

# Cities for All: Urban Equity and Cultural Inclusivity in Cosmopolitan Cities: A Case Study of Wadi Hanifa, Riyadh

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## 1 ABSTRACT

The concept of “Cities for All” has become a necessity for addressing the challenges of urbanization, multiculturalism, and social equity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As cities are rapidly evolving and developing increasingly diverse multicultural layers, it became crucial to foster inclusive environments that promote equity, equality, and justice. Yet, challenges persist in developing truly inclusive urban spaces, this acquires a deep understanding of the interlocking complex relationship between social community needs and urban design parameters. This research explores the dynamics of the multicultural societies in urban spaces. It highlights the challenges faced in accessing equitable public spaces. It examines the role of urban design in fostering social cohesion and reducing spatial inequalities. The research aims to study the capacity of the outdoor public spaces to accommodate people needs with cultural diversity, including individuals of different nationalities, genders, age groups, and cultural backgrounds, enabling them to practice their activities and express themselves in public without conflict, while fostering mutual acceptance. The research employs a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative analysis of spatial data with user experiences and perceptions. The study incorporates observational research, annotated mapping techniques, photographing, and looking for traces to provide a comprehensive understanding of space utilization and cultural dynamics. The research conducts systematic observations of public behavior and space usage patterns across different times of the day. This method supported the documentation of how various cultural groups interact with the urban public space, providing insights into the effectiveness of design elements in promoting inclusivity and equity in multicultural settings. The study utilizes annotated maps to visually represent spatial data, and uses qualitative observations to present the distribution of amenities and facilities across the urban public space to identify the patterns of use by different cultural groups. The overlapping between the observational data with the annotated maps creates a powerful tool for analyzing the relationship between urban design of public spaces and social equity in multicultural environments. The study proposes a robust framework for assessing and improving urban equity in diverse public spaces. The research applies its methodology to analyze a case study within the context of Riyadh city (an evolving cosmopolitan city as the capital of Saudi Arabia) with a specific focus on Wadi Hanifa as a study area. This case study concentrates on understanding the concept of urban equity in designing public spaces to promote social cohesion, especially in multicultural communities. The research explores the impact of Wadi Hanifa redevelopment project in promoting spatial justice and equity in public spaces, taking into account the varied requirements of the multicultural community in Riyadh. It examines the project's strategy for establishing welcoming public areas that honor local cultural practices while encouraging intercultural harmony, which provide fair access to parks and recreational areas for all groups. The case study analysis of Wadi Hanifa, demonstrates that its strategy aligns with the macro-movement towards creating “Cities for All”. It emphasizes how important it is to accommodate a comprehensive approach that considers culturally-sensitive design. The public spaces of Wadi Hanifa has a flexible design qualities that serve the whole community. The research shows that the Wadi Hanifa project successfully integrates principles of equity and urban justice, resulting in increased public use and improved quality of life for diverse multi-cultural groups. The study concludes its findings by highlighting the importance of such successful projects in promoting social cohesion in cosmopolitan cities that embrace diversity as well as harmony. This approach is aligned with the kingdom 2030's vision for Sustainable Development, to create safe, inclusive, and resilient communities.

Keywords: Multi-cultural, Equity, Inclusion, Cosmopolitan cities, Public space

## 2 INTRODUCTION

The significant increasing in populations with the rapid urbanization growth in the 21<sup>st</sup> century created multicultural communities with challenging needs and unique characteristics. It has become an urgent need

for designing spaces that understand their demands and address their requirements (Gehl, 2010). Urban planning and design guidelines in many countries regulate the concept of “Cities for All” (Alkhresheh, 2012) which was developed to tackle these new challenges of multiculturalism, seeking to achieve social cohesion public spaces (Sinha et al., 2024). This research focuses on the dynamics of the multicultural communities in cosmopolitan cities. It studies the challenges and opportunities of creating public spaces for all (Harris et al., 2023). By examining the relationship between urban design parameters and the needs of diverse cultural groups, the study aims to develop a framework to understand the phenomena, consider the inputs of variables, aided by the case study-based approach for analysis and understanding (Carmona, 2021). The research support the idea that public spaces should be accessible and welcoming to all, regardless of nationality, gender, age, or cultural background, enabling users to engage in communal activities without conflict, and to express themselves freely (Harris et al., 2023). To study the role of urban design in fostering urban equity, an integration of multiple qualitative tools were implemented as observation, documentation, photographing, tracing, and looking for traces (N. Groat & Wang, 2013). On site observations through multiple field trips to examine the inclusivity of public spaces. Focusing on Riyadh, as a rapidly evolving cosmopolitan city (Elsheshtawy, 2021), the research studies Wadi Hanifa project as a case study for a public space. Wadi Hanifa, represents the principles of equity, equality and justice, aligning with the main goal of “Cities for All” (The Royal Commission for Riyadh City, 2025). The study highlights how urban design can promote social cohesion, and enhance quality of life for diverse communities. The study aims to develop a framework for assessing and improving urban equity in multicultural cities, fostering equitable access to public spaces.

