Dubai Reimagined

There is an exciting and very populous part of Dubai that has been left out of the contemporary image the metropolis has created for itself. The city narrative acknowledges this area known as the Dubai Creek as the historical cradle of the city, while residents consider it either a weekend attraction or the true centre of social life, depending largely on nationality and class. This area includes neighbourhoods such as Deira, Karama, Bur Dubai, Bastakiya and Satwa that encompass over 30% of Dubai's total population. Wholesale activity, which largely occurs in these areas, accounts for 29% of Dubai's GDP making it the largest grossing sector with a value of 106 billion AED in 2015 according to Dubai Statistics Center. Deira, known as a beacon for all the other neighbourhoods, is the oldest part of the city, originating in the 19th century as a pearl traders' post. These areas are essential to Dubai in terms of economics, land use and sociocultural routines for many residents, yet they are not automatically equated with the Dubai brand.

The long history of the Creek area has been recognized by the Dubai government and efforts began in 2013 to designate the area as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Most recently, the government officially launched a series of developments called 'The Dubai Historical District' in 2015. Celebrating the history of Dubai is paramount for a comparatively new city which also has a Bedouin culture and trade history that spanned a millennial. However, by trying to protect some of the last physical sites that evidence this history, the autochthon urban fabric of Dubai Creek could be at risk of dying a slow death in the name of tourism, entertainment, gentrification and eventually adhesion to the standard globalised development model. The globalised model of preservation is starting to claim full control on this truly autochthonous model of development without recognising its true value: its thriving social life.

In order to prevent the decay of the Creek's vibrant districts, an alternative approach to development is needed. First, this means reassessing our understanding of Dubai in order to reposition the image of Deira as a place of the present, not the past. Secondly, we must acknowledge and consider how the Dubai model could benefit from many successful urban design strategies implemented in Deira.

Our efforts and understanding of our responsibility as professional urban operators contributes to how the design, building or regeneration of the communities of tomorrow will occur. As such it is paramount to establish a framework through which we could reimagine Dubai. To reimagine Dubai means to learn how to look at the urban environment through different lenses in order to grasp this city's many identities and consider what each can add to the whole.

We need to remember it is not enough for us to seek the beauty of design. More precious still is for urban planning to address another kind of beauty: people's quality of life, their adaptation to the environment, social encounters and integration of elements. We can learn from the example of traditional sikkas, souks, wind towers, courtyard houses and traditional typologies. Using this approach, our collective aim should be to envisage models that can foster a community spirit for such a complex mix of nationalities and cultures. As I will discuss later, Deira provides a strong case that this spirit can be achieved through the design of urban cores with multi-purpose space. Where many international observers seem paralyzed by the supposed impossibility of creating true public space

due to issues like climate or legal framework, we have the blueprint for finding solutions already built and functioning in Deira, which proves daily that an area can thrive amid complex often contradictory identities in an environment of constant variance and change.
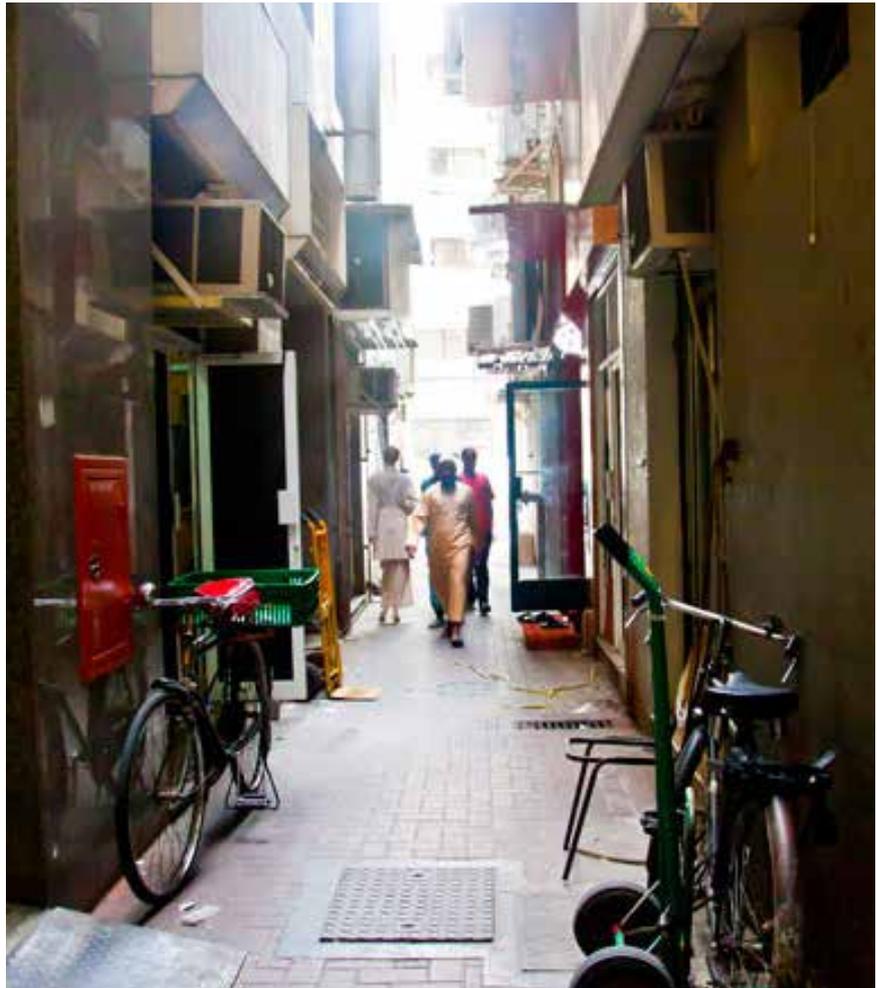
In Deira I believe there exists the potential for the establishment of a more inclusive and nuanced model of development for Dubai, one that will not require changing existing policies or altering conditions of the market. Fully exploring the merits of this perspective is significant as a city that can thrive out of complex and often contradictory identities without segregation or homogenisation is a truly successful cosmopolitan hub.

