

*Fragmented Representations:  
A critique of cross-border homogeneity in the built environment*

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**Veering Away From an Academic Discourse**

This essay generally is about crossing physical and cultural borders. More specifically, it deals with how architectural and urban models defining the built environment cross such borders and the extent to which they consequently have the capacity to homogenise built environments in different parts of the world.

The subject of homogeneity and its manifestations in the built environment addresses themes that directly or indirectly affect so many people throughout the world on a basic, personal, and continuous basis. This ever-present and highly-relevant subject is intimately connected to our lives, and consequently is far more wide-reaching than the subject matter for theoretical (and often esoteric) academic discourse. One consequently may write extensively and intelligently about homogenisation in the built environment without the need to link, ground or define one's writing in relation to the texts of others, as is predominantly the case in so many academic writings.

In this context, the subject of homogenisation in its wider sense is intimidating to write about considering the tremendous amount of both academic and popular writing that has appeared on it, particularly over the past two decades. There accordingly is the valid concern that any new writing on homogeneity will end up being not much more than a literature review, critique, or commentary on existing publications, or worse yet, simply 'spinning' what already has been written, without adding much that may be considered new or insightful. In contrast, writing on homogeneity in the built environment can be considerably informed through direct and personal experiences and observations, which very often can replace the need for a substantive reliance on other writings for referencing and documentation.

I am making these remarks since this monograph has evolved out of an academic workshop, with the participants belonging almost exclusively to the world of academia. In

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Note: All websites referenced in this essay were accessed on 15 August 2009.

their writings, academics are usually reluctant to disengage or free themselves from the writings of other academics, and often feel the need to legitimise their writings through the work of other academics, generally eminent, established, and even trend-setting ones. This partly is the result of the importance that human beings generally place on belonging to larger groups. It also is partly based on the conception that unless academic writing provides extensive documentation and referencing that connects and even binds it to a wider body of established and accepted academic work, it may be disqualified as academic writing and relegated to what is viewed as the less-intellectually rigorous realms of journalism and popular writing.

The argument I would like to make, however, is that when writing on a theme such as cross-border homogeneity, academics should draw on their own direct rich personal experiences, which provide them with unique interaction with the forces that define, shape, and even oppose the phenomenon of homogenisation. So many academics, particularly those belonging to the wide range of disciplines connected to cultural studies, are regularly engaged on both the physical and intellectual levels in crossing cultural and national boundaries. For many, the place where they live often belongs to a different culture than the place they study. Many have colleagues and students from different parts of the world, and they attend conferences and meetings in various parts of the world. They therefore regularly come into direct interaction with people and cultures that are not their own. This puts them in a unique position to clearly explore the divergences and convergences that define relationships between cultures.

I will end this introductory section on a personal note, which is that in writing this essay I have drawn heavily on experiences from my own background of having lived in both North America and the Middle East (Jordan) since childhood, moving on a number of occasions between these two regions. This frequent crossing of physical and cultural borders has provided me with the opportunity to directly observe these two cultural entities and their built environments. What follows therefore is not so much an academic research paper on homogenisation, as a reflection on it based on direct and long-term personal experiences.

### **Defining and Explaining Homogeneity**

Before proceeding further with this essay, there is a need to devote some attention to the issue of definitions. This is especially important for terms that have achieved high levels of circulation, as is the case with homogeneity (and by extension, homogenisation). Such terms inevitably assume a plurality of meanings, or at least shades of meaning, among different audiences, making it futile to attempt to identify a singular exclusive definition. It instead would be more constructive for anyone using any of these terms to clarify his or her own understanding and intended use of it. Accordingly, I will provide my understanding of

homogeneity. It is a basic and simple one. I consider homogeneity to refer to similarity and to a rejection of difference. To elaborate, a brutal and often violent and extreme example of homogenisation is found in the policies of totalitarian and authoritarian regimes, which force a series of behavioural similarities on their subjects and violently deal with any attempts to divert from them.

At the other end of the spectrum are more benign examples of homogenisation that are more relevant to the subject matter of this essay. Here, I am specifically referring to homogenisation as expressed through the practices of large corporations. More particularly, I am thinking of corporations that deal directly with consumers on the retail level, as with those running department stores, fast food and hotel chains, as well as entertainment and media businesses producing music, television programs, movies, printed materials and computer games. Of increasing importance are corporations involved in telecommunications, whether producers of hardware or providers of internet or mobile phone services. In the case of the built environment, one may cite large-scale architectural and engineering firms, as well as residential, commercial and office real-estate developers. These large corporations are generally international in scope, and among them, American ones have played a dominant role, whether directly through establishing a global presence, or indirectly through providing business and administrative models that have been widely followed elsewhere.<sup>1</sup> I will return to the significance of this strong American presence later on in this essay.

