

Resurrecting Babylon : Bahrain's globalized urban delirium

Autor(en): **Poulikakos, Alexander**

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RESURRECTING BABYLON:
BAHRAIN'S GLOBALIZED
URBAN DELIRIUM
Alexander Poulikakos



Al Juffair, Bahrain.
Photograph: Alexander Poulikakos, 2016



View of Bahrain's Financial Harbor.
Photograph: Alexander Poulikakos, 2016

Over the course of the past decades, images of cities around the world have become more present in our conscience and their global economic importance has increased substantially. We can often formulate a clear idea projected through short mental images when we hear «Dubai» or «Tokyo», for instance. A question that has occupied me in this context after living in Bahrain for nine months, is how these flashes of spaces occupy actual space, more specifically, how the actual identity of such places is constructed and defined through new and different identities. It feels like a simultaneous space conglomerate, made up of several subspaces and one or several images that have become intertwined, due to a drastic increase of connectivity in contemporary society. Simultaneous space can be understood as a single physical space that is being occupied by several mental and physical spaces at the same time. This complex combination of spaces and corresponding images is, I believe, evident in contemporary spaces and it is what I witnessed in Bahrain. Before moving to the small archipelago in the Persian Gulf, I had a vague preconceived idea of the small island to be clearly middle eastern, with a distinct morphology. But I found it much harder to grasp exactly what its identity actually projects. Like many Gulf states, Bahrain has erupted in its structure in the past 50 years, through which it emerges as the purest manifestation of our contemporary globalized culture. The state, a small island-country that has been harvested by several different entities in its social, economic and urban appearance as well as being perceived as a developing Gulf state, is an ideal example of a simultaneous space.

Upon what foundations is Bahrain building its new globally connected identity and how is this represented in its morphology? How does this describe how contemporary space is produced?

A rational description of space and our perception of it through the Cartesian coordinate system portrays a search for a disillusioned and sober truth in architecture on a scientific basis, resembling a thought process that was present in the architecture of modernity, as described by August Schmarsow. However, in the course of the twentieth century, the manifestation of real, physical space and objects started to transform. Several entities have begun to occupy the classical three-dimensional space, creating a new simultaneity of a built and unbuilt environment.

Through changes in technology and occupancies, the actual authenticity of a space like Bahrain becomes unclear and unprecedented. Has there been a loss of an aura in the built environment as Walter Benjamin described in art? The «here and now» of the object becomes a secondary factor, meaning the place and time of its creation have lost their relevance.

Through cult status, the artworks used to be embedded in tradition. The tradition may have varied through changing time in the way the statue of Aphrodite had a different traditional context in ancient Greece as it did in medieval times. Nevertheless, both had in common that they recognized an aura, meaning a singularity in it. The reproduced artwork is relieved of traditional value, which is achieved through a mass availability, liquidating the cult of singular occurrence. Therefore, objects start to become spatially and humanly closer. The object's physical significance becomes secondary and the reproduced artwork increasingly

becomes an artwork based on its reproducibility. The exhibition-value starts to replace the artwork's cult-value.

Precisely this questionable factor of authenticity and singularity can be applied to today's urban condition. The consequence of an unprecedented simultaneous identity in a space, consisting of reproduced spaces in the age of globalization is what dominates contemporary spaces.

Through developments of a globalization process it has become increasingly important to be internationally present and dominant in different economic sectors in order to thrive as a city and consequently a country. Therefore, cities do not only consist of the actual urban geography they express, but also of different forms, communicating an identity on a global scale.

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In Bahrain, several factors have led to the transformation of the islands into a simultaneous space. The archipelago has served as a trading hub since antiquity and been occupied by multiple cultures and ethnicities throughout its history, a fact evidently shown in the heterogeneous character of the islands. Today the island's population embodies a hybrid social mosaic consisting mainly of local Bahrainis, Arab Bedouins, Iranians, Indians, Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, Filipinos, Indonesians, Sinhalese, North Americans and Europeans. A large part of Bahrain's population are Shia Muslims. This serves as the cause of frequent tensions with the Sunni Arabs that form Bahrain's government. The transnational labor force has become a part of the identity of the GCC countries and have helped generate the hybrid global spaces, which they have become. In the 1950s, Britain allowed masses of foreign workers to migrate to Bahrain to work in the new oil industry, creating a new social body of expatriates. The South Asian community which account for a large part of the labor force in Bahrain and make up one fourth of the population, lives largely separately from the host society. The extremely diverse populations of Bahrain and the other Gulf states can be described as highly cosmopolitan. As in the UAE, Bahrain is a space where Islam and radical capitalism co-exist. However, the mosaic the diverse population pieces together is far more complex. The different societal groups are segregated into their own microcosms, rarely given the opportunity to clash and mix in a public, physical space.

