

## **Green City Branding. Sustainability or Mere Pretence?**

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### **Abstract**

*Competitiveness among cities has turned in the recent decades into a major phenomenon, as a consequence of globalization. Rivalry in attracting tourists, investments or potential residents is no longer confined to the local or national context, but becomes a global issue. As a result, new branding programmes emerge, designed to communicate to local and foreign audiences the personality and the image of the city as an attractive and dynamic place, offering economic, cultural and personal opportunities. A recent trend in city branding is green development, and cities embracing this vision appear to the public as clean, pleasant places, focused on a sustainable development. While some cities prove an authentic interest towards sustainability, others use it as a marketing tool, in order to enhance their image and appear more responsible. Traditionally, branding programs have strongly relied on advertising, public relations and events, but lately, architecture and urbanism have come to represent important marketing tools. A recent example of a succesful branding programme, based on iconic architecture and massive infrastructure projects, is Dubai. The town has evolved in the last thirty years from a small community to a global city. Faced with the economic and environmental consequences of the rapid growth, local authorities have developed a plan of actions meant to build a green economy and ensure a sustainable development. By analising some of the green aspects of the city branding, this paper aims to determine whether they represent an authentic attempt towards sustainability or a mere pretence.*

### **Rezumat**

*Competiția dintre orașe a devenit în ultimele decenii un fenomen de amploare, ca expresie a globalizării. Concurența pentru atragerea turiștilor, a investițiilor sau a unor noi rezidenți, nu se mai desfășoară la nivel local sau statal, ci depășește granițele naționale pentru o raportare regională sau continentală. Programele de branding, desfășurate în acest context, urmăresc să comunice publicului local și celui extern personalitatea și valorile orașului și să îl prezinte ca un loc dinamic, atractiv, în plină ascensiune și oferind numeroase oportunități economice, culturale și de dezvoltare personală. O tendință recentă în brandingul de oraș este orientarea verde, iar orașele care îmbrățișează această viziune se prezintă publicului ca locuri curate, verzi, orientate spre o dezvoltare sustenabilă. În timp ce unele orașe deovedesc un interes autentic pentru sustenabilitate, pentru altele este doar un program de marketing, bazat pe convingerea că o asemenea imagine este avantajoasă. Un mijloc important prin care se realizează programele de branding pe lângă publicitate, PR și evenimente este arhitectura. Un exemplu recent de program de branding de succes este cel din Dubai, un oraș care a evoluat în ultimii treizeci de ani de la o comunitate mică la un oraș global, bazându-se pe arhitectură iconică și pe mari proiecte de*

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*infrastructură. Dezvoltarea sa rapidă a produs consecințe importante asupra mediului, iar autoritățile au demarat un plan de acțiuni menite să conducă la o economie verde și la o dezvoltare sustenabilă. Lucrarea de față urmărește ca prin analiza programului de branding verde să determine dacă acest demers reprezintă o orientare autentică spre sustenabilitate sau un simplu exercițiu de imagine.*

**Keywords:** city branding, iconic architecture, sustainability, green, Dubai

## 1. Introduction

Branding programs have developed since the end of the nineteenth century in the form of several activities through which corporations have projected and planned their name and identity in order to build or maintain their reputation [1]. From this type of communication specific to trading or commercial activities, branding spread in all social spheres, becoming a competitive way for the transmission of identity and values of public and private institutions, persons or places.

Since the 1980s, due to globalization and the growing competition between places, cities have adopted branding strategies to increase their visibility and attract economic benefits. Postindustrial cities who want to escape the specter of decline seek to reinvent themselves as service centers and thus branding programs help them attract the attention of tourists or investors. Newer cities that are booming wish to emphasize their dynamic character and present themselves as places with many economic, social or cultural opportunities. Regardless of their stage of development, cities recognize the importance of communication and seek to optimally project their identity [2].

Urban branding strategies result from a process of selection and negotiation of meaningful local social, cultural, economic or historical aspects. Private and public institutions deliberately manipulate local memory in order to legitimize their actions and their vision for future development [3]. The tools, most frequently used in urban branding are: personality branding – the association of the city image with a local famous figure, cultural and sporting events that create temporary high visibility and architecture, which through its iconic character can become a great ambassador of the city [4]. This is the context in which we will organize our discussion of Dubai, aiming to highlight the evolution of its urban branding strategy and its metamorphosis towards sustainability.

