



Middle East  
Centre



KUWAIT  
PROGRAMME

# ECOLOGIES OF BELONGING AND EXCLUSION IN URBAN KUWAIT

TOWARDS AN URBAN

CO-DESIGNED APPROACH

مطعم  
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# Ecologies of Belonging and Exclusion in Urban Kuwait: Towards An Urban Co-Designed Approach

Nazanin Shahrokni and Spyros A. Sofos

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## Abstract

The development of Kuwait City's urban agglomeration – home to 3 million inhabitants, 71.2 percent of the country's population – is connected to the country's discovery of oil in 1938. As citizenship became the key to benefiting from Kuwait's oil wealth, a complex system of differential inclusion and exclusion was devised to identify those entitled and the type and extent of entitlement.

Kuwait's oil wealth presented the emirate's rulers with the resources to turn Kuwait's citadel into a modern administrative and commercial centre, but the new city plans largely failed to have an equalising effect. Instead, the existing hierarchical character and divides of Kuwait were grafted onto its urban space. The urban sprawl that replaced Kuwait's citadel was divided into districts whose boundaries reinforced status, class, ethnic and gender divides. Housing and mobility in the city, leisure and work all became entangled in a complex web of exclusion and inclusion.

This paper draws on the findings of a year-long project on the ecologies of inclusion and exclusion in urban Kuwait and its impact on inclusive and effective urban governance.

## Introduction

Kuwait was one of the first Gulf countries to prepare and approve a masterplan for its capital city, in 1952.<sup>1</sup> The citadel, originally a small fishing and pearl diving settlement, struggled to provide space to host the financial and service institutions attracted by the discovery of oil in 1938. It had no capacity to house those arriving to work in the hydro-carbon extraction industries and service sector, whose numbers increased from nearly 31 percent of the population in 1956<sup>2</sup> to 70 percent in 2022.<sup>3</sup> Alongside these practical concerns, there was an aspiration to mark a break with Kuwait's humble past and to develop a modern administrative and commercial centre, projecting Kuwait's confidence externally to the region.<sup>4</sup>

The tender process and architects selected for the masterplan approached urban planning as a deterritorialised practice, disembedded from the social contexts it sought to affect. The masterplan was the product of teams not familiar with Kuwait, relying on little data and minimal contact with the local population.<sup>5</sup> Their brief was based on radically reconstructing the urban landscape through the demolition of the old citadel and the creation of a new administrative and financial centre. The townspeople would be relocated to the suburbs. The relocation of the citadel residents to new suburbs led to the destruction of neighbourhoods as spatial and social milieus, of communal spaces and public institutions where Kuwaitis came together, socialised, and exchanged views. Urban planning was understood as 'building for' the population as opposed to 'building with' the local community, and on understanding the city not as a complex social, economic, and political ecosystem, but as a spectacle.

By 1961, the population of Kuwait, most of which resided in the conurbation of Kuwait City, had already tripled to 322,000, from 110,000 inhabitants in 1950. Two more masterplans were implemented in 1970 and 1997.<sup>6</sup> The continued emphasis on large, visible and spectacular projects led to a disconnect in the lived experience of the city. Very little was done to create a liveable and sustainable urban environment and to organically integrate populations that were not featured in the original design of the city.

<sup>1</sup> Edward Nilsson, 'Urban Memory and Preservation in Kuwait: A Case Study of Souk Al Wataniya', *Presentation at Society of Architectural Historians Conference* (2017), p. 2.

<sup>2</sup> 'Population of Kuwait', *Kuwait Government Online*. Available at: <https://e.gov.kw/sites/kgoenglish/Pages/Visitors/AboutKuwait/KuwaitAtaGlanePopulation.aspx> (accessed 3 October 2023).

<sup>3</sup> 'Kuwait City, Kuwait Metro Area Population', *Macrotrends*. Available at: <https://www.macrotrends.net/cities/21769/kuwait-city/population> (accessed 3 October 2023).

<sup>4</sup> Farah al-Nakib, 'Kuwait's Modern Spectacle: Oil Wealth and the Making of a New Capital City, 1950–90', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 33/1 (2013), pp. 7–25.

<sup>5</sup> Stephen Gardiner and Ian Cook, *Kuwait: The Making of a City* (Harlow: Longman, 1983), p. 34; Sharifah Alshalfan, 'The Aftermath of a Masterplan for Kuwait: An Exploration of the Forces that Shape Kuwait City', *Monografías Colección Monografías CIDOB* (2018).

<sup>6</sup> A mass transit system was first proposed in the second masterplan, see Colin Buchanan and Partners, *A Plan for Kuwait* (London, 1970), and was revisited in the masterplan review, see Colin Buchanan and Kuwait Engineering Group, *Kuwait Third Masterplan Review* (Kuwait, 2005) as well as in the Kuwait Public Transport masterplan, see *Kuwait Public Transport Masterplan* (Executive Summary, 2010). This focused on improving public transport and walkability in the city but was not implemented.

This paper draws on findings from a year-long project on the ecologies of inclusion and exclusion in urban Kuwait and its impact on inclusive and effective urban governance.

The paper aims to:

- (i) reconstruct the official narrative underlying the development of the Kuwait metropolitan area,
- (ii) provide a cursory map of the different ways life in Kuwait City is experienced by the city's population,
- (iii) explore practices of laying claim to 'the right to the city',<sup>7</sup>
- (iv) make the case for Co-Design and participatory policymaking in urban planning through several concrete recommendations.

## Methodology

This paper draws on data derived from qualitative research, including field visits and observation conducted in June and July 2022, as well as 40 interviews. Field visits to parts of the Kuwait City conurbation were undertaken to provide familiarity with the urban environment, engage with residents and participate in local activities. These visits also allowed exposure to different modes of travelling and interacting in the city.

The research is informed by urban planning, environmental and transportation reports, and data on the demographics of Kuwait and its urban areas. These official documents and statistical data were collected through desktop research via the Public Authority for Civil Information (PACI) and the Environment Public Authority (EPA).

Forty semi-structured interviews were conducted with politicians, activists, and academic experts. These were complemented by briefer unstructured conversations with residents of the conurbation of Kuwait City including non-Kuwaiti nationals (*bidūn* and migrant workers) conducted from April to early August 2022. More specifically, our interlocutors included:

- Three politicians, one of whom is no longer active,
- Ten academics with expertise in architecture, urban planning, diversity and art and inclusion, eight of whom have been also involved in various forms of urban and inclusion activism,
- Ten civil society workers and activists focusing on issues of disability and social exclusion, *bidūn* and migrant worker rights,

<sup>7</sup> The right to the city refers to 'the right to inhabit', or 'the uses of city spaces' despite the 'exclusivity of property'. See Henri Lefebvre, 'The Right to the City', in Eleonore Kofman and Elizabeth Lebas (eds.), *Writings on Cities* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996); Don Mitchell, *The Right to the City: Social Justice and the Fight for Public Space* (New York: Guilford Press, 2003), p. 19. It seeks to shift emphasis from the increasing privatisation of the city and its appropriation by commercial interests and dominant classes, to the access and use of the city by its inhabitants and, by extension to people's 'freedom to make and remake our cities and ourselves'. See David Harvey, 'The Right to the City', *New Left Review* 53 (2008), p. 23.

- Five social entrepreneurs focusing on inclusiveness and dialogue, greening and commoning urban spaces, the development of pop-up markets, and urban memory and visioning,
- Five volunteers in community projects,
- Seven migrant workers, five of whom work in the services sector (hospitality and transportation) and two middle to high-rank professionals.

