

## HYPER IDENTITY: THE CASE OF KUWAITI ARCHITECTURE

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### Abstract

This paper focuses on the mutual relationship between cultural identity and the built environment. The questions posed by this paper are: what aspects of cultural identity change and how do they impact architecture and the built environment? And, in return, what aspects of architecture and the built environment change and how do they impact cultural identity? The paper aims at understanding the current struggle to be modern and to return to the roots at the same time in different parts of the world. It focuses on Kuwait as a case study of this struggle. It starts by analyzing the cultural transformation that occurred in Kuwait during the 20<sup>th</sup> century under influences of economic and global changes, and then examines recent attempts at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century to reflect a cultural identity in architecture. The paper utilizes the method of analysis suggested by Zavalloni to understand the identity creation, formation, and transformation. This method provides a theoretical understanding of identity as a system. Several research studies were conducted by the author to understand the extent and the meaning of the phenomenon of expressing cultural identity in contemporary Kuwaiti architecture by utilizing elements from traditional Kuwaiti architecture. The paper concludes that cultural identity is a meaning making process, multiple identities exist at the same time and transforms from one state to another adjusting to external pressures and circumstances.

The paper recommends that when searching for cultural identity, one should expect to find several overlapping identities. In sum, a more open-ended approach is required when studying cultural identities that stresses the *hybrid* and *hyper* nature of culture identity; a hyper-identity.

### Keywords

Architecture, built-environment, culture, hyper-identity, Kuwait.

### Introduction

Manuel Castells (2004) states that "the construction of identities is fundamental to the dynamic of societies" and that "cultural identity is the process by which social actors build their own meaning according to cultural attributes." The paper focuses on the mutual relationship between cultural identity and the built environment. The questions addressed by this paper are: what aspects of cultural identity change and how do they impact architecture and the built environment? and, in return, what aspects of architecture and the built environment change and how do they impact cultural identity?

The premise of this paper is that there is always a cultural identity expressed in the built environment and that there is a mutual relationship between culture identity and the built-environment; as one changes it impacts and changes the other and in return impacted by and changed by the other.

This paper discusses the concept of hyper-identity as it relates to architecture and the built environment in the Kuwaiti experience. It focuses on the transformation of cultural identity and its reflection on architecture and the built environment in Kuwait. The case of Kuwait provides a good example of rapid transformation experienced by other cities in the Gulf countries; such as Dubai and Al Riyad.

### Hyper Identity Defined

Charles Correa (1983) defines identity as a process, and not a found object. He asserts that our search for identity could give us a much greater sensitivity not only to our environment, but to ourselves and to the society in which we live. For Correa, "the search for identity is a by-product of looking at our real problems, rather than self-consciously trying to find identity as an end in itself, without worrying about the issues we face."

For Hall (1996), "cultural identity is a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being' and it belongs to the future as much as to the past." According to Hall, there are two major ways of thinking about cultural identity:

*The first position defines cultural identity in terms of one shared culture reflecting cultural heritage and cultural codes shared in common. Cultural identity is viewed as*

*stable over time since as an inheritance it has been selected and reinforced by many generations. The second position thinks of cultural identity as framed by two axes or vectors, simultaneously operative: the vector of similarity and continuity, and the vector of difference and rupture (Hall, 1996).*

For Song (2005) cultural identity is "not a fixed and unchanged essence that transcends time and space, or a true and authentic origin, to which we can ultimately return, cultural identity undergoes constant transformation." The term *hyperidentity* is used in this paper to signify the hybrid nature of identity. According to the American Heritage Dictionary, *hyper* means "existence in more than three dimensions or linked and arranged nonsequentially." The paper considers the three dimensions of identity to be: time, place and culture; the fourth dimension would be change.

