CITYSCAPE
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architecture

THE FUTURE OF
UAE ARCHITECTURE

There is no doubt, the regional architecture
industry has developed tremendously over
the past decade. We wanted to know what the
greatest achievements of the industry are to
date and how past lessons shape the future
development of architecture in the UAE.

MOBILITY, CONNECTIVITY AND ACCESSIBILITY

Sumaya Dabbagh shares her view on the necessity of employing 'emotionally intelligent architecture' to create a sense of place that connects people to the built environment, creates a feeling of community and ultimately, a sense of identity

About the author

Sumaya Dabbagh is a Saudi Architect educated in the UK with more than 25 years of experience. In 2008, she founded Dabbagh Architects, a privately held architectural design firm, recognised regionally for its contemporary design and quality-driven service. In 2015, Dabbagh became the Honorary Chair of the Steering Committee for the RIBA Gulf Chapter. She has served in the RIBA Gulf chapter since its inception in 2009.

It is very encouraging to see that more and more developments in Dubai are becoming aware of the need to create public spaces for the city. Developers are becoming discerning to the economic benefits of public spaces for people to interact, socialise, consume and shop. This is a sign of maturity and it begins to address the important relationships between people and buildings.

Alas, we often find that these are isolated developments or "islands" that are surrounded by roads, bridges or wasteland that offer little relationship to their neighbouring development, creating a fragmented city.

The themes of the Dubai Expo 2020 of "Mobility, Connectivity and Accessibility," and "A City for Everyone" Campaign which aims at turning Dubai into a disability-friendly city by the same year, are very relevant themes to the city. They have the potential of addressing the neglected junctions in our urban landscape. They are an invitation for the city to start to stitch together these fragments and allow for a smoother transition from one development to the next.

THE DIGITAL AGE

These 2020 themes are particularly pertinent to the city of Dubai as it begins to embrace the Digital Age. An age that promises smart cities, smart homes and smart cars. A premise of a complete transformation of the way we live and interact with our physical surroundings. Where our buildings and cities are made up of intelligent systems that can store information about our habits, likes and dislikes and offer us what we want, when we want it, with minimal effort and telepathic speed. This "futuristic" movie image is here with us now and is already becoming part of our day to day reality.

Technology throughout the ages has transformed the way we live in relation to the built environment. The development of building systems such as modern hygiene and plumbing, electricity and air-conditioning to highly sophisticated Building Management Systems (BMS) have greatly impacted our health, comfort and well-being. Each decade offered further advances in technology that free-up more of our time and energy than the preceding one.

If we take the analogy of the human body and its functions and compare it to a building, then if these services represent the lungs and guts of the building, then BMS would represent the nervous system. This, with its exceedingly sophisticated and intelligent control and data centre, being "the brain" of the building.

Not only the functionality of our buildings is evolving and replicating a living being, but also its forms. Now, technology is allowing us to construct dynamic organic forms that imitate living organisms.

These advances only represent the physical reality of objects, gadgets and systems. All of which have evolved at an exponentially fast rate in recent years. Yet, our primal need to belong and connect to our surroundings has not changed over the centuries. Similarly, throughout the ages, architecture had sought to respond to these primal needs by creating a sense of place, and by creating a sense of belonging.

EMOTIONALLY INTELLIGENT ARCHITECTURE

What we need, therefore, is not just smart or intelligent buildings and cities, we also need "emotionally intelligent" architecture. One that allows and enhances our human interactions to help build sustainable communities.

Creating sustainable cities must start with a sense of place. We need to recognise the interdependency between us and our cities, each other and our planet.

Our relationships with our cities allow us to develop a sense of belonging as well as an identity, without which we can feel alienation

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and separation and a lack of meaning to our lives.

The art of transforming "space" into "place" is the first step towards creating a feeling of belonging and a sense of identity and community.

Belonging happens where there is dialogue between the physical "space" and the emotional "place." Where the built structures, roads and objects are related to people and experiences. It is cultivated in the relationship between objects and subjects. This is when a street can become "our street," when a district becomes "our neighbourhood." These relationships like anything else can be positive or negative. They can create a feeling of belonging or alienation, connection or separation, respect or neglect.

This type of conversation requires presence. We can be fully present when all our senses are engaged. Where the materiality of the spaces we inhabit, their textures, sounds and smells stimulate our senses. These produce powerful triggers for our emotions. This is where an innate object, for example, a door or a threshold, can conjure up feelings of welcome or hostility, hesitation or anticipation.

These concepts have been explored extensively through the ages by scholars, philosophers and poets. Most architects are familiar with the well-known writings of Christopher Alexander's A *Pattern Language*, or Gaston Bachlard's *The Poetic of Space* as well as perhaps the current day poet David Whyte's *The House of Belonging*. They explore the complex relationship between ourselves and our surroundings both natural and built.

ADDRESSING THE FRAGMENTS

The Expo 2020 themes of connectivity, mobility and accessibility are directly related to the city's fabric and how it can reinstate the sense of place to our neighbourhoods. Architectural interventions can create a dialogue between people and buildings. On a practical level, architecture can achieve this connection through an understanding of the importance of context, scale and memory.

Developments need to understand, through careful study and research, where they are historically, where they are geographically and who they are serving culturally. They need to explore the story of what had existed before and allow it to evolve through sensitive design.

Dubai needs an architecture that caters to the human scale and human interactions. One that allows dialogue between building and street, one that addresses the spaces in between buildings that are often neglected and are human-unfriendly. An architecture that respects memory but not in nostalgic stylized references but one that creates a place for memory, of both passing of time and stillness. One that allows for adaptability and continuity.

The fragments of our city are the areas that need to be sensitively addressed through the upcoming 2020 themes. For true sustainability is not only about lowering fossil fuel consumption or carbon emission, it is about sustainability of communities, cultures and allowing identity to evolve with time and place.

Technology allows us to have buildings that can overcome gravity with feats of engineering so that they can soar into the sky. Buildings can be "smart" and "intelligent" and enhance our physical lives. However, what they must also strive to achieve is this emotional intelligence that can impact us at a much deeper level.

Architecture gives us the opportunity to mediate between technology and people. Its main and most fundamental purpose is a means to define ourselves, and a means to evolve culturally.

Architecture and the public realm set the scene for the collective acts that forge community. They give form to our experiences that create meaning. They shape our identity and allow for, not only the technological evolution but also the cultural evolution of our civilization.