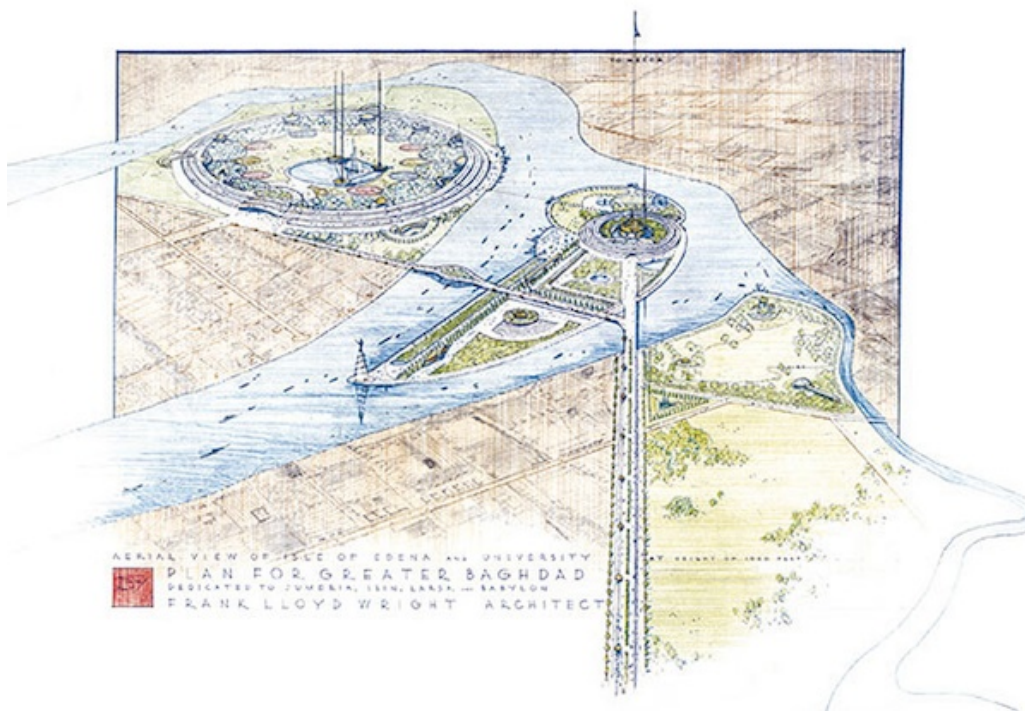


What Do We Need to Deconstruct?

The first cities appeared in modern-day Iraq, Egypt and the Levant and connected the two worlds of the Mediterranean and Asia. The coming of Islam in the seventh century reinforced the city's primacy as the locus of both the community and the polity of the new religion. But the most enduring legacy of the Islamic city has been its fantastic quality, recalling the grandeur and wealth of ancient imperial capitals and trade emporia.

Italo Calvino in his *Invisible Cities* (1972) captured that fabulous strangeness in lyrical descriptions. His fictional Marco Polo recounts to a rapt Qublai Khan the fables of the cities of his vast Mongol empire, which the Khan had apparently not visited. They are magical, mysterious, captivating, depressing, oppressive, liberating, degrading, humanising and demonising all at once. But Calvino is constructing a chronicle of nostalgia, for Marco Polo is weaving together, from memory but also from fantasy, the images of his beloved Venice, the queen of the Mediterranean, all cast in the fragmented narrative of the cities of the Orient.

Frank Lloyd Wright's architectural approach was no less romantic. His plan for Greater Baghdad in 1957–58, which centred on an island in the middle of the river Tigris, is nothing less than a modern Oriental fantasy. Recalling the Round-city of al-Mansur, built more than 1,100 years earlier, the project came complete with an assortment of naïve references to what an American raised at the end of the nineteenth century would have thought of the Orient through his reading of the *One Thousand and One Nights*.



Frank Lloyd Wright, Aerial View of Isle of Edena and University, Plan For Greater Baghdad © ARS, NY and DACS, London 2014.

A seemingly new kind of architectural fantasy has emerged in the Arabian Gulf in the last twenty years. I say 'seemingly' because it is purported to be futuristic, having broken all previous measures of scale, form, luxury, fantasy and often purpose and urban constraints. But in its dependence on formalistic references to traditional forms and patterns, and its reliance on a dystopically halved city, this architecture is in fact regressive and antiquated.

Dubai, with its unrestrained economic *laissez-faire* and aggressive pursuit of investments, was the first to ride, and eventually to guide, the new tide. The entire city, its surrounding desert, and even its coastal water became the world's most phenomenal visual laboratory, where the designers' architectural

flights of fancy, which pushed the limits of size, height, eccentricity and desire, and the willingness of their patrons to bankroll those fantasies, seemed unbridled.

In this make-believe milieu, the architecture of what Mike Davis called the 'utopian capitalist city' appears to have emerged as a tacit design objective shared by the designers and their patrons to lure in more investors in a financial cyclical scheme. Thoughtful design has been hastily given up in favour of a new daredevil architecture that loudly, and often too loudly, bespeaks the ambition to endow the global pursuit of luxury aimed at the wealthy with a fabulous imagery that Joseph Rykwert matter-of-factly calls the 'Emirate Style'.

The Dubai Syndrome has spread to other cities in the Gulf. But this hasty and hungry process of expansion and luxury has its harsh consequences. At home, it has brought into sharp relief the contrast between the lifestyles of the wealthy natives and the huge masses of poor labourers imported mostly from South and Southeast Asia, who are crowded in ill-kempt camps or dilapidated rental neighbourhoods and denied any civic rights.

Severe urban effects are also felt in the older and poorer cities in the surrounding region that are directly influenced by the Arabian cities. The proliferation of Dubai-style futuristic 'New Cities' around these older cities has caused their historic neighbourhoods, already suffering under the weight of acute population explosion and an assortment of governmental corruption, a greedy real-estate market and chaotic overbuilding, to decay faster than at any time before.

The most alarming effect of this relentless neo-liberal transformation, however, is neither architectural nor urban. It is rather the fading away of the cities' civic quality that had been slowly and painstakingly acquired over the last two centuries of the on-and-off modernisation process. The poor quarters, as Michael Slackman had already remarked about Cairo in the *New York Times* in 2007, are being turned into contiguous, ruralised squatter settlements where people live by their own wits and devices, cut off from the authorities, the law and often each other.

When the Arab Spring erupted in 2011, it was partially a response to these conditions, as the famous slogan '*aysh, hurriyya, 'adala ijtimaiyya*' (Bread, Freedom, Social Justice) implies. The various revolutions strove for a freer and more just sociopolitical structure. And although the revolutionary aftershocks are still brutally shaking the region and threatening its very geopolitical balance, their unfulfilled original goals have not lost any of their urgency or significance. Therein lies our professional responsibility. It is time to aspire again to a utopian future urbanism that takes into account a clear conception of the lost respect for the citizen.

Nasser Rabbat

The scholarly interests of architect and historian Nasser Rabbat include the history and historiography of Islamic architecture, art, urban history and postcolonial criticism. He is the Aga Khan Professor and the Director of the Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture at MIT. Publications include: *Thaqafat al Bina' wa Bina' al-Thaqafa* (The Culture of Building and Building Culture, Beirut, 2002) and *Mamluk History Through Architecture: Building, Culture, and Politics in Mamluk Egypt and Syria* (London, 2010). He serves on the boards of various cultural and educational organisations, consults with international design firms on projects in the Middle East, and maintains several websites focusing on Islamic architecture and urbanism.