



**Gulf Research Centre Cambridge**  
Knowledge for All

## Workshop 6

# Arab Gulf Cities in Transition: Space, Politics and Society

### Workshop Directors:

**Dr. Veronika Deffner**

Visiting Senior Research Fellow  
Middle East Institute  
National University of Singapore  
Singapore  
Email: [veronika.deffner@nus.edu.sg](mailto:veronika.deffner@nus.edu.sg)

**Dipl. Arch. Aurel von Richthofen**

Researcher and Module Coordinator  
The Future Cities Laboratory  
Singapore-ETH Centre  
Singapore  
Email: [vonrichthofen@arch.ethz.ch](mailto:vonrichthofen@arch.ethz.ch)

**Zahra Babar**

Associate Director for Research Center  
for International and Regional Studies  
Georgetown University – Qatar  
Qatar  
Email: [Zahra.Babar@georgetown.edu](mailto:Zahra.Babar@georgetown.edu)

## Abstract

The cities in the Arab Gulf are developing in a fast and unprecedented way. The vast majority of the growing population of the six Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries are concentrated in these cities. While they are a focal point for immigration, they are unique spaces and places on various other levels, too: In many cases the Arab Gulf cities represent the exclusive political and economic centres of their countries; they consume a vast amount of energy; they have surpassed other Arab cities in their size and scale; their exponential growth is driven by diminishing fossil resources and, therefore, they have realised the urgent need to adopt sustainable development policies.

These and many other challenges play out in a limited urban territory. Urban Space is the playground for various actors to engage in this ongoing process of transformation; likewise, it is an important common denominator for territorial processes of political and social scale. Since these developments are increasingly interconnected, urban phenomena have repercussions on regional levels. Gearing them towards sustainability would contribute to stability and prosperity in the Gulf region. Urban and regional development policies need to be developed on the basis of GCC-wide recommendations. Understanding the urban dynamics of the Arab Gulf cities through the perspective of changing spatial practices contributes to the interdisciplinary development of Gulf Studies and becomes key for a holistic understanding of the GCC states.

## **Description and Rationale**

Due to the rapid modernisation and urbanisation process after the oil discovery in the late 1960s, cities in the Arab Gulf have become the centres of economic activities and globalised societies. The sheer quantitative importance of cities as main areas of habitation in the Gulf region can be seen in the remarkable urbanisation rates, ranging from 89 to 98 per cent in 2015, according to UN Habitat estimations (2012).

In addition, from a qualitative perspective, the Arab Gulf cities represent the future of the GCC countries and societies. They accumulate strategic control and power and represent aspirational ways of development and lifestyle, particularly for the younger generation. This has been accompanied by considerable changes in spatial practice (mobility, accommodation, leisure activities, consumption pattern, etc.). Cities have become the hubs of not only economic activities, but also of people, in particular migrants, ideas, goods, services, academic institutions, and of social development in general.

Propelled by the present economic wealth earned off revenues from depleting fossil resources while simultaneously aiming to meet the needs of a growing population, Arab Gulf cities face major challenges that play out within confined urban territories. The concept of urban sustainability (understood as the interplay of social, economic, ecological and political dimensions within urban spaces) and its application to Arab Gulf cities will be examined and developed within the scope of this workshop. The GCC cities are currently in the process of transition from being in unsustainable (and in some cases uncontrolled) phases of rapid expansion towards a stable and hopefully more sustainable phase in the near future. The form of this transition has yet to be decided and the success or failure of the Arab Gulf cities is the key to success or failure of the Gulf States.

The aim of this workshop is to develop a new framework for 'Arab Gulf Cities in Transition' by examining the interdependencies between the dynamic fields of Urban

Space, Urban Politics, and Urban Society. This tripartite interdisciplinary concept simultaneously examines spatial, political, and societal dynamics. A 'spatial turn' is necessary to understand the cities and the Arab Gulf region (GCC) as a whole.



### ***Urban Space***

In addition to human and natural resources, Urban Space is the ultimate resource for development in the Arab Gulf cities. Although spectacular land reclamation projects in Dubai and elsewhere are aiming to expand urban territory, the space resource is finite. The use of space within cities is becoming increasingly heterogeneous and often subject to conflicting interests. Mobility within this Urban Space increases with economic development, yet sustainable forms of mobility pose a challenge in Gulf cities. Due to the increasing consumption of natural resources, the energy and capital challenges that Gulf societies face are amplified.

