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The New Arab Urban: Test Beds, Work-arounds, and the Limits of Enacted Cities[1]

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Cities of the Arabian Peninsula have been depicted stereotypically as exceptional and futuristic: the world's tallest building in Dubai; Saudi Arabia's hyper cities being built from scratch; fantastic infrastructures for Qatar's 2022 World Cup. Against such celebrations, Orientalist claims stress socio-political backwardness and inequalities, as well as cultural dependency on the West. As opposed to using the Gulf to issue judgements, urban scholars can use instances of extreme urbanization to discern trends that – for better or worse – are ascendant in other world regions as well. In particular, one can see how urban projects circulate transnationally, how physical and social structures lead to institutional work-arounds and how hybridization operates *in situ*. We can also learn – given the extant great capacities for capitalization and mandate – the evident limits of efforts to artificially enact urban environments and societies.

Gulf cities Transnational urbanism urban policy mobility

Learning from Gulf Cities

To learn from the cities of the Arabian Peninsula, particularly the most controversial and dynamic among them (places like Dubai, Abu Dhabi, and Doha), does not mean celebrating them or ridiculing them. Instead, the authors herein follow the intellectual footprints of the architectural scholars Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour, who looked at a city nearer at hand and in their own time. In their now classic *Learning from Las Vegas*, they went beyond seeing Las Vegas as tasteless, materialistic, or aberrant and insisted that it had important lessons for all places.[3] According to them, the city needed to be studied on its own terms—an insistence that changed not only future understandings of Las Vegas but also of architecture, planning, and urban thinking more generally. In their view, "Withholding judgment may be a tool to make later judgment more sensitive. This is a way of learning from everything."[4]

As we lay out in our edited volume *The New Arab Urban* (written with a group of scholars from across many academic disciplines and much of the world), we strive to learn from the cities of the Arabian Peninsula (or Gulf from Henceforth) —in particular the global showcase cities of Abu Dhabi, Dubai, and Doha. We have given shorter shrift to other parts of the urban Gulf, like Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Bahrain, which are also part of the interlinked economies of the Gulf

1 This study was originally published in Issue 28, April 2019 of the quarterly peer-reviewed social science's journal Omran. The article is also an adapted version of the introductory and conclusion chapters of the book: Molotch H., Ponzini D. (2019) Eds. The New Arab Urban: Gulf Cities of Wealth, Ambition, and Distress, New York University Press. The book is one of the results of the broader Learning from Gulf Cities Initiative, also co-directed by Molotch and Ponzini.

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3 Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1972).

4 Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour 1972, xvii. It came to our attention most recently through Stierli. C.f. Martino Stierli, *Las Vegas in the Rearview Mirror: The City in Theory, Photography and Film* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2013), pp. 35 and 36.

Cooperation Council (GCC). We are also spare in our attention to Riyadh, in Saudi Arabia, which although the largest GCC city is one that, in terms of history, ambitions, and contemporary relations with other parts of the world, is in a class distinct from the others. Recognizing the variation, we avoid thinking in terms of any single "Gulf City model." We do not want to repeat the historically common essentializing error of treating cities, variously "Islamic" or "Arab" or "Middle East," as the same. Especially when dealing with large expanses of geography and peoples, where past scholarship has been radically uneven, we need to avoid falling back on stereotypes, including those which have been generated academically.[5]

We might even fairly describe our cities of focus as "*our* Gulf cities," to further suggest the limits of our reach. What do they, at minimum, seem to have in common? Rather than being the important urban centers of surrounding territories, like Cairo for Egypt or Chicago for the U.S. Midwest, their centrality is more cosmopolitan. To an increasing degree, they have also escaped dependence on the natural resource most prominent in their region (oil), just as they rely little on any surrounding agriculture or manufacturing. These are essentially city-states with the world as their hinterland. What distinguishes them more markedly compared to all other places is that they are rich and in the hands of people with great ambitions, not just for themselves as individuals and families, but also for their rising cities. Given their wealth and autonomy, they are important as possible harbingers—as Las Vegas was in the earlier context in the United States.[6] And also like Las Vegas, their modes of development and ways of life can come to influence the urban world farther afield.

While stressing distinctions, we are also following those scholars striving to "de-exceptionalize"[7] Gulf cities and to use them to enrich analysis more generally. These cities follow economic, political, and cultural trajectories that, at least to a degree, are common to other human settlements. To follow this urban path means placing these cities in their own histories, as well as in the contemporary world in which they now play a prominent role. This involves taking on board not only long histories of trade and governance, but also—and to a great degree—particularities of recent history that do signal a departure from the usual paradigms. Clearly, these Gulf cities do not conform to anything resembling a "third-world" dependency or, given the world region in which they are located, a postcolonial status.[8] Our Gulf cities are, in ways we will be disentangling, following patterns that do not simply recapitulate any single development model of what has come before.

A first declaration and one to which we will eventually return: we are not, in the context of Gulf cities, oblivious to the injustices and dire circumstances that accompany the glamor and fascination of the present day. Indeed, there is a relationship between what appears on the top and what happens lower down, between spectacular wealth and grinding hardship. Appropriately enough, much media and scholarly attention has focused on the social iniquity, as well as the environmental threat, following on from Gulf-style development: surely among the highest levels of world inequality and, as indicated by the best data sources, the highest carbon footprints. As methodological strategy, we sometimes bracket the dystopic as well as – something which also occurs locally – the utopian. To build knowledge, we can leverage all the idiosyncrasies. By restraining a judgmental approach (remember Las Vegas), we can come back to the problematics with a greater capacity to understand and strategize. And, at least as aspiration, we can use the Gulf to further think about how urbanism works more generally.

Gulf Cities Are Theoretical Puzzlers

In scrambling some of the grand traditions of urban scholarship, Gulf cities challenge some basic concepts of the discipline – indeed, of social science more generally. They serve notice, in effect, that some inherited Western intellectual traditions may not be sufficient to grasp how societies, cultures, and economies emerge, cohere, and crumble. As a

5 See Edward Said, Orientalism: Western Representations of the Orient (New York: Pantheon, 1978), and Janet Abu Lughod's insightful essay, "The Islamic City—Historic Myth, Islamic Essence, and Contemporary Relevance," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 19, no. 2 (1987): pp. 155–176.

