

Dr. Saba George Shiber: An Early Practice of Critical Regionalism through the Lens of Arabian Modernity

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ABSTRACT

The discussion of Arabian modernity during the post-war period arose within the process of decolonization, and the reconfiguration of the new Arab metropolis. In the mid-20th century, as the Arab states developed, the Arab region did not only showcase international imported models of modernity; it also exported its own unique concepts of architectural regionalism. Dr. Saba George Shiber's studies of the "Contemporary Arab Metropolis" played a key role in the evolution of architectural regionalism. This paper will review the discourse of architectural regionalism as an ideological and technical implication of the Arab metropolis. To trace the urban and architectural models developed for the Arab region, I will review some of Shiber's written work, discuss his built and proposed projects, and highlight planning tools, including the urban renewal, architectural control, and the study of "Faces of the City."

INTRODUCTION

Following intensive training in the US from 1947 to 1956, Dr. Saba Shiber returned to the Arab region during the peak of Arab nationalism. He left Washington, D.C., his work on housing, rehabilitation slum clearance, and urban renewal to return to his native region and lead Arab professionals in the fields of architecture, planning, engineering, and design (Middle East Business Digest 1963). As a result, he was actively involved in evaluating, critiquing, theorizing, and proposing intellectual methods and technical systems to surmount the technical and cultural challenges facing the contemporary Arab metropolis. The term "Arab metropolis" refers to the citizens, cities, and towns throughout the Arab world that are similar in a practice of urban architecture as a regional and scientific tradition relating to the different environmental, cultural, ecological, economic, and political contexts (Shiber 1970). This approach to urban architecture stemmed from Shiber's personal background, Western training, affection for the ancient Arab civilization stemming from his readings of Ibn Khaldoun (14th century AD), and his exposure to and involvement in post-war architectural theories invested in urban architecture and regional approaches. The notion of displacement deeply influenced his critique of the Arab metropolis; unlike Edward Said (Said 2003), Shiber blamed not only Orientalism, but also local Arab planners' lack of professional training and experience in the fields of design, sociology, and architecture (Shiber 1960). He was actively involved in the remaking of the Arabian¹ urban scene, including present-day Kuwait, Lebanon, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Bahrain. Shiber was also a public intellectual who broadcasted his regional visions and critiques of the urban Arabian scene through regional and international periodicals, conferences, and radio and television appearances. At the International Seminar on City Planning and Urban Social Problems in 1960, he outlined the benefits and drawbacks of the urban plans of each of the Arab states, including Jordan, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, Cairo, and Syria. He emphasized the urgent need for an industrial revolution in the Arab world to maintain organized urban expansion in contemporary Arab cities (Shiber 1961).

In addition, Shiber encouraged Arab professionals to learn from the earlier achievements of Arab civilizations and the technological advancements of international experts. He intended to prepare professional Arab engineers, planners, architects, and municipal councils for the next boom across the Arab metropolis. Shiber (1960) claimed that, when critically studied, the varieties and resemblances among Arab states would help to advance the future expansion of Arab cities across the Arab metropolis. His work emphasized the significant role of the physical buildup² of Arab cities and the development of desert architecture as a critical component of regional architecture. Several decades later after Shiber's life, in 2007, the Danish architect Rem Koolhaas argued that "the Gulf is not just reconfiguring itself; it is reconfiguring the world" (Koolhaas 2010).

The present paper argues that, as the Arab states developed in the mid-20th century, the Gulf region did not only showcase imported international models of modernity; it also exported its own unique ideas of architectural regionalism. Shiber's studies of the "contemporary Arab metropolis" played a key role in the evolution of architectural regionalism. For this reason, I will discuss the concepts of Arabian modernity in the form of the architectural and urban transformation. The socio-political, economic, and natural characteristics of the Arab city generate exceptional urban criteria specific to the Arab region through cycles of urgent and sudden construction booms. Shiber's critiques and recommendations highlight the significance

of urban planning, design tools, and professional training in architecture, engineering, sociology, construction, and management. Thus, through the discussion of desert architecture, I will deliver an overview of the Arab metropolis as an early practice of critical regionalism.

