

Research

Unearthing Al-Dirah's authentic charm: a case study for city branding in Riyadh

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Abstract

Al-Dirah, an old neighborhood in Riyadh, is an excellent illustration of Saudi tradition and history. It was built in 1824 and is widely known for its rich heritage and historical traits, with historic landmarks such as Al Masmak Fort, Al-Dirah Souk, Al-Mu'eiqilia Market, and Deera Square. It also had the major royal castle in Saudi Arabia's second state. It was a thriving economic neighborhood from the past until the present times. With all these values, Al-Dirah has the potential to represent the branding of Riyadh as the capital city. However, this district is facing challenges such as traffic, overpopulation, collapsing buildings, and maintenance issues which might impact the image of the neighborhood. This study aims to investigate the values and potentials of the Al-Dirah neighborhood as well as recent urban problems from the perspectives of residents and non-residents. It argues that having significant potential ranging from cultural, historical, and economic is not enough for developing the branding for the city without considering the perceptions of the residents. Their perceptions are important to create an image that can be potential for the city branding. Therefore, their role needs to be recognized. A mixed method both qualitative and quantitative approach was utilized for this study through online structured and open-ended questionnaires, supported by direct observations on the site. The findings reveal that although old neighborhoods are often associated with urban problems and poorly built environments, however, from residents' perspectives, it has the potential for city branding, especially if it is supported by their cultural, historical, and economic values. While most of the studies related to city branding focus on the policies perspective from the top-down, this study gives another perspective which is from the community or bottom-up. This study supports the Saudi Vision 2030 goals to achieve a sustainable living environment, boost the economy through tourism, and strengthen national identity at the same time. This study enriches references about city branding for practitioners and policymakers.

Keywords: Al-Dirah; city branding; old neighborhood; residents' perspective; Riyadh-Saudi Arabia

1. Introduction

Al-Dirah is an old neighborhood in Riyadh with a very strategic location. It is an excellent illustration of Saudi tradition and history. The district, which was built in 1824, is widely known for its rich heritage and historical traits. There were no major urban concerns or problems occurred, the neighborhood was developed nicely. It was a thriving economic neighborhood from the past until the present times. With historic landmarks such as Al

Masmak Fort, Al-Mu'eiqilia Market, Al-Dirah Souk, and Deera Square. It also had the major royal castle in Saudi Arabia's second state.

With all these values, Al-Dirah has the potential to represent the branding of Riyadh as the capital city. However, as time went on, Riyadh's principal growth direction changed to the north/east, leaving the Al-Dirah area behind. Traffic, overpopulation, collapsing buildings, and maintenance issues are among the urban problems that Al-Dirah is facing nowadays. These urban issues might impact the image of the Al-Dirah.

By investigating the values of the Al-Dirah neighborhood as well as recent urban problems, this paper argues that having significant potential ranging from cultural, historical, and economic is not enough for developing the branding for the city without considering the perceptions of the residents, and their voice should be recognized. The perspectives of residents are important to create an image that might be potential for the city branding of Riyadh. While most of the studies related to city branding focus on the policies perspective from the top-up, this study gives another perspective which is from the community or bottom-up.

A mixed method both qualitative and quantitative approach was utilized for this study through online surveys supported by direct observations on the site. Targeting the residents of Al-Dirah specifically and Riyadh residents in general, the main goal of data collection is to determine the current state of the neighborhood, its potential, and primary problems from the residents' perspectives. Moreover, their proposals on how to improve the neighborhood condition were also gathered for the analysis.

2. City Branding and Saudi Vision 2030

Cities were developed through a continuous process that created diverse values and systems which represented the characteristics of the built environment and its people (Al-Hinkawi & Zedan, 2021), (Cvijic & Guzijan, 2013), (Mr & Pelser, 2021). City image reflects wider aspects ranging from economic, social, cultural, and political. It also resonates with the perception of the residents (Alzouby et al., 2023), (Castillo-Villar, 2018). Therefore the residents' perspective towards their city is important in city branding (Wu & Chang, 2020), (Castillo-Villar, 2018), (Lukić & Dejanović, 2022), (Shirvani Dastgerdi & De Luca, 2019). According to (Shirvani Dastgerdi & De Luca, 2019), residents' perceptions that translate the city image can be built by understanding the immaterial elements of landmarks, cultural heritage, and historical events. Their involvement gives a positive impact on city branding as they formed the city's character (Hakala, 2021), (Lukić & Dejanović, 2022). Moreover, residents' satisfaction and spirit should be fully recognized and considered (Shirvani Dastgerdi & De Luca, 2019). At the same time, promoting the historical and cultural charms of the city gives positive effects on residents as it improves pride and identity, and activates their creative life (Wu & Chang, 2020).

