

Globalization, Identity, and the Urban Built Environment: A Theoretical Context

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Abstract

Globalization has much to do with the “widening, deepening, and speeding up of worldwide interconnectedness in all aspects of contemporary social life” (Held et al., 1999, p. 2). Globalization processes, including transnational capital and investment, mass migration, and the transfer of goods and ideas, have increasingly been transforming Arab cities and shaping their spatial patterns and building forms in the past few decades. Globalization’s forces and the new forms of architecture and urbanism they produce strongly influence how people interact with the urban built environment and how they understand themselves and perceive their identities. This paper provides a theoretical overview of globalization and the meaning of identity and discusses the ways globalization and identity relate to one another as well as to the urban built environment. The paper reviews literature on the theorization and periodization of globalization, globalization’s influences on cultural production in general and architecture and urbanism in particular, and the nature of identity and its negotiation in the built environment. The paper argues that globalization is not a new phenomenon. However, in contemporary globalization the extent and intensity of the flows of capital, people, goods, information, and ideologies are unprecedented, and their influences on the urban built environment are particularly significant. This is evident in new types of buildings and urban developments that are particular to this contemporary phase of globalization in certain cities, such as mixed-use megaprojects, malls, and gated communities that were not known before in their contemporary ubiquity, form, and function. This paper concludes that globalization may simultaneously result in a degree of homogeneity and hybridity, heterogeneity and hybridity, or even homogeneity and heterogeneity of the built environment; it also may result in all three forms of transformation together. The paper argues that identity is a construct, not an essential thing. As such, identity is continuously shaped and reshaped through intersecting local, regional, and global forces. Not only is identity expressed in the built environment, but also it is constructed through the built environment. This paper helps set a theoretical context for the study of the question of identity in contemporary architecture and urbanism in globalizing Arab cities.

Keywords: globalization, identity, globalization and the built environment, identity and the built environment, identity and contemporary globalization, meaning of identity, architecture and urbanism in globalizing cities.

1. Introduction

Globalization processes have been increasingly transforming Arab cities in the past few decades, changing their spatial patterns, and shaping their building forms. The different forces of globalization and the new forms of architecture and urbanism they produce strongly influence how people understand themselves and perceive their identities. This paper provides a theoretical overview of globalization and the meaning of identity. It discusses the ways globalization and identity relate to one another as well as to the urban built environment. The paper reviews literature on the theorization and periodization of globalization, globalization’s influences on cultural production in general and architecture and urbanism in particular, and the nature of identity and its negotiation in the built environment. This paper helps set a theoretical context for the investigation of the question of identity in contemporary architecture and urbanism in globalizing Arab cities.

2. Theorization of Globalization

Defining globalization from the economic point of view was the earliest way globalization was approached and remained for a long time the most common. Scholars in this vein tend to equate globalization with “economic globalization,” understanding it in terms of the global opening up of national banking, insurance, securities, and foreign direct investment that result in the emergence of a global capital market. Globalization, for them, is evident in the high intensity of financial flows and the high speed of multinational financial transactions, which were made

possible through advanced transportation and telecommunication systems and, most recently, information technologies, and extensive international surveillance and regulation. Under such globalization, national financial markets become integrated into the global market, heavily influencing the role of the state and its decisions (Held et al., 1999).

Some scholars emphasize the significance of capitalist economic forces for understanding globalization. Nowhere is this more obvious than in Wallerstein's (1979) theorization of world-system theory. According to this theory, world trade between the "core," that is, the dominant capitalist societies, and the "periphery," that is, the dominated underdeveloped societies, is essential to the understanding of capitalism. In such a world-economy system, production is pursued for the purpose of exchange and as long as it is profitable.

One important concept central to globalization, and its relation to capitalism, is what Harvey (1989, 1990) refers to as "time-space compression," or, citing Karl Marx, "annihilation of space by time." According to Harvey, time-space compression is a relative process that has been going for centuries, but we have been exposed to a new intense phase of it since the early 1970s. With increasing advancement in means of transport and telecommunication, time taken to travel, communicate, and move money and information, among other things, becomes shorter and shorter in a sense that makes space seem to be shrinking. For Harvey, the primary impetus for time-space compression is the speeding up of the circulation of capital, that is, acceleration of profit turnover time under capitalism.

