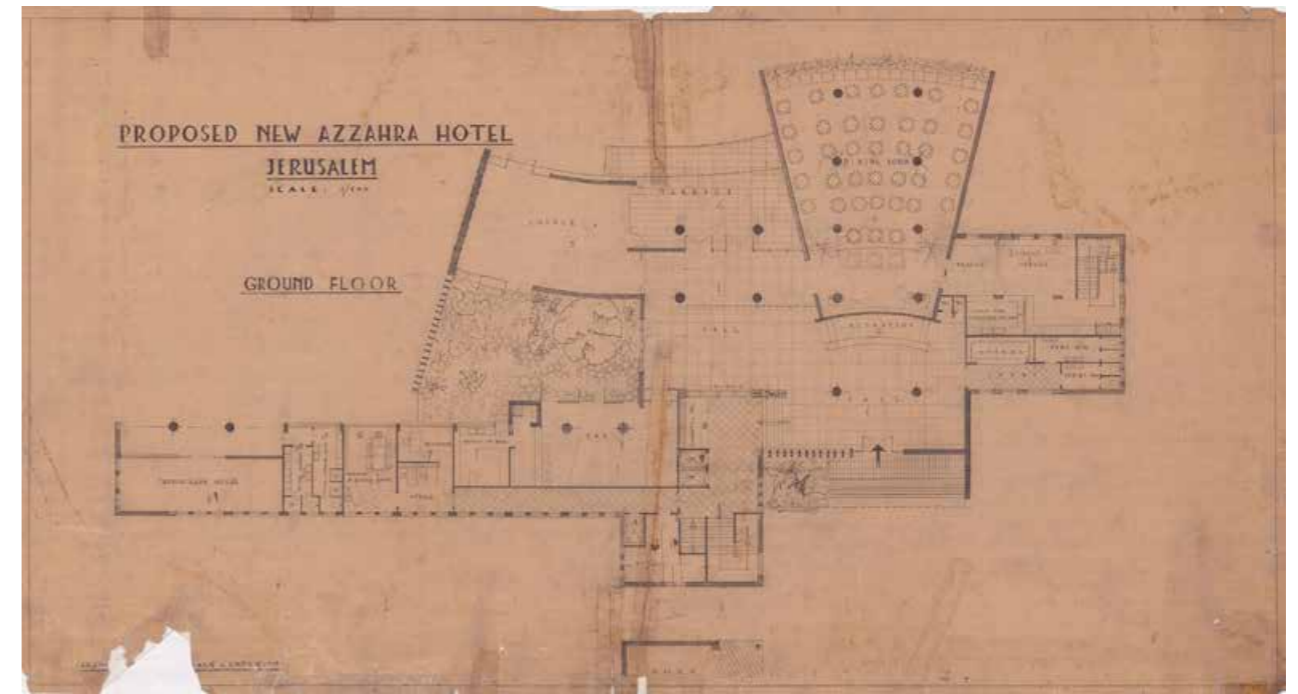


A MODERNIST ARABIA

by Kasia Maciejowska

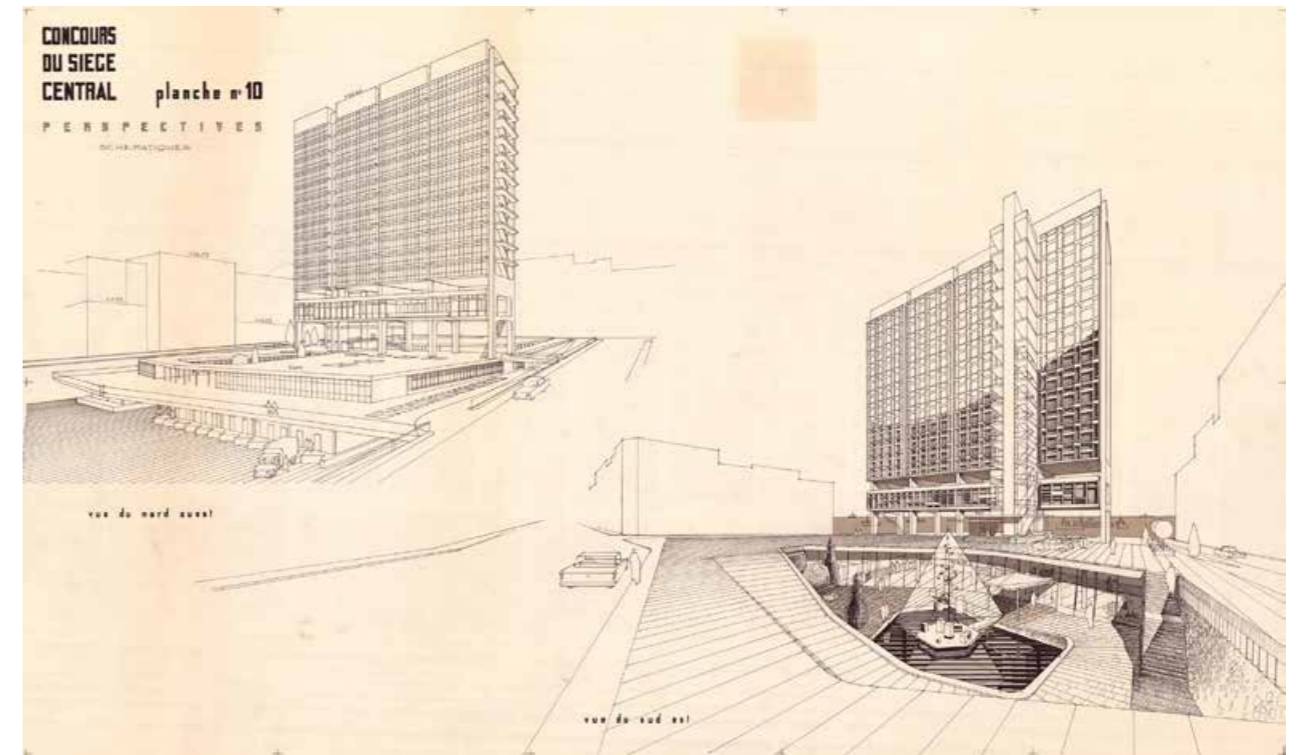
The **Arab Center for Architecture (ACA)** presents the story of **pan-Arab modernism** for the Kingdom of Bahrain pavilion at this year's Venice Biennale, curated by George Arbid and Bernard Khoury. The Lebanon-based archive chose **100 buildings from across the region** to represent 20th-century architectural progress. Conceived of as a counterpoint to the polarised perception of Arab architecture as either romantically traditional or the flashy showpiece of 21st-century capitalism, the pavilion and its take-away book aims to rehabilitate popular attitudes to modernist design at a time when many of its finest local examples are being torn down. Here we look at highlights from this long-overdue project, kindly shared with Selections by the ACA.



