

Natalie Lentz  
ARDS 315H3 – Honors Method of Design Inquiry  
Prospectus  
5/6/2025

## **Cities Through Time: Cultural Expression in Urban Models Beyond the West**

### **Introduction**

Since space and place are rooted in expressions of culture, ideology, and interaction with the environment, an intersectional view of cultural and environmental adaptation over time is necessary to respond to a variety of site-specific conditions. My research emerges from an interest in how cultural expressions shape spatial organization, particularly outside the influence of Western traditions. Historically, the Renaissance and Baroque periods—revivals of Classical Greek ideals—have reinforced a standard of formal geometry, monumentality, and control over nature as the dominant model for urban and landscape design. Over time, these ideas became deeply embedded in the foundations of Western design pedagogy, shaping both educational frameworks and built environments across the globe<sup>1</sup>.

However, with rising global populations, the urgency of climate change, and increasing concerns for social equity, there is a growing need for urban development models that are more responsive, adaptive, and community centered. Western traditions, while historically significant, offer a limited range of design approaches rooted in a narrow cultural and historical context<sup>2</sup>.

This research seeks to study places shaped by different ideologies and environmental needs to

---

<sup>1</sup> “Over the course of two centuries, therefore, the precepts of the canonical tradition of architecture education were developed according to two models: the Beaux-Arts approach, based on Classical architectural principles; and the Bauhaus approach, based on modernism.” (Ashraf M. Salama, Lindy Osborne Burton 2023)

<sup>2</sup> “The need for a multifaceted approach has probably accounted for the limited number of comparative studies in the subject, for anthropological enquiry is not customarily a part of architectural education, and architectural principles have rarely been considered a significant aspect of the training of an anthropologist.” (Paul Memmott 2008)

reveal new insights that support a more inclusive and expansive approach to landscape architecture education.

This focus is inspired by Paul Memmott and James Davidson's "*Exploring a Cross-Cultural Theory of Architecture*," which advocates for a more inclusive and expansive architectural education<sup>3</sup>. They emphasize the importance of integrating diverse cultural traditions, values, and practices into architectural theory<sup>4</sup>. Central to their argument is a critique of the term 'vernacular architecture,' highlighting its Eurocentric origins, negative connotations, and exclusion from formal architectural discourse<sup>5</sup>. This perspective directly informs my effort to reframe how non-Western spatial practices are studied and valued in landscape architecture.

In this research, I will examine the cultural identity and site-specific environmental conditions of Fez, Morocco, and Kerala, India as case studies for historic urban development. These two cities were chosen for their distinct cultural foundations and adaptive responses to challenging environments. Fez represents a dense, Islamic urban morphology shaped by spiritual and social hierarchies, while Kerala offers a coastal, monsoon-adapted system influenced by centuries of cultural exchange, trade, and religious diversity. Together, they provide contrasting yet complementary lenses for exploring non-Western urban development.

Through cultural investigations, insights into distinct spatial ideologies – emphasizing adaptability, community, and environmental integration – will offer challenges to the Western design pedagogy reinforced by Renaissance and Baroque landscape design principles. This research aims to contribute to a more pluralistic and decolonized understanding of spatial

---

<sup>3</sup> (Paul Memmott 2008)

<sup>4</sup> (Paul Memmott 2008)

<sup>5</sup> (Paul Memmott 2008)

organization<sup>6</sup> in landscape architecture and urban development. I will conduct qualitative research based primarily in historiography, with elements of creative analysis through drawings, diagrams, and visual comparisons.

My overarching research question asks: *How do alternative cultural ideologies and environmental adaptation manifest in the historical urban development of Fez, Morocco, and Kerala, India, and in what ways do these provide comparative insights that inform or expand the pedagogical foundations of Renaissance and Baroque urban design?*

## **Background**

### **Renaissance and Baroque as a Design Foundation**

Urban form reflects the cultures, climates, and histories that shape it. Comparative study is crucial to uncovering how different societies embed values into the built environment. Each built environment is a product of evolving needs, beliefs, and environmental challenges, and a deeper exploration across cultural contexts reveals that there is no singular blueprint for “good” design. My project focuses on the design ideologies underpinning two key contexts: Renaissance and Baroque Europe and historic cities in North Africa and South Asia.

