Madinat al Irfan,
an urban centre in Oman
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edited by Daniel Elsea and Alfredo Caraballo
Omran, Oman’s master developer of major tourism, heritage and urban developments, appointed a team led by Allies and Morrison following an invited competition held by the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) to create a masterplan for a new city, Madinat al Irfan on a 624 hectare site outside the Sultanate’s capital, Muscat. The masterplan has grown out of an understanding of Oman’s geography, culture and considered policy of sustainable development.

The essays published here have been commissioned in association with the exhibition, Madinat al Irfan, an urban centre in Oman, being held at Allies and Morrison from 18 September until 20 October 2017. These writings explore the different ideas and motivations which have shaped the work of the masterplan’s design team, as well as its implications – most especially the more resilient mode of urban development the project offers for Oman, its region and the wider world.
It is a privilege to be invited to take part in the selection of an architect for a significant project, and having been involved in dozens over the years, I can say that I have enjoyed all of them except one. (The exception was the result of an absurdly over-zealous procurement process that made a nonsense of the shortlist interviews: we were instructed that each juror had to ask the same question - in the same order - of the architect, even if they had covered the subject of the question during their presentation!)

In the case of Madinat al Irfan, not only was the selection process enjoyable, but it was rigorous. A site visit, with temperatures which made the prevailing breeze feel like a hot hair dryer, was essential, not least because it revealed the opportunities of exploiting the wadi on which the proposed city of Irfan is predicated.

The competition itself comprised two phases: examination of a shortlist drawn up by RIBA Competitions, conducted anonymously; then interviews with the final candidates who made full presentations of their proposals and were interrogated by a mixed panel of architects, engineer, academic, developer and your correspondent, who ended up chairing the panel. (Editors often end up doing this because we are supposed to be able to write reports at speed.)

Our unanimous recommendation to Omran, our delightful Omani client/hosts, was that the Allies and Morrison masterplan represented the best of the ideas proposed. We also, without being asked, produced a note for the client on the challenges that would accompany the implementation of any masterplan on this scale, given its sheer size and the long time frame of two decades likely required to bring it all to reality. We felt confident that the recipients would take our advice on client organisation in the spirit intended, and they did.

We flew back to our various locations and assumed that was that. Happily that was not the end of the story: a further invitation was made to the London members of the selection panel, asking if we would like to take part in design reviews of the winning masterplan idea as it started to be developed in detail. Peter Oborn, the RIBA vice president who co-ordinated the competition process, brought in Design Council Cabe to organise the design reviews, and I was invited to chair them, which I was delighted to do. The panel was supplemented by another group of reviewers with a wide variety of experience and expertise.

So a double privilege: selection, then an engagement with further iterations, of the idea which won the competition.

The review process was enjoyable and constructive. We made a further visit to Oman, but conducted most of the reviews at the Allies and Morrison’s studios in Southwark, where the long wall of the presentation room was used to full advantage in explaining the emerging thinking about the masterplan. As might be expected, there were some significant changes, not least because of external decisions about adjacent sites and facilities. The changes were rational and we thought were generally improvements. Any concerns we had were those familiar to the world of masterplans: the best place for certain uses; sequencing; strategic infrastructure decisions and their timing and so on.

However, the core ideas in the masterplan were robust, providing a strong basis for what followed. Perhaps more important, they were imaginative enough to make the masterplan not just credible, but inspirational. From the first time we saw the ‘City of Bridges’ postcard image, we knew that this proposal could both make a unique place and generate a memorable image, for Irfan and indeed Oman as a whole.

Rather than impose something wholly new in this instance, it is context that has generated, or provoked, the overarching idea. This urban design sensibility is embedded in Oman’s culture, landscape and climate, a strategy which we hope will ensure Irfan’s future success as a city. The extraordinarily detailed presentations that we enjoyed over eighteen months, including the most intelligent and exacting design guidelines document I have yet seen, paid full compliment to the power of this informing idea.
EXTRAORDINARILY ORDINARY

Alfredo Caraballo

La Nuova Topografia di Roma, Giambattista Nolli, 1748
Architecture has always represented the prototype of a work of art the reception of which is consumed by a collectivity in a state of distraction.

Walter Benjamin

In his seminal essay ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’, Walter Benjamin made a distinction between the way in which we perceive paintings or sculptures (a focused and attentive activity) and the ‘distracted’ way in which we perceive architecture. Whereas we tend to ‘go and see’ paintings and sculptures in galleries and museums as a conscious and deliberate activity, architecture surrounds us and our perception and awareness of it is much more vague and distracted. Architecture effectively creates the spatial background for our daily life, but our conscious awareness of it is, at the same time, sporadic and all-encompassing.

Benjamin had in mind the established and traditional cities of western Europe when writing that passage: Vienna, Berlin, and in particular, Paris. But crucially, this ‘distracted’ way of experiencing the city and its architecture is only possible when the urban space allows that distance, a certain degree of detachment: a peculiar combination of clear legibility of the urban space but also the ‘backgroundishness’ and normality of most of the buildings that define it. A distracted flâneur walking through Paris’ covered arcades and the grand boulevards of Haussmann’s city could wander assured that just in the right moment a building will stand out and call for his attention. Most of the time, a calm and reassuring normality allows walking while attending our own thoughts.

Does the ‘distracted’ perception of architecture still hold today? Does urban design in a society of the spectacle, the culture of the icon and the cult of the image, still aspire to provide a background to urban life? Is it possible to hold the same distance when everything, from the dustbin to the houses to the city, in its entirety, is desperately asking for our attention?

NORMALITY AND LEGIBILITY

One key aspect that makes Benjamin's reading of architecture possible is the intelligibility of the urban space. Cities are made up of multiple and complex sets of elements of different natures and scales. How we read and experience cities depends on the relationship between these pieces, being discreet individual components, groups of buildings, open spaces or special moments.

The extraordinary Nolli plan of Rome engraved by Giambatista Nolli in 1748 surveyed the city establishing a clear distinction between two types of elements: the civic and the non-civic. The civic buildings, the public spaces, the streets and the squares are rendered in clear detail, whereas everything else – namely, houses, workshops, office buildings, apartment blocks, are rendered in a continuous black mass. This innovative method of representation highlighted the difference between the urban figures of the city (being buildings or spaces) and the background, the normative fabric around it.