Taking a political-economy view, Harvey (1995) asserts that globalization has always been significant to the dynamics of capitalism. The accumulation of capital, which is essential to the survival of capitalism, has always been "profoundly geographical and spatial" (p. 2). Capitalism has always sought a "spatial fix" to its problems, not only through long-term investment in the built environment to support the processes of production, exchange, and consumption, but also through the flow of excess capital to remote geographical areas to invest in new markets and businesses (Harvey, 1989, 1990, 1995). According to Harvey (1995, p. 2), "without the possibilities inherent in geographical expansion ... capitalism would long ago have ceased to function as a political-economic system."

Giddens (1990) criticizes the overemphasis Marxist theorists such as Harvey put on the relation between globalization and capitalist economy, although he considers economic forces, particularly under capitalism, a significant influence of globalization. Giddens believes the role of the nation-state as a political system in a global system should not be undermined. For despite the fact that transnational corporations, for example, may have great economic power, the power of such corporations cannot compete with that of the state. Central to Giddens' understanding of globalization is his notion of "disembedding," which he defines as "'the lifting out' of social relations from local contexts of interaction and their restructuring across time and space" (p. 21). Disembeddedness was made possible through the separation of time from space, which Giddens finds central to globalization. This latter phenomenon is what Giddens calls "time-space distanciation": the spread of social relations across wide distances. This phenomenon is similar to the notion of time-space compression advanced by Harvey, although, as Waters (1995, p. 58) convincingly argues, it "leaves the [false] impression that time and space are becoming stretched." Embracing the notions of time-space distanciation and disembeddedness, Giddens defines globalization as "the intensification of worldwide social relationships which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice-versa" (p. 64). This pattern of unprecedented intensification, according to Giddens, brings with it dramatic change to societies and states.

Other scholars emphasize the importance of the relation between the global and the individual to the understanding of globalization. Robertson and Lechner (1985, p. 103) take globalization as a "sociocultural system." This system involves "both the compression of the world and the intensification of consciousness of the world as a whole" (Robertson, 1992, p. 8). The notion of intensification of consciousness of the world suggests that many issues we encounter are likely to be redefined globally, instead of being understood as local or national issues (Waters, 1995). However, the consciousness of the world, as Robertson sees it, does not mean that the locality becomes irrelevant. For Robertson, we should not understand globalization in terms of the local-global polarity. Rather, globalization involves the reconstruction or even production of locality, community, and home. Globalization as Robertson sees it involves "the simultaneity and the interpenetration of what are conventionally called the global and the local" (p. 30). Robertson thus finds that the concept of "glocalization" conveys more accurately than the term "globalization" the complex relationship between the global and the local.

Some scholars take a cultural approach to globalization. For Appadurai (1996), capital is just one of five dimensions or "scapes" of "global cultural flows" (p. 33). He uses the term "scape" to emphasize the fluidity and subjectivity of the dimensions of global flows. Thus, Appadurai talks about "ethnoscapes," that is, the flow of people, be they

tourists, guest workers, refugees, or others; “mediascapes,” that is, the flow of media; “technoscapes,” that is, the flow of technology; “financescapes,” that is, the flow of money; “ideoscapes,” that is, the flow of ideas that have political implications and often relates to state or counter-state ideologies. Appadurai emphasizes the central role of the interconnected scapes of media and migration and how they work together to construct “imagined selves” and “imagined worlds” (p. 3), the kind of imagined localities immigrants produce in their place of diaspora.

3. Periodization of Globalization

There is no agreement among scholars and theorists on the origins of globalization. Giddens (1990) and others associate globalization with nineteenth-century Europe, finding it directly connected to modernity, industrialization, colonial expansion, and nation-state building. But scholars such as Harvey (1995), Robertson (1992), and Held et al. (1999) suggest that globalization predated modernity, and they speak of phases or episodes of globalization, although they adopt different time periods for those phases.

