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Disappearance of Modern Heritage in Kuwait, Adaptive Reuse of 'Al Sawaber' Housing Complex

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Abstract

After the discovery of oil in Kuwait in 1940, a tabula rasa of the historic city centre made place for modernist buildings and structures. However, the replacement of the original built fabric inhabited by fishermen and functioning as trade route from the Persian Gulf to Aleppo, was seen as an historical and socio-cultural loss; the same is happening today. In this light, the paper addresses the current modernization process of the city of Kuwait, which is resulting in the disappearance of modernist housing all over the city, in particular the 'Al Sawaber' housing complex. The first part of the paper presents a brief history of the various planning processes Kuwait went through. The emerging modern state embraced the 1960s utopian movement. And therefore, renowned members of TEAM X were invited to rethink the city of Kuwait. The second part zooms in on the extraordinary case of the 'Al Sawaber' housing complex; constructed in a period of modernist experimentation. Nowadays 'Al Sawaber' is being demolished, like many other modernist constructions in the city, 'to make the Kuwait's future regeneration possible'. Questions are raised about the arguments pro-demolition. In conclusion, we explore alternative strategies for urban renewal and adaptive reuse of the 'Al Sawaber' project. The analysis of the modernist approach of housing in the 1970s provides significant material on how to reuse this mass housing typology. Our personal project investigates the importance of the public spaces and the necessary economic development of the city without losing sight on the social aspects connected to a dynamic process of modernization. Therefore, it is important to enhance the potential of the existing built fabric, but at the same time invest in new functions that adapt this heritage to current needs.

1. Introduction

This paper elaborates on the development of Kuwait to become a modern city in the period of 1950 to 1980. The first part describes the historic, economic and social context of Kuwait and its transformation after the first shipment of crude oil, which contributed to the creation of the Modern Kuwaiti Nation.

The second part focuses on the modern architecture built in Kuwait during the post oil period, which still represents the largest part of the existing urban landscape. Unfortunately, modernist buildings, like the 'Al Sawaber' housing complex, constructed in 1981 and designed by architect Arthur Erickson (1924–2009); and many other modern constructions currently face the threat of demolition, mainly because of the so called 'urgent' transformation of the city centre. In addition, this paper reflects on the built environment of Kuwait and elaborates specifically on the modernistic approach to housing in the 1970s, and more specifically the 'Al Sawaber' complex. In conclusion, the research presents possible strategies about how to deal with this housing complex. In particular, it focusses on the design of the urban landscape and the introduction of new programs and functions. In general, it points out that adaptive reuse can be a valuable alternative for demolition. One can ask what defines the value of 'Al Sawaber'? And whether it is a relevant project for the city? Specifically, what are the different historical layers that contribute to this potential relevance? The answers to these questions might give us real arguments for the adaptive reuse of this modern heritage architecture.

2. The Emergence and Planning of Modern Kuwait

2.1. Planning Processes

The urban development of Kuwait can be divided into two periods: the pre-oil era and the post-oil era. In the first period (1610–1930), the city primarily functioned as a fishing village, fulfilling an essential role in the trading economy. Kuwait was the principal commercial centre for the transit of goods between India, Muscat, Baghdad, and Arabia. It was establishing itself as the major trading route from the Persian Gulf to Aleppo.¹ In 1938, oil was discovered in the fields of Kuwait. The exportation, which started in 1946, resulted in the increase of revenues, new infrastructures, and communal facilities for the city. These proceedings mark the beginning of the ‘modern’ era that brought a profound transformation to the urban landscape of Kuwait, as the old city centre was demolished. At that time, the need for a city master plan and general urban strategy was prominent, therefore Kuwait’s municipality commissioned several proposals related to urban renewal and civil projects, from the early 1950s to the 1980s.

