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the cultural heritage and the science of design

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cultural heritage, vented, invented and appropriated

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the role of cultural identity in Dubai's present major expansion projects. A brief historical sketch stresses the cultural signifiers which inform Dubai's contemporary self-actualization. This is followed by a discussion of three modes employed in the design of Dubai's contemporary self-image. Issues of national identity, collective memory, authenticity, and landscape creation are touched upon.

Keywords

Dubai, cultural identity, created landscape, authenticity designed.

To link, as the session theme suggests, showing with preserving and rebirthing, conjures up dilemmas. Cultural heritage is presumed a precious good to be protected, kept safely in the vault, but when exhibited, made prominent and advertised, its safety is compromised. Protection and exposure not enough, the call is also for prolific procreation, which necessarily requires coupling with the other, thus diluting its identity.

Rem Koolhaas would have a lot to say about the inherent pitfalls of such management of cultural heritage or the past in general. He would note that due to exponential human growth "the past will at some point become too 'small' to be inhabited" and warn that history has "an invidious half-life - as it is more abused it becomes less significant"; it will grind "successful identities down to a meaningless dust."¹

In light of such apocalyptic visions of the demise of urban identity under the onslaught of homogeneity, it seems ludicrous to talk about a grand effort of creating, as we speak, a new and unique world city. That is exactly the reason why I want to bring Dubai into this discussion. This Gulf city in the United Arab Emirates is attempting the feat of self-actualization. Dubai, for some, embodies "the triumph of the future: an authentic mix of the local and the global, the Islamic and the cosmopolitan."² Dubai shows, preserves and procreates cultural heritage: material culture here is vented, invented and appropriated. Unlike the urban centers which Koolhaas describes, the identity of Dubai does not depend on a historic core that needs to feed the periphery. The historic Dubai undoubtedly exists. But it is small and young in comparison to cities elsewhere which try to nurture their ancient cores by protecting them while simultaneously modernizing their infrastructure. In 1822 the recorded population of Dubai was around 1200 people³. It had a low wall around town with three watchtowers, houses made of mud and huts of palm frond. After smallpox and fire decimated population and dwellings, more stable houses made of

¹ Koolhaas, Rem. 1998. "The Generic City", in Rem Koolhaas et al, S,M,L,XL, O.M.A. Monacelli Press: p. 1239, 1.2

² Sadik, Rula. 2004. Dubai's Iconic Urbanism: Searching for a Locally Defined Global Soul, Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review, XVI: I, fall 2004, p49.

³ Luiza Karim quotes the British Lieutenant Cogan.

coral stone and mortar appeared in the early 20th Century. Most of these merchant homes were razed to the ground in the first oil-financed development phase of the 1960's and 70's. In a recent and ambitious salvage effort, almost 100 courtyard houses, mosques and schools were restored or simply built again from traditional materials, guided by old images from family albums and the aerial photographs which British authorities had produced during their 130 year colonial intervention in Gulf events. In 1971 the region gained independence with the founding of the United Arab Emirates.

Concentrating here only on the essential parameters that allowed sustained habitation, I would like to briefly sketch out five phases of development. All of them inform the identity of the UAE and feed into the present design construct of material culture.

Inhabited since the Late Stone Age, early people who lived on the southern coast of the Arabian Gulf were skilled herders and fishermen. They eked out a precarious, semi-nomadic existence between the sands, the savannah, the grasslands and the sea. As always, available resources dictated lifestyle: gazelles and oryx, fish and shell fish, camels and date palms provided nourishment, clothing and implements. Collective tombs of the 4th Millenium BC. contain bodies adorned with shell and pearl ornaments, the latter presaging an economic mainstay of the future.

The second phase is triggered by the domestication of the camel around 1800 BC. Transport of goods over long distances became possible. Ingenious irrigation devices (*falaj*) brought water from higher ground aquifers to gardens below. Date palm farming, a labor-intensive activity, yielded the vitamin-rich sweet staple with unlimited shelf life. Palm fronds, when plaited, became containers, mats, flooring and reinforcement for the roof. When cleverly crafted, palm frond could even turn into seafaring canoes (*shashah*). In the Emirates, the popular infatuation with the palm tree is more than tourist nostalgia for a warm beach. The palm was a vital resource, creating conditions that allowed survival. Although subsistence today does not depend on palm products, 40 Million date palms of 50 different varieties provide inexpensive sustenance and raw materials for many goods.

What has the date palm to do with design of material culture? The following will show that Dubai is using the palm as an iconic referent in the building of its future.

Neither the Roman nor the empire of Alexander the Great touched upon the region of the Emirates. Even the advent of Islam, at first resisted by insurgents whose 10,000 graves can still be seen today near the East Coast town of Dibba, had less immediate impact on cultural tradition than, say, the exploits of legendary navigators of the 15th Century or the establishment of Maktoum rule in the early 19th Century. The economic backbone of this third phase was provided by trading links: maritime exchange across the Gulf and the Indian Ocean as far as China and East Africa, and camel caravans carrying spices from India and Sri Lanka and precious frankincense from Yemen to still the insatiable appetite of the Byzantine Empire and towns and churches in Europe.

