

Architecture and Globalisation in the Persian Gulf Region



Edited by
Murray Fraser and Nasser Golzari

ARCHITECTURE AND GLOBALISATION IN THE PERSIAN GULF REGION

The Persian Gulf, possessing half of the world's total oil reserves, has over the centuries become a major centre of global attention and conflict. Recent architectural and urban development in the Gulf has been equally dramatic. The so-called culture of 'Dubaisation' in the last decade or so is now ringing alarm bells among different professions. A 'free-for-all' approach to architectural development is seen by many as creating surreal cityscapes which deny real reference to place, climate or cultural identity.

This is the first book ever to examine the architecture and urbanism of the Persian Gulf as a complete entity, dealing equally with conditions on the eastern Iranian shoreline as in Arabic countries on the western side. By inviting a range of architects and scholars to write about historical and contemporary influences on 14 cities along both Gulf coastlines, the book traces the changes in architecture and human settlement in relation to environmental factors and particularity of place. It provides an innovative contribution to the study of architecture and globalisation through a detailed investigation of this particular region, investigating how buildings and cities are being shaped as a result.

A set of thematic essays at the end offer important insights into issues of globalisation, urbanism and environmental design, drawing from the experience of the Persian Gulf. The outcome is a unique record of the Gulf in the early-21st century at a point when global capitalism is making major inroads and yet questions of architectural design, climate change, ecological sustainability, cultural identity and so-called 'Facebook Democracy' are likewise shaking up the Middle Eastern region. The book thus offers a fresh reading of the architecture and urbanism of a fascinating and often contradictory region, while also showing how globalisation can be analysed in a more engaged and integrated manner.

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Murray Fraser and Nasser Golzari

Introduction

Murray Fraser

This collection of essays addresses pivotal issues of architecture, urbanism, cultural identity and globalisation, and in doing so offers two original lines of investigation. Firstly, it is the first book in English (or any language) to look critically at the buildings and cities located around the entire perimeter of the Persian Gulf, not only from one perspective. This might seem a curious point to make, so is worth spelling out. Previous studies have tended to discuss the Gulf either from its western Arabic side or its eastern Iranian side. Cultural variants, ethnic divides and other enmities currently divide the two sides of the Persian Gulf – and yet, equally, it has been a singular entity for most of human history. Hence this book is innovative in that it examines the architectural and urban patterns along both coastlines, giving no pre-eminence to either. Instead the aim is to provide a vivid snapshot of the complex changes now occurring as result of cultural exchanges across the Persian Gulf and the wider processes of globalisation. The essays stem from a conference that I, along with my co-editor, Nasser Golzari, organised at the Royal Institute of British Architects in London in September 2009, as well as from fieldwork research since then. As in the RIBA conference, the book provides an inclusive overview of geographic, economic, political and cultural factors which have shaped, and are still shaping, the built environment around the Persian Gulf.

The book's second innovation is in the way it treats the concept of architectural globalisation, with this term being usually translated into Arabic as '*al-'awlama*' and into Farsi as *jahani shodan*. The historiography of architectural globalisation will be discussed later, but it is worth pointing out here that this book presents a different kind of analysis – one that is deliberately not focussed on any one particular country, or particular type of architects, or particular building type. Instead, each of the authors has been invited to study a specific town or city on the Persian Gulf within a broader cultural continuum which retains strong urban differentiations. Too much writing about architectural globalisation tends to be overly hysterical, or else merely repeats ideological themes laid down by the operations of global capital. This book also wishes to sidestep the limitations in the notion of 'critical regionalism', which, as Adrian Forty points out, is merely a new form of 19th-century

architectural nationalism.¹ If anything, the book's approach is much closer to what is referred to as 'area studies', in which different disciplines drawn from across the social sciences and humanities examine together a specific geographical or cultural region of the world, with the aim of revealing underlying systems and forces. Previous writers have pointed out that the Persian Gulf 'provides a laboratory par excellence to assess and fine tune the theories of globalization'.² This is precisely our intention.

