The Dubai Effect Archipelago
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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.

In the following text, part of a larger study on the new scales of context within contemporary cities, I examine how Dubai stands as a switch-point for current discussions on scale. To do this, I try to highlight Dubai’s swift mutation not from its locality but from its effects. I propose the idea of the “Dubai Effect Archipelago,” by which I mean the application of the Dubai model of urban development to other countries in the world, by way of global large scale cluster projects initiated by Dubai companies. Dubai Effect is positioned in the essay as an emerging template of large scale development delineating an awkward symbiosis between the organizational (network) and the monumental/iconographic realms of contemporary urbanism. With its peculiar urban and transnational reconfiguration, this symbiosis not only extends our seemingly settled templates regarding the global versus the local as well as the generic and the specific, it also asks for new disciplinary frameworks within urban discussions.

The Dubai Effect

By orienting the oil-reliant economy to service and tourism and taking Hong Kong and Singapore as its model, Dubai has become 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 İstanbul, 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 Dubai International Financial Center which 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.” With the term, “the Dubai Effect,” I refer to the global diffusion of Dubai development projects and their potential effects on the localities in which they come to reside. Coupling logistics and infrastructures with tourism and real estate with the Dubai Effect, one could argue that Dubai is moving from being a unique city to a model, a template for urban development. While Dubai has already been likened to a corporation with its entrepreneurial and “visionary” projects and management, the
Dubai Effect can be argued to be the extra-generation of the Dubai code of private urban development. 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.

Here, the Dubai Effect borrows the name from the so-called “Bilbao Effect,” an expression coined for the self-referential landmark franchising itself for urban regeneration and regional development. Namely, with the Bilbao Effect, the building becomes a flagship of seduction for tourism, entertainment and also for large-scale urban development projects, which are argued to be the “mechanisms...through which globalization becomes urbanized.” In parallel, the Bilbao Effect signifies architecture’s desire for an alternative reality:

The concept of indigenization affords a more nuanced understanding of the way architectural ideas get disseminated and the experience of their varied materializations. It reminds us that the “context” of any built work encompasses not just the “authentic,” pre-existing characteristics of a place. Architecture also has the capacity to embody the often conflicted feeling a place harbors about its own past and future, its insecurities about being provincial, its fantasies and desires for a reality that is alternative to the present. The assimilation of foreign tendencies within a local situation is in this sense not just or not necessarily, a hegemonic process, but sometimes, as at Bilbao, one of voluntary adaptation and a consciously acknowledged need for change.

If the Bilbao Effect marks an aspiration for an alternative reality for a city or region, and a desire for change, the Dubai Effect is its “bigger” version. While Bilbao Effect franchises architectural spectacles to promote local authenticities, the Dubai Effect validates its spectacle first by its own locality and then franchises templates of compact urban organization to other spots as a package.

The projects of the largest real estate and investment companies of Dubai—of Emaar Properties, Damac Properties, Sama Dubai, Istithmar, Nakheel, Limitless, Dubai World— are now spread all over the world. These projects appear regionally and globally, in places as diverse as Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Oman, Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, Qatar and Turkey; reaching out to Russia, China, India, Pakistan, Indonesia, Philippines, and Vietnam in Asia; South Africa, Djibouti, Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia, Libya, Algeria, Senegal, and Rwanda, Zanzibar, and Mozambique in Africa; Germany, England, Czech Republic, and Malta in Europe, and in United States. Among the list, Africa and Southeast Asia are projected to become one of the major components of the list soon with more project announcements in the near future. Considering Emaar Properties’ recently announced large scale Lombok Island projects in Indonesia, the Dubai Effect can be argued to be the extra-generation of the Dubai code of private urban development. If the autonomous clusters of Dubai (Dubai International Financial Center, Dubai Internet City, Dubai Healthcare City, Dubai Media City and 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.

Dubai’s investments activate the property sector as well as further belief in the strategic position of the country as the center of business, trade and tourism, “Dubai’s investments activate the property sector as well as further the commitment of these [Dubai] giants to the investment market in Turkey just proves that there is massive potential in the country and that the time is definitely right for property investors to do their due diligence on Turkey and commit to careful real estate investment projects.”

