INTERSECTIONS BETWEEN THE PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SPHERES OF CULTURE

Modern heritage practices in Kuwait

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Kuwait's modern heritage in context

The concept of modern heritage in Kuwait has its historical roots in the emergence of an eighteenth-century political entity that linked space and place with the ideas of community, power, and culture.¹ The centuries that followed maintained these socio-spatial connections but on a much larger scale. As noted in previous studies, the decades between the 1950s and the 1980s, in particular, are characterized by the dynamic and rapid changes that took place in the built environment, transforming class dependencies and socio-economic structures.² The emergence of a complex state apparatus helped institutionalize modern myths of heritage and identity that shaped the socio-spatial landscape according to a top-down, modernist vision of a nation and society.³ This imagined tradition legitimated a modern project of a progressive state in a geographical location rife with tension.⁴ In parallel, historical gaps that did not fit neatly into this top-down narrative were filled in the private spaces of culture, either embedded in everyday spaces of the home or modernist buildings retrofitted for this purpose. On this basis, this study situates Kuwait within a much larger debate on modern cultural production, engaging briefly with the connected terms of modernity and modernism as they relate to public and private spaces of culture. This context provides the historical supports that anchor more recent calls to engage with modern heritage in ways that ensure its survival and put an end to its destruction.

While this study contends with the historically linked terms of modernity and modernism, unpacking the often-blurred theoretical threads is outside the scope of this paper. Briefly, modernity here is defined as a value system often set against tradition or what is considered to be a more conservative worldview while modernism is connected to a set of aesthetic values inspired by a 'will to change'.⁵ These theoretical systems paralleled industrialization and rapid urbanization, that radically transformed global systems of governance. Indeed, modernism developed as a reaction to these conditions and unfolded at the different scales of existing and newly created cities. As David Harvey argues, modernism is site-specific and interchangeable with modern methods of city planning, zoning, and separation of vehicular and pedestrian movement.⁶

On the scale of architecture, universal design values upended historical connections to the styles and constructions of the past. Although many of these ideas were short-lived, they assumed a prominent position in the history of modern architecture. In the European and North American context, the utopian proposals of Le Corbusier's Radiant City, Frank Lloyd Wright's Broadacre City, Ebenezer Howard's Garden City, and Arturo Soria y Mata's Linear City – and traced further back to the revolutionary theories of Henri de Saint Simon, Robert Owen, and François Marie Charles Fourier – were reactions against the socio-economic

inequities of industrialization. These diverse proposals were united by a common intention that architecture and urban planning were the answers to the social ills of the modern metropolis. While each proposal was unique to its time and location, they all integrated modern aesthetic values within specific modes of capitalist production, including public housing and urban administration of the built environment.⁷ This ambition to locate architecture and planning within an equitable social cause continued up until the mid-twentieth century when economic and political developments began to split modern ideology from built work.⁸ This split widened with the everyday realities of built projects and the political and economic demands that infamously led Manfredo Tafuri to claim that critical architecture is dead.⁹ The failure of modernism's goals can be mapped in the polemical divide between the old and new guard of the Congrès internationaux d'architecture moderne (CIAM) that led to divergent forms and values adopted by different national chapters. Although Eurocentric scholarship has collectively moved beyond this debate,¹⁰ this study draws from this connection between architecture and ideas of socio-cultural progress as it relates to the production of modern heritage in the Gulf region.¹¹ Addressing this connection anchors the physical spaces of Gulf modernist heritage in a broader and seminal period of dynamic social transformation.

Al-‘Imara Al-Hadītha as cultural expression

For the most part, scholars of Gulf studies have to contend with the displacement of their field from the centre of knowledge production. In fact, modern architectural histories in non-Western contexts are often measured against a dominant canon of Eurocentric origins and non-Western peripheries. Histories outside these defined geographical and temporal locations are often marginalized in academic research. As Mercedes Volait argues, it is assumed that modernity is intrinsically Western and reached non-Western settings through acts of imperialism and colonialism.¹² Not unlike other contributions in this book, this study illustrates the ways in which urban and architectural modernity is shaped by the context in which it has been developed and dislocates its privileged associations with European and North American cities. This will help redress its meaning and assert its plurality and diversity.

