

## Cultural activism through spatial practices: walking tours and urban gardening in Kuwait City

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### Abstract

Studies on urban transformation in the Arab Gulf have thus far predominantly dealt with the city as a space of financial investment. Only recently they began to pay attention to contestations of urban space. Cultural initiatives in Kuwait, as this article argues, present and foster new forms to reclaiming urban space. They not only demand, but also engage in practices according to which citizens have a say in how the space which they inhabit is reformed and re-shaped.

I analyse two such initiatives - one which organises walking tours of Kuwait City and another which creates an urban garden in a public park. In so doing, I outline the social and cultural fields, which contain partially overlapping actors and networks, in which these initiatives are situated and analyse the entrepreneurial frameworks and practices - from »social entrepreneurship« to »commons« - in which they are articulated. In their attempt to construct participatory spaces the initiatives have nevertheless been targeted towards a certain strata of Kuwait's society, first and foremost, middle class Kuwaitis with a cosmopolitan outlook.

### Introduction

Many researchers have pointed out that previous studies on issues of urban transformation in Arab Gulf cities have largely neglected the city as a social space and its urban fabric. Instead, they have, due to a strong focus on the oil economies, approached the city merely as a space of economic investment (see, for instance, Fuccaro 2013: 2). Beyond this, Gulf cities are hardly dealt with in the study of both historical, as well as contemporary contes-

tations, of urban space in the Middle East (see Al-Nakib 2014a: 723).<sup>1</sup>

The article endeavours to understand recent forms of spatial practices tied to cultural initiatives in Kuwait City.<sup>2</sup> My research focuses on how and to what extent these initiatives foster new forms of urban space (re-)appropriation, in their attempt to construct spaces of participation. The forms of »spatial activism«,<sup>3</sup> as one might frame them, are not first and foremost led by the political agendas to reclaim urban space usually found in occupying movements or social movements opposing neoliberal megaprojects. Nevertheless, when looking at their direct engagement with material urban space, these initiatives and cultural projects, led by Kuwaiti (not foreign) residents,<sup>4</sup> foster new approaches to reclaiming urban space. The

**1** Both Nelida Fuccaro and Farah al-Nakib, however, counter this dominant trend in their work on Gulf cities. See, amongst others, Nelida Fuccaro. 2009. *Histories of City and State in the Persian Gulf: Manama Since 1800*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, and Fuccaro (2013), as well as al-Nakib (2014a, 2014b).

**2** Thanks to Yazid Anani and Miriam Stock for their valuable comments in reviewing this paper, as well as to Deema al-Ghunaim and Sarah al-Zouman of Madeenah and Maryam Al-Nusif of The Secret Garden for their additions to and clarifications of my representations of their respective initiatives. Thanks also go to H el ene Laurain and Berenice Br uggemann for their assistance in literature research and transcriptions of interviews.

**3** In contrast to Misgav's (2014) understanding of spatial activism - in which he outlines how all forms of activism are inherently spatial - I deploy a more narrow understanding of spatial activism as direct engagement with material (here: urban) space.

**4** My use of the term is inspired by Neha Vora's (2013) study on the Indian diaspora in Dubai in which she argues for blurring the dichotomy between citizens vs. non-citizens and uses the term »foreign residents« to denote the latter.

article investigates for whom these initiatives are possible participatory spaces and how they are socially and culturally situated.

In approaching these cultural initiatives, it is of great importance to take into account the cultural and economic models that have influenced or were adopted by the people taking the initiatives. These ultimately reveal translocal references. The paper argues that the initiatives' practices and organisational structures are articulated in contradistinction to prevalent societal norms and political circumstances, yet can be understood as a reflection of global entrepreneurial models. Contrary to the common understanding that are Gulf cities exceptional urban specimens (Vora 2013)<sup>5</sup>, they actually reflect global tendencies in their urban forms, networks, and experiences.

This paper is grounded in field research conducted in Kuwait in February 2015 and November-December 2015, during which the author interviewed various cultural actors, visited their respective spaces, and participated in the activities they held. This research project is part of larger collaborative project on »Spaces of Participation« in various countries including Morocco, Egypt and Palestine, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait.<sup>6</sup>

### Urban transformation

Before detailing the case studies, it is vital to outline Kuwait's urban transformation starting with the advent of oil in the 1950s, relying on Farah Al-Nakib's essential writings on this topic. This background is indispensable for understanding current forms of cultural/spatial activism in Kuwait.

Post-oil urban development in the Arab Gulf has been, in most places, a top-down process including in Kuwait, as Farah Al-Nakib demonstrates in her work on the urban transformation of Kuwait City from 1950-1990.<sup>7</sup> In 1952, after the advent of the oil industry, a British planning firm was commissioned by the Kuwaiti government to plan the new modern Kuwait City. According to »new town« planning principles, the city centre was envisioned as a primarily commercial zone, while the housing areas were located in residential suburbs and

»connected to one another and to the urban centre by a system of ring and radial roads« (2013: 10). Specific industrial and educational zones were located outside the centre. This plan established an urban model revolving around the car as the principal mode of transportation, which was quite in line with urban visions and developments in Europe and the US at the time. For the realisation of the plan, the historic mud town was nearly completely destroyed and the urban population was mostly displaced and rehoused in new suburbs equipped with new schools, wide roads, and gardens. This large-scale urban renewal project did not encounter much resistance, as Al-Nakib states, which she explains by the fact that »the urban landscape was the physical embodiment of...life before oil« (2013: 11), which was marked by an economic decline due to the collapse of pearl trading and a grand economic recession. Public opinion in Kuwait at that time was that »oil wealth was allowing them to escape their past toward a brighter future« (ibid.).

