

Toward Livable City Centers. Hebron as a Case Study

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1 ABSTRACT

City centers of Palestinian cities face many urban planning problems; the downtown city is mostly crowded especially in the last few years, because of the increasing population of the cities and the daily migration of the residents from the nearby villages. Everyone can touch the traffic jam problem, the bad quality of urban spaces, the lack of gardens and open spaces in the city center. All this affects negatively the citizens of the city, feeling uncomfortable in the city center. Thus, this study comes to light to draw guidelines to create a comfortable and livable urban environment for people in the city center and to develop the city center to a more environmental, functional, beautiful, attractive, healthier, walk-able and livable place. This will improve the quality of life for Palestinian citizens through the city center reflecting a legible image of the city, reducing environmental and visual pollution, solve traffic jam problems, solve mixed use problems, and enhance the social relations between the people themselves and between the urban spaces.

To achieve the goal of this study, theories related to the subject are discussed, then Hebron city, the largest city of the West-Bank, is selected as a case study. An analysis of existing situation of Hebron city center is conducted in terms of land use, and transportation which will pave the way for suggesting a new structure of the city center forming basic guide lines for other city centers of Palestinian cities. This study is so important, to draw down new policies for municipalities related to city centers.

Key words: city center, unhealthy spaces, traffic jams, pedestrians, opens spaces.

2 INTRODUCTION

This paper focuses on creating livable city centers in Palestine. Palestinian cities transformed significantly in the last century, from the traditional form characterized by back to back buildings, courts, pedestrians, and open spaces to a modern form characterized by the lack of open public spaces and gardens. This transformation was not accompanied with new suitable policies and regulations dealing with this new situation. This study emphasizes on the city center area considering it, an important area for the whole group of the society. Walking through the streets of the city centers reveals many problems facing that area; traffic congestion, lack of public spaces and gardens, urban deterioration, and unhealthy spaces. All these have been affecting the quality of life in the center of Palestinian cities. The main goal of this paper is to create a comfortable urban environment for people in the center, in order to make it more environmentally friendly, functional, attractive, and healthier place. Hebron city center is selected as a case study because it reflects the phenomena that the study focuses on. The output of this study are new recommendations and new guidelines aiming to enhance the quality of life in the city center to create livable and walk-able places in the city center. This study will form a corner stone to other studies dealing with the same subject leading to a new image for new city centers of Palestinian cities: an image of attractive appearance, healthier, environmentally friendly, and more functional place, transformation our centers from hostile centers to welcoming centers.

3 LITERATURE REVIEW

Mumford (1937) defines the city as “a geographic plexus, an economic organization, an institutional process, a theater of social action, and an aesthetic symbol of collective unity” Mumford defined the city as a theater of social action to emphasize the importance of social activities that reflect the culture and communication between citizens in the city. As Herbert Girardet (2000) indicates, one of the most important layers of the city is the human social activity. Meaning that, the city is not just a physical structure and a trading center but also a space of social activities. Without that layer, the city loses its livability.

The city center is the heart of the city. It contains the main commercial activities, offices, and gardens. It has a uniqueness that differs it from others parts of the city that makes it attractive for different social groups

from all parts of the city. Which means that, planners, urban designers, and policy makers should consider special criteria, such as enhancing social relationships, while putting policies related to it. Through history nations considered significantly public open spaces in city centers, forum and agora are significant features of Roman and Greek cities, public piazzas of great mosques were very obvious in Islamic cities. These public spaces were social, cultural, and political spaces, symbolizing the ancient communities.

The Physical form of the city has a huge impact upon their citizens. It affects children, women, adults, and elderly peoples either in a positive or a negative way. Gehl wrote (1980) that the physical environment is considered the main factor that influences out-door activities in the city. Gehl J. (1987) wrote that there are three types of outdoor activities in public spaces: necessary activities such as going to school or work, optional activities which are participated only when exterior space conditions are optimal, when weather and place invite people so it is dependent upon exterior physical conditions for example of optional activity is taking a walk to get a breath of fresh air. Thus, the outdoor activities depend on the exterior physical conditions. If the city has a good and high quality of public spaces the optional activities will occur, otherwise the necessary activities only occur. In this case the people achieve the necessary activities then they hurry up to their houses.

Existing public spaces in the city enhances the social interaction, strengthen the identity and the sense of belonging to the place. As Altman and Werner point out (1985) that if people do not contact and interact with each other, the identity and sense of belonging will be weakened. Many contemporary theorists encourage the existence of open spaces in the city center such as Madanipour (1996) who indicates that public spaces express our public life and civic culture. Carr S. (1995) emphasizes that public spaces enable people to feel that they are from a larger community, provide the opportunities of interaction between people and participation in street life. Blumenberg E. (2008) points out that, public spaces provide people with opportunities to express themselves, including their political opinions. An obvious recent example for this is Al-Tahrir square in Egypt that is used from citizens to protest against the old regime of Egypt.