The French social philosopher Henri Lefebvre (1991) suggests that every society produces its own space according to its mode of production. Following this idea, we would like to push further to consider Urban Space of the Arab Gulf cities as a capital and as a resource. Unlike other global metropolises, Arab Gulf cities have limited access to resources within their own national territory. Where these exist, pressure from urban development reaches far into previously rural or desert areas. Urbanisation marginalises agriculture and other traditional forms of spatial practice. The hinterland of Arab Gulf cities is often located beyond the administrative boundaries of these cities or city-states, yet this hinterland is a necessary pre-requisite for urban and national development. Urban Space understood as capital and resource in this context thus encompasses all spatial practices subject to a Lefebvrian notion of production, whether they may be located in urban, rural or interstitial spaces. This expanded concept of Urban Space will tackle the following questions and aspects of changing spatial practices for Arab Gulf cities:

- Spatial resource allocation and capital flows
- Spatial visions and imaginations
- Spatial organisation
- The impact of foreign investment and the gradual opening of the real estate market within the GCC
- Mobility across space and modes of transport

### ***Urban Politics***

The process of urbanisation in the GCC has been unfolding rapidly and irreversibly. Decisions taken today will have far reaching consequences on the future development possibilities of the inhabitants of Arab Gulf cities and further implications for the prosperity and stability of the region. Therefore, planning and development policies, their agents and forces, need to be studied, compared, and synchronized.

Examples of recent planning and policy frameworks of Gulf cities are: The Abu Dhabi Vision 2020 (2010), which developed a pioneering development scheme addressing social housing, urban and regional development within a comprehensive policy framework; The Oman National Spatial Strategy (2014-17), which is another attempt to develop a comprehensive planning framework for spatial practice, the Dubai Green Guidelines or the engineered new cities in Saudi Arabia, e.g. the King Abdullah Economic City (KAEC). These development frameworks have not been developed within the respective countries but are often imported and fall short in addressing the specific local context.

Due to the steep demographic growth rates within the GCC, the provision of adequate housing schemes intertwines economy and society in a particular way. While many urban and regional planning frameworks are complex and difficult to visualise, all GCC governments have adopted housing as a key development component. Urban and regional policies need to be synchronized on GCC levels. Participatory forms of planning and policy making may yield potential avenues that have not been arrived at so far. Urban Politics in relation to changing spatial practices in Arab Gulf cities would thus encompass:

- Development of urban and regional planning policies
- Description of policy implementation, including their agents and forces
- Housing policies at the intersection of demographic development, economy and society
- Changing notions of space and spatial practice: Public vs. private space?

### *Urban Society*

Without a doubt, the cities in the GCC have emerged as the new centres of the Arab world in a globalised world, having outstripped their sister cities in North Africa and the Levant (s. Al Quassem 2013) particularly in terms of their economic prosperity.

Gulf societies are becoming “younger” in their demographic aspect. In addition, the cultural transformation is showing significant impact, particularly on the growing younger generation of nationals. Currently, the evolution of urban societies in the Arab Gulf can be attributed to two main phenomena: The rise of a new middle class, and the internationalisation of the societies due to the high percentage of foreigners working and living in the Gulf. Both are interrelated and inducing changing lifestyle patterns, including movements towards a consumer-driven society, car-based mobility, proliferation of information and communication devices, and the impact of social media, as well as a cultural transformation with regard to socio-cultural diversity and heritage within Arab Gulf cities.

A major distinction between the “new” and the “old Arab centres” has been drawn due to the high number of foreigners in the Arab Gulf cities who vastly outnumber the GCC citizens. This imbalance has led to significant questions about socio-cultural and national identity, belongingness, and the question about the “right to the city.” The current reality of the high number of non-citizens also needs to be linked to the endeavour for a “sustainable existence” or development for Arab Gulf cities.

