

Critical nostalgia: Kuwait urban modernity and Alison and Peter Smithson's Kuwait Urban Study and Mat-Building

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In September, 1970, Peter Smithson presented the 'Kuwait Urban Study and Mat-Building' proposal to the Crown Prince of Kuwait. The meeting took place two decades after Kuwait's 1952 Master Plan that had transformed the historical mixed-use centre into a central business district. The new urban landscape, as some suggested, lacked the character and coherence that the old city had once possessed. At the same time, the Smithsons' dissatisfaction with post-war British reality inspired a shift in their understanding of the city and the development of ideas of 're-identification' and 'association'. This paper explores the cultural traces of this encounter and ties these narratives together through the more recent concept of 'critical nostalgia'. It draws conclusions from the parallel narratives of loss that were expressed about the 'modern' environment in mid-1960s Kuwait and those that were recorded in the 'Englishness' of the Smithsons' writings. These debates about the role that 'tradition' would play in the contemporary city set the context of this cultural intersection that, in turn, informed the making of the Kuwait Urban Study.

Introduction

The narrative of the 'Modern' city was challenged in the 1960s. Modernist ideals were attacked for their naïve propositions, for their blind faith in progress and for their urban regeneration schemes that ruptured vibrant neighbourhoods.¹ At the same time, a second generation of modernists, notably Alison and Peter Smithson, redefined its tradition. The Smithsons repurposed dominant themes of a so-called 'Englishness' to reshape their own urban ideas for the contemporary post-war British landscape. While this was taking place, many countries in the Gulf region were taking rapid steps towards nation building. This spurred the construction of modern identities, and in Kuwait architecture played an important role in their fabrication. Traditional urban and socio-economic structures were reshaped to make room for a new reality. In the

wake of these developments, Kuwaitis began nostalgically to debate the role that the past would play in this modern present. The Smithsons' reflections on the topic of 'Englishness' and the Kuwaitis' nostalgic review of a city that had lost its sense of place are examined in this paper through the more recent concept of 'critical nostalgia'. Although neither used this term, it colours the Smithsons' method of urban practice and permeates the discussions on modern Kuwaiti transformation by those who have witnessed this change. The recent body of literature on critical nostalgia provides a helpful frame of reference for a retrospective understanding of that period.

Nostalgia, as an instrument for critical thought rather than a longing for the past, is the focus of the first part of the paper. Contrary to the negative coding of nostalgia put forward by Lowenthal

et al, some have argued for its importance in re-evaluating the present.² In the second half of the paper, nostalgic practices that transpired after the changes made to Kuwait's urban vernacular and the state's review of Kuwait City's development in 1968 are explored through this perspective. The Smithsons' concepts of 're-identification' and 'association' that attempted to restore 'lost' social connections are also investigated. Finally, the design of the Kuwait Urban Study and Mat-Building (hereafter the Kuwait Urban Study) by Alison and Peter Smithson is examined as the link between their late modernist explorations and Kuwait's critique of its present through a nostalgic lens.

This paper departs from the existing body of research on the husband and wife team. Some scholars have focused on their earlier work on media, pop culture and consumer society.³ Others have explored their theoretical contributions to Team 10.⁴ Others still, have addressed their work in relation to post-war British architecture.⁵ This study examines the cultural background of the Kuwait Urban Study and situates it within a 1960s' Kuwaiti critique of identity, tradition and modernity. In 1968, a planning team at the Kuwait Municipality invited architects to propose a new way forward, one that would help to recover a lost sense of place in the old city. The Smithsons, who were among those invited, recommended the idea of the mat-building for the town and for a ministries complex in the Mirqab district of Kuwait City (Fig. 1). This proposal investigated the so-called 'Arab sense of space' that, I will argue, both complemented and was set against what Christine Boyer and others call the 'Englishness' of their writings.⁶ This

study calls attention to the Smithsons' less familiar work and, although unrealised, the Kuwait Urban Study offers another perspective from which to discuss their *oeuvre*.

Defining nostalgia

Nostalgia has been predominantly viewed as a sentimental longing for the past brought about by social, economic or political disruptions in the present.⁷ However, this narrative was often uncritical, since the past can be falsified and idealised. Such 'restorative nostalgia' stresses the 'reconstruction of the lost home' and sees this imagined fabrication as authentic.⁸ This way of looking at the past has fuelled a negative view of nostalgia. As Marshal Berman noted, nostalgia is a 'failure of our collective cultural confidence in the modernizing impulse'.⁹ Literature on nostalgia, dating from as recently as the 1980s and the early 1990s, is still 'at best ambivalent about and more often dismissive of' the concept.¹⁰

In the latter half of the 1990s, studies of nostalgia presented an alternative view. 'Reflective' or 'critical nostalgia' is a practice that allows the nostalgic to move back and forth in time with a sense of agency, resisting dominant social narratives and constructing alternative identities for a changing present. This 'analytical recollection', as Rosaldo suggests, disrupts an accepted ideology by making it 'fully present until it gradually crumbles under the weight of its inconsistencies'.¹¹ Meanings and effects shift with the context; thus nostalgia creates new frames for meaning and dramatises those 'aspects of an increasingly fluid and unnamed social life'.¹²



Figure 1. Alison and Peter Smithson, Kuwait Urban Study and mat-building project, July, 1970 (courtesy of the Frances Loeb Library; Harvard University Graduate School of Design).