These corporations have highly-standardised procedures that are applied wherever they are located, and they go through extraordinary efforts to minimise, if not eliminate, any divergences from such standards. They aim at reaching as many consumers globally as they can, and are willing to enter any market where there is a critical mass of consumers who demand their products or services, or may be convinced to do so, and can afford them. These corporations accordingly depend on mass production and mass marketing, which makes it extremely difficult to tailor their products and services to meet the needs of specific markets, except in a superficial manner.

Another point that should be made in this context is that through intense advertising efforts, these corporations market 'experiences' to consumers rather than merely sell utilitarian products or services, and therefore can have profound and large-scale influences on behavioural patterns affecting whole societal groups, ranging from defining trends of social interaction to determining consumption habits.

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<sup>1</sup> Of the world's largest 500 companies by revenue in 2008, 153 are from the United States. Of the world's largest ten companies, five are from the United States. In contrast, Japan, the country with the second largest number of companies among the world's largest 500, only has 64 companies. See [http://money.cnn.com/magazines/fortune/global500/2008/full\\_list/](http://money.cnn.com/magazines/fortune/global500/2008/full_list/).

To elaborate further on the issue of definitions, it should be emphasised that the term 'homogeneity' conjures up a considerable number of related terms, and it is difficult to explore it independently of them. These include terms that may be viewed as opposing homogeneity, such as heterogeneity, diversity or plurality, as well as interconnected terms that may be applied to cultural relations, such as interaction and filtering, as well as others that fall beyond the scope of this essay such as acculturation, hybridisation and assimilation. And, of course, it is simply impossible to tackle the theme of homogeneity as it applies across national and cultural borders without connecting it to the ever-looming term 'globalisation'.

Finally, one should keep in mind that homogeneity depends on the extent to which people, goods, capital and information are able to freely cross borders, not only geographic, but also social, economic and cultural ones. In the case of the built environment, this cross-border movement applies to a wide range of activities including the teaching and training of architects and planners, as well as the processes of designing, developing and constructing buildings, districts and cities. In addition to the freedom of movement of information, it therefore also depends on the level to which the professionals, labourers and the materials involved in the making of the built environment are able to cross borders. A main goal of this essay is to examine the extent to which the crossing of national borders in connection to the built environment is taking place and to what extent it is resulting in 'one size fits all' architectural and urban solutions, to the detriment of any pre-existing pluralities consisting of locally-based and developed approaches.

### **A Brief Overview of Homogenisation in the Built Environment Before the Current Wave of Globalisation**

Attempts at homogenising the built environment across geographic borders present nothing new. Any cursory overview of the history of the built environment shows that the world has had no shortage of cross-national political or cultural forces presenting architectural and urban models that claimed a certain level of universality, and that these models were consciously and, in some cases, aggressively exported well beyond the political and cultural borders from where they emerged. Roman architecture, particularly during the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> centuries AD, is an early and prime example of this. The Romans created highly-standardised architectural and urban models that their architects and engineers implemented around the Mediterranean, and beyond, reaching areas as far as the British Islands. These models included specific urban elements such as the *cardo* and *decumanus* as well as the forum; building types such as theatres, temples and baths; and architectural features such as the Classical orders.

Almost 1,500 years later, particularly during the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Ottomans constructed mosques and religious complexes with their own specific syntax and

morphology, including central low-lying domes, supporting half-domes and pencil minarets, throughout their far-flung empire, which covered south-east Europe, west Asia, and North Africa. Such religious buildings were, after all, the most important public monuments of their time. The Ottomans, however, did allow for more local variety in the implementation of this model than the Romans before them.

The various vocabularies that are part of the Classical revival, including those of Renaissance, Baroque and Neo-Classical architecture, all spread across considerable geographic areas, often beyond the boundaries of the Western world where they originated in the middle of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. During the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, they spread to areas as diverse as the Middle East, East Asia and South Asia. They were often a public symbol of Western colonial supremacy and of the homogenising forces that accompanied it. They were also a manifestation of the wave of globalisation that took place at that time, which was brought about by technological developments such as the railroad and the telegraph as well as the spread of Western political and military influence – often taking the form of direct colonialism – to just about every corner of the world.

Closer to our own time, particularly during the first half of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Modern movement, most eloquently articulated through the ‘International Style’, boldly claimed a sense of universality that was enthusiastically embraced – rather than imposed – in many parts of the world. As with the vocabularies of the Classical revival, the vocabularies of Modernism also emerged in the West, but they achieved higher levels of international dissemination and acceptance, and proved alluring to various non-Western audiences as they were presented through a vision based on the theoretically more abstract and universal, and also less culturally-constrained concept of technology.

