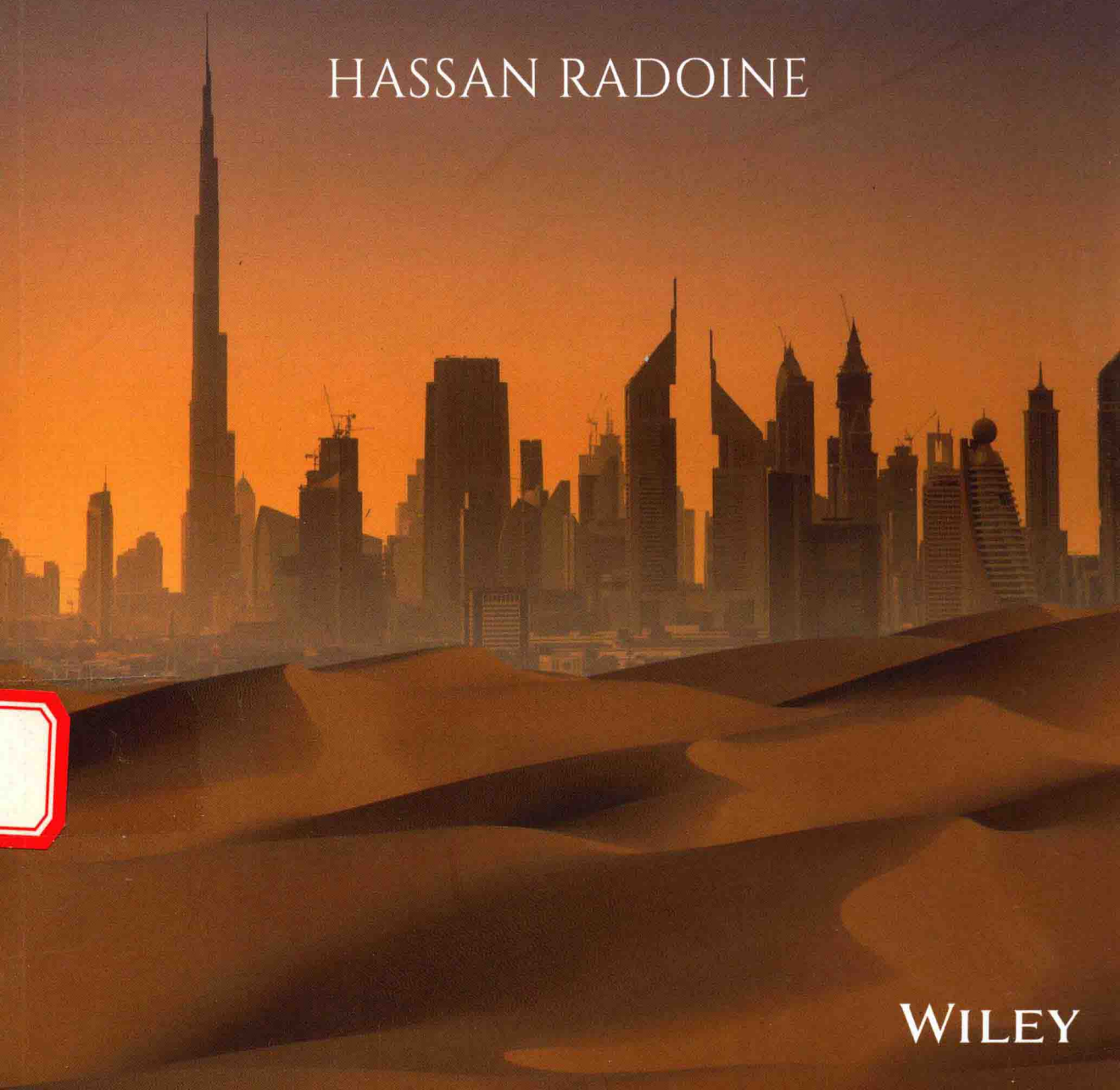


# ARCHITECTURE IN CONTEXT

DESIGNING IN THE MIDDLE EAST

HASSAN RADOINE



WILEY

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# ARCHITECTURE IN CONTEXT

DESIGNING IN THE MIDDLE EAST

*I dedicate this book to all those young architects who are striving to design out of the box, with the aim of improving the human condition through an architecture of sense in all regions of the world.*

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The process of preparing it started as an open dialogue with students and young architects, in response to their queries, after I realised how much they were suffering from the lack of a guiding textbook on contemporary architecture and design in the Middle East. Since I cannot mention all their names, I fully acknowledge my smart students' great contribution to making this a practical textbook and, I hope, a reference for generations of students and architects to come.

