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Article

## ‘Globalizing the Local, Localizing the Global’: Writing Space in the Arab Gulf Region

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### Abstract

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Qatar are taking the lead in the urbanization boom that is drastically transforming the spatial fabric of the Arab Gulf region. Embedded in the ambitious urban development projects launched by the UAE and Qatar is an endeavour to ‘bring the world to the Arab Gulf region’. To this end, these two states are engaged in a process of collecting and borrowing antique objects and canonized artefacts, as well as reproducing and duplicating some internationally celebrated architectural sites and spaces. While some consider these projects to be ‘part of strategies to prepare for the post-oil era’, others hold that ‘Arab Gulf States aim to strengthen or ... creatively (re)construct identitarian patterns’.<sup>1</sup> It can be argued that Arab Gulf cities should be looked at as ‘political actors’ due to ‘the functions they fulfill as spatial command posts for globalized capitalism’.<sup>2</sup>

The production and organization of social space, in this sense, cannot be seen as a 'dead' or passive category with no influence over various dimensions of lived experience, including thought, politics and economy. Juxtaposing the UAE's and Qatar's urbanization projects with the nineteenth-century phenomenon of world exhibitions and fairs, this article takes the Louvre Abu Dhabi and Villaggio Mall as case studies to investigate the modalities of knowledge generated through processes of cultural and spatial (re)production and the impact of the latter on the construction of personhood and lived experience in the Arab Gulf region.

**Keywords:** the UAE; Qatar; Louvre Abu Dhabi; Villaggio; space; architectural signature; themed shopping mall; world-as-exhibition; spatial knowledge; Gulf Futurism

## Introduction

This article examines the spatial metamorphosis taking place in the Arab Gulf region, using the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Qatar as two exemplary cases. Taking ‘space’ as a category of analysis, the article attends to the cultural, political and economic implications embedded in the project of ‘globalizing the local and localizing the global’. This phrase – or rather motto – is taken from the Emirati magazine, *SHAWATI*, which is owned by the Cultural Programs and Heritage Festivals Committee in the UAE (see <https://www.shawati.ae>). The phrase reflects an aim to (re)produce copies of internationally renowned architectural sites and cultural institutions, as well as collecting and borrowing canonized artworks as a developmental strategy in which the UAE and Qatar are involved. After the two years I spent in Qatar to pursue a master’s degree in media and cultural studies (2017–2019), and the week of fieldwork I conducted in the UAE as part of this research project, the motto ‘globalizing the local and localizing the global’, made sense to me, as it captures the core of the phenomenon examined in this article.

The article is inspired by Timothy Mitchell’s idea of the ‘world-as-exhibition’, by which he refers to the politics of representation associated with the phenomenon of the nineteenth-century orientalist world fairs and great exhibitions, whose organizers constructed and exhibited copies of Eastern cities such as Cairo as an epitome of the exotic. The article reverses the equation by looking at this phenomenon not through sites and modes of ‘oriental’ cultural practice and tradition that are transported from the East to the West, as Mitchell brilliantly demonstrates in *Colonizing Egypt*.<sup>3</sup> Rather, the article investigates what was – particularly over the course of the past three decades or so in the Arab Gulf region – ‘transported’ or ‘replicated’ from the West and elsewhere to the East, beyond dichotomous thinking that bifurcates the world into West and East as opposite poles. By these terms – ‘transported’, ‘replicated’ and ‘reproduced’ – I do not mean a mere or mechanical act of producing an exact copy of such kinds of spaces. The terms are used to highlight the process of simulation at the heart of the UAE’s and Qatar’s urbanization projects. The article addresses two main questions. First, to what extent does this project of ‘globalizing the local and localizing the global’ undermine the potential of these countries to become active producers of meaning and culture, rather than remaining mere reproducers and consumers thereof? Second, in what ways do acts of collecting canonical artworks and ‘reproducing’ architectural sites consolidate the hegemonic Western aesthetic framework as a ‘universal’ referent against which non-Western artistic objects and cultural practices are defined? Since the wide range of architectural sites that reflect the UAE’s and Qatar’s aforementioned project exceed the scope of this article, the Louvre Abu Dhabi and Villaggio Mall are selected as the main case studies to illustrate the argument.

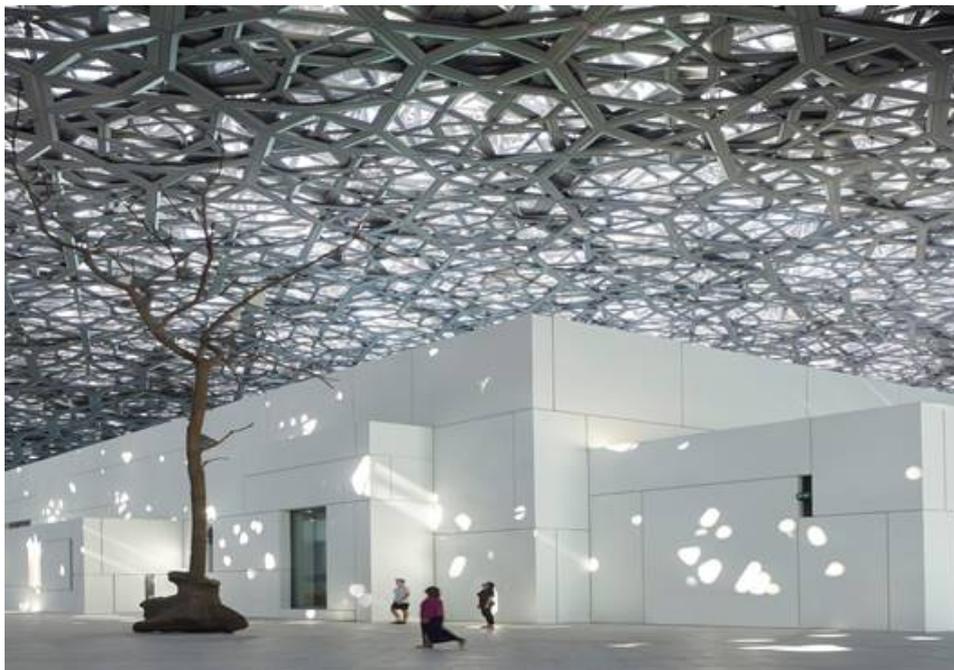
### **‘From One Louvre to Another’: Domesticating Canonized Artefacts and Appropriating ‘Architectural Signatures’**

