The western influence on traditional Arab cities: with particular reference to Dubai, UAE

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Abstract

During the past few decades, Arab countries have been successful in gaining political independence. This independence has been accelerated by their economic strength and fast urban development. In the cultural domain, however, western concepts and ideologies have been adopted, which to some extent contradict the traditional way of life. There is a concern that in most modern Arabic societies, the conflicts arising from this situation have rarely been seriously debated. Many practical decisions, which ultimately affect the structure of society, education and administration systems, and the shaping of the physical environment, are taken largely according to western ideologies. In many cases, major planning policies, development strategies, and even legal codes follow western models. Moreover, large-scale projects have been imported and implemented by western professionals, using their own modern building technologies. Dubai city, which is the second largest of the seven comprising the United Arab Emirates, has been a subject of colonialism, and has been significantly shaped by various imported ideologies: Arab, Persian and British. The fast urban development that followed the 1971 federation completely changed the character of Dubai. The local citizens now represent only a minority of the population of which the great majority consists of immigrants from different societies with different planning ideologies. The aim of this paper is to identify and discuss the impact of western planning ideologies on the traditional pattern of Arab cities. The transformation of a traditional community and its impact on the built environment is a major concern of this study, focusing on the architectural and planning implications of the cultural dichotomy. This transformation will be examined in relation to a case study of Dubai City. To explain the complex pattern of architectural concept and style, the development of building processes is discussed with respect to changes in socio-economic, political and cultural development. The dichotomy between the different generations of traditional and modern fabrics is also underlined.
1 Historical background

Archeological excavations have established the existence of settlements in Dubai as far back as the third millennium BC. However, the first recorded history recognizes the city of Dubai as a small fishing village during the 18th century (Gabriel [1]). Towards the end of that century, the area south east the Arabian peninsula was governed by two rivaling tribes: Qawasim (Ras Al-Kheima) and Beni Yass (Abu Dhabi). To consolidate their control over the area, the British required the leading Sheikhs along the cost to enter into a general treaty of peace that was signed in 1820 by nine Sheiks. This was further developed in a “Perpetual Maritime Truce” of 1853, in which they agreed to a complete cessation of hostilities at the sea. In 1892, Britain concluded an “exclusive agreement” with each Sheikdom whereby they agreed not to enter any agreement or correspondence with any other power other than Britain. By the end of the century, all formal external relationships of the Trucial Coast were handled solely through the government of British India. The beginning of Dubai as an independent Sheikhdom has started during 1930’s, when about 800 members of the Al-Bu Falasa subsection of the Bani Yas migrated from Abu Dhabi to Dubai after a dispute with its ruler.

At the turn of the century, Dubai’s relatively cosmopolitan population was estimated at 10,000. The first systematic census in what is now the United Arab Emirates (UAE) was conducted in 1968. At that time the population of Dubai reached 59,000. By 1985, the figure had risen to 419,000. The population thus increased six-fold between 1900 and 1968 and over seven-fold between 1968 and today (Gabrial [1]).

By the turn of the 20th century, Dubai was a sufficiently prosperous port to attract settlers from Iran, India, and Baluchistan. During the first half of the 20th century, Dubai has been subject to various changes. In 1920, the central government of Tehran established the Imperial Customs in the Persian port and a series of restrictive measures were imposed on the merchants their. The Indian trade, as a result, began to shift to Dubai. Along with the trade, merchants, craftsmen, pearlers, and others came with their families to live in Dubai. This was reinforced in 1904 by the introduction of a fortnightly steamship service from Bombay.

The word recession of the 1929, the introduction of the cultured pearl by the Japanese, and the 2nd World War had affected the economy of the area. In 1937, the ruler of Dubai has signed a concession agreement with the Petroleum Development (Trucial Coast) Company. The development of the oil industry has accelerated the economy and the society of Trucial Oman. In 1950’s Sheikh Rashid embarked on programs to establish new services and infrastructure, in addition to the dredging of the Creek (Khor). In 1953, the British Political agency was moved from Sharjah to Dubai, reflecting the latter’s established commercial importance. In 1966, Oil was discovered offshore Dubai, and the export of crude oil began just three years later.

