The Destruction of Modernist Heritage: The Myth of Al-Sawaber

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Powerful myths dominate modern architectural history. Design of postwar high-density housing, it has been argued, has failed in delivering its utopian promises. Political, economic, and social factors are mostly missing from these postmodern narratives that have connected modernism to failed housing projects. This association has set a precedent for false histories to emerge around the world. The history of Kuwait housing, in particular, has been written with a bias against the apartment block. My study introduces a controversial Kuwaiti housing project into this debate and contributes to the legacy of modernist state housing schemes in architectural discourse.

Figure 1. Al-Sawaber complex (photograph by author).

Introduction

Myths serve social, cultural, economic, and political interests. Katharine Bristol made this argument in her article "The Myth of Pruitt-Igoe."[1] For some architectural critics and historians, Pruitt-Igoe became the symbol of modernism's allegedly failed dream of a social utopia. Charles Jencks famously announced the death of the 20th century project the moment Pruitt-Igoe fell.[2] Rather than reaffirming Jencks's argument, Bristol traced the failures of Pruitt-Igoe to the shortcomings of public planning and housing institutions, so as to expose the ideological underpinnings of this historical viewpoint and the motives of the architects who had an interest in fostering this false history. Bristol's article contributed to the shift in the historical narrative of modern architecture from the wholesale failure of its heritage to more contextual debates that include racial, social, and economic inequalities, which lay outside architecture's boundaries and, in Bristol's argument, led to Pruitt-Igoe's demise.

In Kuwait, as in St. Louis, a powerful myth dominates housing policy. In the late twentieth century, many voiced their critique of the apartment block as a suitable model for the Kuwaiti family. The Al-Sawaber complex, located in Kuwait City's Al-Sawaber area, was constructed as a higher density model for collective living. It enjoyed a short period of success after which its lack of maintenance and demographic shifts in Kuwait City's population resulted in its deterioration and subsequent calls for its demolition. Not unlike in the St. Louis example, in which Pruitt-Igoe was used to further an ideological agenda, the Al-Sawaber complex, as it came to be known, became the symbol of squalor and antisocial behavior (Figure 1). The Al-Sawaber project came to be during a period of radical experimentation in housing typologies. It was part of the 1960s utopian stock of projects designed by renowned international architects, who took part in shaping a Kuwaiti modern architectural history. Now under threat of demolition, its current alarming state of disrepair gives legitimacy to this narrative; however, I will argue that regeneration discourse, asserting the failures of modernist buildings and favoring their demolition rather than restoration, has led to the unwarranted demonization of a large chapter in architectural history.[3] Moreover, more recent architectural histories challenged the social position of modern architecture and its ability to withstand adverse political and economic transformation. These debates are, in part, responsible for the contemporary decline in value of modern heritage around the world and its subsequent demolition.

Through the examination of the mid–twentieth century Al-Sawaber complex, I will demonstrate that filling the missing gaps in these dominant histories would not only enrich architectural education but it would also provide incentive for the maintenance and preservation of some of these buildings.

Histories of architecture, written in the later half of the twentieth century and later, challenge the critical position of modernism. Modern architecture, it has been argued, is powerless in the face of capitalist structures and, at times, complicit in this alignment with economic forces. Alan Colquhoun disputed modernism's social claims, describing the modern movement as a "stylistic preference, a particular taste, a set of meanings binding together a certain group of architects at a certain time."[4] Colin Rowe argued modern architecture "displayed a wholly naïve idealism."[5] The most scathing critique came from Manfredo Tafuri. His thesis challenged past claims that suggested architecture can be critical. He stated, "one is led almost automatically to the discovery of what may well be the 'drama' of architecture today: that is architecture obliged to return to *pure architecture,* to form without utopia; in the best cases, to sublime uselessness."[6]

Tafuri's critique has split theorists into two camps, with those advocating for the return of criticality spearheaded by Michael Hays.[7] On the other side are those who want to do away with this dimension of architecture, led perhaps by Rem Koolhaas. However, the two camps are united in their critical re-examination of modern architecture.

This debate has extended into histories of late-twentieth-century housing. Alison Ravetz, for example, argues that each generation needs to re-examine historical facts. As she states in *Council Housing and Culture: The History of a Social Experiment*,

> … a collective knowledge of events is accumulated as they unfold, and where social affairs are concerned, this is inevitably within a partisan framework. In the process much gets forgotten or foreshortened, and the memories of what was experienced harden into orthodoxy. There comes a point when this body of accumulated knowledge needs reassessment for new generations. It is here that, with distance of time, a more balanced overview can begin to be constructed.[8]

Ravetz's history of British postwar housing provides another perspective with which to critique housing and the modern welfare state, thus contributing to a changing attitude towards modern architecture.

