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Modernity Reloaded: Architectural Practice and the Gulf Cities

Today's general perception of Gulf cities is based on the assumption of a futuristic vision, a visionary development and a cluster of hi-tech constructions of steel and glass reaching towards the sky.

Since oil was struck, this 'brave new world' has been a testing ground for experimental, risk-imbued architecture and real estate. The sudden affluence and ambition of the rulers to demonstrate progress and social advancement (sometimes expressed through outlandish 'iconic' designs) has certainly fired this drive. The building of cities seemed an appropriate culvert for the vast funds generated, turning what was once barren into a fertile land for real estate, as well as prioritising education, health and basic services such as water and electricity.

Furthermore, there is an ever-present sense of the 'tabula-rasa approach' that forced (or perhaps tempted) architects to pursue different and alternative design processes. Gulf cities seem to encourage the idea, if not always the reality, of being able to 'start again', to be re-made, re-imagined and re-modernised. There is a sense of being in an ever-present 'now', with 'historical' projects stretching back

Fig. 1
New and old constructions in Kuwait City from the Sawaber Housing Complex, by Arthur Ericson Associates, 1977-89, now demolished, Sharq, Kuwait (Photo by Iain Jackson, 2016)

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mere decades. Perhaps this desire to continually reinvent brought about shortcomings in early Modernist paradigms and the rapid rise of new social/cultural/artistic concepts (such as pop art/metabolism/structuralism/post-modernism/idiosyncratic etc.). Modernism as a tectonic and social task could not satisfy the urgency nor pace of change. To paraphrase Berman, Gulf cities did *melt into air*; they could not become solidified nor express a sense of permanence or completion, nor a solution that was satisfactory for more than a fleeting moment[1]. The quest to differentiate within the market seems a primary concern to seduce investors, tenants and customers and establish a brand expressed through form, space, materials and the very latest facilities.

These preliminary reflections offer an image of the Gulf as a fluid domain that challenged designers for several decades in the light of a central question: how do architects, planners and engineers operate in a place with a constantly changing context? How are ideas of history, tradition, memory and heritage constructed and expressed in this vortex of flux? It seems paradoxical to even raise these concerns and presumptuous that these things are even important at all. Yet they would appear to be meaningful because such qualities and values are repeatedly explored and discussed, and continue to be re-made and re-imagined within this elusive search for the ever-new.

In the second half of the 20th century, circumstantial conditions generated a series of experimental, utopian, sometimes unbuildable projects with a high level of idealisation. Some are renowned and garnered much exposure, such as Wright's proposal for Baghdad (discussed in further detail in this volume by Kubo) or Alison and Peter Smithson's Kuwait mat-building attempt that continues to resonate and incite discussion.[2] Many are still to be unearthed as they were shelved and never implemented or abandoned along the way, altered or quickly demolished to make way for something else.

In other cases, the region's specific constraints – such as limited material availability, narrow construction time and challenging climate – led architects, engineers and clients to original ideas, technologies and procurement methods with highly inventive and analytical processes. The concentration and fervour of this activity are surely unprecedented.

The notion of time, which we recalled in this collection's title, is crucial in defining the Gulf's construction paradigm. The need for speed, the urgency to achieve *modernity* in no time has been a common denominator of all the post-oil urban transformations. Newspapers and magazines for the general public always praised – and still praise – this quickness as the result of the natural inclination of the region towards audacity, dynamism and thirst for emerging. On the other hand, technical literature often depicted a less triumphant picture, especially in the early days. For instance, 'The paramount problem has been to

1 Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (London and New York: Verso, 1982).

2 See Mark Crinson, *Alison and Peter Smithson* (Swindon: Historic England, 2018).

build quickly', reported UNESCO consultant J. B. Barron as early as 1967.[3] Like many other invited consultants that travelled the region during the modernisation era, Barron attributed the poor construction to the rushed development programmes. On some occasions, the incessant pace not only affected the quality of construction but also impinged on the design phase. Architects and planners had to compromise data collection and analysis as these activities do not manifest tangible progress in the initial stages. In this framework, a specific workflow emerged as being more effective in the Gulf: the turnkey project. This formula packages all the construction stages in one contract, including survey, feasibility studies, design at different scales, engineering, services, tendering, construction supervision and testing. In other words, a system that promised – and often delivered – better control over time and costs. It also made clients and investors feel more comfortable dealing with one counterpart.

