CompliCity: Transforming Urban Spaces of Sharjah

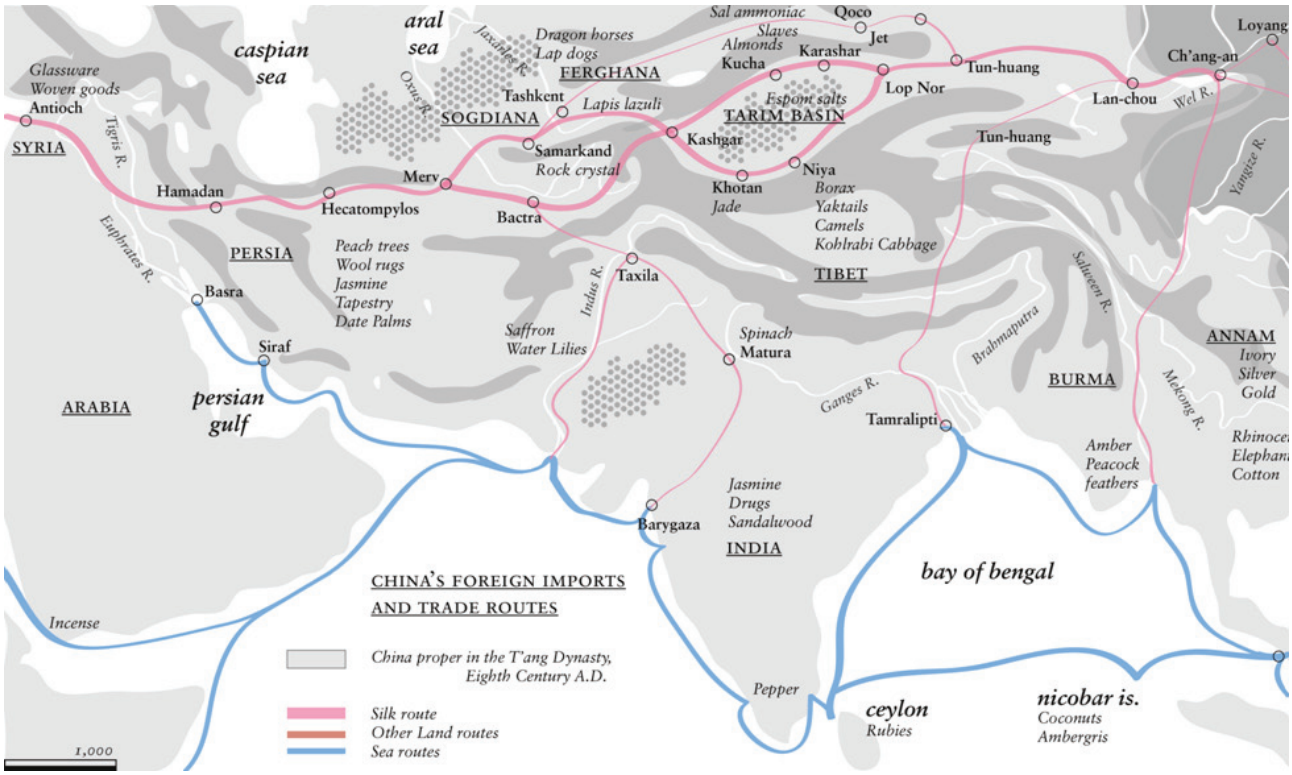
Samia Rab
American University of Sharjah

INTRODUCTION

Though countries forming the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) are collectively the third most important migration destination after North America and Europe, they are unusual contexts where the local population is disproportionately smaller than the migrant communities. Ancient trading links between port cities along the Gulf and the Indian Ocean developed distinct forms of pre-modern urbanism that I have elsewhere termed "seascape" urbanism[1], where urbanism and urban life were shaped by trans-continental, religiously diverse and multi-linguistic communities. In this paper, I will focus on the heritage area of Sharjah to analyze the restoration, de-restoration and revitalization efforts that are transforming and gentrifying the urban public spaces.