Once the international spice trade had shifted to other forms of transport, bypassing the region, the natural pearl, hailed for its incomparable luster and traded since antiquity, gained a central role as cash crop. During the heyday of this fourth phase in the early 20th Century, some 5000 pearling boats⁴, crewed by semi-nomadic migrants operated the industry, requiring month long voyages under cramped and risky conditions. Cooperative ventures reduced the individual risk and spread the profit. One risk no-one had foreseen was competition. In the 1930's, the pearling industry, already harmed by weakened demand during WW I and the depression, succumbed to the newly introduced cultured pearls from Japan. The economic base of the Gulf coast was devastated. Those who could afford to leave emigrated, those who stayed were to endure 30 years of dire poverty.

Again, what has 19th Century pearl fishing to do with cultural heritage and the science of design? The following review of development initiatives will support and question the claim that "landscape, with its great inertia, is often a guarantee of local culture, protecting against transformation induced by mono-cultural globalization"⁵. The sea facilitated prosperity, or at least subsis-

⁴Dickson, H.R.P. 1936. *The Arab of the Desert*. London: George Allen & Unwin. P. 484

⁵Librato, Palma and Saidi, Mohamed. 2004. *The Landscape as Guarantee of Local Culture: Castles and their Pertinence in the Region of Tartous, Syria, Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review*, XVI: 1, fall 2004, p.34.

tence. Dubai in the 21st Century pays tribute to this gift of the sea in spectacular fashion. The poverty of the period of 1930 to 1960 profoundly shaped the generation of the UAE that presided over the newfound riches of the subsequent oil phase. After three decades of preliminary surveys interrupted by WW II, Dubai's neighbor, Abu Dhabi, exported its first shipment of crude oil in 1962⁶. Sheikh Zayed Al Nahyan, ruler of Abu Dhabi and later (1971-2004) the first president of the United Arab Emirates, utilized oil revenue immediately towards infrastructure improvement and undertook a massive program of construction of schools, hospitals and roads.

The next decades were marked by steady, albeit fluctuating, increase of wealth from petroleum exports. This phenomenon is well enough known to require elaboration here. What may not be widely known, however, is that forward looking leaders in the Emirates recognized early the finite nature of oil reserves. The Al-Maktoum sheikhs have launched multiple initiatives to diversify economic life. Today for instance, oil accounts for only 6% of Dubai's GDP, while aluminum production accounts for 7%⁷.

Over the last seven years I have witnessed an extraordinary drama, enacted in carefully staged scenes. The turn of events illustrates how in the post-traditional, post-global world a single protagonist challenges cynicism, eliminates sloth and rearranges the playing field to his country's advantage.

The 1960's and 70's set the stage. Dubai Airport is built, Dubai Creek is dredged and the world's largest man-made port opens at Jebel Ali in 1979. Having secured a communications base, Sheikh Mohammad Bin Rashid Al Maktoum, now Dubai Crown Prince and UAE Defense Minister, begins to put Dubai on the map. I somewhat flippantly call this first act in the drama the "venting" component of material culture creation in Dubai. Hotels with breathtaking architecture are constructed to attract the attention of well-heeled tourists who wish to add a novel destination to their winter holiday agenda. The design brief from the client must have required reference to the sea. Approaching from the Gulf, the *Jumeirah Beach Hotel* appears like a giant wave, white foam cresting across its undulating elevation. The hotel had just opened when beachgoers could witness another extraordinary structure rising next door - The *Burj Al Arab Hotel*, shaped like a windblown spinnaker emerging from the sea. Hailed as the only 7-star hotel in the world, it has graced countless architecture and design magazine covers with its evocative contour. If Dubai vents, or "gives vigorous expression" with these remarkable investments in tourism, what makes this initiative different from old fashioned vending, the business of selling something? Closer inspection of other projects will clarify the pattern.

We have noted that the sea has played an important role in the feasibility of human habitat in the region. An *Emirati's* remark, "Everything we have today is because of our forefathers and their love of the water,"⁸ sums up the sentiment of national coastal dwellers.

Dubai has only about 70 km of precious coastline, most of it already spoken for. A recent marketing brochure for a mega project of 36 residential towers across 17 km of waterfront lures investors with the statement "... it is also the last of the beachfront properties available in Dubai today"⁹.

Yes and no. If living on the water is a source of wealth, why not increase this dwindling resource? The old real estate wisdom "better own land, they don't make it anymore" is about to be overturned in Dubai. With four major artificial island projects, water frontage is slated to increase ten fold. *Palm Jumeirah* alone, the first and already visible man-made island, will add 120 km of beachfront, almost twice what the emirate has today. Two more Palm Islands and *the World*, a cluster of 220 islands designed in the shape of a map of the world, are presently rising from the shallow seabed of the Gulf. These inventions are featured in the second act of the Dubai drama. But how dare one claim that a profit-oriented lifestyle development, hardly more than a gated community that speaks of exclusion, should be bestowed with the cultural stamp of approval? Can invented material manifestation not contribute to a concept of identity that "has been fundamentally altered into a changing, fluid and ambiguous construct"?¹⁰

⁶UAE Yearbook 2004, p. 42

⁷Gulf News. January 10, 2005. "Dubai accounts for 7% of GDP."

