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1. The creation of the modern Kuwait City

Throughout history, cities have developed incrementally and grown at a steady pace that revolved around particular social, economic and political constructs, and spatially developed to reflect their community's building knowledge, availability of materials and particular locality. Some had walls to protect them from outside invaders, and rulers to guide their populations. The city wall had a defence and security purpose, and as a physical element it also defined the city boundaries and confined building and development within its limits. Kuwait Town, pre-oil discovery, had similar characteristics to those described here. With the first tribal settlements in this coastal town dating back to the eighteenth century, trade, fishing and pearl diving were eventually established as economic means to sustain life. Families started growing, a ruler was appointed and a wall was built in 1760 (Kuwait Municipality, 1980:14). Mud-brick buildings replaced the tribes' tents, and with that the physical characteristics of the town appeared with a coastal front, a commercial area, and residential homes. The absence of the car meant that roads did not need to be wide, resulting in the compact fabric of the city. Life on the street was vibrant as people travelled to different parts of the town for work or commerce, children played outside in the shaded alleyways, while public life happened unplanned and unaccounted for (Fig. 1).

Eventually the population grew and called for the expansion of the town beyond the wall; a second wall was built and finally a third to accommodate for this continual growth, in 1811 and 1921, respectively (Kuwait Municipality, 1980, pp.14–16). This final wall lasted for just over thirty years before it was torn down, this time, not to build a fourth wall to house further growth, but rather to clear the way for the new and advanced Kuwait. Oil had been discovered and Kuwait was to be modernised. In 1946, the first shipment of crude oil was exported and with this new-found wealth an elaborate welfare system was soon established that promised free healthcare, education and housing and guaranteed employment to all its nationals. Land acquisition schemes

The plan had sanitised public life and decontextualised the city from its locality and inhabitants. The lively streets and alleys of the old town were now empty.

were established as a principal method of redistributing this wealth. Property within the existing Kuwaiti town was generously valued and families were to be given plots of land or built homes to move outside the boundaries of the old town into modern standards of living, together with running water, air conditioning and a new urbane life ahead in the newly developed city.

Figure 1. Vibrant city life in in the old town of Kuwait city (1950)



Source: Kuwait Municipality.

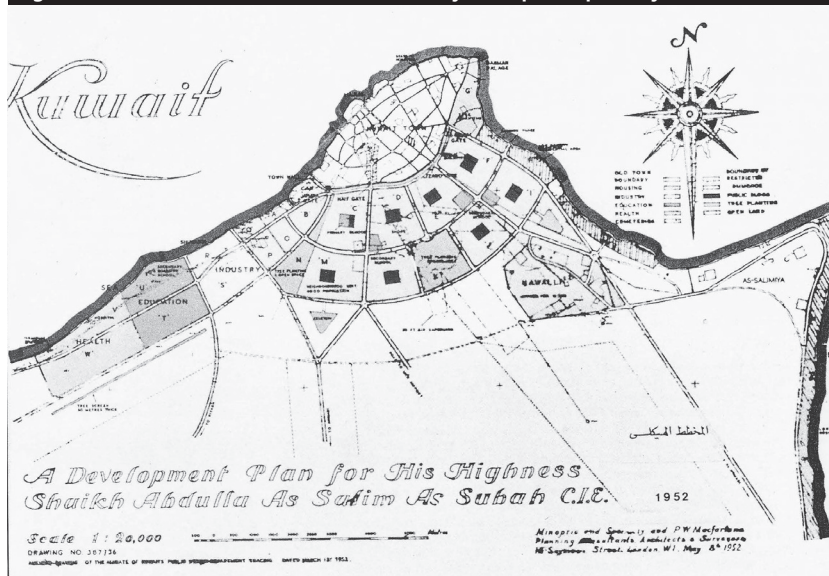
This ambitious wealth redistribution doctrine called for a physical plan to serve this now modernised population. The British firm Minoprio, Spencely and Macfarlane were commissioned in 1951 to create the first masterplan for Kuwait. Working outside of the UK for the first time, they were confronted with a culture, society and climate that was alien to them. Prevailing modern planning principles of the time in the UK were imposed on a landscape that was foreign to them and were themselves the result of particular circumstances that were absent in Kuwait. Planning in Europe had evolved as a response to overcrowded and polluted industrial cities. Ebenezer Howard's Garden Cities (Mumford, 2007) imagined clean air and natural light, away from the unhealthy city. Further evolutions of these concepts were the New Town (ibid.) principals that were based on self-sufficient neighbourhoods separated from one another by a series of ring roads and radial roads and further detached from the inner city by a green belt.

