

Editorial note

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The Arab City seminar was launched in 2012. Already then, the introduction started with, “At a time of devastating conflict and uncertainty in the Middle East and the Arab World in general, it can seem futile to focus on the evolution of its cities, past and present.” Fifteen years later, it is devastating to re-read this statement in light of the recent tragedies unfolding across the region. And yet, it is precisely because of such violence that it seems important to turn to the region’s history, mining its cities’ rich past and complex present to enable the projection of possible, peaceful, and progressive futures.

The Arab City does not exist. Yet, as an idea, it has occupied the site of endless projections—from exotic to political—which, re-examined, can enable us to better understand the region’s architectural and urban complexities, amongst other things. As a reality, the Arab City has manifested itself in varied ways across time and place. As such, it is a wonderful lens through which to understand a shared culture and people, its interconnected geography, and complex histories.

In the past decades, The Arab City has fostered a wide array of radical experiments in architecture and urbanism. From leading the wave of ‘instant urbanism’ to building the first zero carbon city, the MENA region has hosted the FIFA World Cup, witnessed a resurgence of social housing and investment in outstanding institutional buildings, public spaces, and education campuses, led major reconstruction and preservation efforts as well as re-affirmed for the world the importance of public space through ongoing civil resistance and revolutions, however brutally repressed.

Beyond the contemporary production of wildly broadcast ‘iconic’ projects, this seminar will contrast the region’s emerging and struggling cities while situating the work within a long history of complex exchanges regionally, between East and West, and between North and South. The seminar will move across time from the Ottoman Empire to the present while also moving across space, contrasting historical centers to emerging ones. Throughout, we will ask what constitutes the project of Arab Modernity, as embodied through architecture and cities, then and now.