⁸Quoted by Rania Adwan in *Arabian Trends*, Oct. 2004, "Buried Treasure."

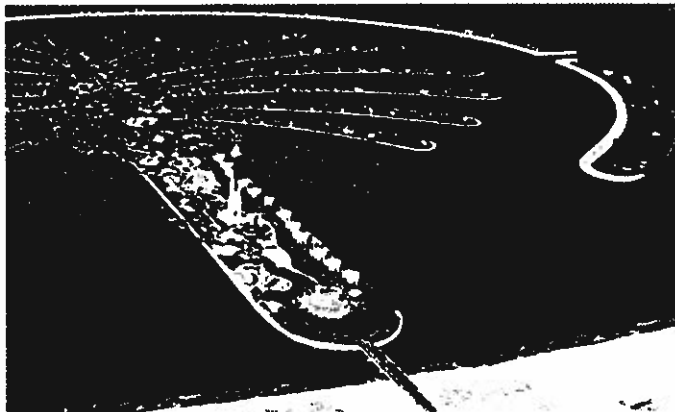
⁹Jumeirah Beach Residence. 2004. "The lifestyle of a lifetime", marketing brochure.

¹⁰Elshehtawy, Yasser. 2004. From Dubai to Cairo: Shifting Centers of Influence? *Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review*, XVI: 1, fall 2004, p.65.

I propose that the choice of the palm tree, uprooted from the sweet water of its desert aquifers and laid low into the salty Gulf, goes beyond a clever design trick to exploit the maximum peripheral exposure available by form. Invention, appropriation, transference and hybridization mark "the tendency in contemporary post-structuralist theory to see concepts and their material manifestation as active agents in the construction of group identities"¹¹.

Group identity in the Emirates is a construct of fragments. Less than 20% of the population are native *Emiratis*. The majority of the residents are *guestworkers* ranging from subcontinent laborers and software engineers to college professors from the USA and aluminum workers from the Philippines. The Palm and World Islands create alternative geography in a very un-Islamic self-actualization. Rulers of Dubai create landscape, a prerogative previously reserved for the "divine architect"¹².

Most of the projects that invent or imaginatively reformulate existing cultural conditions in Dubai select persons, customs and/or manipulated collective memory to construct cultural identity: an underground theme project is planned around the destinations of a historic traveler Ibn Battuta, an Arab voyager of the 14th Century who toured Central Asia, China, India and East Africa; *Dubailand* is the name of arguably the most ambitious tourism and entertainment destination ever created, combining 45 projects on a site of 15 million square meters. Among the promised attractions is *Women's World*, a "secluded oasis of indulgence created for and staffed exclusively by women"¹³; the pearl is lending name and identifying luster to a residential and business quarter. The Arabian horse is featured in public art projects and in the *Arabian Ranches* development, a



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UAE Palm Jumeirah small

¹¹ Hawker, R. W. 1999. *Imagining a Bedouin Past: Stereotypes and Cultural Representation in the Contemporary United Arab Emirates*. [www.inhouse.lau.edu.lb/bima/papers/R_W_Hawker.pdf]

¹² Austin, Mike. 2004. *Antipodean Authenticity*. *Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review*, XVI: 1, fall 2004, p.25..

¹³ *Dubailand*. 2004. "Investment Opportunities", marketing brochure

gentle reference to this legendary breed, ancestor of thoroughbred race horses, and entirely appropriate since the Maktoum-sponsored *Dubai Cup* is the richest prize in horse racing today.

Where is the authenticity in all these ersatz creations? As a partial answer it may help to know that Sheikh Mohammad, the chief initiator of the new Dubai, is himself an accomplished horseman and former champion in international endurance riding competitions - on an Arabian steed, of course. Other projects which have been announced by the dozen in the last years feature in the latest, but probably not last, act of the Dubai Drama. I have given this act the title "appropriating". Acquisition of someone else's culture is now fully deregulated. The *Dragon Mart* - a 14 km long trade mall in the shape of a colorful beast - will serve as permanent exhibition and commercial space for more than 3000 Chinese companies. Contrary to traditional expo projects which were dismantled after the fair, Dubai simply usurps the "other". Its planned Chinatown follows the example of Japan's "Rituruworudo,"⁴ and will import 1500 Chinese people to create instant authentic place. This ongoing drama of venting, inventing and appropriating material culture poses questions of legitimacy and manipulation, conflict with history and marketability of identity. It communicates that tradition is no longer safe in a context of ritual and formulated truth; that it is largely in the hands of the authority of money, and is subject to change.

The question remains whether change will in effect be limited to an endless fractal regeneration of sameness.

If it does, Rem Koolhaas will have been right after all.

⁴Graburn, Nelson. 2004. Inhabiting Simulacra: the Reimagining of Environments in Japan. *Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review*, XVI: 1, fall 2004, p.39.

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