

# BUILDING LIKE A STATE

## ARCHITECTURE AND NOMAD-STATE RELATIONS IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

A Symposium Presented by the Aga Khan Program  
for Islamic Architecture at MIT

**SATURDAY, MARCH 4, 2023 IN MIT ROOM 56-114**

Throughout history, states and empires have used architecture to subdue and defend against nomadic peoples perceived as troublesome and threatening. Architectural history tends to read such building projects solely as evidence of top-down state control, and to position nomadism and permanent architecture as mutually exclusive. This symposium contests these narratives, highlighting the diversity of building practices among nomadic communities and the nuanced ways in which nomads engage with and respond to state building projects. Through papers offered by historians, anthropologists, architects, and artists, with a global focus spanning North America, Scandinavia, the Middle East, and Asia, this symposium uses architecture as a lens onto understanding and reframing nomad-state relations in the past and present.

### PROGRAM

**10.00** WELCOME NOTE  
**Huma Gupta, MIT**

OPENING REMARKS  
**Maggie Freeman, MIT**

#### PANEL 1 - BUILDING FOR THE STATE Respondent: Huma Gupta, MIT

- 10.15** *The Case of the UAE Sha'abi House: Appropriating Architecture and Forming a State*  
**Yasser Elsheshtawy, Columbia University**
- 10.45** *"Tombs, Mummies and Bones Lie Silent:" The Paradox of "Dead Cities" in Late Imperial and Early Soviet Russia, 1880-1905.*  
**Ismael Biyashev, University of Illinois**
- 11.15** *Desert Control: A Story in Four Acts*  
**Maggie Freeman, MIT**
- 11.45** DISCUSSION AND Q&A
- 12.00** LUNCH BREAK

#### PANEL 2 - BUILDING IN THE STATE Respondent: Thomas Barfield, Boston University

- 13.00** *"Functionalism" of Settlements for Tibetan Pastoralists in China*  
**Jarmila Ptáčková, Czech Academy of Sciences**
- 13.30** *Governing Nomads in and from Ashgabat and Bishkek, Soviet Central Asia in the 1920s and 1930s*  
**Alun Thomas, Staffordshire University**
- 14.00** *Peripheral Interest? Sámi Building in Nordic Architectural Discourse*  
**Sofia Singler, University of Cambridge**
- 14.30** DISCUSSION AND Q&A
- 14.45** COFFEE BREAK

#### PANEL 3 - BUILDING WITH THE STATE Respondent: Mark Jarzombek, MIT

- 15.00** *Sámi Placemaking through a Mobile Library*  
**Joar Nango, Independent Artist**
- 15.30** *National Belonging and the Design of Bedouin Towns in the Negev Desert*  
**Noam Shoked, Tel Aviv University**
- 16.00** *Working with the Nunavimut and Nunavumiut in the Canadian Arctic: The Architects' Changing Role over the Last 40 Years*  
**Alain Fournier, EVOQ Architects**
- 16.30** DISCUSSION AND Q&A
- 16.45** CONCLUDING REMARKS

### PRESENTERS BIOS AND ABSTRACTS

**Ismael Biyashev** *"Tombs, Mummies and Bones Lie Silent:" The Paradox of "Dead Cities" in Late Imperial and Early Soviet Russia, 1880-1905.*

**Abstract:** Can "nomads" build "cities"? In the Russian Empire of the late 19th and early 20th century, this simple question stumped academics, interested amateurs, and laypeople alike, and gave rise to, a great deal of speculation about the history, culture, and development of nomadic societies on the margins of scientific discourse, in pamphlets, general-readership feuilletons and travelogues. This speculation was due, in no small part, to a central paradox that lay at the heart of nomadism as a phenomenon in the Russian case. Nomads were simultaneously a thing of the past, "atavistic relics" of a bygone era of societal evolution, and also vocal subjects of the Russian imperial state, a state that by the second half of the 19th century projected an explicit agenda of modernization and progress.

