

Local Identity in a Global Context: The Case of Dubai, UAE

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Abstract

Dubai, the business capital of the United Arab Emirate (UAE) —a relatively new country—, has emerged lately as a regional centre in the world global economy. International companies in technology, banking and media (among others) have moved-in to this booming market place. In order to promote its acquired role the city has developed both horizontally and vertically. The new image of a modern hub is well portrayed by skyscrapers, construction sites, traffic jams, and continuous expansion of the city. Modern amenities are opening regularly such as an international golf course, a city convention centre, etc.

Now that Dubai has established itself as a modern and international city, there is a major trend to promote its own regional assets; and its unique cultural features. The new focus of the city is driven by strategies and projects that respect and bring the local identity into the planning and design projects. In this context, three approaches have emerged. The first approach promotes the importance of the unique local cultural heritage among the population and provides training and tools for the local government and city staff. The second, calls for modern developments to be inspired from the local culture (i.e. the new Jumeirah Mall —a modern suq— and the new palm island—a modern real estate business project that is built on reclaimed land from the sea with a palm shape as a plan design—). The third approach calls for the renovation and reconstruction of the old urban fabric that was either destroyed or was in decay such the Bastakia district in Bur Dubai.

The development of the city of Dubai is quite remarkable and unique. The city grew from a fishing and trading urban center to a modern city competing for a place in the global network economy. Most of the urban development happened within a short span of time. This boom reflected the city development and urban form after the discovery of oil in 1967. However, it was a series of successful business decisions such as the creation of the free trade zone of Jabel Ali (about 20km from the city) and incentives to businesses and other developments in the eighties that helped put Dubai as a major regional player in the global economy.

During the seventies and eighties, the city embarked in major planning efforts to modernize the built environment: freeways, transport infrastructure and green spaces. At that time the old and historical urban form was either destroyed and/or obliterated both by government and property owners. This attitude of rapid urban transformation reflected the feeling to modernize and replace the historical built environment perceived as incompatible with progress. It is during this period that a part of the Al-Shindagah, a historical district in Bur Dubai was bulldozed to be replaced by the Diwan (siege of the city government). In the historical district of Bastakia the owners moved to new villas in other parts of the town leaving their houses to bulldozer and/or decay. The fate of other historical fabric such as in Deira was similar at the exception of scattered buildings such as the Ahmadiya School and the old municipality.

Historical Background

Dubai is a modern city. Its history goes back a century ago. Prior to that, little is known about the city and its urban form. However, historical documents point out that the region (modern United Arab Emirates and Oman) had trading activities dating back to 2000 BCE (Y. Elsheshtawy, 2004, p. 173). In the 15th century, the Portuguese colonized this area partly to control this strategic location at a crossroad between Europe, Africa and Asia –a center hub of the old caravan route and a transit trading center for dhows, and partly to extend, with Spain, the reconquista war against Moslems which started after the fall of Grenada in 1492. Portuguese domination (1500 to 1750) was followed by British control from 1820 to 1971.

Modern Dubai goes back to 1833 when a portion of the Bani Yas tribe moved from Abu Dhabi to Dubai following a brokered agreement with the British to rule the area. Their arrival into the small fishing urban center at the time doubled the population estimated then at 800 inhabitants. The new rulers succeeded into diversifying the economy of the city, which was based until then on fishing and pearling, by attracting merchants and funds from the neighboring regions and by good business strategies. Dubai grew to a population estimated at 3.000 and prospered with affluent suqs at the end of the eighteenth century.

Gradually, the city developed into a busy commercial center and attracted a cosmopolitan society. Attracted by city incentives and an attractive business location other ethnic groups joined the Arab tribes in the city; Iranians (as merchants) and Indians (as workers). The city urban form and architecture symbolized Arab/Islamic style and culture. Dubai was a dense urban fabric built around the courtyard houses and a hierarchy of mosques and suqs. The wind-towers, symbol of historical Dubai, are of Iranian origin as are some decorative panels. The carved doors and balconies used in the city are from Indian origin.

A Global City

Dubai today is a multicultural society where different ethnic groups are represented: locals, Arabs, Indians, Iranians, Asians, and westerners. In fact the local population in the city is a minority; only about 10% of the estimated 1 million city inhabitants.

Since the nineties Dubai embarked in yet another phase of urban transformation with a series of mega projects; the Internet City, the Multimedia City and Dubai Mall meant to be the biggest mall in the world to cite only few examples. It was also during this period that the city held major international and regional events such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (organized in 2003 with 14,000 delegates coming to the city), the Dubai World Cup (horse racing) –celebrating its ten years anniversary this year–.

Dubai has also become an attractive tour stop for artists, musicians and athletes, business men and tourists for concerts, work and/or visit. The city has responded with several luxurious developments and some bold projects; elegant and fancy hotels in Jumeirah such as the Jumeirah Beach Hotel and the new project Hydropolis the first underwater luxurious hotel.

The Awakening of Local Identity

It is ironic that the same forces behind making Dubai a modern and global city have now realized the importance of local identity in the development of the city. It was not enough to be a global city; Dubai needed to be unique. Dubai needed to be a city with its own regional and cultural assets; a city with its own identity. The view was shared by the government and the inhabitants who felt the loss of past

cultural heritage. In fact, since the nineties tremendous efforts have been made to continue to grow, to appeal to the world but within a reference to historical roots and local identity.

The new emerging urban image is seen as a complement to the city aspiring role in the international arena. Most new projects and developments in Dubai are now announced in terms of what they bring to the city and how they contribute to its urban identity. The government leadership believed/believe on the traditional urban fabric as a cultural expression which not only should be preserved but should inspire future development as well. The late UAE president, Sheikh Zayed (1971-2004), was quoted: “*Who has no past, has no present, and no future.*” This statement is widely shared by the local population.

