

Feature Articles

“Denial of Coevalness”: Discursive Practices in the Representation of Kuwaiti Urban Modernity

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An examination of selected images used to illustrate Kuwait’s mid-twentieth-century urban transformation reinforces the view that visual representations can reproduce or resist established socio-cultural narratives. The article locates this reading within debates on knowledge construction and legitimation and the ways the “other” may “speak back” against their authority. It argues that hegemonic narratives are regularly negotiated in everyday practices of living, and are constantly produced and reproduced to meet growing challenges to their legitimacy. Support is drawn from an analysis of images of Kuwaiti urban modernity collected from both academic journals and the popular press.

A special section in the March 1957 edition of *Architectural Design (AD)*, entitled “Architecture in the Middle East,” illustrated the transformation of Kuwait and other countries in the region partly through the presentation of aerial photographs and images that romanticized a traditional urban vernacular and the supposed everyday life of the old city.¹ The guest editor, the British architect Raglan Squire, in turn set these images against photographs of realized and proposed “modern” buildings from which the city’s residents and most of the urban context had been removed. The modern images thus highlighted “Western” imported technologies and building techniques. Interestingly, therefore, while the aerial photographs reproduced representations of the local “other” in the myriad clichéd settings of the old town, the framing of the modern was largely empty of any signs of the contemporary forms of inhabitation that Kuwaitis already enjoyed. Instead, the techniques used to depict the city’s changed condition harkened back to those used to capture Eurocentric modernism in the early twentieth century.

Such selective framing of the old versus the new, apposed in tension, signified a duality of “primitive” values and customs on the one hand and signs of progress and

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technological advancement on the other. Significantly, it also limited early debate on Kuwaiti urban modernity to the ways imported methods, values and aesthetics had transformed traditional society; little attempt was made to explore how transnational ideas were being appropriated to fit the local context. Such early representations of Kuwaiti modernism ultimately helped reinforce certain traditional cultural hierarchies and socio-spatial divisions, which would remain uncontested for years to come. Rarely presented at the time, but equally polemical, were images commissioned and produced by locals to represent their own version of progress, however. In many instances, this included images taken by Western photographers, which were reproduced, most notably through postcards, to support local accounts of modernity.

As this article will show, these different histories illustrate the ways traditions are legitimated through rhetorical and visual representation. Yet, they also show how locals may “speak back” against their authority through similar means. The article argues that hegemonic narratives are thus regularly being negotiated in everyday practices, and must be constantly produced and reproduced to meet new challenges to their legitimacy.

THE IMPORTANCE OF IMAGERY TO PROCESSES OF LEGITIMATION

This article’s title refers to the anthropologist Johannes Fabian’s concept of “the denial of coevalness,” by which people of “elsewhere” are assigned a different historical time.² As others have pointed out, this allows cultural events such as modernity to be measured in terms of similar “occurrences” that allegedly first appeared in the “West.”³ The article will examine how this discursive practice allows equality to be denied to discursive practices outside a Eurocentric canon, and it will explore how this prejudice may be perpetuated through the publication of visual material — especially photographs. Such an analysis exposes the processes through which consent is manifested visually.⁴ As Jacques Derrida argued, “[photographic] framing is a field of force, a violent enclosing which subjects both the inner field and the boundary to the pressures of restraint, demarcation and definition.”⁵ Over time, however, these exclusionary margins may be both challenged and/or expanded.

Briefly, the “West” here is treated as a “reified category,” as Dipesh Chakrabarty has demonstrated — one that holds within it figures and objects of the imagination that act as dominant values against which a “non-Western” other is compared or judged.⁶ On the other hand, as Zeynep Çelik has suggested, the term “non-Western” also comes with an “attendant train of charged meanings” and definitions arrived at through negation.⁷ The present reading of Kuwait’s urban modernity, vis-à-vis visual material, will thus necessarily move back and forth between a critique of these terms and

the dismantling of the structures and processes that underpin their legitimacy.⁸

As Terry Eagleton has pointed out, systems of binary opposition, such as that between the Western and non-Western, gain credibility through processes of legitimation that rely on the instrumentality of cultural tools (such as art, architecture, literature and photography), which help construct discourses concerned with the transformation of ideals.⁹ This process of legitimation is, however, ultimately the work of those with a privileged position of intellectual, political and cultural power. It thus allows them to disseminate, in a hegemonic manner, symbols, ideas and significations that might otherwise be seen as arbitrary.¹⁰ From this perspective, cultural values may be understood as derived from a power/knowledge relationship, which opens up the necessary ideological space for their normalization. According to Eagleton, this relationship is essential to the activity of aesthetic judgment, as this is understood to engage human perception and sensation outside the powers of reason, knowledge and logic. Indeed, despite contributing greatly to cultural production and identity formation, he has described such experiences as “shorthand for a whole project of hegemony.”¹¹

