

**Regional Architecture and Identity in the
Age of Globalization**

**The Center for the Study of Architecture in the Arab
Region (CSAAR)
(www.csaar-center.org)**

**In Collaboration with
Department of Architecture,
National School of Architecture and Urbanism, Tunis,
Tunisia
13-15 November, 2007**

Constructing Identity : The Quest of Dubai



Figure 1: AUS main campus

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Abstract

Cities are dynamic entities. Their identities grow over time from determinate physical and less determinate historical contexts. The city of Dubai is presently engaged in a major re-invention quest to shape an identity that can position Dubai prominently as a world class city. As vehicles to achieve this goal of self actualization, Dubai has chosen real estate and spectacular architecture over historic narratives. Dubai is embracing the West. The West is embracing Dubai. This union impacts traditional notions of identity at a time when a shrinking local population is threatened by demographic marginalization.

Keywords: Dubai, identity, branding, real estate, architecture, demography



Figure 2: Dubai aerial view

1 Key Concepts

To clarify the frame of reference governing Dubai, identity and architecture, I propose three simplified definitions. Dubai is the second largest of the seven emirates which comprise the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Identity is the notion an entity has of itself as well as the sum of notions others have of the entity. Architecture is the human intervention that creates and shapes the built environment.

Relating these three keywords to one another triggers permutations of meaning and hierarchy. One might agree with Farshid Moussavi and state that

“architecture plays a fundamental role in creating an identity” (Carver, 2005). One could take a more forceful stance and claim that Dubai has no identity but uses buildings to fill this void. One might even join the lament common in contemporary discourse that architecture has lost its power to establish identity.

In English, identity, oddly enough, means both sameness and its opposite singularity. In this discussion I will choose the nominalist meaning which relates to individual uniqueness. This is complicated by the fact that even personal identity grows from nature and nurture, from DNA and environmental and social impact. As nothing is closer to ourselves than the self, let me position my identity as follows: My own identity is an amalgam of perceptions. One component is how I see myself. Another component is how I am seen by others. A third one, equally important and fiendish, is the perception I have of how others see me. You will agree that the complexity is as intriguing as it is potentially tiresome.

2 Identities of Cities

Shifting our gaze to cities, we can agree that all cities have some level of identity. If a city like Dubai wants to enhance its identity or create a new one, the identity and brand consultants will study ways to achieve this. The experts may look at well known cities to learn what made their identity unique. In their research they might come across cities with “primeordialist identities” (Eric Meyer as cited by Wickramasinghe, 2006, XI), such as Jericho in Palestine, often named the first real city because it had a stone wall protecting it and trumpets that were employed from its ramparts. Bethlehem, not much of a city today, but part of the primeordialist rubric, owes its identity to a famous son born there while his parents were en-route to register for a census. Bethlehem endlessly replays its ordained script, part of an ancient construct and solidly anchored in collective memory. Rem Koolhaas would warn that the anchor is not as solidly fixed as it appears, since history has “an invidious half-life; as it is more abused it becomes less significant” and it will grind “successful identities down to a meaningless dust” (1998, 1239, 1.2). Mecca too is a city whose fame is gilded by history and continues to be the center of an event that touches more than a billion people worldwide.

Despite Mecca’s singularity, Islamic cities, although as varied in appearance as cities anywhere, see themselves as uniform and monolithic, founded on the notion that the unchanging and unchangeable *umma* safeguards identity according to the precept of unity.

Primeordial cities are by definition ancient. Many famous cities of the past are known to us because their destiny was shaped by natural disaster or accidents of history. Atlantis, Marathon and Carthage belong to that category. Modern cities in contrast, are more often distinguished by reputation, an important though less tangible aspect of identity. They are associated with a prevailing mood or attitude. Heidelberg is labelled romantic, Manhattan frenetic, aspects of Bangkok are seen as either carefree or sinful, depending on one’s perspective. Las Vegas built its fame on the lure of gambling and was aided by architecture

that postmodernists learned from. Some cities span the range of history and owe their fame to architecture. Babylon had its tower and hanging gardens. The pyramids play their part in Egypt's tourism. Isfahan has its *Meidan*. Bilbao has become a trendy destination helped by the Guggenheim Museum -- or was it Frank Gehry's building that shifted the balance?

Another variable that affects a city's identity is the vantage point of the observer. As a teenager I lived in Berlin. For me, Berlin is the place where John F. Kennedy, riding in a motorcade, turned his head to smile at our hand-painted banner. For the generation of my parents, Berlin was associated with Nazi Germany, World War II and the Cold War that followed. Today some see in Berlin the future capital of an enlarged Europe. Students of popular culture would cite the Gay Parade or Knut the Baby Polar Bear who gained celebrity status a few months ago. You will agree: the notions that fashion a city's identity have eclectic origins.

