The Arab City: Architecture and Representation

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The symposium “Architecture and Representation: The Arab City” was held at Columbia University’s Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation (GSAPP) in November 2014, as a second iteration of an event by the same name that took place in Amman in 2013, with the collaboration of Studio-X director Nora Akawi. The topic was a result of the seminars and studios I held at GSAPP from 2011 to 2014, which all revolved around the question of representation in architecture and urban design, as seen through the lens of the architectural and urban production in the Middle East and North Africa region over the past decade. “Representation” is a multiple term for architects, evoking the act of architectural drawing or the affordances of participation in a society, but perhaps most significantly for these discussions, it is understood as the capacity for buildings to hold meaning or to be iconic. The seminars in particular were focused on situating this contemporary conversation and production within a larger historical context, starting with the fall of the Ottoman empire and its division into colonized territories and extending to the rise of the “Gulf cities,” an ascension in which architecture and real estate development played a critical role.

The focus on the “Arab City” came first as a personal interest in reexamining the various constructions of this term historically. Such constructions have spanned the scales of architecture and urbanism, with architecture always carrying the many ideas about the “city,” even in its details. Acknowledging the ludicrousness of reading cities as essentially defined or categorized along ethnic lines, the term “Arab” can nevertheless connote unique aspirations and evoke particular images, rendering the city specifically other to “Islamic” or “Arab-Islamic,” as the latter’s two adjectives are decoupled to uncover a history that is today too often forgotten, or even erased. Those aspirations were awakened in a hopeful moment during the events of the Arab Spring and its “retaking of the public square.” They seem to have continued to live and grow, if not in the realities of the “Arab Street” (now sadly bloodier and more repressive than ever), then in the minds and work of a new generation of highly engaged architects, historians, and scholars. With many of them joining the symposium, the conversation was charged not only with great intensity and a sense of urgency but also with a feeling of irreverent optimism in the continued power of the ideas embodied by a secular, transnational, progressive, and intellectual “Arab” that attempted to articulate modernity, and indeed politics, on its own terms.
The second reason for taking the Arab City as a focus was to probe underexamined issues raised by the notion of "global practice" in architecture today. The term has been generating hype for over a decade now, yet the discussion surrounding it has been stymied by its inevitable clichés. Over and over the terms to be negotiated have been reduced to the assumed opposition between "local" and "global," with architecture bestowed the role of bridging "tradition" and "modernity," even as it further conceals the very modernity of "tradition" as a construction and an effect of modernity itself. These contradictions have given us many of the most notable icons of the twenty-first century, on the one hand, often conceived as built metaphors, with the power of brand. On the other hand, they have provided a new kind of socially motivated architecture that brings together local craft, labor, and materials with imported western technology, and where words such as "authenticity" and "heritage" are embraced unselfconsciously as architects talk earnestly about expressing cultural specificity and difference. In both instances, otherness is usually enshrined in sound bite motifs, easily digested by our virtual, twenty-four-hour infoscape of architecture-as-image.

In many ways, what contemporary global practice ushered back is the question of architecture as symbolic form, engaged in representation rather than limited to performance. This return has succeeded despite the heated debates of architectural postmodernism, which ran from the pleasures of signs and symbols reintroduced by Venturi, Scott Brown to the disarticulated and voided architectural bodies and processes of the Museum of Modern Art's 1988 deconstructivist show, to the more recent debates around affect or procedure. As representation came back largely in the form of branding—a strategy imported from graphic and product design—it enabled the expediency required to serve the speed and scales of global practice and global capitalization, as well as the production of architectural icons. Yet the encounter of those representations with the realities of local contexts has not always been pleasant, inviting us to consider the impossibility that architecture could ever exist outside of either context or content and to engage instead in a more critical reading of the content and contexts being produced. When we continue to hear of identity building through architecture, whether for a corporate client, an institution, a city, or a state, what are the meanings produced? What identities are being constructed, and how can that knowledge allow us (architects) some margins in which to resist?

There is probably no context more pregnant for this investigation than that of the Arab City, as site of imagination and projection, in a region at once feared and exoticized. The Arab City has witnessed simultaneously, and not coincidentally, the devastation of its old centers and the rise of new ones. The old centers—Beirut, Baghdad, Damascus, Cairo—represent a long, rich, and complex dialogue with, struggle over, and embrace of modernity, not only through art, literature, poetry, and intellectual and political thought, but also through the architecture and urban experiments launched during the last stretch of the Ottoman rule. What the new centers offer is a seeming blank slate—"no context," as many architects might say. This seeming contextual void is fast-tracking from tradition to modernity as it gives rise to new urban centers of great power and influence. This is the typical narrative: Only recently inhabited by fishermen and Bedouins roaming the desert and living in tents, these instant cities today boast the financial skyscrapers, luxury lifestyles, and cultural centers of the post-industrial city, led by visionary rulers who are single-handedly lifting their citizens and cities toward the future while respecting the traditional and religious values of the past. This harmonious coming together is set in contrast to the narrative of politicized Islam and the violent clash of civilizations we are said to be experiencing, even as it is intimately connected to it. For even as we move beyond the narrative of an East/West civilizational divide, we are nevertheless witnessing a struggle for regional power through the rise of these new cities. On one side is a progressive attempt to engage modernity; on the other, a conservative pull to modernize without democracy. And in this struggle, ethnicity, tradition, and religious identity are set as the foundation for new transnational formations, however moderate or extreme they may be.

Standing as the skillful diplomat is the architect, weaving together "tradition" and "modernity" in a mashup of signifiers for both. Among the most notable and successful examples of the past decade are the twin proposals of Foster + Partners' Masdar in Abu Dhabi and OMA's new eco-city for Ras El Khaimah, both of which were designed to echo the traditional medina, with its high-density, low-rise built form that so inspired Alison Smithson's 1974 manifesto for the mat building. Masdar in particular presents a sophisticated language of traditional Islamic architectural motifs-turned-high-tech devices for green energy performance, such as the use of the mashabbiya to screen the sky and as part of building façades, a strategy also embraced in Jean Nouvel's Abu Dhabi Louvre and in I. M. Pei's Islamic Museum in Qatar. Other strategies involve layering calligraphy onto the bold forms of contemporary expression, such as for the new Qatar Faculty of Islamic Studies designed by Ali Mangera and Ada Yvars Bravo. Finally, there are the proliferation of architectural metaphors referring to traditional life in the desert and on the ocean, exemplified by buildings such as Burj Al Arab (a building in the form of a sail), Zaha Hadid's Dubai Opera House ("the gentle winding form evokes images of mountains or sand dunes"), Morphosis's King Abdullah Petroleum Studies and Research Center ("the new KAPSARC master plan is rooted in the historical model of the oasis village"), OMA's Jeddah International Airport proposal ("both the main terminal and
Royal pavilion with their crescent-like shape enclose an internal oasis that can accommodate different forms of use), and Nouvel's National Museum of Qatar, which "crystallizes" the Qatari identity, in "a building that, like a desert rose, appears to grow out of the ground and be one with it."18

In many ways, this approach is not dissimilar to that of camel racing, which has regained popularity among young Emiratis. Anthropologist Sulayman Khalaf traces the genealogy of this sport and its significant revival starting in the mid-1990s, demonstrating how it was reinvented, expanded, and promoted by the United Arab Emirates' ruling family and President Sheikh Zayed as a means to construct the Emirati identity as stable and continuous in the face of significant transformation of its society.19 The camels signify tradition and the historical Bedouin lifestyle, but they are driven by highly developed robot-jockeys, which embody the Emirates' embrace of modern technology and progress. This bringing together of camels and robots demonstrates the ruling family's visionary approach to developing its city-state, with a commitment to reconciling traditional lifestyle and values with the modern, technologically driven western world. This bridging of tradition and modernity enacts a kind of harmony as it produces a unique, highly specific cultural experience that reinforces the strength and preservation of local identity in the face of global homogenization.

This last point, that of the construction of identity, becomes the most interesting, for it is a particular identity that is being constructed, one that is not only stable but also exclusive and exclusionary. The Emirati identity is here narrowly defined as stemming from the pure lineage of Bedouins, the only original inhabitants of the watan (homeland), staged as bearers of the "authentic" culture of this land and place, at the exclusion of many of the other populations and cultures that in fact rendered the historical populations of the Gulf States much more hybrid over time.20 This narrative also serves as a political and cultural performance to reassure the Emirati nationals, to whom the newly created population in which they have become a minority is alarming. Set against the reality of a highly diverse people—from young western expats, to Arab refugees, to Southeast Asian construction workers—the representation of authentic cultural heritage that groups all non-Emirati together as a never-to-be-integrated "other."

