FRAGMENTARIUM

Episodes of modernity in contemporary Kuwait City

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Introduction

Jibla, the southwestern quadrant of Kuwait City. Once a traditional part of the pre-oil town, its *firjan* (neighbourhoods) accommodated merchant family houses and their maritime trades for generations. In the early 1960s, modernity entered the city through the quadrant's gated walls to permanently change the city's landscape. As part of the post-oil urban development, the 1951 master plan designated Jahra Road and Naif Avenue, Jibla's main axes, to become its first modern alleys with shops, arcades, and geometric façades. They pointed to Safat Square, the main public space, adjacent to the first municipal park and surrounded by new concrete structures. Within this triangle, Kuwait's early modern dreams materialized before anywhere else in the city, becoming a recurrent visual theme in government propaganda. Later constructions, such as the Parliament and the National Museum, epitomized a new and different visual representation of local values and traditions. Jibla, however, was also the place in which architectural modernity attempted to come to terms with history. In the heyday of modernization, preservation was not considered an option, demolition was the norm, and tradition was reinterpreted nostalgically, like Behbehani Compound and Youm-Al-Bahar (the Sailor's Day heritage village). In recent years, new redevelopments swallowed the urban fabric of the 1960s, and Jibla became part of a bureaucratic downtown, running nine to five as a service hub. Outside of business hours, it turns into a liminal place chosen by many migrant workers as a meeting point for social gatherings. Lately, it has also been the testing ground for a few examples of reuse and rehabilitation of early modern structures, such as the former American Mission Hospital, known locally as Al-Amricani and the Catholic church, later analysed in this text.

This chapter aims to map a city within a city. Kuwait's modern urban landscape is now but a sequence of fragments, dispersed among shards from different epochs, all reminders of an unaccomplished urban vision: a kaleidoscope of uncorrelated episodes of obsolescence, adaptation, and reinterpretation. By tracing and reading the trajectory of these architectures and questioning the notion that tradition, authenticity, and locality are attributes applicable only to pre-oil structures, this study captures how city and citizens are coming to terms with Kuwait's modern legacy. With its stratified urban history, Jibla offers a sounder and more articulated case study than other parts of the city. In particular, the area allows a comparative reading of the 'strata': the text will initially analyse the urban landscape in today's condition, then trace back the projects, ambitions, and strategies that originated it, and to conclude gauge a few rehabilitative interventions.

The present-day context was assessed through direct fieldwork and a series of photographic sessions of the area during a long-term residency in the country, which also gave me the

opportunity to actively participate in the rehabilitation project of Al-Amricani. The historical aspects of the chapter elaborate on first-hand material retrieved from the General Hasted's and Kuwait Development Board's papers at the Churchill Archive Centre of the University of Cambridge, United Kingdom, as well as the Dar Al-Athar Al-Islamiyyah archive in Kuwait.

Philipindia

The very centric wedge, between Kuwait Bay and the streets Soor and Abdallah Al-Salem, is casually referred to as 'Philipindia'. Soor ('wall' in Arabic) is the street that replaced the empty corridor left by the demolition of the old city wall in the 1950s. Fringed by a vegetated buffer zone, the Green Belt, Soor Street delineates the inner urban core from the suburbs while Abdallah Al-Salem Street (once Naif Avenue) ● runs orthogonally, being one of the radial roads that connects with the outer residential neighbourhoods. This triangle is currently one of the few walkable parts of the city, and in milder seasons, it is commonplace to see groups circulating under the arcade of the bisector Fahed Al-Salem Street (once Jahra Road) ● or gathering in vacant lots between buildings. Generous sidewalks, usually quite uncommon in Kuwait, and many interstitial plots all lead to the central market area, Souk Mubarakia, and the bus station: a crucial gateway to the suburban settlements where low-income expats usually reside.

fig.1
(A9–G9)

fig.1
(A4–G9)

The rather derogatory name of the area does not truly reflect the plurality of accents that can be heard in this central part of the town; while Indians and Filipinos do compose a large portion of migrant workers in the country, Pakistanis, Bengalis, Sri Lankans, other South Asians as well as Egyptians also constitute a significant demographic.¹ According to the 2011 census, the most recent official data available, around 5,000 non-Kuwaitis reside here, mostly in the run-down apartment blocks erected in the 1960s around Fahed Al-Salem Street.²

In addition, a significant number of non-Kuwaitis work in institutions such as small businesses, governmental agencies, and outdated commercial strips that animate this part of town, returning to the suburbs after working hours. Most of Jibla's street levels offer commercial activities related to non-nationals' needs, such as money transfers, currency exchanges, and travel agencies alongside convenience stores, small cafés, and food shops serving until late hours.

