URBAN FORM IN THE ARAB WORLD
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PAST AND PRESENT
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Preface

The main focus of the ORL Planning Institute (Institut für Orts-, Regional- und Landesplanung) at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology (ETH) is on research and training related to national planning tasks. Yet, acknowledging the potential importance of other cultures with regard to the future activities of its graduates, the Institute is open to research topics transcending the narrow boundaries of Switzerland, and has encouraged the integration of planning tasks related to foreign countries into its curriculum.

When Dr. Stefano Bianca was appointed from 1978 to 1980 as a visiting professor at our Institute, a group of architectural students became involved in a number of research and planning projects in the Moroccan city of Fez, carried out under our joint supervision. The result of these studies, summarised in Chapter 12 of the present book, was first published by the ORL Institute in 1980 ("Städtebau in Islamischen Ländern", ORL Studienbericht Nr. 44). Subsequently, in 1990/91, our Institute hosted a research project on town planning in Islamic countries, co-sponsored by the Swiss National Research Fund, to enable Dr. Bianca to synthesize his more recent professional experiences in places such as Aleppo, Baghdad, Mecca and Medina, and to develop his analysis of the clash between traditional urban structures of the Islamic world and conventional modern planning methods.

We are happy to present this long-awaited new publication by Stefano Bianca, issued under the auspices of the ORL Institute, as a volume of our research series. The mandate of the ORL Institute is to nurture research related to the theory of town planning, as well as to engage in practical planning courses and exercises. The present book realizes both objectives in an exemplary way, as it combines a structural analysis of the historic urban form with a discussion of contemporary planning problems, illustrated by a number of actual case studies. Thus it has the potential of becoming a textbook for individuals and institutions interested in the urban dimension of the Arab-Islamic world, and particularly for those who care about the cultural implications of modern development.

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Introduction: The Subject and the Approach

When I first conceived this book in the late 1980’s at the request of the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology (ETH), it was clear to me that I should not attempt to write another history of architecture of the Islamic world. A number of distinguished orientalists and art historians have already dealt with this daunting task with varying degrees of success. As a practicing architect and town planner, and occasional architectural historian, I am indebted to the existing stock of publications on this subject which, for lack of any better designation, continues to be labelled “Islamic Architecture”. Having lived and worked in the Arab world for long periods since my first journey to Morocco in 1964 and having developed a strong interest in the traditional Muslim philosophy of life, however, my aim was to transcend the conventional categories of architectural history: rather than limiting the study to the stylistic aspects of architecture and urban form, I wanted to explore the inner motivations behind visual structures as the main sources of pre-formal shaping forces and morphological structuring principles.

I have applied this approach more extensively in some earlier studies, most of them written in German and all of them dealing with art, architecture and urban form in Muslim cultures. The present book draws on this material, although due to the necessary shortening and my limited command of English, it may be less eloquent and occasionally less subtle than its German predecessor (“Hofhaus und Paradiesgarten”, C.H. Beck Verlag, München 1991). Yet what distinguishes this book from the latter publication is the attention given to the contemporary situation as well as the attempt to bridge the gap between past and present, which is also a divide between theory and practice. My contention is that, by looking into the deep-rooted human factors which gave birth to distinct formal and artistic expressions and to a specific type of built environment, it should be possible to reveal certain non-formal patterns which are, to some extent, time-resistant and which therefore contain the seeds from which cultural continuity can grow – even at times of disruption by strong outer forces. If this book can contribute to the discovery of such elements and to their future implementation in terms of adapted architectural and urban design, or if it can stimulate others to continue exploring these paths, then it will have achieved its purpose in spite of its imperfections.
The manifestations of Islamic architecture are not based on explicit formal prescriptions and have varied considerably from period to period and from region to region, which has given rise to the provocative thesis that there is no such thing as “Islamic Architecture”. Yet from an early point in history (about the 9th/10th century AD onwards) there is a specific Islamic quality which becomes apparent in every appropriation and adaptation of pre-existing architectural and artistic heritage, be it of Roman, Hellenistic, Byzantine or Sassanian origin. The respective regional styles of Islamic architecture are not necessarily linked by formal resemblances, but they show inner affinities which are clearly based on related customs, patterns of use and corresponding structuring principles. This “common denominator” draws on various sources: there are, for instance, certain climatic conditions, socio-economic factors and vernacular building techniques shared by many regions of the Islamic world. There is, at least for some regions, the common basis of the Roman-Hellenistic building tradition, already “orientalized” in the context of Byzantine, Parthian and Sassanian cultures and brought to a new synthesis by Muslim craftsmen and architects. But above all, there is an unmistakably Islamic character that can only be attributed to a prevailing spiritual identity, as materialized through a consistent daily practice and the corresponding built environment.

