

Counterpublics in Saudi Shopping Centers, Beach Resorts, and Gated Communities

Stefan Maneval

In recent decades, Saudi Arabia, much like other places around the world, has witnessed a trend towards the privatization and securitization of urban space. In this paper I argue that although indisputably exclusive, gated communities and other types of privatized public spaces in Saudi Arabia enable practices which, outside the walls of such developments, are strictly banned. In a country known for its strict moral standards and lack of civil lib-

erties, these architectures permit the formation of “counterpublics.” Offering alternative perspectives on gender relationships, modesty, and nudity, such “counterpublics” challenge prevailing notions of what public and private mean.¹

Keywords: Saudi Arabia, Public Space, Counterpublics, Privatization, Gated Communities, Urban Development

When I asked a 29-year-old architect from Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, where young people in his hometown spend their spare time, he responded:

Young men and women meet their friends in cafés, restaurants, or shopping centers. When the weather is nice, they spend time with friends and relatives in vacation spots at the seaside in Obhur. Some families have their own holiday cottage on a private piece of land. Others rent chalets, either for several years, or for shorter periods, in one of the hotel firms’ “holiday villages.” In those neighborhoods in Obhur, one spends time with other people, in a kind of closed-circle of acquainted families. This makes it possible to use public spaces and green areas together with others. Normally, there is no opportunity to do so in the city.²

His response highlights a problem that many young people in Saudi cities face: a lack of what are generally called “public” spaces, green areas and places that allow people to meet and spend time with one another. The solution he describes in his e-mail, i.e. meeting and socializing in shopping centers, beach resorts, cafés, and gated communities, is not available to everyone. Only the middle and upper

income groups can afford it. For better or for worse, such ways of spending time are part of the global trend towards the privatization of urban space. Critics of this trend contend that it intensifies social, economic, and racial segregation (Low 11, 224-28). This is due to the fact that shopping malls, amusement parks, gated communities, beach resorts, etc. are owned by individuals, or companies, who have the right not only to police who enters the premises, but to prohibit unwanted activities—among them, the assertion of one's civil rights (Kohn; Alhadar and McCahill). Access to such places depends on a person's financial resources, personal contacts, racial identity, or nationality. Such places, so the argument goes, are not really public, because of their limited accessibility and exclusive character (Scharoun 88-96; Sorkin).

Without questioning the exclusions introduced by the privatization of urban space, other authors have, more recently, considered the phenomenon from a different angle, focusing on social interactions in such places. They have emphasized that shopping centers, for example, not only serve the purposes of commerce and consumerism, but also generate new forms of sociability and new social practices (Abaza, "Shopping Malls", *Changing*

Consumer Cultures; Nissen; Scharoun). In this paper, I extend this argument by showing that in Saudi Arabia, shopping centers, beach resorts, and gated communities of various types fulfil an important role in the public lives of many people. Although privately owned, such developments allow for, and to some extent foster, communication between strangers. It is in this sense that they can still be considered public, or rather, *privatized* public space.

The publics that form in such places have little in common with the Habermasian ideal of a public sphere (Habermas). Habermas's normative concept defines the public sphere as a forum for citizens to engage in rational debate about issues pertaining to the common good, preferably in a "neutral" language, undiluted by religious beliefs or other ideological convictions. By contrast, my understanding of the term "public" is informed by Michael Warner, who conceives of a public as an imaginary social entity, which comes into being through communication, or "by virtue of [its participants'] reflexively circulating discourse" (11-12). This somewhat abstract conception of publicness has the advantage of being open to all sorts of topics and discourses, as well as to various forms of communication, both verbal and non-verbal. The formation of publics

through non-verbal means of communication cannot be overestimated in a political context like Saudi Arabia, where freedom of opinion, expression and assembly are not formally granted. In the Habermasian sense, which still seems to shape common Western notions of what a public is, or should be, this lack of civil liberties would seem to prohibit the emergence of a critical public sphere. As I show in this article, images and bodily practices (such as clothing, haircuts, embodied gender roles, body language, and behavior) are important forms of expression through which people in Saudi Arabia contribute to public discourse, while manifesting both their belonging to a particular social group and their identification with (or rejection of) specific values and ideals. Finally, Warner's emphasis is on publics, plural, in contrast to a single, cohesive public sphere. Public space, then, is both the place and material framework that enables these social entities to form, and to contribute to public discourse. My use of the term "public space" is further influenced by Doreen Massey, who emphasizes the contested nature of public spaces: groups and individuals compete for power and influence, for access to and distribution of both capital and resources, for the right to define the terms and conditions of social coexistence, the right to

