Normative Urbanism: Between Convention and Invention

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In the development and urbanism in the Middle East, the question of "normativity" and the generic 'subject' becomes a complicated issue as problems of identity, tradition, and lifestyle are anything but lacking in contradiction in this evolving social context. For the occasion of the Holcim Conference, I shall present an urban plan for an expansion of the New Kuwait Sports Shooting Club in an attempt to illustrate the emerging cultural terrain on which the terms of public are being redefined. The plan calls for an ambitious development which includes a series of public programs – an arena, convention center, theater/cinema complex, convention hall, market and mall, and a spa, as well as some private (or domestic elements) including housing and a hotel complex. While the scale of the project operates at the level of urban design, the proposal offers an architectural interpretation that densifies and urbanizes the plot by way of a singular intervention, fashioned on the Mat typology, bringing the diversity of programs into strategic adjacencies while taking advantage of the transforming cultural trends and indicators to create an environment that underlines the loss of the normative, and even more so the generic subject.

For starters, Kuwait is a young nation by any comparison, and its history beyond nomadism really blooms in the 20th century. At the same time, its culture has affiliations with and has borrowed from the region –from the Saudi, the Iranians, among others—for centuries, and thus has much to draw from even if it evades conventional forms of authentication. But what does it mean to develop 300,000 square meters in one stroke, and moreover what does it mean when notions of phasing are compressed into the 3 years span, composed for 24 hour construction cycles? And how do we reflect on Kuwait City and its evolution as a modern city when there is so little history—at least in physical terms -- to build on? Indeed, Kuwait as we know it today, is a modern phenomenon, and little remains of the urbanism that characterizes its historic fabric. The tabula rasa takes on new meaning in its desert, and its transformative social core makes this tabula rasa fertile with possibilities of invention.

In Kuwait City, the recent developments reflect an increasing cultural debt to emerging typologies borrowed from Western models, —from malls and office towers to modern apartment buildings. Often, as in their western counterparts, these projects are developed with little regard to their urban context, resulting in very little cohesion in the city. Also, since most projects are conceived as programmatically segregated, it results in environments that are socially sterile –business districts being evacuated after work hours and residential projects without the ample services and social spaces required for an integrated life. At the same time, these environments are strangely received with a great deal of cultural and commercial success as they represent varying degrees of liberation from conventional associations with the Islamic city, its traditions, and its limitations. Still, even the new environments are anything but western; the malls are inhabited differently, for different purposes and maybe only compare to their occidental counterparts in form, as the process of social appropriation brings new meaning, associations, and traditions to a rather stable set of types.

With this in mind, we propose to examine an alliance --or a formal affinity-- between two types of architecture from which a third may be born. First, we have studied the typologies that must be invested in for a contemporary development; this entails modern construction techniques, health and safety parameters that are up to date, and state of the art technological amenities. From the other perspective, we have examined typologies that are culturally specific to the region as a way of invoking some sort of connection to the city, its history and its people. This connection, then, is not merely iconographic, but rather spatial, typological and programmatic—all as a way for forging a new connection between an emerging culture and some idea of its history. Insofar as architectural form has the ability to blend, to hybridize, or to conflate dissonant elements, the proposal also casts doubt that any architecture has the ability to over-determine its reception by its corresponding public, be they generic or specific. It is precisely in its autonomy that architecture thrives as both a formal and political instrument, and so we have invested in this hypothesis to radicalize the separation between the invention of form and the assumptions of its reception.