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# INTRODUCTION

There is a vast amount of architectural activity taking place in the Gulf and other countries of the Middle East, including Turkey, Lebanon, Egypt and Morocco. In various places throughout this region, high-rise structures made possible by the freedom from structural limitations of materials such as concrete, steel and glass are taking the art of design to heights never reached before. Some embody the new 'global' approach that relies heavily on imported forms, while others reflect the 'local', pursuing a rather postmodern form of romantic aestheticism. Consequently, contemporary architecture in the Middle East and the north of Africa is at a critical crossroads with regard to the limits of global and local design practices.

However, the striking conceptual framework that underlies the new approaches to designing in this particular area never takes into consideration its entrenched rich architectural tradition and sense of place. Indeed, modern local and international architects have designed most of the new buildings as if there were no context. What is meant by context here is not the ordinary emotional forms but the intrinsic memory and prophecy of a locality to engender an innovative project centred on a sustainable genius loci, or spirit of place. Architects currently designing in this area are instead pursuing an iconic-abstract architecture that is once again dominating worldwide architectural discourse and practice.

Very few local or international architects are trained to capture grassroots contextual elements, and therefore most are unable to creatively translate these into their projects, particularly in those located on sites with high natural, cultural and environmental potential. This is due firstly to decades of modernist ideologies which influenced a whole generation of architects to take a negative position towards any historical or contextual reference, and secondly to the loss of empirical

## OPPOSITE

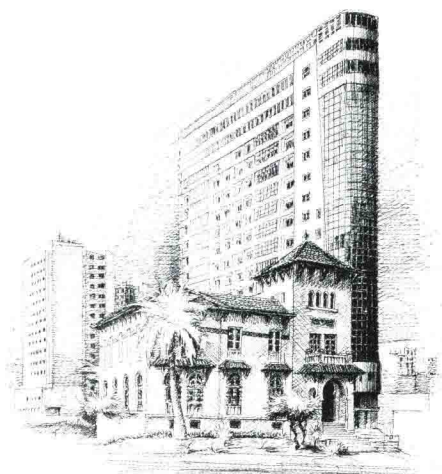
**Early 21st-century postmodern romantic versus global iconic architecture in Dubai, United Arab Emirates**

*In the foreground is the Madinat Jumeirah resort (2003), designed by Eduardo A Robles and Thanu Boonyawatana with DSA Architects in postmodern romantic style, while soaring beyond is the Burj Khalifa (2010) by Skidmore, Owings & Merrill and Hyder Consulting.*

## BELOW

**'Monopolio' building, Tangier, Morocco, 1884**

*A historic tobacco factory in Tangier is overwhelmed by the standardised international style of the tall buildings around it as they take over the existing urban heritage cityscape.*



knowledge regarding local building know-how beyond dramatic and superficial pastiche.

The current new generation of students and young architects seem to be at a loss about what to do with this discordant state that the previous generation inherited at the beginning of the 20th century, when any contextual form was considered a hindrance to architectural avant-gardism. Even today, students of architecture in the Middle East region are being exclusively taught Eurocentric historical surveys with insufficient focus on those closely relevant to their own context. They are unfortunately not offered the opportunity to grasp local architectural vocabularies and their embedded environmental and cultural signifiers.

Consequently, the redundant internationalist standardised vocabularies and forms of architecture plague all cities in the region, with no consideration for their environmental, ecological, cultural, geographical or social settings. The rich architectural diversity and uniqueness of the region, which once offered the world architectural wonders, has frequently been substituted with monotonous and repetitious forms by designers seeking international fame at the expense of the human factor and its environment that ought to be its *raison d'être*.