Naturally, by importing those planners, Kuwait's first masterplan (Fig. 2) imported their planning principals as well. They proposed a plan based on zoning and the separation of land uses. Eight self-sufficient housing neighbourhoods were to be distributed parallel to what used to be the third wall of Kuwait, with a green belt in between. Zones for education, health and industry were allocated to the peripheries, while the old city, with its previous inhabitants relocated, would now be the centre for commercial activities and offices (Fig. 3 and 4). These various zones would be separated by a series of radial and ring roads, and the car was

now the main mode of transportation to connect them back together. Such a radical shift in planning from what used to be intuitive and incremental to rigid and controlled had prevalent ramifications on city life. The plan had sanitised public life and decontextualised the city from its locality and inhabitants. The lively streets and alleys of the old town that once related to humans in their size and activities were now empty thoroughfares dictated in scale by the size of the car. Consequently, the old buildings had to be torn down to accommodate wider roads and other modern infrastructure. What used to be a vibrant coastal town has now become a commuters' city, filling with traffic during the day and almost uninhabited at night. A local planner of Palestinian origin working at Kuwait Municipality at the peak of the implementation of this first masterplan was extremely critical of what was happening. He recognised the problems that would face the city should attention not be given to climate, culture, and providing opportunities for social interaction (Shiber, 1963: 117). He was calling for the Jane Jacobs and William Whytes of Kuwait to challenge the notions of conventional planning and their effect on people's everyday life, but was confronted with the reality that this masterplan had set the groundwork for an era of top-down urban planning, neglecting the quality of life of the people, their environment and general wellbeing.

The most recent Kuwait masterplan, completed in 2005 for the year 2030, is merely an extension of the previous masterplans prepared during the second half of the twentieth century in Kuwait.

Figure 2. Kuwait's First Master Plan, 1952 (by Minoprio, Spencely and Macfarlane)



Source: Gardiner, 1983.

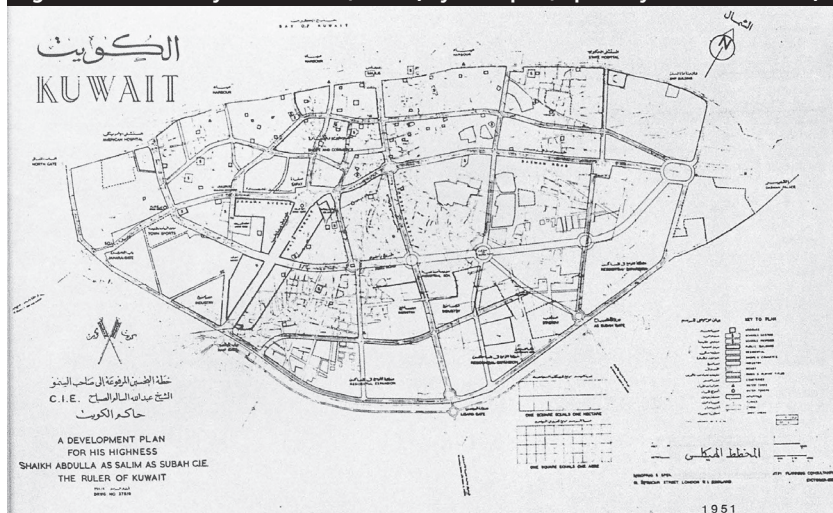
As the population grew, there was a need to constantly expand the boundaries of the city. Various planners came to Kuwait to design the second and third masterplans, and the respective reviews in between. Complete neglect of the cultural and contextual issues raised above continued to happen. Instead, the focus was on designating separate zoned areas with defined land uses. This resulted in the need for more road network expansion to reconnect the various city components back together. The human was viewed as a statistic that needed housing, work and supporting amenities. Little attention was given to the creation of a sense of place, understanding of scale or the role of the city dwellers in