While efforts to restore Sharjah's heritage began in 1990s, a new five-stage redevelopment project began implementation last year to rejuvenate the Heart of Sharjah. This project is being developed by the Sharjah Investment and Development Authority (Shurooq), which is a private real estate development company owned by the daughter of the current Ruler HH Dr. Sheikh Sultan Alqasimi. The Heart of Sharjah project will provide a destination for regional and international tourists and host the 11th Sharjah Art Biennale in April 2013. While the project's five phases are scheduled to conclude in 2025, the physical transformations are changing the public spaces from places of transnational inhabitants to "tourism and trade destination with modern contemporary artistic touches".[2]

This paper describes the historical development of Sharjah and studies the global presence of "leisure" in a localized urban environment that is being shaped around nationalistic agendas. The elimination of the port activity from the historic city center has resulted in the loss of its function. This is one of the crucial reasons why recent urban analysis of the historic center found it so segregated.[3] While the tall buildings may not seem to "fit the historic context", they provide livelihood and habitation for a large transnational community. To increase the vitality of the Heart of Sharjah requires an economically productive historic core and the existence of local community of transnational origins.



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SHARJAH IN THE CONTEXT OF THE GULF AND INDIAN OCEAN

Contemporary states of the GCC were former port cities along the Gulf. They were sites of pre-modern urbanism where maritime influences shaped the places, buildings, settlement pattern and people's attitude towards land and water. From here, diverse communities (linguistic, ethnic, religious and social ranking) engaged in the lucrative Indian Ocean trade since the 8th century. Traces of this diverse cultural heritage are still found in the coalesced historic building traditions of Gulf Cities linked to the maritime Indian Ocean trading route. Many scholars have recently identified shared political and economic patterns in Arabian Gulf Sheikhdoms,[4] while others have revealed historic development of Persian Gulf settlements.[5]

Political, economic and land-based orientation of current discourse has mostly ignored the primacy of the ocean in Gulf historiography.[6] Seascape urbanism, a unique and unifying aspect of pre-modern settlements along both sides of the Gulf, is ignored by current scholarship and threatened by respective heritage authorities. Before oil, navigating the maritime space was easier and more lucrative than traversing the desert. Connected through territorial patches of maritime space, Gulf port settlements straddled the land and the water with exposed and continuous seascapes, protected and disconnected from the landscape.

Sharjah is the only Emirate in the UAE with land on both the Gulf and the Indian Ocean. Its major urban area is situated at the South-east end of the Gulf on the flat coastal strip that stretches from the Musandam peninsula, where Sabkha flats alternate with low-lying sand dunes. Safe anchorage

Figure 1: Sharjah and the Indian Ocean

offered by its sheltered creek and the availability of fresh water encouraged permanent settlement since 1650s with a simple economy based on fishing and pearling. While the earliest houses were *areesh* (palm frond) structures, coral and sea stone became viable construction materials for more affluent merchant houses. By the early 19th century, Sharjah evolved from a small fishing village to a permanent settlement facilitating maritime trade and transactions of goods between gulf port dwellers and the interior Arabian tribes.

The main impetus for Sharjah's expansion, consolidation and pre-modern urbanization was the British Navy's destruction of Ras al Khaima in 1819. As Brittan closed the chapter of piracy in the Atlantic, it opened another in The Gulf. In 1764, as one of the last pirates of the Atlantic ocean was hung, a British resident in Bushire reported the first official act of piracy in the Gulf. To liberate territorial waters, the British abandoned their "policy of strict neutrality" in political aspects of the Gulf to gain primacy over the Indian Ocean trading route. The burning of the Qawasim Fleet at Ras Al Khaima led to Sheikh Sultan bin Saqr Al Qasimi's move to Sharjah facilitating its rapid growth. Between 1823 and 1954, Sharjah served as the base for Britain's only political representative on the Trucial Coast. The subsequent treaties restricted canons on the water edge further advancing the historic seascape urbanism of Sharjah. Sharjah was rebuilt after the fire of 1820s, so the age of the oldest houses that were not reconstructed in the 1990s is estimated to be around 120-140 years.

