

Behavioral mapping of Abu Dhabi's public spaces: Urban research photography and cultural clashes

Abstract:

While the study of quotidian practices and daily experiences is now fully appreciated in western urbanism, it is still at an embryonic stage in the emerging new cities of the Middle East. This paper presents an ongoing research project of social-behavioral mapping of Abu Dhabi's public spaces and its correlation with the existing urban morphology, in an attempt to shed empirical light and update the local public space design guidelines.

Photography is one of the observation tools used. However, due to sociocultural conditions, special techniques had to be used. Time-lapse, high-contrasted, undirected street photography was key to visualize both formal and informal activities in the realm of the private.

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1. Introduction to context

Abu Dhabi is arguably the exemplar of new cities in the Gulf region, meeting unprecedented urban growth – as fueled by the oil boom – that transformed it from a seasonal fishing post to a contemporary global hub. Its five decades of history, although shallow compared to other cities, were enough for the city to grow beyond biological rates, under a consistent and pragmatic political will (Kyriazis, 2017). Dependency on cars still monopolizes and shapes the urban form (Montagne, 2016) resulting an expensive sprawl against the desert and a post-modernist suburban lifestyle with significant horizontal segregation (Rode, 2017). Catalyst to that is the

effort of the city to keep up with the latest trends on global urban design and real estate developments while pushing for high targets in tourism that led to emphasis on security and public space privatization (Samarrai, 2018). The urban and architectural scales of the city are controlled by a meticulous set of manuals, partially aligned with the local cultural and climatic conditions. Especially with regards to the public space, it is the analytical manuals, privatization and an almost Orwellian level of security that generate a sense of overmanagement.

2. Research Project

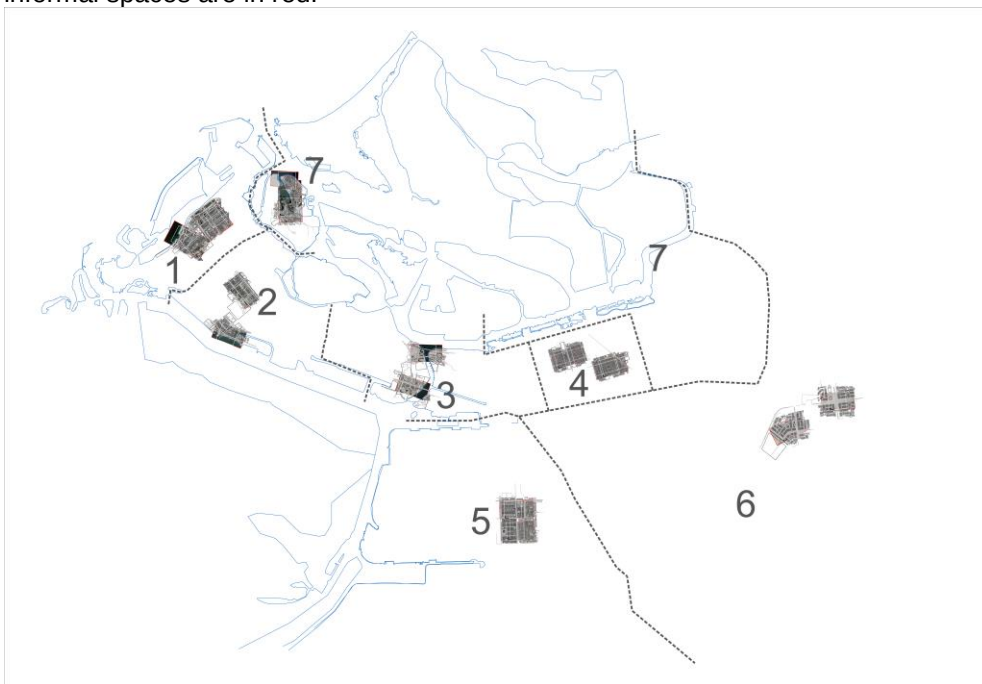
This paper hinges on an ongoing research project of behavioral mapping in Abu Dhabi's public spaces and its correlation with the urban form. The city was divided in seven zones with distinct characteristics of architectural/urban morphology and ethnic distribution. Two public spaces were chosen from each zone; a formal and an informal one. This way, observations from all fourteen spaces in various timings and days would secure a representative enough reading with comparable results.

