

A Prophetic Model of Sustainable Urbanism for an Ideal Islamic State like Pakistan: Perspectives from Non-Muslim Western Scholars

Dr. Muhammad Asim (Corresponding Author)

IRI Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the Islamic Research Institute, the Islamic International University Islamabad

Email: asimsheikh62@yahoo.com

Publication History:

Received: June 02, 2025

Revised: June 28, 2025

Accepted: July 19, 2025

Published Online: August 01, 2025

Keywords:

Islamabad Urban Development,
Abuja,
Consumer
Culture,
Islamic Jurisprudence,
Al-Farabi,
The Death and Life of Great
American Cities,

Research related to Academic Areas:

Islamic Studies, International
Relations, Cultural Studies,
Governance and Public Policy

Acknowledgment:

This paper has been written as a prerequisite announced by the Islamic Research Institute (IIRI) for awarding post-doctoral fellowship certificate.

Ethical Consideration:

This study has no aim to hurt any ideological or social segment but is purely based on academic purposes.

DOI:

10.5281/zenodo.16677563

Abstract

The Islamic concept of an ideal state emphasizes sustainable urbanism as an essential component of societal well-being. The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), in his governance of Medina, championed principles of sustainable urbanism, urging Muslims to adopt measures such as equitable resource distribution, environmental preservation and social cohesion, while highlighting the significance of planting trees, conserving water and maintaining public welfare. By referencing Surah Al-Baqarah (2:205) and Surah Al-A'raf (7:31), this study investigates the premise that the modern terminology surrounding "sustainable urbanism", claimed to have been inaugurated by Susan Owens of Cambridge University (UK), has, in fact, been inherited from the Quran and the clear Prophetic examples demonstrated during his governance of Medina.

Not only Muslims, but numerous non-Muslim Western scholars, such as Markus Daechsel (2015), Stefan Maneval (2019) and Francois Gauthier & Birgit Krawietz (2024), have also acknowledged this historical fact. Hence, by utilizing David Harvey's Theory of Urban Justice and postmodernism as theoretical frameworks, this study examines how occidental concepts of Ideal or Welfare state such as Brusselization, Californication, Hyper-Cognitive Urbanism and Vancouverism reflect pure Islamic urban philosophy, specifically as addressed by the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). Simultaneously, this study also identifies the roots of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) within the Prophetic model, as derived from the Quran, for an ideal Muslim state like Pakistan.

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Introduction

Sustainable urbanism in 2025 is generally supposed as an interdisciplinary subject that integrates environmental sustainability, economic viability and social equity within the built environment. It is not merely an architectural or planning ideology but a holistic paradigm that seeks to address weather

resistance, resource conservation and inclusivity in urban governance (Biswas & Mahata, 2022, p. 26). Prominent scholars such as Peter Calthorpe (2013) and Timothy Beatley (2024) have articulated that sustainable urbanism is predicated upon compact city designs, walkability, public transit integration and green infrastructure as fundamental tenets for promoting ecological balance and human well-being. Beatley, in his book *“The Ethics of Cities: Shaping Policy for a Sustainable and Just Future”*, argues that sustainable cities must hold renewable energy systems, vertical green spaces and water-sensitive urban design to counteract the adverse effects of urban extension and environmental degradation (Beatley, 2024, p. 3). Similarly, Calthorpe, in *“Urbanism in the Age of Climate Change”*, highlights the urgency of mixed-use developments, transit-oriented designs and carbon-neutral communities as core principles that should define contemporary urban landscapes (Calthorpe, 2013, p. 2). Against this backdrop, Susan Owens of Cambridge University (UK) is credited with inaugurating the modern discourse on “sustainable urbanism” in the early 1980s, particularly by aligning sustainability with policy-oriented urban governance frameworks. Owens’ work focused on reconciling economic growth with environmental management, positioning sustainable urbanism as an antidote to the exploitative urbanization patterns characteristic of post-industrial societies (Owens, 2025).