This homogenisation of the built environment extends to include the training of the architects and planners involved in realising it (admittedly, many of these remarks apply not only to the built environment, but also to other professional fields and to those involved in them). Schools of architecture established outside the Western world over the past two centuries have been based on Western models, initially the French Beaux-Arts model, followed by the German/Central European Bauhaus model, which in turn was transplanted to the United States around the Second World War. An examination of architectural university curricula anywhere in the world over this rather long period shows that they are generally indistinguishable from each other in their overall formal structure and their inclusion of coursework covering areas such as architectural design, structural design, construction technologies and architectural history.

## **Homogeneity in the Built Environment and the Current Wave of Globalisation**

### ***The Forces of Americanisation***

Although attempts at cross-border homogenisation in the built environment have a long history, what has taken place over the past two decades or so is far more widespread and intense than anything experienced before, sparking fears that local cultural entities, with the plurality and diversity they offer within the international context, are at risk of being completely taken over by overwhelmingly bland and banal consumer-based homogenising forces. As shall be seen shortly, this may be connected to corporate homogenisation and its link to Americanisation.

The forces of Americanisation as we know them today may be traced back to the end of the Second World War. Although the United States by then had been the world's largest economy for almost three quarters of a century, its crucial role in ending the war and in supporting international reconstruction efforts following the war brought about a new level of engagement in world affairs and its ascendancy as the world's undisputed economic power and – along with the Soviet Union – one of its two major political and military powers. Since then, the United States actively marketed on the international scene a socio-economic and political model for national organisation based on the primacy of the free market, which highly depends on a consumer-based society and, in principle though not always in practice, a level of participatory democracy. In marketing this American model, the United States was supported by its unparalleled affluence and the relative personal and institutional freedoms it offered.

Also of tremendous significance is that the United States boasted unmatched higher-education and research institutions that attracted students and scholars from all over the world. These institutions were particularly strengthened as a result of the Second World War, when they incorporated large numbers of European scholars seeking refuge from the war and the forces of intolerance that led, in part, to it. The foreign students who returned to their home countries after studying at institutions in the United States (a good number also ended up settling in the United States) generally took on the role of 'ambassadors' who, consciously or unconsciously, promoted that American model.

In terms of the built environment, the American vision of an affluent life primarily was expressed through expansive green suburban developments with spacious houses stocked by a dizzying variety of household consumer appliances, with the automobile (an ownership level of one automobile per adult household resident was common there since the 1950s) providing America's ever-increasing number of suburbanites the freedom to go wherever they needed or wished to go. These suburbs were linked to cities through

extensive highway networks. As for the city-centre, in many cases it became less the place where people resided and more the place where they worked. It also was presented as a glamorous world of corporate white-collar employees working in Modernist shiny glass and steel skyscrapers. Images of this vision of the built environment with its suburban dwelling place and urban workplace were spread effectively and extensively throughout the world, primarily through American commercial television programs and movies.

During the Cold War, this vision of the good life that the United States promoted to the world at large, although widespread, was not uncontested as it had to counter an opposing state-based vision presented by the Soviet Union. The latter promoted itself as a defender against American imperialism and (at least outside Europe and to the developing world) as a powerful force of anti-colonialism standing up for the world's weak and poor. In place of the affluence that the United States presented to the world, the Soviet Union marketed concepts of a classless society and socio-economic equality, which resonated well in the many parts of the world with considerable levels of poverty and inequality. In terms of the built environment, however, the Soviet Union was not able to promote equally seductive models as did the United States. Instead, its building legacy, rightly or wrongly, has been viewed in the popular consciousness as primarily consisting of large-scale, monolithic, characterless and dilapidated housing blocks and governmental buildings.

### ***The Triumph of the American Model***

With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War in the late-1980s, whatever challenge the Soviet Union presented to the United States' world predominance came to an abrupt end. The United States by default emerged as the world's uncontested military, political, economic and cultural power. The collapse of the Soviet Union and of Eastern Bloc governments through the efforts of local movements with widespread popular support even allowed the United States to declare moral victory and assume a position of moral superiority.

The ensuing period initiated a wave of international economic and political liberalisation and openness (or what critics often refer to as 'Neoliberalism') primarily advocated by the United States. Expressions of this 'New World Order' included a freer movement of goods, capital, information, and to a far lesser degree, people across national borders. The cross-border movement of information particularly took place in a spectacular manner as this new and more open political climate coincided with revolutionary developments affecting information technologies, most of which originated in the United States. The speed through which satellite television and the internet spread everywhere may be viewed as the most powerful expression of this new era. Both have become increasingly affordable and accordingly ubiquitous, allowing people throughout the world, and from an incredibly wide range of cultural, political and economic backgrounds, almost unlimited

access to the same pool of global textual and visual information. The effects of these developments in relation to the built environment will be discussed in more detail below.