6 Some indeed thought of Las Vegas as "the prototype of the American city of the future." See Martino Stierli, *Las Vegas in the Rearview Mirror: The City in Theory, Photography and Film* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2013), 90, citing Fielden 1970, 64.

7 For a first example, see Nelida Fuccaro, "Visions of the City: Urban Studies on the Gulf," *Review of Middle East Studies* 35, no. 2 (2001): pp. 175–187.

8 Nelida Fuccaro, *Histories of City and State in the Persian Gulf: Manama since 1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

first stop, models derived from classical economics do not work in explaining Gulf development. Given the Gulf, it is hard to apply the precepts of classical thinkers like Adam Smith or David Ricardo. Whatever the general propensity to barter and exchange, in the Gulf such tendencies are subservient to other forces. Markets are not open and free; information is held close to the chest on vastly unequal playing fields. Crucial principles like comparative advantage as a determinant of price and productivity hardly reign with consistency. The market is not an apparatus to deliver the greatest good for the greatest number. Investments, in real estate or in other sectors, are detached from so-called market discipline.

Based as they are on economistic models, much of land economics and allied approaches in geography and urban sociology loses its explanatory power. Across the history of Gulf monarchies, real estate evolved from the outset as monopolistic—explicitly and persistently. Property derives from the birthright of the sheiks, as modified through truces with the British colonials, and—in varied ways—the playbooks of important merchant families. The bounties of oil followed arrangements of lineage as well, organized at least initially through early-twentieth-century links of favored families with the British colonials and the British, European, and U.S. energy corporations that initiated deals. Together, they constituted parts of what James Bill refers to as "informal empire."[9]

Famously and noticeably on the land in the early period, oil companies created gated zones reserved for Western technocrats and managers. Nelida Fuccaro identifies a section of what became central Manama, Bahrain, as the first of its kind in the Gulf, a "neo-colonial" residential outpost built in 1937 by the American-owned Bahrain Petroleum Company (Bapco).[10] What has evolved in various parts of the Gulf—skyscrapers, resorts, wholesalers, coffee bars, and the whole repertoire of structure and infrastructure—follows a path dependence from monarchical origin and early commercial agreements. Specific to particular Gulf states, there followed further layering of privilege and connections.

Economistic concepts have similarly filtered in across the disciplines of urban sociology, planning, and geography – all at best of only partial relevance in the Gulf. According to one such foundational perspective that follows from the work of the economist Walter Christaller (in the mid-1930s),[11] it is geographic centrality—a geometric discipline that minimizes friction of distance. This assumption gives rise to models like the rank-size rule, which aims to specify just how many cities will be on a plain, how large each will be, of what sort, and how cities relate to one another. Centrality also supposedly affords agglomeration benefits as relevant types of land users end up clustered together in central downtowns, complementing one another's core functions.[12] The regularity of outcome was noticed in the famous concentric zone hypotheses put forward in the Chicago School of Human Ecology. Other models turn on special geographic features that "determine" city location, like the break of bulk points, where, for example, rivers meet up with land transport. These ideas, at least in the terms they were formulated, prove to be poor predictors for Gulf conditions.

The alternative to conventional economics in any guise is, of course, Karl Marx. But Gulf conditions also challenge Marxian analysis. Along with the continuous potential for intervention through privilege and patronage, the state asserted itself with other traits we associate with feudal monarchies: colossal structures and symbolic showiness. Rather than displaying signs of withering away, the state became a tool for enhancing monarchical rule. Tax-free zones, which might otherwise be thought to have been hatched as capitalist plots, involved "political and economic logics of great powers, regional-rivals, state builders, and local businesses."[13] In other words, the apparently capitalist vehicle was (and is) a tool of the monarchical class, rather than (or at least as much as) vice versa. Far from being

9 James A. Bill, "The Geometry of Instability in the Gulf: The Rectangle of Tension," in Jamal S. al-Suwaidi, ed. *Iran and the Gulf: A Search for Stability* (Dubai: The Emirates Center for Strategic Studies in Research, 1996), p. 106, as cited in: Arang Keshavarzian and Waleed Hazbun, "Geopolitics and the Genealogy of Free Trade Zones in the Persian Gulf," *Geopolitics* 16, no. 2 (2010): 263–289, p. 270.

10 Fuccaro, *Histories of State and City,* p. 191.

11 Brian Berry and Allen Pred, *Central Place Studies: A Bibliography of Theory and Applications*, (Philadelphia: Regional Science Research Institute, 1965).

12 William Alonso, *Location and Land Use: Toward a General Theory of Land Rent* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1964).

13 Keshavarzian and Hazbun, "Re-Mapping Transnational Connections in the Middle East." *Geopolitics* 15, no. 2 (2010): 203–209, p. 208.

mere superstructure, these states have been active agents in furthering the wealth and legitimacy of the royal faction. None of this is to gainsay the authentic advances following from Marxian perspectives on the Gulf as in other world settings (or for that matter, the presence of neoclassical markets within specific delimited arenas)—but the application is approximate and, alas, sometimes contorted.[14] We have privileged vassals, favored merchants, and armies of workers—but not a bourgeoisie in service to capitalist rulers or a mass proletariat structured through the means of capitalist production.

Some contemporary urban theories, Marxian or otherwise, purport to explain cities as following in historic stages, concomitant with shifts in economic base and changes in social organization. Agriculture, itself arising from early sedentary life, provided the surplus to allow urban-based specialization to take root. Or, from a different development paradigm, it can be said that dominant proto-urban elites forced surpluses out of the peasantry. Either way, as Laura Lieto noted,[15] the classic explanations do not fit the Gulf case. Cities like Abu Dhabi or Doha grew from small settlements with limited preexisting fixed structures or even year-round populations (especially in the case of Abu Dhabi). The open desert provided opportunity for expansion under schemes provided by foreign planners and designers, embraced by local rulers with little regard for what had come before. In this sense, the contemporary urban form of our Gulf cities, professionally hatched and of recent vintage, is visible as an enacted construct, particular to the specificities of time and place. Some of it is surely conjuncture borne out of indeterminacy. The timing of oil and the voluntary British exit, co-occurring in an ideological climate of self-determination, opened the way to facilitate state structures. We can term our Gulf nations, borrowing language from Hossein Mahdavy, as instances of "fortuitous étatisme";[16] agencies and structures that follow on lend themselves to having a similar idiosyncratic quality.

