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Strategies for Humanization of Urban Areas: Case Study from the Qassim Region, Saudi Arabia

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Abstract. This study investigated an urban humanization project in the Qassim region of Saudi Arabia, focusing on unintended consequences and disruptions to social cohesion in the community. Through a case study, site observations, and interviews, we discovered that, overall, the project's users were pleased, but neighboring residents complained about the unregulated influx of outsiders. The results of this study suggest the need for a multilevel planning approach that fully considers community characteristics to enhance the effectiveness of humanization initiatives and generate integrated urban synergy.

Keywords: Social Sustainability, Humanization Strategy, Complete Neighborhood, Social Cohesion, Urban Development.

1. Introduction and Background

Initiatives for humanizing cities aim to increase the social capital of neighborhood communities and strengthen their social cohesion. However, a few projects undertaken by various municipalities have yielded negative results. Quality of life encompasses the overall well-being and satisfaction experienced by individuals and communities. It includes several key aspects such as physical and mental health, education, social relationships, economic stability, environmental quality, and personal safety. These elements collectively contribute to how individuals perceive their personal and social lives, overall happiness, and opportunities for fulfillment.

The humanization of urban spaces is a complex subject with a long and diverse history involving cultural, economic, and social factors. The idea of incorporating natural elements such as parks and green spaces to create a more livable environment is as old as the first cities (e.g., the hanging gardens of Babylon). Throughout the centuries, architects, designers, and urban planners have sought to create both a functional environment and one that satisfies the needs and desires of the people who live and work there. Livable cities and communities are those that successfully provide essential housing, health, welfare, and safety services to their residents. According to the American Association (2005) and Gough (2015), a livable community not only offers affordable housing and safe transportation options but also fosters a societal structure that encourages the integration of its population into civil life. This integration supports a vibrant lifestyle for all ages, enhancing the quality of interactions and the overall social fabric of the city. Enhancing quality of life in an urban setting involves a holistic approach that considers safety, welfare, and the cultivation of strong community ties. By concentrating on creating inclusive neighborhoods and humanized urban spaces, cities can become more livable and supportive of their residents' diverse needs. Well-designed public spaces and community facilities can play significant roles in promoting social cohesion and inclusivity in rapidly evolving communities.

We hypothesized that the methods for choosing the location of humanization initiatives and novel design features are very important for achieving the desired aims. Such programs should be designed for use at multiple levels with clear descriptions of the characteristics of the target community. Moreover, the plans should first consider the city on a large scale, and then move down to work with suburbs and smaller communities. This approach is essential to ensure that multilevel initiatives achieve a complete neighborhood with well-integrated synergy.

The concept of a complete neighborhood is centered on creating environments that nurture community connections and strengthen ties among residents. These neighborhoods are designed to encourage interaction and collaboration, featuring spaces that enrich the collective sense of belonging. They are typically equipped with human-centric spaces such as parks, children's playgrounds, well-designed gathering areas, spacious sidewalks, inviting building facades, and essential facilities, including libraries, places of worship, local shops, and restaurants. These human-centered elements are crucial in fostering a sense of community and belonging, as highlighted by Jan Gehl (2010) in his book, *Cities for People*.

The concept of neighborhood humanization revolves around the design and development of a cityscape that prioritizes the well-being, comfort, and needs of both users and residents. Drawing upon the ideas of prominent urban planning thought leaders such as Jacobs (1961) and Gehl (2010), this approach strives to develop living spaces that encourage social interaction among all classes, inclusivity, and a strong sense of shared community. Our study sought to evaluate how well the Buraidah project had succeeded in achieving the goals of creating a human-centered urban environment while minimizing dissatisfaction and promoting a high quality of life for all inhabitants

2. Study Aims and Research Objectives

This study delved into the underlying reasons for misalignments in urban development projects, with a particular focus on initiatives aimed at humanizing city spaces. The goal was to understand the root causes of these adverse outcomes in terms of needs of users compared to those of residents to avoid problems. We strongly believe that developing an effective blueprint for smart city architecture with multilevel design considerations will enhance the likelihood of satisfactory outcomes for all and the sustainable success of the project.

3. Site Location and Methodology

The target of our analysis was Buraidah, the capital of the Al-Qassim Province in central Saudi Arabia (Fig. 1). Its plan for sustainable human-centered development is an outstanding case study for urbanization and cultural dynamics within the framework of the Saudi Vision 2030 initiative [<https://www.vision2030.gov.sa/en/vision-2030/overview/>]. Located approximately 400 km northwest of Riyadh, Buraidah is not only centered geographically but is also pivotal for its substantial contributions to agriculture, particularly as a leading city in date farming and the host of the world's largest annual date festival. Thus, we felt that Buraidah's strategic plan constituted an excellent model system for assessing outcomes in terms of their effects on local residents in contrast to the project's users.