WHO IS SABA SHIBER?

In 1924, Saba George Shiber was born in Palestine to a family of engineers, including his father, uncle, and younger brother. Like other Arab professionals of his time, he was trained at the American University in Beirut and at Cairo University as a civil engineer and an architect. During the English colonization of Palestine and the Second World War, the Shiber family was concerned about the lack of Arab training in architecture, especially in Jerusalem, where the training gap was highlighted by the arrival of well-educated Jewish émigrés fleeing Europe (Nasr 2005). Driven by a strong desire for Arab rebirth, the younger Shiber moved to the United States in 1947 to pursue a Master's in Architecture and City Planning at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). His academic goals exceeded simple personal ambitions. He dreamt of returning to Jerusalem and opening a university to provide young Arabs, particularly Palestinians, an opportunity to pursue an American education and training in architecture and city planning without having to migrate (Nasr 2005). Shiber's MIT master's thesis comprised two design projects: a campus design for Jerusalem University and a detailed architectural design for what he called the Shiber Institute for Training Young Palestinians (Shiber 1962).

Following the loss of Jerusalem in the Arab-Israeli War in March of 1949, Shiber was granted asylum in the US as a Palestinian refugee. He became an American citizen in 1954 (MEBD 1963). While in the US, Shiber's ambitions for the contemporary Arab metropolis continued to evolve. He pursued training in architecture and city planning to better understand the growth of contemporary cities around the world. Between 1948 and 1957, and after earning two master's degrees, Shiber held a wide variety of jobs in the US. He worked as a civil engineer, an architect, and a municipal planner in Kansas City, Missouri; an economic consultant for the New York State Planning Board in Albany; a director of architecture and city-regional planning at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, New York (1949 to 1951); and a research fellow at Cornell University (1951 to 1956). In 1956, he moved to Beirut, where he was appointed the chief of the Technical Bureau of the National Reconstruction Authority, Lebanon. In 1959, he launched a consultancy for urban, architecture, and engineering issues called the Associated Consulting Engineers (ACE). The practice, which mirrored the structure of Dar al-Handasa Consulting Engineers, was the first of its kind in Lebanon and one of the first in the entirety of the Middle East. Both practices were organized according to an Anglo-American model of engineers including architects and town planners (Nasr 2005). In May 1960, upon invitation from the government of the State of Kuwait, Shiber moved to Kuwait to become an assistant chief engineer in charge of the Department of Surveying, Town-Planning, Architecture Design, Agriculture, and Research at the Public Works Department. In 1964, he was also appointed as an expert consultant member of the Technical Committee at the Municipal Council and Development Board at the municipality of Kuwait (Dr. Saba George Shiber Vita, April 1961). Simultaneously, as a planning expert, Shiber was assigned several regional planning missions, such as the planning of Aqaba in Jordan, the planning of al-Karama in Palestine, the planning of Dhahran in Saudi Arabia, and the development of the capital city of the Republic of Rwanda, which he conducted upon invitation from the United Nations.

In December 1963, Shiber was nominated Arab of the Year and featured on the cover of *Middle East Business Digest* because of his active role in not only the fields of architecture, city planning, regional development, and public administration in the Arab world, but also economics, administration, politics, and various Arab affairs. Shiber was the only Arab to have worked in top positions for five Arab governments—Lebanon, the U.A.R. (Syrian province at the time), Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Kuwait—a feat that he accomplished over a very short period of time and at a young age (MEBD 1963). He also published more than 1000 articles in about 16 English and Arabic newspapers and magazines as well two articles in Japanese newspapers in 1963. His work demonstrated a bold, critical, and constructive character that reflects his design ideology. (MEBD 1963, 46)

1.0 ARABIAN MODERNITY

The American historian Joan Ockman (2014) argued during the early 20th century, modernization was based on the idea of a "culture of experts." This approach originated from the technocratic drive to perfect life, labor, and leisure to optimize the organization of the social environment in the decolonized world. As Avermaete (2014) noted, "modernization was assumed to accompany change and progress, and above all to solve the existing problems of Third World cities and rural areas" (35–36). The "myth of development" and its socio-cultural implications were, thus, associated with the urban transformation models, and the concept of modernization became associated with the notion of "progress" as a cultural means of degrading human values in pursuit of the linear path of development motivated by man-made progress to create a Western utopia (Bianca 2000). Arabian modernity developed along similar notions, with a greater emphasis on the socio-cultural, ethnic, political, and regional characteristics that distinguish the Arab states from the rest of the world as cultural, political, and economic entities. Because of the abundance of financial recourses resulting from oil production and the ensuing development pressures in the Arab region, urban interventions were expressed through the superimposition of new cities against an old urban fabric.

