Identity, Modernity, and (Post)coloniality in the Architecture of the Arab Gulf Countries *from the 1950s to the Present*

Organized by the SAFIR Institute · Sorbonne University Abu Dhabi

Day 1 — Monday 26 October

ROBERT DE SORBON ROOM

KEYNOTE LECTURE · 3.00 — 4.30 PM

Making Worlds in Abu Dhabi

Prof. Łukasz STANEK, A. Alfred Taubman College of Architecture and Urban Planning, University of Michigan (United States) · Introduced by **Dr. Dorian BIANCO**, Sorbonne University Abu Dhabi



Entry to the competition for the Municipality and Town Planning Department, Abu Dhabi, 1979, external view. Shiber Consult (Kuwait), Wojciech Jarząbek, Edward Lach. Private archive of Edward Lach, Wrocław (Poland).

ABSTRACT

During the final years of the Cold War, the United Arab Emirates and Kuwait were crucial nodes of exchanges between architects, planners, and construction companies from across Cold War divides. Building upon my book Architecture in Global Socialism, this talk will foreground the work of design institutes, construction firms, and individual architects from socialist countries that collaborated with local and foreign actors to shape Abu Dhabi, Al Ain, and Kuwait City. I will show how Bulgarian and Polish professionals aspired to integrate into the Western-dominated and increasingly globalized market of design and construction services in the Gulf. While Eastern European professionals left aside references to socialism, their integration into this market was based on technological and cultural expertise that they had been acquired during their earlier work in North Africa and the Middle East in the networks of socialist internationalism. This talk will show Gulf cities during the late Cold War as cosmopolitan sites of worldmaking—or reimagining and practicing the world beyond its inherited concepts and visions—with long-term consequences for urbanization in the region and further afield.

ABOUT THE SPEAKER

Łukasz Stanek is Professor at A. Alfred Taubman College of Architecture and Urban Planning, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, USA. Stanek authored Henri Lefebvre on Space: Architecture, Urban Research, and the Production of Theory (University of Minnesota Press, 2011) and Architecture in Global Socialism: Eastern Europe, West Africa, and the Middle East in the Cold War (Princeton University Press, 2020). His most recent edited volume is The Gift: Spaces of Global Socialism and Their Afterlives (Jovis Publishers, 2026). Previously Stanek taught at the Swiss Federal University of Technology (ETH) in Zurich (Switzerland), and the University of Manchester (UK), and he held guest appointments at Harvard University (USA), and the University of Ghana at Legon in Accra (Ghana). He curated several exhibitions, including The Gift: Stories of Generosity and Violence in Architecture (Architekturmuseum der TUM, Munich, 2024). Together with Michael Gameli Dziwornu, he founded Office Southeast, an urban research collaborative based in Accra, Ghana. He is currently a NOMIS Senior Fellow (2026-27) at the Collegium Helveticum in Zurich, Switzerland.

4.30 — 5.00 pm	**Presentation of the exhibition (Im)Possible Abu Dhabi, followed by a break**
5.00 — 6.00 pm	**Presentation of the Modern Heritage Grant Program** **Fatima ALSUWAIDI**, Ministry of Culture · **Adina HEMPEL**, Zayed University

Day 2 — Tuesday 27 October

MARIE CURIE ROOM



Kuwait National Assembly, 1972-82, Jørn Utzon © Utzon Archives / Aalborg University & Utzon Center

CONFERENCE · 9.30 AM — 6.00 PM

Conference organizer
Dr. Dorian BIANCO, Postdoctoral Fellow in Art History, Sorbonne University Abu Dhabi

Organized by the SAFIR Institute, the international conference Identity, Modernity, and (Post)coloniality in the Architecture of the Arab Gulf Countries from the 1950s to the Present brings together Gulf and international architectural and planning historians to examine the transformations of the six GCC countries during the oil boom and the post-oil era, and to question the forms of modernity these transformations produced. Through questions of nation-building, regional identity, climatic design, welfare, heritage and infrastructures, the conference explores how architecture in the Gulf has been shaped by changing forms of globalization and transnational exchanges between local actors and architects, engineers, and planners from across the Arab world and beyond. It seeks to reassess the narratives and specific trajectories of Gulf modernity and their place within broader histories of modern and contemporary architecture.

