Dubai Creek: The Telling Place

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Abstract

Dubai, one of the world's fastest growing cities, has created at breathtaking speed one of the world's largest waterfront developments. Much to the detriment of its ecology, multi-billion dollar projects, enormous human-made islands, are forming off its coast. The city's tourism trade is one of the largest sectors of its economy and has garnered international attention among travelers wishing to partake of its brand of luxurious Arabian ambience. At the heart of old Dubai are the districts that straddle the original creek; they harbor the original context of the city's ancient reputation as the most notorious port on the Persian Gulf. The contrast between the old and new Dubai is what attracts many of the tourists to its port center. Yet the new modernist narratives being set in place are at odds with the sustainability of the authentic experience that the Dubai Creek has to offer. An exploration of the place names around the creek points to a past intimacy between landscape and culture and tells a story that could inform how these essential sites can retain their valuable resource of authenticity.

***Keywords**: sustainable tourism, urban design, cultural landscape, historic preservation, Place theory, Arabian culture,*

Introduction

The Las-Vegas styled developments that promoted Dubai as the new cosmopolitan model for the 21stcentury have been significantly affected by the recent global financial crisis.The overly ambitious 2025 master plan for Dubai has proved to be unsustainable and will not be completed as projected. Nevertheless, the new Dubai is a tourist hotbed for a reconstructed Arabian fantasy. Dubai describes both the dated Western visitors' view of the exotic East alongside the current narrative with corporate symbols of an outsourced Orientalism. In contrast, at the location of the original settlement at the mouth of Dubai Creeklie encoded narratives of the former sustainable Khaleeji culture lived by the people of the Gulf.Before we analyze these artifacts let us review the tantalizing hybrid that has made Dubai a household word all over the world.

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Orientalism's Paradox

Orientalism, as a manifestation of Western thought, inadequately describes the essential character of the cultural landscape of Dubai Creek and the surrounding built environment. Dubai itself is a tale of two cities in one as it is the meeting ground of East and West. Edward Said, in his most influential book "Orientalism"(Said,1979), critiqued orientalism, which he perceived as a constellation of false assumptions underlying Western attitudes toward the East.This projection of the exotic by the West has a long history. My own upbringing was conditioned to interpret the Orient through a list of 'B' movies produced in Hollywood in the post-War era that presented a vision of the Middle East as a dreamscape inhabited by characters with strong desires for both beauty and revenge. The lead actress, Maria Montez, in the 1944 production of "Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves" was billed as "Queen of the 'B' Movies".(Figure 1.) Her exotic glamour was the result of her Latino background as she was born in the Dominican Republic.

Fig1-Hollywood's Orient

The image of feminine pulchritude in Araby has been a result of this projection of Western ideals onto the Orient. This precedent reaches back in history to the Circassian women from the Northern Caucasus who was a prime example of an idealized image of exotic beauty coming from outside of Arab culture. Thought to be unusually beautiful, spirited and elegant, and as such Circassian women were desirable as concubines. Their reputation dates back tothe Ottoman Empire when Circassian women living in the Sultan's harem built a reputation for their extreme beauty which became legendary in Western Orientalism. These women, pictured in paintings from the 19thcentury have fair skin and aquiline features in contrast to the physiognomy of Arab women. In paintings from the period the 'otherness' of Western Caucasian features was lauded as exotic beauty in the East.The same lure of the Circassian women could well be conjured out the frayed magic and glamour of the Hollywood 'B' movies. In the 19thcentury a Circassian woman was on display in P.T. Barnum's Dime Museum show in New York City. Barnum sent an agent to Turkey to obtain a Circassian woman but the agent returned empty-handed. Ever the showman, Barnum selected a local girl, gave her a frizzy Afro-style hairdo and a last name beginning with the letter 'Z'. He

perpetrated this hoax by using local female subjects with a backstory of escape from the erotic slavery of the Turkish harem. The Circassian woman caters to the seemingly insatiable lust for visceral fantasy that is both foreign and terrible.[2]There is an abiding fascination with the "Other" that is manifested in reciprocal phenomena between cultures of the East and the West.