A detailed case study of a new project called Othman bin Affan Street north of Buraidah (Fig. 2) was conducted to identify the unique challenges encountered and propose viable solutions for aligning the needs of users and residents. A diverse set of data was collected through site visits and researcher observations of user behavior. Site visits and data collection were performed according to standard protocols by experienced observers who visited the Othman site in 2022, and detailed information was recorded along with many representative photographs. The observations included sidewalks, places for gathering and socializing, good lighting and other safety features, inviting architecture with soft edges, street furniture, and many other aspects highlighted in the literature. Interviews with inhabitants of neighboring communities adjacent to the project were conducted to determine their points of view. The neighbors were interviewed in the mosques as it was easier to meet and interact with them there. The data were later organized and categorized for analysis and screened to limit bias.

4. Results

As part of the Future Saudi Cities program, collaboration was established with UN-Habitat to assess Buraidah's level of urban development and to identify key challenges and opportunities in alignment with sustainable development goals. The diagnostic study highlighted four strategic issues: polarized development, socio-ecological and economic imbalance, unbalanced growth and development, and lack of cohesion in city structure. In response, the Buraidah Strategic Plan, as outlined under the Future Saudi Cities initiative, proposed strategies aimed at creating a sustainable urban environment. These strategies included creating a more compact city model to enhance efficiency and reduce sprawl, promoting connectivity to improve infrastructure and mobility, ensuring inclusivity to support social cohesion and equitable growth, and enhancing resilience to prepare the city for future socio-economic and environmental challenges. These integrated approaches are crucial for Buraidah's alignment with the broader objectives of Saudi Vision 2030 to ensure a sustainable, vibrant, and socially cohesive urban future.

The findings of a recent study conducted by the Qassim Urban Observatory on the livability of Buraidah City revealed a paradox in accessibility to open spaces. Although the per capita share of open space in Buraidah was estimated at 4.7 m² per person, surpassing the global average of 4.4 m² per person, accessibility was significantly lower. This discrepancy was primarily attributed to the haphazard distribution of these open spaces across the city, which adversely affected the overall accessibility index. This highlights the need for strategic urban planning to enhance the equitable distribution of open spaces to improve livability. One of the new humanizing initiatives north of Buraidah is the development of Othman bin Affan Street. The aim of this project was to actualize some of the strategic responses mentioned above by providing open spaces and creating places for social interaction and relationship building. However, the attitudes and opinions of neighborhood residents towards the project differed substantially from those of the users. The following are some of the results of the research observations and interviews with project users compared with those of neighborhood residents.



Figure 1. Buraidah city centers and project location (NHSP 2019).

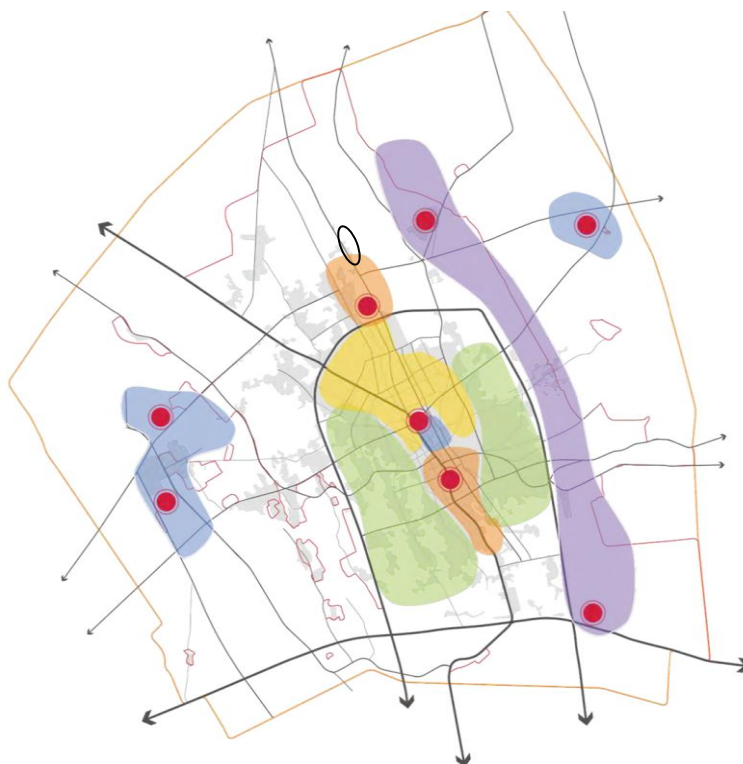
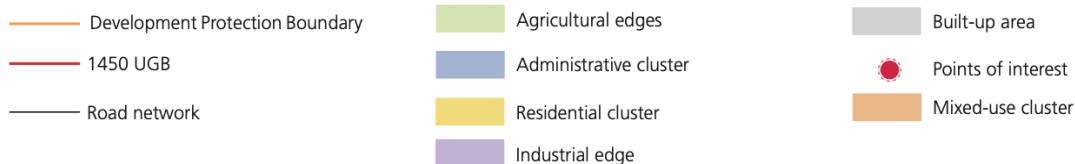


Figure 1. Buraidah land use and project location (NHSP 2019).



