Chapter 58

Cities in the Gulf:
Rapid Urban Development and the Search for Identity in a Global World

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ABSTRACT

In fast growing cities, such as Dubai, Jeddah and Doha the issue of identity and its implications are increasingly complex and multi-dimensional. Traditionally, people were able to maintain a strong identity in their urban environment because everything was locally influenced, created and managed. In dealing with the question of identity in the present Gulf city, several important concepts are raised; impact of rapid growth and urbanization on the resilient historic centers is one such important issue. This chapter raises and discusses the following question "Will the historic city, the heart of urban life, survive and maintain its place in the emerging global Gulf cities of today and tomorrow?" This study will focus on the three old centers of Dubai, Jeddah and Doha with the aim to explore ways of being undertaken to rediscover their vanishing cultural identities in the mainstream of rapid growth and urbanization that happened since the discovery of oil in the 1950s.

INTRODUCTION

Heritage areas and buildings echo the "spirit" of a culture and remind people of their past. They express the collective attitudes and the common patterns of life, and as such, they are a source of identity and inspiration. In many areas of the Gulf, historic urban centers have been suffering from neglect, lack of maintenance and deterioration. The importance of bringing these historic areas back to life, through urban regeneration cannot be overemphasized within the emerging global world.

Urbanism is not new in the Middle East; its urban centres emerged about 6,000 years ago. In the 1980s, about 46% of the population in the Middle East lived in towns of over 20,000 or more. Compared to Asia and Africa, the Middle East like Latin America, is seen as a highly dynamic region in terms of population growth and urbanization. During the late 1990s, Middle-Eastern cities have been transformed by large-scale urban development schemes while old areas were often neglected and given

minimal attention and consideration. It was just recently that some concern about conserving cultural heritage started in the Gulf.

In Beirut, Lebanon, the Solidere- Project is often seen as a model for regeneration of a historic center. However, this project was severely criticized for demolishing Beirut's old core and deleting all memories of the civil war, aiming at creating a modern economic and cultural center. The other main drawback was the rise in the real estate's prices that gentrified the local inhabitants.

Luxury housing was provided in the vacant lands, which targeted rich buyers from Lebanon and the Gulf (Sharfenort, 2013: 2).

Since the discovery of oil in the Gulf, modernization has been put at the ultimate expense of the local cultural heritage. The latter has been dramatically sacrificed and compromised for the sake of catching up with modernization in a very short period. Anything old was considered of little value and was left to decay and disrepair. Historic centers were seen as signs of poverty, underdevelopment and misery of the past that should be erased. Consequently, the easy way was to pull down these urban centers. The resulting empty spaces made room for imported iconic buildings and high-rise towers.

Urban growth in the Gulf is perhaps the most staggering, both in its scale and in speed. While the Arab world is urbanized at a rate of 4 to 4.5% annually, the rate of urbanization in the Gulf is four times and reaches 15-18% per year. For instance in Kuwait and Qatar more than 80% of the population are urban dwellers. What is triggering in the Gulf is the phenomenon of city-states like Kuwait and Doha, where the indigenous population forms a fraction of the total population (10- 20%) but controls most of the wealth.

Urbanization in the Gulf is due to the increasing flow of expatriates since the 1950s, when oil was discovered in the Gulf (Figure 1). In every urban centre, extensive and massive apartment blocks accommodate the burgeoning professional and middle class expatriates, which rapidly replaced the traditional

Figure 1. Map of the Arab World, showing the three countries from which the three case studies have been selected; Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar

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