The Dubai Effect Archipelago
Neyran Turan

In parallel to the widespread effects of globalization where cities expand horizontally and vertically with urban development projects and urban/regional sprawl, the question scale remains as a question for the design disciplines. As the notion of scale paradoxically oscillates between being a symptom of emergent urban conditions, and a model for new architectural and urban organizations, architectural attitudes towards the large scale tend to oscillate within two poles: the retroactive research/mapping on emergent urban/global networks and conditions (large scale as a symptom), and the extra-fat and iconic landmark (large scale as a model). In that vein, being one of the fastest growing cities in the world, Dubai is the current paradise of the large scale. With its biggest shopping mall, tallest building, largest landfill, super congested condition of the free zones, Dubai has become the ultimate coordinate for the retroactive mapping project and a testing ground for the iconic landmark. However, almost portraying the limitations of existing disciplinary positions regarding the idea of dimension in architecture and urbanism, Dubai is also busy with prompting unusual templates of scale.

By orienting the oil-relianteconomy to service and tourism and taking Hong Kong and Singapore as its model, Dubai is the high-speed version of a regional financial hub. In order to raise the seduction level within the competition for being a hub, cities invest heavily on the rapid development of their transportation infrastructures, regulatory and legal systems, technologies, and aim to provide good quality living conditions for their expatriate bankers and emerging middle class. In this context, Dubai is the high-speed version of a global city, and it is becoming not only a model for other cities in the region (prominent examples being Financial Centers of Bahrain and Qatar; or recently announced Ras Al Khaimah Financial City), but also an important template for more dispersed locations such as São Paulo, Shanghai, Kuala Lumpur, Johannesburg and Istanbul, which are now seeking to become regional financial centers like Dubai. For Dubai, to become a high-speed regional hub meant a rapid urbanization plus a unique urban form, offering a new port city model. This new model is different not only because of its unusual metropolitan organization, land-use systems (city-state, city within city, free trade zone clusters or its regulations (independent legal, regulatory and judicial regime of the clusters sometimes may even supersede various federal and/or local laws), but also because of the new templates and configurations it presents within a global scale.

If we map this new model of Dubai not so much from its unusual urban form but through the form of its global effects, i.e. urban development projects developed by Dubai companies abroad, we see Dubai replicating itself to a new scale and geography. That is, Dubai development and investment projects are packaged and tested first as a brand within their own locality (Dubai) and then exported and franchised adaptively as templates of compact urban organization to various spots in the world. In this essay, this is referred to as the idea of the “Dubai Effect...
Archipelago." With the term, I refer to the global diffusion of Dubai model of cluster projects and their potential effects and interaction with the localities in which they come to reside. Coupling logistics and infrastructure with tourism and real estate, Dubai has already been likened to a corporation with its entrepreneurial and “visionary” projects and management. If the autonomous clusters of Dubai (Dubai International Financial Center, Dubai Internet City, Dubai Healthcare City, Dubai Media City, Dubai Silicon Oasis, etc.) present a congested form of an archipelago city, transnational configuration of the Dubai Effect Archipelago marks an expanded version of this condition.

Presenting an emerging template of large scale development, Dubai Effect Archipelago delineates an awkward symbiosis between the organizational (network) and the monumental/iconographic realms of contemporary urbanism. With its peculiar urban and transnational reconfiguration, this symbiosis extends existing templates regarding the global versus the local as well as the generic and the specific. In that light, while the floating islands of the Dubai Effect Archipelago are produced via various combinations of its existing clustering model to provide a “full-spectrum city,” this condition marks the level of interaction that corporations and cities have reached in our contemporary culture, and points to the irrelevancy of mere architectural fascination with the extravagancy of the large scale. If Bilbao Effect marked the questioning of the iconographic/self-referential landmark and the role of the architect in our contemporary culture, the Dubai Effect points perhaps a deeper shift for the architect. After a decade of mapping emerging phenomena of the contemporary city (the horizontal-bic on one side and monumental/ expressionist iconography (the vertical-bic) on the other, new disciplinary positions towards large scale are crucial for architecture and urbanism.