

"Use of urban interventions [place-practice] as a discourse for consolidating memory"

A case study of Sharjah cricket playgrounds

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Abstract

This research discusses how expatriates living in Sharjah intervene with the urban landscape through practices that allow them to take possession of that place-space and use it as a discourse to consolidate their identity. A thorough documentation of the urban sprawl of one of the major arteries of Sharjah was used as a means to collect imagery that portrays the human appreciation of the environment. A design-urban intervention was used as a discursive instrument to entitle us to make visible (and thus tangible) the transition from a simple sign of cultural identity into a memory for a collective society.

Keywords: Urban Intervention; Practice; Place; Rituals; Memory

Introduction

"El olvido está lleno de memoria vamos a destaparlo a revelarlo sin mezquindades ni pudores tibios vamos a compartir los sueños con los sueños del prójimo más próximo y más niño" (Benedetti, 1995)

This work aims to use urban interventions as a discursive instrument to make invisible practices into visible signs of cultural identity for people living in or transiting the Emirate of Sharjah. This visual discourse is relevant, as it does not only document the urban landscape, but it also explores the rituals and practices undertaken in a specific space (University Road). In opinion of Pink (2012), "living life and making interventions are not detached from what and who we are - they are processes we are part of" (p.25). Thus, practices and places are an intrinsic part of the collective memory of the people that transit these areas.

This research work examines the multicultural variety and identity in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) using urban spaces that reflect the distinct way of life of groups of people. It is recognized that citizens can transform mute and motionless cities or urban spaces into alternative spaces with significance. Researchers (Auge, 1995; La Varra, 2003; Solá-Morales, 1996) consider that communities can create alternative spaces that are self-regulated, which are more natural and less imposing. Hence, the features that characterize these spaces are related to the practices undertaken, the temporary nature of activities, and the determined time.

The collective memory of participants and observers emerge from the place-practice intervention, as an understanding of how minds work together in society and how their operations are structured by social agreements. Durkheim (1997) and Halbwachs (1950) recognize that conforming group memberships are essential for providing materials for memory and for prodding individuals into recalling particular events and into forgetting others. What individuals remember is determined by their group membership and their own perception.

This work contains six main sections that discuss theory and praxis relevant to the urban intervention designed in the urban landscape of University City Road in Sharjah. The first section covers the theoretical underpinning of the project, which discusses the place (Sharjah) and practice (cricket) found in an arterial route of Sharjah; the rituals undertaken by members of a social group; the memory held by these groups; and the visual discourse of the urbanization. The second section describes the research methodology used throughout the project. The third section describes the intervention as a case study and then the fourth section discusses the findings obtained. The fifth section provides conclusions and resources to finally draw lines for future research actions.

Place - Sharjah

In today's world, we are immersed in a material, sensory, and technological environment that affects how we perceive the social environment. Researchers (Casey, 1996; Ingold, 2008; Hirsh, 1995; Hubbardt et al, 2004; Massey, 2005) have been discussing

the notion of space and place, resulting in their being relatively diffused, ill-defined and inchoate concepts. The definition of space-place is abstract because the entities of place change constantly in people's own conceptualization.

For the purpose of this research, we are going to use two concepts of space: *post-it city* (La Varra, 2003) and *terrain vague* (Solá-Morales, 1996). According to La Varra (2003), places are complex and heterogeneous because they are non-codified, temporal, and intensified spaces in where diverse groups of society carry out different, multiple and acceptable behavioral codes. The features that characterize these spaces are related to the practices undertaken within a regulated urban space or blended with them; the temporary nature of activities (ability to leave no trace); and the determined time frame (practices and physical things involved that disappear after a time slot). Solá-Morales (1996) views spaces as places that are reincorporated into the productive logic of transforming them into rebuilt spaces, as there is value in ruin and lack of productivity. Thus, he coined these strange urban spaces as places where society can manifest itself as alternative scopes of freedom to lucrative reality. Under both definitions, place-practice environment, cognition, and behavior occur together and at once, as every perception requires an action and every action requires a perception.

