

SALVAGING SAIDA'S CULTURAL LANDSCAPE HERITAGE: THE ECOLOGICAL LANDSCAPE APPROACH

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INTRODUCTION

Cultural landscapes of the Mediterranean region are associated with rural heritage resulting from a long dynamic interaction between man and the surrounding ecosystems. Agri-cultural landscapes contain, on the one hand, tangible traces such as orchards, terraces, irrigation systems, paths, etc., and on the other hand, intangible values of "know-hows", traditions and rituals characterizing the community (World Heritage Council, 2007). However, the existence of these landscapes is threatened by the radical transformation of the urban environment and the practices of urban societies.

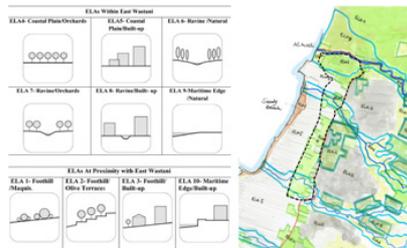


Figure 1

This paper will discuss the challenges of Lebanese cultural landscapes posed by urban growth and the prevailing planning regulations through a case study in Saida, South Lebanon. The research will draw on findings from the author's graduate thesis research (Al-Sabbagh, 2015) to define cultural heritage preservation and sustainable development strategies. The aim of this research is to demonstrate that combining ecological landscape design and urban planning tools can help:

- a) protect a cultural landscape character that maintains social practices and responds to communal needs;
- b) preserve fragile ecosystems and natural resources as part of an urban amenity to enhance the quality of life;

c) rethink planning tools to encourage urban ecological integrity, improve livability and achieve a sustainable, healthy urban environment.

1- CULTURAL LANDSCAPE HERITAGE UNDER THREAT – CASE STUDY OF SAIDA:

Saida is one of the few Lebanese coastal cities to retain an agri-cultural heritage that has defined its landscape since Phoenician times. Sociocultural practices have long been associated with the city's fertile citrus orchards irrigated by the seasonal streams crossing the coastal plain through the ancient "Khaskiyeh Qanat" system.

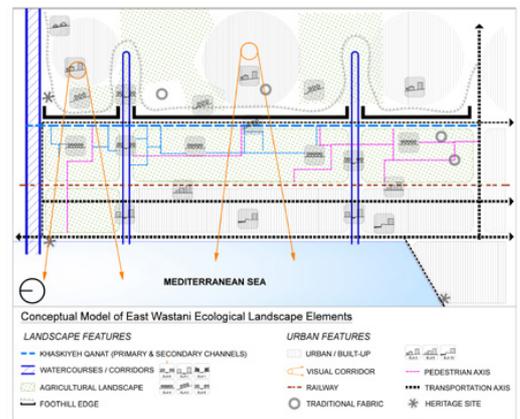
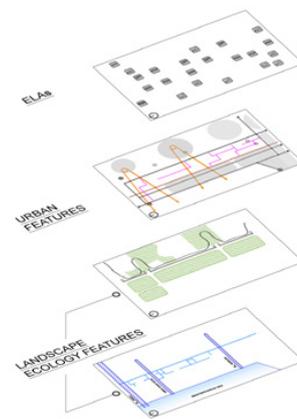


Figure 2

However, in the absence of clear protective policies, the city's cultural heritage is threatened by rapid urban development that is encouraged by prevailing planning practices and the lack of regulations limiting the built-up spread in the Lebanese planning framework.¹ The municipal and governmental authorities are relying heavily on conventional regulatory and operational planning tools inherited from the colonial model, such as master plans and Land Pooling and Subdivision (LPaS), to control the built-up fabric. The formulaic outcome of such tools is a generic urban fabric that undermines natural (topography, watercourses, view corridors) and sociocultural (connectivity, existing fabric, social ties, rural/urban life styles, sense of place and belonging) heritage.

The 1980s West Wastani LPaS-project in Saida exemplifies the outcome of this conventional planning practice. A geometric urban grid was imposed over the traditional fabric of the "Bustan", rupturing waterways and irrigation channels, interrupting the agriculture-function, halting footpaths by wide streets, and confining public amenities to traffic-related green spaces and a

municipal garden. Forty percent of the project remains unbuilt thirty years after its completion, with the physical, social and cultural urban fabric disrupted (Al-Sabbagh, 2015).