In 1890s, as reported in the American Mission Reports, Sharjah's demographic pattern included 75 families from India, Ceylon and Persia in addition to the indigenous Arabian population and Arabians of Persian descents. Sharjah became a strategic port where the British established their first regional airport and the locus of Gulf oil exploration even though it was not the source of this valued resource. Though the decline of the pearling industry and the 1903 declaration of Dubai as a free port affected the commercial significance of Sharjah, it remained an important political port of call through subsequent decades.

The decline of the pearling industry during the Great Depression of the 1930s coincided with successful oil exploration in the Gulf. While western interest in the spice trade of the Indian Ocean perpetuated maritime conflict since the sixteenth century, alliances between tribal leaders of Arabia, British and American oil companies shaped the emergence of modern nation-states (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and United Arab Emirates) in the twentieth century. In 1981 the new states along the Arabian Gulf coast Gulf collectively formed a regional co-operation system, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).

Beginning in the 1970s, planned modern interventions in Sharjah imagined a new city with its back to the Gulf facing the desert, rather than defending against it. The introduction of Bank Street perpendicular to the water required the demolition of the old Hisn Fort, which was "reconstituted" soon after through a Ruler's Decree. The Fort now sits on a precarious island

within Bank Street dividing the historic core into two distinct zones, Al Mureijah Heritage Area and Al Shuweyhein Arts Area. The waterfront and *souqs* (market) that once acted as a primary entry point to Sharjah ultimately became an industrial backdrop. Though the introduction of a vehicular service road and loading/unloading activities have disrupted the access to the water, the lost spaces along the *sahil* (coast line) have persistently been used as places for interaction by Sharjah's still diverse inhabitants. Despite their expatriate status this diverse community, is an important urban continuity that persists since the sixteenth century. Historically, Sharjah's urban form was contained within a gated protective wall and the Al Hisn Fort marked the central entrance from the desert side of the town. There was an open external market (*saht Al Hisn*[7]) immediately outside the fort where the settled community came in protected contact with the hinterland families exchanging palm fronds, dates and camel milk with rice, textile and other objects from across the Indian Ocean. Until last year, the *saht al hisn* called the Rolla Square, functioned as the only all-inclusive public space in Sharjah. It is now delimited and controlled through paid access.

Concrete has played a major role in the demarcation and ordering of public space in Sharjah. It is a material that delivered the ambitious modern projects of the 1970s and it is also the material used in 1990s restoration of historic buildings. While the introduction of modern buildings created a dense urban environment, it also enfolded urban spaces for public encounters.

Increasing oil and natural gas revenues make the GCC states the fastest growing economies in the world. Despite the recent economic crises, petroleum revenues are extravagantly used for speculative developments, enhanced infrastructure and service to prepare for the post-oil economy. However, it is a fallacy to think that this modern vision of economic growth in these countries has developed a cosmopolitan culture, and significantly impacted demographics.[8] Transient and multicultural populations has always characterized port cities along both sides of the Gulf. But in the last four decades stringent immigration laws and the lack of local technological and construction expertise have created a dependency on foreign knowledge and labor, resulting in an immigrant population that outnumbers the citizens in most GCC states. In fact, one of the main formative goals of the GCC was to address this demographic imbalance by constructing an identity on the principle of a single culture (Arab), common language (Arabic) and shared religion (Sunni-Islam). New forms of legislative structures (such as the immigration laws to limit foreign workers' contractual duration of residencies) have since created socially unequal urban enclaves whose transient and disconcerted population have no desire for social mobility or civic responsibility.