However, if we consider that such criticism or rejection of context is based on resentment or alienation for mere polemical or ideological ends, we will not find a straightforward answer to the question of contemporary design in today's

**BELOW**

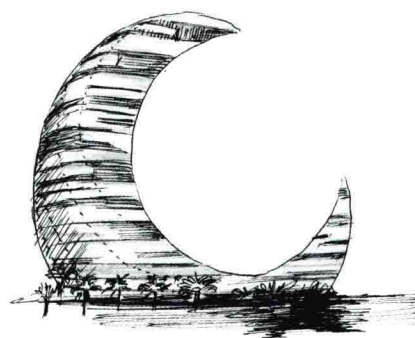
**Cityscape of Cairo, Egypt**

*A monotonous cityscape similar to those of most Middle Eastern cities, with conventional forms.*



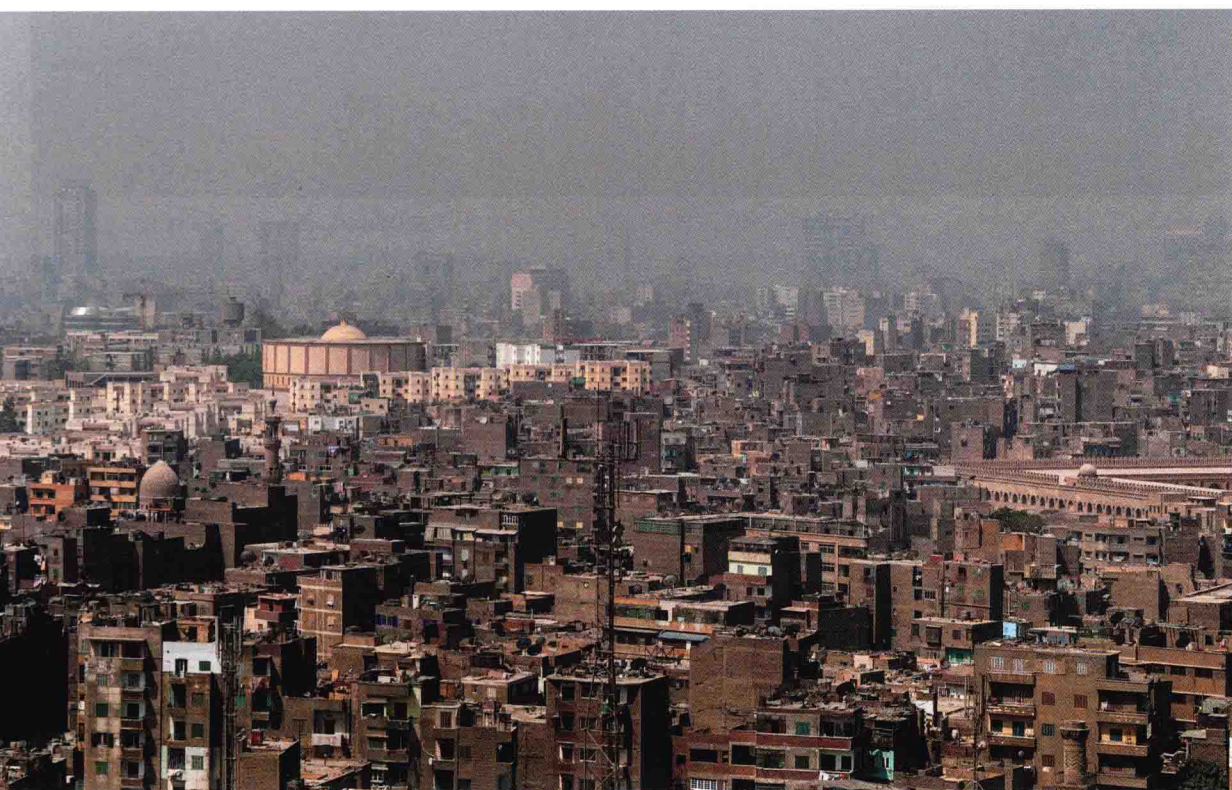
Middle East. Hence the urgent need for a new orientation to cultivate responsible design practice geared towards a more responsive architecture that communicates with its place while being concomitant with its time. This need echoes a voice that seeks to raise awareness among the architectural community all over the world about the risks of the fast-spreading ego-centred designs that exempt the act of designing from any relevance to its milieu.

