Cultural Resilience in Contemporary Urbanism: The Case of Sharjah, UAE

Dr.Hassan Radoine

After four decades of rapid urbanisation and construction, cities in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) are in danger of losing their social and cultural identities. The UAE federation was created in 1971 to unite the country as a political and economic structure, but the country's territorial and urban structures are yet to be realised. The disparity between urbanised areas as isolated mega theme parks and the country's rich cultural resources misrepresent the UAE. This paper argues that, despite globalising urbanisation, the resilience of cultural heritage enhances the UAE's urban sustainability. Hereinafter, heritage is taken to mean not museum-like artifacts, but a more resilient culturally dynamic impetus. By analysing the urban morphology of the city of Sharjah, I examine the challenge of preserving its cultural image in the face of overwhelming pressure from its global neighbour, Dubai. This paper concludes with a discussion on the integration of cultural resources into contemporary urbanism, arguing that further attention ought to be given to the role of cultural resilience in the making of cities in the Gulf countries.

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The fast-changing urban and so cial fabric of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) is shifting the paradigms of cultural heritage. Since the advent of the discovery of oil and other seemingly endless economic resources in 1960 and the establishment of the UAE in 1971, the contemporary urban form has developed a global and cosmopolitan image in cities throughout the UAE. This new image is based on a modernist ethos of tabula rasa and abstraction and has had devastating consequences on the representation of social and cultural structures. While cultural heritage underlines the relevance of historical, cultural and social anchors, the rapid modern urbanisation of the UAE is erasing its genius loci. The rich culture of fishermen, traders and pearl divers, which is woven into its strategic geopolitical location, has been overridden by a multi-ethnic population seeking economic opportunities within a newly fashioned urbanism.
This rich history is encapsulated in a series of museums that reduce Emirati culture to a collection of carefully selected artifacts. These museums are divorced from reality and diminish Emirati cultural heritage to mere representational objects, as asserted by Coomaraswamy (Coomaraswamy, 1956, 9), or, to use Bourdieu's phrase, 'high culture', as opposed to the vibrant 'low culture' (Bourdieu, 1984, 34) that is also present. The Emiratis struggle, meanwhile, to preserve their genuine traditions and sense of identity. The rich nomadic settings, historic towns and natural wilderness are under threat of extinction, and no strategic attempt is being made to include these cultural resources in the territorial and urban planning processes. Sensible planning, which integrates these unique resources, would undoubtedly strengthen the muchneeded sense of belonging and identity of the place. This lack of identity represented in the social and urban fabric has recently surfaced as a topic of solemn national debate among Emiratis, who continuously voice their discontent, vis-à-vis their urban milieu (Al Lawati, 2008).

The city of Sharjah is a key example of this cultural representation paradigm in the context of rapid urbanisation. While facing the pressure of neighbouring supramodern Dubai, this 1998 UNESCO Cultural Capital of the Arab World (Sharjah Department of Culture and Information, 1998, http://www.sharjahtourism.ae/en/ heritage/culture) strives to create a sense of cultural belonging and continuity, which is essential for sustainable economic and urban development. This small walled town, erected between 1804 and 1819, has grown to become one of the largest cities in the UAE and could be a distinctive model for presenting how to integrate cultural heritage into contemporary urbanism and so sustain a sense of place and belonging.

Cultural Resilience in Contemporary Urbanism

The integration of cultural heritage resources in contemporary urbanism is imperative. Over the past three decades, city planners and stakeholders have been continuously faced with communities worldwide who are reclaiming some form of cultural representation in the contemporary cityscape. The denaturalisation of the cityscape, with its monotonous repetitive architectural and urban forms, generated unconvivial and decontextualized urban spaces. While sustainability is still viewed as a technical matter, focusing on carbon emissions, energy consumption, waste management or economic development, it has become increasingly vital to consider cultural heritage and its new potential to render the city more humane and memorable.

