
Case Study Paper

Old Deira, Dubai

The Role of Culture, Identity and Planning in a Global City

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Abstract

This research project will explore the relationship between planning strategies and multi-culturalism in Old Deira, Dubai. Now an established global city that is firmly integrated in the world economy, Dubai is a salient case study to scrutinise the role of cultural diversity in the growth of this (mini) mega-city. This research will serve as an evidence-base for a presentation that will be given at the 55th World Planning Congress in Jakarta – some concepts may be omitted or expanded by then. This paper will investigate the role that one specific multi-cultural neighbourhood – Old Deira - played in the development of Dubai. What planning strategies, if any, have shaped the multicultural identity of Old Deira, and, based on these findings, how can urban planners apply them in other global cities to promote diverse and multi-cultural neighbourhoods?

Keywords

Deira, Dubai, transnationalism, organic urbanism, authenticity

1. The history of Old Deira: situating Deira in the context of Dubai

1.1. The creation of the Emirates and development of Dubai

In the late 1800s, the British Empire informally controlled swathes of what is now Oman and the UAE. Various agreements between the British and local Bedouin tribes devolved a degree of autonomy and legitimacy in the form of Trucial States, allowing the Al Maktoum family to rule the Emirate of Dubai since 1833. The General Maritime Pact of 1820 and the Perpetual Maritime Truce of 1853 were crucial in pacifying the violent relationships between the different Sheikdoms (Elessawy, 2017). However, the pivotal political pact was signed in 1892. The Exclusive Agreement gave exclusive territorial and commercial rights to the British Government, effectively turning the region into a British Protectorate.

At the turn of the 20th century, the coastal and regional economies were primarily based on maritime trade and the pearling industry. This flow of goods was facilitated in 1904, when Port Saeed, which sits on the Dubai Creek, was made a free trade zone. The stability, tolerance and employment opportunities enticed many labourers from other British Protectorates to relocate to the city. Afghanis, Pakistanis, Bahrainis and Indians were among the first to settle. Simultaneously, custom-tax increases on the other side of the Gulf, in Iran, led to a wave of Persian merchants immigrating to Dubai. As a result, between 1900 and 1920, the population of Dubai doubled from 10,000 to 20,000 (Hvidt, 2009).

The economic landscape of Dubai and the UAE changed profoundly throughout the first half of the 20th century (Pacione, 2005). Triggered by the mass production of Japanese cultured pearls, the local pearling industry slowly collapsed throughout the 1930s. In a timely

coincidence, preliminary surveys were being carried by British companies in search of oil reserves. In 1939, onshore concessions were granted to Petroleum Development (Trucial Coast) Ltd, a subsidiary of the Iraq Petroleum Company, whose majority shareholder was the British state-owned Anglo-Persian Oil Company. Extractions begin, albeit in rather limited quantities.



Figure 1 Map of Deira with UAE

Dubai would grow at a somewhat pedestrian pace over the next 20 years; the oil industry did not initially flourish like it did in neighbouring Abu Dhabi. Port Saeed and the Dubai Creek remained the driving forces of the local economy. Being strategically located between important former British Colonies and England, Port Saeed saw increased traffic from nearby Iraq, India and East Asia. The city developed as a hub of trade, and the areas surrounding the Creek naturally grew in tandem with the port. As such, Deira quickly asserted itself as the commercial heart of the city (Elshehtawy, 2010).

The ruler of the Trucial State, Sheikh Rashid bin Saeed Al Maktoum, had a vision for the city that extended far beyond a regional port city. He envisaged a modern city that would eventually rival the mega cities of the world. Despite limited resources, the Sheikh took the strategic decision to invest in an international airport, which was operational by 1960. With financial support from the Emir of Kuwait, he followed this up with the progressive dredging of the Dubai Creek, a pricey endeavour that proved to be crucial to the city's development (Ogaily, 2015). Port Saeed and the creek would soon be replaced by new deep-water port, Port Rashid, that could be used by the world's largest container ships.

