



SUSTAINABLE ARCHITECTURE & URBAN DEVELOPMENT

Vol. I



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First experiences of sustainable neighborhoods in Arab Mediterranean countries: reproducing the European model?

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Abstract

The first projects of sustainable neighborhoods have appeared in the countries of the south shore of the Mediterranean Sea (especially in Morocco, Tunisia and Egypt). Yet the context is not favorable to such experiments because of a number of factors: oil is rather inexpensive in Arab countries, existing regulations do not push promoters to implement sustainable projects and, due to the high cost of eco-technologies and eco-materials, few families have the financial capacity to buy homes and live in such eco-friendly spaces. However, these pioneer projects are flourishing and are part of a new paradigm: the development of public policies and urban projects promoting urban sustainability in Arab countries since the mid-2000s.

This paper will discuss the need for a sustainable agenda in Arab cities and will try to shed light on the diversity of existing initiatives (from big private companies to NGOs and para-statal bodies). There are a wide range of approaches from spectacular high-profile eco-projects to modest initiatives with city-dwellers. Although they share a number of similarities in the design with projects developed in rich countries, especially in Europe, sustainable urban initiatives in the Arab Mediterranean world fit also with Arab urban models. And because the structure of the power is completely different compared to Europe, the comparison shows the amount of illusion that these projects represent.

Keywords: urban planning, neo-liberalism, urban models, green experts, Arab Mediterranean countries, Europe

1 Urban sustainability and the Arab world

1.1 The neo-liberal agenda in contradiction with the sustainable agenda

Over the past decade, researchers have studied both “The Evolving Arab City” (Elsheshtawy, 2008) and the neo-liberal shift. In Cairo for example, E. Denis focused on the proliferation of gated communities and resorts in the desert suburbs where the use of water to green golf and public spaces is completely unsustainable (Denis, 2006).

First, the shift is embodied by a new culture and practice of project-based planning (Barthel, 2010). I consider this as a major turning point. From one city to another, a systemic change is recognizable for the Arab metropolises which includes the following elements: the emergence of capitalist Arab elites with the capacity to be both investors and targets of urban projects; transnational movements of Arab capital from the Gulf; the development of experiments based on Dubai's projects; and the creation of private development companies backed by banks or hedge funds. Al-Abdali in Amman, Solidere in Beirut, Saphira and Bou Regreg in Rabat, Tunis' Lake are examples of the new globalized spaces that aims to provide high returns on investments for firms like Sama Dubai, Emaar, Saudi Oger and other national developers (Mawared in Jordan and Caisse de Dépôt et de Gestion in Morocco).

Secondly, in Arab countries the creation of industrial zones, touristic areas, new communities (new towns for example) has relied on infrastructures that target an increasingly urban population. This trend has led authorities to sell extensively public lands and goods (forests, seafronts, river banks...).

Thirdly, the public policy agenda is shaped by neo-liberalism. In Jordan, R. Daher suggests that regional policies (pan-Arab unity) and social security are no longer a priority. Rather, the private management of public property is becoming more prominent (Daher, 2008). In Morocco, the movement seems more subtle. J. Bargach (2008) argues that urban planning comprises on the one hand major projects promoted by Mohammed VI for the elites and on the other new towns targeting other social groups and regulated by the ministries.

Against the background of this neo-liberal global agenda, decision-makers promote their policies as fitting within the sustainability framework. The new neo-liberal "playscapes": malls, gated communities rather horizontal (contrasting with the verticality of the towers of mixed office and housing), prestigious facilities (the Islamic Museum in Doha) now coexist with fields of wind turbines, new sustainable neighborhoods, new green infrastructure for public transportation (tramway under construction in Rabat, metro under studies for Damascus...). Tensions between the neo-liberal development and new sustainable policies may become increasingly more visible in Arab countries. But also, capitalism may reinvent itself through the sustainable paradigm.

