

# Architecture Washing: A Framework for Investigating Human Rights Abuses in the AEC

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper identifies, names, and characterizes the practice that is ‘architecture washing’ as present in the Architecture, Engineering, and Construction (AEC) industry to demonstrate that when and where it occurs, ‘architecture washing’ detrimentally impacts the industry, the quality of our built environment, and society at large. The content addressed in this paper includes a working definition of ‘architecture washing’, a body of academic research associated with human rights abuses in the built environment centered on forced labor, an analysis of the more established practice of ‘greenwashing’ as a possible model for ‘architecture washing’, and the outline of a framework for investigating the probability of ‘architecture washing’ on any given project. In so doing, it offers a framework for recognizing some of the material, economic, social, and political conditions that encourage its deployment, mechanisms intentionally designed to render AEC participants complicit, and key characteristics in a project’s delivery process that exposes said project to a high probability for ‘architecture washing’.

**KEYWORDS:** architecture washing, forced labor, human rights abuses, AEC industry

## 1.0 ARCHITECTURE WASHING, WHAT IS IT, AND WHY IT IS IMPORTANT?

This paper identifies, names, and characterizes the practice that is ‘architecture washing’ as experienced in the Architecture, Engineering, and Construction (AEC) industry to demonstrate that when and where it occurs, ‘architecture washing’ detrimentally impacts the industry, the quality of our built environment, and society at large. Ample evidence of contemporary examples of ‘architecture washing’ are discussed to indicate its currency and extent. In addition, this paper offers a framework for recognizing material, economic, social, and political conditions that encourage its deployment, mechanisms intentionally designed to render AEC participants complicit, and key characteristics in a project’s delivery process that exposes said project to a high probability for ‘architecture washing’.

But what is ‘architecture washing’? Quite simply, it is the deployment of building design and infrastructure projects as forms of spectacle for cleansing—that is, ameliorating—the reputation of those who commission them. Architecture washing occurs when building projects are used to rehabilitate the public image and/or financial standing of governmental (legislative, judiciary, and extra-judiciary), para-governmental, corporate, and private entities. This act of ‘purification’, aimed at benefiting clients, patrons, and investors, seeks to avert attention from possible wrongdoing, silence one’s opponents, and distract from rule of law violations. Implied in the very act of building is the power and strength needed to marshal all the material and energy resources with which architecture defies gravity. However, when authority and influence co-opt the practices of design, engineering, and construction, to validate, certify, and celebrate without question or critique, we are witness to ‘architecture washing’. Laundering, cleansing, rehabilitating, and purifying the political, reputational, and financial standing of those who commission said projects and who possess the ‘strength’ to build is its very goal.

An essential characteristic of most forms of ‘washing’—be it ‘green’, ‘sports’, or ‘architecture’—is that the power of projection—be it in social media, international relations, or economic forums—is held, disproportionately, by state, corporate, or institutional players. They set the agenda, construct the language, dictate the terms, and lay claim to evidence. In the face of such vast expenditures of human effort and financial investments, those who dare allege unethical, corrupt, and illegal activities are swiftly challenged. Commissioning ‘impressive’ works of architecture persuades and influences public opinion. Indeed, nation-states routinely harness large-scale building projects for bolstering morale, strengthening national identity, and fortifying regimes. Projects conceived at an international scale for advancing national interests are planned, bid, and constructed to attract investment, revitalize state pride, and bolster political might. Vast transformations to the built environment are made precisely for their global impact, international acclaim, and self-evident value. Yet, they don’t always partake in ‘architecture washing.’

When they do, they are at a much higher risk of perpetuating social injustices, state crimes, and human rights abuses. When buildings are used to distract, they silence opposition, finance misinformation, and render their makers complicit. In this, the AEC industry is called upon to recognize how the commissioning, promotion, design, engineering, and construction of large-scale signature projects are practices that place its members at risk. All who labor in the AEC industry and who partake in ‘architecture washing’ implicitly underwrite the social harms, which include but are not limited to disempowering a workforce, forced migration, inhuman working conditions, modern slavery, and environmental degradation. How, therefore, might we better recognize the material, economic, social, and political conditions that precipitate the presence of ‘architecture washing’? What are the various mechanisms

that are expressly designed to facilitate its complicity? And what are identifiable characteristics, or signs that indicate that a project is at a higher risk of succumbing to its practices?