On the other hand, images and memories are part of the unique identity that each city has, including the historical and cultural values of the places and people (Al-Hinkawi & Zedan, 2021). However, the authentication of identity and city image is often ignored in the global world (Abd Ghafar et al., 2022). As a marketing tool (Cvijic & Guzijan, 2013), city branding can successfully be worked if the significance of the cities such as cultural and historical values are recognized (Galerakis, 2020), (Al-Hinkawi & Zedan, 2021), (Cvijic & Guzijan, 2013) (Alraouf, 2019). Nowadays, the development of city cultural resources becomes a central component of city branding (Wu & Chang, 2020).

Furthermore, better access to public places and historic districts as well as establishing cooperation and network between the local organization, communities, and public-private sectors might improve the branding of the city (Al-Hinkawi & Zedan, 2021). The connection between residents and their built environment and the meaning of it needs to be well

understood for building the identity of the city (Castillo-Villar, 2018). However, relying only on sustainable infrastructure and cultural characteristics is not enough, but creating experiences will activate the city branding effectively (Wu & Chang, 2020). Moreover, (Wu & Chang, 2020) argues that combining recent cultural heritage and modern culture is one of the solutions to form city charm that might boost the competitiveness of cultural cities.

City branding is considered a new discipline and become a global phenomenon, particularly for developed countries or countries with high sources of income (Mr & Pelser, 2021). One of the aims of city branding is to attract investors, talent, enhance tourism and increase community identity by making it more significant than other cities (Alzouby et al., 2023), (Abd Ghafar et al., 2022), (Al-Hinkawi & Zedan, 2021), (Cvijic & Guzijan, 2013), (Ardhanariswari et al., 2022). The common approach to city branding development comes from urban policy or top-down (Al-Hinkawi & Zedan, 2021). However, developing the city branding is not the task of city planners only, it should be built together with all stakeholders, particularly the local community or residents. It can be achieved by creating a public image and designing the city landscape (Cvijic & Guzijan, 2013), (Castillo-Villar, 2018).

Most of the studies on city branding examined the topic from an academic perspective and marketing and urban studies (Ardhanariswari et al., 2022). Nevertheless, there is growing interest coming from the built environment fields including architecture (Abd Ghafar et al., 2022), (Ardhanariswari et al., 2022). Similar to corporate branding which considers complex entities, the approach of developing city branding also targets various elements of cities such as enjoyment, and a better place to live and work (Al-Hinkawi & Zedan, 2021). Saudi Arabia along with other Gulf countries has benefited from abundant oil reserves and is a major oil producer for the past decades. However, at the same time, they also have to face a unique challenge in terms of sustainable development due to their reliance on oil and gas. The Kingdom recognizes the need to address future challenges related to the sustainability of energy supplies. As the day approaches when oil production will eventually cease in Saudi Arabia, the country must proactively seek alternative solutions. Saudi Arabia's reliance on oil and the foreseeable end of oil production necessitates a shift toward sustainable development. Under the Saudi Vision 2030 framework, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia currently is in the process of shifting its major income from the oil and gas sector to more diverse sources of income including tourism. To promote tourism and to be an asset of the globalization competition, city branding becomes fundamental (Ardhanariswari et al., 2022), (Shirvani Dastgerdi & De Luca, 2019). Boosting tourism is one of the missions to be achieved in Saudi Vision 2030 which was the blueprint for the Kingdom to detach from its dependency on the oil and gas sector. To achieve this, city branding is very important as it has a strong connection with tourism (*Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030*, n.d.).

Riyadh as the capital city, represents the Kingdom in economic, social, cultural, and political, therefore, building the branding for Riyadh city is important not only for tourism but also for general economic purposes. This study discovers the authentic charm of Al-Dirah, an old neighborhood of Riyadh as the potential asset to be promoted as city branding for Riyadh city.

