



## ON THE FABRICATION OF CULTURAL MEMORY: HISTORY THEME MALLS IN DUBAI

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### ABSTRACT

Dubai, one of the most mobile cities in the world, is rapidly cementing its image as a global city and icon of Islamic tolerance. Dubai's economic opportunities, relative safety and geographic centrality in the heart of the Middle East make it attractive to a wide range of economic and political migrants from across the region. This article asks how a city which is overwhelmingly populated by members of a highly mobile and diverse non-citizen workforce could construct a plausible sense of collective memory, a fundamental requirement for any meaningful social cohesion. In considering this question, the article reviews two well-known history-themed commercial centers, Ibn Battuta Mall and the Khan Murjan in Wafi Mall. Each of these emphasize Arab-Islamic cultural heritage and the region's long history of trade and transit. Both malls highlight culturally significant journeys documented in historical manuscripts. The article concludes that in constructing a complex experience which maps immediate spatial movement onto well-known travel narratives, the Ibn Battuta and Khan Murjan centers provide scaffolds for a cultural memory essentially "made to order" for a population who share, if little else, a profound sense of dislocation, flow and perpetual movement.

### KEYWORDS:

Dubai; Museums; Malls; Islam; Culture

### INTRODUCTION

*People move. We become refugees from violence and exploitation, and poverty, and boredom. This has happened before. But before, we believed we would settle, or resettle, or die trying. Now we go around and around. We no longer believe there is settlement.*

Istvan Csicsery-Ronay

In his memoir "Notes on Mutopia" [1], Istvan Csicsery-Ronay reflects on a widely shared sense of flux and anomie in a world where the fluidity and movement associated with shifting contemporary capital flows, production centers, and population movement become more and more pervasive. Nowhere is this reality of perpetual motion more apparent than in Dubai.

The unremitting mobility of Dubai's population is itself extraordinary. Unfortunately, population figures by nationality and origin in UAE are difficult to determine, since the UAE National Bureau of Statistics does not identify resident numbers by nationality [2]. Even overall census numbers give only an approximate idea of total population, as it is understandably difficult to trace illegal immigrants, those who overstay visas, those who work under tourist visas, and many of those without official citizenship status (*Bidoun*). According to the United Nations, however, by 2013 UAE had perhaps the fifth largest international migrant stock in the world [3]. World Bank data and foreign embassy surveys suggest that out of a total population of

around 9.5 million, somewhere between 80 and 90 percent of the population are non-citizens. Jure Snoj notes that this makes UAE, along with Qatar, the country with the highest ratio of immigrants to citizens in the world [2].

Numbers for the city of Dubai itself are equally difficult to estimate, but by all accounts expatriate numbers in Dubai are proportionally higher than in UAE overall. Tourist inflow and outflow is even more staggering. Gulf News reports that 9.3 million tourists visited Dubai 2011, with an average stay of under 4 days [4]. Even executive expatriates, who are employed in relatively stable work environments and are staying in country longer than in the past, still tend to rotate out approximately every 4 years [5]. This suggests that up to one quarter of those employees are on the move every year. Again, the business focus of Dubai's economy suggests that the majority of UAE's expatriate executives are located there, rather than in Abu Dhabi or elsewhere in the country. Taken altogether, in a country with a total citizenry of no more than about 1.4 million, no fewer than 8 million are non-citizens, and at least another 10 million each year are tourists. Together with inflow and outflow of non-citizen workers and citizens on vacation trips to destinations outside the country, this amounts to a truly extraordinary movement of people into and out of UAE, and most especially Dubai. It is no wonder, then, that if any image could convincingly condense the felt and lived experience of a place like Dubai, it would be a picture of overwhelming and unending

movement, of ceaseless flow, churn, and turbulence. In every conceivable sense, Dubai is a city in motion.