Today, Saida's remaining cultural landscape heritage on the eastern side of the Wastani district is facing a similar LPaS-project. If applied, this conventional planning approach will transform existing, valued agricultural orchards into characterless residential and commercial urban neighborhoods (as per the 1995 city master plan), modifying its geomorphological features and disrupting related sociocultural practices. The Saida Urban Sustainable Development Strategy (USUDS),² as well as the advocacy efforts of the Lilmadina civil society group³ (both of which the author was a team member

of) have argued in favor of the necessity of rethinking the project and the way it is being configured. Both initiatives stressed the importance of adopting a multi-disciplinary holistic approach that looks into the different constituent layers of the site (ecological, environmental, social, cultural, archeological, etc.), preserves its heritage landscape and improves the proposed design.

2- ECOLOGICAL LANDSCAPE APPROACH TO PRESERVE CULTURAL HERITAGE

The ecological landscape approach studies the relationship between people and their environment, taking careful account of the local context and its constituent tangible (natural and built setting) and intangible (cultural values, identity, social practice) elements (Makhzoumi and Pungetti, 1999). Such a holistic landscape design framework has the ability to be integrated into urban strategic planning and come up with a naturally and culturally contextualized proposal. The study's key premise lies in the development of a

framework that combines an ecological landscape design approach with urban design (Lynch, 1996) and planning tools (Forman, Dramstad & Oslan, 1996) to mitigate the undesirable effects of conventional planning and provide culture and place-specific strategies responsive to site constraints and opportunities.

Taking the East Wastani-district as a case study, the ecological landscape methodology was applied in three steps: first, research assessed the morphological, ecological, cultural, social, economic and political components with respect to temporal and spatial dimensions. Second, the thematic mapping of site features helped categorize the different processes into heterogeneous, site-specific key urban and landscape units, identifying Ecological Landscape Associations (ELAs) (Makhzoumi & Pungetti, 1999). Accordingly, six ELAs were identified (Figure 1).

Lastly, ELAs were combined with landscape ecology structural elements (and urban design spatial elements (Figure 2) to develop a Landscape Character Zones (LCZ)-plan.

On the one hand, the East Wastani LCZ-plan is complemented by a set of strategies that inform the planning process and account for ecologically sensitive and integrative planning solutions tailored to the city. Planning principles for every character zone are proposed to guide future urban interventions, taking into account the incorporation and preservation of the identified ELAs. These principles, which play a role in improving the design of districts and neighborhoods, include:

- re-conceptualization of strategic cultural heritage sites (old orchards) as amenity and productive landscapes;
- recognition and preservation of riparian and seasonal streams;
- distribution of green open spaces across both public and private property;
- protecting and enhancing the peri-urban character through incorporating urban productive gardens as part of the development guidelines for private lots;
- preserving landscape heterogeneity through multiple urban character zones.

On the other hand, the composite reading of the site allows the translation of ELAs and LCZ into specific spatial configurations and key design features, including:

- blue-green infrastructure joining waterways, footpaths, and multifunctional amenity landscapes ensuring landscape connectivity, continuity and promoting soft mobility;
- a network of landscape heritage features, reclaiming strategic orchards and protecting Khaskiyeh Qanat-features.

These features constitute fundamental components of the East Wastani LCZ strategic plan (Figure 3) and aim to

guide future urban intervention, notably the envisioned LPaS-project. Consequently, natural and cultural elements become one of the primary determinants for planning, rather than the limited focus on land-use densities and transportation.

Comparing the potential outcomes of the proposed strategy with the West Wastani LPaS-project shows that the proposed East Wastani-model designates and protects existing natural and cultural landscapes as green open spaces, serving the city at large before the full development of the planned area. The totality of the culturally invested landscapes covers almost 40% of the project area and helps protect the site's ecological integrity and distinctiveness, minimizing environmental degradation, raising awareness on the management of environmental resources and contributing to social betterment. Thus, the applied model demonstrates the possibility of overcoming the disadvantages of

conventional planning projects and serves as a model to enhance Lebanese planning regulations and practice.

3- A FRAMEWORK THAT INSPIRES CIVIC INITIATIVES

Professionals from various backgrounds are becoming aware of the importance of cultural landscape heritage sites within urban contexts. Realizing the latter's contribution to modern techniques of sustainable land-use, planners are stressing the maintenance and preservation of these natural and cultural landscapes (World Heritage Council, 2007).

