Feature Articles

Legitimizing the Illegitimate: A Case for Kuwait's Forgotten Modernity

FARAH AL-NAKIB

The city-state of Kuwait has undergone significant transformations since the advent of oil urbanization through vigorous, state-led development processes that constantly replace old with new. After 1950 almost all pre-oil structures inside the historic urban center were demolished to make way for a new, modern city. And, since 2003, a renewed cycle of demolition and development has destroyed that modernist landscape and replaced it with something newer still. At the same time, a sudden regret for the erasure of Kuwait's traditional city has resulted in the renovation of pre-oil buildings into sites of national heritage. However, the destruction of the modernist city is not viewed with the same regret, for the landscape that is being erased today — and memory of the era in which it was built — is not considered a valid representation of Kuwait's historic identity. This article relegitimizes Kuwait's early oil modernity in the nation's past, while considering the consequences of its erasure from the landscape, and from collective memory.

In 1983 the British architect and critic Stephen Gardiner wrote the following about Kuwait:

> There was no breathing space between ancient and modern, rags and riches; from a
> tiny place in the sand on the edge of the Gulf . . . Kuwait hurtled like a missile into
> the high technology of the mid-twentieth century. And over the next thirty years, the
> new city of Kuwait — optimistic, imaginative, confident and utterly modern — was
> conceived, planned, built, replanned and rebuilt. The unique creation of oil, the story
> of this city is astonishing.[1]

Farah al-Nakib is an Assistant Professor of History at California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo.

Though Gardiner's observations certainly captured the ambitions and intentions of Kuwait's state-led modernist project that was launched in 1950, the reality of that transformation was a lot more complex than this very linear and uncomplicated depiction might

suggest. The process of oil urbanization in Kuwait was not as smooth and heroic as it is often described, nor was it as successful as state actors, modernist planners, and even Kuwaitis themselves had anticipated. As James Holston, James Scott, and others have argued, most modernist projects deployed in cities around the world — even in Brasília, the seemingly quintessential modernist city — failed to produce the new social order they believed could be created through the transformation of the urban landscape. Kuwait's modernist project also arguably failed to achieve its lofty and heroic intentions. But when it comes to understanding the modern, according to Marshall Berman, "what matters is the process, not the result."[2] And indeed, the *process* of oil urbanization in Kuwait was, in many ways, unmistakably modern. As Christine Boyer has written, "being 'modern' in the early part of the twentieth century meant, among other things, being self-consciously new, blowing up the continuum of tradition, and breaking with the past."[3]

In Kuwait, this process of "breaking with the past" has become a cyclical occurrence. In 1972, just over two decades into Kuwait's oil-driven modernization, Zahra Freeth, who grew up in Kuwait in the 1930s as the daughter of the British Political Agent Harold Dickson, wrote the following: "Blessed with the resources to create all that they desire, [Kuwaitis] sometimes behave with wasteful capriciousness, like a bored child who must destroy a sandcastle that he has built, merely so that he can build it up again."[4] A decade later, in 1983, Gardiner similarly noted: "When the programmes of the seventies and eighties are completed, parts of the city will have been built and demolished three times. Rather like artists who start with a sketch, paint it out, bring it back, and then paint it out again in search of the perfection to be found next time, the Kuwaitis seem determined to get their city right."[5]

This habit of constantly shaking off the old to create the new began in 1951 with the creation of the country's first master plan. Over the next three decades, Kuwait's pre-oil landscape was systematically demolished, to be replaced by a new, modern city.[6] Since 2003, Kuwait has once again been undergoing a cycle of demolition and redevelopment; this time, it is the early oil modernist landscape itself that is being destroyed and replaced by something newer still. Alongside this new cycle of demolition has emerged a seemingly contradictory desire to revive the pre-oil city on the urban landscape, as historic courtyard houses that escaped the first round of demolition are being renovated into sites of national heritage. This reification of the pre-oil landscape reflects a deep-seated regret for the erasure of Kuwait's traditional city. However, the destruction of the modernist city is not viewed with the same regret.

To investigate this discrepancy, this article examines the current delegitimizing of Kuwait's modern era through the lens of the built environment. It analyzes how, and possibly why, Kuwait's modern era is being erased from Kuwaiti historical memory. It also underscores the consequences of this

forgetting for Kuwait's historic urban identity — urban here meaning not just the landscape but also the particular social, political and cultural life that produces and is reproduced by that landscape.

KUWAIT'S MODERN ERA

In 1960 the British author Ian Fleming, originator of the James Bond series, came to Kuwait to research an article for a series in *The Times* on the world's "thrilling cities." His fascination with the place produced a full (unpublished) book manuscript that aimed to document Kuwait's dramatic economic transformation and to capture the country's coming of age as it matured from adolescence to adulthood.[7] This crucial stage he referred to — full of excitement, chaos and drama — is known today as Kuwait's "Golden Era," although state discourse at the time also called it Kuwait's "Modern Era." These were the three decades between the advent of oil modernization in 1950 and Kuwait's *suq al-manakh* stock market crash in 1982.

Before oil, Kuwait was a port town integrated into the western Indian Ocean trading network and the regional pearling industry **(FIG.1)**. Established in 1716 by tribes emigrating from central Arabia, the town grew substantially over the next two centuries due to "the equity of its rule and . . . the freedom of its trade," which encouraged continuous immigration.[8] The urban landscape was primarily shaped by environmental and climatic conditions, with single-story mud-brick courtyard houses clustered into tightly knit neighborhood units, threaded together by narrow streets and high walls that blocked out the sun and dust. The town's seafront, *dhow* harbors, and market area were the central spaces of everyday activity, reflecting the town's mercantile and maritime identity **(FIG.2)**. In the 1930s Kuwait entered a period of economic decline due to the invention of the Japanese cultured pearl and the world economic depression. It was in this context that oil was discovered in commercial quantities in 1938, and the industry was launched in 1946.

