

BUILDING SHARJAH

In a new book, Sultan Sooud Al Qassemi and Todd Reisz trace the early boom days of modern Sharjah, drawing on personal archives as well as crowd-sourced photographs and documents.

Words by Charles Shafaieh

In the early 1970s, the discovery of oil in Sharjah led to an international obsession with the emirate's subterranean depths. A host of actors from France to Australia soon arrived, hoping they would profit from the Gulf's last oil boom. The preoccupation with what was found beneath the earth's surface often eclipsed a dynamic built environment above ground that arose in the 1970s and '80s due to the influx of wealth, migrants, and tourism. This overshadowing has had serious consequences: As Sharjah, like its neighbours, replaced still-young structures at a dizzying rate during the past 40 years, the risk has grown that this rich moment in history will disappear from its, and the world's, collective memory.

Sultan Sooud Al Qassemi, the founder of Barjeel Art Foundation and a prominent academic, has long been aware of this potential loss. Born in Sharjah in 1978, he recalls numerous buildings from his youth that have been demolished and of which younger Emiratis are ignorant. Myriad competing interests occasioned these alterations to the skyline, from the mandates in the 1980s which spurred an "Islamisation" of new and existing designs to the competitive urge throughout the UAE in the 21st century to replace concrete modernist structures with ever-taller—and less environmentally friendly—glass towers. The result can be disorienting to anyone who struggles to retain a grasp of their childhood home when confronted with rapid change.

SHARJAH CINEMA

Designed by Dutch architect Reinder de Vries, the cinema opened on August 8, 1972. Remembered for its landmark forms—corrugated blue cylinders that encased the stairs and an impressive cantilever—it was demolished in 2005.



In an effort to preserve these crucial decades for the emirate and for his own nostalgia, Al Qassemi began an unprecedented five-year project that became *Building Sharjah*. Published by Birkhäuser in June and co-edited by Amsterdam-based architect and writer Todd Reisz, the 432-page volume brought Al Qassemi and his collaborators to architecture offices, national and institutional archives, and former Sharjah residents' homes in Oslo, Beirut, Karachi, Mumbai, and elsewhere, in an effort to reconstruct a city which no longer exists in the same form but that persists as the backdrop to multiple generations' memories.

In these pages, readers learn about ambitious projects such as the 24 monumental concrete Córdoba and Granada Buildings (1979; partially survives today) along Al Burj Street, which was considered "a Wall Street in the desert", and the petite but ornate Airport Mosque (1969), or Masjid Al Matar, that could hold fewer than 100 people and which met new arrivals as they emerged from the emirate's original airport. Both the airport and its mosque were demolished. Structures that still exist are also highlighted, like the vaulted, sprawling Central Souk (1978), as well as unrealised projects such as Polish architect Józef Zbigniew Polak's Seashore Development at Khorfakkan (1977), whose spherical constructions and other curvilinear forms now would be considered "futuristic."

Building Sharjah should not be considered an "architecture book," however. "It tells the story of a city through its urban history and, through documenting Sharjah, is my way of trying to safe-

guard the history of modernity in the UAE," Al Qassemi explains. The book's idiosyncratic structure illustrates this goal. Mirroring and reinforcing his description of Sharjah in his introduction as "an urban patchwork" that is "traditional, modern, Islamic, and global all at once," it contains academic essays, personal meditations, and interviews alongside the archival photographs and short, encyclopedia-like entries about 66 specific architectural projects. These longer pieces, written by over a dozen contributors, extend the project beyond material architecture and reveal the psychologies and experiences of the people who occupied these spaces. Their areas of focus are eclectic and wide ranging: the Aqwas collective's radical performance art that took place in 1985 at the Central Souk; Kuwait's transformative influence on Sharjah's education sector; a snapshot of Sharjah's nightlife at its popular hotels; the story of an Indian photographer who, in 1982, established a studio in the city. The book's form resists a dominant narrative about a complex city repetitively built and rebuilt, demolished and renovated under the influence of local and international forces.

While these transformations often have been dramatic, they occurred within the borders of a relatively stable trio of masterplans designed by the British firm Halcrow. As Reisz describes in his essay about Sharjah's long relationship with the UK, Halcrow's influence was constant during the reigns of three rulers. Its designs—submitted in 1963, 1969, and 1984—were only tweaked to meet new economic conditions and concerns, and to satisfy each ruler's

The circumstances make apparent an ironic, though poetic, counterpoint to the supposed fixity of built structures: that even concrete buildings can eventually leave no trace on the ground and persist in physical form, like a photograph, only by chance.



SHARJAH POST OFFICE

A new main post office opened on Government House Square in 1978. It still stands today, but its original design is now barely discernible.

CHOITHRAMS BUILDING

The King Faisal Street structure is the work of Sharjah-based Gulf Design Group. The design includes shapes reminiscent of work by Charles Correa and Le Corbusier.

POST OFFICE: COURTESY OF DR. NAMAN AL JALILI ARCHIVES COLLECTION



personal predilections. The resulting city is a marked difference from Abu Dhabi and Dubai, for instance, where multiple architects' plans were fused together.

