

Reprioritizing the Human Factor in Building Gulf Cities

FAISAL BIN AYYAF AL MOGREN

Department of City and Regional Planning, University of California, Berkeley, Berkeley, Calif.; e-mail: FAIMogren@berkeley.edu

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Until relatively recently, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), a regional intergovernmental political and economic union consisting of the Arab states of the Arabian Gulf (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE), was predominantly a nonurban region. Most of its inhabitants were nomadic Bedouins who were constantly traveling in search of scarce water resources, traders who were always between destinations, and a smaller number of agriculturalists and fishermen. A small minority constructed and occupied several residential agglomerations, compact and confined, consistent with the limited economic and social needs of people at that time. This trend remained true until the 1950s, when larger social, economic, and political shifts dramatically and permanently changed the landscape of the region. The major trigger was the exploration of oil, leading to economic wealth, in addition to other factors, including globalization, aspirations for modernity, and technological advancements, especially those enabling water provision. In the context of a harsh natural setting, this meant that urbanity would become the new favored form of living. What followed was rapid urbanization, mostly machine-like, with little regard for humans living in the newly formed cities. In Saudi Arabia, for example, urban residents made up only 10 percent of the total population in 1950. By 2005, this figure skyrocketed to 85 percent (Figure 1). The present-day urban scene in the Gulf is globally unique in many respects. Not only did the process of city building occur in a short period of time, but the intensity and scale have been largely unprecedented. About 80 percent of the region's population now lives in urban areas, making the Gulf one of the most urbanized regions in the world. In Kuwait, for example, 99 percent of the population occupies only 8 percent of the country's land area. In Qatar, the capital city of Doha alone is home to about 55 percent of the country's total population. The physical characteristics of this urbanism are also unique. It resulted in an urban form mostly characterized by suburban-like downtowns and low densities in expanding territories.

Managing and guiding this intensive city-building process was not an easy undertaking, prompting countries in the region to rely on imported expertise. Western planners were brought in to Gulf cities to produce master plans for future growth and urban development. These planners, who guided growth and development for a long time to come, included Doxiadis in Riyadh, Munro in Manama, and Harris in Dubai. The plans were manifestations of many popular modernist planning principles of the time, reflecting dependency on automobiles and the concept of superblocks, as well as a commitment to strict zoning and land-use laws and low-density sprawl. A much-needed response to a difficult task during a critical time in the region's history, their plans were at least partially successful in providing a timely development framework for a growth that had previously been largely unguided. The urgency and difficulty of the endeavor caused the plans that ultimately prevailed to be purely functional—a typical approach at that time—with a focus on efficient city building. Looking at these proposals, one is struck by all

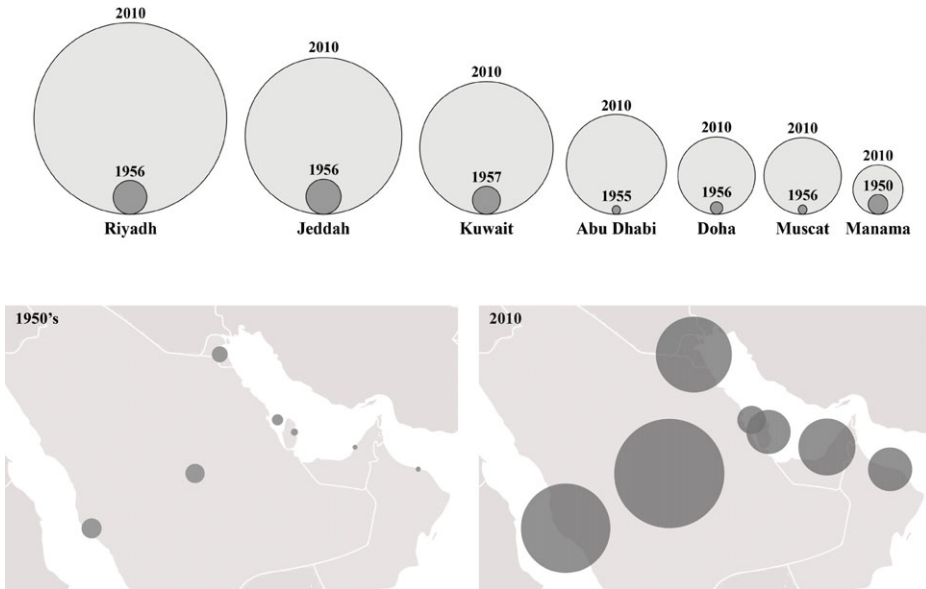


FIGURE 1. (Color online) Population growth in major Gulf cities.

