ABSTRACT

Kuwait is a city that is forever being demolished and built anew, a cyclical process that began in the early 1950s when the old port town was razed to make way for oil modernization. Today’s development boom is seeing the systemic demolition of the early oil landscape to be replaced with something newer still; the few remaining pre-oil buildings, meanwhile, are currently being renovated into heritage sites as part and parcel of the city’s redevelopment. The contradiction inherent in the simultaneous demolition and resurrection of different temporal parts of Kuwait’s built environment reveals that, to those in control of the city’s development, whatever came up after 1950 does not constitute a valid part of Kuwait City’s urban heritage and can therefore be demolished. An alternative view is emerging, however, amongst a young generation of Kuwaiti architects who are starting to actively voice their dissatisfaction and regret for the destruction of the post-1950 built environment, which they believe occupies as valid a place in the evolution of Kuwait’s urban identity as the pre-oil town.

Through interviews with individuals currently involved in shaping the city (architects, planners, developers, heritage-makers, entrepreneurs) on both sides of the debate, alongside an analysis of their contrasting projects and writings, this paper will critically explore these changing and competing perceptions of the historical value of Kuwait’s built environment. The objective of this inquiry is to address one of the biggest challenges facing Gulf urbanism today: how to allow the city to grow, develop, and reinvent itself without the constant need to demolish and build anew. What role can this new generation of architects, for whom demolition is not the only answer, play in this regard? How can Gulf cities move beyond the fetishization of heritage and make room for old spaces to acquire new functions and serve as active sites rather than historical artefacts in the city? Can the latter allow for the preservation of the post-1950 city even though the planning authorities do not view such sites as worthy of “historical” conservation, and how might this impact existing impressions on the urban identity (or the perceived lack thereof) of Gulf cities?