When he came to power in 1950, Kuwait's new ruler, Abdullah al-Salem, announced plans to use the country's new and exponentially increasing oil wealth to make Kuwait "the best planned and most socially progressive city in the Middle East," unveiling a state-led modernization project hinging on the twin pillars of urban development and social welfare.[9] Modernity in the form of social progress (in state-funded education, public health, employment, housing) and urban development (infrastructure, wide streets, luxurious houses, modern buildings) would "[confer] upon Kuwait a distinct position alongside the civilised and developed world states."[10] To begin this process of modernization, in 1951 the state commissioned a British town-planning firm, Minoprio, Spenceley and MacFarlane, to produce a master plan to replace the old mud-brick port town of the pre-oil era with a new city to serve

FIGURE 1. *Kuwait's pre-oil townscape. Source: Kuwait Oil Company archives.*

as the ultimate symbol of Kuwait's newfound prosperity. Accordingly, the vast majority of the pre-oil urban landscape was subsequently demolished throughout the 1950s and 1960s (FIG. 3). This process of "out with the old and in with the new" was common to universal experiences of modernity around the world. As Andreas Huyssen has argued: "The price paid for progress was the destruction of past ways of living and being in the world. . . . And the destruction of the past brought forgetting."[11]

FIGURE 2. *The seafront where the trading ships unloaded their wares before oil. Source: Kuwait Oil Company archives.*

FIGURE 3. *The demolition of the pre-oil town. Source: Kuwait Oil Company archives.*

One planner working in Kuwait in the 1960s noted that Kuwaitis at this time demonstrated "an unquenchable zeal for development."[12] When Zahra Freeth told a group of Kuwaiti women in 1956 that she had been taking photographs of some of the older houses in the town, the women grew "impatient at my interest in the Kuwait of the past, and asked why I wasted time on the old and outmoded when there was so much in Kuwait that was new and fine." When Freeth mentioned that many of the old buildings were due to be demolished, one young woman exclaimed: "'Let them be demolished! Who wants them now? It is the new Kuwait and not the old which is worthy of admiration.'"[13] The mass demolition of the pre-oil landscape was not simply a means of clearing space for something new; it was a conscious act of erasure — of deliberately shedding Kuwait's past while dreaming of a better future. Kuwait was coming off the heels of the worst economic recession in its history, and so, as Gardiner put it, "the optimistic prospect of a gleaming new city to replace the muddle, poverty and primitive conditions would have seemed irresistible."[14]

In his analysis of cities in modernity, Richard Dennis has convincingly argued that such determination to replace the old with the new in modern cities underscores the fact that there is a constant dialogue between past and present in this process: that the past is in fact needed to construct and make sense of the present. On the one hand, the rejection of the pre-oil town as old and outmoded validated the wholesale construction of a brand-new cityscape. At the same time, however, "the retention of the past as 'other' as continuing proof of the superiority of the new" was also necessary for the validation of modernity.[15]

As such, amid the concerted effort to forget the recent past, in 1957 Kuwait City's first national museum was opened in a historic palace. According to the British Political Agent at the time, "the aim of the museum [was] to preserve a record of local crafts and customs in Kuwait and to show a comparison between conditions in Kuwait before and after the many development schemes which have been started

since oil was discovered."[16] The museum contained reconstructed scenes of a Kuwait that had existed only two decades previously but that was already becoming a distant memory, including model ships and a replica courtyard house, along with displays of common household objects such as oil lamps, palm-leaf mats for eating on the floor, water-skins, and charcoal hearths. The museum provided a visible contrast between the "primitive" pre-oil town and the progressive city developing so rapidly outside its doors, and therefore had an important role to play in the post-oil modernist agenda. Though explicitly involved in an act of memory, the museum helped Kuwaitis move on from their past and was complicit in the process of forgetting.

The dichotomy between past and present constructed by the mass demolition of the pre-oil townscape on the one hand, and the museum that was meant to capture memories of that disappearing world on the other, gives the distinct impression that life in Kuwait after 1950 had little in common with what came before. And change during this period was indeed substantial. The British anthropologist Peter Lienhardt, who came to Kuwait in 1950 to "[study] a society that was changing," called this a time of "flux."[17] Fleming titled his 1960 monograph, in which he documented myriad aspects of Kuwait's rapid modernization, "State of Excitement: Reflections of Kuwait."[18] And in 1983 Gardiner described Kuwait as "optimistic, imaginative, confident and utterly modern."[19]

Excitement, flux, optimism, confidence: these were accurate descriptions of Kuwait at that time. In the late 1940s the first rounds of young Kuwaitis had been sent on government scholarships to universities in Beirut, Cairo, the United Kingdom, and the United States. And, as captured during the opening of a 1962 Kuwait Oil Company film called *Close-Up on Kuwait*, these graduates were excited to return to Kuwait to work as pioneer doctors, lawyers, engineers, artists, and university professors — all new professions for Kuwaitis.[20] By the mid-1950s these groups of students also included women. In 1953 a group of Kuwaiti girls took off their traditional black cloaks or *'abayas* and burned them in their schoolyard as a symbolic gesture demanding equal opportunities as men, including their right not to wear a veil.[21] By 1956 the government had dropped the veil as part of the uniform in public secondary schools, and by 1961 women were permitted to work in the public sector without being veiled.[22] Whereas life before oil had often entailed the segregation of men and women in social settings, during these early oil years men and women in the new suburbs began to entertain in their homes together "in the European way" **(FIG. 4)**. As Freeth noted during a visit back in 1956: "The wife welcomes her guests at the door and moves freely among them. . . . Often at parties there will be dancing to the record-player, and some Kuwaiti girls, with their husband's consent, will go so far as to partner other male guests."[23]

Kuwait also went through a cultural transformation during this period. The first major Kuwaiti plays were written

FIGURE 4. *Dancing at the seaside Gazelle Club in the 1960s. David Cupp, National Geographic Creative.*

in the late 1940s, by Ahmad al-Adwani and Hamad al-Rujaib respectively, both Kuwaiti students studying in Cairo. From its inception, Kuwaiti theater — always performed in local dialect rather than formal Arabic — focused on everyday social life and used humor as a form of social and political self-critique. Mohammed Hassan Abdullah has referred to the early days of Kuwaiti theater as "the stage of self-searching," reflecting the flux and change that the country was going through.[24] The theater industry peaked in the 1970s and early 1980s with the production of social and political satires like the famous *Bye-Bye London* (1981), which — in the wake of both the 1973 oil boom and the disillusionment with Arab nationalism after the 1978 Camp David Accords — dealt with the "bizarre experience of simultaneous economic abundance and political enfeeblement."[25] Kuwaiti plays of the time openly and humorously critiqued state policies, social flaws, and religion, and were renowned throughout the Arab region.

