



## Universities as Architecture of State Formation in the Gulf

A discussion on how Qatar University and Kuwait University leveraged differing architectural strategies in the construction of national legitimacy

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### Abstract

Across the decolonizing Gulf of the mid-twentieth century, the founding of a national university was among the first acts of a newly independent state. To build a university was to claim the capacity to reproduce a governing class on national soil and to internalize the formation of expertise the state required.

### Introduction and Context

As Rizvi argues in *Urban Modernity in the Contemporary Gulf*, social change in the postcolonial world “was actualized through the construction and establishment of new institutions, such as museums and universities,” with architects “called upon to monumentalize these transformations, acting as both an agent and mediator between often conflicting political and ideological beliefs.”<sup>1</sup> Universities emerged as developmental instruments through which Gulf states attempted to materialize sovereignty spatially – the architectural form through which a newly independent state could demonstrate that it possessed the institutional capacity to transform oil wealth into bureaucracy, expertise, and political continuity.

This urgency was intensified by the specific conditions of the post-oil Gulf. The rapid expansion of administrative institutions after independence required the accelerated production of engineers, planners, doctors, and

civil servants capable of sustaining increasingly centralized welfare states.<sup>2</sup> Educational expansion throughout the Gulf became inseparable from state-building itself. As Powell notes, the GCC states invested heavily in higher education following the discovery of oil, particularly after the 1970s, in response to both demographic growth and the political need to educate a rapidly expanding population internally.<sup>3</sup> Universities were expected simultaneously to modernize society, nationalize expertise, and position the Gulf state within emerging international knowledge economies.

The university also addressed a deeper political anxiety specific to the Gulf. Newly independent states possessed extraordinary financial resources yet lacked long-standing institutional traditions capable of legitimizing their rapid transformation. Universities became symbolic devices through which these states could claim historical continuity and futurity simultaneously. Powell

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1 - Rizvi, Kishwar. ‘Forms of Engagement: Architectural Modernism and Heritage in the Arab Gulf States.’ In *Urban Modernity in the Contemporary Gulf*, ed. Fabbri and Al-Qassemi. London: Routledge, 2022, p. 1.

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2 - Ulrichsen, Kristian Coates. *The Gulf States in International Political Economy*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, p. 3.

3 - Powell, Justin J. W. ‘Small State, Large World, Global University?’ *Current Issues in Comparative Education* 15, no. 1 (2012), pp. 100–109.