This notion of »brighter future« through a modernist, urban remaking of Kuwait was, however, an exclusive hegemony envisioned by the state. Kuwait City was depicted as a representation of the country's new oil wealth, while urban development was marked by an »architecture of spectacle,« as noted in Al-Nakib's (2013) analysis. Within this mega urban transformation project, Al-Nakib argues that Kuwaitis have, based on Lefebvrian notions, lost »the right to the city« - and in particular - »the right to participate in shaping and using the spaces of the city« (2014b: 106).

In a recent study on housing in Kuwait, architect and urban researcher Sharifa Al-Shafan highlights a major shift in the attitudes of Kuwaitis towards urban participation and development by contrast with their attitudes in the 1950s. Al-Shafan's study from 2013 reveals that the present-day prevalent features of Kuwaiti citizens' engagement are in the domains of the »right to housing« (which means single homes) and the »right to investment«.

Taking these two analyses together, there seems to be literally no space left for participation. Rather, »non-participation« stands out in matters of urban development. Furthermore, and linked to this fact, there have been a substantial lack of public spaces and planning for such spaces, as various Kuwaiti scholars and activists have noted.<sup>8</sup> Privatisation and commercialisation of public spaces have led to what Farah Al-Nakib labelled as »urban crisis« in Kuwait City.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>5</sup> See the introduction to Vora's book, »Exceptions & Exceptionality in Dubai«, in which she argues that while Gulf cities, in particular Dubai, are always understood as exceptions (in particular, when it comes to questions of migration and citizenship), they often »reveal epistemological assumptions embedded in scholarly inquiry about migration and citizenship in other parts of the world as well« (2013:15).

<sup>6</sup> The project is financed by the Volkswagen Foundation (VolkswagenStiftung) for a period of three years. See the project's webpage: [https://www.zmo.de/forschung/projekte\\_2014\\_2019/spaces\\_of\\_participation\\_e.html](https://www.zmo.de/forschung/projekte_2014_2019/spaces_of_participation_e.html).

<sup>7</sup> See Al-Nakib (2013) and (2014a). See also Al-Nakib *Kuwait Transformed: A History of Oil and Urban Life*. Stanford: Stanford University Press (forthcoming).

<sup>8</sup> Farah Al-Nakib, »Urban talks 1«, held in Al-Shaheed Park on 1 October 2015; Alanoud Al-Sharek during a Madeenah walking tour the topic of which was »The Constant Re-invention of Bneid al-Qar« on 28 November 2015.

<sup>9</sup> Al-Nakib made this statement during her lecture on »Kuwait's Urban Alternative: Youth Activism and Rights to the City« held at ZMO, 22 October 2015.

## A turn to re-appropriate urban space?

Against the backdrop of this assessment there have been recent developments in »re-appropriating« urban space, be it through protests (see Al-Nakib 2014a, 2014b), quests to be involved in urban development, or by activities in cultural initiatives. The following section will focus on latest developments in the latter field.

In an interview, architect Zahra Ali Baba from the National Council for Arts and Letters describes the cultural scene in Kuwait by asserting that »back then, in 2008, there was nothing happening in Kuwait«, apart from a few art galleries. By contrast, a growing number of small, space-related initiatives have been popping up on the cultural scene in Kuwait in recent years.<sup>10</sup> For instance, Nuqat<sup>11</sup>, a cultural non-profit organisation, which began operation in 2009 and hosts annual conferences for the »creative scene«, serves as a catalyst and umbrella for cultural projects. Moreover, new cultural spaces have opened in the last year, such as Masaha13, »an art infused community space«<sup>12</sup> in the industrial Shuwaykh district, as well as al-Makan, a project and exhibition space combined with a restaurant and coffee shop, in the city centre.<sup>13</sup> At the same time, another important form of spatial occupancy that has emerged in Kuwait's urban realm are the pop-up markets. The most outstanding examples are the Shakshooka<sup>14</sup> Nomadic Market and the monthly Qout<sup>15</sup> Market,

**10** Interview with Zahra Ali Baba in Kuwait City on 13 February 2015. Zahra's statement reflects the perspective of young Kuwaitis engaged in the cultural field.

**11** »Nuqat is a non-profit organisation based in Kuwait City that is dedicated to the development of creativity in the Arab world. We produce training programs, lectures and cultural entertainment in both Arabic and English covering topics in visual, therapeutic, commercial and performing arts in addition to creative entrepreneurship.« <http://www.nuqat.me/en/nuqat-foundation> (accessed on 2 September 2015).

**12** <http://www.masaha13.com/aboutus/> (accessed on 2 September 2015). Next to a café and hangout space, Masaha13 has a space for events and exhibitions, which can be rented. For non-profit events, such as roundtable discussions and talks by young Kuwaitis (as for instance the »cultural diwaniyya« and »Hikmat«) they offer use of the space for free.

**13** <http://www.almakan-kw.com/> (accessed on 2 September 2015). The café and restaurant are both profit-oriented, and the restaurant is also run by the initiator, who completed an education in gastronomy (after a BA in Arts) and tries out »new culinary creations« in his kitchen. Thus, in a way, the initiators are merging their cultural ambitions with a business model that allows them to have the cultural space (see more on the notion on social entrepreneurship later in this article). In addition, they rent their space to other cultural events and initiatives, such as the yearly cultural event Nuqat.

**14** Shakshooka was initially a travelling market that was later integrated in The Secret Garden, the urban gardening initiative discussed in this article. See also this article on the market from 4 June 2014: <http://www.elanthemag.com/shakshooka-kuwaits-first-popup-farmers-market/> (accessed on 2 February 2015).

**15** See <http://www.qoutmarket.com/>.

which normally appear in the city during the winter season.