While cultural production involves the aestheticization of social conduct, aesthetics in turn relies on systems of representation and signification. It is here that the dual nature of the photograph — first as an image illustrating “life as it happened,” and second, as an idea with a historical trace — becomes important.¹² According to Jennifer Evans, this condition both betrays the underlying power relations and draws “on our other senses and emotions through a series of cues that originate both within and outside the frame.”¹³ In fact, the image and the idea are closely intertwined, as the viewer sees the one through the other. This doubling, or “recursive thinking” — what W.J.T. Mitchell has called the “hypericon”¹⁴ — underlies the way we imagine ideas as images, and inversely, see images as ideas. As Evans has argued, when applied to the ways we “see” images, this “doubling” also embodies a discursive strategy produced through processes of categorizing, framing and archiving.¹⁵ Socio-cultural hierarchies may be understood as both born and resisted through these processes.¹⁶ And in terms of the built environment, as Claire Zimmerman has pointed out, the connection between architecture, photography, and “sign systems” may be particularly useful in understanding changing regimes of architectural representation and the value systems that underpin them.¹⁷

The visual documentation of Kuwait’s architectural modernity provides a valuable case study of both Mitchell’s concept of the hypericon and Eagleton’s views about the importance of aesthetic judgment within processes of cultural hegemony. Indeed, both discourses will be used here to anchor and critique a selection of images sourced from both academic journals and popular newspapers and magazines. These images were not chosen as representative of an exhaustive critique of visual culture in Kuwait. Rather, they were

selected with the more limited aim of expanding and opening up a more nuanced debate on the topic of mid-twentieth-century Kuwaiti urban modernity.

Kuwait provides a particularly fruitful location for such discussions of tradition and modernity. Traditional settlements have a long and rich history in the Gulf region, and the site of modern-day Kuwait long provided an important nexus for their socio-political and commercial encounter. Historically, Kuwait's emergence as a political entity in the eighteenth century also marked one of the earliest engagements in the region with the notion of tradition and heritage, linking space and place with the complex ideas of nation and society. Specifically, the expansion of Kuwait's diverse pre-oil population, along with the establishment of a built and imagined tradition, helped secure a narrative of political independence in a region rife with conflict. Corresponding to the onset of the oil economy, however, the thirty years from the 1950s to the 1980s brought great creative activity and destruction in terms of architecture and urban design. The post-oil period also witnessed the alteration of class and socioeconomic relationships that challenged the pre-oil status quo.¹⁸ At that time, new popular myths were likewise rationalized, codified and institutionalized, all in a matter of decades, by a burgeoning bureaucratic system whose whole purpose was, and continues to be, to placate a dependent citizenry.¹⁹

Although not explicitly addressed, the concept of tradition will also be implicitly challenged here. This will take place through a qualitative mapping of acts and institutions of legitimacy set up to normalize certain ideas and values for everyday consumption. The article thus reflects the view, widely elaborated upon at the 2016 IASTE conference, that an examination of the relationship between tradition and legitimation may help reveal the diverse networks of power that underpin these concepts.²⁰ Toward this end, the article builds on existing literature that seeks to destabilize tradition "as a repository of authentic ideas and customs."²¹ And it seeks to bolster the view that such a "deterritorialization of tradition" may shed light on how knowledge — and arguably its mirror, tradition — are constructed.²² The article finally seeks to bring into focus the struggles of the marginalized and demonstrate the ways that different communities attempt to insert their own narratives into this malleable discourse.

THE USE OF PHOTOGRAPHY TO FRAME THE MODERN IN KUWAIT

While many historians have tried to expose the power relations that underpin photographs, others have used these very qualities to help establish disciplines and norms. William Curtis's *Modern Architecture Since 1900*, for instance, employed just such a rhetorical and visual strategy to categorize and reinforce a certain kind of historical "othering." Specifically, in the chapter "Modernity, Tradition and Identity in the

Developing World," Curtis's book described Kuwait's architectural modernity as a "degraded form of modern design" disseminated through rapid economic development. As in other locations within the region, the chapter alleged that modern architecture and design were imported to Kuwait through continuing colonization and the "brainwashing of post-colonial elites."²³ Interestingly, Curtis's book afforded in-depth description of the work of the dominant protagonists of the Modern Movement — with the discussion of some of these figures even occupying several chapters. But the original edition glossed over all of the "developing world" in one chapter, collapsing heterogeneous communities and urban structures into essentialized descriptions. From this perspective, actual cities might be considered little more than spaces of imagination, representing historical narratives of an already established canon.

Curtis's representation of Kuwait and the surrounding region is not the only such archive to operate within such a colonialist/Orientalist discursive space. Indeed, his reading had its roots in the way the transformation of Kuwait was first introduced to the world. This was built on a story of "rags to riches" and a tabula-rasa anecdote of the desert changing overnight, following the encounter with the West, into a modern metropolis. In some accounts, modern Kuwait was further associated with opulence — with images of palaces and the latest fashions and lifestyles — which were interpreted as symbols of a nouveau-riche society that espoused Western consumer values and customs. Throughout the 1950s, such typical readings circulated both in the popular press, as in *Life* and *National Geographic*, and in architectural journals such as *Architectural Design* and *Architectural Review*, to name a few.