The colourful presence of the area's many nationalities does not impress as much as the almost complete absence of locals. According to official data, only 167 nationals live in Jibla; though on a regular day, other Kuwaitis may converge here for work as the majority are employed in the public sector or collect documents from the same offices. Excluding the Salhiya Mall and the adjacent Plaza, Kuwaitis would not pick Jibla as a social space

fig.2 Proximity of Fahed Al-Salem Street with Souk Al-Muttaheda on right (Photo: Roberto Fabbri, 2019. Reuse not permitted).

for recreation. It would not be considered appropriate, nor attractive. Since ministries and governmental workplaces typically close at 2 p.m. and the other offices a few hours later, in the evening the area becomes available for other forms of social interaction. In the after-work hours and during weekends, migrant workers and low-income expats reclaim this space for recreational practices and social gatherings. Among the relics of the Kuwait modernist project – the unbuilt plots, uncompleted plans, rejected spaces, and obsolete objects – ‘other citizenships’ find meaning in a public space that was never intended nor designed for them, demonstrating how the sense of sociality that a place encourages or represents also defines its public life and accessibility more than its property and ownership.³

The area does not usually show itself to be appropriate for family gatherings on weekdays as the majority of Jibla’s residents are young males, but on weekends the demographics radically

change. The entire area offers shopping opportunities at affordable prices, and under the arcades of Fahed Al-Salem Street and the squares up to Salhiya Cemetery walls, ● food shops promise ingredients for ‘exotic’ cuisines – some say even rabbit or pork can be found around here.⁴ The modernist car parks/souks – such as Al-Mutteheda and Al-Masseel (built by Bonington Partnership, 1973–1979), Al-Watiya (PACE, 1974–1979), and Al-Wataniya (TAC, 1973), ▲ once experimental typologies intended to reintroduce retail and residential functions in the city – today offer inexpensive Chinese goods, household products, luggage, and counterfeit luxury brands as well as beverages and street food in a shaded, air-conditioned interior.⁵

fig.2

p.183

Commerce aside, the main attraction on weekends is the Christian cathedral, which is also a building from the era of modernization. From Friday to Sunday, long lines of people cross the bridge over the First Ring Road and gather in the vacant area around the church’s compound. That is the Bishop’s seat of the Apostolic Vicariate of Northern Arabia and one of the tangible testimonies of the country’s religious tolerance. The church currently serves a congregation of more than 50,000 followers from many nationalities, with services offered in English, French, Latin, Arabic, Tagalog (Philippines), Konkani and Malayalam (India), and Tamil (Sri Lanka).

Jibla’s modern project

Before becoming Philipindia, Kuwait’s urban project commenced in Jibla. As early as the 1950s, ‘modernity’, in terms of urban transformation, entered the city through Jibla’s two wall-gates, Naif and Jahra, ● to permanently change the proxemics of the area’s traditional fabric. A 1951 survey of the town, redacted by the British War Office and Air Ministry, clearly shows that, typology wise, the only modern buildings in the old town were Edwin Lutyens’ British Political Agency in Dasman (1937), the Safat branch of the British Bank of the Middle East (1949), and the American Missionary Hospital (1911–1936), all of which could be considered foreign ‘intrusions’. ● The rest of the walled town was an intricately woven carpet of traditional courtyard houses and narrow alleyways. The transformation started in 1950 with the rise to power of Sheikh Abdullah Al-Salem and the vision to restructure the country. Unsurprisingly, after 50 years of protectorate status, the political and financial guidance of the modernizing project started under strict British influence. In particular, the entire construction cycle was orchestrated between the Foreign Office in London, regional coordination in Manama, local Agency in Dasman, and Seif Palace (the Amir’s office). With the loss of India in 1947, the Gulf became even more strategical for the UK, especially to steer exponentially increasing oil revenues towards British companies. The influence of the Political Agency was sufficient

fig.1
(A9 and A4)

fig.1
(R19, G9
and E3)

to suggest – and by de facto impose – British consultants onto all major design works, starting from the first master plan by Minoprio, Spencely and Macfarlane (MSM), finalized in November 1951. To actuate the plan, the agency encouraged the government to embark on a five-year modernization plan, placing British advisors in key positions in the Ministry of Finance and Development Board. At the same time, a monopoly system secured and distributed the lucrative contacts to five construction firms, precluding open tenders.⁶ The so-called ‘big five’ were Taylor Woodrow; William Press; Richard Constain; Holland, Hannen and Cubbit; and John Howard, and they operated on a 15% profit over costs, leaving Kuwaiti partners with only labour provisions. A sixth firm, Ewbanks and Partners, was also active in the country as a specialized consultant in power generation. General William Hasted coordinated the modernization plan, as Chair of the Development Board and Controller of Development. The Board started the first session in January 1952.

