CHANGING FAÇADES IN GULF CITIES

Identity, icons, and lamentations of loss

Kevin Mitchell

To cite this chapter: Kevin Mitchell, "Changing façades in Gulf cities: Identity, icons, and lamentations of loss", in *Urban modernity in the contemporary Gulf: Obsolescence and opportunities*, eds. Roberto Fabbri and Sultan Sooud Al-Qassemi (Abingdon: Routledge, 2022), 120–137

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the significant inflow of foreign direct investment into the Gulf and competition among cities to establish centres for commerce and tourism fuelled extraordinary expansions of the built environment across the region. International Monetary Fund (IMF) data reveals that the number of employees in real estate during the most recent building boom in the United Arab Emirates, supported by the rapid growth of Dubai, more than doubled from 42,000 in 2000¹ to an estimated 97,000 in 2008.² During the same period, the number of people involved in the construction industry rose from 287,000 in 2000³ to 757,000 in 2008.⁴ The extraordinary increase in employees in the real estate and construction sectors is an indicator of the rapid development of the built environment in the city, now recognized as an exemplar of unbridled growth among the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) member states.

While the latest phase of development that propelled Dubai ahead of its neighbours was notable in terms of scope and scale, other cities also experienced major transformations of the built environment at various times following the discovery of oil. For example, Kuwait grew rapidly to accommodate a growing population that increased from 262,000 in 1960 to 750,000 in 1970, and then to nearly 1.4 million in 1980.⁵ The plan for Kuwait signed by Minoprio, Spencely and Macfarlane presented in 1951 and the subsequent plans by Colin Buchanan & Partners (1968) and Shankland & Cox (1976 and 1981) guided growth and resulted in continual redevelopment of areas of the city through demolition and rebuilding, a practice that remains common in many Gulf cities.

The building booms that have transformed the built environments throughout the Gulf have often been accompanied by elegies lamenting the loss of a past perceived to be superior to the present. In *The Kuwait Urbanization*, published in 1964, Saba George Shiber reacts to the destruction of parts of the city to facilitate new construction:

The new city is undoubtedly a startling new machine that has been assembled in an astonishingly short period of time ... By profound urban and architectural concepts, Old Kuwait is a classic. Many of the top architectural and urban authorities that I have had the occasion to discuss new Kuwait at length with are unanimous in their opinion that it is not: at least not yet from the urban-architectural significance points-of-view.⁶

Shiber goes on to describe connections between the urban organization of what he terms “Old Kuwait”, domestic architecture, family structures, social norms, cultural values, and religious practices.

The unease, precipitated by the abandonment of “profound architectural and urban concepts” that in Shiber’s estimation are people- and place-specific, is related to contemporary claims that Gulf cities have lost their identity; though, ‘identity’ is rarely defined and often invoked when the pace of change is perceived as a threat to prevailing norms. In her article “The Islamic City – Historic Myth, Islamic Essence, and Contemporary Relevance”, Janet Abu-Lughod addresses the challenges associated with approaching cities in the Islamic world in essentializing terms by raising a series of critical questions related to the challenges of reproducing historical forms that emerge from context-specific circumstances and may no longer have relevance. Abu-Lughod maintains that cities are processes rather than products, arguing that there are three conditions that influence the urban form of Arab-Islamic cities: “(1) juridical distinctions between Muslims and/or citizens and outsiders; (2) segregation by gender and a virtually complete division of labour according to it; and (3) a fully decentralized and *ex post facto* system of land use and governmental regulation of space”.⁷ Although Abu-Lughod maintains that none of the conditions exist today, she nevertheless concludes that measures could be taken to encourage processes to enhance cities in the Arab-Islamic world and advocates for learning from the achievements of the past:

The historic Islamic city often achieved community, privacy, and beauty. It would be wise to seek the same goals, even though the old means are no longer available to us. We can only encourage growth in the desired direction, but since cities are living processes rather than formalistic shells for living, they cannot be built by us, we can only encourage them to grow in a desired direction. Can we nurture neighborhoods that are supportive but not defensive? Can we foster privacy for women alone but not for households? Can we guard the rights of neighbors while still applying laws consistently? This is the task Arab city planners must set for themselves.⁸

A survey of urbanism in the region indicates that planners continue to face challenges in achieving a sense of community, privacy, and beauty. Abu-Lughod’s makes for a convincing and strong case, but the assertion that cities are processes rather than products is, arguably, only partially correct. Cities are processes *and* products: the individual works of architecture that make up cities are physical products with particular qualities and attributes. They function in specific ways according to formal structure, spatial organization, and overall appearance. Individual buildings can also take on meaning and be contested in significant ways that lead to destruction and/or alteration, and this is one of the reasons for the renewed interest in mid- to late twentieth century architecture in the Gulf.

While both Shiber and Abu-Lughod recognize the complex relationship between the built environment and the broader social, cultural, and religious context, the calls for preserving and maintaining buildings constructed during the period from the 1950s until the beginning of the twenty-first century have tended to focus on outward appearance rather than the specific qualities or particular approaches to space, form, and context that would be the basis for assessing the significance of a work of architecture. The tendency to focus on façades is perhaps due to the rather substantial challenges of addressing the complex socio-cultural contexts of Gulf cities informed by the diversity of inhabitants and their respective communities. Demographic structures may vary greatly depending on the city and on investor-driven models of urban development. These models promote demand for generic commercial and domestic space with the broadest possible appeal for rental and resale. There are a number of compelling reasons for preserving and maintaining buildings from the more recent past, ranging from reducing the resources required for demolition and new construction to the architectural significance of the work; however, the continued emphasis on the outward appearance of buildings can be detrimental as it propagates the assumption that architecture begins, and ends, with the façade.

The indiscriminate concern for outward appearance has been important in the brand-building competition among cities – seeking to attract the inflow of capital, corporations, and tourists – as evident in the demand for “icons” that must always aspire to be bigger and better. Leslie Sklair, in *The Icon Project: Architecture, Cities and Capitalist Globalization*, writes that

Icons emerge at the meeting point of power, meaning, aesthetics, and taste, where the power of those who dominate the global economy, the meanings produced by its ideologues, and the aesthetics produced by architects create the condition in which the Icon Project thrives. One of the consequences of capitalist globalization is the need to transform the social production, marketing, and reception of iconic architecture. These processes are largely driven by those who own and control most of the land and other resources all over the world, conceptualized here as the transnational capitalist class (TCC). The TCC is organized in four overlapping fractions – corporate, political, professional, and consumerist. In most societies, the TCC has the lion’s share of economic resources, political influence, and mass media attention.⁹

One manifestation of the emphasis on the iconic in the Gulf is participation in the global contest to build higher. At the turn of the twentieth century, projects like Al-Faisaliyah Centre (2000) and Kingdom Centre (2002) in Riyadh or Burj Al-Arab (1999) and the twin Emirates Towers (2000) in Dubai were nearly one-third

taller than other high-rises in the region at the time they were completed, in spite of a surplus of available land, the expense associated with building taller, and an oversupply of leasable space. In 2010, Dubai secured the distinction of world's tallest building with the 828-metre-high Burj Khalifa; the Jeddah Tower planned for Riyadh, and currently under construction, is estimated to reach 1,000 metres. Dubai's latest contribution to super tall structures is the Dubai Creek Tower, announced in 2016. While the final height of the building has not been made public, the developer's website promises a superlative-worthy icon:

Set to be the 21st Century's [*sic*] new global icon, Dubai Creek Tower soars up from the heart of Dubai Creek Harbour into the clouds above. Designed by the renowned neo-futuristic Spanish architect, Santiago Calatrava, this gravity-defying structure is inspired by the lily flower and traditional Arabian minarets. A product of great vision, innovation and construction excellence, it will add to Dubai's significant skyline and elevate the city's position as a world-leading metropolis of the future.¹⁰

While the design and construction of the Burj Khalifa and the Kingdom Tower have advanced technical knowledge and fulfilled client demands for an iconic presence, there have been few attempts to consider how high-rises could respond to the Gulf climate and context.