While enlisting cultural heritage to construct an exclusive, and purportedly authentic, identity is one way the UAE's ruling family has engaged in statecraft, another is the seemingly opposite: as a narrative of a nation-state engaged in a kind of "reverse Orientalism," as anthropologist Ahmad Kanna has brilliantly argued in Dubai: The City as Corporation,21 Building on Edward Said's theory of Orientalism as an essentialist reduction of a people depicted as frozen in static religious beliefs and cultural practices, Kanna renders Dubai and the Gulf States as equally and miraculously suspended outside of history or politics, but this time as hypermodern states driven by futurist and visionary development purveyed by urbanists and starchitects.22 In this narrative, Dubai becomes the fantastically glittery city-as-spectacle, emerging from the desert as the twenty-first-century incarnation of the One Thousand and One Nights, which inspired Frank Lloyd Wright's vision for Baghdad in the middle of the last century.23 As the old centers of Arab struggles for modernity make way for the new centers of global entrepreneurial neoliberalism, Dubai asserts the promise of a new future that constitutes a radical break from "Arab traditions and pathologies."24

Set against the representations of authentic and original culture as embodied by the Bedouin lifestyle and the imaging of futuristic hypermodern cities is "the real," whether the desert, the crumbling modernist old town, the new shopping malls, or the relentlessly generic housing and commercial buildings of the prebranded neighborhoods.25 Deemed inauthentic and uninspiring for architects, this banal reality ushers in the typical question of "how do you build in a place with no context?"26 Inviting context to become a fantasy that brings together the golden age of a mythical Islamic empire with the promise of new technological utopias. Naturally, this narrative is made to resonate with another, that of a mythical historical golden age of Islam, now a reconstituted archive that groups together, undifferentiated in space or time, the traditional medinas of Fez and Aleppo, the lush palaces of Andalucía, the golden buildings of the caliphate of Baghdad, or the domes and pixelated refracting surfaces of Sinan's mosques.27 This construction of a mythical context, at once nostalgic and futurist, produces a powerful narrative: Islam is not against progress because it was once the driver of progress. What we are witnessing is in fact a new Islamic renaissance, that of an emerging society at once deeply religious and conscious of belonging to a broad "Islamic nation"—a concept that has possibly never been as complex or charged as today—and at the cutting edge of a visionary, global, urbanized future.

The most undeniably successful (and quite beautiful) architectural embodiment of this narrative is, Ateliers Jean Nouvel's Louvre Abu Dhabi. Situated on Saadiyat Island, the building takes inspiration from the organic patterns of the traditional medinas to create a landscape of building-scaled rooms, whose nonhierarchical relationships are made legible by a shallow dome with a diameter close to that of the Louvre's Cours Carrée in Paris. As a layering of fractal three-dimensional patterns, the dome filters light to create microenvironments of dreamy mist, echoing at once rays of sunlight trickling through the palms of an oasis and the refraction of light produced by the ornate surfaces of mosques. As with many of Nouvel's projects, architecture is dematerialized, blending with the scenarios and atmospheres of its context both real and imagined. Nouvel, a self-declared contextual architect, is a no kitsch designer, his sophisticated...
knowledge rendering him an orientalist of the highest caliber. Such has been Nouvel's reputation since his Institut du Monde Arabe, where the mechanical façade of sun-sensitive lenses is a technological interpretation of the Islamic geometric pattern that calibrates light to render vision as both optics and experience in a multilayered and complex configuration.

So what, then, is the problem if these constructions are able to produce exemplary architecture? A first problem is that this montage of signs and symbols usually leads to reductive meanings and experiences, the essentializing of an entire society, which, as Said's thesis demonstrated, was not only offensive in its representations but also instrumental in advancing the colonial project. The construction of cultural specificity is all too often reduced to a simplistic identity, defined in opposition to, and at the exclusion of, others (a difficulty inherent in architecture's reductiveness). A second and possibly larger problem lies with a tendency toward a type of pan-Islamism. While art historians like Oleg Grabar have thoughtfully probed the boundaries of Islamic art (and its continued vitality, defined in opposition to, and at the exclusion of, others (a difficulty inherent in architecture's reductiveness). A second and possibly larger problem lies with a tendency toward a type of pan-Islamism. While art historians like Oleg Grabar have thoughtfully probed the boundaries of Islamic art (and its continued influence), others still believe that if particular architectural features were developed during the technological advancement that took place in sixteenth-century Istanbul under the genius of the architect Sinan, it is equally contextual to use them in the desert of Qatar or Abu Dhabi because they belong to a unified history of Islamic architecture. Regardless of place and time, politics or economics, material advancements and technologies, Islamic architecture is constructed as the principal unifier that extends from the lands of Syria to Iraq—a form of cultural displacement that strangely makes possible the conception of a romanticized, cohesive Islamic people, nation, or empire. At its most dystopic, this is the same mythical Islamic empire claimed by (and marked by the horrific violence of) ISIS, where an overgeneralized idea of Islamic culture is used to legitimate the brutal murder of innocent others as well as the destruction of any symbol of ancient architectural hybridity or contaminated progressive modernity.

This kind of essentialized identity should in fact be seen as the construction of a particular archive, which at once renders if not impossible then at least quite difficult the possibility of uncovering and reconstituting any alternatives. The endless focus on the expression of Islamic culture in all its forms—whether scholarly, in popular culture, or in architecture, and even cities—has produced powerful and all-encompassing noise that has rendered invisible the knowing and uncovering of another past, that of the endlessly rich and varied intellectual, political, literary, and artistic dreams and discourses that attempted to build a modern, progressive (and secular) Arab nation. It is those two visions—and histories—that collided again for a brief hopeful moment in the streets of Cairo, inflamed by a youthful and disenfranchised population whose memory and appropriation of Nasserian slogans was not coincidental—though neither was its violent silencing by the Muslim Brotherhood's singular Islamic vision. This alternative history has driven many of the intellectual, political, and artistic practices that have emerged from the region in the past two decades, and that have questioned "identity" as an interpretive lens. A seminal recent account is that of historian and political economist Georges Corm in his Pensée et politique dans le monde arabe. Starting from his disappointment with the Arab Spring's denouement, Corm brilliantly traces the evolution of Islamic and Arab intellectual and political thought, their encounter with modernity from 1850 to today. Looking to early religious reformists such as Sheikh Tantawi and, later, Taha Hussein, both emerging from Al-Azhar University in Cairo, and early Arab secular thinkers such as Yassin El-Hafez, Mahdi 'Amel, the poet Adonis, the economist Samir Amin, and the feminist poet May Ziade, to name but a few, Corm generates an archive that counteracts the dominant "Jihad vs. McWorld" narrative that is fueling much scholarly research on, and architectural rhetoric in, the region today. Faced with such a long and complex account of modernist progressive thought, one can only wonder why this line of critical engagement with an Arabic modernity could not constitute an alternative archive from which to construct new architectural possibilities in the face of the conservative social and political structures we are most often invited to serve.

Institutions such as the Arab Image Foundation (AIF) and the Arab Center for Architecture, both based in Beirut, are engaged in this same project in historical memory and Arab modernity, at times secular and at times stemming from religious reforming forces. Founded in 1997, the AIF houses a unique collection of over 600,000 photographs taken between 1850 and 1950—precisely the same time frame of Georges Corm's account of the Nahda, or Arab Renaissance—by professional, amateur, and anonymous photographers. The images encompass a wide range of subjects, genres, and styles that capture everyday life during an age of transformation, progressive thinking, and optimism about the future of Arab nations. While the AIF's stated mission is to shed light on the practice of photography in the region over that century, it acknowledges that "inevitably, the research projects raise questions about how images are used or their relationship to notions such as identity, history, and memory." With powerful collections such as Akram Zaatari's "The Vehicle," which splices through family albums "the infiltration of modernity into the Arab world through the representation of the vehicle"; or "Arts et Couleurs," which depicts "a time of economic growth, hula hoop parties, bee hive hairdos and the Beatles"; or the Rafik Chadirji collection, which documents Baghdad's ebullient intellectual and artistic renaissance in the 1950s, the AIF presents modernity in its multifaceted and complex layers, in contrast to the common narrative of a region stuck in time and mindless conflict. For architecture, the Chadirji collection is particularly important, as it documents a time when Iraqi architects, poets, and writers were welcoming modernist ideas and styles, hybridizing them not with
Islamic references but rather with a playful mix of Babylonian ancestry and contemporary critical discourse. This was a time that brought the talents of architects such as Mohammed Makiya and Hisham Munir together with Walter Gropius, Josep Lluís Sert, and Marcello d'Olivo. Even Hassan Fathy, whose language has come to embody the quintessential regionalist architecture, never referenced Islamic motifs in his seminal 1958 New Gourna project but rather freely wove together abstract modernist forms with pharaonic imagery.

This embrace of modernity helped Arab nations shed the shackles of colonialism and build new, independent institutions. The writing of certain architects, urban theorists, and scholars resists the notion that modernity was experienced as an imposition, arguing instead that it adopted a unique form (architectural and otherwise) in every city it took root in. This narrative is one that the Arab Center for Architecture is painstakingly documenting as a collection of buildings and projects whose traces are recorded through photography, drawing, and texts. Gradually, these valuable documents are becoming available in an online archive, as well as a collection of original drawings at the center in Beirut. As with the Arab Image Foundation, the archive collapses the distinctions between generic structures and exquisite buildings, private houses and public monuments, and makes palpable the many-layered complexities of the modernist project in the region. Like the AIF, the archive also carefully traces authorship, documenting collaborations between local and international architects as well as temporary and permanent residents of the region. CETA, a collaborative of French and Lebanese architects and engineers (J. Aractingi, J. N. Conan, J. Nassar, P. Neema), for example, was responsible for the design of the perfectly proportioned Electricité du Liban building (1965–72) in Beirut. J. N. Conan, J. Nassar, P. Neema), for example, was responsible for the design of the perfectly proportioned Electricité du Liban building (1965–72) in Beirut. Today, many of these jewel-like buildings have been destroyed by either conflict or development, fallen in complete disrepair or "pimped up," hidden behind Orientalizing arches and a depressing pastiche of the architectural tropes commonly used to signify identity.

