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LEARNING FROM DUBAI: IS IT POSSIBLE?

In this chapter, I describe the kinds of formal experimentation that are occurring in Dubai. Although even Las Vegas's teachable excesses can appear to pale in comparison to those of Dubai, a key to understanding the Gulf city lies in seeing how it partially cites and incorporates well-regarded planning and design traditions. It is this excessive citation and its amplification in terms of size, repetition, and class segregation that are Dubai's specific contribution to the current global urban landscape.



DYNAMICS OF BINGO URBANISM

Less than 10 percent of Dubai's gross national product derives from oil production, compared to 55 percent in 1980. One of the main reasons for this formidable shift in the economy is the massive investment that over recent decades has provided Dubai's desert land area with infrastructure and other site-development projects. Since independence at the beginning of the 1970s, the United Arab Emirates have spent \$225 billion on expanding infrastructure.ⁱ Eight-lane motorways run through the desert and divide almost desolate areas into strategic plots. Pipelines connect enormous power plants to oil wells. Desalination plants with widely branched distribution systems and modern communication technologies form an open-plan structure of technological support along the Persian Gulf. Together with a rapidly increasing number of spectacular high-profile projects, infrastructure provides a unifying narrative for the city.

Urbanized Dubai comprises a rectangular system measuring roughly 500 square kilometers of irregularly built-up areas, which run along the coast from the frontier with the neighboring state of Sharjah in the north to Jebel Ali Port in the south. No original city center can effectively be said to exist (although, as Ramos and Rowe argue in this volume, the Creek can be seen as the effective traditional locus of a central business district of sorts). The majority of old buildings were demolished long ago, but the street array around the tidal inlet of the Creek has retained part of its concentric structure and has become a loose knot in an organic grid of north/southbound arteries and east/westbound connecting roads. As scattered urban development has taken place, old buildings are demolished to make space for new ones and empty spaces are filled. Unsurprisingly, however, primary growth takes place within those areas left untouched by the infrastructural system, which despite a calculated overcapacity nevertheless requires regular expansion to absorb the increasing growth.



There has been an attempt to organize Dubai's urban development according to a traditional modern ideal. This has involved clear zoning and a rational organization of production in a finely woven network of mobility, which works according to some sort of "fuzzy functionalism" instead of Fordism's principle of assembly-line order.ⁱⁱ Yet despite definitive planning for monofunctional areas of general, rectangular systems, the culture of construction that has emerged does not behave according to any known ideal. The scattered structure of growth oases does not match the concentric model, yet neither does it call to mind anything that can be traced back to the earlier autonomous enclaves of polycentric conurbations. Neither is this situation controlled by the formalistic principle of dispersion, which ribbon development immediately simulates. Dubai has a backbone of development along the coast, but all modern programs such as business parks, residential enclaves, shopping centers, and so on, which make up the greater part of urban growth, are too scattered to form a recognizable territorial pattern. The city is a fragmented post-polycentric environment held together by technologies with their base in mobility, whose general layout is a French landscape, but whose local organization complies with an English garden plan, and whose economic dynamic is globally oriented.

This combination of rational structure, autonomous internal organization, and external growth conditions makes Dubai a good representative of what California geographers Michael Dear and Steven Flusty have labelled "keno capitalism."ⁱⁱⁱ The system of infrastructure divides the uniform desert landscape, mechanistically, into numbered units like a bingo board. The incoherent private development projects descending from above are like pieces drawn in some external game with no relations of physical proximity. These conditions make the image of "the city as gaming board seem an especially appropriate twenty-first century successor to the concentrically ringed city of the early twentieth century."^{iv} With globalization, Dubai has come to evince this kind of "bingo urbanism," a mosaic of monocultures in a field of business opportunities.



The huge mass of structural imports that form the basis of Dubai's development were initiated and carried out by English engineering firms allowed to function as a kind of local authority in the first consolidation phase.^v All public services such as sewage systems, electricity and water supply, and waste disposal were in the hands of a small number of private companies that came to play a central role in local affairs. The close connection between the state and a few handpicked companies is, however, largely a thing of the past. A locally based expatriate labor force has taken over the operation of the various facilities, a new system of tenders has partly replaced the more personal connections of earlier times, and the sheikhs' unit shares in several of the active consortiums have made the distinction between private corporations and state activities more diffuse.