In the context of the related discourse on modernity, Hilde Heynen argues that the urban and socio-cultural phenomenon of loss is the 'Modern' reality.¹³ Important here are Tönnies' concepts of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, describing the transformation that disrupted traditional structures and led to feelings of alienation in the metropolis. The first represented an ideal setting, rooted in a primitive sense of place that succeeded in uniting different elements of society; the second was the antithesis, what many expressed as the reality of the Modern city.¹⁴

In some non-western societies under colonial rule, nostalgic practices developed to resist some of these same conditions. This form of nostalgia challenged Euro-centric models and the idea of Europe, through colonialism, as *the* modernising agent.¹⁵ As Bonnett argues, nostalgia, in this sense, 'obtained a far more vibrant and important role in many of the forms of activism that sought to reclaim political autonomy and cultural identity from the colonial powers'.¹⁶ It contested the tradition/modernity division that was set up in the colonial narrative. As such, nostalgia was not a form of resistance to modernity but a way to navigate 'a path through it'.¹⁷ Nandy argues that this 'critical traditionalism' affords individuals in these contexts the means to regain their histories and identities.¹⁸ It shapes a future through interventions made in the present from 'new constructions of the past'.¹⁹

Kuwaiti modernity and a narrative of loss

Kuwait's history, from 1899 as a British protectorate, until its independence on 19th June, 1961, deviated from the typical colonial experience. A patriarchal

system of government, power wielded by a few individuals, and the weakening of the British Empire were some of the reasons a strong colonial system never took root in a pre- or post-oil Kuwait. The 1899 Kuwaiti/British political agreement, establishing Kuwait as a protectorate, came to pass only after appeals by individual sheikhs intended to secure their positions within the region.²⁰ Britain, in the Gulf, was compromised after the 1956 Suez War; it was also weakened by legislative changes made by British policy makers who questioned the 'viability of Britain's special position' in the Gulf.²¹ Local sheikhs were exercising more power whilst marginalising the few incumbent political agents. Even direct pressure from the Prime Minister, Churchill, to install a senior advisor over the ruling Sheikh Abdullah Al-Salem was thwarted by the emir.²² Kuwaitis had the authority to invite and disinvite British 'experts' during this period and to circumvent British planners any time it suited them.

This reading of the Kuwaiti colonial experience highlights the role of local actors in mobilising developments that are often overlooked when too great an emphasis is placed on colonial agency in the region. Colonial officers in charge of development and planning first arrived in Kuwait in 1951 but resigned shortly thereafter due to discord between them and powerful sheikhs.²³ In 1953, the Foreign Office expressed doubt as to whether Colonel Crichton or General Hasted—the financial and development advisor respectively—had the technical expertise or importance to exert enough influence on Sheikh Abdullah Al-Salem, the ruling emir.²⁴ Colonel Crichton was marginalised from preparation of the state budget by Sheikh Fahad Al-Salem, who

was in control of the Department of Public Works and the Kuwait Municipality and, as a consequence, Crichton resigned in 1957.

Earlier, in 1954, General Hasted had 'quit in frustration after clashes' with the same Sheikh.²⁵ Jill Crystal describes Hasted as the defender of the five British firms which had monopolised development contracts.²⁶ With Hasted gone, the 'Big Five', as they had come to be known, were left 'unprotected', resulting in 'their decline'.²⁷ However, prior to his departure Hasted, in 1952, secured the partial implementation of a large-scale development programme that importantly included a master plan by the British urbanists Minoprio, Spencely and MacFarlane (MSM), submitted a year earlier (Fig. 2).²⁸ The execution of the MSM Plan resulted in a construction boom that helped distribute oil revenues not only to the 'Big Five' but also to many Kuwaitis. Kuwait's urban transformation can thus be split into periods before and after this development programme.²⁹

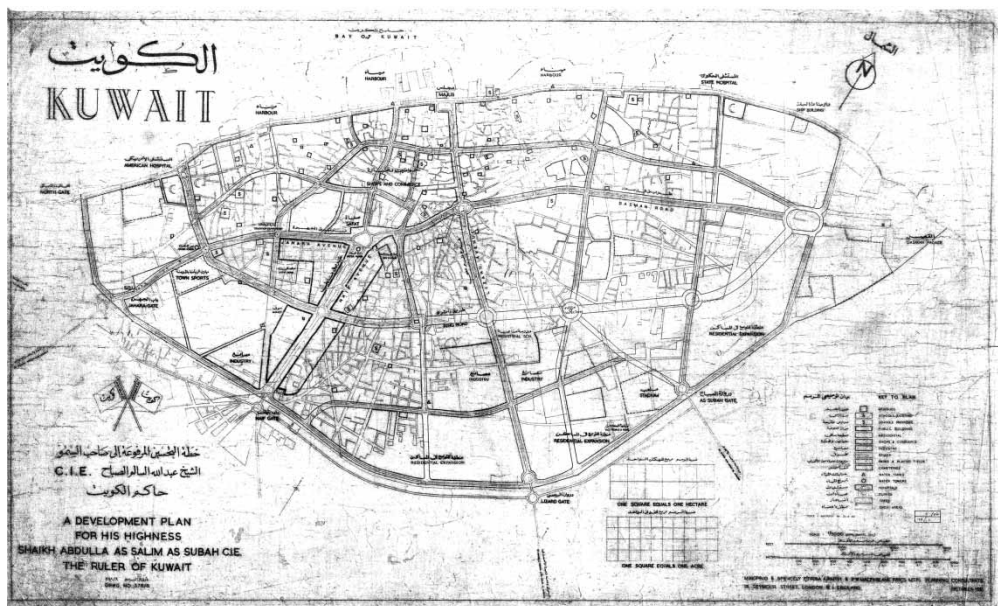
Before the implementation of the MSM Plan, urban development was on a much smaller scale. The old town of Kuwait was a densely knit network of mud brick courtyard houses, mosques, markets, squares and a small number of palaces; a defensive wall surrounded these elements. Streets were sometimes widened to accommodate the car and modern state functions were housed in modest buildings.³⁰ However, architecture and urban planning increased dramatically in scale in order to carry out the MSM Plan. To a large extent, the plan disrupted the spatial and social heterogeneity of the old city and replaced this with zoned districts that accommodated administrative,

