

# Arab Gulf Cities in Transition: Towards New Spatialities

**Conference Paper**

**Author(s):**

Cummings, Veronika; Richthofen, Aurel von; Babar, Zahra

**Publication date:**

2019-03

**Permanent link:**

<https://doi.org/10.3929/ethz-b-000339846>

**Rights / license:**

[Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International](#)

# Arab Gulf Cities in Transition: Towards New Spatialities

Veronika Cummings, Aurel von Richthofen, Zahra Babar

Due to rapid modernisation and urbanisation processes after oil discovery in the late 1960s, the cities of the Arab Gulf became the centres of economic activities and globalised societies in the region. Evidence of the sheer quantitative importance of cities as main areas of habitation in the Gulf region can be seen in the remarkable urbanisation rates, ranging from 89 to 98 percent in 2015, according to the estimations of UN Habitat.<sup>1</sup>

But also from a qualitative perspective cities represent the future of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries and societies. Gulf cities demonstrate both the state's strategic control and power over its territory and population, and embody aspirational social development and life-style choices. In particular the younger generation of Gulf citizens' spatial practices (mobility, accommodation, leisure activities, consumption patterns, etc.) taking place within cities demonstrate considerable differences when compared to their ancestors. A growing literature on Gulf cities suggests that they have become hubs not only of economic activity but also for social development. Citizens and migrants inhabit the cities that serve as the market-place for the exchange of goods, services, ideas, and learning.<sup>2</sup> The concentration of people, the extensive and non-sustainable consumption of resources, and the changing life-style patterns have a strong transformative and perhaps even disruptive potential for cities. According to Batty and Longley cities can be understood as complex systems comprised of interrelated socio-economic dynamics playing out in space.<sup>3</sup> Cities are also being investigated as 'metabolic' systems that orchestrate the stocks and flows of material and energy.<sup>4</sup> The rate of change of urban metabolic systems is crucial to determine their sustainability. Case-studies of these various socio-economic dynamics in Gulf cities are thus fundamental. The hegemonic (mis-) use of the sustainability discourse in the Gulf States has been described, too.<sup>5</sup> Thus, cities now represent the key arenas for profound transitions that affect not only the material representation of the Gulf nations, but also influence social and spatial practices. In this context, we define transition as the emergence of "new" spaces or opportunities, in other words as new spatialities.

<sup>1</sup> UN Habitat, *The State of Arab Cities 2012: Challenges of Urban Transition*, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Deffner and Pfaffenbach, "Migration, Modernisation, and the Urban Immigration Society in the Sultanate of Oman.", 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Batty and Longley, "Fractal Cities", 2016.

<sup>4</sup> Baccini, *Metabolism of the Anthroposphere: Analysis, Evaluation, Design*, 2012.

<sup>5</sup> Cummings and von Richthofen, *Urban Sustainability as a Political Instrument in the Gulf Region Exemplified at Projects in Abu Dhabi*, 2017.

While a number of scholars have been emphasizing the remarkable modernisation processes visible in Gulf cities, much of their work has adopted a primarily economic perspective. It is important to extend the economic lens and examine transitions in Arab Gulf cities by studying the intersections of urban space, society, and politics from a trans-disciplinary and pluralistic perspective.<sup>6</sup>

The vast majority of the growing GCC population, comprising of both citizens and migrants, is concentrated in Gulf cities. In many cases these cities form the exclusive political and economic centre of their respective states. Gulf cities rely on a vast amount of energy, and much of their current growth trajectory is based on the exploitation and consumption of non-renewable fossil resources. The concept of urban sustainability understood as the inter-play of social, economic, ecological and political dimensions within a confined urban space and applied to Arab Gulf cities needs to be critically examined and developed further.<sup>7</sup>

The idea that cities are in a constant state of transition is not new. Transition and change are an intrinsic part of the phenomenon of the “urban”, a concept that incorporates urban society and the city itself. Until the second half of the 20th century this notion was mostly relegated to the field of urban history and mobilised as an argument for new urban projects. Scholars like Lewis Mumford<sup>8</sup> drew attention to the causality of historic urban transformation phases affecting both present cities and determining their future potentials. Transformation has partly been seen as a technical process that occurred along with technological developments at the time. Hauptmann and Graafland<sup>9</sup> position cities in a wider globalised setting that reconfigures the “urban” altogether. Their socio-economic critique highlights that the urban transformation engendered by globalisation is not restricted to confined geographic settings or linked to technological development alone. Globalisation reaches far beyond mere economic processes, the presence of global player and globalised consumption patterns. In today’s world, this meta-term represents mostly invisible structures of power and influence that create globally entangled economic, political, and social spheres and relations. While regional conditions and local activities remain significant, urban transformations take place within and are impacted by the larger global context.