On the economic level, a major expression of this new age has been the increased access to a variety of consumer goods and services, primarily provided by international corporations (and also by their local and regional affiliates and imitators). Various factors, including the lowering of tariffs, the increased ability of corporations to relocate production and distribution centers from wealthier industrialised countries to ones with lower labour and production costs, and the creation of larger markets resulting from regional economic groupings, all allowed for the prices of many of these goods and services to come down significantly. The overall effects of these developments on poverty alleviation and socio-economic equity remain highly contested, but what is definite is that the trappings of middle-class consumer life, which were primarily limited to consumers in the United States and, by the 1970s, to other Western industrialised countries, now became available to emerging middle classes in various parts of the world, who have witnessed an increase in their incomes accompanied by a decrease in the prices of numerous consumer goods and services.

While welcomed by many, these various developments also raised deep concerns, if not alarm, throughout the world and among various groups – not only left-leaning and traditionalist intellectual, political and religious ones, but even among promoters of globalisation themselves – regarding the international spread of homogenising American modes of behaviour (or what may be referred to as a process of ‘Americanisation’) on the cultural, political and consumer levels, and the resulting decimation of local traditions. While such fears have existed since the end of the Second World War, they took on a tone of utter urgency and seriousness in the post-Cold War free-market age.

Such fears of course have included the ‘Americanisation’ of the built environment. On the residential level, this American model has been expressed through the rise of the suburb, mentioned above. The negative side of the rise of the suburb has been extensive sprawl characterised by low-density developments that eat up vast tracks of agricultural areas, replacing them with large, single-use residential communities with cookie-cutter, repetitive, housing units. Since these suburban developments are located at considerable distances from the more urbanised central business districts, where job opportunities are primarily located, commuting between the two depends heavily on the private automobile, using a network of highways connecting cities and suburbs. The highways become completely congested during the morning and evening commutes, and the overall result is a highly wasteful arrangement in terms of the energy consumed and the time spent commuting. The Levittown suburban developments built by Levitt and Sons beginning in the late 1940s were the earliest examples of this post-war suburban model and have come to symbolise it.

This Americanisation of the built environment is also expressed through the increased ubiquity of big-box stores and enclosed, climate-controlled shopping malls, both engulfed by vast, seemingly-endless parking areas, isolated and disengaged from any surrounding urban fabric. Instead of traditional commercial streets (which also were predominant in the United States before the Second World War and the widespread use of the automobile) with their dense urban fabric, lively pedestrian activity and adjacency to residential areas, the commercial streets of the suburban American model consist of seemingly endless automobile-dominated stretches of road where one drives from one location to the other, moving between uninspired, repetitive and bland fast-food restaurants, hotel/motel chains, supermarkets, gas stations and strip malls all located within or next to wastelands of parking.

Wherever one may be in the United States (and this to a great extent also applies to its northern neighbour Canada, making this model a North American one), these suburban developments are almost indistinguishable from each other, providing tremendous levels of homogenisation across vast geographic areas. The latest wave of globalisation has allowed this North American model to spread globally.

Although for many architects, urbanists and cultural observers, this is a realisation of a nightmare scenario of how the built environment in diverse areas of the world may evolve, such a view is not necessarily shared by the public at large. For most suburbanites in North America, the suburban model described above provides their only direct experience of the built environment, and they therefore tend to accept it uncritically. For many outside the United States, and particularly in the non-Western world, this suburban model is a major component of the 'American Dream' and the vast opportunities that the United States historically offered to its people. While students of urbanism may see it as environmentally and economically unsustainable, wasteful and destructive of local urban fabrics and built environments, many across the world, in contrast, view it as an expression of a life of plenty and a consumer paradise that they are willing to embrace enthusiastically.

### **Beyond Americanisation: Other Homogenising Influences**

Americanisation is one component – definitely, a very strong one – defining this ongoing homogenisation process in the built environment. There of course are other homogenising factors. While those are strongly interlinked to the Americanisation process, and in some cases even find their origins in it, they nonetheless have taken on a life of their own to function as independent forces. These factors are influencing the evolution of the built environment on various levels ranging from how its professionals are being educated to how its physical composition is being developed. Three of these factors deserve particular attention.

The first factor relates to how the built environment is increasingly being defined by the activities of large-scale corporate real-estate developers. Considering the scale, the high levels of standardisation, and the cross-border reach of such corporations, they clearly function as major homogenising forces. As mentioned above, the clearest manifestations of the emergence of such developers initially took place in the United States, symbolised by the Levittown suburbs of the post-Second World War era. While this phenomenon is very much part of the Americanisation process, it now has taken on an independent path of evolution outside the United States, with new large-scale developers emerging across the globe, particularly in locations with robust economic growth such as China, India and the oil-rich parts of the Middle East.

