Transitory Sites:  
Mapping Dubai's 'Forgotten' Urban Public Spaces

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Abstract

Seeking to uncover a hidden side of Dubai, this paper investigates the cities forgotten urban spaces. I am using a theoretical framework which responds to a shift in global city research, emphasizing the everyday, as well as transnational connections in which both the local and the global are closely intertwined. I am arguing that such processes could be observed in these ‘forgotten’ settings. Utilized by Dubai’s low-income migrant community for the exchange of information as well as being a major gathering point. Through an analysis of users, their activities as well as the morphology of these spaces, I am situating them within the overall development of Dubai. A key construct developed in this study and used as a unit of analysis is the notion of transitory sites – viewed as a main element in understanding migrant cities. The architectural and urban character of these sites is identified.

1 Introduction

“The panorama-city is a “theoretical” … simulacrum… The voyeur-god created by this fiction … must disentangle himself from the murky intertwining daily behaviors and make himself alien to them. The ordinary practitioners of the city live “down below” … they are walkers, Wandermaenner, whose bodies follow the thicks and thins of an urban “text” they write without being able to read it.”

Michel de Certeau (1984) (my emphasis)

If one were to truly understand the city of Dubai, or any city for that matter, we need to move closer, to places where everyday life is taking place. By focusing on the spaces of the everyday, rather than the abstract spaces of economic flow, I am trying to respond to a shift in global city research whereby the emphasis has moved towards establishing uniqueness and differences rather than similarities, among cities (e.g. Ley, 2004). To that end, this paper reports on a survey in which the cities urban public spaces in its traditional areas are mapped. Both the morphology of these spaces in addition to their use and users are studied. Through this narrative an attempt will be made to read the “urban text” written by the cities migrants.

Here, I will offer an analysis of these ‘forgotten’ urban spaces, situating them within the city and showing how they are a prime example of what I have termed, transitory spaces. The paper concludes with an attempt at identifying some of the unique qualities of these transient settings and how they have become a way of identifying transnational cities.
2 Surveying the Cities Urban Public Spaces: Transitory Settings

In surveying the cities urban public spaces my main criteria for identification was that they should be a central gathering point for the cities migrants, are easily accessible, and contain a variety of activities as well as users. Four sites were identified and three were selected for further analysis: Baniyas square; the Ghubeiba square; and the Satwa district’s central gathering area (Fig. 1a & b). I employed a methodology of participant observation which entailed observation of activities, taking field notes, interviews with selected informants, and photography. In addition archival information was used to contextualize these settings (e.g. newspaper reports); governmental reports, maps and aerial photographs were used for conducting a social and morphological analysis.

The three selected settings have a set of common factors: location next to public transport (bus stops); intense levels of commercial activities; location within, or in close proximity to, poor areas. Furthermore, they have the highest density of residents in the city. They are characterized by a very active and vibrant street life, to the extent of being a main gathering point for low-income residents. I will discuss the character/inner life of each of these briefly below.

Fig. 1a: Four sites identified for the survey

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2 The fourth site is the residential Karama district. It caters mostly to a middle class expatriate population and has a different type of activity than the other settings.

3 Photographs were taken using long exposure times (10sec to 3 min) to convey some of the dynamism present in these spaces.

4 Ranging from 22,000 to 75,000 people/km² (Dubai GIS Center, 2006).
2.1 Baniyas square

Baniyas square is surrounded by well-off and middle zones in addition to being in close proximity to the poor district of Naif. It is located in a section of the city called Deira – considered to be the traditional commercial hub of Dubai. One informant told me that the square was known for the presence of a cinema, as well as shops offering luxurious fashion items. However, as locals have moved out from the city center and into suburbs it has become a setting mostly associated with expatriates (Aysha Belkhair, personal communication, March 20, 2006).