This paper focuses on two case studies – the first is an initiative to explore the city through cultural walking tours and providing documentation of its urban history, while the second is an urban gardening project. Both initiatives are fairly recent, and have been in operation since 2014. While both projects are contextualised in relation to Kuwait's broader cultural field, considering the individual initiators' social and educational background is also important, as I will show in the following.

I chose these two initiatives since they present two different approaches to reclaiming urban space: the initiative engaged in documenting the city is primarily engaged in the production of knowledge, while the garden operates in a concrete urban space. These were also the initiatives with the greatest online presence, which was the starting point for my research on Kuwait. The choice thus also reflects both their accessibility to me, as well as their strong online presence. Related to the outset of the broader research project my project is located in, which focuses on »spaces of participation«, I anticipated that studying these initiatives would reveal, besides their new approach to reclaiming city space, their »participatory« character – an expectation that will be discussed when examining both initiatives more closely.

## Madeenah: from walking the city to invading the »landscape of economy«

The young architect Deema al-Ghunaim started Madeenah (Arabic for »city«) in autumn 2014. The primary idea for the initiative was »establishing an archive for the urban fabric of Kuwait City and all its transformations«, including both governmental as well as personal documents, as Deema told me when I first met her for an interview in February 2015.<sup>16</sup> The initiative's direction is strongly related to her architectural background. After receiving training as an architect, she worked at the Municipality of Kuwait in the Masterplan Department, which gave her superior insights into city planning from the municipality's perspective, vis-à-vis an overview of the rich, but poorly maintained, archive on Kuwait City. However, Deema's strong interest in the urban archive is also related to her personal history, which she narrated as follows: »When we were children, every weekend he [my father] puts us in a car and goes around and visits his old house, which is no longer there, [instead,] there is a traffic light...«<sup>17</sup> Her father Abdullah Al-Ghunaim is a geomorphologist and, since its establishment in 1992, director of the Center for Research and Studies on Kuwait (CRSK), »which

**16** Interview with Deema al-Ghunaim in Kuwait City on 11 February 2015.

**17** Ibid.

aims to document the cultural history of Kuwait«.18 He is thus a well-known figure in Kuwait's political and scientific landscape.



Madeenah tour »From Route to Floor - Mubarak Alkabeer Street«, photo taken at Safat Souq, built in the late 1970s. Deema al-Ghunaim is the third from left (Source: Madeenah Archive)

As Deema did not study abroad, as is the custom among many other Kuwaiti students, her »knowledge of local dynamics in Kuwait are 'specific' since [she] was working and studying in town«.19 The passion »to make the city a school for [herself]«,20 through exploring the neighbourhoods and their hidden stories stemmed, as she explained to me, mainly from her studies of architecture, because as she stressed »you need to relate to the city you live in«.21

Madeenah, which is now run by a team of five young female professionals, collects micro-histories about Kuwait City and its neighbourhoods with the aim of sharing them and making them public.

18 Deema al-Ghunaim, Email conversation from 16 November 2015, her feedback to an earlier draft of this paper.

19 Ibid.

20 Interview with Deema al-Ghunaim in Kuwait City on 11 February 2015.

21 Email conversation from 16 November 2015, her feedback to an earlier draft of this paper.

The project is multifaceted, with one major pillar revolving around organised walking tours in different areas of the city. Following the end of the first season of tours in May 2015, a publication out of the tour scripts was prepared (forthcoming in 2016) that is, according to the editor-in-chief Sarah Al-Zouman, »an exploration of the themes that have arisen through [the] tours«.22 As published on the Madeenah's website, a core component of the project is its online database »that makes information about the city accessible to all citizens«.23 However, collecting, analysing and publishing are by no means Madeenah's only core activities.

### Walking the city: appropriation of urban space

The »cultural tours« are scheduled almost every Saturday in winter (from November until May) and announced on the group's Instagram page.24 According to Deema and my own observations while participating in several tours, tour participants are mostly Kuwaitis (students, academics, architects) and a few interested expats. Partakers pay a fee of 7-8 KD (approximately 20-25 €), which is affordable for the aforementioned groups, but not for underpaid workers. However it should be mentioned that Madeenah's long-term vision is to provide free tours in order to enable people from lower socioeconomic classes to participate as well.25

Each walking tour is led by the Madeenah team, sometimes in collaboration with invited tour guides, who escort the participants through specific parts of the city. The tour explains explicitly the history and morphology of Kuwait's urban fabric, social history, as well as key urban and social transformations. The tours render »visible« the pre-oil city, which is only remembered by older generations. Additionally, the walks illuminate modernist architecture from the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s that are currently misperceived as outdated and without value. Some of these modernist edifices are in bad structural condition and have been left derelict and in danger of being demolished to make space for new buildings. During the tours, historical and recent forms of urban development are questioned and critical points in Kuwait's urban history touched upon.

22 Email conversation from 16 November 2015, Sarah Al-Zouman's feedback to an earlier draft of this paper.

23 As stated on Madeenah's website, <http://www.madeenah.co/about> (accessed on 15 August 2015). Since then, the website has undergone substantial changes and has recently gone online with a new look.

24 Instagram is an online social network for sharing photos and more. See <https://instagram.com/madeenahkw/> for specifics.