Addressing the Amir in the *Preliminary Report* of February 1952, Hasted set priorities straight. To create “the finest city in the Middle East and the happiest State”, he suggested a list of urgent infrastructures to be implemented, such as water and electricity plants, housing, a port, an airport, and industries. He also advised the Amir to carefully locate and design all the public buildings, suggesting to assign them to “architects of repute”.⁷ He was reinstating the master plan strategy which, a few months earlier, had suggested placing all the public buildings in the triangle between Naif and Jahra Gate and Safat Square. MSM envisioned “a broad avenue, with garden and trees; lined with public buildings and forming an impressive approach to the town centre”, to properly define two arteries converging in the vibrant heart of the city centre.⁸ While Jahra Road was left undefined at this stage, the documents show particular care in detailing Naif Avenue – the gardens, flanks of buildings, as well as water and clock towers at the junction with Safat.

Out of the entire city footprint, the Board identified Jibla’s two main axes as an opportunity to showcase the country’s progress, and that may have been related to the overall vision of the master plan. In fact, Naif Avenue was intended to serve as the connector between the centre and the southern expansion; it would have led to the airfield in Nuzha, to the new airport further south, and finally to the oil town of Ahmadi. Instead, Jahra Road headed towards the new deep-sea port, new hospital, and technical college, all situated by MSM in the west district of Shuwaikh. It would also have led to the new residential districts of Shamiya and Shuwaikh, where prominent members of ruling and merchant families received residential plots of land. Thus, Jahra Road later assumed a more commercial and retail-oriented role, while Naif was, from the beginning, more institutional.

Paving the road to modernity

Following the indication to pursue renowned architects, the Board assigned Naif Avenue's project to Farmer and Dark (F&D), a British firm founded in 1934 which had successfully partnered with Ewbanks. F&D specialized in designing industrial and office buildings and, in particular, explored the architectural expression of power plants in UK. In the same period, the British Energy Authority integrated architects into the plant-design teams since the post-Second World War energy plan would have required particular care to incorporate the plants into delicate urban or natural contexts. F&D's approach soon became popular, not only for a more functional distribution but also for experimenting with 'machine aesthetics': exposed pipes, bright colour schemes, and alternations of cladding material such as aluminium, glass, and concrete.⁹ In September 1947, the *Architectural Review* published four examples of the firm's latest work: the Stourport, Hayle, Llynfi, and Little Barford power stations.¹⁰ Meanwhile, during the same period, they collaborated with John Bruce to design Brunswick Wharf on the River Thames, a monumental edifice in bricks and fluted white chimneys, very similar to the Battersea Power Station.¹¹

In 1949, the Kuwait Oil Company (KOC) called up Ewbanks and F&D to design the Fahaheel Power Station, a plant intended to supply electricity to Ahmadi. In 1951, they were charged with the design of the Kuwait Town Distillation Plant and in 1954 with the Town Power Station.¹² Later, in 1955 and 1956, they also designed a number of school buildings and a palace in Surra for Shaikh Jabir Al-Ali Al-Sabah, head of the Department of Electricity and Water.¹³ At this time, Dark was the only founding member, with six partners, and they operated in the region through the Middle East branch in Beirut, managed by partner William Henderson, who first visited Kuwait in 1952.¹⁴ Since the mid-1950s, architect Anthony Irving led the Beirut office and was in charge of Kuwait's school project.¹⁵ He would later go on to found the Design Construction Group (DCG) in partnership with Gordon Jones, eventually acquiring a reputation for designing bank headquarters and several institutional buildings.

