



**Gulf Research Centre Cambridge**  
Knowledge for All

Workshop 10

## **Re-engaging with the Gulf Modernist City: Heritage and Repurposing Practices**

Workshop Directors:

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### **Abstract**

Long-time neglected architectural and artistic productions of the modernization era are now at the centre of a renewed interest. In the last decade, a series of initiatives were launched to understand, analyse and re-engage with the once-modern city, which meanwhile lost its pivotal function and meaning. A city within a bigger city, the urban fabric produced in the Gulf during the modernization era has the potential to narrate the social growth, as well as the East-West dynamics typical of the region and citizens' memories of a recent past. Lately, media reported the news of preservation policies to be issued for the architecture of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. What future can be envisioned for the Gulf modern heritage? The workshop invites qualitative and quantitative contributions that will look at this compelling topic from a cross-country perspective pondering the cultural, historical and sociodemographic aspects of possible repurposing actions.

## Description and Rationale

In summer 2018 the Municipality of Dubai launched the Modern Heritage Initiative, intending to preserve a series of buildings from the 1970s, such as John Harris' World Trade Center and George Rais and Jafar Tukan's Al Khuloud Nursery School, among others. This is one of the rare occasions in which a GCC government agenda puts the word 'heritage' in direct association with the architectural production of the modernization era. For decades, modernist architecture in the Gulf has been equated to the demolition of the traditional *medina*, with top-down plans and the gradual *westernization* of the country. In the second half of the 20th century, the rapid urban and social transformation has been blamed for allegedly superimposing foreign narratives to local customs, blurring the contours of the native culture. As a consequence, people and institutions have demonstrated disaffection and a low sense of belonging to the 1960s-1970s city. Today, it is not the most appealing residential/commercial location, and demolition is normally accepted as a common practice to liberate strategic central plots to attract investors and real-estate speculators. Moreover, since the local population has progressively snubbed the once-*ville moderne*, it has become a vital and informal gathering point for 'other' citizenships.

However, and despite resulting in an incomplete vision, modernist architecture has been the language - for better or worse - of Gulf cities' global aspirations. Modernism again, both in the arts and in architecture, has been instrumental in reconsidering and negotiating fluid concepts like tradition, contemporaneity and identity in relation with society and the built environment.

In the last decade, a new tangible interest for these artefacts has grown stronger, as demonstrated by a variety of new studies and bottom up-initiatives. Scholarly research and publications, students' thesis topics as well as Venice Biennale participations, public debates and exhibitions, place-making campaigns and a few rehabilitation projects demonstrate a raising and compelling need to re-engage with the concrete city of the 1960s and 1970s.

Now, if, as it seems, the Gulf will move towards the preservation of his recent *physical past*, what conservancy can be expected or envisioned? Architecture is meant to perform as a *living organism* in synergy with the urban environment. Given the Gulf cities' tendencies to 'spectacularize' or 'museify' the built environment (e.g. heritage villages or history theme malls), and the wave of nostalgia perceivable especially on the social media, what can be a projected trajectory for these specific artefacts in the near future?

### Scope and Objectives

Within this framework and in relation with the last decade, the workshop intends to map, read and analyse initiatives investigating the notion of modern heritage, its potential and its possible reuse in relation to the Gulf city. The focus is not limited to actions of physical transformation of the space, but it embraces also reflections on cultural practices, strategies of urban re-appropriation and place-making.

The workshop also seeks to interrogate the historical value of urban heritage from the second half of the 20th century, examining how academic research and grassroots plans intervening on the urban environment are expanding the debate on Gulf cities.

In the same way, the organisers wish to address how the reuse of this particular heritage could foster the place-identity sense of belonging and how the re-appropriation of neglected spaces could also address the endemic land consumption in the GCC cities. Finally, the workshop aims to investigate the present condition of this urban fabric as a liminal territory for low-income expat communities, and the possible impact of future urban regeneration projects.

### **The Workshop's Contribution to the Expansion of Gulf Studies**

The workshop will build on the last decade growing interest in Gulf architecture studies, which generated a conspicuous progress in the specific fields of urban and heritage studies research. It will problematize the tendency to show the modernization of the physical environment as a one-directional phenomenon, a West-to-East technical knowledge export and not a bijective relationship. While many scholarships read the city transformation from a historical angle, very few attempts were made to envision future scenarios for modern heritage reuse. Since in most cases the parts of the city where these architectures sit became areas for informal dwelling or gathering, the workshop will also allow to investigate policies of exclusion in relation with the built environment, and how different interventions could rebalance the right to the city.

The workshop aims to collect participations that would offer a broader contribution to heritage studies, employing a multidisciplinary perspective to account for diverse and inclusive contributions to this field.

Since all Gulf cities had a very similar *imprint*, the critical examination of the 1960s and 1970s built environment will allow to consider architecture as an expression of the national narrative in a cross-country perspective, reading the Gulf heritage in its salient possible trait of *Khaleeji* identity. An equally significant contribution is represented by the recognition of Gulf modernist architecture as a paradigm of the relationship between East and West, and between historic patterns, indigenous narrative and cosmopolitan aspiration.

### **Anticipated Participants**

The workshop invites papers that address but are not limited to, the following topics:

- Gulf cities, forms and identities
- Heritage and conservation practices
- Urbanism in the Gulf
- Place identity and Placemaking
- Cultural practice in the GCC
- Modernity, tradition and transition
- Westernization vs modernization
- Youth identity and the built environment
- Heritage, memory and narratives of the past in the city
- Decolonial urban practices
- Liminal spaces and policies of exclusion
- Heritage nostalgia and commercialisation of memory

The anticipated participants of this workshop are researchers, academics, members of cultural institutions and students engaged in research on the region. The workshop will also welcome contributions from architects, planners, anthropologist, sociologist, practitioners, etc.

