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Branding Backlash: The Erring of Urban Advertising in Gulf Cities

Roman Stadnicki

1 Introduction

The Gulf States were quick to feed oil revenue into urbanisation, as early as the 1950s in the case of Kuwait. In just a few decades, new conurbations appeared and feature among today's key players in the region's globalisation. These cities were planned to meet the requirements of economic diversification in a post-petroleum world. They are also the result of an image policy that aims to create an "urban spectacle of modernity".¹ Renowned architects and planners participated in the international promotion of the metropolitan cities that was orchestrated by the governments themselves. Thus, current images of urban projects, often projected as avant-garde and excessive, are heirs to a relatively ancient policy of creating *showcase cities*.

This strategic urban communication, the theme of this chapter, has been handed down to a plethora of prominent private players in the form of real estate developers and advertisers, making the general approach and strategy of governments less clear. Worse still, the systematic recourse to visual branding (which concerns not only the Gulf), and the proliferation of town-planning advertisements on city walls, has produced a series of counter-effects. Starting with graphic town-planning overload, followed by an increase in the "simulated urban surface",² or a process of urban virtualisation, whereby in designing the future, the images of the planned spaces run the risk of being out of synch with the future reality of those very spaces.³ In the discrepancy between the city as projected and the one finally produced, urban advertising appears as a symptom of the real estate and financial crisis, as a public indicator of unfinished planning and a printed representation of what the city should have been. In the end, the very production of images of urban projects reveals a two-fold crisis in communication and the urban fabric. Architects become producers of visuals (marginalising those who resist the shift), the layering of posters forces the observer to practice the *archaeology of the future* and billboards on which the visuals are displayed end up in a state of decay. This can be seen as the backlash to "the economy of fascination"⁴ that consists of building a marketable image from the accumulation of varyingly iconic urban projects.

Urban imagery is approached here as both the method and the object of research. The notion of imagery is preferred to that of image insofar as it refers to the processes of both design and distribution of images. We focus more on putting urban objects into image form than on the images themselves. Moreover, imagery is associated to visual aspects, thus to image, to the speech that goes along with it. In seeking to convey a specific representation of a city, district or project, the way this association occurs helps to shape the imaginary. "More real than you can imagine", in the expression coined by M. Godelier,⁵ the imaginary lies at the heart of social science research, particularly with regard to the Arab world.

¹ Cf. Elsheshtawy, 2010; Al-Nakib, 2013.

² Söderström, 2001: 72.

³ Cf. Bailleul and Houllier-Guibert, 2008.

⁴ Cf. Schmid, 2009.

⁵ Godelier, 2015: 81.

Our methodology analyses the strategies along with the visual and discursive aspects of urban imagery in order to understand what the latter conveys about contemporary urbanisation. Urban imagery is an appropriate means to understand the political, economic and social dynamics at work in the urban environment. In short, there is more to this than meets the eye!

Much has been written about what the images actually depict, particularly about how the Gulf cities moved into the international spotlight via abundant images of urban and architectural projects, to the point of saturation of urban landscapes locally.⁶ However, as to what the imagery reveals of the town planning production, of the city's materiality – any image, even an artificial one, is generally displayed in a physical place and on a specific medium –, of its policy and of the transnational logic involved (from local production to international distribution), little work has been done on the Middle East. This chapter aims to contribute to reinforcing the legitimacy and the heuristic value of this second approach that involves seeing beyond the image and the ideologies it conveys, by considering it first and foremost as being *in* and *of* the city, both one of its parts and its products.

With regard to imagery being a research subject in its own right, in the age of generalised visual communication, the city as a whole has become a *medium*.⁷ Architecture and advertising, for example, are totally intertwined and imagery is present at every stage of site development. The discipline of urban planning is increasingly based on things visual and virtual. Images that are disseminated by town planning through architecture and construction involve a broad spectrum of urban society, from the designer - whose role in the urban production chain is constantly growing - to the receiver, immersed in a “continual visual suggestion”.⁸

2 In the Gulf, Image takes Precedence over the City... Bringing it Down

In the 1960s, the visibility of the young monarchical powers that still had everything to prove, meant promoting their cities internationally. The cities' location between the Indian subcontinent and the Middle East, along with economic globalisation, took care of the rest. We are now witnessing the birth of urban phenomena of a new kind: a global city created from scratch, in a matter of decades for Dubai, and veritable city-states, in the case of Kuwait and Qatar, almost completely urbanised, having agglomerated former Bedouin populations now submerged by expatriate labour.

