‘What is your research actually about?’ Dr Hisham had asked me. As a professor of Islamic architecture at King Abdulaziz University (KAU), he had been assigned as my mentor in Jeddah. A few days after my arrival in March 2011, we met in his university studio to pay a visit to numerous deans, chairmen and heads of department at KAU who had provided Dr Hisham with their signature or other forms of support in his efforts to obtain a research visa for me and to arrange my accommodation in the on-campus students’ hostel.

‘I investigate public and private spaces in Jeddah, past and present’, I explained. ‘Therefore, I am looking for information about the old city and contemporary neighbourhoods alike.’ While one of my benefactors, whom we visited that day, had serious doubts regarding my inquiries about the old city of Jeddah – made apparent in his question, ‘Is there an old city?’ – Dr Hisham was sceptical about a different part of my quest.

‘Past and present, I see’, he said, adding, ‘but there aren’t any public spaces in the contemporary city of Jeddah. Such a thing does not exist.’

For a moment I wondered if I was actually comparing something that had ceased to be with something that had never existed at all. Contemplating what Dr Hisham and the Dean of Graduate Studies and Research had meant and how their subjective experience may have influenced their views helped me regain confidence in my own work. In the case of the dean, the question was simple. As a scientist and a relatively privileged member of society, decrepit houses were perhaps not central to his interests. I soon encountered more people of a comparable social standing—both Saudi nationals and Western expatriates—who, after years of living in Jeddah, had never set foot in the old town. As for Dr Hisham, who had spent several years in the UK and the US and travelled all around the world, he was referring to the squares, plazas, marketplaces or public
gardens he had encountered in the heart of many other cities where people meet, socialise, celebrate or assemble, make announcements, wear billboards and demonstrate. As a historian familiar with Jeddah’s past he may also have had in mind the market streets and open spaces that had existed in this city in the past. Comparable places are indeed hard to find in the contemporary city. My impression when I visited Jeddah for the first and second times had in fact been similar to the view articulated by Dr Hisham. I was struck by the contrast between the seclusion and, in some cases, fortification of isolated private dwellings on the one hand, and the monotony of a gigantic gridiron motorway on the other (Figure 6.1). Yet, at the time of my conversation with Dr Hisham, I had also discovered forms and places of encounter which serve some of the social functions of a public space, albeit in different ways, and for a different cross-section of citizens. Moreover, I had learned about public expressions of political dissent and opinions that challenged the dominant moral code, which are barely known outside Saudi Arabia.

This chapter deals with the publics which produce these discourses and counter-discourses, as well as the architecture enabling their constitution. I first discuss different factors limiting the availability of public spaces of the type referred to by Dr Hisham. Assuming that opinions on gender segregation, mixing and privacy are essential to an understanding of public space in a Saudi city like Jeddah, I provide an overview of a debate on mixing in confined spaces of encounter, such as seminar rooms and workplaces. The overview of divergent opinions on gender segregation is followed by a presentation of social practices involving different strategies of dealing with the segregation regime. This leads to a discussion of how both Saudi citizens and migrant workers find ways to make their concerns public, although open space designed for public sociability is very limited, and opportunities for the constitution of publics are constrained by the Saudi state.

**Routine human encasement in Jeddah**

As explained in the previous chapter, people in Jeddah began fortifying their homes and avoiding the public realm because they felt the need to protect their privacy from intrusion and prying eyes. Is it possible that, as a consequence, the streets appear hostile and dangerous because they are largely devoid of human beings? Attempting to cross the dual carriageway to go shopping at a supermarket on the opposite side of Amir Sultan Street, or waiting for the next available cab on the dusty northern fringes
Figure 6.1  King Fahd Street, also known as Sittīn Street. Photo: © Stefan Maneval 2012.
of Medina Road, I had the feeling that I was the only person deliberately setting foot in what was undeniably public space. In Jeddah’s contemporary neighbourhoods, only garbage collectors at work are seen walking distances longer than that between a parked vehicle and the next shop.

Everyone else in these districts, which were designed according to the American-style automotive city, seems to go everywhere by car. I learned this during my first period of fieldwork in early 2009, when I had an appointment at the Municipality of Jeddah. I asked the taxi driver to drop me in front of what was clearly the main entrance of the building – a giant flight of steps leading to an ornate entrance gate. Upon reaching the top of the steps, I found the gate closed. Wondering what I was looking for, a guard told me that the official entrance was only used on ceremonial occasions. Access to the building was in fact through the car park. Since my taxi had already left I had to walk around the huge office tower, past an outdoor parking lot in order to enter a multi-storey car park on foot. Sweating and exhausted from my involuntary promenade in the heat of the midday sun, I reached the car park lift, which carried me directly to the air-conditioned reception hall on the upper floor. The building was designed to minimise both visitors’ exposure to the sun and the distance to be walked between the parked car and reception hall. This principle is very common in Jeddah. People living in neighbourhoods constructed in the 1970s or later normally enter their cars while still at home, that is to say in the integrated garage on the ground floor of an apartment building or in the car port within the enclosure of a detached house. They park and leave their car within the walled premises of their workplace, in the indoor car park of a shopping centre or office building, or immediately in front of a shop or restaurant. They may not even step out of the car at all before they return home again: not having much else to do, many young men spend the night drifting around aimlessly with friends, occasionally making use of the countless drive-ins at fast-food restaurants, juice bars and ATMs.

Avoidance of the elements certainly has climatic reasons: the weather in Jeddah is hot and humid throughout the year, reaching an average of 24–5°C (average max. 32°) in the winter and 31–2°C (average max. 41°) from May to September, with a relative humidity of approximately 60 to 70 per cent throughout the year. The heat, especially during the summer, is experienced as unpleasant and enervating by expatriates from cooler places and Saudis alike – and much more so than in the past, it seems. Inhabitants of Jeddah constantly keep their cars and houses cool and dry due to the heat. Russell Hitchings and Shu Jun Lee (2008) have shown that the omnipresence of air conditioning in a hot
and humid environment leads to decreased tolerance of the outside temperature among the local population. Individual thermal sensitivities are dynamic and can change over the course of months. The liberal use of air conditioning among long-term residents of Jeddah thus leads them to perceive the hot, humid weather of their own hometown as unbearable. As a consequence many people avoid exposure to the weather outside, particularly during the daytime.

But many in Jeddah cannot afford a car, or for that matter an apartment with an indoor car park, let alone a single-family home with a private car port. Male migrant workers from the lowest-income groups can occasionally be seen on bicycles, and a public bus service provides transportation on a small number of routes for those who do not have the money for a private car or taxi. Similarly, the *aswāq* (sing. *sūq*), or shopping areas, in low-income neighbourhoods such as al-Balad, al-Kandara, al-Hindawiyya and al-Ṣabil, as well as the narrow streets in densely populated *ʿashwāʾīyāt* (informal settlements; sing. *ʿashwāʾīya*) to the south of Jeddah, such as al-Ghulayl, Bitrūmin (Petromin) and al-Karantina, are routinely frequented by pedestrians. That said, people in Jeddah avoid walking and those who can afford to prefer to bridge the passage from one place to another using a car, ideally one that is air-conditioned.

**Urban design and state control**

Many stay inside because they are intolerant of the weather. It may also be argued that streets in contemporary neighbourhoods in Jeddah have been designed for cars and not for pedestrians. The city’s main streets consist of at least three lanes plus a service road in each direction, and still they are heavily congested since the number of cars keeps rising with the ever-growing populace. Except for a few streets in the old town and its adjacent neighbourhoods, there are no pavements, neither in shopping areas such as Tahliyya Street nor along the subsidiary streets of residential districts. Public squares and gardens which are open to everyone simply do not exist. Whereas the coastline that reaches southwards from the historic city centre has become a vast industrial area, large strips of land to the north have been sold to private investors who have built exclusive hotels and restaurants or private beach resorts there, obstructing access to the sea for all but a small number of select customers. The remaining coastline has been turned into a sea promenade known as *al-kurnish* (corniche). It is the only place within the city area of Jeddah that is officially dedicated to outdoor leisure activities. Highly frequented
after sunset by families of the middle and lower classes, it stands as a testement to the demand for more open spaces suitable for picnics, fishing and children’s play, as well as walks in the evening breeze.

The construction of streets and facilities in Saudi Arabia is financed exclusively by oil revenues. The Saudi state, acting as the sponsor of infrastructure, does not depend on the taxpayer. This provides the government with ‘a strong tool to intervene in the planning and development of all settlements’, explain Saleh al-Hathloul and Muhammad Aslam Mughal (2004: 611), both employees of the Saudi Ministry of Municipal and Rural Affairs. The Saudi government has an interest in providing utilities and services because these are key factors in rendering it legitimate. At the same time, the state and its administrative institutions, notably the Ministry of Municipal and Rural Affairs and the Municipality of Jeddah, can model the urban infrastructure in a way that best suits its own interests.

In his study of male youth subculture in contemporary Riyadh, Pascal Menoret (2014) discusses urban planning as a means of state control. His focus is mainly on the migrant rural communities who flooded the capital from the 1960s onwards, making up more than half the population of Riyadh already by 1968 (Menoret 2014: 82–3). The urban population and the authorities regarded the rural migrants who settled in slums constructed out of sheet metal, recycled wood panels and paperboard with anxiety and aversion. The royal family, recalling the armed insurgency of the ikhwān movement of the late 1920s (Kostiner 1990; Steinberg 2002: 453–69; Vassiliev 2000: 268–81), feared an accumulation of under-privileged Bedouin in the cities for their potential to mobilise against the government and foment social unrest (Menoret 2014: 84–5). From the mid-1970s onwards, rural migrants were moved to designated ‘Low Income Neighbourhoods’ well away from the city centre. More attractive pieces of land were, and presumably are still, frequently gifted to members of the royal family and their clients in return for loyalty (Menoret 2014: 62, 77–8, 91–2, 99).

Jeddah is not Riyadh and, to my knowledge, rural migration was regarded with less suspicion in the harbour city (see al-Turkī and Baqādir 2006: 74–5). Yet the municipality of Jeddah struggled with urban sprawl and unplanned settlements as well, and the Āl Sa’ād’s attitude to urban planning was roughly the same all over the country. Consequently, the urban development of Jeddah followed a similar course as in Riyadh, although different consulting firms were commissioned: both cities were designed for cars and not for pedestrians. The urban territory was segmented by a grid of streets. And residents who could not afford the
down payment for a house, which was required in order to take out interest-free loans from the Real Estate Development Fund, were pushed to the margins of the city. There, the authorities were unable to put an end to the construction of shanties.

The grid pattern of Riyadh and Jeddah not only makes the provision of civic services easier, it also facilitates policing and the control of streets and citizens. For the authorities, observing what is going on is much easier in the broad and straight streets of northern Jeddah than in the maze of irregular lanes and winding footpaths of the old town or adjacent low-income neighbourhoods of the 1950s. The design of the streets makes it unlikely that demonstrations and other activities that challenge the authority of the state will be carried out. ‘The absence of separate pedestrian walkways in most local residential streets and the increase in street area exposed to the heat and dust … discourage the residents from using the streets for social activities’, writes the urban planner Waleed K. al-Hemaidi (2001: 187). As an assistant professor at the urban planning department at King Saud University, Riyadh, al-Hemaidi is careful not to blame the authorities for the urban design he despises. Yet it is hardly surprising that the Saudi state, which does not grant citizens the freedom of assembly and the right to protest, does not provide public places suitable for such activities either. The urban design follows the logic that, if a public gathering place does not exist, it cannot be occupied by demonstrators.