The urban plan for Naif Avenue was a recurrent topic in Hasted's minutes since the Board's early meetings, which often concerned the new governmental headquarters' siting. The general concept was developed by F&D following the Board's requirements and presented to the Amir in spring 1952.¹⁶ The project defined a large, dual-carriage, monumental axis, connecting Naif Gate to Safat Square. The central spine was to be a green third-space, with decorative gardens, trimmed grass, trees, and walkways. Sideways, key buildings were positioned creating the avenue's architectural curtain in a scenographic manner, which was meant to culminate in Safat. Following what appears to be

fig.3 Left: view of termination of Naif Avenue with water tower at Safat Square (n.d., postcard). Right: Farmer and Dark's project for the water tower, 1953 (Source: William Henderson, Special Collections and Archives, University of Liverpool D1176/2/7. Reuse not permitted).

common practice in British colonial urbanism, the plan allocated all the key institutions of the country in one stretch, including the Ministries of Health, Education, Marine, Religious Affairs, and Finance; the Departments of Water and Electricity, Security and Public Works; the Chamber of Commerce; and the Law Court together with the fire station, post office, and a large, open-air auditorium.¹⁷ The axis's main scope was to rhetorically frame access to the civic centre of the city, creating a climax culminating in the strong verticals of Safat, or "Kuwait's Piccadilly Circus", according to F&D's partner R. L. Banks.¹⁸

Among these ascending landmarks, the Board and F&D envisioned both a clock and water tower, though priority was given to the latter as it meddled with the water-distribution grid. ● Cyril Farey's meticulous architectural drawing perfectly renders F&D's talent in balancing expressive features in technical architecture; the tower has a small circular podium and slender space-frame structure as a pedestal. The latter supports a massive cubic tank protected from direct sunlight by an array of slanted louvres. A viewpoint overlooking the square and the gardens crowns the structure. The whole composition concentrates the masses where they are needed for the correct functionality of the aqueduct yet, at the same time, is careful not to impede the view at street level.

While waiting for the Amir's approval, the Board proceeded to acquire the parcels needed, finding the process more complicated than initially expected due to the opposition of several landowners.¹⁹ The Amir's endorsement finally came in September 1952, and drawings and maquettes went on display at the municipality for a week.²⁰ Together with his approval, Sheikh Abdullah also donated part of the land for the project.

The situation radically changed in November 1952 when Sheikh Fahed Al-Salem was appointed as the new president of the Development Board by his half-brother, the Amir. In the following years, Sheikh Fahed gradually dismantled the British monopoly in the construction system, opening the market for international consultants and contractors, changing the terms of contracts and tender procedures. In early 1953, he appointed the Syrian engineer Majadin Jabri as head of the Public Work Department (PWD), reducing Hasted's decision power drastically.²¹ Later in 1954, he also appointed the Lebanese engineer Fuad Abdul Baqi as the new Inspector General.²² As a consequence, many projects took a different direction, and Hasted finally resigned in frustration in April 1954. Among the affected projects, Naif Avenue fell from one of the top six priorities of the 1953 budget plan to an unaccomplished project; the initial idea was reduced, fragmented, and became known only as a parcellation plan. In February 1953, the Board decided to exclude any architectural or decorative feature from the water tower, which was built a few years later based on a different, resembling scheme.²³ Similarly, the Board established bylaws for the buildings, based on the code of Heliopolis; but given the actual aspect of the street, these guidelines were probably never implemented.²⁴ ● Nevertheless, the avenue maintained its land-use pattern, and during the years that came, several institutional buildings were erected here. First, the Majlis Al-Ummah (the old National Assembly), inaugurated in 1962 and later converted into the municipality; the only building in the country to sport a cutting-edge curtainwall, it was designed by the Lebanese architect Sami Abdul Baqi, brother to PWD Inspector General Fuad.²⁵

fig. 3
(right)

While Naif Avenue remained an unaccomplished, bi-dimensional plan, another coeval urban project led to different results. Jahra Road was on the Board's project-list during the same period as Naif was, mostly as a carriage enlargement to solve frequent traffic congestions.²⁶ It eventually turned into a more ambitious project: with 1,000 shops and over 8,000 rooms for Kuwait's new commercial high street. Hamra Street, Beirut's new showplace, was the reference model. On Jahra Road, every merchant family in Kuwait competed to acquire spots to flaunt their businesses, and consequently, land speculation and highly inflated costs of expropriation fuelled the (credible) myth of Jahra as the most expensive mile on the planet.