2.2. The Master Plans

By looking at the different master plans, the challenging mediation between the modernist reformations and the preservation of the pre-oil traditions comes to surface.² The first master plan was developed in 1952, by British architects Charles Anthony Minoprio (1900–1988), Hugh Greville Castle Spencely (1900–1983) and P.W. MacFarlane (dates unknown). Their visions were influenced by the Garden City and New Town concepts. However, these ideas were considered controversial and did not meet the (future) needs of the city at that moment, as the team of architects lacked a connection with the Kuwait’s culture and was too unfamiliar with the scale of the city.³ In 1960, the Kuwait Municipality changed their perspectives. The (disappointing) results of the first master plan and the regrets about the demolition of the old city resulted in a new vision and strategy. The new master plan focused on restructuring the old town, incorporating additional residential and industrial areas and extending radial highways.

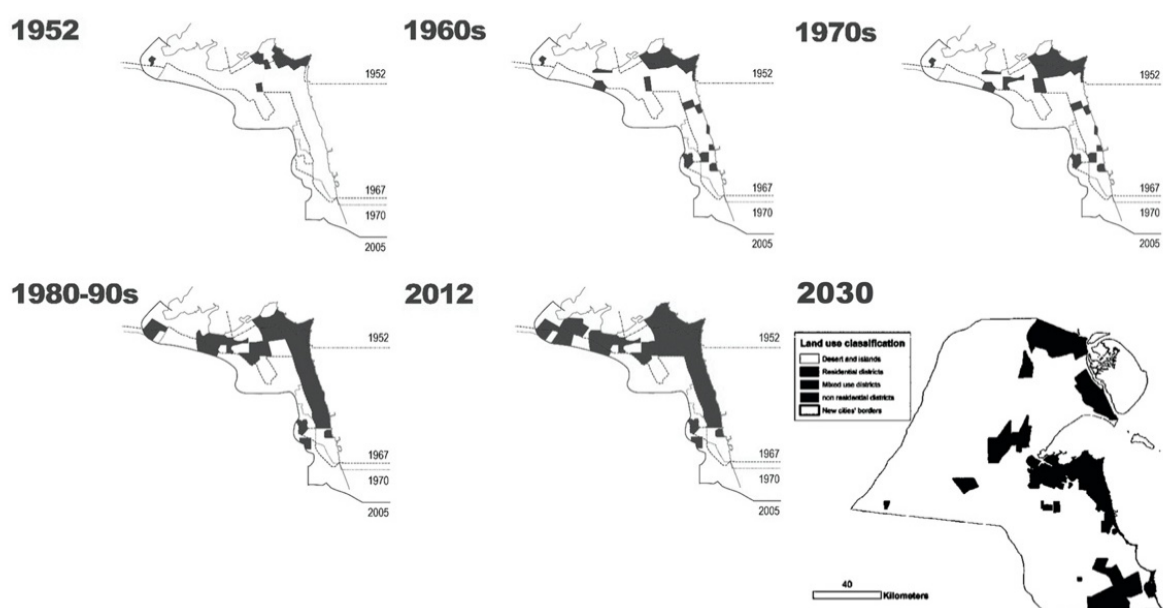


Fig. 1 Planning timeline, Kuwait City, Kuwait, 1952–2030. © Credits collage by Diana Mosquera, 2019, based on plans by Mohamad Alsayegh, 2017.

There was a new attitude towards modern architecture, as the municipality proposed a number of strategic projects that enhance the atmosphere of the central area of Kuwait. These projects, that proposed new ideas to reconstruct the city (**Fig. 2**), were commissioned to prominent members of the TEAM X generation, like Georges Candilis (1913–1995), together Josie and Woods of France, Reima Pietilä (1923–1993) of Finland, the office BBPR of Italy, Jorn Utzon (1918–2008) of Denmark and Peter Smithson (1923–2003) together with Alison Smithson (1928–1993) of the United Kingdom. In the following chapter, we zoom in on this last, most interesting proposal.