Nevertheless, under flyovers and on empty lots, groups of youths can be observed playing football. Some of these young men are of African origin, and some are from Yemen, Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries (personal observation and conversation, January 2012). South Asian men sometimes gather at larger roundabouts, such as Maidān al-Baiʿa to the north of the historic city centre, to play cricket. When the temperature drops after sunset, Southeast Asians, chiefly Filipinos, unpack their camping equipment and have picnics on greened roundabouts in northern Jeddah. Fully veiled women can be seen jogging – or rather walking quickly, as jogging is considered inappropriate for women – along certain roads in Jeddah (Figure 6.2). As this habit is particularly popular among pregnant women advised to engage in some kind of physical exercise, it has earned King Abdullah Street, a street favoured by many joggers, the nickname shariʿ al-ḥamil, or Pregnancy Road. Men also jog, albeit to a lesser degree. In the historic city centre known as al-Balad today, people of all nationalities do grocery shopping, have a coffee at the Indonesian cafes in front of Corniche Plaza – an old-fashioned shopping centre opposite the ultra-modern National Bank tower – and buy cloth or hajj
souvenirs in the sāq, or spices and cosmetics at a Hadrami incense dealer. Low-income neighbourhoods, especially those to the east and south of the historic city centre, such as al-Sabīl, al-Hindāwiyā, al-Ṣuḥayfa and al-Kandara, are characterised by vibrant street life at night. In these districts, young men set up table tennis, table football and pool tables on roadsides (Figure 6.3). Youths spend their spare time there from around 9 p.m. until well past midnight. Other men gather in one of the numerous marākţās (sing. mirkāz), or sitting platforms, still in use in these districts. They may also have rented a small separate room, or nādī (club), for the purpose of meeting friends on a regular basis, watching football together, playing video games, exchanging news, joking and forging alliances and networks. Men’s meeting places outside the home are particularly important in areas where houses are too small to provide an indoor division between female household members and male guests. Women are also a common sight in the streets of these neighbourhoods, much more so than in residential districts of the upper and middle classes. They fetch dinner at a restaurant around the corner in al-Hindāwiyā and they go shopping in the sāq of al-Kandara. Unlike men, however, they do not rest and socialise in the streets (personal observation, March 2011).

The only people unlikely to be seen in the poor southern districts of Jeddah are Western expatriates or middle- and upper-class Saudis, who

Figure 6.2  A woman jogging on the roadside. Photo: © Stefan Maneval 2012.
Figure 6.3  Youths playing table football along the roadside. Photo: © Stefan Maneval 2011.
avoid the so-called ‘ashwa‘iyyat or informal settlements of the lower social classes. Dr Hisham’s urban planning perspective may explain why, in an earlier remark quoted at the beginning of this chapter, he denies the existence of public spaces in the contemporary city of Jeddah. Another explanation could be that he is unaware of these spaces. Even if Dr Hisham has observed migrant workers spending an evening with their families on a roundabout in Medina Road or youths playing football on the undeveloped area of the old airport when passing by in a car, partaking in them would be unthinkable for him.

The occupation of undeveloped land, car parks, roadsides and roundabouts by migrant workers, youths and the poor is regarded with suspicion by the authorities. As stated in the 2009 Jeddah Strategic Plan:

Open space and leisure facilities include formal city and local parks and gardens and coastal recreation areas such as the Corniche as well as leisure centres, amusement parks, stadiums, public realm areas and streets. … These facilities are currently limited in Jeddah, while those that exist are of variable quality and are often overcrowded. As a result, many people use vacant land, roundabouts and median strips along the sides of roads as open space.

(Jeddah Strategic Plan 2009: 305)

Worried about ‘significant’, though unspecified, ‘safety, health and management issues’ resulting from the occupation of the margins of urban space, the Municipality of Jeddah has formulated the goal of providing more ‘high quality open space and leisure facilities’ (Jeddah Strategic Plan 2009: 326). The Jeddah Strategic Plan contains two images exemplifying how the planners in the Municipality envision ‘high-quality open space’. The pictures show a vast car park in front of the shiny facades of high-rise buildings facing the sea at Jeddah’s North Corniche. But who can afford to live in these buildings? Who owns the yacht lying near the shore? Who dines in the restaurant with the nice sea view? Certainly not the same people who picnic, socialise and play on median strips and undeveloped land. In other words, vacant land, roundabouts and median strips are not supposed to be used as public space. None of these places was designed for the purpose of outdoor sociability. Their unofficial function is not mentioned on the map. The appropriation of marginal open spaces is the undesired side effect of land speculation, social inequality and urban design which combines the logic of the authoritarian state with the American model automotive city.
Cars

A closer look at how people use their cars reveals that neither the climate nor the authoritarian state suffice to explain why so many people in Jeddah, particularly Saudi nationals, prefer to spend most of their time indoors and to reduce the passage between their home or another building and the car. Given that a car provides sufficient visual protection, passengers tend to behave according to the norms of domestic space. In the back seats of privately owned vehicles with tinted windows, for example, women do not feel the need to cover their faces. This also means that other people are expected to be mindful of female passengers and respect their privacy, as I have myself learned by way of a faux pas.

It is very common in Jeddah as well as elsewhere in Saudi Arabia to roll down the window and ask other drivers for directions. Everyone immediately responds by rolling down their own window and giving an answer, using roundabouts as landmarks or providing a count of intersections, crossings and traffic lights. Stopping at a traffic light with my rented car one night in January 2012, I rolled down the window to ask the driver of a large SUV for directions to a particular address in northern Jeddah. The driver responded only hesitantly. Some days later, while driving with my friend Mustafa sitting next to me on the front seat, I found out why my request had been met with bewilderment. Mustafa, being a native speaker, was usually the one asking for directions.

‘Why don’t you ask this one?’ I asked, desperate to end an odyssey during which we found ourselves back at the same intersection again and again.

‘Impossible. There are women sitting in the car’, he replied.

‘But you’d only talk to the driver and not to his wife’, I remarked in surprise.

‘He might still feel offended’, Mustafa explained. ‘Here, if women are present, people are very careful not to disturb them.’

I suddenly remembered that there had been a veiled woman sitting next to the driver of the SUV the other day. The episode shows that people in Jeddah avoid walking not simply because they have little tolerance for the local climate and shun physical exercise. Amidst an unpredictable public space, a sphere characterised by chance encounters resulting in verbal and visual communication with strangers, many inhabitants of the city prefer to move from one place to another in the bubble of privacy provided by a car.
The secluded space of an individual car offers and assumes a level of privacy even without visual screens and tinted windows, as the following incident illustrates. One night I was sitting in a ramshackle Hyundai driven by my friend Mustafa’s cousin, an elementary school teacher of religion who was born and raised in Mecca. In the car that stopped next to ours at a traffic light, we saw two women smoking. Conservative Saudis reject smoking – after the Saudi–Wahhabi conquest, it had even been prohibited for some years (Rathjens and von Wissmann 1947: 80). Even the less puritanical consider smoking to be unsuitable for women, which is why women are normally not seen smoking in public. The two women in the car were accompanied by two young men. They could have been their brothers, but more likely they were friends; at least, they did not appear to be on a family outing. They were playing loud music, smoking, partying and having fun right there in the car, and they did not bother to conceal it. Mustafa’s cousin got upset.

“What is this?!” he yelled.

But he could not help it. As soon as the traffic light turned green, we heard tyres shrieking and watched the tail lights of the car speedily disappearing into the night (personal observation, January 2009). Even without tinted screens, the car grants its passengers privacy in the sense that no outsider can properly interfere. This can be a sort of privacy which has nothing to do with ʿār (honour) and ʿayb (shame; see chapter 2), but rather with ḥurriyya, or freedom. Anā ḥurr – ‘I am free (to do what I want)’ – is an expression used in the sense of ‘This is none of your, or anyone else’s, business’. The girls did not bother to speak to us, but their behaviour was an ostentatious display of this attitude made possible by the secluded mobility of the car.

Both cases described here indicate that a private vehicle, although moving in public, has much in common with the screened and isolated contemporary Saudi home (see chapter 5). In the first case, it serves as a physical barrier protecting the privacy of a family from undesired contact with strangers. In other cases it allows women to unveil and smoke, and men to pick up girlfriends, prostitutes and other men. If it does not provide enough visual protection, speed helps passengers to escape other people’s control. The car is in this sense a private living room on wheels. Just like the fortified and visually protected home discussed in the previous chapter, it serves to enact different conceptions of privacy. One centres on non-interference with strangers of the opposite sex, as demanded by a particular version of piety. Another one emphasises personal freedom and permits, in some instances, the circumvention of a rigid moral code. Enabling these different, if not contrary notions of privacy – which
all emphasise non-interference of strangers – a car, preferably one with tinted windows, provides a means of transportation that corresponds perfectly with the spirit, and ambiguity, of New Islamic Urbanism.

As is evident from the cases I have presented, people’s notions of privacy determine how they access, or move and behave in, the public realm. In the following sections I will explore different attitudes to two Arabic concepts – *khalwa* and *ikhtilāṭ* – which inform divergent notions of privacy. In Arabic, these terms are used to distinguish between two forms of mixing. The former translates as intimacy or seclusion, and the latter refers to mixing in groups.

**Encounters on the stairs: Strategies of avoiding *khalwa***

The transition between home and car, or interior and exterior space in general, presents a peril especially to women. I became aware of this when I visited my Lebanese friend Hamid, who had spent more than half his life in Jeddah. Climbing up the stairs to his apartment, we encountered a female neighbour. Much to my surprise, he turned around, pressed himself against the wall and demonstratively looked in another direction. I thought that there was enough space for her to pass by.

‘She is Saudi’, he explained. ‘After a while you’ll learn that they have to be treated differently.’ Something can be gleaned about the precariousness of stairwells in Jeddah from this one instance. As a common space and interface between the home and the outside world, stairwells necessitate specific rules for simultaneous use by men and women. The prevalent rules of privacy forbid verbal, visual and physical contact between unrelated men and women. By pressing his body from top to toe against the wall, Hamid demonstrated that he would not take advantage of the opportunity to look at or touch his neighbour while passing her on a narrow flight of stairs.