It is almost self-evident that the legibility of the urban space relies on the careful balance between the ordinary and the extraordinary. Too much of one without the other and the desired equilibrium is lost. However it seems that today a disproportionate amount of human effort is spent aiming for the extraordinary. Conversely, it would appear that achieving just the ordinary, the normality that characterises most of the urban environments we cherish from the past, is simply beyond our current means and capacities.

The obvious failures of modern urban planning have led to multiple waves of regeneration and attempts to fix past mistakes. How do we tackle these challenges, particularly in the context of rapid urbanisation in the developing world? Can we produce streets that can hold their own against Haussmann’s boulevards or Cerda’s avenues?

The task of reconnecting the ordinary with the extraordinary is not easy. This anxious desire for uniqueness has made the ordinary and normal unique and special, being so rare in contemporary architecture.

The 'modern' city that so fascinated the urban environments we cherish from a more distant past? Can we create new places that avoid the mistakes of recent past and are able to learn from a more distant past? The 'modern' city that so fascinated Benjamin is the direct consequence of the commodification of space and the compulsion for the extraordinary. Our discipline has seemingly lost the capacity to produce streets that can hold their own against Haussmann’s boulevards or Cerda’s avenues.

RECONNECTING
of a rapid densification that demanded urban interventions to expand European cites past the industrial revolution. Barcelona, Vienna and Paris went through intense and wildly successful expansion, densifications and regenerations that have generated flexible, adaptable models that allowed these cities to accommodate ever higher densities without completely losing key aspects of their identities and urban character. As architects and urbanists, why have we not always done this in our own? At a crucial historical juncture, where the world is increasingly urbanising, it is worth revisiting some key urban lessons from the past to help build a more resilient future.

**LAND, STREETS, SPACES, BUILDINGS AND COMPONENTS: AN OMANI EXAMPLE**

The Madinat al Irfan masterplan offers answers to some of these challenges. Planning a new city from scratch is a daunting prospect. Without attempting to be exhaustive, the scheme concerned itself with five scales: land, streets, spaces, buildings and components.

There is no such a thing as an 'empty' site. For millennia, cities and towns have taken advantage of the conditions of the land where they are placed. As such, our first step was a fairly traditional one: understand what the land itself had to offer and follow its suggestions. The topography, the vegetation, the climate conditions already defined the best places to build and where not to build. This simple step allowed developing a plan that emerges from the landform where do something that the city in itself is not dissimilar to the strategy is not dissimilar to the way in which traditional Omani villages were laid out in the past, resulting in a plan that is unique and specific to its site.

The landform early on defined two types of settlements: denser districts in the flatter areas on the south. This configuration is immediately recognisable in the street pattern of each area. The downtown has a grid configuration that provides big blocks that adapt itself has a civic, public role that in the most basic of its duties has to do with shading the street, thus helping to define a walkable public realm. In this seemingly modest aim, the building has to play a role in an ensemble; blending into the texture of the street against the backdrop of something they already know or have seen, whilst being completely new. There are big spaces such as the Wadi Park, at the heart of a village or in the main square of a downtown. The prime concern is how to balance making the streets particular, responsive to the local conditions whilst at the same time, normal, belonging to a series.

In order to do so, the masterplan puts forward the perhaps unfashionable idea that the façades of buildings facing the streets belong more to the public space than the building itself. In other words, the façade has a civic, public role that in the most basic of its duties has to do with shading the street, thus helping to define a walkable public realm. In this seemingly modest aim, the building has to play a role in an ensemble; blending into the texture of the street wall alignment, rather than stand isolated, as a distinct object.

Needless to say that not every building plays exactly the same role: some strategic locations demand special attention despite that the building that might occupy the site is a normal block of apartments or an office building. In other occasions, a building with a special use acts as a pivotal point in the streets particular, responsive to the local conditions whilst at the same time, normal, belonging to a series. The spaces within Irfan aspire to a certain degree of familiarity; they should remind the user and passerby of something they already know or have seen, whilst being completely new. There are big spaces such as the Wadi Park, at the heart of a village or in the main square of a downtown. The prime concern is how to balance making the streets particular, responsive to the local conditions whilst at the same time, normal, belonging to a series.

The spaces within Irfan aspire to be recognisable and unique whilst specific to the place and their location within the scheme. But more importantly, they also aspire to a certain degree of familiarity; they should remind the user and passerby of something they already know or have seen, whilst being completely new. There are big spaces such as the Wadi Park, at the heart of a village or in the main square of a downtown. The prime concern is how to balance making the streets particular, responsive to the local conditions whilst at the same time, normal, belonging to a series.

The network of spaces will provide diversity and familiarity; creating the frame both for the buildings to come and for public life to happen. And at the same time, it is a very specific and local network, defined by the densities, uses, topography of the site. The spaces within Irfan aspire to be recognisable and unique whilst specific to the place and their location within the scheme. But more importantly, they also aspire to a certain degree of familiarity; they should remind the user and passerby of something they already know or have seen, whilst being completely new. There are big spaces such as the Wadi Park, at the heart of a village or in the main square of a downtown. The prime concern is how to balance making the streets particular, responsive to the local conditions whilst at the same time, normal, belonging to a series.
how its buildings will be and which role they will play.

The buildings of the masterplan are defined in two ways: opportunities and duties. One of the primary roles of any masterplan is to guide investment and trigger opportunities. This very act is key to, firstly, trigger investment and then the development and construction of the city, making it an attractive place to invest, and subsequently to live, work and visit. The masterplan approaches this scale through a typological study that provides the backbone for a catalogue of buildings: a thorough study of residential, commercial, civic, retail or religious buildings of different sizes and configurations. This study has two aims. On the one hand, it puts forwards a set of types that draw from successful examples from the past but also tackles the needs of today: what is a sensible office building size in this place? How can residential buildings be organised? But on the other hand, this study has informed the size of the blocks and its potential subdivisions; this responds to pragmatic questions of how many buildings of what type can be place within blocks, allowing the necessary flexibility for a project of this scale.

At the same time, buildings will have an urban role depending on where they are located. Some buildings will form part of the framing of key public spaces, such as the CBD square of the Wadi Park edge. Others are simply defining the streets and pedestrian areas that connect the whole city. And then there will be special buildings, either by their strategic location or their use, which will punctuate and qualify the urban grain. The fundamental aim of the masterplan is that every building, being an iconic object such as a theatre or the main mosque, or a background residential building in a secondary street, are all part of an ensemble, where the whole is much more than the sum of its parts.