One example of such phases of globalization is the four episodes given by Held et al. (1999). The first is the pre-modern episode, which took place before the sixteenth century and involved interregional flows of people in Eurasia and the Americas as well as imperial interests. The second is the early modern, which took place during the sixteenth century into the mid-nineteenth century and is marked by the spread of world religions and the flow of people into the Americas. The third is modern globalization, which took place between the mid-nineteenth century and the end of World War II and in which much of the world was involved through colonial expansion, migration, and advancement in transport and communication technologies. The fourth episode of globalization is contemporary globalization, which took place from 1945 up to the present day. This is an episode that, according to Held et al., is marked by the creation of many newly independent nation-states and by new patterns of global flows of people, increasing global economic interaction, and the spread of international economic regulations. Unlike Held et al., Harvey (1990) believes contemporary globalization began in the early 1970s. He attributes this new episode of globalization to the “transition to flexible [capital] accumulation,” which was facilitated by the use of “new organizational forms and new technologies in production” (p. 284) as well as “developments in the arena of consumption” (p. 285). It even could be argued that the 1990s marked a new phase of globalization as this decade witnessed significant advancement in information technologies and wide-spread use of the Internet, which would make possible global social networking, further shrinking space and leaving the world more connected than ever.

The phases of globalization given by Held et al. are primarily set from a Western perspective general context. Episodes of globalization and their time period may vary based on the context where they are at work. For example, Amman became deserted during the thirteenth century and was sparsely inhabited through the third quarter of the nineteenth century; thus, the early-modern phase of globalization given by Held et al. does not apply to Amman, nor do the time periods of the pre-modern and modern phases of globalization.

4. Globalization’s Influence on Cultural Production

Globalization scholars and theorists have paid attention to the influence of globalization on culture and cultural production: the argument of whether or not globalization is likely to produce material cultural items, such as images, artifacts, and music, and cultural meanings and symbols that look alike. If cultural productions are to become similar, then the debate is whether or not those will express domination of cultural values of certain nations or groups of people. In such arguments, one comes across discussions of diversity versus uniformity, particularity versus universality, homogeneity versus heterogeneity, and hybridity versus authenticity. Those arguments strongly relate to the appearance of urban built environments in globalizing cities and what identities they express or construct.

Some scholars believe that globalization produces uniform culture. They argue that the West, particularly the United States, is reshaping, primarily through the media and commercial products, the culture of societies all over the world in accordance with Western ideas, values, beliefs, and lifestyles. This is obvious, for example, in the domination of English as a global language in business, academia, and advertising, and in the world-wide domination of US movies and TV programs (Held et al., 1999; Williams, 2003), not to mention American fast-food chain restaurants. Herbert Schiller goes so far as to consider cultural homogeneity under globalization a kind of cultural imperialism (cited in Williams, 2003). Under “the most pessimistic version of cultural imperialism,” write Beynon and Dunkerley (2000, p. 23), “local culture [is] being eradicated and [survives] only in museums and heritage centres.”

Other scholars argue against the homogenization thesis. True, cultural flows are basically “from the West to the rest,” but there is enough evidence that the West has its share of cultural inflows, particularly those immigrant

communities bring along. Furthermore, although the adoption of Western cultural flows has erased some of the cultural differences between the West and segments of societies elsewhere, more often than not cultural flows have been reinterpreted locally resulting in cultural productions different from the Western ones (Held et al., 1999). That is why “the strong version of cultural homogeneity is now widely rejected as simplistic” (Beynon & Dunkerley, 2000, p. 26).

Appadurai (1996) is among those scholars who perceive the heterogenizing effect of globalization. For him, “locality itself is a historical product and ... the histories through which localities emerge are eventually subject to the dynamics of the global” (p. 18). Appadurai (1990) argues that globalization forces are likely to become “indigenized” in the society where they are at work, producing heterogeneity in cultural production. Similarly, Beynon and Dunkerley (2000, p. 23) believe “no culture anywhere exists in a ‘pure’, pristine state: all cultures have changed over time and continue to change.” Robertson (1995) advances a similar argument, asserting that the interconnectedness of localities under globalization is not to be mistaken for cultural homogeneity. The local, according to Robertson, is “an aspect of globalization” (p. 30). Furthermore, globalization is a dialectic process in which there is a “universalization of particularism” and a “particularization of universalism” (Robertson, 1992, p. 100). The global is interpreted locally.