Dubai's majority expatriate population has no formal civil rights. Theming can be seen to dramatize this lack by aesthetically overemphasizing the putative utopianism of global space. This is a "wonderland" of consumption, and tourism is one of the city's most important sources of income. Today, 25 percent of Dubai's GNP derives directly or indirectly from tourism. The number of visitors will, according to airport authorities, increase from the present 15 million to 45 million per year within the next three decades.^{vi} The thematic organization of space can, to a certain degree, control bingo urbanism's random pattern of expansion.

The most significant alteration to this global post-industrial city-state may be the introduction of the extensive enclaving that defines the city's places, coordinates the heterogeneity of space, and keeps the architectonic elements apart. This themed enclaving, moreover, has an afterglow of re-feudalization and therefore exceeds a polycentric urban fragmentation in which each enclave as a decentralized unit contains the narrative of totality. Although Dubai's post-polycentric urban pattern is generally woven together by infrastructure and exclusively differentiated by theming and enclaving, the representation of the city as material culture has no indexical picture to which to refer. There is no stylistic discrepancy between, for example, the Egypt-inspired entrance of the Wafi shopping center and the adjacent High-Tech residential tower. Postmodern citation has emancipated the continuity of history and pluralized the semantic logic.

THE CITY OF THE IMAGE

Two of Dubai's best-known monumental buildings are the Burj al-Arab luxury hotel and the Palm projects, three giant palm-tree-shaped peninsulas that will materialize in the next few years in Jebel Ali, Jumeirah, and Deira. These projects will feature entertainment and residential developments reserved for the wealthiest of global elites. Kevin Lynch's insights, made more than forty years ago about the image of the city, have thus come full-circle, and the themed, enclaved city has become the city of the image.

The Palm was created as an image and not planned as an actual project until the image had proved its conceptual strength. Without heavy marketing, the thousands of



millionaires' residences would not have been sold, and without strict design precepts, The Palm would never resemble its original idea, its image. In this sense, architecture has become the last link in the semiotic chain that ties a cultural image to place and city. The Palm erodes all traditional contexts; there was nothing before The Palm, and its community, if it can indeed be called that, will fashion its attachment to place through the form of a brand.

The artificial landscapes off Dubai's coast may be expressions of an autonomous materiality in regard to the symbol, but The Palm refers primarily to its own nature and is therefore emblematic of the way in which habitat can be lifted out of its given otherness and shifted into a virtual ecology of conceptual projection. The role of the architect is to design within the style that has been predetermined by the design manual, actually a variation on a dizzying number of generic styles such as "Italian," "Mexican," and "Ranch." These thematized offerings signal a strategic alliance between the idea of a global jetset lifestyle and a generalized local style. Architecture as the articulation of a global focal plane has been on the program for a long time, no more clearly than in the International Style of modernism. What is new, however, is that the cultural expressions that are specific to a certain region have been drawn into this symbolic broadcasting as generic markers. Folklore has become "fakelore."^{vii}

HERITAGE PLANNING: IMPROVING THE PAST

Not only is Dubai's future taking shape at a rapid rate, but the city's past is also in a process of radical change. EMAAR Properties, the company that is building new golf communities and luxury enclaves in the Jumeirah district, is restoring the "old" Dubai around the tidal inlet's southern bank in Bur Dubai. From the Al Fahidi roundabout in the east and nearly 1,000 meters to the west, there will be a new and historically transformed urban area consisting of the Bastakiya and al-Suq al-Kabir (the Large Market) districts. Here several historical fragments of isolated buildings and smaller built-up sections are scattered over a large area and hidden between modern developments.

As the name implies, there is a market in the area, but there is also a museum of national history and a small cluster of traditional buildings known as the Bastakiyya, named in memory of the quarter's original Iranian inhabitants, who came from a part of Iran called Bastak. Buildings in the Bastakiyya were erected in coral stone and constructed around confined courtyards, and equipped with the characteristic *barjeel*, cooling wind towers, which still jut out over the flat-topped roofs. The Bastakiyya district is being extended, and the number of historic-looking buildings will have grown considerably in the near future. A predetermined route through the area is the main control mechanism that will tie the districts to the narrative of the city, "particularly those areas which are relatively unchanged by the fast pace of development."^{viii} Parking is available by a nearby roundabout or at the Dubai Historical Museum, and the trip, which takes

the visitor through the sixteen most important points in the thematically bound narrative of the city's history, is estimated to last two hours.

