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# DUBAI: THE SPECTACLE OF FLOWS

**Abstract** Over the past few decades, Dubai has developed into a major global city by using spectacular, iconic architecture to attract flows of capital, people, and ideas. Because of this, Dubai has had a rapid and unique urban development. The skyline is now made up of skyscrapers and luxury resorts, many of which have radical designs, and the area of the city has been increased through the construction of artificial islands off of the coast, a dramatic contrast to the barren, desert landscape just a few decades ago. A city based on superlatives, Dubai provides a unique and interesting urban model which is explored in this paper.

**INTRODUCTION: GROWTH OF A GLOBAL CENTER** For the past few decades, Dubai, a seaport in the United Arab Emirates, has been developing into a major global city. During the 20th century, oil was discovered off the coast and Dubai profited from the oil trade revenues as it became a major trade center in the Middle East. The oil trade significantly contributed to the growth of the city until the 1990's when the leaders began pushing to develop the spectacle that is contemporary Dubai. Dubai dramatically transformed between 1991 and 2005, just fourteen years, which can be attributed to

its rapid evolution. Dubai, obsessed with spectacular expansion, continues to grow with unprecedented speed.

Without a doubt, the world is amazed and intrigued by the spectacle of Dubai. The need for Dubai to have the biggest, tallest, and most extreme everything has created an attraction based on superlatives and extravagance. This attraction is a catalyst for increased flow of trade, tourism, labor, communications, and information, all of which have furthered the accelerated development of Dubai. Ultimately, the radical urban projects and spectacles of

Dubai have created an allure which has attracted flows of capital, people, and ideas from nations across the globe.



**Figure 1:** A street in Dubai in 1991 compared to the same street in Dubai in 2005. In the image on the right, the street has transformed into a highway, and the rapid development of the city is clear.

## DUBAI'S UNIQUE URBANISM

Contrasting to cities of the past that were separated from each other, presently major cities are interconnected and part of a world system. This is due in large part to the rapidly changing contemporary world through the development of technology and innovation. Due to technological advances, boundaries between countries barely exist. Travel, trade, and communication are easy and expeditious, sometimes almost instant, because of the disintegration of boundaries. Now, people travel and move all over the world quickly with transportation luxuries like cars and airplanes, and the media can connect the global with local using technologies such as television and the internet. Similarly, both technology and ideas spread across the globe rapidly, and money crosses borders at lightning speeds. Global flows affect the urban environment by challenging locality and present opportunities through the access to

global capital and knowledge.

Unlike most contemporary cities, rather than developing as a result of the flows of

capital, people, and ideas, Dubai has been developed in order to attract these flows. By the mid 1990's the oil industry was booming, and oil exports had peaked at 400,000 barrels a day.<sup>1</sup> The four sons of the former Vice President and Prime Minister of the United Arab Emirates recognized a need to diversify Dubai's economy and reduce its dependence on oil. They based Dubai's new economy on trade and merchant immigration. Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, one of the brothers, expanded the "free zone" policies with the support of his brother, Maktoum, the ruler of Dubai. Many European and North American companies took advantage of Jebel Ali Free Zone, and Dubai became the Middle Eastern Hub for major economic players across the globe.<sup>2</sup>

While Dubai has been able to successfully develop a global image in a short period of time, the strategy of its urban development is fragmented. Currently, the city is composed of disconnected

centers, which are only accessible using cars, since they are separated by ten lane highways. This hinders the pedestrian traffic through the city and prohibits a wide sense of community. Dubai is the epitome of "splintering urbanism" as coined by geographers Stephen Graham and Simon Marvin. Its infrastructures, including networks and information and communication technologies, fragment the experience of the city. At the same time, all of the networks rely on each other to function. The infrastructure systems contribute the growth of the city, both socially and physically, and attract international capital.<sup>3</sup>

Certainly, the sheer speed at which expansion has occurred in Dubai is a unique characteristic of the city's development. In 1950, Dubai took up less than one square mile. By 2005, it had expanded to nearly fifty-five square miles, rivaling the size of other major cities across the globe.<sup>4</sup> Although it may have grown rapidly in physical size, Dubai's population has not grown to the same level. Most world cities have a population of anywhere from four to twelve million; however, Dubai's current population is only 2.3 million.<sup>5</sup> The discrepancy between size and population is concerning, since this indicates that Dubai is both unbalanced and dependent upon tourists to fill a large part of the city. Equally important, the lack of population leads to many unoccupied areas in the city, which, at times, makes some areas feel deserted.