By the time oil was discovered in commercial quantities in 1966 and in full production in 1969, the city's infrastructure was ready to match the incoming surge in maritime trade. The opening of the new port in 1972 concurred with unification of the Trucial States, and the founding of the United Arab Emirates. Much like the country's founding father, Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, Sheikh Rashid was weary of building Dubai on oil money. He had the foresight to diversify the city's economy and redirect oil revenues towards vital mega-infrastructure projects (Ogaily, 2015). The Al Shindagha of tunnel, which connected the two

sides of the creek, opened in 1975, followed by the Dubai World Trade Centre in 1978. The Emirate saw these projects as a way of gaining legitimacy on the international stage.

Many attribute Dubai's explosion of development to oil money – this is true, to a certain extent. But there would be a lot less Dubai were it not for the advent of the jet airliner (Brooke, 2013). Dubai's geographical location, more or at less at the centre of the globe, is ideal for a human and freight logistics hub. According to Tim Cook, CEO of Emirates Airline, DXB can serve just about 90% of the world through non-stop flights and a third of the population within 5 hours. Initially, however, Dubai International was just a regional hub, handling mainly Indian businessmen and Saudis and Iranians who came for the relative freedom and debauchery. It was also a destination for Soviet hustlers, who raided Dubai's supermarket to resell the foodstuffs back home (*ibid.*).

Early in its development, the Emirate adopted a proactive approach to tax exemption (Pacione, 2005). As previously mentioned, Port Saeed was made a free zone in 1904, as was Port Rashid in 1972. By the mid 1970s, Dubai's position as major player in global maritime trade meant that Port Rashid needed an upgrade. Sheikh Rashid thus embarked on the country's most significant infrastructure project to date: Jebel Ali. The huge container port was built far from the city centre, equipped with a worker village and, from 1985 onwards, designated as a free trade zone (FTZ). Having since been expanded several times, Jebel Ali FTZ is now the world's largest free zone and 9th busiest container port in the world. Building on Jebel Ali's success, tax exemption was repurposed as model of accelerating the city's development. There are presently more than 30 free trade zones, covering sectors from logistics to finance and technology (such as the aptly named Dubai Silicon Oasis).

Most importantly, money made in Dubai is tax free. Coupled with the Emirati Dirham's pegging to the US Dollar, this incentive proved to be effective in attracting foreign white-collar workers. By the turn of the century, it was one of the world's fastest growing cities, the unrivalled hub of the Middle East. Despite the trauma of the 2008 crisis and endless property booms and busts, Dubai's status as an Alpha + city places it in the same league as Tokyo, Paris, Shanghai and Singapore – a vital node of commerce in the global economy.

1.2. Old Deira, gateway to the city: a brief urban theoretical analysis

At first glance, Dubai is very much considered a 21st century city. It is smothered by ultra-modern architecture; gaudy glass skyscrapers are omnipresent. Cranes topping off new buildings are a permanent installation. Modern Dubai's urbanism on steroids provides a cutting contrast with the fabric of Deira. These areas immediately surrounding *Khor Dubai* (the creek) exhibit an urban typology that reflects the district's main function: trade (Hempel, 2018).

As more and more cargo came through Port Saeed and eventually Port Rashid, the areas around the dock yards grew. Import-export businesses and general traders set up shop around the Creek and set up homes in its back streets. People follow people; initially adventurous, male merchants came to Dubai, but their families soon followed. Those working in Deira were mostly from the former British Raj, so large Indian and Pakistani communities developed around the creek. Emirati nationals lived separately, in gated compounds.

Cities grow around people. Supermarkets and small businesses that cater to everyday needs sprouted around Nasser Square, Deira's main public place (now Baniyas Square). A vibrant,

active neighbourhood was being built around the creek. By the early 1970s, when the Government commissioned British architect John Harris to produce the city's first masterplan, Deira was the undisputed commercial hub of Dubai. Like countless other port districts, Deira attracted merchants from far and away. Those who liked it, stayed, and agglomerated around the docks. Much of the city's early growth can be attributed to the vibrant business environment that bubbled in Deira - the history of Dubai starts in port (Akhavan, 2019).