Repositioning the Image of Deira

What immediately strikes a casual pedestrian walking around Deira is the dense urban fabric of narrow streets and alleys. This is the product of choices and contributions of several generations of residents that, following the settlement of 800 members of the Bani Yas tribe in the creek in 1833, arrived to inhabit the area. A spontaneous development spurred by the booming pearl trade and later, from about 1903, the opening of a British shipping line that was stopping by the harbour. The result is an urban fabric that allows a great number of people to be in close proximity to the harbour, thriving amidst a range of mixed-use facilities, where shops fill the ground floor alleys and residential or office space occupies the upper floors. Density means higher footfall for the shops but also naturally shaded alleys for citizens that are encouraged to walk and socialise.

This spontaneous and harmonious interconnection between economical, demographical and environmental concerns in Deira is perhaps best symbolised by the many sikkas. Narrow pedestrian alleys between buildings that allow for shaded decompression chambers where people can take solace from the desert sun and where natural ventilation is maximised through orientation towards the coastal north-western winds. The use of attractive masonry screens that draw in air cooled by the breeze is often another feature of the façades in these alleys. Long-term costs for residents are substantially reduced by minimizing building maintenance and artificial climate control. This is an autochthon solution borne out of a holistic approach to a problem, much more subtle and sustainable than any mechanical acclimatised solution.

Traditional urban infrastructure also caters to informal social gathering points scattered throughout the area. A point in case are the many basta - public bench areas enclosing a narrow strip of pavement – where people of various ages and backgrounds sit down to socialise or simply enjoy a cup of tea bought from a nearby cafeteria. Here, the sheer pleasure of sitting, watching the urban symphony in full swing and exchanging a few words is enough to bring people together. There is efficiency and wisdom in informal neighbourhoods, where their planning is borne out of necessity and spontaneous initiatives by city dwellers. This sort of collective learning process generally necessitates public intervention for investing in its infrastructure and civic core.

Deira stands for an urban texture born in the tradition of urban enclaves that are the unique result of local conditions, available materials and customs. Far from aspiring to a foreign or past image, Deira is a deeply local urban environment which has been determined by global dynamics. Even today Deira is the only place in town where we can eat in an Ethiopian restaurant together with Ethiopians, take part in a collective Indian dance class and smoke shisha in an Egyptian coffee joint within a block.

This is the only area where many foreign citizens of Dubai experience social life, an area where its vibrant nature comes from the harbour which occurred first instead of the opposite, which is true for most of the last decades' mixed-use areas. This is where a great part of wholesale trading still happens and where people from all around Africa, the Sub-continent and central Asia still come to negotiate big shipments of everything from gold to fabrics.

Learning from Deira

Re-incorporating Deira into the mainstream image of the city as an active district instead of a historic relic would change Dubai's principles of development, but how? To begin, we must start with ourselves, the professionals working daily to design this ever-expanding city.

Some of the most significant changes to our globalised world are not being written in the language of diplomacy and law, but rather in the language of space-making. Accepting this position, the process of creating spaces will often benefit from a coordinated effort by the municipal authorities, however it is also clear that any urban designer has the responsibility and the potential to bring change over the course of their work.