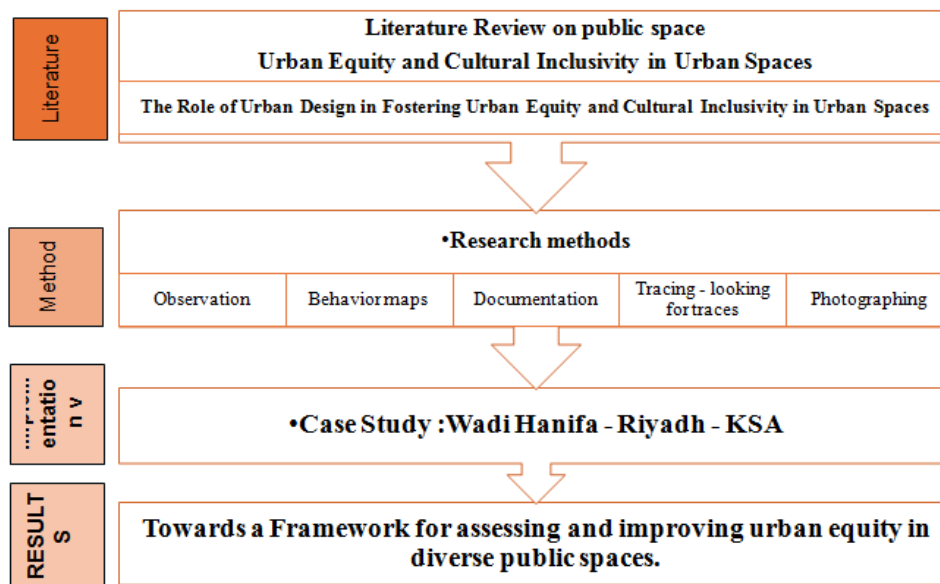


Figure 1: Research Methodology-Source: Author

### 3 CITIES FOR ALL

For the past decades, Cities have continued to follow a dynamic path of growth and change (Gehl, 2010). It is noticeable that cities become hubs for diversity, as a result of urban populations growth, such differences as language, and gender (Kihato & Massoumi, 2010). Despite the growing emphasis on inclusivity, many cities face substantial challenges in creating equitable and culturally sensitive public spaces (Sevincer et al., 2017). A significant consideration has been dedicated to the concept of “Cities for All” from the urban development perspective, emphasizing the need for inclusive, equitable, and culturally diverse urban spaces, addressing challenges as rapid urbanization, multiculturalism, and social equity (Harris et al., 2023). This research explores the key themes of urban equity, cultural inclusivity, and the role of urban design in fostering social cohesion, with a particular focus on public spaces in multicultural cities (Carmona, 2021). As public spaces play a crucial role in promoting social cohesion and reducing spatial inequalities (Sinha et al., 2024). The research examines the theoretical foundations and practical applications of inclusive urban design. As the implementation of public spaces should consider accessibility for all community members (Abdelfattah & Nasreldin, 2019), cultural sensitivity in design features, and chances for diverse groups to

interact and engage (Harris et al., 2023). Successful public spaces can perform as catalysts for broader urban transformation, positioning cities as models for embracing diversity although maintaining cultural authenticity (Carmona, 2021).

### 3.1 Urban Equity and Cultural Inclusivity in Urban Spaces

Urban equity is a crucial aspect of creating inclusive cities. The UN Habitat's urban planning principles emphasizes the importance of integrating social equity into urban development to create inclusive, sustainable cities (UN-Habitat, 2013). It defines social equity as the fair distribution of resources, opportunities, and services, addressing differences caused by socioeconomic factors (UN-Habitat, 2013). As, Pratt (2014) explores the evolving role of culture in urban development, highlighting major shifts, he identifies main aspects of differences, including education, technology, and governance, emphasizing cultural inclusivity and equity (Pratt, 2014). He highlights the importance of integrating diverse cultural practices to foster social cohesion and economic growth, aligning with the broader discourse on creating inclusive, equitable cities for multicultural communities. As cultural inclusivity in urban spaces involves creating communities that respect and cherish cultural diversity while fostering mutual understanding and acceptance among different groups. According to (Uitermark, 2012) the pursuit of urban equity is essential to achieving social justice in cities. (Sandercock, 2009) highlights the role of public spaces as sites of cultural exchange and interaction, where diverse communities can coexist and thrive. (Okano & Samson, 2010) highlights the importance of urban cultural diversity in metropolitan cities, suggesting that successful cities should recognize the value of diversity. Correspondingly, Marcuse (2009) discusses that spatial justice and urban equity requires the equitable distribution of public services including green spaces, recreational facilities, and cultural amenities. However, as (Madanipour, 2003) notes, many urban spaces fail to accommodate the multicultural community needs, which might lead to social fragmentation. This highlights the importance to have flexible and adoptable public spaces that consider the values, and preferences of diverse cultural groups, allowing them to practice their culture habits without being judged (Sinha et al., 2024). These sensitive public spaces align with the concept of "Cities for Life", which places people at the centre of development based on principles of equity and justice (Abdelfattah & Nayer, 2023), and promoting social cohesion (Marcuse, 2009). This research is proposing urban design as a tool to approach more equitable and inclusive open spaces (UN-Habitat, 2014).

