

The Memory of Oil

Re-Inhabiting Kuwait's Forgotten Modernism

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Abstract

The former headquarters of the Kuwait National Petroleum Company (KNPC) is one of the last few modernist buildings presiding as a symbol of the oil boom and Kuwait's emergence into modernity. The introduction of oil transformed the country architecturally, socially, politically, culturally and economically. Today, it is surrounded by a landscape suffering from rootlessness where much of what used to exist has been demolished, homogenized, or left to decay. While Kuwait possesses numerous institutions focused on oil and national development, they not only lack contextual researchers, dedicated curators, and experts familiar with the material, but also suffer from disorganized and largely inaccessible archives. This fragmentation hinders meaningful engagement with the complex socio-political, economic, and cultural transitions that marked Kuwait's shift from a pre-oil to a post-oil society. This paper proposes an adaptive reuse strategy that transforms the KNPC building from a forgotten relic into a living ethnographic archive, where it weaves architectural preservation with embodied cultural memory and temporality etched through collective experience. Rooted in Heideggerian and Pallasmaa's phenomenological frameworks, the design moves away from ocular-centric heritage preservation and towards embodied, multisensory dwelling. The intervention preserves the building's material memory, exposing original surfaces and volumes, while layering reversible spatial additions that allow temporal coexistence. A designated research library and reading room, operating as a controlled-access archive, becomes a space for deep engagement with rare collections, oral histories, and post-oil scholarship. The reuse approach reconfigures the site as a hybrid typology that combines functions of a research and cultural institution. By integrating research, public engagement and education, the building becomes a vessel of cultural memory, shifting heritage from static preservation to actively evolving interpretation. This project goes beyond architectural reuse; it positions heritage as a continually unfolding process. It invites visitors to explore Kuwait's post-oil identity through learning and cultural renewal. The goal is to activate the structure as a catalyst for national awareness, meant to be experienced physically and intellectually, not just visually.

Keywords: Cultural Memory, Post-Oil Identity, Phenomenology

Introduction

The former headquarters of the Kuwait National Petroleum Company (KNPC) stands as one of the few remaining witnesses of Kuwait's modernist era. This period of economic

transformation resulted in a distinct architectural language that reflected the nation's new identity.¹ Once a symbol of progress, the building now sits on the edge of its urban context, detached from the civic and cultural networks it once anchored. Its Sadu-Patterned brise-soleil and floating concrete volume speak of an optimism now eroded by time and neglect. This paper reconsiders the KNPC building through the lens of adaptive reuse, drawing upon Martin Heidegger's notion of embodied perceptions. Based on this theoretical foundation, the project proposes an ethnographic living archive that transforms the building from a relic of the oil era into a living vessel for collective memory. The project explores how architecture can transcend preservation to become a medium of remembering, sensing, and reinhabiting Kuwait's post-oil identity.

Historical & Cultural Background

Before the discovery of oil, Kuwait's architectural landscape was shaped by its harsh desert climate and limited resources. The traditional mudbrick settlements developed vernacular techniques to suit the desert climate, embodying the social fabric of communal living and adaptability to nature². However, material limitations affected the structure's durability. Following the discovery of oil in the 1930s, Kuwait rapidly abandoned its vernacular architecture for a modern, urban landscape shaped by industrialization and global capital.³

Urban Significance

The KNPC former head office was one of the early modern heritage buildings constructed during the oil boom. Designed in 1962 by the Lebanese firm Dar Al-Handasah⁴, the structure reflected the aspirations of an era where design and material innovation were seen as symbols of national growth and progress. The building was among the first constructions to have an integrated auditorium and advanced building systems, such as chiller and HVAC setup.