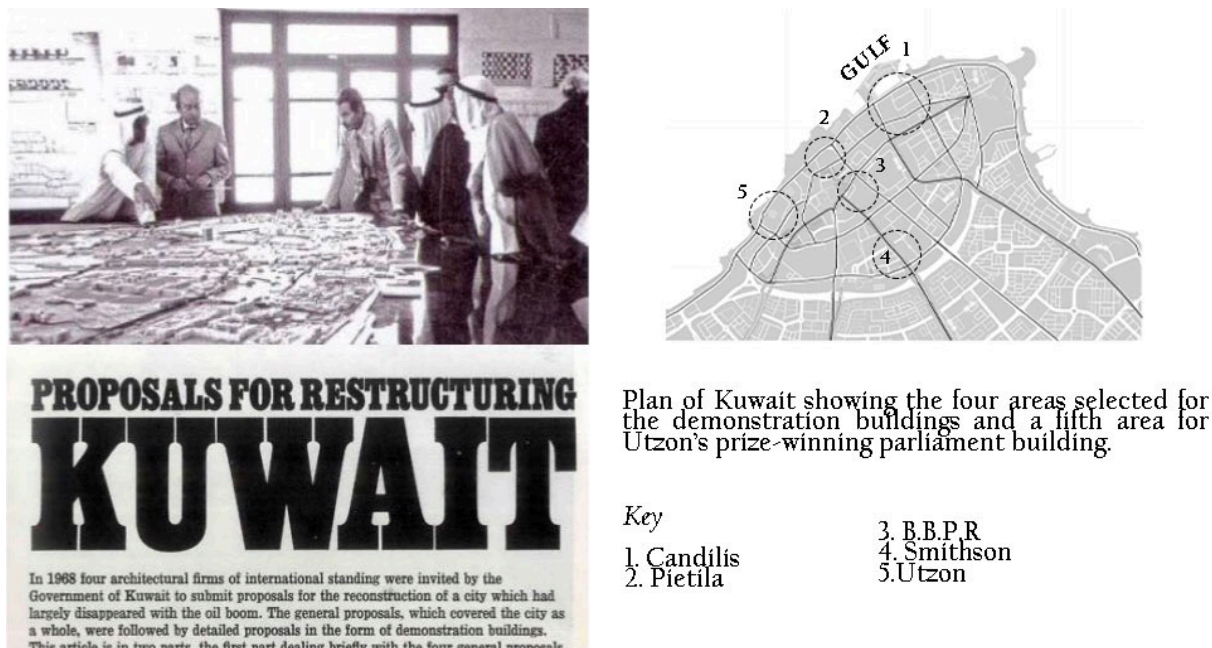


Fig. 2 Proposals for demonstration buildings in Kuwait, Kuwait city, 1961. Selections of four areas of development to restructure Kuwait city. © Kuwait Municipality, 2019, <https://www.baladia.gov.kw/sites/ar/Pages/main.aspx>

In 1978, the Shankland Cox Partnership⁴ reviewed the second planning phase, focussing on three basic elements: the old town centre, the urban landscape and the physical setting of buildings, oil explorations, (water) infrastructures etc. However, in 1980 Kuwait experienced a major economic crisis resulting in drastic changes to the master plan. In response, another evaluation of this second master plan took place in 1983 (**Fig. 1**). This review emphasized the question of the National Housing Authority to create circa 25,000 dwellings/units (single detached house type). In this light, the idea of collective housing was introduced to Kuwait. This happened for the first time with the project of the 'Al Sawaber' housing complex, consisting of high-rise buildings with apartments of 100 to 300 sqm.

New revisions of the master plan were done by 1997 and 2012 (**Fig. 1**), as the consulting office 'Salem Al Marzouk and Sabah Abi Hannh' (SSH) was commissioned to elaborate a plan that focused on the booming economy and the population increase. They do this by creating new commercial spots in the city (reconnecting the physical and social components) and targeting the popular 'Marina' waterfront.⁵ As result, a large number of properties became vulnerable for demolition in the light of the city's 'regeneration'. That is the case for the 'Al Sawaber' complex, condemned to be demolished.