Hamid’s behaviour was not over-cautious, but expected of him, because shared spaces connecting the home with the street in apartment buildings are in fact seen as problematic by many Saudis, as the history of the Rush Housing Project (*mashrū ʿal-iskān al-sārī*) on Jeddah’s King Fahd Street reveals. Due to a severe lack of housing, the Ministry of Public Works and Housing sponsored the construction of 32 pre-fabricated high-rise apartment blocks in an area between the old airport and the historic city centre (Figure 6.4). After a construction period of less than two and a half years, the so-called Jeddah Towers, comprising a total of 1,936 generously sized middle-class apartments, were finished in 1979 – but
no one moved in. The official explanation for the vacancies, which lasted for several years, was that, by the time of the completion of the development, a demand for housing did not exist any more and that there was now an over-abundance of residential units in Jeddah (al-Hathloul and Mughal 1991; Tuncalp and al-Ibrahim 1990: 115–17). Considering the accelerated growth of the city throughout the 1980s and given that other housing developments consisting of single-family units and small multi-family buildings did not stay tenantless, this explanation is hardly convincing. One of my interlocutors, an English-speaking Yemeni who moved to Jeddah in the 1960s, commented on the uninhabited apartment blocks as follows: ‘It was a shame because there was a huge lack of houses among Saudis at that time, and from far away you could see those high towers standing there, all vacant.’ According to him, the reason for the vacancy was reluctance among Saudis to move to a building with many shared spaces:

Saudis were not used to living in a flat with all its consequences. They didn’t like the idea that others could see when you come and leave and things like that. Sharing the same lift, for example: they didn’t like the idea that their women would take the lift with
another man. At least, that is what was said to explain why no one wanted to move in.

(Personal communication, January 2009)

The towers had been built especially for Saudis, yet without taking their preferences and habits into consideration (Krause 1991: 30–1). Years later, the government decided to sell the apartments to Saudis who then rented them to foreigners with different conceptions of privacy, as my interlocutor explained.

While hinting at the lack of reliable information about the circumstances of the vacancies – ‘that is what was said to explain why no one wanted to move in’ – my informant corroborated the plausibility of the account by referring to his own Saudi neighbours’ behaviour:

Even where I live – there are four Saudi families living in the same house [an apartment block comprising six units] and it is something like an unwritten rule that, if you see one of them entering the lift with his wife, you try to avoid taking the same lift, even if you live on the same floor.

(Personal communication, January 2009)

He added that neither would he share the lift with a Saudi woman in a public building.

The presence of a woman and an unrelated (non-mahram) man in a closed room is termed khalwa and considered as harām, or forbidden by Islamic law, by the vast majority of religious scholars in Saudi Arabia (al-Rasheed 2013: 159). Many Saudis thus regard shared spaces in apartment buildings as problematic, and a man entering a lift already occupied by a Saudi woman could cause her severe trouble. Unless she belongs to the liberal, Western-oriented elite, she would find herself in a situation which in her view conflicts with God’s own rulings. The same can be said of pious men, who consider avoidance of khalwa as a religious demand. Even if someone does not have such strict beliefs, he or she would feel uncomfortable in a situation defined as khalwa due to other people’s disapproval. My Yemeni interlocutor, for example, refrained from using the lift with Saudi women because he did not want to offend anyone, and many women in Saudi Arabia avoid being alone in a room together with a non-mahram man because they do not want other people to speak or think ill of them. Hamid’s reaction to meeting his neighbour on the stairs was an adequate answer to a situation when khalwa was unavoidable.
Debate on *ikhtilāṭ*

While Saudi religious scholars forbid *khalwa* more or less unanimously, there has been much debate about *ikhtilāṭ*, or mixing between the sexes in public and within groups of people, in recent years.8 In 2004, at one of the 10 National Dialogue conferences held by the Saudi government between 2003 and 2015 (see Drewes 2010; Hamzawy 2008; Thompson 2014), conservative clerics dominated the debate, leading to recommendations which, according to critics, confirmed the status quo rather than initiating change that challenged it. Published in Saudi newspapers, the recommendations issued by the conference – which was especially dedicated to the topic of women in Saudi society – emphasised that women’s ‘natural role’ and ‘basic duty’ was at home within the family. The document dealt with questions of education, employment and mobility only against the backdrop of this notion of ‘the nature of women’ (Dankowitz 2004). In contrast, four years later, at a National Dialogue conference on the topic of work and employment opportunities, prominent voices demanded greater acceptance not just of women working outside the home but even of mixed workplaces (Drewes 2010: 44–6; al-Rasheed 2013: 159–60). In the reign of King ʿAbdullāh (2005–15), the Saudi state was inclined to demonstrate commitment to gender equality and women’s rights. In 2005, the election of two women to the administrative council of the Jeddah Chamber of Commerce was celebrated in the media. Mixed delegations started to accompany ministers and princes on travels abroad. Nūra al-Fāyīz was appointed the first female deputy minister in Saudi history in 2009. In the same year, the co-educational King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST) was inaugurated in the north of Jeddah (Le Renard 2014: 40–3; al-Rasheed 2013: 149–51). New women’s universities were founded, and in the 2015 municipal elections, women were allowed to vote and stand as candidates for the first time.

Not all of these steps have gone unchallenged. Conservative ‘ulama condemned the increased mixing of the sexes at work and in education. In a TV interview on the occasion of the opening of KAUST broadcast by the private TV station al-Majd, Shaykh Saʿād al-Shithrī, member of the Council of Senior ‘Ulama, complained that ‘in mixed-gender universities we see lots of evil/corruption’. He warned that, in those places, ‘men can look at women and women can look at men, and their hearts might catch flame’ (TV interview published in al-Watan, 30 September 2009, quoted in Meijer 2010: 86). His statement triggered an acrimonious debate between the relatively liberal press and the conservative ‘ulama
supporting al-Shithrī. Although the shaykh had chosen his words with care, not failing to praise King ʿAbdullāh’s initiative to establish the new, prestigious university, journalists writing for newspapers such as Okaz and al-Watan accused him of questioning the king’s religious integrity. On 4 October 2009, one week after the TV interview, al-Shithrī was dismissed from his dual positions as a member of the Council of Senior ʿUlāmā and the Permanent Council of Religious Studies and Fatwas (Meijer 2010: 85–7).

Two months later, in December 2009, Shaykh Ahmad bin Qāsim al-Ghāmidī, head of the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice in Mecca, published an article in the Jeddah-based newspaper Okaz in which he argued that ikhtilāṭ was a recent concept and its prohibition was not based on Islamic law. In interviews and public talks al-Ghāmidī addressed other sensitive issues in a similarly radical tone. He cast doubts upon the authority of the ʿUlāmā on questions such as compulsory common prayers and the closing of shops during prayers, and he demanded a reform and reconstitution of the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice. These opinions, voiced by a high-ranking member of the so-called hay’a (committee), scandalised conservative religious scholars. They tried to discredit al-Ghāmidī by questioning his expertise and competence. His publications were denounced on internet forums, and he was physically threatened. Yet, unlike Shaykh Saʿad al-Shithrī, he remained in office (Meijer 2010: 87–91).

The two cases indicate a shift in the political climate since the 1990s, when the state took the wind out of the Islamists’ sails by introducing strict rules of gender segregation and giving greater power to the so-called religious police to execute those rules. Large parts of the Saudi population had embraced the conservative morality preached by the shuyākh al-ṣahwā. In late 2009, in contrast, the Saudi government fired a hitherto loyal religious official for carefully repeating the ʿUlāmā establishment’s mantra of gender segregation. At the same time it backed a leading member of the hay’a who doubted the validity of strict injunctions against ikhtilāṭ as it was currently practised in Saudi Arabia, called the authority of the ʿUlāmā into question and advocated a public debate on the mistakes of the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, which, above all, happened to be the organisation he worked for.

The disparate responses to both al-Shithrī’s and al-Ghāmidī’s public statements show that there is a variety of opinions about gender segregation among Saudis. A growing number of religious scholars maintain
that *ikhtilat* is permissible in certain situations. Outspoken opponents of *ikhtilat*, on the other hand, can be found among the ranks of conservative *ʿulama*, but also among female Islamists. For them, as for adherents of the Islamic Revival movement treated in chapters 4 and 5, avoidance of mixed spaces is a religious precept. Following this logic, the religious scholar Nūra al-Saʿad, for example, rejects mixing at workplaces and universities ‘because it restricts us and limits our freedom at work and education’ (al-Saʿad in an open letter published on the website www.harfnews.org, translated by al-Rasheed 2013: 162). She thus speaks for those whose reading of the sources of Islam leads them to reject *ikhtilat* even while supporting women’s work and engagement in spheres outside the home and family. Alongside other women Islamists she objects to *ikhtilat* because, as many women and their families are against it, they would refrain from higher education and employment if those sectors involved mixing. Following al-Saʿad’s line of argument, more gender-segregated spaces would be required to widen women’s range of activities (al-Rasheed 2013: 159–63). As Amélie Le Renard (2014: 138) has observed in her study of female public spaces in Riyadh, even some progressive women prefer women-only workplaces because they enjoy greater freedom in the absence of men. Unlike in mixed spaces, where they have to wear an *ʿabāya* all the time, they can wear different clothes, such as jeans, for example, use make-up and reveal their hair.

**Masculine, feminine: The duplication of spaces**

While the debate on *ikhtilat* was going on, one could observe how the contrary positions manifested in two divergent trends in urban development and public space. The first, epitomised by the inauguration of the co-educational KAUST, embraces more mixed spaces. The second trend, favoured, among others, by conservative *ʿulama* and female Islamists, is a duplication of spaces – the creation of male and female versions of the same public space, or of female institutions parallel to existing male ones. Since the 1980s, banks, large mosques, ministries and other government organisations have had female branches (Le Renard 2008, 2014: 36–40). During the reign of King ʿAbdullāh, this solution was more widely implemented: King Abdulaziz University, like many other Saudi universities, has both a male and a female campus; upscale cafes, larger restaurants, beach resorts and some shopping malls used to have a family section and an area reserved for men. Both trends have continued since King ʿAbdullāh’s demise, with a noticeable tendency towards more mixed spaces.10
A small incident in 2012 illustrates the wavering course of action of the authorities vis-à-vis these two options and its implications for the social production of public spaces. Having discovered the art exhibition ‘We need to talk’ of the artists’ group Edge of Arabia, I wanted to see it with my friend Mustafa. When we tried to enter the venue we were stopped at the entrance.

‘You are not allowed to enter’, the security guard told us, pointing to a sign at the entrance door, a sheet of paper affixed to the door with a piece of tape. *Li-l- ʿilāt faqat*, the sign read – families only. The previous times I had visited the exhibition no such sign had existed and the event had been open to men and women, families and bachelors alike. I had in fact been surprised at seeing elegant ladies next to unaccompanied young men and a mixed group of students, among them a young woman with short hair and no headscarf. On my first visit to the exhibition I had got to know Hamid from Lebanon, who later taught me how to behave on the stairs in the event that a Saudi woman passes by. He was at that time working as an exhibition guard inside the building. When the security guard refused to let Mustafa and me in, I called Hamid on the phone and asked if he could help us, which he immediately did. Once inside the exhibition space, Mustafa and I had plenty of time to see the artworks. Afterwards we went to one of the luxurious cafes in the same building, where I had previously enjoyed an espresso and a magnificent view of the Red Sea and the harbour of Jeddah. Soon, a waiter came. But instead of taking our order he told us that men were not allowed to sit where we had seated ourselves. We tried another cafe where screens were set up on the terrace to create a division between the male and the family sections. Small in size and with ample space between them, the screens were obviously only meant to serve as reminders of gender segregation rather than preventing male customers from catching sight of women. Still, I had seen women sitting on one side of the demarcation and men on the other side. Even here we were asked to leave.