Image plays a fundamental role in the development of these political urbanisation projects at the service of economic development and of international standing. Without any physical or financial limits, these cities quickly turn into a playground for internationally renowned architects and town planners who engage in all kinds of experiments, using American-style master plans and who receive highly prestigious awards. Each experiment is made legitimate by an iconographic production that is widely distributed nationally and internationally.⁹ From the central streets of Kuwait City, where buildings with modernist architecture of the 1960s were set up and inaugurated lavishly even before completion,¹⁰ to the highest tower in the world, Burj Khalifa, inaugurated in Dubai in 2010, the permanent search for urban spectacle seems to prevail. Major institutions dedicated to urban staging, in both the public and private sectors, are reminiscent of the large international campaigns led by the

⁶ Cf. Elsheshtawy, 2010; Wippel et al., 2014; Stadnicki, 2019; Steiner and Wippel, 2019.

⁷ Cf. La Rocca, 2013.

⁸ La Rocca, 2013: 160.

⁹ Cf. Al-Ragam, 2017.

¹⁰ Cf. Al-Nakib, 2013.

Chamber of Commerce and Industry in Dubai as early as the 1980s, or of the Media & Communication branches of the great multinationals of real estate promotion (Emaar, Nakheel, Qatari Diar, Kipco, etc.), the main authors of the dissemination and the exportation of a “Gulf urban model.”¹¹

The urban communication that is set up enables governments to hide certain internal difficulties. Although Kuwait was in economic stagnation during the 1980s, as a result of the oil counter-shock, with a parliamentary crisis into the bargain, it was also then that the Emir most called upon architects to produce certain iconic buildings (Parliament, Kuwait Towers, etc.). Likewise, the inauguration of Burj Khalifa¹² meant that people forgot dozens of other urban projects that had been abandoned in Dubai after the financial crisis of 2008. When the United Arab Emirates (UAE) appeared as the world's leading CO₂ emitter, Abu Dhabi chose, in a flurry of communication, to launch the construction of the first theoretically “100% ecological” city, Masdar City. As Doha was under diplomatic embargo from its Saudi neighbours between 2017 and 2020, criticizing the Qataris for their proximity to the Muslim Brotherhood and Iran, it continued to build stadiums for the 2022 football World Cup.

Today, the Gulf cities excel in the art of international self-promotion, judging by the mass of investments in events, the promotion of heritage, and iconic architecture, currently the three major domains of city branding.¹³ Some projects tick all three boxes, such as the Abu Dhabi Louvre inaugurated in 2017. It satisfies event criteria via the exhibition principle, heritage criteria by celebrating the history of civilisations, and iconic architectural criteria with the Jean Nouvel design. The organisation of “Festivals” in gigantic exhibition centres, the construction of many “Heritage Villages”¹⁴ and the race for height records in the skylines are just some of the concrete illustrations of self-promotion. In such domains, cities employ the most advanced visibility strategies to assert their existence in the global market of metropolises.¹⁵ “Showcase projects are therefore a means of existing on a stage increasingly obstructed by metropolitan cities from a range of backgrounds.”¹⁶ In a competitive regional game, these strategies try to mark each of the cities with a sophisticated identity: sport for Doha, culture for Abu Dhabi and entertainment for Dubai are just a few examples. However, this large sectoral division, which has more in common with political marketing strategy¹⁷ than with territorial marketing, reveals little of the fierce architectural and urban competition waged by metropolitan cities vying to take advantage of the other's difficulties. Abu Dhabi, for example, took advantage of the financial crisis that hit Dubai to reassert its authority over the federation of the UAE and launch a series of major projects, including the museum island of Saadiyat. Kuwait City and Muscat, with a more peripheral position in the Gulf, are seeking to improve their attractiveness at a time when the regional powers, Riyadh and Doha, are politically opposed.