One of these "rags-to-riches" accounts was a photographic essay in the March 1959 issue of *Life*, with the rather lengthy title of "Kuwait: The Fabulous Sheikdom: Flood of Oil Brings Wealth and Worry to a Sandy Realm as the Ominous Hand of Nasserism Threatens Its Independence." It presented a series of photographs by Joseph McKeown of "princely opulence," oil tanks in Mina Al Ahmadi "caught in [the] afternoon sun [of the] desert," and the glitz and lights of the modern city that it heralded as testimony of "Kuwait's oil fat boom."²⁴ These images of modernity were then arranged next to others showing Bedouin herders and their flocks, camels drinking from troughs, and barefoot boys playing in the sand.²⁵ The essay thus foregrounded "symbols of the past" that evoked accepted imaginaries of traditional Kuwait — the Bedouin, the desert, the camel — sometimes literally against a modern background of oil tankers, concrete buildings, and the contemporary city of light.

Such early unbalanced representations established the alleged tension between a traditional way of life and an imposed "Western" lifestyle that would become a recurring theme in local cultural histories. It also presented Kuwait's transformation as the outcome of patriarchal bargaining. By this ac-

count, the father, in the form of Kuwait's ruler, controlled his subjects through generous welfare benefits, giving priority to conservative customs and tribal traditions. In the article in *Life*, such a reconciliation between tribal customs and modern society was, in fact, explicitly referred to as part of the "high cost of welfare" and the "burdens of huge wealth."²⁶

There was certainly an element of truth to this representation; however, it was far from a complete representation of cultural and political conditions. As I have argued elsewhere, it ignored, for instance, the emergence of an antagonistic

middle class, who fought for greater representation through a nascent public sphere symbolized by the same modern buildings attributed to a benign state.²⁷ Still, the early depictions of newly designed central kitchens serving free modern schools and industrial facilities celebrating the benefits of modern technology, all set against symbols of the past, reinforced an unbalanced narrative that circulated in mid-twentieth-century publications (FIG. 1). And these implicit meanings helped deny a place to Kuwaiti civil society and limit its space of debate within the global discourse on modernity.



FIGURE 1. A page from the essay, "A New Day: Molding Future Generations," with photographs of children in modern schools. Sout al-Khaleej, No.123 (October 1, 1964). Courtesy of the heirs of the late Baker Ali Yusef Khuraibet.