This anecdote has been reenacted with the production of what passes for "Arabian" architecture in modern day Dubai. The 'Arabian' architecture in Dubai is a Hollywood version artificially projected on the Gulf landscape. The opinion that there is no vernacular architecture in the UAE was accepted as a convenience for the creation of a hybrid style of architecture that mixes North African design elements with science fiction Modernism.Theresult has been large-scale developments with little or no relation to the ecology and culture ofthis unique place. The narratives driving the marketing campaign of the franchised new Dubai reflects a desire to establish the city as a financial hub in a rising global market, not the history of its built environment. The branding campaign that has made the city of Dubai a household word world-wide can be reflected in RanaKabbani's statement in "The Lure of the East: British Orientalist painting": "Orientalism has always rested on the peculiar premise that the West knows more about the Orient than the Orient knows about itself."This statement is evident in a number of recent architecture projects in Dubai that exhibit a fetishized Arabian style.

"The New Mecca"

One of these projects is the MadinahJumeirah which, as a sprawling commercial mall, is themed to appear in the style of an Arabian souk.(Figure 2.) It happens to be right next door to the Burj al Arab which is located on an artificial island just off-shore and is billed as the world's only seven-star hotel. In his essay on Dubai titled "The New Mecca", the essayist and author, George Saunders (2007) writes about his experience of MadinalJumeirah.

> "The Madinat Jumeirah is, near as I can figure, a superresort consisting of three, or possibly six, luxury sub-hotels and two, or maybe three, clusters of luxury villas, spread out over about forty acres, or for all I know it was twelve sub-hotels and nine luxury-villa clusters ---I really couldn't tell, so seamless and extravagant and confusing was all the luxury. The Madinat is themed to resemble an ancient Arabian village. But to say the Madinat is themed doesn't begin to express the intensity and opulence and areal extent of the theming. The site is crisscrossed by 2.3 miles of fake creeks, trolled night and day by dozens of fake Arabian water taxis (abras) piloted by what I can only describe as fake Arabs because, though dressed like old-timey Arabs, they are actually young, smiling, sweet- hearted guys from Nepal or Kenya or the Philippines, who speak terrific English as they pilot the soundless electrical abras through this lush, created Arabia, looking for someone to take back to the lobby, or to the largest outdoor pool in the Middle East, or over to Trader Vic's, which is also themed and looks something like a mysterious ancient Casbah inexplicably filled with beautiful contemporary people."
>
> "And so, though my first response to elaborate Theming is often irony (Who did this? And why? Look at that modern Exit sign over that 18th century bedstead. Haw!), what I found during my stay at the Madinat is that irony is actually my first

response to tepid, lame Theming. In the belly of radical Theming, my first response was to want to stay forever, bring my family over, set up shop in my hut- evoking villa, and never go home again."

"Because the truth is, it's beautiful. The air is perfumed, you hear fountains, the tinkling of bells, distant chanted prayers, and when the (real) Arabian moon rises over the fake wind towers, you feel you are a resident of some ancient city – or rather, some ancient city if you had dreamed the ancient city, and the ancient city had been purged of all disease, death, and corruption, and you were a Founder/Elder of that city, much beloved by your Citizens, the Staff. "

(Saunders 2007: 23)

Fig2–MadinahJumeirah

The MadinahJumeriah, along with several other examples, points out the problem of heritage and identity that pervades the city also known as the Vegas of the East. These design gestures are based on nostalgia for the past and anxiety of the future. Periodically the press revisits the issue of heritage and identity in the UAE with some focus on maintenance of cultural practices. These most often are visual manifestations of patterns or elements of buildings which appear as if they respond to their context. While this is an extreme example of the (mis)use of representation, it is illustrative of broader tendencies. To ask that we accept that a building taking the shape of a man in a *dishdasha*that honors the religion, culture and language of the Arab people from a real estate perspective is perhaps to ask too much (Mitchell,2007).

The building trivializes architecture for the sake of spectacle. (Figure 3.) Roland Barthes in his collection of essays "Mythologies" addresses the issue of representation and the production of meaning. In the world of "professional" wrestling the function of the wrestler is not winning, but doing what is expected. The dramatic excesses move wrestling from the realm of sport to the realm of spectacle. The wrestler's physique constitutes a basic sign that is reinforcedwith every gesture. Barthes surmised that "It is obvious that, at such a pitch, it no longer matters if the passion is genuine or not. What the public wants is an image of passion, not passion itself."[5]

The Dubai version of the Atlantis Hotel (there is a replica of the same hotel in the Bahamas) was completed in 2008 and is dramatically sited at the end of the central axis of the man-made island of the Palm Jumeirah. (Figure 4.) In the basement level of the Dubai hotel there is an elaborate attraction housed in a subterranean grotto. Advertised as "The Lost Chambers", the hotel's website makes the following claim: "During the construction of the resort, a complex series of passages was uncovered, thought to have been buried thousands of years ago by the waters of the Arabian Gulf. Upon further investigation, an ancient street systemwas discoveredand the theory came into being that these were, in fact, remains from the LostCity of Atlantis."Artifacts found in the archeological excavation of the hotel's site are for purchase in the gift shop. The objects found from the faux "dig" are marked with their own origin "made in China" and are available as tourist's souvenirs. Indicative of much of Dubai's new developments, the site narrative is outsourced to a Disneyesque franchised version of a theme park.