Networks of highway roads, infrastructural services, nation buildings, and capitol cities replaced historical sites and traditional towns (Bianca 2000). Arabian modernity was depicted in the form of social science, including architecture as the process of the industrialization, rationalization, urbanization, and social change of the rising societies.

In the International Seminar on City Planning and Urban Social Problems, Shiber discussed the nature of the urban growth and development of Arab cities through a series of normal industrial drives and other abnormal urbanization shifts resulting from the lack of scientific and rational urbanization responding to local habitats and climates. He described Arabian urbanization as follows:

The Arab World was subjected to sudden urbanizing forces, and that the Arab World was subject to unique conditions; sociologic, economic, and political. The uniqueness of the situation, and the magnitude of the pressures, have caused many understandable irrationalities to pervade and dominate the Arab urban scene, as it abruptly began to give way from the agrarian craftsman era to the industrial-commercial era of the 20th century. (Shiber 1960, 21)

Moreover, the political tension between the Arab states themselves and their political regimes, the instability of Arabs as individuals and as nations, and the unpredictable external political and economic pressures impacting the Arab world reduced the prospects of rational planning (Shiber 21). Shiber, therefore, outlined his vision for the "contemporary Arab metropolis" by calling for greater socio-cultural, economic, and scientific collaboration among the Arab states to achieve technological independence from Western domination:

If Kuwait can build the largest sea-water distillation plant in the world, and Saudi Arabia the largest air-conditioned power plant in the world, and Lebanon the most glamorous casino in the world, the Arab World must, and can, master the best brains in the world to study the regional and economic future of the Arab World on a scientific basis. (Shiber 1960, 31)

Shiber's vision seemed exceedingly ambitious at a time when the Arab world was racing toward national identity and the rise of the metropolis as the center of the state. However, he believed that the economic, cultural, social, and industrial capacities of the Arab states, especially the oil-rich Gulf States, could revolutionize and maximize the regional capacities of the contemporary Arab metropolis. This vision stemmed from his readings of Ibn Khaldoun and his emphasis on the Arab ideology and the power of strong cohesion in nomadic societies, or *asabiyya*. *Asabiyya* fostered strong leadership and group solidarity as essential qualities for building cities and empires (Ibn Khaldoun, 2015). Nomadic tribes bred these strengths to thrive in the harsh environmental conditions of the desert (Shiber 1964). For a metropolis to sustain and grow over time, new social and cultural institutions demand new technical and rational Western administrative and planning methods. The active process of urban transformation and reinvention has been the root of Arabian modernity since the early 20th century, beginning in Cairo, Lebanon, and Baghdad, Iraq. The second wave centered particularly on the Gulf region, stemmed from abundant energy resources and a continuous increase in national income resulting from the Arab oil embargo. This income growth generated increased cultural, economical, and technical interest and investment in the Arab metropolis. Finally, the first decade of the 21st century saw another construction boom and urban reinvention wave, particularly in Dubai and Doha. Thus, Rem Koolhaas (2010) claimed:

The Gulf is the current frontline of rampant modernization: a feverish production of urban substance, on sites where nomads roamed unmolested only half a century ago... Eventually, the Gulf will reinvent the public and the private: ... the coexistence of many cultures in a new authenticity rather than a Western Modernist default; experiences instead of Experience. (195–195)

Therefore, studying Shiber's mid-20th century urban and architectural designs and proposals is fundamental for comparing and comprehending the development of Arabian architecture and cities, especially now. Shiber's discussion of the Arab metropolis is closely related to the universal concept of temporary spaces or cities, as both focus on environmental aspects like the desert climate, a construction culture, scientific technologies, and design innovations. All of these concepts will be investigated in my Ph.D. dissertation. The remainder of the present paper, however, will focus on the urban design and planning tools developed for the Arab metropolis, beginning with the theoretical discourse of Arabian regionalism, continuing with the concept of physical buildup, and concluding with the development of Architectural control for the urban expansion.

