

## Speaking of the City: Establishing Urban Expertise in the Arab Gulf

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The Arab Gulf remains a marginalized, even unfashionable, area of research in the Middle East academy. In spite of—or maybe because of—this marginality, the region offers an interesting vantage point for reflecting on the production of knowledge about geographic and cultural regions. The frame of knowledge production casts into relief discourses of “the city” in Middle East, and particularly Gulf, studies over the past decade.

In clarifying my point, let me contrast the approach I will propose here to something that might be called a Western folk theory of the urban, in which the “city” as some universal category is blithely invoked by architects, urbanists, military counterinsurgency theorists, and others as a catchall for any kind of densely settled or built-up conurbation. The role that academics play is significant as well, with our industry of publications, conferences, and research centers often reinforcing decontextualized invocations of the city. The city has become something of a fetish in such discourse, not least in relation to the Arab Gulf. But what does the category “the city” mean, specifically? Or, more precisely, what does the category of “the city” do? If there is no such thing as the city in a universal, transhistorical sense, if “the city” is not denotative in any straightforward way, then perhaps this category plays a more interesting and political discursive role. In my current research, I attempt to grapple with how the category of the city (and particularly the Global South city) becomes an object of expertise, produced at the intersection of discourse and technopolitics.<sup>1</sup>

Does it matter that the vast catalog of conferences, workshops, and symposia in the Gulf region are funded and organized at the confluence of the Gulf state, “security” think tanks, Gulf universities (which tend to be headed by rulers or members of royal families), and Western (particularly American) universities increasingly operating under a for-profit paradigm? What kind of urban knowledge object is produced in this encounter? Is it one that highlights and naturalizes consumption of global commodities as a source of well-being, one in which rights discourses organize (and contain) the politics of labor, or one that closes off possibilities for alternative modes of urbanism? Who invokes “the city,” in what contexts, and how are they acting to frame and transform reality by doing so? Does it matter that a region long stereotyped as “archaic” or “Bedouin” is suddenly stereotyped as hyperurban and supermodern?<sup>2</sup> What kinds of legitimacy are conferred by “urbanizing” the Gulf in this way? These are questions that need more rigorous research.

The Gulf is particularly good to think with because it allows us to see “the city” as a situated object produced in practices of mapping, constitutive speech acts, and other kinds of mediation. Take as a simple example a conference on Gulf Cities at the American University of Kuwait that I attended earlier this year. The organizers and participants of the conference constituted the conference space—both in a tangible, physical sense, and as a less tangible space for thought, deliberation, and so forth—through various

mediatory devices typical of such urban-academic settings. During their talks, several of the conference participants showed maps, plans, and statistics that tracked various kinds of economic, social, and political activity and demographics. Several of the papers, along with the conference brochure and informational documents, imaged a particular form of the built environment, the skyscraper silhouette. Such representational devices do not simply reflect the realities to which they refer, but rather help to constitute the object we call, and act upon, as “the city.” In particular, this becomes a normative (fetishized?) city that “should” have certain characteristics, such as public spaces, planning, citizens, an image that establishes the alibi for our expert interventions.

A mediatory device of particular interest that we notice emerging over the past decade is the increasing use of biomedical metaphors for urban space. Geographers such as Derek Gregory have pointed to the use of biomedical discourse in U.S. military knowledge production about targets of U.S. intervention (counterinsurgencies are meant to “stop the bleeding” or to minister to an “ailing” urban “patient,” for example, and insurgencies are analogized as “tumors”).<sup>3</sup> It is quite peculiar that such discourse finds an echo in a seemingly dissimilar phenomenon, the apotheosization of the Global South in architectural theory of the past ten to fifteen years. But instead of the metaphor of medical care favored by military theorists, the tendency in this case is to focus on the “sterility” of Western urban spaces depicted as monotonous and lacking in vitality.<sup>4</sup> Working in non-Western contexts, in turn, yields the opposite experience: it is about “building something new” and “a daily pleasure,”<sup>5</sup> a “nostalgia for a pre-modern condition,”<sup>6</sup> the magic of the landscape and authenticity, and a receptiveness to new ideas and experimentation.<sup>7</sup>

If one condition of the production of the category of the urban in the Gulf and other parts of the Global South involves, therefore, the use of biomedical analogies, another involves the invocation of “local culture,” “culture talk.” In recent years, the Arab Gulf, especially cities such as Abu Dhabi, Doha, and Dubai, have been engaged in major initiatives of “urban entrepreneurialism,”<sup>8</sup> with firms such as Ando, Gehry, Hadid, Koolhaas/OMA, Jean Nouvel, Skidmore Owings Merrill, and Snøhetta “rushing” to what one observer has called (referring to the UAE in particular), an architectural “Xanadu.”<sup>9</sup> If, as Henri Lefebvre has put it, urbanism is always “class urbanism,” then the emphasis of this expertise on notions of culture and authenticity illuminates the ways that local and global vectors of cultural power intersect and produce space in the Arab Gulf.<sup>10</sup> A review of Koolhaas’s (abortive) Dubai Waterfront City project, for example, opens with: “the plan’s geometric grid gives way to an intimate warren of alleyways, like a traditional souk.”<sup>11</sup>

