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Sana'a: A hybrid city

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Old elites are abandoning the old city and are moving to newer residential areas of Sana'a like Hasaba, Hayil, and Shumaila. (badalotti.com)

Mostly known for its old city—which has been listed as a UNESCO world heritage site since 1986—Yemen's capital has witnessed unprecedented urbanization trends over recent decades that have restructured the city along territorial and social lines.

Little is known about the organization of Yemen's capital, apart from its old city center, its history, souqs, traditional tower-shaped houses, and ancient buildings like its Grande Mosque—built, it is said, during the life of the Prophet.

1970-2000: Three decades of urban explosion

Even though Sana'a constitutes one of the very first urban centers in the Arabian Peninsula, the city remained a small town until the end of the 20th century.

During Yemen's Imamate (898-1962) the development and diversification of Sana'a's economic and cultural functions progressed slowly. At the time, the pattern of Sana'a's growth followed that of other Arab-Islamic cities: An expanding of the souq, a re-centering of the city around its main mosque, and the emergence of culturally segregated neighborhoods. Sana'a's Turkish neighborhood, Bir Al-Azab, emerged during the first Ottoman occupation in the 16th century, and was long preserved as a place of leisure for the imams, while the city's Jewish neighborhood, Qa Al-Yahud, emerged in the 18th century.

Today Sana'a's development is being shaped by growing demographic pressure, a rapid spread of new buildings, and the resulting intensity of traffic flows. Its urban layout is the product of the 1962 revolution, a phase of economic prosperity and sustained commercial activity that followed, and increasing rural-urban migration.

Prior to the 1962 revolution, tribal law forbid farmers with land extending to the old city walls from selling any land to urban dwellers. This explains why Sana'a could not spread beyond its traditional borders until 1962. It also explains the intensity of the "urban explosion" that followed the revolution.

Early urbanization was marked by attempts to modernize the city's infrastructure. A Chinese company funded the building of the Hodeida-Sana'a road, completed in 1961, which remains a major highway today, connecting Sana'a with Hodeida city. The road's construction symbolized the beginning of the country's automobile era and constitutes the starting point of the city's extension towards the west (Al-Zubayri Street). The end of the 1960s also witnessed the creation of Tahrir Square (Freedom Square), regarded as the first planned development project in Yemen.

Tahrir Square was thought by many to symbolize the control of the republican government over the city. The large square also reflects Egyptian influence on the Yemeni development process: The construction plans of Tahrir Square were designed by engineers and architects from Cairo, who aimed to provide Sana'a with a central business district.

Following its construction, a great number of ministerial and financial institutions, as well as shops, were eager to settle close to Sana'a's new city center, which in their eyes symbolized modernity and Yemen's turn toward Egypt, a leading economic power in the Arabic world at the time. As a result, Al-Mughni and Jamil Street, which surround the square, were densely populated with administrative and commercial institutions, and Tahrir Square quickly took on the role of a versatile economic center—a role that older areas were no longer able to fulfill.

With the ending of civil war in 1969, the city began developing at a higher rate. At the time, the new republican regime was supporting and facilitating the emigration of Yemeni workers to economically booming Gulf countries. Having been employed as workers at large Saudi, Emirati, and Kuwaiti construction sites, many Yemenis started up a number of businesses upon their return to Yemen. The country was then enjoying an era of relative economic prosperity, which was to last over ten years. In Sana'a, most of the capital provided by returnees flowed into the construction sector, triggering an unprecedented boom in the city's urban economy. Construction materials, carpenters, locksmiths, electricity, imported machinery, and other industries and products were required to sustain the city's development.

The urban growth of the 1980s was stimulated by waves of newly returning Yemenis, a government that was keen to affirm its role as a modernizing force, and the diversification of commercial activities, including the expansion and multiplication of souqs, the development of retail businesses, and the emergence of small and large supermarkets. After building Dayiri Street in the 1970s, the municipal authorities created a new ring road towards the end of the 1980s, Al-Siteen Street, which added a concentric structure to Sana'a. The road quickly improved the situation of new peripheral neighborhoods, while encouraging the creation of others. In addition to the west, urbanization—which is blocked on the east by the Nuqum Mountain—spread southward, mainly along Taiz Road, and northward.