In spite of the lingering repercussions of the post-2008 financial crisis, which included the sudden cessation of construction activity and the promise of more considered approaches to the built environment to address the excesses associated the unchecked speculation in real estate, fondness for the iconic and for appearance remains. At the beginning of October 2019, Dubai announced a series of initiatives that included "to design and implement a clear architectural identity that makes Dubai different from other international cities. This identity can be placed on public and private buildings".¹¹ Although details related to the actual implementation were not explained, there is the implication that "architectural identity" would result from an applied façade treatment.

The assumption that "architectural identity" can be reduced to the façade treatment of a building is indicative of the increasing focus on appearance. By tracing the development of the Central Bank of Kuwait (CBK) buildings – from the Arne Jacobsen-designed structure completed in the 1970s to the most recent headquarters designed by HOK in collaboration with Pan-Arab Consulting Engineers (PACE) – and comparing the CBK high-rise to the National Commercial Bank (Jeddah; completed 1983) designed by Gordon Bunshaft and Skidmore, Owings & Merrill (SOM), this paper examines the shift in emphasis from formal

structure, spatial character, and climate responsiveness to a concern for iconic expression. The paper also addresses ways in which terms like 'context' and 'identity' are challenged and problematized with respect to the production of architecture in Gulf cities competing to establish themselves as legitimate nodes within global networks that facilitate the flow of commerce and culture.

Acceptance, rejection, and a turn towards the iconic

As part of a major building programme in Kuwait, Danish architect Arne Jacobsen was invited to develop a proposal for a new building to house the CBK in 1966. Although Jacobsen died prior to the initiation of construction in 1973, the building was completed by Dissing+Weitling, an office initially founded by Hans Dissing and Otto Weitling to carry out Jacobsen's work following his death. Dissing had been with Jacobsen's office since the early 1950s, and Weitling joined in the mid-1960s.

The selection of a Danish architect known for a minimalist approach to form and the rejection of applied ornamentation was a bold choice for the CBK but not necessarily surprising given the outward orientation of Kuwait following independence in 1961 and ratification of the constitution in 1962. In a broader historical context, Denmark's connections extend back to the Danish Arabia Expedition (1761–1762), which was later chronicled by Carsten Niebuhr, the only member to survive the trip. In the more recent past, Barclay Raunkjær led a Royal Danish Geographical Society-sponsored expedition that included Kuwait in 1912, and Danish archaeologists organized the first excavations in the Gulf region and have been active in Kuwait since 1958. While the academic exchanges would have brought exposure to Denmark, the trade ties between the two countries were strong as evidenced by companies such as the Kuwaiti Danish Dairy Company established in 1962.

The design of the CBK exhibited the formal clarity and minimalist approach to detailing that characterized Jacobsen's work. ●

fig.1

There were also clear lessons drawn from the National Bank of Denmark (NBD) project in Copenhagen, on which Jacobsen had begun work in 1961 after being invited to participate in a closed competition.¹² Like the CBK, the final stages of the NBD project were completed by Dissing+Weitling after Jacobsen's death. The sites for CBK and NBD were both trapezoidal, which created particular challenges. In both instances, Jacobsen filled nearly the entire site by establishing a consistent street wall. In the case of NBD, the boundary wall maintains a one-storey height and a block, containing an additional five storeys, appears to float above a one-storey wall expressed as a solid plinth on the façade. The north and south façades of the block are divided into vertically oriented sections clad in marble, and the solid portions of the