## 2. Dubai City branding

Dubai is one of seven emirates that make up the United Arab Emirates. The modern history of the settlement begins in 1833, when 800 members of the Bani Yas tribe, led by the Maktoum family settled in the present-day city. The city has grown spectacularly into an important commercial center and became an important port and a significant perling centre. The first large infrastructure works started in 1950 under the leadership of Sheikh Rashid bin Saeed Al Maktoum, who dredged the natural harbor of the town, initiated the construction of the first airport and the modern road network. After the discovery of oil in 1966, the new source of income was used to further develop the city's infrastructure. Starting from the idea that oil resources are limited, the ruling family launched extensive measures to modernize the city and to diversify the economy. Essential facilities were built for the local population, hospitals, schools, as well as a modern communication networks. The airport was enlarged, two new ports were built, as well as a free zone to attract commercial activities. Since 1971, Dubai and Abu Dhabi, along with five other emirates, formed

the UAE confederation which, within several decades, became one of the richest countries in the world, by exploiting oil resources [5].

Through a series of visionary policies the ruling family of Dubai, whose oil resources are low compared to other states, has started an unprecedented economic and physical development, transforming the city into a major international tourist and business destination. During the 1980s and the 1990s a series of economic incentives were implemented, designed to attract international companies. At the same time, numerous investments in tourism, trade, real estate, aviation, logistics, industry and services have turned the city into a modern metropolis [6]. Dubai markets itself today both as a luxury tourist destination, as well as an important business centre, and in order to achieve this, the authorities have taken actions in all three directions: personality branding, events and architecture.

The most important local personality is HH Sheikh Mohammad bin Rashid Al Maktoum, who holds the positions of Vice-President and Prime Minister of UAE, and is the ruler of Dubai. Nicknamed by the press the “CEO of Dubai” the sheikh is the most important decision factor in the emirate and all important policies bear his footprint. He and the royal family represent major investors in the development projects and this provides confidence to their partners also ensuring the rapid implementation of the projects [7]. He is also the patron of numerous cultural and sporting events, thus enhancing their prestige and credibility.

The city of Dubai organizes a series of cultural, sporting and commercial events, designed to attract both the locals and the tourists. One of the largest events is Dubai Shopping Festival, held annually, in winter, throughout a whole month. The festival was launched in 1996 in order to encourage local trade and later expanded to comprise in addition to sales, contests, prizes and entertainment. Organized since 1998 as a summer attraction, Dubai Summer Surprises is another annual festival that takes place during a period of 45 days and is particularly addressed to families. Its events include concerts, meetings with celebrities, fashion, shopping, and discounts on various products and services. In addition to these large commercial and cultural events, Dubai organizes a series of specialized festivals in various areas from film, Dubai International Film Festival, sport - golf tournament Dubai Desert Classic, horse racing Dubai World Cup, Dubai Duty Free Tennis Championship, or Dubai Rugby Sevens - music, Dubai International Jazz Festival, cookery, Food Festival, or aviation, Dubai Airshow.

Besides these local festivals and events, the city has chosen to promote itself through mega events as well, and thus bided for the staging of World Expo 2020. Its candidacy was accepted in 2013, and so Dubai became the first city in the Middle East to host such an event. The exhibition will be organized under the theme *Connecting Minds, Creating the Future* and it is estimated that it will attract between October 2020 and April 2021 a total of 25 million tourists and will catalyze the implementation of a vision of sustainable development in the coming decades [8].

Despite the diversity and large number of events aimed at promoting Dubai as an attractive destination throughout the year, architecture remains the most important urban branding direction. The city has developed rapidly during the last three decades through vast urban planning and architecture projects. In an impressive pace, the small commercial and fishing village turned almost overnight into a great modern metropolis that blends traditional Arabic heritage with the innovation of the Western world [9].

From the very beginning, the city's development plan aimed to attract new economic activities in the area, therefore, the urban actions have been largely motivated by the needs of these new

activities. Foreign employees working in Dubai and tourists are the main audience of these large urban projects and the main engine of local development. Of the total number of inhabitants, the locals represent less than 10%, while the remaining population consists of workers coming from SE Asian countries and Western expatriates. Because of this, it is easy to understand how the local image came to resemble the western world, being built with foreign expertise and aimed to compete the architectural achievements of Europe and North America.

The first major projects started in 1960 when the city was in a primitive stage lacking paved roads, utility networks or water supply. The first master plan was developed by British architect John Harris and outlined a road network and identified areas for further development [10]. Later, with the discovery of oil and the formation of the UAE in the early 1970s, the plan was extended, with a proposed functional zoning, a new center and new connections within the city: a tunnel under the creek, bridges and roads. In the 1980s the city developed along the main artery, the Sheikh Zayed road and a new financial and commercial center was created. This expansion along the major axis parallel to the shore led to a fragmented development, where small neighborhoods and centres alternate with big empty spaces [10].