Meanwhile, a flourishing Indian population had also settled in Dubai and they were working mainly in the Souk (market). The cosmopolitan environment
began to attract other foreigners to come and stay in the city. By the 1930’s, about 25 percent of the total population were foreigners; mainly Persian, Baluchis, Indians, and substantial communities from Bahrain and Kuwait (Heggins [2]).

In 1971, the UAE came into existence as an independent nation, merging seven sheikdoms (Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah, Ajman, Umm Al-Qaiwan, Ras Al-Khaimah, and Fujairah) to take the place of the formerly British-protected trucial states. The fast urban development that followed the 1971 federation completely changed the character of the traditional cities of the UAE. Workers from Asia, Europe and the USA arrived, increasing the population to 2.5 million by 1995 (Ministry of Planning [3]). The dynamism of the UAE economy, boosted by vast oil revenues and relieved by the end of conflict in the Gulf, is likely to continue to attract immigrants.

Over the past 30 years, Dubai has been transformed beyond recognition. The few traditional buildings, which remain, stood as isolated pockets in a new modern city. Old Dubai lies on the tip of a small line of salty water extending inland from the Creek, which divides Dubai into west side “Bur Dubai” and the east side “Deira”, as shown in figure 1. Bur Dubai contains the oldest traditional architectural fabric, including Sheik Saeed House (1896), Bastikia district (1910), and the old Souk. Deira contains Deira great souk (1920), Al-Ras residential areas and the Gold Market.

![Figure 1: Traditional districts of Dubai.](image)

2 Contradictions between tradition and modernity in Arab cities

The city, in general, is a place of appearance and a mixture of materialistic and spiritual values. Clark [4] defines city as a consequence of ideology that can be prospected to garner greater insight into the nature of culture, and culture can be
interrogated to foster a more profound understanding of the condition of the city.

Singer et al. have pointed out that according to the interaction of socio-cultural and urban forms of the city, there are two distinct patterns: orthogenetic and heterogenic (Hanafi [5]). Orthogenetic cities develop upon a local base and their role is to carry forward into systematic and reflective dimensions an old culture. They transform the implicit little traditions of the local culture into an explicit and systematic great tradition. The heterogenic cities reflect the influence of other areas and cultures. They represent technical orders and different ideologies of the local culture. In such cities, the priority comes to be given to economic growth and the expansion of power among goods of life. These two opposite patterns are well recognized in most traditional Arab cities, particularly with the growing presence and influence of dominant western cosmopolitan communities. In these cases, western concepts and ideologies have been adopted and implemented, which to some extent contradict the traditional way of life. Local traditions are increasingly suppressed in favor of typical western architectural style and occidentalized urban and planning techniques.

In many Arab countries, traditions provide a strong sense of community and privacy. However, western systems have been adopted in many cities. This adaptation might contradict the traditional way of life. The tools of western civilization, for instance, imply an ideology of their own, which is inseparable from the corresponding techniques. In most modern Arab cities, the conflicts arising from this situation have rarely been seriously debated. The usual way of concealing the inherent contradictions is to stress the importance of tradition in very general terms and to consider it as a guideline for private life, while many practical decisions, which ultimately affect the structure of the society, and the shaping of its physical environment, are taken largely according to western models and ideologies. This leads to divorcing private from public responsibilities in order to accommodate possible conflicts.

It is recognized that in Arab cities, there is almost complete rupture between the structure of the traditional urban fabric and the imported western style environment. Due to the unprecedented speed of development, there was no chance for an evolutionary process to emerge, where new technologies and building methods could be tested and adapted in accordance with the laws of the indigenous cultural system (Bianca [6]). Accordingly, modern environmental planning techniques and concepts have taken over, with the effect that they have overturned the authentic traditional pattern of Arab cities. Yet, in most Arab countries, the pretend superiority of the foreign model has been taken for granted, and the alleged obsolescence of the cities has never been seriously questioned, as it should have been. Therefore, large-scale development projects have been imported and implemented without taking into consideration the cultural context and environmental conditions. Basic needs were not reexamined in the light of indigenous life patterns and traditional cultures, but were simply identified with the physical structures developed to meet western needs. As a result, many traditional urban fabrics have been left to decay, while
modern western style patterns have been built at an amazing pace to replace them. Skyscrapers, curtain wall and glass facades, highways and tunnels now characterize most traditional cities. These modern urban fabrics are usually unable to cope with the specific cultural and environmental requirements of Arab societies, since they no longer reflect their culture.

