

Evolutionary approach towards redevelopment of historical sites versus complete erasure. Case study Kadhimiya historical centre, Baghdad, Iraq

City redevelopment: current trends

Rapid urbanization, fast growth of cities results in great transformation of urban fabric. As the new districts appear, the older historical ones might be left in despair: buildings fall apart, the living conditions worsen. Such picture is common to many cities in developing countries. Cities with historical districts have a difficult question to answer. On one hand, it is desirable to preserve the heritage, the social life and existing diversity; on the other – there might be great economical pressures to demolish everything and build anew with higher densities and more commercial visibility.

Redevelopment of historical sites traditionally starts with a Masterplan. A Masterplan would present a Vision of the site in the future, which quite often involves great amount of demolition and new construction. The Vision is usually formed based on ubiquitous clichés, well known examples, the planners understanding of what a good urban design is. In the end it turns out to be universal and do little based on the site context and local inhabitants.

In this article I would like to argue that redevelopment of historical sites should not be based on the Masterplan, but a different method should be used to generate change, what is needed is an evolutionary approach.

Masterplanning, towards the Vision

Masterplanning is one of the most common urban design methods, used to introduce change into cities. A Masterplan provides a vision of how the area should look in the future. The concept of Masterplanning finds its origins in the Renaissance, when the first grand plan utopian projects were created. But the method gained general acceptance in the 20th century, to be more precise – after the World War II.

Modern Masterplans have developed into three dimensional detailed illustrations, which are supported by artist impressions of what the place would be like. Such Vision is a desired outcome. The Vision is an easy to sell product, which is widely used by commercial developers.

In reality a Masterplan implies a top-down approach of planners which cannot consider and interpret all the complexity of the place, its social networks and opportunities that exist. It turns out to be the simplified version of the place, which suits the needs of the developer. There are a lot of concerns about effectiveness and impact of Masterplans on cities in general. Masterplans “are starting to become an end in themselves and bear little relation to real urban settings... the plans are deterministic, inflexible and based on the concept of a completed product whereas the evolution of the city is a process” [1].

Evolutionary approach: generating change

The city is a living organism, which is in a process of constant change. It is obvious that a lot of forces influence the process and that the process could be regulated to a certain level.

In the field of urban design there is a search for methodologies that would generate and coordinate city redevelopment process, would involve joint forces of multiple urban actors and not just the large commercial developers. Some cities or development areas put forward Frames of Reference and Design Guides, which are less prescriptive and detailed than Masterplans, but at the same time provide frameworks for a place to change over the long term. It is acknowledged that there should be fewer top-down schemes and more judicious intervention, more stitching-together of the urban fabric. This stitching-together process is highly contextual and should rely on the empirical understanding of the site, should formulate projects from a standpoint of the continuity of the whole city, but implement them as series of independent interventions with an impact on the whole [2].

By renewal of historical sites the method of punctual interventions or Urban Acupuncture is seen as a healthy alternative to the overall masterplanning. The idea of urban acupuncture circles around creating mini-renewal projects that are strategically placed within the development area. These projects aim to address the most acute problems, transform the worst, the neglected areas. Often punctual interventions result in the creation of multifunctional public places funded by the government, these serve as beacons for further development, change general attitude towards the area, make the inhabitants more proud of their locality and in the end generate further projects, attract private initiative and multiple investments. The set of small interventions can influence the process of renewal in a way, which is hard to predict and prescribe in a masterplan. The result is a collective City, formed in collaboration of the government, the inhabitants and entrepreneurs.

Case study: competition for redevelopment of Kadhimiya historical centre, Baghdad, Iraq

Kadhimiya is a town located in what is now a northern neighbourhood of Baghdad, Iraq. It is regarded as a holy city in Shia Islam. It received its name for the two Shiah Imams buried there. A shrine was first built over their tombs, and subsequently the al-Kadhimiya Mosque. The Shrine's is a primary element of the town. The gradual accumulation of urban fabric around the Shrine resulted in the distinctive historic urban form of Kadhimiya seen today.

