A Journey to the Center of Kuwait: Cultural Hybridity and the Construction of Hawalli's Spectacle

By Nadeen DAKKAK

Kuwait University, Fall 2013

This paper received the KSP Student Paper Award

The KSP Student Paper Award, offered by the Kuwait Program at Sciences Po, distinguishes outstanding papers by students both at Sciences Po and in Kuwait, written on a topic related to the study of the Arab World and the Gulf Region.

The Kuwait Program at Sciences Po (KSP) is a partnership between Sciences Po and the Kuwait Foundation for the Advancement of Sciences, based at the Paris School of International Affairs. Working together, the two institutions are supporting a range of initiatives in the fields of research, teaching, executive education and academic events, with special emphasis on the study of the Arab World and the Gulf Region.

www.sciencespo.fr/psia/kuwait-program

*A Journey to the Center of Kuwait: Cultural Hybridity and the Construction of Hawalli's Spectacle

by

Nadeen Dakkak

Visual Culture 319

Dr. Mai Al-Nakib

18 December 2013

Kuwait's discovery of oil in the 1930s, which resulted in strong relations with economically developed nations after the first shipment of oil in 1946, brought massive changes to this small country and its people. Suddenly in possession of high oil revenues, Kuwait wanted to make new improvements into its different facilities, infrastructure and the economic system as a whole. Most of all, Kuwaitis needed to project a modern image of their country, which would provide prosperity in the social, cultural, and economic spheres. The city was the place where such modernity could be visually manifested, with its organized streets and beautifully designed new buildings. In an attempt to make Kuwait City truly "cosmopolitan," in the international sense of the word, almost all Kuwaiti residents of the city had to move into the suburbs, most of which were established to offer the best living environment, according to modern standards.

With the sudden advent of modernity there was an urgent need for skilled workers and professionals. This resulted in increased migration to Kuwait, starting from as early as the 1930s and accelerating in the mid-twentieth century onwards. Migrant workers constituted seventy percent out of the total workforce of Kuwait in 1957. They increased throughout the years. The population of non-Kuwaitis jumped from 92,851 in 1957 to 247,280 in 1965, to more than triple that within fifteen years to reach 793,762 in 1980 (Al-Mousa 34-35). This rapid increase in population required further housing facilities for non-Kuwaitis. While the old Kuwait City offered the ideal residence for immigrant workers at first, there was an urgent need to start organizing other districts. Hawalli and Salmiya, which were arranged by the municipality in 1954 and 1957 respectively, along with Kuwait City, constituted the three most densely inhabited areas for non-Kuwaitis (Al-Mousa 75). It was Hawalli, however, which turned out to be the most crowded, accommodating about 56 % of the entire population of non-Kuwaitis from as early as 1957 (Al-Mousa 46). Throughout the years and

until today, Hawalli remains the most welcoming home for immigrants of various origins. Even though it was supposedly a suburb – one of the oldest outside the capital – a walk in one of its busy streets proves it to be more of a city and a commercial center.

Hawalli, however, is not just a town that happens to embrace immigrant workers and their families during their stay in this new country. "Cities reflect social and cultural norms as well as economic and technical means. They are also expressions of belief and will. The current state of our cities reflects much about our time: mobility, governmental policies, technical shifts, race relations, materialism" (Bond 12). The importance of Hawalli, then, lies in its being a mirror, reflecting crucial facts about Kuwait's present and past, as well as anticipating its future. Through an exploration of the city of Hawalli, this paper aims to reveal some of the most important implications that are embedded within Kuwait's economic and social reality. First, it will show the astounding cultural hybridity of Hawalli. Then it will argue for its constructed position and vital value within Kuwait's economic market. Finally, it will demonstrate how Hawalli as an almost exclusively non-Kuwaiti residence area reflects the strict division between Kuwaitis and immigrants. This, I argue, has a significant effect on Kuwait's current and future social life.