Similarly to other ancient traditions, Islam has developed and maintained a set of ritualized patterns of human behaviour which embraced all aspects of daily life, on the individual as well as the collective level, permeating man’s activities with constant references to an acknowledged religious truth. This may not be consonant with the secular beliefs of modern Western civilization which, for the sake of “individualism”, tend to ignore spiritual hierarchies and thus to reject the idea of normative types of human conduct – without always recognizing that, by excluding service to higher realities, the human mind may become subservient to much more limited man-made ideologies and their constraints. In the traditional Islamic context, the divine order was a commonly accepted reality and accordingly, the given system of daily rituals was capable of infusing meaning and consistency to every single human activity. As vernacular architecture is a relatively direct spatial crystallization of man’s thinking and behaviour, the built form could hardly remain unaffected by this cultural coherency. The real source of the inner unity of Islamic architecture, therefore, has to be sought in the realm of such pre-formal archetypes and not in ephemeral stylistic features.

What strikes most Western observers is the fact that the basic factors and patterns of Islamic life should have been subject to relatively little change throughout the various historical periods. Notwithstanding the development of a sophisticated civilization during the first two centuries after the
Prophet’s death, Islam as a religious and social order has always maintained a certain archaic simplicity. Its way of life remained faithful to the original modes of human behaviour defined by the first nucleus of the Muslim community in Medina, which had absorbed the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad. Through later centuries, and until the 19th/20th century, this cultural mould was perpetuated generation by generation and continued to be followed by a growing number of societies in many different regions of the Islamic world.

To be sure, the outer conditions changed considerably during the history of Islam and, as Muslim philosophers of the past readily admitted and sometimes deplored, reality often fell short of the ideals. Yet most Muslim societies have never believed in “progress” in modern Western terms. They rather understood the course of history as a gradual decline and sometimes as a deviation from the original path. Possible aberrations were attributed to human weakness and did not affect the unquestioned validity of the divine order. Being supported by the enduring force of steadily reproduced archetypes, the ideal Muslim way of life thus remained the target, and although it could no longer be fully met, it still provided Islamic culture and its various expressions with a rare continuity throughout time.

As a result, divergent historic perspectives emerged in East and West: one could say that the evolution of Islamic culture proceeded along circular or spiral patterns, maintaining a permanent relation to its spiritual centre of gravity. In contrast, European civilization after the “Renaissance” (and especially since the 19th century) adopted a linear path of development, determined by the underlying utopia of man-made progress towards “the best of all possible worlds”. Both perspectives obviously implied different basic assumptions, and thus they elicited contradictory philosophies of life as well as different modes of architectural expression. While it is impossible to weigh the achievements of a secular and rather single-minded technological progress against the benefits of a spiritually determined, more comprehensive (and arguably more realistic) tradition, it should be emphasized that both attitudes build on their own set of criteria, and that confusing the respective parameters will not result in adequate approaches, let alone judgements.

A case in point is the disillusionment of a number of modern Western art historians, who are unable to find real “progress” in Islamic art after a certain point in history, when most of the specific artistic tools of Islam had been articulated. This led them to the conclusion that Islamic art in its later periods had lost vigour and substance or had become a merely “mechanical” repetition of existing models. Nothing could be more misleading for the understanding of the real objectives of Islamic arts and crafts: in fact, for
a craftsman in any traditional culture, the highest pride is to remain faithful to the models or archetypes he chooses to interpret, because they convey a distinct spiritual meaning. To him, the idea of “individual expression” for its own sake does not appear as a desirable value, for in fact it is already implied in the very process of the traditional artist’s re-creation, which is nothing but a personal and temporal interpretation of an immaterial and timeless truth. Explicit emphasis on subjective expression would only distort the real message by subjecting it to the limitations of the transmitter.