The paper utilizes the method of analysis suggested by Zavalloni (1993) to understand the identity creation, formation, and transformation. This method provides a theoretical understanding of identity as a system. He uses the term *figure* to describe any unique group representation of identity. According to Zavalloni:

*We can imagine the cultural space as an open "clipboard" to which anyone can affix a figure that describes those groups. A figure can take many forms: it could be a discourse, a text, a painting, an argument, an exemplary act or a metaphor, ranging from the trivial to the complex, from the innocent to the malevolent, which addresses a social group. Hyperidentity figures can be described as cultural elements that are embodied and energized by the brain/mind of those who create and of those*

*receive them. Inside the person, so to speak, as part of the identity system, these figures are invested by desires and emotions that were produced, originally, in a different context (Zavalloni, 1993).*

Architecture and the built environment constitute some of the *figures* found in a cultural space produced by individuals, groups and institutions to satisfy certain needs and requirements according to common culturally accepted and desired ideas. Zavalloni uses the term *hyperidentity* to “characterize groups as the sum of all the representations produced about them” (Zavalloni, 1993). He believes that the concept of hyperidentity frees us from thinking about groups in terms of an “essence” and allows us to view cultural identity’s changing nature.

### The Cultural Space in Kuwait at the Beginning of the 21st Century

The city-state of Kuwait has evolved during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century under influences of economic, international and global changes. After living for hundreds of years in a traditional environment, the Kuwaitis migrated to planned neighborhoods that rapidly transformed their traditional way of living and cultural identity. The planning of new neighborhoods was influenced by models and strategies of urban planning and architecture borrowed from other cultures and introduced through master plans and design schemes. This process of cultural change has continued through the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, when this hybrid culture was subject to regional and international political and economic impacts

under the forces of globalization. The result was, as Stross (1999) called it, a “hybrid culture derived from the mixing of cultural elements from unlike sources” and a cultural space that reflects a *hyperidentity*.

The migration of Kuwaitis from the traditional settlement to planned neighborhoods during the Fifties and Sixties was the result of economic prosperity after the discovery of oil during the Forties when oil flowed, population boomed and the city sprawled. The rapid expansion was matched by hastily made plans. The first Kuwait Master Plan of the 1950’s was based loosely on standard city planning of post-war Europe. It tore down old houses and replaced them with modern buildings and structures. The city center, once a place where families lived, shopped, worked and played, was foreordained a commercial district and residents were shifted to Western-style family homes and apartments in the new neighborhoods. This period was followed by other transformations resulting from global economic and political challenges during the Eighties and Nineties. The stock market crash of the Eighties was followed by the dramatic experience of invasion and liberation during the Nineties. This rapid transformation of culture resulted in a vibrant, jumpy, and agitated identity; a hyper-identity. It also idealized the past as the only valid cultural identity and initiated the search and reinvention of a lost tradition.

The 21<sup>st</sup> century has brought new challenges to the already transforming cultural identity in Kuwait. Following 9/11 attacks on the US and its efforts to retaliate by attacking “centers of evil” around the world, Kuwait found itself in the midst of world events as the only available

US point of entry to Iraq. This brought world attention to Kuwait for the second time after its liberation from the Iraqi occupation in 1991. These events highlight the important location of the small city-state of Kuwait at the cross-roads of world events and global interests as a major producer of oil since the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Figure 1).

Following the 2003 Iraq war and the relief from security threats, Kuwait has started to develop plans to catch up with other rapidly developing Gulf countries; especially Dubai, who used to be followers to Kuwait steps during the Sixties and Seventies. The decade of the 1990's was a dark age in Kuwait under the shadows of the Iraqi hostile regime. In the 30<sup>th</sup> of March 2006, Kuwait has announced plans to build a new city on the north side of Kuwait bay area. The new city is called "The City of Silk"; or "Madinat Al-Hareer" in Arabic, and is expected to cost more

than 25 Billion KD. (1 KD equals approximately \$ 3.33) The Vision Statement (2006) of the new city states that:

Over the past two decades, the world has watched as the Middle East has emerged as a centre of invention and innovation. Our sister cities of Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Riyadh, Manama, Muscat, and Doha have transformed themselves from quiet trading ports and crossroads into international cities of commerce, leisure, hospitality, and an entrepreneurial splendor that is the envy of the world. From this tradition started over 20 years ago, we've seen our neighbors accelerate development at a pace unimaginable. Today, we add to this great continuum of growth in the Arabian Gulf with *Madinat Al Hareer*, the City of Silk.

