

# **THE BRANDING OF A CITY – LESSONS FROM DUBAI**

Martin Giesen, Ph.D.

Professor of History of Art and Architecture  
School of Architecture and Design  
American University of Sharjah  
P.O.B. 2-6666  
Sharjah, United Arab Emirates

Phone: +971-6515-2827  
e-mail: [Giesen@aus.edu](mailto:Giesen@aus.edu)

Paper presented at **1<sup>st</sup> Urban Design International Congress,**  
4 – 7 September, 2006, Isfahan, Iran

## THE BRANDING OF A CITY – LESSONS FROM DUBAI

Let me begin with an awareness exercise. Who of you could identify the likes of Versace, Chanel and Louis Vuitton? In a recent AC Nielsen poll, Chinese buyers named these brands the most desirable. Of course urban planners gathering for an international conference on urban design in Iran are not necessarily expected to be familiar with Western luxury goods, but it is a fact that in our global economy consumers in HongKong, Teheran and Vancouver wear the same designer shirts, drive designed cars and watch the same movies. At least they would like to.

But cities are not handbags and designing them is a complicated, ambivalent process, often replete with mistakes that become apparent only generations after they were made. Part of this dilemma is caused by our human conviction that when we think of the future - and that is what planning is all about - we project it to develop pretty much along the lines of the past. Ludwig Wittgenstein however argued convincingly that the future “moves not in a straight line, but in a curve, and that its direction constantly changes” (L. Wittgenstein, *Vermischte Bemerkungen*, p.14. Suhrkamp, Band 535).<sup>1</sup>

Even Wittgenstein would admit that cities grow out of their past, regardless which direction the planning takes. Most cities have a long and robust history and their present state is shaped by physical and cultural, even political determinants planners are familiar with.

All will agree that the planning process is ideally guided by consensus as to what is in the public interest. This assumes that any change that affects the public realm should come about in a way that the change will benefit everyone. In liberal democratic societies such as the ones I am most familiar with, the concept of an *identifiable unitary interest* however is elusive.

This conference has the subtitle “Urban Design: from Theory to Implementation.” I find it intriguing that the formulation of an *identifiable unitary interest* was first published in 1987 in a book called “Planning in the Public Domain: From Knowledge to Action.” The analogy between our conference title and Friedmann’s book title is too obvious to be accidental.<sup>2</sup>

These preliminary remarks may appear poorly connected to my topic: The Branding of a City. Let me construct the linkage more clearly. Branding is an action designed to give added value, recognition and commercial penetration to an existing product. Urban Planners generally do not treat cities as products. Recently this has changed. The global marketplace has broadened brand awareness. Today not only soap and ketchup are branded. Staid institutions such as television stations, symphony orchestras, even political parties have found a way to increase value and recognition for their product by concentrating on “awareness, perceived quality, and customer loyalty” (D. Aaker, 2000).<sup>3</sup>

The leadership of the Emirate of Dubai in the United Arab Emirates has gone a step further. The sheikhs of this city state of about one million people have re-planned their hometown to become a product. Dubai is on its way to become a trademark: A brand with worldwide recognition.<sup>4</sup>

Brands flourish when customers associate positive things with the product. As a German, I assume buyers of Mercedes cars associate superior engineering with the brand name. It is an identity that was forged over many decades. Urban planners know that cities too have identities which shape their image. Aleppo is different from Homs and Shiraz is perceived differently than Isfahan.

How have the planners of Dubai shaped the identity for their city?<sup>5</sup> Certainly history helps, but Dubai - even if we are generous - can hardly be called a historic city. There are no remarkable artifacts in the Emirates which are comparable to Pharaonic Luxor, the Persepolis of Darius, Roman Baalbek, or Ummayyad Damascus. The earliest accounts, little more than a hundred years old, speak of a walled community of about 1200 people.<sup>6</sup> Few original examples of the traditional architecture survives – no wonder the Emiratis themselves considered the coral stone houses hardly worth saving once they had the chance to replace them with modern structures.<sup>7</sup>

Brand building requires first a product and a vision. As recent as twenty years ago Dubai was neither a product nor a brand. Development started following first revenues from oil exports in the 1960's with infrastructure investments in a port and an airport. That is in itself not remarkable as the product lacked uniqueness. Under leadership of Skeikh Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum the vision of Dubai took shape in the late 1990's. Using the potential appeal of iconic architecture on a grand and innovative scale, the Burj Al Arab Hotel was only the first salvo in a barrage of sensational initiatives. Most of you are familiar with them: Dubai Media City, the Palm Islands and The World, Dubailand, the Burj Dubai and most recently a new urban type gathered around Jebel Ali Airport.