‘What’s the matter?’ I asked the waiter. ‘I’ve sat here before.’

‘Amr malakī’, he replied – a royal order. It had been issued by Prince Nayif (who died in June 2012), the Minister of the Interior known for his conservatism and rigour.

‘Have there been any problems?’ I wanted to know.

‘Yes, there have been problems’, was the answer. Hamid later told me that young men had haunted the cafes and restaurants to flirt with girls. The entire premises were therefore closed to single males now.

The brief period of mixing at a public event and of a merely symbolic gender division in the cafes on the same premises had come to an
abrupt end. The closure of the venue for unaccompanied men reminds us that the duplication of spaces has its limits. Due to financial reasons, spatial constraints and logistical obstacles, not every space can be duplicated. In the case of the exhibition and cafe, this led to the closure of the place for single men. Other places, such as some cafes and restaurants, cannot offer a family section and are therefore not accessible for women. Nevertheless, I consider the episode to represent an experiment with ikhtilāṭ. It illustrates how the mixing of men and women in public places is negotiated not only in newspapers, TV interviews and fatwas, but also in situ, i.e. in the places concerned. By visiting certain places, such as the exhibition and cafes, and by pushing the boundaries of gender segregation in a specific direction, or even transgressing them, people contribute to these debates as well. The fact that such experiments were carried out in and around 2012, and that the sheet of paper at the door could be removed as easily as it had been affixed there, suggests that Prince Nayif’s ‘royal order’ was not the final word on the matter.

The duplication of spaces reflects an imaginary division of society into two distinct spheres – one for men and another for women – that produces powerful social structures. With the vast majority of political offices held by men, strong publics, to return to the terminology introduced in chapter 2, are still overwhelmingly masculine in Saudi Arabia today. Leadership positions in a university with both a male and a female campus, such as King Abdulaziz University, are occupied by men. While more than half of the university students in Saudi Arabia are female, the list of subjects they are allowed to study is limited – mostly disciplines related to education, health, religion and design, but also IT and law. Many occupations are also restricted to men – women cannot become judges, for example. Under the reign of King ‘Abdullah, companies were allowed to be run by women as long as they were women-only businesses (Le Renard 2014: 43), and in February 2018, women were granted the right to open their own businesses without the consent of a male ‘guardian’, normally the husband or father. Still, the employment rate of women is among the lowest in the world, and they made up approximately 16 per cent of the total workforce in 2018. Women’s choices and opportunities concerning their professional careers are thus far more limited than those of men (see Doumato 1999; Prokop 2005; Yamani 1996; Za’zū 2004: 17). In addition, in cities designed for car traffic, the ban on driving for women severely constrained their movements for many decades. It was lifted in 2018, but the notion that women should not drive cars can be expected to persist, and prevent many women from driving, for many more years.
However, as critical studies on masculinity have shown for other patriarchal systems of society, access to the privileges that a state or a society grants men is often limited to certain types of men (see e.g. Carrigan, Connell and Lee 1985; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Ghoussoub and Sinclair-Webb 2000). In the Saudi case it depends heavily on factors such as social background, religious confession and nationality. Although certain professions and public offices are reserved for men, for example, they are beyond the reach of most male residents of Jeddah. Opportunities to make a career and gain access to decision-making positions differ tremendously. Family background is a decisive factor, and in Saudi Arabia a family name reveals much about a person’s geographical origin as well as tribal affiliation or family background.\textsuperscript{13} Political dissidents, religious minorities, especially the Shia in the Eastern Province,\textsuperscript{14} and people labelled as Bedouin\textsuperscript{15} are among those who, due to their social, religious or ethnic background, do not benefit from the patriarchal structure of the Saudi state and who face severe obstacles to constituting publics and obtaining public positions.\textsuperscript{16} The most under-privileged members of Saudi society are the millions of migrant labourers who drive taxis, collect rubbish, clean toilets and floors of public buildings and shopping malls, sell garments and agricultural produce, construct buildings and roads, maintain the outdoor areas of gated housing estates, and serve tea, coffee and dinner in cafes and restaurants in every Saudi city.\textsuperscript{17} Immigrants do not have the same rights and opportunities as Saudi nationals.\textsuperscript{18} They are not allowed to keep their passport but have to give it to their respective employer or patron (\textit{kafil}), which makes them much more dependent on their employers than Saudi employees. Not all migrant workers are poor – white-collar workers and experts, doctors, pharmacists, architects, engineers and scientists from all around the world come to Saudi Arabia for higher salaries or better career opportunities than they can find in their home countries (Johnson 2010). However, the majority of the approximately 8 million immigrants, or 63 per cent of the working population (2004 statistics; cf. Dehne 2010), hold a position where they receive orders from Saudi employers or superiors, and not uncommonly from both male and female customers. Considered as unsuitable for marriage with a Saudi woman due to the difference in status, male migrant workers are allowed to work in places otherwise limited to women or families.\textsuperscript{19} Saudi women, on the other hand, are often far more powerful than these men. While not denying gender inequality in general, scholars such as Soraya Altorki (1986), Amélie Le Renard (2011, 2014), Madawi al-Rasheed (2013) and Mai Yamani (2000) have shown that gender
segregation in Saudi Arabia does not preclude women from voicing their opinion, participating in public debate and having a social life beyond that of their own family. In sum, while women’s opportunities in general are more restricted than men’s, the social hierarchies within Saudi society and the structural racism separating Saudis from non-nationals can have a much deeper impact on a person’s opportunities than the hierarchy of genders. This includes his or her access to the privilege of a private sphere or a public office, and to certain spaces in the city. The sign at the entrance to the Edge of Arabia exhibition indicates that women can access some places more easily than men. The episode also shows that being a white Westerner is an advantage when it comes to circumventing the rules of gender segregation, and that knowing the right person to call is another. One can only speculate whether I would have been stopped at the entrance had I come alone, but it is very unlikely that Mustafa would have been allowed to enter without a German at his side.

Whereas the impact of gender segregation on women’s lives in Saudi Arabia has been discussed at length in books, journals and newspaper articles, male perspectives on gender segregation have been widely overlooked in both media coverage and scholarly writing on Saudi Arabia. My aim, in this and the following sections, is to consider various men’s and women’s views and experiences to provide a more balanced approach to gendered spaces and social practices.20

Negotiating gender segregation (1): A man’s world

‘That’s how it goes in Jeddah’, Hamid sighed, concluding our conversation on the closure of the exhibition venue to single males. ‘As a single, life really sucks here.’ For him as well as for other unmarried men I talked to it was beyond doubt that the segregation regime led to restriction of movement and opportunities for men as much as for women. Whereas women used to depend, and often still depend, on a male driver to reach any spot in the city, for unaccompanied men entry to many places is strictly forbidden. Gated public gardens, amusement parks or the food courts of some upmarket shopping malls, for example, used to be designated ‘families only’ – which meant that women had access with or without men, while men were only allowed to enter in the company of women (Figure 6.5).

In Saudi Arabia, men seem to enjoy greater freedom in public because the male dress code is less rigid than the female. The rule that women are allowed to see men, but men must not look at women,
however, sets narrow limits on men’s freedom of movement. One night at the corniche in March 2011, I got to know Ahmad, a 25-year-old state employee working for airport security. I was sitting on the elevated walkway between the street and the beach, observing what was going on in front of me and taking notes. A Westerner sitting there alone, writing in a notebook, must have been a strange sight, so Ahmad sat down beside me and asked what I was doing. We spent an hour conversing. Ahmad’s family was originally from Abha in the southwest of Saudi Arabia, but he was born and raised in Jeddah. Open-minded and outgoing, he called me on the phone the next day to meet up again. We agreed to meet in the same place on the corniche, which was one of Ahmad’s favourite spots in the city, as he told me (Figure 6.6). After a walk, we sat down on a small concrete structure – a piece of modern art used as a playground by children. Two minutes later, a man picnicking with his family in front of us at a distance of several metres got up and asked Ahmad to look for another place to sit. Although all his female family members were fully veiled, sitting in our field of vision made him or them feel uncomfortable. As Ahmad could not find another place for us to sit without offending someone by looking in the direction of the women, we continued walking. Being male was not to our advantage that night.

Figure 6.5 Amusement park in northern Jeddah. Photo: © Stefan Maneval 2011.
In mixed spaces accessible to all, men have to be very careful to avoid intruding into other people’s privacy. Unmarried men like Ahmad or Hamid in particular are advised to keep a cautious distance from unrelated women in public. With hardly any public leisure facilities available, they can meet their friends either in the male section of cafes or at home. A woman, on the other hand, is officially not supposed to be accompanied by men other than her husband or closest kin (father, brother, son, uncle). Access to many male spaces is generally forbidden for women. According to one of my contacts, however, pretending to be siblings opens many doors. A Lebanese man in his mid-twenties, my interlocutor said he never had to prove that he actually was the woman’s brother he claimed to be (personal communication, January 2009).

In order to pretend to be a woman’s brother or cousin, a man has to get to know her first. This is not an easy task in a city which follows a strict segregation regime. But it is not completely impossible either. When I was out for a walk together with Ahmad at the corniche, he suddenly interrupted our conversation to call ‘a friend who had run out of phone credit’. When his friend answered the phone, Ahmad’s voice immediately turned softer. His use of the female forms of pronouns corroborated my assumption that his friend was a girl. He asked her to tell him her name, which she refused. So he called her qalbi – my heart. What followed was a mix of mutual exchange of biographic data – age, origin, profession – and flirtation. ‘Qalbi’ claimed to be 18 years old, she was from Egypt and...
worked in Jeddah as a hairdresser. When Ahmad finished the conversa-
tion after a few minutes of small talk, giggling and reciting verses from a
passionate love song, I asked him how he had obtained the girl’s phone
number. He replied that he had given her his own number earlier that
day in a shopping mall. She had responded with a text message while we
were walking down the corniche.

Whereas some shopping centres for the lower- and medium-income
groups have always been mixed, upmarket shopping malls in Jeddah used
to be gender-divided before the reign of King Salman. Situated near the
coastline in the very north of Jeddah, an exclusive mall featuring several
Western coffee bar franchises was particularly inventive in dealing with
gender segregation. It had a rather common horizontal gender division:
the ground floor was reserved for men, the upper floor for families and
women. On the first floor, the entrance hall of the building is spanned by a
bridge used as a ‘families-only’ sitting area for one of the coffee bars. Many
female customers preferred the seats immediately next to the transpar-
ent balustrade facing the entrance of the building. From there, they could
watch other customers entering the building and, exposed like actors on a
stage, be seen by them. Since they were officially sitting in the family and
female section, many of them did not feel obliged to wear the niqāb, the
part of the veil covering the faces of most Saudi women in those years.
Some did not even cover their hair. Women sitting on this stage obviously
sought and found some public attention. Besides this coffee bar, the mall
contained one of the few cafes in Jeddah where women could regularly
be seen sitting at a table in front of the building, an area usually reserved
for male customers. Although these women were mostly foreigners – my
informant Helen claims to have started this trend – the place was excep-
tional. Even in upmarket shopping malls and cafes applying gender seg-
regation in rather playful ways, and in mixed shopping centres for the
medium- and lower-income groups in the city centre, it was not accept-
able for men to strike up a conversation with women. Yet one could from
time to time observe a man dropping a small piece of paper containing his
telephone number while passing a young woman, as Ahmad had done.

