

Urban Traditions in the Contemporary Lived Space of Cities on the Arabian Peninsula

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This article aims to answer the question “Whose tradition?” in relation to the contemporary architecture and urbanism of the Arabian Peninsula. It first contextualizes tradition in the region within the geocultural politics of the Arab World and identifies key factors that shaped its traditional settlements, including tribal governance, social systems, building materials, and construction techniques. The article then contends that the region’s urban traditions have been transformed from ones shaped by common people to ones shaped by the elite, in which the role of rulers is heavily emphasized. To explore this view, it analyzes two representative scenes in the contemporary urban lived space of the region, using examples from Dubai and Doha. These are articulated in terms of the emergence of elite enterprises, persistent patterns of social and ethnic segregation, and a continuing struggle to construct identity. Conclusions drawn from the discussion delineate key answers to the question “Whose tradition?” But a framework of examination is also introduced that emphasizes that lived space and the traditions that ensue from it cannot be seen in isolation from other types of space — such as conceived and perceived space. There needs to be a new cycle of knowledge production about cities in the region that integrates concern for all three (lived, conceived and perceived space) to better understand its traditions.

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Cities on the Arabian Peninsula are currently experiencing a series of changes that reflect a spectrum of intents and attitudes. What is now a rapidly emerging global region was just a few decades ago a series of oasis settlements, fishing hamlets, and small port

settlements. Relationships between rulers and ruled have also changed in recent decades to produce highly asymmetric power structures. From a tradition of people making common decisions about their environments under tribal leadership, the region has now embraced the logic of the “modern state,” in which organizing bodies are granted legal authority to represent the will of the people. The state now claims the right to intervene in most aspects of people’s lives.¹

Guided by these principles, the region also finds itself in the midst of an ongoing effort to reposition itself on the map of international architecture and urbanism. Contemporary urban projects express different qualities in terms of economy, environment, culture, and global outlook. In part, this is a reaction to global conditions, as national development strategies reflect concerned and concerted effort to promote economic diversification. Since the beginning of the new millennium, all Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries have actively sought to develop and promote oil- and gas-independent economies through new emphases on sectors such as trade, finance, tourism, sport and culture.

These efforts have brought new qualities to the cities of the Peninsula. Dominant urban traditions of the past have already been altered, and new traditions are emerging that require different types of conceptualization, contextualization, and rigorous investigation.

TRADITION WITHIN THE GEOCULTURAL POLITICS OF THE ARABIAN PENINSULA

Within the context of geocultural politics, an amalgam of influences underlies the development of cities on the Arabian Peninsula. However, among the most prominent historic influences are Mediterraneanism, Middle Easternism, Pan-Arabism, and Islamism. Being constructs that serve political and ideological ends, these influences also have important heuristic value, posing questions of meaning, identity, and the sharing of urban and existential values at a regional scale.

Mediterraneanism is present in the region as a result of its strong ties with the governmental, cultural and religious institutions of the Levant and the greater Mediterranean basin. Threads of Mediterraneanism have been woven and intertwined on the Peninsula through centuries of trade and cultural exchange, and actually constituted an earlier form of globalization (albeit on a much smaller scale than that of today). These centuries-old connections have substantially influenced political and cultural models evident on the Peninsula.

In the latter part of the twentieth century, however, these influences were challenged by Pan-Arabism. A secular ideology, Pan-Arabism aimed to constitute a single Arab-Islamic nation comprised of different societies, from the Atlantic Ocean to the Arabian Sea, linked by common linguistic, cultural and religious practices and a shared heritage.

More recently, Pan-Arabism itself has been largely displaced by the revivalist ideology of Islamism. Its influence may be seen as arising from the rigid ideologies of contemporary Iran, the conservatism flowing from Saudi Arabia (the heartland of the Peninsula), and even recent and controversial Islamist movements.

In larger debates over cultural politics, it would likewise appear that Mediterraneanism has taken a back seat to other forces and institutions, such as the Arab League, the European Union, and Middle Easternism. In Europe, debates on the Mediterranean now manifest two conflicting attitudes — one perceiving it to be a bridge in terms of history and culture, the other as a line of division. The first refutes Samuel Huntington’s thesis of a “clash of civilizations.”² The second reflects a growing fortress mentality in the ongoing conflict between North and South. Indeed, the latter appears to have only one interest — closing frontiers against the culture of the South for political purposes.

It is in this context that scholars have called for a rebuilding of the Euro-Arab partnership. And it was thus that Middle Easternism was introduced to the world community in the 1950s as a way for the region to be more inclusive and accommodating of non-Arab countries.

Mediterraneanism and Middle Easternism have been described as conflicting partnership models. They have, however, several common features. Both seek to include partners with polar differences. In the context of globalization (one of whose main characteristics is the downfall of barriers between regions and societies), they propose that none of these partners can ignore the others.³ On the other hand, some voices from poorer Arab nations now claim that the globalization paradigm has run its course. They argue that local problems — exemplified by economic hardship, poverty, and political instability — have proven stronger than the unrealized potential of global connectedness. Other voices from oil- and gas-based economies, however, have been more receptive, recognizing the positive impact of globalization on urbanism and development.

Pan-Arabism, as an ideology, was introduced in the late 1920s by Michel Aflaq. But it was championed most successfully by the former Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser. Nasser argued that the Arab World could be rejuvenated through political union, and he capitalized on the anti-imperialist sentiment of the 1950s to encourage a program of modernization and secularization.⁴ This program, however, was resisted by Muslim traditionalists, and it suffered a serious blow following the “Arab defeat” in the Six-Day War of 1967. The rise of Islamism has since offered an alternative. But it, too, has been challenged by “nationalist particularism,” which has become the norm in most Arab countries since the late 1970s.

Cultural politics in recent years have had a significant impact on development, architecture and urbanism. Thus, although Mediterraneanism, Middle Easternism, Pan-Ara-

bism, and Islamism are constructs that primarily serve political ends, they also bring into focus questions of collective identity and the sharing of deeper meanings at a cultural and existential level. In this regard, the cultural and geopolitical position of the Peninsula, combined with the contemporary global condition, has produced rich soil for urban experimentation. In addition, a number of voices have emerged to advocate new forms of meaning and identity.⁵ Yet, despite the potential for new correlations between cultural politics and urban tradition, discourse continues to label, debate and refer to the region's architecture and cities as "Arabic," "Islamic," "Mediterranean," "Gulf," "Kuwaiti," "Qatari," "Saudi," etc.

In questioning whether cultural politics can generate a more significant discourse of urban tradition on the Peninsula, I refer to several key interpretations of "tradition." Among these is Henry Glassie's comment, in a classic article, that "all architecture is the embodiment of cultural norms that pre-exist individual buildings."⁶ This seems to validate the view that broad constructs such as Mediterraneanism or Islamism may underlie the shaping of built environments across cultures. Thus the spread of architectural or urban elements such as balconies, terraces, plazas, and other public spaces that originated in one context — the northern Mediterranean — became the norm in parts of the Arabian Peninsula. Yet the specific spatial practices of individual communities, such as those reflecting religious doctrines designed to regulate social interaction, also seem to have had great influence. In essence, I argue that manifestations of cultural norms may not only be instigated from within a society or a local community but may be borrowed or imported from other contexts.