Renaissance and Baroque design ideals emphasized monumentality, symmetry, centralized planning, and the visual domination of the landscape. Edmund Bacon’s *Design of Cities* illustrates how Roman and Baroque urbanism relied on spatial compression, monumental axes, and points of visual tension to structure public life. Large plazas, straight roads, and axial vistas were intended not just for movement but for the creation of awe and order, aligning with a

---

<sup>6</sup> “For example, the simple act of positioning the global South at the center of discussion is gradually leading to practical approaches and methods to decolonize Eurocentric architectural pedagogy and curricula — including through the design of erasure and the disruption of homogeneity in architectural practice.” (Ashraf M. Salama, Lindy Osborne Burton 2023)

vision of human dominance over the natural world<sup>7</sup>.

These aesthetics, rooted in Classical ideals, have long dominated Western education in landscape architecture. They trained designers to prioritize formal geometry and unified visual experience, often abstracting space into an idealized, controllable framework. Over time, these models became the pedagogical foundation for Western design education, establishing a standard that prized monumentality, visual mastery, and geometric clarity above localized adaptability.

The Renaissance revival of Classical form established a blueprint against which much later urban design was measured, creating a self-reinforcing cycle of replication and valorization. Yet as Aidan White and Mark Whitehead note in their analysis of urban climate change, these standardized models are increasingly insufficient in an era where environmental variability and local resilience are critical<sup>8</sup>. Cities today must confront the realities of climate unpredictability, social fragmentation, and ecological strain.

The universalizing assumptions embedded in Renaissance and Baroque principles—such as the ideal city as a controlled and perfected artifact—clash with the need for diverse, adaptable, context-sensitive urban environments. There is a growing imperative to widen the design canon to recognize culturally and ecologically specific models, not only as historical curiosities but as active contributors to the future of urban resilience.

In Western academic and professional design discourse, particularly throughout the 20th century, non-Western urban traditions have often been marginalized. Comparative study allows for a deeper understanding of how societies across history have designed for community,

---

<sup>7</sup> (Bacon 1978)

<sup>8</sup> North and Longhurst discuss grassroots climate initiatives, such as Transition movements, which aim to create adaptive, low-carbon urban communities. They emphasize the potential for cities to serve as multi-scalar contexts for integrating local adaptation strategies into broader governance systems. (Aidan White 2013)

ecology, and resilience without reliance on rigid monumentality or visual order. It makes visible a wider spectrum of spatial logics, offering ways to question and expand upon Western assumptions. Focusing on Fez and Kerala highlights urban systems that evolved outside the Western Classical tradition and that offer enduring lessons for contemporary challenges.

## **Case Studies**

### *Fez, Morocco*

Fez, Morocco, is one of the best-preserved medieval cities in the world and a compelling example of an alternative urban design logic. The Medina's organic, labyrinthine structure contrasts sharply with the geometric rigidity of Western models. Rather than imposing straight lines and large open squares, the city grew around environmental constraints and social functions. Internal courtyards, passive cooling strategies, intricate hydraulic systems, and ecological zoning all reveal a sophisticated environmental adaptation.

According to Moujoud and Chahbi's analysis of Fez's hydrography, the city's water system fundamentally shaped its urban form, offering critical lessons for sustainable water management today. Water channels, fountains, and gardens were integrated into the everyday life of neighborhoods, ensuring decentralized access and microclimate regulation<sup>9</sup>. Narrow alleys, courtyard houses, and neighborhood clustering illustrate a model of urban resilience that privileges environmental integration and community adaptability over visual dominance<sup>10</sup>. Importantly, Fez's urban fabric also successfully layered Berber, Arab, Andalusian, and French influences, creating a living archive of cultural expression embedded into the built

---

<sup>9</sup> "Fès developed a hydraulic system starting in the 8th century, incorporating elements like qanats and fountains to provide water to the city, crucial in maintaining the urban population in its arid environment." (Moujoud Lamiae 2025)

<sup>10</sup> "The hydraulic system's presence significantly influenced urban planning by shaping densely populated areas such as Fes el-Bali, where structures and markets arose around access points to clean water, promoting trade and social interaction." (Moujoud Lamiae 2025)

environment<sup>11</sup>. Each successive influence adapted to the existing form rather than erasing it, resulting in a palimpsest of social and environmental negotiations.