Finally there are the components. Masterplans are commonly understood as the definition of large-scale operations: the grand gestures defining the form of the plan or the big infrastructural moves. The Irfan masterplan also concerns itself with the urbanity of the small; the scale of the component. What should be the urban role of a cornice, of a setback, of a balustrade, of a colonnade? In which ways can a collection of components help to establish the character of a place? As such, key spaces are not only defined by the buildings that frame them, but by a set of components that the buildings must share: a projecting canopy defining the urban room of the CBD square or the continuous colonnades defining the edges of the Souk district. The attention to these kind of details aims to establish commonalities at the other end of the scale, not unlike how we associate mansards with Paris or projecting balconies with Cairo.

BEYOND INVENTION

Nothing at the scale of the city, its buildings and its spaces is strictly a new invention. Each of the key elements of the city could be traced back to an existing typology or place. At the same time, the masterplan proposal is specific to the site, the culture and its time. Its normality derives from the familiarity of elements that have defined successful places for centuries, while at the same time providing an answer to specific problems of today: scarcity of resources, climate change, densification or the diversification of the economy of Oman. We believe that the fundamental challenge to building cities today is getting the ordinary right, as it is likely that the extraordinary will take care of itself. Leaving behind the anxiety of producing something intrinsically new, Madinat al Irfan aims to produce something much more difficult to achieve: a place that feel as if it had always been there.
WHY URBAN DESIGN CODES?

Deciphering the Invitation: Dressing for the Occasion

Black Tie Optional
- Crisp White Dress Shirt
- Dark Conservative Tie
- Solid Dark Slit or Tuxedo

Semi-Formal
- Crisp Dress Shirt
- Unpatterned Pattern
- Conservative Tie

Business Casual
- Tie Optional
- White, Color or Patterned Button Down Shirt
- Sport Coat or Blazer (Recommended)
- Khakis or Nice Trouser

Casual
- Sweater
- Polo or Casual Button Down Shirt
- Leather or Canvas Shoes

Nicholas Choy
Urban design codes are primarily concerned with co-ordinating the actions of private and public actors in the enterprise of city-building, to create meaningful places and high quality public realms that will serve their populations well and stand the test of time. Codes formulate development not only as a technical and economic exercise, but a social one as well, bridging gaps between the people that make places and those that ultimately live in them.

For a project the size of Madinat al Irfan, these gaps can be significant. The development of 624 hectares will take place in multiple phases over the course of many decades, involving a large number of organisations from local, regional and international interests, each with different goals and concerns. In the midst of this complexity, codes provide continuity and focus for the development, preserving vision, strategies, and priorities that have been vetted and tested, while also allowing for suitable innovations and response to shifting conditions and an unknown future.

CODES: A BACKGROUND

In its contemporary form, urban design codes emerged as a critique of several aspects of modern city building: zone-based planning, large-scale housing production and automobile-oriented urban design. Zone-based planning segregated land uses into discrete areas, ostensibly into rationalised, functional units that were part of a city-wide system. This was an understandable objective for those that lived in the noxious wake of industrialised cities of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries where homes existed cheek-by-jowl alongside factories. Later, large-scale housing production met the material needs of burgeoning populations, particularly during periods of post-war growth in the US and the UK. And simultaneously, rising affluence made car-ownership commonplace and highways engineering a central aspect of city planning. Yet the combined effect of these trends was the amalgamation of traditional towns into much larger urban agglomerations, often of a homogeneous character, with the replication of standard building types with little regard for geographic and historic contexts. All this unfolded in a new kind of landscape dominated by roads and car-scaled development. For many critics, this amounted to forgettable, oppressive, alienating environments venomously described as civic blunderland, subtopia, and the geography of nowhere.

A closely related critique is that certain strands of contemporary architectural design make an unbalanced emphasis on iconic impact and formal novelty to the detriment of urban life. When architecture is reduced to a game of sculptural daring or branding one-upmanship, the city risks the unexpected consequence of rendering the extraordinary banal as my colleague Alfredo Caraballo points out elsewhere in this volume. Together, there is space for maverick architecture, its unchecked pursuit can clutter the civic realm with a parade of spectacles and gestures, each concerned only with itself, addressing internal ideas and ignoring the narratives running through the city as an ensemble.

DESIGN CODES

While design codes aim to remedy these issues by embedding civic values within urban development. Land-use planning is tempered by the human scale, expressed in finer-grain, mixed-use places and walkable distances between compatible uses. Large-scale mono-functional development is broken down and a sense of place established by responding to topographic, historical and cultural contexts. Neighbourhood identities can be nurtured through anchoring elements and distinct building typologies. The design of streets is shifted away from automotive priorities towards human ones: building profiles and roadway widths that create enjoyable pedestrian environments, clear spatial hierarchies that orient people, and more carefully considered townscapes can lead to a more visually pleasing city. Most significantly, codes provide an agenda for discussions about the public realm so that the city becomes a conversation rather than a series of isolated architectural monologues. Just as different social contexts – such as a black tie dinner or a casual weekend gathering – can imply different dress codes, so too can the hierarchy of public spaces articulate ways for private developments to collectively contribute to a civic sense of place.
CODES AT IRFAN

The codes developed for Irfan took into account a wide range of precedents that captured current debates and international best-practice in urban design. It drew upon design codes written in-house at Allies and Morrison and its consultants over the previous two decades, as well as research published in the field. This work covered worldwide precedent, with a diversity of development briefs including central business districts, residential estates, healthcare campuses, transit-oriented designs and Olympic redevelopment plans. Research publications reviewed included those by American urbanists and pilot studies conducted by the UK government in the mid-2000s. Each new project brings about unique conditions that lead to new perspectives on the practice. In Irfan, the dramatic topography of the land, the national remit and ambitions of Omran, and the particularities of the planning and development environment were married with the detailed masterplan vision to produce several innovations in urban design coding. Six are highlighted below.

