Reinterpreting Tradition; Hybridization and Vernacular Expression in Emirati Housing

Mohamed El Amrousi¹, Mohamed Elhakeem², Paolo Caratelli¹

¹Department of Architecture, Abu Dhabi University, UAE, 59911
²Department of Civil Engineering, Abu Dhabi University, UAE, 59911

Mohamed.amrousi@adu.ac.ae

Abstract. Contemporary urbanism and architecture in cities in the United Arab Emirates are becoming more aware of issues such as improving energy consumption and constructing a local identity as mandated in the Abu Dhabi 2030 master plan. Remnants of Emirati heritage is currently being revisited such as the majlis, a space of meeting that was part of local vernacular expression in the UAE, and the liwan, the shaded portico preceding private spaces in the Emirati housing. The majlis provided an autonomous space that retained family privacy by providing a male space on the boundaries of the domestic one. These phenomena are being revived in contemporary architecture signalling their socio-cultural needs that cannot be satisfied by western styled villas. This paper studies contemporary Emirati housing typologies in Abu Dhabi and the emerging hybridization of designs that allow for modifications/cultural expression within their walled boundaries. This research highlights also highlights the re-emergence of the majlis and the liwan as a cultural counter space to the rapid sprawl of modernity in the UAE.

1. Introduction

The rapid development of the real-estate sector in the United Arab Emirates constitutes a major segment of its investment in constructing its image, socio-cultural change and retention of its expatriate community and workforce. Globalization and the increased cultural friction on local architectural and urban aspects resulted in the construction of countless buildings with mere connections to their local identity. Facades are an integral and inseparable component of city image, they have to be comprehended as the connection between the interior and exterior space of a building and shape the urban fabric of the neighbourhoods. The Abu Dhabi 2030 vision, through its call for a revival of traditional forms re-contextualized in time and space, aims to regulate the orientation of buildings, to promote passive cooling strategies, and to retain local identity through the planning of Emirati neighbourhoods that revive traditional Emirati designs including reinterpretations of the liwan/shaded portico. Existing heritage only represents fragments of the physicality of what may have existed however, since the social content and collective memory of the building no longer exist. Today some of these principles are being revisited in the Abu Dhabi 2030 plan, in form of re-contextualization of the Emirati house as an integral element of urban expansion based on traditional vernacular forms. In the last decade increased awareness towards sustainability, culture and identity have become drivers to rethink urban strategies, as international pressure fostered policies on environmental and sustainable guidelines to re-shape architecture and urban fabrics in rapidly urbanizing cities. While the elements imported from abroad spectrum of architectural vocabularies under the penumbra of sustainability have been familiarized, such as prefabricated screens emulating traditional stucco patterns, conversely the
socio-cultural aspects of local Emirati traditions have not been fully incorporated in vernacular architecture [1]. Precedents to create a vocabulary of architectural forms and ornaments as a basis to revive regionalism/Arab/desert architecture exist in adobe forts such as Al-Jahili and the Sheikh Zayed Palace Museum in Al-Ain, however very few historic Emirati neighbourhoods remain intact. In light of massive urbanization plans in the UAE, re-interpreting local tradition to constitute an identity for Emirati housing is part of a Nation State policy to assure the community of their Arab/Islamic identity in a rapidly developing world. Exploration of hybridized forms with historic links can also form the foundation for contemporary interpretations of regional/Arab styles and neo-Islamic forms. It is essential to compare these notions of what constitutes the identity of a modern Arab Nation, notions arguably embedded in the processes of modernization itself, which provokes a system producing and consuming spaces of neo-heritage in a country where the scarcity of local heritage is noted due to its rapid urbanization. This paper does not aim to nostalgically revive a bygone image of local tradition, rather we aim to highlight the genealogical shift in style in villas shaped by individual ownership and more institutionalized forms created by developers in gated communities and newly urbanized islands such as Al-Saadiyat (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Al-Saadiyat residential units displaying prefabricated local ornaments on façades