### 3.2 The Role of Urban Design in Fostering Urban Equity and Cultural Inclusivity in Urban Spaces

Urban design plays a critical role to approach equity and justice in public spaces. (Gehl, 2010) highlights the significance of human-centered design principles to create vibrant public spaces. He asserts that well-designed public spaces foster social interaction, and promote cohesion communities. (Carmona, 2010) supports the argument by highlighting the necessity for adaptable and flexible design solutions that can accommodate the changing needs of the multicultural communities of public spaces. Ensuring that their needs and preferences are adequately addressed (Carmona, 2021). In order to foster equitable and resilient communities to create inclusive urban spaces that address social, and economic challenges (Harris et al., 2023) highlights the importance of integrating accessibility into urban design to promote social equity and urban resilience, offers a model for inclusive urban design, aligning with the goals of creating equitable, sustainable cities. On the other hand (Sinha et al., 2024) focuses on how inclusive design and participatory approaches can strengthen social cohesion, ensuring urban spaces benefit all residents and promote equitable, sustainable cities (Nasreldin & Abdelfattah, 2020).

## 4 THE METHOD

Towards investigating urban equity and cultural inclusivity in public spaces, several scientific methods were adopted. An integration of multiple qualitative tools were implemented, in order to study the role of urban design in fostering urban equity, as observation, documentation, photographing, tracing, and looking for traces (N. Groat & Wang, 2013). On site observations through twelve field trips were applied to examine the inclusivity of public spaces. Six trips were completed on weekends (three trips in the day time and three trips at evening time). The other six trips were conducted on the weekdays (two trips in the day time and two trips at evening time), distributed among the four sessions (summer, winter, autumn and spring). Annotated maps and behavioural analysis were adopted to study the interaction of diverse cultural groups within the public spaces. During the field trips, the research conducted semi-structured interviews (Aboubakr et al., 2020) with

the users and visitors. The interviews tackled criteria related to the frequency of visits, activities conducted during the visits, and their sense of safety and comfort. Information were collected regarding the availability of services and facilities, quality of the set-up, vegetation and shadings, lighting during night visits, availability of parking spaces. Discussions were raised about the ability of the space to accommodate multi-culture communities from different nationalities and their overall sense of comfort, equity and cultural inclusivity in the Wadi Hanifa platform.

#### 4.1 Framework for Inclusive Design: Improving urban equity in diverse public spaces.

The study proposes a robust framework for assessing urban equity and inclusive design to improve the interaction of diverse cultural groups within the public spaces. The framework reviewed the literature related to multiculture societies, urbanization of cosmopolitan cities and culture inclusivity, in order to develop a clear understanding of urban equity, urban equality and urban justice (Norman-Major, 2011). Equality means that everyone is provided with the same opportunities or identical resources, regardless of their individual circumstances or needs. It is based on the premise that everybody is in the same position and needs the same level of support (Minow, 2021). In equality, individuals and groups receive equal resources, regardless of their unique situations. Though, this approach does not take into consider the variations of outcomes, as everyone get advantage from the same level of support, although their different needs (Chu, 2019). On the other hand, Equity focuses on fairness rather than on equality. It takes into account that individuals are different. As Equity as a concept is trying to provide the resources or opportunities necessary to achieve equal outcomes. Equity recognizes these differences and provides unique support to individuals or groups, ensuring that every person receives the needed support to succeed (Lewis et al., 2021). Unlike equality, equity addressing individual needs for fairness, which means that some may require more support than others to achieve the same outcome (Norman-Major, 2011). Justice goes one step further from support, by tackling the fundamental causes of inequality (Lewis et al., 2021). It ensures that everyone's needs are met by removing any barriers and challenges. Justice is all about creating conditions where fairness is integrated and implemented (Minow, 2021). A model that incorporates equity, equality, and justice enhances wellbeing, social cohesion, and finally leads to the creation of inclusive public spaces (Lewis et al., 2021).