Central Bank of Kuwait, prior to renovation. The building was design by Arne Jacobsen in 1966 and constructed by Dissing+Weitling from 1973 to 1976 (Source: Dissing+Weitling. Reuse not permitted).

fig.1

façade are separated by recessed windows that serve to create a gap, reinforcing the appearance of verticality. The long east and west façades are sheathed in curtain walls that maintain the same rhythm of the solid panels covering the north and south façades. Typical of perimeter blocks characteristic of Copenhagen's urban fabric, interior courtyards have been created to allow for narrower floor plates and access to light. Perhaps the most striking aspect of the NBD building is the 20-metre-high lobby containing a staircase that appears to be suspended with no visible means of support. Like the site itself, the lobby is a trapezoidal plan, and visitors enter into the narrowest part of the plan underneath a low plane and then emerge into the space facing the stair. In terms of formal structure and spatial configuration, Jacobsen explored some of the same ideas developed in the NBD in the design for the CBK; however, the ideas were transformed in fundamental ways to respond to the context of the Gulf.

As mentioned above, the plot for the CBK was irregular and, as in the site response for the NBD project, Jacobsen proposed a low building that extended to the plot boundaries. While the site strategies were similar, there were subtle but significant differences beyond the response to the irregular plot: the boundary wall enclosing the CBK site has a slight vertical slope, and one

fig.2 Central Bank of Kuwait, Kuwait City, following renovation with Central Bank of Kuwait Headquarters shown beyond on left (Photo: Kevin Mitchell, 2020. Reuse not permitted).

corner is defined by a mastaba-like, two-storey mass adjacent to the main entry. Given the degree of formal abstraction employed throughout the project and the fact that the mastaba form was found in other parts of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region but not indigenous to Kuwait, the treatment of the wall raises questions regarding the way in which Jacobsen considered the relation between building and context. In an interpretative leap, one could argue that the sloped wall surface is a reference to buildings such as Qasr Al-Ahmar. However, as discussed below, the visual reference to potential precedents was not enough to prohibit an intervention that substantially altered the interior integrity and exterior appearance of the project.

While both the NBD and the CBK rely on a one-storey building expressed as a plinth and a taller structure to house essential functions, in terms of overall organizational strategy the CBK differs substantially. The tower for the Kuwait project is based on a square plan comprised of five structural bays in each direction, rendered visible as vertical columns on the façade. A central, courtyard-like atrium extending across three bays rises five storeys; the atrium is bounded by a single-loaded corridor that leads to open plan offices. Similar to the NBD, the entry sequence for the CBK is planned to provide experiences of compression

and expansion; in the case of Kuwait, the sequence extends, and visitors pass through a series of distinct spaces, including a thickened wall at the entry and the service zone, before entering the atrium. In response to the harsh sunlight in the Gulf, Jacobsen filtered light into the atrium using roof lights. The façade responds to the climate through a system of horizontal louvres spanning between the vertical columns expressed on the façade, which results in the tower block appearing as a light volume that contrasts with the massiveness of the solid boundary wall.

The façade treatment of the CBK could be viewed as an adaptation of the *mashrabiyya* used to control light and reduce glare in some parts of the MENA region. However, the extensive renovation of the building that occurred in the mid-1980s clearly revealed that the *mashrabiyya*-like devices were not enough like *mashrabiyya* for some. ● In addition to drastically altering the appearance of the building, the renovation negated the conceptual clarity evident in Jacobsen's original building.

fig.2

The façade was radically altered as the louvres were replaced with precast panels intended to invoke 'traditional' architecture with arches and dark-coloured, lattice-like screens that replicated, rather than recalled, *mashrabiyya*. The interior was not spared as the atrium was filled in, and decorative flourishes and a poorly executed extension of the building left the project muddled in terms of massing. There were also significant changes to the interior that affected both formal clarity and functional efficiency. As Dana Aljouder has pointed out, the political climate in Kuwait in the 1980s was tenuous, and the conservatism that impacted the political sphere also impacted the reception of what were viewed as "Western" ideas.¹³ The fact that the CBK building was altered so dramatically from Jacobsen's original design indicates perhaps not so much a rejection of the building per se but rather a rejection of the fact that a public building such as the CBK was not stylistically derived from what was considered to represent what some deemed to be 'appropriate'.