The square and its surroundings – particularly the space around the Sabkha bus stop – is a setting for the exchange of messages and receiving news from home. This has become quite prevalent to the extent that surrounding areas are divided by nationality and ethnic backgrounds. Each member of a group would therefore know where to find his compatriots (Kutty, 2002). The space is relatively empty during the day however in the evening it is crowded with people. This reaches a climax on Friday. Particularly attractive are the green lawns, in the middle of the space, which are a place for people to sleep, eat or simply chat with others. Also, street corners are gathering nodes for people, who simply stand there and talk while observing passers-by (Fig. 2).

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5 Aysha is a scholar on the history of Dubai, studying at Harvard’s Center for Middle Eastern studies. Information was communicated during a workshop on Dubai held at Harvard Graduate School of Design titled „Dubai: Emerging critical themes in Planning and Design“
2. 2 Ghubeiba and Satwa

These two spaces are closely associated with low-income users – mostly from the Indian sub-continent.\(^6\) Ghubeiba, is located in Bur Dubai, near the historic Shindagha district. Satwa on the other hand is further away, bordered by the two wealthy areas of Sheikh Zayed Road, and Jumeirah/Um Suqeim both containing high end residential villas.\(^7\) The two settings have major bus stops which draw in people from all over the city contributing to the crowded feeling, particularly on weekends. Further adding to the attraction are commercial establishments which cater to the constantly moving transient users. They include eateries, cafes, and newspaper stands which display mostly Hindi magazines and newspapers. There are also seating areas. Food and drinks which are being served in these places are a reminder for these workers of places back home. In some instances they even are places for illegal consumption of alcohol (Fig. 3) (Menon, 2006).

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\(^6\) Afghanistan, India, Pakistan and Bangladesh; but also Philippines and China

\(^7\) Satwa was initially planned as a suburban residential district for Dubai’s low-income local population in the 1960s. Consisting of repetitive, identical plots on which houses were provided by the government. Eventually, in the 1970s and 80s the local population moved out to other areas in the city. At the present, a small local population occupies some of these houses – they are mostly low-income and poor and belong to the Shiite sect.
In close proximity to these bus stops, are zones which act as a major hangout for passers-by. A fascinating sight they include hundreds of people, simply standing, talking to each other or watching others (Fig. 4). Interviews revealed that many come to these settings on a regular basis to interact with others and meet friends, and receive news from back home, thus serving an important communication function (Kutty, 2002). A variety of dialects and languages could be heard while walking through the crowd.
In addition to these informal modes of communication other more advanced means exist as well. For example, I observed a heavy use of mobile phones which many of these workers have; there are also a number of Internet Cafes which are close by, and heavily used. Thus, ties to home countries are retained, and these spaces become settings where such transnational connections are nurtured (Fig. 5).

![Figure 5: Maintaining connections through Internet Café’s and mobile phones](image)

Further, highlighting this transnational connection is the ubiquitous presence of money exchange operators. There is also a large presence of ethnic restaurants although being aware of the multicultural nature of potential clientele advertisements entices users by noting that the menu contains Indian, Chinese and Philippine specialties. Other restaurants are restricted to a certain ethnic group (e.g. Karachi restaurant) and making this quite clear through decorative elements and other signs (Fig. 6). Furthermore, spaces are imbued with meaning by becoming a way to connect to home countries – territories are marked through traces such as the placement of paper lights celebrating the Indian Diwali festival, the presence of advertisement geared towards compatriots, the playing of culturally specific sports such as cricket in parking lots and writing of graffiti (Fig. 7).

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8 For an excellent analysis on the role of remittances and the extent to which they have revived local economies in India see, see Raymer (2005).
Figure 6: Remittance centres and ethnic restaurants
3 Urban Character

Dubai is frequently described as a city without character, lacking any identity and some have even questioned whether it is a ‘real’ city to begin with (e.g. Parker, 2005). Yet this analysis showed that meaning and identity can be found in some of the cities public spaces frequented by its low-income population who add character – although most of it is transitory and fleeting. In looking at all these settings a number of commonalities and interesting observations emerge:

- All are dominated by male users (reflecting the cities demographic).
- Absence of locals – except for those using commercial establishments
- Newspapers portray these areas almost like exotic locales; a place where one can find some sort of authentic living (e.g. Landais, 2005; Bharadwaj, 2005).
- Gathering points of labourers occur at the edge of large spaces, empty lots, etc. In other words, incidental spaces which were not planned for such use.
- They are easily accessible and in some instances visible from the main roads. Being in them is not threatening, as there is still a sense of the main city being nearby. However informants
have told me that they become haunts for drug users, prostitutes, and other illegal activities in late hours. Crime is high in these areas as well with reports of murder and robbery (Al-Jandaly, 2006).

