
Guest editorial: Women and Gulf Cities. The transformative impact of women influencing the architectural and urban developments of the gulf region

Abstract

Purpose – With this special edition, “Women and Gulf Cities”, we collect scholarly contributions to the ongoing discourse on the impact of women on architectural and urban developments in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).

Design/methodology/approach – The discussions offered in this issue highlight the various implications, ranging from gender-inclusive urban planning, educational and professional development, sustainability and heritage to global frameworks of innovative and practical solutions for achieving inclusive and integrated urban practices that promote the full and equal participation of women in architecture and city-making.

Findings – The increasing involvement of women in these sectors play a pivotal part in their development and success. It can also be recognised as essential for promoting individual and family well-being, fostering social cohesion and driving economic development. Women play essential roles in sustainable solutions, evolving green economy and sustainable development. Moreover, collaborations initiated by women in the Arab region are instrumental in advancing sustainable development to pave the way towards a sustainable future.

Originality/value – This special edition offers a comprehensive exploration of various facets, ranging from gender-sensitive urban design (GSUD) to the educational and professional development of women in architecture and design, particularly in the Gulf region. The originality of this research lies in its focus on the multifaceted and integral role of women in shaping the architectural and urban landscape of the Gulf region, providing valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities for GSUD and the potential for creating more inclusive, equitable and sustainable built environments in the Gulf.

Keywords Equity, GCC, Women, Sustainable urban development, AEC (architecture engineering construction), Gulf cities

Paper type Guest editorial

The Gulf region has witnessed unprecedented urbanisation and development in recent years, promising new opportunities for more integrated and balanced architectural and urban development contributions. However, women’s participation in architecture and planning, crucial to sustainable urban development, is at stake. Significant impacts and instrumental positive changes initiated by women in and from the Arabian Peninsula and the Arab World, in general, are too often misrepresented and underestimated, even though historically women played an essential role during the pearling season, taking on tasks that otherwise would have been attributed to their husbands or fathers of the household. Those roles included but were not limited to having agency over the family’s financial affairs, construction and amendments made to the house or ensuring safety and steady income while men were out on sea for months. Women have continuously been instrumental in the built environment through crafts and the usage of local resources. They could be considered the first builders of architectural structures and settlements in the Arabian Peninsula, as the famously known Bedouin tents, the “Beit Al Sha’ar”, were woven by women using local goat or camel hair. The weaving of such shading fabrics shaped the first housing structures, protected the family against external weather conditions and created areas for privacy.



Women have spearheaded notable transformations across diverse sectors, from culture and science to engineering, politics and business. Notable examples include HE Reem Ebrahim Al Hashimy, Minister of State for International Cooperation in the UAE and Director General of the Expo 2020 Dubai Bureau. Al Hashimy demonstrated exceptional leadership in steering the Expo 2020 city and exhibition development, overcoming the challenges posed by the global COVID-19 pandemic. Another outstanding offering comes from HH Sheikha Mai bin Mohammed al Khalifa, the former President of the Bahrain Authority for Culture and Antiquities and the Minister of Culture of Bahrain. Sheikha Mai was pivotal in revitalising the historic pearling path in Manama, Bahrain, leading the cultural, economic and social rejuvenation of the city's ancient Muharaqq district and ultimately earning UNESCO World Heritage status in 2012 (UNESCO, 2024). She was honoured at the World Monument Fund in 2015 and subsequently the Aga Khan award for architecture in 2019 (WMF, 2024).

While women's involvement in the field of culture is often considered in a so-called "safe space" as female leaders arguably dominate this field, one should not forget the impact culture has on urban change and is considered a form of soft diplomacy. Nevertheless, women have also led in male-dominated fields, such as engineering and science. Most recently, Professor Niveen Khashab, a Professor of Chemistry at KAUST - KSA, named as one of the winners of the Great Arab Minds Award, considered the Arab Nobel Prize, as her work benefited humanity and supported the growth of the Physical Sciences and Engineering Division becoming one of the leading centres for studies in natural science globally (Great Arab Minds, 2023). Internationally acknowledged for their exceptional contributions to society, Emirati businesswomen Hana Al Rostamani and Raja Easa Al Gurg secured positions within the top 20 in Forbes' 2023 list of the World's 100 Most Powerful Women (Forbes, 2023). We must recognise the impact business sectors have on urban development. How is it that we still have limited studies on women being actively involved in planning, designing and creating Gulf cities?