Regarding observations' timings, Abu Dhabi's special climatic conditions became a key constraining factor. Extreme daily temperatures during the Summer (together with high humidity rates and frequent sand storms) force almost all open space activities to nocturnal. This phenomenon is amplified during the Islamic holy month of Ramadan and to fasting during daytime. Therefore, most observations were conducted as early as April 2019, with few nighttime spots remaining to take place during June.

The research team combines forces from two institutions and three disciplines: Architecture, Sociology and Human Geography. Documenting the behavioral profile of public spaces and superimposing it to the urban form and mobility patterns would answer questions related to the genesis and impact of informality, to the consequences of zoning practices and to the interconnectivity of the public realm. Since access to any statistical and demographic information was limited, the empirical analysis was supported by impromptu discussions with public space users, while the role of photographic documentation became even more critical.



Figure 1: Map of public spaces in Abu Dhabi, Project: “Redefining Abu Dhabi’s Public Spaces: Urban Classification and Social Interaction”. Formal spaces are in green (sized after their importance) and informal spaces are in red.



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Figure 2: Map of the selected public spaces to be studied, Project: “Redefining Abu Dhabi’s Public Spaces: Urban Classification and Social Interaction”.

3. Sociocultural clashes

Photography owned the lion’s share at the proposed methodology. While simple photographs could document remarkable isolated activities, time-lapse techniques were addressed for highlighting the activity flow through time. Furthermore, special settings (i.e. shooting against the Sun, high contrast and shadow manipulation on

post-processing etc.) were introduced as a response to very strict controls with regards to family members' privacy and to religious considerations. Cameras were always remotely controlled and positioned low, next to the ground, in hard-to-detect spots.



Figure 3: Shamkha Formal park: Camera positioning at an artificial slide hill.

Cultural clashes come in two distinct ways:

One is easy to detect and relatively easy to document, since it includes the public space users. Cultural and religious boundaries – rather than ethnic ones – may appear on behavior related with seating choices (proximity amongst westerners and abaya/hijab-wearing women), clothing choices (staring at passers-by) and the like. However, those boundaries become more blurry with time (as a sign of mutual respect to the use of the same public space and a sense of direct “democracy” the common use of public space offers).



Figure 4: The cultural divide. Shot from behind a wooden playground structure (visible on the photo's border).



Figure 5: Pic-nic time for an Emirati family. A line of trees separate them from a family of Indians.

The second case is far more difficult to grasp and equally demanding to document (after its conception). It is the correlation of each public space (and its uses) with the immediate urban surroundings, in terms of the urban/architectural morphologies. Both formal and informal public spaces culturally contrast their urban landscape in various ways: The void but informally active plot with the post-modernist, curtain-wall, mid-rise building. Or the surprisingly successful suburban parks against the increased privacy of the already provoking “western villa” (Kyriazis, 2018).



Figure 6: Fishermen at an empty plot next to some of the most luxurious residential towers in Reem island, Abu Dhabi.



Figure 7: A local center for retail and informal activities as the extension of its vital space.



Figure 8: One of the formal parks at Khalifa A suburb. The western villa morphology and the plot walls contrast this simple but beautifully designed park. The privacy rules highly shape the urbanscape and the pedestrian flows within the park.

While the first case is more direct and random, discretely photographing it was difficult. In contrast to that one, the second case was documented through a directed selection of a vantage point for the time-lapse photographic session to take place.

4. The third clash

Quotidian urbanism has been studied thoroughly in many cities for the last decades, following the influence of Jane Jacobs, William Whyte, Kevin Lynch, Jan Gehl and others. Middle Eastern cities were also examined, as their pre-modern, organic urbanity highlights the importance of randomness and spontaneity (Elsheshtawy, 2011, Egypt Ministry of Culture, 2018, Alawadi, 2019). However, this meticulous study of Abu Dhabi is critical, as the role of informality is tested – and eventually becomes essential – against a condition of overmanagement and overregulation. Informality is not theofied, but it becomes an indicator of urban health, in terms of social cohesion, urban planning, public space design and management.



Figure 9:The hilly landscaping does not discourage people with disabilities from enjoying the view to the Corniche. The lack of provision from the designer is replenished by the help of family and friends.

