Fig. 1.1
Gentile and Giovanni Bellini, St Mark Preaching in Alexandria, 1504–7; Oil on canvas; Pinacoteca de Brera, Milan
The minaret wept
When a stranger came - bought it
And built on top of it a chimney
Adonis, The Minaret

“\textit{I found myself in a spacious and lovely hall as vast as a playground.}
\textit{It was surrounded by forty chambers with doors of sandal and aloewood,}
\textit{covered with plates of red gold and graced with silver handles.}
\textit{At the far end of the hall, I saw forty girls, sumptuously dressed and lavishly adorned.}”
\textit{The Arabian Nights}

Can the Middle East develop its own architectural transition to modernity? Laden with the Orientalist literature of the last few centuries and cast into the role of the opposite, 'the other' and the misguided counterpart to 'western' civilisation, it has struggled to carve it's own modern stylistic identity except as one of a mirror image to European styles.

The Arabian Nights have been translated into english several times since the early 19th century. Despite the original tales being traced orally back to the 10th century, as well as being a collection of distinctly fictional and fantastical folk tales, “translators, scholars and readers shared the belief that the Nights depicted a true picture of Arab life and culture at the time of the tales, and for some strange reason, at their own time.” They were translated for the 19th century European as contemporary travel guides to Cairo, Damascus and Baghdad. It is not, then, difficult, to trace the beginnings of "Europe's collective day dream of the orient." as VG Kiernan put it.

The Arab poet Adonis, in his poem The Minaret, takes the point a step further whereupon the architectural symbol of 'the orient' is taken possession of, and quickly transformed to suit 'the occident'. The stranger, the colonialist forces himself upon, and transforms, a symbol of arab identity. Yasser Alsheshtawy in his essay 'The Great Divide: Struggling and Emerging Cities in the Arab World' interprets from this that 'while much of the blame for the Arab crisis is from within, external forces are conspiring to maintain the region in a constant state of backwardness.' On the other hand, the problem could be seen today as only accentuated by the ruling arab classes. When in 1978 Edward Said published Orientalism, as well as redefining the term itself, he criticised the practice of the privileged arab classes who internalized the Orientalists' ideas of Arabic culture. Writing in 2003 in an essay for counterpunch Said rediscussed his 1978 text. He described the 'Orient' as "that semi-mythical construct which since Napoleon’s invasion of Egypt in the late eighteenth century has been made and re-made countless times"and he asks "whether modern imperialism ever ended."

This essay will examine how the idea of arab nationalism is intertwined with the notion of being 'the other'- the Orient-and how or whether the modern built environment, largely designed and commissioned by the ruling classes can be seen as a projection of not only arab nationalist values but also the absorbed views of the Orientalists - are the newer arab cities and buildings shaped to fulfil an Orientalist's idea of how an arab city should be?

Through examples of building in the gulf and middle east, the search for a non-western transition into modernity will be examined, in contrast to traditional vernacular, and against the backdrop of the dramatic shifts in power that took place in middle east over the course of the 20th century.

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1 Adonis The Minaret\textendash; in Yasser Alsheshtawy, "The Great Divide: Struggling and Emerging Cities in the Arab World". (New York: Routledge, 2011) p.1
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Orientalism in Culture

Orientalism has its roots in an academic tradition, and anyone who “taught, wrote about or researched 'the orient', could be described an orientalist.” A term which has become distinctly unpopular, especially since the publication of Said's text. More importantly, Said defines Orientalism as 'a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between 'the orient', and (most of the time) 'the occident'. As Said illustrates, the study of Orientalism was widespread and well-established. It stretched back centuries to the roots of imperialism and was taken up across the colonial powers in Europe and North America. Said also notes that this well-documented study of all countries deemed oriental, indistinguishable from one another in cultural and social terms, was geared towards the West. It was to inform the colonialist and the political powers that existed, it was not for the benefit of the orient itself and was in no way made available to them.

One of the strongest tools of the Orientalists was art. Orientalist paintings provide an immediate and powerful insight to the 'collective daydream' being circulated about Europe in the 18th, 19th and 20th Centuries. When in 1504 Gentile Bellini began work on his painting of 'Saint Mark Preaching in Alexandria' (fig. 1), he was working against the backdrop of Venice at the time, where trade with the Orient was established and yet, it was still the mystical unknown. While it was preceded by other Venetian Orientalist work, like that of Giovanni Mansueti’s, Saint Mark Baptising Anianas, Mansueti's clustered agglomeration of Venetian Orientalist motifs were not as coherent and well-conceived a summary of Venetian Orientalist work. In 'Saint Mark Preaching in Alexandria', the Venetian piazza is superimposed onto its 'other', the Alexandrian Square.