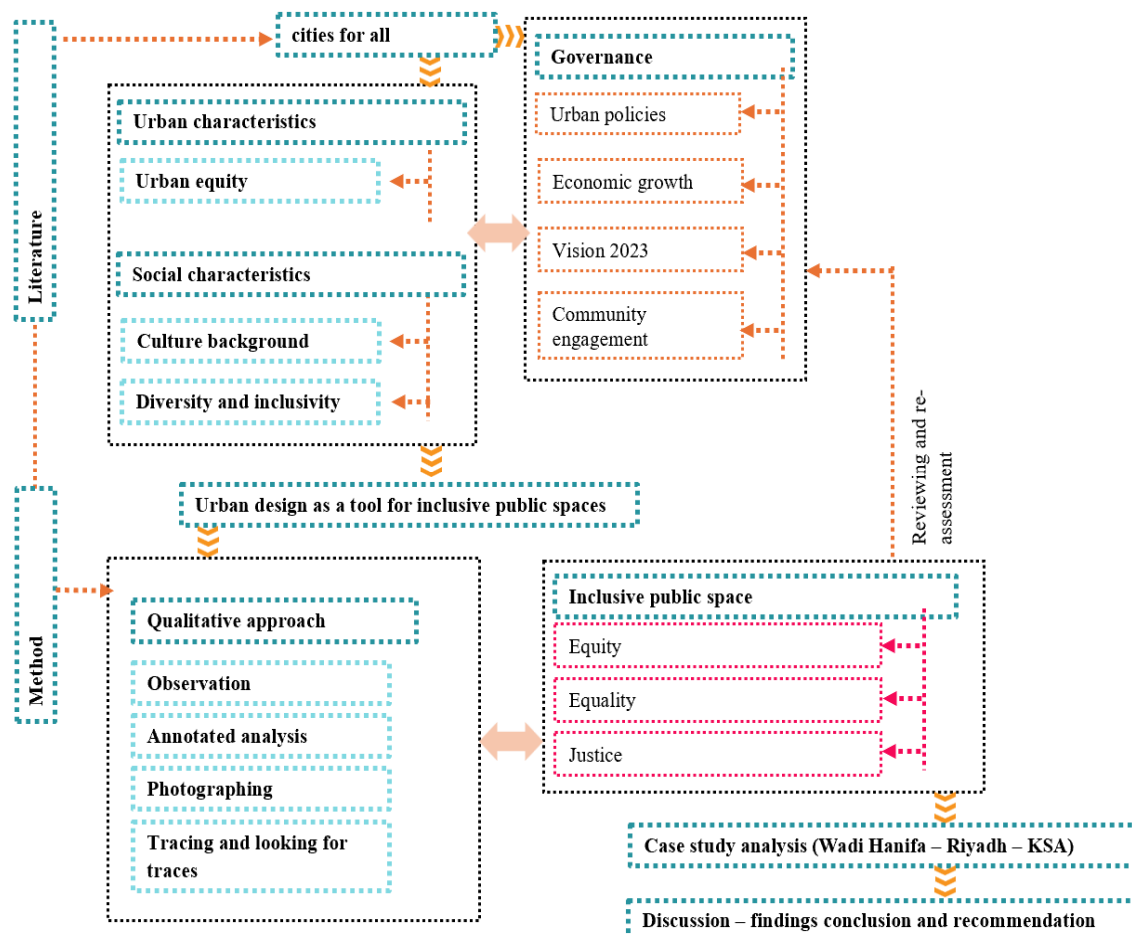




Figure 2: Urban design framework for inclusive public space – Source: Author

## 5 CASE STUDY: WADI HANIFA, RIYADH:

Throughout its history, Saudi Arabia has developed a cosmopolitan society, due to the free movement of traders and pilgrims, fostering cross-cultural and environmental diversity. Saudi Arabia is known for its multiculturalism, rooted in the coexistence of various national cultures (Al-Hathloul, 2017). This multicultural community includes Muslim Arabs and numerous other groups who have moved to the country for employment, bringing with them their unique cultures and languages. Saudi Arabia's population, exceeding 35 million people, diverse in terms of gender, class, and country of origin, with an estimated 10 million non-Saudis residing in the country (Ahmad Taha & Abdelfattah, 2023). Riyadh city (capital of Saudi Arabia) is considered one of the rapid growing cosmopolitan cities in the middle east and Asia within the past decade (Elsheshtawy, 2021). It is characterized by culture diversity that emphasize values such as equality, and mutual respect. It is becoming a hub for scientific and economic innovation allowing cultural expression and diversity. (Al-Naim, 2008) highlights the importance of preserving cultural identity while accommodating the needs of a diverse population in Riyadh. The concept of multiculturalism in Riyadh city can be recognized on various levels, starting from the top down urban policies that support inclusion, bottom to the daily practice of equity, equality and justice (Al-Hathloul, 2017). Wadi Hanifah represents a natural watershed for the floods and rainwater in an area of 4000 m<sup>2</sup> in the Najd region, located at the Riyadh Province, in central Saudi Arabia (Fahad & Sulaiman, 2017). The valley runs for a length of 120 km (75 mi) from northwest to southeast, cutting through the city of Riyadh, the capital of Saudi Arabia (Philby, 1920).

