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Arab Academy for Science, Technology, and Maritime Transport, AASTMT Abu Kir Campus, Alexandria, Egypt
P.O. Box: Miami 1029
Tel: (+203) 5622366/88 – EXT 1069 and (+203) 5611818
Fax: (+203) 5611818
Web Site: <http://apc.aast.edu>

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HAUS

HORIZONS IN ARCHITECTURE AND URBAN STUDIES JOURNAL

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Inducing Urban Policy from Urban Development in Egypt

Ali El-Faramawy

Ain Shams University, Cairo, Egypt.

faramawyali@gmail.com

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Abstract:

The goal of the paper is to inductively extract urban Policy from urban development experiences. The objectives are: 1) to define Policy, 2) to inductively extract slum upgrading Policy from slum upgrading experience, 3) identify urban sector policy related to informal areas, and urban planning, 4) identify high public policy themes, 5) recommend core urban sector policy, and 6) identify the triggers of urban policy change. The goal is accomplished by defining what constitutes Policy, outlining the values, principles, and actions of slum upgrading and urban planning policy, and generalising a policy framework for the urban sector, as well as identifying its triggers. Methodologically, the paper is a portrait of urban sector experiences and a qualitative analysis of the major themes and categories of substantive Policy as well as policy change. The paper concludes that in spite of the detailed policies adopted and adapted to various sectors and situations, the main high-level general framework for policy development deals with principles related to procedural consultation, to care and wealth substantively, and envisions the physical urban sector as a platform.

Keywords: Urbanization, Policy, Strategy, Slums, Marketplaces, Education, Health, Water and Sanitation, Urban Planning, Informal Areas.

1. Introduction

Research and discourse on urban Policy normally addresses urbanization and policies to resolve urbanization issues. Urbanization issues are generally related to poverty, housing, sanitation, water, waste, environment, and quality of life in general. One of the problems in addressing policy issues is the variation in urban conditions between and among regions. Each country presents a unique case when it comes to economic conditions and urban agglomerations, and the linkages between villages and cities. General recommendations about urban Policy seem not to be possible. Researchers and international agencies resort to promoting governance and decentralization policies to enable local-level decision-making that addresses strategic issues about their place. In this paper I provide my experience in dealing with urban Policy, namely, what are policies, principles and values, and how do they relate to slums and deteriorated market places where the poor reside and work, unplanned areas that overcome agriculture land, urban planning through which government manages future visions, and provide a policy about the dynamic physical setting we refer to as urbanization. This paper is about policies, principles, and values that speak to care and/or wealth.

2. Policy and strategy

I remember the difficulty when having a conversation about urban development in Egypt. The difficulty was about the definitions of the terms policy and Strategy. Policy and Strategy, in the English language, translates literally to *Siasat* (سياسات) and *Estrategiya* (استراتيجية), in the Arabic language, respectively. To our surprise, the meaning of the words we used was reversed. What I mean by Policy was to others *Estrategiya*, and what I meant by Strategy was to them *Siasat*! Making sure that discussants are on the same page is crucial to making sense and a first step towards agreement. The sense of confusion might be attributed to the fact that experts, when talking about Policy and Strategy, refer in both cases to actions. Another indication of the confusion is recognized when addressing “policy objectives”, not realizing that policies – strictly speaking – are about principles while strategies are about objectives.

A Policy is a course or principle of action; a set of criteria, rules, or guidelines to follow. Policies answer questions about what should be the priorities, directions, limits, and principles to

follow when seeking *decision-making guidance*. Policies are based on a set of value-based norms, i.e., rules or principles, that guide the *manner* in which a particular action is undertaken. Rules are different from principles. Normative rules are either complied with or not, while normative principles, as a structure, weigh and balance two opposing positions in tension. An example of a rule is “policy of *high density* in an urban context” or “relying on *civil society* to provide socio-economic programs for slum dwellers.” The selection of an option among alternatives is a policy decision. Alternatively, an example of a principle is “a commitment to sustainability in delivering development programs,” where the complex multidimensional principle of sustainability balances current and future rights and benefits, balances finance generation and payback as a business model, and balances social, economic, and environmental impact. These balancing acts are a *commitment* to the natural tempo of the domain (e.g., urban development) and equitable care of nature, resources, and stakeholders in the long term. It is important to emphasise that rules and principles are *context* dependent (appropriateness), seek maximum *impact* (optimisation), and bring an *ought to* effect (normative) to Policy.

A strategy is different from Policy. The link between Policy and Strategy. i.e., action, brings them close and creates a sense of confusion. A policy qualifies decisions that lead to actions, while a Strategy identifies actions that accomplish a goal. Policy prepares for action by incorporating motivation, while Strategy looks forward to the action's goals and results. Policy and Strategy define the intention (motivation and goals) to be acted upon. The simultaneous impact of Policy and Strategy on action, as well as action being the visible component of both Policy and Strategy, may have underpinned the confusion.

3. National urban context

The urban sector in Egypt is led by the Ministry of Housing and Urban Communities (MOHUC). On the national level, the MOHUC is managing urban planning, national housing, and new urban communities.

The relatively high rate of increase in population and limited economic opportunities in villages resulted in internal migration from villages to cities seeking employment. As a result, informal settlements emerged either by direct occupation

of public land or through informal construction on private agricultural land. Recognising the threat of the spread of informal areas to food security, the MOHUC advocated 'exiting the agricultural Nile valley to the desert' and halting the expansion of informal areas as a national strategy. Exiting the Nile valley has kick-started the New Urban Communities Program, and halting the spread of informal areas has started the National Urban Planning Program. While informal construction has for decades been criminalised, the legal framework has changed from severe sanctions of demolition to lesser sanctions of fines to the recent provision of tenure for these unplanned areas.