The visual arts also flourished. Like theater, art was first taught in Kuwaiti schools in the 1940s, and the first public art exhibition was held in the Mubarakiya School (opened in 1911) in 1942. In 1960 the Free Atelier was established, a government-supported institution giving young Kuwaiti artists free studio space and materials as well as financial stipends to work and exhibit their art.[26] In 1969 Najat and

Ghazi Sultan, two young Kuwaiti siblings who had recently returned from studying abroad (the former in Cairo and the latter in the United States), established the Sultan Gallery, the Gulf's first professional art gallery (**FIG. 5**). Their mission was to support modern young Arab artists, who they believed were "generally overlooked by their societies."[27] The Sultan Gallery became a regional hub encouraging interactions and exchanges between Arab artists. In 1973 the siblings helped establish Kuwait's state-run National Council for Culture, Arts, and Letters, modeled after Britain's Arts Council. In 1977, with Najat's encouragement, the NCCAL invited Andy Warhol to exhibit his work in Kuwait at the Sultan Gallery.

The arts were able to flourish because of a high tolerance for freedom of expression, including political expression, in Kuwait. Beginning in the late 1940s, Kuwaitis began to experiment with new forms of social and political organization. Led by students who had studied abroad, young Kuwaitis began to establish civil-society organizations ranging in type from professional associations to sports clubs. Many of these clubs led the Arab nationalist reformist movement of the 1950s, calling for greater social equality and political participation, and for improved state services. The clubs represented ordinary Kuwaitis' first experimentations with institutionalized democracy. In 1961 Abdullah al-Salem terminated the Anglo-Kuwaiti Agreement that had bound Kuwait as a protectorate of Great Britain since 1899. With constantly increasing oil revenues at its disposal, Kuwait was ready to prove to the world that it was capable of making it on its own. Within a year of independence Kuwait had a constitution, and in 1963 elections were held for the country's new National Assembly. Kuwait was confidently becoming the Gulf's first formal, independent democracy.

The excitement of the period was vividly captured in the country's dramatically changing urban landscape. According to the Kuwaiti architect Huda al-Bahar in 1985: "Kuwaitis began to experience a sense of freedom from the constraints

FIGURE 5. *The Sultan Gallery. Source: Sultan Gallery archives.*

of the traditional way of life and a sense of affluence toward a modern living environment."[28] This was reflected in the way they designed their new spatial surroundings. Villas, apartment complexes, offices, and government buildings were designed borrowing international architectural influences as diverse as California space-age googie, art deco, brutalism, and Bauhaus modernism, and mixing these with stylistic features like the colonial verandah and Arab *mashrabiyya*. Such eclectic architectural experimentation revealed the excitement and flux of a country rapidly transforming and eagerly searching (FIG.6).

By the 1970s state architecture was also geared toward creating a spectacle of Kuwait's newfound wealth and progress. Beginning in 1968 and peaking after the 1973 oil boom, state planning authorities commissioned "a veritable Who's Who of the international giants" in the field of architectural modernism to design various state projects.[29] Kenzo Tange from Japan designed the new international airport; Arne Jacobsen from Denmark designed the Central Bank; the Danish architect Jørn Utzon, of Sydney Opera House fame, designed Kuwait's National Assembly; and Reima Pietilä from Finland designed the Seif Palace extension that includes the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (FIGS.7–9). These structures — many of which, like Malene Bjorn's Kuwait Towers, received prestigious international awards — put Kuwait at the cutting edge of modernity and on the map of international architectural modernism (FIG.10).

One of these structures, however, was a new national museum building, designed by the French architect Michel Ecochard and completed in 1983. As one of the city's new symbolic structures meant to deliberately replace Kuwait's pre-oil past with a spectacle of modernity, the national museum was once again complicit in erasing the past it was designed to exhibit.

AN IMPORTED VS. INDIGENOUS "MODERNITY"

There was a clear tendency among state officials in Kuwait to believe that "modernity" was something that could be constructed in the bricks and mortar of the built environment — whether by commissioning British consultants to design a master plan "in accordance with the highest standards of modern town planning"[30]; or by hiring "well-known names" to transform Kuwait into "a great capital city."[31] It is not surprising, then, that the prevailing assumption in Kuwait today is that "modernity" was brought in to Kuwait by outsiders. For instance, the Kuwait pavilion of the Biennale di Venezia's 2014 International Architecture Exhibition used the heading "Acquiring Modernity" to respond to the event's overall theme of "Absorbing Modernity."[32] The pavilion's publication thus claimed that "Kuwait sought foreign consultants to tell us how to be modern: what we had to display, how we had to behave, live, and function."[33]

But, even though these new architectural styles might have been imported, there were clear continuities between Kuwait's pre-oil and oil eras that can be seen to challenge the impression that modernity was simply "acquired" from foreign sources and constituted a radical break from Kuwait's pre-oil past. A common critique expressed by foreign observers like Freeth in the early oil years, as well as by some Kuwaitis like Huda al-Bahar in the 1980s (when the so-called "Golden Era" was on the decline), was that the process of architectural change Kuwait witnessed between the 1950s and 1970s was a "disruption" of its architectural identity. For her part, al-Bahar blamed the "hodge podge of architectural forms" on expatriate Arab architects who did not understand Kuwait's environment or how to interpret the "confused thoughts" of their Kuwaiti clients into sound residential spaces.[34] Yet, while the eclectic architecture of the early oil era might have been far removed from the country's pre-oil

FIGURE 7. *Kuwait International Airport designed by Kenzo Tange. Source: Aga Khan Award for Architecture.*

FIGURE 8. *Kuwait Central Bank, designed by Arne Jacobsen. Source: Aga Khan Award for Architecture.*

FIGURE 9. *Seif Palace Extension and Ministry of Foreign Affairs designed by Reima Pietilä. Source: Aga Khan Award for Architecture.*

urbanism, it did nonetheless reflect continuity in Kuwait's cultural identity, insofar as that identity had itself been historically mixed.

As an active and busy port, Kuwait had been a cosmopolitan city well before the coming of oil — as Rhoads Murphey

FIGURE 10. *The Kuwait Towers, designed by Malene Bjorn. Photo by author.*

has put it, "a word which does not necessarily mean 'sophisticated' but rather hybrid."[35] Kuwaiti society was established and grew largely through immigration, and like the rest of the Gulf, the town was an integral part of the Indian Ocean trading network that for centuries had connected the peoples of the Arab Gulf with those of the Iranian coast and the ports of India and East Africa. Through trade came an immense amount of cultural mixing between these different societies, which is clearly evident in Kuwait's own hybrid culture. Its dialect, food and music all reveal rich influences from Iraq, Iran, India, Zanzibar, Oman, and other cultures Kuwaitis came into contact with over hundreds of years of trade, travel, immigration, intermarriage, and acculturation. In particular, the architecture of pre-oil Kuwait looked very similar to that of other Indian Ocean port towns, as all were shaped by similar climatic conditions and available building materials. For instance, most towns within the western Indian Ocean basin imported mangrove poles (*chandal*) from East Africa to use as ceiling beams, which came pre-cut to a length of 3.6 meters.