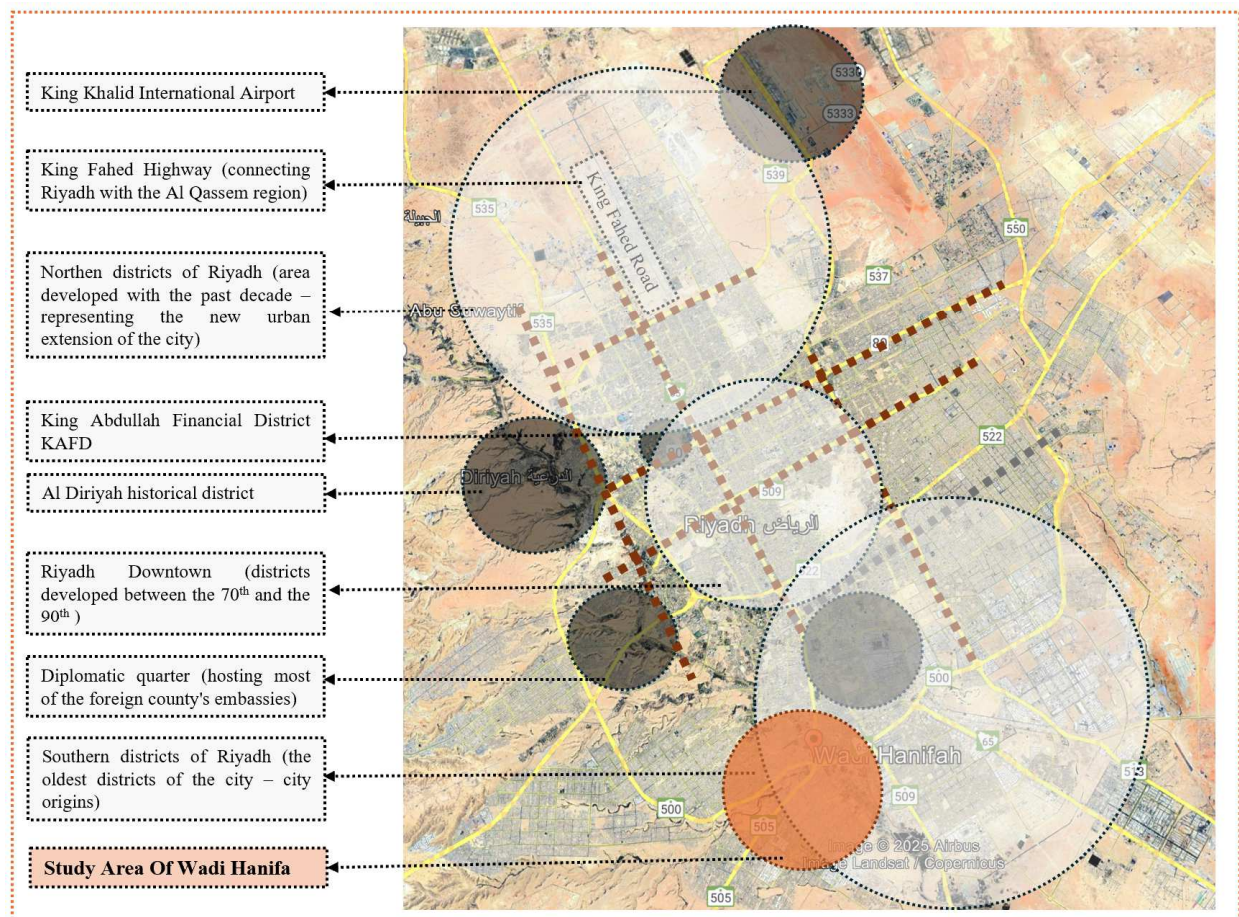


Figure 3: Riyadh City – Source: Google Earth with Author's annotation

The renovation of Wadi Hanifa serves as an example of creating spaces that are inclusive and accommodate accessibility while paying attention to cultural respect and environmental sustainability (Alhathloul, 2022). The Royal Commission for Riyadh City prioritized the conservation and renovation of Wadi Hanifa due to its strategic location and potential investment for Riyadh and its residents (The Royal Commission for Riyadh City, 2025). Back in 1987, Wadi Hanifa was declared as a development area under the direct supervision of the Commission. By 1994, an active renovation plan developed to a comprehensive action



plan. By 2002 Wadi Hanifa comprehensive development plan was approved as the master plan encompassing water resource management, environmental categorization, and land use (The Royal Commission for Riyadh City, 2025). The valley landscapes 47 kilometres of pedestrian walkways, complemented by 7.4 kilometres of rock-paved pathways overlooking rock formations, green spaces, and water canals. The pathways are built to cater to pedestrians as individuals, with strollers and wheelchairs; they also feature seating areas for relaxation and comfort purposes. A two kilometre waterfront promenade runs parallel, to the paths and provides views of the lake dam equipped with palm trees and public amenities. This promenade includes sections where pedestrians and families to picnic and appreciate the lakes beauty, with entry points connecting it to the lake. By incorporating principles of fairness into the design process the initiative has enhanced accessibility. The Royal Commission, for Riyadh City in 2025 provides a blueprint for developing areas in fast growing cities. It shows how careful planning can promote accessibility, to all individuals and communities while also embracing diversity and supporting preservation (The Royal Commission for Riyadh City, 2025).