## **Workshop Director Profiles**

**Sultan Sooud Al Qassemi** is a United Arab Emirates-based columnist whose articles have appeared in *The Financial Times*, *The Independent*, *The Guardian*, *The Huffington Post*, *The New York Times Room for Debate*, *Foreign Policy*, *Open Democracy*, and *ArtAsiaPacific* as well as other notable publications. Sultan rose in prominence during the Arab Spring, his tweets became a major news source, rivalling the major news networks at the time, until *TIME* magazine listed him in the “140 Best Twitter Feeds of 2011.” In 2018 Sultan ranked 19th on the "Arabic Thought Leader Index" by the Gottlieb Duttweiler Institute, the oldest Swiss Thinktank. Sultan was an MIT Media Lab Director’s Fellow from 2014-2016, and in the Spring of 2017 Sultan was a practitioner in residence at the Hagop Kevorkian Center of Near East Studies at New York University, where he offered a special course on Politics of Middle Eastern Art. In 2018 Sultan became a Yale Greenberg World Fellow.

Sultan is also the founder of the Barjeel Art Foundation, an independent initiative established to contribute to the intellectual development of the art scene in the Arab region by building a prominent and publicly accessible art collection in the United Arab Emirates. In January 2018 an agreement was signed with the Sharjah Museums Authority for a first of its kind long-term display of modern Arab artworks at the Sharjah Art Museum lasting five years.

**Dr Roberto Fabbri** is an Italian architect, researcher and current professor at the Department of Architecture, Arts and Design of UDEM - University of Monterrey. As a designer, he practised in Europe and the Middle East, mostly on adaptive reuse projects. In 2006, he participated to the 10th Venice Biennale. From 2010 to 2016 he worked with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) for the rehabilitation of the Kuwait National Museum and the re-installation of the exhibition galleries. In parallel, he completed the repurposing project of the American Missionary Hospital, the Amricani Cultural Centre, which resulted in the 2012 nomination for the Aga Kahn Award for Architecture. In the same years, he was head of design for the museum Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyyah also in Kuwait, coordinating a number of exhibitions on ancient and contemporary artefacts. Prior to joining UDEM he taught architecture studio and exhibition design at the University of Bologna and at the American University of Kuwait. In 2014 he was visiting researcher at the Center for Gulf Studies in Kuwait. His research lines focus on the modern heritage and its rehabilitation, on middle-east architecture and culture, on exhibition design and display methodologies. He contributed to several international conferences and seminars in Italy, UK, France, Lebanon, Mexico, the United States and Kuwait, and published extensively on academic journals and architectural magazines such as *Domus*, *Faces-Journal d'Architecture* and *IJIA*. He released two monographs on the architectural work of Max Bill (Mondadori 2011; inFolio 2017) and he co-authored the double volume “Modern Architecture Kuwait 1949-89” (Niggli 2016 and 2017).

## Selected Readings

Caline Malek, "Rising Gulf Cities look to protect landmarks," *Arab News*, Sept. 3, 2018.

Yasser Elsheshtawy, "We need to talk about the Modernism Fetish in the Gulf," Dec. 26, 2017 <http://dubaization.com/post/168964409563/we-need-to-talk-about-the-modernism-fetish-in-the-gulf>

Sultan Sooud Al Qassemi, "Demystifying Sharjah's iconic King Faisal Mosque," *Gulf News*, November 16, 2017.

Amale Andraos, Nora Akawi eds. with Caitlin Blanchfield, *The Arab City: Architecture and Representation* (New York: Columbia Books on Architecture and the City, 2016).

Fabbri Roberto, Saragoça Sara and Camacho Ricardo, *Modern Architecture Kuwait 1949-1989* (Zurich: Niggli Verlag, 2016 and 2017).

George Katodrytis and Kevin Mitchell (eds.), "UAE and the Gulf. Architecture and Urbanism Now," *Architectural Design* no.233, January/February 2015.

Nezar AlSayyad, *Traditions. The "Real", the Hyper and the Virtual in the Built Environment* (London: Routledge, 2014).

miriam cooke, *Tribal Modern. Branding New Nations in the Arab Gulf* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014).

George Arbid ed., *Architecture from the Arab World (1914-2014) a Selection*, (Beirut: The Ministry of Culture of Bahrain and the Arab Center for Architecture, 2014).

Bambling Michele ed., *Lest We Forget: Structures of Memories in the UAE* (La Biennale di Venezia, 2014).

Pascal Menoret, *Abu Dhabi Guide: Modern Architecture, 1968-1992* (Abu Dhabi: NYUAD/Find, 2014)

Karen Exell and Trinidad Rico eds., *Cultural Heritage in the Arabian Peninsula. Debates, Discourse and Practices* (London: Routledge, 2014).

Nasser Rabat, "What is Islamic Architecture Anyway?," *Journal of Art Historiography* no. 6 (June 2012).

*The State of Arab Cities 2012. Challenges of Urban Transition* (UNHABITAT, 2012).

Yasser Elsheshtawy, *The Evolving Arab City. Tradition, Modernity and Urban Development* (London: Routledge, 2008 and 2011).

Sandy Isenstadt and Kishwar Rizvi, *Modernism and the Middle East. Architecture and Politics in the Twentieth Century* (Seattle and Washington: University of Washington Press, 2008)