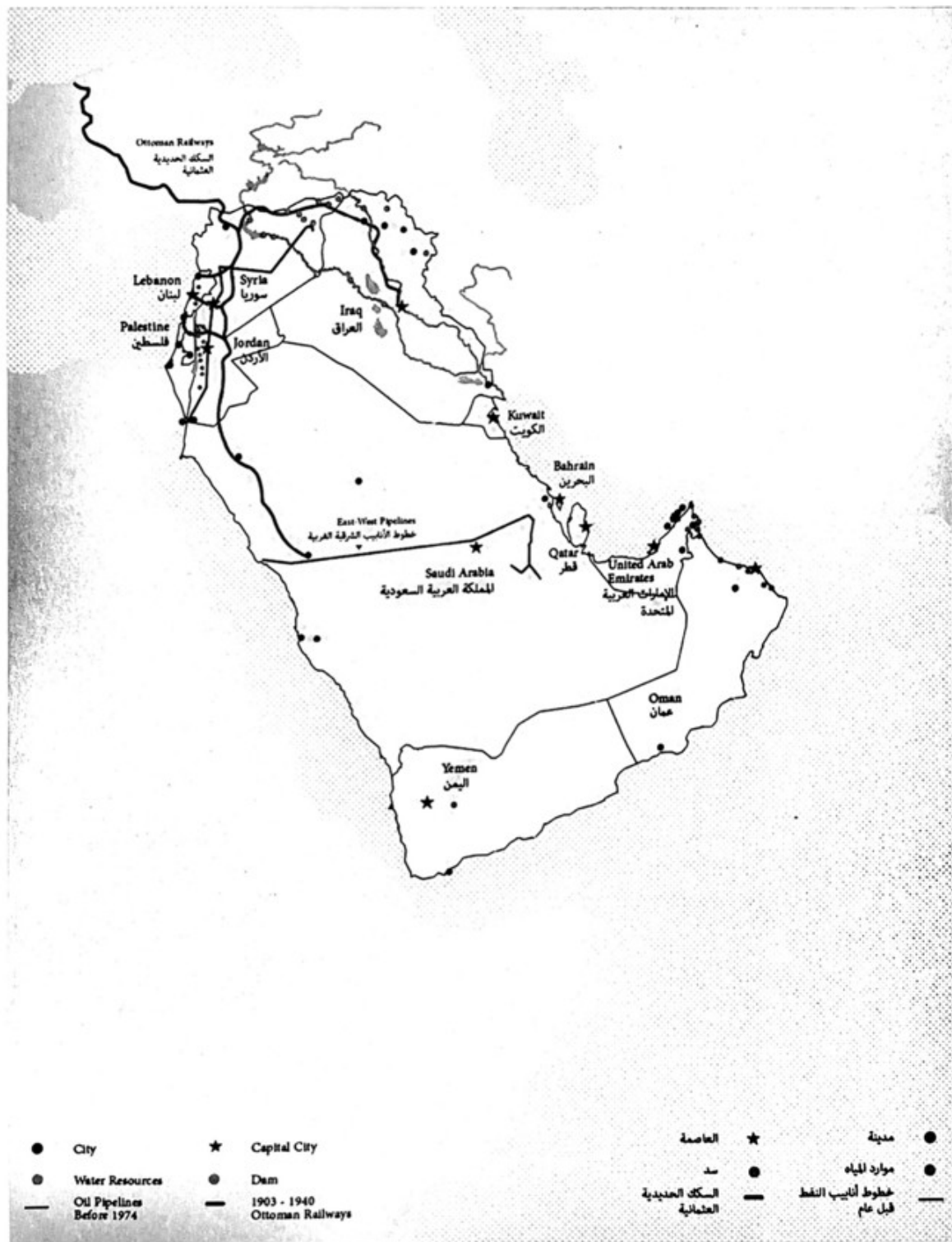


Figure 1. Map of Arabia, mid-twentieth century, showing oil pipelines, water resources, and Ottoman railways. Source: Camacho, Alsayer, and Saragoça Soares, *Pan-Arab Modernism 1968–2018* (Barcelona: Actar, 2021).

observes that ascendant Gulf universities functioned as “national standard-bearers,” institutions through which small but wealthy states attempted to compensate for geopolitical marginality through concentrated investment in education, science, and research infrastructure.<sup>4</sup> The architectural campus became the visible form of this ambition.

Research facilities, libraries, laboratories, and monumental campuses were capable of communicating that the Gulf state could participate in the global production of knowledge. Producing a paradox within Gulf ‘modernization’, the university was expected to be globally competitive while simultaneously constructing a coherent national identity within societies undergoing extremely rapid demographic and urban transformation. Qatar and Kuwait confronted the same institutional problem: how to produce a modern university capable of participating in international academic culture while also legitimizing the political project of the postcolonial Gulf state itself. To achieve that, their campuses and architectural strategies pursued two different answers to that question.

Qatar University and Kuwait University were founded within a decade of each other, in the immediate aftermath of Gulf independence, under conditions of accelerating oil wealth that made large-scale institutional construction both possible and urgent. Kuwait, independent since 1961, established its university in 1966 – the first in the Gulf – while simultaneously commissioning the international firms that would define its urban image for the following two decades. Qatar, independent in 1971, founded its university in 1977; the campus designed by Egyptian architect Kamal El Kafrawi opened in 1985, twelve years later – a gap that registers the seriousness of the commission.<sup>5</sup> Khattab observes that Kuwait made its city “the focus of international construction activities as many of the world famous architects competed for large-scale projects,” the government turning “to famous foreign architects for major building commissions”

as a deliberate and consistent policy.<sup>6</sup> Kuwait’s modernization emerged through a cosmopolitan network of imported expertise and internationally recognizable architectural forms.

The two universities articulated fundamentally different understandings of what institutional modernity should look like and whom it should address. El Kafrawi produced a campus whose organizational and environmental logic derived from the spatial traditions of the Arab city. Kuwait’s campuses inherited their architecture from international consultants – von Steinbüchel-Rheinwall, Alfred Roth, and firms including TAC and SOM – whose formal language was legible to any Western-trained architect or visiting diplomat.<sup>7</sup>

This distinction cannot be reduced to ‘local’ versus ‘international.’ As Andraos argues, “tradition is itself a modernist construction,” and Gulf architectural identity frequently emerges through selective historical reconstruction rather than direct continuity with the past.<sup>8</sup> El Kafrawi’s campus selectively reconstructs an image of Arab spatial continuity within the institutional demands of the modern developmental state – what Andraos describes as “an irreverent optimism – looking forward toward a secular, transnational, progressive, and intellectual ‘Arabism’ that articulates modernity, and indeed politics, on its own terms.”<sup>9</sup> Kuwait’s strategy operates on a different cultural judgment. As Khattab observes, the Arab city’s local image had become “greatly associated with backwardness and obsolescence,” and “western models conveying the desired modern image were

4 - Powell, p. 110.

5 - Qatar University. ‘About Us.’ qu.edu.qa; Kuwait University. ‘About Us.’ ku.edu.kw/about-us.

6 - Khattab, O. ‘In Search for a Local Image in the Arab City: The Case of Kuwait City.’ *Journal of Architecture and Planning Research* (2001), p. 380.

7 - Fabbri, Saragoça Soares, and Camacho. *Modern Architecture Kuwait 1949–89*, p. 13; Kubo, Michael. ‘Building Identities.’ In *Urban Modernity in the Contemporary Gulf*, p. 103.

8 - Andraos, Amale. ‘Problematizing a Regional Context.’ In *The New Arab Urban*, ed. Molotch and Ponzini. New York: NYU Press, 2017, p. 59.