These questions are addressed in this paper whose various sections: (1.0) contribute a working definition of 'architecture washing'; (2.0) identify a body of academic research associated with human rights abuses in the built environment that includes forced labor on building sites and in material supply chains; (3.0) evaluate the more established practice of 'greenwashing' as a possible model for 'architecture washing'; (4.0) outline an initial research-based framework for investigating the presence of 'architecture washing' on any given project; and (5.0) introduce the NEOM project in Saudi Arabia as a case study for testing said framework.

## 2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW, FORCED LABOR INDICATOR

Where and how does 'architecture washing' exist in the AEC industry? To help answer this question, I turn to a larger body of scholarship associated with human rights abuses in contemporary building practice, wherein we are better able to locate key indicators of said 'washing.' Moreover, 'social sustainability' is a principle of care that offers the AEC industry a vastly more integrated definition of sustainability, in recognizing that design and construction directly impact the social conditions of building users, construction site laborers, material producers, and their larger communities.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, at times, these conditions contribute to placing individuals at a higher risk of precarity, risk, and peril; as happens, for example, when design neglects to factor in rising sea levels placing residents of low-lying areas at serious exposure to flooding and death, when engineering encourages the use of inexpensive resins in manufactured materials that thereafter prove to be toxic, or when project managers allow sub-subcontractors to charge migrant workers recruitment fees for working on their projects. All of these are instances wherein the delivery of building projects endangers the lives and safety of others. The social risk indicator that I have identified as most indicative of projects at a higher risk of 'architecture washing' is that of 'forced labor'. A comprehensive literature review focused on the occurrence of forced labor in the building industry has corroborated a clear link between a compromised set of labor practices and 'architecture washing'. Projects identified with forced labor on their building sites and/or in their material supply chains were invariably at greater risk of 'architecture washing'. High-profile international gatherings such as the Olympic Games (Beijing Summer 2008, Sochi Winter 2014, Rio de Janeiro Summer 2016, Beijing Winter 2022) and FIFA World Cups (Brazil 2014, Russia 2018, and Qatar 2022) were most representative of the dual-risk of forced labor and architecture washing.<sup>2</sup> Invariably, events with non-negotiable deadlines encourage vast monetary expenditures by states, institutions, corporate sponsors, and private investors who bank on their global reach and projected financial returns. What is drowned out by the glitz and glam, however, is the increased risk of human rights abuses occasioned by such events.

This was the fate of several building projects associated with the 2022 FIFA World Cup held in the Gulf State of Qatar.<sup>3</sup> For more than seven years, this part of the world witnessed unprecedented construction activity that included multiple stadia, large scale infrastructure including bridges and dams, luxury housing estates, recreational centers, and extensive commercial corridors. Yet, all this feverish building activity was predicated on the exploitation of a migrant population of nearly two and half million laborers, "an estimated 88.4 percent of the small gulf nation's population."<sup>4</sup> According to Human Rights Watch (HRW), 95% of the country's work force is comprised of migrant laborers, of which one million are involved in construction.<sup>5</sup> The result being sociologists, political scientists, economists, anthropologists, medical doctors, engineers, NGOs, and journalists have all documented clear evidence of human suffering in Qatar's building programs. As early as 2016, the predicament of laborers on FIFA related construction sites was brought to international attention when both working and living conditions were the subject of a public awareness campaign by investigative journalists from Amnesty International and *The Guardian*.<sup>6</sup> While UN bodies and NGOs, such as the International Labour Organization (ILO), Human Rights Watch (HRW), and Amnesty International (AI), captured the world's attention with published reports of firsthand worker testimonials.<sup>7</sup> Independent scholars the likes of urban and labor theorist Natasha Iskander, furthered informed us of the underlying conditions which precipitated the vulnerability of those tasked with building the world's playground, that was Qatar 2022.<sup>8</sup>

