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From Openness to Division: How Urban Planning and Policy Reshaped Kuwaiti Society

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Abstract: This article explores how Kuwait's urban landscape was fundamentally reshaped by post-oil urban planning policies, leading to a society increasingly defined by residential, social, and demographic division along national lines. It traces the transformation of Kuwait from an open, integrated port town into a sprawling, car-dependent city dominated by low-density villa housing and rigidly segregated zoning laws. Drawing from historical context, ethnographic observations, and architectural analysis, the article argues that Kuwait's reliance on automobiles and restrictive housing regulations has eroded public street life, fragmented communities, and has both introduced and entrenched social segregation, particularly between citizens and non-citizens. The decline of walkable, communal spaces has limited opportunities for intergroup interaction and led to the rise of malls as the primary venues for social life, spaces that, in turn, reflect and reproduce the broader stratifications of Kuwaiti society. Ultimately, the article illustrates how urban planning choices, shaped by foreign models rooted in colonial era norms, have not only transformed the physical structure of Kuwait City but also redefined its social fabric, replacing a once-integrated urban life with a landscape marked by exclusion and division.

Keywords: Urban Planning, Kuwait City, Residential Segregation, Car Dependency, Public Space, Social Fragmentation.

Review Paper

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the decades following the discovery of oil, Kuwait underwent a dramatic transformation, from a small, integrated, multiethnic port town into a sprawling, car-dependent metropolis. Yet alongside the physical expansion came a profound social shift, driven not by cultural traditions or organic change but by deliberate decisions in architecture and urban planning. Urban design played a decisive role in reshaping the city's social fabric. A once close-knit and diverse community gradually gave way to a society of strangers, divided by nationality and race, each group confined to its own segregated enclave. The structure of daily life, how people interact, where they live, and whom they encounter, was not shaped by inherited norms but by the physical form of the city itself.

This article examines how urban planning policies, particularly those shaped by foreign consultants during the oil boom era, fundamentally altered not only the physical layout of Kuwait City, but also its social and demographic composition. Drawing on historical analysis, ethnographic observation, and architectural critique, it traces how the adoption of low-density villa housing, rigid zoning laws, and car-centric infrastructure contributed to the erosion of public street life and the rise of a deeply segregated urban environment. The article argues that these planning decisions fostered the spatial and social separation of Kuwaiti citizens from the country's large non-citizen population, embedding a system of exclusion into the fabric of everyday life, without the need for the explicit legal barriers typical of formal apartheid regimes. As walkable neighborhoods disappeared and communal gathering spaces declined, malls emerged as Kuwait's primary public venues. These privatized, climate-controlled environments, ostensibly open to anyone with the time and money to attend, offer a clear lens through which one can observe how the city's broader social divisions are both reflected and quietly reinforced.

Ultimately, urban planning, far from being a neutral or purely technical exercise, has played a central role in reshaping the structure of Kuwaiti society. The transformation of the city has altered not only how people move through space, but also whom they encounter, whom they come to know, and whom they recognize as belonging to Kuwait.

2. No Place to Walk: Life in Kuwait's Endless Suburb

Kuwait has often been described as a sprawling suburb disguised as a city, and that description is not far from the truth. At the heart of Kuwait City lies its central commercial district, whose borders mark the original boundaries of the town before the oil boom. Surrounding this core is a vast ring of suburban-style neighborhoods, where wide roads cut straight through rows of walled villas and private courtyards. This pattern stretches outward for miles, repeating itself again and again until it reaches the very edges of the city proper.

From above, Kuwait appears less like a city and more like a sea of villas. High-rise residential buildings do exist, but they're confined to a few designated districts and remain physically separated from the residential neighborhoods. Apartments remain largely unpopular among Kuwaitis, due to a deep cultural preference for villa-style housing (Alshalfan *et al*., 2022). Government efforts to introduce luxury apartment complexes for citizens were met with failure as the populace responded with resounding indifference; almost entire buildings stood empty, their rooms largely unoccupied (Alshalfan *et al*., 2022). Plans for future developments were quietly shelved. As a result, today most apartment buildings are inhabited by temporary migrants and expatriates, who now make up the majority of Kuwait's population but remain excluded from the villa-lined streets reserved for citizens.

The villa, a term used locally to describe large, detached, and often luxurious residential properties, has defined Kuwaiti domestic life since the 1950s and is by far the most popular form of housing. Supported by generous government housing benefits to cover the costs and a cultural preference for privacy, space and prestige, these houses became the ideal home. For a time, villas were more than just homes, they were status symbols of success, freedom, and a new post-oil Kuwaiti dream. Today, over 80% of Kuwaiti citizens live in villas (Jaffar *et al*., 2018).

This, however, came at a cost. The overwhelming preference for spacious, walled-off homes has turned Kuwait City into a vast, low-density sprawl. In a small desert nation with limited land, the capital has grown not upward but outward. Villas do not sit packed side by side, crammed wall to wall, but are spaced apart, separated by wide roads, open lots, and the illusion of endless space. This sprawling layout has made the cars the primary, and for many, the only, means of transportation (Mahgoub, 2003). With distances too long for walking, and sidewalks often nonexistent or unusable, the automobile has become not merely a convenience, but a necessity for daily life. For many, it is the only way to move through a city that was never designed for feet.

2.1 A City of Cars

Kuwait is a city literally built for cars. With no rail network, no metro system, and barely-existent public transportation, and residential areas spread too far apart for walking or even cycling to be practical, the city's infrastructure has long prioritized cars over pedestrians, resulting in one of the least walkable cities in the world, to the point it could be described as a forgotten mode of transport (AlKheder *et al*., 2022; Mahgoub, 2003).

