



**Gulf Research Centre Cambridge**

Knowledge for All



**Visual Culture(s)  
in the Gulf  
An Anthology**

Edited by  
**Nadia Mounajjed**

**Visual Culture(s) in the  
Gulf: An Anthology**



# Visual Culture(s) in the Gulf: An Anthology

Edited by

Nadia Mounajjed



Gulf Research Centre Cambridge



# Gulf Research Center

E-mail: [info@grc.net](mailto:info@grc.net)

Website: [www.grc.net](http://www.grc.net)

## Jeddah

Gulf Research Center  
19 Rayat Al-Itehad St.  
P.O. Box 2134  
Jeddah 21451  
Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

## Geneva

Gulf Research Center  
Foundation  
49, Avenue Blanc  
CH-1202 Geneva  
Switzerland

## Cambridge

Gulf Research Centre  
Cambridge  
Centre of Islamic Studies  
University of Cambridge  
Sidgwick Avenue  
Cambridge CB3 9DA, UK



First published 2016  
Gulf Research Centre Cambridge

© Gulf Research Centre Cambridge 2016

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the Gulf Research Centre Cambridge.

ISBN: 978-1-909864-08-5

The opinions expressed in this publication are those of the authors alone and do not necessarily state or reflect the opinions or position of the Gulf Research Centre Cambridge.

“

By publishing this volume, the Gulf Research Center (GRC) seeks to contribute to the enrichment of the reader's knowledge out of the Center's strong conviction that 'knowledge is for all.'

”

Dr. Abdulaziz O. Sager  
Chairman  
Gulf Research Center

# About the Gulf Research Center

---



The Gulf Research Center (GRC) is an independent research institute founded in July 2000 by Dr. Abdulaziz Sager, a Saudi businessman, who realized, in a world of rapid political, social and economic change, the importance of pursuing politically neutral and academically sound research about the Gulf region and disseminating the knowledge obtained as widely as possible. The Center is a non-partisan think-tank, education service provider and consultancy specializing in the Gulf region. The GRC seeks to provide a better understanding of the challenges and prospects of the Gulf region.





# Contents



Foreword: The Visual Turn.....	11
Acknowledgements.....	15
Visual Culture(s) in the Gulf: An Introduction .....	17
1. Visual Archives: Images from the Formative Years of the Emirates .....	29
<i>Nadia Mounajjed, Sharmeen Syed and Uns Kattan</i>	
2. Visual Censorship as Cross-cultural Negotiation: Teaching Art History in Saudi Arabia .....	47
<i>Lucile Dupraz</i>	
3. Displaying in the Peninsula: Museums as Creators of a Visual Identity .....	71
<i>Pamela Erskine-Loftus</i>	
4. Negotiating Dubai's Cultural Identity: An Excavation of Meaning in the City's Famous Projects .....	91
<i>Butheina H. Kazim</i>	
5. Hyper-Contextual Megastructures: A Vision into New Architectural Identities for the UAE .....	111
<i>Enrique Martínez</i>	
6. Visualizing Urban Form as Mass Ornament in Muscat Capital Area .....	137
<i>Aurel von Richthofen</i>	
7. From the Corner of an Eye: Visual Journeys along the Highways of Dubai .....	159
<i>David Kendall</i>	
About the Contributors .....	179
GRC Publications.....	181



## Foreword: The Visual Turn

*Jack Persekian*

This anthology was instigated by the observation that the “visual turn” – rigorously analyzed in recent decades by prominent scholars, predominantly vis-à-vis Western culture – is a central, fascinating, and defining phenomenon in the Gulf region as well, and that it merits deep and nuanced research.

The British government’s declared decision to withdraw from the Gulf region came somewhat unexpectedly in early 1968, prompting the Gulf leaders to make their nations into independent modern states with a unique cultural identity and an authentic national voice. One example is the seven Trucial Emirates that coalesced into the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The crucial phase of this process culminated with the announcement of the establishment of the Union and the creation of the UAE on December 2, 1971. Over an intensive four-year period (1968-1972), a national identity was forged and bestowed with visual tropes, emblems and attributes: a flag had to be drawn, money minted, emblems, symbols and insignia commissioned, stamps printed, buildings erected, artworks depicting and celebrating the nation designed. In short, a comprehensive visual vocabulary emerged in alignment with this newly established political entity.

The desire to shed light on the role of visual culture in the construction of the nascent collective identity of the Gulf is a unifying thread that runs through the seven essays that comprise this volume. The wealth of accessible and well-

documented sources linked with the region's young history provide a unique opportunity to reflect upon broader themes, such as nation building, Orientalism, the legacies of colonialism, and the challenges of post-colonialism. Beyond this, the essays also raise theoretical and methodological queries pertaining to the emerging field of visual studies and its potential relevance and applicability to the study of non-Western cultures.

This project is premised on the understanding that visual images are powerful signifiers whose complex meanings may be deciphered through the application of scholarly scrutiny. Hence, I shall conclude this brief foreword with two images.

Two photographs, cogently discussed in the first essay in this volume, were on my mind in April 2010, when I invited Dr. Nadia Mounajjed to lead a research project at the Sharjah Art Foundation focused on Visual Identity in the United Arab Emirates. In a nutshell, they encapsulate the multiple queries that sparked this endeavor back then, and that animate the first chapter of this anthology.

The first is a portrait of Shaikh Shakhbut that appeared in *Life* magazine in April of 1963 (Figure 1.1). The orientalist construction of the setting, the subject, and his attributes – a neatly balanced dialectic between interior (carpet) and exterior (desert landscape); and traditional garb and attributes juxtaposed with the modern model of the art oil-rig made this *mise-en-scène* a joy to take apart. But it was the second photograph – a “meta-photograph,” if you will – that I found most intriguing (Figure 1.2). The photograph shot by an unseen camera reveals the strikingly contrived aspects of the first photograph. By shifting the angle of vision of the same site, it exposes Ralph Crane – *Life* magazine's famous staff photographer – in the process of photographing the Shaikh's portrait, described previously. It reveals how the German-born photographer of the American magazine composed, directed and “created” an image of the Arab Shaikh. Deliberately exposing the portrait's status as an artificial composition, this “meta-photograph” invites viewers to ponder the intersecting binaries that weave the fabric that a few years later would “become” the UAE: Nature vs./and Culture; Tradition vs./and Modernity; East vs. West; Familiar vs. Exotic; Them vs./and Us; Subject vs. Object, etc. Moreover, the image conspicuously includes multiple gazes and perspectives: the gaze of the invisible photographer and the implied viewers (readers of the magazine); and the onlookers in the background – soldiers, civilians, locals, and visitors. Indeed, this photograph encourages the writers and readers of this anthology, myself included, to cast a critical eye at this and many other visual images, shedding light and gleaning insights about the Gulf region and the contemporary world.

While the first chapter opens up with an attempt to understand and analyze the “image,” the rest of the chapters examine instances of visual cultures in the Gulf. The authors tackle in-depth a number of issues: art education, museology, photography, architecture, and urban culture. Many issues are worth considering as we see in this volume: What is the nature and scope of visual production in the Gulf? How does the visual manifest itself in Gulf art education, museums, and cultural institutions? What are the narratives behind such manifestation? How do architectural production and urban morphologies affect the visual environment in Gulf cities? What is their impact on culture and identity?

The publication of this anthology is Janus faced. It harks back to my early discussions with Dr. Mounajjed and our incipient vision for a pioneer research program at the Sharjah Art Foundation between 2010 and 2011, but it also points forward to the many additional research paths that have yet to be pursued.



## Acknowledgements

This edited volume is the outcome of a workshop that was held at the University of Cambridge as part of the Third Gulf Research Meeting in July 2012. I wish to thank all participants for their sincere interest and participation in this event. Special thanks go to the Gulf Research Center for encouraging this project since the beginning and for supporting this publication.

Several authors contributed directly to the development of this publication. I wish to thank them all for their commitment, dedication and patience during the publication phase. The Sharjah Art Foundation directly contributed to the first chapter of the book and encouraged the study on visual culture in the UAE from its very beginning. Thanks also to the Middle East Centre at the London School of Economics and Political Science for the research environment it provided during the editorial process.

*- Nadia Mounajjed*





## **Visual Culture(s) in the Gulf: An Introduction**

The first pictures appeared thousands of years ago, well before language and writing were invented. The role of image-making took various forms in history and in the different cultural regions of the world. Historically, the image appeared over and over again as a favored and dominant form of cultural creation. In Europe, for example, a long tradition of artistic practice produced a wealth of visual records that reflected the local values as well as the cultural and socio-political realities of European societies. In the Arab Peninsula, the nature of cultural production and its visual expression are quite different. In this region, the historic inclination towards linguistic practices and the relative absence of the “image” as a cultural product is evident. Moreover, the conservative nature of Gulf societies may have delimited the use of imagery and led to alternative practices of visualization that are very peculiar to this region.

With this limited role of the image, poetry remained as the backbone of artistic practices in the GCC, providing space for imagination and creativity. In fact, until today, poetry remains one of the most popular cultural expressions among local citizens in the Gulf. It provides an authentic and original form of linguistic expression, which has retained its vitality and stability despite the passage of many centuries. However, archival research demonstrates that visual expression is present, and it is becoming certainly more and more popular with time. A mass of precedent and contemporary visual material is yet to be discovered and analyzed to better understand the multiplicity of visual culture (or cultures) of the Gulf.

Visual culture is not only limited to the creation of the image. Its meaning multiplies to the modern tendency to picture or visualize existence. According

to Nicholas Mirzoeff, visual culture also represents “moments where the visual is contested, debated and transformed as a constantly challenging place of social interaction and definition in terms of class, gender, sexual and radicalized identities.”<sup>1</sup> In this sense, practices of visibility and visualism may be understood beyond imagery and can include a range of visual productions.

This volume aims to initiate a discourse on the multiplicity of visual production in the GCC and its various narratives. Without losing sight of the role of the image as such, it also shifts the context of investigation to visual urban milieus and explores the relationship between Gulf cities and their visual and socio-political realities. The seven chapters examine the tangled relationship between cultural creation, visual practices, the politics of representation, and socio-political context. The book highlights the differences between sub-cultures and local realities. The result is a composite picture of the historic complexity of political and social life in the cultural universe of the Gulf region.

## **Theorizing Visual Culture**

Recent academic research on visual culture points to a growing discipline that encompasses the visual arts, new visualizing technologies, practices of looking, and visual methodologies. The scholarly work of Nicolas Mirzoeff on visibility and visual culture since 1999 is an attempt in this direction.<sup>2</sup> Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright’s work on *Practices of Looking* in 2000 is another example.<sup>3</sup> Those are in addition to Kerry Freedman’s book on *Teaching Visual Culture* in 2003<sup>4</sup> and publications by Monica Montserrat Degen and Gillian Rose on *Visual Methodologies and the Sensory Experiences of Urban Design* in 2012.<sup>5</sup> Most of this literature begins with an evocation of the proliferation of imagery within our society. For Mirzoeff, “human experience is now more visual and visualized than

- 
1. Nicholas Mirzoeff, *An Introduction to Visual Culture* (London; New York: Routledge, 1999), 4.
  2. See, for example, Mirzoeff, *An Introduction to Visual Culture* (London: Routledge, 1999; 2008); Nicholas Mirzoeff (editor) *The Visual Culture Reader* (London: Routledge, 2002); Nicholas Mirzoeff, “On Visibility” in *The Journal of Visual Culture* 5:1 (2006) 53–79.
  3. Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright, *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).
  4. Kerry Freedman, *Teaching Visual Culture: Curriculum, Aesthetics and the Social Life of Art* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2003).
  5. Gillian Rose, *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to Interpreting Visual Materials* (London: Sage, 2012).

ever before.”<sup>6</sup> For Freedman, “much contemporary culture has become visual.”<sup>7</sup> In many ways, “our culture is an increasingly visual one.”<sup>8</sup>

This body of scholarly work is confronted with different methodological assumptions: One practice is widely derived from Material Culture Studies focusing on the image as an object. It examines how images cross over into cultural discourse and create parallels between various forms of contemporary media – usually magazines, newspapers, or videos. This study of imagery concerns itself with understanding how images operate by paying special attention to the mechanisms by which they affect and manipulate the viewer. This approach tends to privilege subjectivity over social context – a celebration of individual narrative over a consideration of social critique. Another approach explores the ways in which images play an active role in “making culture.”<sup>9</sup> It explores images with the intention of revealing the hidden ideological agendas embedded in their production and dissemination rather than in the way in which they are received by the individual beholder. Other scholarly work may assume various perspectives to theorize and historicize visual culture including a feminist perspective (one of the most important perspectives from which visual culture has been theorized and historicized over the past forty years) providing a framework within which to understand the shifts in feminist thinking in visual studies, as well as an overview of major feminist theories of the visual.<sup>10</sup>

Visual anthropology examines picture-making traditions around the world and explores systematic order to this seemingly endless array of pictures and depictions. An Islamic perspective may provide unique insights into the aesthetic and cultural history of Islam and provides a vivid window into Islamic visual culture and society.<sup>11</sup> Another perspective may focus on the political role of the visual – particularly political images and their ideological associations.<sup>12</sup>

---

6. Mirzeoff, *An Introduction to Visual Culture*, 1.

7. Freedman, *Teaching Visual Culture*, xi.

8. Sturken and Cartwright, *Practices of Looking*, 1.

9. Mirzeoff, *An Introduction to Visual Culture*.

10. Amelia Jones (ed.), *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader* (London: Routledge, 2010).

11. See, for example, Fairchild Ruggles (ed.) *Islamic Art and Visual Culture: An Anthology of Sources* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011) which collects translations from original sources and texts which help to reconstruct facts on art, calligraphy, and painting and shed light on the aesthetic and cultural history of one of the world’s major religions.

12. Lina Khatib, *Image Politics in the Middle East: The Role of the Visual in Political Struggle* (London: I.B. Tauris & Co., 2012).

While visual culture remains a new field, scholarship focused on the visual culture of the Gulf is even more limited. Often related writings escape any attempt at categorization. Significant academic work can be found within an urban perspective; the research of Yasser Elsheshtawi,<sup>13</sup> Samia Rab,<sup>14</sup> and Nelida Fuccaro<sup>15</sup> are trustworthy references on the visual environments in Gulf cities. Some reference can be made to *Al Manakh*, which examines new urban developments unfolding in the Gulf region.<sup>16</sup> Other writings that may be informative remain focused on the art scene. For example, Robert Kluijver's *Introduction to the Gulf Art World* is an attempt to introduce the historical, political, and social context in which the current boom in contemporary art of the Gulf countries (Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, and Oman) is taking place.<sup>17</sup> *Bidoun Magazine*, and recently *Ibraaz Online Magazine* provide new platforms for conversation in this direction.<sup>18</sup> Overall related knowledge remains fragmented which makes it challenging to theorize or to establish a critical discourse on visual culture in the Gulf. This volume aims to contribute to the existing discourse by examining forms of representation, aesthetics, and ideologies of the Gulf.

Essays are informed by the authors' attention to historical, geographical, and disciplinary contexts as well as by individual concerns such as globalization, post-colonial narratives, feminist critique, transnational cultural shifts, and identity politics, which clearly intersect with the field of the visual. The seven chapters set visual production in a local and global context and use it as a window for exploring the relationship between the visual, on the one hand, and education, identity, urban planning and aesthetics, on the other. This collection is clearly not comprehensive but rather "an anthology" — an attempt to open up a theoretical discussion on an area in Gulf Studies that seems to be under-researched.

---

13. Yasser Elsheshtawi, *Dubai: Behind an Urban Spectacle* (London: Routledge, 2010). Also see the work of Yasser Elsheshtawi <http://www.sheshtawy.org/hidden.htm>.

14. Samia Rab, *Seascape Urbanism: Conserving Port Cities in Al Khalij* (MIT Video: Accessed March 25, 2013 <http://video.mit.edu/watch/seascape-urbanism-conserving-port-cities-in-al-khalij-10750/>).

15. Nelida Fuccaro, *Histories of City and State in the Persian Gulf: Manama since 1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

16. Rem Koolhaas and Todd Reisz (eds.) *Al Manakh Continued* (Amsterdam: Archis, 2010).

17. Robert Kluijver, *Introduction to the Gulf Art World*, 2012, <http://gulffartguide.com/g/GAG-Essay.pdf> (accessed March 25, 2013).

18. See *Bidoun Magazine* website, <http://www.bidoun.org/magazine/> (accessed March 25, 2013). Also see *Ibraaz* website, <http://www.ibraaz.org> (accessed March 25, 2013).

## **Contested Images**

Chapters One and Two use visual analysis and discourses on the location of power. They examine how images can become problematic when they operate in a contested ideological framework. This framework looks at image production as a cultural practice that exposes both the existing power dynamics and the agency of the individuals. This framework also looks at the interplay between subjugation and resistance, where both power and resistance coexist simultaneously within the realms of the image and in the process of its production, reception, and interpretation.

Chapter One examines selected material from the visual archives of the United Arab Emirates. It looks at images produced between 1952 and 1972. During this period, photography assumed a documentation role. It was an instrument used by western travellers to depict a newfound foreign world, framed by an unavoidable orientalist interpretation. On the other hand, early forms of newspaper design show a certain ideological rhetoric that strongly propagates a strong national identity. Between these two outlooks (of a colonial rhetoric and nationalistic discourse) archival graphics, photographs, and images are examined and analyzed. Many aspects seem to have influenced the Emirati visual culture during that time. These aspects co-existed as layers of representation amidst a local tradition, emerging regional influences, a modernizing resolve, colonial control, and pan-Arab awareness. The intensity of material reveals the nature of a place between the East and the Western world.

The second chapter presents a different case of image politics through the practice of censorship. Lucile Dupraz illustrates the iconoclastic gestures on Western art history textbooks that take place at one of the women's colleges in Saudi Arabia. The textbook which included classical paintings are problematic because they show nudity. The covering gestures, as a result, range from ink marks to strokes to a complete covering of the nude bodies. For Dupraz, this iconoclastic practice exposes the relationship of power between the censor and the censored, it also becomes "a necessary mediation in its given context, and exemplifies a fecund entangling of visual creation and its consumption." Dupraz's formal study is linked to feminist critique on Western representations of the female subject as presented by Berger's *Ways of Seeing*.<sup>19</sup> Interestingly, not only does this practice accentuate the contested framework of body politics (women censoring nude female bodies), it also highlights the reality of teaching visual arts in Saudi Arabia and the challenges that art teachers face to bridge the gap between an inherited western art tradition and

---

19. John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin Books, 2008).

local values. It also highlights the dynamics and local politics of image production in this place. While other practices may be simply based on suppressing unwanted visual material,<sup>20</sup> this one opens a new space for intervention. In this sense, the research tries to present a case of censorship as an opportunity for cross-cultural negotiation.

## **Local Identity versus a Global Visual Economy**

In the Gulf, like many other places today, human experience has become more visual than ever before. We are more and more surrounded by images, which affect us, link and condition our existence in many ways. This expansion of modern image-space, as Walter Benjamin's argues, may be "a potentially democratizing affair" that would eventually lead to a more "transparent society."<sup>21</sup> Or it could eventually destroy the depth of the real as Baudrillard argues.<sup>22</sup>

The proliferation of a global visual economy coincides with the emergence since the 1980s of a single global market dominated by multinational companies, international firms, and a global art market, the results of which are made visible within the Gulf region and its visual culture. The image of global cities with their urban developments is certainly one example. Al Jazeera's influence on worldwide affairs and the impact of its popular base on international politics provide another instance. The emergence of an international art market, satellite campuses of top universities, and the opening of leading museum subdivisions in the region further propagate this global visual economy. Hence, the Gulf visual economy is clearly part of a global one. Alternatively, local practices of resistance emerge to counter-balance this universal trend. In the UAE, for example, there is a growing debate on national identity. This is expressed through people's search for identification with their own culture and place. The vast preponderance of expatriates in a community (that has become a minority population) triggered concerns about how it is influencing Emirati customs, habits, and societies. The debate is also a response to the tension between a growing materialism and the spiritual, aesthetic, and moral core that

---

20. See, for instance, the removal of the picture of women from the Ikea catalogue in Saudi Arabia, <http://riyadhbureau.com/blog/2012/10/ikea-sorry-for-deleting-women-from-saudi-catalogue> (accessed March 13, 2013).

21. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* (New York: Schocken, 1969).

22. Jean Baudrillard, *The Ecstasy of Communication* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 1988).

defines Emirati identity.<sup>23</sup> This tension functions within a space of cross-cultural negotiation, between global and local realities.

Various steps are taken to reinforce a local sense of identity. In Chapter three, Pamela Erskine-Loftus examines the museums of the Arab peninsula. Since the 1960s and 1970s, the use of museums as a form through which to create and project visual identity – national and regional – has flourished in this region. Generally, museums focus on local heritage and assume a didactic role that manifests itself through the projection of local identity. However, the manifestation of an adopted western concept of the museum (with its associated visual-centric practice) is the prevalent model in the Arabian Peninsula. This version of the museum, argues Erskine-Loftus, has brought with it a certain western understanding of display and interpretation, as well as expectations and presumptions of audiences. Erskine-Loftus questions whether such reduction of the sensory experience to the visual may be less relevant to the east and in museums outside the west; it brings forward questions related to sensual hierarchies and identity.

Knowledge production in a visual globalized economy is a subject of attention here. The recent establishment of the Museum of Islamic Art in Doha in 2008 paved the way for a number of museums, which are expected to open within the coming few years in Abu Dhabi and beyond. How will these museums contribute as platforms for knowledge production and exchange is yet to be defined. Furthermore, since 2009, three top universities opened satellite campuses in the Gulf, with a set of 18 graduate and undergraduate programs directly related to visual studies, museology, arts and design. Universities that decided to “go global” offer those programs, including New York University Abu Dhabi (NYUAD), Paris Sorbonne in Abu Dhabi, and Virginia Commonwealth University in Doha (VCU-Arts). Whether these programs and museums will be able to respond to the specificity of the place, negotiate local and imported knowledge, and produce critical platforms for a discussion on local modes of visualism and visibilities is yet to be tested.

## **Urban Visual Culture**

Urban form is at the same time the result of demographic and economic constraints, as it is the cultural product of careful negotiation and aesthetic politics. According to the United Nations Population Division, the three decades between 1970 and 2000 have brought about significant economic, political, and technological changes, which have influenced the way urban areas are structured and function in the Gulf.

---

23. Zaki Nussaibeh in discussion with the author, June 2, 2011.



Three crucial factors have shaped the urban landscapes of the region: first, the 1970s oil boom and the sharp fluctuations of oil revenues in the following decades; second, the large-scale movement of people within the region; and third, the forces of globalization since the beginning of the early 1990s. This was accompanied by population growth and increased urbanization. By the year 2000, the majority of the GCC populations lived in urban areas, with the notable exception of Yemen. Almost the entire population of Bahrain, Kuwait, and Qatar were living in urban areas by then.<sup>24</sup> One can then imagine the shift in the visual environment that most people in the Gulf have lived through in those thirty years.

The most recent archetypal representation of the Gulf city embodies an impressive set of large-scale buildings with contemporary formal languages connected by infrastructure and a program of public spaces. Dubai is probably the city that most reflects archetype. The Gulf Global City is a city, which aspires to compete in a global market and tends to accentuate its symbolic economies — making use of arts, signature architectural projects, and commissioning enormous shopping and entertainment attractions to promote its image. In this process, it also works through a continuous progression of identity negotiation between a capitalist super-modern tendency and Arab Islamic conservatism, as Butheina Kazim explains in Chapter Four through the case of Dubai.

For Kazim, the visual spectrum of Dubai holds an ongoing continuous project of identity negotiation. By analyzing specific projects such as Ibn Battouta Mall, Burj Khalifa, Madinat Jumeira, she examines some of the city's record-breaking ultramodern mega structures, and explores the defining elements of the projects, which “now serve as bold, sometimes jarring, effigies of Dubai's visual environment.” Kazim outlines three tropes that characterize Dubai's architectural

---

24. According to the United Nations Population Division,; <http://www.unep.org/geo/geo3/english/435.htm#fig263a> (accessed March 13, 2013)“The 30 years between 1970 and 2000 have brought about significant economic, political and technological changes, which have influenced the way urban areas are structured and function in the Gulf. Three crucial factors have shaped the urban landscapes of the region (UNESCWA 1999): the 1970s oil boom and the sharp fluctuations of oil revenues in the following decades; the large-scale movement of people within the region; and the forces of globalization since the beginning of the early 1990s [...] There has been a massive migration of the population from rural to urban areas in nearly all countries as well as immigration of foreign workers into urban areas in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries.” Maps and results gathered from UNDP GEO3 Global Environment Outlook on urbanization in West Asia show high level of urbanization in the Gulf countries (West Asia) showing Kuwait, Qatar and Bahrain as highly urbanized with an urbanization level of more than 90 percent and UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Oman with 70-80 percent. The exception is still largely rural Yemen (less than 50 percent).

and urban projects. First, a “world-of-worlds” notion — in which the city “engages in the compulsive import of other cultures, worlds, and sometimes civilizations to its borders.” The second trope explores “the Hybrid Orient.” This visual style, Kazim argues, “is an amalgamation of various architectural and design elements from across the Orient that have been combined in single projects with the promise of delivering to the viewer an authentic Arabian experience. The third and final trope explores the projects that were either born or conceptualized during the Dubai heydays of the mid 2000s.

Alas, the practice of adopting contemporary diverse formal and visual architectural languages is often unrelated to the specificity of the current socio-cultural context of the Gulf sub-regions. Chapter Five critically examines the proliferation of mega-structures in the main cities of the UAE. Enrique Martinez explains how such deliberate urban branding strategy may highlight the striking disconnection between the visual excess of the Emirati city and the authentic socio-cultural reality of the Emirati society. He examines the ways in which Gulf cities have embraced mega structures as a status symbol and an economic tool for urban growth and consolidation. As a result, the city of Dubai has become, like many other cities in the neighboring countries, “a collection of juxtaposed built occurrences trying to differentiate themselves from each other.”<sup>25</sup>

Research on the urban visual landscape in the Arab Peninsula demonstrates common factors between various sub-regions but also shows marked differences (for example, discrepancies in the level and pace of urbanization). Obviously, each city is the product of its colonial and post-colonial history. It is the outcome of the evolution of its distinctive social and physical structures, and its intersection with the region and the world. Discrepancies in the demographic, ethnic, and social structures also condition the visual landscape among sub-regions. For example, the Corniche of Ajman and Sharjah’s coastline are each different and both cannot be compared to Dubai’s landscape. Each is a result of its own context as well as a natural result and connector between local, social, cultural, and civic forces, as Martinez concludes at the end of chapter five.

Moreover, Gulf cities (like other cities and maybe even more) transform, evolve, and reveal in their physical fabric layers of time. This transformation of the urban and visual landscape affects the image of the city and the different ways in which we experience and interact with our visual environment. The example of the corniche is relevant here too, because the coastline has always been a peculiar feature that

---

25. See chapter five.

many Gulf cities share. The coastline provided a certain Gulf identity; an identity characterized by what Samia Rab previously named “Seascape Urbanism.”<sup>26</sup> Today, however, the Gulf waters have turned into an ignored “industrial backdrop,” Rab argues – as opposed to the identity shaped by the livability on the water. Instead, the image of urban settlements overseeing the water is substituted with urban sprawl, new developments, or as we see often, the image of a global city with mega-structures and high-rises.

This growth was particularly visible in the case of Oman. According to the UN Population Division, the urban population increased from 11.4 percent of the total population in 1970, to 84 percent by the year 2000. This spectacular population growth and urban transition explains the extent to which urban sprawl has changed the environment, in which most Omanis live and work, and hence transformed visual culture. Chapter Six explores this condition. Richthofen provides a unique reading of Muscat morphology based on concepts of physiognomy and mass ornament. Since most Omanis prefer to live in freestanding villas, “the resulting sub-urban form,” as Aurel van Richthofen argues, represents a continuous urban landscape, turning the individual houses into exchangeable pieces of a nation-wide ornament.<sup>27</sup> While the reasons behind this phenomenon are particularly Omani, in Muscat, Richthofen explains: “We are faced with a new aesthetic regime that transgresses the status quo and that does not resemble in any way the global Gulf city model or the flashy development of Dubai.”<sup>28</sup>

With such a fast growth it may be hard to stop and observe. In some Gulf cities, the economic crisis in 2008 may have slowed down urban development and allowed for reflection on the reality of architectural production in the UAE. This pause may help to reassess the urban environment and its visual spectrum. Another point that is worth considering is the selective approach to the production of visibility in the Gulf. One result of this selective visibility is the exclusion of representation of marginalized groups. In the last decades, a heightened economic and construction boom in the region has meant an increase in the need for foreign labor, Asian, especially south Asian, migrant workers make up the majority of the UAE workforce yet they are rarely represented as part of the culture and everyday life of the global Gulf city. In order to truly experience the visual possibilities of Khaliji (Arabic term for “Gulf”) culture one has to shift tactic from a social invisibility, disconnected

---

26. Samia Rab, Personal Communication.

27. See chapter six.

28. See chapter six.

narratives, and a disembodied representation of the urban environment towards a more embodied, inclusive understanding of the Gulf urban culture. In order to better examine the multiplicity of visual narratives, one has to disobey the simplified narrative of a homogenous visuality and urbanity by highlighting the complexity of socio-urban networks.

In the last chapter, David Kendall highlights this absence by making visible the informal urbanism and the everyday transitory sites of resistance within the city of Dubai. Overtaken by globalizing influences, these transitory sites, often populated by low-income migrants, are almost a reconstruction of lost connections in which the local and the global are closely intertwined. His artistic practice questions views of the city imposed by specific architectural identities and political structures, exposing shifting social views on what is acceptable as contents and modes of public disclosure. Chapter Seven suggests an alternative to Dubai's rendered "image" (depicted by ocular descriptions that simulate presence for global audiences and promote the city-state as a global space of spectacle and cultural hybridity.) Kendall's images/photographs illustrate instead the spatial fragmentation and social exclusion, enhanced by the built environment and new architectural zones spread out across the landscape. Photography and walking are utilized to generate imaginative, site-specific, and multi-sensory responses to these liminal landscapes. The aim is to make distinctive connections between categories of image that are normally seen in isolation by a global audience.

To this end, the study of visual culture in the Gulf is unavoidable in an era when heightened visualization has become a defining attribute. In the past four decades, the Gulf has provided an overwhelming visual spectacle and very particular ways of "seeing" and "visualizing" the world. Which leads me to ask the following questions: How can the Gulf engage in a globalized visual economy yet at the same time retain the local specificities of place and time? How can it effectively negotiate and integrate local knowledge with imported forms of representation? How to deal with body representation and body politics in a conservative culture and at the same time open the door for art and an independent visual spectacle? What would the visual spectrum look like when an inclusive approach to representation is practiced beyond a unified narrative and a scenario where a multiplicity of existing layers is made visible? This approach will probably help us appreciate the everyday sub-texts, and the various aspects, which define Gulf societies and contribute to Gulf visual culture.



# 1

## Visual Archives: Images from the Formative Years of the Emirates

*Nadia Mounajjed, Sharmeen Syed and Uns Kattan*

### Introduction

One of the earliest records of photographic representations found in Western media about the Emirates was in 1956, when *The National Geographic Magazine* featured a photo-essay titled “Desert Sheikhdoms of the Pirate Coast” by Ronald Codrai.<sup>1</sup> The article included text and images and featured some 30 photographs showing pearl fishing, Dubai Creek, and boat schools crossing the waters. The article presented a different image of the Gulf than the viewers were familiar with since the post-oil era. It illustrated coastal towns with a vernacular vibrant and colorful culture as well as a solid social community of men, women, and children. It highlighted the seascape and a lifestyle that is very close to the water when the relationship between the people, land, and the sea was natural and fluid. Images showed street dancing girls, floating boat schools, souks, and fishing practices.<sup>2</sup>

A few years after the publication of this article, in 1963, *Life Magazine* printed another article on the Emirates. But this one was quite different. The article was

---

1. *The National*, History Project Team, 24. *An Issue of National Geographic Magazine*, July 1956, Video. November 21, 2011.

2. *Ibid.*

titled “O Long of Life’ drinks camel milk and runs on oil.”<sup>3</sup> It told a story about the changing lifestyle of Shaikh Shakhbut (the ruler of Abu Dhabi) following oil discovery. Shaikh Shakhbut became the ruler of Abu Dhabi in 1928. He reigned for 35 years; during this period oil was discovered in 1958.<sup>4</sup>

Figure 1.1 illustrates the cover-page photo of the article with Shaikh Shakhbut standing still, fixed and confident in the middle of the desert. Stepping on a Persian carpet, surrounded by palm trees and sand, he is holding a falcon. Cultural symbols all around him represent a local sense of identity. Far behind him is Abu Dhabi’s historic landmark of Al Husn Fort. “A spry man,” as the article described him, he:

**Figure 1.1: Shaikh Shakhbut, ruler of the oil-rich kingdom Abu Dhabi**



Source: Life Images. © 1963 Ralph Crane / © Time Inc. accessed January 22, 2013, <http://images.google.com/hosted/life/23019ce5485b1f9c.html>.

3. Timothy Green, “O Long of Life’ Drinks Camel Milk and Runs on Oil,” *Life Magazine*, May 3 (1963): 50-61.
4. Michael Quentin Morton, “The Abu Dhabi Oil Discoveries,” *GEO ExPro Magazine* 3, no. 8 (2011), [http://www.geoexpro.com/article/The\\_Abu\\_Dhabi\\_Oil\\_Discoveries/a3b23f12.aspx](http://www.geoexpro.com/article/The_Abu_Dhabi_Oil_Discoveries/a3b23f12.aspx) (accessed August 26, 2012).

“has a carefully trimmed black beard, a thin nose, searching brown eyes [ . . . ]  
He wears a brown, clocklike robe and a galabiya. A dagger, in a curved gold  
sheath, is thrust into his belt. He has black loafers on his feet.”<sup>5</sup>

As it appears in the image, the ruler’s body frontality and his commanding posture embody a community that survived harsh conditions and later enjoyed the benefits of potential growth and prosperity. He seems to be eagerly looking to face the new age of the post-oil emirate. The model of an oil rig stands on a small table to his left hand side.

In 1963, *Life Magazine* was already an iconic visual producer and one of the most prominent magazines worldwide. Its article on the Emirate tells about the growing curiosity about the Gulf and its new oil findings. The layout followed the classic early format of *Life Magazine* and the text was condensed into 50 pages with pictures in black and white and framed with advertisements. The visual style of the article still seemed inexplicable if compared to other issues during that time, which often included coloured prints and photos of American icons, movie stars, the Kennedys, the war in Vietnam, and the Apollo program.

For the western reader of this issue, the composition at the time must have seemed particularly curious, if not anecdotal. It is, however, coherent with a historically inherited perception of what this foreign region might have looked like: the Persian carpet, with its intricate patterns and vivid colours, is placed lightly on the sand to define the spatial boundaries of the scene. Its displacement from a domestic environment into the desert evokes the appearance of the flying rug from the fabled east that the western reader has long heard of. The model of the rig acts as an emblematic time marker between pre-oil and post-oil Emirate and the economic growth that the country was about to witness, as if it was the new orientalist symbol – a symbol that soon became strongly associated with the oil-rich countries.

Ralph Crane, the photographer who took this picture, may have seen himself not only as a photojournalist but also as an “interpreter” of another world to the Western viewer and reader. From an orientalist point of view, this photograph may seem as an attempt to encapsulate, reconstruct, and incorporate what is a distinctly different world – the world of the Orient: the “Other” world. In order to accentuate and visualize this geopolitical awareness into the space of the image, it would make sense that Crane decides to photograph his subject in the wide desert of Abu Dhabi standing on a Persian carpet, surrounded by the unlimited sand, palm trees,

---

5. Green, “O Long of Life’ Drinks Camel Milk and Runs on Oil,” 50.



and camels. Figure 1.2 illustrates the process of image production as a form of negotiation. While the camera sits in the middle, both figures appear on both sides of the image symbolizing two positions: the self versus the other; the East versus West; self-identification versus projection.

**Figure 1.2: Ralph Crane while photographing Shaikh Shakhbut, shot in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates, on April 1963**



Source: Life Images. © Time Inc. accessed January 22, 2013, <http://images.google.com/hosted/life/632f01190d5c7a56.html>.

The formative years<sup>6</sup> were critical years in the Emirates. They saw a major process of radical transformation with the discovery of the oil, the withdrawal of British forces from the Gulf, and the independence of the Gulf States by the end of 1971 as well as the emerging discussions on the formation of a federation of the emirates. This shift was accompanied by a significant transformation in the socio-political order as well as in cultural values and expressions.

---

6. “The Formative Years” is a term referring to the years between 1950 and 1970. This period started with UAE unification and independence from British rule. These two decades also saw a process of major developments especially under the rule of Shaikh Zayed bin Sultan Al-Nahyan.

The visual archives of the Emirates illustrate images of symbolic meanings, which may challenge our understanding of the place, its power structure, and the politics of representation. Those images were not created in a vacuum. They existed within an ideological and socio-economic framework. The question is: How were these images produced and what functions did they assume? Furthermore, can they educate us about the past? In other words, can they help us understand the multiplicity and specificity of the culture of the Emirates?

## **Photography and Media in the Formative Years**

In the UAE of the formative years, images took different forms. Mostly, they were produced in the context of photography, stamp design, and print media. Visual arts remained relatively limited during the formative years. There is little evidence of artistic production before the 1950s, and the local art scene did not evolve and develop as a visual form until the 1970s.<sup>7</sup> Even then, art was strongly understood in the context of folklore and heritage, which explains the direction of post-federation identity – an identity that finds itself in tradition, folk heritage, local culture, and a regional belonging.

Other images available for mass use (e.g., stamps and currency) were more prevalent. In the 1960s, for example an astonishing stamp collection was produced in the UAE with diverse local and regional subjects ranging from the Arabian Nights to Kennedy brothers and portraits of Abdul Nasser. According to Obojski, stamps started to be issued in this region in response to an economic necessity “to stamp-out deficits.”<sup>8</sup> He explains:

“During the years after the British Navy moved in and before the discovery of oil, the Trucial States, as well as a handful of other sheikhdoms, protectorates and republics scattered along the east and south coasts of the Peninsula, hit upon the idea of helping to balance their budgets by issuing stamps for sale to collectors.”<sup>9</sup>

- 
7. Nabhan Abdelilah, “National Identity between Arab Folk Culture and the Culture of Folk Heritage,” *Methods in Documenting Popular Heritage in the UAE and the Arab Gulf*, Volume 1, edited by Hassan M. AlNaboudeh and Mhd Fateh S. Zaghl (Abu Dhabi: Zayed Center for Heritage and History, 2000), 237-264.
  8. Robert Obojski, “Stamp Out Deficits!” in *Saudi Aramco World* 12-17 of the November/December 1970 print, from <http://www.saudiaramcoworld.com/issue/197006/stamp.out.deficits.htm> (accessed on March 13, 2013).
  9. Ibid.

American themes were recurrent with surprising frequency. In 1964, Sharjah released a set of three airmail stamps to mark the opening of the NY World's fair. In 1968, a set of stamps was also issued in Umm al-Quwain featuring seven European painters from fifteenth to the twentieth century. Between 1967 and 1972, Ajman, Fujairah and Ras al-Khaimah released stamps depicting the Arabian Nights and Walt Disney's Fairy Tales designed with very bright colors and vivid illustrations.<sup>10</sup> This material reflects the disputed complexity and multiplicity of visual expression, its intricate relationship to economic realities, its global and regional links, and their connotations.

### ***Photography***

The majority of the images we found during our study were photographic. Photography was not yet established as an art genre, but it was not practiced in the UAE as a profession either. Photography, however, clearly emerged as an important image-making tool. It soon became a convenient instrument to document the fast-growing urban and social transformations of the country (i.e., the influx of expatriates; the impact of the newfound oil wealth; the lifestyle). Pictures depicted local culture and captured seascapes, landscapes, and cityscapes. Some beautifully shot historic photos were also taken then from an aerial viewpoint. They illustrated the fast growing urban sprawl alongside the coastline.

These photographs were taken by photographers from different backgrounds and carrying a variety of perspectives and skills: Ralph Crane (American photographer); Ramesh Shukla (Indian photographer), Ronald Codrai (British photographer), Anita Van der Krol (Dutch photographer), Noor Ali Rashid (Pakistani photographer), Wilfred Thesiger (British explorer), Yoshio Kawashima (Japanese photo-journalist), Ahmad Junaidi (Palestinian photographer), and Kamran Shirdel (Iranian photo-documentarist).

Photographers worked through a legitimization process by seeking support or commissions from political leaders.<sup>11</sup> A number of photographers took commissions for western media or produced royal portraiture. Ronald Codrai worked for the *National Geographic* and at the same time took many images of rulers. Ramesh Shukla (another photographer of Indian origins) extensively photographed members of the ruling families and sometimes recorded political events. Both Codrai and Shukla, however, expressed their preference for spontaneous or un-

---

10. This collection of stamps is exhibited at the Sharjah Heritage Museum.

11. Ramesh Shukla in discussion with the authors, April 2012.

staged photography. The photographic genres ranged from individual journalistic ventures (e.g., Ralph Crane and Ronald Codrai) to visual memoirs (e.g., Wilfred Thesiger), and commissions for ruler portraiture photography (Ramesh Shukla, Noor Ali Rashed), as well as landscape and aerial photography produced during the British presence. At that time, photographers were not fully equipped or trained as professionals. Supplies for camera equipment were very rare.<sup>12</sup> The camera itself was still a rare sight; many people were seeing it for the first time and the subjects of photographs were not always familiar with the technology,<sup>13</sup> which resulted in reactions ranging from indifference to aggression. Ramesh Shukla explains: “I was hit with fish by a lady as I leaned in pointing my camera to get a picture.”<sup>14</sup> The incident not only demonstrates the cultural complexities that manifested in these interactions but also shows the relationship between the photographers and their intended subjects, as a form of negotiation across spatial and social boundaries.

