



# Multitude of Gatherings

Architects Zahra Ali Baba and Deema Alghunaim are behind Kuwait's first entry into the Venice Architecture Biennale. Here they tell us more

It's the middle of the Kuwait summer, one week into Ramadan and the team at Arabana is working on a Friday. They could be snoozing before iftar or watching a drama-saturated Ramadan special, but the Venice Architecture Biennale is only a month away and curators Zahra Ali Baba, Deema Alghunaim and their production team are gearing up to present Kuwait's first pavilion. At Arabana - an experimental architecture and design warehouse in the industrial area of Shuwaikh - they are working on a sound and vision installation that will encapsulate life in their small Gulf state and showcase it to the rest of the world.

Although the women are spearheading the project, their team is large, numbering in the dozens. Alongside Ali Baba, who works at the National Council of Culture, Arts and Letters doing restoration and rehabilitation work and Alghunaim, part of the Kuwait Master Planners department at the municipality, is Ricardo Camacho from Portugal who works at the Multitude Agency, an international research agency for architecture. Also collaborating is a British-Pakistani architect and artist called Tasawir Bashir and Brian Duffey, a British sound artist.

The Kuwait pavilion will emphasise the rhythms of daily life in the Gulf state and is called Kethra - Arabic for multitude. In this specific case Kethra stands for the act of social gathering, signifying the tendency of layer upon layer of Kuwait's society to continually get together to chat, relax and co-exist.

Though it must be overwhelming for them to constantly

take group consensus, Kethra's democratic approach is in keeping with the theme of this year's exhibition in Venice - Common Ground.

Curated by David Chipperfield, the large-scale exhibition with 55 participating countries is often hailed as the global architecture Olympics. This year the Biennale aims to bridge the differences in architectural culture from around the world, to promote deeper understanding and constructive criticism within this often misunderstood and insular discipline.

Alghunaim, who has taught in the architecture department at Kuwait University, describes the Kuwait pavilion as an anti-structure, with no walls or dimensions. Ali Baba adds that it is a radical reaction to the 'hypervisual practice of the region' - calling to mind images of the sinuous Hamra tower in Kuwait City and Visa credit card's recent advertisement featuring Olympic diving off Dubai's glittering Burj Khalifa.

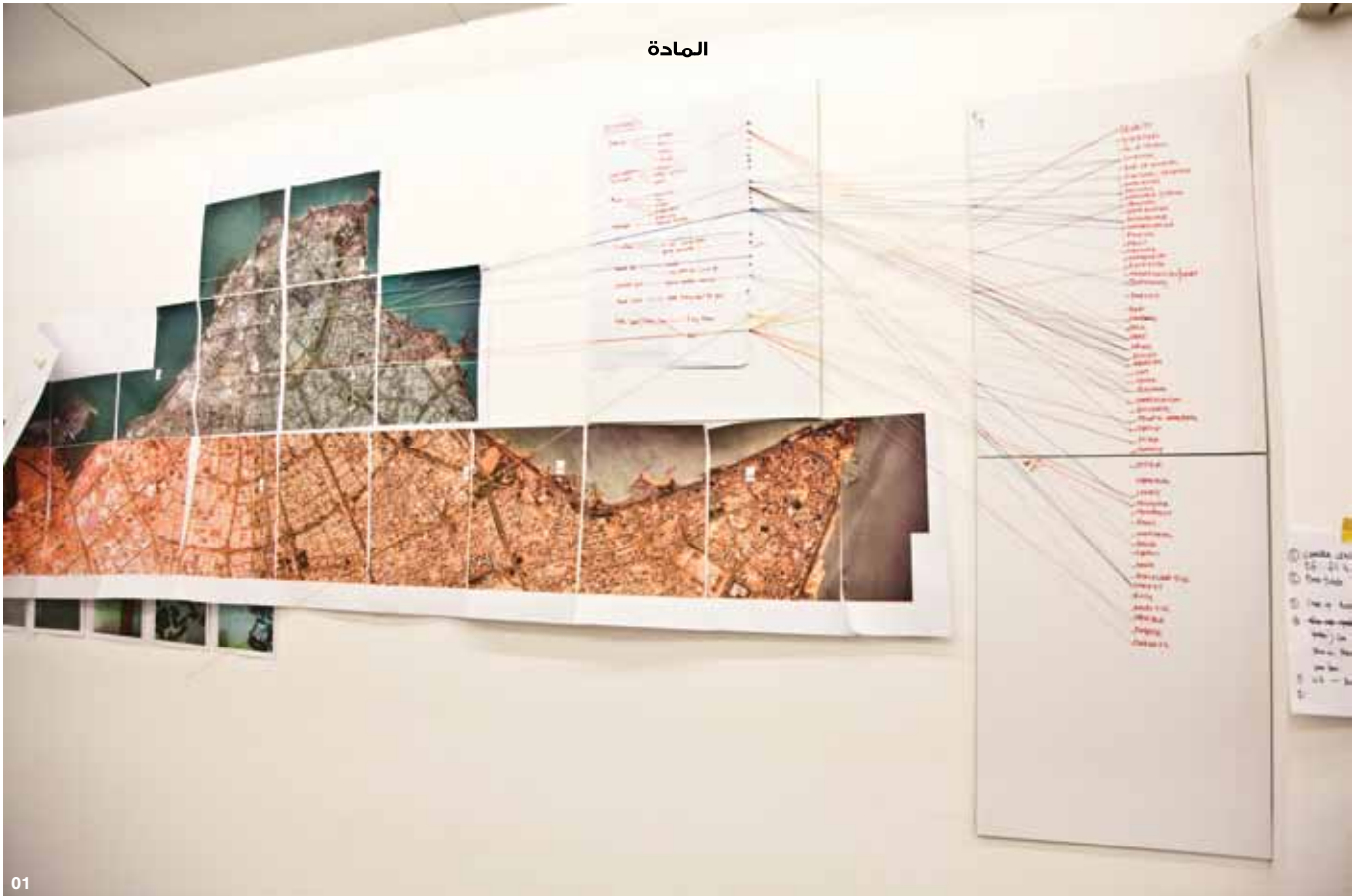
For Kethra, the team has taken sound recordings sampled from several communities and gathering places in Kuwait, such as the parliament hall, majlis and various shopping malls. They plan to project the sounds from hanging speakers, organised in a ring (symbolising the 'ring' in gathering). Research narratives about each of the eight places, which they have called 'conditions', will be printed on the ground, inviting audiences to sit, stay and read. As such, this creates another type of gathering.