1.2 Spreading sustainability: a crucial issue for Arab countries

The paradigm of sustainability comes for sure from "the West" and from the international donors. It dates back from the Brundtland Report in the 1980s. I will present a brief overview of the historical and geographical scope of this concept. The paradigm has been the subject of debate and experimentation in Northern Europe (in Amsterdam, Malmo, and Stockholm) and even in North America in the 70s and 80s (in cities such as Seattle, Austin, Cleveland). In the 90s, it also became mainstreamed in Mediterranean Europe (including France, Italy and Spain). Sustainable development –SD) has widely been circulated and disseminated since the mid-2000s in the South and particularly the Arab world.

Despite the difficulties that came up during the Copenhagen Summit in 2009, SD is now promoted in the south and east of the Mediterranean. However, this trend does not mean that there is a convergence between the North and the South on this issue nor even among Arab countries. Rather there are a plurality of transitions in the context of sustainability through actions, projects, policies, laws, etc (Birch, 2008; Frey, 2007; Kidokoro, 2008).

If it is true that the paradigm comes from abroad and can be seen as a new constraint imposed by rich countries, two main phenomena give the idea that the sustainable shift has to be and is already an internal process. The Arab countries didn't wait for the Summit of Rio to gain awareness on environmental issues. First, environmental policies do exist for a several decades (in the case of Morocco, since the 80s, in Egypt since the 90s). And in a similar manner to what happened in Europe (Emelianoff, 2007, Souami, 2009, Hamman, 2009), the authorities (central and local elected powers) started to tackle issues about urban environment (e.g. waste management, transportation or green spaces) especially with the mobilization of environmental NGOs. Then more integrated (and thus more sustainable) policies have been elaborated since the early 2000s through urban plans and strategies. But differences appear with Europe. On the other side of the Mediterranean Sea, the process has been accelerated through key moments such as the Charter of Aalborg signed in 1994, the early connection to the international network of eco-local initiatives (ICLEI) and the role played by the European Commission. Contrary, the absence of a supra-national structure above the Arab states and lack of local urban powers can be seen as a serious brake.

Secondly, it's very common to mention the particularly strong constraint link to the climate of Arab countries which is rather hot and dry (and more and more with the global change). This new context, particularly critical for Arab Mediterranean countries, calls for new solutions. In Egypt for example, the trend is to build in the desert because of the lack of space, and politicians agree to build "sustainable communities" in the desert (with the idea of a habitat that is not too spread out with a more effective water management system) (Elseragy and Elnokaly, 2008). The development of a sustainable agenda coincides with the fear of oil resources scarcity. Authorities must anticipate the post-oil era and implement new energy policy mix. Thus the generalization of the "sustainable city" paradigm is an important new issue for Arab countries and I must say that the first sustainable neighborhoods are only part of the process.

Based on the above discussion I will analyze the pioneer experiences of three Arab Mediterranean countries: Morocco, Tunisia and Egypt. Except for Egypt, these countries do not experience high levels of population growth, as opposed to the Gulf. But the choice is linked to a current scientific program on "sustainable cities in Arab Mediterranean countries" led by CEDEJ (French research centre in social sciences located in Cairo) in partnership with local and international institutions from the Southern bank of the Mediterranean Sea. This Arab Mediterranean zone is for me a laboratory to explore the cross-references and cross-influences both from the Gulf region and from the West (and particularly from Europe). From August 2009 to January 2010 I conducted fieldwork in these

three countries. It consisted of interviews with the stakeholders in charge of eco-projects and desk research to collect material from the press and the websites of developers, NGOs and consultants. Based on this research, I contend that these three countries are the first to experiment such sustainable planning.

I will focus in this paper on three main aspects: 1) who are the actors who initiate such projects (a typology will be proposed), 2) how the approaches can be radically diversified (three study cases will be analyzed) and exist although urban policies are not sustainable yet, and 3) does the Arab Mediterranean focus on sustainable planning mean that the decision-makers replicate Western experiences. The goal is in other words to investigate the degree of absorption of Western principles embedded in the design, such as environmental sobriety, shared spaces, strong linkage to public transportation, low-carbon territories etc. The idea is to focus if the European experiences serve as a model which may lead, in this perspective, to cross-cultural urban design practices (Bull C., 2007). And finally, what is the place for internal Arab models as a source of inspiration?