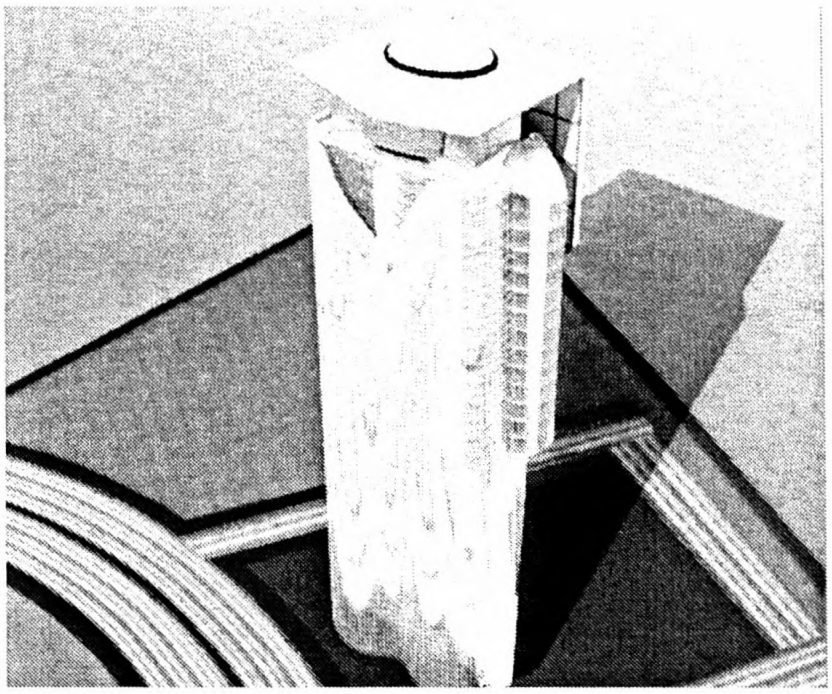

Fig3–Dishdasha building

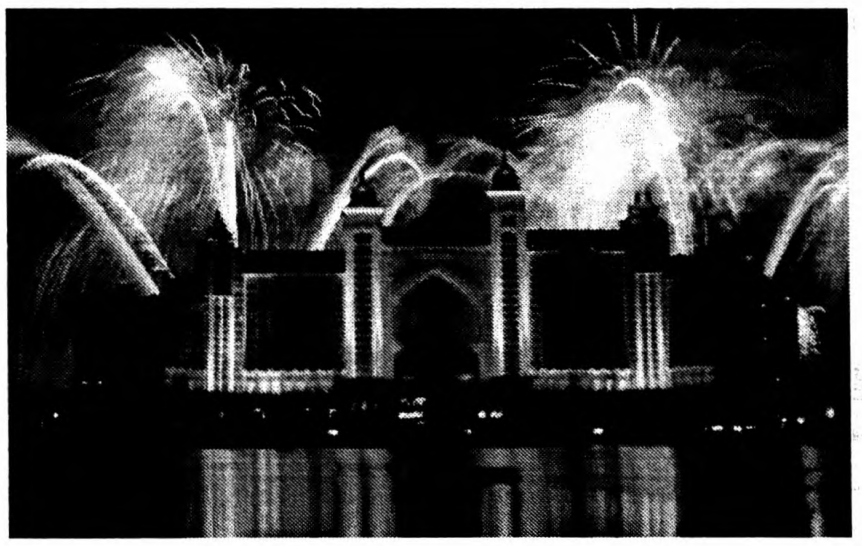

Fig4–Dubai's Atlantis Hotel
located on the headwall of the Palm
Jumeirah

Like the Palm Jumeirah before it, the Palm Deira was proposed as a series of man-made islands, this one located at the mouth of Dubai Creek, directly adjacent to the districts in this cultural landscape study. (Figure 5.) It is a colossal landfill spliced onto the older urban fabric of Deira with seemingly little regard to the impact it would have upon the site of Dubai's origin. Redesigned to allow for proper circulation of the Gulf waters amongst its islands, phase two was reconfigured for a population of 300,000, three times the size of Palm Jumeirah. The Palm Deira, along with numerous other large-scale projects worth an estimated total of 77.3 billion dollars, has been put on hold.