The oscillation between acceptance and rejection of architectural expressions perceived to be from abroad tended towards positive reception of 'imported' models at the time that the CBK required a new headquarters. ● HOK in collaboration with PACE was awarded the commission in 2003 following a limited competition. The 40-storey tower has a triangular floor plan; a diagrid exoskeleton supports a glazed façade oriented towards the north to provide views of the Gulf while the remaining two façades are clad in stone and treated as solid planes with small punched openings.

fig.3

The orientation of the building itself could be considered a climate-responsive measure to protect from heat and glare. The overall appearance of the building indicates that the demand for visual references, a demand which resulted in the renovation of Jacobsen's original building for the bank, were no longer

necessary. Instead, it was vital for the building to have an ‘iconic’ presence as indicated by the following quote from a CNN broadcast that is highlighted on HOK’s website: “Kuwait City is soon to welcome an iconic new landmark to its skyline”.¹⁴

The emphasis on the iconic evident in the new CBK building has become a dominant concern in architectural production in the Gulf since Dubai’s ascendancy at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Projects across the GCC, with the notable exception of Oman, reflect the competition for investment and prestige that could serve to attract capital, enhance reputation, and support the effort to gain regional economic and political prominence. While some projects seek to instantly buy legitimacy through importing institutions rather than building foundations through enhancing capability and capacity over time, there have been others that seek to lead in terms of technological development. For example, the Burj Khalifa has led to a number of advances in engineering for tall buildings. However, the global race to build ever higher is not necessarily fuelled by the need for increased density in urban areas but rather by aspirations to merely prove that a city or nation possesses – or can secure – the financial resources necessary to compete in the race to build higher. As I described in “Restricted by Scarcity, Striving for Greater Bounty: The Role of Architecture in Making Dubai”, the status-enhancing potential associated with boasting the world’s tallest building is deemed to be more important than the monetary costs of construction and continued maintenance:

When considering the relationship between architecture and economy, the physical attributes and architectural aspects of the Burj Khalifa are less important than the way in which the building was part of a larger strategy aimed at establishing Dubai as a major city capable of competing on a global scale. The extent of media attention garnered by the Burj Khalifa and the appearance of the building in films from Bollywood to Hollywood have contributed to promoting Dubai across the world. Unlike the exchange value of International City, which is established by the resale through ‘flipping’ apartment units and rental returns, the Burj Khalifa has enhanced Dubai’s status in the region and beyond.¹⁵

While attaining the moniker ‘iconic’ for the Burj Khalifa and the new CBK may fulfil a client’s desire, there are few high-rise buildings in GCC countries that consider how the typology could be transformed to respond to the particular climate and contexts in the Gulf.¹⁶

As mentioned above, the new CBK does respond to the climate of the Gulf through building orientation and façade treatment to counter solar radiation, but ultimately the reliance on familiar contemporary tropes such as the diagrid, tapering, and

fig.3

HOK in collaboration with PACE, Central Bank of Kuwait Headquarters, Kuwait City, 2008–2017 (Photo: Mark Makhoul, 2021. Reuse not permitted).