The place researched is a young nation that has emerged as a global city and business gateway. The United Arab Emirates is a cosmopolitan country that has a population of 9.2 million, where 1.4 million are Emirati citizens and 7.8 million expatriates (Labor Migration, 2014). Sharjah is one of the seven emirates (Abu Dhabi, Ajman, Dubai, Fujairah, Ras al-Khaimah, and Umm al-Quwain being the other six) that constitute the UAE. Sharjah's history dates back to over 5,000 years ago, but for the purpose of the research we are going to discuss only five historical events that shaped its identity from a trade place to a cultural hub. The first of these significant events is represented by the recognition of the settlement referred to as *Quaxim* in a Portuguese cartographic map (Rab, 2011). The second one is illustrated by the transition of Sharjah from a trading settlement into an emerging town due to the conflict faced between the Ras Al Khaimah ruling family and the British Crown in 1819. The third event is marked by the construction of the infrastructure (Al Mahatta airport) that supported not only the trade network among commonwealth nations, but it also created a regional identity in the Arabian Gulf, an Arab-Islamic identity (Rab, 2011). This event lasted until the 70s, when Sharjah shifted from a commercial and trade city into a political port. The fourth historical event is epitomized by the shift of the city towards a cultural and identity hub. During this period the old town section of the city was regenerated to provide a heritage that work as a public site of art and culture. By 1998, UNESCO named it "the Cultural Capital of the Arab World" (Sharjah Commerce and Tourism Development Authority, 2014). The last significant event is represented by the construction of University City as a counterbalance of the cultural attraction offered by the heritage area. University City is an educational complex that encompasses eight public and private universities and a city library in the Al Juraina district in Sharjah.

Practice - Rituals (Cricket)

Most theorists of practice (Schatzki, 2001; Lee & Ingold, 2006; Sheringham, 2006), conceive of them minimally, as arrays of activities which can be set out as: practice as activity, practice as tacit ways of knowing, practice as human/non-human and practice as embodiments. From this perspective, practices are not just individual, or dislocated from a bigger context, but fundamental to understanding the society they are part of (Pink, 2012). According to Schatzki (2001), practice is the total nexus of interconnected human practices, the components of which include knowledge, meaning, human activity, science, power, language, social institutions, and historical transformation (p.2).

External practices in Sharjah convey a ritual sense. As residents undertake a sequence of activities involving gestures, words, and objects, performed in a sequestered place and performed according to a set of sequence (Aractingi & Le Pape, 2011). These rituals are characterized by formalism, traditionalism, invariance, rule-governance, sacral symbolism, and performance (Bell 1997). The residents of Sharjah, in particular Southeast Asians, grab or borrow a public place in a temporary way, 6 am to 9:00 am, to transform it into a playground to play Cricket. This activity changes the landscape with direct actions of landmarking in two possible ways: permanent and temporary. The permanent practice concerns the construction of concrete pitches in public spaces, while temporary practices concern the temporary use of locations that have a defined purpose, but is transformed into something else to undertake the practice (ritual). In both rituals, users bring their objects, wicket, bats and balls and allocate imaginary geometric boundaries: close-infield, inner circle, out-field and external boundary (Fig. 1). In some cases, the external boundaries overlap between two different practices. This sport practice becomes a ritual, as every Friday for the past 15 years players meet at a specific location, bringing along objects, behaviors, norms, rules, a timetable, dressing and liturgy in a codified, repetitive and consistent way.



Figure 1. Objects for the cricket ritual, Roldán, J, 2014.

Memory and identity

Contemporary usage of the term *collective memory* can be traceable to the 19th century. Durkheim and Halbwachs were concerned in studying memory is so far as minds work together in society and how their operation are structured by social arrangement. Conforming group memberships are essential for providing materials for memory and prod individuals into recalling particular events and into forgetting others. Thus, what individuals remember is determined by their group memberships, but still takes place in their own minds. For example, expatriates remain united as a means to recall the home they have left, even when they find nothing in their new physical surroundings (Halbwachs, 1950).

Spatial places and group membership play an important role in generating a collective memory. Memories of a group can be translated into spatial terms. According to Halbwachs (1950), each aspect, each detail, of a place has a meaning intelligible only to members of the group, for each portion of its space corresponds to various and different aspects of the structure and life of their society, at least of what is most stable of it (p.2). Scholars have variously sought to explain the rise of interest in the past, memory, commemoration, nostalgia, and history in contexts ranging from consumer promotions, popular culture, interior and exterior design, and public spaces, as well as the rise of reparations, apologies, and other forms of redress in domestic and international politics.