- Another level of unplanned, anti-social activity is graffiti. These writings are not along the visible square or spaces, but rather hidden and tucked away in alleyways. They offer an interesting counter point to the carefully groomed image of the city (Fig. 8).

Figure 8: Proliferation of graffiti

4 Conclusion: Transnational Cities – Transitory Spaces
The sites which I have analyzed defy conventional modes of depiction and conceptualization. To describe them as hybrid spaces, settings in which there is an ‘intensification’ of local processes resisting globalization only reveals part of the picture. An approach is needed that would take into account some of the unique qualities of these settings. These spaces exist wherever there are migrants;

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* The classic view of hybridity, a concept articulated by Homi Bhabha and others suggests that the ‘global citizen’ engages in a fusion process where old and new cultures intermingle, creating new forms and through this a detachment from participating cultures can occur (Bhabha, 1994). This concept received considerable scrutiny within the cultural studies literature. E.g. Nezar AlSayyad in Hybrid Urbanism, or Jane Jacobs in Edge of Empire (AlSayyad, 2001; Jacobs, 2001). AlSayyad – making the case for hybridity – argues that in cities throughout the world globalization led to creation of “third places” an in-between space of “spatial reconciliation of incommensurable constructions of subcultures” (Alsayyad, 2001; p. 8).
they are places that – to quote Yeoh who is describing Singapore – “discourage... emotional attachment to the city as lived place” (Yeo, 2003, p. 247).

On the notion of polarization they are not ghettos in any conventional sense. A distinct character is retained – a fact further highlighted by their close proximity to the wealthy areas of Dubai, thus not being completely excluded.\(^\text{10}\) The local/global dichotomy is not present – both processes are played out – informal modes of communications vs. internet cafes; ethnic restaurants vs. remittance centers, and so on. A transnational trajectory where residents occupy both a local space (the city) and a remote, ‘global’ setting (home).

A key word here is transitory spaces. A space where by definition one stays only for a brief period of time. Similar to airport lounges and bus stops they are meant as spaces to be passed through, discouraging unnecessary lingering and hence attachment. Depicted by anthropologist Marc Augé arguing that they have become a distinct sign of super-modern cities (Augé, 1995). Similarly in Dubai, a city that lacks a substantive history, its produced spaces are non-places, characterized by the ephemeral and the transient which can be seen in the following:

- Anonymous building character; minimizing their recognizability
- Soft boundaries, making them easily permeable (accessible) thus discouraging formation of any strong community
- Location next to public transit
- Absence of any planned public space (with the exception of public parks)

One may speculate that these spaces have become characteristic of cities throughout the world, although in most instances they exist side-by-side with fixed settings – places with character and history. In Dubai however, the notion of transience when applied to its urban environment is THE defining character. There is no permanence anywhere. Interestingly, as I have tried to show, people are not passive, and even within these anonymous settings, and under adverse economic conditions, they are able to give meaning to these spaces – and perhaps for a brief period of time make them into places (Fig. 9).

\[\text{Figure 9: A side alley near the Ghubeiba bus stop}\]

\(^{10}\) Not in the sense of Cabrini Green/Magnificent Mile in Chicago for example; or as Teresa Caldeira describes Sao Paolo, Brazil as a ‘city of walls’ (Caldeira, 1996)
Literature review

Menon, S., 2006. Heady illicit brew is on sale in Dubai suburbs: bootleggers masquerading as peanut sellers in Satwa and Muthena areas serve drink in plastic cups for DH5. Gulf News, Feb. 4, p. 4
Parker, I., 2005. The Mirage: The architectural insanity of Dubai. The New Yorker, October 17, 128-143