3 Building process in Dubai

Building process is defined as the activities of a group of people (clients, developers, professionals, contractors, suppliers of building materials, financiers, …etc.) acting with their resources (finance, skills, materials, …etc.) to produce a particular building environment (see figure 2). The role of the participants may change according to changes in socio-economic and political, circumstances and cultural development of the society.

![Diagram of factors impacting building process](image)

**Figure 2:** Factors impact building process.

In the case of Dubai, the building process can be divided into the traditional process, the conventional process, and the modern process. In the traditional process, the changes are usually slow and minor, participants are limited and often have multiple tasks, and the techniques used are primitive. The modern process is usually concerned with highly specialized techniques and sophisticated interrelations between its participants. The conventional process, however, is considered as intermediate between traditional and modern processes using intermediate technologies.

The traditional process in Dubai reflects architectural and planning ideologies of the pre-modern era. Up to the 1950s, Dubai was confined to three traditional residential quarters surrounding the Creek: Deira, which was made up of Arabs, Persians and Baluchies; Al-Shindagha, a former residence of the ruling family,
made up of Arabs only; and Bur Dubai, which was dominated by Persian and Indian merchants. The traditional fabric of the old districts is shown in figure 3.

![Figure 3: Typical traditional architectural fabric of Dubai](image)

Source: adopted from Kay and Zandi [7]

The modern process was established in Dubai during the second half of the 20th century, with fast urban development following the discovery of oil. Therefore, the demand for occidental buildings and western planning ideologies increased. In 1954, a British firm was commissioned to improve the port facilities and deepen the Creek entrance. This enabled Dubai to facilitate the activities of petroleum development. A few years later, a new municipal council was established and dominated mainly by foreigners. One of the most important roles of the municipality was the active participation of establishing the Dubai Town Planning Scheme, which was carried out in 1971. This scheme (the comprehensive master plan) had an impact on the growth of the city and especially the provision of an efficient network linking both sides of the creek through constructing Al-Maktoum and Garhoud bridges as well as Al-Shindaghah tunnel. It also covered the necessity of upgrading the building and planning regulations.

In 1970's, Rashid Port was constructed, developed and extended. This enormous project played a considerable role in the development of the city. A few years later, a new policy was established in order to open the door for industrialization. An enormous industrial center, "Jabal Ali" was established and located 35 kms southwest of the central area of Dubai. This industrial center revolves around a 67-berth harbor for ocean-going vessels and over 650 industrial and trading enterprises.

Rashid Port, Jabal Ali Industrial Center, the Free Zone, and other projects have, on the one hand, added to increased trade activities in Dubai, and on the other, accelerated open-door policies of urbanization. These policies attracted a huge number of immigrants to come to the city. During this period of rapid development, the building industry and urban fabric had been strongly affected by two factors: the import of building materials, and the establishment of foreign factories for producing building materials and building components in Dubai.
Planning organization was based mainly on occidental codes and dominated by foreign professionals. Therefore, mostly western architects and planners controlled the architectural and planning professions in Dubai. Meanwhile, the traditional contracting system was replaced by a modern system with the participation of western professionals in order to cope with the new technologies provided by foreign consultants.

Figure 4: The typical modern architectural pattern – the central area of Dubai.

The foregoing discussion shows that, during the last 30 years, most of the participants of the building process, such as developers, professionals, contractors, and suppliers were foreigners. Meanwhile, both foreigners and local professionals, who controlled the resources of the building process, were mainly graduated from western universities and institutions. This system had a great influence on the building process, which can strongly be recognized in the occidental architectural style and urban fabric, particularly in the central area of Dubai (as shown in figure 4).