Urban design codes have not been implemented before in Oman. In this entirely new context, they have been conceived of as a living document, with a robust structure capable of maintaining the masterplan vision while adapting to future changes. The codes capture important values at a specific moment in history - they are a legacy document for future generations - but they should also be able to grow and respond to new circumstances. As such, the codes have been segregated into modules and organised by urban scale so that individual components can be updated without invalidating the entire document. The codes are arranged generally to the specific, from sitewide, to sector, block, building, down to the architectural element. Strategic planning parameters are enshrined within codes in the first two chapters, whilst the latter chapters gather smaller-scale regulations, such as facade performance standards. Modularity allows for detailed codes to be replaced as research progresses, styles evolve and construction markets mature, while leaving components that are working well to remain in place.

A common debate about design codes often arises about the level of detail or prescription to which they should be written, usually splitting along libertarian and authoritarian lines. The libertarian complaints about design codes include their potential to become rigid, limiting architectural creativity, promoting the repetition of conventional solutions, fixing out-of-date standards. The authoritarian response is that without enforceable rules, self-interested parties will extract as much material and spatial surplus from their development as possible and hollow out the public realm. At Irfan, given the nascent status of design codes in the market, a more prescriptive approach was adopted, though an escape valve was built-in to create a system of selective approval. Each code is comprised of two components: a regulation and a rationale. The regulation forms a benchmark to guarantee a minimum level of quality, but those who wish to outperform or achieve the code objective by alternative means can appeal by fulfilling the code rationale. This allows the code enforcer to solidify the rule against weak designers, but relax it for those who are strong and innovative.

The codes have also been written to be a positive resource for developers, beneficial and easy to use. To support this objective, clear document way-finding is a high priority. Though the codes are over 500 pages long, a short introduction describes how they are to be used and how compliance will be evaluated. Every development parcel comes with a two-page block data sheet that directs the developer to all applicable sections of the code, to quickly steer the designer to relevant material, saving time and effort.

Good documentary structures and styles are not merely graphic exercises; they are tools of governance and conduits of value.
Extra efforts have been made to integrate environmental performance into the codes. Usually sustainability and urban design criteria are separate matters overseen by different agencies, or one is perceived as a bolt-on to the other. The Irfan design codes combine the objectives and aim to generate sustainable development by default. Prescribed streetwall profiles and facade compositions have been created based on solar orientation and tested for thermal performance, so that designers who rely on baseline rules will achieve sustainability goals. Energy and resource consumption targets are listed by development block so that resource consumption targets are listed by development block so that

tests for thermal performance. The design code identifies these sites as urban elements that anchor the identity of different locales within the city. At these locations, the criteria are presented as non-regulatory guidelines offered for creative synthesis, with the quality of the development ensured by an alternative mechanism such as an architectural competition or a design panel review. The power of coding is magnified by withholding its application from these places; special sites and background urban fabric are made mutually stronger by existing in contra-distinction with each other.

Ultimately each of these innovations takes their cue from an increased sensitivity to the social context of design codes. Not all developers have the same capacities or objectives, and not all designers have the same vision. Not all sites have the same development potentials, and economic conditions and political changes depending on context, and circumstance, and indeed on the people who are making the case for a specific argument. As such is evident in the questions that arose during the design of Najaf: should rules be fixed or allowed to change? Are they a constraint or a resource for developers? Should buildings be expressive and unique or typologically unified? The answers can only be found by establishing a transparent process which engages the various participants to strike an effective balance. It is this ambition that is at the heart of the Irfan urban design codes.

They also grapple with the dialectic nature of social values and thus of urban design values; it is impossible to create a perfect code because its validity changes depending on context and circumstance, and indeed on the people who are making the case for a specific argument. As such is evident in the questions that arose during the design of Najaf: should rules be

1 Some researchers claim that design codes reach as far back as antiquity. However, our concern with contemporary development needs only a modest pedantry, tied to the emergence of new design codes. See Ben-Joseph, E. (2005). The Code of the City: Standards and the Hidden Language of Place Making. MIT Press, London. and detail should be commensurate with the site’s position within the hierarchy of public spaces. Finally, exceptions should be allowed. Cities are comprised of background and foreground sites, and certain prominent locations should be permitted to explore more daring and unprecedented building forms. The design code identifies these sites as urban elements that anchor the identity of different locales within the city. At these locations, the criteria are presented as non-regulatory guidelines offered for creative synthesis, with the quality of the development ensured by an alternative mechanism such as an architectural competition or a design panel review. The power of coding is magnified by withholding its application from these places; special sites and background urban fabric are made mutually stronger by existing in contra-distinction with each other.

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ON DESIGN, GOVERNANCE AND PLACE

The Allegory of Good and Bad Government, Sala dei Nove, Siena, Ambrogio Lorenzetti, 1339

Sowmya Parthasarathy
Design plays a fundamental role in the making of great places and sustainable cities. But equally important to the vision is the governance of city building, the other half of the place equation. Good design and governance reinforce each other, and must be developed and implemented together if we are to build successful public and sustainable streets and resilient cities.

Cities across the world, and Muscat is no exception, are facing a perfect storm of social, economic, and environmental challenges, exposing the limitations of business-as-usual urban design and development. There is a rising demand for a more responsive urbanism where the human scale matters, quality of place is prioritised, community needs take precedence, and sustainable environmental outcomes are achieved. Madinat al Irfan’s brief to be a catalyst for change gets to the heart of this ambition, setting out a vision for a certain point in time, and for quality of life and place.

A CATALYST FOR CHANGE

The masterplan for Madinat al Irfan rejects the car-dominated, resource-hungry and soulless urbanism of the past three decades and offers a visionary and implementable alternative for future growth. Its strategies address the critical issues of economic diversification, traffic congestion, rising energy and water demand, climate change, and the rapid erosion of environmental quality. It responds to the desire for a mixed-use, walkable, and resilient community building through an emphasis on walkability, compact mixed-use neighbourhoods, and the incorporation of heritage and culture in land use, open spaces and built form. It is founded on the two pillars of place making and sustainability, fulfilling Oman’s aspiration for the new district to be a change agent and a model for long-term resilience not only for Oman but for the entire region.

However, if development proposals within Irfan have to go through the existing planning and development process, there will be more than twenty agencies and authorities who must be approached separately. The National government support will come in the form of environmental, planning and highways related permits and approvals, and in major infrastructure such as roadways, public transport and civil facilities. Local government will provide building permits and city services over the life of the project including street cleaning, parks and utilities such as libraries, police, fire and others. Utility companies will approve and monitor service connections and ensure that off-site networks have sufficient capacity over time.