As proclaimed by the vision statement, the city is "founded on the rich heritage of Arabic

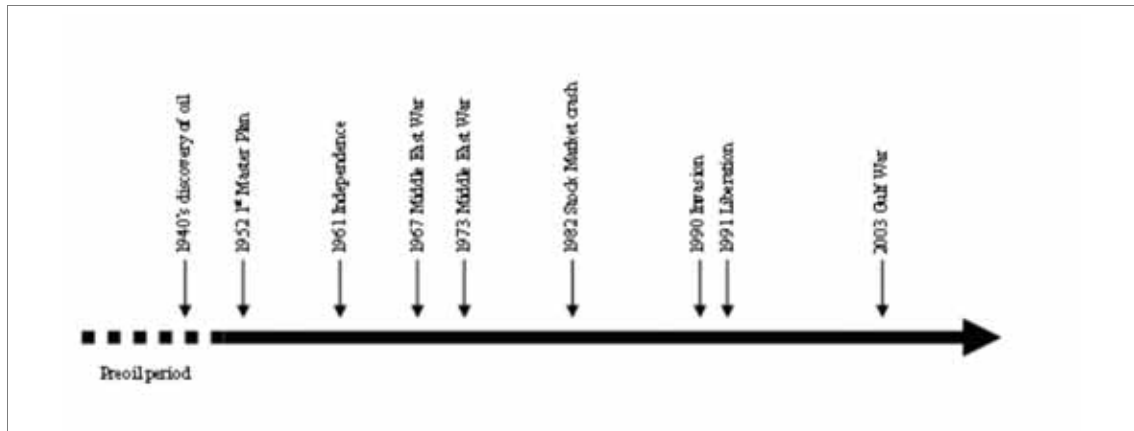


Figure 1: Major Events Since the Discovery of Oil in Kuwait.

gardens, towns, palaces, and markets. It balances Centers of Faith with Centers of Commerce as a rich garden city on the Arabian Gulf." The city is made of four new city centers; Finance City, Leisure City, Culture City, and Ecological City. "It is a new cosmopolitan city for a new century", stated the vision statement.

*At the center of the city stands Burj Mubarak Al Kabir, "the Tower of a Thousand and One Nights" as a symbol that stands as an icon for the world to know. The tower is designed to exceed all known tall buildings in the world, especially the Burj Dubai that is expected to rise up to more than 800 meters in the sky. "Standing 1001 meters tall, it will house 7 vertical villages combining offices, hotels, leisure, and residential into a vertical city centre that reaches for the heavens. The design is inspired by the defiant flora of the desert as much as the rich folklore of Arabic heritage described in 'Kitab Alf Layla wa-Layla'."*

This symbolic use of tradition as a source of inspiration for design in the context of a mega-projects is also found in other parts of the Gulf countries mega-projects and structures; i.e. Burj Dubai. The intention, as Marcuse (2006) put it, is "to link the construction, executed in the tradition of global power, with a local recalled tradition." It also answers the appeals of the officials and the public to "recover the lost identity" in the built environment. Many local critics of the contemporary urban environment in Kuwait are idealizing "traditional architecture" as the only "valid" Kuwaiti architecture identity. A romantic attempt to "rebuild that past" in the form of a "traditional village" is currently under construction and many buildings that utilize elements from traditional Kuwaiti architecture are found (Figure 2).



Figure 2: General Views of the City of Silk, Kuwait

As observed by Nezar Al Sayyad (2001):

*Many nations are restoring to heritage preservation, the invention of tradition, and the rewriting of history as forms of self-definition. Indeed, the events of the last decade have created a dramatically altered global order that requires a new understanding of the role of tradition and heritage in the making of social space and the shaping of city form (Al Sayyad, 2001).*

The same approach is utilized in the design of other projects and buildings. Another mega-project that is expected to be built within the next ten years in Kuwait is the New University City in Shidadiyah. The New University City will have three affiliated campuses, including one for female students, one for male students, and the medical campus. The campus master plan is conceived as a city on the banks of a river of landscape. Two campuses, one for men and the other for women, are separated by a wide oasis – a “Palm Forest” over one kilometer in length containing 10,000 palm trees. Faced by faculty offices and Graduate Studies Research, it will be a quiet space of academic repose, a sanctuary and place for contemplation that will become an icon for the University. Within the University City, college clusters will form neighborhoods bringing scale and identity to each part of the University. (CCA, 2005) While the new university facilities are expected to resemble any western university facilities, its identity will be influenced by cultural and social conditions and references.

