



4.617: Issues in Islamic Urbanism:

The Orientalist Dream City

Time:

Tuesday 2-5, in 5-216

Instructor:

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TA:

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Visitors:

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Prerequisite:

Permission of Instructor
class enrollment limited to 10

As a subject of inquiry, “the “image of the city” is understood differently by different students of urban history. Theologians, moralists, and philosophers propose an abstract paradigm reflecting either a divine or utopian sociopolitical order. Architects, planners, historians, social scientists, and policy-makers put together various models based on combinations of morphological, demographic, environmental, social, cultural, and legal factors. And poets, novelists, artists, and film-makers, depend more on imagined or mythical constructs in the service of their art.

The Orientalists, i.e., those who studied or represented the “Orient” in the 19th and 20th centuries, used all the above approaches in representing “The Islamic City,” resulting in a sizeable body of literature and art on the subject. Their images of the “Islamic City” range from the garrison-town and ordered imperial center, to the chaotic, unplanned, and confessionally or ethnically segregated metropolis, to the imaginary mirage city of the Arabian Nights with its gilded bulbous domes and pencil-sharp minarets. Yet, the notion of an ideal-type Islamic City never lost its paradigmatic appeal, even among designers of contemporary urban projects in the Islamic world.

This seminar seeks to establish a framework for the study of the image of the Orientalist City and its reverberations in contemporary design. It will first review the shaping of that image from the first remarks and sketches of nineteenth-century savants and artists to the contemporary academic and policy formulations. Then, it will consider the impact of that image on the design of new cities in the Islamic world today.

The focus of our investigation will be Dubai, the most phenomenal example of the urban boom that the Gulf region is currently undergoing. Oil wealth, rapid globalization, a deeply religious and conservative outlook, and a fervent quest for identity have all come together to create a demand for a sleek and contemporary yet culturally identifiable city. This has turned Dubai, and to a lesser extent neighboring cities, into a true visual laboratory where the only limits to architectural and urban flights of fancy seem to be the creativity of the designers and their ability to understand and communicate with their clients. In this milieu, the image of the Orientalist City seems to have emerged as a tacit design icon shared by the designers and the patrons.

The seminar is open to advanced undergraduates and graduate students with some knowledge of Islamic history and/or contemporary architecture in the Gulf region. The course includes weekly reading and writing assignments and requires active participation in discussions. Students’ written weekly responses will form the basis of class discussions.

The class will take a trip to Dubai for a week either during Spring Break (March 24-April 1) or the week after (March 30-April 7). During our visit we will tour major projects in the city, visit top agencies responsible for its urban expansion, and attend presentations given by officials in those agencies. All enrolled students are required to take part in the trip. The Aga Khan Program will cover airfare and lodging. The final project, which may be pursued individually or collaboratively, will take the lessons learned from our historical and theoretical investigations and check them against specific examples from Dubai. Final presentations will take place during the last two or three meetings of the seminar.