4.1 Positive Feedback

- High levels of satisfaction were reported among project users, especially in relation to the design of sidewalks and gathering places.
- Users emphasized that the projects provided increased opportunities for social interaction and engagement within the community.
- Individuals from all areas of the city gathered to enjoy the amenities.



Figure 3 Users celebrate special event on the street

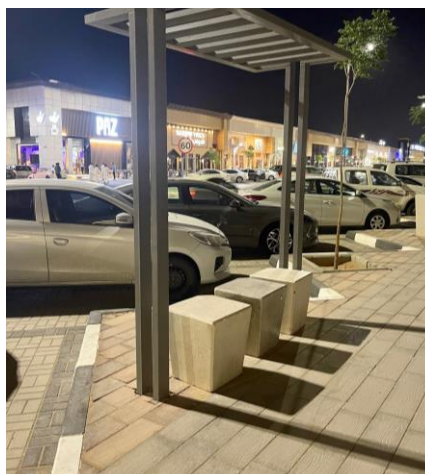


Figure 4 Street furniture



Figure 5 children play and enjoy sidewalk



Figure 2 Shops and restaurants with soft edges



Figure 7 interactive sidewalk



Figure 6 places for social gathering

4.2 Negative Feedback

- Neighboring communities expressed dissatisfaction with the project, citing traffic congestion, noise, and overcrowding as common issues.
- The influx of users from outside the immediate community affects the sense of cohesion and belonging among neighbors.
- The number of traffic accidents increased.
- The cost of rent for shops on the street increased.
- The project was specifically designed to cater to younger age groups.
- The demographics of the neighborhood were not reflected in the design.

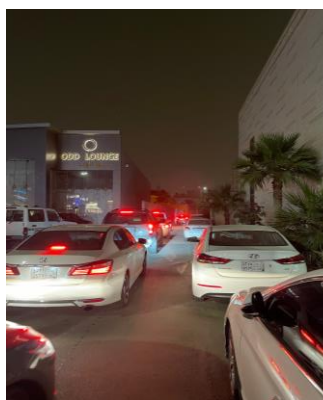


Figure 8 traffic congestion entering the neighborhood



Figure 9 Project users park their cars inside the neighbourhood



Figure 10 Traffic jam

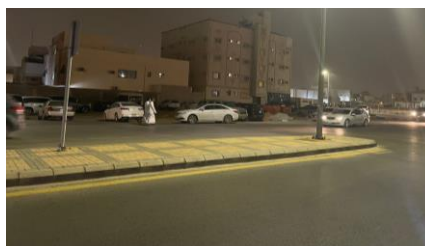


Figure 11 Users walk and park in the neighborhood



Figure 12 Users park in front of neighborhood doors



Figure 13 Neighbors community construct traffic speed bumps

4.3 Strategic Plan Recommendations

- Carefully select appropriate locations for humanization projects, considering their potential impact on existing communities.
- Adopt a multilevel city planning approach that considers the hierarchy of roads and squares.
- Balance city objectives of economic well-being, preserving cultural identity, and creating a vibrant marketplace, against neighborhood objectives related to strong community connections, safety and security, and a healthy place to live and raise a family.
- Consider the target community size and its unique characteristics when designing urban initiatives to ensure positive benefits for all residents.

- Consider the entire range of community factors, including demographic makeup, quality of social connections, and the potential effects of development and construction.

4.4 Strategic planning process

- Make provision for community engagement in joint decision-making discussions.
- Utilize a holistic approach to work with community members to navigate the challenges that arise with neighborhood growth and change.
- Involve all stakeholders in participatory planning.
- Integrate initiatives across all levels. Design plans that align initiatives at the city-wide, community, group, and individual level to maximize positive outcomes and minimize negative impacts.
- Ensure that the initiatives are nested. Changes at one level, such as new public spaces, should support and enhance the social contexts of other levels to strengthen the existing communities.
- Plan for ripple effects to avoid disruptions. Anticipate how changes occurring at one level may necessitate changes at other levels. Seek synergy across the system.
- Periodically reevaluate the initiative. Monitor outcomes at all levels to identify unintended consequences. Adjust plans as needed based on multilevel perspectives.