Consequently, from the mid-1970s onward, this shift engendered a specific type of consultants: large corporate firms such as SOM, Perkins and Wills or HOK, among others, conquered the market and secured most of the major commissions. Similarly, this system promoted collaborations with a series of state-led firms on the opposite side of the political spectrum. Agencies from the Soviet bloc, such as Energoprojekt, Miastoprojekt or Bulgarconsult, could also offer turnkey projects, tight schedules and competitive prices.[4] Smaller European firms, which initially designed tailored buildings for rulers and private investors, lost ground gradually in the big state-led transformation plans. This mechanism not only impacted international consultants but also made the emergence and consolidation of local architectural studios more difficult.

The omnipresent sense of urgency and the chronic scarcity of materials also shaped the territory that sits at the intersection between construction and design: architectural tectonics. During the 1960s and 1970s, due to the rapidly growing population and the vast liquidity generated by oil revenues, the Gulf cities embarked on unprecedented infrastructure plans. Not just housing but also headquarters of ministries, public buildings, power plants, office towers and hotels. For instance, in 1965 Kuwait launched a plan to build 100 school buildings in five years to accommodate a population of students that doubled over the previous decade.[5] Such operations could not be afforded without reconsidering the entire supply chain of building construction. The Gulf has a very limited amount – if any – of usable construction materials. Even desert sand cannot be used in concrete aggregate as it is too fine to generate the necessary chemical linkages. While importing all the necessary means was the norm in previous times, the large transformation programmes of the modernisation era were simply too vast to make shipments economically viable. Time, material

3 J.B. Barron, *Kuwait. The Design of Schools and Related Problems* (Paris: UNESCO Report, 1967), p. 10.

4 See Łukasz Stanek, *Architecture in Global Socialism, Eastern Europe, West Africa, and the Middle East in the Cold War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020).

5 See Roberto Fabbri, "Prototype Spaces for Education: Pedagogy, school planning, standardisation and prefabrication in Kuwait's drive to modernity" in Camacho R., Saragoça A. and Fabbri R. (eds.), *Essay, Arguments and Interviews on Modern Architecture Kuwait*, (Salenstein, CH: Niggli Verlag, 2017).

constraints and the vast quantities needed established prefabrication as the new common practice. With prefabrication came standardisation. With standardisation came repetitive types reiterated everywhere in the new satellite neighbourhoods and the transformed city centres. The buildings became rigid boxes, aligned next to each other like concrete curtains running alongside the new roads. So cold and hard-edged that they triggered the perception of being alien to the local environment.

To mitigate this impact, architects felt the necessity to introduce decorative patterns into the facades. Prefabricated panels, often detached as a building's second skins, aimed to protect against the harsh weather and offered the opportunity to experiment with shadows, rebalance the relationship between solids and voids, reintroduce three-dimensionality into flat surfaces and allude to traditional architecture.

For this reason, modern architecture in the Gulf seems somehow different for sporting an urge for negotiating the local context. It has a seemingly contrarian approach of 'starting again' whilst also 'flirting' with so-called traditional (and sometimes fabricated, imagined or appropriated) elements of locality, such as geometrical motifs, shapes, textures or colour palette. In part, this is an expression of the Orientalist fantasy of the Middle East, and yet the liberal application of decoration, patterns and applied ornamentation requires careful examination, especially when it is so diligently applied or grafted onto forms and arrangements that are more generally associated with a more austere modernist agenda (see Chomowicz's essay on Doha).