Susan Owens (1981), in her PhD dissertation and further research on urban sustainability policy, defined several attributes that underpin sustainable urbanism, arguing that it necessitates multi-scalar governance, participatory urban planning and ecological resilience. According to Owens, a sustainable city is characterized by efficient land use, low-carbon energy consumption, biodiversity preservation and socioeconomic inclusivity (Owens, 2025). Other scholars, such as Mike Jenks and Nicola Dempsey (2005), further refined these principles, identifying community-oriented development, adaptive reuse of infrastructure and environmentally responsive architecture as critical to the sustainable urbanist ethos (Dempsey & Jenks, 2005, p. 3). Steffen Lehmann (2017), in *The Principles of Green Urbanism*, synthesized these perspectives, proposing twelve principles of green urbanism, including climate-responsive design, zero-waste ecosystems and regenerative energy models. Collectively, these scholars advocate for an urban paradigm that integrates economic prosperity with environmental integrity, fundamentally redefining how cities should evolve in the 21st century (Lehmann, 2010, pp. 10-12).

While Western works frames sustainable urbanism within the lexicon of contemporary urban policy and environmental ethics, its foundational attributes were already embedded within the Quranic epistemology over 1400 years ago. For example;

- Susan Owens (1981) emphasized multi-scalar governance and participatory urban planning, which finds resonance in the Quranic principle of Shura (mutual consultation) as mandated in Surah Ash-Shura (42:38);

“And those who have responded to (the needs of) their ruler, establish prayer and conduct their affairs by consultation among themselves”.

The theme of this verse highlights the Islamic tradition of inclusive decision-making in urban and social governance. Owens also highlighted ecological resilience; a concept mirrored in Surah AlRum (30:41);

“Corruption has appeared throughout the land and sea by (reason of) what the hands of people have earned so He may let them taste part of [the consequence of] what they have done that perhaps they will return [to righteousness]”.

This verse warns against environmental degradation, reinforcing the Islamic emphasis on sustainable ecosystems.

- Mike Jenks and Nicola Dempsey (2005) emphasized community-oriented development and adaptive reuse of infrastructure, a principle echoed in Surah Al-Hashr (59:7), which commands fair urban distribution;

“So that it will not merely circulate among the rich among you”.

This promotes equitable urban planning to prevent socio-economic disparity.

- Steffen Lehmann (2017), in his “*Principles of Green Urbanism*”, emphasized on climate-responsive design, zero-waste ecosystems and regenerative energy models; ideals deeply rooted in the Quran. Surah Al-An’am (6:141) prohibits wastefulness;

“And do not waste [resources] extravagantly. Indeed, He does not like the wasteful”.

Similarly, Surah Al-A’raf (7:31) instructs moderation;

“Eat and drink, but waste not by excess, for Allah loves not the wasters”.

These Quranic teachings illustrate that the essential characteristics of sustainable urbanism -- espoused by Owens, Jenks, Dempsey and Lehmann -- are not modern innovations but inherent to the Islamic worldview, as exemplified by the Prophet Muhammad’s (PBUH) governance of Medina.

The recognition of Islamic contributions to sustainable urbanism is not confined to Muslim work alone; rather, numerous non-Muslim Western academics have acknowledged the historical precedence of the Prophetic model. Markus Daechsel (2023), in his study of urban development in South Asia, contends that Islamic urban governance historically emphasized equitable resource distribution, civic responsibility and environmental ethics; long before Western models emerged (Daechsel, 2023, pp. 1-3). Similarly, Stefan Maneval (2019) explores the architectural and socio-spatial dimensions of Islamic cities, illustrating how Medina’s urban layout under Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) prioritized communal spaces, public welfare and environmental conservation; traits now embedded in modern sustainability frameworks (Maneval, 2019, p. 16). Francois Gauthier & Birgit Krawietz (2024) further examine how Islamic jurisprudence (Fiqh) historically regulated urban expansion in a manner akin to contemporary zoning laws and environmental policies. Their research highlights how Islamic cities integrated principles of sustainable water management, green public spaces and social equity, predating Western sustainability discourses by centuries (Gauthier & Krawietz, 2024, pp. 9-10). These acknowledgments reinforce the thesis that contemporary sustainability paradigms are direct intellectual inheritors of Islamic urban philosophy.

This study utilizes David Harvey’s Theory of Urban Justice and postmodernism as its theoretical frameworks to critically evaluate how Western urban sustainability paradigms align with Islamic urbanism. Harvey (2003) conceptualizes urban justice as an equilibrium between economic, environmental and social dimensions within city planning, an idea that finds a direct corollary in Islamic

jurisprudential principles concerning urban welfare (Harvey, 2024). Furthermore, this study engages postmodern urbanism to interrogate how occidental urban ideologies -- such as Brusselization, Californication, Hyper-Cognitive Urbanism and Vancouverism -- function as contemporary articulations of what was originally enshrined within the Islamic paradigm of sustainable cities. By bridging Islamic epistemology with Western theoretical constructs, this paper demonstrates that sustainable urbanism, as understood today, is not an exclusively modern Western innovation but a historically rooted Islamic civilizational principle, first institutionalized in Medina under the governance of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH).

