



View of Sharq district with Al-Hamra tower in the center. Kuwait City, Kuwait, 2015.

IconiCity: Seeking Identity by Building Iconic Architectures in Kuwait

by Roberto Fabbri¹

The Emirates Airlines website welcomes visitors by stating that Dubai's iconic architecture is not only encouraged, but "actively pursued." A subsequent list of evidence describing extreme heights, unconventional shapes, and cutting-edge materials supports the claim.² The Gulf states have turned to architecture as a way to build globally-recognized skylines. This wave of new, iconic buildings is often an attempt to build an urban uniqueness which, moreover, is part of the quest for a stronger national and social identity.

A landmark is traditionally a symbol that raises a sense of belonging in the local population, but normally monuments are few in the urban fabric, and they are limited to specific spaces of public interest. But what happens when the city itself becomes composed of a significant number of icons, and the urban fabric is just the "in between"? Kuwait is an interesting case in the Gulf because it has a more consolidated pre-existing urban form, and these 'new objects' are not related at any level, neither in scale nor in language to the surrounding context. The current transformation process focuses on the development of isolated elements, self-standing on their own plot and auto-referential. Around them, the connective fabric is left with poor design and modest construction quality.

Icon & media

The architectural press normally welcomes these ‘photogenic’ buildings and presents the city not by its ‘nature’ but by its ‘suit.’ One can argue that, apart from the different layers of reading or meaning that a building can generate, architecture is the expression of the society that produces it. In other words, architects and clients are transforming the building into a sort of ‘tridimensional logo’ implementing a series of design choices: an unusual, unique, and symbolic shape different from any other ‘competitor.’ There are certain requirements: The icon shall be a technical challenge that raises engineering to an extremely high standard, where complexity consolidates its identity. Size is another crucial aspect, and specifically the vertical dimension. Iconic architecture has to be big to stand out in the city fabric. Furthermore, the name and the fame of the designer are also major factors in establishing an iconic building.

This design approach often brings these buildings very close to an industrial-design object, self-centered and self-referent. Consequentially iconic architecture has, in most cases, a conflicting dialogue with its context, because it is meant to communicate to a worldwide audience, while the local ‘assimilation’ is more problematic.

Iconizing Kuwait

Iconic buildings are a worldwide phenomenon, and the examples in the Gulf are not too different from what is happening in the rest of the world. One could argue that prestige projects are more prevalent in the region due to the lack of pre-existing local monuments which can catalyze the sense of belonging. However, this would not entirely reflect reality, since at the very initial inception of the urban and social modernization in the Gulf in the mid-20th century, the construction of representative buildings was at the center of every governmental plan.³ Today, Abu Dhabi, Doha and Dubai have all become archetypes for cities in transformation in the region, while Kuwait, on the other hand, is somehow different from its neighbors.

Kuwait has a more complex urban fabric and a longer urban history, one punctuated by a large number of highly experimental projects since the early 1950s.⁴ The city is also in transformation, but the vision is less evident, cohesive, and advertised than in the other Gulf states. In the last decade many projects were announced to modernize the city and keep pace with the region, including a new airport, two new towers for the Central Bank and the National Bank of Kuwait, and a new hospital center, among others.

The city center is now also in transformation, and despite the fact that this part of the city would need more consolidation than ‘intrusions,’ the construction of skyscrapers is now mostly focused here, where large plots are abandoned or under-used. These are mostly initiatives by private actors investing in separate plots without a coordinated vision. The ‘in between’ is a *non-space* left with no integrated functions or quality: a very loose and undefined canvas amid vertical objects unrelated to each other or the city itself.

In contrast, Yasser Mahgoub’s reading of the build environment of Kuwait concludes that multiple identities should be accepted as a natural result of the actions of different groups in the society, and architecture is the representation of this local contemporary condition and desire.⁵ In principle, this argument is convincing, but the *quid pro quo* is the acceptance of a heterogeneous approach to shapes, forms, and languages. This tradeoff was well described in the early 1960s by Saba George Shiber in his critique of Kuwait City’s transformation: “Architecture became an exercise in acrobatics and not an endeavor in creation, economics and organicism. . . . It has become rare to find lines anchored to the earth. Instead, they all seem pivoted

to point restively to outer space.”⁶ Paraphrasing Shiber, proportions, shapes, materials, colors, and placements are so different that it is very difficult to perceive urban unity.

In 2011 Kuwait City received its own internationally recognizable iconic building: Al-Hamra tower.