As shown on the schematic plans (**Fig. 1**), Kuwait transformed from a small town to a metropolis in a relatively short period of time. The city experienced a fast-urban growth

process, linked to the discovery of oil and the particularity of the outnumbering of non-citizens versus Kuwaiti citizens by a factor of about 2.3. The economic prosperity came with a complex urban development, that resulted in an uncontrolled expanded city. Currently, housing shortage is still prominent and the idea of reestablishing residential land in the old town is desirable. The concept of bringing back life to Kuwait City may shed light on the adaptation of the existing complex of 'Al Sawaber'.

3. Alison and Peter Smithson's Urban Study and Mat-Building

After the analysis of the different master plans, this part of the paper elaborates on the proposed master plan of the Smithson's for Kuwait's redevelopment. The Smithson's developed their conceptual projects for Kuwait based on the notion of 'adaptive reuse' of the remains of the older (largely demolished) town, which is relevant also in the light of the contemporary debate on how to deal with the modernist layer of the city. To develop their concept, they performed an extensive urban study of the existing built fabric and a new idea for a demonstration building was introduced.⁶ During these inquiries and site visits, the Smithsons pointed out the value of Kuwait as low-profile city in direct contact with the waterfront. Described in their own words, their proposal wanted to create *"a city in which it is easy to move around on foot in the shade in every direction without being embraced by cars or car noise; a city of apportioned vehicular movement and parking; a city with some of its best old features restored and put to use."*⁷

Their design incorporated the idea of the 'Mat-building'; a concept that they developed during their time in the Team X movement (1956). The 'Mat-building' is a strategy that stresses interconnectedness (1) of buildings. In Kuwait, the demolition of most of the houses in the old city left large empty surfaces that were used as car parks. The Smithson's took advantage of those open spaces to structure the Kuwait City Mat-building. The second element was interchangeability (2). This idea was based on integrating the maximum possible variety of functions. These facilities were placed in terms of the needs and the optimal functioning of the site and its surrounding events. The aim was to reintroduce the vibrancy of the old Arab city life.

4. The 'Al Sawaber' Housing Complex

4.1. The Emergence of 'Al Sawaber'

Kuwait's urban landscape developed from a small cellular village formed by traditional Arab houses to a regional metropolis in a period of circa a decade. This fast development of the urban area was the result of the government's desire to utilize the income, generated by the oil production, for the creation of the modern state of Kuwait.⁸ From 1954 to 1981, the housing typology, promoted by the state, focused on the single-family detached house. The government relocated the residential areas outside of the old city, promising a better living condition with modern facilities and comfort. However, the population increased from 250,000 in 1954 to 1,35 million in 1980 and the single-family houses, concentrically organized and disconnected from the city centre, were no longer a solution to meet this growing housing shortage. In this light, typological experimentation began, resulting in a variety of housing projects. In 1977, the government commissioned the Canadian architect Arthur Erickson to design a residential neighbourhood for 4,950 people in Kuwait Old City, named 'Al-Sawaber'.⁹ Only a decade after the construction 'Al Sawaber', it was already destined for demolition. The arguments given for its destruction were: the lack of architectural value of the blocks, the size of the apartments (not meeting the Kuwait's living standards) and the lack of (fire) safety. However, arguments that are more realistic are: the demographic shifts, the Gulf war (1991)

and the multiple physical transformations of the apartments contributing to the deteriorated image of 'Al Sawaber'.

4.2. Arthur Erickson's Design vs. Developer's Project

The modifications made to the design of Erickson are crucial in understanding its current condition, in which cultural aspects, climate and strong economic forces play a major role. So to speak, there was a decrease of density, from 900 to 520 residential units and an increase of the size of apartments. Furthermore, the communal spaces and commercial facilities were not built according to the original plans (**Fig. 3**) and the main central green area was not developed as principal public space. In addition, 'Al Sawaber' was also affected by the first economic crisis (1982) after the oil discovery (1938). Therefore, the project was only completed twelve years after the design.