In fact, to visit the old centers of Cairo, Beirut, Damascus, or Baghdad is to see disproved the notion of an "authentic" culture brutally displaced by its encounter with modernity. To this day these cities embrace modernism with little doubt. Instead, it is with the rise of the new centers of oil economies that the construction of a conservative rather than progressive form of modernism. From the elegant lines of the Dahran airport designed by Minoru Yamasaki (1961) to the numerous state buildings of Kenzo Tange, places like the Royal State Palace in Jeddah (1980–83) or Alkhairie, the King Faisal Foundation (1976–84 in Riyadh) and the Hajj Terminal (1982) in Riyadh, designed in collaboration with Bechtel. This representation of tradition and modernity—and it is always a representation of synthesis rather than an actual mediasation of past and future—was not limited to the architecture but also manifest in urban planning: from Constantinos Apostolou Doxiadis's plan for Riyadh (1971) to Georges Candilis's plans for Bahrain and Al Khobar (1974) developed for Aramco, in which modernist approaches to zoning and a focus on infrastructure in plan were combined in section with particular privacy concerns, leading to strict guidelines that controlled views, height, and setbacks.

At the same time, ironically, local forms of settlement were replaced by suburban-style gated communities. In the 1930s Aramco introduced the compound typology as a gated community or "company town" for its employees, attracting middle-class Americans to spend a few years in the desert of Arabia with a vision of suburban comfort. These detached homes and surrounding yards inverted the local courtyard housing typology which connected rooms and houses around extended kinship and tribal relationships. As Aramco built suburban-style compounds for its Arab staff—segregated from its American staff—this new architecture borrows oriental, Bedouin, or "Islamic" motifs—patterned surfaces, arched openings, courtyards, medina-like cityscapes, tent-inspired structures—to demonstrate origin stories and authenticity with modern statehood.

Following these early collaborations, the new alliances with American oil and construction companies such as Aramco and Bechtel led to increased commissions for American corporate firms. Their architectural language further coupled conservative social and political values with modern technologies. Today, this narrative can be read across buildings such as Skidmore, Owings & Merrill's National Commercial Bank of Jeddah (1977–84), which boldly wove together modernist abstraction with Orientalized patterns and courts; the firm's Abdul Aziz International Airport in Jeddah, also known as the Hajj Terminal (1982); and HOK's King Saud University (1984), as well as King Khhaled International Airport (1975–84) in Riyadh, designed in collaboration with Bechtel. This representation of tradition and modernity—and it is always a representation of synthesis rather than an actual mediation of past and future—was not limited to the architecture but also manifest in urban planning: from Constantinos Apostolou Doxiadis's plan for Riyadh (1971) to Georges Candilis's plans for Bahrain and Al Khobar (1974) developed for Aramco, in which modernist approaches to zoning and a focus on infrastructure in plan were combined in section with particular privacy concerns, leading to strict guidelines that controlled views, height, and setbacks. Today, as the Gulf States' sprawling luxury gated communities are built alongside invisible camps for imported labor, one is reminded of the oil company's original experiments to promote an American brand of modernity through the single-family home and its consumerist lifestyle.
It is this narrative of conflicting modernities, of forgotten cultural heritage, and of political, social, economic, and technological transformation that the Bahrain Pavilion of the Fourteenth Venice Architecture Biennale so powerfully told. Designed as a rotunda of shelves, the pavilion staged a library filled with thousands of copies of the same book. An archive of seminal architectural buildings from the Middle East and North Africa region built between 1914 and 2014, the book stood as a manifesto for the region’s ability not only to “absorb modernity.” As Biennale curator Rem Koolhaas’s polemical invitation suggested, but to find in the generic and abstract nature of the modernist architectural language and within the universal qualities of its social ambitions, highly specific and various forms of invention and adaptation. As visitors flipped through books while seated around a large circular table, the white dome above displayed an endlessly multiplied identical image: a man dressed in white and absorbed in what seemed a trance-like prayer—an assumption visitors inevitably made as a result of his speaking in Arabic. The speaker was in fact simply reciting the names of the nations from which the buildings had been selected.

The pavilion’s scenography presented the long-standing opposition between an Arab progressive and modernist nationalism—as represented by the collected buildings and the map on the table—and an Islamic conservative nationalism as suggested by the speaker’s incantation above, even as it undermined the simplicity of this binary narrative. The pavilion’s sponsor, Bahrain, supported the vision of Lebanese architects Bernard Khoury and George Arbid, who modeled the multiple, varied, and complex Arab modernity asserted within the pages of the book itself.

This desire to resist single narratives, reveal other histories, and produce multiple meanings has motivated architects working in the region, and in Lebanon in particular, where much of this debate played out during the civil war and throughout the reconstruction of downtown Beirut. The Solidere project, named after the private company that led the reconstruction and continues to oversee the development of the heart of the Lebanese capital, embodied not only the transition from the old centers of power and influence to the new ones in the Gulf but also the reshaping of an Arab secular nationalism to the pre-dominant narrative of religious and embattled identities.

Founded in 1994 by Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, a self-made man who had risen to fortune and power working as Prince Fahd’s personal contractor in Saudi Arabia, Solidere soon became a model for the region and beyond, inspiring new development structures from Mecca to Mumbai. Despite the attacks on its procedures—from the use of eminent domain to the pressure to forfeit property rights to the redrawing of property lines to allow larger parcels to be developed—within a few years Solidere had produced significantly more destruction than fifteen years of war. This destruction represented nothing less than a political editing of history, demolishing certain buildings while restoring and recasting the significance of others. With the goal of reviving Beirut as a tourist destination and the “Paris of the Middle East,” Solidere turned the buzzing, tight-knit, and messy fabric of downtown—with its street vendors, layered histories, and secular modern fabric—into a city of icons, where mosques, churches, and a single temple have been excavated and preserved as ruins while the active cityscape around was wiped out. Transformed into freestanding objects, these religious buildings became at once monuments and meaningless clichés standing in for religious pluralism and gutted of the real life and endless daily transactions that shaped them. Using as its alibi the preservation of memory, Solidere constructed a fiction instead: that of religious pluralism as the only possible foundation of Lebanese identity. As religious icons punctuate shopping streets with alternating Haussmanian and Ottoman flavors, downtown Beirut is today a successful tourist destination for wealthy Gulf and Saudi nationals. Emptied of local population, it becomes a ghost town the minute those countries declare its grounds unsafe for their citizens to travel to.

It is this complex and contingent understanding of the Arab City that makes clear the impossibility of architecture to exist outside of its own context. Yet this context is not the monolithic set of formal devices that have come to represent the Arab City in so much contemporary architecture. Rather, it is a multilayered, messy, and multiple history that brings together the opposites we inevitably continue to construct—the secular and the religious, tradition and modernity, the local and the global. Examples such as the reconstruction of downtown Beirut or the Louvre Abu Dhabi tell a larger story of contemporary global architectural and urban production. They are a testimony both to architects’ powerlessness in the face of development forces and to architecture’s power in continuing to embody concepts, produce content, and shape its context, as Bernard Tschumi once said. And yet, at a time of wrenching violence, unbearable displacement, and devastating conflict across the Middle East, it seems important for architects to contribute a greater understanding to the historical, social, political, cultural, and economical complexities at hand, taking responsibility to articulate and engage both the real and its representation in more complex and incisive ways. The concepts we enlist, the contexts we shape, and the content we produce matter. As a site at once imaginary and real, the Arab City sits at the intersection of much of what is at stake today for architects and for architecture. To engage in its complexity is to acknowledge the renewed urgency of historical knowledge while also embracing the responsibility to project much needed alternate futures.
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2 On the deconstruction of the term "traditional," "Islamic," and "cities," see Janet Abu-Lughod's scholarship. In particu-
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Foundation in Beirut, "with its dominant
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architecture" Phillip Stevens, "Part Images of
David Adjaye's Completed Khalil Founda-
tion at Beirut," The Architectural Review,
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9 On the relationship between the mosque and the square, see Nezar Nashif, "The Arab Revolution Takes Back Public

23 See interview with Ali Mangera in
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8 On erased histories see Nicolai
Kossa in "Gulf Cities" see Rem Koolhaas/
Mariano Dellapenna, The Deutschland

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31 See interview with Hala Wardé in this
volume on supergraphic
shapes actually expresses the needs of the
building as a "sitting on toilet."