### MUSEUMS AND MALLS IN DUBAI

Dubai has developed at an extraordinary pace since the oil boom of the 1970s. In a very real sense, the city is both new and in constant renewal under the pressures of population growth and the real estate development that is required to support it. Historical urban fabrics have largely disappeared, or have been developed into something like outdoor theme parks or urban history enclaves primarily serving the interests of the tourism industry. This is especially evident in the reconstruction efforts that characterize the older historical fabrics along the Dubai Creek. So little of Dubai's urban history is left standing, particularly when considered in the context of rapid and extensive urban expansion that has overwhelmed earlier development, that there is some justification for the widespread perception that Dubai has no use for history, certainly not any history it could call its own [6][7]. Indeed, critics can perhaps be forgiven for thinking that Dubai is a city of contemporaneity alone [8][9][10]. While a sense of history may be difficult to discern in Dubai, however, it can be glimpsed in unexpected places and in unlikely expressions. Among the most interesting of these are the histories presented in Dubai's theme malls.

Mohamed El-Amrousi and I have argued elsewhere that bereft of much historical urban fabric, Dubai's museums remain the primary public vehicles for preserving and disseminating a sense of history [11]. In fact, the popular history-themed malls in Dubai serve as integral parts of a larger system of museum and museum-like institutions which function as a structural whole in preserving an active sense of connection to a shared Arab-Islamic past that is otherwise eclipsed by change, renewal and insistent contemporaneity. Under analysis, the entire museum enterprise in Dubai appears to revolve around an implicit recognition of historical loss and absence, and a concomitant effort to erase or ameliorate that condition within the walls of the city's museums and by their particular treatments of the collections they house [11]. As an extension of this logic, the history-themed malls of Dubai, in their role as popular "museums", necessarily substitute real historical artifacts with reproductions and re-interpretations. However, they do so without sacrificing everything of historical importance or cultural meaning.

These places are most certainly not simply wonderlands or entertainment zones, just as they are not just distractions from a busy work-life, nor are they only decorative venues for retail commerce (although they are indeed all of those, as well). It is easy to miss the public service function and genuine educational impact of these malls if they are interpreted solely as commercial complexes. Together with the large numbers of visitors they attract, the fact that they are publicly perceived as serving authentic educational roles gives them an outsized impact in connecting

people to history and collective meaning. This effect is captured in a visitor's appreciation of such malls as more than just shopping venues. Speaking of the Ibn Battuta mall, a patron recently remarked that "I find I have actually, finally, learnt something about Arabia. I can take a brain-break from shopping, and at least it is not just shops I have already seen" [12]. Mall visitors are aware that they are seeing history as portrayed by and in support of commercial interests, but this does not seem to lessen their appreciation for the genuinely cultural and historiographical roles such malls can play.

### IBN BATTUTA MALL AND WAFI MALL'S KHAN MURJAN

History-themed shopping is present in a number of locations in Dubai, from the historic and recently rebuilt textile souq of Dubai Creek to all new recreations of the historical market experience in the Mina Al Salam resort and, especially, the Al Qasr hotel in Madinat Jumeirah. These shopping venues generally attempt to replicate historical souqs and market spaces in relatively straightforward if somewhat fanciful and sanitized form. Other recent history themed shopping malls are a little more complex, applying notions of historical space in more figurative ways.

By far the most interesting of these recent history-themed malls in Dubai are the Ibn Battuta Mall on Sheikh Zayed Road and the Khan Murjan in the Wafi City Mall near the Dubai Creek. Both malls retreat from their urban contexts to create hermetic worlds where historical images and reproductions produce spaces heavy with references from across Islam, the Arab world, and beyond. Khan Murjan, in particular, occupies an entirely independent space below the main Wafi mall. The typically brief transition from parkade to history-themed space present in the Ibn Battuta mall, marked as it is by floor surface transitions, temperature changes and lighting effects, is further elaborated in the Khan Murjan as the leisurely pace of the escalators reinforce a sense of descending into another time and space.

Both mall spaces are organized as itineraries through historical geographies of an idealized Arab world. Khan Murjan, which takes its name from the famous 14<sup>th</sup> century *caravanserai* of Baghdad, bears only passing similarity to its namesake. However, the reference to journeys and temporary stays embodied in the notion of the *caravanserai*, as an inn for travelers, sets the tone for a wide ranging impression of travel and geographic expanse. This is reinforced by an arrangement of distinct shopping venues named for important areas across the region from Syria in the near east, across Egypt and west to Morocco. These places are ornamented with high quality marbles and inlays, tiled Ottoman arcades and ornately carved wooden doors and *mashrabiyyas* (lattice-work window screens) Together these give the effect of times and places far removed from contemporary Dubai.