As a commercial hub, Deira's built environment is defined by the infrastructure that supports trade: banks, everything-stores, general traders, currency exchanges, hotels, etc. These businesses aggregated along the coast, creating commercial corridors that reached inland and drew the urban fabric tighter to the port. Ground floor commercial and retail uses are common. These active frontages ensure there is a constant flow of people moving in and out of the area. A dense, fluid street network spreads out from these main arteries. By virtue of the creek's geography, which stretches relatively deep into the desert, the liberal business environment and the permeable urban fabric, goods could quickly and easily be exchanged and moved throughout the area (see Figure 2).

Large *souqs* (markets) grew in proximity to the creek. It was straightforward to move goods from the port to the various nearby markets, merely hundreds of meters away. The different types of markets, ranging from spices and textile to gold and grain, reflect the diversity of trade going through Port Saeed and Port Rashid.

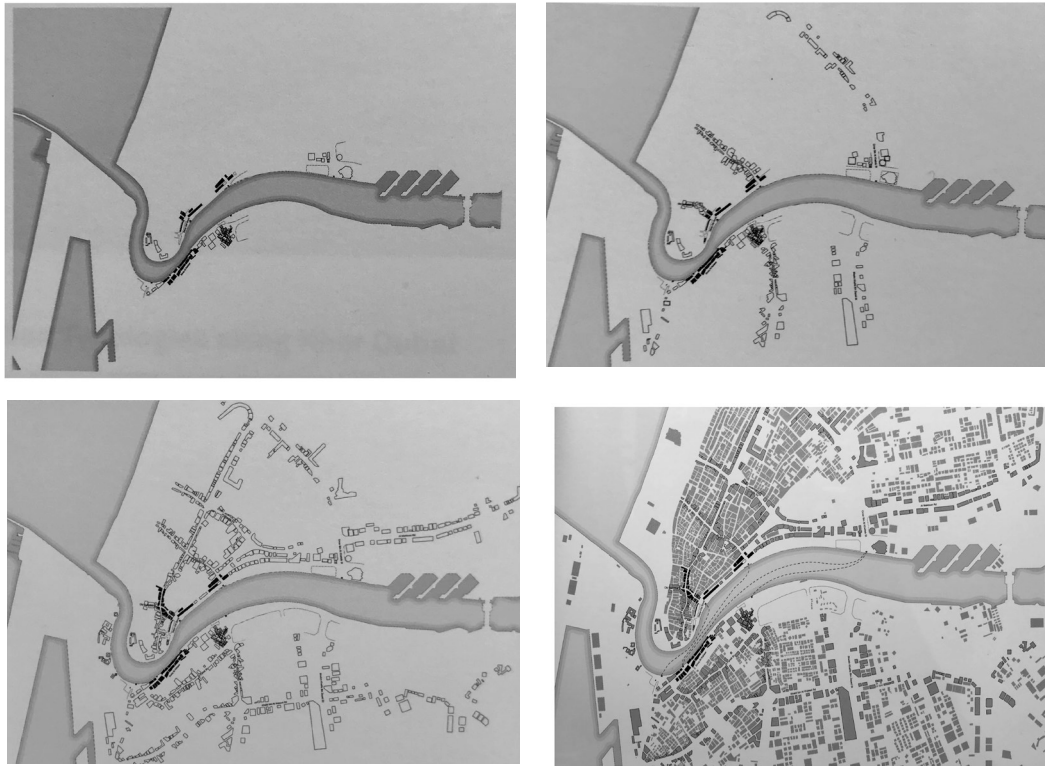


Figure 2 Figure ground plan of key infrastructure and commercial corridors in Deira (Source: Hempel, 2018)

2. Multi-culturalism and transnationalism in Old Deira: how did it happen?

2.1. Planning Deira and Dubai

Despite being a former British protectorate, Dubai's planning system is completely different. The fact that it is a young city means it could be relatively straightforward to observe and comment on potential correlations between planning strategies and urban change. However, this has proven to be challenging, as there is a lack of transparency and documentation. It appears that, since the 1960s, a multitude of city-wide masterplans and strategic land use/zoning plans have been commissioned (behind closed doors) in an attempt to guide the development of the city.