Although, the original plans were redesigned (**Fig. 3**), many of the primary principles remained, like the public gardens that connect the blocks and centralise the old cemetery, or the alignment of the blocks that provides enclosure and protection from visual intrusion. The slightly changed A-formed, stepped buildings give the character of hillside villas (contrasting to the existing housing typology) and emphasize the connection with nature.¹⁰

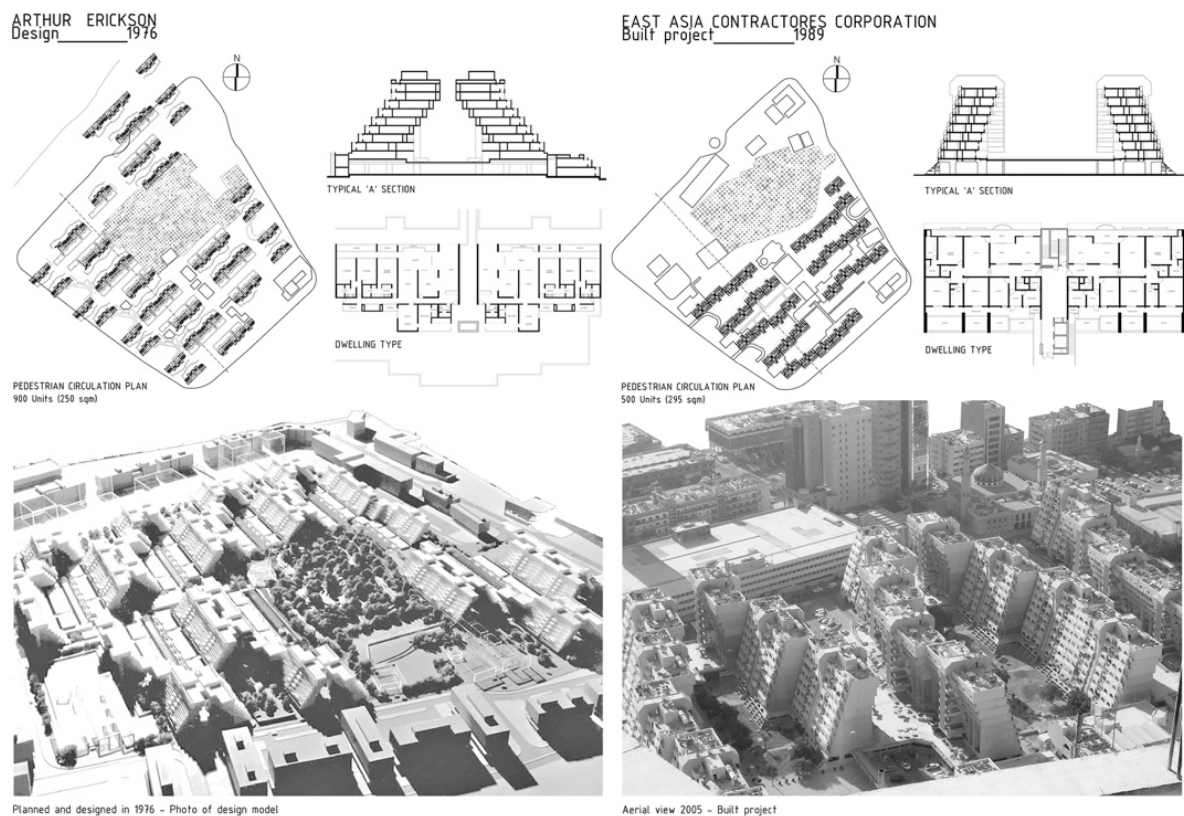


Fig. 3 'Al Sawaber' initial design by the architect Arthur Erickson, Kuwait City, 1976. © The 'Al Sawaber' Project, National Housing Authority Kuwait: Development Study, part C. Arthur Erickson Architects, Canada, May 1977, Kuwait Municipal Archive, Kuwait. © Credits for image Arthur Erickson Foundation.