Many of the material produced in the 1950s and 1960s were not intended for an audience, nor did they have a role beyond the commission (in case of royal portraiture) or individual artistic talent (in the case of personal photo-memoirs). Pictures remained in the private collections of their photographers.<sup>15</sup> No galleries existed to showcase the work. Some pictures of the rulers or of cultural symbols underwent visual conversion and featured on stamps<sup>16</sup> of family cards, or were seen in corner shops and airports.<sup>17</sup> Other images that depicted everyday life were

- 
12. Justin Codrai as cited in “History Project Team, 24. An Issue of National Geographic Magazine, July 1956,” *The National* [Video Interview], November 21, 2011. Justin Codrai explains how his father struggled to secure a film for his camera in one of his photographic expeditions: “The magazine wanted him to shoot in Kodachrome film, unobtainable outside the US. The solution was to ship the films to Dubai, return them to the US for processing and ship the prints back to the Gulf for editing. It took nine months.”
  13. Ronald Codrai, *The Emirates of Yesteryear: The Best of Ronald Codrai* (Essex: Stacey International, 2001), 11.
  14. Ramesh Shukla in discussion with the authors, April 2012.
  15. Kimi Makishima-Akai explains Yoshio Kawashima did not hand over the photographic negatives of his 1962 press trip to Dubai to his Japanese paper *Sankei Shimbun*. In 2010, Kawashima finally felt comfortable enough to disclose and reveal his photographic archives — almost 50 years after they were shot. See Kimi Makishima-Akai, *Dubai 1962: Yoshio Kawashima, Sankei Shimbun* (Dubai: Motivate, 2010).
  16. Ramesh Shukla’s well-known portrait of Shaikh Rashid appears on a postage stamp as does a photo of the Mosque on the 500 Dirham banknote, and a photo he took of a falcon appears on the UAE military uniform. See Asha Bhatia, *The UAE Formative Years 1965–75: A Collection of Historical 21 Photographs by Ramesh Shukla* (Dubai: Motivate, 2002), 143.
  17. Taru Shukla in discussion with the authors, April 2012.

unpublished. They became available to a wider audience much later after their production.<sup>18</sup>

### ***Print Media, Early Emirati Newspaper and Photojournalism***

In the Emirates, print media dates back to the first quarter of the twentieth century. Between the 1920s to the late 1960s, the newspaper was slowly shaped from a tradition of informal print distribution and leaflets passed on by families. Nashrat Al Nakhi (literally translated as “The News of Chickpeas”) by Musabbah bin Obeid Al Dhahiri was one of the earliest recorded forms of the newspaper in the Emirates;<sup>19</sup> this was a socio-visual product with news about highway robberies, births, marriages, and social occasions as well as political news focusing on the leaders’ activities and news from the prominent tribes.<sup>20</sup> Other examples included Ibrahim Al Medfaa’s two papers, *Oman* and *Om Al Qura*.<sup>21</sup> Oman had an anti-colonial tone and was influenced by the Arab press and regional newspapers. It focused on business /market news, reports of Bedouin, crime and theft as well as pearling and diving.<sup>22</sup> *Al Amood* (Arabic for “The Column”) used political satire.<sup>23</sup> By the 1930s, *Saut Al Asafeer* (literally meaning “The Sound of Birds” in Arabic) was issued by Al Medfaa and other writers from the Trucial States, Kuwait, and Bahrain.<sup>24</sup> Issues aimed to cover Islamic rituals, emphasizing religious customs such as the holy month of Ramadan and the Eid festivities that followed.<sup>25</sup> Front-page

- 
18. For example, the first edition of *The UAE Formative Years 1965-1975* which showcased images from the formative years was published in 1995. See Bhatia, *The UAE Formative Years 1965-75*, foreword.
  19. Peyman Pejman, “English Newspapers in the United Arab Emirates: Navigating the Crowded Market,” *Arab Media & Society* 7, January 2009, <http://www.arabmediasociety.com/?article=705> (accessed April 24, 2012); also see Mona Al Khanjare, “Imprints on Time,” *Gulf News* (United Arab Emirates) June 13, 2002, <http://gulfnews.com/news/gulf/uae/general/imprints-on-time-1.390486>.
  20. Jamal Al-Majaida, *The Press and Social Change in the United Arab Emirates (1971-1991)* (Abu Dhabi: Zayed Centre for Coordination & Follow-up, 2002): 108–109.
  21. We found many discrepancies among available sources when trying to define the historical timeline of early media print in the UAE. Sources such as Al Khanjare, Cass, Majaida, and Pejman gave different dates for the production of *Al Nakhi*, *Oman* newspaper, *Sotul Asafeer*, *Al Deyar* and *Akbbar Dubai*.
  22. Al Khanjare, “Imprints on Time.”
  23. Ibid.
  24. Phillip Cass, “Newspaper Archiving in the UAE” (presentation, Australian Media Traditions Conference, Yeppoon, Queensland, June 13-16, 2001): 2.
  25. *Al Ittihad*, December 9, 1969, Issue no. 08: 16.

full-blown centered photographs of the Eid morning prayers illustrate the intention to preserve tradition during the growth of a modern state.

Between 1961 and 1964, *Al Diyar* paper was established by a group of young intellectuals from Cairo, Baghdad, and Beirut.<sup>26</sup> The paper was active in respect to civic participation and was dedicated to the younger generation of literates – cultivating a sense of unity, national awareness, the eradication of illiteracy, and the importance of education. The same issue that congratulated the nation on the rise of the union covered a student strike in Kuwait University against the occupation of the three Arab islands by Iran.<sup>27</sup> With Nasser's Arab socialism spreading to the Gulf, visual rhetoric reflected a pan-Arab nationalist sentiment. As an active voice for the Gulf, Emirati print media also endorsed GCC solidarity.<sup>28</sup> The country's foreign policies focused on Gulf security, pan-Arab causes, and Israeli/Palestinian conflict. Those regional concerns and sentiments constituted a focal point in news coverage.

By 1971, the year of independence, print media emerged as a key tool for local self-representation. Newspaper and photojournalism became vehicles for collective representation of the Emirati society – transferring and delivering cultural values to/of the Emirati people and UAE population. During this period, a link emerged between local print media and photojournalism. State media adopted photographic portraiture to negotiate delicate public relations and to construct self-identities. *Al Ittihad* and *Al Khaleej* newspapers illustrate this quite well.

## Woman Tying a Burka

*“Between Fujairah and Ajman, in a simple dressing room created below the branches of a tree next to a barasti hut, a lady ties her burqa in the light of a kerosene lamp.”*<sup>29</sup>

In 1966, Shukla took one of his most distinctive photographs titled *Woman Tying Burka* (Figure 1.3). This was a peculiar one due to its visual content and daring subject. It shows a woman is standing with her back towards the camera, her arms engaged in a tying motion as she adjusts the string of a burka while looking into a hanging, framed mirror, on which the camera captures the reflection of her burka-adorned face. The woman's ethnicity, identity, expressions are all unclear. They are obfuscated by the apparent physical characteristics: she has waist length hair tied

---

26. Al-Majaida, *The Press and Social Change in the United Arab Emirates*.

27. *Al Khaleej*, December 2, 1971, Issue no. 227, 2.

28. *Ibid.*, 2.

29. Bhatia, *The UAE Formative Years 1965-75*, 19.

into two intertwined braids; she is wearing a screen/block foliage printed/patterned garment. She has, thrown over her left shoulder, a sparkly organza dupatta, typically worn by south Asian women. “The woman is Emirati,” confirmed Shukla.<sup>30</sup>

The subject of the photograph is standing in the foreground in a vernacular palm fond areesh structure. The setting can be described as a makeshift, peripheral, or interstitial space found around vernacular housing at the time. Apart from the surface and texture of the areesh, which constitutes the background of the photograph, there is, in the middle ground, a suspended kerosene lamp and a vertical standing tree trunk. A framed tilted mirror is hung on the tree and the woman’s full-length black abaya is placed on a branch. The natural form of the tree, the light rotation of the mirror, and the natural posture of the woman bring an air of authenticity and fragility. The dropped soft abaya placed on the organic branches and in contrast to the rough texture of the areesh co-exist in a traditional environment.

**Figure 1.3: Woman Tying a Burka**



Photo credit: © 1966 Ramesh Shukla.

30. Shukla in discussion with the authors, April 2012.

The picture includes no modern elements and speaks boldly of an authentic natural world. The caption of the photograph states that the woman may not have been aware of the photographer's presence. While this may seem like voyeurism, it is plausible that she is aware of the photographer's presence and aware of his gaze, but not entirely aware of the concept of a photograph or the function/purpose of a camera. This image is a typical example of Shukla's interest in life photography and of his voyeuristic undertakings in an opaque and extremely conservative culture. The framing and perspective of the photographer along with the gestural/staged pose of the subject is compelling. In photographs, Emirati women typically appeared in black abayas and burkas. Hence, this image is a rare instance that negates the Bedouin stereotype of Emirati woman in a black veil. In those days, the intimate space of Emirati life was not recorded or documented. Here, the photographer has infiltrated the household and presented a different representation of the female Emirati. He later expressed a responsibility of sorts towards the subjects of his photographs, claiming to acquire permission beforehand. By taking this picture, Shukla allowed us to get a glimpse into the impenetrable space of the under-represented "Other" – in an unconscious attempt to break the stereotype.

The woman appears twice in this photograph: first, we see her physical body from the side, and second, we can see her reflection looking back at herself, the observer, or perhaps Shukla, the photographer himself. The invisible presence of the photographer as opposed to the double presence of the woman puts into question the ambiguous relationship between the self and the other.

## **Pamela Codrai and the Girls**

*"In 1952 my wife came out from England to join me in Dubai, for the first time my house began to receive visits from the female members of the local population. She was a novelty to be investigated..."*<sup>31</sup>

Another example of the life photography genre from the 1950s comes from Ronald Codrai's photograph of his own wife Pamela. In this photograph (Figure 1.4), Pamela appears as the main subject in one of Codrai's most personal and intriguing photographs. Sitting in a car, she appears to be looking forward to the road in front of her while a group of native girls gather outside the window and glance at her. The photo was likely taken as the couple approached a settlement, most probably on one of the regular visits and excursions that Ronald Codrai used to make in search of oil concessions.

---

31. Codrai, *The Emirates of Yesteryear*, 149.



**Figure 1.4: Ronald Codrai's wife**



Photo credit: © 1952 Ronald Codrai.

The setting of the image is spontaneous and natural. The photograph encapsulates a moment, not just in time but also in history, but much of it adheres to the common European anthropological concern for “salvaging” the remnants of “primitive” pre-industrial societies in the sense of an imperialist nostalgia, as Renato Rosaldo would argue, “lamenting the changes that the photographers as agents of Western modernity were themselves instigating.”<sup>32</sup>

Unlike orientalist stereotypical representation of the authentic Arabia abounding “with images of camels, armed Bedouin tribesmen, women in burkas, open-air markets,”<sup>33</sup> the figures almost seem to defy the conventional depiction of women from the Gulf. The position and look of the little girl standing in-between affirms this; her gaze as she leans by the window looking back is perplexing. “Is she looking at Codrai’s wife or at the camera?”

---

32. Ronald Hawker, “Imagining a Bedouin Past: Stereotypes and Cultural Representation in the Contemporary United Arab Emirates” (1999): 4, [http://inhouse.lau.edu.lb/bima/papers/R\\_W\\_Hawker.pdf](http://inhouse.lau.edu.lb/bima/papers/R_W_Hawker.pdf).

33. *Ibid.*, 4.

The image emanates its implicit tension from the clear contrast between self and other. Through the window separating Pamela from the outside world, we see three girls: two veiled with a burka, while the third girl looks towards the viewer with her head tilted observing with curiosity. Pamela is separated from the girls both in dress code as well as spatially – she is sitting in the car while the girls are outside. Her modern European outfit is radically different from the girls' uniform. The resulting image highlights this distinction, by means of photography, creates and maintains a certain intention to understand or even to incorporate, what is a manifestly different world; the world of the Other. Another perceivable contrast is the urgency and intensity of the faces of the young girls in the background (one holds her veil in place with a sharp hand gesture another further back has a rather apprehensive expression) in comparison to the calm composure of Codrai. For us, the viewers of this photograph, the visual juxtaposition of the figures and elements provides a heightened dual content: the native against the foreign, and the natural against the formal.

## **The Aristocratic Bedu**

*“Their lean bodies belying their physical toughness, they were the aristocratic Bedu — knights of the sands.”*<sup>34</sup>

Ronald Codrai, along with his contemporaries, extensively photographed members of the ruling families. These portraits appeared in various settings, some as conventional portraits. Others had taken their pictures more spontaneously during events and visits. The Aristocratic Bedu by Codrai represents one of these preserved romanticized ruler portraits. Figure 1.5 illustrates Shaikh Mohammed bin Hamad Al-Sharqi (1908-1975), first ruler of Fujairah, with his two guardians.<sup>35</sup> It contains a central figure, which occupies a third of the space of the photograph in a triangular shape, shedding some sharp contrast of light and dark. On his sides are two men described as retainers, sitting on either side and reinforcing the symmetry of the composition, while their rifles frame the picture-plane along the edges. The elaborate colonnade of the portico in the background visually produces an exaggerated perspective.

The depiction of the figure is slightly elevated and visually enlarged (the emphasized hierarchy and dominant centrality), the body is gracefully frozen, and it

---

34. Codrai, *The Emirates of Yesteryear*, 11.

35. *Ibid.*, 33.

demands fixed attention. The firm poise of the peripheral figures complements the assured presence of the ruler. There is a celebratory essence to the two surrounding figures. The photo is an announcement, a statement, perhaps of a deliberated assertion. To the right, a lamp is lit against the wall emphasizing asymmetry and a symbol of modernity.

**Figure 1.5: Shaikh Mohammed bin Hamad Al-Sharqi**



Photo credit: © 1952 Ronald Codrai.

Another explorer of the region, Wilfred Thesiger, had previously discussed a certain relationship between nobility and bedouinism: “everything that is good about the Arabs has come to them from the desert. The only society in which I’ve found nobility is that of the Bedouin.”<sup>36</sup> The subsequent portraiture of rulers emphasizes this idea. Hawker points out “bedouinism seems to provide a trope around which a collective national identity can be assembled and presented to outsiders as a clear encapsulating image of who the people of the Emirates are.”<sup>37</sup>

Codrai points out “the people of the Sheikdoms were comparatively late in starting their family albums. The only exceptions were the few who visited the portrait studios of Bombay or similar ports of call where photography was already in vogue.”<sup>38</sup> There is still little research on the history and presentation strategies

36. Andrew Taylor, *Travelling the Sands* (Dubai: Motivate, 1995): 130.

37. Hawker, “Imagining a Bedouin Past,” 1.

38. Codrai, *The Emirates of Yesteryear*, 24.

behind such early shaikhdom portraiture. Seemingly, the photographic material that was produced locally at the time of this photograph was not intended for an audience. There is little evidence of visual material within local print media in the 1950s. No galleries existed to display the photos. Furthermore, what is surprising is that in a society so unfamiliar with visual production and photography, there is a level of engagement with the production of the image. Codrai argues that the portrait photographs that he took during his stay in the shaikhdoms “were not designed for posterity.” He continues, “My portraits were simply people I knew and liked. It says much for their open-mindedness that the camera, an unfamiliar object was never taboo: the results tended to amuse them.”<sup>39</sup>

## The Day of Independence

“The traditional society is diminishing ... more individuals are learning how to read and make their own ideas ... and more people are purchasing newspapers and listening to radios...”<sup>40</sup>

Since its early days, the UAE press played an active role in various aspects of social change during and after the country’s independence. These included notions of protection of societal values and cultural heritage, consolidation of the welfare of the people and their common collective interests, commitment to and support of the federation, promotion of the country’s development, and unification of the Gulf by asserting Arab and Islamic unanimity.<sup>41</sup> During the two years preceding UAE independence, local print media developed with a confident local voice. Newspapers were active promoters of local culture, and photography became an integral part of this media. The symbolic role of photography in local newspapers emerged through the prevalent vivid depiction of ruling Shaikhs and Arab cultural icons such as Umm Koulthoum.<sup>42</sup> The visual style and written content of the two prominent newspapers, *Al Ittihad* and *Al Khaleej*, confirms the role of print media in safeguarding the local environment, national heritage, and social values of the United Arab Emirates while endorsing modernity and independence at the same time. *Al Ittihad* was issued first in 1969 as the first official weekly in the UAE. As the title suggests, *Al Ittihad* (Arabic word literally meaning “The Union”) supported the policies and causes of unity between the seven Emirates, and it became the

---

39. Ibid., 24.

40. Al-Majaida, *The Press and Social Change in the United Arab Emirates*, 149.

41. Al-Majaida, *The Press and Social Change in the United Arab Emirates*, 120 -121.

42. These observations are based on our archival research in the local newspaper houses.

voice of the people on different issues.<sup>43</sup> It raised awareness about the importance of the federation, welfare of the citizens, and promoted geographic and social unification.<sup>44</sup> One year later in 1970, *Al Khaleej* (Arabic word meaning “The Gulf”) was published for the first time in Sharjah. It followed a similar public policy with a broader regional dimension calling for the unity of the Gulf nations, yet continuing to project the aspirations of the Emirati people in unity. Archived records illustrate how print media contributed to spreading a new, collective, Emirati civic political culture reflecting aspirations of modernity and an independent identity.

Archival records of the late 1960s, and particularly those that appeared at the very moment of independence, illustrate this visual rhetoric quite well. The design, typography, illustrations, and photographic representation were meant to visually announce the anticipated change that was about to come after independence in December 1971.

Both *Al Ittihad* and *Al Khaleej* issues covered the rise of the UAE with bright, triumphant layouts giving space to photography and text. The right-hand picture in Figure 1.6 expresses the visual style and photo-representation that appeared in *Al Ittihad* on December 03, 1971. The celebratory visual language is reinforced through a red ink headline, whereas the idea of union is communicated through the central photograph of the six rulers. The six influential figures that signed the agreement to unify the Trucial States were photographed in their traditional attire; their picture occupied the center of the first page. In this issue, we also found a poem by Aziz Abbadah nicely illustrated with calligraphic typography. The poem expressed great appreciation and respect for the late Shaikh Zayed.<sup>45</sup>

The dynamic interplay between textual and visual information appears in the *Al Khaleej* cover page on the day of independence too (Figure 1.6, left). A large text is surrounded by images of the designated rulers – reflecting a sense of pride and confidence in their postures and expressions. The layout announced the rise of the new nation with a big red headline that shouts: “Declaring the United Arab Emirates: Zayed President of the Union, Rashed Vice President and Maktoum Bin Rashed Prime Minister.”<sup>46</sup> The subheading below promises “providing decent living for all citizens and supporting Arab and Islamic causes.” In another page of the same issue, the illustrated agreement between the Shaikhs of the seven Emirates is

---

43. Al-Majaida, *The Press and Social Change in the United Arab Emirates*, 113.

44. Al-Majaida, *The Press and Social Change in the United Arab Emirates*, 120-121.

45. *Al Ittihad*, April 2, 1970, Issue no. 22, 12.

46. *Al Khaleej*, December 2, 1971, Issue no. 227, 1.

supported by a verse from the Holy Quran: “And hold the rope of Allah firmly and be not divided among each other.”<sup>47</sup>

The consistent visual rhetoric of both *Al Ittihad* and *Al Khaleej* shows a different ideological framework to the image as it was practiced in the UAE at the time of its inception.

Figure 1.6: Newspaper cover page on Independence Day in 1971



## Concluding Remarks

This chapter explored the relationship between cultural imagery and the socio-economic realities of the UAE during the formative years (between 1950s and 1970s). The research focused on photography and media and highlighted different genres and mediums of visual production. Six artefacts were selected from graphic and media archives. They originated from different sources and reflected different approaches to the relationship between the intended subject, the viewer, and the image making.

In the UAE of the studied period, photographs became popular because they could serve as an instrument to document the rapid changes in the country. The compositional and formal qualities of photographic material vary depending on the

47. Ibid.

photographer and setting. Yet beyond their documentation and aesthetic functions, images can be used to convey ideological meaning. In this context, each photograph turns into a “double-edged sword.” It is a valued picturesque document from the past, but also a site where ideological formations are enacted. Therefore, an image can be seen as a site where social ethnic and gendered disparities are being tested and where the interplay between the photographer, the subject, and the viewer are put into question.

The images analyzed in this chapter are used as interpretative objects. They are records of their time, place, and context. Many pictures found in the archives illustrate a transient landscape in flux – a land open to possibilities. Those are the images that many are familiar with. The overemphasized visual focus of the desert in the photographs of the post oil period shifts the attention from the rich coastal landscape with its multilayered history.

The body is heavily present in the selected case studies. And the landscape is seen through this peculiar superimposition of a body, space, and environment. The invisible body of the photographer is also there as a curious interpreter of a transforming environment and a multi-layered culture. The bodies of the rulers are unified in the moment of independence. Their individual figures are enlarged and projected to embody the spirit of nationhood. The female body is equally present. The intimate space and spontaneous depiction of the woman tying a burka symbolize an aspect of local culture and the often under-represented dimension of Emirati society.

This proposed framework focuses on looking at the interplay between structural organizations (colonial power, media, government), the individuals who are involved in (colonizer, colonized, locals, expatriates, female, male), and the common ideologies that revolve around image making. These multiple and sometimes competing functions of the image shift us away from analyzing visual production and social constructs only and allow us to examine the interplay between power relations, social constructs, and agency as they are made visible through visual production of the early years of the UAE.

## 2

# Visual Censorship as Cross-cultural Negotiation: Teaching Art History in Saudi Arabia

*Lucile Dupraz*

### Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Sometime around 1861, Gustave Courbet put the finishing touches to a *Nude with White Stockings*. In the spring of 2011, and approximately 40,000 kilometers from the location where this French painter once had his studio, I encountered a book illustration offering an unusual version of Courbet's overtly erotic artwork. In addition to her white stockings, its reclining female figure now displayed black underpants, which had been rendered using the broad tip of a pen. I photographed this picture, together with an ensemble of similarly censored book illustrations. The naked bodies these images had originally depicted were covered in ink, paint, or paper collage. I wished to show these visuals to an audience and determined not to publish them on their own despite their aesthetic interest. Besides images to show, I had a critical stance to outline. As an art history lecturer at a university in the Saudi Arabian city of Jeddah, I had been working with the altered pictures I now wished

---

1. Photographic credits: All images: the author, 2011.

Acknowledgments: My thanks and gratitude go to Andrew Beddard, Willem de Rooij, Adeena Mey, Dr. Nadia Mounajjed, Karim Noureldin and Joël Vacheron, whose comments have informed this paper.



to circulate. My consequential engagement with issues at stake in this modification of imagery had provided me with a sense of its rich backstory.

Censorship and its kindred activity, iconoclasm, tend to be regarded in contemporary Western, democratic circles as abnormal practices, indefensible regardless of their motives. Yet historical studies on the phenomena of artwork destruction have made visible the political entanglement of creative and destructive processes: “it is because images are used to express, impose and legitimize a power that the same images are misused in order to challenge, reject and delegitimize it.”<sup>2</sup> Beyond the fascination that views of destroyed cultural artifacts may elicit,<sup>3</sup> a present-day case of tampering with existing visuals provides an opportunity to re-engage with, and explore anew, the notion of art as a “medium of social conflicts.”<sup>4</sup>

Islamic iconoclasm has lately been articulated as an antagonizing practice, carried out by men using sensationalistic stagings.<sup>5</sup> The visual censorship I happened on, however, was not meant to be seen outside the community of the women’s college where it was executed. This iconoclasm was carried out by women, before an audience of women. It brought together artworks of Christian or Western secular origin, and alterations were executed in a Middle Eastern and Muslim setting. These hybrid visuals had sometimes been reshaped in unobtrusive, subtle ways. Such singular contextual and formal aspects of the altered images prompted me to spend time observing them, thinking about their function, effects, and significance.

I have chosen to voice this account of my findings using an autobiographical thread. Research is guided by the contingencies of personal experience, and as the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, who conducted research concerning Muslim communities, expressed, “we are all provincials, enclosed in particular intellectual traditions.”<sup>6</sup> My use of the first person is not only a device to make explicit the necessarily subjective dimension of my attitude towards the visuals considered, and its perhaps provincial quality marked by a Western perspective. First-person narrators are rarely omniscient, and I have refused the endeavor of drawing definitive

---

2. Dario Gamboni, *The Destruction of Art: Iconoclasm and Vandalism Since the French Revolution* (London: Reaktion Books, 1997), 27.

3. The sublime quality and vanitas symbolism of architectural ruins come to mind.

4. Horst Bredekamp’s, cited by Gamboni in *The Destruction of Art*, 17. Bredekamp has researched sixteenth century iconoclasm.

5. One thinks of the Taliban’s spectacular demolition of the Buddhas of Bamiyan in 2001, and, more recently, the desecration of Timbuktu mausoleums by armed groups including the al-Qaeda-related militants Ansar Dine.

6. Pierre Bourdieu, “Thinking About Limits,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 9 (1992): 39.

conclusions from a many-sided story, for censorship involves a censor, a censored, and audiences.

My writing nonetheless stems from a lived experience of teaching with censored material, as well as a firsthand account of the censorship procedure. Formulated from the position of an author in-between cultures, it embraces art historian and iconoclasm specialist Dario Gamboni's suggestion that "research on the destruction of art does not only concern its reception; its creation is involved as well, insofar as the two are interrelated."<sup>7</sup> This visual censorship, although its purpose is to restrict access to information, may lead us to manifold reflections. Firstly, it bears witness to a culture that situates the body outside the realm of public visibility.

## The Body as Private Visual Territory

One day, I noticed a student who had ceased taking notes and was, instead, drawing. We were midway through a lecture on ancient art, and I had by then been teaching at this Saudi Arabian institution for several months. I walked towards the student's desk. She was scribbling over a handout I had distributed to the class, which contained a picture of the Greek statue known as the Discus thrower. The student had formed a rough shape, resembling shorts, over the midsection of this figure depicting a naked athlete. I was alarmed, since this meant I had given my audience a document they had found offensive. It was not the first time I met with the local taboo on the representation of naked bodies. I had, in fact, become used to the students occasionally exclaiming, when they encountered such visuals, the Arabic term that means "forbidden by Islamic law": "haram!"<sup>8</sup>

---

7. Gamboni, *The Destruction of Art*, 11.

8. The Islamic concept of al-Haram designates that which is unsuitable for the faithful. It is opposed to the concept of *al-Halal*, which "refers to permissible behavior, speech, dress, conduct, manner and dietary." (Nader Al Jallad, "The Concepts of *al-Halal* and *al-Haram* in the Arab-Muslim Culture: A Transnational and Lexicographical Study," *Language Design* 10 (2008): 79). The question of what haram encompasses remains widely discussed by Muslim clerics. Although certain substances and behaviors, such as alcohol and stealing, are clearly designated as forbidden in the scriptures, the question of bodily exposure is not precisely settled: "the two *Qur-ānic* verses cited to support the notion of Islamic female modesty, dress and behavioral codes are *Al-Abzāb* (33:53, 59) and *Al-Nūr* (24:30, 31)," which "are simultaneously subject to counter-interpretations that contest the implementation of the *hijāb* [head covering] within Islamic thought." (Noor Al-Qasimi, "The Codes of Modesty: Reconfiguring the *Muslim Female Subject*" (PhD diss., University of Warwick, 2007), 4). However, female modesty as expressed through dress (*sitr*) is a chief concern for Muslims, because it prevents the occurrence of transgression (*fitnah*) (Al-Qasimi, "The Codes of Modesty," 1). Regarding the censure of

A month later, I was equipped with a black marker and asked to censor. This time-consuming chore required my colleagues and me to alter hundreds of art history textbooks imported from the United States. We were reluctant to censor, and I sought comfort in the fact that I was neither suppressing texts, nor silencing spoken words. I was solely editing graphic content. This thought did not provide me with much relief, since it relied on the inexact notion that images do not communicate ideas. Instead, I began to comprehend my duty to perform this task when I considered the particular circumstances of these visual politics. Through dialogues in the classroom and exchanges with co-workers, I gradually made sense of a practice I would never have envisioned willingly participating in. This thought process started when I spoke with my students for the first time and took notice of the particular visual environment they evolved in. It was of a kind I had not experienced before.

On that first day of teaching, in February 2011, I brought a text to the classroom, expecting it would provide us with engaging and thought-provoking material for a discussion about visual culture. The text concerned advertisement and was formulated in an accessible style of writing. I had selected that reading because it had once introduced me to important ideas, when I was a photography student living in a London landscape ridden with billboards. But I was to discover that the questions it raised were foreign to the students. With that essay, part of the book *Ways of Seeing* first published in 1972, John Berger analyzed how publicists use images and words to make products desirable.<sup>9</sup> The author suggested that

---

public female display, the influential Sunni theologian Yusef Al-Qaradawy notes that Islam aims to provide “protection for men and women from all factors of seduction and lust. [...] Allah’s religion protects [the woman’s] morals and decency, guards her reputation and dignity, and defends her chastity.” Al-Qaradawy cites Surah 24:31: “And tell the believing women to lower their gaze [from looking at forbidden things], and protect their private parts.” Within the context of Islam, women must “preserve a decent, unrevealing manner of dress” (Yusuf Al-Qaradawy, “The Woman as Feminine Being” in *The Status of Women in Islam*, 1993, [http://www.ymsite.com/books/Q\\_WI/women\\_feminine.htm](http://www.ymsite.com/books/Q_WI/women_feminine.htm) (accessed November 16, 2012)). Certain Muslim thinkers, such as Swiss scholar Tariq Ramadan, call for a more restrained application of the concept of *haram*. Ramadan argues that “there clearly exist two domains in Islam, which require two specific methodologies. Concerning the bond to God, worship, the only permissible practices are those which are prescribed within a text of the Qur’an or the prophet’s tradition. For everything else, that is to say in the domain of social affairs, morals in its widest sense, everything is allowed apart from that which is explicitly forbidden” (my translation, from Tariq Ramadan, “Glossaire,” <http://www.tariqramadan.com/spip.php?article307&lang=fr>, (accessed November 26, 2012)).

9. John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin Books, 2008), 123-148.

viewing advertisement leads the public to feel dissatisfied with their person and current possessions, because of the ways in which it brings new desires to one's attention. This idea did not interest my students. In a conversation that followed our group reading of the chapter, all voiced heartfelt praises of advertisement. They said it allowed them to dream. They relished its visual and textual effects, and none of Berger's argumentation on its psychological consequences could shatter their enthusiasm.

I was disconcerted by the irrelevance, to my audience, of an idea that I held to be pertinent and easily graspable. On my way home that evening I looked for billboards, hoping to comprehend my students' viewpoint by experiencing advertisement as it appeared in their environment. While I was driven through the avenues of Jeddah I saw large banners posted at regular intervals along the sides of roads and hung over building façades. These displayed photographs of King Abdullah, smiling and waving hands. But the clothing and cosmetics brands likely to interest female consumers in their twenties were largely absent from the cityscape. If advertisement was not predominant on the streets, but I instead had to seek it, would I begin to savor its appeal, I wondered, as my students did?

To see a selection of print advertisement I bought a fashion magazine. Within its pages, international brands marketed their products with visuals that differed from those I had expected in a sole aspect. Discreet digital alterations of the photographs concealed, in what resembled skintight tops and pantyhose, the upper arms of models, and any cleavage or bare thighs.<sup>10</sup> I further acquainted myself with the city in the weeks and months that followed. The few posters displayed in public spaces that did depict women were often modified to such an extent that I felt uneasy looking at them. The women's faces had been erased by blurring their features using digital imaging effects. I soon got used to wrapping around my head a veil and overlaying my clothes with the loose-fitting cloak of an abaya, as women must in Saudi Arabia.<sup>11</sup> I wanted to take in the unsettling experience of a culture in which bodies are thoroughly private visual territory.

---

10. I bought the women's monthly *Sayidati*, which is distributed throughout the Middle East and published in Dubai and Beirut by the Saudi Research and Publishing Company.

11. The abaya is a traditional women's garment of the Gulf region. It is worn over clothes, usually in conjunction with a hijab, or headscarf, and it covers the body from neck to ankles. It is compulsory wear for women in the public spaces of Saudi Arabia, where adherence to this code of dress is policed by an institution named The Commission for Promoting Virtue and Preventing Vice. The abaya tends to be black. It must be ample and long-sleeved, since its function is to conceal the female body.

The abaya “covers the body and disciplines it, tempers it,” while it also “protects, reassures, isolates.”<sup>12</sup> Under its mantle, I was enacting an unfamiliar cultural performance for which the veil served as enclosure, shield, and symbol. The abaya could not be dispensed with and functioned as the primary signifier of my femaleness.<sup>13</sup> I did not merely appear and feel differently: adhering to Simone de Beauvoir’s conception of the body as a situation,<sup>14</sup> I was behaving as an altogether transformed physical entity. This shift in my corporeal condition would alter my position as a viewer, for bodies, as the art historian and image theorist Hans Belting has stressed, “serve as a living medium that makes us perceive, project, or remember images,” as well as “enables our imagination to censor or transform them.”<sup>15</sup> Besides adapting my gestures to this new outfit and being discerned otherwise by onlookers, I was to experience novel ways of seeing.

## Other ‘Ways of Seeing’: Paradox of a Feminist Discourse

For some time I held on to the copy of *Ways of Seeing* I had taken on loan from our library, ahead of my initial meeting with the students. It was within its pages that I had viewed for the first time the censorship I would later on become accustomed to, and eventually partake in. Since much of this book on Western art and visual culture discusses the genre of the nude, it is interspersed with archetypal erotica and well-known paintings containing naked figures. My copy had been altered with concise strokes. Its familiar illustrations now appeared strange, although no more

---

12. This is Franz Fanon’s phrasing, from *A Dying Colonialism*, trans. Haakon Chevalier (New York: Grove, 1965), 59. I wish to quote Fanon here because of his subtle detailing of the dualism inherent in the experience of veiling practices. This author has, however, been criticized in feminist literature for his patriarchal comprehension of the Algerian woman as constituted by her veil (see Lamia Ben Youssef Zayzafoon, *The Production of the Muslim Woman: Negotiating Text, History and Ideology* (Oxford: Lexington Books, 2005), 81).

13. “The *veil* constitutes the primary site of signification in the articulation of gender with reference to Islam.” Al-Qasimi, “The Codes of Modesty,” 163.

14. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. E. M. Parshley (New York: Vintage, 1973). Here “Beauvoir proposes that the female body ought to be the situation and instrumentality of women’s freedom, not a defining and limiting essence.” See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990), 12.

15. Hans Belting, “Image, Medium, Body: A New Approach to Iconology,” *Critical Inquiry* 31 (Winter 2005): 306. According to art historian and theorist Belting, the body serves as primary visual medium, and “internal and external representations, or mental and physical images, may be considered two sides of the same coin.” (304). Belting served on the advisory board of the 2002 exhibition on image destruction *Iconoclasm, Beyond the Image Wars in Science, Religion and Art at ZKM, Center for Art and Media, Karlsruhe*.

than a small amount of their surface had been deducted. This effect compelled me to read again the text these images accompanied.

In the nudes of European oil painting [. . .] women have been seen and judged as sights. The principal protagonist is never painted. He is the spectator in front of the picture and he is presumed to be a man. [. . .] Everything is addressed to him. [. . .] Women are there to feed an appetite, not to have any of their own. [. . .] Today the attitudes and values which informed that tradition are expressed through other more widely diffused media — advertising, journalism, television.<sup>16</sup>

Next to these lines, severe marks obliterating the nudes under discussion coincidentally looked as if they were responding to, and affirming, the urgency of Berger's concerns. Paradoxically, the author's criticism of the "attitudes and values" conveyed by Western depictions of undressed women resounded with renewed force in a censored copy of his book. Further in the text Berger proposed an experiment to his readers:

"Choose from this book an image of a traditional nude. Transform the woman into a man. Either in your mind's eye or by drawing on the reproduction. Then notice the violence which that transformation does. Not to the image, but to the assumption of a likely viewer."<sup>17</sup>

The nudes I had before my eyes had indeed been drawn upon. That transformation had significant effects, for nudes are about flesh and sensuality. Berger remarked that when one gazes at a naked body, one's:

"focus of perception shifts from eyes, mouth, shoulders, hands — all of which are capable of such subtleties of expression that the personality expressed by them is manifold — it shifts from these to the sexual parts."<sup>18</sup>

Sexual parts are infinitely less expressive. This process puts the viewer before what Berger termed the "anonymity of nakedness": most nudes are primarily depictions of bodies that resemble many other bodies. One rarely perceives a nude as the representation of its model's individual and complex personality. Because of censorship I could not look at the sexual content the nudes reproduced in *Ways of Seeing* had originally displayed. For a while I found myself observing faces instead,

---

16. Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 41-57.

17. Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 58.

18. Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 53.

faces I had seen many times yet not lingered over. In these edited replicas I beheld, as I never had before, the subtle facial expressions of different sitters, of several unique personalities. Through censorship I discovered anew the women painted, or photographed, and contemplated how undressing or masking the body alters the framing of subjecthood.

Echoing Michel Foucault's contention that one "who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power,"<sup>19</sup> Meyda Yeğenoğlu, whose research encompasses feminist and postcolonial studies, notes that if veiling "can be seen as a specific practice of marking and disciplining the body in accordance with cultural requirements, so can unveiling."<sup>20</sup> Indeed, "the practice both of veiling and unveiling are culturally specific procedures of corporeal inscriptions, conditioned by specific cultural histories."<sup>21</sup> Viewing these unclothed bodies burdened with marks made manifest the cultural specificity of the nude, an artistic tradition grounded in both eroticism and a Western conception of nakedness as the body's natural, default state. On the other, such modified visuals could be explained as "an effect of Islamic patriarchal discourse,"<sup>22</sup> since they had been shaped in accordance with the jurisdiction of a state that largely restricts female agency.<sup>23</sup> The politics of these pictures depicting women, and altered by women, seemed at once informative and disquieting.

What, then, is one to do when "one is troubled by an action for which there is no way to know, without further enquiry, whether it is destructive or constructive?"<sup>24</sup> Bruno Latour has discussed certain instances of iconoclasm, in which "there is uncertainty about the exact role of the hand at work in the production of a

---

19. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Penguin Books, 1977), 202. This quotation refers to Foucault's examination of jail architecture on the panoptical model. Its central idea can usefully be applied in other contexts: exposure has the capacity to subdue individuals by inciting self-censorship.

20. Meyda Yeğenoğlu, *Colonial Fantasies: Towards a Feminist Reading of Orientalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 113.

21. Yeğenoğlu, *Colonial Fantasies*, 115.

22. According to Al-Qasimi, "the Muslim female body should also be understood as an effect of Islamic patriarchal discourse" ("The Codes of Modesty," 11).

23. In addition to other legal restrictions such as gender segregation in public spaces, Saudi Arabian women cannot travel without the company or approval of a male guardian (such as a father, husband, brother or son), and they are not allowed to drive.

24. Bruno Latour, "What is Iconoclasm? Or Is There a World Beyond the Image Wars?" in *Iconoclasm: Beyond the Image Wars in Science, Religion and Art* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2002), 16.

mediator.”<sup>25</sup> Should the implications of image degradation be undetermined, Latour suggests that one is “to document, to expose, to do the anthropology of a certain gesture, a certain movement of the hand.”<sup>26</sup> This was my next endeavor: to attentively survey these marks applied onto printed images, to inspect their formal elements, to describe them in detail. I suspended for the time being my interest in potential discourses around these visuals, and turned to their pictorial content. Envisioning the Derridean possibility of seeking in “the freeplay of the trace [. . .] an alternative way of understanding phenomena,”<sup>27</sup> I flipped through my copy of *Ways of Seeing*.

## Graphic Interventions Leaving their Mark(s)

On certain illustrations succinct marks had been traced in visible haste. A reproduction of Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres’ Grande Odalisque carried one twirl, which formed a flourish over the contour of a breast. Although this hurried design had been made to cover a curved outline of flesh exposed by a slightly raised arm, it also evoked a flower drawn by a young child’s unpracticed hand. Nearby I saw a large wavy comma that punctuated the photograph of a topless model. Throughout the book, busts were adorned with pairs of thick crescents or undulating streaks like signs of a novel language. Many of our university library titles on Western art had been similarly affected. Their pages, thus reworked, looked as if a highlighter pen had been used to point out the nudity they contained. Rather than wiping out sexual matter, the systematic removal of nakedness heightened my consciousness of its frequency among the library shelves. This apparent discrepancy between the censors’ seeming intention and the visual outcome of their interventions made one question the extent to which these alterations could be deemed successful. If historically, “the violence against physical images [has] served to extinguish mental images,”<sup>28</sup> what did this censorship achieve?

---

25. Latour, “What is Iconoclash?” 20.

26. Latour, “What is Iconoclash?” 17-18.

27. As phrased by Marcus Boon [*In Praise of Copying* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 2010), 23]. See Jacques Derrida, “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences” in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 1978), 278-294.

28. Belting, “Image, Medium, Body,” 308.



Belting has remarked that “the more we pay attention to a medium, the less it can hide its strategies.”<sup>29</sup> The handmade aspect of each censor’s addition reinforced one’s awareness that the pictures lying beneath, mechanically reproduced and circulated in countless copies of books, had once been paint applied onto canvas and photographs devised by individuals grappling, like their Saudi Arabian censors, with issues of representation and ideology. According to Latour, “we treat as iconoclasts those who speak of the humans at work behind or beneath the images.”<sup>30</sup> We should perhaps instead, like psychoanalyst Didier A. Chartier, praise them at times, for restoring our “capacity to feel [the image] in the plurality of its dimensions.”<sup>31</sup> Indeed, the formal compositions censorship had disturbed now appeared as sites open to investigation. These images’ attempt at illusion had been compromised; the bodies they depicted were punctured, broken apart. These seamless impressions of human figures migrated back towards their makeup as dots assembled on a surface, lines and curves traced in space.