Informality can be generated at any given moment, even within the most formal and well-arranged environments. While many people believe it could be an act of disobedience to rules, others could argue that such rules go beyond common sense. While people think this highlights lack of education and civilized manners, others could argue for small, personal scale revolutions that add character. Informal behavior indicates problematic areas with potential security issues and outlaw incidents. However this doesn't necessarily link informality to criminal activities. It highlights lacks or misuse of urban furniture as well as insufficient or unsuccessful design (or construction or even maintenance). It highlights the absence of public spaces in general or their program flexibility. It also expands to other disciplines, i.e. the use of automobiles as an integral part of modernized lifestyles. Cars are everywhere. They are the extension of the drivers' personalities and the families' vital space. It is often that cars usage has been equally informal to pedestrian behavior.



Figure 10: Barbequeing at the Corniche Family park is prohibited according to official signage. However, it remains one of the most popular activities for families from all ethnic backgrounds.



Figure 11: On Friday mornings, all suburban parks are empty of people, with the exception of Municipality workers that use the park furniture for getting some rest.



Figure 12: Canteens dominate this open area at the suburb of Shamkha. Emiratis drive between the canteens to collect their take-away order and return home: At the same time, socializing still takes place amongst such places.

On the other side, Informality underlines the importance of randomness and spontaneity as integral properties of socializing processes. It alleviates feelings of urban loneliness (especially in a city where ex-patriates are the majority) and creates community bonds that could be having ethnic characteristics but rarely limit themselves to them. Furthermore and most importantly, it reminds us of the true values that every public space should possess: openness, democracy, inclusivity.



Figure 13: Fishermen at the luxurious Reem island. They work as bus drivers and spend their free time in that spot, struggling for the catch of the day. They change spots whenever security officers come to check, but they prefer this spot because of its openness.



Figure 14: Fishermen in Maqta Bridge. One of the most beautiful spots in the city, between two gateway bridges and at the pathway of the old passage to the Abu Dhabi island, this spot is favorite to both fishermen and young couples.



Figure 15: Informal volleyball match. A bunch of Indian friends initiated this afternoon rendez-vous. Now it is more than six teams of mostly Indians that share this space in 1 hour slots, renew the carpets and the net every Semester by raising money and play just for fun and for the community.



Figure 16: Two 14 year old friends discover the camera while walking across this informal space at the low/mid-income suburb of Musaffah and try to have some fun with it (while it was still shooting on time-lapse mode). It was a good moment at the end of a hard day, as they were unsuccessfully looking for daily work.



Figure 17: While especially football but also basketball courts are commonly found in most formal parks, a lot of people drive from half the city away to participate at their teams' championship obligations due to the lack of such spaces in the suburbs. Most of the teams are ethnically grouped but there are also cases of impromptu match-ups.

This major and constant clash though between informal urbanism and the urban formulators expands to other forces that also shape the cities (sometimes in a more drastic and impactful way): the very real estate players, developers and private stakeholders. It was both the Researchers' knowledge of Abu Dhabi and project observations that highlighted the fact that public space privatization eradicates (but does not completely annihilate) informal activity, as it advocates for a fully monitored "surgery room" public space with predefined experience provisions.



Figure 18: The kitesurf beach, in Yas island. A nation-wide informal attraction that caught the eye with color, beauty, athleticism and a sense of freedom. Ironically, the spot got utterly fenced by private developers that raised a marine sports center.

5. Conclusion

While some cities have banned informality by law (even if it comes to activities that have no connection to outlaw behavior) it seems that Abu Dhabi authorities are at least aware of the value of informality in constantly safeguarding the openness and social inclusivity of the city and thus informing and updating the planning manuals and standards (to the credit of the research project presented in this paper).

Photography's role in this project extended far beyond the typical documentation requirements. It highlighted human relations and the true impact of informality in the way public spaces function and in their networking within the urban fabric. It revealed the ethnic and social diversity – inclusive of the conflicts generated – that is key to the success of the public space. Furthermore, through time-lapse techniques, it introduced the sense of time, flux and temporality, as perhaps the only underlying constant that governs cities.

The project is still in full process the moment this paper is authored, with minor details remaining to supplement the academic data acquired. However, it is testament to how photography contributes to the emergence of essential urban values even at the most rigid of environments.



Figure 19: Informal Musaffah through the night. 262 photos stacked (in Starstax) to highlight the passage of time through star trails (Orion is visible on the left half) and car-light trails. An interval of 20" between shots led to the fractal look of the clouds. Similar techniques were applied to most of the public spaces assigned.

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