The multiplicity of views, interpretations and definitions of "tradition," as recently critiqued by Nezar AlSayyad, also provides useful insight into urban traditions on the Peninsula.⁷ Particularly important among these is Amos Rapoport's work on the traditionality of process and product.⁸ Both in the past and present, the production of the built environment may be understood as integrally linked to cultural norms and practices in such areas as tribal affiliation, contemporary decision-making capacities, ruling and social systems, and family structures.⁹ Indeed, the analysis of governance models and social orders and agents is critical to debates over urban tradition in the entire Arab World.¹⁰

Urban tradition may also not necessarily be "authentic." AlSayyad has, for example, pointed out that current practices may, in fact, be imagined, manufactured, packaged and sold.¹¹ Academics and intellectuals continue to debate the recycling of traditional architectural elements to generate urban character in the region. Thus old palaces or *souqs*, originally refurbished as cultural enterprises, may in turn serve as visual references for future commercial projects. The practice is evident in the reconstruction of historical urban fabric, real or imagined, such as the Bastakiya district in Dubai and Souq Waqif in Doha; with regard to commercial projects developed around historic cores; and in waterfront and city center devel-

opments such as Ksar Al Hokm in Riyadh or Souq Sharq in Kuwait. These developments all deploy traditional imaging at various scales to impress local societies with their supposed roots, while at the same time heightening the marketing profile of the city. A recent example of the depiction of an imagined past is the Msheireb urban regeneration project in the heart of Doha, which was instigated (and is being supported) by the ruling family to create a contemporary national image.

Expanding the context of discussion to include broad constructs drawn from geocultural politics can add to an understanding of urban traditions on the Arabian Peninsula. Nonetheless, and in parallel, "nationalist particularism" is also manifest in many interventions in cities there. Indeed, urban traditions can be understood as formed at the interface between regional, national and local cultures. This includes value systems and power and governance structures that have the capacity to influence cultural decision-making. Such influences become apparent when examining how rulers actually make decisions concerning land use, public space, and the overall urban environment in cities such as Dubai and Doha.

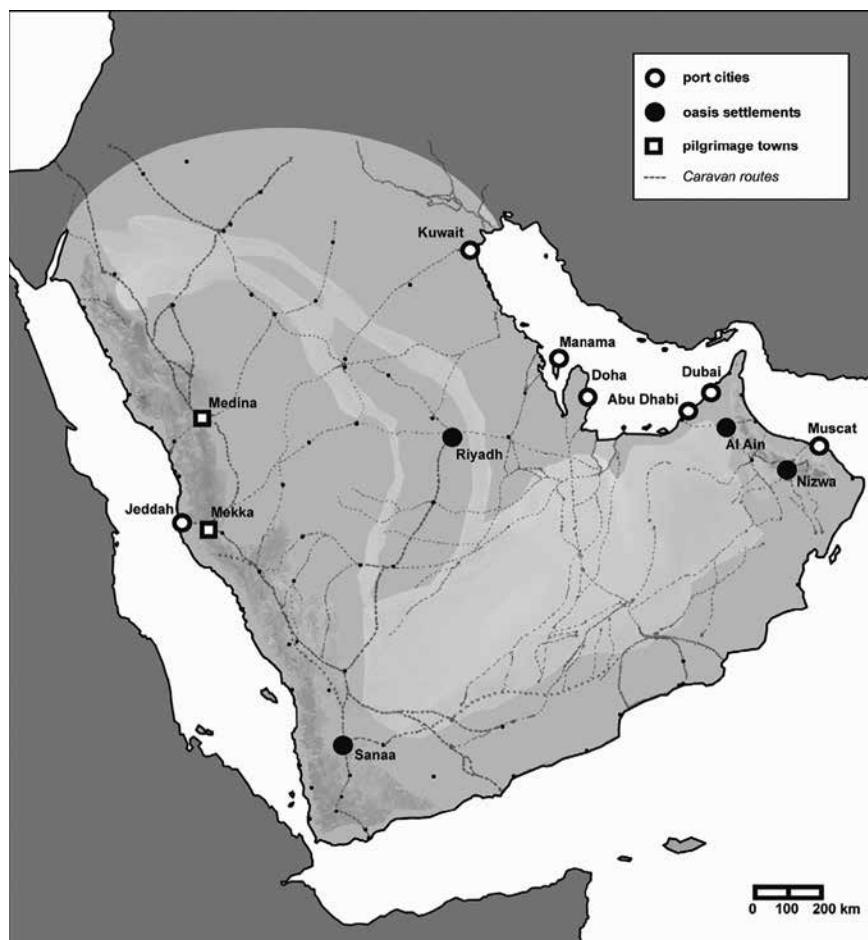
The preceding discussion conveys how urban tradition is constantly changing — a view emphasized by those who have pointed to this as one of tradition's fundamental attributes.¹² However, this view also mandates an understanding of what constitutes continuity. As Jefferson Pocock has stated, "awareness of the past is in fact society's awareness of its continuity."¹³ This brings the discussion back to the question posed by IASTE's 2014 conference, "Whose tradition?" The present condition of cities on the Arabian Peninsula requires understanding how they came to be. And this requires posing fundamental questions of "tradition of whom, by whom, and for whom."

PRE-OIL FACTORS PRODUCING TRADITIONAL SETTLEMENTS

In the pre-oil era the process of developing settlements on the Arabian Peninsula derived from collective effort based on local practices instead of a formal idea or plan imposed by a central authority (FIG. 1). Two factors can be identified that helped shape such settlements. The first were tribal traditions that acted as a system of governance, imbuing a sense of law and regulation. The other was local knowledge that provided a complete system for designing settlements, extracting building materials from the natural environment, and developing appropriate construction techniques.

Historically, tribal affiliation and family structure were key to life on the Peninsula. The existence of strong social networks and kinship groups helped weaker members survive, while a clear social hierarchy, with a tribal leader as *sheikh*, provided an effective organization that could advocate for and defend common interests. Generally, the size and wealth of a tribe determined the amount of land that it had

FIGURE 1. Major settlements in the Arabian Peninsula in the pre-oil era. Courtesy of A.M. Salama and F. Wiedmann.



under its control and jurisdiction. Yet the harsh environment also led to frequent conflicts and wars. Throughout the history of the Arabian Peninsula the need for protection and support thus led to tribal alliances with a strong clan and kinship identity.

From generation to generation tribes passed on knowledge they had gained on how to build structures and settlements suited to climatic and environmental constraints. Wind towers were one example of a traditional and practical architectural feature. Designed to keep dwellings comfortably cool, they were introduced to the Peninsula by Persian merchants, builders and craftsmen who migrated to and settled at various harbors and hamlets along the Gulf coast.

Apart from elements designed to combat the harsh desert climate, buildings and settlements were also shaped by the Islamic faith, which includes stringent prescriptions related to privacy and gender separation. Compliance with these teachings was achieved by following regulations in such areas as minimum building height and the construction of indirect entrances — features that made it impossible to view into other people's houses. In such communities, the Friday mosque was the most important space for community events.

Besides being a religious center, it was also often used as a courthouse to arbitrate disputes and dispense justice, or as a religious school, particularly in smaller settlements.¹⁴

Land in the pre-oil era was usually distributed and shared between tribes and their clans. The leading *sheikh* was the most important person in a community, and his duties included resolving arguments over buildings and land. He also coordinated the allocation of land for public use, such as for mosques, cemeteries or markets. His judgments, normally based on cultural norms and social rules, were unchallengeable and perceived as law.¹⁵ Such laws helped clarify issues related to streets and their use. They also helped control social problems such as noise, or environmental concerns such as pollution, that might cause disturbance or harm. Laws also covered such areas as overlooking building elements (roofs or balconies), walls between neighbors and rights of ownership to them, and the use (and even the drainage) of rain and wastewater.¹⁶ Settlement form in the pre-oil era was thus primarily the result of the collective effort of each clan, in accord with traditional regulations and following injunctions to employ prescribed construction techniques based on centuries-old knowledge of local building materials.

