950s the city's population has grown regularly and now stands officially at 600,000 inhabitants. Tuez has served several times as the capital of Yemen, having modernised and developed under the impetus of Imam Ahmad's leadership. Thanks to investments from the Tuezis diaspora in Aden, Sana'a, and abroad, urbanisation continued during the Civil War, and the city also benefited from the arrival of certain investors from Aden who had been threatened by collectivisations at the beginning of the

²⁹ Abd Rabbo Mansur al-Hadi was elected President of the Republic in February 2012, succeeding Ali Abdallah Saleh who was forced to resign after the social protests of 2011.

³⁰ Pritzkat, “The Hadrami Community in Saudi Arabia and the Rationale of Investing in the Homeland”, in *Le Yémen contemporain*, ed. Leveau, Mermier, and Steinbach (1999).

³¹ Troin, “La croissance urbaine au Yémen” (1999), p. 273.

socialist regime in South Yemen in the early 1970s. This enabled Taz to retain an important industrial sector, despite a post-reunification slowdown. The Al-Hawbān district, at the city's northern entrance, exemplifies local industrial dynamism (food-processing, consumer goods, building materials, etc.).

Hudaydah, which is the closest city to the Saudi border, was especially affected when Yemenis returned home from Saudi Arabia in 1990.³² Immediately after the influx of returnees, four large districts of ramshackle housing appeared.³³ During the 1970s Hudaydah, which had been the Arab Republic of Yemen's biggest port, became severely impoverished, despite government investments in infrastructure and in retail (e.g., tax incentives, land donated free of charge, etc.) throughout the 1970s and 1980s. This is especially visible in the Al-Tijāri district, near the harbour. Today, however, touristic projects are flourishing, with the construction of hotel complexes, beach developments, and so on. It is too early to say whether the city has a bright seaside future, but these projects show that some investors are keen to break with Hudaydah's industrial/harbour past.

4 Urbanities 'in progress': political, economic, and social transformations

4.1 *Questioning urban authorities*

The experience of former South Yemen as a state saw it undertaking a more assertive urban policy than was seen in North Yemen. This was particularly noticeable in the grid or checkerboard layout of the Crater quarter of Aden, which had been planned by the British and was protected by the Popular Democratic Republic of Yemen because of its functionalism. The socialist government also implemented a social housing policy in all former South Yemeni cities, by lowering rents and helping to build several thousand housing units. A significant grant was also made available for the rehabilitation of heritage housing. However, budgetary constraints prevented this young state from attaining all of its objectives. Today,

³² Lucet, "Les rapatriés de la crise du Golfe au Yémen: Hodeidah quatre ans après", *Monde Arabe Maghreb-Machrek* 148 (1995).

³³ De Regt and Ghailan, "Housing and Health Care in the City of Hodeidah", in *Yemen into the Twenty-First Century: Continuity and Change*, ed. Mahdi, Würth, and Lackner (2007).

not much remains of this proactive policy: reunification has erased local particularities in this field. Worse, the new Yemeni state is not very involved in urban issues.

On the one hand, since its financial resources are very low, it is more and more dependent on international donors who can impose their doctrines through financial pressure. Reform of public institutions, aimed at lowering the weight of central administration (through the administrative decentralisation law of 2000), has already begun under the auspices of the World Bank. This law delegated planning and administrative responsibilities to municipal and district councils. For example, in 2008 Yemen held its first elections for governors by council members, although most seats were won by the ruling party. This means that the decentralisation programme in Yemen, which was one of the most ambitious in the Arab world, is far from having been fully achieved, and has been further impeded by the political unrest in 2011.

On the other hand, there are increasing numbers of private companies and new semi-public operators, who have taken over the running of some urban programmes (rehabilitation of ancient districts, organisation of traffic networks, etc.). This obviously diminishes the role of the state, which was formerly the main project owner. At most, the state now retains control over laws and regulation through decentralised institutions and local authorities. But in general, transmission of expertise from state to local authorities has failed, and there are no clearly defined missions in any urban-linked institutions (departments, municipalities, government agencies, etc.).