In 2008, the GCC launched the common market initiative that grants national treatment to all GCC firms and citizens in any other GCC country, facilitating cross country investment, expertise exchange and services trade. While the goals for a common currency and rapid transit rail have yet to be accomplished, the GCC is formulating a new cultural identity, which

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Figure 2: Until recently, transnational migrant workers gathered in Rolla Square (Source: *Emirates News*, Jan. 2011)

can be termed *Khaliji,* but remains grounded in the "Arab" culture and Sunni-Islam. In addition to legislation investments in heritage construction have been a vital and integral in preserving this singular Arab- Islamic identity. It is in this context that the privatized assets in the Heart of Sharjah project may be interpreted as reconfiguring transnational urbanism[9] for global cultural consumption.[10]

THE HEART OF SHARJAH PROJECT

In 1995, Sharjah's Directorate of Heritage demarcated the oldest part of town as the official "heritage" area. The consequent reconstruction of dilapidated and demolished historic structures utilized tons of an endangered material, coral stone, imported from Soqotra in Yemen. The use of gypsum and Portland Cement in these reconstructions encouraged rapid absorption of water and expansion of this mortar during humid months from July through early November. In 2008, the Directorate of Heritage established a specialized department (Historic Building Planning Unit), which is at present de-restoring several historic properties to remove the cement mortar. These efforts reveal a continued upgrading of historic properties to prepare the heritage area as the public site of art and culture.

Work simultaneously began on the larger urban revitalization project, "Heart of Sharjah" that aims to add attractive points of "leisure and tourism that further develop the heritage of our emirate and enhance its position in the region". The key component of the project is a unique space for retailers. This will require replacing a busy port with leisure decks for the *abra* boats which are considered an "important part of Sharjah's history and heritage, and a big draw for tourists".[11] Phase One of the project is scheduled for completion in 2013, in time for the launching of the 11th Sharjah Art Biennale, and it includes work at the Sharjah Art Foundation, rebuilding the Al Shanasiah Souq and making waterfront modifications. The regeneration plans include demolition of buildings that fall within the boundaries of the Heart of Sharjah project and "do not fit in with the overall historical atmosphere of the area."

This will likely include modern buildings in the Sharjah's heritage area that offer extensive covered area for residential, commercial and office spaces, and generate mixed used activities. The total covered area (all floors included) occupied by the 68 surveyed buildings is 313,811 square meters on the total buildings' footprint area of 39,152 square meters. While these buildings may seem "unfit" in relation to the older fabric, it is important to understand the value or insignificance of individual buildings (modern or pre-modern) in reviving the cultural integrity of Sharjah's heritage area. Restoration of select buildings of the modern era is necessary to retain an important layer of the past. Collectively, the 17 buildings along the Bank Street define a unique and contrasting framework for the Al Hisn Fort. The simultaneous existence of historic architecture set against the background of modern buildings is a prime example of struggle between progressive spirit and reverence for heritage, which has generated a unique international discourse in the Arabian Gulf.

The first phase of the Heart of Sharjah project involves rebuilding residences which once housed the ruling family of Sharjah near Al Hisn Sharjah Fort. This will entail the demolition of two modern buildings near the corner tower of the Fort. The reconstruction of these residences and the redevelopment of old houses behind the Al Zahraa Mosque in Al Muraijah, and the conversion of the Al Midfaa family home will result in several boutique hotels. Many other old houses will be converted into hotels, museums, retail shops and restaurants. These changes and upgrades are all planned with the aim of bringing the Al Hisn area in line with its status as a "world heritage site". Upgrades will also take place at the Saqr and Al Arsa souqs, with new lighting before being joined together by the reconstruction of Al Shanasiah souq, which once sat between the two. In support of these improvements and new developments, a number of roads are being upgraded, closed or diverted, in several stages and phases. Sharjah Corniche Road will undergo intensive redevelopment, while Bank Street will be redesigned to serve the new master plan. International teams will collaborate to excavate the demolished houses under the parking lots between the Fort and the water front along the Bank Road.