1. Another example is the *Kuwait Public Transport Masterplan 2011*, which focused on improving public transport and walkability in the city, but which to this day has not been implemented.
2. *Kuwait Third Masterplan Review 2005* prepared by Colin Buchanan and Partners for Kuwait Municipality.

shaping their own city. Kuwait continued to sprawl, with a traffic problem that ceased to be resolved and almost non-existent public life.

The predominant themes that seem to be missing from all these plans are those relating to climate adaptation, energy-use reduction and social inclusion.

Figure 3. Kuwait City Master Plan, 1951 (by Minoprio, Spencely and Macfarlane)



Source: Gardiner, 1983.

Figure 4. Aerial image of Kuwait Town (1950)



A much denser fabric and narrower streets, when compared to the master plan in Fig. 3.
Source: Kuwait Municipality.

As more foreign planners were invited to masterplan the different parts of the city, one seemed to have a different approach early on. The 1969 Future Development of the Old City of Kuwait by the Italian firm BBPR, although never realised, was one of the few plans that studied life in this part of the world by looking at other Arab cities and Muslim societies. Not only was the architecture important to them, so were the social constructs that were specific to those cities. Their interest in the scale of the street and the buildings made their proposal more relevant to the people's experiences in the city. One of their recommendations was a proposal to bring a university into the centre of the city, and thus create a vibrant population of students, bringing in creativity and attracting

business. Similar today to major cities like London or New York, where universities have been integrated into the city fabric, as opposed to isolated campuses on the periphery of town, where students commute for a single purpose, creating more traffic and energy consumption on a larger scale. It is interesting to note that the first masterplan also had a proposal for a university in the middle of the city that was similarly never built. There is no clear understanding of why certain plans get implemented while others do not.¹ And although exhaustive in their effort, many plans never see the light of day; in this case a clear policy on the prioritisation of wellbeing and liveability is non-existent.

The most recent Kuwait masterplan, completed in 2005 for the year 2030,² is merely an extension of the previous masterplans prepared during the second half of the twentieth century in Kuwait. Although it addresses the city, metropolitan area, sub-regional and national scales, the principal planning parameters are the same: a business centre in what used to be the old city, self-sufficient residential neighbourhoods beyond, and various zones for industrial, commercial and leisure activities. Even though it identifies areas for major satellite cities in the north and south of the state, their viability becomes very questionable as they lack the economic model which drives the survival of any city, and thus result in what are essentially large housing suburbs. In addition, a mass transit system is proposed yet again, as it was in the second masterplan in 1970 (Colin Buchanan and Partners, 1970), although neither proposals have yet been realised. Its success again becomes questionable, with such sprawl-inducing planning and the city's inability to retain density to justify the efficiency of this infrastructure meaning the most eligible option for transport continues to be the car.

The predominant themes that seem to be missing from all these plans are those relating to climate adaptation, energy-use reduction and social inclusion. This latest masterplan, for instance, although it sees poor air quality as an environmental concern, suggests reducing the state's subsidies for power and introducing car-pooling as possible solutions. The plan, however, fails to propose an alternative physical development structure that tackles the root cause of the air-polluting built environment through design solutions such as scale, materiality and orientation solutions that address the effect of the built form on the environment instead of proposing policies to overcome its impact. In addition, it lacks efficient planning measures that guide housing clusters, typologies and building densities, and would therefore justify a mass-transit proposal as a conscious energy-reducing solution. Instead, the plan continues to propose low-density city expansion, which not only increases cooling energy demand through the type of architecture and urbanism it produces (Rode et al., 2017) but also reinforces car dependency which in turn creates more air pollution.