Reisz, whose *Showpiece City: How Architecture Made Dubai* (Stanford University Press) was released last year, notes that comparisons between Sharjah and Dubai should be limited, as they have markedly different histories. But he does see a reading of Sharjah that positions it, too, as a "showpiece city." "There was a performance in Sharjah of being planned, and a sense that something is being shown as an element of the future," he says. "The roads were inscribed; roundabouts were built. What happened in between those roads and roundabouts is a messy story, but these masterplans were really executed."

Finding that story's history was itself a complicated, at times messy, endeavour. People with important information are more forthcoming and give more time in person, Al Qassemi says, while acknowledging how costly such outreach becomes. The conversations themselves also require tact and grace. "It takes a lot of skill to get information from people," explains Reem Khorshid, an Egyptian architect who moved to Sharjah in 2017 to serve as the book's lead researcher. "To help them remember, you show them photographs and tell them names. Sometimes we had to do that more than once, meeting people twice or three times because they will remember one thing and call back to say they forgot something else."

Luck occasioned other discoveries. As one memorable example, Al Qassemi cites the Mothercat Building (1976; demolished in 2000), the headquarters of Lebanese businessman Emile Bustani's construction company, which was one of many institutions that relocated to Sharjah during the Lebanese Civil War. "I don't want to give the impression that I was a modernist since my early days," he says, laughing. "But I remember this building because I always wondered, 'Why is there a big black cat on it?' Every time I would come back from school at Choueifat, I would look at it, and it stuck in my head." He discovered it was designed by Cyprus-born Mesut Cagdas, who also designed the Police Academy in Dubai, major hotels in Muscat, and other significant buildings in the region. Yet he couldn't find any photograph of it, which made him start to wonder if he was exaggerating its importance.

Fortunately, evidence emerged, in serendipitous circumstances characteristic of so much of the material that contributed to *Building Sharjah*.

CENTRAL SOUK

In 1983, *Al Bayan* reported on the Arab Youth Cycling Championship as it passed Sharjah's Central Souk. Designed by British firm Michael Lyell Associates, it opened in 1978.

MOTHERCAT BUILDING

The headquarters of a Middle East construction giant, these offices on Al Wahda Street—the boom-induced road to Dubai—were designed by Cyprus-born architect Mesut Cagdas.



COURTESY OF DR. NAMAN AL-JALILI ARCHIVES COLLECTION



Students of Fatima Al Zahra School, 1953-54. Nama is second from right, front row. Author, courtesy of Shaikha Nama bint Majid bin Saqr Al Qasimi.

THE LONGEST NIGHTS WITH JOY ARE SHORT

This excerpt of an essay from *Building Sharjah*, 'The Longest Nights with Joy Are Short', written by Sultan Sooud Al Qassemi, gives the story of his mother, Nama bint Majid bin Saqr Al Qasimi. The essay charts her life, from the mudbrick hut of her childhood to becoming one of the country's first teachers to helping shape her husband's construction business. Ultimately, she would play a vital role in helping educate a generation and propel the city forward into the 21st century. Nama's journey beautifully mirrors Sharjah's transformation in the past 50 years.

Although Nama cannot confirm the year of her birth, she does know for certain that she was born in winter because her mother gave birth to her in a *khaima*, a tent made of palm tree fronds woven, or "stitched," together as tightly as possible to protect inhabitants from cold winds and rain. Even as late as the mid-twentieth century, concrete and even mudbrick structures were few and far between in Sharjah. The majority of them were inhabited by members of the ruling family, wealthy merchants, and Western officials. Most of the indigenous population lived their winters in *areesh*, also called *barasti*, homes. Rectangular in plan, the areesh summer homes were, like the *khaimas*, constructed of stitched palm fronds, but the weave held together loosely, letting in not only more air but also snakes and spiders. Nama's family fetched water from the town's well, a long walk away. She recalls having to use her *sheila*, a light garment worn by women over their shoulders, to filter sand and small seashells from the water she collected. ■

At a café in Muwaileh, Sharjah, Al Qassemi met the great nephew of an Iraqi photographer and urban specialist who arrived at the United Nations Development Programme office in Sharjah in the late 1970s. Upon learning this, Al Qassemi asked whether his family had any photographs. They did, and among them was one of the Mothercat Building. The circumstances make apparent an ironic, though poetic, counterpoint to the supposed fixity of built structures: that even concrete buildings can eventually leave no trace on the ground and persist in physical form, like a photograph, only by chance.

Less intimate but equally important to the research process was crowdsourcing. Al Qassemi harnessed the knowledge of his roughly 650,000 followers on social media, who he says were integral to getting information from Lebanon, Egypt, Palestine, India, and elsewhere. This was evident, for instance, when he would post lists of architects and enquire whether anyone knew them. “I would get seven or eight out of 10,” he says. “In one instance, someone gave me the telephone number of a gentleman who worked in Sharjah in the 1970s who is now in a retirement home outside Las Vegas. I had the nicest conversations with him, and he reassured me about something I had heard about.”