On the other hand, several tall buildings are under construction in Kuwait downtown benefiting from recent changes of building regulations that permitted the increase of building height from 20 to 100 floors. Tall buildings are considered symbols of development and

modernity. All these new tall buildings are constructed using advanced construction materials and technical systems, yet, many of them are using features of traditional and local architecture in order to express a local identity. As one designer put it:

The architect is required to blend modernity and tradition. Modernity in terms of technological advancements; i.e. smart buildings, and advanced building materials; i.e. curtain walls and flooring. Tradition is the need to have architecture that recognizes the environmental requirements and interacts with it. It is the recognition of local and historical aesthetic elements of the region. We should present to the world our own model in order to regain our leadership and tradition and re-write a new history (Abdel Rahim, 2006).

### The Need to Express a Local Identity in Architecture

Why did the need to express a local identity by blending modernity and tradition arise? Is it a real “need” or a “selling” strategy of new real-estate? During the fifties, when Kuwait was transforming from a vernacular settlement into a modern planned city, there was no requirement to blend tradition and modernity in the planning of the new city. The ambition was to join the modern world and break all linkages with the past; including the traditional environment that was associated with poverty and primitive living conditions. Today, the identity expressed through the use of traditional style is viewed as a defense mechanism against the domination of the sweeping identity of globalization.

Several research studies were conducted by the author to understand the extent and the meaning of the phenomenon of expressing cultural identity in contemporary Kuwaiti architecture by utilizing elements from traditional Kuwaiti architecture. The first study was conducted in 2005 and focused on a group of Kuwaiti architects who attempt to express a distinctive Kuwaiti cultural identity in their projects. A sample of 18 architects were selected for the purpose of that study. In-depth interviews and standardized questionnaires were used to collect information from the architects.

The study revealed that there were several strategies employed by Kuwaiti architects to express a Kuwaiti cultural identity in their work. There were architects who express cultural identity by borrowing from traditional architecture believing that the sources of cultural identity are derived from the past, and there were architects who express a cultural identity that relates to today's prosperity and future ambitions. There was an agreement among architects that there were elements, vocabularies, proportions, and materials that distinguished traditional Kuwaiti architecture, but there was no agreement on whether they should be used again or not. Some architects thought that the reuse of these elements and vocabulary was essential to achieve a distinctive Kuwaiti architectural identity that relates contemporary architecture to traditional architecture. Others believed that it was not a necessity to use these elements and vocabularies but it is essential to respond to the climatic conditions and the specific needs of the Kuwaiti people.

There was recognition among Kuwaiti architects that buildings alone are not sufficient to convey the cultural identity. The context of architecture provided an important background against which architecture was understood. The traditional city spaces provided an important dimension to the experience and provided a meaningful reading of traditional architecture buildings. When placed against modern streets and buildings, traditional elements and vocabularies read more like Disney World than authentic architecture. The study concluded that among architects "identity was always pluralistic, fluid and unstable and that it is continuously constructed and reproduced by the collective imagination of the community" (Mahgoub, 2006).

Another more recent research study was conducted in 2006 by the author to compare the views of the architects with the views of non-architects. A random sample of 127 practicing architects in Kuwait and 186 non-architects were selected for the purpose of comparative study. A standardized questionnaire was developed and distributed to compare the differences and commonalities of the meaning and importance of expressing a cultural identity in architecture between architects and non-architects.

The results of the study indicated that there were important differences between the views of architects and non-architects regarding the meaning and importance of expressing a cultural identity in Kuwaiti architecture. There was a significant difference between architects and non-architects views regarding the expression of cultural identity in contemporary

architecture and environment. While architects considered that architecture is always an expression of contemporary culture and life style, non-architects believe that cultural identity is only expressed in traditional buildings and environments. Architects considered cultural identity to be expressed mainly through the urban context while non-architects considered that cultural identity to be expressed mainly through individual buildings.

Another important difference was found between the views of the architects and the non-architects regarding the role of the client in positively contributing to the establishment of a cultural identity. While architects considered the client as an important contributor in encouraging the architect to design buildings that reflect a local cultural identity, non-architects considered the architect as the sole responsible entity for the promotion of cultural identity in architecture.