In such a scenario, there is likely to be a degree of conflict between the requirements of various authorities and the objectives of the Irfan masterplan, leading to a complicated and long approvals process, dampening interest from developers and an uphill struggle to deliver design innovation at both the urban and building scale.

A NEW MODEL OF GOVERNANCE

While the Irfan masterplan itself does not offer the opportunity to pioneer a new institutional framework for city making, together with new forms of governance and more importantly, a shared vision.
of city planning and regulatory control. A comprehensive set of parameter plans, design codes, masterplan guidelines, and review processes have been developed to ensure the project’s long-term success. A new model for implementation and governance has also been proposed through the creation of a new Irfan planning and development authority.

Irfan’s codes and guidelines are clear and transparent as they are designed to deliver the highest standards of urban development, unique to Oman, its climate, built form and cultural traditions. Muscat’s new capital district will help to build local capacity, setting new (national) standards, following international best practices and encouraging investment through the site’s strategic location, quality of its transport assets, urban fabric, public spaces, civic amenities and a clear and transparent development control framework.

The comprehensive scope, scale, and 40-year timeline of Madinat al Irfan means that the project will have significant national and regional impact. Oman and the Supreme Council for Planning (Oman’s national planning authority) have both acknowledged that the masterplan will inspire future urban growth and catalyse the upgrading of systems across the Sultanate.

BUT IS IT ENOUGH?

Can the masterplan and governance proposals for Irfan ensure the longevity of its vision, deliver places of quality, improve environmental performance, and accommodate the inevitable changes that will occur over the 40-50 year of its development? If the design for the urban form of urbanism and the value of long-term stewardship is not shared more widely, if Irfan’s detailed codes and proposals do not receive legal backing, its proposals will unlikely be seen through. The Irfan master plan performance targets and requirements capture the ambition of the project and must remain in place for the long term in order to safeguard the Vision. Without legislative protection, these requirements may be diluted over time in favour of more expedient arrangements.

The governance and implementation structure for Madinat al Irfan thus must also allow for long-term monitoring, masterplan review, and quality control. It is not sufficient to sell land to master developers or subdevelopers, even with block-by-block codes and agreements for compliance in place. A mechanism for regular audits, design review and reporting against performance targets will ensure the vision is implemented, allowing for adjustments to the masterplan over time.

All this cannot happen overnight. Efforts to build capacity across the range of stakeholders who will eventually deliver Irfan is essential. As such, the opportunity to embed learning into the evolution of Irfan is one of the most significant potentials of this project. An important proposal of the masterplan program as well as the governance structure is the establishment of an urban learning centre within the new capital district.

The objective of the urban learning centre is to conduct research on the performance targets at Madinat al Irfan. Led by an international academic partner, such an initiative would provide specialist expertise, skills transfer, training and mentoring. The academic partner would work in collaboration with a range of other stakeholder groups which might include: the Oman Research Centre, the National Centre for Statistics and Information, the Botanical Gardens, universities and colleges, the architectural and engineering community and their respective societies, the financial sector, government ministries and service providers. Its output would play a key role in driving the evolution of the masterplan and codes. It could also be used for promotional, educational and academic purposes thereby firmly positioning the project both locally, regionally and within the international community as a model of sustainable urbanism.

The long-term success of Madinat al Irfan will be measured by its ability to be a catalyst for change. Its vision and value proposition must be communicated clearly to national leaders and stakeholders, utility and service providers, and local, regional and international developers, investors and end-users. Eventually, the real success of Irfan will lie in its ability to foster a shared civic culture and a collective new expectation of good urbanism in the region.
URBAN PICTURESQUE

Alfredo Caraballo
"Beauty is not a quality in things themselves; it exists merely in the mind which contemplates them; and each mind perceives a different beauty."

David Hume, 18th century philosopher

The practice of urban design finds itself on a particular juncture today. On the one hand, rapid urbanisation, particularly in emerging economies, has intensified an urgent need for good planning, the development of successful urban centres. There have been few times in history when the skills of architects and urban designers have been more needed as now, as world's population becomes its most urbanised. On the other hand, there is a somewhat justified scepticism within the profession and beyond on the capacity of architects and planners to produce required responses to the formidable challenge of rapid urbanisation. The disappointment in the failures of the past 50 years of urban design has resulted in a crisis of confidence in our collective capacity to plan successful cities.

In recent times, the most common answer to this problem has been a paradoxical combination of diagrammatic rationality and free shape making. The proliferation of data-informed design has attempted to capture the multifaceted and complex aspects of what makes a city a city into a rational and understandable set of diagrams. From patterns of habitation to density to land values, vast amounts of information can now be translated into diagrams, which more often than not, become the actual form of urban plans. The rationality of the information behind these diagrams conveys a degree of objectivity to this approach. Yet it goes without saying that the urban condition is not reducible to a set of diagrams, let alone their literal translation into physical form. Hence, the schematic nature of most urban plans can be explained in part by their diagrammatic origin, having not been yet enriched by seemingly less rational qualities such as sense of place or character.

David Hume, 18th century philosopher

This helps to explain another aspect of current city making: the reliance on shape making. The fascination with iconic buildings post Bilbao as a place making tool that is not just exclusive to individual buildings. Wonderfully, there are many masterplans today that purely rely on form, most of the times two-dimensionally in plan, as the mechanism to give identity and character to a new place of city. The grand gesture becomes an all-encompassing element, explaining and at the same time representing the idea of the city. Hence, contemporary masterplans of sweeping curves, allegorical circles or other formal devices; not that this approach is entirely new as Palladian or Chandigarh testify. Yet it goes without saying that most successful urban places are not easily reducible to a simple gestural form, instead they are the result of a more complex, and at the same time, subtler set of rules.

Madinat al Irfan advances a region are keys to these same challenges with a different approach. Whilst incorporating data informed design and not shying away from formal gestures where actually needed, the masterplan draws both from the picturesque and townscape traditions to propose a place that is fundamentally grounded in the actual spatial experience of the city: the urban picturesque.

At the heart of this notion, there is a distinction between three-dimensional nature of the composition, of the painterly image in the landscape, implies a subject that looks at it, completing and understanding the composition by the very act of seeing it. In the case of Capability Brown this process unfolded from clear vantage points over the two-dimensional order of the plan. Madinat al Irfan follows the lineage of this tradition: the specific aspects of the place, the site, the topography, but also the particular urban configurations of the region are keys to these same challenges with a decided sensitivity for the picturesque where the plan is the result of the place and not the other way around.

