

Reima Pietilä's Kuwait Ministry revisited... revisited...

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I have observed the transformation of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Kuwait, accomplished in 1985 by Reima Pietilä, for many years. I documented those changes in a seventy-page chapter of my book *Transcultural Architecture*.² If I still feel today like saying more about it, it is first, because by 2018 the transformations have progressed and annihilated the building almost completely. Second, because during more recent conversations with observers from the Kuwaiti side, I had to reconsider some of my earlier

¹ The exposition showed historical and new photo material of the ministry. The exposition went to Tampere University in 2019. <http://archinfo.fi/en/2018/11/seminar-on-the-architecture-of-raili-and-reima-pietila-in-the-middle-east-on-21-nov-at-aalto-university/>

I thank Gareth Griffiths for his comments on the draft paper.

² See Thorsten Botz-Bornstein: *Transcultural Architecture: The Limits and Opportunities of Critical Regionalism*. Routledge/Ashgate, 2016.

reflections. Earlier, my point of view had been that of a Western critic. I appreciated Pietilä's provocative approach. He had deconstructed existing clichés about official architecture and created a sort of anti-Ministry with multicolored tiles and unusual wall shapes. For the Kuwaitis, a Ministry of Foreign Affairs was supposed to represent the authority of the state in an international context. Pietilä was thinking in terms of fancy fountains and ruin-inspired walls; the Kuwaitis were thinking in terms of marble, gold, chandeliers, and red carpets. Not only did Pietilä not provide the latter items, but he created a place where such items were almost impossible to install. Desperate attempts to transform the building led to absurd solutions, and finally to its quasi-demolition.

Let me remind you briefly the unique architectural history of Kuwait's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The planning of the complex stretched over a long period. In 1969, Reima and Raili were invited to participate in an architecture competition for the improvement of Kuwait's Old Town area. In 1973 they were assigned the development of the downtown shore area located east of the Sief Palace, which included the extension of an existing building as well as two buildings now commonly referred to as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Planning activities (directly and indirectly) related to the Ministry stretched over a period of sixteen years: the Ministry was officially inaugurated in 1985. During those years Reima Pietilä visited the region many times, learned Arabic, studied Gulf archeology, and became familiar with Islamic architectural traditions. Once the Ministry was finished, it was ready for the second phase of the architectural process: its demolition. Almost immediately upon the architects' departure, Kuwaiti authorities began transformations, starting with the elimination of tiles and the ceiling cladding. The "renovations" would become a permanent activity during the thirty years to come and are still ongoing. Two generations of architects made a living on slowly demolishing and partly reconstructing the Ministry. As it was not possible to simply erase the building, the demolition proceeded at an extremely slow pace. Transformations turned out to be tricky. Since the structure of the complex is rather organic, once some essential modifications were in place they

would require further modifications. Originally, the building's sense or meaningfulness depended on the particular walk-through-see-through structure. It was a "city" with numerous openings and entrances, meandering routes, terraces, and courtyards (see picture above). Once this concept had been cancelled by closing corridors and wall openings, the building's sense or meaningfulness was seriously flawed. As a result, further transformations became necessary. At present, only a few original exterior walls remain extant and most of them appear strange and out of place within the newly established context. Pietilä was not producing a picture, nor did he have the attitude of a star architect who does not care about the surroundings and the users. His approach was rather different from those architects that is most typically criticized.

The culture clash that took place in Kuwait is not a clash between Western modernity and Middle Eastern tradition, but rather between a Western postmodern deconstructive spirit and a Middle Eastern modernity that could not grasp the ironical approach towards the modern *and* the traditional. The main problem is not that the building is too Western but rather that it is not Western enough. On the conceptual level, the plan of the Ministry follows that of a traditional souk: a loosely coherent, half-covered walkable city offering interesting views from diverse perspectives. Pietilä had modernized this "souk" by applying a stylized, simplified design. One can call this approach postmodern because it unites tradition with modernity by canceling some current modern paradigms and by introducing transcultural interpretations of traditions. Transcultural architecture produces new cultural expressions by simultaneously reinstating and overcoming local culture. The problem is that the resulting mixture remains, most of the time, a product of postindustrial Western culture that non-Western societies will most probably not grasp spontaneously. This is particularly true for those societies that remain determined by traditional industries such as oil production.

Akbar S. Ahmed describes in his *Postmodernism and Islam* a conversation he had within the "decidedly postmodern décor" of the home of Charles Jencks during which Ahmed tried to explain to a group of

illustrious Western intellectuals that the discussion of postmodernism has not yet reached the Muslim world: “The struggle in the Muslim world was still very much with the main issues of modernity – the relationship between a strong central state asserting its own version of the grand Narrative and tribal groups; the question of national identity; the debate about the limits of economic development as a marker of progress...”³ Ahmed provides the label “Muslim,” which is misleading because the problem has nothing to do with religion. Culture clashes do not necessarily happen, as Huntington believed, because of religions and traditions but mainly because of different politico-cultural approaches to modernity.

