

SELLING THE CREATIVE CITIES BY CULTURAL PLANNING: 'DESTINATION DUBAI' AS A CASE STUDY

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Abstract

Cultural tourism and cultural planning are increasingly becoming significant in the context of globalization and the associated growth in urban and regional place competitiveness. Urban theorists and policy-makers are increasingly more recognizing the importance of integrating culture in urban development models. The main aim of this paper is to provide a critical assessment of Dubai's integration of cultural planning in its approach to tourism development. The paper concludes that rapid modernization and westernization of Dubai define and redefine the approaches for tourism development. 'Destination Dubai' does not reliably represent its cultural past, 'localness' and indigenous qualities. The paper suggests that embracing a more culturally focused tourism plans may socially sustain local community and identity deteriorated by rapid modernization and Westernization in newly developed modern societies as in Dubai.

Cultural planning, cultural tourism, creative cities, Dubai, modernization.

Introduction

The need for new approach for urban planning and city's regeneration within the context of the 21st century that takes away planning from its traditional approach and from the narrow land-use focus, has become essential (Kovacs, 2009; Brand and Gaffikin, 2007).). With the growing interurban and regional competition, cities are increasingly required to highlight or create distinctive and livable communities to attract social and capital investment (Baeker, 2005). Culture, including cultural heritage, has been emphasized by scholars as the key to promoting such marketable places (Baeker, 2002). Recognizing the economic benefits, urban theorists and policy makers are supplementing their traditional preoccupation with land-use issues with both tangible and intangible aspects of culture to promote place (Bianchini & Ghilardi, 2007).

After the work of Florida (2002), notions of creativity and the growing recognition of the role that culture-rich environments can play in attracting the "creative class," have gained momentum. These notions are being used partially in the prevalent adoption of urban cultural planning strategies (Kovacs, 2009). The highly mobile creative people (scientists, engineers, professors, artists, entertainers, high-tech and knowledge-based professions) are seeking more than employment opportunities in their search for "home" (Florida, 2008). The creative class is being drawn to destinations that offer rich lifestyles and opportunities for social and cultural interaction (Florida, 2002). Cultural planning is generally defined as "the identification (mapping) and leveraging of cultural assets to support local community and economic development" (Kovacs, 2009,p.1).

Dubai has recognized the significance of culture in urban development models (Stephenson, 2013). Selling Dubai through culture is linked to a certain extent to attempts to build an emotional bonds between the city and the creative class. The recent strategic vision and plans for the UAE nationally (www.vision2021.ae) and locally in Dubai (<http://www.dubaiplan2021.ae/> and the D3 Dubai Design District, suggest that cultural planning is in Dubai has been significantly considered. Dubai Government has declared Dubai as the "City of Happy, Creative & Empowered People"

Methodology

This qualitative research involved examining the cultural planning and cultural tourism initiatives of Dubai. To achieve the research objectives outlined above, multiple research methods were engaged including: the review of the cultural planning literature in North America, Australia, and Europe; the review of the tourism planning and development in Dubai.

For collecting the primary data required for this study, face-to-face interviews with individuals with the Department of Tourism, Commerce, and Marketing (DTCM) were not possible, therefore interview questions were sent through their official email.

Discussion: Dubai As A Case Study

A component of the tourism plan endorsed by UAE's leaders was to appeal to western visitors (Sharples, 2008). According to Stephenson (2013, p. 8), Dubai's tourism industry constructs its tourist routes based on "the production of "ludic" forms of leisure and conventional forms of entertainment". Desert safari activities such as 'camel riding', 'dune bashing' and 'sand boarding' are available outside of the city and are infinitely promoted, sold, and perceived as integral to the Dubai tourism experience. These experiences usually represent ways in which the tourism programs not only are separated from culture, but also possibly weaken the prospects of appreciating local life. Nevertheless, Dubai's distinctive approach to development, yet, its social and physical entanglement with Western culture is certainly evident (Stephenson and Knight, 2010).

According to Stephenson (2013), tourism development in Dubai may result in significant socio-cultural impact as being adjusted to accommodate the tastes of tourists rather than the residents. In doing so, a significant socio-cultural concern is Dubai's perceived lack of cultural consistency, mainly in the absorption of the old into the new. This position is evident through a scarcity of heritage resources and institutions related with the tourism market, in addition to narrow public recognition regarding the ethnic and traditional components of the indigenous society (p.286).