As a form of mass-communication, painting was a medium that spoke to the masses, both literate and illiterate. The audience for this was the Venetians, or rather, the Occident as a whole. By absorbing the Oriental and reading it in their own terms the Venetians were able to 'understand' the other as it was packaged into clearly relatable compartments, or well established symbols: like palm trees and Mamluk turbans. Said references French philosopher Gaston Bachelard's Poetics of Space in describing how we have a psychological tendency as a species to draw our boundaries and declare who is an insider and who is an outsider. The sprinkling of palm trees, and the dressing-up of strangers in the composition does just that.

Not surprisingly, Bellini was painting a square in Alexandria, without ever having been to Egypt. He had been known to have travelled to the east, however this was twenty years before he began work on this, his last painting, and in any case he had only got as far as Constantinople and never set foot in Egypt. In much the same way that Italo Calvino describes mythical cities that are, in essence, always Venice, Bellini is painting a place that is foreign but looks remarkably Venetian. That doesn't much trouble his audience, however, who read into this painting what they want to see regardless. Many of the compositional features in the painting are adapted from Bellini's earlier work, the Procession in the Piazza San Marco (1496):

"The façade, with its arches and domes, unmistakably evokes the basilica of San Marco, shorn of its Gothic tracery, but with the addition of enormous curving buttresses. Probably drawing on a visual memory of Hagia Sophia, which Gentile would have seen in Constantinople a quarter of a century earlier, as well as on the Venetian San Marco, this formidable synthesis serves to situate the scene in a realm at once exotic and familiar. In sum, the giant picture with its hundreds of figures and colossal architecture aspires to nothing less than a displaced affirmation of Christian Venice's sway over the realm of the infidel – imagined, moreover, at precisely the moment when that actual hegemony was threatened as never before."

Across 'the occident' there was already a list of pre-established stereotypes that, when reiterated by artists, poets, novelists and travellers became truths in their retelling. 'The orient' is lewd, a psychological tendency as a species to draw our boundaries and declare who is an insider and who is an outsider. The sprinkling of palm trees, and the dressing-up of strangers in the composition does just that.

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Across 'the occident' there was already a list of pre-established stereotypes that, when reiterated by artists, poets, novelists and travellers became truths in their retelling. 'The orient' is lewd, and licentious - see The Turkish Bath, Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, 1862 . 'The orient' is lazy - see the slothful men watching The Snake Charmer by Jean-Léon Gérôme, 1859. 'The orient' is cunning and cruel – see Execution Without Trial Under the Rule of the Moorish Kings in Granada, Henri Regault, 1870 . The orient, is exactly as 'we' feared.

The amusing result of the propagation of unfounded or un witnessed assumptions, is that it was very much a fantasy and famously, travellers to the Orient like Nerval were disappointed by the actual east that they were confronted with. Similarly Galland, Lane and Burton claimed the Arabian nights were a truer telling of Cairo, Baghdad and Aleppo than any travellers account of the place, and yet would feel the need to take creative license to adjust the tales according their own observations of these cities.

Orientalism in Middle Eastern Architecture

Said marks Napoleon's invasion of Egypt in 1798 as a turning point of the field of Orientalism. It is the beginning of the demarcation of this knowledge of 'the orient' as valuable both socially and politically. Napoleon famously brought with him to Egypt, in addition to the invading army, academics and Orientalists who documented everything that they came across. The Description de l’Égypte they produced was an unprecedented twenty four volume project, and even today the idea that the Arab world might undertake a similar study of its counterpart is unimaginable. As well as literature and art, one of the more lasting physical impressions that the imperialists left upon the East is their buildings. While under occupation, these cities took on the appearance of their european counterparts. Beirut, Cairo and Alexandria began to mimic the grand architecture of their occupiers.

Modernity as defined by Heynen in Architecture and Modernity “is a condition of living imposed upon individuals by the socioeconomic process of modernization The experience of modernity involves a rupture with tradition and has a profound impact on ways of life and daily habits. The effects of this rupture are manifold. They are reflected in modernism, the body of artistic and intellectual ideas and movements that deal with the process of modernization and with the experience of modernity.” It being an imposition is particularly relevant in the case of newly established middle Eastern countries. Since the introduction of the Aga Khan award in the 1980's into international architectural discourse, a Neo-islamic movement in architecture has become more prevalent. As young arab states have formed themselves in opposition to 'the west' their own national identity and style have become forged as an increasingly condensed form of perceived traditionalism. One the one hand, work by architects like Egyptian Hassan Fathy represent a genuine exploration into the idea of modernity in architecture, developed through 'non-western' means.