The Dubai Effect Archipelago

An important aspect of the Dubai Effect Archipelago is its clever symbiosis of branding, infrastructure and real estate development, providing various combinations of autonomous clusters for different locations. Example to this would be the “SmartCity” joint venture by real estate firm Sama Dubai with the Technology and Media Free Zone Authority (tecom), both companies being divisions of the Dubai Holding, which is owned by Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum. Using the autonomous clusters of Dubai Internet City, Dubai Media City and Dubai Knowledge Village as their model, the aim of the SmartCity venture is to “harness the power” of existing technology clusters in Dubai and to build a large network of knowledge-based industry townships across the world. While exploring the global
expansion of various business parks (information and communication technology, media, education, biotechnology, and energy), and coupling those investments with real estate projects, the joint venture promises technological and economic impact and “sustainable development” to regions. As announced by the CEO of TeCom: “The benefits of the SmartCity concept, as we have seen in Dubai, transcend to all areas of the socio-economic sphere.”

As stated above, Smart City is based on the model of the existing technology clusters in Dubai. For instance, like the regulations of the Dubai Internet City and Dubai Knowledge Village, in global Smart City locations, companies will take land on long lease to build their own facilities according to their requirements. In addition to the similarities to existing facilities in Dubai, Smart City brand also has other features that would be specific to the Dubai Effect Archipelago. For instance, for each company that chooses to be located in a Smart City in a particular country or region, it is announced that opportunities will be offered to that company to expand into new markets or to set up facilities in other Smart City clusters, which are located in other countries, and to have global interconnections with them. While the locations of the Smart Citys are chosen according to their potentiality to become a regional knowledge-economy hub, and for attracting “knowledge workers,” the local governments’ commitment for knowledge based development is considered as an important factor for selection.

One of the first projects of the Smart City brand is the Smart City@Malta project, which was approved by the Malta parliament in 2006. While being the “first European outpost” for the Dubai Internet City and the Dubai Media City, Smart City@Malta is promoted by the Malta government as a prospect for radical transformation for the island’s economic activity after its recently approved EU membership. Not only the project is expected to generate 5,600 jobs in the region, the Malta government sees Dubai’s investment for the Smart City as an instigator for other future Middle Eastern investments in the area.

The second Smart City project to be implemented is the Smart City@Cochin (Kerala, India). Upon the signing of the bilateral agreement in 2005 to develop the Smart City@Cochin, Ahmad bin Bayat, Director General of TeCom declared: “Dubai Internet City has developed considerable expertise in developing business campuses that provide infrastructure and support services for IT companies...This project is also part of Dubai Internet City’s global expansion plans where it is seeking to evolve from a regional venture to an internationally diversified organization. Our mission is to become the ICT business campus provider of choice across the world.”

In spite of this bilateral agreement, signed between the Kerala Government and TeCom in 2005, because of the resistance of the government of Kerala to Dubai’s insistence on freehold rights to the land, the final decision has not been finalized until very recently. The implementation of the project has been cleared by the Kerala government by declaring almost half of the site as a Special Economic Zone for the mega IT facility. Being a Special Economic Zone means being like a Dubai free zone cluster; that is, no foreign ownership restrictions will be applied in developing the zone infrastructure, residential areas, and recreation centers in the facility.

As stated above, Smart City is based on the model of the existing technology clusters like the Dubai Internet City. Taking Dubai’s Jebel Ali Port and Free Zone (Jafza) as a model, the integration of infrastructure, port development and real estate would be another form of configuration for the exporting of autonomous clusters. For instance, as part of Senegal’s development plans for the new administrative city in the north of Dakar, and become the “Dubai on the Atlantic,” the Government of Senegal and Jafza International (of Dubai World) signed an agreement to develop an integrated Special Economic Zone in Dakar. Aiming to harness the know-how of the Jebel Ali Free Trade Zone in Dubai, other important international free trade zone projects of Jafza International are Hiep Phuoc Harbour City in Vietnam, Djibouti Port and Free Zone, Orangeburg County Port Project in South Carolina-United States, and Subic Bay Freeport in Philippines. Important to note here would be the relationship between the generic and the specific. That is, in an attempt to present the “compact port city” configuration within various localities, port infrastructures are always coupled with business, residential and leisure areas which are all provided by Limitless and Nakheel, Jafza International’s sister real estate companies.

