



REVIEW OF

The New Arab Urban: Gulf Cities of Wealth, Ambition, and Distress

Edited by Harvey Molotch and Davide Ponzini

Cover Photo by Michele Nastasi. Design by Adam B. Bohannon.

Critics, History, Architecture, History of the Critics

/Abstract

In this volume, editors Harvey Molotch and Davide Ponzini take a decidedly different approach to the analysis of Gulf cities to show that what is happening in the United Arab Emirates and Qatar is not so abnormal and is more indicative of emerging trends in urbanization than what first meets the eye. Organized under four thematic sections, the volume brings together a wide-array of essays, generated by a diverse group of scholars from a numerous disciplines including architecture, architectural history, urban planning, area studies, political science, sociology, geography, and art. Taking cues from Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour's well-known book, *Learning from Las Vegas* (1972), this volume situates Gulf cities within the transnational contexts of colonialism, globalization, neo-liberalism, and emergent trends of human and capital migration.

/Author

Burak Erdim
North Carolina State University
berdim@ncsu.edu

Burak Erdim is an associate professor of architectural history at North Carolina State University. His research examines the work of transnational planning cultures and his recent book, *Landed Internationals: Planning Cultures, the Academy, and the Making of the Modern Middle East* was published by the University of Texas press in 2020.



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Cities in the Gulf have seen some of the most extensive building and urban transformation projects of at least the last twenty to thirty years. The making of projects such as Burj Khalifa in Dubai, Masdar City, or the New York University (NYU) Campus in Abu Dhabi

involve a wide array of multinational institutions, investors, and professionals. Furthermore, these developments have taken place within contexts of boom and bust, wars, and political upheavals in the larger region. Yet, the formation of cities such as Abu Dhabi, Dubai, or Doha have received relatively little attention. Much of what exists treat Gulf cities as anomalous developments shaped by oil wealth and the autocratic regimes of the region. In this volume, taking cues from Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour's well-known book, *Learning from Las Vegas* (1972), Harvey Molotch and Davide Ponzini take a decidedly different approach to show that what is happening in the Gulf is not so abnormal and, in fact, is more indicative of emerging trends in urbanization than what first meets the eye.

The essays in this book are organized under four thematic sections which also identify the primary analytical frameworks contained in the volume. The first section, "The Gulf as Transnational," aims to dispel perceptions of the Gulf as a regional anomaly and provides the underpinnings of the theoretical positions proposed by the editors in the introduction. In the opening essay titled, "Giving the Transnational a History," Alex Boodrookas and Arang Keshavarzian exposes the historical and ongoing orientalisms through which the Gulf has been framed, "as a region somehow exempt from the structural constraints of empire and capital" (35). Instead, as a way to foreground the essays in the volume and to "de-exceptionalize Gulf cities" (38), they draw attention to key strands in recent literature on the region that illustrate, "... the translocal processes that manufactured these cities as 'global' objects... with particular local and historical circumstances," (38) that both produce and challenge binary categories between citizen and noncitizen, resident and migrant, nomadic and urban. The authors then provide a transnational history of urban fragmentation in the region from the nineteenth century to the present, through a survey of recent literature and research. In the second chapter titled, "Problematizing a Regional Context," Amale Andraos interrogates the production and representation of the dichotomous categories of "local" and "global," "traditional" and "modern" through an examination of a number of architectural and urban projects, exhibitions, and archives supported and organized through collaborations between local and international firms and benefactors. The essay examines an impressively large number of case studies that include, to list only a few, Burj Al Arab Hotel in Dubai and the Louvre Abu Dhabi; the Arab Image Foundation (AIF) and the Arab Center for Architecture (ACA); and Solidere, the reconstruction of downtown Beirut. Through this valuably broad outlook, Andraos surveys the meanings and experiences produced against the background of British imperialism and postcolonial frameworks. Davide Ponzini's essay, "Mobilities of Urban Spectacle," is an excellent sequel to Andraos's analysis, as it not only adds to

the pool of significant urban and architectural projects carried out in the Gulf, but also examines them within a context of other development projects from around the world, often carried out by the same parent company based in the Gulf. Through case studies such as Qatar Investment Authority (QIA) or Dubai-based Emaar, the essay explores how such semi-public/semi-private entities are now implementing the development models carried out in over twenty countries including Turkey, Montenegro, Malaysia, England, and the United States. Among the specific projects that the essay explores are QIA's Shard in London and the UniCredit Tower in Milan.

Michele Nastasi's essay, "A Gulf of Images," opens the second section of the book, titled, "Assembling Hybrid Cities," but it is also a great sequel to discussions of transmissions of urban spectacle in the previous section. The essay interrogates the typical architectural image of iconic buildings in the Gulf devoid of people and specific context. Especially in contexts where the contrast between the architectural edifice and the surrounding urban landscape is great, it shows how the architectural photograph works to position cities such as Dubai or Abu Dhabi among other global cities, minus the differences in social and economic contexts, thus discounting their significance in determining the ways these rhetorical objects speak. In the second essay of this section titled, "Planning for the Hybrid Gulf City," Laura Lieto provides a candid account of her experience working as a "Western" expert in the planning of the center of Jubail City, in Saudi Arabia. One of the central ironies that Lieto's essay brings forward is the European experts' countering of the Saudi Government's requests to conceptualize this space as a European plaza with arguments to shape it around traditional forms of the *souk*. Setting the legitimacy of European experts' concerns regarding climate and sustainability to one side, Lieto cleverly foregrounds the topic of the essay with a discussion of the orientaling myths about the traditional forms of the so-called orient while drawing attention to the limits of planning practice in transcending preconceived forms, identities, and imagery. Hybridity emerges as a quasi-strategy for avoiding pastiche and addressing pertinent issues of sustainability. These questions spill over to the last essay of this section, where Hillary Ballon (for whom the volume is dedicated) chronicles the planning and construction of one of the most comprehensive examples of a new paradigm in the globalization of higher learning: New York University's Abu Dhabi Campus (NYUAD). Ballon, who was also directly involved in the planning of the project, provides a matter of fact account of the basic components of the project (from its beginnings with the personal relationship between Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed al Nayhan, the crown prince of Abu Dhabi and NYU president John Sexton to its design process, including site selection and the configuration of design ideas, such as sustainability, density, and walkability, associated with a modern campus) while also bringing attention to the conceptualizations of hybridity represented in the project. Ballon notes, quoting Rafael Vinoli, the project architect, that the Campus was designed as a "New Village, neither replicating the image of the traditional Islamic neighborhood, nor the character of