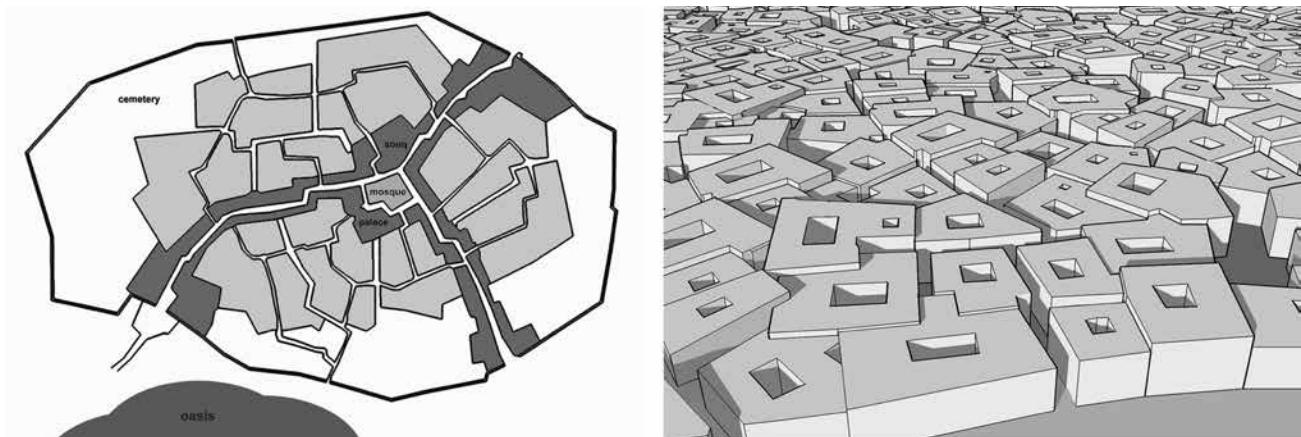


FIGURE 2. A typical structure of a traditional settlement (left); a typical structure of a traditional neighborhood *fareej* (right). Courtesy of A.M. Salama and F. Wiedmann.

An oasis settlement constructed according to these principles was characterized by a strong segregation of public and private life. Private housing and shelter occupied the most land, with only small alleys leading from the main roads to the private homes of residents. The narrowness of the streets and the tight spaces between buildings had two major purposes: they maximized land use within the settlement, and they provided cooling and welcome shade, as the close proximity of the houses provided natural protection from the sun along streets and passageways and in the houses that lined them (FIG. 2).¹⁷ Additionally, the network of narrow side roads and cul-de-sacs or dead-end alleys reinforced the private character of neighborhoods, known as *fareej*. These were developed around a system of branching side streets, which created a cellular arrangement of houses occupied by related clans and kinsfolk.

The architecture of oasis settlements was generally uniform due to the application of common rules and traditions, materials, and construction techniques. This resulted in a marked similarity of settlement form, with only minor variations.¹⁸ What differences did occur were normally derived from particularities of location. In addition to the traditional courtyard house, which formed the most common housing type, simple cubic buildings were often built in remote desert settlements.¹⁹ In such structures, flat rooftops were used as open-air spaces for cooking or sleeping during the hot summer months. The ground floor, which for purposes of privacy normally had very few window openings, was often used for storage and for a *majlis* where male guests could be received. Only in the cold winter months was the ground floor favored as living space. In addition to the rooftop, the upper floors were used as private areas for socializing and sleeping. In some settlements, it was also common for these floors to be extended over the street to link to houses on the other side. Such a room, called a *sabat*, increased private living space and created additional shaded area on the street below (FIG. 3).

Building materials that were generally available in the local context usually determined architectural form. For instance, walls in settlements along the coast were typically built of sun-dried adobe and readily available coral stone and gypsum. Poor families, however, often lived in *barasti* huts — simple structures made of date-palm fronds. Further inland, adobe (mud for which could be found along wadis or dry riverbeds) provided the basic material for both walls

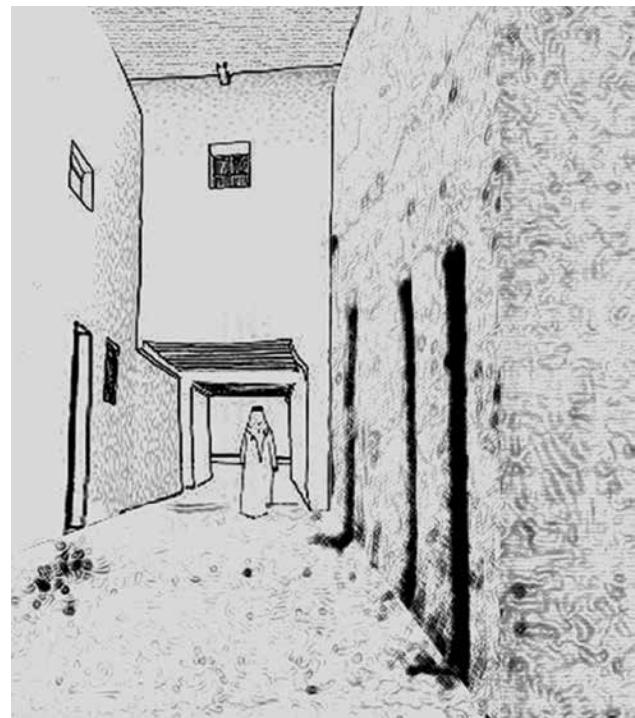


FIGURE 3. A traditional alleyway with a *sabat* dominating the setting. Property of the author.

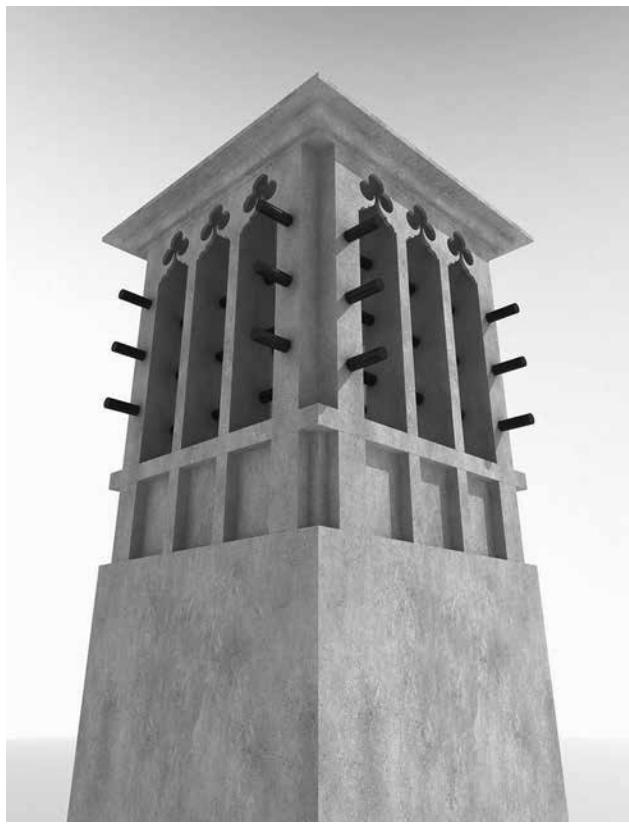


FIGURE 4. A typical wind tower, a characteristic of traditional architecture in the Gulf. Property of the author.

and ceilings. The latter were generally supported by strong beams made of palm trunks.