Further, the ensemble of altered pictures I gathered was noticeably heterogeneous. On a day when I opened duplicates of a publication available at our library, I twice came across a Birth of Venus painted in the nineteenth century by the French artist Alexandre Cabanel. This depiction of the antique female deity lying naked, above the surface of a sea, had been retouched differently in each copy of the book. In both instances, however, the school’s censors had strived to gently integrate their additions to the existing print. One Venus wore a yellow gown (Figure 2.1). Her twin had been draped in brushworks of dark green and light blue shades, colors that mirrored those of the seascape surrounding Cabanel’s Venus (Figure 2.2).

---

29. Belting, “Image, Medium, Body,” 302–319, 305.

30. Latour, “What is Iconoclash?” 18.

31. Didier A. Chartier, *Les Créateurs d’Invisible: De la Destruction des Oeuvres d’Art* (Paris: Synapse, 1989), 145. This English translation is quoted from Gamboni, *The Destruction of Art*.

**Figure 2.1: Anonymous, censored book illustration,  
date unknown, paint on printed page**



(Original artwork: Alexandre Cabanel, Birth of Venus, circa 1863)

**Figure 2.2: Anonymous, censored book illustration,  
date unknown, paint on printed page**



(Original artwork: Alexandre Cabanel, Birth of Venus, circa 1863)

Unlike these two carefully crafted compositions, certain book illustrations were crudely altered. Vigorous black strokes defaced a monochrome reproduction

of the painting *Venus, Cupid, Folly and Time*. This sixteenth century artwork by Agnolo Bronzino originally depicts Venus and Cupid in the nude, as they engage in a sensual embrace. In Bronzino's composition the goddess' legs are in profile view, while her torso is seen frontally — a strangely disjointed posture that exposes each of her curves before the spectator.<sup>32</sup> In its censored version, this dislocated figure appeared further mishandled, under the chaotic slashes of a censor's hand. Graphic interventions thus ranged from meticulous renditions of flowing gowns painted in conscientiously selected hues to bureaucratic scribbles executed in felt-tip pen.

The five angular nudes in Pablo Picasso's painting *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. M.)* were censored to a variety of extents across the modern art anthologies I consulted at our library. In one book all figures were largely blacked out, but in many others the image had been left untouched. One censor had added plain shapes in black ink, which looked like items of clothing designed in cubist fashion. While some students were fortunate enough to be given a textbook with relatively discreet amendments, others inherited manuals revised in much less graceful manner. How did our university's bookshelves come to house volumes having received such unequal treatment?

## **“Attempting the Impossible”: Foreign Weight Balanced with Improvised Means**

My colleagues and I had no guidelines explaining how we should censor. Each of us was left to interpret what an appropriate image should look like.<sup>33</sup> We could, should we wish to, handle this task in imaginative ways. One of René Magritte's dreamlike canvases, which shows an artist who creates a woman by painting her naked figure on thin air, had been treated with remarkable ingenuity. In its censored variant, a dab of silver paint completed the protagonist's palette (Figure 2.3). His creature was clothed in a strapless dress of the same metallic shade, and the resulting composition recounted an alternative story: the man was not painting a nude, but instead an elegant woman. Magritte titled this work *Attempting the Impossible*. As I looked at the transformed image, I wondered at this painstaking attempt to make censorship beautiful. I also wondered at the censor's ingeniousness in employing materials at hand to produce a cohesive new image.

---

32. See Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 49.

33. I conducted book censorship with no written instructions on the technique to employ, or the extent to which figures were to be covered. My sole administrative guidance came as a form approved by the college's dean, listing page numbers where material needed to be altered.

**Figure 2.3: Anonymous, censored book illustration, date unknown, silver paint on printed page**



(Original artwork: René Magritte, *Attempting the Impossible*, 1928)

It was not just the ink and paint employed to cover illustrations that were ad-hoc resorts to facilitate an educational program, but also the very illustrations that lay beneath. These, because no local or Islamic academic publications on the subject of so-called global art history were available, belonged to books that had been imported

from Europe and the United States. Like its textbooks, our institution's faculty often came, as I did, from one of these two places. The sources I used for my teaching recount a narrative populated by European and North American protagonists such as Magritte. These male Westerners have copiously explored the genre of the female nude, so the students and I spent considerable time attempting to navigate an art tradition that conflicted with local ways of seeing. Without the weight, upon our school, of this problematically authoritative foreign art tradition, I would not have found numerous retouched images. Our precarious form of mediation was thus a balancing act or negotiation, made by members of a conservative Muslim society confronted with the necessity to study a Western ensemble of visuals and academic works. These limited alterations allow their audience to consider foreign pictures, in composite versions adapted to local ethics.

Many of the Saudi Arabians I met said they personally condemn the representation of naked bodies, and books needed to be censored in large part to prevent students from bringing home pictures their parents might have found shocking. At times students took it upon themselves to conceal displays of nudity we had overlooked. Yet some of them disagreed with censorship, and we would discuss how we felt about the practice. In any case, everyone could access original artworks, uncensored, on the Internet.<sup>34</sup> Writing on the subject of taboos and their transgression, Georges Bataille has remarked that "concern over a rule is sometimes at its most acute when that rule is being broken, for it is harder to limit a disturbance already begun."<sup>35</sup> Indeed, we censored in the schizophrenic environment of a traditionalistic Islamic nation increasingly engulfed in the satellite television and smartphone-facilitated cornucopia of a digital culture gone global.

Despite having been shaped as a rather symbolic compromise and for pious motives, these censored nudes tend to be perceived as subversive by those, including myself, who are not their intended audience. An exemplary reaction to this imagery was provided by a British friend who studied art history. After reading a draft of the present text and viewing the images I discussed, he wrote to me about the cruder type of censorship, which he felt could be read, on one level, "as a simple defacement of Western culture, a mockery, perhaps a playful intervention." The ways in which

---

34. Saudi Arabian authorities restrict Internet usage by blocking access to undesirable content such as pornography. Websites concerned with art tend to remain accessible. For a detailed account of this cyber-censorship, refer to the 2004 Open Net Initiative study on "Internet Filtering in Saudi Arabia" at <https://opennet.net/studies/saudi>.

35. Georges Bataille, *Death and Sensuality: A Study of Eroticism and the Taboo* (New York: Walker and Company, 1962), 65.

improvisation characterizes this institution's implementation of censorship may provide us with a means of accounting for a Western reception of these amended images as unsettling.

When one makes do with a limited choice of materials, one performs bricolage, a term appropriated by ethnologist Claude Lévi-Strauss from the French word for "do it yourself," "repairing" and "tinkering."<sup>36</sup> Since those who employ bricolage techniques do not possess other means, or otherwise make a deliberately inappropriate use of a given material, this type of production has again and again allowed subcultures to create for themselves an alternative visual identity that separates their members from the mainstream culture of a wider society.<sup>37</sup> The punk movement's "do it yourself" ethos is such an example of dissident bricolage spirit. Subcultures demonstrate the activist potential of misusing things with "prior and sedimented meanings,"<sup>38</sup> because that permits them to voice oppositional discourses through products hijacked from a dominant culture. From a Western perspective, these Saudi Arabian visuals recall countless subversive practices characterized by activities of appropriation and modification. My British correspondent who wondered whether the inscriptions could be read as a "defacement" or "mockery" also described the images as covered in "black scribbled graffiti marks." Using vocabulary related to street art and urban vandalism, he associated the imagery with activities that, by interfering with public space, assertively formulate dissent.

"Is it so different from a mustache drawn on the Mona Lisa?" his commentary continued. With this mention of Marcel Duchamp's parody artwork,<sup>39</sup> he called upon a Western history of visual satire through collage aesthetics, rooted in the twentieth century avant-garde of the Dada and surrealist movements. However, not all of the retouched visuals I came across referred exclusively to the West. Some were Western depictions of Eastern cultures: Orientalist art. Such imagery

---

36. While Lévi-Strauss designated as *bricolage* the workings of mythological thought within the tribal societies he was concerned with, this term is also used to identify the ways in which certain cultural practices and art forms operate. Lévi-Strauss mentioned, in the context of Western Modern art, collage as "the transposition of bricolage into the realms of contemplation" [Claude Lévi-Strauss, "The Science of the Concrete," in *The Savage Mind* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson): 1-33, 30].

37. See John Clarke, "Style," in *Resistance Through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain*, ed. Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson (London: Routledge, 2003), 175-191.

38. Clarke, "Style," 177.

39. Marcel Duchamp's *L.H.O.O.Q.*, 1919, consists of a mustache drawn in pencil, and an inscription of the work's title, over the cheap print of a postcard reproducing Leonardo da Vinci's best known painting.

offers an occasion to review the potential for this cross-cultural censorship to bear significance with regard to identity politics.

### **The Harem made Haram once again: Revised Orientalist Imagery**

I once found a piece of white paper pasted over an entire illustration. The caption read “Eugène Delacroix. The Death of Sardanapalus. 1827” (Figure 2.4). Had this artwork been left in the open, students could have viewed a French Romantic painter’s dramatic rendition of an episode from an ancient tale unfolding in the Near Eastern kingdom of Assyria. In this violent scene, undressed sex slaves implore a king for mercy, as guards execute a mass slaughter ordered by the ruler, Sardanapalus, following his army’s defeat at war. Of the censored image, ironically, I could only discern naked female bodies, whose pale flesh contrasted with the composition’s dark tones, thereby showing through the thin protective sheet.

**Figure 2.4: Anonymous, censored book illustration, date unknown, paper glued on printed page**



(Original artwork: Eugène Delacroix, *The Death of Sardanapalus*, 1827)

Delacroix was one of many nineteenth century European painters who found inspiration in North African and West Asian cultures. Such regions provided these artists with a backdrop for wonderful images and extravagant stories. At a time when industrialization was rapidly affecting Europe, their fantasized Orient was

a mythical land untouched by modernity.<sup>40</sup> They often depicted erotic scenes in which sensual women lounge amidst the intimate settings of magnificent palaces. I found several books containing Orientalist imagery at our university's library. These depictions of a wildly sexual Orient were, at our institution in the Orient, censored. They, after all, repeatedly sought to represent the women's apartments of Muslim households, or harem, a term in close semantic relation to the word haram, that which is "taboo, inviolable, sacred, holy."<sup>41</sup> Yet the removal of entire pictures such as Delacroix's *Sardanapalus* was rare. Most Orientalist images were lightly, and often gently, censored.

*Odalisque with a Slave*, painted in 1842 by Ingres, depicts an interior set before the thick foliage of a lush garden, and framed by heavy curtains. A male African servant in Turkish dress attends to the odalisque, a harem concubine. She leans back, naked, among cushions. In her reclining pose typical of Western female nudes,<sup>42</sup> the odalisque appears exaggeratedly relaxed, as if on the verge of consciousness, perhaps absorbed in a voluptuous daydream. In a censored version of this image (Figure 2.5), the odalisque's body was kept from view by a loose veil executed in a shimmering, dark orange shade matching that of the nearby curtains. As this layer of paint had dried it had accidentally altered the page, warping its paper. The undulating surface thus produced further assimilated this intervention to the original image; a scene furnished by Ingres in naturalistically rendered draped textiles.

---

40. See Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin Books, 2003), on "Europe's collective daydream of the Orient" (V. G. Kiernan's phrasing, cited 52).

41. See Al Jallad, "The Concepts of *al-Halal* and *al-Haram* in the Arab-Muslim Culture," 80. The quotation is an excerpt from a definition of *haram* taken from Rothi Baalbaki, *al-Marwid: A Modern Arabic-English Dictionary* (Beirut: Dar Al-Ilm Lilmalayin, 1993), 460. Regarding female space in a Muslim society, Bourdieu has emphasized that it is "the place par excellence of the haram, i.e. of all which is sacred and forbidden, and a closed and secret space, well-protected and sheltered from intrusions and the gaze of others." Pierre Bourdieu, "The Berber House," in Mary Douglas, *Collected Works, Volume IV, Rules and Meanings: The Anthropology of Everyday Knowledge* (London: Routledge, 1973), 101.

42. This supine erotic posture, favored by Western artists since the Renaissance, can be contrasted with representations of sexuality in non-European cultures. See Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 46-47, 50.



**Figure 2.5: Anonymous, censored book illustration (detail),  
date unknown, paint on printed page**



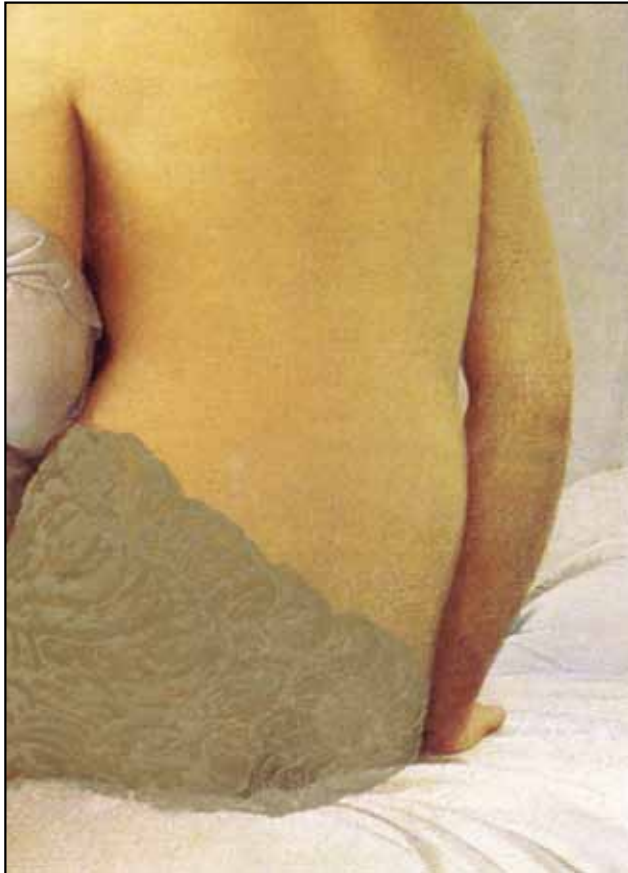
(Original artwork: Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres, *Odalisque with a slave*, 1842).

I knew the patient hand that had fitted Ingres' figure in a drape of copper tones belonged to a woman, for the university was entirely staffed by women, apart from an occasional male lecturer and maintenance men working after hours. This delicate addition was that of a woman carefully handling the image of another woman's body. I did not just value the beauty or oddity of such retouched Orientalist artworks. I had before my eyes images that had been modified by people whose

cultural heritage the original artworks had sought to depict. Each additional layer of paint, like a pregnant second thought, appeared to me as a chance reminder that the representation of a culture is an ongoing, open-ended process. In her thesis on the relations between the “Muslim female subject” as critical category and the veil, Noor Al-Qasimi writes that “the veil can also be understood as a means of discursive self-empowerment.”<sup>43</sup>

An earlier painting by Ingres depicts a woman fully naked save for head covering and a towel pressed against her side. The Valpinçon Bather sits on a couch by a pool, her back towards the viewer. In a book illustration this bather’s hips had been coated with golden paint applied in small, circular brushstrokes (Figure 2.6).

**Figure 2.6: Anonymous, censored book illustration (detail), date unknown, paint on printed page.**



After Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres, *The Valpinçon Bather*, 1808 (detail).

43. Al-Qasimi, “The Codes of Modesty,” 172.

The repetition of minute curls formed, rather than a pattern, an intricate see-through texture that was uneven. This addition did not disrupt much the artwork's luxurious atmosphere in which amber skin is washed with pale light.

The conflicting terms "gentle" and "repression" came to my mind as I looked at this image. In comparison with the strict avoidance of visuals depicting women elsewhere in the country, and the crude digital alterations they sometimes displayed, this skirt of golden lace felt beyond subtle. As a translucent layer, it did not result in an actual, effective deletion. Rather, it appeared to serve as a signifier of censorship.

### **"Crossing Out," a Local Practice and a Signifying Device**

Other educational establishments across the Gulf similarly restrict their students' access to nude imagery. Entire pages are torn off books at a university in the United Arab Emirates. At another Emirati institution a "reserved area" has been delimited, which can be accessed under specific circumstances. Its contents cannot be borrowed.<sup>44</sup> Although these two methods substantially contrast from one another in their impact on the integrity of the teaching material affected, both are inconspicuous and equivocal censorship processes. Trimming a publication may be executed in discreet ways, and only become apparent to a careful reader who notices a jump in page numbers or incoherence in the text's development. Should shreds of missing sheets remain attached to their binding and testify to an abrupt removal, recipients of the censored material would nonetheless lack any indication of what it is, precisely, that has been removed. The second procedure, which leaves publications untouched yet segregates them from other library contents, is a tacit form of censorship. Although the books involved may be accessed on certain occasions, they are not to exit their sealed surroundings, they cannot be circulated.

Our Saudi Arabian solution can be radically opposed to both strategies applied in the Emirates, as a practice that is both manifest and aesthetic. Its visual impact has little in common with the hushed methods of these neighboring institutions. Graphically, it is closer to an episode of iconoclasm as geographically and historically distant as the subverting of Russian communist monuments that followed the USSR's collapse. In the Eastern European territories of the early 1990s, graffiti was added to decreed, obsolete statues. These inscriptions allowed departed statesmen to "speak." Red paint was added to sculpted hands as a metaphor of their owner's

---

44. These censorship methods were recounted by Alia Yunis and Bob Dahm in a conversation with the author on July 13, 2012.

deeds, and so on.<sup>45</sup> Commenting on the variety of approaches called forth to deal with remnants of public art from the Soviet epoch, Christoph Stözl, director of the Deutsches Historisches Museum in Berlin, asserted that “transporting [communist statues] to a depository was no aesthetic action, but only revealed that one did not know what to do.”<sup>46</sup> Rather than stash away or otherwise remove contentious material, our institution dealt with it through aesthetic actions. To consider the implications of this censorship on display as an eloquent practice, let us take a detour through the cityscape of Jeddah, which abounds with surprising open-air sculptures.

A well-known example of this public art consists of five bronze horses, which stand alongside a highway in galloping postures. Each individual horse is rendered in some detail and to realistic proportions, yet is composed of two fragments placed at a distance from one another. The front and rear of the depicted animals resemble pieces of a puzzle, about to be assembled in a gap left where their midsection would have been positioned. I often saw this statuary since it was located on my way to work, and privately speculated on whether its disjointed bodies were intended as an entertaining, or perhaps poetic novelty by their author. Yet I one day chanced upon two gigantic sculpted camels that had been similarly sectioned, and asked a colleague about the peculiar custom to which both sculptors had subscribed. According to her, the statues had been crafted so because pictures of animate beings are haram, and by shaping a severed body one does not represent a live organism. Indeed, none of these creatures, were they alive, would survive the wounds inflicted.

Why had these artists thus compromised, instead of keeping to permitted subjects and abstract shapes? Saudi Arabians consider horses and camels to be prominent features of their cultural heritage. As landmarks erected alongside busy roads such statues provide markers of a shared identity. These commissions must therefore result in noteworthy works that are intelligible to the public, while at the same time it is, on doctrinal grounds, necessary to undermine the figurative cohesion and degree of illusion this endeavor requires. By crossing out their creations, these artists introduce a visual disruption that eventually participates in the making of a local approach to visual culture.<sup>47</sup>

---

45. See Gamboni, *The Destruction of Art*, 51-90. Here I refer to the cases of Ludwig Engelhardt's statue of Marx and Engels in front of the Palast der Republik, Berlin (63-64), and the Warsaw statue of Dzerzhinsky (73).

46. Cited in Gamboni, *The Destruction of Art*, 77.

47. Examples of deliberately incomplete depictions of the living, however, can be found elsewhere. In the hieroglyphic inscriptions of Egyptian pyramids, characters consisting the image of a

Crossing out can be expressed in French with the term “rature.” Sous rature, sometimes translated as under erasure, is a textual device used as philosophical strategy, which appeared in the writings of Martin Heidegger and was developed by Jacques Derrida. When Heidegger first performed a rature in a text, he crossed out the word ‘Being,’ letting “both deletion and word stand.”<sup>48</sup> The philosopher wrote: “a thoughtful glance ahead into this realm of ‘Being’ can only write it as Being.”<sup>49</sup> Heidegger found the term ‘Being,’ with its accepted signification and attached connotations, to be an inadequate tool for a discourse attempting to question the concept of Being. Yet he had to use this word, given the constraints of language. Hence the rature, which does not entirely remove the contested term, yet transforms it with provisional means. Instead of resorting to a neologism, the philosopher opted for a graphic inscription which, while invalidating the word, let it remain legible. A rature foregrounds not only the limitations of representation, but also the necessity to employ it. Our nudes under erasure signify, in ways similar to the philosopher’s gesture, a working compromise whereby unsuitable yet indispensable images are left to bear a mark of disapproval.

## Conclusion

Students once asked me why photographs of Michelangelo’s frescoes that decorate the Sistine Chapel, a “sacred” site, had been blacked out in their textbooks. A conversation ensued, which drew both on the legacy of Greco-Roman representations in Christian iconography, and Muslim doctrine. Rather than prevent one from confronting the actuality of artistic nudes, this form of iconoclasm encourages its recipients to address and interrogate the retouched material as well as the act of censorship itself. Writing on the seventeenth century beginnings of a “modern prudishness” in Europe, Foucault proposed that “censorship” may have had to first “subjugate” and “extinguish the words that rendered [sex] too visibly present,” amounting to “instances of muteness which, by dint of saying nothing, imposed silence.”<sup>50</sup> Our prudish censorship was of a different kind: its operations

---

dangerous beast are sometimes fragmented: a lion may be cut in half, a Scorpio may have no tail. In certain Jewish parts of Poland, statues are permissible possessions when at least one of their parts is missing, such as a finger. See E. H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* (London: Phaidon, 2002), 95.

48. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, introduction to *Of Grammatology*, by Jacques Derrida (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1997), xv.

49. Cited by Chakravorty Spivak, Introduction, xv.

50. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New

were conducted overtly, not quite efficiently, and at times provoked unexpected discussions.

Foucault doubted, however, that “prohibition, censorship, and denial truly [are] the forms through which power is exercised in a general way,” at least in the West.<sup>51</sup> Equally to the expurgation of women from the Saudi Arabian sphere of public visibility, Western society’s customary exhibition of female flesh can be argued to partake in the “polymorphous techniques of power”<sup>52</sup> that police gender. We have envisioned this censorship as negotiation, since it is a maneuver performed at a crossroads between these divergent ways of seeing, characterizing, and delineating bodies. It has emerged as a necessary mediation in the light of its given context, considering Saudi Arabia’s momentous exposure to Western cultural products in the field of academia and the wider mediascape of televised broadcasts and the Web.

When it indifferently ladens images with bold appendages, this censorship has appeared to mock the “saints, angels, gods and heroes” of a Western artistic tradition in which “the outward aspects of bodies and faces has also entailed certain conclusions about the minds and souls inside them.”<sup>53</sup> Yet we have accounted for this air of hostility or derisive commentary, as a by-product of the institution’s resort to bricolage techniques. Because it is not conducted according to a strict framework of directives, this censorship produces mixed results. The retouching at times appears like a caress, as when it gently amends Orientalist depictions of the harem. Through a gesture of veiling, foreign representations of female space in Islam are appropriated, and identified once again as that which is “at once sacred and illicit for every man who does not form part of it.”<sup>54</sup> As Heidegger termed it, “the sign of crossing out can, to be sure, ... not be a merely negative sign of crossing out.”<sup>55</sup>

---

York: Pantheon Books), 17.

51. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume 1*, 10. Foucault sees, from the eighteenth century onward, developing simultaneously with the institution of sexually repressed Western “bourgeois societies,” a proliferation of discourses on sex, whereby subjects are incited to speak about it, and receive guidance in this matter from the Church and other authorities. See “The Incitement to Discourse,” in *The History of Sexuality Volume 1*, 17-35.

52. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume 1*, 11.

53. George L. Hersey, *The Evolution of Allure: Sexual Selection from the Medici Venus to the Incredible Hulk* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1996): “since our saints, angels, gods and heroes inhabit these physiques, the physiques have been equated with superior mental and spiritual qualities,” 3.

54. Bourdieu’s definition of the *haram*, “The Berber House,” 103.

55. Cited by Chakravorty Spivak, Introduction, xv.



### 3

## Displaying in the Peninsula: Museums as Creators of a Visual Identity

*Pamela Erskine-Loftus*

### Introduction

Since the 1960s, and specifically after the early 1970s, the use of museums as a form through which to create and project visual identity – national and regional – has flourished in the Arab Peninsula. As institutions seen internationally as both producing and consuming visual culture, museums have the responsibility to enable visitors (actual and virtual) to interact, learn from, and participate with existing and emerging visual cultures and representations. Specifically since the beginning of this century museum creation and building has grown extensively in the Peninsula, particularly in the UAE and Qatar. With this has come the museum as a symbol of nationhood and modernity, both representing as well as regulating visual culture.

This chapter discusses some of the foundational aspects of the impact of western museum practices and methods in, and on, Peninsula art museums and their possible productions of meanings. As museums have spread globally from Europe/ North America, the hypothesis used in this chapter is that many (though not necessarily all) museums in the Peninsula utilize aspects of western museum theory and/or practice, and that this is manifested visually to the population through the museum and its displays. Therefore, this chapter will start by examining the possible understandings of “museum” locally, primarily if the museum is viewed as local or



imported, and this idea's relationship to heritage; then, via the use of the circuit of culture, the possible connections of understandings this may have within society.

Display is a museum's primary form of communication with visitors. How museums engage and communicate through display in western museums is based on rarely questioned cultural understandings. Certain cultural aspects are prominent within museums and these have spread with the concept of western museums around the world. However, forms of communication and the preference and use of some forms over others, is not universal but culturally specific, and bound with regional, national, and community identities. The two examples used for discussion are visualism and silent reading. These practices have travelled with museums globally; however, they are not universal.

By examining these ingrained components of both western and Peninsula museum understandings and practices, this chapter will show that visual and cultural aspects play an important role, possibly a decisive one, in the consumption of visual culture in/of museums.

## **Displaying in the Peninsula: Museums as Creators of a Visual Identity**

Within the West, museums may be seen as one of the most influential and powerful creators, regulators, and consumers of culture, particularly those museums that collect, research, and exhibit art. The reach of museums into culture is extensive, with influences far outside their physical walls and attendant audiences. There are multiple definitions of culture; however, the traditional and dominant western view of culture is that of specific artistic products including drama, music, dance, painting, sculpture, among others, and their associated institutions, including museums. More specifically, museums engage in visual culture, often narrowly viewed as the convergence of fine art and sociology, and a concept concerned with the practices of looking and seeing, a concept that therefore requires both something to be seen and someone to look. A more nuanced museum view may be that "visual culture encompasses multiple forms of cultural production which, taken together, constitute one's visual environment."<sup>1</sup> Museums in the West since the Enlightenment have partaken in specific systems of vision and viewing, which have shaped the visual culture and environment of the museum.

---

1. Helen Klebesadelm, "Reframing Studio Art Production and Critique," in *New Museum Theory and Practice: an Introduction*, edited by Janet Marstine, 248-265 (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 253.

All objects exhibited in museums may be considered as visual culture, as may those not currently on public view, for the actual viewing of the object does not make it visual culture. However, what and how museums display, interpret, and share their visual culture is highly influential. Museums are understood – by themselves and by their audiences – as places of authenticity and of the “real” thing. They are in the West institutions which as a component of “high art” perpetuate and legitimize systems of power, control, and identity. Therefore, what they display and how they display it has significant influence on the understandings of objects, and the relationship between object and viewer. Since the emergence of new museology in the early 1990s, the increased prioritization of the seer over the seen can be applied not only to the object(s) but also to the museum as an institution. This duality, the “museum effect” works in both directions, as not only do objects take on new and different meanings once in the museum, but the “museum experience itself becomes a model for experiencing life outside its walls.”<sup>2</sup> Therefore, not only may the contents of a museum (objects, collections, and exhibitions) construct, change, and influence visual identity but the museum itself creates its own visual identity. This is shaped by both the institution and by its users, but is never static or universal. This essay will discuss some of the foundational components of how museums in the Arab Peninsula may be creating visual identities and what that may mean for their audiences.

In 2001, the International Council of Museums (ICOM) defined a museum as: “A non-profit making, permanent institution in the service of society and of its development, and open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits, for the purpose of study, education and enjoyment, material evidence of people and their environment.”<sup>3</sup> The manifestation of this concept of the museum that has spread from the West is the one that is prevalent in the Arabian Peninsula. This version of the museum, which is not the only version, has brought with it the majority of its western understandings of display and interpretation, as well as expectations and presumptions of audiences. The idea of the museum, as with many other western creations, has spread globally but it is the western iteration that holds sway internationally, institutions which as part of cultural policy “very often hold an honourable if not dominating place,”<sup>4</sup> components

- 
2. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums and Heritage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 51.
  3. International Council of Museums (ICOM), *ICOM Code of Ethics for Museums* (Paris: ICOM, 2006), 14.
  4. Henriques Abranches, “Museums and Cultural Identity,” in *Museums for a Developing World*:

of society viewed by many as one barometer of modern civilization, as “signs of politically virtuous states.”<sup>5</sup> In the early 1970s, small history museums started to appear within the newly formed Gulf States. Not solely designed to project the new nation externally, these museums perhaps contributed more directly to creating nationhood internally, consolidating and creating history and background to the country and its rulers via which citizens might feel connected to a new nation state.

Since the 1970s, the number of museums in the region has grown extensively, to include not only “national” museums but also the regeneration of historic buildings, purpose-built institutions, and living collections. However, compared to their western counterparts, museum attendance and associated support is very low. Attendance at a museum is not required for an individual, and their community, to be affected by the museum. However, the degree of visitorship to institutions may have an effect on the range of influence museums have on identity and visual culture, and the timeframes in which this may occur.

One of the main questions that this generates is whether the museum is viewed as a western import or as a component of local culture. Within the Peninsula, there has been virtually no research into how this western construct of the museum has been understood, used, and reacted to by those living in the region. Therefore, this chapter will start with a (necessarily short) investigation of museum, and how this may be understood locally. The idea of the museum within the West is not fixed but changes with place and time, and is therefore understood differently by different people. It may be presumed that this is also the case with museums in the Peninsula. In order to attempt to understand this and how it may influence visual culture and identity, the circuit of culture is used.<sup>6</sup>

To build upon this, the second part of this chapter will outline two specific but concurrent aspects of difference in the cultural and social landscapes in which these museums exist: visualism, (ocularcentrism), and silent reading. Although neither is exclusively western, both are ingrained and mostly unquestioned components of western culture, including museums, their displays, and visitor interaction (or lack

---

*Proceedings of the 13th General Conference and 14th General Assembly of the International Council of Museums, London, 24 July – 2 August 1983, 19-31 (The Netherlands: International Council of Museums, 1983), 20.*

5. Carol Duncan, “From the Princely Gallery to the Public Art Museum: The Louvre Museum and the National Gallery, London,” in *Representing the Nation: A Reader: History, Heritage and Museums*, edited by David Boswell and Jessica Evans (London: Routledge, 1999), 304.
6. Paul du Gay, Stuart Hall, Linda Janes, Hugh Mackay and Keith Negus, *Doing Cultural Studies: The Story of the Sony Walkman* (Milton Keynes: Sage Publications Ltd./The Open University, 1997).

thereof). As the western construct of the museum has spread, so these practices have accompanied the institution. Although much of current visualism is a hybrid of image, text, and sound, museums have been very successful at minimizing possible textual incursions, eliminating sound almost all together, and consequently heightening the visual. However, the continuation of visual-centric practices in museums outside the West brings forward questions related to sensual hierarchies and identity.

This chapter discusses only some aspects of the relationships between museums and visual identity in the Peninsula, using examples predominantly from the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Qatar. The museum in the West has been, and is, a major contributor to, and user of, visual culture and producer of identity, and these aspects can all be investigated within the region for their possible iterations. However, currently there exists a scarcity of research and data to make all possible investigations feasible and productive.

## **Understanding Mathaf**

What may be understood by the term “museum” in the Peninsula? There are few Middle Eastern writers who have commented on possible understandings of museum in the wider region, comments limited to statements that the museum is understood universally, even outside the West. This limited literature does not address whether this perceived universal understanding may in fact be accurate and/or useful for museums in the Peninsula. Undoubtedly western museological literature overall presumes this universal understanding although it does not state it. An examination shows that recent museum studies compendium volumes featuring broad discussions of museums and new museology do not include essays that discuss or qualify the parameters of museum – it would appear that the general western understanding is taken as an unwritten standard.

The ICOM report on the proceedings of the conference “Museums, Civilization and Development” held in Jordan in 1994, and which included delegates from the Arab Peninsula, states that participants felt that the role of Arab museums was the “protection of natural and human heritage . . . [and the] valorisation of the concept of a cultural identity in all present and future museums.”<sup>7</sup> Peninsula countries at the conference gave the following outlines of understandings, purposes and uses

---

7. International Council of Museums (ICOM), “The Role of Museums and Museum Personnel,” in *Musées, Civilisation et Développement/Museums, Civilization and Development* (Paris: Conseil International des Musées, 1994), 37.

of museum: “It is necessary to preserve the cultural and intellectual heritage since it reminds us and the future generations of the achievements of the past.”<sup>8</sup> “Today museums are considered as symbols of civilization, educational institutions, cultural centres, schools of art and leisure areas. They are the perfect environment [in which] to come into contact with our heritage.”<sup>9</sup> “Museums are the natural keepers of the heritage that should be conveyed to the next generation so that they are aware of the contribution of their predecessors to the development of Humanity and of their own duty to build a better world.”<sup>10</sup>

Sayyid H. Hurreiz includes the following on museums in his 2002 publication on folklore and folklife in the UAE: “The rationale behind these institutions is the education of youngsters as well as enlightening visitors and preserving the history and heritage of the UAE.”<sup>11</sup> Indeed, even today mission and vision statements, which some (though not all) museums in the Gulf States have, are not informative as to why they may exist at all or in their current form, but focus rather on the services that they provide. Currently the reasons for, and the roles of, these museums are divergent. In general, the current role would appear to be the projection internally of nation, aimed at cohesion, cementing national identity and education, and externally the projection of the nation on/to the international stage. Most often, these projections are delivered through a single didactic authoritative, though passive, narrative. Some of the roles found internationally do not currently appear strongly within Peninsula museums – particularly as actual activity rather than desired plans – such as the roles of strengthening civic society and community cohesion, urban regeneration, the challenging of societal presumptions, or polivocality within narrative and story. With vagueness of purpose rampant, at present museums commonly see themselves as a place rather than an ongoing, active process or experience.

From these and other descriptions and understandings of the museum in the wider region, there is an obvious link between these institutions and ideas of history and heritage. For many countries in the wider Middle East, the prevalence of

---

8. Laila M. Al Lamki, “The Experience of the Museums in the Sultanate of Oman,” in *Musées, Civilisation et Développement/Museums, Civilization and Development* (Paris: Conseil International des Musées, 1994), 271.

9. Mohamed J. Al-Khulaifi, “The Civilizing Mission of Contemporary Museums,” in *Musées, Civilisation et Développement/Museums, Civilization and Development* (Paris: Conseil International des Musées, 1994), 305.

10. *Ibid.*, 306.

11. Sayyid H. Hurreiz, *Folklore and Folklife in the United Arab Emirates* (London: Routledge, 2002), 64.

archaeological sites means that the number of museums dedicated to archaeological objects is (necessarily) high. Summer weather in the region discourages the use of in situ display for most of the year and so objects are housed in museums. “Heritage museum” is the regional term applied to what in western literature would be described as ethnographic, anthropological, and historical collections and buildings. This type of museum was the first to appear in most Peninsula states, shortly after their formations in the early 1970s. Qatar National Museum is a prime example, opening in 1975 with multiple parts of a former Al-Thani palace combined with a new building, the Museum of the State, designed “in sympathy with the other buildings but not competing with them.”<sup>12</sup> Many museums in the Peninsula contain heritage collections often exhibited in restored houses and buildings, or those made to resemble historic structures; examples include several in Sharjah’s Heritage Area, UAE; the Shaikh Faisal bin Qassim Al-Thani Museum in Doha, Qatar; Bait Al Zubair in Muscat, Oman; and Tareq Rajab Museum, Kuwait City. Although many of the new museums appearing in the region utilize modernist architecture and materials, the use of traditional and/or vernacular architecture and style has not been completely removed, though it is used primarily for heritage related museums. In Qatar, the former National Museum’s historic home is under renovation as a component of the new museum, and in addition four historic house museums are currently under production, and in Sharjah, the use of aspects of vernacular architecture are highly evident in the purpose-built Sharjah Art Museum.

The speed at which the GCC states have developed has meant that houses still occupied thirty years ago are today perceived as part of the tangible heritage of the country. These houses and the objects they contain are used as a vehicle for “identity enhancement” within the fast-paced change brought about by globalization.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, the visitor experience of these heritage museums by Peninsula nationals is inherently different from that of foreigners living in the country or visiting. “A culture can never be reduced to its artefacts while it is being lived,” wrote Raymond Williams<sup>14</sup> and so the understanding of these houses as museums functions somewhat outside of the western idea, as part of society is still actively engaged with the objects, the people who made them, and their original purpose. In general,

---

12. Michael Rice, “National Museum of Qatar, Doha,” in *Museum International* 29, no. 2-3 (1977): 80.

13. John W. Fox, Nada Mourtada-Sabbah and Mohammed al-Mutawa, “Heritage Revivalism in Sharjah,” in *Globalization and the Gulf*, edited by John W. Fox, Nada Mourtada-Sabbah and Mohammed al-Mutawa (Abingdon/New York: Routledge, 2006), 267.

14. Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society: 1780-1950* (New York: Anchor Books, 1960), 343.

western understandings of heritage are directly linked to history and to the past, in other words to aspects of life which are not active. In addition, heritage is seen as a selective component of history; “as an alternative to history, heritage accentuates the positive but sifts away what is problematic.”<sup>15</sup> Therefore, different understandings of heritage will influence what may be understood as, and what may be gained from, heritage interaction.

These museums do not just present and represent visual culture they also produce it, creating a different and new history and culture dependent on the audience. For example, historic house museums frame the contents as heritage, historicizing the objects as important. To westerners (expatriate or visiting), the concept of the museum is understood and the objects within viewed as authentic and authoritative, and therefore as a true record of the country’s past. For national visitors, the houses and objects are far closer to an idealization of a still current lifestyle, culturally and socially. In addition, within certain spaces, such as the Sharjah Heritage Area, the very space frames the houses as heritage, segregated from much of the modern construction geographically, socially, and architecturally, creating a landscape of group identity. The Sharjah Heritage Area mix of traditional buildings and town layout assimilates newer iterations, such as the purpose-built Sharjah Art Museum building. It is uncertain whether this may also occur in completely new vernacular architectural spaces, such as Qatar’s Katara: Valley of Cultures, utilizing vernacular architecture in a sea front setting offering extensive cultural facilities and restaurants.

An alternate concept to this is the idea of the museum as a method of preservation: “museums are repositories of what must be preserved and is too fragile to be left to chance.”<sup>16</sup> Due to the speed of globalization in the Peninsula, decisions are required to preserve buildings and objects that within larger contexts would not be considered either old enough or in need of protection. Particularly in light of the extreme growth in land and property prices, heritage sites must be identified quickly before being demolished for new construction, an issue across the region. These buildings may not necessarily be converted to museums but are often put to not dissimilar uses, as research centers, charitable organizations’ premises, libraries, cultural centers, vocational training spaces, and similar. Again, heritage – including

---

15. Michael Kammen, *The Mystic Chords of Memory: the Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 626.

16. Joseph Margolis, “The Idea of the Art Museum,” in *The Idea of the Museum: Philosophical, Artistic, and Political Questions*, edited by Lars Aagaard-Mogensen (New York: E Mellon Press, 1988), 176.

its restoration and maintenance – is linked with “non-profit” activities seen to be for the public good and which supports local visual culture.

Within western texts the body of literature discussing the place of dominant cultures and attitudes within the museum, and the use of museums to disseminate these views, is extensive and this should not be discounted as an aspect of Peninsula museums. The dominant culture is that of the ruler, and therefore in certain states, most notably Sharjah, UAE, and Qatar, one that encompasses the importance of education and heritage. As such, museums support these identities via the representation of the history of the state and country, and the use of museums as educational sites for students.

The linking of museums to heritage, via the use of specific aspects of architecture, location, and/or the collection and display of objects, may appear as a purposeful route to bring them into the arena of accepted spaces for interactions with heritage, and by association other types of collections. However, there would appear to be little evidence that this linking has been a purposeful course of action. Indeed, in many parts of the Peninsula, museums receive very few visitors compared with more active and interactive heritage encounters, such as festivals. For example, in the UAE there are several heritage festivals centered around specific aspects of local culture, but which include many other tangible and intangible heritage components. Examples include the Liwa Date Festival (ten day festival, 2011 festival attendance of approximately 70,000), Sharjah Heritage Days (fourteen day festival, 2011 attendance approximately 100,000), and the Dhafra Festival (ten day festival, 2010 attendance of approximately 10,000). Audiences at these festivals far exceed yearly museum attendance. Nevertheless, these festivals actively include aspects of museum practice: display, activities and programs, occurring in a semi-public space open for a set amount of time at set hours, etc. This may, therefore, suggest that engagements with heritage are preferred in a multi-sensory, “live” environment, rather than the more static, vision-centered museum setting. This has significant implications for museums, traditionally vision-centric, and where the other senses of touch, hearing, smell, and taste have been relegated. This aspect of the visual identity of museums will be discussed later in this chapter.