Reflected at the street scale, this particular type of planning results in the absence of any public life in the city. Cars have taken over not only the streets but the sidewalks also, in what has become a typical character of the local Kuwaiti street today (Fig. 5). Looking at the single-family housing neighbourhood as an example of the zoning plan for Kuwaiti families, the focus lies on housing demand and supply; building and population density and land availability. Housing needs are determined through average projected family size, land outside certain constraints mostly pertaining to oil reserves, and minor adjustments to previously set densities (Figs. 6 & 7). The city is

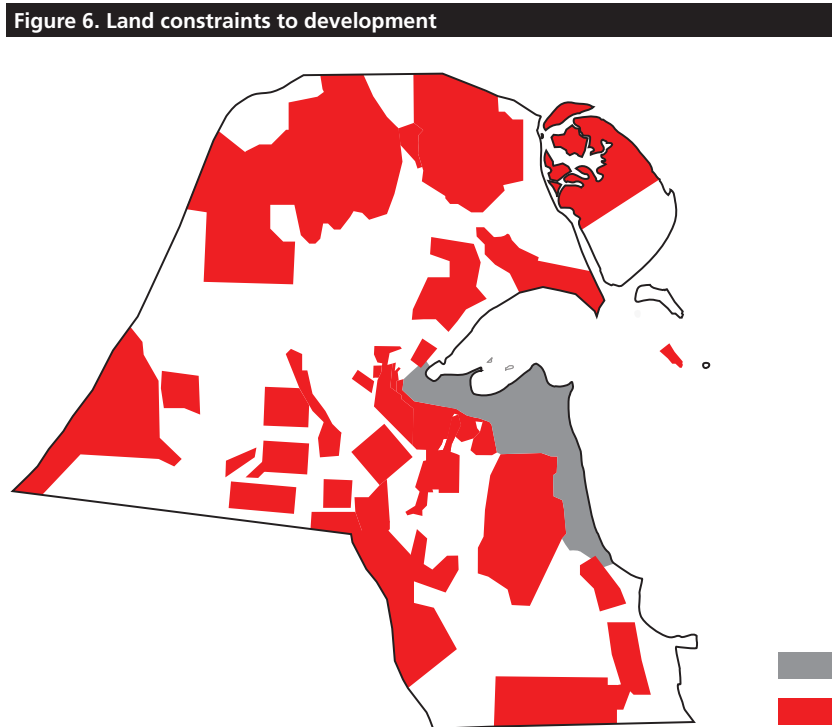
3. For further discussion on housing entitlement rights in Kuwait, refer to *The Right to Housing in Kuwait: An Urban Injustice in a Socially Just System* (Alshalfan, 2013)

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treated as a flat landscape, where these parameters are considered universally, irrespective of location. For example, NW Sulaibikhat, a development on the western coast of the country, applies the same parameters described earlier, resulting in arbitrary plot sizes, setbacks and building heights. Consideration of being close to the water, people's spatial needs and the quality of the public space to be created there are completely absent. Involving the local community in decision-making would mean that assumptions made by the planners might be challenged by the various needs and desires of the families to be housed in different parts of the city.



Source: Image by author.



Original Source: Third Kuwait Master Plan Review (2005).

Figure 7. Available land for development



Original Source: Third Kuwait Master Plan Review (2005).

Incremental growth at a human scale can be considered not only as a more affordable means of development but can also foster alternative values in a society that has prioritised modern and expensive development schemes over the quality of life of its people.