Another unique characteristic of Dubai's urbanism is the fact that it was built in the

middle of the desert. Because of this, there are large areas of sand that surround and are

DUBAI IS THE EPITOME OF “SPLINTERING URBANISM” AS COINED BY GEOGRAPHERS STEPHEN GRAHAM AND SIMON MARVIN.

part of the city. Not only does this contribute to the fragmentation of the city, but it also creates the feeling of a construction site. Encountering these areas sparks questions in the minds of travelers regarding the next fantastical project that will be built. Being rapidly built in the middle of the desert gives Dubai a sense of artificiality. The urban framework, or lack thereof, echoes the speed at which it was built and is indicative of the disjointedness that is ever so present in the city.

A clearer sense of the disjunction can be seen in a figure and ground of Deira, an area in Dubai (figure 2).<sup>6</sup> While there are areas that exhibit the typical grid pattern of contemporary cities, the grid is not the

dominating principle in Deira. There are many winding roads and alleyways in every section of the city. Throughout, there are awkward areas that seem to be left over after development, mere afterthoughts. Specifically, there are many open areas on the right portion of the figure and ground. This shows that the city was developed as a seaport, from the water towards the land with no real plan. (Note that the gulf is to the west of Deira). Despite the disjointedness of the

fashion, tourism is based on luxury and lavishness. Established in 1997, Jumeirah International Group introduced the trend of spectacular, iconic architecture in Dubai. The use of iconic architecture is a global strategy to “enhance the appeal of the city” and attract investors, tourists, visitors, and therefore, capital.<sup>7</sup> One of the first iconic resorts built was Burj Al Arab (figure 3). With fifty-six stories and at 1,053 feet, this luxury five star hotel was the tallest hotel in

Dubai, Deira, 2014  
figure-ground analysis

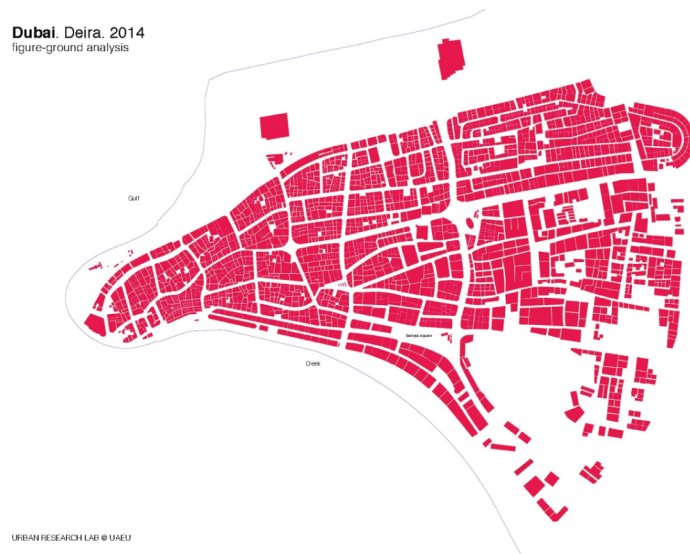


Figure 2: 2014 figure and ground analysis of Deira, Dubai courtesy of the Urban Research Lab.

city, ultimately, Dubai has been able to successfully grow its global image, and it has done so rapidly, uniquely and in the absence of a formal framework or urban development plan.

#### TOURISM AND THE INCEPTION OF ICONIC ARCHITECTURE IN DUBAI

Tourism has become a central component to Dubai and its economy. In typical Dubai

the world at the completion of its construction in 1999 and is the third tallest hotel in the world currently. The hotel was designed to mimic the shape of a sail of a dhow, an Arabian vessel. Unsurprisingly, there is an alluring feeling about Burj Al Arab. Most notably, it is built upon an artificial island that is 920 feet out to sea. The seeming inaccessibility creates the allure almost entirely on its own, and the self-



**Figure 3:** *Burj Al Arab, the seven star hotel in Dubai. The building declares itself a spectacle due to its separation from the main land and alluring form.*

proclaimed seven-star luxury is appealing to world travelers.