Other men used to write their telephone numbers on the back of
their own cars, hoping that some woman would call them (Figure 6.7).
Still another means used to establish contact between men and women is
the Bluetooth technology of mobile phones and laptop computers. This
medium of communication allowed men to contact women, or women
to contact men, without physically approaching one another. Since the
range of the wireless interconnection is short, using it for this purpose
requires a mixed environment, such as cafes and lounges in luxurious
Western hotels, or access to the family section.
While public encounters between men and women are regarded with suspicion in Saudi Arabia, social media and the internet evidently provide opportunities for men and women to interact without being physically present in the same place. Among the questions I asked when I interviewed six students of Jeddah’s exclusive private girls’ college, Effat University, in February 2012, was how and where they spent their leisure time. Samira, whose family is from Bangladesh and who had lived in the US and Canada for four years and in Jeddah for 16 years, replied that she spent a lot of time at home, communicating with friends via social networking websites. Most of her online contacts were male. Another girl, Layla, whose family is from India and who had grown up ‘in eight or nine different countries’ also had male friends on the internet. Not only are men and women able to get to know each other online, but they can also, if both sides show interest, use the internet to arrange a meeting (see Le Renard 2014: 71–2). As for Samira and Layla, they both stressed that, in Saudi Arabia, they did not actually meet male friends. They only communicated with them online.
Considering the small size of my sample of Effat University students as well as the fact that all interviewees were in the same age group and had a similar socio-economic background, their interests, spare time activities, social networks and places where they spent their leisure time could hardly have been more disparate. Almost all of them frequently used the internet, but only Samira said that she spent large portions of her spare time at home on the computer. Two out of the group of six, Layla and a Saudi from Dhahran, Fatima, who had moved to Jeddah three and a half years ago, loved to go to shopping malls. Apart from these, Layla mentioned the Jarir bookshop and a whole host of other places she visited with her family or friends on weekends, including the corniche, the historic city centre, al-Balad, and the Shalal amusement park. Two others, Saba and Nur, said they disliked or even ‘hated’ shopping malls. Saba was a Saudi born and raised in Jeddah. Judging from her appearance and statements, she was probably the most conservative in the group. Still, she liked to visit cafes and restaurants in Tahliyya Street, a bustling shopping area for the well-off. The sixth girl, Fa’iza, was from a family from Mecca. Born in Riyadh, she grew up ‘between the US and Bahrain’ and had moved to Jeddah four years earlier. In the city she liked to attend cultural events and public discussions. One of the cafes she visited regularly, Bridges in Arafat Street, hosted open mic and movie nights. She added that the cafe was currently facing problems with the hay’ā, or religious police. Among Fa’iza’s friends were also men. One of her male friends was Ahmad Angawi, a young artist whose artwork I had recently seen at the Edge of Arabia exhibition. Fa’iza often attended talks and cultural events in the house of Ahmad’s father, the architect Sami Angawi. In contrast to Layla, Samira and Fa’iza, the other three students said they did not have any male friends, neither on a face-to-face basis nor on social networking websites.

Modes of travelling from one place to another in the city varied among the group of Effat students almost as much as the activities they engaged in. When I asked them how they travelled to all the places they had just mentioned, Saba jokingly replied: ‘It’s either you have a driver, or your dad, or your brother – or forget it.’

Fatima also had to ask a male family member or private driver to take her to any social activity she wanted to attend. When she or Saba went out with friends they would plan in advance whose driver took them to a place and who would later come to pick them up.

Layla, in contrast, said, ‘For me it’s either my father or taxis.’ She reported that she was using taxis a lot, adding, ‘I take them either with a friend or with my mother and sister.’
Samira surprised the other girls, and me as well, by laconically stating, ‘I go by foot.’ This led Layla to add that she also walked to the neighbourhood shopping area from time to time – something Saba and Fatima would not do. For the two Saudi girls in the group, neither walking nor taking a taxi was an option.

As Saba explained: ‘Actually I’m afraid to get into a taxi here. So it’s either the driver, or my friends can pick me up or something, or it’s my dad.’ She concluded with the remark ‘We’re khāṣṣ’ – we are special – dropping an Arabic term into the English conversation.21

At times one can hear Saudis referring to an alleged Saudi khusūsīyya, a noun derived from the same root as khāṣṣ denoting particularity or exceptionalism. Rather than explaining anything, this commonplace expression underscores the perception that Saudis are exceptional, thus broadening the gap between expatriates and Saudi nationals. Expatriates from diverse countries also stress the differences between their own and the Saudi way of life, or between Saudis and other people. I have already quoted Hamid as referring to Saudi exceptionalism when explaining why he pressed himself against the wall of the stairwell to make way for his Saudi neighbour. Ahmad had told me about different ways of approaching Saudi and foreign women. And my Yemeni informant who spoke about the Jeddah Rush Housing Project and the unwritten laws of Saudi lifts noticed differences in his Saudi neighbours’ attitude to shared activities and spaces as well.

‘The Saudis in the house where I live stay pretty much on their own. They do not socialise very much’, he said.

I do not intend to question the validity of my interlocutors’ perception in general. Yet my interviews with Effat University students show that the distinction between Saudis and non-Saudis is too simple. The young women’s accounts mirror a large variety of attitudes to gender segregation and moral principles with respect to contact with the opposite sex. One can also say that they represent different conceptions of privacy which are informed by varying attitudes to khalwa and ikhtilāṭ. None of the students rejected ikhtilāṭ in all respects; otherwise they would not have been willing to meet me. Saba and Fatima, however, avoided ikhtilāṭ outside the university context. What appeared to be normal for Fa’iza – frequent contact with male friends, not just via social media, but also face-to-face encounters and joint activities, some of which might imply khalwa – was not the norm even for Samira and Layla. The two South Asian girls met with male friends in the US and in India, but not in Jeddah. Unlike Fa’iza, they as well as Nur had adapted to the rules of gender segregation that governed public space in Jeddah, but only for
external reasons. Unconvinced of the religious necessity of rules which they did not have to follow outside Saudi Arabia, some of them used the internet to circumvent them.

The varying degrees of mobility, independence and contact with men among these young women suggest that attitudes to khalwa and ikhtilāṭ are not as strictly linked to ethnic origin or nationality as many people suggest by referring to Saudi exceptionalism; they are also dependent on personal experience, individual desires, religious beliefs and political opinions. Furthermore, the divergent notions of privacy and different attitudes to mixing are spatially manifested in the city, as I learned a couple of days after the interview when I visited Bridges, Fa’iza’s favourite cafe, to see one of the few venues in Jeddah hosting public movie nights.

‘Street Pulse’: A public sphere utopia?

Bridges, or al-Jusūr, as the cafe is called in Arabic, was quite different from what I had expected. It consisted of only one oblong room at the rear of which a second floor had been built. Downstairs at the front were some bookshelves and tables offering a small and eclectic selection of new and second-hand English and Arabic books. Seven small tables and a tiny kitchenette in the corner hardly justified calling the place a cafe. The upper floor was used for the film screenings Fa’iza had mentioned: a moveable screen was set up in front of the wall at the rear of the room, and piles of chairs indicated the use of the space for public events.

On that day, a group of about half a dozen students, including both men and women, was seated on the floor, making a banner out of large pieces of paper on which they were writing slogans in Arabic. Among the students was the girl with short hair whom I had seen in the Edge of Arabia exhibition the other day. I asked her what they were doing.

‘We are writing down our demands’, she replied.

‘What kind of demands?’ I asked.

‘Concerning the Syrian people’, she said.

A young man came and asked suspiciously what I was up to. When I told him I was just wondering what was going on here, he explained that they were making these posters because they were not allowed to do anything else to voice their opinion, such as demonstrating in the streets.

‘You know what is happening in Syria?’ he asked me, alluding to the violent suppression of demonstrations against the regime of Bashar
al-Assad taking place at the time. ‘We want to do something, even if it’s just a very small thing. We don’t only want to watch.’

The short-haired woman asked me if I was a Syrian.

‘No’, I replied, slightly surprised, ‘I’m German’.

‘I’m Mariam’, she introduced herself to me, and the young man and I followed her example.

Then I asked, ‘And where are you going to set up these posters?’

‘We don’t know yet’, the man said looking at Mariam, indicating to her not to talk too much.

‘Some sort of flash mob’, she added.

I was curious to learn more about what was probably going to be the first flash mob in Jeddah, but Mariam’s friend hurried to say, ‘Nice to meet you!’ before I could ask any further questions.

Deeply impressed, I went downstairs. Bridges was obviously much more than a cafe housing film screenings. The rules of gender segregation were ignored here, or perhaps circumvented by declaring the place a bookshop. By creating its own rules and disregarding those dictated by the state, such as gender segregation, the cafe presents one method of calling the legitimacy of the state into question. This may explain why, as Fa’iza had mentioned in the interview, Bridges faced problems with the morality police. Furthermore, as a space where exceptional things – such as the preparation of a flash mob, for example – were allowed to happen, Bridges served as a meeting place for liberal-minded young people like Fa’iza and Mariam (Zacharia 2011). Fa’iza had told me that she had met some of her friends at Bridges. Bringing together like-minded people, this cafe constituted a microcosm with its own rules, or its own bubble, to quote Omar once more. Yet, unlike the insulated bubbles in the private realm that Omar was talking about, Bridges was a bubble with public access.

The contribution to the Edge of Arabia exhibition by Fa’iza’s friend Ahmad Angawi was an installation entitled ‘Street Pulse’ – a huge ball covered with microphones (Figure 6.8). Next to it was a map of Jeddah on which the artist had marked different places in the city: spots where he would like to install voice recorders into which residents of Jeddah could speak their mind. He had already sent a proposal to the authorities asking for permission to make his vision real. The exhibition guide doubted that the artist would get permission, ‘but it’s the idea that is most important’ (personal communication, February 2012). In Saudi Arabia, where freedom of opinion is not granted, Ahmad Angawi’s artwork is a political statement. I had hardly expected that a group of young people
in Jeddah were already doing what Ahmad Angawi had envisioned. On Angawi’s ‘Street Pulse’ map, Cafe Bridges could have been marked as a spot in the city that had already been claimed and started to be used as a space where people sought out ways to express their opinion and make it public.\(^23\)

My experience at Bridges thus led me to think of Ahmad Angawi’s artwork in a new way. Perhaps the spots he had marked on the map should not be seen as representing Utopia. Perhaps more places already existed where the inhabitants of Jeddah challenged state authority and made their concerns public. I knew about the publics that convened in residential buildings – the Sufi conventions and majalis (sing. majlis) or nawādī (sing. nādī) of affluent families mentioned in the previous chapter, for example. Now I started to look for publics which assembled outside the home. I soon discovered that various groups of people had found modes of publicly articulating their opinions and expressing discontent. I found that each public is associated with particular architecture and social practices, similar to the way in which Cafe Bridges provided space for a small but subversive public to convene and prepare a concerted action.
Claiming public spaces: protest and resistance

Anyone who is perceived to present a peril to the stability of the regime must fear to lose his job, as the aforementioned case of Shaykh Sa’ad al-Shithrī shows. Critics of the state voicing their opinions in demonstrations, newspapers, reform petitions or blogs are regularly banned from travelling, physically punished or detained for years – often without trial – and thus rendered silent. Yet the silence is never complete, and discontent is not only voiced by a handful of prominent critics. Protest flares up frequently in different regions of Saudi Arabia; it is expressed in various forms and sometimes supported by significant numbers of people.