Eight interviewees are expatriates from South and East Asia, two belong to the *bidūn* community and 30 are Kuwaitis (one naturalised). This list is not representative of Kuwait's population and, indeed, is not intended to be. Our interlocutors were chosen because of their expertise, while a small number were approached to provide a better sense of particular segments of the population and life in the city. The aim of our conversations was to peer into problems, aspirations and actions addressed by civic activism in relation to urban life in Kuwait.

### Data Production and Analysis

Qualitative research and analysis – key aspects of our research design – enabled us to identify key themes in our interlocutors' understanding and experience of urban Kuwait. In the analysis of our exchanges and observations, three themes emerged: (i) place-making in the city, (ii) re-greening the city, and (iii) recovering sociability, which has also been reflected in our recommendations for effective Co-Design strategies in revisioning the city.

### Challenges

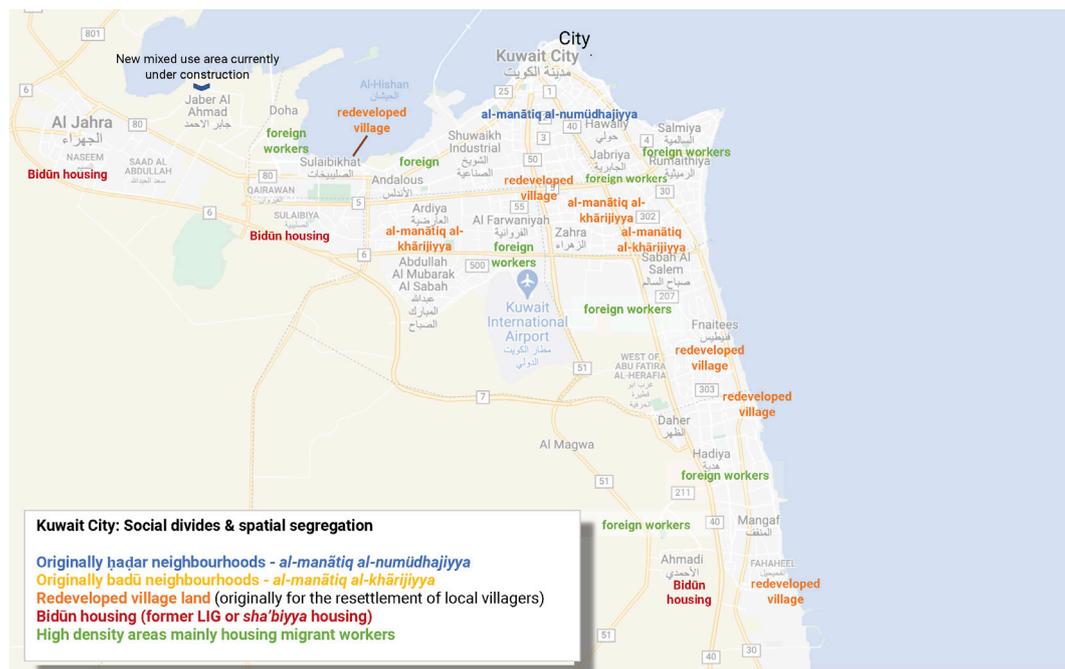
Many informants wished to remain anonymous or asked us to treat their interviews as 'off the record'. Some, wanted to make sure that their responses were not going to be recorded. Our attempts to approach unskilled expatriate workers were often met with apprehension and fear, and this is reflected in the low number of respondents from this demographic relative to its actual size in the city. Requests for anonymity or off the record conversations, as well as refusals to talk to us, were often explicitly linked to the restrictive immigration system, the divide between citizens, stateless residents and migrant workers, and the precarity and discrimination the latter experience. Our shorter conversations with migrant workers were marred with tension and apprehension, indicating that this feeling of insecurity has been deterring the largest segment of the population from feeling a sense of safety and 'belonging' in Kuwait and the city. As we suggest later, this ambient fear and mistrust stands in the way of developing more inclusive urban planning strategies.

## Kuwait City's Social Ecology

### Being in the City

In addition to being divorced from local conditions and socio-historically specific solutions, the successive masterplans also failed to anticipate the growth of the population and the scale of development of the emirate. The city envisioned by planners reaffirmed social hierarchies and reinforced divides that acquired renewed significance in view of the state's redistributive policies generated by its oil-wealth. The residential suburbs kept the city-dwelling *hadar* away from the *badū*, of nomadic origins.<sup>8</sup> The *badū*'s 'lesser' citizenship carried with it a form of spatial discrimination. Unlike the *hadar* who settled at *al-manātiq al-numūdhajjiyya* (the model inner residential suburbs), the *badū* were moved to sub-standard, overcrowded, and temporary dwellings up until the early 1980s. They were then relocated to modest-sized housing in *al-manātiq al-khārijīyya* (outlying areas) far from the city centre, its administrative services, and amenities.

**Figure 1: Kuwait City: Social Divides and Spatial Segregation**



Source: data compiled by the authors and collected from: Kuwait Public Authority for Civil Information; Kuwait Government Online, population of Kuwait <https://e.gov.kw/sites/kgenglish/Pages/Visitors/AboutKuwait/KuwaitAtaGlancePopulation.aspx>; The Population Division, Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations: Kuwait City; Kuwait Metro Area Population <https://www.macrotrends.net/cities/21769/kuwait-city/population>

<sup>8</sup> The *hadar* have documented landed status, guaranteed citizenship and access to welfare provision whereas the *badū* hold second-tier citizenship status.

Beyond this divide, little was done to accommodate the rapidly expanding and stateless *bidūn* community – enmeshed in long struggles to prove their citizenship entitlement and subject to mistrust and suspicion by the authorities. Apart from not being allowed to own property, or access free education, the *bidūn* became spatially externalised, banished to settlements on the outskirts of Kuwait City such as Tayma in Al-Jahra, Sulaibiyya and Ahmadi.<sup>9</sup> They resided in makeshift settlements or *sha'biyya*, popular housing, originally built as temporary dwellings for *badū* before their relocation to the outer suburbs. The areas housing most of Kuwait's 100,000 *bidūn* have recently become the locus of protests over their exclusion from rights enjoyed by citizens such as free healthcare, education, and essential services.<sup>10</sup>

The sharpest divide though, separates citizens and migrant workers – mostly lower-paid, employed in the oil industry, construction, services and domestic sectors.<sup>11</sup> Out of the 1.77 million resident expatriates, over 50 percent, roughly 845,000, are illiterate or have basic education, in contrast to a small, highly educated workforce hailing from developed countries and occupying desirable, high-earning positions in healthcare, business and finance.<sup>12</sup> Consecutive governments, disregarding Kuwait's dependence on the contribution of migrant labour, have been representing migrants as a demographic threat, vowing to reduce their numbers.<sup>13</sup> Although the city is constructed by them and functions due to their work, their lives have been subject to restrictions that limit basic freedoms, and the requirement to have a Kuwaiti sponsor (*kafeel*) to live and work in Kuwait.<sup>14</sup> Expendable, replaceable,<sup>15</sup> and vilified in the Kuwaiti media on account of their lack of education, their 'limited health culture' and, ironically, their 'lack of direct contact with mainstream Kuwaiti society' – largely the product of design on the part of the authorities, means they have become the target of a 'Kuwaitis first' rhetoric that reproduces their marginalisation.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Claire Beaugrand, 'Urban Margins in Kuwait and Bahrain: Decay, Dispossession and Politicization', *City* 18/6 (2014).