### Typology of Hyper Identity in Kuwaiti Architecture

Manuel Castells (2004) has devised a typology to understand the identities of collective projects. According to Castells they are: identities of legitimization, introduced by institutions in order to extend their domination over social actors, identities of resistance, generated by actors which are constituted for cultural survival, to withstand social, religious, territorial and linguistic domination, and new identities, constituted when social actors build a new identity often based on identities of resistance but transcending them. Along with these strong collective identities, there are also individual

identities founded on a personal project or elective principle, and these are particularly important in societies in which communal identities are not developed. The following is an attempt to understand the expression of cultural identity in Kuwaiti architecture by utilizing this typology.

### Identities of Legitimization

State and governmental institutions are utilizing Islamic and traditional Kuwaiti architecture elements and principles in the design of their buildings. These styles provide them with the required reference and identities of legitimization. For example, the Grand Mosque is designed according to Islamic architecture principles and elements as an expression of its function as a religious building, while the Place of Justice is designed using Islamic architecture shapes and elements to reflect its reference to Islamic laws and legitimization. Also, the design of the new state palace, Al Sief Palace, reflects Islamic, Arab and traditional Kuwaiti Architecture in terms of its masses and details, i.e. windows (*mushrabiyas*), rooftop (*dirwa*), and gates (*bawaba*). The interior is a display of formal elements of Arabic and Islamic architecture and Kuwait heritage.

On the other hand, the Municipality building was designed and constructed during the late Sixties according to modern architecture principles and materials of that time. The building is composed of three identical linked glass boxes four stories high, resembling some of Le Corbusier's projects in Brasilia. The building was constructed using reinforced concrete and glass curtain wall system for the first time in Kuwait. Parents used to take





Figure 3: Identities of Legitimization: (Left) Municipality of the City of Kuwait, (Right) Parliament- Kuwait General Assembly.

their children to see the building as one of the marvels and a representation of the future anticipated by everyone in Kuwait. The identity expressed by the building was a futuristic one representing the ambitions of the country, led by the municipality, to become a modern and developed country. The influence of the Municipality building style is apparent in many apartment buildings and private villas especially in the down town area (Figure 3).

Today the Municipality building style is described as outdated "old-fashion" style. The building became crowded with the increase of number of departments and employees required for its heavy administrative work. A new addition composed of a 10-story tower is currently under construction to host the growing need for space and services. The façade of the new addition is designed as a tall

Islamic pointed arch and will be replicated in all six governorates of Kuwait. The large scale of the pointed arch is out of proportion and disfigured. As David Hansen of P+W put it, "it's like wallpaper plastered onto a high-rise." (Hansen, 2006) Other public buildings are also designed using Islamic architecture elements and principles; such as arches and courtyards. They include new buildings for ministries of Public Works and Ministry of Energy.

The Parliament Building, designed by the celebrated Danish architect Jorn Utzon during the Seventies, is an example of a building illustrating the identity of legitimization in different way. The building is not "covered" by traditional and Islamic architecture elements but it incorporates the essence of the tradition in its contemporary design. The building was designed as a grand souq covered by a large

tent. The grand souq provides a place for interaction and communication between people and government under one unifying and protecting roof. The north gate is used as an entrance for the public, the south door is used by the government and people representatives. The building was described by Vale (1992) as “an architectural essay which endeavors to assemble national identity out of sections of concrete.” According to Vale, the attempt by Utzon to define and promote a national identity for Kuwait has two aspects:

*First, there was a perceived need to assert a Kuwaiti identity that went beyond relatively recent matters of petroleum and riches. More precisely, this yearning was for an identity that precedes these and encompasses these in a culture with deep historical roots. And, second, closely tied to this wish to emphasize historical depth was the recognized urgency to stress and maintain the privileged claims of Kuwaiti citizens within the plural society in which they remained a minority. The initial decision to commission a prominent building to house the National Assembly and the particular forms with which this building was carried out are each manifestations of this dual search for identity (Vale, 1992).*

### Identities of Resistance

The second typology of identities, as suggested by Casteells (2004), is “generated by actors which are constituted for cultural survival.” Architects who attempt to resist the “invasion” of the modern style are utilizing elements and principles of traditional Kuwaiti architecture in their design. A major actor in that realm is architect/developer Saleh Al Mutawa who designs his own projects and buildings. His projects include apartment buildings, hotels and restaurants that utilize elements and forms

derived from traditional Kuwaiti architecture. His work is controversial because of its literal reference to traditional Kuwaiti architecture elements and shapes. According to Goodwin (1997), “his architectural language makes an immediate impact on all who see it, but it is disconcerting to fellow architects.” Khattab (2001), has reviewed carefully the work of Al Mutawa and concluded that:

After reviewing some of the works of Al-Mutawa, one can define some positive and negative aspects. Among the positive aspects is that his unique style is his own architectural invention that comes principally out his personal development and cultural background, as well as from advances in modern engineering. He has also shown how he can break the conformity and the monotony inherent in most of the buildings in Kuwait through the creation of poetry of concealed disorder in his domestic buildings. Yet there are some negative aspects in his work, such as the superficial use of wooden beams, which appear to support concrete roofs and balconies, and the contradictory mixture of styles of arches and motifs used in the same building and sometimes the same facade. Despite these shortcomings, a local image of Kuwait’s heritage is invariably reflected in Al-Mutawa’s work. Whether this image is specifically a “Kuwaiti image,” as he claims, or not is open to debate. Some architectural critiques agree with him, while others criticize his work as only pastiche and stereotyped decoration of traditional forms (Khattab, 2001).

Some of his significant projects include Salmiya Palace hotel, Al Zumuruda restaurant and several apartment buildings found in

different neighborhoods in Kuwait. He copies directly from traditional elements of Kuwaiti architecture in an effort to “revive the lost identity”, as he claims (Al-Mutawa, 1994). One of the interesting observations is the reference of the residents and the public to these apartment buildings style as the “Spanish” style and not the “Kuwaiti” style. They are not understood by the public as an expression of a Kuwaiti traditional architecture, an illustration of the miscommunication between architects and people.

Another project that illustrates the same typology is Souq Al Zul Wa Al Bshut designed

by the Kuwaiti architectural firm Bonyan. It is a traditional souq composed of shops selling traditional clothes and rugs located in the heart of the old downtown. It is designed to reflect traditional Kuwaiti architecture. This project was selected by many architects as a successful contemporary attempt that represents a Kuwaiti identity in architecture. The scale and location of the project in the downtown area adjacent to the traditional souq Al Mubarkiya and Souq Al Tujaar relates it successfully to the history of the area which was the heart of old Kuwait city (Figure 4).



Figure 4: Identities of Resistance: (Left) Almutawa, (Right) Souq Alzul.

### New Identities

Buildings designed according to “identities of resistance” are being criticized by architects and critics as a “simplistic” approach that degrades cultural identity to a mere copy-and-paste exercise of traditional elements and

principles. They argue that architecture should focus on new building functions, materials, methods of construction, technology should not be concealed by facades that are copied from the past. They are introducing “new

identities” through the design of buildings that incorporate new functions that did not exist in the past with traditional design principles and elements to satisfy contemporary cultural needs and in completely new ways.

Le Notre restaurant building is an example of a contemporary design by a Kuwaiti architect using a completely different approach. It attempts to create a new cultural identity that blends the past and the present in one single entity. The building hosts a restaurant overlooking the Gulf coast. It has many references to traditional architecture using modern materials and technology. Users do not detect easily the many references to the past that are provided by the building design and details. The past is concealed under layers of modernity and contemporary materials and

technology and it has to be discovered and revealed (Figures 5 & 6).



5.



6.

Figures 5 & 6:  
The Emergence of  
New Identities in the  
City of Kuwait  
5. Chamber of  
Commerce  
6. Le Notre Cafe and  
Restaurant.

Another important landmark is the new headquarter of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Kuwait that was opened in 1999. The building was designed by the international consulting firm HLW in collaboration with the local consultant Al Jazeera Consult. The building covers 5000 square meters and contains a 5-floors podium and 15-floors tower hosting 36000 square meters of office space and higher administration and services. The external cylindrical shape of the tower was inspired by the origin of the name of Kuwait; *Alkut*, meaning small fort and the traditional shape of forts found in the Gulf peninsula that old Arab tribes used for protection during outside attacks. A reflective ceiling tops the tower reflecting its lights to the rest of Kuwait. The podium of the building is covered by rough and smooth precast concrete panels producing horizontal line resembling old Islamic buildings. This reference to cultural heritage of trading was instrumental in developing the design of the building. The building is equipped with state-of-the-art furniture, HVAC, technical and communication systems.