The typical complaint of architects, designers and contractors working in Dubai has to do with irrelevance of the single operator vis-à-vis the local authorities. Another recurring complaint concerns the dilemma of how to create social space when working with private real estate developers. As understandable as it seems, it is clearly a weak excuse on our part— every project's connectivity to the public space and city at large surrounding it should be required and included within the design. We, as urban thinkers, designers, developers and contractors, are all part of this process of change and as such bear a clear level of responsibility.

Our role, both when working on one of the future regeneration schemes that will spring up in Deira or on any of the many greenfield projects is to resist the seemingly standard and simple unidirectional model of development which espouses technical advancement, globalisation and entertainment in the pursuit of economic growth. Instead, we should strive to find ways to reintroduce the centrality of social life in any urban endeavour. The long term success of development that interacts and promotes connections has been proven time and time again— a local example is none other than Deira.

As seen in John R. Harris' 1959 master-plan for Deira, it is the social core that can guarantee the full sustainability of a city and work towards its continuous re-invention. Typical measures to achieve this include encouraging a public-private framework for new developments where the government and developers invest upfront in a central core of commercial, educational, medical, transportation or cultural functions. Surrounding housing will fuel these developments and fluctuate in response to economy and population size, while maintaining an appropriate level of density to encourage walking, natural sun-shading and social life. This is how Deira, and most successful cities, developed.

The best way to see evidenced what Deira can offer is through a visit. At twenty minutes' drive from Downtown Dubai, one of the most celebrated new developments, back in Deira a Hindu temple sits meters away from a mosque, an array of shops and a hip new café. How was this exciting urban fabric planned? Different cultural identities seem to be attracting without any pre-programming, but let's observe who passes by in more detail. Merchants, residents, students, tourists, shoppers and elders mingle with each other and share the same spaces with different individual purposes.

In Deira, where no major public space has been provided, but where social life between people of different backgrounds, social classes and ages do nevertheless spontaneously arise, is testament that a clear solution does exist even within the present legal and political framework of the UAE. The solution lies in the multi-purpose nature of the urban fabric.

Most successful cities on earth have always been created by urban dwellers themselves, thanks to or despite local urban regulation. Proximity, density and a mix of different urban actors is what is common to them. Citizens and visitors are at once producers, consumers, students or simply local residents. This creates a continuous exchange of ideas, goods and emotions which result in a thriving social life borne out of their continuous and spontaneous interaction.

Deira symbolises a different relationship to sustainability which encompasses economic, cultural and traditional aspects at its core. It purports a multi-purpose urban fabric where different people interact

while carrying out their different daily tasks - work, socialisation, commerce, education, religion and culture. The proximity of different social, economic, educational and leisure establishments around a common civic centre transformed the neighbourhood into a community over time as by-product of spontaneous social and economic dynamics.

The city's sustainable future can be built on an exciting and original complex identity which is not solely dependent on continuous stimulus and growth. A truly original mix can reach a harmony of its own so long as it puts social life at its core. It is not a question of abandonning any utopian dream, it is simply time to incorporate within the utopia a more complex and inclusive image where all existing participants are represented and leveraged.

Deira has also proven to be able to interpret and modify traditional and modern influences into locally viable solutions, producing a population that coexists peacefully irrespective of their different traditions, values and customs. In the resulting combination of Arab, Indian, Pakistani, African, Pilipino and Western culture, local identities remain either unmodified such as National Tailors, which has dressed generation after generation of Emirati families, or been amplified, as

in seen in the many commercial ventures between local and foreign businessmen.

Finally, by allowing for different models to proliferate in a sort of urban symbiosis such as that of Deira, the city is more resilient and less exposed to exogenous shocks because, where business and economic interests can move overnight, people that have invested emotionally and financially in the city will not. To build these kinds of powerful ties necessitates a collective history of place which, far from being a presented as an image of itself in heritage districts or museums, is instead inscribed in the social bond among communities. This living bond is more resilient to time than any economic and technical solution. Collective history, as built by local and foreign families that call Dubai home, can only arise out of an inclusive urban development, allowed and established by the authorities, and ultimately designed by architects, developers and citizens over time. This nuanced approach to urban development, informed by all the different identities of the city, fosters a sense of community based on unique local, social and economic dynamics.

Towards an inclusive model of development

Deira is a source of inspiration, and thus a key component of what could

become a holistic and complex development model for the city in the future. By considering Deira as an example of an inclusive model of development, lessons can be extracted for incorporation into other developments elsewhere in Dubai. Far from celebrating one model over the other, or to defend a supposed ideal synthesis of them, the solution is more likely to lie in the creation of a framework where both models are recognised as equally vital for the originality and sustainability of Dubai's future.

Today what makes Dubai such an interesting and exciting city is how different and often contrasting models of urban development exist side-by-side. Each model, together in their full complexity, contributes to a better city, however this holistic vibrancy depends on the contemporaneity of each model being recognized and presented as such.