2. Oil, land and housing shaping the welfare state

Perhaps the policies that most dictated the growth of the city stem from the establishment of the welfare state, which was enabled by oil rents. Swenarton, Avermaete, and Van der Heuvel (2015) made the argument that social welfare has a direct influence on the built form of a city and nowhere is this better exemplified than in the case of Kuwait. Oil, land and housing policies have had a direct effect on the physical realisation of the welfare state which was clearly implemented through the first masterplan (Minoprio & Spencely and P.W. Macfarlane, 1951). Housing was the means through which social welfare was provided, while land was the medium for its physical realisation, and that could only be made possible by the influx of oil. As such, the state established a number of programmes and state institutions to translate these specific policies into reality and continued to produce masterplans to guide their physical implementation.

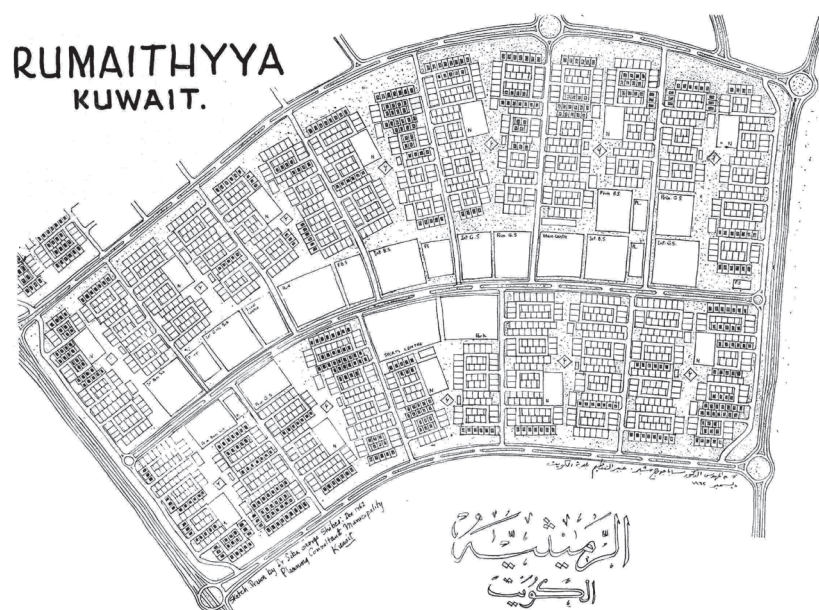
Housing as a means to achieve social welfare was at the onset of the modern state and was being distributed as early as 1954. Unlike other cities that prioritise *affordable housing* as part of their social objective, in Kuwait *housing ownership* has been – and continues to be – the method through which welfare is distributed. The state holds the responsibility for allocating land, developing and distributing it to eligible Kuwaiti families: those who do not own any real estate, irrespective of income. Depending on the type of housing they select – either a parcel of

4. Kuwait Municipality signed a contract with international consultants in November 2016 to carry out the design of the Fourth Kuwait Masterplan. <http://www.worldarchitecturenews.com/project/2016/27355/perkins-will/kuwait-masterplan-in-kuwait.html>

land or a state-built home – they are then provided with long-term interest free financing to either build their house or pay off their state-provided home. Ultimately, citizens are easily able to own their heavily subsidised homes, which they can then legally sell at market price. This unprecedented housing programme has created the social contract out of which housing ownership entitlement has been established and has become very difficult to turn back.³

In order to carry out such an ambitious project, the state not only had to establish the institutions to implement the development and financing of housing provision but also the urban planning parameters that would allow for its execution. As such, concurrent masterplans projected populations and specific densities for future development through a particular neighbourhood unit configuration that has become the blueprint for urban expansion that is replicated across the city. Based on Clarence Perry's (2007) neighbourhood units, the Kindergarten Centre Unit (KCU) was the organising basis for a neighbourhood design which can be described as a self-sufficient area with services and amenities that is separated from other neighbourhoods by highways, and which houses a pre-determined number of units (Fig. 8). The city ultimately grew through the KCU in a sprawling manner, radiating away from the central business district and into the desert.