2 The creation of the first sustainable neighbourhoods: a typology of initiatives

The first eco-neighbourhoods have been recently and simultaneously launched in several Arab Mediterranean countries, mainly in the metropolises, but not exclusively. For the last four years, there is an unexpected multiplication of “sustainable urban projects”. The developers self-proclaimed their actions under this label, even though there is no system of monitoring, evaluation and certification in the Arab countries concerning eco-planning. In Europe we find a similar trend to multiply sustainable projects for the last decade. In this context where doubts are raised about the so-called sustainability of these operations, it is necessary to classify the first experiences into three types:

- The eco-projects driven by private developers;
- The initiatives led by para-public developers or public authorities;
- NGOs and associations’ initiatives to implement local eco-development projects funded by international donors.

The private sector plays a prominent role in the first sustainable experiences, even if public policies are not very sustainable (see table 1). Their role must be underlined. Three reasons of the involvement of the private companies in eco-projects can be mentioned. First, we can mention their will to experience and to diversify their scope of projects. Secondly, they want to improve their image with such pioneer operations and target elites sensitized to SD with eco-friendly marketing. Third, based on their business plan, the companies realize that they can make savings with this kind of approach and sell products more efficient on several levels such as energy consumption or use of water. Several examples can be given: Alliances Group in Morocco with the coastal project of “Sindibad” in Casablanca launched in 2009; Sodic and Solidere with two sustainable

neighbourhoods designed in 2008 for the suburbs of Cairo (called “Eastown” and “Westown”).

The second type is the eco-projects led by public or para-public actions. Pioneer initiatives can be pointed out in several countries and give the idea that the experiences are not the monopoly of big private developers. In Morocco, Al Omrane Group is a holding under the umbrella of the Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning dedicated to the creation of the new towns with a important part for the social and affordable housing. The developer has decided in 2009 to study the design of two new towns in order to be “zero energy” (Sahel Lakhyayta and Chrafat) and to design “eco-villages” in the countryside (two are under studies). Out of our area of study limited to the Arab Mediterranean countries, another example is Mubadala Development Company. Private by the status, this joint stock company is in fact rather public because its funding comes mainly from the Government of the Emirate of Abu Dhabi. Mubadala is in charge of the well-known “Masdar” project located in this Emirate. In Damascus, the Municipal Administration Modernisation (MAM) programme (funded by the European Union and the Government of Syria) aims to improve the quality and effectiveness of local governance. And the “West of 30th Street” Development Area in Damascus is a pilot sustainable project located in the South of the capital on the last substantial undeveloped area in the existing planned area of Damascus (440 ha in size).

Location	Developer or project manager	Experts	Partnerships	Goals	Launching
Al Bustam Rabat, Morocco	Caisse de Dépôt et de Gestion Développement (private / Morocco)	Yves Lion (France), Transolar, Ilex, Citec (France)	City of Rabat, Urban Agency for Rabat- Salé	270 ha, 60 000 new city-dwellers, extension in continuity of existing neighbourhoods, functional mixity, 1 500 000 m ² , relocation of gardeners	Studies in 2009
Sidibbad, Casablanca, Morocco	Alliances Group (private / Morocco)	- Ateliers philippe madec (paris) urban planning and architecture ; - Groupe Signes, landscaping ; - Tribu, consultant in environment ; - Construction & Environnement, structures	City of Casablanca, Regional Centre for Investment	Relocation of dwellers from an informal area, upgrading of the park of Sidibbad, building of a mixed neighbourhood, high eco quality, ocean vue, 200.000 m ²	Studies in 2009, land negotiations in 2010
Kélibia, Tunisia	Association for the environment of Kélibia (AEK)	Staff from AEK and UNDP - Tunisia	UNDP, city of Kélibia, Agency of Energy Management	Three main actions in the neighbourhood (Cité du Stade – 200 housings) - Energy management: use of renewable energies for heating sanitary water, use in homes of low consumption lamps - sustainable waste management and compositing of green waste - and preservation of local biodiversity	18 months : From June 2009
Eastown Westown, Cairo, Egypt	Solidere International (Lebanon) and Sodic (Egypt)	17 international architects and planners (Nabil Goham, Lebanon, Habib Debs, Lebanon, Machado and Silveti, USA, Architecture Studio, France, Shahira H. Fahmy, Egypt)	Governorates, New urban communities Authority (NUCA)	2 new suburb centralities (one for New Cairo on the East, one for 6 th of October on the West), 3 millions of m ² , compactness, mixity, eco-friendly (water, landscape, energy, materials...)	2007 : agreement between the 2 companies / studies 2008- 2010, launching end of 2009
West of 30 th Street, Damascus, Syria	MAM (Municipal Administration Modernization)	International planners	European Union, Syrian Ministry of Housing, Government of Syria	Development Area pilot sustainable project located in the south of the capital on the last substantial undeveloped area in the existing planned area of Damascus (440 ha in size).	Studies in 2009-2010

