UDO KULTERMANN'S HISTORY OF ARAB CONTEMPORARY ARCHITECTURE

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If architectural style is simply reduced to arches, domes and proportions we must be reminded that construction technologies determined these elements. The shapes of arches, the dimensions of columns and thickness of walls are determined by the physics of materiality and the methods of construction.¹

Sayed Karim, *Al-Emara* (Architecture) magazine, 1940

It was not until the 1940s and 1950s that modern forms had any appreciable impact on the 'less developed' countries, and these forms were usually lacking in the poetry and depth of meaning of the masterworks of the modern movement ... through the brain-washing of post-colonial elites (native born but foreign educated) with Western images and ideas that were upheld as 'progressive' counter-agents to an earlier era of 'backwardness and stagnation'.² William Curtis, *Architecture Since 1900*, 1982

What is more important in the Arab states right now is not technology or the transfer of technology which has been developed in other countries but the revitalization of the Arab past, along with an appropriate amount of technology which is needed for specific tasks.³

Udo Kultermann, *Contemporary Architecture in the Arab States*, 1999

The heritage status of twentieth-century constructions is deeply contested across the 22 Arab states.⁴ In large part, this is due to the absence of locally produced histories of modern and contemporary architecture, of narratives that can abet thinking about recent constructions historically.⁵ There are acute crises regarding the study, documentation, and preservation of modern architecture in Egypt, Palestine, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon – where the region's first generations of home-grown architects built; but the histories of their practices are largely unwritten, making the identification and potential preservation of their buildings a difficult task. In these locations, the rise of local expertise, delayed by the presence of colonial experts, came into being alongside nationalist and independence-oriented politics and revolutions after the First World War. Much of this architectural production has gone undocumented; its creators and authors have become anonymous; many buildings are undated; and much of this production no longer exists due to wars, speculative development, and a slew of other factors. In the aftermath of the oil embargo of 1973, American-oriented autocratic regimes across the Arab states favoured the foreign expert, giving new life to a colonial tradition that was only briefly challenged by Arab architects after the Second World War.⁶ In Gulf states, where urban landscapes have rapidly changed several times within a generation, development has come to supersede memory.⁷

A page from Mohamed Hammad's 1963 book *Egypt Builds*, a survey of contemporary Egyptian architecture (Source: Mohamed Elshahed's personal collection. Reuse not permitted).

fig.1

Taqiyy Al-Din Ahmad bin Ali Al-Maqrizi (1364–1442) chronicled the urban and rural landscapes of Egypt in the fifteenth century, and his project was revived in the nineteenth century by Ali Pasha Mubarak (1823–1893) with his monumental, 20-volume *Al-Khitat Al-Tawfiqiyya Al-Jadida*, providing a detailed street-by-street description of Egyptian cities and towns.⁸ Despite these important precedents in historically recording the built environment, architectural history has not been institutionalized in much of the Arab world. A persistently absent aspect of architectural training and education in Arab states is the regional history of modern and contemporary practices. The history of these practices remains a frontier in research and writing, mostly done in English and rarely published in the region. As architect and editor of the regional architectural magazine *Alam Al-Benaa*, Abdelbaki Ibrahim wrote in 1985, “The Arab architect remains a stranger in his homeland”.⁹ There have been separate efforts by authors to construct in Arabic a canon of modern architecture and contemporary practices in the form of a survey, such as Egypt’s Mohamed Hammad (*Egypt Builds*, 1963) and Tawfiq Abd Al-Gawwad (*Egypt: Architecture in the Twentieth Century*, 1989). ● Yet, the limited circulation of these publications meant they have gone untranslated, and buildings featured therein did not make their way into mainstream

fig.1

fig.2 Frei Otto, Mahmoud Bodo Rasch and Sami Angawi, Mountain Tents for Hajj Pilgrims, Prototypes in Muna Valley, Saudi Arabia, 1981–82 (Source: Wikimedia – Creative Common License, 2004).

architectural knowledge. As an example, William Curtis' (b. 1948) popular textbook *Architecture Since 1900*, still in use today with updated editions, has little to offer when it comes to modern constructions in the Middle East and North Africa.

fig.2 From the 1980s, German-American art historian Udo Kultermann (1927–2013) developed an interest in architectural developments in the Arab world. For him, the revival of tent architecture by German architect Frei Otto for his designs for pilgrims' accommodation for the Hajj (1964–1967) ● and for Tuwaiq Palace in Riyadh (1983) are considered positive steps in the right direction towards an authentic contemporary Arab architecture.¹⁰ The endorsement was published in his 1999 book *Contemporary Architecture in the Arab States: Renaissance of a Region*, the only English-language survey of contemporary architectural production in all Arab states with works spanning four decades. The historian was not interested in the early years of modernism in the region; rather, it was the immediate present that he sought to capture historically, to identify the main architects and their buildings.¹¹ In 1980, he wrote, "The emergence of young Arab architects is the first phase of a most recent development of revolutionary importance. Not only do they have to compete with the elite of large international firms, they also have to re-establish

their identity in an architectural language which is linked to their own tradition".¹²

In this chapter, I explore how writing the history of architecture is related to contemporary architectural practice and potentially informs architectural preservation in Arab states. Udo Kultermann's *Contemporary Architecture in the Arab States* not only captures a history but also shapes its discourse by identifying a thematic direction for 'history-worthy' contemporary practices as championed by the historian-critic. The book is a product of intellectual debates in the 'West' (mostly the United States, United Kingdom, and Germany) with regards to the status of modernism: what direction should contemporary practice take? To where and led by whom? Kultermann mediated postmodernist thought in the West and the search for a regionally appropriate contemporary architecture for parts of the Arab professional arena. At the heart of this investigation are questions raised succinctly by Anthony Vidler in his study of historical approaches to constructing genealogies of modernism: "What kind of work does or should architectural history perform for architecture, and especially for contemporary architecture", or in other words, "How is history 'related' to design? Is it *useful*? And if so in what ways?"¹³