In Jeddah, a flood caused by heavy rainfall on 25 November 2009 sparked heated public debate on mismanagement and corruption (Hagmann 2011). One hundred and twenty-three people died in the flood, according to official figures considered far too low by both Saudi activists and foreign media. Shocked by the catastrophic events and the Municipality’s inability to cope with them, residents of Jeddah organised help at the grassroots level. Blogs, newspaper articles, petitions to the king and social networking websites discussed the shortcomings of the authorities prior to and during the disaster. A Facebook group called ‘People’s campaign for support of the rescue of Jeddah’ (al-hamlashasha’biyyali-l-musāhama‘fitinqādhmadmatJiddah) attracted more than 40,000 followers in just a few days. The group abandoned its initial goal of suing the Municipality of Jeddah when King ‘Abdullah promised that persons and organisations responsible for malpractice in the management of the response to the flood would be prosecuted. The king also announced that families of victims of the flood would receive 1 million Saudi riyals (approximately €190,000) in compensation. These steps, as well as the blocking of websites used to circulate petitions initiated as a response to the disaster, show that the government took notice of the furore and viewed some of the agitation involved as a serious threat to the regime.

The debate on malpractice in the city administration of Jeddah in the context of the 2009 flood is an example of how the internet can be used to voice criticism and forge alliances. As the 2011–12 protests in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Syria have shown, even mass protests can be organised online. But no dictator has so far been forced to resign via Facebook. The fact that loosely organised networks of people like Fa’īza, Ahmad Angawi, Mariam and her fellow activists exist also beyond the internet, that is to say, that some people not only join a Facebook group
because they are temporarily upset but also take further political action, is of importance. Constituting what virtually all theorists of the public sphere would call a public, the group of young men and women I had met at Bridges, students probably, organised an act of civil disobedience. This is remarkable especially in view of the fact that any demands made public are regarded with suspicion by the Saudi authorities and can be interpreted as criticism of government policy. The activists who met at Bridges that night were very few, and they did not plan a revolution. The flash mob they were preparing, however, is a way of occupying a place in the city and contesting the state’s monopoly over public space (cf. Butler 2011).

Pascal Menoret (2014: 162–73, 205) interprets the widespread phenomenon of car drifting (tafḥīṭ) by young men in Saudi cities in terms of a similar frame of reference. Saudi youths, according to Menoret, engage in joyriding with stolen or rented cars out of frustration over lack of freedom and opportunities. They are rebels without a cause: dissatisfied with the rigid moral standards prevalent in Saudi society, humiliated by autocratic teachers and despotic parents, and bored because there is nothing much to do for unmarried men in Saudi cities, they do not follow a specific political goal, but appropriate public space in a destructive way. Taking cars, driving like crazy, dodging the police, risking their own and other people’s lives, and openly challenging heteronormativity is their way of expressing discontent. Through actions and behaviour, clothes and haircuts, as well as through songs and YouTube videos of drifting sessions, they deconstruct the image of a clean and secure country ruled and inhabited by deeply religious people. They thus challenge the official narrative according to which law and order have been established on the Peninsula by the Āl Saʿūd.26

Migrant workers employ similar ‘weapons of the weak’ (Scott 1985) to mount resistance and make their concerns public, in spite of the fact that the Saudi state neither grants them sufficient legal protection nor permits the constitution of formal publics that can speak on their behalf. Many Saudi households have a private driver for female family members at their disposal, the vast majority of whom are non-Saudi nationals. Their employers’ dependence on their services puts drivers in a position that they can take advantage of to negotiate better working conditions and higher salaries (Le Renard 2014: 51). Migrant workers who are not capable of exerting pressure on their employers by refusing to work – due to the over-supply of workers in certain professions, for example – sometimes benefit from informal expatriate networks that offer support. In an article dealing with Filipino migrant
workers in Saudi Arabia, Mark Johnson (2010) presents several cases of Filipino middle-class families helping compatriots to escape from abusive employers or providing escapees with accommodation and new employment. NGOs promoting legal protection of migrant workers, though not permitted in Saudi Arabia itself, operate within countries which export labour forces to Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries. Activists in Indonesia, for example, have drawn public attention to the miserable situation of many Indonesian migrant workers in Saudi Arabia, thus urging the Indonesian government to launch monitoring and support initiatives for domestic workers abroad (Silvey 2004; 2006). Some support organisations have informal branches in Saudi Arabia. As the abuse of Overseas Foreign Workers, as they are often referred to, has received much attention in the media of countries such as Indonesia and the Philippines in recent years, support groups can effectively exert pressure on their respective consulates even though they are not officially registered (Dehne 2011: 84–6).

Paradoxically, the very fact that migrant workers and runaways lack institutional support has led to their increased public visibility. Finding no other refuge, Southeast Asian escapees began setting up shacks under flyovers in the city centre of Jeddah or in front of their home countries’ consulates (Dehne 2011: 89–90). At times, more than 1,000 people lived in these makeshift tent cities, sometimes waiting for their deportation for months (see e.g. Arab News, 21 June 2011). This caused the local press to report about them. The Jeddah-based English daily Arab News, for example, wrote on 27 October 2010:

Residents and business owners in the area near the Kandara flyover along King Fahd (Sitteen) Road are complaining about the havoc created by hundreds of illegal immigrants who live in a Hooverville beneath the overpass. Most of these people, a mix of runaway workers and pilgrim-visa overstayers, living here beneath tarps and other flimsy temporary housing are of Asian origin. The phenomenon of illegal immigrants camping out under the bridge has been going on for quite some time, but the situation has turned nasty recently when disturbances broke out and police were called in to make arrests. The overstayers were reportedly creating troubles on purpose so they would be picked up by immigration police and deported from the country free of charge. Some of the squatters vandalized parked cars and caused damage to nearby properties.
Although primarily concerned about the maintenance of public order, media reports occasionally mention reasons why individual migrant workers abscond from their employers:

Housemaids who flee their sponsors due to bad working conditions to seek work in the black labor market often end up in a situation of jumping out of the frying pan and into the fire. ‘They seize our IDs, lock us up in secluded rooms and make us live in very difficult conditions, which is no less than indentured servitude,’ a maid told Arab News on condition she not be named. Nuriyyah, an Indonesian maid who has been working for two years in Saudi Arabia, describes the situation she found herself in as ‘slavery’ after being legally recruited and brought to the Kingdom. The wage she ended up receiving was not enough to feed her family back home.

(Arab News, 13 January 2011)

In another article, telling readers why it is not a good idea to abscond and camp in the streets, Arab News mentions ‘A maid from the southern Philippine region of Davao [who] said she ran away from her employer in Riyadh to avoid getting raped’ (Arab News 2008). For people like her, the private home is a place of violence, whereas the street, perceived as hostile and dangerous by others, becomes a refuge. By occupying certain spots in the city, talking to the press and sporadically turning to more aggressive forms of protest, runaway migrant workers thus manage to draw attention to their issues.

The cases presented in this section illustrate that large groups within Saudi society that are denied access to so-called ‘strong’ publics – such as critics of the Saudi government, dissatisfied Saudi youths and migrant workers – have different informal options of publicly expressing frustration, formulating political demands and mounting resistance. The informal or ‘weak’ publics constituted by members of these groups are not powerless; on the contrary, by exerting pressure on their respective embassies, their employers or the Saudi authorities, they sometimes manage to improve their own situation. Some criticism is voiced on the internet or through other media of mass communication. Often, publicity is generated via the occupation of a portion of urban public space, either sporadically, as in the case of car drifters or a flash mob, or for longer intervals, as illustrated by the camp of escaped migrant workers. What renders these activities effective is their public visibility: they introduce some degree of chaos into the image of orderly public space which the
state wishes to impose. Since the Al Saʿud portray themselves as granters of social, political and moral order as well as of security, justice and stability (al-Rasheed 1996; 2004), the disorder produced by squatters, drifters and protesters against basically anything calls the ruling family’s legitimacy into question.

By focusing in the remaining section of this chapter on a particular form of dissent, which is inextricably linked with certain types of architecture – shopping malls, gated communities and beach resorts – I draw together different strands of my argument as developed thus far. The aim is to show how the public articulation of nonconformist opinions on ikhtilāṭ, gender and sexuality, enabled by a specific architecture, lead to the entanglement of public and private space in a way that challenges conceptions of privacy prevailing in the context of Saudi Arabia.

Gated publics, counterpublics

I asked a 29-year-old Saudi architect what I had also asked the six Effat University students: where do young people in Jeddah spend their spare time? At that time, in the year 2009, my informant was living in Germany, where he was working on a Ph.D. Here is the reply I received in an e-mail:

Young men and women meet their friends in cafes, restaurants or shopping centres. When the weather is nice they spend their time with friends and relatives in vacation spots at the seaside in Obhur. Some families have their own holiday cottage on their private piece of land. Others rent chalets for several years or for a limited period of time in one of the ‘holiday villages’ run by hotel firms. In those neighbourhoods in Obhur one spends time with other people in some kind of closed circle of acquainted families. Like this it is possible to use public spaces and green areas together with others. Normally there is no opportunity to do so in the city.... Boys go to the gym and diving, girls have a lot of parties at home.

(e-mail received on 4 July 2009, originally in German, my translation)

During my stays in Jeddah I got to know some of the holiday villages and beach resorts in Obhur mentioned in the e-mail (Figure 6.9). Except for a small parcel of a few hundred metres, the entire coastline in Obhur to the north of Jeddah is private property. Some areas are owned by individuals,
others by luxurious hotels in the city centre. The hotels offer visitors door-to-door shuttle services to the remote beach resorts. The remaining properties belong to companies which have built gated holiday developments either exclusively for their high-ranking employees or for holidaymakers in general. Tenants of chalets in one of these developments can invite guests. This is the most comfortable way of gaining access to these resorts as a mere visitor. Another option is leaving one’s passport at the entrance gate of one of the beaches belonging to luxury hotels and paying a fee of approximately 100 Saudi riyals per person, about €20 in 2012.

When I visited a beach resort in March 2011, I learned that Saudi nationals are not permitted to enter. I was surprised that Saudis were kept out of beaches in their own country whereas I, a German visitor, and the two men who gave me a ride back to the city at the end of the day, both migrant workers from other Arab countries, had access to them.

‘The place would quickly change if ordinary Saudis were allowed to enter’, the driver of the car explained. ‘There used to be a beach where Saudis could go. Young Saudis went there with their girlfriends. When the police found out about this, the place was shut down for a while. Now, Saudis are not allowed to enter any more.’ The hay’ā had the normal police shut down the place, he explained (personal communication, March 2011).