In a focused workshop titled "Women in the GCC," held at the 2022 Gulf Research Meeting (GRC, 2022) and following the "Ingenious Women's Initiatives" at World Expo 2020 (Cities Research Institute, 2021) hosted by the Australia pavilion, Saudi Arabia pavilion and United Arab Emirates Youth pavilion in collaboration with UN-Habitat Arab regions, in-depth discussions unfolded regarding the socio-economic contributions of women to the urbanisation of Gulf countries. Aiming at investigating the current status, challenges and aspirations, the workshop explored three key themes: (1) socio-culture: environment, research and education; (2) design, heritage and creativity and (3) economy and productivity. The outcomes revealed a significant gap in the study of women's roles in urbanisation in the GCC, emphasising the need for further research in this vital field. Consequently, an extended call for papers for this special Archnet-IJAR Issue was initiated in 2023.

With this special edition, "Women and Gulf Cities", we collect scholarly contributions to the ongoing discourse on the impact of women on architectural and urban developments in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). The discussions offered in this issue highlight the various implications, such as women's empowerment and active participation across diverse sectors, including government, business, education and public life, that emerge as pivotal factors for sustainable development. The increasing involvement of women in these sectors plays a pivotal part in their development and success. It can also be recognised as essential for promoting individual and family well-being, fostering social cohesion and driving economic development. Women play essential roles in sustainable solutions, evolving green economy and sustainable development. Moreover, collaborations initiated by women in the Arab region are instrumental in advancing sustainable development to pave the way towards a sustainable future.

The articles submitted to this edition offer an interdisciplinary exploration of various facets, ranging from eradicating women's discrimination in architectural design firms to empowering the next generation of women in design. The specific chapters and research areas covered in the articles contribute to the following four key themes:

Gender-sensitive urban design (GSUD)

The papers emphasise the importance of gender-sensitive urban design (GSUD) in creating inclusive and equitable public spaces, inclusive and fair shared open spaces. They explore the spatial qualities, indicators and dimensions of inclusivity in public spaces, specifically focusing on creating environments that cater to the diverse needs of all individuals, regardless of gender.

- (1) "Women, Sustainable Development and Heritage Regeneration in Qatar and Bahrain" (Grichting Solder and Alfaraidy, 2024): This chapter explores the multifaceted aspects of women's contributions to designing sustainable urban realms in Gulf cities. By considering heritage, climate change and emerging cultures, the research underscores the integral role of women in shaping the future of urban environments.
- (2) "Towards a Framework for the Design of Fair Shared Open Spaces Case Study: Effat University, Jeddah" (Nasreldin and Ibrahim, 2024): This chapter presents a detailed case study of Effat University in Jeddah, examining the utilisation of public open spaces through a gender lens. The research proposes a framework for the design of fair, shared open spaces, with a specific focus on enhancing the experiences of female students.

Adding to the theme, we have included a trigger article instead of a comprehensive research piece penned by a promising young scholar. This work advocates for inclusivity and reflects the younger generation's keen interest in gender-inclusive planning spanning different regions.

- (1) "Gender-Inclusive Urban Planning: Exploring European Frameworks for as a Potential Methodology for Arabian Gulf Urban Parks" (Chung and Grichting Solder, 2024): Exploring the transferability of European urban planning frameworks to Gulf cities, this chapter focuses on the development of gender-inclusive urban parks. The research offers valuable insights into adapting international best practices to promote inclusivity and accessibility in Gulf city planning.

Educational and professional development

Several chapters focus on women's educational and professional development in architecture and design, specific to the Gulf region. Those include curriculum reviews, employability skills and the agenda for equitable architecture, engineering and construction (AEC) industries, aiming to bridge the gap between academia and practice for women employees.