Given the personalities involved, the project proceeded on the fast lane. The Board appointed PWD to carry on the project in-house, including demolitions, design, and construction supervision.²⁷ The project consisted of a dual-carriage avenue, framed by an array of repetitive blocks, notched on the corners to direct the circulation to the side streets. To homogenize the project, PWD established the Jahra Street Façade Committee, which was

placed in charge of setting the street's norms, heights, colour schemes, and façade elements.²⁸

The constructions proceeded fast, and when George Saba Shiber arrived in Kuwait as Director of the Planning Department, the project was already close to completion. He dismissed it as “a wasted opportunity”, a cosmetic operation to hide incapacity to articulate inclusive public spaces, a rushed execution that sacrificed construction quality and basic services. In other words, the façade-controlled design approach generated a photogenic backdrop, but the lack of civic principles made the newest street of Kuwait already obsolete.²⁹

Soon after Shiber's commentaries, Jahra Road was renamed after Fahed Al-Salem, recently passed. For a decade, it became Kuwait's badge of modernity, depicted in all the postcards, official publications, and international magazines illustrating Kuwait's progress. Later, other prestigious buildings completed the street flanks, such as Sayyed Karim's Thunayan Al-Ghanim Building (1957–1969) and Sami Abdul Baqi's Ministry of Finance (1959–1962). The two, erected face-to-face at the very beginning of the street, acted for years as the new portal to the city.

Modernity by tradition

Jibla is also one of the places where Kuwait's modernity has tried to come to terms with tradition. In search of a possible historical ‘continuity’, in times when demolition was the norm, this part of Kuwait has offered few episodes of alternative ways to reach modernity. This is the case of Behbehani Compound, a low-density residential complex, bordering the Catholic church. ● Highly regarded as national heritage, the 1981 revision of the master plan listed it as one of the nation's few preservation areas. Since “little remains of Kuwait's native architecture, most of which was demolished in the 1950s and 1960s [...] efforts are now being made to preserve what little is left”, commented the municipality's chief architect Hamid Shuaib on the occasion.³⁰ Despite its pre-oil aesthetic, the majority of the compound was erected after 1956. The 1951 survey previously mentioned, shows the presence of a strip of rowhouses along the south end of the plot, each unit with a small patio. Behind the strip, another cluster of similar houses was accommodated in a square configuration. The rest was built afterward in similar style, replicating the existing typology and implementing architectural features taken from autochthonous and other Arab architectural models. The ground floors were organized traditionally around a central courtyard with the rooms divided by bearing walls, mostly in limestone brick. The upper floors were often made of timber and alternated enclosed spaces with verandas, rooftops, and balconies, with slanted louveres and wooden *mashrabiyyas* – all

fig.1
(C2–C3)

traditional elements that, a few years later, had to learn to coexist with air-conditioning compressors and antennas, epitomizing the compromises of modernization.

Architectural critic Stephen Gardiner visited the compound in the late 1970s, praising the project as some form of resistance to the modern local patterns: "... nothing extravagant; economy is the hallmark of Kuwait's heritage".³¹ In these dwelling units, he traced some derivative features from Dickson's House, the former British Residency of the 1940s which even today remains one of the most significant examples of pre-oil houses in a good preservation state. In harsh contrast, he found Behbehani Compound in disrepair as the original tenants left for the suburban neighbourhoods. The compound, initially successful, later experienced difficulties but has ultimately found success in recent years, when it became an 'extravagant' residential opportunity for a few Kuwaiti families and wealthy expats. Besides this, endorsing a typical gentrification pattern, it became home to several small restaurants, cafés, artisanal shops, and one art gallery.

We cannot fully consider Behbehani Compound a 'heritage village', having an embedded element of 'pre-oil authenticity'. It portrays an endeavour to explore alternatives to standardized modernity. Similar to the case of Behbehani, Kuwait also tried to amend the demolition of the old urban fabric by enacting life-before-oil in the neighbouring Youm-Al-Bahar (the Sailor's Day Village). This small entertainment/theme park was built in the late 1980s on reclaimed land near Behbehani. The project still operates to this day with questionable success. With a similar intention and even worse results, Kuwait Heritage Village was a 2003 governmental project to be realized around Dickson House; a brand new Kuwaiti *fereej* built entirely of concrete. The project was part of a series of initiatives to help revamp the city centre that was never completed, a series of empty grey skeletons were left exposed among billboards, inviting passersby to experience the 'authenticity' of a pre-oil life.³²

Next to Behbehani, in a separate and enclosed compound, there was the Catholic church, built on a plot in the proximity of Jahra Gate once meant to be isolated from the rest of the town. The land was conceded by the Amir Abdullah Al-Salem to bishop Teofilo Ubaldo Stella, founder of the Catholic mission of Kuwait in 1948 and Apostolic Vicar since 1955. In 1956, Monsignor Stella assigned the project to Italian architect Emilio Tenca, who designed a traditional *basilica* with a central nave, two lower aisles, and a small transept. The general layout and main façade bear close resemblance to the Mater Orphanorum church in Legnano, a town in the outskirts of Milan, also designed by Tenca and completed in December 1955.³³ The Kuwaiti version of the project was adapted to the local context through the use of limestone brick rather than clay, and by reducing the aperture it adjusted lighting

fig.4 "Our Lady of the Desert", church and Apostolic Vicariate of Northern Arabia. On right, the original building by Emilio Tenca, 1957–1961; on left, Krzysztof Wiśniowski's additions, 1997 (Photo: Roberto Fabbri, 2019. Reuse not permitted).