Narrow, rectangular openings were positioned in the walls of such structures to help cool indoor spaces and provide natural ventilation. Located both slightly above the floor and just below the ceiling, these small apertures helped maintain constant airflow. This system of natural ventilation was perfected by the introduction of the Persian windtower, mentioned earlier. These structures could be as high as fifteen meters, with separate chambers to catch the exterior breezes and release stale air from inside (FIG. 4). Although architectural design was mainly characterized by such practical adaptations to climate conditions, it also featured widespread use of ornamental features such as wooden screens, geometrical block-outs, and crenulated roofs to decorate or personalize spaces and facades.

FROM THE TRADITION OF THE ORDINARY TO THE TRADITION OF THE ELITE

Throughout much of the history of the Peninsula, architectural and urban traditions were shaped by common people without the help of professionals. However, this began to change

in the early twentieth century, and it was replaced entirely following the development of the region's oil resources. A brief recounting of the origins of the major urban areas on the Peninsula will help ground understanding of the what, who, why, and how of the change in urban traditions in recent years.

Since World War I the Peninsula has been engaged in a continuous process of transformation, the pace of which has varied in relation to the intensity, value and impact of key socio-political, cultural or socioeconomic events. I have previously attempted to map these and their relevance to the shaping of urban traditions.²⁰ While such a mapping delineates the impact of socio-political structures, it also conveys the impact of political, economic and organizational events on shaping the urban environment. During this entire process the role of governments and rulers should be underscored.

In the western Arabian Peninsula, along the coast of the Red Sea, the fishing town of Jeddah and its nearby settlements and hamlets developed early on into a major harbor city. Jeddah was the ancient arrival point for Muslim pilgrims heading to the holy cities of Mecca and Medina. Although the western part of the Peninsula from Jerusalem to Sana'a was under the control and administration of the Ottoman caliphate from the sixteenth to the beginning of the twentieth century, the influence of the Ottoman rulers on the built environment, apart from the importation of certain building materials and construction techniques, was minimal.

Inland, the most important cities in the western Arabian Peninsula were Mecca and Medina, whose religious significance provided them decisive political position. However, many smaller settlements were founded in the western highlands and the central plateau, including the fortified hamlet of Riyadh. Riyadh was situated at the crossroads of two important caravan routes, one connecting to the Gulf coast and the other leading to the more established settlements along the Red Sea. As a result of its strategic location and importance, Riyadh soon developed into a flourishing oasis town.

With the development of an oil-based global economy, astute rulers soon also came to recognize the potential of the Gulf region, and set out to develop its cities into important commercial hubs between Asia, Europe and Africa. This included the construction of a number of deep-water harbors to increase their capacity to handle global trade. These were soon augmented by international airports, which were ultimately expanded into vast air cargo and passenger hubs.

The role of international trade as an essential feature of the Gulf economy was accelerated by the introduction of the free trade zone (FTZ). The first of these was established at Jebel Ali in the Emirate of Dubai in 1985. This has now been occupied by many companies attracted by its modern infrastructure and minimal or no taxation. A lack of bureaucratic interference and restrictive labor regulations have also encouraged international entrepreneurs and investors to establish businesses in Dubai. Over the following decade, other FTZs were founded in the region: in the Emirate of Kuwait, the Kingdom of Bahrain, and in other emirates of the U.A.E.



FIGURE 5. Emerging highrise housing districts, a characteristic of the urban environment in most Gulf cities. Courtesy of A.M. Salama and F. Wiedmann.

The size of these FTZs, which are generally located near airports or harbors, varies. Some, however, have now grown into large industrial areas, such as the Jebel Ali Free Trade Zone in Dubai, or large science parks such as Qatar Science and Technology Park (QSTP) in Doha.

One key aspect of contemporary urbanism in the region is that its new generation of desert and coastal cities is supplied with state-of-the-art infrastructure. This has in part been designed to attract global investment and well-trained expatriate residents, who have in turn transformed newly built urban shells into vibrant and desirable activity hubs. Urban governance in the region's cities is thus aimed to initiate and facilitate the construction of space that can be used to accommodate evolving economic interaction and transnational practices. This has included marketing campaigns to attract international attention, which have transformed the cities themselves into investment brands. Today's regional rulers thus find themselves in the role of CEOs managing urban development as a "business idea."²¹ The majority of

firms who have relocated to the area in connection with the execution of these "business ideas" have so far been investment banks and construction-related companies.

A second transformative trend in the region has been the growing role of the private sector in urban development. Major private companies now operate as managers of large-scale projects such as housing districts, business parks, and mixed-use complexes (FIG. 5). To a large degree, the private sector has also now taken over the government's former role in organizing and developing the infrastructure to support these projects. Despite this evolution of roles, however, all major planning decisions and the distribution of land still remain in the hands of rulers and their top officials — many of whom have become direct or indirect associates and sponsors of large-scale developments.

In most cities in the region, the liberalization and opening up of markets driven by a vision of activity hubs, in combination with large-scale public investment, has brought entirely new forms of organization (FIG. 6). Although planning

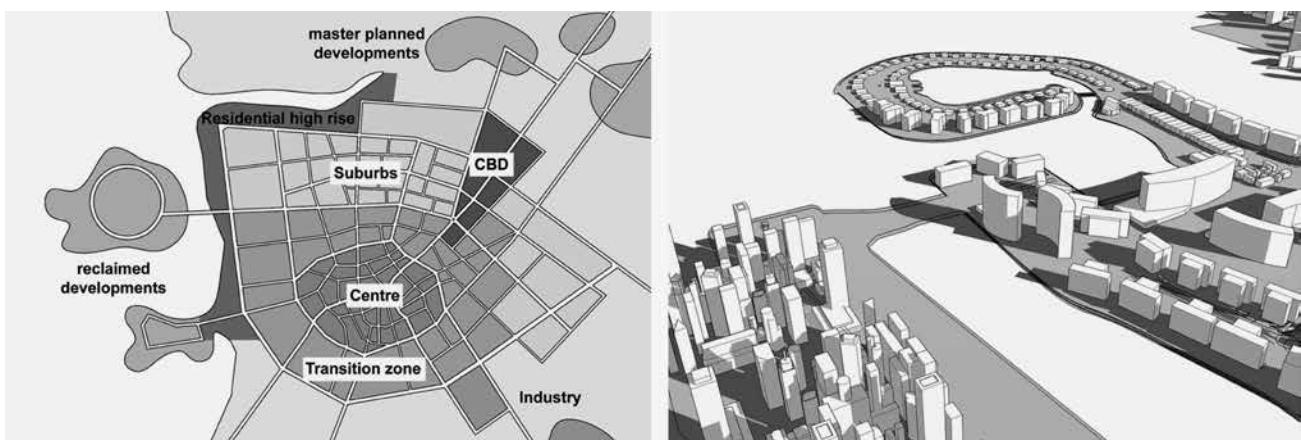


FIGURE 6. Typical structure of a contemporary Gulf city (left); typical waterfront highrise agglomerations and developments on reclaimed land (right). Courtesy of A.M. Salama and F. Wiedmann.

authorities remain in control, real estate developers now have considerable freedom to design and implement their own master plans. This new decentralized form of governance, based on case-by-case decision-making, has resulted in dynamic new urban developments and rapid growth — but it has also resulted in a noticeable lack of infrastructural consolidation.

Since the dawn of the new millennium, regional rulers, decision-makers, and top government officials have started to demonstrate a greater interest in architecture, urban development, and real estate investment. Their attention has initiated a new phase in the architecture and urbanism of the Arabian Peninsula. With the ruling elite now having a focused and vested interest in urban development, the old understanding of traditions as created by and for ordinary people has been replaced by a new, emerging understanding of urban tradition created at the interface between authority and the public.