History is a reminder of the dead while collective memory is a remainder of the living. Historical memory reaches us through historical records and it assists to remember the past with which it no longer has an “organic” relation. Collective memory influences us through everyday communication crystallized in the forms of objectified culture - texts, images, rites, buildings, monuments, cities or even landscapes. Collective memory is the active past that forms our identities.

Visual discourse

Visual critiques are considered an aesthetic judge, as it consists of an individual assessment of a bi-dimensional and tri-dimensional outcome. The critique is determined by the designers or architects’ background knowledge, their methodological procedures, their analytical and synthesizing capabilities, and their sensibility towards aesthetics (Montaner, 2013). Critiques can be situated in a vast horizon that extends between two different extreme ends, false and illusory. The former focuses on the excessive rationalist and methodological discourse that believes that it can establish interpretations that are totally reliable and exemplified (unique and stable) about the creative work. The latter centers on irrational, arbitrary and barbaric excess that pursues the inutility of all critique and interpretation, which establishes a relation with the visual outcomes, creations that are always mysterious and unique as they have an impenetrable essence.

Designers and architects need to critique and provide an interpretation far from both absurd limits. They need to comprehend the work in order to explain its content to the public. This does not imply that architects or designers can completely interpret everything that belongs to the work complexity neither exhaust the roots of the creative capacity of the architect. With a critique, architects or designers assume an aesthetic commitment in which they have to have a stand about the improvement of the society, the enrichment through the artistic desire and the defense of the adequacy of the ends.

Research methods

Social constructivism was used to understand the fundamental structures of consciousness in relation to experiencing the urban context. This means that researchers are able to make sense of (or interpret) the meanings others have about the world. Rather than starting with a theory, inquirers generate or inductively

develop a theory or pattern meaning (Creswell, 2009). Social constructivist researchers (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Crotty, 1998; Neuman, 2000; Schwandt, 2007) assume that individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work. They develop subjective meanings of their experiences that are directed toward certain objects and things. These meanings are varied and multiple, leading the researcher to look for the complexity of views rather than narrowing meanings into a few categories or ideas. This approach assists in generating questions that are broad and general so that participants construct meaning of a situation, typically forged in discussions or interactions with other persons. Researchers are required to listen carefully to what people say or do in their life settings. Often these subjective meanings are negotiated as they are not simply imprinted on individuals but are formed through interaction with others and through historical, social, and cultural norms that operate in the lives of individuals. Researchers focus on the specific contexts in which they live and work in order to understand the historical and cultural settings of the participants. However, researchers need to recognize that their own backgrounds shape their interpretation, and they position themselves in the research to acknowledge how their interpretation flows from their personal, cultural, and historical experiences.

For the purpose of the research, visual ethnography was used as a research method, as it was required to collect visual images that represent the human appreciation of the place and practice. We collected a series of videos and snapshots that exhibit the practice in specific places in Sharjah. In addition, we interviewed senior and non-senior members, as well as we documented the participation of members using ethnographic diaries, of the three different types of places along. The triangulation of these methodologies assisted us to collect a series of snapshots that exhibit the effect of the urban intervention along with documented series of recorded data that back up the reasons behind the practice within the urban spaces that represent Sharjah. Once the compilation was culminated, we used the compilation of a digital archive

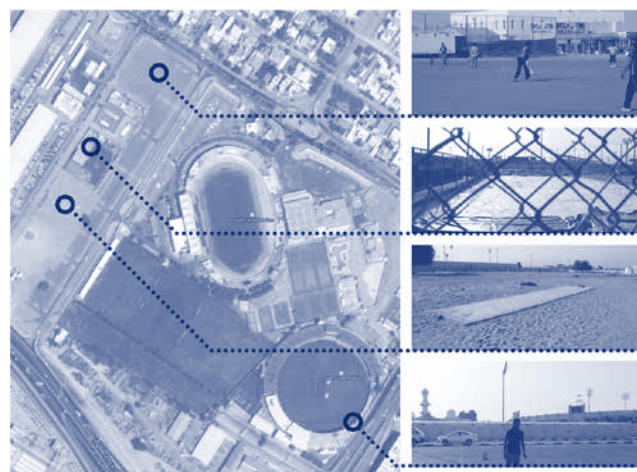


Figure 2. Examples of the different cities, Cruz, B & Roldán, J, 2014

that allows us to sort digital data out in a way that is accessible through a software application and supports restoration of part or all of a system (Pearce-Moses, 2005). These procedures helped us to study a small number of subjects through extensive and prolonged engagement to develop patterns and relationships of meaning (Mustakas, 1994).