Given the special nature of Islamic art and architecture, its essential qualities seem inaccessible to certain modes of interpretation used by conventional Western art history, which, being geared to other types of artistic expression, are often obsessed with analyzing external stylistic development. Such an approach is bound to reiterate the ideological prejudices of positivism, which has informed many aspects of Western science over the past 300–400 years but has little or no affinity with the essential shaping forces of traditional art and architecture. Understanding these forces requires a different approach, based on the identification and interpretation of cultural archetypes, their meaning and their formal variations through time and space. Admittedly, this method, which could be labelled “Platonic” rather than “Aristotelian”, may be of little use for the study of post-medieval Western art and architecture, but it has its merits when dealing with Islamic architecture, which has fostered specific archetypes for architectural and urban form, as generated by prototypical patterns of behaviour.

Acknowledging that the traditional formal structures of Islam – be it in the arts, in architecture or in urban texture – represent significant crystallizations of non-material contents is the basis for the morphological analysis of the historic built environment intended by this book. Yet the same approach also proves useful when it comes to analyzing the contemporary problems resulting from the pre-industrial Islamic city being confronted with modern Western concepts of life. Indeed, it would be wrong to reduce this conflict to the aesthetic or functional dimensions of town planning, for the introduction of new architectural models into a different cultural context has a far-reaching impact. It cannot be limited to isolated “formal” or “technical” problems, but has to address aspects of local customs, human behaviour and, above all, the meaning of architectural forms as perceived by their users.

Urban structures are always three-dimensional projections of human beliefs. At best they can provide a mirror of a spiritual universe which integrates man in a meaningful order and provides him with essential inner fulfilment, by the very fact that his small personal world is in harmony with a
much larger reality; at worst they are expressions of narrow ideologies
which confine man to the cage of his own rationality, depriving him of the
vital contact with his higher levels of existence. The clash between the tradi-
tional Islamic culture and modern Western systems of thought has to be seen
in this wider philosophical context, for the controversial issue is the inter-
pretation of “development” and what it should entail: should development
enable the balanced realization of the totality of human faculties and capa-
bilities, or should it reduce reality to limited aspects of material life at the ex-
 pense of other qualities? Should it foster an increase in quantifiable produc-
tion only, or should it support a different type of creativity, which includes
more fundamental forces and experiences? As far-fetched as these questions
may seem, they determine the cultural responses which eventually generate
the built environment and its physical expressions.

Western models of urban life started exerting their influence on the
Islamic world during the colonial period and mainly in the second half of the
19th century when Europe entered the age of applied sciences and modern
technology, which in turn became the basis for its massive and extensive
industrialization. The underlying aspiration was to establish a new man-
made creation by mechanical means, anticipating a new golden age as a
result of unlimited technical progress. Although (or perhaps because) this
ideology was totally secular, it produced dogmatic beliefs and a somewhat
perverted salvation myth of its own: implicitly or explicitly, the promise was
to achieve “paradise on earth” by the joint forces of technological and eco-
nomic development. A missionary zeal, combined with obvious commercial
and political interests, pushed this new European civilization towards the
exploration and conquest of the planet, up to the last physical boundaries it
could reach.

Today, the failure of technology in fulfilling its promise is becoming
increasingly evident, as is the destructive character of this civilization which
drew, and still draws its main energies from the rapid consumption of finite
natural resources and from the dissolution of self-contained social and cul-
tural systems – paralleled by the destruction of the historic built environment.
On balance, it seems that the environmental, social and economic implica-
tions of this development process are generating more new problems than
they have solved. “Breakthroughs” often lead to subsequent collapses; these
are then postponed or transferred by engaging a higher level of technolog-
ical investment (and risk), which either constitutes liabilities for future gener-
ations or displaces the problems to other, still untouched areas of the world.
Western civilization in its present form has proven to be unsustainable, and
its export to the Third World, in spite of its proclaimed short-term success,
exposes mankind to unpredictable long-term hazards on a global scale.
Seen in the context of the present ecological debate, the age-old wisdom of traditional cultures, hitherto considered as “backward”, reveals itself to be much more realistic and indeed more timely than many obsolete modern utopias. It does not come as a surprise that the growing awareness of the limitations of technological progress and its architectural expressions allowed for a new appreciation of the cultural, aesthetic and social values of the pre-industrial built environment and the conditions that enabled its growth. Dismissing this interest in the past as mere nostalgia or branding it as an outdated revivalism would be too simplistic. The real issue is that human nature needs to respond to primordial emotional and spiritual impulses in order to achieve its full potential. Such responses are an integral part of the cultural framework of the traditional environment, while they tend to be suppressed by a dominant technology which can exert an almost hypnotic influence on man, since it substitutes natural processes with technical surrogates and makes him dependent on them.