occupy spaces in the city, and the right to determine their use. Religious beliefs and ideological dispositions play an important role in these struggles and cannot simply be bracketed off. I will show how, in the context of Saudi Arabia—a country known for its strict moral standards, gender segregation, and government that typically denies the aforementioned civil liberties—gated and securitized private spaces enable social practices which are banned in public, and in conflict with the prevailing normative order. Privatized urban spaces even permit the formation of “counterpublics,” a concept I borrow, again, from Michael Warner, who uses it to describe the kind of exposure, or publicity, sought by groups aiming to challenge the norms of their social environment.

My focus here is on the city of Jeddah, where I conducted five months of fieldwork for my PhD between 2009 and 2012. In the Saudi context, Jeddah is considered less conservative than the capital, Riyadh, and many other places. Yet, both my brief visits to other cities and other scholars’ research (cited below) suggest that elsewhere in the country privatized urban spaces are used in similar ways. Therefore, I believe that even if most of the material presented in this article is from the relatively liberal port-city of Jeddah, my main

claims hold for a broader cross-section of Saudi society. They may also go some way toward explaining the social meaning and attractiveness of gated developments, and similar forms of privatized urban space, in other places throughout the Middle East, where private capital secures pockets of a lifestyle that deviates from the moral standards of the wider social environment.

This article thus contributes to recent debates on the meanings and practices of publicness in non-Western contexts (Qian). First, I discuss public aspects of privatized urban space in Saudi Arabia. Here, my aim is to draw attention to the particular social functions that such spaces serve, and to the public life they enable, in the Saudi social context. The paper’s second part deals with counterpublics as specific forms of publicness in Saudi beach resorts, amusement parks, and other gated developments.

Public Life in Private Urban Developments

Today, gated communities can be found in every major Saudi city. They are a common type of dwelling for all social strata, from poor migrant workers—who often live in overcrowded, gated, mass accommodations owned by the companies for whom they work (Fadan 103-128; Citino;

Vitalis)—to the royal family, who hide their opulent lifestyle from view behind high walls, surrounding vast plots in Riyadh and Jeddah. My concern here is with the middle-class gated communities, which are owned and administered by private real estate companies. Skilled foreign employees and upper middle class Saudis do not live together in the same “compounds,” as these developments are called: Saudis live in special Saudi-only compounds, and foreigners from the US, Europe, the Middle East, India, etc., in non-Saudi compounds. The latter are particularly secluded and well protected. Since the early 2000s, when a series of bomb attacks targeted symbols of Western lifestyle in Saudi Arabia, security measures have been strengthened and entry control tightened (Alhadar and McCahill 317). These gated communities are like cities within a city: maintenance and services are provided, in addition to various commercial and leisure facilities, such as shops, restaurants, swimming pools, tennis courts, and libraries. Such gated housing compounds are not subject to the strict norms and rules of the broader social environment. This makes them especially attractive to foreign professionals used to a more liberal lifestyle than the one prescribed in Saudi Arabia. Inside the precincts of a gated community, unrelated

men and women intermingle, wear clothes that reveal more skin than otherwise appropriate in mixed publics, and have garden parties where they sip home-brewed wine (a euphemism for an alcoholic beverage produced by fermenting grape juice bought in tetrapacks); there, women can smoke cigarettes, take a dip in the pool, and drive cars and bicycles. As one of my interlocutors, who had moved to Jeddah with her husband in 1984, told me, "If you want to live something like a 'normal' life here, you have to live in a compound"¹³. In Saudi-only gated communities, rules are less liberal, because many Saudis reject such practices on religious grounds. Yet, in some such developments, residents do enjoy more freedom than elsewhere in the city: young men and women party together in the "club," or common rooms, and some women do not find it necessary to wear a veil, or an abaya.

In terms of rules of conduct, the Red Sea coast beach resorts (mentioned in the opening e-mail quotation) are very similar. To the north of Jeddah, large swathes of land have been sold to private investors, who have filled them with exclusive hotels and restaurants, or private beach resorts, blocking access to the sea for all but a small number of affluent customers. There, hotels shuttle visitors gate-to-gate, on



Figure 1: A beach resort in Obhur. Photo: © Stefan Maneval 2012.

their way to and from the remote resorts. Other properties belong to companies that have built gated holiday developments, either exclusively for their own high-ranking employees, or for holiday-makers in general. Tenants of chalets in such developments are permitted to invite guests; as a mere visitor, this is certainly the most comfortable way to access such resorts. Another option is to leave one's passport at the entrance to one of the luxury hotel's beaches and pay a fee (approximately 100 Saudi Riyal, or 20 euros, in 2012). Once inside, one can observe unrelated men and women talk-

ing to each other. Men wear shorts that do not cover their knees; women wear swimsuits and bikinis. Some smoke cigarettes and shisha, while some play loud music and some go swimming.