Housing Policy and the Welfare State

The Al-Sawaber complex shares similar associations to those assigned to British council housing. Just as the 1960s council housing aesthetic was vilified in architectural journals and made responsible for criminal and anti-social behavior, the Al-Sawaber project was the target of a similar ideological campaign that developed a decade after its construction. The history of Al-Sawaber can be traced back to housing policies implemented during a period of nation building and adopted by Kuwaiti elites in the 1950s. Sheikh Abdulla Al-Salem Al-Sabah, the emir at the time, put structures in place for an ambitious program that provided unprecedented benefits for all Kuwaitis. Welfare
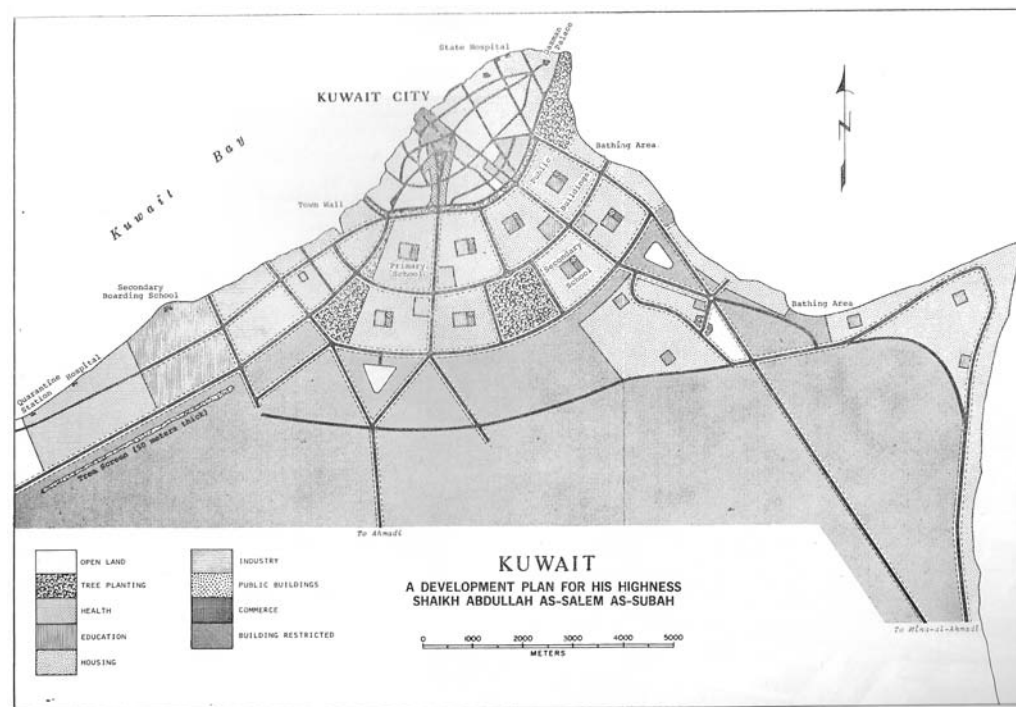

Figure 2. Minoprio, Spenceley and MacFarlane development plan (courtesy the Kuwait Municipality Archives).

benefits were established within the turbulent political climate of the region and the rise of Arab nationalism.[9] These universal policies, which included urban housing, led to the emergence of a new Kuwaiti society.

The Land Acquisition Policy (LAP) of 1951 was one of the laws enacted by Sheikh Abdulla Al-Salem Al-Sabah as part of a broader development program. The LAP was implemented in order to raise the social status of all Kuwaitis; but it was also the start of a much larger housing scheme that provided all Kuwaiti males of a particular age a state-subsidized house in the form of a "loan and plot" scheme or, alternatively, pre-built government housing. The second legislated policy was the Public Organizing Line (POL). It was ratified in July 1954 by Sheikh Abdulla Al-Salem to counteract the effects of the LAP. The POL mandated that all land outside a marked boundary was state-owned, and non-negotiable for private ownership; the purpose of the POL was to end land disputes, speculation, and inflated land values. In August 1954, the POL was extended, and a decision was made that all land acquisition outside the city walls was to halt, with the exception of land purchased by the state. The POL, consequently, affected the LAP, and the latter's application was confined to property within the POL. Under these conditions, the LAP applied to only 3.05% (543.85 km²)

of approximately 17,818 km² of Kuwaiti territory.[10]

In these early stages of modernization, the state policy was to buy private land from within the city limits at prices above market value. Most of the acquired land had previously been residential in use. Displaced Kuwaitis were assigned land plots outside the city limits through a lottery system. These new housing plots were auctioned off at nominal prices and generous state-subsidized loans guaranteed affordability of land outside the city walls. Kuwaitis moved into new neighborhoods designed by the British planners Minoprio, Spencely and MacFarlane (Figure 2). Therefore, Kuwaiti suburbanization, unlike its western counterpart, was not a reaction against urban industrialization. Nor was it a response to population trends or "urban flight." Instead, Kuwaiti suburbanization was implemented in order to urbanize and modernize the city as a symbol of a modern state. This parallel development of the modern city and its suburbs was celebrated in the journal *Architectural Design*. In a 1957 special issue on the Middle East, Raglan Squire, guest editor, documented Kuwait's development:

> Building of houses goes on apace on the flat sandy areas outside the town walls; and here too a vast industrial area has sprung up. Out-

side the walls the master plan provides for a series of residential neighborhood units of about 6,000 each. The development of several of these neighborhoods is almost finished.[11]