Harvey (2001; also see Harvey, 1989, 1990) is of great help when discussing the influence of global capital on cultural transformations. According to him, under globalization there is a tension between the tendency to the “commodification of culture” and the maintenance of a “monopolistic edge,” that is, the command of the global market (p. 397). On the one hand, commodification or commercialization allows “tradeability.” On the other, unless a product has some “special qualities” it loses its “monopoly advantage” (p. 396; p. 397). Although “the bland homogeneity that goes with pure commodification erases monopoly advantage,” Harvey asserts that “no item can be so unique ... as to be entirely outside of the monetary calculus” (p. 397; p. 396). As for the number of global qualities and the number of local qualities cultural products exhibit, Harvey believes that depends on what qualities are likely to ensure command over the international market. If having mostly local qualities is what makes a product or development likely to command the international market, “the most avid globalizers will support [it]” (p. 402). In fact, Harvey suggests that “if capital is not to totally destroy the uniqueness that is the basis for the appropriation of monopoly rents ... then it must support a form of differentiation and allow of divergent ... local cultural developments” (p. 409). Similarly, Hall (1997) argues that it is because capital consistently seeks expansion and internationalization that it supports difference and emphasizes cultural multiplicity.

Some scholars adopt the hybridization influence of cultural flows, in which a combination of the local culture and incoming cultural flows produces a new hybrid culture that is neither Western nor local. Ali Mohammadi believes “the local is increasingly a hybrid formed out of regional, national and global forces” (cited in Beynon & Dunkerley, 2000, p. 20). David Howes also sees the potential that globalization will result in hybrid forms of cultural production. He understands the hybridization of culture as a process in which people at the receiving end make sense of the incoming cultural products as they relocate in a new context, attributing new meanings to them. The receiver or consumer of cultural flows will not necessarily recognize or respect the meaning as intended by their producer (Beynon & Dunkerley, 2000).

5. The Urban Built Environment under Contemporary Globalization

Since globalization influences cultural production, and since we can understand the urban built environment as a part of that production, it is safe to say that globalization influences the urban built environment. And since various flows of globalization affect the different aspects of social life, it is likely that globalization will bring some transformation to the built environment, which, as Lefebvre (1991) argues convincingly, we now understand as both a product and a producer of social life.

Early works on the influence of globalization on the built environment focus on the macroscale of spatial and social organization of cities under globalization. Friedmann (1986, p. 69) theorized “world” cities as “the ‘basing points’ for global capital.” According to him, what makes a world city is the degree to which a city is integrated into the world economy and capitalist system, its “global control functions” (p. 73), including its share of corporate headquarters and international finance, as well as its functions in the “new division of labour” (p. 70), such as serving as a financial center. Sassen (2001) expands on Friedmann’s work to construct the idea of the “global city” and initiate the discourse on global cities. For both Friedmann and Sassen, economic activities are the major player in shaping global cities, and the level of a city’s integration into global economy determines that city’s place in a hierarchical ranking of global cities, which divides the world into core and periphery.

Other scholars focus on the microscale of the process of production and the shape of the urban built environment as it relates to globalization's flows. They point out the increasing introduction of "new" types of buildings and developments that they see as particular to contemporary globalization in certain cities, such as malls and gated communities in cities where they were not known before, at least in their contemporary ubiquity, form, and function (see Abaza, 2006; Denis, 2006). The increasing development of megaprojects throughout the world since the late twentieth century has been associated with globalization. Olds (1995, p. 1713) argues that megaprojects are "deeply implicated in the contemporary globalization processes." The producers of those megaprojects, according to him, seek some kind of "a global urban 'Utopia'," a global city image, or a global firm profile expressive of the twenty-first century. In fact, Elsheshtawy (2004, 2010) and Kanna (2011) argue that the spectacular record-breaking megaprojects, as well as luxury gated communities and hotels and gigantic shopping malls, in twenty-first-century Dubai were conceived to create Dubai as a global city (Figure 1). Similarly, the Abdali development in Amman projects a global city image (Figure 2).



