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High Culture, Heritage and the new 'Capitals' of the Islamic World

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Abstract

Capital cities reveal how the state imagines itself or how it aspires to be, as well as how it wishes to be seen by others. This paper draws upon four separate field visits between 2010 and 2013 to Doha, Qatar; Dubai and Abu Dhabi, UAE and Muscat, Oman. It examines institutions in the religious and public sphere, the public heritage sector and the private sector retail and dining sectors to argue that these recently wealthy cities are augmenting their hypermodernity and economic success with very visible symbols of Islamic high culture. By drawing on the full historical and geographical panoply of the material cultural achievements of Islam, these states not only stake a claim to parity with the great Islamic cities of the past but also, indirectly, recognise the diversity of their own Muslim, largely expatriate, populations. These cities emerged relatively recently in historical terms when compared with the centres of Islamic high culture on whose influence they draw, such as Cairo, Istanbul, Isfahan, Agra and Samarkand and the opulence with which Muslim dynasties, such as the Mamluks, Ottomans, Safavids, Timurids and Mughals endowed them. It must be recalled that all of the cities examined in this paper are ruled by near-absolute monarchies with ample financial resources to announce their cultural credentials with few institutional or financial impediments. While absolute parallels with the Islamic imperial dynasties of the past cannot be made, it is argued here that similar motivations to announce cultural presence by drawing in and constructing the "best" (or at least the most visually arresting) are evident. Therefore, what we see is not so much a new flowering of Islamic culture as much as a new found confidence in its lavish expression.

Keywords

Islam; modernity; heritage; aesthetics; appropriation