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PLANNING AND ARCHITECTURE

In Search for a Local Image in the Arab City: The Case of Kuwait City

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In its earlier attempts to catch up with western modernity and civilisation, the Arab City has lost, whether intentionally or unintentionally, its local image. Since this image was greatly associated with backwardness and obsolescence. And was regarded as unfit setting for modern activities and uses. At the same time western models conveying the desired *modern* image were ready for the pick. Hence architectural development mainly followed the prevailing international style with few exceptions, which addressed the history and tradition of the Arab City.

With the loss of local image in the modern Arab City there was a greater loss of identity. This has resulted in a separation between the Arab City's past and its present, as well as a greater concern for its future. This was apparent in the main cities of the Arabian Gulf states. Particularly in the case of Kuwait, reassert of local identity has become a matter of great importance especially after Iraq's claims in Kuwait and the second Gulf war. The search for a culturally and traditionally responsive architecture, which started during the late 1980s, has taken a boost by the political conditions.

This paper compares some examples of contemporary architecture in Kuwait to examine the effect of Western architecture on their design. At the same time it contrasts this with some other examples, which revive local design elements and traditions in contemporary practice in order to preserve continuity and reflect change. The aim is to document the effect of globalisation on the local architecture of Kuwait, and to investigate whether an attempt to portray a local indigenous image with some global ingredients can prove successful.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

The Arab City has experienced dramatic changes during the second half of the 20th century. Changes in the political, economic and cultural arenas especially in architecture. These changes are attributed to a number of factors such as political independence, rapid population increases and most important of all is the discovery of oil in the Arabian Gulf states. As a direct consequence the built

environment of major cities in the Gulf States has gone under a rapid and gigantic transformation. In the newly thriving Gulf States the oil boom resulted in the flourish of the building industry. The enormous job opportunities in this field have attracted foreign experts and labour to the Gulf States to meet the increasing demand for urbanisation and modernisation.

Kuwait is one of the most important Gulf States. Kuwait City became the focus of international construction activities as many of the world famous architects competed for large-scale projects. In addition, the government turned to famous foreign architects for major building commissions, and so did most of the private sector too.

Although tradition should have been of great significance for contemporary architecture in Kuwait, it was not adequately manifested in the majority of buildings during the last few decades. This alienated the city's inhabitants and resulted in a loss of local identity. Which was anticipated by prominent planners and architects around 40 years ago (Kultermann, 1999).

1.1.1 Early Modern Architecture in Kuwait

The use of traditional local building materials and techniques, which were associated with backwardness and obsolescence, was abandoned in favour of modern imported materials and techniques. Affluence due to the reinvestment of oil revenues in building construction has dramatically changed the methods of traditional design and construction. Especially that modern building technology and materials started to be imported from all over the world (Bosel, 1995).

Some buildings built between 1970s and 1980s in Kuwait were influenced by the early modern and corporate styles developed in the West from 1950s till 1970s. Early modern movement was characterised by simplicity in plan and form avoiding the sophistication of the neo-classical architecture at the beginning of the 20th century. These were mainly office complexes for both public and private influential corporations, which borrowed internationally recognised images of famous office buildings.

Corporate architecture aimed to convey a sense of permanence and authority and was characterised by the extensive use of glass and steel (Peel *et al*, 1992). In the case of Kuwait, fair-face concrete was extensively used in early corporate architecture as well as stone and marble cladding.

Examples on Early Modern architecture include the Kuwait Fund Headquarters, the High Courts complex, Behbahani, Al-Muthanna, Dasman and the Blue towers (Fig. 1.1). Design commissions of these buildings were awarded to internationally renowned firms such as the Architects Collaborative and Skidmore, Owings & Merrill of USA.



Kuwait Fund Headquarters



High Courts complex



Behbahani tower



Al-Muthanna complex



Dasman tower



The Blue tower



Al-Rashed & Al-Anjari tower



Office tower on Fahed Al-Salem street

Figure 1 Examples of Early Modern Architecture in Kuwait.