2. Global Forces and challenges to the Vernacular

In Al-Saadiyat Island that is home to the Louvre Abu Dhabi and Manarat Al-Saadiyat, the cultural aspect of the region is strongly evident in the general architectural style of that area. Developers have created multiple facades that can be fitted to a western styled plan, by postmodernity approach and use of forms and fragments adapted from rapidly urbanized Arab cities, thereby creating a collage of local
vocabularies pertaining cultural and environmental values as a form of façade architecture to contemporary designs [2]. This is manifested in the urban development of Al-Saadiyat Island, representing a paradigm shift from downtown Abu Dhabi’s International Style and the more traditional local cultural vernacular expression in Al-Ain. Here, a re-thinking of residential environments is warranted to reflect a global taste that caters to Abu Dhabi’s diversified expatriate community. The local Emirati vernacular expression witnessed through individual homes is difficult to retrofit within the Mediterranean styled gated communities sprawling along the shorefronts of Al-Saadiyat. The ambitious project of Saadiyat Island currently underway off the coast of Abu Dhabi as a premier cultural centre, is offering an especially interesting counter-example to the artificial Islands of Dubai, wherein ideas of nature and culture have taken on differing epic proportions [3]. Developing an Arab architectural identity have been problematic because image and status associated with contemporary vernacular expression in the UAE has been manifested in many occasions through Greco-Roman styled villas. Emirati families require large scale villas/mansions, and architects have reverted to hybridization between East and West choosing forms and fragments that range from Alhambra Palace to ‘White House’ styled villas.

The scarcity of domestic vernacular architecture survived from the pre-oil era, and the few remains of adobe building traditions make difficult to use existing historic forts as a reference to build on a new vocabulary that satisfies the need for rapid urban expansion witnessed by Gulf cities. Emirati families opt for an eclectic life-style that has allowed cities like Dubai and currently Abu Dhabi to thrive economically. On an architectural level, this is however accompanied by a breakdown in the meaning of forms as illustrated in the use of prefabricated traditional elements. Thereafter, the transform in style and a classical element(s) can be integrated most easily into modern buildings as fragments to freely compose a collage [4]. Recreating architecture with an aim to reconstruct the past creates a problem in term of authenticity that becomes a tricky concept, and there is plenty of room for purists to criticize both the presentation of individual specimen buildings and the impression created by relocating them in artificial relationships to each other [5]. Here cultural resilience of traditional architectural features belonging to vernacular heritage, are presented in forms of re-interpretation and re-use, in order to assure a comfortable level of domesticity given to elements otherwise belonging to past, distant customs and habits of living. This style further reflects shift in societal and cultural demographics as the UAE shifts to creating resident multicultural communities. Such a shift changes the nature of cites in the UAE and derives hybridity at particular crossings of histories and dynamic cultural production generated by the multi-cultural expatriate communities that living in in the city. These new interpretations of heritage are not bound to the constraints of local or regional traditions; in contrast they cater to an intrinsic, adverse interest created by cultural diversity and multiplicity of imported architectural forms in the modern city.

3. Hybridization and Re-Contextualization in the Modern City
As outlined by Muhammad Al-Fahim, only fragments of the history of the past/pre-oil era remain documented, the wealth of the State from oil reserves allowed the government to give each Emirati family three to four times the plots of land warranted for their homes, or to establish commercial enterprise and farmlands in the hinterland [6]. Thereby both cities developed on principles of adaptation to global conditions to create physical forms that reflect the UAE’s modernity and belonging to the network of global cities which are emerging as financial centres of the world. The majlis in the UAE, as in many Gulf cities, is a socially home-grown spatial element that acted as a space of gathering, and within it meetings took place in order to address resolutions of problems, formation of business coalitions, and decision making. Rapid urbanism and the availability of funding, advanced technologies and transnational styles that transgress boundaries further accentuate the challenge. Initially, much of the vernacular expression in the Gulf might have relied on the thick walls common of adobe architecture
and portico’s surrounding the Emirati homes, known as liwan, an architectural element which provided shade on the walls in addition to social spaces of gathering and an early passive cooling system (Figure 2).

