

Dubai in the 80s – Dariush Zandi

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Looking out of my window, the beaches, the sea, Palm Jumeirah, Burj Al Arab and the development along the beachfront are lined up one after the other. In the far distance, I see the densely developed Jebel Ali port, Palm Jebel Ali, the Bluewaters Island and Ferris wheel like a panoramic view.

The beautiful blue sea is there as it has always been, though I would never imagine seeing it from this angle. Where I'm standing now, in Jumeirah Beach Residence, there used to be only a handful of villas, I visited friends here or went sailing and windsurfing a couple of kilometers away in Mina Seyahi. These beaches felt so far away from the city, like an excursion, or a weekend gateway.

It's hard to imagine that any of these would have come about when I arrived to Dubai in 1978 for the first time.

Miles away and years apart...

Dubai, November 1980

The second time around, I came back to Dubai in November of 1980. Right from the airport, I was taken for lunch to the revolving restaurant of the Hyatt Regency Hotel. The hotel was standing alone on the recently reclaimed sea corniche. There was no better place to see the city than here. The straight and protected seashore, the enormous development of Port Rashid's shipping industry, storage facilities and its encroachment into the sea indicated that the effort to develop the city into a viable transportation hub was well on the way.

As the restaurant was revolving, I could see in the distance the city slowly merged into its setting, at one side to the vast sea, and the other to the desert. The exceptions being the scattered villas of Jumeirah lined up by the seashore and the emerging strip development along Abu Dhabi Road with the World Trade Center building in the far distance. There was hardly any major development that existed on this side of the city.

Deira appeared further developed in size and scale, although I believe the first settlers were established in Dubai side because the Creek was deeper and had a solid water front which made Bur Dubai into a natural harbor.

In the backdrop of Deira, the dotted industrial development of Port Saeed, Umm Ramool, Al Khabaisi and Al Qusais were barely visible.

What stood out the most was the Creek that split the city into two, Bur Dubai and Bur Deira. The Creek widened as it worked its way toward the desert and with a sudden turn terminated at the mangrove plantation. The only visible connections were Maktoum and Garhoud Bridges. Maktoum Bridge indicated the limit of the urban growth. Khan Lagoons and the silhouette of Sharjah town in the distance terminated this panoramic view of Dubai.

A city in harmony

As I walked through the city, I felt that there was a flow and harmony from one neighborhood to another and from old to new.

Multistorey buildings with their large billboards and neon signs in Arabic and English were promises of modernity and prosperity.

There was a buzz in the air, and the souks with their lights, sound and the smell of the food, the muezzin's call to prayer and the silhouettes of the domes and minarets of the various mosques were all assurances of a healthy urban setting. Small alleyways, the complexity and density of the traditional houses in the old neighborhoods such as Bastakiya and Al Shindagha with their unique character and windtowers and their silhouette against the city's skyline were all reassurances of such feelings. Al Maktoum Road, along with its multistorey buildings, began from Abdul Nasser Square and slowly leveled off towards the airport. The new developments, mostly concentrated in and around Abdul Nasser Square, merged smoothly into the old fabric creating a comfortable transition into a modest cosmopolitan area.

Al Ras was the heart, most of the essential activities circled around the Creek, so did shops and family businesses, offices, apartment buildings, the municipality and most public amenities, parks and gardens. The roads ran out towards outskirts in a semi circular/fan shaped fashion. The city of Dubai mainly consisted of Deira and Dubai. Maktoum Road connected the city to Mirdif, Al Rashidya, Al Khawaneej and Sharjah. Hatta, Al Ain and Abu Dhabi were the three major destinations with each commencing from the city fringes and extended to their respective destinations.

As I moved away from Al Ras, the activities transformed slowly from those of wholesalers dealing in traditional goods to taller buildings and newer shops selling electronic and modern commodities. Office

spaces in multistory buildings were a new phenomenon. A similar coherence appeared in people's costumes and the way they dressed. In the souk, people of different origins and nationalities mingled with the local population, wearing mostly their national dress whereas in the newer areas it was more likely to see people with Western outfits.

The alleyways and narrow streets grew wider but less intimate as they merged into avenues and boulevards. So the differences were clear but comfortably harmonious and organic.

