CONCLUSIONS Modernism's Back and Forth

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fig.1 Ibrahim Ismail, the Souq, Kuwait, 1995. Oil on Canvas, 100 × 200 cm. (Source: Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah. Reuse not permitted)

When one of the United Arab Emirates' ageing rulers ordered his advisor to convert the emirate's National Museum back to its original state as his residence, the advisor met the decision with incredulity, but the task of stripping down the structure to its original form began. The 'national museum' signboard was dismantled, the glass vitrines were taken out, new furniture was brought in. The change however did not last too long as the ageing ruler's health continued to deteriorate; he spent the last few years of his life confined to his home, and the fort was once again – discreetly – transformed back into a museum.

This anecdote as conveyed orally to me by members of my family who enjoyed close ties with the ruler's household presents one of the many urban and architectural development narratives common in Gulf cities where modern structures are sometimes reused, and in other instances 'modernism' is even reversible. It also reflects how modernism is a gradual process: many structures – through modification and adaptation – include several layers of interchangeability between the traditional and the modern, making it a challenge to assign a date to the beginning of modernism in the Gulf. To quote art critic and essayist Hilton Kramer, "to attempt to assign a specific date to such a fluid historical phenomenon would seem to be about as wise as assigning a birth date to air pollution or traffic congestion".[1]

Over the past few decades, the Arab Gulf states have witnessed an almost unprecedented level of development largely driven by oil capital. As their economies transformed from ones partly dependent on fishing and pearling into fast-moving capitalist centres, an influx of foreign workers led to an increasing demand for housing and accommodation. Citizens, furthermore, expected

and even demanded better housing from their governments. Today, these developments are being reassessed for their value: some are torn down while others are repurposed. This increasing reassessment has been a primary driving force behind the scholarly research that we have presented in this volume.

The 1970s oil prices shock coincided with an unprecedented construction boom as the Gulf states struggled to keep up with demands for housing for citizens and expatriates alike. Foreign expertise was relied on not only to design buildings but also to lay the master plans of entire cities. However, the reliance on foreign expertise came with its own set of problems. Many of these experts had no knowledge of the local contexts that they were expected to overhaul. They were further impeded by the fact that they did not have access to basic information such as demographics and societal order, as well as the fact that these states' growth quickly eclipsed any potential plan, no matter how grand. Decades after the introduction of these master plans,[2] they remain the subject of contentious debate and comprise fertile material for some of this book's chapters. Faisal Al-Mogren, for example, writing in this volume, proposes a reconsideration of Doxiadis' often criticized 1972 master plan of Riyadh.[3] The plan was conceived to regulate the city as a growing organism until the year 2000, but as argued in the chapter, its implementation is still shaping the city today, 45 years after the planner's death. This case study offers one an opportunity to reflect on who is or has been responsible for the Gulf city's transformation.

Authorship is also discussed in Jumanah Abbas and Michael Kubo's chapters as a yet unresolved matter in the Arab Gulf states where much of the rapid urban development is attributed either to the 'vision' of one Gulf ruler or to foreign or regional expertise. These issues are also compounded by the fact that state archives, at least until recently, generally did not consider urban- and architecture-related documentation as an essential component of their collections, making it very difficult to identify the actors involved in the construction of many buildings. In Sharjah for instance, Halcrow, the firm behind three iterations of the city's master plan, had discarded almost its entire archival record of the city following its acquisition by an American firm, thereby rendering research and attribution all the more challenging. Access to such archives and documentation is proving instrumental for scholars and academics, not only to understand the built legacies of modernization plans but also to provide a necessary foundation, or basis, for generating contemporary architectural and urban development resolutions. For instance, Jason Carlow and his students relied on Halcrow and Partners' 1980 master plan for Sharjah to cultivate strategic infrastructure proposals for the development of industrial districts in Sharjah. Additionally, Carlow's research investigates sites that have not been studied and locations that have

not received as much attention, like that of blue-collar migrants who often are hidden in plain sight. In this same vein, my co-editor Roberto Fabbri explores the case study of the bustling Jibla district in Kuwait which once was one of the 'epicentres' of the modernization project; it has now become a home and place for social gathering for various low-income expatriates. The outbreak of Covid-19 in 2020, however, laid bare this inequality, with cases spreading within crowded domiciles that have been overlooked by governments and society alike.[4] This resulted in hundreds of thousands of migrant workers leaving the Gulf states, costing tens of billions of dollars in lost revenues; and it also raised questions about the viability of a seemingly endless cycle of construction. In an era where working from home has become feasible, can the reuse of existing buildings both accommodate workers and save money?

