# Potentials and constraints of urban sustainability in the Arabian Gulf: the case of Bahrain and Kuwait

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## Abstract

One of the fastest transformations in the global market is the transformation of the deserted towns and seaports of the Arabian Gulf. The Gulf coastal countries transformed into urbanised states in a very short period of two generations. Due to this fast transformation, the Arabian Gulf today represents an excellent research laboratory to investigate the theories of globalization.

Relatively few researchers in the Gulf have studied the effects of this transformation on the sustainability of the urban fabric of these states. This paper attempts to address this by investigating the relationship between cultural transformation and urban sustainability in the Arabian Gulf context, taking Bahrain and Kuwait as case studies.

This paper is based on a qualitative study which is part of ongoing PhD research built upon interviews with researchers and government officials in Bahrain and Kuwait, in addition to information obtained through archival resources and published articles, books and diaries. It provides an analysis and a comparison of the cultural and urban situation in Bahrain and Kuwait following the oil boom, in addition to an assessment of the urban sustainability of both countries today.
*Keywords: culture, transformation, urban, sustainability, Arabian Gulf, Bahrain, Kuwait.*

## 1 The Arabian Gulf

The Arabian Gulf States (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), United Arab Emirates (UAE), State of Kuwait, State of Qatar, Sultanate of Oman, and Kingdom of Bahrain) are countries overlooking the Gulf from the Arabian

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Peninsula. They are all located in the Middle East in Asia. The biggest of these countries is the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia with a population of around 28 million and the smallest is Bahrain with a population of a little more than a million [1]. The total population of all the Arabian Gulf States was estimated at 46 million in 2011 [2]. The six countries of the Arabian Gulf are all members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), which is also referred to as the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf (CCASG). The Arabian Gulf States enjoy a lot of diverse ties in all aspects of daily life due to similarities in climatic circumstances, religion, and geographic location. Only minor variations can be identified to differentiate between the different Gulf States.

The Gulf region is one of the oldest continuously inhabited places in the world. This is evident in the traces of the great civilization of the idyllic land of Dilmun, which covered most of eastern Arabia and the islands of Bahrain. The strategic location of the Arabian Gulf States on the route to India and the existence of vast oil resources are two major factors which played a major role in the establishment and evolution of these states. Throughout the nineteenth century, Britain had a direct connection with the Arabian Gulf States because of their strategic location on the route to India. By the end of the First World War, the Arabian Gulf became a British lake as it secured access for the British vessels sailing to and from India [3]. The British existence in the region started the cultural transformation in the Arabian Gulf region, especially in the coastal states which were directly influenced by the British government, Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates.

The Arabian Gulf States developed drastically after the unearthing of oil at the beginning of the twentieth century. This change was mostly led and designed by foreign consultancies brought to the area by local governments who had an overflow of money from the oil industry but lacked the necessary expertise to run those developments themselves [4]. The desert towns and seaports of the Arabian Gulf have transformed within a short period of two generations into urbanized states. This transformation is marked as being the fastest in the global market. Thus, the region provides an excellent laboratory to assess the theories of globalization [5]. This paper therefore focuses on this transformation and, in particular, on the consequences of this major change on the culture of these small Arabian states.

## 2 Transformation of the Arabian Gulf States

The Arabian Gulf region has one of the highest development rates in the world. This is a ‘hot topic’ that is evident in the sum of existing literature about globalization relating to the Arabian Gulf States; see, for example, Fox *et al*. [5, 7], Heard-Bey [35] and Khalaf [36].

The relative rates of city growth in the Arabian Gulf are among the highest in the world, and these high rates of growth are due to the massive foreign migration into the Gulf region. In addition, all indications suggest that this pattern of urban development will also continue in the future [8].

The fast transformation of the Gulf States attracted and was dependent on the massive migration of people to the different Gulf States. The high standards of living following the discovery of oil and the mix of contemporary and traditional lifestyles attracted people to move into the region. In the UAE, Kuwait and Qatar expatriates constitute the majority of the population. The excessive immigration of a large number of workers into the Gulf region has led to many social complications [9].