government and commercial buildings.³¹ Kuwaitis, who were affected by the implementation of this plan, were generously compensated by a state-sponsored land acquisition policy and many settled in newly developed suburbs, just outside the old wall.³² An urban highway system of radial and concentric carriageways carved paths into and out of the city. The city as an iconic symbol of technological modernity suited the national vision at the time.

Throughout this stage of development it was not the state's aim to break completely from tradition.³³ Some earlier buildings were still present as markers of the different periods of the city's transformation.³⁴ The few that did withstand modernisation, however, did so without being integrated into the new context. A report undertaken by the Kuwait Municipality recorded that 'there are still some traces of the [town's] physical form and architectural character, but a new road pattern has been established' and 'large areas... have been cleared'.³⁵

Kuwait City did indeed transform to accommodate the advent of new technology and the plan did in fact deliver on its promises to provide modern amenities; however, the quality of urban life that had existed in the old city was now missing. Kuwait City's demographic structure had altered when Kuwaitis moved to newly designed suburbs.³⁶ Historic quarters that had once held vibrant commercial and social activities had also disappeared and not much had come to replace them. According to Karim Jamal, the MSM Plan was the 'first mistake' 'that brought about a situation of grave concern'.³⁷ The Smithsons echoed the same sentiments after their visit to Kuwait in 1969,

Figure 2. Minoprio Spencely and MacFarlane, October, 1951: plan (courtesy of the Frances Loeb Library; Harvard University Graduate School of Design).



asserting that Kuwait City's 'character and coherence' had vanished.³⁸

A narrative of loss emerged shortly after the realisation of the 1952 MSM Plan and it picked up momentum in the late 1960s. Stephen Gardiner has noted that many in Kuwait, towards the end of the 1950s, were 'disenchanted with the results of advice given' and that they 'were looking elsewhere'.³⁹ Others have located nostalgic sentiment for a Kuwaiti past in the late 1980s.⁴⁰ I argue that a form of nostalgia appeared earlier and it developed a far more critical relationship with the past than the one that transpired later. This form of nostalgia was not a rejection of the present but, as Gerd

Gemünden claims in her study on the subject, was a way 'of being paradoxically both outside and inside modernity'.⁴¹ In 1963, Saba Shiber, a state planner, suggested that 'instead of converting the local historical vernacular into a modern architectural idiom, we have borrowed indiscriminately from here and there, without regard to context'.⁴² Shiber's tenure at the Department of Public Works lasted until 1964 but his ideas on appropriating tradition for contemporary practice had an impact on planning officials long after that.⁴³ For example, a slowing down of building activity to re-evaluate the state of city planning took place under his direction. In addition, Shiber appropriated elements from

Kuwait's traditional markets for the modern development of Fahad Al-Salem Street, a commercial spine in the heart of Kuwait City.

In April, 1960, the state passed the Law of Antiquities that promoted the preservation of the remaining structures.⁴⁴ This document was more a symbol of the changing attitude than truly effective legislation for the preservation of historical artefacts. The idea to build a national museum was also initiated during this period, to record the trajectory of Kuwaiti progress.⁴⁵ Even though some of these developments were an exercise in an uncritical form of nostalgia, they are, in Bonnett's words, still examples of a 'clumsy juggling of attachments to the past and hopes for the future'.⁴⁶