### *Kerala, India*

Kerala's urban forms reflect a different but equally rich story of cultural layering and environmental responsiveness. Situated in a landscape of dense forests, monsoons, and intricate waterways, Kerala's backwater villages and port cities developed unique spatial logics centered on water integration and ecological stewardship<sup>12</sup>. Raised paths, bunds, canals, and timber construction allowed settlements to coexist with, rather than resist, the natural flooding cycles of the region<sup>13</sup>.

Houses were designed with steep roofs and elevated floors to accommodate the heavy rainfall and fluctuating ground conditions<sup>14</sup>. In addition to its environmental ingenuity, Kerala's history of Indian, Arab, Portuguese, and Dutch contact shaped its built environment in distinctive ways<sup>15</sup>. Cities like Kochi display a hybrid urbanism where local timber architecture exists alongside European fortifications, churches, and trading warehouses<sup>16</sup>.

The local architecture of Kerala, influenced by the spice trade and centuries of colonial interaction, provides a living example of resilience and adaptation, where external influences were absorbed and transformed within local frameworks rather than dominating them.

### **Theoretical Implications**

Both Fez and Kerala demonstrate that urban form can be deeply shaped by a society's

---

<sup>11</sup> "Fès is known for its riads and hammams, which exhibit intricate tilework and architectural details influenced by various cultures, including Arab, Berber, and Andalusian designs, reflecting its historical significance as a center of trade and culture." (Moujoud Lamiae 2025)

<sup>12</sup> (W. A. Noble 2025)

<sup>13</sup> ("Vernacular Architecture - Connecting Kerala and South East Asia" 2024)

<sup>14</sup> ("Vernacular Architecture - Connecting Kerala and South East Asia" 2024)

<sup>15</sup> (Noble 2025)

<sup>16</sup> ("Vernacular Architecture - Connecting Kerala and South East Asia" 2024)

relationship to environment, spirituality, trade, and governance—following logics distinct from Classical geometries or centralized visual orders, yet equally complex and intentional. These two cases offer alternative models for thinking about how urban environments can integrate social, environmental, and cultural complexity without relying on Western Classical ideals.

They stand as evidence that urban coherence and resilience do not depend on rigid geometric control but can emerge organically through ecological awareness and cultural continuity. Their histories suggest that adaptability, fluidity, and community-centered development are not signs of spatial disorder but sophisticated responses to local realities.

By studying the histories and morphologies of Fez and Kerala, my project seeks to uncover alternative spatial ideologies that expand on the dominance of Western Renaissance and Baroque design pedagogy. In doing so, it aims to contribute to a broader understanding of how landscape architecture education can embrace a richer, more diverse set of principles—ones that prioritize community resilience, ecological integration, and cultural plurality as essential components of good design.

### **Approach and Methodology**

This research is based on a comparative cultural framework, integrating historiography with creative visual analysis. By bringing together historical study and interpretive methods, I aim to examine dominant Western paradigms in landscape architecture with alternative models, proposing a broader, more inclusive understanding of urban design traditions.

The project will rely on precedent studies, ethnographic research through literature and image analysis, and historical analysis of urban development. Comparative methods will be used to explore urban morphology, cultural symbolism, and environmental adaptation strategies across Fez, Morocco, and Kerala, India.

To carry out this investigation, I will use several specific research tactics. The analysis of urban morphology will include sketches and diagrams tracing the layouts of Fez and Kerala through different historical periods. Environmental analysis will focus on documenting water management systems, biodiversity strategies, and climatic adaptations. Cultural symbolism will be studied by mapping religious, civic, and domestic spaces and identifying sacred materials, symbolic geometries, and spatial rituals.

To synthesize and communicate these findings, I will focus on two primary visual methods: interpretive sketching and photographic collage. These approaches will be supported by selective mapping of key cultural and sacred spaces to contextualize spatial transformations within each city.

The scope of the research will be delimited to historical urban development up to the early modern period, focusing on the Medina of Fez and the port cities of Kerala, such as Kochi. While acknowledging the later impacts of European colonization, the primary focus will remain on indigenous and pre-colonial spatial ideologies.