The Ibn Battuta mall, similarly, reproduces iconic and broadly Islamic geographies from North Africa and Egypt to the Near East, Persia, India and China, all of

which are places Ibn Battuta recounts in his travel memoir, *Rihla* (journey, quest) [13]. In this mall, the notion of museology and historic curatorship is entirely explicit, with highly designed plaques and text panels located adjacent to carefully lighted vitrine displays holding recreations of various artifacts associated with the extensive 14<sup>th</sup> century travels of the historic Ibn Battuta as he made his way across Islam and beyond. These museum-like displays are arranged along the primary circulation route of the mall, proceeding without much distraction or potential side-tracking from a spatial and decorative rendering of Andalusia, on one end, to a similarly immersive treatment of a Chinese port, on the other. This progression of space, rendered as a compression of Ibn Battuta's journeys, reinforces a sense of transit and identification, overlaying visitor movement through the mall space with the larger geographic itineraries of the historic Ibn Battuta (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Image reproductions, artifact reconstructions, vitrine displays and interpretive captions in the Ibn Battuta Mall, Dubai

In Khan Murjan, an extraordinary stained glass ceiling runs the full length of the main space, nominally the Egyptian zone, over a lower floor corridor rhythmically punctuated by doorways, windows and recesses under a continuous strip of projecting wooden balconies. This arrangement strongly reinforces a sense of spatial progression and, in this case, axial movement. This ceiling extracts and represents fifteen Wasiti illuminations out of the original fifty scenes recounted in *Maqamat Al Hariri* [14]. The overarching sense of movement suggested by the orientation of the ceiling along the length of the central space, effectively a wide corridor, and the physical location of the glasswork, spanning the entire central space from above, is further reinforced by the content of the selected *Maqamat* scenes, all of which depict travels and journeys, and all of which are oriented with origin points toward one end of the space, destination points on the other, and consequently a uniformly implied direction of travel. This is not consistent with the original manuscript illustrations, which sometimes imply movement toward the left and other times to the right. However, it does serve to forge a very strong impression of continuous and uninterrupted movement from one

end of the space to the other. Even to appreciate the ceiling as a whole, the viewer must travel along the corridor and position himself under the various scenes in which he is interested (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Stained glass ceiling reproducing selections of Wasiti's *Maqamat Al-Hariri* in the Khan Murjan at Wafi City Mall, Dubai

Both malls thematize travel, in Abu Zayd's case the fictional journeys of a fictional character, and in the case of Ibn Battuta, the derivative and ornamented account of the travels of an historical person. By far the dominant impression and unifying theme of both the Ibn Battuta mall and Khan Murjan, then, is that of a single culturally important literary figure's journeys across Islam and his adventures in foreign lands. In both malls, the organizational and decorative references for mall space and circulation path are the details, liberally interpreted, of these travels.

The illustrated *Maqamat Al Hariri* of Wasiti and Ibn Battuta's *Rihla* both have origins that predate the written expression that comes to us from the medieval period, and thus already incorporate elements and structures from other works, narratives and cultural productions. Ibn Battuta, writing in 1354, relied both on the memory of his own travels over the 50 years preceding his text, as well as on earlier manuscripts of other travelers. The adventures of Abu Zayd in the *Maqamat Al Hariri* as illustrated in the Wasiti manuscript of 1237 obviously derive from Al Hariri's literary text written more than a century before Wasiti. The reference texts that orient the mall visitor's experiences in the Ibn Battuta mall and the Khan Murjan at Wafi mall are themselves both composite and interpretive, then, a fact that goes some way toward legitimizing their further adaptation and reuse as structuring devices for contemporary experience, in this case in shopping venues, and reinforcing a sense that they can remain relevant and meaningful in the modern world.