3. Methods

This study utilized a mixed qualitative and quantitative approach as the main methodology. It was done through online structured and open-ended questionnaires, supported by direct observations on the site. The main targets of respondents are Al-Dirah residents and Riyadh residents in general, who have been lived there, still living, or have visited Al-Dirah. The main goal is to determine the current state of the neighborhood, its potential, and primary

problems from the residents' perspectives. Their perceptions and opinions on how to improve the neighborhood condition were also collected.

Using the Google Form platform, the survey was disseminated online through social media networks, and directly to the respondent during the on-site observation. The survey consisted of a structured questionnaire to collect quantitative data and open-ended questions to gather qualitative data. Residency status, building, and infrastructure conditions, public facilities, and amenities, as well as historical, cultural, and heritage values, are among the issues examined in the survey. To reach enough respondents, the survey was developed in two languages, English and Arabic. A total of 215 respondents took part in the survey. The data analysis was done through an Excel sheet summary result extracted from Google Forms. While the open-ended answers were analyzed using a simple matrix. The Arabic responses were translated into English during this process.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Case Study

Al-Dirah's is located under Al-Batha municipalities of Riyadh City (Fig 4.1). Its built environment was dominated by Najd architecture characterized by mud-construction buildings. The typical houses feature a living room for the owner as well as visitors. A firewood and charcoal storage room is also part of the important elements of the house. Al-Masmak Fortification, the defensive walls encircling the one-square-kilometer region becomes a landmark of Al-Dirah along with its museum. The other points of interest in Al-Dirah are Iman Turki Bin Abdullah Mosque and Alsafat Square (Fig 4.2). There were no major challenges or problems with settlements or the urban surroundings when Al-Dirah was formed, it was developing smoothly.

Figure 4.1 Al-Dirah Map
Source: adapted from Google Maps

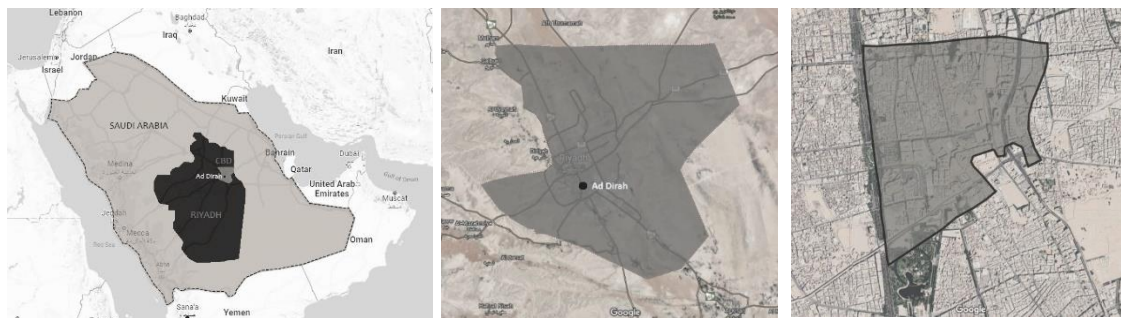
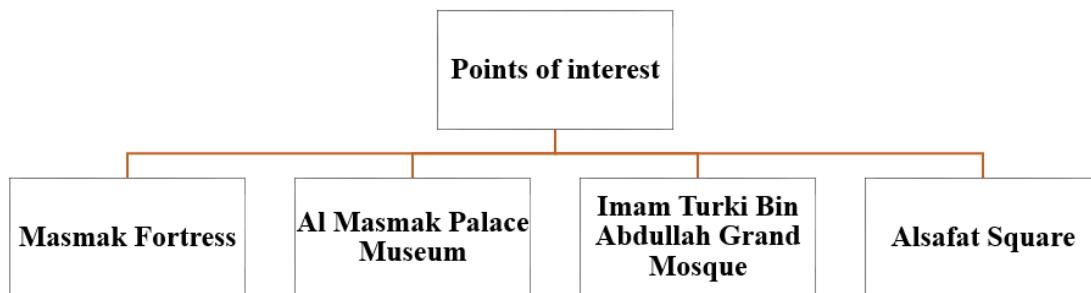
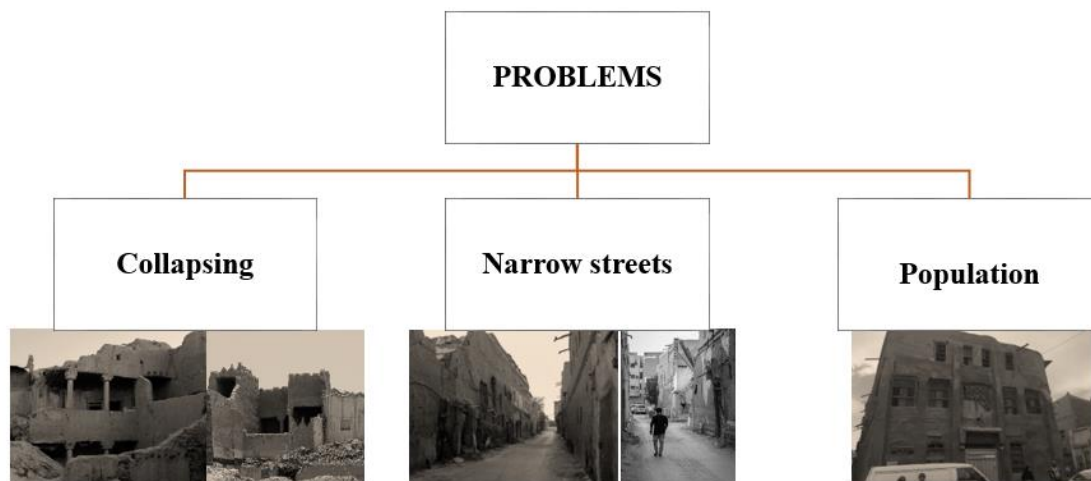