9 - Andraos, p. 58.

ready for the pick.”<sup>10</sup> Both positions shaped not only their design but where they sat in the city, how they organized movement and climate, and which audience they addressed. This essay examines the two universi-

ties across three registers – their relationship to the city, their architecture, and the audience they address – to argue that Gulf universities functioned as instruments of state formation whose architecture encoded competing models of national legitimacy.

10 - Khattab, p. 379

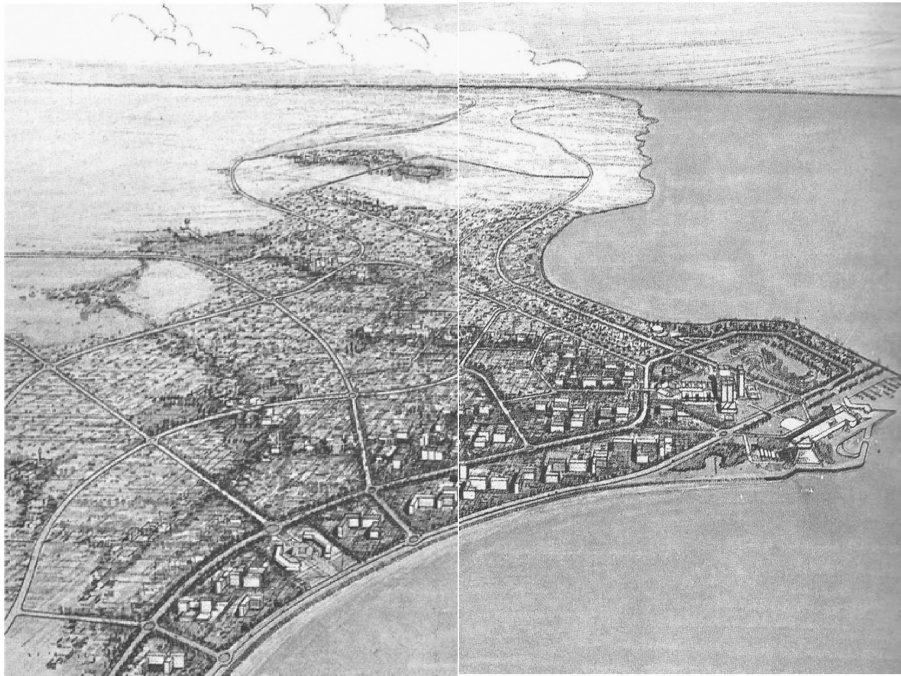


Figure 2. Doha city. Source: Camacho, Alsayer, and Saragoça Soares, *Pan-Arab Modernism 1968-2018* (Barcelona: Actar, 2021).



Figure 3. Kuwait City, 1951. *Plans of Towns in Kuwait, D. Survey, War Office and Air Ministry, 1956, surveyed 1951.* Source: Camacho, Alsayer, and Saragoça Soares, *Pan-Arab Modernism 1968-2018* (Barcelona: Actar, 2021).

### The Campus and the City

Both campuses were built apart from their cities, though the spatial logic of that separation differs entirely. Qatar University sits seven kilometres north of Doha's city centre on an elevated site, enclosed within a ring road that separates the campus from the surrounding urban fabric. Kuwait University dispersed its faculties across four sites inserted incrementally into the expanding urban fabric of Kuwait City according to immediate programmatic needs.<sup>11</sup> The form that separation takes in each case reveals how each state understood the rela-

tionship between its city, its institution, and the nation it was building.

El Kafrawi's ring road marks the boundary of a campus that is spatially self-sufficient by design. The campus recreates, within a controlled institutional territory, the environmental and social logic of the Arab settlement. The oases, shaded circulation spines, badgir-cooled courtyards, and layered thresholds collectively produce a miniature urbanism organized around shade, enclosure, and gradual transition.<sup>12</sup> In *Demystifying Doha*, Salama and Wiedmann document how Doha in this period produced "a pattern of urban patchworks instead of co-

11 - Salama, Ashraf M., Wolfgang Thierstein, and Hisham Gabr. 'Qatar University Campus: Built Form, Culture and Livability.' *American Journal of Sociological Research* 6, no. 4 (2016), p. 99; Kuwait University, [ku.edu.kw/about-us](http://ku.edu.kw/about-us).

12 - 'Qatar University.' [archnet.org/sites/288](http://archnet.org/sites/288); Salama, Ashraf M. 'When Good Design Intentions Do Not Meet Users' Expectations.' *Archnet-IJAR* 2, no. 2 (2008), p. 60.

