



Simon O'Meara. *Space and Muslim Urban Life: At the Limits of the Labyrinth of Fez (Culture and Civilization in the Middle East)*. London: Routledge, 2007. x + 150 pp.p Illustrations. \$150.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-415-38612-8; (cloth), ISBN 978-0-203-94707-4.

Reviewed by Colette Apelian

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Commissioned by Sharon L. Irish (University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign)

Managing Bodies and the Gaze: Walls in Pre-Modern Arab-Islamic Cities

Simon O'Meara begins his compact urban history, *Space and Muslim Urban Life: At the Limits of the Labyrinth of Fez*, by describing how French sociologist Henri Lefebvre inspired O'Meara's conception of cities. Like Lefebvre, O'Meara believes urban spaces are both products of social interaction and the means through which that interaction is endlessly produced. As such, the built environment is not simply an empty vessel subsequently filled with objects and events, but an entity simultaneously resulting from and perpetuating everyday existence (p. 4). While similar definitions of space have long animated urban studies of modern to contemporary European and North American settlements, O'Meara argues that space has yet to be fully analyzed in what he calls pre-modern (roughly 1400-1800 CE) Islamic cities (or Arab-Muslim or Arab-Islamic cities) such as Fez, Morocco (pp. ix, 1). O'Meara's approach towards architecture and social life resonates with Bessim Selim Hakim's and Janet Abu-Lughod's depictions of Arab-Islamic settlements. However, O'Meara fills a gap in their publications and later discourse on Arab-Islamic architecture by focusing upon the relationship between the practice of law in local courts ('amal), local customs ('urf), walls, movement, and vision in Fez. O'Meara also uniquely assesses local customs by analyzing a wide variety of textual sources.[1]

Two of O'Meara's main goals stem from his asser-

tion about space. First, O'Meara seeks to examine the logic of Islamic architecture by rethinking it discursively from within the culture that produced it (p. ix). That is, O'Meara consciously chooses to not objectify and analyze the built environment from the position of outsiders (art historians) who encounter and analyze pre-modern Arab-Muslim cities from a social remove. Instead, O'Meara seeks to narrate how inhabitants who both socially and bodily experience the architecture (the insiders) made and re-made *madinas*, the Arabic term for cities. O'Meara is particularly interested in Fez because its labyrinthine morphology makes it a prototypical example of Arab-Islamic *madinas*, in his opinion.

O'Meara's second major intent dovetails with his first. O'Meara seeks to simultaneously expand upon and recontextualize twentieth-century investigations and publications of Sunni Islamic urban law as records of social life and local customs. Most of O'Meara's primary evidence is legal documents from the medieval to pre-modern discourse. However, O'Meara is particularly interested in texts addressing a fundamental element of the Arab-Muslim labyrinth (walls) and, most importantly, records describing the application and re-generation of legislation (opinions and court records of disputes listed in his appendix). O'Meara concentrates upon the North African context, and, thus, the region of Fez.

O'Meara's interest in Islamic law, its practice,

and bulwarks in Fez distinguish his study from Abu-Lughod's. Abu-Lughod's quarry is the pertinence of the Islamic city category in general, and her subjects range from North African to Indian examples. However, like her, O'Meara recognizes a collective, faith-based interest in segregating and channeling the body and vision according to gender, and in differentiating public and private spaces. Both perpetuated the creation of Islamic architectural and spatial requirements controlling and signifying proper behavior. According to O'Meara, these requirements encouraged a distinct Arab-Islamic configuration of walls, and, thus, urban morphology. Therefore, O'Meara argues, religious law and decisions concerning the built environment are simultaneously a response to and record of inhabitants' common social needs, values, and beliefs, in addition to a collection of prescriptive codes contributing to authorities' regulation of the built environment. Though Abu-Lughod is less convinced than O'Meara that urban form is as closely tied to religion, she presents a similarly flexible understanding of Islamic law.

Unlike Abu-Lughod and Hakim (1986), O'Meara proves the close relationship between Islamic law, its practice, and larger social beliefs and values by cleverly elucidating parallels between a wide range of sources not typically associated with legal discourse. Besides case studies, Qur'anic passages, and hadith, O'Meara analyzes late medieval to pre-modern Arabic language histories and proverbs that mention barriers, buildings, thresholds, and how to enter or cross them and direct one's sight. O'Meara also investigates Arab-Muslim poetry lamenting lost homelands, and foundation legends about Fez and ideal Islamic cities.