Modernism can also reflect a political dimension as appears in Todd Reisz's retelling of how the British Political Agency in the Trucial States was repositioned from a mud-brick, courtyard house in Sharjah to a purpose-built structure in Dubai. Ironically, the structure that the British government vacated in Sharjah went on to serve – for two decades – as one of the emirate's primary hotels; it was given the name Seaface Hotel, signalling its prime location on Sharjah Corniche. The British presence in Sharjah leads me to pose another question: what exactly constitutes modernism in the Gulf? I often consider this particular project in my hometown of Sharjah. A British-commissioned airport – now converted into a museum – was inaugurated in 1932 with a structure made of concrete, aluminium, and glass in addition to corals, mud-brick, and palm tree fronds. Is it not a modern structure? While the airport's control room employed some of the latest technologies at that time, the airport cannot be seen as merely an imported structure. Without the local craftsmen and builders, the construction of this building would not have been fully facilitated. Another structure completed in the same year as Sharjah's Airport was Bahrain's Customs House, whose narrative is carefully reconstructed by Suha Babikir Hasan through her investigation. Hasan leads the readers through the many characters that the building 'impersonated' before it was restored to its initial appearance and historicized. Today, 90 years on, both structures, although never attaining the status of architectural icons, continue to function efficiently.

On a similar path, Kevin Mitchell's paper explores how the status of buildings as 'iconic' impacted their eligibility to be preserved. It could be argued here that iconic buildings designed by renowned architects have a stronger chance of being conserved than those designed by lesser known practitioners. However, that is not always the case as the 'iconic' status of the imposing Constantine Kapsambelis & Associates-designed Abu Dhabi National Oil Company residential buildings on the Abu Dhabi

corniche did not save it from its fateful end in 2018. That same year, Dubai Municipality launched the 'Modern Heritage Initiative'[5] to preserve several structures – many of which are considered 'iconic' – in the emirate including the Dubai World Trade Centre, Clocktower monument, and Al-Baraha Hospital.

A recent example of adaptive reuse of modern buildings in Dubai is Al-Safa Art & Design Library, which was built in 1989 and had recently undergone renovation when much of the original structure was preserved for reuse alongside the newly built glass extension. In the application of reusability of modern architecture, the coming generations will play an increasingly important role as Marco Sosa and Lina Ahmad demonstrate in their chapter. Sosa and Ahmad utilized their university design studio as a research centre for the documentation of modern heritage structures, proposing numerous studies on adaptive reuse of buildings in the UAE. I also wonder how historians will assess texts on architecture and urbanism that are being produced today. An essential review was conducted for this volume by Mohamed Elshahed whose essay revisits Udo Kultermann's book on contemporary architecture in the Arab states on the twentieth anniversary of its publishing. While the book features projects and buildings from cities across the Arab world, Elshahed raises questions about what he deems the "historian's bias" – what gets featured and what is forgotten. Beyond the realm of academia, social media has proven to be a compelling stage to retell the stories and histories of modernization: numerous accounts and pages steadily engage in archival and on-the-ground documentation. For instance, in my research for a book on modern architecture in the emirate of Sharjah and in the absence of a fully developed archive, my colleagues and I significantly relied on social media to search not only for information on featured projects but also for archival images and to gather oral histories, the latter proving to be a very important source in the region. Social media also reflects the growing sense of appreciation for modern architecture in the Gulf, much of it stemming from grassroots initiatives such as city walking tours in Kuwait, Bahrain, and Oman that compose potent arrangements to cultivate the public's awareness of the histories of architectural and urban landscapes of their surroundings.[6]

As a result of this increasing awareness, we have started to see numerous attempts at preservation with varying degrees of success, what Trinidad Rico terms "preservation sensibility" in her chapter. These attempts include the transformation of existing houses, built in Doha between the 1970s and 1980s, into cafés and restaurants – a trend that has been replicated in Dubai's Al-Fahidi district and in numerous diners in Manama's upmarket Adliya neighbourhood. Furthermore, Asseel Al-Ragam explores the private sector's role and contribution to different typologies of individual cultural spaces in Kuwait, examining how each present

different programmes – such as private museums, galleries in warehouses, or exhibition venues inside commercial centres. Also in Kuwait, but on a larger scale, Nilsson presents an existing case study of a building that was largely preserved for adaptive reuse. Souk Al-Wataniya, on whose design he worked, not only survived the devastation of the Iraqi occupation of 1990–1991, but a part of it has been successfully preserved, with the residential floors readapted into offices and a business incubator.