The city is dominated by endless highways and sprawling developments, making it nearly impossible to get around on foot. In residential areas, sidewalks, when they do appear at all, are often claimed by local homeowners, repurposed and transformed into private gardens or parking spaces. Though technically illegal, the practice is so widespread that it has rendered most sidewalks unusable, forcing pedestrians onto the roads, exposing them to danger. Therefore Kuwait is a city one can walk in, but only with enough situational awareness, and a healthy disregard for one's own safety.

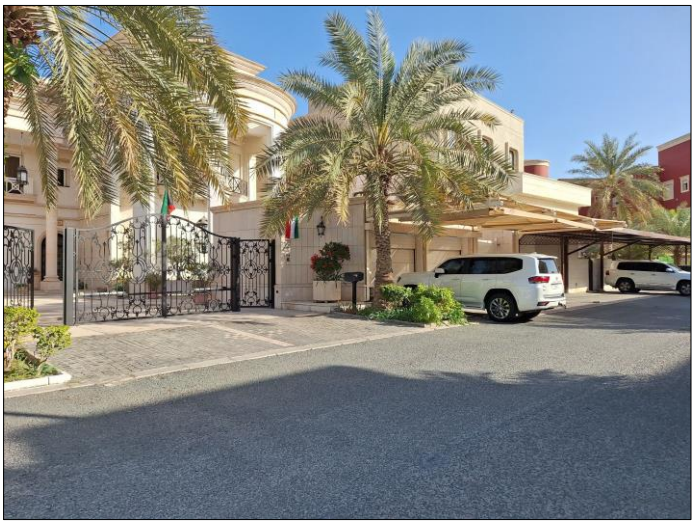

Figure 1: A homeowner's car and trees blocking pedestrian walkway (author's photo)

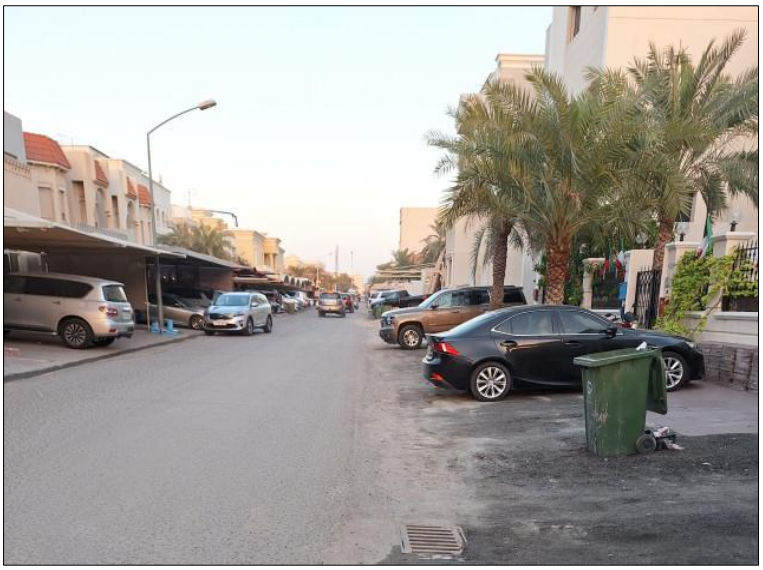

Figure 2: Entire neighbourhood sidewalk blocked off by parked cars (author's photo)

The highways themselves carve through residential districts, dividing neighborhoods. With no bridges to span them and crossing points often miles apart, these vast roads effectively become a wall, isolating anyone attempting to navigate the city on foot. What should be a five-minute walk can easily stretch into thirty or more, unless you're willing to risk your life darting across the middle of a busy highway. These physical obstacles only further entrench the city's dependence on cars.

Combined with Kuwait's extreme weather for much of the year, cars remain the only practical means of transportation for most residents. As one of the hottest cities in the world, Kuwait experiences summer temperatures that regularly average between 46°C and 47°C, with the temperature often soaring past 50°C during the hottest days (Sadek & Crystal, 2025)kuwait . In such conditions, walking or engaging in outdoor activities during the day becomes nearly impossible. Even if adequate pedestrian infrastructure did exist, it would remain largely unusable due to the relentless heat for much of the year. Simply put, Kuwait is not a place you can walk in.

Public transportation in Kuwait can only be described as terrible, bordering on nonexistent. The system is limited to a small, poorly maintained bus network that is widely regarded as unreliable and offers minimal coverage across the city. Breakdowns are common, and buses are notoriously unclean (Ghadanfar, 2019). A British school teacher living in Kuwait once recounted how, unaware of the network's reputation, she attempted to take a local bus, only to step off immediately, unable to bear the smell inside (S. Horris, personal communication, March 15, 2019).

As a result, those who can afford other means of transportation avoid buses entirely. Public buses are used almost exclusively by low-income migrant workers who have no alternative. This creates a self-reinforcing cycle: low passengers leads to poor funding and maintenance, which further diminishes the system's appeal and usefulness, thus leading to even less passengers. For most Kuwaitis, buses are shunned and avoided at all costs, with taxis used only as a last resort (Mclachlan & Al-Moosa, 2019). Compounding the issue, Kuwait's lack of a rail or metro system leaves residents entirely dependent on private automobiles for daily life.

Ironically, Kuwait's overdependence on cars has steadily made driving a frustrating and often unbearable experience. The city's infrastructure was never designed to accommodate the overwhelming volume of traffic it faces today, yet, with no viable alternatives, virtually everyone drives. As Kuwait's population surged and still continues to grow, the pressure on the road network has intensified. Daily congestion has become the norm, especially in central areas and around major shopping malls. Rush hour is now a daily ordeal, with morning and evening traffic jams often stretching for miles (Alattar & Al-Mutairi, 2021).