Table: First experiences of sustainable neighbourhoods in Arab countries (not exhaustive)

The third type is embodied by initiatives from NGOs or associations. The idea of this kind of actor is to experience an integrated action through a participatory approach and synergies with local institutional actors and international donors. I must say that few projects of this kind exist. One of them is the “sustainable neighbourhood initiative” launched by the “Association for the Environment of Kelibia” in June 2009 in Tunisia.

3 From spectacular eco-projects to community-based initiatives

Three case studies will illustrate the wide range of sustainable projects.

3.1 Case study 1: the “green town” of Benguerir (Morocco) based on a strong public-private partnership

Eco-projects are mainly located in major cities, but not exclusively. The project located in Benguerir in Morocco gives an example of the dissemination of eco-actions in medium or little-size cities. The “green town” of Benguerir also called “Mohammed VI’s green town” may be a laboratory in Morocco of the SD approach. At 72 km from Marrakech in the province of Rehamna, Benguerir (70 000 inhabitants) is known for the production of phosphates and the largest military base in Morocco. The idea to build a sustainable project came out of the negotiations between three main stakeholders:

- First, created in 1920 the OCP Group (in French “Office Chérifien des Phosphates”) wants to enhance its image of “big polluter”. It owns 450 ha of land and wants to compensate its bad impact through the ambition to create a new “social inclusive and eco-friendly city”. The idea is to produce housings for the staff of the company and to pay its debt by providing new equipments for the community.

- Secondly, a private foundation - the Rehamna Foundation for Sustainable Development- is also a stakeholder. Member of Parliament for the region and chairman of the foundation, Fouad Ali El Himma is neither the president of the council of Benguerir nor the governor of Marrakech-Tensift-Al Haouz. Because of its proximity with the King, he advocates a package of SD measures including the project of green city.

- Thirdly, the Caisse de Dépôt et de Gestion (CDG Group, the most powerful Moroccan private holding created in 2004) is involved to manage the project in partnership with Valyans (a Moroccan consulting firm specialized in business plans and market studies) and Yves Lion for the planning studies jointly with other French consultants in eco-engineering (energy, structures, landscape, water management, transportation).

The future green city would provide the use of eco-techniques for waste management and an intensive use of renewable and clean energies. And constraining specifications include the use of eco-certification based on the

international standard “LEED”. A green spine would serve to integrate the green city to the existing city of Benguerir. And the new city would also include a sport complex, a new university, a hospital complex, residential programs (23 000 units), public facilities and host various innovative economic activities. The project will be conducted over a decade through a public-private partnership, involving local communities, the Rehamna Foundation for Sustainable Development, OCP and other public and private investors.