In his oft-cited lecture, ‘Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias’ (1967), Michel Foucault describes the museum and the public library as ‘immobile spaces’ for accumulating and collecting artworks and other objects by way of containing different historical junctures, cultures, tastes and forms in a single space. Although Foucault’s reflections on ‘heterotopic spaces’ such as the museum, the library and the cemetery are undeveloped, the points he puts forward remain arguably insightful in this regard. For Foucault, behind museums and libraries is:

the idea of accumulating everything, of establishing a sort of general archive, the will to enclose in one place all times, all epochs, all forms, all tastes, the idea of constituting a place of all times that is itself outside of time and inaccessible to its ravage, the project of organizing in this way a sort of perpetual and indefinite accumulation of time in an immobile place, this whole idea belongs to our modernity.<sup>4</sup>

While Foucault looked at this phenomenon of establishing a general archive where all times and places are enclosed in places such as the museum and the library in the context of the West and its modernity, his insights also speak to the urbanization boom and the ‘collecting impulse’ of the UAE and Qatar. To be sure, and as Eilean Hooper-Greenhill explains, the contemporary museum might differ in its scope and functions from that of the fifteenth or nineteenth centuries, with the latter epoch being

the focus of Foucault's reflections. Compared to the Renaissance and nineteenth-century museums, the contemporary museum also 'acts [in many ways] as a microcosm of the world, as a universal sacred space where Man can rediscover his fragmented self'.<sup>5</sup> The Louvre Abu Dhabi (see Figure 1) stands as an excellent case in point that embodies these functions of the museum. As the administration of the museum states, the Louvre Abu Dhabi 'is a new cultural beacon, bringing different cultures together to shine fresh light on the shared stories of humanity'.<sup>6</sup> The critical eye, however, has to look beyond such catchy statements, as the establishment of these architectural sites, as well as the purchasing and collecting of artefacts and other objects, do not by themselves reveal their 'truth'. As Henri Lefebvre reminds us, 'Things and products that are measured, that is to say reduced to the common measure of money, do not speak the truth about themselves. On the contrary, it is in their nature as things and products to conceal that truth.'<sup>7</sup> It is the task of the cultural critic, then, to unpack the embedded dimensions involved in the arenas where aesthetics, time and space become commodified.



**Figure 1** Plaza, Louvre Abu Dhabi (Source: © Louvre Abu Dhabi, Photograph: Roland Halbe).

Foucault uses the notion of heterotopia to refer to 'places [that are] absolutely different from all the sites that they reflect and speak about'. One fundamental distinguishing feature between heterotopias and utopias is that, while the latter are 'sites with no place' ('imagined spaces' with no concrete referent), the former are real places whose location can be indicated in reality.<sup>8</sup> Heterotopias, in this sense, are in principle real places yet imagined, represented and loaded with utopic signs, meanings and discourses. Some scholars suggest that when Foucault was articulating his views on 'heterotopic spaces', he had in mind places such as the Musée du Louvre in Paris.<sup>9</sup> Originally, the Louvre was a prototype of the modern European museum to be followed by other European countries in the nineteenth century.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, Foucault's assertion that 'The museum and the library ... are proper to western culture of the nineteenth century'<sup>11</sup> resonates with the fact that the administration of the Louvre Abu Dhabi is strategically appropriating the 'signature' of the Louvre in Paris, together with France's cultural legacy and expertise in museology. Based on the collaboration agreement between France and the UAE, the France Museums Agency assists with a number of projects and tasks, ranging from 'Defining scientific and cultural programme[s]' to coordinating the loans from French collections and organizing temporary exhibitions. In line with the collaboration agreement, the exhibition entitled 'From One Louvre to Another', from 21 December 2017 to 7 April 2018, included a collection of 150 masterpieces from the palace, Château de Versailles, and the earliest collections from the Louvre in Paris.<sup>12</sup> This means that the UAE not

only benefits from the expertise of France in museology and the signature of the Louvre in Paris as an internationally renowned museum, it also appropriates the aesthetic and historical value of the works of art it borrows from established French museums and other cultural institutions. What is striking, however, is that the captivating sense of the Louvre Abu Dhabi as a building overshadows the canonized masterpieces that it contains. That is, the Louvre Abu Dhabi as a unique monument of architectural design itself has come to enjoy a captivating status that surpasses the aesthetic value of the exhibited canonized pieces of art that it houses.

Having visited the Louvre Abu Dhabi twice during the week of fieldwork I conducted in the UAE as part of this research project,<sup>13</sup> I noticed that most of the visitors to the museum are not as impressed by the exhibited works of art, but rather seem compelled by the masterfulness with which the museum is designed. This should remind us that ‘architecture is a field that, by the very nature of things, revolves around a world of seduction’.<sup>14</sup> To establish this ‘spatial seduction’, or rather this ‘virtual space of illusion’, the designer of the museum, Jean Nouvel, draws on cinematic grammar and the reflections of postmodern scholars such as Gilles Deleuze and Jean Baudrillard, among others.<sup>15</sup> Leaving aside for a moment the theoretical background that informs Nouvel’s work, his ‘signature of architecture’ – to use David Harvey’s terminology<sup>16</sup> – is being appropriated to bestow a mark of distinction upon the Louvre Abu Dhabi. Indeed, the Louvre Abu Dhabi can be said to derive its appeal from both an internal and an external source: the aesthetic value of the museum as a building and the excellent reputation of the architect who designed it. It follows that the building itself becomes a work of art whose aesthetic value exceeds the canonized artefacts that it contains in the galleries that constitute it.

Jean Baudrillard takes it that ‘The object is the symbol not of some external agency or value but first and foremost of the whole series of objects of which it is the (final) term. (This [is] in addition to symbolizing the person whose object it is.)’<sup>17</sup> In the case of the Louvre Abu Dhabi as an ‘object’,<sup>18</sup> the museum stands as a symbolized object which derives its value primarily from a celebrated ‘signature of architecture’, simultaneously consolidating the status of the designer. The ‘whole series of objects’ to which Baudrillard refers in this respect should be seen as a totality which involves the object, the ‘signature of architecture’, and the entire system that generates the aesthetic framework and economy of knowledge in which the UAE and Qatar are engaged through their cultural and developmental projects. Because this economy of knowledge transcends the spatial transformation of these two countries and the built environment in general,<sup>19</sup> it remains imperative to attend to the modalities of knowledge to which such an organization of space gives rise.