SOM, National Commercial Bank, Jeddah, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, completed in 1983 (Source: © Wolfgang Hoyt/Esto, 1985. Reuse not permitted).

fig.4

cantilevered volumes ensure an iconic presence without the need for exploring spatial or formal strategies that could differentiate the building in terms of its architecture. In contrast, the National Commercial Bank (NCB) in Jeddah, ● Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), designed by Gordon Bunshaft and SOM and completed in 1983, provides an example of a building that derives its iconic presence from a clear, rigorously executed architectural idea with a concern for climate and context.

fig.4

The NCB occupies a prime site adjacent to an area of Jeddah known as Al-Balad, which contains buildings of historical significance, and at the juncture between Al-Manqabah Lagoon and the Red Sea. Since being declared the official port of Makkah in the seventh century AD, Jeddah has grown in size and stature and attracted a cosmopolitan population that brought building traditions from other parts of the MENA region. In spite of the deterioration of a number of buildings of historical significance,

a portion of Al-Balad designated “Historic Jeddah, the Gate to Makkah” was inscribed on the United Nations Organization for Education, Science and Culture (UNESCO) World Heritage List in 2014. Although all of the criteria for inscription were not met, the Advisory Board Evaluation concluded that Historic Jeddah did meet requirements related to architecture. With reference to criterion (ii), which requires that nominated properties “exhibit an important interchange of human values, over a span of time or within a cultural area of the world, on developments in architecture or technology, monumental arts, town-planning or landscape design”, the Advisory Board noted the following:

Jeddah was for centuries the most important, the largest and the richest among these settlements, and today Historic Jeddah, the Gate to Makkah is the last surviving urban site along the Red Sea coast still preserving the ensemble of the attributes of this culture: commercial-based economy, multicultural environment, isolated outward-oriented houses, coral masonry construction, precious woodwork decorating the façades, and specific technical devices to favouring internal ventilation.¹⁷

The site of the NCB was significant within Jeddah and the location on the Red Sea at the mouth of Al-Manqabah Lagoon was prominent. As the building could be viewed from Historic Jeddah, Bunshaft and his colleagues were faced with the challenge of addressing how it should respond to the immediate context.

When comparing the architecture of the NCB in Jeddah and the new CBK building in Kuwait, there are superficial similarities as both are based on triangular floor plans; however, Bunshaft’s seemingly simple plan belies a spatial complexity derived as a result of a v-shaped subtraction from the plan, rotated in seven-, nine-, and seven-floor increments, to create a vertical triangular void through the centre of the building that functions as a courtyard. The wall surfaces that result from the v-shaped subtraction are glazed to allow views, but the windows are shaded from direct sunlight. A 15-metre-high, public banking hall with a mezzanine level fills the triangular floor plan and forms a solid base for the tower; executive offices on the top level of the building also occupy the full triangular floor plan and serve to create a solid cap, visually lightened by alternating vertical openings around the perimeter of the building. A separate six-storey, circular parking garage is connected via a rectangular service and vertical circulation core, distinguished as an independent element through the use of deep reveals.

The NCB in Jeddah was shortlisted for the Aga Khan Award for Architecture, and a comprehensive technical review was completed in 1989 as part of the award process. The technical review included a local report to “evaluate some of the socio-

cultural aspects” of the building.¹⁸ As part of the research carried out for the report, a questionnaire was developed in order to gather information regarding the perceptions of employees, customers, and neighbours in the vicinity. Feedback was also obtained from a group of professionals, architects, and planners practicing in Jeddah. The questionnaire asked respondents to consider the compatibility between the NCB and the context; and employees (75%), customers (83%), and residents who lived nearby (76%) reported that they found the building to be homogeneous with the traditional buildings in the surrounding area. Given that the building was shortlisted for the Aga Khan Award for Architecture presumably because of some degree of sensitivity to the context, it is interesting to note that only 20% of the professionals surveyed perceived the building to be homogeneous in terms of its relation to the buildings of Historic Jeddah. Equally interesting are the findings related to exterior appearance and general impression of the building. Those surveyed were asked to respond to the question related to appearance by stating whether they “like”, “dislike”, or “do not know”. For this question, 63% of employees, 44% of customers, 60% of professionals, and 52% of nearby residents indicated that they “liked” the exterior. The question related to general appearance asked respondents to express whether they “admire very much”, “admire”, or “do not know”; 86% of employees, 94% of customers, 80% of professionals, and 84% of nearby residents stated that they “admire very much” the general appearance of the building.¹⁹