4. Slum Upgrading

The National Slum Upgrading Program in Egypt has had success as a result of unique policies. The Deweka disaster¹ In 2008, this prompted the government to change its informal settlement policy. The focus has shifted from informal areas to slums. Consequently, the Informal Settlement Development Facility (ISDF) was legislated. ISDF proceeded to prepare the National Slum Map and National Slum Upgrading Strategy and Action Plan. Program activities reveal lessons learned regarding slum upgrading Policy and Strategy.

- **Example 1:** Priority policy, such as "Give priority to slums when developing informal areas," is an adopted and legislated ISDF² policy that is based on the principle: "Removing harm takes priority over gaining benefit." The cultural or moral values of "removing harm" and "gaining benefit" are self-evident in the principle.
- **Example 2:** The criteria sub-policy regulated by ISDF is evident in the definition of slums as being areas where there is: "1. threat to life. 2. unsuitable housing conditions, 3. threat to health, and 4. insecurity of tenure." These policies guide and prioritize the type and place of development action. This definition sets a hierarchy of priorities that guide the level of urgency of action, i.e., first priority: life-threatening, second priority: unsuitable housing conditions, third priority: health-threatening, and fourth priority: securing tenure.

1 Huge geological formations from the Moqatam mountain in Cairo slid on the Deweka area buildings, killing citizens below and above the edges of the mountain.

2 ISDF: Informal Settlement Development Facility

- **Example 3:** Social value policy implemented by ISDF is evident in "affecting minimal disruption to the livelihood of slum dwellers as afforded by location." The Policy guides development activity by providing a range of activities as follows: relocation from life-threatening areas to the closest available residence, on-site construction of housing, removing sources of health risk at the source, and providing tenure.
- **Example 4:** Caring for slum dwellers is a value at the core of Policy. Furthermore, care is evident in an integrated development principle adopted as ISDF implements a socio-economic policy whereby economic (microcredit), educational (illiteracy), and health (facial deformities) support programs are provided to local residents of the developed areas.
- **Example 5:** Stakeholder cooperation policy is evident in local government (or central institution owning land) leading the project, and civil society is delegated to implement socio-economic programs.
- **Example 6:** Consultation is adopted by ISDF as a procedural policy in preparing action plans that respond to local needs. The knowledge principle underpinning the consultative process is: "the best result comes from everyone in a group doing what's best for themselves and the group."³ The leadership of local government as a public landowner is imperative and enabled by a consultative process as a value that operationalizes decentralisation (subsidiarity and participation).
- **Example 7:** Local government leveraging finance from ISDF supported the capacity building effort to transform local government into a competitive organization capable of creating partnerships, preparing action plans, overseeing projects, and managing finance to pay back leveraged finance. The vision was to upscale ISDF into a Local Government Facility (LGF) at the Ministry of Local Development.

In contrast to Policy, ISDF's Strategy to effectively and efficiently address slums was based on eight core actions that enable stakeholders to achieve the goals. The eight (8) actions are:

3 John Nash, Nobel Prize recipient in 1994.

- 1) Define slums,
- 2) Develop a national map of slums in Egyptian cities,
- 3) Identify the actions to be undertaken,
- 4) Building the capacity of stakeholders,
- 5) Agree on an effective partnership,
- 6) Manage resources,
- 7) Implement actions based on detailed action plans,
- 8) Monitor, evaluate, and sanction implementation.

The above strategy framework ultimately identifies the actions as well as enables effective and efficient management of these actions. For every action in the Strategy, a policy principle might be developed to further *refine* implementation.

Implementation of the slum upgrading program can be exemplified by the Zerzara area as an unsuitable housing condition in Port Said City, later renamed as Al-Amal Area. There, the governor managed a public consultation with citizens where they each selected their unit in the new housing plan on site. Another important experience was the community built in a flood plain adjacent to 15 May City in Helwan District in Cairo City. The residents of a life-threatening area were offered public housing in the adjacent 15 May City. Unfortunately, the residents refused. Their refusal had grave consequences when they were later subjected to a flood. In other areas whose health was threatened, high-tension cables were buried, and pollution from industries was abated.

5. Unplanned areas

Unplanned areas represent the vast majority of informal areas in cities⁴. Before the change of Policy towards slums, the local government implemented an infrastructure program for unplanned areas. Water, sanitation, and electricity networks were constructed. Recently, the government initiated the process of regularizing buildings in informal areas within the city of *Hayez* (refer to city limits below when addressing urban planning). Land and

buildings outside the Hayez are tightly controlled and sanctioned in defence of agricultural land.

Other informal area development initiatives focus on improving building conditions. By refurbishing the structure, stairs, infrastructure (water, sanitation, electricity), internal and external finishing, the deteriorated conditions of the building were upgraded. In many cases, the residents' families left the community and were replaced by middle-class families. To some, this represents gentrification not of the aggressive type initiated by developers seeking windfall profit but rather by consensual displacements of resident families. In this case, the finance provided to refurbish the building increased the value of both the units and the neighbourhood. I cannot blame the residents for cashing in on the increase in unit value, particularly when these residents are in need of wealth to manage their family's increasing needs. The development policies of upgrading informal areas have provided increased wealth and wellbeing.

6. Informal marketplaces

What policies are suitable for informal marketplaces? Informal marketplaces are trading sites on streets and off-streets that are either run down or an aggregate of pushcarts with umbrellas to protect their good from the sun. Informal market types are fresh food markets, peddling street food, or selling second-hand clothing, furniture, or gadgets. Informal marketplaces serve the poor population, selling low-priced commodities and home-manufactured items. Otherwise, street peddlers on the move should benefit from microloan programs.