2 Dubai's Branding Strategy: Narrative versus Real Estate



Figure 3: Old Dubai

Dubai's quest is extraordinary because it appears to create its identity by fiat and from scratch. First mapped in 1822 as a minor *entrepôt* with a population of 1200, Dubai is today a city of one and a half million attracting daily 1000 new jobseekers. The pace of change and influx of foreign labor has shaped the character of the City: "the notion of transience when applied to its urban environment is THE defining character" (Elshehtawy, 2007, p.112). Dubai tries to counter this impact by consciously shaping its identity. Towards this end Dubai has mined the history of the region for its brand-building potential. Narratives have been re-written; ancestors excavated, desert lore and pearl

fishing have been cultivated. Arab explorers have been summoned from the history books; the allure of orientalist splendour, replete with the aroma of frankincense, has been evoked. Tales of Ali Baba and mysteries of the "Perfumed Garden", a whole assortment of cultural icons, has been engaged in constructing the armature of the brand Dubai™.



Figure 4: Dubai desert

Narratives, however, "are never plenipotentiaries of their past" (Perry Anderson, cited by Wickramasinghe, p.IX). While Dubai's archaeologies have yielded contextual material for company logos and project names, the leverage that shapes Dubai's self-actualization is located in an altogether different realm: the hardcore arena of business and money. Dubai's identity catalyst is powered by the present and what economists quite unpoetically call an "asset class" - real estate. Granted, land has been settled and abandoned, cultivated and traded since the dawn of history. But two aspects applying to land in Dubai deserve special mention. The first is related to political history of the region. Land in much of the Arabian peninsula was until recently not fully ownable by individuals. Property was always available for temporary, even indeterminate holding. Semi-nomadic societies might occupy, even control and defend tribal lands, but title, ownership in perpetuity, rested not in a legal persona but in shifting leadership structures. The seven emirates which make up the UAE are associated with ruling families, some of whom trace their ancestral territorial claims to the shadowy darkness of oral history. While the Al-Qassimi rulers of Sharjah can point to 17th century maps that name a great stretch of the northern Gulf coast "Qassimia", the Al-Maktoums settled as late as 1833 in Dubai. Most of the 3885 square kilometres that make up the land mass of Dubai thus have one owner - the Ruler of the Emirate, appointed in time-honored fashion through loosely organized tribal consultations.



Figure 5: Dubai Felix

The second noteworthy aspect of land in Dubai rests on daring inventiveness. In Dubai the well-known sales pitch, “Buy real estate, they don’t make it anymore,” has been rewritten. Four major terra-forming island projects are increasing beachfront property from 70 km to as much as 1500 km. As waterfront property is the gold-standard of real estate, and since the projects carry with them connotations akin to fables and fairy tales, it is incumbent to compare Shaikh Mohammad Al-Maktoum’s masterstroke of production and marketing to Goldilock’s gift of spinning gold from straw.

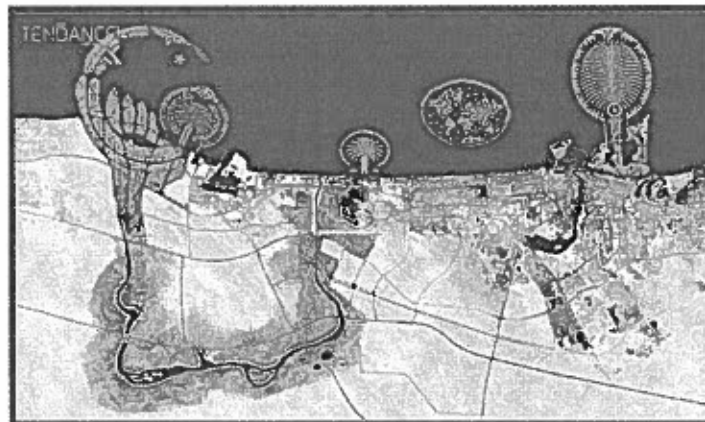


Figure 6: Dubai Islands

Using real estate to develop a region is not a new idea. Ancient Rome developed Baalbek in Lebanon into a sunny retirement community for its officer corps. Florida and Arizona have attracted generations of American seniors. Since then, countless resort communities the world over lure those who wish to combine the benefits of warm climate with advantageous tax status. Dubai, to be sure, has also cast its eye on that constituency, but its strategy goes far beyond tourism. The *Dubai Urban Development Framework* (DUDF) unveiled in August 2007 bluntly states the aim: to position Dubai within the shortlist of the world's most liveable places. To make this happen Dubai is transforming itself from oil producer to a service, knowledge, recreational and industrial economy. Martin Berlin agrees emphatically: "Tourism is as finite a resource as oil. We have to generate growth that grows from itself" (as cited by Willenbrock, 2007, p. 65). The Emirate aims for total engagement, saturating all potential aspects of development. Transport, energy, healthcare, manufacturing, entertainment, banking; whatever the link on the value chain, Dubai has a presence. Whichever sector an investor wishes to engage in, Dubai will point to the parcel of land that has been set aside and appropriately named: Media City, Culture Village, Silicon Oasis, Festival City, Business Bay...