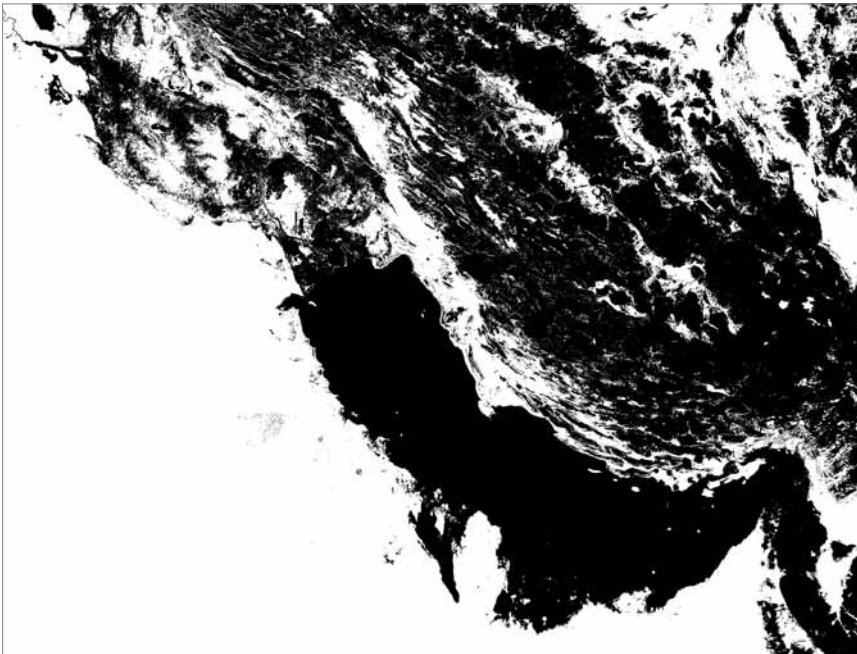
As with any cross-disciplinary investigation, however, there are some obvious problems with the 'area studies' approach.³ Perhaps the key criticism of many 'area studies' scholars is that they appear to think they can come up with a simple coherent summation of a given part of the world. Thankfully, there can be little chance of that mistake being made when looking at the Persian Gulf region. For a start, even the naming of the water channel is deeply controversial, reflecting the contrasting views of the countries around it.⁴ From the Iranian perspective, there is no question that it is Persian Gulf, whereas people on the Arabic side have from the 1960s referred to it as the Gulf, or sometimes the Arabian Gulf (somewhat confusingly, given that term has also long been used for the Red Sea on the western side of the Arabian peninsula). Other variants include the Arabo-Persian Gulf, Islamic Gulf, and Gulf of Basra. Google has recently got itself into serious trouble with Iran for dropping the name of the water channel entirely from its maps, so that clearly isn't an option either. We realise how sensitive this issue is for those involved, but for both the RIBA conference, and this book, we have reverted to United Nations nomenclature as that is the official neutral source – hence our predominant use of the term Persian Gulf, albeit alternating at times with the Gulf for brevity.



1.1 Map of the Persian Gulf showing the countries and cities covered in the book

We are keen not to take any fixed position in relation to these political controversies. The essays in this volume seek not to praise or condemn any part of the Persian Gulf region; rather, they hope to demonstrate that it is just as complex, contradictory and fascinating as any other part of the globe. There is no tendentious spouting about a 'clash of civilisations'. If anything, in the region around the Persian Gulf – where religion is still seen as central to social value systems – it is the ideological and cultural differences between the Sunni-majority Islamic countries on the Arabic side and the Shi'a dominance in Iran which are most notable. Today, increased involvement by new Asian economic giants like China and India is likewise beginning to problematise the geo-politics of the Gulf, reviving memories of the 'Silk Road' which was once so important for Europe and the Far East. Also highly significant are the tensions in the Middle East (and Northern Africa) which began to be expressed during the 'Arab Spring' in 2010–2011, revealing deeply varying views between generations and social groups about the role and purpose of the state, religious institutions, and other agencies.

Turning now to the geography of the Persian Gulf, there are eight countries which can be mentioned: Iran along the east and for much of the short northern coastline, where it abuts Iraq, and then the Arabic nations of Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Oman along the western side. However, the great bulk of Oman 'belongs' to the Gulf of Oman, Arabian Sea, and Indian Ocean beyond, and thus it is more oceanic in location. Oman is not economically dependent on the Persian Gulf, and only the tip of the Musandam Peninsula actually abuts onto it. Iraq does have a coastline on the northern Gulf, but it is an extremely small one with little human settlement. In this sense, Iraq's



1.2 Relief map showing the mountainous eastern side in Iran contrasted with the flat desert-like Arabic side to the west



1.3 Reminder of an older way of life, close-up of an Iranian *dhow* in Dubai Creek

hinterland is much further inland to the north. For these reasons, this book focuses on analysing the key coastal cities in the six countries that possess substantial Gulf coastlines.