The development of marketplaces is tricky. In the process of providing finance for upgrading marketplaces, the payback of cost will increase the rental price for stalls, increase the price of goods, and profits will either decrease or prices will increase. Disposable income might decrease, and the weak business model might collapse, displacing the poor. Marketplaces have to be developed on free public land. Street-based marketplaces will have to be organized by turning the street into a pedestrian zone and managed by civil society. Off-street markets will be developed into a minimal platform by refinishing the ground and providing a retractable shading device, and ensuring a pro-poor management plan to minimize costs by linking the marketplace to rural production of goods.

⁴ Villages have grown unplanned over millennia. Only in 2008 AD have villages been added to legislation mandating the issuance of construction permits according to urban plans.

7. Urban planning and development

Old cities that have developed organically over decades and centuries do not respond to creative visions of urban plans. The realities on the ground are severe limiting factors. Old cities might respond to detailed urban development mechanisms when afforded by urban characteristics and land property ownership. Land conversion, regularization, and readjustment as urban regeneration tools might be implemented when public land is needed for the provision of services and infrastructure or to capture land value.⁵ The process of land development will necessitate the cooperation of stakeholders, landowners, and local government, in a collaborative win-win development process via the utilization of a private organization, e.g., urban cooperatives or companies, to bring together stakeholder into a contractual agreement, and a public organization, e.g., national survey authority, capable of assessing property ownership, land value, implementing land consolidation, and providing a detailed future plan. In this process, capturing wealth is for the direct benefit of landowners.

For old cities, strategic urban planning program that:

- 1) Implements stakeholder-based participatory decision making,
- 2) Identifies priority capacity building and development projects in economic, slums, heritage, environmental, gender and governance related sectors,
- 3) Collects detailed information for land and building characteristics,
- 4) Sets city limits to define the limits of buildable land and separates the domain of authority of the Ministry of Agriculture from that of the Ministry of Housing.

Besides the objective of coordinating the mandate of ministries, the collaborative stakeholder effort

⁵ Urban planning procedures – land regeneration – will be severely challenged with the lack of a property registry that exhibits an authentic lineage of property ownership. Informal tenure may not suffice for land consolidation and redistribution. Participatory land readjustment might be prohibited in view of the lack of a property registry, but it will afford authoritarian land appropriation, consolidation, and compensation. Urban planning policy might not be a choice as much as it may be commanded by the land situation on the ground.

in identifying priority projects was implemented via a mechanism that guaranteed approval of all stakeholders on proposed projects. The success of strategic urban planning in cities can be summarised in:

- 1) Resolving the institutional conflict over the agriculture/urban domain,
- 2) Increasing wealth via land conversion from agriculture to urban by virtue of defining city limits,
- 3) A relative increase in security of tenure for informal built areas,
- 4) Political sustainability achieved by popular consent.

Urban Planning policies underpinning the strategic urban planning of cities were balanced in wealth and welfare achievements.

At the core of these land management mechanisms is land appropriation. Basically, land appropriation is the mechanism for land consolidation to be able to deal with project land as a unified entity by doing away with property divisions and multiplicity of landowners. Landowners are compensated for their land at an estimated price, and land ownership is transferred to a sole owner, usually a public organization. The government utilizes the mechanism to undertake a Public Benefit Project (PBP), e.g., a sanitation project, a park, or a garage. The definition of 'public benefit' seems to acquire a different meaning, i.e., as appropriation for the benefit of a public organization, when appropriation of land is implemented for profit, e.g., capturing wealth. The idea of 'gaining benefit' is a decisive concept that is guided by 'public' Policy. Alternatively, 'displacement of harm' will also constitute a public policy. Nevertheless, the vanishing act of harmfulness is radically different in principle from the birth of benefit. Whereas both may be public in nature, only the former permits the utilization of land in public and private projects. The utilization is not linked to the original act of appropriation. The benefit is accomplished in the vanishing act, so to speak. Alternatively, land appropriation, as we shall discuss below, is used as a wealth-enabling mechanism to compensate for current land and building conditions and make a windfall profit from the relative price increase of the location or development project.

New cities that are created on public land in the desert,⁶ Other remote areas require planning and vision to accommodate population expansion and/or expanding the national urban footprint. In many cases, the government, as the leading institution for the development of new cities on public land, will follow neo-liberal policies of economic development and wealth creation via the creation of competitive urban agglomeration to attract the regional and global creative class of citizens. By planning and constructing mega projects and events related to business, culture, and recreation, investors, tourists, and spectators will travel to experience the unique events the cities offer. To plan, construct, and jump-start such competitive cities, huge amounts of finance are needed. Leveraging such finance presents insurmountable risk in case of failure or the length of the development cycle. Providing city-level infrastructure, services, business centres, recreational complexes, and cultural institutions needed to operationalize the vision, particularly by leveraging international finance, is a great gamble. To compete on the regional or global level, incremental planning may not suffice. For international business, local inflation might not be problematic, but for local demand for infrastructure, housing, and services, inflation may kill demand. The competitive city will cater to the upper classes, who are able to pay for the services demanded. The Neoliberal policies are unbalanced in favour of wealth and upper-class citizens, who represent a very small portion of demand.

We should never forget Spain's financial crisis in 2008. There and then, developers instrumentalised the conversion of agricultural land to urban land and provided housing by leveraging finance from banks. The uncontrolled oversupply of housing, the increase in inflation of prices, the reduced demand, and the default of development companies plunged the country into a financial crisis. The wealth extraction policies have limits related to the nature of the urban sector, namely, limited demand (repeat customers) caused by a long business cycle (tempo). It is also important to note that leveraging international finance with government guarantees for urban development requires massive finance that may translate into significant debt depletion of public finance. The process will encourage the government to seek wealth by taking over the role of

the private sector in planning and managing projects for profit. Armed with legislative power, the wealth-extracting urban development process may mobilize opposition and discontent and may lead to disruption and resistance. A government implementing neo-liberal policies is a contradiction of terms because neo-liberal policies seek market mechanisms as opposed to government intervention.