An architectural clash similar to the one in Kuwait took place in the 1930s between two other cultural blocks: Europe and the USA. In the 1930s it was not postmodernism but socialism that led to cultural misunderstandings. Tom Wolfe describes in his *From Bauhaus to Our House* how famous European architects like Mies van der Rohe and Gropius, who were inspired by the communist spirit of social housing, built soulless skyscrapers in Manhattan that American architects tried to make “habitable” by stuffing them with traditional requisites and homely kitsch items:

Every great law firm in New York moves without a sputter of protest into a glass-box office building with concrete slab floors and seven-foot-ten-inch-high concrete slab ceilings and plasterboard walls and pygmy corridors” and then hires a decorator and gives him a budget of hundreds of thousands of dollars to turn these mean cubes and grids into a horizontal fantasy of a Restoration townhouse. I have seen the carpenters and cabinetmakers and search-and-acquire girls hauling in more cornices, covings, pilasters, carved moldings, and recessed domes, more linenfold paneling, more (fireless) fireplaces with festoons of fruit carved in mahogany on the mantels, more chandeliers, sconces,

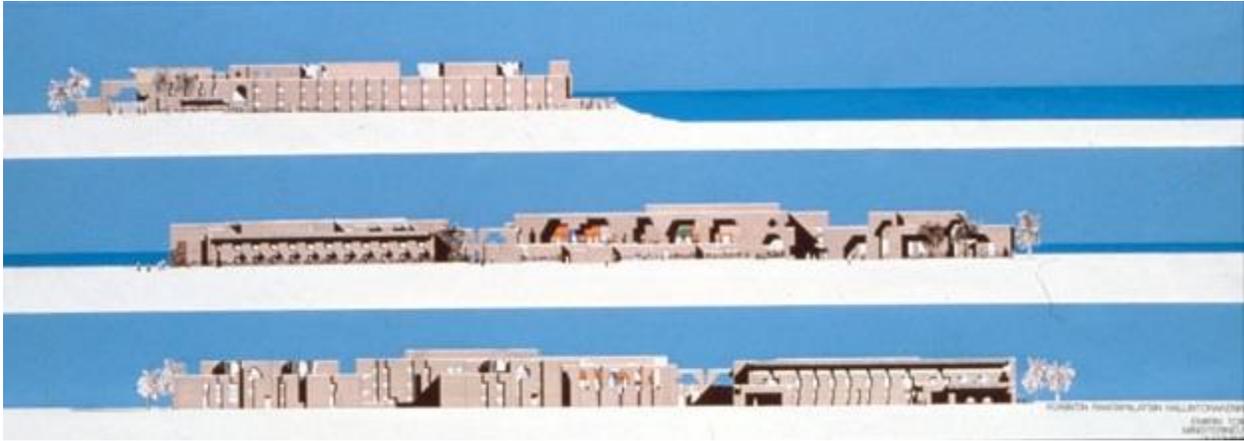
³ Akbar S. Ahmed, *Postmodernism and Islam: Predicament and Promise*. New York: Routledge. 2003 [1992], xii.

girandoles, chestnut leather sofas, and chiming clocks than Wren, Inigo Jones, the brothers Adam, Lord Burlington, and the Dilettanti, working in concert, could have dreamed of.

Similar to what happened to Pietilä's building, the American users required marble, gold, chandeliers, and red carpets. The radically modern language of the buildings was rejected, but the problem could be fixed by "stuffing" the modern shell with objects that were found more adequate. In Kuwait in the 1980s, the modern language of Mies van der Rohe and Gropius would most probably have been accepted and the modern shell would have been "stuffed" exactly like in the cases of Manhattan. The problem is that Pietilä did not even offer such a modern shell but a strange transcultural building.

In my earlier chapter on the Ministry [in *Transcultural Architecture*], I described the shortcomings in the reception of the building by the local public, which might have led many readers to the conclusion that Pietilä should never have accepted this commission. This is the most radical conclusion. However, could he have done things otherwise? One should emphasize the Kuwaiti point view. Pietilä made mistakes and I have referred to some of them in the chapter: there are not enough window openings to the sea, the A/C center and the cooling towers are on the street side... These mistakes appear to be minor. His main mistake was that he employed a language that was neither desired nor understood. Second, the language of advanced modernity extrapolated via a "postmodern" language is particularly unsuitable for architecture conceived in desert conditions. This building might have been more successful in India or in Africa, but here, under desert conditions, this design turns out to be highly unsuitable.

Despite its exuberant display of stylized traditional motives, the aesthetics of the Ministry is determined by simplified horizontal lines. Vertical lines do exist, but they appear like mere slits within a long, flat, stretched body.



