

ROUNDTABLE

Architecture and the Environment in the Arabian Peninsula

Introduction

GARETH DOHERTY

Graduate School of Design, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.;

e-mail: gdoherthy@gsd.harvard.edu

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These short contributions from scholars and practitioners of architecture and the environment in the Arabian Peninsula, offer a variety of viewpoints on the future of the region's built environment. While each piece offers its own perspective, there is a clear consensus among the authors that the design of the future built environment needs to be more environmentally sensitive and human focused. Such a human focus encompasses individuals and the collective, local citizens and foreign-born residents, visitors and workers.

Architect and urbanist Todd Reisz has two interrelated propositions for the future: more locally trained architects, and smaller-scale projects. Addressing the meaning of *local*, Reisz widens its normative references to include those who are “integrated into the Gulf's contemporary form of cosmopolitanism.” Reisz calls for smaller-scale developments in the future, suggesting that smaller contracts can be won by local firms without having to compete with the bigger conglomerates whose work dominates the skylines and the architectural market.

In critiquing the desire for “bigness” as a driving force of Gulf urbanism, and a successful model in some ways, Khaled Alawadi, an Emirati architect and planning professor, advocates implementing old forms in future urban developments and a return to what he terms “neohistorical urban design tenets and ideals” when designing for cities in the region. Alawadi suggests that such neohistorical tenets and ideals are more sympathetic to the human scale and by implication—although he does not use the term—to “smallness.” Smaller developments and urban spaces will make cities more livable between the bigness and include spaces for the public domain.

Faisal bin Ayyaf Al Mogren, a Saudi planner and PhD student, argues for what he also sees as a return to human-centric design, “building our cities by humans, through humans, and for humans.” Al Mogren lists parks and sidewalks among the sort of public spaces he imagines, and suggests that such human-centric design can only be achieved if humans are part of the design and planning process.

Anthropologist Gökçe Günel addresses human comfort in response to the extremes of the climate as a product of the big developments and as a major contemporary environmental and social problem in the Arabian Peninsula. New developments result in extreme heat and consequently require air conditioning. Günel uses the example of the

UAE city of Masdar to illustrate that there is hope for a future with limited to no air conditioning. One imagines that less reliance on this form of cooling represents a major future challenge for Gulf cities.

Anna Grichting, of the University of Qatar, calls for a regional-scale agenda to complement the smaller scale, and identifies three spatial conditions—which she terms the edge, the interface, and the nexus—as deserving of special focus in future urbanization. Edge refers to the often-neglected coastal zones between water and sea; interface relates to zones of difference between one landscape and another; and nexus refers to regenerative food, water, and energy systems and the creation of productive landscapes. Grichting addresses the plight of transient workers and highlights the calls for a landscape-centered approach. Such a landscape approach includes social and environmental components as distinct from a more traditional understanding of landscape as a “beautifier.”

Implicit in all these arguments is the need for moderation of energy consumption and for greater environmental sensitivity. Explicit in all pieces is the need for further integrating a human focus into the design of the built environment. Such a focus includes the development of a public sphere and the creation of spaces for people wherever they are from. What almost all authors are calling for is essentially within the domain of landscape architecture. This echoes my own opinion that the region would greatly benefit from more landscape architects and their expertise in the design of environmentally and socially sensitive public spaces.