The Aga Khan Award for Architecture is one of the few award programmes that carries out multistage reviews of short-listed buildings; and although one could question the formulation of the survey questions or the validity of results based on the number of respondents, the results provided in the local report for the technical review of the NCB raise issues related to elusive notions of ‘identity’ that permeate discussions of the built environment. Surveying various approaches to architecture in the Gulf through projects for the CBK and the NCB serves to frame a discussion related to identity. Rapid growth, the lack of a coherent unified approach to urban design and planning, and the overwhelming demand to deliver visually arresting icons to attract the attention of investors has led to criticism that Gulf cities ‘lack identity’. The criticism stems from an essentialist position that assumes that cities in the Gulf have lost an ‘essence’, once manifest in the appearance of buildings and in the urban fabric, such as that found in extant buildings in Historic Jeddah and in restorations and reconstructions in Dubai’s Al-Fahidi, Doha’s Souq Waqif, and Sharjah’s Al-Mareija neighbourhoods.

Adopting an essentialist position relative to Gulf cities denies of the complex interplay of forces that have shaped architecture and urban form, assumes that all Gulf cities developed

according to a similar trajectory and were subject to the same forces, and fails to recognize the impact of exchange of knowledge and practices through extensive networks across the Gulf, Red Sea, and Indian Ocean. It is perhaps more useful to consider architecture and urbanism in the Gulf in terms of the acceptance of or resistance to ideas that have been adopted and, in some cases, adapted. Even adopting ideas without adaptation is an explicit choice from among the myriad of other possibilities. Writing on adoption or adaptation in relation to the formation of personal identity, Ian Hacking has written that

[People] can make tacit or even explicit choices, adapt or adopt ways of living so as to fit or get away from the classifications that have been applied to them. These very choices, adaptations or adoptions have consequences for the very group, for the kind of people that is invoked. What was known about people of a kind may have become false because people of that kind have changed in what they believe about themselves.²⁰

Tracing the development of the buildings for the CBK, and a comparison with the NCB headquarters in Jeddah, provides insight into the ways in which the adoption and adaptation of architectural ideas reveals changing views related to the built environment. It also suggests that the reception of architectural ideas is contingent upon both time and place.

The problems of reproducing the past

The diverse approaches to architecture in the Gulf are evident in the range of stylistic tendencies observed within and across the major cities, from the calligraphy-covered Museum of the Future in Dubai to the windmill-bearing Bahrain World Trade Center. As noted in the introduction, successive building booms have transformed the built environments throughout the region, and periods of extraordinary growth have often been followed by lamentations over the loss of a past perceived to be superior to the present. As noted in the introduction to this chapter, Saba George Shiber, who is increasingly quoted in relation to his cogent critique of the changes in Kuwait in the late 1950s and early 1960s, expressed concern over the absence of “profound urban and architectural concepts” in the projects replacing “Old Kuwait”. And Janet Abu-Lughod has cautioned against Orientalizing tendencies that give rise to essentialist claims about cities in the Islamic world while advocating for learning from the past and also recognizing that the conditions which gave rise to cities in the region have fundamentally changed. While both Shiber and Abu-Lughod were writing with acute awareness of the complex relationship between the built environment and the broader social, cultural, and religious context, the calls for preserving and maintaining buildings

constructed during the period from the 1950s until the beginning of the twenty-first century have tended to focus on outward appearance rather than the specific qualities or the particular context-specific responses that are important considerations when assessing the significance of a work of architecture.