Greenwich Village (NYU's New York location), but instead an amalgam of both, as a metaphor for the central idea of the institution" (170).

In the third section of the volume, three essays explore how components of Gulf cities act as, "Urban Test Beds for Export." Mina Akhavan opens this section with a tour de force essay that examines Dubai as a completely new type of port city, the likeness of which is not found in the West. Emerging simultaneously with containerization and megaships and capitalizing on ideas of free trade zones and transnational infrastructure of transshipping, Akhavan traces the coming of age of the Dubai port city model. Comprised of mega shipping ports and airports, Dubai somehow thrives without connections to bases of resource extraction, agricultural hinterland or a manufacturing plant. Gökçe Günel, in, "Exporting the Spaceship: The Connected Isolation of Masdar City," explores the contradictions of an experimental sustainable city built in complete isolation from its social, political, and economic contexts. Framing her analysis against the historical and theoretical backgrounds of Buckminster Fuller's, *Operating Manual for Spaceship Earth* (1969) and Timothy Mitchel's, *Carbon Democracy* (2013), Günel explores whether Masdar city and institute, MIT's technology and development program, is a spaceship or a lifeboat in the desert, as it ultimately seeks a sustainable future in the Gulf. Sarah Moser's account of Cityquest forum, held each winter since 2013 in King Abdullah Economic City (KAEC) concludes this section. It examines how this annual meeting of invited elites sponsored and led by Saudi elites, including Fahd Al-Rasheed, CEO of KAEC and a number of other Saudi development corporations operating in different parts of the world. Moser provides an up-close analysis of how Cityquest, "normalizes neo-liberal assumptions of urban development" (226), while it also positions Saudi Arabia as a new expert within a global network of new planned cities.

Yasser Elsheshtawy's essay, "Real Estate Speculation and Transnational Development in Dubai," opens the last section of the book titled, "Audacity, Work-Arounds, and Spatial Segmentation." Here Elsheshtawy provides a brief but excellent prehistory of planning in Dubai from the postwar period to the present. In an alternate organization of the volume, this essay could appear earlier in the book to examine John Harris's master plan (1959-71) and how it contrasts with the way the city and its skyline looks today, as a result of the Dubai Structural Plan (1995) and the 2020 Urban Master Plan. However, the essay's focus is not on the master plans, but on how they impact the older, and in this case, the postwar urban fabric of the city, in and around the low-rise district of Satwa. From this pedestrian view, low to middle class citizens of the city become visible for the first time in the volume, set against the high-rises of the city now in the background. In "Consuming Abu Dhabi," Harvey Molotch examines the culture of consumption in the Gulf in relation to the region's social and political structure. Borrowing Neha Vora's term, "consumer citizenship" (257) Molotch shows how power, dissent, and belonging are negotiated through a "monarchical social contract," where conformism is rewarded by access to franchises and degrees of conspicuous consumption. Businesses, travel, cars, houses, and apartments

act as bargaining chips for consolidating alliances and establishing hierarchies among constituents. “Shopping remains a craft – an avenue of human agency especially relevant in contexts where birth so influences status” (258), writes Molotch, also drawing attention to the work-arounds that are there to include or exclude non-citizen factions based on their consumption status. In the last essay of the volume, “A Quest for Significance,” Steffen Hertog brings forward the question that has been brewing beneath the surface of all the essays. Identifying the primary categories under which many of these, “soft-power projects” fall, Hertog explore the question of why the Gulf’s, “most daring and visible projects cater to Western-defined “liberal” international norms and tastes” (277).

In a concluding chapter, the editors reassess and highlight the findings of the essays for possible take-aways. Overall this is a tour-de-force collection that brings together studies from a particularly diverse group of university administrators, professionals, and scholars representing a wide array of disciplines including architecture, architectural history, urban planning, area studies, political science, sociology, geography, and art. So much so that one can’t help but wonder if the book, *Learning from Las Vegas*, that the editors put forward as an inspiration to this one, gives the wrong prelude to a volume of substantial depth and breadth. A classic in its own right, *Learning from Las Vegas*, was, by comparison, limited in its scope and didn’t really explore the variety of frameworks through which the commercial strip can be made truly legible. By contrast, the essays in this volume ask a wide range of questions about Gulf cities and show how they are far from temporary and anomalous products of oil monarchies and wealth. Therefore, one particular way the Las Vegas book resonates through this volume is that, similar to the way it brought attention to the commercial strip, this volume is a call to heed the Gulf cities as they are one of the most robust products of global finance and they serve as a model for other cities around the world.