Within the confines of a journal introductory essay, we cannot adequately cover the political, geographical and cultural contexts of this diverse and complex region. With some caution, deliberate provocation and being well-aware of the sensitive terminology, we tentatively called this edition 'Impatient Cities of the Gulf'. We showed no preference for which side of the Gulf the Journal issue might focus on, nor the problems of its toponymy. Recent scholarship (including most of the papers presented here) has tended to focus on the Western bank, or the so-called 'Arab Peninsula', undoubtedly a reflection of the scale of architectural production there, as well as a direct result of the political situation in Iran and the limitations on scholarship.[6] The intention is not to restrict, isolate or remove the intriguing and valid attempts to bridge the Gulf from the discussion. We are eager for more research to address this void and deeply aware of the sensitivities involved. We were somewhat surprised to receive email correspondence questioning our approach:

"Our book importantly included Iran within the discussion of the region, which your journal issue seems to omit entirely with its talk of the 'Arab

6 Although some excellent research is certainly changing this, including Talin Grigor, *Building Iran: Modernism, Architecture, and National Heritage under the Pahlavi Monarchs* (New York: Periscope, 2009).

peninsula'. We wanted to get away from Western-derived cliches which your blurb [sic; *call for papers*] appears intent on returning to"[7].

All credit is due to Fraser and Golzari in their noble and innovative quest, and indeed any divide between both 'sides' is entirely artificial and in part a product of Western political interference. Nonetheless, there *is* a crucial difference, and despite the two shorelines being only 56 km apart at the narrowest point, they are now worlds apart. This is not a Western cliché, it is clearly evident today in the built fabric, economies and political agenda, and this attracted our attention. Historically there may have been greater exchange and intercourse across the Gulf – it may even have been what Fraser and Golzari claim to be a 'singular entity', and this should be investigated – but this certainly is not the case today. Fraser and Golzari also chose to omit Iraq from their important study, whereas we are delighted to include articles that focus on Iraq and its contribution to the broader debate. The planning of Basra, its elegant port buildings, innovative airport and subsequent expansion are a subject worthy of study. It is not the length of the coast that determines significance here, but rather what happens there (as Tosland discusses in the planning of the Ubullah Neighbourhood plan, and also the wider flow of ideas explored by Kubo on The Architects Collaborative in Baghdad and elsewhere as revealed by Alshabib et al.). Exchanges and dialogue that operate transnationally are crucial here. Yet the discrete focus on individual cities denies this opportunity for a broader investigation, although through the work of firms such as The Architects Collaborative we can begin to see networks, school influences and collaborative approaches to projects across the region. Future scholarship must surely begin to investigate these flows and multiagency tactics more carefully, and this will undoubtedly lead to a 'decentring' of the architect in the story of the built environment, with greater emphasis placed on the role of contractors, developers, clients and political agencies. This will not lessen the need for more careful research into 'local' architectural firms (some of whom are beginning to commission publications such as *Pan-Arab Modernism 1968-2018*[8], or are receiving new attention such as DAR here by Alkanderi), but it will require careful questioning of current 'archive' and 'source' material. The archival material available is clearly recording a particular and narrow set of data produced by a distinct, powerful minority. This repository of material, whilst useful and relevant, must be questioned and treated with scepticism.[9] It needs to be supplemented by more data from a much broader set of voices. This will require new repositories to be formed and platforms where discussion can take place, including in journals like this one.

We have made an attempt here to attract new voices, we have given precedent to early career researchers (5 out of 8 papers are from early career researchers), and agreed to include papers that might not be readily sanctioned in the upper

7 Email excerpt from Murray Fraser to Roberto and Iain, 19th August 2020.

8 Ricardo Camacho, Dalal Musaed Alsayer, Sara Saragoça Soares, *Pan-Arab Modernism 1968-2018: The history of architectural practice in the Middle East* (Barcelona: Actar Publishers, 2021).

9 Laura Ann Stoler, *Along the archival grain: epistemic anxieties and colonial common sense* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009).

echelons of the academic press. That said, we are confident that some significant contributions are being made here, not to mention considerable scope for further studies that investigate the networks, flows and what Avermaete and Nuijsink call 'contact zones'.[10]

The Gulf region is undoubtedly a fascinating place for this concept to be further studied. As Fraser and Golzari rightly note, this does not equate to something as crude as a 'clash of civilisations', but instead a complex place of encounter, exchange, negotiation and dialogue. The common currency is to convert this vast oil-wealth into the problem of city-making, with all of its dilemmas, contradictions and opportunities. Who gets to direct these operations, and with what consequences? Who features in these cities and who remains firmly on the outside, or even hidden within? Who determines what is built, maintained, repaired and demolished? What is the ambition of the client body, and who is to provide the technical expression of this desire? It would be easy to condemn and highlight inequality here (especially in terms of labour, migration and health and safety). However, there must also be recognition of the social infrastructure – the investment into housing, education projects and healthcare provision has been extraordinary and reveals the tussle of power and priorities.