The 1950s saw, therefore, the beginnings of a welfare state and of radical changes to traditional living. Yet by the 1960s the housing system was already stretched too thin due to the acquisition policy. Even though the LAP was first envisaged as a way to activate a modernization project for Kuwait City, its implementation resulted in an economically unsustainable housing model and changes to traditional structures that overtaxed the state housing institutions. The first generation of displaced Kuwaitis preferred the option of a 70,000 Kuwaiti dinar loan and a plot in the first, second, third, or even fourth tier of neighborhood districts.[12] They set a precedent that future generations insist on following. A post-oil nuclear family model of living usurped the pre-oil standard, in which extended families were accommodated in one house. Therefore, the demand for housing doubled or even tripled. On the one hand, the 1950s state benefits created modern dwelling units and an increase in modern technologies. It gave birth to a Kuwaiti middle class that formed the technocratic body of Kuwaiti society and that demanded reform and development. These Kuwaitis also often held administrative positions in state planning and public works institutions. On the other hand, these policies created a society dependent on state handouts, a demand for housing that far surpassed the available supply, longer waiting periods for housing, development speculation that resulted in an exponential increase in land value and, more importantly, the hegemony of the detached housing model.

The Detached Single-Family House

The detached house did not exist in Kuwait's pre-oil built environment. It was a British import first constructed in Al-Ahmadi town by the Kuwait Oil Company (KOC) in 1946 to house its employees (Figure 3). By 1952, Ralph Shaw reported, "more

Figure 3. Al-Ahmadi neighborhood (courtesy the Kuwait Oil Company Archives).

than 1,000 homes had been built."[13] Al-Ahmadi was modeled after Garden City principles that idealized the relationship between dwelling and labor. Workers at KOC, both British and Kuwaiti nationals, were assigned a detached house with a garden, making them the first beneficiaries of the single-plot housing scheme (Figure 4). Al-Ahmadi's success as a neighborhood model was comparable to that of Bournville, Letchwork, and Welwyn—some of the earlier English garden cities. However, Al-Ahmadi remained an anomaly. Neither the housing models nor the neighborhood plan were considered by the state as prototypes for future development. Its location far outside the city limits and its exclusive clientele added to its isolation.

Instead, the satellite towns proposed in 1952 by Minoprio, Spencely and MacFarlane (MSM) were the inspiration for the earliest modern houses.[14] MSM suggested new settlements that would be separated from Kuwait City by a greenbelt. MacFarlane described the plan as follows:

Outside the [Kuwait City] wall, the land planned for development will accommodate some 48,000 persons and covers an area greater than the old

town inside the wall. Almost all flat and all sand, it is being divided by main roads into eight communities of approximately 6,000 persons.[15]

Housing plots during this period were extremely generous; they ranged in scale from 750 to 1,000 square meters. Building material, construction methods, financial assistance and state policies were designed to support this housing model. The detached house became synonymous with a modern standard of living, mostly due to the technological systems that were incorporated in the design. For most Kuwaitis, a detached house signaled a shift from unsanitary and uncomfortable living conditions to those that provided comfort and relief during harsh winter and summer months. The privately designed house on state-subsidized land was a sign of family prestige and it became a part of the collective Kuwaiti consciousness and, in fact, as recent protests show, it is seen as a basic right. Esping-Andersen stressed the significance in the welfare state of "citizenship rights determining access to services."[16] As Esping-Andersen noted, "decommodification occurs when a service is rendered as a matter of right and when a

person can maintain a livelihood without reliance on the market."[17]

Esping-Andersen's concept of decommodification is associated with services people allegedly are entitled to because "of their citizenship status rather than their income."[18] Ownership of a single family home was perceived as a Kuwaiti right. Kuwaitis, over the years, grew a sense of entitlement and citizen dependence on the state grew exponentially.

High-Density Residential Units

State construction of only one housing model led to a preferred standard of living. High-density residential units were resisted not because of their lack of suitability but mostly because the state did not initially experiment with cooperative living during the early stages of housing development. The Kuwaiti demand for single plots is a cultural phenomenon rather than a claim based on programmatic or social needs. As a consequence, the housing problem of the 1960s turned into a housing crisis by the 1970s. It was only then, as the state was exhausting developable land for single-plot housing, that experimentation with different housing models appeared.

In the 1970s, state officials suggested higher density units as a possible solution to the housing crisis. Row and stepped houses and apartment blocks were investigated. However, before the 1970s, housing institutions were resistant to changes in the status quo. In one example, housing ministries stopped construction of Saba Shiber's row-house proposal in the Magwa area.[19] As early as 1962 Saba Shiber—a Palestinian planner who worked at the Department of Public Works in Kuwait in the 1960s—appealed for a greater variety in housing. In a report submitted to the Municipal Council on April 7, 1962 he stated,

> if Kuwait continues to grow according to the pattern of the 750- and 1000-square-meter plot, it will become even a more tremendously extended city than it is at present. This is not only uneconomical but it is not conducive to social interaction and the conservation of valu-

Figure 4. Al-Ahmadi single-plot homes (courtesy the Kuwait Oil Company Archives).

able urban land. It is therefore necessary to reconsider the question of single plots.[20]