Homogeneous in appearance alone, each of these cities has its own agenda. While colossal means seem to be available everywhere for communication, they are deployed and supervised unequally. Dubai and, to a lesser extent, Doha, are both seeking to become a hub of international tourism and to attract millions of foreign visitors. Both cities are increasingly taking on the appearance of a “creative

¹¹ Sinno, 2018.

¹² The tower, which was originally to be called Burj Dubai, was renamed after the Emir of Abu Dhabi, who paid off the debts of its federal neighbour after the crisis.

¹³ Cf. Dinnie, 2010.

¹⁴ Name given to the new “heritage” neighbourhoods.

¹⁵ Cf. Kanna, 2011.

¹⁶ Meyronin, 2015: 53.

¹⁷ Cf. Piquet, 2013.

city” within the meaning of Richard Florida.¹⁸ To do so, Dubai and Doha have a well-targeted city branding strategy,¹⁹ with their own media, aimed at shaping the image of the city internationally. In other cities, the visual communication is omnipresent and overpowering, as in Dubai, whose success is a model for many. In Kuwait City, as we will show later, visual communication appears to be less well organised and more artisanal, having less to do with government strategy than with private actors from an advertising background who are increasingly influential on the urban production line.

Images are everywhere, proliferating in huge format in front of planned or ongoing construction sites, finding their way into all stages of the urban fabric. They are almost always the product of creative work on 3D design software, producing with results that are both so realistic that they could be mistaken for a photograph and very artificial (smooth surfaces, immaculate flowerbeds, flawless vegetation, and with people positioned geometrically). Advertising for future buildings, neighbourhoods, malls and resorts represent a considerable share of the advertising market. In marketing terms, “city products” are urban projects of symbolic significance and have taken over from the “product-city”, aimed at promoting a particular identity trait.²⁰ Consequently, the interchangeable and de-territorialised dimension of urban projects and their images have been accentuated (Fig. 1).

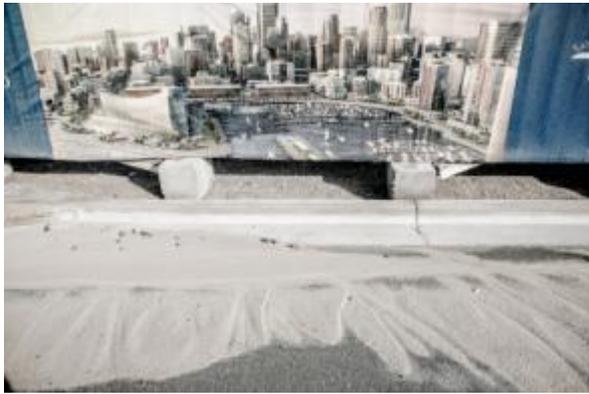


Fig. 1: When advertising looks like a city: construction site in Abu Dhabi, UAE. Photo and copyright: Manuel Benchetrit, 2012. Courtesy of the photographer.

3 The “Dubaisation” via Image: When Advertisers make (and unmake) the City

The importance of advertising of urban projects in the Gulf reflects the increasing role of advertisers in urban production and the regional influence of Dubai. Be they freelance or employees of real estate promoters, the advertising executives are much more than a link in the chain; they exert considerable power of influence on the content of architectural and urban projects. Sometimes, they provide the initial impetus as they are approached very early on by promoters to market a product according to very brief specifications as demonstrated by our surveys in Kuwait.²¹ Advertisers have also established themselves in the physical and institutional landscapes of Gulf cities, especially thanks to the Cityscape show. Cityscape began in Dubai in 2002 and is an annual event comprising regional shows in each of

¹⁸ Cf. Florida, 2013. According to Florida, a “creative city” is one that adapts to the needs of a category of professionals that he calls the “creative class” (comprising individuals working in the artistic sector, the media, research, computing, architecture, design and entertainment) and necessary for a city's economic development.

¹⁹ Cf. Bromber, 2014.

²⁰ Cf. Meymorin, 2015.

²¹ Cf. Stadnicki, 2019.

the Gulf States and beyond. It was conceived as an event where real estate promoters could present their projects in any imaginable advertising format: flyers, brochures, videos, 3D models. More than a real estate show, Cityscape puts the design of urban marketing spin-off products into centre stage.