1.1.2 Neo-Islamic, Late and Post Modern Architecture

As an Arabic and Islamic country Kuwait was bound to experience some experimental work in Neo-Islamic architecture. This movement was characterised by the use of Islamic motifs and architectural elements in a different context, and came as a reaction to examples of Islamic architecture revivalism at the end of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century. Like the use of the decorative element ‘mukarnas’ as a column capital in Al-Awadi towers (Fig. 1.2). In fact this phase was characterised by ambiguity between what is functional and what is decorative.

As Makiya (1990) explains that structure and non-structure were becoming ambiguous which is what they became historically in later Islamic architecture. “Is the ‘mukarnas’ a structural element or a decorative one? The inspiration behind it is constructional: the problem of making the transition from a rectilinear to spherical geometry, from a square plan to a dome” (Makiya, 1990, p. 79)

The use of Islamic geometric patterns on façades presented another way to achieve an image that can be associated with Islamic architecture. This is clear in the examples shown in Fig. 1.2.



Al-Awadi towers



Kuwait Airways Headquarters



Le Meridian hotel



Audit Bureau Headquarters

Figure 2 Examples of Neo-Islamic Architecture in Kuwait.

After the liberation of Kuwait in 1991 till now a number of large building commissions were completed in the efforts to rebuild the country after the Iraqi



Al-Ahli bank (left) and Kuwait Finance House



Hmoud tower



Al-Sahab tower



Al-Ahlia Insurance Company



Gulf Co-operation Council Fund



Al-Jahra Gate tower



United Real Estate tower



Kuwait Chamber of Commerce Headquarters

Figure 3 Examples of Late Modern Architecture in Kuwait.

invasion. Some of these large commissions were influenced by the growing trend in Western architecture towards Late Modern and Post Modern move-

ments. The effect of international architecture became more apparent after Kuwait has opened even more to the West whose US-led troops have secured the withdrawal of Iraqi forces from Kuwait. The influx of foreign architects practising in Kuwait continued adding another dimension to the effect of globalisation on the Kuwaiti architecture. The use of high-tech materials and techniques gradually started to replace the extensive use of concrete and stone cladding.

At the same time some of these architects tried to reinvent traditional Gulf-Arab forms, introducing them into the contemporary development of Kuwait City. This is what consultants HLW International has tried in the Kuwait Chamber of Commerce Headquarters (Fig. 1.3). Where the idea of a traditional Caravanserai (traditionally is a resting place for caravans travelling across the desert) was translated into a modern idiom to create an urban landmark (AR, 1999). Some examples of Late modern architecture in Kuwait are presented in Fig. 1.3.

Post Modern movement in architecture became popular during 1970s and 1980s. The use of classical architectural elements such as Roman orders in an unusual setting, materials and colours characterised this movement. Although the columns and pediments of Post-Modernism went out of fashion in Europe after the 1980s to give way to new directions and concepts in architecture (Tietz, 1999), the spread of post-modernism can still be seen in buildings recently completed in Kuwait. The well-known broken pediment of the AT&T headquarters, by Philip Johnson, which became the cliché of post-modernism (Peel *et al*, 1992) has appeared in Kuwait in residential, commercial and office buildings. Some examples of Post Modern buildings are shown in Fig. 1.4.

1.2 A NEW VISION

“A country is recognised by its architects and its history is built into it ... else the new would have nothing to do and nowhere to go” (Goodwin, 1997, p. 46). In addition to the previous examples influenced by the international modern image, there were a few attempts by some local and foreign architects to recognise and acknowledge the Kuwaiti architectural heritage. Among these is Saleh Al-Mutawa, a Kuwaiti architect whose dream was to revive the traditional architecture of Kuwait (Al-Mutawa, 1994). He set to do just that in his practice using some local architectural vocabulary in a contemporary language of three-dimensional forms. “His architectural language makes an immediate impact on all who see it, but it is disconcerting to fellow architects. The proof of this is that trivial bits of pastiche have appeared on a few other works by architects who have in no way absorbed the ocean of experience, both intellectual and emotional, behind Al-Mutawa’s creativity and merely borrow his ideas as if adding sugar to a glass of tea.” (Goodwin, 1997, pp. 49–50).



Four apartment blocks using the pediment cliché of Post Modernism



Al-Mulla travel agents offices



Central Plaza shopping mall and offices



Office building in Sharq



Al-Usaimi office tower

Figure 4 Examples of Post Modern Architecture in Kuwait.

