



Gulf Research Centre Cambridge
Knowledge for All

Workshop 6

Gulf Cities as Interfaces

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Abstract

From colonial orientalism to post-modern political urbanisms, Gulf cities have become notorious for urbanizing in a very specific way: by taking a spatial-urban approach that emphasizes enclaves as well as exclusivity by means of urban zoning. The production of Gulf cities is based on political will and speculative planning. Almost every part of the city's district enjoys diverse jurisdictions which are customized individually: resort compounds, corporate free trade zones, expatriate suburbias, workforce housing, shopping malls, commercial and governmental zones, museums, universities, and so on. The workshop will explore the factors and forces that generate the physical and socio-economic aspects of Gulf cities: cities that have resulted from rapid mobilization, exponential urban growth, and a very specific wave and adaptation of globalization processes. In addition, they share common historical, demographic and topographical contexts and have been integrated into the global economy under similar conditions and within an identifiable time frame. This makes urban nuances and patterns even more integral to a deeper understanding of how these cities evolve and function as interfaces.

Description and Rationale

Socio-economic and Geo-political Perspective

The GCC is considered as one of the most urbanized regions in the world, with an estimated 70 percent plus of the population residing in cities. Furthermore, within each state, there is predominant pull toward the capitals and metropolitan areas as socio-economic centers and global players. Most GCC states are in the process of setting forth spatial development strategies to balance and shift growth as well as dependencies on oil. This serves as a crucial moment to analyze the growth of Gulf cities. One proposition is that Gulf cities are designed and evolved as pure interfaces to the 21st century economy and as such architecture and urbanism are seen as dynamic facilitators and flexible commodities. One area to explore is how these cities fit in transnational urbanisms and global capitalistic forces, where world cities are conceptualized as nodal points of command, coordination, and control as the spatial (urban and architecture) component becomes evident.

Geographical Perspective

The new simulated SimCities, dynamic formations, master plans and speculative developments are now projecting new satellite urbanisms. Reconnaissance technologies turn into spectacle and 'telegenic' fantasies addressing mass tourism. Simulated panoramas and imagery of unfinished projects give rise to an exciting promise and fantasy. In effect, digital imagery and technology is shaping the future of cities. After all, we are all nomads inhabiting an image. The traditional Islamic horizontal urban pattern and its direct relation to land and water have shifted to vertical and global networks of trading, tourism, fantasy and investment generating new fractal cities and satellite urbanisms. This is the future state of world urbanism – prescriptive and full of visual dramatization. The exploration of places through imagery is a contemporary phenomenon. As the technology in the production of imagery of un-built and newly built architecture has become more sophisticated, its image becomes an end in itself and can now be transmitted across the globe instantaneously. The imagery of artificial coastlines and intense skylines of clusters is now projecting a new urbanism.

Historical Perspective

The discovery and commercial exploitation of oil from the 1930s onwards has served as the historic marker of transformation of Gulf landscapes and communities. A drastic shift from tribal societies and coastal trade to an economy embedded in global networks, occurred in a matter of decades. However, both aspects are still prevalent today and often appear as overtly expressed supra-narratives in an attempt to cater to the longing and nostalgia for a not-so-distant past. This often overlaps with a larger encompassing Arab orientalist narrative. For instance, UAE developers have adopted the elongation of the picture frame - the panoramic - especially resonating the landscape found in Orientalist paintings. This technique simulates depictions used in historical representations. Despite the current production of iconic architecture, this exact historical representation coincides

with a mental map of these cities, which paradoxically is still routed in their Islamic imagery. The expo of Orientalism is now driven by Master Developers, promoting a western lifestyle in oriental settings, representing Gulf culture as haute couture in exclusive towers of wealth or gardens in exotic islands. These cities manifest the contemporary interpretation of Orientalism: sensual, spectacular, artificial, subliminal and, above all, contemporary and global. As the model of the Islamic city shaped by Westerners might show an 'indigenous' space, this imagery is now a major export, attracting millions of tourists seeking the authenticity of the 'Middle Eastern City'. In effect, imagery and the 'global tourist' has been shaping Gulf cities and in return they shape the world.

Scholarly Contribution and Workshop Rationale

There has been significant interest in the region and, in particular, in the capital and metropolitan juggernauts of the Gulf after the manifestation of oil wealth. Real estate developers, economists, policy makers, foreign interests and developmentalists have been at the forefront of producing material on Gulf urban studies, followed by tourism and, more recently, designers. Whereas a sporadic abundance of research on aspects of Gulf urbanism exists, there is a crucial and perceptible void of collective, investigative and nuanced subject matter that explores the dynamics of the phenomena that is 21st century Gulf cities and their accumulative pasts and present realities. We are interested in not only seeking and collating contributions on various aspects of Gulf urbanism but also attempting to produce an original and synthesized discourse based on the relationships and links that can be established between the existing facets of both professional and academic research.

Anticipated Papers

We would like to invite papers that focus on cities in Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates and encourage comparative and explorative analyses with cities in the MENASA (Middle East, North Africa and South Asia) region and/or on a global scale where relevant.

We are particularly interested in how these cities have been designed and evolved as pure interfaces to 21st century economy. We are seeking in-depth perspectives on the dynamics and spatial discourses of modernity and globalization as constructed by: the discovery of oil; the revival of trade and rise of soft economy; the real-estate boom, culture of abundance and subsequent financial crisis; and urban repercussions of the post-Arab Spring realities."

The anticipated participants of this workshop are architects, planners, urbanists, geographers, anthropologists, sociologists, academics, and students engaged in urban research on the region. The ideas and topics to be explored in the workshop sessions are to include but are not limited to:

1. City as interface for consumerism
 - Free trade zones and enterprise enclaves
 - Shopping and the commoditization of space
 - Global tourism and culture for sale
2. Political urbanism and popular taste
 - Revolutionary, public, and symbolic spaces
 - New Arab Orientalism: the real estate spectacle
 - Urban participation
3. Modernity and master planning on sand dunes
 - Sand and fantasy: artificial coastlines and expanded oases
 - Reconnaissance planning
 - Westernization vs. modernization: the dilemma of emerging Gulf cities

Workshop Director Profiles

George Katodrytis is an architect involved in practice, teaching, and research. He is currently Associate Professor of Architecture at the American University of Sharjah, UAE. He has built a number of projects in Europe and the Middle East as well as published widely on contemporary architecture, urbanism, cultural theory and digital media. He recently exhibited his aerial photographs of Dubai. His work addresses the 'city', especially as it is evolving in the 21st century.

Sharmeen Syed has a background in architecture and urban design and is currently working as an architect and researcher at Sharjah Art Foundation. Syed is also engaged in independent research and artistic projects investigating subject matter in the fields of cultural geography and urban sociology. Her current projects focus on 21st century urbanism and derivative spatial experiences through new media and projected memories.

Selected Readings

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Cities and Sand

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