

ESSAYS, ARGUMENTS & INTERVIEWS ON *MODERN* ARCHITECTURE KUWAIT

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The Boom

NAJI MOUJJAES

This transcript has been taken from the conference “Modern Architecture Kuwait: The Architecture Debate Series,” held at the Yarmouk Cultural Centre in Kuwait on May 1, 2016.

Edward Nilsson, TAC lead designer at Souq Al-Wataniya served as Guest Speaker, while debators included Professor Asseel Al-Ragam and Naji Moujjaes, founder of PAD10.

Ricardo Camacho moderated the debate.

The transcript includes the responses from Naji Moujjaes only.

The debaters were asked to give concise answers to ten questions, supported by visual material – one image per question.

On the occasion of the opening of the exhibition “Modern Architecture Kuwait: 1949–1989,” Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyyah organised and hosted a series of architectural debates with local and foreign practitioners. This series was designed to deepen the knowledge of Kuwait’s national architecture, and to foster a greater appreciation of the preservation of collective heritage.

In August 2012, the first conference on modern building heritage took place in Kuwait simultaneously with the first representation of Kuwait at the 13th International Architecture Exhibition at La Biennale di Venezia. The event

included a series of round-table debates between architecture and planning practitioners and the local community. The success of this event triggered several years of research, now in a double-volume book, *Modern Architecture Kuwait, 1949–1989*, commissioned by Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyyah, with support from the Kuwait Foundation for the Advancement of Sciences. Unfamiliarity with Kuwait’s national history and architectural heritage is a major loss for the country. Since this research was initiated, at least three major buildings – all subjects of study – have been demolished to make space for high-rise office buildings, while others have been modified or covered in shiny aluminium cladding. Understanding these previously unknown and uncorrelated incidents is fundamental to providing tentative answers to a series of hypothetical questions: How were architectural design processes and practices developed from the early 1950s until now? How was, and is, architecture practiced in the absence of historical heritage, major local architectural references, and strong morphological elements?

The rise of state-sponsored funding in the 1970s transformed this temporary utopian community, imposing spectacular building developments on the modern town. After the 1973 oil embargo, new buildings were informed by the relationship between Kuwait and the global economy, introducing common architectural paradigms of the post-modern era.

However, buildings such as the new souqs – built between 1974 and 1980 and designed by Pace + TAC and SSH + SOM in the city centre – combined the functionality and efficiency of modernist architecture with recreational needs. Either with The Architects Collaborative (TAC) or with Skidmore, Owings & Merrill (SOM), investment in the production of ‘place’ over the modernist ‘space,’ brought a new level of interest to the city’s urban environment and modern development. A new hybrid typology based on the old commercial street – the souq, vernacular neighbourhood, and car parking – was finally able to mediate levels of comfort throughout the city. These eight buildings are still prominent in the city to this day.

RC_Saba *George Shiber’s recognition of Kuwait as a “fluid city shell” is a diversion from dependence on large planning operations and state building programs.*

Since the construction of Fahad Al-Salem street, an emerging private real estate sector has transformed the pre-oil mercantile tradition into building design and material trading.

Was the city planning of the 1970s drawn up to regulate the expectations of the real estate market, design and construction industries?

NM_Fluid, being an internal dynamic condition of relationships, and shell, the broad external framework that internalises such fluidity, both describing the hope and frailty implicit in Kuwait as a city in flux.

In many ways, Shiber’s “fluid city shell” concept reflects his agitation and anxiety amid the rush, as seen in his book, manifested with cries on lost opportunities, emanating from inherent potentials of unlimited budgets manifested thus far with a private development spine, along a car artery.

On Fahad Al-Salem street, Shiber mentions in *The Kuwait Urbanization* that, “More design goes into such articles as a Dior dress or a door knob than in the study of costly and enduring urban emergents. More design effort was put into the storefronts [...] than in its overall civic, or urban design [...] This is a pity,” he concludes. The design of storefronts and their displays is driven by private initiative and ambition, while the overall civic or urban design is driven by a young state, which defines, shapes and maintains civic space. This suspension of responsibility of the private sector, developers and citizens, reaffirms Mohammad Al-As-sad’s observation that there is a widespread feeling that the city is the mere responsibility of the state, while the state itself has shown a *laissez-faire* approach to policy, doing nominal works that are ill-fated and lacking a commitment to maintain them.