Parking in the city center has also become a major challenge. With far more cars than available spaces, it's common to see vehicles parked on sidewalks or even double-parked behind others, blocking exits and further contributing to the chaos. Traffic violations of this kind are so widespread that enforcement has largely ceased, with the police often turning a blind eye allowing such practices to continue unchecked (Makhoul, 2019).

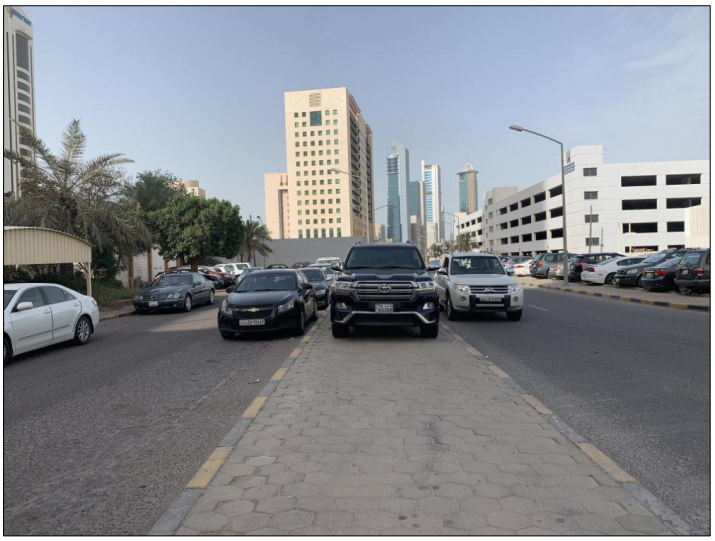

Figure 3: Car parked on pavement in Kuwait City (Makhoul, 2019)

This isn't a new issue for the city, it has been building for decades. In her 1970s memoir, *A New Look At Kuwait*, Zahra Freeth, a British resident in Kuwait, described the city's growing traffic problem as:

> "Kuwaitis' love of cars was becoming self-defeating as the older narrow streets became choked with traffic jams, where their beautiful machines, close-packed and powerless, jostled each other ineffectually like trapped fish." (Freeth, 1972, pg 17).

Her words still resonate today, reflecting a problem that has only worsened with time.

Kuwait's car dependency was not an accidental outcome but the result of deliberate urban planning decisions. Unlike most cities, which evolved organically over time, Kuwait was constructed entirely through a top-down master plan. Rather than expanding naturally, the city was built from the ground up based on a vision developed by British urban planners hired by the state in the 1950s (Hayat, 2014).

Inspired by the Green City Movement of the era, these planners envisioned a modern Kuwait composed of low-density residential neighborhoods separated from the city center, where most people were expected to work (Gardiner & Cook, 1983). At the time, automobiles were seen as symbols of progress and essential tools for building a better future. As such, the city's design prioritized automobile accessibility above all else, emphasizing wide roads and highways over pedestrian infrastructure. Kuwait has become a city where no one walks because no one was meant to. It was designed under the assumption that everyone would drive (Hindelang, 2022).

It was this vision that shaped Kuwait into the car-dependent city it is today. Though well-intentioned, critical flaws in the planners' assumptions led to a city where cars became the only practical means of transportation, rendering walking less a viable option and more an act of desperation.

2.2 The Hollowing of Street Life

The city's design has had devastating consequences for the it's street life. In cities around the world, it is often the spaces between destinations, the sidewalks, the neighbourhood street, the local parks, where communities take root. These are the places where children play, conversations unfold, neighbors exchange greetings. But Kuwait lacks this connective tissue. The utter absence of walkable streets has led to the absence of public shared spaces, and without shared spaces, there is no place for a community to grow.

In Kuwait, commuting happens almost entirely within the sealed comfort of air-conditioned cars and taxis. People move from home to work, from work to the mall, from the mall to a relative's house, all without ever engaging with the spaces or people in between (Shahrokni & Sofos, 2023). The result is a city that feels less like a unified whole and more like a series of isolated destinations with nothing to connect them. The streets were built for cars and engines, not for footsteps or conversation. They were designed for passing through, not for being in.

In other urban centers, street life fosters spontaneous encounters and the slow weaving of social ties (Hubbard & Lyon, 2018; Leyden, 2003). Sidewalks become stages for community, conversation, and the formation of new connections, a shared pattern of everyday life that creates a sense of belonging. In Kuwait, these elements are largely absent. There is no space that invites that kind of opportunity, no shaded sidewalks where someone can take a break from the heat of the sun to linger, no plazas to gather and meet with friends, no place in the public realm where strangers can become neighbors.

When walking becomes impractical, the spontaneity of urban life dies with it. Unexpected encounters or chance meetings with old acquaintances simply never occur. People no longer see their friends and neighbors as often as they once did. As one Kuwaiti woman reflected, she would only ever bump into old friends by chance when she's abroad, in places like Beirut or London (both popular tourist destinations for Kuwaitis) but never in Kuwait itself (Al-Nakib, 2016). It was a sentiment echoed by several others I interviewed. One man even claimed that he only ever seemed to bump into friends and relatives in Kuwait when he's at the airport or on airplanes (M. Abul, personal communication, Feb 19, 2025).

Street life depends on friction: eyes meeting, paths crossing, the possibility of the unexpected. But Kuwait was built to prevent friction, and in that, it has succeeded. The absence of walkable streets has brought with it the disappearance of shared public spaces. The city offers few places to gather, few reasons to pause. Without casual interactions or spaces to meet, Kuwait's streets remain largely barren, quiet, disconnected, and devoid of the social activity that gives cities their soul. Kuwait isn't a city that was simply poorly built for pedestrians; it's a city that was never meant to have street life at all. And so, it doesn't. Public life has retreated indoors, or vanished entirely. And with it, the communal bonds that once connected people have faded, leaving a city filled with strangers and little to connect one another.