Even though they follow rather similar financial, planning, design, as well as marketing models, and even though in the final result their economies of scales require that they produce repetitive, cookie-cutter components, many of these corporations engage in a degree of attention-grabbing one-upmanship. One manner through which a number of these large real-estate development companies attempt to differentiate themselves is through developing themed, planned communities with a Disney-like quality to them, each relating to a given architectural tradition, preferably ones with romantic or exotic connotations (traditional European building traditions in non-Western contexts qualify as 'exotic'). China, for one, has no shortage of such developments, as clearly expressed in the One City Nine Towns development under construction outside Shanghai, in which a series of suburbs have been developed as replicas of traditional European towns, including what are referred to as an Italian, English, French, Swedish, Dutch, Spanish, American and German, as well as a Chinese town.<sup>2</sup>

Another popular location for these themed developments is the oil-rich Gulf region in the Middle East. Consider in Dubai the Residential District of the International City being developed by the giant real-estate developer Nakheel, which features a series of 'internationally themed communities' representing China, England, France, Greece, Italy, Morocco, Persia and Russia. Also in Dubai is the Arabian Ranches projects developed by another Dubai-based real estate giant, Emaar. The project includes various housing developments. According to the company's promotional literature, the developments are inspired by what are referred to as Santa Fe, Spanish, Portuguese, Arabic and contemporary architectural prototypes.<sup>3</sup>

In addition to these themed developments, there are projects that concentrate on creating physical spectacles, as exemplified by a series of developments in the Gulf region consisting of massive urban-scaled artificial islands that take the shape of palm trees, a map

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<sup>2</sup> For a more detailed discussion of this development, refer to the chapter in this volume by Mari Fujita.

<sup>3</sup> Regarding the Residential District of the International City, see the following website: [nakheel.com/en/news/nakheel-international-city](http://nakheel.com/en/news/nakheel-international-city). Regarding the Arabian Ranches project, see [www.Emaar.com](http://www.Emaar.com)

of the globe, or a necklace, as seen in the Nakheel, The World, Durrat al-Bahrain and The Pearl-Qatar developments.<sup>4</sup>

Such large-scale real estate developments of course are not new. Earlier examples may be found during the globalising era that took place during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In the Middle East, a prominent example is the new suburb of Heliopolis outside Cairo, which was developed in 1906 by the Belgian developer Baron Edouard Empain.<sup>5</sup> The developments we are seeing today, however, exist on a vastly larger scale, are more dependent on standardised models of planning and construction, and are spread along a global geographic expanse simply unknown before.

The second homogenising factor I would like to mention is how easily and readily available information on the built environment has become. One should keep in mind that until very recently, the cross-border transfer of information relating to the built environment primarily depended on the physical movement of people and publications. New ideas were introduced through architects and planners who worked or taught outside their home countries, or by those who studied outside their home countries and then returned there to practice or teach. New ideas regarding the built environment also greatly depended on the transfer of information through the print media, e.g. journals, magazines, and monographs, which were not always easy to access outside the countries where they were published. It is worth noting in this context that as recently as the mid-1990s, a monograph featuring the work of a celebrated architect was considered a valued possession among architects and architectural students. Such monographs not only were expensive, but also hard to obtain for those who lived outside cosmopolitan centres with specialised bookstores or those who did not have access to high-quality university libraries with collections on the built environment.

This is no longer the case. On the one hand, printed publications are more widely and easily available internationally through online book sellers and also through large-scale chain bookstores that are emerging globally. Both of these are a result of the current process of globalisation and the easing of the movement of information, capital and goods that have accompanied it. On the other hand, and more importantly, the Internet has made extensive visual and textual information about any well-known architect or just about any aspect of the built environment readily available. Both students and practitioners have come to depend heavily on the internet for such information, and the outcome has been that the same pool of data on the built environment is now available to all.

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<sup>4</sup> For the websites of these projects, see [www.Nakheel.ae](http://www.Nakheel.ae), [www.Theworld.ae](http://www.Theworld.ae), [www.Durratbahrain.com](http://www.Durratbahrain.com) and [www.Thepearlqatar.com](http://www.Thepearlqatar.com).

<sup>5</sup> For more information about Heliopolis, see Agnieszka Dobrowolska and Jaroslaw Dobrowolski (2006) *Heliopolis: Rebirth of the City of the Sun*. Cairo: American University in Cairo Press.