3.2 Case study 2: the dipole Westown / Eastown in the Greater Cairo, the privatization of eco-planning in Egypt

The Cairene case is another example, which confirms how private holdings are involved in this shift towards sustainable urban planning. The private Egyptian developer Sodic, in partnership with the Lebanese Solidere International (developer of the reconstruction of Downtown Beirut), in 2008 launched developments on either side of Cairo, Eastown (in ‘New Cairo’, adjacent to the new American University in Cairo campus and Westown (along Sheikh Zayed/Six of October City).

The concept is to experiment a “sustainable city centre” in both projects. To quote the promotional documents, the ambition is to target “the mix of uses and services, the range of residential options, and the ability to walk and cycle as part of daily life all make for a more sustainable, greener living”. In the context of failure of public authorities to build real centers for the new Cairene towns, Sodic and Solidere want to take into account this crucial issue of centrality. The developers want “to anchor” (to quote the official brochures) their projects in Cairo’s suburbs. To sum up Markus El Katsha, project manager at Sodic (based on my interview), the idea is to target elites for upscale residential and office programs, but also to provide facilities for three millions of residents living in the outskirts of each project. Sustainable in their design, the projects are based several principles: compacity, mixed-use programmes and pedestrian-friendly outdoor spaces. In brief, these two projects are providing a real alternative to horizontal enclaves of villas always bordered by a golf course that have flourished in the Cairo desert since the late 1990s (such as Dreamland, Beverly Hills etc – Denis, 2006).

The idea is to let the spaces open. Thus in Westown, to take this example, “roughly 38% of the project is dedicated to parks, public spaces and roads, which will be connected by a landscaped and arcaded pedestrian 1.2 km boulevard – a broad, central promenade inspired by old Cairo and Barcelona’s picturesque Las Ramblas”. Enhancing walkability (and thus livability) is a major challenge in car-devoted Cairo. In Eastown, urban planners Machado and Silveti Associates (USA) designed different paving materials to speed up or slow down pedestrian circulation. Beyond public spaces, the eco-friendly vision is an “integral” stake for Sodic-Solidere.

These pioneer projects in Egypt reflect the use of international norms and eco-technologies as proofs that the development is eco-sustainable. The Sodic-

Solidere projects are a good example of the intense use of eco-technologies for both marketing and economic reasons. “Sodic and Solidere are committed to becoming the premier agents of environmental conscious and smart urban developments in Egypt” following the luxurious brochure entitled “Inspirations behind the development of mixed-use city centres”. Let me point out:

- The renewable energy techniques: “Many buildings will incorporate solar panels to benefit from Egypt’s abundant solar resources”. One example is the energy-positive building in Westown designed by Wilkinson Eyre Architects (UK). This commercial and retail structure will be roofed with 30 000 square meters of solar panels arranged in a distinctive sinuous shape. The energy generated should be used to power the small electric public buses that will run up and down Westown’s main pedestrian streets.

- The bio-climatic studies to create livable outdoor spaces: “Extensive solar/shadow studies were carried out to determine the optimum alignment and distribution of streets and buildings in both city centres, maximizing sun exposure while minimizing afternoon heat”. The idea is clearly to limit the use of energy-intensive air conditioning. A second component of the bio-climatic approach based on meteorological studies aims to harness the wind. Wind-assisted ventilation is encouraged: “in several areas, buildings have been massed together to create a shield against the hot and sandy Khamaseen desert wind. In other areas, streets and buildings have been configured to funnel the fresh northwesterly Bahary winds to cool public spaces and residences” – to quote once again the official brochure.



Figure 1: Bio-climatic studies for Eastown – Cairo (Sodic-Solidere, 2009)

- A sustainable landscaping: the strategy is to plant appropriate drought resistant plants because of the scarcity of the water resource. The landscaping was thus designed (by Ilex-France and by Craft Pegg – UK) along complex drip irrigation systems that distribute reclaimed water with minimum waste. On the fringes of the projects, trees and plantation should provide protection against noise pollution and wind-blow dust.