Contrary to the controlling aspects of urban planning, city planning or town planning that dictates a priori aesthetic or functionalist rules on the city, I utilise the term urbanism for the sake of a more holistic approach, which intrinsically embraces the political, economic, social and cultural parameters of a city. This approach is echoed by Lewis Mumford, who vehemently opposed the functionalist and formalist ideology of CIAM (Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne) (Mumford, 1996), as well as Louis Wirth, who advocated that: 'urbanism is a way of life' (Wirth, 1938, 1). Nevertheless, urbanism is often still perceived of as urban planning, without the subtle nuance being made, thus bringing its true dimension to the fore in making contemporary cities.

Accordingly, the relationship between cultural heritage preservation and contemporary urbanism, which has conventionally been considered as conflicting, ought to be re-explored as a key catalyst for sustainable cities. The historic urban and natural landscape gives a sense of community representation, which maintains an interactive dimension for currently fragmented urban space. The key value of cultural resilience in urbanism is the focus on the momentum of community participation, through activating dormant memories and refreshing living ones. This approach pledges a broader perception of a historic environment, which ignites its human, social and cultural attractors. Therefore, preservation takes a step forwards, extending its scope from the mere archeological restoration of tangible relics to the rejuvenation and development of cultural resources, expressing the human experience embodied in the dynamic urban morphology of cities. These cultural resources can be defined as a set of: 'distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of society or a social group and that it encompasses, in addition to art and literature, lifestyles ways of living together, value systems, traditions and beliefs' (UNESCO, 2001, 62).

Historically, the cultural dimension of a city was often its raison d'être, but with the advent of modernism, it became devoid of context (Rowe and Koetter, 1978, 38). Reclaiming the city for its citizens is currently a de facto ideal, in order to bridge the widening social gap in urban planning practice (Jacobs, 1961, 15). The social dimension of a city cannot be generated without the permanent cultural meaning of an urban space to foster historic forms and their embedded collective memory (Boyer, 1996). However, the arguments of contemporary architects and urban planners often collide with those of preservationists, in relation to the unsolvable dichotomy of the past and the legitimacy of the future. It seems that the relationship between reason and progress has never ceased to widen the gap between memory and the testimony of the built environment (Gregotti, 1996, 65). The city dweller is currently caught in an artificial urban order, which jeopardises the cultural richness and meaning of urban spaces. This order is embodied in the recurring checkerboard layout of new cities (Choay, 1970, 7). Therefore, the continuity of image and memory of the historic urban environment is not only related to its physical permanence, but, more interestingly, to its standing patterns of human activity over space and time (Lynch, 1972, 72). Thus, cultural heritage is resilient through the omentum of its living memory, particularly in cities with rich historic contexts.

Here, the concept of resilience, in relation to cultural heritage, means the capacity to recover dormant dynamic cultural resources, in order to contextualise contemporary urbanism. It is the ability of a city to regenerate its latent cultural memory and image. This cannot be achieved solely through formal preservation projects, but rather through social patterns, which maintain codes and values that are seldom fully in tandem with modern urbanism's forms and spaces. As a striking example, the Arabic and Islamic urban context seems immune to memory eradication, when it comes to social and cultural manifestations, through the very modernisation that is taking place. Cultural heritage in the region is therefore alive and sustainable, in terms of both its tangible and intangible dimensions. Several reasons reinforce this assertion.

Vibrant Cultural Memory

The individual and the community in the Arab-Islamic context are continuously connected through enduring cultural practices. The individual is part of a complex system of codes that intertwines place with a sense of cultural reference. Jan Assmann states that: '… cultural memory is characterized by its distance from the everyday. Distance from the everyday (transcendence) marks its temporal horizon. Cultural memory has its fixed point; its horizon does not change with the passing of time. These fixed points are fateful events of the past, whose memory is maintained through cultural formation (texts, rites, monuments) and institutional communication (recitation, practice, observance)' (Assmann and Czaplicka, 1995, 129). The vibrancy of this cultural memory challenges the contemporary urban form, which is lacking cultural content. Therefore, in the Gulf countries, in particular, the gap between the cultural set and the modern built environment is enormous.