Site Context

The KNPC former head office is a significant modern heritage building situated on the southwestern boundary of Souk Al-Mubarakiya.⁵ The site acts as a focal point within the urban landscape. It faces the cultural district to the north, where Ali Al-Salem Street stretches up to the national stock market of Kuwait building. Across this street lies an open plot that is informally used as a parking area from which visitors cross the street on foot, passing alongside the KNPC building before entering the old souk. To the south, it is bordered by the Municipality Park and the Palace of Justice, another modern heritage building. This location also marks the beginning of the First Ring Road highway that circles around Kuwait City, drawing its boundary.⁶ For drivers entering the city from northeastern routes, it is among the first structures visible upon approach.

Architectural Description & Spatial Analysis

As an architectural response to the urban planning of that time, the rectilinear mid-rise block is elevated on pilotis⁷ distributed along its two primary elevations, giving the main volume a sense of lightness, and creating a clear visual separation from the open space on the ground floor. As a result, a shaded walkway unfolds, where light filters gently through the angled columns, softening the transition between exterior and interior. This covered path draws

from the spatial qualities of the *liwan*⁸ found in traditional mudbrick houses across the West Asia. Reinterpreted through a modernist lens, it becomes a transitional space that is both climatically responsive and culturally rooted. This effect is further accentuated by the main entrance being centrally recessed forming a sheltered threshold that draws visitors inwards. The pilotis, made of white concrete stand in contrast with the slate cladding at the ground level façade.⁹ The contradiction between the smooth, crisp white concrete of the structure and the textured, greyish tone of the slate further reinforced the perception of openness below, while the introduction of glass alongside the slate balances its visual heaviness and adds a sense of lightness to the composition. Hovering near the main volume, a projecting canopy starts at the main entrance and wraps continuously around the building. Structurally isolated from the façade by a minimal reveal, emphasizing the main entrance and providing a continuous horizontal element around the building. (Fig. 1)

Similarly, a continuous *brise-soleil* extends across all elevations, creating a visual base for the rectilinear floating mass and serving both climatic and aesthetic purposes. Through modernist abstraction, its intricate pattern reinterprets the geometric motifs of Al-Sadu weaving, translating the vernacular ornamentation into a modern architectural expression.¹⁰

Phenomenological Framework: Heidegger & Pallasmaa Applied

The basis of this project is rooted in a phenomenological approach, derived primarily from Martin Heidegger's *Building, Dwelling, Thinking* (1951) and Juhani Pallasmaa's *(The Eyes of the Skin)*(1996). According to Heidegger to dwell is not just to reside in a space, but he reframes it as a fundamental mode of human existence. "Only if we are capable of dwelling, only then we can build" Heidegger writes¹¹. This concept emphasizes architecture's role in shaping existential conditions rather than enclosed functions.



Fig. 1. Exterior view of the KNPC headquarters, highlighting the *brise-soleil* and pilotis that lift the modernist volume above the ground plane (Photographed by Noor Abdulkhaleq and Rabab Raes Kazem, 2025)

Pallasmaa extends this phenomenological lens to architectural experience. He critiques the dominance of the visual in modern architecture, arguing for a multisensory understanding of space where touch, sound, light, smell, and memory shape how we inhabit buildings. “The body knows and remembers,” he writes, emphasizing that architectural meaning emerges through embodied experience and atmospheric presence.¹² His advocacy for haptic, temporal, and material engagement resonates strongly with the KNPC building’s spatial and climatic strategies, from its brise-soleil filtering desert light to the shaded liwan thresholds and tactile use of stone and concrete. Phenomenology, in this context, becomes not an abstract philosophy but a methodological lens for adaptive reuse. It shifts heritage discourse from questions of visual authenticity to those of embodied memory, temporality, and sensory dwelling.¹³ Through this lens, architectural elements such as the canopy, liwan, brise-soleil, and open-plan floors are reinterpreted as spatial mediators between memory, environment, and inhabitation, guiding the adaptive reuse proposal toward a living, experiential archive. (Fig. 2)

Adaptive Reuse Proposal

The adaptive reuse proposal emerges from the phenomenological lens shaped by Heidegger and Pallasmaa. At its core is the idea of the ethnographic living archive, an archive that is not sealed within vitrines or isolated rooms, but one that unfolds through space, atmosphere, and bodily experience. This concept responds directly to the realities of Kuwait’s contemporary condition: the erosion of architectural identity through demolition and homogenization, the institutional fragmentation that renders archives inaccessible, and the resulting urban rootlessness that has left buildings like the KNPC headquarters isolated from their original contexts. The proposal seeks to reactivate this structure as a hybrid cultural and research institution, engaging both memory and future, body and intellect.



