

**THE ARAB CITY:
ARCHITECTURE AND REPRESENTATION**

Edited by Amale Andraos and Nora Akawi
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Reviewed by Deen Sharp

The Arab City: Architecture and Representation contributes to a small but growing critical literature on the prolific architectural production by “starchitects” in the Arab region and specifically the Arabian Gulf. Edited by Amale Andraos and Nora Akawi, the volume gathers contributions from two symposiums: the main symposium was held at Columbia University’s Graduate School of Architecture, Planning, and Preservation (GSAPP) in November 2014 in New York, and the other at the university’s Global Center in Amman in 2013. Importantly, this volume brings together practicing architects and a broad array of social scientists to engage the loose theme of architecture and representation in the Arab world. Although *Arab City* is not a book of architectural criticism, in its introduction Andraos suggests that the underlying impetus for the volume and symposiums was a deep dissatisfaction with the architecture, in particular by international “starchitects,” produced in Arab cities.

The real estate frenzy in the Gulf has resulted in the extensive production of buildings from large globalized architectural firms. These firms,

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many of which also have offices in the Gulf, include Foster + Partners, Jean Nouvel, Zaha Hadid, Santiago Calatrava, and Rem Koolhaas's OMA. In his contribution to the volume, Nasser Rabbat argues that the so-called starchitects have been hired in the Gulf states "as a way to capture the glamour associated with these world-famous designers in the actual buildings they design" (47). The structures they design break "previous norms of size, form, function, fantasy, and, often, urban vision" (47).

As Andraos and other contributors point out, this architecture often attempts to weave together particular notions of "tradition" and "modernity" by utilizing historically prominent architectural elements present in, if not the "Arab" world, then the "Muslim" one. For instance, as many of the contributors highlight, architects make prolific use of the *mashrabiyya* screen, a cover made from wooden latticework that is placed in front of windows or around balconies. While Jean Nouvel's L'Institut de Monde Arabe in Paris, designed in 1988 and one of the most significant buildings in the final decades of the twentieth century, successfully took up and modified the *mashrabiyya* screen, such architectural achievement has been the exception rather than the rule. The extensive use of the *mashrabiyya*, along with domes, pointed arches, calligraphy, and geometric tiling, to signify "Islam" or "Arabness," or the spread of architectural metaphors referring to the traditional life of the desert, has not resulted in meaningful architecture. As architect Ziad Jamaledine notes, "Typically, the *mashrabiya* screen and other regional architectural clichés are employed as an expedient and convenient representation of what is in fact a complex and dynamic culture" (96). Through the obsession with identity, Jamaledine argues, international and local architects in the Arab world are producing a self-effacing architecture.

Architects continue to produce such architecture and become entangled in the question of representation due, according to Andraos, to two central problems. The first is architecture's colonial problem, which Andraos understands to be architects' production of orientalism that is "not only offensive in its representations but also instrumental in advancing the colonial project" (12). The second, related issue is the use, or rather misuse, of Islamic architecture, or the "tendency toward a type of pan-Islamism" (12).

Representation in architecture, and the social sciences, has been a highly contentious debate waged between, to put it crudely, the modernists and postmodernists. The modernists called for "form to follow function."

The machine age, they argued, demanded the rationalization and standardization of design; as a result, representation was suppressed. In reaction to the modernists, postmodern architects purposefully cite a project's context through such techniques as integrating past traditions, such as the *mashrabiyya*, into the design. In the Arabian Gulf, postmodern architecture (broadly conceived) has found a receptive audience with surplus capital and the will to build. In addition, Andraos argues that the Arabian Gulf has been central to the renewed emphasis on representation within architecture due to the speed and scale of "global practice" in contemporary architecture and its production of "iconic" structures (8).

Representation, however, is only tangentially defined in the book, and the elusiveness of this concept is soon apparent. Andraos acknowledges the awkwardness of the central representational motif that the book is organized around: the "Arab city". She notes the "ludicrousness of reading cities as essentially defined or categorized along ethnic lines" (7). The idea of the "Arab city" is not pursued in depth, and moreover only a few of the contributors take the "city" as the object of their analysis. Rabbat, one of the few to concentrate on the issue, examines the "identity crisis" of the city in the Arab world, highlighting how the promise of the Arab uprisings has now dissolved and how the unresolved problem of nationalism has impelled urban populations to degenerate into "discordant social, sectarian, and ethnic groupings that share the same urban space and fight over the right to define and rule it" (48). Nonetheless, it was the political aspirations and imaginaries articulated by the Arab uprisings that, the editors explain, led them to take up the idea of the "Arab city." They also articulate a clear desire to move away from the orientalist idea of the "Islamic city," a concept famously dismantled by the late Janet Abu-Lughod, and the volume includes a moving tribute to her written by her daughter, the noted anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod.

The ambiguity of the idea of representation also results in the contributors suggesting a range of tactics to overcome "essentialized" and clichéd representations of the Arab world. Some contributors argue that architecture should be producing more accurate and/or alternative (nonhegemonic, modern, progressive) representations. For instance, Andraos urges architects to attend to the complex sociopolitical and economic complexities of the region and to articulate these intricacies in their artefacts in more incisive

ways. She stresses that the focus on the expression of Islamic culture in architectural representation has hidden the varied “dreams and discourses that attempted to build a modern, progressive (and secular) Arab nation” (12). Akawi, meanwhile, calls for a postidentitarian and nonessentialist representation, focusing on Edward Said’s framing of the migrant. Akawi demands a representation that is multiple and fluid and calls for architects to abandon any presumption of the representation of eternal truths.

Timothy Mitchell, however, argues in the volume’s epilogue that more accurate or nonessentialist representations will not resolve the tension between architecture and representation. “To speak about architecture and representation runs the risk of starting from a simplification: that the world exists as a built environment, on the one hand, and the meaning or significance that we attach to what is built, on the other,” he writes (258). Seeking to sidestep the question of architecture and representation entirely, Mitchell suggests we follow the actors (both human and nonhuman) themselves. Reinhold Martin notes that the problem Mitchell outlines is being addressed within architecture, as a new materialist turn has complicated the long-standing debates on the representational logic of language and signification.

In drawing the reader away from the theme of representation and toward the occurrence and reoccurrence of practice, Mitchell’s epilogue highlights the history of the corporation, the “political-economic institution that has shaped modern cities and modern lives,” and its associated process of capitalization (258). As Mitchell concludes, we are not dealing with two separate axes of the built and representational but rather focusing on architecture’s role in the larger history of capitalization. In this history, Mitchell notes, architecture plays a key role “in constructing the forms of capitalized futures with which we live” through its processes of calculations, inscription, planning, and drawing, which are all aimed at building a durable future (for capitalization) (261).

What does this shift that Mitchell outlines mean for architecture, representation, and the Arab city? It is maybe too much to suggest that architecture is a nonrepresentational discipline. As Hashim Sarkis notes in his description of his New Town Hall in Byblos, Lebanon, “No matter how much we might try to keep it at bay, the question of identity permeates every architectural project” (189). Architecture and representation will always maintain a link. But it may be that the debate over representation has run

its course. Instead, as contributors like Mitchell and Adrian Lahoud point out, we should turn our focus toward architecture and social practice as an analytical framework for how to understand the way architecture operates in our world. Increasingly, the critical question to bring to architecture, and maybe for architects to confront themselves, is not what context architects are representing, but what context are they part of producing. Architects play a critical role in contributing to the configuration of social life and can elevate the occurrence and reoccurrence of existing and aspirational social practice. Consequential architecture does not merely represent an identity but provides a form that follows justice.