Figure 1. Palm Islands, Dubai



## Figure 2. Dubai Marina

Besides these large urban expansion projects a few mega projects have transformed the original topography and created spectacular new developments on water or in its proximity. One of the most popular projects is the Jumeirah Palm artificial island, built close to the shore, to increase the length of the waterfront. The project was carried out between 2001 and 2007 by the local company Nakheel, by creating an artificial relief in the form of a palm leaf to shelter hotels and luxury villas. Its construction used enormous amounts of rock and sand dredged from the seabed, and was condemned for affecting marine currents and sealife in the area. Despite these criticisms, the project has enjoyed great success and boosted new similar projects, bigger palm islands, Jebel Ali and Deira and a group of islands in the shape of the world, the World Islands. Palm Jebel Ali and the World Islands are partially developed, while Palm Deira Project was stopped, Fig.1.

The shore close to Palm Jumeirah is the site of another extremely ambitious mega project, the Dubai Marina, Fig.2. The project which comprises several quays, pedestrian walkways, hotels, residential and commercial facilities is centered on an artificial 3 km canal, which runs parallel to the shore. Its construction started in 2003 and it is estimated that upon completion, it will become the largest man-made marina in the world, capable of hosting in the nearby buildings about 120,000 people [11].Dubai's Architecture was characterized in recent years by monumental buildings, meant to represent the city as a dynamic, forward-looking, modern metropolis. The ambitions of the local elite were an extraordinary opportunity for the architects to put their ideas into practice, free from the aesthetic and political constraints of the Western world [12]. Famous architectural brands have materialized the local ideals through iconic building, designed to present the world Dubai's new progressive direction. Before the economic crisis of 2008 new projects were announced at a dizzying pace, each trying to overcome the one before. This approach has proved to be a shallow marketing maneuver, divorced from the local social and cultural reality, which is why many of these ideas were abandoned [10]. The iconic constructions and the superlative character of the projects (the biggest mall, the highest building, the longest driverless metro) turned the city into a laboratory of architectural experiments, watched with interest by the whole world.

One of the first tall buildings in Dubai, dating back to 1978, is the 39-storey tower of the World Trade Center. The construction was carried along Sheikh Zayed artery, in an area which was at the time on the outskirts of the town. Meanwhile, the complex was expanded with several exhibition halls, a conference center and residential buildings.

Another new construction, designed to become a symbol of Dubai, is Burj Al Arab hotel, inaugurated in 1999. The hotel was built on an artificial island, 280 meters from the shore and was designed by architect Tom Wright. Other emblematic buildings of the city are the twin Emirates Towers, built in 2000 by NORR Architects, the Park Towers, designed by Gensler (2011-2012), The Index, designed by Foster & Partners and completed in 2011, Cayan (Infinity) Tower designed by SOM and inaugurated in 2013, and Burj Khalifa designed by Adrian Smith from SOM.



Figure 3. Dubai skyline, Burj Khalifa

Burj Khalifa, Fig. 3, was inaugurated in 2010 and is currently the tallest building in the world and an iconic image of the city, symbolic for the emirate's status as a regional power. Inspired by European and American city centers, the surrounding area of the building was organized around a large water basin, with promenades, residential and commercial building overlooking the blue water. The new center of the city, marked by the highest building in the world is also the home of the largest mall. Dubai Mall opened in 2009 and its total area makes it the largest in the world. The complex includes shops and restaurants as well as many attractions, cinemas, theme parks, an Aquarium and Underwater Zoo, and an indoor ice rink. Mall of the Emirates is another large shopping complex in the city with a rich supply of shops and entertainment. One of its special attractions is Ski Dubai, Fig.4, an indoor ski slope offering similar conditions of temperature and facilities to natural mountain slopes.



Figure 4. Ski Dubai

Through all these investments Dubai has managed to communicate to the world that it is a modern city, able to compete with any world metropolis. Its success was made possible by the entrepreneurial vision of the ruling family, by a short chain from decision to the implementation of projects, through an integrated development that built infrastructure for the benefit of all sectors, through public-private partnerships and by focusing on superlative iconic architecture [7].

### **3. Environmental issues and the shift towards green city branding**

However, behind this spectacular urban development lies a series of problems that have urged local leaders to address a new strategy. The rapid pace of city development led to a massive increase in energy needs. Due to the desert climate, the buildings need cooling most of the time, which determines high energy consumption. In addition, the necessary drinking water is provided by desalination of sea water, a process that also requires energy. The main source for the production of electricity is gas imported from Qatar, and high fuel consumption causes high levels of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, Dubai contributing 25% of total emissions in the UAE. The main areas that contribute to the increasing of carbon emissions are electricity and water (35%), transportation (26%), industries (21%), waste (12%), oil and gas (6%). The largest consumer of water and energy is the commercial sector with 45%, followed by the residential sector 29%, government facilities 13% and industrial sector 13% [13]. The built environment is the largest consumer of energy and water in Dubai, with 75% of the total electricity and 86% of local water consumption [14]. Of the total quantity of energy consumed by buildings, 70% is used for cooling, 18% for lighting, and the rest for the functioning of different equipments and appliances [15].