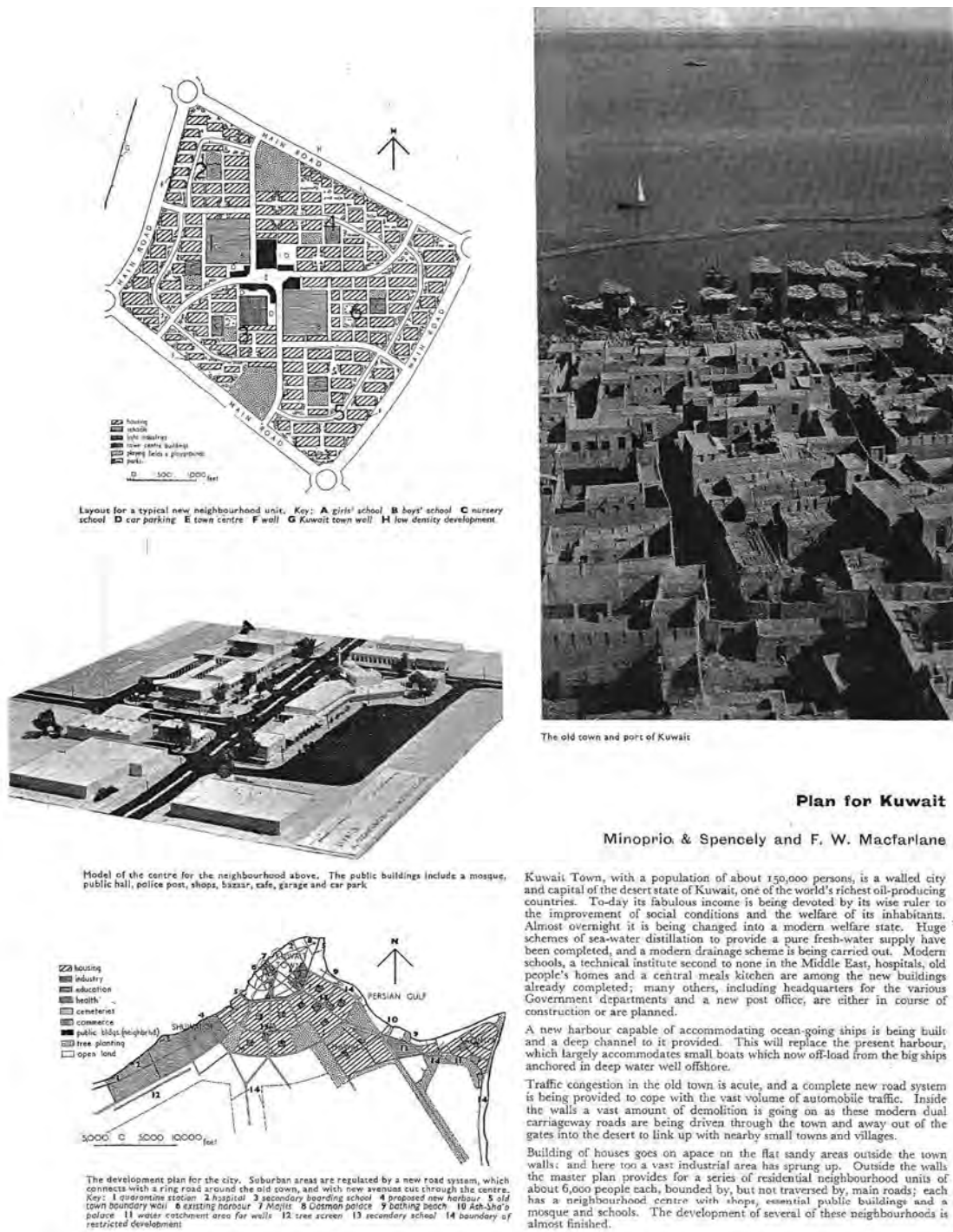


FIGURE 2. An extract from the special section on "Architecture in the Middle East," R. Squire, ed., *Architectural Design*, Vol.27 No.3 (1957), p.75. Courtesy of School of Fine Arts, University of Pennsylvania Library.

Like other of these early accounts, the special section on "Architecture in the Middle East" in the March 1957 *Architectural Design* reproduced and legitimated such colonialist tropes. However, it focused specifically on the idea of the Western expert's "civilizing mission." This was particularly

evident on one page that included four images arranged with captions (FIG. 2).²⁸ Because no photographic credits were provided, interpretation of the cultural and social function of the images was left to the reader. However, the caption text, as well as Squire's introductory critique, helped readers

navigate a relevant argument. On the right-hand side, and taking up a third of the page, was an aerial photograph of old Kuwait City in which a foreground of mud houses, taken at an oblique angle, meets up with the old port. A dhow — a ghost of Kuwait's rich shipbuilding past — is forever reified in the background of the photograph and in the accompanying discourse. This commentary highlighted how shipbuilding and other traditional crafts were making way for a diverse building industry, mostly to supply a construction boom — with the implied result being the slow decline and eventual erasure of Kuwait's rich craft traditions. However, the larger impact of this photograph, with its layers of meaning, was to bring the exotic near — in the words of Susan Sontag, to make “the entire world available as an object of appraisal.”²⁹ In Fabian's terms, it thus provided a recognizable image of the “other” located “elsewhere,” specifically calling forth the picturesque plan of the old town with its meandering streets and courtyard mud houses as evidence of the austere simplicity of the local vernacular and its inhabitants.

On the page, this image of the old town did not speak for itself, however; it was set against an image showing the 1952 Development Plan for Kuwait City, the work of the British planning firm of Minoprio, Spencely and Macfarlane (MSM). And immediately above this were two more photographs — one showing a plan for a prototypical suburb, and the other a model of a typical community center designed by the planners. To readers at the time, the significance of proposals for a modern city and its typical suburban extension would have been as familiar as the image of the old town. They symbolized modernist planning in the form of rational urban networks that would cut through the existing, inefficient traditional fabric. Meanwhile, the layout of these four images on the page mapped out and anticipated a process of transformation, collectively signifying the impending demolition of the old town to clear a path for the “new.”

The images of modern buildings in the 1957 *AD* further doubled as symbols of a paradigm first associated with the heroic period of modern architecture. As icons of social utopia, such buildings were usually photographed in a sterilized state, empty of any signs of inhabitation. To achieve the effect, furniture was often removed, and prints were “touched up” to eliminate any complicating evidence of everyday life that might challenge the naïve foundations of the early Eurocentric debate on modern architecture. However, as a variety of authors have observed, the representational isolation of such buildings from their context created a dependent relationship between the medium of photography and the message of modern architecture.³⁰ This “modernist view” was essential to the meaning of some of the most iconic buildings of the period, including Mies van der Rohe's Barcelona Pavilion and Le Corbusier's Villa Savoye. It also allowed viewers to draw conclusions arrived at through uneven comparison between an established modern experience and one assigned a different temporal location “elsewhere.”