On the other hand, a surface application of Islamic geometries and styles is now applied to everything from building facades to window silhouettes, in ways unseen in any form of vernacular. Typically, the most detailed study of these geometries was carried out by an orientalist, Owen Jones' in The Grammar of Ornament, 1856. As wealth in the gulf is drastically unevenly distributed. The wealthy minority are those with access to education abroad, and the funds to commission built work. They therefore form the majority of the inhabitants of the gulf able to build. They are the families who climbed highest in society, benefited most from the discovery of oil and it's related industries, and when it came time to educate their children, sent them abroad to Europe and North America. Orientalism as a field of study spans so many centuries that its proportional representation in the annals of history give it the upper hand against any who approach western literature in study. The arab elite have shifted the relationship of “us” and “them” by gaining access to “their” literature, and consequently, 'the west's' impression of what arab society and culture is.

Fathy spoke of the cultural confusion in egyptian architecture, and his regret that 'it was seen as a problem of style, and style is looked upon as some sort of surface finish that can be applied to any building and even scraped off and changed if necessary...It is not understood,' he wrote, 'that real architecture cannot exist except in a living tradition, and that architectural tradition is all but dead in Egypt today. One could argue that this is true of most if not all Middle Eastern/Gulf states.

It is the Gulf states, as categorised by Alsheshtawey, that are developing fastest and have continued to grow in recent years. They have also suffered from enforced exposure to European and American building typologies without the time to develop their own vernacular into anything approaching what might be appropriate for modernity. The explosion of building in Dubai, and now Qatar, Abu Dhabi, and Riyadh appears to have sprouted out of the desert with no contextual grounding. Saudi Arabia is but one example of many, a young country (formed in 1932). It's people were chiefly nomadic for centuries, and while they formed a few cities, the growth of these cities was slow. The formation of the new Saudi nation was woven tightly to Islam, the more conservative branch of which, Wahhabism, was used to bolster the takeover of the western province by the family of Saud. The idea of nationality was an entirely new model for the tribal people of the gulf. It was created largely for the convenience of Western powers and of course the ruling family. Rallying behind the new flag and Islam, however, became a stronghold against which resistance to modernity, or 'westernisation' as it became known, could stand.

This resistance to modernity became weaker as oil revenues trickled into the Saudi economy, through various filters, and built up a saudi elite of very wealthy families. Houses and villas, a typology hitherto unseen became symbols of wealth, and the use of costly imported materials a display of ones status in society. In the same way that western capitalism pervades arab society, what is a 'good' house is defined by the styles of architecture seen in the West, which became widely known through the introduction of the television.

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19 Hasan Fathy, Architecture For the Poor (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1989) p.20
It was ARAMCO, the Saudi Arabian Oil Company, who introduced the first housing development to Saudi Arabia in 1955, for expatriates. It wasn't, however, until Saudi's themselves could afford these new shiny commodities that they began to appeared all over the country. ARAMCO's architects were non-Saudis, as no Saudis at the time had been trained as such. Under instruction from the Saudi government to 'tidy up' the shantytown vernacular housing, ARAMCO developed a housing scheme wherein they would offer to build your home as long as the design could be filtered and modified by their in-house architects. Eventually they simply provided blueprints of a selection of villas that could be bought chosen from like a menu, and built.

For the poorer locals keen to catch on to the trend, but unable to afford brand new concrete housing, the intermediary solution was to plaster your mud brick house in concrete, to give it the appearance of the newer, trendier home. Modernity came slowly to be seen as acceptable in its physical form, however modernity in terms of social and cultural change was and still is rejected because it was deemed to be a process of 'westernisation' – as opposed to the newly coined 'saudization' being promoted by the government. To be Saudi is to be muslim, to be 'westernized' is to be non-muslim, and this distinction was made clear in the minds of Saudi people. The palm tree, an earlier emblem of 'the orient' in the work of Bellini, became a Saudi National symbol, fronted by crossed swords, and now available on t-shirts and wrist bands.