4 Conflicts between modern techniques and traditional approaches

To identify the basic ideological conflicts between modern planning techniques and the traditional approaches, different aspects, including social structure, planning approach, land use, and street patterns are highlighted in this section.

4.1 Social structure

Western societies are usually relied on artificial, highly formalized, and specialized bureaucratic networks in order to provide total welfare (Bianca [6]). The reality, however, is different. Life is forced into a bureaucratic straightjacket, social responsibilities and the resulting human commitments are replaced by anonymous institutions, which, in the name of vague and abstract moral principles, exercise a totalitarian control over individuals. To traditional Arab societies, the western system is a basically alien way of thinking. Social structures were based on direct and more real human relationships, on kinship
and social solidarity. In the past, administration and bureaucracy could, therefore, be minimized, while many social groups functioned as self-supporting entities. Traditional Arabic law is based on positive rules of social conduct. It shapes an ideal, spiritually confirmed way of life, rather than being a mere penal code to punish infringements of arbitrary manmade prescripts.

The adoption of the western administrative system in various Arab cities has often created an ambiguous situation. The imported system tends to destroy the self-regulating social structure, because it has to substitute itself for the older network. In addition to that, it cannot work properly on its own terms, because the remaining habits and customs, such as direct human connections and personalized decision-making, create permanent obstacles to its total implementation. Therefore, there is the danger that in the clash of both systems, the values of the traditional order are destroyed, while, the rational efficiency of the modern system is never achieved.

4.2 Planning approach

The goals, methods, and tools of the conventional modern planning approach in western societies are a direct outcome of the institutionalized approach to social life. It is therefore, no wonder that the usual master-plan approach, when applied to Traditional Arab cities, is even less adequate than it is in western cities. Most master plans conceived by westerners imply a different value system, which is consciously or unconsciously imposed. When implemented, their schemes either create stress and constraints in terms of introducing alien ideological concepts, or they result in complete failure for disregard of cultural realities.

In traditional Arab societies, the shared values, the religious consensus and the social interdependence between members of the community were strong enough to coordinate individual decisions in a natural and flexible way. There was no formal scheme, which gives in advance a rigid global picture of forthcoming development. Yet, the collective patterns of life and the given range of traditional architectural vocabulary ensured a balance between the parts of the whole at each stage of development. Planning was limited to a mere regulating and adjusting process, in order to prevent possible individual infringements on the right of neighbors and on the interests of the community (Bianca [6]). In many traditional Arab cities, particularly with the breakdown of traditional life, the society lost many of the bonds, which ensured the balance between accepted liberties and constraints. It lost the common language, while ensuring the homogeneous character of the collective product. New factors, such as concepts drawn from western models, abuse of individual liberties attached to the traditional concept of private property, and speculative trends no longer contained by the idea of public welfare, all played their part in destroying the traditional fabric and in producing a stronger urban structure.
4.3 Land use and street pattern

Conventional western planning methods stress the division of urban space along isolated functional criteria. Different areas of land uses are singled out by corresponding zoning schemes. Residential areas, for instance, are subdivided and socially segregated according to income levels. This pattern is usually characterized by the loss of the social context, on one hand, and a high traffic volume in order to reestablish the lost communication on the other hand. As a result, over-dimensioned street networks and transport systems are needed to reconnect what has been broken up by the land use scheme. The corresponding transport systems might cause further disruption by cutting through residential areas and transforming formerly coherent zones into isolated spaces. In contrast, traditional Arab cities stress the idea of a close interrelation between the various aspects of urban life (Kostof [8]). There was often a separation between various ethnic or religious groups. Therefore, each individual group follows their own way of life and builds up integral, almost self-sufficient social units. There was also a clear division between public and private areas, particularly in the residential quarters. It is also recognized that the contrast with modern western types of buildings are both isolated and exposed to all sort of interferences. Strong communities, which tended to represent complete social units, usually supported the architectural coherence of traditional residential units. Within the traditional quarters, it was possible for rich and poor families to cohabit without discrimination. This symbiosis, as pointed out by Bianca [6], relied on mutual economic and social dependence and was reinforced by common cultural and religious values as well as by the use of shared facilities such as the Souk, the Hammam, and the Mosque. The ideal was clearly the autonomous social unit, which means that integration was achieved by decentralized urban structures, as opposed to the modern city. Similar contrasts can also be recognized when comparing the concept of the central areas. In the traditional Arab cities, interaction between public spaces materializes in the main spines of the central Souk, and Khan. However, in western cities, the trend is totally different. It tends to separate different functions of land use. Modern development policies often neglect both the coherence of residential quarters and the animation of the central area. New mosques, for instance, are often isolated from their social context and their potential for generating lively public areas around them is ignored.

