As contemporary approaches to the appearance of buildings and urban form vary greatly throughout the Gulf, how do architects and planners determine what is most appropriate for the context at the beginning of the 21st century?
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‘The expansion of cities like Dubai and Doha results in global media attention that focuses on the scale and speed of growth; however, characterisations are often reduced to caricature, which prohibits a more nuanced understanding of the forces that shape architecture and urbanism in the region.’
— George Katodrytis and Kevin Mitchell
In the 2000s, the architecture of the UAE and the Gulf attracted international attention and widespread awe. This was epitomised by the audacity and the conspicuous opulence of luxury developments in Dubai such as the Palm Islands, artificial islands reclaimed from the ocean shaped in the form of palm trees; the 7-star sail-shaped Burj Al Arab Hotel (1999) designed by Tom Wright of Atkins, the highest hotel in the world; and SOM’s Burj Khalifa (2010) in downtown Dubai, the tallest tower in the world. In the academic architecture community, the attention-grabbing impudence of these excesses was compounded by Dubai’s upstart status as a new city that had risen out of the desert within decades – it was widely referred to as ‘a phenomenon’. It became the popular focus of urban studies and student research trips. When I made a short visit to the UAE in the autumn of 2012, three years after Dubai experienced its financial crisis in 2009, it was apparent that the situation in the individual emirates and the Gulf was both more diverse and more complex than the stereotypical view that is commonly communicated. At the American University of Sharjah (AUS), the premier architecture school in the region, I was lucky enough to be introduced by the former Dean of the College of Architecture, Art and Design, Peter di Sabatino, to Professors George Katodrytis and Kevin Mitchell. A conversation was initiated with George and Kevin about how they might reframe the architectural and urban situation in the UAE for an issue of Δ that would lead to the more ‘nuanced’ view outlined in their introduction that ‘favours critique over caricature’ (see pp 8–19).

The picture that George and Kevin and their contributors provide is a far cry from the bling of me-me Dubai architecture of the 2000s. Highlighting key issues such as the various manifestations of rapid urbanisation, the cultural identity of heritage and education buildings and sustainability, they bring the recent history and immediate future of the region under close scrutiny. By inviting Noura Al Sayeh, the Head of Architectural Affairs at the Ministry of Culture of the Kingdom of Bahrain, to write the Counterpoint for the issue, Δ has looked even further into the crystal ball by daring to ask: What might happen when the oil runs out – oil having resourced most urban development across the region since the 1970s? Bahrain, unlike its neighbours, is already facing the depletion of oil resources, with the lowest reserves of all Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. What might be the drivers in a country like Bahrain for a new architecture that is primarily driven by concerns for economical and environmental sustainability? Δ
George Katodrytis

Virus House
Cyprus
2001

Award-winning detached house generated through a series of folds and shifts exploring the plastic characteristics of in-situ concrete. Surfaces and structure are developed into a single geometric and hybrid system.

George Katodrytis and Sharleen Syed

Roaming Trans_cities and Airborne Fiction
Dubai, UAE
2011

Proposal for an abandoned megaproject landscape in the UAE. Reconnaissance technologies in the Gulf turn into spectacle and ‘telegenic’ fantasies. Simulated panoramas and imagery of unfinished projects give rise to an exciting promise shaping the future of cities.

Kevin Mitchell

Courtyard Housing
American University of Sharjah campus
Sharjah, UAE
2003

Floor plan and exterior view of courtyard housing designed for the American University of Sharjah campus. Incorporating principles found in regional precedents, the project demonstrates how courtyard models from the past can be adapted to provide a contemporary response to climate and context.

Kevin Mitchell

Emirates Photography Competition Exhibition
Manarat Al Saadiyat
Abu Dhabi, UAE
2014

Conceived as a spatial landscape derived from a reinterpretation of the structure of formal gardens in the Islamic world, the design for the Emirates Photography Competition incorporated premiated photographs from across the world and a parallel exhibition showcasing work from well-known photographers from the UAE, Egypt and Bangladesh.
George Katodrytis and Kevin Mitchell teach at the American University of Sharjah (AUS) in the United Arab Emirates and they have been involved in joint projects for over 10 years. In addition to collaborating on research on the architecture and urbanism of the Gulf region, they have worked together on workshops and design studios in Jordan and Italy. They co-developed and co-teach a course entitled ‘Shelter and Settlement in Post-Conflict Societies’, and continue to collaborate on projects that address refugee-related issues.

George Katodrytis is an architect involved in practice, teaching and research. He is currently Associate Professor of Architecture at AUS. He studied and taught at the Architectural Association (AA) in London and has been a visiting professor at various schools around the world. He has worked in Paris, London, Nicosia and Dubai. He has built a number of projects in Europe and the Middle East, and published widely on contemporary architecture, urbanism, cultural theory and digital media. His work addresses the Gulf ‘city’, especially as it is evolving in the 21st century. He employs digital technology and scripting as tools for establishing new formal and performative language and fabrication in architecture. He is also involved in a series of design projects in territories of limited resources that include children’s homes, schools and refugee camps in the Middle East and Africa.

Kevin Mitchell has taught at AUS since 1999 and currently serves as Interim Provost. Areas of research and writing include design pedagogy and contemporary architecture and urbanism in the Middle East. His recent work has appeared in *The Superlative City: Dubai and the Urban Condition in the Early Twenty-First Century* (Harvard University Press, 2013), *Architecture and Globalisation in the Persian Gulf Region* (Ashgate, 2013), *Transfigurations: Photographs of Tarek Al Ghussein* (Black Dog Publishing, in press) and *The Courtyard House: Between Cultural Expression and Universal Application* (Ashgate, 2010). He is a founding Editorial Board member for the *International Journal of Islamic Architecture*. ©
INTRODUCTION
GEORGE KATODRYTIS AND KEVIN MITCHELL
An unusual city has been built within a period of around ten years with extraordinary speed. Kuwait is a city that has broken many records in hasty and speedy buildup and buildup with haste and speed. The sciences of planning, priority organization, programming and phasing must have fallen victim to the formula of speed. Genesis tells us the world was created in seven days. ‘Let there be …’ and there was. In Kuwait a fantastic urban complex was built, predominantly, within the past ten years.

