Whatever Happened to Dubai's Public Spaces?

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As an ambitious city aspiring to become a major contributor to and player in the global world, Dubai often tends to be endeared to and affected by grand-scale urbanism and skyscraper skylines. The recent practice of architecture in Dubai is replete with examples of architectural monuments and miraculous constructions. Whilst the architectural feats required to raise grand structures for global branding and economic strategy are noteworthy, many other facets of urbanism also warrant adulation and exploration. One example is the narrative of *human-scale urbanism*—the pedestrian-driven places that put people at the center of the town. Due to its human-scale nature and morphology, *the quotidian landscape*, more than other existing settings, such as those modeled on "bigness"[1] and dispersion successfully narrates a clear story about the essence of everyday urbanism: the nexus between the physical and the social, and the architecture and everyday life of the city's urban spaces. Life and culture in the UAE have evolved drastically, but in old communities where the quotidian landscape is still palpable, it has stayed the same—simple, open to everyone, and full of animation and affection.

This essay addresses the following questions: Have Dubai's urbanism and public spaces changed for the better or worse? How did architecture and urban design over the past fifty years respond to public spaces? Are there multiple urban designs, and if so, which ones had the most influence on the quality of urban space? What urban design practices and ideals might alter the city in the future?

As in North America, urban form and architecture in the United Arab Emirates has changed tremendously over the past three decades. In the early 1970s and 1980s, small-scale, highly diverse city blocks, or what Douglas Rae called "urbanism," predominated (Figure 1).[2] Urban form was rich with visual variety, density, human animation, uses, and activities, and was geared towards pedestrians, not automobiles. Urbanism was less concerned with spaces for the privileged or the well-off and more concerned with eliminating the distance between different income groups; its dogma was "space for many" or "space for everyone." Urban space was conceptualized based on cultural ideals and noncommercial social perspectives: it considered multiples cultures and ordinary people as well as elites and entrepreneurs, creating a generous, integrated urban space where cultures congregated and separated based on their daily itineraries and rhythms. Older urban fabrics characterized by the quotidian landscape of human-scale urbanism lay outside the domain of power, consumerism, and politics.

In the 1980s and 1990s, Dubai came to be dominated by large-scale modernist superblocks, transportation infrastructure, and large subdivisions, often promoted by federal policies. Segregated, low-density developments were booming around Dubai, and urban development, inspired by modernist architecture and planning principles, shifted toward isolated, fragmented, single-use buildings that were often surrounded by larger, isolated open spaces, segregating people from each other, the public realm, and basic

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FIGURE 1. (Color online) A human-scale landscape with its dense fabric located a few hundred feet away from Dubai's downtown corridor. (Photo by the author)

daily needs (Figure 2). The public realm lost its social content and was eradicated by the growth of sprawling suburban communities typically served with large arterial streets and Right of Way (R.O.W.), freeways, and grade-separated interchanges.[3] Much of the urban redevelopment of the 1980s and after was notably not understanding of and sympathetic to context and the preservation of historic urban design elements, including the vibrant and tight urban fabrics of the 1970s.

Lately, bigness—large-scale architecture—has become the urban model (Figure 3). It dominated urban design practice and privatized urban life and a large swath of urban spaces. While bigness has emerged as a successful branding strategy for attracting international capital, its architecture has failed to connect with ordinary people, because its physical form emerged under the pressure and concentration of capital and the perpetual movement toward privatization; public space was no longer designed for the general public, but instead merely for commercial uses and consumption. Cities are being built as "new seats of power" to replace older models of urbanism.[4] Urban space became encoded into a political economy that has privatized public spaces to exclusively service consumption, providing fewer opportunities for ordinary people to communicate with each other and engage with the public realm.

This model of urbanism embraces economic tolerance and "bigness", including "megaprojects and spectacular architecture on a massive scale,"[5] all of which is privatized by nature.[6] Centralized and top-down rather than inclusive decision-making has been the foremost means of accelerating bigness in local architecture. Public space

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FIGURE 2. (Color online) Endless suburban expansion surrounded by desert landscape. (Photo by the author)

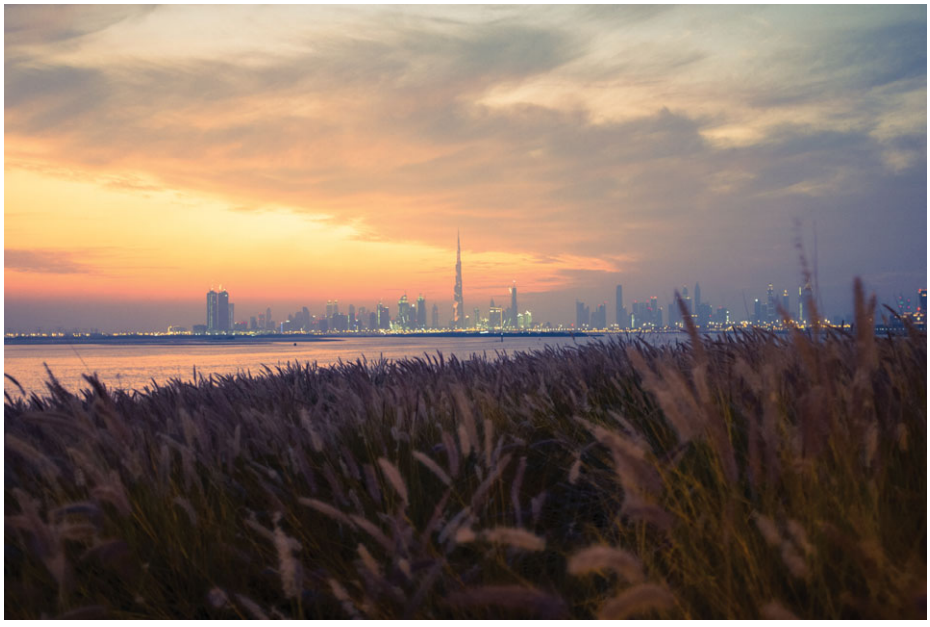


FIGURE 3. (Color online) Bigness in architecture, downtown Dubai. (Photo by the author)