opposite page:
General plan of the Kaédi Regional Hospital,
by Fabrizio Carola, Kaédi, Mauritania, 1992.
Courtesy Aga Khan Trust for Culture

above:
Ground floor plan for Azzahra Ambassador Hotel,
by Rais, Cnaan and Erdekian, Jerusalem,
Palestine, 1953. © Arab Center for
Architecture, George Rais Collection

below:
Électricité du Liban Headquarters, by J. Aractingi,
J. Nasser, P. Neema and J.N. Conan (CETA),
Beirut, Lebanon, 1965-1972. © Arab Center
for Architecture, Pierre Neema Collection

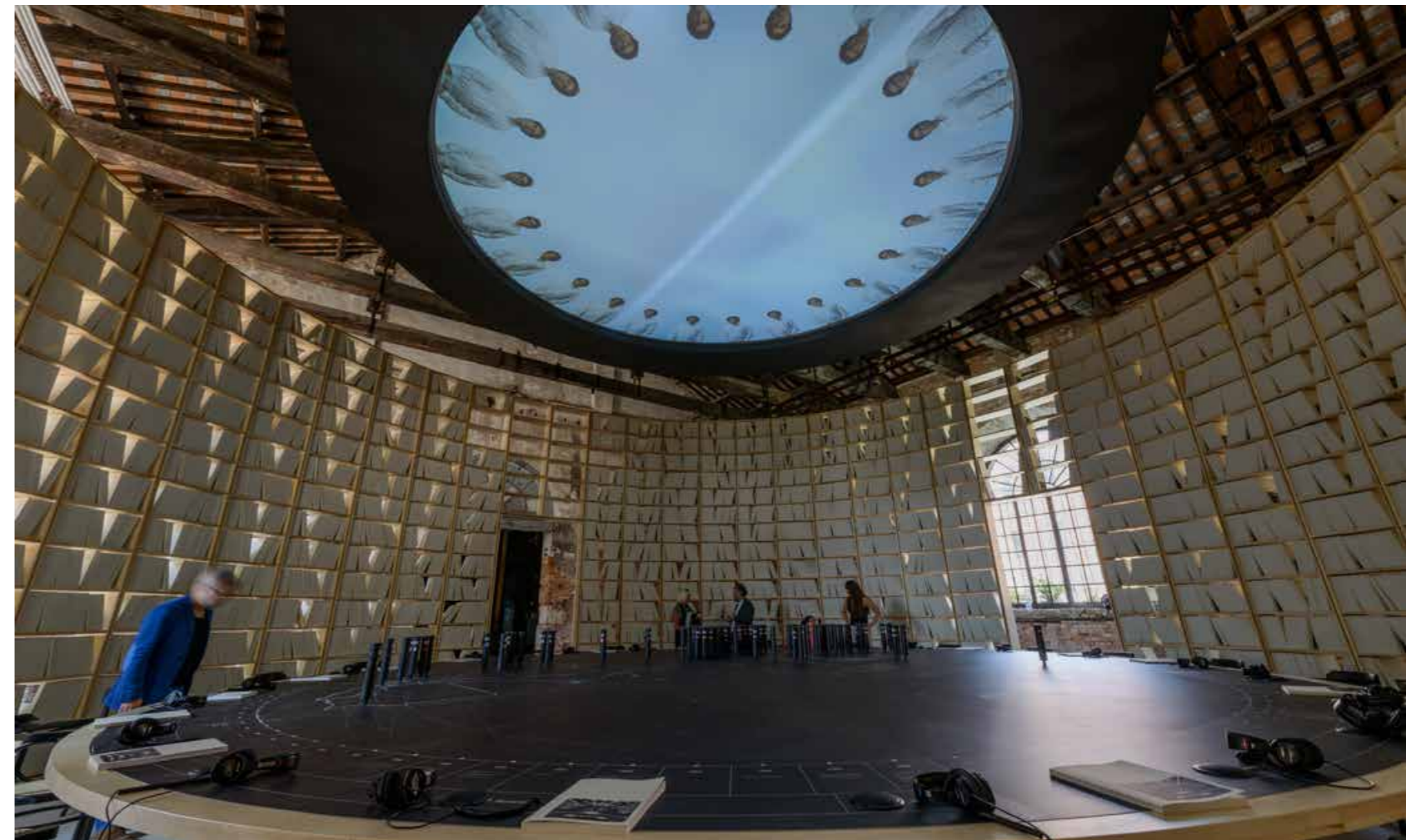


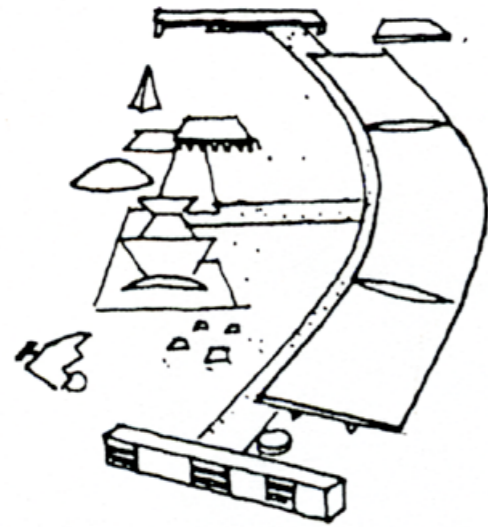
Reign of Fundamentalists and Other Arab Modernisms,
by George Arbid and Bernard Khoury,
Kingdom of Bahrain Pavilion,
14th International Architecture Exhibition,
Fundamentals, la Biennale di Venezia
Photo: Andrea Avezzi
Courtesy la Biennale di Venezia

Approaching from the outside, the Bahrain pavilion, at the Arsenale in Venice, appears to be a round, temporary library. Once inside, one might be at a political conference. Faced with a vast circular table comprising a map of the Arab world circumnavigated by a timeline and dotted with inviting headphones, the gaze is drawn upwards by the sound of prayer-like voices emanating from a ring of talking heads projected onto the ceiling. These voices – in fact one voice recorded many times – recite the national anthems of the 22 Arab states. The books on the surrounding shelves are pavilion catalogues, to be taken away by visitors, each containing an illustrated history of architecture in the Arab world from 1914 to 2014.

THE GAZE IS DRAWN UPWARDS BY THE SOUND OF PRAYER-LIKE VOICES EMANATING FROM A RING OF TALKING HEADS

Under the title *Fundamentalists and Other Arab Modernisms*, the book and corresponding table-top timeline, travel from a university in Morocco, to a hospital in Mauritania, via innovative collective housing projects, rational factories, and the occasional stand-out icons. Such star pieces include Sune Lindström's 1960s water towers in Kuwait and Oscar Niemeyer's 1962 International Fair of Tripoli, which continues