The effects of the transformation of the Arabian Gulf States have been seen also in the consumerism patterns in the Gulf; see, for example, Al-Shouki [17]; Al-Nouri [16]; Al-Abadi [15]; Al-Qudsi [14]; Abdu [13]; Zaid and Abu-Elenin [12]; Al-Motwa [11], and Al-Saif [10]. One of the main causes of consumerism in the region is the increase in national income following the discovery of oil. This is today threatening the social order and has economic, environmental, social, psychological and health consequences [18].

It appears from the existing sum of literature in economic sciences, commerce and management that societies in the Gulf States transformed dramatically from the mid-twentieth century, and that the effect of this transformation has been seen in the resident consumerism patterns of the states. The hypothesis here is that the Arabian Gulf States transformed from being active producing societies that depend on their own people to produce goods and services, and have their own crafts and skills and expertise, especially in agriculture, fishing and pearling, to consuming societies that depend almost completely on imported goods, services, craftsmanship and consultants. This transformation occurred because of the discovery of oil, the sudden wealth of the states, and the dependency on foreign consultants and workmanship. The transformation was reflected in the urban structures of those coastal states and led to the emergence of unsustainable architecture, planning systems and projects in the region. This will be investigated in this research by examining the newly established culture in the Arabian Gulf coastal states and its role in preventing or stimulating urban sustainability.

## 3 Methodology

In research within the Arabian Gulf context, many authors choose to focus more on the states of the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain, and Kuwait because these states are at the forefront of change. Oman is the most traditional state in the Gulf and only began to transform in the 1980s [5]. Saudi Arabia is much larger in area and population compared to the other Gulf States so it is often discussed separately. This research also follows suit: although the main case study in the PhD research study discussed in this paper is the Kingdom of Bahrain, the situation in Bahrain is, however, very much connected with the rest of the Gulf and especially to the three states of Kuwait, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates. All these countries share common features such as their relatively small size and population, their high speed of development since the discovery of oil, and the number of emigrants in their total population, in addition to similarities in culture, climate, environmental circumstances, and the crossover

in knowledge between organizations concerned with urbanisation and sustainability in the region.

Because this study tries to examine a current phenomenon, one which the investigator has a very limited control over its occurrence and because this research is context dependent, therefore, case study is used as a method of investigation. This paper will include two case studies; the first focuses on Bahrain, the main case study in the PhD research, while the second focuses on Kuwait, the second case study in the PhD research and the closer to Bahrain in terms of cultural transformation and the current urban condition. The main reason for choosing Bahrain and Kuwait for discussion in this paper is the existing sum of information, knowledge and data concerning the two case studies. Nevertheless, the full PhD study will also include Qatar and the United Arab Emirates.

This paper is based on a qualitative study built upon interviews conducted with researchers and government officials in Bahrain and Kuwait; however, the main sum of information is derived through archival resources and a thorough literature review. The paper provides an investigation of the limited existing literature on sustainability and the urban environment of the Arabian Gulf States in order to shed light on the bigger context and the challenge that exists in the region. This will be followed by an analysis and comparison of the cultural and urban situation in Bahrain and Kuwait following the oil boom. The paper concludes with an assessment of the urban sustainability of both countries today.

## 4 Findings and discussion

### 4.1 Education and training

Within the context of Bahrain, few research studies have focused on the urban fabric of the country and the changes it went through. Most of the researchers who have conducted these studies are, or have been at some point of their careers, members of the faculty of the department of Civil Engineering and Architecture at the University of Bahrain.