During the 1990s, Sana'a's urban explosion, which experienced a jump from 140,000 inhabitants in 1975 to almost one million in 1994, was amplified by increasing rural-urban migration trends. Initially, a high number of Yemeni emigrants—between 500,000 and one million according to estimates at the time—were expelled from Saudi Arabia during the Gulf war. The eviction was politically motivated, with the Saudi kingdom opposing former President Saleh's pro-Iraqi position. After a quick return to their villages, Yemeni returnees joined the rural exodus which had set in a few years prior to their homecoming, and moved to nearby cities. Domestic migrants mostly settled down in informal settlements on Sana'a's outskirts. Moreover, the reunification of North and South Yemen in 1990 added new importance to Sana'a as a political and administrative center. The unique capital soon attracted people from the former South, mainly from Aden. Better-off than the people who had migrated to the city earlier, southerners settled down in wealthier suburban neighborhoods located around Hadda Street.

Moving centralities

Nowadays, Sana'a's population is very likely to exceed official figures put forth by the Yemeni government, which estimates the number of the capital's inhabitants at two million.

While not included in government estimates, some of the neighborhoods that had emerged in the course of the city's urbanization process seem to have real economic potential, while also constituting key spaces for social life. The formation of these new "centralities" suggests a rethinking of center-periphery relations in Sana'a.

Sana'a's old city is being abandoned by its old elites, who are increasingly attracted to new residential areas located in the city's periphery. At the same time, the city's central souq, Souq al-Milh, is losing its place in Yemen's modern market economy—its roads are too narrow, its buildings dilapidated, and its caravanserais have long been abandoned.

Tahrir Square, while remaining the core of intra-urban connections, has lost much of its economic importance, with many specialized shops, businesses, and services having moved elsewhere. Despite efforts to promote its symbolic centrality, including the development of a small park, public authorities have not managed to slow the decreasing importance of this "old modern center."

Today, Hasaba in the north, Shumaila in the South, and Hayil in the west constitute Sana'a's three new urban centers. They all enjoy intense trade activities, dynamic souqs, and reliable public transportation, and play a double role in the construction of greater Sana'a: They serve as a bridge between the city center and the wider Sana'a basin and are developing links of interdependence with the new peripheral neighborhoods.

Preserving without planning: The limits of public authorities

The emergence of Sana'a's polycentric structure was never planned by public authorities, who are more concerned with the preservation of the old city center. Prior to 2011, the protection of historical sites as a "showcase," and the preservation of the old city's small economic impact in the areas of tourism and craft, seemed reason enough to emphasize the old city over challenges that lie in the social and political regulation of extra-mural peripheral areas.

To this day, urban and commercial regulations are barely in existence. Public authorities seem to engage in "catching up" strategies—including the posterior legalization of informal settlements and the slow expansion of public services—and branding strategies, such as the building of the Saleh Mosque in Hadda.

Identity hybridizations

The exceptional growth of Sana'a has unsettled its former social order, which used to be shaped by the city's urban elite and its general understanding of being "different from" the tribal world. Among these changes is the constant influx of tribal populations, many of whom come to the capital in hopes of making a fortune through the qat trade. The urbanization process itself has also involved an increasing number of merchants and craftsmen of a "lower social status" coming from the countryside to Sana'a.

At the same time, a business-oriented, educated, and increasingly "deculturized" urban bourgeoisie has emerged in wealthy neighborhoods bordering Hadda Street, which reflects increasing globalization trends in the city.

If, as everywhere else, social inequalities are increasing in Sana'a, plural identities are likely

to appear. They would be the result of a spontaneous accumulation and juxtaposition of traditional urban spaces and localities that are impacted by a global urban modernity.

The peripheral spaces of Sana'a are creating an entirely novel identity mosaic, which is mostly the result of private initiatives and inhabitants' own life-style choices. These spaces are announcing deep social changes, hastened by the revolution of 2011, which are likely to move beyond the Yemeni capital and spread elsewhere in the country.