Acknowledging the economic and environmental impact of this rapid growth, the authorities took action to guide the economy in a sustainable direction. Starting from the definition of the green economy, given by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) that states that the green economy is "one that results in improved human well-being and social equity, while significantly reducing environmental risks and ecological scarcities [...] one which is low carbon, resource efficient and socially inclusive "[16], the authorities acted in two directions. The first direction aims to introduce regulations to reduce the energy demand, to diversify energy sources, reduce carbon emissions while constructing green buildings with minimal environmental impact, and preserving biodiversity and the ecosystem. A second direction aimed at raising public awareness on the need for sustainable consumption and behavior is achieved through communication and events.

The first steps towards a more responsible conduct in the construction field were taken in 2003 when the municipality started to study the use of insulating materials for the thermal insulation of buildings and the reduction of energy demand. In 2008 after numerous laboratory tests and official reports, the local authorities examined the possibility of applying the concept of green building in stages. In the first phase they studied the possibility to implement easy solutions with low costs and high benefits. In the second phase, between 2011 and 2013 requirements for sustainable construction were included in a document entitled Dubai Green Building Regulations, which became mandatory for all government buildings. In the third phase, from 2014 this code became mandatory for all buildings constructed in the city. [14]

Dubai Green Building Regulations are a set of rules and specifications for buildings, based on LEED, BREEAM, and Pearl Rating Systems. The document is organized into three major sections: Ecology and Planning, Building Vitality and Resource Effectiveness [17]. In addition to these legislative measures aimed to improve the quality of the built environment, the commitment towards sustainability has been illustrated by several official documents. In 2012 Sheikh

Mohammad bin Rashid Al Maktoum Announced the launch of a long-term national initiative to build a green economy in the UAE under the slogan "A Green Economy for Sustainable Development". In 2014 the directions for a sustainable development were highlighted once more in the "Dubai Plan 2021," which covers six major areas of action: The People: "City of Happy, Creative & Empowered People", The Society: "An Inclusive & Cohesive Society", The Experience: "The Preferred Place to Live, Work and Visit", The Place: "A Smart & Sustainable City", The Economy: "A Pivotal Hub in the Global Economy", The Government: "A Pioneering and Excellent Government"[18].

Based on local issues and the need to ensure a sustainable development of the city, the Dubai authorities want to be an example of sustainable development in the region and aim to become "the green economy capital of the world" [19]. To support this initiative, they have established a number of institutions to ensure coherent implementation of the necessary measures and started to transparently communicate its goals, in several publications, including State of Energy Report Dubai 2014 and State of Green Economy Report 2015. Both documents contain lines of action and measures for building a green economy. In addition, Dubai also hosted in 2014 and 2015 an important international event on economic sustainability The World Green Economy Summit. By organizing this annual event under the slogan "Global Partnerships for a Sustainable Future", Dubai hopes to become one of the key factors in promoting global long-term sustainable development and to turn into reality its vision to become the "Capital of the Green Economy".

Hosting the World Expo 2020 can therefore be seen as an attempt to materialize the principles of its new guidelines and to raise global awareness for the need of sustainable actions. Based on the experience of cities and countries that have recently hosted such mega events, Aichi (Expo 2005), South Africa (FIFA World Cup 2010), Shanghai (World Expo 2010), London (Summer Olympics 2012) , Milan (World Expo 2015) the exhibition in Dubai, with the three sub themes "Mobility, Sustainability and Opportunity", is intended as an example of sustainable design and also a starting point for the future development of the city, aiming to achieve superlative attributes in sustainability. The event is conceived as a very important tool for the city brand and its new orientation and also as a catalyst for green future developments.

#### **4. Conclusions**

Under the visionary leadership of its rulers, Dubai has developed in recent decades, becoming one of the most modern cities in the world. The effects of rapid urbanization have highlighted environmental issues and a huge use of energy. In this context the authorities have started a green branding program designed to address the negative effects of the recent development and ensure a sustainable economy. Inspired by the bold actions that helped them build the over-night metropolis, local leaders want Dubai to become an example of sustainability not only in the region but also globally. This is illustrated by concrete legislative actions, events and partnerships with specialized international fora.

While all these actions represent a credible evidence of Dubai's desire to ensure a sustainable legacy to future generations, questions remain about the rhythm of development and the beneficiaries of these actions. The authorities want to keep the pace of development while meeting the proposed standards to reduce energy consumption and use of new renewable sources. But the emirate has a limited area and there must be a balance between urban and natural space. Also, residents represent a small part of the population, and these actions are not a response to their needs, but in fact address a much larger audience, which is mobile and has a temporary presence in the area. Eventually these

development actions prove too large for the scale of the local population, the city and the country which must be taken into account as the main prerequisites for any activity of future development.

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