fig.4 and thermal insulation. ● Construction commenced in 1957, and the bishop consecrated the church in March 1961 with the dedication to the Holy Family of the Desert.³⁴

In the following years, the Christian community of Kuwait grew significantly in parallel with the increasing number of immigrant workers that had joined the country, and by 1997, the Polish architect Krzysztof Wiśniowski was charged with the redesign of the compound. The new project comprised a series of new buildings embracing the church from the west side, including a new bishop's residence, the rectory, the new parish hall, and seven classrooms for catechism.³⁵ The additions borrowed the limestone brick and colour palette of the original building, yet the elements were combined to create a more post-modernist language.

In direct opposition to the previous examples, this work offers a reflection on foreign traditions and the symbolic elements that represent it, specifically Christian traditional emblems. In fact, while religious practice is tolerated in the country, Kuwait's law prohibits the public display of non-Muslim religious symbols to avoid potential confrontations. Hence, in Wiśniowski's proposal, the tower bell is here dematerialized, becoming a white space-frame structure that only alludes to the traditional campanile's silhouette. Similarly, the cross does not stand above the buildings but has become part of the façade design, punctuating apertures, frames, and shutters.

Redefining modernity/negotiating tradition

Between Behbehani Compound, the Catholic church, and Youm-Al-Bahar there is a large, vacant plot, occasionally used on weekends for improvised football matches. At the end of the plot stands the Amricani Cultural Center, one of the oldest edifications in the country and one of the most recent examples of adaptive reuse in the region. Just like Behbehani, the Center is a national monument and protected under the 1981 master plan revision, but its history has many folds. It was initially a hospital, and its compound has been an experimental site for the country's modern architecture.

Locally known as Al-Amricani, the American Mission Hospital was built by the Arabian Mission of the Reformed Church of America as a base between their headquarters in Basrah and Bahrain respectively. The land was granted in 1911 by the late Amir Mubarak Al-Kabeer at the far edge of town after a missionary doctor successfully operated on his daughter.³⁶ The missionary regarded Kuwait as the door to evangelize Arabia, but their aspiration was met with scepticism from the local population. ●

The first medical facility was erected between 1913 and 1914 by Charles Shaw and Phillip Heynes of the University of Michigan. The two engineers designed a remarkable-for-the-time structure in steel frames and concrete. They imported all the components from abroad, given the complete and utter lack of construction material in the country, and the technique aroused great interest in a city habitually built in mud bricks.³⁷ The hospital was a sleek horizontal body with a pinched roof and deep porch, to protect inpatient rooms from sunlight. The structure allowed for cantilevers, spans, and apertures of an unprecedented size for the country, eventually gaining the name of Glass House. The project was ambitious, and by far the most 'modern' in the region, but the local weather conditions combined with the unskilled labour for such a technique led to several problems, mostly infiltrations, which deterred the mission from replicating the experiment, in Kuwait or elsewhere.³⁸ The coeval Physician's and Pastor's Houses were constructed a few years later with local materials, based on the missionary architecture of the region, such as the 1903 Mason Memorial Hospital in Bahrain.³⁹

The Kuwaiti hospital initially sheltered men and women, creating predictable inconveniences. Consequently, the missionaries built a new temporary women's dispensary, which would later be replaced by a more significant structure in 1939: Olcott Memorial.⁴⁰ The latter was another effort to experiment with more advanced construction systems, a bearing-wall structure in concrete blocks and reinforced concrete slabs; the cement aggregate was produced on-site in a mixer borrowed from the oil company, and all the resulting surfaces were plastered with cement stucco with a 'special' grouting technique which had been previously tested in

fig.1
(E3–E4)

Lutyens' British Embassy.⁴¹ Rev. Dykstra and Rev. Barney designed the new hospital, the latter introducing, as an architectural motif, the two-centred arch for windows and verandas.⁴² This feature, outlined by a raised, tuck-joint plaster, provided an 'Arabian' character to a construction which was – in terms of size, services, and typology – quite dissonant with the rest of the city.