In contrast to European and North American modern experiences that reacted to the environmental perils of industrialization and the disruptive social effects of capitalist production, Kuwaiti modernity unfolded in tandem with and as a critique of a modernization process brought about by a welfare state that unevenly controlled new social conditions through housing, education, and health.¹³ The new destabilized societal customs and accelerated a cycle of innovation and destruction. These

“aesthetics of modernism” were used “simultaneously to exhibit power and to mitigate discontent”.¹⁴ These dynamics seized everyday life and brought into question a never-before-considered relationship between tradition and modernity. Indeed, different strands of modernity existed and gathered strength from a range of sources, including Pan-Arab ideas, top-down modernization processes, regional progressive literature, and modern education. While these local and regional influences coexisted opposingly, they nevertheless inspired modern social norms and cultural production. Indeed, modern concepts of heritage and tradition are rooted in this transformative period.

During the 30-year period between the 1950s and the 1980s, Kuwait’s modern heritage developed as a result of a cross-cultural exchange of knowledge between local, regional, and international design experts.¹⁵ In Kuwait, local actors equipped with adequate funding and expertise navigated a problematic path towards modernity. Standardization of new construction methods and building techniques facilitated rapid growth of Kuwait’s mid-twentieth-century modern heritage. Known as *al-‘imara al-hadītha*, modern architecture emerged as the signifier of cultural expression, shaping various narratives of progress. Inspired by the simple forms of the International Style, it was distinguished by its elaborate façade detail that took climate and context into consideration. The state built civic buildings as well as cultural centres at record speed to adapt to the socio-political transformations of the time. This dynamism that accompanied the unfolding of a modern project is often described by scholars as a “tumultuous experience” that moved at a “breathless pace”.¹⁶ At first, *al-‘imara al-hadītha* was celebrated in daily and weekly Arabic magazines with wide circulation. However, this adulation turned to aversion firstly towards the commissioned architects, considered ‘foreign’ and therefore ill-suited to build for Kuwait’s climate and social customs, and secondly towards the built form that some claimed lacked architectural authenticity. While some modernist buildings were retrofitted with façades inspired by Islamic motifs, others were neglected and even destroyed when the tides shifted towards nostalgic expressions for an imagined tradition and conservative values, cultivated in the late 1970s.¹⁷ As a second wave of destruction continues to unfold – the first wave achieved the almost complete erasure of the traditional city – concepts such as architectural heritage, cultural identity, and authenticity are once more at the forefront of debates. The importance of modern heritage is once again questioned with those arguing for and against its survival in Kuwait’s built environment. In parallel, and with little consideration to this discussion, the state continues to build new developments on existing heritage sites. Top-down initiated development is cyclical and tied to economic stimulus plans. Indeed, the most recent development of state-built cultural centres anticipates a post-oil economy.

Cultural centres as representations of state progress

At the outset, the term 'cultural centre' is used here to refer to the myriad of spaces established to legitimate different interpretations of culture and history for political, social, or economic purposes. It is the space where "museuming", in the words of Pamela Erskine-Loftus et al., takes place and where different countries visually demonstrate their culture.¹⁸ These spaces include private and public museums, art galleries, and heritage centres. In short, the appropriation of space to disseminate and exhibit culture and the intimate and reciprocal relationship that exists between the production of space and the production of culture are the subject of critique here. The concept of space in these cultural centres thus supports Hilde Heynen's model as "a stage in which social processes are played out ... where the spatial structures of buildings, neighbourhoods and towns accommodate and frame social transformation".¹⁹ It also brings to mind Doreen Massey's analysis of "space as the product of interrelations" and as this thing that is "always under construction".²⁰ This social dimension explores on the one hand the microscale of space appropriation as a mode of resistance, submission, or compliance and on the other hand the macroscale where structural indicators might trigger more complex modes of negotiations.

As explored in earlier studies, the first modern wave of heritage production began in earnest as part of a nation-building project in the late 1950s.²¹ A proposal for a national museum marked a significant step towards a Kuwaiti modern project. A museum was imagined by the newly independent state to bolster its credibility as a progressive nation and to construct an official historical narrative for a modern Kuwaiti society. The underlying aim of the National Museum was the codification of selected knowledge as a form of commodity.²² This cultural process of heritage production is primarily a political act, where a range of struggles is negotiated and where certain social and cultural artefacts are validated as part of the dominant narrative.²³ As Stuart Hall explains, "National Heritage is a powerful source of such meanings. It follows that those who cannot see themselves reflected in its mirror cannot properly 'belong'".²⁴ The end goal is to unify different members of society and marginalize counter-myths competing for dominance.²⁵ However, this founding-myth model used to establish state legitimacy, citizenship, and a sense of belonging closely associated with national museums was lost in Michel Écochard's architectural plan.²⁶ This is one reading of the historical becoming and unfolding of the National Museum. It serves as an example of top-down cultural models challenging arguments that suggest national museums succeed in serving larger political goals. Low-visitor turnout and the atypical organization of the museum disrupts "the temporal dimension of national

progress envisioned by the state".²⁷ "The damage done to some of the buildings" in the 1991 Gulf War "served as a final blow".²⁸