Figure 6.9 A beach resort in Obhur. Photo: © Stefan Maneval 2012.
The places mentioned by the young architect in the e-mail quoted above are not considered to be genuinely public spaces by many researchers critical of current trends that privilege privatisation and securitisation of urban space. According to their logic, beach resorts, shopping malls, amusement parks and gated communities are not fully public because they are owned by individuals or companies who have the right to police who enters the premises and prohibit unwanted activities, among them the assertion of civil rights. Access to these places depends on people’s financial resources, personal contacts, racial identities at times or, as in the case of non-Saudi beach resorts in Obhur, on nationality. These are therefore often perceived as intensifying social, economic and racial segregation (Low 2003: 11, 224–8). Following this line of thought, one may argue that the exclusion of Saudi nationals from beach resorts in Jeddah reinforces the stereotype of a Saudi exceptionalism.

However, access to publics and counterpublics often depends on different factors such as language skills, education, social status, money, nationality, race, sex, gender identity and acceptance of certain ethical values. A state-owned ‘public’ museum in many cities of the world also costs around €10–15, a price not affordable to everyone. Access to public libraries is only granted to registered users, with registration requiring valid personal papers, residency in the same country or a valid visa, and perhaps a fee. Habermas’s (1989) bourgeois publics of the Enlightenment era, which were convened in private homes, were not accessible to everyone, and neither were public spaces in Jeddah in the past, such as the sīq, the mīrkāz or women’s gatherings in the residential buildings. Furthermore, counterpublics of gays and lesbians, people of colour and religious or other minorities often meet in secluded private spaces because behaviour practised by the participants contradicts the norms of their cultural environment (Fraser 1992: 121–4; Warner 2002: 109–24).

It is not my intention to deny the discriminatory practices facilitated by the privatisation and securitisation of urban space. My point is, rather, that although indisputably exclusive in some way, shopping centres, restaurants and gated holiday developments can be considered as public spaces in the sense that they enable or encourage encounters and conversations between strangers or acquaintances (Abaza 2001; Nissen 2008). In beach resorts in Jeddah, unrelated men and women talk to each other. Men wear shorts that do not cover their knees, women wear swimsuits and bikinis. Some smoke cigarettes and shisha, some play loud music and some go swimming. The e-mail quoted above indicates that similar developments exist for Saudis, too. Although not permitted entrance into
many resorts in Obhur, they rent holiday cottages in the Mövenpick resort in northern Jeddah or north of Obhur in a famous resort called Durrat al-ʿArūs. In YouTube videos one can see young men dancing in the streets within the precincts of that resort, or in a car park, or on a stage-like elevation of ground, in front of a camera in order to be seen by strangers. These young men want to have an audience, they want to be public.

Partying outside the home is possible in Durrat al-ʿArūs because the walls surrounding the premises keep out views, unwanted visitors and, most of the time, the morality police. These young people make public what others regard as immoral, and they can only do so in a secluded space, in the company of people who largely share their attitudes to gender, sexuality and the body. Conflict with the norms of a cultural context of domination and restriction is, following Michael Warner (2002), what distinguishes counterpublics from other publics. Not every tenant of a chalet in Obhur or Durrat al-ʿArūs is participating in a counterpublic. Some are mere holidaymakers, divers, shisha smokers or bored youths. But with regard to those who have a desire to make their own deviation from the norms public, the concept is a useful analytical tool.

A photo essay by the British photographer Olivia Arthur (2012) titled Jeddah Diary shows Saudi girls riding bicycles and walking down the streets of Durrat al-ʿArūs at night, unveiled, wearing tight-fitting

![Figure 6.10](image.png) Girls riding bicycles in the Durrat al-ʿArūs holiday resort. Photograph from Olivia Arthur’s Jeddah Diary (2012), reproduced with the permission of the artist. © Olivia Arthur.
Western clothes and no ʿabāya (Figure 6.10). In other images by the same photographer women wearing fashionable – and extremely short – dresses and hot pants are partying with men in a gated community. Apart from these pictures, the book contains many scenes from the daily life of women in Jeddah, mostly taken at their private homes in kitchens, living rooms and bedrooms. The women in the pictures did not object to the publication of their pictures. They only demanded that their faces were not visible in them (Figure 6.11).

Nevertheless, when Olivia Arthur showed them the pictures she had taken, one of the women remarked, ‘That’s great … but can’t you show a bit more of her eyes so that people can see how beautiful she is?’ (Arthur 2012: 30). This statement is surprising, given that not even the omission of their faces makes the circulation of their images legitimate in the eyes
of many Saudis. Women are not supposed to be seen by outsiders, and so they are not supposed to be photographed, at least not by anyone who might circulate their pictures to outsiders. Occasionally, people who saw me walking around with a camera in Jeddah were very anxious that I was taking pictures of women. One old lady in Hindawiyya started yelling at me while she continued walking down the street. A man passed by and asked what the fuss was about.

‘Hadha yuṣawwir an-nās!’ she exclaimed – ‘He’s photographing people!’

I explained to the man that I was only taking pictures of houses and showed him some of my images on the display of the digital camera. He did not seem completely convinced but let me go. I heard the same phrase, yuṣawwir an-nās, on another occasion at the corniche in al-Ḥamrā. That time, a woman said it to another woman, again not to me directly because she would not talk to unrelated men. She said it loudly enough for me to hear, though, and I stopped taking pictures. Men in the streets of districts such as al-Hindawiyya, al-Kandara or al-Balad, in contrast, often asked me to take their pictures – only when no woman was present. All the women who were worried that I might photograph them were completely veiled, enveloped in black from head to foot, exposing only face and hands and sometimes not even that.

Many of the young women in Olivia Arthur’s photographs do not veil their bodies, but their faces are disguised. Some wear casual Western clothes, which leave much skin uncovered, but they make sure that their long hair screens their faces. Or an object is placed between the camera and their faces. Or they hide their faces with their hands. Or Arthur photographed her own prints under bright light, so that the reflection of the light blurs the faces, but not the entire image. Thus, rather than legitimising the circulation of the portraits, the techniques employed by Arthur to erase or omit the women’s faces serve the purpose of making the women unrecognisable in the first place. The women want to be photographed, they want to be seen. But as this can damage their reputation, they prefer to hide their identity. The request to show more of the depicted woman’s eyes attests to the play with revelation and concealment. They do not want to refrain from showing that they are beautiful women, but they need to conceal who they are.

Olivia Arthur’s images were not produced to be shared with family and friends, and the women were completely aware of this fact. Some women wearing an ‘ābāya and a veil covering their faces are unmistakably posing for Arthur’s camera – and for an unknown viewer, an imaginary public. Having one’s picture taken by a professional photographer
from Europe and agreeing to the circulation of these pictures, as well as posting videos on YouTube, are ways of seeking publicity. Some videos of Saudi men dancing have been watched more than 200,000 times. One extremely popular video, for example, depicts three youths dressed like religious scholars imitating Michael Jackson. Arthur is a member of the renowned cooperative Magnum Photos. Her pictures from Saudi Arabia were shown in exhibitions in New York and London, her *Jeddah Diary* was written about in the German weekly *Die Zeit*. It can also be purchased and viewed from anywhere in the world via the internet. The dancers of Durrat al-ʿArūs as well as the women hiding their faces but not their bodies in Arthur’s photographs are obviously addressing a global public.

Yet the practices documented in Olivia Arthur’s photographs and in YouTube videos can take place only within an architecture which keeps certain parts of the Saudi public out, thus creating a more or less private setting. Moreover, wearing, before the eyes of strangers, tight-fitting jeans, swimsuits and hot pants instead of an ʿabāya, or shorts instead of a thawb (the white dress worn by many Saudi men), dancing in the streets or in the clubhouse of a gated community, and posing for the camera are not only public forms of display of deviant behaviour. What is made public is, according to the prevailing social norms, part of the private realm: naked skin, the female body, certain types of movements and gestures, as well as communication between unrelated men and women.

Once more: the private setting of secluded and privately owned facilities enables encounters between strangers, and thereby the constitution of publics. The people who meet at these places make practices normally restricted to the private sphere public. Things get complicated at this point. Yet this phenomenon is not entirely unique. In many ways it resembles the drag queens written about by Michael Warner (2002) in the introduction to *Publics and Counterpublics*. Around 1960, they regularly met in a New Jersey house and documented their parties with several cameras. They met in a private setting to avoid social stigma, but they were taking photographs so that, in principle, an infinite number of outsiders could see what they were doing. The imagined publicity created a feel of glamour, as Warner puts it, which allowed them ‘to experience their bodies in a way that would not have been possible without this mutual witnessing and display’ (2002: 13).

If we are speaking about tens of thousands of viewers of a video, tens of thousands of readers of a German weekly and hundreds of visitors to an exhibition, as in the examples from Jeddah referred to here, we are also dealing with real publicity. Communication with the world beyond the gates is important. It aims at making public what otherwise cannot
be openly articulated in this particular cultural environment. Just like the ‘counterpublics of sex and gender’ elsewhere (Warner 2002: 62–3), the counterpublics in Jeddah presented here challenge prevailing notions of what public and private mean within a wider social context. They are offering the Saudi public alternative opinions on gender segregation, definitions of shameful nudity, female modesty and desire. Above all, men and women claim their right to have what for them is a sexually attractive body – a body that can dance, has long legs, breasts, curly hair or beautiful eyes. They show off this body to anyone they want to outside the private realm: friends, strangers, men and women. And they enjoy being admired for it. They enjoy being public. They are engaged in renegotiating the border between public and private space.

These people certainly do not epitomise Saudi youth. Perhaps they represent only a minority. Although their voices are just some among many other voices which may be more powerful, they are able to say that they do not care about the rules. It would be a terrible mistake to believe that this message is addressed only to a Saudi audience, especially in view of the media involved in these cases – the internet, a Magnum photographer’s exhibition in New York City and the German press. The artists and their protagonists promote new perspectives on what it means to be young and male, or young and female in Saudi Arabia. They demonstrate that, within their own bubble, they are free to do what they want. They are told not to play music in the streets. But they do. They are not supposed to dance. But they do. Women should stay away from men. But they don’t. They can have fun if they want to – and they want to. Like the girls smoking in a car mentioned earlier, having a space where they do not need to care what other people tell them to do or not to do is their version of privacy.

**Conclusion**

Public space doesn’t simply exist. A desert is not what we call a public space, and neither is a motorway, so long as it is only used to move from one place to another by means of a car. It takes people, strangers who interact with each other, to turn a place into public space. In other words, public space is socially produced. This is not a new insight; geographers and sociologists have elaborated on this point for some decades (e.g. Lefebvre 1991; Löw 2001; Massey 2005). The question that has captured my interest and imagination in this chapter is whether or not, in a place like Jeddah, where the political environment is plainly hostile to the emergence of critical publics,
the social production of public spaces is in fact possible. And if so, in what ways does this social production manifest itself?