Importantly, the traditional built environment represented architectural and social values that once destroyed posed a threat to a Kuwaiti cultural identity. Site and culturally specific building techniques and spatial organisation, climate consideration in architecture and urban design, greater social interaction among extended families and neighbours were some of the lost values that nostalgic practices tried to reconstruct. A 'vocal and articulate' local press contributed to the debate on 'Kuwaitiness'.⁴⁷ The discussions moved between tradition and modernity. As early as 1952, the *Al-Raed* magazine published an article that argued for traditional customs to be appropriated for today's society; but it also suggested 'limiting ourselves to them in this present time and relying on them alone to build a new life ... is not enough'.⁴⁸ In the September, 1952, Issue of *Al-Ba'tha*, an essay entitled 'Where are We Headed', argued Kuwait's early stages of development should be based on 'history lighting

its way' towards progress.⁴⁹ In 1965, an article in *Sawt Al-Khaleej* entitled 'The Kuwaiti Family Living Between Two Worlds', compared the old Kuwaiti family with the modern.⁵⁰ It critiqued those that indiscriminately espoused the 'modern' without taking into account existing customs, finally asking the readers to join this debate on a modern 'Kuwaitiness'.⁵¹ These discussions encouraged the use of tradition in order to construct a modern identity. Here, nostalgia, as Pamela Sugiman suggests, 'sets up the positive from within the "world of yesterday" as a model for creative inspiration, and possible emulation, within the world of the here-and-now'.⁵²

In the February, 1974, Issue of *Majalat al-Kuwayt*, one of Kuwait's former sea captains recalled that the past was present in the day-to-day and permeated every aspect of a Kuwaiti's life.⁵³ The nostalgic's view of the past, he argued, should be a reminder of what ought to come in the future and not be an escape from it.⁵⁴

Many are nostalgic for the simplicity of the past and for the generosity that was apparent in our way of life ... and yet as they do that they look towards a future in which the rare things they dreamed of could be realized, looking towards progress and taking the difficult and urgent steps towards it.⁵⁵

As such, the nostalgia of this period was not a restorative act but one that was twinned with the idea of looking towards a future while using what worked in the past to construct alternative identities for the changing present.

This reading of nostalgia differs from those that have presented this period's sense of urban loss as uncritical. Suhair Al-Mosully argues that 'after

establishing and reconstituting themselves as a modern society ... [Kuwaitis] became sentimental about their lost traditions'.⁵⁶ Kuwaitis, she added, 'need the courage to admit that the past has been destroyed' and should 'look forward to a future of ... progress and achievement'.⁵⁷ I have argued that Kuwaitis did not lose faith in the idea of the 'modern', and they did not resist the changes that were taking place. Those who were witness to that dramatic period of transformation were fully aware that they were at a turning point in their lives and that the changes to the urban fabric were indeed the outcome of the new reality. In this case, some turned to the past not in order to relive it but to regain control over events in the present. The past, to many who lived before this period of modernisation, was permeated with social and economic hardships. It included long and difficult days away at sea for the men, during the trade and pearl-diving seasons. It was also difficult for women who performed labour intensive tasks throughout the year. *Bas ya Bahar* ('Cruel Sea'), a 1972 Kuwaiti film drama by Khalid Al-Siddiq, is an important depiction of the troubling life that Kuwaitis lived during the pre-oil period.

Kuwaitis navigated between these two worlds not to restore an arduous past but to construct a modern present from the multiple histories that have evolved and changed over the years, as nostalgia can restore identity, agency or community 'felt to be lacking, blocked, subverted, or threatened in the present'.⁵⁸ As Ray Cashman asserts, a "'positively evaluated" past is approached as a source for something now perceived missing, but [the past] need not be thought of as a time of general happiness, peace-

fulness, stability, or freedom'.⁵⁹ Kuwaitis were therefore looking towards progress and taking the 'difficult and urgent step towards it'. The modern project was not aborted and the planning phase that followed addressed the issue of a Kuwaiti urban identity as it related to the observations made above.

Kuwaitis returning from their studies abroad took on a more active role in shaping the urban development that succeeded the 1952 MSM Plan. As such, they were more sensitive to the debates on a lost Kuwaiti urban identity. Hamid Shuaib, a Kuwaiti architect and planner, played an important part: Gardiner noted that 'Shuaib has had the single most constructive effect on the city since Dr Shiber'.⁶⁰ In 1965 he became assistant head of the Town Planning Department at the Kuwait Municipality where he set up an urban design division.⁶¹ However, a dearth of Kuwaiti technical experts compelled the authorities to continue consulting foreign specialists.⁶² In 1968, Colin Buchanan and Partners was appointed consultants for Kuwait's Second Master Plan (KMP2) and in the same year, Shuaib invited architects to carry it out. An Advisory Planning Committee (APC) was established that was made up of Shuaib, Omar Azzam, a representative to the UN on Middle Eastern planning affairs, Leslie Martin from England and Franco Albini from Italy.

The APC did not wish to recreate the lost city but to come up with new connections with those that had persisted over the years. Evangelia Ali states that 'the urban remains of old Kuwait are indeed proof of the indisputable historical correlation of building form and urban layout to changing

economic, political and social factors. The process became engraved in the shape of the town'.⁶³ For example, the greenbelt that separated Kuwait City from the new suburbs ran along the length of the old town wall. The modern radial thoroughfares that led into the city followed the paths of historical trade routes. Kuwaitis continued to refer to these new road patterns using their historical names.

