

“New Frontiers in Gulf Urbanism”

Introductory remarks from Hashim Sarkis, Dean of the MIT School of Architecture and Planning, at the [Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture \(AKPIA\) at MIT](#).

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Contact: sap-info@mit.edu

New Frontiers in Gulf Urbanism

Thank you Sharon and Jim for organizing what promises to be a very stimulating symposium. Stimulating not only for its theme but also for demonstrating how an academic unit and a documentation center can work together to bring the historic document and the present circumstance together. Thank you also for bringing us together.

In Arabic, we say that the Letter could be read from the Address of its sender, or the book from its title. At the onset of opening this symposium, this book, allow me please, to attempt a reading of its title, New Frontiers in Gulf Urbanism:

New:

The New is a perpetual, aspirational state of the region. Even the historians of the region who uncover a thick and layered history attest to how every layer attempts to present itself as new. This self-renewing novelty is the epitome of the modernist condition but given its stellar cast, I hope the symposium will elucidate how the new Gulf distinguishes itself from the rest of our new world.

Frontiers:

Perhaps Gulf newness is different, because it is combined with the idea of the frontier, the un-trodden territory that it occupies, the seemingly frictionless space, the infinite possibility. Here no doubt the frontier is also the uncharted space of the desert swollen with cultural challenges that this association brings to any discussion about the Gulf. How can the concepts of culture and frontier be reconciled?

Ralph Emerson once this country as “A new yet unapproachable America.” Is the Gulf, the New America in this respect?

Gulf:

The Gulf may be seen as a self evident geographic region, but what binds the longer standing experiments of Iraq, Kuwait and Bahrain with those of the Emirates and Qatar, and what separates them all from the other side of the Gulf may be changing dramatically as we speak, and we may discover after all that the language and cultural gulfs are not as strong when we start looking at phenomena like trade, labor, and most importantly at urbanism.

Urbanism:

I understand urbanism to be an attempt to use the physical environment to express a society’s connectivity and aspirations, but also as a tool to rectify its greeds and inequities as manifest in cities. If so, there is no place in the contemporary world that can rival the gulf in its ability to deploy its cities towards the first set of goals but that is as highly challenged at the level of the second goals.

The symposium will no doubt bring these four notions together in different ways combining them to produce new meanings and new reflections from this critical distance between MIT and the Gulf, affording us the space and the longer breath to examine a phenomenon that is often presented with glitter and gloss that gloss over the deeper challenges that await us this weekend.

As MIT embarks on working with Dubai on helping develop the curriculum for the Dubai Design School, we are hopeful that we will eventually expand the collaboration towards studying urban design and that this venue will help us articulate the set of challenges ahead.

Please join me in thanking Jim and Sharon for brining us together and to welcome them to the podium.