3. Segregation: A Divided City

3.1 Residential Segregation

In Kuwait, housing is essentially split into two primary different zones, and this divide plays a big role in how people live, where they live, and who they live next to.

On one side, you have residential areas, neighborhoods where private homes are built and renting is banned (Alshalfan *et al*., 2022). These areas are made up almost entirely of villa-style houses: large, multi-story homes with gardens or courtyards, usually separated from their neighbors by high brick walls. Buildings here are low-rise by law, with no tall apartment blocks, and commercial activity is either tightly restricted or not allowed at all.

Then there are the commercial areas (Alshalfan *et al*., 2022). This is where apartment buildings (also known as investment housing) are built and where renting is legal. It's also where you'll find most malls, restaurants, and shops. There are no restrictions on building's height so high-rise buildings are common, with apartment blocks packed in so tightly they often end up forming massive walls that blot out the skyline.

As Kuwaiti law prevents non-citizens from owning any real estate, nearly all private homes in residential areas are owned and occupied by Kuwaiti citizens. Meanwhile, non-Kuwaitis, who make up the majority of the population, are generally confined to commercial zones, where they're permitted to rent. Though not often spoken of directly, this legal framework has ended up producing a quiet form of residential segregation within the country. Kuwaitis live in one part of the city. Foreigners in another. The rules about who can own land, where you can rent, and what you're allowed to build have, over time, divided the population into two entirely separate spaces.

The irony of this setup is that commercial districts where foreigners live are the ones with the best access to the city's malls, restaurants, and nightlife. The very heart of public life in Kuwait. What should have been prime real estate, right next to the country's busiest social hubs, is largely avoided by Kuwaiti citizens. Instead, these vibrant areas have become the residential centers for non-citizens by default, not design (Al-Nakib, 2016; Wood, 2025).

3.2 Malls: Kuwait's New Social Hub

Malls play an outsized role in the daily lives of most Kuwaitis that cannot be overstated. With few traditional public spaces available, they've quietly become the country's main 'third places', standing in for the informal, communal spots where everyday life used to unfold (Shahrokni & Sofos, 2023).

Historically, Kuwait was a town woven together by the threads of a close-knit community. Local open-air markets, neighborhood gathering spots, and shaded courtyards formed the heart of daily life; spaces where people met, lingered, and built lasting bonds. These public places did more than serve a function; they nurtured connection, fostered belonging, and gave daily life its familiar rhythm. Here, people got to know one another beyond names and passing faces. Relationships extended past the walls of the home, rooted in everyday encounters and shared routines. Children played freely under the watchful eyes of neighbors, and conversations unfolded naturally beneath the shade of a tree or over the rhythm of market stalls (Alshalfan *et al*., 2022). These spaces weren't simply the backdrop to life, they were its stage that made the community possible, and in doing so, made the city feel like a home.

But the post-oil era ushered in a dramatic transformation, one that gradually unraveled the communal fabric of everyday life. As urban planning shifted toward car-centric infrastructure and sprawling villa neighborhoods, the public spaces that once brought people together began to vanish. Streets became unwalkable, neighborhoods stretched farther and wider, growing distant and disconnected both physically and socially. With the rise of private cars, the fall of walkable streets, and summer temperatures pushing people indoors for much of the year, the rhythm of spontaneous interaction slowed to a halt. What remained was a quiet,

noticeable void in Kuwait's social landscape, a city people moved through but rarely connected with.

It was in this context that malls quietly stepped in to fill the void left behind. In Kuwait's post-oil era, malls have transcended their original purpose as commercial centers and evolved into the main arenas of social life. Outside of people's homes, it's no exaggeration to say that malls are where much of Kuwait's social interaction now happens (Mahgoub, 2012). They're where teenagers hang out after school, where families spend their weekends, where old friends catch up over coffee, and where daily life plays out in the public eye.

People don't come just to shop. They come to walk, to talk, to eat, to play with their children, to get to know each other, to meet new people, to linger, to see and to be seen. Some attend book clubs or sporting events held within the mall. Some frequent indoor gyms, bookstores, or cafés, while others simply come to walk and wander through the mall as one might stroll through a park. Parents leave their children at indoor nurseries while they relax with friends. Some malls even house government service centers to help process necessary civil paperwork. They are no longer just spaces of consumption, they've become spaces of belonging.

Eating-out, too, is woven into the daily rhythm of Kuwaiti life. Unlike in the West, where dining out is often saved for weekends or special occasions, in Kuwait it's part of the everyday. For many, it's a daily habit, just as common as having a meal at home (Othman, 2022). Whether with friends, with family, or going completely alone, eating out is seen as ordinary, and as essential, as grabbing a coffee or going for a walk.

This is one of the reasons Kuwait's malls continue to thrive, even as their counterparts in the West slowly fade (Guimarães, 2018). In the U.S., malls are increasingly viewed as outdated relics, steadily hollowed out by the rise of e-commerce and shifting consumer habits. But in Kuwait, even as online shopping grows, the mall remains central to daily life (Al-Nakib, 2016). Not because people need to shop, but because they need somewhere to go. Somewhere that isn't home, school, or work. Which is why, when someone says they want to "go for a walk," they often mean they'll hop in the car, drive to a mall, and walk there. Indoors, air-conditioned, surrounded by cafés, food courts, and retail stores. The mall isn't just a shopping destination. It's a public square.

You might go with a group, or you might wander alone. But either way, it's where life happens outside the home. In a city with few walkable streets, scarce parks, and even fewer public spaces, the mall fills the vacuum. It's where you stretch your legs, grab a bite, chat with a friend, let the kids run free, or simply pass the time. It's not about consumption. It's about existence.