Nikolaus Pevsner and Gordon Cullen, there is clear primacy of the visual and spatial composition. The careful balance between the diagram and shape making is a somewhat justified scepticism within the profession and beyond on the capacity of architects and planners to produce responses to the formidable challenge of rapid urbanisation. The disappointment in the failures of the past 50 years of urban design has resulted in a crisis of confidence in our collective capacity to plan successful cities.

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of a tree, a mound, a stone wall and a creek, only makes sense when seen and experienced, not when laid out in plan.

Experiencing this kind of balanced composition is highly personal, hence the second element of subjectivity. Rather than having a rational, geometrical order imposed on the land, as in the French landscape tradition, the concern for the picturesque relies on the individual designer’s sense of composition in place. The picturesque and the appreciation of it owes its aesthetic authority to a sensible mise en scene of objects, masses and voids artfully put together by someone, where space, matter and order, but also chance, collage and juxtaposition all play their part.

At its heart, there is a delightful paradox here as, the ultimate aspiration of a picturesque approach is to disappear, for a place to become so naturally there, to feel as if it has always been there. This is the result of a most difficult balancing act: designing a place in such a way which will blur the fact that it has even been completely designed. In that very moment, the traces of the personal might be erased or forgotten, and the place will just be.

Despite the poetics, this aspiration is not without fundamental challenges. Is it possible to achieve in a contemporary project the level of naturalness that traditional cities achieved as a by-product of their passage through time? It is possible to design and codify, in the case of a masterplan for a new city, the sense of place and character we feel in existing ones which have long been successful?

FORMALITY AND INFORMALITY

As in any masterplan, Madinat al Irfan organises a development quantum within a given, defined site area. It takes into consideration different kinds of data: from the path of the sun, direction of the wind and other climatic aspects, to population estimates, market profiling or forecasts for transport demand. Whilst the analysis of this considerable amount of information certainly informs the masterplan response, these data do not fully explain the compositional aspects that underpin the design, least alone the character of the place proposed.

Clear design decisions at the very beginning of the project established the primary place making strategy: a city of bridges above a wadi park; a collection of villages on the hillier topography in the southern part of the site; two compact downtown areas in the flatter areas at the north of the site. It goes without saying that this did not have to be the only way to layout the quantum of accommodation within the limits of the site, as the different competition entries testified - each had done it differently.

These particular design strategies were a specific response to site
and brief but also had a particular sensitivity to the place; both the existing one and the one to come.

Several reasons behind the design strategies are easily explainable and almost self-evident; flatter, larger areas lent themselves to the placement of the densely populated downtown areas with higher footprints and taller buildings. Following the contours of the hills imply curvy, sinuous roads, which are the base for villages. The wadi collects water and is a natural green spine, which can easily then become a natural path. Other aspects are mostly defined on terms of character, sense of place, hierarchy, views and composition and these cannot be completely explained in purely functional terms: from the location of the main mosque as a focal point of the Wadi Park, to the sequence of straight lines of the bridges connecting each of its sides; the meandering character of the souk district is a spatial foil to the clarity and formality of the nearby CBD square.

In the juxtaposition of these diverse and contrasting sets of places and formal strategies lies a key to the sense of place of Madinat Al Irfan. Nowhere is this more clear than in the series of key vistas, special corners or moments, key views or adjustments of massing that would have been impossible to acknowledge and address in a purely two-dimensional representation.

In doing so, the Irfan masterplan has been designed three-dimensionally. Whilst this might seem almost self-evident when designing a city, what this actually signifies is that the city is the result of a spatial, three dimensional understanding of the urban form and its experience, rather than just a two-dimensional composition of a plan. Planographic contours, topographical contours, the massing of the building or the solar path have been taken into consideration to produce a three dimensional planning that has been calibrated by literally moving through the spaces of the scheme.

This approach revealed something special in the design development: there was a sense of discovery of the spaces as we ‘walked’ through them, which opened up an iterative process in which the massing, configuration and ultimately the plan were all refined by the vistas and views of the sequential movement across streets and alleys. This virtual promenading has produced changes, accents that informed the design codes of the city, giving way to special moments, key views or adjustments of massing that would have been impossible to acknowledge and address in a purely two-dimensional representation.

Digital tools join the lineage running from the images that are at the heart of the picturesque tradition to the digital realm, running from the images that are fundamental act of the urban design. These methods of representation and the directness of three dimensional tools allows rapid testing of options and variations from a spatial and three-dimensional point of view.

As the plan starts to become just an output to convey ideas, the 3d model and 3d views become the actual design tool and method of representation to plan and understand the city as it will be actually experienced.

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A CULTIVATED CITY

Kim Wilkie
Oman lies on the edge of the tectonic plate where Africa ripped apart from Eurasia 600 million years ago. The geology and botany along this line is extraordinary and the landscape has generated a particular personality and identity for the country. It is a place where rocks, water and plants have been translated into beautiful agricultural terraces and where farming and date palms are central to the national culture.

The site for Madinat al Irfan epitomises the resources of this natural landscape. Poised between the Hajar Mountains and the Arabian Sea, the city will be founded in open desert with a deep wadi running through its centre. Wadis are dry, rocky valleys formed through millennia of storms into ephemeral stream beds. Moisture is mostly protected below the ground but seasonal downpours bring flushes of vegetation and water to the surface.

The natural landscape has shaped the masterplan for Madinat al Irfan from the very beginning. It was decided to make the most of the topography, keeping the steep slopes open and positioning buildings on the upper, flatter land. The wadi will stay undeveloped as a central open space, with the metropolitan core on the northern ridge and the satellite urban villages on the southern rim. Inhabited bridges, cooled by the valley breeze, will connect the two sides and look out over the wadi landscape. Water is the source of life in this desert region. The Omani landscape underpins social and legal systems, which are fundamentally based on the passage of water through human settlements. The ancient falaj irrigation network of mud-walled channels distributes water by gravity through each farm and town. It is a system that dates back at least 5,000 years and communities are organized around very specific access to this supply through an intricate system of sluices. The falaj are collectively owned and guarded by watchtowers.

