Metropolitan Dubai and the Rise of Architectural Fantasy
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Fantasy embraces all forms of dreaming. In architecture, it implies a composed, projected environment that is surprising to the eye—a deliberate exercise that tests reality and triggers possibilities for the future. In a sense, all architecture is fantasy. Architectural design is always speculative, since it attempts to specify the future.

Recent progressive architectural projects have generated new forms and expressions in response to new global realities, cultural fascinations and technological advances. Like their predecessors, the new architectural fantasists move beyond the mundane to transfigure, distort and extend, and therefore bring new meanings to architecture.

The digital interface:
New ways of imaging and imagining

Contemporary culture is led and powered by digital imaging technology, which has transformed the way we visualize and see the world. Architects are now equipped with enhanced tools of dreaming. And as these imaging tools become more sophisticated, the line between the imaginary and the real is increasingly blurred.

In this hyper-consumerist culture, digital/synthetic landscapes are increasingly depicted as "total lifestyle experiences," ready to be consumed. Be that as it may, digital spaces reveal and/or visualize the unconscious desires of urban spaces, in the sense that imaginary architectural space can be modeled, rendered, animated and experienced. It brings forth a new set of dreamscapes, mysterious and surreal. This implies a Freudian spatial unconscious, which can be subjected to analysis and interpretation. The tools of digital dreaming, meanwhile, have opened up a window that looks onto the "urban unconscious."

The tourist city

Historically, the origin of modern vacation time can be traced back to the 1930s, when workers in France, for the first time, were given the right to twelve paid vacation days. Today, tourism has become a "total lifestyle experience."

The modern tourist resort is by definition a constructed one. The tourist's perception seems to have shifted away from the pictorial 18th century: There is no longer the desire for the panoramic view. The excessively visual contemporary culture has made everything look familiar. Contemporary tourists are looking for familiarity: They want to feel at home in a strange place.

This has lead to concentrated tourist infrastructures and mega-structure complexes (containing hotel + apartments + mall + cinema + expo + anything goes), which are clustered very close together.

In Dubai there is little difference between holiday accommodation and housing. Architectural programs are becoming fused and undifferentiated. The morphology of the landscape and sea-scape is becoming fabricated to the point that it may soon be difficult to differentiate between the natural and the constructed. Dubai's natural beachfront is 45 kilometers long. Artificial islands will add another 1,500 kilometers of beachfront, turning the coastline and the city into an inexhaustible holiday resort. This constructed landscape, like a stage set, provides edited scenes of adventure and entertainment.

The city as non-place

The visual voyage through any contemporary cityscape operates like a continuous shift between eye and mind, as though differences no longer existed between the two. Without a doubt, the city has ceased to be an entity, a place with a specific identity.

Rem Koolhaas, in his well-known essay "The Generic City" published in the Italian magazine Domus in 1994 contemplates the following observations, which pertain so well to Dubai:

Is the contemporary city like the contemporary airport—all the same?

01.6 -- It is big enough for everybody. It is easy. It does not need maintenance. If it gets too small it just expands. If it gets old it just self-destructs and renews. It is "superficial"—like a Hollywood studio lot, it can produce a new identity every Monday morning.

06.3 -- The Street is dead.

09.2 -- The Generic City had a past, once?

10.2 -- The only activity is shopping…

11.5 -- Because the Generic City is largely Asian, its architecture is generally air-conditioned.

11.8 -- The apparently solid substance of the Generic City is misleading. 51% of its volume consists of atrium.

The city has definitely ceased to be a site: Instead, it has be-come a condition. Perhaps the city has even lost its site: It tends to be everywhere and nowhere. The growing proportion of space lacks meaning because nobody feels any attachment to it.

What used to be the "thrill" of the urban voyage is quickly giving way to banality and exhaustion: One has nothing more to discover, nothing other than immense, general and non-descript spaces.

Dubai—21st century visionary architecture/hybrid urbanism

Dubai is an extreme example of urbanism. One of the fastest growing cities in the world today, it represents the epitome of sprawling, post-industrial and car-oriented urban culture. Within it, large numbers of transient populations are constantly in flux.

The explosion of mega-scale structures and satellite cities provides opportunities for the study of new typologies of building programs and forms. Within the urban grid, and the monotonous and predictable urban condition, the generation of prosthetic geometries and new morphologies acts as a catalyst for innovation. Maybe this is the right time, in the evolution of twenty-first century architecture, to study and adopt new forms and technologies. The aura of optimism and the apparent financial success of the new building boom seem to require fresh, daring architects and designers.

Over the last twenty years, at a remarkable pace, Dubai has developed into a global crossroads. This urban mirage continues to spread out vertically and horizontally without any signs of slowing down. It takes in/purports a vertical urbanism—giant atriums and spidery passages

among the towers—curiously set against a background of a sprawling "nothingness," the desert.

To the visitor, this cosmopolitan city might seem peculiar and hyperactive, with no layering or apparent hierarchy. Its allure lies in its ability to adjust rapidly, in its complexity, in its contradictions.