Global Experts Cultivating Local Knowledge

The commissioning of 'global experts' is a familiar and common feature of the Gulf city. from From the moment oil was discovered consultants from outside the region were commissioned to produce schemes ranging from entire cities and vast infrastructure projects down to individual intimate villas (starting with Wilson Mason in Iran, Jane Drew in Kuwait[11] and the Aramco housing that Alshabib discusses here). Others were less known and developed a 'specialisation' in the Gulf city, practising almost exclusively in the region with very little if any recognition elsewhere. They were featured in specialised journals devoted to the region (such as *Middle East Construction*) and cultivated strong collaborative networks within this sphere.

Recently returned graduates, a growing art scene and a broader political desire also cultivated a desire to bring the world's most prominent architects to the region, especially in Iraq.[12] Kubo's article sets out two such cases dating back to 1950s Baghdad, each with an opposing methodological approach. Here we see the vision of the sole genius artist, played by Frank Lloyd Wright, and an alternative collaborative ensemble under the direction of Walter Gropius. Although

10 Tom Avermaete, Cathelijne Nuijsink, "Architectural Contact Zones: Another Way to Write Global Histories of the Post-War Period?", *Architectural Theory Review* (July 2021), DOI: 10.1080/13264826.2021.1939745.

11 See Mark Crinson, *Modern Architecture and the End of Empire* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002); Mark Crinson, and Iain Jackson and Jessica Holland, *The Architecture and Influence of E. Maxwell Fry and Jane B. Drew* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014).

12 See Amin Alsaden, *Conceiving the Global: Crises, Encounters, and Architecture in Baghdad*, 1955-1965. Doctoral dissertation, Harvard University, Graduate School of Arts & Sciences, 2018; Caecilia Pieri, *Bagdad. La construction d'une capitale moderne* (1914-1960), (Beirut and Damascus: Presses de l'ifpo, 2015); Mina Marifat, Caecilia Pieri, *Le Corbusier. Gymnasium in Baghdad* (Paris: Editions du Patrimoine, Centre des monuments nationaux, 2014).

tempting to caricature Wright and his sycophantic relationship with the Iraqi monarchy, it was a model that was widely used, with the world's growing list of internationally renowned and famous architects recruited to dramatically shape the region. A variation on this theme was the Gropius approach. Trading on his global fame, collaborations were formed with local architects and designers who would take responsibility for the design execution and brokering more sensitive 'on-the-ground' discussions. Tosland sets out a third, if less popular method of global practice from that period, one of immersion and research. Max Lock's approach of careful observation, documentation, study and learning from the existing context resulted in some fascinating and rather sensitive design solutions for Basra and its environs. Unlike the top-down masterplanning presented by Spencely, Minoprio and MacFarlane at Kuwait and Baghdad, or Raglan Squire at Mosul, Lock's solution could be considered as more sociological and sensitive to the traditional built environment. This approach attempted to integrate and respond to the climatic conditions, construction techniques and planning concerns. James Wilson pursued a similar approach in his archaeological studies in Baghdad, but for Lock it was more a sociological study than one of surveying ancient ruins. Wilson utilised his studies to absorb an architectural language, but for Lock it was more of an anthropological exercise supplemented with a series of detailed drawing studies and documentary work. Lock's work was aligned with the Doxiadis *Ekistics* model and was more interested in designing spaces such as 'gossip' squares and gathering spaces than decorative patterns and 'language'. Lock's desire to be experientially submerged and *part* of the environment gave his designs a more nuanced feel, but it inevitably represented the Middle East as somehow being behind and out of step with the avant-garde. There was a conceptual dilemma of wanting to fit in and contribute to the slow gestation of city-making, whilst at the same time eagerly trying to do what Chakrabarty describes as catching up with the now[13].

