ABSTRACT

PAPER TITLE: Studying and Conserving Urban Heritage of the Gulf
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ABSTRACT:

While cities like Dubai, Sharjah, Abu Dhabi, Ras al-Khaima, Kuwait and Doha exhibit a desire to modernize by growing rapidly and facilitating the emergence of global urban projects, architecture and urban design are used to construct an identity that commemorates the modern nation-state and religious ideology. Several museums are emerging in the UAE and other sovereign nation-states of eastern Arabia. In Sharjah alone there are nineteen museums, the recognition of which led to UNESCO’s selection of Sharjah as the cultural capital of the Arab World in 1998. Large scale urban design projects, such as the Heart of Doha and the Heart of Sharjah, are geared towards “regenerating the historic core” by reconstructing large parts of the city back to their “pre-modern” state, glorifying the pre-modern “madina” urbanism, erasing any marks of multiplicity or modernity from the prescribed “heritage area” or “historic core”. The imagined reconstruction of “inheritance” results in environments that are inauthentic, disregard international standards of conservation, and are coming under attack by international agencies.

Current efforts to “regenerate” vast city blocks aim to reconstruct a national-religious identity (Arab-Islamic). In the vast literature on Islamic cities, the notion of “modern urbanism” is contrasted with the concept of “Islamic urbanism.” Hence change in urban forms of cities in the Islamic world is seen as detrimental to their traditional built environment. There is fundamental problem in imposing the existing frameworks of urbanization (modern or Islamic) to study or to conserve cities in the Islamic world. My proposed paper analyses Sharjah’s urban development from a maritime perspective to transcend the contemporary discourse on Gulf (Khaliji) identity from its present insularity. Sharjah’s pre-modern urban development demonstrates distinctiveness from the generalized notion of “Arab-Islamic city” and offers an alternative to the current nationalistic-religious construction of cultural identity in the Gulf. Urbanism happens mainly on land, but my analysis of Sharjah’s urban form is based on both its territorial development and its access and links to other cities in and around Al-Khalij. I examining Sharjah in terms of its urban continuities (nodes) shaped by transient commerce and transforming navigational conditions of the ocean. This paper thus introduces “seascape” urbanism as a visual complement to the existing domains of “port” and “coastal” urbanism. Future considerations of “identity” in Al-Khaliji will necessitate the revival of centrality of the ocean as a unifying geographic entity and acknowledge a unique urban typology based on secure tenure over the connecting ocean, linking diverse people with landscape and seascape ecologies.

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i “Heart of Doha’ project to get under way in Q4”, in Construction Week, July 29, 2009. Qatar’s ambitious US $5.5 billion (QR20 billion) project anticipates the rebuilding of Doha’s city centre to a 35-hectare mixed-use development by 2016.
iv A “node” in urban theory is identified by overlapping a series of mapping exercises. Nodes are already in place and persist through time. Each node varies in function and will present its unique
problems, which can be addressed to “add” to the long-evolving, existing strengths, instead of replacing them with new and imported ones. Hilberseimer, L. *The New City. Principles of Planning*. Paul Theobald, Chicago, 1944.