Opposite the eastern entrance of the museum is the "Ruler's Office," the so-called Diwan. The building is from 1990 but is built in the old style, with majestic cooling towers. There are also a few mosques in the area. The mosques are both visual urban landmarks and, because of the *athan* or Muslim call to prayer, an auditory feature in the experience of the city. When following the itinerary further, one is guided westward with pauses at strategic places, along the Ali ibn Abi-Taleb Street, past the textile suq, and further westward to a promenade that runs along the inlet. The next stop on the tour is the former ruler Sheikh Sa'id Al Maktum's residence in Shindagha. The Shindagha quarter is not completed: none of the thirty-two original houses is restored yet, but "Dubai Municipality's plans [are] to restore the area to its former glory."^{ix}

Until then, the area where the inlet breaks and districts 311 and 312 converge will be dominated by the neighboring Carrefour supermarket and the stacked containers at Port Rashid. Without a narrative imposed by tour guides and the tourist's predisposition to find an "authentic history" in urban artifacts, such a transmogrification of existing urban space would simply be impracticable. The "old" Dubai we are presented is not an expression of a "true" past. The story related here serves as entertainment and has sidestepped the city's actual past. This does not mean that this particular story of the "old Dubai" is entirely without links to reality, but it illustrates what Anthony Giddens has described as modernity's separation of time and space and its use of history to make history, universalizing not only the future but also the past.^x



JON JERDE WAS HERE: DUBAI FESTIVAL CITY

The fictionalization of space that influences the reconstruction of the “old” part of Dubai can be read through the lens of the “epic urban landscape,” in which history is marketed, rearranging the city to satisfy the growing market for entertainment. Leisure time and the past have become parallel consumption domains, both significant as regards identity and therefore constituting an important twinned economic dynamic of the city. The loss of origins as myth and their reconstitution as commodity (or, as Marx might say, the conversion of history from use to exchange value) constitutes but one aspect of the ongoing retreat that here is being conducted by architecture. The reshuffling of space taking place in the Bastakiyya, Suq al-Kabir, and Shindagha districts bears witness to the ways in which this new economy has had an extra dimension added to its plan. In urbanism, event has largely replaced volume in significance. And where planning used to assume that life could be moulded through the control of space, now it is apparently space that controls the market’s organization of life as style.

The architect behind a new and striking urban development project in Dubai, the Dubai Festival City, is the Californian global place-maker Jon Jerde, and he expresses this paradigmatic twist in the social grammar of architecture: “Our curves are not formal, but perceptual; they are used to draw people in.”^{xi} In much the same way as the optical illusions and anamorphoses of the baroque era attempted to burst the physical limits of space by capturing the attention of the spectator from a specific position, urban space is now controlled by a script that directs consumer toward constant consumption. The expansion of consumption economics is not limited by the physical dimensions of the city. Dubai Festival City is organized like a story, similar to reconstructed history in the shape of narrative. The architect treats space as a storyboard and regards urbanity as something that, first and foremost, extends in time. “Our work synthesizes many disciplines in order to produce the tools needed to advance human community as we move into time.”^{xii} Jerde calls this space a “scripted space,” and even the name underlines the festivalization of the city. “‘The Disneyland effect’ has entered our language, to remind us that hypertrophied mall ‘cities’ have become essential to globalized tourism.”^{xiii}

The chief executive officer of Festival City, American architect and businessman Lee Tabler, says: “The Internet is an essential part of Dubai Festival City’s communication with potential tenants and curious onlookers alike ... In many circumstances it is the first contact some people have with us and it is essential that the website present a dynamic, clear and consistent message.”^{xiv} The future success of the project depends on whether the laying of the electronic “foundations” is successful. The project will cover an area of about 500 hectares, stretching approximately 4 kilometers along the north side of the tidal creek from al-Garhoud Bridge in the east. The project has been given the status of “a city in the city,” a description based on its size alone. This new city-in-the-city will consist of fifteen districts targeting different groups, determined through market research. The plan is shaped like a tadpole. A 55-story tower constitutes

the landmark of the Festival City and orients the development toward the west. A tail comprised of corbie-stepped buildings suggests the maritime theme of “waterfront development.”