#### MOVEMENT, PEOPLE AND PLACES

Perhaps for Islam, and certainly for the local Arab culture out of which it arose, this figurative sense of shifting sands has never been far from the surface. Rooted in its birth and early development in a nomadic culture in which settlement, where present, remained a tentative and negotiable concept, Islam appears to

have always incorporated movement. This is particularly true of those irreducibly physical transits across space characteristic of both everyday/collective answers to calls to prayer and the deeply-invested geographic pilgrimages of *Umrah* and *Hajj*. In the context of contemporary tourism, Aspa Gospodini reasserts a widely held belief that movement across spatial terrain remains central to any plausible idea of modernity [15]. If contemporary Dubai can be framed according to any rhetorical figure that connects past and present, the most apt of these must surely be that of a terrain that moves across Islam and under the feet of a population itself over-determined as both constitutionally fluid and locationally transient, embedded in and conditioned by the modern but also culturally invested in historical echoes and local pasts still very much present.

Across a wide range of analyses in architecture, a number of authors have noted that Islam tends to be closely associated with historical Arabia, despite the wide geographic reach of Islam itself and the fact that Islam necessarily achieves context-dependent interpretation from place to place [16][17][18][19]. Whether or not it is ultimately justifiable to link even a wide and deeply syncretic Arab cultural expression with Islam [20], one implication of this tendency is that Arab forms, arrangements and compositional principles, from the literary to the architectural, comprise a widely recognizable set of references for much of the Islamic *ummah* and beyond. The fact that even the architectural and decorative expressions nominally associated with the Arab world have in fact continually incorporated, combined and modified influences from North Africa, across the Mediterranean, and into the Near East and Asia, only gives them more resonance over a very broad geographic field. As Islam itself extends its geographic reach, this syncretism, in turn, gives movement to what might otherwise remain geographically-bound or locationally-mapped cultural expressions.

What are the broader implications of considering the world and its places as somehow moving beneath the feet of a population that itself is highly mobile? This is a deceptively complex question, but in the present context we can at least start to answer this by noting that Islam and the Arab world-the holy places, the great sites, the famous khans, the cultural artefacts-can most certainly be seen to move “to” Dubai. In the history-themed malls we are discussing here, of course, such movement is generally figurative. In these example, that is, no material artifacts of consequence are transported anywhere, although it should be noted that building materials and decorative elements have sometimes indeed made long journeys before finding their places in these malls. The authenticity of the materials frequently used in creating the various reproductions found in these malls, particularly in Khan Murjan, add a sense of authenticity that further reinforces a sense of geographic compression and transit provided by the appearance distant places brought together in Dubai’s theme malls. It is this over-

determined impression of movement that sets up the initial conditions for the effects these malls have.

The Ibn Battuta mall and the Khan Murjan gather references, recreations, reinterpretations and at times highly convincing reproductions of culturally significant artifacts, places and moments in the history and literature of Islam and Arab culture-from Damascus to China, from Andalusia to the courts of Tunis, from Ibn Battuta’s *Rihla* to Wasiti’s *Maqamat Al-Hariri*. In the shopping venues discussed here, the impact of this gathering is multiplied by a strategy that invisibly tattoos this history of geography and movement onto the very body of the mall visitor who himself moves physically through the mall spaces. Tourist, migrant, and shopper all absorb and retrace the compressed journeys of cultural figures of importance (here, Ibn Battuta and Abu Zayd). Historical or fictional, factual or fabulist, these journeys and places comprise the texture of meaningful cultural memory for a present of movement and flux. In the malls, then, historically significant transits are made co-present with the various journeys of mall patrons and visitors, mapped together, that is, in one space, overlaid and imbricated into the lived realities of the mobile populations of Dubai.

In the context of the Ibn Battuta mall and the Khan Murjan, felt experiences of diaspora, migration and exile are potentially turned into reinforcements of cultural continuity and religious affiliation through an exploitation of this commonality. As we have seen, these places effectively “write” Islamic pilgrimage, Arab caravanserai, and historical adventure travel onto contemporary population movement and flows through Dubai. Circulation through the history themed malls in Dubai essentially becomes a choreography re-enacting historical movement and contemporary travel in the highly compressed and stylised local spaces of these malls.