- (1) "A Framework for Eradicating Women Discrimination in Architectural Design Firms in Egypt and GCC Countries" (Othman and Hegazy, 2024): This chapter critically examines the prevalent gender disparities in architectural design firms and presents a framework to eliminate discrimination against women. The research sheds light on the challenges and opportunities for fostering an inclusive work environment in the architectural industry across Egypt and the GCC countries.

- (2) “Empowering the Next Generation of Women in Interior Design in the United Arab Emirates through Competitive Education: A Curriculum Review” (Pasina *et al.*, 2024): Focusing on the United Arab Emirates, this chapter conducts a comprehensive review of the educational curriculum in interior design to empower and support the professional development of women. The research emphasises the importance of competitive education in equipping women with the necessary skills and knowledge to thrive in the interior design field.
- (3) “Employability Skills in Architecture and Design”: Towards bridging the gap between academia and practice for Saudi women the transition from academia to professional practice, this chapter examines the employability skills of Saudi women in architecture and design. The research seeks to identify strategies for bridging the gap and enhancing women’s career prospects in the Saudi workforce.

Sustainability and heritage: The content also touches on the missing link in the sustainability chain, with a specific emphasis on the role of Gulf women in contributing to sustainable urban realms, heritage preservation and addressing climate change within the Gulf cities.

- (1) “Beyond the Grand Narrative of Al Bastakiya: Ayesha Al Bastaki and the Windtower Houses of Old Dubai” (Bukhammas, 2024): Providing a nuanced perspective on the grand narrative of Al Bastakiya, this chapter delves into Old Dubai’s historical and cultural heritage. Ayesha Al Bastaki and the wind-tower houses serve as a lens through which the research enhances our comprehension of the architectural legacy and the impactful role of women in the Gulf region.
- (2) “Revitalisation of urban spaces by women architects: enhancing cultural heritage in the gulf region” (Moscatelli *et al.*, 2024): The paper critically compares two case studies in the Gulf region – one in the United Arab Emirates and the other in Bahrain – according to four inclusion criteria: context connection, cultural sensitivity, community engagement and choices of amenities. These inclusion criteria are also applied to an experimental project by women architects’ students in Saudi Arabia to inspire the future female architects of the Gulf region. From urban to architectural scales, the project offers a glance into the heritage design by women architects.

Another title already mentioned in the urban design section also links into this theme by considering heritage, climate change and emerging cultures; the research underscores the integral role of women in shaping the future of urban environments: “Women Designing Sustainable Urban Realm in Gulf Cities: Heritage, Climate Change, and Emerging Cultures.”

Empowerment and transformation

In pursuing empowerment and transformation for and within Gulf cities, these chapters aim to address the underexplored role of Gulf women in contributing to the sustainability of the built environment and advocate for greater recognition of their impact. The research emphasises Gulf women’s unique perspectives and contributions, striving to bridge the missing link in the sustainability chain and promote gender-inclusive practices in the architectural, urban design and sustainability fields.

- (1) “The Missing Link in the Sustainability Chain: Gulf Women” (Fadhel, 2024): This chapter addresses the underexplored role of Gulf women in contributing to the sustainability of the built environment. By highlighting Gulf women’s unique

perspectives and contributions, the research aims to bridge the missing link in the sustainability chain and advocate for greater recognition of their impact.

- (2) “Our Common Gulf Cities: Agenda for Equitable AEC Industries for Sustainable Urban Development” (Ottmann, 2024): Focusing on the AEC industries, this chapter advocates for an agenda that promotes equitable and sustainable urban development in Gulf cities. It proposes an actionable framework that fosters equitable and sustainable urban development, spotlighting the pivotal role of women in driving positive change within these industries.

