

# Why Arab Cities Matter ... 1



## Cities, Memory, and the Arab Future

Arab cities are more than skylines and statistics; they are shaped by memory, rupture, hope, and reinvention. They contain the turbulence of histories that were never linear, the aspirations of generations that built, rebuilt, and sometimes abandoned their worlds, and the intimate geographies of people whose everyday lives rarely appear in the celebrated narratives of architecture and urbanism. As Benjamin reminds us in *Goat Days*, 'All the lives we've never experienced are just stories for us' – yet these stories matter profoundly, especially in a region where the boundaries between experience and erasure are often perilously thin. And as the Bahrain Pavilion declared at the 2014 Venice Biennale, 'It was more of an incident rather than modernity', a phrase that captures the dissonant, often improvised, always unstable nature of the region's urban transformation – an evolution shaped as much by disruption as by design (in Arabic incident and modernity are phonetically similar).



*Cairo, 1994: across from the Abu el Ela Bridge with National Bank of Egypt in the background.*

Today, Arab cities stand at a crossroads. They face accelerating pressures: dramatic population growth, intensifying climate stress, economic volatility, expanding migrant populations, and the deep, lingering legacies of colonial planning systems that were never intended to create inclusive or resilient urban life. These pressures are not new, but they have become sharper, more visible, and more consequential. To understand where Arab

cities might go, we must first understand how they arrived at this moment – not through a sudden break, but through a long, intertwined history of encounters with modernity.

That history reveals a pattern far more complex than triumph or decline. Across the region – from Cairo’s vanishing downtown arcades to Kuwait’s early experiments with state-led housing, from Beirut’s fractured reconstruction to Doha’s gleaming megaprojects – cities did not simply absorb imported models. They negotiated them, resisted them, reinterpreted them, sometimes violently rejected them, and at other times embraced them with remarkable ambition. The results are cities full of contradictions: historic cores erased then nostalgically mourned; futuristic masterplans that overshadow the lives of the labouring majority; infrastructural systems that gleam on the surface yet falter beneath it; and neighbourhoods where resilience emerges not from design, but from human improvisation.

Understanding this longer trajectory makes it clear that today’s urban dilemmas – exclusionary megaprojects, the erasure of older neighbourhoods, the fragility of infrastructure, the marginalization of local expertise – did not



*A group of South Asian migrants across from the Qatar National Museum designed by Jean Nouvel, 2024.*

appear overnight. They are the cumulative effect of decades of decisions shaped by geopolitics, oil economies, postcolonial aspirations, and global architectural fashions. In tracing these histories, one begins to see not just the failures but also the remarkable creativity, adaptation, and vision that have always existed beneath the region's surfaces. Equally urgent is the need to rethink the place of Arab cities in global urban and architectural discourse. For too long, these cities have been cast as peripheral imitators – consumers rather than producers of modernity. Yet the region's modern experiments were often original, bold, and intellectually generative. Local architects and planners developed their own interpretations of international styles; governments launched ambitious campaigns to house, educate, and mobilize their populations; communities transformed standardized housing into living, evolving environments; and migrants – millions of them – built entire districts through informal labour, memory, and resilience.

To foreground these voices is to recover an overlooked archive of ideas and practices that challenge the conventional story of modernism. Rather than treating Arab cities as deviations from a normative European model, we can begin to see them as laboratories that reveal the full spectrum of modernity's possibilities and limits. They show how global ideas were refracted through local climates, materials, rituals, and political realities. They show how urban identities were formed not by abandoning tradition, but by remaking it. And they show how modernity, far from being a singular project, was always a field of negotiation – sometimes harmonious, often fraught, continually reshaped by human agency. The stakes of this rethinking extend far beyond the Arab world. In many ways, Arab cities are compressed versions of global urban challenges. Their transformations, unfolding over mere decades rather than centuries, provide a vivid, accelerated view of the tensions that define city-making today: innovation versus identity, growth versus equity, ambition versus ecological limits. What happens in these cities is not an isolated regional phenomenon; it is a concentrated expression of the dilemmas confronting cities everywhere.

The region's experience also offers a lesson for a world increasingly dominated by standardized templates for development. Imported plans and globalized architectural languages – no matter how sleek – cannot substitute for the intricate, slow-forming relationships between communities, cultures, and space. Cities that ignore their past do not become modern; they simply become rootless. Conversely, cities that engage deeply with their histories – however fractured – gain the ability to shape futures that feel meaningful

rather than imposed. Ultimately, the story of Arab cities is one of continual reimagining. It is a story told through ambitious state-led visions and the quiet endurance of informal neighbourhoods; through architectural experimentation



and the lived creativity of ordinary residents; through the erasures that modernization has imposed and the memories that refuse to disappear. Behind every skyline lie innumerable stories – of belonging, displacement, resilience, and the fragile art of making a home in places that are constantly in motion.

To look closely at these cities is to confront the realities of the present and the possibilities of the future. It is to recognize that the struggles unfolding across



*Cairo, 2024: The (New) Administrative Capital;  
Saudi Arabia, 2025: The Buraydah Watertower, Buraydah, Saudi Arabia.*

the Arab world – around climate, migration, identity, justice, and memory – are struggles that will increasingly define urban life everywhere. And it is to see, perhaps more clearly than before, that meaningful urban futures emerge not from grand narratives, but from the human stories embedded in the streets, courtyards, waterfronts, neighbourhoods, and voices that shape the life of a city. The next two blogs in this series will bring these themes into focus – first by tracing how they unfold in the dense, historic urban centres of the Arab world, and then by turning to the new gleaming metropolises of the Arabian Peninsula, where ambition, spectacle, and reinvention converge at unprecedented speed. Together, they reveal the full spectrum of what it means to imagine, build, and inhabit an Arab modernity.



*Informal food vendors in front of the Maspero Development, Cairo, 2023.*

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