Care and wealth are the most general categories of public policy action. While care (community and environment) has been embedded in sustainable development, wealth (accumulation), on the other hand, has been embedded in Neoliberal development ideology. At the core of sustainable development is care for the community in terms of its social, economic, and environmental development. Unfortunately, the social aspect of sustainability has yet to achieve focus and priority, as do economic and environmental sustainability, whose results (positive or negative) are more visible and whose methods are more systematic. Heidegger in *Being and Time*⁷ Indicates that "care", being directed by human consciousness, is an existential aspect of human existence. Care is rooted and motivated by personal, not social action. Social development is motivated by 'hope' or driven by disaster. Conversely, neoliberal ideology in extracting wealth for economic growth entrenches inequalities and disparities. Neoliberal market-based priority has sought to reduce government role, e.g., neglected the protection of public land and delayed sanctioning urban infractions of informal construction. The government has neglected to decisively protect public land. In consequence, once the government starts recovering public lands from settlers, community disruption and organised resistance may ensue. It is important to notice that 'care' benefits others (including their environment), while wealth, on the other hand, benefits the self. We see the predominance of liberal over sustainable action where SELF takes priority over OTHERS. John Nash was consequential in proving that liberal ideology is not sustainable.

8. Urban sector policy

The idea of the platform proposed in the informal marketplace case should be expanded as a Policy to the urban sector. Urban planning should be concerned with organising the ground for economic activities, mainly manufacturing and services, as well

⁶ Underpinning the movement of new cities is the prevalent norm that investment in new cities returns fivefold the initial investment.

⁷ Heidegger, Martin. 2008. *Being and Time*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.

as social activities, including housing, infrastructure, education, health, and legal activities. Provision of new planned areas should be provided in return for property tax. The land for property tax policy will decrease initial investment and increase competitive advantage. The organizational Policy should ensure a collaborative advantage through the planning of industrial, commercial, and administrative clusters. The Policy of the urban sector as a platform should be successful in enabling private sector economic development by reducing the initial investment needed. It is important to recognise the tempo of urban development. Urban development is characterised – naturally – by a long-term development cycle model. New cities take around 30 years to accelerate. The urban sector, as a physical sector comprising land, infrastructure, and buildings, is not an engine of growth. The city's economic (and other competitive sectors) activities are the engine of growth. The primary, secondary, and tertiary economic activities are the factors of economic development. Providing support for these economic activities in the form of land, infrastructure, ports, and linkages between urban agglomerations is the objective of the urban sector. Urban centres are engines of growth because of their role in bringing closer economic activity and generating 'soldering heat'. The economics of investing in housing, retail, or office buildings is totally another type of business with a different pace of investment and payback than the fast and massive production of products for export.

Old cities expand and change as time passes. Whether informal or planned, cities, peri-urban or rural agglomerations will require adjustment of physical form to ensure efficiency of operation. Several land adjusting mechanisms are utilised, including land regularization, readjustment, and conversion. The basic process for land adjustment is the land consolidating mechanism, followed by a detailed urban plan. Land adjustment policy should be founded on the stakeholder (landowners and local government) agreement. The financial benefit of land adjustment should be shared by property owners. Any attempt at instrumentalizing land adjustment to extract wealth will result in conflict. Lessons learned from the Nobel-winning study, "Why Nations Fail?" point to the fundamental cause as being wealth extraction. Again, the Urban sector as a platform seems to be an enabling policy based on equitable and win-win principles.

The social sector seems to be struggling. The poor represent the majority of the population and need significant support from the government. Providing land at basic cost will facilitate the provision of lacking services. The public land upon which slums have grown should be dedicated to slum dwellers for suitable housing and tenure. The idea of the urban sector as a platform will again reduce the cost of social development, increase the economic welfare, and contribute to social solidarity and dignity.

9. Policy change triggers

Several themes related to policy change can be deduced from the above narrative. The public policy change from providing infrastructure for 'informal areas' to addressing the condition of "slum" was triggered by a disaster. By focusing on slums, results were consequential and visible, as manifested by providing dignified living conditions to citizens. The policy change to start preparation of urban plans for a massive number of cities and villages was triggered by the threat to food security caused by the encroachment of informal construction on agricultural land. With the aid of the efficient and effective process of strategic planning, the preparation of numerous urban plans was feasible and delineated the city's urban limits, which operationalized institutional coordination.

The change in Policy, from market-based mechanisms of providing housing and services in new cities to the active construction of strategic projects, infrastructure, and transportation by the government, was intended to accelerate urban growth. The active construction policy was an attempt to reverse the debt spiralling character of the national economy. In effect, the government leading urban sector development manifested the relative autonomy of the government from the private sector. Now the government was able to enact the historical urban policies related to "existing the narrow valley" with little consideration to feasibility in the belief that strategic projects would attract populations and business. The success of the urban Policy has yet to be assessed due to the extended nature of the urban development business cycle. Nevertheless, indications related to growing debt, higher inflation, lesser disposable income, and stifled demand across sectors are negative consequences that might represent barriers to

growth, i.e., a new dilemma. The narratives indicate that triggers for policy change speak to disaster, threats, and weakness as primary themes.

On a more traditional note, a change in government leadership might also trigger policy change. The change of the leadership of the ISDF Board of Directors from the Minister of Local Development to the Minister of Housing has altered the manner in which housing for slum dwellers was delivered. In the beginning, under the leadership of the Minister of Local Development, the governors led the process, and consequently, residential units were built on site, e.g., Al-Amal Area in Port Said. Later on, under the leadership of the Minister of Housing, residential units were supplied in bulk on nearby sites, e.g., Asmarat Housing in Cairo.