2.0 ARABIAN REGIONALISM

Shiber's design ideology—the contemporary Arab metropolis—and sensitivity to regional architecture evolved from his nostalgia for the loss of Jerusalem, which influenced his Ph.D. project, *Urban Formation and Reformation*, at Cornell from 1953 to 1956. Shiber's research included an urban and architectural survey of several contemporary cities throughout the world, including the Arab cities of Beirut, Sinai, Cairo, and Casablanca and the global metropolises of Boston, Tokyo, Manhattan, Chicago, and Prague. It featured visual and spatial analyses of city environments, vernacular buildings and temples, post-war housing projects, and urban plazas and included more than 650 hand-drawn sketches of different city scenes and 24 aerial photographs of the urban fabric as a whole. Shiber simply gazed at different scenes of

urban architecture, trying to understand what constituted a city's character. His intensive visual journey traced what he called "Faces of the City" to stress the criticality of positioning urban relations as a planning tool (Shiber 1962). He referenced the unique designs of houses, mosques, bazaars, and souqs to identify the individual character or "faces" of the traditional Arab city. Because of the critical role of gazing and comprehending a city's urban forms, Shiber continuously published his sketches and descriptions of the urban qualities and forms of cities in local and regional periodicals to emphasize the impact of a built environment on the well-being of its inhabitants (Shiber 1962). Shiber (1961, 5) argued that the city is a physical record of human achievements and a manifestation of the intellectual, technological, and physical power of its inhabitants. However, the boom circumstances of urgent development needs and massive construction processes require unique urban design tools:

It is in the very nature of urban formation to evolve in time, except in boom circumstances. This time factor presents difficulties in conceptualization not otherwise encountered in short-term pieces of plastic work. Since urban conceptualisation must always stay in dynamic changes necessitated by time, active and multi-dimensional vision is required to attune the changes to a gradual unfolding work of art. (Shiber 1961, 5)

Shiber's urban design ideology was distinguished from those of contemporary architects/urbanists, including Team X, Aldo Rossi, Hassan Fathy, and Mohamed Makiya. Shiber combined the modern design notions of Le Corbusier and Walter Gropius with the ancient works of Ibn Khaldon, forerunners to the principles of city planning. His collective background combined the best of the Occident and the Orient, and this transcendence buttressed his authority and lent credibility to his influence in the Arab region. Drawing from local cultural heritage, Shiber was able to adjust the Western development process to uniquely fit the Arab world. He worked to substitute Western terminologies and ideas with Arabic ones based on Ibn Khaldoun's treatise *The Introduction—al-Muqadema* (Ibn Khaldoun, 2015). Ibn Khaldoun's writings focused on the significant role of the desert climate in advancing Arab culture and civilization. He argued that regional planning is not possible as a universal urban tool for all Arab states, or even for neighboring states, due to differences in their socio-political structure and geo-economic nature (Shiber 1960).

From the burning sands of Kuwait to the beautiful hills of Jerusalem, to the nonchalant grace of Rabat, the Arab World is one of infinite variety, a social, historic, political, mosaic, avidly searching for a place in the sun. It is a world where nothing is stereotyped, nothing routine, nothing predictable. (Shiber 1960, 25)

Despite the diverse socio-political characters and economic and technical capacities of each Arab state, all share similar climatic and ideological factors shaping their urban formation. Yet, in 1962, the uniquely hot climate of the Arabian Peninsula was not properly considered in determining the architecture and the urban formation of the contemporary Arab city. The dramatic buildup of the desert urban form at the time, particularly in Kuwait and the Eastern provinces of Saudi Arabia, allowed for a "full-scale laboratory in city planning and architectural experimentation" (Shiber 1966, 58). Shiber, thus, emphasized the importance of learning from each urban experiment in the Arab metropolis to develop and sustain a long-term development plan. There are no clear-cut answers: what applies for an Arab emirate may not apply for Arab republic, and what is applied today may not be applied tomorrow. However, Arabs must develop professional training, technical knowledge, and design skills benefitting from Western experience and design competitions to create planning boards that encourage collaborations between local and international experts (Shiber 1960).