Elsewhere in the world, the ethnic, national or racial exclusion facilitated by walls, gates, and entrance controls in gated communities and other privatized public spaces typically affects ethnic minorities, migrants, and non-nationals. In Saudi Arabia, the opposite is true. With few exceptions, Saudi nationals are not allowed to enter many of these develop-

ments, as the social practices permitted therein are regarded as deviant, or immoral, by both the religious authorities and large parts of the Saudi population. These practices are permitted in gated developments because the Saudi state depends heavily on the expertise of Western and other foreign professionals, who are often unwilling to completely adapt their behavior to the kingdom's rigid moral standards and social norms. Thus, the privatization of Saudi public space generates "cultural enclaves" (Glasze and Alkhayyal), in which privileged expatriates can experience what, for them, is a "normal life." Naturally, this involves social practices that many conservative Saudis consider alien to, or forbidden by, Islam. The majority of those who reject such practices are willing to tolerate the existence of these enclaves. Nonetheless, these developments are protected against terrorist attacks by armored military vehicles and soldiers with machine guns to make residents and visitors feel safe and encourage them to stay in the country.

Although many beach resorts are closed to Saudi nationals, the e-mail at the beginning of this article indicates that similar developments exist for Saudis, too. The activities described by the architect from Jeddah are not as clearly in conflict with

Wahhabi rules of conduct as, for example, the exposure of almost completely naked bodies. Yet, the mixing of unrelated men and women, or *ikhtilāt*, common in such holiday resorts, as well as the fact that women in such places often forgo the abaya, are subject to much debate in Saudi Arabia (al-Rasheed 159-172; Meijer; van Geel, "Separate or Together?", *For Women Only*). One holiday resort to the north of Obhur, called Durrat al-'Arus, is particularly ill-famed for its parties and lax public morals. Just as in Saudi-only gated housing compounds, rules of conduct in Saudi-frequented beach resorts are less strict than in other mixed public spaces. To the extent that only Western-oriented, more or less liberal-minded, Saudis (i.e., those comfortable with *ikhtilāt* and other practices common to beach resorts) are likely to spend time there, the exclusive character of such privatized public spaces permits more freedom, more liberal bodily practices, and less restricted communication between strangers than the surrounding social context.

Shopping malls in Saudi Arabia differ from gated communities and beach resorts, in that they do not distinguish between Saudis and people of other nationalities. In principle, everyone can enter without having to pass a guarded gate. In addition,

whereas shopping centers for lower and medium income groups are usually mixed, most upmarket shopping malls are gender-divided (Le Renard, "Engendering Consumerism"). Normally, the mall's ground floor is reserved for men, and the upper floors for women and families. Neither in the family sections of gender-divided malls, nor in the mixed, medium to lower income shopping centers in Jeddah's city center, is it permissible for men to strike up conversations with women. Nonetheless, all shopping centers create opportunities for men and women to meet and interact.

An upscale shopping center in the northernmost part of Jeddah may serve as an example. On the first floor, the building's entrance hall is spanned by a bridge, which serves as the "families only" sitting area for a coffee bar. Many female customers prefer the seats immediately next to the transparent balustrade, facing the building's entrance. From there, they can see other customers entering the building and, exposed like actors on a stage, be seen by them. Since they are, officially, sitting in the family/female section, many of them do not feel obliged to wear the *niqab*, the part of the veil covering the face. Some do not even cover their hair. Women sitting on this stage apparently

seek, and probably find, some public attention. Here, the mall's architecture allows women to be publicly visible, while supporting non-verbal communication between unrelated men and women.⁴ In shopping centers with a less-permeable gender divide, an unmarried man may only enter the family section accompanied by his sister—or by any woman he claims is his sister. I once observed young men pretending to belong to a group of women while taking the escalator to the family section. They passed the security guard and immediately left the group, giggling, after reaching the first floor. Inside the family section, many women forgo the veil. There, or in mixed shopping centers for the lower income-groups, one may, from time to time, observe a man dropping a small piece of paper with his telephone number while passing a young woman. Men and women also make contact using the Bluetooth technology on their mobile phones and laptops. This medium of communication allows men to contact women, or women to contact men, without physically approaching one another. Since the wireless connection's range is short, those using it for this purpose require a mixed environment, such as the cafés and restaurants in the family section of a shopping mall. Once they have made contact—either by virtue of a woman, for example, having