In the development of the urban Gulf, hired consultants' grand plans are only loosely followed; they get replaced at fairly short intervals. Real-time development happens through opaque agendas in which even otherwise privileged citizens have little say or advance knowledge. Property owners do not form coalitions to publicly lobby for infrastructures from which they will derive financial benefit—as is so common in a place like the United States, where "growth machines" actively strive to use government for pecuniary advantage.[17] Public plans are drawn up and "visions" enunciated but lack for efficacy. There are signs of high-level intra-elite bargaining, directly or indirectly, sometimes involving the monarchs themselves.[18]

What about culture? Might that be a key for understanding Gulf development trends, just as it has been applied—however unevenly and with questionable results—to explain urban shifts elsewhere in the world?[19] A rampant stereotype to explain the region is that it is "all" indeed fundamentally cultural—with the religion of Islam as a prime proxy. But, of course, religion won't do. Great disparities across the Islamic world in doctrine and practice—from Indonesia to Saudi Arabia to Los Angeles[20]—produce differences almost surreal in their variation. Similarly, there are obvious distinctions from one Gulf state to another. As with the overstated or just plain empirically false Weberian claim that Protestantism was the launchpad of capitalism or that Europe and North America are bonded by Christianity, Islam manifests differently in its intersection with markets, policies, and lives. Two veteran and distinguished researchers of the region, Mottahedh and Fandy, flatly summarize the

14 For a strong and strongly informed effort, see Ahmed Kanna, *Dubai: The City as Corporation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

15 Laura Lieto, "Planning for the Hybrid Gulf City," in Molotch H., Ponzini D. Eds. *The New Arab Urban: Gulf Cities of Wealth, Ambition, and Distress* (New York: New York University Press, 2019).

16 Hossein Mahdavy, "The Pattern and Problems of Economic Development in Rentier States: The Case of Iran" in: M. A. Cook, ed. *Studies in the Economic History of Middle East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), pp. 428–467.

17 John Logan and Harvey Molotch, *Urban Fortunes: Toward a Political Economy of Place* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).

18 Davide Ponzini, "Large Scale Development Projects and Star Architecture in the Absence of Democratic Politics: The Case of Abu Dhabi, UAE," in *Cities* 28, no. 3 (2011): pp. 251–259.

19 Ulf Hannerz, *Transnational Connections: Culture, People, Places* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 1996).

20 For an edifying view of young Muslim peer group life in Los Angeles, see: John O'Brien, *Keeping It Halal: The Everyday Lives of Muslim American Teenage Boys* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017).

point: "'Islamic' by itself explains very little indeed."[21] When other informed scholars take up their very different approaches, they rarely—appropriately rarely—invoke religion as a general explanation. Islam is varied and subtle with plenty of room for ambiguity—indeed, indeterminacy—as to what is or is not legitimate. Even within the same branch or sect, elements can be inconsistent and "co-exist as valid doctrine." They can be allowed to stand, writes Frank Vogel, "without being authoritatively reconciled."[22] Through the various texts and circumstances, there can be innovation in judgments—indeed sometimes necessitated by changing external conditions as well as the evolution of new "learning" among guardians of the faith (*ʿulamāʾ*).[23] Thus, the "plurality of doctrine" is caused, if by nothing else, by the obligation to determine true meanings within texts and also the requirement that believers unendingly search, as a personal obligation, for truth in God's will. Islamic scholars, Vogel asserts, both "modern and classical, benefit from this pluralism of doctrine, since they can shift by various means from one view to the other, sometimes even to suit a particular circumstance."[24]

Skeptical of religion as explanation, we can ask about other, perhaps less doctrinal cultural explanations of how states and societies form. The economist Alfred Marshall used the term "industrial atmosphere" to invite attention to the nonmaterial aspects that conjoin with material ones to make countries and regions productive. The concept has evolved further in more recent thinking, where, for instance, prosperity is grounded in an agglomeration of complementary skills and knowledges, along with mutually understood tacit understandings. Actors' intuitive understandings become the basis for regional economic advantage—like the rise, a generation ago, of the "Third Italy" or, more recently, Silicon Valley.[25] Put in the language of economic geographer Michael Storper, these are "untraded dependencies," meaning that the market has no way to affix prices to such assets, but they are of value—economic value—nonetheless. In current discourse, we can cast such qualities as the basis for what makes a place "creative" or "innovative." Jane Jacobs, in her book *The Economy of Cities*,[26] uses something like a Marshallian atmosphere to argue that diverse kinds of people interacting in a common and proximate space (whether like her Greenwich Village neighborhood block or a national region) is the recipe for robust economies. In the Richard Florida argument, creative people are drawn to places that have just such diversity, which then makes them more creative still. It is highly dubious that such ideas make sense when applied to the Gulf. Edict from above is certainly more salient than organic complementarity growing out of the social ground.

Whatever the specifics, the urban Gulf induces, almost as analytic shock therapy, a search beyond the usual urban canons. Understanding these cities requires reaching further, or at least differently. Made skeptical of universalistic explanations, we also have to avoid falling back on an outmoded historicism—"things happen"—or a reductionist physicalist gumbo of oil and sand. So, does a nonjudgmental study of Gulf cities make us agnostic of any grand urban theory at all? Maybe. Whatever "failing" attributed to the dominant paradigms—or alternatively to Gulf cities themselves—something very robust is most certainly happening within and among them. They are robustly present in our world. There is durability—literally of buildings and nonliterally of social structures—that is productive and that can withstand impacts (negative as well as positive) from the outside. We aim, in this essay as well as in our larger project, to advance understanding of how the urban whole can exist as it does in what might seem unlikely circumstances.