Higher density units were not encouraged in 1962 state policy, as Shiber noted: "To date, due to strong social feelings about this subject, the recommendations contained in the … report have not been incorporated as official policy."[21] But by the 1970s, it became necessary to experiment with higher density models. The National Housing Authority—now the Public Authority for Housing Care—proposed apartment complexes in the city. Plans moved forward despite the housing standard that was already established and the high land values in the city brought about by speculation. The 1971 Colin Buchanan Report, commissioned by the Kuwait Municipality, called for higher density housing that would accommodate 4,650 Kuwaitis—30 square meters per person with 40 square meters for "ancillary uses outside the units, including car parks, playground and public space."[22] International architects including Dissing & Weitling, Georges Candilis, and Arthur Erickson provided proposals (Figure 5). These projects proposed higher density units in different areas in Kuwait City's residentially zoned districts that would attract average-income Kuwaiti families and establish a precedent for subsequent urban housing projects. The state motives were primarily to strike a population balance in the city and to alleviate the housing burden. The Buchanan Report surveyed the rapidly transforming structure of the resident population in Kuwait City. In 1965, Buchanan noted, the population was around 100,000, of whom 29,000 were Kuwaitis.[23] In 1970 the population dropped to 80,000, with 21,000 being Kuwaitis. By 1983 a 96.3% decline in the Kuwaiti population was officially recorded, with a 55% drop in the total population.[24]
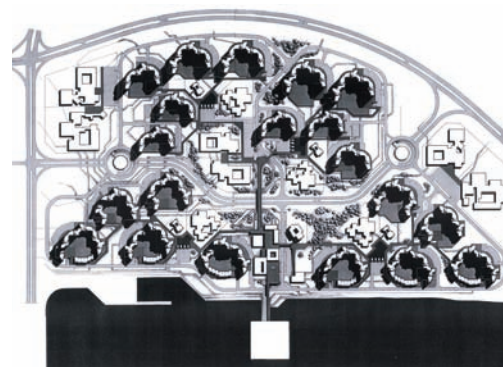

Figure 5. Dissing & Weitling, East Sulaibikhat Housing (courtesy the Kuwait Municipality Archives).

Arthur Erickson and the Al-Sawaber Housing Project

The Al-Sawaber project, therefore, has to be situated within this complex dynamic. In 1977, the National Housing Authority (NHA) was convinced that the Al-Sawaber project would be "a landmark in the progressive housing program for Kuwait, serving as a prototype for future housing developments."[25] The state addressed the educated middle class, encouraging them "to take up residence in the heart of their city."[26] They would set an example and become the pioneers of a new mode of living.

In 1977, Arthur Erickson was one of the architects invited to design higher density residential units for Kuwait City's Al-Sawaber area. Georges Candilis was another. However, Candilis's proposal was to be located on a site adjacent to the Al-Sawaber area. Erickson's and Candilis's proposals for Kuwait are not unique. In fact, during this period, over forty design proposals at various scales were prepared and, for the most part, implemented. These projects were the work of international architects and planners whose appointment by the Kuwait Municipality, for the most part, was based on their prior work in the region. For example, in 1965 a team of "experts" made up of the English town planner Colin Buchanan, two representatives from the United Nations, and the architects Franco Albini and Leslie Martin helped restructure the planning department at the Kuwait Municipality at the invitation of Hamid Shuaib, a Kuwaiti architect and planner working in the department.[27] They each participated in different stages of the planning process, but together they changed the course of Kuwait's architectural discourse.

On other occasions, international architects received direct invitations from the advisory planning

committee. In the case of Erickson, for example, his project for Simon Fraser University (begun 1965) helped him secure a personal invitation from Kuwait's NHA.[28] At any given moment during this period, multiple large-scale projects were simultaneously under construction. This frenzy of architectural and urban projects was part of a larger vision to modernize the social, political, and cultural infrastructure of Kuwait. Erickson's and Candilis's proposals, therefore, have to be understood in the context of this period in Kuwait's modernist architectural heritage.

The proposals were made almost a decade apart; Candilis's project was designed in 1968, Erickson's in 1977. Their architectural philosophies were different. Erickson, who had faith in the utopian underpinnings of the modernist project, stated in a speech at McGill University, "modernism released us from the constraints of everything that had gone before with a euphoric sense of freedom."[29] Erickson also expressed his faith in the phenomenological qualities of architecture, arguing that "space is and has always been the spiritual dimension of architecture. It is not the physical statement of the structure so much as what it contains that moves us."[30]

Erickson's modernist leanings were tempered by his admiration and familiarity with this part of the world. In 1950, after earning his architectural degree at McGill, he spent two years traveling in Europe and the Middle East. His approach to architecture had less to do with solving universal social problems such as housing than was the case for many of his European contemporaries. Instead, Erickson comes from the architectural tradition of Frank Lloyd Wright, whom he called his mentor. Erickson viewed each design project as a unique problem with its own spatial and site conditions that needed to be resolved. Candilis, on the other hand, was a direct descendent of the architecture and urban philosophies of Le Corbusier. He was among the many European architects who were absorbed by the problem of housing; his numerous housing typologies produced for the various sessions at the *Congrès internationaux d'architecture moderne* (CIAM) reflect this

concern. His contribution at the ninth CIAM meeting was a study of North African housing. Candilis's formal approach relied heavily on the romanticization of the subjects of these studies, particularly of lower-income Moroccan housing. He was, along with Shadrach Woods, the architect in charge of overseeing the development of Le Corbusier's Unite d'Habitation. In his 1968 project for higher density housing in Kuwait City, Candilis proposed a variety of housing types to maximize density.