Figure 2: Amusement ride in the Mall of Arabia in Jeddah after the abolition of gender segregation.
Photo: © Stefan Maneval 2019.

called the number she received from a man, or having previously gotten to know him somewhere else—the cafés and restaurants in shopping centers, Western hotels, or other commoditized spaces offer them a chance to meet. As a 26-year-old engineer from Lebanon, who had lived in Jeddah for three years, once told me, “No one checks if the woman you go out with is really your wife, or your sister”.⁵

Amusement parks are used for similar purposes as shopping malls. Unaccompanied men, in contrast to their female counter-

parts, are generally denied access; they may only enter in the company of their female relatives, or wives. While women are permitted to ride roller coasters and carousels, men may only watch. And watch they do. The fact that amusement parks are predominantly female spaces, designed for women to pass time in a spatially confined place, makes them particularly attractive to young men interested in seeing, or dating, women. Amusement parks and shopping centers attract women for the same reasons; many go not merely to shop or ride roller coasters, but because

they enjoy being in public. In such places, they can meet other women, and men. There, they can see, be seen, and be desired.

In Saudi Arabia, all of this is hardly possible in non-privatized urban areas. There, the range of leisure activities is limited, and many of them are commoditized. All major Saudi cities are modelled on the American-style automotive city (al-Hemaidi; Menoret chap. 3-4). The only streets used by pedestrians are in the lower-income commercial and residential areas, which members of higher social strata usually avoid. In Jeddah, the cornice is the only strip of public land used for family outings, besides roundabouts or roadsides, which seem to be an option only for the less-well-off South and Southeast Asian migrant workers who picnic there.

Counterpublics

Lack of alternatives is one reason why privatized public spaces have become popular meeting places in Saudi Arabia; another is the fact that the walls, gates, and entrance controls of such places keep out prying eyes and unwanted visitors. In YouTube videos, young men can be seen dancing in the streets within the precincts of Durrat al-ʿArus. They can do so only in

a secluded place, in the company of people who, by and large, share their attitudes toward gender, sexuality, and the body. In the remainder of this paper, I want to delve more deeply into the fact that so many young Saudis, post similar videos on YouTube and other social media. My aim is to explore why they record activities considered shameful or immoral, and share these documents with an anonymous audience.

A 2012 photo essay by the British photographer, Olivia Arthur, titled “Jeddah Diary,” shows Saudi girls riding bicycles and walking down the streets of Durrat al-ʿArus at night, unveiled, wearing tight-fitting Western clothes and no abaya. In other images by Arthur, women wearing fashionable—and extremely short—dresses and hot pants, party with men in a gated community. The women in the images did not object to their publication. They only demanded that their faces not be visible. Rather than legitimizing the circulation of the portraits, Arthur’s omission of faces serves to render the women unrecognizable. They want to be photographed, and they want to be seen. But, as such visibility might damage their reputations, they prefer to hide their identities.

Olivia Arthur’s images were not produced to be shared with family and friends, and her subjects were fully aware of it. Arthur is a member of the renowned cooperative, Magnum Photos. Her pictures of Saudi Arabia have been exhibited from New York to London, while her “Jeddah Diary” has been the subject of writing in the German weekly, *Die Zeit*. The series can be purchased online and viewed anywhere in the world. Having one’s picture taken by a professional photographer from Europe, and agreeing to let the pictures circulate, is—like posting videos of oneself on YouTube—a way of seeking publicity. Some videos of dancing Saudi men have been viewed over 200,000 times. The dancers of Durrat al-ʿArus, like Arthur’s women, who hide their faces but not their bodies, are obviously addressing a global public. Some of them are even *posing* for it.

It is important to note that the practices documented in the aforementioned photographs and videos can take place only within the confines of an architecture that, by excluding certain parts of the Saudi public, creates a more or less private setting. Critically, according to prevailing social norms, that which is thus made public belongs, properly, to the private realm: naked skin, the female body, certain types

of movements and gestures, as well as interactions between unrelated men and women.