The attention to topography in siting the buildings in the masterplan is exemplary, but the treatment of the open spaces that define the character and layout of the city is revolutionary; it revives a tradition that goes back thousands of years to the cities of Mesopotamia and the Hanging Gardens of Babylon. The city will grow its own food using its own water. The steep slopes of the wadi sides will be sculpted into terraces with stone walls to create an urban agriculture that will permeate the whole of Irfan. Terraces are a particularly efficient way of growing food. From the Andes to Indo-China, agriculture first evolved by terracing slopes that collect soil, hold water and irrigate through gravity. It has a practical logic that remains sound in twenty-first century cities.

With a living, working and visiting population of nearly 250,000 inhabitants, Madinat al Irfan will generate substantial grey water. The costs of recycling grey water come from pumping long distances and removing nitrates and phosphates. The beauty of allowing gravity to carry the water down through agricultural terraces, with crops that need nitrates and phosphates, is that nothing goes to waste and the costs turn into benefits. By the time the plants have extracted the nutrients and the water has percolated through the limestone to the wadi floor, it is stripped clean for the indigenous vegetation that grows in the valley bottom. We are working with the Oman Botanic Garden, a new development by the Diwan of the Royal Court, to source and grow the native plants that will flourish in the wadi base and create a central park that has walks and shelters through a natural wild valley. It will be a place that is fundamentally part of the Omani landscape, flora and culture. Water will snake down the terraced slopes in narrow channels and occasional pools to filter into the rough valley base. Immaculately cultivated date palms, citrus
groves and vegetable plots will give way to wild shrubs and trees in a natural rocky stream bed.

The extent and sinuous form of the wadi will mean that the layers of the terraces on its sides will actually add up to a continuous linear length of over 200 kilometres. Not only will the terraces echo the beauty of ancient towns like Jebel Akhdar, they will also produce a great deal of food. Oman has a gentle and thoughtful culture where the sophistication of modern prosperity has not divorced people from respect for water and growing food. There is a deep love of date palms and the falaj irrigation system that makes life in the hot arid climate possible. Creating a city that is based on this respect and these traditions has struck a chord with the people we have met and worked with in Oman. It is a settlement that will intrinsically have emerged from the place, the traditions and the practical realities of keeping a twenty-first century city resilient, healthy and self-reliant.

In support of this ethos, the Diwan of the Royal Court has donated 20,000 date palms to help establish the city. The trees will provide a dominant pattern of productive green shade that connects through the streets, parks and sports areas to the corridor and wadi terraces. Oman has a gentle and thoughtful culture where the sophistication of modern prosperity has not divorced people from respect for water and growing food. There is a deep love of date palms and the falaj irrigation system that makes life in the hot arid climate possible. Creating a city that is based on this respect and these traditions has struck a chord with the people we have met and worked with in Oman. It is a settlement that will intrinsically have emerged from the place, the traditions and the practical realities of keeping a twenty-first century city resilient, healthy and self-reliant. The changing climate and unpredictability of world economic and political forces put new pressure on cities to be able to fend for themselves in times of uncertainty. For cities larger than Plato’s ideal of 5,000 inhabitants, total self-sufficiency is probably unrealistic, but taking care of food, water and health makes good sense. The aim is to allow public spaces to work in several dimensions. If parks can help to filter water, clean air and grow food, as well as providing spaces for walking and recreation, they give a place a sense of responsibility, pride and identity.

The more that the inhabitants of a city stroll and linger in public spaces, the greater will be their sense of life and wellbeing. When people can also have contact with the soil and take ownership of growing fruit and vegetables, mental as well as physical health greatly improves. The management of the agricultural terraces will need careful consideration. There is however enough space for private allotments, professional farmers, school plots, medicinal gardens and even belvedere cafes and tea houses. Furthermore, during the decades of building the city it will be possible to give temporary plots to the construction workers, who are often a long way from home with no access to cultivation space.

Madinat al Irfan is an idea for a new kind of city where the plan and architecture have responded intimately and subtly with the underlying topography and landscape.

The designs flow from the traditions of the people and the pressures of surviving in a harsh climate in an uncertain century. Throughout the process of developing the masterplan, our concept for this city has been to create a place where it is a pleasure to live and to lay the foundations for a settlement where the inhabitants can feel an active part of the spaces where they meet and share.
A CITY OF BRIDGES

Graham Morrison
If the new city of Irfan is to be beautiful, it would be a place where people wanted to be. Our starting point therefore is beauty and, for us, beauty evolves from a well-considered composition. That is not something that is deliberately eye-catching or iconic or dominated by a single issue such as sustainability or constructed out of gimmicks to prove it is cutting edge. It is, however, something based on an essential normality, an understanding of place and the value of the space between the buildings themselves. Irfan will thus be a composed place, a familiar place and our plan for this new city will set out to modestly, carefully but unashamedly beautiful.

In the making of a city, beauty comes from a composition that understands the topography and climatic geography, acknowledges the value history in relation to a modern culture, and manages a straightforward relationship with all of the sensibilities that make cities comfortable, legible and civic. If, in 50 years from now, people say that the city of Irfan is beautiful, its success will depend as much on how it works and how it feels as a place as what it might look like. If it can achieve the true benefits of normality then it will be exceptional.

As architects, we trained in the 1970’s – an era when Modernism was questioned and when the style of Post-Modernism offered an easy, if somewhat lazy response to the single-minded rhetoric of rationalism. For us, however, Post-Modernism offered not so much the rejection of Modernism but the inclusion of whatever went before. We felt empowered to be both Modernists thinking about the rational, the economic and the real, and to be Post-Modernists being able to consider history, the culture of a community and a sense of place drawn from the site. With Modernism, beauty seemed rarely referred to. With Post-Modernism, beauty was eclipsed by the reaction to Modernism that defined it. We have been fortunate designing in an era of relative freedom but, whereas, many (well-regarded) architects believe this to offer an unconstrained parametric playground, we believe our limitations are simply extended. In the early days of our careers, we used to wonder at the drawings and descriptions of an indigenous Arab architecture. It was the world of Bernard Rudofsky’s ‘Architecture without Architects’ – an unselfconscious but supremely confident response to climate, culture and place. We were impressed by an architecture made from materials found close by, that was of its place and timeless rather than an image derived from the magazines of a faraway land. Sadly, that early glimpse into how a local architecture might develop was easily eclipsed by an imported pre-conceived notion of how buildings ought to be designed not just by budget and the disciplines of project management, but also by an inexorable reflex to make cities and places look like the supposedly successful images of distant places that represented something even temporally vacuous – a common cultural phenomenon.

