



Public Space

# Modernizing Kuwait: Nation-building and Unplanned Spatial Practices

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## Abstract

This is a study of city planning intentions and their unintended spatial practices as manifest in Kuwait's urban center. Focusing on Kuwait's public space, *Duwwar El-Sheriton*, its weekly migrant labor gathering is traced back to Kuwait's first master plan in 1952 up until the present. In a modernizing city built on a very specific regime of labor migration and modernist/nationalist city planning that strategically censor the city's duality, migrant worker's spatial practices in Kuwait's public space subvert their explicit exclusionary nature, injecting a brief public vision of communities rendered invisible by the official plan of the contemporary state.

The act of urban planning is a disciplinary one in which planning actor(s) - such as planning experts and government officials - become complicit in the prevailing technologies of power and their constitutive spatialities. However, these spatialities often elide their original intentions as their *use* as well as *users* change. The use of "public space" in the urban context of contemporary Kuwait is a perfect example of the materialization of these unintended spatial practices. In a modernizing city built on a very specific regime of labor migration and modernist/nationalist city planning, migrant worker's spatial practices in Kuwait's public space subvert their explicit exclusionary nature, injecting a brief public vision of communities rendered invisible by the official plan of the contemporary state.

## Oil, Migration and Modernization

Kuwait was one of the first cities in the Arabian Gulf to experience the material effects of petroleum exploration. With the exportation of oil in 1946, it underwent massive infrastructure development in the name of modernization, spurring a large-scale labor importation across skill levels, necessitated by the inability of the national population to meet the labor demands of the new city. This massive influx of foreign labor transformed the composition of cities throughout the Gulf region from a

mostly Arab Muslim community to one that is nationally, ethnically and religiously diverse. During the 1960s and 1970s most of the skilled and unskilled labor originated from neighboring Middle Eastern countries; recently however, there has been an increase in labor from South and Southeast Asia (Al-Naqeeb 19901).<sup>1</sup>

For political, social, economic and nation-building reasons (especially after the departure of British influence in the region, Kuwait, along with many other gulf states, constructed and maintained nationalist migration and planning policies that, while welcoming their labor, explicitly excluded expatriates from citizenship and political participation. As outlined by Shadid, Spaan and Speckman (Shadid, Span and Speckman 1992), four labor migration policies were common to the Arab Gulf States. The first policy, is the preservation of the existing political structure and dominant position of the national population by enforcing strict citizenship and naturalization laws.<sup>2</sup> The second policy involves strict laws and regulations pertaining to the entry and employment of foreigners. Entry by foreigners for employment purposes requires an application to be made by the future employer (*Kafeel*) of the migrant for which residence (*iqama*) and work permits must be issued by the Ministries of the Interior and Labor & Social Affairs. The third policy is the minimization and rotation of the migrant workforce. In response to concerns about its dependency on foreign labor in crucial economic sectors and the possible negative impacts of the national cultural heritage and political security, the Gulf governments have expressed the need to restrict migration labor. The fourth policy is the preference for Arab migrants and 'Arabization/localization' policies. Despite this government policy, employers have continued to hire their preferred Asian employees because they find them 'cheaper, more obedient, more suitable for heavy work and less liable to become a political nuisance' (Shadid, Span and Speckman 1992).

Although foundational to the current two-tiered system, labor policy was only one set of important technologies of power when it came to the regulation and control of migrants. These explicitly xenophobic policies, promulgated in Kuwait despite the crucial role of foreigners in literally building the nation, were supplemented by a second set of policies: those of city planning.

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<sup>1</sup> This may be attributed to the importing government's concern with certain labor groups' association with political regimes, within the Middle East, which may threaten internal security.

<sup>2</sup> Citizenship is primarily granted on the blood-bond principle (born to a gulf father) or through marriage to a gulf male.

## **A Modern City for a Modern Nation**

A key figure in Kuwait's modernization is Sheikh Abdullah Al-Salem Al-Sabah, the *Amir* (ruler) from 1950 to 1965. His vision of modernity and 'democracy' consisted of a distribution of oil wealth among all Kuwaitis, the establishment of a constitution, ambitious planning programs and a generous welfare system such as those mentioned earlier. The most important part of his vision was the modernization of the city.

In 1952 a master plan was produced by the British firm Minoporio, Spencely and Macfarlane. The Plan's objectives were the creation of a 'beautiful' and 'dignified' town center, provision of a modern road system, commercial and industrial zoning, residential zoning, selection of sites for public parks and open spaces, planting of trees along principle boulevards and important junctions (Al-Mosully 1992). The plan consisted of concentric ring roads that paralleled the old town's wall and these were intersected by radial roads extending through the gates and beyond the city wall. These intersections outlined self-supporting residential areas outside the wall consisting of single-family detached housing and associated programs such as open space, schools, mosques and co-operative markets.

The plan produced significant changes in both the build environment and the everyday life of most Kuwaitis. It encouraged decentralization and sprawl, introducing automobile dependency that rendered pedestrianism inadequate with the wide-spread distance of the planned zones. The new single-family detached housing changed the Kuwaiti family's living tradition from that of an extended family to a nuclear one. Yet despite the significant changes it proposed, the Master Plan saw no major opposition - it came at a time when there was a welcome rejection of the poverty-stricken past in favor of post-oil modernization, and all Kuwaiti citizens were generously compensated for their soon to be razed inner-city homes as they made the transitions to newly built subdivisions.