Moreover, architecture students in different parts of the world now seem to be looking at the same precedents. As an architecture instructor at the University of Jordan from 1993 to 2000, I recall how at the time I started teaching there, students primarily looked at the work of regional traditionalist architects such as Hassan Fathy, Abdel Wahed El-Wakeel and Rasem Badran as sources for guidance. By the time I left that university, when internet use had become widespread, a complete process of transformation had taken place, and these regional sources were almost thoroughly replaced by trend-setting international architects such as Frank Gehry, Peter Eisenmann, Zaha Hadid and Rem Koolhaas. The set of information on architectural design that architectural students around the world are looking at is increasingly becoming homogenous.

The third factor I would like to refer to is the internationalisation of architectural practice. This again is connected to the liberalisation of the movement of capital and information. Having architects and planners work outside their national or cultural borders is nothing new, and examples of it are found throughout history. Still, the work of architects and, to a lesser extent planners, until very recently tended to be heavily anchored to the countries where they lived, or at least the cultural regions to which they belonged. Although their work may have had universal aspirations, they remained intimately linked to specific physical geographies. Existing political, economic and technical/technological conditions dictated such a state of affairs as the logistics involved in being based in one country and designing a project in another were simply too complicated.

A number of large architectural practices, however, began to carry out a relatively significant amount of international work beginning in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This is particularly evident in the work of American firms such as Skidmore, Owings & Merrill (SOM), Hellmuth, Obata & Kassabaum (HOK) and Rogers, Taliaferro, Kostriksy and Lamb (RTKL), as well as others from Europe, Japan and Australia, and such work concentrated on large-scale commercial and institutional as well as urban planning and design projects. The Middle East construction boom of the 1970s that accompanied a spike in oil prices opened up considerable lucrative opportunities for such practices. With the latest wave of globalisation in the 1990s, this tendency has taken on new dimensions. The work of a number of international firms has become so global today that it is often difficult to exactly determine where their home office is located.

There are a number of manifestations of this globalisation of architectural practice. One of them is having the various components of the design process for a given project being simultaneously carried out in a number of countries belonging to different time zones. Work is transferred via the internet from one time zone to the other at the end of the work day, thus allowing it to proceed on a 24-hour basis. An example of this is the 460 million dollar Kingdom Tower in Riyadh in Saudi Arabia, designed by the American firm Ellerbe Becket in association with the Saudi Arabian firm Omrania and Associates, and

completed in 2003. The various components of the design of the project were carried out by teams working around the clock in twenty cities in five countries. With such a high level of international participation, a common denominator linking the design teams in different countries would need to be significant, thus reflecting relatively high levels of homogenisation.<sup>6</sup>

A most interesting development relating to the current wave of globalisation, however, consists of the globe-trotting international architectural star. The most prominent representatives of this group include the winners of the architectural Pritzker Prize. The work of these architects has become completely internationalised; it is no longer particularly connected to a specific location, and it is not unusual for many of these architects to have only a minority of projects located in their home city or country. They have become the ultimate jet-setters, constantly commuting from one project to the other, which usually are located in Europe, Russia, North America, China and the oil-rich parts of the Middle East – basically anywhere that has the financial resources to support them.

In the work of these architects, the idea of creating a sense of place is almost completely absent. They are providing their own personal artistic/creative stamp, which is viewed as being valid anywhere in the world that wants it and has the money to pay for it. Their work in fact provides a rebirth of the International Style aspiration of creating built environments that completely transcend cultural specificity, but is devoid of the higher unifying social, economic and cultural aspirations that often were linked (though not necessarily successfully or seriously) to the International Style. What they present instead are more or less pure visual statements that claim a sense of universality.

A hint of this phenomenon of designers working extensively across national borders may be found in the last great wave of globalisation that took place between the late-19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. For example, although the French engineer Gustave Eiffel (1832–1923) is best-known for designing the Eiffel Tower in Paris, he also designed projects in countries across the world, from Chile to Vietnam. However, today's technological developments in terms of travel and the transfer of information as well as the tremendous global economic growth that has taken place over the past two decades all have allowed this internationalisation (and by extension, homogenisation) of architectural practice to occur at a scale and at a level of intensity that simply was unfathomed before.

### **The Other Side of the Coin**

The past two decades clearly have brought about global levels of homogenisation in the built environment (and this applies to many other aspects of our lives) not seen before.

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<sup>6</sup> See Ellerbe Becket (2004) 'Rise of an Icon in Riyadh: HRH Prince Alwaleed's Kingdom Centre', *Ellerbe Becket Quarterly*, 2:1. The article is available online at [ellerbebecket.com/uploads/Rise\\_icon21.html#top](http://ellerbebecket.com/uploads/Rise_icon21.html#top).

The argument I would like to make in the last section of this essay, however, is that even at such exceptionally high levels of homogenisation, difference continues to trump similarity.