As far as one of Nouvel’s masterpieces is concerned, it should be remembered that ‘the mere fact that a particular object . . . belong[s] to a famous or powerful individual may confer value on it’.<sup>20</sup> It would also be useful to look at Nouvel’s philosophy of architecture and how he conceives of the relationship between architecture, time, space and lived experience. This is precisely because, as Lefebvre points out, ‘If there is a “logic of visualization” [as a constitutive element of spatiality], we need to understand how it is formed and applied.’<sup>21</sup> Discussing the relationship between architecture and perception with Baudrillard, Nouvel asserts that all of the buildings he has designed thus far revolve around one central element: ‘illusion’.<sup>22</sup> The idea of illusion or ‘virtual space of illusion’ – which is at the core of Nouvel’s architectural work – allows the architect to extend the viewer’s visual horizon. The eye in this context becomes the mediating agent between space/architecture and the viewer. In the words of Nouvel, ‘When I play with the concept of a virtual space, in the magician’s sense, it’s because space and architecture are things we become conscious of through our eyes.’<sup>23</sup>

Central to the idea of illusion in Nouvel’s philosophy of architecture is the component of light, which is the backbone of what Lefebvre calls ‘lived time’ and ‘temporalized space’. Along with a remarkable acquaintance with the Arab world (including its geography, history, culture and politics), light remains one of the potent components upon which Nouvel capitalizes in his work in the Arab Gulf region. Nouvel’s reliance on the element of light is quite evident in his architectural pieces in the UAE and Qatar – Doha Tower, Qatar National Museum and the Louvre Abu Dhabi are excellent cases in this regard. Architecture as understood by Nouvel, then, de-familiarizes space and lived experience in that the architectural site as an object or work of art generates desires and imaginaries whose referent might not necessarily exist in

'reality'. Following Maurice Rheims, Baudrillard maintains that 'For man, the object is a sort of insentient dog which accepts his blandishments and returns them after its own fashion, or rather which returns them like a mirror faithful not to real images but to images that are desired.'<sup>24</sup> It is the 'architectural bag of tricks' that – together with other means – enables the architect to create a 'virtual or mental space' and hence play with the senses of the viewer.<sup>25</sup>

Architects, in this sense, can be seen as 'choreographers of dynamic themes and situations'.<sup>26</sup> Yet the possibility of distinguishing between illusion and 'reality' in the realm of pleasure becomes at issue in this context.<sup>27</sup> It follows that the museum and other similar spaces broaden the gap between knowledge and/or aesthetics and the conception of lived experience. Driven by financial capacities and a zeal to construct the country as a global cultural hub based upon an urge to establish luxurious architectural sites, as well as to borrow and collect canonized artefacts, the authorities in the UAE do not seem to concern themselves with the modalities of knowledge they articulate. Yet these projects of urbanization tend to be motivated and assessed in pure economic and developmental terms. Above all, this enterprise of 'bringing the world to the Arab Gulf region' does not manifest itself exclusively in the public museum, but also stretches across the spatial realm of the shopping mall.

### **In the Themed Shopping Mall: 'Away-from-Home-at-Home'**

Gigantic shopping malls such as Villaggio Mall, Ibn Battuta Mall, Dubai Mall and Al Hazm Mall capture intriguing issues inherent in the phenomenon examined in this article. Although my analysis in this section focuses on Villaggio, these four shopping malls share several patterns and characteristics in terms of the logic through which they operate as sites of cultural and urban development.

A brief description of these shopping malls will highlight the characteristics they share as means of 'globalizing the local and localizing the global'. Launched in 2006, Villaggio serves as an entertainment lodestone for residents of Qatar, with an average of over fifty thousand visitors daily. With its Venetian-inspired archways, style and design, Villaggio is home to a number of highly expensive brands such as Christian Dior, Gucci, Louis Vuitton and Dolce & Gabbana. What is fascinating about Villaggio is that it represents a 'simulacrum of a simulacrum', in that it is a simulation of The Venetian Las Vegas hotel and casino, which, as Urry and Larsen explain, itself derives its theme from Venice, Italy.<sup>28</sup> Ibn Battuta Mall in Dubai was established as a commemoration and homage to the travel experiences and life of the Moroccan explorer, Ibn Battuta. The mall contains six courts, supplying spatial and cultural representations of India, China, Andalusia, Iran, Egypt and Tunisia. With its traditional architectural style and sky-like roof similar to that of Villaggio in Qatar, Ibn Battuta Mall is constructed as a gigantic souk which bears the 'spatial imprint' of other cultures, times and places. Despite its traditional architectural style aimed at retrieving and restoring an ancient spatiotemporal environment, Ibn Battuta Mall falls within the same category of modern shopping malls in that it houses the same heterogeneous body of brands and facilities found in this category of malls. As for Dubai Mall, its highly prestigious architectural design and its gigantic size – along with the luxury brands, cafes and restaurants – makes it one of the most internationally visited shopping spaces and tourist resorts in the Arab world. Dubai Mall does not derive its charm solely from the fact that it is adjacent to Burj Khalifa – another global tourist attraction – but also from its spectacular architectural design as a themed shopping mall, together with the wide and diverse range of commodities and facilities it offers to the visitor and/or shopper. In addition to these two malls in the UAE, the case of Al Hazm Mall in Qatar remains equally compelling. Designed as a Renaissance palace to provide visitors with a sense of being in Italian shopping arcades, this mall is a charming piece of architecture constructed from the finest materials from various parts of the world: Italian marble, stone from Palestine, mosaic from Greece and 800-year-old olive trees from Spain. Constructed in a fashion to attract visitors and shoppers deemed 'connoisseurs', Al Hazm's architectural design, and its Thasos marble and yellow Siena marble from Tuscany, Italy, are meant to reflect 'the sun and maintain the same temperature day and night [of] Thasos island in Greece'. A statement displayed in Al Hazm Mall – written by the CEO of Al Emadi Enterprises (the company that constructed the mall), Mohamed A.K. Al Emadi – reveals some key elements of the vision behind the establishment of the mall:

Every time I travel to Italy, I feel overwhelmed with the beauty of the architecture and [its] classical language that has a story to tell. My story with Al Hazm started when I was having dinner in one of the historical monuments in Milan. I was so captured by the detailed carvings that I got inspired to build an architectural masterpiece that would combine ‘classicism and Arabian hospitality’ in my beloved country Qatar.

