Urban Memory and Preservation in Kuwait

A Case Study of Souk Al Wataniya

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1. INTRODUCTION

In Modern Architecture Kuwait 1949-1989, Fabbri, Saragoca and Camacho pose the question: “How was architecture practiced [during this period] in the absence of historical heritage, major local architectural references…or a strong urban footprint?”]

Souk Al Wataniya (Fig. 1) is a residential and commercial building constructed during Kuwait’s 1970s Boom Era of rapid social and environmental change. Designed by The Architects Collaborative (TAC) (in disclosure, the author was lead architect), it is an example of how memory plays a part in urban design by informing a reinterpretation of history and by reintroducing traditional Arabic architectural features in contemporary design. Damaged during the 1990 Iraqi invasion and subsequently repaired, the project’s outward appearance remains a visual link with the medieval residential setting of Kuwait’s pre-oil years.

The worldwide period of modernization following World War II affected many countries differently. Kuwait City’s pre-oil era traditional housing (Fig. 2) was largely demolished in the 1950’s to accommodate the new master plan for transportation and land use. According to Saba George Shiber, Kuwait’s municipal planner from 1960 to 1964, the demolition erased the “agitated urban matrix of Old Kuwait”. On one hand, Andreas Huyssen observes that: “The price paid for progress was the destruction of past ways of living and being in the world. There was no liberation without active destruction. And the destruction of the past brought forgetting.” On the other hand, Muhannad Albaqshi notes that: “One may regret that the demolitions of the 1950s were not more carefully handled; however they did usher in a new era and spirit. Kuwait City is not a place frozen at a particular moment in history. The history of Kuwait’s urbanity continues to unfold, but the memory of the old city will always be there guiding the future.”

Today, rising land values in Kuwait’s inner city threatens more demolition. The situation has spurred the architectural and preservation community to research the memory images of the city's past prior to the 1950s modernization. It also aims to prevent a second erasure of the city’s urban fabric by drawing attention to certain “Boom Era” structures of the 1970s, now vulnerable because of physical deterioration or by the perception by some of its lack of cultural meaning. Such a loss would challenge the relationship between past and present.
2. URBAN DEVELOPMENT OF KUWAIT CITY

Originally settled in the early 18th century, Kuwait grew from a tradition of fishing, pearling, shipbuilding, and trade. A photo from the 1950s (Fig. 3) shows the city with the historic caravan road from the desert terminated at Safat Square and the Old Souk District beyond, where inland goods were traded with those brought in from the harbor. In Fig. 4 we see the pre-oil urban pattern and the location of the original enclosure wall constructed in 1760, and enlarged in 1804, & 1920 as the town grew. The circular dots on the map indicate entrance gates, and the neighborhoods of Sharq, Jibla, and Mirqab are identified, along with Safat Square.

Kuwait’s First Master Plan by Minoprio, Spencely and Macfarlane in 1951 included demolition of the city walls and old houses to provide land for the construction of new buildings and roads (Fig. 5). Residents were offered incentives to relocate into new neighborhoods south of the old city in the desert. The Kuwaitis discovered – belatedly – that the demolition of traditional buildings was a great loss to their cultural continuity. According to Farah Al-Nakib, in the erasure of the townspeople’s close-knit traditional housing “their formerly complex and diverse everyday lives in functionally mixed and integrated urban spaces became fragmented into discrete functional zones and privatized spheres of behavior.”

Planner Shiber “demanded a planning uprising… that would resist the widespread development programs that eroded… traces of the traditional urban fabric.”

In response, the city’s Advisory Planning Committee (APC) in 1968 solicited design proposals from four internationally recognized architects and planners to guide development and restore continuity to Kuwait’s urban heritage. Banfi, Belgioioso, Peresutti, & Rogers (BBPR) from Italy, Peter and Alison Smithson from England, Candilis Josic & Woods from France, and Reima and Raili Pietila from Finland, were chosen to explore the creation of an identity by reconciling architectural form with a wider social and cultural Kuwaiti context. The APC did not wish to recreate the lost city but to revitalize the now emptying city center with new connectedness to its heritage. Each of the four proposals advocated for the return of housing to the city center and expansion of the souk areas.