## **The Circuit of Culture**

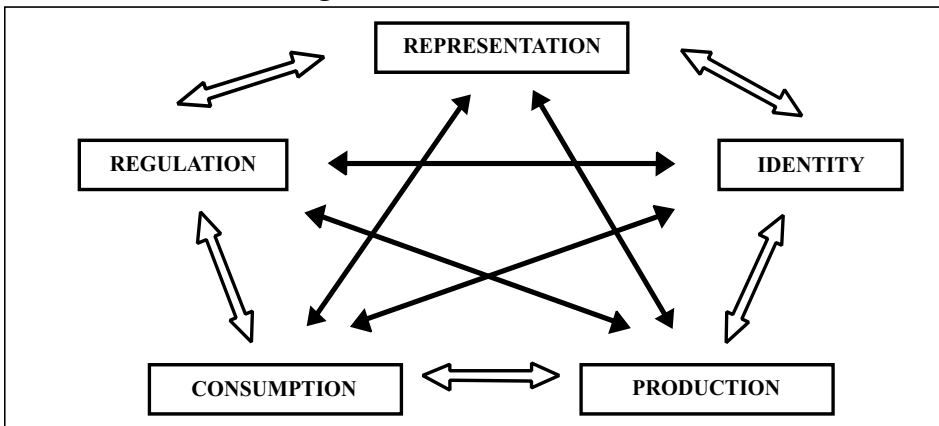
This brief review of the identity of the museum in the Gulf States generates additional questions: is the meaning of museum within the region fixed and aligned with the idea of heritage? Is the understanding(s) of museum viewed as a western



import? Moreover, might the type of museum collection affect this? And is a shaped but changing identity part of the museum in the Peninsula?

Of use in this analysis is the circuit of culture featuring the five cultural processes of representation, identity, production, consumption and regulation.<sup>17</sup> Used originally by Paul du Gay, Stuart Hall and other contributors to analyze the Sony Walkman as a cultural object, the circuit of culture allows for the bringing together of disparate views of the museum in order to create an understanding of it within the Peninsula context and the avenues through which it may influence visual culture. As with any circuit, the route taken through the five components is not set.

Fig 3.1 The Circuit of Culture



Source: Paul du Gay et al. *Doing Cultural Studies: The Story of the Sony Walkman* (Milton Keynes: Sage Publication Ltd./ The Open University, 1997), 3.

Starting with the possibly prevalent identity of the museum in the Peninsula as a site for heritage, this circuit starts with the idea of identity as shaped but not necessarily fixed. Due to the placement of heritage within the national construct of the Peninsula states, and the use of heritage as a signifier of nationality and national cohesion, it is unsurprising that this may be the primary view of museums. As a chain of meaning via which existing meanings are extended to incorporate new information, the incorporation of the modern museum via the existing understanding of heritage has allowed for the inclusion of the museum into the socially accepted sphere of public space due to its support and maintenance of heritage. “One way of knowing whether something has become ‘part of our cultural universe’ is to see

17. du Gay et al., *Doing Cultural Studies: The Story of the Sony Walkman*.

whether you can interpret or ‘read it’ – whether you understand what it means, what it is ‘saying’.”<sup>18</sup> By extrapolation, non-heritage museums can be linked into the chain due to their relationships with heritage museums, education, and national signifiers. It may be that non-heritage museums which have used heritage related aspects – such as vernacular architecture at the Sharjah Art Museum, and at the former home of the Orientalist Museum in Doha – may be more successful within this chain of meaning.

It is the production of the museum as a cultural institution, and by extension a component of visual identity, that defines how the museum is made meaningful, how it is “‘encoded with particular meanings.”<sup>19</sup> For du Gay et al. this is not just the production technically but equally production culturally – how the production of the museum contains meanings. By way of the creation of a museum (by whom, where, when, collection type, architecture, etc.), the museum is encoded with meanings, some of which may be intentional, some not. As with many western museums, the production by a dominant class of institutions such as museums leads to the reinforcing of specific dominant class ideologies and classifications. The production of meaning-laden representations encodes the museum in different ways for different people but overarching meanings will exist, for a “range of social meanings, practices, and usages, power and interest [are] ‘written in’.”<sup>20</sup>

By way of illustration, the heritage and related museums in Sharjah are encoded for both local and foreign audiences in three distinct ways, based upon the general prior knowledge of distinct audiences. For Emiratis, there is the prior knowledge of the objects on view, how they are part of the Trucial States and UAE history, the role they play (or do not play) today, and the nature of the creation of the museums by the ruler of Sharjah, HH Dr. Shaikh Sultan bin Mohammed Al-Qasimi. For foreign museum visitors from western countries (be they expatriates or tourists), there is the general understanding of the museum, the place of heritage and culture in the itinerary of a trip, and a desire to experience the “authentic” UAE, which may be perceived as being more authentic in a UAE-created museum than one from abroad. But for those expatriates from non-western countries, who make up a large percentage of residents in the UAE, there exists for many a void, where cultural capital does not assist with the understanding of the museum and very long work hours make visiting difficult.

---

18. *Ibid.*, 8.

19. *Ibid.*, 4.

20. Hall as quoted in Paula Gardner, Jonathan M. Metzler and Bradley E. Lewis, “Introduction,” *Journal of Medical Humanities* 24, no. 1/2 (2003): 4.

The production of the museum in Sharjah and other parts of the Peninsula forms part of the creation of cultural goods that have an economic importance. As part of Sharjah's ongoing plan to be the cultural and educational capital of the UAE, and Qatar's aim of a knowledge-based economy, heritage and therefore museums brings in economic activity through tourists (both local and global), as well as the less immediately obvious but no less economically tied advancement of the knowledge-based economy. This is therefore also part of identity for both the state as well as local visual culture. As with other major cities around the world, the economic impact of heritage and museums cannot be confined to the expenditure of the visitor in order to enter the museum but includes hotel, food/catering, transportation, and disposable income expenditure. In turn, these both sustain the heritage culture as well as contribute to the production of a museum culture.

As a social and cultural communicator, the western museum has an identity value, found in both the identity and the consumption of the museum. The consumption of the museum is the production of its meaning, for its meaning is made via its usage. Pierre Bourdieu's writings on cultural capital contribute to this, summed up by du Gay et al.: "What we consume and how we consume always involves judgments on our behalf which at the same time identify and render classifiable our own particular judgment of taste to other people."<sup>21</sup> This form of social differentiation again acts differently for local and foreign users. It is the personal act of consumption that creates the meaning of the museum for the user; however, there is no universal meaning to consumption, and therefore following this theory the understanding of the museum cannot be universal or fixed.

In order to consume the museum and its representations, audiences in the Arab Peninsula must know about the museums, via the representation of museums to them. Museums are represented to the consumer primarily via advertising, the cultural language that speaks on behalf of the museum and addresses the consumer. Again, the mode of advertising used and the associations to heritage and other museums will vary for different audiences. For many in the Peninsula, and elsewhere, this may be their primary and/or only interaction with a museum and therefore their understanding of its identity. Advertising "must create an identification between the customer and the product"<sup>22</sup> and therefore the type and message of advertising is, and needs to be, different for different audiences. An example is the differing representations of temporary/visiting exhibitions, between the images, colours,

---

21. du Gay et al. *Doing Cultural Studies: The Story of the Sony Walkman*, 97.

22. du Gay et al. *Doing Cultural Studies: The Story of the Sony Walkman*, 25.

and text used in Peninsula materials and that used for the western showing of an exhibition. An alternate view of advertising, due to the saturation of outlets through which consumers can be reached today, would be that in fact, “advertising serves not so much to advertise products as to promote consumption as a way of life.”<sup>23</sup> In the Peninsula, cities are centers of conspicuous consumption, promoting a consumer lifestyle that has become part of local culture.<sup>24</sup> Museums too offer consumption, of experiences, knowledge, interaction, and enjoyment. Via advertising, museums hope that consumers identify with the museum in some way, and therefore consumption is closely related to identity.

Cultural regulation or re-regulation is often thought of as the regulation of leisure, and related to regulation of social space. Within the museums in the Peninsula, the question becomes: is the museum the regulator of culture in the museum, or does local culture regulate the museum? Alternatively, is it both? On the one hand, the creation of western-style museums in the Peninsula may be seen as a cultural imposition, as dominance (and therefore regulation) via what may be seen by some as a foreign entity.<sup>25</sup> Alternatively, the globalization of the region and the opening up of trade allows for the intentional import of goods, services, and ideas, including museums. Rather than states creating their own culturally specific sites aimed at acquiring, conserving, researching, communicating, and exhibiting, they chose to utilize an existing formula. Cultural protectionism has therefore not been employed to protect national cultural identity from foreign influences within the area of buildings that display perceived important objects.

Although there are privately run museums in the Peninsula, the two largest museum organizations, Sharjah Museums Department and Qatar Museums Authority, were both set up by their respective rulers, and the regulation of national culture can be seen to lie within this purview. As stated previously, what has accompanied this western museum import is the associated regulation of behavior and the reinforcement of the hierarchy of senses, perpetuating the visual. This aspect of regulation could therefore confront two aspects of identity – as a reinforcement

---

23. Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1991), 72.

24. Sulayman Khalaf, “The Evolution of the Gulf City Type, Oil, and Globalization,” in *Globalization and the Gulf*, edited by John W. Fox, Nada Mourtada-Sabbah and Mohammed al-Mutawa (Abingdon/New York: Routledge, 2006), 254 & 256-257.

25. John Tomlinson, “Internationalism, Globalisation and Cultural Imperialism,” in *Media and Cultural Regulation*, edited by Kenneth Thompson (London: Sage Publications Ltd./The Open University, 1997), 119.

of the identity of the museum, but also a contrast to the identity of the visitor, specifically those who are non-western.

Therefore, to answer the question posed previously, the culture of the Peninsula state has regulated the museum via the use of leisure time and space. In addition, it is regulated by the fact that the associated ruler of the state created and funds the museums and therefore the place and social standing of their position. Equally, the museum may be seen as regulating culture, as with the import of the western formula of the museum came western methodologies, practices, and staff. How the museum may then be understood, and to what extent it may be seen as cultural imperialism depends on the consumption and identity created by the users.

The meanings created by users and by the museum as already stated are not inherent to the museum (in any part of the world) but rather the representation of it. Changing with time and geography, representation within the circuit of culture is viewed as “the practice of constructing meaning through the use of signs and language”<sup>26</sup> and a “process by which meaning is produced and exchanged between members of a culture.”<sup>27</sup> Via the chain of meaning, museums in the Peninsula have benefited from their relationship to the placement of heritage as important within society. This relationship accentuates the similarities between local heritage and the purpose and collections of museums, as well as the involvement of the ruler in both. This shared understanding directly informs both the identity and production of museums.

The similarity of objects, as well as the differences between objects, is one of the ways in which meaning can be constructed. Via the combining of these, an object is seen to have its own cultural meaning, different from all others. Although only one method of discerning meaning, it can be seen that the museums in the Peninsula are different from heritage as well as other cultural sites or events while also benefiting from similarities and relationships understood by the public. The high cultural value placed by the West on the institution “museum” and what it is seen to symbolize assists this representation as similarities to museums abroad are utilized by both expatriates as well as travelling nationals. As du Gay et al. have written, “the name itself has become a cultural value . . . its privileged meaning.”<sup>28</sup> If the representation of the museum is therefore inclusive of aspects of “similar to”

---

26. du Gay et al. *Doing Cultural Studies: The Story of the Sony Walkman*, 24.

27. Stuart Hall, “The Work of Representation,” in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, edited by Stuart Hall (London: Sage Publications Ltd./The Open University, 1997), 15.

28. du Gay et al. *Doing Cultural Studies: The Story of the Sony Walkman*, 27.

and “different from”, and informs all the other aspects of the circuit of culture, then these aspects may be discernable in some form in museums in the region.

It is clear that through the linking of museums to heritage a locally understood relationship has been made to elevate the position of the museum within society. Within some of the states, the utilization of heritage, the creation of outdoor heritage villages and festivals, and the conservation and conversion of historic houses has been described as bordering on a new national industry.<sup>29</sup> As such, museums are attempting to become a major component of cultural identity – not just as collections of objects, but the very museum itself. Heritage festivals and art museums both contribute to cultural provision; however, there exists a large difference in terms of attendance between the two. For visual culture, this therefore brings back issues relating to identity and museums, and specifically of the hierarchy placing the visual over other senses for engagement and meaning making.

## **Visualism and Silent Reading**

Visualism has been broadly defined as “the reduction of all experience to the representational means available to only one sensory medium, that of sight.”<sup>30</sup> Also referred to as ocularcentrism, it is the western discourse of vision, which places this sense above others and which dates back to the work of Plato and Aristotle. Although in the West, sight has held sway since antiquity, it was “first among equals” in terms of cultural importance until the Enlightenment. The English language exemplifies this preferencing through statements such as “I see” to infer understanding rather than simple sight, a practice that arose during the Enlightenment when words with strong visual connotations started to be used to denote intelligence.

Within the broad Middle East, this visual preferencing has been investigated within studies of colonial discourse, and its use of a hierarchy of senses to legitimize forms of authority, with sight and hearing as the primary senses for the creation of rational knowledge in western thought. The visual as the primary mode of communication in museums was part of colonially introduced institutions such as early museums in Egypt and Iraq. Stephen Tyler has argued, “The metaphor of seeing is not universal, but rather is part of a particular cultural tradition.”<sup>31</sup> Essays

---

29. Christopher M. Davidson, *Dubai: The Vulnerability of Success* (London: Hurst Publishing Ltd., 2008), 175.

30. Michael Herzfeld, *Anthropology: Theoretical Practice in Culture and Society* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2001), 35.

31. Henrietta Riegel, “Into the Heart of Irony: Ethnographic Exhibitions and the Politics of Dif-

discussing different aspects of vision within western museums exist; however, there is nothing written concerning the “import” of this practice to the Middle East or its museums, in the past or currently.

Post-colonialist writers have regarded the use of visualism as a highly seductive aspect of the colonial experience due to its capability to hide and reduce the indigenous sensory perceptions to the “cultural periphery.”<sup>32</sup> This is not to say that Middle Eastern (or other non-western) cultures were without visual culture. It does, however, acknowledge that “different cultures . . . create their own material orders and in the process make slightly different senses”<sup>33</sup> and that therefore the western ordering developed to make sense of the world is only one of many. Nor is this privileging fixed with regard to museums; touch and smell were inherent to the creation of the cabinet of curiosities and early museums such as the Ashmolean. The use of sight only to engage with a collection was considered a one-dimensional means of appreciation and learning from it, for “Full knowledge could be acquired only if all the senses worked together.”<sup>34</sup> However, it was the growing field and profession of science that escalated vision’s primacy as how knowledge may be acquired.

Historically, visual culture in the Middle East has been associated primarily with the areas of calligraphy, architecture, and decoration. However, transfer of knowledge was not seen solely as visual but primarily audiocentric. Traditionally, vocal sharing of knowledge occurred through the family, clan, tribe structure, and oral folktale and folklore traditions, thereby creating relationships between the speaker and listener. Indeed, the human brain has understood oral communication for far longer than visual reading and writing, which are later evolutionary phenomena. The western primacy of the visual orientation not only meant that the objects but also the museum visitor were “reduced to the visual, or – from a Western perspective – being civilized into the visual”<sup>35</sup> based on the predominance of “the

---

ference,” in *Theorizing Museums*, edited by Sharon Macdonald and Gordon Fyfe (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 85–86.

32. Elizabeth Edwards, Chris Gosden and Ruth B. Phillips, “Introduction,” in *Sensible Objects: Colonialism, Museums, and Material Culture*, edited by Elizabeth Edwards, Chris Gosden and Ruth B. Phillips (Oxford: Berg, 2006), 7.

33. *Ibid.*, 5.

34. David Howes, “Nose-wise: Olfactory Metaphors in Mind,” in *Olfaction, Taste, and Cognition*, edited by Catherine Rouby, Benoist Schaal, Danièle Dubois, Rémi Gervais and André Holley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 68.

35. Constance Classen and David Howes, “The Museum as Sensescape: Western Sensibilities and Indigenous Artifacts,” in *Sensible Objects: Colonialism, Museums, and Material Culture*, edited

archivistic as opposed to oral form of memory.”<sup>36</sup> Inherent to this was the lowering of the “proximity senses” of smell, taste and touch, irrespective of the information the object could communicate via them.

The nineteenth century era of museum building in colonial outposts coincided with the era of rising visualism. As these museums appeared on the colonial landscape, so they utilized the “visualizing trends of the day”<sup>37</sup> irrespective of local customs. In his essay on orientalism and its effect on the display of objects, Timothy Mitchell quotes several Middle Eastern writers and their observations on the visualism of the West during the nineteenth century. These accounts discuss the curiosity of the European via staring at the “visual arrangement,” a scene or picture laid out, ordered, and on view for a spectator: “the world itself being ordered up as an endless exhibition.”<sup>38</sup> To accompany these Mitchell quotes, Gustave Flaubert during a visit to Cairo discovers the visual turmoil of the city and his inability to extract out or nullify the impact of the senses of smell, touch and sound from that of the visual. Flaubert and other travellers, according to Mitchell, tried to view the city as a picture, and thereby found that visually there was for them an absence of pictorial order: “The Orient refused to present itself like an exhibit, and so appeared simply orderless and without meaning.”<sup>39</sup>

The companion of visualism is silent reading. From its first appearance in Britain in the early Middle Ages, and its spread to the Continent in the late tenth century, the act of silent reading has been inherent to western understanding since this time. This came about through the introduction of spaces between words in written text: “The importance of word separation by space is unquestionable, for it freed the intellectual faculties of the reader, permitting all texts to be read silently, that is, with eyes only.”<sup>40</sup> Additionally, the use of punctuation and restructuring of word order and sentences allowed for “the minimal use of short-term memory to

---

by Elizabeth Edwards, Chris Gosden and Ruth B. Phillips (Oxford: Berg, 2006), 210.

36. Paul Claval, “Changing Concepts of Heritage and Landscape,” in *Heritage, Memory and the Politics of Identity: New Perspectives on the Cultural Landscape*, edited by Niamh Moore and Yvonne Whelan (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2007), 90.

37. Classen and Howes, “The Museum as Sensescape,” 208.

38. Timothy Mitchell, “Orientalism and the Exhibitionary Order,” in *Grasping the World: The Idea of the Museum*, edited by Donald Preziosi and Claire Farago (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2004), 443.

39. Timothy Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), xv.

40. Paul Saenger, *Space between Words: The Origins of Silent Reading* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 13.



achieve comprehension, and rapid, silent reading, as we now know it.”<sup>41</sup> Language researcher Paul Saenger has even gone so far as to write that English speakers have an adapted brain system attuned now to a silent and visual understanding of language and that only a few other languages and cultures have this silent and solitary visual process, for example Japan. As with the visual, the English language is littered with phrases which link hearing with the written word, including “hearing from” someone to mean the receipt of written communication, or that something “does not sound right” meaning that the writing is flawed.

The visual rose above the other senses due to its perceived place on the evolutionary ladder, above the lower senses of smell, touch, and taste. This resulted in “relegating cultures in which the visual is given less prominence to an inferior role.”<sup>42</sup> By way of the visual, written, “words are residue . . . oral tradition has no residue or deposit,”<sup>43</sup> and herein lies the western discomfort with verbalisation: it is not “thing like.”<sup>44</sup> All that exists when the oral is not being told or recited is the potential for certain people to tell it.

## Conclusion

This chapter has discussed aspects of how museums in the Peninsula may be creating and participating in visual culture. This participation may be purposeful or may not; current research does not exist with which to attempt to correlate theory with actual museum and visitor data. However, certain distinct aspects come to the fore.

Museums have been related to aspects of heritage, and by association are seen as positive contributors to heritage preservation, conservation of traditional objects and buildings, and education, knowledge and tradition. They differ from the hugely popular heritage festivals in their lack of interactive engagement between audience and heritage. There are indeed highly popular “interactive museums” in the West, many of which are history and heritage based (such as Colonial Williamsburg in Virginia, USA, and Beamish, County Durham, UK); however, currently none of the museums in the Arab Peninsula take this form.

By association some purpose built, non-heritage museums such as art museums have used this association, most notably in architecture. However, it is still unclear

---

41. *Ibid.*, 15.

42. Herzfeld, *Anthropology: Theoretical Practice in Culture and Society*, 36.

43. Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the World* (New York: Routledge, 1982), 11.

44. *Ibid.*, 11.

how museums without some form of heritage connection may benefit from the heritage association and be incorporated into the visual culture associations that actually play an active part in peoples' lives. Some of the region's newer museums, such as the Museum of Islamic Art and Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art, both in Qatar, have incorporated some components of Islamic architecture into their buildings. Others, such as the forthcoming Louvre Abu Dhabi, UAE, and museum at the King Abdulaziz Center for Knowledge and Culture, Saudi Arabia, have chosen far more modernist, almost futuristic, designs. Even with this style of architecture, there have been attempts to link to the past and heritage, such as the connection within written materials of the relationship of the architecture of the King Abdulaziz Center for Knowledge and Culture with components of Saudi culture, and more specifically with oil.

Audiences in the Arab Peninsula are not just consumers of this museum identity but also producers of it, a product of which includes the aspect of lack of visitorship. The preference for the visual within western culture, and its export with the western museum construct, may be a contributor to the ongoing attendance preference for festivals over museums. If heritage festivals and similar cultural offerings engage audiences in more than the visual, by the inclusion of other senses which may not be as "downplayed" as in western society, is this something museums can or should learn from – are museums too reliant on the visual to create relationships with their audiences? Do museums – and perhaps to a greater degree, non-heritage museums – need to employ a less vision-centred approach by creating and engaging in a multi-sensory environment? "Sight is the least personal of the senses. Today in the West it is also the most powerful."<sup>45</sup> However, Arab cultures are considered the most collectivist, and cultures in which there is a greater balance of importance within senses, as opposed to the western ordering. Therefore the inclusion, or not, of shared culturally significant practices can directly influence the understandings of the museum. If both new museology and visual culture theory stress the viewer over the viewed, then the emphasis on the visual may be unhelpful to museums.

It is often forgotten that much of the identity of the museum is of the museum as an institution that has a visual presence rather than the collections and objects that it cares for and exhibits. This shapes all aspects of the use, support, and staffing of museums. The relationship which heritage museums have created with the broader heritage field have benefitted museums by the local understandings of heritage as

---

45. Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Interpretation of Visual Culture* (London: Routledge, 2000), 112.

living, rather than the more western idea of the “past.” This may be a positive aspect for art museums should they choose to use and build upon it. This may also create a link to art museums via associations of meaning. As highly powerful and influential components of “high art”, western art museums are viewed as both the source and desired destination of visual culture. This aspect may be less pronounced in the Arab Peninsula currently due to the relatively new inclusion of these museums within the global art world triad of academic institutions, art museums, and collectors/patrons.

Therefore, the current era of increased visualization may not be beneficial for art museums in the Peninsula. This may appear counterintuitive as museums are vision-centered; however, if the ultimate purpose, as per the ICOM definition, is for museums to share collections and research with visitors then visitors are required, and in order to achieve that a greater understanding and inclusion of visitors – culturally and socially – is necessary. Certainly, museums will receive visitors due to their understandings abroad and their created place within knowledge-based economies; however, their input into visual culture more generally will be restrained.

## Negotiating Dubai's Cultural Identity: An Excavation of Meaning in the City's Famous Projects

*Butheina H. Kazim*

### Introduction

An undeclared competitive air engulfs Dubai city as its symbols race against symbols of the entire world to beat them at their own game – to be bigger, better, and worthy of that space in the heart and mind of every visitor. As Ketuta Alexi-Meskhishvili argues: “Dubai, like a billionaire child star, is overzealous in its attempts at identity development.”<sup>1</sup> Such approaches of superficiality are not new to Dubai. In fact, they shape the most common narrative revolving around the city's identity, or as some assume, the lack thereof.

Dubai presents a living experimental space that demonstrates in real-time how an urban society is created. The questions around this animate test bed are plentiful: “What is involved? What are the results, the products? Is the focus on the local or the global? How is this a different model than that of others in the international arena?” Punctuated by the utterances of its leadership, which often serve as the guidelines for its construction, contemplating unannounced inferences and implicit meaning, this chapter explores how concepts of Orientalism, identity, cultural politics, and Eurocentrism are embedded in the projects of Dubai.

---

1. Ketuta Alexi-Meskhishvili in *Bidoun Magazine # 05, Icons* (Dubai: Bidoun, Winter 2005).

On its journey to build a metropolis that would fulfill its aspirations of becoming a world-class city, Dubai has had to grapple with the trying challenge of carving out an identity for itself. Caught between a rock and a hard place, Dubai has had to shuffle between two worlds, that of a capitalist ultramodern variation and that of Arab-Islamic conservatism. Upon closer consideration, the city holds many a conflicting meaning setting the stage for an ongoing continuous project of identity negotiation. The city's contradictions, mismatches, and its nonsensical order comprise some of its most charming attributes, without ever fully being embraced as an identity. A city of captivating contrasts, Dubai is at once, a habitat for global cultures to coexist in the imported "global cities" in a single space, a regional vanguard safeguarding the heritage sites of Arabia by way of obsessive reconstruction, and a global player, breaking records to buy itself a ticket on an international landscape.

Much exploration is being undertaken on Dubai's landmark projects, and the concepts of how a "New Middle East" may be created there are explored, interrogated, and deconstructed. For critics, when talking about Dubai, as Todd Reisz said: "You're either a champion or an assailant; you will never be taken as a fair critic."<sup>2</sup>

By analyzing Dubai's contemporary urban project under three categories (or tropes), this chapter attempts to explore implicit meaning, political tensions, and value propositions in Dubai's negotiation of its cultural identity. The dearth of nuanced criticism and reading can be attributed to the common practice by cultural critics to tend to revert to Orientalist lenses applying a conscious and sometimes unconscious neo-colonial reading when trying to understand the city's dynamics. In a city in which the discordant is the norm, an understanding of development by Western critics can be quite a challenge because they apply an assessment reliant on the comparison of spatial products, growth, and the realities of the Western countries they hail from. By exploring the defining elements of this identity, this chapter attempts to take a closer look to develop a more complex understanding of the city caught in an identity crisis, struggling to find a confident and fully formed position on a global playground.

---

2. Todd Reisz, "The Architect as a City Critic," <http://www.toddreisz.com/?p=92> (accessed December 2, 2011).

## A Timeless World of Worlds

No longer a place with a fixed identity, Dubai presents an idiosyncratic challenge in trying to understand its dynamics. Drawing inspiration from its position as an international hub, and home to over 200 nationalities, Dubai has over the past two decades embarked on a series of developments that would encapsulate the very idea of “a global city.”

The brainchild of Dubai's desire to position itself as a hub, a home for all cultures and nations, the world-of-worlds notion resulted not only in the creation of specialized districts designed to create industrial, technocratic hubs (Media City, Knowledge Village, Internet City) but entire themed projects and real estate developments modeled in a myriad of simulacra importing the “best of the world” to Dubai. A miniature version of the world was formed with every one of those establishments. Moreover, these imported global projects of Dubai often put forth an appealing display of exoticism, one that finds the “Other” amusing and fascinating. But the exhibitionism begs the questions: “Whose globe are we creating? How were these worlds selected and represented?” Often portrayed in a positive light, characteristics of the honored nations were essentialized only to be enjoyed by the retail user; the visitor, the buyer, and the consumer.

Such projects, commonly taken at face value, could hold overlooked significant meanings of Dubai's relationship to the world. This can only be done in an approach that Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak refers to as “Measures Silences” to look beyond what is on offer, what is displayed to what has been left out, unsaid.<sup>3</sup> Considered in light of geo-politics and social conditions, the narrative of the consumerist-driven experience is complicated as it sheds new light on the Dubai mantel of global representation.

*Ibn Battuta Mall:* “Dubai from an Iranian perspective would represent freedom; from an Indian, opportunity; to an Arab, the hope that Arab modernity can work,” writes architect Rem Koolhaas in *Al Manakh Cont'd*.<sup>4</sup>

Heading into Dubai from Abu Dhabi, it is easy not to take notice of the massive cluster of colorful box-like structures on the right of the Shaikh Zayed Road, for barring a large road sign directing one's attention to the fact that this is in fact a shopping mall, its austere exterior has the appearance of a warehouse than

3. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988): 66-105.

4. Rem Koolhaas, “Stresstest,” in *Al Manakh Cont'd* edited by Rem Koolhaas (Amsterdam: Stichting Archis, 2010), 4- 5.

that of a shopping mall. But this is not just any mall, it is the Ibn Battuta Mall, the namesake of legendary Berber Moroccan traveler and explorer Abu Abdullah Muhammad Ibn Battuta (1304 -1368) whose journeys spanned more than 75,000 miles, a distance unrivaled by an individual traveler or explorer until 450 years later, after the coming of the Steam Age. It was in honor of this storied individual that the giant property developer Nakheel decided to recreate a world of worlds on the outskirts of the city. Comprising six pavilions, the development features magnificent exhibits of “courts” commemorating a country, a civilization rather, visited by Ibn Battuta during his travels. These carefully chosen “courts” are China, India, the precariously titled Persia, Egypt, Tunisia, and finally, and most curiously, Andalucía.

Elaborately designed to encompass and amplify specific attributes of each of the chosen countries or locations, each court features a grand dome as its centerpiece, hovering over a crowd of unassuming, glossy-eyed visitors that distracts them from the absences and manipulations of Ibn Battuta’s itinerary. An act of celebration and approbation through curatorship becomes at once, an act of omission, deletion, and avoidance. Such is the nature of historical storytelling and reconstruction. “A city of simulations, a city as a theme park. It is a city where a collection of images has become the most important tool to manipulate urban space. It is a city in disguise, where invented, or perhaps reinvented, images are so composed to hide urban reality.”<sup>5</sup> It offers history to the visitor, in easily digestible portions, where sheer aesthetic usurps all meaning, where the ornamentation is so breathtaking, that beyond the gaze, the reconstructed history of civilization is so overwhelmingly and suddenly accessible that it begs no further question; it is a cultural bear hug. From a timeless simulacrum of China, overwhelmingly red in color and non-specific adorned with the mandatory prescription of lantern abundance, a large display of two ships takes an unexpected, almost candid, anti-colonialist stance by comparing the size of Muslim Admiral Zheng He’s ship to that of Christopher Columbus. Entering the Indian court of white elaborately marbled walls and ceilings covered in flourishes, one is struck by the specificity of India’s chosen depiction. This is not Mother India with her myriad religious, ethnic, and cultural variation; instead, this is Mughal India of Jalaluddin Mohammad Akbar. This is “Muslim India.” No calls of Jai Hind are sounded in the one-dimensional representation of the country and rather consciously, the colors of India for which she is famed, are muted, washed in homogeneous shades of white like the walls chosen for this court.

---

5. Fatih Rifki and Amer A. Moustafa, “Madinat Jumeirah and the Urban Experience in the Private City,” in *Al Manakh* edited by Ole Bouman, Mitra Khoubrou, and Rem Koolhaus (Amsterdam: Stichting Archis, 2007), 23-28.

Equally baffling as it is telling was the decision to commemorate Persia, not Iran, but Persia of pre-1953. Arguably the most beautiful of all the mall's courts, the Persian dome's Isfahani tiles in shades of azure, turquoise, and blue cool down any heated contention in the historically charged Dubai-Iran juxtaposition. As in the case of India, an Iran, or shall we say Persia of the past, was the appropriate choice for a Dubai-based mall. By avoiding a realistic portrayal of modern day Iran, the city's neighbor from across the Gulf, Dubai circumvents the uncomfortable position of confronting the political and cultural conflicts that existentially question the solidity of its national identity project. Given these discerning curatorial practices, those familiar with the extent of Ibn Battuta's travels are left wondering: "Why are the African countries in the continent's East and West not represented? And what becomes of the Arab world's Achilles heel: the holy land, of Jerusalem, Hebron and of Bethlehem?" Walking through the deceptively celebratory ostentatious courts, they begin to seem less like a tribute to the travels of Ibn Battuta and more like a lament of a time past; an Islamic world that once was what Dubai in its current state could never be.

The eulogy is perhaps, in truth, an elegy. Passing under the lavishly embellished colossal domes of each civilization, it is not far-fetched to imagine oneself transported to 1267 as the captive audience of Andalusian poet Abu al-Baqa al-Rundi bounces off the fiberglass and plastic structures. Epitomized by the developer's decision to commemorate Andalusia in a pavilion, his words sound louder as the undeclared motivation behind the approval signature on the corner of mall's blueprint: "For the accidents of fortune there is a consolation that makes them easy to bear, yet there is no consolation for what has befallen Islam. An event, which cannot be endured, has overtaken the peninsula; one such that Uhud has collapsed because of it and Thahlan has crumbled! The evil eye has struck the peninsula in its Islam so that the land decreased until whole regions and districts were despoiled of the faith . . . Therefore ask Valencia what is the state of Murcia; and where is Xàtiva, and where is Jaén? Where is Cordoba, the home of the sciences, and many a scholar whose rank was once lofty in it?"<sup>6</sup>

Using the mall, the very symbol of the consumerist foot that Dubai so often leads with, Dubai's Ibn Battuta Mall is made the lament incarnate of an Islamic civilization lost, for the Golden Age of Islam has past. Alternatively, it builds malls instead. Alternatively, it breeds consumers instead. Alternatively, it imports instead.

---

6. Abu al-Baqa' al-Rundi, "Lament for the Fall of Seville" in *Hispano-Arabic Poetry: A Student Anthology*, translated by James T. Monroe (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), 332-334.



In Dubai, perhaps the most superficial projects of all are those that beneath the surface and upon secondary consideration hold the most poignant meanings of an identity and sometimes even of silent, silenced rather, political assertion. In the tradition of Dubai's hospitality, the visitor is left alone. Undisturbed by the ruckus of history, he enjoys a tall mocha Frappuccino under the splendor of the replica of one of the great domes of Isfahan. Like Dubai, his experience is reconciled.

*Global Village:* Commercial impetus has long played a key role in Dubai's world-of-worlds positioning, ever since its establishment of the Dubai Shopping Festival (DSF), which at the time, sought to attract regional, predominantly Arab shoppers to Dubai. The Global Village, a main attraction of DSF, was perhaps the first experiment of Dubai's global creation. Nothing like Marshall McLuhan's concept of the Global Village, the Dubai version is closer to a Bakhtinian notion of carnival than a world. That notion of carnival, as explicated by Mikhail Bakhtin, is a context in which distinct individual voices are heard, flourish, and interact together creating 'threshold' situations where regular conventions are broken or reversed and genuine dialogue becomes possible.<sup>7</sup> "Carnival's grotesque realism turns conventional esthetics on its head in order to locate a new kind of popular, convulsive rebellious beauty, one that dares to reveal the grotesqueries of the powerful and the latent beauty of the vulgar,"<sup>8</sup> write Ella Shohat and Robert Stam in *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media*.

And "carnavalesque" the Global Village of Dubai truly is; in an eternally temporary space sprawling across 17,200,000 sq. ft. of 25 pavilions from across the world, a world exhibition is created and gives birth unintentionally to the city's only long-term street fair. Bearing no resemblance to the operational dynamics of the world, Global Village displays in unabashed flamboyance an array of promotional booths set up by invited national tourism boards of countries pre-selected and other participants from across the country choosing to participate in its surreal festivities. The booths, evocative of the world exhibitions, feature dances, products, and food from each country and region giving the visitor a mini world experience. Here, the participating countries are engaged in the act of essentializing its attributes, they offer their respective cultures' products for the six million visitors' consumption, spectacles to be enjoyed. In her critical essay "Cross-Cultural Dress and Tourist

---

7. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

8. Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, "Aesthetics of Resistance" in *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (London - New York: Routledge, 2002), 292-333.

Performance in Egypt” on Giza’s Pharaonic Village, a simulacra-based alternative Egyptian wonderland, Susan Slymovics observed, “Much of the scenery and acting staged for the tourist not only canonizes but also ethnographically characterizes.”<sup>9</sup> Global Village, like the Pharaonic Village, plays a similar role in painting a very specific picture of the places and people it professes to represent. In a single afternoon, in this global carnival, the visitor can sample honey from Yemen from a turban and dagger clad seller, buy leather goods from Kenya of the alligator variety, dine in Pakistan, and enjoy a colorful dance performance in Brazil. “It is not the artificiality of the exhibitor order that matters, however, so much as the contrasting effect of an external reality that the artificial and the model create – a reality characterized by essentialism, otherness and absence,” she writes.<sup>10</sup>

In the Global Village, the fake worlds make no effort to conceal their fakeness, instead, in the carnivalesque context, their vulgar falseness is defiant of a prescribed world order. An amusement park with a bazaar like quality, everything in the Global Village feels temporary, makeshift, and placating. Adhering to the conditions of the city, certain aspects of the participating cultures are edited entirely to accommodate the restrictions imposed by the context. A context so conflicted it curates its celebration of tolerance. Therefore, in the Philippines pavilion, pork dishes, central to Filipino cuisine, are omitted. The wine tasting is omitted from the French pavilion. And in Brazil, Capoeira is privileged over the samba of the carnivalesque variety. In this Global Village, the globe maneuvers around the restrictions and the politics; it adapts to a new reality. Perhaps it is here that an assessment of such a space in which the specificity of the dynamics at play beg further inquiry into the possibility of a bizarre but equally real viability; be it as it may, it defies conventions of the acceptable and real. Ultimately, Dubai is not problematic because it is fake but because it furiously and consistently presents its surrealism as neo-realism.

## **The Hybrid Orient**

An Arabian Night’s fantasyland, hated and loved by Orientalists and Occidentalists in proportional servings, Dubai is as much a breeding ground for ludicrous consumerism as it is a trailblazer of an Islamic-Arab Renaissance. In its quest for attracting tourism and trade en route to modernity, Dubai capitalized on the selling point of its Arab geographic and cultural attributes by developing carefully

---

9. Susan Slymovics, “Cross-Cultural Dress and Tourist Performance in Egypt,” *Performing Arts Journal* 11, no. 3 (1989): 139-148.

10. *Ibid.*, 139.

constructed Arabian experiences by ushering elements of its past into its modern future. Delivered to the visitor through exclusively positive image making, the orchestrated generically categorized Arabian experiences fuse together elements of various regional architectural and artistic influences, evocative of Orientalist imagery, to be enjoyed by the curious tourist of the Orient, festooned by visuals that do not attempt to conceal their referencing of the Orientalist art imagery that is romanticized tribesmen portraiture, rustic desert landscapes, and camels and horses wide-eyed and majestic.

In fusing traditional elements from across the region, specifically those of the Gulf, to produce an alternative, easily-digestible Middle Eastern experience, Dubai risks the perpetuation of an Orientalist narrative. What results from this hybridizing is a flattening of Gulf visual cultures to service the demands of a nonproprietary experience-based development, perpetually reinforcing a misreading of the architecture and its origin as mere spectacle. These metonyms of a fused Arabian experience, perhaps reacting to the widespread negative images of the region, go the extra mile in promoting the positive image of the Arab world to its visitors. By peddling only positive images evocative of scenery from *The Jewel of the Nile* or an Indiana Jones movie, the Arab world is essentialized as being that of the exotic, the foreign, the unfamiliar to be gazed at.

One must look no further than Timothy Mitchell's "Orientalism and the Exhibitionary Order" to understand what function such visuals serve: "Orientalism is not just a nineteenth century instance of some general historical problem of how one culture portrays another, nor just an aspect of colonial domination, but part of a method of order and truth essential to the peculiar nature of the modern world."<sup>11</sup> To what end are these so-called tributes so lavishly constructed? On the surface, capitalization on the region's virtues is the obvious incentive, as Dubai positions itself as a comfortable Arabian experience for the thrill-seeking tourist looking to immerse themselves in the charms of the region. Looking beneath the touristic façade, one might interpret these exuberant nonspecific amalgamations, these hybridized odes to the Arab past, as an act of deliverance perhaps, a silent and grandiose apology seeking absolution for discarding the ways of the past in exchange for a seat in the new world order.

*Madinat Jumeirah*: Like a scene from the Disney cartoon *Aladdin*, a walk down Madinat Jumeirah delivers on the promise of an Arabian experience that an explorer

---

11. Timothy Mitchell, "Orientalism and the Exhibitionary Order," in *Colonialism and Culture*, edited by Nicholas B. Dirks (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992).

of the Orient might expect to see. With the arrival of Madinat Jumeirah, a new Dubai aesthetic was invented: that of the hybrid-Arabian persuasion. This style, employing a syncretism unique to the city of Dubai combines Pan-Arab regional influences in architecture to create a lavish, ornate, non-specific Arabia of a time past. Madinat Jumeirah is a private setting that uses architectural forms melted into each other to create utopian experiences out of spectacle in an urban environment. This urban getaway from reality strikes a chord with those nostalgic, sentimental spectators and visitors alike, yearning for a simpler time. In this hybrid Arabia, the visitor experiences a replica of the original, the inspiration behind the development: the Dubai Creek, where it all started.

In place of the murky waters of the historic Creek, visitors can experience the abra (traditional boat) ride on the clean waters of this reconstructed "Arabian" fantasy as they shuttle between the getaway's five star hotels by boat. The same goes for the hustle and bustle of the traditional souk, the grime and grit of the stalls in the Dubai Souk can be substituted with the air-conditioned, spotlight lined grandiose poseur bazaar, the Souk Madinat Jumeirah complete with valet parking. In constructing the Arabian dream for the tourist, the designers are spoilt for choice and all Arabian charms are incorporated: from the Barjeels (wind-towers) of the Dubai Creek to the chandeliers of Damascus and the gypsum work in Moroccan archways, an Oriental wonderland is curated. You are in the Qasr Al Adham, the Qarawiyyin Masjid and the historic Bastakiya region all at once. And with a beachfront and a pool to spare, the Madinat Jumeirah becomes what Slymovics describes as "a substitute for reality that becomes more than real. The tourist site competes with the sites it represents...that the pseudo-image is more appealing and comfortable than the real thing."<sup>12</sup>

By capitalizing on its Arabian position, Dubai has been able to construct a new version of "the Arabian" experience to be encountered by visitors and voyeurs alike. Complete with the mandatory tourist-friendly amenities of clubs, theaters, pubs and bars, the hybrid Arabia of Dubai is engaged in barter dealing with the past of the most conflicted kind. In return for traditional and religious compromise, it offers the past the commemoration of its legacy in exchange. In this transaction, Dubai wears the mantle of the proud Arabs, ones that are proud of their past and heritage, but not enough to offer it in isolation, without the embellishments. As though to showcase a fear, a lack of confidence in its rather austere heritage, the Madinat Jumeirah and projects offer Dubai a second chance at redemption. This time, Dubai

---

12. Slymovics, "Cross-Cultural Dress and Tourist Performance in Egypt."

can on its own terms create a space allowing it to fortify a feeling of affiliation to places that have ceased to exist and to an era that has long been romanticized; all in a fantasyland equipped with the conveniences of the 21st century. Like an apologetic host, looking to offer its guests the best of its hospitality, Dubai replaces the bleak conditions and resultant architectural simplicity of the Creek and the wind towers of Shindagha with extravagant reconstruction of its past, manifested in Madinat Jumeirah so much that history is effectively revised when the wind-towers of the Gulf and the mashrabiya windows of the Hijaz, Egypt, and the Levant now coexist for the first time. Ideologically, Madinat Jumeirah presents a challenge in that it mulls the social realities that exist and the truths that are unsaid. They are successful as profit making establishments and tourist-friendly consumption centers, but outside of that realm, the place itself remains devoid of the realism that it replicates.