So while the particular variety of influences on Kuwaiti life, attitudes and styles were certainly new after 1950, the idea of being exposed to and absorbing foreign cultural influences was not. The sources of influence were now more Arab than Indian Ocean, but this in itself reflected Kuwait's

changing position within its own geographic milieu after the discovery of oil. As its reliance on trade was reduced, Kuwait started to turn away from its Indian Ocean connections toward its Middle East ones — particularly as young Kuwaitis began studying in Baghdad, Cairo and Beirut on new government scholarships. Architecture speaks a history of what a society is experiencing at a particular time. Before oil, Kuwait's builders were Persian, Beluch, and Zubairi. After 1950, they were Palestinian, Lebanese, Iraqi, and Egyptian. So, while downtown Kuwait City in 1962 might have looked a lot like Beirut, Kuwait Town in 1930 had looked a lot like Zanzibar. The "hodge podge of architectural forms" that characterized the early oil landscape thus reflected continuity with Kuwait's pre-oil past rather than solely rupture.

THE END OF THE GOLDEN ERA

The "Golden Era" arguably came to a grinding halt with the 1982 crash of Kuwait's unofficial stock market, the *suq al-manakh*, which led to an economic recession. The economic collapse coincided with new security threats that Kuwait faced during the Iran-Iraq War. Due to its moral and financial support for Iraq, Kuwait became the site of numerous terrorist attacks throughout the 1980s perpetrated by external pro-Iranian forces, which triggered growing sectarian tensions between Sunnis and Shi'a. Alongside these social, economic and security crises came a growing political crisis after the unconstitutional dissolution of Parliament in 1986 led to an intense political standoff between the government and opposition forces that climaxed in the summer of 1990, just before Saddam Hussain invaded Kuwait on August 2 that year.

The invasion formally ended what a 1986 government publication referred to as the era of Kuwait's "modern advancement."[36] In addition to the physical and environmental destruction, Kuwaiti society changed permanently after the liberation. Largely due to the unfounded myth of collaboration with Iraqis under occupation, more than 350,000 Palestinians — the most integrated community in Kuwait before 1990 and the one most responsible for Kuwait's modern development from the late 1940s onwards — were permanently expelled, forever changing the country's demographic profile.[37] Afterwards, Kuwaitis became much more insular and distant from the majority noncitizen population, adopting what the Kuwaiti political scientist Abdulredha Assiri has called a "siege mentality," a feeling of being threatened from within and from without.[38]

The invasion created a new turning point in Kuwait's history; life was no longer designated as "before oil" and "after oil," but as "before the invasion" and "after the invasion." In this new national narrative, the pre-invasion era was an entirely different world from what came after, creating a new dichotomy between past and present. Moreover, the invasion not only physically destroyed many traces of Kuwait's modern development, it also shattered the confidence, excitement and openness that had defined the post-1950 era. None of Kuwait's achievements as a modern nation-state over the previous four decades had been able to vouchsafe its sovereignty in 1990. In the post-invasion era, the need to create a distinct Kuwaiti "national identity" (to emphasize its difference from Iraq) gained popularity.[39] Kuwait's "modern advancements" had not been able to create this distinguishable identity (hence Saddam Hussain's claims that Kuwait was Province 19 of Iraq), and so the post-invasion era became, again, a time to start over.

This forced break from the past significantly contributed to the forgetting of Kuwait's pre-invasion "modern" era in the post-invasion period, just as the early oil era entailed the forgetting of Kuwait's pre-oil past. As Michel de Certeau has claimed (and as summarized by Boyer), "every new time finds its legitimation in what it excludes."[40] After nearly two decades of decline in the 1980s and 1990s, the optimism, openness, experimentation and excitement that had defined Kuwait's modern era was thus replaced by pessimism, conservatism, fear and paranoia.

THE CYCLE REPEATS

After the seven-month occupation, all public projects were delayed, postponed, or cancelled altogether, as matters of security, national defense, and postwar reconstruction became top priority. Local and foreign investors also worried of a repeat of the events of 1990, contributing to a "deep freeze" in building in Kuwait during the 1990s.[41] This development lull, however, ended with the launch of the 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq. Regime change, a surge in oil prices, and the military and business presence across the border in Iraq all led to a new construction boom, launching the second-largest cycle of urban development in the country since the advent of oil. By now, however, Kuwait was no longer the Gulf leader in the fields of construction, development and investment, as it had been between the 1950s and 1970s. Other Gulf cities, specifically Dubai, had superseded its position during the hiatus of the 1980s and 1990s, and Kuwait needed to make up for lost time.

The post-2003 construction frenzy resulted in a renewed process of mass demolition, similar to that which had occurred during the post-1950 building craze. This time the early oil landscape itself was systematically demolished to make way for something newer still. Missing from the new development cycle, however, was that sense of excitement and anticipation that characterized the large-scale demolition of the 1950s and 1960s. Rather, investors bringing money back into the country during the post-2003 economic boom sought to increase profitability by building highrises on valuable urban land. Throughout the early oil decades, low floor area ratios (FARs) in commercial areas had restricted most buildings to five stories. But in 2004 the municipality in-

FIGURE 11. *The new modernist Fahad al-Salem Street in the 1960s. Source: Kuwait Oil Company archives.*

FIGURE 13. *New highrises along Fahad al-Salem Street in 2008. Photo by author.*

FIGURE 12. *The demolition of the modernist buildings along Fahad al-Salem Street in 2008. Photo by author.*

creased FARs exponentially, allowing buildings to rise up to a maximum of 100 stories, depending on plot size. This led to a flurry of demolition and construction activity, as the iconic lowrise modernist landscape was rapidly replaced by more profitable glass-and-steel highrises (FIGS.11–13).