Extreme situations tend to engender opposing trends and opportunities. At a time when the technological destruction of natural and cultural resources seems to be reaching its peak, new environmental sciences have sprung up, trying to re-establish the relation between man and the created world through a more holistic view of the universe. A similar phenomenon is to be observed in the spiritual realm: while modern Western civilization is threatening to eradicate the cultural identity of age-old cultures everywhere in the world, the West itself has produced thinkers who deeply absorbed the values and principles of traditional cultures and succeeded in transmitting their inner meaning. This knowledge has suddenly become more accessible and more explicit than it ever was before, even within the traditional cultures themselves. For as long as these cultures were not subject to external threats, there was no need to analyze their underlying raison d’être. Their self-evident spiritual principles were shared naturally by the society, and people practised them implicitly, without necessarily exteriorizing them. Today the situation has changed radically: a conscious awareness and support of basic values is needed to balance and master the impact of man-made development, as modern industrial civilization itself is unable to instil meaning to the products it generates.

Under such circumstances it seems a tragic irony that many Third World countries should have adopted obsolete Western ideologies, mistaking them for the miraculous instant solution to all their social, economic and political problems – at the very moment when the Western world is beginning to see the need to revise its previous concepts, re-consider its objectives and methods and take into account the negative effects of inappropriate technologies. Unfortunately, one should add, the intoxication by the Western “Myth
of Development” was not overcome with the end of the colonial period, but has grown even stronger since the emerging Third World nations achieved political independance. One of the reasons may be that the local political “elites” were often trained in the West and still believe in development concepts which have little to do with the realities of the Third World and have now become obsolete in their own place of origin. The cloned Western type of development has produced the well-known architectural disruption in the physical environment of many Arab cities; but its effects were even more disastrous with regard to the social segregation it induced by introducing new categories of “rich” and “poor” according to a value system that was alien to traditional communities.

In addition, the pressures emanating from undigested “progress” tend to provoke a fatal split between “modernist” and “fundamentalist” movements, thus generating yet another rift in many contemporary Islamic societies. The resulting contradictions between “technocrats” and “traditionalists” are extremely hard to reconcile, as after the collapse of an integrated and overarching cultural framework there is no common ground on which they could meet. The battle between conflicting paradigms becomes more complex, and sometimes confusing, since both camps, consciously or unconsciously, distort their message by adopting and perverting the attitudes of the other side: “modernists” pursue their mission with a para-religious eschatological fervour, and “fundamentalists” often revert to the tools of a militant positivist ideology.

It would seem presumptuous to venture into the political and ideological consequences of this struggle, and the present book has no such intention. All it tries to do is to trace the cultural background against which the questions of conservation, adaptation and revitalization of traditional cities in the Islamic world are to be seen and discussed. It is my contention that this urban tradition is not to be considered as a museal heritage, but as a formidable cultural resource capable of regeneration and renewal. To quote an established principle of ecology, one should not, just for the sake of maximum short-term benefits, reduce the genetic variety of a rich flora built up over thousands of years, as this may cause a dangerous shortage of resources for coming generations. In a similar way, historic cities can be seen as containing the seeds of future cultural transformations. They may constitute an essential resource in case alien models of urban development should prove less viable than anticipated.

Therefore, the morphological study of traditional Islamic cities is not only of historical and academic interest, but bears practical consequences for architects and urban designers. It can indeed reveal many culturally determined patterns which carry with them timeless elements of cultural identity
and can therefore be revived and re-integrated under new circumstances. Far from being a matter of replicating, cloning or freezing specific stylistic features, cultural continuity calls for sensitivity, imagination and high creative powers. Anyone who wants to pursue it must be able to recognize and to express the inner forces of architectural archetypes, distill the implicit meaning in its “liquid” spiritual state, as it were, and re-cast it into physical shapes which are adapted to new circumstances and yet constitute a natural link with the chain of a living tradition.