Versus 'Al Sawaber' built project by East Asia Contractors, Kuwait City, Kuwait, 1989. © Plans and section by Diana Mosquera, 2019, based on East Asia Contractors Corporation © Credits for image Mishal Al Musailek, 2016, <http://mlalmusaileekh.blogspot.com/2016/10/al-sawaber-with-my-indulgence.html>

Beside these factors, residents themselves did also some (radical) alterations, such as blocking the windows for privacy issues and controlling of the sun light, changing the private terrace into an interior space (to increase the footprint of the living area) and altering the shared corridors in the public spaces. These adaptations aggravate after the Gulf war (1990–1991), resulting in many empty, strongly altered apartments rented out to migrant workers.¹¹

5. Design Explorations and Conclusion

We believe that the ‘Al Sawaber’ housing complex is an essential part of Kuwait’s history and heritage. The complex is representative of a particular era in the history of the city’s growth and development and is, irrespective of its alterations (both of its plans during the construction as the alterations by its inhabitants later on) a remarkable piece of modernist housing. In the light of the now largely performed demolition we investigated the potential of the regeneration and adaptive reuse of the site as an alternative for demolition, using the methodology of ‘research by design’.¹² The study was performed in the context of a master project (**Fig. 4**) and thesis in the Master of Adaptive Reuse at the Faculty of Architecture and Arts of Hasselt University (Belgium) in 2019. The main heritage values of the site were found in its unique architectural typology (terrace houses), the arrangement of the different blocks, and the link with the public space. Hence, the proposal aimed to preserve these values, and even strengthen some of them further. The proposed interventions can be summarized into three main actions: (1) to clear the typology from later alterations that did not have any quality, (2) to adapt the lay-out of the apartments to the local housing culture and tradition, and (3) to develop the public space between the blocks as a garden for the housing estate and a public park for the city. The re-definition of a ground floor that opens to the landscape and acts like a green carpet could bring pedestrian life to the site. The extreme climate conditions of the location were taken into account in the selection of the vegetation and the creation of shaded areas.

Although the ‘Al Sawaber’ housing complex was at the time of its construction considered high-rise buildings and a dense housing environment, nowadays the complex contrasts the extreme density and height of its surroundings. Although this was perceived the most important trigger for its demolition, we looked at it from a different perspective: presenting the limited height of the buildings and the open spaces in between the blocks as an opportunity for the city to create a public space that could benefit not only the inhabitants of this housing complex but also the whole surrounding neighbourhood.