Drawing on the work of Elsheshtawy (2010), Pacione (2005) and Hempel (2018), the following are deemed to have been the most important in shaping Dubai and, consequently, Deira: the 1960s John Harris Masterplan, the 1980s Comprehensive Development Plan by Dioxidis, the Dubai Urban Area Structure Plan 1993-2015, the 2003 Dubai Structural Plan and, most recently, the Dubai 2020 Masterplan. Arguably the most impactful masterplan remains the 1960s John Harris plan (Elsheshtawy, 2019). It created strategic road links around Deira and laid the skeletal foundations for much of the crucial infrastructure that connected the areas north and south of the creek.

The strength of Harris masterplan lays in its recognition of Deira as a vibrant, thriving marketplace. The framework built on the main physical asset of the district: its connectivity. Through new roads and commercial corridors, it increased connectivity to the creek and the rest of the city (see section above on Urban Fabric). The dredging of the creek and reclamation of land for the shipping industry greatly improved its capacity to move freight, thus accelerating the economic growth of the area.

The city-wide strategies that followed the Harris Masterplan were commissioned without consistency in vision or delivery. The result is a series of relatively ad-hoc strategies that are commissioned at the whim of government officials. The continued blanket zoning of Deira as a "commercial hub" or "central business district" is the closest thing there is to an "area action plan" or "local plan" - there is little to no evidence of any Deira specific planning strategies.

The planning system in Dubai was in theory, managed by government offshoots that cover various districts. Up until recently, there was no over-arching, city wide planning committee, unlike Abu Dhabi which has the influential Urban Planning Council. In 2011, the Dubai Executive Council approved the creation of the Supreme Urban Planning Council (SUPC) to streamline the delivery of the Dubai Urban Development Master Plan 2020. It is hard to evaluate the impact of the SUPC so soon after its creation, but the fact that the government is adopting an integrated approach to urban planning is a step in the right direction.

In practice, however, the various governing bodies operate in isolation (Ramos, 2010). Dubai Municipality theoretically has power over the city's maintenance and approval of development permits in publicly owned land. It has no authority over Dubai's many free-trade zones, which are operated by independent bodies that respond to the highest level of government. Ultimately, the city's large property developers (Nakheel, Emaar, Meraas, Damac, to name but a few) have the most clout. Founded or managed by nationals closely

linked to the ruling family, they are said to operate under the decree of the Sheikh and his entourage. High-profile projects, such as the Palms, are supposedly granted by royal favours.

Old Deira, being a historically low-income neighbourhood, has attracted less interest from the large developers, who have focussed on the city's more luxurious, ambitious projects. Deira has had the freedom to grow organically, relatively untouched by developers and planning regulations. This autonomy allowed it to naturally evolve into a place that authentically reflects its inhabitants, somewhere that is unique in the country.

2.2. Transnationalism in Deira: the case of the fur trade

When Dubai discovered oil in large quantities in the 1960s, the emirate did not have the local labour or expertise to develop its industry and infrastructure. As oil revenues rapidly grew, Sheikh Rashid could afford to attract top Western business leaders, luring them with ludicrously high, tax free salaries. Most of these executives were British men (such as John Harris). Being a former British protectorate, the new oil and construction companies imported workers from countries they knew well – India and Pakistan. Entire labour camp districts were built for workers on mega-project construction sites, with the most famous ones being the Jebel Ali Industrial Area and Al Naboodah, next to the airport.

The more well off moved to Deira. As previously explained, it is the ideal location for small merchants who need good access to the port. First, lone men came, but their families soon followed. Schools and social infrastructure were built to cope with soaring demand. As Dubai grew into its role as the premier hub of the Middle East, it played a vital role in linking maritime trade between Asia and Africa and, to a lesser extent, Europe. People from around the world came to Dubai to do business. Deira really captures the essence of multi-cultural trade. Walking through Baniyas square you see Nigerians buying Korean electronics from Chinese general trade stores operated by Indians.