The Department of Civil Engineering and Architecture at the University of Bahrain falls under the College of Engineering and was opened in 1990. The first graduating batch of students were awarded in 1995 with a BSc in Architectural Engineering [19]. The programme changed its name from Architectural Engineering to Architecture at the beginning of the twenty-first century; in addition, some changes in the curriculum also followed suit to redirect the programme from being engineering and services-oriented to being more focused on design and conceptual developments. The department offers a BSc in Interior Design, a BSc in Architecture, and a BSc in Civil Engineering. However, the university does not yet offer any postgraduate programmes in these fields. Other private universities in Bahrain also offer Architectural Engineering programmes, including the Kingdom University [20] and the Gulf University [21]. But there are still no programmes offered on Urban Design, Urban Planning or Landscape by any institution on the island [4].

The fact that the Architecture programme at the University of Bahrain is relatively new and small explains why there is limited knowledge of urban sustainability in the country. In addition, graduates of this programme are mostly in architect or senior architect positions and are not yet decision makers; most of those who are currently in leadership positions are either expatriates or Bahrainis who were educated abroad. Thus, there seems to be a relationship between the newly established and limited architectural education programmes in Bahrain and cultural change and urban sustainability on the island.

Consultants from different fields including conservation, urban design, management control, and information technology, in addition to economic and legal consultants, have been constantly hired by the Bahrain government and have worked in the Arabian Gulf region in general since the British Empire spread its influence into the area in the late nineteenth century.

This continuous dependency on foreign expertise and consultants raises some questions in connection to their understanding of the cultural identity of Bahrain, its historic fabric, the customs and beliefs which led to its formation, and the appropriateness of the plans and strategies they put forward for the development of the country.

Within the context of Kuwait, the University of Kuwait (the main governmental university in the state) is the only institution which offers a programme for architectural education. A BSc in Architecture has been offered to high school graduates in a five-year programme since the establishment of the Department of Architecture in 1997; the first batch of students to graduate from the department were awarded with the degree in 2002. Furthermore, the Department of Architecture has just been separated from the College of Engineering to form a separate College of Architecture, which was established in October 2012, just a few months after the accreditation of the department by the American National Architectural Accrediting Board (NAAP) [22]. There are, however, no courses in the State of Kuwait on planning, urban design or landscape architecture [23].

Dr Talal Al-Kandari, a lecturer at the College of Architecture, is one of the few researchers in Kuwait who are interested in sustainability; his Master's dissertation investigated the identity of Kuwaiti architecture and his PhD research explored the challenges and opportunities associated with practising green architecture in Kuwait. His PhD research was limited to private architectural offices in Kuwait. Al-Kandari adopted the LEED system and used surveys to measure the degree of sustainability in a number of private architectural offices in Kuwait. He sent a survey to be filled out and then scheduled interviews with the owners or lead architects at the offices which completed the survey. Al-Kandari's research showed that there is a general lack of awareness about the importance of practising green urbanism in Kuwait, to the extent that some of the architectural offices which participated in the research did not even understand the meaning of green architecture [23]. Although Al-Kandari's research is very useful and rich in valuable information about sustainability in the region, a topic that is rarely discussed, however, it that it has

not yet been published; therefore, all the information and findings are not easily accessible.

### 4.2 Written documentation

The sum of documentation, reports and development plans currently produced by foreign consultancies in comparison to the humble number prepared by Bahrainis stands as evidence for the dependency on external consultancies in Bahrain today, which in turn is causing the gradual transformation of culture that is reflected in the way the urban fabric is shaped on the islands.

In terms of urban sustainability and cultural change, few documents have been produced in Bahrain; the Bahrain National Planning Development Strategy 2030 [24] was produced by Skidmore, Owings and Merrill (SOM) in 2008. The strategy gives general guidelines on Bahrain's plans for improvement. The document is the first of its kind in Bahrain; it was produced to unify the work of the different governmental institutions in Bahrain. However, today, more than four years after the production of this plan, it is obvious that the economic side of the transformation strategy has dominated the environmental and, more importantly, the cultural sides of the equilibrium of sustainability.