Fig. 2. Collage study inspired by Heidegger and Pallasmaa, translating dwelling and multisensory perception into spatial and material atmosphere (Rabab Raes Kazem, 2025)

The basement serves as the concealed repository of memory, housing archival storage and digital servers. The atmosphere is intentionally restrained: cool, quiet, and dim. This subterranean level functions like a latent archive, present but unseen, holding the building's collective memory beneath the visitor's feet. On the ground floor, the building announces itself as a civic threshold. The recessed liwan space beneath the floating volume becomes a shaded zone of arrival and gathering. Inside, the lecture hall is reimagined as a flexible, adaptive arena, organized around two circular depressions where lecturers or performers stand within their audiences. Movable seating allows the space to shift fluidly between lecture hall, exhibition venue, and public forum. This floor embodies openness, dialogue, and shared dwelling, revealing original Aurisina marble and concrete columns that root the visitor in the building's modernist material language. The first floor becomes the zone of material memory, housing the memory galleries. Here, archives and artifacts are not passively observed but actively encountered. Architectural fragments, peeled wall layers, and tactile surfaces are revealed as part of the building's own narrative. Visitors navigate through spatial sequences that resist linear chronology; rooms and passages unfold like layers of Kuwait's modern history. Oral histories resonate through sound domes and embedded speakers, enveloping visitors in the ambient soundscape of the oil era, refinery hums, office chatter, recorded voices. Light is choreographed to reveal surfaces gradually; some texts and traces become visible only at particular moments of the day. Material samples, documents, and photographs are embedded within walls, floors, and temporary structures, transforming the galleries into an inhabited palimpsest rather than a conventional display. This floor sets the stage for sensory engagement, positioning memory not behind glass but within the tactile and atmospheric fabric of the architecture itself. The second floor initiates the heart of the proposal, the ethnographic living archive, which extends vertically into the third floor as a double-height spatial volume. This is not merely an archive of documents and objects, but a living spatial field where research, curation, and sensory experience intersect. The archive occupies one side of the building, establishing a strong directional relationship with light and movement. (Fig. 3) The floor plates of the new intervention are deliberately detached from the existing perimeter walls, leaving a narrow void between old and new. This void becomes a vertical light shaft, allowing daylight to filter down through the height of the archive and into the adjacent workshop spaces. The result is a subtle, continuous illumination that shifts with the sun, revealing the material textures of the slate, concrete, and wood as living surfaces. Light enters as both a physical and temporal presence, a phenomenon of revealing and concealing that resonates with Heidegger's idea of truth and with Pallasmaa's view of light as an extension of touch. This design move transforms the archive into a breathing vessel, the gap between wall and floor is not a leftover space but a luminous threshold between preservation and experience. It frames the visitor's awareness of time passing through changing light conditions, morning brightness filtering down the concrete edges, afternoon reflections dissolving into shadow. The floating floor plates also maintain the structural integrity of the original shell, preserving the autonomy of the existing building while allowing new functions to inhabit it lightly and reversibly. The spatial organization reinforces this conceptual duality. On the second floor, the workshops and conservation labs occupy the zone adjacent to the light shaft, where controlled natural light supports manual and material work. The archive volume rises beside them, enclosed yet visually porous, so that the act of preservation is always in dialogue



Fig. 3. Rendering of the double-height living archive, showing the vertical spatial connection between research and archival levels. (Noor Abdulkhaleq, 2025)

with making, learning, and sensory exploration. Moving upward, the third floor contains reading rooms and controlled-access areas for deeper research. The visual continuity between levels, through light, void, and acoustic resonance, ensures that the archive is not isolated but constantly in conversation with the spaces around it. (Fig. 4) The vertical light shaft becomes an architectural metaphor for this permeability, a channel through which knowledge, memory, and atmosphere circulate. (Fig. 5) The void gives the archive a sense of suspension, of being both grounded in history and open to the present, inviting users to engage with memory not as static information, but as something that must be continually rediscovered through light, material, and inhabitation.