<sup>10</sup> 'Kuwait Bidoon', *Minority Rights Home*. Available at: <https://minorityrights.org/minorities/bidoon/> (accessed 3 October 2023).

<sup>11</sup> 'Labor Migration in the GCC Countries: Some Reflections on a Chronic Dilemma', *Middle East Institute*. Available at: <https://www.mei.edu/publications/labor-migration-gcc-countries-some-reflections-chronic-dilemma> (accessed 3 October 2023). Just under 1.3 million of the Emirate's population are Kuwaitis, 1.2 million are citizens of other Arab countries, approximately 1.5 million are Asian, 70,000 come from Africa and close to 40,000 from Europe, North and South America and Australia. See 'Kuwait', *The World Fact Book*. Available at: <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/kuwait/#people-and-society> (accessed 3 October 2023).

<sup>12</sup> 'Statistics Revealed That 845,000 of Kuwait Expats Are Illiterate', *World Gulf*. Available at: <https://gulf-news.com/world/gulf/kuwait/statistics-revealed-that-845000-of-kuwait-expats-are-illiterate-1.71618072> (accessed 3 October 2023).

<sup>13</sup> 'Workforce Nationalization in the Gulf Cooperation Council States', *Center for International and Regional Studies*. Available at: <https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/141001/KasimRandereeCIRSOccasionalPaper9.pdf> (accessed 3 October 2023).

<sup>14</sup> Nasra Shah, 'Second Generation Non-nationals in Kuwait: Achievements, Aspirations and Plans', *Kuwait Programme on Development, Governance and Globalisation in the Gulf States* 32 (London, 2013).

<sup>15</sup> 'Kuwait: The Life of Overseas Migrant Workers', *ECDHR*. Available at: <https://www.ecdhr.org/?p=948#> (accessed 3 October 2023).

<sup>16</sup> 'Statistics Revealed That 845,000 of Kuwait Expats Are Illiterate', *World Gulf*.

Their marginalisation is reflected in spatial segregation policies and practices which are often gendered in character. Many male workers live in temporary housing near work sites or in higher density residential areas with cramped rented housing such as in the suburbs of Hawallī and Al-Sālīmiyyah.<sup>17</sup> They are often targeted by government operations such as the 2019 ‘Be Assured’ campaign aimed at removing unmarried or unaccompanied male migrants – or ‘bachelors’ – from residential areas that left many homeless.<sup>18</sup> On the other hand, migrant women, especially those employed in domestic settings, often experience isolation, mobility restrictions and even physical abuse, effectively remaining housebound with very little protection and support other than that offered by activists and domestic workers’ organisations.<sup>19</sup>

### Moving in the City

The (in)ability to move in the city, the different ways of moving through the city, and ultimately, the different geographies that exist can also create social and economic differentials and disparities. A shrinking and/or stretching of the city takes place in this regard.

Domestic workers usually live with their Kuwaiti employers in residential neighbourhoods that are often not served by bus networks. There is a preference for private transport among Kuwaitis which has influenced public transport planning (or the lack thereof). The absence of leisure and retail infrastructures near residential neighbourhoods necessitates longer trips that make workers dependent on their employers or force them to ‘ration’ their mobility.<sup>20</sup> Moving in the city is dependent on expensive taxi rides and potential exposure to harassment by male taxi drivers.<sup>21</sup>

The fear of harassment is not restricted to female foreign workers: most female informants regardless of social status noted the gendered character of most public spaces, inhibiting their mobility, especially when they might find themselves alone among unknown men.<sup>22</sup> Women, across status and class boundaries, despite a tradition of women’s activism, are often seen as ‘out of place’.<sup>23</sup> In streets, parks, malls and public transport, they are a target of harassment.<sup>24</sup> Grassroots initiatives such as the Lan Asket (I will not be silent)

<sup>17</sup> ‘Kuwait’, *Integral Human Development*. Available at: <https://migrants-refugees.va/country-profile/kuwait-2/> (accessed 3 October 2023).

<sup>18</sup> ‘Migration Profile – Kuwait’ Migrants Refugees’, *Migrants Refugees*. Available at: <https://migrants-refugees.va/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Kuwait.pdf> (accessed 3 October 2023); ‘Forced Evictions: Kuwait’s Dehumanising Campaign Targets Male Migrants’, *Migrants-rights*. Available at: <https://www.migrant-rights.org/2019/09/forced-evictions-kuwaits-dehumanising-campaign-targets-male-migrants/> (accessed 3 October 2023).

<sup>19</sup> Interview conducted on 4 August 2022. Interviewee requested to remain anonymous.

<sup>20</sup> Reem Alfahad and Muhammad Adeel, ‘A Focused Look into Female Mobility in Kuwait’, *LSE Middle East Centre Blog* (2020). Available at: <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2020/04/20/a-focused-look-into-female-mobility-in-kuwait/> (accessed 3 October 2023).

<sup>21</sup> ‘Lone Female Riders Face Harassment by Cabbies’, *Arab Times* (2012). Available at: <https://www.press-reader.com/kuwait/arab-times/20121107/page/3/textview> (accessed 3 October 2023).

<sup>22</sup> Nazanin Shahrokni and Spyros A. Sofos, ‘Kuwait City and its Fragments’, *LSE Middle East Centre Blog* (2022). Available at: <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2022/04/05/kuwait-city-and-its-fragments/> (accessed 3 October 2023).

<sup>23</sup> Zeynep N. Kaya, ‘Women’s Electoral Participation in Kuwait’, *LSE Middle East Centre Kuwait Programme Paper Series* 11 (June 2021). Available at: [http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/110877/2/Women\\_s\\_Electoral\\_Participation\\_in\\_Kuwait.pdf](http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/110877/2/Women_s_Electoral_Participation_in_Kuwait.pdf) (accessed 5 October 2023).

<sup>24</sup> ‘Women in Kuwait Launch Online Campaign Against Harassment’, *Al Jazeera*. Available at: <https://>

Instagram campaign confirm this.<sup>25</sup> Status, but also patriarchal notions of ‘honour’ and ‘shame’ curtail womens’ movement – women are discouraged from venturing out of their houses on their own, and families often employ a driver in the city if they have the means. Those who cannot afford this – mostly female migrant workers – often face harassment in taxis, public transport, or in the streets. Moving through the city with other women (friends or co-workers), or devising elaborate, long itineraries to avoid unsafe routes, become solutions women resort to. The gendered character of the public/private divide makes large swathes of Kuwait City unsafe or uncomfortable for women.<sup>26</sup> This results in gendered geographies of fear, partially reflecting aggressive masculinity that mistakes single or unaccompanied women as ‘available’ and ‘accessible’, and partially shaped by media and societal discourses that consider men, especially migrant males, to be a threat to unaccompanied women.<sup>27</sup>

Emphasis on car ownership and the embeddedness of ‘car culture’ affects the mobility of migrant workers who, facing administrative restrictions to obtaining driving permits, rely on a public transport system not fit for purpose.<sup>28</sup> Despite initiatives promoting public transport, informants stressed the unreliability of bus services and the disproportionate time required to cover relatively short distances.<sup>29</sup> Bus routes meander through the city, stopping frequently in front of the premises of businesses employing their passengers, turning a 15-minute-long drive into one hour-long bus rides, adding time poverty to other disadvantages passengers face.