18 The Arab City in Representation

Andrae Amoros
Traditional and vernacular styles had been indexed, codified, and then hijacked toward a more assimilative form of occupa-


40 This narrative of a "return" to concerns about regional identity starting in the mid-
1960s and expressed through architecture can be traced in Gwendolyn Wright, "Global Ambition and Local Knowledge," in *Architecture and Politics in the Twentieth Century*. Some, however, approach the idea as if "Islamiza-

41 See the US pavilion (OfficeUS) at the 2014 Venice Architecture Biennale.


44 This narrative transpired across all of the pavilions.

45 Architects working in the region include Bernard Khoury, Hashim Sarkis, and L.E.F.T., among others.

46 Solidere was exported as the public-private company Millennium to lead the redevelopment (and destruction of much of the settlement fabric) in Mecca. Solidere also employed UAE-based companies such as Emaar Properties to develop heavily in downtown Beirut. Emaar can be found now across India.


48 "The plan proposes to demolish 80 percent of the town center and increase the density fourfold. Effectively, a fatal blow has been dealt to the memory of this very ancient city, one better suited for oil-rich Arab countries, with a wealth of new build-
ings, perhaps, but a dearth of architectural traditions. In a city such as Beirut, which has more than two thousand years of history, the idea of memory must not be defined. To pretend to protect this memory by preserving a few monuments while obliterating the context onto which they were inscribed can only diminish their real nature. They will be like desecrated tombs, witnesses to the death of the city." Assem Salam, "The Role of Gover-


The Case of the Traveler: Claims for a Post-Identitarian Representation

NORA AKAWI

Amale Andraos’s invitation to work on cocurating a conversation on “Architecture and Representation: The Arab City” presented a tremendous opportunity. In the first iteration of the conference at the Columbia Global Center Amman in 2013, we began the conversation with colleagues from Jerusalem, Dubai, Beirut, Cairo, and Amman. There, discussions on the work of Yasser Elsheshtawy, Bernard Khoury, Senan Abdelqader, and others presented many possibilities for further exploration, particularly on questions on representation and identity, citizenship, participation, and conflict. The 2014 conference, which convened in the Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation’s Wood Auditorium on November 21, was an intensive encounter of historical studies and future imaginations for Arab cities from across the campus and the world. The works presented were authored by, and discussed with, a group working in diverse forms of architectural and spatial practice (designers, historians, artists, educators) and of different generations: from the authors who have set the tone for the dominant architectural discourse on Arab cities today to the emerging voices working to build on, or even challenge, such terms. Beyond these differences, however, the participants in the auditorium shared a collective sense of urgency: a coupling of frustrations and aspirations that seemed to make this encounter more than important, relevant, and timely; rather, it was necessary. Here too was a shared reckoning of, and stake in, “the situation” in our cities, which Adrian Lahoud illuminates in his contribution to this volume, and the possibility for this common interest to produce, in solidarity, alternative futures for the Arab street.¹ Hovering in the room was the weight of the violence with which both destruction and construction are being performed in Arab cities, by local, foreign, and occupying political and corporate powers, causing immeasurable displacement and the loss of lives, livelihoods, histories, cultures, and environments.

Despite the many attempts to undermine its transformative effect, the year 2011 represents a turning point in Arab history. Although met with repressive violence by regimes in power, the uprisings across the region carried with them an alternative imaginary of how people and resources should be organized in the world. But the nonviolent protests and demands for dignity, freedom, and social justice were drowned in a bloody orchestration of violence. A united political struggle against oppression and the nature of ruling powers was replaced by
The political community is a community of interruptions, fractures, irregular and local... It is a community of worlds in community that are intervals of subjectification: intervals constructed between identities, between spaces and places. Political being-together is a being-between: between identities, between worlds.

—Jacques Rancière, Disagreement

For Jacques Rancière, democracy can only exist where a community is defined through a sphere of appearance of a people, a political community. He clarifies that "appearance" is not to be understood in the sense of "illusion opposed to the real" but as an act that modifies the regime of the visible, introducing the visible into the field of experience, splitting reality to reconfigure it as double. This political community cannot be formed only by those who represent, or are considered part of, the state or society. Rather, it is composed of those "floating subjects" that deregulate and derail all authoritarian attempts at representations of places and identities. So democracy can be practiced only when those who are not represented appear and challenge the image of society. The space of appearance where people emerge is the very place of dispute—not disputes between parties that constitute the state but disputes initiated by the nonrepresented subject, which Reinhold Martin refers to as struggles for "the right to representation." It is the struggle for la part des sans-part, the claim of the share of those who are deprived of a share in the common good, excluded from recognition, dignity, rights, property, security, speech, decision making.

This insurrectional moment, according to Étienne Balibar,

Manifests the essential incompleteness of the "people" as a body politic... This instable and problematic character of the civic community has been long concealed or, better said, it has been displaced because of the strong degree of identification of the notions of citizenship and nationality...the constitutive equation of the modern republican state, which derives its apparently eternal and indisputable character from the permanent strengthening of this state, but also, as we know, from many mythical, or imaginary, or cultural justifications.

The understanding of democracy as a regime of collective life, as consensus on a static, united, and whole national character or identity, is the repression of politics and of democracy altogether.
Felicitas Scott warns us of the dangerously common expectation of architecture
to participate in the definition and production of this identity in nation-building.
In the context of recently decolonized or still-colonized societies in the Arab
world, she invites us to “rethink architecture’s role as always facilitating stabi-
lization or unification, particularly vis-à-vis national identity,” and to understand
architecture as a potentially “powerful marker of ambivalences, discontinuities,
and instabilities.” We are urged to “think of a type of postnationalist figuration
of architecture, a paradigm that refuses to collapse into, or even actively contest
assumptions informing exclusivist notions like an Egyptian architecture, a Jordan-
ian architecture, a Lebanese architecture, and so on.”77

In the same way that Scott warns us of the dangers that come when architec-
ture is expected to produce exclusivist identities, Edward Said warns us about
the pact universities make with the state or with national identity. He writes
that academic freedom is at risk whenever discourse in the university must
“worship the altar of national identity and thereby denigrate or diminish oth-
ers.” In “Identity, Authority, and Freedom: The Potentate and the Traveler,” a
lecture he delivered at the University of Cape Town in South Africa in 1991,
Said addresses the still very pressing question of academic freedom—the privi-
leges but also the social and political responsibilities of civic institutions like
the university, as well as the dangers of the relationship between the university
and national identity.

Said elaborates on the notion of academic freedom in regard to the univer-
sity’s relationship to national identity, particularly in postcolonial states in the
Arab world, where universities become nationalist political institutions. Hav-
ing achieved independence after anticolonial struggles, the first changes to be
made were in the area of education, which went through a process of “Arabi-
ization.” For instance, national independence in Algeria meant that for the first
time, youth would be educated in Arabic and learn about Algerian culture and
history, which were previously either excluded or given an inferior status in a
curriculum that reflected the “superiority of French civilization.” But this also
meant that the national universities were conceived as extensions of the new
national security state, with a mandate of shaping national identity, of dictat-
ing what is to be included in that identity or excluded from it, what should and
shouldn’t be taught. So whereas Arab students’ education had been encroached
upon previously by the colonial intervention of foreign ideas and norms, in
the state-building process they were to be “remade in the image of the ruling
party.”10 This had devastating consequences for the Arab university. Academics
were encouraged to conform rather than excel, and the general result was that
“timidity, a studious lack of imagination, and careful conservatism came to
rule intellectual practice…. [Nationalism] in the university has come to rep-
resent not freedom but accommodation, not brilliance and daring but caution
and fear, not the advancement of knowledge but self-preservation.”11

In the larger debate on academic freedom, on the one hand we are faced with
the argument that the university is to be exempt from the practicalities of
the everyday world. On the other hand there is the view that directly inserts
the academy into that world: the university is meant to be engaged, intellec-
tually and politically, with political and social change and to be responsive
to abuses of power. In this view, the university must not only be critical of but
also overtly align itself in opposition to oppressive power regimes. The myth of
the university as impermeable to the world outside, of course, no longer stands.
Said reminds us that “so much of the knowledge produced by Europe about
Africa, or about India and the Middle East, originally derived from the need
for imperial control,” and “even geology and biology were implicated, along
with geography and ethnography, in the imperial scramble of Africa.” He men-
tions both the concealed and the public instrumentalization of the American
academy by the government and military during the Vietnam War, where aca-
demics and researchers were developing studies on counterinsurgency or “lethal
research” for the State Department, the CIA, and the Pentagon.

More recently, according to an article in the Nation, the Technion—the
Israeli Institute of Technology—was involved in developing remote-control
capabilities for the Caterpillar D9R, “Black Thunder” armored bulldozer.12
Referring to these unmanned bulldozers, an Israeli Defense Forces officer said
that the newly improved machine “performed remarkably during operation
Cast Lead,” the invasion and massive destruction of Gaza in 2008–2009.13 At
the time of Said’s lecture in Cape Town, in 1991, Palestinian universities and
schools were closed by the Israeli military, which had kept the major universi-
ties in Palestine shut since the beginning of 1988. Today, learning institutions
continue to be targeted by Israel from both the air and the ground. Examples
include the raiding of Al-Quds University campus by Israeli forces on Novem-
ber 17, 2015, when rubber-coated steel bullets and tear gas canisters were fired
at students.14 The University of Illinois professor Steven Salaita, who had joined
the American Indian Studies program with a tenured offer, was recently fired
on account of his statements on social media criticizing Israel’s conduct of mil-
itary operations in Gaza.15 Also, the systematic prosecution of politically active
students in Birzeit University by Israel and of Kurdish and Turkish “Academics
for Peace” in Turkey for having signed the statement “We Will Not Be Part of
This Crime” testifies to the direct involvement of universities with the political
realities outside.16
In response to the increasing view of the university as simply an arm of the government, which reflects only the interests of corporations and establishment power, Edward Said gives an account of a “new worldliness in [the academy] that denied it the relative aloofness that it once seemed entitled to.” On the contrary, it called for the university to become the place where students would be educated as reformers. He continues: “relevance was the new watchword.”