RC_The *most relevant and evident results of this energy are the new multistorey souqs and the first towers in Sharq, built during the 1970s. Today these souqs are being renovated and new towers built. How can*



1. Jahra roundabout in Kuwait City, 1958. © Kuwait Oil Company Archive.

these be understood – as the direct result of planning and regulations or evidence of market demand?

NM_The aftermath of planning has evidenced sparse developments, with vast vacant lots and weakly defined and maintained public frameworks, indicating that the contemporary mechanism for renovating some structures is to defer to the status quo, however problematic it may prove to be. On market demand: an oil glut, all sense is lost, including the market to its demands; this is known as ‘Dutch Disease.’ This mono-economy somehow sedates an otherwise frenetic real estate market; the latter loses any sensibility for its demand, especially considering “the artificially inflated land value” within the city, as stated by Michael Kubo in his travel grant report to the Aga Khan, *The Incorporation of Architecture: Bureaucratic Modernism and Global Practice after 1945*.

While the towers are emblematic of the prowess of ‘private’ financial institutions, the souqs are more of an arranged marriage between the public and the private

(these souqs were built on publicly-owned land during the 1970s, through Build–Operate–Transfer (BOT) contracts). To understand their impact on the city, we can examine Darwaza Abdul-Razak area, where the Joint Banking Centre towers are across the road from Souq Al-Kuwait. The residual public areas around the Joint Banking Centre reveal minimal but maintained landscaping, a Miesian urban setback that follows an architectural framework. As for the Souq, the developer took an *ad hoc* approach, after it was a sort of wasteland patched with *astro turf*, cut around leftover stylised pergolas.

Such randomness is typical of the way in which these BOT projects were managed, bridging the gap between the mandate renovation for qualified developers and an inactive municipal body. With the termination of the thirty-year contract for the Souq’s operation and its subsequent BOT renovation, a serious opportunity has been missed to mediate between the Mubarakiya traditional souqs and Souq Al-Kuwait – one of the few surviving pedestrian experiences within the city.

RC *Being client driven, many of these buildings were designed by a certain elite of foreign architects, selected based on professional recommendations or through personal connections. However the failure of many of these buildings has been associated with lack of commitment from their designers, or lack of awareness of context, building materials, and regional practice. Why did Sawaber housing project fail?*

NM Firstly, there is professional colonialism, which is far worse than stylistic colonialism. A mandate to have an international designer spearheading the project and local offices processing the paper work and all technical aspects lobotomises them of all sensibility towards the role of the project, its context and community.

The consequences are: the formation of local offices as a one-stop shop for foreign architects, focusing on everything and mastering nothing. In a way this paralysed the offices from taking the lead in most cases, as they propped up international consultants at the expense of leading in a particular discipline. Also, it became unlikely that specialised consultants (specification writers, landscape architects, specialised engineers, QS firms, etc.) could focus on their specialties due to the confusion surrounding their scope of work.

Secondly, the right question should be, Why did Sawaber succeed for so long, when public housing projects failed in many cities around the world? Sawaber succeeded as an architectural proposal, even with all the compromises, as it introduced elevated streets (segregating pedestrians from cars), re-introduced urban density and public communal spaces back into the city, and added shade to communal areas by stepping the

buildings. Practically, it failed when the plug was pulled ten years ago by the Public Authority for Housing and Welfare, which stopped maintaining the buildings. On the other hand, the present replacement housing project in Northwest Sulaibikhat embodies everything that caused public housing programs to fail in the 1970s.

RC *The diversity of production sources, together with a strong motivation for experimentation, generated a series of remarkable architectural and urban models during the 1970s and 1980s that remain challenging alternatives for collective housing today, such as Sawaber or Loulou'a Al-Marzouq. Are these experiments the result of local context or the design process of owners and architects? Can you elaborate on any relevant building characteristics to support your argument?*

NM While Sawaber was part of the public housing welfare program, Loulou'a Al-Marzouq embodied the complete opposite – private housing for the affluent. At the tip of the Ras Al-Salmiya peninsula, seemingly ready to sail out, the Loulou'a captured the imagination of the rich expatriate elite in Kuwait, who perceived it as a private residence, a home far from home, with an elevated vantage point over the city and sea.