Informants with disabilities also pointed out the exclusionary character of the city. Urban design is slowly catching up with the rights and needs of persons with disabilities but mostly in central areas of the city. In more peripheral areas, lack of pavements and, where pavements exist, lack of proper signage for people with disabilities, makes the city hard to navigate. State benefits (available to citizens only) are not designed to engender autonomous individuals either. People with visual impairments are offered the possibility of hiring a driver or a guide, instead of being included in the design of the city through meaningful consultation and the creation of the necessary infrastructure to enable them to move freely in it.

Our informants, drawn from diverse segments of the urban population, and our observations, point to substantially different spatialities and experiences of moving through the city for those who traverse it by car or public transport.

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[www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/2/9/anti-harassment-campaign-led-by-women-in-kuwait-gains-traction](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/2/9/anti-harassment-campaign-led-by-women-in-kuwait-gains-traction) (accessed 5 October 2023).

<sup>25</sup> ‘Lan.Asket @lan\_asket’, *Twitter*. Available at: [https://twitter.com/lan\\_asket](https://twitter.com/lan_asket) (accessed 5 October 2023).

<sup>26</sup> “Kuwait is Unsafe for Women” Outrage Over Brutal Murder of Woman’, *Al Jazeera*. Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/4/22/kuwait-is-unsafe-for-women-outrage-over-brutal-murder-of-woman> (accessed 5 October 2023).

<sup>27</sup> Gill Valentine, ‘The Geography of Women’s Fear’, *Area* 21/4 (1989); Nour Almazidi, ‘Queer Spatial Recognition in Kuwait’, *Kohl: A Journal for Body and Gender Research*, 6(3) 2020.

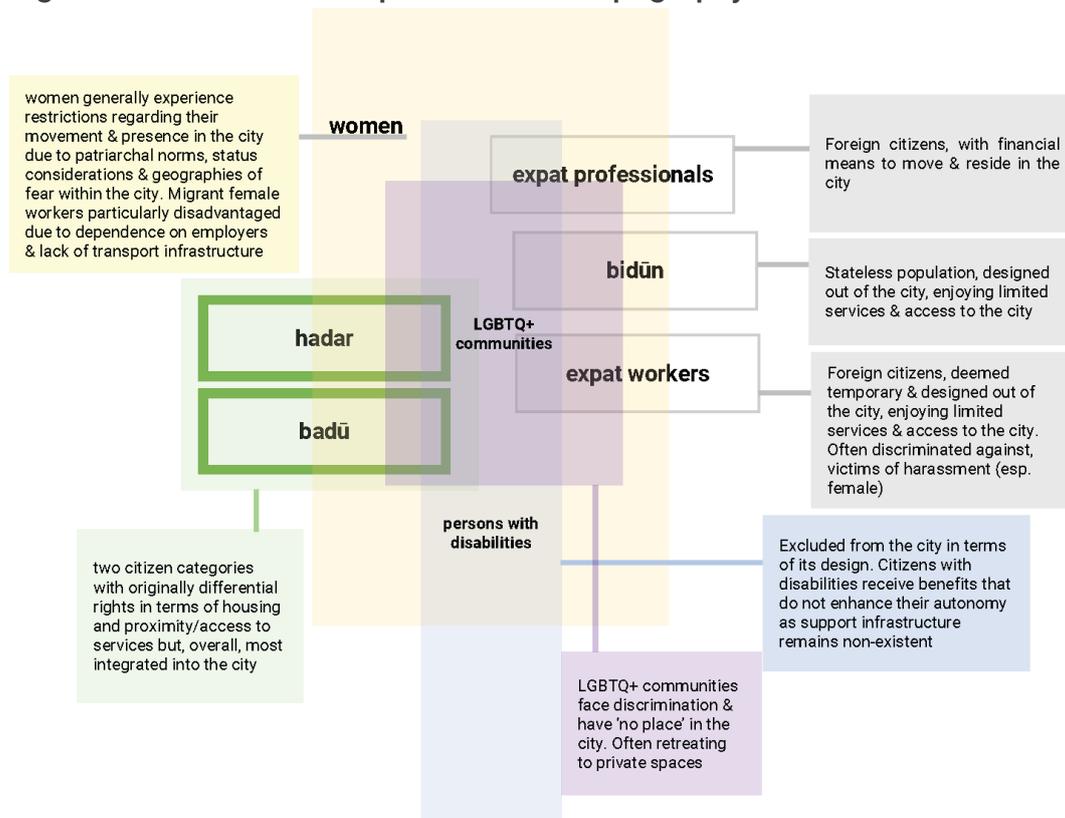
<sup>28</sup> Alexandra Gomes, ‘Urban Planning and its Legacy in Kuwait’, *LSE Middle East Centre Blog* (2020). Available at: <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2020/04/23/urban-planning-and-its-legacy-in-kuwait/> (accessed 5 October 2023).

<sup>29</sup> Jassim Al Awadhi and Geoffrey Martin, ‘Where The Bus At? Public Transportation Challenges in Kuwait’, *LSE Middle East Centre Blog* (2020). Available at: <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2020/01/21/where-the-bus-at-public-transportation-challenges-in-kuwait/> (accessed 5 October 2023).

## Urban Citizenship

Persistent hierarchies and inequalities in post-oil Kuwaiti politics and the nation-building project have meant that most of the city's population have been deprived of 'the right to the city'. The right to the city involves the right to participate in shaping and using city spaces, and the collective power to reshape the processes of urbanisation. Urban development in Kuwait failed to focus on the city as a social space and to consider the impact of rapid and extensive change from above on the urban population. Most of the inhabitants of the old citadel who were relocated after Kuwait's masterplans found themselves uprooted from the familiar spatial and social settings of their old neighbourhoods. Instead, they were placed in more modern and spacious accommodation in new suburbs, designed and built without their input or consideration of their needs. Those not granted citizenship – the *bidūn* – became marginalised urban residents without effective rights, as did the rapidly expanding migrant population who were 'written out of the city'. Their presence was deemed 'temporary' despite the lack of end-by date to their services, hence the inability to access and use city spaces and the lack of freedom to choose where they live, congregate, and socialise.

Figure 2: Urban Citizenship in Kuwait: a Topography



Source: premised on literature and interview data.

The spatialisation of the hierarchical structure of Kuwaiti society, and a system of differential inclusion and exclusion of different parts of the population, fragments Kuwait City's population and frames the way these fragments inhabit, relate to, and experience the city. This combination of fragmentation and inequality has created an urban space that is dysfunctional for the many, lacking usable, accessible, and safe public spaces,

adequate public transport, and marred by high levels of motorisation and environmental degradation. A substantial segment of its inhabitants does not enjoy even essential urban citizenship rights, such as the right to own property, access to public resources and services including education, and having a voice about their own city.<sup>30</sup>

Kuwait's urban planning excluded the infrastructure-starved high-density areas housing non-Kuwaitis, and the *bidūn* neighbourhoods comprised of 'temporary' inadequate and overcrowded low-cost housing often lacking key amenities. Motorisation favoured 'roads' traversing the city, rather than walkable streets connecting neighbours and communities. Interviewees pointed out that a lack of pavements for able-bodied residents, let alone for people with disabilities, or residential areas separated by motorways with no pedestrian crossings, discourage walking. Even for those determined to walk, the streets might lead to dead-ends, as green areas get built up by unscrupulous developers or residents or become car parks. Interviewees stated that local parks can be neglected, overshadowed by status-related flagship developments away from most residential areas. Segregation in the city manifests itself in a variety of ways: people live, traverse, and work in the city apart. They converge to enjoy it apart to the extent that we can talk about different groups populating different urban geographies. Whenever encounters and interactions across class and status boundaries occur, these are mainly transactional and do not require getting to know one another or engaging in the construction of shared projects and visions. There is a dearth of spaces where city-dwellers can overcome divides, especially those of citizenship status and class, where they can encounter, 'recognise' and learn from each other.