But it was Arthur Erickson's design for the Al-Sawaber area that was ultimately implemented. Erickson received an invitation from Kuwait's NHA board to redesign the Al-Sawaber area, located in the heart of the city. The site was mostly vacant with a cemetery occupying the northern corner of the land. Erickson's project, proposed for Kuwaitis, was spatially and formally innovative within Kuwait's built environment (Figure 6). Two organizing principles anchored nine neighborhoods on a 24.5-hectare site. The primary element was the design of the building spines, which were aligned on an east-west axis; this determined the 900 apartment units' north-south orientation. The stepped building form clustered towards these spines in order to provide a microclimate in the public spaces; the composition resulted in an A-shaped section that not only shielded residents from the harsh summer sun but also provided natural ventilation. Communal activities such as markets, cafés, restaurants, and play areas ran along these urban corridors (Figure 7).

The second organizing principle was the series of linked open spaces that empty into public gardens. The importance assigned to these connected pedestrian streets marked a shift in normative neighborhood planning as practiced by the NHA. Model neighborhood units outside the city focused on relationships between objects. More specifically, neighborhoods were organized according to three community levels (Figure 8). The Kindergarten Community Unit (KCU) was the smallest in scale. It was based on the catchment of a single 300-place kindergarten that contained complimentary community facilities; the Primary Community

Figure 6. Arthur Erickson's project for the Al-Sawaber district (courtesy the Kuwait Municipality Archives).

Figure 7. Arthur Erickson's proposal for communal areas and public space (courtesy the Kuwait Municipality Archives).

Unit (PCU) was slightly larger in scale and was composed of five KCUs. The third level of neighborhood organization was based on the Neighborhood Community Unit, which included PCU and KCU structures. Erickson's proposal suggested an alternative solution. Pedestrian corridors that provided structures with scale replaced rational distribution of objects in space. The kindergartens remained essential elements, but it was how residents reached them that was much more important; they became part of the linked corridors. Erickson noted that "the kindergartens form an extension of the garden system and are located to provide easy access and create a community focal point at the north and south edge of the site."[31]

Each building housed two apartments on each floor, separated by the circulation system of stairs

Figure 41.1 National Housing Authority layout theory

Figure 8. The National Housing Authority diagrammatic layout using the Kindergarten Community Unit (KCU) as the basis for neighborhood planning (courtesy the Kuwait Municipality Archives).

Figure 9. Architetti BBPR proposal for Safat Square, Kuwait City (courtesy the Kuwait Municipality Archives).

and elevators. This circulation core was articulated in the building façade, giving it a prominent position in the overall scheme. The floor area for the different apartment types was 295 square meters; as generous as that might seem, it was markedly different from the 750 and 1000 square meters that were earmarked for the single-plot house. In addition, Erickson's apartment layout omitted key elements that were essential parts of Kuwaiti residences. The apartments lacked a clear separation of programmatic functions, as well as hierarchy between public and private space. Most importantly, Erickson's plan omitted the *diwaniya*—the men's social and political gathering space. The diwaniya was and still is an important element in the Kuwaiti house. The state-imposed ban on political parties moved this public sociopolitical space into the privacy of one's home. As a public feature within the private realm of the house, the diwaniya had to be carefully defined within the spatial organization. In fact, the diwaniya was and still is incorporated in the layout of NHA's public housing schemes. These missing features reflected negatively on Erickson's proposed plans. A more in-depth analysis of the constituent parts of

Kuwaiti home life would certainly have eliminated this oversight.

Erickson's proposal for Al-Sawaber occurred during a transitional period in architectural history. Architectural discourse, during that time, had moved beyond the 1920s heroic architecture and past the "second machine age." Postmodernism and structuralism had become influential alternatives to modernist orthodoxy—the former resorting to a short-lived eclectic revival of historical styles, the latter attempting to apply anthropological and literary theories to the architectural field. Despite the emergence of these architectural trends, modern architecture never left the architectural scene; it was simply repackaged. Architects whose faith in the utopian dimension of modernity defended its diverse history and proclaimed that the modernist project was still unfolding, and that architecture cannot operate isolated from the sociopolitical context. At the same time, the period saw a venomous attack against modernist heritage that contemporary architectural discourse is still trying to untangle.

Many of the Kuwait projects from the 1970s and 1980s represented this transition. Among these were unbuilt projects by Peter and Alison Smithson for the

Ministries Complex and the Architetti BBPR proposal for Safat Square (Figure 9). Along with BBPR and the Smithsons, the advisory planning committee at the Kuwait Municipality sent out personal invitations to Candilis, Josic and Woods, and Reima Pietilä to advise on the making of a modern Kuwait City. The invitation of this consortium was part of a much larger vision of the Kuwaiti elite, whose faith in this modernist project was perceived as the way forward.

To a certain extent, these different architectural trajectories influenced Erickson's Al-Sawaber project. The separation of pedestrian and vehicular circulation are characteristic of the functionalist approach of modern urban planning, particularly the concept of "streets in the air," which his pedestrian spines resembled. Despite this functionalist approach to circulation, Erickson's scheme also employed a more comprehensive mixed-use approach in the integration of residential, leisure, and commercial activities. He exhibited structuralist tendencies in his development of a web, in the formal distribution of the buildings, and in the stem, represented by the elevated walkways that connected these structures. One outcome of structuralist influence on architecture was the shift from vertical stacking to a horizontal placement of forms over an expanded field. These modules on the landscape were connected together by an organizing structure, usually corridors, streets, or paths. This "web and stem" design language was advocated as an alternative to the perceived banality of tower block apartments. It was also an attempt to create and frame public space through this system of mass and void.