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21 Roy Mottahedh and Mamoun Fandy "The Islamic Movement," in Gary G. Sick and Lawrence G. Potter, eds. *The Persian Gulf at the Millennium: Essays in Politics, Economy, Security and Religion* (New York: Palgrave, 1997),, p. 298.

22 Frank Vogel, "Islamic Governance in the Gulf: A Framework for Analysis, Comparison, and Prediction," in Gary G. Sick and Lawrence G. Potter, eds. *The Persian Gulf at the Millennium: Essays in Politics, Economy, Security and Religion* (New York: Palgrave, 1997), p. 263.

23 Woolfhart Heinrichs, "On the Figurative (Majaz) in Muslim Interpretation and Legal Hermeneutics," in *Interpreting Scriptures in Judaism, Christianity and Islam: Overlapping Inquiries*, ed. Mordechai Z. Cohen and Adele Berlin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), p. 251.

24 Vogel, "Islamic Governance,", pp. 263–264.

25 See, for example, Robert D. Putnam, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*, with Robert Leonardi and Raffaella Y. Nanetti (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994); Michael Piore and Charles Sabel, *The Second Industrial Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 1984); Anna Saxenian, *Regional Advantage: Culture and Competition in Silicon Valley and Route 128* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996).

26 Jane Jacobs, *The Economy of Cities* (New York: Vintage Books, 1969).

Gulf Cities as Methodological Challenge

Autocratic governance limits access to officials, statistical data, and fieldwork sites. Standard methods like survey, interview, or ethnography are typically not easy or possible at all. Even when data do exist, they might not be made available. A related part of the problem is lack of established traditions of professional, secular scholarship—again, in "our" Gulf, not the region as a whole.[27] As recently as 1957, we should recall, not only were there no universities in Abu Dhabi; there was not a single medical doctor.[28] Scholarship in the UAE locale has thus been especially dependent on outsiders, with all the risks of problematic access and potential for orientalist patronage—including among outside scholars from other parts of the Arab world. Reflecting the sad state of affairs, one UAE notable put it this way: "For most of the last 200 years, the only existing documentation consists of records and correspondence among British and other colonialists. We are in a lamentable position. We must study the past from the perspective of foreigners, using their old documents and photographs in our research."[29] Those words are from the book *From Rags to Riches*, whose author was an intimate of the ruling sheik (and holder of the national Mercedes franchise, among other important wealth resources). Substantively informative, it is also sincerely hagiographic. Contemporary scholarship by locals needs to respect indigenous figures, especially the monarch.

But given the limits on what is known or knowable, scholars must pick up clues where they can, inevitably shaped not only by their disciplinary base but also the cultures from which they come. Gulf cities need to be explained in terms of their complexities, and part of that complexity is represented by the limits of what has been said and not said. In part out of practical necessity, but also because of its epistemological virtue, drawing on the physical urban apparatus becomes a strategic way in. The city's instrumentation becomes a *laboratory* from which to trace larger lessons of politics, culture, and civic life—in this way, following in the tradition of the Chicago school of urban sociology of the mid-twentieth century. Unlike the Chicago setting with its famous plethora of statistical, cartographic, and ethnographic data, scholars (at least for the present) must make do with less while still maintaining ambitious analytic goals. The buildings, from a research standpoint, have the virtue of being *there*, and in a big way. Their sponsors avidly promote them. In contexts otherwise not rich in information, authorities boast and the media report on the structures and the ambitions of their designers, investors, developers, and (sometimes) their government sponsors. Details of underlying technologies, architectural processes, financing, and roles of specific agencies (and sometimes even details concerning the suffering of those whose sweat went into their making) emerge. This is especially true for the major buildings, the stars of the show that, as opposed to the routine modernist structures that fill in around them, get into the books and catch the media eye. Large or small (but primarily large) buildings provide, in effect, *method*. Analysts can deconstruct—reverse engineer—from the physical structures to better understand the social, political, and cultural realms that gave rise to them. Using buildings is not the only way to proceed along these lines and carries its own liabilities—risking, for example, under-attending to both direct opponents as well as to the ordinary folks not central to creating the structures and who remain largely invisible.

Whether or not their specifics are bellwethers for what next comes across the world—including what refracts back to change, for example, London or New York—these are cities that matter in new ways. It is unsatisfactory to label them with simple nostrums like "religious," "feudal," "tribal," or "despotic." Nor can Gulf cities be understood as simple recipients of one more or less coherent form of development that is coming in (typically from the West) to transform the destination society. The Gulf is a place where today, as in the long past, the transnational occurs. Ideas and solutions get tested at the urban level through (re) assembling elements, elements with multiple origins. Some such imports, especially if successfully made

27 Kolo remarks on the common characterization of the Gulf region as having a "limited indigenous capacity in virtually all professions." See: Jerry Kolo, "Accidental or Envisioned Cities: A Comparative Analysis of Abu Dhabi and Dubai," in George Katodrytis and Sharmeen Syed, eds. *Gulf Cities as Interfaces* (Cambridge: Gulf Research Center, 2016), p. 164.

28 Mohammad Al-Fahim, *From Rags to Riches: A Story of Abu Dhabi* (Abu Dhabi: Makarem, 1998).

29 Al-Fahim, *Rags to Riches*. This passage is also quoted by Seth Thompson. See: "Digitally Preserving the Heritage of the Arabian Peninsula: Al Jazeera Al Hamra Considered," in George Katodrytis and Sharmeen Syed, eds. *Gulf Cities as Interfaces* (Cambridge: Gulf Research Center, 2016), p. 211.

part of the local assemblage, then move to another region but—as always—with a landing adapted to the new setting. In at least some respects, it is thus made different yet again. Gulf reality rewards an approach that treats the transnational as a dynamic system, applicable to any system of places and always changing in content.