The book

During his long career, Kultermann published 35 books in German and English on an astonishingly wide variety of subjects, including *New Japanese Architecture* (1960), *New Directions in African Architecture* (1969), *Contemporary Architecture in Eastern Europe* (1985), *The History of Art History* (1987), and *Architecture of the Twentieth Century* (1993) in addition to publications on women performance artists, new sculpture, and architecture of the 1970s. By the 1950s, with the provincial limitations of art and architectural histories clearly evident, historians and critics based in Europe and the USA were itching to be the first to conquer new frontiers of knowledge, at least for English speakers. It appears that for Kultermann moving beyond the West meant becoming an expert on everything else. While he was an early proponent of what is now known as "global modernism"¹⁴ – expanding the canon of art and architectural histories to include geographies such as Japan, Africa, and the Middle East – his approach was conventional in that it was driven by the architect's point of view and was focused on landmark and state commissions. What cuts diagonally across the seemingly different regional histories is his interest in works by local and foreign architects that explicitly refer to tradition and identity in form or presentation. Given the fervour of postmodernist thought in the moment during which he was writing, his interlocutors were architects, scholars, and politicians who witnessed the rise of the International Style and who looked to move beyond it in favour of regional specificity and identity.

fig.3 Cover of Udo Kultermann's *Contemporary Architecture in the Arab States: Renaissance of a Region*, McGraw-Hill, 1999.

fig.3 Kultermann's *Contemporary Architecture in the Arab States* is composed of 13 country-focused chapters including Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Morocco, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, and one sub-regional chapter focused on the Gulf states. ● Each chapter begins with a brief introduction and historical background followed by country-specific synopses on political and architectural developments focusing on the post-Second World War or post-independence years. Embedded in these narratives are architectural examples described seamlessly within the text and accompanied by high-quality illustrations.¹⁵ The architectural descriptions focus on form and the integration or reimagination of traditional references. The book covers four decades starting with the 1950s with the majority of the works built from the 1980s.¹⁶ Featured projects were designed by Arab architects such as Abdel Wahed El-Wakil (Al-Sulaiman Palace in Jeddah, 1979), Kamal El-Kafrawi (University of Qatar, 1985), and Mohamed Makiya (Headquarters for the

Organization of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries, circa 1983), complemented by projects designed by American and European architects particularly in the Gulf, including Michel Écochard (Kuwait National Museum, 1983), Henning Larsen (Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Riyadh, 1984), and William Pereira (Doha Sheraton Hotel, 1982). ▲ Together, these projects are presented by Kultermann as evidence of a regional renaissance fuelled by modernizing governments with a keen interest in the currency of contemporary design.

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The buildings covered in each chapter vary in terms of function. The chapter on Iraq, for example, includes mosques designed by Mohamed Saleh Makiya, Rasem Badran, Robert Venturi, and Denise Scott Brown as well as private residences by Rifat Chadirji and Maath Al-Alousi. There are also banks by Dissing+Weitling and Makiya, Baghdad University by The Architects Collaborative, and Le Corbusier's Sports Hall. The typological variety and diverse methods and approaches to contemporary Iraqi architecture are well represented. This typological diversity is maintained in most chapters; however, few examples of low-income housing are included, such as Andre Ravereau's housing in Ghardaia, Algeria (1976). The vast majority of featured projects are state commissions such as ministry and public buildings, museums, airports, universities, parliament buildings, state palaces, and mosques.

The chapter on Egypt demonstrates the historian's bias. The selection of buildings and architects portrays a homogenous picture of the country's post-Second World War architectural production, focusing on Hassan Fathy, Abdel Wahed El-Wakil, and Ramses Wissa Wassef, all rejecting modernist aesthetic values and design approaches. "Foreign technology and architectural traditions have merely been transplanted to Egypt", writes Kultermann as he refers to work by British and American architects in the country such as the international hotels designed by Bruce Graham; Skidmore, Owings & Merrill; and others. In addition, he echoes critical voices within Egypt opposed to the work of Egyptian modernists, seen as agents contaminating Egyptian architecture with 'Western values'. In this context, the Egyptian architects named above were presented as the vanguard in resisting internationalism in Egyptian architecture. Kultermann's dismissive critique of Egyptian modernists is clear as he writes: "Egyptian architects like Raymond Ayub [Antonius], Sayed Karim and Ahmed Sidky who in their various attempts to remedy the situation [of ugliness in Egyptian cities] with large building programmes modelled after Western structures have not contributed to a viable solution".¹⁷ In other words, Egyptian architects who represented the mainstream of the profession in Egypt and key modernists such as architect, magazine editor, and polemicist Sayed Karim (1911–2005) are nearly omitted from the narrative all together.

The context

In 1970, the death of Gamal Abdel Nasser marked an end to a short-lived pan-Arabism and inaugurated an era of economic liberalism paired architecturally and culturally with a search for identity. That year, a *coup d'état* unsettled Syria. The 1973 oil embargo changed the trajectory of the region. Two years later, a civil war broke out in Lebanon, and by the end of the decade, Saddam Hussein came to power in Iraq. During that tumultuous decade, the world of architecture was increasingly critical of modernism, by then the architecture of the establishment across Arab states. In the midst of these years, in 1977, Charles Jencks announced the death of modernism in his book *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture*.¹⁸ The decade witnessed the rise of the Arab Gulf states which signalled the shift of the region's poles away from Cairo, Beirut, and Baghdad to Kuwait, Doha, and Abu Dhabi. There, vague notions of reviving traditions, centring Islam in public life, and distinguishing between Arab modernity from its universal counterparts were all ideas shaping the discourse on constructing a new Arab identity and Arab exceptionalism. This is what Nasser Rabbat calls the "historical exclusivity and referential reductiveness delimited by the theory of cultural autonomy", which he considers as the most critical root cause "for homogenisation in architectural production in the Islamic world today".¹⁹