In a place where traditional public life has largely vanished, malls have become Kuwait's new gathering places: vast, climate-controlled environments where the routines of daily life play out beneath glass ceilings and along polished walkways. Not just places to shop, but places where public interactions can continue to exist, simply reimagined indoors.

3.3 Mimicking the Past Indoors - Recreating What Was Lost

One can begin to understand just how vital malls are to Kuwaiti life simply by looking closely at the nation's most popular mall and examining what makes them so appealing.

The Avenues mall, Kuwait's largest and most popular shopping destination, is massive. Spanning a total area of 1,200,000 square meters and housing over 1,400 stores, The Avenues is considered one of the largest malls in the world (*The Avenues*, n.d.). Walking from one end to the other can easily take thirty minutes, even if you somehow manage to resist the countless temptations to stop along the way. And still, the mall continues to grow. Since its official opening in 2009, it has undergone a series of grand expansions, with entire new wings opening every few years, each more elaborate than the last.

If The Avenues were simply a place to shop, its monumental expansions would make little sense. The mall's sheer size already exceeds what is necessary to serve Kuwait's relatively small population many times over. But malls in Kuwait are more than commercial centers, and The Avenues is perhaps the clearest example of that.

You can tell, just by how the space is used, that it was designed to be something beyond retail. Even with thousands of shops, they're not crammed into every available square inch of space. Instead, vast stretches of the mall are intentionally left open, creating a sense of spaciousness and ease. The design invites movement and gathering; it signals that even without shops, this is a place where people are meant to be. And perhaps that's exactly why these open areas are often the most vibrant and crowded parts of the mall.

The walkways are so wide that twenty people could stroll side by side without brushing shoulders. One central promenade of the mall, known as "Grand Avenue," is deliberately styled to resemble an outdoor boulevard (*The Avenues*, n.d.). It stretches nearly a kilometer in a straight, uninterrupted line, free of twists or clutter. With stone-paved walkways, tree-lined edges, natural light filtering through glazed glass ceilings, shaded seating areas, and even the occasional bird flying overhead, it evokes the feeling of strolling through a far-off European city.

Cafés lining the avenue often have second floors, their balconies offering a view of the constant stream of people passing below. Literal parades, complete with marching bands, have taken place along this boulevard. It feels less like a mall and more like a city turned inside out: a climate-controlled world where people come not just to shop, but to wander, to linger, to socialize, and to simply exist in ways they cannot within the real city outside.

During Ramadan, when people are meant to fast during daylight hours, hundreds of residents from all across the city gather here to exercise. They walk the long corridors of the mall, looping around again and again until they've completed their step count or daily goals. Some even jog together in small groups, chatting and encouraging one another. With the heat outside too intense to bear, and few dedicated public spaces for walking remaining, people have adopted the mall as their informal space for communal exercise. It wasn't something that had been planned or promoted by the mall; it emerged naturally over time. This scene isn't unique to The Avenues either as similar scenes unfold in other malls across Kuwait, but The Avenues remains the most popular destination by far (DPA, 2024).

There's an irony, perhaps even an unconscious yearning for what was lost, in the way Kuwait's malls are designed. How they attempt to capture the feel of a living city, one that has long slipped away. Nowhere is this more evident than in a section of The Avenues called "The Souk." Named after the Arabic word for marketplace, it seeks to recreate the atmosphere of Kuwait's traditional commercial hubs (*The Avenues*, n.d.). Walking through it feels like stepping into a memory. From the shops to the stone beneath your feet, everything echoes the architecture of old Kuwait: narrow alleyways, earth-toned facades, and cafés styled after those that once dotted the historic neighborhoods.

Families gather here in large numbers, young and old sitting at old-style tables, ordering traditional food, and chatting in the open. One part of the Souk recreates the old alleyways of Kuwait; narrow, winding paths flanked by tall, featureless earth-toned walls casting a dim shade. The alleys twist and turn without any clear direction, each bend revealing a hidden shop or quiet corner café you wouldn't have known was there unless you stumbled upon it by chance. It's a place made for wandering and discovery, a sense of exploration more like taking an unmarked path through a quiet old town in the middle of the countryside than anything you'd expect to find inside a modern mall (Al-Yousifi, 2013).

These spaces feel like a desire to return to a Kuwait that no longer exists outside of memory. A reconstructed past, reimagined indoors, where social interaction becomes possible once again, albeit under very different terms. It's as if the mall is trying to recapture the spirit of a former Kuwait, offering an air-conditioned replica of the communal gathering places that once thrived in the open air. After all, where else can a social hub exist in Kuwait today, if not inside a mall? There simply isn't any other place left anymore.

3.4 Malls - a Space for Everyone, But Not Together

Malls are places where residents of Kuwait come to gather and socialize. Yet, they often reflect the fragmentation of Kuwait's cosmopolitan population. These are spaces where people congregate, but not necessarily together. Different ethnic and social groups tend to gravitate toward their own preferred malls, forming distinct micro-communities within the broader urban fabric.

In a country where two-thirds of the population are non-citizen expatriates, malls quietly mirror deeper social boundaries. There are no formal barriers, no entry fees, but the patterns of self-segregation are unmistakable. At The Avenues, for example, the crowd I observed was overwhelmingly Kuwaiti. Despite Kuwaitis making up only about a third of the total population, they appeared to dominate the space. While other nationalities were certainly present, in a country where Kuwaitis are a demographic minority, the balance inside the mall seemed reversed.

However, The Avenues is something of an exception. It is not just a mall, but a national landmark, deeply woven into Kuwait's modern social and economic identity (Okumus, 2024). It's the kind of place every first-time visitor to Kuwait is told to come and see, and every resident is expected to have visited at least once. Its reach and appeal cut across class, status, and background in a way few other public spaces do. For that reason, it cannot be seen as representative of Kuwait's typical mall. Its unique status draws a broader cross-section of the population than most other malls, which tend to reflect sharper lines of social and cultural separation.