City professionals, builders, engineers, architects and advertisers act as commercial agents, disseminating contact information, logos and references on the city walls. They are also gaining ground in academic architectural training, which is turned towards graphics and new technologies, while advertising agencies and large real estate developers, recruit former architecture students. Architects, at the service of promoters and advertisers, are less creators of space than they are producers of visuals,²² making more permeable the border between the professions of architect and advertiser.

The invasion of the public space by branding, well analysed by Peter Van Ham,²³ is emblematic of the “dubaisation” process that describes the regional influence of Dubai²⁴ or, more precisely, the imitation effect seen in neighbouring countries that dream of developing highly symbolic urban mega-projects so that they too can become metropolitan cities.²⁵ The recurrence of the words *pearl* or *dream* on the posters bear witness to how images and their symbols circulate and are reinterpreted, making Dubai one of the region's lasting models. Beyond its pioneering and avant-garde role in urbanisation, inspiration also comes from advertising that is often conceived in Dubai, where the world's biggest agencies have set up regional branches.

The “dubaisation” can be seen in both the urbanistic-architectural one-upmanship, with Dubai as its figurehead in a quest for technical prowess that actually starts with advertising, and the “topicalisation” of urban projects, that has become a trademark of Dubai.

“Topicalisation” relies upon “territorial ideologies”²⁶ and produces functional zoning that involves assigning a function to a district, generating what Roland Marchal called “self-regulated enclaves”:²⁷ Media City in Dubai, Education City in Doha, Fun City in Al-Ain, etc. Among the currently trending “territorial ideologies”, the urbanistic and communication aspects of heritage receive special treatment. The Gulf cities are in a paradoxical situation as most of them are so recent that they have no heritage to speak of. Today, however, they are being affected by a “heritage boom”²⁸ comprising two aspects. The first aspect reflects the two-fold obsession with international attractiveness and the construction of a collective memory, manifested by the frenetic opening of museums.²⁹ The second aspect fundamentally concerns urban planning and advertising. From the excessive introduction of wind towers as unique vestiges of Bedouin architecture in many projects, to the construction of pastiches of medinas fantasising Arab-Islamic civilisation, the representation of a wholly invented heritage through intense use of images is striking. Dubai set the tone once again with Madinat Jumeirah, at the foot of its urban icon Burj al-Arab, the Gulf's well-known “7-star” hotel, without worrying about having almost antinomic symbolic centralities together on the city's edge. Doha followed suit, replacing its precarious city centre, built in the 1970s and inhabited ever since by foreign

²² Cf. Sommerlad, 2014.

²³ Cf. Van Ham, 2002. According to this author, the practice of the branding by a growing number of stakeholders increases links between two professional environments that usually interact little: public relations and international relations.

²⁴ Cf. Elsheshtawy, 2010; Steiner and Wippel, 2019.

²⁵ Cf. Aoun and Farah, 2014.

²⁶ Houllier-Guibert, 2011.

²⁷ Marchal, 2001.

²⁸ Nonneman and Valeri, 2017.

²⁹ Cf. Kazerouni, 2017.

workers, with a brand-new souk connected to a new business district (Fig. 2 & 3). Since then, “Heritage Villages” have continued to proliferate, sometimes no sooner imagined than abandoned, as in Kuwait, where only the advertising images remain as an illusion of heritage, confirming yet again the strength of the Dubai model.

In Gulf cities that do not benefit from the same financial and political conditions as Dubai, the virtual nature of the results may surprise by their precariousness and the simplicity of the messages, with a simple frieze by way of architectural content, for example. What works in Dubai does not always work elsewhere, largely due to Sheikh Maktoum’s sustained efforts to occupy the main role in shaping Dubai’s urban fabric, where other leaders leave the field open to private players.



Figures 2 & 3: Simultaneous destruction and rebuilding: the billboard reassures those who witness the destruction of the Musheireb district (Doha). But immigrant workers who have been driven out are excluded from gentrification. Photo and copyright: Manuel Benchetrit, 2011. Courtesy of the photographer.