1.2.1 The Influence of Tradition

Al-Mutawa has identified a number of elements of old Kuwaiti architecture (Al-Mutawa, 1994). The most important of these are the courtyard, the *liwan* or passage surrounding the courtyard, the vestibule or bent house entrance, the *mastaba* or outdoor bench, and the high roof parapet. He also identified the *merzam* or roof gutter, the *jandal* or exposed wooden roof structure, the *badgeer* or wind tower, the *mindah* or supporting pillars around the courtyard as components of the Kuwaiti architectural heritage. The use of teakwood for parapets, doors and windows, and finally the specially decorated building corners were a common practice in old Kuwait (Al-Mutawa, 1994, pp. 23–26). Some of these elements are shown in Fig. 1.5.

In Al-Mutawa's architecture all of these traditional elements are employed in an active and somewhat contemporary fabric. According to Goodwin (1997) Al-Mutawa first felt and absorbed what is pertinent in the past through his childhood experience, then with an extraordinary empathy, he was able to transmute it into the living circumstances of today and the future.

1.2.2 Early Works

From the late 1980s till early 1990s Al-Mutawa has produced a large number of middle to large size apartment blocks around Kuwait. In addition to a high rise office building. The main characteristics that distinguished this phase are the extensive use of wooden elements, old and new. The punctuated fair-face concrete walls painted in white with square patterns. And the utilisation of some traditional Kuwaiti elements for the same function in the new buildings.

The use of historic concepts and sometimes building materials in terms of the present and without sentimentality, like the use of traditional drain spouts, also characterised his early works (Goodwin, 1997). The white colour used in all the buildings works as an effective background to dark brown or blue woodwork ornamentation and to the play of shade and shadows of recessed ventilation holes and various projections and cantilevers. This has rendered his buildings with a different image and gave them a special flavour than the rest of similar ones in Kuwait (Fig. 1.6).

1.2.3 Late Works

Since mid 1990s till now there was a continuation of Al-Mutawa's active contribution to the built environment in Kuwait by undertaking the design of public buildings. Among his latest projects is a restaurant/coffee shop and a commercial and hotel complex which is another tall element after his earlier office building. The latter seems to have been met with enough success to be duplicated in a next door site even before the inauguration of the first complex.



Court, liwan and mindah



Vestibule



Mastaba



High roof tops fences



Wooden windows, doors and parapets



Merzam



Jandal



Badgeer

Figure 5 Examples of traditional elements of architecture in Kuwait.



Salwa 1 apartment block



Salwa 3 apartment block



Salwa 5 apartment block



Salwa Complex apartment block



Al-Jabria apartment block



Al-Jabria apartment block



Al-Mubarakia shopping mall



Al-Mutawa office building

Figure 6 Examples of Al-Mutawa's early works.

The extensive woodwork in the commercial and hotel complex Salmiya Palace is interesting and variable in proportions which are generally based on traditional formats. The façades of Salmiya palace simulate decorated lacework especially at night when light comes through colourful glass panels (Fig. 1.7). The wide use of repetitive design elements, like in the façades of Salmiya palace, has characterised this late phase. The use of mahsrabiya or wooden lattice in Salmiya Palace does not quite recall a Kuwaiti tradition but rather an Arab one. Also the yellow paint of the fair-face concrete walls of the Bedaa restaurant/coffee shop presents a deviation from white colour used in almost all his buildings before.



Salmiya Palace hotel and shopping mall



Salmiya Palace complex duplicate



Salmiya Palace hotel entrance at night



Salmiya Palace mashrabia detail at night



Bedaa Restaurant and Coffee shop



Figure 7 Examples of Al-Mutawa’s late works.

From a technical perspective, some studies have stated that Al-Mutawa's buildings have proven to be cheaper to cool or heat. "It is important to note that all the elements together in a building by Al-Mutawa can reduce the usage of air conditioning by as much as fifty per cent." (Goodwin, 1997, pp. 57–58)

1.3 DISCUSSION

Recognition and acknowledgement of tradition can take the form of interpreting the essence, in meaning and function, of certain elements of architectural heritage and abstracting them in modern designs. It can also take the form of reusing, or recreating, some of these architectural elements in a contemporary design to convey a traditional image. Both approaches have been tried in current architectural practice in Kuwait. In my opinion, Al-Mutawa's endeavours come under the second approach. However the previously presented types of contemporary architecture in Kuwait claim to be reflecting its rather brief traditional heritage in one way or another, they do not for sure reflect a local image.