Assigning Kuwait such geographical status consolidated presumptions and established difference.³¹ More importantly, it located Kuwait in a different historical time where modernity, as Chakrabarty explained, had “not yet” unleashed its tumultuous experience. It would thus only be after certain political, social and cultural developments had taken place that Kuwaitis could move on from what he called “an imaginary waiting room.”³² But such a time lag was also perennial, perpetuated through a comparative critique that romanticized transformation as the civilizing work of foreign experts. Squire was thus able to construct an image of the “Middle Eastern” other as “people [who] have lived in a certain way, based upon the home life of privacy, introversion, the harem and pedestrian communication,” while simultaneously presenting the image of the British as the “experts” who would come to their aid. As he noted, “a great deal more help will still be needed from the West before there are sufficient numbers of trained technical nationals to carry out the design work of the large number of buildings which have still to be erected.” Kuwaitis, of course, could only embark on this path with the guidance of Westerners. And even though regional architects such as Sayid Karim were introduced in the article, they were, as Squire mentioned, “of Western import.”³³

Unmentioned, of course, was that Squire himself, along with many others, had set up architectural firms precisely to take advantage of the development surge in the region. In relation to this pool of new work, Tanis Hinchcliffe has even asserted that “the clash of cultures became a leitmotif in the journals . . . as the projects funded by the increasing oil revenues became even larger and more ambitious.”³⁴ Thus, Squire (who Hinchcliffe noted opened a Baghdad office in 1955) promoted British town planners and architects in the *AD* essay and endorsed their technical skills, hoping to secure development projects in the oil-rich emirate. Their prospects were good. Kuwait — at the time still a British protectorate — had increased its oil production from 300 thousand tons in 1946 to 57 million tons in 1957, making it one of the biggest oil producers in the region and the third largest in the world.³⁵ Meanwhile, around £18 million was being spent annually on a ten-year development program.³⁶ And MSM's 1952 Kuwait master plan, which promised to produce a modern capital city, was an essential instrument of this construction boom.

However, instead of fulfilling its promise, the destruction brought about by the 1952 plan ultimately produced what Andreas Huyssen referred to, in the context of Berlin, as “voids” in a previously vibrant city center.³⁷ It also triggered nostalgic sentiment related to the disappearance of the old city.³⁸ Yet, this did not stop others from arguing that, once completed, the MSM plan would create avenues similar to “Whitehall,” with new offices for government departments.³⁹ Such a contrast between the imagined and the real reinforces Sontag's argument that while photographs do not create moral positions, they may reinforce them.⁴⁰ Thus, rhetorical affirmations explicitly communicated the idea of the Western expert,

while images packaged for everyday consumption allowed viewers to serve both as judges and consumers of the underlying ideas. Moreover, as the MSM plan became widely circulated in architectural journals, it continued to shape identities and determine individual understandings of space.⁴¹

Another image, Jean-Philippe Charbonnier's famous "La machine à coudre," a gelatin silver print of a veiled Kuwaiti woman carrying a sewing machine on her head, may help illustrate the awkward relationship between tradition and modernity and the ways that people in places such as Kuwait have navigated this path.⁴² Many of Charbonnier's photographs depicted such scenes of everyday life; and this image, taken in 1955, was emblematic of this genre. Charbonnier described its origins:

I waited five years for this woman. She had escaped me one evening in December 1950 in Marrakech, for lack of light and especially a camera, and I raged against this lost photograph. I found her again in Kuwait, the first picture on my first roll, the afternoon of my arrival. What luck! Only by sleight of hand did I succeed in hiding and saving this film that the male Kuwaitis, pious and courteous but determined, wanted to confiscate in the name of the precepts of the Koran. Despite the amusing rolling stone context, this picture says more about ancient statuary than about the anecdote.⁴³

As the description indicates, the "othering" of the Arab Muslim woman was thus double. It took place first in the representation of a figure without geographic or temporal location. The complex nature of Arab women in diverse locations was thus reduced to an object for everyday critique. The woman was a wandering nomad of the photographer's imagination, who might have escaped him in Morocco but was captured five years later in Kuwait. In a second sense, however, she was also represented as the other within Kuwaiti patriarchal society. Here, Mitchell's idea of the hypericon is clear: the photograph is not only an image of an Arab woman carrying a sewing machine; it is one that helps reinforce typical assumptions about Arab society. Charbonnier thus even claimed to have escaped the wrath of Arab men, who, according to this reading, were complicit in objectifying her.

Charbonnier's photographs of Kuwaiti life were filled with these clichés. For example, they included images of the lazy Arab as well as the curious "natives" posing for a photograph. At times, the photographer even included himself in the frame to help reinforce these uneven geographies.⁴⁴ As Fabian has suggested, "as long as ethnographic knowledge is conceived primarily as observation and/or representation (in terms of models, symbol systems, and so forth) it is likely to persist in denying coevalness to its Other."⁴⁵

LOCALS "SPEAK BACK:" VISUAL RE-PRESENTATIONS AND COUNTER NARRATIVES

Although the function of the photograph is to reproduce dominant values, viewers can certainly challenge these ideas. Indeed, the "viewer's gaze" is far from passive. On the surface, a photograph informs, represents, surprises and signifies; it is this quality that Roland Barthes referred to as "the studium." But such a superficial reception is in turn mediated by what he called "the spectator," who animates the photograph, and in turn is animated by it. Barthes called this process of critical interpretation "the spectrum." He thus described the didactic relationship between three subject positions that are part of the function of a photograph: the operator, the spectrum, and the spectator — representing, respectively, the individual taking the photograph, the subject of the photograph, and the viewer of the image.⁴⁶