The mention of Hawalli immediately evokes the lively Palestinian community out of which emerged the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) in the 1950s. Kuwait's urgent need for skilled workers coincided with Palestine's 1948 *Nakba*. This resulted in large numbers of Palestinian immigrants coming to Kuwait and in a strong relationship developing between these two peoples against the Occupation. Hawalli, then, was – and still is – distinctly Palestinian in its nature. Streets, buildings, shops and people all pointed to the fact that an entire Palestinian community had moved into this developing Gulf country. A 1988 article in an American newspaper describes this effectively: "The Arabic accents outside a

bakery on Tunis Street seem more familiar to Nablus in the Israeli-occupied West Bank than here on the edge of the northern Persian Gulf. Even the pastries displayed inside on huge, round trays are redolent of the aromas of far-off Jaffa and Haifa" (Wallace). But over the years, Kuwait witnessed high levels of immigration from many other Arab and Asian countries, making Hawalli more multi-cultural than it has ever been. The 2005 census proved it to be the second densely inhabited area within the governorate after Salmiya, with a total population of 104,901 out of which 101,736 (the majority) were non-Kuwaitis (35).

Figure 1. Famous laundry lines in an old building in Hawalli. Photo by the author

Whether driving or walking in the streets of this area, it is impossible not to come across pedestrians and drivers from various nationalities, intermixing harmoniously within

the same working and living environment. This cultural hybridity is not only echoed by the residents, but is significantly reflected in the shops, buildings, and alleyways. In the same 1988 article, Wallace introduces Hawalli by mentioning its "ramshackle look of peeling beige apartment buildings brightened only by rows of washing dangled off balconies" (Wallace). Even though the Hawalli of 2013 is somewhat more colorful and modern in its buildings than twenty-five years ago, the "washing dangled off balconies" remains a distinct feature. The old two-storey building in Figure 1 would be from any other Arab country – Egypt, for example – without any noticeable difference.

Figure 2. A Hawalli version of sidewalk restaurants under residential apartments. Photo by the author

Hawalli contains countless numbers of alleyways and buildings that are easily identified as Middle Eastern. The fact that it is both a residential and a commercial area,

unlike most of Kuwait's suburbs, makes it similar in many ways to other cosmopolitan Arab cities, like Cairo, Beirut and Damascus, despite Kuwait's different history. Planning to walk down Tunis street – one of Hawalli's most famous streets – would fail, not only because the pavements are not very encouraging, but also because sidewalks that do exist are lined with dozens of restaurants. From these, one can inhale the tempting aromas of *falafel*, *shawerma*, and *farroug* (grilled chicken). However, despite the multi-culture image of Hawalli, it

Figure 3. Traditional Kuwaiti architecture of Al-Rasheed Mosque built in 1950. Photo by the author

remains a Kuwaiti city in many of its features. Right in between the tall apartment buildings, one is reminded of this by many old Kuwaiti mosques whose traditional designs have been preserved. Very often too one is reminded of such Kuwaiti features by Kuwait's distinct weather.

Just because Hawalli is multi-cultural should not obscure its serious everyday problems, which might be referred to as the 'crisis of Hawalli'. "A list of what makes good cities is fairly obvious," says J. Max Bond, Jr, "encompassing physical, economic, social and environmental elements" (13). Taking the U.S as an example, he argues that "these elements are rarely applied with equal resources and commitment to the vast areas inhabited by the majority of people … Because there is a high correlation between poverty and race in our cities, this burden falls disproportionately on minority groups" (13). Non-Kuwaiti immigrants are definitely not a minority in the literal sense of the word; their number is almost double the population of Kuwaitis according to the 2011 census (22). But a look into the city of Hawalli immediately proves that there is inequality in the way non-Kuwaiti inhabited areas are being managed (it is worth noting that Hawalli is not an exception). The outmoded two- and three-storey buildings, like the one seen in Figure 1, are no longer a marker of this city, for they are being gradually demolished for the sake of higher, more modern buildings that contain a much larger number of apartments. This is understandable in light of the increasing population, but if the crisis of accommodation is solved by moving farther away from the ground,