One exception was the development along Abu Dhabi Road, which was merging as a new downtown with the World Trade Center building (completed by 1980) as its epicenter. This development was linear and concentrated along the highway, competing with yet complementing the old city.

The low-rise/low density neighborhoods of Satwa, Jumeirah and places of Zabeel on either side were marginalized by high-rise construction sprouting along its route, contrasting the harmonious pace of the city. This strip development later triggered overloading the high way and the area around it for the next three decades. Beyond 2010, widening of the highway and adjusting the densities helped the situation by the emergence of DIFC, Downtown Dubai and Business Bay districts and the introductions of metro and alternative roads.

Abra ride along the Creek

After walking through the city, it was time to experience the Creek and its shores the way newcomers would do when they arrived for the first time. A fifteen-minute abra ride from mouth of the Creek to Al Maktoum Bridge offered this experience. The first place that I came across was Al Shindagha, with one and two story buildings, rising wind towers and harmonious sand color and coral stone structures, mostly in a stage of dilapidation, a quarter in waiting for its faith. In the other side, dhows were being built or repaired. The small abras, teeming with passengers, would chug to and fro across the narrow waterway, with a backdrop of people huddled together on the pavements of small streets that disappeared into the shadowy souks selling spices and gold amongst other commodities. Here was a typical traditional gulf town with signs of progress strongly present.

As the abra continued a sharp turn revealed the sight of a busy waterway with passenger abras crossing the creek and then the unforgettable city skyline of the modern Dubai with its multistory buildings with layers of dhows moored in rows along the Creek loading and off loading their goods in the foreground. The Ruler office's building and the wind tower houses of Bastakiyah in Dubai side further complemented this journey. The glittering new skyline and its shiny buildings slowly diminished once we passed the Intercontinental Hotel. The newly completed Dubai Municipality Building and the Sheraton Hotel abruptly terminated the joy of watching this marvel. Beyond this point, for the rest of the trip, we passed by Dubai Electricity Generation Plant, McDermott off shore industries in Deira side and the British Embassy and Sheikh Ahmad Bin Thani Palace compound in Dubai side.

The industrial development continued along the Creek beyond Maktoum Bridge with oil supplies, dhow repairs and fishing industries. This was a trip through decades of transformation and progress. Even though the Creek, seemed to separate the two parts of the city, in reality I felt it was connecting thus uniting them seamlessly.

My first visit Dubai, 1978

My introduction to Dubai began in 1978 when I was assigned as an architect working with the firm Jafar Tukan and Partners in Amman, Jordan to put together a proposal for an urban design competition for the Creek Corniche development. The project consisted of widening the Creek road (Baniyas road) from single to dual carriageway and designing an urban scheme for landscaping and parking on recently reclaimed land from the Creek by the Dubai Municipality.

In November of 1980, I had a stopover in Dubai, after completing my masters in Architecture, Urban Design and City Planning. The city was in urgent need of an urban designer and I needed a job. Everything fell into place naturally. I started my career as senior architect and town planner with Dubai Municipality's Town Planning Department in March 1981.

Working in Dubai Municipality brought me directly into contact with much that was going on in the city, including the development projects and plans for the city's future growth. The 1980s was the era where several major components of urban development took shape in Dubai: Historical preservation of old Dubai, the urban design and master planning, transportation, infrastructure, parks & recreation and arts & culture.

Preservation of Historic Dubai

In the early 1980s, Dubai Municipality recognized the importance of the preservation of historical buildings and the old city, which resulted in several projects. The first assignment was to look after the reconstruction

of Sheikh Saeed's House, which was Sheikh Rashid's birthplace and the Maktoum family's home for decades.

This was followed by plans for the restoration of Al Ahmadiyah School – the oldest school in Deira – and Al Fahidi Fort (Dubai Museum), the largest and oldest fort in Dubai. In addition, plans were drawn up for the restoration of the old village of Hatta, including Hatta Fort, the watchtowers and the surrounding houses.