What has escaped much attention in the literature on Dubai is the ingenious exploitation of historic associations in building the brand Dubai. Studying the Emirate's history provides the indigenous context for brand identity. For thousands of years, civilization on this coast of the Arabian peninsula was marginal, often threatened by famine and destruction. Survival depended on clever use of natural advantages. The sea offered food and energy for maritime pursuits. The date palm provided a valuable staple and source of basic implements. The camel, once domesticated became a fleet for transport of goods.<sup>8</sup>

Maritime exposure coupled with the world-wide glamour associated with water-front living is one of the major building blocks of the Dubai trademark. Creating the palm islands and The World resulted in a product baffling in its uniqueness, stunning in its technological daring, but ultimately surprising in its simplicity: If water front property is desirable but we don't have enough of it, we will create it. Lots of it. Hundreds and Hundreds of kilometers of it. For devout Muslims this land creating venture may even seem an inappropriate use of human ingenuity. Was not creation supposed to be the sole prerogative of the Divine Architect?

From the above we see that Dubai's planners have selected historical notions to formulate identity of the contemporary product. But it is not camel racing or the nostalgic beauty of old wooden sailing ships which illustrate the success of the brand. Instead it is a conscious and aggressive opening to the world which accounts for its surging popularity. At a time when many in the Arab World decry political impotence of the Arab nation, Dubai has quietly taken the initiative to open itself up to the world of finance, tourism, trade, entertainment and culture. Dubai, almost stealthily has raised its banner high to announce an Arab revival of fortunes.

Contrary to Sheikh Sultan bin Mohammed al Qassimi, who as Ruler of Sharjah aspired that investments in museums and universities should "ensure that science and education regain their rightful place" in society,<sup>9</sup> the rulers of Dubai have unabashedly followed more mercenary objectives, guided by classic Western models of brand marketing.

Dubai builds brand equity through strategic engagement. The scope is multiple, international, and aims at exclusivity. The tallest building, the largest man-made island, richest horse race, sponsorship of Premier League Football, the fastest growing airline, a new stock exchange, and establishment of a gold and diamond market. No competitor is seen too big to be confronted head-on. In Dubai the sky is not the limit and in the future Airbus parts may be built in the Emirates while the American government shies away from allowing a Dubai based company to manage some of its ports.

The irony of the success of the brand Dubai can be found in the pattern of its creation. For half a generation the UAE has sent its best and brightest to be educated in the West. But unlike many other Arabs, Emiratis returned to their country of origin and began creating facts on the ground. Quietly at first, and then with and ever growing confidence, bordering on arrogance. When 9/11 changed world politics and public opinion of Muslims in the USA, the brand Dubai was ready to absorb the money and the energy of disenchanting Muslims worldwide.

But brands – like cities and the price of oil – are artifices. They are subject to political upheavals and natural catastrophes. I am told that when the tsunami hit South East Asia in December 2004, the authorities in Dubai temporarily supported the stock price of the companies building the Palm islands.

That may just be a rumor. Realities on the ground are better built far away from rumor mills. Sustainability, an issue I have carefully avoided up to now, may still challenge the brand Dubai. I, for my part, wish Dubai luck. It has quietly learned to play the game, and when it was ready, Dubai has come up trumps.

---

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Wittgenstein's position is applied to urban planning by Erin Huner and Liisa Tipman who state that linear planning models, based on "linguistic representations of a *world*"... "cannot anticipate change, and as a result severely limit the actual evolution of a city or a community". See their **Building the Artificial: The Languages of Utopia and Planning Regulations**, University of Calgary, 2006.

<sup>2</sup> Cited by Stanley M. Stein and Thomas L. Harper in **Defining the Public Interest: The Professional Planner's Ethical Responsibility**, paper prepared for World Planning Schools Conference, Mexico City, 2006.

<sup>3</sup> David A. Aaker and Erich Joachimsthaler, *Brand Leadership*, The Free Press, N.Y. 2000.

<sup>4</sup> For an informative introduction to Dubai, see *The United Arab Emirates Yearbook 2004*, Trident Press, available from <http://www.uae.interact.com>

<sup>5</sup> For a useful introduction to the role of identity in building a brand, see Alina Wheeler, *Designing Brand Identity*, Wiley, 2006.

<sup>6</sup> I owe this reference to Luiza Karam who quotes the British Lieutenant Cogan in her *Modernity and Tradition in Dubai Architecture*, Al Shindagha, October 1999.

<sup>7</sup> Fortunately, Dubai's authorities have recently atoned for decades of neglect. Some eighty historic structures are being rebuilt, sometimes with only personal memories or aerial photography to guide restorers working for the Historic Building Section of Dubai Municipality.

<sup>8</sup> For a more detailed account of Dubai's identity building, see Martin Giesen, **Dubai 2004: Material Culture – Vented, Invented and Appropriated**, conference presentation, Cumulus Conference, Association of European Schools of Art and Design, Lisbon, May 2005.

<sup>9</sup> See Historical Preamble, American University of Sharjah, Catalog 2004-2005, p.2.