All of this has an unfortunate set of effects. Aside from reinscribing onto Gulf urban space an array of clichés, the power both of Western experts and of actors connected to the ruling families of the Gulf states is erased, while stereotypes long afflicting the region are reinforced: the erroneous ideas that these are “cultures without history” or that they are “backward, tribal” societies who were privileged to have visionary, modernizing rulers. As Donald McNeill discusses in his important book *The Global Architect*, architectural firms increasingly see themselves as “strong service” providers whose services include both international expertise and “local knowledge and cultural sensitivity.”<sup>12</sup> But whose “culture,” exactly, is being referred to, and to what uses are such representations being put locally?

Rather than exhibiting a critical awareness that visual icons of so-called Gulf Arab national identity are traditions invented as part of the cultural politics of the ruling Gulf dynasties,<sup>13</sup> urban experts usually take these icons at face value. The example of Dubai in particular shows why this is so problematic. Between the 1920s and the 1950s, there was a struggle in Dubai between, on the one side, the ruler and his British protectors and, on the other side, various formations of reformists, from constitutional monarchists to nationalists and Nasirists. Although the ruler successfully repressed and finally coopted them, these reformists left a modernizing legacy from which all Dubayyans still benefit today: the social welfare state, a more egalitarian educational system, healthcare and social security for the elderly, and national control of ports. These achievements all appear, in much of the Gulf literature, to have been simply gifts given to the people by a supposedly visionary, progressive royal family. But none of this would have been possible without the agitation of reformists, who often risked arrest, deportation, and even death in making their demands. Discourses of the Arab Gulf city, produced in overlapping contexts of architectural, academic, and journalistic expertise, have the (arguably) unintended consequence of oversimplifying, dehistoricizing, and depoliticizing their referent. It is our task as ethnographers, historians, and theorists of space to recuperate these marginalized aspects of Gulf urban development.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>On technopolitics, see Timothy Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil* (New York: Verso, 2011).

<sup>2</sup>For a detailed account, see Ahmed Kanna, *Dubai, The City as Corporation* (Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

<sup>3</sup>Derek Gregory, "The Biopolitics of Baghdad: Counterinsurgency and the Counter-City," <http://web.mac.com/derekgregory/iWeb/Site/The%20biopolitics%20of%20Baghdad.html> (accessed 20 June 2012).

<sup>4</sup>Katrina Heron, "From Bauhaus to Koolhaas," *Wired*, July 2006, <http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/4.07/koolhaas.html> (accessed 4 June 2008); Nicolai Ouroussof, "City on the Gulf: Koolhaas Lays Out a Grand Urban Experiment in Dubai," *The New York Times*, 3 March 2008; Jennifer Sigler, "Rem Koolhaas," *Index Magazine*, 2000, [http://www.indexmagazine.com/interviews/rem\\_koolhaas.shtml](http://www.indexmagazine.com/interviews/rem_koolhaas.shtml) (accessed 4 June 2008).

<sup>5</sup>Heron, "From Bauhaus to Koolhaas."

<sup>6</sup>Sigler, "Rem Koolhaas."

<sup>7</sup>Matthew Brown, "Hadid Leading Architectural Rush to the Emirates," *International Herald Tribune*, 3 April 2008; Wide Angle, *The Sand Castle* (2007), <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/wideangle/episodes/the-sand-castle/introduction/975/> (accessed 24 May 2008).

<sup>8</sup>David Harvey, "From Managerialism to Entrepreneurialism: The Transformation in Urban Governance in Late Capitalism," *Geografiska Annaler. Series B, Human Geography* 71 (1989): 3–17.

<sup>9</sup>Brown, "Hadid Leading Architectural Rush"; Hassan Fattah, "Celebrity Architects Reveal a Daring Cultural Xanadu for the Arab World," *The New York Times*, 1 February 2007.

<sup>10</sup>Henri Lefebvre, *The Urban Revolution*, trans. Robert Bononno (Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 160.

<sup>11</sup>Ouroussof, "City on the Gulf." See Kanna, *Dubai*, for a detailed critique. See also Ahmed Kanna, "Urbanist Ideology and the Production of Space in the United Arab Emirates: An Anthropological Critique," in *Global Downtowns*, ed. Marina Peterson and Gary McDonogh (Philadelphia, Pa.: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 90–109.

<sup>12</sup>Donald McNeill, *The Global Architect: Firms, Fame and Urban Form* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 13.

<sup>13</sup>Sulayman Khalaf, "Camel Racing in the Gulf: Notes on the Evolution of a Traditional Cultural Sport," *Anthropos* 94 (1999): 85–106.