A possible resolution to the this ambiguous paradox arose precisely from the margins of scientific discourse, in the form of a descriptive trope of the so-called "dead city." In the period roughly from 1880 to 1905, several dozen newly-discovered archaeological sites in the Russian Empire were identified

as "dead cities" by journalists, explorers, artists, and other actors, and a significant number of these were explicitly or implicitly attributed to ancient nomadic societies.

I will examine the discursive image of the "dead city" in its application to archaeological sites explicitly connected by period actors with contemporary and ancient nomadism. I aim to show, ultimately, that despite being classified as "dead" or "dying" by global mainstream science, among certain groups of self-styled reformers in the Russian Empire these sites often became loci for various, sometimes competing visions of postimperial modernity.

**Bio:** Ismael Biyashev is a seventh-year PhD Candidate in Russian Imperial and Early Soviet History at the University of Illinois at Chicago. His dissertation, "Beyond Myths and Ruins: Archaeology and Nomadism in Russia and the USSR (1850-1925)," is the first attempt to write a history of the archaeology of nomadism in the Russian empire and the early Soviet Union and chart its historical development.

**Yasser Elsheshtawy** *The Case of the UAE Sha'abi House: Appropriating Architecture and Forming a State*

**Abstract:** Throughout the Arab Gulf region a very unique social housing program was implemented in the late 1960s and the 1970s. Designed using prefabricated modules, its inherent simplicity allowed inhabitants to adjust and modify the physical structure thus facilitating the transition from a nomadic lifestyle to a sedentary and urban existence. Significantly this housing program demonstrated the extent by which the ruler at the time, Sheikh Zayed, sought to settle the nomads which would in turn affirm the permanence of the state project which unified the various Emirates under his leadership in 1971. My paper will focus on this housing model, called the Sha'abi (People's) house. The persistence of this model in many parts of the country represents a testament to the extent by which inhabitants aim at asserting their presence in the midst of a constantly changing cityscape. First, I will contextualize the subject by surveying the current urban and housing landscape of the UAE. This is then followed by a historical overview of the development of the Sha'abi housing model and the extent by which the implementation of this model aimed first and foremost at asserting the formation of the state and legitimizing rulers' authority. I then shift to a case study analysis of a number of these houses to show that they continue to be an enduring element of the country's built patrimony. I end with suggestions on how to move forward.

**Bio:** Yasser Elsheshtawy is an architect and urbanist. He is an independent scholar and an Adjunct Professor of Architecture at Columbia University and non-resident Fellow at the Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, DC. His publications include his latest, *Riyadh: Transforming a Desert City*, published in 2021 by Routledge, and *Temporary Cities: Resisting Transience in Arabia*, published by Routledge in 2019. He was one of the lead authors for the UN-Habitat's "State of the Arab Cities 2020" report and served as curator for the UAE Pavilion at the 15th Venice Architecture Biennale in 2016.

**Maggie Freeman** *Desert Control: A Story in Four Acts*

**Abstract:** After World War I, Great Britain acquired control over the former territories of the Ottoman Empire in Palestine, Jordan, and Iraq through a Mandate granted by the League of Nations, their responsibility being to oversee the administration of these countries "until such time as they are able to stand on their own." A key security concern for the British in this region was the control of the desert zone and its inhabitants, who were primarily nomadic pastoralist Bedouin tribespeople. To British eyes, the desert and its dwellers had been neglected by the Ottoman administration, and left uncontrolled, unchecked, and under-exploited. The solution to the Bedouin "problem" was a policy known as the "principles for desert control," which was pioneered in Iraq, perfected in Jordan, before finally being exported to Palestine. Britain's "desert control" strategy revolved around the creation of a network of so-called "desert outposts"—militarized forts located at sites frequently visited by Bedouin tribes and occupied by imperial police officers who surveilled and controlled Bedouin movements and activities.

Britain's "principles of desert control" were premised on the belief that permanent architecture and nomadism are inherently incompatible. The outposts were imagined as an effective, or even the most effective, method of state control over nomadic peoples, that could by their very presence and physical materiality signify and denote imperial control over the desert. I will discuss how this policy was implemented; how within this context permanent architecture was both physically constructed and symbolically imagined to exert control over people, space, and resources; and the long-term consequences of this policy on the built and natural environments and Indigenous inhabitants of the desert territories. The story proceeds in four acts, or rather, through the lens of four materials: water, stone, oil, and concrete. The first three of these each reveal a different dimension of Britain's "desert control" policy and its underlying ideologies, while the last, concrete, illustrates the policy's broad and long-lasting repercussions in the final years of the Mandate and beyond.