Despite the project's apparent formal connections with structuralism, Erickson never explicitly expressed structuralist leanings when describing his projects. Instead, the relationship between the building modules and the connecting paths had more to do with his admiration of Wright's sensibility towards constructed and existing landscape. Erickson reconstructed the topography of the existing Al-Sawaber site from this interplay between natural and manmade elements. However, this juxtaposition came at a cost to the apartments themselves. The apartment

buildings were designed to face one another, compromising privacy and eventually leading to the closing off of openings in the building façades.

Construction and Administrative Shortcomings

There is, however, a wide gulf between architectural ideas as written in history books and the contexts in which they developed and were implemented. Unlike other arts that enjoy a level of autonomy, architecture is an applied art that has inescapable structural and economic demands. From the outset, the Al-Sawaber project was blighted by construction and administrative problems. Erickson's 1977 proposal was completed in 1981 and in 1989 it housed 2,600 inhabitants. Only 524 apartments were built, just over half of the 900 units proposed by Erickson. Therefore, Al-Sawaber never reached its optimal density. At this point, the project was subcontracted to a Singaporean-Korean contractor and many of the elements that were part of Erickson's original design were omitted. The complex network of pedestrian routes was not seamlessly connected, thus breaking the continuity of pedestrian circulation, one of the main features of the original design. The A-shaped section defined by the clustering of apartment buildings was not implemented and the sustainable microclimate was not achieved. Communal facilities were built but were not operational. Eyad Al-Attar, secretary of the Al-Sawaber Administrative Council, noted that a large depot, four restaurants, and four retail spaces were not fully functional.[32] Al-Attar added that some of the facilities were used by nonprofit organizations outside the Al-Sawaber community, such as the Women Cultural and Social Society, Center for Research and Social Studies, and the Youth Sports Society. This forced residents to go outside the complex for basic needs.[33] According to Eisa Al-Gharabally, the president of the Al-Sawaber Administrative Council, communal facilities have not successfully operated since the establishment of the complex.[34]

For the Al-Sawaber complex to succeed, a homeowners' association or a similar union was essential. This type of organization is responsible

for the maintenance and upkeep of cooperative complexes. However, the NHA did not enforce the establishment of a union from the outset; instead, it claimed responsibility for maintenance, and a cooperative culture among the residents was never established nor was a sense of responsibility for the upkeep of shared spaces. Residents relied on the NHA, which only did the bare minimum. In 2001 the Ministry of Finance put a stop to a 750,000 Kuwaiti dinars (KD) budget allocated to the NHA for maintenance. And it was at this time, a full twelve years into the project, that the NHA first pushed for the establishment of a homeowners association. In 2006, the Audit Bureau fined the NHA for unlawfully continuing its services. The NHA, as a response, urged the residents, once more, to establish this union. In March 11, 2006, Minister of Public Works and Minister of State Housing Badr Al-Humaidhi confirmed "the formation of such a federation would make it easier for the state to reach an understanding with [owners] in the complex."[35] Al-Humaidhi claimed this union would allow the state to deal with a single entity when it comes to the maintenance and renovation of the building.[36]

But Al-Humaidhi's recommendations were not implemented. In a 2011 interview Mohammad Al-Othman—a tenant of Al-Sawaber who is actively fighting for the valuation and subsequent demolition of the units—rejected the idea of a homeowners' association on the grounds that it would drive a wedge between different owners. His main reason for refusing, however, was stated later in the interview: "Why," he asked, "should we be asked to pay for maintenance?"[37] Al-Othman's lack of awareness of collective living requirements is a result of this precarious relationship established between the NHA and the Al-Sawaber tenants, and of Kuwaitis' general dependency on the state. This project had been imagined as a self-sufficient, economically sustainable community. It was meant to generate profits from the retail and commercial facilities. A union would have helped regulate these activities. It would also have helped regain custody of the facilities now

usurped by organizations outside the Al-Sawaber community. In one example, the Women Cultural and Social Society had taken over a large storage room to be used as a children's nursery, the proceeds from which were used to benefit the women's society. Owners and residents therefore blocked any potential for a successful community to emerge by refusing to establish a cooperative union.

Demographic Shifts: Public Health and Safety

Another obstacle to the formation of a homeowners' association was that a demographic shift had already occurred in the resident population. The apartments targeted Kuwaiti families and were leased to them by the state. However, in some cases, apartments were set aside for what was termed "extraordinary cases" and, at times, units were distributed to individuals via the Amiri Diwan, the ruler's headquarters. It has been reported that the NHA still owns 139 units.[38] Further population shifts occurred after the 1990 Gulf War. According to Haya Al-Mughni and Mary Ann Tetreault, female Kuwaitis married to non-Kuwaitis, female divorcees, and widowers squatted in flats that were deserted after Kuwait's liberation.[39] Private investors purchased the remainder of vacant apartments. They, in turn, leased these to non-Kuwaitis. Migrant workers and illegal expatriates also moved in. Overcrowded apartments led to safety and public health issues. Ahmed, an Al-Sawaber tenant, observed that "more than ten people stay in one apartment now, making the place unhygienic. They dispose of their rubbish on their neighbor's doorstep, which fills the whole building with an unpleasant smell."[40]

Fires, as recently as November 2012, have engulfed apartment blocks. In 2011, a fire that damaged an entire block started in an apartment that was rented to more than twenty migrant workers. Subdivisions were common and many of the apartment façades were altered and fire escapes blocked off. The complex became unrecognizable because of these provisional changes (Figure 10). Public spaces were now unwelcoming and unsafe. The elimina-

Figure 10. Al-Sawaber complex with façade alterations (photograph by author).