Following this logic, uncovering the hidden fragments of an untold history should be one way to challenge the legitimacy of an unbalanced discourse. Indeed, such an approach may be particularly useful to advancing Kuwaiti urban modernity beyond the impasse of an alleged "imaginary waiting room," where it is forever dependent on the input of Western experts. In this case, the work of local editors, artists and architects, writing and creating illustrations for the local press, may begin to problematize the dominant narrative described in the previous section.

One publication in which such evidence appears is *Sout al-Khaleej* [*Voice of the Gulf*] (hereafter SAK). This was a weekly political independent magazine, founded by Baker Ali Yousef Khuraibet in April 1962, with an initial estimated circulation of around one thousand copies.⁴⁷ On the cover of its 136th issue, at the end of 1964, in red type, was the headline "Kuwait Ushers in the Year 1965" (FIG. 3). Below the text an illustration depicted three women in varying opacity, with the one in the foreground, dressed in modern clothes, appearing to overshadow the other two, dressed in traditional costume. In an act of defiance, the foregrounded woman further appears to be stepping on an 'abbaya (the traditional overgarment or robe worn by the two women in the background). Written on the 'abbaya are the words *raj'iya* and *ta'akhur*, meaning "regressive" and "backwardness" respectively.

This illustration was inspired by events that had taken place earlier in 1956, when four women were reported to have burned their 'abbayas in a school courtyard, demanding greater freedom.⁴⁸ Unlike the submissive woman captured in Charbonnier's award-winning photograph, the one illustrated in SAK thus represented the way modernity was being negotiated within a traditional cultural setting, and it expressed progressive steps being taken by members of Kuwaiti society. It further seemed to imply that societal development was inevitable, an organic condition of modernity. It is in this sense that Carol Gluck has asserted that "modernity is not optional in history, in that society could not simply



FIGURE 3. Cover page of the 136th edition of Sout Al-Khaleej (December 31, 1964), with the illustration by the artist Nasr el-din. Courtesy of the heirs of the late Baker Ali Yousef Khuraibet.

‘choose’ another regime of historicity for themselves, for such is the tyranny of modern times.”⁴⁹ The SAK illustration also bears a certain similarity to another image of the time, referred to by Sibel Bozdoğan, which represented Turkish modernity.⁵⁰ In it, a smiling woman dressed in modern clothes stands in the foreground, while another woman, clothed in traditional robes, stands in back.

In both examples, the emancipation of women from traditional customs and values was implicitly tied to the creation of a modern space that might nurture local aspirations and identities.⁵¹ Thus, in contrast to the empty buildings presented in the AD essay, those shown on the pages of SAK were filled with modern expression. They included, for example, images of young women exercising in school courtyards and teachers conducting lessons in new educational spaces (FIG. 4).

The SAK editors also developed a recurring illustrated character called *wild al-dira*, meaning literally “person of the country.” Considered more broadly, this figure represented a collective identity — one reflective of an underlying populist nationalism. On the pages of SAK, *wild al-dira*, dressed in a *dishdasha* (the traditional long robe worn by Kuwaiti men) took on the role of a modern flâneur. However, unlike the flâneur who was at ease in the modern city, *wild al-dira* was more cynical. Yet, his cynicism was not directed at the inevitable leap forward into modernism or particular experiences tied to the country’s urban revolution. These were, to a degree, welcomed. Rather, it was rooted in a general distrust of the army of foreign architects and planners, then present in the city, and their dubious intentions. The attitude was thus tied to the pan-Arab ideology that had emerged in the region and infiltrated popular debate. And, in more technical terms, it reflected a nascent local urban discourse identified with and expanded on in the work of town planners such as Saba Shiber, Hamid Shuaib, and Ghazi Sultan.⁵²

A personification of all these ideas, the figure of *wild al-dira*, in one 1962 illustration, for example, sits on the pavement observing a collection of individuals taking personal advantage of the construction boom tied to oil money (FIG. 5). Some are drinking from flasks, some are smoking, and others are lazily perched on the edge of the sidewalk; but all seem oblivious that the street and its curbstones are deteriorating in front of them. The illustration symbolized the chaotic transformation of the town, the corrupt and avaricious practices associated with the building frenzy, and the substandard building materials and construction techniques that plagued some development projects. It also echoed a remark by Sir Rupert Hay, the British Political Resident, who predicted that



FIGURE 4. Female students performing their dance routine in the school courtyard. Sout al-Khaleej, No.101 (April 30, 1964). Courtesy of the heirs of the late Baker Ali Yousef Khuraibet.