## **Timeline**

### *Week Tasks*

- 1–2 Define theoretical framework + literature review of Renaissance/Baroque
- 2–3 Focus on literature review + non-Western critiques
- 3–5 Framework for analysis – focus on critical theory sources
- 4–5 Collect maps/images of Fez & Kerala
- 5–7 Start drawing + developing visual method (layouts, vignettes, collages)
- 6–9 Case study analysis (Fez + Kerala side by side)
- 8–10 Comparative synthesis + critique of Western pedagogy
- 10–12 Draft full capstone and visual documentation for review

## Annotated Bibliography

Aidan While, Mark Whitehead. 2013. "Cities, Urbanisation and Climate Change." *Urban Studies* 50 (7): 1325–31. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26144293>.

This article explores how cities must adapt to rising environmental pressures through resilient and sustainable urban planning. The authors emphasize the importance of socio-ecological resilience, adaptive governance, and infrastructure innovation in the face of climate change. They also highlight grassroots movements and alternative strategies as key components in creating equitable and climate-responsive urban futures.

Ashraf M. Salama, Lindy Osborne Burton. 2023. "Pedagogical Traditions in Architecture: The Canonical, the Resistant, and the Decolonized." *Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review* 35 (1): 47–72. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27273582>.

This article critically examines the evolution of architectural education through three pedagogical lenses: canonical, resistant, and decolonized. The authors explore how Eurocentric traditions continue to dominate design curricula and argue for the integration of non-Western, indigenous, and resistant pedagogies. Their framework supports the inclusion of culturally diverse perspectives in architectural education and theory.

Bacon, Edmund N. 1978. *Design of Cities*. London, England: Thames & Hudson.

Bacon's book traces the historical evolution of urban form, emphasizing how city design reflects cultural power structures and aesthetic values. He focuses on the Renaissance and Baroque periods, illustrating how monumentality, axial planning, and visual perspective were used to create symbolic and functional order. The text serves as a foundational resource for understanding the classical influences embedded in Western design pedagogy.

Moujoud Lamiae, Chahbi Mariame. 2025. "Hydrography as a Guide to Reading the Urban Form of the Medina of Fez." *Materials Research Proceedings* 47: 188–96.

<https://doi.org/10.21741/9781644903391-22>.

This study documents the evolution of Fez's hydraulic infrastructure from its founding in the 8th century through successive Islamic dynasties. It details how water systems—including canals, fountains, and reservoirs—shaped the city's spatial layout and supported social organization. The article illustrates Fez's longstanding tradition of environmental adaptation and offers valuable insights for contemporary sustainable urban design.

Noble, William A. 2025. "History of Kerala." In *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Britannica.

<https://www.britannica.com/place/Kerala/History>.

This encyclopedia entry provides an overview of Kerala's history, emphasizing its coastal geography, cultural diversity, and exposure to foreign influence through trade. It highlights the region's complex social and religious fabric, as well as its reputation for high literacy rates and progressive social indicators. The article is useful for contextualizing Kerala's historical development and multicultural identity.

Noble, William A. 2025. "Kerala." In *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Britannica.

<https://www.britannica.com/place/Kerala>.

This article offers a general introduction to the state of Kerala, focusing on its geographical, ecological, and demographic characteristics. It discusses how Kerala's location between the Western Ghats and the Arabian Sea has influenced its development and interaction with other cultures. The entry supports a basic environmental and cultural understanding of the region in relation to its urban form.

Paul Memmott, James Davidson. 2008. "Exploring a Cross-Cultural Theory of Architecture." *Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review* 19 (2): 51–62.

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/41758527>.

This paper critiques the dominance of Euro-American architectural traditions in education and calls for a cross-cultural and interdisciplinary framework. The authors argue for the integration of indigenous knowledge systems, environmental responsiveness, and cultural diversity in architectural theory. Their work supports the expansion of design pedagogy to include historically marginalized voices and spatial practices.

"Vernacular Architecture - Connecting Kerala and South East Asia." 2024. The Kerala Museum.

April 4, 2024. <https://keralamuseum.org/article/vernacular-architecture-a-connection-between-kerala-and-south-east-asia/>.

This article explores the architectural parallels between Kerala and Southeast Asia, focusing on shared climatic adaptations and cultural exchanges. It highlights structural features such as saddle-shaped roofs and earthquake-resistant forms, while tracing religious and colonial influences. The research underscores Kerala's unique architectural heritage and its ties to broader South and Southeast Asian traditions.