Many *local* architects and planners were also acutely aware of the context and historical environment, and following their education in the West began to quickly document and take creative influence from these works. The American University at Beirut was a particularly fertile institution for incubating new talent and collaborative practice, as Alkanderi's account of Dar al-Handasah reveals. Mohamad Makiya's interest in the villages of Iraq followed his overseas studies[14] and is a further example of this reassessment and subsequent documentation of the vernacular that was then re-imagined in new solutions. George Shiber was also important in this regard, and his appreciation of Kuwait's historic core sets out a broad cultural appraisal and recognition of the architectural qualities and values that we would now term heritage.[15] Shiber's caustic response to the

13 Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincialising Europe: Postcolonial thought and historical difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).

14 Karen Dabrowska, *Mohamed Makiya: A Modern Architect Renewing Islamic Tradition* (London: Saqi Books, 2021).

15 Saba George Shiber, *The Kuwait Urbanization. Documentation, Analysis, Critique* (Kuwait: Government Press, 1964).

destruction of Kuwait's old town remains pertinent today, but all too often the response is to make a token gesture towards heritage and design tradition. In the rush to build and rapidly propel change, much has been lost or treated with less reverence than was deserved.

Whilst there has been little restraint in terms of preservation, the developers and governments of the Middle East have invested heavily in architecture and the built environment. In commissioning and procuring these cities, infrastructure and buildings, they have produced a rich collection and unrivalled ensemble. This is often overlooked, and as pioneers and risk-takers there will inevitably be mistakes and ventures that seem misguided (and even negligent) in hindsight. This bravery (or irreverence) has in places also been rewarded, and as this modern architecture reaches a certain maturity, it too has begun to form a rich and enviable contingent.

New Towns and Neighbourhoods

John Harris was being hyperbolic when he suggested that 'There is something ridiculous about a thirty-storey Islamic tower'.[16] The problem facing Harris was how to address ideas of decoration and tradition and how to increase the scale of construction. 'The punch', claimed *Middle East Construction*, 'derives from a careful balance of solid and void, controlled areas of detail and from the celebration of such functional items as access balconies or wind tower ventilators. Nothing that does not have a purpose.'[17] TAC followed similar principles, delivering an architecture that, although somewhat stark and restrained, generated a language that seemed to speak of newness and difference whilst nestling within the landscape. Others pursued solutions with more overt references to the vernacular settlements, such as the new town of Jahra, Kuwait, designed by Michael Lyell Associates in 1979. This project was important because of its attempt to re-make or rethink the vernacular settlement in a similar vein to the Max Lock approach. Whilst on first impressions it could be accused of pastiche mimicry, it sought to create homes that would foster community and belonging. It was a reaction against acontextual form-making. However, it was far from nostalgic or attempting to recreate a bygone time. For example, 'bushwhacked' concrete facades and 'mixed-use' types were adventurous solutions. Hanley's article on other projects in Saudi Arabia reveals a similar approach in low-rise high-density housing with innovative landscaping. These projects were precursors to more recent developments in Msheireb, Qatar, that Chomowicz discusses here.

The Msheireb development is an attempt to create a 'downtown', mixed-use, sustainable city district with low-key architecture and close attention to the streetscape and public spaces. Of course, it has the now ubiquitous museums

16 *Middle East Construction* (December 1984), 33.

17 *Middle East Construction*, 33.

and carefully placed cultural 'anchors', and even its own tram system. Even if it has the hallmarks of simulacrum and feels too pristine, surely it is a more considered response to creating a place to live and work in. The quest for increasingly unusual tower gimmicks, structural contortions or figurative gestures is being called into question here. Msheireb should not be mistaken for preservation or allegiance to retaining a historic core. Rather, it is the replication of a familiar pattern and seems to offer a solution to urban planning and architectural form that responds to both the popular imagination of the Middle East and the desire for the old, densely arranged, serendipitous city.