Kadhimiya today is a rich matrix of small scale buildings gathered around the Mosque, some are exclusively housing, some integrate services, some are of historical and religious importance, some are newly constructed, some already fall apart. Joint together by narrow streets and pathways they create a rich kaleidoscope of the Oriental town.

The religious importance of the Shrine attracts large numbers of national and international visitors. 5,000 - 10,000 people visit the Shrine on a normal day, rising to 15,000 - 20,000 people on Wednesdays and Saturdays. On special religious days over 6,000,000 people visit the Shrine in a 48 hour period. These numbers of visitors in Kadhimiya's tight historic urban grain produces unpleasant and dangerous overcrowding. In addition, the need for service sectors such as efficient food provision, hotels/accommodation, toilets etc. is very great.

In the spring of 2009 the Mayoralty of Baghdad announced an international urban design competition for the regeneration of the holy town of Kadhimiya, Iraq. The Mayor's brief called for a vision of comprehensive renewal for Kadhimiya, integrating religious, commercial, and local residential needs. The competition brief asked to accommodate additional religious buildings as well as adequate services in the area; at the same time it requested competitors

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to provide strong solutions to current urban problems, whilst respecting Kadhimiya's unique historic urban fabric.

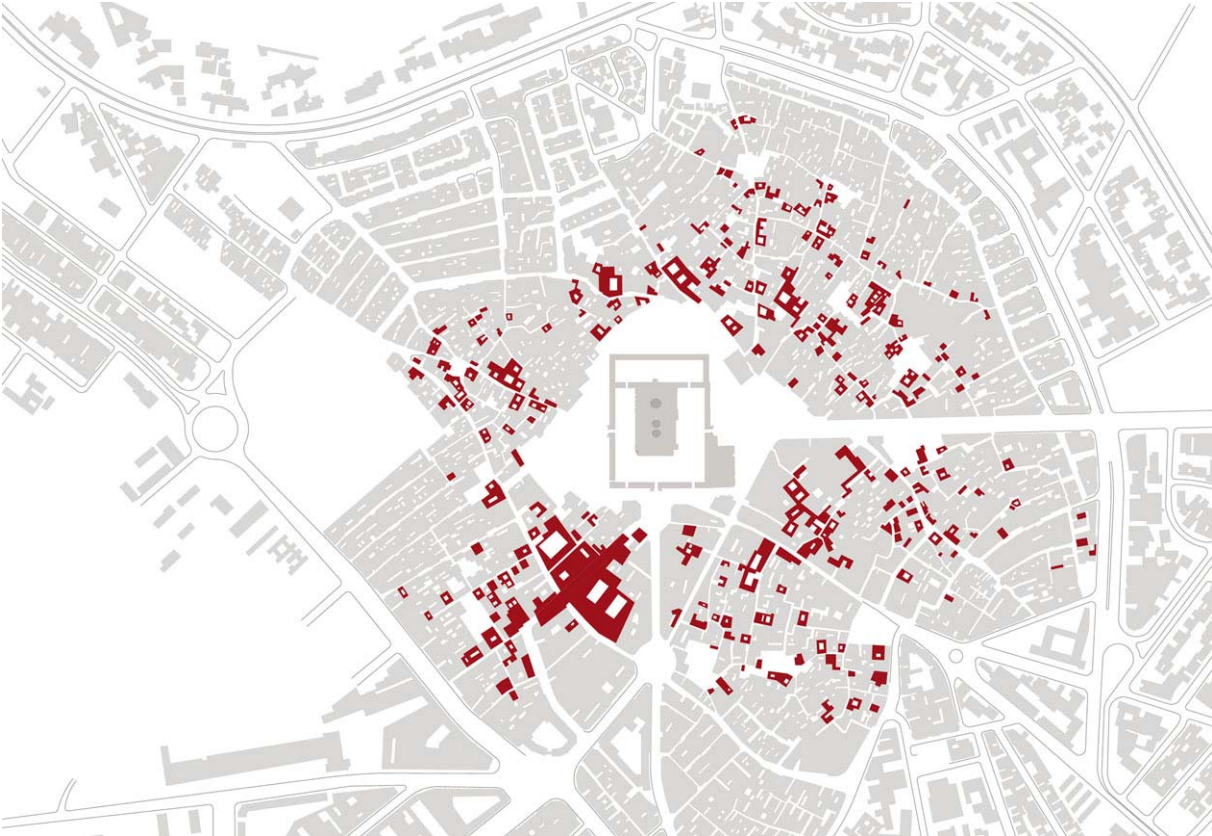


Figure 1 – Existing urban grain of Kadhimiya with the historic buildings highlighted
Source: competition entry, Assemblage architects



Figure 2 – Al-Kadhimiya Mosque within the historical urban grain

Source: competition entry, Assemblage architects

The winning entry to this competition is a good example of modern well developed and well illustrated Masterplan. The jury committee acknowledged the entry as “the most comprehensive, aesthetically pleasing and sensitive to the area’s historical, cultural and social character”. [3] The Masterplan shows how the area around the al-Kadhimiya Mosque could transform: wide promenades are traced through the urban grain to provide access to the Shrine; these are flanked with new buildings. Only limited number of existing buildings is preserved within the inner city blocks, historical leftovers are hidden behind the bright new facades. New large scale religious facilities and other services are placed on top of the existing city. Most of this Masterplan is demolition and new construction. The whole area will have to transform into construction site with current residents moving out.



Figure 3 – The winning entry: Masterplan for the development of Kadhimiya