FIGURE 5. Wild al-dira sitting on the pavement observing a collection of individuals pursuing their personal agendas. From a special issue of Sout Al-Khaleej, No.107 (June 21, 1962). Courtesy of the heirs of the late Baker Ali Yousef Khuraibet.

FIGURE 6 (BELOW). Postcard view of Jahra Gate with modern buildings in the background. Courtesy of Center for Research and Studies on Kuwait and A.G.A. Rais, Al-Kuwayt fi al-Bataqat al-Baridiya [Kuwait in Postcards] (Kuwait: Center for Research and Studies on Kuwait, 2009), p.521.

... the attempt to create a super welfare state where everybody will get everything for nothing . . . means that none of the existing projects will pay for their maintenance, but also because the population will inevitably increase by leaps and bounds by the immigration of adventurers and vagrants.⁵³

The figure of *wild al-dira* and the urban commentaries that featured him were thus a creative response by locals to contemporary conditions. They gave voice to an alternative sense of modernism that challenged the idea of the productive Western “expert” and the trope of the “civilizing mission” tied to imperialist projects.

Postcards that reproduced iconic photographs of Kuwait’s urban modernity provide another example of locals speaking back (FIG. 6). The postcard is a particularly interesting medium because it encourages cross-cultural encounter and interpretation through the act of exchange and receipt (FIG. 7). Archived in a recently published book of postcards about Kuwait, one such card included a quote from the French poet Jules Renard — “l’ironie est la pudeur de l’humanité,” or “irony is the chastity of mankind” — written on the back of a reproduction of Charbonnier’s photograph of the Kuwaiti woman (FIG. 8).⁵⁴ On the surface, the card, which was dispatched to France, appeared to communicate typical assumptions that modernity was at odds with conservative traditions and customs. In effect, Charbonnier’s veiled woman carrying the sewing machine had come to exemplify this contradiction.





FIGURE 7. Postcard depicting national day celebrations. Courtesy of Center for Research and Studies on Kuwait and A.G.A. Rais, Al-Kuwayt fi al-Bataqat al-Baridiya [Kuwait in Postcards] (Kuwait: Center for Research and Studies on Kuwait, 2009), p.353.

The book, however, reveals a different story. From a local perspective, it was the Singer sewing machine, rather than the woman, that was important.⁵⁵ Thus, the woman was no longer a migrant wanderer floating in Orientalized space; she was geo-historically located in Safat Square, one of the most important plazas for commerce in pre-oil Kuwait. In this reading, the image may be seen as depicting the incremental development of the socio-spatial context in which this Kuwaiti woman lived and how she was adapting to changing times. As I have pointed out elsewhere, she may even be seen to personify the struggles and hardships of a self-made middle class, which legitimated its existence by appropriating modern technology to achieve greater financial autonomy. Seen in this light, aspects of modern identity such as the sewing machine afforded a chance to challenge traditional class hierarchies and achieve upward social mobility.⁵⁶ Such a story is entirely absent from Charbonnier's representation and anecdote. However, its appearance on a postcard revealed how images of modern Kuwait could be appropriated by residents as symbols of an emerging local identity.



FIGURE 8. Postcard reproduction of Jean-Philippe Charbonnier's famous "La machine à coudre." Courtesy of Center for Research and Studies on Kuwait and A.G.A. Rais, Al-Kuwayt fi al-Bataqat al-Baridiya [Kuwait in Postcards] (Kuwait: Center for Research and Studies on Kuwait, 2009), p.447.

Aerial views that captured the unfolding of Kuwaiti urban modernity were also depicted on postcards (FIG. 9). The earliest state-commissioned aerial survey was made in 1951 by the British company Huntington Aerosurvey (FIG. 10). For the first time its images presented, on a grand scale, the spatial structure of the traditional urban fabric. By mapping Kuwait's terrain in this manner, the survey also revealed a reality that was far from the homogenous tabula rasa implied in some of the representations described in the previous section. A second set of aerial photographs, commissioned in 1960, subsequently recorded post-oil buildings as examples of Kuwait's modernist architectural and urban heritage.

In a polemical monograph on Kuwait's physical transformation, the Kuwaiti architect and planner Saba Shiber wrote:

The aerial anatomy of Kuwait, as any city, is like a piercing novel, a profound poem, a meaningful piece of art. The aerial form of the city reveals not only the unadulterated portrait of the city, but provides an X-ray of the people who inhabit it, work and play in it and deal with each other on the arena that is the city, enfolding every conceivable and possible facet of dramatic performance, be that performance static or kinetic, physical or social, political or economic, tragic or comic.⁵⁷

Using biological terms such as organ, anatomy and metamorphosis to describe a cycle of change, Shiber was among the first to contextualize Kuwait's aerial photographs in relation to its modern transformation.⁵⁸ In particular, he used images that presented the traditional vernacular of the old town as a starting point for a critique of the modern me-