Of course, this kind of venture will only work if it can be sold. If it lacks the glamour of a tower, it does not lack influential friends. The endorsement of this project is bestowed from the highest level. Royal approval suggests this particular approach is preferred, and in a society with a 'top-down' approach to governance, this provides a clear orientation of what is expected of future projects. It also brings us to the role of the client, promoter, developer and media. These are often hidden or background players in the architectural realm, yet their significance and presence cannot be denied. The notion of the architect as the sole creative agent or the primary author is being firmly challenged, as well as directed. The developer's brief and expectations are explicitly discharged to the architect to deliver. The architect is tasked with creating a suitable vessel that will satisfy these demands as well as giving the project a form and/or facade that can communicate a narrative or sense of meaning. This could be through technological innovation (and architects are becoming more conscious of their ability to contribute in meaningful ways here) but is more likely to be from a reference to precedent, ornament, or, as in this case, a district-wide response. Could Msheireb's commitment to sustainability offer a more appropriate approach to development, as well as being better suited for adaptive reuse and retrofitting?

Housing and Enviro-tech

Hanly's article offers a position that needs further investigation and presents a picture of the Gulf that is rarely discussed and has not featured as prominently as it should. The stories of Jubail and Yanbu are fascinating. Located on each coast, they were built to handle the transportation of oil that flows from the eastern coast in Jubail and ends on the western coast at Yanbu, ready to be shipped elsewhere. TAC, again featured as part of the narrative, alongside civil engineers and petro-chemical industry clients. This approach to a wider historiography of city-making is to be commended, not least because it discusses the collaborative and multi-designer-maker approach required to produce such large and complex *system-object-environments*. The outcome of this project is equally intriguing because the quest was to rebuild this arid, parched environment so that it could be cultivated and become a lush garden of 'desert-resistant' flora and fauna. This was not a simple irrigation installation, but a highly enviro-technical resculpting of the earth's surface on an almost unimaginable scale. This Edenic

'garden city' included carefully choreographed and rather beautiful housing with clean geometric forms suitably arranged to appear informal and accidental, whilst birds and wildlife also took up residence in the ample gardens and landscape. They form part of the Company Town pattern so familiar throughout the Gulf, but appearing very different to the hierarchical solutions of Kuwait Oil Company's Ahmadi, for example. Whilst giving the impression of being 'natural', they completely replace what was an actual wilderness. To maintain this fabricated even-better-than-the-real-thing-nature, the soil samples are monitored, air quality is analysed and botanical specimens are slowly acclimatised to their new homes after being tended to in what looks like a medical-grade facility or laboratory. Meanwhile, the *real* natural resources of the Earth are being piped beneath the city and across the desert to the coast, or refined into petrol and plastics a short but carefully calculated distance away from the city to avoid pollution or accidental contamination. There is something deeply appealing about these projects, because the pursuit of utopia is always attractive and innocent. Part of the attractiveness lies in the extreme but flawed attempt to achieve the goal. Its message is one of hope, betterment and that *everything* will be well. It feels optimistic and hopeful (and for sure, the quality of life appears enviable), yet behind the entire project, including its procurement and execution, is something so fundamentally detrimental to our environment. Whilst the intention to provide a good quality of life was admirable, the result was rather naïve and even manipulative, especially as the next stage in the highly curated process was to develop fertiliser industries to enable the plants to survive and to aid mass food production.

The architecture of the Gulf has always been provocative, and its extreme (i.e. courageous) plans and buildings make it an obvious and somewhat easy target for pithy critique and harsh rebuke. It is a place where innovation, experimentation and a desire to test and play have resulted in some major design provocation and astonishing solutions. The pace of the work and the ability to create entire cities in little more than 50 years is testament to the vision and determination, as well as a commentary on wealth concentration and the ability to recruit a large overseas labour force. The question now is will the funds gathered from oil be sufficient to maintain a progressive state, and will the various attempts at diversification be sufficient? The transport hub and attractive conditions for trade have certainly helped the UAE and Qatar to exercise some dominance here, and with the potential to 'work from anywhere' model being a real possibility for many, perhaps they will attract a workforce drawn to its lifestyle and business potential. Of greater importance is whether alternative energy sources and building technologies can be developed in this innovative incubator-theatre that could provide a 'total architecture' zero-carbon model for our future cities.