These projects led to others, such as the preservation of the historical part of old Dubai, the souks, the identification and documentation of historical buildings and structures and listing them on the preservation program for future restoration. Several watchtowers and forts, including Burj al-Nahar, the Shindagha watchtower and other buildings such as Sheikh Obaid bin Thani's house in Shindagha were added to the list. There were also buildings in Al Bastakiya, including the Amiri House (now the Majlis Art Gallery). Some of the houses are now used as museums, galleries, restaurants and headquarters of non-profit organizations.

The historical preservation in Dubai towards the end of the 1980s became significant and the Department of Historical Preservation in Dubai Municipality was established. This department grew to scale that not only preserved the buildings in Dubai but also helped the other emirates for preserving their historical buildings. Consequently the creation of "Architectural Heritage Society of UAE" which I had the honor of serving as vice chairman for the English-speaking Chapter was another accomplishment in the field.

The 1980s was an imperative decade that set the precedent in preserving Dubai's past and revitalizing it, thus leaving a legacy for future generations. Seeing these buildings still standing, lends a sense of history to the architecture and to the city, which is rewarding and I am grateful to be part of it.

Dubai Master Planning and Urban design projects

Dubai continued to grow, with projects becoming ever more ambitious. I was right at the heart of this growth, living a life where senses were challenged by newer, larger and more imaginative projects. Most of these needed planning approval, so they had to go through the Planning Department where I was working at; and my responsibility was to study them, give my comments and judge their impact on the city as a whole.

In 1981, I was assigned to draw up a plan and propose a town in Jebel Ali to support the port development which was envisaged to grow for a population of half a million.

The Jebel Ali beach sand was taken for many years in the 1970s to use in the construction of the buildings of the fast growing city. This clearly had a negative environmental impact on these pristine beaches. Upon approval of the plan, the measures were taken to protect this natural resource and thereafter, rehabilitation of the coastal zone of the Jebel Ali area began.

Part of the plan was to initiate Jebel Ali Airport with the idea to complement and eventually to replace Dubai Airport in the long term.

This area went under a comprehensive master planning exercise under the title of Dubai Waterfront project in mid 2000, which resulted in a much bigger scale and denser with the estimate population of 1.5 - 2 million. Incidentally, in the capacity of urban design consultant, I became involved in this project, working with the private firm of Gruzen Samton in subdividing and designing guidelines for the parcels of lands along the shorelines of Jebel Ali. I succeeded together with RMJM Architects to work on the design development of Madinat al Soor, a city center for the new town of the waterfront.

In early 1981, I was asked to put together a package for an urban design competition for the development of Al Maktoum Road, a crucial project encompassing a major artery starting from the heart of the city in Deira, to the airport. This project was implemented in phases, for and between four major points of: The airport, the flame roundabout, the clock tower roundabout and Abdul Nasser Square (Baniyas Square).

The need for a structure plan, not only to look at the 1960s and 1970s development, but also study the future expansion of the city and its direction for the next two decades, rose. I was appointed as the project coordinator in overseeing this study and preparing the guidelines and program outline, not only for the city of Dubai, but also extended to the emirate. One of the tasks of this assignment was to look for consultants. Dioxides Associates were consequently selected.

The Dubai master plan included regional, citywide and neighborhood planning on a short and long-term basis. The project resulted in several reports of the substantial volumes ranging from detail planning of the old Dubai, the city, the extension of Jebel Ali and the outskirts and Hatta and the overall infrastructure of Dubai. As the city grew, its plan and direction were naturally adjusted based on the policies and needs. The first decade of 21st century Dubai experienced the intense pace of urban development in all aspects thus making it a global hub.

The last three decades of expansion and major growth starting in 1980 translated into two master plans: Dubai 2020 urban master plan by the planning department of Dubai Municipality and the launch of Dubai

plan 2021 by **His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum**, Vice President and Prime Minister of the UAE and Ruler of Dubai through the executive council.

Urban Design Guideline

As an urban designer, part of my responsibility at Dubai Municipality was to study, comment and endorse the issues related to public domains that would come to the planning department for approval. This includes the infrastructures, utilities, street furnishings, landscapes, road networks and highways, their effect on the environment, their safety and visual impact.