The desire to acknowledge the value of mid-twentieth-century buildings is warranted, and there are numerous examples that demand serious consideration and critical assessment. While the CBK building from the 1970s and the NCB designed by Gordon Bunshaft and SOM are rather insensitive to the urban context, perhaps necessarily so given their function, there is evidence of a considered approach to formal structure, spatial character, and climate responsiveness. The fate of the Jacobsen-designed CBK resulted from a lack of recognition of the value of the building and from broader societal forces, rejecting the appearance of the original façade in favour of what was deemed to be 'traditional' expression.

The early twenty-first century fascination with mid- to late twentieth-century buildings, if limited to a concern for outward appearance, ultimately devalues the potential of architecture and perpetuates the pervasive view that the 'identity' of cities can be made – or remade – by constructing icons or making stylistic choices. Jacobsen's design for the CBK and the NCB demonstrates how façades can be used to mitigate the impact of solar radiation, and the buildings also illustrate how the treatment of façade is commensurate with strategies related to, for example, the distribution of interior space, location of service zones, and design of structural systems. If one begins, and ends, with the façade of notable precedents in the region, then there will be reason to lament the loss of lessons that could be learned from the recent past to inform the development of more sensitive approaches to architecture in the present and future.

Notes

- 1 International Monetary Fund [IMF], *United Arab Emirates: Statistical Appendix*, IMF Country Report No. 06/256 (Washington, DC: 2006), 15.
- 2 IMF, *United Arab Emirates: Statistical Appendix*, IMF Country Report No. 09/120 (Washington, DC: 2009), 9.
- 3 IMF, *United Arab Emirates*, 2006, 15.
- 4 IMF, *United Arab Emirates*, 2009, 9.
- 5 The World Bank, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL?locations=KW>.
- 6 Saba G. Shiber, *The Kuwait Urbanization* (Kuwait: Kuwait Government Printing Office, 1964), 74.
- 7 Janet Abu-Lughod, "The Islamic City – Historic Myth, Islamic Essence, and Contemporary Relevance", *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 19, no. 2 (May 1987): 172.
- 8 Ibid., 173.
- 9 Leslie Sklair, *The Icon Project: Architecture, Cities, and Capitalist Globalization* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 2–3.
- 10 "Dubai Creek Harbour", accessed August 15, 2019, <https://www.emaar.com/en/our-communities/dubai-creek-harbour/dubai-creek-tower>.
- 11 "Unique Cultural Visa Aimed at Turning Dubai into a Cultural Hub", *Gulf News*, October 1, 2019, <https://gulfnews.com/uae/unique-cultural-visa-aimed-at-turning-dubai-into-a-cultural-hub-1.66822670>.
- 12 For a discussion of the National Bank of Denmark, see Carsten Thau and Kjeld Vindum, *Arne Jacobsen* (Copenhagen: Arkitektens Verlag, 2002), 508–521.
- 13 Dana Aljouder, "Monologues with Bureaucracy", in *Acquiring Modernity*, ed. Noura Alsager (Kuwait: National Council for Culture, Arts and Letters, 2014), 10–12.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Kevin Mitchell, "Restricted by Scarcity, Striving for Greater Bounty: The Role of Architecture in Making Dubai", in *Economy and Architecture*, eds. Juliet Odgers, Mhairi McVicar, and Stephen Kite (London: Routledge, 2015), 222.
- 16 Roberto Fabbri, "IconiCity: Seeking Identity by Building Iconic Architectures in Kuwait", *Gulf Affairs* (Autumn 2016): 13–16.
- 17 The International Council on Monuments and Sites [ICOMOS], *Historic Jeddah, the Gate to Makkah (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia) No 1361*, 94, <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1361/documents>.
- 18 Serge Santelli, Aga Khan Award for Architecture, *1989 Technical Review Summary: National Commercial Bank*, 0684.SAU, unpaginated, <https://s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/media.archnet.org/system/publications/contents/736/original/FLS0746.pdf?1384748560>.

19 Ibid.

20 Ian Hacking, *The Social Construction of What?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 34.