3 World Central: The New Omphalos



Figure 7: World Central – Jebel Ali

Dubai World Central is the name of new airport city near Jebel Ali. This futuristic metropolis for 900.000 people is slated to become the new *omphalos*, the navel of the world. The ancient Greeks used this term with uncharacteristic *hubris* to describe Delphi, where the powerful of the world consulted the oracle. In World Central, we are assured by the property agents, expatriates of the world will live in villas and 400-meter tall residential towers fronting the Arabian Canal, take water taxis to reach company headquarters, partake in multi-denominational worship opportunities, helicopter to pristine nature preserves

where oryx roam free, take the children to pet robotic dinosaurs and dive for hidden but regularly replenished treasure among deliberately sunken wrecks. In this "Benjaminian phantasmagoria" (Katodrytis in conversation with the author), the airport will be the world's largest. Medical care will be provided by the Mayo Clinic, private education by MIT. The Louvre will have established its franchise nearby and a new society, populated by the elite of a new global harmony class will frolic till kingdom come. Neighboring Dubai Waterfront is Atlantis resurfaced, this time as a man-made island safely protected by a tsunami levee shaped in the form of a poem set in concrete.

5 Forcing Change, Assuring Continuity

While the advertising hype that accompanies Dubai's identity quest obliterates detail and discourages questions about substance and sustainability, doubt is soothed by official pronouncements. The government website quotes a calming message from H.H. Shaikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan, President of the UAE: "The true and pristine Islamic creed and Arab culture are the two most significant elements we trust to protect that identity" (<http://uaeinteract.com>, accessed April 16, 2007). Official statements of this kind, more often emanating from Abu Dhabi rather than from Dubai, gently prepare the populace for change while assuring continuity. This is a wise policy because the grand scale of the quest is linked to the identity issue. If ever there was a specific Gulf Arab identity to be preserved, the present initiatives may in fact undermine, contradict or disregard that identity.

To get more than a rudimentary sense of Gulf Arab identity is beyond the scope of this presentation. Al-Gurg (1998) has described Emirati identity in some detail. I will attempt a brief sketch and refer to a previous paper on the topic of historic narratives of Gulf identity (Giesen, 2005). The indigenous population of the Emirates, small as it is, traces its origins to the New Stone Age and probably hails from a mixture of coastal dwellers and nomads with historic tribal links to populations living today in Yemen, Saudi Arabia and Persia. Iran is in many ways its closest neighbor, little more than a day's boat ride across the northern Gulf. With growth of commerce and industry, the influx of human resource talent from the subcontinent, especially India and Pakistan, began to dilute the relative homogeneity of the population.

6 The Demographic Dilemma

It is well known that as consequence of the recent explosive growth, the proportional representation of Emirati nationals versus expatriates is shrinking rapidly. While only five years ago the local component was estimated to be 25% of the population at large, the ever-growing influx of foreigners may reduce Emirati content to near 5% within this generation. Even some Emirati officials use untypically blunt language to describe the situation. Jamal Al Suwaidi, Director of the government-run Emirates Centre of Strategic Studies and Research (ECSSR), complains of "the government's lack of seriousness in attending to the demographic nightmare in the country" (Abdullah, 2007).

Multiculturalist discourse has tended to link indigenous population with identity. Either we agree to disassemble this linkage or the question of UAE identity may become moot as there are too few citizens to matter.

When identity is separated from indigeneity however, a very different scenario emerges. Dubai can become the newest and most complete multiethnic and multicultural city - a true creation of 21st Century globalization. Al Suwaidi appears to see opportunity in the lost demographic battle: "The policy option he recommends is one of coexistence rather than resistance, which [would] amount to a national suicide for the citizens of the UAE. The logical conclusion of the proposed strategy could well be a new social contract whereby the local Emirati minority willingly accept to share power with the overwhelming foreign majority... this could lead to the birth of a fast-globalising society with [a] brand new national identity that is neither Arab nor local but rather multicultural and global in essence" (Abdullah, 2007, p.2). As long as identity is tied up with indigenous citizens, the demographic dilemma will spread to related issues of concern. Fundamental questions will arise regarding political representation, religious orientation and lifestyle issues. While Dubai's identity presents a kaleidoscope of contradictory facets, the realities on the ground point towards an embrace of westernization