25 In her comments to an earlier draft of this paper. See footnote 22.



Madeenah tour on 14 February 2015 (© Sarah Jurkiewicz)

Within this framework, the tours encourage participants to question the unseen, and to uncover new layers of the ordinary and »blank spots« that are marginal and not experienced by driving through the city. The initiative of Madeenah in a car-centred city such as Kuwait is in itself a novelty as aptly cited in the online magazine *bazaar.town*, »In a country where driving has become the main mode of transportation, Madeenah is making walking cool again.«<sup>26</sup>

However, declaring that driving is the main mode of transportation is inaccurate, when it comes to Kuwait's foreign residents, who make up two-thirds of the population. Buses, the main means of public transportation in Kuwait, are mainly used by low-income workers and employees, for whom owning and driving a car is economically not feasible. Yet, »even a bus or a taxi used as transportation to get to, from, and around the city has a similar tendency to isolate a person from certain parts of the city«, as Sarah explained.<sup>27</sup> That said, unlike the case of middle- and upper-class expats, walking in the city is an everyday practice performed by low-income migrant groups, which constitutes a major component of the appearance of the city and its urban visual experience. When it comes to Kuwaiti citizens, walking through the city is certainly not a common practice.

Walking, as de Certeau puts it in his essay, »Walking the City« (1984), allows one to experience »another spatiality«, in contrast to the »theoretical« conception of the city through urban planning, i.e., the »conceived space« (as conceptualised by Lefebvre 1991). Furthermore, since walking represents a different spatial practice from driving through the city, it thus stands in contrast to how spatiality is both *perceived* on a daily

level and, accordingly, subjectively *lived* and experienced.<sup>28</sup> In the Madeenah tours, walking stands as a consciously chosen strategy that bridges the segmented worlds between those who drive cars and those who use public transportation. Walking, especially in the marginalised segments of the city (which might not always be remote, but rather sometimes are located in the city centre), allows the participants coming from the middle class, to acquire a first-hand experience of the urban life of the low-income stratum, whom they otherwise only encounter in the context of the workplace or household support. Following de Certeau, one could further argue that »the act of walking« is »a process of *appropriation* of the topographical system on the part of the pedestrian« (1991: 97). Walking thus constitutes an appropriation of the »conceived space« created by the authorities and urban planning. Furthermore, walking changes the way space is normally perceived by someone who is driving through that space, and affects how space is lived (subjectively experienced). Walking can thus be understood as a spatial practice that bridges the divide between conceived and lived space, and hence serves as an appropriation of urban space.

### Beyond walking: the company

Overall, one could state that Madeenah, albeit on a very small scale, provides a »new« approach to experiencing the city and re-appropriating urban space, at least for certain social and cultural strata. Madeenah's urban walks facilitate the gathering of marginalised and alternative urban and social narratives which are, in turn, »materialised« and archived through the website and in printed publications. Furthermore, Madeenah's online space is set up as a participatory forum, to which not only team members, but also tour participants, can contribute.

Madeenah's long-term goals exceed organising the walking tours and documenting urban space. The initiative's managers, young female Kuwaitis (with backgrounds in architecture, graphic design, journalism, literature, politics, and business), are working to register as a company, as Deema noted in February 2015:

The third phase is becoming a spatial agency... it is not stopping at being tour guides. We continue...this is just an accumulation of more services we plan to provide. The spatial agency is more about filling the gap between the government and the public. So basically, from what I experienced in the municipality, those decisions

<sup>26</sup> <http://bazaar.town/madeenah/>, Bazaar, May 2015 edition (accessed on 17 June 2015).

<sup>27</sup> In her comments to an earlier draft of this paper. See footnote 22.

<sup>28</sup> Drawing on Lefebvre's (1991: 33, 38-39) differentiation between conceived space (representations of space), perceived space (spatial practices) and lived/experienced space (representational space). See also Zhang (2006).

to develop certain areas are taken...far from the demands of the public...So that's why Madeenah is there, to kind of fill this gap.<sup>29</sup>

And she continued explaining that architectural consultants tend to discard the »real analysis«, due to a lack of access to the population's concerns, due to time constraints, as well as for economic reasons. Furthermore, the market prices of buildings and construction materials are prioritised over the needs and aspirations of inhabitants. »So this engagement with people living in this area, this crossing these borders we created for, between ourselves, that's what we are trying to do as Madeenah«, Deema concluded.<sup>30</sup>

Based on her own experience working in city government, and observing over time how urban planning processes actually take place, Deema sees the need for a spatial agency that can provide missing »services« in the top-down planning process. Beyond that, she also argues that in order for Madeenah to survive and sustain itself, it needs to become a »company« that does not provide services for free:

We wanted to be a company. We wanted to be for-profit, because being non-profit takes it away from business, and we want to invade this landscape of economy that we have...Because non-profit means that investors won't be interested.<sup>31</sup>

Even before completing the process of registering as a company, Madeenah's managers had already been approached by a real estate company and asked to provide information about a specific area, which indicates that their business idea might indeed meet a demand.

The shift in institutional structure from a small initiative for spatial activism to a business model seems to be a long stretch at first glance. Deema, however, represents it as a natural step in meeting the self-designated goals of the initiative, namely, to change the way urban planning is taking place in Kuwait. Furthermore, as she stressed, making Madeenah's work profit-oriented is an alternative to other forms of sponsorship, such as seeking support from the state or NGOs, which may not necessarily be less problematic than developing as a business. Last but not least, I would add, this step may also be understood as a tool for the »self-professionalisation« of the team members and allows them to earn money doing work that they have been primarily financing, to date, using their own means.

**29** Interview with Deema al-Ghunaim in Kuwait City on 11 February 2015.

**30** Ibid.

**31** Ibid.

By November 2015, the team had progressed in the application process and had managed to register for office space. Also their approach to how they present their business model has evolved somewhat, and as Sarah Al-Zouman, the editor-in-chief, put it:

Madeenah is a social enterprise that prioritises and facilitates the needs of the community, aiming to work with the public and private sectors to address those needs...In the future, Madeenah hopes to offer free tours, initially for lower-income participants, and it is through our profit-making services that we can launch and sustain such social responsibility initiatives.