Migrant laborers who travelled from as far as Nepal, India, Bangladesh, and the Philippines were subjected to serious hardships.<sup>9</sup> Basic worker rights were curtailed, be this in the form of delayed or unpaid wages,<sup>10</sup> not having access to protective work gear,<sup>11</sup> working in excessive heat and sandstorms,<sup>12</sup> having contract conditions misrepresented,<sup>13</sup> being subject to debt bondage,<sup>14</sup> and having to wait inordinately long for civil proceedings, when available.<sup>15</sup> Both on and off the construction site, laborers dealt with serious challenges to their health and well-being. Housing for most migrant workers was inadequate, unsanitary and unhygienic.<sup>16</sup> For many, nutrition was inadequate,<sup>17</sup> they were deprived of sleep<sup>18</sup> and unable to access medical assistance.<sup>19</sup> At times, laborers had no personal freedom to leave the site and/or living compounds, and with their right of movement seriously curtailed, the comings and goings of workers were tracked.<sup>20</sup> This was certainly the case when laborers had their passports withheld upon arrival.<sup>21</sup> Even more egregious, were risks to personal safety both on and off the building site, with laborers subjected to verbal abuse,<sup>22</sup> sexual harassment,<sup>23</sup> and even death.<sup>24</sup> By the end of 2016, the Qatari government and companies involved in the construction of its various building sites were called to account. It could no longer be denied that construction sites in a country readying itself to receive a global audience were subject to human trafficking, dangerous working conditions, and physical abuse. With ever more evidence mounting, the State of Qatar agreed to establish a legal task force. Following the publication of its independent report commissioned from the international law firm, DLA Piper, claims of increased compliance and auditing were made by Qatari officials to placate some of the most serious concerns.<sup>25</sup> New housing was built, and workers were offered better working conditions. However, repeated calls for overhauling, if not eliminating, the incredibly punitive legal regime that is Qatar's Kafala system went unheeded.

In essence, Qatar and its various legal surrogates drowned out their critiques with abundant counter-narratives in the press and with carefully deployed diversionary tactics that included shepherding international reporters to visit newly built dormitories and increasing sustainability claims of projects under construction.<sup>26</sup> By 2021, on the eve of the FIFA tournament, the press and NGOs returned to reporting on abusive practices in Qatar.<sup>27</sup> Changes and reforms had been ineffective, yet the government soldiered on, largely proceeding as if they had addressed even the harshest of critiques. In truth, it mattered little whether recommendations were adhered to and reforms passed, let alone enforced: Qatar's extractive labor system that pillaged the body of laborers had cultural<sup>28</sup> and historical precedent<sup>29</sup>, and the harsh building conditions were touted as the only way to complete the project on time within desired margins of economic success. In this, the Qatari government had not been alone or the first. Similar challenges to human rights were registered during the Summer 2016 Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro and the 2014 FIFA World Cup in Brazil: both, global sporting events that came under serious public scrutiny for their displacement of impoverished peoples, questionable labor practices, and greenwashing. In the end, all these high-visibility events include building projects that occasion a significant investment in construction and infrastructure projects, commissioned by national and para-governmental entities to rehabilitate reputations and increase financial status. And wherever spectacle at the global scale intersects the circulation of luxury assets, we are likely to identify the perfect circumstances for the trifecta that is 'sports washing', 'architecture washing', and 'greenwashing'.

### 3.0 LESSONS FROM THE ALL-TOO-COMMON PRACTICE OF 'GREENWASHING'

The use of spectacle, via words or building, to distract is nothing new. 'Greenwashing' is a well-documented and studied practice in which the false advertisement of sustainability performance is used to bolster reputations, be they corporate, political, or institutional. In the corporate space, watchdogs have identified copious evidence of false environmental claims across all industries including aviation, beauty, food, and garment. Possibly, the most egregious, recent example of large-scale greenwashing was that of Cop28, hosted by the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in December 2023. The two-week United Nations (UN) conference charged with combating climate change attracted "85,000 participants, including more than 150 Heads of State and Government" to Dubai.<sup>30</sup> The UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, is responsible for promoting rigorous policy initiatives for reducing global carbon emissions, and yet it chose to locate its signature event in a State whose GDP is led by the fossil fuel industry (oil and gas).<sup>31</sup> The UAE, as an OPEC member and the seventh-largest global producer of oil, was hardly an obvious choice. Moreover, deciding to have Cop28 presided over by Sultan Ahmed Al-Jaber—CEO of the Abu Dhabi National Oil Company (Adnoc), UAE minister of industry and advanced technology, and chairman of Masdar—revealed vast incongruities between UN member aims and those of the host nation.