4 SITE STUDY AND ANALYSIS

Hebron city has the largest area among cities in the West bank; it lays on about 200 thousand square dunms. According to the Palestinian Central Bureau of statistics the population of Hebron in 2011 is approximately 189,000 citizens. It is located about 20 miles southwest of Jerusalem.

As most of Palestinian cities, there is an old city in Hebron which was the main place for commercial and social activities about fifteen years ago. However, nowadays the old center lost its function as the Hebron city center due to many reasons, political (Israeli occupation), social, and economical. The city center moved gradually from the old city to edge of it (Bab Elzawya), then towards west (Almanara Square), expanding towards north until (Ibin Roshed Square) (fig. 2). The existing city center (CBD) is called (Albalad). This does not mean that the borders of the city center stops there, there is a continuous extension of the city center towards the main street of Hebron that connects the city center to its northern part then to Jerusalem.



Fig. 1: Hebron in West Bank
Source: <http://www.poica.org>



Fig. 2: Transmission of city center from the old city to West. Source: Author.

After Oslo agreement, the priority of the Palestinian Authority (P.A.) and Palestinian municipalities was constructing and rehabilitating the infrastructure of the Palestinian cities; water network, sanitation, paving streets, and constructing new schools and administrative institutions. Neglecting the development of new regulations for the cities and rehabilitating city centers. This led to chaos in Palestinian cities.

The development of the city center has occurred randomly, without well-studied plans. The city center of Hebron which is shown in (fig. 3) has the following characteristics:

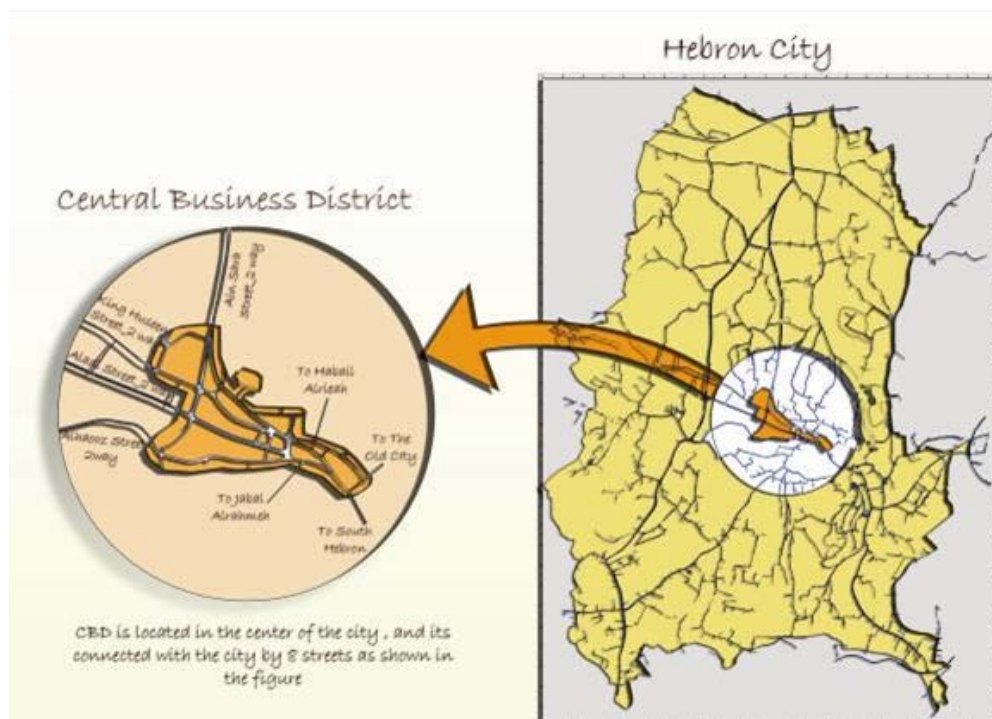


Fig. 3: The border and location of city center of Hebron. Source: Halawani A., Atawneh S., Za'tare I., Sultan M., 2008

- Traffic congestions because public transportation mainly depends on small taxis that contain four seats or seven seats (fig. 4). This causes ridiculous traffic congestion in the city center especially in the peak hours. Moreover, there is no existence of buses or light train as an efficient mean of public transportation.
- Neglecting of old buildings which have an architectural and historical value.
- The mixed land use in the city center between educational facilities and commercial activities causes pressure on traffic in the morning and afternoon during peak hours, increasing traffic flow in the city center, and increasing risks of accidents among pupils. In addition to that there is the noise coming from the streets around the schools, annoying students during classes.
- Narrow and uncomfortable sidewalks that are used by shops owners, leading people to walk on streets and move in crowds with cars in the same route in the city center (fig. 5).