O'Meara carefully defines what his sources mean by walls and the importance of walls within Arab-Islamic societies. Though he acknowledges bulwarks functioned in several ways in Arab-Islamic cities, O'Meara is primarily interested in their use as thresholds and covers. As thresholds, walls and various openings within them acted as liminal spaces, both linking and marking limits between certain types of areas. Examples include walls distinguishing the sacred from the profane at mosques, the civilized world from the wild beyond city ramparts, and the public from multiple layers of private space in residential streets. As covers, walls were protective barriers preventing inappropriate vistas that might elicit feelings of shame from viewers or the viewed upon, shame and honor being essential sentiments binding Arab-Islamic societies, in his argument. O'Meara's interest in the relationship between

local culture and architecture encourages his focus on the spatial dimension of shame, particularly how walls were purposefully arranged in accordance with cultural notions of modesty and, therefore, prevented men from gazing upon honorable women, for example. The crux of O'Meara's contention is that the proper arrangement of external walls in particular and according to religious law signified acceptable notions of neighborliness and honor/righteousness, two fundamental aspects of Muslims' urban life within the close-knit and gender-sensitive social environment of Arab-Islamic neighborhoods.

Space and Muslim Urban Life will likely stoke the fires of a few larger debates animating studies of Islamic cities and place-making. Some readers may wish that O'Meara had more thoroughly engaged Abu-Lughod's (1987) and Andr © Raymond's (1994) deconstruction of the Arab-Muslim city category and Fez's place within it.[2] O'Meara's occasionally broad treatment of urban morphology, culture, legal guidelines, and the pre-modern era may provoke clashes within academic discourse over acceptable levels of temporal and spatial homogeneity. O'Meara's faith-based approach to culture and morphology may also incite discussions over framing subjects by religion, especially among scholars of heterogeneous populations in the Arab world. Others may claim that there are stronger logistical reasons for labyrinthine wall arrangements, such as real property issues and the reduction of heat and glare in hot climates. I personally would have liked a deeper analysis of physical aspects of Fez, especially materials and building and urban plans. However, even readers dissatisfied with certain aspects of O'Meara's approach will find it difficult to deny the significance of his work.

Besides his focus upon local customs and his interest in social space, there are several reasons why O'Meara's study is a valuable addition to histories of North African and Middle Eastern urbanism. Chapter 3, "The Legal Dimensions of Walls: The Book of Walls," presents an extensive examination of medieval to pre-modern Sunni Islamic law concerning Arab-Islamic cities, especially *madinas* in North Africa. Chapter 4, "The Juridic Basis of The Book of Walls," and the list of cases and case titles in the appendix provide much-needed documentation about the application of laws concerning walls. Many of the primary sources O'Meara uses are not widely dispersed or translated into European languages, making O'Meara's work especially useful for scholars in the United States or new to or outside of O'Meara's field. In addition, O'Meara's positioning of Islamic legal texts and

his focus on their practice in specific contexts encourage a thoughtful analysis of law as flexible and socially engaged prescriptions rather than rigid iron cages.

A meticulously researched study examining insiders' views of cities, O'Meara's *Space and Muslim Urban Life* will appeal to historians and sociologists concerned with urban codes, social space, and architectural history in the Islamic world. One hopes O'Meara's interest in inhabitants' voices and his creative way of ferreting out their narratives will inspire similar studies of local customs and cities.

Notes

[1]. O'Meara refers to Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991). Regarding Janet Abu-Lughod's argument that Arab-Islamic cities are social creations, see her essay "The Islamic City—Historic Myth, Islamic Essence

and Contemporary Relevance," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 19 (1987): 155-176. Besim Selim Hakim examines the relationship between religion, society, and architecture in his *Arabic-Islamic Cities: Building and Planning Principles* (London: Kegan Paul International, 1986). In the late 1990s, Hakim called for investigations like O'Meara's that examine the relationship between local customs and architecture. See Hakim, "Viewpoint: Urban Form in Traditional Islamic Cultures: Further Studies Needed for Formulating Theory," *Cities* 16, no. 1 (1998): 51-55. Hakim also linked local customs and Islamic jurisprudence by defining the former as that which were "sanctioned by the School of Law ... having the jurisdiction in a locality, provided the custom did not contravene principles of Islamic law" (54).

[2]. Andr   Raymond, "Islamic City, Arab City: Orientalist Myths and Recent Views," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 21 (1994): 3-18.

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