
January 2016

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Recommended Citation

Nugali, Salwa (2016). Multi-Architecture in Saudi Arabia: Representing the History of Women. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 17(1), 76-85.

Available at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol17/iss1/6>

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Multi-Architecture in Saudi Arabia: Representing the History of Women

By Salwa Nugali¹

Abstract

The purpose of this research project is to put into context the role of women in Saudi Arabia through reading of symbols and signs of the physical shape of the first sky scrapers: AlMamlakah (Kingdom) and AlFaisalia. The paper analyses perceptions of modern Saudi Arabian architecture and the significance of our visual perception to gender codification is what this project attempts to analyze. The project uses three interlaced lines of investigation. The first is the relationship of architecture to the culture and the population. The research paper will study the architecture of the two skyscrapers. The second line of investigation is the perception of a symbol or a sign by the public. Thirdly, the paper will present feminism theories and finally connect these three investigations to the representation of women in art and history.

Keywords: Architecture, Feminism, Women's Rights, Modern Saudi Architecture, Skyscrapers in Feminist Theory, Culture and Symbolism, Interpretation of Architecture

Introduction

In modern architecture, form is a distinctive feature that draws attention and many times becomes subject to classification and association. Recent studies in architecture have moved to association of form to its significance and relation, linking these different forms to human cognition, culture, and even social values. The problem with reading these architecture designs is that in the general public the ability to interpret symbols varies among individuals. Some symbols are "archetypal" or general to everyone, but the majority of them are understood and learned by communal living, and these differ from one person to another. Subjective views require the study of aesthetics, dealing with the nature of beauty, and art, and most importantly, the tastes and opinions of the people who view this art. In many art forms, this usually creates two categories or types of art: "the art of the people" and "the art of critics". An alternate resolution has been to design the symbolism of works of art in a way known as "double coded": i.e. several messages are aimed at to the common people and others to art connoisseurs. The multi-coded works are also multi-sensed in such a way that it allows more than one definite interpretations.

Architecture and Symbolism (As an Icon)

Etienne-Louis Boullée (1729-99), an Instructor Paris school of construction engineering (Ecole des Ponts et Chaussées) in the field of architecture, proposed rather creative ideas on the symbolism of architecture and buildings. He mentioned that design must "talk" (Fr. parlant)

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architecture, e.g., the house of a saw owner had to be designed to resemble the blade of a saw. "Buildings should be like poems.² The impressions they create to our senses should produce analogous feelings to those produced by the use of those buildings." Architectural signs frequently also refer to political or social relations. Introduction to such studies and works could be found in *Politische Architektur in Europa vom Mittelalter bis heute* edited by Martin Warnke (1984).

However, the advent of l'Art Nouveau encouraged the world's most skilled architects of to create their private languages of art and form. The first and one of the most influential of these was Le Corbusier who also proposed a short written groundwork to his system of proportions (based on the Golden Section) in the book *Modulor* (1951). The primary perceptive psychology base for this was formerly presented in the book *Vers une architecture* (1923):

A brilliant, orthodox and original jigsaw puzzle of masses combined in light. Our eyes were created to see the forms in light; light and shadow reveal the forms. Cubes, cones, balls, cylinders and pyramids are primary shapes that light so excellently reveals; the picture they give to us is clear and perspicuous without indecision. That is why they are beautiful forms.³

Modern Architecture and Aesthetics

Recently, modern architecture has been functional with its emphasis mainly on the economic aspects of buildings. But, since architecture deals with the entire field of humanity and human life, real functional architecture must be functional mainly from the human point of view. Technology is chiefly an aid. Functionalism is valid only if it enlarged to cover even the psychophysical field. That is the only way to humanize architecture.⁴

Alghazali in alchemy of happiness wrote: "The beauty of a thing lies in the appearance of that perfection which is desirable and in accord with its nature...[For example] beautiful writing combines everything that is characteristic of writing, such as harmony of letters, their correct relation to each other, right sequence, and beautiful arrangement."

Harmony, then, is not only in the natural world, the intelligible world and the human soul but also in the city, works of art as being in the service of this objective. The call for this order and harmony in the society, in the city and architecture designs for the purposes of the community is greatly manifest in philosophy. At the same time the high technology material and design of both skyscrapers is not traditionally used in Saudi Arabia. However, the materials and design used are to create a dialogue between east and west.

Architecture, then, is the language of the community and calls forth images of the past local tradition. Study and dialogue of the architecture deserves greater attention to help communities understand themselves; their history and connection with the world and finally the upcoming changes – the future. That is to say, human production is purposely and methodically created.