Whilst Dubai is now an established hub of high-end globalisation through its financial centre, its economy is underpinned by small time trade. Elsheshtawy (2014) explains that places like Deira grew as nodes of low-end globalization. Since regulations are so lax – few questions are asked at customs – businesses that blur the line between the legal and illegal prosper. This system is consistently exploited. Dubai is the perhaps the world's money laundering capital (Forbes, 2019). Deira more specifically is a stop-off point (The National, 2010) for drugs on their way to Europe from poppy-producing nations, such as Afghanistan and Burma. In an otherwise incredibly safe country, the area has also become rather notorious for low-end prostitution and the sex/human trafficking industry. Dubai's powerful underground economy thrives in Deira's affordable and loosely policed environment.

Elsheshtawy (2014) and Mathews & Yang (2012) details the relationship between East Africa, Dubai's Deira and Hong Kong's Chungking Mansions. The Kenyan entrepreneurs he met in Deira had just come from Hong Kong and were on their way to Nairobi. Many specialise in the import and export of mobile phones. Gordon Mathews, Professor of Anthropology at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, describes this flourishing informal industry (Financial Times, 2011). Second-hand or fake mobile phones (of varying quality) from Japan, Korea and China are repaired in mainland cities like Guangzhou or Shenzhen and are then delivered in mass to the Chungking Mansions shopping centre, located in Hong Kong's well Tsim Sha Tsui district. Indian and Pakistani vendors buy the phones at cut-rates and sell them to African middle-men, who stuff thousands of phones into their luggage and fly onto to their next destination.

For most, the pit stop is in Dubai, where they can unload some of their merchandise to be sold in (most likely) Deira before flying back home, where they sell the rest. According to Mathews, in 2009 (Financial Times), an estimated 15-20% of mobile devices in sub-Saharan Africa can be traced back to Hong Kong. In countries like Kenya, some 70% of cell phones are from Chungking Mansions. It is hard to measure the exact logistics of this informal economy, but it is safe to assume that a fair amount of the handsets passed through Dubai.

Deira has its own unique case study. The informal economy that best highlights this is the fur trade. Since the turn of the century, quality furs are sold at cut prices in malls and apartments around Baniyas Square (Khourchid, 2008). The majority of shops are owned and operated by Greeks from one particular town, Kastoria, in the north of the country. Kastoria has been at the heart of the ancient fur trade since the 14th century – Byzantine nobility famously shopped for furs there. The furs are originally from Scandinavia but are processed and assembled in Kastoria. Targeting Dubai's fur-loving Russians, Greek entrepreneurs brought their product and expertise to Deira, which was the city's commercial district in the when they arrived in the noughties. The furs are quite cheap in the emirate as consumers benefit from the inevitable tax exemptions.

The Greeks occasionally employ Russians to work in sales. But most are actually from Central Asian countries, as they expect lower wages (van Leijen, 2012). As a result, there is a growing community of Uzbeks, Kazakhs and Kyrgyz expatriates. I recently ran into an Uzbek owner of an electronics shop (which included perfumes and jewellery) in Deira who spoke English, Russian and Arabic. To add another ingredient in the cultural melting-pot, the Greek fur traders employ Indian runners, who prowl the streets of Deira in search of Russian tourists and live off commissions from sales. Seemingly Slavic enough, I was approached numerous times by young Indians who spoke commendable Russian. Many shops in Deira attempt to lure clientele with both Cyrillic, Chinese and English advertising. Foreignism has marked its territory.

3. Lessons learned, the future of Deira and conclusions

3.1. Lessons learned and international transferability

Organic Growth: highlighting the intimate relationship between form and function

Walking through Deira on a Friday night is an experience rich in sensation. I wandered through Baniyas Square at around 23:00 and the area is in full swing. African families gather next to Pinoy couples in the main square. Pakistani construction workers huddle around public benches whilst Indian store owners stretch out in the grass. Egyptian and Iranian children play football next to a taxi stand. Shops are open, and people drift in and out, browsing lazily. This vibrancy is an outcome of the co-location and competition between innumerable small businesses that essentially sell much of the same.