The city tends to be everywhere and nowhere at the same time, because it has no urban center or core. Dubai thrives on newness and bigness, in an act of ongoing self-stylization and fantasy. Hence architecture is crucial, for it defines these elements. Little more than a grand-scale shopping mall, the city is comprised of "mind-zone" spaces, and of airport-like lobbies. In this theme park orientated cityscape, there is no differentiation between old and new. Everything is recent. Yet everything seems to point to the twin towers of consumerism and tourism.

Here, architecture and interiors act as interfaces to consumer-ism, to the act of purchasing, to the ephemeral experience. Interior shopping spaces are ever larger, more luxurious and seductive. The advent of air conditioning liberated the architectural form and gave rise to a new set of formal possibilities.

Dubai is a prototype of the new post-global city, which creates appetites rather than solves problems. It is represented as consumable, replaceable, disposable and short-lived. Dubai is addicted to the promise of the new: It gives rise to an ephemeral quality, a culture of the "instantaneous." Relying on strong media campaigns, new satellite cities and mega-projects are planned and announced almost weekly. This approach to building is focused exclusively on marketing and selling.

As the visionary architect Cedric Price noted in an interview in 2001, "The actual consuming of ideas and images exists in time, so the value of doing the show betrayed an immediacy, an awareness of time that does not exist somewhere like London or indeed Manhattan. A city that does not change and reinvent itself is a dead city…"

Dubai's recent development has put it on the map of iconic projects, of real estate prospecting and holiday dream destinations. Yet what is missing is the visionary realization of its architecture. Now is the time for architectural projects to be innovative and original. Now is the time to initiate a much-desired discourse about the face of the city.

A historical perspective: a desert waterfront

Dubai began life as a small port and collection of barasti (palm frond) houses clustered around the Creek. Not endowed with abundant fertile land, early twentieth century settlers set about making their living from the sea, concentrating on fishing, pear-ling and trading. Commercial success coupled with the liberal attitudes of its rulers made the emirate attractive to traders from India and Iran, who began to settle in the growing town. This gave the city an early start before the explosion of wealth brought on by oil production in the late 1960s.

The trajectory of the development of Dubai is reflected in its population, which has grown fifteen-fold since 1969: from 60,000 then to well over 1 million today. It is projected that, by 2010, Dubai's tourist trade will accommodate around 15 million tourists per annum, serviced by more than 400 hotels. Comparisons are telling: in 2002, Egypt, for example, had 4.7 million visitors, and Dubai 4.2 million. (The former, of course, hosts "real history," against the latter's Las Vegas version—including, in the next few years, the construction of a set of Pyramids in the vast theme park Dubailand.)

The emirate's expansion has followed the Los Angeles model: New developments sprout in the desert, beyond the older cores of Deira and Bur Dubai, linked by freeways and ring roads. The open spaces left in between are gradually filled with a lower-intensity, car-dependent form of urban sprawl.

Since Dubai has no real urban history, it has had to invent a variety of new urban conditions. Using its transitory oil wealth, the emirate has built "free zone" areas, promoted as clusters defined by economic liberalization, technological innovation, and political transparency. Jebel Ali Free Zone, an industrial and trading hub, was followed in the late 1990s by three sprawling industrial parks: Internet City, a bid to make Dubai the Arab world's IT hub; Media City, which aspires to replace Cairo as the Middle East's media capital while broadcasting the emirate's vision of openness; and Dubai International Financial Center (DIFC), a stock market headquarters meant to match those of Hong Kong, London and New York.

While the desert is usually considered barren and worthless, Dubai's "empty quarter" has unique real estate value, thanks largely to two companies: Emaar Properties (founded 1997) and government-owned Nakheel. Among many residential projects, Emaar is currently developing the 3.5 kilometer-long Dubai Marina behind the existing Jumeirah

beachfront hotels. A high-rise city-within-a-city and home to more than 40,000 residents, it is set to become the focus of the New Dubai. Nakheel has be-come synonymous with The Palm, Jumeirah, a 5 kilometer-long, reclaimed island. Other Palms and islands are currently being "planted," in the massive undertaking of transplanting the desert into the sea. The latest project, Dubai Waterfront, will not only add 375 kilometers of new beachfront but will include the largest man-made canal carved out of the desert. By 2002, when freehold property rights were established in Dubai, allowing foreigners to buy property for the first time, the stage had been set for a real estate boom.

Projects

If Rome was the "Eternal City" and New York's Manhattan the apotheosis of twentieth century congested urbanism, then Dubai may be considered the emerging prototype for the 21st century: prosthetic and nomadic oases presented as isolated cities that extend out over the land and the sea.

Yet, while Dubai is perhaps becoming architecturally the ultimate fantasy city, it has not provided many opportunities to innovative architects. Most of the new projects do not push the boundaries of design innovation. They stay within a safe range of design styles that are palatable to the masses.