As far as this book is concerned, it is an attempt to make a contribution – modest as it may be – to the discovery of this potential continuity, both by analyzing and interpreting basic urban and architectural patterns and by exemplifying how some of them can be adopted or re-interpreted in a contemporary context. Taking into consideration the cultural disruption which occurred during and after the colonial period, the book is structured in three parts: the first section is devoted to the morphological and typological analysis of traditional architecture along the principles explained at the beginning of this introduction. The second section deals with the problems and incompatibilities caused by the impact of modern Western planning and design models, both in philosophical and in practical terms. The third section is an attempt to explore new alternative approaches which could reconcile traditional principles with contemporary needs, based on a number of case studies.

Given the intricate social, political and economical dimensions of the problem, nobody will expect the author, or anyone else for that matter, to provide readily and universally applicable solutions. It is my experience and firm belief that valid projects cannot be derived solely from theoretical principles, but must grow out of a careful and realistic study of the specific local conditions and existing resources. Hence the interest in presenting and discussing a variety of case studies in their context and with reference to the implementation problems encountered.

Whilst the case studies may illustrate desirable – as well as undesirable – approaches and principles, they are not intended to provide recipes. As architects, we should refrain from rash generalizations and schematic design transfers, which may be too rigid to match a complex reality. Individual solutions for each case and each site must spring from the careful interpretation of concrete circumstances and constraints if they are to meet users’ needs and to support the growth of a lively human environment. Community resources, economic potentials and institutional mechanisms must be considered together with physical interventions and harnessed as driving forces of urban rehabilitation. Projects cannot be designed in an abstract manner, nor can they be imposed “by decree”, which is perhaps the very reason for the ultimate failure of so many modern town-planning schemes.
After explaining at some length my approach to the subject, I would like to conclude this introduction with a few personal remarks. The first one concerns the fact that a Westerner has written a book which aims at promoting cultural continuity in the architectural and urban traditions of the Islamic world. The only argument I can invoke in my favour is that I have been a lover and admirer of traditional Islamic architecture for over thirty-five years now and that I owe many rewarding experiences to living and working in that environment, to studying Muslim poets, philosophers and historians and, not least, to the acquaintance of a number of Muslim friends and colleagues who contributed to the development of my thoughts and the case studies contained in this book.

I might add that with today's rapidly shrinking geographical barriers, the survival of the Islamic architectural heritage has become a universal concern which can and should be shared by Westerners. If there is such a thing as cultural solidarity and acknowledgement of timeless values, the relative distance of a foreign eye, combined with the necessary empathy for the subject, may be of help in unravelling complex problems which tend to appear even more confusing to those directly involved in the matter. An external observer certainly runs the risk of over-simplification (and I apologize in advance in this respect), yet given the present impact of an aggressive type of modernization, he has the advantage of having already experienced the results of a process which is now finding its way into the Islamic world.

There is room for hope that the young generation of Muslim intellectuals and decision-makers will be discerning and critical enough with respect to the crucial issues of cultural transformation and evolution. To be sure, the message of this book does not imply that Western tools and methods are to be rejected in toto, but that a selective process of adaptation and gradual integration should be followed, guided by a strong awareness of existing local values and by an informed evaluation of the successes and failures of modern development trends. This is a monumental task indeed, comparable perhaps to the earlier synthesis the Islamic world had to achieve with regard to the impact of Greek, Roman and Byzantine cultures. The future shape of cities in the Islamic world will tell to what extent such a synthesis is feasible and whether the impact of ubiquitous modernization trends still allows for local identities to be maintained, strengthened and developed.

Finally, I feel compelled to express my sincere thanks to all those who, in one way or another, have helped me develop the content of this book or assisted in its production. I am especially indebted to the late Titus Burckhardt, whose intimate knowledge of the traditional Islamic world is not only contained in his exemplary writings, but imbued his whole personality and
his approach to the field work, which I was fortunate enough to take part in for a few years in Fez during the late seventies.