Among them were electrical overhead and underground lines, power stations and substations of different sizes and their distribution routes throughout the city into the neighborhoods, sewerage treatment plants, drainage lines and pumping stations, telecommunication buildings and towers. This responsibility extended to public amenities such as street lightings, sidewalks, underpasses, soft or hard landscapes, public arts, street furnishings, bus stops, signs and details of sidewalks, locations of street crossings, street numbering systems, even assignments as detailed as locating a telephone kiosk.

Transportation

By the mid 1980s, Dubai emerged as a major transportation center in the region. To cope with the increase in trade, the volume of import/export and the regional growth of Jebel Ali Free Zone was established and the existing Port Rashid was expanded. In addition, Hamriyah Port, Jadaf and Creek Corniche went through improvements to manage the demand. Emirates Airline began operations to later become the number one airline in the world and put Dubai's name on the map.

Through the continuous effort of Dubai Municipality's Road Department, numerous projects expanded the city in all directions and sectors including industrial, commercial and residential. In the early 1980s, the clock tower under pass, the first tunnel, was built to ease the traffic in the area. This was a major achievement, which paved the way for other adventurous projects of a similar kind. Many new squares and roundabouts such as the flame roundabout, Al Itihad, and World Trade Center were later introduced. The idea of symbolism in the cases of Fish, Nahar or flame roundabout was grown and became synonyms with many other interchanges in the city. The following improvement in traffic flow was to introduce the grade-separated junctions and interchanges, such as roundabouts along Abu Dhabi, Al Ain and Hatta Roads, which were later converted to cloverleaf. In order to reduce the congestion in Dubai city and ease the pressure on Abu Dhabi Road, I was assigned to draw up a right of way passing Dubai city to the Northern Emirates. This became a reality in the 1990s as Emirates Highway.

Infrastructure, utilities, and industrialization

The ever increasing population of the city required a continued demand and an increase in utilities such as water, electricity, and telecommunication. The water piped in from the wells of the outskirts of Dubai was sufficient to satisfy the need of the modest population of the 1960s and 1970s. However, in the 1980s, desalination of the sea water was the only solution to quench the city's thirst for water.

The development of the power generation plant in Jebel Ali began to replace the modestly sized electrical power generation yard in Deira. Toward the mid 1980s, the oil gas turbine station of Jebel Ali was slowly replaced and complemented by the gas operated turbine functioning in two folds: the sea water was used to cool the turbines and as a result, the water was desalinated.

Industrial development growth was in the areas of Jebel Ali, Al Quoz, Al Qusais on a larger scale and Umm Ramool, Al Khabisi and Port Saeed for lighter industries were all fed by this essential network. As the city grew, the need of expanding utilities such as the sewerage and drainage systems was essential. A couple of years of heavy rain and storm in the early 1980s resulted in the increase of surface runoff. This proved that Dubai could no longer survive without these vital infrastructures. The design of the networks began and later the main treatment plant was built as the first comprehensive treatment plant along Al Awir Road to cater for the greater city of Dubai.

Parks and recreations

Excess water from the treatment plants provided much needed water for the landscaping of the city in the later part of the 1980s and therefore, parks and recreations throughout the city were boosted. Union Square Park was the first project that I was assigned to, the theme was inspired by the UAE's unification and served for many years as an urban park until it was recently converted into a metro station.

Mushrif and Safa were two of the major parks that I was assigned to as project coordinator. They were both initiated in 1981 and completed by the mid 1980s. These parks, along with Creek and Mamzar and smaller neighborhood parks played a vital role for the city and its residents to spend time with family and friends and a place to picnic or exercise. Also, they became a place for reunion and celebration of the multicultural people of Dubai. Introducing landscape median in highways as well as streets, sidewalks and several boulevard-like streets further enhanced the greening of the city.

To cope with high demand, the Horticulture Department of Dubai Municipality initiated its own nurseries to produce much needed shrubberies, trees and grass. Several private firms at the same time were established and assisted in providing the city with greenhouses and automation of this industry to reduce the reliance on the manpower and manual labor.

The continuation of the ever growing number of plants, flowers and trees encouraged research and study to select suitable species to provide diversity in the plant material. A large number of these plants adapted to the Dubai climate and became common in landscapes of Dubai.