According to the *World Development Report 1994*, as cited by Kultermann, "The 1992 per capita income in US dollars was \$520 in Yemen, \$640 in Egypt, \$16,150 in Kuwait, and \$16,750 in Qatar".²⁰ The drastically different economies across the region manifested architecturally as countries such as Egypt barely provided adequate infrastructure for its growing population while new wealth in Gulf states translated into substantial investment in infrastructure, housing, education, official buildings, and leisure facilities. By the 1990s, the economic unevenness across the Middle East was starkly represented through labour migration within the region and through architecture.²¹ Ageing modernist buildings in the old cities of Egypt, the Levant, and Iraq gave way to new gleaming structures utilizing late modernist but more often postmodernist aesthetics in the new economic, political, and cultural centres of the Arab world. Hotels, universities, government buildings, and other typologies with no precedence in historic architecture were built across the region, often by foreign architects, inventing traditions that are Orientalist and postmodernist but presented to patrons and the public as contextual and regionally modern.

The shortcomings of the post-independence pan-Arabism led by Gamal Abdel Nasser left many countries in political, cultural, and economic disarray. In Egypt, the region's most populous country, dire economic conditions, unchecked corruption, and uncontrolled demographic growth has left the

bloated Egyptian state perpetually incapacitated since the 1970s. With postmodernism in fashion, international firms seeking to expand their business to Arab clients focused on inclusion of vague symbolic references to traditional or historic architecture handpicked from across the region with a concentration of their constructions in the new Gulf cities.²² Arab architects represented in Kultermann's book effortlessly hopped between cities from Baghdad to Kuwait and Amman to Dammam designing what they saw as a regionally specific architecture, moving beyond the nation-state as an identifier and towards the notion of an Arab contemporary architecture.

For the German-American historian, the fast urbanizing terrain of the Middle East in the 1970s to 1990s was a new frontier for architecture, developed not only with designs by international firms eager to gain commissions in a region undergoing immense transformation but also by some local architects who were, according to his reading, mediators between a universal internationalism and regional specificity. Tradition and identity are themes that define Kultermann's survey of architectural developments in a region he frequented from the 1970s, invited by governments such as Morocco, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates to deliver lectures and to study local architectural developments. Since the 1950s, under the guise of post-independence, states across the Middle East invested heavily in architecture and urban development, fuelled by the politics of post-colonialism in some cases or in other cases by new wealth generated from oil and gas. Architectural developments during those decades reflect the cacophony of changing politics, economics, and culture of the post-Second World War, Cold War Middle East.²³

As architecture serves financial and political power, the economic unevenness across the Middle East during the period covered in Kultermann's book is evidenced by his selection of buildings. The selection focuses on state and elite private commissions, rendering invisible the widespread building practices excluded from these categories. While he frames the entire book as an investigation of the re-emergence of regional architecture, mainstream architectural practices, populist architecture, and the vernacular of the poor urban majority in all the considered countries are omitted. Thus, not only is the question of identity placed at the centre of the investigation, it is demonstrated with large, expensive commissions from rich states or elites within specific national contexts. This leaves little to discuss in countries with poor economic performance; thus, the chapters on Sudan, Oman, and Yemen are a mere few pages each. Saudi Arabia, in contrast, is the most represented country in the book with mention of government, educational, religious, industrial, residential, and commercial buildings as well as sports, health, and recreational facilities in the kingdom.

Surveying architecture

When British-German art historian Nikolaus Pevsner (1902–1983) published *Pioneers of the Modern Movement* in 1936, he “became responsible for legitimizing the modern movement and providing it with a basis of historical authenticity”.²⁴ By creating a genealogy, selected contemporary works were given “a provenance of ancestors for modern architecture and design”.²⁵ After 15 years of British, American, and German historians publishing historical examinations of modern design, by 1940 modern architecture was “fully assimilated into the art-historical canon, and given its place in the history of the ‘styles’”.²⁶ This “canon” was provincial in conception, considering works and architects operating within limited geographies, yet its claims were universal. By the 1980s and 1990s, when Kultermann was conceptualizing how to narrate the various contemporary architectural developments across the Arab world, the “canon” was decried by a new generation of historians and critics for its hierarchies, its fixed styles and language, its Western-centrism, and its focus on white, male architects.²⁷ On the one hand, Kultermann’s book is a response to a gap in knowledge; on the other hand, like his predecessors, he provides a partial narrative historically justifying specific contemporary practices he admired. In the absence of other narratives, his stands unchallenged.

Architectural history has been fundamental to the development of the architectural profession since the nineteenth century.²⁸ The formalization of architectural education in the United States and various European contexts centred on the study of historical examples, spawning a new era of revival architecture throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As Stanford Anderson noted, “From a time of the dominance of academic classicism around 1800, through all the historicisms and eclecticism of the nineteenth century, history was in some way intimately wedded to the practice and teaching of architecture”.²⁹ This may be true for those contexts, but the relationship between architectural education, practice, and history in the modern Arab states is vastly different and varies from one national context to another. The region’s first systematic identification, listing, and documentation of buildings commenced in 1881 in Egypt with the establishment of the Comité de Conservation des Monuments de l’Art Arabe.³⁰ It was a task that combined architectural history writing with upkeep and restoration and that also produced a wide array of accurate documentation of historic architecture that spawned a new wave of revival architecture at the end of the nineteenth century. Thus, history writing, heritage identification and protection, and contemporary practice were, for a brief time, intimately wedded. Max Herz Pasha (1856–1919), for example, did all three. The Comité, led by Herz, made parts of Egypt’s urban landscape legible by codifying styles, creating genealogies

of buildings and establishing a canon of 'Arab monuments'. As Nairy Hampikian writes,

In 1881, members of the Comité initiated a list of 'monuments' in which all buildings that were historically, aesthetically, and/or culturally worthy of protection were registered. The chosen buildings were identified as 'monuments' under one category, varying from each other only in the date of their construction.³¹