SABA GEORGE SHIBER
The Kuwait Urbanization
1964

Astonishing for both its scope and depth of thought, Saba George Shiber’s The Kuwait Urbanization documents the transformation of the Gulf city by an astute architect-planner who provided a cogent critique while working to guide development from within. Equally astonishing is the fact that one could retrospectively substitute the name of numerous other Gulf cities for ‘Kuwait’ in the passage and it would remain accurate.
Certainly speed has impacted contemporary architecture and urbanism in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and in the neighbouring countries comprising the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). The pace of development not only transformed the physical dimensions of cities, but also resulted in demographic imbalances, changes in legal structures and, perhaps most significantly, challenges to preconceptions about the ‘Middle East’. The rapid expansion of cities in the Gulf prior to the global financial crisis in late 2008 supported ambitious aspirations to transform the region. Following a prolonged period of restructuring state-run developers and re-evaluating state-sponsored development, construction activity has steadily increased and at least some of the projects delayed by financial exigency are moving forward. This once again raises critical and complex questions related to the design of the built environment.

The expansion of cities like Dubai and Doha results in global media attention that focuses on the scale and speed of growth; however, characterisations are often reduced to caricature, which prohibits a more nuanced understanding of the forces that shape architecture and urbanism in the region. Such criticism tended towards oversimplification and often failed to acknowledge the challenges associated with modern state formation in a complex region. Of course Gulf cities share many commonalities with counterparts around the world. For example, the desire for differentiation to attract foreign direct investment, multinational business and tourism is evident in ever-higher high-rises, new urban districts, artificial islands and strategically located free zones, as well as cultural and educational institutions that have built their ‘brand’ elsewhere.

While cities around the globe struggle to remain fiscally afloat, some Gulf cities benefit from substantial sovereign wealth funds to support development if revenue from oil and natural gas declines or foreign direct investment falters. State-owned investment funds ensure a degree of economic diversification and provide a future source of income. With a current value of US$773 billion, the Abu Dhabi Investment Authority is the second largest sovereign wealth fund in the world, followed by the Saudi Arabian Monetary Agency (SAMA) Foreign Holdings fund that manages US$737.6 billion in assets. The Sovereign Wealth Fund Institute’s rankings also place funds from Kuwait and Qatar, as well as two other UAE-based funds, in the top 20. In addition to providing an indication of the wealth concentrated in the GCC, the investment strategies of sovereign wealth funds highlight the connection to global flows of capital and the interdependence between Gulf countries and other nations.
Model of Lusail City, Doha, Qatar, 2007

Model of Lusail City on display at the Cityscape Global real-estate investment trade show in Dubai. Planned to cover 38 square kilometres (15 square miles), the projected population will be 450,000 people. The model, and others like it, were used to attract off-plan buyers prior to the economic downturn that impacted real-estate sales in the Gulf in late 2008.

Population of Major Cities in the GCC, 2014

Graph showing the population (in millions) of the largest cities in the GCC. (Data source: www.arabianbusiness.com/photos/population-melting-pot-expats-vs-locals-across-gulf-555330.html).
The interdependence between the GCC, the region and the world at large has been vital for supporting the growth of Gulf cities for centuries. As Lawrence Potter notes:

The Gulf has always been a key international trade route connecting the Middle East to India, East Africa, Southeast Asia, and China. Its orientation was outward, toward the Indian Ocean, and its society reflected this. A cosmopolitan, mercantile, and tolerant society developed here, which thrived in spite of the lack of local resources. The mobility of these people and their assets differed markedly from that of the oasis-based agricultural peasant societies that arose in the interior of neighboring states.5

Dubai capitalised on its prime location on a trade route and took deliberate measures such as creating favourable conditions for merchants to relocate from the Persian coast in the 1920s, improving port facilities along the creek in the 1950s, and developing the port at Jebel Ali in the 1970s. The facilities at Jebel Ali remain the largest in the Middle East and, according to a report in 2013, the recently established Abu Dhabi-based Khalifa Port ‘intends to become a global mega port. It and the Kizad zone are forecast to create more than 100,000 jobs and contribute 15 per cent of Abu Dhabi’s non-oil GDP by 2030, when capacity is expected to reach 15 million TEUs, which equals the current capacity of Jebel Ali port.’6

The creation of jobs through economic diversification initiatives such as large-scale port projects will contribute to accelerating urbanisation and will exacerbate present and future challenges associated with building and maintaining cities in the Gulf. While GCC citizens will benefit from job creation in the private sector, there will likely be continued reliance on an expatriate labour force to support economic growth. Despite the uncertainty associated with the lack of permanent residency and other challenges, ‘push’ factors such as unemployment and unsettled situations in the broader region and ‘pull’ factors such as job opportunities and the promise of higher wages than those available in the home country sustain labour migration. This of course results in imbalances between citizen and expatriate populations. In terms of demographic distribution, there is significant variation across the Gulf: estimates indicate that Bahrain has the highest citizen:expatriate ratio (49 per cent of the population are citizens), while expatriates in the UAE are estimated to constitute 87 per cent of the total population.7 Projections forecast that the total population in the UAE will increase from approximately 9 million in 2014 to 11.5 million in 2017; if this prediction proves to be accurate, then the overall percentage of expatriates will further increase.