Figure 1. View of Downtown Dubai and its surroundings showing Burj Khalifa in the center and Dubai Mall on the right. This megaproject was conceived to create Dubai as a global city (Ilona Ignatova / Shutterstock.com).



Figure 2. The Abdali development, Amman, is a megaproject that projects a global image of the city (by the author).

6. Identity Constructedness and Its Implications for the Built Environment

Identity is about “sameness” and “oneness.” AlSayyad (2001) and Woodward (1997) take such definitions as the starting point to understanding identity, yet both agree that “identity is always about difference” (AlSayyad, 2001, p. 4). This is similar to Hall’s (1996) view that identification is a process that “operates across difference” (p. 3). Thus, identifying the other is significant to self-identity. With this preliminary meaning of identity in mind, scholars talk about individual identity, corporate identity, and collective identity, as well as popular identity and official identity, among others. It is difficult to completely separate these identities from one another, and it is even more difficult to comprehensively study the relation of identity to the built environment with reference to only one kind of identity. However, the official collective identity, which the nation-state promotes as its national identity, is worth more emphasis.

For a long time, scholars studying nationhood and national identity have viewed them as essential: deeply rooted “things” that have always been there and have always been the same. However, today many historians and other scholars view the nation, nationalism, and national identity as “constructed.” We owe the notion that national identity is constructed to Benedict Anderson who in his seminal work *Imagined Communities* (2006; first published 1983) tells us that the nation is “an imagined political community” (p. 6). Illustrating this notion, Anderson writes:

It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined. (p. 6)

Building upon the notion of identity as a construct, some scholars understand the urban built environment not only as expressive of identity but also as constructive of identity. For example, Harvey (1990) argues that under modernism the relation between place and individual and communal identities became stronger. The loss of urban fabric under modernism meant the loss of “traditional sites of collective memory and identity” (Harvey, 1991, p. 55). The urban spectacle and “the commodification of the city and its spaces” are meant to make up for that loss (p. 55). It is in this light that Harvey understands the spectacle of Times Square in the early-twentieth century. Times Square (Figure 3) was “the source of civic pride,” becoming “the heart of Manhattan, of New York City, and even, at times, the nation” (p. 61). It was a place to celebrate some kind of community in a situation of an increasingly class-divided, alienated society and growing commercialism: “the place to which the populace flocked in manifestation of communal unity at times of trauma, celebration, and ritual” (p. 62).



Figure 3. Times Square, New York, was meant to bring the alienated society together and create a sense of community (Luciano Mortula / Shutterstock.com).

Similarly, the building of Ankara in the 1930s as the capital of the new Turkish Republic under Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the organization of the city's spaces, and the shape of its buildings were inseparable from the building of the modern Turkish nation-state (Çinar, 2007). The new nation adopted a secular modernization project, which replaced Ottomanism and Islam. Ankara's architecture and urbanism were "the means" and "the product" of this project of modernization (p. 153). Through "the making of the city" and its spaces, "modernism as a founding ideology came to constitute the social reality of [the city's] citizens" (p. 153). The city's architecture, which through most of the 1920s continued to incorporate features of Ottoman and Islamic architecture commensurate with the then prevailing Ottoman national identity, was soon to change. In modern Ankara, thus, no longer was the mosque to occupy the center of the city as was the tradition in cities in the Islamic world. Instead, the Nation Square with the Victory Monument at its center and the state public buildings flanking it constituted the center of the city (Figure 4).



Figure 4. The Nation Square, Ankara, with The Victory Monument at the center represented and created the modern Turkish nation (Oleg Znamenskiy / Shutterstock.com).

7. Identity and the Built Environment under Contemporary Globalization

How does the concept of identity as a construct and the urban built environment as active in materializing identity relate to how globalization processes affect identity and the construction of identity through and its expression in the urban built environment? Culture and identity are inseparable. It is not surprising then that we find discourses on identity transformation similar to those on the qualities of cultural productions under contemporary globalization. Building on scholarly work on globalization's influences on the homogeneity, heterogeneity, and hybridity of culture, scholars discuss how relevant the question of identity becomes under globalization, how global flows transform identities, and the implications of this new condition for the urban built environment.