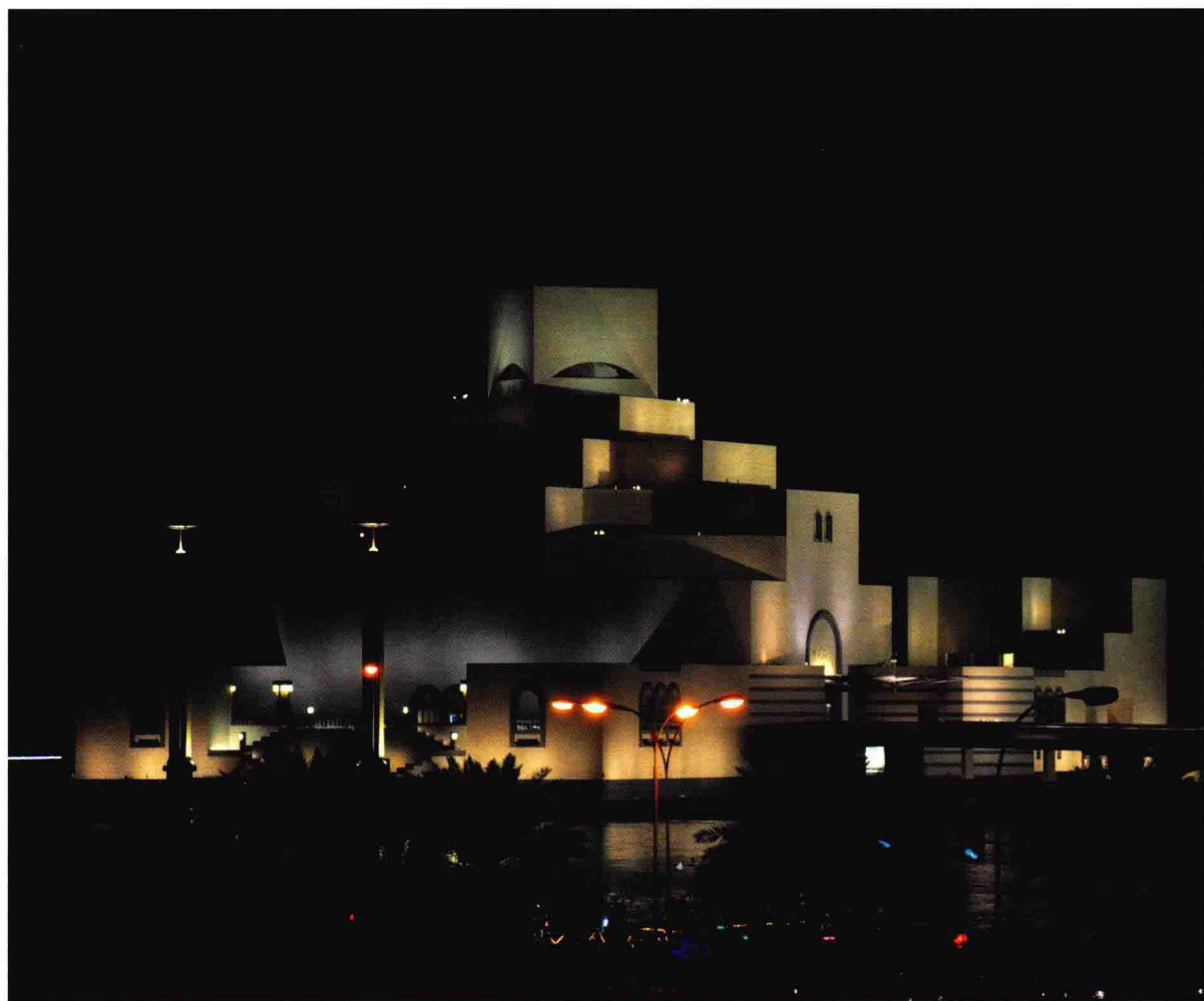
Therefore, this book is intended to be a guiding tool and an eye-opener on the long-overdue revalidation of context in current design processes that have been deprived of the quintessence of their locality due to the common alibi of constraining architects' creativity. Stressing this concern among architects, this book serves as a reminder of the importance of reaching a balance between embracing a creative regionalism that anchors architecture in its site and culture, and adopting an effective globalism without utterly surrendering to an ultra-technological form devoid of any sense of place. This cannot be attained without first training students and young architects in the region to grasp contextual parameters as not limitations, but rather opportunities that can be translated through architectural innovation in order to boost the overall quality and comprehensiveness of the design process. Secondly, the book sets out to provide them with efficient methods and techniques for



