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The Bazaar in the Spring: Public Space and the Modern Gulf City

Abstract

Traditional shoppingscapes that characterized many Islamic cities known as the *souk*/bazaar constructed spaces in the city that specialized centres of production, and exchange, commonly depicted as spaces of socio-cultural interaction accessible to all. However, these spaces of consumption became tamed with the advent of the modern city and the department store, they became more institutionalized, homogenised and tourist/souvenir oriented. Changes in urban planning policies, societies and civil lives of its citizens allowed malls to expand as spaces of inclusion and exclusion to certain social groups, their success affected the morphology of the Souk which still remains present in the modern Gulf city as a space of interaction and exchange of cheap goods, fruits and vegetables. Devouring any form of public space in the city, planners and policy makers gradually exchange any form of public space with contemporary shoppingscapes. This paper examines shoppingscapes of the contemporary Arab/Gulf city by tracing the development of souk/bazaar genealogy and examining the socio-cultural drift that created such change. It also intends to investigate the notion of public space and its diminishing role in the Gulf cities.

Keywords: Modern bazaars, the *Souk*, Spaces of Consumption, Parallel Shoppingscapes.

Introduction

Despite the emergence of the new city quarters lined with shops, sometimes even department stores, the *souk*/bazaar as a space of consumption as well as an important public space did not completely diminish as a prototype in the Gulf States. Nevertheless, by the turn of the twenty first century it has been tamed to merely a space of exchange of consumable goods such as fruits and vegetables and other mundane goods.

The aspect of the *souk* (Arabic for market) as a space of cultural exchange began to diminished as municipal structures clad in Islamic architectural attributes only represent a hyper-real image of the traditional souk/bazaar within a sanitized context. The emergence of the urban mall also had an impact as much of the shopping of the middle classes and the affluent turned to the new venue. The repercussions are the replacement of public spaces in which a range of identities and cultural experiences are exchanged, with new spaces that are inclusive only to certain groups. This seems to be a trend seen not only in the region but worldwide. However, it has additional consequences in the Gulf States in light of their interest to emerge on the world map as modern cities Arab with diverse economies that are capable of attracting international investors.

A restructuring of the Arab city image and perception is followed by new forms of social interactions: spaces of belonging and places of alienation are created (Zukin, 1991). In other words, the contemporary Gulf State city is branding its urban policies as one tolerant to multi-ethnic groups through creating parallel urban enclaves bound and also separated by the same spatial mediums such as freeways, gated communities, and high-end shoppingscapes. These multiple cities within the city allow social order to be maintained and at the same time represent comfortable/distant spaces of interaction between multi-ethnic groups of expatriate workers that reside within Gulf State cities.

These expatriate communities sometimes remain for decades socially circulating within sanitized socio-cultural bubbles and groups of common ethnicity. This conglomeration of diverse cultures, are exhibited in newly created shorefront developments such as the Dubai Marina, and Jumeirah Beach Residences, where the extend of the of multi-ethnic nature of the city can be experienced in a similar, yet different manner to Dubai's restored textile bazaar. However, despite visualization of the diversity of the community, segregation and hyperrealism, are manifested touring tourists in artificial canals, and themed mega shopping malls, that construct secluded covered and open air theatrical backdrops, secluded for the multi-ethnic

middle class communities and tourists. This paper argues that traditional shoppingscapes in the Gulf region are being gentrified in a slow but sure process that aims to ensure both tourist attraction and maintain existing social order. The souks are basically being tamed, resulting in the emergence of exclusionary places that allow only limited and safe social interaction for specific communities and tourists. Neo-liberal capitalist policies and advanced virtual means of communication obviously play a role in this type of urban shift in the modern Arab city. As a consequence excluded social groups mostly Indo-Pakistani workers, migrate to the peripheries of the city creating their own urban landscapes and shoppingscapes, distant from the gentrified tourist bubble.

1. The 'Arabian' souk image and perception

The bazaar historically had a dual function, a commoditized space of exchange and icon of the city's Islamic identity. This is created through its strong links to traditional bazaars and Caravansaries. The extended vaults and domes adorning the intersections of the massive cathedral like building draws on Ottoman traditions of the 16th century where Sinan Pasha's massive mosques complexes transgressed beyond the narrative of the mosque as prayer space to include a *souk*, schools, and soup kitchens. The spatial arrangement of the market via gathering and reconstructing socio-cultural backdrops where culture and commodity can be consumed, whether covered or open, seasonal or permanent, the traditional market continued to be the ultimate public space in Arab cities until the mid-twentieth century when the automobile became an important means of transportation. What was particularly significant about historic souks is that that they represent cosmopolitanism in microcosm.