Climate and Character

The climate of the Arabian Peninsula has generated a characteristic built environment throughout history. This built environment has a deeply rooted character in the Saharan landscape and cannot easily be substituted by a fast-paced imported urbanism. Settlements and cities in the Saharan territory have survived through ingenious methods produced through exploring and understanding their unique climate, and this reflects their character (Norberg-Schulz, 1980, 97, 126). Despite modernisation, the local population still identifies with its nomadic Saharan environment and lifestyle. This is proven through predominant social and urban patterns, which are particularly persistent in residential areas. Spiritual or mythico-ethical factors The religious or spiritual belief factor needs revisiting. A culture of progress and globalisation has put the religious nucleus of Islamic societies under pressure. This has resulted in endless contradictions. Recognising what Ricoeur calls the 'mythico-ethical' dimension of Islamic societies is a key criterion for appraising their Traditional urban environments (Ricoeur, 1965, 278). To deny the impact of religion on the shaping of spaces would be an apparent repudiation of a seminal factor in the making of Islamic geographies. Contemporary urbanism is incapable of fostering these complex realities where faith is a quintessential element of the social and urban fabric, especially within localities where the Muslim population constitutes a majority.

Heritage is not a Hindrance

Heritage in the Islamic world has a peculiar meaning. This confuses many experts, who do not have the necessary insight into this world. This lack of insight leads some Western and Eastern researchers and experts alike to attempt to find quick methods for synthesising heritage into ready-made formulae, so as to make it easy for Islamic societies to digest progressive ideas. This creates a serious gap between local and dictated concepts of heritage and increasingly alienates the built environment that has been newly created, without the consideration of intrinsic cultural variables. Since regeneration elements are still existent and vibrant within the community that bears its seed, heritage should not be a hindrance, but an impetus. This is another facet of the aforementioned resilience that challenges contemporary physical settings.

The UAE context encompasses all of these dimensions, with cities longing to be cosmopolitan and modern, while their local populations remain traditional and conservative. This dichotomy of modern versus traditional is different from other countries, such as Egypt, Syria and Morocco, in which their economies did not abruptly change and, hence, have to rely upon historic sites or tourism to sustain themselves. The sudden economic shift in the Gulf region is abrupt for a local population that is still very traditional and conservative, despite the imported global urban and architectural image.

UAE's Urbanism and Contextual Paradox

> Who would prefer this rapid suburbanization to timeless wonders? What kind of park supervisor would permit such vandalism of nature? An all too familiar kind of mind is obviously at work here: a mind seeing only disorder where a most intricate and unique order exists; the same kind of mind that sees only disorder in the life of city streets, and itches to erase it, standardize it, suburbanize it. (Jacobs, 1992, 447)

Urbanism in the UAE is currently a double-edged sword: on one hand, it represents the wealth of the country and the rapid development of its cities and, on the other hand, it also distances the society from their own sense of place. The fast rate of UAE urbanisation over the last four decades signifies not only urban population growth, but also a significant extension of the city territory. When the city is no longer limited to geographical constraints, it becomes a transposable machine, with an artificially built environment produced as a result of new energy and technology. The level of comfort within an office in a high-rise building in Dubai does not differ much from that of one in New York. Populations from different regions of the world, who are not used to the bio-climate of the desert, are able to live in completely air-conditioned spaces throughout the year. This has enabled an influx of immigrants and encouraged social mobility. Consequently, urbanism has automatically pursued quantitative momentum, rather than qualitative momentum, in order to cope with the influx of millions of newcomers, who are only willing to occupy air-conditioned urban settings. Facing the challenge of accommodating and settling this new foreign population and in order to have a modern urban image, the UAE's cities rushed to become fully urbanised, often at the expense of guided territorial and city planning. The imported road system infrastructure has merely equipped the city for vehicular circulation at the expense of the human and civic dimension.

The UAE's cities rely heavily upon traffic engineering, which inflicts even more damage on their sustainability as viable built environments. Transported ideas and models were copied, without even questioning their conformity with the peculiar climatic and cultural nature of the UAE. This has resulted in urban chaos: road grids of endless roundabouts that frame districts of noticeable disorder. The zoning is nothing but a fragmentation of land, observing no regulations, even though tremendous efforts are currently being made to bridge this gap. Moreover, since 1940, there has been a continuous and irrepressible direct transfer of mega-urban structures, which have been parachuted into the middle of deserts. There is a serious lack of local urban governance to ensure that the city functions, on the one hand, and that its unique character is preserved, on the other.

