

## Identifying a Local in Gulf Cities

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Depending upon how you approach the matter, it is either humdrum or complicated to ask an architect how he would improve the Gulf region's built environment. Humdrum, because that is what architects do every day: say how they can improve what was done poorly before them. Complicated, because there's a frustrating modern history of experts coming to the Gulf to do just that. In the Arab Gulf countries, architecture is most often assumed to result from imported expertise, certified and purchased abroad. The foundation of that assumption rests in the late colonial British management of Gulf cities. Colonial officers, most often referred to as political agents or political residents, harnessed the built environment to visually convey the bureaucratic order that the British government was instituting where it had suppressed it in the decades before. Modern architecture served as a sleight of optics to foster economic improvement and political stability. It was less style, more content. Literally, the contents of the building: medical machines, cadastral maps, canned foods, air conditioning. In this way, the architect was perceived as a herald and packager of promised technological improvements from afar. And, in many ways, he or she still is perceived as such. And that's a problem worth touching upon.

The problem is not that there are no local architects to hire but that there are not enough opportunities for them to practice their profession. Before elaborating on that, it is important to clarify the meaning of *local* in this instance. The word *local*, like the architect, has a complicated relationship with the Gulf. For the sake of this essay, *local architects* refers not only to those architects who are citizens or permanent residents of a GCC country but also to those who were born and raised in Gulf cities and those who have studied or lived much of their lives in Gulf cities. The issue of *local* here is not so much about the nationality of the working architects but their commitment to, daresay investment in, these cities. *Local*, in this way, can also refer to people who are integrated into the Gulf's contemporary form of cosmopolitanism. Therefore, when I recommend more work opportunities for the Gulf's local practitioners and practices, I refer to architects who might carry identification documents as Palestinians, Jordanians, Indians, Pakistanis, Iranians, Iraqis, Egyptians, among many others.

The undying assumption that the practice of architecture must be something imported from abroad is proved false by the number of architectural practices based in the Gulf. There are also numerous architecture programs at Gulf-based universities, at least nineteen. One of them, King Saud University in Riyadh, is the second-highest ranking Arab university in an index of the world's best two hundred architecture schools.<sup>1</sup> Of the eleven schools with American architectural accreditation in the Arab world, ten are in the Arabian Peninsula.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, Gulf states such as Kuwait are known for providing scholarship packages to citizens to study in the United States and Europe, many of whom return home to work. Despite the increasing number of architects in the region,

the most distinguished projects remain fodder for global firms that keep at least one site office in the region.

The issue of *local* has been perplexing in Gulf cities such as Dubai, Manama, and Kuwait, whose cultures are defined by their ports and hence their connections to other places. Since early modernization efforts in the 1930s, notions of import and foreignness have often taken on a threatening characterization, arguably because they signaled British power. In the 1970s and 1980s, there were calls, from within government and without, that architecture should reflect “Islamic” or “Arab” culture. The esteemed sociologist Janet Abu Lughod associated the rise of interest in the “Islamic City” with the search for forms and meanings to inflect local meaning onto international design practices.<sup>3</sup> The call for more local, more Islamic, more Arab representations in architecture and urban development coincided with an increasing postmodern aesthetic within Western architectural practices. The result was not that more Arab or Muslim architects began to acquire work but that the global architect was obliged to exhibit some understanding of local climates, social and physical. There consequently developed a catalogue of visual signals of the local. References to arches, wind towers, *mashrabiyya*, patterning—all contestably Arab or Islamic—were the means of affirming a local culture. It continues today. Take, for example, the French-based architecture firm which designed the recently opened Louvre Abu Dhabi and which claims that the 7,500-ton, 180-meter-wide steel dome over the \$1 billion museum is inspired by how palm fronds were once woven to create a lightweight roof on a Bedouin hut, or *arish*.<sup>4</sup>

The lack of opportunity for local architects has as much to do with who is getting the work as much as it does with what kinds of projects are being offered. And this brings me to my second suggestion, namely that a decreased scale in urban development projects would help enable local architects and their firms to win more commissions. The fact that urban development in the Gulf is predominated by large-scale development contracts is not a new condition. In fact, such an approach was already being formulated as early as the 1950s. Architecture as an import also meant that the building systems and materials specified were more likely sourced from where they were designed. In 1953, Doha’s ruling family commissioned the first medical hospital at an unrivaled architectural scale for the Gulf region. The complex’s architects, John and Jill Harris, were British. Part of their mandate was to choreograph the entire logistical process—organizing the delivery of everything from the steel structure to the interior veneers to the flagpoles and medical equipment—from their London offices. This approach—that an entire project could be designed, specified, and shipped as an autonomous entity—became a regional norm. John Harris built up one of the first global architecture practices based on this model. By the 1970s, it was not unheard of that an entire building, including its fabrication stations, could be designed and specified abroad and shipped as a single boatload to a Gulf port.<sup>5</sup>