The Gulf as Transnational

Ironically given common Western discourse presuming parochial identities, Gulf settlements owe their historic origins (and continuous existence) to trade, travel, and migrations. Akin to how the Mediterranean shaped the European and North African worlds into a coherent entity, as famously depicted by Fernand Braudel,[30] so it is that the Gulf waterway has not been a barrier, but a content maker—its own cauldron of linkups. These Gulf cities are, as articulated by Manuel Castells with respect to essentials of the modern urban, spaces of "flow."[31] Ideas, raw materials, and finished goods moved through towns, villages, and ports, yielding sediments of cultural content and human practice, upstream, downstream, and on all sides. In ways scarcely imaginable in thinking about Braudel's era of focus—centered on the sixteenth century—flows came to operate at a vast scale and volume. In the lead, on a world basis, are Gulf-region initiatives and practices.

The image of a transnational Gulf has long been further obscured, of course, by the imposition of political boundaries and other institutional arrangements that give off—or indeed enforce—a misleading fixity.[32] As Boodrookas and Keshavarzian[33] urge, acknowledging historic fluidity helps defeat the propensity to see Gulf peoples as trapped in backward and hidebound modes of life. Careful examination of the histories of Gulf cities easily reveals how particular variants of the transnational have long been in place. This Gulf (and its related waterways) constituted a sea of amalgamations, with specific regard to the economic, familial, and religious. The fixity of borders and hostilities—for example, Iran "versus" Saudi Arabia—is not "ancient" or essential but modern and artefact.

A real past of interconnections and comingling is something that can also be seen in architecture (as well as artifact). Among others to trace the material and visual result is the scholar-architect Amale Andraos (2019). Through the prism of design and built-form, Andraos calls into question oversimplified contemporary conversations about so-called Arab culture. All over the Middle East, there is verbal respect—even compulsion—for honoring "context," for deference to what has come before and what is left of it. This can result in domes, mosaics, or versions of Islamic calligraphy. As Andraos has gone to great lengths to show, context is not simple to determine, and the effort to do so is not at all necessarily innocent. Indeed, it can be quite problematic. What is or is not authentically "Arab" does not come so labeled as a package off the historic or cultural shelf. After the many layers of influence moving to and from the Middle East (including to and from Europe, China and, in later times, North America), it becomes difficult to describe, much less proscribe, what is an "Arab" motif or an "Arab" building or an "Arab" material. Does the temporal era of the origin make it more or less Arab? And if so, which date counts?

In fact, patterns of Middle East social and physical development are in interaction with urban development elsewhere in the world, altering, in fact, what has been built locally, as well as interpretations made of it. For her part, Andraos is ready and eager to celebrate new buildings in the Arab world that emanate, as they long have, from foreign architects and design influences. As in the past, it is the combination that gives value. To think in terms of a regional past of mixed influences, including modernistic shaping from Europe, risks charges of apostasy. Behind her thinking lie the catastrophic impacts of essentialist perspectives—of declarations that something (or somebody) is or is not truly "Arab" or "Islam" or

30 Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995 (1949 French edition).

31 Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society: The Information Age: Economy, Society, and Culture*, vol. 1 (John Wiley & Sons, 1996).

32 See, for example, Thiollet, Hélène, and Leïla Vignal. "Transnationalising the Arabian Peninsula: Local, Regional and Global Dynamics," *Arabian Humanities* 7 (2016).:

33 Alex Boodrookas and Arang Keshavarzian, "Giving the Transnational a History: Gulf Cities across

Time and Space," in Molotch H., Ponzini D. Eds, *The New Arab Urban: Gulf Cities of Wealth, Ambition, and Distress* (New York: New York University Press, 2019)..

"colonial" or "Western" or, at the extreme, "infidel." This is all a realm of mischievous – and dangerous – fiction.

Whatever their inspirations or references to an Arab past, the major buildings of our Gulf cities (and the design skills behind them) are heavily sourced from the West. But—and this too repeats a historical phenomenon of the past—these Gulf city designs have their own "legs" that carry them out again to other parts of the world. With avid Gulf participation, a global elite of "starchitects" are setting the terms of contemporary urban form, often ebullient and, in the Gulf context, made capable of satisfying superlative claims. The tallest building in the world is Dubai's Burj Khalifa (Skidmore, Owings, and Merrill). Doha's spectacular Museum of Islamic Art is by the Chinese American architect I. M. Pei. London's Lord Norman Foster and Paris's Jean Nouvel are all over the spectacular place. And again, we have Las Vegas as a place that used superlatives to put itself on the map—albeit primarily the U.S. map.[34]

Whatever the national origins, these projects take form through Gulf-specific conditions and demonstrate the process and urban effects of the local in its interaction with the global. Beyond a common striving—in one way or another, to be Arab-like they also bespeak traits less essentially architectural: abundant financial resources, strong and monocratic political commitment, weak planning regulation, and great ambition. The "taste" for such structures, hence, follows not from some disembodied aesthetic preference, but from local interpretations of regional goals and, indeed, ongoing global interpretations of them. Also part of the mix is the presence of skills with which to negotiate, broker, and manage the right linkages between patrons, clients, and professionals of various nationalities and specializations. Together, they bring complex and, at least potentially, inventive projects into being.

Through the speed of such projects' execution and their sponsors' willingness to take risks, the region functions as a "test bed" for projects that then can be picked up, sometimes by the same firms that did the initial versions, and executed in other parts of the Middle East and beyond. Gulf-based real estate operators have expanded their portfolios to Europe, India, and North America. They also buy existing buildings or new ones being erected, especially those with iconic meaning. The Abu Dhabi Investment Council owns New York's Chrysler Building. Qatar Holding has a 95 percent share of the Shard in London—the tallest building in Europe—and the whole Porta Nuova development in Milan, which includes the tallest building in Italy. These architectural artifacts reflect a newly ambitious mode of financial deployments: not just for real estate, but investments of all sorts. In so doing, Gulf operatives change the world that changes them.