5. Discussion and Interpretation

Following the guidelines proposed by the urban planner, Jeff Speck (2012), neighborhoods should be designed to promote walking and the use of non-motorized transport on well-designed and spacious sidewalks, crosswalks, and pathways. Enhancing walkability is crucial for enhancing social interaction by drawing people into public areas, decreasing traffic congestion, and stimulating the local economy. Safety and accessibility planning ensures that public spaces and facilities are safe, well-lit, and accessible to people of all ages and abilities in line with the principles of universal design. Lively vehicle-free pedestrian zones and street environments encourage residents to walk or cycle, supported by a logical network of streets that ensures safety by making essential city services accessible by foot or bike. This helps curb traffic jams, air pollution, and resource depletion, contributes to a healthier living environment, and adds vitality to urban life.

Incorporating parks, gardens, children's playgrounds, and walking paths among green spaces within the neighborhood, as suggested by landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted (1865), is essential for providing recreational opportunities and serving as gathering places for residents. Embracing the

mixed-use development ideas of urban planner Peter Calthorpe (1993). the combination of residential, commercial, and recreational spaces in close proximity allows residents to live, work, and play without having to travel away from their community. Providing essential facilities such as libraries, community centers, places of worship, and local shops within walking distance of residential areas is of paramount importance. Community engagement, as Jacobs (1961) emphasized, encourages residents to actively participate in the planning, design, and management of their neighborhoods. This engagement fosters a sense of ownership and pride.

Building on Jan Gehl's (2010) work, architectural design means creating buildings and public spaces with human-scale architecture and inviting building facades with soft edges and human-scale architecture, promoting interaction and connection between private and public spaces. Public art and cultural installations that integrate art and cultural elements into the neighborhood space should also be part of the design.

Inclusiveness requires an approach to neighborhood planning with a diverse range of housing options, facilities, and amenities to accommodate various lifestyles, income levels, and cultural backgrounds, as advocated by urban theorist Richard Florida (2002). Following the work of architect William McDonough and chemist Michael Braungart (2002). the goal of sustainability is to incorporate environmentally friendly design principles and technologies that promote a healthy living environment and long-term resilience.

By focusing on these aspects, the humanization of a neighborhood aims to create a vibrant, inclusive, and thriving community that meets the needs of diverse residents and enhances their quality of life.

Based on the above, the following successful strategies can be employed to create a neighborhood that fosters a strong sense of community.

1. Social interactions should be encouraged by creating public spaces such as parks, community centers, and libraries where people can meet, interact, and build relationships. These spaces create a sense of community by bringing people together and fostering friendly interactions, which in turn promote a sense of community with social cohesion and inclusivity.

2. Celebrate the diversity of a neighborhood by using public spaces to host multicultural events and festivals. This encourages the acceptance and appreciation of diverse cultures and fosters a sense of belonging in everyone in the community.

3. Provide community facilities such as libraries, community centers, and recreation centers to enhance community empowerment and the overall quality of life. By offering access to resources such as books, computers, and educational programs, these facilities help to level the playing field and promote a sense of equality and inclusivity within the community. This accessibility ensures that all members have equal opportunities to learn, grow, and participate in communal life, thereby strengthening the collective fabric of the community.

4. Foster community involvement by creating opportunities for residents to join a local group involved in planning and implementation to align projects with community needs. Encouraging residents to take an active part in shaping and improving their neighborhoods creates a sense of ownership and belonging that strengthens social cohesion and inclusivity.

Planners can use the following questions for comprehensive evaluation and planning of initiatives to ensure that they are effectively integrated into the social fabric at all levels, from the city-wide scale, down to the individual.

How will the initiative benefit the entire city and fit within the larger urban landscape? What city-wide goals does it support?

How will it affect different neighborhood communities? Will some communities benefit more than others? What are the specific needs of the target communities?

How will social groups within communities be affected? Will some groups face more disruption than others? How will it affect marginalized or minority groups?

Will the initiative truly enhance the social lives and well-being of individuals, and not just provide places for socializing? How do the perspectives of different individuals vary?

6. Conclusions

The study of urban humanization in Saudi Arabia's Qassim region highlights the mixed effects of such projects. While users of new public spaces express satisfaction, local residents report decreased social cohesion owing to the influx of outsiders. The findings emphasize the need for a multilevel planning approach that respects community dynamics and is appropriately scaled. This approach can potentially balance development and social interactions, thereby fostering a more livable and cohesive urban environment.

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