Today, even though there seems to be a Gulf-wide trend leaning towards the preservation of modernist architecture, these efforts largely remain not coordinated by a state-wide policy but isolated as can be observed from the papers in this volume. This publication stems from the workshop, "Re-Engaging with the Gulf Modernist City: Heritage and Repurposing Practices", convened by the Gulf Research Centre in Cambridge, England, in July 2019. Many of those presenting and in attendance – through their writing, activism, and creativity – have been behind the increasing appreciation of modern architecture in the region. This creativity was evident in an award-winning short film by Kuwaiti director Noura Al-Musallam called *Bait Oboy* (My Father's House);[7] it starts with a son entering a modern-looking house and attempting to convince his elderly father to sell the house for a repurposing project. "A restaurant? I am not moving out of this house. I built it in 1960, before independence". Despite the father's pleas, the movie ends with a sledgehammer being driven at a wall. The house will be turned into a restaurant after all. The movie revolves around the concept of memory and nostalgia for a lost past. These factors, perhaps less academically relevant or less related to disciplinary topics for architects and city planners, could play an important role in preserving modern heritage in the Gulf. The movie presents how memories trigger a deep sense of belonging in citizens, and this can help counter real estate forces that, at the moment, are major threats to the existing building stock.

As I shared the events depicted in the film with my colleague Roberto Fabbri, one of the authors of the *Modern Architecture Kuwait: 1949–1989*, he mentioned that it reminded him of Bayt Lothan in Kuwait, a cultural centre and former residence of Emir Sheikh Sabah Al-Salem, bulldozed and turned into a food court. Fabbri remarked that "Similar to Bait Oboy, Bayt Lothan[8] was not meant to be a remarkable example of architecture, nor regional, nor imported, nor traditional, and neither modern. Rather, it was a fond memory for many who remembered or participated in the cultural activities such as training and art classes similar to those now offered in the new cultural centres, some cited by Asseel Al-Ragam, that the government has recently inaugurated".

As touched upon in the introduction, a primary driving force behind this book is the documentation and analysis of modern structures, both obsolete and in use, in order to study their

present condition and consider alternative uses that would allow for their preservation. The lack or scant amount of archival documents along with the relatively small amount of literature about modern architecture in the Arab Gulf region continues to pose a challenge for both researchers and governments alike at a time when interest in preserving modern architecture is increasing. In her preface, Kishwar Rizvi suggests that modern architecture is not simply an "artefact of the past" but sits at the forefront of contemporary culture and design, potentially inspiring future developments. It is our hope that this book, like others that have been published over the past two decades, would encourage both further research and interest in the structures that have born witness to the promise of modernity.

Notes

1 Hilton Kramer, “Contemporary Began When? Times Sets Date at 1970”, *Observer*, January 24, 2000, https://observer.com/2000/01/contemporary-began-when-times-sets-date-at-1970.
2 The first master plan for an Arab Gulf city was for Kuwait by the British firm Minoprio, Spencely and Macfarlane in 1951. For further reading, see Sharifah Alshalfan, *The Aftermath of a Masterplan for Kuwait: An Exploration of the Forces That Shape Kuwait City* (Barcelona: Barcelona International Affairs, 2018).
3 Faisal Mubarak, “Urbanization, Urban Policy, and City Form: Urban Development in Saudi Arabia” (PhD diss., University of Washington, 1992).
4 By 2020, the Arab Gulf states hosted an estimated 23 million migrant workers mostly from South Asia. In the first few weeks of the Covid-19 outbreak, 200,000 Indian nationals registered to be repatriated. For further reading, see Sameer Hashmi, “Coronavirus leaves Gulf migrant workers stranded”, *BBC News* May 15, 2020, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-52655131.
5 “Dubai to Preserve Modern Heritage Buildings under New Initiative”, *Gulf News*, August 2, 2018, https://gulfnews.com/entertainment/arts-culture/dubai-to-preserve-modern-heritage-buildings-under-new-initiative-1.2260871.
6 Grassroots initiatives include Madeenah in Kuwait City which was founded by Deema Alghunaim in 2014. For further reading, see Mai Al-Farhan, “Madeenah: Exploring Urban Development in Kuwait City”, *Kuwait* (blog), *The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington*, March 20, 2017, https://agsiw.org/madeenah-exploring-urban-development-kuwait-city.
7 11.1960 Kuwait (@11.1960), “Bait Oboy, Directed and Written by Noora Al Musallam @mshn, Produced by the Ministry of State for Youth Affairs”, Instagram video, May 30, 2020, https://www.instagram.com/tv/CA03sPChUbf/?igshid=d9nmjmynfrv4.
8 Ben Garcia, “Planned Demolition of Historic Bayt Lothan Stirs Opposition”, *Kuwait Times*, February 24, 2016, https://www.zawya.com/mena/en/life/story/Planned_demolition_f_historic_Bayt_Lothan_stirs_opposition_-ZAWYA20160224050927.