Theoretical Framework

Building upon David Harvey's Theory of Urban Justice and the principles of postmodern urbanism, this study proposes the Dynamic Equilibrium Urbanism (DEU) Model, an integrative theoretical framework that reconciles spatial justice with the evolving complexities of contemporary urban sustainability. The DEU Model sees urban sustainability as a balance between social fairness, economic stability and environmental resistance, where cities are flexible and adaptable rather than fixed structures. It takes Harvey's focus on fair access to resources and merges it with postmodern urbanism's ideas about how cities change due to globalization, consumer culture and modern urban planning trends. Using this model, the study will analyze urban trends like Brusselization, Californication, Hyper-Cognitive Urbanism and Vancouverism to see how they address modern urban challenges. The goal is to create a more adaptable and fair approach to city planning that works for both people and the environment.

What are Brusselization, Californication, Israel's Hyper-Cognitive Urbanism and Canadian Vancouverism?

Urban development across the world reflects different philosophies and approaches to balancing economic growth, social justice and environmental sustainability. Under the Dynamic Equilibrium Urbanism (DEU) Model, this study interrogates an integrative framework to analyze contemporary urban sustainability. As DEU Model suggests that cities should be flexible and adaptable rather than rigid, it ensures fair access to resources while responding dynamically to globalization, consumer culture and modern urban challenges.

As the major objective of the study is to apply the DEU Model on four distinct urban trends -- Brusselization, Californication, Israel's Hyper-Cognitive Urbanism and Canadian Vancouverism -- just to assessing how each phenomenon aligns with or challenges the principles of dynamic equilibrium in urban planning and all the defined traits in each urban model has been exhibited within the Prophetic model of sustainable urbanism; called the State of Madina.

Hence, first this study describes the traits of each urban trend through the lens of DEU Model;

1) Brusselization: The Perils of Unregulated Urban Expansion

Brusselization refers to the uncontrolled and indiscriminate development of high-rise buildings in historic urban areas, primarily originating in Brussels during the 1960s and 1970s. The phenomenon emerged due to weak zoning regulations and a laissez-faire planning approach, leading to the destruction of architectural heritage and the transformation of urban landscapes without consideration for historical continuity. The backlash against this form of development led to legislative changes, such as the Town Planning Act (1991) and the Heritage Conservation Act

(1993), which attempted to regulate demolition and protect historically significant buildings. However, these measures led to a new trend known as “façadisme,” where only the facades of historic buildings were preserved while the interiors were redeveloped (State, 2004, p. xliv).

As per this concept;

- There should be strict regulations for unregulated high-rise development of modern buildings in historic neighborhoods without urban cohesion (State, 2004, p. xliv).
- Traditional architectural identity due to demolition or radical redesign of cityscapes must be avoided (State, 2004, p. xliv).
- City administration must endorse rules and regulations for avoiding chaotic urban expansion and inefficient land use (State, 2004, p. xliv).
- Ongoing tensions between preserving cultural heritage and accommodating modern urban growth must be intellectually managed (State, 2004, p. xliv).

2) Californication: The Cultural and Economic Shaping of Urban Spaces

Californication, a term originally referring to the cultural influence of California on other regions, extends into urbanism as a model of sprawling development, car-centric infrastructure and rapid commercialization of landscapes. This phenomenon is driven by consumer culture, technology-driven urban expansion and the emergence of distinct architectural forms such as strip malls, fast-food chains and suburban sprawl. While California’s urban identity is often associated with innovation and modernity, it has also faced challenges such as housing crises, environmental degradation and gentrification. The interplay of real and mythologized perceptions of California has shaped its urban policies and global influence on city planning (Schneider, 2019).

As per this trend;

- This emphasis on utilizing highways and public transport just to avoid urban sprawl and personal cars’ usage (Schneider, 2019).
- There should be commercialization of Public Space, such as, dominance of fast-food chains, shopping malls and branded architecture (Schneider, 2019).
- Tech-Driven Urban Growth should be introduced, such as, Silicon Valley’s influence on smart cities, startup ecosystems and digital infrastructure (Schneider, 2019).
- Discouraging or avoiding Housing Market Volatility, such as, extreme housing booms and crises driven by speculative real estate investment (Schneider, 2019).
- Environmental Challenges must be interrogated, such as, wildfires, water shortages and climate change impacts that are being worsened by unchecked urban sprawl (Schneider, 2019).