**Bio:** Maggie Freeman is a third-year PhD student in History, Theory and Criticism of Art and Architecture and the Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture at MIT. Her dissertation research examines how the built environment was mobilized and manipulated to control nomadic peoples under the authority of the British Mandate in the Middle East, and how nomadic groups responded to and influenced building projects intended to control or surveil them.

**Alain Fournier** *Working with the Nunavimut and Nunavumiut in the Canadian Arctic: The Architects' Changing Role over the Last 40 Years*

**Abstract:** The evolution of Air Terminal design in the Canadian Arctic, in Nunavik and Nunavut, will be used to tell the story of how the architects' role has changed over the course of the last 40 years. When architects were first called in to design infrastructures for the Inuit nomads, they blindly followed Canada's official assimilationist policies. Until the 90's the presence of the Inuit on their own land was all but ignored. Their presence was considered a "problem," mostly a source of vandalism. They were not users to be understood or respected or whose specific cultural needs needed to be catered to. There is now a growing awareness that architects must help reverse the course of

decades of forced acculturation. As an ally, architecture must now clearly and strongly express Inuit culture. The challenge for architects is how to express a nomadic culture when the only relevant built precedents are small traditional nomadic or semi-nomadic shelters that have nothing to do with the scale of institutional buildings such as Air Terminals. This is what sparked the search for a new architectural language, one that speaks of and to the Inuit. After many years of experimentation alongside the Inuit, relevant answers were found through the narratives and symbols found in the material culture as well as in the local flora and fauna of the Inuit. This led to exploring new avenues of architectural language, a language that speaks directly to the Inuit, a language they understand and connect with. This took us on a completely new course, away from “cookie cutter” Western precedents, away from the fashionable, publishable contemporary language of architecture, deep into largely uncharted territory.

**Bio:** Alain Fournier is a founding partner of architecture firm EVOQ. For over four decades, Alain has been a leader in collaborating with Canadian Inuit and First Nations communities to develop contemporary designs that reflect their local culture. He teaches an Indigenous design studio at the Université de Montréal and chairs the Architectural and Planning Advisory Panel at McGill University, with a specific emphasis on indigenizing the campus. Alain is a graduate of the McGill University School of Architecture and is a Fellow of the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada. He is the recipient of the 2022 Ernest-Cormier lifetime achievement award for his work with Inuit and First Nations.

#### **Joar Nango** *Girjegumpi - Sámi Placemaking through a Mobile Library*

**Abstract:** Girjegumpi is a spatialisation of conversations and research initiated over two decades of practice at the intersection of architecture and art. A mobile Sámi architectural library with 200+ book titles addressing indigenous architecture, resistance and decolonisation, the library moves to different temporary locations and hosts workshops, conversations and debates around the role of Sámi architecture's tools and techniques. Girjegumpi is derived from two North Sámi words: “gumpi” is a mobile cabin on runners, most often pulled by a snowmobile; “girji” means book. The compound word, and the work Girjegumpi, include a library, an archive and the construction in which these are stored and transported. Girjegumpi is also an artistic project and a platform for investigation and discussion. What actually is Sámi architecture? What can Sámi architecture be? When is architecture an exercise in oppression? And what is the role of the architect in the overall process?

**Bio:** Joar Nango is a Norwegian Sámi artist and architect. He trained as an architect at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology in Trondheim, Bergen School of Architecture in Bergen and Weissensee Kunsthochschule in Berlin. In his artistic practice he investigates identities of indigenous people and spaces, often with a starting point in contemporary architecture. His artistic practice includes site-specific installation, sculpture, photography, architectonic structures, social projects, clothing, publications and theory, exploring the boundaries of design, architecture, philosophy and visual art.