Understanding this stratification and denial of urban citizenship rights is the first step towards the substantive integration of these excluded populations to the city, optimising their contribution to urban growth.

## Writing the City from Below: A Topography of Practices

Despite these fragmentations, those populating Kuwait's urban space subvert dominant visions and assert different, often splintered visualisations of the right to the city, and acts of (re)assembling' and reconnecting the urban.<sup>31</sup>

Having surveyed an array of practices and initiatives that embody claims to urban citizenship by challenging official visualisations of the city and their rigidities in urban Kuwait, we selected a representative sample that revolved around three key areas:

- (i) Place making – investing physical spaces with meaning through their use;
- (ii) Re-greening the city – creating organic, community-rooted, sustainable, and replicable green spaces;
- (iii) Recovering sociability across social divides – creating more inclusive spaces of communication and interaction

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<sup>30</sup> Public schools are segregated in terms of nationality, religion, gender and cultural and economic backgrounds. Free access to them depends on residents' legal status, which means that the majority of the country's population have to pay for substandard education.

<sup>31</sup> See Farah Al-Nakib, 'Towards an Urban Alternative for Kuwait: Protests and Public Participation', *Built Environment* 40/1 (2014), pp. 101–17 for a discussion of the right to the city in the case of Kuwait.

Such initiatives have multiple dimensions; they are acts of coping as well as of contestation of urban space and expressions of protest. Contestation serves as a warning system for dysfunctionalities and problems inherent in the city, its organisation and governance. We suggest that such practices are communicative acts, providing invaluable insights as to how to rethink and rebuild the city, how to develop spaces where urban residents can voice visions, preferences, and criticisms that authorities can hear and from which they can learn, and how to achieve sustainability through urban citizen involvement.

### Place-making Practices

Despite their diverse backgrounds, most of our interlocutors have identified the absence of relatable and accessible public space as a key deficiency. They stressed the emphasis on spectacular developments such as otherwise unwelcoming corporate plazas, or several high-profile open public spaces such as Al Shaheed Park which were highly controlled, exclusive spaces.<sup>32</sup>

Such places where diversity is carefully circumscribed, monitored, and coupled with conspicuous consumption, where one's presence is dependent on neoliberal prescriptions, are not inclusive. They serve as additional boundary zones in an already segregated and fragmented city. The emphasis on spectacular developments has overshadowed the need for functional public and green spaces for residential neighbourhood dwellers. It is in this context that residents of urban Kuwait resort to rewriting the city, appropriating, or repurposing its topographical system. During our research in the city, we encountered numerous place-making activities – using existing places – neighbourhoods, buildings, parks, or even empty space – creatively, converting them to spaces of encounters, interactions, transactions, fashioning the self and engaging with others. Here we will focus on just a fraction of this polyphonic universe.

Shopping malls are one example of a place used to create a sense of belonging, to perform, negotiate, and challenge social norms. Spectator-based practices such as people-watching in shopping malls are common among Kuwaitis and non-Kuwaitis alike. Informants pointed out that in a city which is not walkable, and where most places are inaccessible and most people move from private homes to work or recreation spaces through private cars or taxis, there are not many opportunities to encounter people and engage in 'passive interaction'.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Al Shaheed Park is Kuwait's largest green infrastructure project. It is part of a series of developments of corporate towers and massive mall complexes such as The Avenues in the Al-Rai District. The park is a highly regulated space located away from most of Kuwait's residential areas. There is a ban on food and beverages not purchased in the park's restaurants, a prohibition of picnics, bicycles, and skateboards, a lack of play spaces for children and a requirement of obtaining permission for activities of groups of more than 5 people, excluding young families and people who cannot afford to use its commercial facilities.

<sup>33</sup> Douglas B. Holt, 'How Consumers Consume: A Typology of Consumption Practices', *Journal of Consumer Research* 22/1 (1995).

Beyond spectatorship, more active modalities of interaction include being seen by others, ‘performing distinction’ through one’s dress or behaviour, and ‘hanging out’ with friends. Interlocutors consider malls to be spaces of social interactions as much as, or even more than of consumption where, mostly younger people prefer to meet each other, spend time together or make new acquaintances. Some pointed out that malls, especially the ones that are far from their neighbourhoods and workplaces, engender a sense of freedom from family scrutiny, offering moments of liberation and invisibility. In the absence of other alternatives, the relative anonymity of being lost within the crowds makes malls preferred sites for fleeting encounters, contacts and flirting. In a city lacking accessible and relatable open areas to spend time in, shopping malls assume the function of public spaces where people of different ages, social status and backgrounds can congregate, ‘see and be seen’, and encounter strangers.

More visible interventions on the city’s fabric are made by people excluded from its design – migrant workers and the *bidūn*. This is clear to the visitor of *bidūn* settlements which consist of overcrowded prefabricated housing units served by dirt roads and lacking refuse collections, water drainage, or local amenities. In the settlement of Tayma, the sense of deprivation of the local inhabitants was reinforced by the separation of their locality by a motorway. Areas integrated into the city enjoy amenities and services the former were denied.<sup>34</sup> Yet, local residents fashion gathering points in the intersections of the dirt roads, furnished with benches and awnings to provide shade. Locals fashion makeshift playgrounds for children who, according to a resident, cannot attend the fancy school on the other side of the motorway as they are stateless and, instead, must walk for over twenty minutes to their own under-resourced school.

Spatial creativity is also evident in Sālmīya’s Little Manila. The neighbourhood, 15 km from the centre of Kuwait City, is a popular destination for migrant workers from the Philippines who frequent it during their days-off to meet friends and catch up with news.<sup>35</sup> Other expatriates and Kuwaitis frequent this vibrant neighbourhood too. Little Manila is teeming with small stalls, restaurants, shops, and pop-up markets where visitors hang out or buy products they need or miss at cheaper prices. Bright Tagalog graffiti adorns the neighbourhood walls – some the product of a local artists’ cooperative, while the busy soundscape of the street is accompanied by live music that travels through the Souq. The transformation of this neighbourhood into a lively social and commercial hub replete with sounds and spectacles of a life migrant workers left behind create a sense of ownership over fragments of the city.

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<sup>34</sup> Visit to Tayma (July 2022). The use of motorways to separate the *bidūn* from ‘the rest’ and keep them out of sight is common in the geography of urban Kuwait.

<sup>35</sup> According to the Philippines Embassy ca. 250,000 Filipinas/Filipinos were living in Kuwait in 2018. Having established a noticeable presence in the city, unlike workers from other countries, Filipina domestic workers developed a strong movement to counter numerous instances of mistreatment. See ‘Kuwait/Philippines: Protect Filipino Migrant Workers’, *Human Rights Watch* (2018). Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/02/21/kuwait/philippines-protect-filipino-migrant-workers> (accessed 5 October 2023).