*The Old Town:* In a similar hybrid Arabian manner, an Old Town is constructed to surround Dubai's latest architectural wonder, the Burj Khalifa, the world's tallest tower to date like a fortress. As though to "protect" Dubai from forgetting where it came from, a copy of a copy is employed, as the English-named development sprawls out in sharp contrast to the ultramodern tower. In a city where themed projects and experiences are the norm, the delineation between old and new is relatively nonexistent with two consistencies always in mind: consumerism and tourism. "Developers have packaged a past that pays no heed to categories such as fact, fiction and fantasy," explains a frustrated Kevin Mitchell in *Al Manakh*. "Projects such as this obscure a truly rich and variegated past that is not so easily described or represented in facades 'inspired' by turn of the century architectural typologies imported via exchanges with settlements across the Gulf."<sup>13</sup>

The Old Town uses the hybrid Arabian concoction as a selling point, rather than an experience. It delivers, not the "Arabian" experience of sitting under a silk canopy; the tourist-friendly space begets something "Arab" through architectural extravaganza, which draws on Western cinema's fancy of an imagined Orient of seraglios, lattices, and harems. Not exclusive to the Old Town or Madinat Jumeirah, a similar Orientalist aesthetic is applied across the board to a multitude of projects including the Souk Al Bahar, the souk façade which plays host to a collection of world-class restaurants and cafes.

*Khan Al Murjan:* The syncretism of Arabia in the Khan Al Murjan project extends far beyond the borders of the UAE as it pays tribute to the original 14th century

---

13. Kevin Mitchell, "Constructing Fact, Fantasy and Fiction," in *Al Manakh*, edited by Ole Bouman, Mitra Khoubrou, and Rem Koolhaas (Amsterdam: Stichting Archis, 2007), 30-33.

bustling quarter in Baghdad, Iraq, once again, through Dubai's newly found mastery of imitation and amalgamation. In one go, as planned and boasted about by its founders, visitors to the project will stroll through Morocco, Syria, Egypt, and Turkey walking under incredible works of commissioned craftsmanship.

Through its hybrid Arabian projects, Dubai not only conjures up a compensatory apology to its own past, but to the past and present of its neighbors. In its 150 bazaar shops, Dubai plays permanent host to vendors and shopkeepers shuttled in from across the Arab world; in the Khan Al Murjan simulacrum, it offers an outlet. Taking the wind tower, the Gulf region's famous vernacular building design, and turning it into an object of ornamentation becomes a more common practice than a walk through Bastakiya, an old neighborhood in Dubai, where it was first built. From the magnificent glass ceiling illustrating the tales of ancient Arab traders to the hybrid architectural combinations spanning Moorish Andalusia to Libya, Tunisia, and Oman, the Khan Al Murjan laments an Arab world past, most painfully in the commemorated district of Iraq. Once again, as with Andalusia this memento is an expression of the powerlessness felt by Dubai, its inhabitants, all it stands for. So it offers the Khan Al Murjan as compensation, a reassurance of the real pride felt in the glory of Arab civilization, a celebratory mourning of what once was.

## **A Bigger, Better Arabia of the Future**

Nothing has fascinated the world about Dubai more than its decade-long affair with the superlative, the impossible. On a mission to gain "world-class" status Dubai has, since the beginning of the new millennium busied itself with building the biggest, best, tallest, and greatest of everything. From the tallest tower in the world, to the biggest mall in the world, to the ultra-modern Dubai Metro zooming past what has been described by some as an "architectural apocalypse," the Dubai of the 2000s was fixated on being a global player, no different than New York, Singapore and Hong Kong. "Dubai thrives on newness and bigness in an act of ongoing self-stylization and fantasy...it takes in/purports a vertical urbanism – giant atriums and spidery passages among the towers – curiously set against a background of sprawling 'nothingness' the desert."<sup>14</sup>

Inventing a new form of super-modern architecture, Dubai gave birth to the Arab-inspired mega structure, which incorporated Arab influences in its

---

14. George Katodrytis, "Metropolitan Dubai in the Rise of Architectural Fantasy" in *With/Without: Spatial Products, Practices & Politics in the Middle East*, edited by Shumon Basar, Antonia Carver, and Markus Miessen. (New York: Bidoun, 2007), 244-249.

conceptualization, exterior, or sometimes its architecture. By no means did these colossal projects come at a low cost, weighing heavily on the city financially, culturally, socially, and sometimes environmentally.

Dubai has sought to prove time and time again to be the developers' ultimate blank canvas. This experimental phase prior to Dubai's financial crisis raised many questions about its implication on the city's cultural identity. What did the projects mean to the inhabitants of the city watching a new skyscraper sprout out of the desert at every turn? Who was behind these so-called "air-conditioned glass-boxes" and the manmade island? Who were they trying to please? What meanings did they produce? "Blank incommunicado meets more blankness...more and more, more is more ... Nothingness meets nothingness and ironically produces over-excitability everythingness," states critic Shumon Basar in *With/Without: Spatial Products, Practices and Politics in the Middle East* describing the city skyline.<sup>15</sup>

One is forced to question, why is it that the decision makers feel compelled to incorporate influences from the region into the superlative architectural structures? Is it an Orientalist exploitative attempt by the conceivers, architectural firms, to appease the leadership by alluding to their heritage in an effort to strike a chord? Is it a directive spelled out by the decision makers to assuage and humor the increasingly isolated and confused publics, which are now struggling to shape or hold on to an identity? Or is it simply true inspiration drawn from the region's many charms? The compulsion has been to imagine an entire building or structure as a reflection of a perceived heritage of the entire Gulf region, a superficial homage of sorts marked with insincerity in its application. The result: a cityscape littered with edifices with a likeness to sailboats, dunes, falcons, and waves. If so, why is it then that there exists no structure that draws its inspiration from the most obvious Arab artistic influence: calligraphy?

The only two buildings that incorporate calligraphy in their architecture to date, the Palm Jebel Ali and the New Moon building, remain at the conceptual stage on glossy boards in the offices of developers. The New Moon building was designed to be a centerpiece of Zabeel Park; inside, the building concept provides for five levels with an observatory on every level, to symbolize the Five Pillars of Islam. Should this project see the light of day, it will be the first modern building in Dubai to blatantly incorporate an outwardly Islamic design rationale, defying perhaps the city's tradition of secular modern architecture. From a very different

---

15. Shumon Basar, "The Sky is not Near Enough" in *With/Without: Spatial Products, Practices & Politics in the Middle East*, edited by Shumon Basar, Antonia Carver, and Markus Miessen. (New York: Bidoun, 2007), 250-253.

angle, the Palm Jebel Ali was planned to incorporate an island crest surrounding another palm-shaped island of Arabic calligraphy writing out, on water, a verse from the poetry of Shaikh Mohammed bin Rashid, which reads: "Take your wisdom from the wise...not all who can ride a horse is an equestrian...I write on water and who, before me, inscribed on water? [...] Obstacles choose amongst men, the enduring"<sup>16</sup> showcasing an exhibit of a rather personal statement and ambition into a city's landscape, confusing and concealing the identity of the intended consumer further.

*Burj Al Arab:* The late 90s was the era of the Dubai-based skyscraper impersonating a Middle Easterner. In the late 90s, shortly after the launch of the Dubai Shopping Festival, Dubai began to assert its ambition to become a Pan-Arab regional force to be reckoned with. With advertising campaigns showcasing Arab and regional tourists flocking to the city, Dubai needed a structure to assert a leadership position in the Pan-Arab regional landscape, and so the Burj Al Arab ("The Tower of the Arabs") was conceived.

Dubai planted the Burj Al Arab on a stand-alone man-made island, claiming a stake on a modern Arab world. An iconic structure, designed to symbolize Dubai's urban transformation and to mimic the sail of a boat, the self-proclaimed 7-star hotel the Burj Al Arab, along with its neighboring wingman, the breaking-wave-shaped Jumeirah Beach Hotel, marked the beginning of Dubai's mission to perform on the modern world stage. To create the Burj Al Arab as its entry point into this world of modernity, it assembled a team of experts in modern architecture from the UK, South Africa, and Canada lead by British architect Tom Wright. "This is very similar to Sydney with its Opera House, London with Big Ben, or Paris with the Eiffel Tower," claimed Wright as he explained the design rationale.<sup>17</sup> Bar its name and the perfunctory inspiration drawn from the waters of the Gulf, the Burj Al Arab bore no resemblance to its Arab legacy as it entered the Dubai urban landscape like a stranger. The imposed entry of this outsider was received with much apprehension by the unassuming conservative population of the UAE, which prior to the Burj Al Arab's arrival had been accustomed only to the Dubai World Trade Center building, built in the 70s by John Harris, as its center point.

In 2004, a rumor broke out across online forums, very popular among the local community at the time, raising concerns about the Al Muntaha restaurant structure

---

16. Shaikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, *Take Wisdom from the Wise*.

17. Maryam M. Gharavi, *Semeiotic Dubai: Peirce and Pop Architecture*. <http://thenewinquiry.com/blogs/southsouth/semioteic-dubai-peirce-and-pop-architecture/> (accessed December 2, 2011).



intersecting the mast of the Burj Al Arab facing the Gulf. Spreading like wildfire, it was widely proclaimed that Tom Wright, the architect, had used the project as a fulfillment of his lifelong dream to build the largest cross in the world, in a Muslim country. “The Burj Al Arab in Dubai is the biggest cross on the face of this earth! Erected on an Arab Island in the direction of the Qiblah!” exclaimed one forum post. The forums were brimming with calls for the destruction of the structure and eradicating this act of apostasy. In response, Tom Wright, the architect of the Burj Al Arab, said in a statement, “to put the rumors to rest I can categorically state that the idea of designing the largest Christian cross in the world on the shores of Dubai never crossed my mind.”<sup>18</sup> This incident spoke volumes about the community’s reaction to the foreignness of the structure that entered the land as something of an intruder. This benign act of insurgence was a reflection of how disconcerted the Dubai society still was about the changes happening around it.

*Burj Khalifa:* The Burj Al Arab and the Jumeirah Beach Hotel were eclipsed by bigger, more ambitious projects such as the Burj Khalifa which bestrode the world stage like a colossus. Originally conceived as the Burj Dubai (or “Tower of Dubai”), the Burj Khalifa (Tower of Khalifa), renamed on the opening night in honor of the UAE’s president, Shaikh Khalifa Bin Zayed, was created to affirm Dubai’s record-breaking position in the global arena. A product of Dubai of the 2000s, the project discards the Pan-Arab stance and aims further beyond the region, in a one-man show attempting to take the world by storm, or in this case, by structure. An expression of sovereignty and federal unity, Burj Khalifa, also referred to as the Burj, stands today, the tallest tower in the world at 829.84 meters; it is both a symbol of defiance and a piecing cry of yearning for acceptance by the world. “From the earth to the sky, aspiration and achievement – a shining symbol of what Dubai strives for and what we can accomplish,” proclaims a placard at the Burj Khalifa Visitor Center. But what does the Burj Khalifa strive for? What does it want? Celebrated by architects the world over, the Burj Khalifa epitomizes the ultramodern, Arab-flavored architectural style of the “modern” Dubai puncturing the desert skyline.

In contrast with the hybrid-Arab reconstructed simulacra of the Madinat Jumeirah and the surrounding Old Town, the Burj Khalifa’s audacity is a celebration of all that is new, with lessons from the past. Its design, based on a 73-floor tower in Seoul, Korea, claims to derive its inspiration from patterning systems in Islamic architecture. The triple-lobed footprint of the Burj is modeled after an abstraction of the hymenocallis, a desert flower native to Dubai. In an amalgamation defiant of

---

18. “The Largest Christian Cross in the World?” Tom Wright Design.

all convention, Islamic, political and aesthetic, the Burj Khalifa, while claiming to reference Islamic architectural influences evocative of the onion domes of Turkish maşjids, at once houses the lavish Armani Hotel complete with clubs, bars and a zero entry swimming pool. Its plan to privilege European art in a permanent display of Spanish artist Jaume Plensa's work of 196 bronze and brass alloy cymbals representing the 196 countries of the world also complicates the claim of a regionally grounded narrative. The result of an outsourced art curatorial program by the Chicago-based firm Owings & Merrill and Skidmore alludes to an implicit self-inflicted Orientalism.

It beckons the question: if the Burj Khalifa truly had its roots in an Islamic, regional selfhood why are Arab architects, Arab artists, or Arab curators rarely, if ever, involved in its conception? What does the Burj Khalifa truly strive for? The next big thing is the name of the game in Dubai, and no matter what the time, phase, or the project, the city races to outdo even itself. Everything it builds will soon have a contender that is better endowed in height, size, structure, architect fame, and sometimes budget. Whatever meaning is attached to the tower of the hour remains in place until the next comes along to steal the show rendering the former irrelevant.

In the Burj Khalifa case, there are many lessons to be learnt in the search for Dubai's cultural identity, besides the intentions governing the curatorial and decision making practices, perhaps the biggest lesson to be learnt for Dubai, is in comparing the experience of reality to the conceptualization. In the words of renowned architect Bernard Tschumi, "Architecture only survives where it negates the form that society expects of it. Where it negates itself by transgressing the limits that history has set for it."<sup>19</sup> Indeed, in an unintentional effect the Burj Khalifa unlike the Burj Al Arab was able to produce a truly Dubai experience. While the Burj Al Arab was built isolated, on an island, limiting participation and engagement both geographically and economically (entry alone costs Dh100), the Burj Khalifa stands open to all, accessible both visually and physically in the heart of the city. Unlike the Burj Al Arab, the Burj Khalifa opening celebration was a truly public spectacle to be enjoyed by all. In this recognition, the Burj Khalifa might actually stand a fighting chance at truly being a symbol of "what Dubai strives for and what we can achieve."

---

19. Bernard Tschumi, *Advertisements for Architecture*, 1976. <http://www.tschumi.com/projects/19/> (accessed December 2, 2011).

*The Dubai Mall:* The unplanned participatory effect is witnessed even more clearly in the neighboring Dubai mall, conceived as a record-breaking venture, as the biggest mall in the world housing the biggest aquarium in the world and the biggest indoor skating rink among other grandiose titles. In its effort to reproduce a behemoth of modernity with Arab inspired flourishes emblazoning sections of its imposing exterior, the Dubai Mall has produced a public space of a unique variety. The Mall took the public by surprise. Not just due to its massive scale, the huge ice skating rink, the shark-housing aquarium, or any of the other permanent festivity spots. The Mall became a much-needed public space in a way that was so unintentional, yet so pleasantly reflective of the city's society. The distinct uniqueness of the Dubai-effect is witnessed in the performances of the dancing fountain, a copy of the Las Vegas hotel Bellagio fountains. The dancing fountain spectacle becomes a public experience to be enjoyed by all under the auspices of the Burj Khalifa hovering over the city and the Mall. Malls in the city create regulated spaces for the city's environment that invites to its center the vast variety of what comprises Dubai society. The subject of much criticism, especially of the Western variation, the mall, especially the Dubai Mall, has, in the context of Dubai become a part of its cultural identity, creating a re-imagination of the notion of public space, defying conventions. "While the mall has historically been a spatial product of the periphery, in the Gulf it tends to be at the heart of the city."<sup>20</sup> In his article, *Bringing the Mall Back to the Center*, Markus Miessen chastises the Western critic's simplistic understanding of the mall in the context of the Gulf, "these critics remind us that the shopping mall, as an urban typology, has become the *bête noire* of the West...to the shopping mall, they have imported a model of critique dating from the 1980s America, when critics opined that the arrival of gated communities in California heralded the end of public space..."<sup>21</sup>

Beyond the record-breaking and the superficiality of the consumerist experience the mall connotes, the mall in the Dubai context allows for assembly and co-existence in a most peculiar formation. The experience is not confined to the Louis Vuitton stores lining the Fashion Avenue in the Dubai Mall or dining at a Dean and DeLuca outlet, it extends to embody the pseudo-outdoor experience created by the dancing fountains, beneath the indoor waterfalls, in the shark-filled aquarium and over the year-round ice-skating rink. As Miessen elucidates further,

---

20. Markus Miessen, "Bringing the Mall to the Center," in *With/Without: Spatial Products, Practices & Politics in the Middle East*, edited by Shumon Basar, Antonia Carver, and Markus Miessen (New York: Bidoun, 2007), 133-136.

21. Ibid.

the mall should not become “the yardstick” with which the GCC is measured or judged. Rather, the criticism should be rechanneled to focus on the socio-economic angle. “Interestingly, the archipelago of malls in Dubai provides a (rare) kind of public space. In a desert city dominated by freeways, the mall becomes the one scale, density, and interiority that the majority of the population can relate to.”<sup>22</sup> The Dubai Mall example puts to the test Dubai’s conception of what it needs to be, and who it needs to serve. Designed to attract tourists the world over with world records, designer brands, and promises of luxury, it has simultaneously, however unconsciously, been able to provide a space that celebrates its diversity and its indigenous charms. Perhaps the Dubai Mall illustrates, more than anything else that Dubai, in its attempt to reach for the moon, has forgotten the stars around it.

*The Palm Jumeirah Island:* The Palm Jumeirah (one of three planned palm islands) man-made island project epitomizes Dubai’s endeavor to being the vanguard of the Middle East to the world. The Palm Island, now known as the 8th Wonder of the World, using the most obvious of native symbols to the GCC, an abstracted date palm tree, was conceived as mixed-use extension to the city extending into the Gulf waters and connected to land by The Golden Mile tree trunk. “The morphology of the landscape and seascape is becoming fabricated to the point that it may soon be difficult to differentiate between the natural and the constructed.”<sup>23</sup> While an Arabian palm tree island that can be seen from outer space might seem like the greatest celebration of Arab identity, its inhabitants and developments tell a different, conflicted story. This Arab-inspired mega structure was built, not to celebrate Arab identity as such, it was meant to employ Arab identity to attract foreign direct investment, and thus very specific decisions were made with that goal in mind. Unlike the austere perseverant tree it references, the Palm Island is a symbol of luxury and decadence housing world-class five star hotels like the Atlantis of the Bahamas and the Taj Exotica hotel complete with the tourist and investor friendly facilities to be expected. “With the advent of the Palm islands, Dubai reveals its weakness...From the Asian to the Tuscan and back to Venice, the Palm is but an architectural Epcot Center where all is fiction, written by developers, even one’s life.”<sup>24</sup>

---

22. Ibid.

23. Katodrytis, “Metropolitan Dubai and the Rise of Architectural Fantasy.”

24. Amale Andraos and Dan Wood, “Why Are We Still Learning from Las Vegas?” *Bidoun Magazine*, January 1, 2005, 47.

Yet no matter how hard it tries, Dubai seems never to be good enough to be compared to the cities of the West. From a Eurocentric perspective, it is still seen as and may always remain an outsider. “There was an ongoing effort in the Western media to downgrade Dubai – and by, implication, the Middle East in general – similar to how Singapore had been ridiculed in previous decades. Not Disneyland death penalty, but Disneyland boredom.”<sup>25</sup> This is apparent in the words of Mike Davis, as he writes in “Sand, Fear and Money in Dubai in *Evil Paradises: Dreamworlds of Neoliberalism*,”

“The result is not a hybrid but an eerie chimera: a promiscuous coupling of all the cyclopean fantasies of Barnum, Eiffel, Disney, Spielberg, Jon Jerde, Steven Wynn and Skidmore, Owings and Merrill. Although compared variously to Las Vegas, Manhattan, Orlando, Monaco and Singapore, the sheikhdom is more like their collective summation and mythologization: a hallucinatory pastiche of the big, the bad and the ugly.”<sup>26</sup>

Nowhere was this annexing of the eager Emirate more apparent than in the uproar in the US Congress in 2006 regarding Dubai Ports World, a Dubai company, and its takeover of British port operator PNO (Peninsular Oriental Steam Navigation Company) which operates ports in New York and Miami among other locations. For weeks, cable news programs, radio talk shows, and other bodies protested the deal voicing concerns over “dangers of ceding control of American commercial ports to a Middle Eastern government.”<sup>27</sup>

This, during a time known as the “golden years” of Dubai, the boom years during which Dubai had done everything in its power, made many a concession and bent many a rule to play ball with the world. Alas, its efforts were only met with dismissal. Forced to withdraw from the PNO deal, Dubai learned, perhaps for the first time, its real place vis-à-vis the Western world. Fueled by a predominantly biased narrative, it learnt of its immutable subaltern status, which it had tried, over the years, so hard to overcome.

---

25. Rem Koolhaas, “A Refusal of Obligatory Extravagances,” Interview by Markus Miessen in *With/Without: Spatial Products, Practices & Politics in the Middle East*, edited by Shumon Basar, Antonia Carver, and Markus Miessen. (New York: Bidoun, 2007), 90-101.

26. Mike Davis and Daniel Bertrand Monk, “Sand, Fear and Money in Dubai,” in *Evil Paradises: Dreamworlds of Neoliberalism* (New York: New Press, 2007).

27. Ibid.

## Conclusion: Dubai Moving Forward?

“Dubai’s ambition is to become a truly global locus, liberated from any trenchant localism. In doing so, it has also come to represent an alternative 21st century Middle Eastern reality that simultaneously ushers in radical capitalism while sustaining Islamic identity.”<sup>28</sup> Beyond the superficiality of analyzing the architectural extravagance and commercial excess, there exists many a signifier shaping Dubai’s constantly evolving identity. Looking past the façade of constructed images and sanitized experiences, it becomes apparent that Dubai is enduring the growing pains of a young city that tried to grow up too fast too soon. As it juggled its Arab, Islamic, Global, Modern, World-Class, Progressive, Oriental, Subaltern, Repressive strati all at once during its boom days, Dubai made many a mistake and compromise along the way. Verily, identity building is not an overnight endeavor; it requires time, consideration, contemplation, and most of all, experience, and Dubai, in its post-crisis stage has begun to see that. As it evolves and shifts through the accumulated wisdom of the past few years, Dubai will likely discover a new, more comfortable version of itself, which does not need to seek either the world’s admiration or its approval. “The Emirate needs first to come to terms with its past by decisively denouncing the very route it embarked on in those years. Here, symbolic action is key. Dubai must show the world it is aware of the mistakes it made. That it has reflected on all its wrong decisions and learned from them. That the pubertal psychology of ‘bigger, taller, faster’ is obsolete. That the new Dubai will be a more mature, more thoughtful, more self-reflective, and more self-assured place,” writes Jim Krane in *Dubai: City of Gold*.<sup>29</sup> To emerge an evolved Dubai, it must reconcile its plethora of identities, global, Islamic, Arab, modern, traditional and progressive alike. It must take a solid stance and must speak for itself and of itself with confidence – of its past, its present and its future, with no apologies, no constructions, and no justifications. It must understand itself to be understood, and once it does, it will discover its true selling point notwithstanding any critique of superficiality.

It will be a “real” Dubai. New York, for instance, allowed a massive property bubble to build in the 1920s, bursting in the Great Depression. Like Dubai, it built the world’s tallest tower, the Empire State Building and only completed it after the

---

28. Shumon Basar, “The Freedom to Create: How Dubai Makes Room for Exception,” in *With/Without: Spatial Products, Practices & Politics in the Middle East*, edited by Shumon Basar, Antonia Carver, and Markus Miessen (New York: Bidoun, 2007), 102-107.

29. Jim Krane, *City of Gold: Dubai and the Dream of Capitalism* (New York: St. Martin’s, 2009).

crisis. And just like Burj Khalifa, the Empire State Building became the subject of mockery, dubbed the “Empty State Building” in the years after completion for its lack of tenants. Yet, the better part of a century on, New York is still one of the world’s leading business hubs. That is because it learned from its mistakes. Dubai is one of the most inspiring tales in the history of cities. It still has the potential to go on and achieve what New York did, or even more, and there is no reason why it should not. Before it knows it, Dubai’s growing pains will become a unique amalgamation combining the good, the bad and the ugly of the city, producing a confident, unique and “Truly Dubai” experience which the world will see for what it is. It will emerge from the sand, the water, or from atop one of its towers, a more confident, a more responsible, and a more sophisticated Dubai of the future.

## 5

# Hyper-Contextual Megastructures: A Vision into New Architectural Identities for the UAE

*Enrique Martínez*

### **Introduction**

The first steps leading to the formation of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in the early 1970s were taken as the Megastructure Movement in architecture was waning. The ability of this Movement to fuse architecture and urbanism in a number of heterogeneous proposals, utopian in nature, was a moment of extraordinary lucidity, cultural vitality, and authenticity in the architectural discourse of the late twentieth century, one that would offer valuable insights into the identity of the city of the twenty-first century and the rise of architectural internationalism that we see as a prevailing trend in the Gulf region today. With just a few built examples and numerous conceptual proposals developed by enthusiastic individuals and international avant-garde groups, this movement remained largely a theoretical experiment, before it slowly found its way into the mainstream architectural debate of the second half of the twentieth century. It was a call to action with more value in its own ephemeral influence than in its ability to influence the architectural production of subsequent years.

Forty years after this Movement subsided, as the United Arab Emirates was emerging as an independent country, the macro-scale of some of its proposals shows



visual similitudes with a number of large-scale buildings and urban developments recently completed in the main cities of the UAE and neighboring Gulf countries. This text establishes significant connections between the macro-scale architectural production in the UAE in the twenty-first century and some of the basic tenets of the Megastructure Movement, and defines those connections visually in a series of digital collages that present new architectural identities capable of redefining the visual urban culture of the UAE in decades to come.

## **Key Concepts**

*Megastructure Movement:* A period in architectural history, spanning roughly the decade of the 1960s and early years of 1970s, characterized by the production of large-scale architectural and urban proposals that were mostly utopian in nature and international in scope. The majority of the projects and proposals that aligned themselves with the Megastructure Movement would remain unbuilt.

*Megastructure:* A project or architectural proposal aligned with the precepts of the Megastructure Movement. Megastructural projects – Megastructures – often originated with a lack of awareness of being categorized as part of a larger, international, movement which, in any case, would only be defined in retrospect after it ended. The struggle of key architectural historians and architects in agreeing on the essential defining characteristics of Megastructures expanded the scope of this Movement considerably, to include a variety of projects ranging from the purely conceptual to those addressing real urban challenges.

*Mega-structure (mega-building):* In the context of this text, a building of exceptionally large size, height or floor area, built in the twenty-first century in the main cities of the UAE and, occasionally, neighboring countries in the Gulf region. This text establishes a relationship between contemporary mega-structures and their historical counterparts, the Megastructures that defined the aforementioned movement.

*Hyper-contextual Megastructure:* In the context of this text, an architectural proposal that incorporates both the utopian and ideological essence of the Megastructure and its contextual and pragmatic aspects. Hyper-contextual Megastructures are the link between both, and the visual materialization of the theoretical position of this paper, in relation to a new visual identity for the cities of the UAE and the Gulf region.

## **Large Buildings of a Particular Kind**

In the general context of human civilization, a mega-structure is an unusually large manmade product, a constructed or manufactured outcome beyond the norm in terms of scale, size, floor area, height or performance. There are no specific physical size limits that define a mega-structure, other than the intuition of our own interpretation, although it is generally accepted that this denomination encompasses the whole range of manmade constructed outcomes: from buildings to bridges; from offshore platforms to ocean liners; from dams to communication antennas.

Outside of this definition, the focus of this text will be specific and restricted to the small number of record-breaking mega-buildings completed in the major cities of the UAE in the twenty-first century.

In the context of the history of architecture, the noun “Megastructure” designates a specific period, also known as the Megastructure Movement, spanning roughly the decade of the 1960s, with roots in the Modern Movement and some of the European avant-gardes of the early 20th century. The Megastructure Movement found its common ground in the production of proposals that merged architecture and urbanism in an attempt to offer integral and contemporary solutions for the post-modern city. These visionary projects incorporated the idea of large systems and maximized the possibilities of building technology in a number of proposals and plans that were radical in nature, visionary in spirit and, often, unbuildable using standard construction methods. They questioned the idea of architecture as a discipline that finds its ultimate expression in the built form by committing to a radical architectural expression that challenged the status quo of urban life while, at the same time, attempting to address the pressing problems of the cities of their time. In retrospect, that seems to be one of the Movement’s contradictions: the generalized claim that the building technology of its day could deliver new forms of urban life while, at the same time, the majority of the proposals that were being developed were unbuildable.

One way in which some of those proposals redefined the new urban environment that the architects of the time envisioned was by offering city inhabitants new opportunities to shape and customize their own living conditions while creating innovative social frameworks capable of establishing progressive urban communities. This proposition found its most compelling expression in the architectural possibilities that large-scale, repetitive, spatially consistent structures afforded. Architects saw this approach as a new tool for the redefinition of the city emanating from the idea that the building technology of the time was able to

support any architectural proposal. Even if the majority of projects associated with this movement were extraordinarily large buildings – true mega-structures in the literal sense of the word – there was an early discussion as to whether size alone was enough for a building to be considered a Megastructure.

The very first image in Reyner Banham's book *Megastructure: Urban Futures of the Recent Past*<sup>1</sup> is a bird's eye view of the Vertical Assembly Building (VAB) at NASA's Kennedy Space Center in Cape Canaveral. In 1976, when the book was published, the VAB was the largest building in the world. In spite of that, Banham did not quite consider it a full-right Megastructure:

“At an internal volume of 150,000,000 cubic feet, [this is] the largest building in the world on completion, but not a megastructure because of its singleness of function and image.”<sup>2</sup>

What did Banham mean by “singleness of function and image?” Even if the VAB had its main 52-story space devoted to the single function of assembling rockets, the building included a myriad of supporting facilities and additional functions that would make it a multi-functional building. Equally subjective and ambiguous is to speak of “singleness of image” in regard to the VAB, given the fact that some of the most notorious examples included in Banham's book were highly modular, repetitive buildings, without much visual variation, at least in terms of their external appearance. Why did he not find the VAB deserving of a place in this broadly-defined movement, especially when it was one of the very few built examples of a period defined mostly by theoretical proposals unfit for construction?

Perhaps he considered the VAB more of an engineered container than an architectural paradigm; maybe it was its location in the anti-urban desolation of Cape Canaveral, an urbanized nothingness in which the presence of the VAB was overwhelming and lacking critical context. Either way, his assertion about VAB's “singleness of function and image” places ideology over size and programmatic complexity above singleness of function as the primary identity signs of this movement:

- 
1. Reyner Banham, *Megastructure: Urban Futures of the Recent Past* (New York: Harper & Row), 1976, 7.
  2. *Ibid.*, 7.

“Megastructures, in their time, were all large buildings, but not all large buildings of their time were megastructures . . . Megastructures, then, were large buildings of a particular kind, though what kind remains difficult to define with neat verbal precision.”<sup>3</sup>

Banham considers the anti-definition the best possible definition. Unsure of what a Megastructure is, he defines what it is not: just a large building with singleness of function and image.

A few years before the publication of Banham’s book, Japanese architect Fumihiko Maki published a small book on the increasingly popular field of urban mega-projects,<sup>4</sup> then a new form of urbanism that in countries like Japan was a consequence of the rapid rate of population growth that was quickly transforming cities and demanding new patterns of urbanization. Maki asserted that there was a necessary component of urbanism in the definition of Megastructure that implicitly justified the over-sized scale of some of the buildings and proposals of the time as a mechanism to insure functional multiplicity:

“The megastructure is a large frame in which all the functions of a city, or part of a city, are housed . . . Inherent to the megastructure concept, along with a certain static nature, is the suggestion that many and diverse functions may beneficially be concentrated in one place.”<sup>5</sup>

Implicit in Maki’s definition is the idea that only large-scale constructions capable of taking full advantage of burgeoning building technology innovations could incorporate the abundance, complexity, and diversity of functions and behaviors that urban life demanded; a sine qua non condition for a large building to be considered a true Megastructure.

Fifty years after initial attempts to define the essence of this movement, an article by Jan Maruhn about Le Corbusier’s linear skyscraper project for Rio de Janeiro illustrates the modern origins of the Megastructure Movement and rephrases the question that Maki and Banham considered decades earlier:

“Two preconditions of urban and architectural megastructures were thus fulfilled [by the project]. On the one side, there was the possibility for inhabitants to shape their lifeworld in an overarching tectonic system

---

3. Ibid., 7.

4. Fumihiko Maki, *Investigations in Collective Form* (St. Louis: The School of Architecture), 1964.

5. Ibid., 7.

independent of the architect. On the other side, there was the repudiation of hierarchy within the shape of the city.”<sup>6</sup>

Even if the chronology of this movement is difficult to determine accurately, a possible initial moment may have been the launch of the Metabolist manifestoes at Tokyo’s World Design Conference in 1960 and the presentation of Kenzo Tange’s Tokyo Bay project that same year. Reyner Banham shows his deference for this project and refers to it as the true precursor of the Movement:

“Almost before the Megastructure Movement was under way, Tange had produced what looked like remaining the movement’s major masterpiece . . . and thus made Japan the fount of inspiration for architectural and urban visionaries for most of the sixties.”<sup>7</sup>

One of the specific characteristics of the Movement was its global presence and simultaneous development in a number of countries across different continents. Two years after the presentation of the Tokyo Bay project, Alexandre Persitz, editor of *L’architecture d’aujourd’hui*, reformulated the definition of the Cité Spatiale:

“Imagine not a single Eiffel Tower but ten, twenty or even more, like an immense metal forest, connected by bridges, roads and platforms. Within this gigantic ‘three-dimensional’ spider-web are ranged dwellings, schools, theatres, and commercial enterprises... Scintillating coloured materials, lighter and smaller forms are threaded through this Cité Spatiale . . .”<sup>8</sup>

In addition to L’Urbanisme Spatial in France, the early years of the 1960s witnessed the consolidation of a growing number of international interpretations of this new way to understand architecture and urbanism. This materialized in a number of sub-movements that customized the main postulates of the Megastructure Movement to their local and national circumstances. Such examples include the Metabolist Movement in Japan; La Città-territorio in Italy; or the projects and proposals developed in the United Kingdom by a number of individuals and collectives, in particular Archigram, whose work encapsulated the spirit of the Megastructure Movement like no other, in projects such as Plug-in City Max Pressure Area, Blow-out Village, Tuned Suburbs or Instant City.

---

6. Jan Maruhn, “Le Corbusier and his Revolutionary Children: From the Ville Radieuse to New Babylon” in *Visionary Architecture and Urban Design of the Sixties Reflected by Contemporary Artists*, edited by Sabrina van der Ley et al. (Berlin: Hatje Cantz, 2008), 45.

7. Banham, *Megastructure*, 51.

8. *Ibid.*, 57.

The visibility and increasing influence of these national responses and other sporadic projects and proposals in Japan, Europe, the United States, and Canada, culminated in 1964 with what Banham would call the *annus mirabilis* of the Megastructure Movement. In 1966, Archizoom and Superstudio began their activity in Florence. Superstudio's *Monumento Continuo*, Archizoom's *No-Stop City*, and *Struttura Urbana Monomorfa* quickly became emblems of a movement that had already peaked and was slowly winding down with the decade. The 1967 Montreal Expo, also called *Megacity Montreal*, presented to the world the first mega-buildings: the *Theme Pavilion* by the office of Affleck, Desbarats, Lebensold and Size, and the nearby *Habitat complex*, by Safdie, David, Barrott and Boulva.

In 1969, still in the shadow of *Megacity Montreal*, Alan Boutwell and Michael Mitchell brought to the public what is considered, arguably, the most radical and emblematic proposals of the time: *Continuous City USA*. Almost ludicrous in its ambition, the project envisioned a gigantic linear city supported by hundred-meter high pillars. Far beyond the category of mega-building, this ideal city spanned more than 4,000 kilometres from coast to coast, linking New York City to San Francisco. *Continuous City USA* was, at once, a pure, unadulterated, example of the largest imaginable mega-structure and the unofficial grand finale of a short-lived, intense, and radical movement that had shaken up architectural thinking around the world for more than a decade.

Boutwell and Mitchell's project, illustrated in complex cross-sections and inspiring perspectives, was so far removed from common sense and practical logic that it could only be explained in plain, call-to-action terms and a tone of true existentialism:

“This is our city. We have not sensationalized. All that we have described is feasible today . . . if we do not act now, in spite of all the seemingly insuperable difficulties, we shall soon reach a state where action is no longer possible.”<sup>9</sup>

Despite the fact that, even if feasible, *Continuous City USA* could never be possible, the irresponsible charm of this project and its validity as a utopian architectural statement embody the values of the Megastructure Movement like no other. Curiously, it is today, when the world population maintains its healthy incremental path and the forecasts assume that three quarters of it will live in cities by mid-twenty-first century, that a radical proposal such as *Continuous City USA*

---

9. Alan Boutwell and Michael Mitchell, “Planning on a National Scale,” *Domus*, January 1969, 6.

might be examined under a new light, still not quite as a doable project, but as an architectural metaphor to Spaceship Earth being on its way to reaching full capacity.<sup>10</sup>

The revision of the principles of the Megastructure Movement in light of the recent proliferation of mega-structures in the main cities of the Gulf region has been presented as a way to establish a frame of reference for the understanding of the role of large-scale buildings in the definition of the contemporary visual identity of the UAE. This connection is reinforced by the precedent of a moment in architectural history that had strong similarities with the current technology-driven, socially-complex, urban moment in the Gulf region.

## **Megastructures UAE**

Barely ten kilometres apart, the second largest building in the world by floor area – Dubai International Airport’s Terminal 3 – and the tallest building in the world – Burj Khalifa – define Dubai’s status as the global epicenter of contemporary mega-buildings in the UAE and the Gulf region. In December of 2011, the country celebrated its 40th anniversary. The foundation of the UAE roughly coincides with the end of the Megastructure Movement, proclaimed by Banham in a series of lectures at the department of architecture of the University of Naples, in 1973.<sup>11</sup> It is unlikely that, back in 1972, Abu Dhabi’s ruler, Shaikh Zayed bin Sultan Al-Nahyan, President of the newly formed United Arab Emirates, and Dubai’s ruler, Shaikh Rashid bin Said Al-Maktoum, the country’s Prime Minister, could anticipate that forty years after its constitution as an independent country, the UAE would showcase the closest built versions of Megastructures that the world has yet seen.

A comparative chronology of the evolution of the Megastructure Movement and the decade leading to the formation of the UAE establishes a contextual frame of reference to put both processes in perspective (Table 5.1). As the radical

---

10. Population Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat, “World Population Prospects: The 2006 Revision and World Urbanization Prospects: The 2007 Revision.” <http://esa.un.org/unup> (accessed August 9, 2012). The exact figures are that out of a total world population of 9,191,287,000 in the year 2050, 6,398,291,000 will live in urban areas. Beyond these figures, the mention of Spaceship Earth pays tribute to one of the key visionaries of the time, R. Buckminster Fuller.

11. Sabrina van der Ley and Markus Richter, “Megastructure Reloaded. From Space Frame to Spatial Monad and Back,” in *Visionary Architecture and Urban Design of the Sixties Reflected by Contemporary Artists*, edited by Sabrina van der Ley et al. (Berlin: Hatje Cantz, 2008), 28.

proposals of the decade of the 1960s were taking shape in Europe, Japan, and the United States, cities like Dubai and Abu Dhabi were still immersed in a process of establishing the very basic urban infrastructure networks that would make their future growth possible. In the early years of the 1960s, when oil was discovered in Abu Dhabi, Dubai was still a small city lacking essential roads and the basic mechanisms for energy production and water supply. Al Satwa and Al Karama, two of its most emblematic neighborhoods, did not have running water until 1964, and the Dubai city centre would not instal its first street lights until 1965. In contrast, the VAB, the largest building in the world of its time, was completed in the Kennedy Space Center, Cape Canaveral in 1966.

Considering that the United Arab Emirates was not fully established until 1972, with the addition of Ras Al Khaimah to the initial federation formed by the emirates of Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah, Ajman, Umm Al Quwain, and Fujairah in 1971, it is commendable that the UAE has radically redefined its urban culture and visual identity in barely four decades, with transformations of a scope and scale beyond the reach of most countries. The propensity for large-scale construction was, until the recessionary effects experienced in 2009, the natural consequence of the alignment of the necessary political support and economic conditions with a deliberate process of accelerated urbanization intended to quickly bring the main Emirati cities to a position of international prominence within global markets. The instrument for this strategy was non-stop urban growth and the addition of a number of key mega-buildings capable of supporting a fast-developing economy based on high-end tourism, hospitality, and services, as alternatives to the well-established national petroleum industry. These grand new mega-buildings became the beacons of a new society capable of providing a high-quality lifestyle for its local and expatriate populations while, at the same time, defining its high-profile global identity. As tokens of national pride that helped in consolidating the incipient national consciousness of a young country, these record-setting buildings were a calculated market strategy, a natural consequence of the ambition of cities like Dubai and Abu Dhabi to become leading economic engines in the region, as well as global destinations situated in a strategic pivotal geographic location between Europe and Asia.