Robertson (1995) finds that national identities are not endangered by contemporary globalization processes. On the contrary, he argues that the drive for nationhood is an important part of the processes of globalization. Furthermore, Robertson argues that "much of the apparatus of ... the national-state organization of societies, including the form of

their particularities – the construction of their unique identities – is very similar across the entire world” (p. 34). Robertson, therefore, finds that the argument that globalization threatens national identities oversimplifies “global dynamics” (p. 34) in the construction of the nation-state.

On a related note, Castells (1996) believes cultural identities will not disappear under globalization. Rather, the search for and the expression of identities become fundamental under globalization. Similarly, Harvey (1990) argues that the search for collective identity, as well as individual identity, becomes significant under the condition of global capital flows. Harvey understands the search for identity under globalization as an “opposite reaction” to the continuously transforming world (p. 302).

Furthermore, Harvey (1989, 1990) believes that in this contemporary phase of globalization, which he basically sees as driven by global capital flows and capitalists’ underlying logic of accumulation and overaccumulation, the differentiation of products becomes significant for the command over the ever-expanding global market. Capitalists, according to Harvey, are well aware that the varied products need people of “different identities” who would feel the need to consume those products. Since commanding the market requires consistent change of products and product qualities, it follows then that identities should be manipulated consistently to create people’s need for such products. Harvey and other scholars see such identities as superficial and defined by the “style,” “look,” and “image.” As Harvey (1990, p. 288) puts it, “the acquisition of an image (by the purchase of ... designer clothes and the right car) becomes ... integral to the quest for individual identity [and] self-realization” Thus “investment in image building” (ibid) to establish an identity extends from the individual, through corporations, to governments, not to mention the nation.

Cvetkovich and Kellner (1997) seem to be more optimistic than Harvey about the influence of globalization on identity. In understanding identity as a construct, they see the potential for remaking empowering identities under globalization. Cvetkovich and Kellner believe that the situation of intersecting global and local forces makes the construction of “hybrid identities” legitimate, particularly considering that the local itself is a hybrid influenced by global forces. However, they argue that the endurance of national identities in their more “traditional” meaning should not be underestimated. Under contemporary globalization identity becomes more complex, combining local, national, and global ingredients, not to mention specificities such as gender and race. In other words, “traditional” identity is at work along with “new local hybrid” identities (p. 8).

AlSaiyad’s (2001) work on identity and hybridity is relevant here. According to AlSaiyad, “hybridity tends to juxtapose ... objects from different and normally separated sources” (p. 5). Despite the relevance of hybridity today, AlSaiyad, like Cvetkovich and Kellner, argues that hybridity is not a product of contemporary globalization since culture has always been hybrid. He believes that hybridity emerges “from a space where elements encounter and transform each other”; the space Homi Bhabha refers to as “the third space” (p. 7). Robertson (1995) holds a similar view on hybridity. He argues that the nation-state has always been “a major agency for the production of diversity and hybridization” (pp. 40-41). Robertson speaks of nation-states’ “selective incorporation” of ideas and practices from other societies they encountered, including colonizers.

The work of AlSaiyad (2008) on identity and its relation to the built environment in the Middle East is helpful when it comes to understanding how the hybridity of culture relates to the production of the urban built environment. AlSaiyad believes hybridity is intrinsic to national identity, which he sees as constructed and constantly evolving. But he asserts that “hybrid people do not always create hybrid places” (AlSaiyad, 2001, p.16). AlSaiyad (2008) argues that in different historical moments in the Middle East urban forms expressed different identities. Even during the same historical period, such as the period of independence and nation-state building, identity expression in the built environment varied from the traditional to the modern (ibid).