It appears from the sum of Bahraini documentation reviewed for the purpose of this study that the number of studies conducted on the urban fabric of Bahrain is generally limited; most of these studies were conducted by foreigners who worked or spent some of their lives in Bahrain while others were conducted by consultants hired by the Bahraini government. Moreover, there appears to be an adequate number of studies tackling the historic urban fabric of Bahrain, the indigenous architectural style and the traditional community, but hardly any regarding the connection between the cultural transformation and the sustainability of the urban planning system in Bahrain.

The situation mentioned above about the limited amount of documentation in Bahrain is not very different in Kuwait; however, there seems to be a little more documentation available than in Bahrain. One of the most famous sources of information about the history of urbanisation in Kuwait and its transformation was written in 1964 by Saba George Shiber. Shiber (1923–1968), an architect, was a consultant in urban planning; he was interested in the urbanism of the Arab world in general and had a rich career in many Arab countries before he settled in Kuwait during the 1960s [25]. His writings explain the transformation of the city during the existence of the British Empire in the region and when the production of oil was just speeding up after the end of the Second World War.

In his publications, Shiber, using very harsh words, criticized the unsustainable patterns of urbanisation that emerged in the Arab region in general and in Kuwait in particular; he urged control to be taken over urban patterns and the quality and design of the built environment [26]. Although Shiber was talking about the urban structure of Kuwait and the changes it went through, the situation in the State of Kuwait was very much similar to what was happening around the Gulf region in general and in Bahrain in particular; thus, a lot of his writings explain what was happening on the islands of Bahrain at that time:

"What have they built? Collected on this virgin and generous place is an encyclopaedia [sic.] -In brick and concrete- of what is wrong in engineering and architecture. Never in the history of mankind has a more costly, more unwieldy, more anti-organic urban complex been created with such speed and cost" [26].

Shiber's writings were neutral and were more truthful than any other documentation or diary written by Englishmen or other colonial powers present in the Arabian Gulf States during that period. This was mostly because of his experience in architecture and planning and his awareness of the catastrophic effects of modernization and urbanisation in the area, which were mostly led by foreign powers.

### 4.3 Patterns of Urbanisation

Within the states of the Arabian Gulf, the culture of Kuwait is the closest to the culture of Bahrain; this is evident in the close association between the two states in terms of accents, food, and clothes, in addition to the similar degrees of freedom and openness and the democratic systems of the two states.

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, urbanisation in Kuwait and Bahrain was mostly traditional and sustainable as the economies of the two countries were dependent on the local resources of pearls and agriculture. Things started to change with the collapse of the pearl fishery due to the invention of the artificial cultivation of pearls in the 1920s and 1930s; there was a general shortage of resources and materials, which was reflected in the built environment in Bahrain, Kuwait, and the coastal states of the Gulf in general. People did not have enough money to buy food and clothes, let alone build houses.

Luckily, the discovery of oil in Kuwait in 1938 following the discovery of oil in Bahrain in 1931 rescued its economy and restored the state's economic situation [27]. However, although the unearthing of oil was a perfect solution to rescue the failing economies of the coastal states in the Arabian Gulf, it had other associated costs of its own which the people of the Gulf have continued to pay until this day.

The morphology of Kuwait and Bahrain is similar to that of many coastal cities. However, Kuwait has a more interesting and organised urban structure. Its development expanded from the water inwards, and to protect the back of the city of Kuwait from any threat coming from the desert, walls were built over periods of time. The first wall was built in 1760 and was only 750 metres long. Later on, and with the increasing population in Kuwait, the first wall had to be demolished to expand the city further towards the desert. A second wall was built in 1793; this time the wall was 2,300 metres long and surrounded an area of 274 square kilometres. The wall remained for about seventy years until it needed to be demolished in 1874. The last wall built around the city of Kuwait was constructed in 1920 and was built over a period of two months using local materials of clay and mud covered with plaster; the wall was 6,400 metres long and surrounded an area of 7,500 square kilometres, about ten times larger than the first wall. The wall was massive at that time, with five wooden gates; each was four metres high and 1.5 metres thick, in addition to having five security towers [28].