One of the best examples of this strategy is Dubai International Airport's Terminal 3, the country's new gateway for international travellers. An article published in *The National*, the UAE's main English-speaking newspaper launched just a few months before the new terminal began its operations, describes the official inauguration of the building:



“Dubai International Airport unveiled a US\$4.5 billion temple for global travellers yesterday, spread over 1.5 million square meters of glass, marble and chrome. With the new Terminal 3 and Concourse 2, the airport will be able to handle 60 million passengers annually.”<sup>12</sup>

Following a brief description of the new mega-building, the article quickly jumps to the expansion plans for Terminal 3 and the project of an even bigger airport in Jebel Ali:

“A third concourse, due for completion in 2011, will boost capacity to 75 million passengers a year. However, in 2015, it could be overshadowed by the construction of Al Maktoum International Airport in Jebel Ali. That airport is expected to cost US\$32 billion and process up to 160 million passengers per year when it is finished by 2020. Officials have given no indication about what will happen at Dubai International Airport when Al Maktoum is fully operational.”<sup>13</sup>

In the UAE, architectural obsolescence is a feature incorporated into buildings. Until very recently, the accelerated rate of new construction, especially in Dubai, seemed to have no ceiling. Each project was its own nemesis in that it became a pretext for the next, bigger, project, designed to overshadow the one just being completed. New plans developed as older plans got built, as if building something monumental was just a necessary exploratory step, a test for an even greater monumentality.

It happened with Terminal 3 as it did with other emblematic buildings. Early in October 2008, days after the inauguration of Terminal 3, Dubai developer Nakheel unveiled plans for a tower that, at an approximate height of one kilometre, would surpass the yet-to-be completed highest tower in the world, Burj Khalifa. The complex Nakheel Harbor and Tower, where the proposed skyscraper was to be located, would cover 665 acres and house an estimated population of 100,000, comprising residents and day workers.

Its budget, \$38.2 billion, was almost ten times that of the Burj Khalifa (\$4.1 billion). The presence of Hollywood celebrities Michael Douglas and Catherine Zeta Jones as guests of honor for the project launch in October of 2008, added the glamour that the developer wanted to associate with the new skyscraper, and spoke

---

12. *The National*, “New Terminal 3 to Evoke Tranquillity,” October 9, 2008, <http://www.thenational.ae>.

13. *Ibid.*

of the role that public relations has in the construction of modern Dubai.<sup>14</sup>

The voracity of urban development in Dubai is applicable to all building types. Coupled with a craving for recognition and differentiation, recent urban developments in the city have been committed to a constant search for record-setting work that contributes to an established list of firsts. The list includes the likes of the Dubai Mall, the largest shopping center in the world; the Rose Rayhaan Rotana, the tallest hotel in the world; Ski Dubai, the largest indoor ski resort; or, as proudly noted in the UAE yearbook website, the farthest tilting building in the world:

“The recently completed Capital Gate building, part of the Abu Dhabi National Exhibition Centre, tilts at an angle of 18 degrees. This is more than 14 degrees further than the leaning tower of Pisa, which leans by accident, not design. Capital Gate was recently certified as the ‘World’s Furthest Leaning Manmade Tower’ by the Guinness World Records.”<sup>15</sup>

As a way of challenging the current climate of economic austerity, the Dubai Mall announced in 2013 that it will be adding roughly 90,000 square meters in retail and hospitality to its existing 1.1 million square-meter area:

“The Dubai Mall is to add one million square feet (about 93,000 square meters) of new retail and hospitality space to its already staggering 12 million square feet as a means to cement its hold as the most-visited shopping destination in the world.”<sup>16</sup>

This addition will increase the Mall’s total floor area to 1.2 million square meters, an amount close enough to Terminal 3’s original 1.5 million. If Terminal 3 was designed to handle 60 million passengers per year, the Dubai Mall’s annual footfall in 2012 added up to 54 million.<sup>17</sup> Traveling and shopping define the nature of Dubai as an effervescent centre of transience, a true capitalist oasis in a region that celebrates its opulence and status as the artificial paradise of modern mega-

---

14. Arabianbusiness.com, “Design Unveiled for the World’s Tallest Tower,” October 5, 2008, <http://www.arabianbusiness.com/design-unveiled-for-new-world-s-tallest-tower-85911.html>.

15. UAE Yearbook, “Iconic New Buildings Come Onstream,” July 2010, <http://www.uaeyearbook.com/updates.php?lang=ENG&cat=15>.

16. Gulfnews.com, “Massive Dubai Mall to Get Bigger,” February 14, 2012, <http://gulfnews.com/business/retail/massive-dubai-mall-to-get-bigger-1.980224>.

17. Ibid.

structures. The four decades spanning the golden Megastructure years and the completion of Dubai's emblematic mega-structures define the gap between the principled discourse of what is, arguably, the last significant utopian architectural period in the history of modern architecture and the bold pragmatism that has characterized recent urban developments in the main cities of the UAE.

Dispossessed of architectural ideology, the question of what these record-setting mega-structures bring to the major Emirati cities does not have an easy answer. Their visual identity is, usually, bland and prone to architectural ennui, as if their greatest achievement is to be a first and every other consideration is unimportant. While the original Megastructure projects aspired to be transformative and socially driven, record-setting mega-buildings are designed to impress and are simply and directly driven by market considerations.

In Dubai, it is the exterior appearance of mega-buildings that best defines them. Terminal 3's 1.5 million square meters of glass, marble and chrome, are not quite as impressive, when seen from the inside, as the building's true magnitude when perceived from a moving vehicle cruising on Airport Road or the air-conditioned comfort of the Dubai Metro. Curiously, this is a point of coincidence with the projects of the Megastructure Movement, similarly intended to be perceived from the outside rather than inhabited. This peculiarity of exterior-centric perception is no more apparent than in Banham's book where less than 20 percent of the book's images and illustrations relate to conditions of interiority (Table 5.2).

How much does the visual identity of the new Emirati city owe to these new mega-buildings capable of processing millions of transient individuals every year? Both the effervescent character of Dubai and the more austere character of Abu Dhabi share an interest in the urban protagonism and identity-defining ability of over-sized buildings as activators of social and economic processes.

## **A New Visual Identity for the Emirati City**

On May 13, 2010, the issue of *Volume* magazine entitled *Al Manakh: Gulf Continued*, or *Al Manakh 2*, was launched at the recently inaugurated Paris La Sorbonne University, Abu Dhabi. Rem Koolhaas, the putative father of the work, shared the stage with Michael White, Senior Planning Manager at the Abu Dhabi Urban Planning Council (UPC), the exclusive sponsor of *Al Manakh 2*, a comprehensive compendium of over 140 articles analyzing issues of architecture, urbanism, culture, socio-economic analysis, and political commentary in the context of the Gulf region. In a brief statement on the inside front cover of the book, the UPC

emphasizes its mission to support Abu Dhabi's sustainable urban growth and economic development, a goal perfectly compatible with the country's dependence on foreign expertise:

“Abu Dhabi is moving towards realizing its overarching ambition to be globally recognized as the sustainable Arab Capital and the gateway city to the Gulf. The exclusive sponsorship of Al Manakh 2 offers the Abu Dhabi Urban Planning Council (UPC) the opportunity to initiate and participate in international and regional discussions on the growing importance of the cities within the Gulf.”<sup>18</sup>

The launch of this large-scale, collaborative compendium, barely five months after the international media publicized Dubai's accumulated \$80 billion debt, set a new frame of reference for the future urban development of the UAE and the Gulf region. *Al Manakh 2* is an unofficial measuring device that qualifies and quantifies the mosaic of forces at play in the foreseeable future defined by a new urban culture for the Gulf region. This new proposition emanates from solid principles, substantial goals, and sophisticated procedures, unlike the projects defining the uncontrollable development frenzy of the main Emirati cities during the early years of the 2000s.

In the Gulf cities, and especially in the UAE, urban development is to a large extent determined by an imported modus operandi based on mainstream Western aesthetics and insufficient attention paid to the local social, cultural, and aesthetic factors. Even if cities like Abu Dhabi, Ajman, Dubai, or Sharjah are fundamentally different in nature, the complexity of forces at play in the definition of their individual visual identities is greatly unified by the fact that they are all a product of “the culture of consultants” under which the country operates today and has operated since its inception. In one of the articles of *Al Manakh 2* entitled “Measuring the Presence of Consultants,” Rory Hyde explains that the key role that consultants play in determining the future of the Gulf is impossible to deny.<sup>19</sup> Supporting this argument, a diagram showed that, in 2009, the combined income of the top 10 architectural consultancies in the region was \$442.3 million, roughly 10 percent higher than the figure from the previous year. Both in 2008 and 2009, only three of the top ten income-producing architectural consultancies operating in the UAE were from the Gulf region (two from Kuwait, one from the UAE).

---

18. ARCHIS and AMO and C-Lab and NAI and Pink Tank, *VOLUME 23, Al Manakh 2* (Abu Dhabi: Abu Dhabi Urban Planning Council), 2010, 2.

19. *Volume 23, Al Manakh 2*, 160.

The rest were, mostly, from the United States and the United Kingdom. This massive presence of foreign consultants reinforces the notion that the built present and future of the prevailing urban centers of the region remains, and will remain, an eclectic field of imported visual identities, rather than an environment committed to the local socio-cultural context. Even if the Gulf's days of architectural excess might be behind us, and even if cities like Dubai will never go back to their former fast-paced urban development, a quick look at current architectural blogs and day-to-day digital publications still reveals a good number of extravagant proposals by both notorious and unknown architects, firms and consultancies, trying to gain a foothold on the future developments of the region. This constant stream of ever more emblematic additions to cities, already saturated with one-offs and architectural oddities, seems to have become a necessary feed into the social and economic ambitions of Emirati cities, caught in the spiral of the ephemeral nature of their own urban condition and an utter dependency on constant updates and ever-bolder additions of buildings and urban plans by non-national architects.

The speed of urban transformation that the UAE has experienced since its inception in the 1970s makes it difficult to understand the original architectural context of the main cities and evaluate its influence, or lack of it, in their current visual identity and urban form. The rare examples of historic buildings such as Sharjah's Heritage Area or Dubai's Bastakiya, have become iconic urban anomalies, testimonies of an indeterminate past isolated by the accelerated urban and infrastructural growth of Emirati cities in the last decades. It is difficult not to see those urban remnants today as mere curiosities in the midst of an urban context that hardly relates to them.

In just a few decades, Emirati cities grew at an astonishing speed and changed their visual identity as the scale of their buildings increased. Historic images of Abu Dhabi and Dubai from the 1970s depict abundant empty lots covered with desert sand, bordering streets lined up with sparse four to eight-story buildings relatively homogeneous in their volumetric and material characteristics. Many of them did not have centralized mechanical systems yet and used passive cooling methods manifest in their smaller façade openings within a compact, light-coloured presence that blended well with their proto-urban context.

This first wave of larger buildings still resembled the vernacular architecture of a not too distant past. As the density in Emirati cities increased after the formation of the UAE and the establishment of its petroleum industry, increasingly taller buildings still maintained a simple geometric presence, incorporating larger glazing surfaces, a visual manifestation of the widespread implantation of mechanical

cooling systems. This trend of using reflective building skins was also evident in the smaller commercial and residential buildings at the scale of the neighborhood. They were resolved with increasingly larger glazing surfaces as well, usually tinted glass for reasons of reflectivity and the preservation of interior privacy.

While residential and small commercial architecture has maintained an eclectic visual language emanating from the loose interpretation of local materials, colors, and architectural elements, the greatest transformation of the Emirati city has taken place in every other order of construction, from mid-rises to high-rises, from mega-buildings to infrastructural facilities. The economic bonanza of the region and the country's ambition to become a regional hub have transformed the main cities of the UAE into living outdoor museums of heterogeneous, hyper-formalistic buildings, competing for attention.

In this frame of reference, the race for the record-setting mega-structure is best understood as a top-down exercise. The city is no longer a coherent system of interdependent elements, but a collection of juxtaposed built occurrences trying to differentiate themselves from each other. An aerial view of the main Emirati cities, particularly Dubai, corroborates this observation in the way in which large portions of land, developed at different moments in time, form a mosaic of adjacent urban fragments without any other apparent relationship other than the sharing of infrastructural elements and common boundaries; a land-puzzle with pieces of varying shapes, contours, and sizes. This fractured built environment that defines the visual identity of the Emirati city as an amalgam of relationships associated to inflexible binary lines — stucco versus glass, villa versus high-rise, highway versus urban oasis, mega-structure versus building — has generated an urban landscape without a predominant urban identity or, perhaps, an identity defined by the lack of a predominant urban identity.

## **Hyper-Contextualism: The Context of Not Having a Context**

The basis of this paper is a response to the visual identity of the Emirati city by means of a collection of authored images. They form a visual discourse around the idea of potentially new architectural identities for the UAE that emanate from establishing a conceptual bridge between the Megastructure Movement and the current direction in which the main Emirati cities are growing with the addition of mega-structures. These new identities are the result of some of the principles inferred earlier in this paper:

1. The critical revision of the Megastructure Movement, a moment in recent architectural history that represented an attempt from architects to claim full responsibility for the design of the urban environment. The timeliness of this revision has to do with the current conditions of the main Gulf cities and a perceived connection between them and some of the fundamental principles of the Movement.
2. The recent proliferation of mega-structures, large-scale developments and buildings proposed as discrete operations of self-reaffirmation by means of their record-setting features, and their ongoing competition for establishing new focal points of ephemeral social, cultural or urbanistic value.
3. The heterogeneity of the Emirati urban context as a loosely-regulated laboratory for a type of formal architectural experimentation defined, almost exclusively, by market forces, top-down politics, and abundant capital, and executed mostly by foreign expertise with a limited interest in fully understanding the local social and cultural forces at play in the cities of the Gulf region.

This collection of images is anchored in visual thinking, what O. M. Ungers called “the imaginative process of thinking.”<sup>20</sup>

“But [the imaginative process of thinking] is always a fundamental process of conceptualizing an unrelated, diverse reality through the use of images, metaphors, analogies, models, signs, symbols and allegories.”<sup>21</sup>

As an active exercise rather than a mere discourse, visual thinking is a point of departure founded on the critical recombination of existing elements of urban and architectural identities taken from the everyday urban landscape of, in this case, Emirati cities. The hyper-contextual nature of this exercise has a strong personal component in that it proposes an alternative to the widespread practice of adopting ever-updated formal and visual architectural languages foreign to the area, mainstream and, often, unrelated to the specific socio-cultural context of the UAE and the Gulf region. But this personal aspect of visual thinking understood as a creative tool is also a way of knowing. The process by which the visual content is presented here is as medium and not an end, a proactive tool developed to

---

20. Oswald Mathias Ungers, *Morphologie – City Metaphors* (Köln: Walther König), 1982.

21. Ungers, *Morphologie*, 9.

understand the complexities of the Gulf region. This work is equidistant from the architectural principles of the Megastructure Movement and the lack of principles that has defined the growth of the main cities of the UAE.

Forty years after the creation of the UAE, architecture and urbanism still seem to be in the background of economic development, somehow undervalued at social, cultural, and political levels. In informal conversations with an executive in one of Dubai's main development companies, the author of this paper learned that the role of the architect in the development of the company's recent built portfolio of mid and high-rise buildings in Dubai and other Gulf cities was, at best, marginal, usually reduced to the role of aesthetic consultant without any say or involvement in further design development stages or additional urban considerations.

The fact that, in recent years, Emirati cities grew by accreting for-profit developments that hardly relate to each other, often with little regard and consideration for the construction of a strong, systematic, urban culture, contrasts with the lack of a serious debate on the future of Gulf cities in the post-petroleum era. The way in which Emirati cities have transformed themselves in recent years has been arbitrary and purely market-driven, rather than strategic. In that context, reinterpreting some of the principles of the Megastructure Movement and considering some of its idealistic ambitions may offer an antidote for the current visual excess of the main cities of the region and an invitation to fully understand the present urban condition of the Gulf as a pre-condition to better envision its future.

The decision to respond to the existing urban reality of the UAE with an alternative (visual) reality that emanates from the actual urban context is an attempt to underline some of the rapidly evolving social and cultural processes at play in the country today, such as the diversity and heterogeneity of the Emirati society or the cultural adjacencies that find their strongest expression in the balance between imported culture and local tradition. The name "hyper-contextual megastructure" has both pragmatic and historic connotations. The former refers to the relative ease with which Gulf cities have embraced the mega-building, the mega-master plan, or both, as a status symbol and an economic tool for urban growth and consolidation. The latter is the link with a moment in the history of architecture that happened in parallel with the formation of the UAE as we know it today, a moment that, this paper argues, has implicit links to the present and future of the cities of the UAE and neighboring Gulf countries.

The Emirati city is forged in the coexistence of opposites: old versus new; local versus imported; planned versus ad-hoc; small-scale versus large-scale;



Western versus Eastern; traditional versus modern, etc. It is in those dichotomies, superimposed over a number of rather chaotic, rapidly growing environments and communities of extraordinary urban vitality, that a more progressive definition of the elusive architectural identity of the Emirati city may be found. The contemporary architectural production in cities like Dubai or Abu Dhabi and, to some extent, Sharjah or Ajman, mediates between the emblematic building and the anonymous building. The former projects an urban presence that is about singularity and glitz. The latter, builds the city by slowly increasing its density and offering additional economic and social capacity. To an extent, every city in the world combines a majority of anonymous buildings with a limited number of singular ones. But in the case of Dubai and other Emirati cities, singular buildings are so extra-ordinarily singular and so numerous, that they have the effect of asserting their presence and influence as the norm that determines the growth of the city rather than the exception to that norm.

## **Conclusion**

The proliferation of mega-structures in the main cities of the UAE and the propensity to ever-more singular buildings as part of a deliberate urban branding strategy highlights the striking disconnection between the visual excess of the Emirati city and the socio-cultural reality of the Emirati society. There is a perceived lack of authenticity in the image of cities like Dubai, a belief that they are founded on a sense of urban urgency that considers economic forces above and beyond socio-cultural considerations. This circumstance begs the question: how responsible is the massive urban growth that Emirati cities have experienced in the last four decades for the current lack of visual identity of the Emirati city?

This identity is easier to perceive if we consider some historic and contextual facts. One of them is the confluence of desert and sea, a powerful combination that has maximized the value of an urban element— the corniche— that absorbs the extraordinary vitality of public life in most of the countries of that area. The corniche is the true connector of social, cultural, and civic forces. It fosters pedestrian interaction, social cohesion, cultural diversity, and most importantly, is a metaphor for shared traditions. The corniche defines the identity of the Emirati city like no other urban element. It explains that there is a culture of the everyday that happens on the margins of the designed glitz that surrounds every new inauguration of every new mega-structure. Terminal 3 is a large processor of transient people, but it could also be, at best, a modern, climate-controlled corniche in which civic

interactions could take place, as they did and do in the old souks, still in operation today in most cities of the region. Even if the Dubai that will emerge from the current recession will be significantly different from the city that always seemed to be recession-proof, Dubai and other major cities in the UAE are still in search of urban identity. Four decades of accelerated development have produced cities that combine extraordinary sophistication and a lack of common vision and shared urban principles. The creation of Abu Dhabi's Urban Planning Council in 2007 is an important strategic first step in the definition of the shared urban priorities that the cities of the UAE should have as normative instruments for the future.

The images that support this paper ask the question: what are the signs of identity of the Emirati city and how do they reflect the local social and cultural dimensions? This paper contends that the identity of the major cities of the UAE is defined by the lack of a predominant visual identity. The singular character of some of the emblematic buildings that have been sprouting in the UAE in recent years, brings back the question of whether a reformulation of urban density, as a primary factor in future urban developments, should be considered an essential tool to guide the growth of the Emirati cities, and those of neighboring Gulf countries, in the future. Urban density has been a historic characteristic of this geographic area due to its extreme climate conditions, the scarcity of natural resources, and the socio-cultural DNA of its inhabitants. The early settlements in the Arabian Peninsula that preceded the development of the modern cities were compact and established social structures based on dense living. After the petroleum industry gave way to an abundance of resources and the influx of foreign experts, qualified consultants and unqualified labor overpowered the local socio-cultural status quo, and Emirati cities became gradually dispersed.

The connections between the utopian proposals of the Megastructure Movement and the opportunities created by the large-scale developments in cities like Dubai and Abu Dhabi, together with a more responsible understanding of the history and context of the UAE, represent an innovative and promising direction for future urban growth and the definition of a shared and accepted common urban identity.

**Figure 5.1: Contextual high-rise**



- Plate 1 (left) Contextual high-rise with oversized local street symbol;  
Plate 2 (centre) the tallest transmission tower in the world;  
Plate 3 (right) Sun-sheltering tower designed for passive cooling;  
Photos credit: © 2012 by Enrique Martínez.

**Figure 5.2: Mid-rise buildings**



- Plate 4 (Above left) Sub-materials as finishing materials;  
Plate 5 (Above right) Ajman twin towers;  
Plate 6 (Below left) Bullying engineering for cantilevered architecture;  
Plate 7 (Below right) Livable streets above the streets.  
Photos credit: © 2012 Enrique Martínez

**Figure 5.3: Megastructures**



High-density community in a mixed-use development including a mosque, museums, cultural institutions, schools, food growing facilities and offices. Photo credit: © 2012 Enrique Martínez.

**Figure 5.4: Megastructures**



Continuous housing for the expatriates: hovering above the existing city, a high-tech continuous building that maintains the expatriate communities as an isolated reality nevertheless in close proximity and contact with daily life. Photo credit: © 2012 by Enrique Martínez.

**Table 5.1: Comparative evolution of the Megastructure Movement and the pre-unification UAE**

Year	Megastructure Movement	Pre-unification UAE
1960	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Tokyo Bay project (Kenzo Tange).</li> <li>➤ Space City project (Arata Isozaki).</li> <li>➤ Urbanisme Spatiale (Yona Friedman).</li> <li>➤ Town center, Cumbernauld (Wilson, Copcutt).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ New Dubai Airport inaugurated by Sheikh Rashid.</li> <li>➤ Shaikh Rashid forms an advisory committee to approve and promote the Harris master plan.</li> <li>➤ Oil discovered in Abu Dhabi.</li> </ul>
1961	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Helicoids project (Kisho Kurokawa).</li> <li>➤ Agricultural city (Kisho Kurokawa).</li> <li>➤ &gt; East Island proposal, Welfare Island (Gruen).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Dubai's first central water supply system, to accommodate 86,777 households, installed.</li> <li>➤ Dubai Electricity Company's first power station begins delivering electricity to Deira.</li> </ul>
1962	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ City under the Seine project (Paul Maymont).</li> <li>➤ Downtown Frankfurt am Main project (Candilis / Josic / Woods).</li> <li>➤ Sectors of the New Babylon (Constant).</li> <li>➤ Fun Palace project (Cedric Price)</li> <li>➤ Brunswick centre, London (Hodgkinson, Martin, Hodgkinson).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ First cargo of crude exported from Abu Dhabi.</li> <li>➤ Shaikh Rashid begins planning work on Port Rashid. Halcrow study recommends 4 berths. Shaikh Rashid insists on 15. Ambition trumps conventional wisdom.</li> <li>➤ Dubai Electricity is now delivering power to 2,500 customers and signing up 100 new customers per week.</li> </ul>
1963	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Walking City project (Archigram).</li> <li>➤ Plug-in city project (Archigram)</li> <li>➤ Free University of Berlin project (Candilis / Josic / Woods / Schiedhelm).</li> <li>➤ &gt; New Babylon/Ruhrgebiet (Constant).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Shaikh Rashid's son-in-law, Ahmed bin Ali Al Thani, Ruler of Qatar, funds Dubai's first bridge, Al Maktoum Bridge.</li> <li>➤ Decree signed establishing National Bank of Dubai.</li> <li>➤ Dubai Petroleum Company formed. Consortium included American Continental Oil Company, Compagnie Française des Petroles, Repsol of Spain, RWE-DEA and Wintersall of Germany.</li> </ul>
1964	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ English Channel Bridge project (Yona Friedman).</li> <li>➤ Babelnoah Arcology project (Soleri).</li> <li>➤ Jersey corridor project (Graves, Eisenman).</li> <li>➤ Struttura urbana per 70,000 abitanti a Brozzi (Deganello, Chiappi, Marliani).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Dubai neighborhoods of Satwa and Karama have running water in each home. These newly developed areas were the first areas to receive running water. Water was initially provided free of charge.</li> <li>➤ By the 1964-1965 academic year, Abu Dhabi had six schools attended by 528 students, taught by 33 teachers. Dubai had 3,572 students in 10 schools and 137 teachers.</li> </ul>
1965	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ &gt; Skyrise proposal for Harlem (Fuller, Sadao).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ First street lights are installed in Dubai city center.</li> <li>➤ Sir William Halcrow and Partners commissioned to study feasibility of a deep water port.</li> </ul>

**Table 5.1, continued**

1966	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Vertical Assembly Building, Cape Canaveral (Urbahn, Roberts, Seeley and Moran).</li> <li>➤ Instant city project (Tigerman).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Satwa, Karama and Al Ghusais become huge building sites as Shaikh Rashid encourages developers to build low rent housing colonies.</li> <li>➤ Shaikh Zayed Bin Sultan Al Nahyan becomes Ruler of Abu Dhabi.</li> </ul>
1967	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Yamanishi Communications Centre, Kofu (Kenzo Tange).</li> <li>➤ Habitat Montreal (Safdie, David, Barrott, Boulva).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Work begins on constructing Port Rashid.</li> <li>➤ Outbreak of smallpox results in major medical and health reforms.</li> </ul>
1968	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Oasis project (Ron Herron).</li> <li>➤ Urban project (NER Group).</li> <li>➤ Triton city project (Fuller, Sadao).</li> <li>➤ Byker redevelopment, Newcastle (Erskine).</li> <li>➤ Instant city (Archigram).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Harris completes his first architectural project in Dubai: the expansion of Al Maktoum Hospital from 38 to 106 beds.</li> <li>➤ Dubai population reaches 59,000.</li> <li>➤ Shaikh Rashid establishes the National Bank of Dubai. Harris designs two branches. The Deira branch is the tallest building in Dubai at seven stories.</li> <li>➤ Work begins on Dubai's first telecommunication station at Jebel Ali.</li> </ul>
1969	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Graz-Ragnitz project (Domenig, Huth).</li> <li>➤ Continuous City USA (Boutwell, Mitchell).</li> <li>➤ The continuous monument (Superstudio).</li> <li>➤ Fragment van een sector (Constant).</li> <li>➤ &gt; Aerodynamic city (Archizoom).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Oil is finally tapped in Dubai.</li> <li>➤ Shortage of cement causes crisis within construction industry. Projects in Satwa, Karama and Al Ghusais are affected. Shaikh Rashid buys 3,000 tons of cement from Bombay to alleviate crisis.</li> <li>➤ 5,600 students now enrolled in Dubai in 10 schools with 231 teachers.</li> </ul>
1970	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Lower Manhattan Expressway project (Rudolph).</li> <li>➤ UN Complex, Vienna (Gruen).</li> <li>➤ Centre Pompidou (Piano, Rogers, Franchini).</li> <li>➤ Plug-in Capsule House (Kisho Kurokawa).</li> <li>➤ No-stop city (Archizoom).</li> <li>➤ Struttura urbana monomorfa (Archizoom).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Port Rashid opens informally when MV Dwarka arrives at Berth 3, the first deep-sea commercial vessel to use Port Rashid.</li> <li>➤ Construction of a road between Dubai and Jebel Ali begins.</li> </ul>
1971		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Declaration signed on December 2 establishing the United Arab Emirates. The new federation includes the emirates of Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah, Ajman, Umm Al Quwain and Fujairah, under the leadership of Shaikh Zayed. The Federation's initial Constitution is provisional for five years, after which it would be replaced by a permanent one.</li> <li>➤ Abu Dhabi's Shaikh Zayed Bin Sultan Al-Nahyan is elected President and Dubai's Shaikh Rashid bin Saeed Al-Maktoum, Prime Minister.</li> </ul>



**Table 5.1, continued**

1972	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Westyard, New York (Davis, Brody and Associates).</li> <li>➤ Stadterweiterungsplan Stuttgart (Krier).</li> <li>➤ Nakagin capsule building (Kisho Kurokawa).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ His Highness Shaikh Sultan bin Mohammad Al-Qasimi becomes Ruler of Sharjah.</li> <li>➤ Ras Al Khaimah joins the UAE.</li> </ul>
1973	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Autobahnerbauung Rehberge, Berlin-Wedding (Heinrichs).</li> <li>➤ In a lecture in Naples, Banham announces the end of the Megastructure Movement.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ The UAE Cabinet approves the merger of the oil departments of Abu Dhabi, Dubai, and Sharjah into a single UAE Petroleum Ministry.</li> </ul>

**Table 5.2: Distribution of images in Reyner Banham's Megastructure book by type**

Type of Image	Number of images	% of total images
Exterior	170	83
Interior (perspective, no exterior information)	14	6
Interior (section, possibly with exterior information)	24	11

## 6

# Visualizing Urban Form as Mass Ornament in Muscat Capital Area

*Aurel von Richthofen*

### **Introduction**

This chapter examines the recent urban development of Muscat Capital Area as a continuous urban form. This urban form is at the same time the “result” of demographic and economic constraints and the cultural “product” of careful negotiation and aesthetic politics. The urban form, manifested in an expansive urban sprawl, radically and irreversibly changes the environment in which the majority of the Omanis live. These circumstances condition the production of visual culture. The emergence of visual culture through the deployment of urbanism is far from coincidental, and yet distinctively Omani, as the process sets itself apart from the flashy development in other GCC countries. Less exhibitionist in nature than in the neighboring Emirates, Oman’s urban form is nonetheless developing at an alarming rate. At a population of merely two million inhabitants, more than 130,000 new applications have been filed for plots in Oman in 2009 alone. Most applications aspire to the principle of the free-standing villa, a building type that stands diametrically opposed to social habits, environmental and climatic responsibility and, ultimately traditional Omani culture. This new (sub-) urban form represents a continuous urban landscape, turning the individual houses into exchangeable pieces of a nation-wide ornament.

The paper traces the concepts of physiognomy and Gestalt-theory from their Romantic German origins towards Siegfried Kracauer's thesis of "the mass ornament" developed in Weimar Germany. The "reading" of urban fabric necessitates a short record of the concept of physiognomy developed by Lavater and the seminal work on the relation between monuments, open spaces, and the urban fabric as a play of figure-ground by Camilo Sitte and later generations of physiognomist architects. Based on the theoretical work of physiognomists, we can propose a framework to support research in urbanism that contributes to visual culture in Oman. The concept is transposed from a general cultural critique of literature, theater and movies to urbanism and applied to contemporary Muscat Capital Area. The concept of the mass ornament postulates that "surface-level expressions" are the product of mass culture. Its constituting parts interact dynamically, their relationship form specific geometries. The relationship of individual contributions (the performance of the actor for Kracauer, the house in Muscat Capital Area) to a larger whole (the development of culture for Kracauer, the urban expansion in Muscat Capital Area) no longer have any impact on the direction of the development itself if the constraining mechanisms of this development can no longer be addressed critically.

In the case of Muscat Capital Area, political, social, and aesthetic processes coincide. Understood as reciprocal layers of urban morphology, these processes describe the visual repercussions of a society driven by the regulating geometries of urban planning, the predominant expanded infrastructure, conformist and self-censored, modern Omani citizens, an invisible "infrastructure" of myriads of expat workers and, finally, the reemergence of tribal structures in the guise of urbanism. Ultimately, a layered model of urban morphology leads to a different approach of defining aesthetic politics in urban form and visual culture.

## **The Origin of Physiognomy and Gestalt-theory in Romantic German Thought**

"Auffallend wird die Erscheinung besonders beym Anblick mancher menschlicher Gestalten und Gesichter—vorzüglich beym Erblicken mancher Augen, mancher Mimen, mancher Bewegungen – beym Hören gewisser Worte, beym Lesen gewisser Stellen—bey gewissen Hinsichten auf Leben, Welt und Schicksal [. . .] Der Sitz der Seele ist da, wo sich Innenwelt und Außenwelt berühren."<sup>1</sup>

- 
1. Blütenstaub Novalis, in *Werke in einem Band*, edited by Hans-Joachim Mähl u. Richard Samuel (München, C. Hanser 1984), 432.

In his poem, “Blüthenstaub” the German Romantic poet Novalis (1772-1801) located the “soul” at the intersection of the Inner and the Outer world. He emphasized that the soul (of people and things) is revealed through the observation of their surface. Novalis implied the existence of a dialectic relationship of inner (constituting) constraints and outer appearances. (Adolf Loos later made a moral claim on the truth of things stripped from their ornamental appearance based on this thought). While Novalis’ intent was to reveal the hidden inner structure of the object of contemplation, inner parts and outer appearance gained similar importance. Swiss philosopher Johann Caspar Lavater (1741-1801) – a contemporary of Novalis – reversed the historic predominance of the inner value of things over the outer apparition in his concept of “physiognomy.” His methodology was based on critical observation and perception: “To observe or to perceive and distinguish is the soul of physiognomy.”<sup>2</sup> In the scientific recast of Dibutades’ (600 BC) ancient explanation of the origin of drawing as the “tracing of shadows,” Lavater studied the silhouette of people to derive the “contour” of their personality.<sup>3</sup> To Lavater, the reduced paper cut silhouette portraits represented an abstraction – the “spirit” – of things. While he still clung to the dialectic of inner and outer aspects of the material world, to him, physiognomy represented a significant shift towards the examination of the surface, the outline, and the appearance as the relevant categories of investigation. Furthermore, the surface of things was seen as an individual category – as “a medium” – worth interpretation. “The discourse on physiognomy constructs new topoi at the borderline of inside/outside, surface/depth, core/hull, etc. as transitional stations of physiognomy.”<sup>4</sup> As such it is a dynamic process under constant change, a further parallel to urban phenomena.<sup>5</sup>

Lavater’s concept of physiognomy entered the intellectual German discourse through Goethe, Brentano, and Ehrenfels and laid the conceptual ground for later psychoanalytic Gestalt theory. In a similar fashion, Gestalt theory is based on the

2. Johann Caspar Lavater, “Physiognomische Fragmente zur Beförderung der Menschenkenntniß und Menschenliebe,” in *Eine Auswahl mit 101 Abbildungen*, edited by Christoph Siegrist, Universal Bibliothek Nr. 350, (Stuttgart: Verlag Philipp Reclam jun., 1984), 111.
3. Victor Stoichita, *A Short History of the Shadow. Essays in Art and Culture* (London: Reaktion Books, 1997), 94.
4. Heiko Christians, “Gesicht, Gestalt, Ornament: Überlegungen zum epistemologischen Ort der Physiognomik zwischen Hermeneutik und Mediengeschichte,” in *Deutsche Vierteljahresschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte* edited by Gerhart von Graevenitz et al. (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler 2000).
5. Karl Schlögel, *Im Raume lesen wir die Zeit. Über Zivilisationsgeschichte und Geopolitik* (Carl Hanser Verlag, München/Wien, 2003), 36.

principle of psychophysical isomorphism, postulating the correlation between conscious experience and cerebral activity (inner and outer realms). The concepts of physiognomy and Gestalt found various entries into the architectural discourse at regular intervals as urban phenomenologies of the late nineteenth century to cybernetic theories of the mid twentieth century.

## Physiognomic Debates in Architecture since the 1890s

Roughly a hundred years later, the discourse on physiognomy entered the field of architecture and urban planning. Austrian architect Camillo Sitte invented a graphic method to analyze urban spaces and published it in his book *City Planning According to Artistic Principles*.<sup>6</sup> Studying “organically grown” Italian cities and contrasting them with symmetrically planned imperial Austrian cities, he claimed that morphological analysis of urban space could provide insights on the degree of cultural sophistication. Sitte drew maps of emblematic squares in each city, by contrasting private buildings as black solids to open public spaces as white. The resulting double reading of solid/void, figure/ground became a topic of the American architectural discourse from the 1970s onwards. Anticipating Gestalt theory, the city, according to Sitte, was more than just the sum of its parts (the buildings). The Gestalt was a greater pattern legible from the disposition of the parts. While the architecture and the buildings (the inner) were a known quantity for Sitte, the urban shape (the outer) was a result of accumulated processes that surfaced on the scale of the city.

Austrian architect Adolf Loos used the dichotomy of inner values and surface representation in his polemical treatise on architecture, *Ornament and Crime*, in 1908, not to make a moral judgment on the actual surface treatment (ornament), but to defame the reactionary state of architecture at the time.<sup>7</sup> In his eyes, architecture had to represent on the outside its inherent governing structures, even at the expense of decoration which most of his contemporaries failed to address. His designs were shockingly “naked” in the sense that they exposed previously covered (functional) elements of the building. Architecture, for Loos, had a revelatory even missionary

---

6. Camillo Sitte, “Gesamtausgabe. Schriften und Projekte,” edited by Klaus Semsroth, Michael Mönninger und Christine Crasemann-Collins (6 Bände. Böhlau, Wien 2003–2007) 64. See also: George R. Collins and Christiane Crasemann Collins, *Camillo Sitte and the Birth of Modern City Planning* (Random House: New York, 1965).

7. Adolf Loos, *Spoken into the Void: Collected Essays*, translated by Jane O. Newman and John H. Smith, (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press 1998).

goal of educating and correcting social mores, yet the insistence on the congruence of content/shape persisted. The later Modernist movement reduced his thesis to a rejection of ornament all together.

Kevin Lynch can be seen as the next physiognomist. In his 1960s' seminal book, *The Image of the City*, Lynch approaches the city from the perspective of the inhabitant.<sup>8</sup> Hence, perception of space from the point of view of the user and not the planner is the main tool of investigation. The modus operandi – deduction of inner values from external observation – remains the same. The “image” of the city is nothing but the physiognomic silhouette portrait of Lavater applied to the larger scale of urbanism.

Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter took the idea of physiognomic analysis to an extreme by turning it into a design strategy in their book *Collage City* in 1978.<sup>9</sup> Rowe and Koetter utilized fragments of various cities rendered in contrasting black and white drawings à la Sitte. As if these reductive fragments were not abstract enough, Rowe and Koetter extracted them from their original context, re-shuffled them, and juxtaposed elements of various times and scales to re-compose a city. The multiple acts of physiognomic separation and re-combination subverted the initial idea to read the city, yet accounted for the depth of the creative urban design process. As Victor Burgin put it: “It is not that one spatial formation was replaced by another. It is rather as if a superior “layer” of spatial representations itself became permeable, “porous” and allowed an inferior layer to show through.”<sup>10</sup>

These examples – that still form the canon of the discourse on urban planning – ultimately account for the impossibility to reduce urban phenomena to a singular image. As critical instruments they reveal a layered model of urban morphology. Applied to the case of Muscat Capital Area, this concept reveals structures and modes of production of visual culture hidden beneath the facade of rapid urban development.

---

8. Kevin Lynch, *The Image of the City* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1960).

9. Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter, *Collage City*, 1978. Mit einem Nachwort von Colin Rowe, Bd. 27 der Schriftenreihe des Instituts für Geschichte und Theorie der Architektur an der Eidgenössischen Technischen Hochschule Zürich, translated into German by Bernhard Hoesli et. al., (Basel/Boston /Berlin: Birkhäuser Verlag, 1997).

10. Victor Burgin, *In Different Spaces. Place and Memory in Visual Culture* (University of California Press, Berkeley/Los Angeles 1996), 147.

## The Local Context: Research on Urban Morphology in Oman

Due to the remote location of the Sultanate, and the voluntary isolation imposed by the Bu Said rule till the ascension to the throne by Sultan Qaboos in 1970, Muscat remained an uncharted territory in terms of urban geography. At the beginning of the twentieth century, J.G. Lorimer published the *Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf: Oman and Central Arabia*. As a by-product of his mandate for the British Protectorate, Lorimer delivered detailed descriptions of location, population, and history of the various quarters of Muscat. His work published in 1915 represents the first modern attempt to describe Muscat and its hinterland.<sup>11</sup> J.E. Peterson also visited the Sultanate in the 1960s and collected important material. He took the first color photographs of the city and surveyed the old town producing an important figure-ground plan of Muscat.<sup>12</sup> Shortly after Peterson, Ian Skeet depicted the late sixties with vivid descriptions of the lives of the inhabitants in contrast to the transitional moment of the ascension to the throne by Sultan Qaboos.<sup>13</sup> These accounts are very useful to contrast the rapid development of the events after 1970, but remain historical due to their focus on the end of a specific era.

The first modern study was conducted by the German urban geographer Fred Scholz from 1980 to 1990.<sup>14</sup> Scholz was fortunate to witness the country's remarkable transition from a middle age Arab town to a modern city. By applying geographical tools of mapping and surveying, Scholz drew a comprehensive snapshot in time of a dynamic city with his two volumes on Muscat.<sup>15</sup> His merit was to record both the traces of a fading traditional lifestyle as well as to anticipate the developments laid in various regional and urban plans at this pivotal time in the development of the Omani capital. The seeming objectivity of his socio-geographic approach was highlighted by meticulous use of maps and charts. All records on these remarkable maps were done based on comparative historical studies and reconnaissance on site. His efforts as geographer were mostly focused on meticulously documenting the various social and cultural changes and to synthesize a first urban morphology. His

---

11. John Gordon Lorimer, *Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf, Oman and Central Arabia*, 2 Vols. (Calcutta: Superintendent of Government Printing, 1908-15), vol. 1, 10.

12. J.E. Peterson, *Historical Muscat: An Illustrated Gazetteer, Handbuch der Orientalistik*, Vol. 88 (Leiden / Boston: Brill, 2007).

13. Ian Skeet, *Oman Before 1970 –: The End of an Era* (London: Faber & Faber, 2nd Sub edition, May 1985).

14. Fred Scholz, *Muscat Sultanat Oman: Geographische Skizze einer einmaligen Arabischen Stadt*, Vol. I (Berlin: Das Arabische Buch, 1990).

15. *Ibid.*, 25.

works on Muscat, including large scale maps of future transformation of the city, form the point of departure for this paper.

## **Geometries of Urbanisation in Muscat Capital Area**

The majority of the present urban expanse is located on previously uninhabited land along the Batinah coast towards the East as we can see in Figure 6.1. While this land was used for agriculture with tiny semi-nomadic settlements, the urbanization-wave progressed along former caravan paths. As the settlements grew, the pathways gradually turned into paved roads and later highways. A particularity of the urbanization process is the restriction in favor of low-rise houses. No dwelling residential or commercial can exceed nine stories, inevitably leading to an urban sprawl. Unlike other processes of urbanization shaped by constant dialogue and negotiation, the single-handed planning tools of Royal Decrees lead to a top-down deployment of urban regulations and subsequent formal expressions: scale, monotony, and repetition.