Wael al Masri, consultant architect in the Jordanian firm Dar Al Omran, conducted studies "to sort out the traffic congestion and allocate enough parking slots for all residents and visitors" and "bring the whole area back to its past glory, making the emirate a destination for those looking to experience the Gulf as it once was, without losing out on modern artistic touches". The project's five phases are scheduled to conclude in 2025, but the physical transformations are already changing the urban public spaces in Sharjah to "tourism and trade destination with modern contemporary artistic touches".[12]

Against the backdrop of modern buildings, the de-restored historic structures are home to six museums in Sharjah where they attract global tourists, national visitors and local residents of the central business district that has continued to generate mixed used activities. This coalesced community appropriates old Sharjah's spaces of public encounter and it is precisely these public spaces that will be privatized and transformed through the Heart of Sharjah project.

The private/public partnership that will gentrify the waterfront of the Heart of Sharjah is a novel idea in the Gulf. The residential demography will be reduced from 70% to about 15% in the overall land use and leisure activities will be introduced to maximize profits, changing the urban, economic, and social dynamics of the city in a ways that cannot be fully anticipated. The motivation to seek speculative profit is not new to Sharjah. As a seafaring community of traders, merchants and pearl-divers, the inhabitants of Sharjah have always run that the risk. Uncertainty that has been the driving force behind maritime journeys and encounters. As seafarers have historically sought this terrain of ambiguity, lending money to ship owners was always considered "risky business" (see, Bernstein, Against the Gods, 1998). In English, the word "risk" appears in the seventeenth century from the Dutch "risico" meaning "danger and a possibility of loss or damage."

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Figure 3: Modern buildings flanking the Hisn Fort in Sharjah (Source: GoogleEarth)

Figure 4: The proposed Heart of Sharjah (Source: *Travel News*, 23rd Nov 2011)

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Figure 5: Arts Area of Sharjah: Football Field created by artist Maider Lopez for the 2007 Biennale

The word is only used in a naval context at first and indicates the dangers at sea and the "possible loss of valuable cargo at sea when an accident occurs." Risk, therefore, a synonym for hazard, and perhaps why the first insurance contract against "risk" was drawn in Genoa to a ship owner.

In Arabic, the word *rzk* means "whatever creatures tend to gather for themselves in this world through their life (good or bad, positive or negative)". And in the Quran, any potential source of pleasure and happiness are included in *rzk* (food, spouse, job etc.). Arab navigators sought the pursuit of sustenance (*rzk*), ignoring an ancient regional proverb warns against "chasing after your *rzk*, when in reality your *rzk* chases after to reach you". In their travels, Portuguese and Spanish sailors used the term "risky" for the unknown areas of the maps. Perhaps Sharjah is making a calculated risk as it transforms the seascape urbanism. And perhaps the city merchants will discover new avenues of *rzk* through their dealings with middle men (*dalals)* as they go through the proper channels of the "free zones". These consequences are yet to be determined, but the Heart of Sharjah project demonstrates the how urban design links transnational communities and history.

CONCLUSION

Sharjah exemplifies pre-modern urbanization in Gulf port cities. The national and regional goals embodied in acts of restoration, reconstruction and demolition are remarkably self-contradictory. While structures made of fragile building material (coral/sea stone) are being carefully restored, reconstructed and de-restored, buildings made of concrete are demolished to create a homogenous urban environment. Concrete was implicated in the destruction of many historic houses in Sharjah. With its powerful fixing capacity and associations, standardized form that transcended the specificities of local conditions,[13] concrete gave modernizing Sharjah the regulatory spaces of the modern state.

The 8-story tall buildings constructed in the historic center encroached on the privacy of the remaining courtyard houses. While the local (national) population relocated to the emerging suburbs of expanding Sharjah, the tall modern buildings hosted a large segment of transnational migrant workers bringing a new vitality to the historic center.