For structural reasons, Gulf Cities were somewhat sheltered from the immediate impact of globalisation. The constant extraction of fossil resources allowed GCC states to maintain a modernised yet “pre-globalised” status quo. The transformation processes in Gulf cities are complicated by the particular political economy produced by rentierism and a distinct socio-cultural setting. These are nation-states still in the process of nation-building to some extent still characterised by tribal bonds of kinship, and which currently demonstrate a peculiar demography with high numerical imbalance between national residents and foreign

<sup>6</sup> A few studies have already embarked on such a trajectory: A critique of the ‘Dubai-model’ of urbanisation (Elsheshtawy 2011); an encyclopaedia of sustainable urbanism for Kuwait and the Gulf (Pollalis and Ardalan 2012); ‘spatio-temporal interfaces’ in Salalah as a ‘Secondary City’ of Oman (Wippel 2013); urban specificity and territory (ETH Studio Basel 2015); images and transformation of public spaces in Bahraini cities (Al Sayeh 2016); trends and perspectives of urbanisation in Muscat Capital Area (Nebel and von Richthofen 2016).

<sup>7</sup> s. Cummings and von Richthofen, *Urban Sustainability as a Political Instrument in the Gulf Region Exemplified at Projects in Abu Dhabi*, 2017.

<sup>8</sup> Mumford, *The City in History: Its Origins, Its Transformations, and Its Prospects*. A Harvest Book, 1961.

<sup>9</sup> Hauptmann and Graafland, *Cities in Transition*. Stylos Series, 2001.

employees. The aftermath of the so-called “Arab Spring”, that began to affect the Arab Gulf States in 2011, started to question this premise of modernised, yet not fully globalised nations and urban societies, strongly committed to traditional and conservative structures.

This urban space is defined as the totality of the territory subject to urbanising forces, and is not merely restricted to administrative boundaries that separate urban from non-urban areas. Urban space in Gulf cities is limited not by the harsh conditions of the desert, but by the high costs of providing urbanisation infrastructure such as desalinated fresh water, electricity, and roads. The provision of this infrastructure is currently directly or indirectly reliant on the rent from the limited fossil resources. The maintenance of the modernised urban infrastructure will demand even more energy, material and resources. The increasing costs to develop more distant parts of the desert are already limiting the growth potential of Gulf cities. Unlike other global metropolises these cities have limited access to resources within their own national territory. Food, building materials, and human capital are all sourced from outside the GCC in order to maintain the status quo. The pressure from urban development reaches far into previously rural or desert areas where local resources still exist. Urbanisation in the Gulf, much like elsewhere, marginalises agriculture and other traditional forms of spatial practice. The hinterland of Arab Gulf cities is often located far beyond the administrative boundaries of these cities or city-states, yet this hinterland is the necessary pre-requisite for urban and national development. Urban space understood as capital and resources in this context thus encompasses all spatial practices subject to a Lefebvrian notion of production, may such practices be located in urban, rural or interstitial spaces.<sup>10</sup>

Urban space is the common denominator for territorial processes of both a political and social nature.<sup>11</sup> Since developments are increasingly inter-connected, urban phenomena have a repercussion at national as well as regional levels. Understanding the urban dynamics of the Arab Gulf cities through the perspective of changing spatial practices contributes to the Gulf studies trans-disciplinary body of scholarship and becomes a key for a holistic understanding of the nuances of states and societies of the GCC.