Doubling its footprint with skip-stop elevators made its preservation worthwhile, and it somehow escaped the fate of fifty percent of Ras Al-Salmiyas demolished buildings in the last decade.

Its pitched red roof and sandstone warm facade infused a Mediterranean feel to the Arabian Gulf. The commercial elevated plinth regulated by pilotis, a pool area encroaching on the sea opposite to an enclosed private courtyard, and a

hybrid of house typologies, was inflated to multiply a collective experience, bringing to Kuwait the excitement of a dense urban mix. Somehow, it was convincing for well-to-do locals to substitute the privacy of their single residences and claim their prime duplexes and penthouses, mixing with white-collar expats. Until today, part of the building is on hold, captive to such dreams.

RC *Referring to the new public buildings erected in Kuwait in the late 1970s, Lawrence Vale wrote: "Most of these buildings [were] being treated like isolated islands in a sea of parking lots," highlighting how the lack of an organic urban connection system led to the production of a cityscape made for cars more than for pedestrians.*

Do you agree, and, if yes, can we attribute such a phenomenon to the absence of public interest in many of these building operations or lack of social and urban responsibility from designers and design firms?

NM Any city in the making with car access and loose legislation may run such risks. On an optimistic note, one of the trends that shaped the city counter to this is Souq Al-Kuwait. A hybrid of building with vertical parking, where cars are stacked between offices and shops to extend, internalise and acclimatise the urban experience. This symbiosis of the vital elements of the city was lessened over time due to the bypassing or lack of enforcement of drafted laws. Car-parking areas exempt from the new office buildings littered cars onto adjacent vacant plots.

However, the BOT contracts governing the wellbeing of such hybrid buildings are mere sheets of below-budget bill-of-quantities, with no qualifying clauses meant to be preserved. There, a 'qualifying' regulatory

authority must step into the process to render it more culturally and environmentally relevant.

In order to build on current booms and past models: what if we learn from other cities with tough climates? – using for instance the strategy of urbanist Vincent Ponte's underground city for Montreal, by having the Avenues Mall less of a commercial strip and more of an underground or raised network of connections between disparate city blocks. The Shopping mall could be less of a big box and more of an urban acclimatised shopping connection, animated by museums, art galleries, and bookshops.

RC *Alison and Peter Smithson, who were invited to Kuwait in 1968 to prepare urban form studies for the old city, advocated for buildings that could help to define national identity. They called for buildings that, in their words, carry qualities that would differentiate Kuwait from other Arab cities, such as Cairo or Beirut. They envisaged buildings within the frame of Arab urban traditions adapted to modern life, contrary to the idea of variation models from America, Europe or from Europeanised North Africa. With this said, do you think that the projects developed after the 1968 call for "urban form studies" were able to build a city that differentiates from Cairo or Beirut?*

NM The mat-building was strategically antithetical to the organic old city, thus positing itself as a clear alternative. The mat plan simplified the functional zoning and considered the newly emerging needs of a modern state, with a sectional complexity capable of providing shade and space through functional zoning. This *tabula rasa* extended the building facade and the plot limits, internalising the urban experience of the old city and dissociating itself

from dense settings like Cairo and Beirut, not mentioning their already dense urbanity. Still, with Jørn Utzon's National Assembly, the facade was re-introduced as an urban space, with an ambition to mediate between parliamentarians and their constituencies. There were threats to value engineer the symbolic structure, whereby the architect asserted that he must do it, and luckily he got his way.

RC *From his presentation "Architectural Conception of Buildings in Accordance with Twentieth Century Islamic-Arabic Style," at the Conference on Building Maintenance in Kuwait in January 1969, Macklin L. Hancock called for an Islamic-Arabic inherited approach to "understand how this could be achieved [using] materials to help keep maintenance costs low [and] effective solutions to technical problems unique to this part of the world."*

During the 1970s, practices such as Iraq Consult, Pace, KEO, KEG and Sabah Abi-Hanna (later SSH) initiated a remarkable body of work related to the private development of mixed-use programs, which utilised, in their own ways, the aesthetic values identified by Hancock. Can you elaborate on this assumption?