Conclusion

This adaptive reuse proposal treats the KNPC headquarters not as a monument to be frozen, but as an evolving cultural vessel, a living archive that engages the senses, body, and memory. It is a response to rootlessness and fragmentation, offering instead a phenomenological architecture of gathering, dwelling, and remembering. By reinhabiting this modernist structure through light, material, and atmosphere, the project reclaims Kuwait's oil-era heritage as a field of lived experience rather than distant nostalgia. The building's transformation into an ethnographic living archive repositions preservation as a dynamic and participatory act, where research, culture, and public life intertwine. Through thresholds that invite pause and spaces that breathe with natural light, the KNPC becomes a place of reflection and renewal, a vessel through which memory is continually reexperienced, and architecture once again becomes a medium of dwelling and cultural continuity.

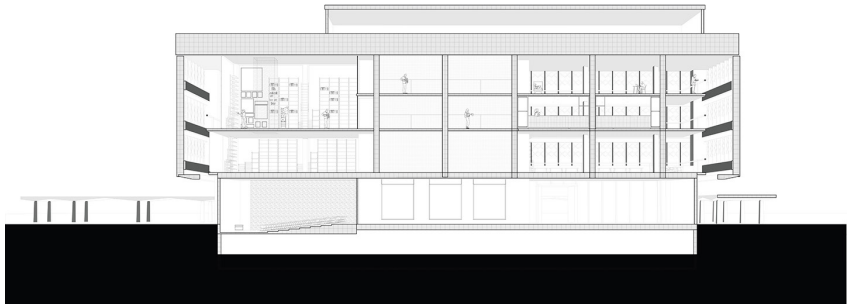


Fig. 4. Section perspective showing the suspended living archive on one side and the conservation lab on the opposite side (Drawn by Rabab Raes Kazem, 2025)

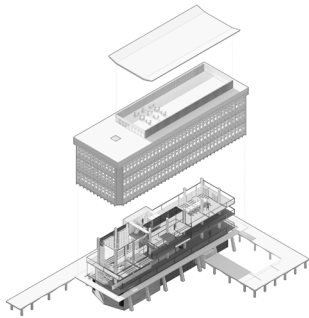


Fig. 5. Axonometric drawing of the proposed spatial organization. (Drawn by Noor Abdulkhaleq, 2025)

Notes

- 1 Oil modernity reshaped Kuwait's built environment and national identity.
- 2 Traditional Kuwaiti architecture relied on climate-responsive mudbrick courtyards and shaded passages.
- 3 Kuwait's oil boom accelerated urban expansion and modernization after the 1930s.
- 4 Dar Al-Handasah is a prominent Lebanese engineering and architecture firm founded in 1956.
- 5 Al-Mubarakiya is one of Kuwait's oldest marketplaces and cultural districts.
- 6 The First Ring Road defines Kuwait City's core boundary.
- 7 Pilotis reflect a modernist structural strategy, elevating mass to create public permeability.
- 8 The liwan is a shaded semi-open Gulf architectural element used for climate comfort and social transition.
- 9 Slate cladding contrasts with exposed concrete to emphasize the suspended volume.

- 10 Al-Sadu weaving is a traditional Bedouin textile craft characterized by geometric patterns.
- 11 Heidegger argues dwelling precedes building as a way of being in the world.
- 12 Pallasmaa critiques the dominance of vision, emphasizing memory and bodily perception.
- 13 Phenomenology prioritizes lived experience, material presence, and sensory encounter in architecture.

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