The APC selected four firms to participate in the town's development. According to Gardiner, this was not a competition but rather a working session where the firms were asked to provide advice and recommendations.⁶⁴ Alison and Peter Smithson were among those selected. Buchanan reported that 'Mr Smithson [is proposing] a design for Government offices in Mirqab'.⁶⁵ The Smithsons, along with the selected architects, were asked to 'think about a city, and to express their thoughts as architectural ideas'.⁶⁶ The APC asserted that:

What is clear is that a remarkable opportunity to establish the character and environment of this inner city still remains... the purpose of these studies for the Old City is to provide desirable objectives and guide lines in relation to its physical form.⁶⁷

Throughout this process there was never an order to return to some imagined city. Instead, comprehensive surveys were first conducted and those yielded the conclusion that 'despite all the modern development that has occurred, the present urban structure of the Town is still rooted in the past'.⁶⁸ The objectives were to maintain its national function as a state capital and to strengthen spatial connections between the old historical sites and the new proposed land uses. In an extensive survey, 'fixed

factors' —structures that were considered of 'historic and architectural importance'—were also identified to give new form to these landmarks.⁶⁹ It was argued that users would feel a sense of 'delight' when new buildings were integrated with the old because it stressed the continuity of the past in a modern present.⁷⁰

'Englishness' and Alison and Peter Smithson

The above review seeks to offer a detailed outline of the background to the Kuwait Urban Study. The Smithsons' participation has to be situated within this context of a Kuwaiti urban critique. At the same time, it has to be located within the Smithsons' reflections on post-war British reality.

The Smithsons' proposal for Kuwait City was prepared during a period of general frustration with the development of modern architecture. Not unlike many of their contemporaries, their view of modernism, in the post-war period, is described by Mark Crinson as a 'developing apostasy, a growing sense that while one must remain within it one could loosen its terms and infuse it with a renewed sense of the regional and the historical'.⁷¹ For others, like Dirk van den Heuvel, the Smithsons developed a position that was at once both inside and outside modernist orthodoxy.⁷² According to him 'their work and thinking [include] elements of both a nostalgically regressive existentialism and a forward looking positivism'.⁷³ Christine Boyer suggested that the couple worked together to strengthen the formal and social dimensions of this new architectural language.⁷⁴

For the Smithsons, the heroic period of bold innovation was to be replaced with a 'lyricism of

control, for calm as an ideal'.⁷⁵ In 1955, they observed that 'young architects today feel a monumental dissatisfaction with the ... ideas of the Garden City Movement and the Rationalism of the thirties'.⁷⁶ Van den Heuvel argues that by the mid-1970s onward, it becomes difficult to include them within the modernist tradition.⁷⁷ He adds that the Smithsons 're-invented the tradition of modern architecture and ... inserted themselves and their own work into that tradition'.⁷⁸

This aesthetic and rhetorical shift emerged from conditions in which the Smithsons found themselves after the Second World War. Promises unfulfilled by the British welfare state and changes to what they perceived to be an English identity had brought about a sense of loss. As Alison noted, 'a de-anglicizing ... effectively swept away the incestuous control mechanism of our Englishness. The glue of a particular society became less and less adhesive. Gradually ... we see the loss of the particular English milieu'.⁷⁹

The Smithsons addressed this sense of loss by creatively engaging with the idea of time. They were 'not mere iconoclasts ... they were reaching back to move forwards'.⁸⁰ Van den Heuvel argues that time was indeed re-imagined in the 'synchronizing of traditions' of Aldo van Eyck's work and in the idea of 'bricolage' in Colin Rowe's *Collage City*.⁸¹ For the Smithsons, time was re-invented in their concept of the 'as found' that defined a new way of looking at the ordinary and inspired a new creative intensity.⁸² The 'as found' defined the existing objects found in any given site and the accumulated history and past experience that they embodied. For the Smithsons, these uncovered patterns and meanings helped to generate new patterns of society.

Memory played a role in drawing out these markers of past experience, and linked personal and collective identities to space. The Smithsons recalled memories of a better quality of urban life that reinforced patterns of human association where 'children run about, [and] people stop and talk'; for the Smithsons, this 'glue' where 'you know the milkman, [and where] you are outside your house in your street'⁸³ was gradually disappearing. These spatial patterns were repositories for social meanings and identities, and according to the Smithsons this 'sense of English scale seems lost'.⁸⁴

The Smithsons' 'Englishness' developed out of a new understanding of the 'English experience'. It was, as some have argued, an unparalleled transformation of the city and the country due to the Industrial Revolution.⁸⁵ Raymond Williams contended that the intensity of this experience was so great that traces of its former expressions still remain.⁸⁶ It was both a source of the Smithsons' nostalgic lament and their re-inventions because it suggested the possibility of a better social and cultural present.⁸⁷ They wrote that 'the time has come ... for bringing the Virgilian dream—the peace of the countryside with the self consciousness of the city dweller—into the city'.⁸⁸ These reflections on 'Englishness' were a way to navigate through established norms and from this process claim them as their own; thus the Smithsons would end up redefining this experience according to their own personal history.⁸⁹ For van den Heuvel the Smithsons did not reduce its complex nature into essentialist categories but rather 'Englishness' was the 'trope' that would direct their architectural

language.⁹⁰ For Boyer the essence of the Smithsons' Englishness can be found in the 'home' that they described as 'the house, the shell which fits man's back, looks inwards to family and outward to society'.⁹¹ As such, the threat to the dual nature of the home, as the idea of a nation called England and a shelter for private life, explains the Smithsons' polemics on the aesthetic and social decline of this 'Englishness'.⁹²

The concepts of 're-identification' and 'association' played a role in re-establishing some of these lost social and urban connections. The Smithsons mapped patterns of human behaviour based on the degree of complexity and on the spatial expressions that corresponded to these 'associations'. These ideas helped individuals better to understand their environment, where 'every building, every lamppost and street sign will seem part of a predestined harmony of which man is part'.⁹³ The architect/urbanist interpreted these ideas as physical realities.