4 Image as the Project

The place occupied by image in professional town-planning and architectural practices, revealing a general and probably irreversible trend towards visualisation and “virtualisation” of projects,³⁰ has reversed the established order. First the image, then the building and finally the site itself! The image comes before the project. It can even be a project in itself. In Kuwait City, as elsewhere in the Gulf, image sells. In the Tamdeen Square project, according to the developer who proudly displays the point in his office window in a mall of the 6th Ring Road, 50% of the apartments were sold before the first phase of work, before the appointment of architects, before the publication of the master plan. The virtual city possesses a real value: the housing of Tamdeen Square was actually negotiated in Kuwaiti dinars.

When the image is associated with a construction site, the dimension of the project is enhanced. This is not specific to Kuwait. L. Serra has shown that the site is no longer considered, in France, as a simple space to be developed, suspended in the city.³¹ It is also a reference in space and time that is perceived and experienced by the inhabitants, which explains why communication about the site is innovative. The palisades of Kuwaiti construction sites illustrate this perfectly. Images, adds Lise Serra, build “the immunity of the construction site”, anchoring it to the urban landscape.

³⁰ Cf. Söderström, 2001.

³¹ Cf. Serra, 2017.

Failing to keep promises does not prevent the project from being “virtualised”. Advertisers usually design posters with few lines presenting the construction project and the target audience, not always with models or a land use plan. M. Abotera and S. Ashoub made a similar observation based on urban planning advertising in Egypt: “The developer (or client) only presents facts, the target audience and market differentiators (unique selling proposals) and passes them on to the marketing agency. The agency then creates marketing materials stressing the message, with its slogans and images.”³² The visual results are often very vague, functioning as trailers highlighting certain aspects of a fantasy lifestyle. Information about the precise location of the project, prices, activity content, site characteristics etc., seldom appears on the posters. As Felix Sommerlad points out about Dubai, “the site is no longer a premise for the architecture; and the architecture is no longer the premise on which its image rests.”³³ Images therefore seem to have acquired almost total autonomy *vis-à-vis* the project they support, becoming interchangeable and transportable.

Moreover, the generalisation of digital tools has accelerated both processes and increased the “virtualisation” process. Proportions and angles that are impossible in reality become possible with digital tools. Radiant suns inhabit the cloudiest skies, ten-storey facades are made from one block of marble, and lawns are immaculate. Instead of blending the “existing city and potential city”,³⁴ the virtual world seems to have overtaken the real world. At a time of open access and big data, unlimited image banks are used to reproduce any type of urban atmosphere – raw material for urban advertisers. They have produced what O. Söderström names an “extension of simulated urban surface”,³⁵ maintaining the illusion of an ideal unchanging world, without conflict. But do these mirage images withstand the test of urban development’s reality?

5 The “Virtualisation” of Urban Projects: The Case of Kuwait City

5.1 Image before the Project: The Hessah Al-Mubarak District

The Hessah Al-Mubarak District project is a good example of the deployment of blaring and colossal imagery presiding over the project itself, revealing how project communication sometimes slips through the hands of its developer³⁶. The Hessah Al-Mubarak District is presented in the project brochure as “a comprehensive mixed-use development that caters to the country’s millennial population and expat residents alike (...). The exemplification of Kuwait’s drive into the future; a unique, inclusive community that gives back to its hard-working, ambitious populace.” Apart from the fact that these extracts suppose that those who write the texts are probably also those who produce the images, they summarize “the spirit” of the project: a new district of businesses, services, residences of high standing and leisure at the heart of the city, on the coast road (Da`iya district). The new district

³² Abotera and Ashoub, 2017: 14.

³³ Sommerlad, 2014: 94.

³⁴ Söderström, 2001: 72.

³⁵ Söderström, 2001: 74.