**Figure 6.1: Map illustrating the growth of Muscat Capital Area from 1970 to 2010**



Photo credit: © 2012 Aurel von Richthofen

*Scale:* The scalar process of urbanization can be read in a twofold way: Geographically, as horizontal expansion in the northeastern direction toward the Batinah coast and sociologically as the stratification of social status into sizes of residence along privileged infrastructure nodes. Since 2005, so-called Integrated Tourism Projects have created new forms of occupation of strategic spaces within the urban compound. Demographic pressure played an important role in the process of urbanization,



acting as a main driving force for urban expansion. Half of the Omani population is under 25 years of age and eager to build a home. Oman's urbanization is growing at an alarming rate with more than 130,000 new applications for construction plots filed in 2009 alone. Compared to a total population of two million Omanis, the relative size of the annual development reflects the potential of large numbers inherent to the mass ornament.

*Monotony:* In contrast to traditional courtyard houses, the predominant type of residential dwelling is the freestanding villa. This building type repeats monotonously across Muscat Capital Area. The single villa is the most wasteful building in terms of land-use and the most demanding in terms of supporting infrastructure. It stands diametrically opposed to social habits, environmental and climatic responsibility, and traditional Omani culture. The propagation of the single villa on the plot is driven by Royal Decree No. 81 / 84. Accordingly every Omani citizen of age 23 or above has the right to a plot of land.<sup>16</sup> In a 2008 amendment, the Decree was extended to male and female applicants alike, if he or she is the sole breadwinner of the family.<sup>17</sup> The land is surveyed and prepared by governmental agencies, subdivided into equal plot sizes, serviced by roads and infrastructure, and generally speaking is ready for construction. The plots are then put in a lottery. Applicants register for the draw and finally pick their plot from the lucky pot. In the logic of homogeneity, these given plots are all equal in size and shape. Through the years the size of the plots increased dramatically, leading to alarming development: from 150 m<sup>2</sup> in 1970 to 600 m<sup>2</sup> in 1990 per plot. This legal framework is still in place today.

*Repetition:* The urban expanse is made up of a multitude of constituting parts, namely architecture, infrastructure, and open spaces. The interest is not so much in enumerating these parts but to study their interaction – “their geometry.” The geometry of Muscat Capital Area is, first of all, determined by a master plan originating in the 1980s following a nation-wide Five Year Plan from 1976.<sup>18</sup> The term “Muscat Capital Area” was coined in 1977 by the consultancy of Llewelyn-Davies Weeks Forestier-Walker and Bor in their “Coastal Policy Study” and the

---

16. Royal decree 81/84, Oman 1984.

17. Amendment to the Royal decree 81/84, Oman, of 1984 in 2008.

18. Oman adopted its first “Five-Year Development Plan” in 1976 after the ascension to the throne of Sultan Qaboos in 1970. Key to this plan was the implementation of measures to secure economic welfare in all regions of Oman, with a strong emphasis on investments in infrastructure.

“Capital Area — Seeb Local Plan.”<sup>19</sup> Their estimates of population growth to 226,000 by 1980, 443,000 by 1990, and 686,000 by the year 2000 have proven accurate.<sup>20</sup> This master plan shows the typical separation of functions and divides the greater Muscat area into “zones.” These zones are designed for single uses (residential, commercial, industrial, and recreational); massive roads serve the different parts with new highways, fly-overs, and roundabouts, built to escape the inevitable traffic collapse. This “modernist separation of functions” marginalized the traditional mix of uses that characterizes the traditional Omani city. The instrument for realization of the Capital Area Plan of 1977 was Royal Decree No. 26 /1975 describing the functions of the Ministry of Land Affairs. This Royal Decree determined residential, commercial, and industrial uses as well as the subdivision, preparation, development, coordination, and allocation of land. The zoning plan and the legal framework of the institutions governed the development of the urban landscape that is characteristic of the Muscat Capital Area.

## **Al Khoudh Neighborhood: A Study Case**

The neighborhood of Al Khoudh showcases the underlying processes within Muscat Capital Area; Al Khoudh has been developed recently (2007–present) and stands for areas set for development or in areas of rural-urban transition (refer to Figure 6.2). All these areas are covered by satellite imagery tracing the development over the last few years. The satellite snapshots allow the reconstructing of an image of the city from the outside. The resolution of the imagery allows the determination of the time of construction and the classification of the different typologies of buildings. The predominant building type evolves from single story villas to double story villas, towards twin villas and ultimately super-sized villas (the latter consisting of a large villa to the front side with two apartments attached to the back). These types represent new strategies to maximize the land-use under the prevailing rules and stand in direct connection to the economic base of the constructor. These plots belong to Omani homeowners and are developed by the families directly. Translated with geo-information systems (GIS) into maps, these images become a key indicator of visual culture in the city.

---

19. Llewelyn-Davies Weeks Forestier—Walker and Bor: “Coastal Policy Study” and “Capital Area – Seeb Local Plan” of 1977.

20. “Capital Area Structure Plan,” in *Muscat Sultanat Oman: Geographische Skizze einer einmaligen Arabischen Stadt*, Vol. I by Fred Scholz (Berlin: Das Arabische Buch, 1990), 125.

**Figure 6.2: GIS mapping of the development of Al Khoudh**

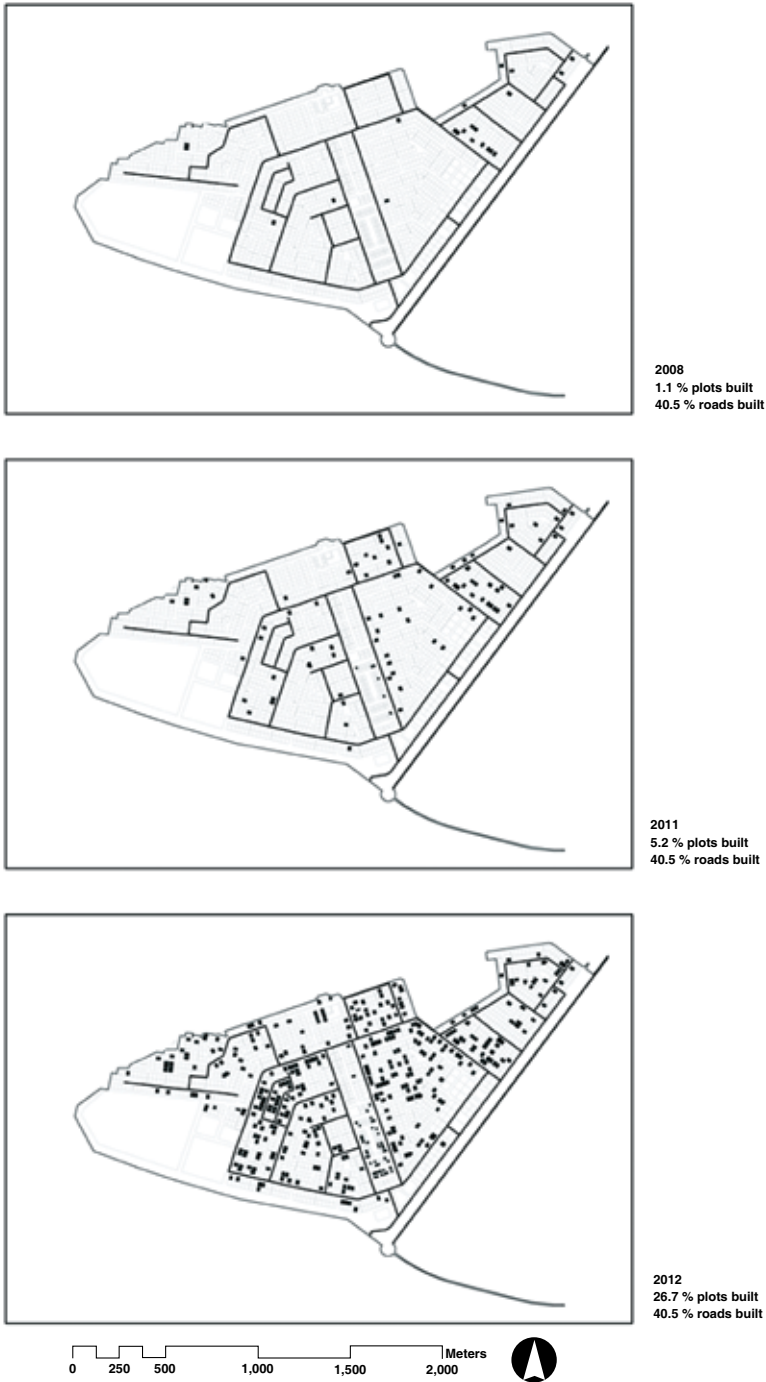
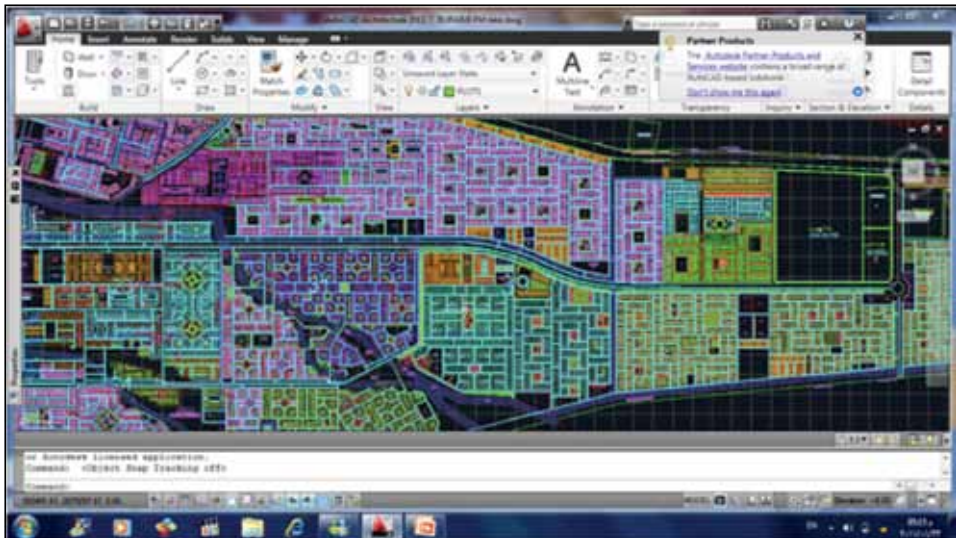


Photo credit: © 2012 Aurel von Richthofen.

The mapping done with GIS of the development in Al Khoudh can be contrasted to the proposed regional plan issued by the Ministry of Housing in Muscat. The proposed regional plan resembles a static image of the projected city – rendered in equal blocks of 600 m<sup>2</sup> arranged in clusters of 12 to 18 plots, serviced by dead-end roads, feeder roads, and highways. The plan is available as an AutoCAD drawing file. The screenshots that we see in Figure 6.3 reveal the underlying logic of the urban plan. Literally flat, this document fails to represent topographic and natural features of the city. The logic of the AutoCAD program prescribes the waste of space with rigid setback-rules and arbitrary allocation of land. The proposed plan restricts the development of dynamic urban space. By contrasting the proposed plan and the actual development, mapped in GIS on site, a multitude of exceptions and changes become evident. In the case of Al Khoudh, the development slowed down when approximately 35 percent of the plots were built. Most of the recent plots had been over-built with massive houses while the development of the road network was still incomplete. The discrepancy between the proposed plan and built reality is prototypical of the urban morphology of Muscat Capital Area.

**Figure 6.3: Screenshot of the AutoCAD plan of Muscat Capital Area in May 2011**



Courtesy the Ministry of Housing in Oman.

A mechanical documentation of this transformation process with the classic tools of an architect and planner such as drawings, maps, and charts would fail to address the underlying cultural processes at stake. Based on the theoretical work

of physiognomists, we can propose a framework to support research in urbanism as visual culture in Oman. Sitte, Loos, Rowe, and Lynch delineate an architectural strategy to read and interpret ordinary urban phenomena to decipher rules, patterns, and strategies for urban design. These strategies enable a new mode of reading urban form, involving the abstraction of immediate, ordinary, and gratuitous phenomena into applicable theories and approaches to visual culture and urbanism. In the case of Oman, the cultural changes have been dramatic since 1970. Due to the gradual opening of the country to the world, the Omani society is transforming towards a modern capitalist society. The pace of development defeats standard modes of documentation. The study of urban form in the Muscat Capital Area as an expression of a cultural shift requires new analytic tools.

The complexity of urban phenomena poses a challenge to a visual-cultural reception. Urban phenomena happen continuously at various scales and speeds. Developed cities carry the legacy of their architectures within the cyclical processes of building, renovation, demolition, rebuilding. The imprints of various phases of expansion and shrinkage become legible as visual culture. In analogy to living organisms (plants, mushrooms, corals), the structure of cities has often been described as rhizomorphic. Recently, architects and urbanists have used the metaphor of genetics to decipher the “code” of a city. While some cities carry a clear blueprint – Ildefons Cerda’s Nineteenth Century plan with octagonal plots across Barcelona is one example – the analogy of genotype and phenotype is deceiving considering the complexity and multiplicity of the processes at stake. Neither the rhizome metaphor nor the genetic analogy serves to describe the production of an aesthetic regime within an urban phenomenon in the Muscat Capital Area. Instead, the top-down process inherent to Muscat Capital Area creates a stratified urban “geology” in which the inhabitants have less and less options to participate in the creation of visual culture: Muscat Capital Area as the Golden Cage of Suburbia.

## **Form, Ornament, and the Visual in Omani Urban Culture**

While theory (and practice) of urbanism turned out to be slow in response to the physiognomic revolution of the turn of the twentieth century, shaping all aspects of visual culture, cultural critics shifted their attention to newer media like photography and cinema. In Weimar Germany, intellectuals Siegfried Kracauer and Walter Benjamin, among others, commented on contemporary visual culture by scrutinizing ordinary urban phenomena for insights, trends, and clues on prevailing cultural directions. “Instead of just writing texts, [Walter Benjamin] practices

‘Seeing as Reading of Things’.”<sup>21</sup> The surface was at the same time a projection foil for cultural desires as well as the product of the fast paced cultural developments in the metropolitan culture. Walter Benjamin surveyed the cosmos of new mediatized surfaces to conclude: “to reach, suddenly, into those secret, generally untapped surface-worlds [Oberflächenwelt] represented by the ornament.”<sup>22</sup>

The ornament, in contrast to Loos’s polemical use of the term, allowed for the penetration into the surface world opening multiple interpretations of the primordial condition of the ornament, constituting just one aspect of its inherent ideation. The reciprocity of the expression in surface levels of unmediated nature to the fundamental substance of things is reminiscent of earlier physiognomic thought, yet the Kracauer assigns to the surface-level expressions a dynamic and animated character. The animation arises from the mathematical repetition of parts. The superficiality of the ensemble marks the advent of a new established form.

The constituting elements are interchangeable, the individual reduced to a building block. The ornament does not need to reaffirm itself through the dialectic of inside/outside: “The patterns [...] are composed of elements that are mere building blocks and nothing more. [...] The ornament is an end in itself.”<sup>23</sup> “Clusters,” “mathematics,” “spectacles,” and “form”: these categories are transposed to describe urbanism. The observation on mass culture, that the repetitive elements emerge from mechanical production and are both a product of and the condition for further production of culture, can be applied to all “artefacts,” including architecture and urbanism, as an animated system. Relating the constituting parts, their aggregation and shape into a mathematical (geometrical) relationship, the ornament becomes a process in constant dialogue emerging out of the principles of production. In their totality, these dynamic processes can be read as visual culture. Kracauer takes the analogy further by equating his concept of ornament to surveying photographs of geography and urbanism:

“The ornament resembles aerial photographs of landscapes and cities in that it does not emerge out of the interior of the given conditions, but rather appears above them. Actors likewise never grasp the stage setting in its totality, yet they consciously take part in its construction. [...] The more the coherence

---

21. Susan Buck-Morss, *Dialektik des Sehens: Walter Benjamin und das Passagen-Werk* (Suhrkamp: Verlag 1989).

22. *Ibid.*, 57.

23. *Ibid.*, 76.

of the figure is relinquished in favour of mere linearity, the more distant it becomes from the immanent consciousness of those constituting it.”<sup>24</sup>

Kracauer identified aerial photography as an effective tool to analyze and qualify visual culture in the 1920s. Contemporary technology, including satellite imagery, digital projection and GIS mapping, expanded the possibilities of surveying complex urban phenomena in space and time. While they produce vast amounts of data that can be observed on a single surface, the tools serve to identify mass ornaments. At the same time, Kracauer’s mass ornament is devoid of utilitarian connotations; the aesthetic dimension resists a reduction to the function and opens up the examination of larger social and economic aspects of life.

Kracauer depicts the creation of a new aesthetic emerging out of the subject/object relationship. He describes a scalar relationship between constituting parts and the larger ensemble, the latter revealed only through the lens of the detached observation. This new aesthetic regime is inherent to the new cultural conditions, which produce it, yet does not manifest itself immediately. The transformations have a fundamental paradigmatic character; they “must remain in disguise because they are at odds with out-dated but still reigning notions.”<sup>25</sup> These “out-dated notions” collapse once the emerging ornament is widely accepted as the new modality of culture, which Kracauer identifies as new aesthetic. Kracauer identifies the social consequences of the mass ornament in the detachment of the bearer and being that ultimately transforms the human figure: “Precisely because the bearer of the ornament does not appear as a total personality [. . .] he becomes transparent to the man determined by reason.”<sup>26</sup> Kracauer recognizes the inevitability of the mass ornament as an automatic, telekinetic system arising from the prevailing conditions. He describes the mass ornament as: “The aesthetic reflex of the rationality to which the prevailing economic system aspires.”<sup>27</sup> The muteness of the ornament and its immunity against ratio make attempts to diminish or ignore it futile: “But reason has not penetrated the mass ornament; its patterns are mute. The ratio that gives rise to the ornament is strong enough to invoke the mass and to expunge all life from the figures constituting it.”<sup>28</sup> Conversely, this system entails its alternative

---

24. Siegfried Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, Translated by Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995), 77.

25. *Ibid.*, 93.

26. *Ibid.*, 83.

27. *Ibid.*, 79.

28. *Ibid.*, 84.

mode of production: Deducting a positivist attitude towards the mass ornament opens the possibility to transgress it. Understanding and utilizing the mechanisms that give rise to the mass ornament allow tuning its productive modes and offering an alternative aesthetic form – a new layered model of urban morphology.

## **Muscat Capital Area as a Layered Model of Urban Morphology**

The introductory discourse on physiognomy describes the impossibility of reducing urban phenomena to a singular image in general and the phenomena at stake in Muscat Capital Area. Instead of a singular image, this work proposes a “Layered Model of Urban Morphology” anchored around a key thesis of the mass ornament:

“The position an epoch occupies in the historical process can be determined more strikingly from an analysis of its inconspicuous surface-level expressions [Oberflächenausdrücke] than from that epoch’s judgment about itself. Since these judgments are expressions of the tendencies of a particular era, they do not offer conclusive testimony about its overall constitution. The surface-level expressions, however, by virtue of their unconscious nature, provide unmediated access to the fundamental substance of the state of things. Conversely, knowledge of this state of things depends on the interpretation of these surface-level expressions. The fundamental substance of an epoch and its unheeded impulses illuminate each other reciprocally.”<sup>29</sup>

Kracauer’s concept of mass ornament originates in the observation of mass culture. While he developed the concept in Weimar Berlin, it offers a range of tools applicable today, withstanding the transfer from Europe to the Omani context. Kracauer’s first observation lay in the recognition of surface-level expressions as products of contemporary culture. His next observation identifies the constituting parts of surface-level expressions as aggregation, clusters, and forms and establishes a geometric relationship between them. Kracauer’s third observation lies in the description of a dynamic system legible from a remote vantage point: the mass ornament.

*Surface-level expressions:* While approaching the Muscat Capital Area from Al Amarat Road crossing the Hajar Mountains, one sees a carpet of villas stretching toward the Indian Ocean. The carpet analogy stands for the endless proliferation of the urbanization process. The strict building regulations governing heights and setbacks on regular shaped plots lead to a general morphology of predominantly

---

29. Ibid., 75.



low-rise and low-density urbanism. The uniform plot sizes and equal regulations lead to a uniform architectural typology: The endless palace on the plot that maximize allowed floor area ratio, differing only externally by means of variation of the style-guide imposed by the loan-giving Oman Housing Bank (see Figure 6.4).

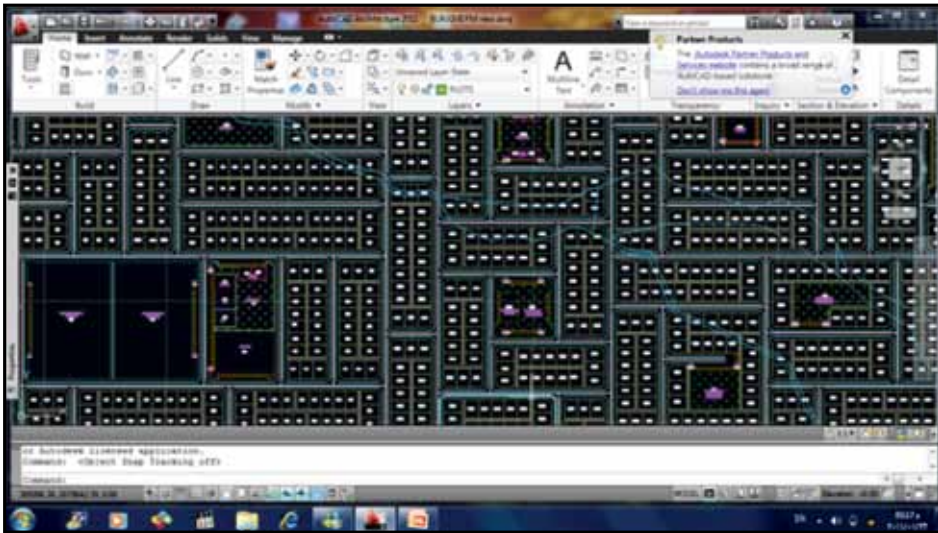
**Figure 6.4: A panoramic view of Muscat Capital Area 2012, taken from Al Amarat Road on November 2012**



Photo credit: © 2012 Aurel von Richthofen.

*Geometric relationships:* As we can see in Figure 6.5 from the screenshot of an AutoCAD file for the planning of the future expanses of Muscat, the geometric relationship guides the planning process regardless of topographic features (Wadis – Arabic term literally meaning “valleys” or “riverbeds”), climatic aspects (sun and wind orientation), or social aspects (uniformity of residences in contrast to the diversity of the Omani population). The geometry of the urban expanse is literally inscribed into the patterns of blocks and neighborhoods, repeated using the ubiquitous AutoCAD transformation commands “copy,” “mirror,” “rotate” and “scale.” The uniformity of the layout in conjunction with a scalar difference in block sizes and street width reflects the hierarchical discrimination against social status of the future residents. Neighborhoods are reduced to exchangeable tiles within a larger urban mosaic. Within the repetitive logic of the tile-pattern, the geometry of the Muscat Capital Area proliferates endlessly in the infinite space of the software program. Scale and repetition play an important role in the concept of the mass ornament. The mode of observation needs to shift in scales – zooming out from a single housing block towards the larger neighborhood and finally to the new suburbs and the entire city. The mass ornament requires repetition in large numbers: Each sample area resembles the next one. The neighborhoods in Muscat Capital Area display similarity and reflexivity, since they are over-constrained by the regulating mechanisms. Kracauer’s geometric relationships find their contemporary equivalents in the endless proliferation of similar houses, streets, and neighborhoods.

**Figure 6.5: Screenshot of the AutoCAD plan of Al Khoudh in May 2011**



Courtesy the Ministry of Housing in Oman.

Through the lenses of the mass ornament one can criticize the rise of Muscat Capital Area as an aesthetic form driven by a powerful economic machine. This process is engendered by the state, exploited by the financial frameworks, broadcast by the media, and imposed without alternative on a generation of Omani citizens. It can be understood as a passive act of violence. Starting from the built environment, the sublimated subject is permanently conditioned to the role of consumers. On the other hand, the aesthetic regime of geometry and repetition aims to create a modern Omani citizen. The specificities of the mechanisms at stake in Oman literally redistribute a previously tribal population across the Sultanate. The processes point at the inevitability of the mass ornament and, at the same time, at the muteness of the ornament and its immunity against ratio. Yet, exposing and understanding its modality offers a way to tune the mechanisms of the mass ornament. The shapeless urban expanse becomes legible as urban mass ornament.

Surface-level expressions, geometric relationships, and mass ornament form a paradigmatic shift in the creation of aesthetic politics in urban form and visual culture. Applied to Muscat Capital Area, we can discern the following inherited layers of development:

*First Layer:* Because of the hierarchical principles of the Royal Decrees, the resulting urban morphology rests on a base of regulating geometries originating in urban planning. This “first layer” is rigid in the sense that it expands regardless of natural or cultural conditions. As we can see in Figure 6.6, this “first layer” is

planned in the Ministry of Housing and based on a master plan developed by the German consultancy firm Weidleplan in 1990. CAD programs offer the perfect tools to implement this grid of identical plots and self-similar houses. While the grid implies absolute control over the development of the city and the control of visual culture, it does, in fact, only offer faint means to develop a sustainable city due to its inability to cope with dynamic systems in general.

**Figure 6.6: Muscat Capital Area Structure Plan, drawn after Weidleplan scheme of 1990**

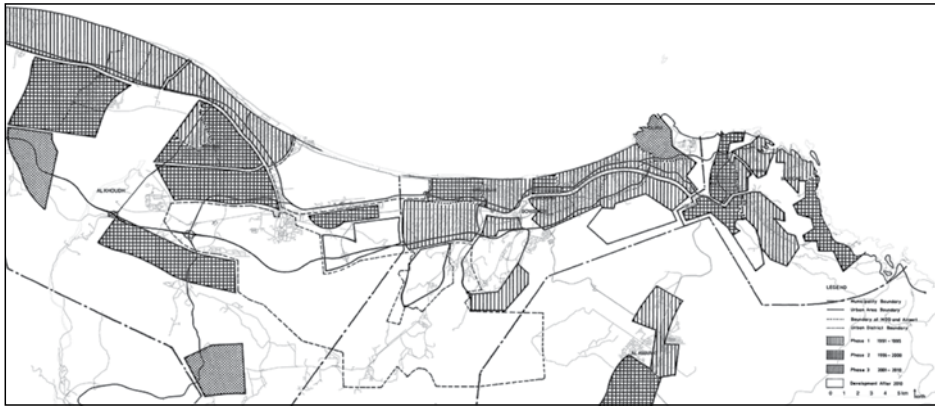


Photo credit: © 2012 Aurel von Richthofen.

*Second Layer:* In order to regain control, the authorities of Muscat Capital Area have introduced a “second layer” of expanded infrastructure: The network of highways and service roads criss-cross the urban area at huge expense on initial investments, land use, and maintenance. This layer of infrastructure illustrated in Figure 6.7 dictates the modes of transit, exchange, and communication within Muscat Capital Area and between the neighborhoods. It comes at the cost of social isolation. At the same time, isolated urban pockets emerge with a distinct local identity. The neighborhoods of Wadi Kabeer, Al Kuwair and Al Ghubra within Muscat Capital Area have managed to create a distinct modern identity around a former functional determination embedded in the zoning plan and with it an independent visual culture. These pockets form insular moments and decentralize the urban fabric. Nonetheless, the distribution of privileged facilities such as recreational spaces, large commercial complexes, administrative buildings, and access to the road network remains uneven.

**Figure 6.7: Map of Muscat Capital Area road network 2012  
(Map based on Open Street Maps data)**

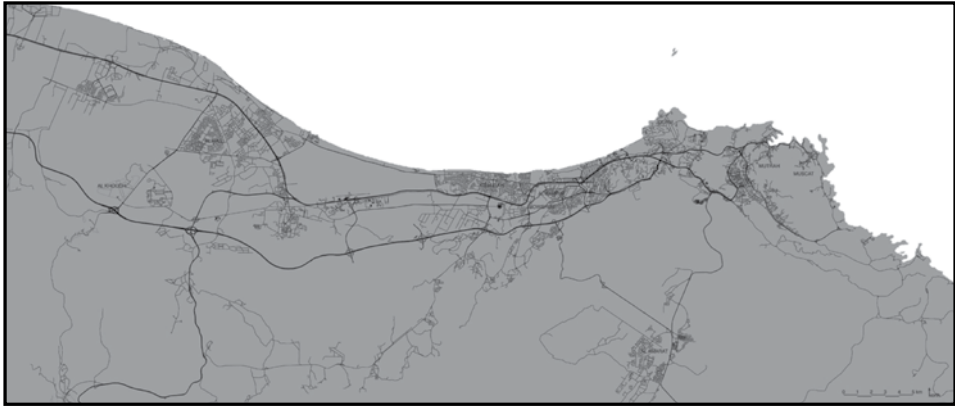


Photo credit: © 2012 Aurel von Richthofen.

*Third Layer:* This emancipatory tendency is again undermined by the compliance of the inhabitants to their presumable roles, at least on the surface. Instead of embracing the freedom within the confines of their modern neighborhoods, these citizens re-create a pastiche of rural and traditional Omani villages while enjoying the comfort of modern technologies and car-based mobility. We witness a cultural conflict typical of societies in transition. The process of modernization happened in less than 40 years. The necessary cultural dialogue has just recently started in the wake of the Arab Spring. The citizens of Muscat Capital Area voluntarily drop out of the productive cycle of visual culture. As we can see in Figure 6.8, the deterioration of architecture is symptomatic of the crisis of content. Urban planning is reduced to aspects of decoration. The representation of values is pushed to the exterior patterns of the buildings. This “third layer” is the “conformist and self-censored, modern citizen.”

*Fourth Layer:* The next layer is formed by the myriads of expat workers who build and maintain the city. This invisible “infrastructure” gets mobilized when it does not disturb the other residents of Muscat Capital Area. It forms the glue that holds otherwise loose parts together. A social contract is imposed onto this cast of workers binding them to restrictive working conditions and revoking their right to express their needs. Still, their growing number is a time-bomb and a chance at the same time. Once the expat workers claim their rights, an inter-cultural dialogue will take place and change the face of the city once again. As a sea-faring nation, Oman has proven to be able to integrate various cultures from Persia, the Indian West coast, and the shores of Eastern Africa.

**Figure 6.8: Drive-by shootings: photos of similar houses in Shatti, May 2012**



Photo credit: © 2012 Aurel von Richthofen.

*Fifth Layer:* The “fifth layer” of this proposed model is the topography of Muscat Capital Area. The Hajar mountain range runs parallel to the coastline and finally meets the Indian Ocean at Old Muscat. Running off the mountains, a series of wadis drain the coastal plain at regular distances perpendicular to the coastline. These dry riverbeds form natural sections in the city. The sand dunes of Bowsher rise more than a 100 meters above the city. These topographic landmarks challenge and disrupt the grid-like expansion of the city, where plot lines meet natural features and new edge conditions appear. The unfinished edges of residential developments offer views over wadis and mountain ridges into the hinterland of Muscat Capital Area. Highways contour larger dunes and fly over mountain ridges and valleys. At times, these highways cut into the soft limestone. New geometric figures appear. The works of Chinese construction companies resemble large scale land-art. The residual space between highway and plot lines become a landscaped feature of the city. The interstitial spaces of cloverleaf highway exchanges are re-appropriated as soccer grounds and impromptu market places. While these spaces are not planned, and have in some cases very limited access, they complement the otherwise uniform development of Muscat Capital Area with unique urban features.

**Figure 6.9: Carved-out landscape and highways in Bowsheer, November 2012**



Photo credit: © 2012 Aurel von Richthofen.

*Sixth Layer:* The “sixth layer” is the distinct Omani culture rooted in a tribal society. Tribes are very influential in the Muscat Capital Area. Their esteem is based on historical achievements, financial power, and social networks. Some tribes have more than 10,000 members. *Wasta* – Arabic term literally meaning “nepotism” and referring to a measure for the degree of power and influence of an individual or clan – is the social currency in Oman. Adherence to the tribe is more important than national pride, a source of constant threat to the authority of the state.

While the land allocation by lottery can be seen as an active way to re-distribute the Omani population across the region, thereby disrupting traditional tribal structures, the strains of tribal adherence can be traced in every neighborhood, every company, and every form of social representation. Therefore, tribal structures reflect in the urban morphology of Muscat Capital Area through clusters of re-organized spaces, independent commercial activities, and privately founded institutions such as mosques and school. The tribal structures are very effective actors on the low and mid-level development of the city and fill a gap that was left in the threshold of governmental planning. At times improvised, and at other times carefully planned, the tribal construction activities account for the majority of the residential and commercial developments. Their creative momentum is a source of ingenuity constantly re-interpreting the city.

**Figure 6.10: Tribal neighborhood in the walled city of Sur Al Lawati 2012, in Old Mutrah, Muscat Capital Area, May 2011**



Photo credit: © 2012 Aurel von Richthofen.

These layers do not need to be read in this particular order; rather they should be seen as parts of a stratified model with various folds and overlaps. The first two described here are driven by the state and can be seen as a response to, but also as the trigger of, the later economic and social layers. In return, the social components can account for a historical explanation of the development towards the present condition, as the topographic features condition the development of the urban morphology in general. But this model wants to be more than an accumulation of acute Omani conditions. Each layer interacts in specific ways with the others. This interaction could be called “the geometry of urbanization.” The reciprocal interdependencies create a dynamic system, whose ever-changing surface-level expressions create a distinct urban morphology.

Finally, no other development in Oman consumes more space, resources, and attention than the ongoing urbanization process of the Muscat Capital Area. The urbanization process in most radical and fundamental shift imposed onto the Omani society that cannot go by without the emergence of a new visual culture. Indeed, the new mass culture described in this model finds its visual-cultural representation in Muscat Capital Area as mass ornament.

## 7

# From the Corner of an Eye: Visual Journeys along the Highways of Dubai

*David Kendall*

### **Introduction**

Photographs are instrumental in depicting planning processes, architectural changes, and structural events in metropolitan areas. The routes in which photographs are produced and interpreted are vital in understanding their value as social and aesthetic objects. Photographs can generate social memory, geographical awareness, and ocular perceptions of architectural objects and activities that take place within urban spaces. This chapter considers how urban photography practice could be utilized to explore how photographs and embodied experience influences exploration of new architectural developments in the Gulf, specifically in Dubai. The complex relationships between photographic production, cultural processes, and social/spatial experiences have often been conceived as individual elements that evolve within urban environments.<sup>1</sup>

I would propose that these concepts act as creative processes that spatially intersect thereby presenting opportunities to discuss how artistic processes and interventions in cities generate and introduce new visual discourses about the politics and histories of contemporary urban life that overlay ocular processes in

---

1. Graham Clarke, *The Photograph* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 75.



the Gulf. This chapter uses theoretical insights taken from the fields of sociology, cultural geography, social anthropology, philosophy and photography. These studies identify how photography practice could be useful to develop visual culture in the region.

Before arriving in Dubai in 2007, I asked myself a question: How does “state of mind” create a nation-state? The term “state” is associated with the control and formal organization of territorial space. Consequently, building design and infrastructure influences how social codes generate cultural expectations and promote spatial interactions within shared environments. A “state of mind” could be defined as social apparatus that inspires the mental and embodied conditions that generate new visual connections within the fabric of the city. Invisibility became a device to insert myself imaginatively within this organized structure and reinvent and reorganize spatial visualizations by challenging spectacular visual accounts of the city. I wanted to look at ocular intersections between the city as “spectacle” and the mundane space of everyday life.

The practice of walking is significant in project development and is spatially influenced by social rhythms, flows, and embodied moments of indifference and attachment to particular landscapes. Therefore, inside the built environment, photographic practice could be creatively deployed to produce tactical responses, to disparities between visual conceptions of “space” and “place” in Dubai. I propose that visual knowledge and culture is not only generated by the institutional examination and promotion of Dubai’s global image via existing visual and photographic media. Ocular information is accordingly stimulated by intimate social rhythms and observational practices taking place “on the ground” that are instant and often overlooked.

Geographically a city’s streets and roads remain important locations and starting points to find one’s bearings, witness and make ocular sense of the metropolis. These settings become experiential and referential connections between “space and place.” Significant visible, relational, and sensory events occur with a shared focus on everyday activity, and not a fixed iconic visual identity or insular social, cultural, and geographical locality.

## Visualizing the Everyday

**Figure 7.1: Shaikh Zayed Road, Dubai**



Photo credit: © 2008 David Kendall

In the Emirate of Dubai, highways and carriageways visually dominate the landscape, concrete constructions that spatially control and visually connect architectural zones, structural locations, and building developments within the city-state. Within this infrastructure walking is marginalized, a provisional activity associated with spatial alienation and embodied obscurity. The spatial effects of walking could encourage communal intersections in and around Dubai's transport networks and specific spatial traces and social characteristics could become visible within these cityscapes. Journeys on foot can reveal or hide these societal differences, hidden maps, and ocular boundaries.

The embodied practice of photography and walking combine to generate imaginative, site specific and multisensory responses to these transitory landscapes, opening up new lines of critical and spatial enquiry and enhancing the study of visual cultures and spaces of cultural hybridity in the Gulf. The combination of embodied experiences and visual interaction with the built environment plays an important role in how I construct and conceive projects in the region. In her geographical explorations of space and place, Doreen Massey defines “differentiated mobility” as relationships that individuals and groups have with certain spaces and how some people open up spatial and ocular mobility and others are controlled by it.<sup>2</sup> Walking in sites designed for road travel offers me autonomous opportunities to move freely and weave within infrastructural spaces intended to direct users to certain destinations. During my first visit, I noticed an advertising slogan placed on a billboard erected next to the Shaikh Zayed Road. The statement, “If you want to go somewhere new, you will return to the same place” summarized my experiences of navigating the vast network of roads that spanned the city. Dubai’s transport networks began to frame my landscape.

Wherever I walked, the uniform infrastructure and structural similarities within the architectural environment appeared to generate certain realities. Routes appeared to lead towards predictable outcomes, placing something or somebody in a particular location or position. However, behind the visual spectacle of the built environment, roads always offered possible realities, uncovering new opportunities, desires, and risks in an evolving cityscape. Thus forming spatial and ocular perspectives from multiple orientation points, there appeared no clear vantage point; boundaries became defined by points of social contact and non-contact with architectural space. According to Geoff Dyer, roads could act as photographic and spatial metaphors for “distance” and “proximity” and convey the passage of time.<sup>3</sup> Macaulay defines walking as an embodied practice that informs how people navigate Urban Space:

“Walking locates the body in place. In the repetitious act of turning over our legs – of falling forward, then rising and collecting ourselves into a corporal rhythm – we are as it were like large knitting (or perhaps sewing machine) needles stitching ourselves into the local fabric of the environs, grounding and rooting ourselves even if momentarily.”<sup>4</sup>

---

2. Doreen Massey, *For Space* (London: Sage, 2005), 141.

3. Geoff Dyer, *The Ongoing Moment* (London: Little Brown, 2005), 170-176.

4. David Macaulay, “Walking the City,” *Capitalism, Nature Socialism: A Journal of Ecology* 11, no. 4 (2000): 3-43.

The creative act of walking absorbs a sense of well-being and purpose and becomes relational, forming a productive and coherent assemblage of social time and space. Wayfaring becomes a tacit response to social situations rather than a reaction to environmental simulations. Walking is utilized to form and encourage sites of social agency where storytelling, memories and people integrate and are assembled and reassembled by human activity. Place becomes an event, social, dynamic and mobile with a shared focus on everyday activity not a fixed cultural identity or geographical locality.<sup>5</sup> Site-specific art practice and photography fosters the development of visual identity in the built environment. Artistic research can provide an alternative form of spatial discourse to explore cultural aspirations, dreams, and environmental fears, find common ground within architectural space, and form new communal connections with people and the landscapes they occupy. Exploring how visual methods imaginatively recur and intersect within the built environment enhances the critical analysis of architectural zones and spatial relations that may manifest within a cityscape.

Photographic images made in cities have been historically utilized to explore the complexities of visual production and spatial movement over time. Institutionally, the photographic medium is often utilized as a political and historical tool to generate ocular panoramic perceptions and overlay social conceptions of space, imposing specific cultural understandings and visual representations of city planning and architecture. Clarke provides a description of this ocular process, “the eye imagines that it dominates a dense and disparate space whilst simultaneously keeping the city at a distance.”<sup>6</sup> The single viewpoints generated suggest that one only sees (physically and mentally) architectural space from above, ignoring dynamic activities and spatial events that manifest and exist within the heart of cities. This approach to image production becomes apparent when one looks into the ocular processes used to present and celebrate new architectural and infrastructural development in Dubai. Architecture dominates public access to visual space; spatial politics are revealed or obscured by its structural infrastructure.

The new city is often presented and rendered in its proposed “image” and the visual imagination is utilized to form both geographical and perceptual links with the new visual identity of the “City.” One may observe how the visualization of the city of Dubai creates a montage between what is seen or perceived from a distance or close-up (locally and globally). The artist’s impressions are visual devices

---

5. Arturo Escobar, “Culture Sits in Places: Reflections on Globalism and Subaltern Strategies of Localization,” *Political Geography* 20 (2001): 139–174.

6. Clarke, *The Photograph*, 75.

that mimic material forms, architectural structures that hover between concept and reality, images that appear to be photographic representations of the city but are rendered or computer-generated. They are diagrammatic representations: digital formations and models that speculate on what may exist within the cityscape utilized to connect the visual imagination with potential realities on the ground and materialize architecturally within the urban landscape. They are ephemeral images that simulate presence and propose what could or will materialize within an area of urban space in the future.