Political repression, the lack of democratic rights, and the absence of a free press have never been good for academic freedom. They are in fact disastrous for academic and intellectual practice. “To make the practice of intellectual discourse dependent on conformity to a predetermined political ideology, or predetermined canon of learning, Western or other, Said argues, “is to nullify intellect altogether.” Academic freedom is the freedom to be critical, the rejection of any kind of homely comfort:

> The world we live in is made up of numerous identities interacting, sometimes harmoniously, sometimes antithetically. Not to deal with that whole is not to have academic freedom. We cannot make our claim as seekers after justice if we advocate knowledge only of and about ourselves. Our model for academic freedom should therefore be the migrant or the traveler: for if, in the real world outside the academy, we must be ourselves and only ourselves, inside the academy we should be able to discover and travel among other selves, other identities, other varieties of the human adventure.

He suggests that we consider academic freedom as an invitation to give up on identity, in the hope of understanding or assuming more than one. “We must always view the academy as a place to voyage in, owning none of it but at home everywhere in it.”

According to Said, there are two ways of inhabiting academic and cultural space in the university. The first is the academic professional who is there in order to reign: the king or the potentate who surveys everything with detachment and authority. This entails dictating what should and should not be taught, what should or should not be included, defining disciplinary boundaries, reinforcing existing canons. The second is based on the figure of the migrant, “considerably more mobile, more playful, although no less serious. The image of the traveler depends not on power but on motion, on a willingness to go into different masks and rhetorics… Most of all, and most unlike the potentate who must guard only one place and defend its frontiers, the traveler crosses over, traverses territory, and abandons fixed positions, all the time.”

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1 See Adrian Lahoud, "Fallen Cities: Architecture and Reconstruction," in this volume, page 102.
4 Jacques Rancière, Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 100.
5 Reinhold Martin, "Remarks on the Production of Representation," in this volume, page 182.
17 Said, "Identity, Authority, and Freedom," 598, emphasis added.
Janet Abu-Lughod, my late mother, would have loved to be at a conference on architecture and the representation of Arab cities, and she would have loved to see the discussions that followed it in this publication. She loved cities, and Arab cities held a special place for her. We all belong to intellectual lineages. We hope that we will be remembered by those who come after. Many of us believe that books carry our legacies. Her books on Cairo and Rabat are part of her legacy. But so is her personal library, which now is housed in Amman, at Columbia University’s Global Center, where new generations will have access to the books she learned from and loved.

My mother loved architecture. It was a family joke to mimic her enthusiasm about Islamic art and architecture by exclaiming, after a trip we took across North Africa in 1969, “Look at that beautiful doorway!” Yet she had little patience for “representation,” except to critique Orientalist representations of “the Islamic city,” whose isnad (chain of authority) she traced back to an article published in 1928 by William Marçais titled “L’islamisme et la vie urbaine” and whose continuing influence she feared in the misguided efforts of contemporary Arab planners to recreate “Islamic cities” by edict. Later, her deep knowledge of the histories of Arab cities would make her question Eurocentric representations of the world’s networks. Cities were, for her, for living in, and people made cities over time within social, legal, and political contexts. That is what interested her, as well as the comparisons to be made among urban forms and functions.

In this essay, I draw from an unpublished intellectual memoir my mother wrote when in her seventies to offer some insight into how she came to work on Arab cities and what she studied about them. She traced her interest in cities to her early concerns with prejudice and poverty and her opposition to racial segregation in US cities, starting with the place she grew up, Newark, New Jersey. When she moved to Chicago as a young college student, she was horrified by the white ghettos she found herself in (Hyde Park) and remembers picketing all-white skating rinks. “Like many other young idealists eventually drawn into sociology—a field I had never even heard of when I set out for the University of Chicago in 1945, just barely turned seventeen and decidedly wet behind the ears—I wanted to fight injustice.”
She explained her next move, into urban planning, as follows. She met a young man at a dance and politely asked him what he was doing. He told her about a new program being established at the university. It was 1948. The new program was in planning.

This appealed to me because it was then believed that social pathologies were "caused" by bad housing environments (ah, innocence!). What better way to solve the problems of the world than by putting knowledge to use in action. I soon transferred from sociology to planning, filled with the hubris (and unrealistic hopes) of having found my métier. Our three-year program of study focused on two issues: first, planning housing, cities, and even river basins in the United States; and second (to me a complete revelation), planning economic development for "backward" nations. This latter was as exotic as anthropology, but I remember feeling very uncomfortable about our presumptuousness... In our small collaborative workshops we laid out ambitious research projects and, in God-like fashion, translated our values into "solutions," independent of economic constraints, the realities of political implementation, and (I am ashamed to say) the participation and guidance of those being planned for!

Fairly quickly she became disillusioned. She realized she had taken a wrong turn.

City planners at best were "servants" of politicians and beholden to real estate interests and financiers; the "public good" I thought planning could achieve was not uppermost on their minds. This became clear when as director of research for the American Society of Planning Officials I read racialized zoning ordinances and recognized that the chief purpose of planning was to segregate people by class and to "protect" and enhance returns on investment. It was also becoming clearer that the good intentions of housing reformers who should have known better were likely to end in disaster.

Her four years in Egypt were utterly transformative. Even after our return to the States in 1961, I continued to study and write until my book on Cairo: 1001 Years of the City Victorious was finally finished in 1967. [This was her PhD thesis, written while she had, by this time, four children.] It was not published until 1971. I am deeply gratified that this book, now a "collector's item," is still considered the definitive study of that city. (At least, when I return to Cairo, I am greeted enthusiastically by many Egyptians who are unaware that I ever wrote anything before or after!)
Her interest in Arab cities broadened:

Ever since completing my book on Cairo, I had considered comparing Cairo to other cities in the Arab world, especially those in North Africa that had been transformed under French colonial rule.... The Europeanized quarters of Cairo had been planned even before British colonial rule. No legal attempts to separate European settlers from "natives" were imposed, although class differences served to "sift and sort." The situation was quite different in Algeria, Tunisia, and especially in the cities of the French "zone" of Morocco, where planned apartheid achieved its most remarkable "success." Although my original too ambitious plan had been to compare Algiers, Tunis, and Rabat, the book I eventually wrote dealt with "urban apartheid" in Morocco. I uncovered the full depth of French racism and was able to trace how law (and force) succeeded in constructing and maintaining radical segregation between "natives" and colonial settlers, thereby assuring the full exploitation of Moroccan labor and resources. I still think that this is the best book I ever wrote, although French scholars hated it.

Of her next major project, Before European Hegemony, she wrote:

Ever since my self-taught courses on world history when researching Cairo, I had become increasingly annoyed by Max Weber's dismissal of Islam and, in general, and with the self-congratulatory narratives about the "Rise of the West" written by Western historians, which took the superiority of Western culture for granted. I knew that China and Egypt, inter alia, had long been innovators in culture, literature, and technology, and that long-distance trade had connected those two centers of power with one another and with a large number of intermediary points—long before the West "rose." Furthermore, I had been reading urban histories over the years, just out of curiosity, and was struck with the fact that many of these places had important connections to one another. In addition, in my various travels I had casually visited many museums in Europe and Asia and had noticed that, regardless of where I went, many of the most beautiful objects I saw had been made between 900 and 1300 A.D., a time when Europe was still in shadow. I kept hoping I could find a book that described and explained the world in this period. I never expected to have to write it.

By the time she finished Before European Hegemony, she had moved to New York, having taught for almost twenty years at Northwestern University. For the next couple of decades, she would turn her gaze back to the United States. She embarked on major comparative studies of America's global cities—New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles. Her final book was a comparative study of race riots in these three cities, returning her in the end to the interests that had driven her since high school in Newark: the injustices of racism and racial segregation. But she never lost her love of Cairo, returning there when she could and keeping up with the literature.

In the last year of her life, when she was mostly housebound, I hired a graduate student to go to my mother's apartment and catalogue her library. She had agreed with my idea, enthusiastically endorsed by Safwan Masri, then director of the newly opened Columbia Global Center in Amman, that it would be wonderful to donate her books to the center. I had just visited and noticed that they had no books in their reading room. And I discovered that they were developing an urban studies and architecture focus, through the GSAPP's Studio-X and its director, Nora Akawi. But when it came down to it, my mother was reluctant to part with her books. "Not now," she said.

Still, I thought maybe my mother would enjoy the process of seeing her books taken off the shelves, one by one, for cataloguing. We went bookcase by bookcase. The volumes were arranged in terms of subject areas related to her shifting interests and projects. In the living room were the books she had worked on most recently. Books about American cities—particularly New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles. Berenice Abbott's black-and-white photographs of New York. Books of maps. Encyclopedias. Books on globalization. Books on race relations. Books on housing policy and gentrification. These were related to her first New York–based research—a collective study with her graduate students at the New School of the Lower East Side, From Urban Village to East Village. Tucked in among these were a couple of precious shelves of books by her students and colleagues, personally inscribed to her.