Shiber's regional ideology shares roots with Kenneth Frampton's (1998) definition of "critical regionalism." Instead of resisting universalism, which reduces cultural differences to a single universal civilization, Shiber demanded that Arabs to look closely at contemporary metropolises around the world and develop rational models and systems to overcome the short outcomes of their rooted ideologies. He stressed the importance of importing rational and technological expertise to support the development of the contemporary Arab metropolis as a transcultural practice that integrates rational scientific achievement to develop urban and architectural design solutions suitable for the desert climate. Unlike Frampton (1998), Shiber believed that town planners, whom he saw as the "orchestration of the city," should manage urban planning and architectural projects simultaneously. He described the role and mission of the planner as follows:

He must lobby, write in papers, talk to groups', caucus with members of parliament, spend time with mayors and "mukhtars," design subdivisions for free so that new ideas will be accepted by subdivisions and so on.... All engineers, architects, surveyors, and draftsmen he directs, he must look upon as potential students, and so he must not lose his patience when the politicians press ruthlessly for the production of plans and drawings. (Shiber 1960, 35)

CONCLUSION

Shiber's complex persona, which combined Western expertise, regional compassion, and, most importantly, his identify as an "Arab in Exile" led Shiber to be known as "Mr. Arab Planner." When the *Middle East Business Digest* featured Shiber as Arab of the Year in 1963, it described him as:

An engineer, architect and town planner by profession but who is, by avocation, an artist, a writer, a rebel and one of the best travelled and informed men of the Arab World who has worked, relentlessly, to make the Arab World a better place. (MEBD 1963, 45)

Shiber's critique of Arabian modernity was delivered from his perspective on Arab nationalism. He was greatly influenced by both Western education and his nostalgia for the Arab Renaissance. His theoretical approach counteracted the vision of his colleague Hassan Fathy, who, a few years later Shiber's discussion of the Arab metropolis, would lead the charge to resist Western technology and methodology and replace them with local and indigenous design methods. Shiber, on the other hand, developed an Arab architectural language that challenged Western models by incorporating their principles to form Arab tectonics inspired by the local environment. His vision for the contemporary Arab metropolis was a response to the rampant demolition of urban historic centers in the name of redevelopment. Hence, he promoted an extreme approach to city evolution by encouraging a fresh start—an "urban reinvention" or "urban renewal"—that he argued would avoid disturbance and discomfort by applying optimized solutions made possible by the use of advanced technology and updated design solutions. This approach was specific to the planning and urban development of the Arab region because of the economic and socio-political configuration of Arab states (Shiber 1961). To create a sense of identity surrounding the new status of the modern, independent Arab city and to overcome the "superficial understanding and application of concepts behind so-called 'modern' architecture," (Shiber 1964) Shiber called for only first-rate architects and planners to be commissioned. To stimulate innovative design solutions, establish well-founded scientific methods for construction, and discover new materials, he called for the creation of professional challenges and competitions. Finally, he developed guidelines for zoning, architectural control, and regional planning to avoid rational two-dimensional planning and to neutralize the power of climate through design and technology (Shiber 1964). In conclusion, Shiber was a planner and visionary. His models and methods of regionalism were anchored in a desire to improve the bureaucratic system and train professional designers, architects, and engineers to organize the progress of Arabian regionalism across the Arab world, based on the notion that planning is the "orchestration of the city."

FOOTNOTES AND REFERENCES

¹ Arabian references the states in the Arabian Peninsula and Levant whose urbanization directly resulted from the revenues from oil productions. Some of these states are the largest oil producers of the world, while others have benefited from financial programs funded by oil income, such as the Kuwait Fund for Arab Economic Development.

² Urban Buildup is a term introduced by the planner Saba George Shiber to describe the process of transforming the old Arab medieval towns to a modern metropolis.

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