Today, many Arabian Peninsula cities are undergoing rapid growth, facilitated by fast-track design and construction. But the large-scale trade and industrial facilities, new educational and residential environments, and mixed-use developments out of which they are being made are intended to serve a specific segment of society — the rich and affluent, rather than the masses.²²

SCENES FROM THE CONTEMPORARY LIVED SPACE

As I described above, contemporary conditions in the new cities of the Arabian Peninsula have primarily emerged from partnerships between local rulers and investors and large-scale developers. New planning strategies have also stemmed from the need to adapt to and accommodate global flows.²³ Such a condition can be articulated in two representative scenes pertinent to the debate over urban traditions. The scenes are culled from governance and urban practices over the past fifteen years in the rapidly growing cities of Dubai and Doha.

SCENE 1: ELITE ENTERPRISES AND SOCIAL SEGREGATION

One of the most far-reaching effects of decentralized urban governance and decision-making has been the emergence of “cities within the city,” or CiC.²⁴ This new form of development may be observed in all major cities on the Peninsula, particularly those of the Gulf. CiCs are usually client-particular because of their large scale, self-contained spatial quality, and iconic design. Unfortunately, these new cluster developments, usually created through public-private partnerships, have also had a negative impact on urban quality. Their very exclusivity has generated a fragmented and disengaged urban fabric, which in turn has promoted divisive social segregation.

Over the past fifteen years the oil-impoveryed Emirate of Dubai has pioneered this type of development, beginning

with its initiative in 1999 to introduce freehold property rights at the exclusive residential enclave of “Emirates Hills” in the northern suburb of Jumeirah. The project was developed by the newly founded real estate company Emaar, 33 percent of whose shares were actually owned by the rulers of Dubai.²⁵ Since then, a number of other real estate companies have been established (many of which are subsidiaries of public holdings) to initiate iconic and unprecedently ambitious projects. One example, the private holiday-destination development “World Islands,” launched in 2009, is an archipelago of manmade islands that together resembles a map of the world.

In vigorous competition with Dubai, developers in Doha have pursued a similar urban growth strategy, encouraged by policies liberalizing markets and allowing the establishment of real estate development companies with public shares. Despite the fact that many of the units in luxury projects in Dubai have yet to be sold, developers have pushed ahead with building projects of comparable scale and profile in Doha (FIG. 7).

Today, three main types of CiC projects can be identified: mixed-use projects, tourism projects, and FTZ projects. Mixed-use projects generally integrate commercial facilities in the form of retail districts and malls. Tourism projects typically provide areas for resorts, marinas, theme parks and promenades, and are located at waterfronts, where they are often developed on reclaimed land or manmade islands (FIG. 8). FTZ projects are typically located at the junctions of main infrastructural networks. A further recent phenomenon is the construction of entire new satellite cities consisting of several CiC projects.

One of the most significant characteristics of CiCs is the planning process behind them, which is usually independent of master-planning strategies adopted and approved by local authorities and the public sector. Consequently, despite a reliance on public infrastructure, many projects developed by major real estate companies actually formulate their own building and planning controls and guidelines. This laissez-faire approach has resulted in unprecedented rapid and sometimes shoddy urban and suburban growth, as developments turn their back on the city. Consolidating new and existing urban structures has thus become a major challenge for contemporary urbanism both in Dubai and Doha.

The new development strategies endorsed by the rulers of Gulf states have had a significant impact on both urban structure and architectural development. In particular, the decentralization of decision-making has led to the increasing influence of private and semi-public developers and wealthy property tycoons. These interests have initiated master-planned projects in the form of exclusive manmade islands, attractive but isolated new suburban districts, and mixed-use and residential enclaves such as Palm Island in Dubai or Pearl Qatar. Highrise agglomerations have also appeared on the urban periphery. These projects have resulted in new purpose-designed business districts, as ancillary support hubs, along main growth corridors such as Sheikh Zayed Road in Dubai and West Bay in Doha (FIG. 9).²⁶

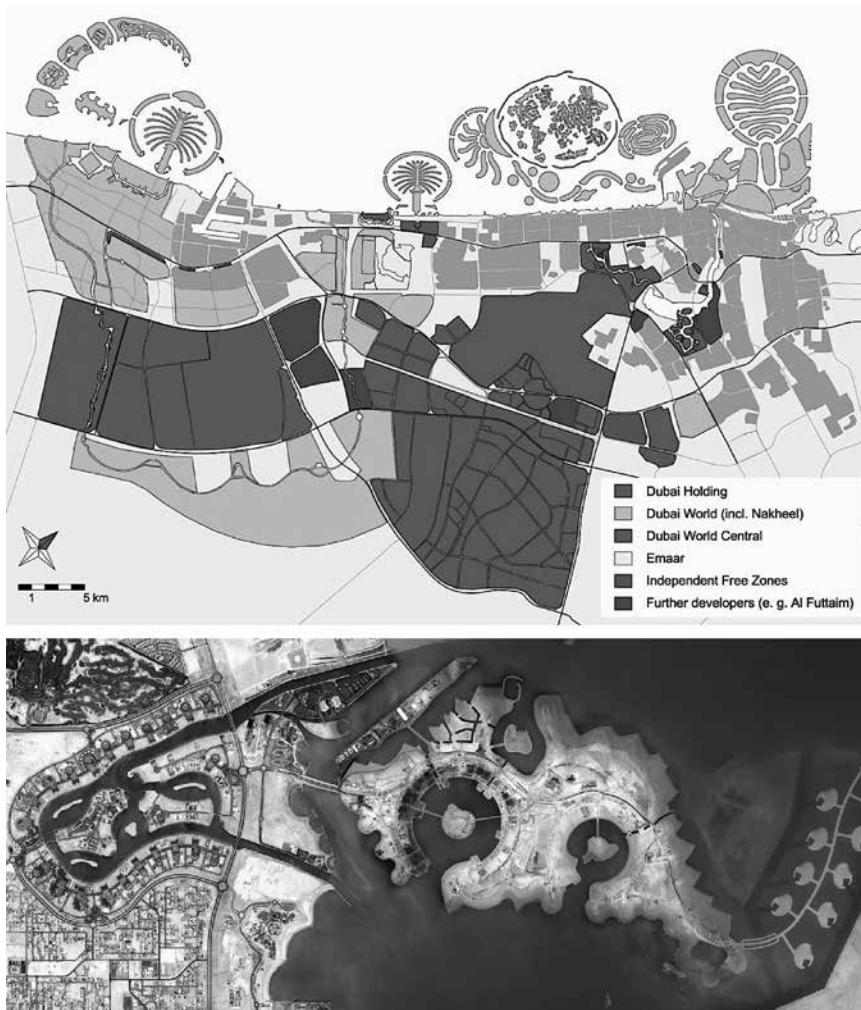


FIGURE 7. Examples of CiC mixed-use projects: artificial and reclaimed island developments in Dubai (top), and Doha (bottom). Source: modified from Google Earth.