As we can see, this statement remains consistent with the UAE’s and Qatar’s project of ‘globalizing the local and localizing the global’.

As key participants in the global economic system, the UAE and Qatar are massively involved in an ‘Active production of places with special qualities’, which ‘becomes an important stake in spatial competition between localities, cities, regions, and nations’.<sup>29</sup> With the advent of globalization and consumer culture, as a result of structural transformations brought about through different phases of capitalism,<sup>30</sup> the current processes of ‘diminishing spatial barriers give capitalists the power to exploit minute spatial differentiations to good effect’.<sup>31</sup> Space, then, becomes a potent category appropriated for a variety of purposes that encompass material and symbolic aspects of social life. While globalization has ‘de-territorialized’ geography as a result of the sheer flow of capital, people, ideas, images and information,<sup>32</sup> the symbolic elements that constitute social space and the framework of intelligibility of the human subject inhabiting space are in a state of ‘dialectic’.<sup>33</sup>

Serving as one of the constitutive elements of consumer culture, the themed shopping mall has come to acquire novel functions that transcend its structure as a ‘court of commodities’. As John Urry and Jonas Larsen explain, ‘Many shopping malls have now become major tourist attractions in their own right and represent exceptional de-differentiation through theming.’<sup>34</sup> To extend Urry and Larsen’s point, one can add that the themed shopping malls in the UAE and Qatar have transformed local inhabitants into ‘tourists’ in their own geographical locality – that is, Khaliji locals have become ‘away-from-home-at-home’, to reverse a phrase of Urry and Larsen.<sup>35</sup> It is in this sense that the visitor to such shopping malls embarks on an experience of being ‘mobile within immobility’, in that the visitor/shopper experiences ‘the Old World [or an elsewhere] for a day without actually having to go there’.<sup>36</sup> Theming remains one of the crucial features from which such architectural sites derive their impressiveness and their character of imaginary transporting or ‘virtual transport’. Put differently, the shopping mall – imbued with ‘Disneyfication’ effects – has come to act as a ‘travel machine’, in that it provides a sense of spatiotemporal mobility within immovability. Drawing on a plethora of architectural designs and styles borrowed from different cultures, traditions, geographies and historical eras, as well as containing various brands, tastes, facilities and commodities, the shopping mall attempts to encompass the entire world in a single immobile space.

Interestingly, the developers of Villaggio had in mind the objective of transporting the mall visitor in time and space through a set of ‘architectural tricks’, designs and pastiches. For instance, the management department of Villaggio states that it aims to make it ‘A place of shopping, entertainment and social interaction, where the décor transports [the shopper/visitor] to a world unlike [their] own, and where an unrivalled mix of shops, restaurants and recreation lets [the visitor] discover something new with every visit.’<sup>37</sup> The key phrase in this statement is that Villaggio is designed in a fashion ‘where the décor transports [the shopper/visitor] to a world unlike [their] own’. Indeed, Villaggio does more than transporting the visitor to a different world, in that it also blurs the boundaries between the ‘real’ and ‘unreal’, for it is a copy of an ‘imagined world’ which is constructed to serve as a representation of an ‘original’. Furthermore, the statement from the management department of Villaggio resonates with a significant statement from the company that constructed the mall, Business Trading Company, saying that those ‘*who have not visited Italy, have no worry because a piece of Italy can be found right on [their] doorstep!*’.<sup>38</sup> This statement draws our attention to the fact that the shopping mall has become tantamount to a vehicle made to transport mall visitors and shoppers through time and space. In this way, the shopping mall becomes a ‘glocal’ space – or rather, a ‘microcosm of the world’ – wherein the visitor is not only simultaneously at home and elsewhere, but also positioned between the ‘real’ and ‘unreal’ or ‘hyperreal’ – that is, more ‘real’ than ‘reality’ itself. The hyperreal – generated through various forms of simulation in a system of signs – is ‘real without origin or reality’, yet presented as a copy of an ‘original’.<sup>39</sup> In this way, the hyperreal blurs the boundaries between reality and representation as it masks its self-referentiality,

while promising to provide a representation of an origin or truth. As Baudrillard points out, ‘dissimulating ... leaves the principle of reality intact: the difference is always clear, it is simply masked, whereas simulation threatens the difference between the “true” and the “false”, the “real” and the “imaginary”’.<sup>40</sup> That is, while it is easy to identify the falsity of dissimulation in relation to reality or truth, the ‘precision of simulacra’ complicates the distinction between representation and reality. It follows that Villaggio has to be seen as a self-referential spatial representation with no relation to any ‘origin’; nor is it a ‘*piece of Italy*’ as the management department of the mall claims, but rather a reality in itself.

The logic through which Villaggio operates, and the spatiotemporal experience it engenders, also apply to Ibn Battuta Mall, Dubai Mall and Al Hazm Mall. Taken together, these malls are all involved in the same process of ‘abstracting space’ through signs, symbols, themes and pastiches that contribute to the construction of ‘imaginary spatialities’. Such an ‘exchange of signs which makes possible the construction of a pastiche of themes, each of which seems more real than the original’,<sup>41</sup> feeds the illusion of experiencing the entire world in one time and in a single place. In addition to providing a sense of ‘virtual transportation’ across time and space, these shopping malls further blur the lines between interiority and exteriority, or inside and outside, the mall and the street. As such, these themed shopping malls provide a space where innumerable desires are both constantly created and conveniently brought to the consumer, who is encouraged to imagine himself or herself in a ‘Babylon’ wherein an amalgamation of fragments of other times and ‘elsewhere(s)’ is contained. This ‘illusion of spatial and temporal mobility’<sup>42</sup> is facilitated through ‘the interweaving of simulacra in daily life’, which – in the case of these themed shopping malls – ‘brings together different worlds (of commodities) in the same space and time’.<sup>43</sup> What is at stake here are the modalities of knowledge, or the framework of intelligibility, generated through ‘spatiotemporal reproduction’. Mitchell refers to such processes of spatial and temporal reproduction as an ‘entire machinery of representation’, whereby ‘everything [is] collected and arranged to stand for something, to represent progress and history, ... everything set up, and the whole set-up always evoking somehow some larger truth’.<sup>44</sup> It follows that approaching the ambitious urbanization projects in the Arab Gulf region through pragmatic or aesthetic terms obfuscates fundamental issues embedded in these developmental models. As Mike Savage and Alan Warde suggest, a critical approach to the production of space ‘is not a matter of intellectually scrutinising the landscape: rather it is a matter of exploring the fantasy, wish-processes and dreams locked up in our perception of [space]’ and lived experience.<sup>45</sup>