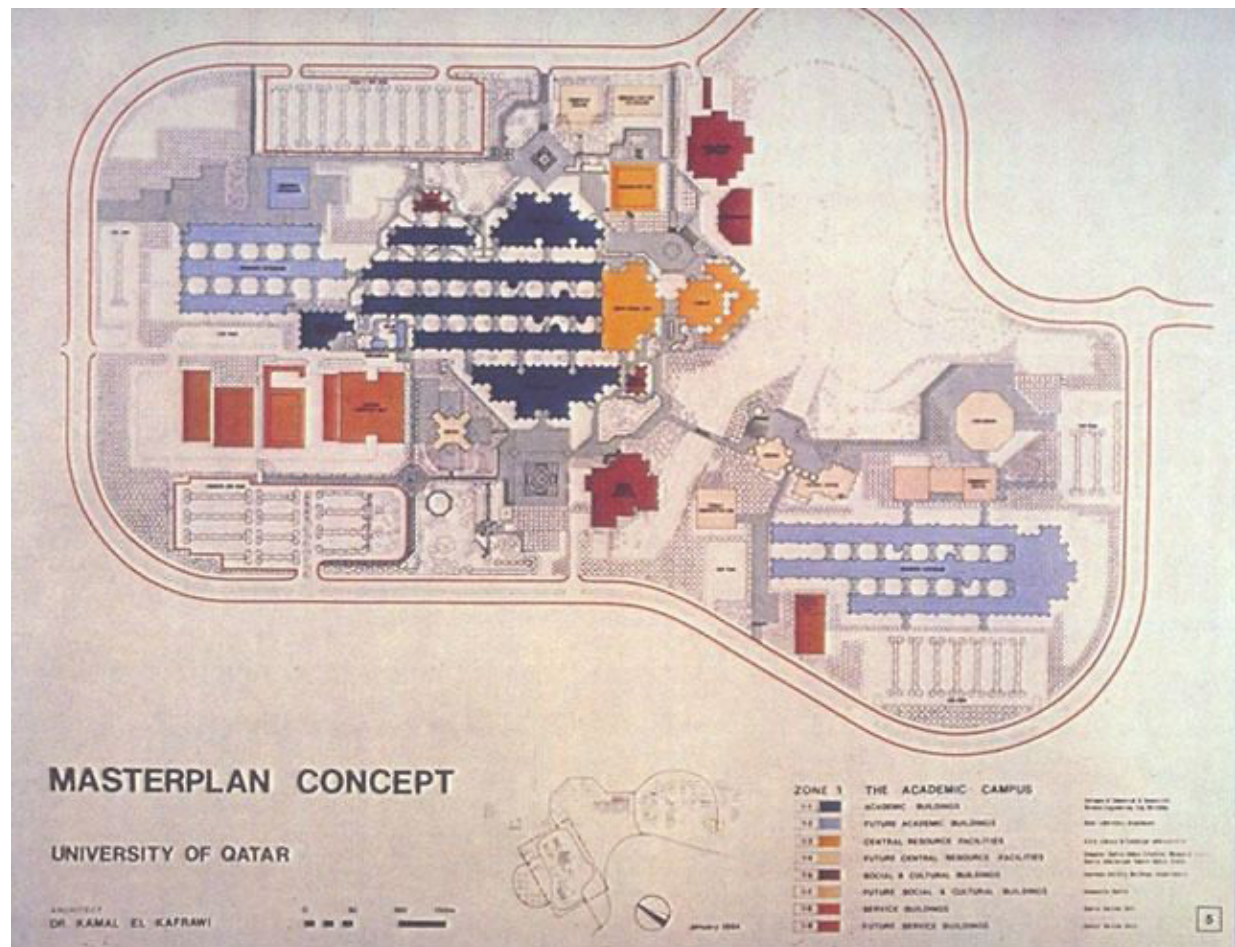


Figure 4. Masterplan Concept, University of Qatar. Architect: Dr. Kamal El Kafrawi, 1984. Source: Archnet, [archnet.org/sites/288](http://archnet.org/sites/288).



Figure 5. Qatar University campus, view of shaded walkways, gardens, and modular academic clusters.  
Source: Archnet, [archnet.org/sites/288](https://archnet.org/sites/288).

hesive and integrated urban areas,” with developments built “without taking into account their surrounding built environment.”<sup>13</sup> El Kafrawi’s ring road sealed the campus against this incoherence, preserving the integrity of its argument – that Arab organizational and environmental knowledge remained architecturally sufficient – in a city that was rapidly abandoning those principles.

The physical isolation of the campus performs an ideological function. Qatar University’s enclosure attempts to preserve a controlled environmental and internal order. The campus produces a carefully regulated sequence of movement through shaded exterior circulation, filtered courtyards, and semi-open gathering

spaces.<sup>14</sup> El Kafrawi organizes the university through connective tissue, allowing students to experience the campus as a continuous urban fabric. Through shaded corridors, compressed thresholds, filtered light, and passive environmental systems that continuously reinforce the idea that institutional modernity can emerge from Arab spatial traditions, the master plan of the campus functions as pedagogically as its institution. Every environmental device becomes simultaneously a climatic technology and a political statement about the continued relevance of Arab architectural heritage within a contemporary university.

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13 - Salama, Ashraf M. and Florian Wiedmann. *Demystifying Doha*. Farnham: Ashgate, 2013, Ch. 4, p. 101-2.

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14 - Salama, *When Good Design Intentions Do Not Meet Users’ Expectations*, p.59-60.



Figure 6. Qatar University campus, aerial view showing the ring road enclosure and the repetitive modular roofscape of the academic buildings. Source: Archnet, [archnet.org/sites/288](http://archnet.org/sites/288).