Saudi Architecture and Feminism

The Saudi Society is still among the most traditional societies, despite of the fact that it's known to be among the modern state worldwide in various aspects. Governed by firm rules,

² Arnheim, 1977: 275 on the nature of poetry and its impact on architecture

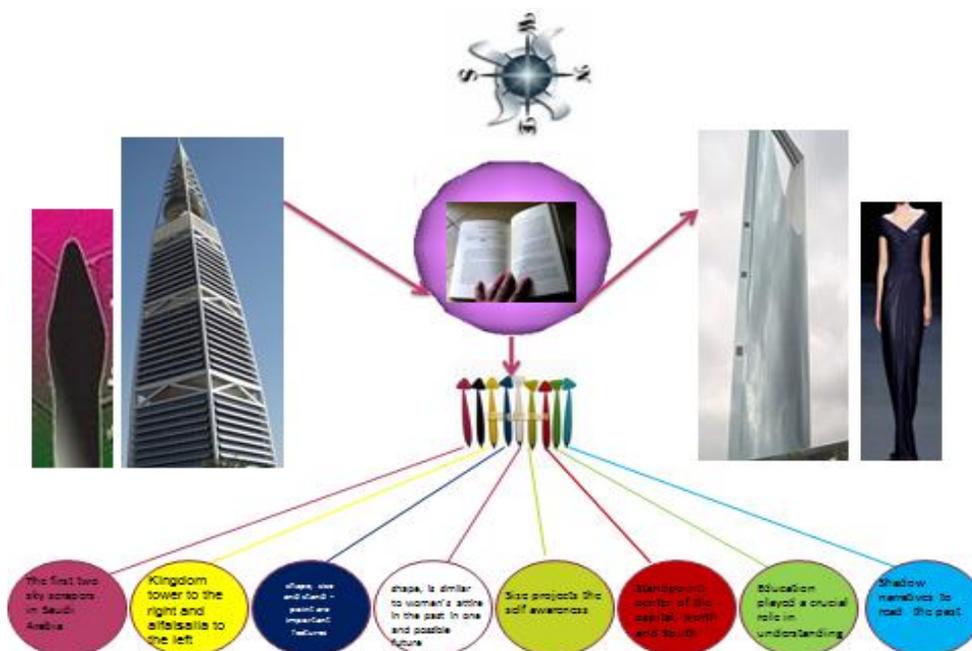
³ Le Corbusier, 1923 explains the use of geometry in architecture to create aesthetically pleasing works

⁴ Aalto: 1970, p. 15 – 16, discussing the need for functionality and human nature of buildings

traditions and religious beliefs, the place of women in Islamic society in common and in Saudi Arabian society in particular is a composite and often misunderstood issue.

Recent years have seen development in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and improvement the opportunities for women in both employment and education, but every Saudi woman, has a male guardian, regardless of her age who is allowed to acts as their legal representative if she wishes to attend school, travel, or start work. The laws of Saudi Arabia, while fair and just, have been known to create difficulty for independent women aspiring to work or study.

Figure 1 – Visual Interpretation of the two Skyscrapers, comparing the traditional woman (wearing abaya) to Al-Faisalia on the left and the modern woman to Al-Mamlaka on the right



In a country where the male commands so much influence in everyday life, the traditions, laws and customs will be dictated by men, and it is only natural then that the architecture too will reflect signs and symbol depicting male dominance. The phallus is the most ancient and widely used symbol for male dominance, power and fertility. Devotees of some cultures in parts of Nepal are said to worship phallic statues believed to contain spiritual powers of nature. The obelisks of ancient Egypt themselves had several functions, signifying both a reference to the cult of the sun and of the phallus, representing fertility and power.⁵

The Al Faisaliyah Center, has the honor to be the first skyscraper built in Saudi Arabia, and is now ranks second, among the tallest architectures in Saudi Arabia. The ball constructed atop the tower is said to be inspired by a ballpoint pen. Inside the ball is a restaurant; at ground level, a shopping center with major world brands.

The Kingdom Centre, also known as Al-Mamlakah, is the tallest skyscraper in Saudi Arabia. It stands 302 m (992 ft) tall and is the 25th tallest building in the world. The tower is constructed on area of around 94,230 square meters, whereas the centre covers approximately 300,000 square meters. Situated in Al-Urubah Road between King Fahd Road and Olaya Street,

⁵ MacKenzie, Kenneth R. H explain the occurrence of phallic symbols and statues throughout history.