Zoning within this fragmented city is an end-result and does not stem from an intrinsic planning process. The morphology of the city is dictated by large private properties, which are set within the boundaries to form scattered islands. Residential districts defined as extra-large land subdivisions create a kind of suburbia in the downtown area. This is due to the attempts of the local population, which distances itself from other ethnic groups and creates its own boundaries. Accordingly, there is a distinct lack of cultural belonging (or sense of it). Yasser Elsheshtawy's work on everyday urbanism, which reflects upon the multi-ethnic recreation of daily space within the global urban form of Dubai, is essential in understanding this urban fragmentation from the bottom-up:

> ... In the course of this progressive 'redrawing of boundaries' there has been an apparent '... evacuation of the national' (Oncu and Weyland, 1997, 10), and fragmented developments are geared towards a global audience. The city is thus being re-created through the gaze of the tourist, the look of multi-national corporations, and the stare of real estate development companies. In such a context it becomes quite natural for developments to become isolated and fragmented islands. (Elsheshtawy, 2004, 193)

In addition, the continuous mega-projects have no consideration for the long-term consequences on local flora and fauna. For example, various projects, such as the Palm Islands in Dubai, have been carried out in coastal areas and on land reclaimed from the sea, which adversely impacted upon marine life, as well as the human environment.

Urbanism is thus called upon as a normative or corrective process, not as a visionary or preventive one. It is often an action that is utilised to resolve the negative impacts of hastily developed projects, produced when UAE's cities had not yet reached urban maturity. It can hardly be said that any of its cities has established a specific successful urban archetype through impressive commercial rchitectural projects. Urban form is not given priority. There is continuing confusion between real estate evelopment, traffic infrastructure and urban planning. In order to resolve the issue of the absence of a cultural image, the tendency is to over-restore historic areas or invent heritage theme parks. However, a close examination of the city of Sharjah, which has invested more than others in their cultural representation and sense of belonging, will shed light on the urban genesis and cultural evolution of a typical UAE city.

Sharjah Urban Morphology and Cultural Mutation

The case of Sharjah City is relevant to this paper's argument, because of the longstanding position of its government in preserving a certain cultural image. Sharjah is currently the third largest city in the UAE, but its history proves that it was at its most authentic and powerful during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, due to the Qawasim ruling family. Although Sharjah might not be as progressive as neighbouring Dubai today, it does have a community wide sense of belonging. However, hastily developed urbanism is common to all Gulf cities, which hinders attempts to cultivate a genuine sense of place. Sharjah is not presented here as an ideal model. Through analysis of its urban morphology, it is clear that the city has undergone major urban changes, but through the resilience of its community, it possesses a unique sense of identity, when compared with other UAE cities. Through a field and literature study, I have traced the trends of Sharjah's urban changes and their reciprocal cultural mutations.

Traditional and Conservative

The Qawasim tribe first settled in the most strategic border of the Arabian Gulf, from Ras al-Khayma to Sharjah, in 1720. In 1820, a general treaty with the British military caused the collapse of Qawasim maritime activity, dividing the Qasimi kingdom into smaller sheikhdoms. The Qawasim made Sharjah their urban hub, where the first settlers survived by diving, fishing and trading. Sharjah was the embryo of a typical Arabic and Islamic walled town, as shown by the first map drawn by the British military in 1820 (see Figure 1).

The key feature was the defensive wall (Sour), built by Sheikh Sultan Ibn Saqr Al-Qassimi (1804–1819), in order to protect the small town from invaders. The wall (2.75m high and 0.5m thick) had three main entrances. Due to the expansion of the town, no parts of this wall remained by 1886, except remnants of its main tower (Husn). Surrounding this wall was a palmary area, which provided ecological and agricultural resources for the town. A small satellite fishing village was located on the other side of the creek. This early development of Sharjah shows that the city consisted of several types of architectural and urban elements. The houses had clear Persian and Indian influences and the surrounding fabric was of a primitive nature, 'arish. The main attraction, though, was its coastal linear market (Souq), which is still a vibrant social and urban magnet. A community was established through several residential neighbourhoods, which show that Sharjah's cultural features were welldefined and that it had an urban setting, which was one of the most advanced in the Gulf region (see Figure 2).