It is precisely this kind of political context that has made the existence of an autonomous town authority an impossibility for Sana'a. Three factors explain the weaknesses of the Capital's Secretariat. First, it is mired in a tricky — if not contentious — relationship with central and local authorities;³⁴ secondly, it underestimates land and population pressure even though they are quite important in the main districts of the city; third, without any clear urban policy, strictly speaking, the organisation tries to solve the technical dysfunctions created by urbanisation after the fact, while neglecting the proactive aspect of its role as a planner.³⁵ Obviously, the main problem lies in this ambiguous state role, which fluctuates

³⁴ Conflicts with the Ministry of Public Works about the organisation of the transportation system, antagonism towards the Sana'a Governorate (*Muhāfazat San<ā>*) concerning territorial limits, etc. [Stadnicki, *Nouvelles centralités* (2009)].

³⁵ At its inception in 1983, the Capital's Secretariat took its master plan from a master plan that had been conceived in 1978 by the British consultants Berger and Kampsax. But the city

between being involved in the urban field and interfering in local affairs (the prime minister has supervisory authority). Thus, the Capital's Secretariat has real difficulties in affirming its own legitimacy and providing coherent guidance and action. Yet, part of its remit involves defining "the general development, industrialisation, and planning policy of the capital"³⁶ as specified in the 1983 law. The Capital's Secretariat lacks an all-embracing vision of urban policy. We can see this, on the one hand, in the role of "spontaneous economic and social forces"³⁷ in the construction of a city and, on the other hand, in the disproportion between planned spaces and illegal urbanised ones, which obviously outnumber the former.

The two most recent directors of this institution, Al-Kuhlāni and Al-Shu'aibī, both of whom were interviewed for this research, went so far as to acknowledge that the organisation was helpless in managing the city and its inhabitants, although without specifically mentioning the three reasons noted above. Al-Kuhlāni, who headed the Secretariat between 1999 and 2005, was shown to be powerless when confronted with the poor relationships between his institution and the central government. According to Al-Kuhlāni, this absence of interaction became counterproductive as soon as it came to planning a master policy:

We carried out our policy without a master plan. We sketched one, but it is now in the hands of the new municipality, which clearly wanted to start from scratch. The Department of Public Works was supposed to take care of its preparation because they don't respect our work and never take it into account.... Sana'a is developing itself in all fields, but without any strategic choices being made.... The city must absolutely find its function, its identity.

Al-Shu'aibī, who served as director from 2006 to 2011, emphasised a long list of problems on which his team worked daily. His rhetoric revealed that, for the Secretariat's director, the main issues lay more in the consequences of past urbanisation rather than in

grew beyond the boundaries suggested by this document. Although it was rendered obsolete by the demographic pressure of 1990 (see Section 1), it more or less remained the model document until the early 2000s.

³⁶ Al-Jarbani, *Le système des collectivités locales au Yémen*, PhD thesis (2003), p. 76.

³⁷ Wirth, "Les forces économiques et sociales de l'aménagement de Sana'a", in *Politiques urbaines dans le Monde arabe*, eds Métral and Mutin (1984), p. 451.

opening new paths of development. In fact, most of the tasks of the institution's employees involved issuing fines to people who failed to respect the application of regulations: "We have many problems with people working in the street.... Buildings consume green spaces.... We must move some cumbersome and harmful marketplaces to the outskirts of town", insisted Al-Shu'aibī.

4.2 Retail as a driving force for urban development

With its staggering development during the last few years, retailing has played a major role in starting the metropolisation process in Sana'a, and in the development of suburbs in most secondary cities.³⁸

Retail activities are over-represented in the urban space for several reasons: first, because retail forms are extremely and extraordinarily diverse, but also because such activities adapt themselves to the urban fabric, and because they play a central role in urban planning and development.