In the front hallway were art books, mostly of Islamic art and architecture—those doorways (and carpets, mosques, and engraved metal urns) she had so admired. In the entrance to her apartment were books about medieval cities and trade networks. Her thirteenth-century world. Her bedroom held the oldest of them all. Here were the books about Cairo, Tunis, Baghdad, Damascus, and other Arab cities. Planning documents. Government statistical abstracts. Magazines from UNESCO, UN Habitat, and the Aga Khan Foundation, for which she had once served as a juror. She had given away many books to students when she retired and lost her office at the New School. These were in anthropology, psychology, and general sociology. And she had given me her very old
books about Egypt—like Winifred Blackman’s, *The Fellahin of Upper Egypt*. There was no room for these in her apartment.

The final bookcase, crowding her bed, held her own publications and offprints and the books of family and family friends, from my first (Veiled Sentiments), to Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (dedicated to her and my father), to my father’s, including the groundbreaking volume in which her famous article on “The Demographic Transformation of Palestine” appeared: *The Transformation of Palestine*. When he moved back to Palestine in 1992, my father had taken all the books in Arabic they had collected from the Cairo book-sellers in the late 1950s and ‘60s. He donated these, along with the rest of his academic library (and the bookshelves!), to the Birzeit University Library.

I had secretly hoped that the library would trigger memories and that my mother would be inspired to talk about her books and her life as we catalogued. Mostly she didn’t feel like it. But one day when I came by for a visit, I found her sitting with a very old book on the dining table that now doubled as her desk. She touched the beige cloth cover of this large volume with loving care. She turned the pages slowly to show me, her eyes alive. Carefully she opened up the delicate fold-out maps. I could see her handwritten notes penciled in the margins. She was clearly moved by seeing this book again. I then remembered. When David Sims, a Cairo-based urban planner, had asked her to write a foreword to his book, *Understanding Cairo: The Logic of a City out of Control*, she had been excited. It was, I believe, the last academic writing she did. She loved his social-spatial approach, was impressed with the maps and statistics, and endorsed his political-economic analysis of the city’s growth. It was use, function, and change in cities that interested her. She had an abiding interest in politics and finance that she had first explored as a budding urban planner, and these were the themes of David Sims’s book.

She had been shocked, though, that he had not cited one work that she considered crucial. It was the only real flaw, she believed, in his well-researched work. She told him so. I now recognized that this old book she was so fondly showing me was the book she had scolded him for not citing. It was Marcel Clerget’s dissertation, *Le Caire: étude de géographie urbaine et d’histoire économique*. She saw herself in a lineage that went back to Clerget. She saw David as carrying forward this lineage. My mother respected history. Not just the histories of Arab cities and those who have built them—from architects to planners to ordinary people—but also the histories of those who have tried to understand and write about them.

Our family is proud that Janet Abu-Lughod’s library has now found an excellent home in Amman, a city she visited many times as it was where her much-loved mother-in-law lived. Columbia’s Global Center will ensure that these treasures are made available to students and researchers in the region. I had wanted to be able to donate Clerget’s *Le Caire* to the library as well. But this time, it is I who find myself not quite ready to let go. I can’t forget the look of love in my mother’s eyes as she showed me this book about Cairo.

But I did find a few more special books and pamphlets for the library. They include some original offprints of the work of André Raymond and some works by Nezar AlSayyad, a younger Egyptian colleague of whom she was fond. These are two scholars who are very much part of that family who have been drawn to study Cairo. And we are contributing a copy of her own book, long out of print, that has become what she called “a collector’s item”: *Cairo: 1001 Years of the City Victorious*. May the city have many more years and emerge victorious. And may those who have studied and loved this great Arab city live on through it.
FALLEN CITIES: ARCHITECTURE AND RECONSTRUCTION

ADRIAN LAHOUD

The nature of contemporary power is architectural and impersonal, not personal and representative.
—The Invisible Committee, To Our Friends

THE SITUATION

In Arabic conversations, “the situation” (الوضع) is used to indicate prevailing political, social, and economic uncertainty. Those who use the phrase rarely specify what situation they are referring to. Has there only ever been one situation? The multiplicity implied in its nonspecificity binds one speaker to another in an implied assumption that is both intimate and collective. A former Baathist, Phalangist, Communist, or Pan-Arab Nationalist no longer. Not yet a martyr. Just a shared hesitation to speak the language of parties, names, and events. In their place, an empty term that stands for all possible parties, all possible names, and all possible events: “the situation.” Like an incantation, if you repeat it enough times, a million tiny acts of solidarity will add up to a collective perception. Curiously, this affective precision is secured by the complete absence of content in the statement. “The situation” can literally refer to anything. Its task however is not to convey information but rather to forge agreement that the predicament is so self-evident as to require no further explanation—“it’s bad,” “we” are “in it,” “together.”

This “we” is its work. Perhaps nothing forges solidarity like a shared sense of malaise. Perhaps it all depends on whether this shared sense is exhausted by its capture as malaise. In any case, whatever it lacks in specifics the term makes up for in scope. Indeed, the seeming inescapability of the situation colors every question and every judgment on the Arab city. Like the “Arab street,” a foreign policy term now used as shorthand to describe popular Arab sentiment, the “Arab city” appears perpetually aggrieved and inflamed. Undoubtedly, the fact that Arab identity, Arab cities, and Arab streets are constituted as certain kinds of problems, ones that command public interest, invite debate, and are worthy of discussion, cannot be separated from the multifarious geopolitical investments in the region. After all it is Arab identity, not some other identity,
that is at stake here, and not only for Arabs, since the question has for some
time merited discussions of a broader and certainly more pernicious nature
within colonial states with respect to their former empires. The streets and cities
of other communities are mainly matters of interest for those communities, as
well as those whose job it is to be interested in such things; they are simply not
burdened in the same way or by the same fears. To enter into this particular
debate then, even as a strenuous critic, risks accepting its frame and reactivating
the habit of posing questions according to these terms.

How to proceed then? One might take “the situation” and the commonality
of its use in everyday speech as a sign of caution and equivocation, a reluctance
to betray positions or enter into public dispute out of fear of recrimination. But
why insist on seeing this expression as a lack rather than an act of everyday
resistance? Its compulsive repetition is evidence of an attempt to suspend rep-
resentation long enough to allow mutual sympathies to form. If the statement
is not framed as lack, failure, or disavowal—and the suggestive ambiguities it
offers are pursued—then another entry point into questions about the Arab city
can become possible. This other entry point would not presuppose either of the
two terms that guard its entrance, either “Arab” or “city,” let alone the colo-
nial legacies that mark the significance of their conjunction beyond the Arab
world. So instead of starting with its refusal to specify, let us try to start with
its function, which is to forge a collective sentiment. These sentiments, articu-
lated through the countless expressions of popular sovereignty that have been
heard in the last few years suggest a nuanced understanding and sensitivity to
the relations between implicit and explicit registers, as well as to the tension
between affect and its capture through systems of representation.

After all, the implicit affective solidarity produced by

الوضع / الحالة

can suddenly crystallize into a perfectly explicit revolutionary demand:

 الشعب / الامكان

al-sha‘ab [the people]

يا يرث / اصرف

ya yurid [want to]

يا حقك / اصرف

isaqät [bring down]

النظام / النظام

an-nizām [the regime].

I would like to examine the way that new collective sentiments are expressed,
formed, and made explicit within contexts of social transformation. Architec-
ture has a fundamental role to play in these processes, and the examples cited
above provide new insights into how we might understand the political func-
tion of architecture. Beyond an attention to the intrinsic precarity of these
utterances is their urgent need to acquire a life beyond their performance in
everyday conversation, to take forms that survive moments of “popular jubila-
tion,” as Jonathan Littell recently put it.2 When the chorus of voices falls silent,
it is urgent to seize possession of all the passions of resistance, the investments,
the sympathies, and the sentiments, and to finally discover what structures best
secure their fate. It’s a question of desire: how to produce it, how to satisfy the
demands that flow from it, how to secure this satisfaction into the future?

Architecture has a fundamental role to play because it is able to contribute
something essential to the durability of new social diagrams—an impersonal
form. By stating that “the nature of contemporary power is architectural and
impersonal, not personal and representative,” the Invisible Committee point to
something that is growing clearer in leftist thought—the need for a constructive
political architectural project.3 This is not to say that personality has nothing
to do with politics, or that we are done with the significance of the face, or
manners of speech, or charismatic leaders, but rather to indicate the way that
contemporary forms of power cannot be understood without a serious exam-
ination of our imbrication in material and technical worlds and the subtle yet
persistent solicitations these worlds make on life.