In addition, some of their earlier concepts, such as the 'doorstep philosophy', continued to play an important role. The 'doorstep philosophy' related urban planning to the concept of dwelling.⁹⁴ It emphasised the idea that the house was a microcosm of the city in terms of its spatial organisations and patterns of movement. The 'doorstep philosophy' was a new sense of order based on the relationship between people and their environment. It reasserted meanings and identities that are produced over time and challenged by it. It supported patterns of human association through which 'society can recognize and realize its new self'.⁹⁵ Instead of arbitrary boundaries that cut and isolated

these patterns, the Smithsons' 'doorstep philosophy' facilitated social communication and nurtured cohesion; at times, it even proposed new such dimensions.

Alison and Peter Smithson and the 'Kuwait Urban Study and mat-building'

The invitation to carry out a plan for Kuwait City was an ideal opportunity for working out these ideas, given the feeling of placelessness and loss that both Kuwaitis and the Smithsons were feeling towards the contemporary city. The Kuwait Urban Study was both a general vision for Kuwait town and a more detailed proposal for a government complex in the Mirqab area (Fig 3). The plan was dominated by two elements: the mat-building that spread like a carpet over the site and that housed different programmatic functions and the galleries that cut into this continuous fabric and provided dramatic views onto existing historical mosques. Leisure and commerce were proposed as activities in the gallery spaces; these were site lines rather than pedestrian routes. They provided air circulation and light penetration into the otherwise shaded ground level; the cantilevered mat-building floors, achieved by their gradual setback, provided additional shade from the harsh summer heat (Fig. 4). A 22.5° grid was laid over the entire site to help organise and arrange these elements: this they hoped would express 'the new pace of Kuwait as a Gulf capital'.⁹⁶ The entire structure was raised on columns and access into the 'open plan' interior space was through circulation cores on the ground level. These service towers extended vertically beyond the three-storey mat-building to echo the

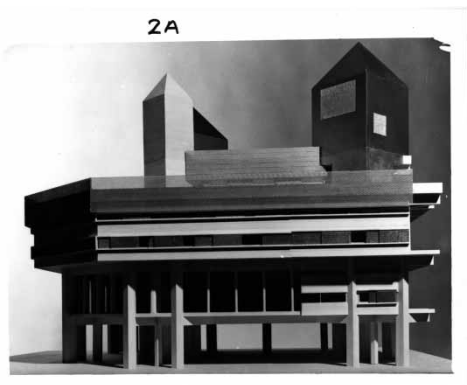
KUWAIT OLD CITY: PLAN AS AT 1868. SCALE 1:10,000.

DRAWN AS. JULY'74.

GEMATELY
MARSH

The development of the Mirqab area was made a priority in the action plan for the KMP2.⁹⁷ It was a 'crucial area' for the functioning of the city because it contained most of the state functions. Historically, Mirqab had been a tightly knit

The Kuwait Urban Study, designed with the mat-building in mind, was the antithesis of the free-standing tower block. Unlike the modernist vertical



KUWAIT OLD CITY مدينة الكويت القديمة
DEMONSTRATION BUILDING, AREA 5. KOC
TITLE DATE
SCALE DRAWN BY
ALISON & PETER SMITHSON, ARCHITECTS, LONDON, S.W.10. 01-573 7423

Model in relation to skyline of Kuwait.

object, the mat-building extended horizontally. It was a 'new interpretation' of the ideas of 'connectedness' and 'interchangeability' that they observed to be the 'essence of the Arab city'.⁹⁸ The Smithsons' understanding of an 'Arab sense of space' began from a study of these ideas.