The oil boom in the Gulf in the 1960s and 1970s resulted in a real-estate boom in the whole region and an increase of international presence. Due to the insufficiency of oil-resources, Bahrain has set more emphasis on financial sectors, tourism and aluminium production. The financial sector and tourism have shaped the city's appearance substantially. Many fully glazed sky scrapers have been constructed and are being constructed on reclaimed land, to create an iconic skyline as a face to present on an international stage. This forms a contemporary city gate in a globally transmitted space, represented through electronic interfaces, as described by Paul Virilio in «Lost Dimension» which will, according to Virilio, replace our physical real space. This image of Bahrain simulated through its newly constructed skyline is shown in tourism advertisements on global interface platforms like CNN, creating an illusionary icon-based

reception of the country, representing a carefully crafted reality. The problem with icon-based city planning is that a lot of money is invested in developing sculpturally impressive glazed towers, resembling jewels, that are not designed to create space for the inhabitants or hold the city together. The towers are connected by highways, excluding pedestrians from access. They fail to generate direct service to Bahrain's capital of Manama by creating a dense and diverse metropolitan sphere because they are scattered and private with no external public services. Simulating a skyline that imitates American metropolitan iconic images that have been transferred to cities like Dubai and Doha, lead to the international faces of these cities all being homogeneously similar, defeating the purpose of creating a unique contemporary global presence. Still, the main investments in urban fabrication are set on branding and therefore image-based planning. The national theatre of Bahrain, for example, also follows an appearance of an internationalized «starchitecture-based» architecture whose goal is solely to create iconic sculptures that are marketable. Most newly commissioned large building projects are granted to western architecture companies who are constructing identities for most of the Gulf states. Connected and planned space in an urban unity has become secondary to the design of punctual climaxes, scattered and disconnected.

The instantaneous transfer of an image becomes more important than the durability of locality, shifting Bahrain's urban morphology to an image based and globally adjusted facade. But in contrast to Virilio's theory which states that the computational interface will replace built space, in Bahrain built space is planned today based on the interface. The image is only completed when it is actually built, even though it is not coherent with its reality; the image generates it.

The «Pearling Path» project initiated by Bahrain's Authority of Antiquity and Culture in the historical town Muharraq is meant to restore some of Bahrain's national heritage by turning historical buildings to cultural ones and adding several new cultural buildings as a way of attracting tourists through branding. Architects that have been commissioned to participate in this project are Anne Holtrop, Valerio Olgiati, Christian Kerez as well as OFFICE's Kersten Geers and David Van Severen to name a few. Being the main cultural center of the country, it is supposed to be a mirror of Bahrain, embodying its history and *genus loci*. As the commissioned architects are of European heritage, what they are supposed to contribute is a larger global appeal to Bahrain, creating unconventional buildings. This could be viewed as inauthentic but at the same time Bahrain is trying to present itself on a global platform as a hybrid country to sustain its multinational economy, which is just as much a part of its heritage and identity considering the country's propensity for diluting different traditions into a delirious confusion of hybrid cultures, histories and realities. So, if the *genus loci* (from Latin *genus* «race, stock, kind; family, birth, descent, origin» and *loci* «place, spot, locality») describes the spirit of a specific place, one could say Bahrain has acquired multiple ones, contradicting and stimulating each other at the same time. It consists of physically present and mentally projected spaces diluting the threshold between reality and imaginary by being both, as Foucault's «Heterotopia» does.

The global space that currently occupies Bahrain is what connects and represents a culture in which everyone seemingly participates. Superficially, so many different worlds are simulated through symbols and forms in real space, creating a hyperreal Simulacra following Jean Baudrillard's definition. It is no longer clear what the origins of many things are. Nearly all restaurants are either regional or international chains, imitating various ethnic culinary languages. Bab al Bahrain, literally meaning the Gate to Bahrain, is one of the physical representative public centers of Bahrain. During the day it is occupied mainly by tourists, while in the evening it is frequented by transmigrant workers. It is surrounded by touristic shops, food chains, mosques and hotel chains. The hyper-reality which the hybridity creates here is the most representative for Bahrain. Through an oversaturating presence of advertising symbols, a spatial connection, independent of physical space is rendered. Mental and physical spaces are merged and blur into a new composition of spaces.

Similar simultaneous compositions can be seen in the fashionably international area of Adliya, located in the heart of Bahrain's capital Manama. The neighborhood is home to many restaurants and bars which have façades attached to them, mirroring the culture of the goods they offer. Just as Beaudrillard analyzed Disneyland as the perfect model of all the orders of simulacra, Adliya creates a similarly imaginary world. A social microcosm mirroring a real world but miniaturized and simplified in symbols and simulations. The French bistro «Madleine» has a wooden frame glued to its glass, imitating French narrow windows, and the East-Asian restaurant «Monsoon» holds up a roof clad with a simulation of a vernacular structure. The actual inauthenticity of the three-dimensional material form is secondary to the permanent accessibility to a cosmopolitan semblance.