### **Imaginary Spatialities, Spatial Knowledge and Gulf Futurism**

Addressing the element of affect produced through these themed shopping malls and architectural sites – or rather these ‘dream palaces’ – can assist us to acquire a thorough understanding of some critical issues inherent in the UAE’s and Qatar’s strategies of producing social space. Lefebvre pertinently reminds us that space has peculiar effects in that it ‘unleashes desire ... and presents [it] with a “transparency” which encourages it to surge forth in an attempt to lay claim to an apparently clear field’.<sup>46</sup> As such, the sensuous aspect of experiencing space – or what Urry terms ‘microspatiality’<sup>47</sup> – remains one of the key entry points to unpack the affective aspects of these spatial structures. It is, in other words, the sensation that the mall or museum visitor experiences while absorbed in these spaces, along with the spatial knowledge generated, which my analysis is concerned with in this section.

Anna Klingmann argues that ‘it is no longer the formal design of a building that determines its quality, but rather its powers of affecting and engaging users, emotionally, bodily and mentally. The key becomes what it does rather than what it is’.<sup>48</sup> Klingmann, however, overlooks the point that the effect of a built environment acquired through the element of the ‘gaze’ or visibility contributes a great deal to the emotional and spatial experience of the shopping mall and museum visitor. The reason for this is that space in general, as Chris Jenks explains, ‘has to be conceptualised in order to be experienced and understood, our “sites” are informed by the predisposed character of our “sight”’.<sup>49</sup> In this way, separating sensation from the physicality of space and ‘representational space’ – that ‘which its inhabitants have in their minds’<sup>50</sup> despite its inaccuracy – cannot result in an adequate understanding of social space and its effects on the human subject and lived experience.

Taking into account the specificity of the socio-historical context where the senses are shaped, Paul Rodaway maintains that 'The senses offer important media through which space and time is experienced and understood (made sense of).'<sup>51</sup> Rodaway goes so far as to assert that the senses are also spatial – or 'sensuous geographies', to use his terminology.<sup>52</sup> In *Sensuous Geographies* (1994), which explores the relationship between the senses and space, Rodaway presses the case that the senses constitute the access to lived experience.<sup>53</sup> The significance of Rodaway's contribution in this context derives from his focus on the spatiality of four senses (sight, smell, touch and hearing), and how these elements contribute to what he calls 'geographical experience' and 'spatial knowledge' at both the individual and social levels.<sup>54</sup> Significantly, although Rodaway underscores the potential of each of these senses in the formation of geographical knowledge, he does not overlook the collaborative way in which senses operate and the 'multisensual' character of spatial experience, nor does he neglect the hierarchical structure of the senses.<sup>55</sup> The sense of sight or visuality, for instance, arguably takes the lead when it comes to our experience and consumption of architecture or spatiality. For one thing, this is because the eye, more than other senses, 'objectifies and masters'; for another, it is because the 'visual sense enables people to take possession, not only of other people, but also of diverse environments'.<sup>56</sup> This sense of possession emerging through the act of seeing is of cardinal importance to the experience of the shopping mall. It is for the aforementioned reasons that the discussion of the relationship between sensation and spatial knowledge in the realms of the shopping mall and the museum remains crucial.

All four shopping malls mentioned in this article operate through the 'Disneyfication' effects they exercise upon the visitor, targeting the senses to achieve illusory sensation. As far as imaginary spatialities such as these themed shopping malls are concerned, the elements of the 'gaze' and imagination occupy a central position in processes of acquiring spatial knowledge. This is precisely because 'whenever there is illusion, the optical and visual plays an integral and integrative, active and passive, part in it. It fetishizes abstraction and imposes it as the norm'.<sup>57</sup> Apropos of the question of imagination, Arjun Appadurai asserts that 'The world we live in today is characterized by a new role for the imagination in social life', wherein 'the imaginary (*imaginaire*) [remains] a constructed landscape of collective aspiration'.<sup>58</sup> The imagination – including its 'sisters', the image, the imagined and the imaginary – has become a constitutive element of the current global order.<sup>59</sup>

The work of the architects and designers of such imaginary spatialities does not only reflect an awareness of the sensuous effects they aim to achieve; it also indicates a solid understanding of the philosophical and sociological debates on spatiality. Nouvel's case is exemplary in this regard, as in his interview with Baudrillard – *The Singular Objects of Architecture* (2002) – he demonstrates a complex understanding of the production of space. Furthermore, using the elements of design and other 'tricks of architecture', architects and designers participate in the construction of hyperreality and the illusion of experiencing an elsewhere while in these spectacular spatialities. As for mall visitors, they obtain both an 'ecstasy of looking' and a sense of 'reality' acquired through 'mobile shifting gaze' in these architectural 'imaginary worlds'. In effect, the visitor to the mall becomes 'a consumer of experiences [who] seeks out the stimuli and aesthetic sensations of urban spaces, enjoying the freedom of mingling in the crowd and mingling with the world of goods on display'.<sup>60</sup> With regard to the act of shopping, it 'is not just about purchasing goods; goods must be understood as symbols containing imagistic and lifestyle associations which relate to both desire and assumed, or anticipatory, status'.<sup>61</sup> Above all, the urban development projects of the UAE and Qatar – of which the shopping mall stands as a vital component – should not be investigated solely with respect to the consumer, but should rather be probed in light of these countries' enterprise of nation building.