Trading, Shopping and Entertainment

Dubai is based on trade and shopping. It was the culture of shopping that continuously attracted newcomers, whether to trade or to shop. In different periods, one would become more important than the other in helping the city to grow.

Up to the early 1980s, the trade and shopping in both wholesale and retail industries were practiced in traditional and conventional styles, with covered walkways and shops selling similar goods concentrating together, thus creating the souks, which was typical of the region.

In the 1980s, the western style of indoor, climate-controlled shopping centers emerged in Dubai not only for shopping, but also to dine and to be entertained. Al Ghurair Center in Deira was the first and the only shopping center for many years. Dubai saw several of these centers of different sizes towards the end of the 1980s. Hamarain, City Center and Burjuman were among a few.

As the city grew, like the other sectors, the shopping became an important synonym with Dubai, so much so that today Dubai has some of the largest shopping malls of the world and became a shopper's paradise.

Housing, Hotels, Health

Dubai shared the indigenous style of housing typical to the traditional Gulf cities, which consisted of a Courtyard and rooms built around it. Wind towers were used to bring coolness and comfort to these houses and neighborhoods such as Al Bastakiya, Baharna, Al Shindagha and Al Ras in Deira became known for these.

Many of these buildings are still in existence and have been restored to their original conditions.

Arish was another type of housing, built out of palm fronds, with similar configurations to the wind tower house type but smaller and more affordable.

By the 1980s, conventional apartment housing was as popular as ever for expats, they were located closer to the city center and villas to the outskirts.

For most locals, land became available through various ways: either built as multiple dwellings with similar sizes (80 x 80 to 150 x 150 feet and higher), or individually granted land to build their own villas or multi story residential buildings. This type of housing was spread throughout the city in neighborhoods of Jumeirah, Al Qusais, Al Safa or Al Rashidiya.

Local houses comprised of rooms around a central courtyard very much similar to traditional houses of old Dubai.

Government sponsored dwellings in areas such as Karama, Al Shabab, and Al Qusais were developed and offered to expats for a lower rent through Majlis Al Amar. In areas such as Jumeirah, large parcels of land were subdivided to create private gated housing developments and rented to mostly executive expats. Large plots of land were also allocated to major real estate companies to develop suburban Western-style cul-de-sacs. Mirdif is an example of this type of housing.

Government owned land was also developed in residential, industrial, and commercial forms and were rented to both the local and expat population.

Art Scene in the 1980s

Having developed based on trade and business, when I arrived to Dubai in 1980, I could not find any art and cultural platform to be engaged in as somebody who was dealing with art as part of daily life.

So the first and only place I came across was Dubai Art Center, which had just begun operating from a villa in Jumeirah. I immediately joined it and it was not long until I found myself chairing the photography group.

Other disciplines at Dubai Art Center were painting, sculpture and ceramic.

There were often exhibitions of art by members and it was the most active venue to bring people together, especially those of the expat community throughout 1980. Dubai Art Center survived and is still thriving and serving the art community.

The only exception to this were the events and musical performances and plays that would either take place in hotel ballrooms or educational institutions such as the British Council.

From my very first day in Dubai, I was recording my daily experience, personally and professionally, by capturing the contrasting images of what was happening around me. Some of those moments I captured have been useful in several books about Dubai and the Emirates.

I organized several exhibitions of photography and architecture in the Dubai Municipality building and elsewhere around the city. This effort eventually resulted in turning the hall on the ground floor of the Dubai Municipality building into a permanent exhibition hall.

Today, Dubai is a destination for art in the region, a home of world-class art fairs, galleries and art institutions and the recently inaugurated Opera House in Downtown Dubai is a statement.

Conclusions

I performed my duties throughout the 1980s for and under the direct guidance of Dubai Municipality and its policy makers. It was an honor and a fabulous opportunity to be involved in such challenging projects in various disciplines for a growing city.

Watching from my apartment in Jumeirah Beach Residence, the sun setting behind the Bluewaters Island with its half finished Ferris wheel and the silhouettes of buildings under construction, once again remind me of how far Dubai has come from 1980 when I started my new life and professional career. I have no doubt it will continue in an even faster pace than the last three and half decades that I have watched it pass in front of my eyes, like it was yesterday.