According to Abdulaziz Musalam – a native specialist in cultural narratives – Sharjah never ceased to provide an ideal environment for its community, with a longstanding history of urbanity prior to 1820.[1] Despite a modest economy relying on pearl diving, farming and nautical trades, Sharjah's sense of place derived from the traditional urban system around the creek. Norberg Schulz defines a place as a space which has a distinct character and becomes manifest as an environmental totality, known as 'countries', 'regions', 'landscapes', 'settlements' and 'buildings' (Norberg-Schulz, 1980, 2). Therefore, Sharjah's urban character is unique, with distinctive natural and cultural figures. By the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century – a period of major changes and external influences – the character of Sharaj as an Arab town changed to embrace new foreign urban elements, causing its urban morphology, as well as its community structures, to radically mutate.

Modernisation of the Traditional

The first noticeable modernisation of Sharjah occurred in 1930, with the arrival of the first airport, significantly shifting its urban morphology away from the coast and towards the desert. The airport was constructed by the British military as the Royal Air Force station, as well as a transit point between India and the United Kingdom (UK). As a new gateway for this old town, which was connected only through land and sea, it brought a new financial income to the city when the pearl trade was declining, becoming known locally as al-Mahatta (which is the Arabic translation of station). This significant piece of infrastructure underlined Sharjah's strategic geographical position and brought new technology and, subsequently, new urbanism. The airport was created in a small military urban district, which contained more than 1,200 air-conditioned housing units, a power station, water reservoirs and a hospital. The construction of the airport and its district and the appearance of major sandy roads influenced the traditional urban setting (see Figure 3). The current al-Uruba road was the first runway, and this road is now one of the main artery roads. In 1938, the new oil-based revenue prompted further modernisation of the city's infrastructure. However, despite these new changes, the old Sharjah remained intact as an established cultural hub with a traditional local community until the 1990s.

The arrival of the first groups of multi-ethnic labourers did not have a large impact upon the social and urban fabric of the city. The Sheikhdom's system of management kept urbanisation under control when the modernisation of infrastructure began. Communal land distribution followed, according to individual and community needs, without disturbing land speculation or property market volatility. This maintained a certain stability for the local community, whose members had the right to free housing land. However, the layout of the city spread towards the desert with the rise of a new urban mode, which hitherto had no planning precedent.

Rectilinear and Gridiron

The first systematic planning was introduced by the 1968 master plan, with a gridiron city layout in place until 1980 (see Figure 4). The old town was altered to fit the linearity dictated by traffic and expanded to include new districts, such as Maysaloon, Falaj, Sharq and Majarra. Sharjah had a strict grid pattern, with new paved roads, roundabouts and a bridge connecting Majarra and Leyya. By the time that the creek was extended, the urban form of Sharjah had significantly shifted from a local model of urbanism to a modern one.

The vehicular urban layout confined the old Shajah, as priority was given to the roads, at the expense of the social and community fabric. Using Taylor's term, this was typical 'physical planning', which pursued a mere statutory order (Taylor, 1998, 39–40). This order seemingly had a sense of physical organisation, but it lacked the social and cultural sense of the place. The extension of roads enlarged the city and its urban territory, and the old city began to shrink under the pressure of the vehicular infrastructure. This resulted in the superimposition of a totally new imported urban model, without heeding the potential damage caused to the local urban setting and its historic role (see Figure 5). Consequently, its inhabitants abandoned their historic neighbourhoods and settled in the newly made urban extensions. This move was also prompted by the influx of economic wealth, generated by the oil industry and the desire for modern amenities.

After independence in 1972, the local municipality followed the existing urban layout and continued to lay streets and divide the city into districts following the traffic (see Figure 6). Accordingly, the Sharjah Government decided to change the shape and entrance of the creek, and this affected its traditional commercial activities. In 1977, more houses began to spread over the southern part, and the first tall buildings began to appear. The city began to change into a more imposing modern form, with paved roads, roundabouts and squares, but without any cohesive or functional urban blocks. Disparity between the social and cultural patterns of the inhabitants and the modern city structure started to become apparent.