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design was driven by the concentration of power in public-private capitalists' firms, which have been more concerned with the accumulation of revenue than with the tenets of sustainable urbanism.[7] In Dubai's current policy environment, branding, exclusionary practices, and global urbanism will continue,[8] and "bigness" is definitely unstoppable and inevitable.[9] Recently, Dubai began the construction of the Santiago Calatrava tower, which will surpass Burj Khalifa, the tallest skyscraper in the world. Dubai's "bigness" approach to urbanism has made applicable Moser's concept[10] of "serial seduction," which describes a "seductive" power of particular cities that inspires pervasive imitation—for instance, imitation of Dubai in neighboring cities such as Abu Dhabi and Manamah, leading Yasser Elsheshtawy[11] to coin the term "Dubaization" as a label for cities' emulation of Dubai's bigness model. However, recent urban design practices in Abu Dhabi reveal a reconciliation between local, traditional design ideologies and technological advancement, which appears in the development of Masdar City; this reconciliation may preserve Abu Dhabi from a future that is overly reliant on the model of bigness.

The quotidian urban form moves beyond the notion of the city as a spectacle, of fancy towers, it represents another form of architecture and space in Dubai that is worth understanding and exploring. The concept of human-scale urbanism calls city planners and architects to look beyond bigness in development and to instead strive for an urban fabric focused on sharing, integration, and tolerance. Human-scale urbanism appears clearly in Dubai's pre-1980s urbanism, which embraced compactness and diversity. Human-scale urbanism involves places that appear to be centers of generosity, spontaneity, social vitality, and a diverse economic landscape. It also involves Walters's[12] interpretation of everyday urbanism: "people claim leftover spaces of the political economy of global capital for their own cultural purposes and needs.

Neighborhoods characterized by human-scale architecture are generous spaces where strangers and acquaintances gather, mingle, and interact (Figure 4). They are also places where members of a variety of ethnic groups meet with tolerance and respect.[13,14] According to Elsheshtawy,[15] human-scale architecture "evokes a poignant sense of realness and humanity." In the UAE's urban landscape, human-scale environments are examples of generosity and thoughtfulness in urbanism—indications of ordinariness, openness, humbleness, and modesty in Dubai's built environment that offered to everyone the free gifts of consolidated landscapes and human interaction.

Human-scale elements of architecture and landscape are often overlooked in popularized descriptions of the UAE's megaplanning narratives; these elements have received scant attention in the urban studies literature. The construction of mega-developments, high-rises, superlative architecture, waterfront developments, and island projects illustrates a longstanding image of Dubai as a luxury destination. Other narratives suggest that cities in the UAE are not vibrant and have not been designed for people due to the country's hot, arid climate and a recent planning approach that facilitates grand architecture and large-scale transportation interventions. In reality, however, large sections of Dubai are designed around and for people, not cars or iconic architecture, signifying the UAE's urban diversity and "resilience of human spirit."[16] This human-scale architecture reflects a unique urban design and architectural philosophy that emphasizes the notion of openness and space for everyone rather than for consumers only, revealing the power of architecture to create public spaces full of spirit, stories, opportunity, exchange, and

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FIGURE 4. (Color online) Streets bustling with people and everyday urbanism. (Photo by the author)

movement. The philosophy of enhancing the capacity of architecture to connect with people and their cultural practices was at the heart of Dubai's urbanism and architecture in the 1970s, a reality that has been forgotten in recent urban development.

I argue that in the future Dubai should focus on "fewer, smaller, iconic buildings that deviate from Dubai's monumental weakness for [bigness]."[17] Dubai should recover its traditional and human-scale urban forms. This emphasizes the revival of the urban design ideologies—such as density, diversity, and fine-grain urbanism—that shaped Dubai and the broader region in the past.[18] The revival of old virtues and urban design ideals are not a matter of historicism or nostalgia for the good old days. Instead, it's a necessary acknowledgment of socially rooted values and culturally sensitive urbanism that emphasizes the role of public spaces in creating an inclusive and engaging environment for many, not merely for elites.

This essay stresses the importance of understanding the merits and virtues of these old urbanism(s) and architecture and revising the old forms to guide our future development. The goal is not to literally replicate the forms of urbanism that developed in the 1960s and 1970s, but to recover some of the urban design ideals and actions that modern and postmodern urbanisms have bypassed and eliminated. The article argues that architecture and urban design are influenced by seemingly unalterable forces in the region, such as technology, politics, culture, and the economy.[19] For that reason, a return to or reintroduction and adaptation of neohistorical urban design tenets and ideals should be considered in all aspects of city evolution and reflected in future urbanism.

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NOTES

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