NM Nationalism as a way to strengthen identity was simultaneous to the Modern Movement, and was a common motivation pursued both by the local offices and international consultants. Modernity somehow captured the imagination of a nation that was seeking stature. It was more a pan-Arabist motivation, rather than an Islamic movement at that time. Islamic iconography and style was more apparent in the post-modern era, as we can see in the transformation of Arne Jacobsen's Central Bank of Kuwait facades.

When we look at design production in local offices during the 1970s and 1980s, it seemed less stylised. Geometrically abstract, the concrete constructions with deep and minimal fenestrations were driven by climatic motivations.

Hancock's coupling of Arab and Islamic influences ran the risk of one stifling the other, as Ghazi Sultan's article, "Designing for New Needs in Kuwait," suggested.

Lastly, the illusion of low maintenance, locally misinterpreted as 'no maintenance' is what degrades modern structures and cities to a point of no return.

RC *Kuwait capital city has suffered from gradual deterioration in areas once characterised by their modern architecture. Today, the city faces the challenge of urban renewal. During this process, the conservation of the existing buildings, regardless of their use and institutional value, has been the subject of denial and many have been demolished and replaced. This refusal to preserve buildings has been encouraged by a political and academic elite, as well as architecture and planning practitioners, who have labeled such buildings as 'foreign' and therefore implicitly indifferent to local history and building traditions. Only recently, with narratives of 'nation building' through memory and identity, has an emerging community of young, well-educated artists and professionals from varied sectors in society started to ascribe 'archeological status' to buildings and urge their preservation.*

Please elaborate on the differences and similarities between the movements to preserve Bait Lothan and Sawaber.

NM This is a wave of arguments and counter-arguments, whereby the first sets a pretext for demolishing 'foreign' constructions, and the latter

argues that we as a culture and a nation are a sedimentation of all these accumulated built works, which are representative of a history that is built and not one that is eclectically selected to construct a mythical past.

Considering the history of Kuwait's modern and pre-oil constructions as 'archeology' may be problematic terminology that has been sanctified in some ways.

More accurately, to borrow from the Landmarks Preservation Commission of NYC, it must be replaced by "architecturally, historically, and culturally significant buildings and sites" that are granted "landmark or historic district status" and regulated "once they're designated." Landmarks can be "individual landmarks, interior landmarks and scenic landmarks." They are regulated rather than owned, which is key.

For Bait Lothan and Sawaber, to preserve first and foremost you need to maintain and program with economic viability, with cultural and architectural significance playing a role. In Sawaber, maintenance stopped a decade ago. The movement for its preservation should have happened back then, as the deterioration of the buildings today may, by itself, undermine such a movement.

A building must be re-imagined, reprogrammed, and re-situated to fit its present context, as in Loulou'a Al-Marzouq, where primarily it encroached on the public beach, but now, with its central garden, is itself a public venue.

RC *The building conservation and the emergence of different commitments towards the rehabilitation and adaptive re-use of modern buildings in Kuwait is confined to the lack of recognition and an almost non-existent framework for legal protection.*

The local authorities approach to building conservation, by entities such as the NCCAL, is based on the idea of building fossilisation. Every building becomes a monument to itself or a museum. Can you comment on the cases of Kuwait National Museum, Loulou'a Al-Marzouq and Kuwait Towers recent intervention works?

NM While monuments are usually fossilised to capture memory rather than imagination, private developments are not; they need to be relevant and help shape our present surroundings.

Loulou'a Al-Marzouq belongs to the latter, as it was retooled according to programmatic thinking rather than aesthetics. In this situation, we were activists, before we were hired as architects, by creating a community blog to document the building's history, architectural significance, and to monitor its systematic degradation. The owner was sympathetic to it and finally implemented measures: the main access was reoriented through the central courtyard, with all the apartment vertical cores also accessed through this area.