Therefore, the aim of this book is to offer a new framework for the analysis of ‘Arab Gulf Cities in Transition’ by examining the interdependencies of a dynamic field of urban space, urban politics and urban society. This tripartite trans-disciplinary concept examines simultaneously spatial, political and societal dynamics. A critical perspective is necessary to tackle the spatial relationality of increasing interrelated phenomena such as Arab Gulf cities. Urban planning - the traditional discipline responsible for the development of spatial answers to cities - alone is not able to resolve the growing challenges associated with sustainable planning and resilience.<sup>12</sup> The problems at stake require to uncover and describe the new spatialities and temporalities<sup>13</sup> that emerge in an increasingly globally entangled context in the Arab

<sup>10</sup> Lefebvre, *La Production de l'espace*, 1974; Schmid, *Stadt, Raum und Gesellschaft: Henri Lefebvre und die Theorie der Produktion des Raumes*, 2010.

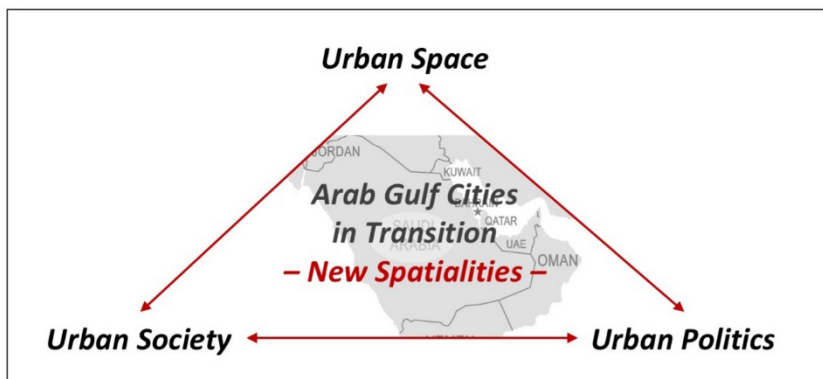
<sup>11</sup> Valeri, *Oman: Politics and Society in the Qaboos State*, 2013.

<sup>12</sup> Soja, “Regional Planning and Development Theories”, 2009.

<sup>13</sup> Sassen, “Spatialities and Temporalities of the Global: Elements for a Theorization”, 2000.

Gulf region. The contributions to this book are an attempt to formulate some of these new spatialities and temporalities in the Gulf cities.

In 2012 UN-Habitat<sup>14</sup> issued a report on “The State of Arab Cities 2012: Challenges of Urban Transition” stating that the urban population of the Gulf had quadrupled in the past 40 years and is set to double within the next 40 years. The report forecasts a major urban growth phase as being necessary to house this population. The report, however, also provides a note of caution about social, economic, ecological and political consequences of engaging in un-sustainable urban development. Since 2011, the Gulf states have stated their intent to engage in an accelerated urban transition. The form of this urban transition depends both on factors within and outside the domains of urban planning, governance and national economics. As such there is an urgent need to study urban transformation in the region from a wider, holistic perspective. This volume provides a multidimensional and transdisciplinary approach to help us understand complex transformation underway across the region. The structure of the volume is divided along three intertwined spheres of Urban Space, Urban Politics and Urban Society, and all the chapters are bound together by the underlying premise that the future success of the Arab Gulf states is critically tied to the success or failure of its cities.



### About this collection

This collection is the result of a concerted effort of the participants of a workshop that took place at the 7th Gulf Research Meeting at Cambridge University in August 2016. The aim of this workshop was to engage regional and international scholars engaged in carrying out trans-disciplinary research on Arab Gulf cities. The given compilation reflects the success and the international relevance of a differentiated look upon the cities in the region – beyond modernisation and economic development.

<sup>14</sup>UN Habitat, The State of Arab Cities 2012: Challenges of Urban Transition, 2012.

As described previously, Arab Gulf cities are an important area of research to contribute to a better understanding of the contemporary Arab Gulf, comprehending the visions, challenges and endeavours of the GCC States. The relatively young history of the cities, the larger cultural and religious context, the cross-comparability and parallel development make Arab Gulf cities ideal research areas. Moreover, the Gulf Region is still marginalised in Global Urban Studies e.g. 'Planetary Urbanisation'. Therefore, the workshop aimed to offer a platform for international scholars, practitioners, planners, academics and others, to exchange ideas and findings about the Urban Gulf. The participants of the workshop represent fields of study that include policy making and practice (e.g. planning and development), as well as academic disciplines of politics, architecture, urban studies, human geography, history, social and cultural sciences, engineering, economics, and management.