to be threatened with redevelopment despite being admired by design enthusiasts the world over. Names like these, from Sweden, Brazil and elsewhere, appear throughout this narrative as the Arab states – often born from the designs of international politics – have been inscribed by the interests of colonialism and post-colonial neoliberalism, although many local architects also adhered to the modernist project.





A better fit couldn't have been curated for the theme Absorbing Modernity: 1914-2014, chosen by this year's architect curating the Biennale Rem Koolhaas. And no curators more suited to the task of telling Arab modernism's architectural story than Arbid and Khoury, whose project at the ACA is to do just that. Between them, this academic and practitioner – both Lebanese, both Harvard-educated – have crafted a detailed narrative that every visitor can take home in book form, while constructing an installation that plays on international perceptions of Arabism.



opposite page:
Sketch by Oscar Niemeyer for the
Rachid Karameh International Fair, 1962.
© Oscar Niemeyer Foundation

above:
Rachid Karameh International Fair by
Oscar Niemeyer, Tripoli, Lebanon, 2006

The ACA was set up in 2008 by Arbid and Khoury along with Jad Tabet, Fouad El Koury, Amira El Solh, Hashem Sarkis, and Nada Assi. It has NGO status, receiving funding from bodies like the EU and projects like this commission for Bahrain. Seen in a regional context it forms part of the current pan-Arab mission across the arts to record, understand and validate local modern history and how it informs the present day. This year the United Arab Emirates makes its debut at Venice Architecture Biennale, as do Morocco, Turkey, and eight other nations. The UAE pavilion historicises its own urban development in a literal manner under the title *Lest We Forget: Structures of Memory*. By comparison, Bahrain's choice to present an inclusively Arabist multi-national story lent it far wider global relevance, and as sectarian violence soars across the region, is commendable to say the least. ■