Due to disinterested laissez-faire policies, areas previously designated as lowrise, low-density residential districts have also been subject to unbridled redevelopment, and are now frequently characterized by disparate clusters of mixed-use residential and commercial highrises, often in the form of unattractive, closely packed tower blocks. Such energetic construction activity has been fuelled by investment pressure and an exponential increase in the need for housing and commercial space to accommodate a rapid influx of migrant labor and expatriate workers.²⁷

Meanwhile, in addition to highrise clusters and luxurious master-planned development projects, urban sprawl in the form of lowrise housing has continued at the periphery of major cities. In spite of concerted efforts to revitalize old or historical centers, a pattern of peripheral development has persisted because of the lower price and greater accessibility of land there. Waterfronts have been similarly and dramatically expanded through land reclamation.²⁸

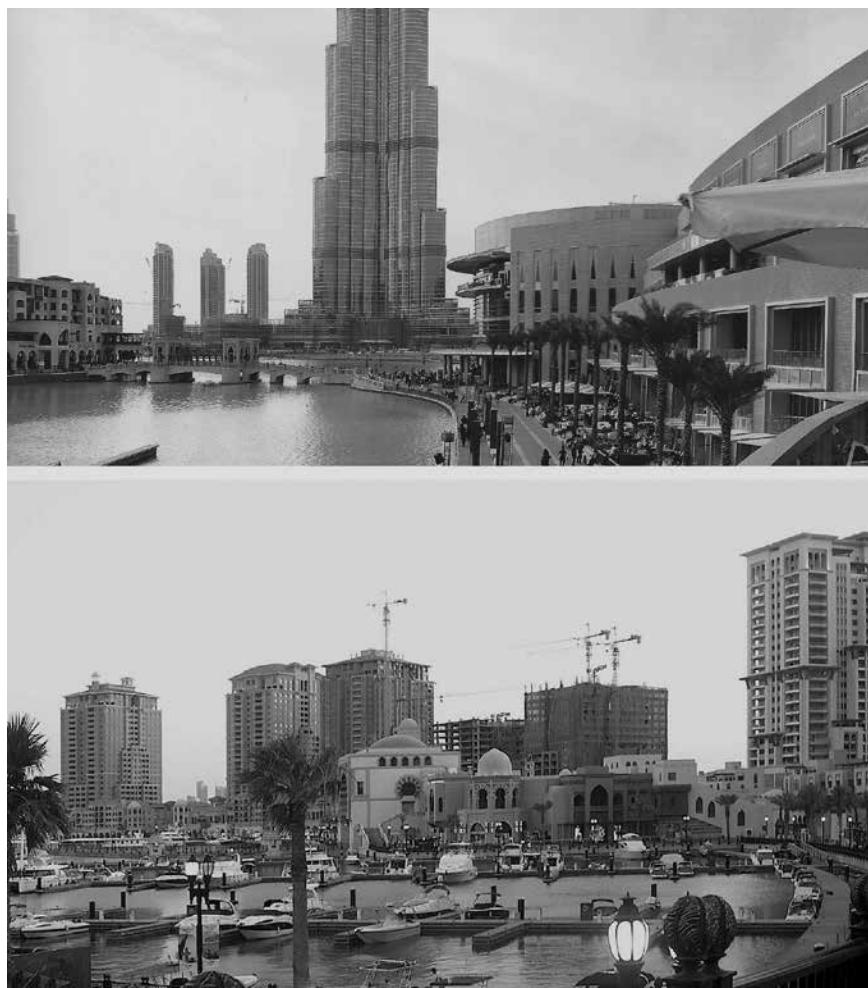
Coupled with the growth of elite developments, the urbanism of most cities on the Peninsula is producing new patterns of segregation. In part these result from new real estate

typologies designed to house an extensive inflow of a medium- to high-income expatriate workers and their families. The residences of higher-income expatriates were initially located on the fringes of historic city centers, where they took the form of gated communities. As a rule, this maintained existing segregation patterns preferred by the locals. However, the recent surge in construction has seen this type of housing appear in areas where established local communities and neighborhoods already exist.

In addition to gated compounds geared toward well-paid expatriates, a new residential typology — the serviced apartment and apartment hotel — has also emerged. Such high-price units are generally located in residential highrises and tower blocks on key sites, often close to business areas or service locations. In Dubai, one such location is along Sheikh Zayed Road, and in Doha they may be found in the West Bay.

The city of Doha in Qatar clearly illustrates the growing segregation phenomenon. Over the years, high-income groups largely settled on the north and west peripheries of the city, while low- to medium-income groups occupied marginal, shabby or derelict housing in congested city-center

FIGURE 8. Promenades around the Burj Khalifa development in Dubai (top); Pearl Qatar development marina and promenade in Doha (bottom). Property of the author.



neighborhoods. However, these core neighborhoods are now being demolished because of deterioration and overcrowding, and employers of low-income expatriate workers have been forced to house them in substandard and often appalling accommodations in peripheral areas to the south.²⁹ One such locale is the Industrial Area, where low rental rates now allow employers and sponsors to house their technical staff and laborers cheaply (FIG. 10). The inadequate, crowded and substandard accommodations here have recently attracted international scrutiny and negative commentary.

The lack of affordable accommodation for this sector of the population is a growing problem that some companies have tried to address.³⁰ Such initiatives do sometimes represent a real attempt to provide appropriate yet affordable housing for laborers and low-wage earners. Yet the peripheral locations chosen for such housing reproduce existing patterns of segregation. One could argue this represents a new type of contemporary urban tradition. It is practiced deliberately and supported by exorbitant property values (FIG. 11).

Residential development in Doha today is dominated by fragmented “island” communities of expatriate workers.

The expatriates are an extremely diverse group, with the greatest number being South Asians from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. Meanwhile, the local population represents only a small minority — approximately 15 percent of the total. In light of the lack of a coherent local majority, segregation between nationals and expatriates is zealously maintained. The development of a less anonymous and more integrated society is further constrained by the temporary nature of labor contracts, with a large percentage of the workforce being exchanged on a regular basis.³¹

In their desire to maintain the status quo, possibly out of morbid fear of “cultural contamination” and negative influence, little effort has been made to develop more integrated environments as platforms for an emerging society.³² There is some, very limited, mixing in cultural venues and shopping malls, which are the most frequently used leisure and entertainment spaces for higher-income residents. Low-income groups, however, usually shop and stay close to their residences, a clear indication of social and income demarcation which extends beyond residential patterns into the public realm. In part this pattern is due to a lack of public transport,



FIGURE 9. *The modern business district along Sheikh Zayed road in Dubai (top); emerging West Bay waterfront development in Doha (bottom). Property of the author.*

as most low-income workers depend on inadequate and infrequent bus service provided by Qatar's only public transportation company. Most bus routes require two or three transfers, a further discouragement to venturing too far from home turf. In addition, many low-paid workers cannot afford to hire taxis, which are expensive and hard to find.

These exclusionary residential policies and practices today comprise a new form of tradition. It underlies the contemporary society and social fabric of Doha, which is built on a plurality of parallel societies living in various segregated environments according to very different living conditions and standards.

SCENE 2: STRUGGLING TO CONSTRUCT IDENTITY

A narrative of cultural identity has typically been used to situate the architecture and urbanism not only of the Arabian Peninsula but of the entire Arab World. The search for a new identity is likewise one of the major forces driving the architecture and urbanism of the region today.

Many divergent interpretations of the notion of identity may be found in contemporary literature. For example, some theorists see the quest for identity as a fundamental human need. Others regard it as a simpler process of giving priority to certain cultural attributes over other sources of meaning.



FIGURE 10. Example of a labor camp in the Al Quoz District in Dubai (top); example of a labor compound in the Industrial Area in Doha (bottom). Property of the author.

In architecture and urbanism, identity can also be envisioned as the collective aspect of a building or portion of the urban environment that allows it to be definitively recognizable.

In recent decades, issues that pertain to the identity and character of architecture on the Arabian Peninsula have become a topic of fervent debate — the more so because of the region's contradictory state of cultural exclusivity and plurality. Indeed, it is this very cultural paradox that has made the debate difficult to pursue, and that has in many cases culminated in a type of overt and occasionally crass symbolism that is painful to comprehend. Some critics question the apparent necessity to use cultural or religious symbolism in the architecture of the region to reflect or maintain specific national identities. Others argue that architecture on the Peninsula should embody the collective aspirations of all societies there. Still others question the need to debate architectural and urban identity at all, claiming that such debates merely display a lack of “self-confidence.” In effect, the ongoing debates show how the region and its component nations are still at odds over the issue of identity.