The UAE's and Qatar's enterprises of creating pastiches based on globally celebrated monuments and architectural sites does not diverge in principle from nineteenth-century orientalist world exhibitions. The main difference between the two projects, however, is that, while the French and British colonial powers, for instance, constructed replicas of the East in their world exhibitions to facilitate their colonial enterprise by depicting the 'orient' as an ahistorical and exotic space in a state of nature that awaits to be civilized by the West, the UAE and Qatar are now reversing the equation by bringing the West to the Arab Gulf region through acts of 'spatiotemporal reproduction'. Mitchell's *Colonizing Egypt* –

especially the chapter 'Egypt at the Exhibition' – rigorously explicates European colonial powers' and orientalist's impulse of constructing replicas of the East to articulate a narrative meant to justify their colonial economic interests. In a World Exhibition of Egypt organized in Paris in 1889, for instance, the organizers of the exhibition did their utmost to produce an exact copy of Rue du Caire (Cairo Street).<sup>62</sup> Keen to construct a precise depiction of Egypt as an exotic place, or rather as a bazaar, the French organizers not only 'imported from Cairo fifty Egyptian donkeys together with their drivers and the requisite number of grooms, ferries, and saddle-makers', they even painted the buildings of the street in dirt, with Frenchmen dressed as 'orientals' selling perfumes, pastries and turbushes.<sup>63</sup> Such 'festival[s] of representation' are meant – among other aims – to train the 'European gaze' and to provide a knowledge of the world outside the exhibition.<sup>64</sup> Interestingly, the realism with which these models – or, localized elsewhere(s) – were constructed astonished the visitor to these exhibitions.<sup>65</sup> In other words, despite the preserved distinction between these 'theatrical events' and the 'reality' outside, 'it [is] not always easy to tell where the exhibition end[s] and the world itself beg[ins]'.<sup>66</sup> It bears repeating that space, and its representations in this context, becomes a potent instrument through which an international struggle over meaning and capital is played out. As Harvey pertinently points out: 'The image of places and spaces becomes as open to production and ephemeral use as any other.'<sup>67</sup> Yet these sorts of images or spatial representations can hardly be expected to unpack 'errors concerning space', precisely because 'Where there is error or illusion, the image is more likely to secrete it and reinforce it than to reveal it.'<sup>68</sup> What is at stake here are the modalities of knowledge or forms of meaning generated through the production of space in general and processes of replicating or reproducing an elsewhere in particular – the content of which is often taken for granted as an unquestionable maxim. Harvey maintains that the transformation that has occurred in our experience of time and space, together with the sheer flow of capital, 'has formed a distinctive material basis for the rise of distinctive systems of interpretation and representation'.<sup>69</sup>

Furthermore, juxtaposing orientalist world exhibitions and fairs with the UAE's and Qatar's projects of 'globalizing the local and localizing the global', it becomes evident that these acts of importing and replicating an elsewhere occupy a central position in the construction of cultural and political narratives. Just as European orientalist world fairs of the nineteenth century attempted to construct social life as what Mitchell terms the 'world as an image' – or, following Martin Heidegger, the 'world-as-exhibition'<sup>70</sup> – the UAE and Qatar are endeavouring to establish their countries as a permanent global exhibition. The idea of the 'world-as-exhibition' does not mean an exhibition of the world, but rather the 'world conceived and grasped as though it were an exhibition'.<sup>71</sup> It should be noted that the emergence of the museum and shopping mall is an extension of world exhibitions and fairs, each of which contributes to the creation of 'an effect of reality' and the establishment of a 'representational order'.<sup>72</sup> The inextricable link between the exhibition, the museum and the shopping mall is grounded on the economic and thought system that informs colonialism. As Mitchell explains: 'the age of exhibition was necessarily the colonial age, the age of world economy and global power in which we live, since what was to be rendered as exhibit was reality, the world itself'.<sup>73</sup> This is not to assert that reality or truth does not exist, but rather to draw attention to the effects of such modes of representation and production of space on the conception of lived experience. Within this 'representational order', 'Everything [is] set up before one as though it were the model or picture of something. Everything [is] arranged before an observing subject into a system of signification . . . , declaring itself to be the signifier of a signified.'<sup>74</sup> As such, while seeing becomes central to knowing, fetishizing an 'origin' remains crucial to the project of spatial duplication inaugurated by European colonial powers and currently picked up by Arab Gulf counties. However, while Western colonial powers and orientalist have been discursively and imaginatively constructing the East and its inhabitants as 'uncivilized' to justify their exploitative colonial programmes, the UAE and Qatar seem indifferent to the political dimension inherent in their developmental project of 'globalizing the local and localizing the global', which celebrates the Western epistemological and aesthetic framework as the prototype that other cultures have to follow. Importantly, the principle of appropriation that informs the UAE's and Qatar's developmental project cannot be seen as a form of resistance, in that the political question remains secondary in the view of those who fostered this project.

With the abundant resources of oil, and the establishment of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) in 1960, Arab Gulf States could gain an influential political status in the region, as well as a potent position on the world stage of trade and finance.<sup>75</sup> Yet the very same financial capacities have made these states central actors in a global system with an increasingly boundless ‘commodifying machine’. The project of ‘globalizing the local and localizing the global’ – that is, purchasing and borrowing canonized artworks, as well as replicating internationally renowned architectural sites – encourages a consumerist local culture which has already given birth to a Khaliji individual who adopts an ontological motto that reads, as Wippel, Bromber and Krawietz wittily put it with reference to René Descartes, ‘I shop therefore I am.’<sup>76</sup>

At the heart of this developmental project, which is meant to provide an economic alternative to the post-oil period, is a peculiar notion of the future. Such a future is not an aspired project that draws its substance from a local cultural trajectory and dynamism, but rather ‘was already prescribed, premediated and integrated as a temporal infrastructure’.<sup>77</sup> This is what Fatima Al Qadiri and Sophia Al-Maria term ‘Gulf Futurism’ to describe the rapid change in architecture, urban life and popular culture in the Arab Gulf region. For Al Qadiri and Al-Maria, two artists from the Gulf region, ‘the Arabian Gulf has given birth to a very particular brand of futurism. It is a phenomenon marked by a deranged optimism about the sustainability of both oil reserves and late capitalism.’<sup>78</sup> This type of futurism shares several features with early twentieth-century Euro-futurism and mid-twentieth-century American retro-futurism.<sup>79</sup> The latter refers to a capitalist social context characterized by ‘the isolation of individuals via technology’ and ‘the corrosive elements of consumerism on the soul and industry on the earth’.<sup>80</sup> To put it simply, the futuristic vision embraced by the UAE and Qatar is an extension of the European and American futurisms – that is, a derivative version installed in a different historical, political and cultural context.