The proposed demolition of modern buildings along the Bank Road will replace the migrant community with programmed visitors to a "revived" Heart of Sharjah. The predominant male worker population is seen as a threat to family leisure activities. The demolition of modern buildings inhabited by transnational workers will clear the space for reconstructed old buildings that will house boutique hotels to accommodate the global tourists. However, the official story line is that, since all sixty-eight modern buildings employ reinforced concrete as building material, their lifecycle is estimated at 30 years. This is primarily because many of these buildings were constructed on limited budgets, with non-traditional techniques and materials, and are thought to have limited life-spans. But it should be noted that many concrete structures are designed for a 100-year life span

(NSW Heritage Office, The Investigation and Repair of Historic Concrete). Concrete is the strongest building material created by human beings and its repair is today a major industry with methods and techniques developed to prolong the life of concrete buildings (Michael Bussell, "Structural Appraisal", in Susan Macdonald (ed.), *Concrete*, Blackwell Science Ltd, 2003).

While the modern buildings along Bank Street do not possess intrinsic or historical value, their plain architecture highlights the intricate details, material and texture of the traditional architecture exhibited in the Al Hisn Fort. In a way, this particular setting rivals the significance of the urban setting in Boston downtown where Trinity Church is enhanced and glorified against the glass tower of the Hancock Building. It is also similar to, though in reverse form, to the Louvre in Paris, where the historic buildings provide a rich background for the modern intervention by I.M. Pei. The urban juxtaposition of modern buildings framing the Hisn Fort in Sharjah is truly unique in the region and enhances the historic significance of the Emirate as a progressive state that respects its heritage.

Understanding the significance of individual buildings is a fundamental step in developing historic urban landscapes. This will provide vital information upon which decisions can be made that affect the building's existence, performance or appearance. Ultimately if the intrinsic qualities (physical and social) of Sharjah's historic landscape are not clearly and comprehensively identified and understood, improvements will not add value but potentially erode the quality, character and uniqueness of the Emirate of Sharjah.

While cities like Dubai, Sharjah, Abu Dhabi, Ras al Khaima, Kuwait and Doha exhibit a desire to modernize by growing rapidly and facilitating the emergence of global urban projects, architecture and urban heritage is being used to construct an identity that commemorates the modern nation-state and religious ideology. Several museums are emerging in the region, and in Sharjah alone there are nineteen. Large scale urban design projects, such as the Heart of Doha in Qatar and the Heart of Sharjah in the UAE, are geared towards "regenerating the historic core" by reconstructing large parts of the city back to their "pre-modern" state, glorifying the pre-modern "madina" urbanism, erasing any marks of multiplicity or modernity from the prescribed "heritage area" or "historic core". Sharjah's pre-modern urban development contradicts the notion of an "Arab-Islamic city."

Examining Sharjah in terms of its urban continuities shaped by transient commerce reinforces my consideration of "seascape"[14] urbanism as a visual complement to the existing domains of "port" and "coastal" urbanism. The past century's efforts to modernize have left the built and the natural environment of eastern coast of Arabia in jeopardy.[15] A new development process is needed; one that unites conservation and architecture design, and addresses the climatic conditions, cultural and religious diversity, historical developments and current environmental challenges in Arabia. Understanding and safeguarding the unique historical and geographical environment must be at the heart of a balanced and contextual approach

to revitalizing the Heart of Sharjah. Any development within a living historic area should prioritize strengthening urban public spaces as opposed to mere preservation of the built fabric. The search for cultural identity tied to the geography of land is at the expense of a connected culture shaped by the space of the ocean. Cultural heritage along the Gulf should not just engage with but inform contemporary discourses on transnational urbanism,[16] provided traces of these historic urban continuities are not all lost by 2025.