Throughout urban Kuwait, we observed migrant workers turning bus stops and terminals into pop-up micro-public spaces by posting handwritten notes offering to sell no-longer needed furniture or other items. These, more temporary or intermittent spaces were also used for posting community-related announcements or engaging in conversations about life in Kuwait City as they wait for the city's unreliable buses. Others congregate during their days off in mall car parks, or other open spaces which are dis- or under-used, they 'inhabit them with their footsteps', turning them into makeshift and momentary markets, places of respite and encounters.<sup>36</sup>

One frequently mentioned space is the 'Dawwar El-Sheraton'. Approximately 3 km from Al Shaheed Park, the roundabout is the point of convergence of several bus lines, close to churches of different denominations, mosques and small shops which attract many of the city's migrant workers on their days off. Although designated in the city masterplans as an open public space, Kuwaiti nationals rarely considered the Dawwar a destination. Most Kuwaitis passing the roundabout barely register it as a place of leisure or encounters. For the migrant workers living in the city, this disused space has become a point of convergence when they are nearby to attend religious services, or to have a quick meal in the small food outlets of the area. During our visit, we saw people of diverse backgrounds populate what was deemed empty space. People we talked to said that renovation works in 2013 – part of a broader facelift of the area – rendered the space inaccessible until early 2014. Although it may no longer be as busy as it was before the works, they pointed out that its 'weekend inhabitants' returned to reclaim it. In stark contrast to 'regulated' open green spaces, the Dawwar El-Sheraton roundabout presented an accessible alternative, reclaimed and rewritten by Kuwait's ultimate 'outsiders' into a space of respite, encounter, and interaction. Apart from these spontaneous ways of placemaking, more organised interventions do exist. One example can be seen in the work of Madeenah, established in 2014 to document the development of the city and encourage the active engagement of city dwellers with its past and present.<sup>37</sup> Madeenah's founder and managing director, Deema ALGhunaim, a Kuwait University architecture graduate, and former employee at Kuwait Municipality's masterplan Department has drawn on her unique insights on the municipality's approach towards urban planning to develop this project.<sup>38</sup>

Madeenah has been curating regular walking tours to explore the relationship between society and the city. The intention was to eventually offer free tours, as participants used to pay a fee equivalent to £25–30, normally affordable to middle income Kuwaitis but inaccessible to most migrant workers. Tours sought to unearth memories of the city's sites, but rather than expressing nostalgia for the pre-oil era, tours explored Kuwait's modernist architecture and identified aspects of the city's modern identity that were in danger of being demolished or left to decay. The tours were also designed to encourage the participants to imagine ways of potentially re-vitalising the sites that were victim to spectacular development.

<sup>36</sup> Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), pp. 91–110.

<sup>37</sup> 'Home Page', *Madinati*. Available at: <http://www.madeenahkw.co/> (accessed 5 October 2023).

<sup>38</sup> Interview with Deema ALGhunaim (25 July 2022).

The slow pace of walking in, as opposed to driving through the city, combined with observation, discussion and 'Build Your Own Place' activities – pointing out 'missing' features such as urban furniture, lighting, or plants – interspersed in the tour schedule, provided a hands-on interaction with the city. Madeenah's tours sought sense in the city, from its planned districts to its pockets of spontaneous use and adaptive reuse. It is this focus on utilising spatial practices such as walking in the city as a tool for rethinking, that is crucial in processes of revisioning urban Kuwait.

The tours have also provided opportunities for interaction among different segments of the city's population by including perspectives that were unlikely to be encountered in a segregated and fragmented city. This polyphony was complemented by the encounters of the tour's participants with the spaces where 'other' city dwellers live and their actual inhabitants. Madeenah's walks programme was scaled down by 2017 but the organisation continues documenting the city's history and trajectory.

### Re-Greening the City

Most efforts to reimagine and rewrite Kuwait City focus on environmental interventions – specifically initiatives that aim to create green neighbourhood spaces. One of the first interventions of this kind was the Secret Garden established in 2013. The Secret Garden was spearheaded by a group of local citizens, including Maryam Al-Nusif (Mimi) who is also the founder of the first popup farmers market in Kuwait, Shakshooka market. The Secret Garden's aim was to create a green space for the community, as well as establishing a sense of collective ownership of the project. The Secret Garden was set in a largely disused public park, off Baghdad Street in the mixed commercial and residential district of Sālmīya, whose apartment buildings house people from the Indian subcontinent, Arab countries, and the Philippines. The team received informal permission to use 2,000 square metres of the park for its community gardening project in 2013, and soon after embarked on reshaping and animating the space. Calls for help from the local community in terms of work, but also for tools and seeds were met with enthusiasm.<sup>39</sup> On weekends, adults and children from the surrounding apartments and further afield would fill the garden, painting discarded tires and converting them into colourful planters to grow flowers and organic produce. As volunteers told us, the project fostered a sense of community and enthusiasm.

The garden was largely built with sustainability in mind, using recycled materials, introducing sustainable practices such as rainwater harvesting, composting, and the use of renewable energy. The emphasis on not only decorative plants but ones that can yield crops, however small, was significant in ensuring that those involved could relate more to the space attempting to avoid the fate of the deserted park within which it was created. In addition, strategies to integrate the garden into daily routines may hold the answer as to how to create relatable public spaces, reanimate existing ones and make them relevant to neighbourhoods and communities. The Secret Garden was more than a garden, it was a space to hold film screenings, cooking, photography and theatre workshops, as well as concerts.

<sup>39</sup> Interview with Maryam Al-Nusif (8 August 2022).

Although situated on local authority land, the Secret Garden faced opposition from it for being too ambitious and not complying with local environmental regulations. Volunteers suggested the main reproach was due to the garden hosting the Shakshooka farmers' market, using public land for commercial purposes which is prohibited by law. The grassroots activity of creating commons out of public space is also something that local authorities have difficulty understanding.<sup>40</sup> In the face of adversity, the volunteers became dispirited and, eventually, the Public Authority for Agriculture Affairs and Fish Resources removed all the furniture made by the volunteers, uprooted the plants, painted over all the art in the garden, and broke whatever furniture was hard to remove, bringing the experiment to an end in 2016. Despite this, the initiative created knowledge of sustainable urban gardening and increased awareness of the impact localised civic initiatives can have on increasing much-needed green space in the city.

A slightly different project took roots in 2014 in Shamiya, when Noha Al-Kharafi, Adiba Al-Fahad and Mazna Al-Mutairi attempted to enlist residents to turn the disused, empty space of Shamiya's Youth Centre into a local garden. With the support of several ministers and the capital governor, they started work using their own financial resources and some donations, planting the first trees compatible with Kuwait's climate. The project developed a better working relationship with the government and state agencies than the Secret Garden – it is registered with the Ministry of Social Affairs, and has a memorandum of understanding with the Shamiya Youth Centre, and thus faced fewer obstacles.<sup>41</sup> It soon attracted approximately 40 volunteers of different ages and ethnic backgrounds who share the aspiration to use the reserve as a springboard for creating a sustainable agricultural and ecological model for greening the city and land rehabilitation.<sup>42</sup> Others found the Reserve's model of community work attractive, as well as the cooperative relationship the project developed with government agencies and civil society institutions.<sup>43</sup> The project appears to be achieving its key aim of disseminating the concept of sustainable greening of the city, as seven schools in Shamiya and other stakeholders including teams in Mubarak Al Kabir and Jahra have expressed an interest in developing green plots and spaces.

Environmental action seems to be more successful in bringing together a cross-section of the city. The garden volunteers we talked to confirmed that such projects constitute attempts to reimagine the city and demonstrate its potential. The projects also express the desire of city residents to have a say on what kind of city they want and to engage creatively with its spaces, indicating that the environment is a convergence point where 'environmental' and 'cultural sustainability' – the capacity to create and nurture together – are achieved.