The Kingdom Centre is owned by Alwaleed Bin Talal Bin Abdul-Aziz Al Saud, a prince of the Saudi royal family. The location of Kingdom Centre is within the growing business district of Olaya in Riyadh. The kingdom Centre also has the honor to win the Emporis Skyscraper Award in 2002 and was chosen as the "best new skyscraper of the year for design and functionality. Another major design award won by this landscape is its three-level shopping center. The huge opening is illuminated at night in constantly transform with various colors. Moreover, Four Seasons Hotel and state-of-the-art apartments are also included in its design. The ellipse motif taken from the tower's footprint emerges in the light fixtures, wastebaskets, ceiling panels, furniture and entrance canopy.

Analysis

As gathered by word of mouth, visual reception of the external shape or architecture of the two building is perceived publicly as food items, namely, a bottle opener and a toothpick. Public opinion as defined by Hegel is:

The formal subjective freedom of individuals consists in their having and expressing their private judgments, opinions, and recommendations on affairs of the state. This freedom is collectively manifested as what is called "public opinion," in which what is absolutely universal, the substantive and the true, is linked with its opposite, the purely particular and private opinions of the many. Public opinion as it exists is thus a standing self-contradiction, knowledge is thus as appearances, the essential just as directly present as the inessential.⁶

Public opinion, in spite of being inessential and self-contradictory, is of cultural significance. This expression, which presents the essential and the rational, reflects a genuine need for correct tendencies in common life in a form of common sense. In this context, the sign signifying and pointing to the signified is an indication of a primary concern and at the same time leaves a lot to imagination. In his argument, Hegel also points to the origin of the human desires of enslaving as primarily due to the need for food and sex. In this primary culture one of the Hegelian parameters has dominated the perception of the two buildings. The other parameter is the object of this study. What is the importance of the other Hegelian parameter of desire in reference to this project? The role of the feminine is an indication of cultural unconscious concerns pertaining to female identity. The two buildings under investigation provide past and a future model of depiction of females in this part of the world.

The architecture of the two buildings has two aspects that can be related to women in the past and the present: the size and the shape. Considering size, one is smaller than the other and also has different form, material of structure and architectural and functional design. These two aspects can be intertwined and historically related to females in the past and present and a possible prediction into the future.

The architecture of the two buildings symbolizes or can be seen as a register of women, particularly their attire and dressing styles in the past and the present. The two buildings are designed by architects from the western world, which signifies that they are amalgamation of western and middle-eastern roots concerning the female position and role in history. Therefore, western influence and a connection to western history and religion cannot be entirely ruled out,

⁶ Hegel (1770-1831): Rights of ethical existence discuss about the possibility of mutual recognition of rights.

rather it is quite probable. The strategic positioning of these buildings opposite to each other gives a picture of contrast reflecting female form then, now and a possible future. AlFaisalia is smaller in size and is structured out of iron in a very symmetrical form. AlFaisalia is the older monument and its structure mirrors the woman from the past- petite, subdued, protected, covered and completely unaware of her body and sexuality. She made a conscious effort to look unattractive by shrouding her anatomical assets. There is a ball like structure on top, which depicts the head and the intellectual atop which stands a diamond shaped structure pointing in the direction of the sky that in most probability reflects spirituality and quest for heaven. This links directly to history of women generally. The architecture is an almost direct imitation of the San Francisco skyscraper Transamerica Pyramid.

Figure 2 - Architectural Similarities between the Transamerica pyramid in San Fransisco (left) and Al-Faisalia



AlMamlakah on the other hand is bigger in size and more modern. The structure is smoothly constructed and reflects the rays of the sun during the day and glitters at night with lights. It has no head but a V-shaped hollow at the top. It resembles a woman wearing a beautiful dress, which emphasizes the chest. It mirrors a futuristic and liberated woman who is aware of her physicality and is proudly displays her sensuality. This structure lays more emphasis on the physical aspect than the intellectual that is underplayed but nevertheless present. The “V” shape could have a possible link with Da Vinci Code, which also revolves around symbolism of the feminine in history. The “V” could symbolize the Holy Grail and the Chalice that is again a symbol for a woman’s womb, which bears “the blood of God”. This has a sacred and holy connotation in Christian belief and most probably in middle-eastern culture as well since the two have intertwined roots of origin. The female figure connects with the world through her ability to breed, connecting her physical body with the spiritual. The sensual connection of mother to child was disrupted in history where the father, in his attempt to connect with the female sensuality, names the child after

him (J. Culler, 1982:59-60). The connection then is a purely linguistic one rather than actual, lacking the strong emotional bond or the need for nurturing care.