Since its inception, ISDF has fought attempts to change or do away with the organization. One such attempt was to change ISDF into a Ministry of Urban Development. The effort failed as its organizational structure under the Prime Minister's Office enabled the effective coordination of sectoral efforts. The ISDF continued to serve under the Prime Minister's Office – even if the leadership of the Board of Directors changed – until obligations of the National Slum Upgrading Program were fulfilled.⁸ Policy will have to survive institutional struggle over the allocation of funding or the claim of success. Resources enable activity, and activity permits success. The main administrative challenge is the continued motivation and resilience in the face of a changing environment and leadership.

10. Conclusion

I have discussed the constitution of Policy and its elements as actors, values, principles, processes, and results. I have provided examples of slum upgrading pro-poor policies and discussed policies related to unplanned areas as well as urban planning in general. I have also shown that most policies are related to care and wealth as well as the affordance of the platform. Public policies related to care are the responsibility of the government towards the poor. Public policies related to wealth should be treated with caution lest they cause inflation through fiscal expansion, a decrease in disposable income, and a destruction of demand. Public policies related

to affordance demands treating the urban sector as a platform to enable economic activities; and Policy that enables wealth creation and redistribution, not extraction.

In general, basic themes of public Policy include:

- 1) **Care Policies:** slum upgrading, abolishing illiteracy, providing micro-credit, etc;
- 2) **Wealth Policies:** experiential learning (high cost, low density), private enterprise, etc;
- 3) **Cross-cutting Policy:** prioritize poverty, gender, environment, and governance issues;
- 4) **Structural Policy:** underpin urban and internet as platforms;
- 5) **Procedural Policy:** structure consultation in decision making and taking.

Furthermore, policy formation can be described in terms of intention, guiding principles, process, and evaluation. Intention is constituted by motivation (values “care” or “wealth”) and goal (outcomes “social capital reinforced” and outputs “vibrant cultural district”). Guiding principles are constituted by moral values such as “relieving harm before gaining benefit” and/or knowledge “good for self and group”. Process is constituted by “communicative” and “consultative” priorities. And evaluation leads to adjustment of results, i.e., “sanction”. The paper has proposed dealing with the physical urban sector as a “platform” that enables the growth of economic activities and social wellbeing. And finally, this paper has also categorised the triggers of policy change (disasters, threats, and weaknesses) from real narratives.

It is important to note that Policy is created within a framework of governance, i.e., the state. Policy and forms of governance will change within a framework of tradition that may be characterised by either uniform or different forms of governance; the latter will manifest itself in struggles for dominance. Policy and forms of governance will also confront dilemmas of failure and seek solutions and adjust themselves to resolve these dilemmas, hopefully towards success. The new forms of governance and policies might produce new dilemmas to be addressed. *“When people's perceptions of the failings of governance conflict with their existing*

8 The only National Slum Upgrading Program successfully designed, executed, and completed worldwide to date.

beliefs, the resulting dilemmas lead them to reconsider beliefs and traditions. Because people confront these dilemmas against the background of diverse traditions, there arises a political contest over what constitutes the nature of the failings and what should be done about them. This contest leads to a reform of governance ... and policy agendas." (Bevir 2010 p. 91).

The urban sector is unique in its density, multilevel, and diversity. The urban sector is an intense manifestation of social order, its values, institutions, and role, as well as coordinates policy regarding platform, wealth, care, and process. Without a comprehensive, integrated, and inclusive policy framework that guides development strategy, the urban sector will be fragmented and uncoordinated in terms of priorities, responsibilities, and sanctions. As an intense environment, the urban sector will brightly flag the success or failure of public Policy.

Economic sustainability is about wealth. Social and

environmental sustainability is about care. Wealth enables care, and care means justice of economic growth. Consultation is the road to caring for all and means to achieving economic cooperative advantage. Care and wealth are intertwined and shaped by affordance and social values. Policy outlines an obligation to an agreed vision, is about principles related to values and knowledge, is supported by political will and legislation, and should ensure enduring implementation and progress. The development of policy principles is also situated in historical values as well as today's needs. Situated in tradition and motivated by dilemma, public Policy should both learn from past experiences and adjust to new situations. Knowledge supported by genuine consultation is the road to policy-making that benefits all, not only an interest group, to the detriment of others. The linkage between Policy and principles brings together governance and conviction in an open relationship that enables the freedom to re/define Policy without sacrificing the obligation to principles.

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Developers' Branded Architecture and the Contemporary Urban Image of Dubai

Cristiano Luchetti

Istituto Marangoni, Dubai, UAE.

crikx@yahoo.com

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Abstract:

Dubai's ongoing urban transformation has been driven by an ambitious development program that has positioned the city as a global icon of modernity, luxury, and architectural experimentation. An increasingly dominant part of this transformation is represented by branded architecture that now characterizes large portions of the metropolitan territory. These distinctive projects are designed to cultivate an immediately recognizable urban identity, associated with a brand that guarantees construction quality and investment security while satisfying the local and international real estate market. This text examines how branded architecture, promoted by major developers, increasingly shapes the contemporary urban image of Dubai by influencing its identity perception, urban livability, and socio-spatial dynamics.

Through an analysis of iconic projects built by major developers operating in the city, the study explores how these developments serve both as architectural statements and marketing tools that reinforce Dubai's image as a futuristic and business-friendly metropolis. Moreover, the paper examines the strategies employed by developers to brand urban space, including the use of purpose-built formal languages, thematic master planning, and integrated lifestyle offerings. While such developments contribute to Dubai's economic positioning, they also raise critical questions regarding the city's architectural accessibility, the exclusivity and privatization of public space, the appropriation of local urban identities, and the lack of a clear sustainable proposal for the development of the built environment.

