

From Imagining Dubai to Imaging Dubai:

A Transition in Urban Representational Ideologies from an Image of
Dubai's Architecture to an Image of its Urban Experience

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Introduction

Among the play of worlding cities and city branding discourses, the visual representations of urban form and urban life remains eminent in a climate of image and media consumerism. Not far from this prevailing trajectory, Dubai, a city arising from tabula rasa context to construct its urban spaces, idiosyncratic brand and its image, has systematically deployed its mega developments and iconic architecture in the construction of its spatio-visibility to an extent associating the city trademark to a blizzard of images of skylines and offshore developments. Real estate marketing strategies as well as city campaigns, at first, dwelled on the image of the city's "starchitects" and "starchitecture" and served heavily in transfiguring the city into purchasable urban fragments and commodities thereby intensifying Dubai's economy in the aim of locating it on a map of global cities.

However, the credit crunch of 2009, in addition to severely affecting the economic condition of Dubai, had impacted upon an already problematic notion, which is the social and communal sentimental attachment and belonging of Dubai citizens to their city. The discourse governing the production of the image of Dubai, prior to the crisis, was exclusively typified by the image of its built forms and amenities for the advantage of investment and development. This was prioritized over the production of an integral image of the city's urban society, which in turn, magnetized scholarly criticism of Dubai's "Cityness" and its existence as a condition rather than an urban reality and gradually dismantled its image.

In the process of reclamation, in an attempt to reestablish Dubai's image, not merely as an investment destination, or as representation of high-rise towers and artificial islands, but also, as home to its respective cultural capital and urban society, the discourse shifted towards commissioning means of social media to emphasize the role of individuals and communities play in forming their respective image of the city. A new municipal initiative launched in the foreground of this framework plead "the world to see Dubai in all its human details" named "#My Dubai" utilizing Twitter, Instagram and Facebook "to create the city's story by its people" image-by-image

creating “the world’s first autobiography of a city” diminishing any skepticism on “whose city is it”.

From a perspective that focuses on the transition of visual representation discourse of Dubai, this paper enquires into the role of social media in the transition Dubai’s image from an imaginative representation of its built forms to an elaborated image of its urban experience and ownership. It also concerns itself with inversion from a top-down image construction strategies to an integral process drawing on the involvement of the “*modern Flâneur*” to recompose a revitalized image.

Imagining Dubai: The provisional landscape of Modernity

It is essential to begin by demonstrating how Dubai’s urban development and the construction of its image emerged simultaneously. It is equally critical to note how the image of Dubai was focalized on its architecture and modern landscape as evidence of its modernity and the way in which media helped shaping its distinctive image.

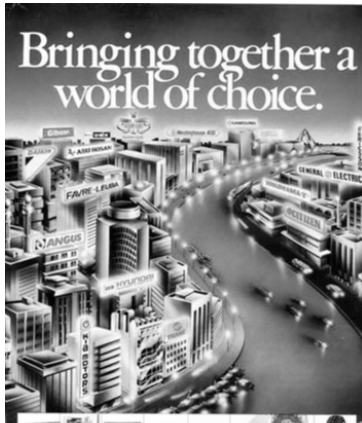
From the 1960s onwards, Dubai exhibited unprecedented model of rapid urbanization fueled by its socio-cultural and economical transformations triggered by the oil boom. The emphasis on exemplifying Dubai’s sought modernity was constant through “demand-oriented” planning (Ashworth & Voogd,1990), which required consecutive urban plans to rationalize the city’s rapid expansion and to provide comprehensive urban structure and infrastructure. Dubai, a model of the “Instant City”, with its rapid urbanization occurring in the form of an expanded belts, demographic outburst and influx of investment aspired to merge itself into the wider regional and global networks seeking to promote its economy and to establish itself as a recognized global player in the global marketplace. Its fast track urbanism as Simpson asserts was propelled by the wish-image of contemporary global capitalism (Simpson, 2008).

Subsequently, in a gesture to lessen Dubai's dependence on oil revenues to expand other sectors of economy, strategies concentrated on constructing a modern image necessitated to attract foreign investments as Anne Haila argues (1997). Dubai engaged in an image construction by utilizing media to represent its modern architecture as an object of display of the city's increasing wealth and power to lure to foreign investments. Dubai's constructional narrative provided an archetype for this kind of fast-track, overnight city building that was constantly announcing key projects aimed at granting the city a modern appeal. International Architects were repeatedly invited to design key projects such as the Emirate Telecommunications Corporate (by Arthur Erickson, 1986), Dubai chamber of Commerce (by Nikken Sekkei, 1995), National Bank of Dubai (by Carlos Ott, 1996), as well as the self claimed 7 stars hotel Burj Al Arab (by Tom Right, 1999).