**ABOVE**  
Transparent House design  
agency, Crescent Moon Tower  
proposal, Dubai, United Arab  
Emirates, 2012

*A metaphorical and fantasist ego-  
centred design with an Orientalist  
'Islamic' form – the crescent.*





**ABOVE**  
**I.M. Pei, Museum of Islamic Art,**  
**Doha, Qatar, 2008**

*Pei's successful attempt at dismantling the local architectural vocabulary and redesigning it in a contemporary style without falling into pastiche.*

a judicious exploration of contextual realms. Thirdly, it gives them pointers to explore universal design with its innovative mechanisms, acquiring its scope while embracing the spirit of places.

Accordingly, this book's main message for architects is, first, to approach architectural design with more subtlety and responsibility, in order to heighten the vivacity and originality of the region's buildings – not only for the decades to come, but also to set a referential value for future architectural masterpieces. And second, it is a plea to all architects to re-centre design and creativity around the vital human living condition rather than be satisfied with an ephemeral aestheticism. This will hopefully alert students and future architects to the possibilities of designing a more responsive and sensitive architecture.

Several new terms have recently been coined to voice these contextual concerns in different disciplines, such as sustainability, resilience and smartness. To avoid any confusion in students' and young architects' minds, it is imperative to note that this book does not seek to propose a historicist or a nationalist architecture



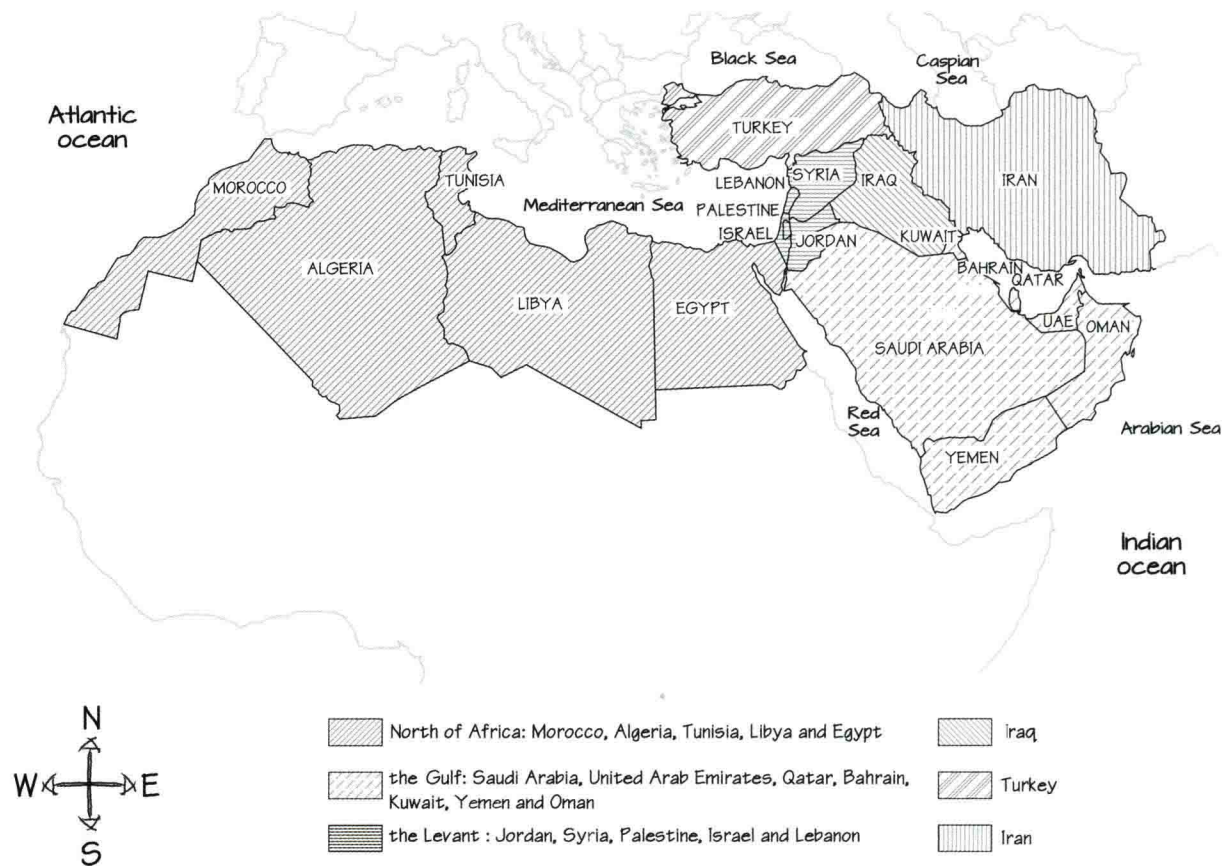
LEFT  
**X Architects, Wasit Natural  
 Reserve Visitor Centre,  
 Sharjah, United Arab Emirates,  
 2016**