Note: Figures are based on statistics produced by the UN Statistical Office through the Department of Economic and Social Affairs. See *Demographic Yearbook* (New York: United Nations, 1960).

the formulas, algorithms, transportation studies, density numbers, and other functional studies and ideas. These were the priorities of that time, and the plans accomplished what was most needed. Largely missing, however, was the human aspect, the social understanding of the region. As an outcome of the functionalist approach, cities in the Gulf are like well-engineered machines, but like machines, they lack soul, character, and identity.

“Cities are not organisms . . . they do not grow or change themselves, or reproduce or repair themselves. . . [it is] the human purpose and human willfulness that drive the making of cities,” states Spiro Kostof.¹ Any act of city building represents a deliberate exercise, a manifestation of certain values and motives held by those doing the implementation, as an illustration of their priorities. A traffic engineer would conceive of a city based on transportation ideas, prioritizing efficient circulation above all other considerations. An economic approach would focus on enabling networks of production, while a real estate approach would calculate the maximum value of the land. Similarly, an architect would focus on a city’s aesthetic values. When Kuwait was being developed, Sir Colin Buchanan, a traffic engineer who had earned his fame as a successful planner based on the traffic solutions he mastered mostly in the UK and for his publication *Traffic in Towns*,² took the responsibility of producing the city’s master plan. Given his background, it is not surprising that his plan was “primarily a road plan,”³ as Gardiner described it, with the result that Kuwait is a city built mainly for cars. Humans must adapt to the needs of the vehicles, occupying the remaining spaces. Similar

approaches have come to define most other Gulf cities. Harris's plan for Dubai consisted mainly of transportation considerations with residential zones in between, and Doxiadis's proposal for Riyadh championed cars as the "necessary and inevitable vehicle of the future."⁴

In the opinion of this writer, what is needed now is a move beyond the current status quo, toward a new approach to city building and urban form that prioritizes human considerations. Recently, more and more people are demanding a reevaluation of the human position in the city-building exercise, and individual attempts to reconsider the dialogue between cities and their inhabitants are starting to emerge. One of the first such attempts was in Riyadh, where the city's former mayor sought to apply a similar approach through the large humanization project that the municipality implemented during his tenure.⁵ Presently, however, the most pressing need in the Gulf is to build upon individual attempts to systematically reconsider our urban development priorities.

What would such a change of priorities mean for cities? How would Jeddah, Al-Ain, Muscat, or any other city change if human needs became the main consideration? This desired shift would mean completely flipping the prevailing notion in Gulf cities, currently designed primarily to accommodate traffic/economic/real-estate needs, to be geared toward human needs. Roger Trancik labels the leftover space that humans occupy as "lost space," citing it as the central problem facing modern urban design and planning. "Mobility and communication have increasingly dominated public space, which has consequently lost much of its cultural meaning and human purpose," he writes.⁶

A human approach would prioritize the use of space for interactions, enabling residents to encounter each other and, at least equally importantly, their city. In today's car-oriented Gulf city, residents are isolated from other people and the environment, secluded inside their homes, their places of work, and their cars. A city designed mainly for humans, by contrast, would include spaces for socializing and interacting, simultaneously enabling both the planned meeting and the unplanned social encounter. It would allow for interactions between residents and their city, enabling people to live in the public realm as opposed to accepting it as a space intended exclusively for movement from one private space to another. A human-oriented city is complex and includes many different components. For example, it could include a park where families spend their Sunday afternoons, a public space where office workers meet during their lunch hour, or simply a well-designed sidewalk. The current design practices that consistently consider the city as a single unit are distinctly unhuman, as no person can experience at once a large modern metropolis! A city needs to be considered from the perspective of human scale. It should provide spaces for the two main types of interaction—among people and between people and their city—as well as for a large mixture of uses, a variety of efficient travel choices, and amenities and resources that enhance quality of life. The end result would be a city where residents feel welcomed, engaged, and safe, a city they are happy to call home.