Representations of Dubai city in media and promotional material, between 1970s and 1990s, often visualized the city's modern architecture and landscape. The city's modern architectural icons appearing in these representations were mostly dislocated, and often falsely adjoined into an illusive proximity and density in a noticeable contrast with their actual positioning and their social reality. As a result, the incomplete city undergoing immense construction was "imagineered" and collaged into a vivid complete modern urban setting, and the image of Dubai emulated traits of an ideal modern landscape of Dubai's envisioned future.



Images of Dubai from Sheikh Rashid Tower looking south (left) and looking north (right), 1978



Dubai Representations showing the Creek 1986 (left), and a virtual juxtaposition of Dubai iconic buildings 1992 (right).

Following the turn of millennium, the establishment of semi-government properties enterprises (such as Nakheel and EMAAR), developments were by all means supporting and realizing the grand visions of turning Dubai into the spectacle it was envisioned. Dubai's urban planning, following the same logic of its "Imagineering", was steering towards producing mixed-use projects and mega-scale developments for the real estate market, both inland and offshore. This spatial reconfiguration of modern architecture, high-rise towers and man-made islands was extensively paraded through media and architectural imagery as part of everyday advertising and marketing practices thus leading to redefining and bolstering Dubai's image and brand-scape. The abundance of computer generated imagery and 3D modeled architectural renderings of planned developments were inevitable to advertise commodities of the real estate market; their effects on Dubai's image were extensive.

The outcome was a juxtaposition of images of polished skyscrapers and artificial islands serving the emergent economy to express via media tools its ideology and fascination for symbols of economic development and national progress, therefore ultimately associating Dubai image with its "Manhattan-like" spatial composition (Davidson, 2008). With the media overemphasis on the city urban form on the bigger scale, the image and its visual content reveals how the city was converted into a sort of visual spectacle, which foster an illusive reality accessible to a privileged handful. Consequently, Dubai's spatio-visibility comprising its skyline, shoreline and its array of "starchitects" signature buildings became the spectacle and

consumption of tourists, investors and residents; its land, desert and water became the medium of its urbanism.

According to the view widely shared by locals, visitors and a worldwide audience, Dubai, created its unique brand within the global market place by “capturing the attention through superlatives” (Elsheshtawy, 2013). The main feature of the “Dubai brand” was its deployment of media infrastructures to “Imagineering” its emblematic architecture, landscape and emerging urbanity aspects into its own respective brand in a considerably brief period of time. This image however, as often criticized, had marginalized aspects of the city’s urban life in favor of promoting a reformed economy experience heretofore based on real-estate market.

The vast majority of Dubai’s official representations in the media were subjugated by a general fascination of tangible superlative spaces and places. The medium itself that is Media, was predictably influenced by the governing ideology seeking global exposure as opposed to local interest. Everyday practitioners of Dubai, whether residents, tourists or business seekers were placed at the recipient end of the image making equation thus making them external viewers and consumers of the spectacle.

As a result, Dubai’s rapid development concurrent with an image making process created a brand-scape of glittering skylines and shorelines which, despite of its sustained hegemony, excluded individual experiences and often denied urban and cultural life manifestation in most of city’s representations.



Above: Dubai International Financial Center real image (2003). Below: Dubai International Financial center development plan (2005)

2009 Economic Crisis: Implications on the notion of the Image

Since the turn of millennium, the image of Dubai and its urbanity mirrored its ideology of turning the city into a global center of exchange. In the process of constructing this brand and urbanity, as we previously demonstrated, ideological representation often privileged a hegemonic and homogeneous quality of Dubai brand-scape over a comprehensive social-scape of everyday life. This trajectory resulted in an image of the city severed from its complex social fabric and its urban experience.