Such methods were not extended to more recent constructions. In the meantime, architectural education was tied to schools of engineering, originally established by the army in the 1830s, where the history of architecture was not 'intimately wedded' to practice and teaching.³² During colonial rule (1882–1952), architectural education shifted towards a Beaux Arts model led by mostly British faculty until the 1940s. The emergence of a new class of Egyptian architects was not accompanied by the emergence of specialized art historians chronicling the production of the present and recent past. Kultermann's *Contemporary Architecture in the Arab States* does not attempt to link post-1970s constructions with this earlier chapter in the region's history of modernism. Instead, he frames such constructions, regardless of the national origin of the architect, as the 'true' although belated beginning of a uniquely regional architectural language, an 'other' modernism.³³

Constructions of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in Muslim societies produced during two centuries of colonialism, industrialization, revolution, nationalism, and modernization rarely appear in architectural canons associated with these periods, nor are they included in surveys of Islamic architecture.³⁴ Historians have constructed the history of Islamic architecture following one of two approaches, ordered according to chronology or according to a theme. More often chronology starts with the rise of Islam and ends in the eighteenth century "when the Islamic world is supposed to have become inextricably dominated by the victorious Western culture and ceased to be creative on its own".³⁵ The development of Islamic architecture, or the architecture of Muslim societies, was deemed to have had a beginning and an end. This notion, that with modernity the Muslim world became contaminated by the West, is the *raison d'être* for later projects of revival, of regaining regional identity in art and architecture. Such projects are those embraced by Kultermann as authentic expressions of an Arab modernism that is directly linked to the revival of traditional forms and references centred on Islam. In this worldview, 'Arab' and 'Islamic' become "non-historical" styles rather than responsive, evolving architectures. Kultermann did not veer too far from Sir Banister Fletcher's (1866–1953) view, expressed in his influential *A History of Architecture*, which "divided world architecture into 'historical' and 'non-historical' styles. While he discussed

'historical styles' as Western ones that have continuously evolved from Ancient Egypt and Greece to the present, he introduced Indian, Chinese, Japanese, Ancient American and Saracenic architecture as 'non-historical' styles without evolution or succession".³⁶

Modernism elsewhere

Forms and ornaments, or "the tactile and the tectonic" to use Kenneth Frampton's words, "have the capacity to transcend the mere appearance of the technical in much the same way as the place-form has the potential to withstand the relentless onslaught of global modernization".³⁷ By the time Kultermann was writing his survey of contemporary architecture in the Arab states, Frampton's ideas on critical regionalism³⁸ were already echoed by several key authors such as William Curtis, whose survey *Architecture Since 1900* is well established as the textbook for teaching the history of architecture.³⁹ Curtis' chapter titled "Modernity, Tradition and Identity in the Developing World" opens with a 1973 quote from Hassan Fathy (1900–1989) that states, "Every people that has produced architecture has evolved its own favourite forms, as peculiar to that people as its language, its dress, or its folklore".⁴⁰ The year of that quote was when Fathy's *Gourna: A Tale of Two Villages*, originally published in Arabic in 1969 by Egypt's Ministry of Culture, was republished for a wider international audience as the now famous *Architecture for the Poor*.⁴¹ ● For Frampton (b. 1930), a figure such as Hassan Fathy employs a fundamental strategy to "mediate the impact of universal civilization with elements derived indirectly from the peculiarities of a particular place".⁴² Fathy provided an Arab voice that bolstered and further solidified Western-centric narratives about the exclusivity of modernism to the West and the subsequent critique directed towards it.⁴³ Curtis' opening lines to that same chapter in which he quotes Fathy provide a compelling but problematic narrative: "Modern architecture was created in Western industrialized countries ... where *avant-garde cliques* attempted to produce an authentic modern style appropriate to rapidly changing social conditions ... but its results were copied all around the world, and were often misapplied".⁴⁴ For Frampton, Curtis, and Kultermann, Fathy is a convenient example of the singular possibility of a corrective regional modernity that distinctly operates outside the standards of the West. Kultermann described Fathy's mud-brick vernacularism as "the first steps towards an emerging autonomous Egyptian architecture".⁴⁵ The inclusion of selected 'Global South' figures such as Fathy foreclosed the possibility of considering contending visions. As Keith Eggner later wrote,

It is ironic that writers discussing the places where these designs appeared so often emphasized one architect's interpretation of the region over all others: Tadao Ando for Japan, Oscar Niemeyer for

fig.4

Brazil, Charles Correa for India and Luis Barragan for Mexico. In other words, a single correct regional style was implied, or imposed, sometimes from inside, more often from outside the region.⁴⁶

The deeply ingrained notion that Western modernism is authentic, as opposed to modernist expressions elsewhere, is rooted in two convictions expressed by Curtis: that Western modernity developed on its own in the century following the Industrial Revolution and that Western societies have had the time needed to absorb the ideas propagated by the avant-garde cliques that created modernist forms in the twentieth century. He is suspicious of manifestations of modern design outside the West, seen as inauthentic due to two corresponding points: first, given that the world outside the West did not experience an industrial revolution of its own (no mention of European colonialism, slavery, or exploitation), manifestations of modernism in architectural form relied on the West to contaminate the rest of the world with its ideas. Second, the embrace of modernist forms following independence or by post-colonial regimes occurred at a fast pace that did not allow the time needed to make these forms and ideas rooted in such societies. As a counter-argument, one can suggest that global modernism was not possible, in Europe or elsewhere, without the multi-directional circulation of ideas, resources, and labour around the world by networks of expertise, power, and capital including local interlocutors. The Industrial Revolution was not possible without the expansive European colonial projects that exploited geographies far outside Europe. Modernist architecture did not develop in a hermetically sealed Europe but in an interconnected and networked world where the peripheries of empire were often laboratories of innovation and experimentation, with long forgotten local partners.