A more recent project is Al Kut shopping center located on the waterfront of Al Fahaaheel district south of Kuwait was opened in 2005. The project hosts modern shopping center amenities within a design that incorporates local and Arab style. Designed by the Jordanian architect Rasem Badran, the project is expected to boost the economy of the area especially after the addition of Al Manshar hotel and shopping complex by another Jordanian architect Wael Al Masry.

### Individual Identities

Individual identities are found in villas and

houses built by Kuwaiti citizens on lots of lands given by the government as part of plot and loan housing program. The owners hire architects to design their houses and villas according to their specific needs and desires. They try to lower the cost by hiring "low-budget" architects, most of them are from Arab or Asian countries who do not have any interest in expressing a cultural identity in their buildings rather than that of the owners' wishes and whims. The product is a "mixture" of architectural styles lined side by side along the narrow streets of residential neighborhoods. Some owners are influenced by what they see during their visits and travels to other countries. Others are influenced by their religious and cultural backgrounds that dictate certain requirements and needs; especially privacy requirements and separation of men and women. Other owners express their interest in expressing their Kuwaiti cultural identity by incorporating elements of traditional Kuwaiti architecture or even elements from their old houses in the new designs; i.e. old wooden doors and windows. A significant traditional element that is added to each house is the *diwaniya*, a separate room where men gather in the afternoon to discuss social, political and economic concerns (Figure 7).

### Conclusion

*Architecture is a story teller, and its narrative provides the basis for understanding identity (Baudrillard, 2003).*

The paper utilized many projects to illustrate the typology of identities that can be found in Kuwait. They illustrate the story of development of cultural identity and the current struggle between tradition and modernity expressed



Figure 7: Individual Identities as Expressed in Private Residences throughout the City of Kuwait.

in architecture and the built environment. Buildings constructed during different periods of the development of Kuwait illustrate the state and priorities of cultural identities at that time. For example, during the Sixties and Seventies the interest of the country was to join the modernized world utilizing the financial capabilities allowed for by the revenues of oil sales. Buildings constructed during that period; i.e. Municipality building, Airport, Kuwait Towers, Stock Market, etc., were designed according to modern and international style approaches. During the Eighties the economic crisis of the stock market reduced the financial capabilities of the country and the individuals and produced buildings with basic structural and technological necessities. The security crisis of the Nineties, due to the invasion and liberation experience that Kuwait has passed through, promoted the renewed interest in expressing a "genuine" cultural identity. The source of this genuine cultural identity was thought to be found in traditional buildings and lifestyle. Meanwhile, globalization is facilitating contact with other culture and lifestyles, through ease of travel and communication, is adding to the paradox of defining a "proper" cultural identity. As Song (2005) put it:

*Globalization and migration brought and continue to bring multiple cultures into contact, the complexities of cultures render a simplistic binary theoretically problematic. There is a calling for scholars to move beyond binary forms of analysis and invent new critical paradigms that will help scholar to theorize the fluidity, multiplicity, and intricate contradictions that characterize all forms of cultural identity (Song, 2005).*

The problem of architecture and buildings is that they are tangible, static and lasting more than

other products of culture. They freeze moments of cultural process as products of certain time and era. Baudrillard calls it "architecture's cultural omnipresence" (Baudrillard, 2003).

While cultures change rapidly their architectural products remain unchanged expressing moments of cultural change and development. This paper concludes that cultural identity is a meaning making process that consolidates past traditions with contemporary conditions and desires. Multiple identities may coexist at the same time representing different groups in the society. Cultural identities may also shift from one state to the other adjusting to external pressures and circumstances. The paper utilized the case of Kuwait as an example of hyper-identity expressions in architecture that can be found in other Gulf countries and the world. The paper recommends that when searching for cultural identity, one should expect to find several overlapping identities. In sum, a more open-ended approach is required when studying cultural identities that stresses the *hybrid* and *hyper* nature of culture identity; a hyper-identity.

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## Acknowledgement

The research work utilized in this paper was supported by Kuwait University, Research Grant No [A02/04]. The author would like to thank Kuwait University Office of the President for Research for the academic and financial support provided for the research study that led to this research paper.