<sup>40</sup> Mary Dellenbaugh et al. (eds.), *Urban Commons: Moving Beyond State and Market* (Basel: Birkhäuser, 2015), p. 10.

<sup>41</sup> Interview with Anas Burhama, Shamiya Garden (30 July 2022).

<sup>42</sup> Interviews with Amira Al Hassan, Head of the United Nations Human Settlements Program, and Anas Burhama, Shamiya Garden (30 July 2022).

<sup>43</sup> Interview with Ahmed Al-Saffar, Shamiya Garden (30 July 2022).

## Recovering Sociability: The Transformations of the *Dīwāniyya* and Beyond

A key element of re-writing the city examined in this paper involves attempts to see and be seen. Kuwaitis have been inventive in this area as they have adapted and repurposed one of the key institutions that has been central in processes of hearing and negotiating, the *dīwāniyya*.<sup>44</sup>

The institution has changed over time, from a tribal forum to a more democratised type of meeting, adapting to the social and political circumstances of the times. *Dīwāniyyāt* held all over Kuwait in 1989–90 by ex-parliament members revitalised Kuwait's political life at a time when the National Assembly was suspended.<sup>45</sup> In 2022, various *dīwāniyyāt* hosted lawmakers to press the Crown Prince to appoint a new government after a caretaker administration resigned in a standoff with parliament.<sup>46</sup> Arguments for women's continued exclusion from public and political life, despite their active participation in the resistance against Iraq's 1990 invasion, prompted campaigns that culminated in them gaining political rights in 2005. Crucial in this process was the transformation of the *dīwāniyya* that was imbued with a patriarchal bias into a space open to women. Public figures such as Saleh Al Mulla, opposition lawmaker, member of the Kuwait Democratic Forum and one of our interviewees, opened their *dīwāniyyāt* to women hosting female politicians, but also female students and activists as participants and speakers.<sup>47</sup> Women from elite, liberal circles established women-owned and the rarer women-only *dīwāniyyāt*.<sup>48</sup> Female politicians such as former minister of social affairs and labour, Ghadeer Al Aseeri and human rights defender, writer, and Kuwait University professor of philosophy Sheikha Al Jassim run their own mixed *dīwāniyyāt* attempting to break the male monopoly in political networking and discussions.<sup>49</sup>

Efforts to create hybrid and physical spaces to incorporate traditionally marginalised groups culminated in various cross-cultural *dīwāniyyāt* as early as in the 2010s with mixed success. One such project, the Cross-Cultural *Diwaniya*, was initiated by Equait, an organisation promoting social equality for Kuwaiti residents.<sup>50</sup> Launched in 2013 by Faisal Al Fuhaid and Leanah Al-Awadhi, the Cross-Cultural *Diwaniya*'s mission was to 'elevate conversations'. It provided a monthly open forum discussing social, political, and

<sup>44</sup> 'Advice and Dissent in Kuwait', *Middle East Report*, 2003. Available at: <https://merip.org/2003/03/advice-and-dissent-in-kuwait/> (accessed 5 October 2023).

<sup>45</sup> Abrar Dahham Alshammari, 'Sociopolitical Narratives and Contestations in Kuwait's Creative Sector Post-2012' (Masters Thesis) (Georgetown University, 2019), p. 36.

<sup>46</sup> 'Kuwait Opposition Lawmakers Stage Sit-in to Press for New Government', *Reuters* (2022). Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/kuwait-opposition-lawmakers-stage-sit-in-press-new-government-2022-06-15/> (accessed 5 October 2023).

<sup>47</sup> Interview with Saleh Al Mulla (28 July 2022).

<sup>48</sup> Interview with Suhaila Behbhani and Nosaiba Al Rjaib, owners of women-only *dīwāniyya* (30 July 2022).

<sup>49</sup> Interview with Ghadeer Al Aseeri (4 August 2022).

<sup>50</sup> Pamela de Leon, 'Cross-Cultural *Diwaniya* Aims to Foster Open Dialogue On Social Issues In Kuwait' (2020). Available at: <https://www.entrepreneur.com/en-ae/entrepreneurs/cross-cultural-diwan-ya-aims-to-foster-open-dialogue-on/352714> (accessed 5 October 2023).

economic issues. Collaboration with groups such as the Kuwait Transparency Society and Kuwait Commute facilitated the translation of discussions and recommendations into concrete draft policy suggestions. The fluctuating attendance, the competition with ‘digital *dīwāniyyāt*’ – WhatsApp Groups mentioned by several of our interlocutors – and the Covid-19 lockdowns negatively affected the Cross-Cultural *Diwaniya* experiment and led to its suspension in 2021. Digital spaces fared better as they did not require travel to a physical location. These novel forms of dialogue became popular and, as they were not governed by the conventions permeating the space of traditional *dīwāniyyāt*, have become spaces of cross-cultural sociability for men, women, younger people as well as non-Kuwaiti nationals.

Many *dīwāniyyāt* remain restricted to friends and acquaintances, or, while in principle open to all, are known only within certain social circles. The *dīwāniyya* remains a semi-public institution with relatively limited access for ‘outsiders’, especially uninvited non-Kuwaitis. Gender, ethnicity, status, and class remain obstacles to the inclusion of a substantial part of the city’s population. Having said that, more women have used these platforms to raise issues pertaining to them, and more of the official representatives of *bidūn* and migrant workers communities have had their voices heard in such fora. Yet, more is needed to turn such experiments into genuine intersectional critical spaces, as, for instance, status, ethnicity, and class divides among women have prevented initiatives addressing common problems such as harassment. Beyond experimental *dīwāniyyāt*, initiatives such as en.v are representative of an expanding sector of Kuwaiti civil society. A women-led organisation, en.v brings people from different backgrounds together to explore personal and community biases, build bridges and document and capture unheard, and unseen perspectives of city dwellers. In contrast to older, more established philanthropic foundations and institutions, en.v seeks to bring change through enhancing the presence of civic listening spaces, working not only on rendering difference visible, but also on what Alberto Melucci described as ‘the parallel necessity to overcome it, to make the constant effort of listening and understanding each other’.<sup>51</sup>

Overall, the initiatives examined recognise the diversity of city life and take more seriously the need to develop more inclusive practices. The fragmented, multiple experiences that make up life in urban Kuwait present a challenge that a new generation of civic activists are attempting to address through turning the differential experience of life in Kuwait into a resource, a repository of insights as to how to rethink the city and make it more equitable and inclusive. These projects represent the first steps in overcoming the divides that fragment the city and its inhabitants. Most of the practices discussed have been initiated by middle-class activists, and predominantly attract middle-class participants, including members of the city’s disadvantaged communities who possess the necessary cultural capital and habitus to engage with them, but they have been moving towards an inclusive and participatory destination.

<sup>51</sup> Alberto Melucci, *Challenging Codes: Collective Action in the Information Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 162.