The word kethra also indicates abundance and surplus, which are definitely characteristics of Kuwait's oil economy and generous welfare state. The Kethra project is critical of



01 Zahra Ali Baba, who is heading up Kuwait's first entry to the Venice Architecture Biennale

## المادة



01



### KETHRA

Under the title Kethra, Kuwait's participation at the Arsenale in Venice was commissioned by The National Council for Culture, Arts, and Letters (NCCAL). Kethra uses Venice Biennale as a global platform to launch a long term project that will host discussions, workshops and other parallel events in Kuwait.

As a precursor the NCCAL held a three day local event to officially introduce Kuwait's participation. At the conference titled Kuwait: Buildings and Architects, was a round table discussion between international guest speakers and locally based architects

the Kuwaiti citizen's penchant for extravagance, who as Alghunaim notes, 'make up only one third of the total population and live off almost 100 per cent of its resources.' So they made sure to take an even-handed set of audio samples from daily life in Kuwait, including the sounds of an expatriates' cricket game and those of a fisherman's house, which is a way of honouring the past, when Kuwaitis subsisted on pearl diving and fishing.

The rhythm of daily life in Kuwait is punctuated by five calls to prayer and the country's building laws include a stipulation that a mosque must be built within a certain number of metres. Ali Baba has her finger on the pulse of what makes Kuwait's social and architectural culture different. 'We're a society of faith,' she says as her light almond-shaped eyes glint from behind her black headscarf. 'There's material and then there's manner,' she continues. Her point ultimately being that human and social needs should take more priority when building a city and that imported Western models and the growing Arab world continue to be strange bedfellows.

The problem of premature progress first reared its head when oil was discovered in Kuwait in the late 1930s. Almost the entire city was demolished and rebuilt in the 1950s when the expanding oil industry meant Kuwait would need more soundly paved roads and infrastructure. The result was new schools, hospitals, oil refineries and suburban neighborhoods filled with Indian, Egyptian, Palestinian and Lebanese workers, engineers, doctors and teachers.



02



03



04

## There's material and then there's manner

ZAHRAALI BABA

British urban planners came in as consultants for the new designs and soon the country was completely rebuilt with traditional mud houses being replaced with roundabouts and trading posts with high-rise buildings.

Alghunaim claims that her father, Abdullah Alghunaim, still sees downtown Kuwait as it used to be and is therefore living in a virtual reality of sorts. He ignores the skyscraping bank buildings and instead refers to them by what stood in their place when he was a boy.

To this day, the casualness with which buildings in Kuwait are demolished is a growing concern for architects. Kethra's original proposal for the Venice Biennale Pavilion was related to restoring endangered buildings from the 1960s, but was shot down. 'It's too recent,' say the curators. 'Kuwait is ready to revisit only history history - its pre-oil past. They are not ready to talk about or criticise the current climate. What we are doing is groundwork for further research.'

The team's drive to spread local awareness about Kethra before it went to Venice Biennale was admirable, with a local conference being held to discuss the present climate of architecture in Kuwait prior to the event.

Ali Baba is no stranger to education, having co-directed Winter School Middle East in 2011 with Markus Miessen, an event which hosted architecture students from Germany, Finland, Oman and Kuwait to study the history of the dewaniya, a reception room traditionally used by Kuwaiti males. Not to be underestimated are continued efforts by Alghunaim to digitally archive historical writings such as

Saba George Shiber's *The Kuwait Urbanization*, written in 1964. The two tireless architects have not only put Kuwait on the global culture map, but also make sure to give back to the local community that made them the expansive thinkers and architects that they are.

Kethra is able to truly re-contextualize the architecture of Kuwait, highlighting the importance of the places they record in, doing things like comparing the silence of the dewanya and that of an airy shopping mall. The soundscape they will present in Venice has a sacred tenor, defining structural resilience not by the strength of a building but by the energy of a gathering.



01 A wall map pinpoints the locations for Kethra  
02 Ali Baba introducing Kethra at the launch event

03 During the three-day introduction conference  
04 Ali Baba says Kethra is a Kuwaiti first