

## MECCA: POLICY OF DESTRUCTION OR DEVELOPMENT?

The Holy City of Mecca is the physical focus of the daily devotions of every Muslim on earth and is also a place of pilgrimage. All Muslims hold Mecca in both awe and reverence and therefore expect it to be the city of their dreams. But how does Mecca in its existing condition measure up to this wonderful vision?

To be absolutely honest and to face facts with courage, the existing city falls far short of the vision and an analysis of the existing urban development plans gives little hope for the future. Only the great beauty of the Holy Ka'aba in the Great Mosque and the solace and community spirit of the Meccan Villages give us a glimpse of what Mecca was in the past and how it might be in the future: a Noble City. Modern Mecca has all the worst characteristics of modern cities throughout the world without their redeeming qualities. Present day Mecca is noisy, ugly, dirty and smelly and has been sold to a new god: Money. The modern architecture is appalling (with one or two notable exceptions) and is out of human scale; land and property speculation is rife resulting in central urban decay and severe social problems; trees and landscaping are almost non-existent and where they exist they lack imagination.

The present Master Plan for the Holy City of Mecca was completed and submitted to the Saudi Arabian Government in 1973. This Master Plan outlined a basic growth strategy indicating areas suitable for new development and proposed possible alternative high and low population growths for a period of twenty years until 1411/1991 of 950,000 and 550,000 persons respectively. A skeleton highway network connecting the different areas of the Holy City was indicated. In addition, standards for densities, building heights and various social services 'for religion' (sic), health and education were defined. *Strict adherence to the Master Plan would totally destroy Mecca as we know it today and at enormous cost.* Moreover, a comprehensive transportation policy involving both public and private transport was not discussed in depth with the result that four highway alternatives were proposed; no thought was given to transportation policy alternatives which might have involved different

public/private transport solutions and different employment location policies. Thus Central Mecca according to the Master Plan will be surrounded by a gigantic ring-road, the environmental impact of which has not been fully appreciated since most of it is outside the Central Action Area boundary.

These problems have now arisen because one simple question was never seriously considered or discussed: "What kind of city should Mecca be in the future?" *It seems that the planning authorities have little or no development control of vested interests of land and property speculators whose only interest is quick profit and who have little or no social conscience or any feeling for the sacred nature and the beauty of the City of Mecca and the holy areas.*

In summary, therefore, we can identify the following problems:

1. The Master Plan for the Holy City of Mecca is in need of a complete and fundamental review of its basic objectives and strategies;
2. The development activities of consultants and others within the Holy City are in need of a complete re-evaluation before they are accepted;
3. The relevant planning authorities for the Holy City are in need of real power and authority to match their given responsibility in relation to the work of other Ministries and private developers.

### LIMITS TO GROWTH FOR THE HOLY CITY

If the Holy City of Mecca is to be the Ideal Islamic City, its social and urban structure should be the prime consideration. In this respect, the future population growth is the most important factor. No limit to growth was proposed and it is a thesis of this report that a limit to the growth of the Holy City is the most important strategic issue. Why cannot a city be designed which provides both the economic opportunities of the metropolis and the social security of the village? Fortunately, the urban structure of Mecca is the ideal structure for combining the advantages of city and village life without the disadvantages of either. The Holy City of Mecca is really a conglomerate of village units which are either nestling in the small valleys or are perched on mountain tops. Such a unique structure gives Mecca its very special 'patchwork' character. It would, therefore, be appropriate to continue the present urban structure in designing any new development.

Extracts from 'Mecca: Policy Framework and Future Development', a report of The Hajj Research Centre, King Abdul Aziz University, Jeddah.

Moreover, in order to avoid the ineconomies and social diseases of extremely large cities, the Holy City of Mecca should not be allowed to develop above that population required to serve its religious function. Thus the low population growth figure of 550,000 persons of the Master Plan predictions would still probably be in excess of the ideal figure.

### THE PRESSURES FOR DEVELOPMENT

The Holy City of Mecca has much remaining physical beauty in its old houses and 'village' scale despite the ugliness of its modern development. Therefore, a basic policy required to preserve the beauty of Mecca and to ensure that future development would be in scale and harmonious relationship would be to impose:

1. A General Policy of Minimum Change in the City;
2. A Limit to the Capacity of the Employment and Residential Accommodation to specified thresholds defined by social and environmental objectives.

These two policies would be supported by Tactical Policies, the basic intention of which would be to reduce the pressures for development within the existing city, particularly in the Central Area contained within a radius of approximately 1.5–2.0 kilometres from the *Haram*. More pertinently, development which does not require proximity to the Great Mosque should be positively banned from the centre and offered attractive sites in other parts of the city where access would be much easier. The method whereby development pressures would be reduced is to pursue a strong policy of decentralisation of employment centres coupled with an appropriate transportation policy designed to serve both the existing and new city areas. The various policies for the Plan Components for the existing city are briefly described below.

Fundamentally, the pressures for developing arise from three Plan Components: (1) the Hajj, (2) Commercial and Administrative Activities which occur during normal times of the year (some of which may be concerned with the Hajj), and (3) Residential Accommodation.