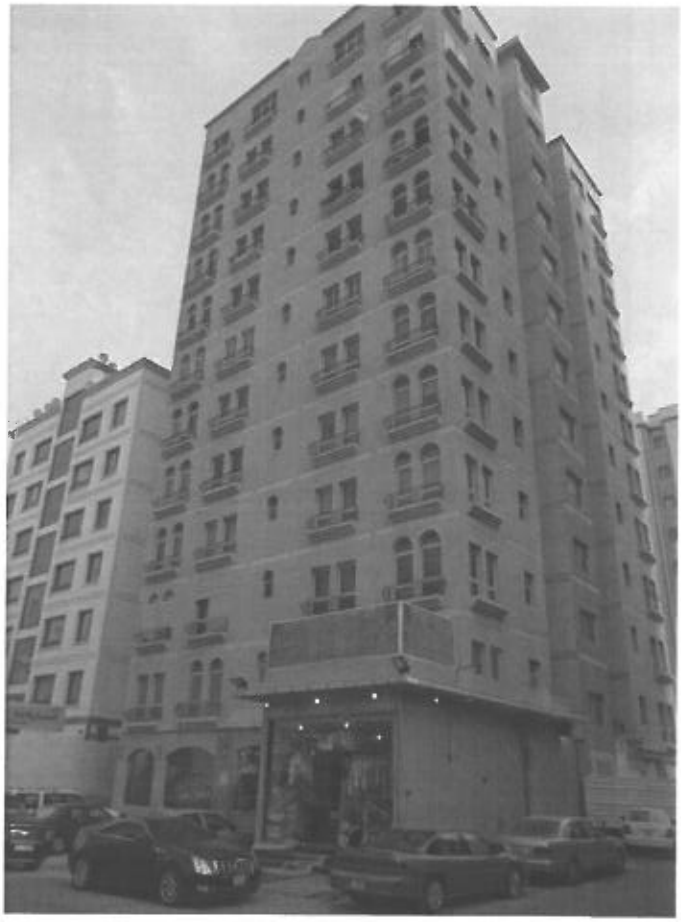

Figure 4. Huge modern complex with no enough parking spots, Hawalli. Photo by the author

it is definitely not the case below with the never-ending traffic jams and the lack of parking spots. Huge commercial and residential complexes are being established in place of the old buildings, without giving a thought to the problem of parking (see Figure 4). Nowadays, most individuals, both Kuwaitis and non-Kuwaitis, become car owners as soon as they graduate from high school, making the old scheme of one spot for each apartment no longer applicable. Parking problems are not exclusive to Hawalli. Many Kuwaiti areas, the most significant of which is Kuwait City, suffer from this issue. But the fact that Hawalli is supposedly a residential area rather than a commercial one makes this problem truly worthy of attention.

Figure 5. Alleyway in Hawalli, Tunis St. crammed with cars due to lack of parking spots. Photo by the author

The problem of parking in Hawalli correlates with the architecture of the new buildings and the design of their apartments. Aiming to accommodate as many tenants as possible, the buildings are built in a very short time without prior planning regarding the street's capacity to handle the new addition. Empty sand lands where many children from low and middle-class backgrounds play often get transformed into buildings rather than a park or playground. Analyzing the process of establishing modern Kuwait City during the country's early oil years, Kuwaiti historian Farah Al-Nakib identifies a number of crucial problems that have resulted in a city not as organized as it should have been. She argues that although "the city began to house large numbers of non-Kuwaitis from the early 1950s onward … the government did not put nearly as much effort into developing adequate public services and sufficient infrastructure inside the city center as it did out in the suburbs" (13). This negligence of the city in general and of non-Kuwaiti workers in particular seems to extend to today's organization of Hawalli and some of Kuwait's other areas as well. In figure 6, a whole alleyway was recently demolished and a number of new buildings are now being constructed in its place. Buildings are lined up one next to the other with no outlet or space in between. The apartments inside those buildings are compressed on each floor and badly designed for the mere purpose of gaining profit.

In fact, the whole city of Hawalli seems to fit perfectly within the globalized world we live in, because it is constructed to satisfy the demands of capitalism and profit at the expense of ordinary people. The old building with laundry lines that we have seen in Figure 1 may not be as dazzling in its design as the modern one in Figure 4, but its apartments are definitely more spacious and rationally structured than those of the latter, which are either one- or two-room apartments barely fitting a double-bed. It seems that buildings these days are established without a practical sense of architecture and without paying attention to people's

actual needs. They are created hastily for a type of population that exists in the country temporarily to work. Many immigrants, however, have, for a variety of different reasons, chosen to settle down in Kuwait rather than to return to their countries. The apartments that are supposedly created for temporary workers have become their homes for decades, embracing them and their families despite the tightness of the rooms and the lack of parking.