Fig5–Palm Deira proposed

Encoded Visions on the Creek

Global capital has been the major influence on this manifestation of the "new Orientalism" that Dubai promotes. Dubai has been greatly affected by the influx of global capital and the long list of corporations that have sought to make Dubai the financial hub of the Middle East.

The level of cultural change in Dubai over the last 60 years prompted me to document for posterity the current state of its urban process. I began to read the old maps of the city and to do this I asked my students to assist me in translating the old Arabic place names.They also acted as guides through the maze of streets and nested contexts representing the multicultural population.

The place names of the districts that border the creek reveal the culture's relationship to locality, land and natural process. As an aural culture without written records of its history, there are myths that surround the origin of the name of Dubai. Some scholars maintain the word has Arabic roots while others contend the name's origin is Persian. Stories abound including one that says that the Arabic root word Daba is derived from the word Yadub, which means to creep. This word refers to the process by which the creek creeps from the sea into the dry land and is likened to the movement of a snake across the sand. Another origin story states that Dubai has a Persian etymology that translates the word's meaning as "having two sides". The story logistically refers to the settlement being defined by the two sides of the creek. Both stories reference the native ecology of the site. None of the various origin stories can be verified through evidence but the city's name dates back to the 6thcentury.

Little known to tourists and newcomers, the labyrinthine network of public alleyways offers the peripatetic traveler a view of daily life off the tourist path and hidden from the thoroughfare. (Figure 6) The courtyards that exist where the alleys converge are sites of a condition of public domain that in Dubai doesn't know its name. Anywhere else it would be called public space. Atmospheric of a past time the alleys create a system of open space that

connects a pedestrian web of commercial and social interactions. Walking the streets and alleys of the old urban fabric which straddles Dubai Creek one finds place names embedded like fossils. Names derive from other unseen places and form an intertext, a locus of intersecting histories and places (Potteiger, 1998). Naming the land according to human anatomy reflects an intimacy and assumed reverence for local ecology.

Naming is a fundamental strategy for making places. The named site becomes a storied place. Each name carries its own inception, the story of how it got its name (Johnston, 1990). It's not so much that the places remind us of stories, but rather that they exist because of the stories associated with them.