Throughout the 1980s, Kultermann published a series of articles in *Mimar* magazine, edited by Hasan-Uddin Khan, on the architecture of Egypt, Iraq, the Gulf states, Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, Libya, and Jordan. Kenneth Frampton's ideas on critical regionalism are strongly echoed in Kultermann's writings on Arab states.⁴⁷ The introductory essay sets the tone for the rest of the series. Titled "Contemporary Arab Architecture: Toward an Islamic Identity", in it he states that the "common denominator of the architects from these countries is their search for identity, which is a fundamental necessity in order to continue the great tradition of Islamic architecture".⁴⁸ For Kultermann, tradition is only valid when it maintains its relevance and is updated by new generations of architects and builders. This follows Paul Ricoeur's assertion that "a cultural tradition stays alive only if it constantly creates itself anew".⁴⁹ The question is, how will this newness manifest architecturally? Kultermann's answer, informed by the post-modernist zeitgeist, suggests a revival of 'static' notions of Islamic

fig.4 Hassan Fathy speaking to builders implementing his New Gurna village design, 1945 (Source: Rare Books and Special Collections Library, American University in Cairo. Reuse not permitted).

and Arab symbols in contemporary architecture.⁵⁰ However, his reference to defining Islamic architecture relies on vague, outdated notions: “the concentration given to the interior space, the continuous experience of the architecture as part of the urban fabric ... [and] the non-representational appearance and the meaningful application of decoration”.⁵¹ Kultermann conflates ‘Arab’ and ‘Islamic’; he emphasizes form and decoration in identifying contemporary manifestations of Islamic architecture as expressions of Arab modernity, even if many of the celebrated projects in the book were designed by American and European architects. Forms and decorations are what Nasser Rabbat considers “tangential” in understanding Islamic architecture.⁵²

A contending vision to Kultermann et al. comes from Egyptian architect Sayed Karim in a published lecture he delivered in 1940 at Cairo’s Royal Geographic Society: “Architecture within any single region exhibits diversity within a common theme”, he said. “For example, Arab architecture slightly differs in Egypt from Iraq or Spain, so too will the new international architecture be expressed with slight and shallow differences on the same theme”.⁵³

Sayed Karim's Village University, 1945 (Source: *Al-Emara* magazine, Mohamed Elshahed's personal collection. Reuse not permitted).

fig.5

Karim advocated a materialist reading of how architecture developed in different national and regional contexts. Historic, vernacular, or contemporary architecture was not described stylistically. For him, contemporary architecture of every epoch responds to contemporary needs with the means, materials, and technologies available to society.⁵⁴ The shapes and sizes of elements that compose a style are, in Karim's view, determined by the construction material, technique, and construction methods. The palate of materials Karim used in his designs includes concrete, brick, wood, tiles, stone, marble, glass, and glass block. With those and other materials that are subsequently introduced, contemporary

architecture in the Arab region can simultaneously belong to national and regional identity while speaking an architectural parlance that is international, without subscribing to a fixed style.

The assumed, rigid duality between the modern and the traditional, an invention of colonial historicism, does not appear in Karim's discourse.⁵⁵ Karim and his co-editors in *Al-Emara*, Mohamed Hammad and Tawfiq Abd Al-Gawwad, were not iconoclasts. They did not explicitly reject traditional architecture, nor did they make explicit architectural links between the modernism they produced and specific historical forms or elements.⁵⁶ *Al-Emara* magazine frequently featured vernacular and historic architecture among the heterogeneous modern constructions. Architecture and urban form were measured based on their performance rather than their subscription to certain notions of identity or style. For example, the numerous articles in the pages of *Al-Emara* regarding village reform did not focus on the rejection of village architecture based on the idea that it was traditional. Rather, reforms were proposed due to sanitation issues and to raise the quality of life of peasants. In contrast with the primitivism of Hassan Fathy's celebrated but failed New Gourni Village (1945), Karim's little-known design for a what he called a 'village university', ● built the same year, gently inserts modern solutions and amenities, such as a swimming pool, into inherited architectural forms and materials. Similarly, the promotion of modern villas, apartments, and worker housing were not rooted in a rejection of traditional forms of dwelling; rather, they were presented as necessary changes to accommodate social and economic transformations as well as the utilization of new building materials and technologies. In contrast to their European counterparts, some Arab modernists did not legitimize their architectural designs based on an ideological rejection of the past nor a blind embrace of Western models.

fig.5

Build, write, maintain, remember

In addition to shaping the discourse on the history of contemporary design, Nikolaus Pevsner's largest body of work, published between 1951 and 1974, is his monumental 46-volume architectural guides *Buildings of England*. It is a town-by-town, in some cases street-by-street, account of individual buildings across the country, including monuments and vernacular, lesser-known buildings from all periods, all treated historically. His guides have been fundamental to the preservation of England's architectural heritage, in large part by making the architectural landscape legible to the masses. Not only has the publishing of such architectural guides been fundamental to preservation, but also "research undertaken around the practical tasks of restoring and preserving historic monuments and places [is] the backbone of local architectural history".⁵⁷ The uneven development of today's modern world is mirrored in the unevenness of the institutional

infrastructure required to record the world's diverse and contemporaneous architectural histories and, by extension, in the legibility of the architectural landscape and its potential preservation. Large sections of our collective picture of global modernism are distorted, pixelated, or entirely missing.