Such varied goals, projects, hybridities, interpretations, and executions have to be developed and implemented in real time in real places by particular people. At a professional level, there is a "crafting," in which particular forms of expertise intersect with an awareness of diverse cultural, political, and material specifics. Artfully "photogenic" commercial pictures that promote a spectacularized model in the Gulf circulate internationally.[35] The same occurs with urban plans and policies by reproducing existing models and mythologies or by hybridizing new ones locally.[36]

Urban Test Beds for Export

Things can get done faster and more ambitiously in the Gulf, creating buildings, infrastructures, technologies, and financial configurations that then travel to other parts of the world. There is less blockage from planners, regulations, or workplace rules. Historic preservation seldom arises as a challenge; nor does the need for the meaningful mitigation of environmental impact. Gulf cities are investment-friendly. This means they can implement new types of assemblage on a fast-track basis. The resulting outcomes can then serve as precedent for replication, sometimes under Gulf sponsorship, sometimes under sponsorship of the foreign actors who participated in initiating the Gulf arrangements. Because of what is now happening in the Gulf, we can move beyond the orientation of seeing the West (or the North) as the source and learn how things happening in the Gulf move *out* of the Gulf.

34 Robert Beauregard, "City of Superlatives," *City and Community* 2 (2003): 183–199.

35 Michele Nastasi, "A Gulf of Images: Photography and the Circulation of Spectacular Architecture," in Molotch H., Ponzini D. Eds. *The New Arab Urban: Gulf Cities of Wealth, Ambition, and Distress* (New York: New York University Press, 2019).

36 Lieto, "Planning for the Hybrid Gulf City".

The test bed phenomenon also means that the Gulf can teach, within the Gulf but also to those outside, about negative impacts. We can learn what happens when projects are misguided, sometimes suggesting how correctives can then be implemented (or not). In civic terms, we can also learn what happens when projects are executed without citizen surveillance or traditional market discipline.[37] Elites sometimes construct buildings that will remain mostly (or completely) empty, even causing bankruptcy for a participating investor or at least an embarrassing need to reschedule payments. The negatives are made less noticeable by the immense wealth liquidity that cushions mistakes. Buildings operating at severe cash-flow deficits can be maintained ("patient money" as it is sometimes termed) as development regimes move forward to their next projects, perhaps gaining knowledge or techniques through the failed precedent.[38] Even if dramatically inefficient in the short term, projects can become functional at a broader transnational scale or over the longer haul. Or, as with chain restaurant operators in the West who envision replication from the start, the ambition to reproduce is a built-in feature. This can change the calculus of what profit level the first implementation needs to provide. The same kind of logic can be used to explain—at least to investors—complexes built at a far larger scale, even as entire new cities that will not show profit for many years.

The creation of the port system of Dubai has become significant for the urban world. From the Dubai base, DP World—the Dubai-based global operator is now third in world ranking for container throughput—encompasses a total of seventy-seven marine and inland terminals across the Earth.[39] Ancillary facilities, like warehousing and logistical services, are intrinsic for port functioning, making them an aspect of ports everywhere. But under the Dubai regimen, ports push inland to organize or reorganize urban territory at increasingly distant locations, utilizing rail, highway, and air facilities as means for intermodal logistics systems. The innovations move beyond the Gulf, with hardware and software aligning and coordinating across global sites.

Driven by a set of even more radical industrial and economic ambitions, Abu Dhabi moves forward with the "zero-carbon" Masdar City project, as described after several years of fieldwork by Gökçe Günel.[40] With great ambition to create a climactically neutral mode of urbanization and with an investment estimated at $16 billion,[41] breakthroughs have fallen short. While the hype and a handsome campus (designed by Norman Foster) have been impressive at every turn, the hoped for advances in solar energy, pollution-free driverless vehicles, and self-sufficient cooling technologies have been unimpressive. Looking back, one can interpret the project as too much tied into a scenario of technical breakthrough—without attending to social, economic, or political transformations that might have fostered authentic discovery. This may be a general lesson coming out of Gulf technology ventures. Weakness on the social and political side hinders the chance for technology to come through.

For some Asian and African urban policy makers, projects like Masdar or King Abdullah Economic City (in Saudi Arabia) appear to be highly seductive – something described through the unique ethnographic research of Sarah Moser and colleagues.[42] With showy materials (and sponsorship of visits to the sights and sites), the Gulf cities invite emulation, including from places which lack the financial wherewithal to be able to pay off the massive investments required. Apparently, elites in less developed parts of the world

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37 Charles Edward Lindblom, *The Intelligence of Democracy: Decision Making through Mutual Adjustment* (New York: Free Press, 1965).

38 Again, we can caution against simplistic characterization: monied interests in other parts of the world also may tolerate empty buildings or even build into unfavorable markets when they think markets will eventually rebound. Almost drawing from the Gulf playbook, many owners of downtown U.S. real estate would rather maintain empty storefronts than sign long-term leases at lower rent levels. See Charles Bagli, "In a Thriving City, SoHo's Soaring Rents Keep Storefronts Empty," *New York Times*, August 23, 2017. www.nytimes.com.

39 Mina Akhavan, "Gateway: Revisiting Dubai as a Port City." In Molotch H., Ponzini D. Eds, *The New Arab Urban: Gulf Cities of Wealth, Ambition, and Distress* (New York: New York University Press, 2019).

40 Gökçe Günel, "Exporting the Spaceship: The Connected Isolation of Masdar City," in Molotch H., Ponzini D. Eds. *The New Arab Urban: Gulf Cities of Wealth, Ambition, and Distress* (New York: New York University Press, 2019).

41 Tamsin Carlisle, "Masdar City Clips Another $2.5bn from Price Tag." *National*, December 1, 2010. www.thenational.ae..

42 See: Sarah Moser, Marian Swain, and Mohammed H. Alkhabbaz, "King Abdullah Economic City: Engineering Saudi Arabia's Post-oil Future," *Cities* 45 (2015), pp. 71-80; Laurence Côté-Roy and Sarah Moser, "'Does Africa not deserve shiny new cities?' The power of seductive rhetoric around new cities in Africa". *Urban Studies*, pp. 1 - 17.

strive to emulate the Gulf urban glories however unwise they may be. In this way as well, Gulf events influence development elsewhere in the world.