Turning into a »social enterprise« entails a shift from a non-profit initiative to a business enterprise that merges profit-making business with social causes. There is no fixed definition for the term »social enterprise« in the academic discussion, which is dominated by business scholars.<sup>32</sup> It remains »a term whose definition remains as vague as private enterprise,« as Ridley-Duff puts it, »but which embodies the notion that trading activity can bring about progressive social change by addressing issues of social exclusion« (2007: 384). Beyond this, it is represented as a term referring to quite diverse things: »a movement, a debate, an idea, a debacle« (Kucher 2011: 112). In my reading, social enterprise is thus to be understood less as a specific entrepreneurial format, and more as a business idea and an ethical stance very much inclined to the notion of (social) change.

In Madeenah's case, it is, however, not »simply« that a commercial activity is added to the roster of activities undertaken by a non-profit organisation, in order to finance certain activities – even if that is part of the justification, as Sarah's argument above exemplifies. Rather, the organisation is oriented towards entering a market-driven field.<sup>33</sup> Madeenah's managers' main goal in transforming it into a business is to become an »actor« in urban planning in Kuwait City and to mediate among the state, the market, and the needs of the »community«. <sup>34</sup> Beyond that it is also for the professional

**32** See for an overview the edited volumes by G.T. Lumpkin and Jerome A. Katz (eds.) 2011. *Social and Sustainable Entrepreneurship*. Emerald: Bingley (UK) and Alex Nicholls (ed.) 2006. *Social Entrepreneurship: New Models of Sustainable Social Change*. Oxford University Press: Oxford, as well as a book review by Helen Haugh (2007).

**33** Madeenah's business form, at least insofar as how it has been imagined thus far, most closely resembles a »mission-centric« form of social enterprise, i.e., one where the compatibility between business and the organisation's social mission is relatively high (Alter 2006: 207).

**34** In theoretical discussions, a social enterprise is located »in the intermediate space between the market, the state and civil society« (Haugh 2007: 748). This exactly fits the role which Madeenah strives to fill.

women involved in Madeenah to get paid for their work. Who constitutes the »community«, however, seems to not yet be clearly defined – is it the citizens, or the urban residents (including foreign residents) of Kuwait City more broadly? Thus far, the activities of the initiative include the former, while the latter have not become active participants yet.

In the long run, what such a shift will mean for the initiative and how its profit-oriented and activist goals may diverge remain to be seen. The »tensions between nonprofit missions and market phenomena, and the necessity of balance and trade-offs for social enterprise activities«, as Bielefeld states (2009: 79), certainly constitute a future challenge for the initiative.

### **Gardening the neighbourhood park: The Secret Garden in Salmiyah - a community garden and occasional market place**

The Secret Garden Project, in contrast to Madeenah, which makes use of multiple concrete spaces, uses a fixed, concrete place for creating a productive space of encounter, namely Baghdad Park, which is a small neighbourhood park. The park is located in the Salmiyah District, which is a mixed neighbourhood (with inhabitants mainly of Indian and different Arab origins) characterised by multi-storey apartment buildings.

In autumn 2013, Maryam Al-Nusif (»Mimi«) along with her mother, and her friend Yusra Ahmad started an urban gardening project in one part of the park. The urban venture took place in the park's upper end, which is concealed from the main street. The project started when Mimi was given a lemongrass sprout by a friend, and decided to nurture it in Baghdad Park. Planting the lemongrass gave her the idea to »start something communal, food-based«. <sup>35</sup>

Mimi is a chef by training. She started her studies in accounting, completing a Bachelor's degree at Kuwait University and then started an MBA in London. However, she changed her career and decided to register in a renowned cooking school in London. Afterwards, Mimi worked in restaurants in London and the Maldives before returning to Kuwait. Since her return, she has become active in initiating various »culinary projects«. As with Madeenah, The Secret Garden was founded by a young female professional with entrepreneurial ambitions.

The garden initiative is strongly related to Mimi's family history, as her father owns a farm in which organic food is grown. Mimi gets full support from her family for her urban project, especially because they live close to the garden, in the Salmiyah neighbourhood. Her grandmother

is from the Al-Khalid family, which owns a lot of land in the area, and, together with her sister, two apartment buildings as well, which they inherited from their father. <sup>36</sup> The family is thus well known in the neighbourhood and Mimi is accordingly more able to push boundaries and make her activities accepted by the municipality than would other residents of the neighbourhood from a different background.

Mimi's cousin has been expending tremendous effort trying to get official approval for the commencement of the project. While Mimi and her cousin managed to obtain oral permission quite quickly, official written documentation is still pending. Yet, they receive some support from the city, such as a water tank for the garden. To create the initial design for the garden, a collaboration was developed with the local Kuwait Healthy Living NGO that works with children.

During a halt in their activities in 2014, Mimi travelled to Berlin with her mother and sister, where she visited the Prinzessingärten urban gardening project in Kreuzberg.

It was painful for me, I saw it and I was like: In Kuwait, we started something, I know it's very small, but it's a very big step, and newspapers wanted to cover it. It got a lot of attention. People were excited! And I think for Kuwait, to get anything like that, it's very impressive. And then I go to Germany and I see the same thing I did but five years farther down the road.

This experience motivated her to continue her urban gardening activities in Baghdad Park in autumn 2014 and beyond. Even in the summer of 2015 – gardening activities are usually minimal in summer in Kuwait due to the excessive heat – Mimi and her co-gardeners were active. Using what Mimi had learned in a permaculture workshop in Portugal, the green activists worked to nourish the garden's soil (by burying nutrients in the earth) and built composting containers. <sup>37</sup> This project's spatial activism is thus characterised by direct engagement with material urban space, i.e., the park and its surroundings, by means of cultivating the garden, composting, painting the walls of the garages that adjoin the park, et cetera. In this way, it is through its hands-on approach more inclusive than the Madeenah initiative discussed above, which is more concerned with knowledge production.