The Olcott set a precedent for the last construction in the compound, Mylrea Memorial, meant to replace the 1911 Men's Hospital. Inaugurated by the Amir in October 1955, Mylrea was a bigger, more equipped version of Olcott, featuring the same architectural envelope and a different, more reliable solution for the roof: jack vaults, locally known as the Persian manner.⁴³ Lovick, the designer, arranged a c-shaped plan facing the sea and extended the arched verandas all around the perimeter.

Despite the 'pre-oil appearance', mostly given by the façades, it could be argued that Al-Amricani is a transitional building in that it reinterprets traditional features; its modernity does not only lay in advanced construction techniques or innovative services but foremost in its spatial design and typology. The two main buildings face the sea aligned on a northwest/southeast axis to take advantage of the sea breeze. The verandas on both principal fronts protect interiors from direct sun exposure and at the same time foster cross-ventilation, as is logical for a modern medical structure. Beyond this, the traditional local typology was the courtyard house, introverted and centripetal towards the inner patio, as can be seen in structures such as coeval Amiri Hospital (1949). In opposition to this, Al-Amricani turns its typology into an open plan, extroverted and facing outward, leaning towards some linear structures that will epitomize Kuwaiti architectural modernity for the following years to come.

Readapting modernity

Al-Amricani remained operational until 1967 when it was deemed obsolete and subsequently closed. The Mission kept half of the compound, continuing its pastoral and educational services, while the main buildings initially became governmental offices and then abandoned. It was only after the invasion that a new interest for the hospitals arose in relation to the destruction of the Kuwait National Museum (KNM), which was set on fire in 1990 by Iraqi troops, who took the objects to Baghdad, including the Dar Al-Athar Al-Islamiyyah (DAI) collection.⁴⁴ After the Liberation, the United Nations forced the occupants to return the museum's artefacts, but the KNM was unfit to receive the collection, so the reuse utilization of Al-Amricani emerged as a possible solution. In the following years, several UNESCO/UNDP expert missions worked on damage assessment of artefacts and KNM buildings as well as on a feasibility study for the rehabilitation of old hospitals as new DAI headquarters.

American Mission Hospital, locally known as Al-Amricani, before the renovation (Photo: Abdulkareem Al-Ghadban, 1993. Reuse not permitted).

fig.5

Since Al-Amricani ● was on the country's heritage list, the intention was to set a standard for future rehabilitation projects. The UN-led committee, in collaboration with DAI, conducted an in-depth campaign for the buildings which included a dimensional survey, materials and structural assessments, a conservation status, archival research, and a design proposal. This phase was coordinated by Michael Bielinsky with UNESCO consultants Alex Castro as gallery designer, Alan Frost as head of architectural restoration, and Manuel Keen as museum curator.⁴⁵ The team assessed that many sections of the buildings had faced significant structural failures and needed to be replaced, which inadvertently gave a certain level of freedom to the rehabilitation project.

fig.5

The concept was elaborated in partnership with the Kuwaiti firm KEO, with Nader Ardalan as project director and Ghazi and Abdul Aziz Sultan as the project's "special advisors".⁴⁶ It proposed that Olcott Memorial could become the new DAI administrative office while the Mylrea, bigger in size, would accommodate the galleries. Hence, the former did not require much alteration, but the latter's distribution changed entirely by the introduction of a wide spiral staircase and new body in the south court. Ghazi Sultan's rendered views depict this space as a triple-high, distributional hinge, protruding above the actual roof with ample fenestration for zenithal lighting. The windows, in this case, were

fig.6 Ghazi Sultan and KEO, unbuilt proposal for new lobby of Amricani Cultural Center, n.d. circa 1996 (Courtesy of Aruna Sultan. Source: Dar Al-Athar Al-Islamiyyah, Kuwait. Reuse not permitted).

fig.6 shaped to resemble Rev. Barney's arches, restating the building's signature element. ● As an alternative, Ghazi Sultan offered two other versions of the roof: either a tensile membrane or space-frame structure.

The project in this form never fully materialized as it implied too many modifications of the original structure to be viable. The National Council for Culture, Art and Letters conducted the works in early 2000 as a simplified 'philological' restoration, intended to bring back the construction's original look. Nevertheless, a few years later, the concept of a new hall in the south court came up again following further UNESCO/UNDP missions in 2005, to which the present author was invited to participate as architect. By this time the project had already been approved, and the proposed roof shape was now a concave metal plate with metal trusses, accommodating a large auditorium below. In 2011, DAI finally inaugurated the building as its new exhibition centre and administrative headquarters.