In 1968 Candilis noted that before oil Kuwait’s main urban quality was diversity. There was a close association of the different “functions of the city life” – habitation, commerce, worship, and administration. These corresponded to the physical integration of houses, markets, mosques, streets, and squares. An aerial view in early 1970s (Fig. 6) shows some of the new office buildings in the Central Business District amid the absence of the earlier housing, and the site of Safat Square in upper left corner.

The BBPR proposal included a new framework of multi-level pedestrian walkways running north south between the Dhow Harbor and Safat Square that would link the waterfront with the city center (Fig. 7). Their submittal was the most detailed of the four original proposals, and by April 1973 an updated plan for the Central Business District provided integrated transportation, land use and building massing components, and which later informed the design of Souk Al Wataniya.

The plan contained three important urban design concepts:
• A series of eleven large car parks for 10,000 cars, connected via an elevated monorail system (unbuilt).
• Multi-level zoning, including ground floor shops, upper level housing or offices, and above and below ground parking
• Conservation of the historic Souk district.

3. SOUK AL WATANIYA – A KUWAIT URBAN BUILDING TYPE

Constructed in 1978, Souk Al Wataniya is one of over 40 mixed-used car parks that were planned throughout the city to take the rapidly increasing and congested traffic off the street. As an incentive for private developers to undertake the project, revenue from parking, and leasable space for souks at ground floor and offices or housing at upper floors was offered for a designated period of time. The car parks represented a new building type for Kuwait, in this case, combining the historic souk culture of nearby Safat Square and the traditional courtyard housing previously occupying the site. The Old Souk had been the commercial center of Kuwait, featuring clusters of smaller specialty markets. Al Wataniya combined many of these into one large building on two-floors, together with 50 courtyard houses at roof level and 1000 cars sandwiched between shops and housing, and below grade (Fig. 8). The rooftop housing is a palimpsest, or memory image, of what previously occupied the site – a present representation of an absent thing, but layered atop a contemporary souk and parking deck. Not long after construction was completed, however, many apartments were converted into offices, yet the outward appearance remains a visual link with the medieval setting of Kuwait’s pre-oil years (Fig. 9).

A major goal of planner Shiber was to see “a significant modern architecture created in the post-oil period by studying the simplicity of the structures erected in the pre-oil era.” Perhaps the most important traditional Arab architectural feature in the program for Al Wataniya was the courtyard house, as exemplified in the pre-oil image in Fig. 10. The courtyard was an essential space-creating, space-forming feature. This traditional house-type of the region, in addition to privacy, serves an environmental purpose to trap cooler evening air and redistribute it into the house during the daytime. If needed, the front bedroom at Al-Wataniya could serve as a ‘diwaniyah,’ or traditional reception room, accessed from the outside walkway or from the courtyard (Fig. 12). The presentation model photo (Fig. 11) shows the courtyard housing, along with the arch motif and several other traditional features that were incorporated into the project, as outlined below:

At the uppermost level the residences are clustered in the form of a ‘fereej’. In a traditional fereej 10-12 courtyard houses are grouped around a small open semi-public space; the micro social unit forming a large and extended family. This allows the social life of the neighborhood to be intimately integrated with the private life of the home (Fig. 13 & 14). Among other traditional features, a fina is an approximately 1 meter deep area in front of a façade that the owner or tenant had certain rights for using, such as for seating or for a cantilevered floor above (sabat) as in Fig, 15. A mashrabiya, or decorative screen used to provide shade or privacy, at Al Wataniya provides ventilation to the apartment level garage. The arch form is incorporated in the windows and also
in the colonnade, or liwan, which surrounds the building on four sides providing protection from sun and heat (Fig. 16). The traditional souk, or marketplace (Fig. 17), is typically based on a 3m x 6m shop module. The shop may also include a storage mezzanine accessed by ladder. Al Wataniya includes 2 floors of shops and a full storage mezzanine for the upper level shops. At ground floor are 2 skylit interior courtyards.