Architectural renderings present a macro view of the city: The viewer looks at the city in close-up and at a distance at the same time, generating images that simultaneously unpack and restrict knowledge of what the city could be; to be close up is to imagine and dream of being in the city, yet they are observed from an optical and geographical distance. Artist impressions simulate presence; they present Dubai as a visual and spatial metaphor, a new experience and destination and act as an interface between the imagination and geographical space.<sup>7</sup> Architectural renderings are images designed to encourage economic investment in the built or un-built environment within the city. They become architectural landscapes and destinations that are utilized to create desire. Expanding networks of ocular information seem to expand the realm of the imagination into physical space. People imagine that they could visually and spatially invest in a destination. Technology speeds up the flow of information, yet the process of visual description and destination becomes more complex, fusing reality with virtuality.

The notion of “destination” is also a significant concept developing embodied photographic practice. Dewsbury writes that the notion of “description” is “the politics of forming understanding from a different orientation point.”<sup>8</sup> Photographs can be used as a point of intersection between the physical manifestation of the city, its architectural form, and personal experience. Merleau-Ponty writes: “the perceived thing is not an ideal unity.”<sup>9</sup> Staring into space suggests presence; the photograph holds the event and embodied sensations clarify the moment. The production of constant sensory and intellectual spaces of divergent and experiential

---

7. Peter Carl, “Learning From Dubai,” in *Cities from Zero*, edited by Shumon Basar (London: Architectural Association, 2007), 114.

8. John Dewsbury, “Witnessing Space: ‘Knowledge without Contemplation,’” in *Environment and Planning A* 35, (2003): 1907-1932.

9. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception and Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History and Politics* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 16.

action and embodiment influences the sequencing of collective thought that affects the decisions of the individual. Merleau-Ponty writes “I attempt to imagine some place in the world which has never been seen, the very fact that I imagine it makes me present at that place.”<sup>10</sup> Photographic composition relies on where we stand, locate, or position a camera. The technological and narrative experience of making a photographic journey interacts with these visual, spatial, and political concepts that develop as a result of new architectural development and city planning. One could propose that the combination of these photographic techniques could be applied to visual production and offer new ocular impressions of architectural evolution and human mobility in Gulf cities. Photographs do offer people opportunities to reflect and move beyond preconceptions of what their world is and to develop fresh visual perspectives of what their world could be.

Ocular knowledge is not only generated by the examination of existing visual media and images generated in the Gulf region but is stimulated by intimate social rhythms and embedded observational processes that are instant and often overlooked. Academic studies that explore relations between art, visual media, sensory perception and walking, could offer insights into how utilizing experiential processes, spatial rhythms, scale and location can offer starting points to develop practical and theoretical frameworks to explore architectural and communal environments in Dubai and develop fresh perspectives of visual culture in the Gulf.

Sarah Pink, Phil Hubbard, Maggie O'Neill and Alan Radley suggest that interconnections between walking, visual image making, and urban and rural environments could offer dynamic opportunities to explore relations between art, spatial mobility, and social practices. In their paper *Walking across the Disciplines: From Ethnography to Arts Practice*, they offer a practical appraisal of how photographs could be perceived as multisensory objects. Photographs can represent walking; we can therefore start to understand such images not as visual objectifications of experiential realities, but as texts that suggest or invite routes through which other people's multisensory ways of knowing in movement might be imagined or imaginable.

Likewise, this signifies a move away from the idea of privileging vision or visual knowledge, and instead recognizing that the production and viewing of images happen in multisensory environments and are experienced in ways that are embodied and multisensory. They propose that photographs “have the potential to invite viewers to empathetically imagine how and where that photograph was

---

10. Ibid, 16.

taken in a sensory moment of movement, through a material, sensory, social and emotional environment.”<sup>11</sup>

The connections between mimesis, photography practices, and embodied experiences are investigated in Sarah James's article “What Can We Do with Photography?” James stresses that, “making oneself similar to one’s environment; a non-objectifying interchange with the other” may offer photographic artists methods to explore, in her words “a fluid, pre-individual form of subjectivity.” She writes: “Mimesis, a form of instinctive mimicry and imitative behavior”<sup>12</sup> could influence how photographic artists become embedded and relate to phenomenological experiences in the spaces where they make projects.

Walter Benjamin has been influential in the development of projects/studies and the phenomenology of contemporary urban photography practice. His theories could be utilized to examine the visualization of contemporary urban planning and architectural design within the Gulf region. Benjamin studies how “Modernity” at the start of the twentieth century replaced social ability, *Erfahrung*, to gather, recall, and communicate experiences in the city and how its replacement, *Erlebnis*, led to the fragmentation of identity and lack of commonalities within the city.<sup>13</sup>

Benjamin offers a view of the city influenced by the modernization and fragmentations of everyday experiences, perceptions, and events. In the nineteenth century, the industrialization of cities such as Paris and New York introduced new urban planning systems that facilitated the free movement of city dwellers within the built environment. “Motion” encouraged individual detachment and indifference and deterred the movement of organized groups through the cities.<sup>14</sup> The dispersion of social movement within the built environment and the public and private perception of architecture and spatial relations between the individuals and groups are key concepts in Benjamin’s theoretical approach of visualizing early twentieth century European cities.<sup>15</sup> Benjamin’s spatial sensibility arose from the practice of walking in cities, he conceived cities, streets and arcades as spaces of visual consumption – in the words of Macaulay “as places of seeing and being

---

11. Sarah Pink, Phil Hubbard and Radley Alan O’ Nell, “Walking across Disciplines: from Ethnography to Arts Practice,” *Visual Studies* 25, no. 1 (2010): 1-7.

12. Sarah James, “What Can We Do with Photography?” *Art Monthly* 312 (2007-2008): 1-4.

13. Joe Moran, Benjamin and Boredom, *Critical Quarterly* 45, no. 1-2 (2003): 168-181.

14. Richard Sennett, *Flesh and Stone, the Body and the City in Western Civilization* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co, 1996) 322-323.

15. Graeme Gilloch, *Myths and Metropolis: Walter Benjamin and the City* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997), 44, 105, 113.

seen.”<sup>16</sup> Individuals became lost in a crowd. Spaces in cities became crowded sites generating strange private visual experiences within streets of spatial consumption.

Benjamin’s theories consider experiences of the city that are mobile, fleeting, fragmented, and viewed from many perspectives – both intimate and distant. He considered the camera as a technological device that could visually intervene in the city. Through the medium of photography, the familiar becomes unfamiliar, the invisible becomes visible, or as Keith puts it “the order of things disguises as much as it reveals.”<sup>17</sup> The camera could be used to perceive objects and everyday life in a way that the human eye alone could not, forming dialectical relationships between human and photographic perception.

## Street Photography and Visual Culture

Historically, photographers have continued to utilize city streets as sites to capture the vitality of everyday life, social moments, and the visual interplay between people and architecture.

**Figure 7.2: Streets and pedestrians in Dubai**



Photo credit: © 2008 David Kendall

16. Macaulay, “Walking the City.”

17. Michael Keith, “Walter Benjamin, Urban Studies, and the Narratives of City Life in Bridge,” in *A Companion to the City*, edited by Gary and Sophie Watson (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 410-429.



One could explore how the historical development of “Street Photography” and the photographic methods of Henri Cartier Bresson play its part in developing visual approaches to exploring architectural and social spaces in Dubai. Bresson conceived photography as an “instantaneous operation, both sensory and intellectual – an expression of the world in visual terms, and also a perceptual quest and interrogation.”<sup>18</sup>

At the start of his photographic career in the 1930s, Bresson developed a practice that was self-reflective; this sensibility influenced the practical and creative development of contemporary urban photography practice and its relationships between geographical and social conceptions of space and place. It was vital for Bresson “to place oneself in relation to what one perceives.”<sup>19</sup> The journeys he made to find pictures became his destinations.

Fleeting social rhythms, flows, and embodied moments of indifference and attachment to particular landscapes spatially influences the practice of walking in Bresson’s photographic portfolio. Inside the built environment, he creatively positioned himself to produce tactical reactions to inconsistencies between ocular and communal conceptions of space and place in world cities.

Based on the above, contemporary architectural photographs can generate social memory, geographical awareness, and ocular perceptions of architectural objects and activities that take place within urban spaces. Photographic technique is elemental in this process: Composing well-organized architectural pictures that explore the informality and techniques of the “snapshot” could enhance mutual investigations of the disproportionate perceptual relationships that may exist between the photographer, subject, and site. Abstraction becomes a distraction that draws the viewer into the experience of the space as much as referencing the space. The image not only provides a destination, it also provokes empathetic and experiential sensations of being in place and incites the imagination to create a sense of place. The cities’ streets remain an important location and starting point to explore these processes and find one’s photographic bearings, witness and make ocular sense of the metropolis, and foster a sense of place. A city street could be defined as a public space, or a territory, created and dominated socially by its users from the basis of its given spatial and environmental conditions.

Bayat describes the “street” as a networked space: “The Street as a public space possesses this intrinsic feature, making it possible for people to mobilize without

---

18. Henri Cartier Bresson, *The World of Henri Cartier-Bresson* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1968), Preface.

19. Ibid.

having an active network. This is carried out through passive networks – the instantaneous communication among atomized individuals that is established by the tacit recognition of their common identity and is mediated through space.”<sup>20</sup>

Lens-based media and technology may communicate sociological insights simulated by artistic processes, collective experiences, and territorial practices that may occur within shared spaces within architectural infrastructures in cities.<sup>21</sup>

It is important to consider how one can explore and discover ocular relationships between perceptual experiences on the ground and how events form new perceptual possibilities and connections that indicate new viewpoints of architectural sites and landscaped environments, conceive and generate visual culture within the Gulf.

The perception of exterior and interior spaces has been elemental in practice development. The utilitarian qualities of architectural photography focus on the structure and façade of a building. Architecture is often portrayed as a visual backdrop that bears witness to social events that takes place in and around these spaces.<sup>22</sup> As noted earlier in this paper, in Dubai architecture’s visual identity is generated via visual impressions, rendered diagrammatic representations that reinforce mathematical models and planning simulations, which dominate external visual perspectives of the expanding city.

If one considers Dubai’s new ocular identity, the rapid pace of architectural expansion has played a central role in how planning develops and influences how the cityscape is externally portrayed. “Destination development” has been embedded within the fabric of recent architectural and city planning initiatives in the Emirate.<sup>23</sup> The visual spectacle of the “skyscraper” is utilized to direct road users towards destinations, reinforcing specific visual identities and spatial flows. Organizing city space via transportation infrastructure promotes administrative strategies that oversee the ebb and flow of people, objects, and vehicles.

Accessibility to transport infrastructure – airports, ports and roads – has played an essential role in this process and produces a visual conflict between mobility and monumentality.

---

20. Asef Bayat, “Un-Civil Society: The Politics of the ‘Informal People,’” *Third World Quarterly* 18, no. 1, (1997): 64.

21. Pink, Hubbard and O’Nell, “Walking across Disciplines.”

22. Ian Wiblin, “The Space Between: Photography, Architecture and the Presence of Absence,” in *Cinema & Architecture: Méliès, Mallet-Stevens, Multimedia*, edited by François Penz, and Maureen Thomas (London: BFI Publishing, 1997), 107.

23. Joan C. Henderson, “Tourism in Dubai: Overcoming Barriers to Destination Development,” *International Journal of Tourism Research* 8 (200): 87-99.

In her essay, “Transport: Disciplining the Body that Travels,” Jennifer Bonham argues:

“Travel has been made manageable as it has been anchored between an origin and destination. ‘Freedom of movement’ has been re-conceptualized through traffic and transport discourse into ‘freedom to access destinations’. Individual and collective mobilities can be directed and maintained and analysed as units of measurement rather than maintained by distinct socialites and effectual relationships sustained by everyday life.”<sup>24</sup>

Flow, deviation, static space use, passing distance, and standing locations are concepts utilized by city planners to collect statistical models and simulate visual data. This visual information can disappear or reappear in architectural renderings, macro models and planning proposals. “Pedestrian Simulation” is another contemporary term used by urban planners to describe mathematical models constructed to investigate how people locate, or navigate thorough, architectural spaces and infrastructure within a metropolis. Photographs are instrumental in depicting these planning processes, architectural changes, and structural events in metropolitan areas.

The micro aesthetics of the “Photographic Snapshot” is often appropriated and imitated by city planners and architects to gather and reproduce geographical data and used to calculate and assess the circulation of pedestrians within architectural spaces. Two approaches have been introduced to define models and data recording of human movement: first, Visual Recognition, which attempts to identify how individual optical perception encourages or discourages interaction with a city’s infrastructure and buildings. The second strand of research considers how the physical manifestation of city planning encourages or discourages social interaction and the speed with which people move within the architectural fabric of a city. These mapping techniques form part of a series of methods and organizational patterns that promote the intangible movement of people along controlled routes at specific times and in definite spaces.<sup>25</sup>

Therefore, if I appropriate the observational techniques of pedestrian simulation, photography and the practice of walking becomes an itinerant act of navigation. The potential interactions between traffic and pedestrians could offer

---

24. Jennifer Bonham, “Transport: Disciplining the Body that Travels,” in *Against Automobility*, edited by S. Böhm, C. Jones, C. Land, M. Patterson (London: Blackwell, 2006): 58.

25. Taku & Tyler Fujiyama, “Predicting the Walking Speed of Pedestrians on Stairs,” in *Transportation Planning and Technology* 33, no. 2 (2010): 177-202.

new interfaces to generate new visualizations of spaces between existing buildings, unconstructed architectural developments, and transport networks within the Emirate. By returning to the same site and re-tracing events I can discover, via the practice of walking, how the space can be reused or visually adapted. Repetition generates a sense of place for all road users and forms site-specific encounters within the city-state's infrastructure.

The Emirates highways are spectacular feats of engineering connecting networked infrastructures including shopping malls, housing developments, and beaches.<sup>26</sup> Dubai's roads do offer definite structured realities. Providing a sense of unity architecturally, they regulate mobility and bring the city together. They are immense. Their physical stance structurally cuts lines across the building developments erected around them. However, roads are instrumental in maintaining and controlling mobility.<sup>27</sup> These predominately private spaces remain visually separated in the landscape and superimposed onto residential and industrial areas, landscaped verges, and undeveloped plots. These spaces merge into the background and remain provisional sites where wayfaring activities blend into the surroundings.

In Dubai, driving on road forms the linear horizon, guiding the traveller (at speed) towards destinations and sites to be consumed. What is on the side of the carriageway may be viewed from the corner of a spectator's eye and disappears from view. On the ground, the horizon is often obscured and the journey takes precedence. Destinations appear as ocular pauses, momentary fragments of cohesion that punctuate inter-subjective experiences en route, creating a field of view that is reliant on the human paths and routes that intervene in and are woven between architectural spaces.

"Witnessing," as Dewsbury writes, is a "creative space for social explanation."<sup>28</sup> Wherever one stands in Dubai, it feels like the edge of the city, although in a new city that is always expanding where the "Edge" is one can only speculate. Forming images on the ground and in the street thoughtfully uncovers spatial frictions, embodied practices, and the wayfaring of residents.

---

26. Stephen Graham, "Networked Infrastructure and the Urban Condition," in *Open City: Designing Coexistence*, edited by K. Christiaanse, T. Rieniets, J. Sigler (Amsterdam: Sun Architecture, 2009), 162-163.

27. Can Altay, Yasser Elsheshtawy, Markus Miessen, and Phillip Misselwitz, "Dubai: Mobility" in *Open City: Designing Coexistence*, edited by K. Christiaanse, T. Rieniets, J. Sigler (Amsterdam: Sun Architecture, 2009), 237.

28. Dewsbury, "Witnessing Space," 1907-1932.

Thrift and Morris recommend that Michel de Certeau's spatial theories remain a set of potential opportunities to explore and open up new spatial and social practices between people, transport infrastructure, and architecture within cities. Thrift proposes that the practice of "walking: should not dominate theoretical discussions about how people inhabit urban spaces. He suggests that car users create their own embodied practices and form spatial and visual relationships with landscapes via computer and imaging technology.<sup>29</sup> I propose that roads offer identical opportunities for all road users to follow their unique routes in the cityscape's infrastructure. Dubai's roads could act as visual and spatial metaphors for distance and proximity for all users, thus allowing diverse spatial practices to intersect.

In his analysis of walking as spatial practice, de Certeau divides the power relations of urban space into "tactics and strategies":

"I call a strategy the calculation (or manipulation) of power relationships that becomes possible as soon as a subject with will and power (a business, an army, a city, a scientific institution) can be isolated. It postulates a place that can be delimited as its own and serve as the base from which relations with an exteriority composed of targets and threats (customers or competitors, enemies, the country surrounding the city, objectives and objects of research, etc.) can be managed. As in management, every "strategic" rationalization seeks first of all to distinguish its "own" place, that is, the place of its own power and will, from an "environment."<sup>30</sup>

De Certeau defines the space of tactic:

"A tactic is a calculated action determined by the absence of a proper locus. No delimitation of an exteriority, then, provides it with the condition necessary for autonomy. The space of tactic is the space of the other."<sup>31</sup>

De Certeau's writings on the practice of walking form the basis of significant considerations, which migrants living in cities could utilize to disrupt spatial and communal relationships that may be imposed on them by planning and structural developments within the built environment.

---

29. Nigel Thrift, "Driving in the City," in *Theory, Culture and Society* 21, no.4-5 (2004): 41-49.

30. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988), 35-37.

31. *Ibid*, 35-37.

When examining the concepts of space and place, De Certeau writes:

“In short, space is a practiced place. Thus the street geometrically defined by urban planning is transformed into a space by walkers.” Stories thus carry out a labour that constantly transforms places into spaces or spaces into places. They also organize the play of changing relationships between places and spaces.<sup>32</sup>

## **Shifting Visual Awareness from One Space to Another**

As noted at the start of this chapter, the site informs visual editing and the practice of photography. The spatial narrative generated enhances a sense of dislocation and blurs distinctions between the center and periphery of the metropolis. From the corner of an eye, slowness elicits photographic detail and an intimate and intense sense of place evolves; the photographic image extends that moment and locates the spectator in a space of metaphor that transcends time and space.

**Figure 7.3: Pedestrians and transport infrastructure in Dubai**



Photo credit: © 2008 David Kendall.

32. Ibid, 117-118.

Leach writes that, within the construction of architectural space, imitation “relates not just to the creation of a model but also to the engagement with that model”; he goes on to note that a spatial connection exists between “making of an object and making oneself like an object.”<sup>33</sup>

The climatic conditions within the Gulf affect the practice of walking. One could suggest that the structural design of Dubai’s transport infrastructure requires pedestrians to walk extensive distances and restricts access to the city. The city-state infrastructure becomes an edge condition to be negotiated and high environmental temperatures remain a powerful barrier. If one’s body becomes part or extension of the edifice, one begins to mimic its shape and form, and develop new structural relationships with the space and climatic conditions. This site-specific appropriation allows the user to create a new habitual, interim material territory within the built environment.

Weather patterns affect people’s mental and physical journeys on foot or inside vehicles; the climate can speed up or slow down mobility, with the potential to restrict movement and interaction in urban and rural landscapes. Remaining close to the edges of walls, houses, barriers and roads, using the infrastructure to shelter the “body” from the sun, wandering over a long period of time and resting for short periods at particular times of the day leads to the discovery of spatial and visual scenarios, which would (or could) have been overlooked by a passenger or driver in a car.

The horizon becomes significant in this process as a visual location to orientate all road users in Dubai; the horizon becomes a destination. Witnessing could, therefore, be defined as a journey and the photograph allows one to set out, critically explore, and make sense of this journey. For example, the image of an open road is often used within cinema, visual art, and documentary practice to represent a narrative or journey. Macaulay writes, “The horizon is strictly speaking neither a completely subjective nor objective phenomenon. Rather, it represents an ongoing reciprocity of the walker with his or her surroundings and an invariant dimension of environmental perception.”<sup>34</sup> The speed at which a person moves towards a stationary point in the distance can allow the driver or pedestrian to adjust and situate himself in time and space. Visualizing the horizon may originate from multiple starting points; above and below, near and far, here and there are examples that an observer

---

33. Neil Leach, “Vitruvius Crucifixus: Architecture, Mimesis, and the Death Instinct,” in *Body and Building: Essays on the Changing Relation of Body and Architecture*, edited by George Dodds and Robert Tavernor (Cambridge, Massachusetts; London: The MIT Press, 2002), 219-220.

34. Macaulay, “Walking the City.”

can utilize ocular perception to locate himself, and spatially construct a sense of place in relation to climatic conditions within a landscape.

The work of the photographer Dorothea Lange used the metaphor of the “road” to create photographic interpretations of the movement of economic migrants across the US during the Great Depression of the 1930s. Dyer describes Lange’s body of work as “a long road to some kind of economic salvation.” He writes that Lange created “not an expression of her journey but the road taken by those who lives she was documenting.”<sup>35</sup> The silent photographic image slows down the pace; Lange’s pictures of open roads and migrant workers who navigate these offer audiences an opportune image of hope and desire. The photograph becomes an interface and shared experience between the private passage of the photographer and the possible journeys of economic migration she is recording.

Walking is elemental in this process, allowing the re-conception of spatial and collective possibilities that may manifest in a landscape of restricted mobility. It is a transformative practice that facilitates multiple visual interpretations of the metropolis. Excursions made within the cities can uncover or conceal societal differences, hidden maps and peripheries within the Emirate, opening up new lines of critical and visual enquiry. The inclusion and exclusion of the body within the image of the city are key factors in my ongoing visual commentary. Within Dubai’s infrastructure, men stay waiting unnoticed in a state of visual suspension and perpetual renewal. Inside the private realm, there is a need to separate undisclosed moments to find peace of mind, collect together thoughts, and move on. Routine social engagements with architecture influence what we choose to see or cut from the scene.

Interchanges, elevated ramps, and user-generated footpaths offer access and exit points in spatially and socially divided landscapes. For residents with limited economic resources, walking is a logical and viable option to navigate the city. As a recreational practice, long distance “walking” in cities allows pedestrians to create informal social relationships with each other and architecture. In this context, architectural space is not tailor-made to be occupied but is produced by events and actions generated by collective memories and spatial practices such as walking. Wayfaring activities indirectly or directly leave visual traces and impressions, tracks, and pathways.<sup>36</sup> These informal interventions could be incorporated into state planning authorities’ designs and planning of new cityscapes.

---

35. Geoff Dyer, *The Ongoing Moment* (London: Little Brown, 2005), 170-176.

36. Tim Ingold, “Culture on the Ground: The World Perceived Through the Feet,” *Journal of Material Culture* 9, no. 3 (2004): 315-340.



## Conclusion

As noted earlier in this chapter, the routes in which images are produced, interpreted, and replicated are vital in understanding their value as social and aesthetic objects. Wayfaring combined with photography practice is informed by experiential and embodied processes and spatial rhythms. Consequently, scale and location can offer starting points to develop practical and theoretical frameworks, to explore fresh perspectives of how people interact with architectural spaces and the influence of this practice on the development of visual cultures in the Gulf.

A photographer makes images that influence others' aesthetic perception of the world and the subjects depicted. Photography and the practice of walking combine to explore prosaic insights and observational encounters with city spaces portrayed in photographs. Ocular events may evolve from the experience of making journeys; lens based media allows individuals to share cultural experiences and experience critical insights into others' lives.

The important role of embodied experiences and visual interaction with the built environment is vital in the construction and application of photography projects in the region. Over time, a complex and expanded visual practice has evolved in Dubai influenced by the co-presence of passing traffic, fused with embodied experiences simulated by sensations and encounters, induced by the positive immersion in my surroundings during excursions into the city. Indeterminate pauses and photographic simulations made during a journey become moments of departure; waiting for the right moment to move on promotes the journey as destination.

These site-specific techniques allow one, as Cartier Bresson writes, "to place oneself in what one perceives."<sup>37</sup> Using the physical elements of architecture allows users to become acutely aware of how the structural design of the "street" when combined with climate can be territorially appropriated in order to create a sensibility or typology and can direct and inform how one makes choices within this space. Temporality is the key element here, territories are changed every day. A visual routine state of mind that at first appeared strange through the process of repetition allows the users of architectural space to return to the same site and create a provisional visual typology that symbolizes passing time and a sense of familiarity. Routine tactics and territorial appropriation allows individuals to claim a space as their own.

Walking in sites designed for road travel does offer autonomous opportunities to move freely and weave within infrastructural spaces intended to direct users to

---

37. Bresson, *The World of Henri Cartier-Bresson*, Preface.

certain destinations. The experiential and referential connections between “space and place” are significant visible and sensory events. The repetitive act of walking along a city’s streets and roads places and fosters the development of spatial awareness of new and alternative visual identities and critical discourses in the Gulf.

“Temporality” therefore is a vital structural component in the formation of ocular identity in the Gulf. A photographer makes images that influence others’ aesthetic perception of the world and the subjects depicted. Photographically it is important to consider how the “body” has become a visual device to portray particular territorial elements and social conditions generated by the transnational circulation and localized movement of people within the Gulf region.

“Diversions” in space promote original spatial conditions to manifest in architectural spaces that may have outgrown their original function.<sup>38</sup> One could suggest that the re-appropriation of spaces along the highways of Dubai has a similar, yet uniquely distinct effect: giving social life to the “invisible” city offers spatial opportunities to explore how the undocumented and unregulated social activities of residents in the Emirate play their part in influencing the ocular perception of architectural spaces within the Gulf region.

Photographic practice is a process of discovery and the photographer needs to remain self-critical. Photographs could provide visual links between consensual and conflicting territorial practices and make public hidden maps and boundaries. The processes presented in this chapter continue to influence critical artistic practice and how I develop projects in the Gulf. Ocular knowledge is not only generated by the examination of existing visual media and images but is stimulated by intimate social rhythms and observational practices that are instant and often overlooked.

Pictures offer multiple interpretations of how we spatially access a city. Our first impression of architecture often comes via a photograph. The urban photographic image leaves a trace not rendering or impression, it is an interface between the body, the road, and street. The photograph becomes a territorial object, a critical “model” for revealing what is socially present or absent, offering an alternative political rendering of spatial and visual production within the Gulf region.

---

38. Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 168.



## About the Contributors

**Aurel von Richthofen** is a researcher at the Chair of Architecture and Construction at the Future Cities Laboratory in Singapore (FCL) affiliated to ETH Zurich. He is a German architect trained in Switzerland and the USA where he practiced in New York City and taught at the Ohio State University from 2007-09. From 2010-14, von Richthofen taught and researched urbanization patterns on the Arabian Peninsula at the German University of Technology in Oman. He was co-investigator on a research project sponsored by the Research Council Oman. He developed a new urban planning framework addressing social, cultural and climatic needs and served as consultant to urban renewal projects and spatial planning strategies in Oman. Since 2014, he leads a research module developing sustainable building materials in Singapore. The aim of the research is to change architecture and urban design in a bottom up approach by empowering emerging economies to develop with local, sustainable materials, alternative building techniques and inclusive neighborhoods.

**Butheina Kazim** is the co-founder of Cinema Akil, a Dubai-based independent cinema platform. She was a Fulbright scholar of Media, Culture and Communication at New York University (NYU) from 2011-2013. She has worked as a project manager in television and radio stations in the UAE and has contributed to publications including *Al Jazeera*, *Gulf News*, *Jadaliyya* and the Art Dubai blog. She is the producer of the short documentary film “Letters to Palestine” which won the Special Jury Prize at the Abu Dhabi Film Festival in 2010 and has been screened in festivals around the world. Kazim is currently curating a “Special Focus on the

UAE” short film program at the Regensburg Kurzfilmwoche (Short Film Week) in Germany where she is part of the International Jury for the 2015 competition.

**David Kendall** is a visiting research fellow at the Centre for Urban and Community Research (CUCR), Goldsmiths, University of London. His work explores how spatial, economic, and design initiatives, as well as participatory practices, combine to encourage social and spatial interconnections or conflict in cities. Kendall utilizes visual archives, mapping, events and embodied experiences to activate and generate his site-specific projects. His photographs, spatial research and collaborative projects have been exhibited and presented internationally including at Tate Britain, Southbank Centre London, the British Library and Whitechapel Gallery in the UK. His work was also shown in Denmark, Austria, Mexico, Sweden, France, Croatia, Germany, USA, UAE, Turkey and Colombia. In 2013, Kendall completed a Openvizor residency in Doha and is now developing audiovisual projects in the city. New research explores spatial mobility, visual identities and notions of “heritage” in response to rapid structural change and changing architectural conditions in Qatar.

**Enrique Martinez**, founder and director of Muchieast, is a systems designer working at the intersection of social, cultural, and urban contemporary practices by incorporating the principles of systems innovation and creative thinking. He holds a Masters in Architecture from the Universidad Politécnica de Madrid, Escuela Técnica Superior de Arquitectura de Madrid; and a Masters in Industrial Design, with Honors, from the Rhode Island School of Design, where he was granted the Norman Bel Geddes award in 1998. He is a member of the American Institute of Architects (AIA); the Industrial Designers Society of America (IDSA); Colegio Oficial de Arquitectos de Madrid (COAM); and the Design Research Society (DRS). He is a Senior Critic at the Department of Architecture, Rhode Island School of Design; a Visiting Lecturer at the Department of Urban Studies, Brown University; and the Design Lead for the Clinical Trials System Project with the MIT Collaborative Initiatives.

**Jack Persekian** was born and lives in Jerusalem. Curator and producer, Persekian is the Director and Head Curator of the Palestinian Museum and the founder and director of Anadiel Gallery and the Al-Ma'mal Foundation for Contemporary Art in Jerusalem. Previous positions he held include: Director of the Sharjah Art Foundation (2009 – 2011), Artistic Director of the Sharjah Biennial (2007 – 2011), and Head Curator of the Sharjah Biennial (2004 – 2007). He is the Founder and Artistic Director of *The Jerusalem Show*, Al-Ma'mal Foundation, Jerusalem

(2007 to date) and *Qalandiya International* (2012). Curated exhibitions include: *Disorientation II*, Manaret Saadiyat, Saadiyat Island, Abu Dhabi (2009); *Never-Part*, Bozar, Brussels (2008); Dubai Next, co-curated with Rem Koolhaas at Vitra Design Museum, Weil am Rhein, Germany (2008); *Reconsidering Palestinian Art*, Cuenca, Spain (2006); and *Disorientation – Contemporary Arab Artists from the Middle East*, Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin (2003). Additional productions and artistic direction include: *The Palestinian Cultural Evening* at the World Economic Forum in the Dead Sea, Jordan (2004), and *the Millennium Celebrations in Bethlehem – Bethlehem 2000* (1999–2000).

**Lucile Dupraz** makes performance art and writes on visual culture. She was born in southern France and has called several places home including London, where she studied photography, and Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. There she taught art history and aesthetics at the women's university, Dar Al-Hekma. At present her studio is in Prilly, Switzerland and she coordinates the Fine Arts Masters Program at ECAL/ Ecole cantonale d'art de Lausanne.

**Nadia Mounajjed** is an architect, educator, and researcher currently residing in the UAE where she works as assistant professor of architecture in Abu Dhabi University. In 2012, she was a visiting fellow at the Middle East Centre at the London School of Economics. Between 2007 and 2012, she worked as Assistant Professor at the American University of Sharjah where she taught various courses in architecture and design. Mounajjed was the research advisor to the Sharjah Art Foundation. She earned her Ph.D. in Architecture from the University of Sheffield and a M.Arch from the University College London. Prior to her academic career, she trained as an architect in Damascus. Her research interests are focused on architecture and body theory, the politics of space, and visual culture.

**Pamela Erskine-Loftus** is the director of a new museum project at Northwestern University in Qatar. She has been a curator with Qatar Museums and was the founding Head of Interpretation and Education at Sharjah Museums Department, UAE. Prior to this, she worked at the Museum of Modern Art in New York where she was Manager of the Department of Education, and at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego. Erskine-Loftus holds a Ph.D. in Arabian Peninsula museology (ICCHS, University of Newcastle, UK), and a Masters in Museum Studies (University of Leicester, UK) with a dissertation with distinction on the effects of the 1991 Gulf War on art museums in Kuwait and Iraq. She is the editor of the first publication on *Peninsula Museology, Reimagining Museums: Practice in the*

*Arabian Peninsula* (2013), and *Museums and the Material World: Collecting the Arabian Peninsula* (2014), both published by Museums Etc. (Edinburgh/Boston).

**Sharmeen Syed** is an architect and artist based in Dubai, UAE. Her projects and research interest lie in the field of sociology of space. She has previously worked as an architect and researcher at Sharjah Art Foundation. Her projects have been presented at the Independent Museum of Contemporary Art, Art Dubai Projects, Asia Europe Foundation, and the Gulf Research Center.

**Uns Kattan** is interested in artistic practices as a tool of social development within zones of conflict. She currently works at Art Dubai where she manages the Global Art Forum in addition to the education and outreach initiative. Prior to this, she served as a researcher and curatorial assistant at the Sharjah Art Foundation. She graduated with a degree in Mass Communication with minors in International and Governmental Studies from the American University in Sharjah.

# GRC Publications

## Books Published by GRC

Unfulfilled Potential: Exploring the GCC-EU Relationship	Edited by Christian Koch	ISBN 9948 424 30 1
Discovering the Arabian Gulf: Canada's Evolving Ties with the GCC States	Robert J. Bookmiller	ISBN 9948 432 18 5
A Window of Opportunity: Europe, Gulf Security and the Aftermath of the Iraq War	Christian Koch & Felix Neugart	ISBN 9948 424 73 5
Gulf Yearbook 2003	Gulf Research Center	ISBN 9948 400 26 7
Gulf Yearbook 2004	Gulf Research Center	ISBN 9948 400 93 3
Gulf Yearbook 2005 - 2006	Gulf Research Center	ISBN 9948 432 22 3
Constitutional Reform and Political Participation in the Gulf	Gulf Research Center	ISBN 9948 432 53 3
Dynamic Alliances: Strengthening Ties between the GCC and Asia	Gulf Research Center	ISBN 9948 432 81 9
Green Gulf Report	Gulf Research Center	ISBN 9948 432 69 X
Gulf States: Counterterrorism - Laws and Treaties	Mustafa Alani	ISBN 9948 432 61 4
E-Learning in Social Sciences and Humanities	Group of Authors	ISBN 9948 432 65 7



Defense and Regional Security the in Arabian Peninsula and Gulf States, 1973-2004 (An Annotated Bibliography)	J. E. Peterson	ISBN 9948 432 02 9
Youth and Environment Research	Group of Authors	ISBN 9948 432 67 3
Narcotics and Human Trafficking in the GCC States	Faryal Leghari	ISBN 9948 434 27 7
Gulf Geo-Economics	Edited by Eckart Woertz	ISBN 9948 434 52 8
Boom in the GCC Skies: Assessing Aviation Growth Patterns	Samir Ranjan Pradhan	ISBN 9948 434 58 7
Gulf-Pakistan Strategic Relations	Faryal Leghari	ISBN 9948 434 74 9
Gulf Yearbook 2006 - 2007	Gulf Research Center	ISBN 9948 434 29 3
Gulf Yearbook 2007 - 2008	Gulf Research Center	ISBN 9948 434 71 4
EU-GCC Relations and Security Issues Broadening the Horizon	Edited by Christian Koch	ISBN 9948 434 83 8
Fostering EU-Italy-GCC: Cooperation: The Political, Economic and Energy Dimensions	Edited by Christian Koch	ISBN 9948 434 85 4
India's Growing Role in the Gulf: Implications for the Region and the United States	A Group of Authors	ISBN 9948 432 35 5
Russian & CIS Relations with the Gulf Region	Edited by Marat Terterov	ISBN 9948 424 00 X
The EU and the GCC: Challenges and Prospects under the Swedish EU Presidency	Edited by Christian Koch and Leif Stenberg	ISBN 9948 490 01 2
GCC Financial Markets	Edited by Eckart Woertz	ISBN 9948 16 097 7
Renewable Energy in the GCC Countries: Resources, Potential, and Prospects	Imen Jeridi Bachellerie	ISBN 978 9948 490 04 3

India and the Gulf: What Next?	Edited by Ranjit Gupta et al.	ISBN 978 1909 864 00 9
The Gulf and Latin America: An Assessment of Expectations and Challenges	Alejandra Galindo	ISBN 978 1909 864 02 3
GCC-India Relations	Ranjit Gupta, Christian Koch	ISBN 978 2970 086 90 1
Housing Markets and Policy Design in the Gulf Region	David A. Smith and Angus Freeman	ISBN 978 1909 864 04 7
GCC Relations with Post-War Iraq: A Strategic Perspective	Omar Al-Ubaydli and Andrea Plebani	ISBN 978 1 909864 05 4

## Research Papers

Peer-reviewed bilingual research papers and studies written by specialists in Gulf issues. The research papers are comprehensive in character and meant to open the door for more specialized Gulf studies.

GCC- EU Military and Economic Relations	Elizabeth Stevens	ISBN 9948 400 30 5
GCC- US Relations	Gregory Gause	ISBN 9948 400 36 4
GCC-EU Relations: Past Record and Promises for the Future	Giacomo Luciani & Tobias Schumacher	ISBN 9948 400 37 2
Political Reform in the Gulf Cooperation Council States	Hasanain Tawfeeq Ibrahim	ISBN 9948 424 95 6
Israel's New Friendship Arch: India, Russia and Turkey	P. R. Kumaraswamy	ISBN 9948 424 46 8
Gulf Cooperation Council Relations with the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS)	Marat Terterov	ISBN 9948 432 04 5
Political Participation and Stability in the Sultanate of Oman	Joseph A. Kéchichian	ISBN 9948 424 97 2
Gulf Cooperation Council and the European Union Military and Economic Relations	Elizabeth Stephens	ISBN 9948 400 30 5
Gulf Cooperation Council Relations with Russia	Elena Suren Melkumyan	ISBN 9948 424 63 8

Realignments within the Gulf Cooperation Council	Bogdan Szajkowski	ISBN 9948 424 77 8
Political Reform Measures from a Domestic GCC Perspective	Abdulaziz Sager	ISBN 9948 424 55 7
Gulf Cooperation Council Relations with Australia	Patricia Berwick	ISBN 9948 400 55 0
Environmental Situational Assessment for the GCC Countries	Frederic Launay	ISBN 9948 432 16 9
Education Policies in the GCC States	Salem Al-Khaldi	ISBN 9948 432 91 6
Piracy: Motivation and Tactics The Case of Somali Piracy	Nicole Stracke Marie Bos	ISBN 9948 434 79 X

## Policy Papers

Analytical policy papers offering in-depth and well-researched exploration of public policies in the GCC countries. Policy papers set forth perceptions likely to contribute to a deeper understanding of these issues.

Reforms in Saudi Arabia	Abdulaziz Sager	ISBN 9948 400 24 0
Arab Peace Forces	Abdulaziz Sager	ISBN 9948 424 19 0
Political Kidnapping an Operational Methodology	Mustafa Alani	ISBN 9948 424 03 4
Saddam's Fate and Blunders of Intelligence Speculations	Mustafa Alani	ISBN 9948 424 02 6
Gulf Cooperation Council States Probable Attitude towards a Military Action against Iran's Nuclear Facilities	Mustafa Alani	ISBN 9948 400 99 2
Establishing a Successful GCC Currency Union	Emilie Rutledge	ISBN 9948 424 22 0
A Gulf WMD Free Zone within a Broader Gulf and Middle East Security Architecture	Peter Jones	ISBN 9948 424 40 9

The Regional Roles of NATO and its Potential Role in the Gulf Region	Musa Hamad Qallab	ISBN 9948 424 87 5
A Case for a GCC Political & Economic Strategy Toward Post-War Iraq	Abdulaziz Sager	ISBN 9948 400 61 5
The Phenomenon of Blowing up Iraqi Oil Pipelines: Conditions, Motivations and Future Implications	Amar Ali Hassan	ISBN 9948 424 52 2
Combating Violence & Terrorism in The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia	Abdulaziz Sager	ISBN 9948 400 01 1

## Gulf Theses

The Center has catalogued a growing collection of MA and Ph.D. theses beginning as early as the mid-1970s to the present day. The GRC is also committed to publishing and translating exceptional theses relevant to the Gulf.

Sea Change: Alan Villiers and the Subversion of the Arabian Travel Narrative	Grace Pundyk	ISBN 9948 424 97 2
Institutional Change in Saudi Arabia	Nicole Stracke	ISBN 9948 424 67 0
Iran and the GCC States: Prospects for Long Term Regional Security in the Gulf	Nicholas Stivang	ISBN 9948 434 04 8
EU-GCC Relations: A Study in Inter-Regional Cooperation	Abdullah Baabood	ISBN 9948 424 69 7

## Yemen Studies

A peer-reviewed bilingual series that includes academic studies and research on Yemeni political, economic, social, defense and security affairs.

The Yemeni Parliamentary Elections	Ahmed Abdul Kareem Saif	ISBN 9948 400 77 1
------------------------------------	----------------------------	--------------------



## Visual Culture(s) in the Gulf: An Anthology

The most widespread representation of the Gulf depicts megastructures and a network of infrastructural landscapes organized within a highly visualized urban environment. The Gulf city aspires to compete in a global market and tends to accentuate its symbolic economies making use of arts and signature architectural projects to promote its image. In this process, it works through identity negotiation between a capitalist super-modern tendency and Arab Islamic conservatism. Dubai is a good reflection of this archetype. Yet beneath this image, there exist countless narratives that are inherently integrated within regional visual practices: the particularities and cultural limitations of visual territories, local ways of seeing, imagery production, display and visualism, as well as ocular perceptions of the city and issues of physiognomy of form in urban morphology.

This book is about the visual turn in the Gulf. It traces image production and consumption and examines the existing visual landscape in the region. Writings examine the wealth of visual culture(s) in the Gulf in order to explore how meaning is both made and transmitted in an increasingly visual world. Seven chapters draw together writings on the relationship between cultural production, visual practices, and the politics of representation while ultimately arguing for a multidimensional reality in the cultural production of the Gulf region. Authors depart from various theoretical perspectives on iconology, museology, urban morphology, globalization, post-colonial narratives, feminist critique, transnational cultural shifts, and identity politics.

---

Gulf Research Centre Cambridge  
Centre of Islamic Studies  
University of Cambridge  
Sidgwick Avenue  
Cambridge CB3 9DA, UK  
E-mail: info@grc.net

ISBN 978-1-909864-08-5



9 781909 864085 >