In the years of extreme optimism leading up to the global financial crisis of 2009, the success of Dubai's real estate market reached a record altitude surpassing any other market in the Gulf region or in the Middle East (Elsheshtawy, 2006) thereby acquiring Guy Debord's notion of the 'spectacle' and sheer consumerism (Debord, 1988). The spectacle that is Dubai's advertised image was centered on property exchange thus turning the city into purchasable urban fragments of offices, retails and gated communities. Throughout the period leading up to the credit crunch, Dubai's notion of urban experience remained peripheral while other cultural representations of Dubai's urban life often excluded the majority of its expatriate community to merely represent an image of an elite lifestyle. This process of culturally and socially selective image-making exemplified a general sense of "alienation", in Debordian terms, produced by the disconnectedness between the observer and the physical object (Debord, 1967).

Dubai's economy took a paralyzing hit in 2009 consequent to the US credit crunch and housing bubble crisis. Effects spilled over into Dubai real estate market causing a great recession, if not an outright depression. The notion of spectacle that was held by a worldwide view of Dubai's growth until 2009 was deemed questionable and left the city's economy in free fall. Expatriates were reported fleeing by thousands as their cars sit abandoned in the parking lot at the Dubai Airport (Ney York Times, 2009), in a downward spiral, Dubai — once hailed as the economic superpower of the Middle East — looked like a ghost town with its empty markets and out of business real-estaters.

It was evident that city officials fell into the trap of deliberately emphasizing the image of the city market that they perceived as positive rather than accentuating the soft side and the everyday life of the city. Therefore, in the absence of the market demand element, Dubai's image as an architectural achievement and as an investment dreamland was falling apart. And with the disproportional existence of everyday cultural and social representations of Dubai's image, its urbanity came in questioning and its identity was threatened.

The notion of "Urbanity" which is "that quality forwarded by cities to their citizens in terms of communication and sociability" (Castello, 2008) meant that Dubai's urbanity, until 2009, was forwarding qualities of its exchange market, brand-scape and real estate marketing, not qualities of its cultural and urban life. Malcom Miles, Tim Hall and Ian Broden (2004) in *The City Culture Reader*, discuss this everyday aspect of urbanism and the hidden life of cities relevant to constructing city cultures and identities. De Carteau, in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, also explains the difference the "panorama city" that is purely visual "the simulacrum" and the urban text written by everyday practitioners of cities:

"The panorama-city is a 'theoretical' (that is, visual) simulacrum, in short a picture (...). The ordinary practitioners of the city live 'down below', below the threshold at which visibility begins. They walk – an elementary form of this experience of the city; they are walkers, Wandermaenner, whose bodies follow the thicks and thins of an urban 'text', they write without being able to read it." (de Carteau, 1984. pp.93)

Of specific concern with this rapture, Dubai officials began to turn attention to the problematical notion of identity and belonging associated with the image making and the socio-political concerns related to the indigenous and expatriate communities and the question of "whose city is it anyway". Although this ideological turn is not publicly asserted, it is however traceable through visual presentations of the city and through initiatives that embrace new dynamics in city image making.

The construction of Dubai's image, which was previously aimed at attracting global flows of capital, had to be pragmatically re-created in the aim of establishing a correlation of culture, society and a unique urban experience to induce sentiments of

belonging and to incorporate notions of identity. And while official discourse remained fully devoted to promoting Dubai's emblematic urbanity, parallel initiatives were aiming at enriching the city's urban experience by transforming the city's void-scape into a space of social representation and interaction by means of social media.

Revitalizing Dubai's Image: Social Media as a Spatio-Visual Tool

The image making of Dubai city, until the financial recession, was concerned with the city's architecture or the city's "Hardware" as Saskia Sassen refers to it. The city's physical setting or "Hardware" was one of the indicators analyzed in the global system research whereby cities compete to construct similarities in order to magnetize global flows. However, the new wave of scholarly works on global studies, as Elsheshtawy highlights (Elsheshtawy, 2013), indicates a shift in the global city research mode emphasizing and establishing uniqueness and differences among cities rather than similarities. In this paradigmatic shift, the focus was placed on abstract spaces of everyday lives as opposed to spaces of global and economic flows. In this trajectory, new spaces of intangible complex systems of everyday life are preforming as urban software determining many aspects of cities urban experience.

Most of Dubai's criticism was confronting its "Cityness" by emphasizing the disproportional focus on the city's built environment and its social realities. Skepticism on Dubai's urbanity and social continuity was articulated in references such as "theme park" or a "Disney Land" (Johann, 2009). In an attempt to bridge the gap between the urban experience of Dubai and the image of the city's urban form, city officials resorted to alternative strategies for reconciliation and reinforcing a soft image of the city that can be rooted in the identity of its users.

It goes without saying that the effects of social media, both internationally and on Arab society, were considerable specifically following the political uprisings in the Arab World since 2010. It became the most effective public dimension of shared opinions, and an integral instrument to mobilize national sentiments. Dubai as well, to benefit from the expanding tendency, utilized social media as a bottom-up

participatory method inviting individuals to contribute in constructing a collective image of the city. In 2014, the crown prince of Dubai launched an initiative called #MyDubai on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram to create the world's first autobiography:

“A city's story is created by its people, its time to join together and show the world how 2.1 million people can create one remarkable story: together we will create the world's first autobiography of a city.” (Khaleej Times, 2014)

CEO of Dubai Corporation for Tourism and Commerce Marketing asserted that the aim of the initiative was to “show life in Dubai beyond the landmarks, headlines and superlatives for which the city is known”. Campaign officials claimed this initiative to be an “attraction on its own right” which will “demonstrate the breadth of experiences residents and visitors enjoy in Dubai” and to tell the real and human stories of the city through photographs and videos. This reformed ideology that relies mainly on participation of individuals, as opposed to marketing campaigns, engages direct communication of lived experience of the city and constructs a novel social narrative “by the people for the people”.

Remarkably, the initiative did not merely promote footage capturing and sharing among social media users, it also publicly displayed the visual material in the city most frequented public places. The 19.2m x 19.2m led screen placed in Dubai Downtown next to the world tallest skyscraper and the world largest dancing fountain showcased over 2000 images chosen from over 6 million images of #MyDubai e-museum. The display screen situated at the heart of Dubai's spectacle was complemented by nearly 300 display screens that were installed into various locations in the city and airports displaying visual material of the campaign to get #MyDubai to the older and younger viewership who does not necessarily use social media.

Unlike the image of the city dictated by measurable dimensions of economy, the participatory quality of #MyDubai scheme aimed at integrating individuals in the process of drafting an “urban text” as they walk, live and observe the city.

de Carteau's had pointed out that the urban-text writers "write without being able to read", however, in Dubai's case the urban-text writers are indeed capable of instantly reading—or viewing thereof—the urban text which they compose. The public presentation of urban life and urban experiences in such a manner, as Isaac Lerner argues, is constructing a "now-place" that is a space of instant and direct communication (Lerner, 2008). These now-spaces in Dubai exclusively produced by social media instant visual communication and display are instantly liaising the author and recipient of the urban-text. Therefore, a messenger in the traditional sense is no longer required as the message is instantly conveyed in the now-space allowing different sensory filters or influences on the content of the visual.

This reformed image-making ideology moves away from the traditional marketing oriented strategies into an integral approach of displaying urban beauty and indices of real living qualities of the city through the view of everyday practitioners. This transition implies shifting from the use of media towards employing social media as a collective tool of image making. The outcome of the novel strategy feeds forward a general behavior and activities of city users to a local audience envisaged to modify the general perception that informs identity and meaning and diminish skepticism on notions of belonging or urbanity.

Conclusion

This paper aimed at providing a brief narrative of visual representations of Dubai city involved in the process of constructing an image of the city and its urban experience. It outlined an ideological turn in image-making instigated by the emergence of a new economy, and rethought following the financial downturn of 2009. This inquiry on urban image-making demonstrated how a modification in visual approaches was necessitated to address notions of identity and ownership in cities of fast-track urbanism. This paper also highlighted a shift in the use of visual and communication tools to construct a favorable image of the city, from using media as predominant tool of representations to the use of social media and public display as an integral tool of ownership. All of which contributed to writing an urban-text of the city of Dubai to advocate its qualities.

The shift in the involvement of individuals or communities was equally asserted in the process of image making and image re-appropriation. On the one hand, the period prior to the economic crisis constituted a top-down strategy oriented towards users and consumers, which by the nature of its medium denied a dialectical relation thus resulting in a general sense of alienation. On the other hand, the reformed tactic that deployed social media inverted the process and openly invited all city users to become active contributors to narrating the city.

This paper invites the reader to further inquire on how digital intangible cloud of social media can be embedded into the city physical spaces ,and whether it can indeed influence collective social dynamics and constructs on an urban scale. The question remains whether such novel urban tactics can effectively rely on social media to overcome ambivalences regarding the city's identity and the re-appropriation of its image.

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