This international community also corrected false information. When searching for an Indian architect named “Ashok Mehta” who designed the Al Zahra Hospital, he was told repeatedly that no architect with that name existed. But many knew about one named Ashok Mody. “Three letters sent me on a wild goose chase!” he says.

Sharjah’s evolution shows little sign of changing

pace, which reinforces how important it was that Al Qassemi, Reisz, and Khorshid persevered with their efforts. “At least four or five of my structures have been demolished over the course of writing the book, and they are documented here,” says Khorshid. Unlike the US and Europe, buildings in the UAE of a certain age do not receive national heritage or other protective statuses. Only recently have a few, such as the iconic Flying Saucer (c. 1974-1976), become protected.

Despite appearances, *Building Sharjah* is neither a lamentation for a “lost” city nor does it demand the preservation of any existing buildings. Rather, it documents, in polyphonic ways, a moment in time that risks being forgotten by history and which has significance to a readership beyond the UAE. “This city of the past which no longer exists is made up of more than concrete and asphalt; it’s made up of plans, ambitions, and hopes,” Reisz asserts. This is evident both in structures that were built as well as those that remained dreams, which together “capture what was in peoples’ heads” in Sharjah during these lively decades.

“A kind of global fable plays out in Sharjah, with international banking, migrants from different parts of the world, and the circulation of international expertise. These are topics we are very interested in today and which significantly shaped the future of a city in the 1970s and ’80s,” Reisz says. “While you can read theoretical approaches to these topics, it’s also essential to read how they take physical form across an urban landscape. A compression of scale and time lets us observe these forces over Sharjah.” ■



KING FAISAL MOSQUE

This landmark, named after Saudi Arabia’s assassinated ruler, opened in January 1987. The architect, Abdulrahman Al Junaidi, estimated that it could accommodate more than 5% of Sharjah’s population at the time.

DESIGN

WATER IN THE GREEN

Drinking fountains at EXPO 2020 reinterpret the sabeel, explore the UAE’s complex relationship with water, and showcase UAE-based design talent.

Words by Jumana Abdel-Razzaq



Set to welcome millions of visitors from October 1st, Expo 2020 will bring some cutting edge ideas and concepts to the UAE, where they will be showcased alongside innovative designs by leading local creatives.

Unveiled at Jameel Arts Centre in November 2019 were the winners of Sabeel 2020, a programme that invited UAE-based designers to reimagine the humble sabeel—a traditional water fountain that provides relief to passers-by and travellers, a potent symbol of shared humanity and collective responsibility. Designers, architects and artists were invited to interpret the sabeel as a design feature for the Expo 2020 public realm, capturing the spirit of the UAE and the region’s cultural values while providing fresh water for visitors during the Expo’s six-month run.

The 39 fountains join a plethora of public realm installations that will dot the site. They also figure in the event’s legacy plans, which will see the 4.38-square-kilometre site transformed into District 2020, a smart and sustainable city anchored in the needs of its urban community.

The two winning designs, chosen from more than 100 submissions by an international jury, were by design duo Alia Bin Omair and Faissal El-Malak, and Sharjah-based architecture and design practice Architecture + Other Things. The latter’s design, Water in the Green, explores the possibility of creating an innovative, living, and sustainable public drinking fountain.

“We were inspired by the proposition to explore the fountain as a meeting place for visitors from all over the world to connect at the Expo site,” says Faysal Tabbarah, Associate Dean at the College of Architecture, Art and Design at the American University of Sharjah and co-founder and architect at Architecture + Other Things. “This has a strong historical legacy in the UAE where the sabeel, or public

water fountain, became a site for sharing a scarce natural resource with the community. Therefore, the sabeel is a microcosm of the larger relationship of the UAE to its water resources.”

Tabbarah and co-founder Nada Taryam wanted to respond to two important elements of Expo: the commitment to working together to build a better future; and sustainability in relation to scarce resources—particularly water.

The designers also wanted their unique fountain concept to be an educational piece, helping to familiarise visitors with the environment and flora of the UAE. They did this by integrating local plants that are common to the country’s natural environment and thrive in its arid climate—including thafra (tephrosia apollinea), harm (salsola imbricate), and suwayd (suaeda aegyptiaca).

“These flora, which demonstrate resilience despite their size, have had many historical and cultural functions and reflect the UAE’s relationship to the more unseen aspects of its environment,” Tabbarah says.

The plants, he explains, will be irrigated by water collected as the fountain is used. Distributed across the vast Expo site, each fountain will develop a unique identity as the plants grow and change colour throughout the duration of Expo, creating a living and evolving project.

As for its legacy, Tabbarah hopes these plants will live and grow and contribute to the natural landscape far beyond the run of Expo. He is keen to see how each of the fountains will adapt to its microclimate within the Expo site and how this will create different opportunities for flora interaction.

“In the end, every one of the fountains can become radically different from the others just by virtue of its relationship to its environment,” Tabbarah says. ■