In conclusion, this special issue, titled “Women and Gulf Cities: The Transformative Impact of Women Influencing the Architectural and Urban Developments of the Gulf Region”, encapsulates various contemporary research, insights and perspectives. These contributions claim the way for a more equitable and sustainable future in Gulf cities by addressing critical issues, advocating for inclusivity within cultural means, and celebrating women’s achievements. The various approaches presented highlight women’s roles in urban projects across different dimensions – as practitioners, visionary leaders, commissioners of urban projects, researchers, policymakers and educators. Case studies and analyses of national and/or international policies and frameworks underscore the significance of a multi-pronged approach to research. From focused ethnographic material research on architectural objects to urban master plans and international frameworks for gender mainstreaming, the papers underscore the importance of integrating multiple scales, from micro-cultures to urban parks and historic neighbourhoods.

Although this edition cannot comprehensively cover all emerging theories, the importance lies in recognising the need for ongoing exploration and understanding of women’s specific roles in urbanism and city-making. “Urban Feminism” is a field largely missing from the Arab World, suggesting a necessity to apply a female perspective to the Arab urban city by conducting gendered, spatial research and analyses, according to Lina AbiRafeh (2018). It is imperative to approach feminist urbanism and gender mainstreaming in the Gulf and Arab region without a colonial mindset. A deep understanding of the evolving and transforming cultures is crucial. While Europe speaks of “Gender Mainstreaming”, others of “Urban Feminism”, Turkey has a program called “Women Friendly Cities”, which is probably more aligned as a concept within an Islamic society. Historical perspectives reveal women’s significant role in space and community building in Islamic and Gulf cities. As an informal yet powerful organism in power sharing and policymaking, the “Majlis” deserves further exploration, considering it as a space and method for a “feminist participatory method” (Ortiz Escalante and Gutiérrez Valdivia, 2015).

While cities are becoming more multicultural and global, preserving cultural practices and spaces is crucial. Women are leading in heritage and regeneration projects, as observed in the Doha, Manama and Sharjah case studies. The importance of women groups, networks, awards and role models, including figures like Sheikha Moza bint Nasser (Qatar), Sheikha Mai bint Mohammed Al Khalifa (Bahrain) and Zaha Hadid (Iraq, UK), cannot be overstated. Recognising the significance of “Urban Feminism”, there is a call for applying a female perspective to Arab urban cities through gendered, spatial research and analyses. Resistance to feminism, especially in academia and educational facilities, poses challenges in a patriarchal system. However, actions often speak louder than words, as exemplified by the leadership of Sheikha Moza, advocating for a “lead by example” approach. A gender-sensitive participatory approach, exemplified by organisations like Col·lectiu Punt 6 in Barcelona, is a model for gender-inclusive cities (Ortiz Escalante and Gutiérrez Valdivia, 2015). The success of a case study in Khan Younis in Gaza, where UN-Habitat designed the

Haya Promenade exclusively for women, girls and families, further underscores the importance of participative processes and innovative tools in creating safe and inclusive urban spaces (UN-Habitat, 2024).

Findings of this issue underscore the significance of understanding the distinct roles women play in “reclaiming the city” (Haas, 2023), along with the potential variations in their approaches compared to men. Exploring current societal themes related to urbanism, architecture and city planning must be further approached through female perspectives. Drawing on diverse frameworks and fields (including critical studies, indigenous and ethnic studies, postcolonial theory, feminist theory, progressive urban theory, social ecology, urban planning and design, architecture, urban economics and social geography, landscape urbanism, heritage management, political ecology and cultural studies), alternatives have to be explored to existing classical theories and conceptualisations that have fallen short in providing a genuinely intersectional analysis of dominant city and urban discourses, policies and practices.

We invite readers to engage in a thoughtful exploration of the contributions of this special issue. The individual papers provide not only valuable insights but might also spark inspiration for future scholarly investigations. As we address gaps in the profession, we view these challenges as opportunities for collaboration. Join us to gather more insights and form ingenious and inclusive teams that contribute to creating healthful and sustainable Gulf cities accessible to socio-cultural adequacy. Any future participation is vital to unlocking the potential for positive change and innovation in our shared professional landscape to truly transform women’s impact on the Gulf region’s architectural and urban developments.

Wishing you an insightful reading experience that may evolve into future actions for women and Gulf cities!

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