3.3 Case study 3: The Kélibia project in Tunisia, a grass-root initiative

The pioneer projects mainly focus on creating new eco-friendly spaces with the intense use of eco-technologies. But the project of Kélibia shows another way to understand the eco-friendly transformation of spaces. It comes to reveal that eco-projects are not only focused on the production on new urbanized spaces. This new kind of action can be met in neighborhoods already existing. Secondly, this study case also shows that the initiative can come from the civil society even if they may be not as spectacular as the first two examples.



Figure 2: Poster of the Kélibia Project (Association for the environment of Kélibia, 2009)

This pilot project is clearly the initiative of the “Association pour l’environnement de Kélibia” (AEK) created in September 2001. Based on several previous projects including a pilot project on sustainable waste management, the association is pro-active and its president, Wahid Jenhani is also director of the Department of Environment at the City of Kélibia. The link is obvious and “the residents know about me but trust our work with the association which is funded both by the municipality and by international donors” to quote the president (interview, February 4th, 2010). Capitalizing on this synergy between the municipality and the association and based on the success of previous projects, the association asked the Global Environmental Facility (GEF) at the beginning of 2009 to finance a new project for 18 months in an integrated perspective. The project is called “Initiative Quartier Durable à Kélibia”. And UNDP (in its role of implementing agency for the GEF) easily agreed because of the success of its previous funding for the sustainable waste management action.

The project is based on a small scale approach in order to experiment and after to replicate in other neighborhoods. The neighborhood (“La Cité du Stade”) was chosen because: “it’s close to the offices of the association; we know the families quite well since the waste management project, and the scale is not too high – 240 families live in a space of about 200 villas” told the director of AEK. Four main actions have been selected:

- developing and popularizing a new approach to energy management generalizing the low consumption lamps given for free for a start;

- increasing significantly the number of households opting for the use of solar water heaters through grants (50 families are targeted as for a first step);

- increasing the number of households opting for separating waste and composting green waste;

- enhancing local biodiversity with sour orange trees or olive trees. The municipality provides the corset to protect the tree and the association gives for free the tree and in exchange residents must prepare the holes in front of their house, and drizzle.

During my stay in Kélibia last February 2010, Wahid Jenhani mentioned the importance of the offices of the association (families come there looking for eco-friendly lamps, special bags for recycling, trees, composters). Many meetings are held with the city-dwellers and experts and the children also come in this context of proximity. Finally, through key actions aimed at changing practices of the inhabitants, the strength of the project is based on pedagogy and acceptability by these latter beneficiaries. The work is planned in a smooth and gradual manner with residents to change their lifestyles towards moderation in energy consumption, environmental awareness and direct participation in enhancing the livability of their neighborhood.

4 Reinterpreting urban models in sustainable planning

One last question about the urban models embedded in this sustainable urban fabric can be raised. Do the Western experiences work as a model for the Arab Mediterranean countries? And what are the references within the Arab world to build its own model?

4.1 SD networks and experts involved in the projects

Expertise is largely internationalized (see table 1). I find a mix of Anglo-Saxon and French experts for the Cairene dipole Easttown / Westtown. Sodic is mainly linked to English-speaking experts and the Lebanese developer Solidere, is linked to both French and English-speaking networks. In Morocco, the involvement of "stars" of the French planning is obvious (Yves Lion, Francoise-Helene Jourda, Philippe Madec). However, Arab experts are not totally absent. As an example, Habib Debs is a Lebanese town planner who has worked in France for a long time and is involved in key projects in the Middle East since the 90s (Jeddah, Beirut and Cairo). The Moroccan Rachid Haouch, landscaper and urban planner, is also currently working on sustainable projects in his country. All these architects, planners, landscapers come with some interesting ideas: reduction of land consumption, energy management, position of the built environments according to bioclimatic studies (see section 3). However, do experts from the West achieve to adapt their proposals to the specific contexts? An investigation is to conduct more thorough also to search if spaces for joint-work between local and international experts exist or not.