Kuwait University's dispersal across four primary campuses – Shuwaikh, Khaldiya, Kaifan, and Adailiya – produces a fundamentally different relationship between institution and city. Founded in 1966, the university emerged through an immediate institutional appropriation of existing prestige infrastructure: the high-end secondary school complexes that were already landmarks of Kuwait's early Master Plans<sup>15</sup>. As Shiber observed in *The Kuwait Urbanization*, the city was organized into “urban cells,” and by inserting the university into these existing school-cells, the state embedded the institution directly into the metropolitan expansion of the oil city.<sup>16</sup> This dispersal mirrors, at the urban scale, an additive logic of growth driven by immediate administrative necessity rather than by a unifying spatial project. Emerging directly from Kuwait's broader post-oil urbanization – a city that Fabbri describes as radically transformed through a corporate building program, with neighbourhood units and ring roads “rigidly planned and implemented” while the old urban fabric was progressively demolished and replaced, producing what Vale characterized as buildings “treated like isolated islands in a sea of parking lots” – the university functioned as a distributed apparatus woven into the city's residential and administrative districts.<sup>17</sup> Faculties aligned themselves with available land and existing administrative districts, embedding the university within the broader mechanics of Kuwait's rapidly modernizing oil urbanism. *Pan-Arab Modernism* identifies this as characteristic of Kuwait's broader institutional architecture during the post-independence decades: a phase of accelerated state formation in which architecture primarily served “fitting the buildings’ program” rather than constructing a unified symbolic order.<sup>18</sup>

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15 - Al-Ragam, Asseel. ‘Towards a Critique of an Architectural Nahdha: A Kuwaiti Example.’ *ABE Journal* 8 (2015).

16 - Shiber, Saba George. *The Kuwait Urbanization*. Kuwait: Kuwait Government Printing Press, 1964

17 - Fabbri, Saragoça Soares, and Camacho, p. 12-13.

18 - Camacho, Ricardo, Sara Alsayer, and Sara Saragoça Soares. *Pan-Arab Modernism 1968-2018*. Barcelona: Actar, 2021, p. 161.

Kuwait University operated as a distributed administrative apparatus woven into the metropolitan expansion of the state itself. Its presence across the city remained diffuse: legible through individual prestige buildings that functioned as competent modernist institutional architecture, yet collectively producing a fragmented spatial claim about the nation being constructed within them.

### The Architecture of the Campus

The two campuses employ architecture that constructs fundamentally different arguments about institutional modernity. Both rely on systems and rational planning logics, yet each derives those from a different intent. Qatar University adopts Arab urban and environmental vernacular to define Arab modernism, while Kuwait University adopts the international language of postwar institutional modernism as a means of communicating participation in a global architectural movement.

The enclosure of El Kafrawi's design places architecture as an argument for nation-building through inherited environmental knowledge and contextual solutions. The plan is organized around a repeating modular unit: an octagonal classroom of 8.4 metres in width, connected to adjacent octagons through square lobby connectors of 3.5 metres.<sup>19</sup> The octagonal geometry produces diagonal movement, layered visibility, and clustered social interaction, generating a field of possible expansion and continuous connection – effectively reproducing the expandable logic of the Arab souk. Ultimately, El Kafrawi's design solutions attempt to demonstrate that modularity existed within the historical organizational systems of Arab urbanism long before the Bauhaus formalized it as a principle of international modernism. The campus reframes Arab architectural tradition as a technically and organizationally sophisticated infrastructure capable of accommodating a globally recognized institution as well as its growth. One of El Kafrawi's original intentions was to introduce “a series of open public spaces and partially covered courtyards, displaying gardens and fountains to

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19 - Archnet, ‘Qatar University,’ [archnet.org/sites/288](http://archnet.org/sites/288); Salama, ‘When Good Design Intentions Do Not Meet Users’ Expectations.’ p. 60.