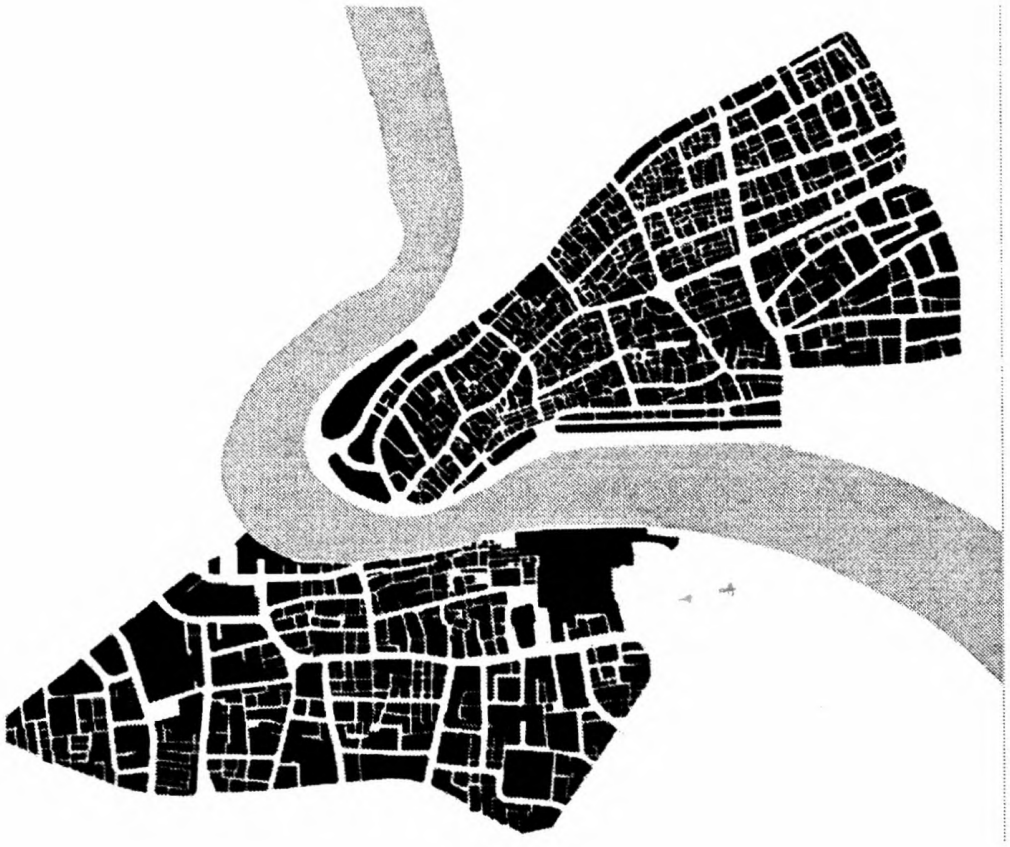

Fig 6 – Figure/ground of Dubai Creek Districts

The districts that straddle the Dubai Creek reveal through their place names a palimpsest linked to the narrative between Landscape and Culture. Contrary to this congruencyare many of the modern tourist sites in Dubai: Dubailand, Internet City, Media City, Knowledge Village, International City, The Greens, and The Meadows. These places often evoke their own versions of narrative topos but with reference to other mythologies and imaginative literature (from Disneyesque theme parks to English- styled picturesque landscapes) which falloutside of the historic context of the UAE.This framed habitat is in stark contrast to the destination resorts and franchised bubbles that house the corporate flux of tourists.

Dubai Creekdistricts' names:

1. **Al Rigga**district – refers to a landscape pattern where a shallow water table precipitates the ease of digging water well.
2. **Muraqqabat**district – named because of the design of its water wells. Muraqqabat means "those of the long neck" and describes the tall stone collars that ringed the wells' openings.

3. **Nakheel**district: Nakheel is the plural (like fish) meaning a group of Palm trees and described the vegetative pattern of the area.
4. **Dhaghaya**district: named for its close proximity to the sea and its fishermen inhabitants.
5. **Al Wuhelda**district: named for a single landmark Palm tree that distinguished this place.
6. **Al Barsha**district: named after the planting of trees in groups, which looked like a decorated landscape.
7. **Al Muteena**district: named as the land of mud.
8. **Umm Rumool**district: named after sand dunes consisting of soft sand, which has certain characteristics.
9. **Abu Hail** district – named after the well of potable water that marked this place.
10. **Al Gubaiba**district –translates as the Vanishing Place. Subject toflooding and vernal pools, this edge of the creek is submerged during the months of spring.

Fig 7 – Dubai Creek District Names defined

The place names, coding place-telling into stories, are evidence of the past inhabitants' sustainable integration with the surrounding environs. As Kristina Hill writes, "they support a vision of sustainability with messages suggesting: 1) cultivation of insight into the sustainable challenges that we face; 2) avoidance of the human tendency towards ideological and technological hubris; and 3) perception of the patterns in our landscapes that have implications for ecological processes and human health."(Hill,200)The districts that border both sides of the Dubai Creek are framed by re-presentations of the past functions of public and private life. The old creek makes visible for the ephemeral tourist a tangible view of its former sustainable society and its works.

The UAE is now known as the country with the world's largest per capita carbon footprint. Every resident in the UAE uses an average ranged between 550 - 970 liters of water every day (depending on the emirate), which is one of the highest rates of water use in the world. The total consumption of water resources in the Emirates today exceeds 24 times its natural recharge capacity. As SeyyedHossein Nasr (1967) observes, "There is near total disequilibrium between modern man and nature as attested by nearly every expression of modern civilization which seeks to offer a challenge to nature rather than to co-operate withit."Howdo we right ourselves to experience and understand Nature in the current crisis so as to maintain a direct relation with nature? We need not consider ourselves alone in the world. Though nature is our companion, it is often disregardedby the urban dweller. All of its parts are living exactly as we are,and if we are properly attuned to them, they speak to and instruct us – and may, indeed, speak more truthfully than our own kind.It is the urban ecology of the Creek that remains a touchstone for Dubai's inhabitants of the memory of sustainable formand its scheme to integrate humankind into nature. Historically there has been a strong linkissued from the Quran between Islam and Environmentalism. The Sufi poet Rumi expresses this instinctive affinity to the world of natural processes when he writes: "Like the inclination of babes toward their mother, the babe does not know the secret of its desire for being suckled (Rumi,1990).

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