Even if eco-projects initiatives are partly coming from private developers quoted on the stock-exchange for whom the issue of social mix is not the first priority, the experts see them as opportunities to experiment sustainable planning. “They are niches that must be seized to experiment, even if the intentions of the big developers are not pure. Why not trying to make things interesting? And besides experiments are a success in some operations”, to quote Habib Debs, planner of Eastown in Cairo (Interview conducted in Beirut, 26 June 2009).

Internationalization is not only for the design work. It also concerns the financing. The “West of 30th Street” led by the MAM in Damascus will be funded by the European Investment Bank and French Development Agency. Finally, the use of labels indicates the desire to include projects in a lineage of international “success stories”. For example, for its new town called “Bab Draa” in Morocco, Alliances Group wants to obtain the label “One Planet Living” from BioRegional and WWF – the label has been developed with the famous BedZed in suburban London. Besides, the Moroccan developer has in the late 2000s created a foundation for sustainable development to serve as a think-tank and is linked with alternative NGOs such as Agrisud (directed by Robert Lion, for the micro-enterprises).

4.2 (The North of) Europe as a model?

Ultimate question: do Arab Mediterranean developers use and refer to models and best practices experienced in the West for building their own eco-neighborhoods? Or does this new trend point to an invention of specific sustainable models for the Arab world? In other words, this question opens a debate on the position of Arab countries towards the North European model identified by the academic research. This model consists of a series of cases and towns that come to constitute a “school”: among them, Augustenborg (Malmö), Vauban (Freiburg), Kronsberg (Hannover), GWL (Amsterdam). To mention them briefly, the model components are: rehabilitation of the water (reopening of channels, renaturation of river banks, open-air water management), green spines, compactness and social mix, environmental sobriety and efficiency in built environments. The model derived from the Aalborg Charter (1994) and marks a double turning point: end of hygienism and inversion of modernist urbanism (Emelianoff, 2007).

The North European model seems to be very distant in the heads of Arab elected officials and planners. My fieldwork is an on-going process and is not achieved yet. What I can say is that when I recently asked to professionals if they knew these experiences, the answers were rather different. In some cases, at most, business travels in China, or in Abu Dhabi or examples identified on the Internet fuel an operational background on sustainable planning. However, it is more certain that global sustainable planning practices disseminate in the Arab Mediterranean countries through the use of eco-technologies, the certification for environmental quality or the bio-climatic approaches in urban planning studies. Some professionals can be quite critical about Europe. “I think that in France, the

SD is hyper formatted with too many rules and standards. Here in Morocco, we do not want such regulations and we must contextualize and do with our climate and our country” to quote the technical director of housing in the Moroccan Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning (Interview, 20 January 2010). Some professionals can be very eager to distinguish from the old continent: “we have the advantage of being developing countries and we have the chance not to reproduce the same mistakes as the rich countries” (from the same interview). The West becomes to a certain extent in these discourses a kind of counter-model. In the same perspective, researchers speak of “environmental leapfrogging” (Sauter and Watson, 2008) in the context of transition towards urban sustainability. Meaning the South could “jump” some steps to limit the production of more pollutant energies or to produce more quickly and systematically eco-simple materials. Finally to put in other words, a debate occurs to say if developing countries must go or not in the same direction taken by the rich countries with an intense use of norms and eco-technologies. Because they cost a lot, some local professionals think that norms must not be too high-leveled and a sustainable development can be built and mainly based on low-tech principles and inspirations based on its own urban models.

Another answer to the question of the influence of the European experience can be given. Basically, the influence may be not that strong as the mapping of the power is completely different for the Arab Mediterranean countries. In brief, the dissemination of sustainability in urban policies is still timid: the shift is mainly driven by authoritarian states which constrain bottom-up initiatives (however the Kélibia experience shows they can exist) in a context of absence of real local elected powers. Thus, sustainable urban development is mainly driven "from above". And the eco-projects are not linked to sustainable urban policies.

4.3 Reactivating urban patterns of the Arab city

The first experiences witness an interesting backtracking towards urban patterns of the Arab city: the urban fabric of the medina (old Arab city) and the “modern” urban fabric experienced in the late 19th century and first 20th century.