3) Israel’s Hyper-Cognitive Urbanism: The Strategic Use of Heritage and Innovation

Hyper-Cognitive Urbanism in Israel, particularly in Tel Aviv’s “White City,” represents a unique blend of heritage conservation, modern urban renewal and cognitive-driven city planning. This model emerged with UNESCO’s designation of Tel Aviv’s Bauhaus-inspired architecture as a World Heritage Site, triggering a complex process of heritage commodification, urban densification and political discourse. The Hyper-Cognitive approach in Israel reflects both strategic planning and

socio-political narratives that shape urban identity and memory, often excluding certain historical narratives in favor of a curated urban aesthetic (Tufano, 2019).

As per this model;

- There should be heritagization of urban spaces, such as, selective preservation and branding of historical areas for cultural and political purposes (Tufano, 2019).
- There should be High-Rise Proliferation, such as, rapid vertical expansion in peri-heritage zones to accommodate economic growth (Tufano, 2019).
- Government must focus on Memory Stratification, such as, prioritization of certain historical narratives while marginalizing others in urban storytelling (Tufano, 2019).
- Each city should be a smart city with usage of AI, surveillance and digital governance in urban management (Tufano, 2019).
- Socio-spatial exclusion should be managed during urban renewal projects (Tufano, 2019).

4) Vancouverism: A Model for Sustainable Urban Density

Vancouverism is a distinctive urban planning philosophy originating in Vancouver, Canada, characterized by high-density, mixed-use development that prioritizes public spaces, sustainability and transit-oriented growth. Unlike Brusselization or Californication, Vancouverism emphasizes livability through compact city design, pedestrian-friendly infrastructure and extensive green spaces. The False Creek and Coal Harbour revitalizations exemplify this approach, transforming industrial wastelands into vibrant, eco-friendly urban communities. Vancouverism has influenced global city planning by demonstrating how high-density living can be harmonized with environmental and social well-being (Beasley, 2019, p. 139).

As per this approach;

- There should be Mixed-Use High-Density Development, such as, integration of residential, commercial and recreational spaces within high-rise structures (Beasley, 2019, p. 139).
- There should be Public Transit Reliance, such as, expansion of rapid transit and walkable neighborhoods to reduce car dependency (Beasley, 2019, p. 139).
- The major focus of city administration should be the preservation of waterfronts, parks and urban greenery as core design elements (Beasley, 2019, p. 139).
- View Corridor Protection must be occurred, like taking regulatory measures to maintain sightlines of natural landscapes and cityscapes (Beasley, 2019, p. 139).
- There must be Community-Centric Urbanism, emphasizing on public engagement, livability and inclusive city planning policies (Beasley, 2019, p. 139).

Now, this study moves towards tracing what are commonalities among all the respective urban trends.

Joint Traits Across the Four Urban Models

Despite some of differences, these models share many common characteristics that associate with the operational definition or principles of Dynamic Equilibrium Urbanism (DEU) and can be examined through Islamic urban principles.

1) Heritage Conservation and Sustainable Development

- Brusselization attempts façade preservation after unregulated development.
- Hyper-Cognitive Urbanism focuses on selective preservation of heritage with strategic urban planning.
- Vancouverism protects view corridors and integrates urban greenery.
- Californication struggles with urban sprawl but has historical preservation districts.

2) **Balanced Urban Expansion**

- Brusselization expands often at the cost of heritage, causing tension.
- Hyper-Cognitive Urbanism balances heritage conservation with modern high-rise development.
- Vancouverism implements high-density urbanism with sustainability.
- Californication expands through sprawl, leading to environmental concerns.

3) **Regulation Against Unplanned Development**

- Brusselization lack of regulation initially but later attempts at control.
- Vancouverism strict regulations on density, public spaces and transport.
- Hyper-Cognitive Urbanism strategically plans high-rises near heritage areas.
- Californication's less regulation led to urban sprawl and housing crises.

4) **Public Transport and Walkability**

- Vancouverism is highly transit-oriented, reducing car dependency.
- Californication does over-reliance on cars, but urban planners attempt transit reforms.
- Hyper-Cognitive Urbanism addresses smart city planning integrates AI for efficient transport.
- Brusselization was initially unregulated but later adopted public transport-friendly policies.