Spaces of Work-arounds

Actual and existing Gulf cities have settled into patterns that could not have been envisioned. Before "disruption" became a fashionable term in Western policy circles, cities of the Gulf engaged in the practice—without using the term—to a high degree. Desert ecologies, trade relations, migration streams, and neighborhood residential patterns were arranged and rearranged through dictum, segregation, and abrupt transformation. On a continuous basis, parts that would appear inconsistent, even mutually exclusive, were made to cohere and be made durable. Challenges came and some are still present, but they have been, at least thus far, held in check. In part, but only in part, because of the long-term upward trend in world oil markets, regimes survived even risky maneuvers.

Gulf cities remain famous for their contradictions, the most often cited being the tension between cosmopolitan reach and fealty to some envisioned Arab or Islamic tradition. The solution is what we term the "work-around." They are make-do arrangements to bypass awkward or "rigid" legal, social, and cultural proscriptions. Both in daily life and in the history of peoples, we have to see such creative moves as normal and indeed necessary[43]—and a presence in societies of every kind. Here the work-around presses in, making itself evident in land use, law, and custom. It can carry into virtually all spheres, including the social-psychological, what one observer terms "an ideology of daily adjustments."[44]

In urban land use, one work-around mainstay is spatial separation. Whatever their etiology in other parts of the world, in the Gulf, the separations are frequently mandated—as when certain residential areas are set aside for citizens only or for particular groups of manual workers. The outcome represents a kind of "urbanism as a way of life" different from that empirically observed by past urban analysts. It is also distinct from the colonial or postcolonial cities of the Americas, Asia, or Africa. With their capacity to adapt and invent as they go, the Gulf regimes foster something new again in the world.

Often overlooked in accounts of urban regime functioning, goods consumption plays an outsized role in shaping the urban Gulf. Those with ancestors living in what became the UAE before 1925 (as evidenced by lineages recorded in their "Family Book") are citizens with whom the largesse is, by rights, to be shared. As a mainstay of the "contract" between the sheikdom's inner circle and its other citizens comes the wherewithal for the massive purchase of goods, with houses and cars (both with air conditioning) at the core. Extreme urban sprawl derives in good part from these twin elements, made especially evident given the flat topography. Building and maintaining the consumption infrastructure requires extensive and ongoing labor, performed—in lieu of an indigenous working class—by foreigners. Absent democracy, high levels of consumption yield a specific substitute form of political and social stability among the beneficiaries.

Consumption also arguably includes, in ways that are historically distinct, the import of prestige cultural institutions like the Louvre, Sorbonne, the Guggenheim and over a dozen significant western universities (including NYU). They are part of the work-arounds that enable modernization, globalization, and permissive practices—among certain types of people in demarcated zones—toward sexuality, food, finance, alcohol, and artistic representation. Among the most important tools is separation into special geographic spaces, conceptually similar to free ports that exempt shippers and merchants from duties and other taxes. But these are places that permit exception for activities like Western-style education (allowing a high degree of academic freedom) as well as easy social mixing, particularly across genders. Tourist service zones also cater to special tastes and pleasures—providing, in effect, a kind of "morality zoning"[45] familiar enough in the West (e.g. as red-light districts). In the Gulf, a specific mode of spatiality similarly reflects the attempt to reconcile contradictory goals.

43 See, for example: Harold Garfinkel, *Studies in Ethnomethodology* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Polity Press, 1967); Don Zimmerman, "The Practicalities of Rule Use," in Jack D. Douglas, ed. *Understanding Everyday Life* (Chicago: Aldine, 1970).

44 Boris Brorman Jensen "Masdar City: A Critical Retrospection", in Steffen Wippel, Katrin Bromber, and Birgit Krawietz, eds. *Under Construction: Logics of Urbanism in the Gulf Region* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2014), p. 49.

45 Nelida Fuccaro, *Histories of City and State in the Persian Gulf: Manama since 1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 231.

Gulf monarchies are engaged in what Hertog[46] has termed a "quest for significance". The oil elites have been using their wealth to buy the accoutrements of "good citizenship" and apparent "progressiveness" on the world stage. Their very costly projects—undertaken through the heavy involvement of international partners—have an audience, regardless of where they are specifically located, that is almost exclusively international. There is evidently a desire to acquire international recognition independent of hydrocarbon plutocracy. The proliferation of global-elite institutions displays the cumulative result. There are particular state apparatuses that finance, develop and – at times – protect them from parochial opposition. Modes of finance, gender relations, dress and diet are made bespoke for different needs and clientele. Specific agencies sponsor, service, and support – separately from the rest of the state bureaucracy. Such agencies may operate their own "cities" (actually more akin to districts in Western terminology[47]) or other types of enclaves operating independent of other physical and regulatory entities. The underlying strategies are thus anchored in the monarchies' local political economy, rather than, for example, international civil society or substantive emulation of outside forms of governance. While the ideas and language informing these regimes' international strategies are often borrowed from the West, their roots are very specific to the Gulf situation.

Such patterns and their intellectual depictions are, as we repeat, greatly challenged by dynamics in the Gulf. Gulf city arrangements, something like them, or something else again—as in China—are in increasing contemporary evidence. They have always been around in some variant, providing anomalies indeed for West-based paradigms that, however awkwardly, reach for generalizability. But modes of inclusion and exclusion—distinctive assemblages of peoples, capital, and spatial arrangements—need to be taken on board as their own kind of normal, maybe even of the ordinary. Where there are "issues," there are work-arounds that have at least the potential to manage them.