To make this proposition more concrete, I want to draw on a moment in
Lebanese history that was as unlikely as it was decisive. Commissioned by a
proto-state, named after a zaim (leader) designed by a part-time communist
and full-time Caricau, the Rachid Karama Fair and Exposition project in Leb-
anon by Oscar Niemeyer is an object lesson in architecture and the problem
of nation building. The project depended on the model of the state that gave
birth to it, one that conceived of the nation as something plastic, one that
reserved the right to intervene in that plasticity in order to shape it. But already
by the 1970s, when an aggressive return to laissez-faire markets and the civil
war interrupted the nascent movement toward a social welfare state, Lebanon’s
political leadership was no longer willing or able to secure the conditions in
which the project was supposed to operate.

For many, the sense that individual projects fail to produce social transforma-
tion is troubling, if familiar. Maybe because it mirrors the secret presupposition
that individual works effect social transformation in the first place. At the very
least, it raises the question of architecture’s contribution to social transforma-
tion. In the case of the project in Tripoli, the failure to build a new Lebanese
state, legitimate institutions, and a workable idea of citizenship makes broader
questions regarding the instrumentality of architecture and its contingency
within social movements more explicit rather than less. Still, this judgment of
failure can only be made from the perspective of the 1960s Nahda, or renais-
sance, and its commitment to socialist, nationalistic, and pan-Arab programs.4
A contrary position could be taken, that the inability to take a monolithic form
in a country without a hegemon was what lent Lebanon its peculiar ability to
everless absorb regional pressures: not quite a state in any real sense, not even
a peace—more a permanent, uneasy truce.

In either case, nation building is an impossible burden for a work of archi-
tecture to carry when extracted from the political, financial, and institutional
context that commissioned it, lent it sense, and struggled to sustain it. More
useful than any appeal to Arab-ness, then, is to examine the concrete processes
of experimentation in which social diagrams are produced and how the instru-
ments of modernity are taken up and modified, reactivating and mobilizing
archaic structures like feudalism. By social diagram, I refer to implicit norms and
explicit spatial and institutional forms that work together to produce, stabilize,
and secure specific relations of power, including the production of national iden-
tity. In doing so, a more consistent, if transversal, genealogy can be cut through
different claims for social change regardless of their periodization or their sup-
posed regional or linguistic commonality. By way of Niemeyer’s intervention in
Tripoli, I propose that the diagram is what secures the operation of the work. It
is what sustains the drive for transformation, what allows it to persist.

Finally, I suggest that this work sets out to manufacture a certain kind of
subject. The era of nation-building projects was directed toward an imagined
subject to come, one whose natural affinity to family and community had to
be reoriented toward the promise of citizenship and national belonging. In this
process, one kind of collective sentiment had to be replaced by another: famil-
ial, communal bonds would need to dissolve and national ones would need to
emerge to take their place. However, there was a challenge. The nation did not
exist. It would need to be invented. In the case of Lebanon, the reformist nature
of this project meant that this transformation would take on an inherently ped-
agogical nature. The state would draw heavily on urban, infrastructural, and
architectural projects to dissolve filiations at a communal scale in order to better
establish it at the scale of the state. Exactly how this was supposed to be accom-
plished is a matter of importance not only because the era was such a crucial
juncture in Lebanese history, one that belies the catastrophic upheaval soon to
follow, but also because it raises questions of a broader disciplinary nature.

THE DOME IN THE PARK

Returning to social transformation via this refrain, “the situation” requires that
we distinguish between two different aspects: an interpretation that signifies
some lack on one side (the inability to specify) and a direct intervention in the
field of subjectivity between the speakers on the other (implying a common
perception). One could say that architecture is still far too indebted to the

first at the complete expense of the latter. In order to explain this and justify
why it is relevant to a discussion on architecture, a digression through theory
is necessary, primarily to differentiate between a signifying and a-signifying
signs. This distinction, which comes from the work of Félix Guattari, refers to
those signs or aspects of signs that exist prior to their formalization as meaning.
Guattari uses the concept to break the dominance of structuralist linguistics
and psychoanalysis on our understanding of the unconscious. With respect to
the statement “the situation,” it works to mobilize certain kinds of passions prior
to the allocation of positions or the articulation of identities. In fact we could
say these substrata of affect become a kind of raw material for the subsequent

Dome for experimental theater and music.

Interior of the theater dome
formalization of linguistic statements. The difference is crucial: the absence of the referent with respect to the meaning of “the situation” produces the conditions under which a new referent (solidarity) can emerge. The condition that is being produced by the statement is nothing less than a small but precise intervention in the formation of subjectivity itself. The concept of the α-signifying sign invites us to attend to processes of subjective transformation that exist prior to or alongside understanding—that is to say prior to or alongside the recognition of meaning in signs.

Acknowledging both the operational and semantic character of signs through this spoken example offers a way of thinking about architecture, especially the idea that “intelligibility” should be the dominant mode of reception. Consider the example of the dome, a paradigmatic element within Christian and Islamic architectural traditions. It’s an enduring form whose resistance to transformation makes it particularly qualified to reflect the immutability of sacred and profane images of the cosmos. Think not only of churches and mosques but also of observatories and planetariums. Responding to historians Rudolf Wittkower and Heinrich Wolfflin—who argued that dome of central-plan churches was the ideal embodiment of Renaissance thought—the architectural critic Robin Evans suggests that, within the Christian tradition, these structures and the frescoes painted on their inside were evidence of nothing less than an architectural and artistic struggle to reconcile contradictory theological concepts of heaven and earth. After all, the heavens were composed of orbiting celestial bodies arranged in concentric spheres around the earth, yet all power—includ-

ing divine power—radiated out from a central point. The dispute, as Evans puts it, was between envelopment and emanation. Each position embodied distinct and sometimes antagonistic social, theological, and political claims about the location of God with respect to man. According to Evans, the achievements of Brunelleschi or Raphael lay in their ability to literally give form to the contours of this dispute by bringing these differences into proximity and holding them in a space of coexistence. Somewhat perversely, when it comes to domes, the very recalcitrance of their geometries has only encouraged rather than lim-

ited this kind of interpretation and speculation. For Wittkower and Wolfflin the dome embodied perfection while for Evans it embodied dispute. Yet all agreed that the dome must be interpreted. What was at stake was never signification as such, only what was signified.

Indeed Wittkower, Wolfflin and Evans might well be justified in framing this problem in terms of codings and decodings of meaning insofar as such framing describes how the work was often reasoned by its authors and received by its audiences. The legacy of this question and its hold over contemporary accounts of architecture is of more concern. The issue of Arab identity and its architectural representation is a case in point, since it is still posed in terms of tropes and
To answer this, consider another dome. In the northern Lebanese city of Tripoli, in the park-like Rachid Karame Fair and Exposition site, there is a dome that wears its dereliction a little better than the buildings around it. Some 62 meters wide, its slightly squat, not quite hemispherical shape gives little away. Only the acoustics and the sunken orchestra pit inside betray its uniqueness. The dome was supposed to be a venue for experimental theater and music, a program that makes it possible to calibrate the precise distance between the present situation in Lebanon and the past situation in Lebanon.

Back when it was still called the Syrian army and not yet "the regime," thousands of soldiers were stationed in temporary barracks alongside the dome. These days, because of the situation, only the especially curious venture in. A 1-hour drive from Tripoli will take you to the top of the Lebanese ranges, where you can look out to what used to be Syria and listen to the sounds of shelling from the Qalamoun Mountains across the Bekaa Valley. From either vantage point, the sense of resignation is hard to shake. Nevertheless, these lost modernities deserve closer scrutiny. If a system of subjectification was built into the fair and exposition, it is worth asking exactly what kind of techniques would be addressed to the bodies and characters of those meant to populate the project? What was specific about architecture's contribution to the project of nation building during this period? Is it possible to account for the imagined instrumentality of the project without relying exclusively on a semantic interpretation of its tropes?

TECHNOLOGIES OF NATIONHOOD

The exposition type played a critical role within nation-building projects throughout the nineteenth and twentieth century, exemplifying concepts of citizenship and cultural belonging. The Rachid Karame Fair and Exposition site draws on this history, especially its appropriation during the postcolonial era. Surrounded by a four-lane road and nestled in the elbow of a freeway connecting Tripoli to Beirut, the 1.1 kilometer long elliptical site might pass for the world's largest roundabout were it not for the occasionally beguiling structure poking past the canopy of trees. The exposition and fair facilities occupy maybe one-third of the site, with the rest set aside as an imagined parkland for the metropolis that never materialized around it. The 750 meter long exposition hall or within the exhibits themselves. Niemeyer's proposal for Tripoli is different from the prototypical world's fair or international exposition in that it combines an exhibition hall with buildings dedicated to cultural production within a landscaped urban complex that was intended to be used as a model for structuring the growth of a city. These four elements—the exposition hall, the cultural pavilions, the park, and the urban plan—should be understood as complementary components within a nationalistic, pedagogical project.

There are two main forms of movement through the site corresponding to the linear organization of the exposition hall and the placement of the pavilions. Niemeyer constructed a series of ramps and elevated vantage points that encourage visitors to continually withdraw from the mass and survey the crowd before returning back down to the ground. Here, the crowd could see itself seeing and being seen. Outside of protests and demonstrations, organized public gatherings of this scale were unprecedented, and the effect of finding oneself caught in this reciprocal spectacle would have been quite powerful. Being shaped here was not just architecture; that architecture forged an audience that could, in the vastness of its own spectacle, become self-aware.