It is interesting to note that society embraced the built environment of the west while doggedly holding onto, and in some cases exaggerating its own cultural values. Aspects of western houses such as gardens, swimming pools and picket fences were incorporated into Saudi homes. However, one had to also preserve the dignity of ones family by hiding these now private spaces behind 4m high solid walls. What the introduction of 'western' building styles into Saudi society resulted in was the building of fortified streets, with high impermeable walls and automobile designed highways where no pedestrian could or would venture. Homes were built into islands. From a society where doors were rarely used or locked, one's mistrust of 'the other' began to be internalized even further, until you could only really trust those within your own walls, where you housed your family, your garden, your swimming pool, and the staff that maintained your own kingdom. And as the old joke goes, even they started to look a little suspicious.

When buildings are commissioned in the gulf, they are either designed and built as shadows of 'european' buildings, or what could be considered european post modernist buildings. (As Mashary Al Naim points out in his article 'Riyadh: A city of institutional Architecture' with the introduction of the villa typology to a part of the world where no such building formerly existed); or they are outsourced to foreign architects. Preferably famous ones who can provide the nation with a symbol of its superficial modernity and wealth by buying into the 'starchitects' brand name, while retaining the cursory nod to traditional vernacular of the region.

As but one example, SOM have been hired on countless occasions by Middle Eastern clients to bring a bit of glamour to the desert. The description of the 1981 Hajj terminal on the SOM website reads: "For its Hajj Terminal design, SOM utilized the highly identifiable form of the Bedouin tent to create a marvel." It is, they say, "culturally symbolic". Of the National Commercial bank in Jeddah, SOM say that the "office windows open directly onto courtyards with an inward orientation typical of Islamic traditional design." Like Bellini's painting of the square in Alexandria, what SOM do in built form is to superimpose familiar building typologies onto their equivalents in the gulf, before dressing them up in Mamluk turbans and dotting palm trees about them. What's more, they do this commissioned by the Arab's themselves. This form of 'modernity' has become acceptable, as the caricature of the culture of arab people is further engrained in global society. The idea of an inward facing building might be typical of some Islamic traditional design, but Hejaz is not famous for it's courtyard houses. Nor is the architecture of one of many Islamic countries in the region defined by the fact that it is Islamic. Orientalism has now pervaded global attitudes to architecture. They either provide the arab world with what they believe to be suitable, or they pander to the Arabian Nights palace. The lifestyles of the people of Saudi Arabia are not identical to that of Morocco, or even Yemen. Which is not to say that modern architecture ought to stem from the vernacular of the particular region it is built in, but that the gulf may have lost the opportunity to develop its own style by copying what forms European architecture have taken or directly commissioning them to build in the first place. If such lazy design as the "Muqarnas" Tower by SOM in Riyadh continue to be propagated about the region, there is little chance of anything but the gulf acting as a lucrative outpost to european architects' offices. They design their buildings exactly as they would for a european client - but wrapped in a facade that vaguely resembles the Muqarnas corbel detailing of Ummayad dynasty mosques (that were never a feature of gulf architecture). The problem is exacerbated by the fact that architecture and aesthetic is so little regarded in Saudi Arabia. Art is non-existent, and historic architecture is routinely

destroyed for fear it might become a site of worship.

'Most countries of the Middle East suffered from the fundamental problems over their national identity. More than three-quarters of a century after the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire, from which most of them emerged, these states have been unable to define, project, and maintain a national identity that is both inclusive and representative.'

At the heart of Said's controversial text lies his belief that the concept of 'our nation, our language, our culture' is bankrupt. All cultures, he says, are interrelated and there is no such thing as an unsullied original source. Instead of searching for an isolated nationalism arab countries should embrace their full history. Modern architecture in the middle east has become intertwined with arab nationalism. This is not an exception, the architecture is but one of many cultural outputs of society that draw the line between 'us' and 'them'. What must be accepted, however, is that this architecture is also intertwined with the styles, building methods and tectonics of western architecture. It is a product of western imperialism and the hang over of Orientalism that arab society has still not recovered from. The crucial 20th century, wherein growth, technology and modernity came all at once cannot be ignored. Middle eastern architecture can't go back to it's founding geometries and vernacular styles without acknowledging the transformations it has undergone in the last few decades alone. Gone is the chance for cities to slowly mature: the cities are there already. What comes next must be architecture that taps into more than The Grammar of Ornament, it must respond to the way we live now in the Middle East, 'westernisation' and all.

Kumaraswamy, P, R "Who am I?: The Identity Crisis in the Middle East", The Middle East Review of International Affairs Volume 10, No. 1, Article 5 (March 2006)
Fig. 1.1
Gentile and Giovanni Bellini, St Mark Preaching in Alexandria, 1504–7; Oil on canvas; Pinacoteca de Brera, Milan