Consequently, piecemeal development took place to replace the self-generated environment. This exacerbated the social segregation between locals and expats, who automatically followed the spatial segregation already established by the vehicular gridiron, in order to create cities within a city: a city of workers, a city of entertainment, a city of business, a city of expats, a city of locals and so forth. This resulted in the urban fragmentation of all city functions (residential, commercial and industrial), as well as distinct disconnects between urban growth and the sea, due to suburban and peripheral developments.

The trend towards suburban and peripheral urban development was ignited by the previous 1968 plan, which pushed several functions to the outskirts, either because of the lack of urban space or to escape from its disorder. This was exacerbated by the 1980 plan, which advocated a more rigid traffic pattern (see Figure 7). During this period of time, the city was not comprehensively planned; the 1980 plan caused construction to spread over peripheral areas where roads were projected. Since 1980, this trend has spawned a sort of urban suburbia, decreasing the relevance of the city's cohesive structure. As a point of reference, the old Sharjah became obsolete. The civic and public rubrics were referred to by only a very few buildings on the map, and this could be neither sufficient for the giant urban projection, nor representative of the existing conservative community. The industrial districts, which are normally located in the urban periphery, were given a strategic area that was adjacent to the lagoons. This caused tremendous functional issues between the zones of Sharjah. This plan continued to be implemented until 2000, without rectification or questioning of its relevance.

Conservation of Heritage

Due to the noticeable urban fragmentation, as well as the cultural mutation, cultural heritage began to become one of the strategic urban issues that were addressed under the auspices of the ruler of Sharjah, Sheikh Dr. Sultan Qasimi, in order to re-establish the cultural image of the city. Educated in history and agriculture, Dr. Qasimi launched a major conservation programme for the old Sharjah. Despite previous sporadic attempts, as well as the widespread damage to Sharjah's historic built environment, in 1990, the ruler hired an Iraqi archeologist and conservationist, Dr. Abdusattar Azzawi, to establish a holistic architectural and urban conservation programme.2 In an interview, Dr. Azzawi stated that the ruler of Sharjah was very conscious of the damage and that, in addition to the international campaigns aimed at safeguarding heritage worldwide by institutions such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), he had his own approach to rejuvenating the dynamic cultural elements of the city.

This conservation programme was quintessential for saving the maximum number of historic buildings from the rampant demolition that had taken place for almost four decades. Many historic structures have remained, thanks to this programme. Although the restoration techniques may be criticised for the over-restoration of some buildings, the conservation of historic sites in Sharjah is more genuine, when compared to that conducted in Dubai. The human factor of heritage is clearly looked upon as a key catalyst for the development of old Sharjah as a vibrant commercial centre. Sharjah was longing to establish cultural continuity through a conservation programme that provided not only restored buildings, but also a cultural environment that represented the authenticity of the city. This was clearly a decisive moment for distinguishing Sharjah from its neighbouring Dubai, which followed and encouraged modernisation, without a distinct sense of place. In order to boost their cultural image, Sharjah undertook several measures to reinforce its identity, adding new monuments, parks, squares and resorts that enhanced the Arabic and Islamic cultural traits of the city, such as Islamic souq, the Islamic civilisation museum, an archeological museum, a cultural palace and universities. The design of these monuments pursued an Islamic and Arabic style. Although these buildings might be criticised for their extravagant eclectic ornamentation, their role in endowing Sharjah with a typical cultural image cannot be ignored. Despite the fact that the master planning of Sharjah suffered from decades of gridiron traffic planning, H. H. Sheikh Dr. Sultan Qasimi explored this cultural project, in order to reverse the static image of modernisation. His perspective focused on a holistic vision, as echoed in the following statement:

> A central element in Sharjah's cultural expansion has been the desire to retain traditional values and preserve its heritage. H.H. Sheikh Dr. Sultan says, 'Besides showing visitors our museums, the main goal we would like to achieve from their visit is for them to have a greater understanding of our culture and beliefs.' Consequently, throughout the Emirate traditional Arab architecture has been maintained, while many of Sharjah's events and museums commemorate Arab history and art ... . (New York Times Magazine, 2007, 1).