Figure 8. Plan of Rumaithyya



Source: Shiber, 1963.

The state maintained this type of development and set a precedent for a particular model of housing provision defined by a specific typology and tenure: villa ownership. Through time, housing provision within these parameters was established as an absolute right in the name of equality amongst citizens inter- and intra-generations (Alshalfan, 2013), irrespective of real needs. Just as the first generation of homeowners in

modern Kuwait received housing both as a means of providing hygienic living conditions and a method of wealth distribution, the generations that followed believed it was the state's role to continue with the latter. What may have been a tool for social mobility has now become the status quo for all citizens. In essence, the blurring of the inherent differences between equity and equality created the social contract from which housing demands were justified. Housing has become the currency through which the state physically transfers its wealth to its citizens.

The constraints of the physical architectural type of the villa and the land-consuming development model have made this programme of housing provision not only unrealistic in its aspirations but also in having a detrimental effect on the urban fabric of the city. Focus lies on meeting demand defined by this single criterion, resulting in a number-based calculation of plot size and number of units. By failing to consider other aspects of welfare such as quality of life and the creation of sense of place, neighbourhood design becomes sanitised of the underlying principles of building communities, and instead turns into a pure exercise of maximising the number of units and their amenities within a pre-determined set of parameters. As a result, the city sprawls in the name of providing housing for all its citizens, while compromising their health and wellbeing, as witnessed through alarming environmental and health indicators, with the country boasting one of the highest levels of carbon emissions per capita (World Bank, 2014) as well as soaring obesity and diabetes rates (World Health Organisation, 2016), all contributed to by car reliance and a sedentary lifestyle.

As the population grew, pressure on the state to maintain this type of housing continued to rise. Over time, certain measures were taken to increase the supply, mostly by gradually decreasing the parcel size from 1000 to 400 square metres. However, due to limits on development including access to land and infrastructure, supply struggled to meet the rising demand. In 2015, the Public Authority for Housing Welfare had over 106,000 applications on the waitlist for housing (Public Authority for Housing Welfare, 2005a), yet from the start of the housing programme in 1954 and until 2015, the state was only able to provide 114,600 units (Public Authority for Housing Welfare, 2015b). For the state to fulfil the current demand, it would need to develop almost the same amount of housing units it had provided over the past sixty years. Yet, this rising demand is not only caused by the state's inability to provide housing at a similar rate, rather it is due to the lack of financial instruments that allow first-time homeowners to get financing from the local commercial banks to purchase their own homes. The only place to access this type of financing is the Credit Bank – a state-owned financial institution providing mortgages capped at a specific amount barely covering a quarter of the cost of the average home available in the market today (Kuwait Finance House, 2017).

The state's role in the housing market is not constrained to its limitation of mortgages, but extends to its ownership of land, as it is the largest holder in the country. Apart from the housing programme, the state does not release freehold land into the market. As the provider of welfare, control of land and oil, its two main natural resources, becomes imperative. The latter, as the single most important source of income

for the state (OPEC, 2016) is prioritised over land development, hence the Kuwait Oil Company (KOC) has concession rights over undeveloped state land for oil exploitation and exploration. This policy creates scarcity in the supply of land, and fragmented growth of the city, as neighbourhoods are dispersed across the state with the pre-condition for their development being their release from the Kuwait Oil Company. Furthermore, this control over supply creates rising prices in the real estate sector, making purchasing a home for the average citizen almost impossible. This, in turn, increases demand on the state to provide housing, entering into a cycle of negotiation between land for oil and that for housing where housing cannot be developed without oil revenues, and yet land cannot be freed due to oil exploration.