At the upscale Murouj complex, a partially outdoor mall that had opened just a few years earlier but quickly gained popularity among Kuwaitis, I took a seat at a café with a clear view of the main promenade. For an hour, I remained there and observed the steady stream of shoppers and visitors passing by.

While it can be difficult to distinguish Kuwaitis from other Gulf or Levantine nationals based on appearance alone, spotting foreign residents from other backgrounds (particularly South Asians, Westerners, or other expatriate groups) is generally much easier. Over the course of that entire hour, I failed to identify a single individual who didn't appear to be of Arab descent among the crowd of shoppers. In a country where citizens make up only a minority of the population, the utter absence of foreign residents within the crowd was eerie.

Even among a crowd entirely made up of Middle Eastern faces, it soon became clear that Kuwaitis made up the overwhelming majority. While the physical features of locals and their regional neighbors are often indistinguishable, there are subtle cues that reveal themselves upon closer observation: the style of clothing, the way men wore their ghutra (the traditional headscarf), the ease and familiarity with which they moved through the space, and, occasionally, the distinct accents I overheard in passing. Taken together, I felt reasonably certain that I was observing a crowd made up almost entirely of Kuwaitis.

Murouj was a popular destination for both families and younger adults. It featured a petting zoo and a small carnival for children, but was also home to some of the most stylish and in-demand cafés and restaurants in Kuwait. Built alongside a horse racetrack, the complex offered riding lessons for all ages and regularly hosted events such as marathons and pop-up markets. Given the variety of attractions, one might expect Murouj to draw a broad and diverse demographic. Yet as I sat and scanned the crowd, all I could see was a sea of Kuwaiti faces. In a country where the majority of the population was foreign, the homogeneity of the visitors held unsettling implications.

Murouj can be entered from multiple points, and during my visit, I didn't see a single security guard stationed at any of the main entrances. There were no physical barriers to access: no barred gates, no ID checks, no visible restrictions. Yet the only non-Arabs I encountered during my entire time there were the employees. This raised the obvious question: what was keeping non-residents out? A few possible barriers came to mind.

First, accessibility Murouj is only reachable by car. Those who don't own a vehicle or afford a taxi would find it difficult, if not impossible, to get there. It's far removed from residential areas and practically inaccessible on foot. Second, price. Murouj is expensive. Food and retail items are noticeably pricier than in many other parts of Kuwait, making it less appealing, or simply out of reach, for lower-income visitors. Third, and perhaps most subtly, social knowledge. Murouj is a well-known hangout among Kuwaitis, but it's not necessarily a place you can stumble onto by chance. You have to know about it, and go out of your way to reach it. I only learned of its existence through word of mouth from my Kuwaiti friends. Had it not been for them, I might never have known the place existed at all. For foreigners, especially those outside of the natives' social circles, Murouj may simply be invisible. A popular gathering spot that exists just outside the edge of their awareness. This, combined with the general discomfort of feeling like an outsider, a "nail that stands out", might be enough to discourage non-Kuwaitis from entering at all.

However, even in malls where these barriers such as car access, pricing, or insider knowledge are absent, the same patterns of racial and social division persist. In Souk Al Maseel, a mall located in the heart of Kuwait City's bustling commercial district, I observed a completely different crowd. As I wandered through its halls from top to bottom, I found that all the visitors were Asian workers, predominantly Indian. Except for myself, there was not a single Kuwaiti or Arab in sight. All of the customers, staff, everyone who was wandering within the Mall's walls was a foreigner. This, in a mall surrounded by office towers and bank head offices, where tens of thousands of Kuwaitis work every day, made their absence feel all the more pronounced. And yet, just steps away, not even a full minute's walk, stood another shopping center, Baitak Mall, where the scene was flipped. There, the crowd was overwhelmingly Kuwaiti once again.

There were no gates, no guards, no signs telling anyone where they did or didn't belong, and yet the lines were clear, invisible but as real as any physical barrier. While anyone *could* walk between the two, they didn't. One was for Kuwaitis, the other wasn't.

Here, prices could not fully explain the divide. Souk Al Maseel generally offered cheaper food and lower-end stores compared to Baitak Mall, but not every store. Several vendors in Baitak sold meals at prices similar to those in Souk Al Maseel. And while higher prices may discourage lower-income migrant workers, it did not explain why Kuwaitis avoided the more affordable mall entirely.

Accessibility wasn't a factor either. Anyone who could reach one mall could just as effortlessly make their way to the other. They were neighbors in the most literal sense, built side by side, separated only by a parking lot. For the same reason, awareness was not the issue. These malls were physically adjacent and plainly visible. I could stand at the entrance of one and see the doors of the other. This was no secret spot, no hidden path, only a short, unobstructed walk between two very different worlds.

Part of the divide may have had to do with what was being sold. Souk Al Maseel featured shops that catered to a specific demographic; stores selling saris, traditional Indian foods, and regional goods. But not exclusively. It also offered the kind of general products you'd expect to find in any mall. Likewise, Baitak Mall housed familiar international brands: a Subway, a Starbucks, and even a potbelly. It held shops selling phone accessories, and a tiny kiosk near one entrance. On the surface, their offerings weren't different enough to exclude entire demographics.

Perhaps the difference wasn't in what was being sold, but in who the space felt like it was for. It came down to the atmosphere. The subtle cues. The quiet,

unspoken understanding of where one fits in and where one does not. The quiet logic of self-segregation, playing out without need for words. In this way, malls mirror Kuwait's broader social landscape; nominally open to all, yet informally and powerfully divided. Not walled off, but worlds apart.