Deira is so obviously in opposition to most of the rest of Dubai. The core reason is rather simple: Deira is old and Dubai is young. The historic districts that surround *Khor Dubai* date back hundreds of years. Some say Al Fahidi (on the opposite side of the Creek to Deira) was linked to the Old Silk Road. Regardless, Deira has had the time to grow as a place and build character. The essence of the area is still steeped in maritime trade. As previously explained, form follows function in Deira. From the commercial corridors and main roads that lead out from the port to the alleys and courtyards filled with everything-stores, every street corner

in Deira contributes to the viability of the area. The urban fabric reflects the area's economic value as a successful market place, an interface that has evolved between buyers and sellers from around the world. The vibrancy of Deira is ultimately proof of its success as a neighbourhood and as a public space (Elsheshtawy, 2008).

-Authenticity vs. imported generic modern

For all its deficiencies, Deira is nonetheless an authentic environment. If you close your eyes and take in the smells of 5 streets throughout Deira you could be transported to 5 different countries. Places where Deira's nationalities collide, such as Baniyas Square, are psychedelics trips into the heart of what Deira is – gritty, thriving and genuine. I observed Pakistani-Pino couples drinking *karak chai* (milk tea) next to Iranian elders. Hanging above them was a neon light in Chinese character. There is an element of Blade Runner to the heart of Deira. At first glance the streets are seedy. The lighting is not the best, so wandering through can seem a bit intimidating. It all feels a bit chaotic, as people swarm in and out of shops and arcades and alleys. The sweeping sound of the call to prayer clashes with the abundance of aggressive neon lights, giving the area a uniquely surreal atmosphere.

After spending a few days in Dubai, wandering through Deira is a refreshing experience, as the rest of the city is so obviously imported from everywhere else. Business Bay, the new central business district, could be an office complex from anywhere in South East Asia. The Marina could be Miami, the International Financial Centre could be Manhattan, so on so forth. Huge gated communities, such as Arabian Ranges, are copy and paste jobs from Arizona. These places are imported from other cities, meaning that Dubai can feel like an exaggerated and tacky recreation. At times, Dubai can really feel like a fragmented mish-mash of generic modern architecture. The eccentricities of Deira are a welcomed counterweight to the more spurious aspects of the city.

De-regulated urbanism: the autonomous development of Deira

The urban development of Deira is a tangible example of what could be called autonomous urbanism. Because of its affordability, it has not yet been targeted by Dubai's institutional developers. The built environment has therefore organically evolved to reflect the needs of the community in the form cheap, flexible spaces that can accommodate a range of different uses. What is currently being used as the office for a general trader could potentially be converted, very easily, to a light-manufacturing showroom, an electronics shop, a convenience store or even a Chinese restaurant. The clustering of many industries in one location innately attracts both customers and business. The de-regulated planning system guarantees the fluidity of the property market, which is crucial to its success. Conversely, this also allows for the development of a semi-illegal and abusive land ownership system; Deira is known for its squalid living conditions and violations of health and safety standards.

In summary, it is perhaps the lack of an articulated planning system (Ling, 2018) that has most contributed to the development of Deira. The key drivers of growth have mostly been initiatives that are loosely related to planning. Ultimately, the vibrancy of Deira appears to be a positive externality of investment in infrastructure and neo-liberal-ish economic policy (Bertaud, 2018). As previously demonstrated Deira is product of trade, not vice-versa. The district's status as a free trade hub is the source of its energy, density, affordability and transnationalism. Formal planning strategies played a very limited role.