<sup>36</sup> As Mimi clarified in an email conversation in which she gave feedback to an earlier draft of this paper, 23 November 2015.

<sup>37</sup> See Mimi's Instagram page: <https://instagram.com/p/5K-erYzZKY7/?taken-by=mimikuwait> and <https://instagram.com/p/5AvR1-zKYL/?taken-by=mimikuwait> (accessed 3 September 2015).

<sup>35</sup> Interview with Maryam Al-Nusif in Kuwait City on 13 February 2015.

## A participatory space and contested common

The Secret Garden's participants are a loosely bound group of people that is not formalised in any way, and the garden in principle is open to anyone who is interested in spending time there or in contributing to its activities. Cultivation is primarily performed by Mimi's mother, Mimi herself, and some more or less permanent volunteers from different parts of Kuwait City, as well as the neighbours. The neighbourhood has been mostly supportive of the project: some of the neighbours have provided water or endowed the garden with an aesthetic touch by decorating the back facades of their garages, which overlook the space.

During the winter season of 2014-2015, Saturday mornings were devoted to gardening, as well as to a collective breakfast in Baghdad Park. In 2015-2016, the Secret Garden's activities shifted to Saturday afternoons.<sup>38</sup> At that time, parents come by with their children, who are exposed to their first experiences of planting living things, take part in special creative activities for kids, and socialise in the garden. Other adults come to help with gardening activities, bringing their own visions of how the garden might be developed. Also, on weekdays, a few volunteers drop by to water plants, clear up and decorate the garden, and to enjoy spending time outdoors in a calm place. The group of gardeners is, according to my observations, composed mainly of students, and young and middle-aged professionals, both Kuwaiti and from other Arab nationalities.



*Secret Garden during the Saturday Gardening, Mimi stands in the background wearing a red checked shirt, 28 November 2015 (© Fabian Larsson).*

**38** Mimi told me the gardeners chose Saturday afternoon, since that is when most Kuwaitis come back from their beach houses, the visiting of which is a common activity on Friday, the official day off. (Informal conversation with Mimi in the garden on 28 November 2015.) However, choosing Saturday excludes non-Kuwaitis from taking part; for the majority of lower income workers, Friday is their only day off from work.

Thus, the garden has become a vibrant space of participatory activity in the neighbourhood of Baghdad Park and beyond. The communality and collective nature of the space have emerged as a new semi-public place for interaction and connectivity between different social groups in the neighbourhood, namely the few Kuwaitis residents (mainly Mimi and her family) and Arab migrant families.

I suggest framing the garden initiative as a means of »commoning« public space,<sup>39</sup> similar to other urban gardening projects worldwide. Even if Mimi and the other gardeners do not employ the term »commons« themselves, »commons« is a useful analytic category for understanding the institution of the garden. In an edited volume on *Urban Commons*, Dellenbaugh et al. (2015) depict community gardens as one form of »new commons«<sup>40</sup> – in contrast to the »traditional« forms of commons.<sup>41</sup> When it comes to urban commons, in particular, the authors »suggest that they are about collectively appropriating and regulating shared concerns of the everyday«. (Dellenbaugh et al. 2015: 10). The shared concern in the case of The Secret Garden is accordingly how a public governed space, the neighbourhood park, can be reclaimed and used by different groups of people.

Interestingly, in explaining the model of how the garden is run, Mimi, rather than referring to the commons, mentions the model of »social entrepreneurship«, which she describes as:

...more, like, horizontal. Like, we're working together creatively, you know, it's making us creative in how we're getting money, you know, and then we're running it, and it involves more people, and more people feel...ownership, and there's interaction among the people we meet, you know.<sup>42</sup>

**39** See Yazid Anani (forthcoming) on commoning a public park in Jerusalem through an art intervention. The park was »badly reputed and abandoned by the community« and the intervention had the goal »to reclaim the space for the neighborhood and the communal right to use it exceeding its landscape aesthetical values that the municipality is trying to maintain solely« (Anani forthcoming: 5).

**40** A term coined by Charlotte Hess (2008).

**41** The concept of commons first referred to shared natural resources, such as fishing grounds and water, and was later applied to other forms of commoning (see Dellenbaugh et al. 2015: 9). For wider literature on the commons debate, see, amongst others: Garrett Hardin. 1968. »The Tragedy of the Commons.« *Science* 162 (3859): 1243-1248; Peter Linebaugh. 2008. *The Magna Carta Manifesto: Liberties and Commons for All*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press and Silvia Federici and George Caffentzis. 2013. »Commons Against and Beyond Capitalism.« *Up-ping the Anti: a journal of theory and action* 15: 83-97.

**42** Interview with Maryam Al-Nusif in Kuwait City on 13 December 2015.



She contrasts this model with one whereby The Secret Garden would receive funding from a local *jam'iyya* (»cooperative«), in which case the gardeners would simply receive payment for their activities. Once more, social entrepreneurship has very positive implications for the initiative's leaders and Mimi emphasises the creativity involved in the process. In this case, however, it is not the idea of profit-making for the sake of financing other activities or entering a specific economic field that is at the forefront, but instead a form of shared ownership of the garden space, which, in turn, exhibits a strong overlap with the concept of commons.