Intervention - Case Sharjah

This case study analyzes the route to go from University City to the Sharjah Heritage area (future heart of Sharjah) using as main artery University City Road. We studied the façade between these two points, focusing on the voids and categorized them according to their attributes. These voids were grouped under three typologies considering their nature in the short, medium, and long term: indelible city, pinned city and post-it city (Fig 2).

Indelible city

Tag: *formal; legal; official, planned; stiff; designed; regulated; defined limits; rent space*. This space is planned and designed for specific purposes and thus has a target market. This type of space is of interest in that has to be managed and regulated by private and/or public entities. Thus, users are not empowered to change or modify the space or the behavior codes as they have paid a certain amount of money to become members in a temporary or permanent contractual relationship. Their rituals depend on the number of members that can afford the price to belong to this type of space.

Pinned city

Tag: *formal; illegal; semi managed; borrowed; informal space; formal ritual; permanent space*. This space is semiformal because a group of people borrowed it in order to build a formal and regulated playground (*Maldab Saba*¹). This urban space is claimed by residents that do not have the means to become members of a formal space of practice. Hence, they borrow the space and build a permanent landmark of their ritual (cricket pitch). Members are empowered to change the space in order to have a formal space in where they can undertake formally their rituals. The membership for this space can be earned through invitation for work relations or through their active participation in improving continuously the place of practice.

Post-it city

Tag: *landmarking; character; temporary; appropriation; grab; illegal; belong; membership; cooperation; consensus*. This space is informal because a group of people grabbed it and transformed its real purpose into a temporary informal and regulated playground (*Maldab Saba*). This urban space is claimed by residents that do not have the means, capabilities, or interest in designing a formal space of practice. They grab the space and use it illegally for a lapse of time to undertake their rituals (cricket pitch). Memberships are obtained through sporadic discovery of the group, or word of mouth or personal invitation. Members claim their space and command level through seniority and consensus.

1 *Playground/Arena in Arabic*



Figure 3: Diagram place/user participation, Cruz & Roldán, J, 2014



Figure 4: Temporary intervention, Cruz, B & Roldán, J, 2014



Figure 5: Permanent intervention, Cruz, B & Roldán, J.

Discussion

The data obtained shows two relevant sets of information regarding the intrinsic relationship between users and the appropriation of place and engagement of practice. Figure 3 exhibits the three different types of active participation of users: spectator, unexpected user and user. In the left, we have the spectator as those members that have appropriation of the space but they are mere observers, even though they undertake practices within the space. Then, we find in the middle of the diagram the unexpected users that grab the space for determined period to undertake their practices. Thus, they are more engaged as a collective and take consensus actions. In the right, we find the users that have a full appropriation of the space through illegal transformations of the space to formalize their practice.

After obtaining these three different types of users, it was relevant to play with the interventions (digital) using the principles that rule them. Therefore, we propose a digital intervention that

represented the temporality of the practice of unexpected users (Fig. 4). Meanwhile, the intervention for users is a digital intervention that is a permanent reminder of the land marking (Fig. 5). Therefore, we used the theoretical underpinning of the *instant city* to create an intervention (floating self-made cricket pitches) above the horizon without any provisional structures (performance space). This information deliberately overstimulates a cultural element (the pitch) with self-advertising aesthetics.

"The city is borrowed by its citizens and their actions by unsolicited designers and unexpected users"
(Roldán, 2014)

Conclusions

To sum up, Sharjah is a cosmopolitan city in which residents are able to redefine their urban landscape through their rituals. We find out three different types of users: spectator, unexpected user, and user, transforming in particular ways the space, indelible city, pinned city and post-it city. We as observers propose a series of digital interventions that exhibited the essence of each type of engagement. We believe that this is necessary to understand the publicly available social commemorative symbols, rituals and representations at a moment in time and location, as these elements represent tools to stroke provoke consciousness and to forge the future.

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