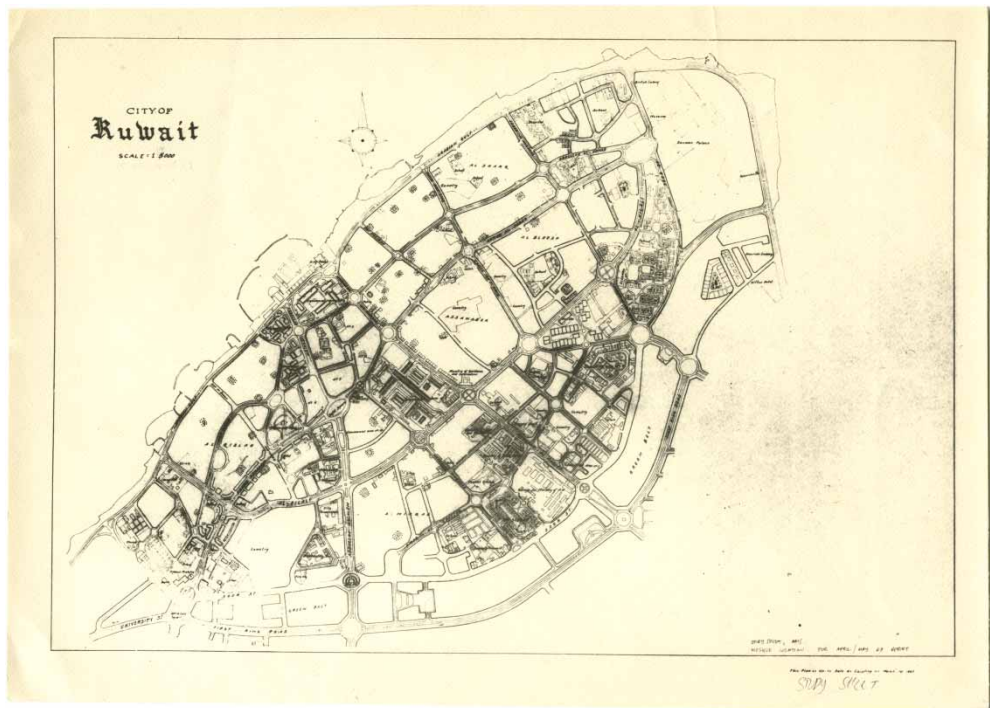
'Connectedness' and 'interchangeability' were values they saw represented in the old town. The first described the nature of the Arab space as one uninterrupted by changes over time and defined by different patterns of stops, starts and shadows. The second noted its flexible nature, which could be adapted for different uses. This 'Arab sense of space', according to the Smithsons, consisted of 'low enclosures carried lightly above the user'.⁹⁹ The cell was the organising unit and the *souk* ('market') was the exemplar and the manifestation of this 'unmonumental' organisation.¹⁰⁰ It expanded as needs grew by 'the simple expedient of adding pieces of fabric over the public way'.¹⁰¹ These 'as found' objects were those marks that formed memory in the old town and inspired the creation of new patterns of life. Past accumulations in the old town were still present and, at first glance, helped the Smithsons to understand a certain time and history.

However, the Smithsons observed Kuwait town as 'outsiders', thus creating enough distance between them and the 'clients' for cross-cultural comparison.¹⁰² The Arab city, 'a broadcast of houses, mosques, and bazaars', according to the Smithsons was 'new to our Roman-seeded urbanism'.¹⁰³ By looking as an 'anthropologist',¹⁰⁴ they disengaged from the 'unspoken assumptions' of a Kuwaiti culture and what that transcribed as meanings in

Figure 4. A study model of one of the demonstration buildings in the Kuwait Urban Study (courtesy of the Frances Loeb Library; Harvard University Graduate School of Design).

Figure 5. A study model of the relationship between the mat-building and the existing mosques (courtesy of the Frances Loeb Library; Harvard University Graduate School of Design).

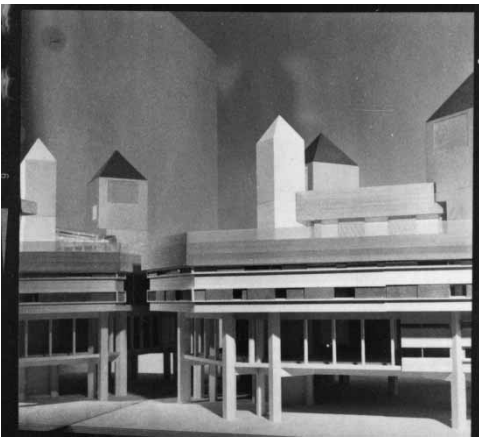
Figure 6. Plan that marks the surviving pre-oil mosques surveyed by Alison and Peter Smithson (courtesy of the Frances Loeb Library; Harvard University Graduate School of Design).



its built forms. They looked at the city as an object frozen in a particular moment in time. Thus they declared that 'Kuwaitis abandoned an older cohesive order and replaced it with a fragmented one which is in no way Arab'.¹⁰⁵ Englishness was contrasted with Arabness. The former was 'construed as white and native, symbolized by the hearth and the home into which strangers, those who knew nothing about English customs and conventions, were not invited'.¹⁰⁶ On the other hand, their understanding of Arabness inaccurately conflated

different historical periods and places, such as Kairouan, Cairo, Isfahan and Aleppo, into one monolithic narrative.¹⁰⁷ As such, the Smithsons began with a misguided interpretation of the 'Arab sense of space' and built on this 'image' even when describing their project.

Thus, the Kuwait Urban Study was an "'oasis" of shade, with its fringe of shaded car parks, [that] allow[ed] an interplay between the most modern handling equipment and the nomad, who can walk in any direction as if he had just come from



his tent' [sic].¹⁰⁸ Remarks such as these illustrate how cultures are interpreted and later represented in terms of the 'image' through the eyes of the 'beholder'.¹⁰⁹ The image is often imaginatively reconstructed as the 'other'. The romanticisation of the North African *bidonville* and the *casbah*, which had been introduced to the Smithsons in CIAM meetings, before the Kuwait Urban Study, were some of these 'imaginative reconstructions' that reinforced this 'other'. It then reduced multiple identities and social hierarchies into what was called the 'Arab sense of space', none of which, truly, represented Kuwait City. Historically, Kuwait City was a port town that lacked the 'oriental' qualities that dominated the Smithsons' imaginaries.¹¹⁰ In this sense, the concept of the 'as found' that had worked to define an 'Englishness' had failed to represent a 'Kuwaitiness' due to the Smithsons' location outside this social and cultural context.