The last wall of Kuwait was demolished in 1957 when Sheikh Abdulla Al Salem Al Sabah declared that the wall was to be brought down, but that its five gates were to be kept and replaced with what is currently known as the gardens of the wall (Al Soor Gardens) [28]. Researchers in Kuwait are not quite sure of the exact location of the three walls. There are a number of hypotheses in this regard; the most accurate hypothesis seems to be that 'Al-Soor St.', which runs parallel to the first ring road on the inside, closer to the sea, is the street that follows the line of the last city wall [25]. This seems to be the most accurate hypothesis, firstly because of the naming of the street after the wall ('Soor' is Arabic for 'Wall' or 'Fence'), and secondly because of the approximate similarity of the area surrounded by the current street to that documented to be the area that the third wall surrounded in the past. Also, traces of the four gates, Al-Shaab, Al-Shamiya, Al-Jahra, and Al-Maqsab, can still be found along this street.

The remains of the wall of the old Kuwait city are one of the most precious cultural heritage assets Kuwait possessed throughout its history due to their significant meaning and associated historical value. However, unfortunately it was not until recently that people started to appreciate this and write about it. Al-Basis [29] included a number of stories describing traditional life in the city of Kuwait, one of which tells the story of the first wall of Kuwait. In a beautifully written dramatic piece of writing, Al-Basis describes the wall as if the wall itself was talking to the construction man who was sent to bring it down, saying:

"My name is the fence. And specifically, the first fence. Do you recognize me now? Do you understand why I am standing here like an old mountain? (…) I was built by Sheikh Sabah Bin Jaber with an odd combination of mud, stones and extreme caution, to prevent greediness that comes from the mainland (…) I was born from the effort in the arms of the poor and the luxury in the wealth of the rich and this is the only way civilizations are born (…) this is my job, to remain standing, to withstand with stupidity for the longest possible time. Here I am as you can see; my latitude extends for a thousand steps, starting from Bahetah in a curved line until it reaches tirelessly to Al-Negaa. And my height rises to seven jumps in the sky, to appear from above like a broad chest that genially embraces the houses of the city" [29].

Despite the above recognition of cultural heritage, the appropriate widespread awareness is still lacking. Today, only a few residents of Kuwait really pay attention to the remains of the gates, and know their location or the history associated with them [30], even though they are positioned in what is today the most crowded and congested parts of the city centre of Kuwait.

The demolition of the three walls through the history of Kuwait due to the expansion of the city represents the physical dimension of the gradual urban transformation which Kuwait had to go through in its natural and sustainable journey to urbanisation. It is important to note here that the last of these walls was demolished in 1956, during the peak of oil production and British colonization; however, this time it was not replaced with another wall as in the previous times, but with a completely new planning scheme implemented by foreign planners and developers.

Almost all the houses inside the wall were purchased from their owners by the government of Kuwait and replacement options were provided for them in the newly developed areas outside the wall. This was done in order to achieve a complete redevelopment of the city centre by foreign planning developers [31], thus marking the beginning of the unsustainable urban transformation of the city of Kuwait.

Although Bahrain's urban structure does not, however, include the building of a number of walls around the city throughout history, during the mid-twentieth century when oil production was at its peak after the Second World War, drastic changes started to accrue in the urban structure of the islands. Awali, the first planned town in Bahrain, was built by the British in the middle of the desert with pitched roof houses, an architectural and planning style that did not exist in the area before that time and which was completely irrelevant to the context in which it was built.

When it comes to the intangible aspects of urbanism, the most distinguished intangible culture in the Gulf in general and in the Kuwaiti society in particular is the love people have for gathering together. This was publicised in Kuwait's first participation in the Venice Architecture Biennale. The idea of the project started from the hypothesis that the Kuwaiti society believes in intangible things more than the tangible, and that they have more faith in "word of mouth" than the physical environment because the latter was destroyed almost completely in the process of redeveloping the city and following the introduction of the imposed architecture by foreign developers [33].

