

# Islands in the Sand

## Late Modern Architecture's Xeric Sum Game in the Arabian Desert

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## Late Modern Architecture's Xeric Sum Game in the Arabian Desert

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The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia had long existed as an impoverished “island” in the Arabian Gulf region, but from World War II, as the overwhelming importance of the extraction economy came into focus, private corporations such as Standard Oil of New Jersey, Standard Oil of California, and Texaco funded and constructed oil pipelines throughout Africa and the Gulf region. To support these efforts, large-scale architecture and engineering firms such as Bechtel Engineering master planned and designed new cities in the deserts across the Arabian Peninsula, centred around massive shipping ports and large-scale airports constructed to serve growing international trade networks fueled by the sale and export of oil. Corporate investment was motivated by the skyrocketing global demands for fossil fuels, which in turn radically reconfigured international relations. This was especially true in Saudi Arabia, where oil became the bedrock of Saudi Arabia’s modernisation efforts, and which motivated significant foreign investment. In turn, key outside investors – particularly those from the United States, Western Europe, and Japan – built up Saudi Arabia’s airports and infrastructure to serve their growing business needs in the Kingdom and the region.

With the inherent idea of remoteness in mind, this paper explores an island by another definition: one in the desert, surrounded by little other than seemingly endless quantities of sand and sky. A gateway. An outpost. An oasis. Or a series of architectural insertions in the inhospitable Saudi Arabian biome of xeric shrublands and vast sand deposits, loosely divided between the Palearctic realm to the north and the Afrotropical realm to the south. We might similarly consider these foreign outposts in the Kingdom as islands of diplomacy or coordinated neoliberalist intervention. One early example of this phenomenon is the Minoru Yamasaki and Associates’ Dhahran Civil Air Terminal (1958–61). This decontextualised modernist outpost embraced a kind of “fabricated regionalism” and became a central player in global relations, intertwined with the newly important extraction economy at a critical juncture during the Cold War. The resulting imageability of the terminal’s form plays into architecture’s ongoing role in iconic branded form in the 20th century, a theme that has been well established by architects and scholars alike. Corporations such as IBM, Trans World Airlines, and the Seagram company are of course among some of the

best-known examples of the phenomenon. In this case, however, officials leveraged architecture as an image-making tool for a new nation state and Kingdom, rather than for a private entity, even as corporations benefited greatly from increased access to oil concessions and the resulting lower per unit cost of extracting what came to be known as “liquid gold.” The exponential rise in importance of petrodollars as a marker of global wealth was unprecedented, and to this day has continued to shape foreign policy and global economic strategies and paradigms around the world.

As we navigate the expanded definition of an island, we might understand these international developments as having a three-part relationship. The projects are literal insertions of foreign objects in the vast desert, rendering them material islands in a sea of sand. They are also islands of foreign relations vying for diplomatic partners in a critical region of the world. And they represent islands of formal ebullience, outliers in the neatly packaged history of modern architecture, but with nowhere else to belong. In other words, a kind of “xeric sum game” played until the well runs dry.