At present, there are multiple transnational networks operating in the historic center of Sharjah, and at least two are critical to the daily life of the city: Iranian shopkeepers sell objects of daily use to the city dwellers and send goods back home to Iran through the departing ship's crew; Gujarati ship crew come ashore the creek of Sharjah to load and unload goods for merchant shopkeepers and, until recently would reconnect with the absconded members of the previous visits. Until March of 2010, ships docked along the city's edge to load and unload goods directly onto the pavement. One side of the busy two-lane Corniche Road (recently renamed *Al Bahar* Road) was the wharf and the other side was lined with shops selling goods primarily from Iran. The shopkeepers along the city side of the creek bear the brunt of this urban transformation that has led to the shifting of harbor activity across the creek. The shopkeepers have resorted to adaptive techniques of hiring middle-men (*Dalal*) to continue business in Sharjah, as they have in the past.

Their predecessors underwent a major transformation in the 1970s, when the introduction of the Bank Street perpendicular to the creek disconnected from each other the *souq*s (market) running along the length of the creek. Two distinct commercial activities emerged in Sharjah's CBD. In the reconstructed and enclosed *Souk Al Arsah* stages "tradition" through sales of handicrafts commodities that attract tourists while the open old souk is maintained by individual shop owners selling objects of daily life. The goods sold and the display techniques have certainly changed over time, but the shopkeepers' link to the water is maintained through the long "shotgun" architecture of the shop that opens both to the inner souk street and the Corniche road. The open souk has also recently been rehabilitated and enclosed by the Historic Building Planning Unit with marked entrances. Since the boats have moved away from the city's edge and the souk now are gated, the shopkeepers' interactions with the city, customers and traders have significantly changed. They have to deal with middle men (*dalal*) to fill their shops, they need to a have presence in souk street to attract customers, and they can no longer easily send goods back home with departing sailors. These transnational networks have operated across centuries within Sharjah. Though their faces change, these transnational shipmen, merchants and shopkeepers are a permanent feature of the urban life that is threatened by significant urban transformations aimed to gentrify the public spaces for leisure and transitory visitors.

The fact that the 1970s tall buildings are earmarked for demolition within one generation reinforces the assumption that 'time' for us is compressed. We have lost our ability to think beyond our existence on this planet (before

or after). This self-referential notion of 'time' is our inheritance from a particular kind of "modernity" pursued after the emergence of 18th century European Enlightenment, and implemented around the world with distinct zeal. This kind of modernity celebrates the present, both its opportunities and its problems. The main, albeit highly relative, idea behind this modernity is that only we can best understand and critically engage our situation. By the same token, the past is largely incomprehensible to us as we are not the living members of that past and, by that rationale, the generation to come will fend for themselves. Bottom line: We are not the custodians of things inherited nor are we responsible to the future; we are forced to think, act and build in the present.

Moreover, design has come to mean a self-reflective and artistically expressive activity of an individual devoid of collaboration with multitude of actors involved in shaping the built environment and oblivious of the people inhabiting places we shape. The self-referential basis of time and design activity is seriously harming the unique and historical places in Arabia. A narrow and disconnected focus on the present and self can only lead to periodic destruction not accumulated growth.

Design is a transformative act of improving upon the existing condition to ensure an evolved future. Urban design is not one designer's act; it is accomplished through collaboration and across generations. Urban design within an existing environment impacts several stakeholders and many people who inhabit the city. Urban designers in these contexts have the responsibility to establish links between the past and the future through their creative, responsible, rigorously researched and thoughtful interventions in the present. One of the most significant roles of designers in this context is to help maintain a record of time through thoughtful and contemporary interventions, thereby inspiring memories and fantasies about places of their intervention. It is important to underscore the difference between being 'contemporary' and being 'self-referential'. While the former uses the present to relate the past with a potential future, the latter is only about serving or exploiting the present. It is important for designers to engage, through their acts of design, with particular places and connect with people through a rigorous understanding of their past. ◆

ENDNOTES

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