These six countries are united in that they face each other across the Persian Gulf. While mountainous and greener on the eastern Iranian side, the western shoreline is flat and desert-like. The Gulf itself runs in a direction from north-west to south-east, and on plan it is crescent-shaped, even banana-shaped. As a water channel it varies from 200–300 km in width, and is 989 km in length, creating a surface area of 251,000 km². This makes it roughly the same size (but not the same shape) as Romania or Ghana or the United Kingdom. Indeed, it's a useful comparison to get into one's head that the UK would more or less fit straight into the Persian Gulf. Seasonal water temperatures of between 16–32°C make the Gulf one of the very warmest seas in the world, plus it is also one of the saltiest. At the southern end of the Persian Gulf, the celebrated Strait of Hormuz acts as a *de facto* entry chamber, or lobby, from the Gulf of Oman (which then drops into the Arabian Sea before widening out even further as it joins the Indian Ocean). As a consequence of its geographical location, it is no surprise that the Persian Gulf has for millennia been of vital strategic and military importance. That role continues today: the US Navy 5th Fleet is based in Bahrain and the US Air Force runs a base with 9,000 personnel in Qatar, largely to offer protection to Arabian oil states and as part of an ongoing diplomatic stand-off with Iran on other side.

But of course it would be wrong to reduce the Persian Gulf to merely a strategic or military entity, given that it has other important facets. Most fundamentally of



all, it acts as the drain for the mighty Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, thus making it part of what is often referred to as the 'cradle of civilisation' (or at least one of the 'cradles' around the globe). The first settlements in the Gulf region are estimated to have been born around 3,200 BC.⁵ Soon it became a major trading route with ships heading in both directions to and from the Indian Ocean, setting up astonishingly rich networks of commercial exchange with Africa, India and the Far East. For its indigenous people, and the numerous immigrant communities who have come to live there, the Persian Gulf has long served as a metaphorical 'table' over which tribes and other cultural groupings on both sides can trade goods and services, share customs and diets, and at times fight each other outright. Indeed, a key function of the Gulf has often been to offer a route of refuge from conditions on the other side, such as in the case of the discontented Iranian merchants who sailed over to set up business in the 'free port' of Dubai. Cultural interchange has been profound. 'The result today is that the coastal populations of both sides of the Gulf contain a mixture of Arabs and Persians', as one commentator observes.⁶ For instance, there are now an estimated 10,000 Iranian businesses in Dubai, and the annual flows of money from Iran to Dubai (estimated at \$15 billion in 2007) easily make the latter Iran's biggest trading partner.⁷

In terms of environmental features, the Persian Gulf hosts a number of important natural habitats: the reed marshes of southern Iraq, harsh dry deserts along its western side, fertile mountain ranges close to the western shores of Iran, and an abundant collection of marine life and coral formations in what is a relatively shallow body of water. The Persian Gulf is only 90m at its deepest,

1.4 View across Dubai Creek to the heavily Iranian district of Deira

with 50m being the average depth (although it suddenly gets far deeper once one has left through the 'lobby' of the Strait of Hormuz). Today, however, the Gulf faces many ecological problems. It is one of the most polluted seas in world, with an estimated 66 per cent of its coral reefs and hundreds of its marine species now at risk. Causes of this heavy pollution include the presence of oil and gas industries along the Arabian side (on land and offshore), discharges from coastal desalination and power plants, residues from wars in the form of shipwrecks/oil spills/oilwell fires, unchecked sewage waste, aggressive 'alien' marine species brought in inadvertently by international tankers, and – not least of all – the rapid urban development of cities like Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Doha or Kuwait City, each of which contains a staggering 80–90 per cent of their country's population. Given the need for copious cooling of buildings in this hot and dry part of the world – summer temperatures regularly rise over 40°C and there is virtually no rain for six months of the year – the demands placed on air conditioning and other building services, or for heavily cooled car transport, is immense. In 2008 it was estimated that the UAE, with an ecological footprint of 2.5 hectares per person, had at last ousted America as the largest consumer per capita of natural resources and the worst producer of carbon emissions.⁸