FIGURE 9. Postcard of an aerial view of Safat Square's iconic water tower, a symbol of modern progress. Courtesy of Center for Research and Studies on Kuwait and A.G.A. Rais, Al-Kuwayt fi al-Bataqat al-Baridiya [Kuwait in Postcards] (Kuwait: Center for Research and Studies on Kuwait, 2009), p.269.

tropolis.⁵⁹ Shiber often moved between nostalgic sentiments for the “ethereal, if not aerial beauty of the old city,” to the rational but also chaotic growth that resulted in the 1960s “urbanistic disharmony.”⁶⁰

For Shiber, and for the nascent Kuwaiti state, aerial photography provided a new way of “seeing” that was particularly useful for understanding ongoing patterns of development. For example, according to Jeanne Haffner, it encouraged a reevaluation of the discipline of planning and presented unprecedented views of spatial relationships.⁶¹ For many, aerial photographs further provided unparalleled access into the inner workings of society; according to the French geographer and ethnologist Chombart de Lauwe, it was the very vision of modernity.⁶² As such, the “aerial view” or “gaze” was the ultimate symbol of technological progress and optimism. Through maps and photographs, it made accessible what was once “uncharted” and undiscovered — even if, according to Christine Boyer, “a sense of mystery about the world disappeared.”⁶³

While their function was often much more prosaic than that sketched out by Shiber and other critics, the aerial photograph also challenged accepted perceptions about exotic locations, revealing far more similarities than differences. As I have written elsewhere, Shiber, not unlike Edward Said, “was confronted by the notion of displacement.” He was, in Said’s term, “out of place.” Nevertheless, both men, “as displaced nomads, were influential in their resistance to a Western discourse to which they remained intellectually indebted.”⁶⁴ For example, aerial photographs provided Shiber with the visual tool needed to bridge between a Eurocentric narrative on urban modernity and an alternative view he was hoping to develop for the region.⁶⁵ His juxtaposition of images of Kuwait’s municipal park with texts describing Manhattan’s Central Park helped create these links.⁶⁶ He also established an urban language that moved between a rational revision of an “Arab” history and one that made references to the earliest debates on modernist planning — inserting, within that narrative, figures such as the Arab historian and sociologist Ibn Khaldoun and architectural principles rooted in traditional “Arab” towns.

As someone both within and outside this discourse, Shiber’s critique speaks of how displaced “Arab” planners not only critically engaged with urban modernity but also challenged its tenets using the same intellectual terms that had been used to construct a Eurocentric canon.

BEYOND LEGITIMATION PRACTICES: AN ALTERNATIVE APPROACH

This critique has relied on a selection of visual material to highlight the complicated relationship between image and idea. It has tried to indicate how the connection that defines Mitchell’s concept of the hypericon is ever changing, oscillat-

FIGURE 10. Aerial photograph of Kuwait City taken in 1951 by the British company Huntington Aerosurveys. Courtesy of Kuwait Oil Company Photo Library.



ing toward different centers of power that either strengthen this underlying association or challenge its foundations.

By tracing processes of knowledge construction, the article has argued that the complicated layering of values and ideals present in any image may shift over time depending on social and cultural perspective. The earliest representations of Kuwaiti urban modernity, which reinforced a colonialist and Orientalist discourse, can therefore be challenged today. Likewise, their repetition of familiar tropes of patriarchal rule, princely opulence, and the civilizing mission of Western experts have been complicated by local accounts of modernity. In a process of negotiation with the modern experience, locals thus questioned tradition and encouraged the gentle seeping in of progressive ideals. New sets of conventions were thus brought into relation with an existing tradition. Yet their diffusion did not signal the end of one form of society and the emergence of another; instead, different sets of values existed simultaneously.

This constructed discourse indirectly influenced the built environment. An antagonistic local press brought into focus the corrupt and avaricious practices of development projects, which occasioned greater oversight on architectural and urban proposals. And, as I have previously described, Saba Shiber's polemical contributions on Kuwaiti urban transformation helped stop further destruction of the old city.⁶⁷ The wax and wane of "Western" influence in the re-

gion also had a direct effect on the architectural and urban models used to "furnish" Kuwait's built environment. As regional and international design firms competed to build projects funded by oil revenues, Kuwait came to be seen as a site in which to realize utopian dreams, carry out personal agendas, or complete unfinished projects with theoretical roots "elsewhere." With these conditions as a background, the unfolding of Kuwaiti modernity came to reflect forms of cross-cultural exchange and adaptation that were informed as much by local and regional developments as by "Western" technical expertise and British political interference.

Nevertheless, early representations helped enshrine a naïve understanding of Kuwait's urban transformation that has weighed heavily on the ways it has been (and continues to be) debated in the history books. As a consequence, physical evidence of Kuwait's early modern project is today slowly being erased from the built environment through acts of demolition that consider only the foreign quality of its forms. However, these violent acts at the same time delegitimize the pioneering progressive values these buildings represented from a local point of view. Through this reading, this article has aimed to promote a more nuanced and balanced comparative critique of the concepts of tradition and modernity in order to critically reflect on the ways in which histories are produced and legitimated.

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