Jerde calls his strategy “place making,” and one of its fixed reference points is classical town space such as we find in the historic city centers of northern Italy. “Place making” has to be understood in contrast to the European-dominated contextualism that attempts to express the inherent character of the place and an impression of its spirit, such as Christian Norberg-Schulz prescribes in his notion of *genius loci*.^{xv} Jerde is interested in historic styles as scripts and not as expressions of a place-specific character. Dubai Festival City is not bound to place as an expression of *genius loci* or any other embedded vernacular. Jerde himself delivers all the inscriptions, even those that refer to something historic. According to a press release, “when we looked at the site we found it had the right energy we were looking for, it was virgin land which gave us the flexibility to do what we wanted to do.”^{xvi}

Dubai Festival City thus has its origins in what can be called “genius logo,” or town planning as media strategy. The plan is a brand; a loyal double of the project’s logo. “The logo reflects the dynamism of Dubai Festival City and will assist in establishing its image with its local, regional and international audiences.”^{xvii}

The developer behind Dubai Festival City is the Al-Futtaim Group, which operates within a range of financial sectors and brands such as Volvo, Lexus, and IKEA. The Al-Futtaim Group has financed the project alone and therefore can lease the majority of its commercial programs itself. Once it is completed, this \$4 billion development will be the largest mixed-use real estate project in the Middle East. The festival city will not be inhabited in the traditional sense of the word; it will be time-shared. Festival City is a consumption community, the inhabitants are consumers, the city is a store, and the recreational facilities form part of the development plan as effective production facilities. The eighteen-hole Robert Trent Jones II golf course, the “green” element in the development, is not just designated for fun; it is for the use of the elite’s “business vacation.”^{xviii} With Dubai Festival City, the Al-Futtaim Group has completed what mallification has long heralded but only hinted at realizing. With Dubai Festival City, the mall has actualized its latent ambition of assuming the character of a consummated city.

GOLF AND THE HABITATION ARMÉE

At the top of the hierarchy of the desert state’s green enclaves are golf courses, most notably the two eighteen-hole courses of Dubai Creek Golf and Emirates Golf Club. Dubai Creek Golf’s clubhouse, with its contours in the shape of a fully rigged sail and prominent location at the waterfront of the inner harbor, has some references to Jørn Utzon’s Opera House in Sydney. Both clubs’ courses are ranked highly by the international golf community. At the same time as golf is conquering ever larger shares of the



overall recreational landscape, several of the newest and most fashionable residential developments in Dubai have been built around greens and laid out as golf communities.

EMAAR Properties' "visionary community," The Greens, is a good example. According to the promotional literature, the twin aims of the Jumeirah district development are that it "meet the needs of your family and provide you with the prestige of being steps away from Emirates Golf Club."^{xix} Nearby, the twenty-five square kilometers of the Emirates Hills, also by EMAAR, boasts The Colin Montgomerie Golf Course Community. The development has its own golf course designed by "world champion golfer Colin Montgomerie," but the development itself is also shaped and characterized as a golf-like terrain. All of the large villas have a view of an artificial landscape whose topography and picturesque protective planting conform to the requirements of a professional golf community. Boundaries with the surrounding landscape as well as those between individual properties are camouflaged by areas of green plantation. The view from the inside suggests that the private domain is unlimited, but Emirates Hills is a restricted area: "for your comfort and peace of mind, we've made Emirates Hills a 'gated community', with restricted access and round-the-clock security."^{xx} Although there is virtually no crime in Dubai, according to available statistics, the militarization of the boundary with the surroundings is necessary to display to outsiders that the golf community has seceded from the surrounding city and society. The fence guarantees for its inhabitants the opportunity for "escape and tranquillity."^{xxi} The modernists' dream of *Unité d'Habitation* has become *Habitation armée*, the fortified community.

SHEIKH ZAYED'S POTEMKIN CORRIDOR

The three-kilometer stretch of Sheikh Zayed Road between the World Trade Center and the so-called military roundabout is the city's Little Manhattan. A single row of skyscrapers on each side of the eight-lane road symbolically graphs the city's towering economy and constitutes a sort of monumental town gate in the otherwise flat urban area. In addition to the 1970s-monolithic World Trade Center, the Potemkin corridor consists of several characteristic block tower developments, including the 300-meter Chicago-style twin Emirates Towers, the four-towered and neogothic Fairmont Hotel, and the much-hyped Burj Dubai. From certain angles, the double row of tower blocks is an impressive manifestation of the powerful aesthetics of commerce, yet they appear more fragile when viewed from the surrounding post-industrial urban landscape, away from the tunnel effect.