Greenwashing is so prevalent, that frameworks for helping to recognize and evaluate its frequency have been the subject of rigorous research across various industries and knowledge groups.<sup>32</sup> Studies of why corporations, institutions, and governments are frequently cited for incidents of greenwashing indicate that contrary to expectations, where policy initiatives are aimed to encourage higher levels of sustainability and corporate responsibility, the reverse is what results. The more one institutes laws that regulate environmental performance, the higher the chance of greenwashing.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, according to Noémi Nemes et al., the very high rate of the practice is worrisome. In their article "An Integrated Framework to Assess Greenwashing", they recognize that both regulated commercial sectors and unregulated governmental and non-governmental agencies participate in greenwashing as a way of circumventing "making more substantive changes necessary to rapidly reduce negative impacts on the environment."<sup>34</sup> They assert that central to the problem is the absence of an agreed-to "definition of greenwashing or standard of behaviour that would help to detect it."<sup>35</sup> As such, they argue that it is all the more important to identify a framework that would help us measure and evaluate the presence and degree of greenwashing across corporations, governments, and NGOs. To do so, Nemes et al. reviewed more than a hundred academic articles published since 1995 on the subject, conducting a systemic review of "drivers", "varieties" and "impacts", as well as seeking "the meaning, ... antecedents, consequences" of, and ways of "reducing" and "detecting" greenwashing.<sup>36</sup> They also examined the internet using associated Google® keyword searches and reviewed government guidelines in the United States, United Kingdom, and European Union for the same. In establishing their greenwashing framework, Nemes et al. identified thirteen different types whose categories they called: Selective disclosure, Empty claims, Irrelevant [claims], Lies, Just not credible [claims], Corporate responsibility inaction, Dubious certifications and labels, Political spin, Co-opted endorsements, No proof, Vagueness, Misleading symbols, and Jargon. In each case, the category identifies how claims that are made can be less than truthful, verifiable, and measurable.

Coordinated reviews of 'greenwashing' practices found in the press, advertising, and business space are made possible by the ready availability of published documents and internet sources. This is not, however, the case, when seeking to study incidents of 'architecture washing'. Recognizing, naming, and measuring when building projects are used for rehabilitating the public image and financial standing of governmental, para-governmental, corporate, or private entities cannot proceed from textual sources alone, as to date the term has little academic currency. Using the Google Ngram viewer, the phrase does not appear at all in print between 1800 and 2019, whereas the term 'greenwashing' was first registered with some frequency in 1989, and when it appeared at its greatest frequency in 2013, it did so at a ratio of .000001000%. (By comparison, the word 'architecture' appeared at its greatest frequency with a ratio of over .000003000% in the year 2000; no doubt, for having been adopted by computer engineering). The situation is the same across scholarly academic searches. Bibliographic resources for 'greenwashing' are substantially more robust than for 'architecture washing'. The latter term does not appear in academic texts allied with the AEC industry. What accounts for this and might we conclude, therefore, that there is no such thing as 'architecture washing'? Not quite, for notwithstanding the lack of a readily available language, definition, or set of metrics with which to identify it, we all recognize when a design, engineering, or construction

project has been co-opted in service to misinformation. Not having the vocabulary to name it does not mean the problem does not exist; it simply means we need alternate means for inferring its theory.

#### **4.0 A FRAMEWORK FOR IDENTIFYING “ARCHITECTURE WASHING”: CONDITIONS, MECHANISMS, AND CHARACTERISTICS**

What might a framework that helps members of the AEC industry identify, name, and challenge the practice of ‘architecture washing’ look like? Where might one search for indices of its conditions, mechanisms, and characteristics, if as stated above there are no academic sources on the subject? This paper answers these questions by asserting a productive alignment between architecture washing and forced labor, such that human rights abuses associated with illegal labor practices in the material supply chain of buildings often indicate building projects that are at a higher risk for being used as distractions. Across hundreds of academic, investigative, and news-centered sources collected on the subject, three main research questions arise: What are the material, economic, social, and political conditions that encourage ‘architecture washing’ in countries and states in which the practice occurs; What are common mechanisms and forms of engagement which render its participants complicit in its goals; What are project characteristics that indicate a higher risk for ‘washing’ across the delivery process of said project? Each of these questions is addressed below to develop an initial matrix of indicators against which future case studies might be tested.

##### **4.1 Material, economic, social, and political conditions that support ‘architecture washing’**

This paper asserts the most egregious examples of ‘architecture washing’ take place where a host of material, economic, social, and political conditions converge; nine of which are herein identified.

