

A COMMENTARY ON RECENT HERITAGE CONSERVATION EFFORTS IN THE EMIRATE OF DUBAI

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ABSTRACT

Recent efforts at the preservation of cultural heritage sites have raised questions about the purpose of heritage preservation. Whether it is to preserve traditional material culture in a world where it is increasingly threatened or to create a new market for cultural consumption; heritage conservation efforts constantly struggle with the idea of 'authenticity.' This paper analyzes recent heritage conservation efforts in the Emirate of Dubai. It contextualizes these efforts with respect to their social meaning and relevance to the society they claim to represent.

BACKGROUND

The city of Dubai is well-known as the financial capital of the Middle East. Dubai's rise to financial and commercial success is upheld as an example for the rest of the region. Dubai's built environment is reflective of this commercial bonanza which is advertised and marketed in the region, and indeed to the rest of the world. Apart from projecting the values of capitalism and modernity however, the city is beginning to project another, contradictory image. An image which claims to pay tribute to the true and 'authentic' heritage of the region. It is a constructed image of a past which has, until recently, been completely absent in the built environment and architecture of the city.

The history of Dubai dates back to the mid-eighteenth century when it was a small fishing village. Later on, being a natural port it captured the lines of trade in the region. Early merchants from India and Iran settled in Shindagah and Bur Dubai, Dubai's oldest settlements. Dubai's subsequent development responded to the trading and commercial needs of its early inhabitants.

It was the discovery of oil in the 1960's that led to a major economic boom in the region in general with profound consequences for the economy of the Gulf Region.

The Emirate of Dubai, part of the United Arab Emirates, founded as a nation in 1971, became a trade and service hub in the Gulf region attracting migrant workers from Pakistan, Bangladesh, India and Sri Lanka. Today the population of Dubai is 80% expatriate. This phenomenon also raises particular questions about the cultural identity of the place, the most important component of the claimed heritage of any place.

1. HERITAGE CONSERVATION IN DUBAI

Heritage conservation efforts began here in the early nineties and focused mainly on the restoration and subsequent reconstruction of identified heritage sites in the city of Dubai. These are mostly in the form of domestic architecture. Other identified heritage sites include forts and souks.

One of the most celebrated conservation projects has been that of the Bastakia District in Dubai. This was the site of one of the oldest settlements in the area whose history dates back to the 1890's. The old houses in the Bastakia quarter were built at the turn of the 20th Century. These houses were at that time homes of wealthy Persian merchants who came from the Bastak district in southern Iran. One of the most striking architectural features of these houses was the '*Birjeel*' or wind tower which gave the quarter its distinct character.

The process of heritage preservation has been more along the lines of reconstruction. For example, one of the old houses marked for conservation efforts is the Sheikh Sayeed house.



Figure 1: An Example of Reconstructed 'Birjeel' or Wind Tower that gave the Historic Districts its Distinct Character.

This house is not located in the Bastakia quarter but dates from the same period and shows the same features. The house has been systematically reconstructed after being dismantled piece by piece. All the salvaged parts were catalogued for use in the reconstruction work. For the reconstruction traditional building materials such as coral stone, lime and plaster were married with a modern, re-inforced concrete structure. Details consist of specially crafted Teak doors, plaster screens and comices.

These heritage efforts are presented as an effort to resist the otherwise global commercial forces shaping the city and indeed they do provide an alternative vision. The positive aspects of this project are that it does provide the only model of what used to be the traditional architecture of the region as well as setting an example of an



Figure 2: Specially Crafted Teak Doors, Plaster screens and Cornices used in reconstructed houses within Bastakia District.

alternative image for the city. The recreation of sustainable construction features such as the wind-towers provide a much-needed alternative to the wasteful and energy consuming construction practices in the region.

However, it cannot be ignored that the backdrop to the conservation of the Bastakia district and other similar projects has been the push to sell a certain alternative image of the city, namely its Arabian Heritage, for tourist consumption. Walking through the quarter, one is constantly reminded of this fact when looking at the exclusive boutiques and cafes which are housed in former residential quarters. It is not just the material aspects of the built form of the quarter which causes some food for thought but also the use it is being put to. Other forms of material culture which are promoted and sold here raise questions about the artificial nature

of this cultural image. For example, most of the paintings with traditional subjects and the craftwork being sold are the work of foreign or expatriate artists and designers which is very expensive. At the very least, an alternative approach could have been the encouragement and stimulation of grassroots involvement of local inhabitants in the production of the material aspects of their own cultural identity.

The Bastakia district, hence seems frozen in time, separate from what is otherwise happening to the urban fabric of the city. There is a lack of integration in terms of incorporating the heritage area with the everyday activities of the city through some kind of grassroots participation. This has resulted in the creation of a museum like environment in the heritage areas which seems to be completely at odds with the surrounding environment and somewhat inaccessible to the general public.

Another question which arises is, what does the preservation of heritage mean in a city where building projects are defined in terms of superlatives and exclusivity – the tallest hotel, the only seven-star hotel, the biggest Mall?

An interesting counterpoint to the 'authentic' heritage preservation efforts is the creation of environments which simulate cultural authenticity. Madinat-al-Jumaira is a newly constructed commercial complex in Dubai which mimics, almost all features having the characteristics of the Bastakia quarter. It is a simulated environment which shows the ease with which authentic cultural identity can be reproduced for consumption. The project expresses this not just with its architecture but its siting and location as well. Madinat-al-Jumaira is located at the foot of Burj-al-Arab, a skyscraper hotel which is the latest in the modernist experiments which dominate the skyline of Dubai. The building has rapidly become a symbol of wealth and power in the region which has invoked a kind of cultural pride in the Arab, and by extension, the Muslim world. Standing at 321 metres, it is the tallest hotel in the world which stands on its own floating island. Hundreds of millions of dollars have been spent on its construction, which is redeemed by rates ranging between \$900 to \$15,000 per night. The city of Dubai now sports license plates bearing a sketch

of the tower.

It is in the shadow of this extraordinary construction that a simulated heritage environment has been created mainly for tourist and elite consumption. In terms of architectural styles and materials, the contrast between the Burj and the complex could not be more striking. In terms of the clientele and prices of goods on offer the difference is not that great. The question arises whether heritage conservation is mainly a matter of preserving or recreating the material aspects of culture or is there something else as well? What about the social and economic life of people which is indeed at the heart of cultural identity?

Although in efforts such as Madinat al Jumeira, these aspects have been completely ignored, more



Figure 3: Burjal Aras Hhotel with the Madinal al Jumeira Complex in Foreground.



Figure 4: Simulated Heritage Environment is Created in Shopping Areas for Consumption of Tourists and Elite.

'authentic' i.e. in comparative terms, projects like the Bastakia quarter are qualitatively better and far more desirable, despite their flaws. This should not detract from the fact, however, that it is the museum-like and tourist-oriented nature of such heritage conservation efforts which have spurred on and inspired commercial interests to simulate and mimic them for their own ends.

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Conclusion

What is common to both these projects is that the decision-making process is concentrated at the top resulting in the actualization of an elite concept of heritage. This concept feeds either into nostalgic and frozen images of the past or is oriented towards the tourist gaze which thirsts for the exotic. This is a problem which is not unique to these examples but has been raised again and again when considering the intersections between cultural heritage, tourism and consumption.

There should be an attempt to dissociate heritage conservation from an elitist and nostalgic notion of the past as well as tourist consumption. Otherwise the past will be reduced to these new urban museums in our cities which are disconnected from contemporary reality ■

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