

# Preserving the modernist *vernacular* in the Middle East

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This paper focuses on the fast disappearing urban heritage of the modernist neighbourhoods in the Middle East. This often overlooked architectural legacy of the mid-twentieth century is significant for the role it played in the early transformation of many cities into their 'modern' image. Though often modest in scale these buildings collectively exemplify a critical period of modernisation and urbanisation in the region. Rarely recognized as 'heritage' the modernist vernacular is rapidly disappearing as it is subsumed by urban growth and renewal or adapted beyond recognition. There are, however, a number of examples where the value of this heritage and early modernist neighbourhoods is being recognized, though often in the context of new functions.

## 1 Introduction

It is now widely accepted that the modernist architecture that emerged in the MENA region in the middle of the twentieth century is not simply a replication of an international style, but a uniquely local and regional expression in the spirit of its time (Isenstadt / Kishwar 2008). Designed by a combination of Western architects, émigré architects and local architects trained abroad, modernist architecture has made a distinct mark on the region with significant politico-geographic variations. In the process, highly iconic buildings have emerged, and some such as the Sheraton in Doha or emblematic Kuwait towers have become national symbols and arbiters of a tradition in their own right. The focus here, however, is the more modest expression of modernism that became evident in towns and cities across the region often taking the form of 2-3 story apartment buildings that emerged within many of the newly laid out neighbourhoods from the middle of the last century. I will refer to these collectively as a modernist vernacular.

The intention of this paper is to consider this component of Middle Eastern heritage that is regularly overlooked as being locally or nationally significant in terms of architectural heritage or character defining in the context of urban conservation. The architecture of the mid-twentieth century has had a profound role in shaping cities in the region and introducing an architecture and urban form that is international in style, yet profoundly local in character. Though often modest in scale these buildings collectively exemplify a critical period of modernisation and urbanisation in the region, and need to be considered with the discourses of urban conservation and urban identity. Like most urban heritage, it is a collective value connected to urban morphology that is character defining rather than the value of each individual building.

As a means of containing the discussion, this paper specifically considers three distinct geographical regions of Turkey, Jordan and Israel, and the Arabian Gulf States. Each have experienced a distinct form of modernism as part of urbanisation processes in the middle of the twentieth century with differing influences. They do, however, face a number of shared challenges in protecting and conserving this urban heritage. Since these buildings often appeared in newly laid out neighbourhoods, and on occasion within older areas, I will roughly position my argument within a Conzenian approach to urban morphology by considering the formative urban process to encompass urban plan, buildings and utilisation and the emergence of new typologies within the periphery (Larkham 1996).

## 2 Background and historic context

Colonial influences in some places, the emergence of nation states, and a post-colonial search for local identity have all played a role in the production of modernist architecture in the region (Isenstadt / Kishwar 2008). Middle Eastern countries have created their own versions of

modernism as it heralded a new era of urban development. Wittrock (1998) has articulated the arrival of modernism to the periphery as being *belated* and *inauthentic* in the sense that it has merged with local vernacular practices. Akcan (2012) describes the process as being one of *translation*. Modernisation in the region came from a combination of European influences and powerful national leaders. The initial period of modernism was often a case of European architects transposing their ideas on the East, sometimes without even visiting the region. As architects from the region started studying abroad, either at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris or in Germany, they brought functionalist architectural styles and new materials such as reinforced concrete back with them (Lefaivre / Tzoniz, 2012). A number of émigré architects working in the region reinforced certain stylistic preferences, but imported styles were never direct copies of western modernism “but significantly modified visions”, that were “transformed during translation” (Akcan 2012: 2). Many were an amalgamation of regionalism and modernism, responding to regional socio-cultural conditions and climate through sailing overhangs, window shades and balconies (Figure 1).

European style town plans also instigated a move from low rise to medium rise and shared occupancy living, which in itself was a significant break with tradition. The vernacular in this case is one that was being produced by architects, who in a new role had “shifted from providing custom designs for the elite to a more social central role of accommodating the larger polity” (Isenstadt / Kishwar 2008: 20). Although often the home to a newly emergent educated urban middle class, apartment plans and their external organization would often reflect strongly held cultural norms alongside aspirations of modernity. They were emerging not only at a time of significant societal change, but also of urban governance structures and growth and modernisation policies that were intertwined with nation building.

Unlike examples in North Africa where strong colonial influences are evident, in the Middle East locally commissioned masterplans such as the Jansen plan for Ankara or the first Dubai masterplan prepared by John Harris in 1960 provided a base for the new architectural style of urban villas and low rise apartment blocks. In Riyadh, Saudi Arabia the grid layout of Al-Malaz district with its modern villas and apartments for public sector workers provided a template for buildings elsewhere in the city through the 1950s and 60s (Al-Hathloul 2017). These masterplans were often a significant shift from the traditional settlements that had preceded them and fell into a segment of time of nation building and modernisation but before the oil boom and rapid growth. Thus most developments remained of a modest scale. Nonetheless, these western style city plans also marked a move away from the generative model of growth inherent in Islamic towns (Hakim 2007).