In relation to this, one development project in Africa seems unique and at the same time remarkable for a possible contemplation on the provision of free zones within Dubai Effect Archipelago. As of 2000, Dubai’s involvement in developing Djibouti’s oil terminal, port infrastructure, industrial and commercial free zone with projects (worth $800 million) stimulates Djibouti’s economic growth, helping it develop as
While Jafza International manages Djbouti Free Zone and Dubai Customs International manages Djbouti’s customs operations, DP World has invested $30 million in the Horizon Djbouti Terminal facility and committed $100 million for a new container port. In addition to infrastructural projects, Nakheel is developing its first overseas development, a five star hotel at the center of Djbouti City, capital of Djbouti; and Al Fajer Properties is in talks to set up and build an island resort close to the Djboutian coast. In addition to those, Jafza International has recently announced Phase II of its Djbouti Free Zone project comprising the development of 280,700 sq feet of space for light industrial units and warehouses, and 23,000 sq feet of office space. For the expansion and re-development of the Djbouti port, certain Arab financial institutions are involved in the project: the Arab Fund for Social and Economic Development (jasra), funds from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the Abu Dhabi and Saudi Arabia will finance the project. Also, as part of its World Food Program, The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) will develop the port facilities and connections to the hinterland via upgraded highways.


Djibouti for Dubai.18 While Middle East Development LLC also announces plans for two new cities to be built at either end of the bridge (Djibouti and Yemen), and that both cities will be “a free-trade zone and will have their own law, court system and administration.”19 It is also noted that the JAFZA International will be developing an airport zone in the area, serving as an air-land-sea link for the inner neighboring landlocked African states.

In addition to using specified free zone models of Dubai (Dubai Internet City, Dubai Media City and Jebel Ali Free Trade Zone) as brands and franchise, iconography is also exported in the Dubai Effect Archipelago. For instance, Sama Dubai has created the real estate brand “Dubai Towers” for the iconic high-rise complexes to be built by the company (Dubai Towers-Doha in Qatar to be completed in 2005, Dubai Towers-Istanbul in Turkey to be completed in 2010 and recently announced Dubai Towers-Casablanca) with an attempt to create Dubai Tower landmarks in other cities.

Full-spectrum City Provider

Of the BIG projects of the Dubai Effect, King Abdullah Economic City in Saudi Arabia, a mega city that spreads across 168 million square meters land (55 square meters of built area) and located on the 22 mile shore lines of the Red Sea, marks the most prominent aspect of the Dubai Effect. With a promise to the potential investor the access of both regional and global markets by land, air and sea, the city is divided up to six zones: Sea Port (that spreads across 2 million square meters), Financial District, Education Zone, Residential Area, Industrial District and The Resorts (with 18-hole golf course). Dubai based real estate company Emaar’s positioning of the projects enlightens our understanding of the Dubai Effect: “King Abdullah Economic City…signals a strategic move of Emaar from being a property developer to a full-spectrum city provider.”20 This idea of the “full-spectrum city provider” is important as it marks the ultimate aim of the Dubai Effect Archipelago: to go beyond the provision of Dubai islands abroad and essentially to provide compact variations of the Dubai Archipelago City. A perfect example of this is the giant airport city “The Dubai World Central” (140 square meters, twice the size of Hong Kong, housing a population of 750,000) planned to transform the region into a powerful global hub. Composed of 6 clustered zones, the Dubai World Central will consist of Dubai Logistics City, International Airport, Golf Resort, Commercial City, Residential City and Enterprise Park. With this and other similar examples in the region for such large scale projects (i.e. Masdar Eco-town project in Abu Dhabi and the RAK Gateway Project in Ras Al Khaimah),21 one wonders if the next step would be the franchising of “compact cities” to the world. Considering such examples as the announcement of 20 ecotowns in the UK, or the Dongtan project in Shanghai, the self-contained city from scratch poses urgent questions within contemporary urban discussions, regarding the issues of ecology, density, publicness and urbanity.
Among all the projects, the crucial question seems to be whether the Dubai Effect Archipelago marks a territorial reconfiguration of globalization as it relates to urbanism and development. If “exceptionality” is the main dictum for neo-liberal urbanization and large-scale development projects as argued by theorists, by replicating and re-configuring its clusters and free zones into various “full-spectrum city” models, Dubai is generating “exceptionalities” within a global scale. With their separate laws and regulations, these “exceptional zones,” are the clever symbiosis between the iconographic branding and the infrastructural realm of urban development within a transnational scale. As the autonomous character of the Dubai clusters is often discussed as offering flexible land-use regulation, urban form and legislation in Dubai itself, it should be added that this new model also allows for easy adaptations into new global locales, strategic cooperation with various local government agencies in the world, and various (infrastructural and iconographic) combinations of “full-package” urban development when needed.