Lu (2011) also addresses cultural hybridity and the built environment, focusing on modernity in the context of the developing world. He argues that a “Third World modernism” emerged in developing countries in the mid-twentieth century as societies in these countries adapted the Western modernity. According to Lu, this new modernity was but one of many ways of being modern and it led to the production of built environments in which the Western modernity was readjusted. Similarly, Isenstadt and Rizvi (2008, p. 3) argue that Middle Eastern countries “invented their own versions of modernism.” These new versions, according to Isenstadt and Rizvi, were sometimes consistent and other times inconsistent with Western versions of modernism. Wright (2008) makes a relevant argument in the context of the Arab Middle East. According to her, modernism’s ideas, images, and ideologies were reinterpreted as they intersected with local conditions and agencies. Analyzing buildings and urban forms in the region in the third quarter of the twentieth century, Wright finds several cases where Western and local modernist architects made

reference in their designs to local culture or history or incorporated specific vocabulary in response to climatic conditions, producing different architectural forms in different cities and, even, in the same city. Wright also argues that master planning for Beirut, a government complex in the city, and large-scale housing projects in Lebanon designed in the 1940s-1960s in the International Style, but only partly implemented, were conceived not only to modernize the city and country but also to unify its population under the modern identity.

Al-Naim (2008) makes a different argument about modernity and the built environment in Riyadh. In the 1950s and 1960s, several government-sponsored buildings and residential neighborhoods for government employees were designed in an adapted International Style and built in concrete – as opposed to mud used in traditional buildings. The designs and materials of these buildings as well as their association with government employees, who were held in high regard by the largely uneducated society, represented modernity to the city residents. Al-Naim argues that the increasing modernization of Riyadh's built environment through the 1970s, which many city residents welcomed, is not to be understood as a part of the society's modernity. Saudis remained traditional with conservative social values. According to Al-Naim, in Saudi Arabia modernity was, and continues to be, widely connected with Westernization, and thus rejected. By the end of the 1970s, the expression of modernity in the city's built environment was viewed as threatening to the Saudi identity. Consequently, the city undertook in the following two decades several large-scale government developments in which traditional local and regional architectural vocabulary and forms were reinterpreted and reintroduced (p. 134). In the early twenty-first century, as Riyadh prepared to transform into a regional and global financial center, privately-owned modern high-rise buildings began to change the image of the city. Al-Naim notes that despite this shift away from tradition in the city's architecture, Riyadh residents remain conservative. Whereas they do not reject the economic and technological aspects of globalization, they "resist cultural globalization" (p. 145). Thus Al-Naim concludes that, unlike other global cities, Riyadh will globalize slowly and turn into "a very conservative global city" (p. 148; figures 5 and 6). AlSaiyyad (2008) advances an argument at least partly in line with Al-Naim's. For AlSaiyyad, under contemporary globalization it is unlikely that the built environment will be able to fully represent the peoples, nations, and cultures within which it exists. Still, today's built environment remains an arena where "one may observe how local cultures mediate global domination" (p. 264).



Figure 5. Faisaliah Tower, Riyadh, in the background in the center and low-rise residential buildings in the foreground (mmuenzl / Shutterstock.com).



Figure 6. View of early-twenty-first-century Riyadh with the tall building of the Kingdom Center in the background in the center (Copyright: Fedor Selivanov).

Sorkin (1992a) is skeptical about the differentiation of culture under the contemporary condition of global flows of capital, where what matters most is “production” and “sale.” Late-twentieth-century urban built environment, as Sorkin sees it, is disassociated from its physical and cultural context. The differentiated “traditional” cities have been replaced with “the new city” in which the place has become completely “ageographic,” that is, “it can be inserted equally in an open field or in the heart of town” (p. xiii). Harvey (1990) seems to hold a view partly akin to Sorkin’s. He argues that the particularity of place can be understood in relation to how we shape our identities through “individuation,” be it at the level of the home or the nation. We are witnessing a “collage of superimposed spatial images that implode in upon us” (p. 302). The uniqueness of place “in this shifting collage world,” becomes significant to bring people together and to establish and maintain “a secure social order” (ibid). Still, Harvey is aware that efforts made to construct place-identity have not always been successful. The result is that only a limited sense of differentiation can be identified amidst wide similarities in the shape and pattern of built environments in different geographical locations.