On the other hand, the interview with tourism planners revealed that it is recognized how significant is using cultural resources in Dubai to improve its livability and quality of life and to enable Emiratis feel that they belong to place with a distinctive identity. They noted that this sense of belonging is more related to "the feel of the place" rather than to the development of luxurious cultural amenities. Thus, initiatives have been taken in order to conserve about 40 traditional buildings in Bastakia district and historical buildings. However, many others were ultimately demolished (Elshehtawy, 2010).

Dubai needs to identify and record the tangible cultural resources by roundtable meetings including: tourism planners, consultants, council representatives, arts boards, cultural and heritage groups, and community. The second step would be, linking these cultural resources and products, services and heritage with the creative industries such as media and entertainment, design, architecture and fashion, which will offer great advantages in attracting visitors. Vibrant cultural environment also promotes cultural tourism and local spending, employment, and social cohesion. Dubai may invest more in shaping its regional roots, for example, new building designs and structures reflecting the "Arab eclectic" similar to Atlantis Hotel (Elshehtawy, 2010, p. 146).

According to Stephenson (2013, p. 13), the privatization of social life and the social detachment from tourists may be understood as a way through which the Emiratis adapt to their feelings that their city and their country are often under the international spotlight. However, Emiratis may have recognized that their culture which is related to their life in the desert do signify important meanings and significant social context with which they can stand rapid modernization and cosmopolitanism. Accordingly, if Emiratis decided not to be engaged in the development of any tourism strategy, then this is their right that has to be respected.

From a political perspective, significant cultural buildings and institutions represent a dynamic, modern polity, and reveal or reflect the city's and the country's international position (Jenkins, 2005). Dubai case shows that there is essential for newly developed modern societies, particularly those captivated with making an instant and exceptional appearance on the global stage (Stephenson, 2013), not to lose the opportunities of the critical development of more locally produced cultural products. Dubai has imperative prospective to develop and promote local museums, heritage centers, indigenous sport, local cuisine and festivals.

Within this context, Dubai may develop an idea of merging features of the conservative Islamic lifestyle with the modern tourism industry, which could present new tourism options and spheres (Al-Hamarnah and Steiner, 2004, p. 25). Islamic hotels, for example, debatably have important opportunities for speeded growth, and there have been some examples in the Middle East region that illustrate ways in which Islamic hospitality can be developed. As the "Traditional Village" in Beirut (Mona, 2006). Dubai may make advantage of such successful initiatives and produce "meaningful experiences" of places involving the local community.

While some emirates have already developed cultural initiatives through certain shapes of heritage and museum tourism (Fox et al., 2006), lack of a cultural master plan in which prioritization to the production of cultural heritage forms are defined is resulting in tourist experiences to be socially detached from Dubai's culture and tradition. Dubai has significant potential to develop and promote localized forms of cultural capital. Entertainment and leisure amenities such as large shopping malls, theatres, and urban theme parks are generating greater amounts of consumer spending.

Conclusion

Developing cultural plan for Dubai is essential given that Dubai is now a dynamic global city that competes with other regional and international cities for cultural and economic dominance. This paper provides a critical assessment of Dubai's approach to cultural planning, focusing on its tourism implications. Destination Dubai is building an image based on iconographic prominence, immense novelty and invention and super-modernism.

Dubai the destination is already solidly developed and established and is heading for whatever direction it chooses to head in. Many people across the world including those living in Dubai admire its prosperity. This paper is not attempting to call for a holistic transformation in Dubai approach for tourism development; it just suggests that if Dubai tourism industry recognizes the significance of adopting a cultural approach to a sustainable tourism development, positive outcomes could be accomplished in the long term. Embracing a more culturally focused tourism plans may socially sustain local community and identity deteriorated by rapid modernization and Westernization.

Cultural mapping will help Dubai assesses its community strengths and potential within a framework of cultural development. It establishes an inventory of local culture and defines resources, gaps and needs enabling planners to plan for better, livable, socially just and responsive communities. However, not prioritizing the production of cultural heritage forms of tourism is an overlooked prospect for destination Dubai, as tourists experience are usually socially detached from indigenous culture and tradition. Therefore, this study recommends re-conceptualization of the planning tasks and objectives by adopting a holistic definition of culture that focuses on more than just cultural production and consumption, or cultural tourism. This definition should enhance the idea that culture should be used in urban planning for its value rather than solely its economic benefits.

Thus, defining of culture should be based on arts activities, narratives of the city of Dubai, and built and natural heritage. Cultural values and arts to be promoted when branding the city through cultural planning should be negotiated between cultural experts and practitioners with the engagement of the public or community, rather than defined or arranged by arts producers, organizations and governmental authorities alone.

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