Spaces were hybrid notions that were constructed through buying, selling, eating, and sharing of food. Food consumption and production, its display and celebration, lie at the centre of this multiethnic public space, a space which is both shared and contested. Today, culture is dominated by simulation, objects and discourses that no longer have any firm referent or grounding. Likewise, in these new constructed souks the notion of hybridity and cultural exchange in the traditional market is restrained as purely functional forms beyond the glamour of the spectacle, and even though attempts to create silhouettes of Islamic bazaars are praised, the nature of expatriate community limits interaction to pure necessity. Here the market acts as a space of

inclusion to all, and a modern image of the Islamic bazaar is devoid of its socio-cultural activities (R. Kallus & Z. Kolodney, 2010).



FIG 1. Nizwa's new souk, Oman (All photographs are taken by the author)

As souks are the major icon of Islamic cities, the first spaces to be transformed for tourism were the souks. What is particularly significant about markets here is that they represent cosmopolitanism in microcosm and an epitome of local identity. Constructing a certain image of a souk is best experienced in the souks of Nizwa and Muscat in Oman. In Nizwa, the historic capital of Oman, planners designed a generic 'Arabian' souk as part of a plan to revive tourist interest in Oman's heritage. The *souk* with all its representation of an exotic orient was created next to the Nizwa fort and the main mosque (Figure 1). In this reconstructed Arab Plaza, all basic cultural, religious and commercial facilities reflect an image of the Arab *souk* to be consumed by visitors to the historic city. The image of the plaza is further accentuated by the public square with pointed arches and shopping arcades around it as well as a variety of gardens and restaurants. Gateways and parking lots link the Sultan's fort to the surrounding walkways, filtering the traffic through landscape. Oman, especially Nizwa, prides itself with the ability to attract cultural tourism. The exotic landscape and constructed heritage bring substantial numbers of tourists to this particular destination to indulge in the exotic environment of a set of pre-determined places in the destination city. Tagged with different names such as 'eco-tourism', 'cultural tourism', and 'ethical tourism', as outlined by Linda Young, such practices or reconstructing an 'authentic' past manifest a deep commitment to collecting and saving old buildings as the meaningful construction of a certain historical identity. (Young, 2006) The urban character of Nizwa's souk is clearly emphasised through thick adobe plastered walls, small exterior openings, and the principles of seclusion

and privacy, are revived from known historic examples and highlighted in the design of the Plaza that is complemented by a Sultan Qaboos mosque with a large tile-mosaic dome, all constructing the perfect image of a traditional Arab city that may never have existed in such form and character.



FIG 2. Muscat's main *Souk*

Supporting the exotic image of the Arabian bazaar is Muscat's main *souk* which matches the commonly perceived image of the souk bazaar with its long narrow intertwining corridors, spice, herbs, textiles exhibitions, all reconstructing perceptions of the Ottoman Bazaars of Istanbul on a smaller scale (Figure 2). The winding corridors are shaded because of the crowded stalls dense 4-5 story buildings that date from the 18th century. At night it is lit artificially, yet still maintains its conventional social context despite being restored in the 1980's. The souk of Muscat is accessible to all, and unlike artificial bazaars recreated in the Jumeirah and Mina al-Salam, in Muscat the Souk due to its proximity to the old Port still offers real products/not touristic assemblages. Here cheap imported goods, Indian tailors offering their services to produce customized shirts and suits, in addition to textiles, fruit, vegetables and dates can all be found. The original market is depicted by travelers to Muscat as a prominent space of cultural exchange in the city, while the main artery of the souk displays traditional crafts including ready-made garments, as the visitor ventures inside the souk frankincense, perfume oils, and spices are all displayed in stalls affirming the image of the traditional bazaar of the *Arabian Nights*. The section facading the Corniche is the more touristic section because its stores paintings, hookah pipes and framed daggers. Nevertheless, it still constructs a public space of gathering that is diminishing in other Gulf state cities, here social class is not

ordered according to a certain hierarchy, tourists interact with Omanis and East Asians in the Indian/Persian cafes and juice shops framing the entrances of the souk.

2. Contemporary attempts, identity, forms and fragments

Markets as hybrid spaces within modern cities where different ethnic groups come into contact through everyday activity are sites where these more complex, fluid relations may be found and indeed encouraged (Duruz et al, 2011). A revival of a bygone 'Orient' connects to yet distant from building reality in the Gulf. Shopping is not merely an economic activity, many studies have shown that shopping is more of a social activity. The first public spaces since the dawn of history have been shopping spaces in the first degree. Historically, Arab markets were places of different social and cultural activities in addition to trading. Poetry recitals, sporting contests, entertainment shows and other activities took place in those markets. Through the years, the markets neither remained seasonal nor temporary; they turned into an enclosed network of spaces where the same activities continued to be practiced in different settings. City officials are looking to cultural strategies as means of encouraging economic development and for marketing the city in an increasingly competitive global market place (Hall & Hubbard, 1996). Marketing a city through cultural regeneration suggests a shift in the concept of the urban dynamic beyond politico-economic and structural functions. This has resulted in acknowledgement of the socio-cultural forces that are currently reshaping cities worldwide, albeit in different ways. These cultural policies and strategies have, however, focused largely on the development of urban economy through cultural tourism and flagship projects rather than on culture as a process of urban change (Zukin, 1991). Abu Dhabi Municipality has taken another approach to its reconstruction of its souks and at the same time experiment with forms and fragments from the broader context of the Islamic world to retain its Arab identity in the wake of a homogenizing world. A series of *souk's*/markets that are covered precast concrete vaults and domes has been planned in different areas of the Emirate ranging from the city centre of Abu Dhabi to its hinterland cities and even in other Emirates. The precedent of these Islamized markets is the textile and carpet *souk* in the Emirate of Sharjah which may have been planned as a brand for the modern Islamic style. The Bazaar that was initially aimed at attracting tourists ended up becoming a hub for local residents, a down-to-earth souk with mundane everyday products. In the Islamic market of Sharjah some of the attributes of bazaar are retained. Though price setting is the most conspicuous

aspect of bargaining, the bargaining spirit penetrates the whole of the confrontation. Quantity and/or quality may be manipulated while money price is held constant, credit arrangements can be adjusted, bulking or bulk breaking may conceal adjustments, and so on to an astonishing range and level of detail. In a system where little is packaged or regulated and everything is approximate, the possibilities for bargaining along non-monetary dimensions are enormous. Bazaars offer an alternative to markets as well as networks for the modern city image the bazaar as an oriental market refers to a specific system of transactions within disorganized space (Ozveren, 2007). The Islamic market which was constructed in the late 1970s created a context of a cultural institution with an explicitly Islamic mandate (Figure 3).



FIG 3. Sharjah's textile and carpet bazaar

The massive external concrete walls with embedded lines forming geometric patterns and single turquoise tiles at the junctions of these lines enhance the feeling of regional vernacular but with a distinctly modern spirit. The use of prefabricated concrete panels is extensive in the market, and the liberal use of tiles in the interior, together with the other features, produces a contemporary interpretation that is keeping with Arab/Islamic architectural forms and fragments (Ottoman-Ahmad, 2006). Here interaction between all factions of the society merge despite the effects of privatisation and exclusion that is treading cautiously as part of neo-liberal economic policies that highlight the importance of economic diversification and promotion of tourism. Inevitably the contexts of gentrification have shifted over the decades. The fiscal crises and new conservative consensus redefine social mixing from a progressive intent of inner city strategy to a policy to outcast certain social

groups (Tunstall, 2012). In addition to literally cleaning the structure and decorating it, the activities needed to change in a way that suits the cultures of the Westerners, which comprise 80% of world tourists causing a cultural change. Moreover, the focus of services provided need to move from trading services to tourist services, and the items sold need to cater for souvenirs rather than mundane day-to-day merchandise. Beyond the touristic mall far more diverse range of goods and services as well as more competition between sellers is found. The locally promoted gentrification of some sections of Abu Dhabi can be seen as a neo-liberal approach to the problems of the urban up-scaling of the city that seeks to recapture and increase the value of real estate.

3. The Ostentatious *Souk*

Abu Dhabi's demolition of its old central market as part of its gentrification plan of the downtown area, and its replacement by a high-end mall called '*The Souk*' designed by Norman Foster and Partners as well as Dubai's Mega malls further accentuate the importance of the image of the modern Arab city as a city that excludes all that libidinous beyond its boundaries. The result of this gentrification, which is part of the Abu Dhabi 2030 plan, created commercial spaces on the boundaries Abu Dhabi, creating new suburban enclaves. As outlined by Sharon Zukin, the complexity of the modern city creates two urban phenomena, localization of socio-economic forces manifested in 'spaces' shaped by the people despite their multi ethnic backgrounds, and 'places' created by a world capitalist order best represented by Norman Foster's *Souk* in the centre of Abu Dhabi. Abu Dhabi's Central Market by Norman Foster can be viewed as a regional trend to experiment with sustainable living mediums in Abu Dhabi, a piecemeal development to the modern city (Figure 4). It is, however, yet another project that followed the same tradition of urban erasure and reconstruction of a new heritage. The Abu Dhabi Souk and Khan Murjan build on known antecedents such as the caravansary or *wekalla*, a wholesale market that also provided rooms for travelers, its second-floor shopping spaces are fronted by corridors bordered by wooden arches and traditional *masharabiyya* screens. The local distinction between inside and outside can no longer be posited because of the new souk's neo-traditional screens that replicate a past but is no longer part of it, it is a manifestation of the processes of representation of tradition and at the same time diffracts from it. Its massive solid walls set the stage for implosion and disconnections from a culture that is replaced by a simulation of another and

fascination of interior place instead of the old souk's spaces (Baudrillard, 1988). Given the duality of newly constructed heritage and existing heritage, the process of self-identification and reinterpretation are understood within an emotional and psychological context as the state reassures its community that Arab space and heritage remains unaffected by global socio-cultural changes. Nonetheless, these projects are primarily intended as money-making operations, especially with the aim of increasing tourism and luxury consumerism; they are also "modal" in terms of the global ubiquity of the tourist-entertainment complex. They also constitute a peculiar phenomenology in which the ideas of hybridity, interiority and enormity play an important role in the self-imagination of individual inhabitants of Dubai (Kanna, 2005). Today a new social class enjoys the Shakespeare Café and abstract wooden louvers simulating traditional shading devices. These new interpretations and compositions of Arab Islamic forms and fragments retained an originality in terms of their functional subdivisions which allocated certain functions to specific floor levels, here sounds and smells of the traditional *souk* are quarantined.



FIG 4. Abu Dhabi's new Souk/Central Market

In 2005, Aldar was commissioned to re-build the Old market. The old Abu Dhabi market was demolished and in 2010 a new building was opened, a high-end exclusive mall called 'the Souk', designed in a way that was believed by the developers to reflect a traditional bazaar, but inside the activities were all highly privatised and tourist oriented. The new building was in fact more expensive than the other malls in Abu Dhabi, more securitised, more controlled and much more exclusionary. It is also part of what Mike Davies calls "modular liberties" based on the rigorous spatial segregation of economic functions and ethnically circumscribed social classes (Davis, 2006). The activities that used to take place in the old market have been moved or totally closed down and no trace of the old market remains. The project has replaced the old market space with its cheap goods and socio-cultural aspects by offerings of 'Orientalized' sections within a closed space that caters to an exclusive social group through high end retail brands (ElSheshtawy, 2008). The new Central market illustrates through its enormity the vision of Abu Dhabi to represent itself as that capital of luxurious state and maintain its links to an Arab Islamic heritage. The new Abu Dhabi Central market buildings are erected in order to create and point to a distinct destination image and identity that did not previously exist. In other words, designers have combined the interior model of the 'traditional' city center with the exterior model of the 'local and patrimonial. Mixing entertainment with cultural exchange, these spectacles painted the world at large in microcosm, with an emphasis on a time space compression. This type of space constructs an imaginative geography that not only has material affects, but is produced in dialogue within the materiality of specific contexts (Harvey, 2000).

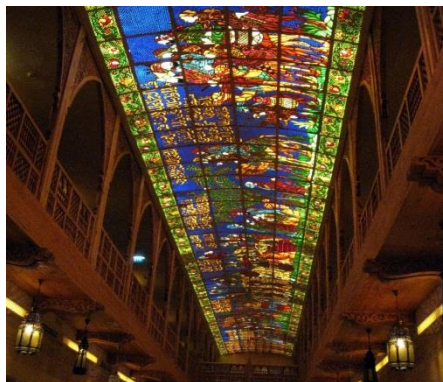


FIG 5. Khan Murjan Dubai

In the process of re-imagining the city through cultural strategies is intended to highlight it in a competitive market and attract investors by emphasizing economic opportunities and quality of life. Tourist attractions are a means of presenting the city in local and global markets, as if the city itself were a marketable product. Tourism has become increasingly important economically, with growing weight given to re-imagining the city. Harvey (2000) argued that urban regeneration and the marketing of an urban image distinguish a locale in the increasing uniformity of consumerist culture, while at the same time helping to create a sense of place amid growing globalization. Tourism also has great potential for local development. Dubai's Khan Murjan represents a new level of simulacra of the Islamic Khan/caravansary, its facades and decorative themes highlight the way in which attempts that are made to regulate and delineate various zones via stylistic boundaries that shift the visitor and at the same time loosen and transgress tight boundaries (Duruz et al. 2011). In *Khan Murjan* in Dubai (Figure 5), the enclosed space of the caravansary with its narrow winding paths transcends the boundaries of time and space within a new context as it offers a selected historiography of arts and crafts of Islam, that also assume the role of selling of a particular global dream of high-class consumption and luxurious lifestyles. As part of the iconic landscape of the city, Wafi Center including Khan Murjan entices expatriate workers and tourists to invest and spend time in spaces of cultural representation and consumption (Haines, 2011). Here the mall and city are both representative of the same image, an inspired dreamland that is also a lived reality, an everyday experience for those who make Dubai home. Khan Murjan with its Moroccan shopspingscapes, interlacing projecting windows, Syrian Umayyad marble floors and black and white marble walls, offers hyper-real museum like experience without the constraints of a museum. Visitors consume everything, touch everything, looking deciphering, studying and in the process construct hopes and aspirations of the emergent middle classes, inspired dreams of endless consumption possibilities (Baudrillard, 1988). The historical time-space compression of large-scale fragments such as portals, minarets, and towers are integrated into the new compositions (Celik, 1992). In the food court, partly shaded by facades lattice screens—*mashrabiyyas*, and tiled Ottoman arcades connect the inside of the mall with an outside courtyard where food is served and music is played. A false ceiling reflects on the hyper-realism of the space as it narrates selected images from the famous *maqamat al-Hariri* manuscript an early example of Islamic painting from Baghdad in the 12th century. The Ottoman Pavilion occupying a visible part of Khan Murjan and also its cafe façade comprises a vestibule opened to a terrace, arcades adorned with iznik tiles building on a 15th century reconstruction of

the Cinili Kiosk in Istanbul. Here the khan becomes the epitome of multi-ethnic identity through the different cultures within it and diversity of foods offered. Identity of hybrid notions are constructed in a hybrid place, materials, and influences extended beyond boundaries from Baghdad to Egypt, Syria and Morocco exploiting every possible known art, craft and technique to highlight a symbolic marketplace. This concept of hybridity is a particularly valuable one, especially what cultural exchanges occur, and social relationships can be created. On a broader notion Dubai represents an interest in accommodating the needs of a certain multi-national class more than the needs of a wider spectrum of individual subjects from diverse social backgrounds (Kanna, 2005). Khan Murjan manifests how networks of interconnecting places through capital investments and the production and exchange of symbolic capital that cater to the neo-bourgeois have replaced mercantile class, interactions in caravansaries along ancient trade routes, as part of the modern Arab city(s) competition for status and prestige, structuring a dialectical relationship between the East and West (Haines, 2011).



FIG 6. Parallel shoppingscapes emerging in Mussafah

Conclusion

Abu Dhabi is probably best understood as simultaneously modern and traditional, contemporary and historical, real and mythical, local and distant. And while public spaces are important for the wellbeing of the city and the health of the society within it (Mandipour, 2003), the emergence of a new world order, homogenizing cities is re-negotiating the concept of urban-mixing. Ethnic diversity exists, however, invisible

boundaries are created, best exemplified by the emergence of Mega Souks that re-interpret inter-ethnic understanding. (Cattell et al, 2008). Abu Dhabi's gentrification process has resulted in a gradual segregation of social classes as new upscale-buildings replace multi-ethnic run-down areas. Despite that, at a safe distance from the gentrified city core, the peripheries of the city are also witnessing change – a return to traditional coffee houses and grocery stores is happening on the peripheries of Abu Dhabi, in Muhammad bin Zayed City and Mussafah (Figure 6), creating public space and pedestrian routes that lower middle class neighbourhoods and their residents escape to as spaces of interaction beyond the clear up-scaled malls that are beginning to dominate Abu Dhabi's urbanscapes. Old souks are demolished to give way for gentrified *souks*, nevertheless, these monuments continue to play their parts as key elements in a new world order that is more interconnected and where homogenization and branding run hand in hand. Perhaps more importantly, these monuments have collectively begun to form powerful imaginary places that replace traditional spaces of interaction and exchange, thereafter creating a new heritage for a future society. What remains to be seen is the degree of social mix or segregation towards which this future society will adopt.



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