The outcome of the workshop was in the form of selected papers covering a wide range of sub-topics seeking to address research questions on various aspects of the new spatialities, new temporalities, new mobilities, that are changing spatial practice in different Arab Gulf cities.

The individual contributions add different weight to the fields of urban spaces, politics and society according to their regional and disciplinary focus – even though several of the chapters crossover and contribute towards all three areas of focus.

### Part I: Urban Space

Next to human and natural resources, physical space is the ultimate resource for development in the Arab Gulf cities. Although spectacular land reclamation projects in Dubai and elsewhere aim to expand the urban territory – and, thus, produce physically new spaces - the resource space is limited, as **Hamad Al Gharibi** exemplifies at the example of the case study of Muscat, the capital of the Sultanate of Oman.

The use of space within cities is increasingly heterogeneous and often subject to conflicting interests. Mobility increases with the economic development and becomes a distinguishing form of social capital; yet sustainable forms of mobility pose a challenge in Gulf cities, as **Wolfgang Scholz** and **Sebastian Langer** show in their study on the transportation networks in Muscat Capital Area. Due to their larger consumption of natural resources, energy and capital challenges towards Gulf societies amplify in cities.

The French social philosopher Henri Lefebvre<sup>15</sup> suggests that every society produces its own space according to its mode of production. Following this idea, we would like to push further to consider urban space of the Arab Gulf cities not only as a physical resource, but also as capital or asset. **Ludovica Tomarchio** visualises the use of public space in Muscat Oman through social media data. Her studies suggest a vibrant use of spaces that are neither planned nor officially endorsed as public spaces.

## Part II: Urban Politics

The process of urbanisation in the GCC unfolds rapidly and irreversibly. Decisions taken today have far reaching consequences for the future development possibilities of the inhabitants of the Arab Gulf cities and further implications for the prosperity and stability of the region. Development policies and practices do not evolve in a vacuum but are shaped by their particular social and political contexts. Therefore, planning and development policies, their agents and forces, the drivers and motivations, the role of the state and other actors, need to be studied in a systematic fashion.

Examples of recent planning and policy frameworks of Gulf cities are: 'The Abu Dhabi Vision' 2030<sup>16</sup> which developed a pioneering development scheme addressing social housing, urban and regional development within a comprehensive policy framework; 'The Oman National Spatial Strategy'<sup>17</sup>, as another attempt to develop a comprehensive planning framework for spatial practice; or 'The Dubai Green Guidelines'.<sup>18</sup> These development frameworks have not always been locally produced within the respective countries but are often imported and tend to fall short in addressing the specific local context.

While many urban and regional planning frameworks are complex and difficult to visualise, housing, which is of key concern to inhabitants of the Gulf cities, has been adopted by all GCC governments as a critical development component. **Kristin Eggeling** shows how the new politics of urban development have unfolded in Qatar and discusses future-oriented sense making within those politics. As Eggeling points out, in the authoritarian contexts of the Gulf it is extremely useful for local political elites and regimes to use the distant future as an aspirational setting within which to justify new forms of urban development. As she suggests, once the imaginary "future potential" of an urban development project becomes an acceptable justification for it in the first place, this allows rulers to amend and alter their visionary plans for the city and state whenever the future starts looming closer or whenever circumstances change. **Anamika Mishra's** chapter provides another example of the state and its involvement in the production of space, as she examines Abu Dhabi's public realm and the changing pattern of spatial practices in the context of place-branding.

## Part III: Urban Society

Undoubtedly, the cities in the GCC have emerged as the new centres of the Arab World in a globalised world, having outstripped the sister cities in North Africa and the Levant – mainly because of their economic prosperity.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Lefebvre, 1974.

<sup>16</sup> Abu Dhabi Urban Planning Council, "Plan Abu Dhabi 2030 Urban Structure Framework Plan", 2010.

<sup>17</sup> Constatt Ltd, "Oman National Spatial Strategy", 2014.

