

Arabia Interrotta Symposium
Thursday, April 10, 2025,
10:30 am–5:30 pm,
1100 Architecture + Design Studios,
845 W Harrison St, Chicago, Illinois

OVERVIEW

This one-day symposium, which will be held jointly with the Garofalo Fellowship exhibition at the University of Illinois at Chicago School of Architecture, examines spatial, material, and symbolic practices tied to landscape and territory in the Arab East (Al-Mashriq). It asks: “What does the Arabic-speaking world offer architecture today and what can architecture offer the region?” Between the Arabian Gulf and the Mediterranean Sea lies a diverse and idiosyncratic spatial production, where archaeological sites, folk architectures, and monuments of empire intermingle with extralegal settlements, low-rise high-density sprawl, stylish office towers, artificial islands, and luxury desert resorts. Underlying this simultaneous collapse of ‘past’ and ‘future’ is the relatively recent shift in the locus of cultural production from the once vibrant urban centers of Damascus, Baghdad, Cairo, and Beirut to the superrich and, until recently, sparsely-populated nations of the Arabian peninsula (Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE). Acknowledging this shift, the symposium deliberately foregrounds the peninsula, aiming to facilitate a conversation between the hybrid practitioner-academics that have been studying, teaching, and designing in the region for decades and a new generation of young designers from the Gulf who are seeking to reconceptualize it anew.

The symposium is comprised of two panels and a roundtable discussion. The first panel, which interrogates the link between landscape and memory, will articulate a “nomadic imaginary” that rethinks Anglo-American paradigms of order and permanence. In contemporary Western contexts, nomadism is often associated with a marginal existence and a severed link to place—an undesirable, alienated state that one descends into. However, for the ‘*arab*’ (a term that, according to folk etymology, once applied only to those who dwelled in movable tents), nomadism represented a sophisticated cultural technique—a fluid attachment to place, grounded in an intimate knowledge of land, collective stewardship of scarce resources, and customs of inscribing territory. The panel revisits such practices with the aim of resurfacing their lessons for contemporary design. The second panel, which focuses on urban ethnography and design research, investigates the relationship between infrastructure, typology, and urban fabric in contemporary Arab cities. It considers the role of behavior in producing public and private space, self-built and ‘incomplete’ architectures, as well as the representational techniques used to document urban dynamics. The panel will conclude with a student-panelist roundtable discussion and the opening of the exhibition.

DETAILED SCHEDULE*

10:30–10:45 a.m.

Welcome by David Brown, *Acting Director, UIC School of Architecture*
Introduction by Zehra Ahmed, *Conference Organizer*

Session 1: Landscape & Memory (zoom panel)

10:45–11:15 a.m.

Ahmad Al-Jallad

The Written and the Unsaid: Mortuary Monuments Among the Nomads of the Pre-Islamic Harrah

This talk will explore the ways in which the mobile populations of the Syro-Arabian black desert (the Harrah) commemorated their dead some two-thousand years ago through the interplay of stone installations and epigraphy.

11:15–11:45 a.m.

Faysal Tabbarah

A Goodly River Runneth: An Incomplete Story of Barada, Écochard, and Damascene Imaginaries

This talk examines Damascus's environmental imaginaries as deeply shaped by the Barada River, French architect and planner Michel Écochard's 1936 and 1968 masterplans for Damascus, and a transforming built environment.

11:45 a.m.–12:15 p.m.

Pascal Ménoret

Floating Weeds Haunting the Egyptian Post-Plantation

Water Hyacinth (*Eichhornia Crassipes*), an invasive flower with sinister traits, drifts through the Lower Nile Valley, a vast urbanized area that more than 50 million people call home. Following the flower, this talk explores the damaged urban ecology of the Nile and analyzes the alliances contracted by the plant with members of other species, including our own.

12:15–12:45 p.m.

Charlotte Malterre-Barthes

Housing Cairo, Unlearning Field Research

Capturing the complex reality of Cairo's urban development is an impossibility. This talk will reflect on the positionality of foreign scholars and methodological approaches to conducting meaningful field research in self-built settlements.

12:45–1:00 p.m.

Panel Discussion

Schedule cont'd

1:00 p.m.

LUNCH BREAK

Session 2: Urban Ethnography & Design Research (in-person panel)

2:00–2:30 p.m.

Ali Karimi

Architecture Between Seasons

This talk examines seasonal lifestyles in the Gulf, including the cultures of farming, fishing, and uses of various calendars. It considers how such research can drive design, with an emphasis on the domestic garden and the public park as typologies. Projects shown will be Seasonal Springs, Sun Path 1444, House between Two Trees, House with Seven Gardens and Mangrove Park.