5) **Socio-Spatial Inclusion vs. Exclusion**

- Vancouverism has community-driven urban policies for inclusivity.
- Hyper-Cognitive Urbanism excludes certain historical narratives in favor of curated aesthetics.
- Brusselization poorly manages heritage conservation led to social segregation.
- Californication facilitates gentrification-driven exclusion and economic inequality.
- Quranic Proofs and Examples from the State of Madina

Now, this study looks how these principles have been addressed within the Islamic urban philosophy, specifically in the development of Madina under Prophet Muhammad (PBUH).

Prophetic Model of Sustainable Urbanism; A Case Study of Madina

1) **Heritage Conservation and Sustainable Development**

- **Quranic Verse**
 “And do not cause corruption upon the earth after its reformation”. (Surah Al-A’raf 7:56) The Prophet (PBUH) ordered the preservation of the historic Banu Najjar gardens when expanding Masjid al-Nabawi.

It shows how urban expansion was done while respecting the existing agricultural and residential balance.

- **Hadith**
The Prophet (PBUH) said: “Whoever plants a tree and it bears fruit, every part of it will be a charity for him”. (Musnad Ahmad)

2) **Balanced Urban Expansion**

- **Quranic Verse**
“It is He who has made you successors (Khalifah) upon the Earth...” (Surah Fatir 35:39)
The Prophet (PBUH) encouraged the strategic distribution of land for both settlement and agriculture to avoid congestion.

This was the first urban zoning policy in Islamic history was implemented, separating residential, market and mosque areas.

- **Hadith**
“Do not block pathways; leave space for people to walk”. (Sunan Abu Dawood)

3) **Regulation Against Unplanned Development**

- **Quranic Verse**
“So that, it (wealth/resources) does not merely circulate among the rich from among you”. (Surah Al-Hashr 59:7)

The Prophet (PBUH) restricted hoarding and monopolization of land, introduced Waqf (endowment), ensuring public land remained for collective use.

- **Hadith**
“The people are partners in three things: water, pastures and fire (energy resources)”. (Sunan Ibn Majah)

4) **Public Transport and Walkability**

- **Quranic Verse**
“And We have created you in pairs and made your sleep for rest and made the night as a covering and made the day for livelihood”. (Surah An-Naba 78:8-11)

Marketplaces in Madina were centrally located so people could walk to them. Masjid alNabawi was centrally placed, encouraging a pedestrian city.

- **Hadith**
The Prophet (PBUH) prohibited harmful urban expansions that blocked access to public pathways. (Sunan Abu Dawood)

5) **Socio-Spatial Inclusion vs. Exclusion**

- **Quranic Verse**
“Verily, the most honored of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous among you”.

(Surah Al-Hujurat 49:13)

The first multi-religious constitution, the Charter of Madina, ensured urban inclusivity. The Prophet (PBUH) assigned separate spaces for different ethnic and religious groups but ensured equality.

- **Hadith**
The Prophet (PBUH) said: “A city’s ruler is the servant of its people”. (Sunan Abu Dawood)

Conclusion

“The world is a prison for the believer and a paradise for the disbeliever” (Sahih Muslim 2956). The urban models of Brusselization, Californication, Israel’s Hyper-Cognitive Urbanism and Vancouverism reflect Occidental attempts to construct cities based on materialistic progress, consumerism, selective heritage preservation and sustainability. However, each of these models struggles with fragmentation, exclusion and ethical dilemmas that Islam already addressed through the Prophetic governance of Madina. Brusselization’s unchecked urban sprawl contradicts the Islamic principles of balanced city planning, where land use was regulated to ensure fairness. Californication’s rampant commercialization and real estate speculation mirror the excessive materialism that Islam curbed through just trade practices and the prevention of economic monopolies. Israel’s Hyper-Cognitive Urbanism, which distorts historical narratives for political gains, stands in contrast to Islam’s inclusive approach to heritage, where the Prophet integrated diverse cultural elements without erasure. Vancouverism, though praised for its sustainable and community-oriented planning, still struggles with socio-economic disparities, while Madina’s model established an equitable system where housing, water and resources were accessible to all without exploitation. These modern urban models, shaped by Occidental visions of development, continue to seek solutions that Islam had already perfected in the first Islamic city-state. The moral lesson is clear; true urban sustainability is not achieved through mere structural advancements but through ethical governance, social justice and spiritual balance, as demonstrated by the timeless legacy of the State of Madina.

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