<sup>18</sup> Dubai Municipality, "Dubai Green Building Regulations & Specifications", 2013.

<sup>19</sup> Al Qassemi, "Thriving Gulf Cities Emerge as New Centers of Arab World", 2013.

**Aliyu Barau** gives an example of those changes due to globalisation in his analysis of the holy city of Mecca. He shows the changing patterns of spatial practice and the spatial transformations due to capitalisation and changing consumption pattern over time, combining a historical perspective with a contemporary view of actors and their spatial imaginations. Gulf societies are becoming “younger” due to the demographic development. But also the cultural transformation is showing significant impact in particular among the growing younger generation. Currently, the evolvement of the urban societies in the Arab Gulf is seeing two main phenomena: The rise of a new middle class, and the internationalisation of the societies due to the high percentage of foreigners working and living in the Gulf. Both are mutually interacting and inducing changing lifestyle patterns including trends towards consumer society, car-based mobility, proliferation of information and communication devices, the impact of social media etc. and a cultural transformation with regard to socio-cultural diversity and heritage with Arab Gulf cities.

**Gidon Windecker's** contribution looks at the use of social media in Oman, and the new spatialities that emerge due to those virtual spaces and the rise of a (new) public sphere. His analysis gives furthermore evidence of space as a changing resource with the new understanding of spatial distances, especially the change of felt social distance within the realms of virtual spaces.

A major distinction between the “new” and the “old” Arab centres is given due to the high number of foreigners in the Arab Gulf cities who vastly outnumber the GCC citizens. This imbalance leads to significant questions about socio-cultural and national identity, belongingness, and the question about the “right to the city”. The current reality of the high number of non-citizens needs also to be linked to the endeavours for a “sustainable existence” or of a sustainable development for the Arab Gulf cities.

Albeit those and other challenges of the heterogeneous urban fabrics are undeniable, this book also aims to open the floor to look beyond the “struggle to belong” and towards diversity and urban pluralism as a potential for sustainable development. The creative potential of diversity can be helpful e.g. for productivity and economic diversification – not only for new business ideas, start-ups of small medium enterprises (SMEs) on the way towards knowledge-based and information-driven economies; but also to guarantee the necessary supply with qualified and skilled workforce. Heterogeneity amongst the workforce has been proven at many examples to be a significant driver for fostering creativity, diversification, and tolerance which is another important aspect to guarantee social stability. The book wants to encourage further explorations of new spatialities of Arab Gulf cities at the crossroads of urban space, urban politics and urban society.

Mainz, Singapore, Doha, March 2019



## Acknowledgements

The presented collection is based on edited papers presented at the Seventh Gulf Research Meeting (GRM) in Cambridge from 16-19 August 2016. We would like to thank the organisers of the Gulf Research Centre at the University of Cambridge for their support and invitation to hold this workshop within the conference, and, of course, all our participants for their contributions and input to the discussion that enabled and sparked this compilation: Aliyu Barau, Kristin Eggeling, Hamad Al-Gharibi, Laura Goffman, Sebastian Langer, Anamika Mishra, Jessie Moritz, Wolfgang Scholz, Ludovica Tomarchio, Sarina Wakefield, and Gidon Windecker.

## Bibliography

Abu Dhabi Urban Planning Council. 2010. "Plan Abu Dhabi 2030 Urban Structure Framework Plan."

Al Qassemi, Sultan. 2013. "Thriving Gulf Cities Emerge as New Centers of Arab World." *Al-Monitor: The Pulse of the Middle East*, October 8, 2013. <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/10/abu-dhabi-dubai-doha-arab-centers.html>.

Al Sayeh, Noura. 2016. "Bahrain: On History, Coastlines, Renders, and the Image of Public Space." In *Gulf Cities as Interfaces*, edited by George Katodrytis and Sharmeen Syed. Cambridge: Gulf Research Center.

Baccini, P. 2012. *Metabolism of the Anthroposphere: Analysis, Evaluation, Design*. 2nd ed. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press.

Batty, Michael and Paul Longley. 2016. "Fractal Cities." <https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.1.1867.2724>.