This row of towers is a trademark of Dubai's high-profile economy and represents its central business district, but the symbol has also become a nostalgic echo of a time when it was still possible to measure a city's power by the height of its skyline. This image of the city was connected to an emerging industrialism, and the Dubai scenario almost caricatures the modernist vision of the city as a lucky coincidence of elevated engineering and scientific rationalism.^{xxii} The tower block silhouette along Sheikh Zayed Road has already, before its completion, become a historic outlying quarter when seen in relation to the new agglomerations of network societies further down the same road.



LEARNING FROM DUBAI

The few examples I have described here provide sufficient documentation to destabilize basic assumptions in the theory of modern architectural and urban planning, both in quantitative and qualitative terms. The claim can be made, with *Learning from Las Vegas* in mind, that as macrohistoric phenomena, Dubai's extravagant projects are to globalized post-industrial society what "the Strip" was for "Main Street America." Dubai's urban development demonstrates how the globalized, post-industrial city takes on "game board" character representing a form of bingo urbanism, with imported building capacity, themed landscape scenarios, and structures promoting mobility.

There is, however, another significant aspect to the story of Dubai that relates to the recirculation of all of these elements requisitioned from abroad. For although Dubai's extensive importation of everything from cheap labor to record-breaking architecture and urban planning might appear to be the city's Achilles' heel, it is also its strength. Just as Bilbao reinvented itself as a post-industrial metropolis by importing a Guggenheim museum, so Dubai, as "city of the image," is an example of how, given the new challenges to political identity posed by globalization, architecture and urban planning constantly have draw from a cornucopia of universal possibilities to construct an identity.

Notes

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1 According to *Gulf News* online edition, November 11, 2001, www.gulfnews.com (accessed June 2, 2005).

2 In other words, a logic that does not follow a framework of scientific management. "Fuzzy functionalism" thus refers to the highly rational yet eccentric planning schemes used in Dubai.

3 See Michael Dear and Steven Flusty, "The Postmodern Urban Condition," *Spaces of Culture: City-Nation-World*, Mike Featherstone and Scott Lash, eds. (London: Sage, 1999), p. 77.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 81.

5 See Gwilym Roberts and David Fowler, *Built on Oil* (Berkshire: Ithaca Press, 1995), p. 135.

6 According to Dubai International Airport's website, this number includes transit passengers, which makes the airport the world's sixth-fastest-growing and at the same time Dubai's most important shop-

ping center. www.dubaiairport.com, accessed February 2003.

7 See Tracy Metz, *FUN: Leisure and Landscape* (Rotterdam: Nai Publishers, 2002), p. 177.

8 *Townwalk Explorer* (Dubai: Explorer Publishing, 2000).

9 Department of Tourism and Commerce Marketing project description of "Shindagha Cultural and Heritage Project," 2002.

10 "We can all sense how fundamental the separation of time from space is for the massive dynamism that modernity introduces into human social affairs. The phenomenon universalises that 'use of history to make history' so intrinsic to the processes that drive modern social life away from the hold of tradition. Such historicity becomes global in form with the creation of a standardised 'past' and a universally applicable 'future.'" Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Cambridge: Polity, 1991), p. 17.

11 Jon Jerde, quoted in Frances Anderton, *YOU ARE HERE* (London: Phaidon, 1999), p. 198.

12 John Jerde, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 203.

13 Norman Klein, *ibid.*, p. 113.

14 "Dubai Festival City Website Revitalised" (press statement): <http://www.dubaifestivalcity.com/press15.html> (accessed March 2003).

15 "Genius Loci" is Christian Norberg-Schulz's expression for architecture's pre-modern and site-specific alliance with culture. See Christian Norberg-Schulz, *Genius Loci* (New York: Rizzoli, 1980).

16 Stars Online at <http://www.stars.com/art/101757501715460.htm> (accessed April 2, 2003).

17 http://www.afwebadmin.com/futtainwatches/new/details_press.asp?id=860 (accessed January 15, 2003).

18 "Business Vacation®" is one of Koolhaas's patented concepts. "Glossary" in *Pearl River Delta, Project on the City I* (Cologne: Taschen, 2001), p. 704.

19 "The Greens at Emirates Golf Club," promotional literature, 2002.

20 "Emirates Hills," promotional literature, 2002.

21 *Ibid.*

22 E.C. Relph, *The Modern Urban Landscape* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987).