The spectacular Burj Al Arab made itself into the symbol of Dubai for a period of time after it opened in December, 1999 due to the success of the emergence of its iconic architecture. Burj Al Arab is intentionally extravagant and excessive, and everyone loved the spectacular theme. Its image was used widely in advertisements to attract tourists, and this tactic was lucrative.<sup>8</sup> In the late 1990's, the emphasis on luxury travel was so strong that it was estimated that ten percent of Dubai's GDP was spent on tourism.<sup>9</sup> The construction of spectacular resorts such as Burj Al Dubai contributed to the incredible growth of tourism to the city. By 2012, almost ten million tourists were traveling to Dubai and staying in one of the hundreds of hotels, of which several have five stars.<sup>10</sup> According to the Department of Tourism and Commerce Marketing, in 2011, "Dubai's hotels recorded a ten percent increase in the number of tourists."<sup>11</sup> Because of the success of increased global flows due to the iconic architecture, project

proposals in Dubai continue, each more radical and spectacular than the last. The spectacle of the high end hotels and resorts, which began due to the success of Burj Al Arab, has significantly strengthened the overall allure of and growth in tourism to, and consequently the expansion of Dubai.

Since the opening of Burj Al Arab, many lavish hotels and resorts have been constructed in Dubai, using spectacle and

DUBAI WANTED TO PROVE THAT IT COULD DO WHAT HAD NOT BEEN DONE IN THE PAST BY PUSHING ENGINEERING TO THE EXTREME.

iconic architecture as a guide. Many of these resorts have been built in the same area as Burj Al Arab, including Jumeirah Beach Hotel, with its wavelike form; Royal Mirage, which flaunts an Arabian theme; and Atlantis, The Palm, notably one of the most extravagant resorts. Atlantis, The Palm (figure 4), like Burj Al Arab, is a five star hotel and parallels the stylistic themes of the Atlantis resort in the Bahamas. It is located on Palm Jumeirah, one of Dubai's manmade islands, and has

1,539 rooms, twenty-one restaurants, a waterpark, 65,000 marine animals, a shark lagoon, and one of the most sophisticated dolphin bays in the world.<sup>12</sup> Consistent with Burj Al Arab, Atlantis, The Palm declares itself "iconic" and attracts visitors by dazzling them with splendor.<sup>13</sup> Dubai's need and appreciation for exhibitionism is apparent in Atlantis, The Palm, with its brag worthy list of world class features and activities.

Another resort, Ski Dubai (Figure 5), Dubai's indoor ski resort, is nothing less than ostentatious. In the heart of the desert, Dubai managed to create and sustain a 242,190 square foot ski resort, complete with real snow. This remarkable resort maintains a temperature of thirty-four to thirty-six degrees



**Figure 5:** *Ski Dubai in the Mall of the Emirates.*

Fahrenheit for perfect skiing conditions and a refuge from the desert heat.<sup>14</sup> Ski Dubai proves that Dubai strives to accomplish anything to be considered the best travel destination in the world.

Ostensibly, many of Dubai's resorts were built around the premise of extravagance and luxury to appeal to high class travelers. Every resort is decorated with chic furnishings, capturing "panache and style," and details

are highly regarded.<sup>15</sup> Undoubtedly, luxury resorts continue to entice travelers to visit Dubai to be treated like royalty. Everything that is part of the hotels and resorts must be the best, giving Dubai's hospitality sector little competition from around the world.

### REAL ESTATE: RECLAIMED LAND

To further attract investment, a real estate sector was established in the late 1990's. The construction of Palm Islands had a huge impact on real estate. The Palm Islands consist of three artificial islands, Palm Jumeirah, Palm Jebel Ali, and Palm Deira. Palm Deira, the largest of the three palms, is seven and a half times larger than Palm Jumeirah (Figure 6) and five times larger than Palm Jebel Ali. Each island resembles a palm tree and has residential, leisure, and entertainment centers built upon it. Construction of the first two palms began in 2001, and by 2004, they were both sold out.<sup>16</sup> Because of their success, the third Palm Island and the World Archipelago were constructed, creating more space for real estate projects.