Amidst this complicated climate of oil, land and housing, the physical character of the city has emerged as a haphazard reaction to these forces. Yet, these policies did not only have an effect on the city from a liveability point of view, as described earlier, rather they stifle the market from flourishing through regulations that control the role of the private sector from development in the housing market. This is reflected in the masterplan, where all the proposed new settlements are dedicated to the Public Authority for Housing Welfare. What may have been perceived as wealth distribution endeavours are now the very policies that are creating higher land prices and dissatisfaction on the social front. This centralised approach to planning continues to produce masterplans informed by policies that frame the state as the provider and developer of the land, allowing little room for the private sector to operate, yet struggling to meet the current needs of society.

3. Looking to the future

Today, the Emir's vision for the state is different, aiming for Kuwait to be a trade and financial centre that is led by the private sector (New Kuwait, n.d.). This calls for a drastic shift in the planning paradigm from one that was based on welfare provision relying on oil rents towards a capitalist market economy varied in its sectors. However, a clear policy to connect the state's aspirations with the spatial plans is yet to be established. The existing urban policies no longer fit in the current sphere of state revenue diversification, nor are they able to cope with the inflated scale of the welfare state. The approach and processes of the previous plans, heavily compliant with the state institutions' needs and capacity to provide for citizens, can no longer sustain, nor are they aligned with, the new vision for a private sector-led economy.

In order to articulate the role of the private sector in the economy, reform within the existing regulatory framework and state institutional capacity must take place. Special attention will need to be given to the role of land and the policies related to its allocation and use. With the fourth masterplan for the year 2040 currently underway,⁴ an opportunity exists for alignment with the state's economic policies to pave the way for a spatial arena through which the national development plan can be realised. The status of land, flexibility of the regulatory framework and advancements in institutional capacity are central to guiding this new plan. In addition, an economy led by the private sector would require a strong state as regulator and facilitator, identifying the exact sectors

that require growth and establishing the parameters to maintain equity amongst citizens. Reconsidering the masterplan's role in recognising how and by whom land will be developed, especially in terms of its supply into the market, becomes imperative. By recognising the masterplan's impact as a physical implementation tool for the state, one can steer its strategic direction towards a re-envisioned future for the country.

Kuwait today faces a critical turning point in its income dependency on oil. With the price of crude oil dropping by more than two-thirds within a period of less than two years, the fiscal space of the government has narrowed (Oil Price, 2018). The reliance on the welfare state and in particular its current planning and spatial development principles comes into question. The current state of economic and regional instability makes it crucial to challenge the "business as usual" model. At this time of economic uncertainty, an opportunity can be found in re-evaluating the approach to the physical environment and rethinking the current unsustainable method of urban development. Housing and planning policies, although aiming at social welfare, have had a detrimental effect on the quality of life of the people, been excessive in their energy consuming effect and created an undesirable effect on the real estate market. Little attention is given to the type of sprawling city that has been created and its dependence on private car transportation. A link is yet to be made between the current type of urban planning and energy use. Furthermore, the low population densities stipulated in the previous masterplans create excessive energy consumption at the building scale (Rode et al., 2017), while at the city scale expensive infrastructure expansion is required to serve the sprawling city, including power linkages, water supply and road expansions.

Incremental growth at a human scale can be considered not only as a more affordable means of development but can also foster alternative values in a society that has prioritised modern and expensive development schemes over the quality of life of its people and the role of the city dwellers in shaping their own cities. Masterplanning in Kuwait has long been concerned with mere numbers, dehumanising the individual by treating him/her as a simple statistic. This simplification of society's needs has led to addressing housing in the form of replicated enclosures, otherwise known as villas, detached from the creation of homes and communities. Private property has long been prioritised over public space and the vibrancy of city life has been given up for endless plots of land through a defined rational plan to accommodate certain densities. Change is long past due. By recognising the masterplan's impact as a physical implementation tool for the state, one can steer its strategic direction towards a re-envisioned future for the country.

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