Source: <http://www.archdaily.com/51225>



Figure 4 – The winning entry: preserved buildings behind new promenades

Source: <http://www.archdaily.com/51225>

Even though this project is admitted by many there are a lot of concerns. People, who are more familiar with the area and its culture, argue that such massive development is inappropriate; the overall design resembles a “fake lifestyle centre” and could be built anywhere: in UAE, Oman or Qatar, for instance, but not in an ancient city like Al Kadhimiya - Baghdad. [4, comments] Kadhimiya is said to be beautiful as it is and only requires cleaning, more greenery and street furniture.

In this article I would like to discuss an alternative competition entry, which might not be as well illustrated, but shows a more generous and less harmful attitude towards the historical site. It tries to find appropriate means to add to the urban matrix of Kadhimiya without eliminating the established life.

This competition entry starts with a conceptual proposal: all the planned large scale new development should happen outside the historical core. There is plenty of disused land for that. Conceptual model shows that a new western axis could be formed to link the al-Kadhimiya Mosque and the currently disused train station. Most service and religious facilities could be placed along this axis, thus creating required grandeur and providing adequate access to the Shrine.



Figure 5 – Proposed axis of new development
Source: competition entry, Assemblage architects

Moving most of the requested facilities to the edge of the historical city allowed a more sensitive approach towards redevelopment of the city core. There are two types of interventions proposed: one has to do with the functioning of the Shrine, the other is intended to improve living conditions for local residents.

It is obvious that there is a conflict between the Shrine and the adjacent constructions. The Shrine requires large open space, room for additional services and an appropriate protection for security reasons. To encircle, protect, and support the Shrine, a new Sacred Wall is proposed. The Sacred Wall forms a new outer circle around the Shrine and works to enhance the intensity of space around the Shrine, filter access, and provides numerous functions for visitors. The internal line of the Wall forms a clearly defined space around the Shrine. The Wall acts to mark the space of the sacred from everyday life. But at the same time it is in a dialogue with the city: the external wall line is inscribed in the existing urban pattern. This new element in the historical city is embedded in the urban fabric and feels as though it has evolved there over time.