This paper highlights the tension between image-driven urbanism and the creation of increasingly less inclusive cities by situating Dubai's branded architecture in the broader discourse of globalization and urban spectacle. The findings suggest that while these projects successfully project a dynamic urban image, they risk marginalizing everyday urban life and limiting opportunities for authentic public engagement. The study calls for a more balanced approach to urban branding that reconciles market-driven aesthetics with socially responsive and user-focused design, ensuring a more inclusive and sustainable urban future for Dubai.

Keywords: Branded architecture, Dubai, Urban image, Globalization, Urban spectacle, Public space.

1. Introduction

Throughout modernity, architectural discipline has experienced a continuous renegotiation of its social, cultural, and aesthetic role. Starting from the beginning of the 20th century, in particular with the affirmation of the modernist avant-garde, architecture has set itself the ambitious objective of contributing to the improvement of the living conditions of the classes emerging from the industrial revolution. The functionalist and rationalist approach, emblematically represented by the Modern Movement and codified in the CIAM documents, was based on the belief that architecture could be a device for social reform, capable of responding ethically and systemically to the needs of a transforming society (Benevolo, 1960; Mumford, 1961). However, by the mid-20th century, this vision had already begun to show cracks. The protests of the countercultures of the 1960s, followed by the affirmation of Postmodernism and Deconstructivism, marked a fracture with the modernist paradigms, criticizing their universalism and formal abstraction. These movements introduced greater attention to the semantic plurality, context, and subjectivity of architectural experience (Jencks, 1977; Eisenman, 1987).

Finally, the advent of the digital era has inaugurated a new season of design experimentation: thanks to the use of parametric software and digital manufacturing tools, architecture has been able to explore complex morphologies and highly individualized languages, often more oriented towards aesthetics and formal innovation than towards the social responsibility expressed in the past. In this scenario of growing disciplinary ambiguity, in the variety of approaches and opinions, some editions of the Venice Architecture Biennale – the most influential international observatory on the evolution of contemporary architectural culture – have sought to reaffirm architecture's ethical and civil dimension. At least in its initial intentions, the 2000 exhibition curated by Massimiliano Fuksas, entitled "Less Aesthetics, More Ethics," emphasized the need to overcome formal self-referentiality to rediscover concrete social commitment. Similarly, and perhaps more incisively, in 2016, Alejandro Aravena, with "Reporting from the Front," drew attention to marginal contexts and the challenges of decent living, while in 2018, Yvonne Farrell and Shelley McNamara, with "Freespace," explored the concept of public space as eminently inclusive, underlining the responsibility of architecture in promoting equity and civic sense. These curations have witnessed a persistent

tension – albeit not consistently effective – towards an architecture that recognizes its transformative potential for society and the environment (Crysler, Cairns & Heynen, 2012).

In recent years, however, in the global and hyper-consumerist context of the contemporary world, particularly in the expanding cities of the Arabian Gulf, architecture has taken on a new meaning: from a vehicle of universal social progress to a privileged tool for exclusive empowerment, often through the construction of the experiential value of commercial brands. In such contextual geographies, architectural space becomes a strategic platform for producing meanings and constructing symbolic relationships between consumers and brands. Commercial architecture is no longer simply a functional container that effectively repeats its clichés, but aspires to become a multisensory environment, capable of mediating emotions, values, and identity narratives (Klingmann, 2007). This transformation fits into the broader logic of experiential capitalism, where architectural form merges with emotional marketing to give life to immersive and performative devices (Pine & Gilmore, 1999).

Through materials, geometries, lights, sounds, and paths, the built environment thus becomes an extension of the brand's language, a semiotic artefact that communicates authenticity, exclusivity, and symbolic coherence. In this sense, architectural identity is configured as a code of visual and spatial recognizability, which actively contributes to the construction of brand equity (Schmitt, 2010). The project of the architectural form takes on a narrative and relational function, capable of generating engagement and loyalty, stimulating a form of consumption that is no longer just transactional, but experiential and value-based. Architecture thus becomes a new grammar of desire, an aesthetic-economic device that organizes the perception and memory of the brand in urban space.

2. Branded Residences and the spectacularization of living: the case of Dubai

In the urban context of Dubai – a city emblematic of neoliberal transformation and spectacular urbanization – branded residences represent one of the most sophisticated expressions of the hybridization between architecture, the luxury real estate market, and experiential marketing strategies.

These are residential complexes developed in collaboration with global luxury brands (fashion, automotive, hotels), where the home is no longer conceived only as a private and functional space, but as an aesthetic experience, status symbol, and object of aspirational consumption (Attuyer, Guironnet & Halbert, 2012). The phenomenon began only recently and is already showing significant numbers and impacts. In 2024 alone, the city launched 17 new branded residential projects, bringing the total to 121 developments and over 39,000 units distributed across the city. This intensification signals the growing value attributed to symbolic and narrative capital in contemporary real estate production. (Gulf Construction, 2025)

A particularly relevant aspect of the Dubai case is the ever-increasing emphasis on storytelling as a key tool for creating value. Unlike the traditional methods, a brand project is no longer successful by the only internationally recognized brand's power but rather the latter's ability to articulate a captivating narrative. The project must generate emotional resonance within the potential buyers, both as a planning instrument and as a marketing lever. A new typology is emerging within this trend: the standalone branded residence. These are residential developments, with no hotel components, in stark contrast to the earlier dominant hybrid models. In Dubai, approximately 78% of branded projects in the pipeline fall into this category, significantly higher than the global average of around 41% (Hotelier Middle East, 2024).



Figure 1. Bulgari resort & residences (Source ACPV architects website)

Thus, a “purified” model of branded residence is configured, in which the brand’s spatial identity, aesthetics, and philosophy prevail over the service logics typical of hospitality.