Tremendous efforts have been initiated to restore historical city landmarks as to rebuild ‘portions’ of the old fabric now destroyed. These efforts by the local government although not officially part of one integrated program seem to follow the same pattern: How to preserve the local identity in a growing international city. All of these efforts however have started showing positive results owing to public education and government initiatives. Renovations and rehabilitation projects are being carried out in Bastakia and Shandagha. At the same time new buildings and projects take their inspiration from the local context. Workshops and conferences on urban design and conservation have been organized for the general public, officials and professionals.

Public education

The government and public attitude towards local identity symbolizes a successful education and awareness program which has been setup in the city throughout the last decades. This program is geared towards students through schools, homes through televisions, and offices through newspapers and radios. This success is due in part to a series of activities targeting locals, expatriates and tourists. Among such activities are conferences, symposiums and lectures which are well advertised, attended, and published. In addition to local gathering the first international conference and exhibition between theory and practice, 2004 on historical heritage was launched last year. Another activity is the creation of organizations to promote, educate, lobby and work on urban conservation. One such organization is the National Heritage Revival Organization which uses a restored house in the Al-Shandagah as headquarters. In addition to the above activities, efforts to install street signage and publish maps to indicate historical fabric and buildings have made it easy for tourists and city residents to learn and visit historical fabric. On a related note, the opening of several buildings as historical museums, Al-Fahidi fort in Al-Shandagah and Sheikh Said house in Bastakia provide a rewarding place of learning about local identity and the development of the city and are very popular locations to visitors.

Tools and training for professionals

Tools and training for professionals engaged in preserving the historical city of Dubai. In addition to conferences and organizations mentioned above, the city has brought a number of international organizations such as UNESCO and IKOMOS to provide advice and expertise in their conservation efforts. Also, individuals and firms were invited to help in such efforts through workshops and projects. The results of these efforts can be seen in the publication of guidelines on how to approach local conservation and the key elements of traditional architecture.

Local identity as a source of inspiration

A good example of how things have been changing in Dubai is the new Jumeirah development. The first project was the Jumeirah Beach Hotel, a luxurious facility. The hotel is a modern building with a curved shape facing the seacoast. The second project, next to it, is another hotel; Burj Al-Arab. The building became a modern icon in the city. It is inspired by the long city seafaring history as it evokes the sail.

The latest neighboring development is the Jumeirah Mall, the Kasr and Madinat Jumeirah Hotels. This development layout and design is inspired by the local suqs and by Arab and local architecture. A modern facility with elegant aesthetic lines –the Jumeirah Hotel--, and a modern building with aesthetics inspired by local context –Burj Al-Arab--, and the rest of the project as an expression of traditional architecture. Today the whole Jumeirah complex looks as an example and an answer to what Dubai is. A city open to the world yet unique where new international, old and new inspired from the past stand side by side.

Another mega-project, also in Jumeirah, is the Palm Islands development (under progress with estimated cost of a 1.5 billion). Shaped like a palm tree (as seen from the air), this project was one of the largest created island. The reference to local context is no coincidence. The palm is an ever lasting symbol of life in the desert. It brings to mind the oasis in the middle of harsh climate; a garden and paradise in an unexpected place. Palm development will provide residences, hotels and facilities in an island attached to land.

Other projects such as Dubai Mall, the largest mall in the world, although a new modern facility it is inspired from local and Arab architecture as it recreates a sense of traditional streets and neighborhoods. Burj Dubai, inspired from Arab patterns and geometry, is expected to be the tallest tower in the world when finished.

Finally, an effort is also made in the appellation of facilities to be also inspired by the local identity. The new shopping centers were called malls even in Arabic. Now there is an attempt for appellation to be inspired from the local identity as well. Some appellations of new projects: Wild Wadi (Wild River), Ibn Batuta Mall (after the famous Arab traveler Ibn Batuta (1307-1377 CE).

Preserving the old identity through the old fabric

The success of the first historical conservation project, Sheikh Said house in Al-Shandagha, although completely reconstructed is considered as a turning point in Dubai's attitude towards globalization, modernity and local identity. It is this project that paved the way for old Dubai to be saved from bulldozers. Today, the city is actively engaged in renovating and/or rebuilding entire small areas which were spared. Historical sites in Bastakia and Al-Shandagha although not finished have already attracted very strong popular support from locals and tourists alike. With their preservation, the urban image of Dubai has become unique and appealing to the world.

Conclusion

Dubai has been described by some as one of the fastest growing and one of the most dynamic cities in the world today. Yet it is a unique and interesting example of local identity in a global context. The city has reached a degree of maturity in how to reconcile the will of being an international city and at the same time being distinctive.

The debate over which city image Dubai should portray; global or local is past. As is the role and degree of the local identity in city development. The past years have brought the answer. Dubai is an international and regional city with strong and yet flexible local identity based on its Arab/Islamic and Asian context.

This paper looked at one positive aspect of Dubai's urban growth. However, other aspects need to be addressed. The renovation and urban conservation of Old Dubai is still an exclusively government led effort. It is time for the city government to find a set of public incentives such as involving the private sector in this endeavor. Some scholars have also argued that the new developments have been created to respond to globalizing tendencies such as tourism and large corporations (Y. Elsheshtawy, 2004). Others

have also pointed out to the exclusive nature of these big luxurious projects which have segmented the city into different private and public spaces (A. Mustafa, 2005). To resolve these issues, the government of Dubai needs to find adequate solutions that continue to balance modernity, globalization and local identity.

Note: Due to printing constraints, illustrations accompanying this paper are available upon request.

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