All too often, the region’s cities are made from an architecture that is taller than it needs to be, making places that are without shade in a desert environment, using materials that are imported and all planned with an absurd dependency on the car even for even the shortest of journeys. It is an irony that the supposed expression of some newly self-confident nation states is supplanted by an impulse to imitate the very post-colonial architectural culture whose representation may be an anathema to the definition of these emerging political entities. The expression of apparent independence is overwhelmed by the dominance of an imported and often irrelevant way of designing buildings and places. It is an out of date, without context and without any long-term contribution to a region so needful of a way of thinking that reconciles the enormous need for growth with...
a culture seeking answers to the problems such expansion poses.

Though Madinat al Irfan may seem a romantic response to what has gone before, it is anything but. It is intensely rational. It is a city that is walkable. The car is not excluded but neither is it dominant. Though there is a loose grid pattern that allows for flexibility and provides a pattern made up of short walkable episodes that lead deliberately to others – an easily developable place that is essentially comfortable and legible. The buildings may be simple and respond to the climate but the spaces they form are complex, revealing and inviting. And though the landscape may be rugged and robust, it provides the basis of the plan. The spaces of this new city are all determined by a landscape that follows the wadi – a wadi that might have divided the city, but here becomes the very determinant that unites it. The scar in the topography made over many millennia becomes the place or the park to which the entirety of this linear city refers.

Though Irfan may have an unfamiliar density in the region, it nevertheless provides a relatively low-rise city with a level of accommodation that addresses the needs of the city of Muscat. It offers an intense juxtaposition of uses that, with a new found flexibility, avoids the sanitising effect of zoning. It is real place to live made from materials that are there, built in forms that respond to the climate and organised with a public realm that avoids the dominance of the car. Planned on the raised plateau overlooking the sea and with a mountain backdrop, the city looks in to the 25 kilometres of retained and reused wadi and, by controlling the flow of water, the wadis become a managed park – a place for recreation and for growing food, a place that all of the new city relates to and a defining characteristic of the new city that unites it. Crossing it will be fifteen inhabited bridges, all occupied viaducts, all devices to provide shade when walking from the main city on one side to the villages on the other, all different in their architectural expression and all deeply symbolic of Madinat al Irfan. This will be a city of bridges - defined by an architecture responsive to place and climate, defined by its relationship to an extraordinary landscape and defined by optimism and a way of planning that brings a new and convincing self-confidence to the culture of Oman. Above all, it will be a memorable place because it will be beautiful.
As an Omani, residing in Muscat, I am aware of a need for public open space and acutely aware of my yearning for such spaces. Madinat al Irfan’s driving force is the recognition and activation of the landscape to invite activity and engagement in a way that is deeply rooted in the Omani memory. Irfan’s terraced gardens recall the terraced farms of Jabel Al Akhdar born out of the practical limitations of water flow and topography. Having once done an allotment project at university in my second year of studying architecture at the Makintosh School of Architecture, they evoke the British allotment gardens in the wartime era with individual non-commercial urban plots for gardening and growing food.

With this in mind, I was very privileged to attend a design workshop discussion about the masterplan for Madinat al Irfan with HRH Prince Charles on his visit to Oman last year. This was an opportunity to discover the project’s imaginative approach to realising sustainability in an urban context, and an Arabic arid city, which is of course very noble, important and worthy of presentation at this level. I can see in this project a place which unleashes the human connection to landscape and nature squarely within an Omani climactic and urban context.

I imagine the terraced allotments at Irfan as an opportunity to re-integrate urban with rural lifestyles, an opportunity to allow individuals to express individuality and re-connect with nature, and finally an opportunity to activate a community spirit, delivering a quality of life for the residents as citizens and members of a community rather than customers or consumers of a product. It is a vision of a city for all.
PAUL FINCH, OBE is in editorial director of the Architectural Review and The Architects’ Journal and was chair of the RIBA Competitions jury which selected the winning team for the Madinat al Irfan masterplan. He serves as programme director of the World Architecture Festival and is a leading authority on architecture and urbanism. As a journalist, he has worked for Estates Times, Building Design, the AJ and AR. He is an honorary fellow of the RIBA and of University College London and was Chairman of the Board of Commissioners at Cabe where he was also previously deputy chair and chair of its design review panel. Paul read history at the University of Cambridge and holds an honorary doctorate from the University of Westminster.

NADIA MAQBOOL is founding member of 23 Degrees North, a sustainably driven and professionally recognised architecture, research and design practice based in Muscat, Oman. Her practice promotes design which is sensitive to the health of the individual, the community and environment. Founded in 2011, its growing portfolio of work is noted for its ability to evaluate and learn from the wisdom embedded in the successful innovations of local and regional traditions. In 2006, Nadia became the first female Omani architect to achieve RIBA accreditation after graduating from the Mackintosh School of Architecture, Glasgow.

GRAHAM MORRISON, OBE is a partner at Allies and Morrison, and has been one of the design leaders of the Madinat al Irfan masterplan. He founded the practice with Bob Allies in 1984 and has lectured extensively on architecture and cities both at home and abroad, having held a visiting professorship at Nottingham University and serving as an external examiner at Cambridge and Portsmouth Universities. He has served as an RIBA Council member, been advisor to the Cabinet Office and has judged a number of major competitions. A Commissioner of Historic England and chair of the South Downs National Park design review panel, he has been a member of the Arts Council Lottery Committee, a Royal Fine Art Commissioner and a Cabe Design Review panellist. He trained at Cambridge University where he won the Brancusi Prize to Finland to study the work of Alvar Aalto.

DR NICHOLAS CHOY is an associate at Allies and Morrison and was instrumental in delivering the first phase of the Irfan masterplan, using his expertise to optimise the effectiveness of design codes being applied there. A graduate of the University of Waterloo and the Southern California Institute of Architecture (SCI-Arc), he has a PhD from King’s College London where his research focused on urban design codes. He has presented papers at conferences for the Housing Studies Association, the Royal Geographical Society and the Association of European Schools of Planning, and has regularly served as an external juror at universities including the California Institute of the Arts, Manchester City University, the Architectural Association and the University of Cambridge.