## Recommendations: Co-Designing the City

Researchers have pointed out the importance of democratic design experiments, involving emerging publics in the process of re-envisioning and re-building the city. This can help to inform urban planning practices and reconfigure existing socio-technical systems to encourage and incorporate diverse constituencies in urban design.<sup>52</sup> Central to this research is the emphasis on sustaining and scaling local inclusion and resilience practices that pay attention to the neighbourhood level, the social stratification of the city and the differential needs of the citizens and their views. Successful urban planning and governance rely on bringing together fragments of the city and drawing on their knowledge, experience, and practices through Co-Design processes.<sup>53</sup>

Co-Design rests on urban citizens' involvement in the development of their neighbourhoods as experts of their own experiences, bringing different points of view together that inform design and innovation. It entails substantive engagement with the different communities that make up the city, a more inclusive participatory policymaking that needs to heed the intimate connection between representation, recognition, and redistribution with regard to all citizens.<sup>54</sup> It entails the design of more inclusive participatory processes, including all residents irrespective of gender, status, class, or ethnicity. In the conurbation of Kuwait City, this process is likely to be protracted as the fragmentation of the city has created rifts within the population. Civil society has, with mixed success, been more successful in experimenting with safe spaces and open processes so it can be an invaluable partner in efforts to overcome divides and restore trust.

To be sure, Co-Design processes can become more effective by 'learning' from the participatory processes city dwellers have been experimenting with, such as design games, rough prototyping, or storytelling – creating friendly spaces of meeting and visualising their neighbourhoods and the city, pointing out *in situ* dysfunctionalities in the current arrangements and potential solutions and integrating them in Co-Design methodologies.<sup>55</sup> This learning process can be facilitated through the integration of 'ethnographic' tools to study less visible ways in which city dwellers redesign and repurpose the city 'with their

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<sup>52</sup> Thomas Binder and Eva Brandt, 'The Design: Lab as Platform in Participatory Design Research', *CoDesign* 4/2 (2008), p. 115–29; Carl DiSalvo, 'Design and the Construction of Publics', *Design Issues* 25/1 (2009), pp. 48–63; Peter Munthe-Kaas and Birgite Hoffmann, 'Democratic Design Experiments in Urban Planning – Navigational Practices and Compositionist Design', *CoDesign* 13/4 (2017).

<sup>53</sup> Munthe-Kaas and Hoffmann, 'Democratic Design Experiments in Urban Planning'.

<sup>54</sup> Katie Collin et al., 'Designing on the Spikes of Injustice: Representation and Co-design', in Daniela Sangiorgi and Alison Prendiville (eds.), *Designing for Service: Key Issues and New Directions* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017).

<sup>55</sup> Co-Design methodologies include co-labbing. See Emma Puerari et al., 'Co-Creation Dynamics in Urban Living Labs', *Sustainability* 10/6 (1893, 2018). Drop-in tents in areas where redesign is considered where visitors are invited to furnish streets; walking tours where participants are invited to mark what is missing from routes or experimenting with temporary urban furniture to enable users to redesign an area. The important element here is to institute processes of, not only listening, but of working together. See Arkin A. Efeoğlu and Charles Møller, 'Redesigning Design Thinking for Codesign with Nondesigners: A Method Efficiency Perspective', *Design Science*, 9/E14 (2023).

footsteps', with informal practices of frequenting places or subverting their use but also to support effective mechanisms of conflict resolution and transformation where residents, stakeholders and authorities become wedded to incompatible perspectives.

Co-Design shifts from designing for the city dwellers to designing with them, and involves the acceptance that practices considered marginal (building multifunctional green spaces), aberrant (frequenting disused spaces) or eccentric (walking tours, or narratives of the hitherto ignored and hidden city dwellers) encapsulate and identify needs, problems, and solutions.<sup>56</sup> Such an approach requires that policymakers accept 'trespassers', and 'agitators' as interlocutors – participatory thinking is antithetical to urban planning conducted by experts behind closed doors, who at best engage society with the help of survey data.

Co-Design may present a host of advantages as to encouraging and incorporating publics in the urban design process, and in engendering the polyphony inherent in the urban space. But in doing so, it also has the potential of creating disagreement and even conflict between experts and non-experts, or different stakeholders and/or publics, especially if the outcome of Co-Design processes is premised on a zero-sum logic. Thus, it is important to ensure that Co-Design projects are geared toward the design and production of shared 'objects' and processes. Participants should be able to discover connections as well as conflicts between different ways of thinking and knowing, working to engender the former and transform the latter, encouraging multi-modal communication within and across different social worlds.<sup>57</sup>

To achieve this, planning officials, experts, grassroots activists, and stakeholders need to 'retrain' to genuinely embrace more dialogic design processes and be open to partnering. Planning officials need to look at civic initiatives not as capricious 'nuisance', but as valuable resources and model pathways to sustainable solutions. Grassroots activists need to think beyond their communities and seek connections with other visualisations and perspectives, to mention but a few instances of adaptation that are a prerequisite of Co-Design processes. Co-Design means co-ownership of the result of the design and implementation process and requires adjusting the way people relate to the city and the process of creating it.

The design of such strategies and processes is necessary as it is the citizens and their involvement that can guarantee the relevance and sustainability of urban planning. These need to be guided by:

- (i) A comprehensive retraining of planning officials to enable them to genuinely embrace more dialogic design processes and be open to partnering and looking at civic initiatives not as an inconvenience', but as valuable resources and model pathways to sustainable solutions.
- (ii) More flexible ways of visualising and administering space. Many of the conflicts between authorities and local activists have been the product of a rigid understanding

<sup>56</sup> Elizabeth Sanders, 'From User-centered to Participatory Design Approaches', in Jorge Frascara (ed.), *Design and the Social Sciences: Making Connections* (London: CRC Press, 2002).

<sup>57</sup> Elizabeth Sanders and Pieter Jan Stappers, *Convivial Toolbox: Generative Research for the Front End of Design* (Amsterdam: BIS, 2014).

of space, the inability to accept commoning activities in public space, and a culture of heavy handed 'policing' and administering of the latter.

(iii) A more grounded and localised approach to city-wide urban planning. Localised and not necessarily holistic civic approaches provide valuable suggestions for micro-interventions in the complex urban space and interesting insights as to how to create sustainable, resilient, and inviting public spaces.

## Conclusion

The design of urban space in Kuwait was associated with the aspiration to transform the emirate into a symbol of urban modernity and premised on a radical rupture with Kuwait's urban and rural past. The absence of the local population, both indigenous and migrant, from the planning of the city meant that the city was designed with very little understanding of the challenges of the urban plans and of the ways urban citizens were included (if at all) in the city as dwellers, workers, commuters, or sojourners. What is more, a rigid understanding of space and its uses resulted in a city that has difficulty in adapting to the changing makeup of its population and its needs.

The intention behind this project was:

- (i) to identify aspects of the polyphony that characterises urban Kuwait and of the alternative visualisations of the city among city dwellers;
- (ii) to point out the absence of voices and visualisations 'from below', from the policies and visions of the city articulated and implemented by policymakers and urban planners, exploring the tensions that ensue by such distinct objectives and understandings of the city;
- (iii) to explore how urban planning can benefit from visualising the city 'from below'.

Clearly more research needs to be conducted to provide a more exhaustive mapping of the alternative visualisations of the city, with a more profound stakeholder analysis. Nevertheless, this project has identified the capacity to bring together diverse constituencies and urban planners, facilitate a better awareness of diverging or conflicting visions and solutions, and set in motion practical processes of conflict resolution, policy design and implementation.

There is much to be learned about ways of breaking the culture of atomised existence and how to engage with communities. There is a wealth of experience waiting to be scaled up and replicated throughout the city, and there is much more that could be done if authorities embraced civic action, cooperated with activists, and supported them financially.

Much needs to be done to create an inclusive, welcoming city where visions of the city stem from the development of shared horizons that include all citizens. Participatory policy making and Co-Design processes can embrace the vibrant civil society activities and informal acts of re-designing the city from below, incorporating them into urban planning and the administration of urban space in Kuwait City.

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## Cover Image

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