Due to these efforts to conserve and develop a cultural image of Sharjah that distinguishes it as a regional cultural and heritage hub, in 1998, UNESCO rewarded the city the title of 'Cultural Capital of the Arab World'. Urban conservation in Sharjah was more than archeological and historic sites; it was the abstraction of the modern city through significant cultural landmarks and places.

Genesis of a New Mega City Centre

Despite these tremendous efforts to bestow and preserve a cultural image for Sharjah, developers exercised enormous pressure to emulate neighbouring Dubai's international style, and this prompted the genesis of a new city centre around the area of the three lagoons. Because of their adjacency to Dubai, these lagoons, which the ruler had crafted out of his environmental concern for the city of Sharjah, become an attractive area to developers, who were competing for dense high-rise buildings. In less than five years, this area has shifted the cultural paradigm of Sharjah by creating a new modernistic downtown as an antithesis to the established authentic image of the city. The increasing disconnect between the old and new centres is generating a conspicuous urban antagonism. On one hand, there is a dynamic old town with an active traditional harbour, which is still a vibrant traditional naval front with multiethnic activities, while, on the other hand, there is the artificial waterfront of the lagoons, which represents the contemporary image of Sharjah with mixed functions.

The area of the lagoons is currently completely driven by the development market and opposes the cultural representation that the city has long advocated. Besides the Al Qasba cultural and entertainment resources and a few governmental and non-governmental buildings that portray a cultural image and experience, this new imposed centre is an extension of Dubai's iconic image. However, Sharjah has been very active over the last decade in terms of activating its cultural memory through community development, education and cultural events. As an example, the Sharjah Biennial, which was organised around the heritage area and throughout different cultural spaces in the city, has gained both a regional and international reputation and adds much meaning to the cultural representation of the city.

Towards a Contextual Urbanism

Contemporary urbanism in UAE's cities is closely linked to the vehicular grid and fragmented architectural mega-projects. In addition to unsuccessful or hasty planning, these cities suffered from a lack of institutional structures that were sufficiently suitable for implementing and promoting healthy and humane urban development. As in most Middle Eastern and Gulf cities, the first imported Western model of municipalities, as well as planning ideologies, clashed with the traditional system of city management and making. This clash between the two systems of urban organisation and management, as well as the sudden appearance of material wealth, resulted in the gradual destruction of the historic and cultural environments. However, the potential of these environments was not perceived as being due to the dazzling image of modernisation and attractive consumerism; the local cultural heritage was seen as primitive and unworthy of consideration.

Currently, discourse on the cultural dimension of urbanism has undergone a local change, upon realising the long-term threat that modern urban forms pose to Emirati cultural and social potential. This is internationally supported, with voices advocating a new urbanism, which provides for new cultural landscapes and gives a new role to the community (Calthorpe, 1993). Rem Koolhaas iscerned new urbanism as follows:

> If there is to be a 'new urbanism' it will not be based on the twin fantasies of order and omnipotence; it will be the staging of uncertainty; it will no longer be concerned with the arrangement of more or less permanent objects but with the irrigation of territories with potential; it will no longer aim for stable configurations but for the creation of enabling fields that accommodate processes that refuse to be crystallized into definitive form ... Since the urban is now pervasive, urbanism will never again be about the new only about the 'more' and the 'modified'. It will not be about the civilized, but about underdevelopment. (Koolhaas, 1995, 969)

Although the concept of new urbanism is widely used and has started to lose its meaning as in the case of garden city, the focus here is not on the modality of how urbanism is practiced, but how it is embraced and understood, in order to produce a cultural space charged with communal meaning. What exacerbates the crisis of urbanism in the UAE is the scarce research or criticism of the urban status quo, which is peculiar to Gulf cities. The meagre local understanding of imported planning ideologies and practices endangers Gulf cities that rely blindly and solely on commercially driven international design firms.

To counter the destructive process of the loss of cultural memory through modern planning practices, Sharjah has been the driving force behind recovering the cultural image of cities in the UAE. Sharjah is still resilient enough to forge cultural continuity, and there is a clear governmental and community stance on cultivating a contextual urbanism that embraces the genius loci (Norberg-Schulz, 1980) or the sense of place (Jackson, 1994) pertinent to its urban fabric. Despite the fact that Sharjah may be regarded as not yet fully developed in contrast with the global Dubai and Abu Dhabi, the city has become a place where the sociocultural perspective of urbanism is prevalent. This is sought through preserving its past urban and cultural fabric and casting light on its contemporary one, in order to engender a genuine cultural image.