Most significant is the growing diversification of stakeholders among the actors in this industry. More and more frequently, fashion, luxury, and car brands enter branded residence construction, but remain uninvolved in the management of the assets. Their contribution focuses on the curatorial aspects: architectural language, interior design, furnishing packages, and brand licensing. These collaborations redefine the branded residence as an

expressive lifestyle device, in which the living space becomes an extension of the aesthetic and symbolic culture of the brand. This change is also indicative of the general trend in the real estate business of converting properties into products. In this sense, the standalone branded residence is configured as a relevant object of investigation, both for architectural research and for economic and socio-cultural studies on contemporary urban development.

Unlike traditional luxury residences, branded residences leverage the brand’s semiotic strength to add symbolic and commercial value to the property. The brand identity translates into coherent

aesthetics, exclusive services, high-end materials, scenographic settings, and a codified lifestyle. Architecture thus becomes a physical and narrative

extension of the brand image, while the act of living is transformed into a performance of distinction and belonging (Bourdieu, 1979; Twitchell, 2004).



Figure 2. Armani hotel & residences, Diriyah, Riyadh (Source: Archello)

In Dubai's specific case, this dynamic takes on a paradigmatic form. The city has constructed itself, even physically, as a global showcase of hyper-capitalist modernity, where urban form is constantly redefined by spectacular real estate transactions, underpinned by narratives of excellence, innovation, and international desirability (Elsheshtawy, 2010).

Within this ecosystem, branded residences such as Bulgari Resort & Residences, Armani Residences at Burj Khalifa, or Cavalli residences act as competitive positioning tools for developers and as symbolic governance devices of the urban landscape. Their diffusion responds to the logic of space production

deeply intertwined with the financialization of living and the commodification of desire. The house is no longer just a refuge or identity space, but a financial asset and a platform for staging the self, intended for a globalized and mobile audience. According to Knox (2012), this "luxification of urban space" produces new geographies of inclusion and exclusion, strengthening dynamics of urban segregation disguised as aesthetics of excellence. From a design point of view, the branded residences in Dubai stand out for the use of highly iconic architectural languages and the construction of a sensorial imagery consistent with the brand's narrative. Elements such as custom-made furniture, 24/7 concierge services, private spas,

reserved lounges, and even selected ambient scents become tools for building an all-encompassing living experience. In this sense, architectural space is conceived as a habitable stage (Debord, 1967; Koolhaas, 2004), where every detail is calibrated to evoke exclusivity, comfort, and distinction.

The overall effect is twofold: on the one hand, an image of Dubai is consolidated as a hub of global luxury and extreme architectural experimentation; on the other hand, a form of selective urbanization is fueled, in which the quality of public space and the right to the city are subordinated to the logic of branding and real estate income. The city thus presents itself as a scenario of aestheticized consumption, where architecture becomes a vector of desire and a symbol of privileged access to social and economic capital. This trend raises critical questions about the future of urban living: What are the spatial and social implications of the spread of designer residences in contexts already characterized by profound socio-economic inequalities? How can the aesthetics of luxury and brands coexist —if they can— with the principles of inclusiveness, spatial justice, and urban sustainability?

3. Socio-environmental impact and redefinition of the urban image: the contradictions of branded exclusive residences.

The growing diffusion of branded exclusive residences not only represents a typological transformation or design innovation phenomenon but also produces significant and often problematic effects on the socio-environmental level and the symbolic configuration of the urban image. In the context of Dubai – a paradigm of a globalized, verticalized, and highly consumer-oriented city – such residential developments contribute to constructing a spectacular and elitist city, strongly marked by spatial and environmental exclusion processes.

From a socio-spatial point of view, branded residences act as selective access devices to the city. Their offer is aimed at an international target with a high economic profile – often foreign investors, mobile elites, or individuals with high financial resources – consolidating a fragmented and polarized urban model. Housing is transformed into an aestheticized and overserved privilege.



Figure 3. Cavalli tower (Source: Damac properties website)

At the same time, large segments of the urban population (particularly, low-income migrant workers, who constitute a significant demographic component of the city) remain excluded from the benefits and opportunities deriving from real estate and infrastructure investments (Davis, 2006; AlSayyad, 2011). This process produces a “geography of invisibility” in which narratives of excellence and innovation mask inequality.

In environmental terms, branded residences often embody an unsustainable development model, based on high consumption of resources, energy intensity, soil waterproofing, and climate impacts connected to the construction and maintenance of hyper-conditioned environments. Luxury architecture, in its spectacular and performative sense, rarely adheres to the criteria of systemic environmental sustainability. However, it often resorts to greenwashing strategies through partial certifications or isolated technological solutions. In a desert territory like that of the United Arab Emirates, this approach risks exacerbating the environmental problems linked to water scarcity, desertification, and the urban heat island effect (Ghazal Aswad, 2019).

Finally, the impact on the city’s image is two-fold. Branded residences not only hugely contribute to Dubai’s reputation as a luxury city, but they can also be leaders in architecture, new languages, and cutting-edge technology. By being iconic buildings, they are the symbols of urbanity that can produce a global aesthetic for an international audience perceiving Dubai as a city of luxury, architectural creativity, and advanced modernity. These buildings become true landmarks; urban icons capable of conveying an aspirational international aesthetic. Architecture becomes a key component of the city’s branding strategy, strengthening the city’s competitive positioning on the global scene (Vanolo, 2008; Gospodini, 2004). On the other hand, this image tends to standardize local specificity, reducing the city to a series of “architectural postcards” that favor immediate recognizability to the detriment of the socio-cultural complexity of the territory. Branded residences often replicate aesthetic and stylistic models borrowed from other contexts (New York, London, Paris), contributing to a loss of authentic urban identity and a sort of “Disneyfication” of the urban landscape (Zukin, 1995).