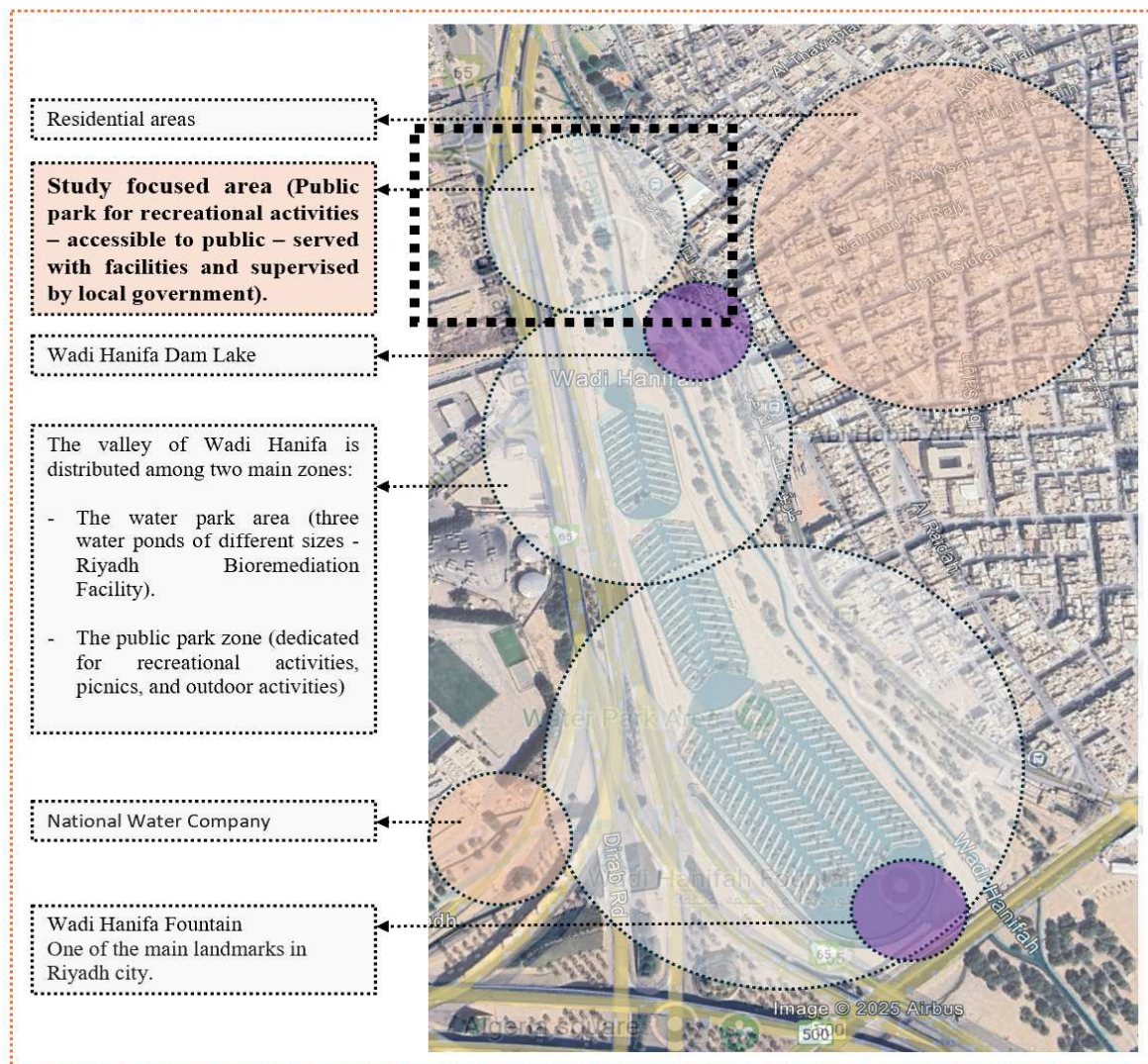


Figure 4: Wadi Hanifa – Source: Google Earth with Author's annotation

## 5.1 Wadi Hanifa existing conditions documentations and analysis

Documenting the existing conditions contributes a deeper understanding of the layout with insights into the facilities and functions. A layer of analysis has been added in the form of the Annotated maps and behavioural analysis, to explore the potential and determine its variables as an approach for developing a set of guidelines and framework for assessing urban equity in diverse public spaces, targeting further enhancement and improvement. The valley of Wadi Hanifa has One of the main landmarks in Riyadh city, which is the Wadi Hanifa Fountain, located directly before the water parks. The valley of Wadi Hanifa is distributed among two main zones: The water park area (three water ponds of different sizes – Riyadh



Bioremediation Facility), with direct connection to National Water Company, and The public park zone (dedicated for recreational activities, picnics, and outdoor activities). The study focuses on the northern zone of the valley, above the area of the Dam Lake. The area is designed as an urban space for public park and recreational area, where services are allocated, such as toilets and praying areas for both genders, in addition to barbecue area for outdoor cooking activities).