In the case of Saida, the ecological landscape approach, adopted also in the city's USUDS-project, inspired local designers and planners concerned with the city's urban projects such as Lilmadina, to think and suggest

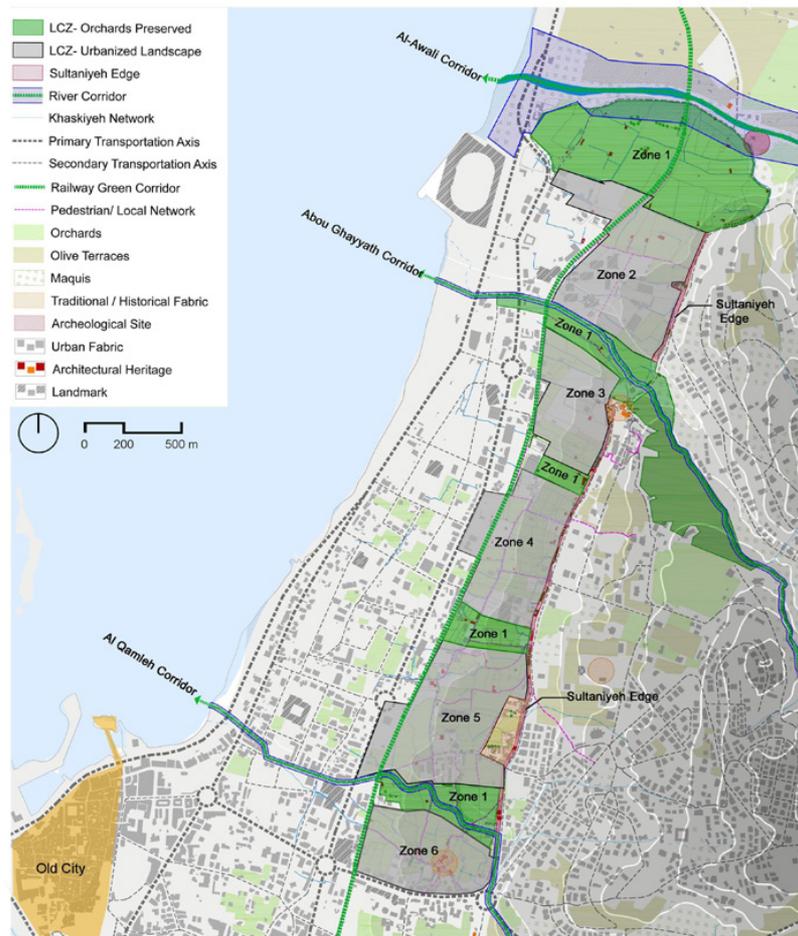


Figure 3

alternative solutions for a healthy urban environment. The Lilmadina-initiative started by documenting and archiving sites of cultural value and conducted a series of workshops and focused discussions with experts to propose strategies that can help alleviate threats and promote such sites. The initiative also engaged with the municipality and governmental authorities through providing recommendations and alternative solutions for practices threatening the city's cultural landscapes. Finally, and since the protection of the cultural landscape cannot be successful without the participation and engagement of civic societies and local inhabitants, the initiative organized awareness campaigns to talk about the importance of such sites in defining the city's identity, reviving cultural practices and values and ensuring a healthy living environment.

In conclusion, the paper's methodological significance lies in the development of a model that combines the ecological landscape approach and urban design with planning disciplines to provide an alternative way to think about urban development and quality living. The proposed model succeeded in the development of planning strategies that complement and enhance existing Lebanese planning tools, and thus salvage what remains of Lebanese natural and cultural landscapes without compromising on urban development needs.

FOOTNOTES

1. Article 17 of Lebanese building law: allows construction everywhere in the Lebanese territory, even within areas that have no zoning ordinances or master-plans.
2. Saida Urban Sustainable Development Strategy, a MEDCities project commissioned by the Municipality of Saida, 2012-2014
3. Lilmadina a group of activists from Saida with different professional backgrounds, concerned with the protection of the city of Saida's heritage and its urban development.

FIGURES

Figure 1. East Wastani Ecological Landscape Associations (Al-Sabbagh 2015).

Figure 2. Conceptual Model of Ecological Landscape Composite. Elements (Al-Sabbagh, 2015).

Figure 3. East Wastani LCZ Strategic Plan (Al-Sabbagh, 2015)

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Salwa AL-SABBAGH graduated from the American University of Beirut with an MS in Urban Design (2015) and a BS in Landscape Design and Eco-system Management (2011). She is currently working at Unit 44 (Beirut) and is a founding member of the Lebanese Landscape Association. Salwa has worked

on large-scale architecture, urban projects, and city development strategies in Lebanon and the MENA-region. With Dr. Jala Makhzoumi, she researched various topics related to landscape, public space, urban development and planning policies in Lebanon and the Middle East. Al-Sabbagh also participated in a number of local and international workshops tackling heritage, ecological, urban and informality issues to attain comprehensive solutions to deal with problematic conditions in the Mediterranean region.