Al-Amricani stands close to one of Kuwait's (modern) architectural symbols: Jørn Utzon's Parliament (1982). The two buildings have been close neighbours for 40 years yet have somehow mutually absorbed architectural elements from one another. From a distance, the Amricani new roof follows, on a smaller scale and simpler manner, the parabolic shape cast over Assembly Hall

and the sea-view square. Reciprocally, Parliament's north and south elevations retrace the Amricani's façade module, composed by two pointed arches on two floors, framed by two pilasters and a horizontal cornice. The two-centred arches helped Utzon manifest the 'Arabness' of the building, together with the sail and tent metaphors for the roof. The Danish architect refers to his 1959 trip to Iran, with particular regard for Isfahan as one of the most significant historical inspirations for the Kuwaiti building.⁴⁷ On the other hand, Persian influence has permeated Gulf architecture for centuries, was evident in pre-oil Kuwait, and could have also been a known reference for the missionaries.

This episode helps to demystify Kuwait's approach to architectural modernity, often depicted as a predetermined, superimposed, imported pattern. It is, in fact, a more complex and interwoven stratification of historical and contemporary references. The coexisting presence of pre-oil and modern elements reflects the country's traditional openness to external influences, cultural exchange, and trade, embedded in its nature as a port town.

Conclusions

The present work moved from the analysis of lesser known episodes of architectural modernity that sit at the cross-road of tradition and progress, paraphrasing Harold Rosenberg's definition of modernity as the tradition of deposing traditions.⁴⁸ Examining a series of projects that took place in the same quarter of Kuwait City, Jibla, and in the early days of the country's urban transformation, this chapter attempted to demystify the binaries according to which, in the Gulf particularly, 'tradition' is only 'pre-oil', and 'authenticity' is only regional. Many examples of what is considered heritage nowadays, some of which are discussed here, blend in their architectural form reflections on history, locality, global practices, and external influences, still remaining an authentic expression of their era. These are all the ingredients that compose the country's multifaced society and are mirrored in its heterogeneous urban environment, where global and regional aspects coexist. However, pre-oil architectural manifestations are usually preferred to represent shared values, even if the philological reconstruction or even the 'authenticity' is sometimes questionable, as is the case with some heritage villages or Behbehani Compound, for instance.

In this framework, this study considers how Kuwait's modern urban project contributed not only to the physical reshaping of the city but also to the establishment of a bijective relationship with the past. This connection was not always a conflictual superimposition of foreign narratives or practices. In fact, some projects established a dialogue with the local physical and cultural context despite being drawn by foreign hands. Al-Amricani perhaps captures this concept best, a project argued here to

represent a sort of archetypally modern approach to architecture, also influencing both the bordering Assembly Hall as well as a more recent example of adaptive reuse in the region.

This chapter also offered a reading of the legacy of modernity in this contemporary city and of how this vision, generated by a top-down practice to target a specific 'user', has radically changed into a liminal space, a theatre for social interaction of completely different citizenships. In contemporary Kuwait, after 5 p.m. and during the weekends, this part of the town is Philipindia, and the rigid 1960s concrete blocks around Fahed Al-Salem Street assume more fluid contours. The rational urbanscape of the 1960s does not appeal any longer to the citizen for whom modernity was acquired, and for this very reason, Jibla is now an open territory in transformation.

In conclusion, this analysis argues how Kuwait's modernist urban project resulted in a 'fragmentarium'. The term metaphorically describes a museological space that collects and accommodates a series of apparently uncorrelated shards that were initially part of cohesive ideas. Now, being incomplete, altered or superseded, these objects can no longer fit into the general narrative of one gallery, just as Kuwait's modernist fragments are currently obsolete in the logic of the contemporary city, waiting to be demolished and replaced or to become heritage and survive. While 'museumification' cannot be a solution for an urban environment, adaptive reuse has shown itself to be the only feasible strategy to repurpose these fragments.

Notes

- 1 The exceptionally disproportionate ratio between local population and migrant workforces in Kuwait, and in the region more broadly, is one of the highest in the world. It often fuels discriminative behaviours based on ethnicity that result in the marginalization and poor living conditions of migrants. The subject has been widely investigated by the press, academia, and international organizations, especially after the widely circulated reports on working conditions in the Qatar 2022 World Cup building sites. For more information, see *Fair Migration: Setting an ILO Agenda*, Report of the Director General at the International Labour Conference (Geneva: International Labour Office, 2014) and "Labour Migration in the Arab States", official website of the International Labour Organization, accessed October 17, 2020, https://www.ilo.org/beirut/areasofwork/labour-migration/WCMS_514910/lang--en/index.htm.
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