Eilean Hooper-Greenhill suggests another theoretical approach for a more critical reading of cultural centres. She argues that "effective history" rather than the founding-myth model frames a more nuanced understanding of knowledge construction in cultural institutions.²⁹ She notes that effective history

is an opposition to the pursuit of the founding origin of things, a rejection of the approach that seeks to impose a chronology, an ordering structure, and a developmental flow from the past to the present. History must abandon its absolutes, and instead of attempting to find generalization and unities, should look for differences, for change, and for rupture... The question to be asked, therefore, is not "How have things remained the same?" but "How are things different; how have things changed; and why?"³⁰

From this reading, the recent expansion of state and private cultural centres, after a period of inactivity, begins to take on new meanings with mid-twentieth-century, modern architectural heritage entangled in this dynamic frenzy of development. Limited by the uninterrupted refrain of 'develop-or-fall-behind,' modernist buildings are often the first casualties of an enduring race for destination branding in the Gulf region.

Today, the state has resumed government spending on cultural centres after a period of post-war reconstruction, residential planning, and general improvement of outdated road networks and infrastructure. Mounir Bouchenaki argues that until recently the cultural policy of Gulf states has been grounded in the "modernist" vision of its rulers.³¹ Efforts to restore the National Museum are also ongoing, and a new cultural district is underway that includes the recently inaugurated Jaber Al-Ahmad and the Abdullah Al-Salem Cultural Centres. They are state funded cultural centres that, although advertised as public spaces, invite a certain demographic group due to higher ticket prices. While the former offers a range of events from local and international shows, theatres, and workshops, the latter operates under the museum type with curated exhibitions. These projects tie into the existing state museums nearby, mainly the National Museum, Museum of Modern Art, Maritime Museum, and Dickson House.

These recent attempts to resurrect a dormant cultural project mark state re-engagement with concepts of heritage after a cycle of divisive policies. Still, development projects of this nature face political pressures from an antagonistic legislature, and few come to fruition; those that do come to fruition are often backed or initiated by the Amiri Diwan, the headquarters of the country's ruler. The Amiri Diwan has gained a reputation of decisiveness among the local population. Both the Jaber Al-Ahmed and the

Abdullah Al-Salem Cultural Centres are Amiri Diwan projects that were realized in record speed. They remain object-oriented architecture that do not tie into the surrounding context. Not unlike the National Museum, their museum narratives avoid political ruptures, difference, and social dissonance that might cause local or regional fissures and discontent. This top-down approach seeks to unite a nation and society and follows a founding-myth model that “impose[s] a chronology, an ordering structure, and a developmental flow from the past to the present”.³²

Filling the historical gaps: Private spaces of culture

As others have mentioned, locals are filling in the historical gaps and in so doing are challenging museum spatial archetypes.³³ Different accounts of gallery exhibition and display are performed within the relative autonomy of the private museum and the art gallery. Karen Exell has noted that the value of private collections as “documentation and memorialisation of local and regional history is recognized by the owners and regarded as being more authentic than those in state museums”.³⁴ The private Saif Marzooq Al-Shamlan Museum represents these goals that are positioned, in the words of Exell, “to accommodate the realities of recent social and historical developments and ruptures”.³⁵ In the case of Al-Shamlan’s museum, it marks an “anxiety over the loss of traditional heritage”.³⁶ Bait Al-Othman and Kuwait House for National Works Museums both are other notable examples. These models, as Marjorie Kelly presented, rely on an “expositional” rather than an “exhibitionary” model of display oriented towards the “visitor [and is] non-sequential, multisensory and social”.³⁷ These narratives frame “a critical understanding of knowledge construction”³⁸ and represent the struggles locals encounter when navigating between the comforts of modernity, or *hadātha*, and what some perceive as a more authentic heritage, or *turāth*. Thus, as Kelly rightly argues, “as citizens edge towards alienation, heritage displays organized by citizen volunteers ... implement a plan of action that addresses the needs of the society as they perceive them”.³⁹

Unlike state cultural centres that rely largely on a narrative of destruction and building anew, many of the aforementioned examples are private residences or, in the case of Kuwait House for National Works, vacated buildings provided by the state. Their reuse activates neglected urban nodes and halts the deterioration of modernist heritage. As of 2018, the total building stock in Kuwait is over 723,000, with around 180,000 buildings abandoned and not in use.⁴⁰ Their adaptive reuse would not only be environmentally sustainable, but the practice would also verify historical traces erased or ignored, affording private museums and galleries a space that offers other versions of history. Adaptive reuse is practiced locally for buildings marked as ‘heritage’

sites, whereby spaces are converted to fit the functional requirements of a museum. In fact, adaptive reuse should be a more common practice.