The development of the real estate sector attracted the interest of many wealthy investors. As a result, the demand for real estate projects dramatically increased, and Dubai continued to launch projects. By attracting people, the construction of spectacular real estate architecture has dramatically increased the population. Fifty years ago, Dubai was home to only 30,000 people. Now, due to the attraction of Dubai's spectacles, more than 2.3 million people

inhabit the city.<sup>17</sup> This increase means that many foreigners occupy the city, allowing for global outreach and high-profile investments. Evidently, the construction of spectacular real estate, particularly Palm Islands, has attracted global investors and stimulated development of Dubai.

While the size of the three palms varies, the general appearance and structure is



**Figure 4:** *Atlantis, The Palm, one of Dubai's most luxurious resorts located on Palm Jumeirah.*

the same, and the same state of the art engineering procedure was employed for the construction of The Palm Islands and The World. The islands were constructed using all natural materials, unlike previous manmade islands which used concrete and steel for structural stability.<sup>18</sup> Dubai wanted to prove that it could do what had not been done in the past by pushing engineering to the extreme. The biggest challenge was developing reclaimed land that would stay in place without any structural materials. Another challenge was finding suitable sand for the project. While Dubai has a plethora of sand available in the surrounding desert, this sand was too fine to be used in the construction. The ideal, course, dense sand used for the projects was acquired from the bottom of the Persian Gulf. In order to

construct the islands, sand was sprayed by dredging ships, which used Differential Global Positioning Systems to guide sand placement within .39 of an inch of desired boundaries. After the placement of the sand, vibration compaction technologies were used to compact the sand to ensure that the manmade masses did not settle over time.<sup>19</sup> Dubai's goal of constructing engineering-intensive projects on a strictly short schedule had been achieved.

Reclaiming land by constructing massive manmade islands is another facet of Dubai's extravagance and excess. The staggering cost of the projects was not an issue for Dubai, which wanted to enhance its real estate sector and attract high end buyers. The islands have done just that and promote the dreamlike atmosphere of contemporary Dubai. Certainly, the construction of The Palms and The World proves that Dubai is capable of breaking boundaries and developing complicated engineering projects that contribute to its utopian culture.

### UNFORESEEN DEBT CRISIS

By 2008, it seemed as though the diversification efforts of the sons of the late Vice President and Prime Minister had succeeded. Rather than being the main source of capital flow, oil only made up five percent of Dubai's GDP. Additionally, the three billion dollars in annual foreign direct investment supported the ranking of Dubai's economy as the seventeenth most attractive city for foreign investment.<sup>20</sup> At this time,

Dubai was buzzing with activity, and the future seemed bright for the gulf city.

While the rest of the world economy was suffering from the credit crunch, as of September 2008, Dubai seemed to be immune to the economic turmoil. Projects were continually being proposed, parties were constantly being held, and hotel rates were consistently increasing. In truth, Dubai's spectacles were only hiding economic issues, and they could do so only for a limited amount of time. Behind the curtain, foreign investors were losing interest; tourists were finding cheaper vacation destinations; and the banks were having difficulty finding credit on the free market, so owners started selling properties. Naturally, people were losing confidence in Dubai, which ultimately caused Dubai's stock market to crash.

In only a few short months, Dubai's economy changed from one of stability and promise to one left in shambles. By the end of 2008, many projects were left incomplete due to the massive eighty million dollars in debt Dubai had accumulated.<sup>21</sup> The economic downfall meant that Dubai, a city previously surrounded by extreme wealth, was bankrupt by late February of 2009. Facing probable economic meltdown, Dubai received aid from Abu Dhabi, which enabled it to start to rebuild its economy.

## BURJ KHALIFA: AN OSTENTATIOUS SUPERLATIVE

Prior to the economic turmoil, tourists and investors from all over the world were

confident in the spectacular development of Dubai, and the flows of people and capital continued. In typical Dubai fashion of pursuit of power and ambition, in the early 2000's, Emaar Properties proposed the construction of Burj Khalifa (Figure 8), the tallest man-made structure in the world. Construction for the impressive, half mile



**Figure 6:** *Palm Jumeirah, one of the three Palm Islands off of the coast of mainland Dubai. The island has been developed to host residents and travelers alike.*



**Figure 7:** *Dredging ship spraying sand to construct The Palm Islands.*

high skyscraper began in 2004. The blurred boundaries of the world meant that there was global collaboration on the project. For example, the SOM office in Chicago designed the building; while the Engineering and Construction Group of Samsung C&T Corporation, located in Seoul, South Korea, was the main contractor; and Turner

Construction, headquartered in New York, did the construction management on the project. Because of global flows, Dubai did not have to carry out the project on its own. The overall development of Dubai drew continuous attention from the entire world, and Dubai was able to globally publicize the plan for the construction of Burj Khalifa.