It is impossible to make quantitative assessments specifying how much of the built environment in different parts of the world today is being determined by the various global homogenising forces mentioned above in comparison to more localised factors. Nonetheless, a cursory observation of cities in various countries being exposed to the forces of homogenisation shows that these forces merely provide one set of factors within a multiplicity of forces defining the evolution of the built environment. In fact, such a multiplicity of forces creates conditions that are in opposition to homogeneity. These include the forces of what has been identified as 'glocalisation', which bring together global and local forces into new and interesting combinations, often adapting global influences to local needs.<sup>7</sup> More often, however, this multiplicity of local and global forces acts as a source of fragmentation, and in some cases even chaos, as they pull the evolution of the built environment apart, often in opposing directions.

It also should be added that we are in the midst of numerous developments that in fact threaten to curtail the effects of the ongoing forces of homogenisation. It is of course very difficult to make any conclusive remarks regarding such an issue considering that we are dealing with ongoing developments that have been taking place for only about twenty years, which is a miniscule timeframe within the context of long-term historical evolution. Moreover, any development can easily take on sudden and unexpected reversals. One example is the almost fivefold increase and decrease in the price of oil that has taken place this decade, over the timeframe of only the last five years, which has had a destabilising impact on construction activity throughout the world. Nonetheless, it is useful for the purposes of this study to briefly go over relevant current political, cultural as well as socio-economic trends taking place today.

### **The end of American hegemony?**

Let us begin with the forces of Americanisation discussed above. What may be described as an international infatuation with the United States' economic, political and technological accomplishments seems to have peaked at the end of the 1990s. In contrast, these sentiments took a nosedive with the new millennium. This primarily has been a result of the country's reaction to the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on its soil, best summarised by former United States president George Bush's declaration to the world that 'either

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<sup>7</sup> The term 'glocalisation' was popularised by sociologist Roland Robertson. For more information on this term, see John Eade, 'Introduction', in John Eade (ed.) (1997), *Living the Global City: Globalisation as Local Process*. London: Routledge, pp. 1–19. I would like to thank Majd Musa for bringing this source to my attention and also for her general feedback regarding this essay.

you are with us, or you are with the terrorists'.<sup>8</sup> Following the attacks, the United States government initiated its 'Global War on Terrorism' and took on a series of unilateral and overly-aggressive actions on the global level that managed to turn widespread international sympathy towards the United States into apathy, and, in many cases, outright resentment. Many felt that the United States government used this war to justify aggression, human rights abuses, and other violations of international law. Accordingly, while it may be said that the United States attempted, very often successfully, to positively engage the world as its sole superpower during the 1990s, the world experienced a different, darker and more ominous side of American power during the first decade of the new millennium.

In addition, the serious economic and financial setbacks affecting the American economy since 2008, and which to a great extent have been the result of unbridled greed and poor regulatory oversight, as well as a propensity to spend beyond individual and collective means, have further eroded the country's international standing. Add to this the spectacular economic growth of China to currently become the world's third largest economy, and the impressive economic growth taking place in India as well as in other countries such as Brazil. According to the International Monetary Fund, the size of China's economy in 2008 closely trailed that of Japan, the world's second largest, and was almost one third the size of the United States economy, the world's largest.<sup>9</sup> If China is able to maintain its robust levels of economic growth, which is a realistic assumption considering its status as an emerging economy with considerable room for growth, it is very likely that it will become the world's largest economy over the course of the next generation. While the world's major economic powers – primarily Japan and the countries of the European Union – have been willing to take a back seat to the United States since the end of the Second World War when it comes to global political leadership, this is not the case with China, which is gradually but surely playing a more assertive role in the international arena, as with its foreign aid programs, which often take an opposing position to the policies of the United States and its allies. It also is very probable that India at one point will follow suit. In addition, Russia clearly has aspirations to rebuild as much of the influence and might it used to enjoy during the days of the Soviet Union, and will do so to the extent that its economic fortunes will allow.

These various developments lead one to wonder whether the United States will be able to maintain its position of global primacy over the coming generation. Will a multi-polar world emerge in which the United States is only one of a number of major military, political and economic players, or will the United States be able to reinvent itself, as it had

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<sup>8</sup> From President George W. Bush's Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People, September 20, 2001. Available online at [georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010920-8.html](http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010920-8.html).

<sup>9</sup> See the International Monetary Fund, World Economic and Financial Surveys, [imf.org/external/pubs/ft/weo/2009/01/weodata/index.aspx](http://imf.org/external/pubs/ft/weo/2009/01/weodata/index.aspx).

done before (and is attempting to do now, as symbolised by the election as president of Barack Obama, whose father is a Kenyan Muslim and whose wife is an African-American), confirming its position of world leadership? The answers to these questions will have a profound impact on upcoming global political, cultural and economic developments.