Vehicular movement is another determining factors that have shaped cities. Axial street patterns gained additional momentum due to the aesthetics of the newly discovered perspective view, and buildings had to be lined up so as to produce monumental vistas. The idea was adopted and further developed by the French boulevard, which become a major planning device in the 19th century. Since then, town planning in western cities has been identified with street planning, and building blocks have been treated as mere islands within the street pattern.

Traditional Arab cities, however, were built for human scale pedestrian movement (Cohen [9]). Interior display of architectural beauty prevailed, while
exterior ostentation was considered as contrary to social convention. With reference to the urban fabric, priority was given to the clear definition of space compartments for various sort of private and public use, while movement patterns were made subservient to the resulting cellular structure (Bianca [6]). This pattern is recognized in the traditional districts of Dubai (see figure 5). This structure corresponds to a well-established hierarchy and marked degrees of privacy, ensuring that every section of the network is clearly adapted to the character of the space it serves.

![Figure 5: Typical traditional and new patterns of movements in Dubai](image)

Source: adopted from Fairservice et al [10]

The previous discussion shows that western architecture and planning typically neglect the interrelation between randomly placed architectural volumes. Western planning techniques rely on a purely rational approach and on quantitative methods. Master plans are diagrammatical schemes with little relation to meaningful physical space. The schemes are usually implemented in large dimensions without much concern for proportion and for architectural detail, which are essential in producing a human environment. The result is not usually related to the pattern of human life and is difficult to animate, particularly in traditional societies. This is because the correlation with social content is usually missing. Most architectural designs and urban planning are affected by industrial esthetics and therefore directed by standardized building components and architectural products as well as by mechanized urban life.

5 Conclusion

The modern history of Dubai began in the 1970s. The construction of the "Rashid Port", the massive development of transportation and infrastructure, and the construction of "Jabal Ali" industrial center, were all part of the modernization scheme in the city. Fast urban development, accelerated by great economic strength, has been affected by the adaptation of western planning ideologies. Large-scale projects have been imported and implemented without
taking into consideration the cultural context. The main questions could be asked here are: Are western planning ideologies able to cope with the cultural and environmental requirements of Arab societies? What are the main contributions that could be added by architects and planners in order to avoid any conflicts arising from any adaptation of western ideologies?

Most Arab cities, including Dubai, are facing some contradictions between modern planning techniques and the traditional approach. This might destroy the values of traditional orders and culture. In the case of enforcing western planning approaches, the traditional fabric would be bound to disappear after few decades. Therefore, traditional architecture would lose its roots and become a matter of history. At the same time, it would not make sense to keep the structure patterns of the traditional environment in their historical form or to impose them onto the present situation, which might be rejected by society. To avoid that, more in-depth approaches are needed in order to consider the culturally relevant factors of architecture.

Architects and planners would have to play an important role in the establishment of a new cultural and environmental synthesis. They should have a good knowledge of the traditional solutions to environmental problems in order to grasp their spiritual principles. They should develop: a critical view of western methods of planning and their ideological implications; an insight into possible incompatibilities with their own cultural system, and perspicacity for the potential of western technologies with regard to possible conversion and adaptation.

References