The process of »commoning« the garden, understood as »the social practice that produces and recreates the common«,<sup>43</sup> has, however, not gone smoothly. Conflicts with the neighbourhood's youth, who have been using the park as a hangout space, mostly in the evening hours, have become an integral part of the story of Mimi's initiatives. The gardening community, as Mimi elucidated, complained about the constant trash and cigarette butts the youth left in the garden. Vandalism is another symptom of this conflict, in the form of the destruction of furniture. After many conversations with the adolescents, Mimi's cousin tried a different strategy, by talking straight to their parents. Since then, the youth come to the garden, but seem to abide by the gardening community's rules. This is why Mimi frequently referred to the garden as »a social experiment«.<sup>44</sup>

This example shows that although The Secret Garden has become a participatory common space for some people in the neighbourhood and beyond, the »ownership« of the Baghdad Park, or, put differently, of the park as a common resource, remains nonetheless contested. The garden was not established in a neglected spot in the neighbourhood park, but rather in a space that neighbourhood youth used to hang out away from the surveillance of parents or other adults.<sup>45</sup> Setting up a gardening project as a collective integrating project in the park intruded upon the adolescents' space and their reaction to the initiative was not positive, since they marked the space as their own. The project's founders did not identify the youth as stakeholders in »communing« the garden, though they were the ones using the park informally, and integrate them into the project's inception and later activities.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>43</sup> Massimo De Angelis cited in Dellenbaugh et al. (2015: 13).

<sup>44</sup> The account is based on what Mimi had told me. The »other side« is thus only represented and the youth do not speak for themselves here.

<sup>45</sup> Also a group of younger boys uses the park for playing soccer in the early evenings. There are thus different usages over time. (Thanks to Brian Collett, active gardener, for making me aware of this.)

<sup>46</sup> Mimi told me when I met her in December 2016 that she and her collaborators are trying to find ways to integrate

As Dellenbaugh et al. put it, »Urban commoners thus constantly need to negotiate and rearticulate the 'we,' and at the same time to 'maintain collective interests and identities'« (2015: 18) – a challenge that the garden project faces as well, also with regards to its changing group of gardeners. Commoning, accordingly, needs to be understood as a »process of negotiation« (Dellenbaugh et al. 2015: 15), a process in which conflicts over how to use the common (space, in this case) are inherent.

### Beyond gardening: events, markets, and future dreams

Like many urban gardening projects, whether in Berlin or elsewhere, The Secret Garden is also a cultural and culinary space. In spring 2015, the garden started to host cultural events, including a concert, a photography workshop, the activities of a theatre group, et cetera, all of which are well documented on Mimi's Instagram page (which she describes as »her office«<sup>47</sup>). Beyond this, since February 2015, the garden started to host another regular event in addition to the Saturday brunches. Called the Saturday Night Lights,<sup>48</sup> this event is an activity where young people from all over town gather in the garden for collective meals, including some children from the neighbourhood. This event alternated with the Saturday brunches last winter (2014-2015). As with Madeenah, due to the excessive heat, outdoor activities are only held seasonally.



*Saturday Night Lights, 24 February 2016*  
(©Sarah Jurkiewicz)

the youth, and added that this needed to be done through activities other than gardening. For instance, when a graffiti artist came to decorate the walls of a nearby garage, the youth showed a strong interest. (Interview with Maryam Al-Nusif in Kuwait City on 13 December 2015).

<sup>47</sup> »I don't have an office, I don't have anything. Instagram is my office, it's everything« (Interview with Maryam Al-Nusif in Kuwait City on 13 February 2015).

<sup>48</sup> The name recalls the American TV series »Friday Night Lights« from 2006.

The Saturday Night Lights has been combined with a little market, where homemade products (from food to pottery) are sold. Mimi cooks and sells her culinary dishes there as well. The market is actually another of her projects and first started as a little pop-up market, named after the famous tomato and egg dish called Shakshooka. It became quite popular and ran for several months, but since Mimi did not have legal permission (which is quite difficult to get) to hold it in the park, eventually, Shakshooka had to be shut down. The garden collective managed finally to provide Shakshooka with a new, albeit yet not completely legally authorized, space, and thus maintains the spin-off activity within its premises. Since the beginning of winter 2015-2016, the event runs simply under the name of Shakshooka.

Mimi dreams of transforming the garden into a true culinary space with its own kitchen. Whenever the Berlin Prinzessingärten experience is mentioned, Mimi without fail refers to that garden's canteen that serves daily dishes. »It's like a dream that I never dreamt. They set it out for me but I couldn't think of anything better«. The dream of a canteen serves as compensation for or even perhaps an alternative to Mimi's ultimate future plan of opening her own restaurant. The garden thus provides her with a space for testing such a possible future project. The idea of the canteen in the garden coincides with a social entrepreneurship model, combining non-profit work with business.

The inspirational experience of Berlin as a cultural reference for the further development of Mimi's initiative can be perceived as cosmopolitan. This is the case with the Saturday Night Lights, albeit from a different international point of reference: One visitor asserted that »it feels more like being in San Francisco than being in Kuwait«, which was clearly a positive connotation. Another mark of the cosmopolitan nature of the initiative is the dominance of the English language in the garden's various events. Announcements are mostly made in English; most of the signs are in that language as well. In this respect, dual access to the local and the global by those with privilege characterises the gardening project, as well as many other forms of cultural activism in Kuwait. It very much reflects the social group that comprises the main actor in the field of Kuwait's cultural activism, a young urban elite of cultural entrepreneurs – a group described in other contexts as the »creative class«, which stands for a new middle class working in the creative sector.<sup>49</sup> This social group has often received parts of its education abroad (mainly in the US or the UK) and positions itself

<sup>49</sup> See Martha Rosler's (2011) critical engagement with Richard Florida's 2002 bestseller, *The Rise of The Creative Class*.

equally as participants in the global and in the local cultural scenes.<sup>50</sup>