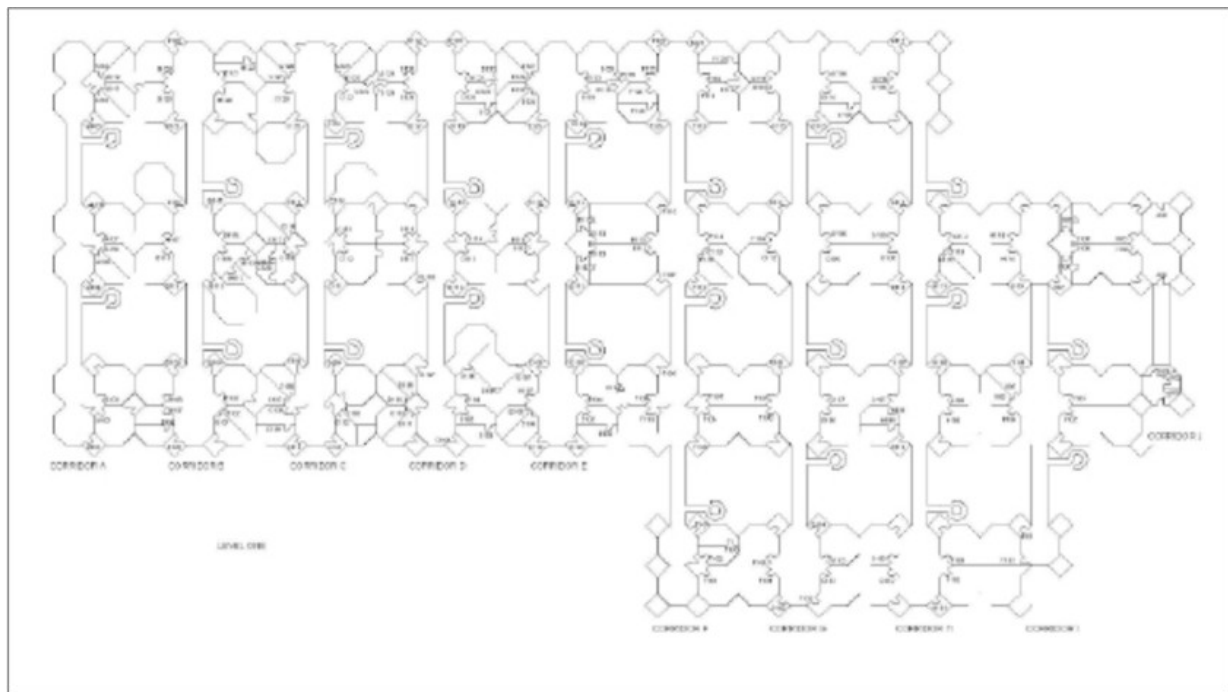


Figure 7. Diagrammatic plan of the modular pattern utilized in the design of the Academic Buildings. Source: Qatar University Facility Management Department, reproduced in Salama, Ashraf M., 'When Good Design Intentions Do Not Meet Users' Expectations,' *Archnet-IJAR* 2, no. 2 (2008).

create small oases throughout the university.<sup>20</sup> Relief accumulates through shade, vegetation, water, and compression. The environmental systems are inseparable from this spatial logic. Each wind tower is divided internally into chambers that allow hot and cold air currents to circulate without mixing, cooling the campus passively at human height. The badgir towers are environmental infrastructures integrated directly into the modular system itself, with climate comfort as the driving factor of its form. The mashrabiyya screens regulate privacy, glare, airflow, and visibility simultaneously. The campus constructs an environmental regionalism in which social organization, climate control, and institutional identity converge into a single architectural language.

El Kafrawi's campus occupies an unstable position between regional representation and state-managed image production. The project is perceived as modernist – an attempt to define international modernism by demonstrating that Arab architectural systems could themselves generate rationality, modularity, and technological competence. As Andraos argues, architecture in the Gulf consistently raises the question of “what kind of identity architecture is being called on to produce, what identities are being constructed.”<sup>21</sup> El Kafrawi's architecture transforms vernacular forms into octagonal solutions capable of representing the developmental ambitions of the post-oil state, and in doing so, participates in the same project of international recognition that it might appear to resist through its employment of local aesthetics.

20 - Salama, 'When Good Design Intentions Do Not Meet Users' Expectations.' p. 57.

21 - Andraos, p. 60.



Figure 8. Qatar University, view between academic building volumes showing the tiled roofscape and wind tower elements. Source: Archnet, [archnet.org/sites/288](https://archnet.org/sites/288).

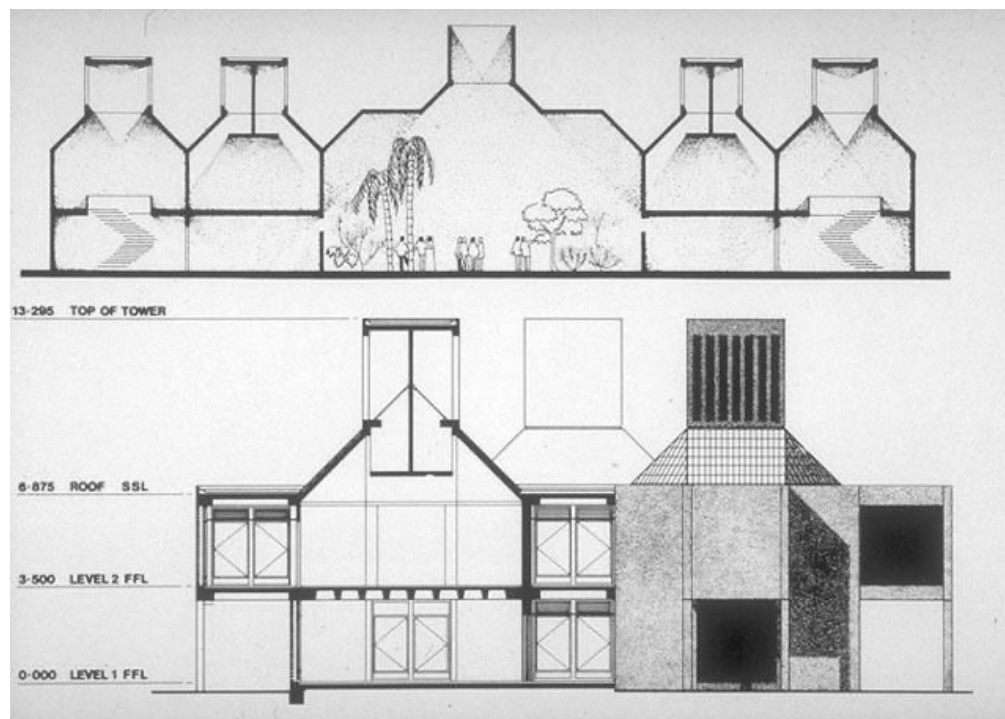


Figure 9. Section and elevation drawings of Qatar University academic building unit, showing wind tower chambers, roof SSL levels, and floor levels. Source: Archnet, [archnet.org/sites/288](https://archnet.org/sites/288).