In Kuwait, malls have long since transcended their original role as shopping centers. They have become the country's primary *third places*, substitutes for the public square (Mahgoub, 2012). They are where social life happens, where teenagers linger, where old friends reconnect, where families spend long weekends. Refuge from the heat outside. But while they provide comfort, climate control, and a space to meet, they also quietly reveal the deep social divisions and invisible boundaries that shape life in Kuwait. They are reflections of a past that has been lost, and of the new lines drawn into the social map of the present.

4. Construction of Division: Integration to Exclusion in Post-Oil Kuwait

Kuwait wasn't always the highly segregated place it is today. Back in the pre-oil days, especially before the 1950s, the instinct to divide by race, class, or religion never really took hold. What we often think of as a natural human tendency, the urge to stick with your own, was surprisingly absent in this small port town (Calverley, 1958; Mclachlan & Al-Moosa, 2019).

It was one of those rare places where people truly lived side by side. Africans, Persians, Hasawiyya, Baharna, Zubairis, Baluchis, Jews, Armenians, Arab Christians, had all called Kuwait home and shared the same streets (Lorimer, 1915). They traded in the same markets, raised their kids within shouting distance of each other's homes, and lived lives that overlapped and interconnected in every way. Even the usual patterns of residential clustering you find in most cities, the rich here, the poor there, the Christians on that street, the Muslims on this one, just weren't part of old Kuwait's social map. The only clear division came after death: different burial grounds for different communities (Calverley, 1958). But in life, they lived together.

As historian Nelida Fuccaro points out, there wasn't even a local word for "immigrant" during the time period. Even the term "Kuwaiti" as a national identity was not widely used. People simply referred to themselves as *ahl al-Kuwayt*; the people of Kuwait (Fuccaro, 2010). It was a moniker that anyone who lived within Kuwait had the right to wear. And despite the differences in race and religion, Kuwait managed to function as a unified whole, a network of coexisting communities. It wasn't a perfect harmony, but it worked. A British official in the mid-eighteenth century had described Kuwaitis as "closely united and free from feuds and factions." (Harcourt, 1905)

This fragile, pluralistic balance began to slowly unravel with the arrival of modern urban planning during the oil boom. As mentioned earlier, British planners were brought in to design a new Kuwait, one that would replace the organic messy layout of the old town with something more modern, more ordered (Gardiner & Cook, 1983). With straight lines rather than curves. Their vision was built around the car, not the pedestrian. Streets widened, neighborhoods spread out, and street life began to fade. Along with these new roads came something else: zoning laws and spatial divisions that Kuwait had never known before. For the first time, people were being sorted, quietly, but deliberately, by where and how they could live.

The British architects who drew up the plans came from a world where racial and class divisions were seen as normal, even expected. Segregation wasn't questioned, it was built in. And whether they meant to or not, they brought those assumptions with them when they designed the city Kuwait would become. These plans may not have been explicitly colonial in intent, but they echoed the logic of empire. They mirrored the norms of the British world at the time, where separating people by class, race, and origin was simply how cities were made (Christopher, 1992).

Even before the 1950s, when Kuwait was ruled as a British protectorate, there were already places where the blueprint for segregation had quietly taken root. One of the clearest examples was the oil town of Ahmadi, often described at the time as the most beautiful and desirable place to live in the entire country (Alissa, 2013). But behind that polished image was a carefully constructed social order, shaped by British planners who brought with them a very specific vision of hierarchy and separation.

Designed in 1947 by British architect James Mollison Wilson, who also happened to be a follower of the Garden City school of architecture, Ahmadi was divided into three distinct sections. British and American senior staff lived in the best areas and with it the best houses, Indian and Pakistani clerical and technical workers brought in from other colonies of its empire in the middle zones, and Kuwaiti and Arab laborers were placed on the edge, a shanty town, in what at the time was called the "Arab Village" (Alissa, 2013). It was little more than a collection of huts made from cast of wood and straw, with no plumbing or electricity. The Arab Village was built for the exclusive housing of natives, with the explicit aim of keeping them physically and socially separate from the expatriate staff. In the logic of the time, locals were at the bottom of the social order below the foreign expatriates, and the layout of the town made sure everyone knew it.

After independence, Kuwait didn't dismantle this model, it embraced it. The state picked up where the British left off but scaled the concept across the entire

country, with one crucial twist: the roles were reversed. Kuwaitis took over the prime zones once occupied by colonial elites, while non-Kuwaitis were pushed into the margins, packed into overcrowded, overlooked corners of the city (Alissa, 2013; Al-Nakib, 2016; Alshalfan *et al*., 2022). Strict housing laws made the divide permanent. Only Kuwaiti citizens could own property. Non-citizens were left to rent, often in dense, temporary-feeling neighborhoods far from the quiet suburbs reserved for citizens. What had been a foreign colonial design became domestic state policy. And with it came more than just physical separation, it brought a quiet, lasting sense of social distance. A deep, lingering alienation that still shapes life in Kuwait today.

What started as imported urban planning slowly turned into something far more intentional. Over time, the state began drawing sharper and sharper lines between citizens and non-citizens. On paper, in law, and in daily life. Housing, schools, hospitals, even access to public spaces, everything started to revolve around a single question: *Are you a citizen?* There were no fences. No signs saying "you don't belong here." But people knew. The divide was quiet, but it was everywhere, woven into the way the city worked. Citizens and non-citizens might have walked the same streets, but they lived in separate worlds.

They didn't mix. They didn't run into each other. They lived in the same city but shared no spaces. They shopped in different malls, ate at different restaurants, and lived in different neighborhoods. They lived entirely different lives, unconnected to one another. What used to be a tightly woven, walkable city slowly came apart, thread by thread, into separate, distant pockets. Inclusion here. Exclusion there.