The result is a city built on iconic fragments, devoid of urban continuity and poorly permeable to social and cultural diversity. Moreover, the emphasis on

ultra-exclusive residential enclaves contradicts the potential of public space for interaction, inclusion, and social cohesion. The city risks being a place likely to break down into islands of privilege and zones of service provision, driving a segregative and potentially unstable urban form in the long term (Harvey, 2008). These contradictions pose central questions for the future of urban planning and architectural design, which we will investigate in the following paragraph.

4. Future perspectives

The Arab cities of the Gulf – in particular Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Doha, and Riyadh – today represent some of the most advanced laboratories of urban experimentation based on the spectacularization of the built environment and territorial branding. Metropolitan development is conceived as a response to functional or demographic needs and a strategic operation of symbolic and competitive positioning in global geography.

This trajectory, begun at the end of the last century, has profoundly reconfigured these cities’ urban identity, privileging architectural processes of consumerism, landscape symbolic manipulation, and residential exclusivity. Such strategies’ effects and evolutionary potential are now the object of a critical examination.

A first potential transformation concerns the need to rebalance between image and substance. If in the recent past, city branding has often translated into a race to build architectural icons and exclusive neighborhoods – symbols of modernity and economic success – the future may require greater attention to the widespread quality of urban space, environmental resilience, and social inclusiveness. In this sense, the possibility of a transition from “performative branding” to “substantial branding” emerges, in which the reputation of a city does not depend only on what it shows, but on what it achieves in terms of collective well-being, sustainability, and spatial justice (Jivén & Larkham, 2003).

A second transformation trajectory concerns the redefinition of urban design methods. The use of global brands and international architecture firms has contributed to making Arab cities “showcases of architectural globalization” (Bagaeen, 2007), but has often generated discontinuous, hybrid, sometimes culturally unanchored urban landscapes. Future generations of urban intervention can look toward

more integrated and contextual typologies, capable of amplifying the territory's environmental, climatic, and cultural features. Taking inspiration from design models saturated with urban vernacularism principles, climate adaptation, and social cohesion can be a viable alternative to the paradigms of symbolic consumption and aesthetic standardization.

In parallel, Arab cities are exploring new branding narratives related to the ecological and digital transition. Initiatives such as the Saudi Vision 2030 plan, innovative city projects such as NEOM, or the growing emphasis on environmental certifications and smart technologies indicate a political will, at least apparent, to redefine the prevailing urban model, orienting it towards more sustainable, interconnected, and future-oriented forms. However, the question remains about how far these visions can translate into structural transformations that include the most vulnerable segments of the urban population, avoiding the reproduction of new inequalities disguised as innovation (Doherty, 2020). A further area of evolution concerns the construction of new urban citizenship. Branding strategies, which traditionally have been aimed at investors and visitors, can be recombined to involve citizens, especially younger generations and migrant communities, actively. Plans for participation, equitable access to service, clean transportation, and good housing can become pillars to make the urban project not only appealing but also equitable and inclusive.

Finally, it is plausible that Arab cities of the future will seriously and increasingly face the challenges of climate change and resource scarcity. In this scenario, adopting urban strategies capable of combining branding and sustainability, such as bioclimatic design, the regeneration of desert landscapes, intelligent use of water resources, and strengthening collective transport systems, could become a distinctive and competitive element. Sustainability, from a narrative accessory, must become a structural element of the urban brand. Suppose Dubai and other Arab cities can reinterpret the potential of branding as a tool for economic attraction and a lever for social and environmental innovation. In that case, they can contribute to the definition of new paradigms of post-global urbanity, capable of responding to the complex challenges of the 21st century with more equitable, resilient, and context-rooted architectural and spatial solutions.

5. Conclusion

In the past decades, urban planning and architecture in the Gulf Arab contexts have witnessed astonishing changes, fueled by urban branding strategies and increasing interdependence among built environments, symbolic consumption, and global visibility. The evolution of branded exclusive residences represents one of the most evident manifestations of this paradigm: buildings and residential complexes that not only offer a luxury habitat but are configured as identity narrative devices for global brands and territorial marketing tools for cities in search of competitive positioning.

Nevertheless, this paradigm has promoted strong socio-environmental tensions. Using a hyper-iconic and privilege-derived architectural language tends to generate exclusive urban forms, stretching social polarization and spreading an aestheticized image of the city that cannot absorb elements of inclusivity, equity, and ecological sustainability. Branded housing, though enhancing the reputation of a cosmopolitan and developed modernity, undermines local contexts' cultural recognition, triggering homologation and detachment processes.

With these dynamics in place, the fate of Arab cities that venture into urban branding will be shaped mainly by whether they can evolve into more integrated, adaptive, and inclusive systems. If urban branding can transform itself from a simple marketing operation into a planning tool to improve urban living conditions, enhance local identity, and address environmental challenges, it could constitute a strategic resource for a new post-global Arab urbanism. Otherwise, the risk is perpetuating a spectacular but fragile city fragment, where architecture progressively loses its civil and cultural function in favor of a purely extractive and symbolic logic.

In this scenario, contemporary architecture's task can only be to re-establish its public role, reaffirming the project's ethical dimension as an instrument of social and environmental transformation. Only in this way will the cities of the Gulf—and, more generally, the metropolises that adopt branding as a development lever—be able to become true laboratories of sustainable urban innovation beyond the surface of the image.

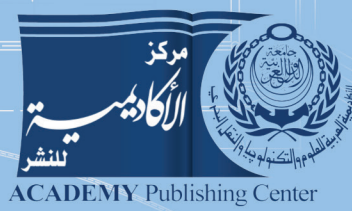
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