Figure 4.2 Point of Interest
Source: developed by authors



However, the further development of Riyadh to the north/east has impacted Al-Dirah’s urban features. Traffic, overpopulation, collapsing structures, and poor maintenance are some of the issues faced by Al-Dirah residents nowadays, resulting in a lot of crowds in the neighborhood which becomes more commercial than residential. These problems have impacted the image of the Al-Dirah in general (Fig 4.3).

Figure 4.3 Urban Problems
Source: developed by authors



Dilapidated walls, abandoned buildings, and narrowed lanes are the common features of the old cluster of Al-Dirah. However, although dilapidated, the old buildings in Al-Dirah are inevitably picturesque. The presence of arches inside the buildings not only functioned as structural support but also as an added architectural value to the building. Until the early 1940s, the streets around Masmak Fort were crowded with these mud-brick buildings. Nowadays, there are still building standing strongly supported by stable roofs and structures found. Renovated buildings with new materials such as brick combined with mud structures are also found in the neighborhood. With all these attributes, Al-Dirah is a perfect representation of the built environment of Saudi cultural heritage (Fig 4.4).

Figure 4.4 Observation of the current condition of Al-Dirah (Old Riyadh)
 Source: authors



4.2. Findings and Discussion

Most of the respondents who participated in the survey are Saudi nationals (90%), the rest are mixed nationalities such as Syrian, Palestinian, and Indian and all of them agreed that Al-Dirah is an old neighborhood. Almost half of the respondents (47%) have been living there for over 20 years, a sufficient period to observe the changes in the neighborhood at

least in the last 2 decades. In terms of the housing type, more than half (58%) live in a villa (single house), 29% live in apartments, and the rest live in other forms of residents such as shared-unit buildings. However, not all of them are living in a good state of residence. 29% of them stated that their residences need renovations ranging from minor to major renovations needed.

Regarding urban-related problems, this study identified that insufficient public spaces and traffic including parking are the major issues facing in Al-Dirah. The narrow streets and lanes have also impacted privacy. However, regardless of the concerned problems, and although considered an old neighborhood, more than 50% of respondents said they want to live there. 70% of the current residents confirmed they want to continue living there. Moreover, the study also found that 87% of non-resident respondents said they want to move to Al-Dirah if the quality of the neighborhood and environment are improved.

Furthermore, the survey reveals that 47% of respondents are aware of and recognized the historical potential of the Al-Dirah. According to them, the souk (traditional market) is the main attraction of the neighborhood that attracts local people as well as tourists. 65% stated the economic potential of Al-Dirah is coming from the trading activities in the souk. When they were asked about their opinion on how to improve the current condition of Al-Dirah, 35% responding suggest the renovations of the physical buildings and structure, 47% proposed Al-Dirah to be an open museum, and 59% advised re-adaptive use solution for some of the old or historical buildings in Al-Dirah.