Revisiting past heritage or replicating it is problematic in a rapidly urbanizing nation, in addition as outlined by Sandra Piesik since very little of the craftsmen that have the knowledge to work with traditional materials such as coral stone and palm fronds to construct summer and winter dwellings remain [7]. As highlighted by Oleg Grabar, symbolically rich cultural traditions but could only preserve symbols which were not religiously charged, and therefore especially in secul architecture it is easy for ornaments to travel freely in time and space, to be copied and imitated in a contemporary context [8]. Nasser Rabbat on the other hand mentions that contemporary attempts to create Arab/Islamic architecture cannot escape the realization that in this age of globalization many of its motifs, forms and fragments are used in different forms to claim a certain nation hood status and represent the identity of communities [9]. The delicate balance between modernity and tradition in rapidly urbanizing Gulf States, and the search for a modern Arab/Islamic style represents a challenge for contemporary architects. Most local (Emirati) villas range in build are from 600 to 1000 square meters and planned to house an extended family. These oversized villas no long er sustain their original function as Emirati communities move to newer neighbourhoods. Many of them have been transformed into cafes and, spas and for commercial activities. Therefore, they cannot be examined isolated from other factors such as identity, social relations, status, and the like which have become more heterogeneous, varied, flexible, and dynamic; therefore, their meanings and cultural messages projected by dwellings have become ever more important. In a rapidly homogenizing world, hybridization of architecture is inevitable and may construct a third space that is neither frozen in the past yet one that counters postmodern pastiches manifested in the architectural forms and fragments developing in residences in gated communities. Such expression as highlighted by the recreation of a majlis (Figure 3) attached to modern villas represents a preservation of the sanctity of inner space and domesticity by creating a male space that is

Figure 2. Traditional liwan dating to the 1970s –Al-Ain City
reconnected to traditional vernacular expression with a contemporary context. This change in the architecture of the UAE can be understood as a need to preserve local identity and cultural habits in the wake of urbanization triggered by unprecedented oil reserves that allowed a major shift in architectural design in less than a generation, starting in the 1970s.

![Figure 3. Contemporary majlis/tent annexed to a classic style villa](image)

Today tent manufactures such as Al-Baddad International, and Al-Raways, reflect the re-contextualization of the majlis as a socio-cultural form re-established in the modernized Emirati cities. In this sense, vernacular expression of traditional Emirati homes is resilient in the wake of more institutionalized building typologies adorned by postmodern manifestations of Arab/Islamic ornament. Emirati homeowners attempt to create a niche of local identity through a reflection of cultural habits that obviated in the design of European styled villas. Here domesticity is lost as local vernacular expression allowed for more flexibility in the design of its spaces that grew with the growth of the family and incorporated spaces for domestic help. Opting to go beyond the gated community and to create individual designs can offer a new style to the city that intertwines modern technologies warranted by a contemporary society and segments of the past that retain the processes of producing identity and difference. Recreating the majlis and the liwan (Figures 3, 4) represents a mediation between Global forces of modernity and local tradition, in addition to creating intermediate spaces between exterior space and interior space. Both traditional architectural features are associated with regional practically aiming to create shaded spaces and have a cultural function of pre-gathering and exchanges of greetings. Re-visiting traditional vernacular environments by Emirati homeowners advocates more culturally and environmentally sensitive links to crossroads between East and West, which allow popular and acceptable amendments in terms of style to Emirati culture. Here, attention to detail is warranted and decor also includes exhibition of artefacts, including historic objects, weavings, and artworks. As highlighted in Figure 4 the local identity of the villa is strongly linked to Alhambra via its projecting
porticos and horseshoe arches [10]. However, it is also an example of the flexibility space reconstructed to adapt to the new functions. Given the duality of newly constructed neighbourhoods of the city, here the State reassures its community that Arab space and heritage remains unaffected by global socio-cultural changes. Therefore, in Mohammed bin Zayed City new images of the Emirati dwellings are constructed to manifest socio-cultural values, flexibility and social adaptation. These new aspects of tradition emerge as a form of critical vernacularism in the UAE that provides space to review local vernacular expression beyond categorized stylistic boundaries, transgressed by lineage to regionalism and the broader vocabulary of Islamic ornament (Figure 4). The contemporary the liwan and the majlis, is an interpretation of sustainability that took on a dynamic approach and did not freeze the past in a certain timeframe through the creation of goat-hair tents in their authentic form but rather paid an homage to it, and thereby avoids an orientalist reconstruction of the past [11].