Fig. 4: Traffic jam in city center. Source: Author



Fig. 5: People walking in the streets due to narrow sidewalks. Source: Author

- No existence of open spaces, pedestrian sidewalks and public gardens except (Ibn Roshd garden), with a very small area reaching about 700 square meters (Hebron municipality). This shows that very limited area is devoted for gardens and green spaces, all the area of city center is devoted to cement blocks and asphalt streets leading to unlivable city. Thus, people do not find a space to interact with each other in the city center. The streets are full of traffic jams and shopkeepers use the pavements as a platform for their goods, not leaving any space for regular contacts between people.
- Constructing high rise building (mixed use with commercial and offices) in the city center without providing sufficient parking space inside buildings, causing pressure on traffic flow (fig. 6, fig. 7).

In addition to that, the city center city center is designed more for cars than people, on the contrary of traditional cities, the streets -in the old cities- were belonging to the people but now the streets are belonging to the cars. Thus, people lost the sense of belonging and normal social interactions in their cities.



Fig. 6: High rise buildings in city center. Source: Author



Fig. 7: Mixed use high rise building in city center. Source: Author

5 NEW STRUCTURE OF CITY CENTER OF HEBRON

People look to the city center as an economic and a commercial center, while it is a social, cultural and commercial center. It should contain cultural activities such as festivals and art galleries side by side with commercial and public offices. As mentioned the goal of the study is to develop a livable and walk-able city center. Hence, the city center must be built to give people relax, calm, and the opportunity to communicate, reflecting the culture of people. This goal could not be achieved without enhancing the social interaction within it, by drawing new policies and regulations related to that. The proposed development of the city center is based on the following:

1. Organize the transportation in the city center by enhancing public transportation

Current transportation system gives the priority of using private cars and taxis, causing air pollution, congestion and eco-system destruction. The traffic circulation is organized by the allocation of public parking around the city center, suggesting bus routes to move within city centers center which facilitates the movement of people between the city center and its edges as (fig. 8) indicates. The suggested buses will service the city center, having specific bus stops and accurate time schedules, reducing the dependence on taxis which are considered one of the causes of traffic jams. Everybody can use this bus and go to achieve his goal either working, purchasing ...etc, without difficulty. This reduces the use of cars and reduces the high need of parking beside sidewalks leading to the creation of wider side-walks.

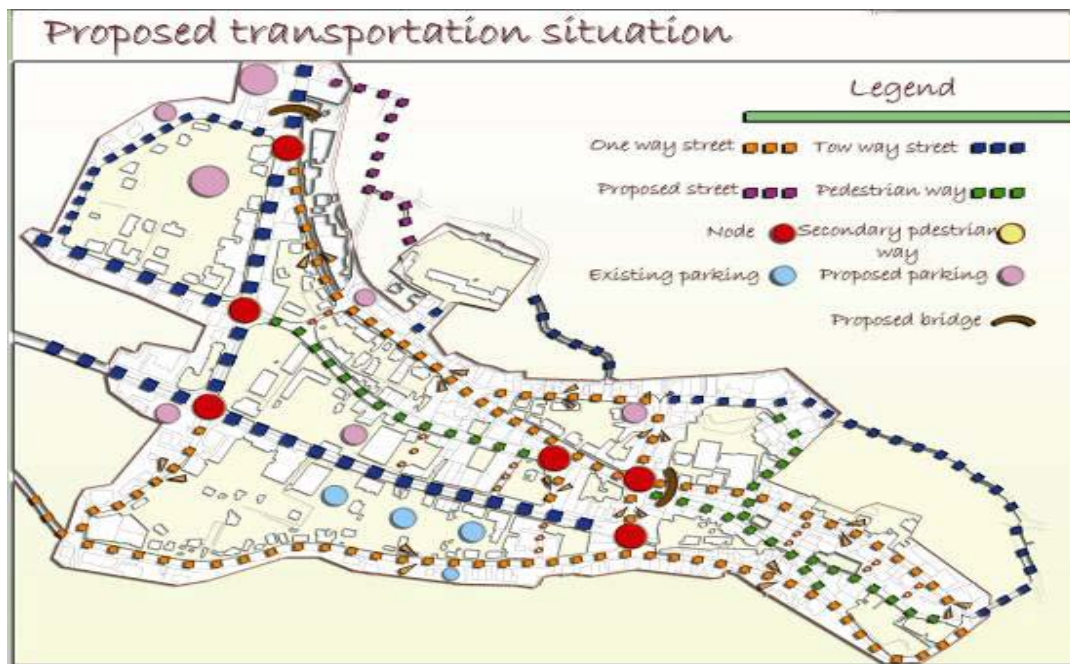


Fig. 8: Proposed transportation plan. Source: Halawani A., Atawneh S., Za'tare I., Sultan M., 2008