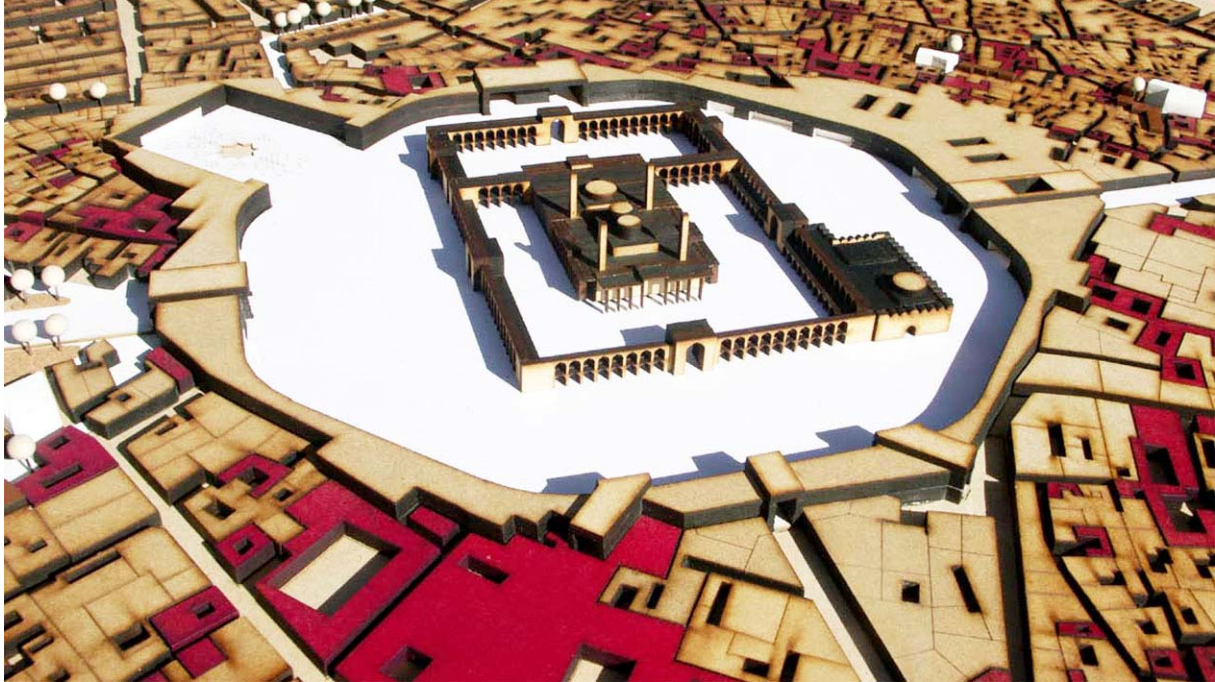


Figure 6 – Sacred wall

Source: competition entry, Assemblage architects

The city fabric around the Shrine is predominantly left as it is, the architects did not take the right to decide over the historical area from the far perspective. Their proposal is a series of punctual interventions. A circular “necklace” of small courtyards is traced in the existing residential districts. The proposed courtyards are created on under used open space with minimal demolition of existing buildings.

The courtyards are intended to inject new services and infrastructure to local communities in Kadhimiya, and enrich the urban grain. The Necklace of Courtyards is seen as an initiative, which would influence bottom-up action. It is proposed that each courtyard is designed as a square, local meeting place, providing shaded open space, greenery and services. The importance of the Courtyard to the community could be supported by construction of governmentally funded community buildings such as primary schools. It is predicted that businesses such as small shops, cafes, small hotels etc. would evolve naturally around an active public space. By creating a system of active public spaces a good push is given to further redevelopment of the adjacent areas. Such redevelopment will happen over time and will be performed by multiple urban actors, including local residents.