Though this round of demolition may ultimately have been profit-driven, the physical destruction of the past once again brought forgetting. If the modernist architecture of the early oil years was a vivid representation of the excitement and experiences of the time, then the widespread demolition of these structures has not only resulted in the physical erasure of Kuwait's modernity from the landscape, but has also erased memories of all that made Kuwait so "worthy of admiration" then. For example, the iconic al-Hamra and Firdous cinemas in downtown Kuwait City were the country's first modern movie theaters; built in the 1950s, one showed Arabic and Hindi films and the other American and European ones. These cinemas represented Kuwaitis' earliest encounters with modern entertainment, and with international popular culture. Both structures were, however, knocked down around 2010 to make way for the new al-Hamra skyscraper (Kuwait's tallest building at 77 stories), taking with them their memories of Kuwait's cultural openness of that time.

It may be tempting to attribute this demolition simply to the dilapidated state of these early oil buildings coupled with the rise in floor area ratios. However, other examples reveal a more conscious wiping out of Kuwait's modern — and modernist — landscape. Many of the masterpieces of that era, like Tange's airport and Pietilä's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, have been defaced beyond recognition in recent years by (nonessential) renovations or expansions that have obliterated the very features that made these structures stand out as modernist innovations (such as Tange's white-marble-clad, open-plan check-in hall and Pietilä's randomly placed, multicolored facade tiles). The current mutilation of these structures, which were once considered the ultimate symbols of Kuwait's newfound modernity in the oil-boom era, disregards that Kuwait once aspired to be, and to be seen to be, a truly progressive and modern place.

PRE-OIL HERITAGE VS. MODERNIST (NON)HERITAGE

This renewed process of forgetting through demolition has, again, been reinforced by a seemingly paradoxical process of remembering. Specifically, the early to mid-2000s witnessed a flurry of activity to reinject traces of Kuwait's pre-oil past onto the urban landscape. Several dilapidated pre-oil buildings that had escaped demolition in the early oil years were physically restored after decades of neglect, and new state-run museums were opened within some of the renovated structures, such as the Dickson House Cultural Center (in the former British Political Agency building) and the Kuwait Maritime Museum (in the former al-Sharqiyya boys' school). Images and representations of the pre-oil past also increasingly appeared in street-side and roundabout monuments, print and television advertisements, art exhibitions, and commercial architecture.

Although ostensibly involved in opposing processes, demolition and heritage do similar things. Spatially, both remove old sites from ongoing city life, the former by eliminating them and the latter by turning them into urban artifacts that stay rooted in the past. In Kuwait these sites get rehabilitated to the point of sterility, where even the history the space seeks to reify gets rubbed out. Furthermore, as places of limited, state-centric history and national memory, heritage sites inadvertently contribute to the erasure of the multiple individual histories and memories of place that have no national value, and therefore remain permanently at the mercy of the bulldozer. But this is true of heritage industries everywhere. In Kuwait today the fact that the *pre-oil* urban landscape is being resurrected at the same time that the *early* oil landscape is being demolished reveals how the former process is as complicit in the erasure of Kuwait's modern era as the latter. Unlike the early oil years, when the same past that was being eliminated was simultaneously utilized as part of the process of validating the new, this time the memory markets have remained fixed in the pre-oil era, despite the fact that it is the early oil landscape that has been erased. Memories of Kuwait's post-1950 modernization, it seems, serve no purpose in the present, and the absence of conservation of any aspect of this era alongside its demolition has created a double-act of forgetting.

To those in control of Kuwait's heritage industry, whatever came up after 1950 does not constitute a valid part of Kuwait City's urban history or identity, and therefore need not be conserved. According to one young architect working in the National Council for Culture, Arts, and Letters: "The Council considers anything not made of mud as unimportant."

In 2009 I interviewed a man involved in the creation of one of the country's new replica "heritage villages" (which has yet to be completed). At the time, one of the most iconic vestiges of Kuwait's early oil modernity — the pedestrianized shopping strip commonly referred to as "Old Salmiya" — was being demolished. I pointed out the obvious irony: here we were building replicas of the pre-oil cityscape that we demolished after 1950, while simultaneously demolishing the early oil city that replaced that pre-oil landscape. I wondered to this man if in fifty years we might build a replica of Old Salmiya. He summarily dismissed my sentiment and said, "Good, let them get rid of the buildings that came up after oil. They don't represent our heritage."

As this statement reveals, the landscape that is being erased today — and, by extension, the era in which it was built — is not considered a legitimate representation of Kuwait's historic identity. His sentiments toward demolition in 2009 were strikingly similar to those of Freeth's informant in 1956: "Let them be demolished! Who wants them now? It is the new Kuwait and not the old which is worthy of admiration."[42] However, the inherent contrast in their feelings toward the early oil landscape (the earlier statement celebrating it and the later vilifying it) suggests that, looking back now, that era of the city's past is no longer considered "worthy of admiration," as it was while it was being constructed.

This lack of conservation of the early oil landscape, once produced with such excitement and optimism, can be read as a rejection of the early oil era itself as a valid part of Kuwait's history and cultural identity. Again, this process is not unique to Kuwait and has occurred elsewhere in the world where modernist projects were deployed. As Boyer has argued, high modernism's failures to live up to its utopian ideals contributed to a postmodern backlash that began in most places, including in Kuwait, in the 1970s and 1980s. The postmodern impulse, particularly in architecture and city building, has been to turn back to "premodern" traditions that modernism allegedly erased — as Boyer put it, "to explicitly jump over the city of modernism, hoping to drive that representational order out of their sight."[43]
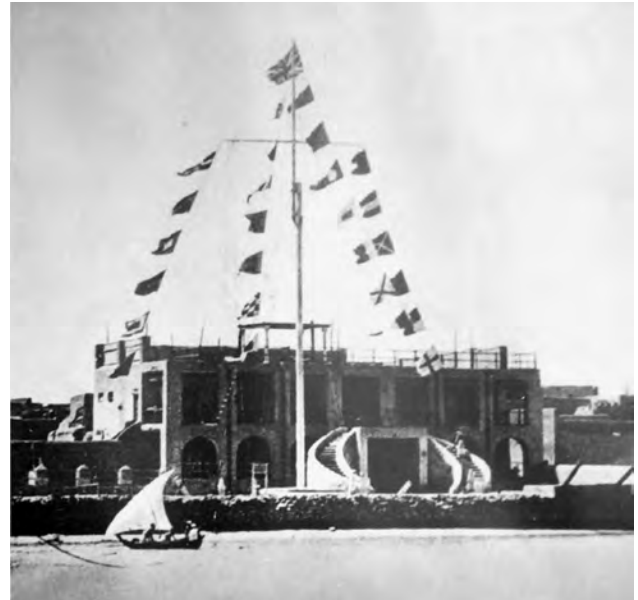
In Kuwait's context, the aforementioned heritage official claimed that in the 1950s and 1960s Kuwaitis brought architects from abroad to construct their new cityscape, and the buildings they created held no cultural meaning for the country. And yet the same could be said about some of the buildings that have been painstakingly preserved as sites of national heritage in Kuwait in recent years. The Dickson House Cultural Center, for instance, which once housed the old British Political Agency, started off as a typical one-story courtyard house, which one of the political agents, Captain William Shakespear, modified to be similar to British colonial architecture with the addition of a large English-style drawing room (the first in Kuwait to use a steel girder to avoid the restrictions imposed by the mangrove poles), a dining room with a fireplace, and a large verandah with dual staircases (FIGS.14–15). The staircases were inspired by the house of Sayyed Hashem al-Naqib in Sharq (which later became the first state-run Amiri Hospital), which itself was influenced by the al-Naqib palaces in Basra. The American missionary hospital, meanwhile, was the first steel and concrete building in Kuwait. It was designed in 1910 by American architects and engineers from Ann Arbor, Michigan,