In what way is a conceptual and expressive fusion of this kind necessary? Clearly, the placelessness of many global cities, together with the trauma of dislocation and exile, work against attempts to live authentically in the modern world, at least if authenticity means negotiating a transient present with recourse to a sense of place and past that might still carry meaning. This is as much an issue for Dubai’s itinerant populations as it is for other migrants under modernity. To the extent that modernity is characterized by disruption and radical change, something Marshall Berman memorably condensed into the phrase “all that’s solid melts into air” [21], we are all migrants and exiles-from familiarity, from constancy and even from self-recognition. Indeed, this issue is perhaps especially important in a place like Dubai. For migrant workers uprooted from home and thrust into a foreign culture, and equally for an Emirati population pulled out of traditional ways of life and effectively dropped into a foreign country that should still be their own, an overwhelming sense of displacement is ubiquitous.

## REFLECTIONS

The words of Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, with which we opened this piece, present for us a world of perpetual transience and physical displacement. As Csicsery-Ronay points out, this is a world in which we all live. We have seen how this is at once made explicit, intensely concentrated, and figuratively re-expressed in the history-themed malls of Dubai. Not only is it possible to find our shared condition mapped out and represented in these place-constructs, but we also see a tightly defined version of the past gathered up and made present for us. Both what we live, and what we remember, are interwoven in these apparently simple commercial spaces. Yes, these malls work to sell us particular realities and memories consistent with their own themes and images. And, yes, all of this falls under a logic of consumption and profit. But these malls in Dubai also reveal a truth that neither they nor we could easily conceive on our own.

Csicsery-Ronay notes in “Mutopia” that central to his own family’s spatial-heritage is a place called Bohemia. Over the years Bohemia was part of (Hapsburg) Austria, “then Czechoslovakia, then Nazi-occupied Austria, then again Czechoslovakia, and now Czechia.” It was not Bohemia that moved, but “Europe itself”. Csicsery-Ronay does not mention this, but we also know that long before than the birth of Europe, Bohemia was a region incorporated into the early Holy Roman Empire, perhaps the most “mobile” of the great civilizations of the medieval and proto-modern period. Csicsery-Ronay concludes that now, let us say “especially now”, even when people remain in a place for generations, “the world migrates under them”.

In Dubai, a sense of shifting sands derives directly from an unsettling mix of endless population movement-into, out of and around the country-and the experience of a landscape that never ceases to “migrate” as the country undergoes continuous local transformation and a dizzying global transit from geospatial periphery to geopolitical centrality.

Dubai’s theme mall implicitly recognize that, for people bereft of the usual markers of normalcy and familiarity, some fabrication of meaning is required. Intentional or not, these malls acknowledge interpret and re-express loss, anomie and exile as the fullness, presence and homecoming that accompanies an insertion into a world of cultural meaning and historical memory reduplicated in text and image, through simulation and local spatial expression. In these malls, Dubai’s populations are offered the opportunity to find themselves again, this time in a Dubai that brings a history of Arab and Islamic journeys together with the travels and transits of the mall patrons themselves.

The unease of dislocation may not be eliminated in this way, and a robust sense of social cohesion may not be delivered in a single stroke, but reflected in these malls and overlaid onto mall visitor’s own spatial movement is a narrative suggesting that if their various cultural references and histories are

characterized by anything common, it is the centrality of journeys, migrations, exiles and dreams of return.

## CONCLUSION

The history-themed malls of Dubai may not quite produce an alternative homecoming in compensation for a home far away, or lost forever, but they manage to fabricate a cultural memory that selectively reproduces a shared history and cultural narrative-of travel, movement and displacement-that resonates with the felt experience of so many residents, visitors and citizens of Dubai and the United Arab Emirates. This is indeed a fabrication “made to order” for a present that otherwise remains either intolerable or beyond figuration.

Not only do we see our own condition reflected back to us in the guise of a collective experience repeated across time and space, but these malls suggest that we might even begin to feel more at home with our condition. These malls reconnect us to the core of our cultural heritage as much as they capture the essence of Dubai-a city of incessant motion for a people whose cultural references have always included pilgrimages, exploration, adventure travel and mobile encounters of myriad kinds. The fact that this narrative of movement is highly selective and carefully tailored to enhance a commercial agenda in no way lessens its impact.

Csicsery-Ronay may well be right to say that we “no longer believe there is settlement.” But the mall museums of Dubai offer hope that we may yet find a level of familiarity, or even comfort, in contemporary experiences of displacement and movement when these are interpreted through a memory construct that emphasizes a shared and resonant inheritance of mobility and transit.

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