Meanwhile, some suggestions or recommendations on how to re-develop the neighborhood to be more livable are also raised by the respondents in the survey. They include renovating the buildings with more sustainable materials, widening the streets and lanes to provide more space for parking as well as increasing the privacy of the residence (spaces between residency buildings) at the same time. Lastly, more housing development is needed to accommodate the dense population of the neighborhood.

The findings reveal that although old neighborhoods are often associated with urban problems and poorly built environments, however, from residents' perspectives, it has the potential for city branding, especially if it is supported by their cultural, historical, and economic values.

As an old neighborhood, Al-Dirah has significance for historical, cultural, and heritage values, especially its built environment characterized which represents the Najd architectural style. Residents of Al-Dirah, as well as Riyadh residents in general, agreed about this. Even though the types of buildings particularly houses vary from villas, apartments, or shared-unit buildings with different states of conditions and maintenance levels, most of the residents want to continue living there. A similar impression also comes from non-residents who consider moving to Al-Dirah, especially if there are some improvements carried out. Some of the urban-related improvements proposed by the residents are including building renovations, street, and lane widening, more parking spaces, more housing units, and more public facilities developed. All options point out the appropriate approaches for improving Al-Dirah, demonstrating how much the residents value their amazing heritage and desire to preserve the identity that this place holds at the same time.

Immediate actions to repair and renovate this area is required to keep the historical and cultural heritage features this place holds. Taking care of the residents' needs and

developing and improving the urban plan will result in greater pleasure and a higher quality of life. Being historically significant and rich in heritage and culture, Al-Dirah will contribute to the Kingdom's economy through tourism activities. Tourists from all around the world come and enjoy the experience.

Furthermore, from an economic point of view, the souk becomes the main magnet for commercial activities in Al-Dirah that serves not only residents but also tourists. This is another potential of Al-Dirah can be a good asset for the city branding of Riyadh. To improve the image of the neighborhood, the ideas of developing Al-Dirah to be an open museum and applying re-adaptive use concepts for some historical and heritage buildings are also among the excellent recommendations coming from the residents.

In summary, although considered an old neighborhood that is often associated with urban problems and poorly built environments, however, from the perspective of the residents, Al-Dirah represents an image of a good neighborhood to live in, particularly if the living conditions were improved. The image framed by the residents becomes crucial since it can be an asset for city branding, supported by other values and potentials of the neighborhood. This study confirmed that having significance from the historical, cultural heritage, and economic values are not enough for developing the branding of the city if it is not supported by the image framed by its residents, since they are part of and represent the branding itself. Therefore, their perceptions should be heard and fully recognized.

Taking care of the neighborhood and creating an arrangement for forthcoming issues will lead to expanded fulfillment and a way to achieve a better quality of life. This will contribute to accomplishing the Saudi Vision 2030 objectives to enhance the sustainable living environment, promote culture, boost the economy through tourism, and strengthen national identity at the same time. This study proposes a different perspective of discussion about city branding which mostly focuses on the top-down points of view. It enriches literature about city branding not only for policymakers but also for practitioners and other stakeholders.

5. Conclusions

The comprehensive study conducted on Al-Dirah neighborhood highlights its significance in terms of historical, cultural, and economic values. Despite facing urban challenges such as traffic congestion, population density, and deteriorating buildings, the residents perceive Al-Dirah as a valuable and desirable place to live. The neighborhood holds a strong potential for city branding, especially when supported by the preservation of its cultural and architectural heritage.

The findings emphasize the importance of residents' perspectives in shaping the image and identity of a neighborhood. Their attachment to Al-Dirah and their desire to preserve its unique character and historical significance emphasize the need for community engagement and participation in the development process. Suggestions from the residents, including building renovations, street and lane widening, increased parking spaces, and more housing units, provide valuable insights for future planning and improvement initiatives.

The study highlights the importance of holistic and community-driven approaches to urban development and city branding. By preserving the historical and cultural heritage, improving infrastructure, and living conditions, and actively involving residents and stakeholders, Al-Dirah can transform into a model neighborhood that represents the rich traditions and history of Saudi Arabia while offering a high quality of life for its residents.

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Conflicts of Interest:

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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