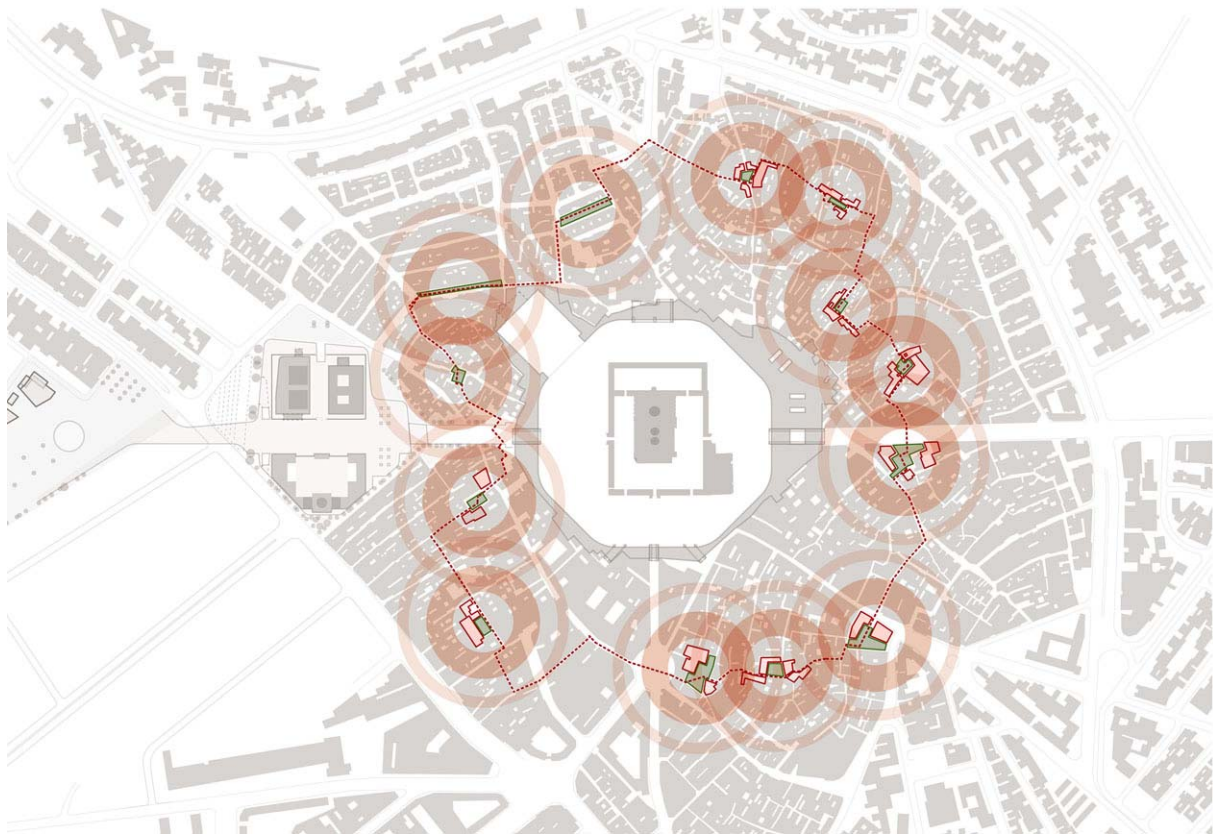


Figure 7 – Necklace of Courtyards

Source: competition entry, Assemblage architects

The overall proposal is very contextual and displays cautious attitude towards the rich existing diversity. The site problems are addressed in a way that does not require large amount of demolition. There is room for action for commercial developers as well as smaller scale local initiative.

There is a question, why an aggressive Masterplan was preferred over a more sensitive evolutionary approach? There is currently an issue of low self esteem in developing countries; people do not cherish what they have, instead they go for images of the developed world, there is a general valuation of materiality and visible things and under-valuation of invisible cultural things.

This attitude should change; the redevelopment of historical sites should be contextual, based on local assets and opportunities. Urban design should create platforms on which urban life flourishes, but not be seen as placing desirable objects on a blank page. The redevelopment of historical sites is about regulated evolutionary process, it is about integration and fermentation of a new urban condition into the existing realm.

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