³⁶ The data presented here on Kuwait City are the result of two field trips in June and October 2017. The first one, in the presence of photographer Manuel Benchetrit, enabled us to constitute a corpus of about 3,500 photographs covering more than 150 items of urban advertising. It was also possible to identify the main players in the advertising and the display (promoters, advertising agencies, architectural firms, construction companies, government). On the second field trip, we carried out 13 semi-structured interviews with a sample of those involved and renewed our observations on the project sites, in progress or abandoned, which are the subject of particularly pronounced advertising.

will be fully managed by its developer, Kuwait Projects Company (KIPCO),³⁷ which acquired the 220,000 m² land at a state auction. KIPCO is also the “master planner”, according to the expression of the group's communications director, whom we interviewed. Marketing the project lasted two years, according to the group, with to-ing and fro-ing between the parties: “the American architect”,³⁸ “consultants in French communication”, the international advertising agencies and J. Walter Thompson (JWT) via their Dubai offices, as well as the Starcom agency that organised the photo sessions of the human subjects in the images.³⁹ In an interview, the director of communication recognises that “it's a huge machine that cannot be stopped (...). Posters were displayed on all the city's billboards, the campaign was present on YouTube and Instagram, a website was created, a call centre was opened, and a press conference was organised (...).⁴⁰ But the product was not in place. Things moved too quickly, and we could have lost our credibility.” On site, communication went through two phases. In the first phase, giant images printed on tarpaulins were hung on the black palisades that surround the site. The second phase consisted of opening a “pavilion”, dedicated to a public presentation of the project. Between these phases, the advertising tarpaulins were torn down within a few days by order of the government, which banned advertising on sites after the work had started (Fig. 4). However, the advertising images did not disappear, they simply changed format, shifting to glossy paper brochures available at the entrance to the pavilion and projected in promotional films shown in a constant loop on three flat screens. In the pavilion, a URC employee was in charge of welcoming the public during our stay in October 2017. His main role was to ensure that visitors looked at the leaflets and videos. The man introduced himself as a communication officer but knew almost nothing about the project's communication (be it the person/company that had produced the promotional film, published the booklet or produced the 3D models). In a speech learnt by heart, like a live slogan, he repeated that “the materials are imported from Europe”, that “solar energy will be used” and that “the apartments are luxurious and high-priced”. All that remained of an internationally orchestrated marketing strategy machine that gets carried away at the start of the advertising campaign, were a few truncated and disconnected messages in the words of the official communication officer. This man is at the service of the image he supports and extends. Of course, Kuwaiti architects attempted to alert KIPCO and URC to approximations in the project's plan, such as the major problem of residences facing each other, but to no avail. According to one of these whistleblowers, “the sexier the image, the easier it is to sell, even if it is not liveable!”

³⁷ In 2010, KIPCO acquired 30% of the capital of United Real Estate Company (URC), another real estate development giant in Kuwait.

³⁸ His name escaped the person speaking to us, which speaks volumes of the role played by the architect in the process...

³⁹ According to the director of communication, these sessions are “the most difficult part” because “the models who work in Dubai are not Kuwaiti enough in appearance, nor do they speak Arabic and we see them in too much advertising. I recognized the same face in an advertisement for a bank and a taxi company.”

⁴⁰ See the link to the press conference on the project's official website: <http://www.hessahalmubarak.com/sub-media.html>. You see people filmed from behind, watching a promotional film of the project, a rather eloquent *mise en abîme*.



Fig. 4: Tearing down advertising tarpaulins in the Hessah Al-Mubarak District before the start of the works. Photo and copyright: Manuel Benchetrit, 2017. Courtesy of the photographer.

5.2 The Image without a Project: The Heritage Village

The Heritage Village project, located on the coastal tip of the Sharq district, reflects two strong trends in Kuwait that are also found in neighbouring countries: an encouragement from the State to increase the number of “public-private partnership” type projects⁴¹ and the reinvention of urban heritage from the reconstruction of pastiches of Arab-Islamic cities, signalling a desire to restrict outside identifying influences from the urban landscape. Following a rather singular definition of “tradition”, Heritage Village projects have been multiplying in the Gulf since the 2000s. The one in Kuwait was launched in 2009. Its 75,000 m² was to include housing, shops, a restaurant, a hotel and, of course, a souk. The building designs were inspired by traditional architectural forms, and the site plan (in a system of alleys and courtyards) was apparently conceived from old maps of Kuwait City. The land belongs to the State (Ministry of Finance), the Municipality carried out the technical studies, the Faculty of Architecture was consulted and an *ad hoc* developer, Heritage Village Real Estate Company, was in charge of the financing. But by 2018, little more than a skeletal reinforced concrete edifice had appeared. The reasons for interrupting work varied according to who was asked. For one of the project's senior executives, it was due to having chosen a “bad investor” who did not follow the Municipality's instructions. The promoter put it down to poor coordination with public authorities that failed to comply with the terms of the public-private partnership (particularly by building on part of the site reserved for the new headquarters of the National Bank of Kuwait). Ironically, genuine antiquities, including at least one wall and the ruins of an old mosque, were discovered. One architect pointed to “glaring design flaws”, amongst which were the roof terraces with sea views that were “fine, were it not for hundreds of apartments in the Sharq towers just behind, overlooking them directly.” Lastly,