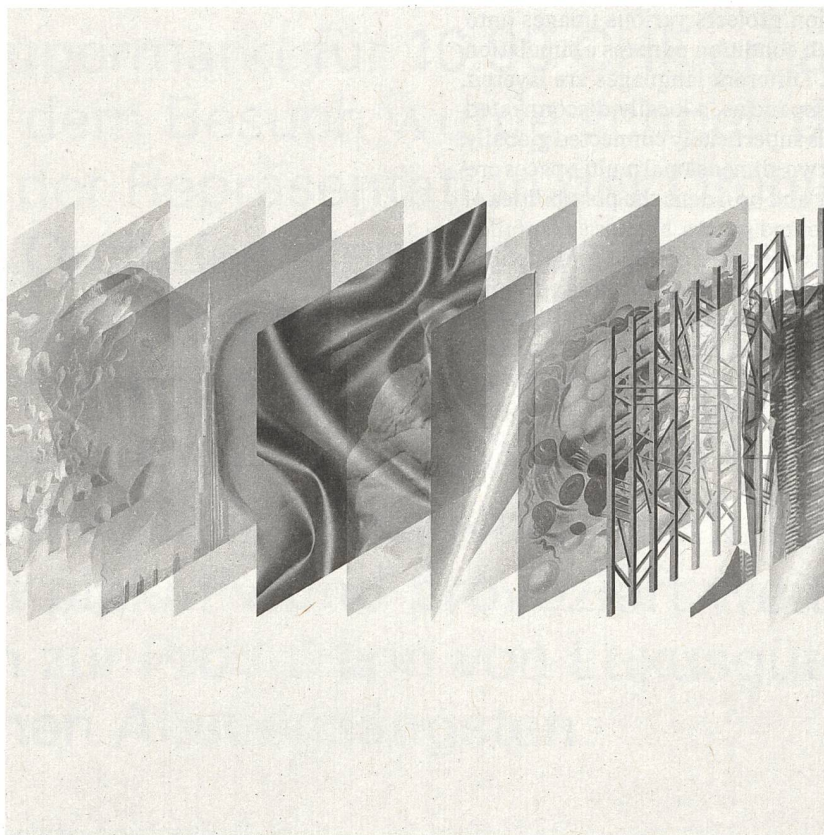
In residential real-estate, which is mainly inhabited by western expatriates, traditional local architecture is adapted and applied as a relief, propagating an abandoned identity. Forms of once natural ventilation systems are solely visible as reliefs on the façade, since they have been replaced with excessive air conditioning systems.

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Clearly, it has become inevitable that the globalization process has made neo-liberal spaces take over our environments and made them more homogeneous. In the early twentieth century, the search towards a reality in architectural formulation was predominant. Through technical advancements as in the elaborated use of reinforced concrete, it was possible to formulate three-dimensional spaces in their purest, largest and most truthful forms, by unfolding space into its absolute and naked machine-made structure. However, with developments in technology, the reproducibility of reality changed our perceptive conventions. A new narrative to our built environment has been added, an un-built environment. Perfected myths of ideal lifestyles infected our physical world in advertisements, displays and symbols. These simulations have folded space to a two-dimensional image, but they serve as an interface, dissolving geographical as well as physical and mental boundaries. As a consequence of technology, three-dimensional space has



Dilmun Homes Villas,
Adliya, Bahrain, 2016



Contemporary Space.
Picture: Alexander Poulikakos, 2018

been flattened to an image but at the same time expands space by dissolving distances by travelling information at light speed. A building like Dubai's newest climactic architectural adventure ‹The Frame› is evidence that a part of architecture has become dominated by interfaces which generate its form. In this case the building itself serves as a huge golden frame around Dubai's skyline, simulating a controlled urban image based on pure global ascendancy. Instead of embodying a full physical reality, it is built to communicate an aspect of a built environment, interconnecting to an immaterial reality.

Therefore, it has become possible for several spaces to be occupying the same place concomitantly. Simultaneously, these replicated realities exist in a built environment, not eliminating it. Rather, what has changed is that the physical world has been distorted as a consequence of the economic and political dominance of the simulated. What is being built is catered to its two-dimensional replica. Hence the distinction between the imaginary and the real has become delirious. Where in modernity human perfection was sought through architecturally constructed reality and truth, now it is striven to in unlimited images. As in psychosis, boundaries in the globalized architectonic fail. Neither subjects and objects can be separated, nor reality and the imaginary. A sense of invasion has taken place.

Due to its history, Bahrain has always been a simultaneous and connective space. However, since the oil boom, Bahrain has developed rapidly into a fully globalized delirium, elevating the concurrent to a new hybridity. Endless worlds are simulated and replicated to different extents, creating a layering of two dimensional spaces. The distinction between an actual real space and a simulated space is no longer obvious, turning all spaces into a simulacrum. An occupancy of globalization projects various images onto Bahrain, making its urban condition perhaps a simulation of the tower of Babylon. Different languages are layered, creating a tower of discrepancies, a locally disconnected hyperreal hybridity that is superficially connected globally. The delirious layering of two-dimensional multi-spaces creates a hyper-connectivity and broadens the possibilities of architecture to unprecedented spaces, but has so far failed to function as a complete system in a distinct geographical environment. As in Babylon, the striving towards a divinity and not a necessity, has been fueled by politics of alienation. The incoherence leads to a cataclysm of an identity and a casualty of local connectivity. Whilst physically scattered, contemporary spaces like Bahrain exceed the density of the tower of Babylon through the accelerated presence of delirious spaces.