#### **Jarmila Ptáčková** “Functionalism” of Settlements for Tibetan Pastoralists in China

**Abstract:** At the beginning of the new millennium, the Chinese government launched several programs for the resettlement of pastoralists in Tibetan areas and western China. The resettlement was supposed to help combat the difficult economic situation of households residing in areas affected by severe erosion or suffering loss of herds. The function of these new settlements, however, gradually changed from fighting poverty to serving the political goals of the government, such as control of the population in remote and politically tense areas. The original settlement site plan looked promising as it included green spaces, cultural facilities, or even schools. During the realization stage, however, the priority turned out to be gathering people together in these artificial villages rather than providing a comfortable environment. The settlements were used in a purely “functionalist” manner and as soon as houses with four walls and a roof had been erected, their new inhabitants were settled there. Instead of green spaces, cultural facilities, or even infrastructure, police stations

were sometimes the only amenities provided in the settlements. The extensive state-promoted sedentarisation severely endangers the traditional art of animal husbandry as a major livelihood in Tibetan areas without offering suitable alternatives. The pastoralists as well as the state representatives are both forced to develop strategies that would comply with the state prescriptions, but at the same time allow them to survive.

**Bio:** Jarmila Ptáčková graduated from and earned her Ph.D. at Humboldt University in Berlin, specializing in Chinese and Tibetan Studies. Her research focuses mainly on Chinese development policy and subsequent social and economic changes in China's Tibetan pastoral areas, in particular on the sedentarisation policies, on China's ethnic policy, and on the role of China's minorities in the PRC's cultural diplomacy. Currently, she is affiliated with the Oriental Institute of the Czech Academy of Sciences in Prague.

#### **Noam Shoked** *National Belonging and the Design of Bedouin Towns in the Negev Desert*

**Abstract:** Between the 1960s and 1990s, Israel built seven towns for the Bedouin population of the Negev, a desert area in the southern part of the country. From a bird's-eye view, these towns present a narrative of crude top-down planning: Israeli government officials, wishing to concentrate the Bedouin and seize their lands, commissioned planners who developed modernist urban environments that were at odds with Bedouin ways of life. An architectural history of the Negev towns, however, reveals a more layered narrative. It uncovers repeated attempts on the part of Israeli architects to develop urban schemes that would speak to what they perceived to be the needs of the Bedouin, some of which were more successful than others. Moreover, it shows how Bedouin residents ultimately altered the architects' plans, by covering the original houses with eclectic building additions that borrow liberally from different aesthetic traditions and challenge Israeli design conventions. Recently, as upwardly mobile Bedouin families began migrating to adjacent suburbs that previously catered exclusively to Jewish-Israelis, they built similarly eclectic houses, announcing Bedouin presence in some of Israel's more affluent spaces, if not even the expansion of the Negev towns into these very spaces. This paper traces some of the transformations the Negev towns underwent. Focusing on Rahat, the largest of the Negev towns, and the adjacent suburb of Lehavim, it will show how these transformations reflect Bedouin claims for inclusion in mainstream Jewish-Israeli culture at the same time as they point towards the Bedouins' growing sense of solidarity with the neighboring Palestinians. The pursuit of these seemingly opposing ends, I argue, was made possible thanks to the Bedouins' use of ongoing privatization processes.

**Bio:** Noam Shoked is assistant professor of architecture at Tel Aviv University. His work focuses on the relationship between politics and the built environment. His book manuscript, *In the Land of the Patriarchs: Design and Contestation in West Bank settlements*, forthcoming with the University of Texas Press, explores the architectural history of West Bank settlements.

#### **Sofia Singler** *Peripheral Interest? Sámi Building in Nordic Architectural Discourse*

**Abstract:** This paper offers a historiographic analysis of Sámi building in Nordic architectural journals. Surveying Nordic journals both self-defined and publicly perceived as the torchbearers of the architectural discourses of their respective national cultures—Arkitekten in Denmark, Arkkitehti in Finland, Arkitektur N in Norway, in Arkitektur in Sweden, and Arkitektúr verkætnei og skipulag in Iceland—from the early 1900s to today, this paper seeks to identify and critically assess how, why, where, and by whom Sámi building has been addressed in ‘mainstream’ Nordic architectural discourse. The paper pays particular attention to the tensions inherent in the interpretation of indigenous and nomadic building cultures in journals produced by, and so strongly associated with, nation-states. While the quantity and quality of articles focused on Sámi designs—projects either authored by Sámi designers, erected in Sápmi, or commissioned for Sámi communities—has increased sharply in Nordic journals since the 1970s, this paper argues that the discourse still suffers from a myopic focus on questions of authenticity, often at the expense of recognizing and problematizing the links between political reality and architectural criticism.