Figure 10. Classroom interior, Alfred Roth school, Kuwait, showing high clerestory windows and controlled natural light. Later appropriated as the Adailiya or Kaifan campus of Kuwait University. Source: Tosland, Ben A., 'New Research: Alfred Roth's Criticism and Answer to Early Schools in Kuwait,' *Transnational Architecture Group*, 19 December 2017. [transnationalarchitecture.group](http://transnationalarchitecture.group).

Because Kuwait University inherited its physical form from existing schools, its architecture reflects the varied aesthetic agendas of the international consultants hired by the Ministry of Public Works.<sup>22</sup> Each campus site is designed independently by different architects at different moments, each reflecting the architectural conventions of its decade. The Khaldiya campus occupied the former Khaldiya Secondary School for Girls, designed by German architect Rambald von Steinbüchel-Rheinwall, whose work Roth criticized for its "gaudiness" and "fancifulness" – a flamboyant international modernism characterized by sculptural concrete forms, an enormous glass area, and a dramatic folded-plate assembly hall,

22 - Al-Ragam, *ABE Journal* 8 (2015).

addressed to visibility and institutional prestige rather than to climate or context.<sup>23</sup> In direct response, Swiss architect Alfred Roth – who had worked in Le Corbusier's office – designed the schools that would become the Adailiya and Kaifan sites. His prefabricated low-rise buildings introduced covered walkways blocking direct

23 - Tosland, Ben A. 'New Research: Alfred Roth's Criticism and Answer to Early Schools in Kuwait.' *Transnational Architecture Group*, 19 December 2017. [transnationalarchitecture.group/2017/12/19/new-research-alfred-roths-criticism-and-answer-to-early-schools-in-kuwait](http://transnationalarchitecture.group/2017/12/19/new-research-alfred-roths-criticism-and-answer-to-early-schools-in-kuwait), citing Fabbri, Saragoça Soares, and Camacho. *Modern Architecture Kuwait 1949–89*, pp. 54–56.



Figure 11. Khaldiya Secondary School for Girls, Kuwait, designed by Rambald von Steinbüchel-Rheinwall. Later appropriated as the Khaldiya campus of Kuwait University. Source: Tosland, Ben A., 'New Research: Alfred Roth's Criticism and Answer to Early Schools in Kuwait,' Transnational Architecture Group, 19 December 2017. [transnationalarchitecture.group](http://transnationalarchitecture.group).



Figure 12. Covered courtyard colonnade, Alfred Roth school, Kuwait, showing shaded walkways and prefabricated low-rise construction. Source: Tosland, Ben A., 'New Research: Alfred Roth's Criticism and Answer to Early Schools in Kuwait,' Transnational Architecture Group, 19 December 2017. [transnationalarchitecture.group](http://transnationalarchitecture.group).



Figure 13. Exterior facade, Alfred Roth school, Kuwait, showing brick construction, hooded ventilation outlets, and minimal glazing. Source: Tosland, Ben A., 'New Research: Alfred Roth's Criticism and Answer to Early Schools in Kuwait,' Transnational Architecture Group, 19 December 2017. [transnationalarchitecture.group](http://transnationalarchitecture.group).

sunlight, minimal external glazing, and ventilation outlets punctuating the exterior elevations, drawing on what Roth identified in Shiber's *Kuwait Urbanization* as the "simple, humble, dignified, beautiful and organic architecture that is the heritage of Old Kuwait."<sup>24</sup> With Roth's critique of von Steinbüchel-Rheinwall, Kuwait City becomes part of an international architectural debate that appears to indirectly construct its nation's legitimacy. Kuwait University's occupation of these existing "western models conveying the desired modern image" reveals the inheritance of both internationally recognized architecture and the discursive prestige attached to them – furthering its strategy towards global

institutional recognition.<sup>25</sup>

### Audience and Legitimacy

The divergence between the two universities' strategies manifests itself ultimately through the audience they address. In the post-oil Gulf, architecture became one of the primary mediums through which states communicated political legitimacy internationally. Universities occupied a particularly important role within this representational economy because they suggested that the Gulf state was capable of producing its own knowledge and expertise – a claim that extended the university beyond education toward the establishment of institutional competence and participation within global intellectual networks.

24 - Tosland, citing Roth, Alfred. *The School Buildings of Kuwait*. Unpublished Report, 1966, ETH Zurich: Alfred Roth Archive, pp. 10–22; Shiber, *The Kuwait Urbanization*, pp. 285–294.