FIGURE 14. *The renovated Dickson House Cultural Center. Photo by author.*

FIGURE 15. *The British Political Agency building in the early twentieth century. Source: Kuwait Oil Company archives.*

and constructed by a Persian mason who, Dr. Stanley Mylrea recounted in his memoirs, was the first local builder he had come across who used the proper tools to ensure that lines were perfectly straight, perpendicular and symmetrical — all traits largely absent in local architecture (**FIG. 16**).[44] Again, there was never a singular cultural identity in pre-oil Kuwait, and the mixed architectural influences of the post-1950 period are arguably, therefore, as legitimately meaningful as what now "counts" as legitimate heritage.

Nonetheless, the belief that modernist buildings do not represent Kuwait's "heritage" or "identity" remains widespread in both official and popular discourse (**FIG. 17**). This perspective fixes Kuwait's urban and cultural identity in the pre-oil period rather than understanding both urbanism and national identity as being mutable and constantly evolving. In this context, the wiping out of Kuwait's modern era has be-

come part of a postmodern quest to return to some perceived premodern essence. Even voices sympathetic to the modernist landscape tend to focus on the idea that "modernity" was an imported concept in Kuwait, as seen above in Kuwait's participation in the 2014 Biennale di Venezia under the title *Acquiring Modernity*.[45] (Remember how the pavilion's publication claimed that "Kuwait sought foreign consultants to tell us how to be modern."[46]) Although the authors of the publication rightfully critiqued the state's planning paradigm for not con-

FIGURE 16. *The renovated American Missionary Hospital. Photo by author.*

FIGURE 17. *The Gazelle Club in the 1960s. Source: Kuwait Oil Company archives.*

sidering public needs and desires when designing the new cityscape, the pavilion inadvertently perpetuated the uncritical idea that "modernity" could be, and indeed was, "acquired" — carefully planned and constructed after 1950 rather than having any roots in Kuwait's own pre-oil past.

A strange paradox thus emerged in the *Acquiring Modernity* publication. On the one hand, it expressed a clear call to protect and safeguard Kuwait's modernist architecture. In one of its essays, the architect Hassan Hayat wrote, "It would cause great remorse to see the buildings of this era demolished; as artefacts of Kuwait's 'Golden Age,' an effort must be made to preserve them before they too, are replaced."⁴⁷ Yet, on the other hand, much of the language used to describe Kuwait's modernization is one of loss. For example, the exhibition curator, Alia Farid, claimed that the pavilion examined the "devastating side of affluence" and how, "with the advent of oil, sensitivity and all sense of urgency was lost."⁴⁸ Hayat, too, argued that "Rapid change fragmented the social fabric as the normal associations, subcultures, and memories that formed the old city were erased."⁴⁹ And Sara Saragoça Soares wrote that "[Kuwaitis] embraced modernity and welcomed a massive destruction [*sic*] of the old town without fully understanding its meaning."⁵⁰ Like many critiques of modern urban life, these sentiments, as Ash Amin and Nigel Thrift put it, "tell a story of an authentic city held together by face-to-face interaction whose coherence is now gone. . . . In the great accounts of history, the modern city is more loss than gain."⁵¹

MODERNISM VS. ISLAMISM

Though the architects involved in the pavilion sought to conserve that era in form, this narrative of cultural loss — coupled with the suggestion that Kuwaitis learned how to be modern (how to behave, live and function) from foreigners — echoes the sentiments of present-day critics who argue that modernity was a foreign (read: Western) concept that should be erased, and that Kuwait should go back to its more traditional (read: Islamic) roots. The vanguards of such criticisms are the country's Islamist forces.

Islamist groups first entered the political arena in Kuwait in the early 1980s. To defend the ruling family against the country's traditionally oppositional Arab nationalist forces and other sectors of Kuwaiti society that were becoming increasingly critical of the al-Sabahs throughout the 1970s, the government sought to ally itself with the passive, nonpolitical Islamic forces emerging in Kuwait at the time.⁵² Islamist MPs, who won seats for the first time in Kuwait's parliament in 1981, focused on issues that were new to Kuwait's socio-political landscape: having Shari'a law recognized as "the" rather than "a" principal source of law in the Kuwaiti constitution, imposing on women to wear the veil, and restricting naturalization to Muslims (only the latter was actually passed). As a way of politically co-opting the religious groups, the government took a more Islamic stance itself on certain issues, like tightening the ban on alcohol.⁵³

The Islamists had a short political run in the 1980s; in 1986 the Amir unconstitutionally dissolved the 1985 assembly and did not call new elections until 1992. In the meantime, in the late 1980s, Islamist groups began dominating neighborhood cooperative boards, and therefore played key roles in providing Kuwaitis with everyday services during the Iraqi occupation. They subsequently received strong public support in the country's first post-invasion elections, and by the late 1990s they dominated the country's political arena.

Islamists have since managed to pass numerous laws and exert sufficient pressure on the government to significantly alter many aspects of everyday life in Kuwait. For example, a 1997 law segregated the state university — established as a coeducational institution in 1966 — and all future private universities (none of which existed at that time). Then in 2008 the Parliament also unsuccessfully tried to segregate private high schools. In the early 2000s, under pressure from Islamists, the state began to crack down on musical concerts and mixed private dance parties in hotels and restaurants, including on New Year's Eve.