The current status of architectural heritage from all epochs is dire across the Arab states, and so too is contemporary architectural practice. The two crises are connected. Recent constructions across the region have fallen into historical purgatory: neither 'historically' legible nor protected, they take with them large swaths of physical evidence necessary for deciphering the region's troubled modern history. The work of Arab architects in Cairo, Beirut, and Baghdad from the 1930s to the 1980s has been defaced by war, deteriorated by negligence, and eliminated by real estate speculation or state-led urban projects. In Egypt, none of Sayed Karim's buildings are on the heritage protection lists, and modernist architecture in general is omitted from the outdated registers of national patrimony. It should be noted that Karim's vibrant career was abruptly ended in 1965 when he fell out of political favour with the Nasser regime. ● His offices were closed, his assets confiscated, his archive scattered. Although he lived on for another 40 years, he retreated from public life except for the occasional column or essay in a magazine or newspaper, propagating his critique of urban and architectural affairs in Cairo.

fig.6

Thus Karim, despite his ambitions, is not a modernist 'hero' like those depicted by European and American historians in their early efforts to provide a historical narrative to modern design. What kind of history of modern design does a figure such as Karim afford us? Since the Free Officers proclaimed independence in 1952, Egypt has listed only around 150 Islamic monuments in addition to the 619 already listed, previously recorded, and restored by the Comité. Since then, there has been no methodological approach to writing local histories of the built environment in all its epochs and architectural manifestations including the contemporary, the vernacular, and the anonymous. The perpetual present has been rendered ahistorical.

The focus on identity and its relationship to contemporary architecture in the Arab world, as proposed by Kultermann, has been at the expense of the legacy of an important chapter in the history of global modernism, namely, its manifestations in the Arab world from the start of the twentieth century to the 1970s. George Arbid writes, "In contrast with some quickly concocted 'regional' recipes sometimes legitimized by foreign expertise, many attentive local or foreign professionals designed in response to time and place".⁵⁸ Sayed Karim was perhaps the first "regional" architect; in the decade following the Second World War, he travelled across the Arab states, named in the Egyptian press 'the flying architect', gaining commissions in locations as diverse as Saudi Arabia,

fig.6

While his career abruptly ended in 1965, Sayed Karim published the occasional critique of architectural affairs in the Egyptian press, such as this 1993 column decrying developments in Nasr City, a modernist urban plan he produced for the Egyptian state in 1958 (Source: *Al-Ahram*, Mohamed Elshahed's personal collection).

Kuwait, and Jordan in addition to his rich portfolio in Egypt. With the exception of a short-lived attempt to document and protect his Cinema Ahmadi in Kuwait, his buildings have not been granted the status of national heritage across the region, where the conditions for a locally institutionalized and methodological approach to the study and documentation of the built environment with the aid of local experts does not exist.

With some rare exceptions, Karim's cinemas, residences, and public buildings in Kuwait City, Giza, Amman, and elsewhere have disappeared. ● No record of this vision of regional modernism has been sufficiently studied or fully archived. In 2015, the modernist block by architect Mahmoud Riad in Cairo – originally built as the city's municipality (1959) and subsequently reused as the political headquarters for Nasser's Arab Socialist Union and then later for Anwar Sadat and Hosni Mubarak's National Democratic Party – was demolished by army engineers who deemed it ugly after it was torched during the 2011 protests.⁵⁹ Nearby, overlooking Tahrir Square, the American University in Cairo's Science Building (1966), one of the earliest experiments in passive solar design in Egypt, was also demolished in 2015.⁶⁰ In 2019, Kuwait's Al-Sawaber apartment complex (1981) based on a design by Arthur

fig.7

The Al-Qatami Residence in Kuwait, designed by Sayed Karim in 1958
(Source: Rare Books and Special Collections Library, American University in Cairo.
Reuse not permitted).

fig.7

Erikson was also demolished despite efforts by local architects and heritage enthusiasts to save it.

Numerous other examples of historically significant, modern constructions at various scales, from official and large to private and small, have been demolished without ever receiving the attention of historians or heritage institutions, both in short supply in the region. Such buildings are in the blind spot of architectural history, at least the kind championed by Kultermann in his account of the contemporary architecture of the Arab world. The situation is not entirely bleak: in August 2018, Dubai announced a plan to preserve the city's modernist heritage, such as the city's first skyscraper the Dubai World Trade Centre (1979) designed by John Harris. However, rather than singling out iconic buildings for heritage status, Arab cities in constant flux require solidarity in building institutional infrastructure that fosters a body of knowledge and practice, based in the region, linking architectural practice, history and criticism, and architectural memory.