Nevertheless, so that Sharjah reaches its full momentum in a contextualizing urbanism that recovers a sense of place and cultural belonging, a comprehensive integration of cultural resources in urbanism should be sought and not only rely on individual interventionist or conservationist projects. The urbanisation process should henceforth incorporate the following effective measures. It should, first, recognise cultural heritage as an integral part of urbanism; second, explore historic and cultural continuity through comprehensive planning; third, establish a holistic approach to heritage that considers all past and present cultural and ethnic differences; fourth, enhance the sense of identity and sense of belonging, while still being contemporary; fifth, make use of history as a dynamic trigger for a sustainable culture; sixth, generate new cultural experiences or new value-added heritage; seventh, sustain communities and their sociocultural attachments to place; eighth, preserve natural and ecological resources that augment the urban experience; ninth, project a balanced population-carrying capacity, which maintains quality of civic life, and; finally, render traffic as a tool for efficient urban life, without exposing its mechanical infrastructure. These measures, amongst others, are imperative for reaching a contextual urbanism and countering the consequences of imported theme parks with dictated, fragmented and decontextualised urban forms.

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SHARJAH ARAB CULTURE CAPITAL MONUMENT 1998

Conclusion

Sharjah City is presented in this paper as a microcosm of the UAE. It demonstrates the conflict between conserving and promoting cultural heritage, while also developing social, environmental and economic potential. Unfortunately, at the national level, urban planning has not been at full speed until recently, due to mounting urban issues throughout the country. This paper explores the role of cultural resources in the urbanism of Sharjah, which, in terms of the UAE's cities, is advanced in respect to its efforts towards preserving its culture and unique environment. However, feeble urban planning and urban governance fails to lead the process forwards and allows local developers and foreign consulting firms to take hold of the form of the city. The chief argument in this paper is that cultural heritage is not stagnant and has latent dynamic elements that can be fully synergised through an integrated planning process to create the city as a space of cultural diversity, complete with a sense of place, sustainable environment and economic prosperity. Although Sharjah is a neighbor to artificially modern Dubai, it has the potential to attract communities that are ready to settle in today's agitated global economic market. Thus, what makes a city sustainable is not its towers and high-tech network, but its inhabitants, who are anchored in its setting through memory and a sense of belonging. In case of a catastrophe, such as the recent economic recession, businesses and people flee the city if it has nothing to offer besides its superficial image. In defiance of this image, Sharjah can be a place rooted in history, where heritage and economy provide a sustainable city.

The city form is not the result of drawing boards and fantastic designs. It is the building of a process that encapsulates the human experience and augments its potential through an adequate urban form, which is neither cinematographic, nor ephemeral. Hence, heritage has twofold momentum. On one hand, it provides a physical anchor with which to sustain the city through time and, on the other hand, it serves as a reference for future urban forms. It can never escape the genius loci of place. Urban fantasy through futuristic form may create its own myth, but it has no intrinsic value that portrays reality as true human experience, including its spiritual dimension.

The challenge is to reverse the definition of cultural heritage from a set of relics to a set of tools that awakens the innovative dynamic process to consider all possibilities of urbanism and so to forge an adequate city environment. Accordingly, the value of heritage sites needs to be recognised as a true incentive to guide the planning of cities that currently have no reference. If cities are not shaped to cultivate both physically and mentally sound human beings, then human sustainability is forever threatened. Cultural resilience in contemporary urbanism is a phenomenon that cannot be ignored in contemporary Middle Eastern cities, particularly in the Gulf cities. In the case of Sharjah, comprehensive planning that integrates cultural assets would augment urbanism from a utilitarian state to a contextual one. The urban morphology of the city has presented the resilience of cultural patterns, amidst fast-changing urbanisation. This resilience reveals the limits of physical planning and exposes the potential of human and cultural values in generating future sustainable urban spaces.