Visa regulations and government supervision

Any paper on Dubai must address, in some form, the wider socio-political context. Emirati nationals – those born in the Emirates to predominantly Emirati families – represent around 8% of Dubai's total population. The other 92% are expatriates, who live and work in the country under strict supervision. Work visas are generously granted to foreigners; after all, the country was built by them. But when you are in the Emirates, you respect the rules. The country is one of the most supervised in the world, meaning that it is also one of the safest. There is virtually no room for error for those on work visas. Having already paid so much to find work and secure the visa to the UAE, the low-skill, low income workers from Pakistan, India, Nepal and the Philippines are not going to waste their opportunity. Furthermore, many families back home rely on remittances to get by. For example, remittances contributed 28% to Nepal's GDP in 2018 (World Bank, 2019). Consequently, there is not much petty-crime, as breaking the rules unconditionally results in expulsion.

The UAE has been labelled by some as a "benign-dictatorship". Public displays of discontent are not tolerated. There is very little religious freedom and even less free freedom of expression. Deira can therefore be gritty and authentic without the sense of danger normally associated with such places. To a certain extent, Deira provides a soft introduction to some of the more challenging cities of the developing world – like, say, Karachi or Nairobi. The melting pot of cultures can prosper because there is no lenience for dissent or violence. The Deira social experiment that pits many diverging nationalities together may not be as successful in more tolerant, chaotic Western democracies.

3.2. Conclusion: the future of Deira

In the context of planning for culture, Deira is a fascinating case study. Dubai, the modern mini-mega city we recognise today for its ambitious developments and outlandish skyscrapers, owes much of its growth to Deira. The success of Deira potentially highlights two points. One, globalisation is good for cities – when monitored. Two, multi-culturalism works – when supervised. From this perspective, Deira and Dubai really embody the modern, world city. The rest of the globe can learn a lot from it.

The "Deira" model of trans-national, organic urbanism has elements that are applicable to other parts of the world. Many cities can promote organic urbanism by loosening the administrative grip on planning. Deira demonstrates that a bottom-up, market and user led approach to urban development can be very successful. Whether the government intended to do so is debatable, but small enterprises are empowered by the ease of doing business and finding suitable facilities in Deira. The location is sustainable as it benefits from excellent access to ports and public transportation. The network of roads and alleys also allow goods to be distributed cheaply and efficiently throughout Deira.

This is an extreme case, however, and it is recognised that this would be a challenging approach for other cities to embrace. Nonetheless, there is value in making planning systems more flexible and community-driven. Many city districts could benefit from regulatory relaxation by using the planning system as a framework that guides development, as opposed to a set of prescriptive policies that suffocate neighbourhoods. This being said, the "Deira" model functions well within the socio-political context of the United Arab Emirates. Such considerations must be factored in when discussing the transferability of the Deira model abroad.

Above all else, Deira shows that successful places can be created when various, contrasting cultures are organically integrated through the development of economic relationships. It is

hard to despise someone when you buy fish or tires from them. A significant positive externality of the Deira model is racial and ethnic tolerance. Walking through Deira I witnessed countless inter-racial couples; Pinoys and Pakistanis, Caucasians and Indians, North African and East African, etc. Deira could also be used as a case study for pro-immigration policies, though perhaps extreme in this case, as the representation of Emirati locals is so exceptionally low.

Looking forward, the future of Deira could soon be at a crossroads. The Dubai 2020 Urban Master Plan gives little information other than a land use plan and some relatively generic sustainable urban planning principles. As always, Deira is zoned as “Metropolitan Urban Centre”, which one would presume is relatively similar to a Central Business District. Pondering the future of Deira leads us to the age-old question: who are we planning for? Dubai badly needs to provide affordable housing (Alawadi, 2017) for its majority low-income groups. They need decent homes with good access to public transportation, public and green spaces and a provision of flexible space for business.

Dubai seems determined to deliver the opposite. Driving down the city’s main highway, Sheikh Zayed road, one can not help but notice the skeletal structures of new skyscrapers. Many stand empty or incomplete, a sombre reminder of the cyclical nature of the property market in Dubai. Unfortunately, the construction of the Palm Deira indicates that city leaders want to push forward with the “luxury living” agenda, despite suggestions that money can be best spent elsewhere. Dubai seriously does not need more gold-plated towers - it needs to draw from its success stories and reflect on how it got to where it is now (The National, 2012). Learning from Deira could be a good starting point.

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