Having observed the development of Dubai for the last decade I have come to believe that while the leadership of Dubai has adopted a Western development model, it seeks to soften the impact of transition with carefully chosen identity saving measures. In the macro political sphere, the UAE has staunchly supported American interests in the Gulf while arduously preserving bi-lateral ties to its Arab and Iranian partners. In the economic sphere, the UAE seeks to comply with international agreements including membership to the WTO while seeking bilateral trade links, including a free trade agreement with the USA. World-wide investment in a broad range of activities underscores the global positioning goals of Dubai. In the area of education, Dubai's Ruler, Shaikh Mohammad bin Rashed Al Maktoum has, in his role of UAE prime minister, recently publicly criticised the prevailing backwardness of rote-learning in UAE schools. At the same time Shaikh Mohammad awards substantial prize money to the winners of the annual *quran* recitation competition. This would not be a contradiction if the young Muslims were speakers of Arabic. In reality, many of the competition winners are youngsters from non-Arabic speaking countries who learn the 114 *suras* of the holy book by heart without understanding more than a smattering of what they recite.

Other observations support the claim that identity saving measures in the UAE run parallel to a broad embrace of Western ways. Sharia-compliant investment for instance has grown exponentially. Simultaneously, Dubai is engaging at the opposite end of the spectrum. *The Economist* reported in August 2007 that Dubai World, the Emirate's holding company, has taken a stake in MGM Mirage which runs some of the best known casinos in Las Vegas. This gives the architects' popular phrase "learning from Las Vegas" added meaning.

7 Architecture: Opportunity for Renewal

Architecture and the built environment too give cause to question the commitment to preserve Gulf Arab identity. Regional architectural traditions, guided by physical and cultural determinants, have a proud history of sustainability. Climate conscious practices supported by attitudes of modesty and privacy have, in the past, created densely packed but integrated urban centres. Today, architectural extravagance and wastefulness stand in stark contrast to traditional custom. The UAE is paying for its world class status with record rankings in water use, energy use and waste production. A sustained public debate of architectural developments is still missing in the Emirates. Most practicing architects are probably too closely engaged in the construction boom to take critical positions, but there are exceptions. Amale Andraos and Dan Wood see high energy and an upbeat rhythm in Dubai but lament that the excess of life witnessed renders the architecture irrelevant and fictional. "Why are we still learning from Las Vegas?" they ask. "Shouldn't Dubai develop new models for it and for the world instead of adopting already failed ones?" (Andraos, 2005, p. 47). Andraos advocates "vertical density everywhere", a "zero-sprawl" model, sustainable and carless. A city where public blimps transport people, where wind is used as primary power source and where thick adobe walls provide deep pockets of shadow and cool. Concentrating on the real, she suggests, "could become Dubai's ultimate fantasy."

Fantasy and the Real feature prominently in the debate. George Katodrytis perceives chances for a new utopia, shaped with the help of the speed and the magically transformative power of digital design. Architects are empowered by these "enhanced tools of dreaming" (Katodrytis, 2005, p.42) which should discourage the prevailing morphology of sameness where holiday accommodations look like housing and vice versa. Katodrytis describes Dubai as a "prototype of the new post-global city ... addicted to the promise of the new," but he regrets that the visionary realization of architecture is missing. Kevin Mitchell advocates functional adaptation and contemporary application of vernacular elements and chastises their relegation to mere ornament. He is not satisfied with lamentations over lost identity. For once the population projections are seen as a trigger to force more comprehensive planning strategies and greater density. "If Dubai is able to move beyond the current fascination with the image of architecture and confront the real challenges of building an urban center in an arid region, then there may be the possibility of being ranked at the top of the lists that focus on quality rather than quantity" (Mitchell, 2005, p.59).

8 Conclusion

Dubai's efforts to forge an identity without loss of Gulf Arab authenticity appear to be faltering. It is ironic that it is the sheer scale of the project requiring a disproportionate influx of foreigners that has contributed to the demise of indigenous identity. It proves that mega development projects carry with them unforeseen risks. On the other hand, the magnitude of change experienced in Dubai generates unexpected potential. The suggestion that the numerical

marginalization of the Emirati population could open the way towards voluntary and peaceful change in citizen law and suffrage, resulting in a truly global residency is as hopeful as it is groundbreaking. Likewise, the discourse on identity has been invigorated by the challenge to shape identity without the encumbrance of a controlling indigenous population, allowing for an identity concept that breaches established categories. As Dubai embraces a post-global future, its new identity is sure to follow.

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