There is, of course, no universal template for a successful "human" city that is applicable to every context. What is key is the process that generates it, with outcomes varying on a case-by-case basis depending on the specific needs and demands of residents. Creating a city for humans requires allowing residents to have an active role in shaping the city in which they live rather than rendering them passive recipients of forms

imposed on them. At its best, urban form is the result of collaborative efforts combining local values through resident involvement with the technical knowledge of technocrats. This involvement unfolds in two distinct but parallel ways: playing an active role in shaping the form of the city through longer periods of time, while using dynamic adaptable spaces for shorter periods. A humane city is also closely connected to the human experience. It involves processes of experience creation, including not only the physical aspects of the city, but all aspects connected to the experience of living. It involves creating a distinct identity linked with that of the inhabitants, and connecting with them by allowing for individual creation of meaning, memory, and association. Finally, it involves respect for choice and personal preference in all realms, including modes of movement, degrees of socializing, and various usages.

A walk through any Gulf city—whether Dammam, Abu Dhabi, or AlMuharraq—yields the observation that, while differing in many respects, the Gulf’s urban centers all share a failure to center the construction of the city’s fabric on human needs. In general, because the needs of automobiles were prioritized during development, operations and places were planned and implemented at the scale of the city as a whole rather than at the small-scale level with consideration for the spaces in which human interaction occurs. The Gulf’s urban form is generic and functional. It works properly, but could just as easily be the form of a city in Europe, Asia, Africa, or any other part of the world. Because it was imposed from outside, the form lacks specificity and has little connection to contextual considerations and local values. To illustrate, Joyce Hsiang describes Doxiadis’s major plan and main guide for the development of Riyadh this way: “Dry and factual, [the plan] appeared to operate by pragmatic necessity with little use of the active voice.”⁷ Most Gulf plans clearly rank common human values at the bottom of their list of priorities, a point that is evident in the outcomes of those plans. While car traffic is well calculated, spaces for production are sufficiently provided, and economic values of the land are carefully considered, there are no spaces that allow for human interaction among the residents or between them and their city. Indeed, there is no emphasis on quality of life in general.

This was not always the case in the Gulf. An exploration of older Gulf forms of urbanism, prior to the 1950s, clearly illustrates the careful considerations of social, human, and local needs that were factored into the form of the region’s cities. Older cities were far friendlier to their inhabitants. In the drive to urbanize and in our aspirations for modernity, we have lost track of these earlier priorities, which should matter most. Instead, our priorities are based on survival. With growth and development at a scale and intensity that have been difficult to manage, we have focused on providing frameworks to keep pace. We have sacrificed quality in the interest of quantity. We need to rethink the entire development process in terms of human values. What this calls for, in effect, is a return to the building of our cities by humans, through humans, and for humans.

NOTES

¹Spiro Kostof, *The City Shaped: Urban Patterns and Meanings through History* (New York: Bulfinch, 1991).

²Colin Buchanan, *Traffic in Towns: A Study of the Long Term Problems of Traffic in Urban Areas* (New York: Routledge, 2015).

³Stephen Gardiner and Ian Cook, *Kuwait: The Making of a City* (Harlow, UK: Addison-Wesley Longman Ltd., 1983).

⁴Doxiadis Associates, *Riyadh: The Master Plan* (Athens: Doxiadis Associates, 1972).

⁵Prince bin Ayyaf was the mayor of Riyadh between 1997 and 2012. During his tenure, he explicitly listed humanizing Riyadh as a major component of his mission statement. Since then, many programs were initiated under the humanization framework, such as the program to construct one hundred civic plazas, pedestrian sidewalk networks, and park accessibility. For more, see Abdulaziz bin Ayyaf, *Riyadh: A Paradigm, Enhancing the Human Dimension in Saudi Municipal Work* (Riyadh: Tarah International, 2014).

⁶Roger Trancick, *Finding Lost Space: Theories of Urban Design* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1986).

⁷Joyce Hisiang, "The Doxiadis Effect," in *Al Manakh*, ed. Todd Reisz (Amsterdam: Archis, 2010), 248–53.