Figure 11. Al-Sawaber public spaces and elevated pathways (photograph by author).

tion of a visual connection between apartments and public spaces removed that added measure of safety (Figure 11). Owners were forced to move out because of these conditions.

Visual connections are an important safety measure in urban neighborhoods. The urban activist and critic Jane Jacobs referred to this quality as "eyes on the street."[41] Jacobs's formula for a successful neighborhood developed as a direct response to the controversial 1960s urban renewal schemes in American cities. Jacobs's concept of "eyes on the street" defined a social behavior that was produced when buildings faced the street, where residents would monitor improper activity. This safety gauge ensured the continuity of the "sidewalk ballet," a term she also coined, which defined day-to-day activities that gave neighborhoods their distinct identities. Jacobs successfully saved her neighborhood from destruction by illustrating the vibrant social interaction among the inhabitants and the diversity of building types and functions that her neighborhood accommodated.

Economic Forces and the Regeneration Discourse

The fate of the Al-Sawaber neighborhood is precarious. Modernist heritage around the world shares a similar unstable future. Strong economic forces and negative campaigns against modernist state housing are the main contributing factors that have seen the unfortunate demolition of iconic housing projects such as the Heygate Estate.[42] Robin Hood Gardens, despite sustained efforts by the Twentieth Century Society to save this building, will probably follow suit.[43] As in the case of Jacobs's West Village and British council housing, land speculation in the Al-Sawaber district has led to cries for its demolition. Familiar arguments are used to justify the proposed destruction: Al-Sawaber is a slum not fit for living, and particularly for Kuwaiti living. Despite huge gaps in the official narrative, this myth has gained permanent status in Kuwait. Adrian Glasspool argued that demolition is part of a "regeneration discourse" supported by "environmental determinism." Glasspool, one of the last remaining tenants of London's Heygate Estate, explained:

> Environmental determinism is part of the same discourse bandied around in the 1960s…. Then, it was said that the tenement buildings needed to be demolished because they didn't create an environment where people could live happily…. Suddenly the place was being labeled a problem estate…. This is all part of this regeneration discourse. Because there's nothing wrong with the buildings, they have to find an excuse to regenerate the place, i.e. knock it down and replace it.[44]

This discourse is, at times, nostalgic, or refers to a past when the buildings were better maintained. A glorious past is juxtaposed against an evil present. In an article in *Al-Watan Daily,* titled, "Al-Sawaber Complex Unfit for Living, Haven for Prostitution," Nancy Oteifa reported on the public health and safety issues that inhabitants of the complex faced on a daily basis.[45] Oteifa's interviews with tenants

illustrated these conditions. Mai, one of the first residents of Al-Sawaber, stated:

> During my childhood days, the place was clean and looked new, but now the complex has become unpleasant for people to live in. Back in the early days, there were shops in the complex and residents didn't have to leave the building.[46]

Mai added that "the complex … is unsafe for children as there is nobody to supervise them."[47] Oteifa's article makes no mention of the contributing factors that led to these unsafe conditions.

Given the lack of a homeowners' association to regulate safety issues, the absence of communal facilities that provide amenities, and the absence of economic profits that would nurture a self-sufficient community, the Al-Sawaber complex has little chance of survival. Land speculation on the site is an additional problem. The owners, today, have little incentive to rehabilitate the complex and the campaign for its demolition increases in strength. Those residents who have not moved out have spearheaded a campaign for state appraisal and demolition. In 2006, the state appraised the Al-Sawaber complex for 120 million Kuwaiti dinars. This would amount to 206,000 KD for each unit. Private appraisers hired by Al-Sawaber apartment owners estimated a 2 billion KD valuation, which guarantees residents half a million each. Al-Othman and others argue that the state's appraisal would not guarantee ownership in the contemporary housing market. However, state appraisal and land acquisition of Al-Sawaber should not be a solution. Land acquisitions were the primary contributing factor in the current housing crisis. The valuation and demolition of this complex would only lead to increased squandering of the state coffers and create a precedent for a second round of state acquisitions, which will only further land speculation, increase land value, and exacerbate the housing crisis. Contemporaneously, the state retracted its initial low offer, yet land speculation on the Al-Sawaber district and the campaign for its appraisal and demolition continues.