With the Ministry of Education under Islamist control, music and art were removed from public school curricula. In 2012 Islamist MPs called for the removal of all churches in Kuwait, and in 2013 for the banning of Christmas celebrations in the country (despite the fact that several Kuwaiti families are Christian).⁵⁴ They also condemned stores and schools that celebrated Halloween. Christmas, music, and the mixing

of the sexes were all labeled as anti-Islamic and, therefore, counter to Kuwaiti traditions and heritage, which, according to groups like the Social Reform Society, are historically based on Islamic principles. In this Islamist narrative, Kuwaiti traditions are seen as having been corrupted by modernity, and specifically by the foreign (predominantly Western) influences that infiltrated Kuwait after the advent of oil, and especially in the post-2003 period. The Kuwaiti Parliament even established a "foreign influences" committee to weed out many of these seemingly illegitimate vices from the country.

In late 2014 the late Kuwaiti MP Nabil al-Fadhl called for a lifting of the ban on alcohol, stating that liquor was part of Kuwait's "customs and heritage" and that previous generations had been more tolerant toward its consumption.[55] Al-Fadhl had previously called for lifting tough restrictions on musical concerts. He also vowed to challenge an article in the Kuwaiti constitution banning non-Muslims from being naturalized as Kuwaiti citizens, which was passed in 1982 as an amendment to the 1959 nationality law. Al-Fadhl's statement that liquor was a tolerated part of Kuwait's past came under fire by Islamist MPs and religious societies. The Social Reform Society in particular condemned al-Fadhl by stating that Kuwait was an Islamic state that applied the principles of Islam. MP Humoud al-Hamdan more specifically accused al-Fadhl of "distorting the history and the image of Kuwait and its people." He said that the ancestors of Kuwait were known for their fight against moral corruption, including the use of liquor.[56]

In fact, al-Fadhl was not wrong: alcohol had been readily available in Kuwait well before oil. In 1920, when Kuwait was under attack by the puritanical Ikhwan tribes of Najd (under the auspices of the Saudi leader Abdulaziz Ibn Sa'ud), Kuwait's ruler, Salem al-Mubarak al-Sabah, met with an emissary of the Ikhwan during the infamous Battle of Jahra to negotiate terms for peace. The emissary told Salem that the Ikhwan had been surprised to hear the Kuwaiti forces "praying like Muslims, as they had always been led to suppose that the people of Kuwait were infidels." To bring peace, he demanded that Salem prohibit all smoking, drinking, gambling and prostitution in Kuwait. He also demanded that the ruler declare the Ottoman Turks heretics and promise that Kuwait would adopt the puritanical Ikhwan doctrine. Salem refused to adhere to these terms, and the battled resumed.[57]

Ignoring this history, MP Faisal al-Kandari said that al-Fadhl was "trying to confuse between the noble traditions of Kuwaitis and those who intruded their life and brought with them liquor and even traded in it."[58] Al-Kandari's ambiguous language may have been a reference to new arrivals to Kuwait after 1950, or possibly to Kuwait's Jewish community before oil, who were the town's main liquor distillers.[59] By labeling either the Jews of the pre-oil town or the new foreigners who helped build and advance Kuwait's modernity after 1950 "intruders," al-Kandari was negating Kuwait's cosmopolitan history and positioning himself, along with his fellow Islamists, as the protectors of Kuwait's "noble traditions."

This discourse was captured in a 2008 article in the *Christian Science Monitor* discussing the potential impact of an Islamist victory in Kuwait's parliamentary elections that summer. In it, Jamie Etheridge (an American journalist based permanently in Kuwait) described debates on the "pace of social development" in the Gulf region as "a tug of war between traditionalists and modernists." She argued that while the region's post-2003 oil boom "brings in a flood of Westerners and their ideas, traditional local societies are increasingly questioning how much change they'll accept along with the economic surge." She went on to say that more Kuwaitis were also traveling and studying abroad and "returning home with experiences once alien to this arid region of the world. The impact has indeed angered many here. And some — like the Islamist parliamentarians in Kuwait — are reacting with a vengeance."[60]

Moving beyond the well-worn "modernity vs. Islam" rhetoric prevalent in both the article as well as the Islamists' own discourse, the language Etheridge captured, which accurately reflected that of Kuwait's Islamist forces, suggested that the "foreign influences" supposedly destroying the country's "morals" and "values" were new. However, the customs and experiences that Kuwaiti students studying abroad bring back to the country have been around since at least the late 1940s when Kuwaitis first began studying abroad, while, as already discussed, the habit of being influenced by foreign cultures dates back to well before the coming of oil. However, this history has all been forgotten in Kuwait today, particularly among younger Kuwaitis. Kuwait's history is rarely taught in schools, and when it is, the focus is on the pre-oil era. As of June 2017, 55 percent of Kuwaitis were under the age of 25, meaning they were born after the Iraqi invasion, and 63 percent were under the age of 30, so they too probably would not have sufficient personal memories of life before 1990.[61]

Even if and when it is recognized that today's "foreign influences" are not new and have been around at least since the 1950s, young Kuwaitis tend to believe that the country's present-day conservative turn constitutes a "return" to an authentic Kuwaiti culture, to a time before the vices of modernity came from abroad and contaminated Kuwaiti society and its so-called "noble traditions" — just as the heritage official I quoted earlier believes such influences tainted Kuwaiti architecture. Hence, perhaps, derives the prevailing desire to reestablish a link with Kuwait's pre-oil past (when in fact — to return to the case of liquor — alcohol was more openly and legally available before the 1960 Penal Code by which its production and distribution were first criminalized in Kuwait).