Article 13 in Kuwait's Law of Antiquities supports this process, noting that historical buildings are to be preserved and converted into museums or permanent exhibitions to illustrate the history of the site.⁴¹ Although not put into practice as often as it should be, it did provide a roadmap for the conservation of the Mubarakiya School in the Sharq district of Kuwait City, which was adapted by the state as a museum for education. While adaptive reuse has its precedents in the 1950s with Abdullah Al-Jaber Al-Sabah's house converted into the first state museum, today's reuse of the existing building stock signals a new relationship between everyday space and user interaction. These shifting tides bring different spatial priorities and leanings towards unconventional spaces of display. As this process of cultural reflection goes on, "the identity of the museum shifts and modulates".⁴²

Industrial warehouses and malls are also serving as the new spaces of culture for locals in Kuwait. One example is the Sultan Gallery set up in 1969.⁴³ At the time, it performed as an important site for established and up-and-coming artists in the region.⁴⁴ It also introduced international artists to a Kuwaiti public that welcomed "these alternative cultural expressions".⁴⁵ Today, it continues this important role. The gallery was originally located at the Thunayan Al-Ghanim Building, on the "prominent Sheraton Roundabout that connects the first suburbs with the modern capital city".⁴⁶ After a long hiatus, it relocated to a family-run warehouse in the industrial district of Sabhan in 2006. While the relocation has its economic advantages, as the renovated warehouse falls under a Sultan-run business, the choice of moving its operations and gallery space to an industrial area "along the skirts of many government subsidized factories"⁴⁷ pushes the boundaries of where and what exhibition space should look like.

Contemporary Art Platform (CAP) is a more recent example of art galleries that have embedded themselves into existing buildings. CAP was established in 2011 by art collector Amer Huneidi, who happens also to own the Life Centre mall where CAP is located. The main stores include a furniture showroom franchise and a large electronics shop patronized by a diverse local population. Like other private art galleries in Kuwait, CAP provides artists greater freedom to engage in difficult topics often evaded in state museum displays. In 2016, in her "It's a Mad World" series, local artist Shurooq Amin presented another controversial exhibition at CAP.⁴⁸ One of the rooms was concealed behind closed doors. Once inside visitors were confronted by the installation titled *The Last Sip*, a nod to Leonardo da Vinci's *The Last Supper*. Empty bottles were strung by plastic cords from the ceiling. A mixed media diptych of a woman in contorted positions performed as

a background for the hanging bottles. The complicated margins that exist between public and private social norms in Kuwaiti society play out in the spatial layout of the exhibition. In an interview with the local magazine *bazaar*, Amin stated that the installation “is extremely relevant and timely for me. Geographically, it is also site-specific, as it explores the damaging ramifications of [substance abuse] in a society where it is forbidden”.⁴⁹ By drawing the visual boundaries between visible and invisible display space, Amin becomes her “own overseer in the ongoing process of normalization”.⁵⁰

In this regard, the relative flexibility of mall architecture affords Amin greater agency to curate the exhibition both spatially and conceptually. It equally provides visitors the freedom to move without the restrictions often imposed in museums. Visitors walk through a series of spaces before accessing Amin’s more contentious *The Last Sip* installation. They are first confronted with the spatial characteristics of the mall where they take on the role of a hypermodern flâneur, visually engaging with the displayed goods for sale. They are then brought into CAP’s seemingly unassuming, modernist open plan with its archetypal white walls. As visitors make their way through the exhibition, they are then prompted to enter a third space, concealed behind closed doors. Visitor performance can therefore vary at different spatial turns that range from material consumption to critical engagement and contending with socio-cultural taboos. They can also exit at any given point. This spatial dissonance counteracts what Hooper-Greenhill notes as “the connection between visibility and the establishment of deep-seated relations of advantage [and] disadvantage. It also [opposes] the idea of an apparatus designed for observation”.⁵¹ While the subject matter might disturb certain viewers, the familiarity of the mall as a space of consumption and even voyeurism creates a less threatening relationship between the art and its audience. The spilling out of visitors to the pop-up cafe just outside the gallery space is perhaps the moment of convergence, between gallery visitors, curators, displayed work, and importantly the mall’s everyday users. They are in full view of each other and even intersect at different junctures. This tension inspires diverse user behaviour and elevates this performance to a value equal to that of the exhibition.