The pilotis buoyancy of the building was reclaimed by promoting commercial exposure to both sides, the central courtyard and building perimeter. The transparency of the retail units allowed for a ground floor that could be seen from outside, through to the central courtyard garden.

In the apartments, bay windows replaced the facade closet blocks, opening the building up to view its unique surrounding, and the falling sandstone was overlaid with expanded metal mesh to hold the stone in place.

Still, the dynamics among different parties: the incapability of the authorities to comprehend the

benefits of retooling the building, and the management of the facilities are future challenges that will set a precedent for the re-use and retooling of modern structures especially as this structure has proven its communal relevance.

RC *Kuwaiti citizens often show a lack of attachment to many of these buildings. The local authorities have taken very few measures in the past to promote their proper conservation and restoration. Among the worst examples of preservation are state-owned buildings, such as the Mubarakiya School and the former Ministry of Information and Guidance, actual head offices for the NCCAL.*

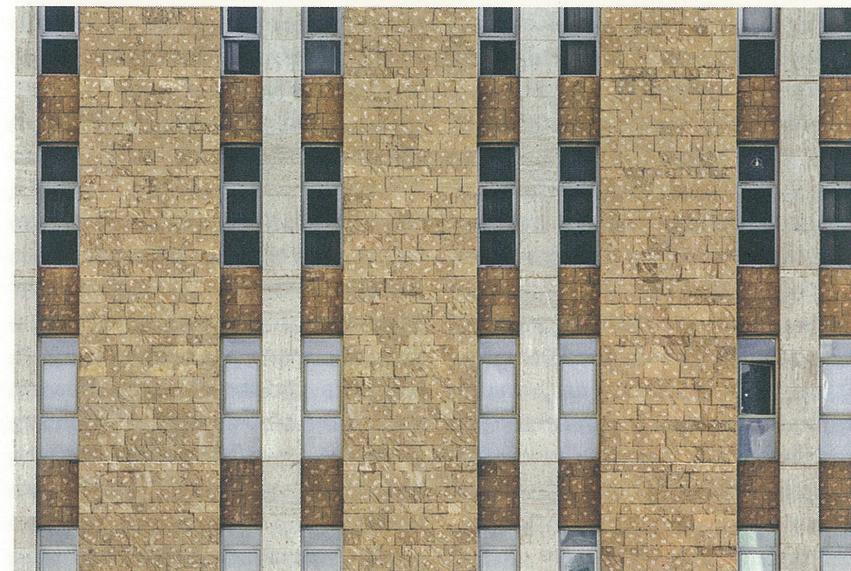
Can you suggest how this culture might change?

NM Actually, I feel it is the other way round, whereby Kuwaiti youth want the city to believe in them. As we have seen in the recent past, and currently, many are coming up with initiatives and small businesses all around the city, sometimes claiming worn out structures to revive them and their surrounding neighbourhoods.

Local authorities must pick up this momentum and reach out to these private initiatives, securing proper urban programming think tanks, amenities, infrastructures, and most importantly spaces and connectors that bind these sporadic initiatives to reclaim and sustain a street life that has long disappeared.

Additionally, Kuwaitis and non-Kuwaitis, who feel affinity to the place and what it stands for, must not hold back from claiming a leading role in re-imagining the city as a space in which everyone should claim his or her own place, forming a sense of belonging.

With the ruthless non-dialogue all across the Arab world, we at PAD10 imagined a space for dialogue.



Along the 1 km stretch of sea front, car-free with the Gulf road diverted underground, the National Library, the National Museum, the National Assembly, *Bayt Bader*, *Bayt Sadu*, and last but not least *Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyya* have become pavilions within the park. All at walking distance from one another, they connect the city back to the sea and the people to the pillars of a nation that is representative of their hopes and aspirations. •

2. Aerial view of old Kuwait City, 1940s. © Kuwait Oil Company Archive.

3. Detail of Dasman Complex facade, KEO, Kuwait City, 1975-79. © Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyyah, Nelson Garrido, 2015.

4. Aerial view of new neighbourhood units, Kuwait, 1980s. © Kuwait Oil Company Archive.