Architectural production has changed somewhat since then, but the main ideas remain the same. A development project can be designed simultaneously on multiple continents. Steel and concrete will come from wherever it is cheapest, though aluminum is often produced in the region. What has not really changed, however, is that development projects continue to remain at a scale that a single company can manage. John Harris’s practice has been surpassed by much larger behemoths such as AECOM, SOM, and HOK, whose own corporate growths correlate to the increasing size of major

development projects in the region. In fact, one of the Gulf's largest, most audacious development undertakings in the last several years was Qatar's Msherieb Downtown Doha project. Its seeming architectural pluralism, local attentiveness, focus on sidewalks, and urban sensitivity are actually components of a \$5.5 billion, 300,000 square-meter master-planned conception by AECOM, the world's biggest engineering firm that subcontracted some mid-size design firms to complete buildings that obeyed their master plan.<sup>6</sup>

Rescaling urban development projects into smaller components, even down to the scale of a single building, would enable a more diverse assortment of firms to qualify for these jobs. The result would not only increase the chance of smaller firms to win work but would also free the cities' urban development from monolithic contracts with monochromatic consequences. In the process, I would hope, locally based firms would be able to put forward their proposals and qualifications and gain work. Today, a locally based firm is lucky if it can survive on single-family villa contracts and interior fit-outs for residential and commercial projects. There need to be more opportunities to design in-fill projects throughout the city—public libraries, mixed-used buildings, shopping plazas, neighborhood parks, and residential blocks. In-fill projects within built-up parts of cities could provide these firms the chance not only to grow but also, and more importantly, to build and enrich conversations about a local design community. This would then further the conversation about how *local* looks or works.

It might be too much to suggest that Gulf cities avoid global design firms altogether. There does come a time, however, when the region will become tired of architectural tropes that take inspiration from the desert's dunes and rock formations, from the ports' dhows and pearling trade, and from the mishmash of architectural details haphazardly derived from Aleppo's souk or Tunisia's coastal villages. For now, these indexable deployments of so-called traditional symbols are the alleged antidotes to the practice of global architecture. Gulf cities—with their cosmopolitan demographics and their essential connections to places beyond the headquarters of global architectural practices—have great potential to redefine what a local response to globalism is. The very question of what is *local* about an architect might very well help to define the discussion about what can be local about architecture. It might turn out that local is richer, more complex, and more radiant than anything globalism was ever claimed to be.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>“QS Top Universities, Architecture/Built Environment,” QS World University Rankings by Subject 2017, accessed 21 October 2017. [https://www.topuniversities.com/university-rankings/university-subject-rankings/2017/architecture#sorting=rank+region="+country="+faculty="+stars=false+search=](https://www.topuniversities.com/university-rankings/university-subject-rankings/2017/architecture#sorting=rank+region=).

<sup>2</sup>Sawsan Saridar Masri and Hisham Arnaouty, “Architecture Program Accreditation: A Pathway to Graduates International Mobility,” *Athens Journal of Architecture* 1 (2015): 65–81.

<sup>3</sup>Janet L. Abu-Lughod, “The Islamic City—Historic Myth, Islamic Essence, and Contemporary Relevance,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 19 (1987): 155.

<sup>4</sup>Maria Dermentzi, “There's another Louvre Museum, and It's Floating on an Artificial Island,” Mashable.com, 21 September 2017, accessed 18 March 2018, <http://mashable.com/2017/09/21/abu-dhabi-louvre-futuristic-architecture-artificial-island/#6eqgkCF.8aqt>.

<sup>5</sup>Riad Kamal, conversation with the author, Dubai, 9 November 2016.

<sup>6</sup>See Todd Reisz, “Doha: The Post-Accumulation City,” in *Perspecta 47: Money*, ed. James Andrachuk, Christos C. Bolos, Avi Forman, and Marcus A. Hooks (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2014), 209–18.