BIG and the Dubai Effect

What exactly does the expanding large scale of the Dubai Effect Archipelago suggest for contemporary architecture and urbanism? The first idea is architecture’s changing relation to large scale. For more than a decade, various discussions on scale saw the large scale either as a symptom or a model. On the one hand, with an attempt to analyze and understand our complex urban condition and develop a repertoire of concepts, research on the contemporary city presented an abundance of retrospective manifestos with the ungraspable evidences of political and technological imagination. On the other hand, driven by economic intensity and market forces, the necessities of large scale and private development provided various templates of corporate architecture and urbanism. As “Bigness or the Problem of Large,” Rem Koolhaas’ renowned manifesto for the large scale, set the latent theory and provocation for the large scale a decade ago, the BIG skyscraper has been both the symptom and the model within emergent urban phenomena.

Koolhaas’ admiration for the skyscraper, and manifestly with the BIG resonates with Le Corbusier’s fascination the ocean liner, best expressed in Corbusier’s Aquitania collages. In this context, it would be important to note that, both for Corbusier and Koolhaas, the significance of the ship and the skyscraper lies not only in their expansive scale, but more importantly, in their provocation for a suggestive template for possible urban architectures: the ship and the skyscraper as floating islands independent of any context. Corbusian intervention was like a ship, a floating city, conceived as a hygienic separation from the existing urban fabric, positioned itself as opposed to the unsanitary traditional city, where a vertical city would float on nature (i.e. urban parks provided on the ground plane). Written as a caption showing the cross-section of the Aquitania ocean liner in The Radiant City, the direct relationship to Corbusier’s proposal for a city model is evident. Here, Corbusier writes: “Inside this floating city [the ocean liner] where all ought to be confusion and chaos, everything functions, on the contrary, with amazing discipline. [M]ain services...are all separately located. Why should a city apartment house not attempt to provide us with the same comfort as a ship?”

Koolhaasian intervention, on the other hand, was like a skyscraper, again a floating island/city, conceived as the hedonistic and zipped replication of the metropolitan culture (i.e. the absurdities of the private domain and its unconventional programmatic and social encounters) detached from the urban tissue. If, for Koolhaas, Manhattan is “a dry archipelago of blocks...[where]...each block is now alone like an island, fundamentally on its own,” then, beyond a certain scale, architecture would take the inventiveness of the autonomous skyscraper, independence of context, layering in section for an self-sufficient programming, and generic form separating itself from fragmenting etc. all from the urban tissue, would inform a new architectural urbanism: “Bigness, through its very independence of context, is the one architecture that can survive...[I]t gravitates opportunistically to locations of maximum infrastructural promise.”

In parallel to that, within the last decade or so, infrastructure urbanism – with its clear and necessary replacement of the post-war “contextualisms” and its intricate emphasis on scale – saw design and infrastructure in a symbiotic relationship where infrastructure became the context, resulting with vertical/sectional dispositions (Bigness, Koolhaas) or topographical/operative urban surfaces (Landscape Urbanism). However, with current urban aspirations within rapidly urbanizing coordinates (such as examples in China, and Dubai), the large scale urban architectures come even before or at the same time with the infrastructure, where infrastructure might result from the extension of the design intervention. Thus, in those conditions, rather than reacting to a predefined context, designers are bound to redefine and shape their contexts. This condition not only marks the shifting role of infrastructure in design but also puts the pressure on the agency of the architect.
within a much wider contextual scale, where ecological, regional, social and political questions come upfront and design decisions cannot simply be an innocent extension of external realities.

In that light, while the floating islands of the Dubai Effect Archipelago are produced via various combinations of its existing clusters for 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 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.

Dubai Effect Archipelago in the global context. Courtesy of the author.
Smart City brand advertisement. Courtesy of TECOM & Sama Dubai.