These newly built subdivisions were an integral part of Abdulla Al-Salem's nation-building project (Sadiq 1996). Under the welfare system set up by the Sheikh, every Kuwaiti citizen was entitled to low cost housing as a citizenship right (Ibid 1996). The implementation of the first housing plan of 1951, which created new, fully equipped and serviced neighborhoods on the outskirts of the old town, brought the institutionalization of the 'Kuwaiti standard' for housing, propagation of the people's dependency on the nation for housing needs, and most critically, the residential segregation between Kuwaitis and non-Kuwaitis.

The new neighborhoods of the 1950s were - and are - intended exclusively for Kuwaitis.<sup>3</sup> This was further enforced by prohibiting rental units. As non-Kuwaitis may not own land or property, the exclusion of rental units meant the exclusion of non-Kuwaitis resulting in extreme residential segregation (Ibid 1996).<sup>4</sup> Non-Kuwaiti housing is provided through the unregulated yet constrained private market, meaning that speculative rents are barely affordable and migrant worker housing barely habitable. Due to escalating rents, especially in the 1970s and 1980s, expatriate families were forced to leave and find cheaper housing - congested living situations proliferated, unhealthy and unsanitary living conditions arose - especially in bachelor housing<sup>5</sup> - as workers often took turns sleeping on the same bed rotating according to work schedule. Thus, the chance to leave this space of so-called 'rest' for public space is a welcome one (Al-Moosa 1985).

### New Publics for Old Spaces

Public space, particularly that which is designated as such in city master plans i.e., physically open "accessible" space, parks, squares, etc., is rooted in an idealized, western understanding with Aristotelian roots,<sup>6</sup> promulgated by the prevailing modern city planning principles as a space to serve leisure and rejuvenation purposes for civil society, one that supposedly allows for the simultaneity of multiplicity and plurality to occur. The aforementioned British planners of Kuwait included such public space - what Teresa Caldeira calls the "modern ideal of public space" - in Kuwait's master plan; city space is conceived of as open space to be used and enjoyed by everyone, as most famously seen in Baron Haussmann's Paris (Caldeira 2000).

The imposition of the Western modern ideal of public space never followed its purpose in the Kuwaiti context as it was incommensurable with its nature and culture. It was and still is not the 'norm' for Kuwaiti women or Kuwaiti men to linger in open outdoor public space (unless surrounded by commercial establishments). The weather does not help - with temperature's averaging in the high forty degrees Celsius, being outside in Kuwait is difficult even for the most dedicated *flaneur*.

<sup>3</sup> This practice continues to the present day.

<sup>4</sup> Recently however, many of these single-family structures have been converted to multiple units and rented out to more affluent expatriates causing a recent shift in the nationally homogenous residential subdivisions.

<sup>5</sup> Bachelor housing is a common type of migrant worker housing in Kuwait, as many migrants were and are either single men or men whose families remained in their home countries.

<sup>6</sup> Aristotle conceived of an open space in the Greek polis in which civil society may congregate and discuss civic matters in a democratic manner. At this point in history slaves and women were not part of civil society.

These cultural and environmental conditions mean that most Kuwaitis and affluent expatriates ignore officially designated “public” space for the socially and climatically controlled spaces of malls and corporate plazas, open spaces cum “public” space which allow for marketable designed-and-contrived diversity as opposed to uncontrolled social interaction that might hinder exchange value. Most Kuwaitis and professional expatriates roam the air-conditioned interiors or exteriors of consumerist paradises to get a whiff of ‘publicness.’<sup>7</sup> What then has become of the officially public spaces laid out by planners a generation ago?

*Duwwar El-Sheriton*, or the Sheraton Rotary, is one of the most active and congested parts of Kuwait’s downtown, surrounded by hotels, office complexes and small street front stores that range from travel agents to *shewirma* (Arab sandwich) joints. In its vicinity are the only two churches in Kuwait city. All of these different building types surround a large landscaped traffic rotary, a “public space” in the western sense which most Kuwaitis use to drive around.

On Fridays and Sundays, this area is famously transformed into a gathering place for migrant workers, from the Filipina domestic worker to the Indian tailor, depending on the migrant worker’s religious affiliation and assigned day-off. Spurred on by its location near churches and a major bus hub, this space transforms from an empty desolate island surrounded by automobiles – one abandoned or ignored by most Kuwaitis - to one thriving with a multiplicity of bodies, in terms of nationality, ethnicity, race, religion and gender, however, not class.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, this is arguably the only space and time in which Kuwait city experiences the simultaneity of multiple publics that run the gamut of the social spectrum.

It is, in many ways, a perfectly ironic legacy of the planning and labor policies of nation- and city-building in Kuwait. Public space, as conceived in the west, never really fulfilled its idealistic mission due to natural and cultural disparities. Yet the most powerful legacy of this era, a highly segregated dual city produced by the mix of labor and housing policy, created a need for space by a different “public,” a group of workers formally left outside the bounds of citizenship and the possibility of being Kuwaiti. The divide between nationals, who are privileged members of

<sup>7</sup> Lest we immediately jump to a conclusion following Michael Sorkin’s proclamation of the “end of public space,” let us remember Don Mitchell’s critique of this common vision by stating that they refer to a highly idealized past where public spaces and the public sphere were supposedly safe, stable and accessible to all. Rather, public space was always a contested site and source of conflict, rife with inequalities, inclusions and exclusions.

<sup>8</sup> Buses are the most affordable mode of transportation for most migrant workers and many also split cabs. Buses are not used by Kuwaitis or more affluent expatriates and taxi cabs are seldom used by them either.

society, and non-nationals, who are "lucky" to be there, shows itself most starkly on those days in which those left outside congregate in a public open space at the physical center of the city, blurring the strategically constructed duality of the city as one prong penetrates the other, subverting the social engineering of a modernizing Kuwait.

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