#### (1) The Hajj and Religious Activities

Within the Central Area of Mecca the Hajj imposes two types of accommodation pressures:

- (a) Residential Accommodation pressures for development. At present these are satisfied by building large hotels and apartment blocks which remain unoccupied for most of the year since

the revenue from the Hajj is much more profitable than available from normal revenue from living accommodation for the people of Mecca. Thus, Mecca is becoming a ghost town during non-Hajj times, coming to life only during the Hajj. Such a situation is socially disastrous for the city.

- (b) Prayer Space pressures to accommodate worshippers at peak periods such as a Friday occurring on or after 'Eid al Adha'. In this situation, nearly all the pilgrims may desire to pray Friday prayers at the Great Mosque.

It is most important that excessive pressures to over-develop sites and accommodation within the existing city are removed by reserving areas outside the city for Hajj Camps and Reception Centres. In this way, the Holy City would be available for the ordinary citizens of Mecca and it could function as a normal city. Fortunately such a policy is being considered at the moment and it is expected that there will be considerable benefits in its implementation. The provision of adequate prayer space is a more difficult problem to solve in that temporary accommodation cannot be provided. The most ideal policy for this problem would be to provide as much prayer space as possible without total and destructive demolition as has happened at the Holy City of Medina.

#### (2) Accommodation for Commercial and Administrative Activities

Without doubt, the busy and varied life of the central business areas of Mecca depends upon the commercial and administrative activities around the Great Mosque and it is absolutely vital to the economic life of the city. Nevertheless, it must be appreciated that uncontrolled business centres can grow to such a size that they create enormous problems which are extremely expensive to remedy; excessive roads and car parks, which also consume valuable building space, are required to serve the overgrown business centres. After a certain point, the attempt to provide business accommodation becomes a negative exercise in that to provide more business space requires even more ancillary space for service land uses. In addition, residential areas are squeezed out of the central areas owing to the pressures from commercial activities. After a time, the central area of the city becomes dead and lifeless. It is obvious, therefore, that there is

an optimum limit to the capacity of a city centre to accommodate business activities. *In the Central Area of the Holy City of Mecca, this optimum point is nearly reached.* In this case of business accommodation, a policy of minimum change is not only appropriate, but also absolutely essential to the vitality of the city.

### (3) Residential Accommodation within the Central Area

Naturally, many people would like to be able to live as near to the Great Mosque as possible. For this reason, the hills and mountains around the Great Mosque are densely inhabited by people living in poor accommodation without water, electricity or transport services. In addition, these mountainous areas, although physically near to the Great Mosque are very remote and inaccessible owing to the extreme nature of the topography. Direct access to dwellings by motor car is totally impossible and only a very small percentage of dwellings will ever have this facility. Parking facilities and opportunities are also extremely limited. Underground services of water, electricity and sewerage systems are also expensive to provide.

Because of these problems a policy of minimum change is strongly advocated and no new dwellings should be allowed in the mountainous areas. Naturally, structural and comfort improvements to existing dwellings (except shanties) should be encouraged to build new dwellings in the flat and vacant land to the west of Mecca.

### THE TRANSPORTATION PROBLEM

Within the framework of a General Policy of Minimum Change for the Holy City, any highway proposals for the existing urban areas must result in the minimum of demolition and road widening. It would be impractical, however, to suggest that there should be no street widening at all. Nevertheless, in order to preserve the character of the Holy City and to control the quality of the environment, street widening must be done both *sensitively* and *selectively*. Since many of the beautiful old houses of Mecca are along old pedestrian routes which have now become roads, the pressures for street widening are intense. The architectural heritage of the city is now threatened and unfortunately the indiscriminate street widening of the past has removed many beautiful old buildings forever. And, adding insult to injury, the modern concrete buildings replacing the old houses are both ugly and badly constructed. In fact, they have become

modern slums. It is obvious that policies of conservation and minimum change must be closely linked to transportation policy.

It is common knowledge that Mecca is being torn apart by the independent and unilateral action of some Ministries outside the Ministry of Interior, Department of Municipal Affairs. Compromise solutions to save face or to be 'practical' for political purposes may be good enough for Jeddah, but not for the Holy Cities of Mecca and Medina.

It is strongly recommended that:

A special planning unit is established within the local Town Planning Offices for the Holy Cities of Mecca and Medina which shall be independent of private and political pressure and which shall operate on a technical/professional basis only.

Its purpose shall be to guide and plan the future development of the Holy City in accordance with the policies and principles outlined in this report, review and recommended all projects and ideas concerning Mecca, review progress and the Review Master plan bi-annually, have complete control over all development and proposals etc.

So far, the development pressures from land and property owners have done absolutely nothing to improve either the social or environmental quality of the Holy City. Land and property speculation motivated by sheer greed has destroyed much of the city. The insistence to build high, to overdevelop land and the harassment of government officials to accede to these demands regardless of the consequences is a disgrace on the Holy City. There are two alternative solutions to this problem, either development controls are strictly enforced regardless of the status of land or property owner or the government compulsory buys land and property at depressed prices.

### IMMEDIATE ACTIONS REQUIRED

- (1) Stop and halt immediately all development works in Mecca and take immediate steps to squash land and property speculation;
- (2) Review all current and proposed projects in the city only allowing 'low-impact', non-destructive and well-designed projects to proceed;
- (3) Completely review the planning situation for both Mecca and Medina by setting up special planning units of high technical ability which will have real and independent planning control and power.