The art gallery or museum in the mall is arguably the logical conclusion in the loss of Walter Benjamin’s artistic aura. To this end, exhibition display and art objects find their place in what Benjamin described as the “dream-world” of capitalism. This “marriage of display and commodity” has its long history where new spaces of culture encourage “the pleasures of consumption and a heightened awareness of exhibition and fashion”.⁵² By appropriating spaces inside the mall, a gallery or museum visit offers a consumer experience through which one sees culture.

It is the space where the non-specialist spectator weighs in on values packaged as art, and in turn the distance between art and the everyday object narrows.⁵³

This is certainly not a call for galleries or private museums to set up in malls, but it is an opportunity to understand the relationship between everyday spaces such as malls and user behaviour and experience. They do not subscribe to the powerful myth of the museum as a fortress for the elite and cultured. They are not the synchronized spaces of the curator or the setting for hegemonic knowledge or the place where codes of conduct are outlined by cultural institutions that are reinforced by uniformed guards.⁵⁴ The Foucauldian argument that disciplinary technologies depend on enclosed spaces where the subject undergoes unconscious reprogramming gives way to critical engagement between audience and museum display.⁵⁵ Visitors' movements in these nonconforming spaces chip away at museum surveillance and at the "transmission model" that lays out "knowledge for the visitor such that it may be absorbed".⁵⁶ Museums today, according to Hooper-Greenhill "are no longer built in the image of that nationalistic temple of culture".⁵⁷ With these shifting tides, different values emerge. This is a more democratic engagement with the subject matter, where the urban and the familiar become part of the exhibit.

A proactive approach towards re-engaging modernist heritage

The socio-economic advantages of cultural institutions' embedding themselves within the existing building stock should also be observed and analysed. These spaces reinforce existing communities and provide much-needed support for their growth and development. The attack taking place today on modernist buildings, that locals once proudly called *al-'imara al-haditha*, has to be situated within what was already a volatile and ever-changing urban condition. The fluctuating attitudes towards proposed and built work, as well as a cycle of development and destruction, have been constants in the architectural and urban discourse. Whereas in the 1960s architects and planners, such as Saba Shiber, called out against the destruction of the traditional urban vernacular, today a local community of architects, academics, and planners are doing the same for mid-twentieth-century buildings. However, the dangers that emerge from today's attack on the modern 'project' are the erasure of its progressive ideals that occasioned a re-evaluation of socio-cultural norms and customs. The push back that is taking place today through urban interventions, art installations, city walks, and public debate on social media might not be enough to hold back that destructive tide. Certainly, the regional trend for destination branding that requires spectacular buildings built on the debris of modern heritage contributes significantly to the problem.

This period of demolition is not unlike the one that took place in mid-twentieth-century Europe and North America. The destruction of modernist buildings signalled a departure from modernism's social and aesthetic ideals. This ideological crisis of the modern project developed beyond an intellectual debate.⁵⁸ However, Eurocentric discourse shifted with many still defending its progressive values.⁵⁹ The Kuwaiti project of modernity, in a similar manner, will continue to unfold and its history rewritten. In practice, preservation policies that include activating and updating the Law of Antiquities are ways that challenge demolition arguments and cultivate a critical debate on mid-twentieth-century modern heritage. The historical layers of the city that mark the cycles of change will add diversity and enrich the built environment. Building codes that take into account informal practices such as popup markets and the adaptive reuse of the existing building stock are additional models of resistance. These grassroots exercises challenge outdated forms of economic strategy and building typology and offer a method of cultural engagement alternative to top-down models. As maintained in earlier studies, the cultural material of the modern project is therefore maintained, and its communities supported.⁶⁰ This is an ongoing conversation that questions the nature of heritage production within the complex realities of local and regional transformations as well as of development and decay.

Notes

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- 13 See Asseel Al-Ragam, "Towards a Critique of an Architectural Nahdha: A Kuwaiti Example" (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 2008).
- 14 Al-Ragam, "Kuwaiti Architectural Modernity", 2.
- 15 See author's publications.
- 16 Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (New York: Penguin, 1988), 23.
- 17 Al-Ragam, "Kuwaiti Architectural Modernity", 3.
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- 38 Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge*, 11.
- 39 Marjorie Kelly, "Kuwait's Museums", 145.
- 40 Statistics are based on Public Authority for Civil Information data. <https://www.paci.gov.kw/stat/SubCategory.aspx?ID=4>
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- 46 Ibid., 10.
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- 51 Ibid., 169.
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