1. Systemic and chronic labor shortages that require contractors and sub-contractors to access global recruitment networks for the sourcing of migrant laborers, who at times, are undocumented. The amount of building activity is so high, that the local population is incapable of supplying the required labor force for which recruiters introduce workers from abroad.
2. Evidence of significant income disparities between project sponsors, building users, and building laborers.
3. Building projects have architectural programs that serve the top five percent of global consumers, servicing their luxury lifestyles and capitalized economies.
4. Absence of labor unions or third-party workforce representation on behalf of workers.
5. Lax, or non-existent legal oversight of labor laws, alongside non-enforcement of anti-trafficking laws or supply chain reporting.
6. State-sanctioned lack of transparency in the contractual management of projects that precludes disclosure of how sub-contracts are awarded.
7. Absence of financial oversight by third parties with no mechanism for signaling and reporting possible money laundering or the illegal transfer of funds.
8. Absence of a free press.
9. Disempowered civil society, where non-democratic governments or autocratic rule exist.

##### **4.2 Mechanisms designed to render AEC participants complicit in its goals.**

In addition to the high probability of finding the above-mentioned material, economic, social, and political conditions amid the practice of ‘architecture washing’, diverse yet recognizable business mechanisms are often used to render members of the AEC industry complicit in its aims. Eight such tools and forms of engagement are herein identified. They include:

1. Hiring of ‘star architects’ by project patrons to impart, by association, cultural significance, and design importance to the project.
2. Use of targeted public relations campaigns, social media posts, and marketing initiatives that include project-sponsored exhibitions, videos, and placement ads.
3. Covert planting of ‘news’ items in financial and industry press, that are seemingly authored by third parties but sponsored by project patrons offers yet another way of normalizing said project.
4. Invitations to AEC members to participate in travel junkets that help to promote the said project and paid invitations to speak about it do the same.
5. Voluntary applications for sustainability and/or labor certifications and other forms of due diligence accreditation are often used to stave off scrutiny of poor environmental performance or suspected forced labor violations.
6. Co-opting of representatives from sympathetic democratic countries for offering their support to said project, and/or regime when projects are commissioned by non-democratic countries.

##### **4.3 Project characteristics indicative of high risk for ‘washing’ in its delivery.**

###### **4.3.1 Project’s contractual and legal definition**

1. Projects that are primarily designed as financial vehicles for soliciting global investment by third parties.
2. Expropriating land for the project’s site without clear authority.
3. Excessively short or long construction timelines that encumber the successful completion of the project.
4. Lack of transparency amongst AEC member professionals and a bidding and sub-contracting process.

###### **4.3.2 Sourcing of project materials**

1. Lack of transparency in the life cycle of materials.
2. Significant amount of the materials used in the project are imported, non-local, fossil fuel derivatives.
3. Building process results in an exorbitant amount of material waste.

- 4.3.3 Sourcing and management of the project's labor force. When the labor rights of those who are tasked with building the project are at risk of denigration, this too is a sign of concern.
1. A lack of transparency in on-site labor recruitment practices.
  2. An out-sized percentage of migrant, non-citizen laborers.
  3. The lack of a shared language between laborers and managers (or available translators) for communicating.
  4. Excessive travel distances between the building site and worker housing.
  5. Inadequate quality in the housing and living conditions.
  6. Inadequate worker safety and access to health verifications on and off-site.
  7. The inability for laborers to leave the project site at will, and to have access to their citizenship papers.
  8. The inability of the same to self-organize or associate with third-party representation.
- 4.3.4 Building-use and life cycle indicators. There are two key characteristics that when identified during the post-construction life of a building are indicators of possible washing.
1. A low percentage of building occupation and programmatic use upon completion, with large portions of the building remaining empty, not purchased, or unrented. This is often a sign the building was built as a financial vehicle for investment or money-laundering.
  2. A poor Life Cycle Assessment (LCA) score, including embodied energy and carbon, given that many of its materials are imported and originate in fossil fuels.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has identified, named, and characterized the practice that is 'architecture washing' as experienced in the Architecture, Engineering, and Construction (AEC) industry to demonstrate that when and where it occurs, 'architecture washing' detrimentally impacts the industry, the quality of our built environment, and society at large. Contemporary examples of 'architecture washing' were discussed and a framework was devised for recognizing material, economic, social, and political conditions that encourage its deployment, mechanisms intentionally designed to render AEC participants complicit, and key characteristics in a project's delivery process that exposes said project to high probability for 'architecture washing'.

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