Charles Correa has defined identity as a process, not a found object — and a process that is not even self-conscious.



FIGURE 11. Very similar, if not identical, spatial practices in labor communities in Dubai (top), and Doha (bottom). Top photo property of the author. Bottom photo by Richard Messenger/Flickr.

Nevertheless, he has written that the search for identity provides a much greater sensitivity not only to the environment, but to ourselves and to the society in which we live.³³ Stuart Hall has similarly argued that “cultural identity is a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being’ and it belongs to the future as much as to the past.”³⁴ Two opposite qualities in Hall’s position point the way to a more profound understanding of identity: one related to similarity and continuity, the other to difference and rupture. Contemporary architecture on the Arabian Peninsula vividly exemplifies this contrasting yet somehow complementary duality.

In essence, identity can be represented by three cogent underlying characteristics: the permanence over time of a subject unaffected by environmental changes below a certain threshold; the notion of unity, which establishes the limits of a subject and enables us to distinguish it from other subjects; and a relationship between two elements which enables us to recognize them as similar.³⁵ Together, these characteristics suggest permanence, recognition and distinction and allow the attribution of identity to a physical object, a work of architecture, or a portion of a built environment.



FIGURE 12. *Recycled traditional architecture. Bastakiya quarter in Dubai (left), and Souq Waqif in Doha (right). Left photo courtesy of the Historical Buildings Section, Dubai Municipality. Right photo property of the author.*

In attempting to understand the problem of identity in the architecture of the Arabian Peninsula it should be noted that identities can be invented and endorsed by important cultural, social and political institutions, and that their decrees may reflect the often self-indulgent preferences of key individuals. In other instances, identities may be created by property developers whose main interest is economic, enabling market logic and market demands to take preference over social needs or environmental concerns. Within this tightly controlled context, some architects and urban designers may find themselves in continual conflict, having to evaluate their own visions of modern and postmodern architecture against a prevailing discourse and practice of recycling elements of traditional architecture to establish and impose meaningful character on the contemporary city. Examples of this approach are evident in conservation and reconstruction efforts like those used for the old Bastakiya quarter in Dubai or that carried out in Souq Waqif in Doha (FIG. 12).

Another approach to the construction of identity has been to borrow visual references from the past, either real or imagined, and utilize them in contemporary buildings. Historical architectural revivalism is one of the paradigms that characterize such schemes. With a view to constructing a recognizable architectural identity, some architects have thus adopted and adapted a selection of historic features derived from Arab and Islamic heritage. They believe that simulating or even fabricating history in contemporary buildings can help establish a sense of belonging and forge strong emotional ties between society, place memory, and contemporary interventions. Mina Al Salam at Jumeirah Beach in Dubai and Al-Fanar Islamic and Cultural Center in Doha are just two structures that manifest this composite approach (FIG. 13).

Underpinning these two approaches is the desire of rulers, governments and officials to boast about and boost

the profile of their capital cities. This is typically a matter of promoting projects that herald traditional imagery to excite local society with a carefully contrived reconstruction and reimagining of their origins and traditions. In this respect, Al-Sayyad has argued, and rightly so, that “a particular tradition is made so obvious and apparent that outsiders can see it . . . [but] its mere legibility does not by itself make it a tradition.”⁶

The need to address and visually represent a discourse of tradition and modernity is another paradigm driving international architects to construct architectural identity as they or their clients conceive it. Tradition in this respect can be regarded either as an internal action or as a reaction to external forces. In essence, the result of the interaction between internal influences and external forces creates and fosters a perceived, if not necessarily authentic, identity.

Discourse continues with regard to the dialectic relationship between tradition and modernity, the contemporary and the historic, and the global and the local. Meanwhile, a number of important projects, either recently built or under construction, exemplify the acknowledgement, presence and incorporation of multiple identities.

One such building is the satellite branch of Texas A&M's engineering college, established under the aegis of Hamad bin Khalifa University (HBKU) in Education City in Doha. This monolithic and visually stunning structure, designed by the Mexican architect Ricardo Legoretta, applies and adapts pre- and post-Columbian architectural forms to a global context (FIG. 14). Legoretta has long employed traditional Mexican architectural elements in his work, including earth tones, plays of light and shadow, and features such as central patios, courtyards, porticos, and massive solid volumes. The design concept in the engineering college is based on two independent but adjoining masses — the Academic Quadrangle and Research Building — linked by a wide, spacious atrium. The

FIGURE 13. *Instituting visual references (local and regional) as an approach to constructing identity: Mina Al Salam in Dubai (top), and Al-Fanar Islamic and Cultural Center in Doha (bottom). Property of the author.*



overall expression of the building demonstrates a masterful integration of solid geometry with a skillful use of color and tone values, resulting in a visually pleasing conceptual dialogue between tradition and modernity.

Such a dialogue is also evident in Legoretta's latest intervention on the campus, the HBKU Student Center. This striking building creates a vibrant and welcoming environment, containing a cinema, bookshop, art gallery, gymnasium, black-box theater, and even a crèche and nursery. Such user-friendly accouterments inevitably foster dynamic social and cultural interaction.

The huge Msheireb urban regeneration project in Doha is another example of how a search for architectural identity

has spawned complex and conflicting representations. This area of the city was once a vibrant commercial landscape frequented by low-income office workers, employees and laborers, but it will soon cater to a more affluent sector of society.³⁷ Some of the massive fortress-like buildings under construction in this CiC already give the impression of distinct class barriers and exclusivity (**FIG. 15**).

In an attempt to balance global aspirations with the reinterpretation of traditional environments, such projects endeavor to recount spatial and visual language concerns in an integrated yet highly selective manner. The considered selection and/or rejection of appropriate/inappropriate architectural elements are crucial to the success of such projects.



FIGURE 14. Bringing and adapting Legoretta's own traditions to the context of Doha: HBKU-Texas A&M engineering campus (left), and HBKU Student Center (right). Property of the author.

Thus, one of the main segments of the Msheireb regeneration project, the Emiri Diwan Quarter, designed by Tim Makower Architects, attempts to create a modern metal and glass structure that is ostensibly rooted in perceived, if not actual, Qatari culture. At a smaller scale, Al Barahat Square, designed by

Mossessian and Partners, also plays on a contrast between traditional and modern design influences. A central element of the larger project designed to act as an urban lung, it draws on traditional Qatari architecture to establish the character of its surrounding buildings.



FIGURE 15. Msheireb urban regeneration project in Doha, an example of a CiC presenting distinct class barriers. Courtesy of Msheireb Properties, 2013.

FIGURE 16. Advanced technology as represented in skyscrapers and highrise towers: O-14 tower in Dubai (left), and skyscrapers in the West Bay in Doha (right). Property of the author.



On the other hand, as part of the struggle to construct identity, one can find multiple approaches and examples of buildings in Doha and Dubai that express a profound determination to claim ownership of advanced construction technologies. Two examples are the O-14 tower in Dubai and the competing skyscrapers in central Doha (**FIG. 16**).

New buildings may also validate the grit of rulers to act on their cities, and on behalf on their very people, as hubs for cultural performances and the arts. Two examples are the

Museum of Islamic Art in Doha and the recently built Dubai Opera House (**FIG. 17**).

In the not-to-distant future, it also remains to be seen what impact Qatar's successful bid for the 2022 FIFA World Cup will have on the region. The same can be said with regard to bids for other hallmark events that have sought to establish a new identity for both Doha and Dubai as sport and mega-event hubs.