### 3 Current condition and conservation challenges

The rapid spread of this modernist architectural form across the region has also been followed by its rapid demise and loss. This *everyday* modernism is rarely recognised as local heritage although it includes some *vernacular* gems that define the region just as much as some of the older architectural styles do.

Conzen’s theory of morphology and typology aptly explains the formation of many of these neighbourhoods in relation to more historic areas (Conzen [1978] 1981:87). The planned neighbourhoods appeared at the periphery of historic cores and provided a base for the newly emergent modernist typology, which over time also made an appearance within the older cores. And although this might expect to be one layer in a continuing urban growth pattern, rapid urbanisation pressures combined with an appetite for rapid replacement of building stock and a relaxation of height restrictions is often resulting these older neighbourhoods experiencing rapid turn-over with only the pre-modern historic cores of cities being protected as heritage zones. As economy dictates demolition, the city is also losing its sense of continuity and sense of accumulation. Even in Tel Aviv’s White City, now a World Heritage Site, it has taken significant effort and campaigning to achieve a sense of integrity (Figure 2). The many issues facing the protection and conservation of modernist *vernacular* buildings are a combination of economic, social and technical factors.

Just like the more traditional houses and neighbourhoods before them, by many they are considered old fashioned, lacking qualities and comfort facilities of newer buildings. As land values open up lucrative replacement and development opportunities, few are considered to be of historic or architectural merit and are being replaced by newer and taller buildings reflecting ambitious urban growth plans of city authorities. This is not dissimilar to earlier replacement of the more traditional historic cores resulting from urbanisation and densification of central areas and often compounded by the Islamic inheritance system. As more buildings are replaced, the townscape character is also irrevocably altered, whilst the few examples that remain become isolated from a context *of their time*, with a distinct probability that this period of urban development will all but disappear from Middle Eastern cities.

Where they have survived, the buildings themselves have also often been significantly altered with various additions or new finishes that are not necessarily in keeping with their architectural character. As many are located in what has now become central urban districts, their function has also altered as ground floors have been extensively converted to commercial uses and associated signage that can also negatively impact on their character and integrity (Figure 3).

A further constraint is the technical challenges involved in the conservation of reinforced concrete structures. The quality of building materials and limited knowledge of reinforced concrete technologies to the region and the advanced construction technologies were not just imported but also still experimental in their countries of origin (de Jonge 2017). Many of the buildings of this period are reinforced concrete using a low grade concrete mix, hand mixing and pouring. The climatic conditions in which the concrete was cured, including high summer temperatures, would also have differed significantly from the conditions under which these materials were originally tested for specification. Given these constraints some buildings have survived extremely well, but that does not diminish the conservation challenges that lay ahead, including lack of local know-how to undertake concrete repairs and the prohibitive cost of doing so for building owners.

#### **4 Looking to the future**

This paper has identified a number of significant challenges to the ongoing protection and conservation of a modernist *vernacular* architecture that generally emerged in newly laid out neighbourhoods in the middle of the twentieth century, marking a period between the emergence of nation states and the rapid urban growth and developments that continue to this day. Nonetheless, there are some conscious efforts being made for their preservation, most notably in cities that lack an older core where this period of heritage is being recognised as making a contribution to urban character and in establishing a historic precedent to the city identity. In Amman in Jordan converting houses in particular from Amman's early modern period (1930s to 50s) into restaurants has become a trend that is also seen as a way of celebrating the cultural legacy of what is a relatively young city Jacobs (2010).

The modernist neighbourhoods in cities like Amman have become on the one hand desirable places to live for their urban qualities (e.g. Webdeh) and on the other hand destination and recreational districts attractive to a young urban elite (Rainbow Street). The coveted World Heritage Status won by Tel Aviv for what became defined as the White City, has not only generated broader interest in preserving and restoring modernist heritage, but has also highlighted the commercial viabilities of preservation. It now seems inevitable that conservation will also be coupled with functional change as these neighbourhoods are now positioned in the urban centre rather than the periphery they once occupied.

For many places, however, there is still the concern that a period of history and urban development that was critical to the growth and development of the city is totally obliterated, both obstructing an urban narrative of growth and in some cases further isolating older traditional quarters into showcase and twee *heritage* destinations.

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## Figure captions

Figure 1: These modern movement apartment blocks in Sharjah, UAE, incorporate features that make them regionally relevant. (photo by Aylin Orbasli, 2008)

Figure 2: Some of the common threats to the integrity of modernist quarters are growing commercial uses and increased heights of surrounding buildings as in this example from Dubai, UAE (photo by Aylin Orbasli, 2009)

Figure 3: In Tel Aviv, Israel the modern movement buildings have been extended upwards as land prices increase in city centre locations (photo by Aylin Orbasli, 2013)