As Lebanon urbanized during the colonial period, asabiyah (an Arabic term referring to social cohesion within a community group) and feudal familial ties that had traditionally structured sectarian belonging persisted in response to a highly competitive capitalist environment and the insecurity such an environment produced. Old networks of patronage remained important in the absence of a legitimate state able to insure the poor against the difficulties of urban life. In Lebanon, metropolitan anonymity did not dissolve feudal or familial bonds; it re-territorialized them and made them stronger. For a brief decade between the mid-1950s and 1960s, however, a concerted attempt was made to dissolve these links in order to establish them on new and different terms. The project in Tripoli is part of this history. Its organization manifests an attempt...
to orchestrate a set of affects and feelings of belonging that, when inscribed in dominant narratives of nationhood, would become untethered from their communal histories.

One can see the project as a machine designed to produce new relationships between the crowd and the individual, and therefore the nation—a mass orchestration of affect. However, the surplus of affect produced by the spectacle of the crowd that Niemeyer orchestrated through the ramps and vantage points would as yet remain undifferentiated, little more than a mass gripped by various existential intensities and feelings. This unformed set of affects therefore had to be captured and assigned a proper location within the social order. The crowd recently decoded must be recoded, classified, and naturalized within a national narrative. The exposition hall and the display of “characteristic” elements from the various nations assembled would inform the normalization and stabilization of a new Lebanese identity. Visitors would learn to distinguish themselves as citizens by acquiring new rules of public conduct, especially the consumption and appreciation of cultural artifacts.

Ordering the world into an image, as Timothy Mitchell puts it in his description of the Paris Exposition Universelle of 1889, produces two effects: first, a representation of national difference and, second, the extension of a colonial system of representation into the world itself? In Tripoli, the mass public organization of the crowd and the relation of the individual’s vantage point within it draw on the typological history of the international exposition and its curatorial organization. Through arranging encounters with artifacts, the fairground would have attempted to recode this undifferentiated population in order to define Lebanon’s newly won place among other nations. In addition to exposition planning and exhibition design, Niemeyer introduces a third element: the pavilions for cultural production and performance. These pavilions locate the citizen in a position of imagined ownership over the products of cultural activity.

We might imagine the components of the fair working together to achieve the following ends: The subjects’ communal bonds are confronted by something new—an orderly mass public spectacle, in which the subject undulates into and out of the mass producing a charge of affect that is not yet formalized. The consumption of the artifacts within the exhibition positions them in the world through a national narrative, until finally they are led to see themselves as the imagined producers of this national narrative. This is what the architectural machine accomplishes within the social diagram. The first component of the machine operates using a-signifying signs. The ramps and changes in height are not symbols to be interpreted; they intervene directly in the subjective field. Only later do the elements collaborate to produce signs whose meaning must be read. However, the precondition of meaning in the sign is the visceral charge produced within the subject. This representation of nationhood can only operate insofar as it can recode and formalize this substratum of affects and passions the spatial qualities of the project produce. However, this a-signification was only the architectural aspect of the diagram. The larger pedagogical ambition depended on more than the designs buildings have on human nature. They depended on a state that was willing to see itself as the architect of this national narrative, one in which these kinds of large-scale infrastructure projects were secured and oriented to specific ends through forms of cultural administration, curatorial strategies, exhibition programs, and the media. The weakness of the state meant that the pedagogical diagram and its technologies of nationhood did not stabilize before the onset of civil war in 1975.

**AFTER THE REGIMES**

*Those who refuse to wean themselves off an enthusiasm for politics project insurrections without end, powers constituent but never constituted, interruptions that are never the prelude to less abject continuities.*

—The Invisible Committee, *To Our Friends*

Of the many outcomes of “the situation,” perhaps the most accepted is the conflation of destruction and reconstruction. Revenue from luxury apartments will shower down upon those who broker peace. In war, land speculation makes a joke of military calculus. Soon enough, the rhetoric of imminent futures promised in renderings of a new Aleppo or a new Damascus will double, albeit in an architectural register, the present legacy of violence through systematic destitution and dispossession. Before these images of cities to come have acquired their final touches, however, the future they depict will have been engineered into existence through land expropriation and models of real estate speculation, through promissory notes based on calculations of future revenue according to reliable standards and estimates of return. Untethered from the realities of existing land tenures, undisciplined labor markets, and unpredictable steel prices, they will reach purely speculative heights. Like the images of many urban futures, those destined for the “Arab world” will need to become standardized before they can be bankable—the recent images from a design for a city of seven million people between the Suez Canal and the shores of the Nile being a case in point. Like a bushel of wheat or a barrel of oil, the urban future has become a standard measure. Its consistency, its ubiquity, and its reliability are what allow it to circulate. It is not surprising that promised cities act like commodities: in one sense, that is increasingly what
they are. The future has to learn how to flow. Its promise has to become liquid before it can become solid. As with grain and oil, too many inconsistencies leads to friction.

Despite the inherent conservatism of real estate markets and the dispiriting reliability of these propositions, their colonization of imaginations is far from complete. There is no lack of discontent toward—or critique of—these propositions within architectural discourse, and certainly no lack of emotional investment in alternative futures for Arab cities and Arab streets. In Aleppo, in Amman, in Beirut, in Cairo, in Damascus, in Gaza, and in Jerusalem, there are the most startling signs of political experimentation, social movements, activism, and institution building. There are, in other words, signs of survival, resistance, and invention to be found everywhere. From experimental coalitions on human and natural rights in Lebanon to proposals for democratic federalism in Southeastern Anatolia, from feminist movements in Kurdish communities to autonomous neighborhood assemblies in beleaguered Syrian cities, we see brave and vital attempts to reimagine social ties and forms of political organization. But without access to the equivalent of what Timothy Mitchell describes as the future’s “engineering works,” it is difficult to imagine how these precious experiments of alternative social orders can be sustained. Discontent, critique, and desire alone will not be enough to turn aspirations into reality, because the various systems of calculation and capitalization that drive real estate development have a particular kind of durability.

The aversion toward “social engineering” within architecture or urban design has not resulted in societies that lack “engineering,” let alone societies that are more perfectly ordered. On the contrary, the result is simply societies whose order and engineering have been dictated by those who have access to the future’s infrastructure, leaving the rest condemned to precarity. The persistence and dominance of these conditions is often described as “neoliberalism,” but this term fails to capture the specificity or diversity of the many socioeconomic diagrams that it is said to encompass. Moreover, it misses the fact that it is precisely these different socioeconomic structures that normalize processes of subjectification. The stability of the links forged between foreign capital, real estate speculation, and the domestic unit, for instance, works to ensure the reproduction of social and political power in urban space. The elements that compose these diagrams—their links, their ability to persist in time, repeat in space, and shape forms of subjectivity—cannot be reduced to matters of representation and interpretation. Financial calculation, debt, and living and working arrangements secure their own reproduction because they appear as sets of norms, material constraints, and habits that function regardless of the meanings or interpretations that critics assign to them.

Perhaps the people that were supposed to inhabit the fair site in Tripoli ended up materializing fifty years later in the streets and squares of other cities? These crowds, recently gathered and too quickly dispersed by brutal counter-revolutions, insist that we question assumptions about the durability and stabilization of new social orders. The contingency of architecture with respect to these orders suggests a more careful examination of histories of subjectification as a pedagogical project. Such an inquiry would not simply entail escaping from signification but rather describing the feelings, codings, and structures in which signifying and a-signifying elements cooperate within a political project. The institutionalization of social movements might be one place to start, and architecture’s impersonal form might have much to contribute. After all, when regimes are brought down and after the people have expressed their demands, new kinds of structures to support new habits of life are needed if legacies of social transformation are to be kept alive.
Important parts of this essay evolved as a response to Timothy Mitchell’s keynote address at “Architecture and Representation: The Arab City,” Columbia Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation, New York, November 31, 2014, included in this volume as “The Capital City” (page 270), and as a result of an ongoing conversation with Nora Akawi, beginning in Palestine on March 20, 2015, on the function and understanding of “the situation.”


The Invisible Committee, To Our Friends (South Pasadena, CA: Semiotext(e); Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015), 83.

The exemplary account of this period and its regional effect is Samir Kassir, Being Arab (London: Verso, 2006).


Writing a decade after Evans, Jeff Kipnis makes the following comment regarding Villa Savoye, “It works for me and on me, but I can understand why others just see a nice looking house” (“Re-originating Diagrams,” in Peter Eisenman: Feints, ed. Silvio Cassarà [Milan: Skira, 2006], 194). The comment comes in the context of an attempt to explain the role of the diagram in architecture and its potential political instrumentality. Yet in every example cited in the text, from D. H. Lawrence’s appreciation of Cezanne’s apples to the author’s own appreciation of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony, intelligibility is tied to recognition, especially the recognition of signs. As he suggests, “only some are sensitive to architectural effects in the full political dimension” (194). The cultivation of “sensitivity” notwithstanding, and regardless of whether one reads this as a claim for prior acculturation or just personal taste, these signs are always things that are conveyed through formal tropes, in this case Le Corbusier’s five points. Architecture may or may not have specificity as a medium as Kipnis claims, but the model for how the medium works is stubbornly linguistic.