However, while those and other challenges of the heterogeneous urban fabric are undeniable, we also need to look beyond the “struggle to belong” and towards diversity and urban pluralism as potential areas for sustainable development. The creative potential of diversity can be helpful, e.g., for productivity and economic diversification – not only for new business ideas, start-ups of SMEs on the way towards knowledge-based and information-driven economies, but also to guarantee the necessary supply of a qualified and skilled workforce. Heterogeneity among the workforce has been proven at many junctures to be a significant driver for fostering creativity, diversification, and tolerance, which is another important aspect in guaranteeing social stability. Urban Society in relation to changing spatial practices in Arab Gulf cities therefore addresses:

- New consumption and mobility patterns and their spatial scope
- Urban society and changing values/lifestyle
- Socio-cultural diversity
- Temporary migration, translocality, and immigration policies
- Nationalisation strategies
- The new middle class and national identity

### **Scope of the Workshop and Contribution to the Expansion of Gulf Studies**

Without a doubt, these cities represent major processes and dynamics in the Arab Gulf region. They mirror all social, economic and political transformations. Therefore, they are a great area of research to delve into in order to reach a better understanding of the contemporary Arab Gulf, specifically in terms of the visions, challenges, and endeavours of the GCC states. The relatively young history of the cities, the larger cultural and religious context, the cross-comparability and parallel development make Arab Gulf cities ideal research areas. Moreover, the Gulf region is still marginalised in Global Urban Studies (e.g., Planetary Urbanisation, s. Brenner 2014). Therefore, we see an important opportunity to offer a platform for international scholars, practitioners, planners, academics and others, to exchange ideas and findings about the Urban Gulf. This workshop aims to bring together international and Gulf Arab scholars and practitioners for a fruitful exchange.

### **Anticipated Participants**

The proposed workshop aims to bring together knowledge and resources from various disciplines to enhance a deeper understanding of the dynamics, role, and the development of cities in the Arab Gulf countries. We welcome contributions from policy making and practices (e.g., planning and development), as well as from different areas such as politics, architecture, urban studies, geography, history, social and cultural sciences, engineering, economics, management. Papers in the workshop may take various forms, including case studies, theoretical concepts, conceptual papers, and policy and practice statements. The workshop aims to attract papers which can be identified with one of these three suggested areas: Urban Space, Urban Politics, and Urban Society in the Arab Gulf region. These areas may be represented in detail by the following or similar aspects:

<b>Urban Space</b>	<b>Urban Politics</b>	<b>Urban Society</b>
Changing spatial practice (public vs. private space)	Planning policies [government, agents, forces]	Social changes [rising middle class, foreign workforce, migration, national identity]
Mobility (across space); Transport/ alternative modes of transport	Urban and regional development	Changing lifestyle patterns [consumer society, mobility]
Spatial resource allocation and capital flows [under domestic and foreign investments]	Housing [demography, economy]	Cultural transformation [socio-cultural diversity and heritage]

## Workshop Director Profiles

**Dr. Veronika Deffner** is a social and cultural geographer. She is a Visiting Senior Research Fellow at the Middle East Institute of the National University of Singapore. Prior to this, she was a Visiting Assistant Professor at the German University of Technology (GUTech) in Muscat/Oman and a Research Fellow at RWTH Aachen University (Germany). Her research covers social, cultural, and political aspects of international migration and cities in the Gulf region. She is particularly interested in the production of space and society in the heterogeneous Gulf societies, the question of the Urban, and the nationalisation and economic diversification process in the Gulf.

**Aurel von Richthofen** is an architect and urbanist. He is a researcher and module coordinator at the Future Cities Laboratory in Singapore (FCL) affiliated to ETH Zurich. Aurel was trained in Switzerland and the USA and is a registered architect in Berlin and Zurich. Prior to moving to Singapore, Aurel spent four years teaching and researching on urbanisation in the Arabian Peninsula at the German University of Technology (GUTech) in Muscat/Oman. He was co-investigator on a research project on sustainable urbanisation patterns in Oman – sponsored by The Research Council Oman – and served as consultant to urban renewal projects and spatial planning strategies in Oman. In Singapore, Aurel leads a research module developing sustainable building materials. He is currently writing his dissertation on the topic of “Extended Urbanisation in Oman” at the Institute for Sustainable Urbanism at TU Braunschweig.

**Zahra Babar** is Associate Director for Research at the Center for International and Regional Studies, Qatar University. Previously, she has served with the International Labor Organization and the United Nations Development Program. Her current research interests include rural development, Gulf migration and labour policies, citizenship in the Gulf States, and GCC regional integration. Her recent publications include “The Cost of Belonging: Citizenship Construction in the State of Qatar” (Middle East Journal, 2014). She has edited, with Suzi Mirgani, *Food Security in the Middle East* (Oxford University Press, 2014) and, with Mehran Kamrava, *Migrant Labor in the Persian Gulf* (Hurst/Columbia University, 2012).

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