⁴¹ Cf. Cadène, 2012.

according to Omar Al-Khattab (Dean of the Faculty of Architecture), the competition was “more effective when it came to creating artificial heritage” in the form of The Souq, a pastiche of a shopping medina rebuilt within the walls of The Avenues mall, which opened around the same time.

It is not unusual for speculative phenomena to be abandoned but maintaining the advertising despite incompleteness is unusual (Fig. 5). The images are imposing, a mixture of impressions on fencing and large metal panels in the ground. The cocktail of “tradition” and “modernity” lacks subtlety (a man in a *thawb*⁴² carrying a briefcase, an aerial view of a 3D model of sand-coloured buildings bearing the slogan “Inspiration from the past”), on posters that are in good condition. According to one source, some of them have been replaced since the work ceased. You can tell that they were not all put up at the same time. Several layers coexist to form a sort of stratification, echoing how the site’s archaeological content arose through layers of history. Why would the developer make such changes after having abandoned the project? Is it to maintain the illusion that the work is ongoing? The government is usually quick off the mark when it comes to removing posters that just take up space. Is it not attempting to save face by allowing the town-planning fiasco to hide behind flattering images? These questions remain unanswered but support the two-fold thesis of the image rendering something “invisible” and the image as a project. Cover prevails over content and the absence of images in an *icon-mad* society appears to be more attractive than their presence.



Fig. 5: Advertising stratification and pixelation of the Heritage Village project, discontinued in 2010. Photo and copyright: Manuel Benchetrit, 2017. Courtesy of the photographer.

⁴² Traditional male clothing.

6 From Mirage-Image to Waste-Image: When the Gulf Cities lose Control of their Urban Image(s)

To the spectacular images of urban development, investigative journalism, researchers and social networks present counter-images, showing the Gulf's "vulnerability of success"⁴³ in urban planning: frozen construction sites, inhumane living conditions in the workers' camps, automobile crime, etc.⁴⁴ Without going behind the scenes, the decor itself bears signs of fragility. Beyond major architectural gestures, urban imagery reveals contradictions and hesitation in production and everyday urban management with oppositions between private and public players (particularly in the case of Kuwait where the government can arbitrarily order that advertisements be taken down, either to requisition billboards, or to reprimand a particular company); power games between architects and designers or advertisers; reinventing tradition after having replaced the vernacular habitat with glass towers...

Saturating the landscape with images of projects suggests absence of a defined approach or strategy in urban communication, even though some Gulf governments have made significant resources available for city branding. The external image appears to have been better thought through than the internal image, which is unrestrained, deregulated and rather precarious. As a matter of principle, urban imagery simplifies things as the project portrayed provides something "to see rather than to understand."⁴⁵ But the Gulf tends to standardise and to provide little information. Section drawings replaced traditional computer-generated images, advertising slogans did away with factual and technical information...

The relationship between image and construction site also raises questions. Although advertising on fencing generally provides "immunity" against criticism and a bad image,⁴⁶ it can also reinforce the fact that it is unfinished. Advertisements for City of Arabia were still to be found in Dubai three years after it had been abandoned by the Emir after the 2008 financial crisis for lack of funding.