And the shift didn't just change where people lived. It changed how the city felt. The old alleyways, the shady courtyards, the neighborhood full of familiar faces, they were replaced by wide roads, tall gates, and cool, polished malls that stretched for miles and held an artificial town within its walls. The ease of street life, the warmth of casual connection, the simple joy of knowing your neighbors, it all began to fade.

No one set out to kill street life. But as it vanished, something else went with it: trust, spontaneity, little moments of kindness between strangers. All the small, quiet things that used to hold the city together. In old-town Kuwait, it was once customary for men to gather in the evenings with neighbors and friends by bringing chairs outside the gates of their homes, always leaving extra space for unexpected guests (Freeth, 1972). It was a simple but meaningful tradition, an open invitation for anyone in the neighborhood to sit, chat, and connect. A quiet ritual that kept social bonds alive.

By the 1970s, in the rapidly changing city of Kuwait, some older men still tried to cling onto this custom. But by then, sitting outside meant placing their chairs beside busy highways, enduring the noise, dust, and exhaust of passing traffic of the evening rush hour (Freeth, 1972). The experience must have been miserable, yet they sat there anyway, determined to reclaim a piece of what had been lost. Today, there are no longer old men sitting outside their gates. The custom has vanished entirely.

It wasn't until strict housing policies came into play that segregation truly sank its roots into Kuwaiti life. That's when the shape of the city, and the society around it, began to shift in ways that made it almost unrecognizable from what it had once been. These effects of separation didn't stop at where people lived. It found its way into the smallest rhythms of daily life, even into how people got around. Once it hadn't been unusual for Kuwaitis to hop in a taxi, but by the 1950s, public transport had started to carry a social weight (Lienhardt & Al-Shahi, 1993). A stigma that was never before. Buses were seen as the domain of migrants. Kuwaitis were never to be seen in one. Taxis became something to avoid. A last resort only to be taken when all other options were exhausted.

Soon enough, the segregation of housing spilled over into the segregation of society. What began as government policy quickly settled into the public mindset. The transformation came startlingly fast, barely more than a decade, unfolding right in front of people's eyes. Within a single generation, Kuwait, its people and way of life had changed.

By the 1970s, national housing surveys made something clear: almost no one wanted to live next to non-Kuwaitis. Only 3% of Kuwaiti respondents said they'd be open to living in a mixed neighborhood (Al-Nakib, 2016; Mclachlan & Al-Moosa, 2019). And when it came to apartments? They were flat-out rejected. To many Kuwaitis, apartments weren't just inconvenient, they were foreign. Cramped, noisy, too exposed. One Kuwaiti professed that renting an apartment made him feel like a guest in his own country (M. Abul, personal communication, March 22, 2025). Villas were for citizens. For families. For people who belonged. The privacy they offered mattered. The space they provided mattered. But just as important was the comfort of being surrounded by neighbors who looked like you, spoke like you, and lived like you.

Kuwait didn't always look like this. The shift from an open welcoming port-town to the segmented, status-conscious nation we see today wasn't some accident of history. It happened slowly, deliberately. Shaped by planning decisions, state policies, and flawed ideas of what the ideal future should look like. Maybe it wasn't entirely intentional at first but by the end, it certainly was.

5. CONCLUSION

Discrimination exists as a fundamental part of life in modern Kuwait, but it is not intrinsic to Kuwaiti culture, nor is it a reflection of some deep-seated flaw in its people's nature. The segregation we see today was not inherited. It is not a natural extension of Kuwait's past. It was built, literally.

The shape of the city shapes its people. Zoning maps, housing laws, street grids, and the rise of the private car have all come together to carve invisible lines into everyday life. This new geography emerged throughout the 1950s and 60s, when foreign British firms were brought in to design a modern Kuwait (Hayat, 2014; Partners, 1983). Their plans, grounded in the colonial logic of separation, introduced zoning and spatial hierarchies that had never existed in old Kuwait, a place where people once lived, worked, and worshiped side by side.

After independence, the Kuwaiti state did not dismantle that logic. It adopted it. Internalized it. Layered it with its own policies: laws that allowed only citizens to own property, forcing non-citizens into dense, temporary rental zones; a transportation network built for cars rather than people, making walking rare and accidental encounters rarer still. Neighborhoods became isolated islands where you only met the people you already knew.

What began as imported urban planning met the old patterns of tribal exclusion, where loyalty turns inward and the unfamiliar is kept at arm's length. Together, they produced a new kind of urban apartheid. Not one based solely on race, class, or even wealth, but on citizenship. On legal belonging. On the question of who the state deems *from here*. Though this system began as a foreign design, it has since been embraced so thoroughly that it is now a part of Kuwait's modern identity. It can no longer be written off as someone else's fault. It has become the architecture of the Kuwaiti psyche.

This isn't simply a geographic divide. It is a social divide. A behavioral and structural one. In Kuwait, you don't bump into strangers. You don't cross paths with people outside your circle. The city is designed to ensure that you only meet those you already know, and so, over time, unfamiliar faces remain just that, unfamiliar. Distant. Foreign. Not because they are, but because they're given no chance to become anything else. This is how tribalism is made modern. How difference becomes suspicion. And how a city once known for its openness has come to be defined by its walls.

In the span of a handful of decades, Kuwait went from being one of the most integrated places in the region to one of the most divided. And what disappeared wasn't just a sense of inclusion, it was the small, everyday things: the neighborly hellos, the streets shared by a myriad of different people from all walks of life, the feeling that this city belonged to everyone in it. Urban design didn't just reshape the city, it reshaped the people who moved through it. Today, Kuwait feels like a place of invisible lines. Citizens and non-citizens live side by side but rarely cross paths in any meaningful way. The old street life is gone. The familiarity of a close community has faded. And the quiet chairs outside old gates sit empty, forgotten.

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