“Disneyfication” is a significant phenomenon that Sorkin (1992a, 1992b) and other scholars find a serious problem in the urban built environment of the past few decades. Sorkin (1992a, p. xiv) believes that the city under global flows becomes “the city as theme park.” Sorkin writes:

[The theme park is] the place that embodies it all, the ageographia, the surveillance and control, the simulations without end. The theme park presents its happy regulated vision of pleasure ... as a substitute for the democratic public realm, and it does so appealingly by stripping troubled urbanity of its sting, of the presence of the poor, of crime, of dirt, of work. (p. xv)

Like the theme park, which is a major design component of Disney World, Sorkin (1992a) argues, the contemporary city disassociates itself from reality (figures 7-9). It lacks sensibility to the needs, values, and traditions of the communities living in it. It is a city with “happy-face” buildings; a city of deceptive architecture (ibid). According to Sorkin, “whether it represents generic historicity or generic modernity,” the design of the theme-park city follows the same formula of advertising: “the idea of pure imageability” (p. xiv). But not all scholars studying urban transformation under contemporary globalization agree that the city has become disneyfied. There are even some scholars who recognize the similarity between today’s city and Disney World but seem uncritical of it. Fainstein (2001, p. 209), for instance, argues that today’s developments are “reasonably accurate” in portraying the social forces underlying them.



Figure 7. Mercato Mall in Jumeirah, Dubai, has a historicist style that disconnects from the city’s architectural tradition (by the author).



Figure 8. View of a mixed-use building in Uptown Mirdif, Dubai, showing Western architectural vocabulary (by the author).



Figure 9. View of an upscale gated community in Uptown Mirdif, Dubai, showing the Western style of the community's villas (by the author).

8. Conclusion

Globalization is a set of processes relating to different kinds of flows including capital, goods, people, information, and ideologies. It has much to do with the “widening, deepening, and speeding up of worldwide interconnectedness in all aspects of contemporary social life” (Held et al., 1999, p. 2), be they cultural, economic, technological, or others. Globalization is not a new phenomenon. What distinguishes the new episode of globalization from the earlier episodes is the extent and intensity of the different flows. Advancement in telecommunication and transport technologies makes it increasingly difficult for more and more people in any certain place to be disconnected from what goes on in other places. Today, we live in a “global village,” to use the term Marshall McLuhan coined in the 1960s (McLuhan, 1962; McLuhan & Fiore, 1967).

Scholars have argued for different influences of globalization processes on cultural productions, which include the urban built environment: homogenization, heterogenization, and hybridization. There is no reason why globalization should lead to only one form of these transformations. Globalization may simultaneously result in a degree of both homogeneity and hybridity. It also may have simultaneous heterogenizing and homogenizing effects. We should recognize that although Western cultural influences of globalization cannot be denied, they are at work with different levels of non-Western influences. Globalization is no longer “from the West to the rest.” This is evident, for example, in the flows of capital, images, and ideas from the Gulf cities to other Arab cities and the influences of these flows on the built environments of the receiving cities and the lifestyle of their residents.

Identity continues to be relevant under contemporary globalization. But globalization processes do transform identities. Under contemporary globalization, the diversity of identities among nations becomes important, and the fragmentation of identity into “consumer identities” becomes significant. Identity is a construct not an essential thing. As such, it is continuously shaped and reshaped through intersecting local, regional, and global forces.

Understanding what identity is, how it is shaped, and how it relates to the production of the urban built environment, particularly under the processes of globalization, is significant for understanding how and why this environment looks the way it does. Architecture and urbanism in Arab cities, as in other cities around the world, are not merely an expression of identity. They are also a means for the construction of identity. Identities are being negotiated in large- and small-scale developments, privately- and public-owned developments, ordinary and upscale developments. Therefore, there is a strong need for studies of how our identities are being transformed or emphasized through the environments we build. This paper has set a theoretical context for such studies, and in a forthcoming publication I address identity negotiation in the built environment of Amman. More studies will be needed to enhance our understanding of identities and built environments under contemporary globalization in other contexts. This conference is an important venue to stimulate the discussion of identity as it relates to the built environment in globalizing Arab cities.

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