In an article that was published just one year after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, Tetreault (1992) wrote about the civil society in Kuwait. He discussed protected places in the urban fabric and connected this to the development of women's rights. Tetreault discussed in his article the protected space of "the house" and its attraction to political organizations during periods when public meetings are restricted or banned. In Kuwait, as in the Gulf region more generally, concepts of privacy are highly important for ensuring that women of the house are not exposed to foreign men. However, the Kuwaiti house includes a substitute space for civil society in the public space; this is called the "Diwaniyya" which overlaps the public-private divide [33]. (A room attached to the house, usually with a separate entrance to maintain the privacy of the house. It is mostly a male gathering space where they play cards, eat, and talk about business and politics, among other activities. It is more common in Kuwait than any other Arabian Gulf state. In some other states it is called "Majles".) This component, although in existence in other Gulf countries, does not, however, have as great an influence on the urban fabric as is the case in Kuwait. There seems to be a relationship between the existence of the Diwaniyya in Kuwait and the maintenance of social sustainability in the country.

On the other hand, the transformation of the Kuwaiti culture has taken shape through interparental conflicts and interpersonal disagreements that have arisen between those who maintain their indigenous Arab culture and others who accept and adopt more liberal attitudes from the western cultures imported at the end of the twentieth century. This has been discussed by Fakhr El-Islam *et al*. [34].

Their research showed that there is a conflict between indigenous and imported cultures in the Arabian Gulf, where westernization followed the acquisition of petroleum wealth, causing rapid social changes [34]. This problem is not only in existence in Kuwait but could also be generalized as occurring in Bahrain, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates, as all of these Gulf States witnessed dramatic changes in their demographics and population structure, causing conflict and disagreement between those who are resistant to change and those who are more flexible and open to other cultures and religions.

## 5 Conclusion

In general, the situation in Kuwait is very much similar to that in Bahrain. The unearthing of oil and the British existence in both states had its own implications for the societies and therefore the built environment. Although the urban morphology of Bahrain is not a replica of that of Kuwait, both countries suffered dramatic changes following the discovery of oil at the beginning of the twentieth century. The change in the urban structure of both states is a reflection of the parallel change in their culture due to the dependency on foreign consultancies and expertise.

Both the University of Bahrain and the University of Kuwait offer BSc programmes in Architecture which are relatively new, having only been established at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Furthermore, both countries still lack programmes that focus on a bigger scale such as urban planning, urban design or landscape architecture. This newly established architectural and urban education has its implications for the urban structure of these countries. The lack of local expertise in both states forces their governments to depend greatly on foreign expertise and consultancies, which in turn has caused gradual cultural transformation and thereafter change in the urban fabric of both states.

Both countries have just started to establish a sense of awareness of the destroyed cultural heritage of the mid-twentieth century, and there are a limited number of published research studies in Kuwait, as in Bahrain, about sustainability, let alone the relationship between cultural change and urban sustainability. This lack of awareness of the deterioration of urban sustainability and the implications resulting from adopting unsustainable foreign planning systems in the region is causing the continuous transformation of culture which is reflected in the urban fabric.

The cultures of Bahrain and Kuwait have continued to transform since the unearthing of oil in the region, although the pace of transformation is today slower than in the mid-twentieth century. However, the on-going transformation of the urban structure of both states and the unsustainability of their current planning systems result from the transformation of their cultures due to the imported foreign forces of change.

Further research is needed in this area to investigate the social, physical, cultural, economical and environmental consequences of cultural change in the Arabian Gulf. This will be addressed in the full PhD research. The full study also

includes other countries of the Arabian Gulf such as Qatar and the United Arab Emirates and it will focus on Bahrain as its main case study. The study will result in an assessment of the sustainability of the current planning system in Bahrain; in addition, it will provide a set of recommendations to enhance the sustainability of urbanism in Bahrain.

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