*An example of designing with  
 the demands of the site in order  
 to generate a living landscape  
 where architecture is a balanced  
 environmental ensemble.*

or one that advocates an emotional regionalism. However, it does pursue a programmatic approach that seeks to holistically integrate the genius loci of different places through a responsible process of designing. While taking care first not to fall into ready-made recipes of one of these terms, and second not to blindly surrender to the pressure of sheer consumerist architecture that satisfies only the demands of competitive developers – market rules, monotonous commercial building materials, regulations and fast production – architects, particularly young ones, are indeed called upon to endure the struggle of keeping the profession sustainable and noble. Subsequently, the approach pursued in this book can be applied to any other region in the world while exploring the proposed elements, taking into consideration their own local characteristics and peculiarities.

The key questions to be raised are the following: How should the background of architectural tradition in the Middle East and the north of Africa be comprehended? How can architecture in the Middle East be designed in a way that observes contextual qualities without falling into emotional pastiche? How can context be grasped in order to design responsibly? How can a sense of judgment regarding a responsive contextual design be cultivated? How can contextual elements be explored in an innovative way? What are the different contextual and cultural meanings to be considered in design? How should the practice of a contextual design be situated within the current architectural trends and discourses in the region? How can local anchorage be achieved without discarding positive global input?

BELOW  
Map of the regions and  
countries covered by this book



This book is thus an attempt to address these questions by critically exploring four fundamental aspects:

- ❖ the historical background of architecture in the Middle East, presenting the key knowledge elements that need to be mastered so as to situate the content of this book in time and in place, and recall what is essential to design in contemporary theory and practice
- ❖ the local architectural vocabulary and its elements of local styles, to enable an understanding of the paradigm of authentic local design principles and forms, and how they can still be reactivated in contemporary projects through their stylistic contextual idioms
- ❖ the cultural and contextual meaning of forms, which allow genuine cultural and contextual references to be set that may influence contemporary architecture in the region by critically questioning all local and foreign preconceived concepts about the architecture of this area
- ❖ the different discourses and trends of contextual architecture that need to be taken into account in order to position the theories and practices vis-à-vis the current global/local dichotomy – the purpose being to find out to what extent the global interacts with the local and vice versa.

With such a perspective, the book discusses the dynamics of the context of contemporary architecture in the Middle East in both theory and practice. Arching over these four aspects will be the spectre of crisis, change and opportunity that can collectively be understood as the sustainability question. The regions of the Middle East that are covered in the book are North Africa (Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya and Egypt), the Levant (Jordan, Syria, Palestine, Israel and Lebanon), the Gulf (Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, Yemen and Oman), and the zone of Turkey, Iran and Iraq.

This book is intended for a new generation of students and architects who are well versed in visual culture. Its content is interwoven with informative illustrations and photographs that together generate an innovative narrative. It is important to consider that this book is only a modest starting point for a new line of research on the possibilities of reactivation of dormant and dynamic contextual parameters in the making of a contemporary architecture that is continuously becoming detached from its human factor:

