

## Dubai: An Urbanism Shaped for Global Tourism

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### Abstract

The urban transformation experience of Dubai presents an interesting model of dealing with globalization and benefiting from its flows of people, capital, and transformation. Although that city does not have rich urban heritage or natural attractions compared to other cities in the region, it managed to construct an urban structure that captured a relatively significant portion of global tourism to its local context. In this research paper the author argue that Dubai has achieved this quest by constructing a series of what author call "places of people flows." This research mean by places of people flows, projects that have the capacity of triggering people flows to the city. This research mean categorizes these places into: 1) Places of urban image, or spectacular projects that contributes to the quality of the urban image of the city. 2) Places of linkage that connects the city to the global domain. 3) Places of agglomeration that host flows of people flows coming to the city. This research mean analyzed by the role of these places of people flows in transforming Dubai from a peripheral city to one of the most attractive tourism destination in the Middle East.

**Keywords:** Urban design; Architecture; Spectacular structures; Dubai; Globalization; Tourism; Urban image

### Introduction

The revolution of communication, information and transportation technologies has created what David Harvey refers to as time-space compression. It accelerated the experience of time and shrank the significance of distance [1]. This has triggered unprecedented flows of people, capital and information across the globe. Nearly one billion people travel internationally every year. Billions of dollars are transferred across the globe daily. Information and knowledge move with the speed of light. These new patterns of movement are referred to as global flows. They contribute to emergence of transnational networks, relation and interdependency. In the context of this paper is focused on developments that target flows of people and more specifically tourists. Tourism has become one of the largest economic sectors in the world today. Its export earnings were estimated by \$1.4 trillion in 2013 compared to \$475 billion in 2000. In the same period, the number of international tourist arrivals has jumped from 674 million to 1.087 billion. The Middle East has also witnessed a substantial increase in tourist arrivals during the same periods. The number of tourists jumped from 24 million in 2000 to reach 52 million in 2013 (World Tourism Organization). It could be argued that Dubai has contributed significantly to this growth. During the last ten years, the city was able to increase its share of tourist arrivals by nearly four folds. According to Dubai Tourism Authority, hotels in the city hosted 11 million tourists in 2013 which makes it the number one tourism hub in the Middle East.

### Dubai in the New World Order

Dubai, more than any other city in the Middle East managed to benefit from globalization and its flows. The city managed to transform itself into a major tourism hub by constructing a series of projects which primarily aim to attract global flows of people. It is referred to these projects as 'places of people flows' [2]. These are projects that have the capacity of attracting, facilitating and hosting flows of people to the city.

These places are crucial for any city aiming to become part of the new world system. They play a significant role in connecting the city to the global domain. As noted by Smith and Timberlake [3], "the world system is constituted, on one level, by a vast network of locales that are tied together by multitude of direct and indirect exchanges". These ties and networks are the routes of flows of people, capital and

information. On the scale of global flows of people, these ties include modes of transportation that facilitate the movement of people and hubs that have the capacity of hosting them. The scale and rate of people flows across the globe has increased dramatically because of the revolution in modes of transportation, especially air travel. According to the International Air Transport Association, the number of passengers who travelled by air in 2012 is 2.98 billion. This huge figure indicates the intensity of human flows between cities on the domestic and international scale. Human flows from one place to another require both modes of transportation and nodes of agglomeration. Places such as airports, seaports, highways and train stations facilitate mobility. They contribute to what Janelle [4] describes as space-time convergence or the diminishing time needed to connect two places due to the advancement of transportation technologies. The capacity of airports is becoming one of the major indicators of the status of a city in the global system. They perform as hubs that connect the local context to the global domain. They are becoming crucial urban components for cities aiming to attract flows of people. Hubs of agglomeration of human flows are other essential components for globalizing cities. Hotels, resort areas and tourist attractions are examples of these hubs. They determine the scale of human flows to a city.

Places of tourists' agglomeration such as hotels, resorts, museums and other attractions are another indicator of the scale of human flows to a city. No doubt that information technology has created what Urry [5] calls "virtual and imaginative travel" through internet, radio and TV, noting that there is no evidence that virtual and imaginative travel is replacing corporeal travel. Tourism is currently one of the largest sectors of the global economy. Cities that do not have natural or urban attractions tend to create attractions and facilities to encourage global tourism. Invented tourist attractions are emerging in many of the

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globalizing cities and in particular the Middle East. These places tend to trigger flows of people to their urban context. They are gradually becoming commodities that generate wealth for their cities.

## Dubai and Places of People Flows

During the last decade, Dubai managed to construct an urban structure that attracted global attention and triggered massive flows of people to its local context. The city became one of the top tourist destinations in the Middle East. More than any other city in the Middle East, Dubai managed to deal successfully with globalization and its flows of people, capital and information. It could be argued that the city was built for global flows. Dubai has relied mainly on the production of a series of places which can be classified into the following three categories:

### Places of urban image and fascination

Dubai was introduced to the world through its urban image. The concept of creating iconic architecture designed by celebrity architects has dominated urban development not only in Dubai, but also many other globalizing cities during the last decade. The quest for impressive urban images or what Charles Jencks refers to as the “Bilbao effect” became a major driving force that has been shaping urban change in cities seeking to upgrade its world city status [6]. Priority has been given to projects that have the capacity of attracting global attention and seducing global flows [7]. A major portion of real estate investments has been directed to the production of spectacular buildings and urban settings.

Dubai has actually embraced this approach to the extreme. The city has invested extensively in developing unique projects that made the city known around the world. It all started by Burj Al Arab, one of the most luxurious hotels in the world that opened in 2000. This project introduced Dubai to the world. It also jump started a trend of development in the city that primarily focused on constructing urban spectacles. In less than a decade, Dubai managed to attract enormous global attention. The city is now perceived as the capital of extravagance, luxury and spectacularity.

Dubai pursuit for a spectacular urban image is not actually a new phenomenon. However, the competition between cities to occupy the top ranks of the “world cities rankings” has triggered this quest. Cities are no longer relying on fancy brochures and charming postcards portraying polished places in order to promote themselves. The internet and satellite channels have exposed cities and their urban realities. It is becoming extremely important for cities to construct a presentable image to display around the world. Attracting global attention is becoming easier for cities that can afford the construction of spectacles. For others, it is becoming significantly difficult to veil urban deterioration and backwardness.

Dubai is actually one of the cities that managed to construct an attractive urban image. The process of development in the city mainly focused on creating a spectacle, an urban structure that makes the city known around the world. It was a process that featured a commodification of urbanism. The excessive emphasis on branding and the promotion of Dubai as an urban spectacle have overridden social and environmental aspects. As argued by Guy Debord [8], “the spectacle is the moment when the commodity has attained the total occupation of social life. Not only is the relation to the commodity visible but it is all one sees: the world one sees is its world.” Saunders [9] notes that: Spectacle is the primary manifestation of the commodification or commercialization of design: design that is intended to seduce consumers will likely be more or less spectacular, more or less a matter

of flashy, stimulating, quickly experienced gratification, more or less essentially like a television ad. The stimulation that leads to ‘Wow’!

Dubai has been seeking this ‘WOW’ effect in almost every major development during the last decade. The city has been determinant to impress the world by every project it builds. Burj Al Arab, the most luxuries hotel in the world, Burj Khalifa, the tallest building on earth, Palm Islands the largest man made islands on the planet are all examples of projects seeking the WOW effect. As noted by Davis [10], the vision of the ruler of Dubai was simply that ‘everything must be ‘world class’, by which he means Number One in the Guinness Book of Records’. Iconic projects that can create this image were given the priority. Dubai as a place lacks the historic charisma that features other famous cities like Rome and Barcelona. It does not have the political influence of New York and London, or the cultural importance of Paris. Accordingly, in order to make the city famous, the idea was simply to build spectacles. Each of these spectacles has a distinct theme or a story that in most of the cases has no relation to the local context. New developments were the tallest, largest, most dramatic or most luxurious in the world. Hotels such as Burj Al Arab became major tourism attractions. People even pay an entrance fee to get into its reception. Same phenomenon could be observed in Atlantis, the Palm which attracts much more visitors than guests. The hotel is a replica of Atlantis Bahamas. It was built on the artificial island of Palm Jumeirah and offers underwater suites. The cost of the opening ceremony of this hotel was estimated by \$20 million. The Armani Hotel is another example of spectacular destinations in the city. It is the first of a new chain of Giorgio Armani Hotels. The hotel is located in Burj Khalifa the tallest building in the world, and was exclusively designed by Armani Designers. Many of Dubai spectacular hotels such as Burj Al Arab Hotel for example, were not built to make quick profits. With its cost that exceeded half a billion dollars and a minimum room rate of \$2000/night, the place is not financially feasible. The main objective was simply to attract attention and create a spectacular image of the city that makes it recognizable across the globe.

Mega shopping malls are another example of spectacular places in Dubai. The city has been investing intensely in creating mega malls, the largest, not only in the region but the whole world. Dubai Mall a 9,000,000 ft<sup>2</sup> of shopping retail space that is designed to host 1200 stores is one of the largest malls in the world. It marked the largest mall opening in history with 600 retailers. The mall is located in Burj Khalifa, the tallest building on earth. The mall has attracted 30 million visitors in its first year. It includes a 10,000,000 litres aquarium with 33,000 marine animals on display. Ibn Battuta Mall is another example of spectacular malls. It is named after the medieval traveller and explorer Ibn Battuta. The mall has six main sections; each replicates the architecture of the regions visited by Ibn Battuta. It has Chinese, Egyptian, Persian, Tunisian, Andalusian and Indian themed sections. Mercato Mall is another example of themed malls in Dubai. The place replicates Italian Tuscan architecture. The developer states with pride that Mercato Mall is the first themed mall in the Middle East.

To a great extent, these projects and many other spectacles managed to make Dubai famous. The city managed to attract global attention more than any other place in the Gulf region. It is now competing with countries such as Egypt and Morocco in the number of tourists it attracts every year. The city now hosts more transnational corporations than any other city in the Middle East. Dubai is becoming a model for places seeking a top world city status. In almost a decade, this young city managed to construct an image that marked its name among the world famous cities.

### Places of linkage

In order for global flows of people to reach a city, there should be places that facilitate their movement between the global domain and the local context. Airports, seaports and train stations are examples of these places. In literature on globalization and urbanism, much emphasis is given to the capacity of cities to connect to the global society both physically and digitally. Global accessibility and linkages are among the main measures that identifies top world cities [11].

Dubai has recognized the importance of creating linkages with the global domain both physically and digitally. The city has invested intensively in constructing the most advanced information and communication infrastructure. It also developed media and internet cities in order to connect its local context to the global domain. This has contributed to the promotion of the city around the world. Through these digital networks, the city managed to market its new spectacular urban image and attract global attention. This exposure was supported by a series of spectacular events such as hosting a tennis game between world champions on the helicopter pad of Burj Al Arab.

On the physical level, Dubai invested in constructing one of the largest airports in the world. In 2011, Dubai International airport served 51 million passengers on 326,341 flights making it the fourth busiest airport in the world in terms of international passengers. The airport current capacity is 62 million passengers. Over 150 airlines operate out of Dubai International Airport. The airport capacity is expected to reach 90 million in 2018 and will be expanded again to serve 98.5 million passengers in 2020. Once fully completed, it will be the largest airport in the world with a passenger’s capacity of 120 million. This huge number of passengers compared to the small population of the city reflects the massive flows of people to and from the city. Dubai International Airport is currently one the major transit hubs in the world. Its duty free shops with its fancy daily prizes as Ferrari cars and Rolex Watches make it one of the most preferable transit airports.

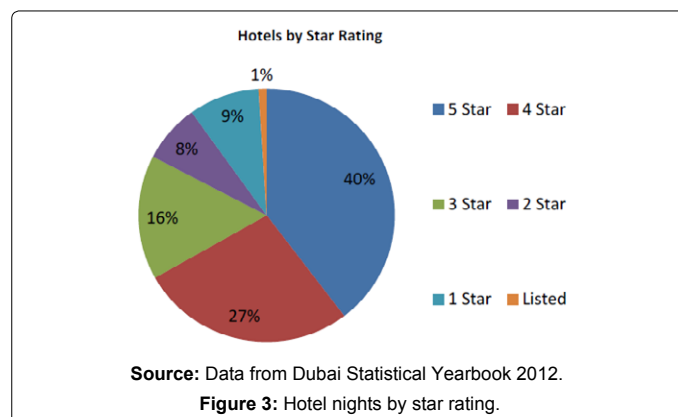
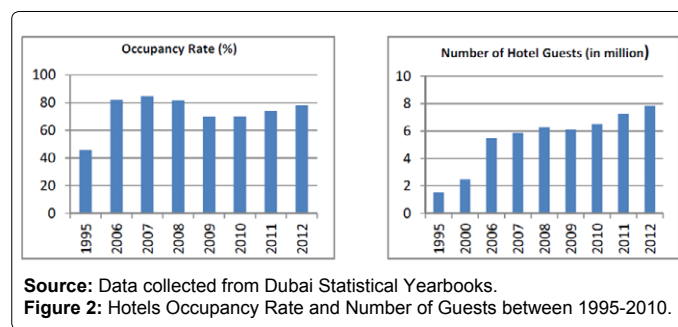
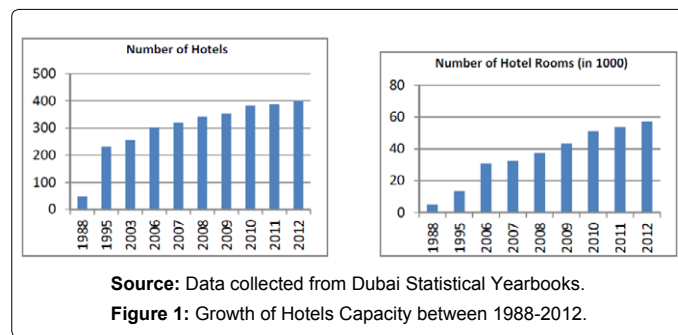
Jebel Ali Port and Port Rashid are another example of places that facilitate the movement of people to Dubai. Although these ports were mainly developed to serve flows of goods and capital, they remain major access points to the city. Port Rashid was built in 1972 by Sheikh Rashid Al Maktoum. This modern port managed to attract much trade to the city. It was followed by Jebel Ali Port which started operation in 1977 and Dubai World Trade Centre, a thirty nine stories building that opened in 1979. When built, Jebel Ali Port was one of the largest ports in the region. Dubai has also invested in developing an advanced highway networks that connects with neighbouring cities in the UAE and the region. The city is currently a major tourism destination for residents of Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Oman due to its proximity and unique urban quality. All these places of linkage made Dubai a major hub of people flows in the Middle East. In nearly a decade, the city managed to increase its share of tourists five times making it one of the top tourism cities in the Middle East. Dubai is one of the most globally connected cities in the world today, both physically and digitally. This contributes to its capacity of capturing part of global people flows to its context.

### Places of agglomeration

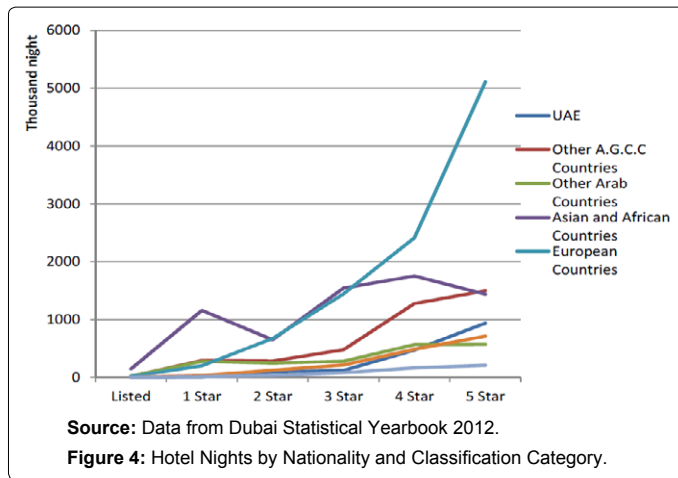
In order for Dubai to assure continuous flows of people to its urban context, it was important for the city to keep directing investments in the development of places that can host these flows. In nearly a decade, Dubai managed to establish a series of places that can absorb the continuously increasing number of visitors to the city. This process of urban transformation started by the construction of the

Intercontinental Hotel in order to serve Jebel Ali Port and the World Trade Centre in the early 1980s. This was actually the first world class hotel in the city. It was followed by a group of projects that primarily aimed to serve the growing number of city visitors (Figures 1-4). In 1988, the number of hotels in Dubai reached 48 and then jumped to 223 in 1995. The number of hotel rooms was 4,764 in 1988 and reached 12,727 in 1995. The period between 2000 and 2010 witnessed unprecedented expansion in hotels capacity. The number of hotel rooms has nearly tripled during that period. In 2010, the number of rooms reached 51,115 offered by 382 hotels. Although the occupancy rate has dropped from 80.5% in 2008 to 70% in 2010 due to the world economic crises, the number of hotels in the city has increased by 41 hotels during the same period. This reflects the intention of the city to keep expanding its capacity of hosting tourists.

The most recent published statistics by the Government of Dubai indicates that by the end of 2012, Dubai had 399 hotels and 200 hotel apartments. During that year, nearly 40% of the hotel nights in the city were spent in Five Star hotels compared to 7.5% and 8% in One and Two Star hotels respectively. This is attributed to the nature of tourists who visit the city. Except for Asians and Africans, tourists tend to stay in Five Star hotels more than other categories. For example, 75% of







European tourists and 63% of Gulf Cooperation Council Countries preferred to stay in either five or four Star hotels. They also tend to spend more hotel nights in these categories than others. 80% of the hotel nights spent by European tourists in Dubai were hosted by Four and Five Star hotels (Dubai Statistical Yearbook 2012).

Hotel apartments also host a significant portion of tourists in Dubai. The number of apartments is estimated by 23,069 units distributed over 200 establishments. In 2012, the number of guests who stayed in these apartments has reached 2.13 million, spending 11.44 million nights compared to 7.8 million hotel guests who spent 26 million nights. These apartments usually serve visitors staying for more than four days or are coming with large family or group. They also serve corporations that continuously host foreign experts and professionals for limited periods of time. Nearly 56% of hotel apartment's guests are Asians and Europeans (Dubai Statistical Yearbook 2012).

The continuously growing tourism market in Dubai demands a population of foreign labour and professionals to construct operate and serve tourism facilities. It is worth noting that expatriates make the majority of the city population. Ethnic enclaves that host their agglomerations have gradually emerged and became crucial components of the urban fabric of the city. In the case of Dubai, these enclaves are not yet as established as Chinatowns and Korea towns in many American cities. However, some distinct urban qualities, signs and symbols could be traced in these settings. The presence of these enclaves triggers more expatriates flows to the city. They provide haven for new comers and more specifically, cheap labour from South East Asia who neither master the local language nor are familiar with the new lifestyle. In these enclaves immigrants can find "middleman minorities" who can help them settle and find a job [12].

In Dubai, expatriates' enclaves are not limited to low income labour. Gated communities and residential towers hosting talented professionals and executive elites are examples of these places. These urban typologies consider the preferences and lifestyle foreigners and tend to segregate them from locals' neighbourhoods. These enclaves allow its residents to enjoy a lifestyle that might not be socially acceptable outside the gates. These places are crucial for the agglomeration of expatriates. They are as described by Featherstone and Lash [13-15] a 'global creation of locality.'

## Conclusion

During the last decade, Dubai managed to transform itself to become one of the major tourism hubs in the Middle East. The city

managed to benefit from the new global order and its flows of people, capital and information. It has mainly relied on creating an exciting urban experience in order to attract global tourism to its local context. Dubai focused on developing three types of projects which have triggered enormous flows of people to the city. This process started by the construction of a spectacular urban image which attracted global attention. Projects such as Burj Al Arab, Burj Khalifa, and the Palm and World Islands managed to make Dubai famous around the world. This was associated with the development of physical and digital linkages with the global domain. Information and communication technology infrastructure and networks in Dubai are among the most advanced in the world. Dubai International Airport and Jebel Ali Seaport are among the largest ports on the globe. These places managed to link the city to the global system. Dubai has also invested in the development of places that have the capacity of hosting agglomerations of people flows in its urban context. The number and capacity of hotels, resorts and hotel apartments in the city have increased dramatically during the last decade. All these projects managed to make Dubai a major tourism attraction in the Middle East.

The urban experience of Dubai during the last decade presents an interesting model of cities dealing with globalization. The city managed to attract massive global flows of people to its local context by constructing a series of places which could be described as places of people flows. There is much to be learned from Dubai experience and its approach to dealing with the new world order.

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