25 - Khattab, p. 379.

Kuwait's strategy for legitimacy relied on the visual capital of recognized international modernism. *Pan-Arab Modernism* documents that Kuwait's first international architectural competition was launched in 1960 for the National Museum, marking "a departure from the over-reliance on British expertise by inviting six international architects to participate."<sup>26</sup> Khattab confirms the broader pattern: "design commissions of these buildings were awarded to internationally renowned firms such as the Architects Collaborative and Skidmore, Owings & Merrill."<sup>27</sup>

By appropriating elite secondary schools already designed by foreign consultants like von Steinbüchel-Rheinwall and Roth, whose work was legible to international professionals and visiting academics, Kuwait University participated collectively in this strategy. Kanna identifies this as "urban entrepreneurialism," in which architectural legitimacy accumulates visual capital in the same register as financial capital.<sup>28</sup> Modernity, in this logic, was acquired through the expertise of internationally recognized firms, conferred by recognized names and directed at the international community whose recognition the state required. The structural vulnerability of this strategy is visible in *Pan-Arab Modernism's* assessment of the Kuwait National Museum: "ambitious in its attempt at creating a nationalistic entity," yet failing "to build a life of its own" as "an idealised architectural product of the 1960s."<sup>29</sup>

An architecture whose legitimacy derives from international recognition is contingent on the continued willingness of the international community to confer it. Fabbri observes that Kuwait's modernist urban project produced a city whose "rational urban landscape of the 1960s does not appeal any longer to the citizen for whom modernity was acquired" – an architecture that

effectively disengaged the very national audience it was meant to serve.<sup>30</sup>

Qatar University addressed a more complex audience. El Kafrawi's architecture attempted to construct a national audience internally through the modernization of an Arab institutional identity. The campus performs two representational tasks simultaneously: internationally, it demonstrates that Qatar possesses the institutional capacity of a modern state; domestically, it reconstructs and perpetuates a coherent image of Arab identity at the precise historical moment when Doha itself was rapidly abandoning those spatial conditions. As Rizvi argues, "modernity may be enacted in different ways, yet the stage is a shared one," and El Kafrawi's campus demonstrates that institutional modernity could be reached by a route running through the Arab city rather than through a Western city.<sup>31</sup> Salama and Wiedmann document how Qatar later abandoned this position when the Qatar Foundation commissioned Isozaki, Legoretta, and OMA for Education City as "the first such project worldwide with many international architects working on the same site and at the same time."<sup>32</sup> Qatar addressed the international community through the prestige of recognized names, adopting the same outward-facing strategy Kuwait had pursued from the beginning. The pivot registers the pressure that El Kafrawi's inward-facing argument might have always suffered: in a region increasingly pursuing western recognition, an architecture addressed primarily to its own citizens might have been a harder position to sustain than one addressed to the world.

## Conclusion

Qatar University and Kuwait University emerge from the same historical condition: the rapid transformation of newly independent Gulf states through oil wealth,

26 - Camacho, Alsayer, and Soares. *Pan-Arab Modernism 1968–2018*, p. 158.

27 - Khattab, p. 380.

28 - Kanna, Ahmed. *Dubai: The City as Corporation*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011, p. 80.

29 - Camacho, Alsayer, and Soares, p. 160.

30 - Fabbri, Roberto. 'Fragmentarium: Episodes of Modernity in Contemporary Kuwait City.' In *Urban Modernity in the Contemporary Gulf*, p. 74.

31 - Rizvi, p. 3–4.

32 - Salama, Ashraf M. and Florian Wiedmann. *Demystifying Doha*, Ch. 2, p. 55.

institutional expansion, and accelerated modernization. Both campuses attempted to produce the technical and administrative elites required by the developmental state. The two universities constructed fundamentally different spatial arguments about how national legitimacy should be represented architecturally.

Kuwait University embedded itself within the infrastructural expansion of the oil city through the appropriation of existing prestige school complexes, becoming a collection of individual buildings produced by different international architects, each legible within the international modernist conventions of their time. Rather than constructing a new institutional world, the state occupied modern structures, communicating competence through an architectural language it had inherited in its rapid growth.

Through environmental regionalism and modular reinterpretations of Arab vernacular architecture, El Kafrawi's Qatar University attempts to construct an autonomous institutional world capable of embodying Arab identity within the newly modern state of Qatar. The campus transformed climate, circulation, thresholds, and modularity into political instruments through which the developmental state could spatially reconstruct an image of coherent nationalism. Though this strategy was eventually displaced by Education City's roster of international starchitects, it records, with precision, the difficulty of defining modernity as a localized solution in a region where external recognition had become the dominant currency of institutional legitimacy. The irony is that Kuwait University's new Sabah Al-Salem campus, designed by SOM and opened in 2019, deploys mashrabiyya screens and shaded courtyards — the spatial vocabulary El Kafrawi had argued for decades earlier. Whether the abandonment of these strategies reflects the limits of architecture as a political instrument, or simply the particular pressures of Gulf geopolitical competition, both universities exist as documents of nation-building whose formal choices remain the most legible record of what each state understood legitimacy and modernity to be.

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