It would, however, be rather simple to dismiss their work in Kuwait as a form of orientalism. The Smithsons arrived in Kuwait during a period when much of the city had, in fact, been demolished. As such, the Smithsons relied on historical references for inspiration in order to construct new spatial patterns of human association. However, the Smithsons location outside a Kuwaiti history made the complex nature of its narrative inaccessible to them; therefore the Smithsons were not able to move back and forth temporally as critically as they did at 'home'. As 'English architects' they were sensitive to the 'unspoken assumptions', to their 'patterns' and to 'the collective language of [English] built form'¹¹¹ in a way that they were not able to be in the Kuwaiti context.

Nevertheless, the method of urban practice was the same and as such there are many links between the Kuwait Urban Study and ideas that they had previously developed. For example, it bears similarities to their 1964 Economist Building but, as Peter stated, 'on a larger scale'.¹¹² The Economist Building, not unlike the Kuwait Urban Study, is an example of their increased interest in re-identifying users not only with the existing context but also with the new ones that were generated. In both cases, this idea was illustrated in the views from the Economist plaza that had framed existing 'fixes' and in the galleries of the Kuwait Urban Study that had looked onto the historical mosques. Another example is in the way that the Smithsons further developed the idea of the 'space between'.¹¹³ It described the well-defined quality of space that is produced when objects are properly sited in their context. This space between buildings has a 'palpability' that is separate from that of the

Figure 7. A study model that illustrates the Smithsons' idea of the 'space between' in the Kuwait Urban Study (courtesy of the Frances Loeb Library; Harvard University Graduate School of Design).

building itself.¹¹⁴ Peter wrote that the idea of the 'space between' was 'explored with great intensity in the Government Offices for Kuwait' (Fig. 7).¹¹⁵

As such it would be more critical to examine the Smithsons' representation of the 'Arab sense of space' as a continuation of their ideas rather than to dismiss their project as some form of 'mild orientalism', or 'casbah-ism'.¹¹⁶ James Clifford argues that 'one may ... read against the grain of the text's dominant voice, seeking out other, half hidden authorities, reinterpreting the descriptions, texts and quotations gathered together by the writer'.¹¹⁷ For the Smithsons, history and its material culture was a 'resource of knowledge and attitudes' for their practice and although there might be a privileging of an 'English' history, historical references, in general, played an important role in their architectural language.¹¹⁸ Moving between a past and a present was a tool for design and was in fact employed, although less successfully, in the Kuwait Urban Study. These 'nostalgic' practices defined the Smithsons' position within this turbulent period in modern architectural history and helped to shape the final outcome of their proposal for Kuwait.

Conclusion

This paper has re-contextualised the Smithsons' Kuwait Urban Study as well as a post-1952 Kuwaiti urban development through the critical lens of nostalgia. It does not, however, pretend to be a comprehensive study. Instead, it aims to explore the critical dimensions of an oft-maligned practice and to claim that it was in fact a precursor to critical action for both the Smithsons and those in Kuwait.

This reading of nostalgia departs from those that have dismissed this Kuwaiti period's sense of loss as uncritical. It also relocates the beginnings of this attitude to a much earlier date: starting shortly after the 1952 MSM Plan and gaining momentum in the late 1960s. A new urban environment inspired a turn to nostalgia. These feelings coalesced after the old architectural and social values were 'not replaced with anything that can yet mark the new city of Kuwait as a great capital city'.¹¹⁹ This void posed a threat to a Kuwaiti identity. To move forward, some in Kuwait debated a new relationship between the past and the present. The 1968 urban direction by the Kuwait Municipality and the formation of the APC were some of the more constructive reactions to this critique. These developments also highlighted the role of local actors in mobilising developments that are otherwise overlooked when too great an emphasis is placed on colonial agency in the region.

At the same time, the Smithsons were disillusioned by the post-war British landscape that broke connective social and urban links. This loss of 'Englishness' inspired new reflections on the city. They looked back at the 'as found' in a new way in order to move forward. Their concepts of 're-identification' and 'association' generated the 'doorstep philosophy' that sought to connect people with their community.

Their invitation to participate in Kuwait was an ideal opportunity to further these ideas, given the feelings that both the Smithsons and the 'clients' shared about the contemporary city. Despite the 'us/them' dichotomies that were set up during the design of the project, the Smithsons' Kuwait Urban

Study was strongly influenced by their earlier ideas. This suggests that during this cultural encounter the Smithsons attempted to adapt their method of urban practice for the Kuwaiti context. However, their location outside the social and cultural history of Kuwait made this complex narrative inaccessible and resulted in a misguided image of the 'Arab sense of space' that did not accurately represent a Kuwaiti pattern of built form.

The Kuwait Urban Study, however, was never realised. Differences over costs eventually led to the project's abandonment. Nevertheless, one can draw lessons from the cultural context that led to this project. The aim is to continue the debate on the relationship between the past and the present in nostalgic practices, and the social and urban constructions that develop out of this process. As such, critical nostalgia offers creative solutions for a changing environment and encourages ideas that are complementary to a city's multiple historical narratives.

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