**Bio:** Sofia Singler is an architect, architectural historian, and Fellow of Homerton College, Cambridge. Her research interests lie in the history and theory of modern and contemporary architecture, with particular focus on Nordic modernism, the Aaltos, and the architecture and urbanism of the Arctic.

#### **Alun Thomas** *Governing Nomads in and from Ashgabat and Bishkek, Soviet Central Asia in the 1920s and 1930s*

**Abstract:** In the mid-1920s the cities of Bishkek and Ashgabat were both set on a radically new trajectory by the nascent Soviet administration. From minor frontier towns of the Russian Empire they became the national capitals of new republics, Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan. Suddenly they symbolized the Bolsheviks' commitment to both non-Russian national emancipation and breakneck economic development, and they played host to the paradoxes that quickly emerged between these twin priorities. Nowhere were these paradoxes more apparent than in the management of nomadic pastoralism. Bishkek and Ashgabat became the urban centers responsible for overseeing this most challenging of governing projects in Central Asia, one that pitched local ways of life against macroeconomic ambitions. As municipal authorities grappled with nomadism, the cities' populations began to expand rapidly, with many new arrivals coming from local nomadic communities, settling either permanently or seasonally. How were these simultaneous processes, of urban growth and increasing administrative complexity, manifested in the landscape of Bishkek and Ashgabat, both figuratively and literally? This paper follows the histories of both cities through the 20s and 30s, looking for lessons about the relationship between the Soviet state and its nomadic cultures. I argue that urban history in the nomadic republics of the Soviet Union can complicate prevailing narratives about modernity and modernization in Central Asia.

**Bio:** Dr. Alun Thomas is Senior Lecturer in Modern History at Staffordshire University. His research pertains principally to the modern history and contemporary politics of Central Asia, with a particular interest in the early Soviet era. His first book *Nomads and Soviet Rule: Central Asia under Lenin and Stalin* was published in 2018 by Bloomsbury and awarded the Alexander Nove Prize for outstanding scholarly contribution to Russian, Soviet and post-Soviet studies by the British Association for Slavonic and East European Studies.

#### PANEL RESPONDENTS BIOS

**Thomas Barfield** is Professor of Anthropology at Boston University. He has conducted extensive ethnographic fieldwork among pastoral nomads in northern Afghanistan. He is the author of *The Central Asian Arabs of Afghanistan* (1981), *The Perilous Frontier: Nomadic Empires and China* (1989) and *Afghanistan: An Atlas of Indigenous Domestic Architecture* (1991). He was awarded a 2006 Guggenheim Fellowship that led to the publication of *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History*. His forthcoming book, *Shadow Empires*, explores how distinctly different types of empires arose and sustained themselves as the dominant polities of Eurasia and North Africa for 2500 years before disappearing in the 20th century.

**Huma Gupta** is Assistant Professor in the Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture at MIT. Gupta holds a PhD in the History and Theory of Architecture and a Master's in City Planning from MIT. Currently, she is writing her first book *The Architecture of Dispossession*, which is based on her doctoral thesis on state-building and the architectural transformation of migrant reed-mat and mudbrick settlements in mid-century Iraq.

**Mark Jarzombek** is Professor of the History and Theory of Architecture at MIT, where he researches, teaches and publishes on a wide range of topics, both historical and theoretical. He is one of the country's leading advocates for global history and has published several books and articles on that topic, including the ground-breaking textbook *A Global History of Architecture* (Wiley Press, 2006) with co-author Vikramāditya Prakash. He is the sole author of *Architecture of First Societies: A Global Perspective* (Wiley Press, 2013), among many other titles.