Politically and culturally, the countries along both sides of the Persian Gulf have long experienced phases of colonisation by imperial armies led by Persians, Ottomans, Portuguese, Safavids, British, Americans, etc. Each has left a lasting legacy. As one vivid example, every year more than 1 million people from Britain alone, mostly tourists, visit Dubai.⁹ As another concomitant of this complex history of colonisation in the Gulf region, for centuries there have been volatile relations between the largely Shi'a Persian and Sunni Arabic sides of the Gulf. Following the discovery of oil resources, a situation has arisen whereby American interests now prevail. Present-day intervention by western powers – generally neo-imperialist in intent and led by the USA with British backing – has over the past few decades maintained a status quo in the Persian Gulf to protect oil supplies. Historians duly point out that the previous 'Pax Britannica' has given way to a new 'Pax Americana'.¹⁰ As such, since the 1980s the region has experienced three major wars involving Iraq, one of them directly with Iran, the other two with America and its allies. Today there is widespread hostility to Iran from those on the Arabic side of the Gulf, not least because of the Iran's shift towards a Shi'ite theocracy after the 1979 Islamic Revolution, which makes it (at least officially) opposed to western capitalism and materialist values. The latest worry in the Gulf region, voiced largely by Israel as America's main ally in the Middle East, is that Iran is secretly building nuclear weapons to use on Israel. Iran has indeed opened its first nuclear-powered electricity station near to the city of Bushehr, amidst fears from some observers that its real purpose – somewhat ironically, given that this would follow the lead set by Israel's nuclear power station – is to produce enriched uranium for nuclear missiles.¹¹ In response to concerns about Iran's nuclear ambitions, a series of economic sanctions have been imposed by the USA and European Union, which are now creating serious hardship and political instability in Iran.¹²

Meanwhile, the traditional economic activities once carried out by people in the Persian Gulf (pearl diving, fishing, trading, farming, craft industries, etc) have been changed dramatically by the impact of western-style capitalism. With the advent of oil and gas extraction, surplus capital now abounds. In a clear example of the process described by David Harvey, there is immense competition for this surplus capital to be invested back into new showcase buildings in cities on the western coastline, most conspicuously in Abu Dhabi and Dubai in the United Arab Emirates, Doha in Qatar, Manama in Bahrain, and Kuwait City¹³ (see Plates 1 and 2). These development pressures are noticeably less intense in Iranian coastal cities, even if similar trends can be seen there too. Such differentials only add to the older rift between Persian and Arabian cultures. This is not to forget that there are deep social divisions inside Iran, as well as between Arabic nations despite the frequent expressions of pan-Arab sentiments. As an example of the latter aspiration, the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf – usually shortened to the Gulf Cooperation Council – was founded in Abu Dhabi in 1981. It has had variable success since then. Disputes within the Arabic countries are often tribally based, with the presence of extended clans ruled by sheikhs remaining a strong social feature. On top, there persist tensions between nomadic Bedouin tribes and the settled majority population. The changes engendered were brilliantly captured in the *Cities of Salt* novels by Abdul Rahman Munif, as published from the 1980s. However, it should also be pointed out that divisions amongst the Arabic Gulf countries are no greater than those found between much of Europe or elsewhere around the globe.

The natural resources offered by the Persian Gulf represent significant economic assets, as it were one giant feeding bowl. Originally it was all about fish and pearls, more recently oil and gas reserves. Oil fields, which were first detected in Iran and Iraq in the early-twentieth century by British oil companies, and later developed on a far greater scale by US firms after the Second World War, have transformed life along both coasts of the Persian Gulf. As in other places like Texas, but in an even more intense and exceptional manner, oil became ‘black gold’ for many of the Arabic countries involved. As a consequence, from the late-1950s the Persian Gulf has served as the main petrol pump which fuels the world’s automobiles. Staggering wealth fell upon Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar and the UAE, leading to increased global political power for their rulers after the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) was created in September 1960. Of course there have been many historical ups-and-downs since then, such as the ‘Oil Crisis’ of 1973–1974, during which the Gulf nations were portrayed as greedily holding western economies to ransom. Following that was a period of steady growth that lasted until a noticeable tail-off in the early-1990s. The situation has since become more complicated, with oil output still rising slowly in Gulf countries and yet being heavily supplemented by the extraction of liquefied gas. Today, the Arabic countries of the Persian Gulf, taken together with Iran and Iraq, own around 62 per cent of the world’s known crude oil reserves; in terms of natural gas reserves, Iran and Qatar are the second and third largest holders after Russia.¹⁴ Widespread fears about ‘peak oil’ syndrome is, however, prompting serious efforts by Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar and the UAE to diversify economically in a search for a post-oil future.