2:30–3:00 p.m.

Amale Andraos

Hotel Beirut

This talk traces Beirut's history from the French Mandate to the present through the lens of hotels, resorts, and sandy beaches—architectural typologies that have long captured Beirut's imaginaries and embodied many of the city's most enduring myths across cycles of destruction and reconstruction.

3:00–3:30 p.m.

Hussam Dakkak

The Sacred and the Unmaking of Memory

This talk explores Makkah as a city shaped by the presence of the sacred and the weight of its absence, examining how the proliferation and fading of its mosques have redefined its spatial and spiritual identity, and how their loss—within a city that is itself the epicenter of holiness—reveals a paradox at the heart of its transformation, and invites a new reading of its landscape.

3:30–4:00 p.m.

Ziad Jamaledine

After Typology

This talk reimagines Islamic architecture beyond the fixed geographical and periodic typologies that have traditionally defined it, proposing instead a more fluid and multifaceted framework for understanding its contemporary global expressions.

Schedule cont'd

4:00–4:15 p.m.

Panel Discussion

4:15 p.m.

COFFEE BREAK

4:45–5:30 p.m.

Student & Panelist Roundtable Discussion (4530 Octagon)

5:30 p.m.

Reception (4530 Octagon)

* All times are listed in CST.

BIOGRAPHIES

Ahmad Al-Jallad is the Sofia Chair of Arabic Studies at the Ohio State University and author of *The Religion and Rituals of Pre-Islamic Nomad Arabia* (Brill, 2022). As a specialist in the history of early Arabic, he is one of the world's foremost authorities on Safaitic and Paleo-Arabic inscriptions, leading epigraphic and archaeological expeditions across the Middle East.

Amale Andraos is professor of architecture and dean emeritus at Columbia University, GSAPP, and co-founder of the internationally-acclaimed architecture practice WORKac. She is co-editor, with Nora Akawi, of *The Arab City: Architecture and Representation* (Columbia Books on Architecture and the City, 2016), which contends with the question of representation in the age of global practice.

Hussam Dakkak is director of projects at Malcolm Reading Consultants, and tutor at the Architectural Association (AA) Visiting School: Makkah vs Makkah—a workshop dedicated to archiving and documenting the holy city of Makkah. He was the co-curator, with Basmah Kaki and Hessa Al Bader, of *Accommodations*—the Saudi Pavilion at the Venice Biennale 2021.

Ziad Jamaledine is assistant professor of architecture at Columbia University, GSAPP, and co-founder of L.E.FT Architects, based in New York and Beirut. He has presented his historical research on the architectural typology of the mosque at the Oslo Architecture Triennial (2016) and at Studio-X Istanbul (2017). His built work includes the Shakib Arslan Mosque, Lebanon, winner of the Interfaith Design (AIA) Award (2018) and the Al-Fozan Award for Mosque Architecture (2022).

Ali Karimi is co-founder of Civil Architecture, a Bahrain and Kuwait-based practice that works to articulate alternate futures for a nascent Middle East. He was the co-curator, with Hamed Bukhamseen, of *Between East and West: A Gulf*—the Kuwait Pavilion at the Venice Architecture Biennale 2016.

Charlotte Malterre-Barthes is assistant professor of architecture at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology Lausanne (EPFL), where she leads the Research and Innovation On architecture, urban design and Territory (RIOT) laboratory. She is co-editor, with Marc Angélic, of *Housing Cairo: The Informal Response* (Ruby Press, 2016) and *Cairo Desert Cities* (Ruby Press, 2017). In 2021, she founded the initiative 'A Global Moratorium on Construction.'

Pascal Ménoret is the Khalid bin Abdullah Al Saud Professor in the Study of the Contemporary Arab World at the University of Oxford, and the author of *Joyriding in Riyadh: Oil, Urbanism, and Road Revolt* (Cambridge University Press 2014) and *Graveyard of Clerics: Everyday Activism in Saudi Arabia* (Stanford University Press 2020).

John McMorrough is principal at studioAPT (Architecture Project Theory) and professor of architecture at the University of Michigan, where he also served as interim chair of the architecture program. His extensive body of writing examines the relationship between design and culture with a focus on architecture's extended field, encompassing not only buildings but complementary media such as installations, films, and other forms of structured content.

Faysal Tabbarah is associate professor at the American University of Sharjah and Carleton University, and the co-founder of Architecture + Other Things, based in Sharjah. In both his research and practice, he investigates the relationship between regional environmental and architectural imaginaries. He was the curator of *Aridly Abundant*—the UAE National Pavilion at the Venice Architecture Biennale 2023.