

**Steffen Wippel,
Katrin Bromber,
Christian Steiner
& Birgit Krawietz:
“Under
Construction:
Logics of
Urbanism in the
Gulf Region”**

Andrea Fischer-Tahir

Book Reviewed
Farnham/Burlington: Ashgate; 2014; 336
pp; ISBN: 978-1-4724-128 (hardcover).

Since the 1970s, the small Arab states in the Gulf region have managed to transform themselves from semi-nomadic Bedouin societies into giants of economic growth and urban architecture. Representations of today's urbanism in the region are as manifold as they are seemingly contradictory:

“[The] (momentarily) tallest building in the world; the (probably) highest density of construction cranes worldwide; the transition from fishermen's ports to megacities; the highest percentage of migrants in the world; the record gross domestic product (GDP) per capita; the contrasts and simultaneity of veils and miniskirts, of Bedouins and chief executive officers (CEO's), of camel races and prime quality airlines ...” (1)

This edited volume offers valuable insights into urban development of the states at the southern shore of the Gulf region. Going beyond “matter-of-fact descriptions and popular praise,” the volume seeks to understand the internal logics of urbanism in that part of the globalized world. The editors start from the assumption that the elites of these “neo-traditional authoritarian (...) Arab Gulf states”(3) leave only very strictly limited opportunities for public debates on urban development. As a result, it is the “urban sphere” itself that “constitutes an essential arena”

for negotiating ideas in the present age of the oil-based societies, and more relevant: for negotiating ideas about the post-oil future of these states (3). Therefore, the book turns its attention to the built environment of the urban landscape as “materially translated (...) *Weltanschauung*” (7). The book is an outcome of the conference “Under Construction. The Material and Symbolic Meaning of Architecture and Infrastructure in the Gulf Region,” held in 2010 at the Zentrum Moderner Orient (ZMO) in Berlin. It takes an interdisciplinary approach that involves perspectives from “economics, cultural geography, urban studies, history, Islamic studies, architecture, culture and museum management and art.” The aim of the book is to identify “the symbolic, political and economic value, iconicity, aesthetics, language and performative characteristics of the built environment, the design and the evoked imagery of the region” (3) as well as the power of the Dubai-metaphor in other parts of the Middle East and North Africa. The structure of the book, to which altogether twenty-four authors contributed, comprises four chapters: 1. The Politics and Economy of Infrastructure and Architecture, 2. Images and Iconic Brands: Constructing Markets and Identity, 3. Art Production and Exhibitions: A Critical Engagement with Urban Developments,

and 4. Dubai-Style Elsewhere: Plagiarizing or Transforming the Gulf Model. The book includes a wide range of photographs representing the urban landscapes and visions inscribed in miniature planning models; some pictures have been provided by the authors, others by artists. These pictures not only serve as illustrations but are sometimes an integral part of the arguments brought forward in the individual contributions.

Cultural analysis not only seeks to describe and to interpret what people are doing. It is among the pleasures of being a researcher to signify the various manifestations of human practice, be it acts of the moment, the ideas behind them and meanings attached, patterns, or processes. What I find very valuable in the introduction, as authored by Katrin Bromber, Birgit Krawietz, Christian Steiner and Steffen Wippel, is the suggestion to understand what happens in the Gulf region not as any “part of a modernization project” (4) or even—as critically argued about current development in the contribution by Martin Hivdt on the political economy and hyperrealization of urban spaces in Gulf cities—in terms of “late-late development” (31-43). Instead, the authors suggest conceptualizing the dynamic processes of the previous decades and present day as “search

movements” (4). The authors argue that the construction of artificial islands, iconic buildings, globally renowned museums, theme parks or prestige sport facilities do not simply serve in strategies of the ruling elites of the Gulf states to prepare for a post-oil era and future economic and political survival. These representations should also be interpreted as the materialized manifestations in a search for identity. In this sense, not only the urban space is “in the making” or “under construction.” In motion are also the collective identities in these societies, with their stark contrasts between wealthy and poor, citizens with rights or fewer rights, and non-citizens without rights. The Arab Gulf societies are undergoing “exploratory processes of orientation,” (ibid.) which are characterized more by tentative solutions and inconsistencies than by coherent answers to the new challenges of the neoliberalized world.

These complex search movements could be analytically deconstructed into driving forces, interests, and power relations at work. The editors particularly highlight the “struggle for recognition,” which is behind the “overwhelming addiction to iconic buildings and manmade islands” (6). On various levels, “states, rulers and elites in power, (international) companies, Gulf citizens, migrants, architects and artists” bar-

gain for different ideas of how the future of the Gulf states should look. In doing so, they want to be visible, they want to be seen, and they want to be distinguishably recognized by locally, regionally or globally defined audiences. As a result, the transformed “urban landscapes, as socially produced spaces, are inscribed with acts of loyalty to global capital” (7).

Interestingly, the rapid change and radical reconfigurations of the space are often connected to “visions” (*ru'ya*) of the ruling elites or the neo-patriarchic rulers of the particular emirates and states. The editors say that in recent years the rhetoric of “visions” even seems to have replaced the (modernist) technocratic master plan as a tool of catch-up development. In contrast to the science-based rhetoric of development, visions appear as transcendental, and as such they are more difficult to call into question by competitors, opponents or—in case it would exist—a parliamentary opposition. When “applying the visionary discourse of big enterprises to the management and the marketing of the state,” “visions” of the male rulers are not only useful to push and justify particular practices of urbanism and urban change, but also very powerful means “to legitimate the dominant role of the ruler” (7).

A foreign tourist guide book praises “1,001 places to see before you die” (contribu-

Andrea Fischer-Tahir

is a social anthropologist with regional focus on Kurdistan and Iraq. Currently she is a research fellow at the network Re-configurations: Memory, History, and Processes of Transformations in the MENA Regions, at the CNMS, Philipps University of Marburg.

email:

andrea.fischertahir@staff.uni-marburg.de

tion by Nikolai Scherle and Mikael Jonasson, 147-59). These places include skyscrapers, theme parks, museums, or Oriental ski-malls, all of them “manmade” things representing political power and economic capital as well as the ambitions and visions of the Gulf monarchies. Animals have also become part of the representation economy, and above all the falcon. Birgit Krawietz introduces us to the realm of falconry with the central figure of the falcon “as a cultural icon of the Arab Gulf region” (131-46). In former times an animal friend of “men” serving the Bedouin in practices of trapping and hunting and as a “means” to learn and exercise patience and endurance and to initiate boys, the falcon was transformed into a commodity. The production of falcons is mainly outsourced (to Germany, England, and the US), and so is the preservation of their hunting skills (Pakistan, Iran, Kazakhstan, Morocco, Sudan, etc.), whereas the Souq Waqif Falcon Hospital, with “9,000 patients a year,” is in charge of keeping

alive the hybrid and illness-prone creatures of the Lord mainly for the purpose of luxury sport. But Krawietz also explains the “spiritual reward people may gain from practising what could be called neo-falconry.” As a “meaningful other,” she argues, “falcon iconicity can be perceived as a forceful statement of Gulf Arab hegemony” (141). In addition, the falcon is appreciated due to its “high velocity” and represents the dream of flying, as well as the “fusion of living beings and flight technology,” which renders it a contribution of the Islamic world to the global heritage and human progress (143). And finally, the falcon “embodies certain social values,” (ibid.) above all patience, endurance and strength, mobility and independency. However, Krawietz reminds us that the falcon is still a bird of prey, a beast of prey. Therefore we could also say that he perfectly symbolizes the “carnivore capitalism” (ibid.), and thus the matrix in which “1,001 dreams” are spun.