It has everything necessary to be considered an icon: a prominent designer, oversized structure, technical challenges, and a unique shape. It is not difficult to imagine the role that this 400-meter high business hub plays in the skyline of the city. Its sculptural shape and flaring walls demanded extreme engineering work and placed Al-Hamra among the world’s most complex tall buildings.

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The official company brochure highlights a long list of technical data and new records achieved: the tallest carved skyscraper in concrete, the largest office building in the country, and the largest stone façade.⁷ Among other technical marvels, one specific design solution is worth mentioning. The tower is, in a way, site-specific. Its design is still not related to the urban scale nor to the city context, but it is partially the result of solar condition studies. The tower is oriented so that the inclined flaring wall protects and shades the southern elevation, where the desert sun can be more powerful. Nevertheless, when the building touches the ground there is no sign of urban mitigation or integration with the fabric. It sits on its own plot just like any other object in the surrounding area, demonstrating once again the lack of urban design of this part of the city.

Gary Haney, from the design firm SOM,⁸ defines Al-Hamra as “a statement (that) will be the landmark of Kuwait for the next generation.”⁹ In general, the local population seems to have embraced Al-Hamra as a new landmark. On the contrary, tenants did not find it completely attractive: the high-end shopping mall on the lower levels provides a vast array of restaurants and boutiques, but a large number of office floors are still empty. So what kind of statement does Haney refer to? Which ideals or which shared feelings will the future generations of Kuwait see in this tower? An answer comes from the brochure issued by the building management company: “Hamra is a business monument!”¹⁰ So the icon is a monument, and in a contemporary commercial-oriented society the monument is essentially a ‘business memorial.’

Connecting the past to the present

In the same brochure a picture showcases Al-Hamra facing the sea with the Kuwait Towers, the country’s 1970s national monument, in the background. The intention probably was to present a sense of continuity with the past despite the fact that to make space for the new tower, one of the oldest cinemas in town, a vivid expression of 1960s modern heritage, was demolished. All this leads to a few considerations on how much the two towers reflect the changing needs of Kuwaiti society in their current time. Just like Al-Hamra, the Kuwait Towers are definitely an icon representing the country’s goals of modernization, but the latter also form a narrative space recounting the motivations behind a project of public interest. The towers are a water reservoir with all the meanings that water has in a desert land like Kuwait. With their shape, materials, position, and scale, the Kuwait Towers are evocative objects that bring back memories of the past, reminding the country of its roots.

On the other end, Al-Hamra does not show any sense of continuity with the past. It is presented to the public as a display of current financial power, but it could be better interpreted as an expression of a higher

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level of confidence in the country. The lack of trust and the uncertain international situation in the aftermath of the 1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait virtually froze, with a few exceptions, major investments for more than a decade.

This traumatic event and its long tail arrested the drive toward modernization that had been consistently pursued for over 40 years through the erection of highly symbolic architecture. Unlike other Gulf countries, recent iconic architecture in Kuwait seems to express a general feeling of recovered confidence, perfectly reflected in bald technical features, more than the quest for a national identity or the homogenized vision of a contemporary city.

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² “Iconic Dubai Architecture | Sightseeing in Dubai | Discover Dubai | Emirates,” www.emirates.com, accessed 01 September, 2016.

³ Compare for example Todd Reisz’s analysis of the World Trade Center in Dubai, in *Structures of Memory*, catalogue of the exhibition of the National Pavilion United Arab Emirates, La Biennale di Venezia, 2014, pp. 81-82.

⁴ Regarding Kuwait’s architectural production in the recent past, see Roberto Fabbri, Sara Saragoça Soares, and Ricardo Camacho, *Modern Architecture Kuwait 1949-89* (NiggliVerlag: Zurich, 2016).

⁵ Yasser Mahgoub, “Hyper Identity: the Case of Kuwaiti Architecture,” *Archnet-IJAR, International Journal of Islamic Architecture*, 1:1 (March 2007): 84.

⁶ Saba George Shiber, “Architecture and Urban Aesthetics in Kuwait: Significance or Superficiality,” *The Kuwait Urbanization: Documentation, Analysis, Critique* (Governmental Press: Kuwait, 1964), 306.

⁷ Al Hamra Business Tower Facts and Figures, www.alhamra.com.kw, accessed 2 October, 2016.

⁸ Skidmore, Owings & Merrill was the lead consultant, together with Al Jazeera as local partner, Al-Ahmadiyah as contractor, and Turner as project manager.

⁹ “Record breaker,” *Gulf Construction Online*, accessed 22 Sept. 2016

¹⁰ *Al-Hamra Tower*, Company Brochure, undated, p.20