Figure 6. Buildings under construction in a Hawalli alleyway. Photo by the author

Figure 7. Construction of a new building on the 4th ring road. Photo by the author

This organization crisis of buildings and streets can be taken further by noting the contradiction between how Hawalli appears and its actual conditions. Looking at the new buildings and commercial complexes being constructed on almost every street, one can easily jump to the conclusion that Hawalli is truly modern. The colorful facades of tall buildings surround the area from all directions, concealing everything the residents experience on a daily basis (see Figure 8). Hawalli, then, seems to fit very well into Guy Debord's famous analysis of "The Society of the Spectacle," in which people's everyday reality is engulfed in a world saturated with images. Debord argues: "In form as in content the spectacle serves as total justification for the conditions and aims of the existing system" (6). The insufficient parking spots, the lack of playgrounds and the inconsiderate architectural planning is no longer visible under the flashy designs of the new buildings. But in reality, what we see from Hawalli at a distance is "no more than an image of harmony set amidst desolation and dread, at the still center of misfortune" (Debord 63).

Figure 8. Enormous façade of a new building on 4th ring road. Photo by the author

The case of Hawalli may also be strongly connected to what Al-Nakib states about Kuwait's early development and need to create a modern spectacle. She argues that

> from the advent of oil modernization in the 1950s a primary concern of state and society alike was to project a positive image of Kuwait's newfound prosperity and progress regardless of the realities its residents were forced to deal with behind the scenes. But this spectacle of Kuwait's urban modernity was not just displayed in articles, international exhibits, films, or government brochures; the built environment itself became part of the spectacle. (15)

If Hawalli's role was not as primary in creating this modern spectacle in the 1950s and 1960s as Kuwait City and the other suburbs were, the last two decades mark the beginning of the time when Hawalli's 'built environment' contributes partially to this image. More important, however, is the intensified focus on capital and profit-making that correlates with such images of modernity and progress.

Figure 9.
Demolishing the old to construct the new; creating the 'spectacle' and profit, Tunis St.
Photo by the author

Hawalli's disorganization and dense population and buildings does not only signify the government's unfairness by neglecting non-Kuwaiti residential areas, but also suggests a

very strong division, crucially affecting Kuwait's social life. Hawalli, more than any other non-Kuwaiti area, is inhabited almost entirely by immigrants and their families, making Kuwaitis themselves a minority. Streets, alleyways, co-operation societies (supermarkets) and, most importantly, schools – the Arabic ones – are all under the exclusive use of non-Kuwaitis except for some rare exceptions. True intermixture does happen in commercial complexes and shopping malls, but when it comes to the streets and every-day facilities of the residential part of Hawalli, one mostly encounters non-Kuwaitis from their various origins.

The division between Kuwaitis and immigrants has always existed in the country, even before Hawalli itself became identified as the iconic city of non-Kuwaitis. Yet by allocating specific areas where lower and middle class immigrants are most likely to settle, this division gets further perpetuated. It is also worth noting that the negative reactions toward Palestinians after the Iraqi invasion may have contributed strongly toward similar negative reactions toward Hawalli itself, which represented the heart of the Palestinian community. As a result, a sense of repulsion grows between the two sides, making it harder to accept difference, despite Kuwait's intense cultural hybridity. This becomes even more crucial in the case of the younger generations. While foreign schools offer better opportunities for cultural encounters between Kuwaitis and other nationalities, the private Arabic schools where the children of most middle-class immigrants go – many of which are located in Hawalli as well – offer an education to an almost entirely non-Kuwaiti population of students. Hence, not only do Kuwaitis become less receptive of difference and the cultural diversity that exists within their own country, but immigrants also acquire a strong sense of themselves as outsiders and, at the same time, of the 'Kuwaiti as Other'. Unlike the usual diasporic experience, many immigrants live in this country for years without really experiencing its culture and without formulating a true sense of what it is like to live in

Kuwait, which would only happen if a true intermixture is established between Kuwaitis and non-Kuwaitis. Furthermore, this division paves the way for antagonism and discrimination, which may increase in the long run, making this a serious issue worthy of attention.