At the same time the various examples of Al-Mutawa's architecture whether in residential, commercial or office development convey immediately this lost local image. Not to say that this should be a prototype for the revival of traditional Kuwaiti architecture. Or to justify revivalism in the nineteenth century sense by emphatically copying buildings seen and gone (Goodwin, 1997). Also it is not out of nostalgia to a past that no man can recreate, or attempt to create a museum city. On the contrary, it must not become a prototype, or rather a stereotype. But the essence and merits behind his work deserve to be studied before one embarks on a design that needs to reflect a local, yet contemporary, image of Kuwaiti architecture.

After scanning some of the works of Al-Mutawa, one can define some positive and negative aspects. Among the positive aspects is that his unique style is the sole invention of his own form that mainly depended on his personal development, cultural background and advances in modern engineering (Goodwin, 1997). He has, also, shown how he can break the conformity to the monotony inherent in most of the building sites in Kuwait through "the creation of poetry of concealed disorder in his domestic buildings" (Goodwin, 1997, p. 83).

Yet there are also negative aspects in his work like the superficial use of wooden beams under concrete roofs and balconies. Mixed style arches and motifs, sometimes contradicting with each other, in the same building and same façade. Nevertheless, a local image is reflected in Al-Mutawa's work. Whether this image is a Kuwaiti image as he claims or not this is open to debate. Some architectural critiques agree, while others criticise his work as pastiche and stereotyped decoration of traditional forms (Goodwin, 1997).

What is undeniable is that Al-Mutawa has developed a "style of practice" of his own that is reflected in all his works since his early beginnings and right down to his latest project. A style that is able to provoke architecture critique whether praise or curse, approval or disapproval. But certainly his architecture

prompt the emotions of all viewers, in one way or another and cast a lasting impact on their minds.

While few foreign architects might have well understood the culture and heritage of Kuwait and produced traditionally responsive architecture, the majority did not. The latter group once even suggested that “tradition and innovation” are at odds and cannot be combined in architectural terms (Randall, 1985). Being a native of Kuwait is not the only advantage for Al-Mutawa. Like other native architects such as Hasan Fathy of Egypt and Charles Correa of India, who are both recipients of the UIA Gold Medal for their achievements, who did not only rely on their nationality but on deep understanding and interpretations of local tradition. Both of them used the previously mentioned approaches to tradition; i.e. the reinterpretation of inherited functions and meanings as well as the reuse of local architectural elements in contemporary fashion.

1.4 CONCLUSION

This is, by no means, a comprehensive view of contemporary architecture in Kuwait, since there are numerous other buildings and projects worthy of analysis. Also this paper did not aim to analyse the full architectural spectrum in the country, but rather to examine by example some of the current architectural trends. It aims to document an attempt to reflect a local architectural image in the design for contemporary architectural functions such as high-rise offices and hotels, which were considered unsuitable for this type of expression.

In the first part of this paper, the author looked at the attempts to modernise Kuwait by adopting international global architectural images for the design of medium and large-scale projects. At the same time, the second part of the paper presented a small-scale attempt by a Kuwaiti native architect to reflect a local Kuwaiti image through his designs for modern contemporary functions.

We may agree, or disagree, that Al-Mutawa’s architecture represent a revival of the traditional Kuwaiti architecture. We may also like it or not according to our personal architectural taste. In fact some Kuwaitis dislike his style while some foreigners admire it so much (Goodwin, 1997). But I believe that no one would disagree that his consistent and deliberate style is not influenced by the prevailing international style. It is more influenced by the neo-vernacular trend that prevailed during the second half of the 20th century. Al-Mutawa’s architecture surely reflects a local image of some sort, if we don’t take it as a Kuwaiti image. An image that certainly fits its local built environment context much better than other examples presented earlier. This image is undeniably local and in harmony with its physical, social and ecological settings.

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