Demolition Versus Rehabilitation

Demolition based on ideological or unimaginative economic arguments has been the knee-jerk response to dilapidated housing estates. Tim Tinker, the architect of the Heygate Estate, argued that "there weren't any problems [with the estate] until relatively recently, but the [Southwark] council eyed it as an opportunity. Councils always go for big-bang, new-build solutions, as opposed to looking after what they've got."[48]

It would be much more economical to restore Al-Sawaber to a healthy state than to tear it down. In 2010, the volume of construction waste in Kuwait was estimated at 4.1 million tons at a rate of 11,000 tons per day.[49] If Al-Sawaber's thirty-three buildings were to be demolished this would be an unimaginably unnecessary waste burden. In fact, a growing trend worldwide has emerged to rehabilitate high-density, high-rise social housing projects. One of many successful examples is the Paris Habitat-OPH.[50] This 1961 tower had been earmarked for demolition. On an experimental basis, the owners instead invited architects to submit proposals for its rehabilitation. Apartment utilities were upgraded. Diversity in apartment layout was achieved by reconfiguring existing apartments. Corridor space was appropriated to enlarge the apartments. The major intervention was a self-supporting steel structure that extended on all four sides and added exterior space to the apartments. New elevators were attached to this addition allowing for the removal of obsolete elevators that were, in turn, integrated into the apartments to increase floor area. The rehabilitation costs were 11.2 million euros, whereas the cost of demolition would have been 20 million euros. Paris Habitat is only one of many successful examples. The healthy restoration of Brunswick Centre in Bloomsbury, London; Odhams Walk in London's Covent Garden; and Park Hill in Sheffield are testaments to the courage of planning officials in the face of strong economic and political forces. The legacy of an important period in architectural history was maintained and communities were preserved—or in some cases new communities formed—through a little bit of imagination.

Recommendations

The Al-Sawaber project is not a design failure or, as the popular myth maintains, unsuitable for Kuwaiti living. Recent trends that show younger Kuwaiti families preferring downtown living and moving to apartments in the city contradict this myth. Instead, Al-Sawaber is blighted because of changes to Erickson's original design that thwarted the development of a vital and self-sufficient community, because of the absence of an administrative union that might support attempts to maintain the structure, because of economic greed that has led to illegal subdivisions of apartment units, and because of land speculation that further aggravated any form of long-term stability for complex residents. Was Al-Sawaber therefore too progressive for its time? Maybe, but what might not have worked twenty-three years ago might be perfect today. According to the World Health Organization, the number of urban residents worldwide is growing by an estimated 60 million per year.[51] The Public Authority for Housing Care should respond to this trend, and Al-Sawaber might be the solution. Former Minister for Housing Affairs Yahya Al-Summait has been quoted as saying that "the housing problem Kuwait faces in recent times can be resolved, and the government only needs to convince the citizens to live in high-rise buildings in new cities at the outskirts of the country."[52]

Why accrue additional costs, suggested by Al-Summait, when Al-Sawaber presents itself as an opportunity? If Al-Sawaber were to be properly rehabilitated, residents would enjoy the benefits of downtown living. As is the case with the Paris towers, this could be done on a trial basis and apartments could be opened up to a larger demographic. Young Kuwaiti entrepreneurs have already moved downtown and have creatively adapted old *baqalas* for their bistro-like restaurants, in locations close to Al-Sawaber.[53] New malls and high-rise office towers have also come up. But Kuwait City does not need another commercial or office tower. These design projects should not replace Al-Sawaber. In fact, the state needs to put a stop to the annexing of residentially zoned districts

for these purposes; these unsustainable planning practices have only aggravated the traffic problem. Residential communities will add diversity to the city and ensure around-the-clock activity, making the neighborhood safer and more vibrant.

Conclusion

Despite concerted efforts to preserve modern heritage by nonprofit organizations such as Docomomo and the Twentieth Century Society, the international attitude towards modern heritage is apathetic at best and at worse destructive. The housing stock of the period, in particular, has witnessed the brunt of this unapologetically destructive sentiment. The housing crisis grows and now more than ever the preservation of existing buildings is a necessity. The dominant historical narrative has been, in part, responsible for the destruction of modernist housing. Recent scholarship counteracts this perspective through the re-examination of historical facts about state housing, and some of the gaps in modern histories are being filled. Much more needs to be done however, and more scholars need to contribute to this debate. These histories need to contend with the contentious subject of housing, especially when tied to state policies. Political, economic, and social factors are intimately connected to this model of living and cannot be ignored when writing its history. What I have demonstrated in the example of the Al-Sawaber project is that, not unlike the utopian underpinnings of modernist state housing around the world, the state of Kuwait, during a period of nation building, has sold its citizens an untenable dream. As a consequence, the hegemony of the single-plot house and citizen dependency on the state was established. However, this dream was not sustainable and a housing shortage developed that was responsible for the shift in housing policy to high-density collective living.

At first, the experiment proved successful. However, a number of factors led to Al-Sawaber's slow deterioration, including the 1990 Gulf War, the absence of a homeowners association, demographic shifts, and economic greed. A regeneration discourse

that completely ignores these factors followed to justify the project's demolition. Demands for valuation, acquisition and demolition grew louder. While these demolition debates continue, the housing estate continues to deteriorate. However, demands for state appraisal and acquisition of existing stock should not be the state *modus operandi*; these public policies are the contributing factors of the current housing crisis. More recently, the development of state housing projects has been sidelined because of the never-ending political theater and antagonistic relationship between the legislative and executive branches of the government. This antagonism has seen the complete halt of any innovative progress in the housing sector. Instead, palliative measures are applied to an overtaxed housing policy. All the while the housing crisis grows at an alarming speed. Therefore, the rehabilitation of the Al-Sawaber complex is not simply an act of preservation; its healthy existence would debunk dominant myths and support the emerging narrative of modernist heritage in architectural discourse.

Notes

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