4. Local Identity and Rapidly Urbanizing Gulf State Cities
Emirati families enjoy many of the leisure and cultural facilities created along the waterfronts of Abu Dhabi and its newly urbanized islands such as Al-Saadiyat. However, the cultural sense of belonging to the desert environment still exists. National identity in the UAE plays a major role in relation to modernity and socio-cultural habits local tribal communities, this may explain the tendency of Emirati families to reside in hinterland cities such as Mohammed bin Zayed City and Al-Ain...etc. Vernacular expressions in the design of villas by local owners represents the co-existence of a myriad of forms of identification that is also associated with household, large family and domesticity. Among the problems that emerged from developing gated communities and high-rise buildings on a large scale is a dramatic shift from tradition to imported forms. This is counterbalanced in hinterland cities such as Mohammed bin Zayed where the revisiting of local vernacular spaces such as the majlis and liwan, have been consciously integrated in contemporary design from historic and regional vernacular typologies. These cultural spaces form a cohesive integration between inside/outside living spaces that offer privacy to local families. The strong connectivity between inside and outside generated through local design manifestations of architectural elements such as the majlis in its prefabricated tent form, and liwans as porticos conversely constitute an activity of retaining collective memory and introducing a powerful experience of a living culture in the wake of modernity. This implies that ‘national identity is one among several ways in which people may experience a sense of cultural belonging, and that it has a spatial and ideological significance.
Much of the economy in the UAE is reliant on the construction industry and with a massive building stock being created it was essential to diversify building forms and identities in order to cater to the multicultural expatriate communities in Abu Dhabi and Dubai. However, pre-fabricated ornament is not the solution as it only offers a form of façade architecture to imported plans and spaces in residential units. The strategy to create a collective memory through linking communal identity to local heritage, not only through facades, materials and forms but also through many of its interior spaces such as the majlis and the liwan as its extroverted counter space is essential for the preservation of local culture and collective memory. Here the usage of majlis space has been mostly faithful, while on the surface the scale, furnishings and lighting systems in the new majlis are different from their initial precedents, in terms of function the cultural aspect is retained that is separating the male space from the private interiors of home. On a social level the retention of local identity revisited in contemporary forms resulted in the popularity of these large mansions that preserve local family traditions. This duality in tradition can be understood within taking into consideration that the UAE has taken its major developmental steps in the past few decades, and the development of architecture and real estate has played a major role in shaping the image of UAE cities, as is clearly visible in the vernacular expression. Vernacular architecture in Gulf States vary in their architectural manifestations and style especially villas that are built by individuals not by developers aiming to create gated communities. Ornaments on the facades of Emirati houses coupled with the introduction of new forms associated with icons of tradition can be viewed as hybridized architectural forms. Such forms need to be understood within an emotional and psychological context and as a means of reassurance for the community that Arab space and heritage remains unaffected by the urban changes [12]. These interpretative versions of vernacularism is referred here as neo-vernacularism, which has emerged as an approach to bringing a new life to vernacular heritage for new and contemporary functions [13].