Above all, retail dynamics rely on the economic wellbeing of traditional retail structures — the souks. Apart from the fact that the souks of old cities are among the oldest urban markets of the Arabian Peninsula (Sūq al-Milh in Sana'a, Sūq al-Shanīnī in Taz, the old souks of Aden and Shibam, etc.), what makes Yemeni cities special is that the souks, their culture, and their model of trade and sociability have spread to the suburbs.³⁹ Souks have undergone many structural changes and social reorganisations because of the liberalisation of

³⁸ The development of retail is stronger in Sana'a than in other Yemeni cities. It has encouraged the development of a new business middle-class, which really grew during the 1962 Revolution (see below). In addition, the new occupations that appeared with "modernity" (taxi drivers, photographers, electricians, etc.) shook the traditional social order and easily integrated themselves into the social and economic landscape of the city [Lambert, "Consommation de masse et tradition à Sanaa: vers une culture urbaine", eds Grandguillaume, Mermier, and Troin (1995)].

³⁹ Mermier, "Souk et citadinité dans le monde arabe", *L'urbain dans le monde musulman de Méditerranée*, ed. Arnaud (2005).

the Yemeni economy.⁴⁰ However, this has apparently failed to degrade the intensity of the retail sector in any way.

Beyond the souks, trade takes its dynamism from the increasing number of individual shops. The modernisation of trade practices, the spread of urbanisation, and the emancipation from traditional social and familial structures, are the main factors of this phenomenon. Supermarkets are very successful, in the form of medium-sized department stores or franchised supermarkets (Saudi or Chinese multinationals). Furthermore, the past and present morphological structure of Yemeni cities is the one of retail cities *par excellence*. This is exemplified by contemporary architectural plans that allow for the possibility of having stores occupying the ground floors of buildings. Exactly the same structure can be found in traditional architecture, where small rooms that were meant for animals or sanitary evacuation became used for commercial purposes. The systemic relation between urban fabric and retail activities is particularly visible in the establishment of new districts. Quite often, commercial installations (souks, rows of shops, etc.) are installed before construction of the houses starts, and before the installation of infrastructures and services. Most of the shops are in use before the last floors of the building are even complete. Urbanisation grows around these commercial elements. The other urban elements are added and built around them; as such, they are generally drivers of growth.

In Sana'a specifically, players in the retail sector contribute greatly to creating and developing new centralities.⁴¹ Our research showed that some suburban spaces, for example, such as Hasaba and Madhbah, (see Figure 5) really became 'pioneering fronts' for souk tradesmen. These tradesmen are in a certain way responsible for the recent densification of these districts and for the fact that they have become multi-functional. This has several explanations.

First, tradesmen varied their skills to meet consumer demand. Some of them specialised in the sector supplying traditional products needed for social rituals (sweets for feasts, henna for weddings, etc.), while others chose to produce and sell cheap products. Others did not hesitate to be in direct competition with modern shops, by offering various products for a cheaper price (fabric, hardware, etc.), imported in particular from China.

⁴⁰ Dependency on imported goods, new consumer goods, the decline of craft activities, etc. [Mermier, "Les souks de Sana'a, un monde bouleversé: changements économiques et recompositions sociales", *Les Cahiers du GREMAMO* 10 (1991)].

⁴¹ Stadnicki, *Nouvelles centralités* (2009).

Second, alongside entrepreneurial ventures that thrive in the modern commercial districts and major souks, investors during the 1990s and 2000s undertook *ex nihilo* construction of smaller souks in the periphery. Located in neighbourhoods with high commercial densities, all these souks, which specialise mainly in the sale of *qāt*,⁴² benefit from customers who have been attracted by the surrounding commercial areas. Hasaba, with the small souk Abū Luhūm, or Dār Salm and Madhbah, with their new *qāt* markets, are especially favoured by this phenomenon (see Figure 5). Big growers or regional investors — who often come from important tribes — have invested large sums in modern transportation, thereby facilitating the delivery of *qāt* from the countryside to towns. The expansion of *qāt* sale in the urban space has permitted a reorientation of consumer flows towards new suburban districts while increasing commercial diversity.