Brenner, Neil, Peter Marcuse, and Margit Mayer. 2012. *Cities for People, Not for Profit: Critical Urban Theory and the Right to the City*. Routledge.

Constatt Ltd. 2014. "Oman National Spatial Strategy." Muscat: Supreme Committee of Planning.

Cummings, Veronika, and Aurel von Richthofen. 2017. Urban Sustainability as a Political Instrument in the Gulf Region Exemplified at Projects in Abu Dhabi. *DIE ERDE*, 148 (4): 253–67. <https://doi.org/10.12854/erde-148-53>.

Deffner, Veronika and Carmella Pfaffenbach. 2015. "Migration, Modernisation, and the Urban Immigration Society in the Sultanate of Oman." *Middle East Insights*, October. <https://doi.org/10.23976/INS.2015128>.

Dubai Municipality. 2013. "Dubai Green Building Regulations & Specifications." [http://www.dm.gov.ae/wps/portal/DepartmentHomePageEn?WCM\\_GLOBAL\\_CONTEXT=/wps/wcm/connect/DMContentEn/Home/common/Building+Issued](http://www.dm.gov.ae/wps/portal/DepartmentHomePageEn?WCM_GLOBAL_CONTEXT=/wps/wcm/connect/DMContentEn/Home/common/Building+Issued).

- Elsheshtawy, Yasser, ed. 2011. *The Evolving Arab City: Tradition, Modernity and Urban Development*. Paperback ed. *Planning, History and the Environment Series*. London [u.a.]: Routledge.
- ETH Studio Basel. 2015. *Muscat and Oman - Engineered Land, a Territorial Research*. ETH-Zürich. <http://dx.doi.org/10.3929/ethz-a-010335395>.
- Hauptmann, Deborah, and Arie Graafland, eds. 2001. *Cities in Transition*. *Stylos Series*. Rotterdam: 010 Publishers.
- Heim, Bernhard, Marc Joost, Florian Rupp, and Aurel von Richthofen. 2018. "On the Process and Economics of Land Settlement in Oman: Mathematical Modelling and Reasoning in Urban Planning and Design." Edited by J.M. Holler, M. Kocher, and K.K. Sieberg. *Homo Oeconomicus - Journal of Behavioral and Institutional Economics*, March.
- Lefebvre, Henri. 1974. *La Production de l'espace*. Paris: Anthropos.
- Mumford, Lewis. 1961. *The City in History: Its Origins, Its Transformations, and Its Prospects*. A Harvest Book. San Diego New York London: Harcourt.
- Nebel, Sonja, and Aurel von Richthofen. 2016. *Urban Oman - Trends and Perspectives of Urbanisation in Muscat Capital Area*. Vol. 21. *HABITAT - INTERNATIONAL: Schriften Zur Internationalen Stadtentwicklung*. Berlin: LIT Verlag.
- Oliveira, Vítor. 2016. "Agents and Processes of Urban Transformation." In *Urban Morphology*. *The Urban Book Series*. Cham: Springer International Publishing. <http://link.springer.com/10.1007/978-3-319-32083-0>.
- Pollalis, Spiro, and Nader Ardalan. 2012. "Kuwait City Kuwait." 9. *Gulf Encyclopedia of Sustainable Urbanism*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University.
- Sassen, Saskia. 2000. "Spatialities and Temporalities of the Global: Elements for a Theorization." *Public Culture* 12 (1):215–32.
- Schmid, Christian. 2010. *Stadt, Raum und Gesellschaft: Henri Lefebvre und die Theorie der Produktion des Raumes*. Stuttgart: Steiner.
- Soja, E.W. 2009. "Regional Planning and Development Theories." In *International Encyclopedia of Human Geography*, 259–70. Elsevier. <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-008044910-4.00877-4>.
- UN-Habitat, ed. 2012. *The State of Arab Cities 2012: Challenges of Urban Transition*. Nairobi: UN-HABITAT.
- Valeri, Marc. 2013. *Oman: Politics and Society in the Qaboos State*. Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press.
- Wippel, Steffen. 2013. *Regionalizing Oman Political, Economic and Social Dynamics*. Dordrecht: Springer Science+Business Media. <http://site.ebrary.com/id/10747146>.