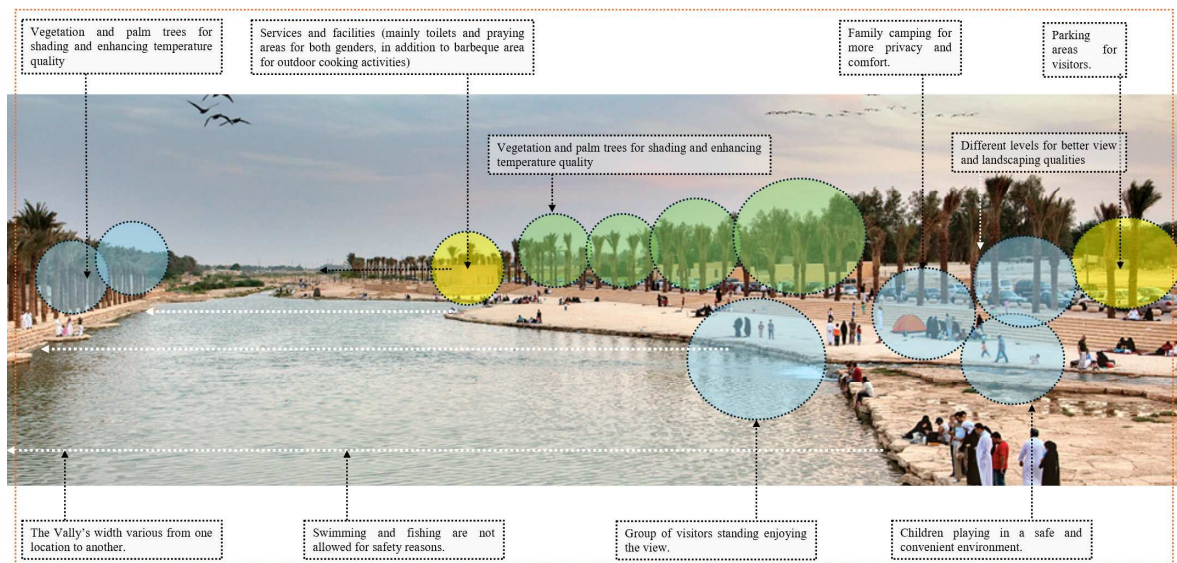


Figure 5: Wadi Hanifa – Source: Royal Commission for Riyadh City, <https://www.rcrc.gov.sa/en/projects/wadi-hanifah/> with author's annotation

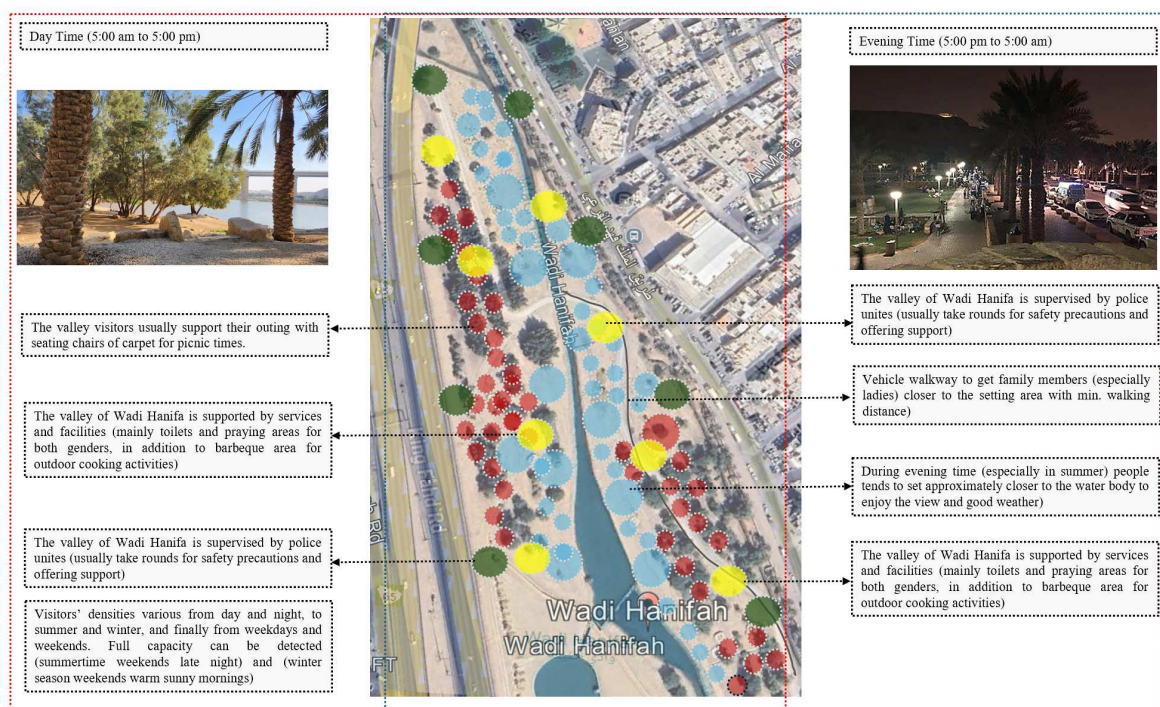


Figure 6: Wadi Hanifa – Source: Royal Commission for Riyadh City, <https://www.rcrc.gov.sa/en/projects/wadi-hanifah/> and Google Earth with author's annotation





Figure 7: Wadi Hanifa – Source: Author

## 6 DISCUSSION:

The research has investigated Wadi Hanifa as a case study to learn more about public spaces, and its resilience to accommodate various users from multiculture backgrounds. As per the case study documentation of the existing condition, the valley of Wadi Hanifa consists of two main zones: zone one, The water park area (Riyadh Bioremediation Facility) with direct connection to National Water Company, and zone two, the public park zone (dedicated for recreational events, picnics, and outdoor activities). The