In the first part of the chapter I discussed key factors that hinder the emergence of lively public spaces facilitating face-to-face communication between strangers as they are known elsewhere. However, the local climate, or rather the perception of it as unpleasant, the automotive city, an autocratic regime suspicious of open spaces with their potential for assembly and collective expressions of dissent, and local conceptions of privacy and its accompanying politics of gender, do not prevent people from constituting publics. Rather, these factors lead to the appropriation of urban places that were not designed for the purpose of public sociability for alternative, ad hoc and at times guerrilla-style public articulations of discontent. They also lead to the use of privately owned facilities for public encounters.

The architecture of public space and men and women’s social practices connected to it are, I have argued, indivisible from local conceptions of privacy. In Jeddah, these are informed by varying positions on two main categories of mixing, *khalwa* and *ikhtilāṭ*. People’s attitudes to these concepts determine their respective modes of travelling in the city, the places they visit and activities they engage in. The fact that dominant forces in society prevent people from doing what they want to do in public, or compel them to hide what they may want to display, leads to increased entanglement between public and private spaces. Practices associated with publics take place within the protected sphere of the private home or other built spaces that keep viewers and visitors out, such as beach resorts or gated holiday developments. The duplication of spaces for the segregation of sexes, the use of private cars often with tinted windows, the ubiquity of gates and guards, and a culturally prescribed avoidance of contact between unrelated men and women, also create islands of privacy within the public realm.

Within these islands, practices that are considered to be part of, and otherwise limited to, the private sphere can take place undisturbed. Such practices are sometimes deliberately made public as a challenge to the border between public and private. This is the case with the young women in Jeddah portrayed by Olivia Arthur, youths dancing in Durrat al-ʿArūs and young men and women exposing their half-naked bodies at beach resorts in Obhur. Following Michael Warner (2002), I have referred to these practices, which challenge prevailing norms and moral principles, as counterpublics.

In the 1980s and 1990s, as could be seen in chapters 4 and 5, the Islamic Revival movement was engaged in a process of challenging the
Saudi state as well as common notions of public and private. The transformation of the Saudi society initiated by these ‘Islamic counterpublics’ (Hirschkind 2006) demonstrates how powerful such dissident movements, unauthorised expressions of discontent and deviant social practices can be. The latter parts of this chapter have focused on contemporary forms of protest, resistance, counterpublics and the revision of existing rules and norms. Although some of the voices presented here may seem feeble, their contribution to an ongoing transformation of Saudi society can hardly be overestimated. At the same time, it is important to bear in mind that there are other publics with different agendas, informed, for example, by a conservative imagination of social coexistence.

I have summarised in this chapter a recent debate on gender segregation and *ikhtilāṭ*, and I wish to emphasise once more that many men and women support a strict spatial division between the sexes. Many Saudis strongly reject the mixing that occurs at workplaces and parties in gated enclaves. Some consider women unqualified ‘by nature’ to perform a public role whereas others support the creation of more segregated workplaces as a way to enhance opportunities for women. Even though, as I have shown, gender segregation constrains the movement of both men and women, many people also use it to their advantage. Men of different social strata benefit in terms of job opportunities and powerful positions, while women gain access to secure and harassment-free spaces. For others, such as the female Islamist Nūra al-Ṣaʿād, it is an important factor in the cultivation of a particular type of piety (see Mahmood 2005; also see chapter 5 of this volume).

It may be said that the royal family is attentive to these divergent opinions and different visions of society. To maintain stability, it carefully adjusts its policy, dismisses leaders of state institutions and inaugurates new ones, according to the way the wind blows. While the negotiation of what is public and private continues, different and also divergent versions of these concepts circulate and are enacted in everyday life, enabled by particular forms of architecture.

Notes

2. VAT was first introduced in 2018, at a standard rate of 5 per cent.
3. The 1971 master plan for the development of Riyadh produced by Doxiadis Associates (DA) states that the Bedouin dwellings, ‘of which a large number are unauthorized … are the cause of unhealthy conditions and unrest. They definitely bring serious problems to the development, servicing and management of the city’ (quoted in Menoret 2014: 76–7). The migrant
population was seen as a source of ‘trouble [to] the security and health departments’ and of ‘moral … problems’ (DA 1963 work report, quoted in Menoret 2014: 86).

4. In 1968, Prince Salmān bin ‘Abd al-‘Aziz, then governor of Riyadh, ordered the removal of approximately 60,000 Bedouin from the centre of Riyadh, then a city of around 300,000 inhabitants. The DA experts objected to the relocation site proposed by Prince Salmān, an area next to National Guard barracks and a cement factory miles away from the built-up city area, but not to the idea of displacing residents and rehousing them in remote areas (Menoret 2014: 74–7).

5. As James C. Scott writes in his book Seeing Like a State: ‘Delivering mail, collecting taxes, conducting a census, moving supplies and people in and out of the city, putting down a riot or insurrection, digging for pipes and sewer lines, finding a felon or conscript (providing he is at the address given), and planning public transportation, water supply, and trash removal are all made vastly simpler by the logic of the grid’ (Scott 1998: 57).

6. Hemaidi’s complaint that ‘foreign experts’ commissioned with the planning of Saudi cities failed to understand ‘the local traditional urban fabric of the city and the Arabic-Islamic cultural background of its people’ may sound familiar from the discourse of New Islamic Urbanism presented in chapter 4. These experts introduced ‘foreign planning principles’ which, in Hemaidi’s view, proved ‘inadequate to the people’s needs and local conditions’ (Hemaidi 2001: 188–9).


8. See al-Rasheed (2013: 159–72), Meijer (2010), van Geel (2016). Van Geel (2018: 113–14) highlights that, in the Saudi context, in which gender segregation is the norm and the mixing of unrelated men and women an exception, the language does not provide an adequate term for segregation, but there is much debate about ikhtilāt. She presents a detailed discussion of the different meanings of the term to Saudi women, thus emphasising also its vagueness. Whereas the meaning of khalwa – the presence of a woman and a non-mahram man in a confined space – is relatively clear and undisputed, there are many different understandings and definitions of the term ikhtilāt (van Geel 2018: chapter 3).


10. While ikhtilāt was introduced in certain places, such as shopping malls, cafes and some restaurants, under King Salmān and crown prince Muḥammad bin Salmān, others remain gender segregated.

11. Since the reign of King ‘Abdullāh, a few women’s universities, such as Effat University in Jedda, have been headed by women.


13. At the top of the social hierarchy stands the royal family, above all the senior princes occupying key ministerial offices. Counting more than 5,000 members, the Āl Sa‘ūd form a powerful network of patrons and clients, interlinked with the economic elite and most of the important tribes and families through intermarriage (Glosemeyer 2002). Members of the royal family engage in business themselves and own the largest media companies in the country (Hagmann 2010). Closeness to the royal family is a crucial asset in a man’s path to success and political or economic power. The king appoints ministers, members of the Shura council and heads of other government organisations, and ministers appoint bureaucrats as well as chief editors of newspapers. In addition, the Āl Sa‘ūd reward loyal clients with pieces of land, employment in the state apparatus, state contracts and monopolised import licences, all sources of enormous wealth (see Hertog 2005; 2011: 86–94; Menoret 2014: 121–8). The relationship between tribes and the state is discussed in Maisel (2014).

14. Saudi Arabia’s Shiite population, approximately 8–15 per cent of the entire populace, are gravely under-represented in the political and educational system. This is true even for the Eastern Province, where the Shia account for half the population. In the Universities of al-Qatif and al-Ahsa, two major cities in the Eastern Province, only 5 per cent of faculty members are Shiites (Dinkelaker 2010; Meijer and Wagemakers 2013).

15. ‘Bedouin’ is a term used for nomads, their sedentary descendants and poor rural migrants in general, another group discriminated against within the Saudi state and society (Menoret 2014: 82–7, 140–7).
16. The emphasis here is on the patriarchal structure of the state, not of society in general, or of tribes and families. Men from these social groups and strata can still have more power within their own families than their wives, daughters and sisters.

17. Although the 2005 Saudi Labour Law grants migrant workers basic rights such as regular payment, breaks and a maximum workload of eight hours per day and 48 hours per week, as well as respect for religion and human dignity, many immigrants complain about appalling living and working conditions (see Dehne 2010). Many of them face non-payment of wages, excessive workloads and racism (personal communication, March 2011 and January 2012; see also Human Rights Watch 2004). They have hardly any rights in respect of their employers and are not organised in workers’ unions, as these do not exist in Saudi Arabia, either for non-nationals or for Saudis. For many, the only way to escape in cases of maltreatment and abuse is to turn to their embassy and wait for deportation (oral communication with runaway migrant workers from Indonesia, March 2011). Female migrant workers – nurses, nannies or domestic servants, for example – are even less mobile and sometimes confined to their employers’ homes.

18. The children of migrant workers are not permitted to study at a Saudi university even if they are born and raised in Saudi Arabia, for example.

19. The rules of gender segregation do not apply to these migrant workers of low social status in the same way, as though they are not males to the same degree as Saudi men (Le Renard 2014: 33). Similar observations on the connection between gender hierarchies and ethnic stratification in Kuwait have been made by Longva (1993).

20. A few years after I finished my fieldwork in 2012, gender segregation was abolished in some of the places described here. Yet it continues to be an important social principle that structures men’s and women’s movements, behaviour and interaction in public. Even though the cases presented in the following pages are already history, the points I want to make with regard to the constitution of public and private spaces remain valid.

21. The Arabic term ‛ādār can denote private property, such as in ‛ayyāra ‛ādār, private car. Just like the related noun ‛adār, it is also used in the sense of special or different.

22. In this respect I follow de Certeau (1984), who emphasises the capability of seemingly trivial practices of everyday life to challenge powerful structures.

23. A few years later, Cafe Bridges was closed. It was purportedly shut down by the authorities as a response to its hosting of public political debates. I owe this information to Ulrike Freitag.


25. For political commitment in Saudi Arabia in the 1950s and 1960s, see Ghrawi (2015). Violent and non-violent forms of protest have frequently been adopted by Shiites in the Eastern Province. Their publications, although banned inside Saudi Arabia, can nevertheless be bought by Saudis in bookshops in many neighbouring Arab countries (al-Rasheed 1998). Since 2011, encouraged by the protest movements in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, Shiites demanding an end to religious discrimination and economic inequality have regularly demonstrated in the streets of towns and villages in the coastal region of Qatif, particularly in Awamiya. Many of these protests resulted in violent clashes with the security forces, during which approximately 20 young Shia activists as well as several policemen were killed (Aljazeera 2012; Alahmad 2014; Matthiesen 2012).

26. For examples of the official historiography see e.g. al-Hāritī (2003/4) and al-Simari (2011). For a critical analysis of this narrative, see Maneval (2014) and al-Rasheed (1996; 2004).

27. The argument and some of the material presented in this section have previously been published as an article (Maneval 2019).


29. Based on this criterion, Amélie Le Renard (2011; 2014; 2015), for example, treats the gated and highly securitised women’s campus of King Saud University, as well as shopping malls in Riyadh, as public spaces. She reports that on 25 September 2008, the national day commemorating the foundation of the Saudi Kingdom, customers of a shopping mall in Riyadh spontaneously put up a fight against the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (Le Renard 2014: 115–16). They turned the mall into a stage for civil disobedience and posted videos of their action on the internet, thus making their dissatisfaction with the morality police public.