Following the bailout, Burj Khalifa opened on January 4, 2009. A "superlative in every respect," Burj Khalifa is the centerpiece of the city and brings a new glow to Dubai as the hub for tourism, dining, and entertainment.<sup>22</sup> At 2,722 feet tall and 163 stories, Burj Khalifa currently holds many world records including tallest building in the world, tallest free-standing structure in the world, highest occupied story in the world, and highest observation deck in the world. Burj Khalifa surpasses the height of all other buildings in Dubai by far, a bold and extreme decision that exaggerates the spectacle surrounding it. Its height slices the skyline, defining it as the center of luxury. Burj Khalifa contains an extravagant Armani hotel, indulgent condominiums, increasingly popular observation decks on floors 124 and 148, and boutique offices. Because it is radical and spectacular, Burj Khalifa has drawn attention back to Dubai. The city is experiencing an increase in capital flows, allowing it to heal and pursue fantastic projects.

Undeniably, Burj Khalifa's extreme height is both captivating and remarkable. The last tallest building in the Middle East before Burj Khalifa was the Great Pyramid

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of Giza, which gives it special significance and verifies that there has been a redirection in global flows of capital. Prior to the construction of Burj Khalifa, the tallest building was Taipei 101 in Taiwan, which stands at approximately 1,700 feet tall.<sup>23</sup> Burj Khalifa surpasses that height by more than 1,000 feet. Clearly, Burj Khalifa was not intended just to beat the record for the tallest building in the world; in fact, it was intended to completely obliterate the previous record and retain its title for more than a few years. This demonstrates the extreme excess and vanity that is ever so present in Dubai. In order to attain such a height, an innovative structural system designed by SOM was implemented. It consists of a buttressed concrete core with an internal steel structure, which not only allows the structure to be "remarkably tall and remarkably thin" but also allows for coveted views from each

room.<sup>24</sup> Burj Khalifa is the manifestation of the ideologies of contemporary Dubai; it is elegant, striking, phantasmagorical, and shrouded in vanity and superlatives.

## CONCLUSION

Dubai is a city developed upon spectacles. These spectacles have been built in order to attract people and commerce. The attraction has led to the establishment of global flows into and out of the city. Interestingly, this is the reverse of typical urban development. Generally, cities are formed due to the flows of people, commerce, and knowledge, rather than the development of city attracting the flows. For Dubai, this urban strategy has been mostly successful. Just a few decades ago, Dubai was an inactive player in the global economy and had a barren urban landscape. Now, Dubai has become a top global city filled with luxury and iconic architecture and development. Despite its successful development into a megacity, Dubai's urbanism is fragmented. Its spontaneous development has left holes in the urban footprint. The disconnected urban centers suggest that the city was built with no strategy for urban framework. Although Dubai's infrastructure systems are disjointed, they still contribute to development and attract global capital.

Tourism and construction are increasing rapidly, and people across the globe have the desire to visit or live in Dubai in order to experience the high end lifestyle of the city. Indubitably, this desire is precipitated by the spectacles and superlatives of the culture

that has been developed over the last thirty years in Dubai. The hotels and resorts are beyond lavish, tempting world travelers to stay the night, regardless of the cost. The Palm Islands and The World archipelago now dominate Dubai's landscape while providing top of the line real estate properties. Furthermore, Burj Khalifa, with its staggering height and graceful silhouette is the epitome of the superlatives upon which Dubai has been built. Conclusively, the radical, spectacular projects that have been executed in Dubai have stimulated global flows that



**Figure 8:** As the tallest building in the world, Burj Khalifa towers above all other buildings in Dubai, creating a dramatic skyline.

have brought people and commerce into the urban landscape, which has allowed Dubai to become a top global city. Spectacular, utopian projects will continue in Dubai and contribute to the overall vanity and extravagant ideology of the city. For now, it seems as though there is nothing that can impede Dubai's rapid growth into lavish excellence. 