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Place Identity in the Age of Disruption: Curating Place through the Case Study of UAE Memorial

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ABSTRACT

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PLACE IDENTITY IN THE AGE OF DISRUPTION: CURATING PLACE THROUGH THE CASE STUDY OF UAE MEMORIAL

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Abstract

As cities turn to their heritage and culture to conceptualize and market an authentic identity in a highly competitive global marketplace, the power of art to create new icons and shiny new attractions become economic priorities. Globalization of cities and unprecedented mass socio-cultural shifts provoke powerful discourse on how creative works transform urban space and impact on the unity of its inhabitants. Presented through the case study of a new memorial for United Arab Emirates, Wahat Al Karama, the Oasis of Dignity treads a fine balance between place destination and image making. Located in Abu Dhabi, where the traditional culture is firmly rooted in Arabia's Islamic traditions, and home to a massive population of expat workers now comprising nearly 85% of the inhabitants, discourse on the theories of brand marketing and place making to connect, catalyze and convey disparate global-local dialectical relationships are explored.

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1. Introduction

Creating a unique identity is equal to standing out from the crowd. In the super charged transformation of cities, having a distinct and marketable identity is paramount. The commissioning of public art in the late 20th and early 21st Centuries to contribute to place identity has seen a change in the role of art. Directed by creative city and culture led policies to “develop senses of identity, to develop sense of place, contribute to the civic identity, address community needs, tackle social exclusion, possess educational value, promote social change, and encourage economic developments” [19], public art is more than a shiny new ornament for decoration.

Presenting a practice based case study of the recently unveiled new memorial in Abu

Dhabi, Wahat Al Karama, *The Oasis of Dignity*, treads a delicate balance between traditional memorial, artist expression and place destination. Its role is far more complex than any monument may suggest. From nomadic Bedouin to modern metropolis, Abu Dhabi was a small fishing and pearling village until the influx of petrodollars. Its evolution from desert oasis to city of the future is fueled by visionary leadership as a nation building a place of contrasts, where Sheiks take selfies and Westerners smoke shisha. Abu Dhabi, where the traditional culture is firmly rooted in Arabia's Islamic traditions is also home to a massive population of expat workers now comprising nearly 85% of the inhabitants.

Curating place redolent with memories, traditions and religiosity juxtaposed with a

global dialogue of icon attraction and brand marketing offers complex, and at times conflicting messages. Conscious of a rising Islamophobia in the West, how can this memorial promise unity and connection, tolerance and respect, to a disparate viewer when it's very subject provokes binary reactions?

Acknowledging further limitations of time and place, socio-cultural and geo-economic politics, the pivotal role of collaborative placemaking posits the question of city identity within the global framework of disruption.

2. Literature Review

"Public art is the child of the postmodern condition" states Felix Duque in his article on *Public Art and making of urban space* [8] It is indeed often one of the more contentious and debated visual insertions into a public space. The history of public art meanders from art as monument celebrating the great and powerful, to art that tells the story of the place. Installed in the public realm, public art has moved from the object that could be situated anywhere, to art that is designed specifically for, and about, the site. Site specific art derives its meaning from the history, environment and people that live, work and visit there.[1,3] In this way, it extracts the vernacular and presents it back to the population.[4,15,10,18] Iconic artworks, bustling laneways and interactive installations feature heavily in tourism to market a place "where engagement "with space gives it meaning as a 'place', at least to the extent of being different from other places"[4]

The consumption of place as a commodity, through tourism or through the exchange of goods and services on a global scale, poses the vexing bind of conserving the local uniqueness whilst becoming part of a broader world agenda - without producing a

bland homogenized sameness [1,16]. In this aesthetic consideration, art must offer more than the object. It must be part of the experience and open up the critical discursive practices in the communicative relationship between people in the public realm [11, 9]

This research, interested in the relationship between public art and the identity of cities, is presented through two intertwined theoretical frameworks. The first is place making, defined as the multifaceted, interdisciplinary approach, to the planning, design and management of places within the public realm to bring the local vernacular into the play of the senses [3,14,22]. The second is city marketing through imagery, defined as the entrepreneurial marketing of a place for consumption to engender a place with an identity [2,12,13,20,22]

The memorial, historically a monumental singular structure, has metamorphosed and inserted itself into the urban fabric of key civic locations. [6]Integrated and empowering, the memorial is now a complex blend of personal artistic expression, design resolution, event commemoration and nationalistic statement packaged into an icon attraction for visiting tourists and dignitaries. "National remembrance often seeks to collectivise national memories into an 'imagined' community so that the portrayal of a 'national past' in monuments and memorials has become synonymous with the symbolic transmission of national identity"[7].

Memorials historically commemorate the cessation or ending of significant events in a time and place. However, the UAE Memorial, commemorating loss of life since Independence in 1971 includes the current conflict in Yemen. This evolving

open-ended dialogue, as additional names are added each year, resists becoming a relic of the past as its evolving future is reframed. The creation of new memorial in the UAE seeks to build a new place identity through constructed new experiences. Drawing together what is experienced physically and intellectually, the form and structure must speak to a broad collective, conceptually speaking to the diverse and broad audience of the rapid urbanization of the UAE.

Resplendent with a multiplicity of meanings and readings, sparking curiosity, sharing, participating and communing with others, new histories are overwritten with time.

3. Research Methods

Mixed method qualitative enquiry within forensic reflective practice in action posits the literate review, policy of place (Abu Dhabi) and select interviews with artist, curator and client as a multifaceted approach to analyzing empirical data. Situated within the context and culture of the inquiry, qualitative research is a “complex, interconnected family of terms, concepts, and assumptions” [5]. Research from different angles to stitch together the study weaves the various methods of into an understanding of the subject.

4. Analysis & Results

The strength of qualitative inquiry lies within “its inductive approach, its focus on specific situations or people, and its emphasis on words rather than numbers”[17]. This type of inquiry seeks to understand the cause, the why of the event, people and context, the process by which something occurs. The results of this inquiry purport to the success of collaborative placemaking within brand management. Winning the American Architecture Prize for Cultural Buildings in 2017, and a finalist in the World

Architecture Festival, is further validated with positive local and international media challenging the notion of global sameness and the production of the vernacular form.

5. Discussion & Conclusion

This practice-led, action-research discusses the complex urban context, the changing role of memorials and the collaboration of client, curator, artist, and architect to create a new urban identity in a highly contested urban fabric.

Within the current discourse on place making and the focus on experiences to attract people, public art is employed as a tool to activate a place, and inspire and mobilise a public to engage. Place making over time requires urban anchors such as public art to build these experiences. Brand marketing looks at how it can create experience as something that can be extracted and presented back to the public as a message. Research on brand marketing highlights the tactic of signature structures to building a marketable city brand through both physical and virtual experience. Here the power of the image and the use of technology to share, search and connect to a broader audience is a pragmatic tool for brand identity.

As a tapestry of interwoven meanings, symbols, emotions, memories and narratives, Wahat Al Karama, The Oasis of Dignity, is ultimately the creation of a new urban place with an authentic, distinct place identity. As a civic landmark, it successfully positions unity as a key principle through the confluence of the grand monument, the intimate experience and the complex context it draws from.

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