4. FROM PRESENT PASTS TO PRESENT FUTURES

During the Gulf War, Souk Al-Wataniya suffered damage from gasoline fires set inside the building; repairs successfully restored serviceability to the building (Fig. 18 & 19). Yasser Mahgoub notes that after the invasion, “architects started to search for the lost identity in Kuwait architecture that was constructed during the seventies. There was [again] interest in developing an authentic Kuwaiti architecture that stems from architecture found in Kuwait before the discovery of oil.” While mid-20th century world-view focused on the future, a common response to 21st century globalism in countries undergoing change is a growing interest in past histories.

Asseel Ragam describes the growing importance of critical nostalgia as a concept in re-evaluating the present. Alison and Peter Smithson’s 1968 review of Kuwait’s redevelopment focused on the restoration of ‘lost’ social connections in the ongoing modernization. Their proposed concept, the ‘mat-building’, was the vehicle that could restore legibility to the city (Fig. 20). Unlike the modernist vertical object, the mat-building is a horizontal multi-level planning grid and physical frame-work - an “interlinked megastructure traversing the downtown area” that provides shade and re-introduces the idea of ‘connectedness’ to local landmarks, for example, utilizing minarets of inner city mosques as a visual organizing element. The mat-building would display a low profile and ‘interchangeability’ of function that the Smithsons observed to be the ‘essence of the Arab city.’ Later infill structures within the mat-building were to be zoned for particular uses, combining Arab urban tradition and contemporary design.

As suggested also in BBPR’s 1973 plan, multi-level zoning offers a way to implement the Smithson’s mat-building concept in principle, if not in bricks and mortar, by offering a flexible framework to combine appropriate uses sensitive to the needs and traditions of the local community. The Smithson’s mat-building concept did not advance further at that time, and with the relaxation of zoning laws in 2004 the city embarked on a second major urban expansion – this time of high-rise freestanding structures isolated from the urban context and from each other, an apparent antithesis of the mat-building concept (Fig. 21).

Al-Nakib sees that the loss of the rich diversity and historical identity of Kuwait’s inner city has triggered a “reinterpretation” of the early pre-oil era - a nostalgia, not so much for the bygone era, as for a critical understanding of Kuwait’s past and its urban society today. Rather than return to a re-creation of its past environment, critics and planners look forward to a more diverse, holistic, and vibrant urban environment that the traditional setting provided.

In The Death and Life of Great American Cities, Jane Jacobs proposes four specific conditions that are essential in building a diverse and vibrant city life:

1. **Serve more than two functions** to attract people at different times of the day and night.
2. Small blocks with dense intersections that give pedestrians many opportunities to interact.
3. Buildings diverse in age and form to support a mix of low-rent and high-rent tenants.
4. Sufficient density of people and buildings.

Unfortunately, inner city housing in Kuwait has lagged significantly behind office development. Fig. 22 shows a view of the Central Business District in 2016, identifying the Al Sawaber 500-unit housing project, currently threatened with demolition for construction of a new finance center, and Souk Al-Wataniya, designed as housing but re-purposed into offices. Inner city housing has suffered due to:

- Kuwaiti preference for more commodious suburban villas.
- Lack of certain cultural features in apartments, such as diwaniyah.
- No legal structure for community association resulting in lack of maintenance of common areas, and
- In some instances, units have been purchased by investors and leased to migrant workers.

In summary, the original housing units at Al Wataniya, designed as a neighborhood of residential units with shared community space, were quickly re-purposed in response to market demand (Fig. 23). This former “residential village,” now a “business incubator” for small offices, nevertheless may still be a sufficient reminder to assist Kuwait’s individual and collective urban memory. In lieu of a policy that encourages residential uses to relocate to the suburbs, a more broadly based housing program is needed in the inner city, both for urban memory in restoring lost social connections and for a diverse and vibrant Kuwait City.
ILLUSTRATIONS

Fig. 1 - Souk Al Wataniya, Kuwait City, early 1980s. Source: TAC

Fig. 2 - View of Kuwait City showing pre-oil traditional housing (left), Photo: Kuwait Oil Co. archives and contemporary view of 21st century high-rise development and vacated land (right), Photo: E. Nilsson.
Fig. 3 – 1950’s photo of old caravan road leading to Safat Sq. with Souk and harbor beyond. Al Wataniya site in lower right foreground. Photo: Kuwait Oil Co. archives.