5. Conclusion
Local identity in relation to urban spaces and new architectural icons, are shaped through the adoption of a wide spectrum of forms and fragments that revive the concept of hybridized architecture, and in this process there is a replacement of traditional forms with new interpretations as manifested by the pre-fabricated tent-like majlis that is now becoming a popular trend, especially when juxtaposed in contrast to postmodern prefabricated traditional ornament in gated community development. Local developers also retain features belonging to vernacular expression of the past such as the shaded liwan that allows for re-adaptation and reuse of space as the size of Emirati families change overtime. The majlis and liwan have been transformed into hybridized forms that can be freely adapted to contemporary building forms in order to reassure local communities of their cultural heritage as a form of resilience in the wake of modernity. Vernacular expressions intersect with much larger scale urban city images of modernity in the form of glass towers and gated communities as advocates of incremental planning and vernacular architecture that has responded to climate and landscape for decades. Indeed, both offer the best solutions for passive environmental sustainability and position architecture within its appropriate position to understand the role of critical vernacular in the preservation of tradition; however, the emergence of hybridized architecture is more capable in supporting contemporary functions through culturally compatible spaces with locally warranted aesthetics. Such forms of hybridization legitimize architectural practices in adopting contemporary forms intertwined with loggias, pitched roofs, and modern fenestration elements to create diversely patterned forms in modern Arab cities that continue to realize an ambitious programs of building developments. This reflects a coherent policy to support new designs that seek integrated new understandings of modernity and tradition, with an obvious determination to experiment with a sense of newness, re-contextualization and re-interpretation of traditional forms such as the majlis and the liwan.

References
[1] N. Perera, “Critical vernacularism a locally produced global difference,” *Journal of Architectural Education*, vol. 63(2), pp. 76–77, 2010.
[2] T. Schumacher, “Façadism returns, or the advent of the duck-olated shed,” *Journal of Architectural Education*, vol. 63(2), pp. 128–137, 2010.

[3] P. Gupta, “Futures, fakes and discourses of the gigantic and miniature in ‘The World’ islands, Dubai,” *Island Studies Journal*, vol. 10(2), pp. 181-196, 2015.

[4] S. Damluji, “Brave new cities, architecture in context: an overview,” In S. Damluji (ed.), *The Architecture of the United Arab Emirates*, pp. 24 - 99, Garnet Publishing, London, 2006.

[5] L. Young, “Villages that never were: the museum village as a heritage genre,” *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, vol. 12(4), pp. 321-338, 2006.

[6] M. Al-Fahim, *From Rags to Riches: A Story of Abu Dhabi*. London: Tauris Limited.

[7] S. Piesik, *Arish: Palm-Leaf Architecture*, Thames & Hudson, London, 2012.

[8] O. Grabar, “Symbols and signs in Islamic architecture,” In J. G. Katz (ed.), *Architecture as Symbol and Self-Identity*, Aga Khan Award for Architecture, Philadelphia, 1980.

[9] N. Rabbat, “The Boundaries of architectural education today,” *Architectural Education Today: Cross-Cultural Perspectives*, Comportements, Lausanne, 2002.

[10] V. Gonzalez, “The Comares Hall in the Alhambra and James Turrell's Space that sees: A comparison of aesthetic phenomenology,” *Muqarnas: An Annual on the Visual Culture of the Islamic World*, vol. XX, pp. 253-278, 2013.

[11] M. Na’ameh, M. Shunnaq, A. Tasbasi, “The modern sociocultural significance of the Jordanian Bedouin Tent,” *Nomadic Peoples*, vol. 12(1), pp. 149–163, 2012.

[12] C. Loth, “Palladio's influence in America,” *Virginia Department of Historic Resources*, [Online] 2008 Available at: <https://jscholarship.library.jhu.edu>.

[13] S. Özkan, “Introduction - regionalism within modernism,” In R. Powell (ed.), *Regionalism in Architecture*, The Aga Khan Award for Architecture, Singapore, 1985.