FIGURE 17. Cultural enterprises simulating regional tradition or assimilating the global condition: Dubai Opera House (left), and Museum of Islamic Art in Doha (right). Left image courtesy of Atkins Middle East. Right photo property of the author.

TOWARD A FRAMEWORK FOR EXAMINING CONTEMPORARY URBAN TRADITIONS IN THE ARABIAN PENINSULA

The transformation of urban environments on the Peninsula — and in particular in Dubai and Doha — has led to a new, more dynamic and functional type of city. This change largely reflects the regional aspiration to create emerging service hubs. It has dramatically oversimplified past traditions at the same time that it has shaped new and evolving traditions that attempt to balance local ambitions with global conditions.

While there is no single answer to the question of "Whose tradition?" these new cities represent, I believe its elements can be dissected. In this regard, my arguments earlier about a transformation from a tradition of ordinary people to one of the elite and my articulation of urban scenes articulating class exclusivity and social and ethnic segregation, offer key, but not full answers.

In the region today, tribal governance and decision-making have been replaced by modern institutions — though elements of tribalism are still evident. Decisions about the environment that were once made and articulated by *sheikhs* and tribal leaders in collaboration with the common people now emerge from collaboration and partnership between rulers, state institutions, and the private sector, with significant input from international planners and architects.

Likewise, as a result of the vast influx of expatriate professionals and migrant workers, settlements and environments that used to reflect cultural norms and religious beliefs and the immediate needs of a homogenous community now reflect multiple interests. A principal urban tradition today would seem to be the maintenance of very different, parallel communities that are not necessarily bound by, or rooted in, place or locality. It is not clear which society or community the environments resulting from present decisions are going to serve in the future — though the economic parameters currently given priority in decision-making clearly serve the rich and affluent. But every indication currently is that this approach will ultimately lead to multiple identities in the form of multiple manifestations and multiple socio-spatial practices.

Palpably, the contemporary lived space on the Peninsula, and particularly in the Gulf, is also characterized by a drive to establish a sustainable identity and react and respond op-

portunistically to the global condition. The real question now is whether this lived space actually represents the collective mind of the culture in which it exists.

One way of answering this question would be to argue that no one collective mind can be conceptually utilized to generalize or build upon. Rather, there is an ongoing, ever-changing plurality and multiplicity that fundamentally invigorates and sustains the urban footprint of the region. This would seem to denote the existence of a fluid emerging sense of tradition. Yet if the lived space is to sustain itself as a form of human and cultural expression (as used to be the case with the traditional environments of the region's past), a thorough examination must be made of contemporary urban projects and their capacity for cultural, functional and symbolic representation.

While many of the projects and emerging place typologies are succeeding in responding to the global condition, they are raising many questions with regard to the question of "Whose tradition?" and their socio-cultural impact on average citizens, expatriate professionals, and low-wage migrant workers. I argue in this context that Lefebvre's triadic notion of the conceived-perceived-lived may be integral to such an examination.³⁸ This may be applied both to the present time-frame and in an evolutionary manner.

Such a larger examination of building practices in the region will first require probing how the urban environment of contemporary Gulf cities is being conceived by planners, architects and authorities, and ask who these people are. It will then be important to scrutinize how such environments are being spatially practiced, and how interactions between agents, institutions and individuals take place and develop. And it will be crucial to examine how interactions between people and their environments develop socially, materially, and allegorically. The results of the latter two inquiries into lived-individual experience of the environment and the perceived-social and socioeconomic networks it supports should then be fed back into the interrogation of conceptions underlying spatial production.

What is observed currently is that the lived and the perceived spaces are an outcome of a nonresponsive conceived space that does not cater to all segments of society. However, by applying rigorous conceptual and empirical tools it may be possible to envision a more complete discursive cycle that may create the conditions for a more responsive urban tradition.

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18. Y.O. Fadan, "Traditional Houses of Makkah," in *Islamic Architecture and Urbanism*, pp.295–311.
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20. In 2014 the Bahrain Ministry of Culture and the Arab Center in Beirut commissioned me to study the evolution of architecture and urbanism on the Peninsula. The study revealed that key socio-political events and institutional decisions have had a direct, dramatic impact on urbanism there. Key findings of this study are included in the catalogue for the Kingdom of Bahrain's pavilion at the Venice Architecture Biennale in 2014. See A.M. Salama, "A Century of Architecture in the Arabian Peninsula: Evolving Isms and Multiple Architectural Identities in a Growing Region," in G. Arbid, ed., *Architecture from the Arab World (1914–2014): A Selection* (Ministry of Culture, 2014), pp.137–43.
21. M. Davis, "Sand, Fear and Money in Dubai," in M. Davis and D.B. Monk, eds., *Evil Paradises: Dreamworlds of Neoliberalism* (New York: The New Press, 2008) pp.49–67.
22. New large-scale interventions intended for rich locals and high-profile expatriate communities are on the rise, from Abu-Dhabi's Saadiyat Island development to Bahrain Financial Harbour, and from Kuwait's City of Silk to Qatar's City of the Future, Lusail.
23. Arjun Appadurai labeled global cities "scapes of flows," and identified five types of scapes: ethnoscapes, mediascapes, finanscapes, technoscapes and ideascapes. While some scholars may argue that such a notion has been overused in contemporary literature, I find that mapping Appadurai's flows helps reveal the global condition of major cities on the Peninsula. Emerging hub cities here can be regarded as *ethnoscapes* — that is, environments created by a vast new workforce and typified by the interaction of diverse cultures: places where large numbers of expatriates live, work or visit. They can also be envisioned as *mediascapes* — spaces that are generated by the expanding role of media as a result of the revolution in information technology. (Developing media cities and controversial TV news channels, such as Al-Jazeera in Doha and Al-Arabiya in Dubai, are clear manifestations of the important role of media in the Middle East today.) Further, some cities on the Peninsula, such as Dubai, can be viewed as *finanscapes* — places created by flows of capital and the establishment of transnational corporations and stock exchanges. In addition, these emerging cities can be regarded as *technoscapes* and *ideascapes*, challenging and stimulating environments that reflect the influence of telecommunication technologies and the resulting spread of ideologies. (Industries in the free trade zone of Dubai, Qatar Science and Technology Park in Doha, and the many international university campuses in Dubai are clear examples of this condition.) By and large, these "scapes" are important players in the shaping of social and professional practices and the resulting spatial environments that accommodate them. They accentuate the role global flows play in shaping contemporary development processes.
24. Across the Peninsula, the CiC phenomenon has been attributed to the diminishing ability of public authorities to deliver efficient urban environments or renew existing urban fabric. However, I would argue that it is more accurate to attribute its spread to the privatization and decentralization of urban governance over the past two decades. Support for this argument can be found in several studies of contemporary urbanism and the role of the private sector in large-scale developments. In particular, Michael Dear has analyzed

- recent liberalization tendencies in urban governance and their role in transforming cities into branded corporate entities. See M.J. Dear, *The Postmodern Urban Condition* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 2001). And Nan Ellin and Jason Hackworth have traced the roots and causes of the CiC phenomenon. See N. Ellin, *Postmodern Urbanism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Architectural Press, 1999); and J. Hackworth, *The Neoliberal City: Governance, Ideology, and Development in American Urbanism* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2006).
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31. Salama and Wiedmann, *Demystifying Doha*, p.229.
32. Anthony K. Appiah has pointed to the term "cultural contamination" to emphasize the tendency of globalization to homogenize cultures and create fear of local societies. See A.K. Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (Reprint edition, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007).
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36. AlSayyad, *Traditions*, p.35.
37. The project was conceived by AECOM in partnership with Mossessian and Partners and Allies and Morrison Architects.
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