## **Local Filters**

Another counterforce to the influences of homogenisation is that of local filters, which consist of various economic, cultural, social, political and technological forces that block out, modify or reconfigure outside influences.<sup>10</sup> In some cases, these filtering mechanisms function in a positive manner, showing openness to global forces and adapting them to local considerations. As mentioned above, the term 'glocalisation' has been used to describe such a process. Examples of such glocalisation within the context of the built environment in the Middle East include the work of architects such as Bernard Khoury of Lebanon and Sahel Al Hiyari of Jordan.<sup>11</sup> Both their educational and professional backgrounds show intimate links and openness to global architectural developments. At the same time, however, their architectural work in their respective countries has emphasised developing vocabularies that while being in sync with global developments, provide innovative and profound explorations of locally-prevalent materials and construction practices.

In many other cases, such filtering may not function smoothly, efficiently or optimally, but still can be very effective in transforming, limiting or even blocking out incoming influences, and is usually put in place by highly aggressive local pressure groups. In some cases, these filtering mechanisms work in a severe manner, as with the forces of religious or social extremism, which aim to block any external influences, and will aggressively and in some cases violently, go as far as attempting to rearrange existing cultural, social, economic and political systems to ensure extensive insulation from the outside world. The result under such circumstances may be referred to as an extreme case of local (in contrast to cross-border) homogenisation. In this context, I had mentioned earlier that homogenisation is directly related to the ease of movement of ideas, people, capital and goods. These prerequisites of course are easier to realise within national borders than across them, which is why homogenisation is much easier to achieve on the national than the international level. Under such circumstances, what under certain circumstances may be viewed as homogenising influences from abroad can function as agents of diversity in

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<sup>10</sup> I have explored elsewhere the issue of 'filtering' within the context of historical artistic exchange between the Islamic World and the West. See Mohammad al-Asad (2004) 'Encounters: A Preliminary Anatomy', *Gesta: International Center of Medieval Art*, 43:2, pp. 177–181.

<sup>11</sup> For more information about Bernard Khoury, see [www.bernardkhoury.com](http://www.bernardkhoury.com). For more information about Sahel Al Hiyari and his work, see Sahel Al Hiyari and Mohammad al-Asad (with an introduction by Alvaro Siza) (2005), *Sahel Al Hiyari Projects*. Amman: Center for the Study of the Built Environment (CSBE).

the manner they influence social, cultural, economic and political development in a given society, including the evolution of its built environment.

### **Concluding Remarks**

I will end this essay with a reference to the personal remarks I made at the beginning, concerning my own personal background moving regularly back and forth between Jordan and North America over a period of about four decades. It may be an issue of the glass being half-empty or the glass being half-full, but for me, ever since I first boarded a plane at the age of seven to travel from Amman to the United States, and throughout the dozens of trips I have made between these two worlds since then, it is the difference between them that continues to make the stronger impression on me. The fact that in both locations one can increasingly access the same internet sites, watch the same television programs, go to similar movie theatres, eat at the same fast-food restaurant chains and shop at similar malls, still remains far too little and far too superficial to make these two worlds, for better or worse, in any way similar.

There is much that is similar between human beings everywhere on the biological, emotional and overall cultural levels, but there is also much that is different. The forces of homogenisation have yet to eliminate such differences, let alone minimise them, and global similarities will have to reach incredibly high levels before one may begin to worry about the dangers of homogenisation. I would go as far as stating that homogeneity in certain doses is not in itself bad. People across the world need minimal levels of commonality to allow them to communicate more clearly, easily and effectively. Even the spread of the McDonald's fast-food chain, a primary symbol of consumer-based homogenisation, is not necessarily a negative development when viewed within the context of Thomas Friedman's 'Golden Arches Theory of Conflict Prevention', which states that no two countries with a McDonald's have gone into war with each other.<sup>12</sup> In fact, while we may think of cross-border homogeneity as being opposed to heterogeneity with its diversity and uniqueness, one may also think of what exists at the other end of the spectrum in terms of a rejection of 'the other' that is expressed through isolationism, jingoism, fanaticism and even racism rather than diversity. Under such circumstances, one may conclude that the world is not even close to having too much cross-border homogenisation.

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<sup>12</sup> See Alex MacGillivray (2006) *A Brief History of Globalisation*. London: Constable & Robinson, p. 180. In this context, it should be mentioned that through his writings as book author and journalist, Thomas Friedman has played a very important role in framing the discourse on globalisation (and by extension, related themes such as homogenisation) for the general educated public, and any discussion of the subject accordingly should directly or indirectly address his views. A good overview of these views is provided in his book, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*. New York: Anchor Books, 2000.