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Notes

- 1 Sayed Karim, "Our Architecture and Its National Character", *Al-Emara* 2, no. 5–6 (1940): 271. *Al-Imara*, or *Al-Emara* magazine as its name is Romanized on its back cover, was the first Arabic-language architectural journal focused on contemporary practice in Egypt. It was founded in 1939 by architect Sayed Karim and funded by his father and later his wife. The magazine produced 67 print issues in its 20-year run until 1959.
- 2 William Curtis, *Architecture Since 1900*, 3rd edn. (London: Phaidon, 1996), 567.
- 3 Udo Kultermann, "Contemporary Arab Architecture: Toward an Islamic Identity", in *Mimar 3: Architecture in Development*, ed. Hasan-Uddin Khan (Singapore: Concept Media LTD, 1982): 77.
- 4 Kishwar Rizvi and Sandy Isenstadt, eds., *Modernism and the Middle East: Architecture and Politics in the Twentieth Century* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008).
- 5 "Research undertaken around the practical tasks of restoring and preserving historic monuments and places [is] the backbone of local architectural history". Andrew Leach, *What is Architectural History?* (London: Wiley, 2010), 4.
- 6 Mohamed Elshahed, "Cairo After the Second World War and the Rise of Arab Engineering Professionals", in *The Arab City: Architecture and Representation*, eds. Amale Andraos, Nora Akawi, and Caitlin Blanchfield (New York: Columbia Books on Architecture and the City, 2016), 79–91.
- 7 Yasser Elsheshtawy, *Temporary Cities: Resisting Transience in Arabia* (London: Routledge, 2019).
- 8 Nasser Rabbat, "Who Was Al-Maqrizi? A Biographical Sketch", *Mamluk Studies Review* 7, no. 2 (2003): 1–20. Also see Nezar AlSayyad, "'Ali Mubarak's Egypt: Between the Testimony of Alamuddin and the Imaginary of the *Khitat*", in *Making Cairo Medieval*, eds. Nezar AlSayyad, Irene A. Bierman, and Nasser Rabbat (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2005).
- 9 Mohamed Abdelbaki Ibrahim, "Alienation of the Arab Architect in His Homeland", *Alam Al-Benaa*, no. 53 (January 1985): 3.
- 10 Udo Kultermann, *Contemporary Architecture in the Arab States: Renaissance of a Region* (New York: McGraw-Hill Professional, 1999), 4–5.
- 11 Anthony Vidler, *Histories of the Immediate Present: Inventing Architectural Modernism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008).
- 12 Udo Kultermann, "Contemporary Arab Architects and Their Contribution to the Renaissance of Architecture in the Arab States (extract)", *Ektistics* 47, no. 280 (1980): 41–44.
- 13 Vidler, *Histories of the Immediate Present*, 3.
- 14 Esra Akcan, "Writing a Global History through Translation: An Afterword on Pedagogical Perspectives", *Art in Translation* 10, no. 1 (2018): 136–142.
- 15 The illustration credits reveal Kultermann's direct access to the architects cited, all of whom are the author's contemporaries, as well as to official archives.
- 16 As a historian, Kultermann shaped the debate – in English and within his elite circle of interlocutors – on what is considered 'contemporary'. He placed his interpretation of present architecture, within an Arab context, in a historical narrative. This parallels Nikolaus Pevsner's project in *Pioneers of Modern Design*, originally published in 1936 as *Pioneers of the Modern Movement*. It was, as Pevsner wrote in the book's forward, the "first to be published" as a historical narrative of contemporary architectural practices organized by key architects and their works, setting the tone for future endeavours to narrate the development of architecture. See Colin Amery, "Nikolaus Pevsner's 'Pioneers of the Modern Movement', 1936", *The Burlington Magazine* 151, no. 1278 (2009): 617–619.
- 17 Kultermann, "Contemporary Arab Architecture: Toward an Islamic Identity", 77.
- 18 Charles Jencks, *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture* (London: Rizzoli, 1977).
- 19 "For as long as architects responding to the demand for a contemporary Islamic architecture turn uncritically to either the nationalist (and by and large modernist) or the neo-Islamicist (and resolutely postmodern) interpretation of the Orientalist paradigm, the pool of conceptual and compositional possibilities available to them will remain limited". Nasser Rabbat, "Why is Contemporary Islamic Architecture Risking Banality?" in *Homogenisation of Representations*, ed. Modjtaba Sadria (Geneva: Aga Khan Award for Architecture, 2012), 113–124.
- 20 Kultermann, *Contemporary Architecture in the Arab States*, 3.
- 21 As Nasser Rabbat argues, there are acute discrepancies in identity across the contemporary Middle East due to the unresolved problems of nationalism, persistence of colonial legacies, silenced debates on secularism, absolute rule or dictatorship in most cases, and overall uneven distribution of wealth. These, not a simplified notion of identity built solely on outdated conceptions of

- Islam and its architecture, are at the root of understanding the contemporary architecture of the Arab region. Nasser Rabbat, "Arab Cities and Identity Crisis", in *The Arab City: Architecture and Representation*, eds. Amale Andraos, Nora Akawi, and Caitlin Blanchfield (New York: Columbia Books on Architecture and the City, 2016), 41–49.
- 22** As illustrated in the US pavilion of the 2014 Venice Architecture Biennale, titled *US Office* and featuring one thousand projects built by American offices around the globe, a significant number of projects are in the Arab Gulf states, rendering the region an extension of America's global reach.
- 23** "The Cold War brought about new geographies of collaboration that fundamentally impacted a myriad of locations including West Africa and the Middle East. Yet while Eastern European architects, planners, and construction companies are vividly remembered by professionals, inhabitants, and the general public in Ghana, Nigeria, Iraq, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Kuwait, their engagements in the Global South have been almost completely written out of Western-based historiography of architecture". Lukasz Stanek, *Architecture in Global Socialism: Eastern Europe, West Africa, and the Middle East in the Cold War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020), 2.
- 24** Amery, "Nikolaus Pevsner's", 617.
- 25** Ibid.
- 26** Vidler, *Histories of the Immediate Present*, 7.
- 27** Sibel Bozdoğan, "Architectural History in Professional Education: Reflections on Postcolonial Challenges to the Modern Survey", *Journal of Architectural Education* (1984–) 52, no. 4 (1999): 207–215.
- 28** Dianne Harris, "That's Not Architectural History! Or What's a Discipline For?" *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 70, no. 2 (June 2011): 149–152.
- 29** Stanford Anderson, "Architectural History in Schools of Architecture", *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 58, no. 3 (September 1, 1999): 282–290.
- 30** Ormos István, *Max Herz Pasha (1856–1919): His Life and Career* (Cairo: Institut français d'archéologie orientale, 2009).
- 31** Nairi Hampikian, "A Decisive Moment for the Survival of Historic Cairo", in *Cairo: Revitalising a Historic Metropolis*, eds. Stefano Bianca and Philip Jodidio (Turin: Umberto Allemandi & C. for Aga Khan Trust for Culture, 2004), 209–219.
- 32** Khaled Asfour, "The Domestication of Knowledge: Cairo at the Turn of the Century", *Muqarnas* 10 (1993): 125–137.
- 33** Timothy Mitchell refers to it as the "displacement, deferral, and delay in the production of the modern". See Timothy Mitchell, *Questions of Modernity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 23. Also Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 111–115.
- 34** Zeynep Çelik, "Reflections on Architectural History Forty Years after Edward Said's *Orientalism*", *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 77, no. 4 (December 2018): 381–387.
- 35** Nasser Rabbat, "Surveying Islamic Art and Architecture", in *Eothen: Münchner Beiträge zur Geschichte der islamischen Kunst und Kultur, Band 5* (Munich, 2012): 267–274.
- 36** Esra Akcan, "Postcolonial Theories in Architecture", in *A Critical History of Contemporary Architecture, 1960–2010*, eds. Elie G. Haddad and David Rifkind (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2014).
- 37** Kenneth Frampton, "Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance", in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, 2nd edn, ed. Hal Foster (New York: The New Press, 1998), 29.
- 38** Critical regionalism first appeared in the early 1980s in essays by Liane Lefaivre and Alexander Tzonis. See also Kenneth Frampton, "Prospects for a Critical Regionalism", *Perspecta* 20 (1983): 147–162; Kenneth Frampton, *Modern Architecture: A Critical History* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1980).
- 39** Kultermann contributed to Kenneth Frampton's multi-volume series *World Architecture 1900–2000*, with a volume dedicated to central and southern Africa. The volume dedicated to the Middle East in the same series was edited by Hasan-Uddin Khan, a key interlocutor of Kultermann, and published in 2000, just a year after Kultermann's own survey of contemporary architecture in the Arab states. The two volumes are distinctly different: while Khan's volume consists of 100 buildings selected from across the Middle East, including Turkey, Iran, and Israel, and spans the twentieth century, Kultermann's focuses on the Arab states from the 1960s to the 1990s.
- 40** Curtis, *Architecture Since 1900*, 567.
- 41** Hassan Fathy, *Architecture for the Poor* (1973, repr., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).
- 42** Frampton, "Towards a Critical Regionalism", 23.
- 43** See Prita Meier, "Authenticity and its Modernist Discontents: The Colonial Encounter and African and Middle Eastern Art History", *The Arab Studies Journal* 18, no. 1 (spring 2010): 12–45.