9.30 — 10.00 am	Coffee, registration and opening remarks by the organizer, Dr. Dorian BIANCO

PANEL 1 · 10.00 — 11.30 AM

Transnational Exchanges in the GCC Countries

Chair: **Dr. Dorian BIANCO**, Sorbonne University Abu Dhabi (United Arab Emirates)

10.00 am	**Far but Close: Ibero-American Architects Working in the Arab Gulf during the Post-Oil Era** **Fernando Luis MARTÍNEZ NESPRAL**, Universidad de Buenos Aires (Argentina)
10.15 am	**Architectural Materiality and Plural Modernities in Kuwait** **Nadya ROUIZEM**, École nationale supérieure d'architecture de Versailles (France)
10.30 am	**Everyday Architectures of Global Oil: Norwegian Construction Companies in the Gulf** **Maryia RUSAK**, KU Leuven (Belgium)
10.45 am	**Rethinking Globalisation: Regional Networks and the Globalisation of Architectural Practice in the Gulf** **Giaime BOTTI**, University of Nottingham Ningbo China (China) & **Jacopo BENEDETTI**, Tongji University (China)
11.00 — 11.30 am	Discussion
11.30 am — 1.00 pm	Lunch

Day 2 — Tuesday 27 October

MARIE CURIE ROOM

PANEL 2 · 1.00 — 2.30 PM

Architecture, Region and Nation-Building in the GCC Countries

Chair: **Prof. Jean-Baptiste MINNAERT**, Sorbonne University (France)

1.00 pm	**Islam, the State and National Identity Building in Oman** **Richard McCLARY**, University of York (United Kingdom)
1.15 pm	**Question(s) of Identity in Architecture in the Gulf** **Kevin MITCHELL**, American University of Sharjah (United Arab Emirates)
1.30 pm	**Educational Architecture and the Negotiation of Modern Identity in the Gulf** **Irene PASINA**, University of the Arts Sharjah (United Arab Emirates)
1.45 pm	**Against Identity: How Kuwait's Eclectic Suburbs Are Almost All Right** **Ali ALYOUSEFI**, Kuwait University (Kuwait)
2.00 — 2.30 pm	Discussion
2.30 — 3.00 pm	Break

PANEL 3 · 3.00 — 4.30 PM

Urbanisation, Infrastructure and Heritage in Regional Perspective

Chair: **Dr. Roberto FABBRI**, Zayed University (United Arab Emirates)

3.00 pm	**The Cultural Life of Industrial Buildings: Converted Spaces and Adaptive Reuse in Sharjah and Northern Emirates** **Alia SOLIMAN**, Al Ain Museum (United Arab Emirates)
3.15 pm	**Al Khobar and the Reluctant Company Town: The Origins of Modern Urbanism in Saudi Arabia** **Atef ALSHEHRI**, Independent
3.30 pm	**Corridors of Modernity: Industrial Routes, Postcolonial Infrastructure, and the Gulf–Levant Connection through Jordan** **Nedhal JARRAR**, Isra University, ICOMOS-Jordan (Jordan)
3.45 pm	**Disjunctive Modernity and the Making of Manama: Commercial Architecture in Bahrain from the 1960s to the 1980s** **Mohammad Saad HANIF**, University of Bahrain (Bahrain)
4.00 — 4.30 pm	Discussion
4.30 — 5.00 pm	Break

5.00 — 5.45 PM

Book Presentations

Moderator: **Dr. Dorian BIANCO**, Sorbonne University Abu Dhabi

	The Future of Gulf Housing **Kevin MITCHELL**, edited with Rashed ALMULLA & Salem ALSUWAIDI
	The Arab Component in Latin American Architecture **Fernando Luis MARTÍNEZ NESPRAL**