research focuses on zone two, where the area is dedicated for public use as park and recreational space. It covered the northern part of the valley, above the area of the Dam Lake. The findings of this research demonstrate the important role of urban design is in the implementation of equity and justice in the use of public spaces, particularly in the growing cosmopolitan city of Riyadh. Studying the case of Wadi Hanifa in Riyadh, the analysis demonstrates how the space is capable of fostering cultural inclusiveness and overcome the challenges of multiculturalism. The semi-structured interviews conducted during field trips to Wadi Hanifa's public park zone (Zone Two) provided valuable insights into how this public space serves a multicultural platform for local community and visitors. The users' feedback stated that the Wadi serves as a public space that promote inclusive community to accommodate different cultural groups, support social cohesion and environmental sustainability. The public space of Wadi Hanifa integrates the specific needs of the multicultural community of Riyadh, the visitors stressed on the ability of the space to provide various amenities and facilities that meet various cultural practices, age, and gender specific needs. Also, they noticed that the design of the public space provides zones or like clusters which are enclosed within rock formations. The use of contextual natural materials promotes the sustainability approaches aligning with the vision 2030. In addition, the majority of women during the interviews focused on the importance of the clusters created to provide a semi-private spots for families especially women to enjoy some freedom, free of restrictions, without being visually exposed to others. Moreover, the space provides prayer areas and water closets for both genders, providing praying carpets, in the outdoor for men, and others in private rooms for ladies. Regarding other activities, the interviews spotted that the Wadi Hanifa visitors usually enjoy outdoor cooking within the picnic areas, using the pre-installed built-in barbeque unites. The space is designed to reflect a deep understanding of the cultural and social dynamics of the community. The direct access to such facilities is directly aligns with the principles of urban equity, which emphasize the fair distribution of resources and opportunities, so that everyone, regardless of their background, can access and benefit from Wadi Hanifa public amenities. The public spaces of Wadi Hanifa contributes to accommodate a wide range of activities, from walking and social gatherings to recreational activities and cultural expressions.

This adaptability ensures the public space design flexibility to be accessible to diverse user groups over time, raising a sense of belonging and mutual acceptance among individuals. This design flexibility can be clearly detected through features like pedestrian walkways, wheelchair-friendly pathways, and seating areas located strategically. These design qualities is emphasizing that the space is inclusive for all, including elderly and individuals with disabilities. This aligns with the core principle of the urban justice, and the right for everyone to enjoy the space freely, with equitable access to outdoor spaces and recreational facilities.

Wadi Hanifa usually hosts one of the important cultural events in Riyadh (the festival of Noor Riyadh: a group of art pieces created by light shades, shiny installations and illuminated pillars). Wadi Hanifah has been one of the significant spots of Noor Riyadh Festival, representing a unique dynamic hub for art and culture. These installations was designed and implemented by both international and Saudi artists. Where Wadi Hanifah has become a shared space for connection and culture interactions, encouraging the dialogue among different culture groups. They highlight the valley's unique role as a bridge between Riyadh's natural heritage and its evolving multiculture urbanism.

The Wadi Hanifa success in encouraging social cohesion proves the significance of urban design in developing the common platform to be accommodated by divers users. It promotes a sense of community. This is remarkably in a cosmopolitan city like Riyadh, where the population includes a combination of locals and expats from diverse cultural backgrounds.

## 7 CONCLUSION

Urban design contributes to fostering social equity and cultural diversity. The literature emphasizes the importance of urban design in promoting social cohesion, and enhancing the quality of life for diverse individuals. In terms of how urban design can address the challenges of multiculturalism, urban justice, and social equity in rapidly growing cosmopolitan cities. This research aims to study the role of urban design as a tool to enhance inclusive public spaces. Wadi Hanifa's documentation provides a valuable opportunity to explore these principles in practice, highlighting the potential of inclusive urban design to transform public spaces and promote social equity in rapidly developing cities. The semi-structured interviews showed a great integration between the multiculture users and the facilities that meet their requirements. The public spaces provide a pleasant environment with waterfront presence. Offering opportunities for multiple activities,

sufficient to accommodate all age groups and achieve urban inclusivity to all social and culture classes. The space is well designed with a flexibility to accommodate various activities over time, that changes from walking, playing, outdoor cooking, and social gathering activities. One main thing can be highlighted, that sense of nature integration between the multiculture communities to coexistence in harmony, where every group can express his culture freely and enjoy the space.

In conclusion, based on the literature review, the semi-structured interviews and the case study analysis, the research suggests that Wadi Hanifa has been successful in creating a welcoming and attractive environment that promotes a strong sense of place. The observations and annotated maps analysis indicate that Wadi Hanifa has the key factors to become a successful public space. As cities continue to evolve and diversify, the main outcome from Wadi Hanifa to collaborate efforts to create 'Cities for All' where everyone, regardless of their background, can live and flourish.

These results could be utilize in future studies to create recommendations for improving inclusivity in diversity-focused open space. A range of innovative tools could be considered to evaluate public open space inclusivity.

## 7.1 Limitations and Future Research

This research sheds light and gives valuable insights on the role of urban design in promoting urban equity, and how it can foster cultural inclusivity, however, there might be some limitations. The study focuses mostly on a single case study, which might restrict the generalization of the findings and its applicability to other spaces. Future research could benefit from examining multiple case studies across various cultural and contextual locations, to enrich the understanding of the phenomena. Moreover, the current study mainly utilize the qualitative methods, such as observation, semi-structured interviews and annotated maps. By integrating quantitative approaches, such as user surveys or statistical analyses, researchers could gain a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of equity, equality and justice in public spaces.

## 7.2 Declaration

During the preparation of this research, the author used plagiarism checker and Grammarly in order to check grammar and proof reading. After using this tool, the author reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

## 8 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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