Likewise, ten abandoned or unstarted Kuwaiti construction sites, such as the Heritage Village, still display their advertising on fencing or *ad hoc* panels.⁴⁷ Aging images accentuate their obsolescence, symbolising urban crises, be they linked to stakeholders' conflicts, corruption or financial difficulties of the companies having suspended the projects. Furthermore, the outlandish sums invested in the advertising campaigns of the new Kuwaiti cities of Silk City and Al-Mutlaa, whose images "were never approved by anybody" as the consultant working for the Municipality confided to us at a time when the videos are still available on YouTube,⁴⁸ remind us of the failed municipal master plans (promising new cities for the past 30 years) and the fantasies of the advertising agencies working from reports generally drawn up by foreign consultants.

This seems to convey a form of visual communication crisis in town planning. It stands out everywhere, taking root in the urban landscape and bears signs of precariousness: repeated use of online copyright-free image banks, roughly pixelated photographs, poor quality printing, pasting and frail billboards.

⁴³ Cf. Davidson, 2008.

⁴⁴ On this point, see Ménolet, 2016. He investigated the *tafhit* in Riyadh, a kind of urban rodeo that involves performing acrobatic figures using vehicles, more often than not rented or stolen, in the asphalt suburbs of the Saudi capital.

⁴⁵ Bailleul, 2008.

⁴⁶ Cf. Serra, 2017.

⁴⁷ This was still true in 2019 for the restaurant-club project ShowBiz, the Sahoud Mall and the Abu Al-Ḥasaniya marina.

⁴⁸ For Silk City, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1A0u2Y10G1w> ; Al-Mutlaa City, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6N4rMGIVfpl>

Looking at these signs along with contemporary trends in the advertising market, although still generating a considerable urban micro-economy (Fig. 6), is a 4m by 3m image posted on a panel the epitome of 20th century marketing? Nowadays, new budgets go to advertising campaigns on the social networks and video platforms, as demonstrated by the recent promotional film for the new town of NEOM desired by the crown prince of Saudi Arabia in the Gulf of Aqaba, viewed more than 300,000 times. Dilapidated images, empty billboards and mirage advertising are symptomatic of a crisis in this outdated visual and material advertising. It raises questions about what is to become of urban advertising and on the place it occupies in urban settings when the field is increasingly digitalised and played out on social networks (Fig. 7).



Figure 6: Putting up the image. Advertising is an economy its own right, with its workers and scaffolding, exactly like a construction site, Sharjah, UAE. Photo and copyright: Manuel Benchetrit, 2011. Courtesy of the photographer.



Fig. 7: Panel lying on the ground, Fintas, Kuwait. Photo and copyright: Manuel Benchetrit, 2017. Courtesy of the photographer.

7 Conclusion

On the one hand, today's marketing of urban projects in the Gulf confirms that images tend to become independent of the projects they support, which accentuates the "virtualisation" process of the city as well as the shift from "project" to "programme."⁴⁹ While technical progress has made it possible to produce oversized images as large as buildings, to add human subjects in action thereby enhancing realism, images of urban projects aim less and less to represent reality. Indeed, in the image, the project, including its location, real estate, architectural and town-planning characteristics and activities, gives way to a "programme". And the programme supercedes the scale of the project. It is an urban projection in the broad sense, representing imagined ways of life as well as ideologies.

On the other hand, images of urban projects, whatever their feasibility, enable territorial ideologies to be diffused, including main trends of development that projects are based upon, and to associate "environments for sale",⁵⁰ or distinctive lifestyles. The communication and digital two-fold turning point has therefore considerably modified the role and dimension of town planning imagery.

In town planning imagery, a project is more likely to be abandoned than the traces of its visual promotion are to be taken down. The images then print the obsolescence and preserve the memory of unfinished urban work. Advertising represents and symbolises urban crises. Images of abandoned projects, empty and altered billboards, mirage advertisements selling dreams, are symptomatic of excessive visual communication in the era of globalised urban contexts. However, from a material and global point of view, images convey the extent to which they shape the city. If, as Richard Sennett believes, urbanisation constitutes a society of image,⁵¹ then we have to admit likewise, that the image constitutes urbanisation.

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⁴⁹ Cf. Pignol-Mroczkowski and Mroczkowski, 2017.

⁵⁰ Moreno et al., 2013.

⁵¹ Cf. Sennett, 2009.

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