Expanding the Urban through the Gulf

Examining the Gulf expands our understanding of how contemporary cities and urban societies can be built and sustained. Extremes and distinctions in the Gulf—heights of buildings, demographic incongruity, and the contrast of traditions with cosmopolitan ambition—offer up lessons applicable to many other places. Buildings teach about how innovation, invention, and creativity operate—along with mimicry, suffering, and environmental loss. In the restrictive Gulf context, we get a glimpse of complex systems of authority, partnerships, and subcontracting beneath it all. Physical structures, here as elsewhere (the great gift to archaeology), serve as evidentiary residues. Gulf conditions do run counter to what are supposed to be the social and cultural underpinnings for advanced development – and this, beyond the facades, is consequential. As one practical consequence, to declare one's intentions to "diversify the economy," a recurrent theme of Gulf rulers, is likely not enough. Here's why: enclaves and spaces of exception – we persist in believing – run counter to urbanism's generative potential. They do not leverage the buzzing complementarities of the city. Ongoing accomplishment—which can have legs to carry it into the future and across space—depends on energy and daring from life *in situ*. There also needs to be social trust and tolerance.[48] The knowledge industry arises through inputs that are unanticipated and with outputs that are also unanticipated—and often uninvited. Staging the city as an archipelago of special districts may help in implementing individual megaprojects, but such a tactic does not portend synergy.[49]

Nor is it helpful that so many people in the Gulf are temporary. This militates against the building up of knowledge empathies, especially across groups, professions, and institutions. Expats share

46 Steffen Hertog, "A Quest for Significance: Gulf Oil Monarchies' International Strategies and Their Urban Dimensions," in Molotch H., Ponzini D. Eds. *The New Arab Urban: Gulf Cities of Wealth, Ambition, and Distress* (New York: New York University Press, 2019).

47 The names given to these "cities"—for example, Economic City, Education City, Internet City—do not necessarily describe what goes on within them. Dubai's Internet City, for example, is the location of many non-Internet companies. See Arang Keshavarzian, "Geopolitics and the Genealogy of Free Trade Zones in the Persian Gulf," *Geopolitics* 16, no. 2 (2010): pp. 263–289, p. 274. An extensive discussion of the issue can be found in Easterling 2014.

48 Among others, see Richard Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class: And How It's Transforming Work, Leisure and Everyday Life* (New York: Basic Books)..

49 Edward Malecki, "Creating and Sustaining Competitiveness: Local Knowledge and Economic Geography," in John R. Bryson et. al. eds. *Knowledge, Space, Economy* (London: Routledge, 2000).

clubs, restaurants, golf courses, malls, marinas, and schools for their children. An unintended feature of these Gulf cities is that they provide havens for professionals from other parts of the Middle East, including places where they would have had less ability to pursue careers and live with stability and safety. The expats from Europe and North America mix in as well. Given the internal diversity, such communities may have a special richness, however inadvertent their creation. We might refer to them as "collateral communities," and they are indeed a resource – but one that is inadvertent and temporary. There is not much backup or mobilization from emplaced cultural and social capital. The scene is thin, not thick.

Importing "off the shelf," whether a technology, a labor force, or building design, comes up short. Drawing again on lessons from the built environment, we know that icons derive power in the initial indigenous version and then lose it, almost by definition, as replication. The Parthenon sitting on the Greek Acropolis is not the same when reproduced in the city of Nashville, Tennessee (as has been done). Moving London Bridge to Lake Havasu City, Arizona, is meaningless folly. Ironically enough, the Eiffel Tower has more paying visitors than any monument on earth, but its replica does not work as a landmark in Paris, Texas, or for that matter as a Las Vegas hotel. In repetition of products and commerce, franchise operations do not have the same return as the original. From Cartier to Starbucks, the Gulf has "everything," but it does not have an equivalent of the original.

The precedent for self-starting innovation is not strong, even in the fields of technology, where issues of censorship and social exclusion might come less to the fore. Masdar does register several patents each year,(50) but typical U.S. universities apply for hundreds per year. Under the Masdar brand, construction is underway on apartment buildings, shopping facilities, and a handsome prototype for an environmentally advanced single-family house (the Eco-Villa). Critics will call out the narrative as mere "greenwashing." Genuine innovation may be forthcoming, but in the meantime all we really have is yet another demonstration of the ability to build and market real estate.

Very many of the Gulf urban practitioners are themselves hired hands; their spirits are not indigenous. They are paid to give advice and implement their projects but perforce in a derivative way. For its part, public administration typically does not transfer complex information and learning across comparable places and projects. Simplified policy narratives and catchwords ("world class," "sustainable," "smart," "spectacular") are emptied of meaning. Gulf cities compete with one another around such claims but, we suspect, engage in only limited mutual learning. Speed is the essence, itself a point of pride in its accomplishment. Even though much gets done,(51) it does not encourage the thinking through of problems of overbuild or conflict with existing uses or other projects coming along at the same time. Projects race ahead of institutional ability to guide them.(52) There is little time for sedimenting local knowledge, let alone building a local-specific planning culture rooted in civic engagement. Without provision for political engagement—or involving residents' knowledge—potential gains from any so-called "intelligence of democracy" is thwarted.

To extend the point: every innovation, no matter how daring, rests on a prior layering that is complex and precisely fitted to its situation—including past experiences of complaint and satisfaction. Whether a building, a painting, or a mousetrap, an unseen background gives productive coherence. In the Gulf, there is a kind of patina deficit—a shortage of built-up elements that create, ironically, conditions for innovation. Always dependent on what already has been, usually from somewhere else, Gulf actors are behind, even if only slightly. It is thus not, as crude stereotype would have it, that these places are "mired in the past." Quite the contrary, they seem more mired in the present—almost hidebound to it. And not all of it is pretty.

50 For a Masdar patent enumeration, by year, see http://stks.freshpatents.com.

51 For a prideful government summary of what has been accomplished, see Crown Prince Court, *United Arab Emirates: 40 Years of Progress Retrospective Analysis of Key Indicators* (Abu Dhabi: Mimeo, 2011). www.cpc.gov.ae. 2011.

52 For an insightful description of how almost all megaprojects in the 2000s in Abu Dhabi did not follow a comprehensive city plan or land use regulations, see: Kais Samarrai, "The Evolution of Abu Dhabi's City Urbanization and the Sustainability Challenge," in Mohammad Al-Said and Rahul Mehrotra, eds. *Shaping Cities: Emerging Models of Planning Practice* (Berlin: Aga Khan Award for Architecture/Hatje Cantz, 2016).

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