In sum, the garden can be understood as a form of commoning a public space, the Baghdad Park, which was previously controlled by the city administration. It is an appropriation of a material public space that has been poorly maintained by the municipality—but was and still is attractive as a hang out spot for youth. The example of The Secret Garden also hints at possible conflicts in commoning processes in terms of who is included and excluded (here, neighbourhood youth), and for whom this form of commoning is an attractive project in which to participate. The participants who attend breakfasts and gardening activities are from quite diverse backgrounds, Kuwaitis and non-Kuwaitis, from the middle and upper class, as well as (many fewer) from the lower socioeconomic classes, the surrounding neighbourhood and other parts of town. However, the initiators (Mimi, her family, and friends) are foremost middle and upper middle-class Kuwaitis with a cosmopolitan outlook.<sup>51</sup>

### **Small steps into another urban future? Commoning and reclaiming urban space**

While the two initiatives explored here vary greatly in terms of their concrete activities, some connections and commonalities may be observed. On a very concrete level, Mimi and her grandmother gave a guided tour of their neighbourhood and The Secret Garden in collaboration with Madeenah.<sup>52</sup> Moreover, Madeenah held its »end of the season event« in the garden in May 2015.<sup>53</sup> Both initiatives operate in a similar social and cultural field, with partially overlapping actors and networks.<sup>54</sup> The initiators share a common social background. They are not only both part of the global-orient-

<sup>50</sup> This access can be understood as »critical regionalism« – as suggested by Yazid Anani in his comments on an earlier draft of this paper – which is a concept developed in architecture: »seeking ›to mediate the impact of universal civilization‹ and ›to reflect and serve the limited constituencies‹ in which it was grounded« (Eggner 2002: 228). This concept may help »to account for the effects of larger-than-local forces on the lives of local inhabitants as well as the connections between different people and places characterized by the ›global sense of place‹«, as Miller (2007: 361) argues. It is however beyond the scope of this article to engage deeply with this discussion.

<sup>51</sup> Upper class only refers to a few merchant families in the Kuwaiti context

<sup>52</sup> See the announcement of the tour at <https://instagram.com/p/yZeKFzBSbT/?modal=true> (accessed 2 February 2015).

<sup>53</sup> For the event's announcement and a photo of the Madeenah team, see the group's Instagram page: <https://instagram.com/p/2JV-BMhScj/?taken-by=madeenahkw>, <https://instagram.com/p/2MSwjPBSYU/?taken-by=madeenahkw> (accessed on 9 September 2015).

<sup>54</sup> Both initiatives rely heavily on (digital) media for promoting and documenting the activities of the projects, which is certainly the case for most cultural projects in Kuwait and in the Middle East, in general.

ed middle class, but also come from well-known families, which gives them a greater freedom to manoeuvre and pushing the limits of socially acceptable behaviour. Engagement in changing urban planning, along the lines of Madeenah's activities, by an expat architect might be less well received. Similarly, a gardening project initiated by one of the Salmiyah District neighbours of Indian or non-Kuwaiti Arab origin might not be tolerated for long.

As I argued above, both initiatives engage with concrete material space in Kuwait City and foster new forms of urban space (re-)appropriation in what is, at least for contemporary Kuwait, a rather unusual way. Activities like walking through the city and gardening in the communal park have become urban strategies for perceiving and experiencing spatiality differently, which involve being confronted with various people from different backgrounds. Overall, both initiatives promote spatial practices that are hitherto not common in Kuwaiti society. While walking in the city and gardening might seem quite mundane, they open, in the Kuwaiti context, the possibility of experiencing and »reclaiming« urban space in an innovative way. They can moreover foster new forms of relatedness to the city and its history. The concept of the commons, even if not explicitly used by the initiators of these projects, can potentially serve as a relevant tool for framing such urban space (re-)appropriations.

Although the two initiatives do not engage in classic forms of political participation, such as creating political parties or formulating political demands, they are political in the sense that they not only demand, but also engage in practices according to which citizens have a say in how the space which they inhabit is re-formed and re-shaped. They are a form of direct action. The term »citizen« in this case could possibly transcend the definition which encompasses only Kuwaiti residents with formal citizenship, and rather be expanded to include »urban citizens«<sup>55</sup> more broadly. Yet to achieve this, more effort would need to be made to make the initiatives inclusive. Thus far, the initiatives address only certain strata of Kuwait's society, as indicated by the participants in the walking tours and, to a lesser extent, those involved in the collective gardening.

In the concrete forms that the two initiatives' spatial practices take, a lot of dissimilarities may be observed. While Madeenah is engaged in the production of common knowledge, in which walking functions as strategy for reclaiming and understanding urban space, The Secret Garden is a

<sup>55</sup> I understand »urban citizens« to mean all inhabitants of the city, and thus to deconstruct the division between citizens vs. non-citizens, as Neha Vora tries to do in her work.

productive common reclaiming public space from the municipal administration.

In analysing both initiatives, the mixture between cultural activism and entrepreneurship is striking. Becoming or aiming to become social enterprises does not preclude the projects' cultural impact and agendas. However, social entrepreneurship will influence the organisation and maintenance of both space-related initiatives. As the article demonstrates, in both cases, the professional aspirations of the main initiators are closely tied to the outlook of the projects. This certainly reflects a broader trend among cultural activists in Kuwait, as I touched upon in the introduction, in which I outlined various cultural projects.

On a final note, the question still remains as to what these initiatives mean as modes of resistance in the Kuwaiti context, and in authoritarian regimes more broadly, if their cultural activism is articulated within entrepreneurial frameworks and practices. I will address this in future work. On a similar note, the role of the »creative class« in gentrifying processes in the Kuwait City centre, and by contrast what the space-making practices of lower-income migrants are, demand further research so as to better understand urban transformations in Kuwait and the Arab Gulf more generally.

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