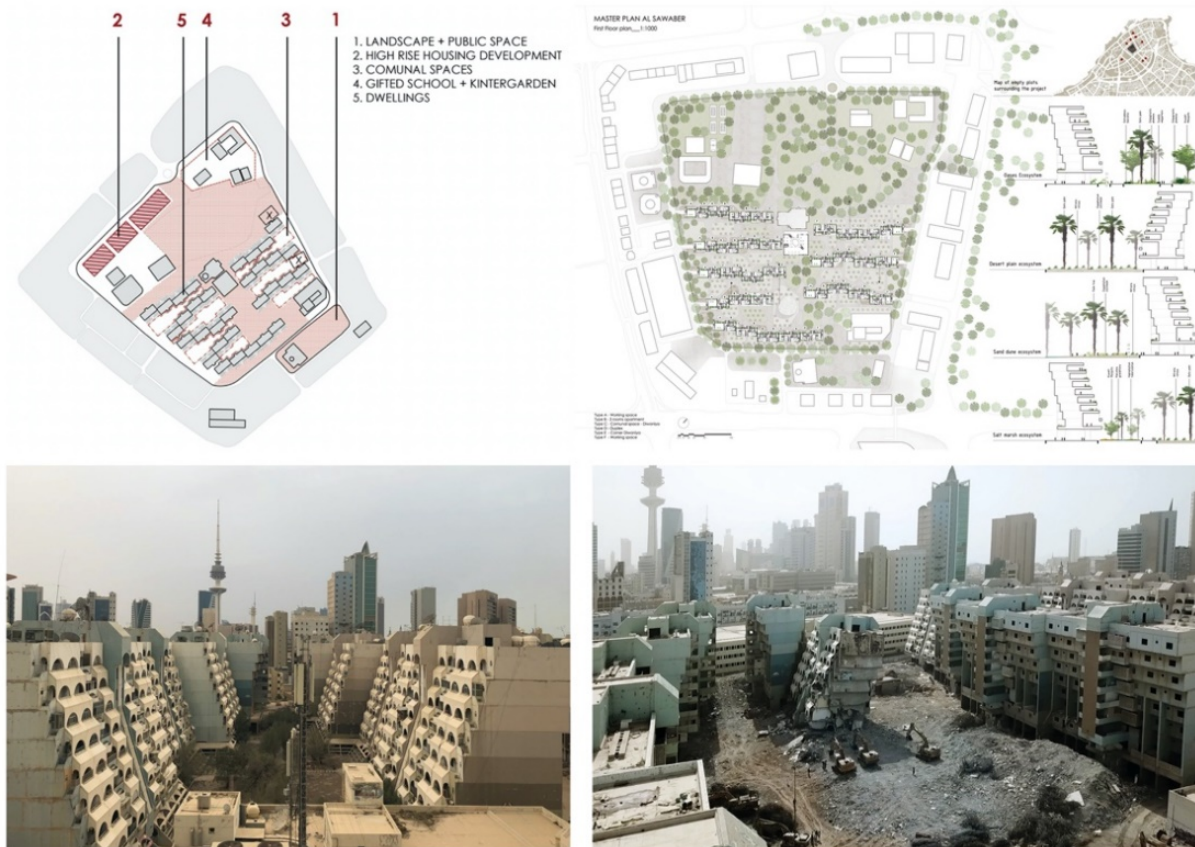


Fig. 4 Scheme and masterplan of adaptive reuse interventions at 'Al Sawaber', Kuwait City, Kuwait, 2019. © Plans by Diana Mosquera, 2019, based on East Asia Contractors Corporation before demolition. Versus during demolition of 'Al Sawaber'. © Credits image (left) Arab times, 2018 © Credits image (right) Tareq Alhouli, 2019.

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- ⁷ Smithsons, 1978 in Risselada & Van Den Heuvel, 2005, 133.; RISSELADA, M., & VAN DEN HEUVEL, D., *Team 10 in search of a utopia of the present: 1953–1981*, 2005.
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8. Biography

Diana Mosquera studied Architecture at Universidad del Valle (CO), Integrated Arts School, from 2004 until 2009. In 2015, she did a summer workshop on modern architecture in New York and Chicago and attended the course of addressing the urbanization challenge in Jerusalem. Afterwards she did her Master of Interior architecture and adaptive reuse at Hasselt University (BE), faculty of Architecture and Arts. Her thesis and master project focused on modern heritage and the adaptive reuse of modern housing in Kuwait. Currently, she is working as an independent architect for the Kuwaiti architecture firm of Alhumaidhi architects.

Marie Moors studied architecture at Hasselt University. Her master project was on display at the Biennale Architettura 2018 in Venice in the light of the Young Talent Architecture Award by the Fundació Mies van der Rohe (finalist). In 2018, she held a one-year internship at the TeamvanMeer! office in Hasselt, which specialises in restoration projects and heritage throughout Belgium. Currently, she is engaged in a PhD (FWO fundamental research) entitled ‘Re-reading modernist housing estates: An inquiry into the value of threatened heritage sites and the possibilities of adaptive reuse as a method for re-evaluation’ and part of the research group TRACE.