The building is determined by horizontal lines

This linear-horizontal aesthetics is suitable in contexts where nature offers a strong “pictorial” sense of verticality, but it should be avoided when designing an official building installed within a flat landscape marked by desert conditions. Pietilä’s graphics of the building emphasizes long horizontal lines, the presence of the sea, and a stylized white desert landscape. A few palm trees, not higher than the Ministry itself, and some dry bushes are placed next to the complex. Flat structures hugging the ground might be suitable for private desert homes in Utah or Arizona, but for a Ministry in an oil-rich Gulf state, most architects would want to think “desert architecture” along the vertical lines of Dubai. The new Central Bank, designed by HOK and placed right opposite the Ministry, is such an example. True, Lloyd Wright created the Prairie Style influenced by the flat terrain of the American Midwest while skyscrapers were going up in Chicago. This was a revolt. However, here in Kuwait we have to do with an official building. So I’m not saying that desert architecture engenders vertical lines but that official buildings in the desert culture are less acceptable when they are flat. Why did Pietilä stick to the horizontality? First, because he was not allowed to go higher. Second, he takes the concept of long horizontal lines from elsewhere. It is typical for a certain type of Western organic architecture since Frank Lloyd Wright. Horizontality provides a modern input for an architecture trying to integrate local traditions. However, such horizontal lines make more sense

in a context where verticality is offered in the form of topology and vegetation. The architecture of Alvar Aalto, for example, is simple and geometric, but it is embedded in a context that is not simple and geometric.



Finlandia Hall by Alvar Aalto in Helsinki

The same contrast can be observed in the aesthetics of Frank Lloyd Wright's second phase. The design of his *Falling Water* is particularly efficient because it is so distinct from the surrounding vegetation. The same building built in the desert would look entirely different.



Falling Water by Frank Lloyd Wright

The contrast between geometric architectural shapes and non-geometric nature is not a paradigm limited to Western organic architecture. It also applies to another architecture that is famous for its simplicity: Japanese traditional architecture. The Japanese teahouse is usually inserted in the complex natural environment of the Japanese garden. The garden provides a pictures background where the simplicity of the architecture can be appreciated via a juxtaposition of contrasting elements.



Japanese traditional teahouse

In Finland, horizontal lines of traditional architecture are imbedded in landscape often composed of “curvy”

lakes providing a picturesque context.



Finnish landscape

Pietilä built most of its buildings into forests. For example, the horizontal lines of the Dipoli building (1966) are surrounded by a forest. The Hervanta Community Center, on which Pietilä had been working in parallel with the Kuwait project since 1979, is also located in the middle of dense vegetation, which almost invades the center (even if most of it has disappeared today). The Suvikumpu housing in Espoo mimics the growth of the forest.





Hervanta Community Center by Pietilä. Modern linearity and “painterly” nature are balanced.

The horizontal-vertical dichotomy is supported by a distinction that has become famous through Heinrich Wölfflin: the linear and the painterly. Wölfflin defined two kinds of aesthetics in painting: one that sees the world in terms of lines and one that sees the world in terms of painted masses. According to Wölfflin, between the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries, European painting underwent a shift from “draughtsmanly painting” to “painterly painting.”⁴ The linear vision “feels along the edges” while the painterly vision sees things more as patches. Wölfflin believes that since the Renaissance, in Western painting, both styles coexist.

Wölfflin’s distinction can be applied to the above-discussed architectural situation. The desert provides no painterly context and, as a result, architects designing in the desert are tempted to use more vertical or painterly elements. All Kuwaiti architects who have been modifying the Ministry made strong attempts to equip the aesthetics with a painterly aspect. This follows the logic of a desert aesthetics in which buildings (especially official ones) should stick out and not be assimilated to the surface of the ground. The long horizontal lines had to be changed into pointed arches and columns. All changes emphasize verticality.

⁴ Heinrich Wölfflin: *Principles of Art History: The Problem of the Development of Style in Later Art* [1915]. New York: Dover, 1950), 18ff.

Square-shaped frames have been put on the roof to make the building look higher. The conversion of the horizontal into the vertical becomes particularly manifest when looking at the development of the facades. The different phases of the renovation of the street side façade and of the East façade show how Kuwaiti architects gained more and more confidence in their search for verticality. They developed an increasingly painterly style until the linear style was completely cancelled. Horizontal geometric lines would be replaced with what Wölfflin calls a play with masses. The new arches on the east façade are top-heavy, which emphasizes their weight and thus eliminates the arches' linear character. At the same time, those arches are floating and not anchored in the ground because they are not standing on a base; or they are placed on disproportionately thin pillars.



Three pictures above: development of east façade



1986



1998



2016

Street façade. There is a clear development towards verticality.

The most important point for me to show is that transculturality can be interesting but here some essential conditions have been overlooked. The Kuwaiti architects who were trying to amend the results were asked not to square the circle but to square the line, which is an impossible task.

For more pictures see: <https://www.botzbornstein.org/copy-of-kuwait-before-after>