Third, some souks experienced a fragmentation phenomenon, which resulted in districts having several specialised retail markets (four, sometimes five in Madhbah or Shumayla). Dictated by the districts' layout or by the growing importance of trading activities, this fragmentation of souk shops engendered connections between various retail areas within the same district. These districts are thus completely structured by commercial activities.

Fourth, the game of economic and financial rivalry sometimes generates an increase in the supply of souks. This is the case, for example, in Shumayla, where Muhammad al-Na<mī went to compete with Husayn Shumayla on the latter's own territory, by building his own souk housing several hundred shops — even though Husayn Shumayla was the district's main tradesman and investor. Husayn Shumayla responded by building a modern mall near the main souk. This building race resulted in an unprecedented level of dynamism in retail activity in this southern suburb of Sana'a.

The commercial revolution of the Yemeni capital affects not only the souks. The modernisation of the retail system has sparked the appearance of new forms of retailing, such as supermarkets, shopping centres, or malls (see Figure 5). New players come to the fore, open to a globalised society. For them, the new districts of Sana'a (Hadda, Madhbah) are privileged places for experimentation. In return, they influence the layout of these areas.

⁴² Stimulant plant consumed by a majority of Yemenis during afternoons. *Qāt*, whose cultivation on terraces in the Yemeni highlands has replaced coffee and reduced fruit and vegetable production, has a major impact on public health, the environment (massive use of pesticides), and productivity (several hours per day are spent on its consumption).

Several strategies can be identified: investments in big shopping centres, buildings that generally restructure the space profoundly (Shumayla-Hari in Hadda); powerful economic actors who buy high-end shops in strategic locations throughout the city (e.g., Al-Ruwayshān or Al-Shaybānī); rich traders who began their activities in souks, and then financed different modern commercial establishments, ranging from closed souks to western-style malls (many examples in Hāyil and Shumayla, see Figure 3); and recent investments in the ‘leisure retail’ sector (gastronomic complex in Hadda, leisure parks in <Asir, etc.).

Informal commercial activities (street-sellers, sometimes itinerant) are also part of urban development in Yemen. On the one hand, supply has become considerably diversified in recent years. Such diversity concerns not only the products themselves (fruit and vegetables; fabrics; clothes; shoes; jewellery; perfumes; kitchen utensils; fast-foods like roasted corn cobs, boiled potatoes, hard boiled eggs; etc.), but also the mode of selling (single prices, batch selling, auction selling) and the structures (normal or tray-equipped wheelbarrows, cardboard boxes, canvas covers, car roofs, etc). On the other hand, these selling structures are easy to handle and the inventories are quite small, which allows the sellers to choose an appropriate location and possibly to move on regularly.

These important assets allow the street sellers to fill the needs of formal retail in some newly-urbanised districts, to the extent that local bureaucracy — often very restrictive — delays the opening of new shops. This compensation also plays on the market supply itself, street vendors selling products that stores do not wish to sell because of low profit margins (fruit and vegetables, bread, etc.). Informal retail is certainly a response to a deterioration in workers’ living conditions, and is a consequence of the liberalisation and deregulation of the Yemeni economy because of growing globalisation. But it offers a significant alternative in a city increasingly organised according to mobility. Informal retailing can be considered as a wealth- and employment-creating sector, which evades heavy tax burdens and can cleverly adapt itself to new relations between citizens and urban space.