First, I can point out the return made on the Arab traditional city. Its features are a new source of inspiration. Sodic-Solidere is, to give an example, proud to mention the case of Architecture Studio (France) which has developed a contemporary interpretation of *mashrabiah* wood screens in their Westown building designs: the use of metal screens and deep overhangs provide shading while allowing fresh air to infiltrate. Other example can be given by Nabil Gholam (Lebanon) who was inspired by the *mashrabiah* in Beit el Suhemy in Medieval Cairo. The last example is Habib Debs who reinterpreted Arab features such as the *takhtabush* (a ventilated loggia located between the courtyard and the back garden, Schearer and Sultan, 1986). This neo-traditional revival is currently meeting the sustainable paradigm; and the reuse of Arab morphologies is clearly seen as an answer to adapt cities of the region in the context of the global warming. What is interesting in this new trend is that the medina is re-read as a genuine compact city, where people move on foot, where houses are adapted to

climatic constraints (with low-tech inputs) and mixed with activities. And therefore, this source of inspiration can be activated in the planning of new sustainable neighborhoods mainly located in the outskirts!

Secondly, the Modern city (urban model from the “colonial” period) is also reactivated in the planning of some projects. In January 2009, a lecture held in Cairo by the project manager of the Westown / Eastown project pleaded for a return to mixed-use areas referring to Downtown Cairo: “Mixed-use communities have been a traditional mode of urban housing. Cairo’s historic core is exemplary of such pedestrian area. In the nineteenth century precincts of the city, people moved on foot, sometimes depending on horses and cattle for the movement of goods. They resided in buildings that provided space for both domestic life and economic activity. (...) Today, the rise in land-costs, along with the realization of the benefits of high-density commercial, domestic, entertainment and habitats, development is prompting corporations and government agencies to revisit mixed-use planning strategies”.

Finally, I can add that planners and architects increasingly are referring to regional and historic architecture practices in their search for sustainable models. It is very interesting to see in Egypt, to take this country, that in any first eco-construction projects, whether those from Orascom (another big Egyptian holding company) or those from Sodic and Solidere, planners and architects are reusing the ideas of Hassan Fathy, famous Egyptian architect, unloved in his time, and author of the well-known book entitled “Architecture for the poor”. In the new sustainable trend, experts give the priority to the traditional materials; reactivate the vaults in architecture etc.

5 Conclusion remarks

Questions remain about the meaning of this experimental eco-planning, as the projects are poorly articulated and underpinned by urban policies in a sustainable manner, as the structure of power is still highly concentrated and low democratized, as the chain of production (from designers to craftsmen) is not ready yet to implement new standards in public spaces and built environments. Under these circumstances, eco-neighborhoods can be understood therefore more as a new “product” of the neoliberal urbanism, putting developers on the new niche of eco-friendly built environments. The inauguration of Eastown and Westown by Sodic and Solidere, which I attended last November 2009 in Cairo, took place in the halls of the luxury hotel Four Seasons!

Once that said, even if eco-projects emerge for a large part from big private developers for whom the issue of social mix is not the priority, these new areas are learning spaces for the decision-makers. I can mention new approaches for the design (bio-climatic studies, spatial moderation), new values (low-energy consumption, liveability, nature-based urban planning), new expertises (on renewable energies, open-air water management, suitable landscaping to dry

areas). And finally, sustainable urban models are taken from abroad through norms, experts and principles, but also from Arab models.

Last finding, the gap is evident with the European model. And the comparison shows the amount of illusion that these projects represent. In Europe, the dissemination of the sustainability is an on-going process from design to implementation and site management. Sustainable planning involves participation of residents, decentralized authorities and transversal actions. For Arab Mediterranean countries, the structure of power is a brake in the dissemination of the model of the sustainable city. And the production of urban pockets of high environmental quality can not be enough. All the strategy in the near future should include the range of “stocks” of built environments displayed during a variety of periods (Arab, pre-colonial, colonial, post-independence) and different morphology (social housing, historic, slums, etc).

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