The UAE’s and Qatar’s future vision, however, should be understood in light of a developmental trend that is becoming increasingly widespread in the Arab Gulf region. Looked at within the whole landscape, the UAE and Qatar can be seen as post-colonial nations striving to recover an ‘already cancelled future’ and seeking regional and international visibility.<sup>81</sup> Yet, although the UAE and Qatari official discourse claims to articulate an original/autonomous vision that corresponds with its local aspirations and specificities, the model of future they aspire to fulfil does not go beyond the confines of the global capitalist system characterized by consumerism. As Jussi Parikka maintains, Arabian Gulf States, with their model of futurism, do ‘not have a future to aspire towards (a people-to-come), but a future that was already prescribed, premediated and integrated as a temporal infrastructure: it feels less of an emancipatory movement than the timely framing of a geopolitical aesthetic’.<sup>82</sup> This is precisely what distinguishes Gulf Futurism from Afrofuturism, which is characterized by its vehement critique of capitalism and Western epistemological and aesthetic hegemony – a form of counter-narrative of colonial modernity and consumerism.<sup>83</sup> The UAE’s and Qatar’s mode of futurism is – in the words of Parikka – a variant of an ‘existing nexus of consumerism, a rewired exoticising Orientalism of technological . . . East without a utopian potential’.<sup>84</sup>

Two fundamental elements come to the forefront concerning the ways in which these countries produce their social space: that this urban transformation constitutes a set of modalities of knowledge production and that this has a direct and profound influence on what Mitchell calls ‘new forms of personhood’.<sup>85</sup> Once we take into consideration these newly independent nations’ historical experience, and the pervasive colonial legacy with which they are confronted, addressing these two issues becomes arguably imperative. The managers and investors of urban development projects such as these themed shopping malls and museums, however, are seemingly indifferent to questions of decolonizing the mind and/or culture. Rather, the economic aspect of their enterprises remains their main concern. Yet it should be remembered that the principles of ‘collage’ and simulation – upon which the themed shopping malls discussed in this article are grounded – extend far beyond the act of shopping or consumption, for they raise pressing questions about the subject position of these two freshly independent countries as producers of knowledge and culture, at both local and international levels. More to the point, the effects engendered by such imaginary spatialities call attention to the sense of ‘alienation’ that is inadvertently being spread among the local inhabitants of these post-colonial societies, whereby key questions about ‘decolonizing

culture' – and, indeed, architecture – are sidelined. Such a cultural and urban development project, which centres on the motto of 'globalizing the local and localizing the global', impedes these countries' attempts to foster an autonomous cultural and aesthetic signature, as it is grounded upon simulation, which in this case not only threatens 'the difference between the "real" and the "imaginary"',<sup>86</sup> but also consolidates the hegemony of a thought and aesthetic system that claims supremacy and universalism. Writing space cannot be stripped of its political dimension, nor can it be assessed solely in pragmatic and/or aesthetic terms. Instead, it should be examined as a multidimensional totality within a world order characterized by asymmetrical power relations.

## **Conclusion**

The UAE's and Qatar's urban transformation can be seen as a key component of their ambitious developmental strategies designed to foster economic alternatives to cope with the post-oil era. Indeed, it would be erroneous to argue that the signs and symbols bestowed upon architectural sites and other spaces are decoded or consumed by people in the same manner. Meaning – whether produced through spatiality, visuality or otherwise – is always open to numerous heterogeneous readings and interpretations.<sup>87</sup> From an agency-based perspective, Appadurai would have us believe that cultural and spatiotemporal reproduction undergoes a process of 'indigenization' whereby the global becomes conspicuous and localized. Contra the arguments about Americanization and cultural homogenization that dominate much of the discussion and debate about globalization, Appadurai contends that the modes of living, products and commodities – including architecture – produced in dominant metropolises and brought to other localities do not thoroughly erase the specificities of the receiving culture and its urban fabric.<sup>88</sup> In a similar vein, in her study of the culture of shopping malls in Egypt, Abaza maintains that the Western model of 'chic shopping malls' cannot be said to 'Americanize' the Egyptian shopper's modes of consumption, as these shopping malls are rather 'Egyptianized'.<sup>89</sup> Likewise, Lefebvre argues that 'No space disappears in the course of growth and development: the worldwide does not abolish the local'.<sup>90</sup> Seen through this premise, the UAE's and Qatar's projects of 'globalizing the local and localizing the global' can be read as a subversive act where well-established architectural signatures, cultural expertise and urbanization models of hegemonic powers are strategically appropriated. However, while it remains debatable to claim that processes of importing and reproducing other spaces and other times through acts of theming and/or spatial reproduction absorb or erase 'local "semiotics"', to use Urry and Larsen's expression,<sup>91</sup> these acts reflect and, ironically, maintain the hold of a dominant aesthetic and epistemological framework that forms the foundation of the current unbalanced global order.

Yet the extent to which 'indigenization' diminishes the effects of spatiotemporal reproduction on people's sense of time and space remains debatable. It bears repeating that being in such 'virtual spaces of illusion'<sup>92</sup> poses the challenge of distinguishing between these embodied imaginary spatialities and the world/reality outside this 'theatrical mise-en-scène'.<sup>93</sup> In effect, our sense of time – the latter being the backbone of lived experience, as Lefebvre insists – 'is no longer visible to us, no longer intelligible',<sup>94</sup> for it is already blurred and exhausted. What this intervention suggests is an investment in the cultivation of a 'cultural capital' that critically draws its material of innovation and creativity from both local and global sources, without nurturing attitudes of assimilation or mimicry. It should particularly be stressed that Arab Gulf States ought to unlearn the idea that hegemonic Western models of modernization are 'universal' prototypes representing the only path towards social development, and hence that they should be emulated or 'reproduced'. The production of space is not an apolitical aesthetic or developmental practice. It is, on the contrary, a potent process of articulating modalities of knowledge informed by a sense of time and space that has direct and profound impact on how people make sense of themselves and the world around them.