INSERT FIGURE 3 HERE

Figure 3: A small commercial centre in Shumayla, Sana’a (by Roman Stadnicki)

INSERT FIGURE 4 HERE

Figure 4: Commercial street al-Zubayrī, Sana’a (by Roman Stadnicki)

INSERT FIGURE 5 HERE

Figure 5: Retail establishments in Greater Sana'a

4.3 City life and urban culture: hybridisation at work

Old and compact Yemeni cities have been replaced by dispersed and fragmented urban territories (but have not disappeared completely). This change has brought a complete upheaval in ancient social structures and traditional city life, which for centuries were dictated by the attributes of urban elites and differentiation from the tribal world. Among these upheavals have been the establishment of thousands of shopkeepers and craftsmen of low social class — migrating from the countryside to cities — as well as the constant influx of tribal people who came to enrich themselves through the commerce of *qāt*.

The suburbs are the place where two profiles meet: ‘neo-city-dwellers’ from rural migrations, and people prone to moving by ‘centrifugal force’ — who have already had an urban experience in central districts and have left their homes in the old city for modern housing in the suburbs. Surveys of households in Sana'a reveal the importance of population shifts toward the suburbs. These shifts are explained by the desire to own property, rising rent costs in the city centre, accessibility by car, the attractiveness of modern buildings, and new types of businesses.⁴³ Such changes imply reconsideration of the relation between ‘ancient’ and ‘new’ city-dwellers, as well as the urban-rural dynamic.

⁴³ The personal itinerary of Yasir (IT technician, thirty-six years old when we interviewed him in 2011), reflects some of these population shifts. In 1996, upon his return from Djibouti where he had long been expatriated, Yasir moved into the city centre, near the Italian Embassy, not far from al-Zubayri Street and Tahrir Square. A few years later, Yasir, who seemed to have trouble coping with the steady increase in rent (10,000 riyals, or about \$50 per year), decided (with the help of his stepfather) to buy land near Hadda-Madina and to build his own house there. “We hesitated”, says Yasir, “because of the many disputes that arise between people regarding land. But in 2001, my father finally bought the land from a parent, which facilitated the transaction and reduced risk.” Thus, the establishment of Yasir and his family in the southwest suburbs of the city seems to have been motivated by a real estate opportunity and the ascension to homeownership by building his own house. This seems to be the *de facto* situation guiding those to the periphery from the city-centre where hardly any

Tribesmen are responsible for most of the *qāt* trade. Urbanisation in the suburbs of major cities has been accelerated through their wealth and their participation in commerce. Through these activities, they deal with the merchant community — usually referred to as “the weak people” whose servant status is “hereditary”.⁴⁴ The sharing of a territory based on economic activities induces new hierarchies and new issues, disrupting the patron-client relationship that is still in use in the countryside between tribal people and souk merchants. Some sheikhs had their villas built in southern districts of Sana’a: the close surroundings of Hadda, the foothills of the Bayt Baws village, etc. Through this residential choice, tribal leaders have freed themselves from community life, preferring to be mixed with a population of *nouveaux riches*, businessmen, senior officials, statesmen, and others. The expression of social status does not preclude a few architectural idiosyncrasies (villas in a neo-classical or neo-baroque style) and territorial curiosities (boulders placed in the middle of the road). Nor is this type of practice specific; everyone behaves this way in these upscale areas. Occasionally, one can note dozens of sparkling 4x4 vehicles around a villa: it may indicate that a tribal chief lives there and has invited a few members of his clan to share some *qāt*.

The spontaneous accumulation and juxtaposition of local traditions with western-inspired locations — symbols of urban modernity — illustrates the emergence of plural identities or, as one might say, the “pluralisation of social realities”.⁴⁵ In support of this analysis, here is an excerpt from an interview with a trader located on al-Matar Street, north of the city, a few hundred metres from the Daris district: “My neighbourhood is not as well serviced as the south of the city but we are lucky to have good neighbours; modern and solid houses; Hasaba — one of the city’s best *qāt* souks; and a supermarket nearby to buy groceries for the whole family.”