In Fez, Ahmed al-Iraqi and Abdullatif al-Hajjami (now the Director of the local conservation and redevelopment agency ADER) have closely cooperated with our Unesco team in establishing the conservation plan for the old city and later in developing the further proposals contained in this book.

In Jeddah, I owe thanks to Dr. Sami Angawi, the founder and first Director of the "Hajj Research Centre", who initiated and participated in the project on the central area of Medina. He also commissioned the surveys on traditional housing in Fez, Aleppo and Medina, which allowed some of the new plans and maps published in this book to take shape. My former students Serge Schwarzenbach and Wolfgang Fülscher drew up most of them in many months of dedicated work.

In Aleppo, I must pay tribute to my friend Adli Qudsi, whose courageous initiatives were instrumental in stopping further wholesale demolition in the old quarters at a crucial moment in the city's long and distinguished history. He enabled me to engage in the revised Bab al-Faraj project and became the driving force behind more recent rehabilitation efforts in the old city.

In Baghdad, I am grateful to Rifat Chadirji, the distinguished architect then in charge of all building activities in the capital, and to Dr. Sabbah al-Azzawi, the chief of the town planning department, for giving me and my colleague Giorgio Lombardi the chance to develop the conservation and redevelopment project for the inner city contained in this book. We were able to draw on the valuable assistance of Dr. Ihsan Fethi, whose knowledge of Old Baghdad was always inspiring. It was a major setback to all of us when this important project was aborted in 1984 due to a tragic and unnecessary war at the very moment its implementation seemed to be within reach.

At Unesco, I wish to acknowledge the support of Dr. Said Zulficar and Dr. Mounir Bouchenaki, now Director of the Cultural Heritage Division, who deeply care for the cause of conservation in Muslim countries and who commissioned several consultancies which allowed me to deepen my field knowledge in Fez, Aleppo, Damascus, Cairo and Sana'a.

My colleague Werner Muller, now in Baltimore, was a dedicated companion who assisted me in the Medina and Baghdad projects and produced the perspective sketches featured in the respective case studies.

The production of this book would not have been possible without the joint support of the Swiss National Research Fund in Berne and the Planning Institute (ORL-Institut) of the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology (ETH) in Zurich. My special thanks go to Professor Benedikt Huber, Director Emeritus of the ORL-Institut, whose support and patience during the various phases of the project were of great help to me.
Oswald Roth, illustrator at the ORL-Institute, and Chester Romanutti from the ETH press (vdF Hochschulverlag AG an der ETH Zürich) saw the book through during the production phase and coped gracefully with the author’s demands and delays. Martin Josephy took care of formatting text and illustrations in sensitive and efficient manner. Together with them, I would also like to thank Jacques Feiner, a young ETH graduate who prepared, redrew or processed many of the plans and maps in this book. His enthusiasm for the subject eventually led him to participate in new projects in Sana’a and Shibam.

Urban conservation and planning in general cannot materialize without a collective effort which brings together institutional decision-makers, international organizations, financing agencies, architects, historians and professionals of various other disciplines, researchers, committed citizens and opinion-makers, and, last but not least, the community concerned and their representatives. In this sense, I would like to acknowledge the help and support of many other individuals who have not been named in this introduction, but whose efforts have contributed to the cause of renewing the traditional urban heritage of the Islamic world and continue to do so.

Postscript
The raw version of this book was almost completed in late 1992 when I joined the Aga Khan Trust for Culture in Geneva to build up the newly established “Historic Cities Support Programme” (HCSP). This challenging task did not allow me, until the summer months of 1996, to finalize the work on the book. Looking again into the manuscript at a distance of several years was somewhat frustrating, and anyone having gone through a similar experience will probably sympathize. While one’s basic views may remain the same, the desire to re-structure the material according to more recent thinking and experiences emerges – but cannot be satisfied, as it would mean recommencing from scratch... Eventually, I acquiesced and retained the “historic” shape of the book. Only in the conclusions did I take the liberty of inserting more recent pieces of writing. I am consoled by the fact that no book on this subject will ever be exhaustive, final or perfect, and I trust that interested readers will still find enough food for thought to pursue on their own.

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Stefano Bianca