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### Declarations and Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests with this work.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Wippel, Bromber and Krawietz, *Under Construction*, 2.
- <sup>2</sup> Brenner and Keil, 2006, 9, cited in Ljungkvist, *The Global City 2.0*, 2.
- <sup>3</sup> Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt*.
- <sup>4</sup> Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces', 7.
- <sup>5</sup> Hooper-Greenhill, 'The Space of the Museum', 58.
- <sup>6</sup> Louvre Abu Dhabi, 'Our Story'.
- <sup>7</sup> Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 80.
- <sup>8</sup> Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces', 3–4.
- <sup>9</sup> See Hetherington, 'Foucault, the Museum and the Diagram'.
- <sup>10</sup> See Hooper-Greenhill, 'The Space of the Museum'.
- <sup>11</sup> See Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces', 7.
- <sup>12</sup> For further information on the collaboration agreement between France and the administration of the Louvre Abu Dhabi, see Louvre Abu Dhabi, 'Our Partners'.
- <sup>13</sup> The ethnographically informed methodology deployed in the fieldwork part of this research project was conducted principally to acquire a first-hand knowledge of these architectural sites both in the UAE and Qatar, rather than relying on computer-generated images and other visual representations of these spaces.
- <sup>14</sup> For an illuminating discussion on architecture and perception, see the interview between Jean Baudrillard and Jean Nouvel, *The Singular Objects of Architecture*, especially page 5.
- <sup>15</sup> Baudrillard and Nouvel, *The Singular Objects of Architecture*, 6.
- <sup>16</sup> Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*.
- <sup>17</sup> Baudrillard, *The System of Objects*, 99.
- <sup>18</sup> For Baudrillard, an object is 'anything which is the cause or subject of a passion; figuratively – and par excellence – the loved object' (Baudrillard, *The System of Objects*, 91).
- <sup>19</sup> Baudrillard and Nouvel, *The Singular Objects of Architecture*, 4.
- <sup>20</sup> Baudrillard, *The System of Objects*, 8.
- <sup>21</sup> Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 98.
- <sup>22</sup> Baudrillard and Nouvel, *The Singular Objects of Architecture*, 6.
- <sup>23</sup> Baudrillard and Nouvel, *The Singular Objects of Architecture*, 7–8.
- <sup>24</sup> Baudrillard, *The System of Objects*, 95.
- <sup>25</sup> Baudrillard and Nouvel, *The Singular Objects of Architecture*, 8.
- <sup>26</sup> This phrase is borrowed from Anna Klingmann, cited in Urry and Larsen, *The Tourist Gaze 0.3*, 122.
- <sup>27</sup> Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 81.
- <sup>28</sup> Urry and Larsen, *The Tourist Gaze 0.3*, 121.
- <sup>29</sup> Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, 295.
- <sup>30</sup> See Jameson, *Postmodernism*.
- <sup>31</sup> Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, 294.
- <sup>32</sup> See Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*.
- <sup>33</sup> Soja, *Seeking Spatial Justice*, 89, terms this characteristic of dialectic between lived experience and space 'socio-spatial dialectic', whereby the social and the spatial co-constitute and mutually influence each other.
- <sup>34</sup> Urry and Larsen, *The Tourist Gaze 0.3*, 129.
- <sup>35</sup> Urry and Larsen, *The Tourist Gaze 0.3*, 127.
- <sup>36</sup> Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, 300.
- <sup>37</sup> See Villaggio, 'About Villaggio Mall'.
- <sup>38</sup> See Business Trading Company, 'Property Development' (emphasis added).
- <sup>39</sup> Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 1–2.
- <sup>40</sup> Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 3.
- <sup>41</sup> Urry, 'City Life and the Senses', 129.
- <sup>42</sup> See Friedberg, *Window Shopping*, 147. See also Featherstone, 'The Flâneur, the City', 919.
- <sup>43</sup> Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, 300.
- <sup>44</sup> Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt*, 6. See also Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, 299, who takes it that the transformation that has occurred in our experience of time and space, together with the sheer flow of capital 'has formed a distinctive material basis for the rise of distinctive systems of interpretation and representation'.

- <sup>45</sup>Savage and Warde, *Urban Sociology, Capitalism and Modernity*, 141.
- <sup>46</sup>Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 97.
- <sup>47</sup>Urry, 'City Life and the Senses', 355.
- <sup>48</sup>Klingmann, cited in Urry and Larsen, *The Tourist Gaze 0.3*, 122.
- <sup>49</sup>Jenks, 'Watching Your Step', 27.
- <sup>50</sup>Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 93.
- <sup>51</sup>Rodaway, *Sensuous Geographies*, 37.
- <sup>52</sup>Rodaway, *Sensuous Geographies*, 37.
- <sup>53</sup>Rodaway, *Sensuous Geographies*, 6.
- <sup>54</sup>Rodaway, *Sensuous Geographies*, 9.
- <sup>55</sup>Rodaway, *Sensuous Geographies*, 36.
- <sup>56</sup>Urry, 'City Life and the Senses', 349.
- <sup>57</sup>Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 97.
- <sup>58</sup>Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, 31.
- <sup>59</sup>Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, 31.
- <sup>60</sup>Falk and Campbell, cited in Featherstone, 'The Flâneur, the City', 916.
- <sup>61</sup>Featherstone, 'The Flâneur, the City', 917.
- <sup>62</sup>Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt*, 1.
- <sup>63</sup>Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt*, 1.
- <sup>64</sup>Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt*, 12.
- <sup>65</sup>Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt*, 7.
- <sup>66</sup>Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt*, 9.
- <sup>67</sup>Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, 293.
- <sup>68</sup>Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 96.
- <sup>69</sup>Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, 299.
- <sup>70</sup>Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt*, xiv–6.
- <sup>71</sup>Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt*, 13.
- <sup>72</sup>Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt*, 11–12.
- <sup>73</sup>Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt*, 13.
- <sup>74</sup>Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt*, 12–13.
- <sup>75</sup>Peterson, 'The Age of Imperialism', 149.
- <sup>76</sup>Wippel, Bromber and Krawietz, *Under Construction*, 10.
- <sup>77</sup>Parikka, 'Middle East and Other Futurisms', 7.
- <sup>78</sup>Al Qadiri and Al-Maria, 'Gulf Futurism'.
- <sup>79</sup>Al Qadiri and Al-Maria, 'Gulf Futurism'; Parikka, 'Middle East and Other Futurisms', 7.
- <sup>80</sup>Al Qadiri and Al-Maria, 'Gulf Futurism'.
- <sup>81</sup>Al Qadiri and Al-Maria, 'Gulf Futurism'.
- <sup>82</sup>Parikka, 'Middle East and Other Futurisms', 7, drawing on Zhang, 2017.
- <sup>83</sup>Parikka, 'Middle East and Other Futurisms', 5.
- <sup>84</sup>Parikka, 'Middle East and Other Futurisms', 7.
- <sup>85</sup>Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt*, ix.
- <sup>86</sup>Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 3.
- <sup>87</sup>See Hall, 'Encoding/Decoding'.
- <sup>88</sup>Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, 31–2.
- <sup>89</sup>Abaza, 'Shopping Malls, Consumer Culture', 114.
- <sup>90</sup>Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 86.
- <sup>91</sup>Urry and Larsen, *The Tourist Gaze 0.3*, 130.
- <sup>92</sup>Baudrillard and Nouvel, *The Singular Objects of Architecture*, 6.
- <sup>93</sup>Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 95.
- <sup>94</sup>Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 95.

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