Figure 3 - The Kingdom Tower, Al-Mamlakah (302.3m)



It is through a discovery of sexuality and its power AlMamlakah is a symbol and a sign that is culturally unrecognized by the public. The female (AlMamlakah) in this respect remains connected in her high status with the heavens. This is to be contrasted by AlFaisalia where the woman depicted is more intellectual, but minimally sensual. She is made unaware of her powers and restricted—so restricted to the point of worrying about her existence (the ball does not light at night). If the ball is inspired by the pen, then, there is a possibility that it is a direct reference to the historical fact where women were not allowed to get an education (write). This is also true to the history of women in the west. During the time of Queen Victoria many female writers were either hiding behind a male writer such as Elizabeth Browning or using male pseudonyms to have their work published and then be recognized of producing such passionate works of art. At the time female writing was not highly appraised even if it was of higher quality. However, AlFaisalia casts a shadow due to its shape—a past which is known and can be reflected upon to find a meaning of this existence.

Contrasted with AlFaisalia, AlMamlakah is positioned south –north as front and back- in the direction where shadow cannot be casted, there are no dimensions. This shape communicates the new position of women where there are no histories available, readings or defined role yet in this part of the world. It is the result of contemplating and reading shadows and thinking left by AlFaisalia. Where, then, is the position of women in Saudi Arabia? Women of the region are always looked at through the past history and their role is defined according to the law of the past sources—history, religion, poetry memoires, etc written by men. The invention of writing in human history created this crisis for women. Men wrote all history, philosophy and stories. Women have only recently been trying to recollect, write and create arguments over this inherited position for women is a result of what men wrote rather than by what she is. This is true in the west as well as many other parts of the world. In the west, since Plato, women were degraded and treated as minorities revolving around the male figure located at the center. Abigail Adams letter aligns this position as well in her response to her husband, the president of the USA:

But you must remember that arbitrary power is like most other things, which are very hard, very liable to be broken – and notwithstanding all your wise Laws and Maxims we have it in our power not only to free ourselves but to subdue our Masters, and without violence throw both your natural and legal authority at our feet.⁷

In the Middle East, Nawal AlSaadawi, Assia Djebar, Hanan al-Shaykh, Sahar Khalifeh and Mai Ziada are among the many voices that are writing and researching what caused this position of women. AlGathami points to the problem as a linguistic one. In an article, Amal Amireh writes about Nawal el-Saadawi,

Her success in the West generates much skepticism. The western interest in her is not innocent, some critics believe. They argue that she is acclaimed not so much because she champions women's rights, but because she tells western readers what they want to hear. In this view, the West welcomes her feminist critique of Arab culture because it confirms the existing stereotypes of Arabs and Muslims as backward, misogynist and violently oppressive.⁸

Looking back at how women were viewed through poetry—of course written by men, poets past and present depict women as the source of love and as desired sexual objects. The treatment is always about their physical appearances; bodily beauty and its effects. Omar bin Abi Rabea (644), Omar Abu Reesha (1910-1990) and Nizar Gabani (1923) are but small examples.

‘Poetry is a woman’ states Awada (2006: 10). She is the rays and inspiration for poets; a source of beauty, happiness and pain as depicted in poetry. Yet it is male poets who write about women. They talk for women and of women. History, dominated by men, has disabled women from communicating about themselves by making written language as male and the oral female. Both buildings are symbols and actualizations of such symbols ‘is not mechanical, it is related to the tensions and alterations of social life and ultimately with cosmos rhythms’—M. Eliade.

The concept of Patriarchy has existed since ancient times; although it is argued that the hunter-gatherer societies of the pre-historic human tribes had no gender discrimination. The patriarchal nature of human civilization further evolved during the time of Aristotle. Gerda Lerner, professor of history states in her book *The Creation of Patriarchy*: “[Aristotle] believed that women had colder blood than men, which made women not evolve into men, the sex that Aristotle believed to be perfect and superior...” She also states, “Through this patriarchy that has been passed down generation to generation, people have been conditioned to believe that men are superior to women. These symbols are benchmarks which children learn about when they grow up, and the cycle of patriarchy continues.”⁹

⁷ Letters Between Abigail Adams and Her Husband John Adams May 7, 1776

⁸ Amal Amireh in her article: *Publishing in the West: Problems and Prospects for Arab Women Writers* - discusses about the issue of Arab Women Writers and discussed the western interest in Nawal el-Sawadi

⁹ Lerner, Gerda highlights in the chapter 10 of *The Creation of Patriarchy* about Aristotle beliefs of Patriarchy

Final Remarks

In light of this reading, AlMamlakah is forecasting the future of women in the region. Unable to read the sign, the community is satisfied with being only 'participant' since symbols and signs are only conceived as ornaments in any text in this culture.

New emerging changes in the power given to women can be illusive since the two skyscrapers are phallus in nature. They veil what is behind the power given to certain and carefully selected women. It is a male figure. It is a mirage like the desert of its existence. A belief that women are empowered and in reality, the power is given, not earned.

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