Figure 10. A group of students hanging out near the bus stop after school, Tunis St. Hawalli. Photo by the author

The persistent transformation of Hawalli into a modern a city by demolishing old buildings and constructing enormous new ones is truly a crisis. The lack of wise planning and the limited and unjust consideration of people's needs both signify a reality that, unfortunately, does not anticipate a desirable future. Many factors contribute to this reality, like the need to project an image of the modern Kuwait to the world, and the strong desire to gain more profit, even when it is at the expense of people's everyday lives and the most basic of their needs and comforts. The problem, however, is being unaware that these same methods which guarantee a modern and commercially developed city are the reasons behind its underdevelopment in other ways. As Debord argues, "Economic growth liberates societies from the natural pressures occasioned by their struggle for survival, but they still must be

liberated from their liberators … The economy transforms the world, but it transforms it into a world of the economy" (40).

The construction work in Hawalli today and the plans of turning it into even more of a commercial city than it already is are, therefore, shortsighted. They not only affect the area's specifically non-Kuwaiti population, but also reflect on Kuwait's image and social reality as a whole. Perhaps change could be triggered from people's awareness and realization of the conditions under which Kuwait's immigrants are living. Our experience of cities today is very limited and indirect, with most of us isolated in our cars and prevented from having any real contact with the city's streets, its alleyways, and its gradually-shrinking sidewalks. Walking is the way for us to get to know our cities. "As public space has become more limited, controlled, and circumscribed, the tactics of the powerless have had to become more explicitly about using public space. Walking is more than a utilitarian way of getting from one place to another: walking is an everyday practice that may be taken up as a tool" (Jacks 36). Walking allows us to see the city as it is, not as a series of fleeting images from the window of a car. It also directs our attention to specific details that would otherwise be invisible and offers us the chance to slow down and contemplate them. Perhaps only when outsiders to Hawalli experience walking its streets and alleyways, stumbling on the sidewalks next to the construction sites, will a sense of awareness of immigrants and everyday problems develop and a promise of change emerge.

Notes

* The title is taken from Jules Verne's 1864 novel *A Journey to the Centre of the Earth*.

Works Cited

Al-Mousa, Abdulrasoul. *Al-Tatawur al-'Umrani wal Takhteet fil kuwayt* (Constructional Development and Planning in Kuwait). Kuwait: Qathima, 1981. Print.

Al-Nakib, Farah. "Kuwait's Modern Spectacle: Oil Wealth and the Making of a New Capital City, 1950-90." *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 33.1 (2013): 7-25. *Project Muse*. Web. 8 Nov. 2013.

Bond, Jr., Max J. "Working Cities: Density, Risk, Spontaneity." Kelbaugh and McCullough 12-13.

Debord, Guy. *The Society of the Spectacle*. Trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith. New York: Zone Books, 1994. Web. 12 Nov. 2013.

Jacks, Ben. "City Walking: Laying Claim to Manhattan." Kelbaugh and McCullough 34-44.

Kelbaugh, Douglas, and Kit Krankel McCullough, eds. *Writing Urbanism: A Design Reader*. New York: Routledge, 2008. Print.

Wallace, Charles P. "Uncomfortable Dilemma for PLO Supporters: Kuwait's Welcome to Palestinians Turns Cool." *Los Angeles Times* 26 Dec. 1988. Web. 10 Dec. 2013. <http://articles.latimes.com/1988-12-26/news/mn-690_1_palestinian-community>.

General Population Census (Final Result) 2005, Central Statistical Bureau, Kuwait. Web. 10 Dec. 2013. < http://www.csb.gov.kw/Socan_Statistic_EN.aspx>.

General Population, Building, Dwelling and Establishment Census (Part One: 2011), Central Statistics Bureau, Kuwait. Web. 10. Dec. 2013. <http://www.csb.gov.kw/Socan_Statistic.aspx>.