Fig. 4 - Pre-oil Kuwait City urban pattern and enclosure walls constructed in 1760, 1804, & 1920. Circular dots indicate entrance gates. Three neighborhoods of Sharq, Jibla, and Mirqab indicated, and location of Safat Sq. Source: Al-Nakib, ‘Kuwait Transformed’.
Fig. 5 - First Master Plan of Kuwait, 1951, by British planners Minoprio, Spencely & Macfarlane, showing new road system and original housing fabric. Source: The Kuwait Urbanization, S. Shiber

Fig. 6 – Central Business District of Kuwait in early 70s. Site of Souk Al Wataniya to left of new telecommunications tower. Safat Sq. in upper left corner. Photo: Kuwait Oil Co. archives
Fig. 7 - BBPR land-use plans for CBD, 1973. Harbor at upper left, Safat Square in center, enlarged detail of Souk Al Wataniya below. Ground fl. & Mezz., (left); Upper fl. (middle); Transportation plan (right). Source: TAC archives, M.I.T.

Fig. 8 – Souk Al Wataniya - building section from 1975 working drawings. Source: E. Nilsson
Fig. 9 - Safat Square area, 1950s (upper left), Souk Al-Wataniya, 1980s (lower left), and 2014 (right). Photo sources, respectively: Kuwait Oil Co. archive, TAC, and N. Garrido.

Fig. 10 – Traditional housing in pre-oil Kuwait. Source: S. Shiber, *The Kuwait Urbanization*

Fig. 11 - Presentation model. Source: TAC
Fig. 12 – Plan of ‘traditional’ courtyard house (left). Al-Wataniya 3-bedroom & 2-bedroom unit. (middle & right) Sources: Plan left, M. Alajmi, *History of Kuwait Architecture*. Plans, middle and right, TAC

Fig. 13 – Roof level courtyard residences at semi-public landscaped areas (left). Plans of lower and upper level units (right). Source: TAC
Fig. 14 - Semi-public spaces at housing levels. Sources: Photos left, TAC; photos right, PACE archive.

Fig. 15 – Traditional streetscape (left). Al Wataniya residential walkway (middle), and sabai cantilever and mashrabiyah (right). Sources: Photo left, Kuwait Oil Co. archive; photos middle & right, TAC.
Fig. 16 - Sources: Photo upper left, N. Garrido. Lower left, TAC

Fig. 17 – Ground fl. Plan, Al-Wataniya *liwan* colonnade (left). Interior courtyard (right). Source: TAC
Inset photo above – traditional Kuwaiti souk. Source: Kuwait Oli Co. archive.
Fig. 18 - Damage to Souk Al Wataniya during Gulf War, 1990-1991
Source: Al-Yousifi, Kuwait Invasion: The Evidence

Fig. 19 – Souk Al Wataniya, 1994, following structural repairs. Photo: PACE archives
Fig. 20 - Alison and Peter Smithson’s ‘Mat-building’ concept-demonstration site, Kuwait.  
Source: Loeb Library, Harvard University

Fig. 21 - High-rise towers in city center, 2016.  Photo: E. Nilsson (left), N. Garrido (right)
LACK OF INNER CITY HOUSING  

Al-Sawaber housing project  

Souk Al- Wataniya  

Fig. 22 - View of Central Business District in 2016.  Al Sawaber housing project (left), threatened with demolition for construction of a new finance center.  Souk Al-Wataniya (right).  Photo: E. Nilsson.

Fig. 23 - Souk Al Wataniya, 2014, Photo: M. Kubo.  

TAC Farewell Party cake, Photo: E. Nilsson.
NOTES:


8 Al-Nakib, ‘Kuwait Transformed,’ p.15.


11 Ibid., P.299.


14 Al-Ragam, ‘Critical nostalgia,’ p.11.


17 Al-Nakib, ‘Kuwait Transformed’, p.18.