- 44 Some architects in Egypt would have agreed to this assessment, particularly by the 1990s. By then, the recent death of Fathy had completed his transformation into a sort of deity for some within the increasingly besieged architectural profession, which had distanced itself from modernism after falling out of fashion. In an article about contemporary architecture in Egypt, published in 1998 in the architectural magazine *Alam Al-Benaa*, architect Abdelbaki Ibrahim critiqued the influence of 'Western theories' transmitted to Egypt via post-graduate Egyptian students who study in Western universities and return to teach in Egyptian universities (such as Sayed Karim). They are accused of contaminating Egyptian architecture with foreign ideas and materials that "reflect Western values". Abdelbaki Ibrahim, "Contemporary Architecture in Egypt", *Alam Al-Benaa* 199 (1998): 6–8.
- 45 Kultermann, *Contemporary Architecture in the Arab States*, 4–5.
- 46 Keith Eggener, "Placing Resistance: A Critique of Critical Regionalism", *Journal of Architectural Education* 55, no. 4 (May 2002): 230.
- 47 *Mimar* magazine, first published in 1981 with 43 subsequent issues, was at the time the only English-language magazine concerned with architecture in the 'developing world'. Frampton, "Towards a Critical Regionalism". For recent discussion of Frampton and his critical regionalism, see Tom Avermaete, Veronique Patteeuw, and Hans Teerds, eds., *Critical Regionalism Revisited* (Rotterdam: NAi010 Publishers, 2019).
- 48 Kultermann, "Contemporary Arab Architecture", 74–77.
- 49 Paul Ricoeur, "Universal Civilization and National Cultures", in *Architectural Regionalism: Collected Writings on Place, Identity, Modernity and Tradition*, ed. Vincent B. Canizaro (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2012), 50.
- 50 As Anthony Vidler notes, postmodernism as a reaction to the apparent failures of modernism's abstraction "posed a problem to historians and critics". He writes, "Historians were in demand ... to provide authorization and depth to present practice. The idea of 'type', to give one central example – an idea that stemmed from the need to rethink the tabula rasa planning strategies of the 1950s". Vidler, *Histories of the Immediate Present*, 2.
- 51 Kultermann citing Ernst J. Grube, who along with George Michell edited the book *Architecture of the Islamic World*, published in 1995. Kultermann, "Contemporary Arab Architecture", 74.
- 52 "Islamic architecture is of course the architecture of those cultures, regions, or societies that have directly or via some intermediary processes accepted Islam as an integral component of their epistemological and socio-cultural makeup. From that perspective, the term 'Islamic architecture' is still a valid designation for architecture being built today because Islam has never ceased being that constitutive component, even though the ways in which it expresses itself have drastically changed over time and space. The actual architectural forms that those expressions take, important as they are in identifying Islamic architecture, are tangential in understanding it". Nasser Rabbat, "What is Islamic architecture anyway?" *Journal of Art Historiography* 6 (June 2012): 1.
- 53 Karim, "Our Architecture and its National Character", 271.
- 54 Jean-François Lejeune and Michelangelo Sabatino, "North versus South", in *Modern Architecture and the Mediterranean: Vernacular Dialogues and Contested Identities*, eds. Lejeune and Sabatino (New York: Routledge, 2010), 22.
- 55 On the invented duality of tradition and modernism, see Anaya Roy, "Nostalgias of the Modern", in *End of Tradition?* ed. Nezar AlSayyad (New York: Routledge, 2004), 63–86.
- 56 Alan Colquhoun, "The Concept of Regionalism", in *Postcolonial Space(s)*, eds. Gulsum Baydar Nal-Bantoglu and Wong Chong Thai (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1997), 13–23; Keith Eggener, "Placing Resistance: a Critique of Critical Regionalism", *Journal of Architectural Education* 55, no. 4 (2002): 228–237; Gevork Hartoonian, "Critical Regionalism Reloaded", *Fabrications* 16, no. 2 (2006): 123–129.
- 57 Leach, *What is Architectural History?*, 4.
- 58 George Arbid, *Fundamentalists and Other Arab Modernisms* (Doha: Bahrain Ministry of Culture, 2014), 8.
- 59 Mohamed Elshahed, *Cairo Since 1900: An Architectural Guide* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2020), 87.
- 60 Ibid., 94.