The idea that the pre-oil or "pre-modern" era represents an authenticity that was intruded upon by outsiders and their alien influences (be it alcohol or architecture) has spread beyond the Islamists' political agenda; and, as seen in the *Acquiring Modernity* discourse, it is currently held by many diverse sectors of society. However, this narrative makes an assumption about Kuwait's pre-oil past that is inaccurate. Kuwait was not a culturally or religiously conservative soci-

ety before oil. Kuwaitis' travels to various ports around the
Indian Ocean and to market towns of the interior opened
them to different cultures and religions. The impact of this
cultural exchange in areas like architecture has already been
described; but it also shaped the townspeople's outlook and
attitudes toward life. In 1865 the British Political Resident
Lewis Pelly noted that the people of Kuwait, "Jews included,
enjoy complete religious toleration."[62] Another British trav-
eler of the time noted that Kuwaitis were "tolerant to others
and not over rigid to themselves."[63]

Indeed, when the Lebanese-American writer and traveler
Ameen Rihani visited Kuwait in 1922 after a trip to Najd, he
wrote: "Kuwait is a city that makes you forget Riyadh. It is the
Paris of Arabia. There is smoking, there is whiskey, there is
a patency of women. There is a doctor and a hospital."[64] The
hospital had been established in 1910 by American missionar-
ies who also opened a small school and held Sunday services
in Arabic, during which, over the next thirty years, thousands
of Kuwaitis "became familiar with the sayings and doings of
Jesus."[65] This history reveals that the claims and demands of
the Islamists mentioned above (e.g., demolishing churches)
constitutes a completely *new* attitude and approach to religion,
rather than a *return* to Kuwait's "traditional" roots.

So while Kuwaitis in the early oil decades were certainly
open to new ideas, influences, and ways of living, this open-
ness itself was not new, imported or acquired. It had roots in
Kuwait's pre-oil past. If Kuwaiti society had been as socially
and culturally conservative before oil as present-day recourses
to tradition suggest, attitudes and behaviors would not have
changed after 1950 as rapidly as they did, and as rapidly as
the physical landscape itself. People would have resisted the
changes and foreign influences infiltrating their lives, just
as Etheridge has alleged is happening today. But instead,
they welcomed and celebrated these changes, as in the case
of Freeth's young informants, and as depicted in the words of
one writer in the March 1950 edition of *al-Bi'tha* (a monthly
journal published by Kuwaiti students in Egypt), who claimed
that the Kuwaiti people were "thirsty for reform, capable of
development, and adapting to change."[66]

Erasing Kuwait's modern era not only forgets these
aspects of the past, but also validates the new and (unrec-
ognizably) conservative present through the creation of an
invented, usable, increasingly anti-modern past, culminat-
ing in the crowning of Kuwait as the 2016 Capital of Islamic
Culture. With its emphasis on Islam, this designation
invalidates such cultural productions as the Sultan Gallery
(Kuwait's first center of modern culture); the famous 1983
Kuwaiti play *Bye-Bye London*, which was set almost entirely in
a London hotel lobby bar in which the main Kuwaiti character
gets drunk; the iconic modern Kuwaiti artist Sami Moham-
med's bronze nude sculptures; the famous seaside Gazelle
Club where middle-class Kuwaitis and expatriates sunbathed,
danced, and drank alcohol; and other expressions of Kuwait's
modern era. Nothing reflects this constructed "modernity

FIGURE 18. *The Kuwait Central Bank as redesigned using Islamic
architectural motifs. Photo by Thorsten Botz-Bornstein.*

vs. Islam" dynamic more than the 1987 transformation of
Arne Jacobsen's Central Bank — arguably the most iconic
modernist structure to be produced in Kuwait by a leader of
the European avant-garde — into a pseudo-Islamic architec-
tural structure with Arab *mashrabiyyas*, which are no more
authentic to Kuwait's architectural vernacular than Jacobsen's
concrete slabs **(FIG.18, REFER TO FIG.8).**

MASKING THE SHORTCOMINGS OF THE PRESENT

Why is Kuwait's early oil era being so explicitly written out of
Kuwait's history? Unlike in the rapidly modernizing 1950s
when certain memories of Kuwait's more "primitive" pre-oil
past evoked in the national museum emphasized the supe-
riority of the new and improved present, perhaps memories
of Kuwait's modern era may negate rather than validate the
country's present. That is, this erasure may be indicative of
a sense of failure in the modernist project that Kuwaitis were
so excited about back then, an acknowledgement that the
optimistic future everyone was working toward never actually
materialized. The erasure of Kuwait's modern era may also
reveal a sense of shame — not of what Kuwait was then that it
is trying to forget, but of where and what it is today.

Perhaps it is easier to erase all reminders of Kuwait's
Golden Era than to confront the fact that the years since the
early 1980s, particularly the post-invasion decades, have
largely been ones of political, social and cultural decline. In
other words, the early oil era represents the failed promise of
modernity prominent in the state's development discourse
and strategy of the post-1950 era, the promise that justified
the wholesale erasure of Kuwait's pre-oil past. Remembering
that era will inevitably lead to questions as to why Kuwait was
so unsuccessful in meeting its ambitious and admirable ob-
jectives, and why it has reached the arguably more dire state it
is in today, one very different from what people were aiming

for back then. Remembering Kuwait's modern era thus exposes the shortcomings of Kuwait's experiences with democracy, the fact that Kuwait has become much less culturally open and tolerant, the reality that the city is collapsing under its own weight due to the fact that no master plan since the 1960s has ever been implemented, and so on. But by *forgetting* how progressive and optimistic Kuwait was then, things do not look quite as bad now.

To return to the built environment, only making room among the new twenty-first-century skyscrapers for pre-oil heritage sites creates a direct link between then and now, while eliminating everything that happened in between. **(FIG.19)** Even a mural painted on several bridges in Kuwait today juxtaposes mud-brick houses on one side with glass-and-steel highrises on the other, the bridge itself making it easy to cross from one era to the next **(FIG.20)**. This juxtaposition projects a straightforward, linear image of progress: look how far Kuwait has advanced in only sixty years (similar to the linearity in the words of Stephen Gardiner that opened this article). If, instead of comparing Kuwait today to where it was sixty years ago, we continue to contrast the present with the pre-oil past, then once again things do not look that bad now. But to critique Kuwait's modernist project and identify its shortcomings and failures — which in itself is a valid and necessary undertaking — should not also be to negate or for-

FIGURE 19. *The juxtaposition of pre-oil buildings and present-day skyscrapers. Photo by author.*

get the era in which the process played out, as that era holds a crucial place in Kuwait's history. It should not, therefore, be disregarded as illegitimate. Relegitimizing Kuwait's adolescent years as a valid era within the broader narrative of the country's history can provide a more critical understanding of where Kuwait is today — and, perhaps more importantly, where it is heading.

FIGURE 20. *A bridge with a mural of Kuwait's pre-oil landscape on one side, and today's urban landscape on the other. Photo by author.*

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