This quote reveals the multitude of reference points, the territorial diversity and the fundamentally pluralistic identities that define the new zones on the outskirts of Sana’a. Our interlocutor seems to be thankful he did not have to choose between a “respectable” neighbourhood — traditionally very important in Yemen — and modern household amenities, or between the souk and the supermarket. Later in the interview, he also mentioned the

vacant lots remain. Many residents of the central districts of Sana’a have followed a path similar to Yasir’s.

⁴⁴ Dresch, *Tribes, Government and History in Yemen* (1993), p. 133.

⁴⁵ Depaule, “Sanaa: chroniques des années 1980”, *Yémen. D’un itinéraire à l’autre*, ed. Naïm (2001), p. 32.

proximity of a mosque where he goes “two to three times a day”, when time permits. He adds, in the same sentence, that with his car, he can “do it all very quickly”, including grabbing a chicken leg to eat at KFC (a fast-food restaurant in Hadda he particularly enjoys). Here, our interlocutor demonstrates his extraordinary ability to adapt to all the changes that affect Sana’a society, and its new urban context characterised by a plurality of neighbourhoods and lifestyles.

5 Conclusion

Yemen seems currently to be at the height of its urban transition which, following an urban explosion, may be the beginning of a new era. A new urban geography comes to light through several underlying dynamics such as the loosening of big urban areas that are undergoing a satellisation process, the boom of some middle-sized cities seizing the opportunity of transforming themselves entirely, or the slowing down of activities in some historic districts. Above all, the inhabitants keep a close control on the construction of their own living space by circumventing official urban planning shortcomings.

The regional and national selection, with regard to production capacities and international connections, would certainly tend to exclude Yemeni cities from the global urban archipelago. However, we can observe an urban, merchant, and connected middle class that lives in the ‘smart’ districts of Sana’a, Aden, and Mukalla. One can take this as a sign of globalisation in Yemen’s urban areas — not yet really part of big international exchange fluidity, but not totally out of the global system. In the suburbs of big cities, souks, *qāt* markets and mosques run alongside supermarkets, leisure parks, or fast-food establishments, which favour hybridisations and the emergence of pluralistic territorial identities.

The Yemeni capital appears vulnerable on many fronts. The political ambitions of economic development fail to hide the shortcomings it has accumulated in many fields, and the competition it is facing both in this sub-region of the world and even nationally. Sana’a’s standing stems not so much from its economic development as from its cultural potential. This is evidenced by the efforts that have been exerted to protect the city’s heritage for the past twenty years, and the resulting increase in tourism. However, the political management of this heritage issue, just as with other urban sites, significantly dampens the city’s potential influence.

As part of the Integrated Urban Development Project, started in 2009 with support from the World Bank, Yemen's government was required to develop a national plan for urban development that had to be implemented by the local authorities. Notably, the plan aimed to improve the living conditions in informal settlements. In Sana'a, the government had also prepared a City Development Strategy that identified planning challenges, made recommendations for its economic development, and improved financial management.⁴⁶

The events of 2011 put these projects on hold, and priorities now lie in "national dialogue", supported by the United Nations and funded by international donors, which brings together representatives of the country's different political, military, and social forces. This dialogue should lead to the drafting of a new constitution and preparation for national elections scheduled for February 2014. Priority also lies in the management of the urban humanitarian crises, and in particular, the management of hundreds of thousands of displaced people in Sa'ada (in the north of Yemen, following six years of conflict that pitted the government against Zaydi rebels), and in Hadramawt (cities of Sibam and Sayun) following the floods of 2008.

Through their structure and organisation, these cities reflect the political, economic, and social unrest in Yemen, as illustrated by the protest movements that started there in 2011 and caused serious damage, especially in the Hasaba district in Sana'a. There are many worrying and uncertain issues concerning the establishment of sustainable urban development in Yemen: technical malfunctions due to uncontrolled explosive urban growth, saturation of the labour and property markets, rigidity of governing forms, and now, political instability. The lack of urban studies in this country prevents any foresight. For now, only individual case studies can shed new light on urban issues in Yemen.

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