2. Enhancing pedestrians streets and auto-restricted zones

Creating pedestrian streets leads people to spend more time in their cities, interacting, communicating, and enhancing their sense of belonging to the city. Calthorpe P. wrote (1993) "pedestrians are the catalyst which makes the essential qualities of communities meaningful". He adds "pedestrians are the measure of a community; they set the scale for both center and edge of our neighborhoods. Without the pedestrian, an area's focus can easily lose". The area devoted to pedestrians should be enlarged. This means develop new pedestrian streets and enlarge the side walk which should include trees, lighting poles, and benches.

In addition to that, it is important to create green roots in the city center by planting trees in the sidewalks of the streets. If the street looks interesting, the city looks interesting; if they look dull, the city looks dull (Jacobs, J. 1961) . The trees modify the scene and the views from an uncomfortable scene to a comfortable one.

3. Increase open spaces, plazas and gardens.

J.B Jackson (1985) defines a plaza as an urban form that draws people together for passive enjoyment. The analysis shows a lack of open spaces within the city center, which influences negatively the social interaction. It is important to design livable open spaces not artificial spaces by connecting open spaces with commercial activities, organizing cultural activities, allowing artists and architects to design sculptures and creating open galleries. There are many elements that can add livability to the open spaces including trees which reduces air pollution, fountains, and benches. Natural elements such as greenery, trees, and water can relax, calm, and refresh people and removes the person from the flow of every day events and demands (Carr S., 1995). Gardens and parks are considered as a lug for the city and are essential for the city center, adding livability to the space. Three gardens and two plazas are suggested within the city center as the following figure shows.



Fig. 9: Proposed Gardens. Source: Halawani A., Atawneh, S, Za'tare I. Sultan M., 2008

The following guidelines - adopted from the book “public spaces” (Carr, 1995).- should be taken into consideration in designing open public spaces:

- Providing the basic needs of people (comfort, relaxation, and discovery) to make the space a livable space, not a useless space. Natural features and water enhances comfort and relations in the space.
- Accessibility to all groups of the community, allowing them to express their thoughts such as the Hyde park in London in which people can speak freely and express their ideas. In other words protecting the right of people in public spaces.
- The space should be meaningful that relate to the city physical and social context. Public spaces symbolize the community culture.

4. Organizing and Increasing the width of side walks

The sidewalks are narrow and sometimes are occupied by shop sellers. This does not affect just the circulation of pedestrians, but also affects negatively the social interaction, and decreases the comfort of people in city center. Sidewalks usually serve multiple functions. They facilitate pedestrian circulation and they are public spaces in which vital aspects of city life occur; places for commerce, spaces for social interaction, and social activity such as political protest (Blumenberg, 2008). Thus it is proposed to prevent sellers to occupy sidewalks because they are public spaces and to allow more space for people to communicate and feeling comfort while walking.

5. Modifying the school functions from educational activities to cultural activities such as public galleries and cultural centers. There are three schools in the city center that is important to find a new location for them outside the city center.

All that leads to a livable and comfortable city center. Moreover, the people will spend more time in their city center practicing the optional activities that Gehl mentioned in his book “life between buildings”.

6 CONCLUSION

This study focuses on creating policies for livable city centers, mentions a detailed case study from Palestine (Hebron) in order to present the applicability of theories that the study follows. The aim of the study is to create a comfortable environment for citizens, and walk-able city center. The concept of walk-able city center is a new concept for modern Palestinian cities; however it was an obvious characteristic of traditional cities. This study tries to offer an applicable solution and techniques for livable center. The study opens the windows to new detailed studies related to public spaces in city centers, how to be comfortable and meets the needs of people. It is observed that people lost happiness while walking in their city streets. The space lost the identity of the place, however city center can be a place of beauty, relaxation, and social interaction by creating open spaces, pedestrians, and gardens. Thus, the study suggests pedestrian streets, open spaces, and public gardens. To enhance the livability and identity of the city center forming the first step for future change.

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