To the extent that secluded, privately owned facilities enable encounters between strangers, they also encourage the formation of publics. The people who meet in these places render public such practices as are conventionally restricted to the private sphere. In so doing, they challenge, and demonstrate their discontent with, prevailing norms and moral standards. This is particularly evident in an example given by Amélie Le Renard, who reports that on September 25, 2008 (the national holiday commemorating the Saudi Kingdom's founding), customers in a Riyadh shopping mall spontaneously expressed their opposition to the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, or moral police (Le Renard, *Society of Young Women* 115-116). They turned the mall into a stage for civil disobedience and posted videos of their protest online, thus publicizing their dissatisfaction with the moral police and challenging its authority.

In many ways, the practice of documenting and sharing alternative notions of publicness recalls the concept of counterpublics, elaborated by Michael Warner.⁶

Groups of people whose sexual identities, or moral attitudes, conflict with the norms of their social environment can often only congregate in secluded places. Meeting in private settings to avoid social stigma, they may nonetheless record their activities—for example, by taking pictures. The imagined publicity creates a feeling of glamour, as Warner puts it, which allows them “to experience their bodies in a way that would not [be] possible without this mutual witnessing and display” (13). For Warner, counterpublics are distinguished from other publics precisely by virtue of their being in conflict with the norms of a larger, dominant, restrictive cultural context. I do not mean to say that every chalet tenant in Obhur or Durrat al-‘Arus participates in a counterpublic. Some are merely holidaymakers, divers, shisha smokers, or bored youths. With regard to those seeking to publicize their own deviation from wider social norms, however, the concept remains a useful analytical tool.

In such cases, the longed-for publicity is not merely imagined; tens of thousands of video-views, tens of thousands of newspaper readers, and hundreds of visitors to an exhibition constitute a very real kind of public attention. Communication with the world beyond the gates is important to those who make, appear in, and circulate

such images. It renders public what in this particular cultural environment cannot otherwise be openly articulated. Like the “counterpublics of sex and gender” elsewhere (Warner 62-63), the counterpublics of Jeddah challenge prevailing notions of what public and private mean, in a wider social context. They offer the general Saudi public alternative perspectives on gender segregation, female modesty, desire, and shameful nudity. Outside the realm of the private, they show their bodies to anyone they please—friends and strangers, men and women. By publicly challenging prevailing norms, they renegotiate the very boundary between the public and the private.

To conclude, I want to emphasize once more that the motivation behind my argument is not to justify the privatization of urban space—neither in general, nor as it is currently practiced in cities around the globe (i.e., as part of a neoliberal urban planning policy through which land, formerly accessible to all, is sold to the highest bidder). The consequences of privatization are severe, and I hope I have made it abundantly clear that they have taken a great toll on Saudi Arabia, where almost all recreational spaces and leisure activities outside the home are commoditized. One's access to such spaces depends on

Stefan Maneval

holds a PhD in Islamic Studies from Freie Universität Berlin. This article is informed by research for his PhD thesis on public and private spaces in twentieth-century Jeddah. His thesis won the 2016 dissertation prize of the German Association of Middle Eastern Studies (DAVO) and will be published as a book by UCL Press in autumn 2019. Stefan Maneval is currently based in Halle (Saale), where he investigates contemporary Lebanese Theology of Religions. For his research, he received funds from the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG), Max Weber Foundation, and the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF).
email: stefan.maneval@orientphil.uni-halle.de

one's financial capacities, personal connections, gender, nationality, or ethnicity. As indicated above, such exclusions give rise to discriminatory practices, suffered by migrant workers and Saudis alike. Nonetheless, in societal contexts such as Saudi Arabia, where strict gender politics and rules of conduct govern public space—and in which the state radically restricts the very possibility of constituting alternative publics—gated communities and similar types of privatized urban space permit those with access to them to enact alternative notions of publicness and privacy, thus enabling the formation of counterpublics capable of assaulting prevailing norms.

Notes

¹ Gender segregation continues to play an important role in public life, even after its abolition in certain places, such as shopping malls, under crown prince Muhammad bin Salman (since 2017). Although some of the cases presented here are already history, the points I want to make with regard to the use of privatized public spaces as places of encounter thus remain valid.

¹ Personal interview, February 2012.

² E-mail received July 4, 2009, originally in German, my translation.

³ See Alhadar and McCahill for further examples supporting this claim.

⁴ Personal interview, January 2009.

⁵ Warner borrows the term “counterpublics” from Nancy Fraser (“Rethinking” 121-24). Whereas Fraser was mostly interested in “subaltern counterpublics,” Warner’s focus is on “counterpublics of sex and gender.” He thus extends the concept to other discourses and demonstrates its applicability to different social classes and contexts.

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